

Forget them not

Marek Edelman was a young activist in the Bund when the Nazis occupied Poland. A commander of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, he survived the War and returned to Warsaw where he still lives. He sent this message to the Bund celebrations in London

One hundred years ago, in a small room in Vilna, Arkady Kremer, Vladimir Kossowsky, John Mill, and 10 other people created the first Jewish political organisation: the Bund. Suddenly there came into being an organisation which declared that a Jew, a Chinese, a Pole are equal. This was the first organisation in Eastern Europe which declared that everyone has equal rights. For many years the Bund was the inspiration for the whole Jewish movement in Europe. It went through many vicissitudes; in Russia its fate was tragic; in Lithuania it disappeared; in Poland it became a mass movement, in the 1930s, leading 17 councilors into the Warsaw town council.

The Bund was a political force connected to the Polish socialist movement (PPS). Together they constituted the majority in the Warsaw town council. Even after the council was disbanded, its spirit remained in Warsaw. One needs to remind oneself who defended Warsaw from the Hitlerite invasion: apart from the retreating remnants of the Polish army it was the battalions of workers who numbered 14,000, 7,000 of them Jews, who were organised by the editors of the *Robotnik*.

There, on the barricades of Vola, Zolibor, Okhota, the first Bundists perished. That was where the fight began, not only for the freedom of the Jews: this was a struggle against Hitlerism for the freedom of the world. In those days, our people, Artur Zygielbojm, Abrasha Blum, M Nieldsialkowski, Puzak were still in Warsaw. They were the

people who defended Warsaw and ought to be remembered. It did not take very long – only 28 days.

The Germans occupied Warsaw and demanded 12 hostages; two of our comrades, Artur Zygielbojm and Esther Ivinska were among them. For several days they were forbidden to leave the town hall, and for each attack on a German one of them would pay with their life. We were a force and this is why the president of Warsaw took us as hostages. By sheer chance these hostages survived. When the Germans came to arrest them, President Starzynski locked Esther Ivinska in a large cupboard because she was the only woman amongst them; after 12 hours the caretaker let her out; that is how she survived. This was the beginning of the resistance of the Bund. The Bund does not exist as an organisation here now, but its spirit is still present in Warsaw. The present law in Poland about the national minorities originates in the programme of the Bund. Later the ghetto came into being: they locked all of us up; we were forbidden to go to school, to eat, to sing, to dance, to read books. We did all that we could during this tragic time in the ghetto, when people were starving, filthy, infested with lice, to help them to remain human beings. Every evening in the locked yards we arranged literary events. The readings were performed by actors, pupils of the Yiddish schools and Tsukunfists (members of the Bund youth movement). This activity was a form of resistance. It was forbidden to learn so behind the façade of a public kitchen we organised primary schools, secondary schools – a university.

The spirit of freedom and equality was always present in the ghetto. In the end, the ghetto was liquidated, but the first armed resistance, on a larger scale, in Poland took place in the Warsaw ghetto. What happened is like a picture concentrated in the pupil of an eye. It became clear that the idealists, inspirers and those who carried out the resistance were, in the first instance, the Bundists. Of course, there were many other people, but the inspiration came from there, from us. We had fierce opponents. Religious Jews said: 'No, one should not put up any resistance, because we are weak, and if we submit ourselves to the Germans, maybe we'll survive.' We created a fighting organisation when no one realised that there would be a mass extermination.

I will say no more now, but I must mention all these people because I don't know whether there will ever be such an occasion again to speak about those who were the nucleus of our activity. If any of you remember Abrasha Blum, and I know there are here some who do remember, he was the spirit and conscience of that movement. In the worst conditions he managed to organise help, literature and newspapers. Mauritz Orzech was another: he always correctly evaluated the international political situation. Berek Shnaidmil, Bernard Goldshtayn, Lozer Clog who was the trade union leader in the ghetto. Such was Sonia Novogrodzka who was





Left: Bundists in the Warsaw Ghetto.
Above: Marek Edelman

taken to the gas chambers from the place where she was feeding children. She organised the school system in the ghetto. She is held in the same esteem as Janush Korczak. And then the younger ones. Henio Rus – a man who lived for the movement; Miriam Shifman – a girl who organised the distribution of literature in the ghetto. And even younger ones who, with Pola Livshitz and Manya Katz, organised theatre productions for children, and sang Yiddish songs. All this took place illegally in the ghetto, in locked rooms.

I must mention another group of people: the ones who were the most courageous, who took the biggest risks. They were the ones who kept the contact between the ghettos. They strengthened us in our belief that we were not alone, that we were in contact with the Polish underground, that Poland was fighting fascism. This group included Michal Klepfisz, Zygmunt Friedrich, Vladka Peltel-Meed, Marisa Warman, Inka Sviderska. There were also our children educated by Sonia Novogrodzka, like Yurek Blones, Yanek Bylak, David Hochberg; Tobcia Davidovitch – a little girl – saved 50 people from death. Remaining alone she said. 'I am wounded. I don't want to be a burden. I'll stay behind.'

These were our people and this was the Warsaw ghetto. But it was not only in the Warsaw ghetto. The only *kehila* (Jewish community) which was completely administered by the Bund was in Piotrkow. On the first day, when they were told: 'You have to send a transport to the gas chambers,' they all ran away to Warsaw. This was Samsonovitch, Kelerman and several others. Please remember that the uprisings in Treblinka, Sobibor and in other concentration camps took place after the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto.

In 1943 the Jewish people in Poland perished. Their emissary, Zygielbojm, who represented the Bund and all the Jews in Poland called the world to defend the Jewish population, but achieved nothing. When the flames in the Warsaw ghetto began to die down he committed suicide as a sign of protest. Symbolically, this closes the epoch when the Bund in Eastern Europe was at the height of its success.

The test of time

Perec Zylberberg was the son of Bundist parents, a pupil at a Bund school and an active member of SKIF, the Bund children's movement. He looks back over his childhood in pre-War Poland and his youth in the anti-Nazi resistance

The period after the *Yomim Naroem* – the days between the New Year and the Day of Atonement – is always a period of reflection, and this was certainly the case on 16 November last year when a large gathering in London celebrated the 100th anniversary of the creation of the Bund in eastern Europe. It was an invigorating experience to be able to participate in the festivities and to talk to a

receptive crowd about my experiences as a child from a Bundist home in pre-War Poland, and as a youth involved in the anti-Nazi resistance in the Lodz ghetto.

My father was a veteran of the first uprising against the Czarist regime. He was a revolutionary who was proud to relate his activities in 1905. He manned the barricades in Lodz, set up by the Bund and the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) to hold off the Czarist forces. My mother was a quiet woman from the provinces, who also joined the Bund at a very young age.

As children we looked forward to May Day, the Bund anniversaries and other celebrations of proletarian achievements. We wanted to know about the activities of socialist movements all over the world. Proudly embracing Jewish culture and secular emancipation, we were involved, even as youngsters, in the fight to improve the situation for Jews and to promote Jewish culture in the language of the people, Yiddish.

I started in the Bundist kindergarten, Grosser Kinderheym. From there, I moved on to school at the Michalevitch Shule. Bronislaw Grosser and Beinsh Michalevitch were leaders of almost legendary fame. Then I joined the Socialist Children's Association, SKIF where the weekly get-togethers were the focus of my real Bundist education.

Political, social, educational, economic and cultural topics were analysed by helpers (helpers) who were only a few years older than the young Skifistn. We felt an affinity with the struggles of socialists elsewhere, and started to think of ourselves as part of a worldwide movement. We rejoiced at the successes of the Austrian and Spanish comrades. We suffered when reactionary regimes imposed totalitarian rule anywhere, including our own country Poland.

At our summer camps, which we called socialist youth republics, we named our tents, houses, paths and playing fields after famous socialists. I am still exhilarated when I think back to those days. At the end of our summer camp in 1939, we came back to Lodz to find it pervaded by an ominous atmosphere. It wasn't long before we were transformed into bewildered and disorientated youngsters.

We weren't allowed to do any normal things, like going to school or to work. It was as if night had taken over, shutting out any daylight.

The SKIF, alongside the *Tsukunft* (socialist youth), the Bund, the trade unions and the cultural and recreational groups like *Morgen stern* (sporting and gymnastic) and *Kultur lige* (cultural promotion) went underground. We concentrated on mutual help, keeping

our spirits up and working out means of active resistance against the occupiers.

The Bund ran kitchens and tea halls for those who didn't have any means of sustenance. Our main aim was to carry on against the overwhelming odds. Pretty soon we were confined to a ghetto. We lost contact with the outside world. Relying on our own meagre resources, we tried to help those who were sick and without work. The whole Bundist camp participated in the unequal struggle against the Nazis. We found out, through clandestine radios, what was going on in the world. It helped keep our spirits up in the tightening vice of ghetto life.

My young days in a socialist environment were a reservoir for my whole life, the inspiration for a lifelong commitment. We retained our socialist ideals despite the near total annihilation around us. We knew then that our ideas would stand the test of time – and they have.

