

ZIONIST ACTIVITY IN KUTNO

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translated from the Hebrew by Carole Turkeltaub-Borowitz

In memory of our dear ones

My first childhood memories about Kutno are connected to the 1905 Revolution, which took place at that time throughout the whole of Russia. Different rumors circulated among the adults who appeared very unsettled. However, I, the young child, was very inquisitive to know what was happening and I therefore decided to watch carefully what was going on around me. The first target of my curiosity was the sweet shop located on the third bridge on the avenues; my eldest sister, Bajle, worked in that shop. Early in the morning I left my house and dragged my feet over to the shop, but already near the second bridge I was witness to a frightful scene. Amid a great hullabaloo, a line of Russian police led about a hundred prisoners past the city hall and among them I recognized my cousin, Abraham Szymonowicz, who worked in the bakery. It turned out that that they were caught next to the third bridge.

I continued on my way to the shop and to my astonishment found it empty of customers but full of goodies. The abundance of sweets and chocolate at hand caused the revolution to slip my mind and I wanted to "rescue" whatever could be saved from the shop. With all of my childish energy I set hard to work. I cleared the shelves as fast as I could and filled the pockets of my winter coat. Just my luck, the pockets were torn and the sweets poured out by themselves down into the bottom of the coat. However, because of the weight of all the sweets I was not able to move. Suddenly my father turned up and when he saw me, he burst into huge laughter. Nevertheless, his great hilarity did not stop him from taking off me the sweet collection which I amassed by great effort all by myself. Although my father did not give me a beating over this, his restraint was in my eyes something revolutionary, no less than the revolution that was then taking place throughout Russia. After my pockets had once again been emptied, I left the shop with a heavy heart and turned towards the town. Groups after groups of people whispering among themselves stood in the streets. But actually, I also knew what a revolution was.

First Immigrants to *Eretz Israel*

The revolution movement slowly died down and the "*Poalei Zion*" [Workers of Zion] program, according to the policy of Dov Ber Borochof, appeared in the Jewish neighborhood. This described *Eretz Israel* ["Land of Israel"] as the central territorial location of the Jewish people and also as the basis of the class struggle of the Jewish worker.

The first immigrants from Kutno to *Eretz Israel* were Arbuz the tailor, and Yosef Moskowicz the shoemaker.

They immigrated in 1907 and settled in Gaza (Tel Aviv had not yet been established) where few Jews were living. Because of the hard conditions prevailing then in Israel, the two immigrants were not able to keep going and returned to Kutno.

However, after a few years, in 1913, the Lamski family immigrated to *Eretz Israel*. The Lamski family were working people who were also involved in agriculture, and for that reason turned to village life and together with their family members occupied themselves in agriculture. But, to their sorrow, World War I broke out, Turkey joined in, and the Turkish government published a declaration ordering all foreign citizens in Israel to take up Turkish nationality. The Lamski family refused to comply with this order and were forced to leave the country and return to Kutno.

The war also reached Kutno. Living conditions became very harsh and then the "well off" had to offer help to the badly off. Thanks to that assistance the situation of the weaker sections of society was made slightly better.

The Start of the Zionist Movement

A few years before World War I broke out agitation was felt among the Jews in the city. Even the youngsters were affected. The unrest stemmed from the worsening national-international situation and the declarations of the European politicians making the circumstances even worse. Unease among the Jews was increased by anti-Semitic currents. This was particularly felt within the precincts of the government school. However, the Jewish youth was not prepared to accept this situation and started to organize. The first meeting was held in the cellar of the house of Sender Rudner (of blessed memory): everyone realized that Zionism was the answer to the Jewish distress. A short time later the group decided to call themselves "*Prachei Zion*" ["Flowers of Zion"].

The Founding of "*HeChalutz*" ["The Pioneer"]

In 1916, at the height of the war, early signs of Zionist youth movements began to appear and among them was "*HeChalutz*". The start of "*HeChalutz*" was rather modest but, slowly, activities increased, and a year later various groups had joined. Jewish youth turned its eyes towards *Eretz Israel* and organized evening classes in Hebrew, reaching hundreds of pupils, mainly girls. But the youngsters were not the only ones wanting to learn Hebrew – their parents, most of whom were craftsmen, also wanted to know the language and persevered in their studies even more than their children; their resolve gave us great encouragement.

In addition to learning the Hebrew language, *HeChalutz* was also active in sports and raising money for Zionist and workers funds. We did not rely only on fund raising but also arranged parties and dances and screened movies, which even brought in a reasonable sum of money.

After a certain time, we set up an agricultural training farm in Konin, where we rented buildings and a plot of land from a Jewish landlord. But the head office of "*HeChalutz*" did not give permission for this training camp and we were forced to move to the central farm which was on the Russian border. It turned out that many of our members continued to do manual labor and some of them settled in kibbutzim.

This is the opportunity to tell of Eizyk the farmer, a well-loved person possessing the Zionist vision. He regarded us as the nation's soldiers, for he knew that we were ready for anything for the sake of our people. He gave us lessons in agriculture and tried to pass on to us his knowledge in flower growing which he considered very important for Israel.

He stayed with us for half a week at one of *HeChalutz's* local meetings and promoted agriculture. He was very attached to his land and only immigrated to Israel after the Holocaust, when his whole family was exterminated by the Nazis. Broken and exhausted by the horrors he had gone through, he died, alone, and was buried in Israel. May his memory be blessed!

Meshulam Landau, one of the veteran members, also died, in 1961. May his memory be blessed.

Daily Zionist Activities

The Zionist vision expressed itself in colorless daily activity, in spiritual and mental preparation for Israel. Our faith was put into dreary and mean practice in the shape of fund raising for Zionist funds. But actually, at the time of donating or collecting, the donor's love and connection to Israel was fully conveyed, while his generous gift did not receive a thing from us since we had nothing to offer him, apart from the recognition that his humble contribution would better the nation. Therefore, Jews such as Turbowicz, Klingbajl, Płocker, Arbuz, Pietrkowski, Chaim Zinger, Dawid Kleczewski, Eizyk and others like them, were for the active members as a clear stream of water reviving the soul on a hot summer's day. And the work was great and the workers were few. Not always did enough volunteers turn

up for "flower day" – although there was a long list of volunteers on paper – when the collectors had to go out on to the streets there were not enough people. Soliciting donations in the street was not pleasant but that was the way to do it. Despite that the difficulties were overcome and "flower day" went into action. Members who did not turn up for this activity were fined and to their credit it can be said that they paid up willingly.



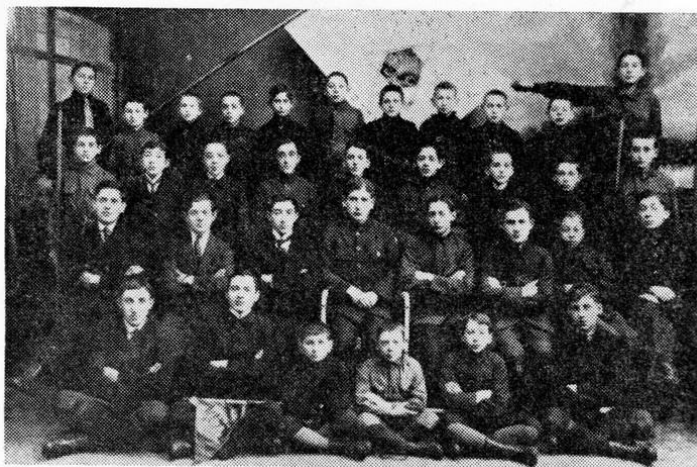
On the agricultural farm of Mr. Eizyk

First Steps

The teachers Zerchin and Bzura (of blessed memory) promoted the organization of Hebrew classes, which struck roots and breath of life into Zionist thought and deed. The same year, under the guidance of Rabbi Złotnik, *HeChalutz* decided to initiate various activities and at the first meeting a committee was chosen which passed the following resolutions: (a) the organizing of agricultural training; (b) the study of the Hebrew language; (c) sport; (d) networks of contacts with neighboring towns. Although an agricultural training center was set up in 1916, it was too small owing to the fact that those were wartime years. But the "*HeChalutz*" movement did not crumble and was always ready to jump into action against rival anti-Zionist parties. When the first Zionist propaganda meeting was organized – after the German occupation – members of the *Bund* party attempted to sabotage it, but we members of *HeChalutz* thwarted their plot and, in a united front, demonstrated all over the town. Needless to say, our procession made a great impression on the entire Jewish youth.

In 1917 a *HeChalutz* Center was set up in Warsaw. This branch was attached to the national movement and we contributed to all the movement's activities, meetings and events in other cities. We planned meetings, parties and artistic socials that attracted big audiences.

However, in the same year, the Zionist movement started to split up and other youth organizations were founded. For the first time the "*Zeirei Zion*" ["Young Zionists"] appeared – their leaders raised the banner for popular Zionism, or popular socialism, not Marxist. A similar process also affected Kutno. The chairmen of the first committee were Nathan Tiger (of blessed memory) and Zysia Szapiro (may he have a long life), but over the years the right-wing "*Poalei Zion*" joined up with the "*Zeirei Zion*".



First Jewish scouts in Kutno

Meanwhile the war was drawing to a close and the year 1918 had arrived. The German occupation rule began to break up and the POW (Polska Organizacja Wojskowa – Polish Military Organization) was established. No Jews participated and there was a fear of disturbances. Therefore, we summoned the demobilized soldiers to a public meeting. The speaker was Ch. Ajzenberg (Barzilai) (of blessed memory) who called on all those present to get ready and prepare weapons, for defending the lives of the Jews. Also, it was decided to approach the *Bund* movement to join forces for defense, but the leader of the *Bund* in Kutno, Szatan, announced to us: "We, the *Bund*, will defend the homes of the poor and no collaboration is possible between us". Luckily for us, there was no trouble and the leader of the POW announced that no conflict would be arranged against the Jews; but we had learnt from experience and continued to organize self-defense. And so it was, a few days later, on Shabbat, while some members had got together at the club, we were suddenly surrounded by the "*Mechabei Esh*" ["Fire Brigade"] and armed legionnaires who commanded us to put our hands up and carried out a rigorous search of the walls and floor of the clubhouse. Of course, they did not find a thing and then the mayor spoke and said that he had heard a lot about us and granted us respect and sympathy – and so it was.

Renewal of Activities

After the end of the war and the start of the Russian-Polish war in 1919 all activities of *HeChalutz* stopped. The

Jewish youth was enlisted in the army and all the certificates and documents of the *HeChalutz* secretariat were hidden. And again, slowly *HeChalutz* started to organize itself anew. On the anniversary of Trumpeldor's death in 1923 we got together and decided to renew our activities. Once again, the youngsters gathered in the *HeChalutz* clubhouse and we even managed to start up a Young *HeChalutz* group. We organized Hebrew classes on a scale we had not known before. The language was taught by teachers from the high school and so we had an active part on the committee for the *Eretz Israel* Workers and we also led activities on behalf of the Zionist funds.

A positive turning point in our activities came about in the year 1924. We were successful in organizing a training camp in the Konin area thanks to the efforts of Yosef Rojer (of blessed memory) and the author of this article, who purchased a piece of land from a farmer. However, the *HeChalutz* Center opposed the establishment of the training camp at that place and ordered it to be disbanded. In accordance with the decision of the Center, our members moved to a training camp in keeping with the orders of the Center.

When the movement set up an *Eretz Israel* office, many who had up till now remained apart, requested to emigrate to Israel, and *HeChalutz* required them to first of all to go through training. At the arrival of the first emigration of our members to Israel the flag of *HeChalutz* was handed to the young guard whose countenance was turned towards *Eretz Israel*.