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## **Abe Lazarus and the Lost World of British Communism.**

### **Geoff Andrews**

The British Communist Party (CPGB), despite what Raphael Samuel called its ‘vocation of leadership’, was not noted for the quality of its national leaders – Harry Pollitt excepted – while only a handful would merit recognition as ‘mass leaders’. These were the figures whose devotion to the cause was paramount, for whom self-sacrifice and commitment to the Party overrode any sense of personal advancement or career aspirations and were identified by their ability to inspire members, galvanize followers and popularise working-class struggles. The South Wales Miners’ leader Arthur Horner, Wal Hannington, leader of the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement (NUWM) and Willie Gallagher the communist MP, are notable ones in trade unionism and politics. Abe Lazarus was a less well-known example, and unusual also in that his contribution came from the ranks of full-time Party organisers, those hard-working but often undistinguished cadres who helped sustain the life of the Party in its districts and committees. (In the 1960s and 1970s, Bert Ramelson, the Party’s Industrial Organiser, could claim such an influence in a very different period.) Lazarus was one of the rising stars in the inter-war years and played a prominent role in leading mass strikes, housing protests, opposing Mosley’s fascists and in galvanising support for Spain and the Popular Front. The high point of his activism took place in Oxford where his oratory and organisational skills resulted in trade union representation at the key moment of the city’s industrialisation, while his activism transcended both ‘town’ and ‘gown’ divisions and those between Labour and Communist parties. In doing so, he carried with him some of the hopes of the Communist Party at a critical point in its history as well as being a pivotal figure in the development of the modern Oxford left.

To tell the full story of the life of Abe Lazarus, however, requires us to think again about how we write histories of the ‘lost’ leaders of the left. Notably, this means avoiding histories that are overly partisan, or at least ones constrained by narrow orthodoxies. These have occasionally afflicted historians of the CPGB and socialist historians generally, with the danger of the former slipping into the role of ‘custodians of the past’; such dilemmas were, after all, at the heart of the debates within the CPGB’s Historians’ Group in the wake of 1956, and resulted ultimately in James Klugmann’s unsatisfactory official histories. Subsequently there has been a tendency on the left to simplify, sometimes

distort, the principles of the 'history from below' method, with lost figures gloriously revived and history reduced once more to a 'weapon in the struggle'.

One of the main criteria in deciding whether a biography is worthwhile is the extent to which someone's life can inform a wider story. The case of Abe Lazarus is interesting in this respect, as a figure whose 'rise and fall' seemed to reflect that of his wider party, though his full story has perhaps only been made possible following the opening of archives, memoirs and now Security Service files. For almost the entire period from when he started as an active communist in the early thirties until his withdrawal from political leadership in the early fifties, he was under surveillance; at different times he was observed, had his phone checked, his correspondence opened, and his house raided. At the peak of his influence, in Oxford in the mid to late 1930s, this diminutive figure, who had risen to prominence very quickly, was the hope of the left. His youth, vitality and commitment seemingly represented the hopes of a generation, while 'his ringing voice could be heard, without the aid of a microphone, from one end of St Giles to the other'.<sup>i</sup>

Arthur Exell, an old Party comrade of Lazarus, former car-worker at the Radiators site of Morris Motors and later contributor to the *History Workshop Journal*, began to write Lazarus's story in the 1980s, but came up against some of the dilemmas alluded to above.<sup>ii</sup> Unofficially supervised by Raphael Samuel, Exell's attempt reflected some of the pitfalls – as well as strengths – of writing inside accounts of a former comrade. Samuel told Exell that 'there were too many triumphs and not enough difficulties and disagreements' in his account of Lazarus's life. Moreover there was a 'huge unanswered question' at the heart of Lazarus's story which historians needed to address. 'It seems to me that there is a kind of tragedy as well as triumph about Abe's life. Here he was before the war, a real mass leader both at the Firestone strike and at Cowley, and then again after the war with the squatters....But, after that, or maybe even some time before, there is a sense in which Abe is going down – the jobs for which he was employed by the Party like in the Bernal Peace Library, are worthwhile jobs, but they are not the jobs of a mass leader, but of someone who is getting more and more boxed into inner-Party life...' Samuel felt that Lazarus's life 'could open up a whole forgotten history' but that it would have to 'convey that tragedy, that decline, that inexorable loss of mass support. Through Abe's life you could tell the story of the Communist Party as exemplified in one man: its heroism, its youth, but also how it got defeated in Britain as the voice of the mass working class movement.' (Samuel adds,

perhaps poignantly, that ‘to do this would be a very painful thing to do...but would serve socialism best...to tell the whole truth of what has happened to us in our political lives’. )<sup>iii</sup>

Exell never completed his work – perhaps the task may have been too painful – and we have been left with only sketches of memories from him and other contemporaries, including some cursory references from Labour politicians who had once been former political allies of Lazarus’s but had gone on to higher office.

Abe Lazarus was born in 1911 in Chiswick, West London, into a Jewish family. His father was in the horse-racing business, while his Irish mother spent much of his early life nursing and teaching him at home after he had suffered an early spell of rheumatic fever. He was to suffer from bouts of ill-health throughout his life, though he retained his boyish good looks into his adulthood; slight at five foot six, hatless, auburn hair (some accounts say red) and a rich cockney accent, which helped make him an attractive and personable figure. After attending Arlington Park College he left at 15 and for a while became a mechanic and driver from 1928, before a spell of unemployment in the late 1920s brought him his first contact with the NUWM and the Communist Party, which he joined in 1930. He was soon involved in youth politics and attended anti-war meetings with an early enthusiasm for the Soviet Union’s Five Year Plan.

It was while working at the Firestone Tyre company, (part of the Ford Group and located in an Art Deco building in the Great West Road in nearby Brentford), that Lazarus first came to prominence in July 1933. He led a six week strike which although ending in defeat resulted in significant recruitment to the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). His leadership was crucial in gaining union recognition and launched his career in the CPGB, initially as a member of the West London Sub-District. It also earned him the nickname ‘Bill Firestone’, which on occasions he later adopted as a useful pseudonym. His rise as a communist organiser, however, largely took place in Oxford, at a time when that city was undergoing rapid industrial change with the development of the ‘new’ industries.

The arrival of Morris Motors (1919) and the American Pressed Steel Factory in Cowley, East Oxford (1926), which produced its car bodies, changed the industrial landscape of East Oxford and brought significant working class and labour movement politics to the city. Prior to this time Oxford had shown little

worker militancy. Lord Nuffield (William Morris) had declared in 1927 that he 'never allowed trade unions to interfere with me' and an Oxford branch of the League of Industry – an employer-backed association for workers – had been established at the plant as recently as 1931. However, large migration from South Wales to Oxford from the mid-1920s until the mid-1930s had profound cultural and political influence on Cowley. The new influx of workers, some of whom had been on hunger marches or had experienced recent unemployment, came notably from Garw Valley in Bridgend, and from the Rhondda Valley; Arthur Exell, son of a railway signalman, was among them.

The imposition of assembly-line production had brought more control over labour, with the piece-work earnings at Pressed Steel a cause of complaint and growing unrest among workers from 1933 onwards, which attracted the interest of the TGWU. However this all changed after a major strike which began on 16 July 1934, in the middle of a heatwave, when 180 workers in the press shop, led by two former Welsh miners Tom Harris and Dai Huish, refused to accept lower piece work rates in order to produce a new car body intended for the forthcoming Motor Show. The strike quickly spread to other departments, a committee was set up and the Oxford Communist Party was approached for support. Oxford asked its London office for an organiser and Abe Lazarus, fresh from his experience at Firestone's, arrived with two TGWU officials, and were met at Oxford station by a group of Ruskin College students. Oxford Trades Council backed the strike call and called for union recognition, holding mass meetings in St Giles addressed by Lazarus, with support from local organisations. This would be the first of many speeches made by Lazarus in the heart of the university city. Oxford had never seen industrial militancy of its kind before. Arthur Exell recalled that:

'The strike became very vicious at times. When the buses bringing scab labour got to the factory, cycles and motor cycles were ridden at a very slow pace in front of them, allowing the strikers to get on to the buses. Bricks were thrown, windows smashed, and there were a few injuries as those buses were open-topped and easy targets for those who were throwing'.<sup>iv</sup>

Soldiers were brought in from Aldershot to resist the pickets while on the other side a soup kitchen and a voucher system were provided together with support from workers in other districts. After initially rejecting the union case, management gave in after two weeks and an hourly rate was agreed along

with full union recognition. Around 1500 people were unionised in the aftermath of the strike.

The arrival of Lazarus marked not only the turning-point in the strike but proved to be of fundamental importance for the development of the inter-war Oxford left. As Whiting puts it:

‘Because of the enormous problems in organising a strike in Oxford in 1934, Lazarus’s presence was of major importance. Although the strike committee had done a great deal to bring together the grievances of the various departments, not one of them at this stage could assume the role of a public figure in the way that Lazarus did and so command, by force of personality, the attention of the whole labour force and other working-class groups’.<sup>v</sup>

The Pressed Steel strike was the first of Lazarus’s Oxford agitations. His skills as an organiser and an orator were recognised both by workers and increasingly among the dons and students in organisations like the Oxford University Labour Club and the October Club, which had been established to support the communist cause in 1932. He decided to stay, and over the next few years helped established the CPGB’s South Midland District. As its organiser over the next few years – a role for which he was ideally suited – he maintained an intense, restless and transient existence, with wages and expenses initially arriving in pound notes in registered envelopes from the Party’s King St offices. He would divide his time between a rapid succession of houses and lodgings, the Peoples Bookshop and offices in Hythe Bridge Street near the station, the basement of the Party’s Little Clarendon Street premises, the Ruskin College library - where he seemed to have been adopted as an unofficial student - and above all in the workplaces and meeting halls of the city. He was soon involved in other struggles, notably taking on a prominent role in two housing disputes which illustrated Oxford’s growing class inequalities.

The Cutteslowe Council Estate in North Oxford had been built between 1932-34 in order to house the influx of working class people arriving in the city. In all this included 228 houses, 7 roads and 34 acres. In 1934, a private housing group, the Urban Housing Company, built six foot walls topped with spikes to divide the more prosperous residents in their private estate from the council tenants. In addition to the explicit class snobbery reflected in that decision, the construction of the walls meant a significant detour of 600 yards or so for working class tenants when going about their daily business.

The council had told the Urban Housing Company not to build the walls and there was much correspondence on the issue throughout late 1934 following their construction, though initially to no avail, despite (unsuccessful) charges being brought against two undergraduates for attempting to demolish the walls. On the back of his success at Pressed Steel, Lazarus, incensed by the class nature of the division and the timidity of the council, now took a leading role in a campaign to remove the walls. He set up a committee and in April 1935 called a meeting at Oxford Town Hall, which was attended by 1,200 people, including tenants of the Florence Park estate who were already on rent strike in another part of the city. A large, noisy meeting, chaired by Patrick Gordon Walker, a councillor and one of the rising figures in the Labour Party, demanded the city council remove the walls. 'Such evidence of class snobbery is an immediate insult to the whole working class', Gordon Walker declared, and the council had a 'civic duty' to oppose it. <sup>vi</sup> Banners at the meeting proclaimed: 'Down With the Walls' and 'Must the Workers Always Live Behind Bars'. <sup>vii</sup> As leader of the grassroots campaign, and as a sign of his widening influence, Lazarus consulted Stafford Cripps, a wealthy barrister and Labour MP - later a prominent supporter of the Popular Front - who was then living in nearby Filkins Village. Cripps had told Lazarus that the walls were illegal, a message he passed on to the raucous town hall gathering.

Lazarus, with his fellow members of the Oxford Communist Party, produced a short series of 'Cutteslowe Wall-Papers', which through words and cartoons depicted the 'contempt the upper class have for the workers'. (Cutteslowe Wall Paper 1). Cutteslowe Walls Paper no 2 described the class barriers imposed by walls through history, and urged tenants to 'fight for their rights'. Lazarus, signing himself 'Bill Firestone', announced that at the forthcoming demonstration on Saturday 11 May the walls would be removed. He also informed the Chief Constable of his intentions. On the day itself, Lazarus led a lively crowd of around 2000 demonstrators (many armed with shovels), which included the Oxford 'Red Players', the Workers Theatre movement, a band and procession and university students in fancy dress. After a pantomime acted out by the Players, in which 'Bill Firestone' assumed the role of the 'Good Fairy', the latter took up his pickaxe and moved towards the wall, followed by supporters. A row of police officers prevented access, however, arguing that while they would not be arrested for damaging the walls, they would be for interfering with the police who were guarding it. This anomaly was explained

by Lazarus to the demonstrators from his vantage point halfway up a tree, and they eventually dispersed peacefully. <sup>viii</sup>

The Cutteslowe dispute had brought home the class divided nature of the city and meant that housing became a key political issue in Oxford. It took place at the time of an ongoing rent dispute in Florence Park, in east Oxford, where a housing estate had been built for tenants on wet, boggy land under the control of a private landlord. These substandard houses with structural defects were rented out mainly to Pressed Steel and Morris Motors workers. Tenants started reporting plants shooting up from the floor, with damp and flooding common. The dispute marked Arthur Exell's political awakening, as he joined the AEU, and his house on the estate became a regular meeting place for the activists as the campaign among local tenants got under way from early 1933 and they started to receive strong support from workers, students and local Labour figures like Frank Pakenham, Richard Crossman, Patrick Gordon Walker, as well as the Oxford Communist Party, whose secretary, Harry Waterhouse, was prominent. It changed Exell's view of students, and his revised perception was one that was growing in the city as long-standing divisions between workers and students – evident as recently as the General Strike just eight years before – were broken down.

'Up till then I had hated students and I saw them as just a bunch of rich people treating us as slaves and peasants who were here just to look after them and help them live in luxury'. <sup>ix</sup>

At one of these meetings a rent strike was proposed as the only option after Alderman Moss, the owner of the estate, refused to compromise and threatened evictions for troublemakers. Lazarus was quickly co-opted onto the strike committee, and the campaign stepped up its actions and profile. He organised meetings outside the house of the housing agent - which prompted the involvement of the police – and canvassed the estate, gathering supporters along the way. He held daily meetings with tenants on the estate premises, in public halls and on Florence Park, despite pressure from the police who saw him as an outside agitator. His essential message to the tenants was 'get organised'. One of his strengths in delivering his message was his ability to situate the rent strike within the wider context of a class-divided society in 1930s Britain. Lazarus led a delegation on behalf of Florence Park to the House of Commons for a meeting with the Minister for Health, Sir Howard Kingsley Wood. After placing a parcel, composed of brick and straw and with bugs



crawling over it on his desk, Kingsley Wood asked he and his delegation to leave. Lazarus, however, always capable of tact and guile as well as powerful oratory, won him round, and Kingsley Wood contacted the Oxford Council asking them to take action. Lazarus, by this time, was in high demand as a speaker for a number of campaigns and was now dividing his time and energy between Pressed Steel, Florence Park and Cutteslowe. Crucially, he was able to bring together the two housing disputes and extend the awareness of the campaigns to a much bigger audience. <sup>x</sup>

Both housing campaigns – Cutteslowe Walls and Florence Park rent strikes - ultimately failed. As the Cutteslowe dispute staggered on the tenants began to see the communists' involvement as overly political. The walls, despite being temporarily demolished in an army manoeuvre, would stay for another twenty years. In Florence Park, Alderman Moss sold the estate though not before evicting some of his tenants and the tenants' movement declined from the late 1930s.

However, the Communist Party and Lazarus, by now a candidate for several influential Party committees – he would shortly become a member of its Executive Committee - and a familiar face at left and labour gatherings, continued to prosper as the international political crisis deepened. A regular speaker at Sunday evening meetings at the Martyr's Memorial in St.Giles, he also regularly addressed meetings at the Carfax Assembly Rooms and the Town Hall, and was winning support across the City. Lazarus shared many of the characteristics of the self-educated, political cadre, those earmarked by the Party as having the necessary leadership qualities. He was a 'natural orator, an energetic and dedicated leader as well as a humorous and attractive personality'.<sup>xi</sup>

At the moment when left wing ideas resonated uniquely with the hopes and fears of middle class Britons, Lazarus's growing appeal extended to students and dons who were drawn to the disputes. They were stimulated partly by Lazarus's charisma and organising abilities, but also by his intellect: he was not intimidated by the stifling atmosphere of the university common room, where he spoke about the housing crisis and other matters at the lunches of Oxford professors. Some of his closest comrades were students; despite differences in class background, Abe in his mid-twenties was not that much older than some of the undergraduates, though his life experience and political acumen were far advanced. As the strength of the communist student group increased, many

undergraduates joined in the protests and saw him as a kind of mentor. One, Mabel Browning, an undergraduate student at St Hilda's fell in love with him (they were to marry in 1937). He lived in various in east Oxford addresses in or near Cowley Road and for a while in Florence Park, which created the sense of a life absorbed in political activity with less time for socialising beyond the Party 'socials' and whist-drives at Hythe Bridge Street. He was disciplined too; his enviable capacity to deal with hecklers rarely led to confrontations with his audience. He disliked drunkenness and his duty to the Party was paramount. Yet here too were signs of the insecurity of the full-time organiser, Lazarus often depending on financial support from Party comrades or wealthier Labour dons and students.

His status in Oxford grew substantially from 1934-1938. As a measure of his growing reputation Lazarus was the obvious choice as a candidate for the Cowley and Iffley ward of Oxford City Council, an electoral battle he was to repeat several times over the next few years. This was made possible by the unusual cooperation between the Labour Party and the Communist Party locally despite pressure from the Labour Party's national leadership. Lazarus had built excellent political and personal links with senior figures in the Oxford Labour Party. He was a regular visitor to the house of Frank Pakenham, who held his political abilities in great regard, while Richard Crossman and Patrick Gordon-Walker were also close allies in many of the campaigns of that time. After the earlier sectarian period when the October Club and Oxford University Labour Club were at odds – the October Club was also banned by the university proctors in 1933 – there was a new unity, and student communists recruited at that time included Phillip Toynbee (who would be elected first Communist President of the Oxford Union in 1938), Denis Healey, Iris Murdoch and Frank Thompson, though the recruitment was much broader than these later well-known figures and included several students from the women's colleges at St Hilda's, Somerville and St Hugh's. Some of the more active communist students included Donovan Brown, a Ruskin student, organiser and speaker at the Oxford Union, Arthur Wynn, a postgraduate scientist who had previously been at Cambridge, and who shared a house with Lazarus for a while and often lent him his motorcycle to get to the meetings, and Peter Rhodes, a Rhodes Scholar from the US who had forged good links with Lewis Jones and the South Wales miners. This was the moment when students began to discover the working classes - in the 1930s the CPGB sent student recruits to

the South Wales mining communities for their induction - and in Oxford Abe Lazarus was a pivotal figure in bridging the gap between 'town' and gown'.

As Duncan Bowie has demonstrated in his detailed study of the Oxford left,<sup>xii</sup> there was increasing convergence in ideas and politics between communists and labour supporters at this time. It would not have been difficult to find common electoral platforms. This included support for new schools and houses, raising outdoor relief payments, reductions in rates, provision for child welfare centres and public baths and for greater involvement of trade unions in council work. The extent of collaboration was such that the Oxford Labour Party executive committee supported communist attempts to affiliate to the Labour Party though this was rejected at Labour's national level. On the other hand, some leading Labour members - Hector Prickett for example - kept secret CP membership and attempts of the CPGB to affiliate to Labour Party continued to receive support. There is no doubt some younger Labour members in particular were influenced by the leftward shift in the city. Frank Pakenham, who had only recently converted to Labour from the Conservatives and became a good friend and neighbour of Lazarus – regularly hosting him and Mabel at his east Oxford home, The Firkins – recalled that 'The Oxford City (Labour) Party was very "left" and among socialist dons and undergraduates alike Marx was on every tongue'. His own socialism he described as a 'pretty red-hot, left wing affair'...<sup>xiii</sup> He carried on: 'The local Labour Party and I myself were very far to the left. We were prepared to join each and every movement intended to ginger up our national leadership'.<sup>xiv</sup> In the event Lazarus got 1,476 votes in the Cowley and Iffley ward in the election of 1936, narrowly failing to get elected.

However, the main political advantage of communist and Labour cooperation – with Lazarus the linchpin of much of the activity – can be seen in the opposition to fascism and support for the Republican side in Spain. It is only recently that the Oxford contribution to this cause has been properly recognised but as elsewhere it dominated Oxford left politics from 1936. Frank Pakenham recalled chairing a 'tumultuous' meeting at Oxford Town Hall with Victor Gollancz, John Strachey, the Red Dean of Canterbury and J.R.Campbell, the editor of the *Daily Worker* among the speakers and Lazarus organising the collection for Spain at the end. There was strong support for the Republican side in Oxford and for the victims of the war. There were four 'colonies' for Basque refugee children in Oxfordshire. The May Day demonstration in Oxford in 1938 was one of the biggest in the country, thousands marching from The

Plain in St.Clements to St Giles where Pakenham and Lazarus addressed them. Denis Healey, who then held responsibility for culture in the communist student group, organised an exhibition at Oriel College of Picasso's Guernica as part of a fundraising campaign. Arthur Exell and colleagues at Morris Motors converted 70 Harley Davidson motor cycles into stretcher carriers and shipped to Spain from Swansea hidden in a food supply. Dons including G.D.H.Cole and Sandy Lindsay were also strong supporters. Among the Oxfordshire volunteers to Spain were three of the Carritt brothers, all communists. <sup>xv</sup>

The communist influence continued in the development of the Popular Front and in opposition to Mosley's Blackshirts. The British Union of Fascists (BUF) had been holding meetings in Oxford, sometimes jointly with the YMCA, since 1933. In opposition Ruskin College students had set up the 'Red Shirts', which was founded to 'preserve the standards of the working class against fascism'. <sup>xvi</sup> They organised protests at fascist meetings and with the support of Oxford Trades Council helped set up the 'Oxford Council of Action against War and Fascism' in May 1933. Engineers, bus workers and railwaymen were among workers who gave their support which was crucial in holding back the advance of the Blackshirts. As Renton notes, the 'most striking feature of the anti-fascist movement in Oxford is that it was based on the trade union movement'. <sup>xvii</sup> Partly as a result of this opposition no BUF meetings were held in Oxford between February 1934 and June 1936.

However, following the growth of the BUF at a national level, the fascists returned for a big meeting in the Carfax Assembly Rooms in May 1936. Mosley arrived with a number of strong bodyguards who started proceedings by marching down the front of the hall in a show of strength as their leader taunted some of the early hecklers ('I know you Ruskin fellows with your strange guardsmen's accents'), telling them that the next shout of 'Red Front' would lead to ejection. Basil Murray, son of the classical scholar Gilbert Murray, responded and was beaten and further fights broke out in which Pakenham, Phillip Toynbee and others were injured, with Blackshirts also among those hospitalised. The violence at that meeting and the association of Mosley with thuggery helped undermine the fascist cause and they were effectively defeated in Oxford from that moment. <sup>xviii</sup>

Lazarus had been a main protagonist in opposing Mosley in Oxford and had urged demonstrators to attend and ask questions at Mosley's meetings but also to be wary of their knuckle-dusters. He was one of the organisers of the

big Hyde Park demonstration against Mosley's Blackshirts in 1936, and was now being recalled regularly to take on extra organisational work in the anti-fascist movement in London (including briefly taking over from Ted Bramley in the east end). The violent clashes at Oxford Town Hall shocked many in the Oxford Labour Party, while at the same time the resistance to fascism on the back of Pressed Steel, Cutteslowe Walls and strong backing for the republican side in Spain, made the question of electoral cooperation between the Labour and Communist Parties feasible, even without the support of Transport House. This reached its peak at the time of the Oxford by-election in 1938, which took place shortly after the Munich agreement and in the midst of Chamberlain's appeasement policy. Patrick Gordon Walker, the Labour candidate, after much negotiation, soul-searching and argument withdrew late in the selection process in favour of Sandy Lindsay, Master of Balliol, who was standing as an independent progressive, though in reality a popular front candidate, who received the support of liberals and dissident conservatives (including Harold Macmillan) in opposition to Quintin Hogg, the official Conservative Party candidate. While the popular mobilisation behind Lindsay (ultimately unsuccessful) owed its appeal to growing anti-appeasement feeling, the role of Lazarus in promoting the party's popular front strategy was also significant. Frank Pakenham (later Lord Longford), an admirer and friend of Lazarus – even if he, like others, was later reticent in admitting as such – certainly attributed the influence of communists in the decision to back Lindsay. 'The coup was engineered, one can say now, by the Oxford Communists with the rest of us more or less starry-eyed dupes'.<sup>xix</sup>

By the late 1930s Lazarus was much in demand, regarded as the CPGB's third most effective speaker after Harry Pollitt and Willie Gallagher and regularly drawn into campaigns and disputes, often travelling between Oxford, London and further afield as the war began. He had become one of those mass leaders described by Raphael Samuel as 'heroic individuals who exemplified communist virtue...people you were honoured to meet because they had given their lives to the cause; people of unbroken spirit'.<sup>xx</sup> He remained a Party loyalist, apparently seamlessly shifting from agitating for the popular front in the mid-1930s to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1939. As late as March 1941 he told a meeting in Bath that both 'Hitler and Churchill held pistols to the head of the working class in both countries', urging his audience to 'Remember this: the lights are still on in Moscow and Leningrad because the people of

Russia didn't want war and they thank Joe Stalin and Molotov for keeping them out of the war'.<sup>xxi</sup>

Three months later, along with the rest of the Party following the Soviet Union's entry into the war, he was now doing his bit to support the national war effort while employed full-time in the Party's Industrial Department as their 'key man to win the labour movement'. This was one of several war-time roles he assumed, which also included responsibility as the first National Organiser of the CPGB's Youth Affairs Committee. He served on the Party's health committee and took on leading organisational roles in east London, South Wales and Devon. Ill-health, with his history of rheumatic fever and heart trouble, prevented him from joining up; though, like many other communists unable for one reason or the other to serve in the armed forces, he took up a position as an ARP Warden, a development which prompted MI5 to require that no confidential information be passed to him.

In fact it was a mark of Lazarus's rising importance as a communist that the security services had been monitoring his political activities closely since the Firestones dispute; the first MI5 notice of Lazarus's activities was back to 1931 when he had contributed to a *Daily Worker* Fighting Fund and again in 1933 when at a meeting in Notting Dale he had defended the Soviet's 'Five Year Plan' against 'capitalist lies'.<sup>xxii</sup> They continued to monitor his activities until the mid-1950s: a perceived threat to the state for over twenty years.

However, the surveillance during his time in Oxford was of a different level from earlier notices. Special Branch officers were placed inside St John's College which overlooked the Martyrs' Memorial at St Giles, Lazarus's regular Sunday evening meeting venue, though his 'moderate' tone was also noted. In June 1940, in the midst of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Inspector Hayter, accompanied by Sergeant Benstead and Detective Constables Ballinger and Diggins, raided the People's Bookshop and temporary home of Lazarus in Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford, where among volumes of books on Marxism they found and confiscated lists of communist members. Lazarus was out at the time though his wife Mabel was reported by the officers present to be 'very sarcastic'. 'She said: I am a communist and proud of it'.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Lazarus himself was aware that he was under scrutiny and had even complained to the Postmaster at its Oxford Sorting Office in September 1939 over the late arrival of letters. 'For some considerable time I have been aware that your department was opening my correspondence but to protest

against such a thing would be futile while the present 'democratic' Conservative government is in power. I do, however, strongly protest at the idea of it taking your investigation department three days to read two of my letters'.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Lazarus was observed for so long – almost his entire active political life – because of his leadership and organising skills and the relative success of his campaigns. He was not alone in this, nor was he unaware of MI5 attentions or would have been surprised by them. It was a reality for leading communists of his generation, adding perhaps to the sense of insecurity as well as potential vulnerability as he sought to maintain an undivided loyalty to his party. Later, under the direction of the obsessive 'Spycatcher' Peter Wright, contemporaries and friends of Lazarus were suspected of being involved in espionage and one, Arthur Wynn, was discovered to be a Soviet agent known as 'Scott', an overly enthusiastic (as far as the Soviet NKVD were concerned) supplier of lists of student communists and details of their likely career paths. Recent releases of MI5 files of prominent communists – Eric Hobsbawm and Doris Lessing among them – have increased interest in communist lives and if treated with the scepticism and critical eye one might attribute to any official government document, they can be useful for the researcher. In the case of Lazarus they help to build a wider picture of the man; his movements, loyalties and friendships as well as his vulnerabilities, and ultimately his deteriorating relationship with the CPGB leadership from the mid-1940s, as the Party's popularity and his own status within it, began to wane. Arthur Exell, of course, did not have access to this material. Moreover, the files help us get a clearer idea of some of the 'difficulties and disagreements' and the sense of 'tragedy and decline' that Raphael Samuel, in his comments to Arthur Exell, had suggested may have engulfed Lazarus.

Above all, it seemed that Lazarus was being 'boxed-in by inner-party life', as Samuel suspected, and herein perhaps lies the 'unanswered question' he raised with Exell. After years of constantly moving house and staying in temporary accommodation at the behest of some new Party duty, he began to suffer from the constant demands on his time to serve on this or that committee, to stand for office, or to address meetings. His health was constantly a problem and he started to take more breaks from work. For example, in turning down an offer of standing as a party candidate in 1944 Lazarus stated:

‘Ever since I worked for the Party I have been one of those people that have been switched about. The longest I stayed in one place is Oxford....You see I am not as fit as I should be. I have this ‘ticker’ and there is a limit to what I can do.’<sup>xxv</sup> Nevertheless he continued to stand in the Cowley and Iffley Ward, where at least he had maintained a strong local following - Vote Abe-ly for Lazarus his election slogan – and in 1945 achieved over 2000 votes. The squatters’ movement, which attempted to reclaim houses and military bases for common habitation in the housing shortage of the immediate post-war years, revived some earlier battles and absorbed more of his energy, but he was tired.

In 1947 he made clear that he was ‘not willing to accept nomination for the EC’,<sup>xxvi</sup> indicating both that he was frustrated with aspects of the Party’s central organisation and that he was beginning to doubt his own abilities. However, the most serious crisis he endured which hastened his end as a CPGB leader was of a personal nature but one which fundamentally tested his loyalty to the Party and the strengths of his beliefs. His marriage to Mabel had become more difficult. She had become less involved in Party work and was pursuing a university career in scientific work in London and then Oxford. They had a daughter in 1942, but long spells apart had put pressure on their marriage as it did for other families of full-time Party workers. In 1948 he started a relationship with Inez Hill, first wife of Christopher Hill, the historian who had been a student communist and Oxford friend of Lazarus from the mid-1930s. Hill, just establishing himself as a Marxist historian of the English Civil War (and a leading figure in the CP Historians Group), was at the time a loyal Party member before becoming one of the most prominent dissidents to leave the Party in the aftermath of 1956. Inez Hill was also a party member (unsurprisingly Lazarus had met her at a ‘Party outing’), though regarded by some as an unreliable comrade with bohemian tendencies. (She would leave the Party and her husband shortly after). The affair made Lazarus doubt his commitment to the Party and he seriously considered leaving. He was reported as being ‘very upset’, and on the verge of giving up political work and even thinking of leaving the Party altogether. He was also concerned that his actions may have implications for Hill’s academic career, at a time when there was a Cold War purge on communists working in universities and public institutions. He was ‘in a hell of a state’, Johnny Gollan reported. Arthur Exell was ‘shocked’.<sup>xxvii</sup> Communist leaders were not merely respected for their self-sacrifice and devotion to the cause, but for leading lives beyond moral



reproach, of exemplary virtuous behaviour befitting a party of a 'new kind'. Personal and family memoirs of former Party members, from Douglas Hyde to David Aaronovitch<sup>xxviii</sup> argued that this was far from reality, but it remained important in the presentation of the Party's image.

In any case Lazarus decided that he could no longer continue working as district organiser in the Oxford offices. The seriousness of the situation and what it might mean for Oxford and the CPGB more widely if they were to lose such a 'leading comrade' meant that a succession of leaders tried to talk Lazarus round, going so far as to give him extensive advice on his personal life. Bob Stewart, one of several Scottish leaders, a Calvinistic teetotaler and temperance advocate, foundation member of the CPGB who had nominally been one of the Party's main links to Moscow, often assumed the role of mentoring or 'counselling' younger members. Three years previously he had listened sympathetically to James Klugmann's account of being caught up in Cambridge espionage activities and had reassured the latter of the correctness of his position.<sup>xxix</sup> Now, Stewart was given the task of talking Lazarus round. Lazarus told him that the Party 'was his life' and that he was 'completely loyal' to it, evidently concerned that Harry Pollitt should know that his Party fidelity was unshaken. Stewart gave him what can only be described as a moral lecture, telling him to 'stamp on' the problem, 'leave the woman', separate from his wife and get back to work, noting along the way that it was a 'difficult age' (Lazarus was 37 by this time) and citing King Edward VIII's marriage difficulties of a few years earlier. The importance given to Lazarus's value to the Party overrode any other consideration – even Christopher Hill suggested that his wife, a 'bourgeois go-getter', would ruin Lazarus financially and he would be better off without her – and he was urged by Stewart and other leaders to end the affair for the benefit of the Party. In the event Harry Pollitt advised him to get away for a while. Some thought he was suffering from mental illness while another proposed solution was to send him to Czechoslovakia for specialist medical attention. In fact, the records show that some in the leadership thought that Lazarus had grown tired of his Party commitments and was using the affair as an 'excuse' to leave the Party. From this time on he was no longer trusted by the Party leadership.<sup>xxx</sup>

In the event he and Ernie Keeling, who now took over from Lazarus as the main district organiser in the Oxford offices, came up with a compromise. The official position delivered to members was that Lazarus - by now close to a breakdown - was 'very ill' and needed some time away from Party work.

Lazarus had made it clear he would not be returning as South Midlands District Secretary. After much deliberation and on doctors' advice he took an extended holiday in the South of France. However, he cut his holiday short and, making clear he did not want to return to Oxford, he soon took up another post as Circulation Agent for the Daily Worker in December 1948. By March 1949 he was reconciled with his wife and in August of that year was speaking again for the Party on the willingness of the Soviet Union and the 'Eastern Democracies' to be friends with Britain – the Cold War now well under way. He remained on good terms with Harry Pollitt, working for him in the ill-fated Rhondda 1950 election campaign, and made another return two months later as Secretary of the newly formed West Middlesex District in April. This, however, was not a success and a mixture of more ill-health (an operation on his nose) and not being hard-line enough at the peak of the Cold War, meant that he left this role just over a year later, from which point he took on a quick succession of minor roles, including the Propaganda Secretary of the London District. In September 1951 he was deported from another holiday in France due to irregularities over his passport - Joe Silver, one of his earlier pseudonyms had come to the attention of the authorities. A year later he was again close to a breakdown, and given two further months off with serious doubts that he would be able to continue working as he had in the past. These doubts were shortly confirmed and probably his last prominent duty for the Party was as the *World News and Views* representative in Bucharest in July 1953. Thereafter, he worked as librarian in the Bernal Peace Library in central London and could still be found at street corner meetings in West London in the early 1960s, by which time he had married for a second time. He died in 1967. At his funeral, Robert Burns was cited in the memory of one who deserved a better fate.

'Not one poor stone to tell thy name,

Or make that virtues known,

But what avails to me, to thee,

The sculpture of a stone'.

Assessing the rise and fall of Abe Lazarus's political career is not a simple matter. It does not conform to the cases of other leading figures who may have left over Hungary, revelations about Stalin, the declining role of the CPGB in the trade union movement or who drifted into the life of a Party functionary.

Lazarus had survived and adapted to the various changes in line since the 1930s. As far as we can see the shift from 'Class Against Class' to the Popular Front, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, support for the war after the Soviet Union's intervention and even the constraints of the Cold War were not the decisive factors in the crisis that engulfed him, even if he lacked the fervour of the hard-line apparatchik. Rather it was the expectations the Party imposed on its mass leaders that ultimately proved too demanding and impossible to sustain as the CPGB's fortunes dipped. Here, we can see that the downturn in Lazarus's politics, which had consumed all aspects of his life, mirrored the Party's wider standing. In *The Lost World of British Communism* Raphael Samuel outlined the characteristics and constraints of communist leaders. They were perceived by members as people of unshakeable faith. The demands placed upon them meant that 'the leader principle, as it operated in the Communist Party, was very different from that prevalent in the Labour Party and the big trade unions. It eschewed any notion of personality, it allowed no space for the fixer, the broker or the 'card' ... Party leaders had none of that strutting self-importance which is the hallmark of the Westminster politician, nor yet of the town hall grandee, promoting proteges, signing expensive contracts or distributing largesse. ... Leaders were admired, when they were admired, not in and for themselves, but as bearers of the Party's cherished virtues: dignity, fortitude, perseverance, sacrifice, learning and (this being a British party) good humour'. <sup>xxx</sup>

Lazarus had all these values and in the inter-war period was held in awe by members, influenced some later notable Labour politicians and was respected by allies well beyond the CPGB. For the Party's national leadership he was for a long while perceived as a 'leading comrade', in whom the hopes and expectations of the next campaign, recruitment drive or strike, were relentlessly invested. Of course, for Lazarus, this proved to be unsustainable. His experience as a 'mass' leader for a brief period in the 1930s would not be repeated: after all the CPGB only enjoyed anything approaching a mass following for any period of time in the South Wales and Scottish coalfields and London's East End. Ill-health was increasingly a barrier for Lazarus in the face of these challenges but there was another aspect to leadership which he found uncomfortable. Communist leaders were perceived to be 'set apart' from their followers by what Samuel called 'moral elitism'. <sup>xxxii</sup> Disdain for aspects of cheap culture and behaviour in preference for self-education, worthy pursuits and serious reading gave rise to some of an exaggerated sense of respectability

that was perceived as typical of the advanced sections of the skilled working class, which imposed its own disciplines and constraints. Leaders were not only organisers and orators, with a 'superior understanding' of the world, they were seen to set rigorous standards of behaviour in what remained a top-down hierarchy. There was a mythical side to this of course: communist leaders in fact had to balance a range of competing loyalties, some of them private as well as public. For members, and sometimes for Party historians too, the tensions between these competing loyalties were overlooked and under-investigated. It was this perhaps that Raphael Samuel had in mind when prompting Arthur Exell to look further into the unanswered question of Abe Lazarus's life.

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<sup>i</sup> Olive Gibbs, *Our Olive: the Autobiography of Olive Gibbs* Robert Dugdale, 1989 p92

<sup>ii</sup> See Arthur Exell: 'Morris Motors in the 1930s' *History Workshop Journal* Part 1 Volume 6 Issue 1 pp 52-78 and Part II Volume 7 Spring 1979 pp 45-65

<sup>iii</sup> This correspondence can be found in the Abe Lazarus File at the Oxford History Centre in Cowley: MSS 12/1

<sup>iv</sup> Arthur Exell 'Morris Motors in the 1930s: Part II', *History Workshop Journal* Spring 1979 p59

<sup>v</sup> R.C. Whiting *The View From Cowley* Clarendon Press, 1983 p67

<sup>vi</sup> Peter Collinson, *The Cutteslowe Walls: a Study in Social Class* Faber and Faber 1963 p60

<sup>vii</sup> Duncan Bowie 'Radicalism, Socialism and Labourism in Oxford 1880-1980' unpublished 1983 (Bodleian Library) p234

<sup>viii</sup> Bowie op cit: Peter Collinson, *The Cutteslowe Walls* Faber and Faber 1963 p 60

<sup>ix</sup> Arthur Exell, 'Morris Motors in the 1930s Part II' *History Workshop Journal* Spring 1979 p53

<sup>x</sup> Abe Lazarus File MSS 12/1

<sup>xi</sup> Peter Collinson *The Cutteslowe Walls* op cit p60

<sup>xii</sup> Bowie op cit

<sup>xiii</sup> Frank Pakenham *Born to Believe* Cape 1953 p79

<sup>xiv</sup> See Frank Pakenham *Born to Believe* op cit p89

<sup>xv</sup> Chris Farman, Valery Rose and Liz Woolley: *No Other Way: Oxfordshire and the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* Oxford International Brigade Memorial Committee 2015

<sup>xvi</sup> David Renton, *Red Shirts and Black: Fascists and anti-Fascists in Oxford in the 1930s*. Ruskin College (Occasional Publication) 1996

<sup>xvii</sup> David Renton, *Red Shirts and Black Fascists and Anti-Fascists in Oxford*

<sup>xviii</sup> Frank Pakenham *Born to Believe*; David Renton, *Red Shirts and Black*.

<sup>xix</sup> Frank Pakenham *Born to Believe* op cit p91

<sup>xx</sup> Raphael Samuel *The Lost World of British Communism* Verso 2006 p121

<sup>xxi</sup> Special Branch Report of meeting of Bath Communist Party, Marlborough Buildings 30/3/1941 National Archives (TNA) KV 2/2000

<sup>xxii</sup> TNA KV 2/1998

<sup>xxiii</sup> TNA KV 2/1999

<sup>xxiv</sup> TNA KV 2/1999

<sup>xxv</sup> TNA KV 2/2000

<sup>xxvi</sup> TNA KV 2/2000

<sup>xxvii</sup> Abe Lazarus File MSS 12/1

<sup>xxviii</sup> Douglas Hyde, *I Believed* Heinemann 1951; David Aaronovitch *Party Animals: My Family and Other Communists* Jonathan Cape 2015

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<sup>xxix</sup> Geoff Andrews *The Shadow Man*, I.B.Tauris 2015 pp 102-104

<sup>xxx</sup> MI5 evidently considered the possibility of Lazarus's leaving the Party a serious matter. The detailed correspondence on this affair can be found at TNA KV 2/2000 and in Hill's own MI5 file KV 2/3941.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Ibid p 124

<sup>xxxii</sup> For a detailed discussion of the CPGB's 'moral elitism' see Samuel op cit 184-202