

MEDEM JEWISH SOCIALIST GROUP

by Daniel Soyer

A year and a half ago, the Jewish Socialist Youth Bund was revived as an active organization. This marked the reestablishment, after a hiatus of several years, of an activist — and primarily English-speaking — Jewish socialist presence in New York City. Since then, the Youth-Bund, and its successor — the Medem Jewish Socialist Group have been very active.

The Bundist Heritage

The Medem Jewish Socialist Group is affiliated with the Jewish Labor Bund, from whom it receives material aid, and to whose traditions it looks for inspiration and guidance. The Bund was founded in Czarist Russia in 1897. From the start it was a militant, revolutionary socialist organization with deep roots in the Jewish working class of Eastern Europe. In its Russian years, the Bund played a crucial role in the Jewish self-defense movement, the founding of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' party, as well as in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

Vladimir Medem, for whom the group is named, was an early leader and theoretician of the Bund. He was born into an extremely assimilated Jewish family and was baptized into the Russian Orthodox church. As a young man, however, he was drawn to return to his heritage among the Jewish people. Already active in the revolutionary movement, he joined the Bund, learned Yiddish, and was soon writing and speaking the language. He became one of the most respected and beloved leaders of the Jewish labor movement. Medem died in New York in 1923.

When the bolsheviks seized power, they suppressed the Bund together with the other democratic socialist forces operating in Russia. Newly independent Poland then became the center of Bund activity. There, the Bund blossomed into a truly mass-movement, with its own press, special organizations for women, children and youth, a sports club, etc. It also played a leading role in the Jewish trade union movement, and in the secular Jewish school system. By the late '30s, the Bund was the most popular Jewish party in Poland. It scored smashing victories in the municipal elections of 1938. In Warsaw, for example, 16 of the 20 Jewish city councilors elected were Bundists.

The Bund took active part in the Jewish resistance to the Nazis, and Bundists were among the organizers of the uprisings in the camps and ghettos. However, together with its base of the Jews of Eastern Europe, the Bund was decimated in the Holocaust.

Bundist organizations now exist wherever there are Jews of Eastern European origin — the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Israel, Australia, France and elsewhere. They publish journals, and run schools, libraries and publishing houses. In New York, *Unser Tsait*, the official organ of the World Coordinating Committee, is published, and the Bund also produces a weekly radio program.

The importance of the Bund in modern Jewish history cannot be underestimated. As



"I'm sorry, Mr. Jones. . . You're not rich enough to pay no taxes."

the first Jewish political party, it brought the Jewish people into all the debates of the modern world. As a champion of secular Jewish folk-culture, and of the Yiddish language, it helped to bring about the flowering of modern secular Jewish culture in that language. It constantly fought for the interests of the persecuted Jewish poor, and defended them against anti-semitic attacks. For Jewish socialists it serves as a model of a successful movement that managed to create an integrally socialist Jewish way of life.

Early on, the Bund developed its own unique approach to the "Jewish Question," as it was then called, opposing both the separatist Zionist movement and assimilationist trends among the socialists. Obviously conditions have changed drastically since those early days, and many specific aspects of the Bund's program have become obsolete, but its basic principles remain valid today. The Medem Group is now working on a new statement of principles based on

Bundist ideals, and adapted to the needs of our generation. However, the following can serve as a summary of Bundist principles.

- 1) Bundists support the continued development of secular Jewish culture, based on national-cultural rather than religious identification, with special reference to the East European heritage and the Yiddish language.
- 2) Bundists believe that the Jewish people is, and will remain, a "world-people." Jews have the right and the ability to create a full and rich Jewish life wherever they reside. No one Jewish community has the right to dominate the others.
- 3) Bundists support the right to self-determination of all peoples. They support the concept of cultural pluralism and comradeship between different national and ethnic groups.
- 4) Bundists support democratic socialism as the best solution to the world's problems. We are also working to integrate feminism into our socialist conceptions.

Medem Group Activities

Chief among the activities of the Medem Group (and before that the Youth-Bund — the name was changed to reflect the wide range in ages of members of the group) has been a very successful series of lectures and forums on a variety of subjects. Programs have been held on: "Secular Celebrations of Jewish Holidays," "American Jewry and the Rise of The New Right," "Jews in City Politics," "Mir Kumen On," a film about the Medem Sanatorium childrens institution run by the Bund in interwar Poland; "Jews, Feminism, and the Family," "Jewish Women's World in Eastern Europe," "Solidarity, Polish Society, and the Jews," and a discussion on, "Jewish Culture and the Jewish Left."

In addition, the Medem group sponsored a memorial rally for the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on April 19th, attended by about 80 people, with a guest speech by Conrad Lynn, a well known civil rights lawyer. The group also took part in the May 3rd, 1981 demonstration against American involvement in El Salvador, and participated in the May Day and Erlich-Alter commemoration rallies of the Bund. (Erlich and Alter were bund leaders executed by the Soviet regime during World War II.)

One of last years most important controversies in the Jewish community was that

continued next page

Medem: continued

surrounding the issue of anti-semitism in Argentina, Jacobo Timmerman's role in exposing it, and the reaction by certain segments of the North American Jewish community. Sections of the American Jewish leadership, particularly the intellectuals grouped around *Commentary* magazine, sought to discredit Timmerman and play down the problem of anti-semitism in Argentina. They did so because they endorse the Reagan administration's policy of support for fascistic military regimes in Latin America. They were willing to betray Jewish interests in support of that policy.

The Medem Group initiated and organized a demonstration in June, at the height of the controversy. The demonstration took place outside of the offices of *Commentary*, and the American Jewish Committee, which had refused to speak out forthrightly against anti-semitism in Argentina. We demanded that the Jewish leadership take a more aggressive stand on this issue, and an end to U.S. aid to the junta.

Within a week the Medem Group mobilized about 100 people for this demonstration. Groups representing the full range of progressive Jewish and democratic socialist views in New York endorsed the rally,

including: the Brooklyn Chapter of New Jewish Agenda; Habonim; Hashomer Hatzair; Anielewicz Circle of Americans for a Progressive Israel; The Generation After; Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee; the Socialist Party, USA; War Resisters League; Committee in Solidarity With the People of El Salvador. The rally received coverage by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency and radio station WBAI in New York.

Future Prospects

The Medem Jewish Socialist Group plans to continue with its series of educational and cultural events, and its participation in movements around the crucial issues facing both the Jewish people and the American people in general. The Medem Group, while maintaining its own unique presence, doesn't hold itself apart from other progressive Jewish organizations. In particular, some members of the Medem Group are also very active in the New Jewish Agenda. The American Jewish community is in sore need of new and different ideas which these movements can provide.

For more information about the Medem Jewish Socialist Group, write:

Medem Jewish Socialist Group
P.O. Box 564
Brooklyn, NY 11217



Study Shows T.V. Destroys Evangelical Brain Cells

Recently ABC screened a movie called "Pray T.V." in which an actor portraying a television evangelist said, "If you have a problem of any kind — financial, medical, spiritual — call the number you see on the bottom of your screen and let us help you to be born again by the spirit of God." In the following three hours the phone company recorded 15,000 calls to the phony number! Too bad they didn't cast Orson Welles as the preacher.



THE MENTSCHKEIT INSTITUTE

O.K. You probably just got finished looking at the accompanying ad for "The Mentschkeit Institute". What are your reactions? Does it make you laugh? Does it offend you? Do you want to apply? Does it make those of you in New York smug about not living in California? Does it make those of you in California want to run back to New York where there are egg creams and real pizza instead of hot tubs and fern-laden therapists?

This ad originally ran several months ago in a local Bay Area paper called the East Bay Express. The two Berkeley women who created the "Institute" have received well over a hundred calls in response to the ad. They created the fictitious institute and placed the ad as a joke, or more precisely, as a way to have some fun. While several callers accused them of being self-hating Jews, the overwhelming majority took the whole thing in the intended vein. However, most were initially not certain whether the ad was for real or not. And, there were those who called wanting to sign up for courses and arrange speaking engagements.

There's really no moral to this story — though, I hear the Institute may offer a weekend retreat in Hamish Advertisement Analysis. But, tell me, how did you take the ad when you first looked at it?

the mentschkeit institute

a non-profit (oy vey) organization

TIRED OF BEING A SCHLEPPE? A SCHLMAZZEL? A SCHLMIEL? "DISCOVER THE MENTSCH" WITHIN YOU"

*(mensh) n. Informal: A person having admirable traits such as fortitude & firmness of purpose. Yiddish.

Now in its first year of operation, the Mentschkeit Institute, a unique, non-resident, six-month, intensive program in the transformation growth process, is designed to shatter the illusion of Original Sin locked within. We treat the person, not the disease, in a gezunteleh and hamische environment.

Emphasis is on shaping ourselves into vehicles for mitzvah-doing. Our experienced staff of instructors, trained in mikveh building, circumcision and fundraising, is available round-the-clock to assist in breaking down the addiction to self-denial, martyrdom, second class citizenship, kvetching, schnorring, etc.

A UNIQUE APPROACH TO THE TSURRES OF OUR TIMES

FALL, 1982/WINTER, 1983 WORKSHOPS INCLUDE:

- How to Endure Cheek Pinching
- Visualization: The Blond Hair, Blue-Eyed Mentsch
- The Origins of Guilt
- The First Mentsch: Archaeological Findings in Mesopotamia
- The Concept of Chosenness
- The Daily Incorporation of Social Responsibility:
 - * How to Make Chicken Soup
 - * Monthly Phone Calls to Bubbeh Mayseh
 - * How to Earn a Living without Going into the Family Business

We offer a three-prong process: 1) the training program: VER A MENTSCH; 2) the intermediate level: ZEIT MENTSCHKEIT; 3) the advanced program: VI GAIT A MENTSCH. Be sure to inquire about our graduate seminars and about our eight-week intensive intensive.

HONOURABLE MENTSCHEN

"The Ivy League schools did nothing for my mamzers! I should've sent them to M.I."
— Marcia Cohen, Great Neck, NY

"Never mind my health, but where am I to get potatoes?"
— I.B. Singer, NYC, NY

"Where were you when I needed you?!"
— B. Streisand, L.A. CA.

BARGAIN!-INTRODUCTORY OFFER WITH THIS AD-50 KOPECKS/CLASS CALL FOR MORE INFORMATION: 415-845-2134