To be Jews among socialists...

Jewish Socialist magazine was very much a product of the 1980s—a period when a whole range of new and radical initiatives burst upon the Anglo-Jewish scene, representing diverse interests and free from the stifling constraints of the official Jewish community and its power structures. But the group that launched the magazine has a longer history. David Rosenberg tells the story.

The first manifesto of the Jewish Socialists' Group (JSG) appeared in Tribune in March 1974. At that time it was a small group primarily based in Manchester. They had come together to break through the barriers of individuals long active in general political struggles throughout the Communist Party and the Jewish Party. They were increasingly concerned with two nagging issues which, in the short term at least, seemed to demand a collective response through a Jewish organisation.

These comrades had begun meeting in October 1973. The date is not accidental. It was immediately after the Yom Kippur War. Although most did not describe themselves as "Zionists", they were very concerned about positions increasingly taken by the Left on the Israeli-Arab conflict which seemed to express an uncritical pan-Arab nationalism that completely disregarded the national rights of the Israeli people and a secure future for Israeli Jews. This trend had, they perceived, become particularly blatant during the 73 War.

The other issue concerning the Jewish socialists was much closer to home—the rise of fascist groups. They sensed that the fascists were in the ascendency and understood that, alongside their anti-black racism, anti-semitism would fester prominently in the spread of fascist ideas and in their public activities. They sought urgently to alert and mobilise both the Left and the Jewish community against this incipient danger.

The group was very active in its first few years, propagandising, educating, and mobilising at street level. Events seemed to bear out their concern on both these central issues. By the late 1970s the National Front had a membership that had grown to 20,000 strong and was taking to the streets at every opportunity. The JSG was very active in the Anti-Nazi League formed in 1977 and, especially in the north of England at that time, anti-fascist mobilisations often featured JSG speakers. While the group was uniting with others to make a "no platform for fascists" policy effective in every sphere, this same tactic was being transposed in a clumsy, opportunistic and threatening way to the more abstract ideological debate around the Middle East conflict. This had disastrous consequences, on college campuses where many Jewish student societies found themselves banded or facing severe restrictions on their activities. JSG members on campus consistently opposed the banning of Jewish student societies, while arguing against Jewish chauvinist positions for a just peace settlement. The group was also busy combating a tendency among much of the Left of complacency about anti-semitism and of fear of compromising the purity of their anti-Zionist position.

In those first few years the group grew and changed considerably. It recruited a number of students who later formed the base of the London branch.

...and socialists among Jews

The wider world was changing too at dramatic pace. Thatcher swept to power in Britain playing the racist card. Begin's Likud came to power in Israel, and the established institutions of the Jewish community swung further right. The events of the late 1970s brought a good deal of political heartsearching on the Left, particularly in movements to activists within minority movements around issues of identity, community and strategies of autonomy.

Appropriate to these times, the group welcomed a number of new members who identified with a specifically Jewish socialist autonomous political tradition—the Bundist tradition rooted in Eastern Europe at the turn of the century, but a tradition that stressed the here and now, politically and geographically; committed to Jewish rights and cultural autonomy in the diaspora; rejecting the centrality of Israel

Five of the best

When Jewish Socialist came into existence, five years ago, it promised that it would at last give a voice to radical Jews. We have kept that promise: the Jewish Feminist conference 1987, Roach 1988, Israeli socialists, army refuseniks and peace activists, anti-racist Jews... have all found a voice in Jewish Socialist.

But we have achieved much more than that. We have opened these debates and tackled these hot potatoes out of a daft principle—wanting to be contrary or sensationalist—but as part of a tradition that has historically challenged bourgeois and reactionary orthodoxies and moralising within our community. We have consciously recognised our roots in the Jewish socialist tradition and have published articles by Bundist activists, Cable Street veterans, anti-Nazi writers working about struggles here, in Germany and in Eastern Europe in the 1930s. Through their reminiscences, the Jewish socialists who have written for us have bridged their experiences and struggles of yesterday with ours today.

Jewish Socialist has always looked towards at least two constituencies—primarily the socialist movement and the Jewish community, providing a unique voice in both. The last five years have thrown up various issues that have tested and in some cases drawn apparently sharp dividing lines between these two communities, such as the GLC experience, the poisonous injection of Farrakhanism into Black-Jewish relations and anti-racist politics, the heated controversy over Perdition. Jewish Socialist was the only Jewish journal to interview Ken Livingstone during his period as GLC leader. The magazine challenged Farrakhanism on socialist and anti-racist grounds, rather than Jewish chauvinist ones, and, on Perdition, what other journal could feature substantial contributions from both Jim Allen, the play's author, and David Cesarini, one of the play's main detractors, as well as providing its own independent critical comment on the claims made both by Zionists and anti-Zionists?

Jewish Socialist has provided a platform not just to engage with the Left but also with the "leaders" of the Jewish community. From the coverage of antisemitic attacks, through its cynical and totalitarian manipulations over the Jewish Quarterly affair, to this very issue where we reveal what is being done in the name of "community security", our magazine has courageously exposed and challenged those who would find it easier to claim to speak for us all if Jewish Socialist did not exist.

The British Jewish community is just starting to emerge from a very insular period when it seemed only events in Britain, the USA or Israel were worthy of note. Suddenly Jews in Eastern Europe are gaining recognition, yet, since issue 2 of Jewish Socialist, there have been in-depth articles on contemporary Jewish life in the USSR, Poland and Hungary. We are committed to internationalism in both Jewish and socialist spheres. We have also covered developments in France, Germany and South Africa.

Who says what surprises the next five years will hold? Whatever they are, you can be sure that Jewish Socialist will be there with its distinctive eye and voice.

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Jewish Socialist reader? Yes.

Jewish Socialists' Group member? No.

Celebrate the 5th anniversary of Jewish Socialist by joining the Jewish Socialists' Group and help to translate ideas into action.

Write to the Membership Secretary, JSG, BM 3725, London WC1N 3XX.

Congratulations and thanks to all who have served on the editorial committee over the last five glorious years!

JSG member

Message from a socialist slugger

If there are approximately 330,000 Jews in Britain and about 123,000 belong to a synagogue and 48,100 males and 26,000 females formally belong to the United Synagogue and 18,000 males and 10,500 females belong to Reform and Liberal synagogues and the ultra-orthodox coda belongs to the Board of Deputies (who serve for a lifetime) and fear of “corruption” by the Progressives (and there are possibly 6,000 Laborites, 2,100 Sephardim (underrepresented), 3,000 Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations members (unrepresented), and an unknown number of members of Orthodox and Hasidic Synagogues and no Federation women, and only the few female United Synagogue members (in their own right may vote for female representatives) and no canvassing is permitted for United Synagogue (US) elections and no hustings are held on policy in Federation or United Synagogues and not more than 10 of members participate in US synagogal elections — how representative or democratic is the Board of Deputies of British Jews, given the concentration in synagogal communities?