

ON *BEITAR* ACTIVITY IN KUTNO

by Moshe WIGDOROWICZ, Tel Aviv

During the so-called "spring period" of Polish *Beitar*, in the years 1925-26, when in a number of cities and towns in Poland the National-Zionist youth set up their organizations, a *Beitar* nest was also formed in Kutno, which was later headed by its first commander, Abraham Goldsztajn.

At first, the youth were not entirely clear about the end goal of the new movement, but they understood that Zionism meant first and foremost a Jewish independent state that would not be achieved through the ways and means of the already paranoid Zionist organizations. At that time, the soil under the feet of Polish Jewry began to burn, the rural youth sought employment and employment in the cities where the Jews were rooted. Influenced by the antisemitic elements, the Poles of town and village saw in the Jew the rival and "seeker" of their economic positions. Later came the sad anti-Jewish excesses in Przytyk, Mińsk Mazowiecki and other places. Jabotinsky's slogan: "evacuation of the Jewish population of Poland", had a wide repercussion – among his supporters, as well as among his opponents.

Although there were no specific anti-Jewish demonstrations in Kutno, the older generation knew that during World War I, our city was miraculously saved from a pogrom because the two enemy armies did not meet here. Their clashes took place in Łowicz and Sochaczew, and local Jews suffered greatly in both places.

In my time, there was a case that during the procession of "Corpus Christi" (during "Green Thursday"¹), which drew from the great church in the old market, one of the Poles threw a stone, with the express intention to provoke anti-Jewish outbursts. Fortunately, the provocation did not succeed and the police took control of the situation.

In the twenties and thirties, Kutno was not immune to the constant influx of freshly-baked Polish merchants, who by all means sought to expel the Jewish craftsman and retailers. Antisemitism became so widespread that the Jewish youth saw no other solution than to immigrate to *Eretz Israel*.

But in and around the Land of Israel, in those years, the historic conflict between the British Mandate and the Jewish "state-to-be" was taking place.

The first *Beitar* groups in our city were recruited from working-class youth, students, tradesmen. In the beginning, *Beitar* had a special influence among the participants in the evening courses of the *Poalei Agudat Israel*, where our friend Yaakov Zajdenwar was active. At first, they gathered in the premises of the Zionist organization, in the new market, in the house of N. Rabinowicz.

In addition to ideological-enlightenment work, the Hebrew language was studied and military exercises were carried out. The latter was not a simple matter, as all parties without exception and individuals mocked the "Jewish army", and even insulted us. This did not deter the young *Beitarists* – and they continued to do their job.

There was not a single area of general-Zionist activity where the *Beitar* was not among the most active. For example, in the collects for *Keren Kayemet*, *Keren HaYesod*, for the cultural school, as well as for the annual "bazaar". I remember that the first bazaar in the "Modern" cinema hall, with the participation of Mr. Isaac Grinbaum, on its way back from a meeting of the Zionist Action Committee, which took place in Berlin, was quite impressive. Most of the exhibits and artifacts for the bazaar were provided by *Beitar* colleagues.

One of the most active and responsible Zionist activists in Kutno, Yosef Sztajnfeld z"l, emphasized on several occasions the loyalty and activity of the *Beitarists* to their organization and to the Zionist work in the city.

*

The events in Palestine, in 1929, provoked a wave of protests among the world Jewry. In Kutno too, in those days there was a large protest-demonstration of all Zionist groups. There, we marched to the meeting in the Great Synagogue, in uniform and in a military manner. With astonishment and appreciation, the comrades were watched marching from their premises on the old market, in the house of Yehuda Nosal – all the way to the synagogue. Mr. Yehuda Riftin and A. S. Elberg, who had just returned from *Eretz Israel* on a visit to their hometown of Kutno, gave speeches.

The protest demonstration, after the passing a series of conflicting resolutions, took place in the courtyard of the "Maccabi" club.

¹ TN: Thursday before Easter.

Due to the transfer of Kutno *Beitar's* commander, Zvi Szczig, to Płock, together with his entire family, Zelig Kowalski z"l, one of the most conscious and capable Beitarist in town, was appointed chief of staff.

Zvi was a very capable and dedicated commander, but the new leadership successfully continued the activity in the organizational as well as the cultural sphere. The "Live Newspapers" every Friday night stood on a high level and attracted a large audience. The feuilletons of Shmuel Elbaum and Shlomo Herszkowicz were received with great admiration.

Shmuel Elbaum was one of the last commanders of Kutno *Beitar*. The surviving Beitarists in Israel remember well these loyal neighbors and friends. He died in the ghetto with his family. Shlomo Herszkowicz was one of the first *Beitar* members in town, the son of a well-known family in Kutno. He emigrated to France before the war, and settled down well. While bathing in the sea, he drowned. It was not until the third day after the accident that his body surfaced. His death evoked sincere grief in all who knew him.

*

In the thirties, in the rural workshop of the Jewish landowner Brewda, a training point was established for Beitarists candidates to emerge. Brewda came to Kutno from Lithuania, and settled in the village of Malina². There, Jewish youths experienced the taste of earthwork. The priest of the village of Malina had at that time returned from a trip to the Near East and his enthusiasm for Israel was extraordinarily strong.

As a leader of training, I needed to care for workplaces. In Malina we managed to recruit 20 colleagues, some of them out of Kutno. It is worth noting

that Yaakov Winyarski ("Alfa") worked at that training at the time, then became deputy commander of *Etzel*³, now Knesset deputy Yaakov Meridor.

*

At the 14th Zionist Congress, *Beitar* in Kutno presented an independent list. The number of votes received – 4. (for Chaim Zajdenwar, father of our friend Yaakov Zajdenwar, today active in Israël in the *Histadrut*; for our later commander A. Goldsztajn, the actual founder of *Beitar* and one of the devoted colleagues; the third vote belonged to Yitzhak Luidor, later chairman of the Kutno Revisionists).

We have already received 24 votes in the 15th Zionist Congress. To the 16th Congress – 60 votes. To the 17th – above 200 votes. And 1,000 eligible voters have already taken part in the elections for the New Zionists organization.

We sent three of our colleagues from Kutno and surroundings to the first *Beitar* Training Center in Klesow: A Goldsztajn, Lipman Menche and A. Kaluszinski. At our first meeting of Polish *Beitar* in Warsaw, our delegation had 40 members participating.

When a training ground was created in Iwacewicze, we sent four colleagues there. One of them, Pesach Gwircman, drowned in a river when he volunteered after work. Pesach was one of the first Beitarists, the son of a Torah-savvy, a carpenter, who emigrated from Lithuania to Kutno. Pesach had an opportunity to make *aliyah* on the basis of a request from his brother. But as a Beitarist, he previously wanted to complete the training, to be ready for a working-class life in the country. After his tragic death, the *Beitar* Library in Kutno was named after him. A



Union of Soldiers – 1932

² TN: 2km outside of Kutno, on the north.

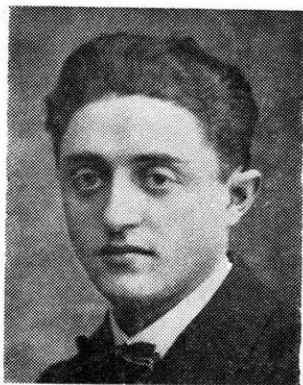
³ TN: aka Irgun Zvai Leumi, or simply Irgun.

memorial service was held at the time of the year, and his picture hung on the premises for many years.

We have never claimed to be the best *Beitar* nest in Poland, but an ambition to be one of the most active – yes it was. It even published its own hectographed page "Tel-Hai". Only one issue appeared.

*

Just in the year of the Stawski⁴ trial and during the elections to the 18th Zionist Congress, the organization had grown. The number of members in *Beitar*, *HaZahar* and *Brit HaChayal* had virtually doubled. Shalom Grosminc came at that time to *Beitar* – from the Folkist Party. Later became one of the devoted and leading colleagues. I remember that after the court in Palestine released A. Stawski, Shalom Grosminc came to me with a proposal to buy all the "Today" copies that arrived in Kutno that day, so that the Jews could buy only the "Moment" – and thus expressing their protest to "Today" for its anti-Stawski stance...



Power of Attorney – Frost



Beitar member Gwircman, who drowned during a training in Iwacewicze

Among the leading colleagues of those bygone times, we can name:

Abraham Kaplan, a Lithuanian fellow with a teaching permit, was very active at *HaZahar*.

Mordechai Walter, son of a prominent family, where he received a national education. Very competent.

Eliyahu Welcman, a young lawyer, was a good speaker at Warsaw University.

Yosef Zhelichowski, a descendant of the well-known family of millers, commander of the *Brit HaChayal*

Of the women, it is worth mentioning the Skusowski sisters. One of them has been Secretary of *HaZahar* for many years,

The young and active members included: Bella Metal, a student at the Hebrew Gymnasium; Franie Frenkel; Miriam Neimark; Ryvka Bild; Paula Pukacz; Hinde Spayer; Teitler, Lasman and others. Comrades Moshe Kaufman, Shmuel Szapszewicz and Moshe Goldwasser. He and his father had already been immigrants, but later returned to Kutno due to the crisis in the *Eretz Israel*. Unfortunately, he and his whole family

perished in Chelmnó. Moshe Goldwasser was full of enthusiasm and idealism for the Jewish land.

*

The visit of revisionist leader and brilliant speaker, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, left an unforgettable impression on Kutno. Jabotinsky was returning from the Katowice conference and his lecture in one of the largest halls attracted thousands of listeners, most of whom had to stay outside.

The second major undertaking, which gave the movement much prestige and glory, was the celebration in honor of the unveiling of the *Beitar* flag. Thousands of people from Kutno and the surrounding area marched in their uniforms through the most important streets – from the school to the old theater. From the windows and balconies, the marching Jewish youths were thrown flowers.

Survivors of the Kutno ghetto know that this flag accompanied their followers on the last journey to Chelmnó.

*

Kutno *Beitarists* have not been privileged to emigrate to *Eretz Israel* with the help of certificates, except Yaakov Zajdenwar. On the other hand, some yes managed to get to the shores of the Land of Israel – thanks to the illegal *Beitar*-aliyah.

Many members of Kutno's *Beitar* were active on the front lines of the illegal immigration, especially after the liberation. A glorious account of the Jewish struggle, resistance, and heroism has been shown by some of our comrades in the Kutno ghetto, on the various fronts of World War II and most recently – in the Independence War after the proclamation of the Jewish state. Many of them fell with arms in hand in battle with the Nazis and later – with the Arab gangs. Honor their memory!

In the underground in *Eretz Israel*, which fought against the English mandate-power and Arab pogromists, Kutno *Beitar* member Nachman Falc hy"d, son of Yechiel Falc, fell in the ranks of *Etsel*.

*

In my memories of Kutno *Beitar* and *Beitarists*, I would like to end with a few recollections of the *Beitar* activity in the surrounding towns: Krośniewice, Łęczycza and Dąbrowice.

As a larger center, we set ourselves the goal of establishing a nest in Krośniewice. The task was easy here, because all that was needed was to turn the "Revival" branch into a *Beitar* organization – its chairman, Zvi Appel, became Krośniewice's commander in *Beitar*. The organization later grew. Ezekiel Bagno z"l, who was visiting his parents from the Land of Israel at the time, set up the branch in Krośniewice. He fell as a guard, during the events of 1938.

To Łęczycza, a district capital like Kutno, twenty kilometers from there, we used to go on foot, headed by commander Zvi Szczig to organize the youth there. It did

⁴ TN: accused of being an accessory to the murder of Haim Arlosoroff.

not take long before Łęczyca possessed a lovely *Beitar* organization, led by the youths Stulinski and Szorek. *Beitar's* growth came at the expense of "Gordonia"⁵.

Abraham Knopf died in Israel – a convinced revisionist. He received a Jewish-national education at home. After immigrating, he was active in the *HaZahar* in Haifa, where he died in 1961.

Dąbrowice had a small Jewish population that was predominantly Zionist. Therefore, it was not difficult to set up a *Beitar* organization here.

But all the towns, like the city of Kutno, were destroyed by a brutal enemy.

⁵ TN: Pioneer youth movement following the ideas of A. D. Gordon.