

## THE "**BUND**" AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

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translated from the Yiddish by Murray Citron

The year 1918. The war-fire has just burnt out. Poland becomes independent. Complicated problems, especially on the Jewish street, call for solutions. Jewish life begins to organize, the political parties reveal immense organizational and political activity. As if a blocked spring suddenly spurted up on high...

In the foreground of the Jewish workers' movement in Poland, as also in Kutno, is seen the general Jewish workers' organization, "*Bund*." The Jewish tradesman, worker, man in the street, and small trader begin to set up their political, social, cultural and professional organizations, the "*Bund*" encourages the process, works it into its own party framework. There is also a consumer-cooperative.



Youth Committee of *Bund* "*Zukunft*" ("Future") –1927

The work grows with difficulty. The available locations are too small. In the year 1930, thanks to contributions of the Kutno Jewish working class, a two-storey structure was erected in which the whole Bundist activity of the town was concentrated – the Beinish Michalewicz House.

### Political Actions

The *Bund* became a mass movement. It stood against injustices, from whichever side they came:

evictions of poor Jewish families that don't have with what to pay the rent; it carried on the war with the local antisemites and their boycott-politics, or hooligan attacks on Jewish passers-by, carried on meanwhile a broad education program during the election for the *Sjem*, for the town council and for the Jewish community. After the pogrom in Przytyk, on the initiative of the *Bund* a protest strike was carried out, the workshops and businesses were closed, and the Jews of Kutno flowed *en masse* to the united protest-meeting.

### "*Tzukunft*" and "*Skif*"

The Bundist youth-organization "*Zukunft*" absorbed enthusiastically and by storm important sections of the Jewish working-class youth in Kutno. Their circles were transformed into political and cultural smithies, where the consciousness of the young folk was forged. The same youth also became the loyal consumers of the Yiddish book, the attentive audience for various presentations and readings. They brought into their traditional Jewish and pious homes not only modern Yiddish culture and literature, but also socialist awareness.

Those in the *Konstancja* ghetto who had, in the worst circumstance, carried on cultural activity and political work, belonged to the Youth-*Bund* "*Zukunft*." The poet Beinish Zylbersztajn was shot in Auschwitz while throwing a stone at a murderer. Beinish was a subtle poet and prose-writer, editor of the monthly literary journal "*Belgian Pages*." He began his writing career in the central organ of "*Zukunft*" – "*Youth-Awakener*."

From the ranks of "*Zukunft*" come also Yosef Turko (Okrutny), the author of 10 belle-lettrist books (now in Argentina), Gradow, Szrank and Sobutki – active in the underground of the Kutno ghetto.

Love of the Yiddish language, of Yiddish writers and of the Yiddish book – began in the youngest Bundist generation, in the child-organization "*Skif*." And to that was added sport, jogging, hiking.

The young Glowinski, Goldberg, Haller and Shlomo Moszkowicz, who had their upbringing in "*Skif*," were in the ghetto among those who created a secret radio-

station and twice a day gave out news, encouraged the people, and called to resistance.

### Professional Activity

Professional activity in Kutno was in practice carried out by a coalition of the three worker parties: *Bund*, Communists, and *Left-wing Poalei-Zion*.

One of the strongest and best-supported unions was the Needle Workers' Union, which took in all those employed in the trade. Even members of *Beitar* belonged to the union. The leadership courageously defended the interests of the wage-workers.



"Bund" cooperative –  
Standing by the entrance,  
the director Gndel Gecel

The youth-section drew the special attention of the union. Besides working to further their trade interests, there was a wide-branched cultural program, especially involving evening courses. The aim was to root out illiteracy, which had become accepted among the Jewish youth living in poverty.

The second union in importance was the transport-union, to which belonged the porters and drivers. This was an older element, with big families and small revenues, always overwhelmed with worries about a living. In order to keep such Jews, with pious ones also involved, it was necessary to maintain an especially warm, comradely atmosphere. The leadership set up a loan fund, from which members could obtain loans without interest. They also fought for and got the right to benefit from the workers' sickness-fund, for minimal dues.

To the professional activity of the "*Bund*" must be added also the blessed work of the Socialist Manual Workers' Union, to which belonged tens of home artisans, craftsmen and tradesmen from all trades, and... many political hues.

### Sports and physical education

Almost every evening, more than 200 youngsters filled the gymnasium in the Michalewicz House in Kutno, where the Bundist sport-club "*Morgensztern*" ("*Jutrznia*") carried on its productive activity. On the wall hung a large print-out: "In a healthy body, a healthy mind." The instructor, Kopel Kirszbaum, a volunteer, conscientiously led the young workers in gymnastic exercises and truly strove for healthy physiques for all. The sport-club was renowned in Kutno. Everyone admired this institution.

Once a year there was a public display by the "*Morgensztern*" sport-club, accompanied by its own wind-orchestra.

The club's football team was the best in the city. Its achievements were spoken of with admiration, and not only by Jews.

### Jewish Schools and Culture League

In the early 1930s, a morning school with Yiddish as the language of instruction was created in Kutno. Let us take the opportunity to recall an episode which led to some bad blood:

Just before the opening of the school, when almost all preparations had been made, there came to Kutno our fellow-townsmen, the great writer Shalom Asz. On a Shabbat, together with his brother Wolf, he visited the Perec Library, where a meeting of the organizing-committee of the school was going on. The guest asked first about the library, its readers, what kind of books interested them, and generally about the cultural life of the town. On the spot he handed over a letter to the publishing-house "Culture-League" in Warsaw to send to the library, as a gift, all his published books. Afterwards, we told him about the opening of the school, which was soon to take place. Suddenly he put to us the startling question:

— Would we not agree that the school should bear his<sup>1</sup> name?

For that, he was prepared to contribute 50 percent of the school's budget.

I remember, as a participant in the meeting, that Asz's suggestion embarrassed everyone. The chairman promised the author to give him an answer in a short time.

And the answer was in the negative. The school was already named after the late Bundist theorician and leader Vladimir Medem.

Returning to the school. It soon had four classes, 40-50 children in a class. It was at first supported by voluntary contributions of Bundists, *Left-wing Poalei-Zion* and non-party people.

Thanks to the Socialist majority in the city council (7 P.P.S., 5 "*Bund*" and 1 Communist), the school received an annual subsidy. The Jewish community also provided in its budget a partial subsidy, as for the other cultural institutions in the city.

Today we know that many children, who received their education in the Medem school became, in time, industrious members of the kibbutz movement in *Eretz Israel*.

Among the teachers with high pedagogic qualifications, I remember: Jeruchemzon from Warsaw, Mandelman, Chanacze Fiszzer and Mann from Vilnius.

A separate chapter is that of the "Culture League", with its rich Perec library with a book treasury of tens of thousands of Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish books and a special division of children's literature. The "family tree" of the "Culture League" stemmed from the society

<sup>1</sup> TN: Shalom Asz's name. The writer is speaking about himself at the third person.

"*HaZamir*", from before the First World War. In his time, Shalom Aleichem came to "*HaZamir*", gave a lecture and read from his works. A share of the receipts was reserved for the library, which later went to the "Culture-League."

The readers were recruited from all strata of the Jewish population and reached the number of several hundred.

The People's University of the Culture League played an important role in strengthening the consciousness of its members, thanks to the presentations, readings and lectures on scientific, literary and socio-political themes. Among the speakers: Bertisz and Grosfeld – teachers of "*Am HaSefer*"; the historian Comber Lipman (perished in Warsaw); the guests from Warsaw – Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter<sup>2</sup>; our writer

and scholar, Israel-Yeshayahu Trunk<sup>3</sup>, the eldest son of the Kutner Rabbi, who had a calling to literature and exact sciences, is a contributor to the literary monthly magazine "Letter"<sup>4</sup> in Łódź. His lectures always drew a big audience. His goal in particular was to popularize the psychoanalysis of Freud and his follower Alfred Adler.

In Kutno there were also lectures by the literary critic Sh. Niger<sup>5</sup>, the educator Shlomo Mendelssohn and the essayist Leo Finkelsztajn, as well as Dr. Kruk<sup>6</sup>, D. B. Malkin<sup>7</sup>, Y. Halperin, the poet Itzik Manger, the literary recitalist Hertz Grosbard<sup>8</sup>.

Great is the register of the achievements and of the doers of the "*Bund*" and its institutions. But the brutal, murderous hand of the Hitlerites made all waste...

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<sup>2</sup> TN: both leaders of *Bund* and both executed on Stalin's order, in December 1942.

<sup>3</sup> TN: AKA Israel Trunk. See on page 271 of the original book.

<sup>4</sup> TN: of the alphabet.

<sup>5</sup> TN: Shmuel Niger, writer, literary critic and historian, June 15 1883 – December 24, 1955 New York.

<sup>6</sup> TN: Dr Józef Kruk, December 5, 1885 Częstochowa – July 6, 1972 Jerusalem.

<sup>7</sup> TN: Dov Ber Malkin, active in the "Culture League", 1901 Grodno – February 12, 1966 Haifa.

<sup>8</sup> TN: reciter of modern Yiddish literature, June 21, 1892 Łódź – 1994 Holon.