

**Hershl Hartman**

## 'Trial' in the Lubyanka, 1952

### The Prosecution and Execution of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee

*The following docudrama, written with research and translation assistance from Igor Kotler, describes the Soviet prosecution of members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee between May 8<sup>th</sup> and July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1952, which ended with the execution of thirteen leading Jewish cultural figures on August 12<sup>th</sup> of that year. The secret 'trial' was held in the Dzherzhinsky Clubroom of the NKVD (secret police) in the Lubyanka prison in Moscow. All statements by the accused are direct quotations excerpted from the archival record. Other passages are based on Arkady Vaksberg's Stalin Against the Jews (1994). An early version of this script was written for the 2000 annual Los Angeles commemoration of the executions; a revised version was presented at the 2004 commemoration by actor-members of The Sholem Community, which joined in sponsoring the event that year with The Workmen's Circle, Los Angeles Yiddish Culture Club, Yiddishkayt L.A., Meretz USA/Hashomer Hatzair, Society for Humanistic Judaism, Jewish Labor Committee and Emma Lazarus Jewish Women's Club. The annual ad hoc coalition has since been joined by Ameinu, California Institute for Yiddish Culture and Language, Na'amat and the Progressive Jewish Alliance. A version of this docudrama is being published in the July-August issue of Outlook in Canada.*

**REPORTER** (*sotto voce*): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. We're at a secret location in Moscow in 1952, at some point between May 8<sup>th</sup> and July 18<sup>th</sup>. There's a trial going on . . .

**JUDGE:** The Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is back in session, hearing the case against the Presidium of the Jewish Antifascist Committee. The judges are myself, Justice Lieutenant General Cheptsov, and Major Generals Dmitriev and Zaryanov. We will now hear from the accused —

**REPORTER** (*breaking in*): Excuse me, your honor, but for the sake of our listening audience, could you also identify the prosecutor and the defense attorneys?

**JUDGE:** There is no prosecutor. There aren't any defense attorneys. We follow Soviet law, established on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1934, for cases that involve anti-Soviet activity. The guilt of the defendants has already



*Ben-Tsiyon (B.Z.) Goldberg, fourth from left, visiting from the U.S. with Major-General Aaron Katz (second from right) and some members of the doomed Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, including (left to right): Itsik Feffer (writer) Shmuel Halkin (writer), Shloyme Mikhoels (actor-director), Lina Shtern (scientist), and Peretz Markish (writer).*

been established by their statements during interrogation. Our purpose here is to investigate further the nationalistic and espionage activities

of these defendants. Their sentences have already been determined by the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

**REPORTER:** I see. (*sotto voce*) Ladies and gentlemen, to help you understand this very strange trial, please meet our commentator, John Smith.

---

**HERSHL HARTMAN** is a secular Jewish *vegvayzer*, Education Director of The Sholem Community in Los Angeles, and a member of the Workmen's Circle District Committee there. In the 1950s, he was the first editorial assistant for *Jewish Life* and, in the 1960s, the "Parents Corner" columnist for *JEWISH CURRENTS*. © 2007 by Hershl Hartman.

John, help us out here. What's going on, and who's on trial?

**COMMENTATOR:** It's very, very complicated, even from our perspective half a century later. In April, 1942, with Hitler's armies at the gates of Moscow and Leningrad, and his killing machine already at work trying to wipe out all the Jews under Nazi rule, Joseph Stalin set up the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. The original idea actually came from two Polish Jewish refugees, the Bundist leaders Henryk Ehrlich and Viktor Alter. Alter and Ehrlich were secretly executed in 1941 or '42, but that's a story for another broadcast.

Stalin's Committee was made up of leading Soviet Jewish intellectuals, scientists, and public figures, directed by Solomon Lozovsky, a Jew who was a major Soviet propagandist. The Committee was supposed to rally political and financial support from Jews all over the world for the Soviet war effort. So it was allowed to appeal to "brother Jews," and to promote Jewish consciousness and Yiddish culture.

**REPORTER:** What's wrong with that?

**COMMENTATOR:** Let's listen . . .

**JUDGE:** Accused Itsik Feffer, you have admitted that you and your colleagues were guilty of Jewish nationalism. Describe your criminal actions.

**ITSIK FEFFER:** I was the assistant editor of the Committee's Yiddish newspaper, *Eynikeyt*, "Unity." I consider myself guilty in the work of this newspaper. From its first issues, it had nationalist tendencies. We published material about the heroism of Jews, but we separated it from the heroism of the Soviet people. We said it was necessary to record

how many Jews were outstanding heroes in the war. The Committee also counted the number of Jewish victims of the Nazis, which later was the basis of *The Black Book*, which described Nazi war crimes . . .

**COMMENTATOR** (*sotto voce*): The book that the defendant is describing was a compilation of eyewitness reports about the murder of 1.5 million Soviet Jews by the Nazis. It was coedited by Ilya Ehrenburg, a well-known journalist, and novelist Vasily Grossman. *The Black Book* was to appear in Russian, English, and Yiddish editions, but it was suddenly suppressed in 1948. Its printing plates were destroyed and the book was never published in the USSR.

**FEFFER:** Under instructions from the Soviet Information Bureau, the Committee sent articles to Jewish media all over the world about the life of Soviet Jews, their heroism in the armed forces and in defense industries, and in general about Jewish culture.

**REPORTER:** Wasn't the confession that we're hearing withdrawn by Itsik Feffer later in the trial?

**COMMENTATOR:** That's right. Feffer, by the way, was the most popular Yiddish poet in the Soviet Union. Many of his poems were set to music, and a few became popular all over the world.

**JUDGE:** Accused Dovid Bergelson. Who carried out this nationalist propaganda?

**DOVID BERGELSON:** There were the nationalists Shloyme Mikhoels . . .

**COMMENTATOR** (*sotto voce*): Mikhoels directed the Jewish State Theater.

**BERGELSON:** Shakhno Epshteyn . . .

**COMMENTATOR:** A journalist.

**BERGELSON:** Itsik Feffer, Leyb Kvitko, Perets Markish . . .

**COMMENTATOR:** Popular poets.

**BERGELSON:** And others, as well as myself, under the leadership and ideological guidance of Solomon Lozovsky. We all participated in the wide dissemination of nationalist ideas in articles we sent abroad and in our newspaper.

**COMMENTATOR** (*sotto voce*): Epshteyn died in 1945; Mikhoels was assassinated by the secret police in Minsk on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1948.

**JUDGE:** Accused Bergelson, explain what you mean to the court.

**BERGELSON:** The role of Jews on both the war front and in the rear was magnified. In fact, that was nationalist propaganda.

**JUDGE:** Since you and your co-conspirators were arrested four years ago, a team of experts in the Yiddish language and literature has been reviewing all your writings and the discussions of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. For example, the experts report that the Committee promoted reverence for biblical images and preached the unity of Jews throughout the world, based only on their blood, without consideration of their class differences.

**BERGELSON:** The glorification of biblical images was common to almost everyone. But I don't see any kind of crime in this . . . some biblical images are very useful.

**REPORTER** (*sotto voce*): John, why doesn't the defendant point out that preaching Jewish unity was exactly the reason the Soviet government set up the Committee?

## Fifty-five years ago, on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1952 . . .

thirteen prominent Soviet Jews were executed in the basement of the Lubyanka prison in Moscow. All had served on the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, established at the close of 1941 (six months after Hitler's attack on the USSR), with the aim of soliciting material and financial aid from the West. Four other anti-fascist committees — for youth, women, scientists and Slavs — were created simultaneously, under the direction of Solomon Losovsky, a Jew who was deputy chair of the Soviet Information Bureau. He too was executed on the 'Night of the Murdered Poets.'

The committee, chaired by the charismatic actor and theater director Solomon Mikhoels, broadcast pro-Soviet propaganda several times a week and helped to fill the pages of *Eynikeyt* (Unity), a new Yiddish newspaper established in 1942. In June, 1943, Mikhoels and the poet-writer Itsik Feffer made a highly publicized tour of the U.S., where they met with Albert Einstein, Charlie Chaplin, Yehudi Menuhin, Chaim Weizmann, and other important cultural and political figures, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and led an anti-Nazi rally at Yankee Stadium. At a meeting with James Rosenberg, a leader of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Mikhoels and Feffer were asked about the prospects of settling Jewish survivors of the Nazi genocide in the Crimea, which led them to submit a memorandum to Joseph Stalin on the subject. Stalin viewed this as evidence that the Committee was seeking to become a nationalistic power center representing all Soviet Jews.

As part of his paranoid anti-Semitic campaign following the war, Stalin disbanded the Committee in 1948 and proceeded to destroy its members. Mikhoels was murdered in an "accident"

**COMMENTATOR:** I think Mr. Bergelson is about to make that point. Let's listen.

**JUDGE:** In its "Appeal to the Jews of the World," the Committee called upon every Jew to take an oath, "I Am a Child of the Jewish People." Isn't that an appeal for unity based only on blood?

**BERGELSON:** This was an appeal for unity in the fight against fascism, when fascism had attacked the Soviet Union. This was a time when people with nationalist feelings also got involved in the struggle. There were many expressions that were allowed at that time as appropriate,

but now they are considered to be "nationalism."

**JUDGE:** Take, for example, Itsik Feffer's poem, "I Am a Jew," in which your co-conspirator cries throughout the poem, "I Am a Jew."

**BERGELSON:** There is nothing criminal about that, nothing wrong. If I meet someone and say, "I am a Jew," is there something wrong in that?

**REPORTER (sotto voce):** John, can you explain just what is meant by "nationalism" in this proceeding, and why it's considered a crime?

**COMMENTATOR:** Well, in Soviet-

early that year; Dovid Hofshiteyn was arrested in September; *Der Emes*, the Yiddish publishing house, was shuttered in November; arrest orders were issued for Feffer and Benjamin Zuskin, Mikhoels' successor as director of the Moscow State Yiddish Theater in December. In January, arrests were made of Boris Shimelovich, director of Moscow's Botkin Hospital; unionist Yosif Yuzefovich; Solomon Lozovsky and his fellow deputy commissar Solomon Bregman; writers Leyb Kvitko, Peretz Markish and Dovid Bergelson; editors Emilia Tyumin and Ilya Vatenberg, along with Vatenberg's wife Khayke; and biochemist Lina Shtern. By July, a final arrest was made of translator and journalist Leon Talmy.

Confessions to the 'crimes' of bourgeois nationalism, treason, spying, and creating a Jewish 'fifth column' were obtained through beatings and abuse. The defendants were confined in prison until secret court proceedings began on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1952, by which time the death penalty, abolished in 1947, had been reinstated. Other Yiddish literary figures had already been recently killed, including the novelist Der Nister (Pinkhas Kahanovich), who died in a labor camp, literary critic Yitskhok Nusinov, who died in prison, and journalists Shmuel Persov, Miriam Aizenshtadt-Zheleznova, and Naum Levin, who were shot.

Only Feffer and Tyumin confessed to being guilty of the charges against them. Lozovsky, Markish, Shimelovich, and Bregman refused to plead guilty to anything, while others pleaded "guilty in part." All of the accused except Lina Shtern were sentenced to death between July 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> and shot less than a month later. (Bregman died before his sentence could be carried out.)

A memorial to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was unveiled in Moscow in September, 2004 at the Solomon Mikhoels Jewish Cultural Center in Moscow, established in 1989.

speaking, "nationalism" means promoting national or ethnic identity ahead of Soviet or proletarian identity. But, in practice, this was considered negative only for some ethnic groups — the Chechens, for example, and the Jews. Glorification of the Russian heritage, on the other hand, was seen as patriotism. In some periods, it was also permitted to stress Uzbek and Georgian culture. On the other hand, the whole Chechen people, and the ethnic German minority, and the Tatars in the Crimea, were exiled to Siberia during the war because of "nationalism" — and Stalin planned to do something similar to the Jews.

**JUDGE:** Accused Bergelson, do you

agree with the conclusion of the experts that, after the war, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee undertook nationalist activities that were far beyond its approved function? That it became involved in questions of resettlement of Jews after the war, and issues of anti-Semitic discrimination?

**BERGELSON:** I talked about this in my interrogation. I pointed out that these nationalist activities were because of the great distress of the surviving Jews, due to the fact that so many of their relatives had been killed. The leaders of the Committee, Feffer, Mikhoels, and Epsheytn, combined with the negligence of Lozovsky, inflamed this process. Even those who had been free of nationalism, like Solomon Bregman, were caught up in it.

**COMMENTATOR:** Bregman was a deputy minister of the Russian Soviet Republic. He was one of the fifteen original defendants, but he died in prison during the four-year investigation that led up to this trial.

**REPORTER:** What, exactly, is the judge describing as “nationalist activities”?

**COMMENTATOR:** By the end of the war in 1945, the Committee was the only official Jewish body still in existence. Jews who had survived in the armed forces and in the partisan groups, as well as those who had managed to hide in Nazi-occupied areas and those who had been transported beyond the Urals at the start of the war, turned to the Committee for help. Listen . . .

**JUDGE:** Accused Benjamin Zuskin, as a leading actor of the Jewish State Theater, what can you tell us about its director, Shloyme Mikhoels, in connection with this nationalist activity?

**BENJAMIN ZUSKIN:** People began to show up at the theater in the mornings, sitting in lines like at the dentist, to see Mikhoels. He was a member of the Moscow City Council as well as Chair of the Anti-Fascist Committee. One day, he sat backstage, looking pale and tired. He asked me why I had come so early. I said, “It’s not early, it’s 5:30 in the afternoon.” Mikhoels said: “5:30? But I haven’t had a thing to eat all day! These Jews are torturing me! They’re not allowed into the schools, they can’t get jobs! The Committee should do something about this!”

I told him that such activity was not the job of the Committee, but if he wanted, he should propose it to the Committee. He kept seeing more and more Jews who complained about anti-Semitic discrimination. It got so bad that the theater did not prepare a new production in 1946.

**REPORTER:** So promoting Jewish identity and Yiddish culture was considered the crime of nationalism? And so was helping Jews after the devastation of Nazism. Anything else?

**COMMENTATOR:** There were all kinds of side issues. Some leaders of the Committee had sent a letter to Stalin arguing that, because Jewish life had been devastated in the vast area of the Nazi occupation, the survivors could be settled in the northern part of Crimea, since Birobidjan hadn’t succeeded as a Jewish “homeland.” Then there was the issue of traveling abroad. Here we go . . .

**JUDGE:** Accused poets and writers Kvitko, Hofshteyn, Markish, Bergelson; accused journalists and editors/translators Talmi, Vatenberg and Vatenberg-Ostrovskaya: Is it true that all of you fled from the Soviet Union after Lenin’s Great October Revolution and that you lived, variously, in

Germany, the U.S., and Palestine, and that some of you didn’t return to our Soviet homeland until 1930?

**BERGELSON:** Yes, it is true. That was public knowledge when we were appointed to the Presidium of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Why is that a crime now?

**JUDGE:** Accused Vatenberg and wife, Vatenberg-Ostrovskaya, is it true that you were leaders of the Poale Zionists, the Labor Zionist Party, in Austria and in the U.S., and that you did not return from America until 1938?

**ILYA VATENBERG:** Yes, but, nevertheless, we were accepted into the Antifascist Committee. Why is that a crime now?

**REPORTER:** And why are these ‘crimes’ capital offenses?

**COMMENTATOR:** They’re not, by themselves. But there were also the crimes of “slander of the Soviet state” and the related crime of espionage.

**REPORTER:** Espionage? Yiddish writers, poets, an actor, a medical researcher, a historian, a doctor, a high-level Soviet propogandist and a government minister — how could they be spies?

**COMMENTATOR:** They had contact with two left-wing Yiddish journalists from America in 1946: Paul Novick, editor of the communist daily *Morgn Frayhayt*, and Ben-Tsion Goldberg, a columnist for the non-communist, moderate newspaper *Der Tog*. Goldberg happened to be Sholem Aleichem’s son-in-law.

**JUDGE:** Accused Lozovsky, tell about your contacts with the spies Goldberg and Novick.

**SOLOMON LOZOVSKY:** All I did was

to allocate funds for Goldberg's visit. Similar visits were authorized by other types of committees. They were politically necessary. As for Novick, I am accused of having requested a visa for him on behalf of the Committee, but by that time, in the fall of 1946, I no longer had any connection with the Committee. In all my seven years at the Foreign Affairs Ministry, I never had any connection with the issuance of visas for visits to the Soviet Union.

William Z. Foster, the chair of the American Communist Party, had told me that Novick was the editor of a Communist newspaper and a very good guy. When Novick came to Moscow, he asked to see me. As head of the Soviet Information Bureau, of course I received him. I received all kinds of bourgeois bastards, and now an editor of a Communist newspaper comes — why wouldn't I receive him?

I am accused of receiving the spies Novick and Goldberg. It would be interesting to learn just when the secret police learned that they were spies. If it was known before they came, why did they allow them to come? If they knew Novick and Goldberg were spies, they should have warned the Central Committee of the Communist Party, even if they didn't want to warn Lozovsky. How can they now accuse me of having met with Novick and Goldberg to establish a spy connection with them? As the head of the Soviet Information Bureau, I met with I don't remember how many hundreds of journalists: Chinese, French, Japanese, Americans, British, and so on. But when a Jew came from the United States, I immediately fell into espionage. That's ridiculous! Not the Central Committee, not the Secret Police, and not I had any reason to suspect him.

Novick is accused of wandering about the Soviet Union collecting

information. This is slander! There are people in the Soviet Union who have known him for decades. If he was a spy, that didn't come out until after he left. Why am I accused of things I couldn't have known? Did I have a better apparatus than the secret police, which has agents in every country?

**REPORTER:** Wow! This guy really told them off! What were the American spies supposed to have learned from the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, anyway?

**COMMENTATOR:** Three things. One, that there was persistent anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union — which would be “slander against the Soviet State.” Two, that the Soviet economy in the areas that the Nazis had occupied was in ruins and that help was needed from the West—which would be “revealing state secrets.” Finally, it was said that Goldberg had been given a secret document about British colonial policies.

**REPORTER:** But didn't Novick keep *denying* Soviet anti-Semitism, even while these defendants were in jail and even after news of their executions leaked out? Didn't he admit it only after Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes in 1956, ten years after his visit to the USSR?

**COMMENTATOR:** That's right. And that would have been a telling argument for a defense attorney to make — but remember, there were no defense attorneys. There was evidence that contradicted the charges, but the verdict and sentences had been determined before the trial began.

Five years after thirteen of the fourteen defendants were executed, four years after Stalin died and one year after Khrushchev revealed Stalin's brutal crimes, the chair of the Court, General Cheptsov, wrote a long let-

ter about the trial to Soviet Marshal Zhukov, trying to prove that, if only he'd have been allowed by higher authority, this travesty wouldn't have happened. Listen . . .

**GENERAL CHEPTSOV:** At the trial there was no proof of the existence of an underground nationalist-Jewish center, since all these nationalist manifestations were done legally and, I would say, with the full agreement of the appropriate government institutions. Charges of espionage for the U.S. were also not sufficiently proven in the court, and in individual matters, they were disproven. All the defendants denied these charges. The experts changed their previous conclusions under questioning and could not authenticate the secrecy of the information placed in various newspaper articles sent to Britain and the U.S. by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. They did not offer proof that these articles were actually sent to the U.S.; they admitted that they had overreached their competence by stating that the defendants were involved in espionage. When I asked the secret police for evidence that Goldberg and Novick were American spies, they declined to provide it. On the matter of Lozovsky giving Goldberg a paper on the colonial policies of Britain, witness Pukhlov — a Party employee — told the court that the paper was written by him, that it did not contain secret information, and that it was given to Lozovsky to give to Goldberg with the knowledge of the Party. This was all revealed toward the end of the trial. Clearly, it was impossible to pass sentence in this case with such unchecked and dubious materials.

After pursuing the matter all the way up to Malenkov, comrade Stalin's closest aide, I was told to execute the decision of the Politburo. Assuming that he had spoken on this

issue with comrade Stalin, for which I have definite confirmation, I told Malenkov I would pass along his instruction to the judges . . .

**REPORTER:** Cheptsov sounds like a decent sort of guy.

**COMMENTATOR:** No way to tell. Remember that the Politburo chose him to be the judge, and that his letter was written when the Soviets were trying to blame all their crimes on Stalin, his closest collaborators, and Beria's secret police. Let's listen to Cheptsov at the actual trial . . .

**CHEPTSOV:** Former Foreign Ministry official Solomon Lozovsky, poets/writers Itsik Feffer, Leyb Kvitko, Perets Markish, Dovid Bergelson, Dovid HofshTEYN; doctor of medicine Boris Shmelovich, actor Benyomin Zuskin, historian Yosif Yuzefovich, journalist Leon Talmi; editors and translators Ilya Vatenberg, Khayke

Vatenberg-Ostrovskaya and Emilya Tyumin: All thirteen of you have been condemned under Article 58 dash 1, Section A of the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, to the most extreme punishment, shooting and confiscation of all personal property. Academician Lina Shtern, you are sentenced to three years, six months in prison, to be followed by exile to a remote area for five years, without confiscation of personal property. In addition, all of the accused are stripped of the scores of medals they have won, including the highest Order of Lenin, the Red Banner of Labor, the medals for Glorious Service in the Great Patriotic War and for Victory Over Germany. Your requests for appeal are hereby denied. Sentence to be carried out in the usual manner and at the usual place on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1952. Signed, A. Cheptsov, Member of the Communist Party of

the Soviet Union since 1927, Party card no. 04521575.

**REPORTER:** And that was it?

**COMMENTATOR:** Almost. The families of the condemned were not told what had happened until after 1956. Many were encouraged to keep sending parcels of food and clothing to their loved ones.

A voice from that trial in 1952 still echoes down through the years, to all of us. The words are those of Dovid HofshTEYN, but they spoke for all of them.

**JUDGE:** Accused, your confessions are correct, aren't they? You recognize them?

**DOVID HOFSHTEYN** (*in Yiddish*):  
*Neyn! Ikh onerken zey nisht!*

**COMMENTATOR:** "No!" he said. "I don't recognize them! I reject them!" ■