

Family Quarrel: Joe Salsberg, the 'Jewish' Question, and Canadian Communism

Gerald Tulchinsky

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Article abstract

Joseph Baruch Salsberg was one of Canada's best known and respected communists when he left the Labor-Progressive Party in 1957 after years of anguish over clear evidence of antisemitism in the Soviet Union. After a 30-year career in the Party in which he and numerous Jewish radicals had invested their belief that communism heralded a "better world's in birth" and solutions for all mankind's troubles, including the "Jewish question," Salsberg concluded that the poison of antisemitism was alive and well in the communist nirvana — and, with a broken heart, he walked away after vainly trying to convince Soviet leaders to reverse the trend.

Family Quarrel: Joe Salsberg, the ‘Jewish’ Question, and Canadian Communism

Gerald Tulchinsky

WHEN JOE SALSBERG (his full name was Joseph Baruch Salsberg but everyone called him Joe; Yiddish-speaking intimates called him Yossele, the Yiddish diminutive for Yosel) left the Canadian Labor-Progressive Party of Canada [LPP] in early 1957, he effectively ended a 30-year career of intense activity in the communist cause, including momentous contributions to the labour movement, to progressive legislation as a member of the Toronto City Council and the Ontario legislature, and to the Jewish radical left in Ontario. But while his departure was an anguished one, it was based essentially on his identity as a Jew and his conviction that in the Soviet Union not only had Jewish culture been suppressed under Josef Stalin but that his successors were also determined to continue that policy. Joe believed that the communist family had rejected him and other Jewish devotees of the great cause — and it broke his heart.

Salsberg, a capmaker by trade, was born in Lagov, Poland, in 1902 and had immigrated with his parents to Canada in 1913. To help support his family, he began a full-time working career when he was a mere thirteen years old. Joe’s parents were devout Orthodox Jews, his father Abraham (known as Avremele in the community) was a follower of the Hasidic tradition who prayed that Joe, his firstborn, would become a rabbi, while his mother, Sarah-Gitel, was a veritable dynamo who had founded and carefully managed Toronto’s important *Malbush Aromin* (clothing the poor) Society. Until he was sixteen, Joe seems to have been an ardent follower of his parents’ wishes, studying with Rabbi Graubart and other teachers in his spare time the traditional texts on Jewish law and commentaries, Mishnah and Talmud, imbibing deeply both the detail and spirit of a system which mandated humanity

Gerald Tulchinsky, “Family Quarrel: Joe Salsberg, the ‘Jewish’ Question, and Canadian Communism,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 56 (Fall 2005), 149-73.

and social justice with the haunting injunction: “You are not obliged to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it!”

When Salsberg joined the Party in 1926 after an eight-year intensive involvement in the Poalei Zion (Zionist Workers) Youth, especially in its left faction, his efforts to affiliate the movement with the Third International had failed.¹ Having by then become an officer of the Hat, Cap, and Millinery Workers International Union, Salsberg was shocked, he later recalled, by the British government’s brutal suppression of the general strike in 1926, and concluded that “there is no way out, but the more militant paths as advocated by the Third International and the RILU [the Red International Labour Union].”² But in joining the Communist Party of Canada [CPC], Joe never abandoned his Jewishness. Like so many other Canadian Jews on the left, Salsberg fostered and eagerly participated in the cultural and social activities of left-wing organizations and, after it came into being in 1944, the United Jewish Peoples’ Order [UJPO] which, as Ester Reiter explains, was “a social world outside the increasingly commodified life.”³ To their minds, there was no conflict between their Jewish identity and their belief in the communist cause.

Salsberg’s Canadian Jewish radical Left until at least the early 1950s, therefore, was much more than just a political persuasion. It was a people’s movement that expressed itself in a rich cultural and social life. UJPO, which had branches throughout Canada, embraced many Jews, not all of them necessarily committed Communists, who in varying degrees supported collectivist ideals and tried in interesting ways to emulate some of those values in their personal lives. Camp Naivelt (New World) in Brampton, which also stressed collectivist values and a spirit of internationalism, drew thousands of children over its 78-year existence — it’s still going — while many UJPO members rented or owned modest cottages in a colony at Eldorado Park, where for a few weeks they lived a modified communal existence and socialized long into the summer evenings.⁴

The Jewish Folk Choir since 1927 held concerts — in several of which the celebrated Paul Robeson participated — mainly of Hebrew and Yiddish music, drawing packed houses and even selling records of its renditions. There were cultural evenings at the UJPO building where poetry and literature were read aloud and then discussed at length. Such evenings sometimes included dance and dramatic presentations as well as many speakers (Joe was a favourite!) on a wide range of topics. In florid Yiddish, occasionally in Russian, and, later, often in English, speakers held forth on the issues of the day: the progress of socialism in the Soviet Union, the imminent decline of capitalism in the West, the horrors of colonialism in Africa, the

¹Multicultural History Society of Ontario [MHSO], Salsberg Tapes, #5.

²MHSO, Salsberg Tapes, #5.

³See Ester Reiter, “Secular *Yiddishkai*: Left Politics, Culture, and Community,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 121-146, 145.

⁴See James Laxer, *Red Diaper Baby: A Boyhood in the Age of McCarthyism* (Toronto 2004), 121-132.



Joe Salsberg in the 1950s.
Ontario Jewish Archives,
accession #2004-5-28.

dire plight of the working class everywhere, and, of course, “the Jewish question.” And always with the kind of commitment and passion that is inherent in people whose lives were driven by the eternal question of “what is to be done?” That was the cultural environment of Joe Salsberg and the Toronto Jewish rank-and-file who fervently believed that “a better world’s in birth.”

I

While virulent and violent antisemitism was an old story in Czarist Russia, this poison was supposed to be eliminated in the new revolutionary system. Old habits and attitudes did not die, however, and as readers of Isaac Babel’s “Red Cavalry” stories know, army units loyal to the communists perpetrated some horrific pogroms during the Civil War.⁵ With the massive social and economic transformations in the Soviet Union [USSR] in the late 1920s when Jews moved to new areas and into the

⁵Nathalie Babel, ed., *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel* (New York 2002), 197-331.

industrial workforce, antisemitism took a sharp upturn.⁶ Despite the fact that the Criminal Code made it an offence, Mikhail Kolinin, the President of the Soviet Republic, noted in 1926 that “the Russian intelligentsia is perhaps more anti-Semitic today than it was under Tsarism.”⁷ Articles about antisemitic incidents appeared in *Komsomolskaya pravda*, the young communist newspaper, while leading writers, including Maxim Gorky, publicly denounced antisemitism as it spread among Soviet workers in factories and collectives, where violent, sometimes deadly, attacks were not uncommon. Even Leon Trotsky, before the 1917 Revolution perhaps the quintessential “non-Jewish Jew,”⁸ Bryan Palmer observes, “could not escape the ‘fact’ of his Jewishness”⁹ and, when Lenin offered him the pivotally important post of Commissar of the Interior, turned it down because his acceptance might stimulate Russian antisemitism.¹⁰ Because so many Jews supported Trotsky, latent antisemitism coincided with “ideological hostilities.”¹¹

Salsberg’s concerns about the Soviet regime’s attitude towards Jewish cultural life had grown since the 1930s, when the Jewish section of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [CPSU], *Yevseksiya*, was suddenly terminated, Jewish schools were closed, and cultural life restricted.¹² In the words of David Shneer, “the project to create a secular Yiddish culture and a people who identified with that culture” had not succeeded because of the lack of Jewish support and government policies.¹³ At the same time, all expressions of Jewish national identity were targeted for suppression, while antisemitism, which had been severely suppressed by Lenin, reemerged as Stalin consolidated his political control. Jews who were prominent in politics — especially Trotsky and others of Jewish origin who opposed Stalin’s policies — and cultural fields were singled out, tried and imprisoned (where many died) as “enemies of the people,” while efforts were underway to exclude them from high party echelons, the state apparatus, and the Army.¹⁴ “Old Bolsheviks,” former Bundists, Zionists, and anarchists were denounced and purged as spies, diversionists, fascists, Trotskyites, Bukharinites, National Democrats, and “hangers-on of the bourgeoisie.” Jewish communist periodicals were shut down

⁶Nora Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union Since 1917: Paradox of Survival* (New York 1988, 2 vols), I, 258.

⁷Levin, *Jews in Soviet Union*, 260.

⁸Isaac Deutscher’s tantalizing phrase. Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (New York 1968).

⁹Bryan Palmer, “Leon Trotsky: Planet Without a Visa,” *Left History*, 9 (Fall/Winter 2003), 79-92, 88.

¹⁰Palmer, “Leon Trotsky,” 90.

¹¹Levin, *Jews in Soviet Union*, 265.

¹²Gregor Aronson, “The Jewish Question During the Stalin Era,” in Gregor Aronson, *et al.*, *Russian Jewry 1917-1967* (New York 1969), 171-208, 179.

¹³David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture 1918-1930* (New York 2004), 219.

¹⁴Benjamin Pinkus, ed., *The Soviet Government and the Jews 1948-1967* (London 1984), 3.

and back issues removed from libraries. From his base in Toronto, Salsberg picked up on some of these events. In interviews he gave in the late 1970s, he remembered experiencing “a turning point” in his life in 1939 because he realized that during the previous two years “Jewish institutions began to wither away.”¹⁵ The Birodidjan project (to create a Jewish autonomous territory in the far-eastern reaches of the Soviet Union) was faltering, and one of the heads of that community had been executed.¹⁶ And while many Jewish institutions ceased functioning, inquiries from abroad went unanswered.

“So a lot of us began to wonder,” Salsberg recalled, “what the heck is going on?” Knowing that he could not raise the matter in the CPC’s National Executive Committee (then called the Political Bureau) because “they would say either I’ve lost faith or that I am influenced by bourgeois ideas,” he decided to go to the Soviet Union to see for himself. He confided only in Toronto friends Al Hershkevitz and *Vochenblatt* editor Joshua Gershman and two other Jewish comrades whom he met in Paris on his way to Moscow in early July 1939.¹⁷ There he was introduced to Georgi Dimitrov, head of the Third Communist International, probably through Tom McEwen, the CPC’s representative at the Comintern.¹⁸

Professing to be very sympathetic to Salsberg’s concerns, Dimitrov trotted out the most convenient excuses: the worldwide menace of Trotskyism and other counter-revolutionary forces, besides the possibilities for espionage. He did, however, promise to establish a joint Soviet-United States party commission to investigate these matters, but it never materialized.¹⁹ As well, he said he would look into Salsberg’s request for allowing some German Jewish refugees into the Soviet Union, but nothing came of this either. Inquiries that Joe made from two American Jewish communists living in Moscow yielded only evasions. So he got nothing from his trip to Moscow, except the opportunity of seeing his family in Poland on his way back to Canada. Though frustrated and puzzled, he wrote later in his famous nine-article series in the fall 1956 issues of *Vochenblatt* that he decided to keep his suspicions “out of the public eye [although] perhaps in retrospect it would have been better if I had spoken out.” This was, he said, “a most painful experience.”²⁰

¹⁵MHSO, Salsberg Interview, Tape 14.

¹⁶Henry Srebnik, “Red Star Over Birobidzhan: Canadian Jewish Communists and the ‘Jewish Autonomous Region’ in the Soviet Union,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 44 (Fall 1999), 129-148.

¹⁷Ontario Jewish Archives [OJA], 98-12-5, Joseph B. Salsberg Papers, Interview Sharyn Salsberg Ezrin with Al Hershkovitz, no date, 5.

¹⁸See Ivo Banac, *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov 1933-1949* (New Haven 2003), 22; Tom McEwen, *The Forge Glows Red: From Blacksmith to Revolutionary* (Toronto 1974), 202.

¹⁹Yale University, Annals of Communism project, Georgi Dimitrov diary, 29 July 1939. (Translation) “Discussion with Canadian representative Salzberg (member of the Canadian CPB). Draft a report for the Secretariat. Party representative to the ECCI luven[?].”

²⁰*Vochenblatt*, 25 October 1956.

But what could he do? Had he left the Party in 1939, where could he hang his hat, given that he was a committed revolutionary? Certainly not with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation [CCF], which he had reviled as “one of the greatest hindrances to the establishment of socialism in Canada” since that party’s emergence in 1933,²¹ where David Lewis had set his face against any incursions from the radical left, and where the Canadian Congress of Labour would not have welcomed him for similar reasons.²² Instead, he decided to stay attuned to the situation of the Jews in the Soviet Union. In this respect, he was like Jewish communists in the United States, Paul Novick (editor of New York’s *Morgen Freiheit*), Reuben Saltzman, and Itche Goldberg; Joshua Gershman in Toronto; and Haim Sloves in Paris, all of whom were hopeful for improvement.²³ Back in Toronto, Salsberg expressed his concerns to Tim Buck, who asked him to keep *shtum* for the sake of the cause.²⁴ He agreed, but he could not have been pleased to hear, while on his way back home, of the recently signed Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which effectively took the Soviet Union out of the impending war with Nazi Germany.

II

The post-World War II attacks on Jewish cultural expression in the USSR certainly would have brought Salsberg no comfort. But, publicly, he continued to hold his peace through the late 1940s, even when, in November 1948, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (which had been established in 1942 to mobilize Jewish support in the USSR and in the West for the war effort and now was valiantly attempting to rebuild Jewish cultural life that had been decimated by the Germans), was suddenly abolished and its printing plant and library shut down. This was followed by the closure of virtually all Jewish cultural institutions, the suspension of Yiddish publications, and the arrest, imprisonment, and execution of writers, actors, and intellectuals.²⁵ Meanwhile, Jews had been eliminated from diplomatic and military academies. By the end of 1948, more than 400 members of the Jewish intelligentsia had been arrested. In the following two years, *Izvestia* and *Pravda* car-

²¹Walter D. Young, *The Anatomy of a Party: The National CCF 1932-1961* (Toronto 1969), 258.

²²I thank Todd McCallum of the Department of History, Dalhousie University, for this insight. See also Irving M. Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-1956* (Toronto 1973), 41-53.

²³See Annette Aronowicz, “Haim Sloves, the Jewish People, and a Jewish Communist’s Allegiances,” *Jewish Social Studies*, 9 (Fall 2002), 95-142.

²⁴Tim Buck, *Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck*, edited by William Beeching and Phyllis Clarke (Toronto 1977), 389.

²⁵See Shimon Redlich, *Propaganda and Nationalism in Wartime Russia: The Jewish Anti-fascist Committee in the USSR. 1941-1948* ([Boulder, CO 1982]), 167-170; Aronson, “The Jewish Question,” 191.

ried stories almost daily of “transgressions” by Jewish officials, “with heavy emphasis,” historian Gregor Aronson writes, “laid on their Jewish names, comprising nicknames, patronymic and family names.”²⁶ Labelled as “cosmopolitans,” these Jews were accused of “toadying to the West” through connections to Tel Aviv and New York. Most menacingly of all Soviet measures against Jews — and they were not the only minority to suffer from cultural aggression in the USSR — was the so-called doctors’ plot of August 1952 (of mostly Jewish defendants who had been arrested in 1948) and the start of an unrestricted antisemitic campaign in *Pravda*, *Izvestia*, and *MeditSinkaia gazeta* accusing Jewish doctors of incompetence and malpractice.²⁷ This was followed by the blatantly antisemitic allegations inspired by Moscow against Rudolph Slansky (who was convicted in November 1952 and executed) in Czechoslovakia. Many Jewish communists and sympathizers in the West were shattered.²⁸

When Salsberg had travelled to Poland in 1947 to see first-hand the aftermath of the Holocaust, he applied to visit the Soviet Union to view the Jewish situation there as well, but was refused entry. “A fog seemed to descend” over Soviet Jewry, he later wrote in *Vochenblatt*, the Party’s Yiddish weekly.²⁹ Not only were Jewish cultural institutions boarded up, but outside contacts between communal leaders and artists were also terminated. Unwilling to stay quiet, at least within the Party, Salsberg went before the National Executive in 1949 appealing that Moscow be asked to explain. But this was rejected. Rumours persisted, but Salsberg would not go public, not wanting to supply ammunition to the anti-Soviet cold war chorus:

I did not make my own views — which differed from that of my party — public property and did not defend them before the bar of public opinion. I simply refused to speak or write about Jewish life in the USSR.³⁰

Within the communist family, however, he continued efforts to convince the leadership of the Party and in other countries to take up the Jewish question in the USSR. He failed. The “Stalin cult” was too strong, he concluded, and leading communists “lacked that measure of real independent thinking in relation to the Soviet Union that was required ... to save the executed writers Jewish and non-Jewish.”³¹

²⁶ Aronson, “The Jewish Question,” 195, 197.

²⁷ Iakov Etinger, “The Doctors’ Plot: Stalin’s Solution to the Jewish Question,” Yaacov Ro’i, ed., *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union* (London 1995), 103–124, 114–115.

²⁸ While living in Israel for eleven months in 1952–1953, I well remember seeing ardent members of the Moscow-oriented *Hashomer Hatzair* (the Young Guard) from Buenos Aires, New York, Johannesburg, and Toronto in tears, and hearing of their anguished all-night meetings where they tried to reconcile their socialist idealism with the unavoidable evidence of Soviet antisemitism.

²⁹ *Vochenblatt*, 1 November 1956.

³⁰ *Vochenblatt*, 1 November 1956.

³¹ *Vochenblatt*, 1 November 1956.

By 1952, Salsberg was sufficiently alarmed that he raised the matter at a monthly meeting of the National Executive Committee, charging that the Soviet Union was practising overt antisemitism.³² Pressed to retract his allegations, he refused, and was expelled from the Executive the following year.³³ His agitation did cause some debate within the Party, however, notably in the National Jewish Committee [NJC], which, since 1925, had advised the Executive on Jewish affairs. At a meeting on 18 April 1954, the NJC objected to “opportunistic theories of exceptionalism ... to the effect that the Jewish people of the world — all Jews — are some kind of a third force between the East and the West,” an oblique reference to — but a serious distortion of — Joe’s challenge. This was followed by a warning against “the dangers of bourgeois nationalism and cosmopolitanism.”³⁴ The following year the NJC issued its guidelines, including deepening “the practise of proletarian internationalism, recognizing that ... the danger is always of bourgeois-nationalism *in one guise or another*.”³⁵ Two years later, however, the NJC changed its tune.

While grumbling inside the Party, in public Salsberg remained a steadfast supporter of the Soviet regime, even labelling the growing allegations of antisemitism in the USSR, in what he called the “reactionary press,” as a “big lie.” At a mass meeting featuring the Very Reverend Dr. Hewlett Johnson, Dean of Canterbury Cathedral, at Massey Hall in February 1953, sponsored by the Canada-Soviet Friendship Society, Salsberg condemned the “phoney protest rally” held two weeks earlier by the Canadian Jewish Congress.³⁶ So-called Soviet antisemitism, he thundered before the packed hall, was a “fabricated issue” which could only bolster United States Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his plans for aggression against the Soviet Union. Jews, he said, should be wary of backing from reactionaries who, like WASP members of some Toronto golf clubs and a St. Clair Avenue dining club, were themselves antisemites and by no means friends of the Jewish people.

³²Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto 1988), 242.

³³National Archives of Canada [NAC], MG 28, IV, 4. Communist Party of Canada, Convention and Central Committee Series, Convention and Committee files, 1921-1937. Vol. 12 (Microfilm Reel H-1584, 1956) “Decisions of the Meeting of the National Committee, May 17-21, 1956.”

³⁴University of Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Books, MS Collection 179, Robert S. Kenny Collection [hereafter Kenny], Box 9, “Enlarged Meeting of the National Jewish Committee, held April 18th [1954],” 3, 4.

³⁵My italics. Kenny, Box 9, Memorandum on the Work of the Jewish National Subcommittee, 2.

³⁶*Vochenblatt*, 26 February 1953.

III

Salsberg's next major opportunity to confront the Soviets directly came after his trip to Helsinki in June 1955 as the UJPO delegate to the World Peace Assembly and to the World Jewish Conference Against German Rearmament in Paris. In Moscow, Party representatives told him that the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee had been dissolved because, since it had been formed to help defeat the Germans during World War II, by 1948 it had outlived its purpose and, in any case, included members who "had developed bourgeois nationalist tendencies."³⁷ Joe may not have known that this was an outright lie (although he probably had his suspicions), because the secret decision to close down the Committee was — according to the official, though then secret, record — based on false charges that "as the facts show, this Committee is a center of anti-Soviet propaganda and regularly submits anti-Soviet information of foreign intelligence."³⁸

Yes, Jewish writers had been arrested, Salsberg's interlocutors admitted, but that was the work of the discredited Lavrenti Beria (former Secret Police Chief, executed in 1953), "and regrettably innocent people were among his victims."³⁹ In any event, not only Jews, but also writers of many nationalities had suffered. "I was urged to be patient," Joe reported. "All those falsely arrested were being freed and rehabilitated." When he inquired about the fate of intellectuals, artists, and actors like Bergelson, Feffer, Markish, Kvitko, Hofshtein, and Der Nister, he was told again that "innocent people had been killed." And in response to his concerns about the crushing of Yiddish culture, he was assured that some concerts were being planned for ten cities.⁴⁰

Salsberg, apparently, did not raise other evidence of overt antisemitism in the Soviet Union, some of it emanating from Stalin himself, especially after World War II when he began to conceive of an "international Jewish conspiracy" against his country.⁴¹ The ensuing campaign against "cosmopolitanism," Zionism, and the State of Israel was nothing less than full-scale antisemitism which was only thinly masked by assertions of a need to expose enemies of the state. Stalin's system, as scholars Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov conclude, "required enemies who would destabilize social and political conditions so that power could be seized and held. Political stability depended on crises."⁴² But Salsberg likely realized that

³⁷ *Vochenblatt*, 8 November 1956.

³⁸ Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented Study of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (London 1995), 464, "Document 181. The Resolution to close the JAFC (November 20, 1948)."

³⁹ *Vochenblatt*, 8 November 1956.

⁴⁰ *Vochenblatt*, 8 November 1956.

⁴¹ Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority* (New York 1988), 144.

⁴² Jonathan Brent and Vladimir P. Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot Against the Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953* (New York 2003), 330.

pressing the point would only have aroused hostility and, quite possibly, even worsen the suppression of Jewish culture. Even if he did not believe what he was told — and how could he? — he did not protest, probably because it would have negatively affected the very Soviet Jews he wanted to help. His goal was to push for the survival of a language and a culture.

We now know — thanks to recently released documents in Russian archives — that Stalin's persecution of these Jewish poets, writers, and actors was tantamount to a pogrom, but in the early 1950s the worst was not known. It was perhaps naive, but not unreasonable in the circumstances, for Salsberg to accept what he was told in Moscow and to regard the annulment of the sentences (on 22 November 1955) as an end to the entire affair.⁴³

During his Soviet visit, Joe tried to get information and impressions from Jews he met in Moscow restaurants, stores, and streets, but had only limited success. Even though the situation seemed to be improving somewhat, he came away with the impression that concerning "Jewish cultural — communal activity ... the basic approach of the Party in the Soviet Union was still negative and inconsistent."⁴⁴ He reported this to the National Executive on his return to Canada in August and insisted that the Party admit that it had been wrong and confront the CPSU's top leadership on it. The Executive balked but agreed to have Buck, who was about to leave for Moscow on Party business, revisit the question with officials there. Joe conceded to wait for his report.

Publicly, Salsberg still continued to toe the Party line. Writing in *Vochenblatt* about his trip, he simply glowed with enthusiasm for the progress he witnessed in the Soviet Union: "The tremendous rate of construction and the universal desire for peace — these two manifestations of life in the Soviet Union — constitute the major impressions of life there."⁴⁵ He gave no hint of his rising angst. In fact, he stated that he was "impressed by the signs which point to a renewed extension of Jewish cultural and religious endeavours," and reported that concerts of Yiddish folk songs in Moscow and other major cities (where there were packed houses) were in progress. Moscow had no less than three synagogues, two of them with full-time rabbis! The city's Rabbi Schleiffer, supported by synagogue officials, waxed enthusiastic about government approval for a new prayer book — to be printed on the finest of paper — and the promise of a new rabbinical seminary.

⁴³ Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven 2001).

⁴⁴ *Vochenblatt*, 8 November 1956.

⁴⁵ *Vochenblatt*, 18 August 1955.

IV

While the situation in the Soviet Union remained unchanged, the Khrushchev revelations of “Stalin’s crimes” at the CPSU’s Twentieth Congress in February 1956 intervened to put virtually all such questions on hold until the bombshell could be absorbed. In April, the ever-loyal National Jewish Committee issued a lengthy document addressing the “profound” effect of the revelations on Canadian Jewish comrades who were “shocked and grieved at the news.” These powerful sentiments, it was reported, were being fanned by the right-wing Yiddish press, whose red-baiters now took to the offensive, deliberately adding further bitterness and confusion. In the face of this assault, the NJC pressed for clarity among the faithful through seminars and discussions, although the “crimes” were, undoubtedly, chiefly the work of the “Beria gang” in the Kremlin, “and the ravages of Hitlerism.” While unhappy with the dissolution of the Anti-Fascist Committee in 1948, the document continued, “most of us had such implicit faith in the workings of socialist justice that we emphatically rejected any serious questioning of what happened.” Maintaining that it was right not to listen to the “anti-Soviet slanders of the bourgeois press, including the campaign of reactionary elements in the Jewish community,” the statement stressed that the wrongs were now being corrected. Nevertheless, it continued, pressing Moscow for explanations and for information on steps being taken to make amends and eliminate the possibilities for “further violations” was absolutely necessary. This, the NJC insisted, must be accompanied not only by patience and faith in socialism but also with confidence that “discussions around the 20th Congress will stimulate improvements on every front.”⁴⁶

In May the LPP admitted its error in expelling Salsberg from the National Executive Committee in 1953, and reinstated him.⁴⁷ It also voted to send him to Moscow on a special mission to reopen the matter.⁴⁸ The Party later balked and decided only to include him as part of a four-person delegation — including William Kardash, Sam Lipshitz (who was accompanied by his wife, Mania), and Tim Buck — to raise a number of issues, not just the “Jewish question,” with the CPSU’s Central Committee.⁴⁹ The Canadian delegation, nevertheless, was not the only communist party group to place the issue before the top Soviet leadership.⁵⁰ In early May, leaders of

⁴⁶“Notes for Discussion on the Significance of the 20th Congress for the Jewish People of Canada,” pp. 3, 5. Box 9, Kenny Collection.

⁴⁷See *Vochenblatt*, 22 July 1956, for the full text of the statement in which Joe was reinstated to the Party’s National Jewish Committee as well as to the National Executive.

⁴⁸NAC, MG 28, IV, 4, Vol. 12, “Decisions of the Meeting of the National Committee, May 17-21, 1956.”

⁴⁹But see Morris Biderman, *A Life on the Jewish Left: An Immigrant’s Experiences* (Toronto 2000), 136. The makeup of the delegation is a matter of some confusion. See Karen Levine, “The Labor-Progressive Party in Crisis: 1956-1957,” unpublished research essay, York University, 7 March 1977, 12, cited in Penner, *Canadian Communism*, 249.

⁵⁰*Vochenblatt*, 15 November 1956.

the Communist Party held a lengthy discussion on the issue with Khrushchev and Anastas Mikoyan in Moscow,⁵¹ and Khrushchev himself sat in on discussions with the Canadians.

However, the famous revelations did not mean that Jewish and other suppressed national cultures would be reinvigorated. All of the concerns Salsberg had raised in 1955 were reiterated — and the same explanations proffered.⁵² In addition, when he raised the “doctors’ plot” affair, the prosecution of physicians, most of them Jewish, for allegedly conspiring to kill the Soviet leaders on orders from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and Zionists, the response was: “Actually, more non-Jews than Jews were indicted in that unfortunate frameup, but it was perpetrated by Lavrenti Beria (now thoroughly discredited).” The accused doctors had been released and the whole issue buried. As for the suppression of the Anti-Fascist Committee, the new party line was that after the War it had become a “sort of aid society” to help Jews get jobs and accommodations, while its organ, the also-abolished Yiddish newspaper, *Einikeit*, was guilty of exaggerating Jewish contributions to post-war reconstruction. In any event, the paper was no longer needed because, it was asserted, most Jews read Russian now.⁵³

Would the Soviets, Salsberg inquired, offer a public explanation, or an apology, for these terrible events?⁵⁴ The gist of the reply was: No! Why should they? Actions spoke louder than words. The wrongs were being corrected. Beria’s crimes had involved nationalities other than Jews, so why apologize only to Jews? Nor would the Soviets allow the revival of Yiddish newspapers, since there already was one issued in Birobidjan. Jews wanting to read it could subscribe, just as Ukrainians, Georgians, and Armenians throughout the USSR could access newspapers in their own languages from their respective homelands and republics. The pre-1948 policy of allowing nationalities cultural expression was different, the Soviets admitted, but it was argued that the context had changed. Jews shared Soviet values with their fellow citizens, it was claimed. Those who did not, or retained Yiddish as their language of reading choice, were described as anachronistic. To address Jewish cultural needs, the Soviets were prepared to stage some concerts, and a Yiddish almanac was to be published. But that was judged sufficient. To Salsberg’s proposal that a democratically elected Jewish committee decide on their community’s cultural needs, the Soviets replied that such a body was not needed, because Jews were becoming Russians.⁵⁵ Upon his return to Canada with the rest of the delegation, Salsberg expressed his reservation with their report, which was, in his mind, not only uncritical but also excessive in its praise for the communist paradise.

⁵¹ Pinkus, *Soviet Government and the Jews*, 54-58.

⁵² *Vochenblatt*, 22 November 1956.

⁵³ The Soviets were actually right on this point. See Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry Since the Second World War: Population and Social Structure* (New York 1987), 183.

⁵⁴ *Vochenblatt*, 22 November 1956.

⁵⁵ *Vochenblatt*, 22 November 1956.

What Salsberg found especially worrisome were Khrushchev's statements about Jewish distinctiveness: Jews in the Rumanian territories incorporated after World War II into the USSR chose to return to Rumania rather than accept Soviet citizenship, Jews refused to sweep the streets in Czernovitz, Soviet Jews who went abroad as tourists tended not to return, and the proposed re-establishment of Jewish settlements in the Crimea destroyed by the Germans during World War II stalled on the supposed grounds that it would incite anti-Semitic activity. "Besides, you know as well as I do, dear comrade," Khrushchev smiled as he put his arm on Joe's shoulder: "Wherever Jews settle, they erect synagogues."⁵⁶ Salsberg couldn't believe his ears:

[Khrushchev's] approach to the problems of the Jewish people is an unforgivable violation of socialist democracy ... If Khrushchev's distrust of the Jewish people is justified then it is a terrible indictment not of the Soviet Jews, but of the Stalinist crimes and distortions of their nationalities policy in general and particularly as applied to the Jewish people.⁵⁷

Tim Buck, who also heard Khrushchev's remarks, was more blunt. In a private conversation with Morris Biderman, a prominent Toronto Party member, he noted unambiguously, "Khrushchev is an antisemite."⁵⁸ These painful realities, Salsberg concluded, needed immediate attention. The central problem in his eyes was that despite Khrushchev's exposure of Stalin's crimes including the crushing of many nationalities' cultures, not just Jewish, the new Soviet regime was doing little to correct things.⁵⁹ What was needed was a return to the policies of the twenties (and Leninist 'first principles') of fostering, or at least allowing, nationalities in the USSR to develop their own distinctive cultural personalities. Salsberg pointed out that the policy had worked more severe hardships on Jews than on others, because unlike Georgians or Ukrainians who enjoyed their own national territories in which cultural expressions in their language were still possible, Jews had no viable national territory in the Soviet Union, outside of Birobidjan, which was failing and provided only "a dimly flickering cultural candle."⁶⁰ His recent conversations in Moscow, Joe confided to *Vochenblatt's* readers, left him convinced that "the Soviet party and the Soviet leaders have still not returned to the principled track [Leninism] in their nationalities policy."⁶¹

Bourgeois democracy allowed such cultural diversity in western Europe and North America where a multi-language press existed, Salsberg argued. So why could not a similar situation prevail in a socialist state? The belief that socialism

⁵⁶ *Vochenblatt*, 6 December 1956.

⁵⁷ *Vochenblatt*, 6 December 1956.

⁵⁸ OJA, Salsberg Papers, Transcript of Interview, Sharyn Salsberg Ezrin with Morris Biderman, 24 June 1991, 6.

⁵⁹ *Vochenblatt*, 13 December 1956.

⁶⁰ *Vochenblatt*, 13 December 1956.

⁶¹ *Vochenblatt*, 13 December 1956.

should allow and protect such “democratic” rights shows just how idealistic — and naive — he remained about the nature of socialism in the Soviet Union, where the very word “democracy,” if used at all, possessed much different connotations than it did in the West. It is not easy to understand such ideological simplicity, even given Salsberg’s enduring faith in the possibilities of Soviet socialism. Yet, it is clear that his beliefs overcame whatever private doubts he may have had. Pointing to the Polish government’s condemnation of antisemitism as “demoralizing to the ranks of the party’s cadre,” he argued that if the Polish regime — only ten years in power — was directly confronting antisemitism, surely the Soviets, after nearly forty years, could be expected to do no less. But such was not the case. Despite improvements since Stalin’s death, the official attitude to Jewish culture continued to perpetuate the Stalinist outlook.

Meanwhile, in New York, Khrushchev’s revelations and their aftermath destroyed the faith of long-time believers, like John Gates and many others, who were also dismayed by displays of old-style Russian imperialism in Hungary and Poland.⁶² In Paris, comrades such as Haim Sloves were shattered and furious debates and splits ensued among Yiddish-speaking communists.⁶³ Back in Canada, steadfast Ukrainian communists also were offended at Soviet antisemitism.⁶⁴

The Jewish question amidst the continuing crisis of the nationalities issue was, in Joe’s mind, at the very centre of the struggle for a return to Communist first principles:

The struggle for the full revival of all-sided Jewish cultural activity in the Soviet Union is part of the general struggle to return to socialist democratic norms in all spheres of Soviet life: and ... every step in the direction of democratization is at the same time contributing to the revival of Jewish cultural life.⁶⁵

Salsberg believed in the possibility of realizing “socialist democracy” in the Soviet Union because, under Lenin, and until Stalinism’s repressive show trials in the 1930s, Jewish cultural and communal expression had thrived. In his final *Vochenblatt* article, on 20 December 1956, he expressed his refusal to despair. The “serious [Stalinist] distortion of socialist theory and ethics ... cannot long continue,” especially now that the international situation was becoming more stabilized, and because of the unstoppable process of “doing away with the distortions

⁶²David A. Shannon, *The Decline of American Communism: A History of the Communist Party of the United States Since 1945* (New York 1959), 309-310; see also John Gates, *The Story of An American Communist* (New York 1958), *passim* and 168.

⁶³See Aronowicz, “Haim Sloves,” *passim*; Maurice Szafran, *Les Juifs dans la Politique Française de 1945 à nos jours* (Paris 1990), iii, and Jonathan Boyarin, *Polish Jews in Paris: The Ethnography of Memory* (Bloomington 1991), 73, 75.

⁶⁴John Kolasky, *The Shattered Illusion: The History of Ukrainian Pro-Communist Organizations in Canada* (Toronto 1979), 150.

⁶⁵*Vochenblatt*, 20 December 1956.

and evils of the Stalin period.”⁶⁶ Moreover, because of the spread of socialism to other countries, in other words because of its universalism, the necessary variety of approaches “will affect the approach to the Jewish question in the USSR.” Besides, he added, the Soviet Union’s Jews will not give up the struggle for “cultural reemergence,” noting, prophetically, that it “will have vital effects on the life of Jews everywhere.” Nevertheless, he continued, the ideological and political struggle must be fought by Jewish socialists within the socialist family, not allowing “ourselves to become partners with the enemies of socialism of those who use the Soviet Jewish problem as an excuse for their anti-Sovietism.” And the collegial ideological struggle should be carried on internationally, so that communists everywhere would pressure Soviet leaders to address their nationalities policies “and especially the Jewish questions” more sympathetically.⁶⁷

Salsberg made essentially the same case in a statement he presented to the Party, but he did so more emphatically than he did in *Vochenblatt*. And he pulled no punches. The Canadians, he said, went to Moscow in the spirit of the joint declaration of the Communist parties of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in June 1956, which proclaimed “cooperation ... voluntariness ... [and] equality” in the “comradely exchange on controversial questions,” to ask about how the national question and the Jewish problem in the USSR were being solved.⁶⁸ “A full answer has yet to be found,” he said, “for the burning question how it was possible to steadily narrow down and finally to make a nightmare caricature of socialist justice in the Soviet Union” since the late 1930s. And while it was encouraging to hear that steps were now being taken to return some powers to the national republics and “to rectify the crimes and injustices committed against the Jewish nationality [which] resulted in a complete temporary extinction of every and all forms of Jewish cultural activity in the Soviet Union,” this was far from adequate and less than what flourished between 1917 and 1930. On this matter the Soviet government should take an example from Poland where the People’s Democratic Republic had encouraged and supported a democratically elected Jewish Social and Cultural Association to administer a wide range of Jewish cultural activity.⁶⁹

VI

Salsberg’s autumn 1956 *Vochenblatt* articles (published in both English and Yiddish versions) aroused intense interest among readers, many of them writing that they too had long harboured deep concerns. In fact, the articles were so famous that New York’s Yiddish daily, the left-centre *Forverts*, commented on Salsberg’s

⁶⁶*Vochenblatt*, 20 December 1956.

⁶⁷*Vochenblatt*, 20 December 1956.

⁶⁸Communist Party of Canada, “Draft Statement on LLP delegation to Soviet Union.” Submitted by J.B. Salsberg, October-November 1956.

⁶⁹Communist Party of Canada, “Draft Statement on LLP delegation.” See also “Revision to Draft Statement by J.B.S.”

views, while the communist *Morgen Freiheit* reprinted the series.⁷⁰ Even the *New York Times* offered favourable response. Condensed versions were published in the Paris *Naïe Presse*, in the New York quarterly *Klorkeit*, and in the Tel Aviv *Drachim Chadashot*.⁷¹ Obviously, then, there was wide interest in what a first-hand observer of Salsberg's standing had to say about the fate of Jews in the Soviet nirvana, and the Canadian debate in *Vochenblatt* is instructive of the depth of feeling among believers. Its editor, Joshua Gershman, started it off by observing in early January 1957 "that this mighty socialist nation is a land of contrasts" and that complete negativity would not do the Soviet Union justice.⁷² Without glossing over "the grim crimes against the Jewish people committed ... during the Stalin regime [and] the fact that even since the 20th Congress very little has been done to make up for the injustices against Jewish communal life in the USSR," Gershman stressed that this was a nationalities issue, not just a Jewish question. And in any event, "the socialist flower, which blooms and glows despite the thorns and weeds, cannot be ignored, and must not." The fact is, Gershman stressed, Jewish communists did not "strongly demand of the Soviet leaders what happened to Jewish cultural institutions, cultural leaders and others since 1948." And it was "a crime" not to have spoken out. But, while Gershman gave his own perspective on these matters, he did not contradict Salsberg's essential message.

In fact, Gershman supplied valuable information that Joe had not, such as the point that Yiddish culture, far from declining as more Soviet Jews were becoming Russified, was actually thriving. In a meeting with a sizeable group of Yiddish writers, Gershman learned that books in that language were not only selling very well but in some cases also getting translated into other languages. Over eight million copies of Kvitko's (one of the executed writers) works, for example, had been translated into thirty-four languages.⁷³

As for alleged low attendance at Jewish artistic performances, the writers told Gershman that in Ukraine, White Russia, and Latvia there was strong interest, while in Baku a drama group was forming, folk songs were being collected, Yiddish books were selling out quickly, and Yiddish was well in use as a first language.⁷⁴ During these and other discussions, Gershman wrote, "I became even more convinced that the official argument that there was no natural desire among Jews for unique cultural expression was incorrect."⁷⁵

⁷⁰Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (New York 1962), 498.

⁷¹OJA, Salsberg Papers, Box 5, "Mein Shlichos in Moskve," *Klorkeit* B (1957); "Shlichoti l'Moskva," *Drachim Chadashot* (1957).

⁷²*Vochenblatt*, 10 January 1957.

⁷³*Vochenblatt*, 17 January 1957.

⁷⁴*Vochenblatt*, 17 January 1957.

⁷⁵*Vochenblatt*, 31 January 1957.

In a meeting with the editors of *Pravda* (one of them a Jew), however, Gershman was told that “there is no natural desire for a Jewish theatre, Yiddish paper etc.” Moreover, whatever little antisemitism existed still in the Soviet Union was depicted as a carryover from czarist days and the German occupation, and insinuations that the Soviet government was antisemitic was “a criminal distortion of the truth.”⁷⁶

While objecting to the fact that Salsberg’s articles were being used by “the old, chronic enemies of the USSR ... to deepen and expand their deadly propaganda,” Gershman nevertheless supported his revelations of the system’s injustices.⁷⁷ And he endorsed his demand for a democratic assembly for Soviet Jews to express their cultural aspirations. Finally he argued:

If the charges against the Jewish writers were false, if their liquidation is seen as a crime, then institutions like the Jewish publishing house, Jewish theatre, [a] Yiddish journal, etc., should be revived, because they were closed down not because there was no need for them but because of spurious charges against their leaders.⁷⁸

Some readers of Salsberg’s and Gershman’s *Vochenblatt* articles were unhappy with their drift. Sam Walsh of Winnipeg — also a recent visitor to the USSR — was puzzled. In a two-part contribution at the end of February entitled “Voohin Gaistu, Vochenblatt?” (“Where are you going, *Vochenblatt*?”),⁷⁹ he challenged assertions that official documents which carried the designation of Jews as Jews were evidence of antisemitism: national identities were registered for all groups in the Soviet Union. In any event, Lenin’s policy of fostering the nationalities was intended only for the more “backward ones.” Thus, when the Soviet government insisted on diversity in groups like young musicians, it was not (as Salsberg had suggested) antisemitic to limit Jewish representation. Rather, it was an expression “of the policy towards training national cadres in the formerly backward republics and regions.”⁸⁰ “Don’t we do the same to foster some national unity in Canada,” Walsh asked? As for Russian Jews pining for Yiddish culture, this was, in Walsh’s view, poppycock. Moscow’s Yiddish Art Theatre played to almost empty houses; instead, Jews flocked to the Bolshoi. They read classic and current Jewish writers, to be sure, but in Russian, not Yiddish. The journal *Emes*, Walsh heard in Moscow, had fewer than 500 readers in the Soviet Union and only about 1,000 subscribers abroad. So “for the *Vochenblatt* to insist that cultural expression in ... Yiddish ... has been extinguished as a result of criminal, anti-Leninist, chauvinist acts of brutal police terror ... is very false and misleading.”⁸¹

⁷⁶ *Vochenblatt*, 7 February 1957.

⁷⁷ *Vochenblatt*, 7 February 1957.

⁷⁸ *Vochenblatt*, 7 February 1957.

⁷⁹ “Voohin Gaistu, Vochenblatt?,” *Vochenblatt*, 21 and 28 February 1957.

⁸⁰ *Vochenblatt*, 21 and 28 February 1957.

⁸¹ *Vochenblatt*, 28 February 1957.

As for the closure of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in 1948, all the other similar national committees established during World War II to mobilize support for the Great Patriotic War had also been disbanded. Moreover, Walsh continued, it was “childish” to ask the Soviets to set up a Jewish congress of the sort Salsberg proposed; this carried the anti-revolutionary flavour of Bundism and Social-Democracy. Walsh suggested ignoring Salsberg’s complaints, because “the Jews of the Soviet Union march onward and upward, alongside all their Soviet brothers, to the conquest of all obstacles, relics of backwardness and mistakes, in triumph and brotherhood to communism.”⁸² “Does *Vochenblatt*,” Walsh ended, “no longer address itself to the interests of the [Jewish] working people?” Or “has it begun with socialism ... and ended with nationalism ...?”⁸³

Walsh’s attack was too much for Salsberg’s longtime friend, Morris Biderman, whose reply in *Vochenblatt* was entitled “Vu Bistu Farkrochen, Sam Walsh” (literally, “Sam Walsh, where did you drag yourself to”? Or, perhaps, “just look where you’ve ended up,” or “you are really off track”!) “I have rarely read anything containing so many quarter and half truths, such twisting and distortion of facts and history, taking the written word and drawing false, distorted conclusions,” Biderman wrote.⁸⁴ He thought it nonsense for Walsh to say that Jews had assimilated to Russian culture. Some of them had drifted away, but certain “administrative-moral” pressures for Russification were exerted on Jews and other nationalities causing “much suffering and tragedy.” Demands that the USSR “return to the national policy” of Lenin was not anti-socialist; nor was it Bundist, as Walsh alleged. He was just “throw[ing] sand in people’s eyes.” Incontrovertible evidence existed that large numbers of Jews wanted a Jewish theatre, newspapers, and a writers’ committee. What a paradox, Biderman continued, that the government offered Jews the publication of a prayer book and the establishment of a yeshiva, but declared that Yiddish newspapers and books written by Jewish workers and revolutionaries were an impossibility!

Letters from a number of readers, including one from the noted Yiddish poet Sholem Shtern, essentially supported Salsberg, Gershman, and Biderman.⁸⁵ However, Gershman decided to terminate the lively debate with a lengthy and blistering attack on Walsh, whose “letter certainly did not contribute to ... the socialist solution to the ages-long, painful Jewish questions ... His theories are alien to Marxists who want to win the Jewish people for socialism.”⁸⁶

Salsberg also responded, but not in *Vochenblatt*. With his growing body of supporters, he chose to fight it out in the Party and in the United Jewish Peoples’ Order, whose Toronto executive moved the date of its annual conference ahead by

⁸²*Vochenblatt*, 28 February 1957.

⁸³*Vochenblatt*, 28 February 1957.

⁸⁴*Vochenblatt*, 14 March 1957.

⁸⁵*Vochenblatt*, 4 April 1957.

⁸⁶*Vochenblatt*, 18 April 1957.

several months to 8-9 December 1956 to highlight what it called “the Tragic Events and crimes committed in the Soviet Union.”⁸⁷ Such painful experiences “profoundly shocked ... the members of our organization,” S. Shek announced in a report indicating that Salsberg’s protests had gone unanswered by the communist hierarchy. As a result, UJPO members were dissatisfied with the organization’s tradition “follow[ing] the political line of the Labor-Progressive Party” because “this influenced the organization and stood in the way of the broadest development of our cultural and educational work.” A conference manifesto put it this way:

For many years we accepted uncritically all developments in the Soviet Union. This was wrong. There were members who questioned the sudden disappearance of Jewish writers and cultural institutions. Their questioning was rejected and dismissed without justification. Developments and events in the Soviet Union, shall be examined and our attitude to them determined on the basis of full, free discussion in the organization.⁸⁸

Finally ready to break away, UJPO would soon sever its ties with the communists, create a fully democratic atmosphere in its ranks, and become an independent organization devoted solely to the advancement of Jewish culture in Canada with a “positive attitude” to the State of Israel.⁸⁹ Moreover, UJPO’s previous financial support for *Vochenblatt* would be ended and members free not to contribute. Ended was slavish adherence to the party line, restraint on protests against Moscow’s antisemitism, and isolation from the Jewish mainstream: “the UJPO will work unstintingly in the interests of its members, their families, and the Jewish community as a whole.”⁹⁰ Salsberg and his UJPO supporters were now effectively out of the Communist Party.

It is not entirely clear, however, whether Salsberg jumped or was pushed. In November, he was ousted from the National Executive Committee (technically, he failed to be reelected) because of “sharp differences of opinion.”⁹¹ He then offered to resign as Metro Party Leader, a post he had reluctantly accepted after returning from Moscow in September. Toronto communists were experiencing major turmoil and serious antagonisms since Salsberg had gone public in *Vochenblatt*. Equally disruptive was his outspoken demands at Party meetings “for a realignment of socialist forces in Canada, for a new Party of Canadian Marxism.” For this initiative he was assailed for his “right opportunist tendency” to undermine the essentials of Marxist-Leninism. The air at Party conclaves was blue with accusations

⁸⁷ OJA, Salsberg Papers, Box 5, “Report to the Conference, December 8th and 9th [1956], by S. Shek, Secretary,” 1.

⁸⁸ “Report to Conference,” 1.

⁸⁹ “Report to Conference,” 2.

⁹⁰ OJA, Salsberg Papers, Box 5, “Statement of Aims and Purposes of the United Jewish Peoples’ Order.”

⁹¹ OJA, Salsberg Papers, Box 5, J.B. Salsberg to Chairman and Members of Metropolitan committee of LPP, Toronto, ON, 2 January 1957.

and what he called "petty bickering and manoeuvrings." He wanted out of this "place d'armes for factionalism," and resigned.⁹² After acrimonious debate, his resignation was formally "rejected" by the Metro Committee. But he was now, in reality, out of the communist movement. A journey that had begun in 1926 was nearly finished.

One last point must be understood about this break. Salsberg saw the USSR's Jewish question as a symptom of more serious problems; the Jewish issue provided a window on the failings of the communist movement and the crisis within its ranks. Canadians, he said, had been so subservient to the CPSU that "this crippled our ability to think independently." The LPP, therefore, must find a new direction and realistically address Canadian issues, within the Canadian context; it must escape its current political isolation by seeking a new approach to the CCF and the trade union movement.⁹³ Within such a new alignment of socialist forces in Canada, only a democratic and independent political party "based on Scientific socialism" could appropriately address Canadian issues and chart a path to Socialism. But "the LPP, with its long history of subservience to the CPSU, its dogmatism, its sectarianism, its isolation from the masses and the distrust with which it is regarded cannot be transformed into such a party." The Jewish question had broken Salsberg's faith. In notes for a speech that he gave at the 2 January 1957 meeting of the Metro Committee of the LPP, he wrote, "[the Party] violated our moral integrity ... Enough. I do not offer amendments because main line is wrong."⁹⁴

VIII

The *Vochenblatt's* editorial and UJPO's support for Salsberg's critique caused deep concern in the Labor-Progressive Party, especially when, at its Sixth Convention in April 1957, his supporters attempted to get Party support for pressuring the Soviet Union on the Jewish issue.⁹⁵ Labelling these moves "revisionist attempts to liquidate our party or turn it into an appendage of social-reformism," the Party's National Executive Committee (in May 1958) condemned those behind this "right wing attack" on communist principles. Castigating the ostensible crypto-Zionists and nationalists who had abandoned Marxism, quitting the Party and even seeking readmission to the Canadian Jewish Congress, that bastion of the bourgeoisie (which, as everyone knew, was headed by the Montreal arch capitalist, whiskey tycoon Samuel Bronfman), the NEC wanted nothing to do with those advocating support for the CCF and raising money for social-democratic causes in Israel.⁹⁶ The

⁹²Salsberg Papers, Box 5, Salsberg to Chairman ... 1957.

⁹³Salsberg Papers, Box 5, "Position of Comrade J.B. Salsberg as Expressed at the Last Plenum."

⁹⁴Salsberg Papers, Box 5, "Position ... Plenum."

⁹⁵Kenny, Box 9, "Party Policy in the Jewish Field," National Executive Committee, Labor-Progressive Party, 9 May 1958, typescript.

⁹⁶Kenny, "Party Policy ... Field," 2.

Executive condemned *Vochenblatt* and the “deviationist” leadership of UJPO for their “serious errors” (which should be “criticized in a comradely fashion”) because “efforts to ascribe anti-Semitism to the Soviet Union’s policy [towards its Jewish minority], no matter how cunningly concealed, are slanders against socialism and the Soviet Union, and are attempts to create fertile soil for anti-Marxist revisionism in Canada.” Finally, communists “should resist all policies and actions which kowtow to the Jewish bourgeoisie or to Right social democracy.”⁹⁷ Subsequent Party documents kept up this attack, even naming Salsberg and his close associate, Sam Lipshitz, as leading the attempts to win UJPO for their “revisionism” against the Soviet Union by “[incorrectly] present[ing] the Soviet Jews as an oppressed nationality suffering discrimination and anti-Semitism.”⁹⁸ Just as bad, to Party stalwarts, was Salsberg’s and Lipshitz’s all-but-unqualified support for the British-French “imperialist” attack on Egypt in 1956.⁹⁹

Salsberg’s protest had such a powerful effect on the Party that Tim Buck felt it necessary to devote a part of his report to the National Executive Committee meeting (31 August-2 September) to the “right-wing confusion” amongst Jewish members, and the need for clarity “on the national question as a whole” and the Jewish question in particular.¹⁰⁰ And in a lengthy statement to members, Buck made a pointed attack on the “recurring sickness [of] revisionism, ... the current of opportunism which reflects the pressure of bourgeois ideas within the Marxist movement.” Revisionism encouraged the illusion that the “irreconcilable conflict between Marxism and bourgeois ideology” could be eliminated and that “capitalism can grow into socialism by a purely evolutionary process of social reform.”¹⁰¹

This, of course, was heresy, long recognized as such since the times of Marx and Engels, who faced down enemies who disguised themselves as Marxists. Buck stressed that the Party had always “repudiated the opportunist line.” And it must do so again, on the Canadian field of ideological battle. Salsberg, in particular, had shown his true colours when he failed to critique the deviationist Gui Caron (a Montreal comrade who had run for the LPP in the Saint Louis riding during the 1948 Quebec provincial election campaign), who had publicly declared that “Marxism failed to explain reality.” Salsberg, moreover, had blatantly informed a newspaper — a capitalist paper yet — that he saw promise in the CCF and that he would like to lead a movement of “individuals who have lost faith in Communism.”¹⁰² Buck’s diatribe against Salsberg took up many pages in the August-September 1957 issue of *Marxist Review*, which also contained other attacks on ‘revisionism’ by Party

⁹⁷Kenny, “Party Policy ... Field.”

⁹⁸Kenny, Untitled, 5.

⁹⁹Kenny, “For NC Meeting, Aug. 30-Sept. 1, 1958. On the Struggle for Marxism-Leninism among Jewish Canadians,” 3.

¹⁰⁰*Marxist Review*, 15 (October-November 1957), 9-17, 13.

¹⁰¹*Marxist Review*, 6 (August-September 1957), 17-32, 18.

¹⁰²*Marxist Review*, 6 (August-September 1957), 17-32, 20.

ideologues and reprinted an editorial from *Pravda* on the necessity for unity in the Party.¹⁰³

The major purpose of Buck's assault, of course, was to counter a serious challenge from one of the Party's best known figures and undermine his credibility. In this he had little success. Many non-Jewish as well as Jewish members of the Party were shaken not just by the Khrushchev revelations of "Stalin's crimes," but also by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in October 1956. Among most Jewish communists the contest between their beloved Yossele Salsberg and Tim Buck was a non-starter. Accusations of deviationism, opportunism, and other ideological impurities be damned. Yossele (Joe's Yiddish name) was one of them, a Yiddish-speaking brother tried and true, a *chaver* (friend) to all, loved by the masses of working-class Toronto Jews, communist and non-communist alike. He had now spoken out for the oppressed of his people — a little late, perhaps, but clearly and unequivocally — and they were with him.

Salsberg's departure left some observers skeptical, however. A few years later, Maurice Spector, once the Party's leading intellectual and a major figure in Canadian communism's formative years until he was expelled for Trotskyism in 1928, commented acidly:

Salsberg ... could have broken with the Comintern over many issues involving such serious things as the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the purging of six million kulaks, the pick-ax assassination of Leon Trotsky.... He chose, for reasons that he will clear with his own conscience, to remain with the Communist Party until a time he went to Russia and discovered that ... Yiddish writers had been liquidated and purged by the Stalin terror. So he broke with Russia because of the persecution of Yiddish. I ... and others have broken over other issues. Everyone chooses his own moment.¹⁰⁴

Joshua Gershman, one of the few leading Canadian Jewish communists who stayed on in the Party, was less kind:

Salsberg was already aligned with people not only in Canada but in other countries as well, ... [they met] in Paris. They had grand illusions ... He [had] the great idea that he will become one of the leaders of an international movement against Moscow domination.¹⁰⁵

IX

Are these observations fair? How should the historian assess Salsberg's behaviour on both the suppression of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union and his support for the Party, which denied it and removed him from its senior councils? My view is that he

¹⁰³ *Marxist Review*, 6 (August-September 1957), 17-32, 20.

¹⁰⁴ Extract from "Whither the Party," CBC Horizons Documentary on the Communist Party of Canada, 1964. I am grateful to Ian McKay for this reference.

¹⁰⁵ Irving Abella, "Joshua Gershman," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 2 (1977), 210.

was, above all other aspects of his identity, a loyal communist, who, despite mounting personal angst which he expressed to close friends, chose to believe what the Soviets told him and to accept Canadian Party discipline — until the autumn of 1956.¹⁰⁶ Where, outside of the Party, could he find a home? He was no closer to the CCF in 1957 than he had been twenty years earlier. He was on the outs with the Canadian Jewish Congress, which he publicly condemned in 1954 for its refusal to protest against the rearmament of Germany and what he called the “revolting stand of [Jewish MPs] [Leon] Crestohl and [David] Croll who voted in parliament for arming the Germans.”¹⁰⁷ Since UJPO had been expelled from the Congress, Salsberg could hardly find refuge in this august assembly (which called itself “the parliament of Canadian Jewry”), or in the Toronto Jewish community councils that were dominated by the local haute bourgeoisie. Dispirited by the loss of his riding in the bitter provincial election of 1955 and increasingly concerned about the declining health of his wife, Dora Wikensky (a prominent social worker in the Jewish community), he clung — naively, certainly; dishonestly, possibly — to the cause which had guided him for nearly 30 years, hoping — with declining enthusiasm, to be sure — that he could make a difference to the Soviet policy towards Jews. This was a kind of political schizophrenia, possibly, but then which politician is without similar tensions?

It is, nevertheless, appropriate to observe here that neither Salsberg nor any other Jewish Canadian communist protested against the suppression of other nationalities in the USSR. In all of Joe’s representations to Soviet bigwigs and in his writings in *Vochenblatt* and elsewhere, there is no mention of the fact that cultural activities were being shut down for other groups as well as for Jews. Soviet nationalities policy became an issue for them, it seems, only when it affected Jews. Should not these good communists have cried out that Stalin’s policies towards all nationalities were undermining “true” communism? By focusing on their own complaint within the family, they were revealing themselves as nationalists, chauvinists even, under the umbrella of socialism, a position not dissimilar from that of the much-reviled Bundists and Zionists. This was, in fact, what the Soviets alleged. Jewish critics apparently wanted to enjoy both socialism and *Yiddishkeit*. But, their secular Jewishness was their first identity; it was the essence of their being; it was in their very souls. In the final analysis, their answer to the question “For whom do I toil?” was in the response that Salsberg and his Jewish colleagues announced in 1956 when, at long last, they realized that they could not have both — and they made their choice.

In *The God That Failed*, Arthur Koestler likened his seven years’ labour in the communist cause to Jacob’s service to Laban for the hand of the beautiful Rachel.¹⁰⁸ Jacob was deceived by his father-in-law and given the ugly Leah instead.

¹⁰⁶OJA, Salsberg Papers, Hershkovitz interview.

¹⁰⁷*Vochenblatt*, 23 June 1955.

¹⁰⁸Richard Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed* (New York 1965), 66.



Joe Salsberg, his wife, Dora Wilensky, on his right, and an unknown person on his left: Salsberg on the hustings. Ontario Jewish Archives, accession #2004-5-28.

But such was his love for Rachel that he worked another seven years for her — and yet another seven to get his revenge for that wrong. Joe Salsberg, by contrast, spent 30 years in the communist movement already possessed of his beloved Dora and for no tangible reward such as Jacob's. When discussing *The God That Failed* on a CBC program (in May 1962) that also featured Arthur Koestler and Stephen Spender (two of the contributors to the book), Salsberg stated that while Stalin “who was defined as the god of communism, proved to be a most disillusioning and disastrous failure ... the god which the Koestlers, the Spenders and I began to worship was one that encompassed the broad concepts of socialism, with its equalitarianism, its social and political democracy and universal brotherhood.” “We cannot say,” he continued, “that *that* god has failed, for he has yet to be reached.”¹⁰⁹ That god of justice and righteousness was the core of the Messianic dream, of a world repaired, and achieved, as Amos (5:25) demanded, if only the faithful, would “let justice well up as waters; and righteousness as a mighty stream,” or as Isaiah (58:6) proclaimed: “to loose the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bonds of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹Queen's University, Salsberg Collection, “Text of Remarks by J.B. Salsberg on CBC Program: ‘The God That Failed’,” Wednesday 9 May 1962.

¹¹⁰*The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text*. Volume II (Philadelphia 1955) 1089, 1454.

Salsberg, then, was more like one moved by these mandates and by Moses' stern injunction taught to him by Toronto rabbis so long ago: *tsedek. tsedek. tirdof* (righteousness, righteousness thou shalt pursue), striving in the belief that this was necessary to achieve *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and, according to the Kabbalistic tradition revered by Hasidim like his deeply devout father, Abraham, seeking out and gathering the scattered sacred sparks — and, finally, bringing them home.

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