

Around the World With a Portable

Excerpts from a Travel Diary: "Pink" Jews of Red Russia

By LEWIS BROWNE

Author of "Stranger Than Fiction" and "This Believing World"

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LEWIS BROWNE
Whose rare gifts as an observer and interpreter of religious movements are now widely discussed

Odessa, September 15.

RUSSIA is a dangerous country for visitors, a dreadfully dangerous country; but not in the way most people imagine. So far as life and limb are concerned, it is quite the safest land in Eastern Europe. I have walked the streets of its cities at midnight, have travelled in peasant wagons through thick forests and over deserted steppes, have dozed in rural stations and slept at wayside inns—and never once have I been robbed or molested. I have talked freely to *natchalniki* and reporters, have grumbled at inconveniences, and sworn generously at red tape—yet without exception the police and other officials have been impeccably polite. I have been ill here with acute lumbago, and have stood in need of considerable treatment—but I have not lacked the most expert and painstaking attention.

Nevertheless I repeat that Russia is a dreadfully dangerous country for visitors. Not for all visitors, of course; no, only for my type, the type that is usually called "pink" back home. There are quite a number of us "pink 'uns" in Russia these days. We have come from many lands and follow varied occupations: artists, "liberal" politicians, broad-minded bankers, millionaires' sons, social workers, authors, and most of all journalists. And we wander about from city to city and stare with mingled amazement, delight, horror, and chagrin, at this bewildering creation which is Red Russia. Frankly, most of us don't know what to make of it all. We are too disconcerted, too shocked, to be able to take it all in and decide what it is worth. For Red Russia is not at all what we expected it to be—not even remotely.

One must understand that we "pink" folk have stood out in the various lands whence we came as the champions of Soviet Russia. Being rebels, of one shade or another, we were naturally inclined to sympathize with the Russian revolutionaries, and insisted loud and long that they be given a fair chance. Besides, we were Socialists—or at least, we thought we were. We wept—in a metaphorical way, of course—for the exploited workingman, and spoke with evangelical fervor of the Socialist State to come, that blessed state when all men would be free and at last equal, and John Haynes Holmes would be bishop of New York. And when men of little faith cried out that such a state could never be realized, we of too great faith retorted: "But look at Russia!" It was not a convincing retort; at least, I never found it so. Somehow the skeptics always managed to turn it on us, proving on the basis of the New York *Herald* reports that Russia, even when cursorily looked at, was the completest proof that Socialism couldn't work. Indeed, so often was that retort turned to our disadvantage that at last we could stand it no longer, and had to come and look for ourselves. We came separately and in delegations, most of us with clear pictures in our minds of what we would see and decide—and now we're all lost.

I SUPPOSE the major cause of our demoralization is the knowledge that Russia is really serious about Socialism. This idea of freeing the workingman is not empty messianism here, not pleasant chit-chat for fashionable rabbis or presidents of women's clubs. It is a reality, a very tangible and disconcertingly obvious reality. The thing has been accomplished here, over-accomplished perhaps. In Russia the *robotchi*, the workingman, is not merely the equal of other men; he is their superior. He does very actually run the government, the factories, the schools, the museums, the law courts, the hospitals—everything. Where he is running them to may still be a debatable question; but that he is running them is certain. He is the lord and master here, and every privilege is his. The outcast here is the "nepman," the individual who has taken advantage of the NEP (New Economic Policy), and is conducting a shop or small factory for private gain. The pariah here is the man who wears a European suit instead of a *muzhik* blouse—a *tolstofka*—and who carries a bank-book instead of a union card. Such an individual has to pay twice as much for his theatre tickets, three times as much for his bath, four times as much for his marriage license, and ten to twenty times as much for his rent. He is openly discriminated against in the law-courts, and his children are practically barred from the universities. He is here the underdog, and is kicked by every hobnailed boot in sight. For here in Russia, they have at last achieved the Dictatorship of the Proletariat!

And just that is why we "pinks" are flabbergasted. We see here one unexpected culmination of our sweet old fantasies—and we are frightened. This is more than we bargained for, much more. And so most of us get together with the Jews in Russia and complain. "You've gone too far," we cry to the Communists.

Perhaps my most unexpected discovery here is that the Jews of Russia are the bitterest grumblers against the Bolshevik regime. Practically all of my conversation here is confined to Jews, partly because they are my major interest on this journey, and partly also because I cannot talk to the other Russians. (Yiddish is the only one of the twenty-odd official Russian languages that I can understand.) I have talked to all sorts of Jews, and under all sorts of conditions. I have conversed with them in vast offices in

the Kremlin, and in foul tenements in Kief; I have sat with them over glasses of steaming tea in Ukrainian colonies, White Russian inns, Muscovite hotels, and Odessan workingmen's clubs. Most of all, and most intimately, I have conversed with them at the mud-baths at the Kuralnyk Liman, for there I have had not merely Jewishness but also rheumatism in common with them. And without exaggeration I can say that eighty percent of all the Jews I have talked to are opposed to Communism!

THE story that Bolshevism is a Jewish creation, like *gefilte* fish or *matzoth*, is utterly and completely a legend. It is true that several Jews, notably Trotzky and Zinoviev, were among the leaders in the establishment of the Communist regime; but the rank and (Concluded on page 724)



The completed home of the Jewish farmer, realized through the funds and assistance rendered by the Joint Distribution Committee. These Jewish farmers are typical of the thousands who have already settled on lands set aside by the Russian government for Jewish agricultural settlement in the Crimea, White Russia and the Ukraine. This work is being fostered by the Joint Distribution Committee with funds raised in the \$25,000,000 United Jewish Campaign, of which David A. Brown is national chairman

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file of the Jewish revolutionaries were from the beginning bitterly antagonistic to it. It is significant that in the great Petrograd demonstration which preceded the October Revolution and Lenin's triumph, the only groups which dared to carry banners proclaiming allegiance to Kerensky were the Don Cossacks and the Jewish Bundists. The Jewish masses in Russia were confessed radicals, but with limitations. They wanted the first revolution, that which occurred in February, 1917, and ended the vile Czaristic regime; but that was all they wanted. When the second revolution came, they were openly in opposition to it, and even to this day they have not fallen in line. For the truth is, the Jews as a group are not and have never been more than "pink."

The reason for that is obvious: The Jews are not workingmen. The Dictatorship of the Proletariat bodes little good for them because as a group they are not and have never been part of the proletariat. They are part of the petty bourgeoisie, poor shopkeepers and half-starved artisans. To be a full-blooded proletarian it is not enough to be poor; one must also be a non-exploiting producer. Therefore the village tailor with his pinched little bearded face and half-blind eyes is not one of the elect, for usually he employs an apprentice, some miserable little unwashed boy who threads the tailor's needles and runs his errands and cuffs his brats for him. And only that wretched apprentice is considered truly qualified to have a hand in the Dictatorship. Indeed, until recently even such poor artisans who did not employ apprentices were still considered outside the pale of the proletariat. They were their own masters, owning their own tools and work shops, and making their own private profit; therefore they were considered unworthy even of voting!

Much lower than the status of the

artisan, however, is the status of the merchant and trader. And at least half, if not more, of the two and three-quarter million Jews in Russia, still belong to this merchant class. The vast majority of them are indescribably poor, possessing no more than a tiny dry-goods shop or vegetable stand; but nevertheless they are counted "nepmen" and taxed accordingly. And how taxed! First they have to pay for a patent to do business; then so much percent on their gross takings during the preceding six months; next, so much percent on the net earnings; then so much percent on the increase in the net earnings during those six months over the net earnings during the six months previous to them; and so on and so forth until those poor fellows are left with barely enough to drag away to some Jewish agricultural colony in the Crimea. . . .

That is why the Jews complain so bitterly against the Bolsheviki system. They complain openly and loudly, not in the public meetings as yet, but constantly in private conversations. In America I was informed that it would be a waste of time to come here, for I should never be able to make the people in Russia tell me what they truly think. But the information, like most other American information concerning Russia, was utterly false. My chief problem here has been to make people *stop* telling me what they truly think. I don't want to be so devastatingly disillusioned. I don't want to become an anti-Communist. It is too dangerous for my soul. For I am a moderate Socialist, and I want to remain one; but if extreme Socialism can bear such fruit, I fear I shall be driven to something approaching anti-Socialism. I am a "pink" and want to remain one; but if the "reds" are such a violent red, I tremble lest I be terrified into a pallid "white."

And that is why I say Russia is a dangerous country. . . .