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## WHERE WE STAND

● We stand for the rights of Jews, as Jews, in a socialist future.

● We fight for a socialist movement, embracing the cultural autonomy of minorities, as essential to the achievement of socialism.

● We draw on our immigrant experience and anti-racist history in order to challenge oppression today. We support the rights of and mobilise solidarity with all oppressed groups fighting for equality.

● We recognise the equal validity and integrity of all Jewish communities, and reject the ideology of Zionism, currently dominating world Jewry, which subordinates the needs and interests of Diaspora Jews to those of the Israeli state.

● We work for a socialist solution to the Israel/Palestine conflict based on equality and self-determination of Israeli and Palestinian Jews and Arabs.

.....  
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# Jewish Socialist

Magazine of the Jewish Socialists' Group

No 36 ● Autumn 1996 ● £1.50



## No man's land CAN THEY KEEP THE PROTEST ALIVE?

Asylum attacked ● Cesarani on Goldhagen  
Jews surveyed ● Alexei Sayle ● Poetry



# Jewish Socialist

'New year, new danger' might have been an appropriate slogan in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories this Rosh Hashona. The election of a right wing government giving increased strength to expansionist and fundamentalist forces, while the frustrated leadership of the Palestinian authority drifts towards autocracy, must surely be seen as a major setback for those seeking a just peace in the Middle East.

As Spike Katz comments (p15) Netanyahu's victory owed a great deal to abstention by leftists and Palestinian Israeli citizens who ultimately found themselves unable to vote for a 'Labour' Party that had compromised on so many principles that they were left disenfranchised. Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson and Jack Straw take note.

In an earlier issue of Jewish Socialist, Israeli left-winger Reuven Kaminer warned against those who merely dismissed the 'peace process' as a sell out. Radicals, he argued, could bemoan its shortcomings but could not be indifferent to it. It needed, though, a 'peoples' peace' to give it meaning. And there are still some rays of hope, as Cynthia Cockburn reports (p17), though the pressure on Jewish-Palestinian alliances is mounting.

For the mainstream media the crisis in Israel-Palestine, however, will play second fiddle, for now, to that in Iraq. Saddam Hussein is once more flexing his muscles against Kurdish forces who refuse to surrender their struggle for equality and self-determination. America has signalled its keenness to intervene, initially stating that it will not tolerate the oppression of the Kurds...unless, it seems, it is being carried out by Turkey. It wasn't long, though before American rhetoric shifted to defence of its 'global interests'. Britain (whose government is not exactly welcoming to Kurdish refugees) and Israel were among the few states to share the USA's enthusiasm at the prospect of a new Gulf War. But the situation could change rapidly and once again the poor and the powerless of the region are likely to be the principal victims. We can condemn cynical intervention by the West but this will only be useful if it goes hand in hand with practical solidarity to the oppositional forces within Iraq.

Solidarity is a theme that will be at the centre of celebrations in Britain this October for the 60th anniversary of the Battle of Cable Street. The Jewish community whose East End ghetto was under assault by Mosley's blackshirts in the 1930s enjoyed solidarity well beyond its own ranks. Trades unionists at the grassroots were an essential vehicle of this solidarity. The recently more open association of the trades unions with anti-racist campaigns must be welcomed, but we cannot ignore the attempt by all the mainstream parties to marginalise trade unions from political life. Bucking the wider European trend, fascist forces here are currently weak and divided, though capitalism's need for 'stronger measures' grows more urgent every day. Perhaps when our community considers how best to remember the anti-fascist fighters of yesteryear it will conclude that fighting for the rights of all oppressed minorities, defending the rights of refugees, and fighting to democratise society must go hand in hand with asserting the need for a strong, independent trade union movement.

Editorial committee: Julia Bard, Paul Collins, Ralph Levinson, Ruth Lukom, Simon Lynn, Karen Merkel, Charlie Pottins and David Rosenberg. Design: Clifford Singer.  
Cover photo by Cynthia Cockburn



Willing executioners? See page 23

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## ACTING TOGETHER AGAINST LANDMINES

Two Jewish organisations are pressing the British government to help combat the damage caused by anti-personnel landmines. A million people have been killed or injured by mines in the last 25 years. Estimates suggest that more than 26,000 people, most of them civilians, are killed or seriously hurt every year. There are believed to be 100 million mines laid around the world, and a similar number stockpiled. The countries affected include Cambodia, Laos, Iraq, Kurdistan, Angola, former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Afghanistan. Britain has ranked among the major landmine producers. And evidence shows that some companies in the United Kingdom are making components for these weapons.

Social Action, a joint project run by the umbrella bodies for the Reform, Liberal and Progressive synagogues, backs the coalition which includes more than 40 British charities and campaigning groups which oppose landmines. The coalition demands a ban on the use, stockpiling, sale, transfer or export of anti-personnel mines and wants higher contributions from the British government for

assistance in mine clearance programmes and to rehabilitate mine victims.

Social Action has produced campaign materials for schools, synagogues, youth clubs and other community groups. Further information can be obtained from Steve Miller,

Union of Liberal & Progressive Synagogues, Montagu Centre, 21 Maple Street, London W1P 6DS (0171-580 1663) or Vicky Joseph, Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, Sternberg Centre, 80 East End Road, London N3 2SY (0181-349 4731).



Women watching the 1958 Aldermaston March. This is one of 170 striking black and white photographs from A Weekend Photographer's Notebook by Vernon Richards, published by Freedom Press, price £6.95. All proceeds from this publication will go to the 'Freedom Press Solidarity Fund'.

## POLITICIANS SUPPORT THE PLAQUE

An Early Day Motion welcoming the unveiling of a memorial plaque in London for the Bundist martyr Szmul Zygielbojm has won wide support among MPs in Britain. The motion, promoted by three non-Jewish and three Jewish Labour MPs concludes with the hope that 'the perpetuation of his memory will serve as a reminder of the horrors inflicted by fascism and the courage of those people and movements who have resisted and are resisting racism and fascism'. The unveiling in Porchester Square, London, was attended by 200 people. A full report is on page 10.

## TRAVELLERS' TALES

With Gypsies again bearing the brunt of attacks by fascists in Eastern Europe, yet still struggling for recognition in memorials to the victims of Nazism, there has been a timely reissue of the pioneering study, Gypsies Under the Swastika, written by Jewish Socialists' Group member Donald Kenrick together with Grattan Puxon. The new edition is published by University of Hertfordshire Press, price £7.95.

## BAGELS & ROLLS



... and our smoked salmon is Scottish

... and our bagels are Welsh?

'Jewish? If it's good enough for the Gestapo, it's good enough for me.' Alexei Sayle – read the rest on page 13

**Come to the Jewish Socialists' Group dayschool – see page 31**

# DEFY THE LAW

Jews from a range of backgrounds are starting to protest against the new Asylum legislation

Jews in Britain have rallied to express strong opposition to the Immigration and Asylum Bill. Indeed, the opposition has been so great that it has moved the official leadership of the community to speak out against the Government. For once we have reason to applaud the Chief Rabbi as well as Neville Nagler who spoke so forthrightly on behalf of the Board of Deputies against the legislation. (Sir Ivan Lawrence, also a deputy, was booed by the rest of the Board when he tried to condemn Nagler's stand.)

Against this background one of the most exciting Jewish events of this year was the seminar entitled 'Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Racism - Debunking the Myths and Stereotypes' which took place at the Spiro Institute in London in July. Organised jointly by Jewish Council for Racial Equality, Spiro, Searchlight Educational Trust, the Refugee Council, and the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, the gathering demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of current Jewish anti-racist activity and the prospects for the future.

It attracted around 120 people, all of whom were keen to do something. There were plenary sessions with keynote speakers on the future of asylum rights, case histories, the arms trade and torture, refugee histories, and a historical overview. There were workshops on refugees and the media, working with refugee communities, interfaith activity, education, the far right, ethical investment, detention without trial, parliamentary

lobbying, legal perspectives, and psychotherapeutic support.

The case histories from Helen Bamber of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture were harrowing and, combined with a Channel 4 report on how Britain sells the instruments of torture, served as a shocking education for people. Equally moving were the refugee testimonies.

Although it was a positive and exciting day with lots of chances to network and discuss ideas, there were some problems. The first was the cost: £30 for organisations, £22 for individuals, £10 unwaged and press. This put the seminar out of reach of many organisations and individuals who want to get involved or, indeed, who are already active on these issues.

In his talk entitled 'Will the right to asylum last beyond the year 2000?' Philip Rudge of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, emphasised the need to make a sharp distinction between refugees and other immigrants. Challenging this in the discussion, I felt that I was in a minority of one. The question is difficult but important. Clearly there is a greater urgency in defending the right to stay of someone facing torture or death in the country they have fled from, but that threat is not unique to asylum seekers. What

about immigrants from countries where starvation rules? Even accepting that some people's cases are more urgent than others, we should be defending the rights of all those threatened with deportation and/or homelessness and destitution because of their immigration status. We have a long way to go before this principle is accepted.

The issue of defiance was hardly touched upon, at least not in the workshops I attended nor in the main discussion. I seemed to be the only person to raise it

and, though it was sympathetically received, it was not taken up. To some extent this reflected the timing of the discussion. With the vote in parliament a couple of weeks away, it was natural to focus our

activity on trying to stop the Bill — or at least to secure the proposed amendments from the Lords. However I suspect there were two deeper issues involved. Firstly, there was a feeling that the sponsoring organisations wanted to keep the official leadership of the Jewish community on board. Secondly, there was no framework for discussion of any strategic way forward. This related to the main problem of the event.

There was no final plenary session to bring together the threads of the day. As we could only go to two out of 10 workshops, we went away

not knowing what came out of the other eight. Worse than that however, was the absence of any opportunity to harness the energy and enthusiasm of the participants and their organisations into a commitment to action beyond a lobby of parliament on the 17 July and a continuation of the excellent work that the Jewish Council for Racial Equality (JCORE) has organised around collection of food, blankets and other necessities.

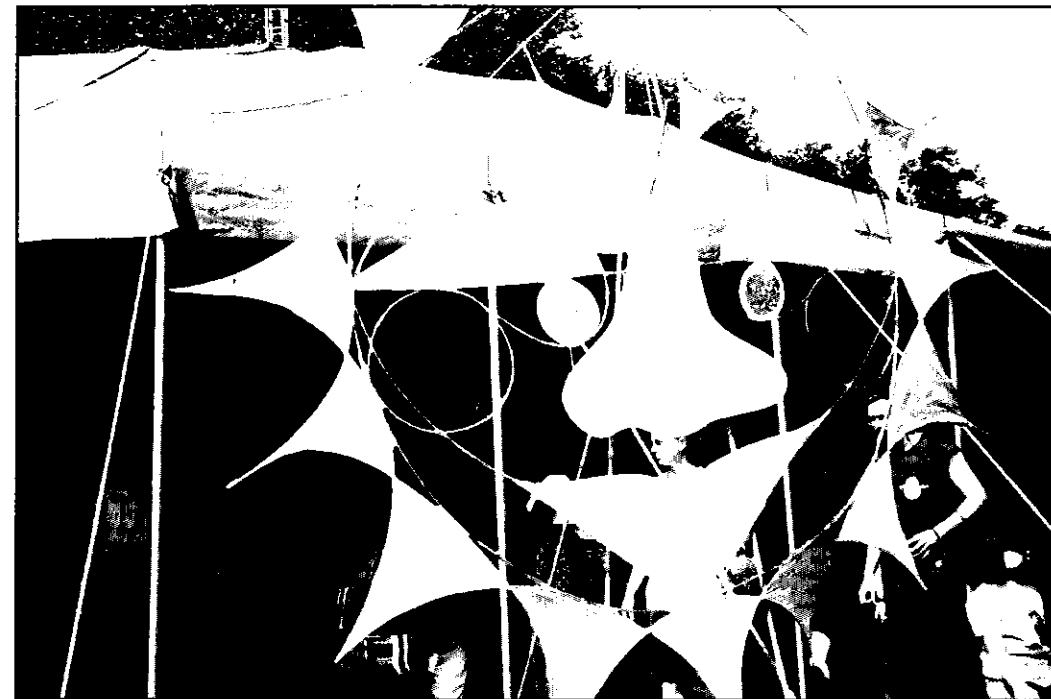
However the organisers said that they would contact all the participants about future activity. We would like to see all these people, and more, brought together in the autumn to agree an emergency plan of action. The lessons of the last year have proved that many Jews are prepared to join with other immigrant and refugee communities, with trades unionists and others to fight back against this racist government and its racist laws. It is no longer enough to campaign against the legislation; we need to defy it and to organise in solidarity with those affected.

David Landau

● If you want to be part of a Jewish network taking practical action in solidarity with immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, as well as building opposition and defiance in the Jewish community to the Asylum and Immigration Bill, write to Network, c/o Jewish Socialist, BM 3725, London WC1N 3XX

The Jewish Council For Racial Equality is at 33 Seymour Place, London W1N 6AT. Tel/fax: 0181-455 0896.

The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture is at 96 Grafton Road, London NW5 3EJ. Tel 0171-813-7777; fax 0171-813 0011.



Happy face — tens of thousands gathered for a good time at the TUC's Respect anti-racist festival in London in July

and we want to link up with other campaigns nationally. The West Midlands Anti-Deportation group (based in Handsworth, 0121-507 1618) recently took successful direct action in support of Audrey Grant, a UNISON worker. Having lost her appeal, she was detained at Birmingham airport. But a round-the-clock vigil was organised and a mass picket was mounted at the detention centre and at the airport terminals and she was released the following day, subject to a judicial review.

Hundreds of people are being flown out of this country every week and many more are locked in detention centres. This splits up families and causes extreme distress when relatives find that their loved ones have been arrested and detained. With this goes harassment of the rest of the family: one woman with four children, whose husband is being detained in Campsfield, was visited by three immigration officials and two police officers at 9am. They didn't tell her where her husband was.

There are campaigns for the closure of the detention centres at Harmondsworth (Heathrow) Campsfield (Oxford airport) and Rochester prison (Gatwick). All these centres, which are full of immigration detainees, are run for profit by private companies such as Group 4 — and they are being expanded.

Asylum seekers need practical support, particularly health care and legal advice on immigration. We are calling on doctors, nurses, solicitors and barristers to get in touch — your support is greatly needed. If you can drive, collect money, help with campaign work or make a donation, please contact the Colin Roach Centre, 56 Clarence Road, Hackney E5 8HB. Tel 0181-533 7111, fax 0181-533 7116.

## STARVED OUT

Anti-deportation activists in Hackney are trying against the odds to help asylum seekers who face destitution

'From 15 May 1995 to 30 June 1996 there were 5,735 refusals and three grants of asylum from short procedure applications. As at 30 June, there were 996 cases still under consideration.'

(Extract from Parliamentary Written Answers, 23 July 1996)

'Home Secretary, Michael Howard, said: "Taxpayers in this country cannot be expected to pay benefits and provide services like social housing for the increasing numbers who were coming here and spending many months on benefit only to have their asylum applications rejected as unfounded."'

(Extract from Home Office News Release, 24 July 1996)

The Asylum and Immigration Bill has just become law. At one point the

government's actions regarding Social Security benefits were deemed to be illegal, but the government amendment sailed through the House of Commons in July. This means that all asylum seekers who have arrived since February 1996 and who are awaiting decisions on their immigration applications, will have all entitlements to benefits withdrawn. In reality this means people will be starved out of the country and in many cases deported to face torture or death.

This is already affecting thousands of people in Britain through immigration checks, poor housing, hunger or the threat of evictions resulting from the loss of benefits. People are being forced to accept charity from various action groups.

In the London Borough of Hackney alone the Bill will affect approximately 5,000 people. The Colin Roach centre is working with people in that area who have had their benefits withdrawn and are being forced into destitution. Members and supporters of the centre are

trying to do as much as they can: organising food distribution, accommodation and clothing, but the resources are small and the problem is great.

Single people are not entitled to any form of hardship payment. In Hackney we know of people, particularly single men, who are suffering from hunger-related illnesses. Those with children who have lost their benefits receive a weekly crisis payment under the Children Act but this is worth only about half Income Support benefit — and some councils are not operating even this policy. Some local authorities are referring asylum seekers to other boroughs to receive this pitiful amount. People have to present their children and prove they have no other means of income. Asylum seekers are questioned on their immigration status at every point of contact with state services such as when they go to the doctor or at the Department of Social Security.

The Hackney Anti-Deportation group is supporting a number of cases

**PORTERHOUSE BLUE**

A friend recites this little ditty:  
"Oh! Lady Porter - what shall I do? the asbestos in my council flat is a nasty shade of blue, take me back to cardboard city, that's where I belong, And if my box comes from Tesco's, I'll be glad to sing this song!"

Singing the supermarket heiress's praises almost as eloquently, the Jewish Chronicle recalls her militancy on behalf of Soviet Jewry (as distinct from those in Paddington). Lest that does not suffice, riding to the Lady's rescue is a gallant knight, Sir Alfred Sherman!

Writing in the Spectator, Sir Alf condemns evil. '60s legislation which forced local authorities to house all the homeless from all over the British Isles and the four corners of the earth, while wicked Harold Wilson's subsidies to tourism encouraged London hoteliers to import a flood of Arabs and other undesirable nationalities to work in their kitchens.

By selling housing in marginal wards to the 'better' class of resident, Lady Porter was not gerrymandering, she 'was trying to keep Westminster civilised', says Sir Alf. So the Tory West End can continue profiting from tourism, services, construction and transport, while shoving the nasty sweaty workforce out to Labour boroughs at night.

Sir Alfred was once an adviser to Baroness Thatcher. Considering Westminster's policy of 'social cleansing', it seems relevant to add that he has also boasted of being an adviser to Dr. Karadzic.

**NOT THE NANNY STATE**

If Lady P is surcharged, couldn't she do community service near her home in Israel? I don't suppose she can help Russian Jews find council flats, and Israel already knows how to evict Palestinians, but as someone who believes in 'family values', she could help the Family Netanyahu.

Watching husband Bibi

**dybbuk's diary**

doesn't stray, and having Washington treat her as 'Israel's First Lady', Sarah Netanyahu has her work cut out; but last summer she had to sack Tanya, the au pair, after a row over burnt vegetable soup. Another nanny, Heidi, from Manchester, ran away after a week, complaining the Netanyahus made her work hard from 6.30 am to late, and kept her hungry. Heidi says she got a tomato a day and an egg every two days, and Mrs. Netanyahu 'never stopped stressing how expensive everything was'. Too right, Mrs N, I blame the government.

What the Netanyahus need is a helper who understands economics, believes in hard work, and promises value-for-money services. I know just the person ... and if she fails, how about her friend, that other grocer's daughter, Baroness Hardup? But watch they don't sell the children's train set!

**PIONEERS! OH PIONEERS!**

Interviewed before the Israeli elections, Kiryat Arba's Rabbi Dov Lior remarked how grateful the settlers were to Labour for building their new school and roads. It was Labour that authorised the settlement in 1970. But it was good of Rabbi Lior to find time for interviews. For his \$5,000 a month from the Ministry of Religion, he helps run Kiryat Arba's religious school, and spends up to three hours a week at the religious council offices.

The settlers may support the right on territorial matters, but they're not fanatical about private enterprise. A telephone

survey of Kiryat Arba residents found 65 % were on the public payroll, far more than in the State of Israel proper. About 60% of employed adult settlers in the West Bank and Gaza are in public employment, including 300 employed by religious councils. The state is an understanding employer. 'In these places, no one lifts an eye when employees leave to demonstrate for the common cause' according to the daily paper, Ha'aretz.

Former Kiryat Arba council leader Menachem Livni, jailed for car bombings and murders in the 1980s, was pardoned by the president, and works for the Ministry of Industry and Commerce lecturing on technology (hopefully, not car bombs). As Prime Minister Netanyahu said in his inauguration speech, 'The settlers are the real pioneers of our day.'

**MAKING A CRISIS OUT OF A DRAMA**

'War against terrorism' in north east London. At 8.30 on the evening of 19 June, police were told that sinister-looking foreigners with guns had been sighted prowling about premises in Stoke Newington. Rushing across to the Kurdistan Workers Association's centre, they found members of the Yeni Yasam theatre group rehearsing a scene from a Harold Pinter play, Mountain Language, where Turkish soldiers are arresting villagers.

The theatre group had notified Stoke Newington police some days before of their rehearsals. The players showed the police the National

Theatre hire certificate for their plastic prop guns. But the firearms squad insisted on smashing its way into the club, spurning offered keys, and doing extensive damage to doors, cupboards and filing cabinets. A volunteer worker who runs the centre's bookshop was hauled out, his head and feet were injured, and he was made to sit on the pavement, handcuffed, for two hours. No weapons were found.

I don't know whether north London residents will feel safer after this episode, but somehow I suspect we won't see it on television.

It reminds me of a story I once heard from an old boy who'd been in the British Socialist Party just after the First World War. Police raided the East End hall where they met, also used by an immigrant theatre group, and as evidence of insurrectionary activity, took away wooden swords and helmets stored under the stage for a play about ancient Rome.

**OFF THE SHELF**

Market forces mean you can have what you want so long as you've got the money and the vendor wants to sell. It's a free country, right? Well, W H Smith's, the wholesalers who keep piling girlie mags on your local newsagent whether wanted or not, have taken 300 publications, ranging from Pigeon-Fancier's Gazette to the left-wing Labour Tribune, off their own shelves, deciding they're not worth stocking. In some parts of the country you won't see them. How can you know what you want, if you've never seen it?

The Morning Star is petitioning for European-style legislation assuring distribution for small titles. Jewish Socialist, never having reached the wholesale chain, wishes them the best of British. Meanwhile, 70 select branches of WH Smith are displaying Adolf Hitler's Mein Kampf. 'In the interests of free speech', a complainant was told. Will they be selling matches, so people can implement the author's ideas on literary freedom?

**DON'T ASK THE RABBI****Fashion Feature**

What will make an impact on the discerning eye of Jerusalem's orthodox men?

Israeli designer, Orit on the Night displays her 'Harlot' Autumn collection.



Says Orit, 'I call this outfit, "Chaste or chased". Note the helmet for stones and the shield for bricks. I've added some waterproofs for when we're spat at.' We asked some orthodox men for further suggestions but they swung at us with some lead piping. One, however, did gasp: 'Split crotch panties'.

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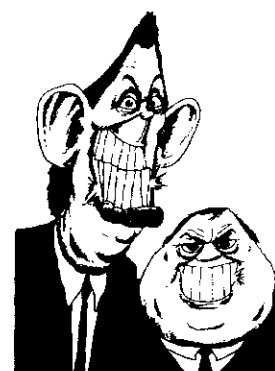
And tonight's winning numbers

★ **The British Jewish Vote** ★

Says lucky winner, J Major:  
'I was really down on my luck.'

**IT COULD BE JEWS!**

Organised by the Bank of England, M6 and the CIA in exchange for £20 million and a couple of rocket scientists.

**The paper they grin and Blair**

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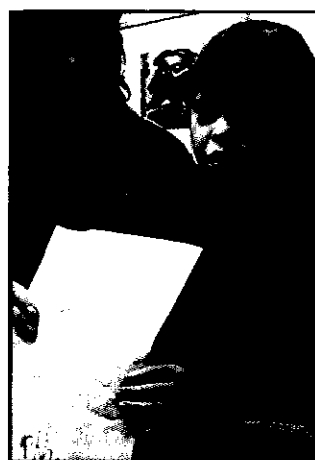
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London W1N 2BH. Tel: 0171 636 7247

# NO SEPARATION

**JS** Following your article about separate schools (JS35), this is also a serious issue for people with learning difficulties. Chloe McCollum, a 13-year-old Jewish girl with learning difficulties is demanding the right to become the first child with Downs Syndrome to attend a mainstream secondary school in the London Borough of Lewisham. With support from her parents, Zelda and Brian, she is actively campaigning for a place at Prendergast Girls School. Chloe has made a personal plea to Lewisham Local Education Authority; she has written to the Chair of Education, Councillor Gavin Moore; she has spoken to local newspapers, the disability press and Radio 4's Women's Hour. A leaflet was distributed outside the Town Hall while her future schooling was being dis-

cussed inside. To Chief Executive, Barry Quirk, and Education Director, Leisha Fullick, Chloe said: 'I should be at school — an ordinary school with other girls. I want to go to a secondary school to learn about animals, maths, science, Greek myths and stories and plastering, painting and French, PE, drumming, dancing and singing songs and having packed lunch. My friends are in Year 8. I want to go to school now!'

While she was at Lucas Vale, a mainstream primary school, Chloe had assumed that she would transfer to a mainstream secondary school with her friends. Those friends collected signatures for a petition to support her campaign. However, Lewisham continued to oppose her wishes and, in a letter to the local newspaper, the Chair of



Chloe and her mother, Zelda, campaigners for integrated education

Education said: Placing Chloe in a mainstream school would be detrimental to her own education and that of her classmates ... I can only hope that the ... campaign group stops using Chloe as a political football and allows her to take up the

place available for her now at Greenvale school.'

In a swift reply to Councillor Moore, Chloe wrote: 'I don't like being called a political football. I want to go back to a mainstream school because I miss my friends. Please come to my house to meet me and my friends to talk about this and disability rights.'

An interim agreement was reached that last term Chloe would attend Greenvale special school for children with severe learning difficulties. From this term, Chloe will attend Prendergast Girls School for half a day each week. Hopefully, the amount of time at the secondary school will increase. 'It isn't right to be separated,' says Chloe, who has told her mum: 'When I grow up I want to be a person with disability rights.' *Simone Aspis People First*

# WRONG DEMAND

**JS** In the last issue of Jewish Socialist, Steve Cohen put the argument against all immigration controls. At its annual conference the Jewish Socialists' Group declared its opposition to all immigration controls, though it was willing to work with campaigners who don't share this view. 'No immigration controls' is fine as a final goal. The problem with putting the 'no controls' position to the fore is that it takes the argument against the racism of controls from our territory of social justice to the terrain of our enemies who promote fears of being swamped.

I don't know whether there can be immigration controls which are not racist, which do not discriminate against poorer people in the world. I do know that con-

trols can be established which are less racist than the ones we have now, whereby black families, spouses and refugees which are now kept out, won't be.

If we are trying to win support for attainable demands, then our insistence on 'no controls' just allows our opponents to dismiss us and not even consider the argument that existing controls are racist. It is a position that allows no space for discussion or negotiation. It isolates us from many black organisations which support anti-deportation campaigns.

There have been many campaigns against individual deportations and the introduction of new draconian laws. When has there been a serious movement to unite anti-racist forces to replace the laws with something that is demonstrably

less racist and has a chance of becoming law — a law which for the first time in nearly a century would be more liberal than the one it replaced?

A less racist policy would certainly facilitate family reunion, remove the primary purpose rule, give more refugees asylum and allow some primary immigration. There would be reasonable rights of appeal against deportation.

The new policy would not be administered by the Home Office, but by an agency whose ethos it was to welcome immigrants. Does anyone think such a proposal is worth fighting for? Or, on the centenary of the Aliens Act, will we be marching against the next Asylum Bill? *Bernard Misrahi London N17*

# MIDNIGHT OIL

**JS** During a recent bout of insomnia I read the spring issue of Jewish Socialist from cover to cover. Pretty much without exception I found the articles interesting and well written. This was the first time that I'd read the magazine for many years and I thoroughly enjoyed it. *Andy Burgess London NW5*

**SEND YOUR LETTERS TO:**  
★  
**Jewish Socialist, BM 3725, London WC1N 3XX**

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# UNITED IN SORROW AND PRIDE

**‘Szmul ‘Artur’ Zygielbojm took his life in protest — not at the Nazis whose atrocities he condemned daily — but in protest against the Allied powers who had the power to intervene, to support and save the Jews from almost total destruction. Here in London today, on the 53rd yortsayt of Szmul Zygielbojm, let us pledge that we will do everything we can to ensure that never again in the future will there be more people who have to sacrifice their lives in order to rouse us all to fight against the murderous oppression of our fellow human beings.’**

These words are from David Rosenberg’s opening speech to the 200 people who gathered in Westminster on Sunday 12 May to share in the unveiling of a plaque to Szmul ‘Artur’ Zygielbojm, the representative of the Jewish Workers’ Bund on the Polish Government in Exile who took his own life in protest in May 1943.

Among the crowd were comrades of Zygielbojm, holocaust survivors, Polish socialists and young anti-racists. It was the culmination of a three year campaign for such a memorial in which the Jewish Socialists’ Group was very prominent.

The plaque was unveiled jointly by Zygielbojm’s daughter-in-law, Adele Zygielbaum, who had flown over from America with her family, with Polish ambassador Ryszard Stemplowski, and the Lord Mayor of Westminster.

The unveiling was followed by a celebration of Zygielbojm’s life at the nearby Yaa Asantewaa Community Centre. Here are some extracts from the speeches made on this momentous day.

‘Suicide is the most lonely individual act, yet throughout the 48 years of his life Zygielbojm immersed his own individual self and his own



Esther Brunstein reads Zygielbojm’s suicide letter

individual aspirations in collective movements for social change. He lived his whole life, not as an individual, but as part of these wider movements dedicated to the common struggle of the people — the working people of Poland and especially the Jewish working people who suffered discrimination and oppression.

...Had Zygielbojm lived another two years he would have rejoiced in the victory over Nazism. How shocked he would be, though, to see that 50 years on racists and fascists are alive and kicking across Europe, east and west, while the movements

against them are weak and divided. **David Rosenberg (Chair, Szmul Zygielbojm Memorial Committee)**

‘It is for me a very great honour and privilege to be able to stand here in London and say something about my teacher, a man that I looked up to, a man who was the personification of all I believed in and still do...

Whilst I was in the ghetto when it happened I personally felt it was for me that Zygielbojm sacrificed his life. **Perec Zylberberg (World Coordinating Committee of the Bund)**

‘The very atmosphere of the meeting, the very place we are in, the style in which it is being carried out reminds me, as a historian, very much of the Bund in the pre-war years. Szmul Zygielbojm would have understood it very well and felt it very appropriate. **Ryszard Stemplowski (Polish Ambassador to Britain)**

‘His suicide was not an act of somebody who abdicated his duties or was afraid of life. His suicide was the death of a soldier on the battlefield. The plaque that the family unveiled this morning is the lasting recognition of his value. **Majer Bogdanski (Bundist)**

‘Zygielbojm was driven to the ultimate gesture of self-sacrifice because the British government, British Jewry, world Jewry, the world at large seemed indifferent to the fate of the Jews, unreceptive to the calls he was making for action, for rescue...

Zygielbojm knew the truth, understood what was happening and had the will to act even if in the end that act was a desperate self-sacrifice...

If (today) journalists go to places like Rwanda and Bosnia and bring the stories back, if public opinion is stirred, if governments are pressured to act, I think in



Polish ambassador Ryszard Stemplowski with members of Zygielbojm’s family

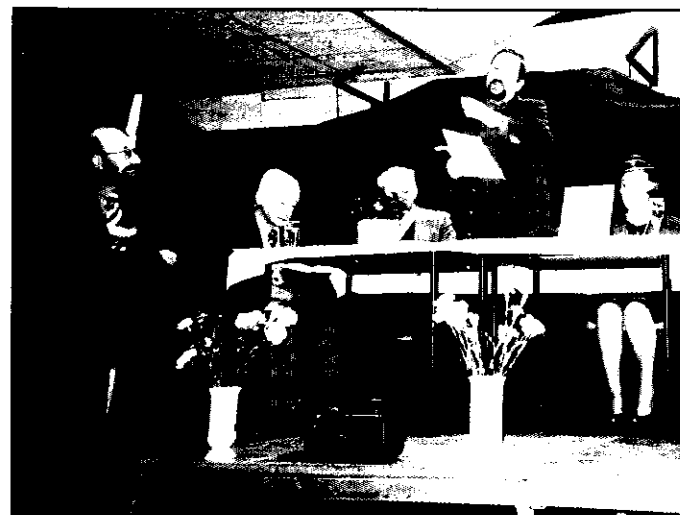
some way that is a tribute to Szmul Zygielbojm, his work and his sacrifice and I am so glad that we have gathered here today after unveiling this plaque to pay a tribute to this man and his achievements. **Professor David Cesarani**

‘The news that Szmul Artur Zygielbojm took his life for the cause of his people

spread quickly around the world. He could not and did not stop the war. He tried to stop the killing of his beloved people. He was brave and did all that was humanly possible to stop the Nazis from taking and destroying the innocent lives of men, women and children...according to the Nazis, they were guilty because they were of a

different ‘race’. No one should be guilty because of their birth; we are not responsible for our birth, but we are definitely responsible for our conduct. No one asks to be born, but each of us has the right to live! **Adele Zygielbaum**

‘Szmul Artur Zygielbojm’s labour and sacrifice were not for the Jews alone. His words and deeds embodied vital lessons for all humankind...about compassion, dignity, commitment and courage. About the ultimate value of life and of each human culture. Within Szmul Zygielbojm’s last letter, amid his anguished plea for the salvation of a people, he wrote of his belief that a better world would come. With his death he invoked the vision of a world of freedom, justice and peace, in which brutality would have no place. In offering up his own life, he reminded us



of such ideals of human existence, and of the path that we must seek...

...His words and deeds will echo whenever there is a reluctance to confront brutality. His legacy remains as relevant to the world today as it was half a century ago. Let us never forget it, and let us look ahead with determination to the building of a world in which all people can live in peace and mutual respect. This is what Szmul Zygielbojm would have wanted. **Paul Zygielbaum (grandson)**

‘I grieve the silence that attended the response to his death. But for humanity the real tragedy is the lost creativity, love, knowledge, skill and experience that lies beneath the soil at places like Auschwitz. All that potential is denied to you, to me and to our children...

Populations of people, mothers, children, sisters, brothers, are still being exterminated because of an accident of birth. Because they are identified with one ethnic group or another, because they are on the wrong side of ethnic cleansing. His death is not resolved. His message is still unanswered. His cry is not silent...

I am deeply honoured to be here to share this event. Szmul Zygielbojm was my grandfather, a hero, and the conscience of a people. He accepted the responsibility of history. **Arthur Zygielbaum (grandson)**

● The Szmul Zygielbojm Memorial Committee produced a 4-page brochure for the unveiling. If you would like a copy please send a stamped addressed envelope (A5) to BM 3725, London WC1N 3XX.

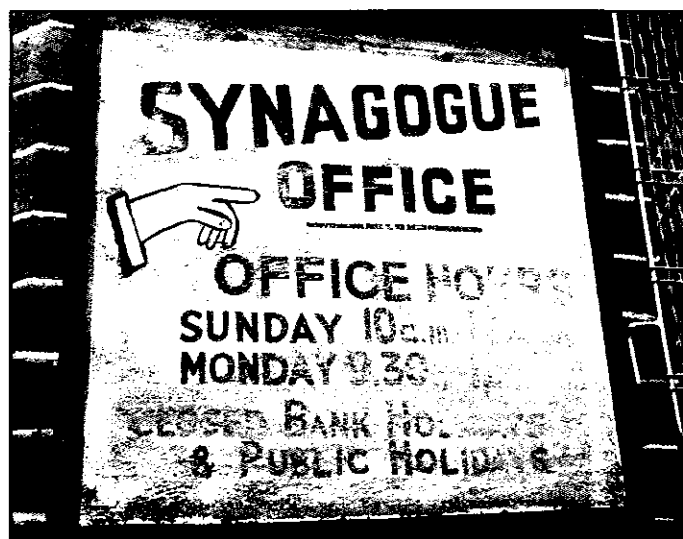
# JEWES WITH ATTITUDE

A new report on British Jews has turned up some surprising results. Simon Lynn reports

The Institute of Jewish Policy Research (JPR) has broken with the bias of recent research into the community by attempting to produce a profile of a self-identified Jewish community defined in the broadest possible terms. Their report, 'Social and Political Attitudes of British Jews' by Anthony Lerman, Marlena Schmool and Stephen Miller, is based on a sample of 2,155 Jews, obtained using random sampling in areas with significant Jewish populations (where Jews are more than 15% of the local population), and a mixture of methods in other areas including sampling addresses corresponding to 'distinctive Jewish names' and newspaper adverts to reach 'intermarried Jewish women'.

There has been no reliance on communal lists such as synagogue membership, or 'snowballing' outwards from mainstream institutions — methods that underpinned the 1993-94 survey into the social and political attitudes of Jewish women. The Women in the Community report also contained many specific examples of bias, for instance women who failed to respond were only followed up for a second time if their names had been obtained from United Synagogue membership lists. The others were left to drop out of the survey.

The brief for the Women in the Community survey reflected the concerns of the Jewish religious establishment; its methodology and content (though not all the findings) reflected their preoccupation with the question 'will we have Jewish grandchildren?' which embodies what they claim is a crisis in Jewish continuity measured by the rate at which people marry out. This led to a marginalisation of most secular and non-conformist Jews in their sample and, most outrageously, set aside all survey responses from women over 70 (19% of their sample) supposedly because they 'were looking to the future', as if Jewish elders have no part to play in this future. The JPR survey, though still concerned with these issues of 'continuity', does



not seem imbued with this sense of crisis and, for the first time, has made an attempt to be open to the community's diversity and to be inclusive of all Jews in Britain.

A problem lies still in its defensiveness — for example in the finding that 'the data clearly disproves the common assumption that out-married, uninvolved or secular Jews display negative attitudes towards Jewishness'. I welcome the day when investigators move beyond disproving this sort of negative stereotype, and start from what does exist — the many Jews who live and flourish outside, and often in critical relation to, the narrow concerns and common assumptions of the religious and communal establishment.

The JPR researchers still cannot bring themselves to address directly lesbian and gay Jews. JPR director, Tony Lerman, says the presence of lesbian and gay Jews, can be inferred from questions about who constitutes a household or about relationships addressed in the section 'singles and the search for a partner'. But any statistics derived in this way would under-represent and misrepresent lesbian and gay Jews in Britain. The JPR did not, in any case, publish what they did discover in this initial 'key findings' report, though they may address this in a future report. The JPR should be challenged on their attempt to keep lesbian and gay Jews invisible or, at best, marginal, in their representation of the Jewish community.

However, the survey does, perhaps, lay the basis for returning us to a more interesting and less partisan approach to

researching Jewish life in Britain. Such an approach has been absent since a brief but fertile period in the 1970s when Barry Kosmin and co-researchers, then at the Board of Deputies, produced a series of in-depth studies on specific Jewish communities in Britain — Hackney (Jews in an Inner London Borough), Sheffield (Steel City Jews) and Redbridge. These studies did not find favour with the Jewish establishment of the day and, in contrast to the bland 'we are all middle class now' assertions made in the Women in the Community report (which are easier to make when you exclude older Jews from the survey), Barry Kosmin and Nigel Grizzard concluded their 1975 research study of Jews in Hackney with the ringing statement that 'there still exists in the 1970s a Jewish proletariat in the inner city whose needs must not be forgotten'.

Yet despite the preoccupation of those who commissioned it, a clear finding from the survey of Jewish women, was that Jews see themselves as a minority ethnic community rather than British people of the Jewish faith. This also emerges strongly from the JPR study. The Women in the Community report stated that 'in the sample as a whole there are remarkably high levels of ethnic identification and far weaker levels of religious faith' and that 'in all groups apart from the strictly orthodox, ethnic identity is a better predictor of Jewish practice than religious belief'. Similarly, the JPR survey finds that 'levels of ritual observance are far more closely related to ethnic identity than to religious belief', and the

researchers conclude that 'for most Jews, therefore, religious observance is a means of identifying with the Jewish community, rather than an expression of religious faith'.

The assertion of a clear minority ethnic identity among Jews in Britain is the most significant aspect of these back to back studies and is a basis for firm links with other ethnic minority, black, immigrant and refugee communities. Yet this finding has been roundly ignored in reviews and commentary on the research. Here is established, for those who need proof, not just that there exists a significant minority of openly secular Jews (in JPR categories: secular 26%; just Jewish 18%; progressive 15%; traditional 31%; strictly orthodox 9%), but that in the community as a whole there is a clear basis for a pluralist expression of Jewish life. In the words of the report: 'many Jews, particularly the young, are redefining the core elements' of their Jewish lives.

The Jewish women's report, while allowing these trends to emerge, had as a brief to somehow control them, to find a way to corral Jews back within the lines defined by the religious and communal establishment. The JPR brief has no such lasso — and perhaps finally represents a section of the Jewish mainstream acknowledging that, far from the image of a diminishing, disappearing community that has preoccupied our communal establishment, there exists a vibrant, diverse community. There is, for example, a strong trend among young Jews to support green and ecological issues, so a festive Reclaim the Streets roadblock on a Saturday may be an expression of political and social action among Jews without a hint of religious orthodoxy!

Asked whether he thought the pluralist reality described in the report would be embraced by Jewish communal leaders or whether it would continue to be seen as problematic, Tony Lerman said: 'I think we are now entering a phase where the battle between these sides on this issue is being joined... conflict is clustering around different notions of an acceptable Jewish identity. The reason why this conflict is getting sharper is because the reality is that things are more pluralist. This survey reveals it for everyone to see. No one can deny it.'

In 'Selling Hitler', the TV dramatisation of the Hitler diaries swindle, Alexei Sayle played the small-time Hamburg memorabilia dealer and Nazi fraterniser Konrad Kajau, who somehow pulled off the publishing fraud of the century. Alexei performed the part with side-splitting aplomb. He's half-Jewish, so the chance to send up the sordid world of Hitler apologists and Third Reich nostalgists must have given him venomous satisfaction.

Alexei arrives for our early evening interview slightly hungover. He's been working on a sequel to the BBC film he appeared in last Christmas, 'Sorry About Last Night'. I bet he is, too, but he says: 'I relax drinking, it helps.'

In a healthier vein, he likes to unwind by ambling about the streets of north London, the area Sayle has settled in with his wife Linda. 'I also go dancing: not techno — soul, something you don't need drugs to enjoy.' He speaks with a gentle, London-modified scouse accent, far removed from the bellicose blast of his stage persona.

He says that the Jewish side of his lineage — his mother came from a Lithuanian, Yiddish-speaking background — means a great deal to him. 'I've never been to a synagogue or anything but I always say in terms of being Jewish, if it's good enough for the Gestapo it's good enough for me. I think of myself as Jewish racially. Certainly my mother is extremely Jewish — if she were in a play you would say she was over the top. I suppose you would say I've caught some of that.'

He grew up on Merseyside where both his parents were Communist party activists. His father Joe, true to his internationalist credo, spoke Esperanto. Alexei's lip curls. 'That is, he said he did. No one ever knew. We couldn't find another person who could speak it.'

Lots of artists, says Sayle, had a childhood 'steeped in family insanity'. He instances novelist Jeanette Winterson, who came from a background of 'raving' Methodism. 'It doesn't matter what it is as long as it stands you apart from everyone else. Because my dad was a railwayman and got free travel we used to go each year to Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria. My dad organised fraternal delegations.'

His father was active in the National Union of Railwaymen. Alexei remembers accompanying him, when he was a child, to the union's seaside conferences. As a railworker's son, surely he must have hankered to be an engine



## I NEVER WENT TO SYNAGOGUE

driver before he ever thought of being a comedian? 'No, my mother was ambitious, it was made clear to me pretty soon that I wasn't going to follow them into being members of the industrial proletariat, that I was a gifted, godlike creature who would bestride the world like a colossus.'

'The railways, there was no romance about it, it was what dad did. We certainly didn't have pictures of the Mallard climbing a 1:6 gradient out of Carlisle.'

And yet a railway theme runs through his career, in his zany novels and in BBC2's 'Great Railway Journeys of the World'. So come on, Mr Sayle, are you a closet anorak? He denies it. So why did BBC2 choose him? 'They must have been desperate. I certainly didn't enjoy the fucking train aspect of it.'

He muses though on this railway link in his career as if for the first time. 'What I like as a writer is not so much the trains as the movement.'

For the source of Alexei's comic talent you have to look beyond clichés. It was not the classic case of having to charm off the school bullies; he was the school bully. 'Perhaps that's why my humour's so aggressive — it came from making trouble. I was a bully in an extremely mild and cowardly way but I certainly wasn't picked upon. My humour wasn't a please-like-me thing. I always knew I was funny... I was a show-off.'

Many radical comedians have moved on to success and lost their political edge. Mike Gerber met Alexei Sayle to find out whether he had travelled far from his socialist roots

*'... the papers won't allow socialists to be elected'*

Having said that, it would have happened anyway. It's not important but it is something I did do and I think I should at least get acknowledged for it.'

Punk culture inspired the irreverent new comics. Sayle tips a hat to the performance poetry of Lynton Kweisi Johnson and John Cooper Clarke, and musically to the likes of Madness and Ian Dury. 'They came out of punk then so did we.' He never spat at the audience though. 'No, they spat at me.' He says he doesn't get heckled today.

Alexei's now famous, successful, middle-aged, but insists he hasn't mellowed. His stand-up routine is probably as 'nasty as ever'. Not everything he does merits this satiric invective. He relishes straight acting. Though he says morbidly: 'The gloomier the part the more fun it is to do.' Sayle particularly loves making his own films.

Is all the best comedy angry, I venture, or do the reactionaries against 1980s 'politically correct' comedians have a point? 'There's only one thing comedy has to be and that's funny. Comedians tend to fall into orthodoxies so now they all go round saying they're apolitical. Similarly in the '80s you had to go around saying dirty Thatcher', victory to the miners.'

Sayle accuses some conviction comedians of doing it entirely for personal gain. 'A lot of the 1980s alternative comedians were fucking awful, they deserve to be reacted against.'

Alexei has been known to lampoon — 'deride would be a better word' — his parent's Communism. Affectionately, one presumed. 'Mmmmm, in a sense if you ignore the 20 million dead in Stalin's gulags. I was a Communist as well, I was in a sort of Maoist party which I left in about '75. You can understand why they thought as they did those Communists, but they were extremely deluded and ignored an enormous amount of evidence in front of their eyes about how corrupt the Communists were in Britain and the Soviet Union.'

'My father used to sneer and spit at people in the streets who left the party after the put-down of the Hungarian revolution. My mother became even more far left.' Alexei confesses to a lingering interest in Communist iconography, and remains a leftie. 'Very much so.'

Would Labour be good for alternative comedians, I ask him, or did they all secretly slaver for another Thatcher to get their fangs into? 'All our careers have been under Conservative governments; we've never had sex under a Labour administration. I don't know how different it'll be when Tony gets in.'

'I think Blair is an ambitious, devious creature, but at the same time I wouldn't moan because those people on the left saying we could get elected on socialist principles, well no they couldn't. No matter how bad things are we're still one of the most prosperous countries in the world, and all the papers are owned by right-wingers — they won't allow socialists to be elected. Blair is the least worst alternative.'

# CELLNET

**People campaigning for Ron Arad's release must also recognise that there are political hostages secretly held in Israel's jails, says Bernard O'Hear**

**I**s punishment really a basis for peace? Is punishing the innocent likely to make them feel like living in peace with their chastisers? One thing that makes peace between Israel and the Palestinians seem impossible is the readiness of many, on both sides, to mete out punishment without justice.

Leaving the question of justice aside, the punishment itself is often monstrous. One need only look at the spate of suicide bombings in February and March this year and the Israeli government's response to them.

Revenge has been the impelling force behind these terrible acts. The Hamas suicide bombings were clearly deliberate and unjustifiable attacks on civilians, apparently carried out as reprisals for the assassination (almost certainly by Israeli forces) of Hamas bomb maker Yahya Ayyash — 'The Engineer'. The Israeli authorities' response, unfortunately, has not been very edifying. All the



usual human rights violations have been deployed, even more so than usual, including town closures, house demolitions, indefinite detention without charge or trial and the torture of suspects.

These are either collective punishments where the guilty (perhaps) and the innocent (certainly) are punished together or, in the case of torture, a suspect is punished inhumanely and illegally before any kind of trial to establish guilt or innocence takes place, if, indeed, one ever does take place. In such circumstances, justice, a sound basis for peace, gives way to revenge.

However, it is not only the West Bank Palestinian and the Tel Aviv commuter who are the victims of unjust punishment. There is a largely forgotten group of Lebanese nationals being held in Israeli jails, either beyond the expiry of their sentences or without having received any sentence, or trial. Two of them are known to be hostages, namely Sheikh 'Abd al-Karim 'Ubayd and Mustafa Dirani, members of armed political groups, who were abducted from Lebanon in 1989 and 1994 and are being held incommunicado without access to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). At a meeting with Amnesty, in February, Israel's then Deputy Defence Minister, Ori Orr, would not clarify the legal status or whereabouts of these two and said: 'We will release them when we have more information about Ron Arad.'

Amnesty takes the view that human rights are inalienable: that the human rights of one person cannot be conditional on the human rights of another. Everyone has equal entitlements and obligations, and violations by one side do not justify violations by the other.

Ron Arad should have his rights respected too. Whoever is holding him should clarify his fate and if, like Ubayd and Dirani, he is being held hostage, he, like them, should be released immediately and unconditionally. If he is being held as a prisoner of war then he should be allowed, as a minimum, access to the ICRC and be able to communicate with his family.

There are others waiting to be remembered by the world, such as Husayn Tlays, one of six Lebanese who went missing in Beirut in 1987 and who were stumbled upon five years later by the ICRC in an Israeli jail. He has spent almost nine years in prison with an undefined legal status. It seems at present very unlikely that he will ever be brought to trial for anything and it is possible that he too is a hostage. For Husayn Tlays, like so many others, the punishment continues while justice and peace seem as far away as ever.

## BEFORE BIBI

**Bibi Netanyahu has made peace prospects worse, but they weren't that good before the election, argues Muna Jawhary**

Before Bibi Netanyahu won the election things were not as good as they seemed, however, now he is in power they are likely to get much worse. Also, if you believe that the Israeli elections were fair, then you must also believe Netanyahu is not really the problem but its manifestation.

If we survey the situation in the Middle East before the elections, what do we see? Firstly, Israeli bombing of civilian areas in the Lebanon. Did anyone object in Israel? Or is anything acceptable if the name of the game is Islamic fundamentalism or defending Israeli lives? Secondly, a peace agreement which gave the Palestinians only 30% of the West Bank, with the remainder being either Jewish settlements, strategic areas in the Jordan valley or state land. Thirdly, Israel maintained 'authority over all security', so the army can enter Palestinian villages at their discretion. Fourthly there was closure of the Palestinian territories, with one third of the people who used to work in Israel sitting at home. Finally, there were, even then, dim prospects for Jerusalem, the refugees and a Palestinian state.

But this was the easy part. The tough bit was still to come — the negotiations on the final status of Palestine, settlements, refugees, water resources and Jerusalem.

Netanyahu grudgingly accepted that he could not change the 1993 Oslo accords which led to interim self-government for the Palestinians. But he did promise that talks on the permanent settlement would not go beyond autonomy; he would not accept a Palestinian state, much less one with its capital in east Jerusalem; the Israeli Army would return to the areas of self-rule; Jewish settlements in the West Bank would expand; and, in negotiations with Syria, and possibly with Lebanon too, a peace agreement would not be based on territorial concessions.

So things have gone from bad to worse, especially given that Bibi Netanyahu the strongest prime minister constitutionally that Israel has had so far — and he is on the wrong side. However, the real problem is not with Netanyahu, as such, but with Israelis. At the election, they had a choice: to make concessions so that they could live in peace with their Arab neighbours and move the Middle East from war and backwardness to detente and development, or to pursue their own narrow survival needs as they perceive them. Peres argued that military might alone could not deliver what Israelis most want — security. He believes that the Islamic fundamentalism which threatens the region can only be defeated by Israel working with its neighbours. Netanyahu countered this with the politics of fear and a strategy for a garrison state. He claimed to be able to deliver peace with security. But Netanyahu has not explained how he will make peace while maintaining Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights, southern Lebanon, Arab east Jerusalem and swathes of the West Bank. This occupation is the root cause of the continuing violence. It is precisely this choice which made the election an historic event.

The problem, as I see it, is that Israel can actually conceive of peace while remaining on foreign territory. That signifies an acceptance that a whole group of people — the Palestinians — can be robbed of their civil and economic rights, simply in order to preserve Israel's own security. I am referring here to the continued closure of the West Bank, unleashing the Israeli Army into towns and villages as they see fit, and accepting collective punishment whenever there is a violent attack by individuals. The problem is with people who can only envisage a peace which includes keeping an upper hand over Arabs. But if you want a real peace, you have to instil real democratic and human rights both in Israeli and Palestinian societies. The road which Peres and Arafat chose could have been a short cut to a pseudo peace, but its failure has also shown that there is a fundamental problem with perceptions and attitudes. Changing those attitudes is a precondition to the achievement of real peace.

# Exodus of the left

**T**he Israeli elections are felt by a number of marginalised groups to be having an immediate and direct impact on their lives — and it is not a good feeling. Whatever the appalling results of the recently deposed Labour Party's 'security' policies and their reluctance to push forward the peace process, Labour did manage some internal developments which made a real difference in the day-to-day lives of Israelis.

The main changes they effected resulted from a reduction in the political power of the religious parties and their reduced access to central funds. A Labour coalition depending on the left and Arab parties provided fewer opportunities for the Jewish fundamentalists to impose their agenda on the wider (secular) population. For example, because of Shabbat restrictions which the orthodox parties demand, there is no public transport from sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday. This mainly affects groups with no access to private cars — people who can't afford them, people with disabilities, young people, people in rural settings for whom taxis are not practical. The Labour party loosened up the notion of Shabbat. Buses ran much later on Friday evening and began much earlier on Saturday evenings. The new coalition is already pushing back the timetable and this obviously has implications for women's (and others') mobility and personal security.

Even if you can make your own way around on Shabbat, you now have fewer places to go; Shabbat entertainment options are being reduced. Throughout the period of the Labour government, there were lots more enterprises staying open — restaurants, theatres, stores. The retreat is already happening. Many Israelis still have a 6-day working week, so once again the 'day of rest' will feel like a fundamentalist prison.

The Labour party was putting more money into education and infrastructure in Arab villages — not enough to ensure parity with the Jewish population, but enough to make a felt difference. Those resources will now be directed back to yeshivot (rabbinical schools) and settlements in the Occupied Territories.

Under Labour there was finally open discussion of civil weddings and funerals. With the large Russian immigrant population added to the rest of the secular Israelis, this was a most welcome and widely supported development. The new coalition puts these important issues back in the closet. For women, civil marriage (and divorce) has been a long-voiced demand. There is no hope of a positive response now.

The position of lesbians and gays has been

**Spike Katz reports on the impact of Likud's election victory on the lives and political priorities of progressive Israelis**





PHOTOS ABOVE AND OPPOSITE:  
CYNTHIA COCKBURN

greatly improved in the last few years. There is no anti-gay legislation, partner rights have been increasingly recognised, annual Pride events have begun to take place and the issue of lesbian and gay rights has figured in a number of Knesset debates. No Israeli queer is optimistic that this positive trend is going to continue under the Likud and their religious allies.

So why was Labour defeated, in the face of these inevitable implications of a Likud victory? Labour was the architect of its own defeat. Like the British Labour party, it sought approval by trying to out-Likud the Likud. Bullied by platitudes about security, Labour was unable to stand by its own declared principles. With the onslaught of suicide bombs in urban centres, Labour was unwilling to tell the truth: that there is little that can be done against such attacks other than building a true peace and accelerating a 'normalisation' of Palestinian lives. Labour procrastinated in the negotiations with the Palestinians, maintained contradictory positions around the settlements and pathetically tried to use an incursion into Lebanon as an opportunistic vote-getter.

The Israeli Labour Party based its fudging of 'principles' on its confidence of maintaining the support of the left and of the Israeli Arab vote. They wooed the undecided at the expense of their own constituents and commitments, because they knew that the left and the Arabs had no choice but to vote for them.

However, in the face of the Labour party's

racism and discrimination, continued protection of Jewish settlements in Palestine and cowboy war-mongering in Lebanon, many people felt crushed between a rock and a hard place. With a Prime Ministerial election that allowed a choice only between Bibi and Peres, the only form of dissent was the petek lavan or blank ballot.

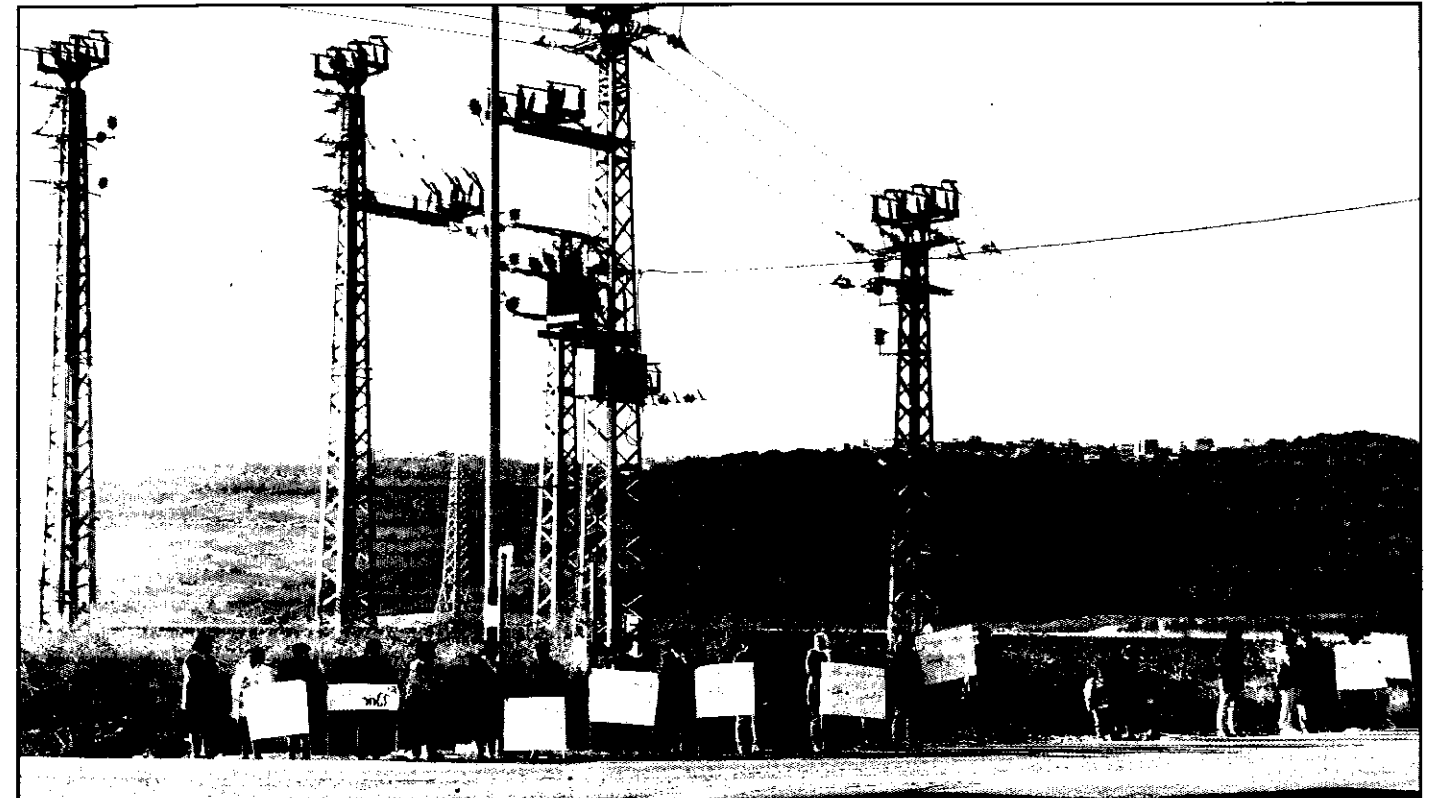
People in opposition to the continuing occupation, including many of the Women in Black, agonised over whether or not to place a blank ballot for the PM election. Everyone was well aware of the possibility that such a move might topple Labour, but at the same time many felt that somewhere, sometime they had to draw a line. As Tanya Reinhart, a well-known left-wing academic, wrote in the daily newspaper Yediot Ahronot, 'Holding your nose while supporting evil is not really a political act. I believe that resisting is an option that should be reconsidered.' The blank ballot option was pushed following the Grapes of Wrath attack by some parts of the Communist Party coalition and of B'nai Hakfar (Sons of the Village) as well as a number of public figures among the radical opposition.

It was a heartbreaking position to be in. Particularly in light of the figures for the last PM election: 148,000 blank votes were cast (5% of the total) including 21,000 Israeli Arab voters and thousands of first-time voting soldiers. If you deduct from that figure the 67,000 who also blanked their party preference vote (people who were completely non-participative), you are left with 81,000 voters who elected a party but quite consciously refused to choose between the two PM candidates. Remember: Peres only needed 30,000 additional votes to win this time.

Says Reinhart, 'The elections were decided by the blank votes of the left, but the full responsibility is on the government, not because it went too far left, but because it went to the right.'

The left is now bereft. Women In Black had, in most locations, ended their vigils. They had begun to feel that with the promise of the end of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, they could begin to relax their efforts around the "national question" to concentrate on other pressing concerns. Women from the various communities began meeting to discuss the establishment of a Women Against Fundamentalism group. Other elements of the women's movement have been organising around male violence, sexuality and Sephardic identity. However, these women now feel catapulted-back into national politics. For progressive people who are part of an oppressing majority, there is no choice. All political energy must be put into opposing what is being done, in their names, to another people.

One activist friend expressed it this way. 'People here are still licking our wounds after the elections, stunned and paralysed. Most people you meet are depressed to such an extent that even the attempts to analyse what is going on, or why Labour lost the elections, are pitiful and lead nowhere. The situation in general is bad and getting worse. Bibi is an asshole, the cabinet is a national joke, and Palestinians are not a priority anymore. Our worst nightmare has come true and is getting worse.'



# No man's land

Is it tougher to be a peace activist during a ceasefire or when the shells are falling? Women of the Bat Shalom group in Megiddo and the Jezreel valley might well wonder. They were demoralised when I first met them last year. On the one hand, the Oslo Accords had removed the urgency from the peace movement in Israel: the state was 'doing peace' now. The Women in Black vigils, that used to occur weekly in many places in Israel, had mostly stopped.

On the other hand, everywhere there was scepticism, and eventually deep disillusionment, about this 'peace'. Jewish settlement in the Occupied Territories and East Jerusalem was going on unchecked. Progress to a Palestinian state was negligible. Arafat was losing credibility fast. This wasn't the peace they'd struggled for.

Yet it was no longer obvious what a peace movement should be arguing. Just what should those placards say? No issue seemed urgent enough, or clear enough, to justify coming out on the streets. Inertia and confusion prevailed in the Israeli peace movement.

Then war came back in a different shape. Just before my research fieldwork in Israel, Jewish extremism had brought about the assassination of Rabin. Palestinian extremists were bombing Israeli cities while I was there. Katyusha rockets fell on north Israel. Then the Israeli armed forces attacked Lebanon.

Protest by the Jewish peace movement to

Operation Grapes of Wrath was muted. Activists were aware they lacked support in the middle ground, for the average Jewish person had been feeling very vulnerable to attack. And many supporters of the centre/left coalition parties condoned the bombardment as Peres's justifiable bid to hold on to power at the forthcoming national elections. But the horrors of Kfar Qana and Nabatiyeh, and the subsequent electoral victory of the right, confirmed Bat Shalom women in feeling that this had been a terrible error.

Bat Shalom in Megiddo and The Valleys is a network of women drawn from two very different, though neighbouring, communities. Jewish members come from the Ha-Artzi kibbutzim of the region whose members are mainly socialist and non-religious. The Israeli Palestinian members live in towns and villages around Nazareth and Umm el Fahm.

To an outsider like me it's hard to credit how little contact normally exists between people living so closely side by side. The Jews work on their kibbutz farms and in their kibbutz factories. Their children go to kibbutz schools. There's little need to go to town, and when you have to, it's to a Jewish town with Jewish shops.

Palestinian Arabs are 18% of the population of Israel (over 40% in the Megiddo area) and suffer marked disadvantages within the Jewish state. The oppressed always know their oppressor better than the oppressor knows them, and so it is with

**Against the grain of their communities, an unusual group of Palestinian and Jewish women in Israel are working together for peace. Cynthia Cockburn spent time with them**



PHOTO: CYNTHIA COCKBURN

the Arab minority. Often they work for a Jewish employer. They certainly encounter Jewish authorities on all sides. Nonetheless, socially most women live their lives within the village community. It is rare for most Arab women to have occasion to meet Jewish women, or for their children to meet.

So Bat Shalom Megiddo is an oddity. These women meet because they want the contact, want the friendship of The Other. They also organise because they're driven by a common wish to see a peaceful resolution to conflict and feel that women have something unique to say about this. They go out on the street together in support of the peace process, calling for the creation of a Palestinian State in the West Bank and Gaza.

On the afternoon of Monday 4 March they were standing at a road junction together, demanding that the Hamas suicide bomb on a Jerusalem bus not be permitted to derail the peace process. I was standing with them — the photos above were taken on that occasion. As we stood there, the drivers of passing cars began drawing up to tell us that they were hearing on their car radios of another suicide bomb, this time in the Dizengoff shopping centre in Tel Aviv.

The impact on a group like Bat Shalom of events such as this has a personal as well as a political dimension. On the demonstration, for instance, was a young Palestinian woman who had been injured in a previous (Palestinian) bomb attack in the local town. She was so personally distraught by the news of Dizengoff bomb that she had to leave the demonstration and be accompanied home.

For continuing to work together in situations like this, the Jewish women and the Israeli Palestinian women pay a social price both outside and within their own communities. Israeli Arabs get viewed with intensified mistrust and dislike by

Israeli Jews. Israeli Palestinian women are often made to feel disloyal to their cousins and comrades in the Occupied Territories, or Lebanon, or elsewhere in the Palestinian diaspora, dispersed by the creation of the Israeli state.

Jewish women also feel vulnerable on all sides. Being a peace activist is no guarantee, after all, that you won't find yourself in range of a Palestinian terror bomb or a katyusha rocket. On the roads, right-wing Jewish activists shower abuse on peace demonstrations. 'Whore of Arafat' is an insult they have to learn to shrug off. And even in their own kibbutzim peace activists are subject to abuse and cold-shouldering. It is difficult to live in a close community where you know that most people see you as a traitor.

During the Israeli attack on Lebanon one Jewish woman, member of Bat Shalom, considered going to Beirut to attend a meeting with Lebanese women. The paralysis that seized many peace activists at this time is clear in the thoughts she had at the time, and later recorded honestly.

'I had a big internal conflict about it. I so much wanted to go. But politically it could be exploited by the right. And I must admit too that I felt afraid. Physically afraid. That the Jewish shells would fall on me. That an Arab would kill me. That I would be arrested when I came back for visiting an "enemy country". And I was afraid of opinion on my kibbutz, where I have no support at all.'

It is not surprising that now, like many others in the peace movement, she feels wiped out with exhaustion and disappointment. Disappointment in the peace movement and in herself. Disappointment in the Jewish electorate. But above all, disappointment in the ruling political alliance that she and other peace activists supported, the government that talked peace, yet rode roughshod over their movement as well as over Palestinians and Lebanese when they sent in the warplanes. And now they have to live under a leadership that talks war.

'I'm tired. So tired. I've lost all my strength. I think the rift between ethnic groups in Israel is huge. The state has no interest in creating a civil society and we

don't know where we are.'

But when I phoned them today Bat Shalom Megiddo ve ha-Amakim was mobilising itself for a new phase of activity. Slowly, the reality of the election results was sinking in. A new beginning was being made.

● A 13-panel exhibition, *Women Building Bridges*, comprising photographs and texts by Cynthia Cockburn, is available for display on request. It features photo-narratives on the three women's initiatives that are the subject of her current research: on Bat Shalom Megiddo ve ha-Amakim; on Medica, a Bosnian Women's Therapy Centre for refugees; and the Women's Support Network, a cross-communal project in working class Belfast.

**'It is difficult to live in a close community where you know that most people see you as a traitor'**

# Don't let the turkeys get you

**M**y name is Margot Sreberny and I live in Finsbury Park. I've lived here for 50 years and I'm quite beginning to like it! What brought me here? I don't know how to start. I was born in a town called Konigsberg in East Prussia. I came over to England with the Children's Transport and finally ended up in London. My mother was a widow and she put me down for the Children's Transport to get me out of Germany. On 20 April, in 1939 I was on a train that went from Konigsberg via Berlin to the Hook of Holland and there must have been 700 or 800 of us kids in a boat coming to Harwich. I remember being met by a Jewish refugee committee with a bag of sandwiches. There was white bread (I'd never had white bread - only on Fridays) and a hard boiled egg and an orange and we thought this is the land of milk and honey. We were put on a train to go to London and then came an experience which I think is one of the saddest of my life. We were in some huge building with a glass roof. On one side were the 700 odd kids and on the other side were all the people who had agreed to foster us. Down below there was somebody with a megaphone calling out names and you could see little kids moving down and meeting their foster parents. It got darker and darker and then suddenly there were three of us kids sitting there and there were no more grown ups on the other side. That was a fairly fallow moment in my life. We were taken to a hostel and the next morning we were sent to Liverpool, where I had an aunt. So, it ended quite well.

**What was it like arriving at your aunt's?**

I was very lucky, my aunt had arranged for me and some of my cousins who came from Gdansk to be billeted or adopted by families in Liverpool. I went to a doctor's family. The wife was very sick and I lived there for quite a time and they were very kind to me. Those were very uncertain times, and then the war was declared and very soon after that Liverpool was announced a protected area and all aliens who hadn't been categorised had to be sent out. The police came to pick me up one morning in a locked van and drove around all day to try and get me categorised. We finally ended up in the police station. Luckily enough, my foster parents had kicked up a big fuss and managed to get me out. All enemy aliens had to be categorised and there were I think three or four different categories. I was too young to have

had that categorisation, so I was allowed to stay there but very soon after that I had to leave and all the Jewish refugees from the coastal areas of England had to go inland. So, we ended up in Birmingham in Selly Oak, billeted on Quakers who looked after us. By that time I was lucky enough to have had my mother come out, so she and I were together. She got a job as a housekeeper and I was allowed to stay with her. I saw an advertisement for the American Joint Distribution Committee and I applied to work in their London office. That started my involvement with all sorts of other things.

**What were they?**

Somewhere in the '40s I met a Polish doctor who had come to look up his sister who had been in concentration camp. I got married and had two kids. My husband was a GP and I did quite a lot of work for him and as well I got involved more in a wider community. This was also the beginning of the National Health Service, so there was a great hope and excitement about it all happening. My husband became a GP in the Health Service and then the kids took care of this, that and the other. When my husband died I was left with two young kids of 6 and 11. I realised I was capable but had nothing at my finger tips. So in 1964, I went to a teacher training college for mature students and became a teacher. I think the great change came at the end of the '70s when I personally felt, it doesn't have to be as bad as this. Well, it still is 'as bad as this' but at least some of us are fighting about it. I've been angry most of my life, but I think I got angrier the older I got and I find it very diminishing that we as a society take so much rubbish that's flying around in a very apathetic and uninvolved way. I'd like people to be united in their anger and do something about it.

I really got involved in community action only at the end of the '70s when my area of Finsbury Park was colonised by strange landlords who changed the houses into hostels for the homeless in a terrible way. The rooms were divided up, people were treated like objects and we started to campaign that 'this is no way to treat people who live in this country'. We won some and we lost some, but the hostels are still there. The hostels might have been upgraded by one degree but we can still see the homeless here. We've got a homeless families project which is trying to mitigate some of the terrible price that the homeless people have to pay, especially their children.

**Margot Sreberny, arrived here on the Kinder-transport. She has become a well known community activist. Karen Merkel talks to her about her life**



**Do you think your early experiences have led you towards this particular issue?**

It took me a long time to become politically involved. That I know was a residue from being oppressed in Hitler's Germany. I remember my mother going to vote, I think it must have been 1936, she was so ashamed that she had to vote 'ja', rather than 'nein', because the 'jas' got a badge to put on their coat and it showed that you were a good person. I waited for her outside the polling booth, I can still see that badge underneath her lapel, she was very crestfallen. I know she was incredibly unhappy having to do that, so much for free democratic voting underneath Hitler's Germany at that time. So, to me political involvement meant a hazard, a danger, a bad way forward and that must have stayed with me for quite a time because I was really quite an adult before I joined a political party. It was really coming out from the closet of being scared politically. I joined the Labour party because I thought 'well, fight in something rather than outside of something'. I don't think that's been fulfilled truly, but never mind.

**What do you think about the Jewish community in England?**

Oh, that's a nasty one! In many ways I thank them, because they got me out of Germany to England but they have lost their connection with what's going on in the real world. I would like them to be more involved with the iniquities that are now being visited on this world by our present government. For instance, fighting the Asylum Bill, fighting racism, which at the moment we're not in the forefront of. It's Indians, Pakistanis, Africans and West Indians who are getting the wrath of this Government, or the false excuse of 'we haven't got the money to do this'. So I would like the Jewish community to have more soul, more humanity and more understanding for discrimination than I seem to be seeing in front of me.

**What does your Jewishness mean to you now? Are you a practising Jew, a secular Jew - how do you place yourself?**

Oh gosh! Well every Yom Kippur, if I have a cup of coffee (which I do) I feel bad. So what does that make me? I know it's Friday night, but I don't light candles. Jewishness in me is something that is just in there, it's certainly not religious Jewishness but it's an ethnic identity. I went to Israel this summer and I found I felt very comfortable there and yet the religiosity that I saw I found quite difficult to take at times. So that's a problem I haven't resolved, the religion and the ethnicity of Judaism, certainly not for myself and certainly not for Israel.

**What is your list of issues that you have on hand now?**

It's so long! I'm involved with the Finsbury Park Action Group which is a community organisation. Its motto is 'to improve the quality of life of people living and working in the Finsbury Park area'. It has been a neglected and underdeveloped area of London for so long that it really is a disgrace. We are trying to improve life here, it is an up hill struggle. I'm involved with the Isledon

Community Nursery Trust which has just built a nursery in a community room in a huge big development in North Islington. I'm also involved in the Homeless Families Project, trying to mitigate their circumstances. I don't go to Labour Party meetings any more, I find them turgid and not productive. I've never been so busy, certainly not when I was working. Retirement is quite a time to get involved in what you think is really valuable.

**What do you think are good examples of political engagement, either role models or campaigns that would encourage someone to leave their house and join in?**

The most important thing is that there must be a glimmer of hope of achieving what you are fighting for at the end. It's terribly difficult to get people going, the only thing that really works is anger. It's a wonderful catalyst for action. But you can't always get everybody angry. I think my grey hair has helped. You can say quite outrageous things and it's very difficult for people to say 'Hey, you little old lady you can't say that.' On the other hand I flatter myself that when you have lived for over 70 years you must have picked up odd bits of wisdom here and there and hopefully your filing cabinet of a mind will integrate them and what comes out is not complete claptrap! I try and open discussions rather than let things fossilise inside.

**Do you think that older people tend to be more radical or more conservative now in the '90s?**

I can see a large dose of apathy which I find sad, because older people have been pushed into the corner. I would like to see a political movement like the American Gray Panthers. I would love to see us being more belligerent. There are groups like Age Concern, I'm not involved with any though. We're not being taken seriously because we're a little slow sometimes, and we have grey hair. I don't want to only talk about older people's issues - we should be talking about issues for all. We're part of society. Once you're past 65 you don't only talk about pensions and heat loss. We are all participants of the whole world and every bloody issue is our issue. That's why I've not joined any of those other groups, they're too nice for me.

**Do you feel isolated?**

No, with all the groups, my friends, I have too much to do, to read, to write, no I don't ever feel alone. I feel terribly terribly sad that people feel alienated from their society and that they're apathetic in not standing up and shouting. I would like to be at some barricade shouting 'this can't go on' and in France they seem to do it. We can only do it on single issues, road building, the poll tax, that's fine but when you take the whole society and the breakdown of the value of all of our institutions that supported society, I can't understand that we're not out there. I'm very lucky, I've had an interesting life as a teacher, I've got two nice kids, three wonderful grandchildren and I've got a nice flat, so what more do I need? I have enough to eat, it's the rest of the world that is suffering and I don't like to see it. Old age pensioners going to the



supermarket and putting the tin of sardines back on the shelf because it's too damn expensive.

**When you were a little girl in Germany and the regime was quite clearly taking its grip on the country, do you recall thinking 'what's going to happen to me, I'm facing peril' or 'I'm going to fight this, I'm going to survive'?**

I do remember falling off my bike in Konigsberg and some man came and picked me up and I said 'Please go away, I'm a Jew, don't help me', so there must have been quite something in there for self-protection and for protecting him for helping a Jewish person. I also had a fairly rough time at school, the Korte Lyzeum, which I still remember with horror. If I sat at the back and had my hand up to answer a question, the teacher would look round and say, 'Well nobody knows, I'll tell you' which made you feel great. But I don't

think I had developed a sense of self there. I think that came with being a refugee kid here. Coming over and learning about life, getting some further education in England, reading and thinking a lot, keeping your eyes and ears open. It's difficult, I don't think when I came out of Germany I had a strong personality, but I must have been a survivor and I think that I decided that I am going to be a survivor.

**What is your message then?**

There's an American saying, 'Don't let the turkeys get you', I think that's something. Don't take everything that happens to you as fate and predetermination. You have got a divine spirit and somehow or other you can fight all sorts of things. I don't mean fight fisticuffs, I mean ask questions, find out why it is so, stir the spoon a little and keep going!

## MICHAEL ROSEN

## MOISHE

One time Moishe,  
my friend Chris's dad, put on a science show  
in the laundry-room in the basement of his flats.  
It was packed out with friends and relatives.  
Moishe was crazy about plastic.  
I think I heard him say that one day  
everything could be made of plastic.

In the science show,  
Moishe poured mercury into liquid oxygen  
and the mercury went solid.  
He put a soft rubber ball into liquid oxygen  
fished it out, threw it on the floor  
and it broke into bits.  
Then he poured liquid oxygen in the sink  
and it boiled.  
It was magic. Everyone clapped  
and somebody's aunt said,  
So this is why you spent all that time at college, Moishe!  
I didn't think Chris's mum, Rene,  
was quite so passionate about plastic  
until one day she served me up fried egg and mush-  
rooms  
with a plastic egg.  
Why didn't I have a father who could break rubber balls  
and a mother who played tricks with plastic eggs?

## CREMATORIUM

Old Jewish Communist funerals at Golders Green  
Crematorium  
seeing off lifetimes of marches, bazaars and strikes  
to the sound of Paul Robeson.  
Rows of old shoulders  
that had shuddered  
when the jaws of Belsen gaped.  
Tired feet that had followed the leaders:  
war wrong - war right;  
man hero, man traitor;  
tanks-in good, tanks-in bad.  
Feeling cheated by the gulags and Chernobyl.  
Sad minds that had blocked tales of  
murdered Bolsheviks, disappeared Partisans  
and nomenklatura privilege.

Hadn't they been right to resist pogroms  
and discard the liberation marked for Jews only?  
Who had stopped Mosley, supported Mandela,  
levered the dockers out of Pentonville?  
Was it all dreck?

Over eats  
Solly would tell the one about Hymie and the Red Cross  
Solly, councillor and prisoner for his principles  
and Lily, Phil, Sam, Rene, Harry glad to hear him.

Simon and Moishe and Peter and Margot gone  
Zhirinovsky 24% of the vote  
3 million unemployed  
Derek Beackon elected

Robeson sings:  
*I never died, said he.*  
*I never died, said he.*

## MORDECHAI VANUNU

THE AGENT WHO DIDN'T  
COME BACK FROM THE COLD

I am the agent who is still in the cold  
An agent who is waiting to his comeback from the  
cold  
An agent without his agency  
An agent who as yet didn't finish his mission  
My mission, your mission-let the people know,  
reveal,  
uncover the truth.  
Who cares about the agent  
Who can hear me in this silence  
Who can want to be my agent  
Who wants me to come back from the cold  
The last agent of the cold war  
The last hostage of the secret Security Service  
Those who want me to be in the cold  
Those who brought me to the cold  
to be left in the cold  
Those who don't want me to come back from the  
cold  
Those who are silencing me by the cold  
to make me very cold  
To cool me, cool my mind, cool my memory.

Agent 18 - 18 years, 18 agencies against me  
One - against 18 years 18 agencies.

The agent of the earth  
The agent of the people  
The agent of the anti nuclear Holocaust  
The agent of the anti nuclear proliferation  
The agent of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Chernobyl  
The agent who is not - spy - no - agent  
No - traitor - no agency  
If not, not. Why am I in the cold  
The judges are the agency of 18 years  
The judges who sent me put me in the cold.

Who can judge the judges  
Who can send those judges to the cold. Siberia.  
Who can tell that I haven't betrayed the earth.  
Who can reveal the truth that I was, is.

The spy of all the world  
On behalf of all the human beings  
The spy of all the world  
On behalf of all the human beings  
The spy who went

And did for - no more Hiroshima Nagasaki  
No more Chernobyl

No more nuclear proliferation  
No more nuclear tests  
No more nuclear weapons  
No more cheating deceiving lying  
But here the cold war doesn't end  
Here the cold war is the solitary confinement  
The war in a silent, by silent  
Against the silent

The war against walls, cement, grills  
The war in the cold, by the cold  
The agent who helped end the cold war  
Is still in the cold  
Yet didn't come back from the cold.

The German  
question

Since its publication Daniel Goldhagen's book has stirred up a hornet's nest in Europe and America. In April-May the book made the pages of every major German daily; its young author graced the front of the weekly *Der Spiegel*, Germany's *Time* magazine. He debated his thesis with American scholars of Nazism in front of a capacity audience at the US Holocaust Museum in Washington. In Britain his name and reputation attracted over 200 people to a fundraising event organised by Jewish Care. Clearly the man, the book and its argument are phenomena of our time. But why have they proved so explosive?

Goldhagen propounds a thesis about German history that was once called Vansittartism, after the British diplomat Sir Robert Vansittart who hated Germans and demanded the complete destruction of their country as punishment for starting the Second World War. Vansittart, whose views were formed in the vortex of the First World War, argued that there was a German mentality which drove the Germans towards expansion and conquest. They could not be appeased and were incapable of peaceful coexistence with other nations. Antisemitism was one aspect of a general beastliness, expressed equally in their murderous contempt for Poles. Hitler, Nazism and the Third Reich were the logical, inexorable culmination of German history.

Vansittartism found a more sober, scholarly embodiment in the work of Sir Lewis Namier and AJP Taylor during the Nazi era. Both historians maintained that the peculiarities of Germany's development destined the country to internal xenophobia and extremism coupled with external aggression. At the end of his wartime study of Germany, when it reaches the *gotterdammerung* of 1945, Taylor comments with a finality assuming no alternative, that 'German history had run its course'.

This thesis was enormously popular during and after the war, for obvious reasons. It became axiomatic amongst Jews, alongside such myths that 'Poles drank in antisemitism with their mother's milk'. During the post-war era, as Britain declined in bad grace, the British comforted themselves with moral superiority over their buoyant European rival. They might be richer than us, produce better cars and beat us to the beach, but the Germans are really bastards. In effect, a racist stereotype of the eternal German. In the hands of Nicholas Ridley this caricature almost became state policy. It was taken out for a more 'lighthearted' spin by sections of the popular press during the beef war and soc-



cer's Euro '96. So any book denigrating Germany has a ready audience amongst the victor nations of the Second World War, and especially among the Jews.

Daniel Goldhagen's monumental study, which has been called a hymn of hate, is the most cogent exposition of why the Holocaust was unique and why only the Germans could have perpetrated it. The book is predicated on a simple, logical premise. About half of the Jewish victims of Nazi policy were shot, starved or beaten to death in ghettos, 'work' camps and concentration camps, or murdered during death marches. The death camps form only part of the picture.

The small number of Germans and Austrians who ran them, all ideologically-honed SS men, were not the classic 'perpetrators'. The final solution was not, and could not have been, perpetrated by a tiny band of fanatical killers. Rather, it was carried out by thousands of policemen drafted into militarised police battalions, regular soldiers, and civilians in and out of reservists' uniform. Labour camps were sited near factories and towns throughout the Reich. During the death marches in 1944-45 the Jews were paraded past the front doors of thousands of evidently uncaring Germans in their towns and villages. Many joined the hunt for escapees or tormented Jews just for the hell of it. According to Goldhagen, the entire German nation was knowledgeable about, and complicit in, the genocide.

To prove this, he takes three agents of the genocide: the police battalions which provided the manpower to execute or deport most of Polish Jewry in

**Daniel Goldhagen claims that the roots of the Holocaust lay in Germany's unique history and that the whole German nation was implicated in Nazi crimes. David Cesarani takes issue with him**



1942-3; the so-called 'labour camps'; and the death marches. The police battalions have been subject to close scrutiny by Christopher Browning, whose pioneering research is treated shabbily by Goldhagen in his copious footnotes. But the book is invaluable for the attention devoted to the camps and the death marches.

The police battalions comprised over-age reservists, unfit for front-line duty, from a cross section of German society. They were not ideologically selected or indoctrinated to conduct genocide. Only 30% were Nazi party members. Most had been socialised in pre-Nazi Germany. Yet they proved efficient, zealous and gleeful mass murderers. In nine battalions the commanding officer excused men who did not want to participate in the one-to-one mass shooting of Jewish men, women, children and babies. Pitifully few availed themselves of this opportunity. Of them, none were penalised. One lieutenant who requested a transfer back home was even promoted later on.

These men, about 15,000 'representative' Germans, killed by choice. They also tortured Jews unnecessarily and selected religious Jews for particular humiliation. They were proud of this work. Some officers brought their wives to Poland to witness it. They unashamedly informed the folks back home and compiled photographic scrapbooks recording deeds which they clearly regarded as morally justified for the wellbeing of Germany.

Countering a fad within German historiography which purports to explain the treatment of the Jews as the 'rational' exploitation of a labour resource, Goldhagen shows that Jews were never properly used for work purposes. The labour camps functioned mainly to inflict misery, pain and death on the Jews. The men who ran them apparently enjoyed the task. In small, isolated encampments serving a remote mine or an underground factory in a forested, hilly area, the guards were often free of supervision and constraints. Even on pragmatic grounds they could have made sure the Jews were fed sufficiently well to work efficiently. Instead, they starved, humiliated and tortured the Jewish inmates. Goldhagen maintains that in so doing they vented the spirit of Nazi society: murderous, racial antisemitism.

He shows that time and again non-Jewish prisoners received preferential handling. During the 'death marches' they were fed and cosseted by comparison to the hapless Jews. These dreadful processions, conducted in the last months of the war when it was clear that Germany would lose, demonstrate a vital point for Goldhagen. The Jewish survivors of the ghettos, concentration and death camps were harried mercilessly and on several occasions, massacred. The aged reservists who plodded alongside them could easily have fed the Jews, allowed them to rest or even let them escape. In the chaotic months of January to May 1945, command and communication structures had virtually broken down. In mid-April 1945, as a gesture of goodwill to the allies with whom he was negotiating, Himmler actually ordered his subordinates to stop killing Jews. But the brutality and murder continued to the last moment. Many Germans later pleaded, like Erich Priebke in Rome, that they were just obeying orders. Historians have often subsequently referred

to a streak of subservience in the 'German mentality' to partially account for the Holocaust. But in 1945, far from blindly obeying orders, these men and women disobeyed them in order to go on slaughtering their Jewish prisoners.

If Goldhagen successfully undermines the conventional wisdom that the perpetrators were coerced into killing Jews, were blindly obeying orders, were driven by careerism or were distanced from the end result of their action by modern industrial techniques of murder, what explanation does he substitute? This is where the controversy begins.

Goldhagen correctly points out that it was no accident when Jews became the chief objects of Nazi hatred and the main targets of Nazi racial politics. He scourges historians and sociologists, notably Zygmunt Bauman, who draw on the Milgram experiments as evidence of a general human predisposition to obey even criminal orders if they are issued by 'experts', and the perpetrator is more or less insulated from the consequences. Firstly, in the horrific mass shootings, much of the killing was done in close proximity. Secondly, there was a given historical and cultural nexus between killer and victim. The murderers were Germans and, nominally, Christians; the victims were Jews. These two peoples had been in an established painful relationship for centuries.

Goldhagen paints a grotesquely Vansittartist version of German history and the place of the Jews within it. In medieval Germany 'the Jew' was held responsible for deicide, which self-respecting Christians had to punish. In modern Germany, 'the Jew' was a racial alien and biological threat to the Volk as defined by blood and millennial ties to the soil. He characterises popular antisemitism in Germany from the 1800s onwards as essentially 'eliminationist'. He argues on the most tendentious of evidence that by the 1890s a majority of German political parties and their voters were committed to expelling the Jews from German society. How does he get around the fact that only a fraction of the popular vote went to self-proclaimed antisemitic parties which obtained only a handful of Reichstag seats? By claiming that the mildly antisemitic platform of the Conservatives and their alliance with violently anti-Jewish parties locked them into 'eliminationist' antisemitism. He never even attempts to deal with the evidence that in 1900 the French were more openly antisemitic, and Russia the country most blatantly set on eliminating its Jews. It was Pobedonostev, not Kaiser Wilhelm, who said of the Jews, of Russia not Germany, that 'one third will emigrate, one third will convert and one third will die'. At this point Goldhagen, whose strength lies in his empirical research, veers dangerously close to blatant intellectual dishonesty.

After his lopsided tour d'horizon of German history, in which every progressive political and social force is marginalised or tarred with the brush of antisemitism, Goldhagen concludes that centuries of Christian Jew-hatred followed by decades of racial antisemitism had convinced the Germans that the Jews were an all-powerful, conspiratorial, protean, demonic force. Thus primed, the Germans were a 'genocidal community' awaiting activation by a leader bold enough to articulate their fantasies about the Jews and their homicidal aspirations



towards them. 'The inescapable truth is that, regarding the Jews, German political culture had evolved to the point where an enormous number of ordinary, representative Germans became — and most of the rest of their fellow Germans were fit to be — Hitler's willing executioners.'

Some Germans who see perpetual penitence as a facet of the new German national character have seized on this thesis and lauded Goldhagen. But most are appalled by it. Yet no one can be a spectator to this debate since it has radical implications for our understanding of racism and genocide. Goldhagen locates the source of the Holocaust in the German character, resuscitating the discredited *sonderweg* thesis which held that Germany followed a unique path to modernity. He disregards comparative studies and pays little attention to the people who aided and abetted the Nazis. Yet from the Channel Islands to the Volga, the Germans found ordinary men and women to help round up Jews and load them on to the railway trucks bound for 'the east'. No European society was immune to Christian Jew-hatred; most exhibited to a greater or lesser extent a violent aversion to a wholly imaginary, manichean, Jewish, racial enemy. Goldhagen may have convincingly explained why Germans hated and willingly murdered Jews, but his reasoning obstructs any understanding of how they found willing helpers everywhere. Nor can he account for the manifest lack of concern for the fate of the Jews throughout the allied and neutral powers.

We are living out the last years of a century of genocide. Now called 'ethnic cleansing' it is still going on and it behoves any student of the subject to contribute something to understanding why it occurs and how it can be prevented. Nothing in Hitler's Willing Executioners helps me to grasp the slaughter in Rwanda and Bosnia. Indeed, in a rather shameful footnote (page 584), Goldhagen confesses: 'As much as the German's antisemitism was the basis of their profound hatred of the Jews and the psychological impulse to make them suffer, it obviously does not explain people's capacity for cruelty in the first place or the gratification they derive from it.' To detractors who have protested at this

extraordinary analytical abdication, Goldhagen has retorted that he was addressing the Holocaust, not other cases of mass murder, and that he wanted to explain German behaviour, which was singular, and not create a theory so general in its application as to be useless.

But the German perpetrators were human beings operating in human society and to that extent there must be a universal explanation of their actions. Such a theory would be none the worse for operating across cultures and borders. The Holocaust may have been unique insofar as it was an instrument of state policy implemented across a continent over a long period of time, consuming scarce resources in the pursuit of every man, woman and child of a demarcated group, but does it matter that other genocides have been less comprehensive, or more erratic or geographically confined? Goldhagen's methodology leads us nowhere. If the Holocaust was unique and rooted in the peculiarities of German history and the 'German mentality', then historians are condemned to travel in a vicious explanatory circle: 'The Holocaust was the work of the Germans because the Germans were primed for the Holocaust.' Even more harmful, this approach perpetuates a stereotype of the 'evil Hun' and results in a process of demonisation similar to that prosecuted by Goebbels against the Jews.

It is a mixed tribute to Goldhagen that his book has created uproar in Germany and been applauded by Jews. It is a powerful work, laboriously researched and written with passion, although Germans (and Jews) may perhaps have a greater incentive than other readers to plough through its many repetitive and over-wrought passages. Yet I suspect it will not excite much curiosity in Kigali or Srebrenica — and this is the mark of its weakness. For if the Holocaust is deemed a purely German business, those of us who are appalled by the recurrence of genocide around the world in different era will have to look elsewhere for an analysis of its causes and mechanics. Goldhagen leaves the history of the Holocaust where the event itself ended in 1945, according to his understanding of it, in a ghastly dance of death for two — Germans and Jews.

David Cesarani, professor of 20th century European Jewish History and Culture at Southampton University and Director of the Wiener Library, edited *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation*, soon to be reissued in paperback by Routledge.



# Bessie's hat

A short story by Lily de Bruin

March the first 1904 is not a very important date on the calendar, but to Bessie it was a day in her life she never forgot.

It was her sixteenth birthday.

She 'put up' her long, dark hair on that day as girls did in those days. For weeks she had been promising herself that hat in Madame Rita's shop window. No one would buy it for her, she knew, so she had decided it would be a Birthday Present to herself. She had asked Madame Rita if she would

keep it for her but that lady had wanted a deposit. So Bessie gave her a hard-earned two shillings — a lot of money in 1904 — and now she had saved really hard to get the three shillings that would make the model hat her own.

Winter had been hard that year and the snow had turned to rain on the Saturday afternoon when Bessie went to collect her prize.

It wasn't just the hat's deep rose colour that had attracted her so much, nor even the outsize shape

that was so different from anything she had ever worn before. No, it was the huge, matching ostrich feather which curled around the brim in so delicate a fashion that fascinated Bessie.

She tried it on. It was so smart! It made her look grown up and gave her so much confidence. So far no one had noticed her much, but when she wore that hat everyone would see what they had been missing.

The rain fell steadily but Bessie hardly noticed it. Madame Rita had graciously accepted the money and made quite a ceremony of packing the hat in a deep, round, mauve hat box with a thick string handle which had sent Bessie skipping out of the shop and along the wet muddy street. She was quite a long way from home but she didn't mind the walk in the rain. The big shire horses that pulled the coal carts sent water spurting in all directions but Bessie didn't care. She would wear her new hat as soon as the rain stopped, she told herself, or the feather would spoil.

Wouldn't everyone look at her! It would change her life for ever, she was sure.

She got home eventually. She opened the gate and, looking down at the mauve cardboard box, her heart almost stopped beating. The rain had soaked through the cardboard. The bottom of the box was gone — and so was the hat!

Unbelieving, Bessie retraced her steps until, sure enough, there was the hat bedraggled in the mud, the lovely feather parted from the rest and filthy in the gutter. Bessie wept for days and would not be comforted. Her life was changed all right, she thought, as she worried about all the money she had worked so hard for.

Still, she was only sixteen, and a few weeks later spring arrived and with it her heart lifted. She could save up again, couldn't she? Madame Rita had a new blue hat in the window. She rather fancied that. It would make a lot of difference to her appearance, she was sure. It might change her life.

You never knew with a hat!

# In the black country

Anita and Me  
Meera Syal  
Flamingo, £9.99

*Anita and Me* tells the story of a nine-year old girl, Meena, growing up as a member of the only Punjabi family living in a working class mining village in the Black Country in the sixties. It explores how the headstrong and impressionable Meena finds the surrounding 'host' community's culture both magnetic and repulsive. This is personified by the charismatic leader of the pack — Anita. Syal wrote the screenplay for the award winning film, *Bhaji on the Beach*, and has developed the same themes in this book.

Much of the terrain will be familiar to Jewish readers, especially those who grew up in 'non-Jewish' areas during the same period. Meena's experience of being different, her first invitation to tea at Anita's appalling home and being offered, and having to eat, a sandwich filled with lard, will almost certainly ring bells. What do you do when you realise your mouth is full of treyf? Do you spit it out and offend your hosts? Do you eat it and risk being sick. There is an evocative description of the only occasion when Anita comes to Meena's house for tea and for the first time witnesses people eating with their fingers! Syal focuses closely on the many cultural roles that food plays.

'What's that!' she demanded, as if confronted with a festering sheep's head on a platter. 'Oh that's mattar-paneer,' Mama said proudly, always happy to educate the sad English palate. 'A sort of Indian cheese, and these are peas with it, of course...'

'Cheese and peas?' said Anita faintly. 'Together?'

'Well,' Mama went on hurriedly. 'This is chicken curry ... You have had chicken before, haven't you?'

'What's that stuff round it?'

'Um, just gravy, you know, tomatoes, onions, garlic...' Mama was losing confidence now, she trailed off as she picked up Anita's increasing panic.

'Chicken with tomatoes? What's garlic?'

'Don't you worry!' Papa interjected heartily, fearing a culinary cat fight was about to shatter his fragile peace. 'We've also got fishfingers and chips. Is tomato sauce too dangerous for you?' ... Anita stopped in mid-chew, looking from her knife and fork to Mama and Papa's fingers with disgust, apparently unaware that all of us had a great

view of a lump of a half masticated fishfinger sitting on her tongue. It had never occurred to me that this would be a moment of controversy, it had never occurred to me because I had never eaten Indian food in the presence of a white person before.

Meena spends all of her time at home railing against her parents and the hordes of 'aunties and uncles' who attend her father's poetry nights and dish out advice and food simultaneously. Her knee jerk reaction is to rebel but she knows that something is not quite right with her struggling. She cannot decide whether she adores mean, spiteful, clever Anita or is sorry for her. We find out that Anita's lone parent spends a great deal of time with strange men, we suspect that she and her younger sister are abused, the dysfunction list is endless. But it is plausible to see why it would hold the attraction for the good little girl from the good

**'Meena rails against her parents and the hordes of "aunties and uncles" who dish out advice and food simultaneously'**

Asian home. Perhaps most acutely, Syal describes the sense of knowing that your family is laughed at, despised or looked down upon by your neighbourhood while your own family feels exactly the same way about them.

'Oh Mrs K,' Sandy, the divorcee two doors down, would sigh, running her fingers through her hennaed hair, cocking her head to one side whilst widening her bright blue eyes, giving her the air of a startled parrot, 'you are a duck.'

This was after my mother had lent her butter or given her a lift down to the shops or taken her son, Mikey, in for some pop and crisps when Sandy missed her bus back from work.

'You're so lovely. You know, I never think of you as, you know, foreign. You're just like one of us.'

My mother would smile and graciously accept this as a compliment. And yet afterwards, in front of the Aunties, she would reduce them to tears of laughter by gently poking fun at the habits of her English friends.

Meena's experiences in the local stable, playground and funfair are so vivid that

you can almost smell them. She is somehow always just out of step with the gangs; because of how she is dressed, her fear of horses, her inadequacies in front of the local boys or because of her colour and her family with their ever present values. When Syal is examining how Meena inhabits two worlds at once and is unsure about where to put both of her feet at any one time is when the book is at its strongest. She is less successful when she takes a didactic approach to the 'big' issue. In the context of a book like this, race hatred and the sixties either need some new insights or more interesting treatment. Syal loses her grip and her confidence, as if she suddenly felt that her previous evocative approach was not profound or serious enough. It is a great pity that the writing becomes so much more blunt at this point. She draws us into another scene, which once again she establishes with great authenticity. This time, the local MP opens his house to the hoy polloy for the spring fete and to win their support for the anti motorway campaign and thus save the local school. They duly all attend and here both the do-gooding local youth leader, Uncle Alan, and Meena are betrayed. Sam Lowbridge, the most stunning of the local lads (and the one Meena has a soft spot for) has apparently, overnight, turned into a rabid racist skinhead.

'Kowtowing to the big lord and bloody master here like he's doing us a favour! You want to stop the motorway, ask him! He's a bloody builder and all, in't he?'

'Sam, a lot of people feel the same as you. This is our money. We could have a vote, yeah? A meeting, let's talk about ...'

Sam interrupted, a sly grin curling the corners of his mouth: 'You don't do nothing but talk, Uncle. And give everything away to some darkies we've never met. We don't give a toss for anybody else. This is our patch. Not some wog's handout.'

A sentence later and our wonderful wayward Meena is politicised, her transformation begins. This breathtakingly quick new understanding of herself is at odds with the fine detail elsewhere. It is as if Syal felt she needed to politicise the book, with a capital P, in order to legitimise it. A few adventures later and our heroine 'finds' herself. Meena becomes what we always knew her to be — a free spirit — but finally at one with her background and her place in both her communities. Ah, if only it were that simple. A shame really, because she knows better.

Karen Merkel



# The boys at the barricades

Street of Tall People

Alan Gibbons

Orion Children's Books, £5.99

The Battle of Cable Street in 1936 has achieved legendary status among anti-fascists. At a time when Nazism was triumphant in Germany and Mussolini was consolidating fascism in Italy, Jews and non-Jews in London's East End turned out in their hundreds of thousands to prevent the forward march of Mosley's blackshirts. Mosley's supporters didn't disappear completely and their descendants live on, but in that politically turbulent period it was a blow from which the British Union of Fascists (BUF) never really recovered.

The events of that day have been celebrated in many books and pamphlets and provide an abiding image for anti-fascists to rally round. For the most part this message had been directed at political activists and trade unionists, not least as a confidence booster: the workers united won't always be defeated. Alan Gibbons, though, has succeeded in communicating with a wider and equally significant audience through his book, *Street of Tall People*, set in London's East End in 1936.

Its main characters are children in their early teens, and that is precisely who this book is aimed at. Benny Silver and Jimmy Priest share the experience of poverty in the East End but their lives are separated by the geography of anti-semitism. Like other young Jews, Benny generally stays in the Jewish ghetto for fear of physical attack if he strays into the wrong neighbourhood. Jimmy follows his elders' warnings to steer clear of the Jewish area for fear of falling prey to corrupting foreign influences. When Benny and Jimmy's paths cross they fight - in front of a baying crowd. It's a boxing ring and Jimmy's club are fighting Benny's. Benny wins the fight, and also, to his surprise, a new friend.



Under arrest at Cable Street

In striving to build a friendship with Jimmy, Benny moves physically and mentally beyond the ghetto walls. On one occasion he is set upon by a gang in a 'goyishe' street but he is saved from a beating by his older streetwise friend Yaro (Samuel Yaroslavsky) who advises Benny to stick to his own streets in future. For Yaro the world is simple. There are only Jews and antisemites. He knows that one day it might be different but he will not be the first to take risks to change things.

Despite Yaro's contempt, Benny and Jimmy manage to maintain contact. A deserted warehouse in Whitechapel serves as a base for their 'brotherhood'. They leave messages and meet when they can. But beyond the warehouse menacing forces are afoot in the shape of Mosley's fascists. Their open thuggery and the growing state of siege among East End Jewry is graphically described and documented. Then Jimmy stumbles across a shocking secret. His widowed mother has become romantically involved with the

hated rent collector on their estate, Eddie Searle. What's more Searle is active in the BUF. Jimmy struggles to find a way to warn his friend Benny but fails and when the two boys' families encounter each other, Searle is abusive and threatening. Benny feels betrayed and driven back into the ghetto walls he had been pushing so hard against.

October 1936. Word is spreading that the fascists are to march through the East End. Slogans are chalked on the walls: THEY SHALL NOT PASS. Beyond the ghetto Jimmy hears voices calling: 'Stop Mosley fascism'; 'Stop Mosley'. The words hammered into him. Stop Mosley and he would stop Searle.

Jimmy tries to make contact with Benny at the warehouse but he only finds Yaro who gives him a beating but Jimmy puts up quite a fight. Refusing to go home to his mother and Eddie Searle, he spends the night at the warehouse where Benny finds him. They are united again and despite the warnings of the adults around them they join the mass demonstration against Mosley.

The description of the battle of Cable Street is powerful and evocative. Benny can't believe that so many non-Jews -

Catholic Irish dockers no less - have turned out in solidarity with the Jews against the BUF: 'Mosley's no friend of working folk,' a docker explains to him. 'Besides we owe the Jews a debt. Forty years ago we were out for the dockers' tanner, on strike for a living wage. I was only a nipper then, but my old man told me about it. There were the Jews, fresh from Europe and dirt poor, and they collected money for us. You don't forget things like that.'

Alan Gibbons shows that many non-Jewish East Enders, rather than being a natural constituency for Mosley's rhetoric, considered the BUF a nuisance who were irrelevant to their real concerns. He manages to convey the striving of ordinary people for a better life and shows that while barricades were going up against Mosley, other barriers between people were crashing down.

The author encourages his readers to enter the world of the Jewish East End. He tends to over-emphasise the cultural differences in speech and mannerisms between Jews and non-Jews but generally draws his characters well, with all their contradictions. The thuggish Eddie Searle also has wit and charm. Gibbons

portrays very effectively the positive values found in working class communities amid the stresses and strains of grinding poverty. People look out for each other and rather than being ignorant they understand only too well what is going on around them. And as Benny stresses to Jimmy, people can fight back against the odds. Victims can take control over their circumstances. The author reminds his readers very effectively that the police and your own community establishment can't and won't do it for you.

This well-written book will make non-Jewish children aware of the situation and forces facing Jews in the East End not so long ago. It will help them to see the parallels in racism and anti-semitism today and hopefully inspire them to challenge today's Oswald Mosleys. Jewish children who read it will get a glimpse into their own history and maybe a view of the future too. At a time when some of the powers that be in our community are trying to lead a voluntary retreat into a new ghetto, the message of human solidarity across communities defeating prejudice and nationalism is more than welcome.

David Rosenberg

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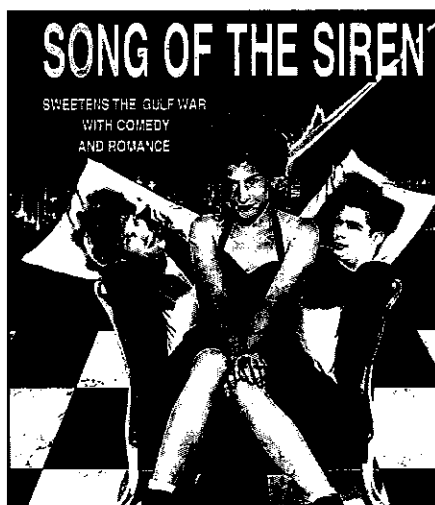
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# Gulf between the sexes

**Song of the Siren**  
Dir: Eytan Fox  
Israel, 1994

Song of the Siren, which was shown at the London Jewish Film Festival, is an Israeli blockbuster. Based on a best-selling novel by Irit Lenur, it portrays the romantic choices of Talila, a strongly extrovert Tel Aviv advertising executive. The film, set during the Gulf War, draws a parallel between a cosmopolitan city, stunned by the violation of its traditional immunity from its own country's wars, and a young woman's attempt to maintain autonomy in her culture's sex wars.

This is a funny film which manages to take gas masks and window-sealing plastic into the bedroom of a budding romance without any loss of universality. Talila is in an on-and-off relationship with hunky, slick Ofer (Sephardic?) when she meets shy, sloppy Noah (Ashkenazi?). Ofer tells her what to wear, what to think and what is trendy. Noah seems to tell her very little at all but lives in a moshav home with a lush garden, and flashes a sweet gap



between his two front teeth.

The Gulf War was, in many ways, unlike any other war Israel experienced, and this movie does a good job of showing both the disbelief with which Tel Avivians faced the arrival of the Scuds and the impotence of the men, forced into a passive role. Stuck at home — unless they escaped abroad or to Jerusalem, like a number of the film's characters — they found themselves squashed into bomb shelters or the

apartment's sealed room, together with the women and children. Used to being in the tanks, trenches and supply centres, they were no longer in control. Tensions rise, secrets are revealed, families find blemishes.

There are some uniquely Israeli moments in Song of the Siren. A hysterical scene in a traffic jam shows Talila accosted by neighbouring drivers on every side — one man sucking a kiss at her, another talking on his mobile phone and winking, and finally a woman (who will turn up again in Talila's life) leaning out of her car to ask her for an elastic band. Later, engaged once again to Ofer, Talila speaks across a long line of her gas-masked relatives to her fiancé down the other end of the bomb shelter. She informs him that she cannot marry him after all. As the many witnesses pull off their gas masks to look at her in astonishment, Ofer hides behind his own.

Reconstructing the common Israeli romantic comedy genre, which is usually overdone and cringingly slapstick, director Eytan Fox has given us a lively, engaging piece of fluff set within what was a traumatic, if defining, moment in Tel Aviv's history.

Spike Katz

# Forbidden fruits

**The Romance Reader**  
Pearl Abraham  
Quartet, £9

Separated as their communities are from the wider society, we have little way of judging how Hasidic women feel about the rules and regulations by which they live their lives. To help recruit new members, the Lubavitch sect groom a cadre of ba'alot tshuva ('born again' women) to tell us the joys of arranged marriage and the rewards of bearing 10 children. But, while these women, most of whom have had the benefit of a broad secular education, choose the apparent security of a closed society, many girls growing up inside ultra-orthodox communities are struggling to get out.

The power of this insulated community over the individuals within it, has generated an equal and opposite force in

Pearl Abraham. The daughter of a Hasidic family, she has written a witty and readable fictional account of a girl's drive to discover the wider world. Most startling is the extent to which insiders break the rules. Secular, 'non-Jewish' books are forbidden, but the heroine, Rachel Benjamin, sneaks off to the public library to read novels. When he finds out, her father invokes first Isaiah's warning to the people of Judea to remain separate, and then the Holocaust: 'The Jews in Germany thought they could be good Germans first, Yuden second. And what happened? Six million killed by Hitler, may his name forever be erased.' Not so unfamiliar after all. Then comes the final threat: 'If I catch you reading goyishe books, you will stop going to school.'

The light touch with which Pearl Abraham conveys breaches of expected behaviour seems to emphasise their seriousness. From sexual play with one of her girl friends, described with convincing innocence, to breaking her fast on Yom

Kippur, we discover that Hasidic girls are not so different from other girls. In that similarity lies the shock of this book. We

cannot distance ourselves by focusing on the visible trappings of Hasidism, such as the sheytl, the wigs worn by ultra-orthodox Jewish women which seem to differentiate 'them' from 'us'. Outside ultra-orthodox groups, sheytl are a target for prurient humour and sexual speculation, like jokes about nuns. A symbol of the extreme restrictions placed on women they focus a generalised curiosity (and perhaps anxiety) about these inaccessible communities through the sexualised and sexist prism of the wider society.

So when a young Hasidic woman tells the story of how she broke the rules, broke ranks and finally broke out of the community she was brought up in you read it nervously, aware that her revelations may be used by Jew haters and woman haters. But this is precisely the threat on which conformity is predicated. The publication of Pearl Abraham's novel is the realisation of her father's fears for her innocence and for his community. It is also the realisation of her need to function as an autonomous, open-minded adult.

Julia Bard

## the shelf

Norman Cohn's *Warrant for Genocide: the myth of the Jewish Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Serif, £13.99) is a highly informative book. Recently reissued, this scholarly study has few surprises about the Protocols themselves. What was new for me was Cohn's account of similar publications throughout the 19th century, many of them from France — indeed the first manuscript of the Protocols was in French. I spent a year in France a few miles from a village called Mirebeau. The priest of the local church, Abbé Chabauty, wrote a series of influential books in the 1880s denouncing a conspiracy by Satan, who was using Jews and Freemasons to take over the world (he was obviously off the rails about the Jews, but the freemasons are another story...).

The other eye-opener was Cohn's passing reference to the massacre of 100,000 Jews by the White armies between 1918 and 1920, during the Russian Civil War. Apparently the Black Hundreds — an organisation of antisemitic thugs — promoted the slogan 'Kill the Jews — Save Russia'. The butchery pales compared to what the Nazis did later, but it's still a staggering figure.

Victor Serge's autobiography, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary 1901-1941* (Oxford University Press) makes agonising reading. Serge worked for the Communist international from 1919, and describes how close the Bolsheviks came to defeat as the counter-revolutionaries pressed in on St Petersburg. The security apparatus set up by Lenin and Trotsky as part of the struggle soon degenerated into a vicious organ of repression and Serge joined the left opposition. After imprisonment and internal exile, he left the Soviet Union not long after Trotsky. Having struggled for years to save good socialists from arrest in Moscow, Serge saw the Communists act as a similar reactionary force during the civil war in Spain. Living through the '20s and '30s must have been sheer hell for anyone on the left. We had some outstanding people on our side and they screwed it up.

It would be hard to claim that the current leadership of the Labour Party is full of outstanding people. In a Socialist Worker pamphlet, *New Labour or Socialism?* (Bookmarks, £2), Alex Callinicos argues that a 'New Labour' government will not bring about real change in Britain. He says that the same was true of Old Labour; a reformist party, he writes, will not be able to withstand the backlash by financial markets and unaccountable centres of state power if it threatens their privileges. Callinicos is scathing about elec-

glory, but latching on to strikes and defensive campaigns like the Anti Nazi League as the road to socialism is not convincing. Why don't we rise up more often? Why do we remain submissive most of the time? These are the important questions.

Two pamphlets published by Ruskin College Library document interesting episodes. In his *History of the Jewish Working Men's Club and Institute, 1874-1912*, Harold Pollins writes about a club in the East End that was like its counterparts up and down the country — except that alcohol was banned, something that would be unthinkable elsewhere. Dave Renton's more recently published *Red Shirts and Black: Fascists and Anti-Fascists in Oxford in the 1930s* is a lively account of how the left organised effectively against Mosley and the British Union of Fascists, as well as winning important industrial struggles. The organised Jewish community in the town took little part in these events. I suppose that in a rapidly evolving world it's good to see that some things don't change.

Raphael Salkie

## Jewish Socialists' Group DAYSCHOOL

Central London

Sunday 24 November 1996

**'JEWS WITH ATTITUDE'**

THE FACTS AND  
FICTION OF JEWISH  
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