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***A Long Life in the Making*, Ben Cohen (2021, Eyeglass Books)**

Review by Henry Maitles, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of the West of Scotland.

Let me start by saying that I liked this book immensely. It is a series of letters from a father (Ben Cohen) to his estranged son (Phil), outlining aspects of his life and the father's own learning from his socialist father and upbringing. He describes his father as being 'anti communist and also anti Zionist. Trotskyist? Perhaps'. It is poignant without being over-sentimental. It has a feel for left wing politics in general and the experiences of what Brossat and Klingberg call *Revolutionary Yiddishland*.¹

There can be a tendency in books where poor immigrants explain their own personal rise out of poverty to have a 'we were poor but happy' sentimentality, a 'I pulled myself out of the mire' and a lack of politics.² A deeper delve into the community in towns like Glasgow shows a much richer history. Jews were in and in the leadership of trade unions, were well represented in the Labour Party and heavily involved in activity against racism and fascism, particularly in the struggle against the BUF in the 1930s.³ The immigrants brought these ideas from the Russian Empire, from their involvement in the Bund and the RSDLP. This short book catalogues some of this, but in a thoughtful and nuanced but clearly partisan way. If there is a criticism to be made, it is that things are mentioned but never elaborated fully – perhaps understandable in a selection of letters rather than a fuller autobiography.

All the way through comes a sense of left class politics overcoming the racism and anti-Semitism – which can be the ruling ideas in capitalist society. From an early age (about 6 years of age) Ben attended the Sunday school of Hutcheson Town Branch of the ILP, where '*we felt no inhibitions about race*'. This must have been about 1921 or 1922. Britain had gone through the Great Unrest, the Great War, post war strike waves culminating in the Glasgow mass protests in 1919 and leading to the General Strike in 1926. He is absolutely clear and supportive of the miners and the General strike, even though his father's income suffered and '*we ate less well*'. Whilst admiring of the miners' leaders, he is scathing about railworkers union leader Jimmie Thomas, who he argues would in later years attend Ascot dressed '*in grey tails and topper*' and was at ease with the '*champagning toffs*'. In a lovely wee addendum, Ben writes of how 30 years later he read an account in a paper by a student of '*the great fun*' he had had driving a train during the General Strike. Although a successful doctor by this point, Ben recalls how he reacted with class fury to this by writing a reply: '*This middle class*

¹ Brossat A. and Klingberg, S. *Revolutionary Yiddishland* (London, 2016).

² Cowan, E., *Spring Remembered* (Edinburgh, 1980); Glasser, R., *Growing up in the Gorbals* (London 1986)

³ Maitles, H 'Jewish Responses to Fascism in the West of Scotland', *Local Historian* Vol. 27 No. 2 (May 1997) pp. 106-117. (ISSN 0024-5585).

Maitles, H. 'Jewish Trade Unionists in Glasgow', *Immigrants and Minorities*, Vol. 10 (1991) pp. 46-69. (ISSN 0261-9288).

git! It must have been good fun to do a bit of work and to drive a railway engine while they were starving up in the Rhonda". He recalls campaigning for John Maclean and that his ILP comrades were 'suspicious of the political sincerity' of Manny Shinwell, borne out for them when Shinwell took a peerage, 'which no true ILP member would do.'

He had no illusions in the events of the 1920s and 1930s in Russia and makes clear that his father was closer to Trotsky than Stalin. He nonetheless recalls the excitement of the revolution in 1917 in the family and recommends readers to get a feel of the events by reading John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World*. He further remembers how when news of Lenin's death came through, his mother wept. In the power struggle in the 1920s between the Left Opposition (led by Trotsky) and Stalin and his supporters, his parents very much supported the former. He writes '*my parents were worried and only hoping that somehow Trotsky and the others would return*'. Alas, no happy ending there.

Ben also deals with the notion of Zionism. This is contentious in the Jewish community still – both the merits of Zionism as a political strategy to combat anti-Semitism and in the nature and actions of Israel. As I mentioned above, he understood that his parents were non or anti Zionist. '*Our dad was anti Zionist and even Paole Zion a pink socialist-cum-Zionist organization was too nationalistic for him*'. To us now, knowing that a majority of world Jewry has some affinity for Zionism, it is an important reminder that, until the Holocaust, a majority of world Jews did not support the Zionist cause. Indeed, the eastern European Jews were opposed to Zionism.⁴ Although he holidayed in Israel his son writes in the afterword that '*he was under no illusion about the nature of the Israeli state and its treatment of the Palestinians and strongly supported the two state solution*', itself now under increasing pressure as a solution as Israeli policy towards settlements and displacement makes it appear untenable.

⁴ Deutscher, I. *The Non-Jewish Jew* (London, 1969), p67

In Eastern Europe and especially in Poland, the Yiddish speaking workers who considered themselves Jews without reservation were the most resolute enemies of Zionism. They were determined opponents of emigration to Palestine. These anti-Zionists thought the idea of an evacuation, an exodus from the countries they called home, where their ancestors had lived for ages, amounted to abdicating their rights, yielding to hostile pressure, betraying their struggle and surrendering to anti-Semitism. For them, Zionism seemed to be the triumph of anti-Semitism, legitimising and validating the old cry - 'Jews Out'. The Zionists accepted it; they wanted 'Out'.

Bundist Leader, Jacob Dubnow (1898) quoted in D. Vital, *Zionism, the Formative Years*, (Oxford, 1982), p176: *The danger of Zionism was that anti-Semites '...would then be able to say to the protesting Jews of the Diaspora, "If you don't like it here, why don't you go away and live in your own state?"*

Now, it would be incorrect to see this solely as a political memoir. There are also some delicious vignettes of everyday life. He recalls as a boy constant harassment of the neighbourhood community by the police, whether on the street corner or ball games but he maintains that it was primarily on a class rather than racial basis. He says that he always viewed the police as *'hunters of men'*. This antipathy stayed with him even when as a successful doctor he had a run in in London with them. He sums it up as *'Bullies and Liars. Police, Church and State, the unholy trinity of oppression, guile and force'*. He also recalls, as many Jewish boys do, his time at the Talmud Torah – often up till about age 15-- most nights for a couple of hours and Sunday morning too. Learning was about Hebrew, preparing for Barmitzvah and discussing aspects of the Torah (Jewish and moral law). Corporal punishment was regular, either a slap across the ear or a caning. He recollects how a group of them took *'industrial action'* in his last year there by deliberately supporting each other and being punished by standing as a group facing the wall. His dislike of corporal punishment was further strengthened by his time as a scholarship boy at Hutcheson's Grammar independent school, where he describes some of the teachers as *'sadists (who) enjoyed using the belt'*, most often for errors rather than bad behavior. Whilst reasonably happy at school and he does not mention any anti-Semitism there, he felt some alienation from others in the school because *'my family were poor'* and also because of his left wing leanings – *'the political culture which my father had introduced me to.'*

Let me now look at a couple of areas where I think the reminiscences fall a bit short. Firstly, there is no mention of the Workers Circle in Glasgow, where left wing – Bundist, socialist, left Zionist and Communist – Jews organized cultural (often Yiddish) and political events. Secondly, there is nothing on the growth and activity of the BUF in the area where he lived and the counter protests organized by the Jewish and political parties and trade unions against them. Not even Cable Street in London in 1936 is discussed.⁵ His father died in 1933 and perhaps that, mixed with his long hours of medical study, meant much less involvement. Linked to this is a lack of any comment or even mention of the events going on in Germany and Europe. Nothing on Kristallnacht or the Nazis. Interestingly, he did volunteer to support the Republicans in their fight against Franco's fascists in 1937, but the ambulance unit he was going to go with *'became unnecessary with the Republicans' defeat.'* This was part of the Jewish experience. It has been estimated that some 10% of the International Brigaders were Jewish.⁶

The chapter on his time in casualty in a hospital in London has some fine and interesting stories. Whilst the work was grinding, like all hard jobs, there are wonderful moments. I loved his memory of Irish nurses in the London Jewish Hospital speaking in Yiddish to their Jewish patients in gynecology and his experiences there and in other hospitals of working with both some fine doctors, some elitist and difficult ones and many excellent nurses. He always is empathic

⁵ In 1936, Oswald Mosley's BUF attempted to march in the Jewish and Irish immigrant London area around Brick Lane. Residents, led by the Communist Party and Labour youth, organized a 'they shall not pass' protest. It was a defining moment of the Jewish East End.

⁶ Brossat and Klingberg (op cit)

and caring towards the working class patients, whatever ailments they presented with.

So, a lovely short read, full of insight and empathy.