

## **KUTNO DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

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*translated from the Yiddish by Mindle Crystel Gross*

The year was 1914, July 28<sup>th</sup>. My mother sent me to my uncle in Kalisz to attend the wedding of his son. Guests gathered from various towns, among them a great-uncle, Shalom Itzik Krośniewski, from the town of Babiak, near Płock. He was a great scholar, studied day and night. As we later learned, he became an early victim of the Russian Cossacks at the beginning of the war. They murdered him in the Babiak prayer-house while he and other chassidim were studying there.

Several days after the wedding, a Shabbat, we, a group of girls, went to the Kalisz town garden. Suddenly, two airplanes began to fly over the garden. It became very noisy, an uproar. Many people did not understand what was happening. Like many others, I ran home, frightened and found out that these were German spy airplanes. My uncle advised everyone to return home. I left for Kutno early Sunday.

During the entire train trip, the conversation was about war. We felt as if black clouds were hanging over our heads. All the pleasure we had experienced at the wedding vanished from us in one minute.

By the time we arrived in Kutno in the morning, all the streets, gates and walls were already covered with large placards which called for war mobilization. Groups of people stood around with frightened glances, and did not want to believe their eyes. At dawn on Monday, while we still lay in our beds, we heard the neighing of hundreds of horses, the sound of their iron shoes and the confused sighs of people. The streets were crowded. Men with sorrowful glances and heavy packs on their backs marched to the train station. Their wives accompanied them with tears in their eyes and withheld sobs, leading terrified children by the hand. There was a terrible smell all through the town from

the horses – but who saw or heard anything now. Everything happened so quickly and suddenly.

The war had barely begun when there was already talk that it would not last longer than four weeks. After that same day (Monday afternoon), we received the surprising news that Kalisz, from where I had returned only yesterday, had been bombed by the Germans and destroyed. Many people perished. Everybody in our household sighed: *Oy, the uncle*. We could not think too long about the uncle. We were immediately notified that the next day, Tuesday, the first advance post would arrive, and if they would encounter the Russians and the latter would shoot at them resulting in German victims, then they would do the same to our town as they had done to Kalisz.

One can imagine everyone's fright and confusion. We prayed all night that it would be better if the Russian advance posts sustained losses rather than the German. We could barely wait for morning. Rumors quickly began to spread, that the town head had hidden himself somewhere and had taken with him about twenty soldiers, and if the Germans made an appearance, he would attack and murder them. And this is what actually happened...

Shooting was heard not far from town. We immediately found out that four Germans and two Russians had fallen dead. Turmoil and terror developed. *Soon our Kutno will be no more than a pile of ashes*. It is difficult to describe in writing what happened. Whoever had money rented larger wagons. Those with less money rented smaller wagons on which they piled their few possessions. They went wherever they could. The draymen charged whatever they could get. Therefore, many poor women with children in their arms, walked on foot, not even knowing where they were going.

Characteristically, all the men remained in town. My mother, younger sister and my sister-in-law (my brother Abraham Erdberg's wife), with a small child, left on a small wagon to friends in a nearby village. Riding in a wagon on such a lovely summer day, I thought: *Why are those people doing such bad things to one another? Why did we leave Grandfather, Papa and my brother?* I said to my mother:

— Let's go back home.

Mama answered:

— We will remain in contact with our town. Your brother will telephone us and tell us what is happening there...

Actually, as soon as we arrived, my brother telephoned. We were staying in a village with rich Jewish aristocrats of our acquaintance who had a telephone. The German military had not yet arrived and the town was still safe. But there were hundreds of people in the streets – some sick, who were in Ciechocinek to take the cure. They could now not catch a train to return home. The town was doing everything possible in order to find wagons in which to send these unfortunates to their homes. Meanwhile, there arrived and passed through many Austrian military with cannons and guns. We all began to cry and tremble out of fear. *They are going to bomb our town to take revenge for the four German soldiers*.

My brother telephoned us again, and calmed us, that the town officials and the rabbi were preparing a festive

reception for the Germans, so that the town should not be bombed. In front of the town hall, they placed a long-covered table with all kinds of good things: wine, liquor, roasted geese – and so forth. Even though we had received all these fine announcements from my brother by telephone, we here, in the village, were restless. We did not sleep the entire night. The younger children nestled close to their parents, sighing and groaning together: *Now our town will become a mountain of ash, together with our nearest – all will be destroyed*. The night appeared endless to us, like the Jewish exile, as we anxiously awaited daylight.



Poster about a Hebrew dramatic literary celebration in 1917.

Early in the morning (Wednesday), we were notified that we could return home. Everything had taken place peacefully. The Germans were behaving politely. We bid goodbye to our friends, thanking them, and travelled home. Upon our return, we found our bundles, tied the way we had left them. We unpacked everything, and thought we would return to our normal routine of work, but not everything proceeded as we had assumed. It was war – long weeks, months, years...

The first half of the day saw the arrival of Russian advance posts, the second half – German. So, in the morning, we were Russian subjects, and in the afternoon – German.

Meanwhile, the town was managed by a combined militia. At the beginning, the Jews felt the pain of war before other nationalities. The Russians shouted: *Beat the Jew!* There before my eyes stood a Cossack with a long spear. I barely escaped with my life. This happened at a time when I wanted to cross the street to buy bread.



Cossacks in occupied Kutno – 1914

The Cossacks with the big fur hats caused much fear in us. They caught all the chickens they saw in the courtyards, twisted their heads off, dug pits, prepared fires, roasted the fowl and ate like savages. In the afternoon, the Germans also looked for chickens, but did not roast them in pits. They came only to the Jewish homes in the courtyards and requested them to clean the chickens and to cook them. Sometimes they even paid for this. I must comment that both the Russian and the Germans caught only Jewish fowl...

We thought that the Germans would be our liberators, and therefore did not refuse to cook for them, gave them sleeping accommodations. That is why the non-Jewish neighbors railed against us, reported us to the Russian Cossacks. Little pogroms upon Jews took place every morning. The only relief was that in the afternoon, the Cossacks had to leave town. Right after their departure on their huge horses, the Germans made an appearance.

Quite often, the Cossacks took young Jews along with them, men who had been pointed out by the Poles as having friendly conversations with the Germans. One of them, Yitzhak Domanowicz, was tortured to death by them in a neighboring town, and another, whose name I don't recall. Many young people were dragged away and held in prisons for no reason whatsoever.

After several weeks of cat and mouse games between the Russians and Germans, large divisions of German military arrived, bringing a great amount of food and ammunition. This march of the military lasted an entire day. They immediately began to dig trenches on the outskirts of town. The entire town was in a feverish state of war. Anyone who could prepared food. Neighbors gathered at night in the cellars of their houses.

A food shortage began to be felt. Anyone who had more money purchased a lot and better food, and those who had little money, had to make do with a minimum amount of food, e.g., bread baked from buckwheat flour, from potato skins, cereals from various offal. On the night when we did not go down to the cellar, we had to go to bed at the onset of darkness. We were not allowed to have any light. Every military man had the right to shoot into a house where he saw a ray of light.

The sound of cannons was heard day and night, sometimes stronger and sometimes weaker. The earth trembled. We stayed like this in our house or in the cellar, half-hungry and in deadly fear.

One evening, we heard stronger shooting than usual. Everyone went down into the cellars and remained there all night. The frightened children nestled against their mothers. Everyone prayed for daylight so we would not feel quite so fearful. The cannons could be heard louder and closer. Even in the cellars the trembling of the earth could be felt. When day began to dawn, one person of the group said that he would go out carefully to find out what was happening. He returned with a smile and said that it was quiet; it appeared that the battle was over.

We all ran out into the street and a dreadful picture appeared before our eyes. Thousands of rifles were lying in



Jewish forced laborers unloading wagons – 1915

the street. Dead and wounded were being carried on stretchers. Blood ran from beneath the sheets. Moans could be heard from some of the stretchers, and from others – high-pitched, frightened screams and others – total silence. Later, the German military marched through the streets with song.

That same day, the Germans took command of the entire town economy, installed the municipality, brought in electricity, began to fix streets, brought in machinery which we had never seen. They immediately took young people (from 17 to 40) for the hardest work. They sent a very large portion of them to Germany for hard labor. Many became crippled or were killed as a result of the hard labor. My cousin, Azriel Erdberg, a youth of 17, was blinded by a dynamite explosion in Germany. (He died in London in 1964.)

We became aware that wounded Jewish soldiers were in hospital with none to care for them. A group of boys and girls organized a self-help and asked permission to enter the hospital. We saw terrible pictures there. The wounded were lying on the bare floors, their shirts – holes burned by bullets, open wounds visible through them. They lay there, weak from hunger and thirst. We brought clothing and food and partially relieved their suffering and loneliness.

Several days later, a series of vaccinations and injections began to prevent illnesses and taking photographs for passes. Young and old had to remain in the town theatre, which was the gathering place, and wait for their row.

German generals were quartered in wealthier homes; in middle-class houses – officers, ill nurses and ordinary soldiers.

It was almost winter. The need and poverty grew with each passing day. The German powers began to remove all products from the country. In those houses where there were

officers or soldiers – it was still tolerable. The military personnel brought a little coal, bread, some beans. But in the poor houses where no military had been quartered, the need was very great. Food cards were instituted. For each person – a half-pound of bread, a quarter-pound of meat, and a pound of potatoes each day. The poor did not have money even for this. They stood in line for days on end in order to receive this little bit of food.

Fighter planes flew above our heads. Some time later, even that little bit of food was unavailable. The wealthy had stored sugar, flour, fat, potatoes. The cannons sounded constantly. They were aimed at Warsaw, which was 300 miles from our town, Kutno. Nevertheless, we made a valiant effort to see that our life continued in a normal fashion for as far as the war conditions allowed.

As in the larger cities, the scarcity of food was great. Warsaw had been besieged for almost a year, where there was a great resistance effort and many people came from the big cities to the little towns where there became a revival. We became accustomed to eating, sleeping and strolling to the sounds of cannon thunder.

Nevertheless, during the war years, we established various unions, organizations, drama groups, because with the influx of young people from the large cities, our Kutno experienced a period of prosperity. The actor, Yaakov Wajslie (died in Australia) led a drama circle for a period of several years. He had a talented group with him which excelled in its performances. We presented "*The Dybbuk*" by Sh. Anski, "*With the Stream*" by Shalom Asz, and other plays. This theatre of drama experienced great success.

The trains ran as usual as far as Warsaw, so we travelled there and back. All the usual means of earning a living failed. People came up with various productive ideas, smuggling food for the large cities.

Mostly the, young clever girls took chances. They hid meat, flour, sugar, in their dresses and travelled this way. Several times a week, there were so-called *tea-houses* in Jewish homes for the Germans. The men stood outside the house and called: *Do you want to drink tea?* Inside, the women prepared tea and a snack. The daughters were all dressed up and ready to serve the tea. They did this because they wanted to earn a few gildn, to have money for some bread. Secondly, maybe they would receive a favor from an officer or soldier – let there be an acquaintanceship.

We lived this way for three years, in the most difficult conditions. We hoped that every day the war would end. Naturally, elderly people lived through this with more difficulty than we, the youth. They ran about, putting their lives in danger, so as to earn a gildn to keep themselves alive. Some Jews had hidden little mills for grinding gruel. The gruel was made mostly of potato peels and other offal. Every morning, my mother went to an acquaintance of ours who had a little hand mill and with the last few groshn brought back a little gruel beneath her shawl.

Mordechai Pszorek (Shalom Asz's character in "*Motke the Thief*"), earned the best living during these times. The girls who stayed with him received pretty clothes. He was not stingy, paying good prices gladly. He and his wife were seen shopping almost every day: he – with his broad, open shirt. From beneath the hat which was cocked to one



An official greeting to Sholem Aleichem by the youth group of Kutno, Poland, on the occasion of the humorist's visit to that city shortly before World War I.—From the YIVO Collection of the Yivo Archives.

Greeting for Shalom Aleichem on the occasion of his coming to Kutno in 1914 (from YIVO archives)

side, there peeked his longish face, and his wife – with long earrings and pock-marked face, and in every store bought the most expensive items.

We had new troubles every day, new suffering. Although the Germans, after occupying the town, ordered that the entire population be inoculated against cholera, typhus or against smallpox – it still did not help due to the difficult living conditions. The typhus epidemic erupted and claimed many lives, mostly those of middle-age, between 40 and 50. Entire families fell ill at the same time. It occurred quite often that young people, who had returned home from the hospital healthy, did not find their parents alive. To our good fortune, only one person in my family fell ill – a cousin of mine, the orphan Freida Strauch, who was raised with us. She perished in Auschwitz during WWII along with her son, Yitzhak. The extraordinary circumstances also stole the life of my only brother, Abraham Erdberg, may he rest in peace. He was 33 years old, a well-known Hebrew teacher, had the first modernized *cheder*, a great Zionist social activist. Even in 1917, he wanted to go to *Eretz Israel* for a post from *Keren Kayemet*. Unfortunately, this long-cherished dream was not fulfilled.

As much as possible, we attempted to accustom ourselves to these conditions. The Polish neighbors caused various attacks against the Jews. The schools were regulated by a combined administration. The Polish language took precedence, and the German language held second place. Every day saw the arrival of darker clouds. The Germans carried out inspections, most especially in Jewish homes, checking every corner, removing everything that was brass or copper; samovars, candlesticks, mortars, even doorknobs. They searched the attics and cellars, took away items that had been handed down from generation to generation. They didn't even allow a dog to live in peace.

For ten years, we had had a dog in our house. The German officer who quartered with us took a liking to him and tied him to his bed with a rope. He left and brought back another dog. Several soldiers came to help him tie the dogs together with a heavy iron chain. This was not an easy job.

The dogs barked with loud voices, resisted when they were led out of the courtyard and their barking was full of fear. Our dog whined fearfully, didn't want to go, kept pulling back. It was bitterly difficult to see. My sister and I went into the house so as not to hear or see the frightened animals.

Rumors spread that the Germans would be leaving Poland. Poland would become an independent state. Either way, we felt unprotected. The Jews already did have their own self-defense should it become necessary to do so. The chaotic economy continued to roll along downhill. The unrest was palpable.

Once in 1918 or 1919, (I don't remember the precise date), I was on my way home from kindergarten where I was enrolled. To my astonishment – I encountered in the street Polish military. They were marching with song and music. There was not a single German soldier to be seen.

The Poles immediately began to install order their own way. Once again, we Jews began to live in fear. We thought that the war had finally ended, but in 1920, the Polish-Bolshevik War began again. Russian military was to be found from the gates of Warsaw to Włocławek.

The war left behind in its wake sorrow and heartbreak, widows and orphans, which was felt long after.

Slowly, the sky began to clear. We believed and hoped that a new day was coming. The youth, together with the older generation of community activists, began many projects. The Jewish library in Kutno was one of the largest libraries in the area. The elementary school was also one of the finest Hebrew schools.

In 1916, there arrived in Kutno the well-known lawyer, cultural activist and writer, Noah Pryłucki (perished during WWII). He organized Jewish schools in the name of Y. L. Perec, which developed well and existed until the outbreak of WWII.

### HILLEL ZEITLIN IN KUTNO

I will conclude my memories of WWI with a memory of a year or two before the war, when there arrived in Kutno to deliver a speech, the writer and philosopher, the later martyr, Hillel Zeitlin.

I do not recall precisely when this took place, either 1912 or 1913. Michael Rasz had built the first large and beautiful hall for weddings where the old marketplace had been in Kutno. The hall had many windows that were hung with long silk curtains. This was a big occurrence in our town. It was there that the first literary evening took place.

Moshe Wajngart, a typical Hebrew teacher of that era, an honest and devoted cultural activist (but also a sort of idler and a bachelor), organized this evening. He did not find this an easy task. Even though there was a committee – the bulk of the work rested upon his shoulders. He organized a chorus and there was also a stage performance of "*Good Brothers*" by Abraham Reizen.

It was difficult to find girls for the chorus. It was easier to get the boys. Firstly, they were chorus singers who sang with cantors, and secondly, they didn't need permission

from their fathers. But that girls were to stand on a stage together with boys and sing, few fathers were willing to allow this. Moshe Wajngart, however, was very stubborn, and told the committee: *We must present this evening regardless of all the difficulties.*

Wajngart took the most difficult work – recruiting girls for the chorus, and also a girl to play in "*Good Brothers*". Since my father was one of the *enlightened, a maskil*, Wajngart came to us to speak to my father, to ask him to allow me to play the role of *Chanke* in "*Good Brothers*", as well as to sing in the chorus. The singing might have been o.k. even though, to tell the truth, I am not much of a singer, but to perform on the stage alongside three boys was too much. But since my father was an enthusiastic reader of Yiddish and Hebrew literature, he gave his permission for this. Once my father agreed, my dear, sincere mother, with a smile, also agreed.

Moshe Wajngart spent entire evenings with rehearsals. Even though it was difficult, he nevertheless derived much pleasure when it finally came to fruition. The hall was well-lighted with bright lamps and filled with young people, their young faces shone with joy and the conversation of the participants. it was a golden time!

In addition to the chorus and the one-act "*Good Brothers*" by Abraham Reizen, there was also dancing to musical accompaniment.

The well-known writer and philosopher Hillel Zeitlin was brought in to deliver a speech. This was at the time when the youth was deeply involved in reading and studying Hillel Zeitlin's works: "*The Yearning for Beauty*", "*Youth Pangs*", etc. Hillel Zeitlin, as I believe, was quite young at that time. His beard was light blond and a little reddish. His large mass of hair was messy on all sides of his high forehead and added much seriousness to his stately appearance. Already at that time, Zeitlin was considered to be a great philosophical writer and there was great respect for him.

More than one fully aware Jew of the older generation of chassidim would go to listen to him, but in a half-illuminated hall where boys would come with girls – that was not suitable. It is also against Jewish law for religious people to attend such an evening. My father too, had the desire to attend, but because of this reason, he remained at home. The chassidim even wondered that a religious writer such as Hillel Zeitlin should agree to appear at an evening where boys and girls would dance together. He gave a short speech and as far as I remember, it was very successful and interesting, and left a deep impression upon all those present. The subject was "*Yiddish Zionism*" and "*Yiddish Language*". He gave a short overview about the writings of the most important Jewish writers, i.e., Mendele<sup>1</sup>, Y. L. Perec, Abraham Reizen, Shalom Asz and others. At the same time, he sharply criticized the assimilation which is very destructive to the Jewish people. He strongly praised the Kutno youth which had built up one of the best libraries in

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<sup>1</sup> TN: Mendele Mocher Sforim, pseudonym for Yiddish writer Sholem Yankev Abramovich (January 2, 1836, Kapyl, Belarus – December 8, 1917, Odessa, Ukraine).

the province and was so active in the community and cultural area.

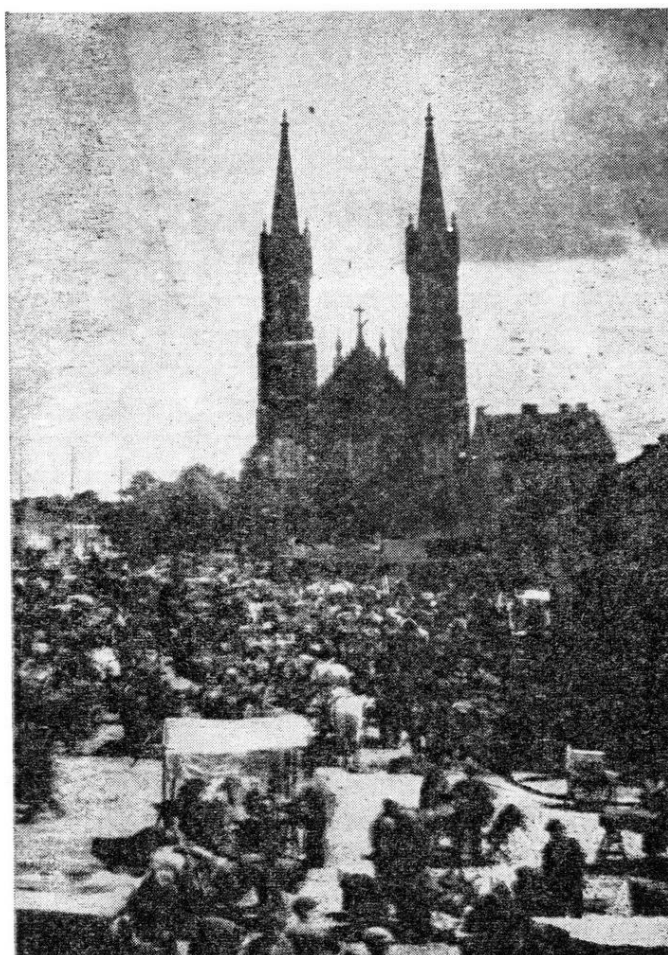
After his talk, Hillel Zeitlin remained quite socially involved. A slight smile appeared on his bright face, and he watched as the young boys and girls danced. I was introduced to him, and he was told that I write poems. He showed interest in me, conversing quite comfortably. As a young girl, I was a bit shy, but yet, it was a great honor for me to sit next to such an important person and to speak with him. Although I was not a great dancer, I would certainly have danced a little, but to give up this conversation for a dance did not even occur to me.

I will never forget with what great pleasure he watched as the youth danced and enjoyed themselves. Suddenly, he says to me: *why don't you dance? Young girls should enjoy themselves. They still have time to be serious.* In his every word, I felt this exalted, deep-thinking person and accepted his suggestion and went to dance. He watched with great pleasure. The dances were followed by a *questions and answers evening*, various interesting questions were asked, love letters written.

This particular evening was a great success for our town. Afterwards, the teacher, Moshe Wajngart, went around with his head held high – no little accomplishment: he had been successful despite having to go through such difficulties and such opposition.

This evening remained as the best event of my early youth. Now, as I conclude these few memories, sorrow and great sadness envelop me, how the great writer and philosopher Hillel Zeitlin ended his life – a victim of the Nazi murderers.

Hillel Zeitlin vanished forever, made holy with six million other martyrs.



A market day