

III: Soviet Jews

How My Father Last Met Itzik Feffer

BY PAUL ROBESON JR.

I JOIN with you today because the Jewish cultural tradition has always been a part of my family's cultural heritage. I can remember vividly how more than 30 years ago my father took me to a wonderful performance of Sholem Aleichem's short stories by a cast of Black and white actors and actresses.

In Moscow in 1959, at a celebration of the 100th birthday of Sholem Aleichem, Paul Robeson said: "... The life-span of Sholem Aleichem paralleled that of my father, and the lives and experiences of their peoples were also very parallel.... How interesting and how wonderful that the tender works of Sholem Aleichem are a natural part of the heritage of my grandchildren — a dear, living example of the closeness of my father's people and the folk of Sholem Aleichem."

I also join with you because Paul Robeson developed a close personal friendship with the famous Soviet Yiddish actor, Solomon Mikhoels, who was murdered in 1948 by the Soviet authorities; and with the poet Itzik Feffer, who is among those whose memory we honor today.

In 1958 my father wrote: "... I remember the great artist Solomon Mikhoels from my first visit to Moscow in 1934... I remember ... his great performance of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and think of the appearance in Russia of Ira Aldridge, the great Afro-American actor in that same role in the middle of the 19th century....

"Mikhoels and I appeared, together with the poet Feffer, in a tremendous Peace Rally at the Polo Grounds here in New York in July of 1943....

"There were several opportunities to meet Mikhoels. His was a warm, rich personality; we talked about the theatre, various cultures, the likenesses between the Negro and Yiddish musics, and the richness of the various cultures in the Soviet Republics...

"I remember him with affection, admiration and respect."

Many years ago, my father told me a dramatic story about a meeting that he had with Itzik Feffer during his 1949 visit to the Soviet Union.

There is another story circulating about a meeting between Paul and Feffer, which is partly mistaken. It originated in an account written by Mikhoels' daughter* and claims that in 1951 Feffer was brought to see Paul from Moscow's Lubyanka Prison by two so-called interpreters.

Paul could not possibly have been in the U.S.S.R. in 1951 because his passport was revoked in 1950 and he did not travel to Europe from Feb., 1950 until his passport was restored in 1958. So the story which he told me describes the only meeting he could have had with Feffer in the U.S.S.R. after the War.

As soon as Paul arrived in the U.S.S.R. on his June, 1949 trip, he was struck by the virulent campaign throughout the press against "Cosmopolitans" and "Zionists." The tone of some of the articles reminded him of the purges of the mid-1930s. And he could sense the anti-Semitic undertones in the editorials.

Deeply concerned about the fate of many of his friends in the Jewish cultural community, Paul set about trying to make personal contact with them. After he became politely but implacably insistent, his hosts finally arranged for Itzik Feffer to come to see him. (Paul had no way of knowing Feffer had been arrested on Dec. 24, 1948).

One afternoon Feffer came to visit Paul. He was unaccompanied and looked very well. They greeted each other warmly and launched into animated conversation in Russian. But Paul quickly noticed that Feffer's comments were at variance with his gestures.

Continuing a "normal" conversation, Paul responded to this "body language," and with the aid of a few handwritten words and phrases (which Paul later destroyed) Feffer "told" him a terrible story in this surreptitious way.

The room was bugged. Mikhoels had been murdered the year before on Stalin's personal order. Feffer was in serious trouble, and many of the most outstanding Jewish cultural figures had already been arrested. They would come for the rest of them soon. There was little hope for any of them, including Feffer (here Feffer drew his finger across his throat). And there had just been a massive purge of the Party in Leningrad — like the awful days of 1937.

When Feffer rose to leave, he and Paul embraced like brothers; both of

*Herbert Marshall, "Paul Robeson's Obituary — the Aftermath," *Bulletin of the Center of Soviet and East European Studies*, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, #18, Fall, 1976, p. 1, who cites article in Russian, "The Murder of Mikhoels," by his daughter, Natalya Mikhoels-Vovsi, in Russian-language journal, *Vremya i My*, Tel Aviv, 1976, p. 140. This story appeared in 1974 in the French edition of *The Long Return* by Esther Markish, widow of Peretz Markish, published in Paris; translated from the French by D.I. Goldstein. This book was published in English in the USA in 1978, where the story appears on p. 172, but the date of the Robeson-Feffer meeting is given as 1950. The authentic date, as indicated above, is June, 1949.

them had tears in their eyes, because they knew that they were probably seeing each other for the last time.

Soon afterwards, Paul sang a concert in the largest concert hall in Leningrad — a “Hero-City” that had withstood a prolonged and devastating Nazi siege in which an estimated one million of its citizens perished. After he finished “Ol’ Man River,” the last song on the program, he announced that he would sing only a single encore — a special song he had just recently learned.

Then Paul spoke with great emotion of the deep and enduring cultural ties between the United States and the Soviet Union, of the great Jewish writer Sholem ALeichem and the Soviet and American Jewish writers and actors who were continuing his tradition. Finally, he spoke of his close personal friendship with Mikhoels and Feffer, and of his great joy at meeting Feffer again.

By now there was a hush in the huge hall. Paul took a deep breath and explained the song he was about to sing — the song by Hirsh Glick of the Jewish partisan fighters which has become the hymn of the Jewish resistance. He would sing the song in Yiddish, but first he recited the lyrics in Russian:

Never say that you have reached the very end,
When leaden skies a bitter future may portend.
For sure the hour for which we yearn will yet arrive,
And our marching steps will thunder: *we survive!*”

When he finished the song there was a long moment of complete silence. Then the entire audience responded with a great flood-tide of emotion. The ovation swelled throughout the hall in waves — rising, falling, then rising again to an ever higher intensity.

As he looked out over the audience, Paul saw an amazing sight. Many people, often complete strangers who just happened to be sitting side-by-side, turned to each other — tentatively at first — and then threw their arms around one another. Some wept openly on each other’s shoulders. Jewish intellectuals and Russian Party officials alike had been seared by Stalin’s machine of destruction that had consumed their loved ones. At that moment they were united by the specter of the Nazi Holocaust, and the Warsaw Ghetto Rebellion had in a sense merged with the ordeal of Leningrad during the war.

Finally, I join with you today because as a Black American I am acutely aware that the treatment of minorities by any regime is one of the fundamental indications of the justice of its rule. The treatment of the Jewish people and their culture in the Soviet Union is one of the important

measuring sticks of the health or sickness of Soviet society as a whole. The repression of Jewish culture over the past 40 years contrasts dramatically with its flourishing growth in the years immediately after the October Revolution and is a sign of a retrogression of Soviet culture.

Yes, there is anti-Semitism in the U.S.S.R! Yes, it has been ignored, condoned and sometimes even instigated by the official state and Party apparatus. And yes, Stalin personally, over a period of many years, was responsible for many anti-Semitic policies and acts.

One must be blind and deaf not to see and hear this evil. One must suppress memory and reason in order to keep silent.

I shall not burden you with examples and statistics. A trip to the library or, even better, the pages of JEWISH CURRENTS, will provide more than enough specific evidence.

Yet the Jewish people of the Soviet Union, in their sacrifices during the October Revolution, the Civil War and the most difficult days of building up the U.S.S.R., were second to no other ethnic group of the Russian people. Over 500,000 served with honor in the Armed Forces during the war against Fascism, and Jews suffered more than any other segment of the Soviet population — 2,000,000, or 40% of the Jewish population of the U.S.S.R., were murdered by the Nazis.

The Soviet poet, Yevgenii Yevtushenko, wrote:

Russians and Jews,
One epoch raised them both.
Breaking time, like bread;
They share the selfsame era.
... Here's the basis of Leninist morality:
That both Jew and Russian died
In bloodiest battle
For their common soil...

The murder of the 24 Soviet Jewish cultural leaders 29 years ago today was not only a tragedy for the Jewish people. It was especially a Russian tragedy and a tragedy for all those who believe in socialism. For these Jewish martyrs were courageous fighters in the cause of socialism, and the arbitrary terror that struck them down engulfed all the peoples of the U.S.S.R. Tyranny, like freedom, is indivisible.

After the failure of the Decembrist uprising against the Tsar in 1825, the famous Russian poet, Mikhail Lermontov, wrote the following bitter lines (in my free translation):

...Farewell to thee, oh unwashed Russia,
Land of slaves and land of masters;

And you blue-tinted uniforms,
And you masses who obey them.
Perhaps beyond the Caucasus' rise,
I may hide from your overseers:
From the stare of their all-seeing eyes,
And from their keen all-hearing ears...

More than 125 years later, the Soviet poet Yevgenii Yevtushenko wrote these lines in his poem, "Letter to Yesenin" (the brilliant young Soviet poet who committed suicide rather than betray his conscience). By the way, I found his poem as a typewritten sheet among my father's papers, with a hand-written request on it that it be delivered to a friend, whose name I cannot decipher, on the evening of Nov. 12 or the morning of Nov. 13, 1958. In my own free translation, Yevtushenko says to Yesenin:

... Dear Yesenin ! How Russia has changed...
And I'm afraid to say it's for the better,
But to say it's for the worse is dangerous.
See what we have built in our land, and the sputniks;
But we lost along our bumpy road
Both twenty million in the war,
And millions in the war against the people.
Forget about it, having *chopped memory* off?
But where is the hatchet with which to *chop* it off?
No one has saved others like Russian have,
No one kills their very own like Russians do.
But our ship floats. When the water is shallow,
We drag Russia forward over dry land.
That there are enough scum is no disaster;
Lenin is gone. Now that's terrible...
Who says that you were not among the fighters?...
You were more a Party man than so many villains,
Who tried to teach *you* Party loyalty....

In our way, we are helping to make sure that the voices of these martyrs will continue to be heard, and that Jewish culture will some day flourish once again in the Soviet Union. Itzik Feffer's words, especially, speak to us so proudly, so poignantly, with such unknowing irony, but yet so hopefully (in Martin Birnbaum's free translation, *JEWISH CURRENTS*, July-Aug., 1980):

The heady wine of generations
Has strengthened me upon my road,
The evil knife of gloom and pain

Could not destroy my treasured load
My faith, my people, nor my striving—
My spirit always rose anew
From under swords my cry was heard:
I am a Jew!...

The Maccabean rebel blood
Still courses through my every vein;
Solomon's wisdom rests with me
And Heine's smile of bitter pain.
Halevi's song is in my heart;
Spinoza's depth and outcry: Do —
Do what you will and still
I am a Jew!...

My eyes reflect the silent mood.
Of evenings when the sun is low —
Expressed so well by Levitan —
Of Russian bayonets aglow
And scythes swinging in the blue,
I am of Soviet Land a son —
I am a Jew!...

To the sycophants who would tell me to be quiet I say, "I am ashamed that it has taken me so long to raise my voice."

To anyone who would call me traitor I say: "If this be treason, make the most of it."

Just as the Jewish partisans sang, "Let us never say that we have reached the very end," let us never say that Jewish culture had reached the end in the Soviet Union. Our voices and the voices of many millions all over the world will amplify the song of these martyrs whom we commemorate today. And that song will thunder down the corridors of history: "We survive!"

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