

OUR HISTORY IN THEIR HANDS

How will history record the Bund? Who will tell its story in good faith? These questions rose to the surface of a fascinating two-day conference on '100 years Bund' in Warsaw at the end of November. Academics from Europe (east and west), America, Australasia and Israel presented 30 papers on aspects of the Bund's history locating the Bund in its various contexts – the history of Eastern Europe, labour history and Jewish history. Some papers covered broad subjects such as 'Women in the Bund' or 'The Lodz organisation of the Bund'. Others were more specific, such as 'The Bund and the Polish Question 1897-1905' or 'The Polish Bund and the Fight Against Antisemitism in the 1930s'.

Before the conference began, delegates visited the graves of Bundist leaders in Warsaw's Jewish cemetery. In the opening session Marek Edelman – sole survivor of the ghetto uprising command group and current resident of Warsaw – spoke about the Bund's achievements. There was a short speech from Piotr Ikonowicz of the revived Polish Socialist Party (PPS) – a party that had collaborated with the Bund especially in the 1930s. Among the audience were a number of older Polish socialists who could recall their party's work alongside the Bund.

The level of information conveyed was impressive, especially as the Bund's own recording of its history has clear limitations. Its massively detailed five-volume *Geshikhte fun Bund* ends in the mid-1930s when the Bund was on the verge of its short-lived major breakthrough in Poland. It remains untranslated from the Yiddish. Exhibitions and videos that have been produced give a flavour of its politics and its social impact but cannot yield sufficient detail to enable a thorough analysis.

Information about the Bund is concentrated in a number of places. The largest collection is in the Jewish

Labour Movement archives of the YIVO institute in New York, which it inherited directly from the Bund. Valuable archive materials collected for a different purpose are in Moscow and are now being looked at by researchers. The Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw has a great deal of information on Jewish life in Poland including the inter-war period when the Bund was so prominent in Jewish and Polish life. And an increasing level of information is concentrated in

have a more rounded picture of their history. But things seem to be turning out differently. The danger is that the Bund's history will be incorporated into a new, purportedly more tolerant, Zionist historiography. Certainly the comments made during the conference by Bund researchers from Israel seemed to confirm this. One suggested that we should focus on the 'similarities' between the Bund and Zionism as 'modernising' movements in Jewish life, which 'mobilised among the

the end of the 1930s.

In a paper on the Bund's rhetoric and campaigning against antisemitism in the 1930s, a professor from Jerusalem University described the Bund's 'beautiful but ineffective' fight against antisemitism but noted how its rhetoric had strengthened its assault on Zionism in the Jewish community which helped it electorally.

Assuming the centrality of Israel in Jewish life, speakers referred to the importance of making the history of the Bund 'part of the Israeli collective memory'. The real challenge is to make it part of Jewish collective memory, and their formulation seems to privilege Israel's place in Jewish life. This flies in the face of the Bund's own philosophy which recognises the precedence of the world Jewish people over any single national community.

The most heated exchange, though, came in a discussion about Israel's attitude to Yiddish where despite the detailed testimony of a Bundist who has lived in Israel from the early years of the state, backed up by other speakers who listed discriminatory practices, the younger Israeli academics denied that any significant discrimination against Yiddish had taken place in the Jewish state.

Such views were challenged from the floor but, in the long run, it is vital that the Bund's history, philosophy and experience can be distilled within the framework of its own positive cultural and political values rather than be co-opted within an ever more adaptable Zionist ideology which ultimately remains as hostile to Bundism as it was a century ago.

David Rosenberg



A statue of the Polish nationalist Josef Pilsudski guards the Europejski Hotel which hosted the Bund conference

Israel which has a Bund Institute in Haifa. The Institute for Contemporary Jewry in Jerusalem also has a significant interest in Bund history.

The Warsaw conference resulted from the collaboration of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and the Israeli institutes and, to a lesser extent, the German Historical Institute based in Warsaw. It demonstrated that the leading role in researching the Bund is currently occupied by Israel, with left-Zionist researchers in the driving seat. The Bund Institute was set up with a legacy from a Bundist. Perhaps he thought it would enable younger Israelis to

same social strata', rather than emphasise ideological differences. In fact beyond the intelligentsia there were clear class differences in the strata wooed by these two opposing movements. Another Israeli academic said that we should attempt to remove ideology from the history and focus on the Bund as 'social reality'. In this way they can look at the history of a 'defeated' movement without acknowledging that its ideas were not defeated when the Nazis entered Poland. Indeed, compared with Zionism and religion, Bundism had massive support and popularity among the Jewish masses at