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How Vladimir Medem transformed the Bund

• By ELI KAVON

Vladimir Medem, upon hearing of the death of Theodor Herzl in 1904, wrote that “Truth to tell, Herzl knew how one should comport oneself in public. His stride was regal, proud, quiet, and his face gave off an uncommon aura.” This admission is startling. Medem was a staunch foe of Political Zionism. He was revered by his followers in the Bund. Like Herzl, he died at the height of his influence. Buried in New York in 1923, Medem’s tombstone bears the inscription: “Vladimir Medem, legend of the Jewish labor movement.” Of course, this is a translation of the inscription in Yiddish, a language and culture that Medem embraced with every fiber of his being.

Ideology must never corrupt the study of history. As the State of Israel prepares to celebrate a 70th birthday, we find it hard to imagine that the Bund – the “General Jewish Workers’ Union in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia” – rivaled Zionism in Eastern Europe a century ago. If we are to recreate the Jewish political dynamic of the pre-Holocaust epoch, we must realize that it is impossible to do so if we cannot empathize with Jews who lived – and died – in a world very different from our own.

I say this as a Jew raised in a Religious Zionism that shaped my worldview – Rabbi Akiva, Rav Kook, Jabotinsky, Uri Zvi Greenberg and Dov Gruner are among the influential figures in my life and vision. Yet, the vibrant and volatile world of Yiddish culture, language and politics intrigues me. For its time,

Yiddish was the language of the Jewish masses in Poland and the Russian Pale of Settlement. Let us look back at this period – and Vladimir Medem – without condemning Yiddish and without nostalgia. Waxing nostalgic for any movement or language is to condemn it to death.

The Bund was founded in 1897, a year that is rightly celebrated today for Herzl’s convening of the First Zionist Congress in Basel. Yet, the Bund’s founding should not be a footnote. The Bund was born as a socialist political party organized to spread socialist values to Jewish workers in Eastern Europe. As described by historian Marsha L. Rozenblit, “Like most Marxist socialists, the members of the Bund at first articulated a strong international perspective and opposed all nationalisms.”

Nationalist movements – such as Zionism – were seen as reactionary by the Bundists, deflecting attention away from the plight of the working class and reflecting Czarist repression. Yiddish was the vehicle through which the Bund would bring the Jewish proletariat to revolution. But even Bund veterans like Medem – especially him – realized that Yiddish provided a potent national identity for the Jewish masses.

As Rozenblit writes in *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture* (2010): “Despite this internationalist posture, in 1901 the Bund adopted a Jewish national position that rejected Zionism as a bourgeois attempt to deflect Jewish workers from their class interests, but insisted that Jews in Russia had the right to

national cultural autonomy.”

The Bund’s approach to Yiddish autonomy was appealing to many Jews in the Pale of Settlement. Hebrew, while always a Jewish literary language, had a slim chance at reviving as a spoken one. Did not Herzl himself say, “Who among us could buy a railway ticket in Hebrew?” Hebrew was associated with the tradition that Bundists rejected. The ancient language was associated with the elite. Yiddish was not just a language but a civilization that dated back 1,000 years.

The establishment of a Jewish state seemed utopian. Even the great founder of Cultural Zionism, Ahad Ha’am, never envisioned a mass migration of Ashkenazi Jews to a Jewish state but rather looked at Eretz Yisrael as the center of a Hebrew cultural renaissance. The Bundists believed that there was too much to accomplish for the benefit of the worker in Vilna and Warsaw. Zionism was peddling an irresponsible dream to desperate victims of pogroms. Better to defend oneself against a Russian peasant than fight Arabs in a territory controlled by the Ottoman Empire.

Looking back, the many condemnations of Zionism by the Bundists seem naive and, certainly with the way history unfolded, self-destructive. But few Jews in Europe or anywhere else could have imagined Auschwitz, Treblinka and Babi Yar. Moses Hess, writing in 1862, had some idea that Germany would never accept its Jews. But even he, a Zionist prophet, like the movement as a whole, never foresaw genocide.

Only a few years before the semi-sweet victory of the Balfour Decla-

ration in 1917, the Bund was a force with which to be reckoned. “In Russia,” according to historian Howard M. Sachar in his 2005 study of Jews in the modern world, “the Bund still vigorously contested for the loyalty of the Jewish working classes.” This challenge to Zionism was led by Vladimir Medem.

MEDEM, BORN in Minsk in 1879, was baptized at birth in the Greek Orthodox Church. His parents were assimilated Jews who, only two years before a wave of pogroms throughout the Pale, believed that Jewish integration into Russian society would soon be a reality. Medem’s early life and his involvement in revolutionary movements led to arrests by the Czarist regime. Eventually, Medem was forced into exile in Switzerland – there he met fellow exiles and revolutionaries Lenin and Trotsky, but was an ardent anti-Bolshevik.

The Czar imprisoned Medem in a Warsaw dungeon before the outbreak of the First World War but the Bundist was released with the retreat of the Russian army in 1915. This began a five-year long involvement in the Central Committee of the Bund that ended with his leaving Europe for New York City. He retired from politics and devoted the rest of his life to writing his memoirs. Although revered and respected by the Jewish workers whom he led and inspired, health problems and political divisions in the party forced him into retirement until his early death.

In *The Golden Tradition* (1967), historian Lucy Dawidowicz, writes of Medem: “Because of his unique personal history in returning to the Jewish people and because of his selfless devotion to the Bund, the austerity of his personal life, his gentleness, modesty, and integrity, Medem even during his lifetime attained a stature considerably greater than that of most contemporary political leaders.”

Despite his conversion, Medem immersed himself in the study of the Hebrew Bible and was always seeking a return to his people through an embrace of the Jewish memories of his childhood and his keen interest in Yiddishkeit. We may be tempted to call him a secular *ba’al teshuvah* – a returnee, not to Judaism, but to a Jewish identity grounded in economic justice and Yiddish culture.

While early on the Bund had already promoted Yiddish cultural autonomy, Medem was the living embodiment for many Jews in Russia and Poland, of a man cleaving not to God but to the Jewish folk of Ashkenaz. As a university student in Kiev, Medem writes in his memoirs that “My political work increased my homesickness for Jewishness.” Medem’s yearning to return to his Jewish roots served as an inspiration for his followers. His vision of Yiddish national cultural autonomy did not survive Bolshevism and Nazism. Nevertheless, it should not be relegated to the dustbin of history. It was a potent factor in Jewish identity, culture, and politics for its time – and a rival that challenged Zionism and Orthodoxy.

Poet Uri Zvi Greenberg composed “Uri Zvi in Front of the Cross” in Yiddish after surviving a pogrom in Lemberg by the Polish Legion in 1918. While he later emerged as a force in Hebrew literature in the State of Israel, Greenberg’s early Yiddish poem is presented in the provocative shape of a cross. Professor David G. Roskies in *Against the Apocalypse* (1984) explains, “In death, Jesus was of limited use to Greenberg as a Jewish symbol.” But Greenberg calls down Jesus from the cross and leaves the Golgotha that Christendom had meant for a crucified nation and asks him to rejoin his people as a Jew.

Greenberg never shied away from his role as a prophet of the Jewish people, and we can learn from him. Today, with the decline of American Jewry, the State of Israel remains the sole heir of the Jewish people, Jewish history, Jewish culture, and Judaism. The Jewish state is the inheritor of all Jews who lived and created before it. That inclusion runs the gamut from Moses Mendelssohn to Isaac Babel to Rabbi Israel Salanter to Saul Bellow. The Jewish state is the guardian of our past as a people.

We return to Medem and Herzl. I leave you with the words of Yosef Gorny, an expert on the Bund’s relationship to Labor Zionism, as well as the antagonism between the two movements. Gorny writes that “Medem resembled Zionist personalities on the fringes of the Jewish national sphere who, for various reasons, penetrated its core, gave it its shape, or left their imprint on it. Such personalities were Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, Yosef Trumpeldor, and the poetess Rachel. This may explain Medem’s unexplained sympathy for the persona of Herzl.”

The author is rabbi of Congregation Anshei Sholom in West Palm Beach, Florida.