

Trotsky in the Bronx

The Yiddish Writers Club had two rooms on the third floor of a brownstone on Vyse Avenue in the Bronx. The club was a poor cousin to its Manhattan counterpart, which, though equally shabby in appearance, shimmered with the brilliance of its membership—journalists and editors for the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and stalwarts of the Yiddish theater. In the Bronx, we wrote mainly for our desk drawers.

Our leading figure wrote but little, and that in English. Dr. Adler was a physician, and, though he was doctor to most of us and we looked up to him, he was not really one of us at all. We led lives of endless striving and frustration, but the doctor, it seemed, neither strove nor failed. In treating patients, he resisted the heroic temptations of his profession and pretended to let nature take its course. “The body knows how to resist an invasive organism,” he said, “We should offer it the least possible help. Medical science deserves our healthy skepticism.”

Dr. Adler, ten years in the United States, had had the good fortune of a mild oppressor. We were most of us Jews from Russian Poland, from crowded flats in Warsaw, Lublin, or Lvov, or from the mud of the countryside between. We knew the czar’s boot and the Cossack’s heel. The doctor came from Krakow and called Vienna the capital. His parents were hoteliers, so he had a polyglot childhood: his German was as good as his Yiddish, his Russian as good as his Polish. His medical degree, which hung in the front room of his apartment on Kelly Street, bore the seal of the Emperor Franz Josef.

In those days of war and social upheaval, we were consumed by the politics of middle Europe—we were Social

Democrats, Social Revolutionaries, Anarchists, Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, Bundists, and Zionists. But Dr. Adler, who had come to America in 1907 as a ship's surgeon, had once witnessed the launch of a vessel at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and had shaken the hand of President Roosevelt. He was a Bull Moose.

I came to know the doctor across the chessboard. Our games were social occasions, a chance for conversation, though to be honest one cannot play chess without a certain competitive intensity. The doctor had a solid conventional game, but he often grew impatient and too impressed with his own insights. Then he would reach for a brilliancy, a dramatic combination or a daring sacrifice, and he would stumble and lose. "You play like an American," I told him.

We usually played at his apartment, not at the club, which the doctor did not often visit. "I tell you, my friend," he said one evening, "I am not so comfortable among the Yiddishists. First there is the whining. 'Doctor, I have this rash. Doctor I have this swelling. Doctor, it hurts here when I bend like this, is it my liver?' Then there are the politics and the factions. Fleinerman won't talk to Zeitlin because Zeitlin sided with Martov against Plekhanov at the party congress in 1906, or would have if Zeitlin had been in Stockholm at the congress instead of in the Bronx stitching pants. And Wassermann won't shake hands with Pincus because Pincus rejects the necessity of bourgeois democracy as a stage between feudalism and proletarian revolution. These people live in a past that never was and a future that never will be. Lunatics."

Miriam, the doctor's wife, came in with tea, in a cup for the doctor, in a glass for me. She was a tiny woman with a birdsong voice. "Dr. Adler," she said, "you don't really think that."

“How do you know what I think?” said the doctor, and Miriam retreated to the kitchen. On the chessboard too the doctor’s queen was in retreat. Perhaps his weak position had made him peckish.

Whatever the doctor’s opinion of their social graces and political acumen, when members of the Yiddish Writers Club were sick he attended to them with a bedside manner so perfected by years of practice, that whether its warmth was real or feigned was a question we never thought to ask.

When Mendel Levin came down with chills, fever, headaches, diarrhea, the works, the doctor went to see him. He listened, he poked, he percussed. With his mirror strapped around his fringe of hair, he looked gnomish, like an imp from the bog. “Mendel,” he said (as Mendel told me), “you have a cold. I could dose you with any number of compounds, and you might recover in a fortnight, but here is my advice: take plenty of rest and liquids, and when you feel up to it, exercise. You will be fine in two weeks.”

“Naturally,” said Mendel, “I took his advice and lived two weeks on broth and tea with sugar, and milk toast or an egg. I began to take a morning constitutional. And here I am, good as new.”

The doctor told me later that Mendel had a case of influenza. “When the disease had reached that stage there was nothing medical science could do for him.” he said. “But I gave him a regimen to follow, which bucked up his spirits for the fight. That worked out well, I think.”

Early in that year of 1917, the insanities of Europe appeared in the doctor’s front room, like a rodent from the wainscoting. Leon Trotsky, the Bolshevik, on the run as he had been for many years, had been booted from Switzerland, France, and Spain and had fetched up in the Bronx with his wife

and children, in a flat near the writers' club that Morris Zeitlin had arranged for him through a friend of a friend. Of course Trotsky was poor as a serf. He managed to sell some articles to the Russian-language press, and Zeitlin translated them into Yiddish for the *Forward*. Zeitlin, who got a bit puffed up with his brush with fame, also arranged a speaking engagement at the writers' club, for which I happen to know Trotsky was to be paid two and a half dollars. But the great revolutionist, who had twice escaped from Siberia, was felled by laryngitis. Zeitlin sent him to the doctor.

Several days later, Zeitlin and I met the doctor at a pastry shop that catered to Jews with the sweet tooth of nostalgia for the puddings and creams they imagined they had eaten in their childhood. "Trotsky presented with stiffness, fatigue, congestion, headache, and inflammation of the larynx," the doctor said, sipping tea and nibbling on rugelach. "He was thin and pasty, with a sunken chest from poor posture. I told him he had a cold and gave him lozenges. I urged him to exercise." Exercise was the doctor's standard prescription. He had less faith in medicine than in physical culture.

"I handed him one of my treatises," he said, meaning an article on calisthenics he had written for Bernarr Macfadden's magazine. "He could not read it, of course. His Russian lacked culture and his Yiddish was worse. I told him, 'You don't need English to study the pictures,' but I translated the words on the cover for him: 'Weakness is a crime. Don't be a criminal.' He looked at me as if I were mad. He was a difficult patient, a complete primitive."

Morris Zeitlin was built like a bear, but he moved with a quick and dainty grace. He lifted his napkin and patted a rogue dollop of custard from his lip. "Adler," he said, "we have had enough of your arrogance and contempt. You think the Old

World is over there, and you are over here and have nothing to do with it. But no man is an island, as the English poet says. Or man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains. Capital will go on crushing labor until labor rises up to stop it. Capital is international, money knows no borders, and the working class in all countries must learn that there is only one war and one enemy. The Triangle factory owners who let the workers burn? They are all like that. Property is theft. Justice demands that the workers take control, here and everywhere. When Trotsky speaks," he said, "you'll see."

The forty-year-old Zeitlin was only four when his family reached New York from a village near Kiev. He had no memory of life in Russia, and he had not done badly as a tailor. He knew oppression from stories, not experience, and his politics were a pastiche of other people's thinking. Much of what he said, he said to make an argument, which he found exhilarating. But the doctor thought debate undignified. He offered no response, giving Zeitlin a victory but depriving him of a contest.

Before Trotsky was to give his speech, the papers brought the news that Russian troops had mutinied and the Czar had abdicated. A new government claimed power in Petrograd. There was talk of revolution in Germany. Would the Kaiser go next? Would Russia leave the war? Would the United States come in? What would happen to the Jews? Trotsky, stranded in the Bronx, became frantic to find a way to return to Europe.

The socialists among us—and who among us in those days was not a socialist?—knew Trotsky's work and reputation, though his global fame was still to come. The club was full on the evening of his appearance. Even Dr. Adler had come. Trotsky was wiry, pallid, intense, and rude. He spoke in Russian.

“The current dialectic is soaked in blood,” he said. “The internal contradictions of the capitalist order and its parasitic culture are on display in an orgy of destruction across the continent of Europe. What now is the role of the Party? The Party is the vanguard of the proletariat. The Party rouses the proletariat from its stupor and frees it from the twin yokes of ignorance and false consciousness that imperialist exploiters have placed around its neck.”

Trotsky’s voice, surprisingly feminine, rose in pitch. “The objective situation is moving rapidly in our favor. The liberal simpletons and the idiot intelligentsia bleat of freedom while the social order collapses around them. The worse for them, the better for us. When Russia is in chaos, power will lie in the streets. The Party will seize it in the name of the workers, peasants, soldiers and sailors. You have a saying here, a wise one, ‘Weakness is a crime.’ Social Democratic dupes and timid Mensheviks will hesitate in their bourgeois delicacy, but we will not. We will slaughter the enemies of the people wherever we find them, we will burn them in their estates, hang them in their houses, and strangle them in their soft beds.”

The room fell silent, appalled but thrilled. Then Dr. Adler began to clap his hands, slowly and rhythmically. Zeitlin joined in, a few others followed, then more, and then the crowd rose and broke into a wild ovation. Zeitlin, who had introduced Trotsky at the start of the evening, took the floor and made an appeal for funds to help Trotsky return to Russia to lead the revolution that had already begun. The hat was passed, but the crowd’s excitement did not reach to its purse. The small change collected was far short of the goal.

Over the next few days, Adler and Zeitlin conversed and conspired. The doctor was too busy for chess. At the end of March Trotsky sailed for Europe with his wife and children on a

Norwegian steamship. Dr. Adler had somehow paid their passage.

I cornered the doctor at last on one of those early spring days when the showers had passed and even the Bronx smells clean. I was determined to learn what lay behind his conversion to the Trotskyite cause.

“Ah, that,” said the doctor. He was eager to tell his story. “You know I give two evenings a week to the Daughters of Jacob charity hospital on 168th Street,” Dr. Adler said. “Through that work I met Jacob Schiff, the banker, who is the Daughters’ biggest benefactor. The connection was strong enough to get me in to see him at his Wall Street office. That made an impression on me, by the way—it was a long walk across the marble lobby and up the grand staircase to a paneled mahogany room like a banquet hall, where Mr. Schiff stood at ease near his desk by a globe in a cradle.

“I told him that for the price of a few steamship tickets, he could get Trotsky out of town and out of the country. I was not surprised when he wrote a check. I knew my man. Mr. Schiff had financed the Japanese Navy when it sank the Czar’s fleet. He has interests in Germany, and, I suspect, the softest bed in New York. Revolution would suit him even less than it suits me.

“Be sure you give Trotsky the tickets, not the money,’ he said. ‘I want him out of here, not buying trouble in New York.’ Then he asked if I played billiards. I said no. He said, ‘Pity. Relaxing sport.’ He put the check in my hand and smiled. ‘This play is my bank shot, my combination. We’ll have Trotsky gone, and the Czar too.’”

Trotsky reached Russia in May, and true to his word, he arranged the murder of the Czar and his family. His armies spread mayhem and terror throughout the dying empire. For

years Europe lived in fear, and in America all the talk was of bomb-throwing Reds, conspiracy, and revolution. At last investigators from Mr. Harding's Justice Department came to the Bronx to find the Trotskyites. They asked me about Morris Zeitlin and Julius Adler, and they asked each of them about me, but they never learned how Trotsky paid his way home. In the end they abandoned their witchhunt, having found no witches. The Yiddish Writers Club, cleansed of its infection, returned to its irritable obscurity. Adler and Zeitlin went about their lives as smug and disputatious as ever, as if the whole affair of Trotsky in the Bronx had never happened.