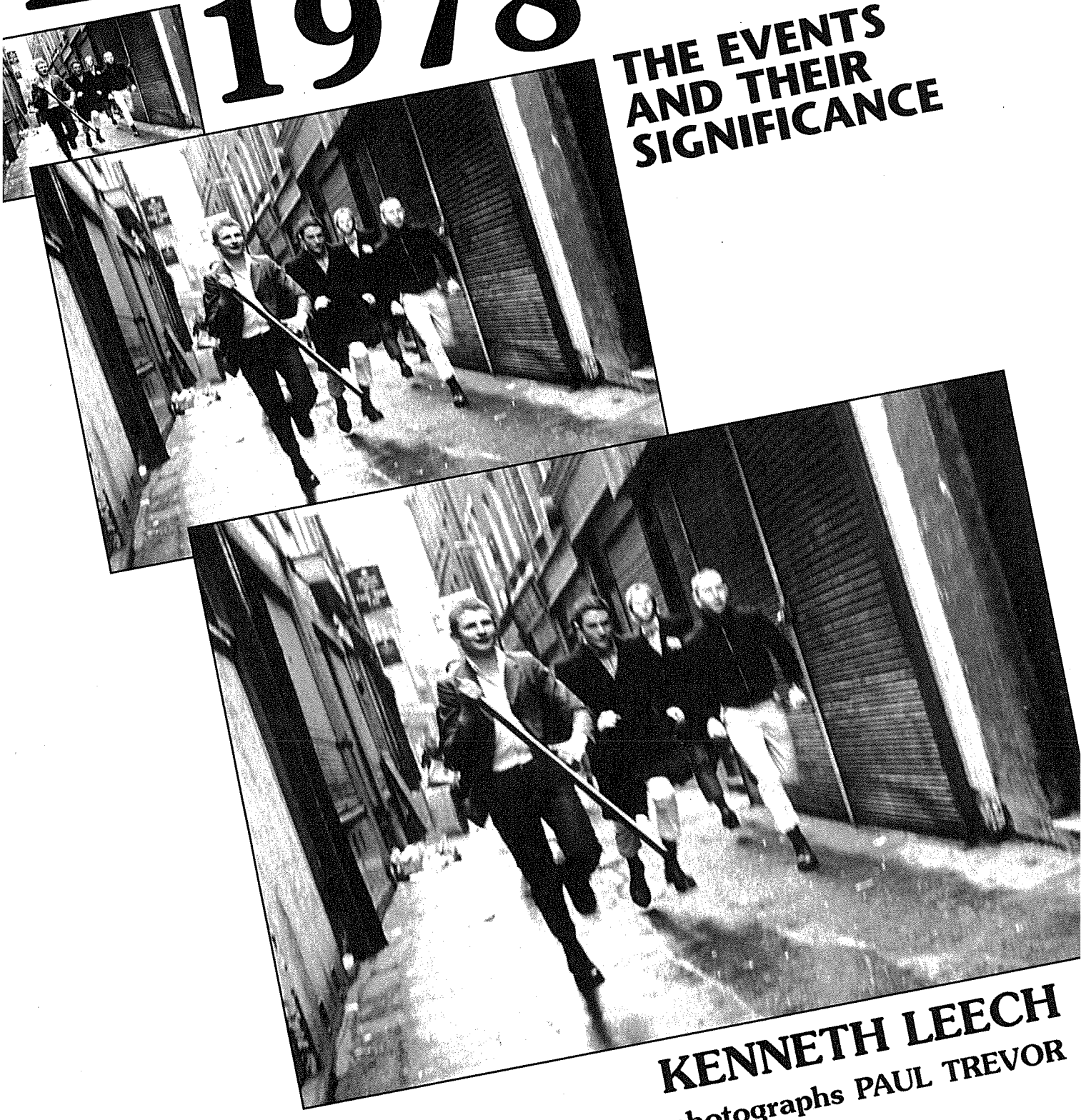
BRICK LANE 1978

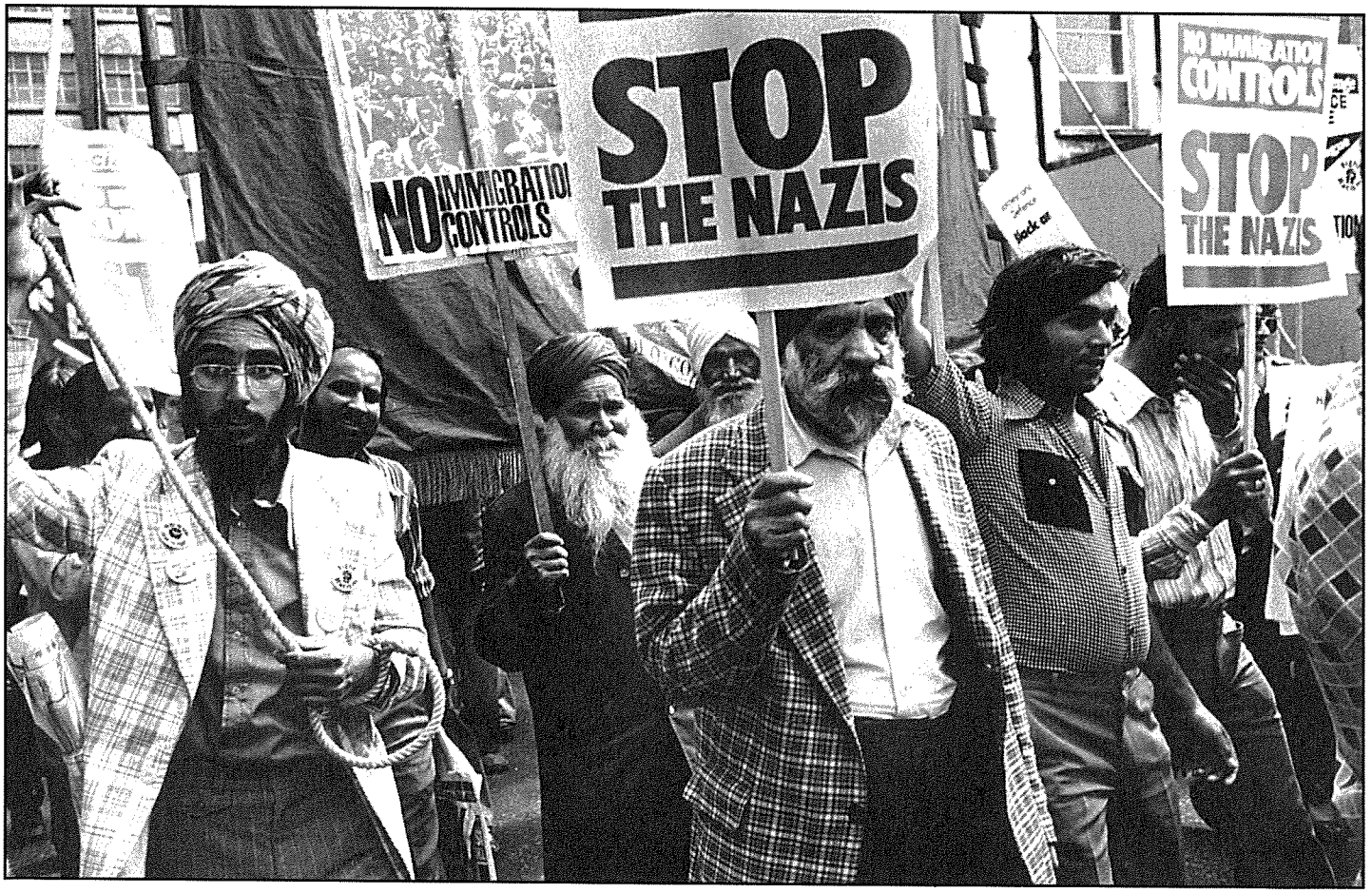
THE EVENTS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE



KENNETH LEECH

photographs PAUL TREVOR

The experience of life in the East End of London leads many Bengali families to accept racial abuse and attack as a constant factor of everyday life.



August 20, 1978: Hackney and Tower Hamlets Defence Committee and the Anti-Nazi League organise a massive march through the East End.

PREFACE

WHAT follows is an attempt to present the background to the events which made Brick Lane in the East End of London national news during the summer of 1978, and to describe the main events as they occurred. I was the Parish Priest of the area which includes the northern half of Brick Lane and lived within a few hundred yards of the National Front "pitch" in Bethnal Green Road. I was closely involved in much of the activity summarised in these pages.

Unlike the events in Southall in 1979, the Brick Lane events have not been well-documented, in spite of a considerable amount of publicity. Indeed the accuracy of the material has been in inverse proportion to its quantity. I hope that this account will help to clarify some of the issues, and to correct some distorted and wrong ideas.

The implications for policy are currently the concern of a number of more detailed studies and I have not discussed them here. My aim has been to describe, to explain, and to try to interpret the actual events of Brick Lane 1978 within the context of the anti-racist struggle in Britain.

I am grateful to many comrades and fellow-activists in the anti-racist movement with whom I have discussed these issues over the whole period. The following pages have particularly derived help from discussions over the years with Joe Abrahams, Ayub Ali, Caroline Adams, Tassaduq Ahmed, Kaushika Amin, Belle Harris, Dan Jones, Denise Jones, Kumar Murshid, Abbas Uddin, Jalal Uddin, Pola Uddin and Claire Weingarten.

INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet describes the events of 1978, a troubled year which was a turning point in the history of the resistance to racism in East London. As I was preparing this revised edition in 1993, the British National Party candidate, Derek Beackon, was elected in a byelection at Millwall on the Isle of Dogs on 16th September. Some days earlier, on the 8th September, a young Bengali Quddus Ali was beaten up in Commercial Road by a group of white youths, and almost died. On 24th September, two white youths from Canning Town were sentenced to life imprisonment for murdering an Asian taxi driver by throwing him into the River Thames. There is an ominous similarity to the events of 1978, though there are some crucial differences. Most important of all, there is much to be learnt from 1978 which is relevant to the present crisis.

After the decline of the NF following the General Election of 1979 when their vote collapsed virtually everywhere, there was a fragmentation and regrouping within British fascism. The NF split into various groups, one of which, led by Tyndall, was called the New National Front. In April 1982 it became the BNP, and into this new group came members of two earlier fascist organisations, the British Movement and the British Democratic Party. It took with it the journal *Spearhead* which had previously been linked with the NF and, before that, with the Greater Britain Movement. It also has a paper called *British Nationalist*. In 1987 the Flag Group, a group which had split from the NF, joined with the BNP. It is the BNP which has formed the main fascist presence in the East End since then.

This period has coincided almost exactly with the life of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), set up in 1981. This development has made the Isle of Dogs known throughout the world, but it has done little to improve conditions for local people, black or white. The persistence of unemployment, poor housing and a general sense of neglect has provided fertile ground for racist and fascist explanations. In the past the Isle of Dogs was not seen as a major site of fascist activity. Mosley never campaigned there. The NF, however, obtained 16 per cent of the vote there in the local elections of 1978, though at that time their main activity was in Bethnal Green. But it was left to the BNP to make the island their main focus of activity.

In contrast to the Mosley movement and even to the NF, the BNP membership is quite small, probably between 1500-2000, though some put it as low as 1200. It seems not to be drawn from "ordinary" members of the public but mainly from former members of the NF and other fascist groups. The membership seems to be mainly young, hence the nickname given to Beackon of "Daddy Beackon", though he is only 47. The term "daddy" is common in prison usage. Like the old NF, the BNP holds annual marches in mid-April when there is a joint devotion to Hitler (whose birthday is on the 20th) and St George (whose festival is on the 23rd). In 1993 the BNP demonstration on the 25th attracted only 200 or so.

Moreover, in spite of the Millwall result, the electoral record of the BNP has not been good. At the General Election of April 1992 the NF and BNP together put up 27 candidates but got less than 12,000 votes. The BNP's 13 candidates got 7005, and the NF's 14 got 4816. In only two areas, both in the East End, did they get much over 1 per cent of the poll. In Bethnal Green and Stepney, Richard Edmonds got 1310 votes (3.6 per cent) and in Bow and Poplar John Tyndall got 1107 (3 per cent).

There is another difference which is itself the result of the events described in this pamphlet. Today the Bangladeshi community is much stronger and more politically active than it was in 1978, though the organised anti-racist organisations are more divided and have fewer roots in the area. There are some dangerous aspects of the present climate. The ruling Liberal Democrat regime is seen by many as a racist regime, and has recently been the subect of a national inquiry. The general political climate is more favourable than in the recent past to the BNP and similar groupings. The need both for unity against fascism and for a closer involvement in the issues of the East End is surely one of the lessons of the BNP vote. It is also one of the lessons of the 1978 experience. The battle against racism and fascism cannot be won by outsiders who march into an area, chant slogans, and then march out again; it can only be won by the most dedicated, rooted and persistent commitment to undermine and destroy the injustice and neglect on which such movements thrive.

Kenneth Leech 1994

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BRICK LANE IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

BRICK LANE is a long East End street which runs from Whitechapel to Bethnal Green. It has had a lot of publicity in the last few years: there has been the controversy about the Bengali "ghetto", and the reports of racist attacks and the anti-racist counter-attack. This has not been the first time that this district of London has been the scene of conflicts or rivalries between newcomers and a host community. There is a geography and a history to what happened there in 1978. It is important, if we are to make sense of recent events, to look back at the past. To begin with, why "Brick Lane"?

The Romans tended to see the East End, outside the walls of their City, as a home for the dead rather than the living. One of their earliest cemeteries was at Lolesworth Field, Spitalfields. In 1576 this field was broken up for brick manufacture, hence the name of the lane. Throughout the Middle Ages, the area had been chiefly rural, with rows of elm trees and stiles and some basic milk production.

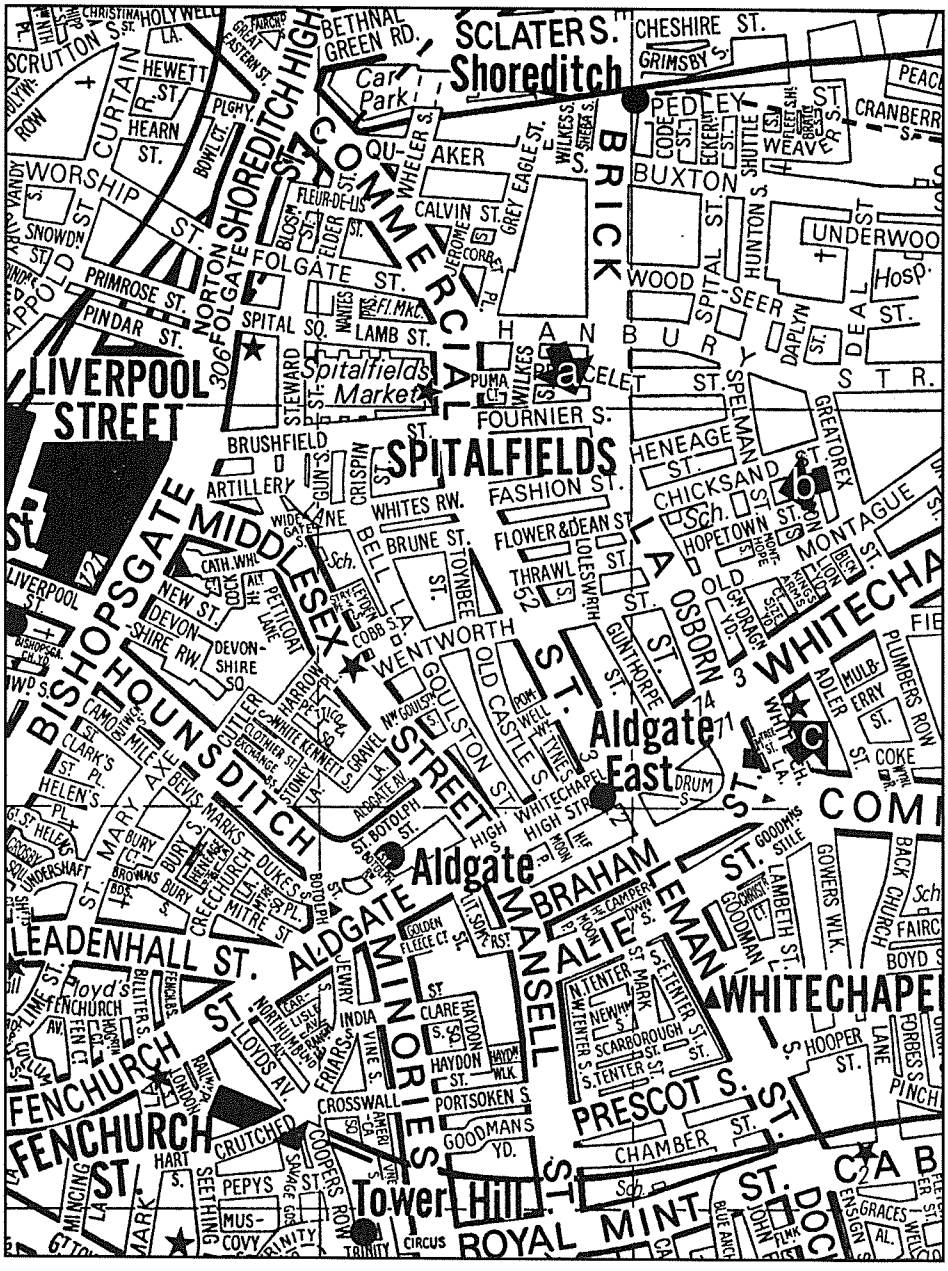
More manufacture developed under the Tudors (including the brick makers), and the Red Lion brewery was built in Brick Lane in the 16th Century. This was followed by the Black Eagle brewery in 1669, which was taken over in 1694 by Joseph Truman. This brewery was the first place in London to use industrial methods. Though now Maxwell Joseph's, the brewery still stands at the centre of Brick Lane. Now it roughly divides the Bangladesh area to the south from the predominantly white area of Bethnal Green to the north. Before 1965 it marked off the borough of Stepney from that of Bethnal Green.

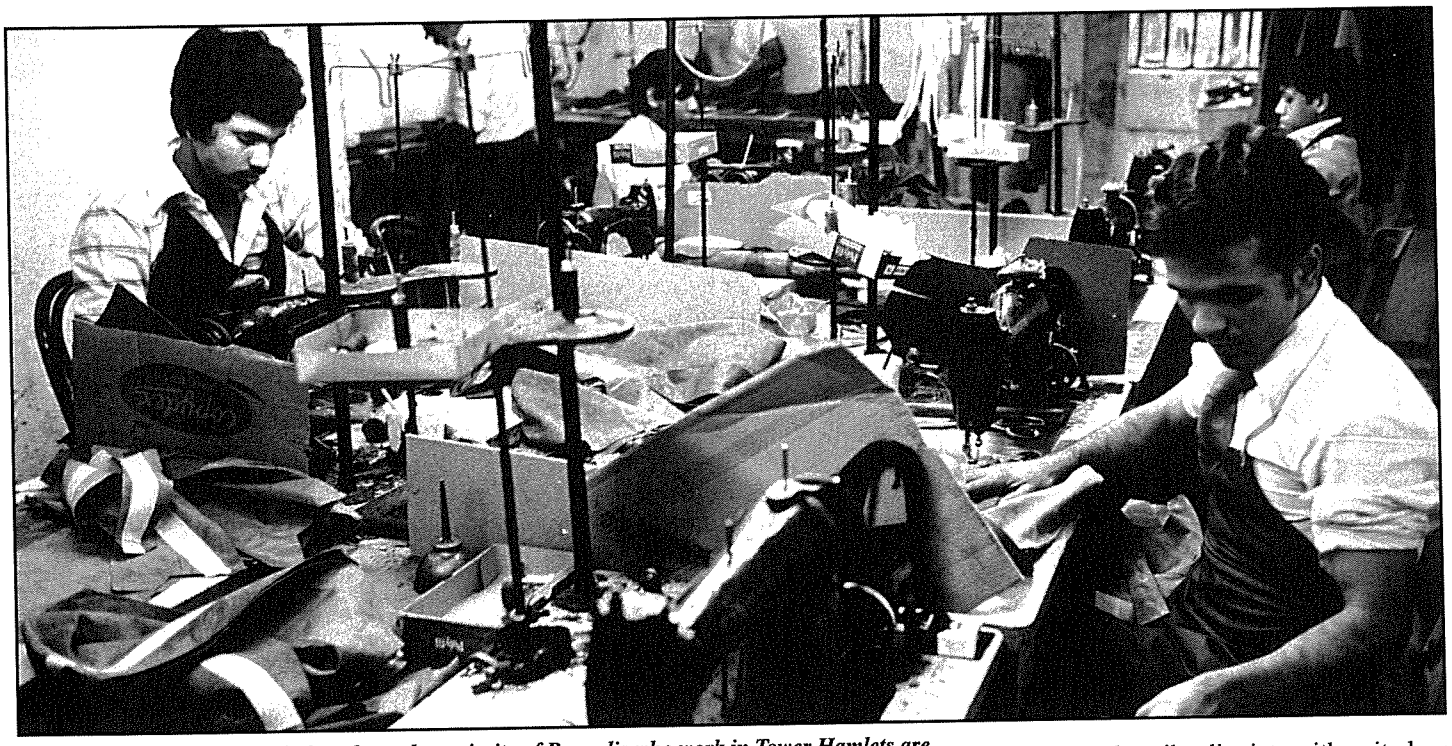
In the 17th Century the street market known as Rag Fair began in Rosemary Lane (now called Cable Street) on the other side of Whitechapel. The market spread to Brick Lane, where it is held every Sunday – a rather different, more local event than the more publicised Petticoat Lane market half a mile away.

Brick Lane was one of the earliest parts of the East End to be built up. In 1580 the population of east London was estimated to be 14,000. A third of these were in Whitechapel, and the rest in Stepney, which seems then to have included Spitalfields. Between 1580 and 1630, the total grew to 48,000. John Stow's *Survey of London* in 1603 referred to the building of "filthy cottages" to the north of Aldgate. At the end of the 16th Century there were already complaints about the numbers of lodging houses in the area. Spitalfields district was built up further in the reign of William and Mary.

A writer in 1748 referred to the area as being "close-built and inhabited by an infinite number of people". Of Brick Lane, this writer noted that it had become "now a well paved street" whereas in 1670 it "was a deep dirty road, frequented chiefly by carts fetching bricks that way into Whitechapel from brick kilns in those fields whence it had its name". By the middle of the 18th Century, Brick Lane was

Brick Lane, the centre of the Spitalfields Bengali community. Arrows show the location of the Brick Lane Mosque (a), the council estates at the centre of the 'ghetto' row (b), and Adler Street where Altab Ali was murdered (c).





Like the Jewish immigrants before them, the majority of Bengalis who work in Tower Hamlets are employed in the rag trade – mainly in the lower level of pay and conditions.

completely built up, as were Princelet, Folgate and Elder Streets.

After this period, the number of houses in Whitechapel and Spitalfields did not noticeably increase. There were 5,690 in 1730 and only a couple of hundred more in 1880. In Spitalfields, of course, what happened was that more people crowded into the same number of houses. The district between Aldgate and Brick Lane (where Toynbee Hall now stands) had clearly become a centre for homeless and drifting people by the early 18th Century. There were references to "idle, vagrant, loose and disorderly persons". From this time, too, there was a significant minority of immigrants – though most of the population in both Whitechapel and Spitalfields Wards were local-born down to the 1881 Census.

In 1571, Whitechapel is recorded as having 169 foreigners. By the early 18th Century there are frequent references to Irish paupers. There were anti-Irish riots in Spitalfields in 1736. Two Irish taverns were nearly destroyed and the windows of lodging houses were smashed. The Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, said that cheap labour was the cause. Irish workmen were being used for the building at Hawksmoor's grandiose Christ Church, Spitalfields, deliberately located there in order to bring the benefits of Anglicanism to the mob.

There was more trouble at the time of the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780. The secretary of the Protestant Association was then living in a nearby street, and much anti-Irish feeling was incited. Jews in Houndsditch, afraid of attacks wrote on their doors "This house is a true Protestant". (These were Sephardic Jews, from Spain, Portugal and the Low Countries, who had settled near their synagogue in Bevis Marks). The extreme poverty of the Irish in Spitalfields was frequently noted. The radical Francis Place remarked in 1816 that the native poor of Spitalfields were better off than the Irish.

At this period there is little evidence of sizeable numbers of black or brown immigrants. There are just a few mentions of Negro seamen and Lascars, mainly in the riverside area, and also further east near Limehouse, where the Chinese community had settled. But Huguenot silk weavers – originally refugees from France – lived here from the early 18th Century. The more prosperous lived in the city and Spitalfields; the poorer weavers settled in Bethnal Green. By the end of the 18th Century there were 13,000 looms in Spitalfields, but the trade collapsed in the 19th Century as Lancashire cotton and Nottingham lace competed with it.

It was during the mid-19th century that the East Enders began to move out towards Essex. At the same time, many of the Irish from the East End started to move northwards into Hoxton, on the edge of Hackney (the district where later both Sir Oswald Mosley and the National Front leader John Tyndall were to stand for Parliament). But contemporary references to "Irish ghettoes" in the East End are incorrect. Both then and now, the term is used loosely to describe districts with quite low ratios of immigrants.

In Whitechapel as a whole the Irish were one in ten of the population around mid-century. Only near the church of St George-in-the-East (also by Hawksmoor) and Cable Street, more than a mile to the south, were there any heavy clusters of Irish. There was, however, a lot of migration into most of inner London from the British countryside. But Bethnal Green was the low water mark for immigration of all kinds. In 1881 less than one in five Bethnal Greeners were born outside East London. This is an important factor to bear in mind when one considers the place it subsequently held, and still holds, as a base for racialist propaganda.

Throughout the last century, Brick Lane was marked by severe social problems. According to Mayhew, the lane and the streets running off it included not only lodging houses but also considerable numbers of brothels. It was in these streets that Jack the Ripper carried out his murders and so helped focus attention on the area. Brick Lane, said the Rector of Christ Church in the 1880s, was "a land of beer and blood". Conditions there in the 1890s are described in the writings of the German exile Rudolf Rocker whose Anarchist Club in Jubilee Street was attended by Peter the Painter. In the later years of the century there was some improvement in the conditions, but it was the arrival of the Jews from Eastern Europe which transformed Brick Lane and the streets around it.

It was Cromwell who had allowed the Jews to return to England. The early Sephardic Jewish settlers stayed mainly

around Aldgate. Right up to the middle of the 19th Century there were hardly any Jews further east than Brick Lane. The older Jews in the street trades were being displaced by the Irish, and a Jewish middle class was emerging in districts such as Stamford Hill and others to the west. Knight's *London*, published in 1851, makes no reference to the Jews in a whole chapter on Spitalfields. But in 1881 the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, and the subsequent pogroms, introduced a new era in Jewish migration. The first wave of Jewish immigrants to Britain came after the May Laws of 1882, restricting Jewish trades and settlement. It was followed by a second wave 10 years later when the Jews were expelled from Moscow. The years 1880 to 1905 were crucial in transforming Whitechapel into a Jewish zone. Brick Lane became the main street of what was truly a ghetto.

At the 1881 Census, more than three-quarters of all London's "Russians and Poles" were in the East End. By 1901 the total number in Stepney was 42,032. By that year, many streets around Brick Lane were 100 per cent Jewish. Israel Zangwill began his famous *Children of the Ghetto* in 1895: "The particular ghetto that is the dark background upon which our picture will be cast is of voluntary formation." It was the first of a series of novels and accounts which were to emerge out of this new Jewish community. One of the last was Arnold Wesker, with his portrait of Flower and Dean Street in the play *Chicken Soup with Barley*. There are obvious parallels between the Jewish ghetto and the present community from Bangladesh in the same streets. (What was once a Huguenot church at the corner of Brick Lane and Fournier Street became first a synagogue, and is now a mosque.) But the pattern of racialist polemic is even more striking in its similarity.

In the 1880s the Jewish ghetto became headline news. As today, there was a striking division between the Whitechapel and Bethnal Green areas. Most Jews, like most Bangladeshis, were at the southern (Whitechapel) part of Brick Lane, behind the brewery "frontier post". Bethnal Green was far less hospitable – though later, some Jews moved into the Boundary Estate, one of the districts at the centre of the controversy about special housing allocations to Asians, referred to later. The immigrant population in Bethnal Green remained low.

At the population peak of the quarter in 1901, the total foreign-born population of Bethnal Green was still only 3.5 per cent. The Bishop of Stepney of the day was complaining of an alien take-over, with the churches "left like islands in the midst of an alien sea". And his sentiments were expressed more forcefully in the fierce anti-immigrant campaign of Major Evans-Gordon, the MP for Stepney, whose speeches and writings are remarkably similar to those of Enoch Powell. The other figure at the centre of the anti-immigration polemic at the turn of the century was Arnold White, whose symposium *The Destitute Alien in Great Britain* was published in 1892. It sought to establish a close link between the Jews and poverty, squalor and the creation of social evils. The government yielded to pressure to the extent of passing the first Aliens Act, restricting immigration, in 1905.

Out of the Jewish ghetto, however, came not only despair but also hope and activism. Jewish socialism was shaped in the streets around Brick Lane. The first Yiddish socialist paper, the *Polish Yidel*, was published in 1884. The group that centred on the paper's office was of fundamental importance in building the Jewish radical tradition. But polemic against "aliens" continued. Bethnal Green was at the centre of it. "I consider the time has arrived", Thomas Benkin told the electors of South West Bethnal Green – the Brick Lane area – in 1892, "when statemen should consider measures which will directly benefit 'John Bull' without due regard to outside and foreign interests. I am in favour of stringent measures to prohibit the wholesale immigration of pauper foreigners. I certainly support the principle of maintaining 'Great Britain for the British'." The Primrose League collected 2,630 signatures in Bethnal Green for a petition demanding restrictions in immigration.

In 1901 Evans-Gordon and others formed the British Brothers' League to help build up the anti-immigrant activity. Every Conservative candidate in Bethnal Green, Hoxton and Haggerston – the districts which are still the key ones for organised racism – exploited anti-immigrant attitudes in elections from 1892 to 1906. The first of Mosley's British Fascist candidates stood in the LCC elections of March 1937 for South West Bethnal Green and Shoreditch.

It was against this background of conflict that the Asians arrived in Brick Lane after the Second World War. By this time the majority of the old Jewish community had moved out – though often continuing to run ragtrade businesses there. There was no dramatic increase in immigration from Pakistan (or later Bangladesh) until the mid-60s. The total number of Indian-born in the old Borough of Stepney was 371 at the 1951 Census, growing to 905 10 years later. Pakistanis grew from 309 to 700. By the 1960s Brick Lane had become the main social centre and concentration point for Pakistanis, as it had been for the Jews before them. The overwhelming majority were single males. There were only 935 Pakistani women in the whole County of London in 1961: there were four times that number of men.

Brick Lane was already being described as an Asian ghetto. But there were few heavy concentrations. The highest ratios of Asian-born people were around parts of Middlesex Street (Petticoat Lane); Princelet Street, which is still the most densely populated; and Old Montague Street. Here the percentages of residents born in India, Pakistan and Ceylon were 12.1, 15 .6 and 18 per cent respectively in 1961, though the enumerators indicated the likelihood of under-counting. After this there was a campaign for electoral registration which achieved some success. By the time of the 1964 Register of Electors, the highest ratios of Muslim and Sikh names in local polling districts were 19.98 and 13.9 per cent. In only four districts did such names come to more than 10 per cent. Again, Princelet Street and Old Montague Street, both running off Brick Lane, came highest, with ratios of 60.9 and 44.4 per cent.

In 1963 the Graces' Alley Compulsory Purchase Order had initiated the gradual demolition of the old seamen's and brothel district in Cable Street, a mile south of Brick Lane. This was the "coloured quarter" described by Professor Michael Banton in his book of that confusing name, based on research done at the end of the 1940s. For more than 20 years it had been a centre for seamen from north, east and west Africa, and then for immigrants from India and Pakistan. Much of the Cable Street community moved northwards – to Brick Lane. The scene was now set for Brick Lane to assume a new role in the 1970s.

Politics in the Indian sub-continent also played an important part. With the emergence of Bangladesh as a separate country in 1974 and its subsequent crises, Brick Lane became the centre of a new community. It took over from Cable Street some of the symbolic status which had surrounded that street since the anti-fascist encounters of the 1930s. So Brick Lane and its inhabitants acquired, often in spite of themselves, a place in the pantheon of the anti-racist movement.

2

RACIAL VIOLENCE PAST AND PRESENT

EARLIER RACIAL VIOLENCE

ALTHOUGH it was 1978 which gave Brick Lane a symbolic role in the national anti-racist struggle, there had been a history of racial violence in the area for many years, going back well beyond the 1976-78 period. There were some minor outbreaks in the East End in 1958, the time of the riots in Notting Hill. But the background to the Notting Hill incidents and the active presence there of the Union Movement (the successor of the British Union of Fascists) and the racist groups which preceded the National Front, show close parallels with the events in Brick Lane.[1]

In 1965 the Secretary of East Pakistan House claimed that there was "a growing mass hysteria against the Pakistanis".[2] And in 1970 the "skinhead era" arrived in the East End. The increase in attacks by young people, often from the area, against Pakistanis and Indians was a significant aspect of this new phenomenon. In Tower Hamlets at that time it was generally felt that little of this wave of racial harrassment was directly attributable to extremist political groups. One of Spitalfields' most experienced youth workers wrote in that year:

"The current racial problem in Spitalfields, and possibly the worst, is the growth of resentment against the Pakistani community . . . There is considerable "Paki-baiting" and "rolling" (robbing with violence) by some of the local young people. The situation is becoming both violent and unhealthy and is evident in the schools as well as the streets".[3]

The racial violence of 1970 is well documented. A study by Louise London[4] showed that the period from March to May 1970 was of vital importance. The first reference in the press to "Paki-bashing" seems to have been on April 3 1970 when several daily papers mentioned attacks by skinheads on two Asian workers at the London Chest Hospital in Bethnal Green. On April 5 the *Observer* claimed that "any Asian careless enough to be walking the streets alone at night is a fool." Tosir Ali was murdered on April 7, and Gulam Taslim documented 36 cases of racial attacks in this period. On April 26,1970 some 50 youngsters went on the rampage in Brick Lane and five Pakistanis were injured. It was in this year, as well, that the discussion of self-defence began, and mass meetings of the Asian community were held in different parts of Tower Hamlets. There were meetings with MPs and the police, and demands for action.

MORE RECENT RACIAL VIOLENCE

IN 1976 the Anti-Racist Committee of Asians in East London was set up as a broadbased body to draw attention to the inadequacy of the protection offered to Asian people by the police and the authorities. The great increase in racial attacks in the area had been catalogued by the Spitalfields Bengali Action Group. Attacks increased further with the "Four-Star Malawi Asians" Press scandal, the killing of Gurdip Singh Chaggar in Southall, and of two students from the Middle East who were attending Queen Mary College in the East End.

On the day that John Kingsley Read of the National Party made his infamous "One down – a million to go" comments in Newham on the Chaggar murder, ARCAEL organised a mass meeting in the Naz Cinema in Brick Lane. The meeting was chaired by Mala Dhonde, and addressed by Darcus Howe of the Race Today Collective, Trevor Huddleston, then Bishop of Stepney, and Dan Jones, Secretary of Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council. It was followed by a 3,000 strong protest march to Leman Street Police Station demanding action to "keep blood off the streets."

In the weeks that followed, however, a number of the victims of racial attacks were themselves arrested for threatening behaviour or for carrying offensive weapons, although the attacks continued. The Press became interested in exaggerated stories of "vigilante groups": but the actual needs of the Asian community had moved them away from passive acceptance to self-protection. Throughout 1976 there was considerable attention paid to Brick Lane in the Press. On June 15, 1976 the two Anglican clergy whose parishes covered the Brick Lane district issued a statement in which they said:

"Considerable attention has been paid recently to this part of the East End, and it has been portrayed as a focus of hostility and violence against Asian, particularly Bengali, immigrants. Sections of the media, Press and TV, have certainly helped to aggravate a tense situation."

A good deal of the racial violence of 1976 was documented. *Race Today* in June devoted a great deal of space to the Brick Lane district, and spoke of the "atmosphere of increasing racial and police intimidation" The same issue listed "the most serious assaults on Asians to have taken place between March and May this year" in the East End: these amounted to some 30 cases, collected by the Spitalfields Bengali Action Group, almost all within the Brick Lane district. It was during 1976 also that the increase in National Front activity in the vicinity of Brick Lane increased. On November 20, 1976, the East London Conference Against Racism, organised by Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council met at Queen Mary College under the chairmanship of Brian Nicholson of the Transport and General Workers' Union. The following resolution was passed:

"Noting the attempts of the National Front to gain a base in East London, and especially their provocative newspaper sales in Brick Lane, conference decides to initiate a mass demonstration based on Labour and community organisations against the presence of the National Front, particularly in Brick Lane." (Resolution 2).

During the following year, 1977, the major ethnic minority organisations locally and nationally began to talk openly about the need to organise for their own defence in the face of the failure of the state to offer adequate and impartial protection to black people. In May 1977 *Race Today* called for patrols in the district in the face

Police initiative fails to halt wave of racial violence against Asians

An increasing number of racial attacks against Asians are taking place in the East End of London, despite special police measures aimed at preventing them. Michael Horsnell and Penny Symon report.

Mr Shomoz Ali could no longer stand the agony of racial violence against him and his family after one of his young daughters had been kicked on her way to the shops to buy some ice-cream. For Mr Ali, a Bengali, aged 45, isolated in a community of whites in a council block in the East End, it was the culmination of a vicious campaign of harassment aimed at forcing him to leave.

Stones had been thrown through his windows, eggs and tomatoes at his wife and four children, and the whole family had been frequently jostled and abused. Mr Ali went to the Greater London Council and was rehoused.

The experience of the Ali family is only one episode in a wave of racial violence against Asians in the area, which reached a peak earlier this year.

Inquiries by *The Times* show that despite a new approach taken by the police in the summer after protests to the Home Office by the Bangladesh High Commission indictable assaults have remained at what community leaders regard as an alarming level.

Police attempts to encourage the 7,000 to 10,000 Asians who live in the East End to report all assaults also appear to have failed so far. We also found that a growing number of Asian children, particularly Sikhs living just outside the East End in Leyton and Walthamstow, are taking part in self-defence classes arranged for them.

Cases of violence against Asians in the East End examined by *The Times* include:

An attack on Mr Samad Khan, aged 45, a tailor and president of the Bangladesh Association. He was rushed by three youths, one of whom threw a bottle at his head, but he escaped. "This sort of thing is commonplace, so I knew it would be useless to report it to the police," he told us.

An assault on Mr Shakur Allah, aged 20, who was rushed by a crowd of white youth and stabbed in the right shoulder. His relatives are incensed by the fact that the attack took place at 5.45 pm in a busy street. No one came forward as a witness.

Mr Suab Choudhury, aged 27, a waiter, was attacked by four youths on his way to a telephone box. Two of them held his arms while the others punched him in the face.

An attack on Mr Rahat Ullah, aged 62, by three youths at the entrance of the block of flats where he lives. He was left with a broken nose and other facial injuries. It was the second attack he had suffered. Unusually, two of the three attackers were black.

An elderly man was kicked to the ground by two youths at midnight and lost four teeth. He received other head injuries.

Of all indictable assaults reported to the police last year in Tower Hamlets, the borough at the heart of the East End comprising the tough districts of Stepney, Poplar and Bethnal Green, about an eighth were against Asians.

That proportion rose to about a fifth during the first six months of this year, when 42 out of 216 assaults reported to police were against Asians.

After consultations with the Home Office the police decided in June to introduce home beat officers to the Spitalfields district, one of the most violent.

A liaison committee of police and local community leaders was set up to encourage Asian victims of assault to report to the police. That committee has been meeting monthly since September, but is regarded as unhelpful by some leaders of the Asian community.

Statistics being analysed by lawyers and social workers indicate that the ratio of attacks on Asians, who are thought to number up to a fourteenth of the population of Tower Hamlets, has not decreased since the police introduced their new measures.

A dossier on the violence being compiled by Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council, which will present to the police, the Home Office and local organizations in the spring.

More than a hundred cases of violence in the past six months have so far been analysed. Allowing for a proportion of incidents not reported to the police and some [illegible] an early analysis of the [illegible] shows that little has altered in recent months.

Lawyers and social workers are examining cases to see whether outbreaks of violence can be linked to growth of National Front and other anti-immigrant activity in the [illegible]

Mr Golam Mustafa, secretary of Brick Lane Mosque, Whitechapel, told us: "People are frightened to go out [illegible]

Continued on page 2.

'The Times', December 23, 1977

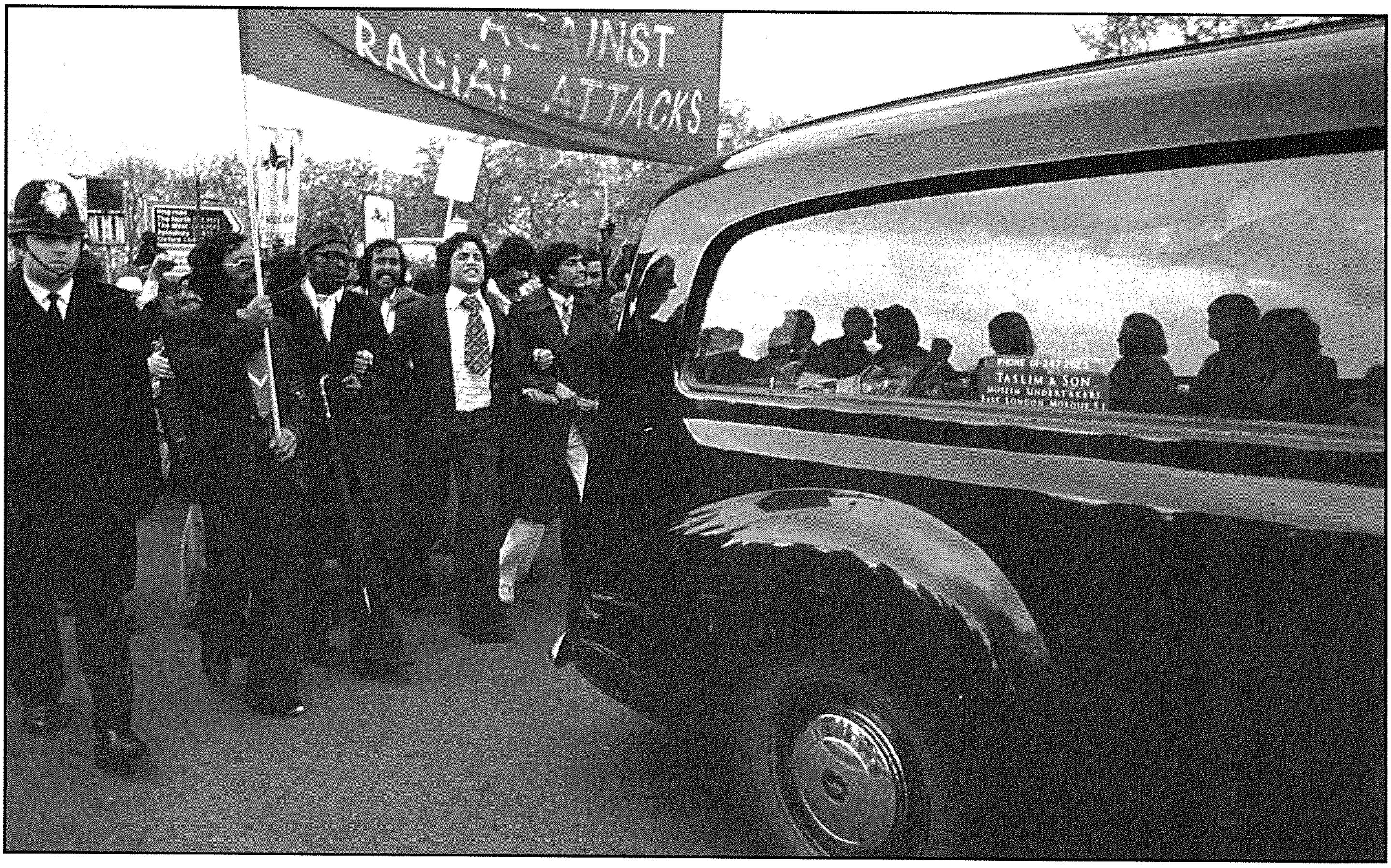
of "a systematic campaign of deadly assaults against the Asian community". They referred specifically to an Asian youth whose ear was almost severed by a gang with knives, and to an Asian who was critically ill after being beaten up. A local newspaper also commented:

"Racial violence has recently centred around the Brick Lane area. The presence of National Front supporters at Sunday markets in the lane has prompted claims and counter claims of violent attacks. The National Front has been concentrating on utilising bands of white youths to give verbal support to Front members selling newspapers in the lane. An Advertiser *reporter recently saw NF supporters swearing and spitting at Asians who walked past members selling papers near Bethnal Green."*[5]

There was activity throughout the second half of 1977. In June the Home Office, at the insistence of the High Commissioner for Bangladesh, called for an urgent report from the Metropolitan Police on racial violence in the East End, and this was apparently prepared by the Community Relations Office at Scotland Yard. The Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG), an important group which will be mentioned in greater detail later, gave the Commissioner the SBAG dossier referred to above, detailing 30 attacks.

On October 17, 1977, more than 3 ,000 anti-racists marched through the National Front strongholds in Hoxton and Bethnal Green to a multicultural festival in Victoria Park. Towards the end of the year there was a good deal of action in the field of painting out racial slogans. In December, five members of the Campaign Against Racist Slogans were found not guilty of defacing a railway bridge in Bethnal Green by painting over NF slogans. On December 4, antiracists removed racist slogans from a wall in Cheshire Street although they had earlier been prevented from doing so by the police. Even a British Movement slogan, which had remained for some months on the outside wall of Bethnal Green Police Station, was at last removed. However, as the year ended, *The Times* reported "Police initiative fails to halt wave of racial violence against Asians."[6]

But it was the year 1978 which was crucial in the build-up of activity around Brick Lane, and it is important therefore to summarise the events of that tense summer.



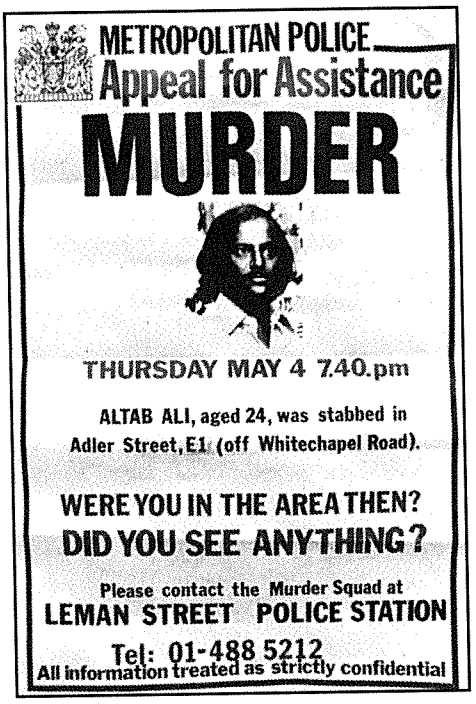
May 14, 1978: 7,000 Bengalis marched in pouring rain from Brick Lane to Downing Street behind Altab Ali's coffin. Altab Ali was stabbed in the neck on the night of local council elections in which 41 National Front candidates stood.

3

THE EVENTS OF 1978

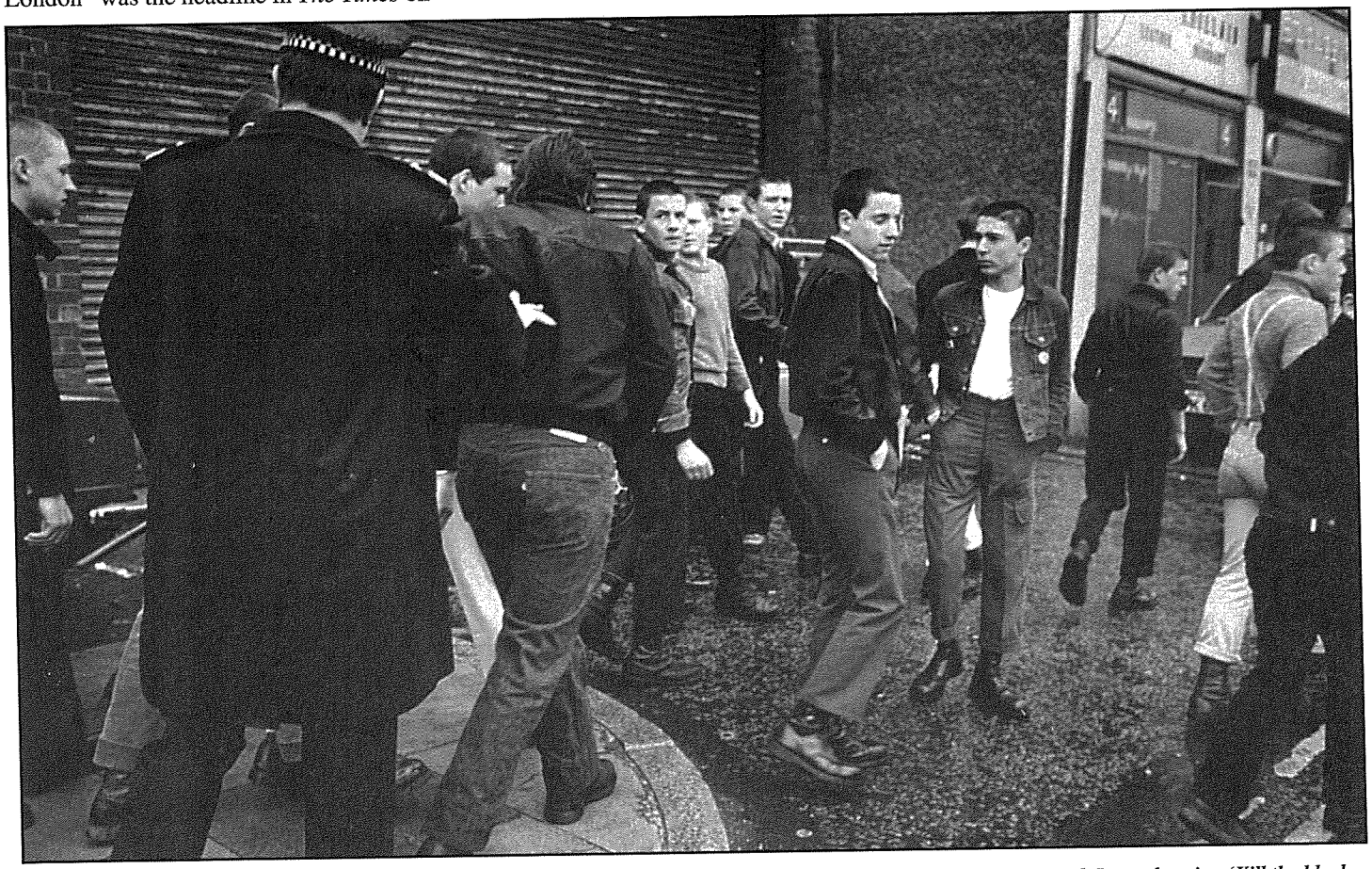
THE events of 1978 began with the tragic murder of a young Bengali clothing worker Altab Ali on May 4 in Adler Street, Whitechapel – not far from Brick Lane. The murder sparked off a series of demonstrations, and the memory of Altab Ali remains a vital part of the anti-racist movement, both among the Bengalis and among white groups. It was his murder which "triggered a massive wave of protest throughout East London".[7] On May 14 about 7,000 Bengalis held a protest march from Brick Lane to Downing Street behind Altab Ali's coffin. The Trades Council report *Blood on the Streets* correctly described this march as "one of the biggest demonstrations by Asians ever seen in Britain."[8]

On Sunday June 11, a day which followed considerable Press coverage of GLC plans for housing Bengalis in what were described as "ghettos", there was a major eruption of violence in Brick Lane. "Mob of youths attack Bengali area in East End London" was the headline in *The Times* on the 12th and the incidents received major coverage in most of the national Press. About 150 youths rampaged through the Brick Lane district, smashing windows, throwing bottles and lumps of concrete, and damaging shops and cars. This day marked a new stage in the escalation of racial violence in the area. We shall return later to the connection between the publicity about the GLC and the alleged "ghetto" proposals, and the violence of June 11 . But it is important at this point to notice the crucial significance of the events of that day in the pattern of racial violence. *The Times* observed:



"Attacks on Bengalis in the Brick Lane area of Spitalfields have usually been the work of relatively small groups. The destruction yesterday was carried out by the largest gang to assemble to threaten Asians in that area."

The following Sunday, June 18, saw an anti-racist march, organised by the Anti-



Police move in on a gang of skinheads roaming Spitalfields. On June 11, 1978, 150 white youths rampaged through Brick Lane shouting 'Kill the black bastards', smashing windows of Bengali shops.

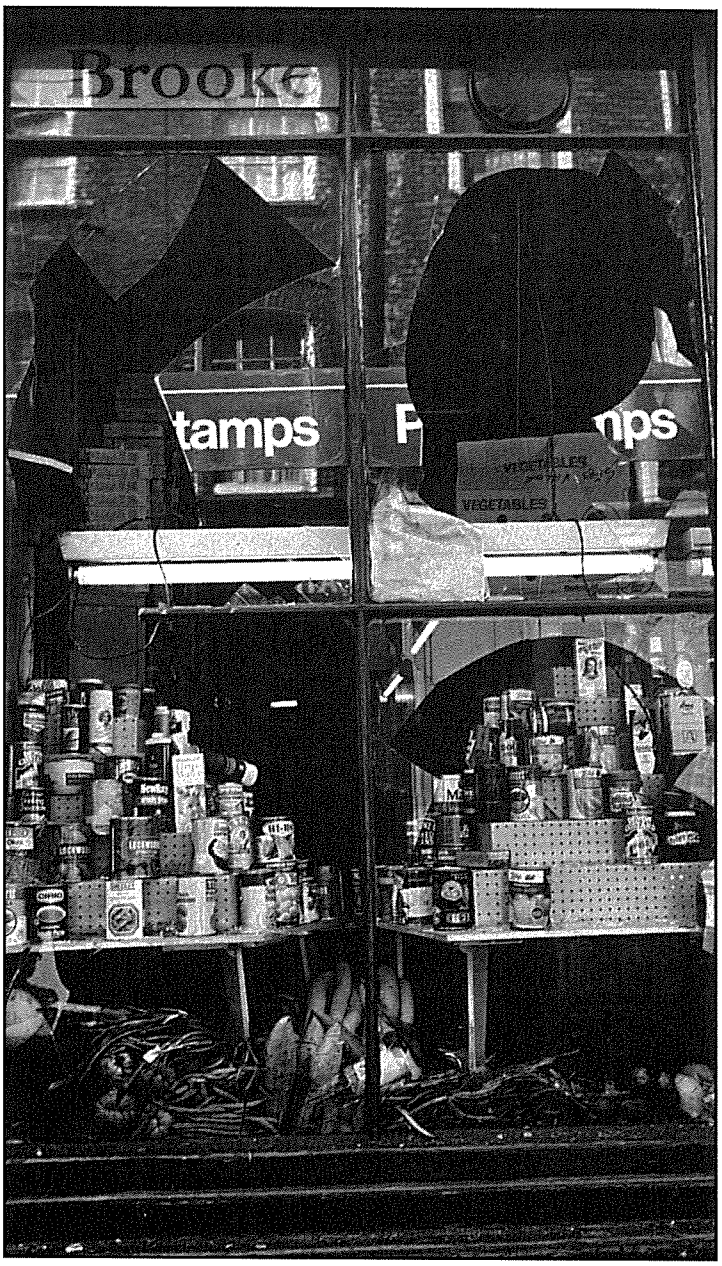
Nazi League and the Bengali Youth Movement Against Racist Attacks (a short-lived alliance between three of the major Bengali youth organisations in Tower Hamlets, all of which had started in 1976.) Some 4,000 people, black and white, took part in this march. But the following Sunday there were further violent incidents, many of the attacks by white racists taking place in side streets. However, during the whole period, many of the demonstrators against racial violence and other antiracists were themselves arrested: some 50 anti-racists and less than 10 National Front or British Movement supporters, were arrested. A detailed study of police tactics in this period was prepared by the Brick Lane Defence Committee, the Anti-Nazi League and local lawyers, and was later published by the local Trades Council. On July 7, David Lane, the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, paid his first visit to the area amidst considerable publicity and addressed a meeting at the Montefiore Centre.

On Sunday, August 20, there was a further march, organised by the Anti-Nazi League, to celebrate the departure – temporary as it turned out – of the National Front sellers from Brick Lane. This involved 5 ,000 people, mainly white. But the Asian community remained active, and one Asian journal observed in August:

"Brick Lane '78 is becoming the focus of attention as did Cable Street in the 30s and Notting Hill in the 50s for the same forces are ranged in confrontation. However, there is a distinct danger that the more sensational aspects of the current situation are being given undue coverage by the media while the more positive, though less dramatic, developments go unnoticed. The bare facts of assaults and killing of Asians in the East End by the National Front's bully boys are known; what is not being sufficiently stressed is the strong multi-racial response that these acts have evoked; in particular among the Bengali youth who have joined enthusiastically with their white friends in combating a menace which in its ultimate form will spell the death knell of a democratic Britain."[9]

In fact, during this period, the Asian community and other anti-racist groups had been actively involved in occupying the National Front selling site in Bethnal Green Road, an occupation which had been inspired by the comment by Chief Superintendent John Wallis at a public meeting of the Council of Citizens of Tower Hamlets that the only way for anti-racists to get rid of the National Front was for them to arrive earlier! When they followed his advice, they were removed by the police on the grounds that a breach of the peace was likely to occur.

On September 24, 1978, while 100,000 people took part in the Carnival Against the Nazis in Brockwell Park, Brixton, a large anti-racist demonstration was held in the East End to "defend Brick Lane" against the possibility that a National Front march might come close to the district. Some 2,000 anti-racists blocked the entrance to Brick Lane, although in fact the NF had gone via side streets to a meeting in Hoxton. During the course of the day, there was a good deal of criticism of the Anti-Nazi League who had organised the Brixton carnival. The Hackney and Tower Hamlets Defence Committee, while it did not explicitly attack the ANL, insisted that the defence of Brick Lane was the "top priority". In their bulletin, issued before the demonstration, the Committee noted:



The window of Mr Abdul Monan's grocery shop in Brick Lane following the skinhead attack on June 11. Mr Monan was knocked unconscious by a hail of rocks hurled through his shop. He lost two teeth and needed five stitches in his face.

"Far fewer racist attacks have taken place in Brick Lane over the last few months which the local people attribute not to the increased police pressure but to the active defense which is being carried out by black people and anti-racists."

Other groups were less kind to the ANL. One group accused them of "an organised betrayal of the fight against fascism". It was a confusing but critical day. An ANL spokesman commented that "the NF's feeble attempt to disrupt the carnival and invade Brick Lane was completely defeated". On the other hand, the purpose of the NF march was to announce the establishment of their new national headquarters in Great Eastern Street, Shoreditch, only half a mile away from the multi-racial community around Brick Lane. The headquarters was later to become the subject of a government inquiry after Hackney Council had refused planning permission. But the wider question of the role of the National Front and of organised racism in the Brick Lane struggles needs now to be examined.

4

THE ROLE OF ORGANISED RACISM

September 24, 1978: the National Front move their headquarters from Twickenham to Shoreditch alongside the Bengali community. Martin Webster addresses his followers.

THE move of the National Front headquarters from Teddington into Great Eastern Street, in the heart of the East End, in September 1978, and their continuous and carefully planned provocation throughout that troubled summer, were essential elements in building the racial tension and forming the context of racial attacks. Yet, as in the anti-Mosleyite clashes of the 1930s, it was mainly anti-racists who were arrested. More than 50 anti-racists were arrested in the Brick Lane area as they opposed the incitement of the National Front. In the autumn of 1978 the London Borough of Hackney wrote to the Commission for Racial Equality, asking that action be taken against the NF under the Race Relations Act. No action was taken, nor does the CRE emerge from the whole episode with much credit, as will be shown.

To understand the place of the National Front in the recent troubles in the East End, it is necessary to look back into earlier history. There has been a long tradition of anti-immigrant and racist polemic in the East End since the turn of the century, and particularly during the 1930s. The activities of Arnold White, Major Evans-Gordon and the British Brothers' League in the early years of the century have been well documented, and the similarities have been shown between that campaign against the Jews and recent anti-black propaganda. In the 1930s Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists concentrated its attack on the Jews in the East End, and the study of anti-semitism among working class residents of the area by J.H. Robb showed the central place played by Bethnal Green in the formation of anti-immigrant feeling and its organisation into action.[10] For Bethnal Green, adjacent to the Jewish ghetto in Whitechapel, was still a district of white and local-born residents, and the sense of being threatened by the alien presence to the South was easy to exploit and transform into active anti-Semitism. The Hoxton district, also white and with a very low mobility rate, was also a major recruiting ground for the fascist movement.

So during the 1930s many fascist and racist groups were active in precisely the same districts where they are active now. In the mid-30s the British Union of Fascists claimed 4,000 members in Bethnal Green, and in 1937 when the BUF contested Bethnal Green South-West and Shoreditch, they polled more than 3,000 in Bethnal Green. The recent resurgence of organised racism in the area therefore must be seen in the context of a long tradition.

In the period after the war there was a revival of Mosleyite activity. Then in the 1950s a new wave of anti-immigrant polemic in the East End centred around the decayed district at the west end of Cable Street, referred to earlier. The racist groups focused their attack on prostitution and bad housing, both of which they attributed to immigrants. On May 29, 1958, an East End

London branch of the National Labour Party – John Bean's movement which later merged with the White Defence League (Colin Jordan) into the British National Party (1960) – was formed at a pub in Cheshire Street, Bethnal Green, on the very spot where Martin Webster held his two Sunday meetings before the 1979 General Election. The BNP held regular meetings on this same spot and nearby locations in the Cheshire Street and Brick Lane district in the early 1960s, and their paper *Combat* was sold there and regularly featured East End issues.

As today, Bethnal Green, with its mainly white population, was the base for an attack on Whitechapel with its immigrant communities. "Stepney vice is a black problem" announced *Combat* in March 1961. "It has been left to the British National Party speakers at their regular Sunday meetings pitch in nearby Bethnal Green to denounce this blot on the face of East London."

The National Front was formed towards the end of 1966 out of three earlier bodies: the League of Empire Loyalists, the British National Party, and the Greater Britain Movement, itself a splinter group, led by John Tyndall, from Colin Jordan's National Socialist Movement. A. K. Chesterton of the League of Empire Loyalists became the first Chairman of the Front: he had been a member of the British Union of Fascists and had edited *Blackshirt*. The NF did not grow rapidly in the East End at first, and the appearance on the racial scene of Enoch Powell in 1968 to some extent deflected attention and support away from them for a time.

After 1972, however, they began to show increases. At the General Election of October 1974 the Front candidate in Hackney South and Shoreditch got 9.4 per cent of the poll, the highest in the whole of Britain, while in Bethnal Green and Bow the candidate got 7.6 per cent, also one of the top six ratios. On September 6, 1975, the Front held an anti-mugging march through the East End. Some 680 people took part. From then onwards their presence in the East End became more pronounced, although electorally they declined between the GLC elections of 1977 and the local elections of May 1978. Between 1976-78 one saw a marked increase in racist slogans, in NF "heavies" and an intensifying of activity in Brick Lane on Sundays, and in the gathering around the NF banner of a large group of alienated youth.

Of less importance in statistical terms, but locally more obnoxious and physically dangerous, was the British Movement, a more explicitly Nazi and anti-Semitic grouping. Formed in 1968, the BM is the successor to Jordan's National Socialist Movement, and its two main centres in Britain have been Merseyside and the East End. BM members have attacked the NF for being too liberal and insufficiently racist ("Don't be fooled by the Kosher Front!" was one leaflet). Its bulletin openly advertises Nazi songs and literature as well as American racist publications such as *White Power* and *Thunderbolt*. Its paper *British Patriot*, in January 1976, was advertising cassettes entitled "Send those niggers back" and William Joyce's "Germany calling", the Battle Songs of the Third Reich, and copies of *Mein Kampf*.

At this time the Hoxton and Bethnal Green areas were littered with British Movement stickers and slogans, including the one on the wall of Bethnal Green Police Station. At the time of writing (September 1980) some of these slogans are still present – on the wall of a pub, and on the wall of a Roman Catholic secondary school in Bethnal Green. There are many other examples throughout the area.

Again the para-military group Column 88 played its part in the total build-up of the 1978 scene. Several individuals, including the present writer, received death threats written in blood, from this group.

The atmosphere created by this cluster of really evil and Nazi-oriented groupings in the East End was therefore one of considerable tension, fear and violent hatred. In this atmosphere the National Front was able to exploit a situation of widespread disillusionment and frustration, and, in its campaign amongst the young, was able to attract some of the most disturbed and problematic teenagers in the East End, for whom it provided an identity for the first time. For many of these young people, vandalism had become the last available form of social action: the coming of the National Front and its satellites into this situation can be seen, at one level, as the expansion of vandalism into a political movement.

'East London Advertiser', Friday, June 16, 1978.

GREATER LONDON & ESSEX NEWSPAPERS LTD., FRIDAY, JUNE 16, 1978

'Ghetto homes' row

'I've been misunderstood' says homes chief

Hundreds of people were turned away from Tuesday night's packed and emotional meeting between GLC leaders and Spitalfields organisations.

The gates of the Montefiore Centre, bathed in the glare of TV lights, had to be locked as the meeting began.

Inside, over five hundred people, divided evenly between Asian and white representatives with a few West Indians, shouted and jeered as Cllr Jean Tatham, chairwoman of the GLC's Housing Management Committee, tried to explain her policy for Spitalfields.

Mrs. Tatham said that the controversial report had been completely misunderstood. She assured the meeting that no-one would be forced to move anywhere, and that no ghettoes would be deliberately created.

She went on to say that Bengali familes would be allocated flats on GLC estates among other ethnic groups including white families.

AREAS OF CHOICE

"We are talking about some 300 Bengali families spread over some 3,500 flats in areas of their choice."

There was a hostile reception for Labour GLC member Cllr Harry Kay, and Bethnal Green MP Ian Mikardo. The both called for withdrawal of the report. There was anger too at the failure of local councillors to attend the meeting.

Much of the meeting was taken up with criticism of post-war housing policies, which have failed to provide modern housing and social amenities for the area. The police were criticised for failing to control racial violence of the type which led to injury and destruction of property last Sunday in Brick Lane.

Mr. Michael Myers, of Spitalfields Frendz and Neighbours, chaired the meeting beneath a wall of posters carrying grim warnings of local feeling. "Police you better wake up, time is running out. Things might get out of control," said one. Another accused GLC leader Horace Cutler, Mrs. Tatham, and the British media of causing racial violence in East London.

The meeting ended with unanimous approval of three resolutions. Chicksand Community Action Group called for a withdrawal of the GLC report at the heart of recent controversy, and detailed discussions between community groups and the GLC on integration and housing policy.

Mrs. Tatham says that she will not withdraw the report, which she maintains, has been misunderstood.

Christchurch pastor, the Rev Eddie Stride, called for more responsible press coverage of sensitive issues, and an amendment demanded full press coverage of racial attacks, and a public inquiry into local police attitudes.

CALL FOR PROTECTION

The Bengali Welfare Association and the Bengali Youth Movement made a similar demand, rejecting official statements that the police force is undermanned, and calling for adequate protection of all residents in Spitalfields.

Despite moments of confusion and outbursts of fury, the meeting presented the GLC with a united cry for better housing, an end to discrimination and rejection of National Front activities.

After the meeting Stepney MP Peter Shore announced that he had received assurances from GLC leader Horace Cutler that no ethnically exclusive estates or areas would be created by the GLC, and that all tenants would have "a proper and real choice" over where they live.

5

THE 'GHETTO' CONTROVERSY

IN JUNE 1978, there occurred a con troversy which was closely related to the outbreak of violence on June 11. That violence occurred at the end of a week which saw tremendous media coverage of a GLC plan to set aside blocks of flats for the exclusive use of Bengalis. The wider background of this episode was the undisputed fact that immigrants from the New Commonwealth were under-represented in GLC housing. In 1971 they accounted for only 3.5 per cent of GLC tenancies although they formed 7.6 per cent of the London population. Of the tenants, the largest single group (13.7 per cent) was in pre-war, high density housing. In Tower Hamlets, New Commonwealth residents comprised 8.8 per cent of the total population, but they accounted for only 3.7 per cent of GLC tenancies – although in one Enumeration District the figure came to 23.3 per cent.

Following a Runnymede Trust study on race and council housing in London, the GLC, in November 1976, published an important study *Colour and the Allocation of GLC Housing*. This was the report of a social investigation of a random sample of households. It showed that non-white applicants were "disproportionately allocated to the oldest and most unpopular types of accommodation", and that "GLC allocations are maintaining and even reinforcing the pattern of immigrant disadvantage which is so characteristic a feature of the private housing market".[11] These two studies provide the essential background to the 1978 "ghetto" controversy.

On May 22, the Director of Housing of the GLC, Leonard Bennett, produced a report *Housing of Bengalis in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets*. The report began by stressing the fact that Spitalfields "represents an acceptable area to the Bengalis as it is the centre of the London clothing trade and has within it Asian shops, a mosque and a community centre". Of 3,270 households in Spitalfields at the 1971 Census, 780 (24 per cent) were from the Asian part of the the New Commonwealth. However, as a result of the imminent rehousing of squatters, many of them being Bengali families who had left GLC flats elsewhere in the Borough because of racial harrassment or attacks, and who had registered under the squatters' amnesty, as well as tenement clearances and modernisation, more than 300 dwellings were likely to be needed within the next year for Bengali families. The Director explained that the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) had given to the GLC a list of estates which it considered safe, and these were listed. The Director then suggested:

"that we might continue to meet the wishes of the Bengali community by earmarking blocks of flats or, indeed a whole estate if necessary, for their community, provided *the existing tenants wish to move away and could be given the necessary transfers."*

There would, of course be no compulsion. The Director ended his report with a formal request to the Committee that he should be authorised:

"to set aside a few blocks of flats in or near Spitalfields specifically for the occupation of people from Bangladesh . . . Such a step to be in the nature of an experiment to see whether a specific estate or area set aside for a particular community group achieves a desirable solution to a difficult social problem."

There was no reference to "ghettoes" and the word was not used at all.

On the first Sunday of June the storm broke with an article in the *Observer* (June 4 1978). "GLC Plans Ghetto for Bengalis", it proclaimed. The following day, the *Evening Standard* had a headline "Labour split over GLC ghettoes plan". The *Daily Telegraph*, in a typically unpleasant leader page article on June 6, said that ghettoes were "not an obviously bad thing" and that their creation should not be discouraged, for "there will be fewer cases of friction if races live separately. Admittedly there will be forays into those areas by hooligans of other races. But, alas, the harmonious, multi-racial Utopia cannot exist outside the minds of those who are striving so disastrously to bring it about." It was only a few days before a foray of hooligans occurred in Brick Lane. It occurred on the Sunday after a week of intensive Press coverage of the "ghetto" theme.

The "ghetto" controversy was important for another reason. It brought together groups of white residents in Tower Hamlets with the representatives of the Bengali community, and forged a new unity between various groups. The reaction of most of the Bengali groups to the plan was hostile. On June 6, a meeting was called by the Spitalfields Friends and Neighbours and the Chicksand Community Action Group was joined by representatives of the Spitalfields Bengali Action Group, the Bangladesh Youth Movement and the Bangladesh Youth Association. All the groups and individuals present opposed the idea of a "ghetto". A few days later a large meeting of the Bangladesh Welfare Association also advocated multi-racial housing. On June 13 the five groups who had met on the 6th called an open meeting at which Mrs Jean Tatham, the Chairperson of the GLC Housing Committee, was present. According to the *Evening News* (June 14), she had "refused to withdraw the plan." The same day, the *Guardian* headline was "Bengali 'ghetto' estates plan buried". Lindsay Mackie wrote:

"The proposed scheme to house Bengalis in the East End of London on segregated housing estates was finally buried last night when the Greater London Council committee chairman who approved the proposal said that she had been misunderstood and that Bengalis would be housed in mixed estates."

The same day as the meeting, June 13, 1978, Peter Shore, the MP for Stepney and Minister for the Environment, issued a statement in which he said that the GLC should "not confine their efforts to particular blocks or estates but should seek to meet individuals' wishes as far as possible . . . It would be wrong to earmark particular blocks or estates for the explicit occupation of particular ethnic minorities."

A letter sent by the five groups who had met on June 13 condemned the plan, claiming that it "would play into the hands of those who preach and use violence".[12] Throughout the controversy it would seem that only the *Daily Telegraph* and the National Front expressed any kind of support for the plan as described in the press. Martin Webster was quoted as saying that

a ghetto was "the best thing to do until such people can be humanely repatriated."[13]

Of particular interest was the response from the Bengali Housing Action Group, the group named in the Director of Housing's original report. It was in fact claimed that the GLC proposal was a response to the wishes and fears expressed by BHAG. In their statement *Asians and Housing: The Bengali Housing Action Group Statement* (June 1978), they referred to the GLC plan:

"We have been told that the GLC plan to segregate us on slum estates because 'it is a demand that comes from within the Bengali community'. It has been claimed that we, in the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) support this move. We do not."

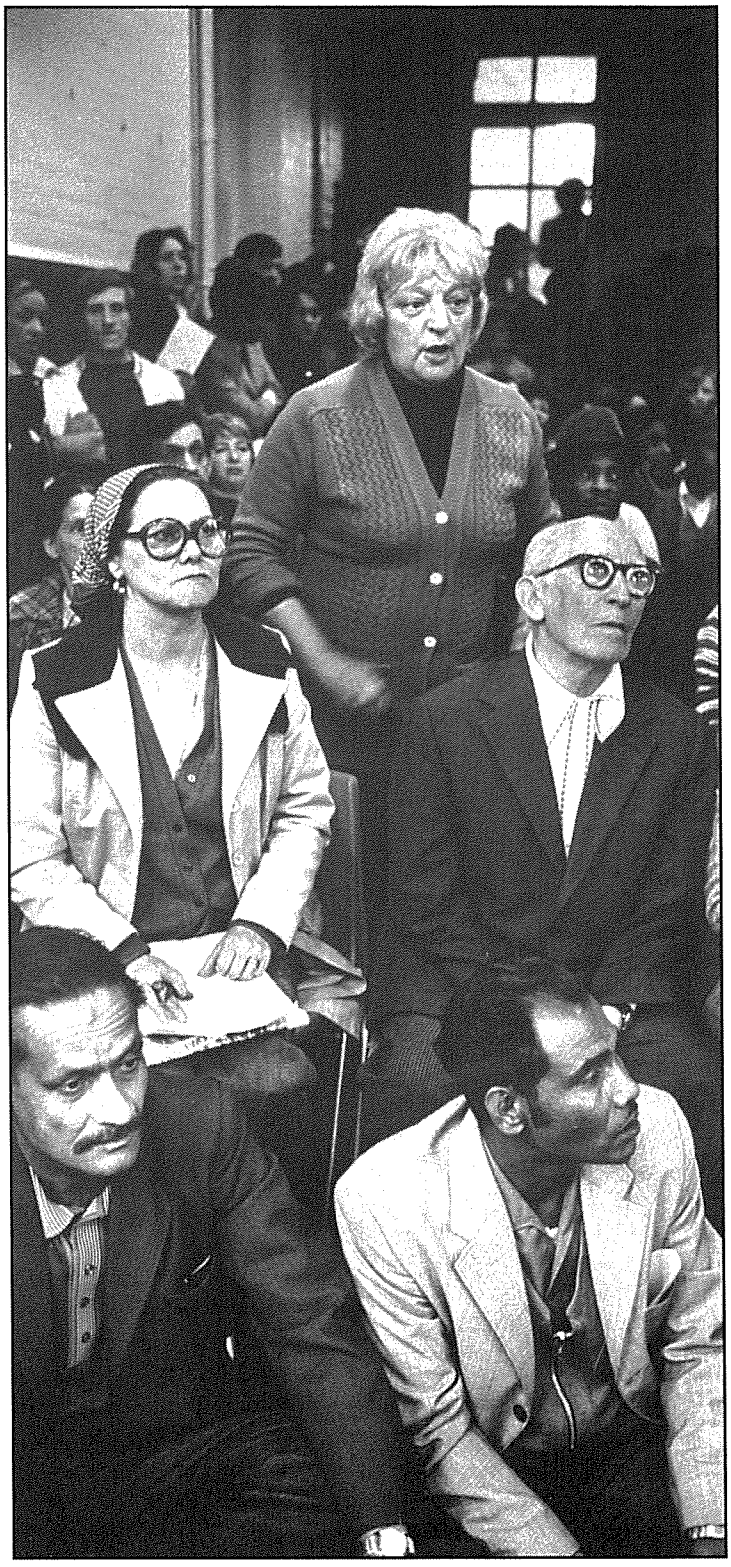
BHAG went on to say that what they had urged was the housing of Asians in safe areas where they would be less likely to be attacked. This request went back a number of years. In 1976, 300 Bengalis had marched, with BHAG, to Bethnal Green Town Hall. They had urged the GLC and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets first, to stop all eviction notices until there had been alternative offers, and secondly to rehouse the residents in the El area.

"At no stage did we ask for a 'ghetto'. Nor did we ask for segregated slum blocks' to be set aside for our members. If this is what the GLC propose, we intend to fight them in the same way that we have fought them before. We will not settle for segregated slums."

Towards the end of 1977, the GLC amnesty for squatters occurred, and 100 Asian families registered for rehousing with the help of BHAG. They asked to be offered accommodation in safe areas, that is parts of the El district. The GLC claimed that there were no empty flats there. In response to this, BHAG produced a list of 13 estates with empty flats. They did not ask that whole estates be set aside, but merely said that they would accept flats on these estates if they were offered. Only three out of the 13 were in Spitalfields, although the national Press "are saying that all of us want to live in Spitalfields. This is not the case." I have devoted considerable space to this "ghetto" controversy because it was directly related both to the violence of June 11 and also to the growing political consciousness and action within the Bengali groups. An Asian journal noted in July 1978:

"By rejecting outright and with one voice the proposed 'ghetto' solution to the housing and racial problems with which the Asian community is faced in East London, the 20,000 Bengalis have struck a blow for multi-racialism and multi-cultural community life in Tower Hamlets." [14]

The same journal noted that "the local host community, and particularly the white community workers, were amazed by the Bengali response" and that "young Bengalis were in the forefront of the anti-ghetto movement". In fact, one of the early responses to the publicity was a letter to Horace Cutler, the leader of the GLC from the Bangladesh Youth Movement. It expressed "extreme disquiet" about the proposals, and went on to "reject absolutely the kind of social engineering which could result in all-Asian estates or blocks. We are committed to the multi-racial, multi-cultural society of which we are part, and join with other local Bengali and white groups in protesting against dangerous separatist housing policies, which would ruin existing and developing relationships between the communities and isolate the Bengali community as a target of violence."[15] On June 20, the LC debated the scheme, and passed a motion reaffirming that the GLC housing stock would be allocated solely on the basis of housing need and not on a racially segregated basis.



June 13, 1978: public meeting at the Montefiore Centre. Residents of Spitalfields reject the GLC 'ghetto' housing proposals and voice their commitment to a multi-racial society.

THE CRE REPORT: Confusion and Worse

NOTE: Although many things have changed since this and the following section were written, I have felt it best to keep the text as it was. Readers should remember that it describes the situation at the end of the 1970s, not as it is today.

The cover of the CRE report.

IN APRIL 1979, the Commission for Racial Equality issued a report *Brick Lane and Beyond: An Inquiry into Racial Strife and Violence in Tower Hamlets*. The report, consisting of 38 pages with an additional 14 pages of notes and appendices, was described by a friendly observer of the Commission's activities, as "a careful analysis of the situation (perhaps too academic for those living in siege-like conditions)". On the contrary, the report is neither careful nor an academic analysis, but a careless, superficial and shoddy production, representing a wasted opportunity and contributing nothing to understanding. It is unfortunately necessary to devote some attention to this report although it received little serious attention. One reason for this is the fact that few people seem to have read it or even to know of its existence. There are not many copies around in the places where one might expect to find them, and many of the people who are most closely involved in the area under discussion have never heard of the document.

The report contains Brick Lane in its title, and the innocent reader might therefore be forgiven for thinking that it might contain some description of this important street and of the events which have brought it to public attention. In fact, however, we are not even told where Brick Lane is. One is reminded of the comment by the secretary of the Jame Mosque during the events of 1978: "We have to remind the gentlemen from the BBC that Brick Lane is a street, not a town." In the report, apart from the title, Brick Lane is mentioned on eight occasions: twice (pages 5 and 34) in reference to racial attacks, discussed in another report, and the remaining times in quotations from people interviewed (pp. 19, 19 and 30.) At no point are we told where Brick Lane is: there is no map of this, or indeed of any other, part of Tower Hamlets, and no attempt at even a simple description or examination of racial strife or violence there. Brick Lane could be on Mars, and this report is not about it.

Its failure to deal with the elementary geography of the area is only exceeded by its total failure to give attention to the growth of racial violence". The amount of space devoted to an examination of racial violence in the area is two half-pages (pp. 5 and 34) with a page of misleading diagrams (p.6). Both the text and the diagrams are in fact taken, and misinterpreted, from another report *Blood on the Streets* which has been mentioned earlier. It is the view of those responsible for this report that the CRE have misused it, quoted its data out of context, and produced invalid statistical conclusions. Apart from this brief reference to another report, with which the CRE had no connection and for which it provided no help, there is no treatment of the actual incidences of racial violence throughout the entire report.

Relying entirely on secondary sources, the report (pp.7-9) describes the earlier history of immigration in a very general and over-simplifled way. "Then came the Irish, in the middle part of the 19th Century, and the Jews between 1870 and 1914 . . ." (p.7). Of course, both the Irish and the Jewish immigrants were present in the area prior to the large waves of immigration in these periods. The account of racial feelings from the Huguenots to the Jews occupies two pages – more than the entire treatment of the racial violence at the present time – and at the end of the account we read:

"Such sentiments, expressed against Jews, have been expressed in more recent times against groups of West Indians and Asians in various cities in England in which they have settled." (p.9).

And with that one sentence the report leaves the question, and goes on to a general discussion of housing and social conditions which provides no help in understanding the background to racial problems. No more is said about the growth of organised racism, anti-semitism, fascism or racial violence.

The considerable space given to these general historical observations contrasts strangely with the utter silence of the report on other, more immediately relevant

factors. Nothing is said about the racial violence of the 1960s or of the "Paki-bashing' of 1970 referred to earlier. The parallels with the Notting Hill situation of 1958, when the Union Movement and other organised racist groups were evident and active, would have merited some study by the researchers, but instead they reminded us what the *Jewish Chronicle* said in 1888 (p.9). The well-documented racial violence of 1970 is something of which the report seems unaware: Louise London's study does not appear in the notes and references while very general background studies on London in the 16th Century, Victorian prejudice and the immigrants of 1880 to 1910 are considered worthy of inclusion.

The attitudes of the police in 1970 would have been worth at least a reference, but the report says nothing. Nor does it mention the essential background to the troubles of 1976. We are merely told that the National Front "and other extreme Right wing groups" – it does not say who they were – "increased their activities during 1977" (p.4). The crucial year 1976 is ignored, and on the next page the report goes on to say that "we have attempted to analyse the pattern of recorded attacks in terms of their geographical location, frequency and intensity." (p.5). But we are told that "these attacks cover the period January 1976 to September 1978" (p.5). The references and notes give no indication of the source of these recorded attacks. A note at the foot of the diagrams on p.6 however shows that the source is in fact *Blood on the Streets*. But that report merely listed "some attacks" (pp.70-82), deliberately avoided drawing any conclusions on frequency, location or intensity, made it plain that it was difficult to give exact figures of racist attacks (p.5), and stated that "our findings only skim the surface of an appalling catalogue of violent crime" and that "we would not, and indeed did not, attempt to carry out any quantitive survey" (p.6). Apart from this misuse of data, the CRE report ignores the developments of 1976 altogether.

Nor does 1977 receive any attention: there is no reference to the discussion of self-defence, or to the role of the Brick Lane Sunday market which was the actual occasion of the NF activity. In fact, there is no reference to the market in the entire report, and the researchers seem unaware of its existence. The activity in painting out racist slogans in 1977 is also ignored, as are all the events of 1977. Yet it was the following year which was crucial in the build-up of activity around Brick Lane, and this also receives no attention. Altab Ali's murder is ignored apart from one quotation where the person interviewed said that the demonstration after the murder was "totally ignored by the Press" (p.17) (In fact it received some national, and considerable local, coverage.) It was however, totally ignored by the CRE report.

The events of June 11 referred to above are also ignored, as are those of the following month from which their cover photograph is taken. It remains unexplained. Equally absent is any reference to the crucial "ghetto" controversy.

Yet in the Preface to the report we are told by Dr Crispin Cross, the Principal of the Research Department of the CRE, that "the Commission, concerned about these developments increased its liaison with various groups and organisations in the area and maintained a watching brief on events. In the summer of 1978, it launched an integrated programme of work with various organisations in the area, one component of which is the inquiry reported in the following pages" (p.l 1.) What this is supposed to mean remains a mystery to anyone working in the field of race relations in the East End. David Lane, the Chairman of the CRE, eventually visited Brick Lane on July 7, 1978, having made no visits in 1976 or 1977. He had not appeared when the local community had begun to plan a programme of civil disobedience against the violence and the inaction of the authorities.

In his speech at the Montefiore Centre, to an audience of 150 incredulous Bengalis, Mr Lane told this community under siege that they should put their trust in the police, the CRE and the local Community Relations Council (CCTH) as well as in the local council and the GLC – the very bodies which had so far failed to deal with their problems. The "integrated programme" of the CRE was certainly not evident.

The recent outbreaks of racial violence and the links with the activity of racist organisations were studied in some detail in the important report by the local Trades Council *Blood on the Streets* to which reference has already been made. There is almost no acknowledgement of this report in the CRE report which is meant, according to its subtitle, to deal with the same subject. However, the only data they provide on racial violence comes from the Trades Council report. When that report was being compiled, the CRE was in fact asked to cooperate and to help with funding, but they refused. They then produced their own report. which relied heavily on *Blood on the Streets* for its only hard evidence, and which, for the rest, contributed nothing to the study of racial strife and violence. The CRE have confused their readers by a series of ridiculous diagrams based on a misuse of the material in the Trades Council document. Having apparently not managed to obtain any direct evidence themselves from the police, the authorities, or the "field reports" from their own staff, they appear to have drawn unfounded and foolish geographical and statistical conclusions from the Trades Council report. So they tell us: "This analysis of the locality of these attacks suggests that they moved progressively closer to the Spitalfields area until they reached the centre (Brick Lane) where they became more frequent and intense." (p.5). This is methodologically absurd and dangerously misleading.

First, the Trades Council was very careful not to draw simplistic conclusions from the cases reported to them. The fact that more cases were reported from the Brick Lane area is hardly surprising since the largest number of Bengalis live in that area. Secondly, if one examines the racial attacks reported in the list, which occurred in 1975, they were directly related to the dates discussed above and which the CRE report ignored.

The largest number of attacks recorded by the Trades Council for each year are outside the Brick Lane area: these account for 12 out of 20 in 1976, 38 out of 48 in 1977, and 23 out of 40 in 1978. To suggest, as the CRE report seems to do, that attacks are "most frequent and intense" in Brick Lane makes nonsense of the fact that the Bengali community wishes to live in Brick Lane precisely because it is a safe area. Yet we are told by the CRE:

"Starting at the perimeter of the Borough, the attacks moved progressively closer to the Spitalfields area until they came near to the heart of the Bengali community where they became most frequent and intensive. This pattern coincides with the attempts made by many Bengalis to move towards the centre of their community in the Brick Lane area." (p.34).

In other words, the local Bengali people do not know what is good for them. The Brick Lane and West Stepney area where the majority of them want to live is, in fact, the most dangerous place for them, while the outlying areas where families are isolated and vulnerable, and where many Bengalis turn down housing offers, are actually havens of peace. The real danger is rather that people in authority in local housing might actually believe the nonsense that the CRE have churned out.

But if the CRE is ignorant of local geography, its ignorance of the activities of the National Front is perhaps even more striking. On December 20, 1978 a CRE circular (242/78) appeared. It was a report of a CRE "information trawl" carried out by Peter Laing, and it was sent to all Community Relations Officers, and to chairmen and secretaries of Community Relations Councils. It was meant to deal with the activities of the National Front and other racist organisations. But the "trawl', carried out after a summer when Brick Lane had become the most inflammable racial tinderbox in Britain, revealed that the CRE had no information about the organisation of the NF or of other racist groups in Tower Hamlets, or about their influence over young people, their activities, leaflets or propaganda. No information emerged from the "trawl" about racist attacks on persons or property in the area, no details about which ethnic minority group was singled out for harrassment, and no concrete data on the basis of which to advise the Government or indeed anyone else. In the actual report, there is virtually no reference to the National Front except in passing. Why are they not mentioned? Dr Cross points out that the inquiry was specifically aimed at, "and therefore limited to, establishing the processes and factors which were associated with the outburst of violence in the area of Tower Hamlets."

Indeed, he tells us that 'several otherwise *interesting* (my italics) developments in the area had to be excluded", and, as an example, he gives the tradition of resistance to fascism in the 1930s (p.l). So organised fascism past and present, while it is considered "interesting" is not studied, while totally irrelevant areas of general East London history prior to the 20th Century take up two and-a-half pages.

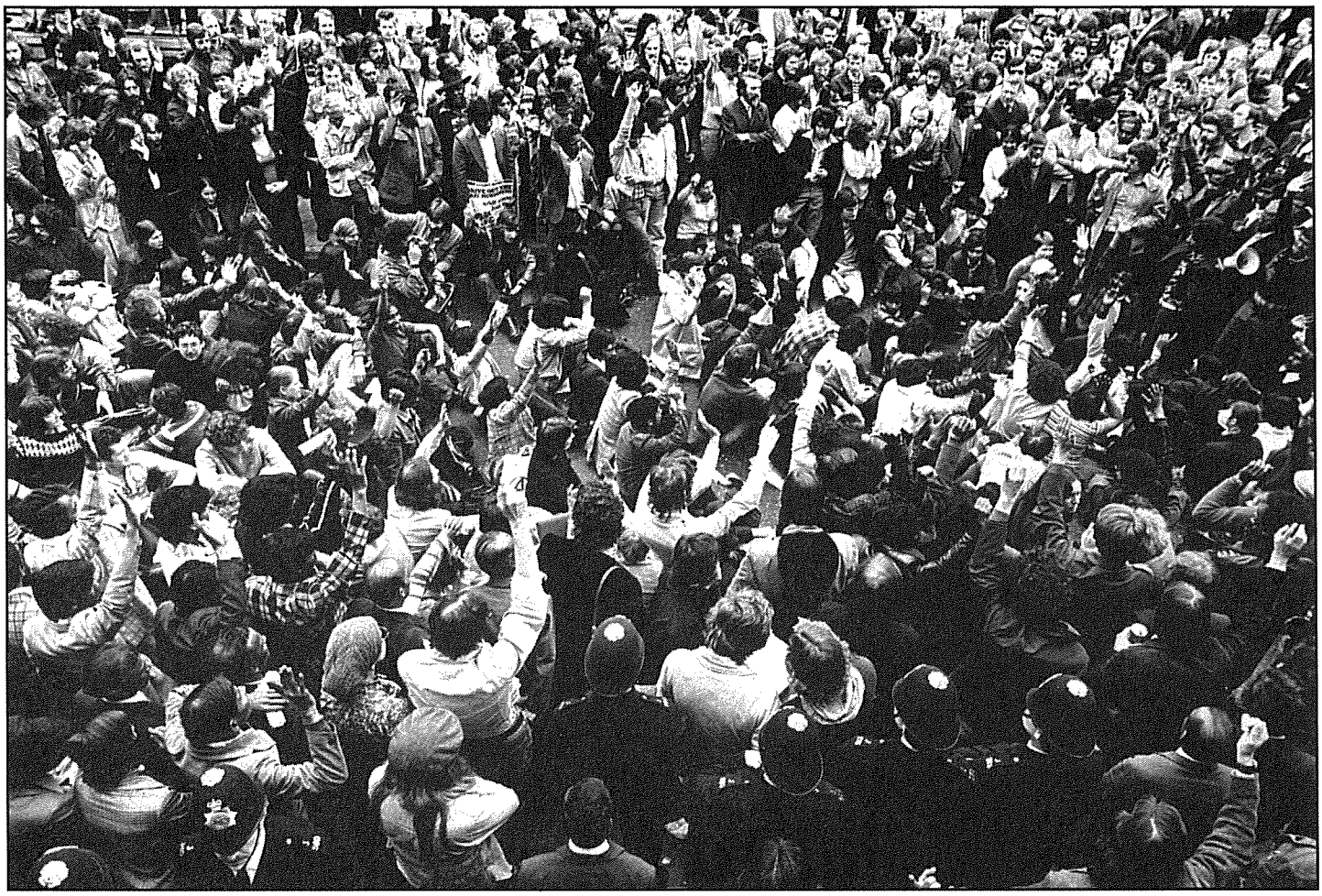
The Bangladesh community has, of course, been the group most affected by the Brick Lane troubles, but the CRE report says very little about them either. References to Bengalis and Bangladesh are scattered throughout the report, but we are told nothing about the size of growth of the Bengali population, or about its organisation and response to the racial violence. Again, this is a startling omission and adds to the list of major omissions in this bleak document. We learn nothing about the origins of the community in Brick Lane: it simply appears from nowhere. There is no attempt to examine the size of the community, a confusing area where one would have thought the CRE researchers might at least have something to offer. Nobody would know from the report that we are speaking of a community of between 10-15,000 people. We learn nothing about the response of the community to the recent events although this is one of the most significant facets of the period under discussion. The growth in welfare and social provision, and in educational activity, is hardly noticed. The major Bengali organisation in Tower Hamlets in the early 1979s, the Bangladesh Welfare Association, is hardly mentioned, nor is any attention paid to the more recent and significant groups of Bengali youth.

'Blood on the Streets', published by Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council. The CRE refused to help fund this report, although they later drew heavily upon it in their own report.

The report does, however, suggest that cooperation between local agencies is poor (p.23) and says that some Bengalis had said that "there was no agency they could approach if they needed advice and help with their problems" (p.31). No doubt some people, black and white, would say that. But in fact there is considerable and growing cooperation between some valued local agencies and groups within the Bengali community. The report ignores them all – the Bethnal Green Institute (undoubtedly the major educational provider for the adult Bengali cornmunity); Toc H, whose hostel Number Seven plays an important role in housing young Bengalis, and whose warden Peter East, received the MBE for this work in 1978; Avenues Unlimited, whose two pioneer youth workers, Caroline Adams and John Newbigin, became two of the most widely known and respected figures in the Bengali community; Tower Hamlets Law Centre with a growing reputation in the area; Tower Hamlets Trades Council which tackles racism through local trades unions; Christ Church Primary School, Brick Lane, which recently had only one non-Asian pupil; the fine work of the Montefiore Centre – all these important agencies are considered unworthy of attention in the report.

The massive social movement which has begun among the Bengali people is also ignored. In many respects this has been the most positive element to emerge from the troubles, and some attention is paid to it below. But it receives no attention in the CRE report, and as a result a totally misleading impression is given that little of value is happening in the area, that the black community are merely helpless victims, and that the authorities are doing their best to sort things out with the CRE.

So, as with local agencies, the significant growths within the Bengali community are ignored. The Bangladesh Youth Movement; the Bangladesh Youth Front; the Spitalfields Nari Samity (a women's group); the two mosques; the Spitalfields Bengali Multi-Racial Association – all these, and many others, receive no attention. The Kobi Nazrul Centre, not yet opened, receives a fleeting mention on p.25



July 16. 1978: thousands of anti-racists occupy the top of Brick Lane and prevent the National Front from selling their papers for the first time.

where it is (correctly) called "a community centre for Bengalis"; on p.28 the report says "there is no community centre for the Bengalis in the Brick Lane/ Spitalfields area". Perhaps this important development is passed over because the researchers remember that the CRE was unhelpful to the Kobi Nazrul plan when the lobbying began in 1974. But for whatever reason, most of the dynamic and exciting growths in the Bengali community are not mentioned. Nowhere does the reader find any account of the East End Community School, the excellent Bengali children's after-school project run by Anwara and Nural Hoque. There is no mention of the immigrant community health project developed by Bengali doctors in Toynbee Hall. The development of rich cultural activities in drama and music is not considered of importance, nor is the emergence of Bengali newspapers, training proposals, major rallies, and widespread demands on various issues. Many of the projects and developments which are ignored represent small initiatives, entirely voluntary, desperate for funds and for official blessing, and it is good that, since the report, some of them have received, or look as if they might receive, financial help from the CRE.

Again, apart from an innocent allegation that there were no black delegates on Tower Hamlets Trades Council – in fact, when the report was compiled there were four – and passing references to *Blood on the Streets* the CRE report ignores the considerable attempts of the trade union movement to combat racism in the East End. This omission is particularly odd since Bill Keys, the General Secretary of SOGAT and a Commissioner of the CRE, played a central role in co-ordinating opposition from the unions to the establishment of the National Front headquarters in Shoreditch, in launching the Joint Trade Union Committee on Racialism in East London, and in visiting the Brick Lane area at the height of the racist onslaught.

It is an open secret that Bill Keys and other trade union representatives on the CRE were very embarrassed at the appearance of the report. In fact, Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council (now Tower Hamlets Trades Council) earned national recognition for its efforts in this field, through its publications, its opposition to racism over the years, its role in the formation of the Defence Committee, and in many other ways. Its appeal to the TUC for help during the crisis period led to a major TUC initiative, the Joint Trade Union Committee on Racialism, but no details about this were included in the CRE report.

The purpose of this initiative was threefold. First, to secure effective Equal Opportunities Policies from all the major employers in the area, particularly in the public sector. Secondly, to encourage workers from the ethnic minorities to join appropriate trade unions through a massive recruitment drive, and to arrange training and other help to enable them to play a full part in the movement. Thirdly, a concerted effort to combat racialist ideas and practices where they exist within the unions. The efforts were concentrated first of all in the three East London boroughs of Hackney, Newham and Tower Hamlets, where leaflets and posters in six languages were issued, explaining the function and importance of trade unions. This propaganda has been used in door to door work and in approaches at the factory gate and in the workplace. A special film on trade unions is being prepared for use at Asian cinemas, concerts and social gatherings. Twenty of the key unions in the area are actively involved in the campaign, which if it is successful, will be used as a model

by the trade union movement in other parts of Britain.

Another startling omission in the CRE report is the story of the crucial "ghetto controversy" which was discussed above. To find no reference to this controversy in a study of "racial strife and violence" is incredible, particularly since the story had more national Press coverage than any other race relations development in the East End during 1978. None of the important history of this issue is referred to in the report, and the only reference to the controversy is a passing reference in the conclusions (p.33). The organisations involved, which were strengthened as a result of the controversy, are not mentioned at all.

It will be evident from what has been said that on all the major issues involved in racial strife and violence in Tower Hamlets, the CRE report is silent. It represents a wasted opportunity and has wider implications and lessons for the present debate on the effectiveness of the CRE nationally. Are we to see an equally useless report on "St Paul's and Beyond"? This report in fact is not a report on racial strife and violence at all. It is merely a random collection of extracts from interviews with unidentified people with no attempt at analysis or discrimination. However, while most crucial issues and groups are ignored, many of the statements which do appear are factually incorrect and some of the groups and people mentioned do not exist. Thus the report goes into some detail about people's "perceptions of the Bengali community", and this seems to include their "perception of the size of the coloured population". But it is silly to spend time asking how many Bengalis people think there are, while devoting no time to finding out how many Bengalis in fact there are, how they are organised, and what has been their response to the recent events. All we have on the actual size of the community under attack are a few brief references to the 1971 Census on p.11. On p.17 we are told of the local "anti-Asian campaign" as a possible cause of violence, but nothing is said about the role of national politicians, such as Enoch Powell or Margaret Thatcher, in making racial hatred respectable, or about the appearance of racist legislation from both the major parties in recent years.

The report gets into great confusion over the question of a Bengali-speaking health visitor. The facts are that a Bengali-speaking health visitor was appointed by the Spitalfields Project in 1975. She had worked for several years in Bangladesh but is not Bengali, and she is still working in the area. In 1978 another health visitor joined her: she also had worked in Bangladesh as a missionary and speaks excellent Bengali. Also in 1978 a Sylheti nurse was appointed to work in the field of health education. There were, at the time the report was compiled, five Bengali-speaking people working as health visitors or in the field of health education. Of course, the area of health care among Bengalis is an enormous one, but it is one of the areas where something positive has been attempted.

But what do we learn of this from the CRE report? First we are told on p.17 that the "Bengali health visitor" (she is not Bengali) has been successful. Page 15 refers to the Spitalfields Project and "its appointment of a Bengali health worker in the past" which "was a great success", but the Project "didn't have the money to carry on with this project". In fact, the Spitalfields Project served its proper function in persuading the local health service to assume responsibility. On p.27 someone is interviewed who says ". . . all our requests to get a Bengali-speaking health visitor have come up against a stonewall", and the report's respondents, we are told, emphasised the importance of appointing a Bengali-speaking health visitor" (p.27). This trivialising of an important area of work by three incorrect quotations is particularly disgraceful when it was quite easy for the CRE "researchers" to have checked the facts of the question.

Unfortunately, these are by no means the only factual errors. The Trades Council is confused with the "Church Council" (p.19), a simple blunder, which was pointed out to the CRE but ignored. The Montefiore Centre and Robert Montefiore School are confused to produce "Robert Montefiore Centre" (p.23). On p.24 we are told solemnly that "most respondents mentioned the names of Dan Jones, Patrick Kodikara, David Cheetham and Alan Sinclair". The first three persons are well known in the community, but Alan Sinclair is entirely fictitious, being apparently a conflation of Alan Hutchinson and Bill Blair of the Spitalfields Project. So now Alan Sinclair goes down in history as a fighter for racial justice in the East End, along with the semifictitious "Dave Aubrey" (p.19), presumably Dave Albury of the Anti-Nazi League. The CRE seems even confused about who its own members are, for "Mr Anowara Jahan" (cover) ironically the only Bengali member of the Commission, subsequently removed in the changes of 1980, is in fact a woman!

This report ends with a series of recommendations which exist in a vacuum and seem to be unrelated to the text. A meeting is suggested between the CRE and the Commissioner of Police, although there have been a number of such meetings. Other recommendations relate to housing and education, calling for yet more meetings and working among the very people who have been inactive in the past. The excellent work on the training needs of Bengalis by Patrick Duffy and Jafar Khan is not mentioned even though the scheme is funded by the CRE. The fifth recommendation is the work of a genius, and tells us: "The Commission should urge the Director of Social Services (LBTH) to look into the various ways in which his department might be better able to meet the specific and urgent needs of the local Bengali community" (p.37). No reference is made to the abysmal failure to implement Section 11 of the 1966 Local Government Act, and at a time when Tower Hamlets provides only two Bengali social workers, the Director is simply asked to "look into" various ways forward.

The CRE report has been scrutinised in detail because, while it is useless in every respect, it represents the only published response of the Commission for Racial Equality, a body set up to advise the Government on matters of race and racism. Many people assume that the Commission is well-informed and therefore pay attention to its publications, some of which are, in fact, of great value. Their study of Brick Lane is of no value whatsoever.

7

THE LOCAL CRC

THERE is one organisation which is mentioned at various points in the CRE report, and this is the local community relations council, the Council of Citizens of Tower Hamlets (CCTH), recently renamed the Tower Hamlets Council for Racial Equality (THCRE). The references to CCTH, however, are curious. The CRE claim that it was one of the two bodies with which the researchers worked closely in order to produce their report, yet it was the Chairman of CCTH who immediately condemned the report as an act of betrayal and as mere rhetoric, and who, with the Trades Council, took the unprecedented step of calling a national Press conference to spell out the objections in detail.

Like many other CRCs, the Tower Hamlets council has suffered from considerable internal problems for a very long time. However, for a short time, under the chairmanship of Joe Abrahams in 1978, the organisation began to obtain greater credibility in the community and began actively to combat racism. For the first time, many people became aware that there actually *was* a CRC in Tower Hamlets. This is recognised by the CRE in an internal memorandum of August 1979, prepared after Joe Abrahams had been deposed at the 1979 AGM. Here they point out that, while Tower Hamlets Borough Council recognised that its financial support for the local CRC was among the lowest for any London borough, they were not prepared to increase it unless "radical changes were made in the organisation". However, this memorandum suggests that the CRC should "be assisted to improve its effectiveness" and to increase its resources.

In the CRE report the first reference to the CCTH occurs on p.3 when the researchers claim to have relied on it in order to conduct their interviews. Later the report speaks of the presence of "the Chief Inspector of Community Relations" (a new post, unknown to the Metropolitan Police) on the CCTH executive (p.20) and to the role of CCTH in setting up the Hackney and Tower Hamlets Defence Committee (p.21). These references occur in interviews, where the alleged fear of Leftist infiltration and of "pressure groups" influencing CCTH is also mentioned (pp.2 1-22). With some understatement we are told that "there has been a level of distrust between the various agencies and the CCTH", and this quotation goes on to say that "very few people have given CCTH much credibility" (quotation on p.23). Another quotation even claims that there are some who use CCTH to recruit members for the Socialist Workers' Party, a group which has never been represented on CCTH or involved with its work (p.25). However, while most of the references to CCTH occur in quotes from unidentified people, the report itself does admit:

"The main organisation which was seen to have failed to respond to the needs of the Bengali community was the Council of Citizens of Tower Hamlets (CCTH)" (p.25).

It goes on:

"There was a general consensus that the Council of Citizens of Tower Hamlets, despite its failings in the past, had possibilities." (p.26).

And in the conclusions they add:

"A great deal of anxiety was expressed about the role played by local organisations in helping to promote racial equality. Much of this anxiety was expressed about the local Community Relations Council (CCTH) which in itself was thought (by respondents) to be weak and unresponsive to local needs, particularly those of the Bengali community It was generally felt by respondents that unless this body plays a stronger coordinating role in the future than it has played in the past, it would continue to lose public respect and support and be unable to make much of an impact on the local race relations scheme (sic)." (pp.33-34).

In spite of this, in the recommendations for action they advise that the CRE "should increase its level of financial support to CCTH" and that "a joint Working Party should be set up between the Commission and the CCTH to explore ways and means by which the latter's credibility with all sections of the community in Tower Hamlets can be increased . . ." (p.37).

The CCTH has been strongly criticised in recent years by numerous groups in the East End as well as by individuals involved in the area of community relations. Dissatisfaction has been expressed at the ineffectiveness of the organisation and its failure to combat racism in the borough. Many people have urged CCTH to become something more than a casework agency. In 1976 the Annual General Meeting of the CCTH overwhelmingly supported an open letter calling for a change of direction within CCTH. Among other things this letter said:

"The physical attacks on members of the Asian community, and fascist provocation, are again on the streets and in the media. People walk in fear because of their colour and background. The need for an effective organisation to pull together the different strands of our community and to stand against these divisive and evil forces has never been more urgent."

It pointed to the demonstration of Asian youth on June 12, 1976 and claimed that CCTH was "not in touch with the dynamic elements in the community" and "has lost most of its credibility in the community". It proposed a reorganisation of CCTH into working parties to tackle the major work of the council, and the building of a more democratic body in which the full-time staff would work more closely with the council and the executive. It pointed out that the Community Relations Commission, the predecessor of the CRE, had not felt able to intervene in the affairs of the CCTH in spite of requests, and urged that, unless there was a radical change, "no further public money should be invested in CCTH". Throughout this period, the Community Relations Commission was quite unhelpful.

A year later little progress had been made in reorganising the CCTH. Controversy about alleged irregularities in the election and questions about the competence and effectiveness of the officers were raised in the local Press in July 1977. A letter was sent to the CRE signed by a number of local active anti-racists, asking the CRE to intervene in the situation. In his reply of July 19, 1977 Leslie Scafe of

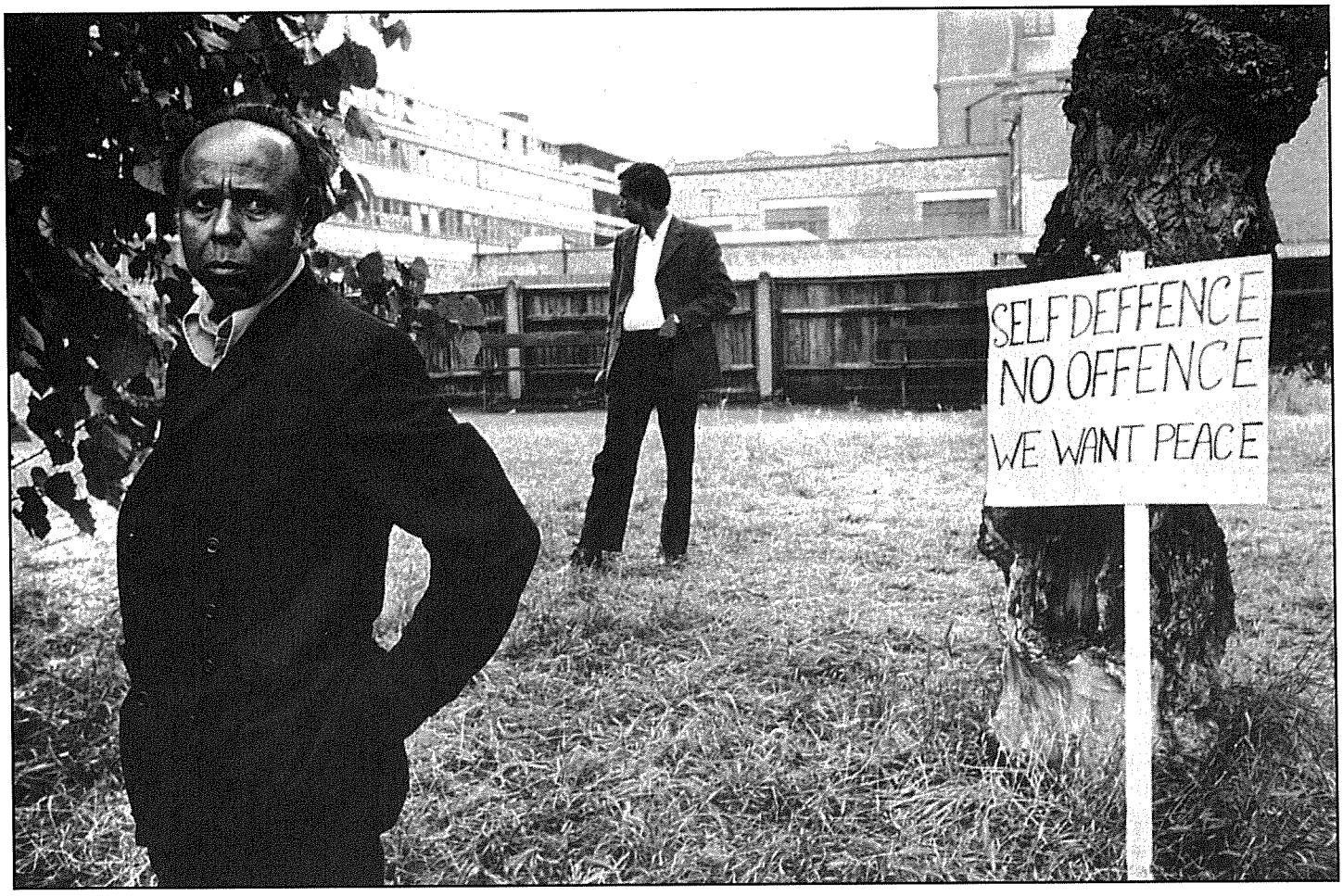
the CRE expressed "a great deal of concern" but said he could do nothing.

". . . the CCTH is an autonomous body and there is a limit to the intervention that we can make in its affairs. We are, however, not without some influence in the work of the CRC particularly as it is (along with many others) substantially grant-aided by us. It seems to us that it is the democratic right of the members of a CRC to exercise rights in getting such changes and improvements in the way the CRC conducts its business as they deem necessary."

However, with the election of a new chairman in 1978, the CCTH began to play a more central part in the anti-racist movement, and for a time the impetus to campaign for structural changes within the organisation subsided. The pressure of that summer, and the influence of personalities enabled people to forget for a time that the involvement of CCTH was in spite of, not because of, its paid staff. The CRE tended in its report and its general reaction to criticism to see the CCTH as if it were a totally independent body for which the CRE had no responsibility. The purpose of the proposed working party was the restoration of credibility in the CCTH: "to explore ways and means by which the latter's credibility . . . can be increased" (p.37). Nothing was said about the credibility of the CRE in Tower Hamlets, although many of those interviewed deserved their help in resolving the continuing difficulties of CCTH.

It was only after another nine months of correspondence and the intervention of the TUC that the CRE began to examine the problems of CCTH though nothing was done about the issues which the critics had raised. Today the CCTH remains on the edge of the anti-racist struggle, most of the inhabitants of the borough remain unaware of its existence, and large amounts of money from the CRE continue to be poured into it.

NOTE: Since I wrote this section, there have been major changes in the structure of the local community relations scene. Readers are invited to reflect on the lessons of this and later history.



A meeting at St. Mary's churchyard, Whitechapel, where Altab Ali was murdered.

8

THE BENGALI RESPONSE

THE commonly held white mythology of the oppressed victimised Asian, passive and fearful, helpless in face of vicious racist attacks, certainly did for a short time correspond with reality as far as some Asian people in Tower Hamlets were concerned. There was a sense of total isolation combined with a sense of terror. "The whole community is now stricken with fear" was one newspaper's comment after one of the racial incidents of 1978.[16] But it would be a serious mistake to see fear and despair as the dominant emotions motivating the Bengali community today. For out of the events of 1978 a new Asian radicalism has emerged, and it is this which is the most important feature of the history of the period.

July 17, 1978: Bengali criticism of police racism in the East End culminates in a mass sit down outside Bethnal Green police station.

However, the radicalising of the Bengali youth of Spitalfields goes back further than the events of 1978. It was early in 1974 that workers in the Brick Lane area became aware of a new initiative to be launched by the GLC, Inner London Education Authority and the local council to attack the "decay of Spitalfields". It was out of this initiative that there emerged the Spitalfields Project. Prior to this period, local councillors and offcials of the local authority had for the most part ignored the existence of the Bengali community, while most Bengalis had ignored local affairs, paying more attention to the events in Bangladesh. However, during the early part of 1974 new tenants' associations and groups were forming to tackle such issues as slum clearance, large scale parking on estates by outsiders, lack of playspaces, and so on. A number of separate groupings were brought together during the Borough Council election campaign. The leaders of the various groups, mainly white, came together into the Spitalfields Community Action Group (SCAG) in May 1974 to form a united front on commonly defined problems. Only a few Bengalis took part in SCAG in the early stages. But parallel developments were taking place in the Bengali community itself. The only active Bengali group, the Bengladesh Welfare Association, was torn apart by internal dissensions. Yet it was from among the youth that a new leadership was to come.

In June 1974, at a meeting in Toynbee Hall, 35 Bengalis set up the Spitalfields Bengali Action Group and began to lobby for a Bengali centre in the Brick Lane area. In spite of attacks in the Press, some progress was made, and the group established close relationships with SCAG. In April 1975 some property in Hanbury Street was found as a possible Bengali social centre, and the Spitalfields Project was asked to buy the property. The pressure for this centre, and the politicisation of the young Bengalis involved in the campaign to establish it, led to the creation of the Bangladesh Youth Movement. After many months of negotiation the property was purchased in April 1977, and in February 1978 work began on the site of what will become the Kobi Nazrul Centre.

It was the formation of the Racist Committee of Asians in East London (ARCAEL) in 1976 the aftermath of a series of racist attacks which was the second stage in the politicisation of the new Bengali leadership. Caroline Adams has written.

"ARCAEL and the activity around it transformed the consciousness of many young people and laid the foundations for crucial changes in the community's relationship with the world around as the police, the council, local whites, the Left learned to regard Bengalis in a new light. The Bengali community had come of age and could no longer be patronised or ignored, at least not without a comeback."[17]

Later in 1976, the Bengali Housing Action Group, referred to above, was formed, while in 1978 came the Bangladesh Youth Front, the other major youth grouping.

Today, the Bengali community is increasingly organised, with its own cultural activities, newspapers, religious and political structures. As a result of the events of 1978 closer links were forged with the indigenous white community groups. The radicalised Bengalis of the East End established contacts with other organised groups of Asian youth elsewhere in Britain – in Southall, Bradford, the Midlands and so on.

9

CONCLUSIONS (1980)

THE saga of Brick Lane is a small part of the larger history of neglect in Spitalfields. For nearly 200 years before the arrival of the Bengali community, the neighbourhood had been characterised by decay and despair. Here was the ghetto of the poverty-stricken Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. Today Brick Lane is not a ghetto in a racial sense. But it is a ghetto of the poor, of the marginalised, of the oppressed. No attempt to deal with racism alone will be adequate any more than will the attempt to evade racism. The attack on racism, whether in the form of organised racist groups or in the more pervasive form of our institutions and laws, must not be watered down. However, it is essential to widen the attack into one on the oppression of the urban poor. Here in Brick Lane the former rural poor of Sylhet have exposed and highlighted the problems of the urban poor in a most acute form.

The increasing tendency of both politicians and police (and some churchmen) to see the needs of the "deprived area" primarily in terms of law and order issues needs to be repudiated. The problems which manifest themselves at Southall, in Brick Lane, and at St Paul's in Bristol, in opposition to the police, have far deeper roots. Brick Lane is a community disfigured by unemployment, by racial discrimination by deprivation of resources, and by failure to use even existing legislative powers. Meanwhile the police continue to operate the infamous "Sus" law and the racist immigration rules. Insensitive to the attacks and criticisms of the black community, and naively insisting that their stance is "non-political", the police cannot or will not see why they are increasingly seen as a repressive and hostile force.

The role of the National Front and the British Movement in the area has been a threefold one. First, they have exploited the widely held feelings of powerlessness and inability to effect change. They have entered into a vacuum left by the collapse of a strong socialist movement based on vision and principle, and by the weakness of organised religion, Jewish and Christian. Secondly, they have built upon the small but important tradition of fascism which has survived in the Bethnal Green and Shoreditch areas since the days of Mosley. Thirdly, they have organised the existing race hatred, enabling many disturbed and alienated young people to see the Asian community as scapegoats and victims, and have given to these young people an identity similar to that of the Hitler Youth of the 1930s.

To claim, as some still do, that the organised racist groups played no significant role in the escalation of violence is very naive and contrary to the known facts and to common sense. At the same time, it is wrong to blame the racist groups for conditions which they did not create, or, by focusing exclusive attention on them, to deflect attention from such figures as Powell and Thatcher, or from the inconsistencies and betrayals of the Labour Party all of which have influenced public opinion to a much greater degree than the National Front and its allies.

Throughout the period described in this pamphlet, the government-financed agencies, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Council of Citizens of Tower Hamlets, have, for the most part, been unhelpful and irrelevant. For a time, under the newly elected leadership of 1978, members of the CCTH were active in the antiracist movement, though they received little support or comprehension from the full-time staff. The CRE has, during the last year, begun to provide much needed financial resources to some of the projects which have grown out of needs expressed during this period. The position of the CCTH, however, remains scandalous, and money continues to be poured into this body whose involvement in the anti-racist struggle remains a marginal one.

The emergence of a new Bengali radicalism is the most encouraging and most hopeful aspect of the whole period. A real process of conscientisation has occurred as the new community has begun to reach political consciousness and to relate its struggles and vision to those of other groups in society. The radicalisation of Asian youth in Brick Lane is part of a nationwide process. In Brick Lane itself, there are close parallels between the radicalising of the Bengali youth and the radical movements among the Jews at the turn of the century. The ghetto has produced not despair and resignation but anger and organised revolt. It is in this new spirit that the hope for the future lies.

Initially the immigrant was defenceless, readily identifable, always available as the easy target . . . Forced back on his own, he suffered the dreary ugliness of slum life, the unremitting struggle for bread, poised tenuously on the margin of existence. The ghetto dreamer consoled himself by the conviction that materially he could haul himself to the top. Only man-made obstacles stood in the way. For the majority such expectations proved chimerical: alienated from English workers more from design than choice, and subjected to the calumnies from co-religionists, as well as those mouthing ideals of universal brotherhood, they fell back on the realities voiced by Hillel "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now why?" The cry for bread and the right of life was barely heard in those grand palaces of worship where pedantic functionaries uttered stern warnings of the vengeance of the Lord against the evil Socialists who transgressed against "the laws of God and Man . . . given on Mount Sinai".

But God appeared either indifferent or incapable of meeting the demand for daily bread. Unrequited want decreed that the Socialists got a hearing too. They assumed the role of fighting advocates for their prejudice. From a changing pattern of radical elites there emerged a social movement of extraordinary dynamism, whose impact was to extend well beyond the frontiers of London's East End.

W. J. Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals 1875-1914* (London, Duckworth, 1975) p.93.

POSTSCRIPT 1994

by **Ayub Korom Ali**

KEN LEECH concludes that the ghetto has not produced despair and resignation, but anger and organised revolt. Indeed the events of 1978, particularly the murder of Altab Ali, marked a turning point in the political awakening of the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets. Faced with the barbarism of the National Front, a hitherto passive and peace-loving community quickly organised itself and emerged as an angry and defiant force against racial violence. In the forefront of this selforganised, grassroots resistance were young people drawn from all sections of the Bangladeshi community.

The challenge mounted by the youth did drive the NF out of Spitalfields. Brick Lane is now considered a "safe area" for Bangladeshis to live in. However, racial violence in the borough as a whole did not disappear. Far from it. What happened was that the racists were forced to move from the centre to the periphery. Today their targets are Poplar, Bow and the Isle of Dogs where the community support network is not as strong as in Spitalfields.

In recent years racial attacks have begun to re-emerge as a major problem for the Bangladeshi community. The general feeling is that things have deteriorated. There have been incidents of racial violence in areas which were once considered safe. In July 1989 a Bangladeshi family living in Flower and Dean Walk, a few hundred yards from Brick Lane, were the target of one of the most callous criminal attacks. Ismoth Ali was shot dead on the spot, and his nephew Waris Ali died a year later from the injuries sustained during the attack. The police denied any racial motives attached to these killings.

The youth organisations did respond to the incidents, and a march was organised in which three thousand people took part. But the response was short lived, and evaporated within weeks. Racial attacks are happening all the time, and are widely reported in the local press. But until recently these incidents have not provoked the same reaction from organised youth. Why was this? One explanation would be that the youth who fought in the 1970s were no longer community activists. Some of them, albeit a small proportion, have taken jobs in the local authority. Some have taken a keener interest in mainstream politics. This created a vacuum. Ideally this vacuum should have been filled with younger members, but this did not happen until 1993.

Yet the need for challenge to racial attacks has remained a crucial issue. In September 1993 Quddus Ali, a Bangladeshi teenager, was viciously attacked by a gang of white youths. The BNP won a by-election a week later. The signs are that the racists are again raising their ugly heads. Fortunately now there are some signs of optimism. In response to the attack on Quddus Ali, quite spontaneously a large number of the younger section of Bangladeshi youth have come forward to mount a challenge. This is a positive development which hopefully will go some way to fill the vacuum at grassroots level.

Physical violence was not the only concern of the 1978 movement. The demand for equal protection was intrinsically linked with the demand for equal rights. The organised challenge against racial violence brought youth leaders into contact with local public agencies which they realised were not meeting the needs of the Bangladeshi community. Institutional racism was seen as a barrier. So the youth organisations combined the struggle against physical attacks with activities to challenge institutional racism. The Federation of Bangladeshi Youth Organisations (FBYO) organised a series of conferences in the early 1980s to expose discriminatory practices within local public services. It was beginning to make some inroads. However, much of what was achieved from the 1978 struggle has been destroyed in recent years.

Institutional racism is intrinsically linked with racism on the street. Discrimination in institutions encourages and reinforces racism on the streets. The increase in racial violence and the gradual re-emergence of attacks in what were regarded as safe areas" are not coincidence, but are linked with wider political changes.

The political struggle that followed Altab Ali's murder was primarily a struggle for survival. Through this struggle the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets attempted to define its position in British society and asked for the same rights and protections that were afforded to other citizens. It is now fifteen years since Altab Ali's death, but the struggles and demands remain as urgent. It is encouraging to see that the recent upheaval has brought out a large number of Bangladeshi youth. The activism and tactics employed by them to challenge the attack on Quddus Ali have striking resemblance to those used by their predecessors in 1978. This is hardly surprising since the issues and the context have hardly changed. It is hoped that the youth who are fighting on the street today will be able to see the experience of 1978 as an important source of strength and inspiration.

Ayub Korom Ali was a founder member of the Federation of Bangladeshi Youth Organisations.

But although the Jews have freedom of entry, rights, etc, do the English like the Jews? The answer is No!

Go any Sabbath afternoon to Whitechapel and stand for a few moments in a doorway near where some English workers lounge with their pipes in their mouths, and you will hear, every time a Jew passes by, the loving call "Bloody Jew!" Is this a token of love?

At the same time in Brick Lane you will often see dolled up Jewish women, girls with golden rings on their fingers sitting outside in the street. Look in the eyes of the passing Englishmen and can't you discern the look – which is already indicative of a pogrom?

When you seek to rent a house you will find many who will ask you if you are a Jew. If you answer "Yes" you will not get the house. . .

If you look for a house and the agent informs you "Our Society does not undertake to find houses for Jews" What do you call that?

When the *Standard* talks of "Jews – and Christian gentlemen", when the *Pall Mall Gazette* prints the words "It is a swindle which passes for a Jew project"; when the *Referee* gets angry at a Jew who owns the winning horse . . .

Jews dwell on this. A pogrom in Brick Lane, in the crossroads of Commercial Road can be a more bloody and terrific affair than one in the Baltic.

***Poilishe Yidl*, No.11, October 3, 1884**

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