

JACK TURAN

Jewish-American alien

By Tatiana and Daniel Tuman

Note — We wish to thank Esther Turansky, sister of the late Jack Turan, for help in preparing this biographical sketch.

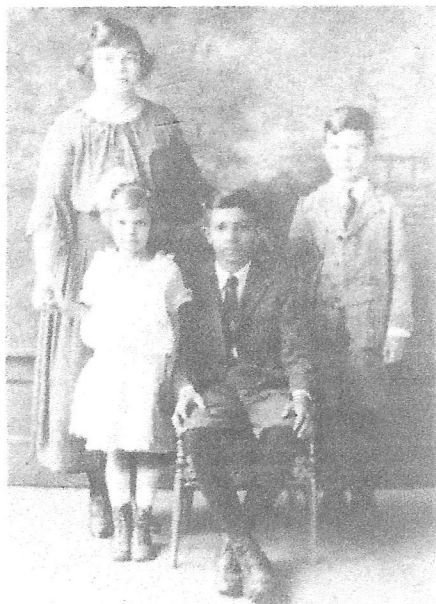
Much of the drama and intensity of Jewish-American existence in the twentieth century was represented in the life of Jack Turan. He was born Yankel Turansky in the small Russian town of Mglin in 1909. His father emigrated to the United States at the end of the first decade of the

Jewry. His paternal grandfather was a rabbi, and his maternal grandfather was a cantor. Their marriage in the early years of the twentieth century was opposed by his mother's family. They had hoped that their daughter Bella Levinsky would marry someone from a wealthier family and

enhance their social and economic status. However, Bella and her childhood sweetheart Isaac Turansky refused to bow to the wishes of their elders. The gap between generations of Russian Jews made

famous in "Fiddler on the Roof" was apparent in this domestic crisis. Isaac and Bella eloped at the end of their teenage years and married. Yankel was born after a short period, and his father emigrated to Galveston shortly after his birth.

Before Isaac Turansky left for Galveston and hope of a new land, he had joined with those who were attempting to create a new society in their ancient homeland. He had participated in clandestine



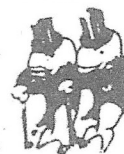
Jack Turan (seated) poses with his mother (Bella), sister Esther and brother Bob.

century and at the end of the great period of Eastern-European migration to the New World. He died Jack Turan in a New Orleans hospital in 1981 as a respected and atypical retired businessman. In between he had been a leading Communist activist and had symbolized the paradoxical roles that American Jews had come to play with regard to the society in which they lived: that of most successful achievers and of most demanding critics. He always remained both literally and figuratively an alien presence in an American society to which he made significant contributions.

Turan's parents had been childhood sweethearts in Mglin. They were steeped in the religious culture of Eastern-European

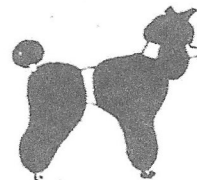
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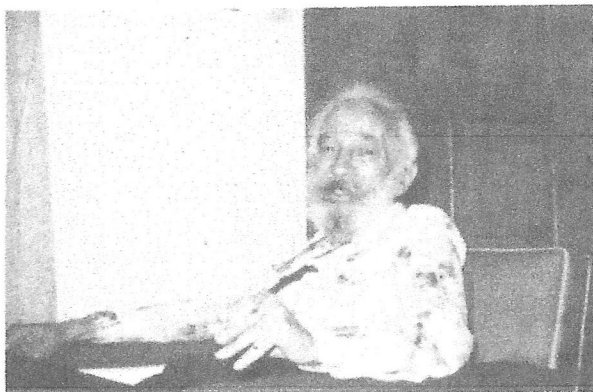
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Turan, pictured some time before his death.

meetings of Social Democrats in Russia and had moved a step farther away from the religious orientation of his father. He was to be an agnostic, leftwing sympathizer during the brief period of his adulthood in America. His eldest son was to continue this philosophical and political leaning throughout his own life.

After two years of work as a longshoreman in Galveston, Isaac Turansky had saved enough money to send for his wife and young son. He continued to work as a longshoreman, an occupation in which his son Yankel was also to engage, and as a confectionary worker in a bakery.

Isaac and Bella had two younger children during their life together in the second decade of the twentieth century in Galveston. Disaster struck the new American family in 1915. Isaac caught some kind of infectious disease which was diagnosed and treated poorly by a physician who advised the young man to continue working. The disease worsened; and in that year Isaac Turansky died.

At this point in the history of the Turansky family, the good intentions of Progressive social reform intervened. Bella Levinsky Turansky, a resourceful and independent woman, now a widow, wanted to maintain her family and rear her children. The elders of the Galveston and Houston Jewish communities pleaded with her for about a year to send her two oldest children to the new orphanage in New Orleans where they could receive the best care that philanthropy could provide. The young widow, who had already exhibited her independence in refusing to accede to the wishes of her father, resisted the wisdom of her elders for many months. However, she finally relented; and in 1916, sent all her

children, including her infant daughter, to the orphanage.

The family was broken, and the relationship between Bella Turansky and her children was limited to occasional excursions paid for by well intentioned charity. More than ten years later she remarried a widower whose children had also been sent to the orphanage. By this time Yankel had already moved from the orphanage and was studying agriculture in Pennsylvania. Much of the rationale for the marriage was the re-establishment of a two-parent family and the removal of the children of both parents from the orphanage. However, a year after the marriage, Bella Turansky

Lehat died.

The majority of Yankel's youth then was spent in the orphanage. It was there that his status as an outsider in American life was impressed upon him. Not only was he a member of a minority religious group, but he was also a ward of charity in the land of the self-sufficient. It was there also that he exhibited his independence and desire to succeed. He operated as a childhood entrepreneur, raising and selling guinea pigs and white rats, pressing suits for small change. Many of his ideals and goals were probably the result of his close encounter with Jewish philanthropy of the early twentieth century. Many of his internal conflicts were also probably the result of this philanthropy which separated parent and child so forcefully.

After leaving the orphanage, Yankel matriculated to another institution with significant Jewish connections, the National Farm School in eastern Pennsylvania. The school's purpose was related to the ideal of Jewish agrarian life which was, and is, so influential in

the Zionist movement. At the school Yankel not only extended his interest in all aspects of agrarian life but also encountered the writings and teachings of the Jewish, nineteenth-century atheist who was to influence much of his future life, Karl Marx. The young man's agrarian orientation shifted from the animal husbandry of his orphanage days to landscape architecture; and his political interest began to ferment in these years before the Great Depression.

It was also at the National Farm School that he first experienced serious illness. He was to remain in some physical discomfort the rest of his life. While a student at the school, Yankel had a ruptured appendix. He was to note in future years that he overheard doctors describing the imminence of his death after the attack and that he vowed to himself that he would not die. The story may have been apocryphal, but it symbolized the power of his own will and determination. He underwent three major abdominal operations before recovering from the rup-

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After leaving the school, Yankel began his career as a landscape architect. His experience working on the great estates of American millionaires and the force of the Great Depression led him back to New Orleans and to years as a leading activist in the Communist movement. He worked on estates in New York and Illinois. On a large estate in Illinois, he met an older gardener whose socialist ideals influenced him greatly. Times were becoming bad however, and soon there were few jobs to be had on the estates. Yankel found one job working for a new member of the American upper class, an east Texas oilman. The oilman hired Yankel to lay out an estate which would symbolize his entrance into grand society. After the estate was planned and planted, the graduate landscape architect was fired and replaced by someone whose labor could be hired at a cheaper rate.

It was at this point that the young man returned to the home of the orphanage, New Orleans. It was also at this point that he began to be involved in organizing the unemployed and in working for the Communist Party. He quickly ran afoul of the authorities responsible for what they



An FBI photograph of Jack Turan taken, probably, in the 1950s.

considered "law and order" and what the radicals of the 1930s considered a perverse and unjust status quo. Yankel was first arrested for selling the Communist newspaper "The Daily Worker". He was arrested many times later and was frequently beaten by the police following these arrests. He was one of the leading political radicals in New Orleans in the decade of the Great Depression. Efforts to organize the unem-

ployed and the laboring poor resulted in social changes that helped to mitigate the worst effects of the Depression on the lives of many.

To Yankel, who changed his name to Jack Turan during these years, political activism was a natural development. His father, whose death had been such an important part of his childhood, had engaged in left-wing political activities in Russia. Experience as an outsider in childhood society had inspired a critical view of the world. Education and travel in the American North had produced a more cosmopolitan perspective. The attractions of Communism were increased by the willingness of the Party in Germany to act as a potent anti-Nazi force. Finally,

the Great Depression was a major force in the history of American society and led many to question the direction in which that society was going.

Jack Turan was one of the persons in the American Deep South who participated most actively in that questioning. He was never to apologize for attempting to carry the message of Marx to the American working class. He felt that the Party represented the voice of reason in an unreasonable world. The American working class was, however, generally unreceptive to this message; and Jack Turan spent much of his political efforts in opposing the populist slogans of

(Continued on Page Seventy)

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the Louisiana folk-hero, Huey Long.

In the second half of the decade of the 1930s, his activities broadened beyond political and union organization. Efforts to return to the world of employment were stymied by his history of political radicalism. He only managed to get jobs offered by Party sympathizers. It was also at this time that he met the woman he was to marry, Irma Claude. They met at a party held in support of the Loyalist government in Spain. Jack's future wife joined him in the bohemian atmosphere of the New Orleans French Quarter at the end of the 1930s.

It was about this time in his life that Jack Turan learned that he was not only an outsider in American society as a result of his religion, his upbringing in an orphanage, and his political activity; but he was also not a citizen of this country. He had been born in Russia, and his father had died before completing the process of naturalization. The government attempted to take advantage of his alien status to deport him. However, the Soviet Union refused to repatriate individuals who had left before the Revolution.

Jack Turan remained an American alien the rest of his life. He had many battles with the Immigration and Naturalization Service and finally won the right to travel abroad and return to this country in the last years of his life. He took the opportunity to travel to Cuba and to the Soviet Union, two countries which had experienced the proletarian revolution which he viewed as a harbinger of a better day for mankind. Jack Turan was indeed an alien — a man who shared many of the ideals of the society in which he lived, but a man who was also at odds with much of what that society had done to its own inhabitants and to the inhabitants of other lands.

With the onset of the Second World War, political activism in America declined. This country joined the anti-Nazi crusade. Jack

Turan could not join the armed struggle against the Fascism he had hated and opposed so vigorously because of his health problems. At the conclusion of the war, there was little resumption of activist left-wing politics.

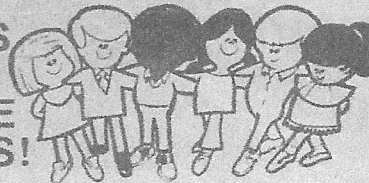
Like so many of his contemporaries, the energies of Jack Turan turned toward participating in the post-war economic development of America. He was now married and head of a family. He spoke about having done his share toward advancing the cause of mankind. The post-war period was one for concentration on more immediate tasks. However, there was no change in his political ideals and goals. There was simply a reordering of priorities.

Jack Turan had always had a keen interest in the world of commerce. This interest had been evident in his years in the orphan-

age. His life there also instilled a fear of dependence on charity and a recognition that in this society independence was equated with material wealth. He joined a fellow former resident of the orphanage in developing a business based upon the rental, sale and service of different kinds of tools. After many difficult years, the partnership began to experience economic success. The immense energy of Jack Turan became increasingly concentrated on the success of his business. Lunches, nights, weekends were devoted to the task of creating a substantial commercial enterprise. The Communist activist became a capitalist entrepreneur.

Efforts to continue the persecution of Jack Turan for his political activities did continue to some degree in the post-war period. During the heyday of

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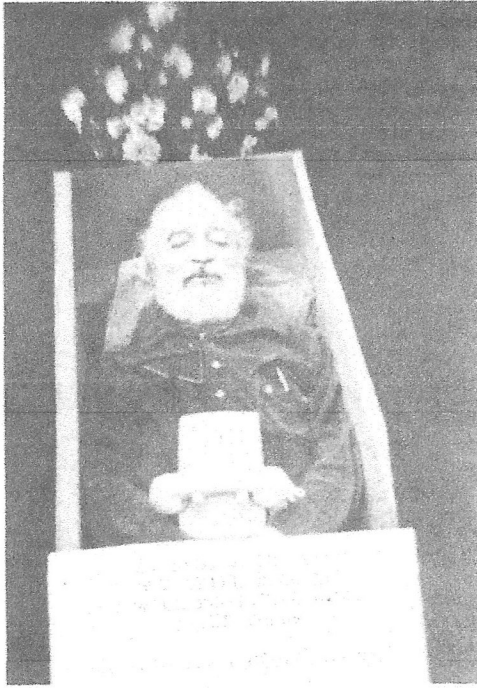
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The "famous" card which Jack sent to his friends on one of his birthdays. The placard in the foreground, at the foot of the "coffin", said, "At rest & in peace but still working. I will phone you when I get there. (The hair does keep growing)." It is said that Turan's friends loved his audacity.

anti-Communism in the 1950s, the FBI questioned neighbors and associates about this unusual man. They reported generally that he was a credit to his community and that there was no reason to make him suffer in that age of witch-hunts. Alien status remained, but Jack Turan became increasingly

accepted in and acceptable to the American society created after the Second World War.

I came to know Jack Turan only in the last three years of his life. His wife had already died after a long period of illness. His business partnership had dissolved, and he had sold out his

interest to his partner and retired from active commercial life. His health was poor, and he spent a good deal of time alone and with thoughts of the past. However, his interest in the present continued; and he followed current developments in both the citadels of capitalism and Communism.

In fact, Jack Turan seemed to enjoy the paradox of Communist and capitalist that he had created. He was a man who did not shy from contradictions. He was a man who respected Jewish ethical teachings and rejected belief in a divinity. He was a man who regaled in the details of capitalist maneuver and manipulation and who spent his entire adulthood speaking out against the evils of the capitalist system. Above all, he was a man whose life revealed much about the people from

whom he came, the American Jews.

Jack Turan epitomized two main streams of Jewish heritage — adaptation to prevailing cultural norms and the prophetic tradition. The Jewish people have made many successful adaptations to different cultures. Their experience in America has been one of great success in terms of the values held highest in the society. But Jewish experience has been much more than adaptation. There has also been the central mission of recalling and rephrasing sacred values in changing settings. The prophetic tradition has been a major force in retaining a separate identity for the Jewish people. Jack Turan's life spanned these two streams. He was a man whose history reflected the deep meaning of Jewish-American culture. ☆

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