

'If we were starry-eyed, it was because our eyes shone with faith in the future'

They used to say we were a special breed: products of the steam-age semi-ghettoes of London, Manchester, Leeds, second or third generation immigrants, a radical upsurge picking up the pieces left by the collapsed East End Jewish Radicals, a current turned towards socialism and internationalism by the 1930s slump and the threat of fascism and war.

The clothing and furniture factories where most of us worked buzzed with militancy. The Russian revolution spurred us on to the hope, nay, the certainty, of world revolution in our time.

The Cheetham (North Manchester) branch of the Young Communist League, in its heyday in 1936, numbered 200, 90% of them Jews won by anti-fascist campaigning and the drive for aid to Spain. From that branch came most of the Manchester Jewish members of the British Battalion of the International Brigade; Monty Rosenfield, Ralph Cantor, Cyril Bowman, Jud Colman, Benny Goodman, Abie Starr, to name a few I remember.

Communism, for many, meant universalism, a rejection of what was seen as 'narrow nationalism', Jewish, British, any other. Some of us, though, held tight to our Jewishness; for us, Marxism was a means of understanding the social process, not of explaining the purpose of existence. Even those who subscribed to unbelief often did so, I think, a little uneasily.

Generally, though, we were a confident generation, not much given to internal probings or self-analysis. Criticism we shattered with our dialectical thunderbolts, and we had no doubts about our political wisdom. The coming revolution would sweep away all social problems, including anti-semitism, including fascism, the last gasp of capitalism.

Militancy, the kind of toughness which brought Jewish communists into the forefront of actions like Cable Street, pride in our working-class origins, these were the badges we wore. And yet, because the old always contains the seeds of the new, even then small doubts were stirring. There were doubts that exploded into revolt in 1956 when the Khrushchev revelations unleashed a torrent of questions and self-criticism. As from a centrifuge, demands for explanations flew in all directions, among them for one on the theory that anti-semitism was merely a capitalist conspiracy to split the workers.

Even before Khrushchev spoke, Jewish communists had been up in arms, the Slansky trials, the infamous 'doctors' plot' frame-up, the destruction of Soviet Jewish cultural life and the murder of its leading lights during the 'shvartse yorn' from 1948 to 1952, caused one after another of the Jewish Communist Party members to question, defy, fight and leave the Party. Of course, there were those who did not, and some among these were the most vociferous critics of Israel and of all Jews who would not agree with them. Among the rebels, Dr Hyman Levy, Chimen Abramsky, Arnold Posner, Issy Rennap, Dave Nesbitt, Joe Garman, Mick Davies, myself, to name a very few of the Jewish-conscious Jews of the CPGB.

It was Issy Rennap who led the small band of

Jewish CP members in Manchester who in 1969 formed the core of 'Progressives for Peace in the Middle East'. Issy died in 1972. I wrote his obituary in the New York 'Morgen Freiheit'. He should be remembered wherever politically progressive Jews gather together, for without him and his guidance the Jewish Socialists' Group would not, I think, exist quite as it does today.

We made a lot of mistakes in our youth. We made them, we learnt from them, and that is the best lesson we learned. And if we were starry-eyed, it was because our eyes shone

with faith in the future.

The light I see in the eyes of young people today has more in it, I think of the glare of desperation. Should we be surprised? The post-Holocaust generation is beset with problems we could not imagine: problems nuclear, environmental, of political betrayals and of strange ideologies opening up in a world we now see as infinitely more complex than we once considered possible.

And capitalism is not yet finished with.

Some of the blame must rest with those of my generation, all of my generation, not just the Communists, who saw things too simply, questioned too little, accepted too much. Not surprisingly, history let us down.

Of one thing, though, I am sure. The resources of reaction, though greater than we once imagined, are not boundless. The complexities of social change will be grasped sufficiently to ensure that the future society will be a socialist one, and a somewhat more human socialism, I think than the one we might have been ready to settle for in those days.

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● Aubrey Lewis died in 1987. This article was first printed in the JSG members' bulletin