

## FOLKSZEITUNG, a Jewish Socialist daily

J.S. Hertz

On December 6, 1918, there began appearing in Warsaw a daily paper of the Bund Party. To begin with, its name was *Lebens-Fragen* (Life's Problems). With forced interruptions and changes in name, on account of repressive measures by the Polish Government, the paper continued its publication until September 23, 1939.

At the end of 1918 the Bund press already had a history of 22 years behind it. For a period of five-and-a-half years, until 1903, when the Tsarist Government permitted the publication of a Yiddish paper in Russia (*Der Fraind*), the periodical publications of Bund were the only periodicals in the Yiddish language throughout the Russian Empire. It was an illegal press set up and printed in underground conditions. After the 1905 Revolution, when limited conditions were created for the freedom of the press, Bund published a legal daily in Vilna, during the years 1906-1907. Later on, when the publication of this daily was forbidden, other weeklies and periodicals appeared. In 1917, following the second Russian Revolution, the Bund press in Russia expanded considerably (two dailies were brought out in Minsk and in Kiev), but the Bolshevik terror was to put an end to its publication. In Warsaw, in the years of the German occupation (1916-1918), there appeared the weekly *Lebens-Fragen*.

The Bundist daily, which was published in Warsaw in the period between the two World Wars, was actually published by the Bund Party and the whole of the editorial staff was composed of members of the Bund. *Folkszeitung* (for convenience sake we shall call it by that name although it often had to change its appellation), fulfilled the function of an ordinary daily paper intended for a wide reading public, although from the ideological and political point of view, it was bound to the platform and resolutions of Bund (*Algemeiner Yudisher Arbeiter Bund in Poilen* — the General Jewish Workers Association in Poland). Never at any time did differences of opinion or disputes arise

between the journalists who worked on the paper and the publisher (the Party).

*Folkszeitung* differed markedly from all the other Jewish papers in Poland, not only in the ideological and political stance that it took up in general and Jewish matters, but also in its very nature as a paper. *Folkszeitung* was regarded, both officially and factually, as a workers' socialist paper. Its readership consisted of members of the working classes, wage earners, the working intelligentsia, poor artisans and the radical popular classes. In addition to conveying general information about affairs in Poland and abroad, and to surveying events in Jewish life, *Folkszeitung* published specific material of its own — information and surveys about the struggles of the Jewish, Polish and International Labour Movement.

The difference inhered not only in theme, in the collection and sifting of the material, but also in the explanation in the reasoning and in the tone of things. *Folkszeitung* was in opposition to the internal and external policy of all the governments that functioned in independent Poland in the years 1919-1939. It gave clear expression to its oppositionist views and, when need arose, with extreme sharpness. On account of this attitude, it brought upon itself a lot of trouble, but it knew to struggle against those who tried to hem in its path.

*Folkszeitung's* criticism was levelled on two planes — on the general social-political plane and on the Jewish plane. In the articles published in the paper, stringent opposition was voiced to the government's policy in the social-economic sphere, which tended to the detriment of the poor classes in the population. At the same time, criticism was levelled against the anti-democratic machinations.

Naturally, the bourgeois, or petit-bourgeois, Jewish press adopted an entirely different approach from that of the socialist press, in matters affecting social-economic problems. Things, however, were different where Jewish affairs were

concerned. The oppression of the Jews, the various injustices committed against them increased to such an extent that they could not be passed over in silence. But, even here, *Folkszeitung* proved to be "unique" in its general oppositionist stand, which was much more extreme and outspoken. The paper did not believe that by intercessionary means or marked submissiveness, it would be possible to change the government's antisemitic policy.



Beinish Michalevitch



Vladimir Medem

There was a marked differentiation in Jewish life in Poland. The Jews were greatly divided among themselves from all points of view, social and cultural, political and ideological. Their organisations and parties of all types were also numerous. In these struggles and clashes of interest, the stand taken up by *Folkszeitung* was often opposed to that of all the other Jewish papers. Indeed, even in questions affecting Jewish life, the paper would attack the various forms of Jewish establishment and the deeply-rooted forms of life, and present other tasks and models of conduct.

The Bund press was a consistent fighter for, and defender of, a secularisation of Jewish life — a tendency that was particularly marked among the young generation. The old, religious mode of life frequently clashed with the new, secularist style. *Folkszeitung* ardently defended the secular elementary school, the libraries and the cultural associations in the towns and townlets. Its writers always voiced the demand that the government and local authorities should



Bund dailies preceding *Folkszeitung*

grant recognition to, and support the secular Jewish network, and put an end to the attacks and attempts at suppression.

*Folkszeitung* defended the Bundist idea that Poland is not the country of one nation but of several peoples, since about one-third of the population consisted of national minorities, and these were entitled to demand not only their civil rights but their national rights, and certain forms of national autonomy. As for the Jews — the largest minority after the Ukrainians — it was only right that they should be accorded cultural-national autonomy.

A leading place in the paper was taken up by the struggle for the right to employment. The Jews were limited insofar as work as concerned. They had no place on the government and municipal service lists, nor were they employed on government and municipal work schemes. Generally, private Polish enterprises refrained from employing Jewish labourers and clerks. This shameful attitude was adopted actually also by many Jewish industrialists. The Jewish Trade Unions conducted a struggle against this discrimination, and their claims and demands, their information propaganda and in fact all their activities were given expression in the columns of *Folkszeitung*.

The poor Jew and humble labourer actually found himself in a narrow magic triangle — as a wage earner, consumer and tenant. The Bundist paper came in support of the workers in all their disputes with their employers. In the years of spiralling inflation and black-marketing in vital commodities, when the poor man was ground to even greater penury from day to day, *Folkszeitung* served as the arena for the struggle of the suffering masses.

As a paper with a clearly marked ideology, *Folkszeitung* has to conduct numerous struggles against the methods and policies of other Jewish circles. The main adversaries with whom the writers constantly debated and contended were the Zionists and the Orthodox. Nor were the Folkists and the Assimilationists spared the rod of this Bundist organ. The same was true of economic and cultural associations and charitable institutions, which were always under the influence of bourgeois tendencies.

The paper was a true mirror of the struggles of the Jewish Labour Movement. It threw its columns wide open to

the various Trade Unions and served as a mouthpiece for their demands, struggles, strikes, etc. Other desirable “customers” of the paper were proletarian, cultural associations, sports clubs, cooperatives, migration offices and other labour organisations.

Considerable space was taken up in *Folkszeitung* by the struggle against the Communist Party. The Communist Party in Poland was founded in December 1918, through



Victor Alter



Henryk Erlich

the union of two organisations — the Left wing of the Polish Socialist Party and the Social-Democrat Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania. Previously, not one of these parties had wielded any influence on Jewish life. The new party gained wide support among the Jews, mainly among the workers, the working intelligentsia and the youth and, in some measure also, in other circles. It did not set itself any constructive goals and tasks in Jewish life. It had only one single interest — to exert its ideological and political influence on the masses and to gain sway over their organisations and institutions.

Although the Communist ranks included also sons and daughters of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois families, its main struggle was conducted among the labouring public. Its goal was to capture its trade unions and cultural organisations, to sow dissent among its ranks and to besmirch its leadership and ideologists. Other Jewish organisations — of merchants, shopkeepers, artisans and other bourgeois



and petit-bourgeois associations, were saved from the attacks and destructive activities of the Communists. It was on account of that that the Communist Party was beyond the scope of interest of the bourgeois Jewish press which paid attention to it only on rare occasions.

*Folkszeitung* also reported extensively about the Polish Labour Movement, its problems and activities. It frequently had opportunity to criticise some of the decisions and ac-



S.F. Shapiro-Blond



Yakov Patt

tions of the Polish Socialist Party — PPS — which adopted a lukewarm attitude towards certain Polish Governments and often acted improperly in Jewish affairs.

A special regular section was devoted by the paper to information and evaluations about Social labour movements in other countries. The years between the two World Wars were replete with ups and downs, with dramatic struggles, crises, splits and changes in the International Labour Movement. *Folkszeitung* used to survey these events, analyse the problems, criticise or defend the various steps taken.

The paper invariably warned against the dangers lurking from Fascism, Nazism and all other reactionary trends, for the world at large and for the Jews in particular.

*Folkszeitung* struggled hard for its existence. Two entirely different factors constantly threatened its continuous appearance — the poverty of its readers and the repressive measure of the Government.

# פאלקסצייטונג

Warszawa, czwartek 6 października 1932 1932

## פארהתמעט די דרוקעריי פון דער „נ. פאלקסצייטונג“

אין סוף פון דער עטלעכער יטעה נעמחט פארהתמעט ווערן די דרוקעריי פון דער „נ. פאלקסצייטונג“ אין ווארשע. דער פארהתמעט וועט זיך אריבערלאזן אויף די האנטן פון די פאליטישע און קולטורעלע ארגאניזאציעס פון דער פאלקסצייטונג. די דרוקעריי וועט זיך אריבערלאזן אויף די האנטן פון די פאליטישע און קולטורעלע ארגאניזאציעס פון דער פאלקסצייטונג. די דרוקעריי וועט זיך אריבערלאזן אויף די האנטן פון די פאליטישע און קולטורעלע ארגאניזאציעס פון דער פאלקסצייטונג.

*Folkszeitung, announcing the closing of its printing shop by the Government*

# פאלקסצייטונג

## דער שיינט ווידער

נאכן געצוהונגענעם איבערייס כירט די „פאלקסצייטונג“ אריין אין א סך נייעס אין איר ארבעט. דער אינפארמאציע-אפארטמאנט פארפולקאמט אלע אפטיילן — פאליטישער, ליטערארישער, טעאטער, קינא, ספארט, אינטערנאציאנאלע ארבעטער-באזעגונג א. א. ו. — ווערן אויסגעברייטערט און אויסגעבעטערט. „פאלקסצייטונג“ — איז די איינציקע יידישע טעגלעכע סאציאליסטישע צייטונג

קויפט און פארשפרייט די „פאלקסצייטונג“  
 Red-WV4 & Coedeler Profekt „A. Folkszeitung“ Druck-„Di Welt“, Warszawa, Nozelpte 7

... and, after an interruption, the reappearing of the paper (1932)

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Neje FOLKSZAJTUNG



הארבע רבועים רבוע

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printing shop

פאררו פון דן

נאכו גע  
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פארשעלע  
סאציאליסטישע  
קוימט און

Warsaw, No. 111111

e paper (1932)

The paper was established without capital and without a printing press of its own. It was set up and printed in the print shop of the Rom family, which was situated in the courtyard occupied by the well-known printers of Vilna, "The Widow and Brothers Rom", at 7 Nowolipie Street, Warsaw. But there was no point in bringing out a daily paper in a strange press, and so Bund decided on acquiring the printing shop. The money for the purpose was raised in America by Vladimir Medem in the early 1920s. Years later, the press was modernised. Type-setting machines were introduced as well as a large and improved rotary press. In acquiring this equipment, the paper had the assistance of Baruch Charny-Vladek, Managing Director of the New York *Forwards*, who before his emigration had been a Bund activist in Russia.

The ordinary income from subscriptions, sales and advertisements proved insufficient to cover the paper's expenditure. The readers were generally people of little means, some of them unemployed, who could not afford to buy a paper, and who would peruse it in club houses or reading rooms, or would buy it jointly with other readers. Income from advertisements was also small. Advertisers and advertising agents always claimed that the poor readers of *Folkszeitung* were not potential consumers, and so there was no point in advertising in the paper. Exceptions were the few firms who were out to attract customers among the poor classes, as well as shipping companies, since most of the emigrants came from labour ranks.

*Folkszeitung* overcame these difficulties in various ways. Wages were smaller than those usually paid at other papers. A wage scale was introduced with wider differentials for journalists and smaller ones for type-setters and printers, and when cash gave out wages were paid first of all to the printing workers and afterwards to the editorial staff. When a large deficit accrued and debts became insupportable, fund-raiding campaigns would be launched among the readers, and when that proved insufficient, help would arrive from abroad. From time to time, Bund leaders would undertake visits to other countries and launch fund-raising campaigns among the members and sympathisers of the Movement. During the last years of the paper's existence one had the feeling that its economic situation was more or less secure.

In the 1930s, Bund's influence rose. The status of its organisations and allied bodies became consolidated and the readership of *Folkszeitung* also increased. The improvement in the paper's economic situation was brought about in certain measure by the fact that the enterprise was turned into a Cooperative. In the first ten years of its existence, the paper laboured under chronic deficits which mounted to tremendous sums, and in the early 1930s the situation



Pinhas Schwarz



D.L. Neimark

became unbearable. It was, therefore, decided to introduce a radical change in its economic ownership and this step brought an improvement. No change, however, took place in the editorial staff and in the composition of the other works. The Central Committee of the Bund reserved the right of determining the composition of the editorial board, and of delineating the general policy of the paper. The Cooperative succeeded in setting the paper on its feet.

A much more serious danger threatened the paper's existence from the regime. Governments rose and fell but the system of repressing the organs of public opinion, so as to avert publication of facts and opinions that did not find favour in the eyes of the rulers, remained unaltered. All papers were subject to the supervision of the censorship, but none of them (neither Polish nor Jewish) paid so heavy a price for its oppositionist stand as did the Bund organ. The copies of the paper were impounded hundreds of times

and its publication was proscribed scores of times. It was then that the paper began to appear under different names.

When it first appeared on December 6, 1918, it was called *Lebens-Fragen*. On January 18, 1919, the Government forbade the paper's appearance, closed down the editorial and administrative offices and arrested the editorial



Victor Shulman



Emanuel Scheyer

secretary Victor Shulman, the bookkeeper Israel Feldman and some 15 printing workers. The paper's appearance was renewed on January 31, 1919 and continued until it was closed down again on March 23, 1920. Until the end of July 1920 the paper was forced to change its name very often since the authorities closed it down time and again, arrested its editors and even impounded the print shop. The last attempt to bring out the paper was made on July 27 and then again the authorities issued an order to close it down and its responsible editor, Mania Elias, was sent to concentration camp.

From now on, it was no longer possible to bring out a daily paper. Hundreds of the Bund's activists were arrested in that year and sent either to prison or to concentration camps. There was a long interval between the appearance of the Bundist daily. The increased repression was in large measure an outcome of the stance taken up by the Movement towards the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-20. Bund opposed

the Polish plans of occupation, the annexation of areas of the Ukrainian and Bielorussia, and at the same time rejected the invasion of Poland by the Red Army, in accordance with its principle that "Socialism cannot be brought on the bayonet of the Soviet Army".

When the renewed appearance of the paper was made possible in 1922, it assumed the name of *Folkszeitung*, but owing to repressive measures it had to keep on changing its name.

*Naye Folkszeitung* was the last name of the Bundist daily. Its first issue came out on January 18, 1926, and this link was maintained until the end, albeit with frequent orders of impoundment. But even this appearance suffered an interruption of more than a fortnight. On October 5, 1932, the authorities closed down the print-shop and prevented the paper's appearance. The Government's ire was aroused by the fact that a Socialist evening paper in the Polish language "Pismo Codzienne" made its appearance at that time. It was a joint publication of the Bund and of the Polish Socialists (PPS). This paper took up a sharp critical attitude towards the Government's policy. On no account did the authorities agree that the Jewish Socialists should address themselves to the Polish community and arouse them to liquidate the enterprise. It sent out a technical Enquiry Commission to the place, which found certain "drawbacks" in the arrangements in the printing press. On October 22, 1932, *Naye Folkszeitung* was allowed to renew appearance.

It fell to the lot of *Folkszeitung* to be the last Jewish paper (and for a period of ten days the only Jewish paper) in Warsaw, on the eve of the destruction brought about by World War II. The last issue of the paper came out on September 22, 1939, the eve of Yom Kippur of 5700 — in besieged and bombed Warsaw.

The numerous orders to close down or impound the paper came as a reaction by the Government to the general oppositionist stand of *Folkszeitung*. The censor forbade the printing of whole or parts of articles. Orders of this kind were numerous, particularly in the 1930s, when the inimical policy against the Jews was aggravated and, at the same time, the hooligan excesses increased.

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Whenever an order to impound the paper was issued, the police would lay hands on all copies that it succeeded in finding (in the press, at the railway station, at the Post Office or even with news vendors in the street). In such a case, a second edition would be brought out with white patches taking the place of the censored material. Sometimes, however, the censors would alter their methods and inform the editorial offices by telephone as to the news items prohibited for publication. If the paper was nonetheless impounded for the publication of some other article or for some other reason, it would issue orders not to leave any white patches in the amended edition and not to mention that this was a second edition.

During the seventeen years of my work on the paper, whether as night or day editor, I had the opportunity of maintaining almost daily contacts with the censorship. Apart from extraordinary cases, these censors were Jews who maintained contacts with the editorial offices of the Yiddish papers. I had connections with three of them, but only with two among them did I meet face to face and get to know personally.

I had a long-standing connection with Daniel Steinbok, with whom I spoke on the telephone almost daily ever since 1923, but met personally only in 1928, when I called at the Government Commissariat in Warsaw in order to take out a passport. The official sent me to the Jewish censor in order to obtain his confirmation of the fact that I was a journalist (such confirmation would absolve me from a high fee for the passport). When Steinbok learned who I was, he called out "Oh, so you are Hertz from *Folkszeitung*." At first he began, as it were, in apologetic terms. He was sorry he had to cause a Jewish paper so much trouble, but what could he do? After all, he had to carry out the instructions of the authorities. But actually it was the editorial staff that was to blame for it. Why was it not holding it itself in check? After all, it wasn't a question merely of financial loss to the paper... it was simply no good for the Jews... and so on. I saw no point in entering into a debate with him on questions of principle. I simply replied that we could not desist from being what we actually were: we deemed it our duty to say what we thought was just and necessary.

At a later period, the Jewish censor was Dr. Samuel

Szymkiewicz, who hailed from Zionist circles. I had the occasion of meeting him in the street only in September, 1939. A friend of mine who knew him, introduced me to him. After years of conversation over the telephone there was no longer any occasion to speak about censorship matters. In the city rising up in flames, and with exploding bombs thundering everywhere, the members of the editorial staff were preparing the last issues of *Folkszeitung*.



Y. Lescinski



J.S. Hertz

The third censor, M., I never met even once. He was only an acting censor and worked on Sundays and on Christian holidays. M., an officer in the Polish Secret Police, was also a renegade. But that did not prevent him from showing favours to *Folkszeitung* — in exchange for handsome sums of money. Whenever he received the printed issues, M. would telephone in to the editorial offices immediately and ask whether they did not contain any "forbidden material". We would, of course, assure him that everything was in order. He did not, of course, read the paper, whether for lack of time, or because his knowledge of Yiddish was limited, and also because he was in his cups most of the time.

In the 1930s, when the hooligan attacks on the Jews (called "excesses" or "extremist action") became a thing of daily occurrence, the censorship would ask the Editorial Board to pass over these matters in silence. It did permit

the publication of some news about excesses against the Jews, but forbade publication of others, and if the latter were printed, an order to impound the paper would be issued immediately.

So for a long time the editorial offices of *Folkszeitung* adopted the policy of holding over the publication of news about antisemitic "excesses" and of "prohibited" reports until the Monday edition of the paper, which used to be



M. Orzech



V. Kossowski

supervised by the censor M. This ruse succeeded for several years. Several news items of this type would be reproduced the following day by other papers. Endek papers did likewise for reasons of their own. As a defensive against orders of impoundment, the Endek paper would give the source of the news item — *Folkszeitung*. One day, an article appeared in an antisemitic organ, from a member of its Editorial Board, Jerzy Or (Orenstein — a notorious instigator of antisemitic acts and a renegade) in which he attacked the censorship for being strict with the nationalist Polish press while showing liberalism towards the revolutionary paper of Bund. In other words, the Government was guilty of discrimination in favour of *Folkszeitung*. Following this incident, we had to exercise greater care with our Monday issues, to be wary of publishing "prohibited" material or to camouflage it well.

The frequent impounding of the paper caused us of course serious financial losses and proved to be a great bur-



Weekly literary, sports and children's supplements of Folkszeitung



den on the economic situation of the paper. The outlays on paper, printing and transportation were doubled. Whenever the paper was impounded it would arrive in the Provinces a day late, which still further reduced the sale of the paper on the streets. Generally, the censorship would limit itself to impounding an edition of the paper and refrain from taking additional steps. In quite a few cases, however, criminal action would be taken against the paper. The responsible editor would be summoned to Court and sometimes sentenced to imprisonment for a certain period.

The general trend of the paper was, of course, in keeping with the attitude of Bund on political and social problems as well as on Jewish affairs. The paper, however, was produced by living people, differing from one another in character, education, scope of knowledge and sphere of interest. With all the common ideology there were differences in style and method of political comment between them.

The members of the Editorial Board were divisible into various categories. Supreme supervision was vested in the hands of a central committee of three appointed by the Executive Committee of Bund. In addition to these, there was also an editorial secretary. In the last 20 years of *Folkszeitung's* existence, Victor Szulman acted as editorial secretary.

For years the central board consisted of seven people: Vladimir Medem, Beinish Michalewicz, Henryk Erlich, Josef Leschinsky, Meir Wasser, Baruch Shefner and Leivik Hodes. Henryk Erlich was the longest of all at his post, and his influence on the policy of the paper was most noticeable. (Imprisoned by the Soviet Police after the outbreak of war, Erlich was executed by order of Stalin on December 4, 1941, along with Victor Alter, another prominent Bund leader.)

The Coordinating Committee held complete sway on the leading articles which would appear daily. Most of the pages in the paper, however, were devoted to topical material: reports on topical events, news from the world at large and from Poland, reports on Jewish life and on the Labour Movement. This was related to members of the editorial staff who were given a lot of freedom in the choice of the material and in its formulation. In this way, the ordinary rank and file of the editorial staff were able to leave their impact on the paper and to mould its character and image.

In addition to the members of the editorial staff, whose

work on the paper was their professional occupation, there were other contributors — writers and reporters, who wrote on a regular basis or only on occasions. No other paper in Poland, whether Polish or Jewish, could compare with the organ of Bund, as to the number of its reporters. This is explained by the fact that Bund and its Youth Movement had branches in hundreds of towns and townlets throughout the country as well as in several cities abroad. When-



*Baruch Shefner*



*Leivik Hodes*

ever an event of importance took place in these localities, the activists in these branches would report on the matter either by mail or by telephone. In the large towns, the paper had regular reporters who reported daily on events in their localities.

In addition to its daily paper, Bund in Poland brought out in the years 1919–1938 a number of local weeklies, organs of trade unions, youth papers and papers devoted to literature, sport and the cooperative movement.



*Folkszeitung "First Press Day"*

