The Arbiter Ring, the Growth and Decline of the Socialist Labor Movement in the Pittsburgh Jewish Community 1904–1947

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Like most immigrants to the United States in the early part of this century, Jewish immigrants were in the majority members of the working class. They took jobs in the sweated industries of the cities where they lived, and they formed unions and other labor organizations. Many of these Jewish labor organizations had a socialist political agenda. The foremost socialist Jewish organization was the Workmen's Circle National Organization (Arbeiter Ring in Yiddish).

I first became interested in the Workmen's Circle when I visited its cemetery near Shaler, Pennsylvania. I thought it was a small, peculiar organization, and had no idea how large the Socialist movement was among immigrants Jews in Western Pennsylvania. It seemed logical that the Workmen's Circle was a tiny organization, comprised of a few radicals. None of these assumptions turned out to be correct. The Pittsburgh branches of the Workmen's Circle were part of a much larger, national socialist organization. The history of the Workmen's Circle in Pittsburgh, its growth and decline, is indicative of the whole immigrant Jewish experience in Western Pennsylvania.

Unionization of the Jewish working class began with the mass arrival of Eastern European Jews in the first decade of this century. These immigrants were mostly employed in non-skilled labor areas and sweat shops. They were, for the most part, unable to join non-Jewish unions; thus they organized their own locals, fraternal, and relief organizations to augment the conditions in which they lived. The labor movement among Jewish people reached its peak in the early part of the 1920's. At this time, organizations like the Workmen's Circle had their highest numbers of members. By the middle of the 1930's unionization and socialism were disappearing from the Jewish community. Organizations like the Workmen's Circle steadily declined in membership.

Several factors contributed to the decline of the socialist labor movement in the Jewish community. The most important factor is the change of the majority of Jews from working class to middle class. The Jewish people who immigrated to America as children entered the work force, not in sweated industries, but, mostly in middle class occupations, and mostly after completing their education. Correspondingly, Jews moved out of their first immigrant neighborhood, Pittsburgh's Hill District, and into middle class neighborhoods like Squirrel Hill and East Liberty. With most of the Jewish community no longer members of the working class, socialism and unioniza-

tion lost much of its relevance to the Jewish community. By the late 1930's organizations like the Workmen's Circle, retained their socialist outlook, but changed their focus to other concerns of the Jewish community, such as anti-fascism and the plight of Jews in Europe.

Even before the first Pittsburgh branch of the Workmen's Circle was organized, there was a strong socialist movement among the working class Jews of the area. "The basis for this lies in the past with Eastern European Jews. They had been a suppressed minority in Russia where the only groups working against discrimination toward the Jews were the socialist parties and trade unions."[1] Many active members of the Arbeiter Ring began their socialist activities in Eastern Europe and Russia. Some members of the Workmen's Circle, when interviewed by the National Council of Jewish Women's Oral History Project, said that their parents were active socialists before they immigrated to the United States. Bess Topolsky's mother used the family home in Skwira, Ukraine to shelter union organizers hiding from the Tsarist police.[2] Nathan Weiner, another member of the Arbeiter Ring said his father's occupation before immigrating from Minsk, Belarus in 1915 was, "socialist organizer."[3] Many of the Eastern European Jews who arrived in Pittsburgh became active members of the socialist movement based on their experiences with the socialist movement in their home countries.

In addition to their past experiences with socialism, the living and working conditions for the newly arrived Jewish immigrants to the Hill District greatly increased their interest in the socialist labor movement. Many of the new immigrants did not speak passable English. Further, many of the major industrial firms in the Pittsburgh area refused to hire Jews. "The big steel concerns were prejudiced against them—it was said that Jews could not work . . . Actually, the only employment possibilities open to these Eastern European Jews were work as peddlers, hucksters, stogie makers, and bushelmen in the garment industry.[4] The stogie industry was the sweated industry of Pittsburgh, in the same manner as the garment industry was in New York. In the first two decades of the century, the stogie industry had no regulation or unionization, and most of the cigar production was done in sweatshops that were actually private homes. Elizabeth Butler, who conducted a survey of the stogie industry in Pittsburgh in 1907 for her contribution to *The Pittsburgh Survey, Volume 4: Women and the Trades,* found that of the 235 tobacco producers in the Hill District there were 32 factories and 203 sweatshops.[5] The stogie sweatshops were found to be uniformly lacking in ventilation, lighting and running water. Further, they employed large numbers of children, a fact that they were able to hide from inspectors because workers, for the most part, "lived in the building where they were employed."[6]

Combined with poor working conditions for the newly arrived immigrants to Pittsburgh, the Hill District offered poor living conditions as well. Hyman Richman, whose father ran a stogie shop in his family's basement,

described the living conditions of his neighborhood, the Lower Hill District around Bloomer Way:

> "We lived in a clapboard house with no running water... we used to go to the Irene Kaufmann settlement every few days, with a nickel to use the baths. For a nickel, you got a cake of soap, and enough time to bathe.... Most Jewish homes had outhouses, no central heating. They used gas mantles or little stoves to heat rooms."[7]

Benefit societies began to help the newly arrived immigrants ameliorate their living and working conditions. Benefit societies were collective organizations that provided sickness and burial insurance for a small amount of money collected in annual dues. Further these organizations supported strikes and provided social outlets in the immigrant community. The Pittsburgh branch of the National Workmen's Circle League was organized in 1904. It grew to be the largest and most important Jewish labor organization in Pittsburgh, with over 1600 members at its height in 1920.[8] The Pittsburgh Workmen's Circle, which was actually Branch 45 of the National Workmen's Circle, provided its members with a loan association, Yiddish and English tutoring, and a socialist Sunday school, in addition to the normal services of a benefit society.

Perhaps, the most important role of the Arbeiter Ring in the early part of this century was as the largest member organization of the Labor Lyceum Inc. Lyceum corporation was organized in 1907 to build a "Jewish labor center in the Hill District."[9] Through its member organizations, which also included the Jewish branch of the Socialist Party and other, lesser socialist groups, the Jewish Bakers' Union, and Pittsburgh's Jewish Anarchist organization, the Lyceum raised money to build its labor center. In 1916, the Labor Lyceum building was finally opened. It was located at 71 Miller Street in the Lower Hill District.[10] The Labor Lyceum had a large meeting hall, with a stage, a public library, and offices for its member organizations. Further it rented offices to many socialist and labor groups, lodges and fraternal organizations. The Labor Lyceum was the center of the Jewish socialist movement until its sale in 1930. At the Labor Lyceum, the Workmen's Circle hosted dances and meetings for the school age members of its Young People's Socialist League. Bess Topolsky recalls, "we had lectures and dances where the youth would meet."[11] In addition to the socialist organizing done at the Labor Lyceum, there were many cultural outlets for Jewish members of the working class. Several small religious congregations or shulas used rooms in the Lyceum building. Further, the Workmen's Circle booked many traveling bands and theater companies to play in the main hall.

The zenith of the Jewish socialist labor movement began with the opening of the Labor Lyceum. However, the construction of the Lyceum

building was not the only reason for this peak period of socialist organizational activity. The beginning of American involvement in World War I saw the opening of many industrial and service jobs that had been closed to Eastern European Jews because of discrimination. Further, people who immigrated to the United States as children in the first decade of this century were able to enter the work force with the benefits of an American education. Unlike their parents, they spoke English and were better able to adapt to life in America. "Thus we find them [people who immigrated as children] employed as salesgirls, clerical workers, store managers, industrial workers, etc."[12] Like their parents, many of these young people joined unions and also joined the Arbeiter Ring. As stated earlier, the influx of new members swelled the ranks of the Arbeiter Ring to 1600 in 1920, by far the largest organization in the Labor Lyceum.

As it reached its peak membership numbers, the Arbeiter Ring began to redefine its role in the Jewish socialist movement. The availability of more jobs to the working class Jews caused them to leave the sweated industries. "By 1919, a major demographic change in the workplace had occurred. The Jewish women were replaced by Polish girls who, at that time were considered the mainstay of the [stogie] industry."[13] As a result, the beneficial society alone was no longer the necessity it was to the Jewish community. The Arbeiter Ring began a higher level of political and union organizational and support activities. The Arbeiter Ring and its membership actively supported Eugene Debs and the socialist party. Further, it supported a series of strikes in the Pittsburgh area.

> "In 1919, it was the distributing agency for the money that the Jewish labor organizations in this country sent to support the striking steelworkers in Homestead and Pittsburgh. Tens of thousands of dollars were distributed to steel workers. . . . The most glorious memory in the history of this organization is its support of the big coal strike of 1923. As in the case of the steel strike, all Jewish labor organizations used the Arbeiter Ring as their distributing agency. For one year, the Arbeiter Ring sent cars and trucks daily with milk and bread to Castle Shannon, Russeltown and other coal mining towns, in conjunction with the Socialist Party."[14]

Members of the Arbeiter Ring saw the importance of union organizing and fund raising. Not only did their organization act as a distributing agency for funds to support strikes in the Pittsburgh area, but they raised funds for striking workers in other cities as well.

At the beginning of the 1920's, the Pittsburgh branch of the Arbeiter Ring did not just focus on labor issues. The Arbeiter Ring took an active interest in American and world politics as well. The newspaper of the Arbeiter Ring, the *Jewish Daily Foreword*, published a series of articles protest-

ing the trial of the Italian anarchists, Sacco and Vanzetti. Further, the Arbeiter Ring protested the deportation of, "anti-Czarist Russians from this country."[15]

It was, however the interest of the members of the Arbeiter Ring in world politics that began its decline as an organization. An ideological debate began in 1917 among the membership of the Workmen's Circle regarding the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Many of the members of the organization in Pittsburgh thought that the Arbeiter Ring should part company with the socialists, and join the Communist Labor Party of America, the American branch of the Bolshevik party. In 1921, a split occurred in the Pittsburgh branch of the Arbeiter Ring. The socialists remained in the Workmen's Circle; however, the communists joined a variety of communist organizations that developed. All of these organizations continued to be housed in the Labor Lyceum.[16] According to Hyman Richman, the socialists were called the "right wing" of the groups housed in the Labor Lyceum by the communists. This was a title that they resented because socialism was considered left wing by the mainstream of American politics.

Difficulties for the Arbeiter Ring did not end with the split between the socialists and communists. By the end of the 1920's interest in the labor movement had waned in the Jewish community. After World War I, the Jewish workers remained at the jobs that the war had finally allowed them to get. Like many immigrant groups, Jews began to leave their first immigrant neighborhood, the Hill District, and move into middle class neighborhoods like Squirrel Hill and East Liberty. Fewer Eastern European Jews, the majority of the Arbeiter Ring's membership, were employed in proletarian professions. The US Census for 1920 shows, according to Kurt Pine, that 27% of the population of the Hill District was categorized as foreign born white people, or native white people with foreign born parents. (Pine assumes that a significant number of these people were Eastern European Jews.) However, in the 1930 Census, Pine shows that the number of people in the Hill District in this category had dropped to 20%.[17]

As fewer members of the Arbeiter Ring were actually members of the proletariat, the concerns of the Arbeiter Ring had less to do with the working class. The socialists still had a majority in the Labor Lyceum, but by 1930, did not have as much of an interest in what the Labor Lyceum represented. In 1930, in a general meeting of the organizations that made up the Labor Lyceum, it was decided that the building would be sold. The reasons given for the sale of the Lyceum building were, "The decrease of the Jewish population of the Hill District, the protests of many Jews over the admission of non-Jews and colored into the house, and the reduction of income from rentals, and the continuous fights between socialists and communists which made life miserable for everyone in the house."[18] The communists of the time were still members of the working class for the most part. According to

Hyman Richman, the communists saw the sale of the Lyceum building as an attempt, "to get rid of them by the bourgeoisie. `Who lost the Labor Lyceum?' was the communists rallying cry that year."[19] The Labor Lyceum building was sold in June, 1930.

The sale of the Labor Lyceum building in 1930 also reflected a change in which issues the socialists in the Jewish community felt were important. The Jewish socialists began to direct their efforts against fascism, which they felt threatened Jewish existence and socialist beliefs all over the world. The Arbeiter Ring adapted to the shifting focus in the Jewish community. Julius Weisberg, the president of the Arbeiter Ring in Pittsburgh became one of the leaders of the National Jewish Labor committee, an amalgam of Jewish labor organizations throughout the United States, founded in 1933. In Pittsburgh, the Jewish Labor Committee consisted of the Arbeiter Ring, the Jewish locals of the Bakers' Union and the Salesclerk's Union, the Jewish branch of the Socialist Party, and the Jewish branch of the Central Labor Union (a communist union).[20]

The leadership of the Jewish Labor Committee in Pittsburgh was made up of leaders of the Arbeiter Ring almost exclusively. Julius Weisberg resigned as president of the Arbeiter Ring in 1934, to run the Committee. His replacement as president of the Workmen's Circle, Samuel Oshry was also an executive of the Jewish Labor Committee. Bess Topolsky, the secretary of the Workmen's Circle was the treasurer of the Jewish Labor Committee.[21] In this manner, the shrinking, and increasingly middle class Arbeiter Ring was able to maintain its importance in the Jewish labor movement. That the leadership of the Workman's Circle was middle class can be seen because all of the people listed on the Jewish Labor Committee's letterhead lived in Squirrel Hill or East Liberty. Samuel Oshry lived on Waldron Street in Squirrel Hill, and Bess Topolsky lived on Northumberland Street, for example.[22]

In 1934, the Jewish Labor Committee organized a boycott of all products made in fascist countries. There was already an existing boycott, organized by the more conservative American Jewish Congress, of all products made in Nazi Germany; however, the Jewish Labor Committee did not feel that the American Jewish Congress' boycott was extensive enough. The Jewish Labor Committee felt that the boycott should act in support of all of the trade unionists and minorities oppressed by the fascists, not just the Jewish victims. According to Julius Weisberg, "As you can see, the Boycott Council [of the American Jewish Congress] is a flop and does not have the support of organized labor or the Socialist Party."[23] Throughout the 1930's and World War II, the Jewish Labor Committee continued its boycott of goods produced in fascist countries. Further, the committee invited lecturers to speak about the condition of Jews and union organizers in fascist countries. The speakers invited tried to galvanize the opinion of the whole Pittsburgh labor community against fascism, rather than only the Jewish segment.

By the 1940's the Workmen's Circle had begun to turn away from

socialism in general. According to Hyman Richman, a large part of this was because the official stance of the American Socialist Party was a pacifist one. "Norman Thomas, the leader of the Socialist Party was a pacifist and appeared on a platform with isolationists. Jews mostly became democrats."[24] After World War II, the Jewish Labor Committee raised money to support refugee Jews and give aid to parts of Europe devastated by the war. However, it was no longer fully a socialist organization. The funds collected by their efforts were distributed by the Jewish National Congress. Although the Pittsburgh branch of the Workmen's Circle still existed, it had very few members by the end of the 1940's. Their meetings were scaled back to a semi-annual basis, however the money raised by the Arbeiter Ring dinners increased. According to Bess Topolsky, the annual dinner on September 12, 1947 was attended by, "only 65 people, who were so impressed with the guest speaker that they contributed $2440."[25] Topolsky notes that in the past, better attended dinners raised less money. By the end of the 1940's few members of the Arbeiter Ring used it as anything more than a burial society.

At one time, being an Eastern European Jew in Pittsburgh was almost synonymous with being a socialist. The living conditions and working conditions endured by the Eastern European Jews that immigrated to the United States in large numbers in the first two decades of this century necessitated socialist organizations. These organizations supported the workers' rights in their efforts to unionize. They provided loans, sickness insurance, and burial insurance. These organizations also provided a social and cultural outlet in which immigrants could maintain their cultural identity. "By far the most important Jewish labor organization in Pittsburgh was the Workmen's Circle."[26] The Workmen's Circle was the largest of these organizations when Jewish labor organization were at their zenith in Pittsburgh.

However, by the middle of the 1920's the Eastern European Jews had begun to establish themselves in Pittsburgh. They no longer worked in sweatshops, in fact many of them had entered the ranks of the middle class. For the most part, they left their immigrant neighborhood, the Hill District, and moved into the more affluent sections of Squirrel Hill and East Liberty. Almost as destructive as the change of Eastern European Jews from working class to middle class was the ideological split that rocked the Arbeiter Ring in 1921. Most of the proletarian Eastern European Jews became communists. The Arbeiter Ring continued its prominence in the labor community, especially for its fundraising and distributing abilities.

By World War II, the Arbeiter Ring was completely a middle class organization. While it retained its socialist political view, it no longer supported the Socialist Party. Its membership had declined because working class Jewish immigrants were no longer arriving to the United States in great numbers. Further, the young American Jews were not interested in socialism any longer.

Endnotes

1. Kurt Pine. *The Jews in the Hill District of Pittsburgh 1910–1940.* unpublished Masters thesis. University of Pittsburgh, 1943. p. 50.
2. Bess Topolsky was the secretary of the Jewish Labor Committee and the treasurer of the Arbeiter Ring during the late 1930's and early 1940's. She also ran the Pittsburgh office of the Jewish Daily Foreward, a national, socialist, Yiddish language newspaper. Her interview is part of the National Council of Jewish Women, Pittsburgh Section, Oral History Project. University of Pittsburgh, Archives of the Industrial Society. Oral History 76:27, tape 64, conducted July 23, 1968.
3. National Council of Jewish Women, Pittsburgh Section, Oral History Project. University of Pittsburgh, Archives of the Industrial Society. Oral History 76:27, tape 160, conducted October 31, 1968.
4. Kurt Pine. *The Jews in the Hill District of Pittsburgh 1910–1940,* p. 46.
5. Elizabeth Butler. *Women and the Trades—Pittsburgh 1907–1908,* ed. Paul Underwood Kellogg, *The Pittsburgh Survey Volume 4.* New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1909, p. 76. Also quoted in Robert Berthold "Industry Labor and Social Change on the Hill in Pittsburgh." Unpublished seminar paper, Carnegie Mellon University, 1991, p. 6.
6. ibid, p. 5.
7. Interview by author of Hyman Richman, currently a member of the Arbeiter Ring, and the child of members. Interview was conducted October 14, 1996.
8. Ruth Arnefeld, ed. *The Pittsburgh Jewish Community Book.* Pittsburgh: 503 Oliver Building. June 1921. p. 25.
9. Pine. *The Jews of the Hill District in Pittsburgh.* p. 51.
10. ibid. p. 51.
11. Bess Topolsky Interview. Archives of the Industrial Society, OH 76:27.
12. Pine. *The Jews of the Hill District in Pittsburgh* p. 46.
13. Berthold. "Industry, Labor, and Social Change on the Hill in Pittsburgh." p. 8.
14. Pine. *The Jews of the Hill District in Pittsburgh* p. 57.
15. ibid p. 57.
16. Many sources cite the 1921 split as the end of the Arbeiter Ring as the most important Jewish organization in Pittsburgh. Hyman Richman and Bess Topolsky remained members, but both say that most of their generation found other than socialist organizations to be more important. Kurt Pine discussed the split on p. 58.
17. Pine. *The Jews of the Hill District in Pittsburgh* p. 6.
18. ibid. p. 51.
19. Author's interview with Hyman Richman, Oct. 14, 1996.
20. Archival Records of the Jewish Labor Committee, 1934–1937 Section 2: American Cities, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU. In microfilm, Archives of the Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh.
21. ibid. Letter from Oshry to B. Geibener, head of Nat'l Jewish Labor Committee on Pittsburgh Jewish Labor Committee letterhead. Sep. 24, 1934.

22. ibid.
23. ibid. Letter to B. Geibener, May 12, 1934.
24. Author's interview with Hyman Richman, Oct. 14, 1996.
25. Archival Records of the Jewish Labor Committee, 1934–1937 Section 2: American Cities, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU. In microfilm, Archives of the Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh, letter from Topolsky to Secretary Citrine of the Nat'l Jewish Labor Committee, Oct. 13, 1947.
26. Ida Selevan. "The Jewish Labor Movement in Pittsburgh." Unpublished seminar paper, University of Pittsburgh: 1971. Archives of the Industrial Society. p. 3.

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