

Culture and Anti-Semitism

**A great task calls for great works—
books, paintings, plays, films, song;
new images, new symbols, new creators.**

By **MORRIS SCHAPPES**

THE affirmation of democracy today begins with the affirmation of the people, in their diversity and in their unity. In our country particularly to say "the people, yes," is to affirm all the national group components of the people, especially of the working class. Such affirmation takes its start from the recognition of the diverse national origin and present national group consciousness and character of the American masses. As democrats, we then move from recognition to respect; as progressives, from respect to concern; as cultural workers, from concern to artistic treatment in all the forms of which we are, or would be, the masters.

The academics have begun to speak in terms of cultural pluralism versus cultural monism. To us the issue is cultural democracy versus cultural monopoly. Anglo-Saxon domination in culture is an ugly facet of the ugly polyhedron of would-be Anglo-American imperialist domination of the wide world. We are opposed to every facet and proclaim the imperialist core of the structure. This is part of the fight for cultural freedom. Randolph Bourne in 1920 saw the issue thus: "If freedom means a democratic cooperation in determining the ideals and purposes and industrial and social institutions of a country, then the immigrant has not been free, and the Anglo-Saxon element is guilty of just what every dominant race is guilty of in every European country, the imposition of its own culture upon the minority peoples." (*The History of a Literary Radical.*) Since 1920, some progress has been made, both real and superficial, in the facing of this issue of freedom. The foaming rabidity with which reaction strives to maintain its position is in fact an index to the strength being shown by the progressive forces in rising to the challenge by the affirmation of cultural democracy.

A specially potent weapon in the arsenal of reaction is anti-Semitism. The rulers of our country have fostered many hostilities in addition to the main one against the Negro. Feelings against Irish-Americans, German-Americans, Italian-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Polish and other Slav-Americans, Mexican-Americans and many other kinds of Americans have been bred and cultivated. Each and all of these hostilities are dangers to American democracy. But none is the great national menace that anti-Semitism is today. We should neglect none of them; we should stress anti-Semitism.

For many centuries, under varying social systems—pre-feudal, feudal and capitalist—the ruling classes have used anti-Semitism as a means of maintaining their power. They have caused their auxiliaries in their cultural institutions—religious and secular—to stamp upon the consciousness of millions vile images and hateful symbols of the Jew. A proper name becomes a common noun, and the word "shy-

lock" spread its venom from lip to lip and is formally defined in the best dictionaries. The noun "Jew" becomes a verb, but with a difference: while "to Americanize" means "to make American" and to Anglicize means "to make English," the verb "to Jew" has been made to mean—as the language of the gutter and even the dictionary will testify—something else than "to make Jewish."

WHEN the New World was born in struggle against the Old World, a heritage of anti-Semitism, as well as the need to fight it, was transmitted in the process. From the earliest colonial days anti-Semitism was a weapon of the reaction, and the struggle against it was the sign of the consistent democrat. So long as our country was the most advanced democracy in the world, the victories against the anti-Semites were repeated and outstanding and were an example to the world. But now that our ruling class has converted the United States into an imperialist power whose main article of export is reaction, forced upon hungry but unwilling customers at the point of the gun and the dollar, these victories of equal rights for Jews, never completely secured, are in danger. With imperialism and the drive toward fascism, the struggle against anti-Semitism enters a new phase. The struggle will be ended only under socialism. But not only will the democratic advance to socialism be impossible of attainment but the defense of bourgeois-democracy will not be successful without waging war against anti-Semitism.

What is at stake is not only the survival of the Jewish people but the survival of democracy itself. They will live or die together. We have no choice in the matter. We stand for life.

To be democratic is to include the fight against anti-Semitism as part of the defense against reaction. The arenas of struggle are political, social and cultural. We see the political relation between the Truman Doctrine abroad and the Hartley-Taft Act here. We affirm the connection also of the Wagner-Morse anti-lynch bill (S. 1352) and the Buckley bill to outlaw anti-Semitism (H.R. 2848). If we have lagged on the political front, the cultural lag is still greater, and is one contributing factor in the political lag.

It is time that progressive cultural workers proclaimed with new vigor the moral degeneracy not only of anti-Semitism but of indifference to anti-Semitic manifestations. In 1916, when Maxim Gorky, Leonid Andreyev and Fyodor Sologub were editing *The Shield* in Petrograd as the organ of the Russian Society for the Study of Jewish Life, Gorky wrote: "The Jew of today is dear to me, and I feel myself guilty before him, for I am one of those who tolerate the oppression of the Jewish nation. . . ." Gorky's feeling guilty can be an arousing lesson. How much Gorky had already done to fight the anti-Semites! He had denounced the Kishinev pogrom in 1903. One of his few lectures in the United States was delivered in 1906 in New York on "The Jewish Question." When Mendel Beilis was being framed in 1913 on the blood-ritual charge, Gorky spoke up. Yet he felt guilty of tolerating anti-Semitism, but by confessing his feeling he stirred others to action too. This was in Czarist times, when Hitler was still a corporal.

In 1936, when a reactionary Polish government was encouraging the anti-Semites, Romain Rolland sent a letter

to a Warsaw magazine. "I really regret that I am not a Jew," he wrote, "for I am ashamed of my brother Christians." The Nazis had not yet annihilated 6,000,000 Jews.

American progressive cultural workers have also on occasion talked up on particular instances of anti-Semitism. But should we not consider: are occasional statements the way in which cultural creators can best contribute to the struggle? Here is the publication of the League of American Writers in 1939, "We Hold These Truths . . ." with statements on anti-Semitism by leading American writers, educators and other public figures. I reread the statements of Louis Bromfield, Margaret Culkin Banning, William Rose Benet, Theodore Dreiser, Langston Hughes, Rockwell Kent, John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Upton Sinclair, Donald Ogden Stewart and Genevieve Taggard. They are generally fine, sincere, democratic statements. But where are the novels, plays, stories, songs, paintings and moving pictures dealing in a major way with anti-Semitism and with Jews? The American people need more than statements from their cultural leaders. The people need the works of art themselves that will touch them and teach them, deeply. But can we think of more than a couple of novels, a couple of plays, a couple of stories, and a couple of radio scripts—and all of them by Jews?

Can we not hear America crying, and the Jewish people in America calling: give us the image, the figure, the name that will work fascination upon the minds of millions and move through history until it too becomes a word in the dictionary, spelled without a capital letter, that will rival and replace the malign noun, "shylock," and the malevolent verb, "to jew," rival and replace them on the page and in the hearts of Americans? Let loose the tide of song, poem,



"Tired Man," painting by Walter H. R. At the 44th Street Gallery through November 14.

story, film and dance that will inundate the evil images of anti-Semitism!

The dignity of a people is at issue. The enemies of all progressive mankind, the antagonists of freedom and equality everywhere, have tried to reduce us Jews to contemptibility. They sought to strip the immigrant Jew of his language and mocked his vernacular by calling it a jargon; they ignored his history and derided his pride in his people. The literature of the Jews is rich in self-critical humor, but we resent being called, and deny that we are represented by, Potash and Perlmutter or Mrs. Nussbaum, any more than Stepin Fetchit or Aunt Jemima are the proper names for the Negro people. We would be represented by other and better types. Only the cultural workers, the historians, the writers, the composers, the graphic artists can furnish these new names to the American people and make them memorable.

FOR the Jewish progressive cultural creators there is also this problem: their relationship to the Jewish people. Who shall be the cultural leaders of the American Jewish community? Shall they be the Ben Hechts and Sidney Hooks and Will Herbergs? Only ruin and confusion can come upon the Jewish people from such leadership, and the American people as a whole are bound to suffer from it too. If the best, most class-conscious, most clear-visioned sons and daughters of the Jewish people abandon their people, what will be left and whom will they follow? Individuals have resigned from their people, but the Jewish people cannot resign; such resignation means extermination, and the inferno of the gas-ovens is more real than Dante's.

Democracy cannot mean turning the back; it must mean facing the issue. Identification with the people is a necessity to guarantee the quality of that people. There are those Jews who seem to act upon the feeling that nothing human is alien to them—with the possible exception of the Jews. We Marxists and progressives declare our stand in favor of identification with the mass and in opposition to separation from it. Know your people, we say, and become a part of it. We will gain in scope, and not lose. That is a narrow vision which sees all American and overlooks that part of America which is the national group in which we were born and reared. This is no call for separation from anything progressive. It is a call for the expanding of the progressive identity.

The relation of the Jew to the non-Jew is a crucial issue in Jewish life, whether in Palestine, Poland, Biro-Bidjan or the United States. We stand for full progressive cooperation in the fight against reaction and in the creation of a better life. We oppose separation of one people from other peoples as we oppose the separation of the individual from the people. Survival and progress depend on unity: unity of the people itself, unity between the people and its neighbors. I found a symbol of this in "The Ghetto in Minsk," by H. Smoliar, recently serialized in the Yiddish *Morning Freiheit*. This survivor of the concentration camp and the ghetto describes movingly how stunned were the Jews in the Nazi concentration camp when the order came through to sort them out from the Byelo-Russians in the camp. They did not know what to do. The idea of resistance had not yet developed. But when some of the Byelo-Russians began to outwit the Nazis as best they could by claiming some Jews as non-Jews, the success attained here gave birth to the idea of resistance. The socialist practice of the brotherhood of

peoples, manifesting itself in this instance in this way, fired the will to resist of the Jews themselves in Minsk. Survival came out of unity, not separation.

How shall progressive Jewish American cultural workers go about their task? There are no ready, easy answers. It is our common duty to find the answers. If we look and strive, we shall find them. Out of ignorance, out of scoffing, out of a desire for separation, out of denial no solution can come. Out of knowledge, out of respect, out of identification, out of affirmation solutions will come. If we know our people, their life, their pain, their hope, we will want to write about them, sing of them, paint them and mold them, set them in motion on stage and screen. It was a Jew who gave us the words that make Jew and non-Jew see Joe Hill in their dreams, but the songs of our Jewish working-class heroes are unwritten and we dream not of them. Who will write them, if not we, the American Jews for whom these workers, our fathers and mothers, fought and fight?

We cannot lack for themes or inspiration. Our history in this country extends back for three centuries, and there is a great progressive trend in all of it. For some seventy-five years, Jewish workers in this country have been making history for themselves and for the entire American labor movement. It is a history of mass movements, great struggles, cultural achievements and heroes, but so far it has been unchronicled, unsung and unpainted. There is the present life of the American Jews waiting for honest, progressive, extensive recreation.

There are the great new themes furnished by the Jews of other countries, of the war and the ghettos and the resistance and the present reconstruction. A world of new problems,

of human relations, was born of the resistance in the ghettos and the Partisan movements, problems beginning with whether to resist, and extending to when and how. There, written large and luridly visible in the flare of the open door of the crematorium are themes enough for a generation of cultural workers, and our generation will not exhaust them.

The material is there, the need is there, the talents are here. Shall we wed them, and strengthen the Jewish people and all progressive America by the union?

A beginning has been made, in a little way. (Beginnings are always, it would seem, small, even though impatience is naturally great.) On *Jewish Life* we have begun to explore for answers. We shall fight to grow. We on the editorial board bring only the clarity of students of Marxism, the authority of devotion, the definitiveness that rises from whatever conviction and light our readers find in our pages. Let us join our forces to create new images, new symbols, new models for the Jewish people and for the entire nation. Let us declare war on the dominance of the anti-Semitic myths in American culture. Let those of us who are Jews assume our responsibility to try to become the cultural leaders and servants of the Jewish people, bringing them into unshakable alliance with all progressive mankind. There is no other road to progress and survival for all.

Mr. Schappes is an editor of "Jewish Life" and one of the sponsors of a national Jewish cultural conference to be held in New York over the week-end of October 31. All cultural, fraternal and labor organizations have been invited to participate. Full details can be obtained from the organizing committee at 189 Second Ave., New York 3, N. Y.

MAN OF RECORD

Disc Jockey Robbins is really straight, gate. Lock, stock and barrelhouse — but don't ask for Uncle Tom.

By VIVIAN HOWARD

FRED ROBBINS, the jive-talking disc jockey of Station WOV, New York, is perhaps the only record-turner in radio who created a sensation among his listeners by *not* playing a requested record.

The recording was Phil Harris' "Dark Town Poker Club." When he began receiving requests for this number, Fred informed his audience that he didn't play "that kind of junk." "There'll be no Uncle Tom records on the 1280 Club," he announced. (1280 is WOV's number on the dial.)

After the broadcast, the letters and telegrams started coming in from those cats who were not only hep to the jive but also to issues of racial discrimination. They applauded Fred for

battling the minstrel tradition of presenting Negroes in stereotype. As one all-out listener put it, "A few more people like you on the American radio and I won't have to worry about keeping my GI uniform for future duty."

That isn't the only time that Fred has taken a stand for Negro rights during his two years of disc jockeying on WOV. On various occasions he has asked his listeners to send him a "hunk of linen" protesting against hoodlum attacks on Negro musicians in Greenwich Village. He publicized the case of Isaac Woodard, plugged for better housing for Negro veterans and denounced the DAR for their refusal to permit Negro artists to perform in Constitution Hall.

What's more important, Fred's "1280 Club" is one of the few radio programs which give Negro musicians their just due as artists. As Fred put it, you can't devote a radio show to good jazz without featuring the great Negro artists who have helped make American jazz, from Louis Armstrong to Duke Ellington to Dizzy Gillespie. Fred said, "I never consider that after playing, say, four or five records by Negro musicians, I ought to stick in a 'white' record. I play jazz, regardless of the color of people's skins."

On Fred's weekly "Guest in the Nest" and "Collectors' Corner" programs he has interviewed nearly every prominent jazz musician, both Negro