

ZIONIST ACTIVITY IN OUR TOWN

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translated from Hebrew by Carole Turkeltaub-Borowitz

My father's house was a Zionist and traditional one, and so, we, four sons and three daughters, were brought up in this atmosphere, although, like most of his generation, father studied at the *yeshiva* in Kutno. When he was about to reach the age of conscription into the Russian army, father decided that, before his enlistment, it would be a good thing to learn a trade, and he made his mind up to become a tinsmith at the workshop of my uncle, Shmuel Rozenbaum (of blessed memory). But this plan did not please his mother. Grandmother Rachel (of blessed memory) complained about it to judge Leibish (a righteous man of blessed memory) who, after hearing the objections from both sides, passed judgement: her son was making a good decision and may there be many Jews like him, since there is nothing finer than a Jewish youngster learning a trade by day and dedicating the night to the Torah. Grandma had no choice but to accept this verdict. After he got married father took care of the Kutno community *mikveh* (ritual bath) for fifteen years.

When the author Shalom Asz visited our home in Israel, he reminded father of his time at the *yeshiva* when they were pupils together. He reminisced about the slap on the face that he got from my father for reading "forbidden" books under the desk during lessons. The author was proud of the people in the land of Israel who came from his town, who were all working folk lending a hand to develop the country. And so, over many years, in Kutno, we were prepared psychologically and pragmatically, even before we emigrated to Israel.

While my brother and myself were still schoolboys at the first Hebrew school in Kutno, the *Bnei Zion HaKtanim* ["Young Sons of Zion"] was founded. Yaakov Zerchin was its leader – he was also principal of the school. The job of the society was to distribute *Keren Kayemet* stamps, picture postcards of the Land of Israel and so on. However, after a short while the First World War broke out and I went to Germany to learn to be a locksmith and a plumber. At the end of the war, I returned to Kutno and joined the *Zeirei Zion* ["Youths of Zion"] society, whose leaders then were



The "HeChalutz" in Kutno

Nathan Tiger (of blessed memory), Zosha Szapiro, Bronia Yarecka, Yaakov Zandberg, the teacher Libart and the son of Rabbi Israel Yehoshua Trunk¹ (of blessed memory). This association promoted cultural events and was active in matters to do with the land of Israel and Zionism. And so, many Zionist leaders in Poland visited Kutno.

In 1918, after the Germans had departed from Poland, for fear of pogroms from the Polish population, Jewish youth started to arrange Jewish defense groups. Even us, Kutners, got organized and obtained arms from the Germans who were withdrawing from Poland. The first head of defense in our town was Wierzbicki, the principal of the high school. Of course, the first search for concealed weapons was made at the high school, but they found nothing because the arms were hidden in the wood store belonging to Mr. Holcman and in Turbowicz and Nachman Wajnsztajn's (of blessed memory) beer factory. However, as a result of this search all Zionist business was stopped, except for *HeChalutz* activity, which apparently the Polish police officer, Miczyński, approved of. The day after the search, while I was walking in the street with my friend Yaakov Maller (of blessed memory), the abovementioned officer stopped us and without saying a word, gave Yaakov a slap and ordered me to report the next day at the police station. When I got there the following day he questioned me about the activities of *HeChalutz* and I explained to him that our aim was to train Jewish youth for productive work in Israel and we had no political agenda.

My reply satisfied him and we were given permission to continue with our activities. He even promised us that as long as he was a police officer in Kutno not a hair on our heads would be touched. And he kept his promise. There were no pogroms in Kutno. After the Germans had left, Kutno *HeChalutz* requested joining the ranks of the Polish military organization, POW. But they turned us down claiming that the organization was closed. Meanwhile we extended our activities and even arranged a local congress of *HeChalutz*.

After the Russian-Polish war, in 1920, after I had been released from the Polish army, I applied to emigrate to Israel, but the central office prevented involved members from emigrating so that the movement's activities would not be shut down. However, at the same time, Shlomo Wolsztajn (Franc), and his brother Yosef (of blessed memory), and Yehuda Bromberg, emigrated to Israel. After them my father (of blessed memory) emigrated to Israel. A year later he brought his family to him and even I emigrated a year after them. My father's house was a meeting place for all Kutno emigrants in Israel. After a short time M. Lustigman, Kolski, Wajngarten, Chaim Elbaum, Gwircman and others came to Israel.

The leaders of *HeChalutz* were: Y. Majranc, A. Szymonowicz, Y. Zandberg, Y. Maller and myself.

It must be mentioned that Kutners played an active part in various aspects of Zionist functions in Israel, in the *Haganah* (before the War of Independence) and in social and economic life in Israel.

¹ TN: Rabbi Moshe Pinchas Trunk.