

YIDDISH SPEAKING SOCIALISTS OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE

—Edward Sanders—

In di Gasn
Tsu di Masn
—into the streets!
to the Masses!

They came when the Czar banned the Yiddish
theater in 1882
They came when the iron-tipped Cossack's whip
flicked in the face of their mother
They came when their parents were cheated out of
their farms in Vilna
They came to escape the peasants at Easter, hacking
with scythes and knives
They came when the Revolution of 1905 was crushed
They came when the soldiers broke up their socialist
presses in Crakow
They fled from Siberia, dungeons and work camps,
for printing leaflets and fliers—

pamphlets and poems and leaflets and fliers
to spread in the workshops
spread in the streets
spread in the factories

in the spirit the era had spawned
the spirit the era had spawned

“In di gasn
tsu di masn
Into the streets
to the masses”

They came to Antwerp and then to London
and then to Ludlow Street

to make a New World
inside a New World
at century's turn—
The Yiddish speaking socialists
of the Lower East Side

Some remembered
with pangs and tears
the beautiful rural life
wrested away

Mushroom hunting in the dampened woods
Bundles of grain in the carts
Market day in the shtetl

Some strained their eyes
for the gold-paved streets of the West
just to be greeted by one of those
“incomprehensible economic collapses”
that New York gives to its poor

The East Side
had been slums
since the overcrowdings
after the War of 1812—

but the tenement rents of 1903
were higher than
nearby “better” places

2/3's of them owned by speculators
getting 15 to 30% (or more)

so that a family of ten
was jammed
in a two room flat

plus boarders!

and a leafleteer
in desperation

lay aside his ink
to open a curbside store
with a gutter plank
and 3 brown bales of rag

Or they carried the cribs
to the hallway
to set up a sweatshop—

They were not alone

from thousands of windows
came the clackety-clacks
of foot-treadled sewing machines

and the drum-like sounds
of long bladed scissors
chewing on oaken boards

and the lungs turned gray
with tidbits of tweed

and the red hot irons
on the tops of the coal stoves
to smooth out the bundles of cloth

and the sweet gulps of air
on Cherry Street
walking out kinks of the legs at dusk
from a day at the torturing treadle.

A rose curled around the mallet of pov.
The Lower East Side
was the strongest socialist zone
in the United States
for the first twenty years
of this century.

It was a
wild world of words
and everywhere
the song
of the wild lecture
arose above a wild lectern—

Scott Nearing

at the Rand School of Social Science
Morris Hillquit
at the Workmen's Circle
Emma Goldman
at the Educational Alliance
Eugene Debs
coming in from Terra Haute
to Webster Hall

And political discussions
on the summertime roofs
in Yiddish, Russian, Polish & English—

wild world of words

Labor Day parades from East Broadway
to Union Square
Cousins on the floor
from fleeing Siberia
after the Revolution of 1905

Union meetings at the Labor Lyceum on E. 4th—
Flashes of the Ideal
in murk
in muck
in mire

Talking all night at the Café Royale
at 12th and 2nd Avenue

after the Yiddish plays at
the Kessler or Tomashevski Theaters

Garment worker rallies at Cooper Union
Joining the Women's Trade Union League
Fighting for a shorter work week
6 and 1/2 days to six, and then
to 44 hours, on the way to 40

Flashes of the Ideal
in murk
in muck
in mire

In di gasn

tsu di masn

To make a New World
inside the New World
at Century's turn
the Yiddish speaking socialists
of the Lower East Side.

For twenty years they grew.
They filled the arenas
and packed the streets

though those who stand
 in the bowl of shrieks
know how the bowl
 stands silent
 so often

when the votes are
counted.

But there was a party in the streets
The Lower East Side had never seen
the night in 1914 that Meyer London,
whose father had worked in an anarchist print shop,
was elected to Congress

They danced and sang
through Rutgers Square past the *Daily Forward*
till the sun blushed the color of communes
above the docks.

Meyer London served for three terms
until the democrats and republicans in
the State Assembly
gerrymandered his district.

In 1917 the Socialist Party of N.Y.C.
sent ten assemblymen to Albany
and seven to the N.Y.C. board of aldermen
and even elected a municipal judge

while Morris Hillquit
pulled 22% of the vote for mayor—

It looked like a Socialist surge

might move as a spill of thrills
out through the state

In di gasn
tsu di masn

to make a New World
inside the New World
at century's turn
the Yiddish Speaking Socialists
of the Lower East Side

And then, in the spring of 1917
the U.S. Congress
voted for war

The Socialists
met in St. Louis
that same April

& issued
what was known as
the St. Louis Resolution—

“We call upon the
workers of all countries
to refuse support
to their governments
in their wars.”

Some were sympathetic
to the strong socialist and
union movements in Germany

in a struggle
against
Czarist barbarism—

others felt it
was just a distracting disturbance
between Russian
& German militaries.

The Lower East Side was split.
The pressure to support

their new country

was great— not that pogroms
by the Brooklyn Bridge were feared
though the dirk-tined rioting peasant's rake
was not that far
in the past.

The Wilson administration
generated war hysteria
Scott Nearing, Eugene Debs
went to jail
the government threatened
the mailing rights of the *Jewish Daily Forward*
and other socialist papers
opposing the war.

And then it
was different
after the war.

There was hideous inflation
and F.O.B.
Fear of Bolsheviks—

and many, mayhemic forces
were set against the
Lower East Side socialist zone.

The anti-red hysteria was nationwide
The Wobblies were crushed
The strikers of Seattle crushed
The Palmer Raids
Federal troops used to club down
honest dispute
Emma Goldman deported
Five socialists expelled from the
N.Y. Legislature
and the socialist Victor Berger
banned from his seat in the Congress.

There was a split in
the Socialist Party in 1919

& the birth of the Communist Party.

For most
the game
was to get OUT

but for some
like Congressman London
the East Side
was the
 world
in which to stay

He was there all his life
till killed by a car
as he crossed 2nd Avenue—

Shelley had Keats in his pocket
London had Chekhov

Oh they failed
but I can hear their ghosts
walk down the cobbles
outside the St. Mark's Church

the poets, the strikers, the printers,
the firebrands, the leafleteers—
comrades when the word had its glow—

with a passion for Justice
 that never fades away
though heartbreak
 to know
 that they had failed

to make a New World
inside the New World
at century's turn
They were the Yiddish speaking socialists
of the Lower East Side.