

Who We Are and Where We Came From

By Myron Kolatch

(The following brief history is adapted from the Final Issue of THE NEW LEADER in print.)

THE HEADLINE on Charles McGrath's adroit New York Times feature story (January 23, 2006) reporting THE NEW LEADER's imminent demise read: "A Liberal Beacon Burns Out." Responding to the news, Sanford Lakoff, a political scientist at the University of California's San Diego campus, saw it as "one more indication of the Center's collapse in this country." Whether or not you concur, there can be little doubt about the impact of the present polarization of American politics. Today most readers and major financial supporters of magazines like the NL seek affirmation of their own views—what I tend to call psychological breast-feeding. Such sustenance, though, has rarely been provided in our pages. Particularly over the past four and a half decades, we have proceeded on the assumption that a sophisticated audience wants to be exposed to the opinions, analyses and reportage of respected writers, regardless (or perhaps because) of their not always being in lockstep agreement.

But my purpose here is neither to rationalize nor to lament the fact that the legend above our logo, instead of flipping forward and promising an "83rd Year of Publication," last April declared with finality "82 Years of Publication." It is, rather, to help set the record straight: to fill in some blank spots, shatter a few myths, and offer glimpses of how the venture managed, intellectually at least, to thrive as long as it did.

THE NEW LEADER made its first appearance on January 19, 1924, as a six-column standard-size weekly newspaper "devoted to the interests of the Socialist and Labor movements," according to its masthead. Prominent contributors listed there included Eugene V. Debs, Morris Hillquit, Algeron Lee, Abraham Cahan, and Norman Thomas. The editor was James Oneal—not, as is widely thought, Sol Levitas, a former Menshevik vice mayor of Vladivostok. He was named business manager in 1930, with responsibility for soliciting funds, expanding circulation, attracting advertising, and overall administration. Soon the tension between the two men was palpable. In December 1937, after Levitas persuaded the paper's board to change his title to executive editor, Oneal submitted a long, bitter letter of resignation. When the board subsequently accepted his "statement of policy" for the paper

and assured him that his editorial authority would not be compromised, he agreed to stay on.

The rapprochement was short-lived. Oneal, working only three days a week because he had suffered a mild stroke, charged that "the secrecy, deception and direct sabotage of the business manager" were undermining "the editorial department." Specifically, he complained about articles being solicited and published while he was out of the office, many of them by Mensheviks, and about contempt for Social Democratic Federation news items.

At its core, the clash between James Oneal and Sol Levitas was about their very different conceptions of THE NEW LEADER. Oneal cautioned against trying to turn it into "a paper for the liberal intelligentsia," with "Social Democracy so faded out of its columns that the reader will have to use powerful glasses to find it." Levitas, by contrast, had little patience for the parochial; he envisioned the paper's Social Democratic roots serving as a link to the liberal anti-Communist intelligentsia in virtually every corner of the world. In April 1940 Oneal quit again, making it clear that this time he would not reconsider. THE NEW LEADER thus became the only place the Mensheviks ever won a revolution.

Their victory quickly turned the NL into a highly regarded source of information about the underlying meaning of ongoing events in the Soviet bloc, prompting even the Kremlin to subscribe. And bylines of well-known political figures, reflecting a growing global reach, started to appear: Hugh Gaitskell and Herbert Morrison from Britain; Jules Moch and André Philip from France; Konrad Adenauer, Erich Ollenhauer and Willy Brandt from Germany; Giuseppe Saragat from Italy; Haakon Lie from Norway; Jayaprakash Narayan from India.

Equally impressive was Levitas' ability to corral literary collaborators, including Albert Camus, Arthur Koestler, George Orwell, Stephen Spender, Alberto Moravia, and Ignazio Silone. His continuing involvement with the international Social Democratic community also enabled him to arrange occasional off-the-record meetings featuring such notable figures as Paul-Henri Spaak of Belgium, Max Brauer of Hamburg, Ernst Reuter of Berlin, and Golda Meir of Israel. Attended by the staff and two to three dozen invited top-level journalists,



1958: BEN JOSEPHSON (L.) AND SOL LEVITAS (R.) AT A TAMIMENT INSTITUTE RECEPTION FOR BERLIN'S MAYOR WILLY BRANDT

these were illuminating, often contentious sessions. One fascinating evening the guest was an NL contributor who had done a stint as U.S. ambassador to the USSR, George F. Kennan.

ESPECIALLY after it switched to a magazine format in May 1950, *THE NEW LEADER* attracted considerable attention by publishing articles from dissident writers and works circulating underground in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. To cite a mere dozen: Milovan Djilas' "The Storm in Eastern Europe"; Leszek Kolakowski's "What Is Socialism?"; Viktor Nekrasov's "Travel Notes in America"; Evgeny Evtushenko's poem "Nefertiti"; Nikolai Gavrilov's "Letter from a Soviet Writer"; "The Trial of Iosif Brodsky: A Transcript"; "Poems by Iosif Brodsky"; "Prose Poems by Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn"; Mihajlo Mihajlov's "Moscow Summer 1964"; Abram Tertz' "Thought Unaware"; Andrei Sinyavsky's "Unfettered Voices"; "The Lament of Abrashka Tertz," a Russian song rendered by John Updike.

Many have creatively speculated about the road traveled by this material to our offices, but the reality would not appeal to a John Le Carré in search of a plot. In some instances, like the historic Djilas piece, nothing more was involved than our own initiative: Anatole Shub (then the managing editor) and I (a relatively new associate editor) were trying to think of someone in the Communist world who might be sufficiently repelled by the ugly turn of events in Hungary and Poland to raise his voice in a meaningful indictment. A friend who dropped by suggested the former Yugoslav vice president. Once an ardent admirer of Stalin, he had recently been booted by Marshal Josip Broz Tito for his "heretical" views. The idea was intriguing. But Shub, aware that it could boomerang, was understandably reluctant to pursue it because Sol was out of the country. I prodded. He pointed out that we did not have an address for Djilas. I countered that the cable office in Belgrade would know where to deliver our request—if it wanted to.

We both returned to our separate tasks. An hour later Shub passed my desk and said, "Okay, I sent the cable." Within four days the manuscript arrived by regular air mail from Belgrade. The next week an envelope came from Rome bearing the same manuscript. Although no explanatory note was attached, we

eventually determined that Djilas had a friend from Italy visiting when he sent off the article and asked him to mail a second copy from Rome for insurance.

A day after "The Storm in Eastern Europe" hit the stands, International News Service called. The INS correspondent in Vienna, a personal friend of Mrs. Djilas, had just spoken to her by phone and was told the secret police had come to search Djilas' apartment and arrest him. When Mrs. Djilas asked why they were taking away her husband, they cited his article in *THE NEW LEADER*. At a closed trial, Djilas received a three-year sentence and was sent off to Sremska Mitrovica, where he had previously been imprisoned for his activities as a Bolshevik.

On my own watch, I learned from the *New York Times* about Mihajlo Mihajlov's "Moscow Summer 1964." The story told of Tito's confiscating the January and February 1965 issues of *Delo*, the Yugoslav literary monthly where it appeared. He was angered by its coming out while he was attempting a reconciliation with the USSR and accused Mihajlov of "a

new form of Djilasism." Guessing that Tito probably had not been able to prevent the mailing of the journal to foreign subscribers, I phoned Andrew Field, a young NL contributor in Harvard's Slavic Languages and Literatures Department, and asked him to see if the Lamont Library received *Delo*. The answer was yes. He photocopied the two installments, we had them translated, and they made up our entire enlarged March 29, 1965 issue, with annotations by Field. This elicited a call, weeks later, from a friend of Mihajlov's in the U.S. who had a copy of the whole manuscript. He informed us of an unpublished concluding installment, which ran in our issue of June 7, 1965.

It was an article Field wrote, "A Poet in Prison" (June 22, 1964), accompanied by a poem entitled "Memoir to Pushkin," that introduced American readers to Brodsky's work. Back from several months in the Soviet Union, Field recalled Anna Akhmatova's praising the 24-year-old Leningrader during a conversation about the young generation of Russian poets. He went on to recount Brodsky's being found guilty of "parasitism" and sentenced to five years of forced labor in the Arkhangelsk region.

Shortly afterward, I heard that a transcript of Brodsky's trial had been smuggled to Western Europe. A Russian journalist sitting among the spectators had taken down virtually the entire proceedings verbatim and succeeded in getting the document out of the country. I managed to obtain the only copy of the original Russian. "The Trial of Iosif Brodsky" (August 31, 1964) was the subject of lengthy newspaper stories across the country, and was presented in dramatic form on television in the U.S. and Canada. It was of singular interest to legal scholars, who never previously had access to the inside of a Soviet courtroom.

Some intellectuals in the USSR responded differently. George Feiffer, a seasoned Soviet affairs specialist, reported in "Brodsky: Reactions in Moscow" (September 14, 1964) that they felt their "inner war" for "openness" was made more difficult by foreign interference. He noted that at a supper for visiting Americans he attended in Moscow's Union of Writers in August, Evtushenko complained: "You who talk of freedom of literature—you make our literature the servant of sensation and the dollar, and the handmaiden of your politics." Though "one often hears that Evtushenko has sold out to the glamour of public life . . . if not to the Establishment," said Feiffer,

“his concern is shared by many of the most liberal intellectuals.”

On November 6, 1966, I was invited to a reception for Ev-tushenko at Queens College of the City University of New York, where he was giving a reading. When I was introduced to him, he put his arm around my shoulder and indicated he knew the NL had published a poem from his 1964 cycle on the power of art to transcend the temporary might of a government. “We must talk,” he whispered into my ear. As he propelled me toward the empty hallway, I had visions of his handing me a manuscript written (by him or a friend) for the drawer. But all he said, in a grave voice, was: “Is there any money?”

Pravda, *Izvestia* and the Soviet Party theoretical journal, *Kommunist*, indirectly formed another source of much smuggled work the NL received. Feiffer’s findings notwithstanding, a majority of dissidents recognized that the Western enemies of their enemy were their friends. When David Zaslavsky, writing in *Kommunist*, leveled a long attack at Shub’s “Labor in the Soviet Orbit,” a separate paperback-size section of our December 24-31, 1956 issue, a stratum in that orbit knowingly winked its eye. Similarly, it took notice when, after a Labor Party dinner in London for Nikita S. Khrushchev and Nikolai A. Bulganin at which Hugh Gaitskell presented a list of 200 Socialists in Communist prisons and urged their release, *Pravda* declared (emphasis in original): “the idea of staging a provocative intervention at the dinner in honor of the Soviet leaders *evolved at an informal meeting of staff members and contributors to the ‘New Leader’ magazine in New York. . . .* The American slanderers gazed at the ceiling and in an instant compiled a mythical list of ‘Social Democrats’ supposedly held in Soviet prisons.”

Pravda’s assertion that the NL supplied the names presented by Gaitskell happened not to be the truth. His list was drawn up in consultation with the Socialist International.

In any event, a compilation of a different sort, *THE NEW LEADER*’s special issue “Jews in the Soviet Union: A Report by the Editors” (September 14, 1959), could not be refuted quite the same way. Produced by Moshe Decter, Shub’s successor as managing editor until 1960, and myself, it consisted—except for an opening contextual essay and a short concluding one—of published Soviet and non-Soviet Communist documents. Together they presented an undeniable picture of the Jewish

community’s deteriorating political, social and religious status in the USSR since the Bolshevik Revolution.

“Jews in the Soviet Union” was widely distributed in the U.S. and abroad by organizations like the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith. It was the precursor of the American Conference on Soviet Jewry and corresponding groups elsewhere. It also contributed to nudging the subject toward the front burner in Western capitals, ultimately leading to the Kremlin’s painfully arbitrary program permitting the emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel.

SOL LEVITAS, who had himself fled from the Bolsheviks in 1923, died on January 3, 1961, a month short of his 67th birthday. Tributes poured in from eminent personalities around the world; editorials in leading newspapers and journals praised his stewardship of *THE NEW LEADER*. Ben Josephson, president of the magazine’s board and director of the Tamiment Institute—a small foundation that was the NL’s staunchest financial supporter as well as its landlord—told me there was some feeling the magazine should shut down now that Sol was gone. I said I didn’t think that would make an impressive epitaph.

On Monday, January 9, a statement issued by the board said in part, “The most fitting tribute we can render to the memory of Sol Levitas is to make certain the magazine to which he dedicated his life will continue to serve the nation and the free world.” In addition, it announced, “for a transitional period Dr. Norman Jacobs, 46, educational director of the Tamiment Institute, will serve as editorial director . . . and Myron Kolatch, 31, assistant managing editor since 1958, will serve as managing editor.” The transition ended in 1962, when Norman left his double-duty for the greener pastures of the Foreign Policy Association. I was named executive editor, with the managing editor’s slot eliminated to cut costs.

My coming to *THE NEW LEADER* in November 1953, immediately after two years as a state-side Army journalist and editor during the Korean War, was the result of a coincidence. Several years earlier, at a print shop on East 4th Street in Manhattan used by many New York college newspapers, I met Mitchel (Mike) Levitas, Sol’s son. He was the editor of the Brooklyn College



1954: THE NEW LEADER 30TH ANNIVERSARY BANQUET AT THE WALDORF-ASTORIA

Vanguard, I was the editor of New York University's Washington Square College *Bulletin*, and we became friends. As I was about to be discharged, Sol happened to mention his needing an associate editor to Mike, who arranged for us to meet one evening at his Greenwich Village apartment. After much bickering over a few dollars, I was sworn to secrecy and we came to terms.

Little did I know I was in for something of a culture shock. My first day at work a blond middle-aged woman introduced



1989: ELIE WIESEL SPEAKING AT THE 65TH ANNIVERSARY EVENT IN THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

herself. “Do you speak Russian?” she asked. “No,” I said. “Were your parents born in Russia?” “No, my mother was born in Manhattan and my father in Brooklyn.” She smiled, “How did you get a job here?” Visits by affable Mensheviks added to an émigré atmosphere, reinforced by the physical surroundings. The rough-hewn brownstone and red brick structure at 7 East 15th Street where *THE NEW LEADER* had its original sparse offices—a five-story Romanesque affair built in 1887 as a YWCA branch that in 1917 became the Rand School of Social Science—remained a relic of another era. But it did not take long for me to appreciate the magazine my talented colleagues were putting out. (In 1966 the building was sold and we moved to 212 Fifth Avenue; in 1983 we moved to our newly-built quarters at 275 Seventh Avenue.)

Upon assuming the managing editorship in 1961, I set three goals: to maintain the NL's international focus; to have it sink deeper roots in its own soil; and to give it a new face. The first was the easiest, with contributors like Adam Ulam, Robert V. Daniels, Peter Kenez, Marshall D. Shulman, F.R. Allemann, Silvio F. Senigallia, Eliahu Salpeter, S.L.A. Marshall, Edward Seidensticker, Edouard Roditi, Ray Alan, Janice Valls-Russell, Denis Healey, David Marquand, Norman Gelb, Elie Wiesel, and a great many others.

Pursuit of the second objective began with a revision of the “back of the book,” detailed in the pieces that made up the back

of our Final Issue. Up front it started with a string of notable Washington correspondents, among them George E. Herman, Karl E. Meyer, Leo Janos, Robert Sandoz, Andrew J. Glass, Bob Schieffer, Steven V. Roberts, Andrew Mollison, and—from February 1987 to the end of 2005, without missing a deadline—Daniel Schorr. The introduction of our “Thinking Aloud” column, with Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol as alternating proprietors (yes, they do differ) added substantially to the domestic side. So did the broad-ranging “Fair Game” and “States of the Union” columns by Walter Goodman and Richard J. Margolis, respectively, and George P. Brockway’s “The Dismal Science” column, which succeeded Sidney Weintraub’s regular articles on economics. The same, of course, was true of our coverage of the Civil Rights revolution by Louis E. Lomax, C. Eric Lincoln, John A. Williams, William B. Gould, and Albert Murray, to name only a handful; of “The World and the Jug” (December 9, 1963), Ralph Ellison’s searing reply to Irving Howe’s “Black Boys and Native Sons” in *Dissent*; and of Martin Luther King Jr.’s granting us permission to publish his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” (June 24, 1963). Longtime readers may recall that an article by Carl A. Auerbach, professor of law at the University of Wisconsin, entitled “Jury Trials and Civil Rights” (April 29, 1957), supplied the formula for breaking a Southern filibuster and passage of the first Civil Rights Act since Reconstruction.

My third objective, redesigning the NL, was getting nowhere until an acquaintance told me she had mentioned our search to Herb Lubalin, one of the country’s top graphic artists, who might know the right designer. When I phoned him for an appointment he seemed reticent, but agreed to see me. I arrived at his office with half a dozen issues, told him about the magazine while people kept marching in to show him their work, and asked if he could suggest a promising young designer. Lubalin, a slight, youthful-looking man in his 40s, with a soft voice and a poker face, said simply: “Leave the copies here. If I like what’s in them, I’ll do it myself.” As I began to reiterate our financial condition, he waved me out. The next week he informed me that he was going ahead, and a month later he phoned to say, “I’ve got a new magazine for you.”

IT MADE ITS DEBUT with the issue of September 19, 1961, to unanimous applause. The issue also marked our becoming a biweekly, because I had admired the *Reporter* magazine’s tempo from the time it was launched in 1949 and felt expanding our pages somewhat would enable us to further expand our horizons. Lubalin became devoted to the NL, designed all of its full-size special issues, “freshened up” (as he put it) the basic design in 1969, and was supportive in various other ways until his death in 1981. For long stretches Alan Peckolick, a Lubalin partner, and Michael Aron, a protégé, helped fill the gap. Peckolick, in fact, redesigned the NL in 2000, when it shifted to a bimonthly frequency, and he did the cover and design for the Final Issue.

Achieving our goals did not assure our survival in a fast-changing world. Is there a place in the cyberspace age for a magazine that, if pressed, describes itself as a “small ‘i’ independent, small ‘d’ democratic, small ‘l’ liberal journal of news analysis and opinion”? The evidence is not encouraging, as Sanford Lakoff has observed. Nevertheless, I’m inclined to be optimistic.

Welcome to *THE NEW LEADER*’s third phase, online.