

Bundists in the Soviet Union during Second World War*

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The outbreak of Second World War and the occupation of Poland by the Germans opened a new chapter in the activity of the Bund. The Gestapo “hunt” for Bundists in big cities was one of the reasons for the decision to evacuate leading activists of the Bund, Tsukunft and other associated organizations to territories outside the war zone, i.e. the Eastern Borderlands (Kresy). One of the activists the Germans were after was one of the leading members of the Bund Central Committee and the Łódź Bund Committee, Shmuel (Artur) Zygielbojm. In retrospect, we know that the decision to flee saved many Jewish socialists from certain death in gas chambers and ghettos. On the other hand, it marked the beginning of the end of the Bund in Poland and the beginnings of the organization’s shift to the West. Already during the war and in the immediate postwar period most of the Bundist fugitives settled and continued their activity in America, Western Europe and Australia.

It is estimated that around 1500 activists of the Bund and Tsukunft escaped between September 1939 and early 1940. This group included all of the Central Committee of the Bund, the Central Committee of Tsukunft, the editors of the *Folks-tsaytung*, the management of the Medem Sanatorium in Miedzeszyn (Shlomo-Fayvish Gilinsky with his family), the founders of the party (comrade Yekusiel Portnoy, alias Noyekh, Józef; Vladimir Kossovskii, real name Nokhem Mendl Jekutiel Levinson), as well as Wiktor Alter, Henryk Erlich, Maurycy Orzech, Leon Oller, Lucjan Blitt, the aforementioned comrade Artur, Yehoshua Ofman, Shloyme Mendelson, Herman Kruk and others. It must be noted that the Bundists escape was not an isolated incident and that many other Jews and Poles with their families did likewise. Bundists from Central

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Poland fled in several directions: some to Vilna via Białystok (where Henryk Erlich, among others, stopped over), some from Warsaw via Brest to Pinsk; others, from Warsaw, to Baranavichy or via Lublin to Lviv. It should be added that most of those who reached Vilna got there after the Soviets had left, with the Lithuanians now in control. In spite of Russian and Lithuanian resentment, compounded by the memory of expulsions to Siberia for party activity, including for participation in the October Revolution of 1917, they decided to stay in the Vilna region at least temporarily.¹ Wiktor Alter fled to Kovel, while Moyshe Zylberlicht to Lutsk, which was already overcrowded. Bundists from southern Poland (Cracow, Tarnów), including Dr. Michał Szuldenfrei, David Batist, Karol Einaugler and Shlomo Fishgrund, sought refuge in Lviv.²

Cities that had boasted dynamic Bundist organizations before 1939 were chosen as places of refuge from Poland's German occupiers. Many of the refugees found shelter immediately on arrival, often with party friends known from party congresses, or with family. Cities that provided opportunities for blending in, making oneself scarce, were chosen. Unfortunately, "thanks" to informers recruited among other refugees and local Jewish communists, the NKVD soon started arrests.

The first wave of arrests took place after the Soviet invasion of Poland, i.e. after 17 September 1939. It swept up mostly local Bund leaders and Bundist members of City Councils, most of them denounced by local communists. One of the main reasons for wanting to remove Jewish socialists was to get rid of "counterrevolutionary elements," as well as in light of their earlier fight for the rights of those at the bottom of society (including workers), against anti-Jewish pogroms in tsarist Russia, etc. In Vilna, one of the first victims of Soviet repressions was Anna Rozenthal, one of the founders of the Bund, who was 70 at the time. In addition, Jakow Żeleznikow, Josef Tajtl and Josef Aronowicz were arrested, Wiktor Alter was arrested in Kovel, Henryk Erlich in Brest, and Karol Einaugler and others in Lviv. When the Soviets retreated after six weeks of occupation of these regions, they took with them the prisoners along with all of their documentation.³

The period from the autumn of 1939 to June 1940 – the Red Army's re-entry into the Vilna region, can be designated as one of "relative stagnation," since the Lithuanian NKVD did not conduct any wide-scale arrests of political activists

1 Herman Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania. Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939–1944*, introduction and ed. Benjamin Harshav, New Haven – London 2002, p. 1–29.

2 Daniel Blatman, *For Our Freedom and Yours. The Jewish Labour Bund in Poland 1939–1949*, London – Portland 2003, p. 5.

3 Gertrud Pickhan, "That Incredible History of the Polish Bund Written in a Soviet Prison: The NKVD Files on Henryk Erlich and Wiktor Alter," *Polin* 1997, vol. 10.