

Freie Arbeter Shtime

The End of an Era

Shelby Shapiro

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In the Autumn of 1977 “Partial Checklist of International Anarchist Papers,” (p. 105), the Freie Arbeter Shtime was incorrectly listed as being in the Hebrew language — the FAS was a Yiddish-language paper. Was? The FAS is gone ...

The Freie Arbeter Shtime — the world’s oldest continuous Yiddish publication — is dead. In December 1977, after 87½ years, the FAS printed its last issue, a victim of rising paper and printing costs.

That the FAS was able to last 87½ years — a long time for any radical publication — is in itself a tribute. Begun as a paper for Yiddish speaking immigrant workers in 1890, it lasted long after the mass emigrations to America ended, long after most immigrants and their children had become “Americanised.” The “Anglicisation” of Jewish immigrants in England spelled the end of one of the FAS’s precursors, the Arbeter Fraind; in the US, Americanisation had meant the end of most Yiddish newspapers — never mind radical. With Dos Freie Vort, the FAS’s brother-paper in Buenos Aires shut down under the present junta regime, only Problemen, the FAS’s sister-paper in Tel Aviv, remains a voice of Yiddish Anarchism.

Throughout its 87½ years, the FAS upheld the Anarchist Ideal. At times derided as “reformist” this was more a function of its non-sectarian character than anything else. It played an important role in the struggles of Jewish immigrant workers in the US, fighting sweatshops, organising, agitating, showing that there was something better to be fought for. The International Ladies Garments Workers Union (ILGWU), the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, and their various locals, although today far removed from their radical origins, continued to testify to the FAS’s role in their foundings by placing paid greetings in every Labour Day and May Day issue, as did a number of other Jewish workers’ and cultural organisations.

The FAS had a dual character: the propagation of libertarian ideas and the development of Jewish secular culture. Its first editor, David Edelstat, embodied both: today known as one of the first of the “proletarian poets,” he died at the age of 26 from sweatshop-contracted tuberculosis. His poetry was a call to action. In “In Kamf” (In Struggle), he wrote:

We are driven and despised, we are tortured and persecuted, for we cherish the poor and the weak. We are shot and hanged, robbed of our lives and our rights, for we demand truth and freedom for downtrodden slaves. Cast us into your iron chains, tear us apart like bloody beasts

— you can only kill our bodies, you will never destroy our spirit. Murder us, tyrants, but new fighters will come and we will fight on and on, until the world is free.¹

In “Vakht Oyf!” (Awake!) he said:

How long will you remain slaves and wear degrading chains? How long will you produce riches for those who rob you of your bread? How long will you stand with backs bent — humiliated, homeless, and weak? It’s daybreak, awake, open your eyes, and see your own strength. Ring the freedom bells everywhere, gather together the suffering slaves, and fight for your sacred rights!²

And from “Mayn Tsavoe” (My Testament):

Oh, good friends, when I die, bring our freedom flag to my grave, our flag stained red with the blood of the working man. And there, beneath the red banner, sing me my song of freedom that rings like the chains of the enslaved, Gentiles and Jews. And in my grave, I, too, will hear my song and there, too, will I weep. Then when I hear the swords resound in the final flight, with bloodshed and pain, from my grave will I sing to the people and cheer their spirits.³

Written straight from the heart by one who knew the sweatshops; perhaps this was one reason the Freie Arbeter Shtime lasted long after the others had passed — it did not speak to “the people” but from the people and with them.

The roll-call of FAS writers was awesome. On the Anarchist side, in addition to innumerable translations of the writings of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, Ferrer and others, there were articles by Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Gustav Landauer, Aba Gordin, Sam Dolgoff, Paul Avrich, Voline and Rudolf Rocker, to name but a few. On the cultural side, contributions from Joseph Leftwich, M. Ravitch, H. Leivik, Abraham Reisen and many more.

The history of the Anarchist workers’ movement worldwide came alive in the pages of FAS with hundreds of articles by participants and observers: Morris Nadelman on the Makhnovist movement; Jack Frager on Emma Goldman; Augustin Souchy on the heady “Golden Years;” Mollie Steimer — now in Mexico — writing after being deported after a jail term following World War One, back to Russia from whence she was also forced to leave — and so on and so on, history from the bottom up, a constant reminder of the great traditions stretching throughout the pages of the Unknown History.

The FAS was internationally known. M. Stanger, now connected with the SAC in Sweden, wrote about reading worn-out copies of the FAS while slaving in a bakery in his native Rumania in the 1920s, never dreaming that half a century later he would be writing his own memoirs for the paper that served as one of his teachers.⁴ Like the old Arbeter Fraind, the FAS served as a link between Jewish Anarchists in New York City, Paris and London. Donations were regularly received from the “Freie Arbeter Shtime Group” in Paris until the very end. The Wobbly poet and newspaperman Ralph Chaplin (author of “Solidarity Forever”) recalled being introduced to Anarchist ideas — Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Most, etc — by an “FAS correspondent” on his way to Detroit via the box car.⁵

¹ In Eleanor Gordon-Mlotek, Mir Trogn A Gezang (NYC: Workmens’ Circle Education Dept., 1977, 2nd ed.) p. 80.

² Ibid., p. 88.

³ Ibid., p. 92.

⁴ M. Stenger, “Vi azoy kh’bin gevorn an anarchist in rumanie,” Freie Arbeter Shtime, Mar. 1977, p. 6.

⁵ Ralph Chaplin, Wobbly: The Rough-and-Tumble Story of an American Radical (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1948) p. 56ff

The Freie Arbeter Shtime was my first textbook of Yiddish; I was introduced to it by my close friends and comrades, Sam and Esther Dolgoff, in April 1973 when they invited me to a lecture at the City University of New York, on the Jewish Anarchist Movement in the East End of London, given by Bill Fishman. I feel privileged not only to have read it, but to have contributed a few articles in its last years of publication. As with others, the FAS helped open and expand a new world for me. And for that I shall always be grateful.

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