

A child of the Bund

Between the two world wars the Bund in Poland established a system of secular Yiddish schools. Esther Brunstein describes her childhood at the *Medem Shule* in Lodz, cut short by Nazi occupation.

Both my parents were members of the Bund. My father was a very, very active member. I don't think the school was reserved for children of Bund members, but the majority were probably children of Bundists and sometimes children of communists who wanted their children to have a good Yiddish education.

We started before school with the kindergarten, *Grosser Kinderheim*. *Grosser* was one of the founders of the Bund. I started there at the age of three or four and from then I went on to the *Medem Shule*. My brothers didn't go there. When I was terribly little my parents had to move from Lodz and my elder brother joined the ordinary school in the town where they lived. On coming back he would have lost some schooling, which was unthinkable. I think my other brother didn't go because my parents could not afford the fees. The parents were mainly working class people, but by no means all. At one time my father worked within the town hall, when a socialist council was elected, and later he was some sort of businessman dealing in textiles. Lodz was the biggest industrial textile centre and he was a master weaver in a factory in Lodz.

The aim of the *Medem Shule* was a good Yiddish education — which took in everything — Yiddish culture, literature, the whole way of Jewish life — and this was different to the other schools, which didn't have it. The first year of school was in Yiddish only. Later on Polish was introduced because Polish was the language of the country. I remember learning geography, mathematics and nature study in Yiddish and Polish history in Polish, but Jewish history in Yiddish. The beauty was that the children that finished our school spoke better Polish than the Jewish children who went to ordinary Polish state schools. The educational standard was very high. In 1936 our school got an international prize for its standard of teaching. As pedagogues our teachers were excellent. And nothing was compulsory. The school was run on free and democratic lines.

There was nothing luxurious in the physical surroundings of our school. We did not have nice gardens. We were always

aware that there were financial difficulties. There were about 20 pupils in each class. We had seven years starting at the age of six or seven. Later on, because it was important as we lived in Poland that our Polish was good, our lessons were in Polish. If you wanted to get into *Gymnasium*, the exams were in Polish. We prided ourselves on having a good standard of Polish.

I remember all the teachers with absolute devotion and love. When I talk to my children sometimes and ask them how do you look back on your school years, there is very little left there that draws them back to it. There is nothing that means an awful lot to them. For me, maybe because it was cut so cruelly, it has become much more important. There was a great feeling of belonging. It was an extension of home. The teachers were excellent and they would, I am sure, be taking a lower salary in order to teach in our school. There was something very special about the school, maybe because we really felt we were being taken care of as little people. As people we mattered. We knew they cared very much. There was this feeling of *not* just going to school in the morning, finishing in the afternoon, and that's it. Maybe it was because the majority who went to the school had this great love for Yiddish, for getting to know oneself and who we were that it played such an important part and felt like an extension of home.

I have come away with the feeling that it was a great privilege to have been there. What this school has given me, and what comes through a lot of our literature — like Peretz and Ash and others who were Jewish but touched on universal problems — was a very strong feeling of what was right and what was just. We somehow



Vladimir Medem

managed to carry it within us. And as far as I am concerned it helped me in the ghetto in the darkest hours of the war. I have always retained this feeling and belief in my fellow human being. I still carry it with me. Soon after the war we were looking for whoever was left, who in the school survived. After your relatives you looked for survivors from the school. We found just a few.

Our everyday conversations at school were in Yiddish and Polish. There were some parents who sent their children to the school because they wanted them to acquire this great knowledge of Yiddish but among themselves they probably spoke more Polish. You had little groups forming in school — some spoke more Yiddish, some more Polish, but everybody had Yiddish as a natural language.

Other Jewish children went to Jewish schools but not Yiddish schools. Yiddish wasn't taught there. They were state schools for Jewish children. Jewish children would go to school on Sunday. Polish children went to school on Saturday.

At the *Medem Shule* we had no such thing as a religious assembly. The other schools did but it was not forced upon us. We had a hymn for the school, which wasn't sung everyday: "*Lomir zingen a lid tsu der Yiddisher shule, vos iz alemen undz azoy tayer. Lomir zingen mit freyd un mit hofnung ful, oyf a velt a fraye naye*". (Let us sing a song to the Yiddish school, which is dear to us all. Let us sing full of hope and joy for a new and free world).

The ultra orthodox had their own schools. There were girls that I knew going to *Beys Yankev*. There were all kinds of other religious schools. Another very good secular school was the Borochov School of the Poale-Zionists. During the war most of our teachers had left Poland to try and get into Russia. Some went to Warsaw. We were left with a few plus some former students. In the first year of the ghetto we still had a sort of school. There wasn't much learning but we did get a little bit of soup when we went there. A few children from the Borochov school came into our class because there were not enough children and teachers for two and it was important that we kept together as a group. We continued for as long as it was possible to continue in the ghetto.

Whether you were a Bund party member or not, the school had great meaning. The important educational aim of the school was to try from the material available and the methods employed to give you a sense of justice. I know this has definitely helped me form my thoughts.

It was through analysing simple works of literature, to bring out that *this* is the important thing — how to conduct oneself in life. Also there was the sense of unity at school, for instance when we took our lunches to school, we would often put them in a communal basket so that the children who were not so well off also had something nice to eat. The teachers managed to impart the importance of one's behaviour inside and outside school. Sport was important — to be a free human being. Beauty was important. Everything was considered important and they worked very hard to bring these points out.

Boys and girls did everything together. We were one of the few co-educational schools at the time. There was a great sense of equality in our school. We had men and women teachers and this was very progressive for its time. When they taught the Hebrew prophets, they taught not just in terms of what they were saying would happen but what was right to do. In Vilna they had very good teacher training colleges for the Yiddish schools.

They imparted a strong sense of Jewish identity not through nationalism but a folkkultur and a sense of belonging to a people, so whether you chose a secular or religious way you still had the same

beginning. It was possible to identify fully with your past and remain secular Jews. There were children from religious backgrounds at our school as well. They had great respect for it. They came for the education.

I knew as a child that I would be envied because I had this kind of schooling. In Lodz there were only two such schools — ours and the Borochov school. Poland had only two decades between two wars. It needed much more time to feel the impact that these schools would have for future generations.

During the school holidays our teachers organised activities at the school. Many children lived in difficult conditions so they organised outings and projects. As a child they gave me a sense that I mattered. Every individual mattered. I don't think I romanticise. If anything that has been so lovely is cruelly cut short then it becomes even more so. I know how much it mattered to me in the war years. Even when the school stopped we still kept as a close group. We would still meet.

We did not go to school on *Rosh Hashana* because we would not be allowed. I don't think it was important to do so just as a *dafke* (to be contrary). Even though we were not a state funded school, we were still under the rules that

every school was. I do distinctly remember when *Pesach* (Passover) was talked about. That was brought to us as a holiday of freedom. I remember coming home and telling this to my father and he would sit down with me. It was explained to us that the Jewish people as a whole revolted and there then followed the exodus to the promised land. It was pointed out to us as a fight for freedom.

My one regret to this day is that though the Yiddish they taught us was beautiful they tried to rid it of the Hebrew. That was wrong I now know. You cannot get to know the joy of Yiddish literature unless you know some Hebrew. They tried to purify it. They would take a Hebrew word and spell it phonetically in Yiddish. We would for example be given 20 Hebrew words and told to make sentences with them and then we were asked to substitute them with Yiddish phrases. I would have liked to have learnt and known more Hebrew because they are so interlinked. Maybe if we would have continued to live there it would have changed. I still keep in touch with some friends from the school. I sent a letter off yesterday to a friend in Buffalo whom I have known since kindergarten days. We were together in the ghetto. Not very many have survived. □

In on the act

Louis Marton plays around with a play by Jim Allen

(The scene is a (royal) court room in London in 1987)

JUDGE: Dr Marton, you are known as a Jewish peace activist and media expert. I suppose you are a defence witness?

MARTON: It depends. I was a founding member of the International Jewish Peace Union and have been engaged in the publication of the *Israel & Palestine* political report for the last 18 years. During World War II I lived in Budapest. Some 10 years ago I started my personal research on the Jewish community in Hungary during the war and found some unpublished material on Kastner.

JUDGE: I assume that you are an anti-Zionist and agree with Mr Allen.

MARTON: To say that I am anti something I would have to accept a definition of the concept. What is Zionism? Who is a Zionist? In the last 100 years Zionism has been so many things. For me, at its beginning it was the liberation movement of Jewish masses in Eastern Europe.

JIM ALLEN: Herzl was a racist. His insane accusation against all non-Jews states: "The people among whom the Jews are living are in general overt or covert antisemites."

MARTON: What is insane is to take a sentence out of its historic context. Herzl's words simply describe what the majority of Jews living in Eastern Europe at the time felt to be their daily experience.

JIM ALLEN: Israel today is a racist state.

MARTON: Very well. I know that nowadays, in the name of Zionism, Palestinian Arabs are denied nationhood and often the simple right to live where they are born.

JUDGE: So you agree with Mr Allen on this point?

MARTON: I also know that Stalin's secret police murdered thousands of people on the grounds that they were Zionists. Their only crime was to be Jews. Gomulka's Poland also arrived at the final solution of its "Jewish question" by persecuting members of the opposition and finally chasing them out of Poland as "Zionists". I would prefer to deal with facts and not semantics.

JUDGE: This is very interesting but we are trying the case of Jim Allen who alleged that Zionists collaborated with Nazis in the extermination of the Jews and with the allegations that Mr Allen is an antisemitic villain. What is your contribution?

MARTON: I would accuse Mr Allen of repeating commonplaces as if they were sensational new facts.

JUDGE: Mr Allen has also been accused of rewriting history. JIM ALLEN: *Perdition* shows how some Zionist leaders collaborated with Nazis during and before World War II.

MARTON: Mr Allen is more cautious in the foreword to the play than in the different versions of the play itself. But the facts are well known. He simply added a new thesis.

JUDGE: What do you mean?

MARTON: To put it crudely, in almost every country the Nazis found Jews to serve them. This may be called collaboration, although I would prefer manipulation. This was the case in Poland and Hungary and has been revealed by many historians, mainly Jews.

JUDGE: So, what is wrong with Mr Allen's thesis?