

THE EAST SIDE I KNEW

A backward look at the Jewish working class community with both its negative side and its unforgettable humanity

By Michael Gold

ON THIS 300th anniversary of the settlement of the Jews in the United States, let's not forget to mention, amid the scrolls, speeches, conferences and other manifestations, that (in the words of Sholem Aleichem) it is still "hard to be a Jew."

Jewish students are still admitted on a quota basis in a number of American colleges, universities and medical schools; Jewish workers are widely discriminated against even in New York, one-third Jewish; Jews are still excluded from many hotels, communities and apartment houses.

The teachers at public school used to assure us that every child born in America had an equal chance to become President. Fifty years later, Jews have not been elected to the Presidency, nor has any other child of non-Protestant white Anglo-Saxons, the Negro, the Pole or Puerto Rican, the Greek, Armenian, Red Indian, Italian, or Irish Catholic.

As a boy on the old East Side I often suffered for being a Jew. I can remember a series of school teachers who persecuted us with nazi-like venom. Such specimens are still to be found in the public school system, sheltered under the wings of authority.

I encountered prejudice when I went to work at the age of 12 and discovered how many jobs in factories and offices were not for Jews. Often, the foreman or boss told you frankly that Jews were not wanted. I remember a brief period when I tried to pass as a Lutheran. They looked at my dark hair, my swarthy skin and waved me off like a leper. The hunt for a job is a big part of life in our capitalist hell. Job discrimination was always important, it kept you from your bread. But working for Jewish bosses offset the feeling I might have had against non-Jewish bosses who discriminated. It was hard to know which was worse—working or hunting for work.

I have since met Jewish bosses who were warm, decent people, but somehow, in my difficult youth, I never seemed to meet a decent Jewish boss. Was it because most of them

were cockroach capitalists, frantically on the make? They worked me such long hours and paid me so little, cursed and abused me, fired me so mercilessly.

I learned the hard way that the Jews are divided into classes like any other people. They are not a unified folk. In the garment district of New York one has seen the unholy spectacle of both Jewish and non-Jewish gangsters and cops beating up and even murdering Jewish workers on strike. The killers and maimers were hired and paid by Jewish bosses. Though they may deny that Jews are class-divided, pious, religious and Zionist Jews also have too often betrayed their own people in the battle of trade unionism versus "free enterprise." Let us not forget this simple historical fact, also on the 300th anniversary.

Despite the class conflict, however, I could never fall into the anti-Semitism one often finds among the "allrightniks," the complacent American Jews with money. A Jewish anti-Semite is usually a snob, a climber, a coward or a self-despising neurotic who not only hates Jews but fears and hates all humanity.

But I grew up with a deep love for the Jews, based on that teeming life I had known in my Jewish working class fatherland on the East Side.

My father and mother were so warm and good even in the hell of their poverty. The friends and relatives of our family were interesting, original and loyal folk. And how can I ever forget my "gang"—the group of vigorous East Side boys with whom I boxed and played basketball and baseball, with whom I discussed life and girls, went to burlesque shows and sang barbershop chords on the street corner every night?

I was brought up in the worst slum in America, yet my memories remain of a brave, neighborly, talented people who, though martyred by tragic poverty, yet knew how to laugh and sing and hope. They loved life, they tried to help each other. There was more neighborly love and mutual aid on a tenement block than in a world of Park Avenue apartments.

Culture on the East Side

The European immigrants of 50 years ago brought a humanist Yiddish culture here that was rich, universal and classic, infinitely better than the degraded Philistine culture of today's Americanized "allrightniks."

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Hester Street market on a Friday in 1899.

My father was a sick, harassed and overworked pauper, but he loved the theater. Every week, with his last pennies, he took me, his eldest son, to see a play. Before I was 12, I had seen the dramas of Gorki, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Schiller, Goethe, as well as the Yiddish classicists, Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, or the East Side's own Shakespeare, the prolific Jacob Gordin. I witnessed the classic art of magnificent tragedians like Jacob P. Adler, Zelig Mogulescu, David Kessler, Bertha Kalich and the others. In our dim, miserable basement on Chrystie Street I heard my father and his friends, semi-literate sweatshop slaves, argue with passion over the classic actors and plays. The East Side was crazy about the classic theater. My father could recite whole portions of *The Merchant of Venice* and Schiller's *The Robbers*, two favorites of the time.

Near us lay a tenement block called by sociologists the "Lung Block," for it contained the highest percentage of tuberculars of any similar area in the world. The people worked 12 and 16 hours a day in the Promised Land, lived on a diet of herring and bread and died at 30 and 40. Where did they find the extra energy to love Shakespeare and Sholem Aleichem? How did the flower of Jewish tenderness survive in such a grinding hell of slave labor; the dear, tender folk songs of my people that I heard at my cradle so deeply human and sad like the Negro spirituals?

The East Side of my boyhood was also a heroic battleground where the sweatshop slaves wrote poetry of protest and rose in a series of great, heroic strikes and political campaigns against their poverty. Against the cops, judges, goons, politicians, editors, clergymen and all the entrenched army of exploitation, they sacrificed and won victories.

The fervent East Side tailors and carpenters who debated

literature and the arts, and revered their actors, musicians and writers, also debated social problems. In crowded tea house and tenement flat, in the sweatshops at work, men and women fought over socialism, anarchism, single tax, Zionism and other proposed roads to freedom. The first Socialist congressman in America, Meyer London, was elected from the East Side. Emma Goldman, the anarchist, lectured in Yiddish to big audiences. Jack London, Mark Twain, Eugene V. Debs and other non-Jews who fought for humanity often visited the East Side and found many admirers and followers there.

Debasement of Jewish Workers' Culture

In their blood, sweat and tears the Jewish workers of the East Side formed the great garment workers' unions which eventually became the vanguard of labor progress in America. Today, David Dubinsky the slick opportunist dominates some once-Jewish trade unions with his philosophy of a businessman. And the classic stage of yesteryear has been turned into the vulgar musical comedy of Second Avenue, a cheap imitation of cheap "American" musical comedy. The language there has been "Americanized" into a jargon of bad half-Yiddish and worse half-English so that the theaters may catch a younger generation that no longer understands the "mother tongue."

It isn't Dubinsky's fault alone, or any other individual's, that Yiddish culture and the spiritual life of the Jew have become so vulgarized. It has happened with other national groups, too; it has happened to the whole nation. American capitalism has steadily undermined the humane values and aspirations of the fathers of American democracy—Jefferson, Lincoln, Emerson, Whitman and John Brown. Never was there such a cultural degradation. Despite a sprinkling of books, symphony orchestras and art galleries, the automobile and the frigidaire remain the chief gods of the cultural pantheon. The billion dollar corporations which grow bigger and bigger now put their commercial seal on everything America reads, thinks, hears or sees. An Emerson, Whitman or Mark Twain could not find a big publisher today—indeed, they have begun taking Mark Twain out of the libraries. It is the epoch of TV, the comic book and Walter Winchell, John Foster Dulles and Mickey Spillane.

And there has been an increase of the Jewish allrightniks. A certain number of these allrightniks are taking the next logical step for an opportunist in America—they have become appeasers of McCarthyism. It is no comfort to reflect that in every troubled epoch, the Jews, like other peoples, have had their own quota of traitors and renegades, that Hitler had a Judenrat of degenerate allrightniks who spied for him and betrayed Jews into the death camps and furnaces.

Yet I sometimes catch myself feeling that the Jews, above all others, should never develop such cancerous growths, which is silly, of course, since the Jews are not a chosen people. We must accept the fact that Jews are like other

peoples and fight our McCarthyite Jews without apologies. The McCarthyites among us are not many. Indeed, the vast majority of Jews, so experienced and sensitized by their long history of persecution, are anti-McCarthy today.

Jewish history is something I teach to my children to give them understanding and a just pride and to make them strong against McCarthyite intimidation.

Traditional Fight for Freedom

Ours is a heritage of courage in the face of impossible odds. It is a history of battle for human freedom. This is probably why Jews feel so keenly the shame of having McCarthyites in our midst. It goes against the great tradition.

I, who am no longer a synagogue goer, join with all my heart those centuries of Jews who died for the synagogue. They really died for man's right to his own life, his own soul, culture, religion. When such freedom is denied the Jew, you can be sure it is being denied to all mankind. To fight for the rights of Jews is to fight for human advance, just as to fight for Negro rights in America is to fight for the equality and freedom of all Americans. When Jew and Negro are equal guests at the board, America will be free at last—and not till then.

Some of the youth born in America have been made ashamed of their European parents and the rich, humane Yiddish culture. How few novels and other books on Jewish themes have been written by Jewish authors of the second generation! There are many, many Jewish writers, but they seem to have run away from their people. One

doesn't ask them to give up the universality which is the right of every author, the freedom to follow one's own special creative star. But let every American Jew in his lifetime bring one little stone, at least, to the building of the temple of world brotherhood, the house of his people. Let him do it for the good of his own soul, for his own liberation from the neurotic twists and guilts that come with Jewish anti-Semitism, however disguised.

It is hard to be a Jew. But it is also hard to be a man today, not a grovelling opportunist, informer and fascist stooge. A Jew who loves his people today has to fight against fascism. The Jew can survive only under democracy. The history of the Jew is a continuous story of such struggle. From the time of Jeremiah to the Spanish civil war, where so many heroic young Jews filled the ranks of democracy, Jews have fought and died for the brotherhood of man, the scientific name of which today is socialism. That is the great tradition.

As an American Jew, I share the culture of the land where I was born, whose schools and literature formed my mind. I love also the poetry and brotherhood of the progressive Jewish tradition. Working class America is my father, working class Jewry is my mother. The best in both cultures is joined in man's universal struggle for equality, liberty, and fraternity. There is no conflict in my mind. I am a man and a Jew. As for the McCarthyites, Jewish or otherwise, like all fascists, they are fast losing the world. With them will go wage slavery, racism and commercialized culture! *Lechaim*, Jews, it is grand to be a man and a Jew!

It's happening in the 301st year:

A MIAMI MOTHER'S WARNING

By Mrs. Augusta Birnberg

TO THE Jews of Miami: Make no mistake. An Anti-Semitic drive is strongly on its way. I know. I have taken an oath, therefore I cannot reveal how I know.

Damon Runyon, Jr., has accused me of being a card-carrying Communist. I want to state here and now, I am not and never have been a Communist. If he can lie about me, logic leads me to believe that he can lie about anyone. Hitler started by calling every self-respecting, liberal, intelligent person a Communist and wound up by spitting out those few Jews who took him to their bosoms.

The fear for my child mounts higher and higher with each sleepless night. They will take her away from me "legally," my heart tells me, or they will come in the middle of the night and break windows, as witness the organized telephone calls that come to me. The past weeks of emotional upheaval have resolved itself into waves of nausea with my child.

I would have been insulted had the Grand Jury not cited me for contempt. My soul is clean and I can look every man straight in the eye. Raised in a strictly Orthodox Jewish home, I have been taught by the Bible that a "muser" (informer) is the lowest form of human life.

According to Jewish law, a *muser* is not buried in the same cemetery with decent people. A good Jew is not a *muser*. They may cut you to ribbons, but the courageous person who feels that only God is his witness, stands squarely with his shoulders straight—and fights back at evil forces.

But the law has changed its fashion. Our Constitution says, "you are innocent until you are proven guilty." Today's fashion in law is: you are guilty and you must prove your own innocence. My message to the common man is: You haven't a chance—unless you support the Constitution as it was written by our revered forefathers, may they sleep in eternal peace!

The men of the bar are terrified. The few that you can count on the fingers of one hand, know they are jeopardizing their careers by defending you. To these few men: Courage! God will give you strength and we will not falter. To all attorneys who fear for their livelihood: Here is your challenge! Teach [Florida Attorney General] Brautigam the law, which you have pledged to uphold. He and his cohorts are making their own laws.

Make my home safe! Let me bring my child home. I am lost without her.