

JEWISH SOCIALIST

is a quarterly magazine launched by the Jewish Socialists' Group in 1985 as a forum for radical ideas and opinions on issues directly affecting the Jewish community here and elsewhere and on questions vital to minorities and socialists everywhere.

Through this forum we aim to:

- ▶ highlight the clash of political, economic and cultural interests in our community;
- ▶ encourage the democratisation of all aspects of Jewish life and publicise and support all democratic forces in the Jewish community;
- ▶ highlight the struggle for equality for women and gays and lesbians within and beyond our community;
- ▶ promote views that link the interests of Jewish people to the interests of other national and cultural minorities and oppressed groups, locally, nationally and internationally, and to a common socialist future;
- ▶ counter myths about the 'shrinking', 'dying' and 'assimilating' diaspora by affirming the vitality of Jewish communities across the world;
- ▶ counter Zionist ideology, which subordinates the needs of diaspora Jews to the demands of Israeli state nationalism, and justifies exclusivist, discriminatory and repressive practices towards the Palestinian people;
- ▶ promote ideas and perspectives that offer a progressive solution to conflicts involving the Jewish people such as the Israel/Palestine conflict;
- ▶ expose and oppose fundamentalist ideas and religious coercion within and beyond our community;
- ▶ reclaim a 'people's history' of the Jews which connects our historical experience to the struggles of other working people and the oppressed;
- ▶ highlight the problems facing minorities in society and within progressive movements and make these concerns central to discussions of socialist strategy here and now;
- ▶ support and promote radical progressive cultural initiatives within and beyond the Jewish community;
- ▶ promote views which link the struggle to build socialism with the struggle for a healthy and sustainable environment;
- ▶ promote a socialism that is culturally pluralist and fully democratic both in its ends and means.

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The group works and campaigns with other organisations sharing some or all of our aims and always welcomes new members who support our political principles. All members receive a regular internal discussion bulletin, a frequent newsletter detailing meetings and events and can participate fully in our annual conference and in any aspect of the group's work.

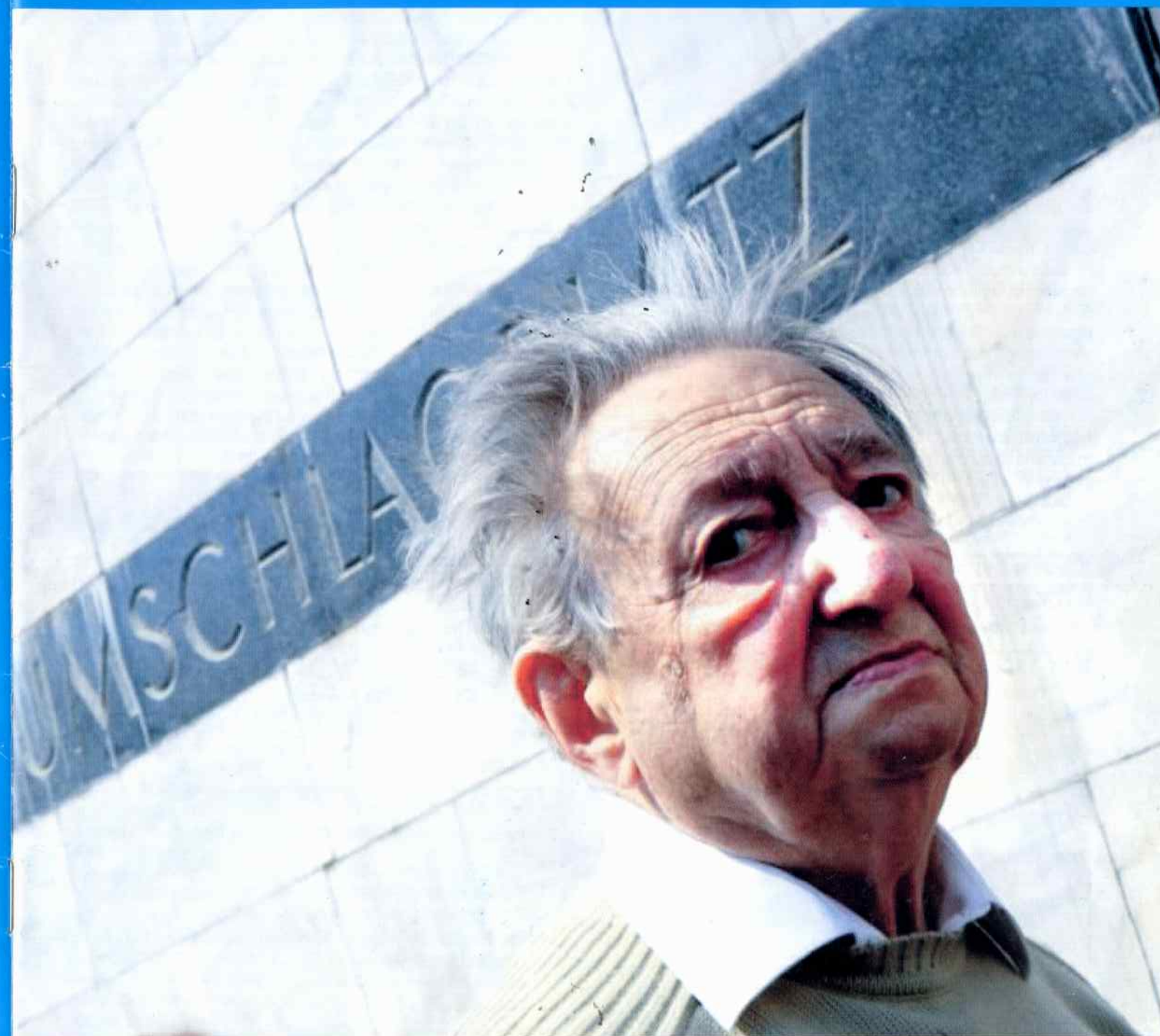
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JEWISH ★ SOCIALIST

THE MAGAZINE OF THE JEWISH SOCIALISTS' GROUP

No 59 Winter 2009-10 £2



VOICE OF THE GHETTO

Nablus visit ■ Palestinian art ■ East End Bengalis
Jewish women report ■ Soweto's Porgy and Bess

The Jewish encounter with Poland goes back 1,000 years. The country's earliest communities were boosted in 1343 when King Casimir provided refuge for and positively welcomed persecuted Jews who were being exiled from Western Europe. Poland was the cradle of immense Jewish cultural creativity, religious commentary, secular literature, music, theatre, art and cinema, yet many Jews look on it today purely as a Jewish graveyard and even then, as a graveyard where the Jewish skeletons sleep but antisemitism still stalks the land. Hitler did not grow up in Poland, but, so the argument goes, he chose it as the most suitable place to site the death camps in which the Jews would be industrially slaughtered.

A former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, who knew the Nazi ideology of dehumanisation well, yet had infamously compared Palestinians with grasshoppers, said that, in Poland, babies imbibed antisemitism with their mother's milk. No one can deny that there have been and no doubt still are virulent antisemites in Poland, that there are Poles who identify with the racists, fascists and reactionaries of the world.

But a recent event in a real Polish Jewish graveyard, which is reported in depth in this issue of *Jewish Socialist*, gives the lie to such a negative portrayal of the country as a whole, its history and relationship of Jews. It was a funeral at which Poland's communities were united in grief across religious and cultural divides for a man who not only symbolised, but positively acted for, unity and freedom for all the oppressed. He was Marek Edelman, the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and the one who had infuriated the Zionists by his stubborn insistence in continuing to live and fight for a harmonious future for all in the "Jewish graveyard" of post-war Poland, which was, after all, his homeland.

In a special section (pages 18-24) we pay tribute to him and what he believed in. We are privileged to be able to publish not only a

personal account of his funeral but also a memoir of Marek Edelman by another survivor of the ghetto who knew him before and after the war. His importance was recognised by the world's media. In newspapers, on TV, radio and the internet, countless obituaries recalled his heroism and humanity in the days after his death, with one dishonourable exception. Here in Britain, the largest circulation Jewish newspaper, the *Jewish Chronicle*, failed to report his death and took five long weeks to publish an obituary.

You might be forgiven for thinking that Poland was not high on their agenda at the time, that the pressing concerns of the Middle East or of Jewish communal issues in Britain or America were dominating their thoughts. But actually Poland was the issue of the moment in the *Jewish Chronicle*. A leading representative of very right wing forces in Poland's political life – Michal Kaminski – was a celebrated guest at the Conservative Party conference. Even the Board of Deputies of British Jews, usually so cautious to criticise high-up friends, demanded an explanation. Many figures at the centre of the Jewish community voiced their concern. Kaminski could rely on one friend, though, who gave him unstinting support, a newspaper editor no less. The same editor who had failed to register, for his readership, the passing of an anti-fascist and fighter for human rights internationally, who was being mourned by Jew and non-Jew in Poland and around the world.

We hope you find our tribute to Edelman worthy of him and the struggles he was part of, and we hope you find much else in this issue that inspires you to continue the fight that began in the Warsaw Ghetto, but has now moved to other arenas, for dignity and freedom for all.

Cover photo: Marek Edelman by the memorial for the "Umschlagplatz" where Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto were rounded up and deported to Treblinka / Dziennik.pl

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Eastern rising

History came to life in Toynbee Hall on Sunday 15th November when the East End venue, itself with a place in history, was packed out with 100 people, young and old, from various backgrounds, for the Jewish Socialists' Group day school, "Rising From the East", on class, community, culture and East End politics.

The day began with Janine Booth talking about the Jewish suffragette and socialist, Minnie Lansbury, one of the rebel Poplar councillors who went to jail in 1921 rather than impose the burden of economic crisis on the poor working class people who had elected them. This raised discussion of what significance "Poplarism" has in our own times.

Ben Gidley took us back to an earlier period, when the first Jewish socialists like Aaron Lieberman arrived in London from Russia, the thriving politics and culture in which poet Morris Winchevsky arose, and the growth of Jewish anarchism, with its most respected leader the non-Jew Rudolf Rocker. Ben showed how the Jewish workers' struggles were interwoven with

both the movement against autocracy and antisemitism in Russia and the battles of other workers, like the dockers, here.

David Mazower's illustrated talk on the Workers Circle, described how it spread from London's East End to other cities, and outlived its original aims of mutual help which predated the Welfare State, becoming a place where a generation of Jewish leftists could meet, argue their different ideas, organise for practical matters like stopping fascists, or just socialise.

From Rodrigo Lopez, a Marrano, Barts Hospital houseman and Queen's physician, who was hung, drawn and quartered in 1594, through to David Widgery, defender inter alia of Bethnal Green hospital and the NHS, John Eversley's wide-ranging tour of East End doctors and politics (not always of the Left) aroused our interest in learning more.

Any idea that the East End's links with Asia, especially Bengal, were comparatively recent was dispelled by Georgie Wemyss. She described how the



East India Company and, of course, East India Docks, brought the wealth of the subcontinent into Britain through this part of London, and with it the poor "Lascar" seafarers used in trade and in war, often dumped there to fend for themselves. Janine Booth said her union, the RMT, was fighting exploitation of foreign seafarers today, demanding that crews receive better treatment and equal pay. Bringing us right up to date, Ansar Ahmed Ullah spoke about

the changing politics of the East End Bengali community, the effect of the Bangladesh war, battles with British racism, encounters with Labour and left-wing politics, and the influence of Islamist politics in the mosque and among the alienated young. This brought discussion on how the Islamists gained influence, and on the failings which the Left needs to remedy.

Articles based on the talks given by Georgie Wemyss and Ansar Ahmed Ullah at the dayschool are published on pages 14-17.

Judge and Jewry

Internationally acclaimed South African jurist, Richard Goldstone, a longstanding friend of Israel, found himself the butt of "self-hater" jibes normally reserved for Jewish anti-Zionists after he published his detailed report on the Israeli invasion of Gaza that took place a year ago. Israeli politicians and prominent Jewish leaders made the accusation against Judge Goldstone, a lifelong Zionist and a Governor of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who is committed to bringing war criminals to justice without fear or favour.

This vilification of Goldstone, however, was condemned and countered in a public advert published in *The Times*, endorsed by six progressive Jewish

organisations, including the Jewish Socialists' Group, and signed by some 600 individuals including several rabbis.

The advert also regretted the British government's failure to endorse the Goldstone Report and its recommendations at the UN General Assembly, reminding Prime Minister Gordon Brown that "British Jews do not speak with one voice on this matter". It added: "We believe Israel cannot afford, nor should it wish, to exempt itself from the scrutiny of the international community on these matters. We consider that it is the attempt to do so, rather than the Goldstone Report, that is damaging Israel. We therefore urge you to endorse the Report at the next available opportunity."

Gaza remembered



Protests calling for an end to Israel's siege of Gaza, a year on from the invasion, took place in many cities. The Jewish Socialists' Group took part in a lively demonstration outside the Israeli embassy in London. On 2nd January, 3,000 demonstrators held a militant demonstration in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square, chanting in Hebrew, "Gaza do not despair / We shall put an end to the occupation!" and "Israel

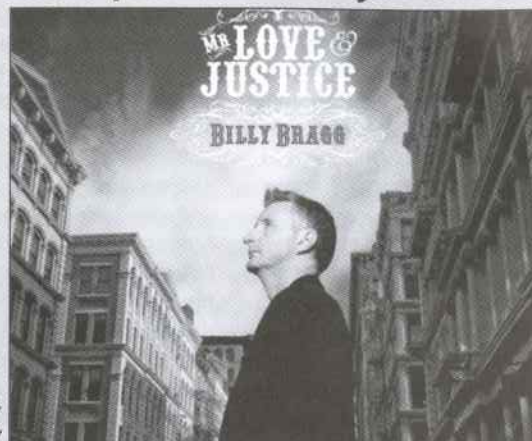
we are ashamed – the blockade is inhuman!" The protesters also condemned Egypt's leader, Hosni Mubarak, for the steel wall which was being built along Gaza's Rafah border. Among the speakers at the Tel Aviv rally was Nasser Raawi, the father of one of the Palestinian families evicted from their homes last year in Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah quarter, which were turned over to settlers.

WISE WORDS

BILLY BRAGG

"In our determination to defend democracy we must not destroy the safeguards that underpin our liberty. For who will pay the price if injustice such as this turns our protectors to oppressors, angry men to terrorists? O freedom what liberties are taken in thy name?"

Lyrics from "O Freedom", on Billy Bragg's most recent album, *Mr Love and Justice*. Billy Bragg has been combining folk, rock, punk and protest in his songs since the early 1980s.



THINKING TOGETHER^{IN} NABLUS

RALPH LEVINSON'S invitation to a Palestinian university brought an insight into a thoughtful, hospitable and, above all, reasonable society

Last October 2009 I was invited at short notice by the British Council to give a lecture at an educational conference at An-Najah university in Nablus. Googling An-Najah, the first thing I found was a right-wing Israeli website claiming they produce more terrorists than any other university in Palestine. Any university that met with this kind of opprobrium seemed a good place to go to me. The theme of my lecture was on "Thinking Together and Meaning Making: Socio-cultural discourses" – entirely appropriate, I thought, for a leftist diaspora Jew seeking to find grounds for fruitful conversation with Palestinians.

In fact, framed by portraits of Abbas and Arafat, "Talking Loud and Meaninglessly" might as well have been the theme. The start of a lecture seemed to be a signal for the audience to bring out their mobile phones and talk as loudly as they could, moving around the auditorium as they did so. I could understand why there hadn't been a major conference here for 20 years. Whether my interpreter did a good job or not, I have no idea. What I thought I'd talked about didn't seem to be what my audience thought I'd been talking about. "In any case," a woman said, "how can you talk about 'Thinking Together', standing up there on a rostrum? You should be down here with us." Exactly.



Perhaps the point had been made after all. I felt even better when a male Palestinian researcher was berated and then heckled by women students: his chief researcher is a woman so why was he claiming all the glory? As the conference went on, I grew more and more hopeful.

It wasn't the university – and it is a state of the art university – which impressed me so much. It was everyday life in Nablus. There were only two non-Palestinian delegates at the conference – an Australian and me. Fortunately, my Australian colleague knew Nablus well and seemingly the

entire *souq* and the Second Intifada. Everyone I met wanted to talk about "the situation". We met Mustafa, a young film-maker, in a café; he became our guide and mentor while I was there. Mustafa took us through the ancient *souq*, the old city of Shechem, to his ancient house, truly Abrahamic, in the centre of the *souq*. Mustafa had six brothers, three of whom had been in Israeli jails, and he showed us the marks where the bulldozers had tried to knock down his house during the Second Intifada. The brothers were incredibly hospitable, there was a steady flow of thick coffee and savouries and biscuits throughout the evening. One of the brothers, who was the only one who seemed in any way bitter, had been in the Al-Aqsa brigade; another had come out of an Israeli jail after three years.

Unemployment is a way of life for young people in Nablus and the rest of Palestine, and yet there was no sense of threat that often comes in areas of heavy unemployment. Nablus is about as safe a place as you can find, provided the Israeli army doesn't get you when they come in at night. Paradoxically, I felt a real vibrancy; there is relative peace, local commerce is gaining momentum, and the brothers all wanted to develop skills workshops. Mustafa, who was incredibly resourceful, had applied for funding from an Italian non-governmental organisation to make an audio-visual archive of the history of Nablus and to start a youth project.

When in jail the brothers were only allowed one visit during the year, but there was no talk of revenge or "driving Israel into the sea". Everyone I talked to – academics, unemployed young men, stallholders, drivers, café owners, hoteliers – only wanted one thing, namely to live under their own government in the whole of the West Bank and Gaza, not in bantustans, and for the occupation to end. It was difficult for me to comprehend how reasonable everyone was. Fawaz, a dignified gentle middle-aged linguist, told me over dinner how he had been stopped a few weeks before at an Israeli roadblock and ordered by a young woman soldier to strip in front of his students. Such ritual humiliations accompany occupation but Fawaz said, as if in exculpation, that was a rarity. The main problem was never knowing whether it was going to take you 40 minutes to drive from Ramallah to Nablus or three hours if the Israelis decided to be stoppy.

Despite the reasonableness which seemed to envelope me wherever I went, a word which Palestinians use a lot is "normalisation". With Israel, this is something Palestinians do not want. Liberal-leaning Israelis want academic partnerships with Palestinians but the Palestinians reject this for it would normalise an abnormal situation. Israeli academics can reach their offices and lectures without having to put up with road blocks and the occasional sadistic soldier. Israeli academics can travel abroad freely; Palestinians cannot fly out from Tel Aviv and have enormous problems getting past security at the Allenby Bridge to leave from Amman. Israeli academics can apply for European Union funding for research; not so Palestinians. Soldiers don't close down Israeli campuses; Israeli soldiers close down Palestinian campuses. Israeli graduates have reasonable prospects for employment; hardly any graduates from An-Najah will find employment when they graduate. Many of the students fund themselves by spying either for

the corrupt Abbas government or for the Israelis. Academics have to be very careful who they are talking to. Collaboration with Israeli academics isn't going to change all that, it will simply help to present a "normality" which does not exist. Palestinian academics have no problems with the UCU-proposed boycott, to them it is laughable that there is such a fuss about it. They have paid close attention to it; they cannot understand why there is such concern to maintain free flow of intellectual information for Israelis but the Israeli government doesn't show the same regard for Palestinian academics and students.

While I was in Nablus I heard only two anti-Jewish remarks, both from non-Palestinians. In response to one of these the President of the university stood up and said he would not hear any vilification of Jews. "Palestinians have no problem with Jews. Yigdal Goldstone is a Jew. B'tselem is a Jewish organisation. There are wonderful Jews and bad Jews. Same with Palestinians. Jews are not our problem. Israel is our problem."

On the morning of my departure Mustafa took me and my Australian friend to Sebestya, a Roman hilltop fort on the outskirts of Nablus. It is marvelously overgrown and stands in poignant isolation. Towards the east Mustafa pointed out a gleaming new road and an Israeli settlement of white limestone houses with red roofs. "Us Palestinians have always been occupied," he said ruefully. "Romans, Ottomans, British, Israelis. Even when we've had political responsibility we've shot ourselves in the foot. Perhaps over the generations we've developed the mentality of the colonised. We need to politicise but we don't know how, that's the sad things about suicide bombers, it's desperation."

When I returned to Ben Gurion airport I missed my witty, shrewd, ineffably reasonable and self-deprecatory Palestinian friends. Coming back to the brashness of the airport I felt I was in enemy territory. Even then, there was one more surprise. The British Council representative in East Jerusalem had warned me to avoid telling Israeli security I'd been to Nablus. But I

have the physical presence of Woody Allen and I lie badly. So I told them I'd been to Nablus. "Where's that?" said the young woman leafing through my passport. (The Palestinians really don't exist.) "Palestine," I said. I was taken over to the heavies where we had a civilised conversation. "What do they want?" the heavy asked me. "They want their own land and their own government. They don't love you but they can live next door." And then he thanked me and assisted me through security, even carried my rucksack for me and shook my hand. I returned to London bouncing with hope.



Opposite: An-Najah – a state of the art university. Below: The souq in Nablus. Photos: Bernard Chazelle, www.cs.princeton.edu/~chazelle/politics/wb08-travel.html

A LONG GESTATION

RUTH LUKOM
finds exciting
work as well as
some difficult
issues in the
beginnings of
the Palestine
Gallery

The Palestine Gallery is on Chalton Street, Kings Cross, London. It sits and waits. Architecturally it is designed and built. Ground floor and basement are neatly divided and purpose built. There is an exhibition/gallery space in the basement and small meeting rooms with books, computers and other resources. There is a café on the ground floor that greets you at the street entrance. At the back there is a conference room with a large screen for films or performance. There are already some powerful original pieces in place. There is John Nassari's interactive installation on lcd screens that allow you to walk through the refugee camps in South Lebanon and listen to the voices of the people who live there. Artist Peter Kennard has installed a huge silk-screened mural that is a historical narrative of Palestine from the Nakbha to the Intifada. The mural sweeps from floor to ceiling from basement to street level along a long walkway. Also installed are several pieces by diaspora Palestinians.

The gallery was poised to open in July 2008 but didn't. John Nassari, the original curator, left 6-8 weeks before it was due to open. The money had run out and he was exhausted and disillusioned.

The gallery began with a donation from someone in a Gulf state. It was obtained by the Palestine Refugee Council (PRC) whose members mostly made up the board of trustees. They approached John.

"They had this building but didn't have any sense of how to produce work within it. I was recommended as one who was an artist who had curated and who understood refugee issues. So I met them on site. At that point the building was strangely formulated. When I got in there the architects had already designed it, things were paid for but it looked like a shopping mall in Dubai. I sat down with the one other artistic person and said: 'How are we going to hang work? All the walls are plastic.' It was like a perfume shop with white shiny plastic, making hanging difficult. It was an awkward space as well. Putting work in was really complex. We began to make some internal changes then started curating."

But the trustees were not from the art world; they were committed to the PRC and felt an obligation to create the gallery in the way that the PRC had visualised. John says, "First, there were differences about how the space would work. This should have been clear from the beginning. Their vision was more of a museum, and I said right from the start that is not what I wanted to do. I think they expected maps and texts and ways in which audiences could learn about the Palestinian situation, culture, costumes and food. No more than a museum. We saw it as a contemporary arts centre. And that caused tensions in the curating of the work and its purpose. And alongside that was what seemed to be a collapse of the funding. We weren't able to pay for work to be distributed, shipped. This made it very difficult to open, so it was agreed to put it on hold until more funding was available."

A year later John has had time to reflect on his experience. "All galleries have issues around curating and internal politics – even the Tate Modern. The curators may want something but are not allowed to do it. But there seemed to be real fundamental and irreconcilable differences about what this place was going to do. Even towards the end, when I was showing some of the work of the best contemporary artists worldwide, some of my colleagues were saying 'Well, that's nice but... can we get them to change it... to what we're trying to say? Where are the maps?' And this is 18 months down the line."

November 2009 and the PRC are no longer involved. The current director is Yahya Zaloom, who worked with John at the beginning of the project. A Palestinian exile whose family originally came from near Hebron and who was raised in Amman, Yahya lives and studies in London. He is currently studying for his MA in Photography at the University of Westminster.

Yahya shares many of John's ideas about what the space is for and is also resistant to simply a museum-defined space, but his passion is revealing the Palestinian people and introducing them to the west. "The only thing you hear about Palestine in the media is humanitarian issues and conflicts and terrorism. We are offering something that is really needed at this time, which is a bridging between east and west using music, culture, art, film, food, poetry, fashion, design. These are interesting to everybody. And British artists will have the link with them and this will start to grow and work with us."

Yahya sees himself as a facilitator rather than someone who actively curates and thus controls what is and what isn't shown. "It is a platform for artists. We don't have restrictions on art – anyone can use the space. And we want it to be a space for the whole Palestinian diaspora. A place where people can bring issues to need to be discussed. Somewhere where Palestinians themselves ask, 'How do I communicate?' The gallery is a blank sheet, and people who want to show in the gallery can – whatever they want. It is very difficult for Palestinian artists to show in London. It is very expensive and there is no one to help them. Even if they find a space there is no one to show them what you need or how to organise a catalogue. So we are also here to help them."

How will Zaloom and the gallery confront difficult issues? "I won't interfere with the artist or the artwork. I am here to provide a platform. But if an artist shows me a piece of work I will judge it on whether it is appropriate to our space. Maybe I will pass it on to our advisory board – as yet not established."

Will they be artists? Zaloom says: "We hope to include artists, architects, writers, people from the theatre. And they are not Palestinians. They are British mostly. But I will not interfere with what kind of message they are giving, as long as it is according to the gallery's principles. We want to give artists creative freedom."

But openness and inclusiveness has its limits. The gallery operates and exhibits work within the following principles. The first recognises that the gallery is based in Britain must abide by its rules. "We will not show racist or antisemitic work. Secondly we don't want to show lies and propaganda and thirdly we will not deal with Israelis."

Suddenly a conversation about spaces for artists and freedom of expression becomes impassioned. "Why no Israelis?" I want to know. "I agree there are progressive Israelis. There are some Israelis who are more Palestinian than Palestinians. This is my policy. I can't deal with somebody who is holding the citizenship of our country and is killing and destroying everything. I don't talk about propaganda, I talk about facts. I see them as part of the decision to attack citizens and destroy houses. My own personal view – there shouldn't be two states – there should be one state. Palestine has been accommodating Jews and Arabs throughout history – no problem. This discrimination means that it is a racist state and you [Israelis] are a racist by holding this citizenship. This is the kind of thinking that I support in my life. There should be no harm in my behaviour towards you but I can say and think whatever I want."

These discussions about boycotts and excluding someone on the basis of their passport are not just a dinner party discussion or a banter on a blog for Zaloom. Sitting opposite him I see his eyes flash as he speaks. But my heart sinks. His policy is wrong

and he is retaliating against Israeli state oppression with an empty fist-waving gesture. But when we are angry and feel impotent – that is what we do. Sometime later, when I have processed his words, I realise that nothing would undermine loud flag-waving Israeli triumphalism more than the inclusion in his gallery of the increasing numbers of dissident Israeli artists/musicians and poets.

So when will the gallery open? "We don't know. Because it is a public space we are looking for the long-term funding. We can't open without two or three years' funding in place, because we have the programme. We can't open then close then open again. If we had the funding in place we could open in six months." Yahya is not optimistic about Arts Council funding. "They will not look at us until we are established..." At this stage, therefore, they are again approaching private donors. But he is optimistic and looks forward to the future of an established space with a unique identity.

Yahya doesn't want me to take any pictures of the gallery or the exhibits already in place. He wants the opening to have maximum impact and thinks advance publicity will steal its thunder.

As I leave a kitchen worker from a nearby restaurant having a quick fag break is standing outside the gallery and staring through the window into the empty café and bar. "What is this place?" he asks me. "It is an arts centre – a gallery space, a place for exhibitions and films and gatherings." "Nice. Very nice" he nods. "It will be" I say.

FROM ICONS TO EXILE

Kamal Boullata's new book is a rich and deep historical overview of Palestinian art practice. The book is divided into four themes: theme one charts Religious to Secular Iconography; theme two examines Memory and Resistance, and how the profound effect of displacement has shaped Palestinian art practice in exile; theme three, Art from the Ghetto, tracks the emergence of contemporary art practice, that has been shaped by discourses and genres in the field, and dominated by the topic of exile, memory, separation, home and return. The final theme The Evocation of Place, examines the author's own art practice, which reaches over four decades. This wonderful chapter combines autobiography, ethnography and historical analysis, which simultaneously blends Boullata's work as a scholar, writer and artist.

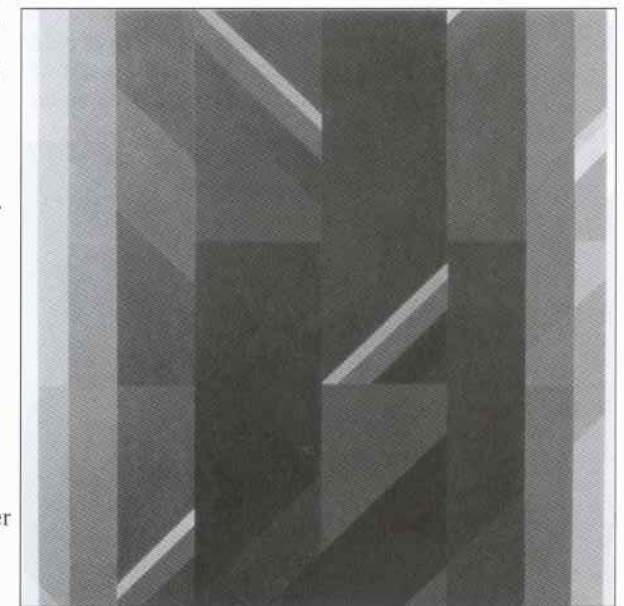
The book starts by charting the trajectory of Arab art from the late 17th century, from the tradition of Byzantine paintings by regional Arab painters, adherents of the Orthodox Church. The naturalisation of religious iconographic language borrowed from the Byzantine model is explored in the local context, with a rich range of examples, references and sources charting the Jerusalem School of icon painting and its productive practices from Arab iconographers.

Boullata's analysis is sophisticated throughout. He contextualises iconographic painting in relation to the way art production was influenced by

colonial, political and religious interests of the time. He highlights a complex social, political and religious context, which shapes art activities. The local Christian Arab Orthodox community at the time was losing its membership to other religious denominations. He shows us how

various branches of the Catholic and Protestant churches, established by different missionaries, all influenced art practice.

Boullata looks at a range of art mediums, from the emergence of photography at the beginning of the 20th century, to the radical Arts and Crafts movements in Britain and Europe that was translated in the local context in Palestine. He takes us across a range of historical and political periods which shape cultural productions, but none more significant than the events of 1948 when, within a matter of months, close to 800,000 Palestinians were uprooted and expelled from their ancestral



Kamal Boullata: Homage to Abd-al-Rahman al-Dakhil, 1994. Acrylic on Canvas, 120x120 cm

**PALESTINIAN
ART, FROM
1850 TO THE
PRESENT**
Kamal Boullata
Saqi Books, £25

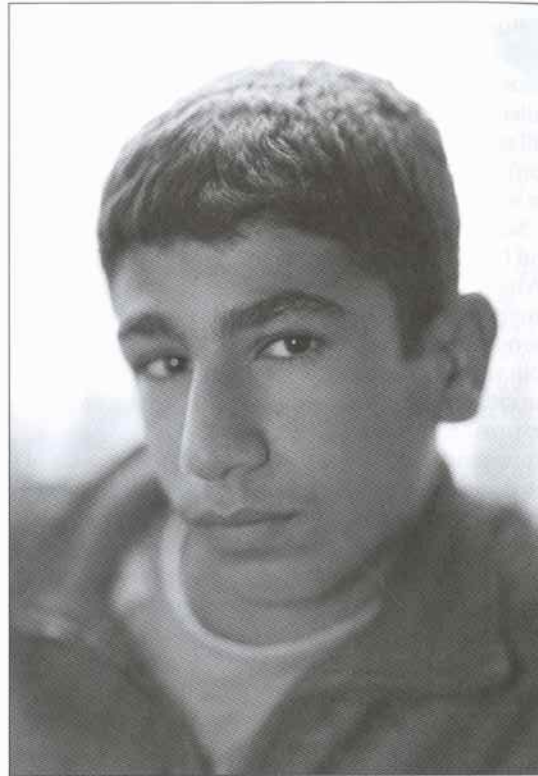
homeland. Boullata tackles a complex field of art, memory, politics and historiographies, as he maps the development of the Zionist movement in Palestine and the effect of a national narrative which effaced all traces of memory and cultural expression. The country's dispossessed might claim: "...native art was doomed to oblivion".

From here, the book deals with art and resistance and the way cultural production and conceptual art became bound together with notions of longing, memory, nostalgia, loss, belonging and home. Boullata shows us an immense range of practices from a wide range of art practitioners and from diverse of contexts. He maps the emergence of contemporary art from within refugee camps and from across the diasporas, Gaza, the West Bank, Beirut and Jerusalem – different contexts producing different and similar responses to the Palestinian experience of exile. In the chapter entitled "Visual Expression inside a Cultural Ghetto", Boullata combines autobiography, art history and analysis. He takes us on a personal journey, blending his thoughts and feelings in 1984 on returning to his country of birth after the Israeli 1967 military takeover of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These reflections are moving accounts of his passion, and of his journey of discovery of cultural practices which range from weaving, crafts, murals, public art, socially engaged art to accounts from case studies ranging from artists' studios to national heritage projects.

In the chapter on "The View From No-Man's-Land", Boullata takes us on an exploration of his own practice. Although most of his life has been lived outside of Jerusalem, all of his work has been made with Jerusalem in his mind's eye. Much of his practice has been concerned with the language of geometry, by which he could explore territories,



Top: El Majeed 2007
Right: Noura 2007



memory, relation to space and Jerusalem's division, its no-man's land, and his banishment from it. Through geometry he attempts to rebuild the invisibility of the place in his heart where the centre, the margin of the sphere and the square become one. In Boullata's *Novicella*, 1991, the continuity and discontinuity of geometry, of fragmentation and reformation, become solitary in a moving and forbidding piece marking loss, reconstruction and exile.

The book is full of beautiful illustrations and includes an immense range of sources, references and footnotes – reflecting an incredible breadth of knowledge and research. It will appeal to readers interested in the contemporary art and cultural analysis of Palestinian art in relation to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but more broadly to readers interested in the history of Palestinian art and its relation to the politics of representation from multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives. The book will appeal to artists, researchers, historians, cultural critics, graduate and postgraduate students as well as cultural theorists and scholars.

Many of the works by Palestinian practitioners explore community memory, loss, trauma, aspiration, grief and negotiating identity and place in relation to national trauma – so the book also deals with issues of memory, film, representation and national and individual identity in relation to communal and national loss of homeland. The book charts the way art has become a form of cultural expression of forced migration and exile while at the same time being a practice that has influenced contemporary art on a global stage. Boullata has crafted an immense work – a rare book – which enables us to see the relationship between politics, history and art and the way it has shaped Palestinian art over the last 150 years. The book reflects the man, a synthesis of art history, creative practice, autobiography and cultural criticism – for anyone barely interested in the field, it is a must have.

John Nassari

FROM WHERE I'M STANDING

Jewish Marxist philosopher G A Cohen gave what turned out to be his final book the title *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton University Press). Why not indeed? The book was published last autumn, not long after Jerry Cohen, as he was better known, died. I ordered it hoping to find within its pages compelling arguments for socialism from a 21st century perspective after the collapse of Soviet communism and the rise – and imminent demise? – of New Labour. We're in the midst of the latest global economic crisis triggered by capitalist greed, while UN figures show that almost a billion people worldwide are starving so, God knows, there must be some better economic order.

I need to introduce an element of personal biography. Years ago, when I was in my second job, in a low-pay, non-unionised, dead-end textile factory in an industrialised part of west London, I learned from some source or other that there were such things as workers' co-operatives. Wow, that really fired my imagination as an antidote to the mind-numbing tedium of that insalubrious factory with its tyrannical boss.

Some years later, while labouring in another menial job, I took an evening class A-level in 20th-century history, where I first heard about the workers' collectives in the Spanish Civil War.

From then on I began to consider myself a 'libertarian socialist', the top-down Soviet model never having appealed to me. I started reading books of a broadly libertarian left nature, among them: French anarchist Gaston Laval's first-hand account, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*; Tony Gibson's *People Power*, about non-hierarchical groups in industry, housing and education; Hilary Wainwright and Dave Elliott's *The Lucas Plan*, a study of the worker takeover at Lucas Aerospace and its conversion to non-militaristic manufacture; Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*, which reconsiders Darwinism from an anarchist outlook; A S Neill's *Summerhill*, about his libertarian school in Suffolk; and Jewish anarchist Emma Goldman's compelling autobiography.

Now, in my late 50s, I still regard myself in a non-prescriptive way to be a libertarian lefty, but I am a lot more pessimistic, as I think are many on the left. So *Why Not Socialism?* Does Cohen's book provide us with any credible answers? It reads somewhat like an abstract philosophical tract; there is insufficient engagement, for my liking, with historical examples of how socialism has worked out in real societies and organisations. As such, though it is a slim work, I struggled to finish it, yet I'm glad I persevered. It became clear towards the final pages that Cohen was a Marxist of a libertarian slant, exploring ideas for socialist economy that accord well with those that inspired me from those books I devoured when I was in my 20s, which perhaps do indeed point a way forward as the left reassesses the ideological landscape following the ultimate breakdown of the Soviet system.

Cohen is open-eyed in the book about socialism's failures thus far: "... central planning, at least as practiced in the past, is, we now know a

poor recipe for economic success." Instead, he considers the feasibility of some form of market socialism. Concepts of market socialism or similar are nothing new: they range from libertarian models such as Proudhon's mutualism, Kropotkin collectivism, anarcho-syndicalism, the co-operative movement, credit unions and the LETS skills exchange network, to statist models as seen in the USSR of the New Economic Policy era, in Tito's Yugoslavia, and today in Vietnam and China.

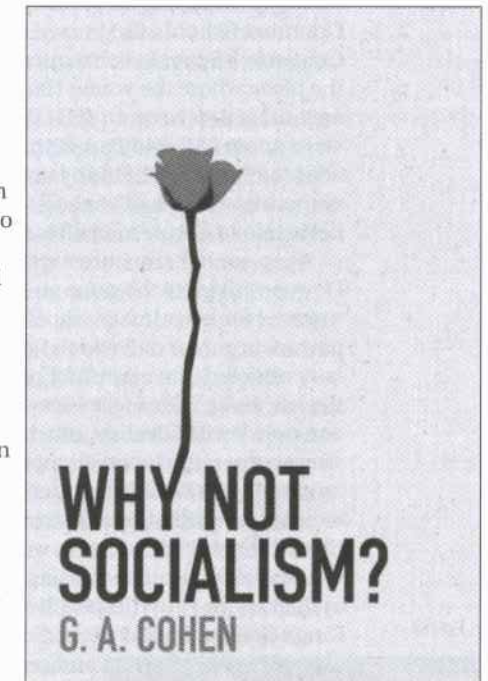
The statist examples in practice have usually involved markets tightly controlled by an oligarchical elite, who cynically invoke Marxism while presiding over regimes of which they and their officials are the main beneficiaries. Yugoslavia was an exception to an extent, in that the socialist self-management system introduced in the 1950s relaxed state control with the establishment of companies supervised by workers' councils that appointed managers, often by secret ballot. Most managers, however, were elected from the ranks of the Communist Party.

The sort of market socialist system that Cohen envisions would go beyond this, with true decentralised workers' control, along with some centrally administered redistributive mechanism to iron out marked inequalities of wealth that would otherwise accrue. "Market socialism does not," Cohen recognises, "fully satisfy socialist

standards of distributive justice, but it scores far better by those standards than market capitalism." Market socialism remains deficient, he notes, because it "confers high rewards on people who happen to be unusually talented and who form highly productive co-operatives" and because "the market exchange that lies at its heart tends against the value of community". Can these shortcomings be largely overcome with effective non-market correctives? About this, Cohen concludes: "I do not know whether the refinements are possible ... We don't know how to give collective ownership and equality the real meaning ... which it didn't have in the Soviet Union and in similarly ordered states."

No, but the ideas Cohen has left us with merit serious further debate as socialists brace themselves for the challenges confronting us at the start of second decade of the millennium.

Mike Gerber



THE PEOPLE'S

Forty years after it was first published, Hackney Jewish novelist Alexander Baron's *King Dido* is back in the bookshops. **KEN WORPOLE** celebrates his life and work

Like a number of other important working class novelists, Alexander Baron's writing has been unfairly neglected by the publishing establishment. He was born in 1917 to Jewish parents who had separately grown up in Bethnal Green and Spitalfields prior to marriage and setting up home in Hackney, London. The new family started with one room in Abersham Road, then two rooms in Sandringham Road, before settling in a small terraced house in Foulden Road, Stoke Newington – then a lively Jewish area – the subsequent locus of many of Baron's most lyrical evocations of street life and community. His father, Barnett Bernstein, was a fur cutter, a "very prim and correct chap"; his mother, a former factory worker in the docks.

Baron attended Shacklewell Lane Primary School, which was then considered "rough", though he later described his years there as "the happiest time of my life". At the age of 11 he won a Junior County Scholarship to attend Hackney Downs Grammar School (also known as The Grocers' Company's School), subsequently made famous as the place where the young Harold Pinter was first encouraged to write. In 1954 Pinter adopted the stage name of David Baron, the surname possibly adopted from that of his by now already famous namesake – who had anglicised his name from Bernstein to Baron soon after the war.

As an adult, Baron never spoke about Hackney Downs with quite the same animation and affection reserved for his primary school years and the pavement games of Foulden Road. This street life later mutated into a youthful political activism on the left, along with a fellow crowd of young Jewish and non-Jewish idealists, much of it conducted at street corners and open air meetings, often in and around Ridley Road in competition – sometimes violently so – with Oswald Mosley's fascist Blackshirts. He left school to work for the London County Council and increasing political involvement in the Labour Party, despite the offer of a place at King's College, London. "For God's sake, let's get out and get a job instead," he later recalled saying to a friend when they were offered the prospect of university education.

From a very early age, Alexander Baron was a storyteller. "In the street when I was a small kid, I used to tell stories. I wasn't very good at a punch-up. Story-telling gave me status. I could sit down on the kerb, with the others all around me, and tell them a story. I drew the material from the masses of books I read."

There were also escapes into the countryside. "My dad was a great one for the open air, parks and so on.

He'd come home from work and say, 'How about some fresh air?' And we'd get the bus to Wormley. Walk through the side lanes and feel we were in the country, and then come home about ten o'clock." This appreciation of easy access to the countryside – not always shared in east London immigrant Jewish life, with its residual suspicion of rural atavism and enmity – is powerfully evoked in Baron's epiphany, "Strangers to Death", the prologue to his 1953 collection of short stories set during the Second World War, *The Human Kind*. This lovely recollection of a brief idyll is, alas, only a prelude to the disasters of war: "Every Saturday morning from early spring to late autumn, a crowd of young people would meet at the street corner. The cyclists, with rucksacks on their backs, tin mugs and kettles, all a-rattle, tied with string to their crossbars, and cheap little tents slung under the saddles, would stream away along the Cambridge road to their camping-site by the River Lea."

At the outbreak of war, Baron joined the Pioneer Corps as a sapper, and was involved in several of the most ferocious battles involving British troops, in Sicily and at the Normandy landings. In a letter to me he once wrote, "I always carried at least one small volume (*Golden Treasury* in Sicily, *Oxford Book of French Verse* in Normandy) and we were dished out Penguins from time to time. It was six years without books but full of experience."

The story of Baron's entry into the world of the novel is best told by himself: "I had no time to think about writing novels before July 1940, when I was called up. I was in the army until the spring of 1946. All the time, through those years, I was seeking experience. And knowing exactly what I wanted to do: I wanted to write a novel about the war. When I came out of the army, I was interviewed by a committee. They said, 'What do you want to do? And how can we help you?' And I said, 'I want a typewriter.' There was a twelve month waiting list, yet they got me a portable typewriter straight away and I just went home."

"After the war, the first novels to get published were all by officers. Either by officers or people who'd come through *Penguin New Writing*, which was a great influence at the time. Stories were by the kind of intellectuals to whom the army was an agony. They wrote about it as an awful experience, sleeping with thirty-five ruffians. The officers didn't seem to have the Robert Graves touch. Graves, Sassoon, knew the Tommies were the men getting the rough end of the stick."

"I read those books and I thought that nobody was writing about the ordinary soldiers. Soldiers were the nation in arms, they were the whole people. They were the young men of the nation. Obviously, I was on the left then. My writing was also therapeutic. I wasn't in the thick of the war all the time – but I was in some fairly big actions. Leading a troop on D-Day, all that. Towards the end of the war I had two fairly hectic concussions. I was pretty ill at this period. And it may be that writing this novel, *From the City, From the Plough*, really put me on my feet."

BARON

It would be hard to over-estimate the impact of *From the City, From the Plough*, when it was published in 1948. The novel was unanimously praised, and sold over half of a million copies. Baron – who died in 1999 – was, as John Williams wrote in his obituary, "the greatest British novelist of the last war". This first novel was also one of his finest, creating the basis of his subsequent literary reputation. It is not too much to suggest that, rather than simply expressing the democratic mood of the post-war social settlement, novels such as *From the City, From the Plough* helped shape it. Baron's quiet humanism and common decency became, for a brief period, the language of popular politics and everyday life. This was not to last.

There were other novels and collections of short stories set in the Second World War to come, as well as historical novels, and novels about the Spanish Civil War, which Baron himself had volunteered to join in 1938. "I, like several of our friends in the Labour League of Youth, was very much involved with Spain. Virtually every boy in our crowd volunteered. But the people in charge of recruiting, the communists, sent us home." It has been suggested that Baron was more useful politically in London, writing and campaigning. In another of his Second World War novels, *With Hope, Farewell* (1952), Baron told the story of a Jewish fighter pilot. On publication, this caused some public disbelief, though as he told me, the Jewish comic writer Denis Norden had been a fighter pilot, and on several occasions Jewish flying officers with Distinguished Flying Crosses (DFCs) had turned up at Ridley Road after the war when there was a concerted campaign to put a stop to Mosley's gatherings there.

In general though, Baron eschewed the opportunity to put the specifically Jewish experience, either of London's East End or of the war, in his writings. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, because he said that he "always had a personal rebellion against the idea of a separate Jewish identity. My father and both my grandfathers were freethinkers and so am I." Secondly, because he saw his respectable, free-thinking Hackney childhood as being beyond the classic Jewish East End, even though both parents had once belonged to it.

In later life he changed his mind on this, publishing *The Lowlife* in 1963, which has become something of a cult novel amongst London writers, including Ian Sinclair, who has promoted the work of Baron on many occasions. This was the story of one of the last of the *luftmenschen*, the elderly Jewish gamblers and street philosophers, who once filled the pavements of Whitechapel, Mare Street and Stoke Newington of a summer's evening to put the world to rights, exchange news of casual work in the rag trade, and discuss the evening's dog-racing at Haringey, Clapton or Walthamstow. "I had to write a Jewish novel," he told me. "I had to get something off my chest."

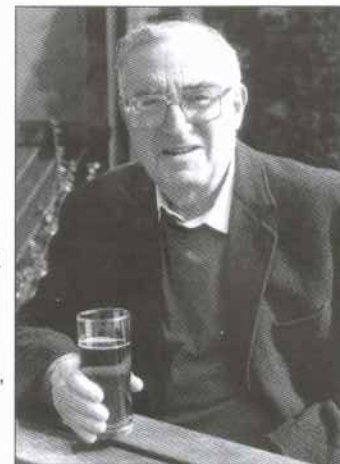
That something was not the common account of poverty and politics, or the religious impulse to radicalism, which characterised much Jewish

writing about London, but was a celebration of a more tangential aspect of Jewish life, the bohemian, sometimes semi-criminal sub-culture of the eponymous "lowlife": a common Jewish expression for a gambler, work-shy intellectual or bookworm, or habitué of basement jazz clubs and Soho drinking dens. In short, a latter-day boulevardier or flâneur. The novel also portrayed, with only a gentle hint of satirical intent, the security and satisfaction afforded the post-war generation of upwardly mobile Jews who were steadily moving northwards and westwards, via Stoke Newington, into suburbia and professional respectability. It is a great novel of cultural transition, capturing the pleasures and anxieties of a generation caught between two worlds, and of one particular character unwilling to adapt or change.

A couple of years later he returned to an area he knew well from his childhood, Hare Marsh, on the fringes of Shoreditch and Bethnal Green. This was the setting for *King Dido*, published in 1969. Baron's interest had been awakened in this particular part of east London from childhood. His mother had grown up in Hare Marsh, just off Cheshire Street. "I visited the area often to see my grandparents. And I think, from what I notice now, that fiction absorbs the power of legend and folklore. Local myths contributed so much to the formation of my novels. The final clash between the actual police inspector who ruled the area and a villain who thought he had the upper hand took place in Spitalfields. The story was told to me, as a very small boy, on the knee of my grandfather who lived in Spitalfields."

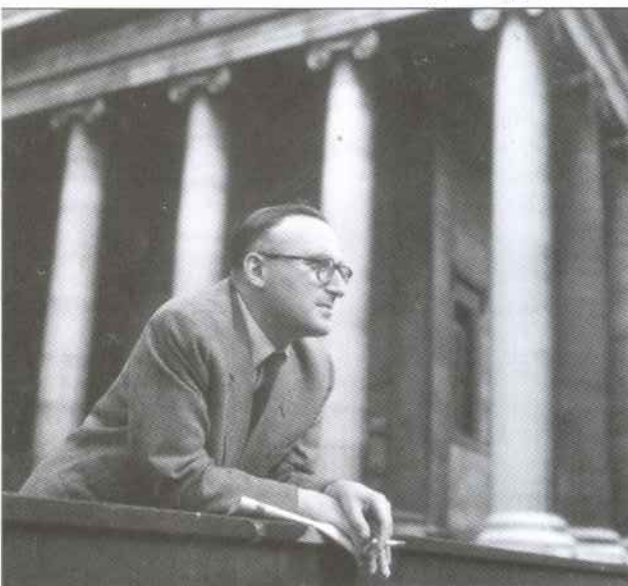
King Dido eschews the moralising and reform-mechanics of "the social novel". It is a taut revenge tragedy about a man who tries to break free of his surroundings but is doomed by his own pride. The novel is expertly plotted, full of twists and turns, and unexpected reversals and surprises. It is significant that at least one critic has misremembered the novel as being about Jewish gangs; it is not. The origins of the principal character, Dido Peach, and his family, are, it is suggested, connected to Romany antecedents. Dido has clear linguistic affinities with *didicoi*, a common slang word for Romany people; otherwise it was commonly a woman's name with regal aspirations. This is an interesting device for suggesting the "otherness" of Dido Peach, which in different writers' hands might have become an allusion to Jewish origins or suppressed homosexuality. Queen Dido ruled Carthage. *King Dido* rules a scrap of Bethnal Green.

Dido is a lost man amongst women, however. He idealises his mother, but time and again betrays her; he is incapable of showing any affection for his young wife, and yet he would love to be a decent husband. More than anything, *King Dido* is an



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Ken Worpole is a writer who has lived and worked in Hackney for most of his life. This essay is based on an interview he conducted with Alexander Baron in June 1983, and forms the basis of the new introduction to King Dido. Worpole's study of early 20th-century radical and working class fiction, *Dockers and Detectives*, is, like *King Dido*, published by Five Leaves. For more details go to www.fiveleaves.co.uk or www.worpole.net

unusually penetrating exploration of a frustrated, violent and uncomprehending masculine world, in which women are cast as victims and drudges. In this brute world, sympathy for others is only a sign of weakness.

There are, though, two moments in the novel in which Baron allows Dido to lift his eyes from his own existential predicament. The first is when, anxiously waiting in Tommy Long's stables to settle scores with one of his worst enemies, he sees a Jewish sabbath meal being prepared in the Burskys' kitchen. Despite the poverty of the family, on this and all other ritual occasions, the single room becomes a temple, where a clean table is laid, prayers are said, food is taken, and sanctuary and peace reign. It raises in Dido's mind, "drifts of longing which he could not follow". The second occasion is more commonplace though no less affecting, and occurs when he sees his newborn daughter, whose innocent gaze returns his

and transfixes him, "pure life, unspoiled by experience". Yet neither potentially transforming moment is powerful enough to deflect him from self-destruction, and *King Dido* ends with his sovereignty and kingdom in ruins.

King Dido was one of Baron's own favourites of his novels, and *Five Leaves* will follow up with the publication of a new edition of *Rosie Hogarth*, a novel set in post-war working class Islington around the Angel, and featuring the febrile world of communist activism and party intrigue. It is good that Baron's reputation is once again in the ascendancy, as few other novelists captured the spirit of youthful political idealism and internationalism once associated with the left (particularly the Jewish left), nor, more grimly, the terrible realities of war for the majority of men and women

A kindly, self-effacing man, Alexander Baron left a rich literary and political legacy.

LONDON CALLING

Klezmer Klub's new CD, *Whitechapel mayn Vaytshepl*, puts the spotlight on little known Yiddish songs written about London. The band's vocalist VIVI LACHS tells the story of these songs

I have been singing Yiddish songs with the band Klezmer Klub for over 10 years: political songs, love songs, ghetto songs, humorous songs and now Yiddish songs of London. A number of mainly unknown songs and fragments, written between 1880 and 1940 describe London and the experiences and feelings of the Yiddish speaking community that lived mainly in the East End. The songs contain glimpses of the society and politics, of people and places, creating a mosaic of different aspects of London's Yiddish life.

Dem Nayem Hashivenu Nazad – The New "Return Us Back" – written around 1900, tells the story of immigrants coming to London to escape poverty and violence in eastern Europe, hoping for new opportunities and employment. But even in London, they are left wandering the streets starving. Sitting for hours at machines, sweating during "*bizi tsayt*" (busy times in seasonal work), and facing destitution during slack times, they are forced to do odd jobs, such as carrying a "lady's basket" for a few pennies. The character in the song cries, "*Hashivenu Nazad*" ("Take me back").

Er blondzhet arum in London umetum (he wanders around London). The song mentions real events and places. *Git a blik in der layn ... file mentshn shteyn / In der corner Goulston Street / shteyt a griner yid / in kukt oys a dzhob* (Look at the queue ... many people stand ... On the corner of Goulston Street / stands a newly arrived Jew / looking for a job). More commonly described as the "*khazer mark*", the pig market, this was a labour hiring market where immigrants, particularly "*griner*" (new immigrants) would wait for employers to choose a few men for a day's work.

The title is evocative. The Hebrew word *hashivenu* is used in a prayer: *hashivenu adonai elekha venashuva*. "Turn to me God and I will return to you". *Na zad* are two Russian words meaning "to go back". The implication is that life in London is so bad they want to return to eastern Europe.

"*Dem nayem*" of the title, means "new". There is an

earlier song, *Hashivenu Nazad*, written in London in 1898 by Goldfaden, the father of Yiddish theatre. He describes the distraught and wandering Jew, and his "going back" refers to "Zion", encouraging people to end "the exile" and settle in Palestine. Goldfaden's song was parodied many times. A *finfte* (fifth) *Hashivenu Nazad* was used as an advertising gimmick by a Yiddish bookseller at 174 Commercial Road, encouraging readers to "go back" to their cultural background and buy Yiddish songs and sheet music.

Dray Shvester (Three Sisters) was written by Morris Winchevsky. A prominent Jewish socialist in mid-1880s London, he founded *Dos Poylishe Yidl* (The Little Polish Jew), Britain's first, but short-lived Yiddish socialist newspaper, and later the *Arbeter Fraynd* (The Worker's Friend), the Yiddish anarchist newspaper.

Dray Shvester is the story of three sisters in Leicester Square: *Di yingste farkoyft dortn blumen / Di eltere, bendlekh tsu shikh / Un shpet in der nakht tut zi kumen / Di drite vos handlt mit zikh* (The youngest sold flowers, the next, shoelaces and the eldest, herself). The younger sisters don't hate the oldest sister, they hate *di velt* (the world) and *di shtot* (the town) and *di gas* (the street). Late at night when they come home, the shoelaces and flowers are drenched with their tears.

Prostitution was seen as a constant danger to young girls. Jewish agencies were set up to protect them. The Hebrew Ladies Protective Society and the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women sent people to the dockside to watch for unaccompanied girls and warn them of the danger. *Dray Shvester* evokes empathy with the sisters, written as a political song of social reality and protest.

I learned *Dray Shvester* from the German Yiddish folk singer Karsten Troyke. He found this song on a 1961 recording by the Buenos Aires Yiddish actress Cipe Lincovsky. Lincovsky said that she was given the lyrics by Helene Weigel, widow of Bertolt Brecht and then chief of his theatre, saying that Brecht

loved the song for its powerful idea that the sisters blame society for their sister being a prostitute, not their sister herself.

Victoria Park in Hackney, completed in 1850, was built as the lungs of London. The *Jewish Chronicle* in 1909 wrote that children flocked there "in their thousands". Musicians played on the bandstand, and stalls sold sweets and drinks. During the week, school classes went to the park for nature lessons and sport.

The song Victoria Park was collected by the poet and folklorist, Derek Reid, from Bertha Jackson. Born in 1888, Bertha lived in Liverpool and learned the song, aged eight, from her uncle, a travelling salesman: (London will become more praised / Who would have believed it / Victoria Park), *Yeder eyner, rut oys di beyner ... er ligt un khropet ... me loyft farsopet in Victoria Park* (Everyone rests their bones here / lie snoring / run barefoot in Victoria Park). A picture is built up of an assortment of curious characters hanging round the park. Yudke and Rachel walking, he with one shoe and she with a sock, immigrants looking for a job, Khayita from Lithuania who works in the City (possibly a euphemism for prostitution). Poxy Fanny, Red Benny (his face, hair, bloodshot eyes, or being a socialist), all hanging out, in Victoria Park.

My home in Morgan Street and Ole Solomon Levy, collected by Derek Reid from his mother, Sylvie Reid, were both street songs she learned as a child in Whitechapel: *My home in Morgan Street, / es iz mir voyl in git. / Ik hob mayn eygn shtib / nur shmekht fin farshtinkene fish* (My home in Morgan Street, / It makes me happy. / I have my own room, / though it reeks of stinking fish. There stands a girl in a dress / shouting "6-a-penny bagels", / and a Jew plays his violin).

Morgan Street (now Hessel Street) was a busy East End market. The character in the song has his or her own room, a rarity, renting lodging, probably in work. It smells of the ubiquitous fried fish for shabbes. R Kalman, London Judaica collector, remembers an almost identical song, My Home in Wentworth Street. The two streets stand not more than half a mile apart, with their separate but similar Jewish worlds.

Linking these two songs is the character of the old fiddler, Solomon Levy: *a froy mit finf kinder / kikt aroys fin der vinder / un oy zi lakht / fin ole Solomon Levy* (A woman with five kids looks out of the window, / and how she laughs / at Ole Solomon Levy). Sylvie Reid described how as a child she would watch Solomon Levy play and the children would dance around him. She remembered his pitches in Hessel Street market, outside Whitechapel Hospital and Petticoat Lane.

The name Solomon Levy is not always remembered as a fiddler. Former Eastender

Hannah Grant knew another verse in English: "If you want to buy an overcoat, suit you nice and neat, go to Solomon Levy, 60 Philpot Street."

Vaytshepl mayn Vaytshepl (Whitechapel My Whitechapel) is a sentimental song describing the people and landmarks of what used to be the Whitechapel community. Here was the *shul* (synagogue) and next to it, *lehavdil* (what a comparison), the jellied eels stall. There was the *lokshn* (noodle) maker. There was the Pavilion Theatre. Where are Kessler, Feinman now? (Yiddish theatre directors). To the left of the Pavilion, you could see Landau's restaurant

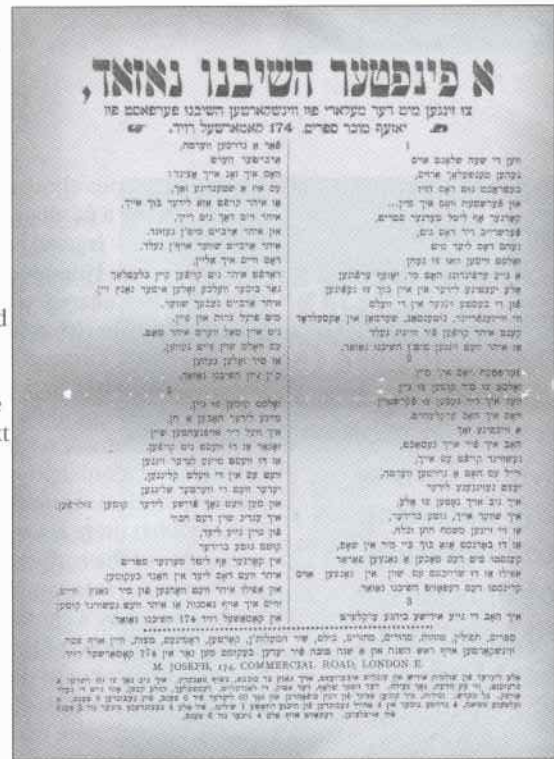
where actors and writers went. There was the hot bagel woman, and here Velv would sell sweets.

The Pavilion was a well-known theatre which showed a Yiddish repertoire and translations of Shakespeare. Feinman's Yiddish People's Theatre was set up in 1912 with opera, such as *Rigoletto*, in Yiddish.

The song refers to the movement away from the East End: "*Vu zenen dayne yidelekh? / Zey loyfn tsu di reyses shpiln hint*" (Where are your Jews now? / They've run to the races to bet on the dogs). The narrator of the poem describes how he is drawn back to Whitechapel from his home in Golders Green, and: "*Ik fil zikh fremd in Edzhver, Stenford Hil*" (I feel strange in Edgware, Stamford Hill).

Vaytshepl mayn Vaytshepl was written around 1940 by Chaim Tauber, a popular actor and songwriter in New York, who passed through London. People were writing songs about their shtetls, Belz, Warsaw or Bialystok, painting pictures of a world fast disappearing. Tauber wrote the *Vaytshepl* shtetl song for the people of Golders Green and Stamford Hill to remember their disappearing East End.

For me, singing about London in Yiddish has been a discovery of parts of a disappeared society, including my own family history, a challenge to make them relevant for an audience today and a joy to be approached after gigs by people singing me their own memories of London songs.

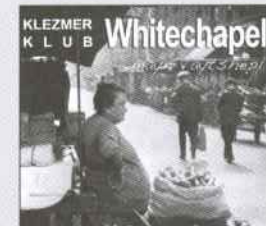


Poster with the words of *A finfte (fifth) Hashivenu Nazad* used as advertising by a Yiddish bookseller

As well as the Yiddish songs about London that singer Vivi Lachs describes, which give this CD its uniqueness, there is much else to enjoy on Klezmer Klub's latest creation. Klezmer is essentially dance music and the opening track, *Freilachs for Sheila*, sets the mood well. Sitting between songs about London that range from the poignant to the playful, are several tunes representing different dance styles from Rumanian doinas to the bulgars typical of the Chasidim to the Bessarabian chain dance "honga" – a style that invites foot stamping as accompaniment.

The songs of London are obviously historical but are given a modern feel and sung without nostalgia. The issues they speak about very starkly – poverty, overcrowding, prostitution and the search for work – are all too contemporary to allow them just to be consigned to the past. But neither do such sombre themes prevent the CD from being a celebration of the Yiddish East End and the resilience and humour with which immigrants faced the challenges around them, as immigrants and refugees continue to do in London in 2010. Buy it and enjoy!

David Rosenberg



GEORGIE WEMYSS explores the untold colonial history of oppression and discrimination which forms the backdrop to migration of Bengalis to London's East End

Popular stories about migration to London's East End follow a familiar pattern. An iconic Brick Lane landmark is used to tell the story of how 17th-century French Huguenots found refuge and built the Protestant chapel, which was converted into a synagogue by Jewish refugees fleeing Europe and later became a mosque as migrants from Bangladesh settled in the area from the 1950s. Even complex retellings of these the histories rarely understand Bengali settlement in the context of Britain as a colonial power in Bengal. Following the recent historical research of Visram (2002) and Fisher (2004) there is now more local historical awareness of the early presence of Indian seafarers and servants. However, this recognition is usually accompanied by a cautionary note to remind you that, in the context of the densely populated East End and in relation to the thousands of settled migrants, the number of South Asians was always small and they were usually passing through the riverside lodging places, rather than establishing any permanent community.

In my book, *The Invisible Empire*, I argue that East End migration histories and contemporary politics cannot be understood unless they are examined in a framework that includes Britain and its colonies. In this article I demonstrate how British navigation and merchant shipping legislation consistently discriminated against working class people from the Asian subcontinent, effectively preventing their legal settlement in Britain. Moreover, the experiences of South Asian seafarers, categorised as "lascars", on board British ships and in Britain were defined by the overt and covert violence of the British colonial project in Bengal and beyond. What I name as "the mercantile discourse", commonly used to describe Britain's relationships with its ex-colonies, consistently hides those processes and works to undermine the South Asian presence and agency in East End past and present.

THE MERCANTILE DISCOURSE AND MIGRATION HISTORIES

In *The Invisible Empire* I demonstrate that when the history of the East India Docks and the British Empire was narrated in the local newspapers, they excluded any mention of the East India Company (EIC), its military power, its colonisation of Bengal and the consequences for the local population. (The reach of the EIC was far wider than Bengal, however, the relationship between Bengal and London was the focus of the ethnography referred to.) When trade in tea or textiles was mentioned, it was in relation to the wealth it generated for London merchants and never in relation to the displacement or coercion of the labour of South Asians. The forced cultivation of indigo and opium, the bonded labour of weavers and spinners, the repatriated tax revenues and the British role in creating famines of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries were never referred to in this dominating mercantile discourse, the thousands of Indian seamen who worked on ships that landed in London between 1616 and the

Second World War were invisible. Such omissions give the impression that South Asians did not share East End spaces with other migrants. Two examples (out of many) illustrate that this was not the case:

Visram quotes an Indian visitor to Britain in 1765 who noted: "The English were not unacquainted with Chatgaon [present day Chittagong] and Juhangeernuggur [Jahangir Nagar – present day Dhaka] Lascars."

In 1805 a British observer described the Shia Muharram procession: "Last Saturday, Monday and Tuesday, the Lascars ... had a great religious festival. The first day they went in a slow procession along New Road, St George's in the East, Cannon Street, Ratcliff Highway, Shadwell ... with drums and tambourines ... performing dances with drawn swords ... they were followed by four Blacks in white robes holding emblematical figures, a vase, in which was a fire ... they conducted themselves with great propriety, although a multitude of people followed them (*Annual Register 1805*, quoted in Fisher, 2004).

Working class South Asian men lived parts of their lives in East London, however, their classification as "lascars" and their position as subjects of the British Empire prevented them from settling legally.

"LASCARS" AND MARITIME DISCRIMINATION

The word "lascar" is derived from the Farsi *lashkar*, meaning a regiment, but Fisher describes how, in British colonial discourse, "lascar" defined the terms of employment of maritime labourers contracted in gangs (Fisher 2004). The classification of "lascar" forced all Indian seamen into a sealed category which ensured that they remained at the base of British Merchant Navy hierarchies. That place in the hierarchy was secured through parliamentary legislation and East India Company regulations, and maintained through the racialised discourses and practices of ship owners and seamen's unions. As well as denying "lascars" employment rights that were granted to other seamen, the legislation worked to exclude "lascars" who were British subjects from settlement in the United Kingdom. This is significant to any contemporary discussion of belonging, and yet is absent from dominant references to British immigration legislation, which usually start with the 1905 Aliens Act. There isn't the space here to detail all the discriminatory legislation through the centuries as it altered according to the needs of the EIC and the British state in times of war and peace. I focus on some key examples to illustrate the point.

From 1600 the East India Company had a monopoly on the importation of goods to England from the East Indies. No ship sailing out of London would return with its original crew, since many either perished or left the ship in order to seek more lucrative opportunities. Indian, Chinese and African seamen were recruited from different ports at various historical moments. The 1660 Navigation Act (Section 7), not repealed until 1849, stipulated that the Master and three quarters of an English

registered ship importing goods from Asia had to be English (Davis 1962, Fisher 2004). In practice the legal requirements were not followed and ships arrived in Britain with more than 25% "lascar" crews. Ships leaving Britain for Asia only employed up to 25% "lascar" crews and in some cases the East India Company required that its ships had all British crews (Fisher 2004). This led to an imbalance as Indian seamen who arrived in London on British ships found it hard to be employed on returning ships, thus becoming familiar figures in London.

The 1823 Merchant Shipping Act ("Lascar Act") imposed further restrictions on Indian seamen and confirmed the legal category of "lascar" as not being British. "Lascar Articles" stipulated that Indian seamen could only be discharged and paid off in India (Fisher 2004). The enshrining of the inferior category of "lascar" into British law, ensured that "the legal minimum standard of accommodation for 'lascars' on board ships, their contractual position and diet scales lagged far behind those of white seamen". The 1823 "Lascar Act" was not repealed until 1963, which ensured that their inferior conditions continued. (Visram 2002).

The increase in imperial trade led to the British Parliament redefining "lascars" as British in 1849. However, their "lascar" status ensured that they did not enjoy the full rights of other British subjects, and laws were passed denying them settlement rights. Philanthropists were appalled by the wretched conditions of "lascars" who were, at different times, homeless, underdressed and starving in the streets. Christian missionaries who had returned from India were afraid that the image of England would suffer if returning seamen told tales of prostitution, homelessness and public houses. The assumption that "lascars needed spiritual and moral welfare", to be controlled and kept separate from the British working class led to the opening of the Strangers' Home for Asiatics, Africans and South Sea Islanders Home in Limehouse in 1857. As well as providing accommodation and a place for Christian evangelism, it acted as a Repatriation Centre, with the India Office donating £200 of Indian taxpayers' money annually for the upkeep of "destitutes" awaiting repatriation (Visram 2002).

The 1869 opening of the Suez Canal and the introduction of steamships which employed Indian seamen to stoke the furnaces led to an increased presence of "lascars" in the dockside localities. They continued to be a focus of racial hostilities and government and philanthropic anxieties, resulting in them being made the subjects of further exclusionary legislation. The 1894 Merchant Shipping Act bound "lascars" to return to India by giving ship owners enhanced powers to place Indian seamen on ships from any British port heading back to India (Visram 2002).

By the end of the First World War, Indian seafarers made up 20% of the British maritime labour force. Partly as a reaction to the 1919 "Race Riots", the 1925 Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order stipulated that "coloured alien seamen are required to register with the police

whether or not they have been in the United Kingdom for more than two months since their last arrival". The aim of the order was to prevent the entry and "accumulation" of "coloured seamen" who, it was alleged, "competed in the overstocked labour market" causing "serious discontent" among British sailors (Visram 2002). Indian seamen were legally British subjects, not "Aliens". However, it was hard for "lascars" to prove that they were British subjects because sailors were not required to carry passports. Unlike white seamen, "lascars" official documentation, their continuous discharge certificates, were not accepted as proof of nationality. The "justification" being that they were often trafficked (Visram 2002).

FOR KING AND COUNTRY

As Britain went to war in 1939, white seamen earned £9 12s 6d whilst "lascars" earned £1 17s. Their hours, food, space and clothing allowances were all less than those of white sailors. Indian seamen demanded a 100% wage rise before the war was declared, and three days after that declaration, eight ships were on strike. As the strike spread, some owners capitulated to the "lascar" demands whilst others prosecuted them for breach of contract; there were mass arrests of "lascars", who were given prison sentences of up to 12 weeks. Although the Indian seamen did not achieve conditions equal to those of white seamen, they made substantial gains (Visram 2002).

In the course of the war, approximately 6,600 Indian seamen lost their lives whilst 1,022 were badly wounded and 1,217 were taken prisoners of war. The invisibility of their lives and roles in the war are poignantly exemplified in the memorial at Tower Hill to seafarers killed in the British Merchant Navy in the two World Wars. Of the 26,833 names on the memorial very few are Asian. Visram (2002) points out that this is because the memorial only records those who had managed to serve on British Articles by somehow circumventing all the restrictions imposed on them that sought to prevent their settlement in Britain. The huge majority who died served under the racially discriminatory Lascar Articles and the names of those men who were killed are not remembered.

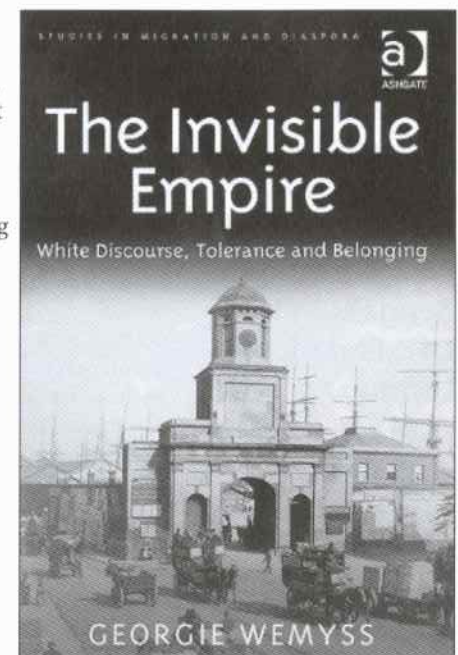
Further reading

The Rise of the English Shipping Industry: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries by Ralph Davis (David and Charles, 1962)

Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857 by Michael Herbert Fisher (Permanent Black 2004)

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World 1700–1750 by Marcus Rediker (Cambridge University Press, 1987)

Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History by Rozina Visram. (Pluto Press, 2002)



Georgie Wemyss is the author of *The Invisible Empire: White Discourse, Tolerance and Belonging*, (Ashgate, 2009).

FROM SECULARISM

ANSAR AHMED ULLAH traces the tradition of activism among Bengalis in the East End of London

The history of the Bengali community and political activism in London's East End can be seen as passing through different phases. It started with localised welfare politics, then was characterised by Bangladesh's national independence movement; that was followed by the political mobilisation of the second generation of Bengali community activists and anti-racist politics, which led to community representation, significant involvement in mainstream politics and to the global politics of Islamism.

The earliest Bengali political activism in London's East End can be traced to the first Bengali settlers, the seafarers. The Bengali presence in the UK goes back long before the Indian Subcontinent gained its independence from the British in 1947, however, it was early in the 20th century that the first large group of South Asian – including Bengali – seamen, known as "lascars", were recruited in British India to work for the East India Company, and came to the UK.

Some of these seamen had begun to settle in London's East End from the 1850s onwards. Evidence of the early settlement of Bengali seafarers in London can be seen in the formation of organisations such as the Society for the Protection of Asian Sailors in 1857.

An early and influential Bengali figure connected to the East End of London was Ayub Ali Master, who lived at 13 Sandys Row (1945-59). He ran a seamen's café in Commercial Road in the 1920s and then also opened the Shah Jalal Coffee House at 76 Commercial Street. Ayub Ali Master turned his home into an advice centre to support Bengalis, which included a lodging house, a job centre offering letter writing and form filling, and a travel agency. He also started the Indian Seamen's Welfare League in 1943. As a result Ayub Ali Master's coffee shop was usually the first port of call for help and guidance for seamen.

By the 1950s the Bengali population was growing and the men, both seamen and others who had come by air, had established the Pakistan Welfare Association (which became the Bangladesh Welfare Association after Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971). The Bangladesh Welfare Association building is situated at 39 Fournier Street, adjacent to today's Brick Lane Mosque, which was originally built for the minister of the church in 1750. It was the base for Huguenot charitable work with the local poor and then, at the end of the 19th century, Jewish charities were based here.

By the late 1960s and early '70s, political developments in Pakistan, and especially in East Pakistan where Bengalis came from, were moving fast. Pakistanis were campaigning against military rule. In addition the Bengalis of East Pakistan felt that they were getting a raw deal within the framework of Pakistan. As result, resentment grew against the Pakistani ruling elite based in West Pakistan. The cause of East Pakistan was being championed by a party called the Awami League led by a young charismatic leader, Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman. In 1971 The Awami League's demand for autonomy soon turned into the fully fledged Independence War of Bangladesh.

During that war, the UK's Bengali community played an important role in highlighting the atrocities taking place in Bangladesh, lobbying the British Government and the international community, and raising funds for refugees and Bengali freedom fighters. A key feature of this period was the support provided by members of the white British majority. Among some of the members of Parliament who gave this support were Michael Barnes, John Stonehouse, Bruce Douglas-Mann and our very own Peter Shore from East London.

It is interesting to note that Bengalis were active in Bangladesh political activity before 1971, as they had supported the Awami League's Six Point Programme in 1966, which demanded greater autonomy for East Pakistan and campaigned for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's release after he was arrested in 1968. UK Bengalis sent the English QC, Sir Thomas Williams, to defend Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others who had been charged with treason.

From the mid-1970s many British Asians, including Bengalis living in the East End of London, were experiencing racism, social deprivation and high levels of unemployment. For the Tower Hamlets Bengali community, who were under constant attack from the racists as early as 1975 - 76, the murder of clothing worker Altab Ali in 1978 was a turning point, especially for the youth, who were mobilised and politicised. They began to organise youth groups, community and campaigning groups, and linked up with other anti-racist activists. The groups that came out of this struggle were the Bangladesh Youth Movement, Bangladesh Youth Front, Progressive Youth Organisation and the Bangladesh Youth Association, amongst others. During 1978 the second generation of Bengali community activists emerged, who would enter mainstream politics in the 1980s.

From the 1970s to '80s Bengali community politics moved away from preoccupations with political struggles in Bangladesh to activism in the UK. The second generation Bengali youth was at the forefront of this political struggle. The energy of these young people was consolidated by the formation in 1980 of the Federation of Bangladeshi Youth Organisations (FBYO), an umbrella body which spearheaded campaigns for better housing, health and education, and against racism. The FBYO was the first truly national campaigning organisation that represented Bengali interests locally and nationally.

The youth took the opportunity to gain access to the local political system and to various funding streams that were channelled through the local council, the Greater London Authority and the Local Education Authority. They also saw the importance of building alliances with activists outside the Bengali community, such as other Asians from Hackney, Newham, Camden and Southall, as well as

TO SECTARIANISM

with those from the white majority community, including Jewish East End activists.

1982 saw the first Bengalis elected to Tower Hamlets Council. Nurul Haque, an independent candidate from Spitalfields, became a councillor, defeating a Labour candidate. This was followed by Ashik Ali, a Labour candidate, who became a councillor in St Katharine's ward. Today, Tower Hamlets Council can boast the largest number of Black/Asian/Bengali councillors in the country, with a total of 32 Bengali councillors (23 Labour, six Respect, two LibDem and one Conservative. This includes four female councillors from the Labour Party).

It is also interesting to note that at the next General Election, in 2010, all the parliamentary candidates from Bethnal Green and Bow (Labour, LibDem, Respect and Green – the Tories have not declared their candidate but it is most likely to be a Bengali) are Bengalis. If that is the case, then, regardless of party affiliation, a Bengali is certain to make history by being the first to enter the House of Commons.

By the 1990s another key development, the increasing importance of religion – in the case of Bengalis, Islam – was taking place. This was partly due to the New Labour Government incorporating faith in its agenda. Sukhwant Dhaliwal traced this trajectory in 2007 in a speech at a South Asia Watch Public Forum, entitled From Anti Racism to Religious Identity Politics.

In addition, in the weeks after 11 September 2001, with the prospect of a US-led war in Afghanistan, the Stop the War Coalition was founded in London, bringing together a number of organisations, the largest of which was the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and more importantly MAB (the Muslim Association of Britain) associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and MCB (Muslim Council of Britain) whose leadership was associated with the Jamaat-e-Islami. The inclusion of MAB and the MCB mobilised thousands of Muslims, including the young, to get involved in the anti-war movement. This brought large numbers of third generation Muslims into global political campaigns for the first time.

The MCB-linked Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist political party in the Indian subcontinent, operates under the auspices of various charities and religious organisations centred around East London's biggest mosque. Its activists have managed to infiltrate all the major political parties, including the Respect Party which came out of SWP-MCB partnership.

The SWP, under the banner of the Anti-War Coalition and the Respect Party, has been working with Islamist groups. This wasn't surprising as, in 1994, Chris Harman, one of the SWP's chief ideologists argued that the party should make common cause on the issue of "anti-imperialism" with Islamist movements, in part as a way of



recruiting members.

George Galloway's victory in 2005 in the Bethnal Green and Bow area, amid allegations of antisemitism, became an international event, since it was seen as a protest against the Labour Party's foreign policy. But it also demonstrated the strength of the Islamists within the community and the dramatic shift in British politics when it came to securing the support of Muslim voters. It reaffirmed that global issues were prioritised in the Islamists' agenda and, when it came to appeal to the Bengali voters, the "Muslim" sentiment was the focus of the election campaign. It's not difficult to understand who the intended audiences were when Galloway made the statement: "If you make war against Muslims abroad, you are going to end up making war against Muslims at home." (George Galloway made this statement at a meeting of the East London Community Organization, TELCO, on 20 April 2005, quoted in S Glynn 2006.) It is no secret that, as Sarah Glynn (2006) has recorded, the East London Mosque (ELM), the Islamic Forum Europe (IFE) and the London Muslim Centre (LMC) extended their support to Galloway and that their members worked to secure his victory.

Today the challenge for the secular Bengali Muslim leadership is to prevent its young people from being drawn into Islamism. They need to engage with non-Bengali secular groups, just as they did during the independence movement of Bangladesh in 1971 and the anti-racist struggle of 1978, to face the Islamists head on.

Further reading

Richard Phillips, *Standing together: The Muslim Association of Britain and the anti-war movement*, in *Race & Class*, Institute of Race Relations, SAGE (2008).

Sarah Glynn, *Playing the Ethnic Card: Politics and Ghettoisation in London's East End*, Institute of Geography Online Paper Series: GEO 018 (2006).

Second generation Bengalis challenging racism in East London in the 1970s.

This article is based on a presentation made at "Rising from the East: A day to explore communities, culture and politics in London's East End" organised by the Jewish Socialist's Group on 15 November 2009 at Toynbee Hall, London, E1. Information for the article was taken from Swadhinata Trust's wider research project "Tower Hamlets Bengali Heritage Trail", funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

MAREK EDELMAN



Marek Edelman in the 1940s.

Throughout October tributes poured in for Marek Edelman, the last surviving commander of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising who died in his native Poland on 2nd October 2009. Though Edelman always rejected the narrative of heroism he was undoubtedly a hero to many – as a fighter against fascism; as a rescuer of children whom he helped place with non-Jewish Polish families before the uprising; as a democratic socialist who challenged Poland's post-war Stalinist regime; as an international human rights activist and, to the embarrassment and irritation of the Israeli establishment, as a lifelong opponent of Zionism.

Zionist leaders have tried to appropriate the Warsaw Ghetto fight as a fight for "Jewish national honour" and attach it seamlessly to the fight for Israeli independence in 1948. Edelman, refuted this lie, stating that this was a fight for dignity and freedom, "not for territory, nor for a national identity".

Efforts to grant him honorary doctorates at Israeli universities were rebuffed by Israel's leading Holocaust

historians. Poland was more willing to confer honours on Edelman but he steadfastly refused them while Poland was ruled by Jaruzelski's Stalinist regime. After democratic rule was established, he finally accepted the award of Poland's highest military honour and an honorary degree from Jagiellonian University of Warsaw.

Edelman survived the Ghetto Uprising. When the overall commander, Mordecai Anielewicz, and many others were trapped in the Mila Street bunker after a defiant armed struggle, they decided to deny the Nazis the pleasure of choosing when and how to kill them – they killed themselves. Edelman chose to fight on. After the mass suicides he commanded around 40 surviving fighters who escaped the burning ghetto through the sewers.

Those still alive a year later took part with him in the general Warsaw uprising in 1944. Edelman clandestinely supported further resistance efforts until liberation, and remained in Poland for the rest of his days. He became a noted cardiologist, pioneering revolutionary treatments. In the Poland in which he died, a renewed Jewish community, confident in its Polish-Jewish identity, is growing again.

The former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir once said that babies in Poland imbibed antisemitism with their mother's milk. And yet leading Israeli figures would dutifully visit Poland for official commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The missing person at these commemorations was Marek Edelman. He boycotted them – especially the high profile events in 1983 and in 1988 – regarding both the visiting Zionist representatives and Poland's Stalinist rulers as illegitimate usurpers and abusers of an uprising for human dignity. Jaruzelski may have fought liberate Warsaw in 1944, but in power he suppressed democratic activity. Under the martial law he imposed in 1981, Edelman, a vocal supporter of the KOR (Workers Defence Committee) and Solidarnosc, was interned.

When the authorities demanded that he join a committee to commemorate the Ghetto Uprising in 1983, he refused, saying, "Don't use me to cover your shame. Forty years ago we did not fight merely to survive -- we fought for life in dignity and freedom." To participate, he said, "would betray the spirit of our struggle." Solidarnosc organised an illegal alternative ceremony by the Warsaw Ghetto

monument, two days before the official event. A message from Edelman was read out. He was under house arrest.

An even more brazen alternative ceremony was engineered by Edelman and Solidarnosc activists which stole the thunder from the official Warsaw Ghetto commemoration ceremony in Poland in 1988 attended by Israel's then Deputy Prime Minister Itzhak Navon, and Minister of Justice and Tourism, Abram Sharir. At an alternative ceremony in the Warsaw Jewish cemetery Edelman unveiled a memorial stone to Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter – Bundist leaders and outspoken critics of both Stalinism and Zionism who had been incarcerated and killed by the Soviet regime during the Second World War.

These socialist internationalists had been Edelman's political mentors and role models. Edelman grew up in a socialist household, though he lost both parents when he was young. His father had been active in the Social Revolutionaries; his mother was a hospital worker, especially active in unionising and recruiting women to the Bund. Edelman joined SKIF, the Bund's children's organisation and graduated to Tsukunft the youth organisation.

He became a dedicated Bundist at a time when the Bund was achieving its greatest influence. In the late 1930s, Poland's 3.3 million Jews represented more than 10% of the country's population. In the largest cities – Warsaw and Lodz they constituted a third of the population. In the municipal elections of 1938/39, the last democratic elections before the Nazi invasion, the anti-Zionist, atheistic, socialists of the Bund swept the Jewish vote. Even mainstream Zionist historians acknowledge the massive swing away from religious and Zionist parties to the Bund. For Edelman the appeal of the Bund at this moment was absolutely clear:

"The Bundists did not wait for the Messiah, nor did they plan to leave for Palestine ... Poland was their country, and they fought for a just, socialist Poland in which each nationality would have its own cultural autonomy, and in which minorities' rights would be guaranteed."

In 1945 Edelman wrote one of the first ever Holocaust memoirs – The Ghetto Fights. It was published in Polish in 1945 and then in English and Yiddish by Bundists in America in 1946. The fact that it took another 55 years before it was published in Hebrew, typifies the attitude of the Israeli state towards Edelman and the movement he represented, and the deliberate attempt to conceal the role of

1919-2009

Marek Edelman remained a controversial figure right to the end of his extraordinary life. **DAVID ROSENBERG** tells his story

Bundists and Communists while elevating the role of pioneering Zionist youth.

One of the most moving paragraphs describes May Day 1943: "...the command decided to carry out a 'holiday' action. Several groups were sent out to 'hunt down' the greatest number of Germans possible. In the evening, a May Day roll-call was held. The partisans were briefly addressed ... and the 'Internationale' was sung. The entire world, we knew, was celebrating May Day ... and everywhere forceful, meaningful words were being spoken. But never yet had the 'Internationale' been sung in conditions so different, so tragic, in a place where an entire nation had been and was still perishing. The words and the song echoed from the charred ruins and were, at that particular time, an indication that socialist youth were still fighting in the Ghetto, and that even in the face of death they were not abandoning their ideals."

Edelman upset the Israeli establishment by declaring that there were no nationalist lessons to be drawn from the Holocaust, only general lessons for humanity, and that the memory of the Holocaust didn't belong to the Jews but to everybody. And, while the Zionist construction of the ghetto fight as a forerunner of the fight for independence was premised on the actions of a brave, determined elite counterposed to the "cowardly" masses who had supposedly gone like lambs to the slaughter, Edelman spoke of the courage exhibited by those Jews who chose to stay with their families, even when staying together meant that the strong accompanied the weak to a certain death. "These people went quietly and with dignity," he said. "It is an awesome thing, when one is going so quietly to one's death. It is definitely more difficult than to go out shooting."

Edelman insisted that the uprising grew out of the countless quieter acts of passive resistance by these masses. It was, he said, "the logical sequel to four years of resistance of a population incarcerated in inhuman conditions, a humiliated, degraded population treated as sub-human ... While the criminal occupying regime denied them their right to education, culture, knowledge, they established clandestine universities, schools, welfare institutions and newspapers. These acts that generated resistance to whatever threatened their right to a dignified life, culminated in rebellion."

Life for the Jewish survivors in Poland after the war was extremely difficult and as the Soviet-backed Stalinist regime assumed total political control, it became very inhospitable for democratic socialists including the Bund. Many surviving

Bundists and Polish socialists emigrated, but Edelman chose to stay.

In 1968 the regime faced rebellion from students and intellectuals and an internal power struggle. As a deliberate diversion, the most powerful faction launched a vicious campaign against Jews, masked by anti-Zionist rhetoric, and scapegoated opponents as fifth columnists. Thousands of Jews were hounded out of their professional positions, including Edelman. Many Jews left Poland at that time, among them Edelman's paediatrician wife, Alina, and their children, who settled in Paris. Alina was a founder of Médecins Sans Frontiers.

The groups seeking to unseat the Stalinist regime a decade later were an eclectic mix from left to right – Edelman aligned himself with those that were left of centre, committed to enhancing democratic rights, especially workers' rights, and not dominated by nationalism – though he could not be responsible for those who would piggy-back and gain major influence on this movement. When the Stalinist regime fell, he served in the new democratic parliament for four years.

He maintained an internationalist outlook and in 1993 took part in an aid convoy to the besieged people of Sarajevo. His close interest in international conflicts brought him back to the questions of Palestine/Israel and Zionism.

In 1993 Edelman had an unexpected opportunity to speak directly to Israel's leading politician. Poland's new democracy, under the presidency of former trade union leader Lech Walesa, planned a major commemoration for the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Walesa knew Edelman well so there was no need for Edelman to be involved in alternative ceremonies. But Walesa knew Edelman principally in the Polish context and hadn't realised he had stepped into a minefield when he invited a delegation from Israel, led by then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, to the commemoration.

The Israelis told Walesa they would not participate if they had to stand alongside, and meet, the anti-Zionist Marek Edelman. Walesa, embarrassed, looked for a diplomatic solution. Before the platform speeches he performed a very public wreath-laying ceremony at Warsaw's marble memorial to the ghetto fighters. He walked to the memorial with arms linked to Marek Edelman and Edelman's grandchild. This made a huge impression. And then Rabin, without having to meet or shake hands with Edelman, was among the platform speakers.

Another Israeli delegate though – the left

winger Shulamit Aloni – arm-twisted Rabin into having a private meeting with Edelman. Rabin emerged very struck by Edelman's personality. Before he left Warsaw, Rabin and Edelman met again over breakfast hosted by Walesa. In the conversation Edelman reminded Rabin that, from his reading, he knew that Rabin himself had a Bundist uncle from Vilna. He then urged Rabin to make proper peace with the Palestinians. Edelman recounted later that Rabin gave an embarrassed smile.

Edelman built up and maintained contact with Palestinian students who were studying in Poland and a few years



Yugnt Shtimme (Voice of Youth), an underground Bund newspaper, Warsaw Ghetto 1941.

later made two interventions which again inflamed the Zionists but also presented a challenge to perspectives within the Palestinian movement.

In 2002, when the Palestinian resistance leader Marwan Barghout was on trial, Edelman intervened through a letter that showed his sympathy with the Palestinians as a people fighting to be free from occupation. He addressed his letter to: "Commanders of the Palestinian military, paramilitary and partisan operations" and "all the soldiers of the Palestinian fighting organisations". In doing so he was making a pointed reference to the "fighting organisation" that he was once part of.

His letter unleashed a torrent of abuse against him in Israel for daring to hint at any such comparison. And yet his letter also asked serious questions of elements of the Palestinian movement and their tactics: He argued that opposition to terror could not come from terror but must come from solidarity and brotherhood/sisterhood.

He wrote of the ghetto fighters and partisans: "We were fighting with a



hopeless determination, but our weapons were never directed against the defenceless civilian populations... In a world devoid of principles and values, despite a constant danger of death, we did remain faithful to these values and moral principles... We have never been careless with life. We have never sent our soldiers to certain death. Life is one for eternity. Nobody has the right to mindlessly take it away."

He added: "Nowhere in the world can a guerrilla force bring conclusive victory, nowhere can it be defeated by weapon-full armies... I know from my own experience that the current unfolding of events depends on you, the military leaders. The influence of political and civilian actors is much smaller."

The following year, Edelman developed a correspondence with Dr Mustafa Barghouti, Director of the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, with whom he had been brought into contact through medicine. In this correspondence Edelman sought support from Barghouti for an initiative to bring together a civil society grouping of Palestinians and Israelis committed to non-violence, to put pressure on political leaders for a just peace

His letter was received warmly but Barghouti commented in reply: "Trust will need to be built carefully. We cannot afford to string out a final settlement over another 10 years. Nor can we afford to accept words without actions from Israel – I doubt you would have stopped defending your life and those of your comrades in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising for an empty promise. You cannot expect this of Palestinians – peace must be built by people with an interest in the future; we Palestinians need to be assured that we have one."

It is typical of Edelman's outlook that he sought a just peace in the name of freedom, dignity and life – these themes that ran through everything he did. In an interview in the 1970s he said: "When one knows death so well, one has more responsibility for life."

As for Jews in the post-Holocaust era, he observed simply that "to be a Jew means always being with the oppressed, never with the oppressors". So, for him, it was perfectly natural as a Jew to align himself with the demand for justice for the Palestinians.

One of the most heartfelt commentaries on his death came from a group of around 40 individuals mainly living in America: "We mourn the death of Marek Edelman, not as a symbol or as a

commander – though he was both – but as the man who directly helped some of us when we were children and teenagers to survive and escape from the Warsaw Ghetto. Marek located hiding places and gave us hope. In the worst of times, he never forgot us and showed us gentle kindness and warmth under terrifying circumstances. Even after the war, Marek kept in touch with the children of fallen comrades, made sure that they and their parents' were not forgotten... [we] were inspired by his dedication to the living as much as his dedication to the past and the dead... We will always remember Marek with deepest love."

The former Polish dissident Adam Michnik said Edelman was "respected, admired and loved. He had the courage of a Polish mounted soldier and the sarcasm and melancholy of a Jew."

His life epitomised the courage and principles we should all aspire to. Wherever there is oppression and occupation and the denial of democratic rights and human dignity, we must hear Edelman's voice and do what we humanly can to ensure that the ghetto is still fighting and that justice prevails.

This is a shortened version of a presentation to the Palestine Society at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, in November 2009.

BURIED WITH HIS COMRADES

Friday 9th October 2009. It's only a short walk from my flat on the terrain of the former Warsaw Ghetto to the Ghetto Heroes Monument. When I get there, shortly before 11, the huge square is filled to overflowing. On the steps of the monument Marek Edelman's coffin lies flanked by a military guard of honour, amid scores of lighted candles and piles of flowers.

President Lech Kaczynski and former president Lech Walesa are present, although they will not be speaking. The main speakers, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Adam Michnik and Aleksander Smolar, are introduced by the Jewish film producer, Agnieszka Holland. After the speeches the Jewish Choir of Warsaw sings the Bundist anthem, "Di Shvuel". To my amazement, a group of young people in the crowd join in, in Yiddish. It's the first time I've sung "Di Shvuel" in a public place, in the open air, amid a large gathering, and it's hard to hold back the tears.

Just before 12 the crowd starts to move out of the square and along Mordechaj Anielewicz Street (formerly Gesia Street), the traditional route of important Jewish funeral processions, toward the Jewish Cemetery on Okupowa. Behind the coffin, the guard of honour and the banner bearers, the crowd advances slowly to the strains of a New Orleans Jazz Band playing St James Infirmary. Did Marek chose that? It would surely have amused him.

Bystanders remove their hats, and many join the procession. I learn later that the police estimated the crowd at over 2,000, but I'm moved above all by the number of young people. Many are carrying yellow tulips, the same flowers Edelman used to place on the Ghetto Heroes Monument every year on the anniversary of the uprising.

We enter the cemetery and move along the main alley, which ends at the grave of the father of modern Yiddish literature, Yitshok Leib Peretz. Edelman's open grave is next to those of the



Bund and Tsukunft ghetto fighters killed by the Germans on the Aryan side after the uprising, and close to the symbolic graves of Abrasza Blum, one of the leaders of the Jewish Combat Organisation, and Michal Klepfisz, who organised the production of Molotov cocktails for the ghetto.

At the graveside a military band plays the Polish national anthem, followed by a gun salute from the guard of honour. Poland's Chief Rabbi, Michael Schudrich, says Kaddish with Edelman's son and the other family mourners, and helps to fill in the grave.

Afterwards I walk to the Town Hall to sign the book of condolences. Among the messages I read: "We have lost someone who is truly irreplaceable, a great man, a hero to Poles and Jews alike."

Barry Smerin

AHEAD OF ITS TIME

The death of Marek Edelman coincided with the publication of a groundbreaking book about the Bund in inter-war Poland. The countless obituaries to Edelman included just passing references to the Bund, yet his coffin was draped in its red banner, emphasising how much this movement, decimated by the Nazis, still largely defined Edelman.

And yet, while he lived for most of his life in Poland as a Bundist, the movement to which he was committed had become a ghost. Mass murdered by the Nazis and then repressed by the Soviet-dominated regime that ruled Poland from the late 1940s, some remnants of the Bund were swallowed within the new and stifling political structure but most took flight. A movement always committed to diaspora, spread its wings to Australia, America, Brazil, Uruguay, Canada, France and even Israel.

The newly triumphant Zionist movement cementing new realities on the ashes of Jewish life was only too willing to help push the Bund into the dustbin of history. The Bund was an irritation and embarrassment to the Zionist narrative. A close inspection of Europe's largest Jewish community in the years just preceding the Nazi invasion, ghettoisation and destruction, shows that the 3.3 million Jews who lived in Poland registered an overwhelming rejection of Zionism as the movement to counter the fearsome forces against which they were ranged.

Zionist parties had been represented in the Polish Parliament of the 1920s, but at every significant election in the late 1930s – whether to local municipal councils, within trade unions, or to Jewish community councils (kehillas), left wing, right wing and centrist Zionists as well as religious parties lost enormous ground to the secular, anti-Zionist, revolutionary socialists of the Bund.

Conservative historians deal with this uncomfortable fact by describing the circumstances as so exceptional as to herald a freak temporary rise to political prominence of a mass radical left wing movement.

Growing up among the children of émigré Bundist survivors, Professor Jacobs was immunised from these ideological preconceptions. He is also a very thorough scholar, and has published a meticulously researched book drawing on fascinating Yiddish archive material and interviews with Bundist survivors to support an alternative perspective. Not only does he provide new and challenging explanations of why the Bundist movement became so popular, he also demonstrates that its rise to prominence was no freak episode but the logical consequence of its multi-layered, consistent work in the arenas that made a difference to the real lives of Poland's Jews. The clear implication is that, had the Nazi invasion not intervened, the Bund may well have retained its newly acquired hegemony among Poland's Jews, while Zionism, religious orthodoxy and conservatism would have continued to retreat.

Historians such as Johnpoll and Polonsky may have disdained Bundist efforts as "the politics of futility" but they cannot deny the simple facts and figures: in the municipal elections that preceded

the Nazi invasion, the Bund took 17 of the 20 seats won by Jewish parties in Warsaw, while in Lodz they took 11 out of 17 seats won by Jewish parties. The Bund celebrated majorities in around 30 towns in Poland. But the conventional historians tend, grudgingly, towards one over-riding explanation – that the Bund played a leading fight in the struggle against antisemitism and economic discrimination: this won it admiration and electoral support from many in the orthodox religious community and among those previously favouring Zionist parties.

However, for Jacobs, this is just one part of the jigsaw. His book focuses on a different set of arenas – the Bund's work in health, epitomised by the creation and maintenance of the Medem Sanatorium which assisted thousands of children threatened by respiratory illnesses, its commitment



Poster of the Bund's youth movement, Tsukunft.

to expanding sports provision through its Workers Society for Physical Education (Morgenshtern), and its willingness to offer frank sex education to Jewish working class youth in stark contrast to the more conservative communal bodies.

His book offers much insight into the daily life of the children's and youth movement of the Bund – SKIF and Tsukunft respectively. The youth movement alone numbered more than 12,000 members in the late 1930s. His research also leads him to conclude that in one important arena the Bund's progress was far less impressive – its women's movement. Although significant, it did not share the same rapid upward trajectory. Not for want of trying though. Jacobs believes that this failure indicated that the Bundist counterculture might have continued to find certain goals still beyond its reach.

Several obituaries to Edelman cast him as "the last of the Bundists", but Professor Jacobs' book reminds us of the Bund when it was at its most alive and vibrant.

David Rosenberg

BUNDIST COUNTER CULTURE IN INTER-WAR POLAND

Jack Jacobs
Syracuse University Press,
£35

SO FAITHFUL TO THE

WLODKA BLIT ROBERTSON has very warm personal memories of Marek Edelman and his wife Ala Margolis. She talked to **DAVID ROSENBERG**

When I was about six or seven years old my parents were close friends of the Lichtensteins who were very active Bundists in Warsaw. They had a daughter the same age so we used to visit them. I remember this slim, shy boy, maybe 16 or 17 years old, living with them rather in the shadows. His parents had died long before. This was Marek.

With other leaders of the Bund, the Lichtensteins left Warsaw in 1939, for the Russian frontier. Marek was left alone. I remember Marek coming once to our house with other young Bundists. My mother, who was not a Bundist – she was in Poale Zion – did some work together with the underground. These young people came for meetings and to distribute bulletins.

Marek was there when we escaped from the ghetto a few weeks before the uprising. Michal Klepfisz came to say he would take us that day. He took us to the place at the wall where the guards were bribed, and a lot of smuggling took place in the dark. Marek was not just helping us out, but probably bringing in some ammunition and food. Other people I knew from the Bund were with him. Marek knew us and talked to us and my sister remembers him helping her up the ladder.

I met Ala after the Russians came to Poland in the winter of 1945. I waited for someone to collect me from the village where I was looked after, but no one came. I couldn't stay longer in this very poor hungry

village so I went to the family I was with in Warsaw and just sat there. It was winter but I didn't have any shoes. But then one day there was a knock on the door and it was Ala Margolis and she said she had come to collect me. I didn't know that she was with Marek at the time. Ala knew my sister was alive. My sister had found her way to Warsaw and found the Jewish committee. A Jew in the street told her there was a committee and she found Wladka Peltel-Meed who was working there, who knew where I was. It was Ala who volunteered in that winter to go to the village to find me. She was a very exceptional person. By the end of the war she was 23 or 24. She looked very Jewish, very dark skinned with black hair, and very nonchalant.

She talked to me about the Jaszunski family who had come from Vilna to Lodz where she was taking me. Warsaw was completely ruined. Nobody was there. Most of the Bundists and those who were coming back from the camps mainly came to Lodz and formed groups who lived together in houses. The Bundists were like a big family helping each other.

I stayed with Grzegosz and Irena Jaszunski. They had an apartment that was confiscated from the Germans. Many young Bundists came and slept at the flat and I remember Mr Jaszunski once slept on the cooker because there was no room in the beds!

My sister was brought there as well and we stayed there until we came to London. In that period I saw Marek a lot – he was a great friend of Grzegosz and Irena Jaszunski. Young Bundists returned from the concentration camps which had been liberated, and the Tsukunft – the Bund's youth movement – was re-established.

They organised some camps in the forests and I remember that they joked about Marek and called him "Robespierre". He was recognised as this person who had been shooting – and the people who had been in the camps looked upon him as a warrior. He organised a guard for the Jewish children's homes because of the dangers of them being attacked by armed Polish hooligans. He knew how to use a gun and taught some others how to.

He was very caring. He could be quite sentimental – he could also be the opposite. In an argument he would especially take up a position that would annoy the people he was arguing with.

I found Ala very warm. Most people were very stressed and had their problems to work out. I needed somebody, not quite a mother figure, to be warm and interested in me and she always was. She seemed very energetic and there was nothing that she couldn't do.

Ala's parents, Alexander and Anna Margolis, were both doctors and her father was a very well known Bundist in Lodz. Ala's mother survived the war and she was very ambitious for Ala and for Marek. Ala tried to persuade him to leave Poland but he wouldn't. He said he had to stay to keep the memory of the ghetto. She was determined to leave. He managed to be really well known as a representative of what had happened. He used to say that if somebody wrote a letter just addressed as

PEOPLE OF THE GHETTO

"Marek" he was well known enough for the letter to come to his house!

I am pleased and proud that he remained because it had the consequences he wanted. The ghetto was remembered more than it would have been otherwise. At different commemorations he was always the representative and had a very high profile. We went to the commemoration about six years ago and I saw Marek. I had a memory of him as a very young man – he was much older but still quite well. He was more sentimental to me and the other people he knew than I had expected. There was a concert and he was given a medal. It was a very moving ceremony organised by the government. They were firing bullets in salute and calling out the names of all the fighters.

Marek didn't distinguish between the fighters and those who didn't fight. He said they were just as heroic. I share this feeling very much. I know of people who could have run away or did some of the fighting but chose to stay with their parents or children. There are those who treat the fighters as the heroes who defended our honour. For years and years I heard British Jews as well as non-Jews say that "in some way the Jews let themselves be killed, we are not like this now, in Israel we are fighting," and such obvious nonsense.

There was a lot of passive resistance in the ghetto. I knew there were secret meetings and libraries and schools, even committees we were not supposed to know about in blocks of flats, which tried to help people in particular trouble.

There was an armed action a few weeks before the uprising. We went to some friends and then in the middle of the night someone from Poale Zion who was carrying a gun led us through a secret passage part of the way. There was some shooting and some Germans were killed. I remember being led through a secret tunnel.

In his will Marek talked about how he wanted a Bundist flag for his funeral, and the Workmen's Circle in Paris supplied one which was brought to Poland by Edelman's children. I was very moved. It showed how much the Bund was part of him. He wanted it known.

He was buried among the Bundist graves in the Jewish cemetery. I know how deeply he felt about the people who died either in the uprising or just after, how much he felt that he had to do whatever he could do either for their memories or for their children. It stayed with him. His time in the ghetto, the uprising, and afterwards, when he lived among the Bundist couriers, was really his life. Marek was so faithful to that experience in the ghetto, both to those people that fought and those that didn't fight.

A FATEFUL PROMISE

Marek Edelman was one of the leaders of the 220 armed fighters who constituted the Jewish resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 19th April 1943. Two of the others were a man named Zelman Friedrich and another named Bernard Goldstein. Goldstein came to the United States in 1948 and I knew him well in my early youth; Bernard died on 7th December 1959, which was the only day of my childhood when I remember seeing my father cry.

Friedrich was credited with being the man who followed the tracks out of Warsaw that carried the railroad cars that took Jews being removed from the ghetto to an unknown destination. Friedrich reported back that the destination was a concentration camp where the Jews were being exterminated. For that effort, and for his part in the doomed uprising of 19th April, he was deemed a hero by the survivors after the war, particularly those in the Jewish Socialist Bund, which also claimed Edelman, Goldstein, and my grandparents on both sides as members.

Friedrich had a daughter named Elsa, born on 18th December 1936. Elsa was smuggled out of the ghetto to live in hiding with a Catholic family in about 1941. Thus she escaped being killed when the

Jews in the ghetto were virtually exterminated during and after the uprising.

As the ghetto was burning, Friedrich and Edelman were on a rooftop watching the final carnage. Friedrich extracted the promise from Edelman that if Edelman survived the war and Friedrich didn't, Edelman would take guardianship of Elsa.

And, indeed, that came to pass. Elsa had been about five years old when she was "adopted" by the Catholic family, and although she recalled the necessity of concealing her story during the war, she was apparently happy in her new home. So when Marek came and took her away from her familiar and comfortable surroundings, honouring the promise he'd made to her father, it was a wrenching experience for a child then only about nine years old.

The global organisation of the Bund knew about Friedrich and knew about Elsa's circumstances. They considered it anathema that the daughter of a hero could be consigned to such a bleak future, growing up in poverty-stricken, antisemitic Poland, even as the control of the hated Soviets was being established in the country.

So, the Bund hunted for an American family that would take Elsa in and raise her in the USA. My

MIKE SHATZKIN recalls how his family was touched by an untold part of Marek Edelman's life story



Young Marek Edelman (centre) with the Lichtenstein family

TO HIM, SHE WAS A FLOWER THAT HAD AMAZINGLY SURVIVED THE CONFLAGRATION OF WARSAW. BUT TO HER, HE WAS A REMINDER OF THE BEGINNING OF HER TRAUMATIC LIFE AND THE LOSS OF HER REAL FAMILY.

father's parents, Julek and Helen Shatzkin, agreed to accept the responsibility. They were then in their early 50s; my father and his younger brother, Uncle Sock, were both in their 20s, married, and starting their own families. My grandparents moved from New York City, where they had lived in Manhattan and Brooklyn since arriving as immigrants in 1920, to northern Westchester. They built a house and prepared for a new life, raising a daughter in suburban post-World War II America. The political clout of the Bund found sympathetic help from New York Republican Senator Irving Ives, who sponsored the special legislation that allowed Elsa to immigrate legally to the United States.

Elsa was a girl of great talent: very beautiful and also brilliant. She was also always troubled, always haunted by the lives (intentionally plural) she had left behind. The spiritual gap between this young woman striving to be a "normal" American and my grandparents, who were culturally still very Old World, created strains. My grandmother was never particularly comfortable with the arrangement; my grandfather was smitten with his new daughter and wanted to spoil and indulge her. From the perspective of her ten and a half years younger nephew (which I was), Aunt Elsa was hip and pretty and virtually unapproachable for most of my childhood.

In the mid-1950s, Elsa graduated from Lakeland High School and went off to Cornell, majoring in English, from which she graduated in about 1957. She went on to study for a master's at Columbia, where she met and fell in love with a young historian named Robert Dallek. They got married in

about 1958. By that time, Elsa had changed her name to Ilse. I remember that Robert always pronounced it as she spelled it; she remained Elsa to the rest of us.

In about 1960, Ilse had a nervous breakdown. I remember visiting her in a mental institution of some kind. But she got out, ostensibly recovered; her marriage to Robert resumed. He continued to study for his PhD and she for her Master's.

Bernard Goldstein, like Marek Edelman, was a leader of the armed resistance. For the 10 years I knew him in my childhood, he was much like a third grandfather. My father had translated his memoir into English and it was published by the house Dad worked for, The Viking Press, as *The Stars Bear Witness* in 1948. (We have a copy of *The Wall* inscribed to Dad from John Hersey because

Bernard's book was critical research material.)

Elsa was always very uncomfortable in Bernard's presence, which was very painful for him. He wanted to relate to her affectionately; he had known her father; to him, she was a flower that had amazingly survived the conflagration of Warsaw. But to her, he was a reminder of the beginning of her traumatic life and the loss of her real family. These perspectives could never be reconciled.

I remember spending the night at the apartment of Aunt Ilse and Uncle Robert in my early teens along with my friend, Tony Klein (now a Vermont State Legislator), after a rained-out Yankee game we had intended to go to. Ilse was then in her mid-20s. She and Robert came in from an evening out and Ilse proceeded to change into short shorts and start cleaning up the apartment. Tony was agog. This is your aunt, he said? His aunts were all old and dowdy; mine was young and vital and attractive. And tortured.

In October of 1962, Ilse committed suicide. She checked into a hotel on the upper west side, near where she and Robert lived, and took an overdose of sleeping pills. Apparently she left a note; I never saw it. My father had the task of identifying the body at the morgue. My grandfather went into an immediate depression; the pain of losing an adopted daughter he loved was compounded by the feeling of having failed in a political responsibility to the Bund. The electro-shock treatments prescribed at that time to snap him out of it were blamed by my family for the blood cancer that ensued and killed him in November of 1964.

In college, Ilse's best friend was a woman whose married name was Faith Sale; her husband was the historian and social thinker Kirkpatrick Sale. Faith became an editor at Putnam. She died, much too young, of cancer a decade ago. Before Faith died, I had lunch with her to talk about my aunt. This was more than 30 years after Ilse's death, but Faith was still touched to uncontrollable tears by recalling the tragedy and pain of her friend's existence.

In 1980, my parents' proclivity for going where the revolutions were took them to Poland, where Solidarity was leading the change which ultimately swept across the Soviet-dominated countries. Marek Edelman, by then a prominent cardiologist, was a key player in Solidarity. He and my parents connected.

As I understood it from Dad, Edelman regretted that he had ever taken Elsa from her Polish Catholic family. He had done that to honour the commitment he had made to her father, and then he relinquished her to the Bund's equally well-intentioned and equally ill-fated desire to find her a better life in America. He felt pain similar to my grandfather's. He had tried to save this girl, but the demons within her played cruel tricks with those intentions.

There are few of us left to remember Elsa: my Uncle Sock's widow; my sisters; and my cousins in Sock's family. What we're left with is the lesson that great tragedy can come from the best of intentions, and the fact that some victims of Hitler died two decades after he did, my aunt and my grandfather being among them.

COSMETICS WITHOUT FOUNDATION

The last British report on Women in the Jewish Community, in 1994, was a PR disaster. Women who were beginning to organise and were finding a voice through the Jewish Women's Network expressed anger at the discrimination and silencing they experienced in the community. But they were angrier still at the benign spin put on the findings of their report by the Chief Rabbi, who had initiated the research.

Fifteen years on, last June, The Board of Deputies of British Jews (BoD) published a new review, *Connection, Continuity and Community: British Jewish Women Speak Out*. Like the earlier report, this project was headed by Rosalind Preston OBE, a highly respected figure in the community who, in the early 1990s, had been the first woman to be elected Vice President of the BoD. The aim was to see how Jewish women were faring in the light of the social, political, economic and technological changes that had occurred since 1994.

Publication of the report was covered by a single Jewish Chronicle article which focused on its authors rather than the women surveyed. In November, the report was used as the focus of an interfaith women's forum; this merited four short paragraphs in the JC, which were little more than a précis of the BoD's single press release on the subject. In short, the communal establishment has avoided bad publicity – and any risk of debate about the important issues the report raises – by avoiding any publicity at all.

This is a pity because the survey shows that after a decade and a half, Jewish women are still angry. The report puts it in measured terms, describing, "something of a reality gap between the ways in which Jews today live (and will increasingly live) their diverse lives, and the ways in which the leaders of institutional Judaism would ideally wish they might live their lives".

The survey points to this conclusion despite the researchers' clear assumption that Jewish identity is based solely on religion and religious institutions. Although the authors claim that the report reflects the diversity of Jewish women's experience – even expressing the extraordinary belief that "it represents the authentic voice of female Jewry in Britain today" – the researchers' concern is with trying to match up a fast-moving secular world with a supposedly unchangeable religious tradition.

The report acknowledges that the patterns of people's lives have undergone profound shifts in the last few decades, recognising that young people are increasingly choosing to live together and not necessarily to marry, that their partners may not be Jewish or of the opposite sex, and that divorce is rising. However it describes these changes as indicating that "[t]he historical pattern of a monolithic, married Jewish community is slowly but surely being undermined," adding the rather gross image of "seepage at both ends."

It's a pity that this attempt to address the clearly expressed and often painful problems that are distorting women's lives is compromised by being predicated on the unverified notion that the community was once monolithic (when was that?): that in the good old days most people led stable heterosexual married lives and participated in

synagogue life, but now it's all falling apart.

The problem of predicating the research on an acceptance of religious rules arrives shockingly in the first section of the report, entitled "Connection", which states: "We cannot afford to be exclusive. The arithmetic is not difficult. The genetic pool of born-Jews is very small. Unless we effectively engage those already affiliated Jews and embrace others who feel ... disconnected from communal life then we will see an unconscious drift away from Jewish heritage and an inevitable demographic downward spiral."

They're right about one thing: it's not the arithmetic that's difficult. However, the genetic definition of who is a Jew is so difficult to stomach that many of us have rejected utterly the religious authorities that insist on perpetuating it.

This religious focus is reflected in the report's emphasis on the rights and wrongs of synagogue life. There is a disproportionate number of quotes from women complaining about being marginalised in the synagogue because they are single, or about being relegated to "tea-making and charity", disenfranchised, excluded and deprived of access to religious education. But far from leading to the conclusion that women should walk away from these arbitrarily discriminatory set-ups and tell the rabbis where to get off, the authors accept the assertion of the religious so-called leaders who perpetrate these injustices: that there is no way of being Jewish other than through affiliation to their institutions.

This is more disturbingly expressed in the "Continuity" section, which asserts "the critical role that women have to play in securing their children's Jewish identity". Despite a nod towards "parents" and "grandparents", there follow pages of quotes from women who feel guilty or inadequate about not having the knowledge or education to "impart a sense of what it means to be Jewish". The authors consolidate this by saying: "Unless we find the means to empower women through knowledge there is a real danger that the community will atrophy."

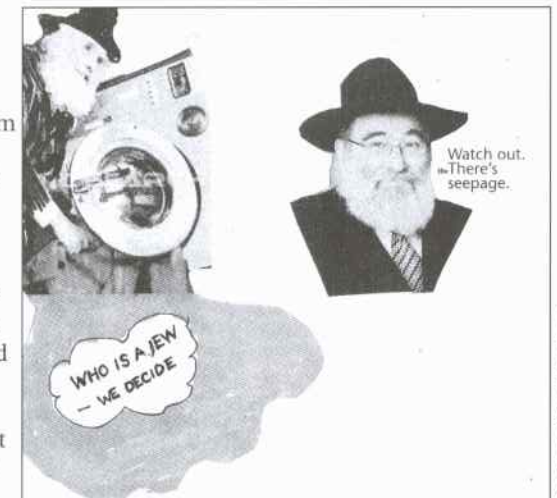
I don't believe that the authors of this report are fundamentalists, but this claim that women are the essential and predominant force in passing on ancient traditions is what characterises fundamentalists, in all religions. It is this that is used to justify controlling women's behaviour, sexuality and dress, to define the limits of their educational, social, economic and political opportunities, and to silence their complaints. Here is the central problem with the latest report on Jewish women: instead of challenging the ideology that underpins the oppression of women, it colludes with it and is left with nowhere to go but to ask nicely if the rabbis and community leaders will behave a bit better than they have done for the last few millennia. I think the answer will be "No".

Can the Jewish establishment provide a role for women in the 21st century or are their attitudes still biblical?
JULIA BARD examines the conclusions of a new report.

Identity card of Zelman Friedrich, father of Elsa and Edelman's comrade.



This is an edited version of a post from The Idea Logical Blog, www.idealblog.com/blog published by Mike Shatzkin from New York.



Cartoon/Ruth Lukom

FROM CHARLESTON

MIKE GERBER looks at the background to George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* after

Recession time, and the living ain't easy. So it was great to take time off from the global downturn and succumb to the seductive strains of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, as performed in an adaptation by Cape Town Opera (CTO) at London's Royal Festival Hall.

My adoration of Gershwin's music goes back to my childhood and the 78rpm disc we had of his "symphonic jazz" composition, *Rhapsody in Blue*. Gershwin, a Jazz Age American-Jew, is equally famous for his Broadway show songs that have inspired countless jazz musicians. But *Porgy*, composed as a "folk-opera" for an all-black company of singers at its 1935 Broadway premiere (following a try-out in Boston), is perhaps the finest representation of his art.

While the Gershwin original was based on a novel by white writer DuBose Heyward about a black fishing community in Charleston, South Carolina, in America's deep south, CTO transposed the storyline to the awful realities of apartheid South Africa. Before I come to the CTO show, some reflections on the racial controversy that has dogged *Porgy* as originally conceived.

Like *Blue Monday*, Gershwin's youthful attempt at a black-themed opera for George White's "girlie" revue *The Scandals* of 1922 – *Porgy* is set in the "black side of town"; in *Blue Monday*'s case Harlem, a district Gershwin frequented in his native New York. There are certain similarities of plot: both deal with the seamier side of life and a heroine – Vi in *Blue Monday*; Bess in *Porgy* – embroiled in a love triangle.

However, whereas *Blue Monday* was written to be performed in blackface,

Gershwin resisted overtures from Al Jolson to play *Porgy*. Jolson had popularised Gershwin's "Swanee" early in the composer's career, but when DuBose Heyward suggested Jolson for *Porgy*, Gershwin reportedly replied: "The sort of thing that I should have in mind for *Porgy* is a much more serious thing than Jolson could ever do." Instead Gershwin stuck out for black performers in all the key roles and chorus.

Musically, *Porgy* is far superior to *Blue Monday*. There were echoes from the earlier work, but in the decade and a half between the two projects, Gershwin continuously strove to develop his innate gifts, taking tuition from masters in orchestration. *Porgy* engaged him in the most intensive endeavour of his career. He removed himself to Folly Beach, near Charleston, to closely observe the lives, mores and music of the black fishing community on which he would base the work. Nearly two years were spent composing and orchestrating *Porgy*, while Heyward worked up the dialogue and collaborated with Gershwin's brother Ira on lyrics. Performers were selected, including Ann Brown as Bess and Todd Duncan as *Porgy*. Duncan was invited to Gershwin's Manhattan studio to hear the brothers, George at the piano, sing the incomplete score. Though, as recounted in Joan Peyser's George Gershwin biography, Duncan was "appalled" by their voices, he recalled: "I was in heaven. Those beautiful melodies in this new idiom – it was something I had never heard before."

That was the Gershwin magic, alchemising the influences of folk and work-song, spirituals, street cries, jazz, blues and opera. What emerges from this creative cauldron is not some "world music" mish-mash but pure Gershwin gold, songs and orchestration unmistakably impressed with his personality and – I do not use the word lightly – genius.

Jewish music seeped into the mix too. Film composer Bernard Herrmann recalled Gershwin telling him about "Summertime", the opening song in *Porgy*: "People may think it sounds too

Yiddish." Normally, that wouldn't have been a problem for Gershwin; he was a habitué of the Yiddish musical theatre and his Jewish heritage infused much of his oeuvre. Before *Porgy*, he had even begun working towards a Jewish-themed opera, *The Dybbuk*. Isaac Goldberg, Gershwin's first biographer, revealed in a 1936 edition of *B'nai Brith Magazine* that he had heard Gershwin playing snatches of that score and said: "It would be a pity, from an artistic as well as psychological standpoint, if Gershwin, during his experiments with Negro-American and native American material, did not find a libretto of Jewish atmosphere for the exercise of his expanding gifts." One can only grieve that Gershwin did not live long enough to produce such a work, or indeed any further work; he was only in his late 30s when he died from a brain tumour in 1937 and surely hadn't peaked creatively. But *Porgy* was an awesome way to cap his career.

What, though, of the racial controversy? Todd Duncan, the first *Porgy*, asserted shortly before he died in 1998: "This business about *Porgy and Bess* demeaning the Negro race is all poppycock. Gershwin wanted authenticity." Gershwin was satisfied that *Porgy* "deals with Negro life in America, it brings to the operatic form elements that have never before appeared in opera ... the humor, the superstition, the religious fervor and the irrepressible high spirits of the race". Many blacks, though, were offended. Duke Ellington, Gershwin's contemporary, thought the music "grand" but decried *Porgy*'s "lampblack negroisms".

In truth, if the reader will forgive me, it is not so black and white. Musicologist John Andrew Johnson, in an essay about *Blue Monday* and its relation to *Porgy*, noted that *Blue Monday* "was a long way from minstrelsy ... it was fundamentally flawed as a serious work about blacks, perpetuating black stereotypes while simultaneously stepping away from such stereotype and grappling with serious, universal emotions ... flawed, too, like many would say of *Porgy and Bess*, because it presents degrading (and many would say racially derogatory) situations without providing social commentary, a pre-requisite for what Duke Ellington termed an 'honest negro musical play'."

James Weldon Johnson however, a leading black literary figure in the Harlem Renaissance, praised *Porgy* for employing more than 60 black performers and said that in *Porgy* "the Negro removed all doubts about his ability to do acting that requires thoughtful interpretation and intelligent skill", while as a play it "loomed

TO SOWETO

watching Cape Town Opera's production

high above every Negro drama that has ever been produced". Johnson's composer brother, J Rosamond Johnson, also defended the work.

White composer, Virgil Thomson, whose own black-cast opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, premiered a year earlier, castigated *Porgy*. Thomson, an establishment scion, wrote in *Modern Music*: "Gershwin has not and never did have any power of sustained musical development ... The material is straight from the melting pot ... I do not like fake folklore, nor fidgety accompaniments, nor bittersweet harmony, nor six-part choruses, nor gefilte fish orchestration."

A fishy whiff, here, of antisemitism and WASP snobbishness. As I have written in my book, *Jazz Jews*: "Gershwin's detractors from the privileged classical realm were, I warrant, jealous that he, a Jewish first-generation product of multi-ethnic New York and Tin Pan Alley so effortlessly out-trumped them."

Debate about the portrayal of blacks in *Porgy* will continue, but Gershwin's opera will live on because the music is peerless. Black soprano Grace Bumbry, born the year Gershwin died, who performed as Bess in the New York Metropolitan Opera's 1985 production, put *Porgy* in perspective: "We had come too far to have to regress to 1935. My way of dealing with it was to see that it was really a piece of Americana, of American history, whether we liked it or not. Whether I sing it or not, it was still going to be there."

Yes, it's still going to be there, like the *Merchant of Venice* with its antisemitic characterisation of Shylock, for modern companies to reinterpret along progressive lines, should they so choose. Which brings us to the Cape Town Opera *Porgy*.

When an all-white group in apartheid South Africa requested permission to stage *Porgy and Bess*, Ira Gershwin refused. It should only ever be performed in its entirety with blacks in the lead roles, he insisted, and inscribed this in his will. South Africa outlived apartheid, and in Cape Town Opera's UK tour, black performers predominated, both as soloists and chorus.

The production transposed the action inland to a hijacked building in Soweto, where police slaughtered black anti-apartheid protestors in the 1960 Sharpsville massacre. Other than that, CTO deviated little from the original story, centering on Bess's vacillating relations with boyfriend Crown, crippled beggar *Porgy* and pusher Sportin' Life, in a plot that involves gambling and murder.

Porgy as adapted by CTO opens a

window on the horrors of the past, but at the Royal Festival Hall in London it felt like a celebration of the new South Africa, 15 years into its existence.

Thankfully, CTO staged the entire opera – some 2 hours 45 minutes – so one could fully savour not only Gershwin's delectable songs but also all the underlying jazzy/bluesy harmonic twists of instrumental passages, choruses and solos. American conductor, David Charles Abell, interpreted the score thrillingly. The instrumentalists were not consigned to the customary orchestra pit, but were on stage in front of the cast.

This might account for my one quibble in an otherwise wonderful evening: although I enjoyed the voices of the cast and the joyous conviction with which they performed, it was a struggle at times to pick out their words. A pity because, as CTO artistic director Christine Crouse confirmed to me, "We have changed some of the lyrics." She is white, as is CTO's general manager Michael Williams, so the company, which celebrated its 10th birthday in May 2009, is hopefully emblematic of post-apartheid South Africa. As a non-profit venture, CTO has survived without subsidy from South Africa's government. Crouse would not comment on this, but CTO gets by on donations, lottery money and the patronage of a loyal audience.

The UK tour of *Porgy*, which also included Cardiff and Edinburgh, was made possible through support from the philanthropic foundation established by South African-born Jew Sir Donald Gordon. "Nobody has seen this production in South Africa," said Crouse. There was, she said, virtually no black audience for opera in the apartheid years. "It has improved, but we have by no means succeeded to fully integrate our audiences."

How much, I asked her, does the South Africanised *Porgy* chime with cast members' own experience? "The cast loved it because they felt that they owned the story. The brutality was often a reflection on the apartheid years and what some of them really experienced. Some of our people live in areas where death, poverty and violence are still very much part of



society. But there is also lots of laughter, happiness and music, singing and dance."

Few CTO singers have had formal opera training, and there is hardly an abundance of black-themed operatic works. So what is the prospect of new operas being commissioned for CTO which integrate the music of black South Africa, such as kwela and township jazz? "Cape Town Opera has a tradition of creating new works, some which have been exclusively written for black singers," says Crouse. "Michael Williams is writing a piece called *Mandela's African Songbook*, which will include kwela and township jazz. We have also a jazz indigenous opera called *Love and Green Onions*, which was written for the company. We are continually looking for new works that will be suited to the strengths of our company."

There is no doubt, however, that *Porgy* has profoundly touched the black cast members. "When I sing *Porgy* I feel everything inside me. It touches me a lot," affirmed Xolela Sixaba. Ntobeko Rwanqa, who doubled as *Porgy* and Crown, said: "*Porgy and Bess* is not about race, colour or creed – it's about being human. For this opera, and its music, it doesn't matter if you're white, black or yellow. Anybody can relate to *Porgy and Bess*."

"Fear of the police still runs deep," he added. "In the '70s they kicked you like anything, they beat you like anything. I remember how police picked up and planted drugs on my father, a church minister. They would mess everything up."

Pretty Yende, who played Clara, concurred that the scars of racism are still here. "You can still see how white people treat black people. But I also think we are really living in a time of possibilities. During apartheid there were so many things black people couldn't do, but I am of a generation which can – there are many possibilities for us now."

Jazz Jews, Mike Gerber's new 656-page book on Jewish connections in jazz, is published by Five Leaves Publications, price £24.99 hbk. Further details from: www.fiveleaves.co.uk



Near death experiences

A WOMAN OF WORTH WHO DIDN'T COUNT

Last autumn I went with my brother and mother to visit my father's grave in Bushey. It was the final weekend before the Jewish New Year – a mistake to choose this date of course. Once we'd waded through what felt like Golders Green Central to get into the area where the graves are, we then had to do the "long march" to reach the graveside – it felt a bit like dodging the trolleys in a supermarket, only these were of course the buggies for people with disabilities to be whizzed about in.

My mother is elderly and not very well at the moment, and my brother has multiple disabilities; both eschew any assistance and insist on walking. So we began our march and of course it was freezing and windy – in other words a typically bleak visit to Bushey, with no physical features to stir our spirits. I comforted myself with the very ideas that Julia Bard (JS58) described so well in her piece: "It's meant to be stark – just think about the person and those who are alive." It was ok, but not evocative.

After that we went to the cemetery in Willesden, which no longer has burials, to visit my grandmother's grave. I have not done this for some years. The contrast was fascinating. The weather was just as unforgiving but the cemetery is full of plane trees, shrubs, late Victorian tombstones and vaults, nooks and

crannies, and instantly we felt lifted. I wonder if it is of significance that it is not run by any single element of the Jewish establishment? We were almost alone and really enjoyed the experience. We spoke about our family and how we felt about death and left full of memories. I was fine until we remembered the funeral of my grandmother's lifelong best friend, at Bushey.

Rachel Bernard never married. She was very clever and was one of the first women to work in the Civil Service. She campaigned all her working life for women to have equal rights in the workplace and to be members of the union, and had major achievements. She also ran, along with my grandmother, the local branch of The Pioneer Women in Maida Vale, a very charming group of elderly Jewish women who were part of the Co-operative movement. She attended a Reform Synagogue regularly throughout her life and volunteered as much of her time as she could – but always on the "welfare" front.

Rachel was of diminutive growth, and had a number of physical disabilities which were extremely challenging for her. I loved her and found her very beautiful. Massively clever and stimulating but never intimidating, she was hugely respected and well loved by many.

NO CONSOLATION FROM THE RABBIS

Having just read Ruth Lukom's article on Jewish funerals (JS58), I thought I would write, having undergone a very similar experience. I agree with everything she and Julia Bard said, and completely understand her rage. The impersonality and lack of feeling of it all is truly outrageous.

I was able to say something at my dad's *levoye* (funeral) because both Dad and I knew the rabbi, who was quite happy for me to talk – even though the rabbi's oration wasn't entirely appropriate. But when my Mum

died, there was a new rabbi who refused point blank to let me say anything, even though he knew I had been able to reflect on my Dad's life.

The mix of indignation and helplessness nearly drove me mad, and I decided I would simply say something and ignore the rabbi, but my sisters would have been upset had I intervened. Anyway, at home among friends and relatives it was much easier to talk about Mum, and I really did find it a great consolation to talk about her life among people who knew and loved her.

She outlived my grandmother and we continued to visit her regularly. When she died, we went to her funeral – we being me, my mother, brother, step-father and my own partner (who is not Jewish). There was an astonishing number of people there considering she was in her 80s and with no immediate family of her own. Most of them were elderly, and many were frail but they came because of their love and respect for Rachel. However, of those present, the only men were those in our little group, and of course my partner "did not count". This meant that the minyan (the religious quorum for prayers), was eight men short, so there could be no proper service in spite of my entreaties, deemed inappropriate of course.

Even now I can hardly write this as it fills me with such anger. This was a woman who was devoted to serving others, but the others she chose to serve were women – and just as they didn't count for enough in her own lifetime, the terms of the religious observance at Jewish funerals are such that she did not count enough in her own death. We were all cheated of giving her the send-off she deserved. I have never been able to forget this betrayal. For me, this is reason enough to be part of the Jewish Socialists' Group – we have to be able to do much better than this.

Karen Merkel, London

Today I was at the cremation of a friend's mother; it was so dignified, and the participants were able to talk about her as much as they liked. Perhaps we can have alternative funerals and stone-settings. (Let's not go into the stranglehold the United Synagogue have over gravestones and the virtual monopoly of a single stonemason!)

I wish I'd written about this at the time, if only to prepare others, but I'm really glad Ruth Lukom and Julia Bard have done so in Jewish Socialist.

Ralph Levinson, London

COMEDY OF ERRORS

Ivor Dembina, in "Occupying Safer Territory" (JS58), writes, regarding Jewish comedians, "publicly debunking your own nation is acceptable but targeting your own racial group isn't ... it (Israel) is not their nation ..."

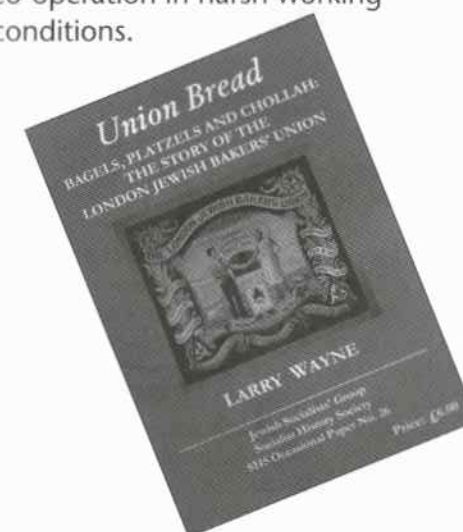
As far as I know, in British law, Jews (and Sikhs), because of their self-identification rules, are both an ethnic and a religious group (for the purposes of the census). That is why two separate questions appear.

I was not aware Jews formed a "racial group" and this is certainly not the case according to any form of Judaism.

And, unfortunately, non-Israeli Jews may voluntarily acquire Israeli nationhood (and add it to one/several existing one(s), in the case of Britons, Americans and French men and women).

David Shepherd, London

Union Bread is the first study of the London Jewish Bakers' Union – and, indeed, the first detailed account of any of the Jewish trade unions – is a story of division and solidarity, of struggle and co-operation in harsh working conditions.



Union Bread: Bagels, Platzels and Chollah – The story of the London Jewish Bakers Union by Larry Wayne published by Socialist History Society and the Jewish Socialists' Group, is available from JSJ, BM3725, London WC1N 3XX, price £6 + 75p p&p.. Please make cheques payable to JSJ.

DRIVEN

by David Kessel

If you truly love your girl you will clean her toilet

In memoriam Cesar Vallejo

A poor Slav, thinking London paved with gold,
Dies in a Whitechapel street.
Misanthropy doesn't ride on the top of a bus
to the edge of chaos,
but in a flash BMW
A can of Special, a badge of honour
Legless by midday
Londoners play at secret policemen
A pimp in Merc the most respected
A city fit for models and mercenaries
Are all suits straights, straight Gods
Gods with spiv gadgets, gimmicks, and guns?
Insane through arrogance, the sirens of
blindness

Chelsea youth fucks like a machine gun
Doesn't know the girl exists.
Footfall of wondrous Bengali lass.
has to make her way into likely bondage
Shattered on all fronts
A passing bus driver with angina,
How then discuss experimental poetry?
Falangists disaffect with body and words,
Seduce, anger and spit outside my window
Each one part cipher, part hyena.
And Peter Lilley's pet hyena
Who makes a noise like a throat being cut.
Toff looks at his watch, thinks he'll never die
Mummy's money, Daddy's land;
Turning the oceanic against the poor
Breaks his own heart.
Dog – eat – dog market; time and again
capitalist goes to the altar
to purge his rapacious invisibility
A lovey-dovey Radio 4 conversation
About genocide
And MIS a distant demented aunt
With the intelligence of a hard-boiled egg
A young Woody Guthrie with his guitar
And a can of white lightning
Staggers into oblivion
Prepossession, rubbish in an alleyway,
Wanton spunk in a young woman's cunt.
Vodka and chips. Poetry and lies
The most downtrodden Englishman
Smokes Mayfair Superkings
"Mummy, can we take a packed lunch on the
outing?"
To Auschwitz?
If black is the colour of earth
White is the colour of rain
All useful hate begins with self-hate
Pathetic to spit in the street,
Hatred and TB
Manly to listen in a backyard
To a robin singing

MYTH, REALITY AND HISTORY

THE INVENTION OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Shlomo Sand
Verso, £18.99

Most of what you think you know about Jewish history is a myth, from the kingdoms of David and Solomon, through the Romans' exile of the Jews from Palestine, to the emergence of the Yiddish-speaking milieu of Eastern Europe by German Jews migrating eastwards to escape persecution.

That's the claim of Shlomo Sand's book, provocatively titled *The Invention of the Jewish People*. By choosing the word "invention", Sand begins to stake his claim that the account of Jewish history with which we are familiar is not reliable – so "invention" in the sense of inventing the facts – and has been consciously created.

This is a fascinating, dense but patchy work, and one that requires careful reading. Some of the patchiness comes from the fact that it is really three quite different books locked inside a single cover.

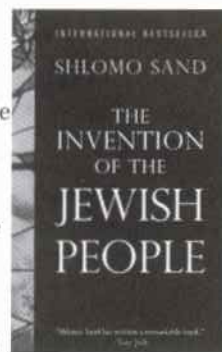
The first book is a scholarly account of developments in the writing of Jewish history – a history of historians and histories. Here we are introduced to pioneers like Isaak Marcus Jost, to Heinrich Graetz, and to the arrival of Zionism in the making of Jewish history (and History Departments). This part of the book is based on a very strong theoretical approach to the relationship between nationalism and emergent national intelligentsias; Sand argues that though we tend to think of nationalism as premised on a pre-existing entity called the nation, in real history nationalism often comes before the nation – with nationalist movements bringing into being the entity that they claim to represent. This is particularly the case in

the multinational empires of Central and Eastern Europe, where intellectuals who couldn't get their share of state patrimony created their own small ponds in which they could be the big fish. Sand recognises that all nations are to some extent "invented" – not only the later arrivals of Eastern Europe but also the major players like the English and the French.

The second book is a popular account of some key episodes in Jewish history. Sand debunks the widely held belief that the Bible can be relied on as a historical source, marshalling arguments from biblical criticism and archaeology. (This shouldn't really be necessary at all in the 21st century, but a surprising number of intelligent people think that the stories in the Bible of the Exodus, or the united monarchy of David and Solomon, are grounded in history rather than in myth.)

More importantly, he examines the historical evidence for the Romans' exile of the Jews from their land, and finds it wanting. And he shows the importance of conversions in the creation of large Jewish populations, both in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages – there are long treatments of the Jews of Southern Arabia, North Africa and Spain, and of course the Khazars.

The third book is the most polemical, focusing



on the way that the specifically Zionist account of Jewish history has been used to construct a sense of Jewish identity which serves particular political ends. It looks at the impact of this process on Palestinian Arabs, Jews in Israel, and Jews elsewhere. It's hard to find fault with much of this analysis, or with Sand's conclusion that Israel is a "liberal ethnocracy" – with the word "liberal" used in a technical sense rather than as a term of approbation. One almost wishes that Sand had also taken aim at diasporic constructions of Jewish identity – the recent rows over the admissibility of converts to faith schools in the UK would have been an interesting addition to the story.

However, while this section will certainly be the part that is most interesting to readers of Jewish Socialist, the latter should be aware that Sand is throwing a lot of secular Jewish identity baby out with the Zionist bathwater. He quotes with approval Rabbi Yeshaiah Karelitz's dictum that "the [secular-Jewish] cart is empty", to bolster his argument that "There has never been secular Jewish culture common to all the Jews in the world". He puts the boot into Simon Dubnow as a proto-Zionist, even though Dubnow's thinking on Jewish nationality inspired alternative strands of Jewish nationalism and Dubnow himself was an inconstant Zionist and more often associated with diaspora autonomism.

Sand seems to be a very nice, thoughtful person. Some of the hatchet-job reviews on his book are unfair, if not unsurprising. Although he's been accused of lack of sensitivity to the Jewish

predicament, a prologue to the book full of quite moving personal anecdotes shows the very opposite. On the issue of how Israelis and Palestinians might be reconciled, he is a pragmatic post-Zionist rather than an "Arab Nationalist of the Jewish Persuasion", with lots of useful insights – and some wonderful stories about how the early Zionist settlers hoped to recruit the Palestinian fellahin to an ethnically-based secular Jewish identity.

But he's not been too well served by his editors. The book contains at least one howler that I spotted (in which the "Marxist Zionist" Borochoff changes his mind as a result of an episode 12 years after his death), and there may be more. There's a long digression on recent research into Jewish genetics that doesn't seem particularly well-informed or useful. There are some odd omissions in the sources that Sand acknowledges – no mention of Ilan Halevi's *History of the Jews*, which covers much of the same ground, no mention of Abram Leon (though a longish account of Kautsky's views on the Jewish Question), not even a mention of Hobsbawm on "the invention of tradition". The discussion of Khazar history says much about how it has been ignored by Zionist historians, but nothing about how it has been appropriated by antisemites (including Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent*).

Ultimately, Sand's book is an important one. It deserves reading, and Sand deserves some support for writing it – though of course, in the great tradition of the left, such support should be critical if unconditional.

Jeremy Green

AMERICA'S LOSS WAS BRITAIN'S GAIN

LEFT OF KARL MARX: THE POLITICAL LIFE OF BLACK COMMUNIST CLAUDIA JONES

Carole Boyce-Davies
Duke University Press, 2009

There were undoubtedly many sides to Claudia Jones; at first glance, her life has two aspects, between being born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, 1915, and dying in London 1965. Harlem raised, she had journalistic aspirations, possibly writing for both the *Amsterdam News* and the *Harlem Bulletin* before joining the Young Communist League, for whom she wrote in their *Weekly Review*. Claudia then reached adulthood as a Communist, working full-time for the CPUSA. Her second life was of course British, which saw her activism blossom both as a newspaper publisher of the *West Indian Gazette* and as cultural promoter of the annual Carnival. Beyond this, there's much to admire in both Jones and her biographer, who peels back many layers to situate her subject in historical context.

Boyce-Davies unpacks Jones' New York City experience as a CP journalist for their *Daily Worker* and *Political Affairs*. The party was overwhelmingly white, but Claudia was adamant that the Negro woman in the USA was central to the struggles of class and gender, and that no political emancipation could happen without a level playing field for women of colour. Her arguments were a mix of Marxism and African-American history, from Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman to the then-current US State Department harassment of Paul Robeson. In the course of this effort from the 1940s

and '50s, she wrote a regular *Daily Worker* column, "Half the World", and toured the speech circuit with white party member Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

Barely mentioned is an important fact readers might miss: Caribbean immigrants to New York City in the early and mid-20th century were highly resented by the mainstream Negro community. This is because they were generally better-educated, brought with them the immigrants' greater entrepreneurial drive, and "talked funny". This is why Claudia Jones didn't become a major Harlem force, for, it appears, she never really became an African-American. Boyce-Davies claims that Jones provided "substantial links to black communities in New York", but there's no evidence that she wrote for non-Communist Negro newspapers or magazines, or was in any other way a presence.

There is rightful bias in this book towards the Caribbean background, as evidenced by the author admonishing Paul Gilroy for having no such component to his work, *Black Atlantic*. Contemporary communist Jews get a look in, as do academics of recent decades, such as Angela Davis and Harry Goulbourne, who have since written on either Jones's community or communism.

I grew up in the States but it's always puzzled me why the hunt to sniff-out and expel "commies" was relentless in the decade or so after the Second

World War. The immorality and disregard for free expression aside, if there was ever a time when the CPUSA had a real chance, it had been during the Great Depression. So to imprison Claudia Jones and other party members, when their influence had shrunk and was so confined (no radio or television for the likes of them) was worse than anything the term "McCarthyism" could convey. This said, you may agree with me that her 1955 deportation to Britain was the best thing to happen to her; she connected deeply with the Caribbean community here, as she hadn't been able to with her urban American black neighbours.

Claudia's 10-year London experience changed things. She fired-up the *West Indian Gazette* in 1958, when it found a ready, post-Windrush, potential audience of 80,000. So it's no surprise that the newspaper survived and the initially indoor Carnival succeeded as well. Calypso stars Lord Beginner and Lord Kitchener had actually been Windrush passengers back in 1948.

The few errors I've found are minor and just due to over-enthusiasm by Boyce-Davies for her subject. It's not right to call the well-loved, courageous publisher and author John La Rose an "academic"; he wasn't a professor and didn't even graduate. There's no need to puff his CV – isn't his New Beacon Books legacy enough to marvel at?

The only serious lapse is personal. There's Jones' poor health; she had a bad heart but no specifics about that, save that it failed her fatally at 50. It's not

until the end of the book that her tuberculosis at age 17 is mentioned. And family? Her brief New York marriage to Abraham Scholnick, is given briefer notice, but apparently that was her way when the subject came up. These aspects of Jones' life are better noted in Marika Sherwood's excellent 1999 biography (Lawrence & Wishart); it's mainly the political Claudia Jones that Boyce-Davies supplies.

It would be a shame if Jones was remembered just for starting the annual Carnival in London, even though she faced black resistance for mixing the culture of partying with wider political struggle. This book reveals a tireless campaigner, publisher, editor, writer and poet, and an internationally travelled speaker trying to stand her ground with men who felt their positions threatened. Carole Boyce-Davies promises to produce an edited compilation of Claudia's early columns and essays, and these would be most welcome. Some of the London writings are already included in Buzz Johnson's earlier *I Think of My Mother* (Karia Press, 1985). She must have been inspirational, for such an exciting life.

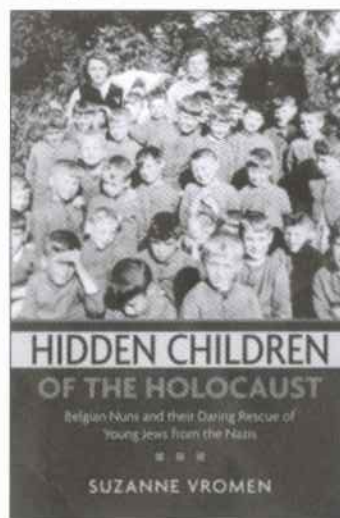
Andy Simons

Claudia Jones' grave in Highgate Cemetery, London
Photo/Simon Lynn



HIDDEN CHILDREN OF THE HOLOCAUST: BELGIAN NUNS AND THEIR DARING RESCUE OF YOUNG JEWS FROM THE NAZIS

Suzanne Vromen
OUP, 2008



OFFENCE: THE JEWISH CASE

Brian Klug
Seagull Books,
£14

SAVED BY THE CHURCH

During the Second World War Nazi occupation of Belgium, some 2,500 Jewish children were rescued by the resistance; many were hidden in convents by Catholic nuns. This is an under-researched topic which Suzanne Vromen (Belgian herself) has explored in her book *Hidden Children of the Holocaust*. The author interviewed hidden children, their escorts (mainly Christian women of the resistance) who took them to their hiding places, and the nuns who hid them.

It was the First International Conference for Hidden Children in New York City in 1991 that created a platform from which the hidden children could start to tell their story, after decades of silence. The nuns' role in the resistance was not institutionally recognised prior to 1992 but, once the children started to find their voice, they sought recognition for those nuns who had sheltered them and several were recognised as Righteous Among the Nations.

The Catholic Church has often been criticised for not taking an overt stance against Nazism. However, if it had, it is unlikely that convents, as institutions of the Church, would have been able to hide – and thus save – so many children. However critical one may be of the Church, it can be argued that the Church's neutrality was a factor in enabling the children to be saved. The convents were hierarchical institutions that were strictly run by mothers superior. It was they who decided to accept Jewish children and kept this a secret from all but a handful of people to ensure their safety. Vromen maintains humanitarian values to be

the prime motivator for such actions.

The decision of Jewish parents to give their children to total strangers to be hidden was heartbreaking for them and for the children. The practicalities of hiding these children presented many dilemmas, such as the participation of the children in Christian rituals. There was obviously an immediate need for the Jewish children to participate in the Christian rituals so that they would not stand out from the Catholic children and thereby endanger the lives of everybody in the convent. Some of the children felt comforted by the rituals and even wanted to be baptised, giving them a sense of security.

When, at the end of the war, the few surviving parents came back to claim their children, there was the dilemma of children feeling at home in the Catholic environment of the convent. Having been separated from their parents and their Jewish roots for such a long period, they did not know where they belonged. Vromen concludes that forcible baptisms did not take place and that children were not withheld from their parents. But one can hardly imagine the traumas they must have gone through and how these shaped their lives.

The book opened my eyes to the hierarchy of suffering and victimisation. I am the daughter of a Belgian Holocaust survivor who could not talk about his experience. I had not fully appreciated the plight of the so called "lucky" hidden children and found their testimonies particularly moving.

I recommend this book – it gives an insight into the courage and humanity of the Belgian nuns and resistance workers portrayed by the author.

Lia Kahn-Zajtmann

CRITICISM IS KOSHER

Index on Censorship has commissioned a series of books on "Offence" and Brian Klug, philosopher and a co-founder of Independent Jewish Voices, has contributed a wonderful, witty, urbane volume on "the Jewish case".

Brian Klug's essay is structured in three parts, each replete with journeys through byways as well as over highways – and all in around 12,500 words. The focus of the first part of the essay is "Judaism"; the second "Enlightenment piety", and the last "The Jewish state". They are united in an argument clarifying a Jewish view of "offence".

At the risk of doing Klug's essay a great injustice, each section can be summarised in a single proposition: Judaism is the cultures of the Jews, a mosaic rather than a religion; don't (mis)use the Enlightenment to try to score points – it had its dark side in its "othering" of the Jews; criticism of Israel is kosher.

Put that way it sounds incomprehensible or banal (or both). What on earth is it about?

In essence it is about a way of arguing. Nothing is simple, nothing unproblematic in "a complex world, a world of dappled things". Klug's pathways to his conclusions are as important as his destinations. Jewish Socialist readers will, I imagine, be in broad sympathy with Klug's conclusion that "Anything

goes," with regard to criticism of Israel, "even discussion of the most sensitive issues, even its existence as 'the Jewish state'." But it would be a mistake to read this essay for that proposition alone. It is not an assertion, but something arrived at through a process of reasoning, informed along the way by three principles, rooted within Judaism: respect for human dignity; rejection of idolatry and commitment to argument.

I have singled out this one conclusion about criticising Israel because it is an important one for Klug – and because, if you are going to give offence in the here-and-now, nothing can be more calculated to do so! There are many other important propositions along the way. But they make little sense (see above!) without the structure of the argument in which they are embedded; they are not labels to be applied to the world, but emerge rather out the application of a particular, Jewish, dialectical way of thinking to the world. It is this that gives them their deep meaning, and Klug's argument its delicate sensitivity.

Indeed, along the way, Klug answers the question as to what Judaism is with a formulation that has tension and contradiction built into it, viz: "[Judaism is] the cultures [plural] of the Jews, whether we parse those cultures as 'secular' or 'religious'. It is less a religion and more a mosaic."

Or, put another way by Klug, Jewish identity has a certain texture: "Instead of the smooth, mutually exclusive surfaces of 'the religious' and 'the secular', you get a rough-hewn fabric with threads woven through it that sometimes overlap, at other times diverge." A texture, Klug says, that makes for a certain touchiness – particularly when it comes to Israel. And when he approaches this topic Klug chooses to develop an immanent critique – one that comes from within Judaism itself. At the outset he says that "Judaism in its depths cries out for outspokenness..." and his essay about Judaism is, at one and the same time, a "battle for Judaism".

As an example of the subtleties of Klug's approach, take the ambiguity of the phrase, "the people of Israel". Klug points out, when you say "the people of Israel" (meaning Israelites and Jews) and "the people" of "Israel" (meaning Israelis) they sound pretty similar. But: "Where the ear hears little difference it is harder for either the heart or the mind

to make distinctions. This does not mean that the different identities are obliterated. But they are leaky: they bleed into each other: they blend or fuse."

The enormous resonances of *am yisroel* "the people" of "Israel" overlap blend (bleed) into those of the notionally civic, secular conception of "the people of Israel" as citizens; just as the distinct categories of Jew, Israeli, Zionist get conflated so easily in "the-whole-world-hates-us" discourse so prevalent today. Klug is a master at teasing his categories apart – and showing how difficult it is to maintain the boundaries between them.

This essay is easy to read – but not an easy read. You have to work at it, but it is worth it. I only hope it is in fact widely read. The publishers, Seagull Books, gouging a *gezunte* £14 out of you for this slim volume, make that less likely than it should be. In a series dedicated to the concept of "offence", Seagull has offered its own particular version!

Richard Kuper

HOME AND AWAY

More people than ever, according to Milton Esman, are living in diasporas. According to the United Nations, 3% of the population of the world, some 228 million people, were living outside their country of birth in 2005. Diasporas form for many reasons. Esman distinguishes three types: labour diasporas, entrepreneurial diasporas and settler diasporas.

Through a series of case studies he gives various examples of the different sorts of diasporas; so Pakistanis in Britain and Algerians in France, as well as Afro-Brazilians are a labour diaspora, whereas the Chinese in various Asian countries are an entrepreneurial diaspora, and Zionists in Palestine and Israel are a settler diaspora.

The internal dynamics of a diaspora combine with the external conditions that it faces to determine how long it lasts in its 'host' society. So the 500-year-old Afro-Brazilian diaspora is still an identifiable community, owing to the discrimination and exclusion that it has faced, both during the period of slavery (until 1888) and afterwards where Brazilian society operated in a way so as to confine almost all to the lowest rungs of society, a situation which has only started to be addressed in recent years (today only 1% of Black Brazilians complete higher education).

The Chinese diaspora has faced differing circumstances in neighbouring countries. In Malaysia, it remains a minority excluded from political power, whereas in Thailand, the Chinese minority have become Thai speaking and have gained access to the political class so that a number of Thailand's recent prime ministers have been of Thai-Chinese origin.

Sometimes a diaspora is instrumental in the politics of its homeland. So much of the pressure for independence for Croatia and Ukraine came from their respective diasporas in countries such as Canada and Australia. And, says Esman, support for John Demjanjuk came from the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, who were concerned to defend their reputation against what they saw as an imputation of collective antisemitism.

He says that the goal of settler diasporas is to

become the mainstream, an aim which, he says, the Zionists in Palestine realised. Another possibility is for the diaspora to disappear as a separate community, either through expulsion, as was the case with the Palestinians in Kuwait following 1990 or the East African Indian diaspora in the 1960s and 1970s, or through assimilation to the "host" community, as has happened to a large extent with the "white ethnics" in the United States, such as the Dutch and Czechs, or with Poles in France.

Esman's treatment of Jews is curious. He does not consider any of the large Jewish "diaspora" communities in the conventional sense of the term within his case studies. Instead he considers Zionists in Palestine as an example of a settler diaspora and later the emigration of Jews to Israel from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s as an example of an entrepreneurial diaspora. He says that a shared history and a distinctive religion can account for the survival of some diasporas rather than others. When he touches on the American Jewish diaspora, it is to portray a community which is well integrated in its "host" society.

American Jews, he says, are all concerned that "no harm should come to independent Israel, which they view as the fulfilment of the millenarian dream of their ancestors, and which must continue to be available as a national refuge for Jews who suffer persecution in the diaspora". With one broad brush stroke, he generalises out Jews who have a more challenging attitude to Israel, and he does not consider differences within the Jewish community.

He also says that there is no contradiction between Jews who consider that it is in America's national security interests to provide support for Israel as a pro-Western democracy in the Middle East; this enables American Jews to reconcile their support for Israel and their position as patriotic Americans. But he does not consider the extent to which this position has been challenged by, for example, the arguments of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt who argue that "the combination of unwavering support for Israel and the related effort to spread 'democracy' throughout the region has

DIASPORAS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Milton J Esman
Polity, £14.99

inflamed Arab and Islamic opinion and jeopardised not only US security but that of much of the rest of the world" (see www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/john-mearsheimer/the-israel-lobby).

Indeed, one is left wondering whether the term "diaspora" as Esman uses it is too broad. For example, he does not problematise the ascription to some of a national diaspora status and to others of a religious diaspora. So he lumps together Pakistanis in Britain and Algerians in France as "Muslim diasporas" and sees them as a labour diaspora, where, particularly in the second case, he argues, there has been ethnic polarisation, occupational discrimination and consequent attitudinal rejection

from French society by large parts of the second and third generations. But Esman does not consider how and why they are seen as a religious rather than a national diaspora. Amartya Sen in his book *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* takes a more critical attitude to reducing the identity of a person to their religious identity, and argues that to do so is a reductionist view which does not take account of internal diversities within particular communities.

Without this critical perspective Esman's book, whilst it contains a wide ranging survey of various communities, can at times seem a succession of broad assertions from an American perspective.

Michael Heiser

ON THE SHELF

RAF SALKIE
goes back to his roots to explore a little known association with anarchism in Israeli history

Your starter for ten: Which famous Jew wrote these words? "The present-day economy does not differ much from 'pure' capitalism. Production is carried on for profit, not for use ... The worker is constantly in fear of losing his job. ... Unlimited competition leads to a huge waste of labour, and to [the] crippling of the social consciousness of individuals. ... I am convinced that there is only one way to eliminate these grave evils, namely through the establishment of a socialist economy."

I'll tell you at the end, but meanwhile here's some more from the same source: "The achievement of socialism requires the solution of some extremely difficult socio-political problems: how is it possible ... to prevent bureaucracy from becoming all-powerful? How can the rights of the individual be protected?"

It was problems like these which preoccupied the early days of the kibbutz movement, as documented in James Horrox's book *A Living Revolution: Anarchism in the Kibbutz Movement* (AK Press). I have to declare an interest here: I spent the first two years of my life on a Habonim kibbutz in northern Israel which my parents founded in 1948. Most of my parents' friends when they returned to England were former kibbutzniks like themselves; and the last time I went to Israel, in 1974, I was greeted like a long-lost son by old-time kibbutz members across the country. I don't remember my parents ever mentioning anarchist thinkers like Kropotkin, whose ideas about free association and self-organising communities were apparently a huge influence on many founders of kibbutzim. They did, however, talk about the democracy and the comradeship which guided their lives on training farms in England and then in Israel (and for my mother, during six months in a British prison camp in Cyprus).

Anyone who is interested in actually creating something like a libertarian socialist society needs to study the kibbutzim. The early ones were built by refugees from Czarist Russia who were determined to live communally, share the dirty work, abolish hierarchies, and to put into practice the idea "from each according to their ability, to each according to their need". Decisions were taken at general meetings, no one was paid more than anyone else, crime was non-existent, and – famously – childcare was organised communally (I can't remember that part, in case you asked).

Some of this worked extremely well, though in

recent times the kibbutzim have changed: many have introduced different pay rates for different jobs, abolished communal nurseries, and employed Arab workers, including very young children. Many of the children of the original kibbutzniks have chosen to live elsewhere in normal towns and cities – and many have left Israel for other countries.

The big question is this: how many of the kibbutzim's problems came about because they were part of a colonial, highly militarised capitalist society which has long been a tool of United States foreign policy in the region; and how many were the result of flaws in the original collective project? Have the kibbutzim renounced many of their early principles because the principles weren't adequate; or was it because grabbing Palestinian land, creating a Jewish state, and occupying the West Bank and Gaza have corrupted everything in Israel? I don't know the answers. My uncle and aunt lived on a kibbutz near the Golan Heights until the end of their lives. They became grimmer and more bitter as the years went by: the last time I saw them, my uncle said that they had tried to build socialism but that it had failed. If he was right – and I hope he wasn't – then we lefties have a lot of thinking to do.

For a clear picture of how Israel has gone wrong, you couldn't do better than *Can I bring my own gun? An Israeli Soldier's Story* by Seth Freedman (Five Leaves / Guardian Books). The author went to Israel from North London in 2004 and joined the army: the book's title is a question asked by one of the other foreign recruits who joined up at the same time. He became increasingly disillusioned with the bullying, brutal, casually racist attitudes towards Palestinians that pervades the Israeli military. With his British passport he was able to travel to parts of the Occupied Territories that most Israelis never see. He also spoke to many West Bank settlers, and the book tries to avoid demonising them (no need to – they are just as awful as you think they will be). Freedman has contributed regularly to the *Guardian's* web site: his two most recent pieces are about restricting access to water for Bedouins, and action against racism by Israeli football fans. This mixture of criticism and signs of hope is typical of the book, and I strongly recommend it.

And it was Albert Einstein, in a 1949 article in *Monthly Review*, reprinted in *Ideas and Opinions* (Crown Publishers).



HARROW & TALES OF HOFFMAN

To Harrow, where Jewish Socialists were part of the crowd confronting supporters of Stop the Islamification of Europe (SIOE) who had come to demonstrate against the mosque. After the fiasco in September when anti-Muslim protestors were taken away under police protection, SIOE founder Stephen Gash had said he would only hold a demonstration in Harrow if 2,000 of his supporters came. Calling for ex-servicemen to come and dignify his action, he urged Jewish people to join if they cared about Israel, and bring "1,000 Israeli flags". Then he announced that 1,500 people were coming.

Take away the two noughts and this proved more or less correct. The SIOE and English Defence League managed between them to bring 15 people to Harrow, plus a couple of Israeli flags. They were outnumbered ten to one by counter-demonstrators who chanted: "The only Jews here are on our side!"

Reform and Liberal rabbis in Harrow and neighbouring areas had issued a statement of solidarity with the Muslim community. The Community Security Trust said: "A demonstration against Harrow mosque under the 'Stop the Islamisation of Europe', is as stupid and offensive as a demonstration against Harrow synagogue, under the banner 'Stop the Zionisation of Europe'.

"...to demonise an entire community, every Muslim and every mosque, in the way that SIOE does, shows exactly the kind of bigotry from which Jews have suffered so often in our history. For SIOE to appeal to Jews to support them shows a complete ignorance of the Jewish experience of being on the receiving end of exactly this type of politics."

Amid the chorus of sound sense from Jewish people who don't always agree, there was one jarring note. "Excellent," sneered Jonathan Hoffman of the Zionist Federation, responding to the rabbis' message, "I'm sure the members of the Harrow Central Mosque will be there to help us at the next antisemitic Amnesty or BRICUP meeting. Maybe you and Rabbi Frank Dabba Smith will be there too as well as 'the surrounding Liberal and Reform communities'."

A sour note. Sour grapes? Amnesty has criticised Israeli treatment of Palestinians, of course, and BRICUP supports academic boycott. Neither they nor any pro-Palestinian organisation has attacked Jews or marched against synagogues. When Jewish graves were vandalised in Newham a few years ago, local Muslims showed solidarity with Jews against the outrage. I didn't notice Mr Hoffman or anyone from the Zionist Federation, though he is not a shy, retiring person. I've seen him protesting carol services and concerts over "anti-Israel" content. But Hoffman has been about as successful as Stephen Gash in mobilising the community for which he claims to speak.

UNIVERSAL? THAT'S CONTROVERSIAL

The United Nations General Assembly voted for the partition of Palestine in November 1947, and the State of Israel was proclaimed on 14th May 1948. Its founders declared it would "foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education". Hmm.

On 10th December 1948 the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On 10th December just passed, the *Jerusalem Post* contained a pull-out UN poster listing the articles of the Declaration. The poster contained no other political statement, just the articles, and a 2010 calendar. But on its front page the newspaper carried a disclaimer: "Note to Readers: Today's *Jerusalem Post* includes a leaflet produced by the UN to mark Human Rights Week '09. This paid insert does not reflect the editorial positions of the *Jerusalem Post*. The *Post* takes no responsibility for the content of paid advertising / advertorial material."

How honest we are these days!

BAH! HUMBUG! UK BORDER AGENCY!

My favourite Xmas card the other year showed three wise men arriving at a large Israeli security wall, and trying to dig underneath. But this year we've had an image to rival that, not from Bethlehem but Bedfordshire. To be precise, Yarls Wood detention centre. A place where families who came to Britain to escape persecution, poverty and war discover our freedom is not for them. These days it is run for profit by a private firm, Serco, on behalf of the Home Office and UK Border Agency.

Canon James Rosenthal, an expert on the real Santa Claus – St Nicholas of Myra – arrived at the detention centre dressed for the part in long red robe and long white beard, accompanied by Rev Professor Nicholas Sagovsky from Westminster Abbey, bearing £300 worth of children's presents donated by South London church congregations.

The security men who guard the place would not let them in, although Santa Claus assured them he was not a security threat, and they had an appointment to meet detainees. Then as the men of God tried to bless the gifts, the security guards called the police.

Funnily enough, those tabloids who are always front-paging claims that minorities or local councils want to "ban Christmas" seem to have missed this little seasonal story.

