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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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The God that Failed, 1950.



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"THE GOD THAT FAILED"

Sunday, February 26, 1950

Russian Communism is now a third of a century old. It has survived two world movements, Fascism and Naziism, which set out to destroy it. It has greatly extended its borders in the West to include a number of satellite states which are today under its hegemony. It has vastly increased its influence in the East as a result of the victory of Communism in China. It has adherents of varying sizes and strength in almost every country of the globe. It is today trading diplomatic blows of equal striking power with all the remaining democratic states in the world. Its military power by all accounts is formidable. It is acknowledged that it now possesses the atomic bomb and may even be in advance of the United States in the development of the hydrogen bomb.

Along with the Allies, it emerged victorious from the Second World War, and in 1942 it was able alone to break the back of the Nazi armies in the East with no Allied ground forces fighting anywhere on the continent of Europe, and to quote Admiral Leahy, "It took up to June 1944 the full force of the mighty German army." Communist Russia is today the second greatest power on earth and Russian Communism is the central fact around which the foreign policy of our own government, Great Britain and many other countries today revolves.

At first glance, therefore, it is quite odd and somewhat absurd to speak of Russian Communism as "The God that Failed". And yet, failed it did if you listen to the confessional testimonies of the six eminent men who had been members of the Communist Party, or had been committed in their sympathies to it; these confessional testimonies which make up the volume which was recently published by that name, "The God that Failed". Evidently these men - and they are important men - are not thinking of military power or of territorial expansion in relation to Russian Communism, but of something quite different, and to them, something quite more important. After all, the Revolution of 1917 was not inspired by the hope of making Russia a great or a greater military power or of extending its empire. The Czars of Russia had done a



pretty good job in extending the empire of Russia pretty nearly over one-sixth of the globe. The revolutionary leaders, the Bolsheviki leaders of 1917 were neither militarists nor imperialists nor nationalists. They carried through their revolution in the hope of creating a new social and economic order which would be based on justice and freedom and equality for all men. They wished to put an end to all forms of economic exploitation and political tyranny. They had an heroic dream of radically rebuilding society; for that matter, not only Russian society, but the whole of humanity after a nobler pattern based upon the abolition of all privilege, of all race discriminations, of all national and economic rivalries - a system of society which would lead to security and dignity for the individual, and peace for the world. This was the god whom the revolutionists of 1917 hoped to enthrone, and this is the god that failed.

The six who had worshipped with great reverence and adoration this god and who today see him only as a monstrous idol, Moloch, at whose desecrated waters they will no longer bend their knee - these six are not irresponsible individuals whose adherence to Communism came lightly and whose present abandonment of Communism comes easily or without much soul-searching and without much grief. Even now, these men are not bitter or vindictive. They acknowledge to a tragic error of judgment. They explain in this volume how they came to be Communists - their high hopes, their fervor; they explain their state of mind, their reluctance to be disillusioned about Communism, their earnest attempts to overlook glaring inconsistencies and shocking acts of revolutionary betrayal. Their efforts to explain them all away are of a deep loyalty to Communism, to explain them all away as the inevitable mistakes of an immature and hard-pressed movement beset by enemies.

And the statements which they now make are not intended to incite any anti-Communist propaganda. They do not call for any war on Russia. These men have not gone rightist. They are still profoundly interested in the cause of social justice. Some of them are still active Socialists; all of them are persuaded that freedom is forever in danger as long as the many who need bread are not satisfied. But, they



have become convinced by very sad and personal experiences that Communism is not the way to achieve these necessary and commendable objectives, that Communism will not make for a better society, but for a worse society, and they give their reasons simply, contritely, in the hope of strengthening the hands of progressive democracy.

Their aim is not to point to the evils of Communism in the hope that we will overlook the weaknesses and shortcomings of democratic society. It is very easy to point to the evils of another man and to one's own virtues with the consequence that the other man appears as a devil and we appear as a saint. That is not the purpose of these men. Their purpose is to point to fatal weaknesses in a philosophy of human progress, warn against them and at the same time, indicate what must be done in order to insure social progress, avoiding these fatal evils of Communism.

Some of these men abandoned Communism quite early; others stayed on until they received their final great shock of disenchantment when Stalin signed the pact with Hitler in August 1939, when the swastika was flown in Moscow and the Red Army band played the Horst Wessel song upon the arrival of Ribbentrop - Ribbentrop who came to Moscow to negotiate the pact of Hitler with Stalin, the pact which made revolutionary Russia a party to an imperialist dismemberment of Poland.

This was the last stage in the Communist career of the first of these six men whose confession is found in this volume, "The God That Failed", Arthur Koestler. Some of you are acquainted with Koestler's writing, at least with some of his books, "Darkness at Noon", "The Yogi and the Commissar". Arthur Koestler was a member of the Communist Party for some seven years. He came to Berlin in 1930. Berlin of 1930 gave the picture of a complete bankruptcy of democracy. The elections of that year showed that the parties of the extreme right, the Nazis, had made tremendous gains, and the party of the extreme left, the Communists, had made tremendous gains. The democratic center was crushed and the Weimar Republic was on its way out. That year one-third of the population of Berlin was unemployed. There was hunger stalking the land. Social democracy seemed to be helpless to solve the problem. It was also



helpless to check the rising tide of Naziism which was threatening all human freedom. In the West in the United States wheat was being burned, fruit was being artificially spoiled, little pigs were being thrown into the river in order to keep up prices while people in Western Europe were starving. Arthur Koestler found himself in this disintegrating society and as he put it, he was thirsting for some faith, and Communism seemed to offer him that faith. Communism alone seemed to be capable of resisting the onslaught of the primitive horde with its swastika totem. It was the one dynamic force in this welter of chaos, and hopelessness, and he became converted to Communism and his soul became filled, as he put, with peace and security and serenity. He had a faith now, he had a program now, he had a mission now. But before very long he began to experience the successive shocks of disillusionment. They began to come very early. The first was the shock of disillusionment which came with the realization of how stupid the German Communist Party was in aligning itself time and again with its sworn enemy, the Nazis, in order to defeat the Social Democrats of Germany. The Communist Party came to look upon the Socialists as their mortal enemies instead of upon the Nazis. And time and again they voted against the Socialist government, undermined the very weak prestige, and contributed to its ultimate defeat.

The Communist Party of Germany helped to destroy the German Republic and helped to put Hitler into power who, of course, turned around and destroyed the Communist Party of Germany root and branch. This stupidity - this political stupidity - dictated by Moscow, according to Koestler, was his first disillusionment with his Party. He could not also stomach the Party's suspicion of and abuse of the intelligentsia. The intellectual was always suspect in Communist circles. He tried awfully hard to accept the principle of the iron monolithic discipline of the Party, that all criticism was deviationist sabotage and that all decisions enforced from above must be accepted unquestioningly. But he couldn't quite make the grade. There was something in him which resisted that total submergence of self and individuality, of personal



opinion, personal judgment to the fiat, the unquestioned dicta of somebody at the top. Koestler visited Russia and spent considerable time there, and he saw the ravages of the famine of 1932 and 1933 which famine was the result of the hasty and enforced collectivization of Russian agriculture. He saw the systematic extermination of the kulaks. He was shocked by the Asiatic backwardness of life everywhere, by the incredibly bad housing conditions which make all industrial towns, he says, appear like vast slums. He was startled by the low standard of living which he saw. But still he was inclined to explain them all away. After all, there was a great program being unfolded. There must be deprivation and suffering in the early stages. And he stayed on with the Party. He stayed on particularly because in 1934, the year after Hitler came into power, the year after he destroyed the Communist Party in Germany, the people at the top suddenly realized that their program had been false. What is needed now to fight the power of growing Fascism in the world was the unification of all democratic forces, whether Communist or not. And in 1934 Moscow, <sup>went</sup> ~~known~~ behind the program of the Popular Front and invited all men to fight Fascism and to champion democracy. It was the time of Litvinoff, it was the time of an effort to reconcile Soviet Russia with the West, it was the time when the Soviet Union entered the United Nations and in the Popular Front Koestler saw a new hope, which kept him loyal to the Communist Party. And again in 1936 when Franco carried out his "coup d'etat" on the Spanish Republic, it was Russia, the only great power, who came to the support of the Spanish Republic government, and in that Koestler saw justification and a renewal of his adherence to Communism.

He went to Spain, he fought with the Republican armies, he was in jail for four months in solitary confinement, and it was in those months in solitary confinement that Koestler began to get a glimpse of what is basically wrong with Russian Communism, what is philosophically wrong with it. He came to the conclusion, and I quote him - his first tentative conclusion "that man is a reality, mankind an abstraction;



that men cannot be treated as units in operations of political arithmetic because they behave like the symbols for zero and the finite, which dislocate all mathematical operations; that the end justifies the means only within very narrow limits; that ethics is not a function of social utility, and charity not a petty-bourgeois sentiment but the gravitational force which keeps civilization in its orbit."

For the first time in many years Koestler began to think of basic ethics, of charity, of the individual, his significance in the scheme of things, all of which doctrines and ideas Communism had<sup>in</sup> so many ways rejected.

And on top of it all came the purges in Russia and then the Hitler-Stalin pact, and Koestler broke with the Communist Party and set out upon his own road.

Ignazio Silone, the second of these six, the Italian, eminent writer and great political leader, at the age of 21 helped to found the Italian Communist Party. It appealed to him out of a sense of justice. He was a very spiritually sensitive individual, and in his village, in the Abruzzi Appennines, he saw almost daily evidences of exploitation and injustice and terrible poverty. And as a boy and as a young man he grew up with the conviction that the state represented everything that was evil, the state stood for injustice and swindling and intrigue and privilege. And he came to hate it, and the choice for an energetic and idealistic young man in those days was either that of a rebel against the state or an accomplice with the evil forces of the state. And so, before very long Silone converted to Communism. It was a complete dedication. To him it was a new way of life completely. He describes it as it is significant to understand the whole of Communism upon the idealistic youth of the world. He said, "So I, too, had to adapt myself, for a number of years, to living like a foreigner in my own country. One had to change one's name, abandon every former link with family and friends (and this was under Mussolini's Fascism) and live a false life to remove any suspicion of conspiratorial activity. The Party became family, school, church, barracks; the world that lay beyond it was to be destroyed and built anew. The psychological mechanism whereby each single militant becomes



progressively identified with the collective organization is the same as that used in certain religious orders and military colleges, with almost identical results. Every sacrifice was welcomed as a personal contribution to the 'price of collective redemption'; and it should be emphasized that the links which bound us to the Party grew steadily firmer, not in spite of the dangers and sacrifices involved, but because of them. This explains the attraction exercised by Communism on certain categories of young men and of women, on intellectuals, and on the highly sensitive and generous people who suffer most from the wastefulness of bourgeois society. Anyone who thinks he can wean the best and most serious-minded young people away from Communism by enticing them into a well-warmed hall to play billiards, starts from an extremely limited and unintelligent conception of mankind."

There was tremendous idealism, sacrificial idealism, in many of these young men who were attracted by the vision and the hope of Communism.

But Silone, too, soon began to suffer these painful disillusionments - the intolerance of the Party irritated him; the intrigues and the arrogance on the part of the Russian members of the Communist Internationale caused him deep concern; the increasing degeneration of the Communist Internationale into tyranny and bureaucracy. Silone, too, like Koestler, visited Russia, visited frequently. And some of his observations are very interesting.

"What struck me most about the Russian Communists," says Silone, "even in such really exceptional personalities as Lenin and Trotsky, was their utter incapacity to be fair in discussing opinions that conflicted with their own. The adversary, simply for daring to contradict, at once became a traitor, an opportunist, a hireling. An adversary in good faith is inconceivable to the Russian Communists."

He found them utterly unable to grasp the meaning of liberty - liberty of the individual. He found that in spite of all their protestations, their promises, there was no progress towards the long-promised democratization of the Party, but instead, dictatorship was increasingly accentuated. He resented the idolatry of Lenin and the



superstitious cult of his mummy. It was almost worship on the Red Square. Above all, he could not stomach the moral cynicism of the leaders of the movement, and he tells a very revealing story of an experience of his. "What my memory prefers to recall may to some people seem only bizarre. They were discussing one day, in a special commission of the Executive (of the Communist International) the ultimatum which had been issued by the central committee of the British trade unions, ordering its local branches not to support the Communist-led minority movement, on pain of expulsion. (The British trade unions ordered its members not to tolerate Communists in their midst on pain of expulsion.) After the representative of the English Communist Party had explained the serious disadvantages of both solutions - because one meant the liquidation of the minority movement and the other the exit of the minority from the Trades Unions - the Russian delegate Piatnisky put forward a suggestion which seemed as obvious to him as Columbus' egg. 'The branches', he suggested, 'should declare that they submit to the discipline demanded, and then in practice, should do exactly the contrary.' The English Communist interrupted, 'But that would be a lie.' Loud laughter greeted this ingenuous objection, frank, cordial, interminable laughter, the like of which the gloomy offices of the Communist International had perhaps never heard before. The joke quickly spread all over Moscow, for the Englishman's entertaining and incredible reply was telephoned at once to Stalin and the most important offices of State, provoking new wave of mirth everywhere. The general hilarity gave the English Communist's timid, ingenuous objection its true meaning. And that is why, in my memory, the storm of laughter aroused by that short, almost childishly simple little expression - 'But that would be a lie' - outweighs all the long, heavy oppressive speeches I heard during sittings of the Communist International, and has become a kind of symbol for me."

Well, Silone found himself increasingly in greater difficulties with the Party, and he finally left it, and he summarizes his reasons for leaving it. "The superiority of the human person", just as Koestler came to a similar conclusion; the importance of saving the integrity of the individual from the destructive and corrosive



mechanism of a Party ideology; the importance of saving the soul of the human being. That finally drove him out of the ranks of the Party.

The third of the writers is an American, a Negro, Richard Wright. In a very moving language he describes how he came to join the Communist Party. His Negro experience on the South Side of Chicago, his hunger for brotherhood, for a community of spirit, regardless of color, race, and how he threw himself into the Party with what enthusiasm and hopefulness, and how disillusioned he became. He, too, the artist, the writer, resented the suspicion which Communists maintain toward the intellectual; he resented the iron discipline, the attacks upon his individuality. And he recounts one experience after another which tended to trample him under foot, to absorb him and consume him completely, and he refused to do it. He left the Party and he resolved to devote himself to his art in order to keep alive in the hearts of men a sense of the inexpressively human - just like Koestler, just like Ignazio Silone.

Perhaps the most significant of these confessions is that of the most famous of living European writers, winner of the Nobel Prize, the Frenchman, Andre Gide. Andre Gide came to Communism because he was ashamed of his own personal comfort in a world of suffering and want. He came to it, as he says, not through Karl Marx, but through the Gospels, through his religious and spiritual convictions. And he had a great hope for Russian Communism. Then he visited Russia in 1936 and he found there, as he puts it, "everything from which I had always fled at home - the privileges that I had hoped to see abolished forever". I quote from his confession because it is written in his inimitable style and sums up much of what is in the testimony of the other five.

He said, "I admitted particularly in Russia the extraordinary impulse toward education and culture. But the sad thing is that the education the people receive only informs them on what leads them to flatter themselves on the present state of affairs and to believe in the Soviet Union 'Ave Spes Unica'. Culture is directed towards one aim only, the glorification of the Soviet Union; it is not disinterested,



and critical discrimination is entirely lacking.

"I happened to visit a model collective," writes Gide, "it is one of the finest, the most prosperous in the Soviet Union - and I went into several of the houses. I wish that I could give some conception of the uniformly depression impression which is communicated by each of the dwellings, that of a total absence of individuality. In each there are the same ugly pieces of furniture, the same picture of Stalin and absolutely nothing else - not the smallest vestige of ornament or personal belonging. Any house could be exchanged for any other without the tenant being aware of the alteration. Of course, the members of a collective take all their pleasures in common, and their homes are only, as it were, lairs to sleep in; the whole interest of their lives is centered in the club. Doubtless the happiness of all can most easily be achieved by the sacrifice of the individuality of each, through conformity. But can it be called progress, this loss of individuality, this uniformity, toward which everything in Russia is now tending? I cannot believe that it is. In the Soviet Union it is accepted once and for all that on every subject - whatever may be the issue - there can be only one opinion, the right one. And each Morning 'Pravda' tells the people what they need to know and must believe and think.

"The disappearance of capitalism", continues Andre Gide, "has not brought freedom to the Soviet workers - it is essential that the proletariat abroad should realize this fully. It is, of course, true that they are no longer exploited by shareholding capitalists, but nevertheless they are exploited, and in so devious, subtle and twisted a manner that they do not know any more whom to blame. The largest number of them live below the poverty line, and it is their starvation wages which permit the swollen pay-packets of the privileged workers - the pliant yes-men. One cannot fail to be shocked by the indifference shown by those in power toward their inferiors, and the servility and obsequiousness on the part of the latter - I almost said the poor. Granted that there are no longer any classes nor class distinctions in the Soviet Union; but the poor are still with them - and there are far too many of them.



"Although the long-heralded Dictatorship of the Proletariat has not materialized, there is nevertheless dictatorship of one kind - dictatorship of the Soviet bureaucracy. It is essential to recognize this and not to allow oneself to be bamboozled. This is not what was hoped for - one might almost say that it is precisely the last thing in the world that was hoped. The workers have no longer even the liberty of electing their own representatives to defend their threatened interests. Free ballot - open or secret - is a derision and a sham; the voters have merely the right of electing those who have been chosen for them beforehand. The workers are cheated, muzzled and bound hand and foot, so that resistance has become well-nigh impossible. The game has been well played by Stalin, and Communists the whole world over applaud him, believing that in the Soviet Union at least they have gained a glorious victory, and they call all those who do not agree with them public enemies and traitors. But in Russia this has led to treachery of a new sort. An excellent way of earning promotion is to become an informer, that puts you on good terms with the dangerous police which protect you while using you. Once you have started on that easy, slippery slope, no question of friendship or loyalty can intervene to hold you back; on every occasion you are forced to advance, sliding further in the abyss of shame. The result is that everyone is suspicious of everyone else and the most innocent remarks - even of children - can bring destruction, so that everyone is on his guard and no one lets himself go."

And so, Andre Gide came to his conclusion, and I read it. "Deplorable and unsatisfactory as the state of affairs in the Soviet Union is, I would have remained silent if I could have been assured of any faint progress toward something better. It is because I have reached the firm conviction that the Soviet Union is sliding down the slope that I had hoped to see it ascend, and because it has abandoned, one after another - and always for the most specious reasons - the liberties gained by the great Revolution after so much hardship and bloodshed. It is because I see it dragging in its wake to irreparable chaos the Communist Parties of other countries, that I consider it my duty to speak openly.



"No question of Party loyalty can restrain me from speaking frankly for I place truth above the Party. I know well that in Marxist doctrine there is no such thing as truth - at least not in any absolute sense - there is only relative truth. I believe, however, that in so serious a matter it is criminal to lead others astray, and urgent to see matters as they are, not as we would wish them to be or had hoped that they might be. The Soviet Union has deceived our fondest hopes and shown us tragically in what treacherous quicksand an honest revolution can founder. The same old capitalist society has been re-established, a new and terrible despotism crushing and exploiting man, with all the abject and servile mentality of serfdom. Rissia.....has failed to become a God and she will never now arise from the fires of the Soviet ordeal."

I wish I had the time to speak of the others, of the American, Louis Fischer, who was also, while not officially a member of the Party, a devotee of its ideals, and spoke for it and wrote for it with such enthusiasm for so many years, who had lived in Russia for a long time - he, too, captivated by the "post-dated checks", as he says, "by the promissory notes of Communism", was prepared to forego democracy with its imperfections, but when he saw one thing after another of evil and oppression and wrong in the system - the destruction of the kulaks, the purges, the trials, the secret police, the adulation of Stalin where the Communist Party itself became the rubber stamp of a dictator, the rise of narrow nationalism in the Soviet Union, the fraud of the 1936 Democratic Constitution which was adopted in Russia, and finally, the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939, he became persuaded that Stalin had built up a super-nationalist, imperialist state-capitalist, militaristic system, and he summarizes his final convictions.

"No dictatorship is a democracy and none contains the seeds of liberty. This I did not understand in the years when I was pro-Soviet. I believed that a temporary suspension of freedom would enable the Soviet regime to make rapid economic strides



and then restore the freedom."

It didn't work out that way. There is no freedom in a dictatorship because there are no inalienable rights. The dictator has so much power and the individual so little that the dictator can take away any right which he gives.

"My pro-Sovietism led me into the further error of thinking that a system founded on the principle of 'the end justifies the means' could ever create a better world or a better human being."

"My years of pro-Sovietism have taught me that no one who loves people and peace should favor a dictatorship. The fact that a system of society proclaims liberty yet limits it is no good reason for embracing a system which completely crushes liberty." ~~This is a very common mistake~~

Well, if one were to summarize these remarkable spiritual autobiographies, one could summarize it this way. Most of these people, with the possible exception of Gide, came to maturity during the period of moral, spiritual wreckage following the First World War. They saw the democratic ideals menaced; they saw the rising tide of reaction; they became frightened; they became impatient; and they forgot what no freedom-loving man ever forgets, and that is the all-importance of method. An ideal in itself is one thing. The method by which you hope to achieve that ideal is another thing and quite as important as the ideal itself, for if the method of achievement is wrong, that method becomes integrated ultimately in the ideal and your pure ideal is never realized. It becomes befouled and the dream becomes a nightmare.

To try to achieve liberty through dictatorship is to defeat liberty. To try to improve the position of the individual by denying his individuality is to insure that the individual will ultimately be crushed, the ideal which you have proclaimed will be vain and meaningless.

If I were to summarize in one word what was lacking with these six eminent men and why they went wrong, I would say that they lacked religion because religion is the way by which human beings are to achieve human progress. The Bible speaks of the "Way of God". There is a way which leads to the ultimate ideal of society.



If you love justice and you emphasize justice and the love of it, and you use the apparatus of good will, of compassion, of charity, of mutual helpfulness, of compromise, then you are likely to approximate that ideal. The ultimate achievement of the absolute is beyond the grasp of mankind anyhow, but if you use the methods of ruthlessness dictated by impatience or fanaticism; if you forego love and compassion and charity and respect for the individual, then you are likely to find yourself in the wilderness of dictatorship and brutality with your beautiful apples, like the apples of Sodom, turned to ashes. These people lost their religious vision. They became so impatient, they sacrificed the method - they assumed that the end is always justified. The end is right and the end justifies the means.

And after their tragic experiences, they rediscovered the dignity of man, the permanence of human personality, the inalienable rights of human beings and the mandate of charity. What they have come to understand, although they do not put it in so many words, is that progress without religion leads to tyranny.

All of which should not be interpreted that everything in the Soviet Union is bad and everything in the Soviet Union must be destroyed, that everything in the Soviet Union is so bad that we must have no truck with it whatsoever. All of this does not mean that the world must remain permanently split into two halves, one arming itself against the other and waiting for the day of ultimate decision.

The reformation of the Soviet Union will not come about by methods of war. If these evils are ever to be eradicated from Russia, it will have to come about from within ultimately after a long period of time when that vast people will come to realize that it is paying too high a price for the ideals which have not even been approximated. What we must do at home is not to remain smug by pointing to the deficiencies in the Russian system but by looking to the evils and weaknesses of our own way of life which led men like Louis Fishcer and Richard Wright to abandon American democracy for a time and dedicate their lives to Communism. The Jim Crow-ism of America, the segregation, the color line, the discrimination which exists in our midst



and which embitter men and women, the social wrongs - they should be eradicated and they can be eradicated by the democratic method, by the parliamentary method, by the educational method - not by brute force and dictatorship. If Socialism is ever to come to the world - and ~~we~~ I don't ~~kn~~ know that Socialism is the Messiah of mankind - ~~but~~ that it will give to human beings all that they hope it will give them, assuming that Socialism is the program of the future - one nation after another seems to be moving in that direction - Socialism will come about, not along the Moscow line; possibly along the Anglo-Saxon line of slow experimentation with forms of socialization through the democratic process without, in the process, sacrificing the rights of the individual, without setting up an apparatus which crushes completely the soul of the individual.

A helpful book, if read with understanding, not with prejudice - a reaffirmation of the great principles of basic, spiritual religion.

