



Twenty Years with the Jewish Labor Bund: A Memoir of Interwar Poland

Bernard Goldstein.

Translated and edited by Marvin S. Zuckerman

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Review by Shelby Shapiro

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In *Twenty Years with the Jewish Labor Bund: A Memoir of Interwar Poland*, Bernard Goldstein, a member, leader and organizer of the socialist political party and labor organization, the Jewish Labor Bund (usually referred to simply as "the Bund"), presents a picture of the Bund, its members and activities, in Warsaw between World Wars One and Two. It is both a memoir and living eyewitness history: Goldstein relates only what he saw and knew. Although the Bund was active throughout Poland, Eastern Europe and beyond, he restricts his book only to his region of operations, Warsaw. The only time we leave its environs is when Goldstein left them.

The Jewish Labor Bund was founded in 1897 – the same year as the first Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland. The two movements had radically different aims. Zionists sought a national solution to the so-called "Jewish problem" through the formation of a Jewish state. The Bund, as a Marxist organization, opposed any form of nationalism as reactionary, and instead sought cultural autonomy wherever they lived. Zionists sought to end the diaspora, while Bundists sought to claim their rights within the diaspora. Significantly, one of the Bund's leading lights, Henryk Erlich, was married to the daughter of one of the founders of Jewish diaspora nationalism, Szymon Dubnow. Nonetheless, Sophia Dubnow-Erlich was an activist in her own right. Another group, the Territorialists, called for a Jewish homeland, but not necessarily in Palestine or Israel. Within the Zionist camp, there were multiple tendencies.

In 1898, the Bund and a number of other organizations and political leaders formed a new political party: the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDWP), which

would later split into two factions: the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin was not present at the 1898 founding congress; his unremitting hostility to the Bund stemmed from the fact that the Bund had a mass, working-class base. Furthermore, unlike the Bolsheviks, the Bund was organized democratically; they organized labor unions (actually, a labor movement), a militia, an educational system in Yiddish, a sports federation (*Morgenshtern*), and organizations for youth (*Yung bund "tsukunft"*) and children (*SKIF*); in short, it developed a "movement culture." That culture included a vast multilingual press for printing newspapers, magazines and broadsides (both above-ground and underground), as well as books. People could live their lives within the precincts of the Bund.

The Bund was most active in Eastern Europe, but had outposts everywhere from South Africa to South America and Scandinavia, to Paris and Palestine (later Israel); everywhere the Bund went, a Bundist press existed. It was only within the last few years that the Bundist magazine in Tel Aviv, *Lebens fragen (Vital Questions)* ceased publication.

This multilayered book covers the depth and breadth of Bund activity in Warsaw. The author was active in so many of its manifestations that he could become the party's chronicler from the frontlines: labor organizer, founder of the Warsaw Bund militia, a member of the Bund's executive leadership. We learn about other political formations in Warsaw, including the various Zionist parties. Another Warsaw Bundist, Isaac Przetycki, would later recall the vitality of the city's intellectual life in his piece "At the Ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1946," appearing in Tel Aviv's *Lebens fragen*. Przetycki particularly noted the variety of

speakers and the publications, and the excitement of hearing newsboys announcing the latest issue of the Bund paper.

As the author takes us through his activities as a union organizer, readers learn about the structure of various industries, and the sub-groupings within each. Warsaw's labor movement had a huge Jewish component, and among those Goldstein organized were transport workers, matzah bakers, general food workers, bagel bakers, candy makers and clerks. Thus, Jewish porters and teamsters included both back porters, and rope and handcart porters. The meat workers union had separate organizations for the various divisions of labor within that industry. His treatment is almost ethnographic – and somewhat reminiscent of the typologies of German workers presented in the photographs of Germany's August Sander. Goldstein duly notes the political factions within the various industries, and the struggles between those factions. He reveals the powers behind the thrones, and how various factions parlayed their power positions.

Two institutions receive constant treatment: the criminal underworld and the Communist Party. He pays especially close attention to the instances – and they were neither fleeting nor incidental – when the two worked in tandem. The violence employed by the Communists was systematic, representing a new and horrible innovation within the Jewish labor movement. It was aimed at all non-Communists, including students attending the Bundist schools, tubercular children at the Medem Sanatorium, and workers in non-Communist unions. Goldstein was asked to form a workers' self-defense organization for protection against antisemitic *pogromchiks* – and gangster-assisted Communists. This would later become the core of armed Bundist resistance against the Nazis during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This book should serve as an antidote to anyone still harboring naive illusions about the Communists – a condition strangely existing in the United States with fanatic diehards still proclaiming the innocence of Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs (despite the Venona transcripts and the statements of fellow spy Morton Sobel).

We learn of the problems in organizing a militia composed of workers, who were expected to stay on their jobs while exercising their paramilitary functions. To form an effective fighting body of part-time members without any special privileges represented a clear organizational challenge. Training and discipline made for additional problems. The Bund militia did much more than march in May Day parades: they protected workers, union organizers, students and children from violence. Goldstein writes of Krochmalna Street, deep in the Warsaw slums, and a Communist stronghold. Readers of the memoirs of Isaac Bashevis Singer [*More Stories from My Father's Court*, transl. Curt Leviant (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000)] may recall Krochmalna Street as an important address in

the Warsaw underworld. In the chapter "An Unusual Wedding" Bashevis recalled watching from his father's study, the marriage of a Krochmalna prostitute together with a wedding party of gangsters, pimps, and prostitutes, glancing first down at the raucous crowd in the courtyard, and then at the wall of religious texts in his father's study, going back and forth, comparing the two scenes (170-177). For the Bund, Krochmalna was a challenge, and the nexus of the cooperation between Communists and the underworld. Goldstein was able to "turn" some underworld figures who wished to go straight. They were able to use their underworld connections, often familial, in this or that campaign. Former underworld members literally used their muscle to keep gangsters or Communists in line.

Comparing the translation with the original – *20 yor varshever "bund" (1919-1939)* – demonstrates Marvin S. Zuckerman's skill as a translator; random comparisons of the original with his translation reveal both faithfulness to the original text and a fluent rendering in translation. Further, his notes and definitions place everything into context. As a bonus, this volume contains many more photographs than the original, including some depicting the translator's father. This volume is highly recommended.

Shelby Shapiro is an Independent Scholar who obtained his Ph.D. in American Studies with a dissertation on the Yiddish press and how various publications of differing political and religious viewpoints sought to construct different identities for Jewish immigrant women. He has written about Jazz, Anarchism, and the labour movement, and presently is Associate Editor of Records of the State of Connecticut.