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**Singular Islands or a Transnational Sphere?**

**Bundist Revolutionary Culture in the Process of Migration\***

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When, back in 1897, thirteen delegates from several illegal Jewish unions met in a Vilna attic planning to found what became known as the *Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeterbund*, the Jewish Labor Bund, or short: Bund, all of them shared the feeling of joining an important act, but none of them could even have guessed the true long-term consequences of this gathering.<sup>1</sup>

Out of the tiny conspiratorial group grew the strongest organized workers' force in Jewish Eastern Europe, the later co-founder and important member of the Russian Social Democratic Party. The Bund fought on the economic front hundreds of strikes, in 1905 became a motor of the First Russian Revolution and already previously was the first Jewish organization battling pogromists – a striking turn in overall Jewish history.<sup>2</sup> In short: It rose as a new, secular force in the East European Jewish *shtetl*, challenging the old Jewish and the tsarist authorities alike. After the fall of tsarism 1917 the Bundist opposition against Lenin and the Bolsheviks had tragic consequences, throwing the Bund back to Polish lands, in deep crisis and partition. But out of this grew the strongest Jewish party in interwar-Poland keeping course in their revolutionary political gesture while parallelly establishing a whole system of cultural institutions new to the Jewish community, like a net of

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<sup>1</sup> Widely commemorized by the participants: From: N.P. [Noakh Portnoy?]: Der ershter Tsuzamenfahr fun Bund. Erinerungen, in: Di hofnung, Vilna, 14 (1907), p. 3, to: Dzshon Mill: Der grindungs-tsuzamenfor fun "bund", in: Unser Tsayt, New York, 3-4 (1946), pp. 35-38.

<sup>2</sup> See: Henry J. Tobias: Jewish Bund in Russia from Its Origins to 1905, Stanford Univ. Press: Palo Alto 1972, John Bunzl: Klassenkampf in der Diaspora. Zur Geschichte der jüdischen Arbeiterbewegung, Europa-Verlag: Vienna 1975.

secular Jewish schools, relief organizations, yiddish workers' libraries and alike.<sup>3</sup> This cultural work in Poland could either be strictly bundist, or, like the founding of the important publishing house "Farlag kulturlige" a result of a new form socialist cooperation between Bundists and Labor-Zionists - but it always served a revolutionary perspective.

After already being under attack by the growing Polish anti-Semitism, the known Bundist work came to an abrupt end in 1939 with the German invasion and the outbreak of the Second World War. But even in the ghettos under the most miserable circumstances, Bundists, now in mainly cooperation with other groups, rebuild a secret net of education, welfare and resistance, the best known results might be the various ghetto libraries, theaters, secret schools and in the end, the preparation and execution of the ghetto uprisings, like most famous in Warsaw and Vilna 1943.<sup>4</sup> So to say, the Bund was a genuine movement of, for and by workers, but far more than a party alone.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, historians often keep reading it in party-only related terms. In this presentation I aim at rethinking Bundism by reevaluating it through its cultural work and transnational importance.

### **Reading the Bund through its Historiography**

Looking at the last fifty years of historiography on the Bund, three "schools" or points of view can be named. First of all there was a long tradition of internal Bundist writing, a self-historicizing in the Bundist journals and in length in book form. Writers like Jacob Sh. Hertz, Chaim Sh. Kazdan, Ephim Jeshurin or here in Argentina Alexander Minc might be the best known below them.<sup>6</sup> They largely drew attention to what they considered as facts: The recapturing of past episodes, structures and biographies - what we right now might read as memory combined with scientific historical research. Although some of them were well-of writers they were mostly autodidacts with a specific historical interest, close to their life line and political viewpoints. In this historiography romanticizing, heroization but also basic research often went hand in hand.

The second group is what might be called sympathizing historians. In contrast to the first group, they had a modern academic background, wrote their works in English, not in Yiddish anymore, and took a far more analytical standpoint. Henry. J. Tobias, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jonathan Fraenkel and

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<sup>3</sup> Gertrud Pickhan: *Gegen den Strom. Der Allgemeine Jüdische Arbeiterbund "Bund" in Polen 1918-1939*, DVA: Stuttgart, Munich 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Blatman: *For Our Freedom and Yours: The Jewish Labour Bund in Poland 1939-1949*, Vallentine Mitchell: London 2003.

<sup>5</sup> A. L. Patkin: *The Origins of the Russian-Jewish Labour Movement*, London 1947, p. 198; Frank Wolff: *Heimat und Freiheit bei den Bundisten Vladimir Medem und Hersch Mendel*, in: Julia Herzberg, Christoph Schmidt (eds.): *Vom Wir zum Ich: Individuum und Autobiographik im Zarenreich*, Böhlau: Cologne et al., 2007, S. 301-323.

<sup>6</sup> Under the major works are: Jacob S. Hertz: *Der Bund in bilder, 1897-1957*, Farlag Unzer Tsayt: New York 1958; *Ibd.* (ed.): *Doires Bundistn*, 3 Vol., Farlag Unzer Tsayt: New York 1956-1968; Ephim H. Jeshurin: *B. C. Vladeck: 50 Years of Life and Labor*, Forward Association: New York 1936; *Ibd.* (ed.): *Arbeter Ring. Boyer un tuer*, Marstin Press: New York 1962; Kh. Sh. Kazdan: *Mentshn fun geyst un mut. Bundishe geshtaltn*, Farlag Yidbukh: Buenos

many contemporary historians are to mention here.<sup>7</sup> Leaving one book by Ezra Mendelsohn aside, until almost the turn of the millennium they largely focused on ideological aspects, like the specific Bundist approach towards nationalism and party organizational matters. Mendelsohn on the other hand already in 1970 declared the Bundist experience as to a better part culturally, because it *"offered its members a completely new way of life, a new framework of conventions within which to live and work, a world unlike anything they had previously experienced."*<sup>8</sup> This sets "experience" over "program" – a view, that became slightly rediscovered only in the last decade following the new cultural turn in historiography.

On the contrary a third group of authors drove against the reading of the Bund as an anyhow successful organization, the best known below them might be Bernhard K. Johnpoll and recently Yosef Gorny. Already in 1967 Johnpoll entitled his book on the Bund "The Politics of Futility".<sup>9</sup> In his view the Bund failed, because it could not establish a political sphere of action and only had a few gains on the cultural front.<sup>10</sup> His theses were frequently taken over in some streams of modern historiography, mostly of Zionist background and lately reinforced by Yosef Gorny. While comparing the Bund and the Poalei Zion, the socialist Zionist party, Gorny concludes, that the Bund largely failed because of its theoretical and structural weakness.<sup>11</sup> But his book is highly biased – from the chosen terms to expected answers. While aiming at the question of governmental representation Gorny and his predecessors loading their guns in their favor, judging the Bund by the results of the Second World War. German tanks, murderers and later Soviet occupation caused the vanishing of the Polish Bund, not the Bund's ideological or organizational weakness. But even then, after the dissolution of the Polish Bund in 1948 the Bund remained existent – abroad. Of course Bundists could never establish something like a nation-state - but they never aimed at doing that. Still even Gorny admits in length that there were cultural gains, but in his sight the more important parliamentary-political ones were far more important and remained without success.

## **The Bundist Culture**

In the gap between political failure and political success is a strange filling: Culture. Looking at all

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Aires 1962.

<sup>7</sup> Most important: Jonathan Frankel: *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews 1862-1917*, Cambridge Univ. Press: Cambridge, New York 1981; Ezra Mendelsohn: *Class Struggle in the Pale. The Formative Years of the Jewish Workers' Movement in Tsarist Russia*, Cambridge Univ. Press: Cambridge 1970; Tobias: *The Jewish Bund*.

<sup>8</sup> Mendelsohn: *Class Struggle*, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> Bernhard K. Johnpoll: *The Politics of Futility. The General Jewish Workers Bund of Poland, 1917-1943*, Cornell Univ. Press: Ithaca, New York 1967.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibd*: *Politics*, p. 268.

<sup>11</sup> Yosef Gorny: *Converging Alternatives. The Bund and the Zionist Labor-Movement*, SUNY Press: Albany 2006, p.11.

of the three "schools", there seem to be two distinguishable levels, one hard and one rather soft one: The political sphere and the cultural. And the second seems to be not more than a consequence of the strong devotion of the Bundists to the first, the political sphere. In my opinion one cannot be read without the other, each was an integral part of the whole Bundist system. But what can be read as a Bundist culture? Strikingly the term remains largely undefined, even in the anti-Bundist works who state that just in this sphere the Bund had some kind of success. So, how to understand "Bundist culture"?

The Bund from the very beginning set up its program as revolutionary against capitalism, against the tsardom AND – very important – culturally against the traditionalist mainstream in East European Jewry. Still even in the recently most discussed time of interwar Poland, the cultural practice remains underresearched. Applying to already established and upcoming points of view, like Jack Jacobs' awaited book on the "Bundist Counter-Culture",<sup>12</sup> I would like to read Bundist cultural practice from the positive, not ex-negativo like the term "Counter-Culture" might suggest: Aside all everyday politics, was a longterm cultural program of bringing Jewish life on a new level through worldly thoughts and practice, founding and using schools, secular education, new self-esteem: *yidishkeyt*<sup>13</sup> and *doykeyt*<sup>14</sup>. The third key-term often neglected in historiography is *khavershaft*<sup>15</sup>, sometimes also referred as *mishpokhndishkeyt*<sup>16</sup>. Consequently there "program" looses significance and "perception" becomes more important. And this is blessed with highest historical relevance: Important Bundist thoughts outlived the Bund and created an aura of cultural experience aside traditional or in anyhow messianic believes.

This is the crux in current research: Historians often ended up talking about what I call the "*Bundist experience*", the everyday perception of daily practice in a Bundist cultural chassis, experienced on the "yidishe gas" allover the "bundishe rayon" – but sources below top-level Bundists were said to be missing. Historians often repeated that the Bundist culture is important to consider but hard to capture, as there is a lack of sources that would allow grassroots-studies in order to examine perceptions and consequences of the Bundist experience on a personal level. I do not agree on that. In the recapturing of this "Bundist experience" I am working with several hundreds of Bundist autobiographies, composed by members of many social strata, by different political orientation in the writing time and various published or unpublished under different circumstances. Main sources

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<sup>12</sup> To be published next year.

<sup>13</sup> The strong devotion to the "yidish" people and its tongue.

<sup>14</sup> The solution of the double marginalization as workers AND Jews at the place of living, not in any exile.

<sup>15</sup> Comradeship and/or friendship.

<sup>16</sup> A concept of understanding the Bund as a protective and warm hearted "family" – central to the Bundist experience after immigration.

are reminiscences published as monographs or in the Bundist press from its founding up to the 1960's. The next important group was published in Communist Russia and much higher in relevance and number in the USA in various publishing houses or journals devoted to American Jewish Immigrants. Another big collection considered is the autobiographical contest the Jewish Scientific Institute, YIVO in New York, held 1942 in order to create a high number of non-canonized sources by individuals.<sup>17</sup> Fourth there are sources stemming from the Bund's self-historicizing after the Second World War: Bund-archivists developed a set of questionnaires now filed in by hundreds of (former) Bundists and often lengthened by unstandardized autobiographical notes. They remained stored in the Bund-archives and now are major component in my sketching of a collective biographical view on the Bundists.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore this presentation bases on the high number of largely unsorted and yet seemingly unused documents on the American Jewish Labor Movement and its Bundists branches stored in the YIVO- and the Bund-Archives in New York.<sup>19</sup> Going through all these sources, there is one component missing in the recent setup of the Bundist experience: Migration. To remember: Those Bundists who survived the Second War did so, because they already had migrated or they migrated afterwards. Just a few remained in Poland. The simple question is: If the Bund focused on institutional politics in their land of origin – what happened to Bundists leaving the Polish environment? As the Bund's program focused so much on Eastern Europe, in how far was there a “Bundism” in the USA and if, how was it related to the Polish one? In my recent work I am looking at the ties between the Bundists in Poland and those abroad mostly in the USA and in the second large immigrant's country: Argentina.<sup>20</sup> The different foci of my sources do allow to draw conclusions on what non-leading Bundists considered important of the Bund and what they carried along from one country to another, because their autobiographical writing often was a result and a reflection of the process of migration.

### **Culturally Bundist**

When from the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Bundist came to the US in large numbers, they arrived in a world completely different from their experiences and expectations. In many cases the USA, in fact New York, was economic promise as much as political exile. But the structure of the often non-socialist American unions with their strictly economic direction and the overall fear of

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<sup>17</sup> YIVO-Archives, New York, RG 102; folder 1-223; introducing: Jocelyn Cohen, Daniel Soyfer (eds.): *My Future is in America. Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants*, NYU Press: New York 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Bund Archives, New York, RG 1400, MG2, 429.

<sup>19</sup> Archival quotations therefore remain rough, there no page numbers are given, only those of folders, sometimes filling whole large boxes.

<sup>20</sup> The in depth research on Argentina has just begun, it is not as advanced as on the Northern American Situation.

leftism, still a result of the post-haymarket paranoia of anarchists<sup>21</sup> (whatever that might mean) left many of the revolutionaries disoriented: It was a big part of Russian revolutionary ideology, that after the abolishment of the repressive tsardom a free and fair world would be much easier to establish. Politics in the USA proved to falsify the productivity of "negative liberty".<sup>22</sup> In many cases immigrants showed the same surprise in the interwar-times, when they either arrived from Soviet Russia or independent Poland. The reality of the United States with its sharp class-differentiations showed an unwanted world: the weakness of the political left, the split of American Socialist Parties, paralleled by previously unexperienced rights, like the freedom of speech, press and public gathering – but on the contrary what many autobiographers mourn: the cold atmosphere of everyday live AND in the political initiatives. Especially in the autobiographies written by former Bundists in the context of non-Bundist initiatives, like the YIVO contest of immigrant autobiographies 1942, this is a frequent motive. To understand that, one needs to look at where the Bundists came from.

From the earliest times the Bund tried to unify various streams that could be subsumed as a socialist modernization of Jewishness (yidishkeyt) in the recent local setting (doykeyt). Yidishkeyt and doykeyt became key concepts in the Bundist programs and became even stronger in the Polish era after the Bolshevik revolution. Whenever possible the Bundist erected cultural institutions, like libraries, educational circles and schools - even in illegality but of course to a much larger extend when they were without a ban. Looking at what non-leading Bundists recapture as most important when writing about their Russian past, it is striking that while recalling the illegal times they emphasize counter-tsarist action, self-defense and prison episodes. In contrast to that and concerning the short time of legality after 1905 and in the Polish times the writers, sometimes within the same book, mostly talk about what I described as cultural activity - an integral part of revolutionary action.<sup>23</sup>

The Bundist action, I argue, shifted from a perspective of collective liberation towards a constructive formulation of a Bundist identity. And for this purpose not the "real" armed action was the key, but its mediation and of other experiences separating the Bundists from their bourgeois and/or Zionist counterparts. It is of highest relevance, that most of the worker authors wrote their reminiscences AFTER their migration. As far as it is possible to recapture the writing place, not a

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<sup>21</sup> James R. Green: *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America*, Pantheon Books: New York 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Following: Charles Taylor. *Negative Freiheit? Zur Kritik des neuzeitlichen Individualismus*, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M. 1988.

<sup>23</sup> Two examples: For the Russian Bund the carpenter Yoel Novikov: *Zikhroynes fun a Yidishn Arbeter*, Tel Aviv 1967, for the Polish-Era: Bernhard Goldshteyn: *20 yor in varshever 'Bund' 1919-1939*, New York 1960; less known: J. Rothenberg: *Fun Varshe biz Shanghay*, Mexiko City 1947.

quart of the 430 collected and partly examined autobiographies were written in Eastern Europe with a large number of those sharing an experience of internal migration as only 20 texts were verifiably written in Russian or Soviet-Russian lands. Far away from the homeland there was an urgent need of recapturing the past in order to create a contemporary identity differing from the mass-society they did not wished to fit (like Bundist Anti-Zionists in Israel or Socialists in America etc.).

But if there was there something like a Bundist identity, how could it develop? Thinking of the formative years and his early refugee in Switzerland, the leading Bundist Vladimir Medem remembers himself walking along a Boulevard with his comrade "*Teumin [who] would point to one or another individual on the street and say to me: 'That's a 'Bundist'.' [...] The term Bundist was strange to me; we never used it in Russia. Within the movement proper [...] people were said to work in the Bund; this was self-evident.*"<sup>24</sup> So raises the question, what it means "*to be a 'Bundist' in Bern, in Switzerland, where there was no Jewish Labor Movement?*"<sup>25</sup> Medem wrote this in the early 1920's – in America! How different things were there, where many writers considered the Bund to be the only harbor after the uprooting migration, or, as Abraham Brumberg reflects: "*The Bund was like a huge mishpokhe*".<sup>26</sup> A strong development indeed must have taken place from Medem's reminiscences on pre-revolutionary Switzerland to the American thirties, when the important Bundist N. Khanin stated: "*Eyn mol a Bundist – ale mol a Bundist.*"<sup>27</sup> [Once a Bundist – always a Bundist.] There was an important cultural shift – from action in a group to self-definition referring to a group. And very important in this sense, referring to a group AND its history, which the new Bundists did not experience personally, but which was mediated by many commemorative texts and acts the Bund performed after 1917. That year caused a shift towards memory by two reasons: The cut caused by the Bolshevik revolution and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bund – presenting in the internal rhetorics at least three different generations of Bundists: First the founders, active from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Second there were the so-called popularizers that had in large entered the workers' movement after the founding of the Bund and who were the carriers of the 1905 revolution. And third a new generation arose, whose members were too young to have actively participated in the 1905 revolution and could only integrate this important phase of the Bund in their lives over the stories written and told by the elder. 36% of the 300 Bundist autobiographies examined deal with the era 1897-1905, constituting the largest group, followed by 23% dealing with the Second World War.

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<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Medem: *The Life and Soul of a Legendary Jewish Socialist*, edited by Samuel A. Portnoy [Orig: *Fun mayn lebn*, Farlag "Di Velt", Warsaw 1923] KTAV: New York 1979, p.222.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.223.

<sup>26</sup> Abraham Brumberg: *From Vilna to San Francisco. Pages from a Diary*, in: Sławomir Kapralski (Hrsg.): *The Jews in Poland*, Vol. 2, Cracow 1999, p.84.

In recapturing their lives just a few Bundists focused on what we could call "party politics", meaning congresses, important debates or the struggle for representative dominance in local politics for example in the Polish *kehillot*. Here it becomes obvious, how interpreters like Johnpoll basically misunderstood the Bund blaming the Bundists "*not [to] recognize the party's true role, that of a seeker of state power.*"<sup>28</sup> Far more attention was always given to cultural, or in the end, identity-forming actions, a wholesome socialist way of being, like through each person's role in self-defense, the importance of the youth-movement, secular schools and socialist welfare institutions and, most important, the yiddish language as a everyday practice of the people for the people. It is widely known, that the Bund, when legal, founded or co-founded a lot of path-breaking institutions like the *Medem-sanatorye*, the *TsISHO* (Tsentrale Yidyshe Shul-Organisatsie) or the *Farlag Kulturlige* in Poland. So in Poland action in the Bund and the creation of a Bundist identity went hand in hand. But what about the Bundists, that left Poland?

### **Bundism in Migration**

Going through these personal sources it is striking, that transatlantic migration was widely understood as a break in the lifeline, unlike comparable refuges in Switzerland, Belgium or France which for a long time were more of a temporary matter. In classical reading life began anew in Northern America, which means a few cities like Chicago, Toronto and Montreal and with New York as the most important harbor. Here was not only another economic and socialist background, here was first of all: Not Poland. In the ideological focus Poland was the core of the *doykeyt*-concept. But were all ties cut? I'd argue they were not, instead there was a strong connection synchronically between the various places – and diachronically between the different times they stood for. In the following I will introduce those widely forgotten institutions and work out their importance for the Polish and the American Labor Movement as much as for the creation of a transnational Bundist identity which became so important after the Holocaust, when the Bund turned into the World-Bund. Then *doykeyt* could only work on a secular, non-Zionist and leftist metalevel, often causing the forgetting of the Bundist background while transforming its ideas into practices of a Jewish world, that has changed like never before.<sup>29</sup> Of course this didn't happen on governmental levels. These consequences rose from the preparations Bundists had to make, while transforming the concepts brought along into, referring to Mendelsohn on the Bundist practice: a

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<sup>27</sup> N. Khanin: Eyn mol a Bundist – ale mol a Bundist, in: Der veker, New York, 528, 10. Nov. 1934, pp.16f.

<sup>28</sup> Johnpoll: Politics, p.260.

<sup>29</sup> In length discussed in the major Bundist journal „Unzer Tsayt“ over the years 1946/1947. No work has yet been written on the Bund after the Shoa, David Slucki's ongoing dissertation is the first step in that direction. See the presentation of his project on the newly founded network devoted to research on the Jewish Labor Bund: <http://www.Bundism.net/slucki-research-project>, 8. Sept. 2008.

usable framework "*within which to live and work*." This background work accomplished new schemes while using the Bundists' cultural bindings and therefore:

1. Established a network of former Bundists and American Socialists.
2. Raised money for local actions and the Polish Bund.
3. Developed a distinct American Bundist consciousness, by transforming internationalism into transnational practice.
4. Set up a cultural (largely commemorative) system in order to link the "heroic" past with contemporary Bundist work.

### **Bundist Institutions between Poland and New York**

Already in 1906 the Bund had so many members in America, that its convention in New York was attended by nearly a hundred delegates from various cities and a large number external visitors and observers. They met in order to: First, inform the local delegates about the activities of the Russian Bund, second, establish a Bundist branch of the American Labor Movement by drawing out the connections to the important yiddish socialist initiatives, for example delegates of the *Arbeterring*, the *Forverts* and socialist Jewish Unions like the *ILGWO*<sup>30</sup> were present there and some where even allowed to address the gathering Bundists in official speeches. Third it was one of the first steps to create a certain American version of Bundism, as local matters played a key role after the first day. This was not only done during the meeting but was also spread by a printed version of the convention's report.<sup>31</sup> That then initiated process of self-establishing took a long way but here the foundations for later developments were laid. In short I will redraw them in the following.

Among the numerically steadily rising Jewish immigrant population was a significant number of Bundists who arrived during and after the first Russian Revolution. The Bundist organization took a stand with their feet in America and the faces turned towards Russia and later Poland. Here the Bund-branches never rose to a strength they had in Eastern Europe. But it is important to keep in mind that there were many affiliated organizations not carrying the name of the Bund along with theirs, but which were founded in the spirit of the Bund or even by Bundists. The renown *Arbeterring*, the then world's largest Jewish Workers' organization<sup>32</sup> and the less known, but nevertheless very important *Jewish Socialist Farband* must be named among that.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> International Ladies' Garment Workers Union.

<sup>31</sup> Tsentral farband fun die Bundishe organisatsye in amerika: Report fun der driter yehrlukher konventsh fun di Bundistishe organisatsye in Amerika, New York 1906[?], Bund Archives, New York, RG 1400, ME 18, folder 2.

<sup>32</sup> On the Yiddish socialist organizations in America before 1917, see: Tony Michels: A Fire at their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York, Harvard Univ. Press: Cambridge Mass. 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Frankel: The Bundists in America and the "Zionist Problem", in: Zvi Gitelman: The Emergence of Modern

What made them Bundist descendants? In the case of the *Farband* it is obvious, as they repeatedly pointed that out, but in some other organizations it is more difficult and one needs to look at rather content than open confessions. In his ongoing project Roni Gechtman recaptures the Bundist everyday politics in Poland as "National-Cultural Autonomy in the Making", as a pre-version of the cultural, social and political life, the Bundists wanted to establish in an equal and socialist world.<sup>34</sup> In America, Bundists first had to decide how to handle the concept of *doykeyt*. Simply asking: Where was “*here*”? For many of them, there was an identificatorial “*here*” in Russia or Poland and the personal pasts there. And there was a second “*here*” experienced in everyday Jewish America. So many of them dealt with this with multiple membership in various organizations. Going through the mentioned hundreds of biographical questionnaires composed by either the *Nyu Yórker bundishn klub* (short: Bund-Club) or the Bund-Archives of the Jewish Labor Movement after the Shoa and for example the large number of autobiographies written in the YIVO Immigrant's contest 1942, singular membership in the Bund before migration was in large followed by multiple membership after the passage. While some of the former activists suspended political activity in the USA a large number, sometimes after a time of delusion, again became active in a threefold: First in a Union, very often one with a radical, socialist orientation which was not common in the US-Unions. Furthermore they joined one or more branches of the *Arbeterring*, the new cultural home. And on the political level they often chose either local Bund-organizations or sometimes the Socialist Party. Some of them even state to be (co-) founders of local branches of socialist initiatives and tend to explain the hardship of the early years of socialist engagement in America in the terms they used in their books a few pages in before, when remembering their youth. To some extent the authors describe their practice they or other worker-authors tell about their intellectual “teachers”, those that introduced them into the Labor Movement back in Eastern Europe. Even in this situation the recapturing of the Bundist experience needed transferred role-models and adaptations of these in the new environment with a new conflict situation – and it provided a mode of describing their path of live as upwardly mobile, even if the economic situation would not allow such conclusions. But aside these American small town activisms with a Bundist background, there was some major Bundist activity in the centers of immigration, like in New York which will be the focal point for my next considerations.

Bundists tried to open an official office of the Bund in the US from the very first years. But in the first 15 years, or even 2 decades the Bundist organization in New York was weak. A step was made

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Jewish Politics, Univ. of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh 2003, p. 189f.

<sup>34</sup> See the description of the project: <http://www.bundism.net/gechtman-roni>, 8. Sept. 2008, based on: Ibid.: “Yidisher Sotsialism”: The Origin and Context of the Jewish Labor Bund’s National Program, Univ. Diss., New York 2005.

when in 1906 they tried to establish a journal called “Der kemfer” as the organ of the American Bundists.<sup>35</sup> But early success in the USA was limited, only the initial number appeared and then until 1941 no other periodical with an official Bundist label was edited in the USA. While “Der kemfer” rose little attention on the yiddish press market in the US, it found its way into the Polish press and was reviewed in Warsaw in the important “*Der veker*” as an example of cultural expression of Bundism, that even in this early times was of a very much transnational constitution.<sup>36</sup> And not a decade later the *Jewish Socialist Farband* [then: *Ydishe sotyalistishe federatsye*] founded by leading American Bundists, managed to establish the long running periodical “*Der veker*” in New York that grew to become an influential secondary Bundist expression in the New World. But the strongest constitution of primary Bundism in the United States arose from the New York Bund-Club, founded in 1923. This must be seen as a cornerstone in American Bundist history. Even in the first decade of the Bund's existence there were clubs established in cities of refuge, like in Geneva, Brussels, London and Paris but their were more like a temporal exile where Bundist waited for return to Russia in order to become active in the Bund, again.

The migration to New York was in the most cases a definitive break away from the Polish soil – but thought were transferred and intellectual and personal ties persisted. In the 1920's this found an expression in the Bund-Club which became a platform for developing a certain Bundist position between Poland and Exile and between the Bund in the USA and other American Jewish socialist groups. This was very ambiguous like it might be explained with ambivalent relation between the Bund and the *Forverts*. On a few levels, like the orientation of socialism in the US, the Bund stood for a eurocentristic point of view while the *Forverts* was an important factor in American Jewish socialism.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless on the personal level, the Bund-Club, like many comparably small organizations, had its office room in the famous Forverts Building on 175 East Broadway – still bearing the portraits of Marx, Lasalle, Bernstein and Wilhelm Liebknecht above its main entrance up to today.

The building then was the highest on the Lower Eastside, symbolizing the presence of the *Forverts* in everyday Jewish life. Important writers were paid by the *Forverts*, there always was an a strong exchange between the groups located there and other important Bundists, like Baruch Charney Vladek held central positions in the *Forverts Association*. In the end many of the conflicts between leading Bundists and the *Forverts* were more of American-Polish nature, then between the New York Bundist and the New York *Forverts* – but it of course inflected the local debates. But the most

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<sup>35</sup> Der kemfer, New York 1906,

<sup>36</sup> A Yid: Der organ fun di amerikanishe Bundisten, in: Der veker, Warsaw, No 3, 3. Jan. 1906, p.4.

<sup>37</sup> Dovid Meyer: Der "bund" un Ab. Kahan, in: Unser Tsayt, New York, 10 (1951), pp. 29-31.

important struggle took place over the Atlantic ocean, between Abraham Cahan and the leading Bundists Henryk Erlich, Victor Alter and "khaver Artur" [Shmuel Zigelboym], mediated by the Bund-Club who edited views of both sides in a collective volume.<sup>38</sup> It was the editors' aim, that everybody should be able to reappraise the debate lead between Cahan and the Bundists, and so they published longer essays that now could be read in line. The Bund-Club tried to find a middle course between being loyal to the Polish leaders and Abraham Cahan being everyday around - in person or in spirit. Becoming a central figure in transatlantic exchange, the self-esteem of the New York Bundists rose in the late 1920's and early 1930's.<sup>39</sup> While in the beginning they were just a colony of the big Polish Bund they now established a system of personal relations and even new founded organizations representing Bundism and the American life.

All of those organizations more or less shared the focus of supporting the work of the Polish Bund. In that era new organization with a Bundist background mostly relief committees came into being and they heralded a new episode in transatlantic relations which lasted until the rearrangement of those organization due to the Nazi attack against Poland when some of the successive organizations became a relevant factor in overall transatlantic relations. Of those early birds the *Friends of the Bund*, the *Veterans' Fond* and the *Medem Club* might be considered as most important. To put the following numbers in relation it must be considered, that the officially largest representation of the Bund in America, the New York Bund-Club was notoriously low on money. Although it officially sold the Polish Bundist journals in the US the income was low, not exceeding 200 or 300\$ a year including all earnings. If there was a positive outcome, like for example in 1933, when the Club could book 219,23\$ the leftover of 139,50\$ was donated to Warsaw.<sup>40</sup> Like the Bund-Club the Friends of the Bund primarily aimed at supporting Bundist work in the widest sense, often sponsored actions in America and send money to Poland, was active in the distribution of or support for printed works – in short was a helpful and flexible fund raising institution and the local gateway for exchange of various kind.<sup>41</sup> The second organization, Veterans' fond, (*Komitet far di veteranen fun der yidisher arbeter bavegung*) headed by important Bundists like J. Vaynberg and D. Mayer and also central figures in American Jewish Socialism like previously mentioned B. Vladek,<sup>42</sup> raised money, too, but with a very special focus: In order to support certain Bundists, or as they called them, Veterans of the Jewish Labor Movement in Poland. Starting in the early thirties they

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<sup>38</sup> Bundisher Klub in Nyu York (ed.): Ab. Kahan un der "Bund" in Poyln, New York 1932; See also: Ibid. (ed.): Der "Forverts" un der "Bund", New York 1935.

<sup>39</sup> Strongest expression was the self-historicizing of the Bund-Club already at its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary: Zamlheft fun bundishn klub in Nyu York. Aroysgegebn lekhoved dem 15 yorkin yubiley, New York, 1938.

<sup>40</sup> Account book of the Bund Club, 1933-1937, Bund-Archives, New York RG 1400, ME-18, folder 28.

<sup>41</sup> Bund-Archives, RG 1400, ME 18, folder 9.

<sup>42</sup> Various letterheads: Bund-Archives, New York, RG 1400, ME18, folder 9.

could from 1934 on traceably constantly support Bundist leaders like Joseph Portnoy, Mendel Skutelski or Henryk Erlikh in Poland with amounts between 20-30\$ a month which back then was a great support for those individuals and the Bund in general, whose main persons were paid and therefore could use its tight money for other ends. Over the years 1935-38 the Veteran's Fond could raise and transfer sums between 1.000 and 1.200\$ each year just for that purpose.<sup>43</sup> Consequently the American Bundists came into the position of sponsoring its own leaders abroad. But their work was not only a Bundist matter, it was also an act in the American Jewish public. When the adored *khaver* Portnoy fell sick in 1935, the Fond organized a campaign and gathered over 250\$ for Portnoy just in a few days<sup>44</sup> – to remember, as much as a year's budget of the Bund-Club. The report was not a matter of bookkeeping, it was also published in the *Forverts*, not giving the name of the sick *khaver* in Poland, but of each donors.<sup>45</sup> So the Fond could show presence, honor the named contributors and officially display its linking role – practiced solidarity bridging the Atlantic ocean. Third and most important example of this transnational "histoire croisé": The so-called *Medem-Club* or *Medem-komitet*, supporting educational centers like the net of secular Jewish schools in Poland and the famous *Medem-sanatorye*<sup>46</sup> close to Warsaw. This organization was one of the most effective supporters often transferring more than 1000\$ several times a year to various educational Bund-affiliations in Poland or indirectly to the Bund's central committee for it to spread the money with reason.<sup>47</sup> The Medem-Club was named after the already quoted early-time Bundist, Vladimir Medem who died in New York 1923 and headed by central figures of the New York Jewish socialism and with a huge number of important members proudly listed in the official letterhead. It was one of the most effective fund raisers: In the 22 months from 1. of march 1937 until the end of 1938 the Club collected more than 46.000\$ - a comparably tremendous sum.<sup>48</sup> Looking at these amounts and the low wages for Jewish immigrant workers, we must proceed to the next questions: Who were the donors and how was the money collected? The answers, buried in the files all over the Bund-Archives can yet only be drawn in general, case studies will be reasonable, but need more time. From the recent perspective I can characterize two major ways to raise the money and to get in contact with possible donors: Either over official short- or long time campaigns in the press with sub-campaigns lead by other organizations. For example of the mentioned 46.000\$ the Medem-Club gathered 1937-1938, almost 18.000 were collected by individuals from certain towns, and the

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<sup>43</sup> Financial reports, Bund-Archives, New York, RG 1400, ME18, folder 23a.

<sup>44</sup> Idb: transfered: 05.05.1935 (100\$) and 31.05.1935 (150\$).

<sup>45</sup> *Forverts*, 8. Juni 1935.

<sup>46</sup> Reflected in: Kh. Sh. Kazdan (ed.) *Medem-Sanatorye bukh*, Hamenora: Tel Aviv 1971.

<sup>47</sup> Bund-Archives, New York, RG 1400, ME14B, folder 8.

<sup>48</sup> Financial report: Bund-Archives, New York, RG 1400, ME18, folder 18.

rest was donated by Unions and societies, branches of the *Arbeterring* and by another central secondary Bundist organizations. For instance there was the other important Bund-affiliation, the Jewish Labor Committee that slightly rose those years and later played a key role in helping Jews in Eastern Europe during the Second World War. These organizations either built constant financial resources for reasons of relief or from case to case led their own campaigns in order to support the main-mediator, the Medem-Club.

Aside this direct bank transfer of donation, events played a central role. Many smaller hotels and not too rarely also the well known huge New York Mekka Tempel (now: New York City Center) often hosted such events arranged by those organizations. In celebrations of that kind the Bund-Club played a key role again. They could motivate a larger number of people to take part in such meetings first at an anniversary. There were quite a number of those and due to its generational shift such commemorative days proved to be as much a good motivator for some hundreds of people to join such celebrations as to be an important part of the new rising Bundist identity.<sup>49</sup> Logically the number of those festivities rose over the years, often accompanied by bigger or smaller publications or special issues of Bundist periodicals.<sup>50</sup> Second, from time to time major Bundists like Henryk Erlich or Emanuel Sherer came to visit the USA in order to meet old comrades, band together the various local organizations, the New York center and the Polish Bund – and to raise money. Banquets and meetings labeled in the visitor's honor were held and very often a good generator of money as much as a pool for the visitors to achieve information about the old home from a Bundist perspective. In such cases like 1937/38, when the huge celebration of 40 years of the Bund and a visit of Henryk Ehrlich were combined, special committees were founded that organized various banquets and meeting of different sizes. All of them were well visited, often sold out.<sup>51</sup> During this exemplary visit, lasting not much more than a month, Henryk Erlich attended 23 meetings, previously organized by a special committee in 15 sessions alone for this which finally send out 7.500 letters. 16 of Erlich's speeches took place in New York, 2 in Chicago and others along the east coast.<sup>52</sup> These gatherings could be used by the Bundists to raise attention for their themes and actions in the Yiddish press which they intensively did and which is reflected in the big and heterogeneous collection of articles attached to the report in the Bund-Archives.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See: Bund-Archives, New York, RG 1400, ME-14B, folder 7.

<sup>50</sup> E.g: the special issue of 37 years of the Bund: *Der Veker*, New York, 10 November 1934.

<sup>51</sup> Bund-Archives, New York, RG 1400, ME 18, folder 13.

<sup>52</sup> Report: Bund-Archives, RG 1400, ME18, folder 11.

<sup>53</sup> Clippings: *Ibd.*

## Diachron ties

The previously described support for the Bund in Poland is mostly an effect of persistent Bundist binding of the donors which in no sense needed to be or must be understood as members of any Bund-Club in the US. Just to remember Vladimir Medem's dictum: In the often reminded Russian times one was a Bundist, when he or she was active in the Bund, not because one possessed a membership-card. The practice evoking this effect was *participating in* the culture offered by Bundists: These were the strengthening of Yiddish culture in the USA as much as: Commemorative events. The events that took place were almost absolutely labeled as commemorative. They were not strictly Bundist happenings, many non-Bundist delegates appeared and the events sometimes where even organized together with the Jewish Socialist Farband, certain Unions or the Forverts Association.<sup>54</sup> Whatever the occasion might have been: Reminding an important date or a person moved people to join these acts, and in this sense to participate. But that kind of memory should not be understood as only looking backwards: It was the room for steadily self-assuring ones or the group's stemming – and a reminder of keeping to follow the former aims, even in a new surrounding culture. There were speeches about the past, there were entertaining artist hired, but there were strictly socialist and progressive actions, too.

It was one of the achievements of that Bundist commemorative culture, to successfully combine the different time-layers and spatial orientations and to create a new, American sphere of (re-)joining the Bund through offering a possibility of practice – and through providing what many immigrants longed for: warmth, comradeship and a homelike cultural atmosphere. This was commemorizing or, like stated for another context, a "usable past".<sup>55</sup> Just like the hagiographical necrology in Bundist publications, the commemorative speeches and acts mostly followed an established narrative scheme, there were hardly new things to learn for the listeners. The acts rather reminded them of the once so active collective feeling of being Bundist and moved them to still join the Bund via supporting its actions in Poland. Bundism so became integrated in their American Jewish experience and it was steadily strengthened by Yiddish cooperations, like the *Arbetering*. Donations were very high, looking at the incomes of the immigrants who only rarely were well off those days and, in contrary to many of their children, remained factory workers or artisans. While the Polish Bund kept strengthening its cultural work in Poland, in America this cluster was used to recreate a Bundist culture born out of memory and solidarity, or in Bundist terms, *khavershaft* as a active devotion and *mishpokhndishkeyt* as a representer of protection and fate.

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<sup>54</sup> Bund.Archives, New York, RG 1400, ME 14B, folder 7.

<sup>55</sup> In derivation from David Roskies: Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern: "The Dead Jews:" A Reflection on two Models of a Useable Past, in: *Ab Imperio*, 4 (2004), pp. 193-206.

So it was less success in any elections, that kept former Bundists part of the system – which in Eastern Europe always understood itself as the "*Yidishe arbeterbavegung*" in general. Aside Polish or Russian ground not the term "Bund" was striking, it were the cultural basic patterns of yiddish secular modernization and most important the persistence of the mishpokhndishkeyt through social changes and migration on a socialist basis – often Bundism remained, even if there was no Bund as known before. This is what I would call the "Bundist experience" and its effects far away from Bundist homelands. And this led to the creation of a transnational Bundist sphere, a metaspace for social action and revolutionary solidarity. That creation of a cultural understanding of the self and the group enabled Bundists even to bridge the cut in Jewish history: The Shoa. Whereas other groups largely emphasize the break the Shoa caused in Jewish history, the Bundists, the strongest organized civil military opponents of the Nazis, could draw attention to their past and link the times before, during and after the Shoa. Insofar their cultural and identifying background of daily practice, primary and secondary Bundist action and commemoration set up a possibly unique cluster in Jewish history. Therefore not questions of success should be asked, but of consequences. For the immigrants they were huge, as I hope to have been showing.

## Résumé

These basic patterns helped individuals as much as it set a system for a rather transpersonal Bundist thought to outlive the Bund. When the Bund lost its territory due to the Shoa and Communist occupation, it also lost the deep rooted organizational structure it had in Eastern Europe. But in the USA as much as in other major immigrant regions, like Argentina and Australia, post-Bundist ideas persisted as important factors in Jewish, non-Zionist thought and practice. As long as the first immigrant generation fulfilled a societal role, the divide between the two described forms of "*here*" could be bridged by commemoration. For the next generation another shape of socialism was necessary. The Bundist experience could persist, but it could not be generated anew because a free Poland was necessary as the central scope. Nevertheless after the Shoa many divides in American Jewish Socialism could be bridged, especially those between the *Arbeterring*, the *Forverts*, certain unions and the 1947 founded *World Coordinating Committee of the Bund*. The coupling agent was not only a strong stand against a rising nationalist and bourgeois Zionist sole claim of representation for the Jews worldwide, it was also a positive approach towards unionism, independence and transnational solidarity, based on the described modern, secular and integrative Bundism in transition. In those days Bundism worldwide, officially labeled or more in practice, proved that the many local spots were not of singular islands, but a grown transnational sphere of the Yiddish workers' Movement. So what remained was not the strong arm in Polish politics, it was the rather

"soft" sphere of culture largely created by Bundists abroad. Over half a century they created a system of transnationality which a large number of Bundist immigrants during and after the holocaust thankfully joined in.<sup>56</sup> In my eyes the here introduced and yet unwritten history of Bundism abroad is a striking example for the liability of party politics to major forces – but also an example for the persistence of cultural clusters and manifold organizational structures that displays flexibility and cohesiveness not despite, but because of its "softness".

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<sup>56</sup> Applications for membership in Bund-Club, only preserved for 1941: Bund-Archives, New York, ME18, folder 15.