

11 *The Second Split*

The chain of events in the Socialist movement following the Chicago convention of September 1919 and the change in sentiment among Jews toward the Soviet regime, though totally unrelated, were instrumental in providing incipient Communism with a voice in the community out of all proportion to its numerical strength.

The two Communist parties did not, by far, exhaust the Left potential in the SP. And all the efforts by the leadership to placate this as-yet vague opposition did not check their rapid alienation from the party. Nor did the unfriendly voice coming from Moscow cool their ardor for the Soviets.

The program of the SP convention was Leftist by any criteria except that of a Communist. It spoke for a reconstituted international of Socialist and Communist parties and excluded those parties which supported the World War. Echoing the general restlessness, the program noted: "Even in the United States the symptoms of a rebellious spirit in the ranks of the working classes are rapidly multiplying. . . . Recognizing this crucial situation at home and abroad, the Socialist Party . . . squarely takes its position with the uncompromising section of the international Socialist movement. . . ." The program pledged support to the Soviet government. It ended with, "Long live the International Socialist Revolution!" *83

To a minority of delegates this program did not go far enough. They desired affiliation with the Third International—preferring to call it by its original name—though admitting, in the same breath, that they did not approve its entire program nor all of its methods.

And in the referendum vote, the resolution of the minority received 3,475 votes against 1,444 for the majority. The Hillquit "Centrists" then agreed to join the Third International, but with a few reservations. . . .

The Socialist Party, already a skeleton of its former self, 26,766 members in 1920 out of 104,822 in 1919 (in 1921 that number was cut in half), was again torn between Rights, Centrists and Lefts.

That international affiliation should have become the focal point of the new struggle would seem to be an inflation of its importance—or a doctrinaire preoccupation with it. But one may surmise that beneath the conflict over affiliation simmered a deeper discontent. Believing that Europe was on the verge of new revolutionary eruptions and that the United States, too, was in for great industrial clashes, the new opposition felt keenly the inadequacy of the party top, accusing them of talking big but doing little.

As to the most disturbing question, dictatorship of the proletariat, the attitude of the new Left was voiced by the Jewish Federation, now a part of it, in the theses to their convention, July 2-5, 1920. Emphasizing that "democracy is sacred and a foundation of Socialism," the theses qualified that "sacredness" by adding that during great upheavals one should not stick to abstract principles and dogmas, and that when the working class is struggling for power, its hands should not be tied.*84

Especially irritating to the Left was the conduct of the defense of the five New York Socialist assemblymen expelled from the State Legislature in 1920. The Left charged that the party top had failed to perceive the enormous political significance inherent in the expulsion, limiting the struggle to the legal phase. They were certain that the party was missing a rare opportunity to lead great numbers of people in a political battle under its own banner. A resolution to that effect was introduced by Salutsky at the party convention in 1920. It caused a stormy discussion, during which Morris Hillquit severely criticized the Jewish Federation. The resolution was stricken from the convention minutes on a motion by Meyer London.*85

The failure of the legal struggle for the expelled assemblymen and the domestic political reaction, that reached its zenith in 1920, were powerful psychological factors in driving the budding Left to Sovietism. The *Naye Welt*, commenting on the expulsion, spoke for the first time of a revolutionary solution for America: "The time

has arrived when thinking people are left with but one choice . . . on the side of reaction or on the side of revolution. . . . The middle road is no longer the golden road. It is the treacherous road. . . ." *86

This was written in a moment of bitter anger. The people of the *Naye Welt*, then and later, consistently denied the possibility of a revolutionary upheaval in this country. They were still dubious of the final goal of the Soviets.

The Left formed a Committee for the Third International. Its leading people were J. Louis Engdahl, Benjamin Glassberg, Alexander Trachtenberg, the last two instructors in the Rand School of Social Science; J. B. Salutsky (Hardman), William Kruse and Juliet Stuart Poyntz. Ludwig Lore, squeezed out of the CLP, joined this group. Its members labored to convince themselves and others that they were not Communists, merely militant Marxists whose sole desire was to gather all the parties still adhering to the class struggle into one world body. This was undoubtedly their genuine approach. However, it proved a weak armor for most of them, and was soon pierced by the "enemy."

MOSCOW CLOSES THE DOOR

The issue of affiliation, though not the conflict, was decided by the famous Twenty-One Points, formulated by the Second Congress of the Comintern, July 17 to August 7, 1920, as conditions for the admission of new parties.

The Soviet leaders, anxious to avoid what they thought was the fatal weakness in the structure of the Second International—its organizational looseness—were bent on hammering the young world Communist movement into a fighting disciplined army, the Executive Committee (ECCI) in Moscow to serve as a centralized general staff exacting complete obedience. The Twenty-One Points were framed with that aim in view. *87

Point three demanded that every section—the parties would be mere sections—should create an underground apparatus parallel with the open one. Point four called for systematic propaganda in the armed forces. Point six required that it be made clear to all workers that capitalism could be destroyed solely by revolution. And in the belief that the "Centrists" were greater roadblocks to

the proletarian revolution than the open Right-Wingers, Point seven closed the gate on them. Serati and Modigliani of Italy, Kautsky and Hilferding of Germany, Longuet of France, Ramsey MacDonald of Great Britain, and Hillquit of the United States were expressly mentioned by name. Only the ECCI had the right to make an exception of individual "Centrists."

Eager to preserve what was left of the SP, Hillquit had to fight a delaying action. Point seven worked in his favor. Still, a new referendum vote approved the minority resolution instructing the NEC to apply for admission to the Comintern, despite the impossible terms. The latter could, without hesitation, comply with this directive, in the certainty that the application would be promptly rejected, as indeed it was.

The rejection, received here at the end of 1920, was a typical Zinoviev blast at the SP, which he labeled an "auxiliary organization of the American bourgeoisie." *88

The receding wave of unrest in Europe strengthened the moderates here. And at the party convention, June 1921, in Detroit, Hillquit could challenge the opposition to declare themselves openly for the dictatorship of the proletariat. But the latter refused to commit themselves. Clinging to the hope that the Third International could be reformed from within, they insisted that the party keep trying to gain admittance.

The idea of further negotiations with the Comintern was rejected by the majority. However, not being ready to affiliate with the revived Second International either, it was decided to wait for a middle-of-the-road international. Talks for such a Second-and-a-Half International had been started by the Austrian Socialists. The followers of the Committee for the Third International then broke with the party and formed the Workers Council.

Similar to the original Left Wing, the Workers Council had most of its strength in the language groups, particularly the Finnish, the Jewish and the German.

THE FEDERATION MOVING AWAY FROM THE PARTY

If the leading people of the Jewish Federation had been asked in 1920-1921 where they were headed, they could have given the reply attributed to Moses Mendelson, father of the Jewish Enlightenment

of the 18th century, when asked where he was going: "I know where I *intend* to go, but how could I know where I shall *land*." But, in all probability, that answer would not have been forthcoming. Salutsky and his associates were sure that in opposing the party policies they would go only as far as they intended to.

In the interplay of reasons and moods that drove stout opponents of Communism in 1919 to a political marriage with Communists in 1921 one must stress the long accumulating friction with the old-timers. And though a scrutiny of the polemics, written and verbal, going on between 1912 and 1919 fails to show any differences on basic principles between the two, the wide variance in outlook and tempo brought increasing ill-will. (The angry polemical exchange between Ab. Cahan and Salutsky—the former in the *Forward* and the latter in the *Yiddisher Socialist*—as early as the spring of 1914, is a fair example of the nature of the antagonism between two generations of Socialists.) *89

The federation top—and they were not the only ones—strove to draw a clear line of demarcation between the Soviet government and Communism. And, while the *Naye Welt* in this period wholeheartedly supported the former, it kept on a devastating criticism of the Communists here. Speaking about the *Funken*, the *Naye Welt* said: "The further they go, the more one can define them as a tendency of humbug, bluff and demogogy." *90

The people of the federation were not Russianized; their thoughts were of America. And their every reference to the Russian Revolution was intended largely as an argument for raising the political level of the movement here. In its first editorial on the fall of the Czar, the *Naye Welt* bemoaned the sad state of affairs here:

. . . The small and petty routine has spread itself out over the length and breadth of the labor movement. No sweep, no broad initiative, no enthusiasm. The Socialist soul is in a coma. . . . With joy and hope we greet the Revolution in Russia; with joy and hope we greet its echo in America! *91

ANTI-COMMUNISM AND ANTI-HILLQUITISM

The first indication that the federation was no longer satisfied with being to the left of the center of the party was the report of its EC to the previously mentioned CP convention, May 1920. The report complained:

The great majority of our members have stayed with us. But we have assumed a great obligation—to see . . . that the entire party should take the same Marxist and, in principle, left position. . . . Regretfully, we were put in an extremely uncomfortable position by the leadership of the party. . . . *92

The "in principle, left position" was still far from Communism. However, the SP convention proved highly disappointing to Salutsky. "The convention consisted of a conscious conservative majority," he observed, "and an instinctive revolutionary minority. . . . It is Hillquit's platform with Debs as the standard bearer. . . . A revolutionary at heart will run on a platform of conservatism. . . . The majority, . . . knew what they wanted; the minority, . . . were not clear in their aims. . . ." *93

Still, the federation definitely resisted the very idea of leaving the SP.

Replying to an important member, who wrote to him of his bitter disillusionment with the last party convention and hinted that the federation no longer had a place in it, Salutsky kept his promise to be brutally frank: "The CP this year is worth no more than it was last year . . . now it is entirely degenerated and rotten. The CLP is no better. . . ."

Salutsky was definitely against a split, for the following reasons:

1. The SP is not hopeless. The members will compel the leaders to take off their . . . white gloves and black frock coats, if the principled elements will take care to enlighten the rest of the members.
2. The SP is an established name. It is not in our interest to permit conservative leaders to enjoy this basic property of our movement. The members can unseat the old leaders. In this area we preach the open shop.
3. The prospects for a new party . . . are zero, . . .
4. A split is a painful operation. Operations of that kind are not carried out with a light heart. . . . We are in need more of unity than of splitting. It is better to live together for another year, even if existence is not so sweet, than to split even for one hour too soon. . . .

Salutsky finished by saying, "*America is not on the threshold of revolutionary action.*" *94

The *Naye Welt*, writing on the eve of the second congress of the

Comintern, steered a neutral-friendly, but cautious course.⁹⁵ It was an attitude of let's-wait-and-see. And, in the public debate between Salutsky and Charney-Vladek, January 1921, Salutsky, representing the new Left, spoke against basic Communist tenets, such as their position on trade unions, their armed uprisings and underground apparatus. But he firmly opposed a new international against the Third.

THE FEDERATION BREAKS AWAY . . .

The decision of the EC of the federation to associate itself with the group that left the party after the Detroit convention, in 1921, was rather extreme in its phrasing. The editorial in the *Naye Welt* finished off the SP with this verdict:

It was 100 per cent Wisconsinism mixed with a dozen Hillquitism. No cause for further fear. . . . The convention clearly stated what it did not want, and what it did want it did not know itself. This is no bankruptcy, but an official seal on a bankruptcy which has already taken place. . . .⁹⁶

A special convention, September 1921, in New York City, was to act on the recommendation of the EC to break with the party.

This decisive issue was now shifted to the branches. A number of old and solid branches opposed the break: the one in Pittsburgh, the largest; those in Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, Newark and Brooklyn. However, a majority of branches voted with the EC.

The pre-convention discussions made it abundantly clear that leaving the party would automatically involve a ruinous split in the ranks, making warfare between the two parts inevitable. As the *Naye Welt* put it, "We do not fool ourselves about the future relations with these opponents. The closer we were with them yesterday, the sharper they will fight us tomorrow. And we, from our side, won't spare them either. It has to be that way. . . . The federation cannot live in a cemetery. The Socialist Party is dead. . . ." ⁹⁷

THE SPECIAL CONVENTION AND THE SPLIT, 1921

Unlike the first split in 1919, the people engaged in this battle of 1921 had until a short time before worked harmoniously, sharing the same basic approach to the problems of the movement. Prac-

tically all of them had come from the same political school, the Bund. Salutsky's leadership was accepted with grudging admiration. As Chanin later phrased it, "Though Salutsky insisted on his opinion, he was respected for his loyalty and hard work." Only two years previously, they had stood together against the Communists. And precisely because of these long and close ideological ties and warm personal relations the mutual bitterness was now more intense.

Salutsky was the brain behind the majority. Nathan Chanin, a capmaker by trade, led the minority. Among the speakers for the resolution to leave the party were Dr. Jacob Mindel and J. B. Beilin. Ironically, these two had also spoken for the majority at the convention of 1919—but against breaking with the party. Most of those who supported the majority also declared their disagreement with the Communists, while the speakers for the minority warned that this split would destroy the Jewish labor movement. The discussion lasted for many hours, converting no one.

Of the 77 delegates from 43 branches, 41 voted for the break and 33 for the SP. The minority immediately assembled in another room of the same Forward Hall, and formed the Jewish Socialist Farband of the Socialist Party. They were joined by Alexander Kahn, Max Pine, Meyer Weinstein, Sol Rifkind and other old-timers who had not belonged to the federation. Chanin was elected general secretary. A week later, the Farband started publication of a weekly, *Der Wecker* (The Awakener).

The new weekly, fighting as it did the open and half-way Communists, was friendly to the Soviet government. No doubt, the people of the Farband heartily endorsed Vladimir Medem's speech at the convention warning against this double standard—supporting the Soviet regime in Russia and resisting the Communists here. But they could not free themselves from the grip of pro-Soviet sentiment prevailing in sections of the community. It would have been a poor tactical move, to say the least.

Typical was the footnote of the editors in the very first issue of *Der Wecker* explaining that an article by Philip Krantz sharply critical of Russian Bolshevism was his personal view. But it seems that this footnote did not satisfy many of the readers. In the second issue the editors made their stand clear: "(Our) opinion on Soviet Russia is known. It is comradely, brotherly, deep, proletarian. . . ."

This sentiment was repeated with more vigor in the fifth issue:

"*Der Wecker* is not an organ for attacks on the Russian Bolsheviks. We have the greatest respect and the best of feelings for the leaders of the Soviet government. It is the first workers' government in the world, and it is the duty of every honest, genuine friend of labor to help it get on its feet, . . . Even if we don't agree with everything that they do, . . . What we oppose is that the Communists are trying to drag in the Third International right here in America, where entirely different methods have to be adopted because the conditions are different."

The "greatest respect and best feelings" lasted hardly two years.

The rift cut across the entire body of the federation. All the local business managers of the *Forward*—Julius Weisberg, Leon Arkin, Morris Polin and Herman Bernstein, leading people in Pittsburgh, Boston, Philadelphia and Detroit, respectively; and Jacob Siegel, editor of the *Chicago Forward*—went with the Farband. So did most of the union officers and the top of the WC, Joseph Baskin, Reuben Guskin, Joseph Weinberg and Ephim Jeshurin. However, all the nationally influential intellectuals, except Charney-Vladek, A. Liesin and a couple of others, remained with the federation; "Zeide" Morris Winchefsky, A. S. Sachs and M. Terman stayed too.

The majority also retained the machinery and by far the largest part of the second layer of leadership—the practical workers, among them a few old-timers, the veteran Ab. Epstein, former president of the WC, and George Wishnak, an officer of the ILGWU. Of the *Forward* staff, five sided with the majority: Zivyon, Hillel Rogoff, managing editor; Olgin, Lilliput (Kretchmar) and Paul Novick. They were immediately fired by the association. Through the intervention of the Jewish Writers Union, they received six-months severance pay.

OPPOSING COMMUNISM, BUT MOVING TOWARD IT

Throughout the excited debates, even after the convention, those who had engineered the break emphatically denied that Communism was the issue. They were not Communists and had no intention of becoming Communists. They were strongly opposed to applying the major planks of Communism to the American scene. Moreover, long tradition made the idea of subordination to Moscow

unpalatable to them. At the same time, they kept repeating that the Third International was the only living world body of militant Marxists. In a mood of wishful thinking, they tried hard to convince themselves that the International would eventually be compelled by the logic of events to resort to a more realistic and flexible course in conformity with conditions in each country.

The convention resolution on the International spoke in loopholes: "The convention recognizes that the Third International is the only logical . . . organization of the fighting world proletariat . . . the labor movement of each country has to join (it). . . . The fact that we don't agree with several details of its tactics should not serve as a reason to keep us from working under its general leadership. We know that the Third International changes and will continue to change its tactics in accordance with the changed political conditions, and we believe that all the differences have to be discussed and straightened out, not from outside but within the International itself." *98

The convention manifesto stated among others: ". . . The practice of the SP in Jewish labor has left the movement with a sense of dullness, listlessness, . . . irresponsibility, political ignorance and . . . disorganization."

Distinct and harsh in its criticism, the federation was high-sounding and ambiguous on its future course. The manifesto spoke of building jointly with similar groups "*a broad proletarian mass party in America, in line with the new view on the Socialist Revolution and the proletarian dictatorship, in accordance with the separate economic and political situation of America and the social psychological uniqueness of the American masses.*" (italics in text.) *99

The break touched off a flareup of animosities. Abraham Liessin, in an eloquent editorial, bitterly reproved the majority: "If the Jewish revolutionary would steadfastly remember his responsibility for the sufferings of his people, he would be more tactful and take better account of the conditions surrounding him; he would then not clamor for the impossible, as our Jewish revolutionaries now do." *100

For this and for a sharper editorial in the *Forward*, Liessin was called by the *Naye Welt* a "*volno-pozharnick* (volunteer firman) from Minsk, a fool that deserves to be spanked," and similar friendly epithets.

Philip Krantz denounced the majority as "a *gilgul* (transmutation) of De Leonism. . . . (They) have affiliated themselves . . . with a government of a far-away land . . . that, as everyone knows by now, does not always stick to the ideals it preaches and the slogans it formulates, that will do everything to serve its own interests and to further its own power." *101

"A DIVORCE WITHOUT REGRET"

The sound and fury of revolutionary phrases notwithstanding, one must conclude that the majority was carried away more by moods than by reason, that antipathies were deeper and more powerful than sympathies. And one could also apply Salutsky's devastating comment on the SP convention of 1921, that it "knew what it did not want, but did not know what it wanted," to himself and his associates. The resolutions were clear and definite only in their dislikes. Olgin expressed this feeling of dislike succinctly, "The marriage (with the SP) was without love, and the divorce without regret."

In a booklet, *A Proletarian Political Party*, published in 1922, Olgin gave vent to the long animosity brewing against the old-timers: ". . . Individuals who were no credit to Socialism were nominated for political office (in the Jewish community). And (they) campaigned in an ignorant manner, that could only lower the prestige of the party . . . the minds of the people were confused, twisted and deafened by all kinds of silly huckster tricks. . . .

"The Jewish labor movement . . . was rocked to sleep in a radical cradle. And the official Socialist press has surrounded it with so many love songs that it really thinks it cannot be any better . . . the masses of the people . . . have been fed for 25 years with yellow, watered-down, formless hurrah-Socialism, mixed with a large dose of ridiculous sensationalism. . . . The federation knows that there are special Jewish problems here and abroad. . . . It will strive for clean, clear, principled Socialism."

The immediate task of the federation, aside from rebuilding its shattered units, was a duofold one: to raise the necessary funds for a "genuine Socialist daily" and, in cooperation with the other dissidents, to build a "new proletarian mass party." But attacking the *Forward* was easier than starting a rival, and breaking away from

the old SP was simpler than building a new party. The campaign for the new paper, that culminated in a meeting at Lexington Opera House, brought in about \$15,000, a sizable sum in itself but insufficient for a new paper. As to the new party, the Workers Council had few followers among the English-speaking. But a new party was imperative, or the Workers Council would have withered away.

At this gloomy impasse, the proposal of the Communists to form a mass party jointly with them, one without the load of a Soviet America and the dictatorship of the proletariat, was highly attractive. The people of the Workers Council, hard pressed as they were from both camps, assured themselves that with the necessary safeguards the dreamed-of unity of all militant Marxists in this country could be a reality. But few of them could have anticipated the kind of unity it actually brought about.