

SIX MILLION AND ONE

The life and death of Szmul Zygielbojm
by Barry Smerin



I cannot be silent. I cannot live while the remnants of the Jewish population of Poland, of whom I am a representative, are perishing. My comrades in the Warsaw ghetto died guns in hand in the last heroic battle. It was not my destiny to die as they did, together with them. But I belong to them and in their mass graves.

By my death I wish to make the strongest possible protest against the passivity with which the world is looking on and permitting the extermination of the Jewish people.

I know how little human life is worth today, but as I was unable to do anything during my life, perhaps by my death I shall help to break down the indifference of those who have the possibility now, perhaps at the last moment, to save those Polish Jews still alive . . . I bid farewell to everyone and everything that was dear to me and that I have loved.

During the night of 11-12 May 1943 Szmul Zygielbojm, the representative of the Jewish Socialist Bund on the London-based Polish National Council in exile, took his own life in a final desperate attempt to shatter the indifference of the Allied governments to the fate of Polish Jewry.

Zygielbojm was 48 years old, a distinguished Jewish socialist with an international reputation. Alone among Jewish leaders safe in Allied territory, he performed the ultimate act of solidarity with the Jews of Eastern Europe. Today, at a time of growing apathy and self-interest, when Jewish activism is often pursued for the most cynical of motives, it is both chastening and instructive to ask ourselves what manner of person could have been capable of a political act of such supreme sacrifice.

Szmul Mordechaj Zygielbojm was born in 1895 in the village of Borowica in the province of Lublin, Poland, one of eleven children of desperately poor parents. Forced to leave *cheder* (Hebrew classes) at the age of ten, and with no prospects of further education, Zygielbojm soon set out alone for Warsaw where he managed to become apprenticed to a glovemaker. It was in the Polish capital that he first came into contact with socialist activists, taking part in a number of strikes, including the mass protest strike organised by the Bund against the infamous trial of Mendel Beilis for alleged ritual murder in 1913.

Two years later Zygielbojm rejoined his family, who had moved to Chelm after their village was devastated in a battle between Russian and Austrian troops. He soon became active in the local Jewish labour movement. A natural leader and talented organiser, Zygielbojm was Chelm's delegate to the 1917 national conference of the Bund at the age of 22.

As the Bund fought to develop its organisation in the new conditions of Polish independence, the young Zygielbojm's talents and energy attracted increasing attention. In 1924 he was elected to the central committee of the party. A popular figure among both Jewish and Polish workers, widely known under his party pseudonym "Artur", Zygielbojm rose to prominence as the leader of the leatherworkers' union, one of the few trade unions in interwar Poland to cater for both Jews and Poles. Eventually the self-educated boy from Borowica came to occupy the highest office in the Jewish labour movement as secretary of the national council of Jewish, class-based trade unions in Poland, a Bund-dominated alliance with close on 100,000 members.

From 1937 Zygielbojm lived in Lodz, having been elected to the city council in the landslide victory of the Bund-Polish Socialist coalition. He did not return to Warsaw until 1939, a few days before the start of the German siege. When the Nazi troops entered the capital, Szmul Zygielbojm was thus one of the few

Bundist leaders who might have escaped immediate arrest, since he was not registered with the local police. Nevertheless, when the Gestapo demanded a representative of the Jewish workers among twelve civilian hostages, Zygielbojm volunteered. Shortly afterwards he was named by the Bund as its delegate to the Warsaw Judenrat (Jewish Council).

From the outset Zygielbojm urged resistance to the Nazis. In October 1939 the Gestapo instructed the Judenrat to order all Warsaw Jews into a closed ghetto. Zygielbojm, having failed to persuade the Judenrat to refuse to co-operate, announced its intention of resigning and giving himself up to the Gestapo. Knowing the inevitable consequences, the Judenrat was shocked into hesitation. Zygielbojm seized the opportunity to publicly address the thousands of Jews besieging the Judenrat headquarters, and called upon them to refuse to obey the German orders.

Following Zygielbojm's open defiance of the Nazis, the Bund decided to smuggle him out of Poland. After a dramatic flight across Germany, he reached Belgium in January 1940 and made his way to the United States, where he joined with the Bund organisation in America in campaigning for support for Polish Jewry.

In early 1942 the Polish Socialist Party proposed that since the Bund had polled a clear majority of Jewish votes

in the last free elections in Poland, the National Council in London should allow it one delegate. The Bund nominated Zygielbojm, who had been its representative at socialist meetings throughout the United States since his escape from Warsaw.

While carrying on a determined struggle against the nationalist and fascist parties in the National Council, Zygielbojm devoted more and more of his time to compiling information and statistics on the plight of Polish Jewry. It was during 1942 that the unbelievable news of the Final Solution began to filter through to Western Europe. With the help of the Bund and Polish socialist underground, Zygielbojm assembled a dossier on the deportations, shootings and extermination camps. He gave himself over entirely to addressing public

meetings, lobbying politicians, embassies and diplomats, assailing an unco-operative press, sending telegrams, desperately striving to persuade the Allied governments to take exceptional measures to save the Polish Jews.

All Zygielbojm's pleadings were in vain. The Allies were not even willing to drop leaflets on Germany threatening retribution for the barbarous crimes of the Nazis. Nor would any government declare its readiness to take in Jews if the Germans agreed to release them.

In a message to the Jewish leaders in the West, brought to Zygielbojm by Jan Karski, a Polish underground courier, the surviving Jewish leaders in Poland made their final desperate plea:

Let them go to all the important English and American offices and agencies. Tell them not to leave until

they have obtained guarantees that a way has been decided upon to save the Jews. Let them accept no food or drink, let them die a slow death while the world looks on. Let them die. This may strike the conscience of the world.

For a whole year, Zygielbojm had employed every means at his disposal. Finally he resolved to try the new "means" demanded by the desperate leaders of the murdered Jews of Poland — the only Jewish leader in the free world to heed their call. His death had an enormous public impact. Newspapers throughout the world carried reports. But the Allied governments continued to turn a deaf ear.

Szmul Mordechaj Zygielbojm, Comrade "Artur", died, as he had lived, in the struggle for socialism and together with his people. He shall never be forgotten. □

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Socialists' Group.

I am being asked to participate in writing to a refusenik in Moscow but am unsure of the political ambience of this. Are you intending to do an article on the background to the refuseniks and where we should stand as socialists? What is the Soviet reasoning for refusing exit visas?

*Rita Craft
London SE12*

You're in luck — we have just the thing on page 5 of this issue! — the Editorial Committee.

IT'S GOOD TO BE A JEW

I found *Jewish Socialist* very fine indeed. I also like the description of JCARP — so many Jews on the Left focus *only* on racism and fail to remember that anti-semitism is, unfortunately, still alive and well.

Do you know my book, *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*? It has been quite effective in catalysing political

LETTERS...

consciousness in the Women's Movement at large and even among some non-activist Jews.

It's good to know the work is continuing in other countries and that we have a network of like-minded people. It makes me feel good to be a Jew, especially now when so many American Jews are Republicans and neo-conservative about *all* kinds of issues.

*Evelyn Torton Beck
Washington DC, USA*

TAKE UP THE CHALLENGE

In his review of Noam Chomsky's *The Fateful Triangle* (*Jewish Socialist*, March 1985) Ralph Salkie writes: "Books like this which shatter myths, expose lies and destroy illusions don't get us any further. The vast majority of Jews won't read it, and most of those who do will not listen to it." Instead, he urges Chomsky to "seek out mainstream Jews, listen to their concerns, and work out ways to convince them that the sources of their fears can

be eliminated by the socialist movement." He concludes that this is "much harder than writing books denouncing Israel. But it might work."

Mr Salkie does not offer any reasons for believing that "it might work." His review therefore amounts to telling Chomsky, one of the few Jews who have had the courage to criticize Israel openly, to stop shattering myths, exposing lies, and destroying illusions. Is not that precisely what the Zionist establishment would like best? It is — to put it mildly — rather curious to read this advice in the first issue of a journal that expects to oppose "the ideology, currently dominating world Jewry, which subordinates the needs and interests of Diaspora Jews to those of the Israeli state." It hardly needs to be said that the myths, lies and illusions are the mainstays of this ideology. Not to challenge them is to give up the fight even before it has begun.

*Morris Halle
Paris France*

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