

BENEATH GATHERING CLOUDS

Majer Bogdanski, a lifelong member of the Bund, recalls the life and work of the organisation in Poland in the days leading up to the Second World War

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 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*, 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* which catered for athletics, football, gymnastics, and was affiliated to the Socialist Workers' Sports International.

We ran our own press with the daily *Folktsaytung* (paper of the people), as well as periodicals. The Bund Central Committee issued a monthly called *Unser Tsayt*. There was also a journal of the minority called *Kegn Shtrom*. 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 *Folktsaytung*. The youth organisation had a monthly. 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 actions 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 cooperate; 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 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 piece 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 committed 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* boycotted it. 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 make massacres.



The children's organisation of the Lodz Bund. Bogdanski is 2nd from right in the 2nd row.

OFFICIAL ANTISEMITISM

Antisemitism was the hardest thing we had to contend with all the time. Anti-semitism 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 to collect money for them. The Jewish trade unions were asked to charge their members 5 *groshen* every week. Again you couldn't pay the levy. Most of 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* — comprising only of students. They not only incited others but they would attack individual Jews or in 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 us because on the Sabbath you mustn't carry a stick. They thought we were organising an anti-religious demonstration. Make no mistake: we were the only ones to actively fight antisemitism. 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

The World Co-ordinating Committee of the Bund is appealing to you for a donation towards its funds for the current year in order to be able to carry on with its activities. Your donation will help towards that.

In 1981, the fifth part of the History of the Bund appeared. Now we are planning the sixth part which will embrace the years immediately preceding the Second World War as well as the period of the Holocaust.

We also intend to issue a book in English about Erlich and Alter with the purpose of bringing the knowledge of their lives, as well as their tragic assassination, to a wider, non-Yiddish speaking public.

We are also in need of funds to keep our press in existence.

We are asking you, therefore, for a generous donation.

Jewish Socialist would like to send a cheque to the Bund from its readers. Anyone who wants to donate money should make cheques and postal orders to *Jewish Socialist* and write 'Bund' on the back. Send them to us at B/M 3725, London WC1N 3XX and we will send a cheque for the whole amount to the Bund's London Representative.

וועלט־קאָאָרדיניר־קאָמיטעט פֿון „בונד“
 און הרובֿשע אָרגאַניזאַציעס
 COORDINATING COMMITTEE OF THE JEWISH LABOR BUND
 AND RELATED ORGANIZATIONS
 *
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 דעם 24-סטן מאי 1985

חשובער חבר
 דער העלם-קאָאָרדיניר-קאָמיטעט פֿון „בונד“ הענדט זיך צו איך צו כאַפּט-
 ליקן זיך אין דער מי-יטריקער אַקציע פֿון די בונדיסטן אין די לענדער, האָט זי
 לעבן, צו טאָן דעם געהעריקן פֿאָר דער היסטעריקער פעסיקעס פֿון „בונד“
 מיט אירער באַשטיקערונג העלעס איר אויטהעלען די אינטימוסציעס פֿון „בונד“, זי-
 גע צימערטן און טאָמם כּבּלל פעלעך די פּאַרשידענע בונדישע פעסיקעס.
 אין 1981 האָבן מיר ארויסגעגעבן דעם 5-טן באַנד, די געשיכטע פֿון „בונד“
 עס מערן געטאָמם צוגריסונגען, אַז עס זאל איך דערשיגען דער 6-טער באַנד,
 טאָס העט ארויסגעגען די יאַרן פֿאַרן אויסברוך פֿון דער צווייטער העלם-מלחמה אין
 דעם פּעריאָד פֿון ייִדישן חורבן בער דער מלחמה.
 עס הערט אויך געמלאָמם ארויסצוגעבן אַן ערליך-אַלמער בוך אין דער ענגליש-
 סער שפּראַך, בריי אַ ברייטערער עולם זעל מיטן פֿען זי און זיער דערשטרונג אין
 רומלאַנד רורן דער פּאַרשעטיקער טאָמם. מיר גייסיקן זיך אין פֿאַרן און פֿאַר אויס-
 האַלפֿן די בונדישע טרעקע און אנדערע פעסיקעס.
 מיר פֿענדן זיך צו איר, אַז איר זעלט העלפֿן דער בונדישער באַהענגונג
 רורן אַ געהעריקער באַשטיקערונג. געסעס אין אַמס די אינפֿלאַציע און העקערס
 א-ער באַשטיקערונג אין פֿאַרגליך מיט די פּריערדיקע יאַרן.

מיט ראַנק טאַרוים - פֿאַרן העלם-קאָאָרדיניר-קאָמיטעט פֿון „בונד“
 שלום הערץ
 העגן א-ער באַשטיקערונג פּאַרשעטיקעס זיך מיטן חבר מאיר באַגדאַנסקי. זיין אַררעג
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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. 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 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 opgerisn* (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 socialist-Zionists (*Poale Zion*) were split into right and left. The left were very small but were Yiddishists and co-operated with us in the Yiddish schools. Right *Poale Zion* were stronger but completely anti-Yiddish so there was no co-operation. In the town councils they joined with the *Aguda* to oppose subsidies for our 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; 17 were from the Bund. In my home town, Lodz, 7 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 saw also 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 French, they were conferring with the Germans. Essentially it was a non-aggression pact by which they divided Poland between them. On September 1st, 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. 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. □

LETTERS

JEWS AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Thank you for publishing my reflections on Jews in the USSR. Unfortunately, in editing the article you have inadvertently changed the meaning of a point I was trying to make.

I mentioned, perhaps too cryptically, that a socialist of Jewish origin feels inclined to affirm being a Jew in the USSR, in the same way that he or she feels inclined to deny being a Jew in Palestine/Israel. You printed the first part of that sentence, but the second part got left out.

This might create the impression that I value Jewish (or other ethnic) identity for its own sake. I do not. I feel that if you are assumed in one country to belong to an oppressed group then you should accept with dignity that identification, as a sign of solidarity. While if, in some other part of the world, you are identified as a member of the oppressor group, then it is natural to want to resist the presumption. Whether that is a realistic option is of course another matter! *Stephen Shenfield*
Birmingham

POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION

With regard to Stephen Shenfield's article on the myths and realities of Russian anti-semitism (*Jewish Socialist*, June 1985), it appears to be suggested that to obtain admission to university, or at least certain faculties, Jews have to reach a higher standard than others and are obliged to offer something extra. It is implied that any quota system must necessarily be informed by antisemitism. I appreciate that, in the evolution of a socialist society, the baggage of pre-Soviet ideas endures far longer than the old economic superstructure.

Since Jews were, and still are, vastly disproportionate in their representation in Russian universities — no doubt a result of the Jewish historical tradition of education, the "incentives" provided by the *Pale* and repressive laws, the lack of opportunity for study for most Russians, and the absence of a written language of at least one Russian nationality, amongst other factors — I do not see why, in the interest of positive discrimination for non-Jewish Russian nationalities, to redress the imbalance, standards for Jews might not be raised, in a sensitive way, and standards for other nationalities relaxed. Such positive discrimination is much less painful within an expanding

student population, as opposed to a contracting one.

In the Baake case in New York, in the late '70s, it was held by an American court that it was perfectly justifiable, in the interests of positive discrimination, for a medical college to relax its entry requirements for a Black candidate, as opposed to those for a formally better-qualified White candidate.

To use another American comparison; because the training period was short for the modestly rewarded profession of teaching in New York, and as a result of many Jewish immigrant families having to rely upon a first-born daughter's earnings to "set up" the family, there was a high proportion of (White) female Jewish teachers in Harlem state schools in the '60s, although the school rolls were entirely Black. Despite the opposition of the teachers' union (on the basis of security of tenure and seniority), in order to provide a positive image/incentive to Black kids in Harlem, of the possibility of success in a profession, the New York administration felt it necessary to positively discriminate in favour of the employment of Black teachers in Harlem schools.

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