

FIGHTING DIRTY

Seventy years after its first showdown with fascists on the streets of London, the 43 Group is the subject of a new TV drama. **Judi Herman** meets two of the organisation's former members



Martin White in his tailor shop in Spitalfields

Martin White welcomes me to his Spitalfields tailoring emporium, his workaday outfit a pinstriped shirt, spotted handkerchief and monogrammed cufflinks. He's surrounded by bales of cloth, including "the most expensive fabric in the world, guanaco wool." Across London, I visit Julius Konopinski in his Hendon home. His wife brings us tea in translucent bone china as he relaxes in his chair. Before he retired, he had a luggage business in Victoria.

Both men have a vibrancy which belies

their years. What they also have in common is membership of the 43 Group, the Jewish vigilante outfit, set up in 1945 to combat the reappearance of Oswald Mosley and his fascists on the streets of London.

Konopinski describes the fascists, "marching and speaking at Speaker's Corner, talking about 'the filthy Jews, that there wasn't enough gas in Auschwitz'". You had ex-servicemen, the war wounded, ex-prisoners of war, decorated people, who suddenly found this on their doorstep! They said, 'We didn't fight the war to come back and find the same

people saying the same things as before."

Though many British fascists, including Oswald Mosley, had been interned during the war, by 1945 they had been released onto the streets again. Konopinski was a boy of just 15 in 1945. In 1939, he and his family had escaped Germany. But going to and from school in Bethnal Green he faced antisemitism all over again. "I had to run the gauntlet, harassed by adults and children. I learnt to fight and come out winning.

"I went to Ridley Road in Dalston, which became like Speakers' Corner at weekends... people saw I was pretty handy, fearless. I became trusted. If I was asked to do something, I'd do it", says Konopinski of his early involvement with the Group, who referred to him as "soldier" or "commando".

The Group's first serious confrontation was in February 1946, when four Jewish ex-servicemen out for a drink came across a Mosleyite rally at Whitestone Pond, Hampstead. The late Morris Beckman, a founder member of the Group, was one of the four exhilarated by taking direct action that night. He recounts in his book *The 43 Group: Battling with Mosley's Blackshirts*, how he and his friends took on two opponents each, banging their heads together before speeding away. It was that incident that led to the inaugural meeting of the Group the following month to which 43 people – 38 ex-servicemen and five women – turned up.

From the start, the Group operated alone. The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Board of Deputies of British Jews wanted nothing to do with it, says Konopinski.

"None of the members did it for gain or notoriety," he says. "Most wanted to keep it quiet, do the job and go away. It was the first time Jews took the offensive. When we heard they [the fascists] were going to start on us, we said we would hit them harder than they could us. And we did." I dare to ask what they used for weapons. "Anything! We used arson, GBH, but we never killed."

But his commitment took a toll. "I was a seven days a week man, available at all times. It became an obsession. I lost quite

a few years of my social life and that's why I didn't marry till I was 26. It spoils my life."

Martin White came to the Group at the end of the 1940s. "I've been fighting antisemitism since I was five," he says. "This boy called me a dirty Jew and crushed my hand in the desk. I went home crying and my older sister said, 'Go back tomorrow, make sure you punch him,' and that's what I did. The only way to stop them [the fascists] was an iron bar on the head". He didn't carry an iron bar – just part of a dumbbell, "which made my punch that much heavier".

The turning point was in 1948. Mosley had radicalised sympathisers by running 'book clubs' where like-minded individuals would meet. Now he launched the Union Movement, amalgamating over 50 of these splinter groups.

"They had huge marches with drums and bands," remembers Konopinski. "We had to bring them into notoriety. People [from the Group] got themselves arrested. When the police realised they were dealing with decorated ex-servicemen they didn't know what to do. They said 'You might as well go home' but our men said 'No, we want our day in court' and we came into public domain. The world began to realise that there were pre-war fascists, Nazi sympathisers, on the streets again."

Konopinski was arrested more than once. "In 1948 I was arrested on a minor charge at Ridley Road. The next day additional charges were placed and it ended up as a conspiracy charge." He ascribes this escalation to the fact that the police officers who arrested him were apparently fresh from a tour of duty in Palestine where they had experienced clashes with Jewish fighters. "The fascists felt they were protected by the police."

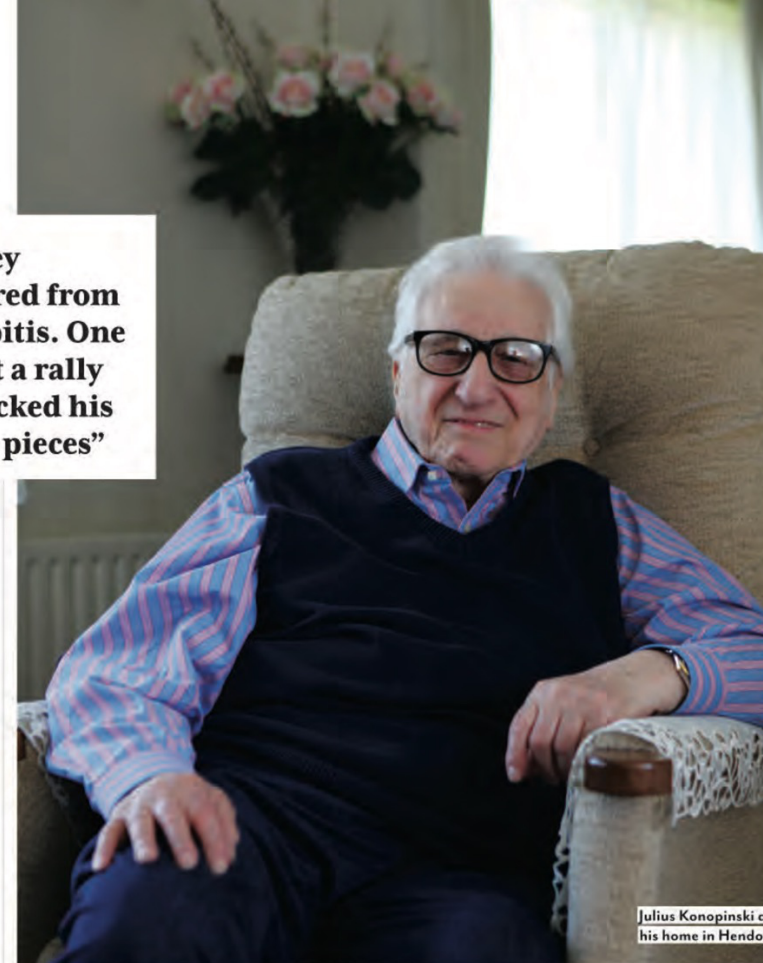
Konopinski himself fought in Palestine with Vidal Sassoon, famously an active 43

Morris Beckman, a member of the 43 Group, speaking against fascism in the East End after World War II



JEREMY FREEDMAN; ELISABETH BLANCHET; © JEWISH MUSEUM

"Mosley suffered from phlebitis. One day at a rally we kicked his leg to pieces"



Julius Konopinski at his home in Hendon

Group member. "When I got back from Palestine, the Group was busy because, once Israel had gained its independence, its antagonists became even more virile."

By the time White joined the Group at their London headquarters in Panton Street the climate was already beginning to change. "I went to a couple of Blackshirt meetings. At one, a fight broke out and I hurt this fellow and the 43 Group asked me not to be involved anymore! They didn't approve of my antics."

Perhaps the Group's veterans were reluctant to endorse the sort of violence they initiated because they were winding down their activities. Beckman describes how, by 1949, "the hive of activity that had been 4 Panton Street was no more". By December, they had largely seen the fascists off the streets and in 1951 Mosley left the country. Konopinski describes a ruthless, if pragmatic, 43 Group initiative that might have helped him on his way. "Mosley suffered from phlebitis. One day at a public rally, instead of fists, legs were raised and we kicked his leg to pieces."

The Group disbanded in April 1950. "Six years after the war, ex-servicemen thought they had done enough and could get on with their lives," says Konopinski, who opposed ending the Group, even "getting chucked out" of the building they

were meeting in because he wanted a vote on the issue. But the end of the Group did enable him to get on with his life. "I was able to socialise again, meet my future wife, get married, have a couple of kids."

But for Konopinski this was not quite the end of the story. "One day in 1962, driving to work, I'm greeted by a banner in Trafalgar Square: 'Free Britain from Jewish control'. It was Colin Jordan, and his Neo Nazis," he says. Shocked at the familiar sloganeering, he formed a new initiative, the 62 Committee, along with some ex-members of the 43 Group. Together they engaged in a bitter campaign against this new wave of fascists. The group broke up in the mid-80s when the National Front became a legal political party.

Now, Konopinski and White have both been recruited again, this time by researchers for a television drama about the 43 Group being made jointly by the BBC and NBC, which is planned for 2017.

Summing up his days in the Group, Konopinski says "My little crowd worked together seven days a week, 24 hours a day. You totally relied for your life on the person next to you."

Did they stay close after disbanding? "Yes, always close. There are people I meet today and the conversation starts where we left off 30 years ago." ■