

Comrade H. Zolotarov, The Freedom-Pioneer, And The Jewish Workers' Movement In America

Saul Yanovsky

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Comrade Zolotarov came to America in 1882; he was then all of eighteen years old. But from what we find out from his life history before he came to America, we must conclude that in his youngest years he already reacted to life with much seriousness. In Yelizavetgrade¹ he frequented the high-school. But he left Yelizavetgrade for Odessa and joined the Am Olam [Jewish socialist emigration movement], in order to travel with them to America, where he hoped to begin a new life, a life of work, a life built on new social foundations, on the foundations of freedom and of Communism.

But before he traveled to America he remained exactly one year in Odessa, and there he took part in the revolutionary movement.

Because of his youthful ideals he leaves his father and mother and begins his own independent life. He cannot remain longer in dark Russia, where human freedom is suffocated, where the true self is persecuted like a wild animal. He cannot make peace with the ugly life around him, and young as he is, he finds the courage in himself to cut himself off entirely from his past in order to begin a new life in America, where everything is strange, unfamiliar, and he can certainly assume that he will have to do hard and bitter work until he comes to something.

Thus it must be clear to us that already from his very first years Comrade H. Zolotarov exhibited signs of that which he was his whole life: a fighter, a rebel, a man with his own opinions, a passionate lover of freedom, and a man with a great heart, who not only sought freedom and good fortune for himself, but freedom for all his fellow human beings.

However it must be noted that in that time, exactly as in later years, a considerable number of young men came to America with great, lofty aspirations, with a passionate fervor to accomplish something great in life. Unfortunately not many retained their youthful ideals. Most of them were consumed by the cloudy stream of everyday life and "equal status." Not, however, Comrade Zolotarov. After he had stayed four years in America – working first with a party of the "Em-Oylem'tzes" [Am Olam] in a Communistic colony, and then traveling with his parents to

¹ Former name of Kirovograd, city in S. Central Ukraine, in SW former Soviet Union, population 237,000 (as of date of my dictionary)

Cincinnati where he enrolled in the Chickering (*sp?*) Institute, and then enrolling in a university Chemistry department and graduating – then, when he was already thoroughly “Americanized,” having become, so to say, a complete American, the first thing Zolotarov did, arriving in New York in 1886, he threw himself with the whole fire of his soul into the anarchistic movement. He lectured, he agitated, he wrote, he protested against the shameful sentencing of the Chicago anarchists, and H. Zolotarov, the graduated chemist, the former assistant professor, associated with green (*meaning recently immigrated*) young men, joined their group “Pioneers of Liberty,” and did everything that he could in order to dig up the stony soil of New York for grains of anarchism.

I can say with a pure conscience that insofar as anarchism, the doctrine of freedom and equality and brotherhood, was accepted amongst the Jewish workers, it is absolutely certain that a great part was owed to the untiring and very effective organization of H. Zolotarov.

And this was much much more than the reader of the present time can appreciate. Now, lecturing and speaking is a considerable profession. We have many such lecturers in America who make an entire living by propagandizing their ideas. Besides money, the lecturer, the speaker, has his adherents who only take care that where the lecturer comes he should have all his comforts, and in most cases he is received with great honor.

But it was entirely different in 1886. What honor, what money? The few poor people themselves who formed the group “Pioneers of Liberty” had to put together their meager few pennies in order to be able to rent a room where they could hold their meetings, or a “mass-assembly” that consisted, when a lot came, of a few tens of people.

And it is then that Zolotarov, instead of thinking about an end result, devoted himself with all his strength to the Pioneer-work. Keep in mind that Comrade Zolotarov was never a rich man, and don’t forget also that his parents were very poor. His father, one of the most loving and warm-hearted men that I had the occasion to meet, was a tailor. He couldn’t then give his youngster everything that he needed to live. The elder Zolotarov had to make a living then for an entire sizable family, and all with his own ten fingers. So it is certain that at that time Zolotarov had to earn for himself in order to live. And this he did also: He gave English lessons to poor, green workers. One can only imagine how much he could earn that way. He wrote for a short time in the “People’s Advocate,” a weekly newspaper with something of a radical tint, and, when necessary, helped his father in his work, as the elder Zolotarov once confided to me. Here, amidst these uncertainties, Zolotarov was one of the very first agitators for free thought, for a more beautiful and better social life amongst Jewish workers. The work was difficult, frighteningly difficult, but Comrade Zolotarov always hoped to be able to sow the seed of a free life; in this Zolotarov was never lacking.

And I often think, who knows if precisely this intense work already then undermined his health?

Yes, at this same time he was also a student, enrolled in medical school. And I ask now, where did the young, small, weak Zolotarov get the necessary strength? I remember that at this time a small group decided to publish a weekly newspaper, and whom did they hope to have as the leader, the lead writer, the chief agitator? Zolotarov. And he didn’t disappoint us. He wrote for the newspaper much more than people expected; he agitated for it with all his strength, and, what is more, he contributed as much as was possible in money for the maintenance of the newspaper.

Such was Comrade Zolotarov, when I became acquainted with him in 1886.

I recall it was very cold outside, and the group “Pioneers of Liberty,” a meeting of which I was attending for the first time, was gathered in a small room behind a saloon somewhere on Allen Street. We didn’t have to pay any rent for the room, but each person had to order a glass of beer whether he wanted it or could drink or not.

I remember that it was already near the end of the meeting, about half past ten. Most of the business had already been accomplished. But everyone remained seated. As a newcomer, I asked my neighbor, for whom is everyone waiting? And the answer was: “Zolotarov must come soon.” That there was a Zolotarov, who was a firebrand, this I knew, but I hadn’t yet encountered him, and naturally, out of curiosity, I remained with everyone. And soon, indeed, a young man in a summer jacket, the collar turned up, ran into the room, badly frozen. And cold as he was, I got the impression that a strong warmth flowed out from him. He had been about five minutes in the room when he noticed me. “A newcomer,” a “recruit,” he shouted, “good. This is how we grow. What is your name?”

Half a year later, in the summer nights, we used to walk around the streets and continually quarrel. But I don’t remember about what, except that often we used to differ strongly and angrily with each other. The first encounter with him I can’t forget, because the shout “a recruit,” “we grow then,” was full of true enthusiasm.

And in that shout the true Zolotarov expressed himself, because more than anything Zolotarov was an enthusiast. He was a truly deep thinker, had a good clear mind; he never stopped learning, studying. But that which distinguishes Zolotarov from all comrades of his time is his great, inexhaustible enthusiasm.

And such a man he remained his whole life. In the hardest minutes of his life – and there were many such times, both in his personal life and in his life as a community leader, as we will soon see – he never became discouraged, always remained the same lively, inspired, and inspirational Zolotarov.

In 1889 I left America for England, where I was editor of *London Workers’ Friend* [*Der Arbayer Fraynd*] for almost five years. Before this time the Jewish anarchists had published the *Free Workers’ Voice*, [*Fraye Arbayer Shtime*] in which Comrade Zolotarov had very strongly participated. After a long martyrdom the magazine had to close down for a time, and the whole anarchistic movement lived through a supremely critical time. From American Jewish life rose up to heaven the star of social democracy.

I come back to America and find Zolotarov already as a doctor, in his own office, married, and I figure that Zolotarov has already “cooled off,” has become an “established person,” earns money and scoffs at the whole world.

I speak with him alone, he is the same Zolotarov from 1886, it flames and blazes from him, and he is participating in the publication of a monthly scientific magazine, that is, according to him, the sole thing that Jewish anarchism must do.

I don’t agree with him. I insist on this, that our propaganda must lead on a broader scale, as cannot be done with a monthly magazine, and Zolotarov gets excited, fumes, yells with shrieking shouts, that what we must do is to elevate the workers, but never, never go down to them. And a debate starts just like in former times.

And the magazine is published, and Zolotarov writes, and Zolotarov holds speeches, and here I leaf through the old *Free Society*, [*Fraye Gezelshaft*] and I marvel when and where he managed the time for everything.

A few years later the magazine had to be given up out of lack of strength. It wasn't possible, as it turned out, to elevate the workers so quickly. The *Free Workers' Voice* [*Fraye Arbayter Shtime*] under my editorship, lives, and I come to Zolotarov and point out to him that his place is in the *FWV* [*FAS*] Not only does he write, but he truly participates in the routine work. He comes to business meetings, participates in different committees, he is active.

And now we intend to publish a daily newspaper. Money is needed, someone must travel to agitate, and no one is as enthusiastic as Zolotarov. I tell him, someone must travel to Philadelphia to kindle the comrades, and Zolotarov locks up the office for two days, and we travel to Philadelphia, and he begs, and he scolds, and the audience showers him with money.

You understand yourself already, that with such a way of "attending" to business as Zolotarov practiced, he couldn't become rich. Barely, barely did he make a living even in the time when he was still healthy.

But the heart becomes weaker, and Zolotarov must refuse a great part of his practice. Yes, there comes a time when his wife, whom he has loved and respected his whole life, must go ahead and help him make a living. There comes a time when Zolotarov can hardly walk, and yet he must, in order to somehow to maintain a respectable style of life, give lectures in the evening schools, for ten dollars a lecture. Yes, he must receive from the *FWV* [*FAS*] five dollars for an article, on which he works a whole night. Hard, frightening times, that would bring to who knows what a man with a weaker character. But Zolotarov remains devoted in the very blackest times of life. He is full of belief in his ideals, and doesn't stop a moment in his life's work. If he can't speak any more because the heart is weak, he writes all the more. He writes dramas, he writes sociological and psychological treatises, and so he remains active, industrious, literally until the last minute of life.

It is not my task to evaluate his literary work, that will be done by others. I can only say that in everything that Zolotarov created, he invested his heart, his soul. He did not one thing mechanically, and that is, in my opinion, the greatest profit from his literary work, as from his entire, great, beautiful, lofty life.

Who, who but the comrades, with whom he worked, fought, and suffered, and the thousands and thousands whom he inspired to a better and more beautiful life, to nobler and more human thought and feeling, these will never, never forget Comrade H. Zolotarov.

S. Yankovski

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