

Bundist Legacy after the Second World War. Real Place Versus Displaced Time, ed. Vincenzo Pinto, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 127.

by Nethanel Treves

Anniversaries are always good occasions for remembrance; sometimes, they prove good occasions for *reflection* on remembrance, as well. This appears to be a key source of inspiration for *Bundist Legacy after the Second World War*, edited by Vincenzo Pinto for Brill to coincide with the 120th Bund anniversary. As is well-known, the Jewish Labor Bund was founded in 1897 in Vilnius. The Bolshevik Revolution left no room for it in Soviet Russia, but the Bund soon became established as one of the strongest Jewish forces in interwar Poland. With its core devastated by World War II, what had survived of the Bund, along with its multiple diasporic branches, evolved into a world organization with a network of chapters spread out all over the globe. The “Bundist experience” lasted until the 1990s when, suffering from the crisis in both socialism and Yiddish culture, the Bund went through its final demise, thus concluding its near-century-long history of calamity and reiterated recovery. What of this remains with us, and what the Bund might represent in today’s memory of the past, are some of the questions Pinto’s book tries to tackle.

The volume is a collection of essays, differing in both focus and nature. Although most of them already appeared in print as articles or book chapters, their juxtaposition and the general frame outline a compelling and to some extent original interpretation. As an East-to-West survey of local Bund organizations in post-World War II years, the book has an obvious precedent in David Slucki’s *The International Jewish Labor Bund after 1945*,¹ whose chapter on the New York Bund the present collection in part reproduces. Confronting this earlier publication, *Bundist Legacy* differs in two important respects: firstly, it tries to take its point of departure from behind the Iron Curtain, investigating postwar Bundist history from within the USSR and then delving deeper into its five years in liberated Poland. Secondly, wherever possible, the volume assigns local contexts to scholars hailing from the places focused on in any one discussion, with all the advantages and disadvantages implied by such a choice. As compared with Slucki’s work, the emergent plurality of voices makes for a less systematic approach to each one of the case studies, but at the same time also

¹ David. S. Slucki, *The International Jewish Labor Bund After 1945. Toward a Global History*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

results in a set of gazes from within, enabling the construction of different perspectives and understandings.

The first essay, by Martyna Rusiniak-Karwat, deals with the Bundists' flight from occupied Poland to the USSR. Rusiniak-Karwat makes use of both archival resources and personal interviews in order to reconstruct the repressive operation enacted by the state – of which she identifies three distinct phases – and its underlying criteria. Bundists, she argues, have been “persecuted not only for national reasons, but mainly as social defectors and ‘social fascists’” (p. 16). The “move to the West” then begins with Bożena Szaynok’s study on the relations between the Bund, reorganized in Poland already by 1944, and the Jewish Fraction of the Polish Workers’ Party (PPR). The author analyzes the political tensions and the debates between Bundists, Zionists, and Communists, as well as the competing arguments within the Bund itself: whether to keep the organization alive as a separate entity, merge with the PPR, or disband and emigrate.

Through an examination of the relations between the Parisian Bund and the American Jewish Labor Committee, Constance Pâris de Bollardière portrays the situation of many Bundist chapters after the war: politics, cultural context, and organizational needs often led them to collaborate, inducing the Bund to develop new connections despite political distances. A similar set of problems is faced by the New York Bund, as shown by Slucki in the fifth chapter. In the “crowded world of Yiddish leftist activism” (p. 72) of New York, the Bund struggled to find its place among the many other parties of the Jewish Left. Too small to exert an influence on its own, the Bund attempted to do this through the Arbeter Ring, a considerably larger group at the time, while also advocating for unity within the Jewish Left. At the same time, the New York branch also became the administrative office of the World Coordinating Committee, the head of the International Jewish Labor Bund.

In significant ways, the fourth and the sixth chapters of the volume stand apart from the others. The former, by Gali Drucker Bar-Am, addresses the exceptional and paradoxical situation of the anti-Zionist Bund in the State of Israel. Like Szaynok and Pâris de Bollardière, Drucker Bar-Am considers a personal account. Focusing on the figure of Ben Zion Tsalevitsh, Drucker Bar-Am retraces his life from early union activism in the Yishuv to the official founding of the Israeli Bund in 1951. Doing this enables her to pinpoint some of the most important shortcomings of the Israeli Bund: after a veritable golden age in the 1950s, the

organization missed the necessity to reconfigure its ethnic and social composition, and started to wane. The author argues that the Bund had remained an Eastern European ghetto, incapable of facing its own “Ashkenazi privilege,” and thus failing to become a genuine party of the masses. While the judgment on the end of the Bund in Israel is likely accurate, one may well ask if the “ethno-socialism” Drucker Bar-Am sees in the Israeli Bund of the fifties is not being retro-projected by the author onto the original Bund as well, which she describes in analogous terms at the beginning of the chapter (p. 57).

Two topics seem to be recurring along the whole volume: that of the Bundist *mishpokhe*, the idea of a close-knit community, a Bundist family; and the question of memory. The mutual entanglement of both can be traced throughout the collection: from the small circles commemorating Alter and Erlich, the two Bundist leaders killed in the Gulag in 1943 USSR, to the effort to recreate a *community* about the reborn Polish Bund, to the latter’s diatribe against the PPR on the need to “revise” the party’s history in order to join the workers’ party. The peculiarity of the French Bund is made manifest: Pâris de Bollardière puts in evidence the fragmentation along generational lines of the Bund in Paris (corresponding to the three waves of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe: the Russians, the Poles, and the wartime refugees). At the same time, the strong ties between the Bund and the American JLC appear to have left more traces of the memory of the latter than of the former, as proved by the “non-Bundist American memory [...] imposed on the walls of the *Arbeter-ring*’s institutions” (p. 48) by non-Bundist JLC donors. In a sense, a similar kinds of *memory pressure* acted upon the Bund in Poland and in France, coming from both Jewish and non-Jewish sources.

On the opposite side of the Atlantic, obsession with the organization’s history is a distinctive characteristic of the American Bund, whose *Farlag Unzer Tsayt* – the organization’s official publishing house – found itself under attack for producing history books in large numbers, but “virtually nothing on politics” (p. 87). The pamphlets originally printed by the old Bundist press in Europe had all been substituted by historiographical works and memoirs.

The question of memory is also pivotal for the concluding essay in Pinto’s edited collection: a substantially revised version of a 2013 article by Roni Gechtman reviewing Israeli historiography of the Bund and comparing the information it provides to popular knowledge about the Bund and Jewish socialism overall. Despite the reforms of the 1990s and the attempts to merge (Zionist) Jewish

history with the general history curriculum, Bundism and Yiddish socialist currents are to this day virtually absent from state school teachings, which Gechtman takes to be the main source of Israeli collective memory (p. 104). Academia offers a more promising setting for research. Gechtman traces the fate of Bund studies, from the neglecting attitude of the first Zionist historians to the attempts by more recent scholars such as Jonathan Frankel, Ezra Mendelsohn, and Yoav Peled to achieve an in-depth understanding of the Bundist experience. Be its national element imposed from the top or demanded from below (the main point of disagreement among these three authors), all of them interpret the Bund's Jewish element as a nationalist claim. Things get even more problematic with the so called "Tel Aviv school," whose attempt to *nationalize* the Bund becomes prominent in works by Moshe Mishkinsky, Matityahu Minc, and Yosef Gorny, all of whom try to integrate the Bund within the Zionist teleological framework.

In closing, a word on Pinto's introduction. The collection's editor calls for a more philosophical approach to the history of the Bund, one that will be capable of taking into account the changed conditions of its matter. "We must," writes Pinto, "leave behind the 'modern' and schematic vision of a Jewish party struggling for rights and replace it with a temporally 'displaced' perspective." We must also "seek another space between past and present. This space is not a 'refugium melancholicum,' but a new dimension of brotherhood, solidarity and authentic hospitality" (p. 5). In order to accomplish this, we should reread – with a "deconstructive approach to the texts" – the personal accounts and the Bundist sources. Then he utters a prediction: "There are two possible paths for the next Bundist historiography: to struggle for an 'Hegelian' recognition by the Hebrew-Zionist father, or to lose its 'religion' in order to gain a new way of life" (p. 6). The metaphor recalls a passage that we find in Gechtman's chapter. He tells that Gorny chooses to interrupt his historical reconstruction in 1985 because at that time the Bund finally *admitted* that the Jews scattered all over the world were constitutive of a single people. It was the "prodigal son's final (and inevitable) return to the bosom of the nation. The Bund's history had reached its *telos*" (p. 102). Gorny's *Converging Alternatives* (where the title gestures implicitly toward Zionism and Bundism) thus epitomizes a specific trait of Zionist historiography, which was often paternalistic towards the Bund, shaping reality according to its goals. Rather than look for recognition or abandon the political arena in search of a transcendental *mishpokhe*, why not study more closely what Bundist historiography today can reveal concerning the mechanisms of nationalist memory?

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