

YEARS OF SEEKING, STRUGGLE AND DREAMS

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Far, far from the Ochnia river, far from the narrow streets of Kutno and Zamenhof Street and the low roofs, which can only be seen through memory, I now try to describe Kutno in the right colors, although we are distanced from that era by more than 30 years.

Here, at the foot of the beautiful Galil mountains, near the quiet shores of the Mediterranean Sea, here where a new life was created – it is difficult to portray the long-ago. We are divided by an abyss of distance and time.

Before me lies the sad document which I found in the archives of *Beit Katznelson*: the Płockers and Herszkowiczses demand revenge by the living, those who witnessed our nearest on their last way – they scream – *revenge!*

My little daughter, nine years old, asks: *Papa, what are you writing?* I cannot find the words to explain this to her. But this book is being written for her and her peers. They need to understand this, must understand, that that which happened to their grandfathers and grandmothers – should never happen again.

As far as I remember, the years 1930-1939, prior to the great perishing, were years of disturbance and seeking in Jewish life. The youth too, look for ways, cannot remain within the confines of the narrow houses and workshops.

As with the adults, organizations and clubs are formed.

The *Bund*, which has great influence with the proletarian youth, concentrates around itself the youth organization *Zukunft*¹ and the many boys apprenticed to tailors. A very nice building is built for their activities, a place for the professional unions, a sport club, *Morgensztern*², Peres Library a football team and a wind orchestra.

I also recall the *CISZO*³ school which the *Poalei Zion Left* supported together with the *Bund*. The school folded due to budgetary problems.

I take this opportunity to remind you of the woman teacher Mandelman and the male teacher, both of whom gave much of their hearts and love to Jewish literature, poetry and other items of national importance.

It would be a sin not to mention the *Powszechna*⁴ supported by the state which also educated Jewish children, but in the Polish language.

I now visualize in my mind like a caricature the lessons of religion and Tanach taught by a Jewish teacher in the Polish language about our forefathers.

Parallel to the development of the *Bund*, there also developed among the general citizenry the *Maccabi*

¹ TN: Yiddish, "Future", *Bund*'s youth movement.

² TN: Yiddish, "Morning Star".

³ TN: Yiddish secular school organization.

⁴ TN: Polish, public school.

organization. Around them gathered the children of small businessmen, merchants, artisans. There is also lively sports activity, a wonderful tournament league with its instructor Krokewer, a football team and a wind orchestra. There is no dearth of youth organizations of any kind. More than once, could be heard on Zamenhof Street the Hebrew song of *HaShomer HaZair* and the melody of the Gerrer chassidim.

On Podrzeczna Street can be heard the singing of the youth until late into the evening. There is where the *HaShomer HaZair*, *Freiheit* and the *Bund* are located. On Narutowicza street, the *HaNoar HaZioni* is concentrated around the *Achad HaAm* library and here is where widespread Zionist activities develop.

The *Keren Kayemet* spread their blue and white boxes throughout the majority of homes in Kutno, making this activity the responsibility for of the youth. There is competition to see which of the youth organizations can collect the most for *Keren Kayemet LeIsrael*.

The method of transforming the Zionist ideal into a reality, the colonizing of *Eretz Israel*, the battle with the powers of the mandate – all of this had influence upon the youth. The heated discussions were more than once accompanied by fights. The revisionists as well, fierce opponents of the official Zionist organization, developed their activities in Kutno.

The uniforms, the militaristic attitude appeals to the youth. It reminds them of Jabotinsky's visit to Kutno when he was received with great honor and parade.

More than once, one heard of the mutual destruction of premises, the tearing of pictures, and flags. On the day of *Lag BaOmer*⁵ a wonderful demonstration by hundreds of young people takes place. They go out to the Glembow⁶ forest to celebrate in the midst of nature. On the return trip, there were also fights among the opposing groups.

The systematic work of the Zionist youth organizations begins to bear fruit. Greetings arrive from the training areas from all corners of Poland. Many of those who are too impatient to wait for certificates and must bide their time training for several years, return home. Regards also arrive from those who were successful in achieving aliya. We hear the name *Ein Shemer*. Greetings are also coming in from the builders of Tel-Aviv.

The only training area of the *HaShomer HaZair* in Kutno brings from time-to-time new boys and girls from the east. Some look at the youth with wonderment, others look at them with derision, and still others, with envy, they look at the young men and women in leather jackets and narrow riding pants. They are creating a work-place for themselves by chopping wood and performing other hard labor.

Eizyk's flower plantation served as an important workplace for a lot of trainees. We must stress, that the trainers from the circles led an important educational work in the local nest of the *HaShomer HaZair*, and as it happens, in the Yiddish language. As you know, the local instructors spoke Polish with the children and, when possible – Hebrew.

They perceived Yiddish to be the language of the Diaspora and they negated it.

I remember the May demonstrations which were very impressive. The parade vehicles in the street of the *Bund*, *Poalei Zion* and non-organized workers who joined the general celebration, were outstanding with their individual uniqueness and creativity. The youth of *HaShomer HaZair* did not participate in the May demonstrations, stating that in the Diaspora there is no class warfare. In *Eretz Israel*, they said, classes are created.

We can speak of the many curiosities about participation of the Jewish workers and plain people relative to the May demonstrations. I remember Buksztajn, a shoemaker by trade, who, after Shabbat prayers, with tallit-bag under his arm, would immediately go to the May gathering, proudly carrying the red proletariat flag.

The *Freiheit* organization came into being only in the last couple of years before the outbreak of WWII. Several active members of the *Poalei Zion* (Socialist Zionists) Ayke, official of the Jewish community, Professor Szur, teacher in the Hebrew school *Am HaSefer*⁷, Chaim Żychlinski a tailor-home manufacturer invested much energy and time in creating this branch of *Freiheit*.

As you know, *Freiheit* also had *Chalutzim*⁸ and several young people for training to Kłósów (Koenig and other boys and girls who find themselves in the land today). It was not a large branch in Kutno, but systematic educational work was conducted by them. We participated in almost all Zionist events, elections to the Parliament, town administration, Zionist Congresses and community. Every year, many of the youth went back home for summer colonies, participating in the *Keren Kayemet* drives. These were years when there took place in *Eretz Israel* difficult struggles for aliya and comprehension. This also was reflected in and influenced the activities and work of the *Freiheit* in Kutno.

We went for courses in Kibbutz Borocho in Łódź. There, there were also *Haganah* courses for the youth from the larger cities and towns.

More than once, the premises of *Freiheit* were changed to a sort of secret place, where behind closed windows, signaling and communications were studied.

Pictures arrived from the land, pictures of the Jewish defenders and workers, the guard with the high *papacha*⁹, rifle on his shoulder, and next to him – the plough. Communities sprang up overnight. The photos beautified the Zionist premises.

Long will there remain in one's mind the gatherings and the evenings, which were filled with *Eretz Israel* spirit. It is impossible to forget the gathering when we sent the first graduate for training to Będzin – Benjamin Abramowicz (today in Holon).

The first of September, 1939, as with the single thrust of a knife, the golden thread of young creativity and dreams was cut. Only individuals miraculously, managed to come through the flame of annihilation.

⁵ TN: 33rd day of counting the Omer – 49 days between Passover and Shavuot.

⁶ TN: could be Gołębiew, near Kutno.

⁷ TN: Hebrew, "People of the Book".

⁸ TN: Hebrew, "Pioneers".

⁹ TN: Russian military fur hat.