

# Commentary

## Honest Abe

Review of 'The Rise of Abraham Cahan' By Seth Lipsky

by Edward Kosner

November 2013

The lost world of Abraham Cahan was alive with clamorous politics, intellectual combat, and misery leavened by immigrant optimism. For 50 years, Cahan was the pulsing heart of the *Forward*, the greatest Jewish newspaper the world has ever seen. He ruled his Yiddish empire with a mix of brains, courage, and guile. When he died at 90 in 1951, ten thousand people swarmed the street in front of the paper's 10-story beaux-arts bastion on the Lower East Side with its bas reliefs of Marx and Engels over the door.

Cahan, who led Czarist Russia when he was 22, was one of the most influential Jews in America in the first half of the 20th century. His resistance to Zionism, early recognition of the menace of Hitler, and indomitable fight against Communism here and abroad shaped opinions far beyond those of his Jewish readers. His 1917 novel of immigrant aspiration and anguish, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, was hailed by the doyen of the WASP literary establishment, William Dean Howells, and celebrated by the crabby H.L. Mencken, who thought of Jews as "rude, unpopular, and often unintelligent."

Seth Lipsky, the founder of a later, English-language edition of the *Forward*, retells Cahan's story in a concise new appreciation of a radical refugee who became a force in American journalism. *The Rise of Abraham Cahan* is a fluent intellectual and political biography but stints on what newspapers used to call "human interest"—the texture of his personal life, especially his childless 62-year marriage. Cahan's roots were unremarkable. He was born in 1860 in the village of Podberez'ye, 14 miles from Vilna, "the Jerusalem of Lithuania." His grandfather was a rabbi, his father a religious teacher who sold brandy at his tavern. Cahan's mother taught reading and writing to girls in Vilna, where the family moved when Abraham was six. There, the boy studied at religious schools but was also exposed to the Jewish Enlightenment. By the time Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, Cahan was deep in the revolutionary underground. After the Czar's police arrested and questioned him, he escaped disguised as a Hasid with forged papers and ultimately found refuge in New York. In his greenhorn imagination, "all Americans were tall and slender and...all the men wore yellow trousers and high hats."

Like so many Eastern European immigrants engulfing America in the 1880s, Cahan brought his revolutionary socialism with him. Just a month after settling in New York, he stood up at a meeting to support striking longshoremen and delivered an eloquent appeal in Russian—the language of radical Jewish discourse—to help political prisoners in the old country. Soon, he made the first political speech

in Yiddish—a breakthrough at the time. All the while, he was industriously schooling himself in America, even enrolling for three months in a class of 13-year-olds to master “American English.” Barely two years after coming to America, Cahan submitted an article about the Lower East Side to the *New York Sun*, one of the country’s leading newspapers. It was promptly accepted, and he was launched. He worked first as a writer-editor for the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, published by Jewish trade unionists, then, in April, 1897, founded the *Forward*, “in full Marxist regalia,” as Lipsky writes, with the slogan “Workers of the World Unite!” running across the top of page one. But Cahan soon fell out with the paper’s backers over editorial autonomy and transformed himself into a true American newspaperman. For the next “ve years, he worked with the muckraker Lincoln Steffens on the small but frisky New York *Commercial Advertiser*, covering the police beat and political speeches—even dictating a story on deadline over the latest technological marvel, the telephone.

When he returned to the *Forward*, Cahan had learned all the tricks of the sensationalist journalism that was propelling Joseph Pulitzer’s *World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *Journal*. Almost overnight, headlines like “8 Bandits Ravish Girl in Midday on Washington St.,” “She Burned Out Her Husband’s Eye With Carbolic Acid,” and “70-Year-Old Worker Takes Job and Drops Dead” were running next to the sober political exegeses on the *Forward*’s pages.

To outflank a competitor, he introduced what became the paper’s most beloved feature: the “Bintel Brief,” authentic letters to the paper from readers with problems to which the editor himself appended sage words of advice or encouragement. To one immigrant guilty about abandoning Russia while workers fought at the barricades, Cahan wrote: “Well, we can give no better advice than to fight right here in America for a social order in which a man wouldn’t have to work like a mule for five dollars a week.”

Purists carped that Cahan was ruining the paper, but circulation took off. “Jewish in WORD, American in THOUGHT” replaced Marx as the new slogan. By 1909, the *Forward* was selling more than 83,000 copies a day, making it the world’s largest Jewish newspaper.

For all his skill as a newspaperman and talent as a novelist, Cahan was essentially a political creature. His life was focused on the dominant “-isms” of his times: Zionism, Hitler’s Fascism and its destruction of the Jews, Leninism and Stalinism, and capitalism (or, at least, its contradictions). He got around. On an early trip to London, he befriended Marx’s daughter, who invited him to sit in the great man’s leather armchair. On another trip, in Cracow, he ran into Lenin, who proudly gave him an early edition of *Pravda*—one newspaperman showing off to a colleague.

His first reactions on the big issues could be surprisingly wrong-headed. Committed to international socialism, he considered Zionism a distraction—“the entire notion of Zionism is child’s play,” he wrote after the death of Theodor Herzl in 1904. He misread the significance of the 1917 Balfour Declaration that committed Great Britain to the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

He first backed Germany over Russia in World War I and initially rationalized the terror of the Bolshevik revolution. “The fruit of the whole revolution would be swept away,” he wrote, “if [the Bolsheviks] were to allow political freedom.”

Cahan was no armchair polemicist. Throughout his career, he went to the places where Jewish history was being made, met everyone, asked questions, and came to his own conclusions, many of which drastically reversed his earlier judgments. His 10-week tour of Palestine in 1925, heavily touted back

home, was something of a revelation to him and a journalistic bonanza. On one Sunday toward the end of his trip, the *Forward* printed 220,000 copies of an edition carrying his latest dispatch.

Lipsky writes that Cahan “kvelled” over much that he saw. Gradually and grudgingly, he muted his disdain for what he had once characterized as “messianic hysteria.” But Cahan’s understanding of the Jewish homeland’s future in the Arab world never approached the prescience of the Russian Zionist visionary Vladimir Jabotinsky, who wrote in 1923, “There will always be *two* nations in Palestine.” Cahan was more clear-eyed about Hitler. The *Forward* knew what the Munich agreement meant—a “shameful document” signed by “a Fascist devil...who had made a fool of the whole civilized world.” When the Nazis invaded Poland a week after his non-aggression pact with Stalin, Cahan wrote: “Hitler has allies in his enterprise of setting the world on fire...and the most important one is Stalin.”

After his early defense of the Bolsheviks, Cahan turned relentlessly anti-Communist. He made two reporting trips to the Soviet Union in the 1920s, concluding after the first, “The world has never seen such a despotism.” The *Forward* was one of the first newspapers to report on the Siberian prison camps. In the 1930s, Cahan’s eyewitness correspondents documented the starvation and exile of millions caused by Stalin’s demonic collectivization scheme. His hard-line anti-Communism never wavered for the rest of his life.

During the Depression, he helped establish the American Labor Party for anti-Communist socialists and backed Roosevelt. He spearheaded efforts by anti-Communist labor unions in their struggle against Stalinist and Communist-front unions in Western Europe and in America that helped turn the tide. Toward the end of his career, Cahan even reconciled himself a bit to the religion of his fathers. He’d always proclaimed himself a freethinker, but over time he warmed to Judaism—if only as a body of tradition. In his 80s, he engaged in a virulent crusade against the Yiddish writer Sholem Asch over Asch’s novel *The Nazarene*, a retelling of Jesus’s story suggesting, Cahan fumed, that Judaism and Christianity were essentially one religion and that Jews should recognize Christ as their messiah.

More than a half century after his death, the issues that animated Abraham Cahan during his half century running the *Forward* have been resolved: Revolutionary socialism lives on only in textbooks, Communism in Russia has been replaced by kleptocracy under Vladimir Putin, Germany is the bulwark of the European Union, Zionism’s monument is the State of Israel. Cahan turned out to be more often than not on the right side of history. Not bad for a newspaperman from Podberez’ye.