

Book Reviews

WORKING CLASS NOVEL

By David Alman

The Sidewalks Are Free, by Sam Ross. Farrar-Straus, New York. \$3.00.

Two things distinguish this novel of Jewish American life. The first is its affirmation of the dignity of labor itself, its sensitivity to a workman's attitude towards his craft and the usefulness of that which he produces. The second is the author's sensitivity to the existence of sharp class lines among the Jewish people and the closer sense of identity between Jew and non-Jew among working people than between Jews of separate classes.

Laid in the post World War I period, the novel recounts a brief time in the life of Hershy Melov, an 11 year-old who is beginning to experience the world of reality. That reality consists of the death of beloved ones, of unemployment, strikes, birth, adult love affairs, parental humiliation and quarrels and the life of a small businessman.

Hershy's father, a cabinet maker, spends the war working at an army camp. Hershy's uncle, a soldier, is killed overseas. Having no family of his own, his insurance of \$10,000 is left to the Melovs. At this point a deep split develops in the family. Mr. Melov wishes to lay the money aside for the education of Hershy and for Rachel's dowry. Another portion is to be set aside for "a rainy day."

Mrs. Melov, aided by a number of relatives, urges that the money be used to set up a business. Her husband resists this pressure until a strike develops in his industry. Unable to prolong his resistance because the few dollars he had saved begin to dwindle, he agrees—bitterly and angrily.

He forms a partnership with a relative and buys a broken down laundry business. Almost from the first day the pressure of bigger and wealthier laundries begins to destroy the business. Mr. Ross' picture of this run-down laundry, always on the verge of physical and financial collapse, is particularly good. But even better is his portrayal of the destruction of the remnants of family feeling. Subjection to the "cash nexus" throws the family into a pitiful turmoil. The laundry finally goes up in a boiler explosion. But that is immaterial—it has already collapsed financially. Gone is the \$10,000. And Mr. Melov must begin his life as a working man all over again.

All this is seen through the eyes of little Hershy, and they are very believable and sensitive eyes. The others, his mother and father and his adopted sister, Rachel, are not drawn as finely. They tend to become spokesmen for various points of view rather than real flesh and blood characters as Hershy is.

The novel is marred by two serious faults. The first is a tendency to over-idealize the life of workers. Thus, we see

the terrible agonies to which the family is subjected when Mr. Melov becomes a businessman, but the hardships he experiences as a worker are not portrayed. Yes, there is poverty, but somehow it is not difficult to adapt oneself to it. As a result the story veers close to the fairy tale that money itself is a source of evil; let the poor remain poor, money will only complicate their lives and bring them unhappiness. It is true that this can be the case, but it is not true that happiness lies in poverty.

The second fault—and this criticism, perhaps, it at the same time a tribute to Mr. Ross—is that the novel is badly underwritten. Scene after scene is flashed at us and pushed aside unexplored. At times one has the feeling that one is reading notes for a novel rather than a novel itself. It is this "thinness" too that leaves many things hanging in the air. For example, the Melovs are not a family given to hatred of other peoples, yet they refer to the Negro people in the most chauvinist terms. Mr. Ross is careful to indicate how the Melovs acquire certain other "American" customs, but his insensitivity on this point is too serious not to be called to his attention.

With these exceptions in mind the fact remains that Mr. Ross has written a lively and ruggedly honest novel. It is at opposite poles to the caricaturistic works of Norman Katkov and others, who use Jewish American themes to lay bare their own anti-Semitic attitudes. Though not as rich or altogether as perceptive as Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money* and similar works, it is a product of the honest tradition they began.

Letters from Abroad

OUTLOOK FOR MAPAM

Tel Aviv

After months of negotiation between Mapai (Israel Labor Party) and Mapam (United Workers Party) over the terms on which the latter would join the Israel government coalition, the Mapam executive council voted 157 to 95 in early March to break off discussions. The council majority, particularly those from urban centers, resolved that conditions were lacking "for the participation of Mapam in the government on the basis of a joint minimum program." Among the specific Mapam

demands on which no agreement could be reached were: opposition to a pact with Abdullah so long as the Transjordan-British alliance has any application to the Arab sector of Palestine; no participation in or encouragement of a facsimile of the Atlantic Pact in the Middle East; no Marshall Plan for Israel; support of a United Nations pact outlawing atomic weapons; support for a "Big Five" pact; immediate extension of equal rights to the Arab minority in all respects; freedom of trade union action for wage raises; and placing of the main tax burden on the rich.

Mapai had hoped to use these negotiations to guarantee the continuation of its reactionary policies by a new coalition government. But it is clear that Israel, which

is at present undergoing a serious political and economic crisis and a threat to its security, needs not merely a government reshuffling, but a basic change in its political line. For many months now the Communists have warned that the policies of the social democratic-clerical government were leading to catastrophe.

Imperialism is weaving its net about us with its accustomed skill. The latest phase is the arming of the Arab countries and the threat of a "second round" of war. Now imperialism is offering us the baited promise "to send light arms" and extend a loan of the well-known Wall Street type. The Israel government appears eager to swallow the sugar-coated bait, oblivious of the hateful hook—further enslavement to aggressive American imperialism.

Certain members of the minority of the Mapam executive council urged acceptance of Mapai's argument that inclusion of Israel in the Marshall plan is merely an

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"abstract hypothesis" and therefore is not worth discussing. But that very day Eliahu Elath, Israeli ambassador to the United States, openly stated that Israel is ready to accept Truman's "point four" program for backward areas. It is well known that at present Truman's plan would mean Marshall "aid," that is, economic enslavement plus military control through arms shipments plus political enslavement in the form of a Middle East bloc or "individual" pacts with the United States, or both. In brief—triple enslavement.

The negotiations between Mapai and Mapam have only served to dull political watchfulness within the ranks of labor: they have given rise to illusions and have paralyzed political struggle on the part of the Mapam. The statement by warmonger Henry Morgenthau urging Israel to join a Middle Eastern pact was an alarm signal. The Communist Party derived no satisfaction from the fact that it was the sole organized force among the people of Israel which expressed the will for peace and independence at that moment.

The Mapam executive council demand for a new government policy will now be tried in the arena of daily practice, in immediate and emergency action. No one can have the slightest illusion that the Mapai leadership will voluntarily agree to the conditions on foreign and domestic policy set by the Mapam executive. The significance of this program is not measured by its proclamation alone, but by the struggle for its realization. And the guarantee for a successful struggle in defense of independence and for social progress, economic development and ability to maintain immigration is the *active unity* of the left-labor forces, of Mapam and the Communist Party. Such unity will attract workers from the ranks of Mapai from among non-party workers and the working intelligentsia. The serious dangers threatening our land make this unity most urgent.

The recent peace congress in Tel Aviv, in which diverse elements, including Mapam and the Communists, participated, proves that such unity is possible.

"FREIE YISROEL" (FREE ISRAEL)

LETTER ON ANTI-SEMITISM

The following self-explanatory letter was printed in the Cincinnati Enquirer in February. Among its signers are Rabbi Jacob R. Marcus, president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and a professor at Hebrew Union College, and Rabbi James G. Heller, a past president of the Central Conference and a leading member of the Labor Zionists.—Eds.

This letter is written after considerable deliberation. Readers take issue with a newspaper at their own peril, for the last word and the setting of that word rest with the paper. Nonetheless, we must take the risk and address this letter to you and to your readers.

Several times in the past committees have visited the publisher of *The Enquirer* and protested against the biased and apparently irresponsible manner in which matters relating to Jews have been handled in the paper. These committees have always had a very courteous reception and assurances that no prejudicial treatment was intended.

But the record continues to accumulate. The first instances occurred several years ago, when the word "Jew" was used in headlines, as though it were an adjective. This practice was discontinued. Then came the Giesecking case, and a column by William Hessler, which seemed to many to rest upon misinformation and ill-concealed prejudice. In spite of various national articles giving Giesecking's background, no retraction or correction was ever published. Last year *The Enquirer* carried an editorial on a demonstration by Jewish Displaced Persons in Munich—an editorial which once again was without information as to conditions in Germany or in the DP camps. A perusal of reports

by the American Army itself might have led to a different expression of opinion.

The final instance, which has prompted us to address this letter to you, is represented by a communication printed in *The Enquirer* of December 28 last. It is eminently desirable that freedom of expression be open to all in the columns of the press. But this letter was a crude repetition of nazi propaganda, a condonation of the incredible treatment of Jews by Hitler. Certainly there is a limit to which a newspaper should go in opening its columns. In the second place, the letter was obviously directed by a writer not frank or courageous enough to sign his own name or address. The name could be found in no authentic source in Cincinnati, and the address was fictitious. We do not know whether any effort was made to check up on these matters, but the evidence would seem to indicate that there was none.

Perhaps this letter, which we now direct to you, will come as a most unpleasant surprise. Doubtless *The Enquirer* is unaware of the impression it has made upon many of the Jewish citizens of this community in recent months and years. That impression is probably neither voluntary nor conscious upon its part.

We do not ask special treatment. We want no suppression of fact. Nor do we advocate muzzling columnists in the untrammelled expression of their opinions. We ask for no more than reason and fairness, for a careful investigation of facts before publication, for some measure of understanding of the dangers involved in instances such as those we have cited.

We feel certain that this communication will have the same courteous reception which individuals have had in the past.

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