

Title: Reilly, Sidney Reilly versus Grisha Rosenblum of Odessa: More BUND than Bond?

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It was not uncommon for Eastern European Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, once they made their way to England or the United States, to fictionalize or outright invent their lives. But few managed to hide the traces of their original life story as successfully as Sidney Reilly, the famous turn-of-the-century British spy who served as inspiration for Fleming's James Bond. And yet we do know that when still in Russia, Reilly was a messenger for "The Friends of Enlightenment" (Друзья просвещения), in which capacity he was supposedly even arrested in 1892 and spent some time in prison. "The Friends of Enlightenment" was a secular Jewish organization which, together with their European brethren, advocated Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment and deeper integration into the culture of the countries Jews found themselves living in while still keeping significant cultural autonomy. As a largely secular movement, Haskalah was in many ways a necessary precursor of Bund, the Jewish Worker's Union, which was formed in 1897, when Reilly was already in London.

Reilly, in his own retellings of his political activities as a young man, deliberately omitted all references to the Jewish nature of the organization he belonged to — or, for that matter, to his own humble Jewish origins. How well he succeeded in persuading those around him to believe his mythmaking betrays not only Reilly's remarkable talent at re-inventing himself but also his listeners' equally remarkable gullibility. His real story was far from unique: it was about a radicalized and largely secular young Jew living in Odessa who chafed under restriction imposed on him as a Jew and joined one of many organizations that sought more justice and freedom for his people. Definitely, at least in these early stages of his activities, much more "Bund" than "Bond."

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