

## The plight of Leyb Trepper

# The world's greatest Yiddish spy

by Isidore Haiblum

This is the way I go marching into history. Roslyn Lacks, Vivian Gornick, and I—three writers—are sitting around Roz's flat one night a couple of months ago, swapping stories. Roz has just hopped back from Israel, Vivian from Egypt;

news-hunting keeps them on their toes. But I, who do mostly humor and science fiction, have only been tramping through my head, a swell place to visit but who'd want to live there? Yet I come up with a story of my own, one of heroes and betrayers typical of our messy century and fitting perfectly into our evening's chat.

In the story I relate, Leopold Trepper, Moscow's ace wartime spy, also known as Leyb Domb and the Big Chief, head of the most successful spy ring of World War II, "the Red Orchestra," has just blown the whistle on Hitler's planned invasion of Mother Russia. There is only one hitch. The time is 1941, it is summer, and the Hitler-Stalin peace pact is in full swing. An attack such as Trepper predicts would be in direct violation of all existing agreements. The king-pin in the Kremlin—Uncle Joe himself—won't buy it; there are witnesses to this, and a nifty quote has come down to us. "Otto (another Trepper nom de plume) sends us worthwhile material that does credit to his political judgment. 'Stalin wisely points out. 'How could he fail to detect at once that this was merely a crude piece of British provocation?' How indeed? So when Der Fuehrer blitzkrieged his loyal buddy, what did it mean? It meant that if Trepper ever got back to Moscow and let the cat out of the bag—provided there still was a Moscow

to get back to—he'd be in big trouble. Along with the witnesses, of course.

I go on to complete my strange moral tale which, as it unwinds, becomes even stranger. I will take up its course presently, but having put across my prologue, I ring down a speedy curtain on that night and jump two weeks ahead. Roslyn is now in California, but Vivian phones me. A remarkable coincidence has dropped from the sky like a giant eagle's egg: Dr. Edward Trepper, the Big Chief's son, has flown in from Israel in a desperate, last-ditch attempt to save his now aged and ill father who, in dutch with the current representatives of Polish czarism, is being kept a virtual prisoner in Poland. (Poland? Read on.) The younger Trepper's success in stirring up world opinion has so far proved somewhat less than astounding. Through pure quirk, three days before his scheduled departure for home, Edward has stumbled across—of all people—Vivian's mother, who immediately calls Vivian, who immediately calls me, the expert. Will I do the story? Months behind in my own bread-and-butter sci-fi output, I agree at once, afraid of missing something really big and important if I say no. There is one other reason, too. Leopold Trepper, Leyb Domb, the Big Chief, Otto, and I share a hobby. Despite my more or less relative youth, I am

hopelessly hooked on Yiddish literature. And first and foremost, the most successful anti-Nazi fighter of World War II is not only a Jew but an ardent and acclaimed Yiddishist.

Edward Trepper turns out to be a bearded redhead of medium height in his mid-30s. Through a translator—for Dr. Trepper speaks only Russian and Polish—he at once launches, impassioned, into his father's story, which in a much-abridged edition, amounts to this:

Leyb Trepper, born in a small Polish town in 1904, became a Communist at an early age. His reasons were quite mundane: a

poverty so stunning and stunting as to make slow starvation his brightest prospect. Something, obviously, young Leyb saw, had gone seriously amiss with the system. Like most systems, this one—under the dictator Pilsudski—didn't take kindly to such notions and Trepper landed in the clink. In those days, Polish jails were no place for suspected leftists and when Trepper—luckily—got out, some eight months later, he kept right on going, first aiding the cause of revolution in Palestine, then in France: a professional spy.

It's 1932: Trepper is in Moscow, recalled from the field. He

brushes up on languages at Prodrovsky University, studies espionage under famed General Orlov at the Red Army Academy (never an MVD-nik, the Big Chief was an army man who subsequently held the rank of general), and in 1935 turns out a column on the arts for Emes (Truth), the most influential Yiddish newspaper in the USSR.

Back on active duty at his old Paris stand in 1937, it doesn't take Yiddishist Trepper long to look around and spot the *real* enemy. (There was some confusion in leftist circles at this time about who the enemy was.) Seeing war with

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## Morton

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from Dachau), my Uncle Carl and I, we stole out of the house to the taxi that would take us into emigration. Frau Ecker carried my father's valise and wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron. Pepi held open the taxi door. "Rrrrr-recht schoenen Aufenthalt," he said. "Have a nice stay." I gave him the last very sour drop.

And then of course the jump-cut across 10-20-30 years to my visit with Frau Ecker last week. In the park a couple of blocks away my little American daughter sang "Somebody come and play" from "Sesame Street." Here in this one-room apartment, bed almost flush against the stove, everything clean, doily-covered and touched by tendrils of tiny potted ferns, here was Frau Ecker once more. Frau Ecker shrunk, widowed, gray, pensioned, bent per-

manently into the litter-picking stoop of the Viennese concierge. But here she was. Here I was, the landlord's son again, for we once more owned the building. And here were Pepi and old man Ecker, two teddy-bear-sized dolls on the red wool cover of the bed. The box that did as table had a paper doily under a glass plate with a flower made of salami slices and another plate with a little pyramid of vanilla crescents and some Gumpoldskirchner wine in a glass carafe that used to contain our private tap water.

"The gentleman will drink, please," Frau Ecker said in archaic third-person Viennese. "The husband, Pepi, and me, we are celebrating the gentleman is here." A locomotive engineer's cap lay folded on the head of the bigger doll. On the other's lap stood a photograph. The snapshot of a Wehrmacht soldier, hands folded over his belt, left eye squinting slightly.

"I'm sorry to hear about Herr Ecker," I said.

"Yes. Last year, the liver," Frau Ecker said. "But Pepi, that was a long time ago, in '43, missing in action in Warsaw. They drafted him the day before his acceptance to the seminary."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"He would have been a nice priest. When he's on my bed here I hear people call him 'Father.' I always wanted to hear people call my Pepi 'Father.' Please, the gentleman must taste the vanilla crescents. Frau Haas upstairs, she let me bake in her big oven."

"Thank you," I said. "They're excellent."

"Now a little taste of ham-and-noodles for the gentleman."

The stove had kept warm a small dish and she now put it next to the vanilla crescents. "The family always loved ham-and-noodles. The husband always had to tell off Pepi for picking out the

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# Greatest Yiddish spy

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Nazi Germany as inevitable, the Big Chief comes up with the Red Orchestra concept—so christened later by the Nazis, who created a special branch to fight it—an octopus-like spy network twining out across Europe (with a major cell in Berlin—the self-styled impregnable fortress itself), and sells his Moscow boss, The Director, on the idea. So the Foreign Excellent Trench Coat Company makes the scene, an almost perfect cover. Specializing in black market goods, it rapidly befriends scores of Nazi bigwigs who like nothing better than to tout their army's incredible prowess. Special agents can be and are planted in German

HQs to turn up more intimate details. Trepper himself—repeatedly—lays his life on the line. A bluff, outgoing man, somewhat resembling the French actor Jean Gabin, he has no trouble becoming thick with the right parties. When, in 1940, the Nazi divisions move outside Dunkirk and in French Flanders, the Big Chief literally rides at their side—in the intelligence coup of the year—driven by Durov, the Bulgarian Consul in Brussels. Naturally, the car is halted. But so impressive are its occupants' credentials that they receive an official invitation to tag along. The interesting result of this jaunt is an 80-page report on blitzkrieg tactics, polished off by Trepper and shot to Moscow through the Soviet Embassy in Brussels. In the words of Admiral Canaris, head of Hitler's Abwehr, the Red Orchestra "... cost Germany the lives of 200,000 soldiers." (Al-

ready knowing the outcome of that other intelligence coup—Trepper's warning to Stalin—we will skip over it.) Festivities progress, heating up considerably. Orchestra headquarters is shifted from Brussels back to Paris. The Big Chief's staunchest co-worker, his wife Luba, and their two sons are sent packing to Moscow for safety. Trepper keeps waving his baton, a cast of hundreds dances to his tune. Agents bleed out their lives—as agents will—in Nazi torture chambers, are gunned down by firing squads or simply hanged. Others take their place. When once asked why his network contained so many Jews, the Big Chief replied, "Because they have a special score to settle with the Nazis."

There are ample details to go with all this, and anyone seeking them can look up Gilles Perrault's "The Red Orchestra," published

by Simon and Schuster in June 1969 and reprinted by Pocket Books in 1970.

Ultimately, due to an incredible blunder on Moscow's part—they transmitted the names and addresses, no less, of some prime network figures in a code which the opposition had already cracked—the Orchestra is blown, Trepper captured. Here begins the Funkspiel, an attempt by the Nazis to create a fatal rift between the Allies. Using Orchestra short-wave transmitters and captured personnel, the Gestapo relays false reports to Moscow on separate peace talks between the U. S. and Germany. The Big Chief plays along, but manages to smuggle a message through to Moscow, one that might seem a jumble to untrained eyes, artfully mixing three languages—Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish—a message that reveals the true situation.

But again it takes Moscow months to believe it!

Meanwhile, Trepper escapes; this toward the war's end. Stalin's personal plane is sent to fetch him. When he appears in Moscow, on the afternoon of January 14, 1945, he doesn't mince words with The Director; Gilles Perrault quotes Trepper as saying, "Before talking about the future, we might have a word about the past! Why didn't you believe me from the beginning? How were you able to mess things up so badly? I sent you enough warnings, didn't I?"

The Director asks, "Have you returned to settle accounts?"

"And why not?" Trepper demands.

So 10 years later the Big Chief gets out of Lubianka prison. His former boss, The Director, has long since himself been purged, Stalin has died, and Trepper's found out "why not?" The ex-spy chief is given a clean bill of health, the highest Soviet court stating that his "conviction" (?) was "wholly without foundations." Reunited with Luba his wife, who assumed him dead, he goes on to lead the comfortable, pensioned life of an honored Soviet citizen.

Exit Trepper the spy, enter Trepper the Yiddishist.

Leyb Trepper, who fought the Nazis as a Communist and as a Jewish secularist, has the strongest commitments to Yiddish culture, but there are no signs of it in post-war Moscow. Trepper starts to badger the authorities, is finally summoned to the Kremlin. The retired general wants to establish a Yiddish newspaper, a Yiddish publishing house. The authorities explain that he is out of touch; no one would be interested in such projects these days. Trepper asks

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ham bits. Please, won't the gentleman?"

"I had a big lunch, thank you," I said. I never could stand ham-and-noodles.

"A little taste, please. Pepi and the husband, they'd like you to taste. They said so. I put them both on the bed and we all chat. It's probably not right. I asked the priest at confession and he said it was all right. Some more wine with the ham-and-noodles?"

"Thank you," I said.

"I talk with them all the time. I show them my X-rays." She reached under the mattress. "Here. That's my kidney. The doctor says he can fix it. And that here." She got out an envelope. "My money reserve from the pension. Eighteen hundred Schillings. The husband still says, 'Re-

member the collapse. No banks. I should have made some salad with the ham-and-noodles. They are a little dry without the salad."

"Oh no, not at all," I said. Pepi and I were staring at each other, he from the snapshot under the high visor of the Wehrmacht cap and me in my Bloomingdale's tweed jacket. "Remember the rat hunt?" I said.

"We never could get rid of them," Frau Ecker said. "But the Americans did it. A big bombing attack at the end. We never had any trouble again. I can get a little red wine for you from the corner. It goes better with the ham-and-noodles."

"No, the Gumpoldskirchner is delicious," I said. "Remember the mop with the sulphur syrup?"

"Yes, once we had to burn up all my brooms and all my mops, just before the Russians came. There was no coal left in the winter. Ah, the ham-and-noodles should be heated better. Pepi

didn't like them cold either."

"No, no," I said. "It's just that I have to leave. I have only a few days in Vienna. Many thanks."

She stooped along with me toward the door in her faded print dress. I wondered if she was still able to cry without an apron, without an apron corner.

"Please to remember me to the gentleman's parents," she said.

And then I stood outside, alone. It was all wrong, my childhood street here so swollen with parked Opels and Pepi with the Wehrmacht swastika and the strange missing-in-action date and myself so irretrievably adult in my Bloomingdale's jacket. And I should have eaten the ham-and-noodles. I went back again. I rang the bell.

"I forgot to tell you," I said. "My parents send you their best regards."

"Thank you," she said. "So kind. Perhaps the gentleman would ask his father, is it safe to

put money in the bank again."

"I think it's safe," I said. "But you I wanted to ask, when Pepi was reported missing in Warsaw, that was really in April '43?"

"Sure. April '43. The last letter my Pepi sent me in March, saying thank you for the rosary—"

"Because there was no front line in Warsaw then. There was just the ghetto rising."

"Oh yes, always so much trouble. But the gentleman should have seen Pepi's letters. Priests usually don't have a nice hand. He would have been a priest with a nice hand."

"I'm sorry I disturbed you again," I said. "I'll ask about the bank."

"Next time I'll put cheese into the ham-and-noodles," she said. "Next time the gentleman will eat."

"I will," I said. "Goodbye." But there will be no next time.



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to be repatriated to his native Poland.

In Warsaw Trepper founds and becomes editor-in-chief of Yiddish Book Publications, specializing in classic and modern Yiddish authors. He is elected president of the Jewish community in Poland. Eleven productive years go by. Trepper does some traveling, works away at preserving the Yiddish heritage for present and future generations. 1968: The Polish satraps uncork their latest anti-Semitic campaign, one in a long series. And a strange government request is made of publisher Trepper. He is to publicly announce that while the Nazis used to be humanity's main foe, a new enemy has now arisen: the State of Israel. In payment for this statement, Trepper is to have his memoirs published, a movie made of his life. He refuses and resigns all his posts. His three sons cannot find work; one by one they leave Poland along with the majority of Polish Jewry. Luba, Trepper's wife, finally departs. The Big Chief remains, alone in his apartment, his bags packed, permission to immigrate to Israel—or anywhere else—denied.

His phone is periodically disconnected. Security police stake out his building. Old friends are gone; neighbors know better than to exchange hellos with the suspect in the empty flat. Trepper, who has suffered several heart attacks, ruefully remarks that,

should he have another, he'd reach heaven before a hospital. Inquiries are made by Jewish organizations. Biographer Perrault heads up a Trepper Committee in France. The Polish government hems and haws. Trepper, says the Polish government, might, after all, be privy to some classified World War II secrets. *Twenty-seven years after the war?* Poor Trepper is stuck in a bureaucratic pigeon-hole; someone is afraid that his departure—unlike his current detention—would result in a fallout of worldwide publicity, a black eye for the Polish pandrums. And of course they can never forgive his not turning quisling.

The sons of Leopold Trepper are determined to rescue their father. They stage hunger strikes in Denmark, Israel, in front of the United Nations, in vain attempts to arouse world opinion. World opinion continues napping. Only two reporters show up to watch Dr. Edward Trepper, student of Russian literature, lecturer at

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Jerusalem University, Picket the UN. Word comes out of Poland: the Big Chief is worried; he'd feel better if his sons stopped their hunger strikes; fasting isn't healthy, what if they should injure their health?

The story is almost up to date. I ask Edward Trepper what he's accomplished in his month's stay. Simon and Schuster, publishers of Perrault's "The Red Orchestra," I'm told, have declined to hold a press conference, the book being virtually out of print. The Jewish establishment has proven sympathetic—Trepper being the genuine article: a folk hero—but isn't able to provide the all-out publicity bonanza that might spring the Big Chief. Edward Trepper, han-

dicapped by a total lack of English, may not have put his case across any too well.

Vivian Gornick and I decide to do what we can. It isn't much. Vivian calls James Wechsler; vacation-bound, he can be of no help. Murray Kempton suggests I. F. Stone. Stone is somewhere in Washington; we don't reach him. The New York Times is at first interested, but a city editor comes up with some past dispatches: Trepper, therefore, is no longer news. The Times Sunday Magazine considers and declines.

I call my friend, the Russian Professor. He calls his friends, a trio of professional Jewish activists battling on behalf of Soviet Jewry. When I call them two weeks later, I receive reports on past efforts to help Trepper, on other projects they are now engaged in.

Meanwhile, Leyb Trepper still sits in his empty flat in Warsaw, the state police still camping at his door.