

THE JEWISH WORKERS'

BUND

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**PAST, PRESENT AND
FUTURE**

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INTRODUCTION

What we know and understand about our history determines how we live in the present and how we envisage and try to construct our future. Those of us who are committed to creating a more equal, collaborative, democratic and humane world, and to organising in ways that match our vision, have to make a consistent effort to uncover and value the experiences of those whose history has been marginalised or actively suppressed.

The ideas, activities and achievements of the Jewish Workers' Bund, which was founded in 1897 and whose high point was between the world wars in Poland, are at last coming into their own after decades of being undermined by both the Zionist telling of 20th-century Jewish history and a skewed interpretation of Bundist history and ideas by orthodox Marxists.

Our aim in producing this pamphlet is to bring the history and ideas of the Bund to life through a variety of voices. Some of the contributors lived through the horrors of the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe, and were saved and fortified by the Bund's support and determined resistance to fascism in the face of impossible odds. Others are exploring that history and developing those ideas which have been obscured, deliberately or otherwise, by the prevailing view of how Jewish life, past, present and future, should be described.

The contributors who survived that onslaught and those who came afterwards, whose words we have published, are all dedicated socialists who have worked and campaigned in the wider socialist movement for social justice. They have built on the Bund's fundamental conception of *doikayt* – "here-ness" – the idea that wherever Jews and other minorities live in the world, that's where they should have full, equal rights to express their cultures, speak their languages, interact freely, and support each other in challenging discrimination, prejudice and persecution. This reflects

the real, multicultural, multilingual lives that most Jews have lived for most of their history.

This commitment to the diaspora – for Jews and equally for other minorities – is a profound challenge to nationalism. It is a challenge to its specific form – Zionism – which oppresses Palestinians daily and claims to embrace and represent all Jews while actually undermining Jewish cultural, political and economic resources in the countries where most Jews actually live. It is also a challenge to the broader manifestation of nationalism which is always inherently hostile to minorities within the borders of nation states.

Every item in this pamphlet – whether written by those who were active within the Bund or directly affected by it at the height of its influence and creativity, or those who were born after those events – gives a powerful insight into a movement whose ideas are as relevant today as they have ever been. People seeking ways to understand and express a positive Jewish identity are seeing their experiences and activism validated by what they are discovering about the Bund's activities and philosophy; they are challenging the distorted historiography they have been taught, and are energised by finding ideas that align with their values.

This publication is not an exercise in nostalgia. It is not looking backwards but is opening a door to a precious resource for today and tomorrow, which we are offering to our readers. The Jewish Socialists' Group has, for many years, been inspired by the Jewish Workers' Bund in our campaigning, analysis and cultural activities. This has enriched our politics. We hope that these insights, experiences and ideas will strengthen today's movements against racism and fascism, and for social justice and real equality, and give us all courage in these troubling and challenging times.

Jewish Socialists' Group, February 2023

This booklet is published in memory of the Bundists Majer Bogdanski and Esther Brunstein. Majer was a member of the Jewish Socialists' Group from 1985 until his death in 2005. Esther was a close friend of the Jewish Socialists' Group from the late 1980s until her death in 2017.

It is also published in memory of Shalom Charikar, a member of the Jewish Socialists' Group from the early 1980s until his death in 2003. Shalom grew up in the Bene Israel Jewish community in India and greatly appreciated how Bundism validated his beliefs in diasporism and his critique of nationalism.

They all made invaluable contributions to our work for a better world.

TIMELINE OF THE JEWISH WORKERS' BUND

THE FIRST FIVE DECADES

1895

May Day meeting in Vilna (Vilnius): Yulii Martov declares the need for a general Jewish workers' organisation on the basis of their double oppression as workers and Jews.

Committees established in Vilna, Minsk and Bialystok to spread secular literature and revolutionary pamphlets in Yiddish.

1896

First issue of the newspaper *Der Yidisher Arbeter* (The Jewish Worker) printed by exiled Jewish revolutionaries in Geneva, and smuggled into the Russian Empire.

1897

Clandestine print shop in Vilna. First issue of *Di Arbeter Shtime* (Worker's Voice) printed illegally in Vilna and other locations in the Russian Empire.

The General Jewish Workers Bund founded in Vilna at a convention 7th - 9th October with 13 delegates from five cities.

1898

The Bund helps to found the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDRP) and joins it as an autonomous organisation. Three of the nine delegates at this founding meeting are from the Bund.

Foreign Committee of the Bund founded in Geneva.

1902

Young Bundist bootmaker, Hirsh Lekert, hanged after shooting and wounding the Vilna Governor General in revenge for flogging of May Day demonstrators.

Bund calls for Jewish self-defence after pogrom in Czestochowa.

1903

Bund walk out of RSDRP Congress in London over questions of Jewish non-territorial national rights and autonomy within the party.

Bund self-defence groups formed.

1905

Bund active in attempted Russian Revolution.

Bund Convention in Zurich adopts programme of (non-territorial) national cultural autonomy.

1906

Bund returns to RSDRP as an autonomous organisation. First daily Yiddish newspaper, *Der Veker* (The Awakener).

1916

Yugnt Bund Tsukunft (Youth Bund) formed as an autonomous group in Warsaw.

1917

The Bund enthusiastically supports and participates in the Russian Revolution in February which topples the Tsar. Bund leader Henryk Erlich elected to Executive Committee of the Soviets. The Bund and other socialists warn against premature Bolshevik seizure of power.

Polish Bund founded at a conference in Lublin

1918 - 21

Ukrainian Bund forms the Jewish Communist Labour Bund – the Kombund – and merges with Communist Party (CP). Poland gains independence (a majority of Bundists live within Polish borders).

Russian Bund splits into Communist and Social Democratic factions. Pro-communist faction joins CP in 1921. Social Democratic Bund disbanded by Soviet government.

1919

National organisation of the Yugnt Bund Tsukunft (Youth Bund) founded in Poland.

Bund founded in Latvia and Romania.

1920

Kombund faction organises within the Polish Bund.

1921

Central Yiddish (secular) School organisation founded in Poland with predominant participation by the Bund.

Bund daily newspaper in Poland, *Der Folkstsaytung* (The People's Paper) begins publication.

1922

Polish Kombund secedes from Bund and later merges into Communist Party of Poland.

1925

Bundist Women's organisation established.

1926

Bund sports organisation Morgnshtern (Morning Star) established.

Medem Children's Sanatorium opened by Bund for children affected by TB, funded by trade unions and donations by Bundists abroad.

World events

1898

Creation of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (RSDRP).

1905

Attempted revolution in Tsarist Russia.

1914 - 18

World War I.

1917

Russian Revolution.

1921 - 23

Creation of "Two and a Half International" of independent socialist parties in Europe. The Bund participates.

1929

Bund joins the Socialist International and operates on its left wing.

1930

Kegn Shtrom (Against the Stream), journal of the Bund's minority faction, begins publication.

1933

Bund calls for a united, anti-fascist, labour front.

1935

Bund co-founds the League for Defence of the Rights of Man and Citizen (concerning political prisoners in Poland).

Polish leader Pilsudski dies; his party splinters and further right antisemitic parties gain more influence.

1936

Bund organises half-day general strike to protest against a pogrom in the village of Przytyk.

Bund wins majorities in many Jewish Community Council elections (which it had previously boycotted).

First national convention of SKIF (Bund children's organisation).

1937

Half-day general strike to protest against "ghetto benches" in schools and colleges.

1938

Bund wins 16 out of 20 Jewish seats in Warsaw City council and is successful in municipal elections in many major cities across Poland.

1939

Nazi invasion of Poland. Bund goes underground and organises clandestinely within ghettos as they are established.

1940

Leading Bundist Szmul Zygielbojm is smuggled out of Poland to the West with a mission to convey the fate of Jews under Nazi occupation and request exceptional measures to save the Jews.

1940 - 41

Leading figures of the Bund, including Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter, are arrested by Soviet secret police in the eastern territories of Poland that have been occupied by Soviet forces. Erlich and Alter co-operate in helping to build a Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee but are then framed on ludicrous charges and perish in Soviet prisons.

1941

The Bund establishes an organisation in New York, and its monthly American Journal, *Unzer Tsayt* (Our Time), begins publication.

1942

After mass deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto from July to September, the Bund joins with left-wing Zionists and Communists in a united fighting organisation, ZOB, which prepares for armed resistance. Marek Edelman from the Bund is appointed to the Command Group.

1943

Bundists take part in armed resistance in the Warsaw, Bialystok and Vilna ghettos. Bundists hidden outside the Warsaw Ghetto play key roles as makers/suppliers of arms and improvised weapons, and as couriers linking with Polish underground resisters.

Szmul Zygielbojm, Bund representative on the Polish National Council in Exile in London, kills himself on the night of 11th - 12th May as a political protest at the passivity of the Allies, as Polish Jews are annihilated. (In 1996 a memorial plaque to Zygielbojm is unveiled in London.)

1944

Bund partisans hidden in and around Warsaw take part in the general Polish Warsaw Uprising. A Bund group is active within the French anti-Nazi underground.

1945

Liberation of the Nazi death camps. Many Bundist survivors are placed alongside others in DP camps.

1945 - 49

The Bund is re-established in Poland by survivors. Bund groups active in Displaced Persons (DP) camps in Germany, Austria and Italy.

1946

Return of 130,000 Polish Jews (including a number of Bundists) who had survived the war and the Holocaust by being in the Soviet Union. Many had endured harsh conditions in labour camps alongside non-Jewish Poles.

1947

World Conference of Bundist Organisations is held in Brussels. It establishes the World Coordinating Committee of the Bund, to be based in New York.

Bund opposes the partition of Palestine and the creation of an independent Jewish state, calling instead for an independent state belonging to both Arabs and Jews, with equal rights of both communities internationally guaranteed.

1932 - 40

"Three and a half international" Committee of Independent Revolutionary Socialist Parties is created, rejecting the reformism of the Second International and the authoritarianism/centralism of the Third International. The Bund participates in it.

1939 - 1940

Nazi Germany invades Poland, separates the Jewish community and segregates them by confining them in walled ghettos.

1943

Failure of the Bermuda Conference to agree on aid and sanctuary for Jews in the ghettos, followed two weeks later by the total destruction of the Warsaw ghetto.

1945 - 1948

Liberation of the Death Camps at the end of World War II. Establishment of temporary camps in Germany, Austria and Italy, for hundreds of thousands of uprooted Holocaust survivors. By the end of 1948, 30,000 people remain in DP camps.

1949

As a one-party state is consolidated in Poland, the Polish Bund is dissolved there but continues in other countries, including Australia, where it is still active today.

1957

The last DP camp closes.

WHEREVER WE LIVE, THAT'S WHERE WE BELONG

The pull of nationalism and the nation state towards uniformity contradicts almost the entire history and experience of Jewish life as a minority among other communities. The Bund's concept of *doikayt* – accepting where and who you are as a minority – offers a way for Jews and other communities to value themselves and build foundations for the future, says Julia Bard.

I'll start with a bit of personal history because I think that at least some of my experiences growing up Jewish in Britain represent more general political, cultural and ideological characteristics of the lives and identities of many diaspora Jews.

The mother tongue of all four of my grandparents language was Yiddish, and that's what they spoke at home with their children. My father spoke it very well; he loved the language, the stories and the songs, and particularly the possibilities it created for mischief and misunderstanding that were part of growing up in a migrant community. My mother's parents arrived in 1912, a few years after the mass migration of Jews from the Russian Empire. Like a lot of second-generation children, the younger ones in that family spoke and understood Yiddish but usually answered in English.

My mother had a more ambivalent relationship with the language than my father. That was partly a question of social aspiration and class (a question I'll come back to later) but it was also because, across the board, there was considerable pressure both from within the community and from the wider society on the first generation to be born or educated in this country to express their Jewishness at home but keep it under wraps in the outside world.

“My Israeli friends were uncomprehending about why any Jewish person would want to stay in the diaspora, a cul-de-sac where we would either assimilate or end up in the gas chambers.”

In my teens I was an active member of Habonim, a socialist Zionist youth movement whose primary purpose was to recruit young people to populate the kibbutzim in Israel. It offered me both a political perspective, socialism, and a culture, Hebrew and Zionism, which seemed to affirm my right to be a confident, secular Jew in a non-Jewish world.



The words on this Bund poster from Kiev in 1918 proclaim: “There, where we live, that is our country!” It calls for “A democratic republic with full political and national rights for Jews.”

At the same time, I discovered Yiddish music that I could add to the songs and snippets of strange Russian Jewish stories from my father. I borrowed and learnt to play the youth movement's accordion. I listened particularly to Theodore Bikel, who recorded in Yiddish, Russian, German, Hebrew and many other languages. And I discovered a culture that I thought had been fatally undermined by the Nazi genocide and then superseded by Israeli culture.

I kept this interest a secret in Habonim, where Jewish life was seen as having two possible trajectories: a dead end in the diaspora or a new future in Israel. When I visited Israel – which I did throughout my teens in the 1960s – my friends there were uncomprehending about why we continued to live in Britain; why any Jewish person would want to stay in the diaspora, a

cul-de-sac where we would either assimilate or end up in the gas chambers.

“Instead of seeing Jews as an abnormal, beleaguered people, hanging on to existence by their fingernails for 3,000 years, we could describe ourselves as a people for whom diaspora existence is normal.”

The historiography that underpins this view is a narrative of suffering, of incessant and inescapable persecution; a dark, clouded existence punctuated by occasional bursts of sunlight. According to this framing of Jewish history, the short-lived Golden Ages when Jews thrived and lived in creative harmony with their neighbours are the exception that proves the rule. But there's another way of understanding the long history of the Jews that seems more rational to me: that after thousands of years in the diaspora, being a minority is normal. Over the millennia that we have lived with other peoples, we have developed cultures that combine flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness to diverse and changing societies, while we continue to recognise ourselves and be recognised by others as Jewish. There have been times of bitter oppression but also long periods in which Jewish life has expanded, developed and flourished. In my view, it's not just inaccurate but it's dangerous for us to portray the rich and varied Jewish world as a relentless saga of exile, exclusion and persecution which is both unique to the Jews and essential to what it means to be Jewish.

Instead of seeing Jews as an abnormal, beleaguered people, hanging on to existence by their fingernails for 3,000 years, we could describe ourselves as a people for whom diaspora existence is normal. I'm using the word "diaspora", I hope, in the way that Paul Gilroy defines it in *Black Atlantic* and other writing. I know that etymologically the word means "dispersion", but the reality of diaspora peoples is that, they live in a dynamic, interactive, dialectical relationship with other peoples and places. Diaspora is a context in which their identities and ways of life shift, change, grow and influence each other while they still maintain a sense of themselves as members of communities, nations or groups.

Predating Paul Gilroy by many decades, the Bund implicitly uses this kind of definition in its concept of *doikayt* – "hereness". *Doikayt* means: wherever we live, that's where we belong. The Bund was an organisation of the Jewish working class. Its purpose was to fight for and defend the interests of ordinary Jews – in the workplace, in the streets, in the face of antisemitism in all its guises. For Bundists, *doikayt* meant building, wherever Jews lived, cultural, educational and political resources to sustain working class communities.

Doikayt is a crucial concept for us in the Jewish Socialists' Group because it underpins our commitment to fight for a better world alongside other minorities, here

and now, on the basis that we all have an equal right to live decent lives without fear of persecution, oppression or discrimination. We don't agree to defer these rights until we reach some *Gan Eden* (Garden of Eden) in heaven or in the Land of Israel. And we don't believe that to be a "normal" people, you need to be in a majority tied to a land within borders.

What's normal for us is to live in many different places, speaking numerous living, evolving languages, developing cultures and forms of political organisation that relate to common traditions and what the Bundist historian Emanuel Scherer calls "community of fate".

“Majoritarianism undercuts the foundations of Jewish life developed over centuries – the complex cultural, linguistic, religious, social and political resources with which Jews have sustained their communities and relationships with each other and with the peoples amongst whom they live.”

More recently we have used the word "polycentrism" to describe the Jewish Socialists' Group's perspective; this means that we regard all Jewish communities as equally valid and equally deserving of support. Our support for all Jewish communities equally, everywhere in the world, comes into conflict with the imperatives of Zionism, which tries to assert that, because it is "*the Jewish state*", its needs take priority over those of diaspora communities. Since 1948 that demand has taken a variety of forms – and the impact of Zionism *on the diaspora* has been to undermine our communities by draining them of the economic, political, social and cultural resources we need to sustain ourselves. This attempt to normalise majoritarianism – the cultural hegemony and prioritisation of the perceived needs of the majority over those of minorities – which is the bedrock of all nationalism, is in direct conflict with Jewish reality. It undercuts the foundations of Jewish life developed over centuries – the complex cultural, linguistic, religious, social and political resources with which Jews have sustained their communities and relationships with each other and with the societies and peoples amongst whom they live.

It's no accident that the Bund and the Zionist movement were founded almost simultaneously in 1897. Both were a response to the rise of nationalism and the coalescence of nation states across Europe out of what were previously vast empires studded with princedoms and statelets. Nationalism is predicated on majoritarianism – a nation is a physical territory with real and *ideological* borders, drawn round "a people", who are usually assumed to share the same language, culture, religion and values. I like Benedict Anderson's terminology, describing this as "imagined communities" in which we don't all know each other but through different ways and means, particularly print and other forms of communica-

tion, we recognise each other. He says these imagined communities were superimposed on the “polyglot and polyethnic” territories of eastern and central Europe.

Inevitably, because it’s the reality of how human beings live, other peoples are caught within those borders who speak different languages, worship different gods, listen to different music and prioritise different values. These minorities in nation states may be tolerated to greater or lesser degrees, but the logic of the territorial nation state, means that those who are not part of that majority are treated as anomalous, abnormal and inferior. And they often accept that definition themselves. That is also the stated logic of Zionism: that as long as Jews are a minority, they’re abnormal, and the only way to acquire normality is to become a majority on a parcel of land which, after some deliberation, was decided to be Palestine.

The other way that Jews tried to shed their so-called abnormality was to assimilate. Assimilation is always portrayed as losing your particular identity, not as acquiring another identity. The powerful hegemonic view that the majority is the norm and that minorities are a problem means that assimilation is perceived as being like a gravitational pull, a natural, almost irresistible force. There is an assumption that minority status is so uncomfortable and undesirable that, left to their own devices – without the threat of being outcast or the lure of “a state of our own” – minorities like Jews would simply melt into the majority population.

It’s true that over the centuries, a lot of Jews have assimilated, taking on the cultures, and particularly the religions, of the majority. But it’s not true that this is inevitable or natural. A French scholar, Richard Marienstras, wrote a brilliant article called *The Jews of the Diaspora or the Vocation of a Minority* in which, among other examples of majoritarian pressure on minority

cultures, he looked at local languages in France that had been suppressed and all but suffocated. As soon as the pressure was taken off them, though, they sprang back to life, and we can see this phenomenon amongst Jews down the ages.

One example that interests me very much is the Sephardim – Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin – who were given permission to live in England after 1656 (Jews had officially been expelled by Edward I in 1290). The Inquisition had driven the ancestors of these Jews out of the Iberian Peninsula in the 1490s. Those who remained were forced by the Inquisition, under threat of torture and execution, to convert to Christianity. Many, though, adopted Christianity while covertly maintaining some vestigial and fragmented Jewish practices. A number of the Spanish Jews who came to England in the late 17th and 18th centuries were these Secret Jews or Conversos (sometimes referred to by the pejorative term, Marranos, which means “pigs”). Within a short time of being in England, even after 200 or 300 years of living as Christians, they started to identify as Jews, set up social, political and religious institutions, and lived as a recognisable community.

The idea of cohesive, discrete nation states has always been maintained by force, by the policing of borders and by defining difference as a threat. We know that, left to our own devices, Jews, Gypsies and other minorities don’t melt away or choose to join the majority culture – which usually isn’t such an appealing proposition as it’s cracked up to be. On the contrary, the Jewish Socialists’ Group argues, like the Bund whose concepts and politics we have inherited, that all ethnic minority communities should be encouraged and resourced to be, and to express, who they are, wherever they are.

What we want is self-determination in the diaspora.

DEFINING THE RIGHTS OF A MINORITY

Mike Heiser follows the sweep of the Bund’s history to explore and explain one of its defining concepts: National Cultural Autonomy

In its early years in the Russian Empire, the Bund was an underground organisation working primarily among the Jewish proletariat. It was initially hostile to any form of nationalism: Bundists saw their job as organising among the Jewish proletariat whose rights were not being protected by existing socialist organisations in the Russian empire. However they quickly found this was not enough. The classic formulation was by Vladimir Medem who wrote in 1904:

Let us consider the case of a country composed of several national groups, e.g. Poles, Lithuanians and

Jews. Each national group would create a separate movement. All citizens belonging to a given national group would join a special organisation that would hold cultural assemblies in each region and a general cultural assembly for the whole country. The assemblies would be given financial powers of their own: either each national group would be entitled to raise taxes on its members, or the state would allocate a proportion of its overall budget to each of them. Every citizen of the state would belong to one of the national groups, but the question of which national

movement to join would be a matter of personal choice and no authority would have any control over his decision. The national movements would be subject to the general legislation of the state, but in their own areas of responsibility they would be autonomous and none of them would have the right to interfere in the affairs of the others.

As regards the Jews as a national group, Medem took what he called a “neutralist” position, neither nationalist in an essentialist way, nor anti-nationalist, considering that national groups would disappear, but arguing that they existed at the moment. He wrote:

It may still be the verdict of history that Jews will assimilate into other peoples. For our part, we will not deploy any forces to stop this process nor to encourage it. We do not interfere with it. We are neutral. ... We are not against assimilation; we are against the pursuit of assimilation, against assimilation as a purpose. ... Should history want the Jews to develop into an independent culture, we will not try to interfere with this process either; we will not care for its success nor interfere with it; we are neutral.

Three points should be made about National Cultural Autonomy as the Bund saw it. Firstly, it involved language and education. It was not economic autarky; indeed the Bund argued for Jewish workers to be allowed to work in areas of the Russian economy which had been closed to them, such as the railways, even though this meant working on a Saturday. (Because of this, some within the Jewish community condemned them as “godless”.) In Poland, when local elections were organised during the German occupation in the

First World War, the Bund leader Vladimir Medem was quite clear that help for the Jewish poor should be a concern of the general budget, and not seen as a specifically Jewish matter.

The second point is that it should happen in conditions of equality. National cultural autonomy was a way of giving minorities equality as *minorities*, as opposed to as individuals. This did not require territorial concentration (as



Above: Vladimir Medem, the Bund's leading theorist.

Above right: Marc Liber, who represented the Bund on the Petrograd Workers and Soldiers Soviet

Zionists and territorialists were urging). It should be financed by a mixture of general and supplementary funding which should ensure equality of resources.

Lastly, national cultural autonomy as the Bund saw it should be secular. The Bund saw itself as an organisation dedicated to the creation of new institutions, not to the perpetuation of existing ones in their current form. It

was not antireligious but saw its Jewish identity in a secular way.

“Bundists also took leading roles in local soviets, particularly in the areas of highest Jewish concentration, such as Minsk and Vitebsk, but spreading to areas well outside this.”

After the February 1917 revolution the Bund was able to meet legally for the first time. Prominent Bundists such as Henryk Erlich and Mark Liber were on the Executive of the the Petrograd Workers and Soldiers Soviet. Bundists also took leading roles in local soviets,

particularly in the areas of highest Jewish concentration, such as Minsk and Vitebsk, but spreading to areas well outside this. For example, in Saratov the chair of the soviet was a Bundist. The Bund's newspaper, *Arbeter Shtime* (Workers' Voice) called for the unity of all workers' organisations (meaning the Mensheviks, the Social



Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks, as well as the Bund). The Bund did well in the municipal elections in the summer of 1917, and in a number of cities such as Minsk and Saratov, Bundists were elected as chairs of the local councils.

The Bund's first conference, in Petrograd barely a month after the revolution, debated what national cultural autonomy should mean in practice. Yiddish was seen as key to this, but it should go beyond language to full self-determination in questions of culture. Anyone who considered that they belonged to the Jewish nation could take part in democratic elections to new public institutions in charge of schooling, artistic and intellectual life, for every locality and for the whole country. These should be secular and funded both through the general budget (the state exchequer and local authorities), and through a right to raise supplementary taxes from members. If a minority wanted a secular school in a language other than Yiddish, they should also be able to obtain public funds. Religious communities should enjoy the full protection of the law as strictly private bodies but should not be publicly funded.

The Bund played a full role in the first all-Russian conference of soviets which took place in Petrograd in July 1917. Mark Liber, the Chair of the Bund, spoke on behalf of the Petrograd soviet in one debate against

Lenin, who held that the proletariat should seize power exclusively for itself. In a speech to the conference, Liber laid out the Bund's position on the national question. Where a people were a majority within any particular province, they should have national territorial autonomy (Ukraine was seen as an example of this). Notwithstanding this, minorities should everywhere have national cultural autonomy along the lines laid down at the Bund's own conference. The two forms of autonomy, national territorial autonomy and national cultural autonomy, should not be confused with each other. A resolution to that effect was carried, with the Bolsheviks voting against.

The Bund lined up with the Mensheviks and condemned the Bolshevik seizure of power. In an article written in 1918 and published in Warsaw, Henryk Erlich said "The 'revolution' ... was not an uprising of the workers and peasants. It ... involved, besides the Bolshevik activists, a few hundred soldiers, sailors and Red Guards. The reasons for its stunning success are not to be found in its organic (stychic) or mass character, but in the weakness of the Kerensky government."

By 1920 the Bund was no longer able to exist as an independent organisation in the Soviet Union; it split between those who felt that what was, for all its faults, a workers' state should be defended against the imperialist powers, and those who felt that the lack of democracy and coercion in that state meant that if the Bund were to stay true to its social-democratic principles, it had to be part of the opposition. The former, which became known as the Kombund, was forcibly integrated into the Communist Party and the latter had its existence made impossible. The Bund continued to be a mass force in the Jewish working class of other countries, notably in Poland, but its history as an independent force in Russia had come to an end.

Thus national cultural autonomy, in the form envisaged by the Bund in its July 1917 conference was never instituted in the Soviet Union. Ironically, after the liquidation of the Bund, the Jewish section of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, known as the Yevseksia, did proceed to establish a form of national cultural autonomy with the development of Yiddish culture and cultural institutions, particularly in Bielorussia and the Ukraine. Some former Bundists, such as Esther Frumkin were prominent in this. But there were, of course, no nationally elected democratic institutions.

"The Bund saw its role as organising among and arguing for socialist ideas within the Jewish working class and building alliances with Polish and other minority socialists."

Between the wars the main focus of the Bund's activity was Poland, where Jews were a large minority and represented 30-40% of the population in large cities. The Bund was legal and had representation in the institutions of the new Polish state: in parliament, local councils, Jewish community councils and trade unions, as

well as in allied organisations like Tsukunft, the youth movement, SKIF, the children's organisation, and YAF, the women's movement. The Bund played a leading role in the Yiddish secular school system (known as Tsisho) and had its own sanatorium – the Medem sanatorium – on the outskirts of Warsaw.

But the conditions in Poland meant that there was never national cultural autonomy of the kind envisaged by the Bund in 1917. In 1920s and '30s Poland, the Bund was forced to fight against anti-Jewish discrimination in many sections of public life, and received no public support for its educational and cultural work. The Bund promoted Jewish culture and Yiddish, supported the rights of Jews as a minority, but frequently aligned with the Polish Socialists rather than other Jewish parties. They were critical of a Judeocentric "Klal Yisroel" conception of peoplehood which, in their eyes, did not take account of the fact that Poland was a bourgeois state, rather than socialist. So the Bund saw its role as organising among and arguing for socialist ideas within the Jewish working class and building alliances with Polish and other minority socialists. For the same reason they were also opposed to the idea of the Jews as a "people-nation" – a concept particularly associated with Simon Dubnov.

Before the Second World War, Bundist organisations did exist in other countries to which Polish Jews emigrated, such as France, Belgium and Australia, as well as Palestine. At least part of their work consisted of raising funds to support institutions in Poland such as the Tsisho schools, and later to do what they could to support the Bund's fight as part of the underground resistance in Poland. Indeed it could be argued that between the wars the Bund was "polonocentric" rather than "polycentric".

"Assimilation is an escape for individuals, not a solution for a whole people with a distinctive national culture and identity. Pluralism is the life-blood of real democracy."

After the war, the Bund conference in Brussels in 1947 set up a World Co-ordinating Committee based in New York (which existed up until 2005). The core of the Bundist organisations in the different countries were people who had lived through the experience of the Polish Bund or were descended from families who had. In these circumstances, Medem's original "neutralist" stance was replaced by one which fought assimilation. This was articulated at a Bund conference in 1958:

Assimilation is an escape for individuals, not a solution for a whole people with a distinctive national culture and identity. Pluralism is the life-blood of real democracy, and this principle applies to national and cultural life within countries as well.

The conference also said:

Jewish national problems arising within the countries where Jews reside can be solved on the basis of freedom and democracy – more securely, by democratic

Socialism – which will guarantee Jews the rights of freedom and equality, including the right to a free, autonomous self-determination to maintain their own Jewish identity and national culture. Within the Jewish community the Bund strives for a secularized Jewish culture in the Yiddish language.

The Bund also moved to categorise Jews as a *Veltfolk* – a world people.

The Bund's attachment to Yiddish became increasingly important. I attended a number of Bund conferences in New York in the 1990s and they were all carried out in Yiddish. The organisation's theoretical magazine *Undzer Tsayt* (Our Times), which continued to appear into the 21st century, as well as magazines such as *Lebnsfragn* (Questions of Life) which was produced in Israel up until 2014, were all in Yiddish. When I interviewed its editor, the late Yitzchok Luden in that year, he said, "Yiddishkeyt was the glue, the identity card that keeps this together, not Jewish religious identity but the Bund applied Yiddishkeyt to 'general Jewishness'." He said: "Yiddishkeyt without Yiddish is like coffee without caffeine," and added that when Jews assimilate into other languages they become incorporated into the culture of those countries, such as France or Russia. But you no longer have a single Jewish people. The Jews are a world people, but losing the Yiddish language, which expresses this history and experience, without Yiddish there is no Jewish future."

National Cultural Autonomy can be seen, in the words of the contemporary scholar of the Bund, Gertrud Pickhan, as "multiculturalism avant la lettre". It should be seen as applicable to other minorities, not just Jews. National cultural autonomy was designed to provide a way in which different minorities can coexist in multinational states.

There are many situations to which it could be applied today, including, potentially at least, in Israel and Palestine. In a 2008 article Daniel Barenboim posed three problems that Israel needs to resolve: "its very identity; the problem of Palestinian identity within Israel; and the problem of the creation of a Palestinian state outside of Israel". The concept of National Cultural Autonomy might help construct a vision of a future in which these three – admittedly daunting – questions could be addressed.

"In Melbourne the Jewish Labour Bund continues to enact its ideological focus of frayhayt, glaykhkayt and gerekhtikayt – freedom, equality and justice."

The 120th anniversary year of the Bund in 2017 saw celebration meetings in different places in the world, including New York, Paris and Melbourne. I attended the day-long seminar in Paris by the Centre Medem/Arbeter Ring. The Jewish Labour Bund in Melbourne put on a year-long programme of events, and in New York a committee was established to organise a meeting and a

brochure. The Jewish Socialists' Group affiliated to the World Co-ordinating Committee of the Bund and draws on Bundist principles.

There are active organisations in two other places that are directly in the Bundist tradition – one in Melbourne and one in Paris. In Melbourne the Jewish Labour Bund continues to enact its ideological focus of *frayhayt*, *glaykhkayt* and *gerekhtikayt* – freedom, equality and justice, focusing on creating and nurturing a strong sense of secular Jewish identity through Yiddish language and culture in the community. SKIF (an acronym for *Sotsialistisher Kinder Farband*) was the Bund's children's movement in Poland, and Bundist groups today have set up SKIF groups. The branch in Melbourne is active to this day with activities and summer camps for 8-18-year-olds and also runs a Yiddish choir (*Mir Kumen On*) and an annual cultural festival. Its principal language of activity is English.

The Centre Medem Arbeter Ring in Paris is based near Place de la République in Paris and its principal language of activity is French. It holds around 60 activities a year, including talks, exhibitions, memorial events and concerts, a theatre group and trips abroad. It runs Yiddish classes ranging from beginners to Yiddish poetry as well as classes in Hebrew, Ladino, Arabic and Judeo-Arabic. It has a youth movement (CLEJ – Secular Club for Jewish Children – formerly SKIF) which organises summer camps and other activities. At one time it also held the largest Yiddish library in Western Europe but this is now formally separate, although it maintains the name of the Medem library.

Unfortunately the Israeli branch of the Bund, which had been active for 60 years, ceased to meet in 2019. Up until then it ran a range of activities – talks, musical events, commemorations, mainly in Yiddish. They were responsible for publishing *Lebnsfragn* (Questions of life) a journal which appeared bi-monthly. The issues of *Lebnsfragn* from 2008 to 2016 can still be accessed – in Yiddish – online.

Up to the 1990s there were Bund organisations in many other countries besides these, which had direct links to the Bund in Poland before the Second World War and some felt that they were looking backwards rather than forwards. In the words of a speaker at a Bund conference in New York, they talked about *doikayt* (here-ness) and practiced *dortnkeyt* (there-ness). The Bundist organisation in the United States no longer exists, although there are still people who come together to organise commemorative events, as they did in 2017 for the 120th anniversary of the foundation of the Bund.

The challenge, for the Jewish Socialists' Group, as much as for the other organisations mentioned, is to keep the link with the Bund alive, including its close connection with Yiddish, while operating mainly in the general language of the countries where they live, whether that's English, French, Spanish or Hebrew. A good start would be to bring the organisations closer together, especially now we have the technology to meet virtually across borders.

A CHILD OF THE BUND

Between the two world wars, the Bund in Poland established a system of secular Yiddish schools. Esther Brunstein writes about the Medem shule – the Bundist school she attended in 1930s Lodz before her education was cut short by the Nazi occupation. Esther died in London in 2017.

This was first published in Jewish Socialist No 11, Autumn 1987, on the 90th anniversary of the foundation of the Bund.



Esther Brunstein

Both my parents were members of the Bund. My father was a very, very active member. I don't think the school was reserved for children of Bund members, but the majority were probably children of Bundists and sometimes children of Communists who wanted their children to have a good Yiddish education.

We started before school with the kindergarten,

Grosser Kinderheyem. Grosser was one of the founders of the Bund. I started there at the age of three or four and from then I went on to the Medem Shule. My brothers didn't go there. When I was terribly little, my parents had to move from Lodz, and my elder brother joined the ordinary school in the town where they lived. On coming back, he would have lost some schooling, which was unthinkable. I think my other brother didn't go because my parents could not afford the fees. The parents were mainly working class people, but by no means all. At one time my father worked within the town hall, when a socialist council was elected, and later he was some sort of businessman dealing in textiles. Lodz was the biggest industrial textile centre, and he was a master weaver in a factory in Lodz.

The aim of the Medem Shule was a good Yiddish education, which took in everything – Yiddish culture, literature, the whole way of Jewish life – and this was different to the other schools, which didn't have it. The first year of school was in Yiddish only. Later on, Polish was introduced because Polish was the language of the country. I remember learning geography, mathematics and nature study in Yiddish, and Polish history in Polish, but Jewish history in Yiddish. The beauty was that the children who finished our school spoke better Polish than the Jewish children who went to ordinary Polish state schools. The educational standard was very high. In 1936 our school got an international prize for its standard of teaching. As pedagogues our teachers were excellent. And nothing was compulsory. The school was run on free and democratic lines.

There was nothing luxurious in the physical surroundings of our school. We did not have nice gardens. We were always aware that there were financial difficulties. There were about 20 pupils in each class. We had seven years, starting at the age of six or seven. Later

on, because it was important as we lived in Poland that our Polish was good, our lessons were in Polish. If you wanted to get into Gymnasium (high school), the exams were in Polish.

I remember all the teachers with absolute devotion and love. When I talk to my children sometimes and ask them, "How do you look back on your school years?" there is very little left there that draws them back to it. There is nothing that means an awful lot to them. For me, maybe because it was cut [short] so cruelly, it has become much more important. There was a great feeling of belonging. It was an extension of home. The teachers were excellent and they would, I am sure, be taking a lower salary in order to teach in our school.

"What this school has given me was a very strong feeling of what was right and what was just. We somehow managed to carry it within us. And it helped me in the ghetto in the darkest hours of the war."

There was something very special about the school, maybe because we really felt we were being taken care of as little people. As people we mattered. We knew they cared very much. There was this feeling of not just going to school in the morning, finishing in the afternoon, and that's it. Maybe it was because the majority who went to the school had this great love for Yiddish, for getting to know oneself and who we were, that it played such an important part and felt like an extension of home.

I have come away with the feeling that it was a great privilege to have been there. What this school has given me, and what comes through a lot of our literature – like Peretz and Asch and others who were Jewish but touched on universal problems – was a very strong feeling of what was right and what was just. We somehow managed to carry it within us. And as far as I'm concerned, it helped me in the ghetto in the darkest hours of the war. I have always retained this feeling and belief in my fellow human being. I still carry it with me. Soon after the war we were looking for whoever was left, who in the school survived. After your relatives you looked for survivors from the school. We found just a few.

Our everyday conversations at school were in Yiddish and Polish. There were some parents who sent their children to the school because they wanted them to acquire this great knowledge of Yiddish, but among themselves they probably spoke more Polish. You had

little groups forming in the school – some spoke more Yiddish, some more Polish, but everybody had Yiddish as a natural language.

Other Jewish children went to Jewish schools but not Yiddish schools. Yiddish wasn't taught there. They were state schools for Jewish children. Jewish children would go to school on Sunday. Polish children went to school on Saturday.

At the Medem shule we had no such thing as a religious assembly. The other schools did but it was not forced upon us. We had a hymn for the school, which wasn't sung every day: *"Lomir zingen a lid tsu der yidishe shule, vos iz alemen undz azoy tayer. Lomir zingen mit freyd un mit hofnung ful, oyf a velt a fraye a naye"* (Let us sing a song to the Yiddish school, which is dear to us all. Let us sing full of hope and joy for a new and free world).

The ultra-orthodox had their own schools. There were girls that I knew going to Beys Yankev. There were all kinds of other religious schools. Another very good secular school was the Borochov School of the Poale-Zionists. During the war, most of our teachers had left Poland to try and get into Russia. Some went to Warsaw. We were left with a few, plus some former students. In the first year of the ghetto, we still had a sort of school. There wasn't much learning but we did get a little bit of soup when we went there. A few children from the Borochov School came into our class because there were not enough children and teachers for two, and it was important that we kept together as a group. We continued for as long as it was possible to continue in the ghetto.

"When they taught the Hebrew prophets, they taught not just in terms of what they were saying should happen but what was the right thing to do."

Whether you were a Bund party member or not, the school had great meaning. The important educational aim of the school was to try, from the material available and the methods employed, to give you a sense of justice. I know this has definitely helped me form my thoughts. It was through analysing simple works of literature to bring out that this is the important thing – how to conduct oneself in life. Also, there was the sense of unity at school, for instance when we took our lunches to school, we would often put them in a communal basket so that the children who were not so well off also had something nice to eat. The teachers managed to impart the importance of one's behaviour inside and outside school. Sport was important – to be a free human being. Beauty was important. Everything was considered important and they worked very hard to bring these points out.

Boys and girls did everything together. We were one of the few co-educational schools at the time. There was a great sense of equality in our school. We had men and women teachers and this was very progressive for its time. When they taught the Hebrew prophets, they taught not just in terms of what they were saying should happen but what was the right thing to do. In Vilna they had very

good teacher training colleges for the Yiddish schools.

They imparted a strong sense of Jewish identity, not through nationalism but folkkultur (people's culture) and a sense of belonging to a people, so whether you chose a secular or religious way, you still had the same beginning. It was possible to identify fully with your past and remain secular Jews. There were children from religious backgrounds at our school as well. They had great respect for it. They came for the education.

"Poland had only two decades between two wars. It needed much more time to feel the impact that these schools would have for future generations."

I knew as a child that I would be envied because I had this kind of schooling. In Lodz there were only two such schools – ours and the Borochov School. Poland had only two decades between two wars. It needed much more time to feel the impact that these schools would have for future generations.

During the school holidays our teachers organised activities at the school. Many children lived in difficult conditions, so they organised outings and projects. As a child, they gave me a sense that I mattered. Every individual mattered. I don't think I romanticise. If anything that has been so lovely is cruelly cut short, then it becomes even more so. I know how much it mattered to me in the war years. Even when the school stopped, we still kept as a close group. We would still meet.

We did not go to school on Rosh Hashona (Jewish New Year) because we would not be allowed. I don't think it was important to do so just as a *davke* (to be contrary). Even though we were not a state funded school, we were still under the rules that every school was. I do distinctly remember when Pesach (Passover) was talked about. That was brought to us as a holiday of freedom. I remember coming home and telling this to my father and he would sit down with me. It was explained to us that the Jewish people as a whole revolted and there then followed the Exodus to the Promised Land. It was pointed out to us as a fight for freedom.

My one regret to this day is that, though the Yiddish they taught us was beautiful, they tried to rid it of the Hebrew. That was wrong, I now know. You cannot get to know the joy of Yiddish literature unless you know some Hebrew. They tried to purify it. They would take a Hebrew word and spell it phonetically in Yiddish. We would, for example, be given 20 Hebrew words and told to make sentences with them and then we were asked to substitute them with Yiddish phrases. I would have liked to have learnt and known more Hebrew because they are so interlinked. Maybe, if we would have continued to live there, it would have changed.

I still keep in touch with some friends from the school. I sent a letter yesterday to a friend in Buffalo (New York) whom I have known since kindergarten days.

We were together in the ghetto. Not very many have survived.

BENEATH GATHERING CLOUDS

Majer Bogdanski, a lifelong Bundist from Piotrkow, Poland, recalls the life and work of the Bund in the period leading up to the Second World War. Majer died in London in 2005.

First published in Jewish Socialist No 3, Autumn 1985.

The Bund consisted of three tiers – the party, the youth organisation (*Yugnt Bund Tsukunft*) and the children's organisation (*Sotsialistisher Kinder Farband, SKIF*). We had many additional associations: a yeshiva group; a women's organisation; and a university students' group. We also had a group among secondary school pupils. These were young people who understood little or no Yiddish, but we wanted to gain our influence among them.

The Bund was affiliated to the Socialist International; the youth organisation was affiliated to the Socialist Youth International; and SKIF to the Socialist Education International. There were other Bund organisations from whom we gained support. There were Jewish trade unions: clothing workers, woodworkers, shoemakers, metal workers, textile workers. In Warsaw, we successfully organised a trade union of the housemaids. And we also had all over Poland a union of the artisans – outdoor workers who worked with the staff they employed, and often longer hours than them. They were exploiting their workers, but were exploited by those for whom they worked. Often we organised strikes with them against the chief employers.

The trade unions were affiliated to their internationals, and within Poland all Jewish trade unions were organised in one central national committee. The Central Council was affiliated to the General Central Council of Polish Workers.

The cultural dimension

We had a system of Yiddish schools all over Poland, organised in one central authority. We also had a *Kultur Lige* (Culture League), which would buy up cinema or theatre performances, organise concerts and cater for libraries. They had one of the finest Yiddish choirs in Poland. We had our own sports club called *Morgnshtern* (Morning Star) which catered for athletics, football, gymnastics, and was affiliated to the Socialist Workers' Sports International.

We ran our own press with the daily *Folkstsaytung* (People's Paper) as well as periodicals. The Bund Central Committee issued a monthly paper called *Unzer Tsayt* (Our Time). There was also a journal of the minority called *Kegn Shtrom* (Against the Stream). They didn't agree with the politics of the Central Committee as explained in the official party paper, so they had their own journal. We also had local weekly or bi-weekly periodicals in towns which could afford them. Once a week,

the children had a page in the *Folkstsaytung*. The youth organisation had a monthly journal. This was one of the nicest journals you could ever see. We also had a youth periodical in Polish called *Voice of the Youth*. The Bund had another periodical in Polish called *Voice of the Bund*. This was aimed at the intelligentsia. We wanted to gain influence and let them know who we were.

Political links

Ideologically we were marxist. Politically we called ourselves revolutionary socialists. Where we could gain power by the vote, in a democratic way, we would; but if this was not possible, like in Italy or Portugal, or in our own Poland, and if force was the only way of gaining power, we would use force. We were absolutely against war and absolutely against the army. We thought it should be disbanded. But this was only until the advent of Hitler. Hitler changed our minds in this respect. We were anti-Zionist and anti-communist. The communists believed that the first fight was against the Bund and the socialists. In all our political work we tried as much as possible to work with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), and also the socialist parties of the other minorities – Germans, Ukrainians, White Russians and Lithuanians.

We took part as much as we could in the local authorities. We had to co-operate; without the PPS we were always a minority. We organised strikes; not frivolously – we couldn't afford it – a strike was a dire necessity. Strikes were mainly for economic matters. We also called political strikes for a shorter working day. We had demonstrations on all sorts of occasions. If there was a pogrom somewhere, we would call a half-day strike and the shopkeepers would usually support it. This was the



Recruitment poster for Tsukunft, the Bund's youth movement.

only way they could protest against such atrocities.

What did we have to contend with? Poland had a constitution. It was a republic. You could never find a more beautiful constitution! It was drafted and established just after 1919 when Poland regained statehood. The constitution guaranteed minority rights – there couldn't be antisemitism – but a constitution is only a bit of paper. The political system we had in the '30s we called semi-fascist and this was no exaggeration. The parliament was elected but the last elections in 1926 were boycotted by all the political parties, right, left and centre, except the Government Party – the Sanacja. The Polish military leader, Pilsudski, created it. He was once a member of the PPS. When Poland became independent he left the socialists.

He staged a coup d'état in 1926. In Warsaw he assembled military units from all over the country who were faithful to him and he dissolved the existing parliament. We had an elected parliament but the election system was such that no one could get any real representation, only them. In some places 105% votes were cast. Over 90% were always for them. It was such a horrible system that even the Endeks (National Democrats) boycotted them. The Sanacja were antisemitic, the Endeks even more so, and still it was constitutional. They said it was a democracy led by an authority. The government was oppressive to all its citizens. It was horribly anti-labour and anti-socialist. When the workers struck, the police would come and commit massacres.

Official antisemitism

Antisemitism was the hardest thing we had to contend with all the time. Antisemitism was official in that no Jew could hope to get employment from a non-Jewish employer or in any government establishment such as the railways, post and banking system, which were all nationalised. The local authorities would carry out open works such as canalisation. They would employ local people but not Jews. To get them to employ Jews was like getting blood from a stone. This was our great struggle. In those councils where the socialists were a majority, we were successful. They would employ some Jews. In 1924 the government nationalised the production of alcohol and tobacco. These industries employed masses of Jews. After nationalisation the government excluded the Jews. Thousands and thousands of Jews found themselves without the means to buy bread, and there was no social security.

As for our Yiddish schools, the government wouldn't pay one penny towards them. We charged the parents a fee, but the parents were poor workers. Even with their fees the schools could not exist. Every year we sent somebody abroad to collect money for them. The Jewish trade



Majer Bogdanski, an activist all his life, from the Bund in Poland in his youth to the Jewish Socialists' Group in London in his later years.

unions were asked to charge their members 5 groshen every week. Again you couldn't pay the levy. Most us were employed six months a year. I was a tailor. I had two seasons – summer and winter. Each lasted three months and out of it I had to eke out the other months.

We also had to organise defence groups simply to defend our lives. The Sanacja discriminated but didn't call for pogroms. In 1938, with Hitler by the door, the Prime Minister stood up in parliament and said: it isn't nice to make pogroms against the Jews; economic discrimination by all means! The students in the universities didn't allow the Jews to take part in the lectures. They would have to stand in the corner and make notes on each others' backs. In one case a student was thrown out of a window and killed. The Endeks called for pogroms. They had a youth organisation – the *Nara* – comprised only of students. They not only incited others but they would attack individual Jews or small groups. They put bombs in Jewish shops. They employed children. In my home town, Lodz, a little boy lost an arm when they gave him a bomb to throw but it exploded early.

In defence, we sought, and often got, the help of the PPS. Their militia had men among the *Nara* and they would tell us that the *Nara* were planning to attack Jews when they came out of the prayer house. We would organise ourselves in groups of five, each with a walking stick. This was the only weapon we could afford or dare to have, because if the police caught us with a knife they could de-legalise the Party. We would go to the prayer houses and stand outside. The people inside didn't even know. Sometimes they came out and hissed at us because on the Sabbath you mustn't carry a stick. We were the only ones to actively fight anti-semitism. The socialist Zionists weren't interested and neither were the Communists.

These were the conditions and these were the things we had to do. Life was hard but it also had very beautiful moments. We managed somehow to have a lot of happiness and enjoyment. With the youth organisation

and the children's organisation we organised summer camps and dances. We had our sports organisation. The children were particularly interesting and nice to be with. They would organise summer camps which we called socialist children's republics, and they learned to live together as socialists.

Conflict within the community

Inside the Jewish community we had to contend with the Zionists – we were anti-Zionist – and also with the orthodox. Religion to us was a private matter. There were Bundists who were deeply religious. If we were anti-religious we wouldn't have support at elections. The people knew that we didn't go to synagogue to pray, but they knew that we were fighting to the last drop of blood for their right to religious practice. Politically we had a hard struggle with them. Apart from the town councils, there were also the Jewish councils (*Kehillas*). We had to belong and pay rates to the Jewish *Kehilla*. They were mostly dominated by the religious – the *Aguda*. There was a time when we boycotted the *Kehillas*. In 1930, on their suggestion, the government passed a law restricting certain Jews from being members of the councils – those who didn't wear sidelocks and beards. In Lodz, two of our most famous leaders couldn't be candidates because they applied this law to them. Voting rights [in the *Kehillas*] were only for men. Women had no right to vote, and that was against our principles.

But in 1936 a conference of Party leaders decided that we should recommend our comrades to take part in the elections. The *Kehilla* had at its disposal masses of money. If we were not there we didn't get a penny, but if we were there in strength we may get something. So the members thought: it is horrible depriving half the population – the women – of voting rights but on the other hand, the *Kehillas* are disposing of our money. We decided to take part. *Fun a khazer a hor operishn* (if you can pluck a hair from a swine) – and where we managed to get a sizeable number of people, we could

get some money for our needs. Without the money, you can't imagine how difficult it was to keep the daily paper going. And we had the Yiddish schools and libraries. The Zionists had their own schools.

1939 saw the greatest triumph for the Bund in Poland. In January 1939 there were elections to the town councils all over Poland. In Warsaw there were 20 Jewish councillors; 16 were from the Bund. In my home town, Lodz, seven out of 11 were Bundists. This pattern was repeated all over Poland. I remember a comrade of mine who asked a very religious Warsaw Jew, "Who did you vote for?" He replied, "I voted for the Bund." "Why did you vote for the Bund? You are a religious Jew." He said, "Yes. They defended me."

The invasion of Poland

1939 also saw a sordid thing. All through the summer, the governments of Britain, France and the Soviet Union met with the objective of concluding a pact against Hitler. Then in the beginning of August, like a bolt from the sky came the news that the Russians had concluded a pact with the Germans, the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. At the same time that they were conferring with the British and the French, they were conferring with the Germans. Essentially it was a non-aggression pact by which they divided Poland between them. On 1st September the German armies came over the Polish frontier from the west and the Russians came a few days later from the east. The tragedy was that the best of our comrades – those that didn't fall into the hands of the Germans – fell into the hands of the Russians and were shot. I mention only a few names: Henryk Erlich, Victor Alter and Anna Rosenthal – an old revolutionary from Vilna (Vilnius). Erlich was a member of the executive committee of the Socialist International. They were the most beloved people in Poland.

And then the Holocaust began, and put an end to everything.

MAREK EDELMAN, 1919 - 2009

Marek Edelman was the best known of the Bund's Warsaw Ghetto fighters. He was born in Gomel, Belarus in 1919. His father, who was active in the Socialist Revolutionary Party, died when Edelman was just five years old. The family moved to Warsaw soon afterwards, where his mother, a hospital secretary, was active in the Bund's women's movement until her death in 1934. Edelman joined the Bund's youth movement, *Tsukunft*, as a teenager.

In the late 1930s he organised a 50-strong group of SKIF – the



Mural in Warsaw commemorating Marek Edelman, unveiled in 2013 on the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Designed by Dariusz Paczkowski

Bund's children's organisation – which met regularly in Praga, a very poor working class district of Warsaw. Among these children were several future Warsaw Ghetto resistance fighters. Edelman was Second in Command during the 1943 Uprising and survived by crawling through a sewer with nearly 40 other fighters after the uprising had been extinguished. He wrote a searing memoir in Polish in 1945 called *The Ghetto Fights*. It was translated into Yiddish and English in 1946. In the

country where 90% of the pre-war Jewish population had been murdered, he helped in the attempt to rebuild the Bund in Poland and gave practical support to survivors among the children of Bundists.

Edelman later studied medicine and became a prominent cardiologist in Lodz, then returned to Warsaw very late in his life. He remained true to his Bundist beliefs post-war, as a secular socialist, internationalist and anti-Zionist. He was a thorn in the side of Poland's Stalinist regime when he returned to political activity in the protest movements that erupted there in the mid-1970s and '80s.

He built friendly relationships with Palestinian students within Poland and was in contact with figures in Palestine (especially Mustafa Barghouti). In the Yugoslav wars he took part in an aid convoy bringing goods to besieged Bosnian Muslims.

His funeral in 2009 was a public ceremony in the square that houses the main Warsaw Ghetto monument. In keeping with a request he had made, his coffin was draped with a Bund flag. Marek Edelman is buried in a section of the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street, Warsaw amongst the graves of other Bundists and memorials for the Ghetto Fighters.

SO FAITHFUL TO THE PEOPLE OF THE GHETTO

Wlodka Blit Robertson and her twin sister were smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto and hidden by non-Jewish families. This is her personal memoir of Marek Edelman, who was Second in Command of the Jewish Fighting Organization in the Warsaw Ghetto, and his wife Ala Margolis

When I was about six or seven years old my parents were close friends of the Lichtensteins, who were very active Bundists in Warsaw. They had a daughter the same age, so we used to visit them. I remember this slim, shy boy, maybe 16 or 17 years old, living with them rather in the shadows. His parents had died long before. This was Marek.

With other leaders of the Bund, the Lichtensteins left Warsaw in 1939, for the Russian frontier. Marek was left alone. I remember him coming once to our house with other young Bundists. My mother, who was not a Bundist – she was in Poale Zion – did some work together with the underground. These young people came for meetings and to distribute bulletins.

Marek was there when we escaped from the ghetto a few weeks before the Uprising. Mikhal Klepfisz [father of Irena Klepfisz, whose article, "My Bundism is not just a memory" is in this pamphlet] came to say he would take us that day. He took us to the place at the wall where the guards were bribed and where a lot of smuggling took place in the dark. Marek was not just helping us out, but probably bringing in some ammunition and food. Other people I knew from the Bund were with him. Marek knew us and talked to us, and my sister remembers him helping her up the ladder.

"The Bundists and those who were coming back from the camps mainly came to Lodz, and formed groups who lived together in houses. The Bundists were like a big family helping each other."

I met Ala Margolis after the Russians came to Poland in the winter of 1945. I waited for someone to collect me from the village where I was looked after, but no one came. I couldn't stay longer in this very poor hungry village so I went to the family I was with in Warsaw and just sat there. It was winter but I didn't have any shoes. But then one day there was a knock on the door and it was Ala and she said she had come to collect me. I didn't know that she was with Marek at the time. She knew my sister was alive.

My sister had found her way to Warsaw and found the Jewish committee. A Jew in the street told her there was a committee and she found Wladka Peltel-Meed who was working there, and who knew where I was. It was Ala who volunteered in that winter to go to the village to find me. She was a very exceptional person. By the end of the war she was 23 or 24. She looked very Jewish, very dark skinned with black hair, and very nonchalant.

She talked to me about the Jaszunski family, who



Wlodka Blit Robertson in 2013 speaking at a JSG event commemorating Szmul Zygielbojm, whose suicide 70 years earlier was a last desperate attempt to alert the Allies to the fate of the Jews.

had come from Vilna to Lodz where she was taking me. Warsaw was completely ruined. Nobody was there. The Bundists and those who were coming back from the camps mainly came to Lodz, and formed groups who lived together in houses. The Bundists were like a big family helping each other.

“Marek organised a guard for the Jewish children’s homes because of the dangers of them being attacked by armed Polish hooligans.”

I stayed with Grzegosz and Irena Jaszunski. They had an apartment that was confiscated from the Germans. Many young Bundists came and slept at the flat, and I remember Mr Jaszunski once slept on the cooker because there was no room in the beds!

My sister was brought there as well and we stayed there until we came to London. In that period I saw Marek a lot – he was a great friend of Grzegosz and Irena Jaszunski. Young Bundists returned from the concentration camps which had been liberated, and the Tsukunft – the Bund’s youth movement – was re-established.

They organised some camps in the forests and I remember that they joked about Marek and called him “Robespierre”. He was recognised as this person who had been shooting – and the people who had been in the camps looked upon him as a warrior. He organised a guard for the Jewish children’s homes because of the dangers of them being attacked by armed Polish hooligans. He knew how to use a gun and taught some others how to.

He was very caring. He could be quite sentimental – he could also be the opposite! In an argument he would especially take up a position that would annoy the people he was arguing with.



Ala Margolis, wife of Marek Edelman, who found and rescued Wlodka at the end of the war.

I found Ala very warm. Most people were very stressed and had their problems to work out. I needed somebody, not quite a mother figure, to be warm and interested in me and she always was. She seemed very energetic and there was nothing that she couldn’t do.

Ala’s parents, Alexander and Anna Margolis, were

both doctors, and her father was a very well known Bundist in Lodz. Ala’s mother survived the war and she was very ambitious for Ala and for Marek. Ala tried to persuade him to leave Poland but he wouldn’t. He said he had to stay to keep the memory of the ghetto. She was determined to leave. He managed to be really well known as a representative of what had happened. He

used to say that if somebody wrote a letter just addressed as “Marek” he was well known enough for the letter to come to his house!

I am pleased and proud that he remained because it had the consequences he wanted. The ghetto was remembered more than it would have been otherwise. At different commemorations he was always the representative and had a very high profile. We went to the commemoration in the early 2000s and I saw Marek. I had a memory of him as a very young man – he was much older but still quite well. He was more sentimental to me and the other people he knew than I had expected. There was a concert and he was given a medal. It was a very moving ceremony organised by the government. They were firing bullets in salute and calling out the names of all the fighters.

“I knew there were secret meetings and libraries and schools, even committees we were not supposed to know about...”

Marek didn’t distinguish between the fighters and those who didn’t fight. He said they were just as heroic. I share this feeling very much. I know of people who could have run away or did some of the fighting but chose to stay with their parents or children. There are those who treat the fighters as the heroes who defended our honour. For years and years I heard British Jews as well as non-Jews say that in some way the Jews let themselves be killed; we are not like this now, in Israel we are fighting, and such obvious nonsense.

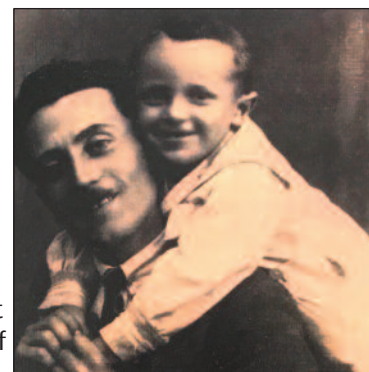
There was a lot of passive resistance in the ghetto. I knew there were secret meetings and libraries and schools, even committees we were not supposed to know about in blocks of flats, who tried to help people in particular trouble.

There was an armed action a few weeks before the Uprising. We went to some friends and then, in the middle of the night, someone from Poale Zion who was carrying a gun led us through a secret passage part of the way. There was some shooting and some Germans were killed. I remember being led through a secret tunnel.

In his will, Marek talked about how he wanted a Bundist flag for his funeral, and the Workmen’s Circle in Paris supplied one which was brought to Poland by Edelman’s children. I was very moved. It showed how much the Bund was part of him. He wanted it known.

He was buried among the Bundist graves in the Jewish cemetery. I know how deeply he felt about the people who died either in the Uprising or just after, how much he felt that he had to do whatever he could do, either for their memories or for their children. It stayed with him. His time in the ghetto, the Uprising, and afterwards, when he lived among the Bundist couriers, was really his life. Marek was so faithful to that experience in the ghetto, both to those people that fought and those that didn’t fight.

THE FINAL PROTEST OF A BUNDIST LONDON, MAY 1943



Born in Borowica, Poland, Szmul Zygielbojm was a factory worker from the age of 10 and apprenticed as a glovemaker at 12. He joined the Bund in his early 20s and became a leading figure for both Jewish and non-Jewish trade unionists throughout Poland. In the 1930s he served as an elected councillor for the Bund, in Lodz and in Warsaw.

After the Nazi invasion, Zygielbojm was one of 24 Jews forced to serve on the Warsaw Judenrat (Jewish Council). In November 1939, the Nazis commanded the Judenrat to co-operate in moving all Warsaw's Jews to a designated area of the city – the first step in creating the Warsaw Ghetto. A large crowd gathered outside the building where the Judenrat discussed this. Zygielbojm could not convince his fellow councillors to oppose the decree, and resigned. But he seized the opportunity to address the crowd from a balcony, and urged defiance: "Don't go voluntarily to the ghetto... Remain in your homes until you are removed by force."

He was ordered to report to Gestapo headquarters. But his Bund comrades hid him, then organised his escape in which he travelled in disguise through Nazi Germany on a false Dutch passport. They entrusted him, though, with two tasks: to tell the world what was happening to Poland's Jews, and mobilise for their defence and rescue.

Receiving bulletins through underground resistance networks, Zygielbojm undertook these tasks in Belgium, France, the USA and ultimately in London, where he was invited to join the National Council of the Polish Government in Exile in March 1942.

From a rented flat in Paddington he sent telegrams to diplomats and political leaders, and conveyed information to the general public by broadcasting on the BBC, addressing public meetings and bombarding the press with letters.

At a packed Labour Party meeting in Caxton Hall in September 1942, Zygielbojm revealed detailed information about the first use of poison gas by the Nazis as a method of mass murder in Chelmno.

Two crushing events coincided on 19th April 1943. While Nazi tanks and soldiers entered the Warsaw Ghetto to destroy it and massacre its remaining inhabitants (most had already been deported to death camps), American and British leaders convened the Bermuda Conference where they spent 11 days ruling out any possibility of taking in significant numbers of Jewish refugees. Inside the ghetto, though, Bundists, Communists and left-wing Zionists under a joint com-

mand fought a courageous guerrilla campaign to defend the remaining population. It was the most unequal of battles but the Nazis paid a high price for their eventual victory. Zygielbojm received news on 10th May that the resistance had finally been crushed.

On the night of 11th - 12th May 1943, Zygielbojm swallowed poison at his Paddington home. He had left letters to political leaders and to his Bundist comrades and friends, confirming that his suicide was a premeditated act of political protest:

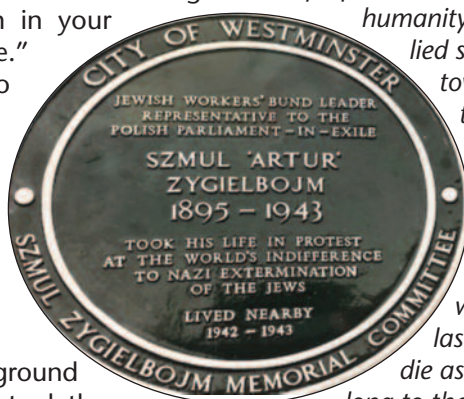
...The responsibility for this crime of murdering all the Jewish population in Poland falls, in the first instance on the perpetrators but indirectly it also burdens the whole of humanity, the peoples and governments of the allied states that, so far, have made no effort towards a concrete action to put a stop to this crime...

I cannot remain silent. I cannot live while the remnants of the Jewish people in Poland, whose representative I am, are being exterminated. My comrades in the Warsaw Ghetto perished with their weapons in their hands in their last heroic battle. It was not my destiny to die as they did, together with them. But I belong to them and in their mass graves.

By my death I wish to make the strongest possible protest against the passivity with which the world is looking on and permitting the extermination of the Jewish people ... as I was unable to do anything during my life, perhaps by my death I shall help to break down the indifference of those who have the possibility now, at the last moment, to save those Polish Jews still alive from certain annihilation.

My life belongs to the Jewish people in Poland and, therefore, I give it to them. I wish that the surviving remnants of the Polish Jews could live to see, with the Polish population, the liberation that it could know in Poland, in a world of freedom and in the justice of socialism.

The Jewish Socialists' Group together with surviving Bundists in the UK, launched the Szmul Zygielbojm Memorial Committee to campaign for a permanent memorial for Zygielbojm in London. A memorial plaque was unveiled on 12th May 1996. Zygielbojm family members flew from America for the ceremony, as did Perec Zylberberg from Canada, representing the World Coordinating Committee of the Bund. Perec had known Zygielbojm in Lodz.



THE JEWISH DISPLACED PERSONS AND THE WAR IN PALESTINE

In June 1948 the *Jewish Labour Bund Bulletin* published this report of violent coercion of Jewish survivors of the Nazi genocide, who were trapped in DP camps in Europe, to go and fight for the newly established state of Israel

Every war has its conscientious objectors. No matter how small their number, they are more than just a legal nuisance for government authorities. They are a moral reminder for all of us. Conscientious objectors are an indication, as well as a promise, that some time in the future the better nature of human beings will make wars impossible.

Be that as it may, the opposition shown by Jewish DPs against being forced to participate in the Palestine war has nothing to do with this moral question. Rather the principle of their elementary human rights is involved here.

We received authentic reports from the Jewish DPs in the various camps of Germany, Austria and Italy to the effect that Zionist agents of the Jewish State in Palestine, supported by well known Jewish relief organisations operating in the DP camps, are doing their utmost to enlist Jewish DPs for the Palestine war. The dubious legal aspects of such a procedure are evident. Nevertheless, it is not our intention to indulge in mere juristics. What is truly unbearable and really unbelievable is the cruelty, the coercion, and the terror employed to force the Jewish DPs to enlist. Every one of these unhappy veterans of Nazi bestiality who dares to refuse the call of arms by the Jewish State is being denied his meagre ration of food and thus actually exposed to starvation.

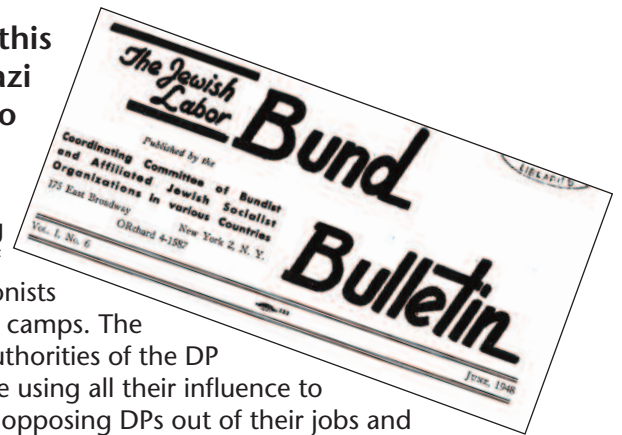
Word has reached us that Jewish DPs objecting to their transportation to the Jewish State of Israel are exposed to beatings, detention and all kinds of persecutions by the self-appointed Jewish police, composed of elements from the notorious groups in Palestine now

operating on behalf of the Zionists in the DP camps. The Zionist authorities of the DP camps are using all their influence to drive the opposing DPs out of their jobs and workshops. Quite often they are doing everything in their power to prevent Jewish DPs with legal visas into other countries to depart, not to mention their efforts to bar Jewish DPs from receiving visas into countries other than Palestine. Jews trying to escape are being ferreted out from their hideouts and forced into military formations against their will. The despair and anger among these victims of ill-conceived Jewish statehood is spreading like wildfire. According to a recent report, unrest and hostility between the Zionist mobilisation drivers and the Jewish DPs are the order of the day.

We do not deny the right of convinced Zionists to donate for the Zionist cause, even to sacrifice their lives by participating in the Arab-Jewish War. What we do vigorously deny is their right to compel others to follow suit. To enlist Jewish DPs against their will is particularly cruel. Those who went through the whole ordeal of Nazi persecution are more than anyone else entitled to decide about their own lives and their own destiny. It is an ugly manoeuvre to use the plight of the DPs as a whip to drive them into participating in bloody fighting. They have had enough of their share in the gory events which resulted in the annihilation of six million Jews by Nazi Germany. They are entitled to a peaceful new start in life. The Bund members among the Jewish DPs are also victims of Zionist persecution, even though their opposition to Zionist ideals is well known.

We deem it wise to emphasise that reports about these incredible deeds of the Zionist agents reached us not only from our Bund comrades among the Jewish DPs.

We call the attention of public opinion to the unbearable situation which has been created in the Jewish camps by these illegal and inhuman steps on the part of the Zionists. We call upon all the agencies concerned with the protection of human rights everywhere to investigate this flagrant case of depriving human beings of their elementary privileges. We protest vigorously against the agencies of the Joint Distribution Committee in the DP camps which, according to our knowledge, are denying food rations to those DPs who rebel against Zionist coercion.



DPs leaving for Israel from the same railway platform where prisoners had arrived at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

OLD IDEAS FOR NEW TIMES

JEWISH SELF-DETERMINATION IN THE DIASPORA

This piece by David Rosenberg is adapted from a talk given as part of the Red Labour Celebration of Jewish Radicalism in December 2020.

In 2013, a remarkable museum called Polin opened in a location that 80 years ago was part of the Warsaw Ghetto. I've visited it several times.

The history most Jews around the world have been taught is that Poland is nothing but a Jewish graveyard. A thousand years of continuous presence collapsed into six years of utter destruction, when 90% of Poland's 3.3 million, largely Yiddish-speaking, working class Jews were wiped out by the Nazis, with operations to find hidden Jews carried out by auxiliary Polish police.

Today, under Poland's ultra-reactionary government, admired by the Tory government in Britain and Netanyahu's government in Israel, you can be punished for exposing Polish wartime collaboration.

And yet a pluralist Jewish life is reviving in 15 Polish cities today. They don't have one central Jewish body, like our Board of Deputies, who arrogantly declare what the community believes; and they're not susceptible to Israeli pressure on their priorities. If Keir Starmer visited them, he would be flummoxed by having to consider several Jewish opinions instead of just one.

Polin Museum showcases 1,000 years of Jewish life, culture, interaction with non-Jews, intellectual creativity, periods of terror and hardship but also long-lasting golden ages. Only part of it focuses on those six years of annihilation.

One compelling display marks the late 19th century, when most Polish Jews lived under Tsarist rule, but when new, radical ideas promising liberation and self-determination were spreading.

The Zionist idea – territorial self-determination in Palestine – was one political current among several. It was challenged from day one by Jews who advanced alternative ways to build equal lives for Jews, as a minority, wherever they lived, whether centred on religious identity, secular cultural autonomy, or strategies for integration.

So when you next hear some *shmendrik* (that's Yiddish for fool) say "anti-Zionism is antisemitism", remind them that anti-Zionism was invented, first used, and developed by *Jews* for positive reasons, though we don't own the copyright.

Today, when people discuss Jewish self-determination, not least in the dubious IHRA definition and its examples, the notion is so impoverished. It refers only to *territorial* self-determination in Israel – a fortress state, built on dispossessing and expelling so many Palestinians in 1948, and then denying self-determination to those who remained.

Twenty one percent of Israelis today are Palestinians who endure multiple discrimination. Israel also rules

brutally over 2.2 million Palestinians in the Occupied West Bank. Palestinian refugees, whether from 1948 or 1967 cannot return.

Under Israel's 2018 Nation State law, only *Jews* are entitled to *national* self-determination in Israel. Not indigenous Palestinians, migrant workers or refugees. That law was passed during a state visit by Netanyahu's chum, Victor Orbán, who used antisemitic propaganda targeting George Soros to help him win the Hungarian election that year.

If Israel doesn't want to be labelled an apartheid



Victor Orbán (left) and Benjamin Netanyahu celebrating the passing of Israel's Nation State Law together.

state, it can repeal the Nation State law and Law of Return, dismantle discrimination, confiscate arms from illegal settlers, make Jewish-only roads available to all. It could enact laws to ensure that Israel/Palestine is a state for all its citizens equally, whether in one state or two.

“Zionism proclaimed the ingathering of Jews in one nation state. Yet 75 years after independence, a majority of Jews (including many Israelis) choose to practise Jewish self-determination elsewhere.”

Despite repression, growing numbers of left-wing Israelis and human rights bodies are working for that goal by protesting, publishing, refusing army service, making illegal solidarity visits. Here in Britain we can support justice there, by amplifying the activities of progressive Israeli Jews, as well as exposing brutality towards Palestinians.

Zionism proclaimed the ingathering of Jews in one

nation state. Yet 75 years after independence, a majority of Jews (including many Israelis) choose to practise Jewish self-determination elsewhere – in Berlin, Buenos Aires, Istanbul, Kiev, London, Melbourne, New York, Paris, Toronto, Warsaw...

Those who shout loudest about defending “Jewish self-determination” are not talking about enhancing the creative, diasporic Jewish self-determination that already exists, but about defending an ethnocracy in Israel. The Israeli ruling class and their supporters among Jewish so-called “leaders” outside Israel don’t like other Jews using their self-determined voice to denounce Israeli racism.

Emanuel Scherer, a Polish-born member of the Bund, a secular, left-wing, anti-Zionist Jewish movement, once wrote: “Rights and Justice for Jews everywhere without wrongs and injustice to other people anywhere.”

Political Zionism and Bundism were both born in 1897, the first at a plush conference in Basle, the other in an illegal gathering in a house in Vilna (Vilnius). The Bund sought to link the struggles of Jews with those of workers throughout the Russian Empire for socialism.

Bundism and Zionism had opposite values: optimism versus pessimism; internationalism versus nationalism; integration versus isolation and emigration. The Bund accused Zionists of worshipping the same nationalist values as the regimes that oppressed Jews and other minorities.

The Bund threw itself into Russia’s revolutionary upheavals in 1905 and 1917 but also engaged very critically with Lenin and warned about the Bolsheviks’ anti-democratic tendencies. The Bund’s socialism was from the bottom up.

Its heyday as a mass movement was in 1930s Poland, where it had a daily Yiddish newspaper and other publications in Yiddish and Polish, it organised strikes and built a world of institutions: libraries, schools, sports clubs, cultural projects; a Bundist women’s movement, youth movement, and children’s organisation; a sanatorium funded by trade unions for children at risk of TB, run on the most democratic, children’s rights principles.

As Poland slid into semi-fascism, the Bund and Polish Socialist Party activists jointly led the political and physical struggle against antisemitism. Apart from one small faction, Zionists and religious Jews abstained from that fight in the 1930s, while the Communists were too obsessed with a trade union turf war with the Bundists to defend Jews.

In the last municipal elections before the Nazis invaded Poland, the Bund won massive victories among Jewish voters in major Polish cities where Jews comprised a third of the population. Many religious Jews voted for secular socialists – the Bund – who defended them from antisemites.

In the ghettos during the early 1940s, Bundists, Communists and left Zionists united in armed anti-Nazi resistance. The Holocaust decimated the Bund. Its post-war presence has been marginal but its philosophy of diasporic self-determination and its fundamental critique of Zionism remain absolutely pertinent today.

“In Apartheid South Africa, Jewish establishment bodies handed over names and addresses of Jewish activists to the Apartheid authorities.”

Zionism represses Palestinians daily but also, through insisting on the centrality of Israel to Jews, undermines diaspora Jewish lives, dividing us from other minorities and other allies, with grave consequences:

In semi-fascist Argentina in the late 1970s, thousands of political opponents disappeared. Jews were 1% of the population but more than 10% of those who disappeared under a regime armed to the teeth by Israel.

In Apartheid South Africa, the most progressive Jews joined the ANC. When I interviewed a Jewish man who



Activists in Poland honour the Bund at the alternative commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, 2019.

had worked in the ANC’s armed wing, he told me that Jewish establishment bodies handed over names and addresses of Jewish activists to the Apartheid authorities.

I will end back in Poland. In April 2019, 12 Jewish Socialists’ Group members went to Warsaw. We met left activists, historians, a socialist choir, and visited museums and the site of Treblinka death camp. On our final day, we joined hundreds of local anti-racists and anti-fascists (some Jewish) in an alternative Warsaw Ghetto Uprising commemoration. We were stunned by the symbolic presence of the Bund – on banners, placards and slogans, and in Yiddish songs sung by a non-Jewish school choir. Those same Polish anti-racists and anti-fascists are in the frontline today, defending Roma and Muslims while also fighting homophobia and attacks on women’s reproductive rights.

Poland’s reactionary government and Britain’s Conservatives are main partners in a Council of Europe grouping that now includes the ultra-right AfD in Germany, Vox Party in Spain, Freedom Party in Austria, Le Pen’s National Rally in France, Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary and Meloni’s Brothers of Italy. If those in Britain who claim to care about antisemitism were serious, they would turn the heat on these parties abroad and Tories at home. But they don’t make a peep about this, partly because those parties support Israel’s government.

Jews and other minorities deserve much better.

MY BUNDISM IS NOT JUST A MEMORY

Irena Klepfisz, poet, writer, teacher, activist, was born in the Warsaw ghetto in 1941, and grew up among Bundist survivors in New York, absorbing their philosophy. She describes the impact of that philosophy on her life and what it means to be a Jewish socialist in the 21st century

First published in Jewish Socialist No 76, Spring 2022



The historian Emanuel Ringelblum organised and led the Oneg Shabes project in the Warsaw Ghetto in order to document ghetto life and to record for posterity German crimes against the Jews. In the intro-

duction to his book, *Who Will Write our History?*, Prof Samuel Kassow explains why Ringelblum continued documenting ghetto life even after he learned of German plans to liquidate the ghetto. Prof Kassow writes:

Over time Ringelblum realized more and more clearly that the survivor identity would overshadow the pre-war past. The "before" would be erased by the "after." As ... [Ringelblum] confronted the unfolding disaster he fought all the harder to preserve the "Now" and the "Before," to keep the a posteriori label of "victim" from effacing who the Jews were before the war. In a very real sense ... [Ringelblum] saw history as an antidote to a memory of catastrophe which, however well intentioned, would subsume what had been – into what had been destroyed.

Ringelblum's prediction that after "the catastrophe" many Jews would perceive themselves solely as victims/survivors came true – at least as I have observed it in the United States. For many Jews – and not only Jews in the US – memorialising the Holocaust has become a central part of their Jewish identity and for them, Jewish history begins in either 1939, the start of the war, or in 1948, the establishment of the Jewish State, seen as the "answer" to the Holocaust.

Over the past four decades I have taught Jewish Studies courses in numerous universities around the US and, therefore, the majority of my students have been Jews – many of them with 12 years of Jewish education behind them. Yet I have found that almost none of them had any significant knowledge of Jewish life before 1939, and knew very little of the "destruction" – *der khurbn* – itself. Few could answer such questions as: Who were the six million? Where did they live? What were their lives before the war? These young people's knowledge of *der khurbn* has been primarily focused on the sadism and horrors of the camps, and they know very little of life in the hundreds of ghettos across Europe or the challenges faced by so many thousands of Jews passing or resisting in forests and in the underground.

I have found this ignorance of Ringelblum's "before"

and "now" painful and also rather peculiar, for I was offered a Jewish history in which the "before" 1939 was vivid and very much alive. The community that raised me in the Bronx in New York City in the late '40s and '50s consisted exclusively of *lebn-geblibene Bundistn*, survivors who were members of the Jewish Labour Bund in Poland, and who remembered vividly and in great detail not only how they survived the war, but how the Bund raised and nurtured them in the decades before the war. Their stories about Skif, Tsukunft, Morgnshtern, (the Bund's children's, youth and sports organisations), the Medem Sanatorium (where young people with respiratory problems were helped), or the Yiddish *veltkekhe shules*/ secular schools, cultural programmes, marches and worker strikes, armed fights with antisemites and fascists were intermingled with memories about the war and with anecdotes about their present American lives. They not only loved their Bundist life before 1939, they also continued to honour the Bund's ideals.

I learned all this while eavesdropping on their casual conversations when they gathered together to

share an evening of talk, a slice of pound cake and some tea. Not being able to afford a babysitter, my mother would bring me along and I would listen to the stories of their lives before and during the war. Their utter love, continued enthusiasm for their pre-war life was infectious. I envied them. My life in the Bronx seemed but a pale shadow compared to the lives they led. If I was living in *goles/exile*, it was an exile from that interwar Poland.

But there was another element in these reminiscences which prevented them from being simply hazy romanticism and nostalgia. These survivors also discussed and sometimes re-argued endless issues that involved Bundists' criticism of other Jews without worry or fear of being called antisemitic or self-hating. I



Irena Klepfisz with her mother in Sweden, 1946

heard how Bundists unhesitatingly challenged Zionists, rabbis, and Jewish factory owners; how they acknowledged the existence of criminal elements in Jewish society. In short Bundists weren't romantic or sentimental about Jews or Jewish life. They identified what was wrong, diagnosed what was needed and worked toward improving the life of the Jewish masses. If Jews are illiterate, establish Yiddish *shules* and libraries. If they lack medical attention, establish clinics. If children suffer from TB

and hunger, establish a sanatorium. And throughout the discussion and arguments I saw that these Bundists were never ashamed. As much as Bundists memorialised heroes and martyrs of the war, they also talked openly about the role of Judenrats and Jewish policemen. These Bundists taught me not to be afraid to admit to Jewish problems and not to be defined by antisemites.

And of course many of them served as role models, though it took me years to realise how special this inner circle was. People that I knew by their first names had well-known international Bundist reputations. Bernard was Bernard Goldstein, always the Bund's tough guy before and during the war, but to me the gentlest of men. Vladka, for whom I babysat, was Vladka Meed, the Bundist smuggler and courier; she sat with my mother and me at Monie and Brucha's Seder together with Monie's father Jankev Pat, the Bundist leader; and next to them sat the cultural leaders Chana and Yosl Mlotek.

And there was always talk of Marek, one of the Bund's organisers and fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, who became an international human rights advocate and famous cardiologist – Marek who had to explain over and over again to one interviewer after another why he, Dr Marek Edelman, had stayed in Poland while everyone else had left. But there were so many others, not as well known, whom I listened to on those Friday and Saturday night gatherings, who had survived in different ways and who before the war were involved in the various branches of Bundist political, cultural and sports activities. These were the people who formed my consciousness.

It was listening to their casual, unstructured conversations and memories that I came to fully embrace the Bund's *sotsyalizm*/socialism, *yidische veltlekhkayt*/Jewish secularism, and the principle of *doikayt*/"hereness" which I understood as being the right to lead a full Jewish life wherever one happened to be. This was my Jewish "norm." It was only decades later, when I was in my mid-30s and came in contact with other Jewish progressives that I began to understand that my "norm" was virtually unknown.

The moment of realisation solidified in my early 30s when I first became politically active and began to engage with Jewish feminists and Jewish leftists who shared my socialist values, but who considered secular identity as being "nothing" (simply not going to synagogue) and who were uncomfortable identifying as Jews, em-



New York City Lesbian and Gay Pride March 1989. The Yiddish words are *Der Freylekhe folk*/The happy (gay) people. Irena Klepfisz is second from right. Photo: Rachel Epstein

barrassed either by the Hasidim or by their own middle-class backgrounds or by Israel or by the constant focus on the Holocaust. Reasons for being ashamed of one's Jewish identity in the left are numerous. Needless to say, no one knew anything of the rich possibilities which Bundism afforded me.

But with that realisation came another – perhaps more painful. Like my parents and their friends, I became politically active because I experienced specific dangers and

challenges. However, unlike my parents, my greatest challenge and danger was not antisemitism. I felt relatively safe as a Jew in the US. My sense of safety, however, was threatened when I came out as a lesbian and became engaged in the feminist and lesbian/feminist movements of the 1970s. So rather than antisemitism, it was homophobia that pulled me into political life, a homophobia that saturated American life including American Jewish communal life. This proved to be a difficult period for me: discovering simultaneously that the Bund and its principles had been forgotten or erased by Jewish progressives and that its adherents, my childhood heroes and heroines, were not perfect. It was countering ignorance that forced me to actually start reading about the Bund and become more educated about the movement that had so shaped my thinking. It was Jewish homophobia that made me stop being romantic about the interwar period in Poland.

Contemporary Jewish homophobia forced me to see that my *doikayt* was not the same as that of my parents. Issues of homophobia and gender identity were unknown to them: they recognised antisemitism, but could not have imagined its genocidal manifestation as the Holocaust; they challenged Zionism but knew nothing of a seemingly irreconcilable conflict between Palestinians and Jews. They recognised a few other Polish minorities, but saw Jews as the largest, most visible and probably most oppressed. In the US, Jews are among the smallest of American minorities. And unlike American Jews today, who are fully integrated into American political life, during the '30s, Polish Bundists were just beginning to experience some political power.

The interwar Bund's views on *veltlekhkayt*/secular identity were also different. In those first three decades in Poland, a system of secular Yiddish schools had developed alongside Yiddish libraries and theatres, Yiddish newspapers and publishing houses – all contributed to a thriving Yiddish culture. Much of this also existed in the States, but after the war it was fading quickly. Like Bundists before me, I accepted Yiddish culture as my legacy while, paradoxically, becoming fully rooted in the English language. Yet despite all these differences and contradictions, I continued to feel a direct connection to the Bund of that generation.

So here is what I have taken from Bundism and here are some areas that I needed to challenge or expand.

In gerangl/In struggle

Without shame or self-consciousness, Bundists identified what was wrong and tried to fix it. Loyalty to the tribe, however, did not make them romantics and did not make them hide problems that were in need of being addressed. The Bund taught me not to be afraid to admit publicly to Jewish problems. That Bundist commitment to free discussion and critical analysis guided all my anti-homophobia and Middle East peace work.

It also enabled me to be critical of the very period that had always fascinated me. As my feminist and lesbian consciousness developed, I became painfully aware of the absence of women in my Yiddish education. There were no women intellectuals, political activists or writers in the Yiddish cultural lessons included in curricula of my *shule*, *mitl-shule*, and later post-doctoral work in Yiddish literature and culture.

When I became active, the American feminist calls to recognise the challenges and struggles of women echoed the recognition that Bund gave to common people or those generally marginalised. Yet, somehow, Jewish women's lives were not given special notice as having perhaps different needs from those of men. Though secular, a lot of the sexist and patriarchal attitudes so easily condemned in observant Jewish communities, were replicated in progressive communities. Following the examples of those who taught me in the Bronx, I was not going to whitewash the past or continue the amnesia.

Veltlekhkayt/Secular identity

I believe in the Bund's formulation that secularism isn't just assimilation or not going to synagogue. *Veltlekhkayt* includes building Jewish life by establishing Jewish education and fostering Jewish culture. I was taught that one couldn't just be against something, one had to be for something. One of the destructive effects of our focus in the US on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is that it has sapped energy away from working to enrich Jewish life here in the States. I struggled with my Middle East activism because it took time away from my Bundist commitment to pass on Yiddish culture in general, and Yiddish women's history and culture specifically, through my writing, translations and teaching. Eventually I felt it became more important for me to do this cultural work, and I began to focus my energy more on that than on the Middle East.

Simultaneously, *veltlekhkayt* has emerged as a wider and even more complicated concept than in my parent's generation. Unlike the Polish Bund of the '30s, American Jews are slowly coming to recognise Jewish multiculturalism and know that there are different ways of expressing one's secular identity. In the States, Jews from Middle East countries and Jews of Colour are emerging as visible groups within communities previously perceived as purely Ashkenazi, and forming connections between Jews and other minorities who are also grappling with issues of identity and their own traditions. The visibility of LGBTQ Jews in all areas of Jewish life is also something that would have been inconceivable to the pre-war Bundist generation.

Doikayt/"Hereeness"

Doikayt within the Bundist framework has not simply meant anti-Zionism. It also demanded building Jewish identity, a refusal to just blend in, an insistence on remaining and being fully, distinctly Jewish, wherever Jews happened to be. Like earlier Bundists, I see *doikayt* as entwined with strengthening our Jewish identity and committing ourselves to a Jewish future in our chosen environments.

There are other Bundist principles that motivated me, such as looking to the margins towards those who are invisible, who seem to exist on paper only: the single mother struggling to feed her children; the woman prisoner who never had any options. Or the Bund's emphasis on memory and history so that as Jews we know our various heritages, know who we are and where we came from, understanding that history binds us as a people and guarantees a Jewish future. These Bundist principles have always been an integral part of my life and work.

And I believe they saturate my life in terms of the many decisions I make, the way I write, where I devote my energy. I believe, as did the Bundists before me, that for people to thrive, to have meaningful lives, they must be part of a just society and a just society is where all people thrive. There is a Yiddish song, *Avreml der mavikher/Avreml the pickpocket*, which expresses this in very simple terms and was written by the great Yiddish poet Mordechai Gebirtig. Throughout most of the song *Avreml* boasts about his skills as a grifter and thief, and claims to be admired for being the best of all con men.

But in the final stanza, Gebirtig, who was a member of the Cracow Bund, provides *Avreml* with self-awareness and a critical analysis of his life. In this stanza, *Avreml* begins to lament his criminal actions and envisions what his tombstone might have contained – not a list with his criminal achievements – but rather a list of his virtues:

*Do ligt Avreml, der feikster mavikher
A mentsh a groyser geven volt fun im zikher
A mentsh a fayner, mit harts, mit a gefil,
A mentsh a reyner, vi got aley n'or vil
Ven iber im volt gevakht a mames oyg'n,
Ven s'volt di fintstere gas im nisht dertsoygn
Ven nokh als kind er a tatn volt gehat
Do ligt Avreml, yener voyler yat!*

Here lies *Avreml*, the best of all pickpockets
He would have certainly been a great person
A fine person, with heart and feelings
A moral person, as God wants him to be
If only his mother's eyes had watched over him
If only the dark street hadn't raised him
If only when he as a child had a father
Here lies *Avreml*, a great guy!

Gebirtig shows us that *Avreml* is a criminal because of his environment. If *Avreml*'s environment had been different, he might have become someone to be admired for his humanity, his morality. In this song, Gebirtig articulates the Bund's belief in people's inherent goodness, but a goodness that can only be activated in a just and humane society.

And that too is exactly my Bundism – in Yiddish and English.

WHAT DOES BUNDISM MEAN TO YOU?

"I was brought up by the Bund, and remember as a small child, dressed in red ribbons, watching a May Day demonstration where the Bundist marchers were fighting with fascist hooligans. The belief that fighting oppression, wanting to end inequality, racism, discrimination and chauvinism is the norm, not an option, I owe largely to the Bund."

Wlodka Blit Robertson, Warsaw Ghetto survivor, London

"Bundists criticised other Jews without fear of being called antisemitic or self-hating. They unhesitatingly challenged Zionists, rabbis and Jewish factory owners. Bundists weren't romantic or sentimental about Jews or Jewish life. Bundists were never ashamed. They identified what was wrong, diagnosed what was needed and worked towards improving the life of the Jewish masses."

Irena Klepfisz, poet, writer, teacher, activist, New York

"The Bund's political agenda didn't aim to achieve 'what is good for Jews', but what is good for humanity – which would necessarily benefit all. For them, promoting Yiddish secular culture with pride did not contradict a deep commitment to a just society for all in the future. At the same time, they were truly national and fully internationalists – and as such, anti-nationalists."

Roni Gechtman, historian, Mount St Vincent University, Nova Scotia

"The Bund experience opens for discussion the important but lost alternatives of 20th century European history. The Bund represented democratic socialist perspectives on internationalism, ethnicity and multicultural solutions that were suppressed. The Bund was ahead of its century but its ideas are vital for labour and human strategies in our current world."

Hakan Blomqvist, historian, Stockholm

"The Bund was the gift from my mother to me. She lived and breathed its ideology. It saw her through the darkest days of the Holocaust and stayed with her all her life. She never gave up believing a better world was possible. We need the Bund now more than ever."
Lorna Brunstein, Installation artist exploring memory, loss, inherited trauma

*"Throughout literature on the Bund, the word *mishpokhe* comes up frequently; the Bund really was a family and felt like that to its members and activists. I feel that spirit has continued with the neo-Bundist activities I've been involved with in Britain in the past 15 years or so. May we Bundists always behave towards each other with good-heartedness, kindness and *khavershaft* (friendship)."*
Joseph Finlay, Jewish socialist activist and historian

*"The history of the Bund has been a major inspiration for me in over 40 years as a Jewish community activist and teacher of Yiddish. Its pursuit of *doikayt* – Jewish culture and national identity in all the places where Jews live – underlies my commitment to rebuilding Jewish life here in Poland."*
Barry Smerin, Jewish community activist, Poland



Left to right, Irena Klepfisz, Wlodka Blit-Robertson, Julia Bard

**"RIGHTS AND JUSTICE
FOR JEWS
EVERYWHERE
WITHOUT WRONGS
AND INJUSTICE TO
OTHER PEOPLE
ANYWHERE"**

EMANUEL SCHERER 1901 - 1971,
BUND ACTIVIST, COUNCILLOR AND
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