



By kind permission of Mrs. M. Sabel

*Rudolf Rocker and the "gentle anarchists"; Rocker holds the walking stick*

## **Rudolf Rocker: Anarchist missionary (1873-1958)**

Rocker devoted nearly twenty years of his life to organising and inspiring the immigrant Jewish tailors in the East End of London

by **W. J. FISHMAN**

**T**HE East End of London is no stranger to political ideologues and Messianists. Its off-beat environment is propitious for the emergence of chiliastic sects and eccentric zealots. The paradox is that this reservoir of the under-privileged and persecuted from a variety of nations should have once housed men who have made history, as well as those of peculiar

genius whom history has unjustly passed by. There were many of the former. In 1907 Stalin and Litvinov, delegates to a Bolshevik congress in London, lived in a Stepney doss-house, which still stands. Marx and Lenin often came to this area inhabited by their classic proletarians; and in Whitechapel, William Booth set up his first platform to preach salvation for

their souls. Of the latter, one came to bring social regeneration to the outcast Jew. He was Rudolf Rocker, the German anarchist gentile, who devoted nearly twenty years of his life to organizing and inspiring the most despised of East End plebs—the immigrant Jewish tailors.

For the Russian Jews between the years 1880 and 1914 needed desperately both a Messiah and a Promised Land. Tsarist reaction to the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 bore heavily on the old scapegoats. They fled from the southlands of Russia and the borders of Poland seeking refuge in the ghettos of Western Europe. Into East London they poured, these “greeners”, the pulses of immigration reaching their heights during the pogroms. But there was no salvation for them here. On arrival they were brought up abruptly into new environs of degradation—the slums and the workshop. It was here that the young German anarchist in exile joined them (January 1895) where, in retrospect, he presents us with the social setting into which they were plunged:

There were at that time thousands of people in London who had never slept in a bed, who just crept into some filthy hole where the police would not disturb them. I saw with my own eyes thousands of human beings, who could hardly be considered such, people who were no longer capable of any kind of work. They went about in foul rags, through which their skin showed, dirty and lousy, never free from hunger . . . scavenging their food out of dustbins and the refuse heaps that were left behind after the markets closed.

There were squalid courts and alleyways with dreary, tumbledown hovels, whose stark despair it is impossible to describe. And in these cesspools of poverty children were born and people lived, struggling all their lives with poverty and pain, shunned like lepers by all decent members of society.<sup>1</sup>

Into this social hell the exiles swarmed. The hatred and calumny mounted against them assumed almost a contemporary ring, with the stock argument against immigrants. The local gentiles accused them of depriving home-born workers of accommodation, even then a scarce commodity—Jack London reiterates this accusation in his *People of the Abyss*: overcrowding and insanitary conditions; undercutting wages and threatening employment; introducing ideas and religions that were anathema to the English way of life. Trade unionists were galled

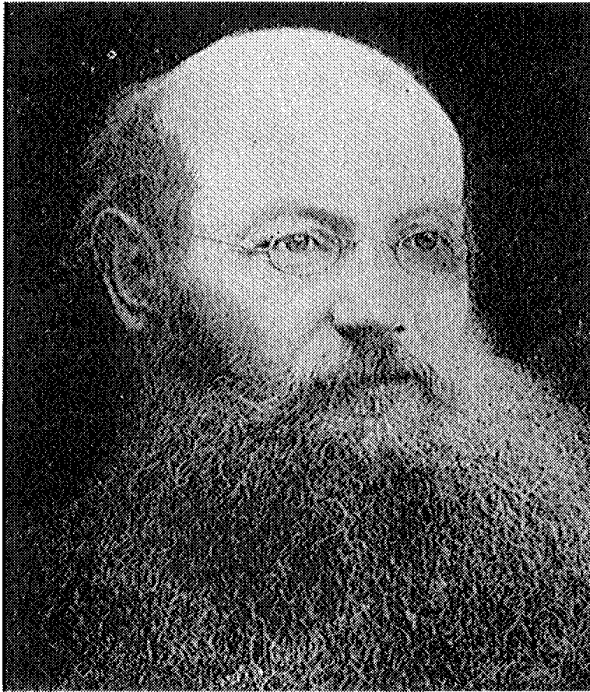
by the sweat-shop conditions under which the newcomers laboured, and despised them for their ineffectual attempts to combine in order to resist exploitation. National publicity was already directing activity towards the sweated trades. Efforts towards their suppression were stimulated by the findings of Charles Booth in his monumental survey of the London working class (1897-1900) and by the accumulation of bills, particularly those sponsored by Sir Charles Dilke since 1898. An Anti-Sweating League, formed in 1905, and the organization by the *Daily News* of a Sweated Industries Exhibition in 1906 paved the way to the Trade Board Act of 1909—introduced by Winston Churchill, then President of the Board of Trade—which attempted to eradicate the evil.<sup>2</sup> But it was the leadership of Rocker among his anarchist field-workers, in direct industrial action, that registered a powerful defeat upon the sweaters in the clothing trade. Before doing so, he had to win the confidence of a people who, through bitter experience, had come to shun the gentile. His emergence from voluntary partisanship to leadership of these people is a remarkable tale. He dedicated himself to a threefold task: to organize and improve the conditions of Jewish workers; to implement better social relations between English and Jewish workers within the Trade Union movement; and, finally, to undertake the broader aim of educating all workers in the libertarian Socialist creed which would lead them towards the anarchist goal.

In the *Sugar Loaf* public house in Whitechapel's Hanbury Street, he became a welcome guest among the Jewish anarchists who met there. This area was particularly unsavoury<sup>3</sup>. It was hazardous to get through the pub to their meeting room since “there were always several drunks there, men and women who used foul language and became abusive when they saw a foreigner”. He was struck by the contrast between the Parisian Jews and those in the East End. The former were mostly skilled artisans, well fed and clothed, while the latter “looked sad, worn and half-starved”. They sat crowded

<sup>1</sup>*The London Years*, R. Rocker, p. 79.

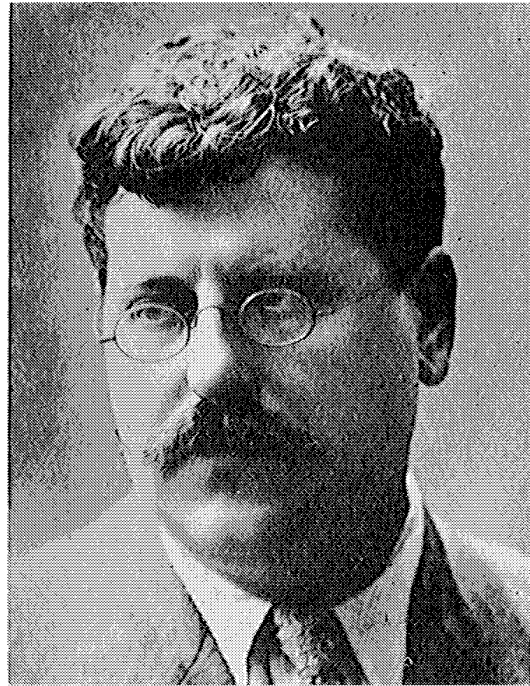
<sup>2</sup>Middle-class ladies learned with horror that their latest fashionable dresses were stitched by girls working sixteen hours a day for less than a penny an hour.

<sup>3</sup>Jack the Ripper had operated here eight years before.



Mansell Collection

*Prince Kropotkin, 1842-1921, the Russian anarchist*



By kind permission of Mrs. M. Sabe

*Rudolf Rocker during his London years*

together on hard benches, pale and taut in the dim gaslight, following with rapt attention the speakers and discussions, that opened up to them the vision of the new society. They soon surrendered to this young burly German who exuded warmth and generosity; and were overjoyed when he spoke to them in their own language, Yiddish. He had only recently mastered this, and it led to the extraordinary phenomenon of a gentile being offered the post of editor of a Yiddish political journal, the new *Arbeter Fraint* (Worker's Friend) in October 1898. The Jews' confidence would not be misplaced. The new publication achieved an international reputation in both libertarian and social-democratic circles.

The years 1898 to 1914 were lean years for the children of the ghetto—the Kishinev pogroms (1903) and the 1905 Russian Revolution brought new waves of immigrants and their incumbent problems. They also, not unnaturally, evoked a high peak of social and political agitation. Rocker was resolved on the parallel duties of teaching and organizing his people. A permanent institution would have to

be established in order to implement this. It would not restrict itself to the propagation of ideology, but would develop as an all-embracing adult institute of education in the modern idiom. In Jubilee Street, in the heart of the Jewish quarter, an old Salvation Army depot was taken over and transformed. The project was financed by the accumulated pennies of the slaves of the sweatshop, many of whom contributed most of their weekly pittance.

On February 3rd, 1906, the club was opened by the doyen of all anarchists, Prince Kropotkin, who, though ill and warned by his doctors not to attend, felt compelled to give this unique venture his personal blessing. Messages of congratulations included those from the three greatest anarchists—Malatesta, Louise Michel and Tarrida del Marmol. The Jubilee Street club was to play a great role in the social and intellectual experience of all East Enders. It was a large building containing two halls: one on the ground floor supported a gallery that could hold eight hundred people; the other on the second floor housed a library and reading room with class-room accommodation in side

chambers. Rocker himself emerged as one of the pioneers of London adult education. The Institute was thrown open to all workers, whatever their creed. Courses included English for the new immigrant, history, sociology, and public-speakers' classes<sup>4</sup>. Groups were taken to the British Museum on Sundays, with Rocker himself acting as guide and lecturer. Meanwhile, a small adjoining building housed the presses of the *Arbeter Fruint*. It was here that Rocker mobilised his forces for the assault on the tailoring sweatshops.

The complications inherent in the system were clearly analysed by Rocker:

The clothing industry in the East End was run by hundreds of small master tailors who were sub-contractors for the big firms in the City and the West End. In order to get the contract they underbid each other mercilessly, thus creating their own hell. They passed that hell on of course to their workers. The new immigrants, who had just arrived from Poland or Russia or Rumania and had to earn their bread, went to these small sweat shops to learn to be pressers or machinists. They started as under-pressers or plain machinists . . . this lower grade of worker was employed and paid not by the master tailor but by the presser or machinist. It suited the master tailor because it placed the responsibility of driving the workers on the upper grade of the workers themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Pressure to exert the maximum effort out of each individual at the minimum cost was passed along the line and bore heaviest on the lowest grade. The pulses of immigration swelled these numbers and ensured a ready supply of cheap labour for the master-tailors. The problems posed in organizing them in a trade union seemed insurmountable. The subordinate workers, on learning their craft, aspired to become master-tailors themselves, when they in turn employed others. So the system became self-perpetuating. A jungle of cut-throat competitors was proliferated. Charles Booth in his *Life and Labour in London* focused the issue:

The capital needed for a start is very small. A few pounds will suffice and the man becomes a master. The wholesale houses can take advantage of the competition which arises and prices are reduced to the immediate loss of the sweaters and the ultimate detriment of those whom they employ. It is this state of things which really

<sup>4</sup>J. L. Fine, O.B.E., J.P., immigrant and later outstanding Trade Union leader, recalls how much he owed his formative education to Rocker and the club.

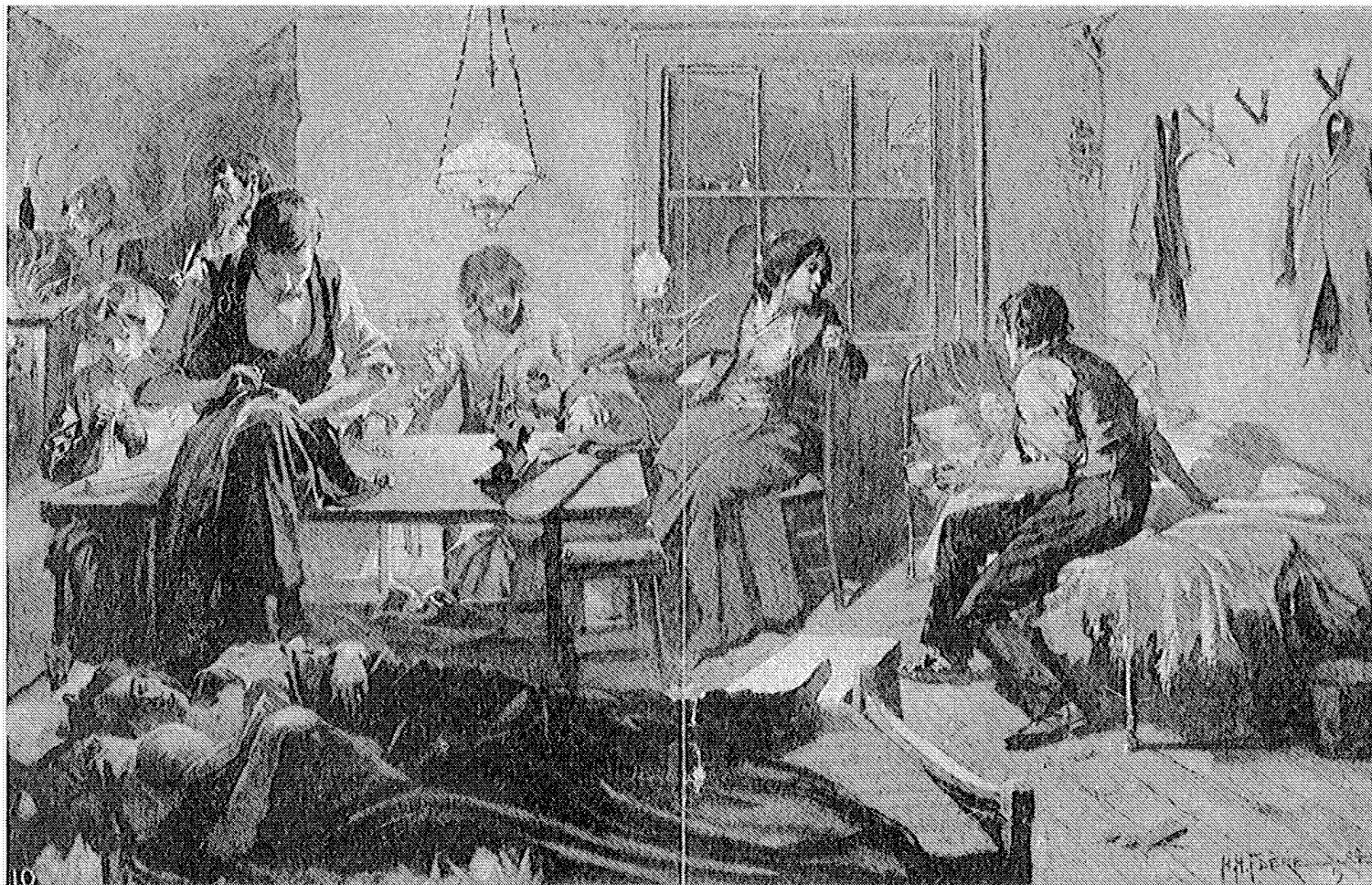
<sup>5</sup>*The London Years* pp. 166-7.

leads to the sweating evils of long hours, low pay and insanitary conditions. As to long hours, it is the master who sets the time. He himself is ready to work any hours, why not those he employs?

In April, 1912, Rocker saw his moment of opportunity. The London Society of Tailors were backing a strike of 1,500 West End tailors, a highly skilled and internationally reputed labour élite. Rocker knew that the East End workshops were and would be used to produce the work left idle, in effect, for strike-breaking. If the strike failed, the East End tailors would, rightfully, stand accused as enemies of Trade Unionism. Anti-Semitism lay beneath the surface, ready to erupt. Rocker was resolved that it was his moral duty to smash the system there and then, and offset these dangers. On May 10th he opened his attack in the *Arbeter Fruint*, explaining the situation to the local tailors, calling on them to back the strikers. His personal plea evoked an immediate response. A meeting held in the old Assembly Hall in Whitechapel was packed to overflowing—over 11,000 workers awaited the word from their leaders. James MacDonald, Chairman of the London Trades Council, demanded that it was imperative that they act immediately. It was Rocker, however, speaking in their native Yiddish, who convinced them. The vote was taken in tense silence. The impossible happened. Not one voted against strike action. The tailors had acted in unison for the first time for their cause.

In two days 13,000 workmen quit their workshops. They faced starvation, and it was the task of the strike committee to collect funds to sustain them. Rocker was appointed Chairman of the Finance Committee and expended his Herculean energy, day and night, to raise money. In traditional manner, the East End rallied to the aid of the strikers. Higher-grade workers refused strike pay and lived on their savings; the Jewish Bakers' Union and the cigarette makers provided free supplies. Strike funds were enhanced by a voluntary levy placed on other Jewish trade unionists. Special performances by the Yiddish theatre and an inflow of contributions from outside sympathisers enabled Rocker to pay the strikers a few shillings each during the first week. The master tailors, assured that there was no permanent strike





*A tailors' sweat-shop in the East End of London, 1904; drawing by H. H. Flère*

Mansell Collection

fund, answered with a three-week lock-out. They were convinced that the workers could not hold out and that hunger would quickly bring them back on any terms. But under Rocker's leadership they held fast. A parallel struggle helped maintain their morale. Their docker neighbours were involved in the great London dock strike. Suffering made strange bed-fellows and Rocker was quick to use the opportunity to bring Jewish and gentile workers together. He addressed joint strike meetings and was the inspiring force in organizing vast joint demonstrations in the Whitechapel waste and at Tower Hill. Their resources almost gone, their families facing the realities of hunger, the tailors still held out—but only just. In the third week the West End tailors reached a settlement. The employers acquiesced in their main demands: no piece-work, reduced hours and employment limited to union

members only. This was a psychological blow at the right time for the cause as a whole. The concept of a negotiated settlement was accepted by both sides in the women's garment industry, since both were getting desperate. The Masters Association was facing the fact that its seasonal trade was almost ruined; the workers had no funds left. The masters agreed to meet their demands on working hours and pay, but refused to consider a unionised closed shop.

To Rocker the last was the point of the conflict. Union recognition was top priority for their security, the workers' strongest weapon in future disputes. A final meeting was called in the Pavilion Theatre, Whitechapel Road, to settle the question. Rocker describes the meeting in moving terms<sup>6</sup>.

A murmur ran round the building when I stood up as the first speaker. I saw those pale, pinched, hungry faces, those thousands of people

<sup>6</sup>*The London Years* p. 223.

who had come together at midnight to decide what to do about this strike for which they had sacrificed so much. I felt that I dare not conceal anything from them . . . I explained the position to them. I said that if they held out a few more days I was sure that they would win. If they decided to go back now the masters would make them feel they had lost. 'But the decision', I said, 'rests with you. I am not going to tell you what to do. You must decide for yourselves.' There was a burst of applause, and from all sides came the cry: 'The strike goes on!'

The next morning the master tailors capitulated. All the workers' terms were agreed to. Rocker and his immigrants had dealt a severe blow to the sweatshop system, which no Act of Parliament could have rendered. Moreover, he had brought about a more congenial relationship between Jewish and gentile worker. The incidence of the dock strike, which persisted after the tailors' settlement, helped cement the new relationship. The view associating the tailors with strike-breaking was now invalidated. At the hour of victory they rallied to help the dockers' families. A trade union Committee of Aid was set up and the *Arbeter Fraind* enjoined its readers to succour the children. Offers of accommodation and gifts poured in from Jews, many of whom could hardly feed themselves. Rocker and his wife personally collected children from the docks; most of them were reduced to "a terribly undernourished state, barefoot, in rags". Local retailers subscribed clothing and shoes. Dockers, trade unionists and social workers spoke of the warmth and hospitality shown to their unfortunate charges by the East End Jews. Over three hundred children were taken to their homes while the strike endured. It laid the foundation of friendship which neither time nor circumstance could erase. The "hungry thirties" registered its fulfilment. It was the dockers of Wapping and St. Georges who were the militant vanguard of the movement which, in 1936, forcibly prevented the Mosleyite incursion into East London.

The years 1912-1914 were those in which Rocker reached the nadir of his power and influence. His efforts at importing union organisation among the tailors had been singularly successful. He had brought together workers of diverse creeds and traditions and provided them with a unifying force. But his

fundamental objective—the proselytization of all to the anarchist creed—came to nothing. In the first decade of this century the anarchists seemed the most dynamic element in East End political life. By the 1920's they were already an anachronism, shadowy ghosts of another era. Why?

The incident of the Sidney Street siege in January 1911 revealed the breach in anarchist ranks. It focused the antithesis between the concept of educative growth combined with militant action, conceived by Kropotkin and Rocker, and the idea of "propaganda by the deed"—that is, individual acts of violence and assassination as means of destroying the state and hastening the new millennium. The advocates of terror embraced a *mêlée* of fanatical idealists on the one extreme and criminal homicides on the other. The post-pogrom immigrants contained many of the latter, conspirators and desperadoes, who had experienced the brutal ferocity of the Tsarist police and had fought back with bomb and knife. Unable or unwilling to adjust to their new conditions, they continued to associate government authority in Britain with that of Russia, "where every policeman and every public dignitary was an instrument of despotism and oppression." Peter the Painter was their ideal representative. It is symptomatic that he, the one who got away, should re-emerge into history as an official of Lenin's Cheka and one of its most ruthless agents<sup>7</sup>. Sir Phillip Gibbs, novelist and journalist, visiting the Jubilee Street Club in connection with a report on Sidney Street, describes Rocker and his entourage and estimates the political potential of the group:

These alien anarchists were as tame as rabbits. I am convinced that they had not a revolver among them. Yet remembering the words I heard, I am sure this intellectual anarchy, this philosophy of revolution, is more dangerous than pistols or glycerine. For out of that anarchist club in the East End came ideas.

He was wrong. A movement divided among itself cannot stand. A mixture of saints and sinners drove it into many directions and confused its disciples. Religious and political factors accelerated the process of disintegration. For in East London Rocker fought a losing

<sup>7</sup>Rocker's associate Alexander Shapiro, who met Peter in London, saw him in this capacity in St. Petersburg in 1917.

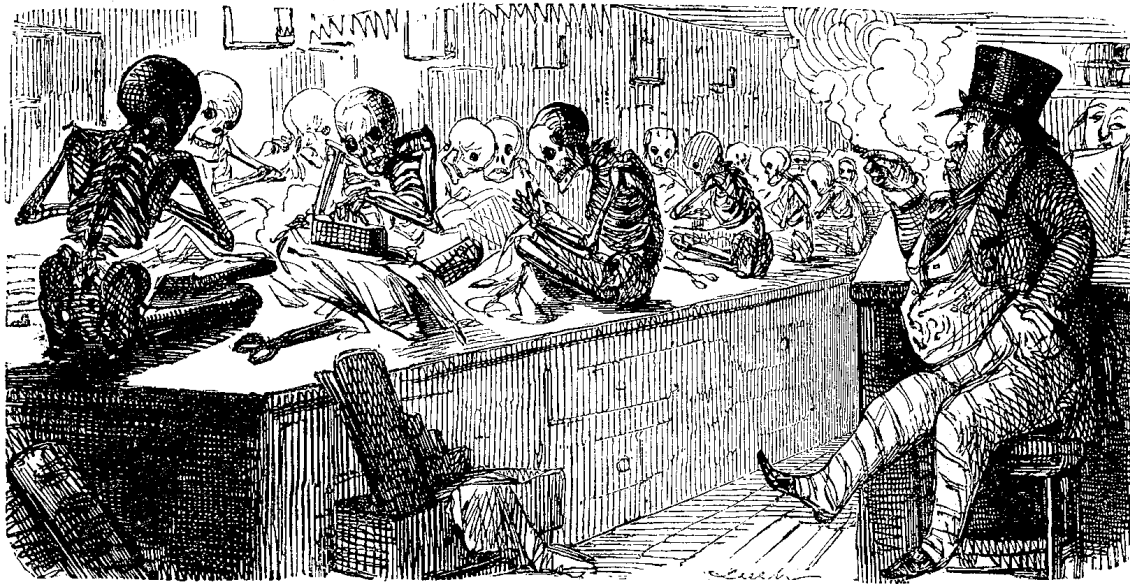


Mansell Collection

*“The Sidney Street siege in January 1911 revealed the breach in the anarchist ranks;” Winston Churchill, then Home Secretary, with troops and firemen in Sidney Street*

battle against Jewish orthodoxy. Anarchist precepts of atheism and free love cut across the basic tenets of Judaism. J. L. Fine recalls the tragi-comedy of the anarchist Balls, deliberately held on Yom Kippur day (the fast of Atonement), the most solemn of Jewish festivals. Young politicals, flouting their contempt for tradition, marched in columns to the main Orthodox Synagogue in Brick Lane, smoking or brandishing ham sandwiches as gestures of

defiance and rejection of their creed. The worshippers in full regalia swept out and attacked the scoffers with any weapon they could seize. The local people gazed dumbfounded at the antics of these strange foreigners; and police intervention was often needed to restore order. These incidents ended with the outbreak of war. 1914 marked the climax of anarchist intercession, which, thereafter, rapidly declined. The movement split further into the



THE CHEAP TAILOR AND HIS WORKMEN.

*The sweating system in 1845; a cartoon by John Leech from "Punch"*

Mansell Collection

pro- and anti-war elements. Kropotkin supported the war against Germany; Rocker and Malatesta opposed war on general principle. The columns of the *Arbeter Fraint* were thrown open to both, but their views were quickly suppressed when, in 1915, the police closed its offices and imprisoned the staff. Rocker himself was interned in December, 1914, as an enemy alien. His removal from the scene was a decisive blow to East End anarchism, from which it never recovered. The triple pulls of Zionism, Orthodoxy and Communism after 1917 offered new challenges to the residual anarchists. The Balfour declaration opened up the prospect of the Messianic realisation of a National home in Palestine. A second generation of Jews, over whom the lean years of suffering had passed lightly, returned to the security and respectability of their ancient faith. Many of the older generation saw their millennium in the advent of the Russian Revolution. They flocked enthusiastically to their old homeland and disappeared in the purges and executions of the Cheka. Many of the younger embraced the new Communism from afar with a fanaticism more lasting than the old. By the 1920's the anarchists had lost most of their leaders, and immigration, which had fed the

movement with its most zealous followers, had virtually ceased.

Today a few intelligent old men and women at the Workers' Circle, a cultural centre whose establishment had been inspired by Rocker and the *Arbeter Fraint*, recall the golden years of the struggle and the memory of their teacher with reverence. The irony is that their grandsons are now respectable members of society.

In this local setting Rudolf Rocker brought much to an alien folk through his quality of sympathetic identification. The story, however, does not end in London. It was only the beginning. Between the years 1918 and 1933, he renewed his political activities among the Jews in Germany, fighting a heroic but futile battle against Nazi anti-Semitism and barely escaping with his life. His last years were spent in America, writing and campaigning for the cause of libertarian Socialism to the end, achieving international recognition among those thinkers who subscribe to the view that where the norms of "love and humanity prevail, divisions of race and creed are of no significance". It is in this context, perhaps, that history will reappraise not only Rocker the man, but also that peculiar ideology to which he had dedicated the whole of his being.