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Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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PUSHKIN RECITING HIS POEMS.
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RUSSIA'S TREATMENT OF HER JEWISH SUBJECTS.

BY VICTOR S. YARROS.

THE Jewish problem is a world problem. The tragedy of the Jews is one of the tragedies of history. It would be mere hypocrisy to pretend that there is no Jewish problem in the most advanced and progressive countries of either of the hemispheres. It would be hypocritical to pretend that there is no Anti-Semitism in America or in western Europe. But there are Jewish problems and Jewish problems. There are problems which must be left to time and tide, to processes and forces which law and government cannot successfully control. Religious bigotry, social prejudice and snobbery, racial antagonism, the vague dislike for the unlike (as Zangwill puts it) which characterizes the provincial and the ignorant, inherited and traditional notions—such factors as these cannot be combated by legislation. The law cannot compel men to meet in friendly social intercourse against their instinct and will. The law cannot compel intermarriage. It cannot compel respect or sympathy. It cannot even force us to study the causes of certain unfortunate and deplorable antagonisms and make us ashamed of this or that narrow prejudice. What education, habit, familiarity and experience can do or are slowly doing to solve those Jewish problems that exist in the most enlightened countries, no legal compulsion could possibly do. Indeed, legal compulsion would only intensify the evil and retard the application of the remedy.

In this paper the writer wishes to discuss the Jewish problems as they present themselves in the empire of the "White Czar," in "Holy Russia." They are different and peculiar there; they are added unto all the other Jewish problems. They test the quality

and measure the extent of Russian political progress and of Russian culture. Some of them are problems created by the character of the Russian government. The right and inevitable solution of not a few of these peculiar problems is resisted and rejected by the Russian autocracy and bureaucracy, although liberal opinion is ready for it, and the masses, to say the least, are indifferent and not positively hostile.

What are the Jewish problems in Russia and Russian Poland?

The greatest problem of all is that of obtaining or forcing recognition of the fundamental human right to equality of treatment by the law itself. Russian law still treats the Jew as a pariah, as a nuisance and a danger to the empire. It deliberately discriminates against him, oppresses and persecutes him, and by precept and example invites the ordinary subject, and especially the ignorant and superstitious subject, to maltreat, insult and persecute the Jew.

Equality of rights and opportunities under the law is guaranteed by the organic law of every civilized state. Russia has a so-called Constitution, a code of fundamental laws, but very little benefit has accrued to the Jewish millions of Russia from this Constitution. Irony and mockery have merely been added to injury.

Equality of rights is the plain correlative of the equality of duties. The Jews of Russia serve as privates in the army and navy, die on the battlefields, pay taxes, but equality of rights is denied them. They are denied the right of residence and travel and the right to carry on legitimate business within the empire. They are confined within a medieval "pale" (certain provinces of Russia and Poland), and the overwhelming majority of them cannot live outside of that pale of settlement. This alone would mean congestion, lack of economic and industrial opportunity, misery and degradation. But with this restriction is coupled a whole series of other galling and poverty-breeding restrictions.

Jews may not own agricultural land. They may not live in any of the villages of the pale. They are thus herded in the cities and towns. Certain of the liberal professions are closed to them. They are practically barred from all the higher branches of the public service.

In Russia, as elsewhere, the Jews have developed a passion for education, realizing perhaps that education is their best shield against aggression. Russia is in every way backward and sadly needs educated men. But education spells disaffection, and the educated Jew is even more dangerous than the educated Slav. As the Jewish children flocked to the schools and colleges and technical institutions,

a reactionary minister devised an ingenious "percentage" plan—ostensibly in the interest of the "true Russians"—for the avowed purpose of curbing the educational zeal of the Jews and keeping as many of their boys and girls as possible out of the schools and colleges. The scheme was simple enough: If the Jews in a given city or town constituted a certain percentage of the population, their children in the local educational schools must not exceed that same percentage, and that regardless of the actual educational situation. If the number of Jewish applicants exceeded the prescribed proportion, the overflow had the delectable choice between emigration and the renunciation of all educational aspirations. Of course many of the Jewish children have had to be sent to western Europe to receive a liberal or professional education and to remain there—until the age of military service. Russia might deny them educational facilities, but she could not permit them to avoid military service.

This denial of equality of civil and legal rights to the Jews of Russia and Russian Poland has begotten the unspeakable "pogrom." The pogrom creates another Jewish problem—the problem of obtaining security of person and property. The pogrom is lynch law on a large scale. It means murderous mob assaults on the Jewish population of a city, or province, or whole group of cities and districts. The pogroms have a certain periodicity; they are not exactly annual or biennial affairs, but they have occurred frequently enough to cause every liberal-minded and honest Russian, or every Russian who has a decent regard for the opinions of mankind, the deepest humiliation and sorrow.

The first anti-Jewish riots and disorders occurred "spontaneously," relatively speaking. The persistent and relentless persecution of the Jews, with charges of ritual murder thrown in occasionally, had naturally resulted in such riots. The Hooligans and the drunken loafers knew well the attitude of the officials, the police and the soldiers toward the Jews. It was comparatively safe to mob a Jewish quarter and to burn and destroy, or steal and carry away, Jewish goods and savings. Such "sport" was tolerated if not maliciously encouraged by the provincial satraps, and they had little to fear from their superiors. A mild rebuke, meant for "European consumption," was the worst possible punishment they had to fear in an extreme case.

Not unnaturally, this policy on the part of the government gradually led to the adoption of the pogrom as a direct political weapon. When the Black Hundreds were organized all over the empire in

the years 1904-1905 as part of the counter-revolution the anti-Jewish pogrom was their first resort. High and low police officials and even governors and heads of the secret service instigated and financed pogroms. Police printing presses turned out inflammatory circulars denouncing the Jews and hinting at the necessity of teaching them their proper place. Certain officials boasted that they "could make pogroms to order" on any scale desired. When Witte, a quasi-liberal, was premier and his ministry sought to conciliate public opinion and induce the czar to grant various reforms, his bitter enemies fought him chiefly by means of the pogrom. The bureaucracy was against him, and his orders and instructions were flouted by the provincial rulers. On one occasion he had police pogrom circulars brought to him and he was startled to learn that these circulars were printed "next door," as it were, in the very heart of the capital of the "reformed" empire. (All of these statements, by the way, are based on official reports subsequently submitted to the Duma and read to that body amid consternation and amazement.)

The third Jewish problem in Russia—the one that grows out of the other two—is a grave moral problem. What happens to a race, or class, or element that is systematically persecuted and oppressed? History is full of instances that supply the answer to this question. Unjust and cruel oppression breeds cunning, trickery, chicane, corruption. The influence of environment and atmosphere on character can hardly be overestimated. Now, the Russian Jews are charged with persistent violation and evasion of the law by means of bribery and fraud. Not a few American and European travelers have written harshly or ironically on this subject and have "testified" to the fact that the legal prohibitions and restrictions, harsh as they appear, do not prevent the Jews from settling and doing business outside of the pale, or from invading the forbidden professions, or from carrying on business prohibited to them, or from exploiting and plundering the ignorant and shiftless peasants. There is, undeniably, considerable truth in this indictment. There is no little successful evasion of the cruel and discriminatory laws where opportunity is presented. Jews do as "agents" what they cannot do as principals, and the so-called principals may be mere dummies. Jews occasionally bribe the extremely susceptible and easy-going Russian officials, who sell their "discretion" in a way calculated to make the most hardened American spoilsman or police "grafter" virtuously proud of his moderation.

But at whose door does the responsibility for all this properly

lie? Laws that cannot be strictly obeyed without suicide, or a fate worse than suicide, will be evaded and violated. Where justice is denied, favors will be bought and sold. Where equal freedom and equal opportunity are things not to be hoped for, license will reign and immunity will be procured for corrupt "considerations." The Russian system invites and begets bribery and corruption, and to blame the victims for seeking some slight measure of relief through bribery is to exhibit grotesque ignorance of the simplest principles of political and social life. The tyrannical and stupid government that corrupts men has no grievance or case against the men. It is the men corrupted by the government who have a serious grievance against it. When the Russian government accuses the Jews of corruption it adds insult to injury. If it sows the wind, what can it expect to reap but the whirlwind? The western apologists of Russian anti-Semitism merely display ignorance and shallowness.

Well might the Jewish millions of Russia exclaim: "Give us equal opportunities and equal rights not so much for the sake of our bodies, of our physical needs and decent comforts, as for the sake of our humanity, our dignity, our character. Do not degrade us; do not force us to defeat injustice by artifice and cunning." But, after all, only handfuls here and there are able to evade the law. The majority are miserably poor, helpless, defenseless.

Let me now glance at the defense or excuse offered by the Russian government and its anti-Semitic spokesmen for its treatment of the Jewish millions. Briefly it is this: "There is no racial or religious prejudice behind the policies in question. We may not like the Jews, but that is not why we discriminate against them. The discrimination is based solely on economic and cultural considerations. Russia is young and undeveloped; the peasants and the wage-workers are actually or practically illiterate; the Jews are more intelligent and more ambitious and progressive than the Slavs; the latter need the protection of law and legal policy if they are not to lose all their property and to mortgage their future. Give the Jew freedom and opportunity, and he will become the economic and financial master of Russia in a quarter of a century. He will own all the land, monopolize the banks and public utilities, control all big business and capture all the prizes in the liberal professions. To give the Russians a chance, the Jews must be handicapped and held down."

Perhaps of the politicians, bureaucrats and journalists who take this position a few take it in good faith and really believe that no racial or religious prejudice animates them. But it is impossible

that it should never have occurred to them that if the Russian peasants and laborers need to be protected against the Jews, they also need to be protected against the Germans, the French, the English, the Swedes, the Danes and the Finns who reside and carry on business in Russia. The cultural level of all and any of these peoples is admittedly higher than that of the Russian masses, and if the Jew is dangerous because of his superiority, every other superior element of the population is equally dangerous. Why, then, is the oppressive and discriminatory legislation limited to the Jews alone?

The truth is, the anti-Jewish policies are conceived in hatred and prejudice, and the "passionless economic argument" is an afterthought, a semi-respectable pretext. To say to Europe and America that the Jews are persecuted because they are hated and detested is to write Russia down as an uncivilized power. To argue that the discriminatory laws are regrettable necessities, and at bottom a tribute and compliment to the "superior" Jews, is to raise issues that are at least worthy of discussion. Most of those who use the economic argument use it because it sounds better, not because they believe it to be valid or related to fact.

Were proof of this demanded the pogrom would furnish it. Are pogroms also a means of benevolently handicapping more alert and intelligent people and permitting the less intelligent to occupy a place in the sun? The sentiment that inspires and condones the pogrom is the sentiment which prompts and cheerfully acquiesces in discrimination and oppression. The sentiment that grasps at ritual murder charges and instigates trials and perjured testimony is the sentiment that encourages anti-Semitic legislation.

The Jews constitute but 7 or 8 percent of the population of all the Russias. The notion that if they were scattered and distributed all over the empire they would appropriate all the land and industry and trade of the empire, is too ridiculous to demand serious discussion. No one in Russia who is capable of honest thinking is deceived by the "economic" argument. The hatred and contempt felt for the Jews are altogether too manifest to admit of any illusion or deception.

The more candid and straightforward of the anti-Semites, moreover, have not used the argument. They do not even care to hold out a vague promise of emancipation in the distant future. They bluntly tell the Jews that Russia doesn't want them, would gladly get rid of them, and does not care to assimilate them. There are those who have openly advocated the policy of treating the Jews as aliens, regardless of the fact that they are natives and that their

fathers and forefathers had never known any other native land than Russia or Poland. Even the most ferocious of the anti-Semitic ministers and senators, however, have not ventured to bestow public approval on this remarkable idea—the idea of definitely conferring on all Russian and Polish Jews the status of permanent aliens incapable of naturalization.

Is there any hope for these victims of prejudice and bigotry? Perhaps revolution might emancipate the Jews of Russia. No legislation conferring genuine equality of rights on them will pass the Duma and Council of State. Few of the existing parties or groups favor equality of rights and opportunities. The moderate conservatives stand with the reactionaries on this question, and even some of the liberal groups are hardly to be depended on. Only the radicals and revolutionists have the courage of their principles and their "humanities." These are only a handful in practical politics.

Pressure from without, such as the United States has attempted to apply in connection with the Russian passport and treaty questions, is not, at present, likely to succeed. There is no probability that the government will alter its position. It believes that the Congress of the United States is wholly insincere and demagogical in demanding a treaty of residence and travel that shall be free from discrimination on any racial or religious ground. It believes that American politicians are willing to flatter and fool the Jewish voters, but by no means willing to offend Russia by insisting on equal treatment of all American citizens. It knows that to grant equality to American Jews traveling or doing business in Russia is to surrender the whole anti-Semitic position. It is the first step that is proverbially difficult, and the Russian official anti-Semitic cabal has no intention of permitting the first step to be taken. The American-Russian passport problem simply defies solution under the present order of things. If the American government does not yield, there will be no new treaty of commerce, residence and travel with Russia. This may be extremely inconvenient and unsatisfactory, but how can the United States weaken and yield after it has once taken the position that it cannot directly or indirectly permit and sanction discrimination by another government against certain of its law-abiding citizens merely because they are of this or that race or faith, or because they are too alert and successful (to adopt the Russian "economic" argument) in a fair and free field?

Russia must be made to feel that the position the United States has taken on the passport and treaty issue amounts to a declaration that

as long as Russia persists in discriminating against American Jews, the United States will maintain *a sort of moral and legal boycott against her*. This is exactly what the absence of a treaty means, and this is what the Russian government richly deserves at the hands of the American people. England and France, though repeatedly challenged by progressive men, have not dared take a similar position. They have not dared to protest against Russian oppression and persecution of the Jews, to proclaim a boycott against the Russian government. They have, in fact, acquiesced in discrimination, thus making a mockery of their professions and principles. But "military and diplomatic considerations" are all-sufficient and all-controlling in Europe. No such situation exists here. The American attitude contributes to a sharp, definite formulation of the Jewish problem in Russia and may in one way or another, sooner or later, prove a factor in forcing a just and civilized solution of that problem.