

## Looking for Avrom Yanovsky: An Exploration of the Cultural Front

*David Frank, Emeritus, University of New Brunswick*

In the spring of 1947 a Toronto graphic artist visited the Cape Breton coal country on the invitation of the miners' union. He attended meetings and concerts in union halls and churches, where he learned about the ongoing strike against Dominion Steel and Coal—a local episode in the postwar struggle to convert wartime gains into higher standards and lasting security. Throughout the visit, the artist filled his sketchbook with pen and ink drawings of the social and human landscape: miners' homes, seaside cliffs, coal pits, colliery buildings, street scenes, a union meeting, women in discussion, performers on pipes, guitar, and fiddle. On the highway, he watched pickets block the road and stop trucks to check for bootleg coal, and this too became the subject of sketches. He gave informal “chalk-talks” for the coal miners—always, he said, “about their strike.” He also held art classes for children and arranged for one boy's work to be published in the local newspaper. To help deliver the union's message, he drew topical cartoons satirizing the corporation's domination of the province and promoting union plans for economic renewal.<sup>1</sup>

That is a glimpse of just one episode in Avrom Yanovsky's long history as a cultural producer and political activist. Researchers in labour and left history are often aware that “Avrom,” as he usually signed his work, produced hundreds of cartoons for newspapers such as *The Worker* and related publications. Besides cartoons, he also drew illustrations, sketches, drawings, banners, and murals. He designed sets and costumes for ballet, stage, and choral productions; he gave art demonstrations at the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO) and its predecessors, and was a popular fixture at their summer camps; he invented original characters and stories for Canadian comic books; he prepared rough sketches for a planned People's History of Canada; he did publicity and labour education projects for unions; he worked on animated films and documentaries; he participated in the Canadian Society of Graphic Art and served as its president. And he was widely known for those popular “chalk-talks,” modelled on the practice of J.W. Bengough, the politically engaged cartoonist of an earlier generation; fellow artist Fred Taylor once addressed Avrom as the “disciple and surpasser of J.W. Bengough.”<sup>2</sup> He was also an occasional writer, whose commentaries on contemporary art insisted on the centrality of culture in any strategy for radical social change.<sup>3</sup>

The historical sieve of cultural selection has not favoured Avrom Yanovsky. There are only a few short biographical references, beginning with an entry in “Who's Who in Ontario Art” in 1948. He was included in a popular history of Canadian political cartoons in 1979, and most recently, he received a separate biographical note in Ester Reiter's history of the Jewish secular left.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in

2005 Anna Hudson curated an exhibition of Avrom's political cartoons for a gallery at York University.<sup>5</sup> Despite his prolific output over the course of almost half a century, however, there have been few efforts to assess the work of this remarkable cultural producer. Growing up in the shadow of the Winnipeg General Strike and steeped in the class-conscious culture of the immigrant Jewish working class, Avrom undertook lifelong political commitments that shaped his practice as an artist. His personal experience and lively intelligence led him to function within many contexts, but none of these intersectionalities was more significant than his affiliation with the Communist Party of Canada. In his efforts to popularize and broaden the appeal of socialist ideas in Canada, he came to share Margaret Fairley's views on the "cultural worker's responsibility to the people," and an exploration of the historical evidence establishes Avrom Yanovsky as a politically engaged activist of the cultural front associated with the radical left.<sup>6</sup>



AVROM YANOVSKY (1911–1979)

Avrom Yanovsky collection, courtesy of Anna Yanovsky.

As Michael Denning has put it, by the middle of the 1930s the cultural front was a metaphor referring both to a field of activity and to a strategy of alliances. In the first place, the cultural front identified the creative arts as a site of contestation and struggle over the social issues of the day. At the same time, the cultural front aimed to promote collaboration between individuals and groups in advancing shared causes. In the ongoing effort to shift the political and cultural discourse of the times, the cultural front was most visibly anti-war; anti-fascist and anti-racist; pro-labour and pro-socialist (if not explicitly pro-communist); at times both nationalist and internationalist—in these ways belonging to the historical bloc often described as the popular front. Despite commonalities in style and content, Denning has noted, individual producers within the cultural front brought their own affiliations and aesthetics to a range of activity that was too broad and diverse to be reduced to a core-periphery model centred on parties and leaders. Moreover, as Andrew Hemingway has pointed out, there was a long-running tension between a utilitarian view of “art as a weapon” in the class struggle and a more inclusive concept of “social art” directed to a broad public audience. Although their activism featured inconsistencies such as these, participants in the cultural front succeeded in producing what Denning calls a durable “structure of feeling” that persisted across the generations from the 1920s and 1930s through to the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup> In the Canadian context, several studies have begun to explore the impact of the cultural front.<sup>8</sup> However, there has been nothing to match the scope of Denning’s magnum opus or Hemingway’s specialized work on visual culture. When the time comes, Avrom Yanovsky will have a place in the story.

### **Progressive Arts**

One starting point is at Krivoi Rog—literally Crooked Horn—in Ukraine. Avrom was born there in 1911 and left for Canada at the age of two with his mother, her parents, and his infant brother. They belonged to an epic migration shared by hundreds of thousands of people, including the Jews who fled the Tsarist empire and came to settle in Winnipeg. Little about the family’s history in Winnipeg has come to light, except that they lived on Pritchard Avenue, in the hustle and bustle of the immigrant north end. Avrom was old enough to remember the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, and at the time of the fiftieth anniversary, he wrote about a vivid childhood dream:

My mother is standing by the kitchen sink washing away the blood streaming down the face of a strange man. “It was no dream, my son,” mother replied when I asked her a few years later. “You were eight then. I was working as a seamstress in Eaton’s and we were all out on strike. It was the General Strike, and I was washing the face of a striker who was beaten up.”<sup>9</sup>

We also know something about Avrom's formal education, as he attended the I.L. Peretz Shule, named for one of the early international promoters of Jewish secular education and the Yiddish language. The school covered the public school curriculum while also focusing on Yiddish and Jewish culture and political outlooks inspired by the Bund, Zionism, and the contemporary left.<sup>10</sup> The teachers were intellectuals sympathetic to Labour Zionism rather than Communism. Nonetheless, several members of the 1925 graduating class, including Avrom, went on to join the Young Communist League and later the Communist Party. Typically, they maintained a love of Yiddish culture alongside their commitment to radical politics. One member of that class was Nechama Gemeril, who became a children's teacher in left-wing shules and later married Avrom.<sup>11</sup>

The adolescent Yanovsky continued his education at St. John's Technical High School, the north-end school with a strong reputation for academic excellence. As it turned out, one of his teachers was a well-known labour radical. A member of the International Association of Machinists as well as the Social Democratic Party, Richard Johns was charged with seditious conspiracy at the time of the General Strike. He was convicted and sentenced to one year in jail. After his release, Johns was blacklisted in his trade but was hired to teach industrial arts and completed a long career in the field of technical education. Avrom recalled that Johns would always come to class on May Day wearing a bright red tie.<sup>12</sup> One former student has added that Johns did not discuss politics with the students but conveyed to them "something which had to be communicated, and that was the dignity of work."<sup>13</sup>

We know something too about Avrom's developing interest in art, which he was able to pursue with the help of a well-used public library card issued to him in 1926. One recollection suggests that he was already drawing political cartoons as a boy of fourteen or fifteen.<sup>14</sup> We know too that the young man took classes from LeMoine FitzGerald at the Winnipeg School of Art, apparently in 1928. Born and brought up in Winnipeg and largely self-taught, FitzGerald had studied at the Art Students League in New York and started to teach at the School in 1924, where he became principal in 1929. He was well-connected in Canadian art circles, as he was invited to join the Group of Seven in 1932. FitzGerald's support may have helped Avrom gain acceptance at the Ontario College of Art after he moved to Toronto.<sup>15</sup> Although Avrom attended there only briefly in 1933, he came under the influence of teachers such as John Alfsen, Rowley Murphy, and Yvonne McKague. He also came to know Arthur Lismer, Fred Varley, and A.Y. Jackson, in part through activities on the cultural front.<sup>16</sup> By 1938, he was submitting brush and ink drawings to the annual exhibition sponsored by the Canadian Society of Graphic Art, which often included his work over the next three decades.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the young man was encountering other influences through his political activity and, by 1931, his move to Toronto. The move coincided with his mother's decision to emigrate to British Palestine, the territory established by the

League of Nations under a mandate to create a homeland for the Jewish people; she was accompanied by Avrom's younger brother, and they remained there to witness the eventual emergence of the Israeli state. But Labour Zionism was not Avrom's choice. He had already joined the Young Communist League in Winnipeg, likely as early as 1927, and was determined to pursue his political and cultural activism in the Canadian context. In Toronto he joined the lively scene around the Labour League Mutual Benefit Society and the Jewish Cultural Centre. Politically, these were Communist-led organizations that provided the secular Jewish working class with a mix of benefits, services, and politics as well as a cultural life that included music, art, dance, and theatre. Reiter notes that Avrom was on staff at Camp Kindervelt in the Rouge Hills in the summer of 1931, where the season culminated in a large concert with choirs, recitations, dance, gymnastics, and drama. One contemporary later recalled that Avrom had a special rapport with the children: "Avrom would romp and play with the children as if he were one of them. Indeed, he reminded me of the young man with the flute—the pied piper of Hamelin. As you know, wherever he went the children were sure to follow." During these years, Avrom was also making sets, murals, and costumes for productions mounted by the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir. He recalls working with little or no budget and improvising from any resources at hand at the Brunswick Avenue hall: "The Toronto Jewish Folk Choir was my school—wherein I learned, the hard way, to design and build stage settings and create costumes."<sup>18</sup>

In Toronto, Avrom was an early participant in the Progressive Arts Club after it was formed in 1932. His collaborators there included politicized creative people of his own age, writers such as Dorothy Livesay and Stanley Ryerson and actors such as Jean Watts and Toby Gordon.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the artists' group, Avrom joined the Workers' Experimental Theatre. When they went on tour in June 1933, they visited labour halls and factory sites in several small towns in southern Ontario. The repertoire included mass recitations such as "Eviction" (about the murder of Nick Zynchuk in Montréal), "Joe Derry" (a pantomime about relief), and short plays such as "Solidarity Not Charity" and "War in the East."<sup>20</sup> Later that year, the Workers' Theatre was responsible for "Eight Men Speak," the large-scale agitprop drama protesting the trial and imprisonment of Communist leaders. Avrom and other artists prepared the stage settings, and he had two small roles, "Old Man" and "Sam Carr," in the short-lived original production.<sup>21</sup>

During the summer tour in 1933, the theatre troupe advertised Avrom as the "foremost Canadian proletarian cartoonist." Standing on stage before a large easel, he worked with fat sticks of charcoal, often red and black, to draw pointed commentaries on sheets of newsprint. As Avrom has explained, "I had prepared in my mind humorous cartoons of political events and I talked about each one. My habit was to combine it with a play on words—puns."<sup>22</sup> He added that the idea came to him from J.W. Bengough, the cartoonist whose career went back to the early days of Confederation. He recalled finding a copy of Bengough's *Chalk-Talks* in a book-

shop and giving it a close study. The book was notable not only for discussion of technique but also for its depiction of the world of social reform of an earlier time.<sup>23</sup>

Avrom made the style his own, and the chalk-talk became his signature public performance, whether he was at a children's class, art gallery, political meeting or union hall. At one stage in the 1960s, he also teamed up with a musician to offer evenings of chalk-talks and folk-songs. The magic in the chalk-talk came, first of all, when a member of the audience was asked to draw a squiggle, which Avrom then built upon to create recognizable images. There was more magic when he joined the elements together as parts of a story. It could be a children's tale, a Bible tale, an historical event, a contemporary issue or character, a lampoon of a public figure, or an allegory of capitalist greed and working-class redemption. In the summers at Camp Naivelt in later years, the chalk-talks, full of the current news of the week, were a highlight of the Saturday night campfires and concerts. Avrom was also on call to go to union events, and, as one activist remembered, his presentations were considered the treat at the end of a long day of meetings.<sup>24</sup> Although some people recall that Avrom spoke with a small stammer, others do not recall it at all or believe it disappeared in the enthusiasm of his performances. The talks had the appearance of spontaneity, but he had practical advice for children interested in following his example:

Prepare your program beforehand. Know what pictures and how many pictures you are going to draw ... Until you get proficient in the trick of drawing rapidly before an audience, it would help a lot if you sketch your drawing very lightly, beforehand, on your paper with a pencil, so that when you are on the platform you can draw with chalk over the previously-drawn pencil lines. This will appear as if you are a rapid-fire artist!<sup>25</sup>

### **Proletarian Cartoonist**

Meanwhile, throughout the Progressive Arts period of the early 1930s and on into the 1970s, there were the cartoons. By 1932 Avrom was a regular contributor to the *Canadian Labor Defender*, the monthly magazine edited by A.E. Smith, the Methodist minister turned Communist Party operative who directed the Canadian Labor Defense League (CLDL). Avrom's first appearance was a sprawling linocut on the front page of the January 1932 issue, "Smashing through Section 98," the Criminal Code provision under which eight Communist Party leaders were arrested in August 1931. A large-fisted hyper-masculine champion in overalls represented the theme of resistance. In subsequent issues, Avrom showed his talent for informal portraits as well, in sketches of Communist leaders awaiting trial and of delegates attending a CLDL conference. There was dark humour in his "Higher Mathematics," in which

a robed professor instructed students to add up sentences based on Section 98, sedition laws, frame-ups, and incitement to riot. Drawing on the work of his older contemporaries in the American radical press, Avrom adapted some of their drawings for linocuts, notably Hugo Gellert's "Dependents" and William Gropper's "Outside the Jail." His efforts attracted attention, not all of it favourable: the May 1932 issue reported that Toronto police had stopped Avrom in the street and taken him to the police station, searched and questioned him and threatened him with being deported or thrown in the river. He was advised, in the editor's words, to "refrain from drawing cartoons for the workers' press."<sup>26</sup>



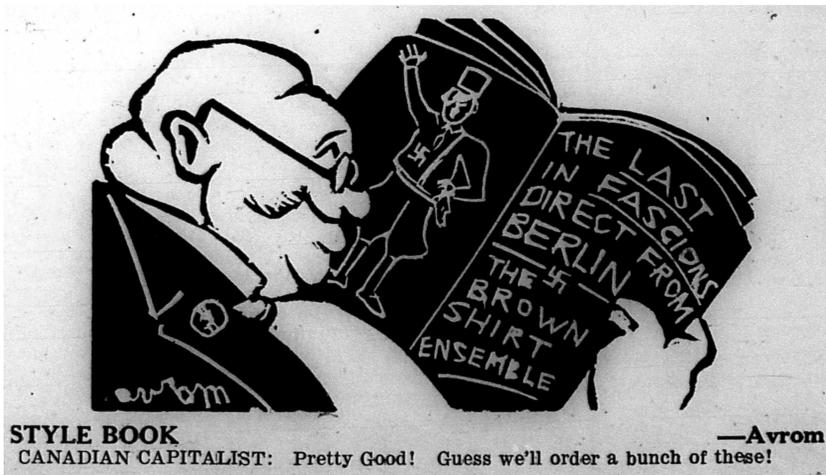
#### CHALK-TALK

Avrom presents a chalk-talk on stage in 1967. This one may refer to Donnacona's encounter with Jacques Cartier in 1534, an episode later memorably distorted in the *Heritage Minutes*.

Avrom Yanovsky collection, courtesy of Anna Yanovsky.

Avrom was also drawing for *Masses*, the literary and cultural magazine produced by the Progressive Arts Club.<sup>27</sup> His work was featured in the first issue in April 1932, and in almost every issue over the next two years. One of his first cartoons was an ironic comment on the late French statesman and former socialist leader, Aristide Briand, in diplomatic dress as the "Apostle of Peace," tiptoeing his way to paradise in between bomb blasts. A second cartoon, "Group of Seven,"

aimed closer to home, showing a panel of “Famous Canadian ‘Painters’ at Work,” all at their easels preparing visions of state repression: jails, deportations, Section 98, Estevan, sedition, even a swastika. Avrom also produced two covers for *Masses*, one (“Workers’ Defense”) showed the Soviet economy threatened by capitalist enemies, and the other (“Canadian Capitalism”) pictured the Canadian rowboat of state, beset at sea by thunderbolts of the class struggle. Several cartoons pointed to the divided politics of the left in this period: “Intellectualigentsia” caricatured the armchair leftist who sits in the clouds high above the class struggle, toying with a flower and reading the moderately socialist *Canadian Forum*, and “Design for a Window” satirized the crowning of J.S. Woodsworth as leader of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). Nor was the new American president immune: “New Peace Dove” showed Franklin Delano Roosevelt as an angel shot from a cannon controlled by the dead hand of capitalism. A lighter touch was apparent in “Style Book,” where “Canadian Capitalist” examines the latest Berlin fashions—spelled “fascions”—and happily makes plans to place an order.<sup>28</sup>



#### STYLE BOOK

A Canadian capitalist considers the latest fashions from Berlin.

*Masses*, May–June 1933.

Like other illustrations in *Masses*, produced by at least a dozen different artists, most of Avrom’s cartoons at this time were linocuts, an inexpensive medium that produced stark images appropriate to the overall message about the injustices of unemployment and poverty, and the rising threat of repression at home and fascism at large. In this work, Avrom was deploying his cultural skills in support of

the political agenda of his class and movement, which he identified with the Communist Party. A comment by “Comrade Avrom” offers a brief insight into his thinking at the time. The context is some criticism of fellow artists who seemed to prefer working on personal projects over serving the needs of the movement: “Comrades should be ready to drop their easels at any time, even when working on a ‘proletarian masterpiece,’ to sit down and hurriedly shoot off posters for our organizations, cartoons and linocuts for our press.”<sup>29</sup>

Avrom’s first cartoon in the party’s most widely circulated publication, *The Worker*, appeared as early as June 1931, but his work did not become frequent in these pages until 1934 and 1935, when he produced dozens of topical cartoons on Canadian and international themes. Meanwhile, the political shift to the popular front during these years enabled the cultural front to expand its influence, as the audience was defined more broadly than the proletarian vanguard of the early 1930s. Avrom’s cartoons readily adjusted to this political change, and his output accelerated in the pages of the new *Daily Clarion*, which was launched on May Day in 1936. That week he published at least seven or eight new cartoons. The first of these demonstrated the new political climate in promoting the unity of the Communists and the CCF in common causes. Later that week, the Liberals’ recent budget was attributed to a circus act called “Grin and Bear It” and, on another day, a worker rolled up his sleeves to take the axe to slum clearance. Meanwhile, Hitler attempted to spread his web over Canada, and in France fascism was hauled off to the guillotine. The following week, an instalment of “Avrom’s Illustrated Weekly” celebrated the May Day marches while an ambulance rushed “Old Man Capitalism” to the hospital to recover from the day’s events and an attack of Spanish and French election results.

The work continued steadily into 1937 and beyond, most of it on Canadian themes: self-satisfied plutocrats and their allies among repressive police, incipient fascists, manipulative politicians, and misleaders of labour, all opposed by militant workers, communist leaders, and a developing united front in causes such as union rights, unemployment insurance, and a secure future for the working class. And there was always an eye on the threatening world situation: Spain, Italy, Japan, Nazi Germany, and the attendant dangers both to the Soviet Union and to world peace. Links were also drawn to the Canadian implications, such as arms exports to fascist powers and Canadian support for the Spanish Republic. For the Labour Day edition in September 1937, in the spirit of the democratic heritage promoted by the cultural front, Avrom represented organized labour as the bearers of the rebel tradition of Mackenzie and Papineau.<sup>30</sup>

Although described in October 1937 as the *Clarion*’s “staff artist,” by this time Avrom was producing fewer cartoons for the newspaper, which often used reprinted material.<sup>31</sup> Still, he was almost certainly the talent behind an ambitious “Who’s Who” contest that featured cryptic cartoons with clues often based on puns; to help the reader, there were lists of possible answers from a wide range of can-

didates, including figures such as Cervantes and Marx and local heroes such as Slim Evans and Tim Buck.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, as the party's influence increased, Avrom was also helping to meet the demand for banners, posters, and backdrops for public events. Barry Lord has named him as one of the artists who drew giant portraits of leaders of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion for a tribute to the International Brigade and Canadian volunteers in Spain in 1938.<sup>33</sup> There was also union activity in the graphic arts at this time, and one of Avrom's contemporaries recalled him as a driving force in Local 71 of the Artists' Union in Toronto, always carrying cards to sign up members. The campaign attracted some 250 members in the city and, with support from the Allied Printing Trades Council, culminated in a strike by commercial artists against several local firms in the spring of 1938.<sup>34</sup> For an article in *New Frontier* on "Trade Unions For Artists," Avrom supplied a sketch of a painter deftly using his brush and palette to attack "Exploitation."<sup>35</sup>

### The Cultural Front

Avrom's long apprenticeship entered a new stage when he received a fellowship to attend the American Artists School in New York City. Opened in 1936, the School was the successor to the John Reed Club School of Art. In line with the expanding cultural front, the School offered a less strident declaration of art as a weapon of class struggle. Promoting the social function of art remained a central theme, however. As the 1938–1939 brochure outlined the school's purposes, "an understanding of modern society can only serve to deepen the student's aesthetic outlook and capacities. Its regular courses are therefore supplemented by lectures in which the position of the artist in relation to forces, conflicts and tendencies of today are discussed by authorities in the arts and sciences."<sup>36</sup>

Among the notable artists on the advisory board was the legendary Art Young, whose cartoons had been familiar to radicals across North America for many decades. An exhibition of Young's drawings and cartoons in New York in March and April 1939, which Avrom had the opportunity to attend, was a notable retrospective that Young considered to be his first one-man show.<sup>37</sup> With the school centrally located on West 14th Street, Avrom was well-situated to witness the dynamism of the cultural front in New York at this time. Besides attending museums, galleries, and shows, there was the chance to meet other cartoonists whose work he had followed, such as Fred Ellis, Hugo Gellert, and the pseudonymous Alexander Redfield, creator of the sardonic "Clawss Struggle" cartoons.<sup>38</sup>

The school itself offered daily, weekend, and evening courses covering both technique and content, and during the 1938–1939 terms Avrom filled several sketchbooks with exercises, assignments, and casual drawings. He studied especially with Anton Refregier, Moses Soyer, and Sakari Suzuki, who were among the most prominent artists known for projects completed under the Works Progress Administration. He likely also attended classes on social satire and illustration given by William Gropper and John Groth. When the field was first introduced a year earlier,

Groth had summed up the approach with the explanation that “An illustration must have wit or drama” and stated that the plan was to study the tradition as established by Hogarth, Daumier, Goya, and others.<sup>39</sup> We know little more about Avrom’s work at the School, but he clearly was able to develop his skills and widen his experience. He successfully submitted several pen and ink drawings to the 1939 Graphic Art show in Toronto, and his work was also exhibited at Macy’s in New York, in an annual show organized by the Young American Artists Association and the American Artists Congress. There is evidence of Avrom too in a playful sketch for the programme cover for a social event organized by the Young American Artists in March 1939: in a style that evokes Picasso’s modernism, a woman with streaming hair and elongated arm and leg is leaping through an empty picture frame and holding a flower to her upturned face.<sup>40</sup>

In 1939, Avrom was named as art director of a Jewish children’s magazine based in New York. The monthly *Yungvarg* [Young People] had started publication in 1937 as “a Yiddish magazine for children published by the National School Committee of the Jewish Section of the International Workers Order.” The magazine, which continued to publish until at least 1950, was directed at children attending the Order’s schools and camps and was distributed in both Canada and the United States.<sup>41</sup> Anna Yanovsky recalls Avrom telling her that during his American sojourn he also worked at the Order’s children’s camp north of the city at Sylvan Lake. At Camp Kinderland he met several popular front cultural figures, such as the writers Dashiell Hammett and Lillian Hellman and the actor, later film director, Jules Dassin, who was one of the instructors there.<sup>42</sup>

On his return to Canada, Avrom resumed activities at the Labour League, soon to become the Toronto chapter of the UJPO when it was organized in 1945.<sup>43</sup> Reiter notes that Avrom created a set for a Sholem Aleichem story that was performed at a children’s concert at the Strand Theatre on Spadina Avenue in May 1940. And in 1941 an audience of hundreds at the same theatre saw him play the lead role in a choral ballet mounted by the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir, directed by the recently arrived Vienna-educated émigré Emil Gartner, who became one of Avrom’s closest friends. First staged at New York’s Carnegie Hall in 1938 by the composer Max Helfman, *Benyomin the Dritter* was based on a classic story that one Toronto participant likened to a Yiddish Don Quixote. An audience member later recalled that Avrom gave “an unforgettable interpretation of that seeker of a better world.”<sup>44</sup>

The Second World War led the Communist Party first into extremes of isolation and then popularity. After initially identifying the war as a continuation of the struggle against fascism, the party leadership then endorsed the Soviet claim that the working class had no immediate stake in an imperialist war, aggravating the confusion among supporters already dismayed by the recent Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact. Meanwhile, even prior to the war the Canadian government had made plans to control domestic dissent. *The Clarion* was closed down in November 1939,

and the Communist Party was outlawed in June 1940. Under the Defence of Canada Regulations, more than 130 party leaders and left activists were arrested and interned, without trial or term. Many of them, including the labour poet and *Clarion* columnist Joe Wallace, were familiar to Avrom; Joe Zuken, his former Winnipeg classmate, acted as a lawyer for a number of the prisoners. After the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Communists turned to the promotion of wartime mobilization and the opening of a second front in western Europe. The interned prisoners were gradually released, although the last were not freed until September 1942.<sup>45</sup> The wartime alliance with the Soviet Union was evident in visits by military and cultural figures who were celebrated at large public events. In 1943 some 12,000 people attended a rally at Maple Leaf Gardens, sponsored by the Canadian Jewish Congress, where leaders of the Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee appealed for support for the war effort, as they had done in New York and other cities.<sup>46</sup> Earlier that year, a cultural front initiative collected works of art to donate to the people of Leningrad, then in the second year of the devastating three-year siege by German forces. The 50 participants included A.Y. Jackson and Fred Taylor and other prominent artists. Avrom appears to have contributed a brush and ink drawing titled “The Defence of Toronto.”<sup>47</sup>

In September 1942, Avrom signed up in the reserves. As he had a weak leg, he was not suited for more active duty but reported to Camp Niagara for several weeks in 1943 and 1944, where he was assigned to train as a driver.<sup>48</sup> Anna Yanovsky recalls Avrom explaining that he was not a great success. “Look out, Avrom’s driving” was the cry in the camp, and people would gather to watch him roll up—and then back down—the steep hills. His drawings made him popular, though, and he was called upon to cover the dormitory walls with caricatures of the officers. During this period, Avrom married his former schoolmate and fellow activist Nechama Gemeril. By the end of 1944, they were the parents of a bouncing boy, Zalman, named for Avrom’s father. Soon Avrom could be seen in the summers at Camp Naivelt, proudly carrying the future rock star and restaurateur on his shoulders.<sup>49</sup>

One wartime episode confirms Avrom’s growing reputation. In 1943 he was approached by Béla Lugosi, the expatriate Hungarian actor who had fled to the west after the failure of the 1919 revolution, eventually making his way to Hollywood where he became known for playing Dracula and other monsters or villains. In June 1943, he was elected president of the Hungarian-American Council for Democracy, a united front organization opposed to the control of Hungary by a fascist regime that collaborated with Nazi Germany. Lugosi telephoned with a request for a cartoon for the use of the resistance. Avrom obliged with a clever image: Lugosi looms starkly in the sky as an avenging Dracula who threatens the cowering Miklós Horthy and Adolph Hitler with the prospect of a democratic Hungary. Hundreds of thousands of copies were dropped by airplanes all over the country. Avrom must have had advice on signing the cartoon with the pseudonym Tinódi, the name of a patriotic poet of the sixteenth century famous for celebrating resistance to the

Ottoman Empire.<sup>50</sup>



BÉLA LUGOSI BY TINÓDI

An original cartoon prepared in 1943 for distribution in wartime Hungary.

Avrom Yanovsky collection, courtesy of Anna Yanovsky.

Under wartime conditions, Avrom also made a foray into a new medium that had been gaining popularity since the late 1930s. The comic book has been described as a “hybrid art form” that combined words and pictures to create graphic narratives that appealed especially to children and young adults.<sup>51</sup> An exceptional opportunity presented itself when, as a wartime measure to support Canadian currency, the federal government limited the import of non-essential goods, including fiction periodicals—a category that included comic books. Several publishers seized the opportunity and launched their own comics, which began to appear as early as March 1941. One of the most active, with sales of 100,000 copies a week by 1943,

was the Toronto-based Bell Features and Publishing. Their comics featured the first Canadian superheroes, Nelvana of the Northern Lights and Johnny Canuck, but there was room for many more. In order to bring out seven monthly magazines, Bell's artistic director, Adrian Dingle, recruited some 50 to 60 freelance artists to supply material. A high degree of creative labour was required to produce the stories and illustrations, and the pay was considered very good, running as much as \$6.50 a page for finished work.<sup>52</sup>

The earliest of Avrom's contributions to Bell seems to be "Shasha and Masha," published in the September/October 1944 issue of *Commando Comics*. The story featured two juvenile Russian guerrilla fighters who caused havoc for the Nazi invaders on the Eastern Front. Fortunately for us, the authors of the 1971 sampler *The Great Canadian Comic Books* were able to ask Avrom about his thinking: "Yanovsky says he drew this adventure series in an attempt to foster a pro-Russian attitude among Canadian readers. His Shasha and Masha were the Red Bobbsey Twins."<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps his most intriguing creation, "Major Domo and Jo-Jo," first appeared in the August/September 1945 issue of *Joke Comics*. While other heroes had done their part to win the war, Major Domo's main concern was to set matters straight in the postwar world. Moreover, he was not a superhero. Indeed, Major Domo was partially disabled, a veteran who had lost both his arms at Arnhem, one of the towns in the Netherlands liberated by Canadian soldiers. In Avrom's imagination the muscular Domo is now a special agent for the United Nations Investigation Bureau, making him a kind of senior household officer, literally a "majordomo" who brought order to the postwar community represented by the United Nations. The hero is assisted in his work by the short, moustachioed Jo-Jo, a former resistance leader in occupied Europe. Their general mission is stop underground fascist activity. In the first episode Major Domo is tracking down a Nazi war criminal. In the next, also dated August–September 1945, Major Domo and Jo-Jo have to handle Dr. Von of the Gestapo. And in an extended three-part episode called "The Mysterious Mr. Mister," they investigate the disappearance of a relief ship, the S.S. UNRRA, which is bound for a place called Polonia. By the end, they succeed in bringing the ship into port, laden with food, clothing and machinery, to the cheers of the local population. To underline the vision of postwar reconstruction, Jo-Jo declares that "The United Nations presents all this to you with no strings attached. Now you can rebuild your country in peace and democracy."<sup>54</sup> Again, we have the benefit of a brief explanation reported by Hirsh and Loubert: "Yanovsky remembers that he was offended by what he calls the 'Anglo-American imperialist bias' of most of the artists who drew the Canadian Whites. And so he created Major Domo and Jo-Jo to offset their propaganda, which he says tried to lull the world into accepting a Cold War situation."<sup>55</sup>



ACTION HERO, 1945

Major Domo, special agent for the United Nations Investigation Bureau.  
Library and Archives Canada, Joke Comics, Issue 21, AMICUS 16526997, p. 24–26.

*MAJOR DOMO AND HIS ASSISTANT JO-JO: THE ADVENTURE OF THE THROBBING VEIN*

© Library and Archives Canada.

Reproduced with the permission of Library and Archives Canada.

Less is known about two other series, “Mr. Distracted Attorney” and “Hugh Dunit, Private Detective.” The first seems to have started in *Commando Comics* in September–October 1945 and continued in the following two, possibly three, issues. Meanwhile, Hugh Dunit was appearing in *Dime Comics*. In the first episode of “Gilt-Edged Guilt,” the story begins with the private eye Hugh Dunit receiving a phone call from J. J. Oinkoink the Fourth, president of Piggy Banks, Inc.—clearly a suspicious character. The plot has some surprises for Dunit, including his rescue by a young woman who drives a motorcycle and is a former RCAF wireless operator, a premise that at least minimally reminded readers of wartime challenges to gendered role expectations.<sup>56</sup>

All told, Avrom wrote and illustrated at least ten different episodes of four original character-driven series between September 1944 and May 1946.<sup>57</sup> These av-

eraged six pages in length, for a total of about 60 pages, each with four to six separate illustrations. In all cases Avrom (or Armand as they were signed in many cases) was credited with both the text and the art. He may have done more, as the preservation of comic book archives was not a priority until long after this short golden age of Canadian production. Notably, with the exception of “Shasha and Masha,” all of this work addressed the postwar world, either the international situation where a new social order was taking shape prior to the Cold War and the Marshall Plan, or the domestic one, where he found scope for satirical targets and for wrongdoing associated with war criminals and fascist plots.<sup>58</sup> The Canadian industry did not survive the end of wartime market conditions. By late 1946 Bell had fallen back on reprinting American comics for domestic distribution. By the 1950s virtually all comic publishers in Canada had ceased operations, and the industry did not revive until the appearance of Captain Canuck and a new generation of heroes in the 1970s.<sup>59</sup>

### New Frontiers

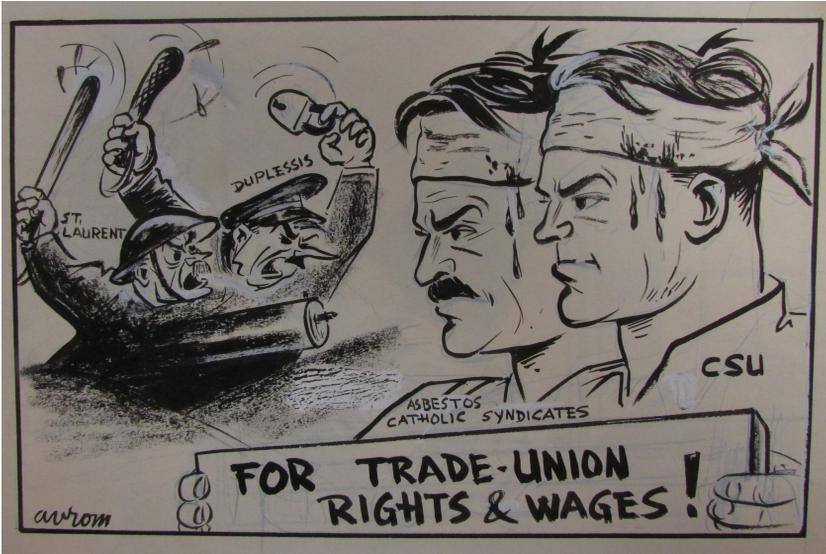
When asked in 1948 to provide information for “Who’s Who in Ontario Art,” Avrom did not mention his work for Bell Features. In terms of professional recognition, the more relevant information was that in 1946 he was elected as a member of the Canadian Society of Graphic Art, previously known as the Graphic Arts Club, founded in 1904 by C.W. Jefferys and his contemporaries. Avrom went on to serve in various executive posts, including as president in 1966–1967 and again in 1972–1973. The 1948 biographical note summarized his professional activity in concise terms: “cartoonist and graphic artist, mainly black and white, brush and inks; designs and executes stage settings.” It also listed his studies and other signs of achievement, such as work as an instructor at the Art Gallery of Toronto. His work for unions was noted, though without direct reference to his political affiliations: “works mainly as a cartoonist for labour papers in Canada; has been reproduced in many European, American, South American, Australian, New Zealand and South African papers.” There were several lines about his recent commission in Glace Bay, noting that some of the sketches were reproduced and displayed for publicity purposes. His work on Jewish themes was also highlighted: “special Jewish art work for Jewish organizations, specializing in designing Jewish lettering and book covers for Jewish books and other publications in Canada and the U.S.A.”<sup>60</sup>

When the *Canadian Tribune* was launched in January 1940, under the editorship of A.A. MacLeod—a leading Communist Party member who had founded the Canadian League against War and Fascism in 1934—the newspaper cautiously described itself as “A Journal of Democratic Opinion.” By 1943, following the creation of the Labor-Progressive Party (LPP) as “the party of Canadian Communists,” the *Tribune* was recognized as the voice of the LPP and its supporters. From the beginning, its pages carried cartoons, mostly reprinted from British and American newspapers, including work by Gropper, Ellis, and Redfield, and a clever contributor

to the New York tabloid *PM* who went by the name Dr. Seuss.<sup>61</sup> Avrom's name did not begin to appear until a few years later, after which he contributed continually, until only a few years before his death. Already in late 1945, Avrom was recognized in a small but wide-ranging collection, *Masterpieces of Labor Humor*, where he appeared along with Young and Redfield and dozens of other cartoonists for labour and left publications in the United States and other countries. In this case, Avrom was represented by a cartoon from the *Tribune*, on recent efforts to paint the old wolf of the Tory party as an angelic keeper of the flock.<sup>62</sup>

A discussion of Avrom's cartoons in the *Canadian Tribune* must be limited here, because this large body of work has not been listed and inventoried, either from surviving original artwork or from the published pages. At the time of Avrom's death a small selection was published in the *Tribune* as "The Best of Avrom." This was organized under three main headings: "In Defence of Workers' Rights," "International Solidarity," and "The Anti-Fascist Struggle." A fourth heading, "Sketches from Avrom's Notebook," featured drawings from travels to Cuba and Germany and his sketch of the Christmas 1960 peace demonstration in Ottawa.<sup>63</sup> A fuller canvassing of sources should allow a closer analysis of such themes as style and content, circulation and reception.<sup>64</sup>

It is also useful to follow the lead of Anna Hudson, whose 2005 exhibition was based on a selection of the original pen and ink cartoons in the possession of the family. Dating from the 1950s to the 1970s, these were grouped around several themes. "Canadian-American Relations" highlighted war and peace and economic domination, including a bilingual "Put Canada First / Le Canada d'abord" cartoon—no doubt from the early 1950s, when this first appeared as an LPP election slogan—reflecting a renewed emphasis on Canadian nationalism as one of the party's major themes. A "Labour" theme depicted the unfair economics of high prices, wage-cuts, and layoffs as well as the promise of united action by organized labour. "Oil" illustrated the politics of the Middle East, focusing on the defence of the State of Israel and the multinational struggles over oil resources. "Prejudice" addressed issues of anti-Semitism, racism, and human rights, including Maurice Duplessis's use of the Padlock Law against the UJPO in Montréal. "Prime Ministers" offered up Louis St. Laurent, John Diefenbaker, Lester Pearson, and Pierre Elliott Trudeau, all engaged in various opportunistic political behaviour. As Hudson wrote about the cartoons in her notes, "All are animated by a cast of easily recognizable characters: the moneybag, the banker, the capitalist, and the politician—with his police or military sidekick." But the leading part was reserved for the universal worker: "an idealized representation of Labour, who endured the endless greed and buffoonery of capital and political power." She reminds us that "We can laugh at the tragedy of economic inequity because Avrom speaks to us personally to remind us of our humanity, our common ground and our collective strength. What is so surprising about his political cartoons is how relevant the messages remain."<sup>65</sup>



#### UNION RIGHTS, 1949

Asbestos workers in Québec and the Canadian Seamen's Union face common enemies.

Original cartoon for *Canadian Tribune*.

Avrom Yanovsky collection, courtesy of Anna Yanovsky.

Some notable examples in Avrom's work featured similar recurring themes. In 1949, for instance, at the time of the strikes by workers in the asbestos country and by sailors on Canadian ships, Avrom showed members of the Catholic unions in Québec and the Canadian Seamen's Union—both bloodied in battles during the same months that year—standing in solidarity against common foes. It was an overly hopeful projection of labour unity, but an indication of the potential to unite labour across the divides of language and nation within Canada. He continued to explore this theme into the 1970s, and it remains to be learned to what extent his work was reproduced in Québec labour and left publications. From the same period "Better Models Please" was a self-portrait of the "ye cartoonist" at work, menaced by Cold War characters lurking over the top of his easel, including a frequently occurring "Hatelet" figure with a swastika tattoo. In the 1950s, a conversation between father and son beavers building a dam (and drawn with particular diligence, perhaps as a result of some of his commercial work at the time) had them wondering why St.

Laurent and C.D. Howe were dangling their feet in the water and failing to shore up Canadian territory against an American flood. There was something of an answer in a cartoon showing the Ontario premier of the 1950s as a thief delivering Ontario's resources to Wall Street in return for a bag of swag (labeled "peanuts"). In 1961, "Apartheid Must Go" documented the latest Commonwealth Conference, where South Africa's membership was rejected due to its apartheid policies; although much was made of Diefenbaker's support for the exclusion ("Me Too!"), Avrom's representation made it clear that the opposition was led by Britain's former African and Asian colonies.



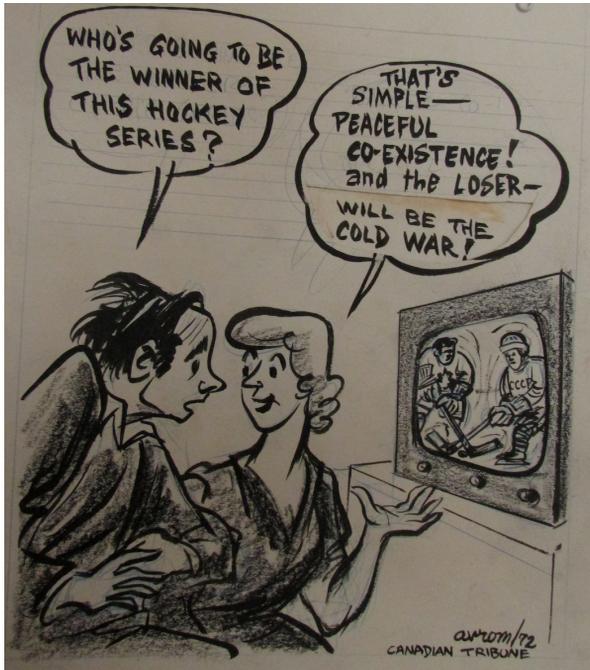
#### ANTI-APARTHEID, 1961

The Commonwealth rejects South Africa, with Canadian support.

Original cartoon for *Canadian Tribune*.

Avrom Yanovsky collection, courtesy of Anna Yanovsky.

One biting cartoon in 1966 linked a newspaper clipping on the flourishing arms industry to a quotation from Shakespeare's *Henry V*: "Now Thrive the Armourers." This was reproduced in a student newspaper at York University and also later submitted to a Moscow-based competition on "Satire in the Struggle for Peace," where it was printed in a run of 30,000 copies. In 1970, another angry cartoon, "Meet the Grim Reaper," pictured Canada's Peace Tower as an instrument of destruction; it was provoked by a newspaper clipping stating "Indian children dying at double national rate." More happily, in 1972, A. Y. Jackson's ninetieth birthday was celebrated with a fond sketch of the artist using his paintbrush to lift the brim of a Canadian worker's hat, enabling him to appreciate the natural landscape before him. Avrom's nationalism and internationalism were reconciled in an interesting way in a conversation on the 1972 Canada-Soviet hockey series: sitting in front of the television, the man asks: "Who's going to be the winner of this hockey series," and the woman answers: "That's simple—peaceful coexistence! And the loser will be the Cold War!"



#### HOCKEY NIGHT, 1972

Winners and losers in the Canada-Soviet hockey series.

Original cartoon for *Canadian Tribune*.

Avrom Yanovsky collection, courtesy of Anna Yanovsky.

Nor did Avrom lose sight of the anti-capitalism that had always marked his work. In his later years he regularly made use of a moneybag figure, a character often with top hat and angry face, apparently descended from the work of Thomas Nast a century earlier. When Canadian workers were threatening to make significant gains in their share of the national income in the early 1970s, an uneasy worker watches while Moneybag, his balloon head now papered in with stock reports, sharpens his knife on the Peace Tower in preparation for wage cuts. In another cartoon, Moneybag is a stick-up artist holding up the Canadian worker at gunpoint on behalf of corporate profits. Elsewhere, farmer and worker are united in kicking Moneybag out the bottom end of the cartoon. One of Avrom's last cartoons, in 1975, featured a quotation from a business leader defending investments in Rhodesia and South Africa on the grounds that corporations served "strictly commercial purposes;" Avrom offered this evidence as confirmation of what Marx and Engels had written on the "callous cash nexus" as the underlying principle of capitalist social relations.

One series of cartoons is worth a separate comment. From 1946 to 1950, many of Avrom's cartoons were tagged by World News Services, and his 1948 biographical note stated that he was "At present working as cartoonist for World News Services, 45 Avenue Rd., Toronto."<sup>66</sup> Most of this work was on international themes and seemed to be targeted for syndication. The selections often warned against the revival of anti-Semitism in the United States and Europe, and many commented on the politics of the Middle East. It was welcome news on the Jewish left when the Soviets, despite their original preference for a two-state solution, endorsed recognition of the State of Israel, and in this spirit, Avrom's cartoons greeted Israel's potential as an incipient workers' state. At the same time, he attacked the machinations of British and American oil interests in the region and made pointed references both to the repressive policies of Arab rulers supported by the West and to the plight of Palestinians abandoned by British policy. This work also included a series of illustrated and informative "Facts in Pix," somewhat in the style of the popular "Ripley's Believe It or Not" panels. These were dedicated to Jewish heritage and identity, often reaching back into ancient or Biblical times or moments in modern history. Both Paul Robeson and Alexander Pushkin were singled out as supporters of the Jewish cultural tradition. There was also some Canadian content, as in the example of "Yank" Levy, portrayed as a Canadian-born guerrilla fighter who fought in Palestine in the First World War, in Nicaragua in 1926, and in the Spanish Civil War, before becoming a military instructor in England and the United States during the Second World War. On the occasion of his death in 1948, there was also a tribute to Shlomo Mikhoels, a determined Soviet advocate for Yiddish culture and a fierce opponent of anti-Semitism in all its forms.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to Avrom's commission for the miners' union in 1947, there was other work for unions. In the early 1950s he prepared a series of "Labour Flashbacks" that used the same "Facts in Pix" style to show episodes in Canadian labour

history. Some focused on particular events or people, such as J.S. Williams and the 1872 Toronto printers' strike ("A Fair Day's Wages / Fair Day's Work") and the career of Daniel J. O'Donoghue ("Father of the Canadian Labor Movement"). Some instalments featured multiple themes: one included the Hudson's Bay Company trading with the First Nations (under the motto "Skin for Skin"), the founding of the Québec Typographical Society in 1860 (with a library featuring Molière and Victor Hugo), and John Hewitt of the Nine Hours League (speaking distinctly Marxist language in 1872). Other "Flashbacks" were devoted to the Winnipeg General Strike, collective bargaining on the railways, workers' compensation, and old age pensions. Some were signed "Avrom" while others carried the pseudonym "Richards." The *UE News* was one of the newspapers that carried this feature, and there was later some discussion of preparing a compilation of this work.<sup>68</sup>

Another union project from this period involved educational filmstrips for use by the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. Under the provocative title "Sheep or Wolf—Whose Dictionary," a 1957 filmstrip focused on the variable meanings of the term "liberty." In this fable, the sheep and the wolf each have their own dictionary. The capitalists have their definition of rights ("Capital's Rights: to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labour"), which they attempt to sell to the workers—neatly bound in sheepskin. On the other hand, workers have their own dictionaries to use in pursuing their rights and liberties ("Liberty: Labour's rights and how to achieve them"). Drawn in an entertaining charcoal and ink style that implies potential animation, the treatment also brings in chattel slavery and wage-labour, Abraham Lincoln, and Mark Twain, suggesting it was prepared with a view for use throughout the international union in North America. In 1961, a more specific Canadian project, "The Time We Work," used data on wages and profits supplied by Mine-Mill's Canadian office to explore some elements of Marxist political economy. This included distinctions between "wage time" ("Working for Yourself") and "profit time" ("Working for the Boss") and the difference between "wages" and "surplus" in the hourly wage. With their attention to the contradictions of liberal democracy and the exploitation of the worker in the capitalist economy, these initiatives were at odds with the ideological climate of the Cold War, and it is not surprising that they were sponsored by unions that remained under attack as "red-led" unions.<sup>69</sup>

### **Cold War**

The small world of Canadian art was hardly exempt from the chill of the Cold War. In 1953, the challenges for the cultural front erupted in a controversy over the annual exhibition mounted by the Canadian Society of Graphic Art. When their show at the Art Gallery of Toronto was announced, a former president claimed that the jury was unduly biased: "work which did not meet Communist criteria had been rejected by the jury in favor of pictures which did." The charge was that "although it might be difficult for a layman to spot, the Communist theme would be very obvi-

ous to a trained artist. They often have such symbols as doves and kites.” In an attempt to address the controversy, Society President Henry Orenstein (whose own work included an “obvious dove picture”) agreed to have an independent panel review the charges. The investigation found that the jury (which had been chosen by a ballot of members across the country) had “acted in good faith” in making the selections, and the show went ahead.<sup>70</sup>



#### SHEEP OR WOLF?

The rights of capital and labour, as represented in a filmstrip for the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, 1957.

Avrom Yanovsky collection, courtesy of Anna Yanovsky.

Certainly, this was not the most auspicious time to launch a collection of art conforming to Communist ideas—especially one explicitly endorsed by party leader Tim Buck as “the work of an outstanding Communist artist.” The publication of a folio of work by Avrom seems to have originated in the idea of celebrating his

25 years of political activism, apparently dating from membership in the Young Communist League in 1927. It was issued by the *Canadian Tribune* as a set of twelve lithograph reproductions on 9 x 12 inch sheets, mainly in black and white but with occasional spot colour, at a price of \$2.00 for the set; on the envelope a self-caricature showed the artist using his pen to puncture a symbolic capitalist pest. The selections demonstrated Avrom's ability to balance human interest and political purpose. The earliest print was "The Last Issue of *The Worker*" (dated 1935) and showed an older worker scanning the pages posted outside the newspaper's offices. One highlight was the set of four prints based on his Glace Bay sketches: pickets on the roadway; a lively child; an older couple promenading in the street; and a troubled landscape of bootleg coal pits. Turning to the wider world, the ravages of war were captured in the image of a woman behind barbed wire; another celebrated the international peace movement; a third showed a boy drawing a dove; a fourth showed a worker ripping up the lies of the Cold War. Contemporary political figures appeared in cartoons of Harry Truman collecting natural resources from Canada, Maurice Duplessis about to be exploded by the legacy of 1837, and in heroic style, Tim Buck as the architect of a socialist Canada. A perceptive review, likely by Orenstein, paid tribute to Avrom's achievement and example as a working-class artist, but otherwise response to the folio was limited.<sup>71</sup>



#### GLACE BAY STRIKER'S CHILD

Lithograph based on sketches from a 1947 trip to Cape Breton. Avrom, *Twelve Litho Prints* (Toronto, 1952). Reproduced courtesy of Anna Yanovsky.

Also launched in 1952 was a quarterly magazine edited by Margaret Fairley, who had conducted book pages for the *Canadian Tribune* and published an anthology, *The Spirit of Canadian Democracy*, a few years earlier. *New Frontiers*, a successor to the earlier *New Frontier*, carried the mission of the cultural front into the 1950s with an editorial statement calling for “A Canadian People’s Culture in a World at Peace.” The first issue named Avrom as an associate editor in a list that included fellow artists Aba Bayefsky, Fred Taylor, and John Goss, as well as writers such as Dyson Carter, Frank Park, and J.S. Wallace, most of them associated with the LPP. In addition to discussions of the Massey Report, French-Canadian novels and the American threat to Canadian culture, the first issue featured poetry selections, short stories, and a worker’s autobiographical narrative. The art included one of Avrom’s Glace Bay prints, titled “Strikers, Glace Bay, 1947.”<sup>72</sup> There was more of his work in later issues, including a cover that unmasked “The Daily Iron Curtain” of the Cold War press. The Winter 1955 issue celebrated Paul Robeson’s landmark performance in *Othello* at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto in 1944, as sketched by Avrom at that time. The timing was not accidental, as this cover appeared on the eve of Robeson’s first trip outside the United States after the State Department revoked his passport in 1950. In the same issue, Avrom wrote about hearing Robeson—on records—during travels in Israel, Hungary, Poland, and Romania: “The people saw to it that the lack of passport must not stop Robeson from entering their hearts.” In February 1956, Robeson performed at Toronto’s Massey Hall and at a Mine-Mill convention in Sudbury. There was also a visit to the UJPO hall on Christie Street. With Avrom beaming from the back of the room, Robeson spoke to children there and gave a memorable recital.<sup>73</sup> However, the Canadian government later that year refused to allow Robeson to undertake a seventeen-city tour across Canada.<sup>74</sup>

The UJPO itself was also directly affected by the Cold War. Established in 1945 as a federation of branches from cities with existing Jewish secular organizations, the UJPO was held together by a sense of belonging to the non-religious and politically radical Jewish culture of Yiddishkeit, rooted in the experiences of continental emigration and North American radicalism. Most members were not Communists, but, like the cultural front as a whole, they were militantly anti-racist, anti-fascist, and pro-labour. In addition to benefits and services, the attractions included music, dance, theatre, art, children’s classes, and summer camps. At its peak, the Toronto branch had a membership of more than 1,400 adults, plus children—numbers that led to the purchase of a large hall on Christie Street, opposite the site of the city’s anti-Semitic riot of 1933. In addition to his work as a recreation director at Camp Naivelt, where he helped celebrate a visit in 1946 by veterans of the Polish resistance, Avrom continued to be a regular at the UJPO hall.<sup>75</sup> He also remained the specialist in designing sets and costumes for the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir.<sup>76</sup> At the time of the Canadian Ballet Festival in 1949, Avrom assisted the UJPO-sponsored Neo-Dance Theatre in the production of an original ballet, “Song of David,”

which was described as “Based on the 23rd Psalm (A Salute to Israel).” Choreographed by dance teacher Cynthia Barrett with music from Moussorgsky, the ballet included a troupe of fifteen dancers. Avrom was credited with work on costumes that featured black and ivory stripes from prayer shawls.<sup>77</sup>

The UJPO came under attack in 1950, when the Québec government used the Padlock Law to shut down the UJPO hall in Montréal. The following year, the Canadian Jewish Congress, the Jewish community’s umbrella organization, expelled the Order on the grounds that they were unduly influenced by Soviet policies on peace, nuclear tests, and German rearmament.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, within the UJPO, there were long-running anxieties about charges of Soviet anti-Semitism, highlighted by the dissolution of organizations such as the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the Jewish State Theatre, and the sudden disappearance of celebrities such as Mikhoels.<sup>79</sup> Concerns came to a head in the period of tentative de-stalinization after Stalin’s death in 1953. Nikita Khrushchev’s 1956 speech denouncing the “cult of personality” and “socialist illegality” precipitated a major crisis. A large exodus of members affected both the UJPO and the LPP, among them the highly influential J.B. Salsberg, who had been one of two LPP members in the Ontario legislature. Other members and supporters, while critical of “shocking abnormalities” in Communist practice, made their peace with the improving situation, believing that the fundamentals of Marxist theory and working-class internationalism remained relevant and that the thaw in domestic politics under Khrushchev was restoring the promise of Soviet society.<sup>80</sup>

Avrom was among those who considered it their responsibility to remain party members, as did the veteran Joshua Gershman—at the time, editor of *Vocbenblatt: The Canadian Jewish Weekly*. In early 1958, Avrom was asked to work with Gershman as the newspaper’s English-language editor. Formally independent of both the LPP and the UJPO, the weekly paper published mainly in Yiddish, with three English-language pages in each issue.<sup>81</sup> For several years, Avrom went to the offices on Tuesday evenings to help put the paper to bed. The English pages carried topical news of interest to the Jewish left, including political developments in places of special interest such as Winnipeg and Tel Aviv. Occasionally there were opportunities for Avrom to include some of his own cartoons and sketches. In 1960, when the United Nations was addressing the issue of anti-Semitism, he reproduced anti-racist cartoons from 1948; and as the Adolf Eichmann trial unfolded in Jerusalem that year, he targeted pro-Nazi speeches in Washington, D.C.; in one of the puns in his cartoon, the slogan “I Like Eich!” sounded suspiciously like a reference to the incumbent American president Dwight Eisenhower. In addition to sounding the alarm about anti-Semitism, another regular theme in the newspaper was the threat of nuclear war and the emergence of a disarmament movement in Canada. With an eye on developments in the Soviet Union, the newspaper also reported on the publication of Yiddish books and magazines there and carried a long discussion on Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s poem “Babi Yar” after it was first published in *Pravda* in

1961.<sup>82</sup>

Avrom's long immersion in the cultural activism of the wider left was visible in an earlier article published in *Vochebnblatt* in 1957. There he had argued that in promoting Yiddish culture it was important to avoid creating a "cultural ghetto" for Jewish Canadians:

Should it not rather mean that through our work we will strive to make Canadian Jews a more integral part of the Canadian people, to become more patriotic, to unite with those who work for the fullest flowering of Canada's independent economic life and eventually for a socialist Canada – with those who want to wipe out anti-Semitism and race-hatred forever?<sup>83</sup>

Certainly, the reader is struck by the wide-ranging cultural content in the newspaper. A sample page from 1960, for instance, reported on CBC successes in radio and television awards in the United States; plans for the carving of a totem pole by a west coast aboriginal artist at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival; the premiere of a Bertolt Brecht play in Toronto, translated into English by a writer whom readers would recognize as a UJPO stalwart; and finally—Avrom must have enjoyed publishing this—a protest at New York's Museum of Modern Art against the gallery's obsession with non-objective art, with artists carrying signs such as "Museum of Modern Nonsense" and "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters – Goya."<sup>84</sup>

### **Making Art**

Few Canadian artists have been able to make a living from their creative work, and Avrom was no exception. We have only a few glimpses of his formal employment history. There were stints as a recreation director at Camp Naivelt and its predecessors. We know too about his work for Bell Features and World News Services. He received some payment for cartoons in labour and ethnic newspapers and likely for presentations at labour conventions. There was also occasional commercial work that ranged from advertising campaigns and publishing projects to puzzles and crosswords. In 1951, shortly before his folio of lithographs was issued, Avrom was employed as a leather cutter in the Spadina garment district. As Buck's foreword pointed out, "except for very few all-too-brief interruptions, Avrom has made his tremendous contribution while working eight hours a day in industry."<sup>85</sup> He was also open to new challenges. In 1957, for instance, he worked on an animation project for a weekly CBC television show in Toronto called *Hit Parade Time*; in a kind of precursor to the music video, he invented stories and pictures to illustrate current popular songs and then drew images in sand to be photographed for stop-action sequences.<sup>86</sup> Later, he did research, interviews and commentary for a short film about the "the multifaceted world of Canadian murals." He also assisted in plans for a documentary film on the Spanish Civil War that included attention to the role

of the Canadian volunteers.<sup>87</sup>

In the early 1950s, Avrom started part-time work for a company called Pest Control Services, which was later able to give him stable employment, and in the 1960s he was listed in Toronto city directories as “artist PCO Services.”<sup>88</sup> His work mainly involved promotional material, instruction manuals, and staff newsletters. PCO Services was started by William Brennan, a former construction worker from Sudbury who was one of the Canadian veterans of the Spanish Civil War (and at one stage had led the Canadian section of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade).<sup>89</sup> Brennan obviously enjoyed working with Avrom and commissioned him to paint at least two murals. One, in his company warehouse, 32 feet in length, depicted the retreat of plagues and pests in the face of the advancing march of science. Another was at his home, in his recreation room, completed in 1967. *The Not-So-Pristine Chapel* was constructed as a parody of Michelangelo, featuring several bearded prophets (one of them reading *Playboy*) bearing witness as women posed in various states of undress and subjugation. The mural included Sigmund Freud (promoting “The Bawdy Beautiful”) and Hugh Hefner (examining “the ticker tape,” possibly the modern serpent). A note by Avrom confirms that the mural was intended as a comment on the exploitation of women: “what happened after all that creation business – was business.” Although the figures showed his skill as a draughtsman, Avrom referred to the images as “executed in the light-hearted vein almost cartoon style, but reflecting in my opinion one of the not so light-hearted positions of women in our society.”<sup>90</sup>

Like other muralists, Avrom must have been measuring his own work against the expectations associated with the great works of the century. It is likely he had seen Picasso’s *Guernica* in New York, when it was shown there in 1939, following its completion for the Paris International Exposition in 1937. When Avrom visited Mexico in 1964, he also studied the work of the Mexican muralists. His trip coincided with the release from prison of the muralist David Siqueiros, whom he met and also sketched. Avrom’s reflections on the trip, published in *Canadian Jewish Outlook*, started with short comments on “the moribund state of contemporary Canadian (and not only Canadian) art.” In his view, abstract art was doomed to irrelevance because it was intent on “eliminating people.” Among the younger generation of humanist artists in Mexico, he met with the émigré Canadian Arnold Belkin, who explained that his contemporaries were pursuing an expressionist “art of anger” in order to overcome the simplistic formulas of the “old” muralists. Avrom’s response was that their art was too often focused on inner moral conflicts—“reflecting the theory of man in general being guilty for all the evils in this world, they depict in the main their human beings in contorted, abnormal and often hideous forms.” What was needed, he urged, was more depiction of those who “fight complacency and want to reform the world.” In his view, this was the challenge for an engaged public art: “They must be pictured differently; true, not prettified – done expressionistically, emotionally, but shown as positive human beings

– it can be done.” He could not dispute the comment that “pastorales are hardly appropriate to the walls of Buchenwald or a bomb shelter;” but he was also offering advice: “why not also depict the forces active in the elimination of future Buchenwalds and the need for bomb shelters?”<sup>91</sup>

Earlier that year Avrom wrote an extended discussion of the 1964 “Picasso and Man” exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto. Like other critics, he was interested in the artist’s transition from largely representational work to abstract, even violent, distortions. In general, Avrom admired Picasso’s ability to “declare his sympathy and support for the downtrodden through art by a perfect merging of content with an appropriate form.” As he put it, “Picasso sees that a society which allows poverty and misery is ‘out of joint’ . . . and he does something about it – he sharpens his method of distorting the human form and surroundings, showing everything as being, one might say, out of joint – his human beings becoming more fiercely broken up, more lacerated.” By the time he painted *Guernica* (the mural was too large for the 1964 travelling show, but many of the preliminary drawings were included), Picasso had sharpened his method, and the mural expressed his response to the horrific suffering embodied in the actual historical event. But if Picasso was a political artist who identified with the Communist Party, Avrom argued, he was also facing a sad contradiction: “Picasso’s art, which is devoted to the common people and a form of protest of their mistreatment, is in the main incomprehensible to them.” The great man had gone too far in his “extreme method of artistic attack against the dehumanization of capitalist society;” and a preoccupation with form had left Picasso open to “arty explanations and hollow interpretations” that failed to take into account the underlying content and intentions.<sup>92</sup> Here Avrom was rehearsing observations that the influential Marxist art critic John Berger would make in his *Success and Failure of Picasso*, which was published the following year.<sup>93</sup>

What kind of art was needed to address the anti-humanism of late capitalism? How was creative work influenced, even shaped, by the artist’s social position? We see Avrom attempting to face the challenges himself in his best-known mural, his *Tribute to Norman Bethune*, completed in late 1964. Its preparation corresponded with a revival of interest in the life and work of the Canadian medical doctor, a larger than life figure in the history of the Communist Party, which he had joined in 1935, when he was a strong advocate of public medicine in Canada, prior to his service in the Spanish Civil War and then in the Chinese Revolution.<sup>94</sup> The Bethune mural, 19 by 7 feet in size, was commissioned for installation in the party headquarters at 24 Cecil Street in Toronto. Avrom noted that while every part of Bethune’s life might be the theme of a separate mural, he wanted to capture “the essence” of the man: “To me that is – the example of the talented intellectual and professional, who, on becoming a Communist, does not just donate his talents to the cause but through and with his talents, not only actively joins in the people’s immediate struggle against war and fascism, but together with Communists the world over, wields the Banner of Communism.”<sup>95</sup>

In the resulting images, we see the surgeon himself, holding his book, grasping a scalpel like a dagger and a large rose branch like a rifle. He is not at the centre of the mural but somewhat to the left, where he is joined by a Spanish woman with an infant, a Chinese soldier with a banner, and a Canadian worker with clenched fist; a placard reads *No Pasaran*, the Spanish Republic's slogan of resistance; not so visible in the background is a thunderbird, a symbol of strength and power and possibly a gesture towards the alternative order of North American Indigenous cultures. On the right are the embattled forces of repression: a helmeted soldier shouldering a missile follows the directions of a suited arm pointing the finger of death; a parody of a familiar politician brandishes a padlock, while the ground is littered with burning books and a skull of death. There is also a large overlapping crab of cancer, which as Avrom notes, belongs to the medical imagery of the whole: the scalpel that will heal the wounded will also attack the disease of capitalism. Although the mural was painted in vivid plastic resins, most photographs show it only in the black, white, and grey tones that remind us of *Guernica*, except that here the wounds of war are confronted by an opposition in which the doctor tips the balance. In colour, it is possible to better discern the thunderbird and blue at the far left, the red book and red flag at the centre, the sickly colours at the right and even, as one critic noted, the symbolic sticks of fascism wrapped in a red herring and a yellow newspaper. As Avrom put it, his intention was to make a statement that pointed to the future while also showing the doctor in his own time in alliance with the forces of resistance to war and fascism.

### The Next Left

Although the Communist Party never recovered from the crisis of 1957, by 1962 there were signs of renewal. Tim Buck was replaced by a younger leader, who promised to give the party a fresh face. Still in his fifties, Leslie Morris was a veteran organizer, with an English and Welsh background, who placed some emphasis on advancing the party's cultural work. In a short guide for newspaper contributors, probably written in the early 1960s, Morris stressed the importance of presenting content of wide interest and doing so from a working-class point of view. He also called for more attention to the use of poems and short stories—and cartoons. The satire in cartoons should be “biting” and the humour “broad,” he advised: “devoted as all great humor and satire is, to the daily, earthy things of life, the world directly around us.”<sup>96</sup> Morris and Avrom shared a background in Winnipeg and were on good personal terms, with Morris occasionally writing to send him a clipping or compliment him on his work. His premature death in 1964 did not put an end to the party's cultural work, but his successor was less committed to such initiatives.

Avrom did not play a large part in internal debates within the Communist Party, but he could be counted on to argue for more attention to the cultural front. In 1961, for instance, he objected that the draft convention resolution, the basic



TRIBUTE TO NORMAN BETHUNE

A mural installation, 19 x 7 feet, for the Norman Bethune Centre, 24 Cecil Street, Toronto, completed in 1964. Original painted in colour acrylics.

Avrom Yanovsky collection, courtesy of Anna Yanovsky.

policy statement, had failed to include a full discussion of culture. He pointed to two main issues. One was “U.S. cultural domination in Canada and resistance to it.” The other he described as “Culture in the battle for ideas,” which would require both “principled Marxist criticism of the arts, literature, music” as well as “critical pride in the achievements already attained.” Several years later, in 1969, Avrom made a written submission that urged the party to make plans to mark the coming fiftieth anniversary of the Winnipeg General Strike. At a time when working-class militancy was on the rise in the 1960s, this was especially relevant: “We should show the historic link between 1919 and the present militant mood and actions of the trade unions.”<sup>97</sup> At times, Avrom had referred to the party’s often inactive “cultural commission” as the “cultural omission.” Perhaps there was some vindication for him when the Cultural Committee marked the party’s fiftieth anniversary with a 1972 calendar carrying the statement: “Culture in the hands of the working people is a weapon in their struggle for Canadian independence and socialism.” By this time the party had a separate Graphic Arts Club in Toronto, through which Avrom was able to have some influence on younger cultural activists.<sup>98</sup>



#### KO-EXISTENCE IN '63

Two months after the Cuban Missile Crisis, John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev join forces to support nuclear disarmament. New Year's Card, 1963.  
Avrom Yanovsky collection, courtesy of Anna Yanovsky

There were also opportunities to build bridges between the old left of his own generation and the emerging new left of the 1960s. In December 1960, Avrom and his son travelled to Ottawa to join hundreds of participants in one of the first anti-nuclear protests organized by the Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; Avrom's sketch of the Christmas Day crowd at the National War Memorial highlighted the placards carrying the then relatively new nuclear disarmament symbol. Meanwhile, Avrom was an early card-carrying member of the Bohemian Embassy, Toronto's original coffee house of the period, when it opened on St. Nicholas Street in 1960. He was also a familiar figure at Grossman's Tavern on Spadina Avenue, where he posted cartoons on the walls and mixed with the next generation of political and cultural activists. His cartoons appeared with some regularity in the pages of the student newspaper at York University's Glendon College, and in 1969 he designed the poster for *The Year of the Barricades*, a conference featuring national and international student leaders. When he attended the huge International Teach-In on the Vietnam War at the University of Toronto in 1965, Avrom sent sketches of the speakers to the *National Guardian* in New York, at the time the largest non-Communist weekly newspaper serving the American left. And he was continuing to draw large banners for various celebrations and public events. For a protest meeting at one of the critical stages in the Paris peace talks of the early 1970s, he made an extended cartoon on a long roll of canvas, showing in turn a globe representing the world addressing an American president who is clutching his missiles while a Vietnamese peasant stands by at a table—all connected by a painted appeal: "End Your Dirty War / Return to the Peace Talks."<sup>99</sup>

One of Avrom's last projects in the mid-1970s took place at a public school only a few blocks from the family home. During the 1975–1976 school year, he worked with a group of students at Withrow Public School to create a mural celebrating Canadian heroes, a theme captured in the project title, "Goodbye Davy Crockett." As a reporter put it, Avrom was concerned that "because of the influence of United States movies and TV, Canadian kids only know about U.S. historical heroes." There were fourteen panels in all, assembled on a mural 16 by 4 feet. Guided by Avrom, the selection was largely made up of people who could be associated with progressive causes and democratic traditions: William Lyon Mackenzie, Louis Riel, and Gabriel Dumont; Jeanne Mance, Laura Secord, Mme. Papineau ("first woman to vote in British Empire"), and Emily Stowe-Howard; painter Paul Kane, map-maker David Thompson, Rev. Evans ("creator of the Cree Indians alphabet"), and Pauline Johnson; Calixa Lavallée and James Naismith; labour leader Daniel J. O'Donoghue and an anonymous Chinese worker ("helping to build the Canadian Pacific Railway"). All of the drawings and paintings were done by the children themselves, including one of Avrom's daughters.<sup>100</sup>

In 1975, Avrom made his last trip to Cuba, where he had an unplanned encounter with Ramón Castro (whom he promptly sketched). He returned home with his usual collection of sketches and ideas for cartoons and puns based on the

visit. By this time, however, his health was deteriorating, and he spent more time in hospital in the following years. Visitors continued to find him drawing and doodling, sketching fellow patients, and ready for the next opportunity to discuss the ongoing situation in the outside world. He died at the Riverdale Hospital in May 1979, but he did not go passively. As one of his last visitors put it, “Despite his weakened condition and his sure knowledge that something fatal was happening, he continued to display an undimmed lively earnestness, passion and combativeness that frankly surprised me.” At a memorial service, party leader William Kashtan attempted to sum up Avrom’s significance in more formal terms:

Avrom used his art to create confidence in man and in his ability to face up to oppression and exploitation and fight back. In truth, he was a people’s artist who identified himself completely and wholly with the struggles of the working class and working people. He did not see art as a neutral force in society but as something the working class needed to help in its struggle today, tomorrow and the next day.<sup>101</sup>

### **Taking Notice**

It is too soon in this process of reconnaissance to offer a comprehensive summing-up, but a few observations are possible. By the time of his death in 1979, Avrom was beginning to receive some wider recognition. Terry Mosher and Peter Desbarats included examples of his work in their popular history of Canadian political cartoons, remarking: “Although not well known to the general public in Canada, his work was reproduced in numerous socialist publications throughout the world during the last forty years.”<sup>102</sup> Avrom has also been represented in more recent anthologies, and his contributions to Canadian comic books have received attention on several websites.<sup>103</sup> As noted earlier, a fuller exploration of his work was initiated in 2005 with a gallery exhibition of his political cartoons, which has circulated to several locations.

As a cartoonist, Avrom Yanovsky had the intelligence, skill and passion of an artist for whom humour was only one of the elements in the tradition as practised by Honoré Daumier and Thomas Nast in the nineteenth century. Their twentieth-century successors in the radical press were not so much hecklers of the passing scene as moral critics of contemporary society. As the editors of a small anthology observed in 1945, “If leftwing humor laughs, albeit rather dolefully, at what mankind is, it is with the hope of arousing him to a vision of what he *could* and *ought* to be.”<sup>104</sup> Though rarely light in tone, Avrom’s cartoons could be amusing or satirical, at other times grim or sombre, determined or hopeful. The execution could be straightforward, even minimalist, or there could be small details, even elements of collage, to reward the attentive viewer. As in the case of Daumier, the range of his work was broader than the cartoon, and his peers in the graphic arts

admired his talent for sketches and portraits and scenes of social observation. As the typographer and designer Carl Dair wrote in a letter of support in 1965: "I have watched his growth from a young political cartoonist to an accomplished artist of stature. All who know him will attest to his intense dedication to his work, and the energy and enthusiasm which he can bring to a project, and sustain until its completion."<sup>105</sup> Contemporaries recall that whether he was attacking enemies or celebrating heroes, researching an illustration or drawing a portrait, making a banner or painting a mural, Avrom's intensity shone through. When he was working at his art, recalled a former student, he was not an angry man but more like a composer with music in his head, and when he performed his chalk-talks, he did not mind laughing at his own work as he went along. Whatever the requirements of a project, his theme was the ongoing struggle for a better world, a conviction that emerged clearly in his occasional writings on the mission of the artist. The transgression in his art was not that of the individual rebel or social critic, but an organic transgression, performed on behalf of the social movements and political loyalties with which he fully associated.

Avrom's closest comrades understood him as an "artist-revolutionary" who found much to admire in the ideas of Margaret Fairley, the dedicated advocate of the cultural front with whom he had worked on many occasions. In particular, Avrom was inspired by her argument that deep-rooted cultural traditions and practices among the Canadian people could enrich anti-capitalist critiques and pro-socialist alternatives.<sup>106</sup> More generally, Fairley identified the responsibility of the communist cultural worker to build upon the existing culture in order to point the way to a more democratic future. To do so, Fairley had written, artists were called upon to resist the "widespread" and fashionable" flight from responsibility and dedicate themselves instead to "enlarging the experience of their fellows through their creative work." As David Kimmel has pointed out, Fairley encouraged artists to turn their energies to cultural activities that engaged public participation and met the needs of the people at large.<sup>107</sup>

To further understand Avrom within a tradition, we may take a page from the Marxist cultural philosopher Ernst Fischer, whose work was also familiar to him. Fischer saw the artist as a magician who performs in art the meanings of the times and discloses the possibilities of transformation. In simplified terms, which he elaborates in *The Necessity of Art*, through this kind of gesture towards the rebalancing of social relations and material conditions, the individual experience is creatively linked to the universal interests of humanity. For the twentieth-century revolutionary, the artist's mission was not only to expose the insecurity and dehumanization of late capitalism but also to visualize the preparation and promise of a socialist future. Without magic, Fischer tells us, there is no art; but, he adds, "the essential function of art for a class destined to change the world, is not that of *making magic* but of *enlightening and stimulating action*."<sup>108</sup>



### MAKING BREAD

Avrom at work, front left, alongside other bakery workers. Originally at Health Bread, Toronto, now at Pan Chancho Bakery, Kingston, Ontario.

Reproduced courtesy of Zoë Yanovsky.

Let me end here with the small moment of magic I experienced a few years ago when I walked into the Pan Chancho bakery, on Princess Street in Kingston, Ontario. Looking up at a large painting above the counter, I was carried back to Health Bread on St. Clair Avenue in Toronto in the 1960s—the aroma of rye and kimmel, cinnamon and challah floating above the Saturday morning conversations. I remembered seeing the same circle of people at their work, mixing, rolling, cutting, decorating, baking, all joyously intent in a purposeful division of labour free of alienation or misery. I inquired of the staff, who confirmed that, yes, the painting was the work of the bakery owner's grandfather, known to the staff as Zalman's father. And there in the foreground of the painting, we see Avrom himself. Perhaps a little more serious than the others. Perhaps he has just made a joke or a pun that has caused the others to laugh. But there he is, all these years later, through

the magic of his art, in a happy environment, still working, sharing, creating. Was he really one of the early bakery workers at Health Bread? It does not matter. Following John Berger, let us remember that great art, when it works, always has the energy of a promise, a promise to reject things as they are in favour of the way things should be.<sup>109</sup>

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One of the lithographs from the visit, “Pickets—Glace Bay Coal Strike,” is reproduced as the cover illustration accompanying David Frank, “In Search of C.B. Wade, Research Director and Labour Historian, 1944–1950,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 79 (Spring 2017), 9–52. The artist appears with union officers in the photograph on page 22, fourth from the left. On the visit, see *Canadian Tribune*, May 3 and May 20, 1947. Some sketches also appeared in the *Glace Bay Gazette*, May 23, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> The comment is in one of Taylor’s letters to Avrom, May 26, 1952. This correspondence is in the unsorted Avrom Yanovsky collection, which I examined in April 2017 with the kind permission of Anna Yanovsky and the cooperation of archivist Shane McCord at Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa [LAC]. Some of the evidence in this article is drawn from this collection as well as other sources, including conversations with Mrs. Yanovsky. For Taylor’s biography, see John Virtue, *Fred Taylor: Brother in the Shadows* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> A short version of this article was presented at the conference “Scholarship, Activism, Public History: A Celebration of the Work and Leadership of Craig Heron,” York University, May 27, 2017. For a selection of the conference’s papers, see *Left History* 21, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2017). At an early stage in this research, I benefited from reading an unpublished paper by Susan Grabek. I am especially grateful to Anna Hudson for sharing research and information, and to the participants in an exploratory workshop on Yanovsky’s work, held at Hart House, University of Toronto, May 28, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> “Who’s Who in Ontario Art,” *Ontario Library Review*, XXXII, 3 (August 1948): 245; Terry Mosher [Aislin] and Peter Desbarats, *The Hecklers: A History of Canadian Political Cartooning and a Cartoonists’ History of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), 227; Ester Reiter, *A Future without Hate or Need: The Promise of the Jewish Left in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 277–278. One of the few academic discussions to include Avrom’s work is Scott Vokey, “Inspiration

for Insurrection or Harmless Humour: Class and Politics in the Editorial Cartoons of Three Toronto Newspapers during the early 1930s,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 45 (Spring 2000), 141–170.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Hudson, *Free Discussion is the Key to Peace: The Political Cartoons of Avrom Yanovsky*, Samuel J. Zacks Gallery, Toronto, 2005. See also David Abramowitz, “Exhibiting the Political Cartoons of Avrom Yanovsky,” *Outlook* January/February 2006, 26–27.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Fairley, “The Cultural Worker’s Responsibility to the People,” *Horizons: The Marxist Quarterly* 25 (Spring 1968): 4–6. See also David Kimmel, “The Spirit of Canadian Democracy and the Communist Cultural Worker’s Responsibility to the People,” *Left History* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 34–55.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997). See also Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002). Some parallel developments in Great Britain are discussed in Robert Radford, *Art for a Purpose: The Artists’ International Association, 1933–1953* (Winchester, Hampshire: Winchester School of Art Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, James Doyle, *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002). See also Patricia Mazepa, “Battles on the Cultural Front: The (De)labouring of Culture in Canada, 1914–1944” (PhD diss., Carleton University, 2003). The emergence of “socialist modernism” among writers is discussed in Candida Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics: Women, Literature, and the Left in 1930s Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). Activist theatre is explored in Alan Filewood, *Committing Theatre: Theatre Radicalism and Political Intervention in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> “Canadian labor’s greatest battle,” *Canadian Jewish Outlook*, July–August 1969, 3. Anna Yanovsky recalls that Avrom sometimes related a story about soldiers marching in the street after demobilization and shouting slogans such as “We want Soviets.”

<sup>10</sup> Abramowitz, “Exhibiting,” 26–27; Reiter, *A Future without Hate or Need*, 154–161. As Harry Gutkin points out, the secular Jewish schools were known for their strong commitment to a “broadly humanist education,” with as much attention to Shakespeare as to Yiddish writers; those who went on to high school often distinguished themselves as a result of their early training. See the recollections in Harry Gutkin, *The Worst of Times, The Best of Times* (Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1987), 15–18 et passim.

<sup>11</sup> Doug Smith, *Joe Zuken: Citizen and Socialist* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1990), 15–18. A picture of the graduates, reproduced in *Canadian Jewish Out-*

*look*, May 1980, 10, shows Joe Zuken and his brother Bill Ross as well as Avrom and Nechama. My thanks to Stan Carbone of the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada for consulting about the photograph.

<sup>12</sup> “Canadian labor’s greatest battle,” 4. On Johns, see “Memorable Manitobans,” *Manitoba Historical Society*, [http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/johns\\_rj.shtml](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/johns_rj.shtml). 4.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Joe Zuken*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Canadian Tribune*, June 4, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Parke-Taylor, *Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald: Life and Work* (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Alfsen had an extensive background in Europe and New York and a particular interest in human figures. Murphy too had excellent training and was known for the accuracy of his landscapes. For her part, McKague was beginning to break with the dominant image of the north as a wilderness and showing interest in the social and industrial scenes of the mining towns of northern Ontario. In New York as a student in 1939, Avrom was invited to sit as the Canadian representative on a peace council; he proposed instead that Lismer, who had recently taken a position at Columbia University, would be more appropriate.

<sup>17</sup> His earliest submissions were entitled “Guadalajara 1937,” “Casting Reflections,” “Retreat from Oshawa,” and “Anschluss.” See LAC, Canadian Society of Graphic Art Records, MG28, I381, vol. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Reiter, *A Future without Hate or Need*, 235. The quotation about the camp is from the text for William Kashtan’s comments at a memorial service in 1979. Avrom’s recollection is quoted by Reiter, 216, from his contribution to the choir’s 25th anniversary book, published in 1945. For insights into the political and cultural context of immigrant working-class Toronto during Avrom’s lifetime, see Rosemary Donegan, *Spadina Avenue* (Toronto and Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Doyle, *Progressive Heritage*, ch. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Toby Gordon Ryan, *Stage Left: Canadian Theatre in the Thirties* (Toronto: CTR Publications, 1981), 34–37.

<sup>21</sup> See the programme reproduced in Dorothy Livesay, *Right Hand, Left Hand: A True Life of the Thirties* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcépic, 1977), 76. The original production was performed in December 1933, to an audience of 1,500 people at the Standard Theatre at Spadina Avenue and Dundas Street. When a second performance was scheduled in January 1934, the theatre was threatened with suspension of its licence. See Richard Wright and Robin Endres, eds., *Eight Men Speak and Other Plays from the Canadian Workers’ Theatre* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1976).

<sup>22</sup> Gordon Ryan, *Stage Left*, 35. She recalls Avrom’s presentations as “light, incisive and comic chalk-talks [that] charmed audiences everywhere we went.”

<sup>23</sup> J.W. Bengough, *Chalk Talks: A Series of Platform Addresses on Various Topics, with Reproductions of the Impromptu Drawings with which they were Illustrated* (Toronto: Musson Book Company, 1922). As practised by Bengough and Yanovsky, the chalk-talks have been described as “theatricalizations of information” that anticipated more contemporary techniques: see Filewood, *Committing Theatre*, 44–45. The chalk-talk was not original to Bengough, as it was used by Methodist preachers in the late nineteenth century. Avrom was also influenced by examples from the John Reed Club in New York, where the working-class cartoonist William Gropper used chalk-talks.

<sup>24</sup> The chalk-talks were recalled in detail in many of the interviews conducted in 2005 in preparation for the York University exhibition of Avrom’s cartoons. I am grateful to Prof. Hudson for sharing the recorded interviews.

<sup>25</sup> “Avrom on Cartoons,” *Always Ready* June 1936, 68–69. Avrom was listed as a contributing editor to this monthly magazine, which published from 1934 to 1937 and billed itself as “A Magazine for Canadian Workers’ and Farmers’ Boys and Girls.” In later years, Avrom’s own preparations included stage notes reminding him of the sequence of images for a particular story.

<sup>26</sup> This discussion is based on issues of the *Canadian Labor Defender* during its first two years of publication, May 1930 to May 1932.

<sup>27</sup> The discussion here is based on issues of *Masses* during its two years of publication, April 1932 to March to April 1934.

<sup>28</sup> A similar idea was later used by Arch Dale, the cartoonist for the Liberal *Winnipeg Free Press*. See “Summer Styles, 1935,” in *Five Years of R B Bennett with Arch Dale of the Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Free Press, 1935). Dale’s cartoon, published July 6, 1935, shows Prime Minister R.B. Bennett at the window of the Dictatorship Outfitting Company, pondering the costumes of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini.

<sup>29</sup> *Masses* (November 1932). See Doyle, *Progressive Heritage*, 90–95, for a discussion of the range of views in *Masses* on art as an instrument of class struggle. He notes that prior to the emergence of the Progressive Arts Clubs, the Communist Party had been relatively uninterested in cultural questions. As Nancy Butler has commented, even when art was positively defined as propaganda, the cultural activists within the movement served to broaden political strategies beyond the formula of class versus class: see Butler, “Mother Russia and the Socialist Fatherland: Women and the Communist Party of Canada, 1932–1941, with specific reference to the activism of Dorothy Livesay and Jim Watts” (PhD diss., Queen’s University, 2010), 355.

<sup>30</sup> My reading of files for *The Worker* and *Daily Clarion* has benefited from earlier research compiled by Anna Hudson and Emma Frank.

<sup>31</sup> One of his last cartoons during this period, “The New Master” (March 1,

1938), accompanied an analysis of Neville Chamberlain's arrival at Downing Street. The reprints were often drawn from the American radical press, but also included items from daily newspapers in the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, and occasionally from the liberal press in Québec.

<sup>32</sup> The contest ended with a blank ballot on September 4, 1937, and the full set of results was published on October 16, 1937. The 42 individual instalments were not signed, but the photoengravers union label indicates that they were produced in Toronto, and the cartoons reflect Avrom's playful style and liking for puns.

<sup>33</sup> Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974), 190–191. A photograph in the *Clarion*, March 2, 1938, identifies the individuals and notes that the event marked the first anniversary of the International Brigade. Avrom was likely also one of the artists who prepared banners and posters to decorate Toronto's Masonic Temple for the 500 delegates at the Communist Party convention in October 1937: *Clarion*, October 18, 1937. During the meetings, he did sketches of some delegates, which were published in the *Clarion*, October 13, 1937.

<sup>34</sup> Locals of the Artists' Union were listed in the *Annual Report on Labour Organization in Canada* for the years 1935–1939. See A.T. Vivash, "Trade Unions for Artists," *New Frontier* May 1937, 22–23. For more context, see Angela E. Davis, *Art and Work: A Social History of Labour in the Canadian Graphic Arts Industry to the 1940s* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), ch. 7, esp. 129–131.

<sup>35</sup> *New Frontier* was the magazine of "Canadian Literature and Social Criticism" that succeeded *Masses* as an editorial project of the cultural front. The managing editor was William Lawson, with a board that included Dorothy Livesay, Leo Kennedy, Margaret Gould and J. Francis White. The artist Henry Mayerovitch was one of the associate editors and contributed work, as did Charles Comfort, Laurence Hyde, Louis Muhlstock, Fritz Brandtner, and others. Avrom's work included a cover illustration (October 1937) linking Mitchell Hepburn and Maurice Duplessis.

<sup>36</sup> *American Artists School, 1937–38* and *American Artists School, 1938–39* [brochures], Joseph Kaplan papers, 1915–1977: Series 4: Printed Material, 1915–1975, Box 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. See also Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "The American Artists School: Radical Heritage and Social Content Art," *Archives of American Art Journal* 26, no. 4 (1986), 17–23, and, more generally, Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 132–133 et passim.

<sup>37</sup> Art Young (1866–1943) came from a small-town background in the American Midwest and worked on mainstream newspapers before undergoing the conversion to socialism and becoming a founder of *Masses* and a leading radical cartoon-

ist of his time. See his autobiography, originally published in 1939: *Art Young: His Life and Times* (New York: Hyperion Press, 1975). Young's cartoons often had an ironic edge and several are among classics of the genre. See <http://www.cartooningcapitalism.com/artyoung/>.

<sup>38</sup> It is possible Avrom renewed contact with Richard Taylor, a contributor to *Masses* under the pseudonym "Ric" before moving to New York in 1936, where he became a frequent contributor to the *New Yorker* and other magazines. In later years, Avrom remained in contact with Groth and Gellert. Redfield, whose cartoons rivalled Young in their satirical bite and were also often reprinted in Canada, was a particularly interesting case; behind the pseudonym was Syd Hoff, another contributor to the *New Yorker*, who became a popular children's book author and illustrator. One of his last books, *Boss Tweed and the Man Who Drew Him* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1978), shows the nineteenth-century cartoonist Thomas Nast serving the public interest by provoking bitter laughter about existing conditions; the book concludes with Nast telling children, 48: "You deserve a better world. That's why I draw."

<sup>39</sup> *American Artists School, 1937–38* and *American Artists School, 1938–39*.

<sup>40</sup> *Spring Arts Ball*, 1939. It was an ambitious event: dancing at 10 p.m.; singers at midnight; a grand parade and costume judging at 1 a.m.; a dance presentation at 2 a.m. The Association aimed to meet the needs of young artists and students through exhibitions, lectures, discussions, and publications. A list of patrons included prominent artists associated with the School and the Congress. For a brief reference, see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 124.

<sup>41</sup> Reiter, *A Future without Hate or Need*, 183–185, has described some of the contents in issues from 1945 and 1947. She also discusses the Polish-born editor Itche Goldberg, director of schools and cultural programs for the Jewish People's Fraternal Order. He immigrated to Canada in the 1920s but left for New York in 1932. Fuller research should shed light on Avrom's contributions to this Yiddish-language magazine. Reiter has noted that Avrom prepared full-page comics about a Jewish hero or Yiddish author for issues of the magazine. More generally, see Julia L. Mickenberg and Phillip Nel, eds., *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> As was the case at Toronto's Camp Kindervelt and its successor at Camp Naivelt, north of the city (which opened in 1937), the emphasis was on progressive approaches to education, including art, music, drama, and dance, all shaped by the political radicalism of the secular Jewish working-class community. See Paul C. Mishler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 89–94.

<sup>43</sup> Participants at the 1941 Kingston Conference, which gave rise to the Federa-

tion of Canadian Artists, included several of Avrom's associates, such as Leonard Brooks, Charles Comfort, Henry Mayerovitch, Louis Muhlstock, Carl Schaefer, and Fred Taylor. His former teachers Yvonne McKague and Eric Alfsen were also in attendance, as were Arthur Lismer and A.Y. Jackson. See *The Kingston Conference Proceedings: A Reprint of the Proceedings of the 1941 Kingston Artists' Conference* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 2001). For insights into the politics of art at this juncture, see Andrew Nurse, "'A Confusion of Values': Artists and Artistic Ideologies in Canada, 1927–1952," (MA thesis, Queen's University, 1991), esp. 105–152.

<sup>44</sup> Reiter, *A Future without Hate or Need*, 221; the reminiscence is by Ben Shek, *Canadian Jewish Outlook*, May 1980, 11. The performance was also recalled in the 2005 interview with Ruben Blaser, who performed in the production.

<sup>45</sup> When a support committee was organized, Avrom drew the cover for a pamphlet issued in March 1941. See *They Fought for Labor—Now Interned!* (Committee for the Release of Labor Prisoners, 1941). For the changing context, see Reg Whitaker, "Official Repression of Communism During World War II," *Labour/Le Travail*, 17 (Spring 1986): 135–166.

<sup>46</sup> *Globe and Mail*, September 7 and September 9, 1943.

<sup>47</sup> *Globe and Mail*, June 22, 1943. Avrom's participation is inferred from a reference in his 1948 biographical note stating that this work was in a Leningrad collection. For the formal presentation and speeches by the Canadian ambassador and others in 1944, see LAC, Records of the Department of External Affairs, RG25, vol. 2923, file 2727-V-40.2.

<sup>48</sup> "Attestation and Statement of Services, Non-Permanent Active Militia of Canada," as supplied by LAC, December 13, 2016. His unit was listed as 2nd Div. Petrol. Coy. R.C.A.S.C (R) and covered activity from September 10, 1942 to November 15, 1945.

<sup>49</sup> A discussion of Zalman (1944–2002) is beyond the scope of this exploration. He was greatly influenced by his parents, but when asked in later years why his music was not more political, his reply was that he had enough of that growing up: "Both of my parents were Communists, so I had already stormed a lot of barricades." Nicholas Jennings, *Before the Gold Rush: Flashbacks to the Dawn of the Canadian Sound* (Toronto: Viking, 1997), 126. Some contemporaries who attended Camp Naivelt were more directly engaged in protest music, inspired in part by visitors such as Pete Seeger. The most notable were The Travellers (who Canadianized Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land") and were widely recognized by 1967 as Canada's troubadours. On Zalman, see the appreciation by Marni Jackson, *Globe and Mail*, December 21, 2002.

<sup>50</sup> The story is from Anna Yanovsky. For context, see Arthur Lennig, *The Immortal Count: The Life and Films of Bela Lugosi* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky,

2003) and N.F. Dreisziger, “Émigré Artists and Wartime Politics, 1939–45,” *Hungarian Studies Review*, XXI, 1–2 (Spring–Fall 1994), 49–75. The American artist Hugo Gellert was active in campaigns against the Horthy regime and was a likely go-between in arranging for Avrom’s contribution. In later years, Avrom continued to use the name Tinódi when he published in the Hungarian-language newspaper, *Canadian Hungarian Worker*.

<sup>51</sup> John Bell, *Invasers from the North: How Canada Conquered the Comic Book Universe* (Toronto, Dundurn, 2006), 15 and, for this period, 43–70. For more background, see Michael Hirsh and Patrick Loubert, *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1971) as well as John Bell, *Guardians of the North: The National Superhero in Canadian Comic-Book Art* (Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, 1992) and John Bell, ed., *Canuck Comics* (Montréal: Matrix Books, 1986).

<sup>52</sup> After some early experiments in colour, the publishers chose to print mainly in black and white (with colour covers) and for this reason the comics were referred to as the “Canadian Whites.” These were easier to print on the available presses, but working in black and white required a high degree of skill to achieve good balance and shading. See Hirsh and Loubert, *The Great Canadian Comic Books*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Hirsh and Loubert, *The Great Canadian Comic Books*, 140. For an excerpt, see 148–149.

<sup>54</sup> For excerpts, see Hirsh and Loubert, *The Great Canadian Comic Books*, 79–80. These are actually taken from different episodes. The first episode of “The Mysterious Mr. Mister” appeared in *Joke Comics* #25, April–May 1946, 11–16; the second was in *Triumph Comics* #30, April–May 1946; the final episode appeared in *Dime Comics* #28, February–March 1946. The UNRRA reference is to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, established in 1943 and active in postwar relief in Europe prior to the Marshall Plan. Hirsh and Loubert, 68–69, also describe another episode: “In one adventure, Major Domo was tricked into accepting a pair of artificial arms, which later proved to be a sort of Trojan horse; the arms were controlled by Dr. Juan, a former Nazi, and Domo became powerless to resist his will. Major Domo became a fascist tool! Yanovsky presumably meant it as a metaphor of what fascism can do to people.”

<sup>55</sup> Hirsh and Loubert, *The Great Canadian Comic Books*, 69. For an excerpt, see 78–80.

<sup>56</sup> For an excerpt, see Hirsh and Loubert, *The Great Canadian Comic Books*, 258. The editors state that the detective resembled Bell art director Dingle, who was of the same age as Avrom and had also studied at the Ontario College of Art in the early 1930s. One document in the Bell Features copyright and trademarks file indicates that “Hugh Dunit” was first published on October 27, 1945 and registered on January 12, 1945; the latter date is apparently an error that, on the strength of the serial number on the document, should be dated 1946. See LAC,

---

Bell Features fonds, R492-0-5-E, vol. 1.

<sup>57</sup> This summary, as well as the discussion above, is based on evidence on the very useful website <http://canadasowncomics.com> as well as the digitized copies of the Bell Features comics listed (and linked) in the finding aid for the LAC Bell Features Collection. For the link, see AMICUS No. 43122013.

<sup>58</sup> Bell, *Invaders*, 16, 50, 86. Avrom's work may be seen as part of a realist trend within the comic book tradition. Some publishers experimented with straightforward didactic stories, as in a "Canadian Heroes" series based on historical figures and police cases. As Bell has noted, in the long run the medium was evolving "beyond adolescent fantasies of super-heroism" towards a more mature art form capable of telling "adult stories." He does not discuss Yanovsky but notes the work of another artist of the cultural front, Laurence Hyde; his wordless wood-cut narrative of atomic bomb tests in the South Pacific, *Southern Cross: A Novel of the South Seas* (1951), is identified as "the first English Canadian graphic novel."

<sup>59</sup> Bell, "A History of English Canadian Comic Books," in Bell, ed., *Canuck Comics*, 27–35. The situation was complicated by a moral panic about the depiction of violent crime in comic books. This resulted in a 1949 amendment to the Criminal Code, directed against the more extreme examples of American imports. The legislation was supported by the Communists as part of their resistance to the Americanization of Canadian culture.

<sup>60</sup> "Who's Who in Ontario Art."

<sup>61</sup> In early 1940, several cartoons were signed George Cruikshank Jr., likely a reference to the British caricaturist George Cruikshank (1792–1878), who was known in his time as "the modern Hogarth," possibly a case of Avrom employing another pseudonym. One of these cartoons was a comment on the fate of Superman—"with apologies to Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster"—under the wartime Defence of Canada Regulations which, the *Tribune* suggested, had caused the *Toronto Star* to suspend the comic for inadequate support of the war. See *Canadian Tribune*, March 2, 1940.

<sup>62</sup> The topical reference was to the role of Gladstone Murray and B.A. Trestrail in the 1945 Ontario provincial election. An epigram from Byron was cited on the futility of the attempt to improve the Tory image: "Looking, doubtless, much more snugly/Yet even then t'would be damned ugly." Harry Gutkin and J.B. Gladstone, eds., *Masterpieces of Labor Humor* (Winnipeg: Contemporary Publishers, n.d. [1945]), 60. Avrom was represented by the same cartoon in a related version of the book from the same publishers, *An International Treasury of Leftwing Humor* (Winnipeg: Contemporary Publishers, n.d. [1945]). The editors were activists associated with the CCF in Winnipeg. The publishing house, which also brought out an edition of Joe Wallace's poetry, was evidently a project of the local cultural front. Gutkin himself was an occasional cartoonist and graphic artist: see

---

[http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/gutkin\\_h.shtml](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/gutkin_h.shtml).

<sup>63</sup> *Canadian Tribune*, June 4, 1979.

<sup>64</sup> The discussion here is limited to work in the *Canadian Tribune*. A sampling of the Yanovsky collection shows that work appeared in various publications of the ethnic left in Canada, including the *Canadian Hungarian Worker*, *Ukrainian Life*, *Vapaus* and *Voebenblatt*, as well as in union newspapers associated with left-led unions such as the United Electrical Workers and Mine-Mill. There was international circulation too, and there are examples of his work in the Soviet satirical magazine *Krokodil* and other Eastern European publications.

<sup>65</sup> Hudson, *Free Discussion is the Key to Peace*.

<sup>66</sup> Some uncertainty attaches to World News Services. In 1945 the New York publishers McGraw-Hill, owners of *Business Week* and other periodicals, established an internal news agency called World News Service to strengthen their coverage of international affairs. See Ralph E. Kliesch, "History and Operations of the McGraw-Hill World News Service," PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1968, esp. chapters IV and V. However, *Business Week* seems an unlikely distributor for Avrom's work. Moreover, the tags on his cartoons and illustrations read "Services," not "Service," implying that these are not the same agency. A tentative answer may be that World News Services was related to a British-based publication, *World News and Views* (1938–1953), later *World News*, that succeeded the earlier Communist International periodical, *Inprecorr* [*International Press Correspondence*] and supplied material that could be reprinted in various national contexts. My thanks to Stephen Endicott for consulting on this matter.

<sup>67</sup> As discussed below, it was not acknowledged at the time that Mikhoels was murdered on Stalin's orders. Five years earlier, he had been at Maple Leaf Gardens as chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee; Avrom was likely in attendance, and his sketch of Mikhoels may have dated from that event.

<sup>68</sup> Also at this time, Avrom was engaged in preliminary work for a planned "People's History of Canada" based on a manuscript by Frank and Libbie Park. The unfinished work included pencil sketches of women millworkers in a factory and a street scene of unemployed workers in the 1870s, as well as rough drawings for episodes such as the General Strike in Winnipeg and Davis Day in Cape Breton.

<sup>69</sup> It is not clear if the second project was completed, although the original art work survives. In 1965, Avrom also assisted Mine-Mill in resisting the Steelworkers attempt to take over their jurisdiction in Sudbury. He produced cartoons, posters, flyers and other graphic material for the campaign. One illustration showed Mine-Mill as a solid tree trunk supported by the many roots of a union town: "Security," "Purchasing Power," "Community Projects," "Union Halls," "Children's Camp," "Brotherhood." Although they lost at International Nickel, Mine-Mill Local 598 retained certification at Falconbridge until joining the Cana-

dian Auto Workers in 1993. From later years, there is evidence that Avrom also did work for mainstream unions, such as the United Packinghouse Workers of America.

<sup>70</sup> *Globe and Mail*, November 13, 1952, March 31, April 2 and 11, 1953. For some relevant documents, see the 1953 file in LAC, Canadian Society of Graphic Art Records, MG28, I381, vol. 4. Avrom was not mentioned in connection with the show but was a member of the executive and no doubt one of those thought to be exerting undue political influence. A favourable review in the *Globe* singled out work by Rudy Kovach, Albert J. Franck, Irene Heywood, Oscar Cahén, Kazuo Nakamura, Ted Kramoic, Telesforas Valius, and Orenstein.

<sup>71</sup> Avrom, *Twelve Litho Prints* (Toronto: Canadian Tribune, 1952). The appreciative review by “H.O.” in *New Frontiers*, Spring 1952, 50, drew attention to the Glace Bay work because it showed the potential of cultural interaction with working-class communities: “The realistic portrayal of life has hardly been started by Canadian artists. Avrom could make a rich contribution in this field as he has in political cartooning.” In private correspondence, Fred Taylor warmly congratulated Avrom on the publication while taking issue with overstatements by his sponsors: “You would be the first [to] deny that your work is ‘always’ striking and that you have never sacrificed ‘artistic’ quality to political content in it.”

<sup>72</sup> *New Frontiers*, Winter 1952. Note also his “Glace Bay Singer” (Fall 1953). The Winter 1954 issue included sketches from Hungary, Romania, and Poland, which Avrom visited as part of a group that included Fairley and Wallace.

<sup>73</sup> A photo of the visit to the UJPO is reproduced in Reiter, *A Future without Hate or Need*, 180. On previous visits, Robeson had performed with the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir. See Laurel Sefton MacDowell, “Paul Robeson in Canada: A Border Story,” *Labour/Le Travail* 51 (Spring 2003): 177–221.

<sup>74</sup> *Globe and Mail*, April 11, 12 and 16, 1956.

<sup>75</sup> In later years, he was recalled as a welcome visitor to Sunday classes after the UJPO opened its new hall at the Morris Winchevsky Centre in North York in 1961. One pupil remembers him asking one of the children to place a squiggle on the drawing board. Then Avrom rapidly added the King’s castle, Haman, Mordecai, and Esther while telling the story of Purim that celebrated the fighting spirit of the Jewish people and their salvation from a threatened holocaust in ancient times. It was entertaining and memorable, he recalled: “All started from that initial mark from my classmate. All of this in less than five minutes.” My thanks to Mitch Kamiel for sharing this account. Very similar recollections from classes in the 1940s were shared by Thelma Kane in the interviews collected in 2005.

<sup>76</sup> Avrom’s imaginative representation of shtetl housing, prepared as a backdrop for performances of the Choir, remains in use on the UJPO website: <http://ujpo.org>.

<sup>77</sup> On the dance production, see *Globe and Mail*, February 22, 1949 and Susan Macpherson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Theatre Dance in Canada/Encyclopédie de la Danse Théâtrale au Canada* (Toronto: Dance Collection Danse Press, 2000), 539, which also includes an account of Barrett's influential career at 65–68. A National Film Board production from 1949, *Ballet Festival*, includes a brief selection from this ballet.

<sup>78</sup> Morris Biderman, *A Life on the Jewish Left: An Immigrant's Experience* (Toronto: Onward Publishing, 2000), 79, 134 et passim. One result of the expulsion was the loss of subsidies for the children's schools. The Congress also refused to support a touring exhibition of Holocaust photographs and documents from Poland arranged by the ostracized organization.

<sup>79</sup> Mikhoels received a state funeral, even as he was one of the most prominent victims of Joseph Stalin's "anti-cosmopolitan" campaign. His body had been found in the snow, run over by a truck in the middle of the night in a remote part of Minsk, where he had been sent to review a play. Stalin's daughter remembered her father discussing the "accident" on the telephone. See Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 32–40 and Rosemary Sullivan, *Stalin's Daughter: The Extraordinary and Tumultuous Life of Svetlana Alliluyeva* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2015), 148–149.

<sup>80</sup> Gerald Tulchinsky, *J.B. Salsberg: A Life of Commitment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), chapter 5. As Tulchinsky points out, for some loyalists, there was a sense of discipline and a fear of irrelevance. He cites, 116, Bill Walsh's response to Salsberg: "What do you have to replace the party with?" For the original reference, see Cy Gonick, *A Very Red Life: The Story of Bill Walsh* (St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2001), 213. More generally, there was the question of the extent to which Communist radicalism in Canada was a product of Soviet and other international influences or the outcome of an existing, or emerging, radical tradition in Canadian society.

<sup>81</sup> *Vochenblatt*, February 13, 1958. By 1963, the English pages in *Vochenblatt* had been replaced by a regular supplement, later an independent magazine, *Canadian Jewish Outlook*, to which Avrom continued to contribute. On Gershman, see Irving Abella, ed., "Portrait of a Jewish Professional Revolutionary: The Recollections of Joshua Gershman," *Labour/Le Travail* 4 (1977): 184–213.

<sup>82</sup> For examples, see *Vochenblatt*, November 19, 1959 and August 31, 1961. The discussion of Yevtushenko's poem continued over three issues, November 2, 9 and 16, 1961. Avrom's sketch of the popular young poet, whose own family history had been affected by Stalin's purges, conveyed some of his optimism in this period.

<sup>83</sup> "Jewish Cultural Wealth Our Base," *Vochenblatt*, February 21, 1957. The discus-

sion drew on his reading of *Culture and the People*, by the American writer Moshe Olgin, founder of the *Morning Freiheit* of New York. Avrom went on to suggest activities such as exploring Jewish contributions to Canadian art, music, and literature and democratic and labour struggles; visiting an exhibition of Inuit art; learning the Canadian square dance and the Jewish sherry; or comparing the humour of Stephen Leacock and Sholem Aleichem. The promotion of Canadian culture was also evident in other activity: see Benita Wolters-Fredlund, "Leftist, Jewish and Canadian Identities Voiced in the Repertoire of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir," *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 29 (2002): 19–31.

<sup>84</sup> *Vocheblatt*, May 12, 1960.

<sup>85</sup> "Foreword," *Twelve Litho Prints*.

<sup>86</sup> *CBC Times*, April 7–13, 1957.

<sup>87</sup> The first of these, *No Barriers These Walls*, was completed by 1965 and included interviews with several Canadian muralists, including Harold Town, Aba Bayefsky, York Wilson, and André Bieler. Unfortunately, no copy of this film has been located. *The Last Cause* was completed in 1976. Both were credited to Sandy McLeod Productions. There were unrealized projects too, such as plans for a filmstrip on the life of Joe Wallace and a graphic novel about the nineteenth-century radical editor Thomas MacQueen. At one stage, there were also plans for a book of Avrom's cartoons, proposed by Progress Books under the title "Us Yes, U.S. No!"

<sup>88</sup> *City of Toronto Directories*, 1953, 1965, 1968. In 1953 he was listed as "artist."

<sup>89</sup> On Brennan, who later worked on *The Last Cause*, see Victor Hoar, *The Mackenzie Papineau Battalion: Canadian Participation in the Spanish Civil War* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969), 86, 95–97, William C. Beeching, *Canadian Volunteers: Spain 1936–1939* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1989), passim., and Michael Petrou, *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 194. Beginning as a modest operation conducted from Brennan's station wagon, PCO grew to become a sizeable company serving clients across Canada. A later company history states that Brennan pioneered formal training and other opportunities for employees in the field. PCO Services was acquired by Orkin Canada in 1999. See <http://www.orkin.com/about/> and [http://www.giemedia.com/Images/Newsletters/Clients/Univar/1209\\_PCT\\_Univar\\_orkin.html](http://www.giemedia.com/Images/Newsletters/Clients/Univar/1209_PCT_Univar_orkin.html).

<sup>90</sup> "The Not-So-Pristine Chapel." Avrom's note accompanies a photograph of the mural in the Yanovsky collection. He completed other mural commissions, but these have not been fully identified.

<sup>91</sup> "An Art of Anger," *Canadian Jewish Outlook*, September–October 1965, 12–13. Reprinted in Henry M. Rosenthal and S. Cathy Berson, eds., *The Canadian Jewish Outlook Anthology* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1988), 235–238.

<sup>92</sup> *Canadian Tribune*, January 20, 1964. Avrom's discussion provoked considerable

interest, including a panel at the UJPO Hall, chaired by Communist Party intellectual Stanley Ryerson. See *Canadian Tribune*, January 27 and February 10, 17, and 24, 1964. Some years earlier, in a discussion of the work of fellow Toronto artist Aba Bayefsky, Avrom had raised similar questions about the relationship between form and content in modern realism: see *Canadian Tribune*, April 23, 1956.

<sup>93</sup> See John Berger, *Success and Failure of Picasso* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965). The critique was not entirely new. In 1937, Anthony Blunt had described *Guernica* as “not an act of public mourning but the expression of a private brain-storm”: quoted by Radford, *Art for a Purpose*, 90–91. Avrom may have been familiar at this time with Berger’s earlier work on Renato Guttuso (in a Soviet edition published in 1961) in which Berger contrasted Picasso with the Italian Communist, who was a more explicit proponent of an expressionism disciplined by Marxist humanism. As Alberto Moravia put it in a 1962 essay, Guttuso never retreated across “the threshold of incommunicability” or gave way to “the temptation of abstraction” because his expressionism was “corrected, integrated and rendered accessible by his fidelity to Marxist humanism”: see “Dialogue on the Painting of Renato Guttuso” in Alberto Moravia, *Man as an End: A Defense of Humanism* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), 237–247, quotation at 245.

<sup>94</sup> Prior to the 1970s, the most accessible book on Bethune was the biographical treatment by the Canadian writers Ted Allan and Sydney Gordon, *The Scalpel, The Sword: The Story of Dr. Norman Bethune*, published in Boston in 1952 and later reprinted in New York and Berlin editions. In 1964, the National Film Board released *Bethune*, a feature documentary by Donald Brittain.

<sup>95</sup> *The Marxist Quarterly*, 12 (Winter 1965), between 64 and 65. A short review of the mural in *Canadian Tribune*, December 21, 1964, confirms that it was completed by that time. It survived a later firebombing of party headquarters and was removed when the building was sold in 1993. It was on display with the exhibition of Avrom’s cartoons at the Varley Art Gallery in Markham, Ontario in 2010.

<sup>96</sup> Morris, “Writing for Our Press.” On Morris, see *The Marxist Quarterly*, 12 (Winter 1965), 1–3, and *Look on Canada, Now: Selected Writings of Leslie Morris, 1923–1964* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1970).

<sup>97</sup> “Discussion Bulletins” for 1961 and 1969 party conventions.

<sup>98</sup> As Kashtan acknowledged at the time of his death: “Avrom often prodded the Party to do more on the cultural field, particularly in the postwar period when the Party was going through a period of difficulties.”

<sup>99</sup> It is difficult at this stage to trace Avrom’s influence, direct or indirect, on younger activists. The cartoonist Mike Constable, editor of the early 1970s Toronto alternative newspaper *Guerilla*, has recalled that he met Avrom through the Graphic Arts Club; Constable and others established the Union Art Service,

which is still in operation today, to supply cartoons and other art to labour and left newspapers. Since the 1980s, the public art of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge has also responded to the needs of organized labour and other social movements. The timing of their emergence as politically engaged artists was such that they were not directly influenced by Avrom, but they have acknowledged him as an historical model. Moreover, they have been leaders in the campaign for recognition of the modern artists' union, CARFAC, Canadian Artists' Representation / le Front des artistes canadiens. See D'Arcy Martin, "Two Artists as Engaged Public Intellectuals," in *Condé and Beveridge: Class Works*, ed. Bruce Barber (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2008), 25–30; for the range of their work, see "Chronology," 58–71. Closer to Avrom in age was the Hamilton-based labour cartoonist Roy Carless (1920–2009); as a member of the United Electrical Workers, he was no doubt familiar with Avrom's work, and his own chalk-talks were perhaps also influenced by Avrom. See Roy Carless and Kerry J. Schooley, *The Carless Cartoon Collection: Canadian Political and Labour Cartoons* (Hamilton: Seraphim Editions, 2006). My thanks to Carole Condé, Karl Beveridge, Mike Constable, Wayne Morgan, and Terry Mosher for sharing thoughts on this theme.

<sup>100</sup> The information is from *Ward 7 News*, March 29, 1975, and notes and photographs in the Yanovsky collection. The project received a small grant from the Ontario Arts Council as well as support from the Home and School Association, in which Avrom and Anna (they had married in 1961, following Nechama's death in 1958) were both active. Their younger daughter, Kaethe, was one of the children who worked on the project.

<sup>101</sup> *Canadian Tribune*, June 4, 1979.

<sup>102</sup> Mosher and Desbarats, *The Hecklers*, 227.

<sup>103</sup> Charles and Cynthia Hou, *Great Canadian Political Cartoons, 1915 to 1945* (Vancouver: Moody's Lookout Press, 2002) and *Great Canadian Political Cartoons, 1946 to 1982* (Vancouver: Moody's Lookout Press, 2011); <http://todaysinspiration.blogspot.ca/2013/06/the-artists-of-canadian-whites-avrom.html> and <http://www.comicbookdaily.com/collecting-community/whites-tsunami-wecca-splashes/avrom-yanovsky/>.

<sup>104</sup> *An International Treasury of Leftwing Humor*, 97.

<sup>105</sup> One of Daumier's biographers has described the dual character of his work as that of "the politically involved journalist cartoonist and the artist-dreamer." See Bruce Loughton, *Honoré Daumier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>106</sup> As Avrom wrote at the time of Fairley's death in 1968, "we often discussed common problems, particularly those of the national groups in which I was involved. Her main concern was how to make the traditions and cultures of these groups part of the leaven that is giving rise to the final basic change so necessary

---

for Canada”: see “A Remembrance,” *Horizons: The Marxist Quarterly* 25 (Spring 1968): 2–4.

<sup>107</sup> Fairley, “The Cultural Worker’s Responsibility to the People,” 4–6. See also Kimmel, “The Spirit of Canadian Democracy,” esp. 46–52.

<sup>108</sup> Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), 42–48, quotation at 14.

<sup>109</sup> Berger, “The Work of Art,” in *The Sense of Sight: Writings by John Berger*, ed. Lloyd Spencer (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 197–204.