

BUNDISM IN ENGLAND

Written histories of Jewish radicalism in England tend to concentrate initially on the Jewish anarchist movement and later on Jewish involvement in the Communist Party — eclipsing the history of the Bund in England. Benjamin Nadel redresses the balance with a historical sketch of Bundism in England.

As soon as the Bund was created in Tsarist Russia there also arose Bundist groups in the countries of emigration in Western Europe, as well as in Galicia and Bukovina, which at that time were part of Austria. The Bund's contact with England dates back to those days.

Already in the year 1900 there existed in London a Bund association *Der Veker* (The Monitor). Arkadi Kremer, one of the founders ("the father") of the Bund came to London and founded a printing shop for the Committee of the Bund outside Russia. In it they printed the leaflets, pamphlets and periodicals of the Bund which were then smuggled into Russia for distribution there. In this printing shop the journal *Poslednia Izvestia* (latest news) was printed, beginning with number 44, intended mainly for the Russian intelligentsia, and also several editions of the pamphlet *To the Jewish Intelligentsia*, in Russian. Arkadi himself did all the technical, administrative, typographical and distribution work necessary to publish the Bundist literature, and together with Vladimir Kossovski, was also the editor.

He lived in great poverty because the money that his wife Pati used to send him each month from Russia he gave to the party funds. Later when Pati came to London she created a commune for Arkadi, Kossovski and herself. Apart from all this work he was also active in the circle of sympathisers of the Bund and for a time was their leader. Arkadi and Kossovski were helped to a great extent by a Bundist from Vilna, Max Nadel, a worker in London, who, through self study, managed to pass an examination in dentistry and was practising as a surgeon-dentist. He was the author of a 20-page pamphlet in Yiddish entitled *Ratavet Ayere Tseyner* (Save Your Teeth) in which he explained the importance of the teeth for the whole organism and especially for the digestive organs. This pamphlet was issued in London in 1904.

In 1907 Nadel met Lenin in London.

Right away he realised what kind of a person Lenin was. In a conversation recorded in the book *Early blossom* by Leon Bernstein he thus described Lenin's autocratic nature: "He (Lenin) keeps all the reins of power in his hands ... he will bow to nobody ... should this man succeed in his desire to obtain power the whole world will be shaken." To that Bernstein adds: "When the world did become shaken after Lenin took power in Russia, I remembered many times this conversation with Nadel."

The London association of the Bund — *Veker* — conducted quite a number of campaigns. For instance, their members took part in a demonstration of 25,000 Jewish and English workers to protest against the pogrom in Kishinev; they celebrated the First of May and the anniversary of the Bund; they organised protests against the Russo-Japanese war; they collected money for the Bund's self-defence groups in Russia. In a house-to-house collection on 30 July 1905 they received over £106 from 325 donors. In June-July of the same year there began to appear in London a weekly, *Di Pogromen Blät* (The Pogrom Paper) issued by the Bund's self-defence committee.

Similar Bund groups sprung up in many towns away from London such as Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool. In a leaflet of the Bund group in Leeds at the time of the 1905 Russian Revolution, we read:

"Long live the truth. Good Luck to the workers. Workers of the world unite. The liberation of the workers will be brought only by the workers themselves. Full of energy and sincerity we bring you the joyful news that at 59 St Lukes Street in Leeds a union has been established whose aims and tactics are the same as the Jewish Labour Bund in Russia. Our aim is to save the Jewish workers here from the torments that fill

their lives! And also to give support to the Russian and Jewish workers in Russia in their noble struggle for their freedom. Our principles are those of international brotherhood and truth."

The plain language of this leaflet shows that it was written by an ordinary worker, one of many to come here with the emigration stream from Russia on their way to America. Of the thousands of Bundists who passed through England in the Tsarist times only small groups stopped in London and other towns in this country. The English law of 1905 against the immigration of foreigners was aimed mainly against the Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe.

Today the same story is being repeated with the difference that the immigration restrictions are of a racist character aimed against Black people. Notwithstanding the restrictions then, 120,000 Jews, half of them recent immigrants lived in east London, the area of Jewish concentration. Their main problems were the struggle for daily bread and equal rights for themselves in this country and for those left behind in Russia. The Jewish trade unions were powerful in those days and the Bund groups were active in fighting antisemitism in general and, in particular, in the workers' movements. They helped, materially, a great number of families in need, on the spot, and sent help to intending emigrants in Russia. For this purpose they established a special Workers' Fund under the Chair of Berl Rosner, a Bundist from Lodz who had become naturalised in 1909.

The association — *Veker* — managed to conduct a protest campaign against the infamous Beilis court case in Kiev in the years 1911-1913. During the years of the First World War, until 1917, Victor Alter, who came to England as a refugee from Belgium after it was invaded by the Germans, was active here. He worked in a factory on the

work bench and later as an engineer. He became a leading member of *Der Veker* and at the same time was also active in the British Socialist Party to which the Jewish Social Democratic Organisation formed largely with the participation of Bundists was linked.

After the First World War the Bundists concentrated in the Jewish Socialist Organisation which became a base for campaigns of aid for the Bund in Poland. In it were such comrades as Berl Rosner, Modecai Masover, Note Kaufman, Sam Leff and others. They were instrumental in establishing a Yiddish Secular School through the Workers' circle whose organisation had a membership close on 4,000 in the 1930s. They reacted sharply to the growth of Hitlerism and antisemitism in Poland. They celebrated in a most imposing manner the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Bund. At that time there came to London a number of delegates to various international congresses: Henryk Erlich, Victor Alter, Shlomo Mendelsohn, Gershon Tybert, Leibman Hirsh. They all met with local Bundists and helped to stimulate their activities.

During the Second World War there were a number of well known leaders and organisers of the Bund in Poland active in London, such as the martyr Szmul (Artur) Zygielbojm, delegate to the Polish National Council in exile — then in London; his successor in that same National Council, Dr Emmanuel Sherer, Lucjan Blit, Leon Oler, Moshe Lokiec and others. Although the war put an end to the Jewish socialist groups in the provinces in England, the Bundists were an exception. As soon as the war ended they activated a Bund group under the name Jewish Socialist Organisation in England in which, together with the pre-war immigrants, newly arrived immigrants such as Lucjan Blit, Moshe Lokiec, Leon Kucsynski, Majer Bogdanski and others were active. They have been in close contact with the Co-ordinating Committee of the Bund in New York and with other Bund organisations in Western Europe. They have worked also among the youth, held regular meetings and are continuing their Bund activities until the present time. In 1947 they also started to publish their own periodical, *Yiddishe Sotsialistishe Shtime* (Jewish Socialist

Voice) of which only two issues appeared.

Recently there arose in London an independent Jewish Socialist Group whose ideological position is very near to that of Bundism. This group is publishing their own journal, *Jewish Socialist*. The journal, which began in Spring 1985, expresses an interest for the Yiddish language and culture as well as for the past and present of the Jewish workers' movement in the widest sense, and especially so for the Bund. True, some articles reflect Trotskyist inclinations. The same inclinations are quite strong also in the Labour Party. The authors who themselves grew out from this environment, came independently to the position of Jewish socialism. This in itself is already a positive fact.

The discovery by the Jewish Socialist Group in England of Bundism as an alternative Jewish and socialist ideology tells quite a lot about the strength of our ideas and the indefatigable efforts of generations of Bundists in England. □
This article, slightly abridged, has been translated from Yiddish by Majer Bogdanski from the Bund's monthly journal Unser Tsayt No. 3, 1986.

The Jewish Socialists' Group's cultural and anti-racist project (JCARP) celebrated May Day this year with an event held in Toynbee Hall, Whitechapel, in London's East End. More than 50 people heard a talk by veteran trade unionist, Mick Mindel, on "Jewish workers' struggles in the East End in the 1930s" which emphasised particularly the area in which he and thousands of Jews worked — the tailoring trade. His talk was followed by a concert of Yiddish songs of work and struggle performed by Majer Bogdanski, Barry Davis, Chaim Neslen, Julia Bard and David Rosenberg.

Majer Bogdanski recalled a number of songs sung by the Bund on May Day parades in Poland in the 1930s. He finished his set with *Di Shvue* (the Bund's oath) and *The Internationale* (in Yiddish). Here we print the words of these two songs with phonetical English transliterations based on the Yiddish Institute (YIVO) standard.*

* ay as in my
ey as in they
kh as in Loch Ness

Di Shvue

Brider un shvester fun arbet un noyt
Ale vos|zaynen tseyzeyt un tseshpreyt
Tsuzamen! tsuzamen! di fon zi is greyt
Zi flatert fun tsorn fun blut is zi royt
Tsu shvue, tsu shvue oyf lebn un toyt!

Refrain:

Himl un erd vet unz hern
edes — di likhtike shtern
a shvue fun blut un fun trern!
Mir shvern! Mir shvern!

Mir shvern tsu kemfn far frayhayt un rekht
Mit ale tiranen un zeyere knekht
Mir shvern bazign di finstere makht
Oder mir heldnmüt faln in shlakht!

Refrain . . .

Mir shvern tsu hitn a blutike has
Tsu merder un roiber fun arbeter-klas
Dem Kayzer, di hersher, di kapitalistn —
Mir shvern zey ale farnikhtn, farvistn
Refrain . . .

Mir shvern tsu firn dem heylikn shtrayt
Biz vanen di velt vet nisht vern banayt
Keyn kaptsn, keyn nogid, kayn her un keyn shklaf!
Glaykh zoln vern ven shtark iz un shlaf!
Refrain . . .

Mir shvern a trayheyt on grenetsn tsum Bund
Nor er ken di shklafn bafrayn atsend
Zayn fon di royte iz hoykh un iz breyt
Mir shvern in trayheyt oyf lebn un toyt
Refrain . . .