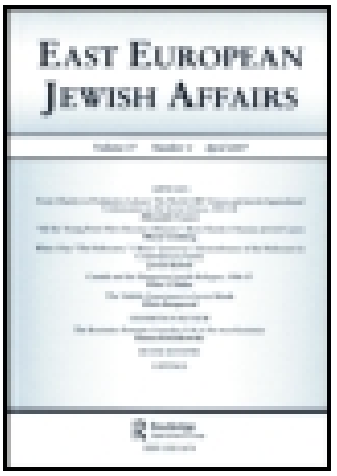

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Abba Gordin: A portait of a Jewish anarchist

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Abba Gordin: A Portait of a Jewish Anarchist

by Joseph Nedava

Abba Gordin was a major figure of Russian anarchism. He led the "Moscow Federation of Anarchists" at the peak of its power and influence during the October Revolution and the Civil War, and was himself an active participant in the events of those "Ten Days That Shook The World." Early in the Revolution the Anarchist groups and Left Socialist Revolutionaries joined the Bolsheviks in a somewhat uneasy coalition. Before long the partnership broke up, and the former allies became deadly antagonists. The institution of the reign of "Red Terror" precipitated the division. For nearly six years Gordin lived a precarious political existence in the Soviet Union, but soon after Lenin died in January 1924, he escaped to the United States through Siberia. During the last years of his life (1958-1964) he lived in Ramat-Gan, Israel, not a genuine pilgrim to Zion—as a youth, he had renounced Zionism and become an incurable universalist, a citizen of the world—but a man overcome by a sense of loneliness in the cosmopolitan city of New York who yearned for the warmth of his family.[1]

I was a close friend of Abba Gordin during his last years. When he arrived in Israel he was already seventy one, yet his vitality seemed undiminished. I remember the first time I knocked at the door of his modest flat expecting to be ushered in by a towering, burly, brusque-speaking human Titan, not unlike the legendary Bakunin. Instead a short, white-haired, smiling, soft-spoken gentleman welcomed me in, and with a limp[2] took me to one of the two chairs in his barely furnished study. He best defined himself: "I am—he wrote—the symbol of Jewishness: a soul without a body."[3] He was mild, condescending, a wonderful conversationalist, yet also attentive to what others had to say. He believed in the manner of Socratic dialogues. A unique figure with a personality made up of polar traits, he was an individualist, yet loved to play the

role of a *guru*. He stemmed from a Lithuanian family of *Mitnaggedim* (opponents of Hassidic pietism), a cool rationalist, but at the same time he was also an adept at Jewish mysticism and Kabbala. He even attached deep significance to dreams, and would often tell me: "My dreams have never cheated me." He was a radical ideologist in close touch with the masses, but at the same time a lyrical poet completely detached from his surrounding society. He claimed to have discarded totally the Jewish tradition; his relationship with Jewry was purely "formal," a circumstance of birth; but I have rarely encountered a more "Jewish" Jew. Though he admitted to having borrowed his entire conception of morality from Isaiah, he never gave up cherishing the Book of Psalms as his most precious spiritual possession. His voluminous works are strewn with the Rabbis' sayings and wisdom. He often quoted the Talmud and the *Midrash* in his disputations with such Bolshevik luminaries as Lunacharsky, Yaroslavsky and their like. He sprinkled his polemic articles in *Anarkhiya*, the organ of the Federation of Anarchists, with Talmudic parables and similes. His style seemed to have been out of step with both his native Russian milieu as well as with Marxist dialectics, but this alien element endowed it with a special grace, a kind of surrealistic weirdness which more than made up for his usual long-windedness.

Gordin was a rebel against all conventions. In this respect he never mellowed even with age. He was an iconoclast by nature. His first revolt was against his father, Rabbi Yudah Leyb Gordin, a man of genius and character. The conflict between them started while Abba Gordin was still a youth. When the son began to renounce religion, he refused to be disciplined by his father, and the open clash occurred when Abba came to the help of his younger brother who was chided by their father for discarding the "small fringed shawl."[4] Abba Gordin admitted that the father-son relationship in his case could serve as a valid subject for a Freudian case study. He was envious of his father and resentful of his authority, admiring and hating him at the same time. He suffered from what he termed the "Abraham-Terah complex," being driven by an inner urge to smash his father's "idols," to relinquish all his beliefs. They were constantly at loggerheads arguing about fundamental Jewish precepts.

> I once said to my father "Why are you Rabbis, who are so meticulous about the word of God, proud of the world of Israel which is not yours. If you were at least to bring the Messiah then I would admit that you possess greater power than we seculars. But you have not brought the Messiah, and *not* to bring him, we can do just as well as you." To which my father answered me: "But are you capable of waiting for him day in day out as we do? This is the question."[5]

With the final break, Abba left his father's house and never returned.

Gordin was a philosophical anarchist. He drew his inspiration from former masters, Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin, but he did not accept all their tenets. Their burning zeal for freedom, their utter irreconcilability with authority, their identification with oppressed humanity and their striving for moral qualities appealed to him. He also found affinity with Tolstoy's Christian anarchism, although he disregarded its religious elements. Because he opposed bloodshed on all counts, his revolutionary activity was greatly hampered. To the notorious Ukrainian guerrilla leader Nestor Makhno who met Gordin and his colleagues in Moscow, the latter seemed "men of books rather than deeds."[6] Makhno's impression was certainly correct, for by nature, Gordin was best suited

to play the role of an ivory-tower ideologue. He often told me that he had been drawn to battle because he could not remain indifferent to oppression, but the task of leading revolutionary masses went against his grain. Here again was an inherent temperamental contradiction. On the one hand he was extremely "bookish", viewing everything in the light of learning,[7] on the other hand, when he and his elder brother, Wolf[8] expounded the doctrine of Pan-Anarchism, they lay stress on its anti-intellectualism, criticising book learning as a "diabolical weapon" in the hand of the ruling castes.[9]

As an ideological movement, anarchism has always had a variety of shades—numerous streams, but no uniform doctrine. At most they have a common starting point—the desire to do away with all governmental authority and institutions, thereby creating an "exuberant" state of freedom. There is no consensus about the means to be used for attaining this goal nor is there a general agreement on the final structure of the human society. In order to obviate rancorous bickering among the various branches of anarchism while the political struggles with the existing powers are still going on, very few ideologues of anarchism have cared to outline in detail the nature of the forthcoming Utopian society. They all agree on the *negative* aspect of their common struggle—the need for shattering the present capitalist framework. They differ in respect of the means to be adopted in bringing this about. As to the future state of human "association"—they leave this to be determined by the spontaneous instincts of the masses.

In our numerous conversations, Abba Gordin time and again referred to what he considered to be the most original contribution of the "Gordin Brothers" to the doctrine of anarchism: the "Union of the Oppressed Five" (*Soyuz pyati ugnetennykh*). "The Manifesto of the Pan-Anarchists," the platform of the Society of Anarchists-Communists, which they founded in 1917, was intended to have a universal appeal to those categories of humanity who suffered most under the present capitalist regime: the workers, the oppressed nationalities, women, youth and the individual as such. Five basic institutions epitomized the oppressors: the state, capitalism, colonialism, the school and the family. It was enough for these suffering groups to unite in order to bring about a change with comparative ease. The remedies proposed for the abolition of the state and capitalism were statelessness and communism, for colonialism—"cosmism" (doing away with the national yoke), "gyneantropism" (emancipation of women) and "pedism" (liberating the young from the "vice of slave education").[10]

In 1918 Abba Gordin developed his own doctrine of anarchism which he termed "inter-individualism." It called for

> the union of individuals in the form of an association in which the individual partners do not lose their economic identity . . . Inter-individualism is related to Socialism to the extent that internationalism is related to cosmopolitism.[11]

In the exposition of this theory Gordin owes much to the philosophy of Max Stirner. He states in his autobiography that in his youth he learned Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* almost by heart.[12] He, like so many anarchistically-inclined people, was taken in by Stirner's philosophy of the "Unique One" ("Nothing is more to me than myself!"). But, strictly speaking, all these self-proclaimed disciples labour under a misconception. Stirner's principles have been misapprehended, or rather, each individual interprets them to his own liking without reference to their genuine truth. The only thing these various anarchists have in common with the German philosopher is a contempt for

authority and a hatred of conventions. Beyond this their ways part. Stirner is a "nihilistic egoist", not motivated by moral standards; his aspiration has nothing to do with human welfare as such. He is not concerned with transforming society, rather with providing the individual with a system for *self-assertion*. Stirner's concepts have more in common with Nietzschean precepts than with dreams of a perfect social harmony. It is "erroneous to describe Stirner as an 'anarchist': the philosophy of anarchism and the philosophy of the Unique One are in almost every respect virtually irreconcilable."[13]

Gordin's collaboration with the Bolsheviks was short-lived. On the eve of the October Revolution there seemed to be common ideological ground between anarchism and communism, all the more so in the light of Lenin's exposition in August, 1917, in his work *State and Revolution* of the theory concerning the "withering away of the state." However, it soon transpired that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was more authoritarian than the Tsar. As soon as the Bolsheviks were in power they brooked no opposition from within, and as early as the spring of 1918 they embarked upon a drive against both the S.R.'s and the anarchists. The "extraordinary commission" (the notorious *Cheka*) exercised arbitrary powers in meting out "revolutionary justice" and soon the prisons were filled to capacity. In his organ *Anarkhiya* Gordin conducted a vituperative campaign against the new "Jacobins" and their orgies of blood. He was against capital punishment; and he now raised his voice in protest, particularly in view of the fact that innumerable innocent victims were suffering at the hands of the Bolsheviks. "At that time, under the Trotsky regime, they used to shoot people to death, regularly, for every little thing . . . , at the command of 'Leon the Terrible'."[14] People were so bitter against the Jewish Commissar, Lenin's all-powerful partner, that certain anarchist terrorists entertained the idea of planning an attempt on his life. It was Gordin who dissuaded them from undertaking such an assignment.[15] The complete break between the Bolsheviks and the anarchists occurred in the wake of the Leontiev Street bombing incident. On 25 September 1918, a splinter group of Gordin's "Anarchists-Universalists", who had formed an underground organisation, threw a bomb into the headquarters of the Moscow Committee of the Communist Party, killing 12 members and wounding 55 others.[16] Following the Bolshevik attempt to suppress the anarchists, their centres were raided, their arms confiscated, and deadly clashes occurred in two places, including "The House of Anarchy", Gordin's headquarters. Hundreds of anarchists were arrested, including Gordin himself.

By then he was used to languishing in prisons; his first such experience had occurred during the 1905 Revolution; he was caught and imprisoned after leading a raid on a Tsarist prison, releasing its inmates. He was no "easy" prisoner, causing constant trouble to the supervisors and guards. A convincing preacher, he often converted his guards into sympathisers of anarchism. During his last stay in a Soviet prison (May 1920), he turned "violent" and planned a general riot to coincide with the prospective visit there of the British delegation, which included Arthur Henderson, Ramsay MacDonald, Sidney Webb and Bertrand Russell.[17] When detained in the Lubyanka prison, he was "privileged" to make the acquaintance of the highest hierachy of the *Cheka*—Feliks Dzerzhinsky, Zaks and Peters. Once, in a sentimental moment, Dzerzhinsky, the head of the awe-inspiring and dreadful "arm" of the Bolshevik Revolution, made a confession in his presence:

Nobody wishes to do the dirty work of fighting against the

> counter-revolutionaries. They all want to have clean hands (*beloruchki*), like you Gordin brothers; to make revolutions—yes, but to besmirch oneself with blood, mud, dust—this, no. To be revolutionaries and remain moralists . . . This whole mountain of mud has therefore been heaped on me . . . Do you think that I know any less than you that men need freedom; I know it quite well, not less than you fighters for freedom, and I have sacrificed my life and my health in this struggle for freedom; but I am convinced that in order to have freedom in Russia there is a need to build ten times more prisons than we actually have.[18]

Dzerzhinsky took his job as seriously as any executioner of the Inquisition. He was a fanatic with a stern face; only once, Gordin told me, did he manage to "extort" a forced smile from his sullen face. He came into his chamber to protest the arrest of a fellow anarchist; he leaned on a cane with a bulging handle, and the head of the *Cheka* sat fidgeting in his chair, suspecting an attempt on his life. Gordin read the apprehension on his face and commented: "You needn't be afraid, I value my life much more than you do yours . . .".

In retrospect Gordin wondered why the Bolsheviks had spared his life. Maybe they were morally reluctant to liquidate an invalid of the October Revolution, although this is doubtful. In one instance he definitely owed his life to the intervention of Krupskaya, Lenin's wife.[19]

I often discussed with Gordin the prospects of an anarchist seizure of power in Soviet Russia soon after the outbreak of the October Revolution, when the Bolsheviks were in the throes of a developing Civil War and when they were fighting against tremendous odds. At the end of 1917 and prior to the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in March 1918, the anarchists were very popular among the masses. Their daily organ *Anarkhiya* had a circulation of some 50,000 to 75,000, more than that of *Pravda*. Wolf Gordin's organ *Burevestnik* in Petrograd had a circulation of some 25,000. The number of sympathizers of the anarchists could be counted in the tens of thousands, mostly among the industrial workers and the sailors. Abba Gordin was elected to the Soviet Congress from three Moscow industrial plants (although the Bolsheviks physically barred him from attending). The Bolsheviks were losing ground because of the brutal food requisitions, the despair of the peasantry, the spreading hunger and the staggering dislocation of the means of communication. In an attempted *coup d'état* the anarchists would have had ready allies waiting to join forces in a common onslaught. The Left S.R.'s were calling for a united front, and a similar appeal to the anarchists for common action came from the extreme right in the person of a White Guard, a cousin of Kropotkin.[20] Gordin declined in both cases to enter upon what he considered to be a risky adventure. Some people have advanced the view that had Gordin not been wounded in October 1917, and virtually put out of action for almost a year and a half, matters would have developed differently in the Soviet Union; the anarchists together with the S.R.'s could have upset the balance of power on the "home front," and thus, perhaps, paved the way for an effective external intervention. Gordin himself discounted this view. He tended to believe that the anarchists were unable to pull any effective lever of power because they lacked an experienced leadership—most of their leaders were young men (Gordin himself was about thirty). The one man who might have became their potential leader—Peter Kropotkin himself—was too old, over seventy-five, and could no longer be relied on even as a source of inspiration. On the one hand he was willing to compromise with the Bolshevik rule, and on the other, his ageing syndrome led him to

sublime standards of morality. Gordin told me a characteristic story which reflected on Kropotkin's mood at that crucial period. When asked to contribute an article to the anarchist organ, Kropotkin declined because the printing-press had been requisitioned by the anarchists.[21]

It seems that even if young anarchist leaders had been available at the time, the cause of anarchism would have remained hopeless. The assumption of power presupposed organisation—the very antithesis of anarchist doctrine. Any reliance on the spontaneity of the masses was bound to be of no avail. Throughout Russian history the "Ivan the Terribles" have always had the upper hand over the "Stenka Razins".

By the middle of 1918 Gordin was a convinced anti-Bolshevik (see his *Communism Unmasked*, New York, 1940), and what was more, he soon realized that there was no reason for him to stay on in the Soviet Union and fight a useless war; no other ideology could survive in the suffocating atmosphere of Communism. He lingered on for some time as the one-dimensional world developed, then had to contrive his departure from Russia, for the doors were already being barred to "friend and foe". He thought he would be assisted by Kamenev, the Soviet Commissar and head of the Moscow Communist Party. Over the years Gordin had been in close touch with this sympathetic functionary of the Soviet hierarchy. In 1924 he called on him at his Moscow office and told him that there was no longer any sense in his staying on in the country when, in his view, the revolution had gone in the wrong direction, and when there were no prospects for a change in the foreseeable future. He asked for permission to emigrate, and when Kamenev refused categorically, Gordin said nonchalantly: "Lev Borisovich, let's escape together." Kamenev was greatly astonished; he was then at the height of his influence and power. He laughed off Gordin's suggestion, upon which Gordin added:

> If we both escape, then we shall meet each other as good friends abroad; but if we both stay on, we shall meet each other either in Siberia or on the scaffold.[22]

Gordin's arrival in Israel was not his homecoming. An ardent Zionist until the Sixth Zionist Congress rejected the "Uganda Project", he made his final breakaway from the movement[23] after the death of Dr. Herzl on 3 July 1904 (Abba fasted the whole day as a sign of mourning). In the course of the following years he moved away from every proposed territorial solution. "The Jewish people has conquered the dimension of *time*," he once told me. "It is thinking in terms of *eternity*, not in terms of territories." He was against exaggerating the importance of the State of Israel, and argued against those who maintained that the destiny of the Jewish people now depended entirely on the fate of the State. The State of Israel could not absorb within its borders all world Jewry. And he was of the opinion that "our creative power, our genius, does not lie in the province of state-architecture, but rather in that of ethical culture."[24] He further argued that

> we have existed for centuries without the Land of Israel, with one qualification. We have been carrying around with us and within us our *Land of Israel*, which has been transformed from a piece of land to a piece of psychology.[25]

Yet, determinism has a way of its own, and the ever wandering Jewish anarchist finally found refuge in the land of his ancestors. He was no stranger to the State of Israel; from childhood he had been familiar with its history, geography and spiritual climate. His loneliness left him from the very first day of his arrival in the new country. For, although he was a kind of recluse by temperament and had no immediate family (a

believer in free love, he never married, and often quoted Bakunin's saying that a revolutionary who marries loses fifty per cent of his fighting élan), he nevertheless mixed easily with the local people. His Hebrew was perfect; indeed, he was a stylist of the language. Before long he was again in communion with the old Jewish masters. Being a rabbi's son, he soon produced excellent works on Moses and Rashi, and his natural proclivity for mysticism found an outlet in writing the lives of Maharal (Rabbi Yehuda Löw of Prague) and the Godly Ha-Ari (the Kabbalist Rabbi Yitzhak Luria). It is symbolic that his last book, *Musar Ha-Yahadut*— published posthumously, was a Hebrew rendition of his basic work; it dealt with Jewish ethics. The stormy petrel had reached his destination; the circle of a life searching for eternal truth for humanity was closed.

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1 Gordin was the uncle of David Raziel, commander of the *Irgun Tsvai Leumi*, who in 1937 led it in its reprisal activities against the Arabs. In defiance of the official policy of the Zionist Organisation which practised so-called "self-restraint", Raziel actually participated in acts of planting bombs in the Arab market in Jerusalem. Gordin, the anarchist, would certainly not have approved of such acts of terrorism against innocent people. He once told me an episode relating to David as a child of five or six: on the eve of Atonement Day, when the ritual slaughterer came to their house to perform the religious function, little David drove him out shouting angrily: "How can you murder these beautiful 'birds'? . . ."

2 He was badly wounded in his left leg during the first days of the Revolution, was hospitalized for six months, and had to walk on crutches for a whole year. See his memoirs *Zikhroynes un Heshboynes*, Buenos Aires 1955-1957, vol. I, pp. 188-9, II, p. 13ff.

3 *Ibid*, p. 131.

4 See Abba Gordin's autobiography: *Draysik yor in Lite un Poyln*, Buenos Aires 1958, p. 291.

5 A. Gordin, "Two Lions: Tolstoy and the Rabbi", *Maariv*, Tel-Aviv, 15 April 1960.

6 Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, Princeton 1967, p. 211.

7 It is significant that when the famous Jewish scholar Hafets Hayim visited the Gordin house, and on wishing to bless the six-year-old Abba asked him what he preferred — *Torah* (learning) or wealth, the child unhesitatingly replied: *Torah*. — *Draysik yor* etc., p. 47ff.

8 Wolf (V.L.) Gordin led the corresponding Federation of Anarchist Groups in Petrograd. The Gordin brothers wielded tremendous influence among the industrial workers in the great cities of Russia. Wolf was later converted to Bolshevism, but not for long. Ultimately he became disenchanted with Lenin and his henchmen, fled to the United States and turned into a Protestant missionary. — Avrich, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

9 In *Burevestnik*, the organ of the Petrograd Anarchists, 27 January 1918, a fiery proclamation urged: "Uneducated ones! Destroy that loathsome culture which divides men into 'ignorant' and 'learned'."

10 *Zikhroynes* etc., vol. I, pp. 76-80. Abba Gordin points out derisively that the "platform", which was written by his brother, "contained more foreign words than Russian". See also Avrich, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

11 *Zikhroynes*, vol. II, p. 306; and vol. I, pp. 449-455.

12 *Draysik* etc., p. 368.

13 R. W. K. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist — Max Stirner*, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 141. This is a brilliant work dealing with Stirner and his philosophy. See in particular pp. 126-144. It is noteworthy that the famous Zionist leader V. Jabotinsky, too, considered himself a disciple of Stirner, even though he was at most a Liberal-Anarchist in the tradition of the 19th century, claiming no affinity with the Russian type of Anarchism. He himself exquisitely defined his doctrine of individualism, which he called *Pan-Basilea*, thus: "In the beginning God created the *individual;* every individual is a king equal to his fellow-individual — and the wicked one is a 'king' too; it is better that the individual sin against the community than society against the individual; it is for the benefit of the individual that society was created, not the other way round; and the final end, the vision of the Messianic days, is a Garden of Eden for the individual, a brilliant kingdom of anarchy, a wrestling-game between lawless and limitless personal forces and the 'society' which has no other role than to help the stumbling individual, to comfort him and lift him up and give him the opportunity to return to that wrestling-game". — *Sippur Yamai* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1947, p. 38.

14 *Zikhroynes*, vol. II, p. 181.

15 *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 237.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 237ff., and Avrich, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-9.

17 *Zikhroynes*, vol. II, p. 286.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 26ff., and p. 85.

21 Curiously enough, *Anarkhiya* (when still a weekly) and the organ of the Union of the Oppressed Five, *Beznachaltsy*, were printed in the "requisitioned" printing-press of the Holy Synod at Sergiyevsky Posad, some four or five hours' travel from Moscow. "Monks used to print and partially set the anarchist verbal outpourings while quietly crossing themselves and cursing when no one could overhear them. They washed their hands in order to wipe off the uncleanliness of the impure words . . . 'There is no God, there is no Nature', was the motto of the Union of Five". *Zikhroynes*, vol. I, p. 122.

22 *Op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 425-8.

23 *Draysik*, p. 270.

24 A. Gordin, *Eseyen*, New York 1951, pp. 121-7.

25 A. Gordin, *Unser Banem*, New York 1946, p. 50.