

FILM

A challenge to Haley's Roots?

THE OTHER FRANCISCO
Directed by Sergio Giral
Produced by the Cuban Institute
of Cinematographic Art

At about the time Alex Haley signed his multi-million dollar contract to turn *Roots* into a TV series, *The Other Francisco*—a Cuban feature film—entered the U.S. These two works offer radically different views of slavery in the New World.

One of the most potent myths in the literature of colonialism is the "benign" impact of slavery in the Spanish territories of the New World. *The Other Francisco* documents the cruelty of the institution, stripping away the embroidery that adorns the master/slave relationship in conventional writing on the subject.

The film opens with the dramatization of a novel, written by a philanthropic slave-owner—the clear that the lot of the slaves was determined not by personal passion, but by economic forces. *The Other Francisco* illuminates the pressures of the industrial revolution in other parts of the

**Cuban film views
slavery in the
Americas in
more realistic
terms.**

story of a love affair between two slaves, Dorotea and Francisco, who are separated by a lecherous white overseer, culminating in the rape of Dorotea by her master and the anguished suicide of her lover.

Having been seduced into this 19th century sentimental romance we are unprepared for the sudden transition to "objectivity." The camera zooms out; the narrator's voice becomes hard and flat; the mood is abruptly changed; the story is retold with graphic brutality.

This time through it becomes world on the society of the Caribbean islands: only the wealthy growers could afford the new labor-saving machinery; the high price of slaves bankrupted the smaller planters; the transition to

modern production—the flowering of the sugar empire—was achieved by the destruction of traditional society.

And from the moment Africans set foot on the shores of the Americas they resisted their masters through flight, sabotage and—as the last frames of the film suggest—violent uprisings. This resistance was crushed by the white overseer—the *mayoral*—employing not the gentle admonitions of Scripture (although the Catholic church owned numerous slaves and mills in Cuba), but the sword and the lash.

There are lingering questions that neither Haley nor director Giral have adequately posed. If Haley has over-romanticized the lives of Afro-American slaves, Giral errs on the side of economism, reducing the slaves to the status of "products" of colonialism. In *The Other Francisco* we get little more than a glimpse of the lives of Cuban slaves. We cannot be satisfied to view Africans in



Above: Alina Sanchez as Dorotea, abused by her master.
Below: the foundation of the sugar empire.

the Americas as their masters did—as commodities whose lives were defined in terms of their relation to the sugar economy.

Despite these shortcomings, however, *The Other Francisco* is an important work. It is available to interested groups through Tricontinental Film Center (333 Sixth Ave., New York, NY,

10014). As the debate over the nature of slavery in the Americas develops, this film from Cuba will offer a significant challenge to Haley's views.

—Mac Margolis

Mac Margolis is a student in the Intercultural Studies program at Trinity College, Hartford, Conn.



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BOOKS

Eloquent voices from prison

THROUGH THE WALL: Prison Correspondence
Initiated and selected by Ethel Shapiro-Bertolini
Edited by Andrew Richter
Peace Press, (Culver City, CA),
1977, paperback \$5.45

Work on *Through the Wall* began five years ago when Ethel Shapiro-Bertolini sent copies of her Depression novel, *When the Storm Broke*, to 300 prisoners and asked for opinions of her book and news about themselves. Within months she had nearly 100 regular correspondents, most of them black men serving indeterminate sentences in maximum security prisons. (She wrote to women as well, but none responded.) Since she had culled her mailing labels from subscription lists of the *People's World* and International Publishers, many of the men are Marxists, as is Mrs. Bertolini.

More than 90 correspondents are represented here, including the resolute Mrs. Bertolini. This is both the book's strength and its weakness. For people who do not know what is going on behind bars, a multiplicity of voices will be more convincing than might be the ravings of an articulate madman. (There are a few madmen here: it was inevitable. There are also con-men, liars, and psychopaths, as there would be if someone began correspondence with subscribers of the *Boston Globe* or *Chicago Tribune*.) But there is consensus of sorts: life is war, prison is hell, and hope beyond the wall lies with revolution.

The flip side of the multiplicity shows that prison, like most of the world, is divided into Right and Left, while the Left is deeply divided. If there are any doubts about this after many pages of argument about reform vs. revolution; Chinese revisionism vs. Leninism; women's rights; and racism, the point is driven home when Mrs. Bertolini and her hus-



One of Shapiro-Bertolini's sharp cat correspondents.

band are expelled from the American Communist party for protesting the Soviet incursion in Czechoslovakia. (They had belonged for more than 50 years.) Shortly thereafter Mrs. Bertolini and Ronnie K. Irwin broke off correspondence over differing interpretations of Allende's collapse in Chile.

Further rifts develop along the racial faults traced by Harold Cruse in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* ten years ago: the conflict between black integration into American democracy and black revolutionary solidarity. "Black people in America have a long history of thinking that our efforts to secure the right to vote would miraculously end 'discrimination' and give control to our lives," Walter Kent wrote to Mrs. Bertolini. "[but] I have yet to hear

any (black) politician come even close to campaigning on the platform of nationalizing General Motors or of abolishing real estate agencies and boards."

Cruse believed that Marxist ideologies would never understand the black struggle for autonomy in a racist state. But *Through the Wall* shows that blacks understand the Marxist ideologue's demands for revolution very well. Whether there is a coherent revolutionary force in America for these men to join upon release is another question. Several men rejoined the world only to discover that as ex-cons they were further away than ever from any class—working, middle, or intelligent—facing the same private war against a state that had defeated them many times before.

Much of *Through the Wall*

concerns the business of getting along in prison. Loneliness looms as the greatest problem, along with debilitating anxiety over parole hearings in systems of indeterminate sentencing. Bertolini's book clearly reveals the self-destructiveness and defeatism in men who do not know the limit of their sentence nor how to obtain parole. (California, where many of these prisoners are, recently abandoned indeterminate sentencing. All jurisdictions should do so.)

More revealing than accounts of prison routine are the stories of how the men got there. A young black named Eddie Taylor tells of a life of tragic misfortunes (his mother broke him before a Youth Authority hearing, falsely accusing him of raping his sister) and miscalculations that Faulkner could have made

use of. At a crucial point in his narrative, Taylor suddenly announced that he had an agent and an attorney to market his stories in the literary world. Mrs. Bertolini never heard from him again.

It is possible that some readers will feel the lack of a unifying voice in the book or expect conclusions about the issues that are raised. But these men raise enough good questions without having to answer them too.

These are sharp cats who remind us that Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson were prophets, not saviors. We owe a debt to Mrs. Bertolini for finding them and creating out of their writings this unique and absorbing book.

—Jeffrey Gillineck

Jeffrey Gillineck is at work on a novel about the 1975 San Francisco mayoral race.

Jewish socialists indifferent to 'Jewish problem'?

**REVOLUTIONARY JEWS
FROM MARX TO TROTSKY**
By Robert S. Wistrich
Barnes & Noble, N.Y., \$16.00

For anyone interested in socialism and "the Jewish question"—and for Jewish socialists in particular—this book is a must. In ten succinct and informative essays on socialist leaders and thinkers who were Jewish (Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle, Eduard Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg in Germany; Victor Adler and Otto Bauer in Austria; Bernard Lazare and Leon Blum in France; Julius Martov and Leon Trotsky in Russia), Wistrich shows that almost all of them were what the late Isaac Deutscher called "non-Jewish Jews."

Accepting socialism's internationalist orientation, most saw their particularist ethnic and religious heritage as an Achilles heel. Indeed, the writings of about half were marked by self-hatred, often expressed in anti-Semitic caricatures. Marx, for example, equated Jewishness with "huckstering" in his essay "On the Jewish Question" (1843), and once

Accepting socialism's internationalist orientation, most saw their ethnic and religious heritage as an Achilles heel.

referred to Lassalle as the "Jewish nigger." Lassalle, parroting Hegel, wrote that "the world of the Jewish people represents the most perfect ugliness, the most extreme submission before God."

The century from Marx to Trotsky saw the end of the "liberal consensus" thanks to which western and central European Jewry was "emancipated" (won civil rights) and the growth of the most virulent anti-Semitism, beginning with the Damascus Blood Libel of 1840 and culminating with the Nazi holocaust.

Most of the Jewish socialists about whom Wistrich writes, manifested an "ostentatious indifference" to this problem. Even the brilliant Rosa Luxemburg was not only ignorant of the culture and religion of her people, but nearly oblivious to their fate. Responding to a letter that discussed the suffering of eastern European Jewry during

WWI, she asked, "Why do you pester me with your special Jewish sorrows?"

That same question was asked implicitly by thousands of Jewish socialists before and since that time who fought for the rights of all oppressed people—except their own. Many, like Victor Adler (a converted Jew), were confident that with the coming triumph of socialism, "Jewish qualities" would disappear in a new era of international brotherhood, and devoted all their energies to fighting for that secular messianism.

There were some, however, who fought for socialism within a particularly Jewish framework. In the same year that the first Zionist Congress was held in Basle (1897), Jewish labor leaders and socialists in Vilna began the labor organization known as the Bund.

Like the socialist/Zionist movement led by Ber Borochov

and Nahum Surkin (about whom, unfortunately, Wistrich does not write), the Bundists were socialists without being assimilationists. Writing and speaking in Yiddish, the language of the eastern European Jewish masses, they limited their organizing to the Jewish community and tried to serve as a link between it and the Russian Social Democratic Workers party. Meeting in London in 1903, the RSDWP rejected the Bund as a separate organization within the party apparatus, acting on a petition signed by 12 delegates, all of whom—including Martov and Trotsky—were Jewish.

Eduard Bernstein and Leon Blum were friends of Chaim Weizman and sympathetic, in their later years, to the Zionist movement. (In 1929, shortly after a bloody anti-Jewish riot in Hebron, Bernstein defended Jewish settlements in Palestine

against the denunciations of Karl Kautsky, and in the same year, Blum attended the Zionist Congress in Zurich.) Bernard Lazare "rediscovered" and wrote extensively on Jewish culture after being jolted by the Dreyfus affair.

Revolutionary Jews main faults are sins of omission. Wistrich might well have provided more information on the socialist movement's response to the "Jewish question" in general and to anti-Semitism in particular. Certainly at least one chapter on an American socialist like Emma Goldman, Daniel de Leon or David Dubinsky should have been included.

In general, however, the book is refreshingly straightforward, informative and highly readable. If it weren't so ludicrously overpriced—or were available in a paperback edition—it could find the mass of readers it deserves.

—David M. Szonyi

David M. Szonyi is a doctoral candidate in modern Jewish history and reviews regularly for *In These Times*.