

The *Morning Freiheit* and the Situation of the Soviet Jews

by N. Koppel

(The following is an English translation of the first half of a letter in Yiddish sent to the Morning Freiheit recently, with a copy to Jewish Affairs. The author, the brother of Paul Novick, editor of the Morning Freiheit, is a retired Soviet journalist living in Moscow. The Morning Freiheit has published the letter, with comment by Chaim Suller. The second half of this translation will appear in our next issue.)

I want to comment on an article by Chaim Suller which appeared in the Morning Freiheit of February 27, 1975. I am referring to his weekly press review, "In der Yiddishe Presse." This issue, which also contained an article I had written, was sent to me directly by the editors of the MF.

I read with much attention Suller's criticism of Gabzeh's article.* A few days later I received the MF of February 9 which contained a reprint of Zhukov's review in Yiddish translation, with some comments of the editors. They stated that the article had been translated "word for word."

Comparing the Yiddish text with the Russian, it is evident that several important passages have been incorrectly translated, further exacerbating the harmful views expressed by Zhukov. The following are some of the incorrect translations:

1. Zhukov cites an excerpt from a resolution adopted by the Communist Party of Israel which says: "The Zionist ideology is reactionary because it is based on nationalism and racism," which is "especially clear in the research [of Wolf Ehrlich of Rakah in his study Zionism--Theory and Practice]," is translated to read "which was specially investigated."
2. The sentence: "This nationalist concept is basically incorrect" has been translated "...is basically a falsehood."
3. The sentence: "A significant part of the capital and industries of the developed countries fell into the hands of the Jewish bourgeoisie" was translated "...most of the capital...".

* In October 1974 the Soviet magazine Ogonyok published a review by Dmitri Zhukov of a book on Zionism. In January 1975 Undzer Shtime, publication of the New Communist Opposition (AKI) and headed by Esther Vilenska and Shmuel Mikunis, published an article by Moshe Gabzeh dealing with Zhukov's review. This article was attacked by Suller in his February 27 column.

4. Zhukov wrote: "The Talmud taught religious Jews to hate other believers." This was changed to "non-believers."

5. "Liberal and humanist" was translated "liberal or humanist."

6. Zhukov wrote that at the end of the 19th century a majority of the Jewish population in the developed countries were part of the middle-class strata. The words "a majority of" were omitted by the translator.

7. Instead of "the Zionists have elevated anti-Semitism to the level of a religious doctrine," the translation reads "with reference to Zionism."

8. In the Yiddish translation the sentence: "A significant part of the industry, finance and news media in the capitalist countries of the world is under the influence of the Zionist bourgeoisie..." was changed to "The greatest part..." This distortion alters the meaning of the whole passage.

9. The translation speaks of the conference of the billionaire Zionists who call themselves a "world government." But Zhukov wrote "who sometimes call themselves a world government."

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Suller's acrimonious attack on Moshe Gabzeh, the inaccurate and in some instances biased translation of Zhukov's article, and the comments of the editors--all this raises serious apprehension about the political position of the Morning Freiheit to which I have been a contributor for many years.

To be sure, Zhukov expresses in his review false and very harmful views on the history and role of Zionism, on the place that the Jewish toiling masses occupy among the Jewish people, and indulges in similar falsehoods. Such an article can only provide added ammunition to the Zionist anti-Soviet propaganda mill.

In criticizing such ignominious, intolerable articles, progressives must stress the need for literature condemning Zionism, which has become a weapon in the hands of reactionary anti-Semitic forces the world over. At the same time we must point out the gains constantly being made by the Soviet people. This must be done, and is being done, by all progressive people.

Gabzeh correctly states that "we must not silently pass by Zhukov's article. It is our duty to criticize this review and expose his erroneous positions which are in glaring contradiction to Marxist-Leninist principles."

Disregarding this, Suller comes to the wrong conclusion that Gabzeh opposes "any expression of criticism of the Ogonyok arti-

cle." Apparently Suller takes such a stand because Gabzeh concludes his article with the following statement: "We are for criticism of negative manifestations in the Soviet Union, but we negate and condemn the wild, rampant anti-Soviet slanders." "These slanders," Gabzeh continues, "are nothing but a betrayal of internationalism. They are part of a campaign for mobilizing an anti-Soviet crusade in which all means are sanctioned."

The Soviet Union has played an important role in the freedom struggles of all oppressed peoples, including Jews, and is making an important contribution to the liberation of peoples from the fascist slavery and from the colonial yoke. The Soviet people are now successfully building socialism. They are showing an example to the toiling masses throughout the world and are giving inspiration to the working people in their struggles against capitalism. But as soon as someone points this out, those in the Forward camp, as well as the Zionists and nationalist-minded people intensify their anti-Soviet campaign, using as added ammunition the pamphlets against Zionism issued by some Soviet publishing houses, or such articles as the one which appeared in Ogonyok. They utilize in their slanderous propaganda the negative manifestations which regrettably have not yet been fully eliminated in our country, and then harp on the errors and wrongdoings during the Stalin period.

Suller does the same thing. In his above-mentioned weekly review he had nothing to say about the achievements of the Soviet people. He wrote only about "Stalin's slaughters" and "Stalin's murders."

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The Soviet people have not forgotten the prominent Communist Party activists and military leaders who were victimized and perished during the Stalin period, innocent of any improbity. But we must remember also that in the 30's, under Stalin's leadership, the bourgeois classes were liquidated in the struggles against Trotsky's and Bukharin's policies. And when fascist Germany attacked us, all Soviet peoples answered Stalin's call and under his leadership, with unsurpassed valor, defended and freed their Soviet homeland and smashed the accursed enemy. They fought with weapons produced in the Soviet Union and employed Soviet military strategy. They freed from fascist slavery not only our Socialist Fatherland but all of the peoples of Europe, along with a great number of Jews.

The Soviet Jews remember that more than a hundred of them were among those who received the highest honors the Soviet Union can bestow--Hero of the Soviet Union. Jews occupy fifth place among peoples so honored. This took place during the Stalin period.

Recently the progressive forces of the entire world participated in the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the victory over fascist Germany. In connection with these celebrations some remarks by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Charles De Gaulle and other

prominent figures come to mind. Here is what they said:

Roosevelt: "The Red Army and the Russian people have gained forever the gratitude of the American people.... The Red Army and the Soviet people have achieved eternal glory. They have written immortal pages in the history of the struggles against tyranny and oppression."

De Gaulle: "The Red Army was the main instrument in freeing the oppressed peoples."

Now, more than ever, people all over the world turn to the Soviet Union in their quest for national and social liberation. Lenin's teachings are coming to pass. At the Third Soviet Congress he said: "Our socialist republic must stand fast as a torch of international socialism, as an example for the working people."

When the merits of the Soviet Union are pointed out the Zionists begin to shout: "This does not excuse the present anti-Semitic policies of the Soviet government which deny Jews the national rights that other nationalities enjoy." The Zionists say that Jews are not permitted to develop their national culture, to establish Jewish schools, and so on. They claim that "forced assimilation" is the primary reason why Jews are leaving the Soviet Union.

These accusations are false. It is true that Jews in the Soviet Union are becoming assimilated. But this is a natural process. It is well known that before the October Revolution the Jews in Russia lived in restricted areas, in a kind of ghetto. Under the Tsars it was difficult for Jews to reside in Moscow, Petrograd and many other regions. The townships and villages of the Ukraine and White Russia were crammed with poor Jews--tailors, shoemakers, carpenters and impoverished storekeepers. In these small towns the Jews conducted religious schools for boys (chedorim) and institutions of higher Talmudic learning (yeshivas).

The October Revolution freed the numerous peoples of Russia from national oppression and secured for them equality of rights. In areas with a compact Jewish population, secular Jewish schools and a broad network of cultural institutions were established. They included clubs, theaters, libraries and so on.

The proletarian revolution also abolished the territorial boundaries of the Pale within which Jews were permitted to live and to work in industrial establishments, cultural institutions and even government offices. Freed from these oppressive measures, the Jews began to leave those poverty-stricken areas. They quickly spread out over all of the vast Soviet land. Surrounded by a non-Jewish population, they began to adapt themselves to their new environment.

In the tsarist schools (gymnasiums), Jewish students were

not accepted, with but a few exceptions that were made for children of rich merchants. After the revolution the schools were opened to everyone. Jewish parents began to send their children to the schools which served the local residents. This had an adverse effect on the secular Jewish schools in the townships with a compact Jewish population which were established in the first decades following the October Revolution.

An acquaintance of mine, Ms. Nodelman, who is now the administrator of a government library in Moscow, was a teacher in Jewish schools in White Russia 50 years ago. From 1922 to 1926 she taught in the cities of Mogilev and Shklav. Already then, she relates, it was difficult to get a sufficient number of children to keep the schools going. Another close friend of mine, Finer, taught in the Jewish schools of the Ukraine in the thirties. He told me that the schools gradually petered out and there were no children left to teach.

As I said before, we are witnessing not a process of "forced assimilation" but a natural process of intermingling of Jews with the surrounding population. If the Jews in our country were to live in compact areas, as they do in New York, where there are more Jews than in the entire Soviet Union, it would surely be possible for them to develop a national Jewish culture, as is the case with all other Soviet peoples who live in concentrated regions.

The quest for Jewishness is not the real cause that led a certain number of Jews to leave the Soviet Union in recent years, nor is it "forced assimilation." Some are motivated by nationalistic feelings. They want to live in "a Jewish state with a Jewish culture." But they constitute an insignificant percentage of the Jewish emigrants. Some leave at the invitation of relatives. They, too, represent a small part of the Jewish emigration.

Incidentally, some of these "invitations" are very insidious. To cite one example: Someone I know received such an "invitation" from his sister who had saved herself from a Nazi concentration camp during the war and had subsequently gone to Israel. She enticed her brother with the most lavish promises. "Come," she wrote to him. "We will not live forever. I am doing well. You, your wife and your son will do well also. You will have no regrets."

When he went to Israel he learned that his sister and her family do not live well at all. They have to endure great hardships. He asked why she misled him. Her answer was that she was made to do this. She was pressed into signing letters which were written for her. In the private letters that they now send to friends and relatives in the Soviet Union, they are asking for help to return to their homeland.

Such invitations, which are being sent with the sanction of the foreign office of the Israeli government, sometimes go too

far. Some Moscow Jews have received "invitations" from Israeli "relatives" they had never heard of. In many instances Soviet Jews have publicly denounced these fraudulent provocations in letters to government newspapers. "The Soviet Union is our home," one such letter reads, "and I don't intend to leave our homeland. These invitations are provocations which are meant to embarrass us."

A considerable number of the emigrants are people with high qualifications; regrettably they were not imbued with the spirit of socialism. They believe that they will earn more money and lead a "richer life" in a capitalist country. In September 1974, in Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, I met the families of some of these professionals. They now regret that they have left the Soviet Union.

Last March a group of U.S. tourists visited Moscow. One of the group, Grigory Melamed, came to the Soviet visa department, threw his U.S. passport on the table and said: "Take it! You can do with me what you will, but I am not going back to the United States!" It was learned that his two daughters had left for Israel some years back. From there they went to New York where he has an older brother. On their invitation he came to the United States and has longed to return ever since. He declared: "Here I grew up, here I worked and I feel that this is my homeland. America is a strange world for us."

A considerable number of the Jewish defectors are merchants and speculators who are not tolerated in our country. They are looking for business opportunities and have an overpowering desire to get rich. Some were working in Soviet state stores or other government enterprises where they cheated or stole money and merchandise. They lived in constant fear of being caught and arrested.

A few of these people I met in New York. I inquired how they were doing, how much they were earning, whether they had a nice apartment and had bought a car. In response to my questions one of them said: "Look at him! He talks to us as if he were an inspector of ABHSST (an abbreviation for a Soviet police agency that investigates criminals who cheat our Soviet state)." It became clear to me who these individuals are and why they fled our country.

It should be pointed out that the number of Jews who want to leave our country has greatly diminished. In the Moscow office which issues visas for travel abroad (Avir) there are now 200 passports with exit visas which have not been claimed. Many Jews who had applied for visas are now withdrawing their applications.

This is how we must approach the question of Jewish emigration. It is evident that today fewer and fewer honest people want to leave the Soviet Union. People who are objective must also differentiate between different categories of individuals who have emigrated. They are motivated by various considerations in taking this step.

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Escalating their anti-Soviet propaganda, the Zionists and their followers are spreading rumors that the Soviet press is trying to hide the achievements of the Soviet Jews and their contribution to the life and well-being of our country.

But this is a crude lie. The Soviet information organs--radio, television, newspapers--objectively inform the Soviet people about the activities and accomplishments of Soviet citizens regardless of their national origin.

Here are some tributes to Jewish personalities which we find in the "anti-Semitic" Soviet press. In September 1974 the central organ of the CPSU, Pravda, carried a full-page article on the popular Jewish artist Arkady Rykin, founder of the Leningrad Miniature Theater. The article, including Rykin's picture, appeared in the section People's Artists.

In the article, captioned The Secret of Success, it was pointed out that Rykin's satire is timely in the broadest sense of the word. Some of his remarks were quoted directly. Criticizing the anti-social elements in the Soviet Union, he said: "Look at these people. They disrupt our lives and our work with their indifference, selfishness and rudeness, with their anti-social attitudes." In conclusion we read in the article: "Rykin's satirical ship proceeds on its designated course. Its compass is set toward the highest goal--service to the people! This is the secret of success of the artist."

On Sunday, July 6, the Soviet central television channel devoted an hour of prime time to a program commending the theater directed by Rykin. The viewers saw the long lines at the box offices and the rush for tickets for his performances, the thunderous applause and the bouquets and ovations with which his appearances are acclaimed. Very prominent literary personalities and artists were presented. They extolled the accomplishments of Arkady Rykin who uses his satire as a weapon to fight bureaucracy and falsehood and thus helps to advance the socialist spirit and the Soviet patriotism of our people.

Lately the Soviet press, radio and television have devoted a great deal of time and space to the very popular Yiddish singer Leonid Utiosov, who resides in Odessa, in commemoration of his 80th birthday. Soviet Culture relates in a long article that Utiosov was born in a family of small traders in Odessa. For over 60 years he appeared on the stage with a repertoire of songs acclaiming life, struggle, vitality and happiness. It has been estimated that he has given 240-250 performances yearly, making a total of some 15,000 stage appearances.

The Odessa correspondent of Soviet Culture who wrote this article reported that Utiosov was at many fronts during the war against the Nazis. He expressed the feelings of those who were

(cont'd on p. 16)