

The Chutzpah Collective Introduction

We came together in 1971 to form a Jewish liberation collective. Fighting continued in Vietnam. Demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic Convention and the resulting "Conspiracy 8 Trial" with the spectacle of a Black man chained and gagged in a courtroom were still fresh in our minds.

We were in our early to mid-twenties, veterans of the civil rights movement, the anti-war and anti-imperialist movement, student activism, and the movement against sexism. We were used to identifying oppression and fighting it. The realities of emerging Black and Latino pride pushed us closer to our Jewish roots. The movements against sexism taught us the value of sharing personal feelings, confronting self-hate, combining warmth and determination: soon this approach would influence our attitudes as Jews.

Jewish issues stared at us from the headlines daily. War constantly threatened the Mid-East. Arab threats to exterminate Israeli Jews were commonplace and Palestinian guerilla calls for Israel's destruction were often romantically but unthinkingly admired by many of our friends on the Left. Working-class Jews in changing urban neighborhoods were being physically harrassed. We followed the development of the Jewish Defense League. We supported their defense of Jews, but vigorously opposed their right-wing racist politics.

At the same time we were drawn into the struggles of Soviet Jews, including relatives of ours, who were trying to maintain Jewish cultural life in the U.S.S.R. or requesting exit visas.

In Chicago, through networks of friends, Hillel rabbis, and articles in "underground newspapers" such as the Chicago Seed, there emerged a group of two dozen young Jews with a wide range of political, religious, and cultural interests. We called ourselves "Am Chai"—the living people. Shared search for identity, holiday celebrations, potluck Shabbes meals and anti-war activity provided some group bond, but it proved impossible to reach full agreement on any one political focus.

So Am Chai spawned a number of smaller groups. Seven of us with strong political interests met and decided to start a radical Jewish newspaper. Each of us had been very active in the anti-war movement and each of us had lived in communes and identified with the counterculture values of cooperation, skill-sharing and community-building. Each of us had examined sex roles in a personal and political way, and brought to the group some understanding of feminism, gay liberation, and more open role choices. Each of us was anti-capitalist. Half were from working-class homes, all of us were working: teachers, day-care staff, taxi drivers and social workers. We viewed the war, racism, sexism, and competitiveness as integral parts of capitalism.

And each of us had been in leftist groups where we had grown furious at expressions of total support for Arab states and Palestinian guerillas in their call for Israel's destruction. Reluctantly, we realized that many leftists we had worked with closely showed no awareness of Jewish oppression and no concern for Jewish survival. We realized that this was anti-semitism and decided to fight it. We would oppose persecution of Jews and work for the survival, self-determination, and cultural flowering of our people. We would maintain the best values and skills of the Left and the counter-culture. Now *that* was Chutzpah!

Producing a newspaper seemed like the best way to spread our views and help organize a movement, so we began to publish *Chutzpah*. From the start we have worked as a Collective. With combined experience in over twenty organizations, we wanted to form the most satisfying and productive group possible. The anti-sexist movements had urged that skills should be shared, that political issues be debated without personal intimidation, and that both leadership and participation in dull everyday tasks would be developed in each person. We were influenced by Mao's writings on the importance of organization, clear thinking, self and mutual evaluation, and placing political goals above personal ambition.

We implemented our Collective vision in practical ways. There was no editor-in-chief and we took turns chairing meetings. We each shared our special skills, and learned several new ones. We tried to work out the personal and political tensions that periodically arose. We shared experiences of physical and verbal attacks by anti-semites, then studied economic, political, sexual, and religious roots of Jew-hating. We discussed with each other the meaning of family and ritual in our lives. We allowed ourselves the chance to freely express anguish and rage at the destruction of three quarters of Eastern European Jewry, then read books about how little the United States and other countries did while six million died; about Jews who fought back; about the struggle for Israel.

As our own understanding increased, *Chutzpah* articles presented topics in greater depth. Two of us researched the Jewish Labor Bund of Russia, Poland, and Lithuania, and realized that Jewish self-determination in a socialist society had been the goal of a mass-based and politically sophisticated organization. Our article on Jews who fought the Nazis in ghettos and forests gave us models for dedicated struggle under the worst of conditions.

At first we shied away from considerations of Zionism, still partially intimidated by much of the Left's vicious characterization and vehement rejection of Jewish nationalism and peoplehood, and frightened that this volatile issue would divide our group. But as we were strengthened by our dedication of Jewish self-determination, we began to learn of and identify with strands of socialist Zionism. This educational process was important for those of us with, and those without, much formal Jewish education. Synagogue schools did not teach much about socialism and struggle, nor did they sufficiently emphasize peoplehood.

The depth of our opposition to the United States' destruction of Vietnam, we discovered, was linked to the indelible marks of the Holocaust on our psyche, the eternal queasiness it left in our guts, the anger and sadness in our hearts.

We grew more pleased with our Jewish looks, our assertiveness and soulfulness, and we wrote of the hidden injuries of growing up Jewish in the United (melting pot) States. As we tasted our Jewishness our appetites grew, and we developed ties with other Jewish groups. We were guest speakers at Jewish college groups, singles clubs, synagogue discussion groups, older liberal and leftist groups, and religious school classes. People responded to our enthusiasm about Jewish culture and political issues and were interested in our stance on socialism and sex-roles.

Our Yiddish consciousness deepened with the arrival of two Collective members. They shared their experience with secular Judaism, and we learned of the movements in Europe and the United States dedicated to the Yiddish language, Jewish peoplehood, socialism, and the observance of Jewish holidays, in a secular, political, rather than religious, framework. Among earlier generations, secularists and religious Jews were often hostile to each other. Socialist atheists were known to eat ham in front of synagogues on Yom Kippur; religious Jews sometimes raided secular Jewish libraries and burned books. We saw this split as outdated, and kept *Chutzpah* open to progressive strands of both traditions.

When we planned an all day teach-in in 1973 on "Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust," our community ties paid off. Spertus Museum of Judaica, Jewish bakeries, the Jewish

Federation's College Age Youth Service, the Labor Zionists, the American Zionist Youth Foundation, the Workmen's Circle, religious school teachers, Hillel, and the Chicago Women's Liberation Union all contributed to our program. Four hundred people attended and heard two Chicago Jews speak of their wartime experiences in Lithuania organizing Jews to fight the Nazis. We had presented our politics and were well received.

We recognized that the needs of working-class Jews are often ignored. Many Jews and gentiles deny that such Jews even exist. Prestige too often comes from the size of one's contribution to the United Jewish Appeal. Synagogue dues, Jewish Community Center fees, and Jewish education for children are expensive. We spoke out on these issues and printed exposés of powerful Jewish families along with articles expressing working-class Jewish identity.

Our consistent opposition to anti-semitism—in relation to General George Brown, Attorney General William Saxbe, Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, the Mid-East, the Nazis, the Soviet Union, and other situations deepened our connections with working-class Jews.

Our activities in the movement to support Soviet Jews' rights to cultural and religious freedom in their native land, and their right to emigrate to destinations of their choice, brought us closer to the Jewish community in general.

Feminist and gay activists were more receptive to us than were most other radicals. Chutzpah members started Jewish caucuses and study groups in many women's and homosexual organizations and conferences. We started a Jewish women's rap group, and organized a gay Seder and a women's Seder. The relationships among men in the Collective have been special—cooperation rather than competition was more than an abstract political line. The opportunity for men and women to be both loving and strong is basic to the way we live now, and to the world we want to build.

In our six years together, we have witnessed many political and Movement changes.

When in 1973 the Vietnamese, aided by the anti-war movement, finally repulsed the United States' attack and toppled the puppet Saigon regime, an era in the Movement had come to an end. Government agents had infiltrated many groups, encouraging suspicion among would-be comrades. Huge sums of money and exhausting organizing efforts were poured into legal defense of leftists arrested by the government. The war was over, and many activists grew passive. Others clumped in an array of sectarian groups, some openly admiring Stalin. Still others devoted energies to single issues such as sexism, legal defense, prison reform, support for China, and free health clinics. Some focused on the Mid-East, supporting the Palestine Liberation Organization's call for Israel's destruction.

How did these post-Vietnam developments affect us? We remained socialists, fully committed to sweeping changes in production and distribution of goods and services, the valuing of human life over material possessions, liberation from sexism, support for national self-determination including self-determination for Jews in Israel. Our ideas, our strong bonds with each other and our strong ties with the Jewish community and humanists on the Left sustained us. We grew more confident and assertive. Our ideas about Israel and the Palestinian movement found expression in sponsoring socialist Zionist speakers and producing several articles and a special supplement to the paper. That supplement, "Israel and the Palestinian Arabs," gave historical and ideological support for a peace settlement based on the continued existence of a secure Jewish Israel and the creation beside it of an independent Palestinian Arab state, with provisions for non-aggression.

In an unusual step for a political group, the entire Collective started group therapy together in 1973. Through the radical therapy movement we found a good therapist who was open to our issues. Occasionally in therapy and frequently outside of it, we discussed how sexism, anti-semitism, and class oppression were factors in the sadness-anger we all felt at times. Although focused on individual fulfilment, therapy influenced our Chutzpah

meetings. We became more aware of group dynamics, more dedicated to doing our work in a spirit of friendship, honest confrontation and mutual support. Rejecting yet another artificial dichotomy (like Jewish/leftist, gay/Jewish, pro-Israel/anti-imperialist), we blended therapy and politics. The therapy group still exists today, although not all of the Collective takes part in it.

In 1977 we realized that many leftist Jewish groups we had known at the start of the decade had dispersed, and that focusing on how we feel together has helped keep us happy and productive. Although we occasionally have been exhausted by our work on *Chutzpah*, we support and energize each other in a way that we have found missing in most of our other Movement experiences.

One change since *Chutzpah's* inception had little to do with producing a newspaper: we each aged six years. Our average age is now close to thirty. While our founding members were all single and in some cases ideologically opposed to marriage, now two thirds are married and there are babies among us. We look at college kids busy at beer parties and consider delivering lectures that start, "Why, when I was your age . . .". Our jobs have assumed an increasingly important role in our lives. Yet we have not slipped into careerism. We are all involved with issues of working conditions, sexism, and Jewish pride in relation to our co-workers and supervisors.

With increased stability in our personal lives and a secure feeling about our Collective, we now share ideas about the next five years, even the next ten years of our lives and work.

We hope that many of you will walk side-by-side with us in the struggle for Jewish survival, humane socialism, and satisfying lives.

This book includes a cross section of the best articles from *Chutzpah*, as well as a number of articles which have not been previously published.



From left to right: Maralee Gordon, Susan Schechter, Myron Perlman, Marian Neudel, Leo Schlosberg, Ari Herschl Gordon-Schlosberg, Steven Lubet, Robbie Skeist, Miriam Socoloff, Jeffry Mallow, Barbara Pruzan Perlman, Adar Rossman.