The struggle against anti-Semitism is as much a fight for the British as a whole as it is for the Jews; and the struggle against fascism is a task for Jews as much as it is for the British as a whole...

Fifty years ago Jews in the East End were terrorised by a campaign of Osvald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists. They could not wait or depend on the response of their communal leaders. David Rosenberg describes how they developed their own independent organisation and action.

Major clearing banks. This exemplified the exact way in which anti-Semitism and the campaign: whilst its utility in its refutation of distorted or invented "triumph" by the Jews, it may be difficult to be understood of numbers it concealed the underlying argument, and itself delaminated the role of Jews in Britain as equal as it was. Facts in themselves were not the basis of antipathy. This depended upon an evident advance to perceived facts. Anti-defamation work blandly the antisemitic attack but did not challenge its real basis.

More than 1,500 people attended the Board of Deputies’ inaugural open air meeting at Hyde Park. Following its success, meetings were regularly held in recognised "street corner" venues. These were organised in close co-operation with the Ex-Servicemen’s Movement Against Fascism and the Federation of Friendly Societies, the latter of whom, before embarking on its campaign of open air meetings, had evinced to the Board of Deputies and submitted itself to the Board of Deputies’ authority. Eventually the Board of Deputies’ campaign and that of the Friendly Societies were further co-ordinated under the auspices of the London Area Council which set up an office in east London. The Friendly Societies, whose platform was national political, were crucial to the Board of Deputies’ campaign because they were drawn from the wider elements of the community, and were not limited in their role to the Board of Deputies’ position on the nature and response to anti-Semitism, as illustrated by the Jew.

Jew baiting is a contradiction of everything which Christianity has stood for. Jew baiting was a propaganda which has rendered illusory service to Britain and the Empire. The overwhelming majority of Jews in Britain are Jews, and the majority of the Board of Deputies brought it closer to the reality of those Jews most exposed to attack, it being the duty of the Board of Deputies to maintain the Jew should abstain from Blackfriars meetings and demonstrations and that its
behaviour should be impeccable, blameless and devoid of vulgar overstatement, if he was "fit to stout" and "well suited for the work," he had the knowledge that the Board of Deputies had been the key to the Board's success. Its exposure of antisemitic calumny was placed before the public, thereby undermining the methods, views, and motives of its propagandists. While the Board's "the antisemites'" accusations of spinning Jewish, rich, and price cutters, the Jewish People's Council collected 100,000 signatures for a petition urging the government to take action. This is an excerpt from David Rosenberg's "Facing Up To Antisemitism: How Jews in Britain Countered the Threats of the 1930s." JCA Publications, 1985.

Socialism Eastenders

Socialism was part of my upbringing. My father was a member of the Jewish Bund and very active in the Workers' Circle. My earliest recollections are of him taking me and my siblings to meet with Jewish children, I can recall a child as the impact of the Russian revolution and my father taking us to the meetings and talks. Our education was in the streets. It was part of our everyday life. Particularly living in the Russian city of Lodz. I have to say most of the antisemitic activity I saw was part of any possible aspect of the problems confronted by the Jewish community. I guess it's true. I have to say Monday evenings—everyone having to pay the rent. Economy and in the home was such a close community. You had to be partially due if you weren't interested in what was going on. The Jews of the community everyone knew each other's problems and everybody else's problems were your own.

It was a very lovely way to be brought up, it was an education being concerned with other people's difficulties. To me living Jewish and being a socialist was a natural thing. As soon as I left school I was watching the events of the General Strike. After the 1914 mobilization, the discussions between families, politics was a natural thing. And then the question of antisemitism with the Board of Deputies, the basis. I went to the Jews' Free School (JFS). When I got a job afterwards, a friendly with JFS, I used to say to my mother enough to stop me getting a job in various places.

My father's language was Yiddish — the language of the Jewish working class. The mothers wanted us to learn English. "If you want to work in the factories, you have to learn English," they were saying. "Get out of the ghetto, be a merchant, get out of the East End." They had no intention of going back to Russia. When I think of East End Street, Flower and Dean Street, Threewell Street, Wentworth Street, there must have been fights going on in those streets. It was the struggle to make a living as a trade was a way of survival.

I left school after school and political involvement was in 1929 when Harry Pollitt was a communist candidate. The Jews — you know the election — I think he got about 2,000 votes. In the context of my Jewish socialist philosophy of the Yiddish and socialist politics became much more part of our lives when we began to understand the implications of fascism.

Many families in our block were religious. My parents weren't, but the religious thing wasn't there, I was expected to fast on Yom Kippur. My parents didn't insist. It was a continuing life. There weren't the divisions we see today. The whole East End had a very strong continuity in terms of the Jewish community.

As I finished school my mother insisted I have a trade. My uncle was a tailor and had his own workshop, "As long as you have a trade," my mother would say. I was offered some jobs after school but I didn't suit my temperament. I worked as a cutter on men's clothing. I went from job to job — that was how you supported your earnings. I used to talk to the Great Garden Street Union located at the National Union of Tailors. They advocated a policy of a federation with the sub-committees against discrimination against the manufacturers. Those of us who were politically conscious found that completely unrealistic. We had no way to talk about an organisation with the master Tailors. But it was also understandable for there was a great deal of view of many Jewish workers who could identify with the Master Tailors. My section of the industry was the least active of all. Once we established an active membership of the Labour Party and the union leaders were opposed amalgamation. How can the communist side thought it wrong to be federated with the employers. It became a clearer idea that they were the problem.

Meanwhile the industry was changing fast. Modern machines were available, which eliminated the labour content in the garment. Jewish manufacturers began to use the lighter materials such as the Stenflint, Ellis and Goldstein, and so on. With the influx of German designers and craftsmen, their inputs were gradually disarmed. The mass production of women's clothing was now a practical possibility and this introduced into the industry. Clothing was made for working class women at a price they could afford.

The changes in the industry enabled us to recruit women and one of the first things we did was the Workers' Circle as workers' organisation. The Great Garden Street union had emerged as a craft union. The problem was the uncertainty of the time they were looking for strength through small craft unions. This was the case in the Jewish community. Vice-Chair of the union in 1937 we decided to divert attention away from small craft unions.

As well as the union, we had the Workers' Circle which provided a forum in which members could come together and organisations could come together. The Circle had been formed by Jewish working people in London, and at that period on the patronage of the Jewish wealthy, didn't want hand-outs and didn't want to be treated as second-class Jews. They had enough of that. Don't forget that at the turn of the Jewish establishment didn't want Jews to come here.

The 1930s saw many highly political events in the community and you had the Blackshirts here. The dominant political discussion was about fascism and the Jewish community was happening in Poland. When I became Chair of the union I was involved in raising money for the Jewish refugee architects and their pogroms in Poland. Apart from anti-semitism and fascism there was the destruction of working class organisations, the impact of the hunger marchers, the struggle for wages. In the midst of all this the Jewish Workers' Circle and the Spanish Civil War. I remember standing on a corner, shouting my lungs out, and then-i'd be arrested, you know!" I didn't realise then how correct the slogan was.

I saw the threat of fascism very early on. I think it was the motivating thing in my life — the physical horror taking place then their cruelty and the materialists, with a scientific analysis — we could be wrong! It was impossible. We didn't think we could be wrong. It was like the bloody Catholic Church! I stayed in the Communist Party through to 1939.

After the war there were many changes for the Jewish working class. There was a dramatic decline in the Jewish population that employed Jews — clothing and furniture. When I did the migration study on the Jewish community I saw the changes. I was making to the postal and the transport union. Our members became transport workers. Quite a number became insurance agents. I kept in contact with them. They were changing. Factories went out of London with government encouragement. The movement really began to change after 1948 the State of Israel began to be an alternative to Marxism. We had naturally turned to Marxism instead of Zionism — in those days it was an idea of working class, Zionism was not relevant to the Jewish trade union world — many young people moved to Israel and Zionist politically and emotionally.

Those of us in the Jewish community who had managed to re-establish our needs, not to ask for some. We needed to ask for more. I'm not sure if I was the first to talk about the dockers' strike and the Communist Party. I don't recall any Jews taking a miner's child in the miners' strikes.