

Inspiring and heartbreaking

TWENTY YEARS WITH THE JEWISH LABOR BUND: A MEMOIR OF INTER-WAR POLAND

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In 1930s Warsaw, Bernard Goldstein usually carried a revolver. He was not a policeman, soldier or gangster – but a trade union organiser of the Bund, a Yiddish-speaking political party and movement that fought for socialism, equal rights for all minorities, and a secure Jewish future in Poland. Forced to operate illegally between 1920 and 1922, they functioned in precarious semi-legality until World War II. Police smashed up the Bund's premises in Warsaw's Praga district in the early 1920s, and viciously beat their members during May Day actions. The authorities arbitrarily banned meetings, and at moments of high political tension the government tried to prevent the Bund's daily newspaper being published. But the Bund also experienced beatings, window smashing, and the use of knives and guns against their members, from political rivals fighting a turf war.

Historians usually cast Zionists as the Bund's main ideological opponents. Zionists argued that Jews could only achieve equal rights in their own national state. They recruited and trained growing numbers of young Jews for emigration to Palestine. But although Zionists had support within the Jewish bourgeoisie, and even had MPs, they were largely irrelevant to Jewish working class struggles in interwar Poland. Goldstein doesn't mention Zionists until page 86 when he describes a unification convention of Jewish trade unions. Thirty-eight delegates were present, 28 of them Bundists. Just four represented Labour Zionists.

A quarter of all workers in 1930s Poland organised in trade unions were Jewish (Jews made up 10% of Poland's interwar population). Economic discrimination barred them from working in Government-controlled enterprises. They eked out their living as metal, leather, textile and

slaughterhouse workers. As meat porters, tailors shoemakers and bakers. As transport delivery workers, clerks and housemaids. The Bund made considerable efforts to recruit female workers, who were excluded from many trades and less likely to be literate, into its *Yidische Arbeter Froyen* (Jewish Women Workers) organisation.

The Bund's bloodiest and most significant daily battles within the working class, were not against Zionists, but against another smaller determined group, with a high proportion of Jewish members, and no qualms about hiring underworld enforcers in sectarian battles over who would represent and lead workers' struggles: the Polish Communist Party (KPP). Goldstein's graphic descriptions of the actions of KPP members and hired thugs, especially during the period when Stalin characterised the party's left opponents as "social fascists", make your hair stand on end. In Warsaw, the Bund and the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) both suffered from the KPP's political sectarianism and thuggery.

In the highly charged and violent political atmosphere in Poland, after Pilsudski's coup (supported by some elements of the Left), the Bund made ad hoc self-defence arrangements to protect large public events such as rallies and May Day marches. Many ordinary Polish Jews hoped that Pilsudski would rein in the further right forces espousing open antisemitism such as the National Democrats (Endeks) and the *Narovytses* (their violent street-fighting movement based among students). But through the 1930s the physical threat to Jews, socialists and trade unionists grew in intensity. With the simultaneous eruption of violent turf wars with the KPP, the Bund decided to create a permanent militia.