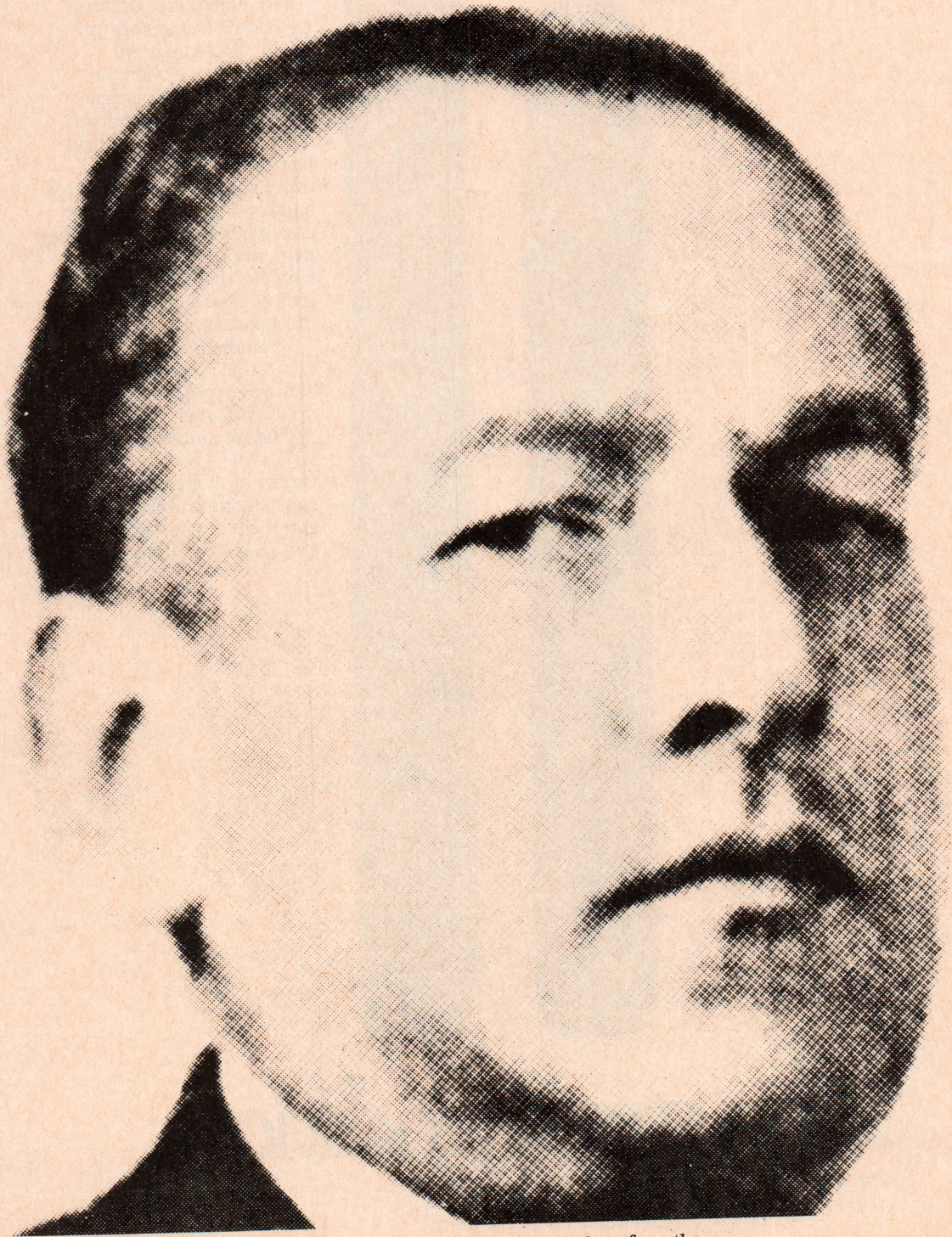


# THE MANY LIVES OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST YIDDISH SPY

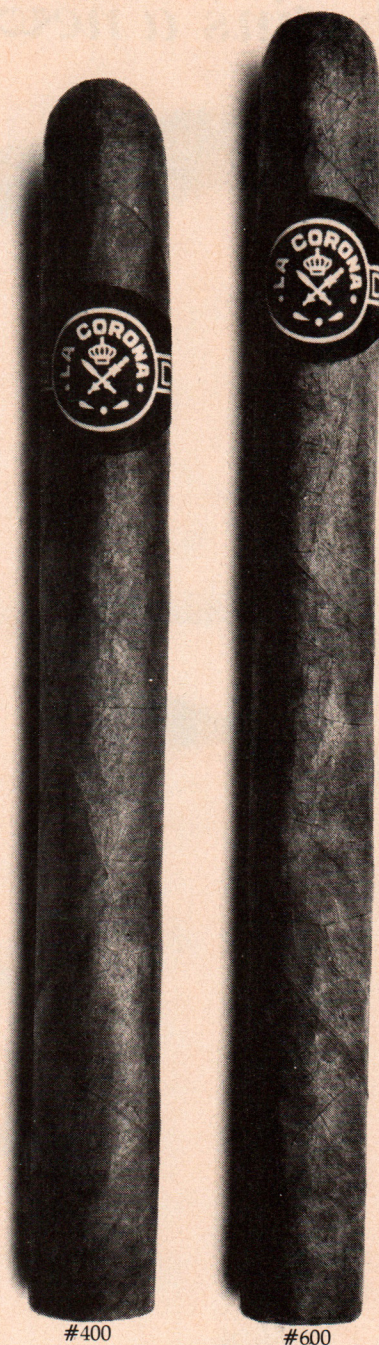
*Former anti-Nazi spy chief and Soviet General,  
now 70, begins a new career*



Trepper in the 1940s—his photo from the  
Gestapo Archives



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## It's a great tradition.

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The long night of Leopold Trepper is finally over. He is free. The man who led the most dazzling anti-Nazi spy ring of World War II, who waited out nine long years in Lubianka Prison, who did battle with the Russian culture czars on behalf of Yiddish, who stood up to the Polish government when it uncorked its 1968 antisemitic spree, has been permitted—after six years of bureaucratic heeldragging—to rejoin his family in England. Now more polemics, memoirs and a motion picture will surely come, giving an inside account of this man's life. It is something worth waiting for; his story is the stuff of daydreams.

Born in a small Polish town in 1904, Leyb Trepper becomes a Communist at an early age. His reason: a poverty all-embracing, without any prospect for improvement. This is Marshal Pilsudski's Poland, where workers swoon in factories from hunger and fatigue. Trepper exhorts them to strike and lands in the local hoosegow, which is known for disgorging few of its inmates whole. Trepper proves the exception. On his sudden release eight months later, he packs his bag and speedily departs his homeland before the authorities can correct their error. Palestine is his destination. Once there, he urges Jews and Arabs to join forces and drive out the British. Mandate authorities don't take kindly to this suggestion and Trepper is expelled. But not before he meets, courts and marries Luba, his future cohort in anti-Nazi activities. France is Trepper's next port-of-call. There he becomes a full-fledged member of a Communist espionage ring shooting back state secrets to the Kremlin.

In 1932, Trepper is suddenly recalled from the field and summoned to Moscow. Others in the service of Soviet espionage receive similar orders, obey them and promptly vanish—victims of Stalin's purges. Trepper decides to go anyway.

Wife Luba has offered an explanation not found—to date—in the volumes dealing with her husband's exploits. At a U.S. Free Trepper Committee meeting held in New York last November, Mrs. Trepper informed me that by 1932 her husband had already begun to sour on Stalin's brand of Communism. Foreseeing, however, the rise of Fascism, its threat to civilization and, especially, to the Jewish

## by Isidore Haiblum

people, Trepper traveled east. Only Russia, he reasoned, would fight the Nazis. Agent Trepper wagered a bet with himself: His Soviet bosses must find him indispensable.

Trepper wins his bet. The Party provides him with education—instead of a tombstone or a barbed-wire enclosure. At Prodnovsky University he brushes up on foreign languages. He studies espionage under spy-chief General Orlov at the Red Army Academy. Never in the Secret Police, Trepper was an army man who subsequently held the rank of general.

In 1935—donning still another hat—Trepper regularly turns out a column on the arts for *Emes*, the renowned Yiddish daily in the USSR. It should come as no surprise. Leyb Domb—the agent's Yiddish *nom de plume*—was always an ardent Yiddish literature buff.

By 1937, he and Luba are back at their old Paris haunts, on active duty. Reds and Nazis are hobnobbing, but Trepper sees this as only temporary; war with Germany is inevitable. He unveils his Red Orchestra concept—so christened later by the Nazis who fashioned a special branch to fight it—an octopus-like spy network reaching through France, Belgium and Holland, into Germany and the upper echelons of the German military itself. The Foreign Excellent Trench Coat Company is born—a fitting cover for spies. Specializing in black market goods, it rapidly befriends scores of Nazi bigwigs who like nothing better than to tout their army's prowess. Agents are planted in the German high command. Trepper himself—a bluff, outgoing man strongly resembling the French actor Jean Gabin—lays his life on the line, time and again. In 1940, when the Nazi divisions move outside Dunkirk and into French Flanders, the Big Chief—as Trepper is called by then—rides at their side chauffeured by Durov, the Bulgarian Consul in Brussels. The car is stopped. But so impressive are its occupants' credentials that they receive an invitation to tag along. An 80-page Trepper report on *blitzkrieg*

tactics reaches Moscow as a result of this jaunt.

In the summer of 1941, Trepper learns that Hitler is about to invade Mother Russia and gives Stalin the tip-off. But this is the era of the Hitler-Stalin Peace Pact: The two dictators have sworn eternal fidelity. Stalin refuses to believe duplicity on Der Führer's part. He is quoted as saying: "Otto [another Trepper cover] sends us worthwhile material that does credit to his political judgment. How could he fail to detect at once that this was merely a crude piece of British provocation?" And when the attack comes, Stalin never forgives his informant—a witness to the infallible Grand Leader's boo-boo.

But that is getting ahead of our tale. We have left the Big Chief twirling his baton, sending off a steady stream of bulletins that detail Nazi movements and plans. The Nazis try to run him down. Orchestra headquarters is shifted from Brussels back to Paris. Luba and their two sons are shipped off to Moscow for safekeeping. Hundreds of agents join up. Some are caught, tortured, executed. Others take their place. 200,000 German soldiers, according to Admiral Canaris, head of Hitler's *Abwehr*, cashed in their chips as a direct result of Orchestra efforts; innumerable Allied lives were saved, the duration of the war was shortened by months. The network employed many Jews. Once asked the reason, the Big Chief replied: "Because Jews have a special score to settle with the Nazis."

As the war progresses, Moscow's appetite for information grows. At the Kremlin's insistence, clandestine radio operators—termed pianists by Trepper—are kept broadcasting as much as five hours a day. The Germans begin to zero in. Moscow blunders, transmitting the names and addresses of prime network figures in a code the enemy has cracked. The Orchestra is blown, the Big Chief captured late in 1942.

The Nazis launch an ingenious attempt to split the Allies by spreading phony reports of peace talks between the United States and Germany. It is up to Trepper to put a crimp in this one, too. The Big Chief plays along with the Gestapo, who are using Orchestra short-wave transmitters and captured personnel to broadcast their lies. But Trepper manages to smuggle a message through to Moscow. It is

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composed in three languages to confuse the untrained eye—Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish—and it blows the whistle on the whole scheme. In the name of credibility, Trepper convinces his captors that they must pass on some accurate information along with the false reports—and he transmits a code to enable the Soviets to distinguish true data from false. Trepper considers this his greatest achievement during the war. But it takes Moscow months to believe the data so transmitted.

Toward the war's end Trepper makes his break, escapes. He hides out, sends word to the Soviets. Stalin's personal plane is sent to fetch him. But no hero's welcome awaits the returning agent. In his book, *The Red Orchestra*, biographer Gilles Perrault describes the conversation that occurred in Moscow the afternoon of January 14, 1945, between Trepper and the director of the Soviet intelligence services. Trepper says: "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 responds.

An unfortunate question. Trepper is chucked into Lubianka Prison, which becomes his home for the next nine years. Cellmates perish, but the Big Chief survives. It may be that French Communist boss Jacques Duclos, Trepper's former comrade-in-arms, kept him alive inadvertently by never failing to inquire after his old friend on his frequent visits to Stalin. "Abroad on a secret mission," the Great Leader of All the Soviets would reply with a well-worn forked tongue.

Trepper outlasts them all. The director of Soviet intelligence is purged. Stalin dies. Trepper is sprung. The Soviet government sends him an apology, its highest court ruling that his conviction was "wholly without foundation." He is reunited with wife Luba and sons, who all thought him dead. He is paid a pension. His rank of general is restored. An honored citizen again.

Most of us at this point would surely

let well enough alone, bask in our newly-acquired freedom, enjoy our pension, perhaps occasionally take out and polish our general's star. But most of us are not Trepper. Exit the Big Chief, master spy. Enter Leyb Domb, militant Yiddishist.

During all the years he mixed with Nazis, the spy chief never forgot that he was a Jew. But there are no signs of Jewishness in Moscow. Trepper badgers the authorities and demands a Yiddish press, a Yiddish publishing house. A friend warns him: "You just got out of prison, you want to go back?" Trepper shrugs it off. "For nine years," he says, "I was in prison for I don't know what. At least now I'll know what it's for."

Trepper is finally summoned to the Kremlin. The authorities explain that he is out of touch; no one these days would be interested in such projects as he recommends. It's thumbs down for Yiddish culture. So in 1957, when Poland signs a belated repatriation treaty with the Soviet Union, Trepper bows out. Back in his native Poland, he founds a publishing venture dedicated to Yiddish literature and is elected Chairman of the Jewish Cultural Union, the top secular Jewish organization in the land. The ex-spy chief prospers in his second career, which is said to be the happiest period of his life. It lasts a decade.

In 1968, as Poland kicks off another round in its age-old antisemitic game plan, a strange government request is made of publisher Trepper. He is to announce publicly that while Nazi Germany used to be humanity's main foe, a new enemy has now arisen: the State of Israel. Rewards are offered. Trepper is to have his memoirs published, a motion picture made of his life. Trepper refuses, promptly resigns all his posts. His three sons are suddenly out of work. Trepper requests a visa to Israel. The request is denied. His family—one by one—is finally allowed to depart but the door is snapped shut on Trepper.

Alone and in need of medical attention, he is spied upon by the secret police. His phone is tapped, his footsteps are dogged. Old friends are gone. Neighbors know better than to exchange greetings with an unpersn in

the empty flat. Biographer Perrault heads up a rescue committee in France; 106 members of the Dutch Parliament sign a petition asking for Trepper's release; 54 of their British colleagues come up with their own petition. Amnesty International intervenes. Polish officials hem and haw. Trepper, they claim, may be privy to classified World War II secrets. *Twenty-three years after the war!*

On October 2, 1972, Edward Gierek, Polish Communist Party Secretary—or undesirable alien 17095, as he was known to French authorities prior to his expulsion in 1937—is due to begin a five-day state visit to France, where Perrault has expanded his support committee. Any pro-Trepper demonstration on Paris streets, both Warsaw and Paris fear, might undermine the meeting and result in a hostile press. It is time to ring in Jean Rochet, France's top G-man, head of the Department of Territorial Security, a French version of the FBI, and a Trepper foe dating back to pre-World War II days. On April 14, 1972 a letter appears in *Le Monde* under Rochet's by-line, accusing Trepper of being a Nazi collaborator. This slander is to finish off the Big Chief once and for all. Trepper immediately launches a libel suit in the French courts. Old anti-Nazi fighters line up behind their former boss; the French Communist Party comes out in his support.

The idea behind Trepper's detention is to keep him under wraps, his startling history hushed up; the world at large mustn't know that Jews successfully battled the Nazis. Russia supports the Arab cause and Poland is Russia's stooge. Gierek, who boasts of his anti-Nazi past, may be embarrassed by his own Trepper policy. But Moscow has laid down the line. Orchestra leaders Grossvogel, grandson of a rabbi in Strasbourg, Hillel Katz and many others, including the Big Chief himself, have been described in Soviet biographies as non-Jews. The publicity about Trepper threatens to expose the truth.

The Polish potentates take steps, deny Trepper permission to leave Poland. He cannot testify at his trial. When Trepper's French attorney shows up in Warsaw, he is allowed to inter-

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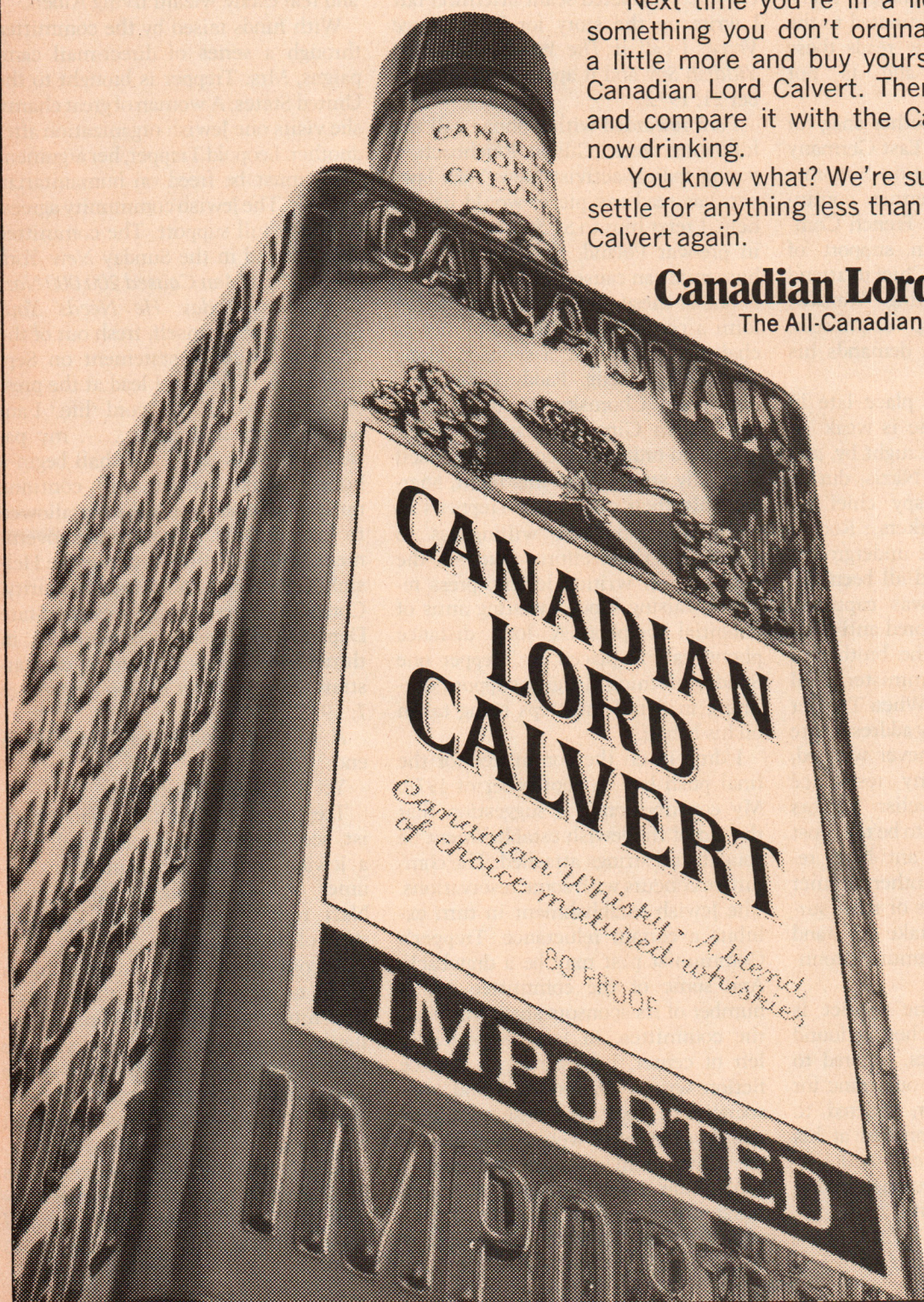


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You know what? We're sure you'll never settle for anything less than Canadian Lord Calvert again.

**Canadian Lord Calvert**  
The All-Canadian Whisky





view his client, but then all his notes and documents are confiscated. On August 23, the weekly organ of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, *Tvrba*, writes, "Jean Rochet has uncovered the true role of [Trepper], the one-time Nazi collaborator and now Israeli espionage co-worker." The Polish ambassador to Denmark has Rochet's charges translated into Danish, disseminated to the Danish press. The public reads these stunning revelations and is not impressed.

In late September, another snag for the Polish government. East Germany has scheduled a celebration honoring the Red Orchestra's German contingent and, following the French Communist Party's lead in support of Trepper, invites the Big Chief to attend and address the gathering. Warsaw, after much grumbling, acquiesces. Trepper goes and again demands his freedom.

The trial itself takes place late in November. Rochet's case is weak: In 1943, Trepper was first caught by, and then escaped from, the Nazis; during his confinement, the spy chief informed on his co-workers; Rochet names names. But these underground figures, it turns out, had all been run down *before* Trepper was captured. Records prove this. Honored anti-Nazi fighter Claude Spaak (the brother of the late Belgian prime minister, Paul Henri Spaak) testifies: "When Trepper was arrested, he knew my address quite well. I was, however, never worried, and continued with my resistance activities." French novelist Vercors testifies, "I hold Trepper to be the most significant hero of the anti-Nazi resistance." One after another, former Red Orchestra operatives or their surviving family members take the stand for Trepper. So does Communist councilman Lederman.

On November 30, the verdict is handed down. Jean Rochet is found guilty, fined 1,000 francs, ordered to pay Trepper a symbolic one franc for defamation of character, ordered to have the court verdict printed at his own expense in *Le Monde*.

But Trepper still languishes in Poland and no end is in sight.

I become involved because I am a Yiddish aficionado, and the Trepper legend is high on my list of Twentieth Century Jewish tales. When the Big Chief's son, Dr. Edward Trepper, a literary scholar living and teaching in Israel, flies to New York to raise a ruckus about his imprisoned father, I interview him. His fast in front of the U.N. has attracted scant attention but I write up the story for *The Village Voice*; I call it *The World's Greatest Yiddish Spy* and it appears on September 21, 1972.

I am rewarded with a phone call the following week. Gustin Reichbach, a young radical-activist New York lawyer, has read my piece, would like to help. I refer him to Sy Sperber, a leftist in pre-war Poland, now dedicated to humanitarian causes. The Trepper case is one of these. Reichbach and Sperber form a committee with the former as chairman. I become a sponsor, along with Bella Abzug, Paddy Chayefsky, Dr. Noam Chomsky, Maxwell Geismar, Allen Ginsberg, Raphael Soyer.

The co-ordinating committee itself—mostly strangers at this point, sharing only their outrage at Trepper's ill treatment and their willingness to donate time and effort—takes on the hard chores: writing letters, press releases, raising funds, twisting arms of potential helpers. A long distance phone call is placed to Trepper one Sunday morning pledging support, outlining in detail the steps being taken on his behalf.

I drop in on the committee for the final push late in September of 1973. My contribution is a suggestion that the aid of the Jewish establishment be sought—no strings attached. The committee concurs with some reservations. The Jewish establishment in turn exhibits a certain reluctance. Trepper's Communist past may be a drawback. And some of the committee and a number of its sponsors share this past; the committee, in fact, is decidedly left of center. I myself am a science fiction writer, non-political and non-socialist. I look at these would-be world savers with wonder and curiosity: Yuri Suhl is our impassioned spokesman and chronicler of Jewish resistance, who pens prose in English and verse in Yiddish; his antipathy

toward things Stalinistic is total. Anthony Schuman is our communications chief who, along with Chairman Reichbach, casts an approving eye eastward toward Maoist China. Steven Adelewitz is our man with a Socialist-Bundist past. Steve Strum is the lone Zionist. And our pair of world-shakers are retired businessman Jerry Spiegel and real estate wizard Irving Albert.

With funds raised by the committee through a series of direct-mail campaigns, Mrs. Trepper is brought to the United States. A woman of great charm, she visits one Jewish organization after another. Leopold Trepper, her argument runs, must be freed on humanitarian grounds. The Jewish community agrees, promises full support. The committee places an ad in the Sunday *New York Times*: *This Man Caused 200,000 Nazi Casualties: Today He Needs Your Help!* Trepper himself, fresh out of the hospital, issues a statement on September 24: "The life I lead at the present is not worth the word 'life.' I am watched day and night . . . my patience is at its end . . . I shall begin a hunger strike, which will continue until I am dead or until I am allowed to leave Poland." The Danish government brings up the matter at the Helsinki Conference on European Security. Congresswoman Abzug sees the State Department. Trepper committees in thirteen countries prepare to demonstrate. *Trepper is set free on November 1, 1973.*

A six-year struggle has come to an end.

Yet it is only a beginning.

Trepper, now a humanitarian socialist, sees his wartime exploits solely in a Jewish context. He plans two volumes, one delineating the Jewish anti-Nazi resistance, the other, his own story of the Orchestra.

According to Luba Trepper, he is about to undertake still a third career. The future of Jews, Leyb Trepper believes, depends on Jewish unity. Once he is out of the London hospital where he is undergoing much-needed treatment, the Big Chief aims to spread the word.

A peculiar thought strikes me. This may actually prove a far tougher mission than all his others combined. *Zol zayn mit mazl.* □