

90 years on

There were songs and poetry, laughter and tears at the London celebration of the 90th anniversary of the Jewish Workers' Bund. In a room packed with people of all generations, the audience sat rivetted as Majer Bogdanski, a lifelong Bundist whose political education came through the harsh conditions of pre-War Poland, told the story of the Bund. He graphically described the oppression faced by the Jewish workers in Russia. The 13 delegates at the first conference in October 1897 in Vilna represented existing organisations – the strike funds and self-education groups which had been set up in the 1870s. So the Bund was not created by those early activists; rather, it grew from the grass roots of the Jewish community and opened its doors to anyone who wanted to participate in the struggle for a better world.

"Tsarism oppressed everyone", said Majer, "but the Jews had a special oppression. They were confined to the Pale of Settlement, they were limited to certain trades; and they were also oppressed *inside* the community, where those with strong elbows exploited the others."



Barry Davis

The Bund had a huge impact as Jewish workers began to realise that they no longer had to be "the slaves of slaves, but could join together to fight for better conditions."

One of the Bund's first tasks was to organise self-defence groups against the pogroms. They also assumed from the very beginning that they would be part of the wider Russian socialist party which was to be set up the following year. In both 1905 and 1917 Jews and non-Jews fought together against the vicious Tsarist regime.

From 1919, when Poland became independent, until the outbreak of the Second World War, the Bund played a central role in the lives of Polish Jews, organising trades unions and leading the daily struggle against antisemitism. "Poland was reborn under the sign of antisemitism," said Majer. "Worst of all was the quiet, virulent antisemitism which meant Jews couldn't be employed in a wide variety of jobs."

One of the major achievements of the Polish Bund was the establishment of Jewish schools where all subjects were taught in Yiddish. With no government support, and serving the very poorest families, they still managed to maintain a system of secular Jewish education all over the country.

There was a youth organisation called *Tsukunft*, a children's organisation called SKIF, and a sports organisation called *Morgnshtern*, all of which were affiliated to international



Majer Bogdanski

organisations. The Bund, itself was part of the Socialist International from its early days.

Majer described his response to "that shameful Molotov-Ribbentrop pact", news of which came "like an earthquake" in the summer of 1939. There were extraordinary acts of bravery in the ghettos – like the man who smuggled himself out of the Warsaw ghetto to trail one of the trains to Treblinka, taking Jews to what they had been told was a work camp. He smuggled himself back in and told the truth about the death camp so the Bund could warn people not to go voluntarily to the assembly point for transportation.

Bundists who survived the War rebuilt the organisation in the different countries in which they found themselves. Today there are Bund organisations in the United States, Israel, Canada, Australia and South America where they work together with socialist parties and keep up their work on Jewish culture and language.

"If I was asked to say in two words what the Bund gave us," said Majer, "I'd say: dignity and hope."

Inspired, we moved on to the cultural part of the celebration. There were songs of work, struggle and hope, some familiar, some less well known. There was also poetry, read in Yiddish and English by Majer Bogdanski and Barry Davis, which breathed life into the bare facts of Jewish existence in Eastern Europe.

The high point though, was when everyone, young and old, socialist, communist and those who had never even seen the words before, sang the two songs which have traditionally ended meetings of the Bund: *Di Shvue*, the anthem of the Bund, and *The Internationale*, the anthem of socialists the world over, this time sung in Yiddish, the language of the Jewish Socialists of 90 years ago.

JULIA BARD



All generations celebrate the Bund's anniversary.

Photo: Jonathan Whitehall

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