

THE BATTLE OF CABLE STREET

The Tramp Poet

You ask me how I got like this, Sir,
Well I don't care to say,
But I will tell you a little story
Of when I was in a big fray.

I'm not very well in my old age,
And as I sits drinking my broth,
My mind goes back to 1936,
That Sunday, October the fourth.

I was walking down Bethnal Green Road, Sir,
Just walking about at my ease,
When the strains of a famous old song, Sir,
Came floating to me on the breeze.

I stopped, I looked and I listened,
Now where have I heard that old song?
Then I dashed to the Salmon and Ball, Sir
I knew I wouldn't go wrong.

It was the Internationale they were singing,
They were singing it with a defiant blast,
And holding up a big red banner
With these words: THEY SHALL NOT PASS.

We then marched on to the East End,
We were five thousand of us, I am sure.
And when we got to the Aldgate,
We were met by three hundred thousand more.

"Red Front! Red Front!" these workers cried,
It was a sight I wouldn't have missed
To see these thousands of defiant workers
Holding up their Mighty Clenched Fist.

The police said "Now move along, please,
This is all we ask",
But we said "No, not for those Blackshirts,
Those rotters, THEY SHALL NOT PASS".

We then marched on to Stepney Green, Sir,
You could see that this fight was no sham,
For there were thousands and thousands of workers
Marching from Limehouse, Poplar, Stratford and
East Ham.

You could see that Mosley wouldn't get through, Sir,
That our slogan that day was no boast,
And I shouted "Hip, hip, hurrah",
As I saw our flag being tied to a lamp-post.

The children shouted from the windows "O, golly",
For Mosley no-one seemed sorry,
But someone had had the goodness
To lend us their two-ton lorry.

We got it over on its side, Sir,
It wasn't much of a strain,
But the police kept knocking our barricade down
So we built the damn thing up again.

The police said we worked mighty fast,
As with a hanky their faces they mopped,
So we got out our big red banner,
And stuck it right on the top.

The police then charged with their truncheons.
They charged us, the working class,
But they couldn't pinch our red banner
With these words THEY SHALL NOT PASS.

I wish you had been there to see it,
You would have said it was a ruddy fine feat,
How we kept that old Red Flag flying
On those barricades of Cable Street.

So this is the end of my story
And I must get back to my broth,
But I hope you will never forget, Sir,
It was Sunday, October the fourth.

On July 26th 1936 a conference was convened under the auspices of the Jewish Labour Council, attended by 179 delegates representing 86 organisations, consisting of Workers Circle branches, trade unions, political organisations, friendly societies, synagogues, Zionist bodies, youth organisations, and ex-servicemen's organisations. They met on the basis of a shared conviction that there was a need for a strong and popular Jewish anti-fascist body that would be capable of taking the necessary practical steps for Jewish defence. They acknowledged that the established leadership of the community was assembling fresh defence structures, but they were unwilling to place their faith in the efficacy of these new steps, since they believed the Board of Deputies to be constituted on an obsolete basis and did not extend the franchise to the widest sections of the community.

A 26 member delegate council emerged from the conference and this was later constituted as the Jewish People's Council. The central tenet of its analysis, which clearly distinguished it from the Board of Deputies, was its contention that antisemitism could not be separated from its political necessity to the fascist movement. The Jewish People's Council characterised antisemitism as "both a rallying cry and a smokescreen, thus hiding from the British people as a whole the true purpose of fascism". It was understood primarily as a political instrument, but with an appeal rooted in economic conflict within the society in which it arose. Whilst recognising that its proponents were influenced by political developments abroad, its ability to gain some degree of mass support rested on home grown roots. This characterisation of antisemitism had implications for the nature of responses to it and the formation of working alliances. The Jewish People's Council argued that:

waited for them."

The *Daily Sketch* was more concerned with the Fascists' feelings than describing what had happened. Under the heading "HITLER AND MUSSOLINI SUFFERED TOO" most of the paper's impressions of the day came from an extensive interview with Mosley. "The Government have capitulated to terrorist tactics that are intended to make free speech impossible," he said. "I do know that hundreds of anti-fascists came from the provinces to London determined to provoke trouble. Their expenses were paid.

"Where did that money come from? That is a question the authorities should answer." The front page of the *Daily Sketch* was devoted entirely to a photograph captioned "Above is the exciting scene in Royal Mint Street as the crowds were being dispersed by baton-armed police."

The struggle against antisemitism is as much a task for the British people as a whole as for the Jews; and the struggle against fascism is a task for Jews as much as for the British people as a whole.

They therefore believed that it was impossible to combat antisemitism purely through anti-defamation work as this was merely attacking the symptoms. They organised a campaign of public protest meetings — often open air and close to British Union of Fascists platforms; appeals to Parliament, particularly on the question of political uniforms and racial incitement; speakers to Jewish and non-Jewish organisations, and co-operation with other anti-fascist groups. A particularly strong co-operative relationship was established with the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL); they organised joint conferences and NCCL speakers regularly appeared on Jewish People's Council platforms.

The intense flurry of activity which was set in motion prompted the formation of numerous other groups wishing to take practical steps in defence of the Jewish community. The Association of Friendly Societies organised speakers' classes with a view to holding open air meetings. An ex-servicemen's movement against fascism was founded and within six weeks of its formation claimed a thousand members including seven hundred Jews. In North West London a rapidly growing Jewish Council of Action had been formed which took as its charter a critical article by a *Jewish Chronicle* columnist on "The Question of Defence". It later merged with the Jewish People's Council. These independent initiatives represented a diversity of approaches to Jewish defence, derived not only from diverse interests expressed in a wider collective framework, but also from strongly held analyses that represented some degree of incompati-

Only the *Daily Worker* celebrated the alliances that grew up in the struggle against Fascism, saying: "The rout of the Mosley gang is due entirely to the splendid way in which the whole of East London's working class rallied as one man (and one woman) to bar the way to the Blackshirts. Jew and Gentile, docker and garment worker, railwayman and cabinet maker, turned out in their thousands to show that they have no use for Fascism.

The same picture in the *Daily Worker* carried the caption: "Clearing the way for Mosley; repeated police charges in Royal Mint Street attempted to clear the street for the Fascist parade." Two views from different sides of the barricades!

According to the *Daily Mail* the "Reds" were driven back. There was no indication until half way through their article that the Fascists had been prevented from marching.

Fifty years ago Jews in the East End were threatened by the growth of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. They could not wait or depend on the response of their communal leaders. David Rosenberg describes how they developed their own independent organisation and action.

bility between different approaches. The *Jewish Chronicle* voiced its concern: "Such a multiplicity of bodies does not make for strength unless there is a clear understanding of the functions of each and harmonious co-operation". It therefore called for unity in order to avoid a squandering and misdirection of energies. Alignments and co-operative working arrangements were made, but they did not result in one unified defence body. Instead the defence of British Jewry between 1936 and 1939 was led by two representative Jewish organisations: the Co-ordinating Committee of the Board of Deputies, and the Jewish People's Council, subscribing to different analyses and developing different strategies.

The Board of Deputies was concerned solely with countering anti-Jewish defamation and would not embroil itself with the issue of fascism. This was for two reasons; firstly because it did not believe that there was any special relationship of fascism to antisemitism, and secondly because a position on fascism would involve the Board of Deputies in partisan politics. In this they were wholly supported by the *Jewish Chronicle* which argued that it was dangerous for Jews to take a single collective attitude towards a legal political party since "no other religious section takes up such a position towards a political party". Furthermore, it argued, some Jewish leaders (such as Waley-Cohen) were not convinced that, apart from antisemitism, fascism was a deadly political error. The Board of Deputies method of countering antisemitic calumny was through leaflets, pamphlets and public meetings. Its leaflets and pamphlets, such as *The Jews in Britain*, *Bolshevism is not Jewish*, and *What the Jews of Britain did in the Great War*, concentrated on facts and figures and extracts were periodically featured in display form in the *Jewish Chronicle*. One such extract asked, "Do the Jews control British Finance?" It then stated that there was not a single Jewish director of the bank of England, that only three out of 150 directors of the "Big Five" banks were Jewish, and there were no Jews among the 70 to 80 directors of the other

major clearing banks. This exemplified the exact weakness of the anti-defamation campaign: whilst its utility lay in its refutation of distorted or invented "truths", by accepting that the argument may be reduced to numbers it conceded the underlying argument, and itself delegitimised the role of Jews in Britain as equal citizens. Facts in themselves were not the basis of antipathy. This depended upon the attribution of relevance to these facts. Anti-defamation work blunted the antisemitic attack but did not challenge its real basis.

More than 1,500 people attended the Board of Deputies' inaugural open air meeting at Hyde Park. Following its success, meetings were regularly held in recognised "street corner" venues. These were organised in close co-operation with the Ex-Servicemen's Movement Against Fascism and the Association of Friendly Societies, the latter of whom, before embarking on its campaign of open air meetings discussed principles with the Board of Deputies and submitted itself to the Board of Deputies' authority. Eventually the Board of Deputies' campaign and that of the Friendly Societies were further co-ordinated under the auspices of the London Area Council which set up an office in east London. The Friendly Societies, whose platform was non-political, were crucial to the Board of Deputies' campaign because they were drawn from the wider elements of the community, but shared the Board of Deputies' position on the nature of and response to antisemitism, as illustrated by their main speaker Frank Renton:

Jew baiting is a contradiction of everything which Christianity has stood for. Jews are trustworthy... they have rendered illustrious service to Britain and the Empire. The overwhelming majority of Jews in Britain are sober, hardworking and with a social and moral standard as high as that of any other denomination. Whilst the public actions of the Board of Deputies brought it closer to the reality of those Jews most exposed to attack, it did not alter its advice. It maintained that Jewry should abstain from Blackshirt meetings and demonstrations and that its

...and what the papers said

by Julia Bard

All kinds of theories were put forward in the newspapers of 5 October 1936. Scotland Yard saved some of them the trouble of working out why or how the Fascists had been stopped from marching on that fine Sunday afternoon. "YARD BLAMES THE SUNSHINE" ran the heading in the *Daily Express* above the official police account of events. "Fascist assembly was held in the East End today, and, largely owing to the fact that the day was one of the finest of the year many people were attracted to it including a large number of women and children."

Notwithstanding the weather, the *Express* launched itself with gusto into the free speech argument: "Now, Sir Oswald is absolutely entitled to hold his meetings and expound his beliefs, subject, of course, to the law of seditious libel.

He can dress himself as he pleased, and if

he can persuade his friends to dress the same way that is nobody else's business. He is entitled to the protection of the police against hooligans who deny him free speech."

"Hooligans" was an odd word to use for the hundreds of thousand of people who came out on to the streets that day. According to the *News Chronicle*, "The greatest East End crowd in living memory — one estimate is 300,000 — awaited the Fascists. If the march had gone on London might have had a new black page to its history. Blood flowed. Barricaded streets round Royal Mint Street — the Fascist rallying ground — were strewn with wreckage. Fierce scuffles took place in Cable Street where police stormed the barriers. . .

"It all began when the Blackshirts — about 2,000 — strode out through the comparatively deserted streets of the City.

"In the teeming East End Streets the people

behaviour should be impeccable, blameless and devoid of vulgarity and ostentation. "If volatile Jewish youth stayed away," argued Laski, the President of the Board, "the charge that Jews are communists would soon be proved baseless."

The Jewish People's Council concentrated its efforts more selectively, combining general anti-defamation work with meetings for particular audiences such as trades' councils, trade union branches, political organisations, and small traders. On the basis of its alternative

analysis its message was in considerable contrast with that of the Board of Deputies. Its exposure of antisemitic calumny was placed within a framework directed towards unmasking the methods and motives of its propagators. Whilst the Board of Deputies reproached Jews with the antimsemmites' accusations of sweating employers, bad landlords, and price cutters, the Jewish People's Council rejected the notion that these were particularly Jewish characteristics. Its advice to Jewry similarly contrasted with

that of the Board of Deputies; it printed and distributed thousands of leaflets urging Jews to join public demonstrations against fascism and participated fully in the events of Cable Street. In the days immediately preceding that demonstration the Jewish People's Council collected 100,000 signatures for a petition urging the Home Secretary to ban the march.

This is an excerpt from David Rosenberg's *Facing Up To Antisemitism: How Jews in Britain Countered the Threats of the 1930s* JCARP Publications, 1985. □

SOCIALIST EASTENDERS

Politics was part of my upbringing. My father was a member of the Jewish Bund and very active in the Workers' Circle. My earliest recollections are of him teaching Yiddish to the members' children. I can recall as a child the impact of the Russian revolution and my father taking me to the trade union premises. Our education was in the streets. It was part of our everyday life, particularly living in the Rothschild Buildings where you saw every possible aspect of the problems confronted by the Jewish working class. The overriding memory I have is of Monday mornings — everyone having to pay the rent. Evictions took place. The whole atmosphere was of such a close community. You had to be pretty dull if you weren't interested in what was going on. Within such a close community everyone knew each other's problems and everybody else's problems were your problems.

It was a very lovely way to be brought up. It was an education being concerned with other people's difficulties. To me being Jewish and being a socialist was a natural thing. As soon as I left school I was watching the events of the General Strike. After hearing all the 'isms' in the discussions between families, politics was a natural thing. And then the question of antisemitism was always lying there at the basis. I went to the Jews' Free School (JFS). When going for a job afterwards, a reference with JFS on the head was enough to stop me getting a job in various places.

Our language was Yiddish — the language of the Jewish working class. The mothers wanted us to learn English. When they said, "learn English", they

were saying, "get out of the ghetto, be a *mentsh*, get out of the East End". And they had no intention of going back to Russia. When I think of Fashion Street, Flower and Dean Street, Thrawl Street, Wentworth Street, there must have been 1500 families in those blocks. I remember the struggle to make a living as the trade was always seasonal.

When I left school my first big political involvement was in 1929 when Harry Pollitt was a (communist) candidate. The excitement — you would think we had won the election — I think he got about 2,000 votes. In the context of my Jewish life, many of my friends were political. Politics became much more part of our lives when we began to understand the implications of fascism.

Many families in our block were religious. My parents weren't, but the traditional things were there. I was expected to fast on *Yom Kippur* but my parents didn't insist. It was a continuing life. There weren't the divisions we see today. The whole East End was a kind of continuity in terms of the Jewish community.

As I finished school my mother insisted I have a trade. My uncle was a tailor and had his own workshop. "As long as you have a trade you won't go hungry", my mother would say. I was offered some jobs soon after school but they didn't suit my temperament. I worked as a cutter on men's clothing. You went from job to job — that was how you accumulated your experience. I went to work then for a mantle and costume company and I made an application to join the union at Great Garden Street. It was 1932.

The 1930s saw the peak of Jewish radicalism in Britain. The struggles for a living wage and against antisemitism and fascism, here and abroad, propelled working class Jews in to the forefront of political activity. Mick Mindel, a lifelong trade union activist, grew up in the East End heartland of the Jewish working class. He recalls the experiences of his generation of Jewish socialists.

I was involved in sports and athletics. I went to Germany in 1933 to play football and I had a taste of what the Nazis were doing. I saw the stormtroopers and I really knew what a pogrom meant. I came to Berlin the day after Hitler got to power. It was a long political lesson for me in a very short time. I had discussions with German communists, socialists and trade unionists. It puzzled me that there were communist unions, socialist unions and so on. When Hitler got to power in spite of the tremendous strength of the German socialists and communists, it was a terrifying experience. I found the bitterness between the communists and socialists so entrenched that the prospect of working class unity was never on.

I met a young Jewish man who worked on one of the illustrated papers there. He asked me if I was a member of a union. I said I was having difficulty joining because they thought I was a communist. He urged me — whatever else you do make sure you are a member of the union. I came back to London, followed up my application, and a few months later they gave me my membership. I worked in the United Ladies' Tailors section of the trade.

In 1935, London was the largest clothing centre in the country. London began to absorb into its production the dressmakers, men's clothing, the bulk of the handicraft section: the Saville Row tailors — a very comprehensive industry. The early 1930s were difficult. In 1935 the average working time in our industry was 36 weeks in a year — a very high proportion of unemployment. The Great Garden Street Union looked to the Master Ladies' Tailors Federaton as an alternative to amalgamation with the National Union of Tailors. They advocated

a policy of a federation with the sub-contractors against the main enemy — the manufacturers. Those of us who were politically conscious found that completely unacceptable. How could you talk about an organisation with the master Tailors? But it was also understandable from the point of view of many Jewish workers who could identify with the Master Tailors. My section of the industry was dominated by Jewish workers. The active membership of the Labour Party and the union leaders were opposed to amalgamation. Those of us on the communist side thought it wrong to be federated with the employers. It became a clear ideological battle.

Meanwhile the industry was changing fast. Modern machinery was developing which was eliminating the labour content in the garment. Jewish manufacturers began opening up their own factories — the Steinbergs, Ellis and Goldstein, and so on. With the influx of German designers and cutters, they introduced garments cut to perfection. The mass production of women's clothing was now a practical possibility and this was translated into the industry. Clothing was made for working class women at a price they could afford.

The changes in the industry enabled us to recruit women and one of the first things we did was to appoint Sarah Wesker as women's organiser. The Great Garden Street union had emerged as a craft union with that ideology. It reflected the uncertainty of the time that they were looking for strength through small craft organisation. When I was elected Vice-Chair of the union in 1937 we decided to divert attention away from small craft union shops.

As well as the union, we had the Workers' Circle which provided a forum in which Jews from different occupations could come together. The Circle had been formed by Jewish working people who didn't want to be dependent on the patronage of the Jewish wealthy, didn't want hand-outs and didn't want to be treated as second-class Jews. They had enough of that. Don't forget that at the turn of the century the Jewish establishment didn't want Jews to come here.

The 1930s saw many highly political events. Hitler came to power in Germany and you had the Blackshirts here. The dominant political discussion was about fascism and antisemitism. Pogroms were happening in Poland. When I became Chair of the union I was involved in raising money to bring children and orphans from pogroms in Poland. Apart from antisemitism and fascism there was the

destruction of working class organisations, the impact of the hunger marchers, the struggle for wages. In the midst of all this you had the Popular Front in France and the Spanish Civil War. I remember standing on a street corner, shouting my lungs out: "Madrid today, London tomorrow!" I didn't realise then how correct the slogan was.

I saw the importance of fascism very early on. I think it was the motivating thing in my life — the physical horror of seeing them in their uniforms in Germany and what was happening to the Jews. In East London anyone who was active in the union knew about the issue. I had argued for many years that fascism wasn't just a Jewish problem but that it was a threat to society as a whole.

Fascism was a living issue with the Blackshirts on the streets in their uniforms and jackboots. I was close to Jimmy Mallon, the warden of Tcynbee Hall, and I remember him saying to me, "Take them out of their blackshirts and they would be nonentities". He was in the forefront of the pressure to the Home Secretary to ban their uniforms. It made a tremendous difference, although I think that the day that fascism was defeated was at Olympia (1934) when fascism showed itself for what it was.

And then there was Cable Street. I got to know about Cable Street before the Communist Party did, from Jack Pearce of the Workers' Circle. It was a marvellous day. There was such a feeling of achievement, of working class unity — They Shall Not Pass! It wasn't any of the Blackshirts we fought, mind you, it was the police. I was so elated, running all over the place — the sheer excitement of it all. These were days that were worth living through. I saw it through the eyes of a trade unionist — appealing to workers to come out. I can't tell you how many of our members were there but the following day everybody was talking about it and you would think everyone organised it! We also fought antisemitism and fascism abroad. In 1937-38 we had a committee to protest against Polish pogroms. The committee included Rabbis, the Workers' Circle and many different organisations. The Federation of Synagogues wouldn't join but they sent £25 to help the work of the committee which was a lot of money in those days.

We were as much anti-fascist as we were convinced of communism. The big change for me came in 1939 with the Hitler-Stalin pact. That was a very traumatic experience. My father could read Russian and was getting the Russian papers. He used to say that the Russian

peasants were always antisemitic. At the time I was too loyal. I was friendly with some very fine people of the Communist Party. I was asked to attend a special meeting and it was pretty obvious what the party line was going to be. At the lunch break I said to Harry Pollitt: "As a Jew, how the hell do you think I'm going to stomach this?" When Harry Pollitt was suspended from General Secretary for a year I lost a bit of *kheyshek* (enthusiasm). It sowed the seeds of doubt, that we, the great Marxists, the materialists, with a scientific analysis — we could be wrong? It was impossible. We didn't think we could be wrong. It was like the bloody Catholic Church! I stayed in the Communist Party though up till Kruschev.

After the war there were many changes for the Jewish working class. There was a dramatic decline in the two basic industries that employed Jews — clothing and furniture. When I did the monthly check on membership figures I saw the transfers I was making to the postal and the transport unions. Our members were becoming taxi drivers and postal workers. Quite a number became insurance agents. I kept in contact with many of them. The whole situation was changing. Factories went out of London with government encouragement. The industry began to be scattered. If you were living in London it was difficult to move. People came back from the Forces to an industry they didn't relish. The Jewish workers were being shifted away from their traditional base. It was one big upheaval and it did mark a change in political outlook. But also after 1948 the State of Israel began to be an alternative to Marxism. Whereas we had naturally turned to Marxism instead of Zionism — in those days it was an ideology of the Jewish middle class; Zionism was not relevant to the Jewish trade union world — many young people now identified with Zionism politically and emotionally.

Those of us in the Jewish community who still have a socialist philosophy need to rethink. There must be other links. We need to pay more attention to other ethnic minorities. In Bill Fishman's book (*East End Jewish Radicals*), he talks about the dockers' strike and Jews taking in the children of dockers. I don't recall any Jews taking in a miner's child in the miners' strike.

Although Jewish trade unionists and Jews in the Labour Party were involved in the miners' strike, as a community we weren't. And when I talk to many Jews today about trade unionism you immediately sense which side most of them are on. □