

ETHNICITY COMES OF AGE

The Workmen's Circle at Seventy-Five

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



WHEN the Workmen's Circle—a Lower East Side society that came to symbolize Jewish radicalism—celebrated its move “uptown” last year to the handsomely remodeled old Harper & Row building on East 33rd Street, the man it selected to deliver the dedicatory address was Abraham Beame, New York's first Jewish mayor and a self-confessed capitalist. Apparently a funny thing had happened to the Workmen's Circle on its way to 33rd Street: Its members no longer craved revolutionary rhetoric. Who had hushed the thunder on the Left? And where had all the Bundists, Anarchists and

Socialists gone? Moved uptown, every one.

The choice of Mayor Beame was a happy one, reflecting as it did the distance (social as well as ideological) that Jews had traveled since their greenhorn days in the sweatshops and tenements of the Lower East Side. Abe Beame had been there, too. As a small boy, he reminded the huge crowd attending the outdoor dedication, he had often accompanied his father to Workmen's Circle forums, where he had listened to speeches by Eugene V. Debs, Morris Hillquit, Abraham Cahan and other radical luminaries of the period. And now, the Mayor and other speakers seemed to be saying, *here we are*, the beneficiaries of those early struggles, unexpectedly prospering among the affluent denizens of Murray Hill, rejoicing in the streets and belting out old Yiddish roundelays. Only in America. . . !

In truth, the Workmen's Circle, which this month will conclude a year long celebration of its 75th anniversary, does strike one as remarkably American: cheerfully assertive, continuously inventive and, like the Pilgrims of Plymouth Rock,

determinedly ideological. It is an organization fueled by a delicate mixture of doctrine and tradition on the one hand, and of accommodation and commerce on the other. In short, the Workmen's Circle has much to tell us about the art of survival in these United States.

For the benefit of non-Jews, non-New Yorkers and non-nonagenarians, the Workmen's Circle—though it defies easy categorization—resembles a fraternal society, a Jewish Elks Club minus the booze, bingo and Babbitry that such an image may suggest, but with its own special brand of boosterism. Consider this turn-of-the-century pronouncement by the society's leadership: “The Workmen's Circle is the best lodge of all the lodges, the best association of all associations, the only society for the worker, where he may be uplifted in spirit and yet deal with his material needs. . . .” Today the organization's “pitch” to prospective members, though less blatantly boastful, makes the identical points.

New York and its suburbs are the heartland of Workmen's Circle territory, but the society has branches in other places as well, including

Toronto and Montreal, Philadelphia, Cleveland and Los Angeles. What these branches and their members have in common with the dominant New York contingent is simply the mystique of the Circle—the tie that binds—as exemplified by the association's sweetly ingenuous motto, "All for one and one for all." The motto has political and economic overtones, yet it is essentially an expression of cultural and ethnic solidarity.

From its inception the Workmen's Circle understood and preached ethnicity as an honorable cause, decades before liberals discovered its peculiar attractions. An early, and still extant, purpose of the organization was to rescue Jews from the nondescript ore of the American melting pot by promoting the blessings of *Yiddishkeit*, a term that originally referred to the culture of Eastern European Jewry. Today a broad translation of *Yiddishkeit* would be, *Jewish is beautiful*.

There is a tendency among many Workmen's Circle members to reminisce, implying thereby that the society's history may be more significant than its present or future. It is true that one's early years often loom larger (and longer) in retrospect. "My first seventeen years seem longer to me than the fifty-odd since . . ." wrote the Yiddish-American poet Jacob Glatstein. Besides, it is always easier to explain the past than the here and now. Still, the circle keeps turning—the Circle keeps changing.

These days, for instance, the society enrolls members—it has 54,000—via direct mail, a far cry from the early days when new branches of the society were organized along more "natural" lines—as concomitants of labor union locals or as *landsmanshafts*, associations of immigrants from the same town or region in the old country. Most of the new branches that spring up are in places like New Rochelle and Larchmont; the mem-

bers are American-born and decidedly white-collar. There are few workmen anymore in the Workmen's Circle.

NEVERTHELESS, those who manage the organization are not about to change its name. Sentiment may be one reason; ideology is another. As Harold Ostroff, the society's president, explains: "The name automatically screens out people who may not be sympathetic to our viewpoint. In a philosophical sense we are still a workmen's association, with strong ties to all the major labor unions. We want our members to know that. We don't want them coming in just to get the insurance or some of the other benefits."

The society's four-page direct-mail brochure is true to Ostroff's word. Most of the front page is devoted to "Our mission in life"—a compound of romantic cosmopolitanism (" . . . to help mold a more just and beautiful world . . . in opposition to Communism, Fascism and Bigotry") and of pure-and-simple *Yiddishkeit* ("We are deeply committed to the perpetuation and enrichment of Jewish life through every form of secularist expression").

Only near the bottom of the page, under the heading "Fraternalism," does the reader begin to learn about the benefits and services available to members. These include: an assortment of insurance "packages" (life, health, home, automobile); cemetery plots and funeral provisions; low-fee medical and dental care (in New York); group travel plans; a discount buying service; a children's camp in Dutchess County, New York; a variety of publications, many in Yiddish; and, in about 30 locations, Yiddish schools for both children and adults. In addition, the society sponsors the *Folksbeine*, which claims to be the world's oldest Yiddish theater group, a touring chorus and orchestra, and a mandolin band.

If this seems like a lot, once upon a time there was more—more local branches, more schools, more members. Strictly in terms of numbers, the Workmen's Circle reached its peak in 1925 with a membership of 85,000. From there it began a slow decline, hitting bottom, at 50,000, in 1971. Membership is gradually climbing again, possibly on the upward currents of a *Yiddishkeit* revival. It is true, in any case, that tens of thousands come to the Workmen's Circle Yiddish music festival in Central Park each summer. It is also true that for the first time in two generations new Yiddish schools are being organized, mostly in the suburbs.

We live in an ethnic age, and the Workmen's Circle is *the* ethnic child of the century, born in 1900 as the *Arbeter Ring*, out of a need among Jewish workingmen to enrich their futures without necessarily wiping out their pasts. The society's history thus contains many of the poignant contradictions that are common to all non-WASP newcomers, whether they have fled the pogroms of Vilna, the depredations of Alabama, or the poverty of a Naples or a San Juan.

These contradictions are known to every "ethnic": the lure of assimilation vs. the pull of the old culture; the American emphasis on individualism vs. the old-world emphasis on family, clan and tribe; and, consequently, the urge to "get ahead" vs. the fear of losing one's friends and loved ones, of being alone. "In no other civilized land in the world," observed the Yiddish writer Abraham Liesin, an early member of Workmen's Circle, "is the fight for survival so menaced by the unexpected and the terrible as in the United States, and in no country is there the feeling of so much insecurity, loneliness and fear of tomorrow."

Implicit in the Workmen's Circle hegira from lower Broadway to Murray Hill is the idea that the best way to achieve the American

Dream—at least if you happen to be poor, alone and generally reviled—is to organize, organize, organize. It is the message of mutual-ity, and while the founders of the Workmen's Circle did not exactly invent that idea, they did help to legitimize its use in New York City and thus pointed the way to later ethnic arrivals.

Recently a friend sent me an obscure but splendid quotation on this point—that is, on what it takes for people to remain in control of their destiny: “They must be able to savor ordinary experience, to accept and take pride in their heri-

Howe, in his forthcoming book on the Jews of New York, speaks of “The Jewish God, to whom one prayed in Hebrew and with whom one pleaded in Yiddish.”

CLEARLY, Yiddish was the language best suited to voice the immigrants' deepest aspirations; yet whenever the time came to organize, debate and plan programs, the people spurned Yiddish in favor of Russian or German. It was as if the language of the hearthside was deemed too private a possession for public use and display.



tage, and be willing to hope that life can be better.”

It was the genius of the organizers of Workmen's Circle that they found ways to nourish both hope and pride among their members—in part through political action and education, but more importantly through the celebration of *Yiddishkeit*. And the key to *Yiddishkeit* was Yiddish itself, a powerfully intimate folk-language that had evolved in the *shtetlach*—the Jewish towns and ghettos of Russia and Poland. It was a profoundly personal instrument of communication, its familiar rhythms and inflections suffusing each moment, each thought, each emotion. Irving

As Judah J. Shapiro points out in a perceptive history of the Workmen's Circle, *The Friendly Society*, Abraham Cahan—who would later edit the *Jewish Daily Forward*—changed all that by speaking in Yiddish at political meetings. He thereby “opened the doors of politics to the Eastern European Jewish immigrants. . . . The Yiddish language would become the tool for relating Jewish life to the developments in the general society. . . .”

That suited the Workmen's Circle, an organization forever addicted to political reforms. “There is a duality in almost every aspect of the Workmen's Circle,” notes Shapiro. “From the beginning, it embodied

both the desire to be part of American society and the determination to correct its evils.” At the outset members tended to practice a militant socialism and to espouse an equally militant atheism. They viewed the latter as consistent with the former, religion being the opiate of the people. Gradually, however, as members left the old neighborhood, their Debs-like socialism turned into FDR-like liberalism. One would place many of them today slightly to the Right of George McGovern.

On the other hand, the society's “determination to correct [America's] evils” seems unimpaired. Recently the Workmen's Circle's veteran executive-secretary, William Stern, received a routine letter from the National Fraternal Congress requesting information on “the patriotic projects and promotions your society conducts on a regular basis,” such as “the sale of United States flags or of patriotic calendars and billfolds.” The executive-secretary fired off a characteristically Stern reply:

“To us patriotism is not merely displaying the United States flag, but rather devoting ourselves to making this a better America for all its people. Thus, our patriotic activities are in the line of calling upon Congress and the President to give us full employment . . . a National Health Security bill . . . good housing . . . mass transportation. . . . It has always surprised me that other fraternal organizations do not realize their great potential for achieving vital social goals of this kind. Instead they perform ritual acts of patriotism which are superficial in their effect and thus ignore the deep-rooted problems of our time. . . .”

So: Your average Workmen's Circle member these days may not be a worker or a revolutionary, but where his notion of the American Dream is concerned, he remains deeply committed, a veritable *chasicid*.