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Beatty Orwell: The Battle of Cable Street

Rachel Lichtenstein

The inter-war years of the twentieth century were a time of great conflict and transition. There was a worldwide economic slump caused by the Great Depression; thousands were out of work, particularly in already deprived urban areas such as the East End of London. Conditions for most of its local working poor were desperate. Poverty and deprivation made the easily identifiable 'Jewish community' scapegoats for the worsening economic situation. Jews were blamed for 'taking all our jobs', driving down labour costs and being unscrupulous landlords, amongst a host of other accusations. Whitechapel in the East End became a volatile and dangerous place for young Jewish women like Beatty Orwell.

Frustrated by the lack of opportunities around her, ground down by poverty and antisemitic abuse and desperate for change, she became fiercely political, like many other working-class Jewish women. In 1932, when Beatty was just fifteen, the former Labour and Conservative politician Oswald Mosley formed a far-right nationalist party, the British Union of Fascists (BUF), which openly encouraged its supporters to attack Jews. They distributed antisemitic leaflets and 'mob orators' such as Mick Clarke and Owen Burke 'sought to whip up violence on the street corners night after night'.¹ Beatty said 'it was frightening to be walking around as a Jew in those days. People were getting beaten up. The Blackshirts used to

¹ <http://www.cablestreet.uk>

rampage around the area and break the windows of Jewish shops and synagogues, it was very threatening.'

By that time Beatty was going 'to all the meetings'. When she was sixteen, she joined over 20,000 others on a protest march to Hyde Park against the Nazi persecution of Jews in Germany. She attended Communist Party socials in Swedenborg Square off Cable Street and joined the Labour League of Youth.

Antisemitic attacks intensified in 1933 after Hitler came to power in Germany. In 1934, Beatty protested outside the extremely violent fascist rally held at Olympia, which resulted in a great deal of bad publicity for the BUF, who were widely criticised for their thuggery. Hundreds of protestors were seriously injured by gangs of Blackshirts 'armed with knuckledusters and other weapons'. Beatty recalled, 'It was bloody murder there. The Blackshirts were really spiteful. I knew it was dangerous, I was clever, I did not get hurt, no way.'

The anti-fascist groups regularly met at Curly's Café on Osborn Street. The walls were hung with photographs of well-known local Jewish boxers, and posters to raise funds for Communist causes in Russia. It was a small noisy, crowded café with a vibrant and highly political clientele.

Many café regulars, including friends of Beatty's, joined the International Brigades and went to Spain to fight in the Civil War which erupted in the summer of 1936 between the left-wing Republican government and General Franco's fascist Nationalists. 'The Civil War in Spain had a profound effect on British Jews. We were so moved by what was going on there –

it was rousing. We were so involved, many young Jewish men from Whitechapel joined up and went to fight; many did not come back.¹²

War was on the horizon, terrible things were happening to the relatives of the East End Jewish community in Europe, the Civil War was raging in Spain, and internationally fascism was on the rise. It was against this background, during a night at Curly's in 1936, that Beatty first heard about the planned march of Mosley and his uniformed Blackshirts through the heart of the Jewish East End. 'We are not having that here!' was her immediate furious response – this was personal.

Over a hundred thousand people, including Beatty, signed a petition to prevent the march from taking place; it was delivered to the Home Secretary, but to no avail. In the following weeks, trade unions, Socialist and Communist groups, along with the anti-fascists, distributed thousands of leaflets to workshops, cafés and meeting halls, synagogues and tenement blocks and to people on the street about the planned counter-protest. News of the demonstration spread throughout the densely packed neighbourhood like wildfire – everyone knew about it.

Early in the morning of 4 October 1936, the Communist Party vans were out with loudhailers driving around the streets. As Arnold Wesker dramatised in his play *Chicken Soup with Barley*, people were called out to join the protest: 'Man your posts! Men and women of the East End come out of your houses! The Blackshirts are marching! Come out! Come out!'¹³ Beatty remembers exiting 'the buildings' that morning with her best friend Ginnie. 'When we got to the top of Goulston Street, my God there was millions of people there and they were all shouting. There were lots of

¹² Julie Bloom, interviewed by Rachel Lichtenstein, 2017.

¹³ Arnold Wesker. 2001. *Chicken Soup with Barley* p.17.

police, some on horseback but we didn't see any fascists there. There was Irish and Jews, they come from everywhere to join us in the fight, along with women, men, children, just loads of people. You know when the Royal Family come down the streets, there was more people than that. Lots more. I was not frightened because there were hundreds of people there.' Nearly 300,000 joined the protest; many others were afraid and stayed indoors and put the shutters down.

As the girls made their way to the meeting point near Aldgate pump, they saw a 'forest' of red flags and banners rising from the crowd with the words 'Remember Olympia' and 'They Shall Not Pass'. More and more people poured into the area singing and shouting – a roar of noise and emotion. Irish dockers, repaying Jewish support for their strike in 1912, 'joined the throng in their thousands, swarming into the streets armed with pick-axes.'⁴ Jewish workers from across the borough downed tools and made their way through the crowded streets. Together they formed an impenetrable blockade at Gardiner's Corner – a heaving mass of solidarity and determination.

The noise was tremendous as the demonstrators shouted, 'No Pasaran!', the battle cry used by anti-fascists in the Spanish Civil War, along with the slogan 'Madrid today... London tomorrow'. Bill Fishman was at Gardiner's Corner and 'watched the Irish and the Jews pour from all over East London 'to unite to stop Mosley and his Blackshirts marching. Catholic dockers walked side by side with bearded Jews, shouting in unison, 'They shall not pass!' before building and manning barricades to prevent Mosley's incursion.'⁵

⁴ *The Battle of Cable Street 1936* – The Cable Street Group, A People's History (2011).

⁵ Bill Fishman in *On Brick Lane* by Rachel Lichtenstein (2007) p. 23.

Beatty described the atmosphere as 'tense' but 'absolutely electric.' At first, she was not afraid; then suddenly the mood shifted. They heard screaming, the shrill sound of police whistles and loud cries somewhere near the front. The crowd was thrown into a state of fright and panic. Pandemonium took hold as the bulk of those assembled fled in one great streaming mass towards where the girls were standing. Mounted police had charged into the throng, indiscriminately hitting protestors with batons. Under the great push of people Beatty and Ginnie were squeezed ever closer against a shop window. They soon became tightly wedged, unable to move backwards or forwards. Under the tremendous pressure the large window shattered. Ginnie fell through and cut her hand badly on a shard of glass. 'It was terrifying. We had to go to hospital and get her stitched up'.

Hundreds of other injured protestors were at the London Hospital when they arrived. Others went to Curly's Café or the Whitechapel Library, which had both temporarily become emergency first aid centres for the day. When the girls left the hospital, the crowd at Gardiner's Corner had largely dispersed, so they walked down to Cable Street together, where the protest had been re-routed. 'There was a lorry overturned there and hundreds of people and little bits of fighting breaking out here and there - but not with the fascists; that happened in Aldgate, the fighting was with the police.'

From Cable Street they walked to Royal Mint Street near the Tower of London, where the fascists had congregated in preparation for their march through the East End. There they saw an army of uniformed Blackshirts, banging drums and raising their arms in the Nazi salute. 'They were all lined up in a row, thousands of them, with their black suits and jackboots on, waiting for Oswald Mosley to come.' Fights and violent skirmishes were breaking out everywhere. 'I was scared of them; they were lashing out at

the crowd. They were dangerous but thank God I never got hurt. It was frightening, so I said to Ginnie, 'We'd better get away from here.'

The girls made their way back through the crowds to Cable Street. By then a fierce street battle was raging between thousands of protestors and over 6,000 police officers, including the entire London mounted division. Barricades had been strengthened with corrugated iron, old mattresses and wooden planks. Protestors were hurling broken bottles, fireworks, paving stones, anything they could at the wall of mounted police. Irish and Jewish women living in the dilapidated houses lining the street were throwing buckets of water and emptying chamber pots, pelting the police from above. Repeated baton charges were made directly into the crowd, there were violent fights everywhere and nearly a hundred arrests made. 'People were shouting and screaming, so many people, they were throwing marbles on the floor for the horses, I didn't like that. My great friend Charlie Goodman got arrested, he climbed up a lamppost. He was a communist, he went to prison for that for about a week.'

Beatty recalls with pride the incredible moment when 'the protestors were singing songs and after a while the police come over the loudspeaker and said, 'they are not going to come, they will not pass.' Huge cheers erupted. The battle had been won. The march was abandoned, the Blackshirts walked back defeated through the deserted city away from the East End. 'Everybody was so excited; we knew they'd never get there. The wonderful thing was that people came from all over to stop them, the dockers as well, but practically all the Jews in London came out, it was an amazing day. We were victorious.' Celebrations went on late into the night. 'There was dancing in the pubs and side streets of the East End.'⁶ A month after the

⁶ Bill Fishman, interviewed by Rachel Lichtenstein, 2004.

event, which later came to be known as the Battle of Cable Street, the government passed the 1936 Public Order Act, banning the wearing of political uniforms in public.

Soon after the Battle of Cable Street, Beatty met a man called John Orwell at a Labour rally in Victoria Park. She was there with the Young Communist League; his Roman Catholic family had emigrated from Ireland and lived on the Isle of Dogs. 'They called us the Kellys and the Cohens,' said Beatty. Two years later the pair were married at Arbour Square Police Station. 'I was the first of our family to get married out of the religion. My mother and my aunts all accepted him. They made us a little wedding. One made the chicken soup for dinner, the other one made the tea, and we had the pickled herrings. That's how the East End was, the Irish and the Jews together.' Beatty and John had three children and raised them in east London. A charismatic figure, John became Mayor of Tower Hamlets and was one of the first local politicians to stand up for the growing Bangladeshi community – lobbying and campaigning for their rights.

Now, in 2021, Beatty Orwell is 104 years old and still living relatively independently in Whitechapel. She has 12 grandchildren, 18 great-grandchildren and 5 great-great-grandchildren. She is a well-known figure in the East End, having been a long-serving councillor and former Mayoress of Tower Hamlets herself. She is also the longest known member of the Labour party, having been active in politics and charity work throughout her life. And she is the oldest living witness of the Battle of Cable Street. Born during the First World War, Beatty has survived its aftermath, the Great Depression of the 1930s, the bombing of the East End during the Second World War and, in our own time, a devastating global pandemic. Her story stands as testament to the strength and resilience of the working-class

women of the former Jewish East End of London and how 'solidarity and collective action can bring communities together and prevent fascism'.⁷

Rachel Lichtenstein

Dr Rachel Lichtenstein is an artist, writer, archivist and historian who is internationally known for her creative nonfiction books, multi-media projects and artworks that examine place, memory and Jewish identity. Rachel currently holds a post as Reader in English and Co-Director of the Centre for Place Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her books include: *Estuary: Out from London to the Sea* (Penguin, 2016); *Diamond Street: The Hidden World of Hatton Garden* (Penguin, 2012); *On Brick Lane* (Penguin, 2007); *A Little Dust Whispered* (British Library, 2004); *Keeping Pace: Older Women of the East End* (Women's Library, 2003); and *Rodinsky's Room* (Granta, 1999, co-written with Iain Sinclair). Lichtenstein trained as a sculptor and her artwork has been widely exhibited both in the UK and internationally. Her oral history collections can be found in many international archives. Recent projects include a collaborative digital [Memory Map of the Jewish East End](#), an oral history and archive project for London's oldest still functioning Ashkenazi synagogue Sandys Row [OurHiddenHistories](#), an international digital project for the Centre for Place Writing [PLACE 2020-21](#), and an exhibition at the People's History Museum in Manchester [Vanished Streets: Lost photographs of Jewish Manchester](#). www.rachellichtenstein.com

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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⁷ David Rosenberg in 'Difficult Legacy of the Battle of Cable Street' by Jenni Frazer, *Jewish Chronicle*, 29 September 2016. Available at <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/difficult-legacy-of-the-battle-of-cable-street-1.53578> [Accessed 01.12.2019]