

Books

How People Live In Soviet Russia: Impressions From A Journey

By Mendel Osherowitch

Published by Kashton Press in association with the Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Toronto
Translated by Sharon Power
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314 pg. \$40.00

Reviewed by MARTIN ZEILIG

*Let others sing of the hungry pain of love,
Let others sing of the hungry pain of life,
I will sing of the hungry pain of hunger.*

Excerpt from *The Hungry Pain of Hunger*— a poem by Moïshe Nadir (translated from the Yiddish by Philip Rahv), *New Masses*, VII, February 7, 1933, p.18 (reprinted in the English language version of *How People Live In Soviet Russia*)

In February and March 1932 Mendel Osherowitch visited the Soviet Union on assignment for the Yiddish-language newspaper, *Forverts* (The Jewish Daily Forward). With a daily circulation of 275,000, this influential New York City-based newspaper was “socialist in content but Bolshevik in form,” notes Lubomyr Luciuk, a professor of political geography at the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario, in the introduction to *How People Live In Soviet Russia*.

The book, which was published in Yiddish in 1933, has only just been translated into English. It provides a profound, oft times poignant, and honest look at the harsh realities of life in Soviet Russia, in particular Ukraine, at that time. It is a clear-eyed testament to truth telling. More than just an essential eye-witness historical document, this book has obvious lessons for us today too.

Osherowitch was born on January 14, 1888 in the Ukrainian town of Trostianets, says a brief bio of him in the book. He emigrated to the USA in 1910 where he began writing for various Yiddish periodicals before joining the staff of *Forverts* in 1914, a position he held until retiring in January 1945. Osherowitch was a Yiddish translator, a playwright, and the author of a number of novels and other books. Osherowitch helped organize the Federation of Ukrainian Jews, served as president of the I.L. Peretz Yiddish Writers’ Union and was a prominent member of the Yiddish PEN Club.

He died on 16 April 1965 in New York City, survived by his wife, Sofia and their daughter, Edith Fayer (later Rosenberg).

Osherowitch’s assignment in Ukraine was to “visit the theatres, cabarets, taverns and marketplaces, the Soviet shops and Jewish houses of study, to speak with common people in the streets, Jews and non-Jews.”

He was fluent in Yiddish, Ukrainian, and Russian. This made Osherowitch able to “converse more intimately” with people than most Western visitors.

During his trip Osherowitch collects many personal stories, “many shared in confidence,” allowing him to record accurately the features of a Bolshevik system he regarded as very dysfunctional, “sometimes criminal.”

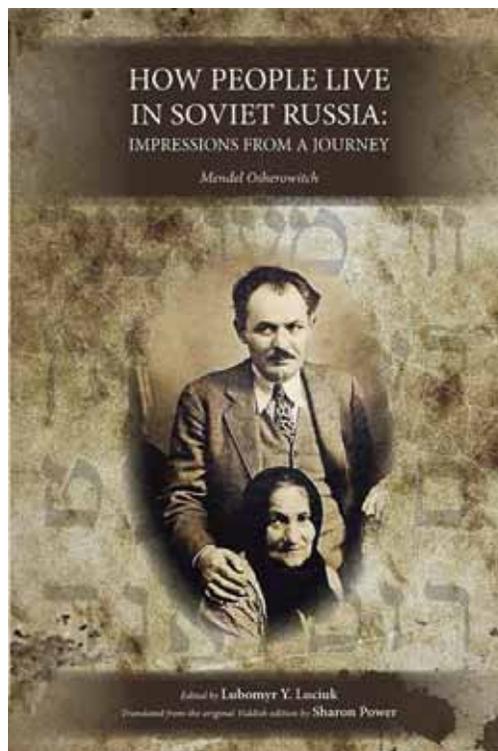
He writes about “the pervasive fear” of the GPU secret police, recounts how parents were scared their own children might be informing against them, and tells of great hordes of peasants clambering onto trains trying to escape into the cities, “in an anguished search for bread.”

“Ukraine was already experiencing an appalling famine,” Osherowitch writes. “Millions of people had been driven to the greatest desperation, to a life sometimes even worse than death. Plagues circulated in villages and in the towns. People died because they could no longer endure their terrible hunger. On many roads, covered with snow, lay dead horses, withered away from hunger. At the train stations, thousands and thousands of peasants wandered around, covered in bodily filth and dirt, waiting for trains they hoped would take them into the cities, where they could perhaps sell something, maybe get bread. The dreadful misery of these people, this harrowing state of affairs, tore at one’s heart. Everywhere I was told conditions had already been like this for a few months and that since the Five Year Plan began, emphasizing heavy over light industry, the situation in the country had gotten worse.”

He was witnessing firsthand the early days of the Holodomor— “the man-made famine that convulsed the Soviet republic of Ukraine from 1932 to 1933, peaking in the late spring of 1933,” says the Encyclopedia Britannica online.

“It was part of a broader Soviet famine (1931–34) that also caused mass starvation in the grain-growing regions of Soviet Russia and Kazakhstan. The Ukrainian famine, however, was made deadlier by a series of political decrees and decisions that were aimed mostly or only at Ukraine.”

Osherowitch also provides moving accounts of visiting his hometown of Trostianets, where he reunited with his old mother and siblings whom he hadn’t seen since moving to the U.S. over 20 years before.



Book cover

He describes visiting the Trostianets’ pogrom memorial.

“It has already been 13 years since the great pogrom happened in Trostianets,” Osherowitch writes. “It has gone down in history as one of the most terrible and bloody pogroms in Ukraine. “It is difficult to find a Jewish family in Trostianets that did not suffer in the great pogrom, which Petliura’s gangs carried out in the town during their ‘uprising’ against the Bolsheviks. In total around 500 Jews were murdered at that time. The unfortunate ones were driven together into a large building next to the industrial plant (in Goldenberg’s house) where they were slaughtered like sheep. Old and young alike— no one was spared. Afterwards, all 500 murder victims were buried in one large grave.”

Osherowitch’s powers of observation are acute. His commentary is decisive.

“I find it quite impossible to just forget the great tragedy that is the life of a human being in Soviet Russia today,” Osherowitch reflects, while in Warsaw, Poland getting ready to travel onward to Berlin, then Paris.

“You just can’t, not if you have a heart and a soul. I tried to think of the good side of what I’d seen in

Soviet Russia. I thought about the many idealists I met, people who truly are sacrificing their lives because they believe in a better future to come. I thought about great Soviet achievements in the domains of industry and culture and in other fields, accomplishments certainly worthy of praise. Then, I remembered what a woman who once active in the revolutionary cause, who had always been ready to sacrifice her life for the Revolution said to me in Moscow: ‘Now we are all rotting under the banner of a beautiful ideal.’”

Canadian far-right politician calls Jews ‘parasitic tribe,’ seeks their removal from Canada

July 15, 2020 MON-TREAL (JTA) — The Royal Canadian Mounted Police has opened an investigation into a fringe right-wing politician who called for the removal of Jews from Canada.

In a flyer and a video posted on Facebook on July 11, Travis Patron, the leader of the Canadian Nationalist Party, describes Jews as “swindlers,” “snakes,” “inside manipulators,” and a “parasitic tribe.”

“If they had their way, our entire way of life would be eradicated,” Patron says in the video. “They don’t like us. In fact, they despise us because of what we are and the spirit we represent. They cannot coexist with it. And what we need to do, perhaps more than anything, is remove these people once and for all from our country.”

In a news release July 13, the Toronto-based Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies said that a police investigation into the video was launched last summer after the video was first shared online.

Shimon Koffler Fogel, CEO of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, the advocacy arm of the Jewish Federations of Canada, said Patron might not only be breaking Canada’s hate laws, but inciting actual violence against Jews.

“It is absolutely outrageous that such vile hatred would take up any space in the public square,” Fogel said. “Such dangerous and dehumanizing language has all too often led to violence.”

In the last Canadian federal elections in 2019, Patron’s party, founded three years ago, garnered just 284 votes.

The video and flyer, both titled “Beware The Parasitic Tribe,” says Jews “infiltrate the media, they hijack the central bank, and they infect the body politic like a parasite.”

Fogel said CIJA is contacting other social network platforms because, in its view, Patron’s posts are a “clear violation” of community guidelines.

“Enough is enough,” he said.



Travis Patron, the leader of the Canadian Nationalist Party, called for the removal of Jews from Canada. (Facebook screenshot)