Norwalk didn't vote for Marx

By Gerald Blank

ONE OF THE THINGS a casual observer would have noted about Norwalk, Conn., is that it seems like one of the last places in America in which a political philosophy generally identified with Karl Marx would stand a chance.

The 1939 American Guide Series put by the WPA describes Norwalk as an industrial city spreading across both sides of the island-dotted harbor of the Norwalks. Manufacturing plants listed in the same volume include Cash's Name Tapes, Norwalk Tires, Bonner Corsets and Church Expansion Bolts. Oyster culture has been a leading industry since the days of the Indians who named the place Norwalk or Narramake.

The main business section clusters about a street intersection crossed by an overhead railroad bridge. Over it New York, New Haven & Hartford trains, plying the main route between New York and Boston, go roaring by at intervals.

'Socialist' triumph

In this New England community of 45,000, Irving C. Freese, who ran for office as a Socialist, was sworn in as mayor on Oct. 9. He had received more votes than any other candidate, the total cast for both him and his Democratic and Republican rivals.

This was not the first time Freese had run for office in Norwalk. In 1933 he ran for school board. He got 56 votes. In 1939 he started running for mayor. Only 668 people voted for him but his supporters drummed up 237 in 1941 and got 237 in 1943. He did slightly better in 1946 than the sum of the total cast for both candidates.

"Freese got in," the Socialist told me, "because the people of Norwalk voted for him. But they didn't do so much vote for him as against the other candidates."

The Socialist shook his head sadly.

"In my opinion, Freese isn't a Socialist at all," he said. "He's a simple, ordinary, crusading, reform-type mayor. He's an honest man—absolutely and incorruptibly honest. He happened to hit a wave this year. Nobody with a fairly decent record could have lost."

Socialists disregarded

Freese's first appointments, the Socialist conceded, had been excellent. But, he went on, the appointments showed a consistent absence of his own party. There were, he said, plenty of old-line Socialists in town who were being overlooked in the filling of posts.

"Freese isn't the man his brother Arnold was," said the Socialist. "Arnold Freese ran for mayor here in 1935. Arnold was a better man than Irving Freese. Arnold was a real Socialist. That was a four-way election then. There was an independent named Poleman running in addition to a Democrat and a Republican.

"I tried to get Arnold to make a deal with Poleman instead of splitting up the vote. I figured Arnold and Poleman could have done some mutually profitable work. But Arnold wouldn't have any part of it."

"In my opinion, Freese is the favorite candidate of the teachers?" I asked.

"No more than he was of any other group," replied the Socialist. "There was an open meeting in City Hall last year when the question of teachers' salaries first came up. Freese attended this meeting, just as he has attended every meeting in town for the last 20 years. Freese got up and charged that the teachers' demands could easily be met if the tax rate were adjusted. He read off a list of companies and their industrial tax rate. He said, "This is the way things happened. In no time that meeting was jammed. Citizens overflowed into the street. Freese showed how some businesses worth hundreds of thousands were assessed for much less. Factories were assessed at a tenth of their value. It caused quite a storm. Freese may have given the teachers the idea that the only way they could accomplish something was by united political action."

Weak-mayor charter

I asked what steps a Norwalk mayor might take in the direction of socialism. The Socialist said there wasn't much that Freese could do, even if he wanted to. He mentioned that there were municipally-owned utility plants in two of the city's districts.

"I suppose," he said, "that idea might be extended."

Transportation, he said, was still privately owned and operated. He recalled that Arnold Freese's 1935 platform had called for unification and municipal operation of the bus lines.

But Norwalk has a weak-mayor charter, he concluded. "There's not too much the mayor has to do, beside presiding at meetings. The charter would trip him up if he tried to go too far, I guess."

I had written to ask Mayor Freese for an interview. He had agreed but suggested I see Mrs. Freese first.

Following Mrs. Freese's telephoned directions, I boarded the Winnepauk bus in downtown Norwalk. It took me, in about 20 minutes, from the main business section, through a comfortable residential area where large, living-looking houses were surrounded by spacious grounds covered with fallen leaves. Then came another business section and after that a second residential section, somewhat less pretentious than the first.

The Freeses live in a small, white-frame house with a screened-in porch. It is two from the last house on a long, tree-lined, dead-end street.

Mrs. Freese, a graying, plump, fading-looking woman, asked me to sit down in a chair on the porch.

"I've had sinus trouble," she explained. "This sun feels good."

I made friends with a brown spitz dog who was sniffing at my shoes.

"Her name's Taffy," Mrs. Freese told me. "She's 11 years old—the same age at our boy, Jospeh. He's at school now."

I explained that I knew the outlines of Mayor Freese's life. He had been born, on February 18, 1906, one of five sons, in East Brunswick Township, N. J. His father had died while he was quite young.

Irging Freese had gone to one-room elementary school and had been graduated from the South Brunswick High School. One of his early jobs had been as boy's work secretary for the Summit, N. J.

A Connecticut city with only 100 Socialists has a new mayor who ran on a Socialist ticket and was elected in a landslide of 8561 votes