

Salsberg Hits Kremlin on Jews

By Harry Ring

Why were Jewish cultural institutions wiped out and leading literary figures exterminated by the Soviet government? Why does the government insist that the Soviet Jews have been "assimilated" and therefore no longer require the rights of a national minority? These and other related questions are today troubling many Communist Party members everywhere. The most prominent figure to articulate these questions has been J. B. Salsberg one of the leaders of the Canadian Labor-Progressive (Communist) Party.

Salsberg visited the USSR in 1955 and 1956 to obtain information on the present state of the Soviet Jews. His findings are published in the February issue of the magazine *Jewish Life*, a U.S. publication generally associated with the views of the Communist Party.

SALSBERG KNEW IN '48

For Salsberg, the shocking post-20th Congress reports of Soviet anti-Semitism did not come as a revelation. Back in 1948 Salsberg came into collision with the leadership of the Canadian CP after he proposed that the party make official inquiry into the liquidation of the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.

Although Salsberg remained publicly silent on this burning issue during the years of his fall from official grace, his recent interview with Khrushchev apparently decided him on the need to speak out, and he does so in fairly blunt and direct language.

He confirms the charge that violations of the rights of Soviet Jews did not begin as now contended, in 1948. Salsberg writes: "As long ago as the late thirties I became worried about several developments in Jewish social and cultural life in the USSR. . . It was clear that some kind of evil blight had descended and was devastating Jewish cultural achievements. . . The problem of Jewish cultural activity in the Soviet Union did not start in 1948. . . It started way back in 1934-35."

A BRUTAL ACT

Salsberg reports that he discussed the entire problem with Dmitrov (a leading figure in the Communist International) in 1939, but with the outbreak of the war he felt he should not pursue the issue. In the recent period the issue became too burning, and he decided to speak out. He reports his efforts in 1955 to secure an explanation from Soviet officials. In the discussion "An effort was made to convince me that there really existed no Jewish question in the USSR" and that the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee had been dissolved merely because its wartime function had ended.

From the discussions, Salsberg says, "It became clear to me that the sudden closing of Jewish institutions was—as I had suspected all along—a brutal act of

violence. The explanation that 'integration' (Russification) was responsible for the cessation of all Jewish social and cultural activity was thoroughly false."

During his 1956 visit, Salsberg tried to find out why the government refused to issue a public statement about the 1948-49 purge of Jewish intellectuals. He reports: "The answer to our request for a public explanation was that in their opinion it was neither necessary or well-advised. Not necessary because the wrongs were being corrected and actions speak for themselves. And not well-advised because such a statement would create much dissatisfaction. Other peoples and republics who also suffered from Beria's onslaught on their culture and artists would wonder why a statement only about Jews."

'COMRADELY ADVICE'

It was at this time that Khrushchev expressed his odious anti-Jewish views to Salsberg, telling him that Jews did not clean their streets and that wherever they settled they built synagogues. In closing the discussion, Salsberg reports, "Khrushchev advised me in a comradely way not to allow myself to become saddled by the bourgeoisie and the Zionists."

Salsberg arrives at two important conclusions. First, he recognizes that the anti-Jewish drive was part of the repressions against all national minorities. He writes: "With the consolidation of the Stalin regime there began, in addition to other manifestations of lawlessness, an assault on the rights of the various peoples inhabiting the USSR. Under the cloak of combatting 'bourgeois nationalism' there were cruelly liquidated the most devoted revolutionary leaders of the Ukraine, Georgia and other nationalities."

Secondly, Salsberg correctly observes that "The Jewish question is part of the general question of Socialist democracy in the Soviet Union. A general conclusion to which I have come is that the rise and fall of Jewish cultural and communal life coincides with the rise and fall of democracy. . . in the USSR. A graph showing the level of Jewish cultural activity and Soviet democracy would indicate a striking parallel development."

But what to do? Salsberg's basic proposal is: "We should carry on a stubborn but friendly ideological and political struggle to influence the Soviet leaders to radically change their present approach to the national question, and especially to the Jewish question in the Soviet Union."

We will discuss whether this is an adequate program in another article.