

the rediscovery of their own traditions and heritage, and not simply for the purposes of evacuation.

Of course, all prognoses for the Jews of eastern Europe must be to some extent provisional and cautious, and there are persuasive arguments for restricting assistance to emigration. No one is more aware of the dangers than the Russian Jewish leadership, and no responsible Jew in the west can ignore their wariness.

Yet the *Va'ad* is acting on the assumption that even in the worst scenario 3 million Jews cannot be evacuated in a year or even a decade. In this case, and more optimistically in the hope of a more favourable turn of events, it is vital to create the structures for the continuity of Jewish life in the Union of Sovereign States. Until these bodies are securely established and Russian Jewry is able to fund them from its own resources, this will entail aid from Jews in the west.

We must offer Russian Jewry our skills and

experience in setting up the totality of communal organisations: Jewish kindergartens and schools, departments of Jewish studies at universities, Holocaust education projects, welfare facilities for young and old, representative bodies and lobbying agencies.

If Russia recovers and prospers – and with its vast potential wealth there is good reason to suppose that it will succeed economically in the long term – Russian Jewry will become a rich, powerful and dynamic community. It will constitute a decisive force in the counsels of world Jewry, balancing the Jews of the USA and Israel. This is a prospect which perplexes the many vested interests at what are currently the two poles of Jewish existence and they are doing their best to establish control over Russian Jewry at the instant of its regeneration. Those Jews with a commitment to a free, pluralistic diaspora Jewish life should respond generously to the call of Russian Jews for partnership and co-operation.

Purged from history

In December 1941, when the German armies were just a short distance from Moscow, Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter, two leaders of the Jewish Socialist Bund in Poland, were shot in Soviet Russia. As we approach the 50th anniversary of their deaths, Majer Bogdanski writes about their lives.

Henryk Erlich came from a Hasidic background. He joined the Bund when still at school. After studying at various universities he obtained a degree in law. Owing to his talents he soon became one of the leaders of the Bund and a member of the Central Committee. He was arrested a number of times for revolutionary activities. After the overthrow of Tsarism in February 1917 he was elected to the Executive Committee of the All Russian Workers' and Soldiers' Soviet. Stalin once wrote of a meeting: 'The only sensible speech in the Central Executive Committee was that by Henryk Erlich.'

The Bolshevik revolution in October made it impossible for him to remain in Russia so he moved to Warsaw. Poland had just regained its independence. He became a member of the Central Committee of the Bund in Poland and the chief editor of the Bund's daily newspaper. In 1919 he was elected to the Warsaw City Council. He remained a councillor until the outbreak of war. Of the 120 members of the council, he was the only one to speak out publicly against Pilsudski's march on Kiev in 1920, against war and for an immediate peace with the Soviet Union. Reactionary forces demanded that he be put on trial for treason to the state. He was arrested, but released after three months.

He was active too in the Jewish Kehilla (community) where he revealed the hypocrisy of the Jewish establishment and its reactionary

policies towards the Jewish masses. Every day there was an editorial by him in the Bund's daily *Folkszeitung* dealing with both Jewish and international questions. It was a time fraught with antisemitism which hit the Jewish working masses the worst. The struggle for the right to work was a daily affair. Jewish shops were picketed by gangs of hooligans forbidding non-Jews to enter them.

It was in this atmosphere of increasing anti-Jewish hatred, particularly after Hitler's coming to power, that two Zionist leaders, Grynbaum and Jabotinsky, came to Poland. The former proclaimed that there were 'a million Jews too many in Poland' and the latter that 1½ million Jews ought to be 'evacuated' from Poland. With an iron logic Erlich, in his daily articles, knocked to pieces such suggestions, explaining how dangerous, stupid and irresponsible they were.

When under his leadership the Bund joined the Second International, he became one of the two Bund representatives on its executive.

Victor Alter was born in 1892 in Mława, Poland. He also joined the Bund while still at school, under the influence of his elder sisters. His revolutionary activities soon brought him into conflict with the police and school authorities. He was thrown out of school with a 'Voltchy Bilet', which meant that he was forbidden to attend any school or university in the entire Russian Empire. With the police hard on his

heels he fled to Belgium where he studied electricity and mechanics in Liège.

In 1912 he came back to Warsaw and was active in the Bund. Arrested again, he was deported to Siberia from where he escaped again to Belgium. After the German invasion of Belgium he escaped to England. He worked in a factory and was active in the Bund groups in London and in the British Socialist Party. He was opposed to the war and took part in the campaign among Jewish immigrants to resist conscription.

He returned to Russia at the outbreak of revolution. He was active both in the Ukraine, where there were many Jewish workers, and later in Moscow where he was elected to the Central Committee of the Bund. In 1918 he moved to Warsaw and soon became a member of the Central Committee of the Bund there as well.

His main interest was the Jewish trade unions which he helped unite into one national federation. He chaired this until the outbreak of war in 1939. The Jewish unions were an autonomous part of the general trade union movement in Poland which was affiliated to the International Federation of Trade Unions. He became a member of the Executive of the IFTU. He also played an important part in the Warsaw City Council of which he was a member right up until the outbreak of war. He intervened with the authorities on behalf of the Jewish poor. He was also editor of the Bund's daily Polish language paper and was the other Bund representative on the executive of the Socialist International.

On 6 September 1939 the Polish government evacuated Warsaw. The Central Committee of the Bund left the capital for Brest, leaving behind a smaller committee to organise the underground movement against the German occupation. On 17 September the Soviets invaded Poland from the east. When they marched into Brest they demanded to know where Erlich and the Central Committee of the Bund were. A Jewish communist who recognised Erlich denounced him. He was arrested and deported to the Butirki prison in Moscow where he was brutally tortured. He gave written answers to all his interrogators' questions. In this way he wrote a sizeable book about the ideology and history of the Bund. His hope was that if one day the archives of the NKVD should be opened, it would be possible to see his answers written in his own hand.

He was tried by a military court. No witnesses were called and the prosecutor said nothing. Only Erlich himself made a speech, again in order to leave a document, to which there was no reply. The court found him guilty of sabotage against the Soviet Union and sentenced him to death by shooting. There was no right of appeal but he was entitled to apply to

the Supreme Soviet for clemency. Although he made no such application, he was told 11 days later that the Supreme Soviet of its own accord had commuted his death sentence to one of 10 years in a labour camp.



Victor Alter was in Kovel when the Red Army marched in. Together with leaders of the Polish railway union he issued a declaration to the Soviet authorities in which they expressed the hope that the Soviet Union would help the people of Poland to free themselves from Nazi oppression. All the signatories to the declaration, including Alter, were arrested by the NKVD. Alter was taken to the Butirki prison. He put up a struggle, demanding that the inmates be given conditions at least comparable with those in Tsarist times. He staged a number of hunger strikes, 40 days in all, during which he was forcibly fed. However, he was allowed pen and paper to write a treatise in which he tried to formulate the laws of non-Newtonian physics. He demanded that it be sent to the Soviet Academy of Sciences to see if there were any scientific merit in it. This request was granted.

The interrogators had a hard time with him. To all their accusations he had only one answer: 'This is a lie.' To soften him up they put him in a special cell with a ceiling so low that a person of average height could not stand erect (and he was a tall man) with reduced food rations. He was tried in August 1941. Having entered a plea of not guilty he maintained a scornful silence. He too was sentenced to be shot for 'sabotage against Soviet Russia' and was given 10 days in which to apply for clemency. He used this time to write a second chapter of his treatise on physics. On the eleventh day he was told that his death sentence had been commuted to 10 years in a labour camp.

On 12 and 13 September 1941 Erlich and Alter were set free as the result of an agreement signed between the Soviet government and the

Unofficial commemorative stamp published by Solidarnosc in 1988

Polish government-in-exile, then in London. Soon afterwards they were visited at the hotel where they were staying by Colonel Volkovisky, Commissar Beria's right hand man, who told them to regard their two years in prison and their death sentences as a mistake. 'Now', he said, 'we are in a common struggle against the mortal danger of Hitlerism [the German army was advancing on Moscow] and we must fight together forgetting the past.' He suggested that they should take on the leadership of a World Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. They agreed at once. They worked out a constitution and plan of action for this committee. They were then invited to Beria who told them that only Stalin could make a final decision. They therefore wrote a letter to Stalin in which they expressed their ardent desire to help Soviet Russia by participating in the fight against Hitler's Germany. They outlined their project for the Anti-Fascist Committee and asked for his go-ahead.

At half past midnight on 4 December 1941, as they were sitting drinking tea, they were called away. They were never seen again. The news of their arrest reverberated throughout the whole world. All enquiries as to their whereabouts remained unanswered. Petitions on their behalf from prominent people were ignored. On 23 February 1943 the Soviet ambassador in Washington, Maxim Litvinov, wrote to William Green, the chairman of the American Federation of Labour, to tell him that Erlich and Alter had been shot. No date was given; it is believed that it happened the same night as they were called away. As a ghastly coincidence, at about this time the gas chambers in Auschwitz became operational.

What can one add 50 years later? When I was

a prisoner in a Gulag I once asked an armed guard for permission to go a few steps away to relieve myself. He refused and told me to do it on the spot among the other prisoners. I could not bring myself to do this so I took down my trousers and had only walked a few steps when I heard a shot and felt a bullet just miss my ear. I instinctively ducked out of his line of fire. I realised that he had shot to hit me. I was trembling and felt that my heart had stopped. My fellow prisoners thought that I had been hit and was dying. When I heard the news of the murder of Erlich and Alter I was in the army. I felt my legs tremble in exactly the same way and my face turned the same ashen colour. I felt that the bullets which had pierced their brains had been aimed at my head too; but I had been out of the line of fire.

They were leaders not only of the Bund but of the whole Jewish people in Poland. They never distanced themselves from their followers. With them in a demonstration we felt uplifted. They helped us to find a way to a new world of love in which all human beings would be respected. Both came from the very midst of the Jewish people and devoted their lives to them. They were always the first target of communist attacks. Yet many communists owed Erlich a debt of gratitude (the Communist Party was then proscribed) for thanks to his skilful and devoted defence as a lawyer – often for no reward – they got shorter prison sentences than they would otherwise have got and in many cases won complete freedom. Now 50 years later, when the Bolshevik system is nothing but a mound of rubble, one is comforted by the thought that one had the good sense and luck to have been aligned with Erlich and Alter.

Racing ahead

The changing contours of racism within and between different societies have defied simple explanation. Michael Heiser describes a new attempt to develop anti-racist theory in France – the hothouse of the new European racism.

If examination or publishing were enough to solve a problem, we need worry no longer about racism. From pioneering analyses of prejudice, such as the *Authoritarian Personality*, to work concentrating on the experience of black minorities; from dissections of fascism, like Michael Billig's *Fascists*, to those of antisemitism – what more can be said?

Missing is any sense of overarching theory. Past theories seem discredited. Some Marxists considered racism to be mere economics, a skein of