

## THE BEGINNING OF ZIONIST YOUTH ACTIVITY

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Before the outbreak of World War I, there was a strong upheaval and dissatisfaction among the adult Jewish population in Kutno, with which the youth also became infected. The main reason for the uneasiness was the various declarations made by the political leaders in a number of European countries. Antisemitism also added fuel to the fire. Antisemitism was particularly acute in the schools – and here the youth had to react.

The first meeting of a group of Jewish youths in Kutno took place in the basement of Sender Rudner z"l. It was decided there to support the Zionist solution to the Jewish question. We also read together the Zionist newspaper "*The Jewish World*", edited by Nachum Sokolow z"l. We have chosen our own name: "*Prachei Zion*". This group (from the basement) was active until 1914.

In 1916, two years after the German occupation of the city, a circle was formed on the initiative of the teachers Zarchin and Bzura z"l, to teach the Hebrew language. This literal approach has deep roots and brought life to our Zionist thought and deed. In that year also came in town the Rabbi Złotnik of Gąbin and under his leadership arose the "*HeChalutz*".

At the first meeting, a committee was elected, which adopted the following decisions:

1. Organize an agricultural training.
2. Learn Hebrew.
3. Conduct a sporting activity.
4. Connect with the surrounding towns.

Agricultural training had to be limited due to the war conditions. The youth was not happy of such condition and demanded more deeds.

We had to stand an inter-party struggle, especially with the anti-Zionist movements, as early as year 1918. I remember that, shortly after the end of the German occupation, our first Enlightenment meeting took place in a small cinema. A group of Bundists came organized to break up the meeting and so on.



Adult training group of "*HeChalutz*" in Łęczycza

They even threatened to shatter the blue-and-white flag, which they had seized. Some pioneers dared to take back the flag with force and in close ranks and singing, we were out in the street. Outdoors, gendarmes with drawn swords stood and blocked the road. After a brief clarification, we were allowed to continue marching. We passed the street, until the premises of "*HeChalutz*". This march left a strong impression on the city, especially on the Jewish youth.

In 1917, the Central Committee of the movement began to operate in Warsaw, and our branch has joined the Center. We participated in various meetings,

including in Kutno, organized by the Center. In the city itself, the activity had expanded: gatherings, performances, artistic evenings for the benefit of the "Foundation *HeChalutz*", films and picture sessions of the developing country. All these enterprises have attracted a large audience and also brought in revenue.

In that year, the Zionist camp was disbanded and new youth organizations were formed. Among others -- the "*Zeirei-Zion*" movement, whose leaders spoke of popular Zionism, or popular socialism, but not Marxist. It goes without saying that a branch of the new movement has also sprung up in Kutno. The first committee consisted of several prominent members, such as Nathan Tiger z"l and -- with him and for many years -- Zishe Szapiro.

As the main activity of the Zionist youth was for *Eretz Israel*, there was no place for the various parties. As for the youth, it conducted its work for *Eretz Israel* in a coordinated manner. Over time, the right wing of *Poalei-Zion* merged with "*Zeirei Zion*".

The year 1918 brought a terrible war for the Germans. The occupying power begins to wane from Kutno. There was a danger of antisemitic excesses. We decided to hold a mass rally of the discharged Jewish soldiers. Hundreds of them came to our premises. The speaker from Warsaw, Ch. Ajzenberg (Barzilai) z"l encouraged the public with his outcry and called for readiness and vigilance, the acquisition of weapons and the ongoing consolidation of all Jewish forces against the threat.

We went to see the *Bund* with a proposal to unite the forces of Jewish self-defense. Their then leader, Szatan, declared: "We, the '*Bund*', will defend the poor neighborhoods and we have nothing in common with you."

Fortunately, there were no excesses. In the morning, after our rally, a meeting of Poles (F.A.O.) took place. A group of our colleagues went there in an organized manner and introduced themselves, in whose name we speak and whom we represent. The chairman

of the meeting reassured us -- but we continued our self-defense work.



Members of "*HeChalutz*"

One week before, on a Saturday, close to our premises, several "*HeChalutz*" comrades were attacked by Polish firefighters and armed legionnaires, who ordered us to raise our hands, performed a personal body-search of each one, and then inspected the walls and the floors of premises, searching for weapons.

They found nothing. On this basis, the mayor of the city declared that he would treat us with respect and that he was favorable to our work.

In 1920, with the outbreak of the Polish-Bolshevik War, the activities of the "*HeChalutz*" ceased altogether. All documents and materials of the Secretariat were buried deep in the ground. The youth was mobilized in the army and found themselves outside Kutno.

In 1923, on the anniversary of Trumpeldor's death, we decided to resume our activities. We managed to bring together new youth forces on the premises and set up the "*HeChalutz HaZair*". The evening classes in Hebrew were a resounding success, and some of the high-school teachers conducted the classes here. We



Workers from the Keren Kayemet (1930)

also took an active part in the Committee for Working *Eretz Israel*. It is clear that we have been responsible for the fundraising for the national funds – *Keren Kayemet* and *Keren HaYesod*.

In 1924, a turning point occurred in our work. We managed to organize a training place for our colleagues. Yosef Rojer and the writer of these lines met with a landowner not far from Konin and a large-scale agricultural farm was created.

The (Warsaw) Center opposed the training point and demanded its release. After lengthy negotiations, our

colleagues immediately moved on to the training point of the Center.

Following the resignation of the Palestine Authority, which has been in charge of immigration, many young people from far and wide have joined the organization. They wanted to immigrate. The "*HeChalutz*", however, was watching and made sure that those who had completed the training and, of course, the first pioneers in Kutno, got the right to *aliyah*. Only after will others be able to emigrate...

These are my memories of the beginning of the Zionist activity among the Jewish youth in Kutno.