

THE ZIONISM IN KUTNO – ACTIVITIES AND CHARACTERS

by Yehuda GRINBAUM

*In memory of my dear children
Abraham and Yehudit whose life
was cut short in their prime youth.*

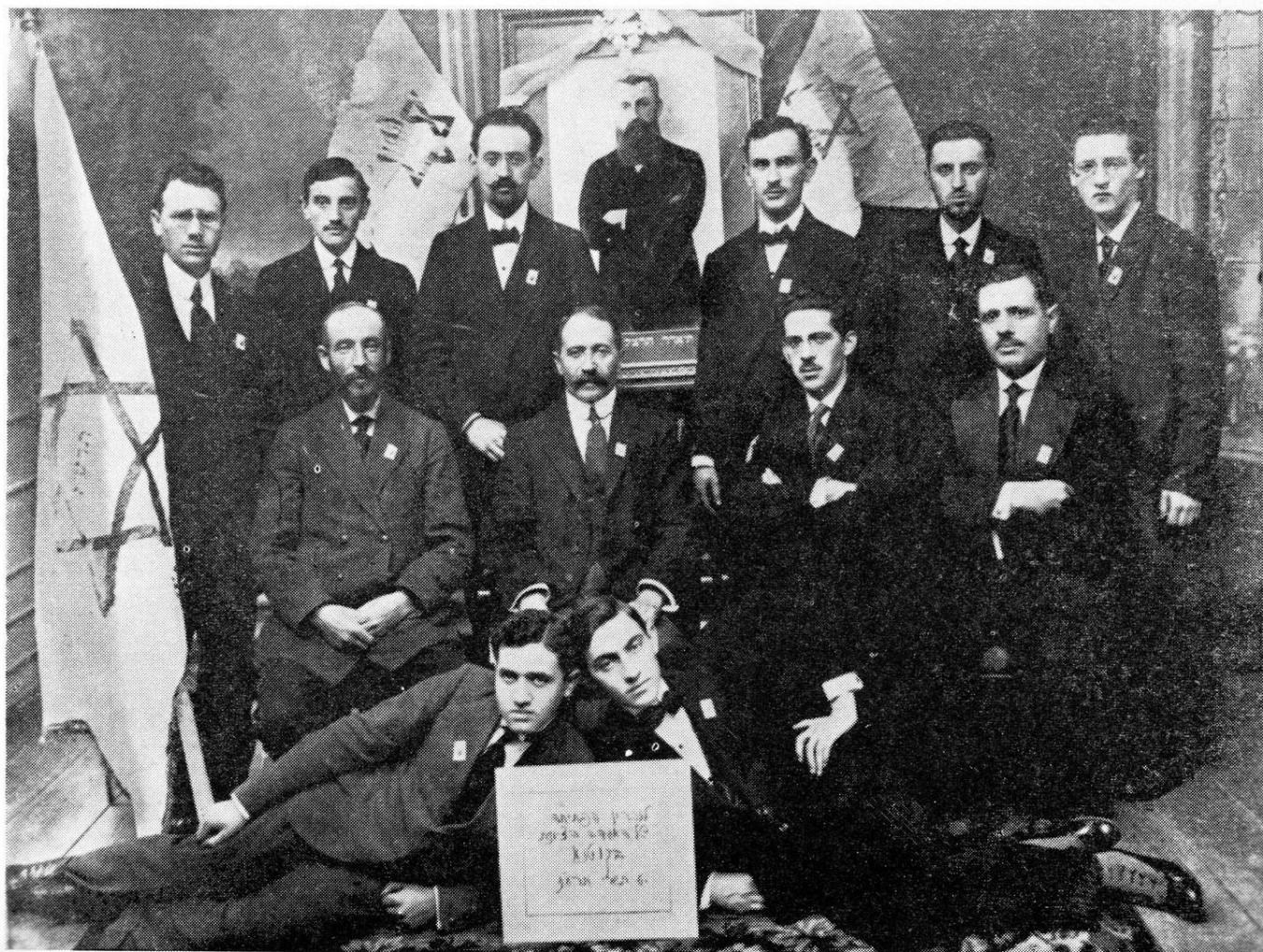
During the rule of Tsarist Russia, the Zionist movement was banned in Poland. It is true that limited Zionist activities were carried out, such as raising funds for the *Keren Kayemet* or distributing shares of the "Jewish Settlement Treasury", but they were done underground and although the Russian authorities did not actually prevent them, they still did not receive official approval.

In those years, Mr. Matityahu Goldman, one of the first "Hovevei Zion", was particularly active in the distribution of shares, before Dr. Herzl and the Zionist Congress appeared on the stage of Jewish life. Mr. Matityahu was a descendant of the "Magen Abraham" (author of the commentary on the "Orach Chaim" section of *Shulchan Aruch*). He was a man with respect for all, straightforward and pleasant-mannered, humble in all his

ways and deeds, and observant of all commandments, easy or hard. However, he was an ardent and loyal Zionist, attending the Minsk Conference in 1902, at which the Zionist faction in opposition to Dr. Herzl was founded¹.

But as we know, one swallow does not make a spring. The whole Zionist action in Poland sank after the 1905 revolution with the strong wave of reaction, which flooded Russia and all the countries occupied by it, including Poland, and the following years were not at all comfortable for any Zionist action. Only in the days of the First World War, with the German occupation, did Zionism begin to awaken to a new life again.

In the summer of 1916, the envoy Yeshayahu Horowicz, a young man, was sent to Kutno on behalf of the Zionist Center in Łódź to organize the Zionist movement in Kutno. The first meeting was held at the home of the Abraham Erdberg z"l. The best youth and adults attended this first meeting. Most of them were educated, book-lovers and dreamers of a Zion liberated and free. Abraham Erdberg was an interesting and open-



Creation of the Zionist Association in Kutno – 1916

¹ TN: Probably a reference to the "Altneuland Affair", conflict between Herzl and Ahad Ha'Am (pen name of Asher Zvi Hirsh

Ginsberg, 18 August 1856, Skvyra, Kiev, Ukraine – 2 January 1927, Tel Aviv).

mindful character, educated and well-versed in the old and new Hebrew literature of his time. Familiar with the secrets of the Hebrew language and a Zionist in every aspect from childhood. He was a great educator and gave his best years to educate the children of Israel in the spirit of love for the people and their culture. In the school he founded, he taught the Hebrew language in Hebrew, since he himself was an outstanding teacher of the Hebrew language. However, his school did not last long, because after the liberation of Poland, the Polish state school was established and he served there as a teacher of religion and Hebrew until his death, still in his best years.

In addition to A. Erdberg, the meeting was also attended by his good friend Hirs Wajnstajn, a rich man, Meir Bozhikowski, a humble, pleasant-mannered man and a loyal Zionist, Sender Falc, always lively, full of energy and action and loved by all who knew him. And I too was privileged to attend this basic meeting of the establishment of the Zionist organization in Kutno. The center's envoy, Horowitz, assured us that the center in Łódź would assist us in organizing and launching public rallies to create a Zionist atmosphere in the city.

First of all, it was decided to buy an apartment, so that it would be possible to concentrate all the operations of the branch in the city. The apartment was rented at Wolf Asz's house, on Chopin Avenue, and we even furnished it quite nicely. Among the first to join the Zionist

organization in the city was Aharon Mendelewicz, a man of education and opinion, and active in the life of the Jewish community. After the liberation of Poland, he was



Kindergarten, with teacher Mrs. Majranc

elected a member of the city council on behalf of the Zionist organizations in Kutno. A few years before immigrating to Israel, he served as chairman of the Jewish community and did much to spread the Zionist idea in the city. In Israel, he worked as an accountant at the *Histadrut* Health Insurance Fund until he reached retirement age. Among the first was also Yehoshua Rak, a faithful Zionist who immigrated to Israel in the days of the Fourth Aliyah² after liquidating the business in the textile industry he had



Pupils of the school "Banot Zion" (1920)

² TN: fourth wave of immigration, between 1924 and 1928.

in Kutno. However, the conditions in the country in those days were very difficult and he could not be absorbed in it. After losing all his money, he was forced to return to Poland, but was not disappointed by the Zionist idea and Israel. Even after his return to Kutno, he continued to be a loyal member of the Zionist organization. Together with all his family members, he perished in the Holocaust that the Nazis brought on all of Polish Jewry. May their souls be bound in the bond of eternal life.

The Zionist organization that was established was called "*Bnei Zion*" and its first operation was the organization of evening classes in Hebrew. The young teacher Henoah Rakowicz, born in Lithuania, who came to Kutno during the years of the First World War from Łódź, was chosen to teach Hebrew. He mastered the Hebrew language and was fluent in it. He was a wise young man and knew how to deal with people, for he was a pleasant man and had a good heart for people. Many came to study the Hebrew language with him and he even preached the Zionist idea to them. Henoah Rakowicz immigrated to *Eretz Israel* himself and there too he devoted himself to Hebrew culture.

The solemn opening of the Zionist Organization took place on the Sukkot of 5677 (1916). The club was packed full and the celebratory speech was delivered by Zvi Brot who was sent by the center in Łódź. His speech was very exciting and impressive. Rabbi Matityahu Goldman was granted the honor to raise the Zionist flag of the branch. With great emotion, he recited the "*SheHecheyanu*" blessing, celebrating *HaShem* and his kingship, and then the choir began singing, under the direction of Shlomo Michrowski. After the end of this part, the "official" party was held in honor of the guest Zvi Brot. The party was held at Y. L. Boruszek's home, who settled in Kutno during the First World War. He was a loyal Zionist, a man with a gentle mind and straightforward. He immigrated to Israel in the late 1920s and was among the first settlers in Afula. His precious memory will be preserved forever among all his friends and loved ones.

After the grand opening, the gray day-to-day operation began. And from the very beginning of its founding, many of its youth and adults participated to it. So, it was decided to call the first meeting that comrade Abraham Erdberg opened. The assembly elected a nine-member committee and its chairman was Timkowski, from Lithuania, who settled in Kutno. He was a straightforward and kind grain trader, but also an assertive and active activist, acceptable to all the townspeople. As secretary of the organization was elected its living spirit, A. Erdberg. The action began to branch out, many began to join the organization and then it was decided to also establish a division of women, called the "*Banot Zion*" association. Among the first to cooperate with the Zionists was Rebbetzin Trunk. She was a woman who was respected for everything, noble in spirit and pleasant-mannered, the granddaughter of the genius Rabbi Abraham of Sochaczew, the author of "*Avnei Nezer*", and

also Mrs. Buki, daughter of Shmuel Babe, a woman with vigor and wisdom. She was also a member of the Municipal Zionist Committee, took part in all the meetings and followed vigilantly everything that happened in it. The third was Mrs. Brot née Walter, wife of Mr. Henoah Brot. She was a pleasant-mannered and respectable woman to all her acquaintances. After a while, the "*Banot Zion*" joined the WIZO³.

With the establishment of the branch of the Zionist movement in our city, the entire *Keren Kayemet* committee was first established and headed by Yehoshua Falc, who had not previously been active in the Zionist movement and assuming this position, devoted himself with all the vigor and momentum in which he excelled. Indeed, he acted and did a lot. I, was appointed secretary of the *Keren Kayemet*. The *Keren Kayemet* boxes were first distributed in Jewish homes. The youth did this and he even took on the role of emptying the boxes.

On Purim that year, "*Banot Zion*" held a market in the fire department and all its income was dedicated to the *Keren Kayemet*. The organization of the "market" was very successful, as both the women and the youth devoted themselves and wanted its success.

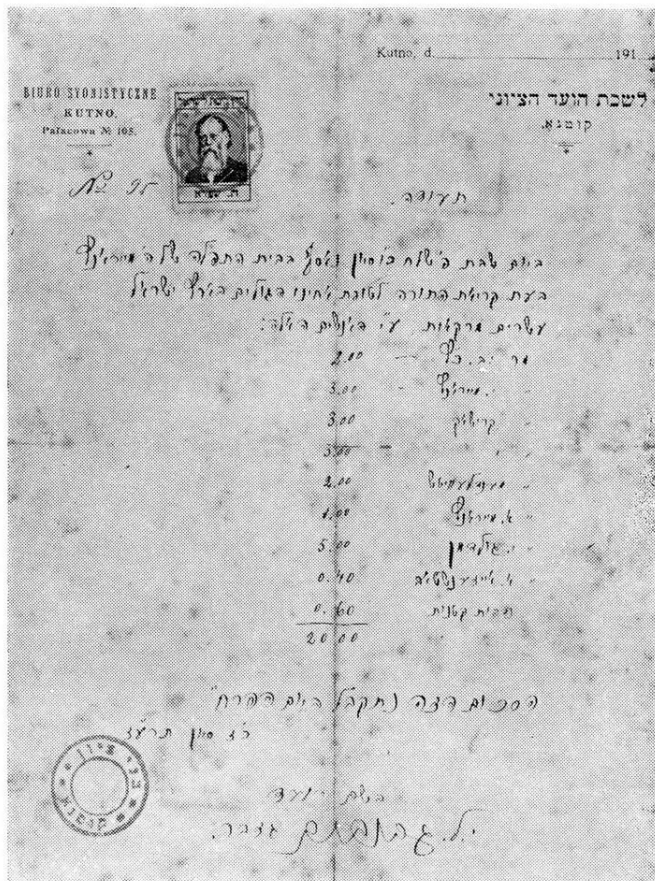
In 1918, a district conference of the *Keren Kayemet* was held in our city with the participation of Rabbi Y. L. Zlotnik (Avida), who then served as rabbi of Gąbin and represented the Central Bureau of the *Keren Kayemet*, and the participation of the foundation's activists in all the towns near Kutno. At this conference a central district committee was elected whose place was in Kutno.

But this was not the first Zionist action of the Zionist movement in the city. While the war was going on, a solemn assembly was held in memory of Dr. B. Z. Herzl⁴. The memorial service was held on the 20th of Tamuz 5677 (1917) in the hall of the Fire Brigade, where Dr. Yehoshua Gotlieb, who came especially from Łódź for this purpose, spoke. Indeed, the memorial was a great success, as many of the city's residents attended. A choir conducted by Mr. Kupfer (the brother of the chief cantor of the city of Kalisz) also sang.

Gradually, Kutno began to occupy a place on the map of Zionist leaders' visits to Poland. Every current in the movement wanted to get the Kutno Zionists on his side. And so, already in 1919, during the election war to the Polish *Sjem*, we receive in Kutno the visit of the Zionist leader of Polish Jewry Yitzhak Grinbaum. With great vigilance and anticipation, we waited for the day of Y. Grinbaum's arrival. The meeting was held in the largest hall in the city and many were left outside due to lack of space. The reception given to him was very enthusiastic and he was highly regarded, as the leader of Polish Jewry. His speech lasted four consecutive hours and delivered a double dose for all opponents of Zionism and the anti-Zionist parties. His visit and speech left a deep impression on the Jews of the city and not only on the Zionists. Indeed, the Zionist idea began to take root not only among the older generation, but also among the young people of the

³ TN: Women International Zionist Organization.

⁴ TN: Benyamin Ze'ev Herzl, AKA Theodor Herzl.



Certificate of donation to the benefit of *Eretz Israel*

city. Among those joining the Zionist movement, it is worth mentioning Simcha Babe, who at the time of the establishment of the Zionist organization in Kutno was still studying at the gymnasium in Gostynin and after graduation devoted himself entirely to Zionist action in the city. Years later he moved to Warsaw where he worked on the Central Committee of the Zionist organization in Poland during the time of the "*Et Livnot*"⁵ headed by Dr. Y. L. Levita⁶. It is also worth mentioning Yosef Stajnfeld, son of Mr. Yoel Stajnfeld, who, despite his Torah education as commanded by his father, joined the Zionist Organization and devoted himself to its action with all his heart and soul. He too was a follower of Y. Grinbaum and his "*Al HaMishmar*" faction. Sadly, he did not get to fulfill the dream of his life and immigrate to Israel and perished with all Polish Jewry during the Great Holocaust. Here is the place to mention Yitzhak Krol, a member of the Zionist Committee at the time in Kutno, who was known by his nickname, "White Krol"⁷, who always excelled in his pleasant demeanor and gentleness of mind. Today he is a member of Kibbutz Sasa in the Upper Galilee and sees the fulfillment of the Zionist vision that his contemporaries dreamed of in the Polish towns.

⁵ TN: "A Time to Build", faction of General Zionists party that encouraged Jewish immigrants to establish an economy based on capitalism. The other faction was Y. Grinbaum's "*Al HaMishmar*".

The "*Am HaSefer*" Jewish Gymnasium

In 1917, the problem of Hebrew education for their children arose among the Jews of Kutno. Parents of four-year-old wanted to educate their young children in the spirit of Judaism and decided to open a kindergarten for this age group. Many parents responded to this initiative and began raising funds to purchase an apartment for a kindergarten. Also, two mothers, Mrs. Sh. Lewin and Mrs. Brot, helped us a lot and even donated considerable sums to this cause. The teacher was brought on the recommendation of the poet Y. Kacnelson from Łódź. In the early days of the kindergarten there were only ten children in it, but during the year their number doubled.

However, the founding of the kindergarten was not enough. For we had to take care of their further education in the national spirit, which we sought to instill in our children. And again, we called for a parent meeting to discuss further education. The parents' meeting decided to establish a Hebrew gymnasium called "*Am HaSefer*" according to the curriculum of the Hebrew gymnasium in Łódź, which was under the direction of the Dr. Brojda. In such a high school, emphasis should have been placed on Jewish studies in addition to secular studies. The assembly elected a board of trustees and its chair was elected A. Sh. Elberg. Mr. Aharon Shlomo Elberg was a unique figure. At first, he was not one of the official members of the Zionist movement, but he was at heart a loyal and devoted Zionist. With the establishment of the "*Mizrachi*" organization, he joined it and took over an active part and even served as a member of its Central Committee in Poland. He was a scholar who swam in the *Talmud* sea proficiently and with ease, and endowed with a miraculous memory, as a lime pit that would not lose a drop. On his own he learned foreign languages: Russian, Polish, English and German and of course Hebrew which came to him due to his complete command of the Bible. All this did not prevent him from being a chassid of Skierniewice-Warka and excelling in two qualities of a good and faithful Jew: love of the Torah and love of the Land of Israel. In 1925 he immigrated to Palestine alone to examine the conditions for settling there. Indeed, he was one of the founders and one of the first settlers in Bnei Brak. On behalf of this settlement, he was sent to the United States to raise funds for the establishment and development of the settlement. In the late 1920s he returned to Poland to raise his family. Upon his return to Israel, he began working in the financial institutions of the Mizrachi movement. However, as stated, with the founding of the "*Am HaSefer*" school, Mr. Aharon-Shlomo Elberg was appointed chairman of its supervisory board (the board of trustees). The appointed treasurer was A. Manszester, a

⁶ TN: Leon Levita (1878, Warsaw – 17 December 1944, Tel Aviv).

⁷ TN: "Krol Lavan", Hebrew pun on "blue-white" ("Kachol Lavan"), colors of the Zionist flag, which would become the flag of Israel.



Kindergarten in Kutno

wealthy Jew, straightforward and at ease with people. In addition, Sender Falc, Płockier and Mrs. Brot were also selected, all of whom gave their time and energy to the success and development of the Hebrew school. The writer of these lines was appointed secretary and principal of the school. I served in this position until my return to Włocławek in 1923.

The first director of "*Am HaSefer*" was Wierzbicki, a graduate of the University of Warsaw, who came to Kutno during the First World War and there gave private lessons in physics and mathematics. He gained a reputation as a good teacher and in addition he excelled as a good speaker at Zionist assemblies where he debated with talent and knowledge with the anti-Zionist parties, the *Bund* and the Folkists. In taking on the role of director of "*Am HaSefer*", he proved himself to be a talented organizer and director. But despite all his efforts, he only succeeded in obtaining a license from the Polish authorities for the establishment of an elementary school, since the director of the Polish gymnasium in Kutno intervened and prevented the establishment of a Jewish gymnasium with a Zionist spirit. Despite this, the curriculum in the primary school was largely based on the curriculum such as Dr. Brojda's gymnasium in Łódź. Two teachers instructed Jewish studies. David Sztajnberger was a teacher of the Hebrew language, Bible and literature. He was a talented teacher who knew how to instill the love of Hebrew culture in his students and educate them in the Zionist spirit. The other teacher was Yonah Baruch Kac.

He had a great deal of teaching experience since his days in Gostynin, where he owned a private school and even here in Kutno, opened his own school. However, with the opening of "*Am HaSefer*" school, he closed his school and joined "*Am HaSefer*" teaching staff as a teacher of Talmud and Bible. Y. B. Kac was a veteran Zionist and loyal to the Zionist idea in every fiber of his soul, with extensive knowledge of Torah literature and Hebrew literature in general. Years later he emigrated to the United States, where he served as a kashrut overseer as well as a synagogue preacher. At the end of his life, he managed to fulfill the dream of his life and immigrate to Israel, after the declaration of the state. He died in Israel in 1963, in good reputation.

After Sztajnberger left his job at the school, Moshe Megged from the city of Włocławek was accepted in his place, where he served as a teacher of Hebrew, Bible and Talmud at the *Mizrachi* school. Moshe Megged⁸ was a student of the Włocławek *yeshiva* and a student of the late Rabbi Kowalski. He excelled in quick perception and good sense, and during his studies at the *yeshiva* he devoted himself to learning the Hebrew language and literature. At the "*Am HaSefer*" school, he lovingly and knowingly taught the subjects of the Bible, the Talmud, and the history of the Jewish people. He was very fond of his students, because he knew how to acquire their hearts and interests in the professions he taught. And not only did he like the students, but also the parents also appreciated and respected him for the pleasantness of his demeanor and

⁸ TN: Israeli name of Moshe David Grinberg.

modesty. In 1925 he immigrated to Israel with his family and continued teaching at the school in Raanana. He died in 1963 leaving two sons, both writers – Aharon and Matti Megged.



Kutno characters

In 1921, Dr. Laszman was appointed director of "Am HaSefer", on the recommendation of the center in Łódź. Dr. Laszman was previously a member of the editorial board of the "Nowy Dziennik"⁹ newspaper in Cracow and an active Zionist. Before long, he was loved by everyone, his students and the public in Kutno, as he was a man of culture and pleasant demeanor. He brought with him talented teachers in their professions and even faithful Zionists. Yosef Ostern taught physics and

mathematics and Yaakov Freund taught Polish language and literature. After several years of teaching in Kutno, he¹⁰ was appointed a teacher at a gymnasium in Włocławek, where he also worked on the *Keren HaYesod* committee. From there he moved to the gymnasium in Przemyśl and also drank from a glass of poison from which all Polish Jewry drank during the Holocaust.

Yaakov Freund was also an outstanding teacher who knew the souls of his students and also excelled in noble virtues and spirit. In the late 1920s, he immigrated to Israel as one of the pioneers and joined the Schiller group. Here he changed his name to Yaakov Yedidya and as such was active in the labor movement in *Eretz Israel* in those days.

In the meantime, "Am HaSefer" was approved as a high school with government rights, and Dr. Laszman was also approved as its principal. The curriculum was determined in coordination with Dr. Brojda, according to the curriculum at his gymnasium in Łódź. But then the Polish authorities demanded that the gymnasium be moved to a more spacious premises and it was decided to rent a six-room apartment, while the three lower classes remained in the previous apartment. The new principal on his talented teaching staff managed to elevate the school to a high level and many students began to flock to it. Even parents who were devout in their religion sent their children to "buy Torah"¹¹ in it, as it gained a reputation as a good gymnasium. However, during the years of the



First Zionist committee in Kutno

⁹ TN: Polish, "The New Daily".

¹⁰ TN: refers to Josef Ostern. Testimony in Yad Vashem.

¹¹ TN: meaning, "get educated".

school's existence, there were exchanges of men for various reasons, both the principal and the teachers changed and others came in their place. But there is no doubt that the gymnasium "*Am HaSefer*" recorded an important and beautiful page in the history of Hebrew education in Kutno.

The redemption fund

In 1920, at the San Remo Conference, the British Mandate for Palestine was approved by the victorious powers in the First World War. The Balfour Declaration was ratified with an international seal. A wave of enthusiasm then flooded all the settlements of the House of Israel all over the world and especially in Poland where there were millions of Jews yearning for freedom and redemption. Then the central Zionist institutions decided to declare a redemption fund. And the people responded to this call with earnestness and soul desire, women dismantled their idols and jewelry, silver and gold vessels were donated generously, because the goal that stood before the House of Israel was sacred in the eyes of all. The response of the Jews of Kutno was also very great. Lots of money, gold, and jewelry was donated by the Jews of Kutno. Eliezer Zandberg, a loyal Zionist who found the right path for each and every person, also participated in this action. I still remember the words of Mr. Nachman Elberg when he brought me a large silver cup and so the man said: The donations of silver and gold that the Jews of the world now bring will serve as atonement for the sin of the golden calf because now, what we donate will be used for the building of our new-ancient land.

After a few years, the *Keren HaYesod* was established. Rabbi Yehuda Riftin, a Lithuanian who came to Kutno after the First World War, was elected its chairman. In his youth, he studied at the Volozhin *yeshiva* with the *HaNatziv* (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berlin z"l). Mr. Yehuda Riftin did not pursue leadership because he was a humble man, but he was active in many areas of the life of the Jewish community and even headed the Zionist organization. He was a refined, sociable man and honest, and therefore had a great influence on the life of the Jewish community in Kutno. Mr. Yehuda died in 1929 and the leader of Polish Jewry in those days, Yitzhak Grinbaum, paid tribute to him with words of appreciation and honor.

These were the first buds of Zionism in Kutno. The Zionist idea, the longings for redemption, to be a free people in our homeland were not a passing phenomenon, Zionism was rooted in the hearts of the Jews even before the idea was shaped in organizational and political patterns. When the echoes of the Balfour Declaration were heard in the city, one of the first Zionists in the city, Abraham Klingbajl, took his belongings and immigrated to *Eretz Israel*. He was a craftsman who had "golden hands", but in addition he was well-informed and fond of Hebrew literature. He was privileged to immigrate to Israel and be among the first settlers in Holon, founded in the early 1920s, and here he continued his profession.

He was among the few Kutno members who were privileged to reach their destination. The vast majority of the Jews of our city perished by the Nazi oppressor during the terrible Holocaust that descended on all of the House of Israel.

Earth, don't cover their blood!