

Introduction

In December 2020, SUNY Press published my *Michael Gold: The People's Writer*, the first extensive study of a radical artist whose signature achievements were a long-running newspaper column under the title "Change the World" and a best-selling novel of 1930, *Jews Without Money*. As its author, I argued for Gold's overdue recognition as a consequential writer and called for an understanding of his oppositional life as a representative American journey.

The book and its arguments were well received. "Anyone who professes to represent a progressive point of view owes no small debt to Gold, who, since the early 1950s, has gone largely unrecognized," wrote Woody Haut in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. In the scholarly journal *American Communist History*, Randi Storch celebrated Gold's rehabilitation as hopeful evidence that "the American academy is increasingly ready to treat seriously U.S. radical writers." *American Literary History* noted poignantly that Gold's life "pays testament to the courage of a man who accepted the limitations imposed by the present in order to hasten the arrival of a different kind of future. This lesson should not be lost."

Such responses were gratifying, but the book also elicited outrage. Editors of several conservative journals reviled Mike Gold while attacking the very idea of a sympathetic biography of a communist artist, thereby reminding us that Cold War fears and orthodoxies linger, and that Gold still agitates. Even today he riles the reactionaries.

One review of *The People's Writer* did the most to spark this new anthology. "Is it time to release Michael Gold from his personal gulag to range free in the pastures of 20th-century American literature?" Jim Hoberman asked in *The Nation* in May 2021. It was the right question, and its answer was implicit: Free Mike Gold. A week later I was contacted by

Richard Carlin of SUNY Press, who said he'd seen Hoberman's piece and would be very interested in a book that gives an introduction to Gold's work in various genres.

Initially I hesitated. Significant portions of Gold's writing had already been collected and anthologized—by Robert Forsythe in 1936, Samuel Sillen in 1954, and Michael Folsom in 1972. As I thought it over, it struck me that all of these anthologies appeared under the imprint of International Publishers, the semiofficial press of the US communist movement. As a result, they were largely denied the recognition they deserved and did not long remain in print. I felt also that each was limited. Folsom passed over Gold the journalist to focus solely on his “literary” work; Sillen overlooked Gold the playwright; Forsythe's collection appeared three decades before the end of the author's career. This book, then, is the first Gold anthology by a scholarly press, the first to include the full range of Gold's work in all genres, and the first in more than fifty years.

That half century has been marked not only by the end of the Cold War and fall of the Soviet Union, but by the stunning rise of fascist authoritarianism in the United States. In this context, I felt that the job of reevaluating Gold's body of work would be a compelling project with the potential to reach a new readership. If millennials and Gen Z know of Gold, it is probably only as an obscure figure associated with a strangely titled novel. Certainly not everyone is aware that Gold wrote plays, stories, avant-garde poetry, personal essays, criticism, proletarian chants, and historical analysis—or that his contributions to literary theory are undervalued. I recall five years ago when I was asked to write an article-length critical summary of Gold's career for the Gale American Writers series, edited by Jay Parini. When I submitted the article, even Parini, one of the most erudite scholars I've known, was surprised. “I had no idea there was so much!” he said.

The title of this anthology is *Damned Agitator* because Gold wrote a fine short story with that title, but really because that's what Mike Gold was. He was born Itzhok Isaac Granich in New York in 1893, the first surviving son of impoverished Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Growing up in the slums of the Lower East Side, he quit school at age twelve to support his family with a series of menial jobs. In spring 1914, Gold, then using the name Irwin Granich, became involved in the labor movement when, after losing his job as a factory worker and shipping clerk, he wandered into a protest rally in New York's Union Square and heard passionate anticapitalist speeches. The crowd was attacked by police and he was

beaten with other demonstrators when he attempted to help an injured woman. Soon afterward he bought his first copy of the radical journal *The Masses* and began submitting revolutionary poetry to editors Floyd Dell and Max Eastman. Recalling the incident years later, Gold stated, “I have always been grateful to that cop and that club. He introduced me to literature and the revolution.” Gold’s first published poem, “Three Whose Hatred Killed Them,” espoused violence in the cause of radical labor by extolling three activists killed by a bomb they had manufactured for use against industrialists.

Only a few months after his political awakening, Gold was given the opportunity to attend Harvard as a “special student.” To support himself while studying he wrote an anonymous daily column for the *Boston Journal* about his experiences with elite education. When the columns became critical of the great university, they were canceled, forcing Gold to drop out of school after only a few months. Ever afterward he was suspicious of the elitists, purists, and professors, the “book-proud intellectuals” and smug arbiters of literary taste.

By the end of 1914 Gold was living in Boston, where he survived for months as a homeless street beggar before taking a room in an anarchist flophouse. In early 1916 he accepted an assignment from the anarchist newspaper *Blast* to report on a strike at the Plymouth cordage factory, where he met Bartolomeo Vanzetti and produced his first article about the radical labor movement. A decade later he was arrested along with other literary activists during protest demonstrations to save Sacco and Vanzetti from the “lynchers in frockcoats” of respectable Boston when the case culminated in the execution of the two immigrant anarchists.

In the late 1910s, Gold found a creative outlet as a member of the Provincetown Players, contributing three one-act plays that were produced along with those of Eugene O’Neill, Susan Glaspell, and Edna St. Vincent Millay at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York. The best of these one-acts, a play titled *Money* (included in this anthology), portrayed starving immigrants who, in Gold’s words, “achieve a certain greatness as all men must.”

With American entry into the Great War, Gold moved to Mexico to avoid the draft. One of his first short stories, a powerful antiwar screed published under the title “First Aid” (also reprinted in this anthology), helps explain that decision. While living in Mexico in 1918–19 he received news of the Palmer Raids: the widespread arrests and detentions of leftists by the US Department of Justice. Upon his return to New York, he

adopted the name Michael Gold as both a protective pseudonym and a symbol of his revolutionary rebirth. The new name was taken from a person known to him, a Jewish friend of his father who had been a corporal in the Civil War, fighting for the North in the liberation struggle against the Southern slavocracy. He kept the name for the rest of his life.

In 1921 Gold was elected to the editorial board of *The Liberator*, the successor journal to the suppressed *Masses*, and a year later became its coeditor with Black poet Claude McKay. In this role Gold encouraged and published works from the “mass poets” of the working classes to counter what he termed the “ego-poets” of the bourgeoisie. In the February 1921 issue he published the seminal essay “Towards Proletarian Art,” an impassioned manifesto in which he broke with the liberal-individualist aesthetic theory of his mentors, Dell and Eastman. Citing Walt Whitman as “the heroic spiritual grandfather” of proletarian culture, Gold called for heightened social consciousness in literature and asserted that “a mighty national art cannot arise save out of the soil of the masses.” The new art, Gold implied, would express the experience of the poor and without exception be created either by the poor themselves or artists who had lived sympathetically among them. The American currency of the term “proletarian literature” dates from the publication of this article, a major document in radical literary theory.

One of Gold’s best poems from the 1920s, “The Strange Funeral in Braddock,” focuses on three reactions to the horrific death of Jan Clepak, an immigrant worker who is buried alive by an avalanche of molten steel. One observer at the funeral chooses self-destructive despair, but Clepak’s widow pledges never to let her children work in a mill and vows to use the death transformatively: “I’ll make myself hard as steel, harder, I’ll come some day and make bullets out of Jan’s body, and shoot them into a tyrant’s heart!” Journalist Art Shields called this elegiac piece “the most tragically beautiful poem that has come out of the United States class struggle.”

During the decade following the 1929 stock market crash, Gold was a controversial national figure as a best-selling novelist, committed communist, and vocal advocate of the literary genre he labeled “proletarian realism.” Two essays from 1930 sum up Gold’s theory and the intense debates it incited. “Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ,” a scintillating *New Republic* review of several novels by Thornton Wilder, scandalized readers and touched off a nationwide “Gold-Wilder controversy” that played out for several years. Gold’s economic interpretation of literature

saw Wilder as “the poet of the genteel bourgeoisie,” whose “irritating and pretentious” novels lacked contemporary relevance because within them “nobody works in a Ford plant, and nobody starves looking for work.” *New Republic* editor Edmund Wilson, who had commissioned the review, gave Gold credit for exposing “the insipidity and pointlessness of most literary criticism” and for making it “very plain that the economic crisis [the Great Depression] was to be accompanied by a literary one.”

In a second important article, his September 1930 *New Masses* editorial column (later given the title “Proletarian Realism”), Gold enumerated the essential elements of a “new form” of literary expression: “Proletarian realism deals with the real conflicts of men and women who work for a living. It has nothing to do with the sickly mental states of the idle Bohemians, their subtleties, their sentimentalities, their fine-spun affairs.” Writers of this genre, Gold insisted, must be workers or must “have the courage of proletarian experience.”

Gold’s authority for making these declarations was based on his recent publication of a successful piece of literature that met his stated criteria. *Jews Without Money*, Gold’s only novel and by consensus his best work of fiction, has been described by Alfred Kazin as “a great piercing cry of lament and outrage” over the struggles of the working classes. A loosely narrated series of sketches from Gold’s childhood, the novel is self-announced as a “truthful book of poverty” that spares no detail in cataloging slum misery while identifying its causes in capitalism: “America is so rich and fat,” Gold writes, “because it has eaten the tragedy of millions of immigrants.”

Aside from its central emphasis on the class war, the work is a perceptive critique of urban America, theorizing racism, sexism, and the costs of assimilation for Jewish immigrants struggling with cultural identity in the United States. Appropriately, the only light in the book’s dark, brutalizing world is the potential for systemic social revolution. The novel ends, and the life of teenaged Mikey Gold is given purpose, when he hears and responds to a speech from “a man on an East Side soap-box” about a world movement to abolish poverty: “O workers’ Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. . . . O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle and to live. O great Beginning!”

Jews Without Money reached a wide audience, going through eleven printings in 1930 alone. In that year Sinclair Lewis mentioned Gold in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, crediting *Jews Without Money* for revealing

“the new frontier of the Jewish East Side.” By 1950 the book had seen twenty-five printings and been translated into sixteen languages. In Germany, as Gold notes in his preface to the 1935 edition, the translated novel was used as “a form of propaganda against the Nazi anti-Semitic lies.” The author was proud to have helped counteract anti-Semitism in Germany, but he reminded readers that the US had its own Hitler-like demagogues.

The World War II years required US communists to adapt rapidly to shifts in the national consensus. They were staunchly antiwar until events of 1941, primarily Hitler’s invasion of the USSR, drove immediate changes in position and rhetoric.

After Pearl Harbor, American communists gained some temporary protection from persecution by virtue of the need for US-Soviet war-time unity against the common fascist enemy. Still, in a December 1941 column, “They Hate the Soviets More than They Love America,” Gold warned that many American politicians preferred fascism to an alliance with the USSR. He had a point. Already the red-baiters were parroting the Dies Committee and calling for the suppression of Gold’s column: “You would never know from their speeches that we were under attack from Hitler and Japan, and it wasn’t the *Daily Worker* that had bombed Pearl Harbor,” Gold quipped.

For their part, US communists like Gold recognized common cause with national war goals and largely sublimated their revolutionary agenda for the duration. These political fluctuations softened Gold’s message in his “Change the World” columns at a time when his family life, including his commitments as a father of two young boys, demanded increasing time and attention.

Of course Gold spent the McCarthy years blacklisted and broke. His wife Elizabeth held down several jobs while he stayed home and did the cooking in their cold-water flat in the Bronx. Alone all day with his health deteriorating and FBI agents parked outside, he wrote poems that questioned whether he and his “petty troubles” could “outlast Wall Street America.” One year he got an idea for a business, the “Mike Gold Writers’ Workshop,” which he advertised as “a place where students can grow in the craft of writing by means of constant experiment, mutual criticism, and advice and inspiration from an experienced leader. The atmosphere will be not that of a classroom, but of a group of craftsmen helping each other.” Tuition for the ten-week class was a dollar a week. Few students registered.

The crisis and transition came in 1956, a terrible time in communist history. In June the *New York Times* published the text of Khrushchev’s “secret speech,” fully revealing the immeasurable horrors of Stalin’s rule.

That October Mike, Elizabeth, and their younger son Carl moved to San Francisco, settling into an apartment at 448 Waller Street. Simultaneously came news of the Hungarian crackdown—in which Soviet troops forcefully put down a prodemocracy movement, turning the situation into a bloody revolt. The brutal repression sent shock waves through the Soviet bloc but was just as devastating to the organized Left worldwide. Within weeks, thirty thousand US communists quit the party. Most of those who remained were bewildered.

At the San Francisco offices of the leftist *People's World* newspaper, the effect was immediate. Circulation fell to a nadir of six thousand. But among the many goodbyes and dispirited turmoil as the *People's World* staff disbanded, there was, according to longtime editor Al Richmond, “one brave hello.” This was from Gold, who appeared in the newspaper's offices one day to offer his services. The younger Richmond remembered Mike as the prophet of proletarianism and guiding light of the thirties. He resurrected the once-famous “Change the World” column and managed to put together a small syndication for the articles, guaranteeing his aging comrade fifty dollars a week.

Given the chance to earn a living again, the damned agitator seized the day. The fresh iteration of Gold's journalism ran from 1957 to 1966, during which he only occasionally reminisced about the heyday of the old Left. Mainly he showed how young he still was. His tone was not bombastic as in the thirties, yet still oppositional, charged with antifascist resistance and optimistic about a socialist future. Unlike most of the literary leftists of his generation, Michael Gold did not eventually disavow his radicalism, nor did he ever seek wealth or adopt a bourgeois lifestyle. He also refused to soft-pedal his artistic or political opinions, in the process earning enemies in the cultural establishment. Perhaps more brazenly (or naively as some would have it), he never abandoned the cause of what he termed “world socialism,” instead retaining throughout his life the hope expressed in the epiphanic ending of *Jews Without Money*, that a workers' messiah would come. What Mike Gold explained about his spirit and temperament at the advent of his fame in 1921 was just as true in the author's final days: “The tenement is in my blood. When I think it is the tenement thinking. When I hope it is the tenement hoping. I am not an individual; I am all that the tenement group poured into me during those early years of my spiritual travail.”

Since the publication of Gold's biography in 2020, an encouraging number of writer-activists and graduate students have contacted me either to ask questions or express solidarity. Recently I've been informed of a

budding Mike Gold Fan Club among some younger progressive students and journalists in Columbus, Ohio. Before that, Massachusetts folk singer Bob Feldman sent a video of a “biographical song” he’d written after reading about Gold. Its refrain—“What workers write/ What workers sing/ Professors don’t let you learn/ But Mike Gold/ The People’s Writer/ His columns the workers loved”—sums up an aesthetic Gold encouraged and cultivated. I heard as well from some of Gold’s actual contemporaries, including Beatrice Lumpkin, an activist, writer, and onetime union organizer who recently reached the age of 104. Looking back on Gold’s glory days, Lumpkin wrote, “I am happy that Mike Gold is coming back. His *Jews Without Money* was a big influence in my life. Gold spoke to our student group around 1935, and I wish I could remember more. Fortunately, his books speak for him.”

These testimonies are signs that Gold may be returning from exile, perhaps sooner than some believed he would. Reacting to Gold’s death in 1967, journalist Robert Shaw wrote a letter to one of Gold’s great advocates, Mike Folsom, in which Shaw declared, “He could have done a newspaper or magazine column that would have made him rich and famous. But my prediction is that when all the hired apologists for the status quo are dead and forgotten, the name of Mike Gold will be known to millions of people around 2067.” As a step toward the fulfillment of Shaw’s centenary prophecy, here are sixty-eight pieces, spanning the period from 1914 to 1966. Over half of these works have not seen the light of day since their original publication. Several selections, like the excerpts from Gold’s unfinished memoirs and the powerful scene from his circa-1950 play, *The Honorable Pete*, have never been published in any form.

From Gold’s early career, there are several of his anonymous columns about Harvard, alongside his first strike journalism in the anarchist *Blast*. From the 1930s there is a key scene from *Battle Hymn*, Gold’s important play about the life of abolitionist John Brown. From the post-World War II years there are the three columns Gold wrote about the death of his younger brother George. These reveal the most intimate reaches of the author’s character and the deep sources of his political passions. From the dark days of McCarthyism there are two manifesto-like pieces: “The Rosenberg Cantata,” an excruciating lament about the most brutal moment of the Cold War, and “The Troubled Land,” a touching personal essay about Gold’s national speaking tour of 1954.

From Gold the activist artist there are short stories, poetry, drama, and a chapter from his novel. From Gold the political journalist there

are commentaries, personal essays, and cultural criticism. You will notice a variety of genres and a variety of messages that are nevertheless shot through with a clear uniformity of voice and purpose. From World War I to Korea and Vietnam, from the 1914 Ludlow Massacre to the 1963 Birmingham church bombing, Gold consistently embodied an art best defined as the direct expression of a man who is angry about something.

But the contents of this book are only a fraction of an astonishingly large output. In this volume it's especially pleasing to include the forgotten trove of columns from the author's late-career stint with the San Francisco *People's World* (articles that were previously collected only by the FBI). From these columns we learn that Gold saw clearly what was happening in Vietnam and knew how it would end. Within them we witness Gold in his early seventies, walking with civil rights marchers in the streets of San Francisco and siding with the beatniks and hippies in their battle against the military-industrial complex. I'm glad to offer these selections to a generation that came of age long after Gold's death.

At the close of my biography of Gold, I stated: "In a period of corporate control, wealth disparity, and the mainstreaming of proto-fascism, Michael Gold should be more than ever of interest to a cultural establishment whose attention to his work has been insufficient." Since 2020 the situation has worsened and we're no longer talking about "proto" anything.

While working in Mike Gold's archived papers at the University of Michigan almost a decade ago, I came across the barely legible manuscript of *Song for Roosevelt*, a play in three acts and a prologue. This interesting drama is too long to include in full in this anthology, but I want the world to know about it. The script was completed in 1948 in France, where the author self-exiled because the Cold War was closing in and he foresaw the McCarthy era's persecutions. As I transcribed the play, I realized that Gold also foresaw what's happening now.

Song for Roosevelt reminds us that American fascism is a deep-rooted phenomenon and offers guidelines for opposing it. Though Gold's characters suffer intimidation that is both race-based and class-based, they ultimately find hope in *community-based* democratic activism. The drama is set in the neighborhood Gold knew best, Manhattan's Lower East Side. The action begins on April 12, 1945, the day of Franklin Roosevelt's death. The spokespersons for the playwright's message are two resilient young women who've lived through separate tragedies in the fight against fascism: Theresa is a twenty-six-year-old war widow and single mom, her husband killed in the 1944 battle against Axis forces at Anzio. Hannah

is a refugee from Nazi Germany whose entire family—parents and two siblings—died in Hitler’s gas chambers.

Adopted by the Shuster family, Hannah had arrived in New York severely traumatized, “afraid of every cop in the street” and panic-stricken when left alone. She enters the play as “a vivid, rather shy girl of 20, carrying books and flowers” but also bearing a question many are asking today: *“I can see America is different from Germany. It could never be another Germany. Just the same, fascism is growing here, also. How can that be?”*

The answer to Hannah’s question follows from a depiction of New York social history. One of the forces Gold addresses is the Christian Front, an organization (composed mainly of followers of radio priest Charles Coughlin) that fomented violence against Jews. In 1945 anti-Semitic attacks were frequent enough to become the subject of an Oscar-winning short film, *The House I Live In*, starring Frank Sinatra and written (by leftist screenwriter Albert Maltz) to counteract the brutality.

Early in the play, anti-Semites emboldened by Roosevelt’s death attack a barbershop co-owned by Hannah’s adoptive father, Louis Shuster, after which the elderly man collapses from a stroke. Months later Louis’s son Bernie, twenty-five, returns from the war against Hitler to learn that his father is comatose. He vows to avenge the assault, but Hannah pleads with him to forgo this plan and recommit to his ambition of becoming a great chemist. One way to defeat intolerance, Hannah knows, is to live a meaningful life.

While in Europe, Bernie too had witnessed the horrors of the concentration camps. Realizing that even New York is unsafe, he weighs questions about how democracies die: “How can we end the Christian Front and Blackshirts in New York? What protects them in a democracy?” He says he can’t understand the dismissive attitude of some politicians toward violent hate crimes.

“It was like that in Berlin,” Hannah responds ominously.

“And the South, too,” adds Randy, an African American porter who dreams of becoming an inventor. He relates the story of his father’s lynching, after which the police arrested his mother rather than the white murderers.

In the play’s last scene, a neighborhood meeting is held in the kitchen of the Shuster tenement. Before it begins, Max Gottlieb, Louis’s partner in the barbershop, wearily reminds everyone that, as “a bunch of nobodies,” they are no match for the fascists. Theresa enters, “dressed for a summer night, a flower in her hair,” and confidently outlines a plan: “Forget the big shots and appeal to the people of the neighborhood. Orga-

nize them.” Max calls this strategy “childish,” but Theresa is unfazed and offers specifics: “Parades, mass meetings, pressure on the politicians—the whole works—the same things we did to fight the black market and elect Roosevelt. Organize the people, and everything else will begin. It’s like unlocking a big dam, freeing the water so it comes rushing down to turn the big dynamos that make power and light for the world!”

Cold War critics never forgave Gold his communist views. He probably knew no audience would ever hear Theresa’s speech, at least in his lifetime. But when my university classes studied the play last year, its lessons resonated. One student wrote, “The strength of *Song for Roosevelt* is its message of empowerment, the encouragement to unite and fight against tyranny.”

The moment seems right for Gold’s message. Something Hannah says in Gold’s play makes this more certain. When Bernie vows solitary vengeance for the assault on his father, Hannah challenges him to see the bigger picture: “You are a Hamlet and want to avenge,” she says, “but *Hamlet* is an old story. It does not fit our time! It is too personal. It does not seek the causes of the murder, the causes of fascism, and fight that.”

Only through collective action will today’s fight against fascism get anywhere. And as Hannah implies, our models aren’t always found in navel-gazing art, or in escapism, or in poets who only poeticize. Instead, we should be talking and teaching about people’s poets like Gold, because the clock is ticking.