

A GLORIOUS PAGE IN THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH YOUTH IN KUTNO

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*Ken*¹ *HaShomer HaZair* in Kutno was one of the oldest in Poland. It was probably founded during the First World War by the Torunczyk brothers of Łódź. At that time, the *ken* bore a distinctly scouting character and devoted itself to the study of the Hebrew language and knowledge of *Eretz Israel*. The *ken* gained the support of the Jewish public thanks to its educational activities and its loyalty to the values of Zionism. For a long time, it carried the name of the Scout Federation or the branch for the distribution of culture of the Zionist Organization. At that time the *ken* was assisted by a parents' committee. The *ken* consisted mostly of the youth who studied in the two schools in the city: the students of "*Am HaSefer*" and the students of the Polish gymnasium. My friends and I joined the *ken* after a conversation with the *ken's* leader at that time, Yaakov Riftin.

In addition to the emotional element of joining the *ken* we also wanted to emphasize the difference that distinguished us by activities for the community and being an example to others. The movement served as a platform for social activity and over time, with its ideological consolidation as a Jewish youth movement that educates its members to national loyalty and aspires to a society based on the principles of justice and equality in which the kibbutz serves as a model for this life – we saw in the movement a challenge to the stark reality of Jewish life in Polish towns. Indeed, such was the reality. The waves of antisemitism began to rise and the Jew's stature leaned over. There were many solutions to the distress of life that the non-Zionist parties raised before the Jewish public. As I listened to the debates conducted by the *Bund* and the Communists, which were also held in our home (my brothers belonged to these parties), I knew that I would not find my way in these parties and the way to the revival of our nation.

The *ken's* activities

The *ken* was composed of three age groups: "*Kfirim*" [young lions] – boys and girls up to the age of 15; "*Zofim*" [scouts] – up to the age 16-17; and "*Bogerim*" [graduates]. We operated under uncomfortable conditions. We did not have a permanent club and we had to wander from place to place. The educational activity, which included the study of the Hebrew language, history of the labor movement and the settlement in *Eretz Israel*, was conducted according to age. Inquiries were made on various subjects, such as: our relations with other parties, the Diaspora and *Eretz Israel*, our place in the international labor movement, etc. However, the essence of education was the aspiration for self-education, self-realization, and the renewal of man and society.

One of the main activities of the *ken* was the organization of "summer colonies" for all the members. In 1925, there were already three "summer colonies" of the Kutno and Włocławek region which included the *kens* in: Kutno, Włocławek, Żychlin, Gąbin and Płock. The head of the regional leadership was the member Yaakov Riftin.

The summer colonies were organized for the purpose of educating for greater independence, for group life with youth from nearby towns, closeness to nature and centralized cultural activities. Of course, we were interested in full participation in the colonies, but it was not easy because of the parents' fear for the fate of their children. It was necessary to invest considerable energy in persuading the parents to allow their children to go to these summer colonies.

The *ken* also took part in general public activities and gained a reputation for its dedication to the activities of the Jewish National Fund in which we always took first place. In addition, we participated in the distribution of the "*Zionist Shekel*" and the *League for Labor Eretz Israel*. In the thirties, we conducted the activities of *HeChalutz*² branch in our city and left our mark on all its activities.

As the members of the *ken* matured it was time to leave for "*Hachshara*," meaning, to prepare ourselves for immigration and life in a kibbutz. In 1926 the first group of members left for "*Hachshara*" in Kisielnica near Łomża, and over the years our members left for "*Hachshara*" points in Radom, Kielce, Częstochowa and others. There was great blessing in the "*Hachshara*" period, social groups were formed and the members adapted to physical work that most of them never experienced before...

On the verge of the end

The *ken* knew periods of ebb and flow in its activities. The gates of Israel were closed. The hope of a rapid immigration was slim, and it was necessary to spend many years in "*Hachshara*." The graduate stratum was reduced and there was no one to deal with the faulty ideas of the "*Bund*" and the extreme left that brought the Zionist movement to an end. Such was the condition of the *ken* in the years 1935-36. It numbered more than 200 members whose instructors were members of the "*Hachshara*" in Kutno (Podlaskie A). After a short time, the number of members was reduced to 150. Part of the graduates' battalion did not go to "*Hachshara*" and was considered to leave the movement.

With the Nazi occupation the *ken* began to regroup. In reports sent from the *ken* to the main leadership by Dov Terszmit, (two of them are kept at the Ringelblum Institute and copies at Yad Vashem) the member, Azriel Mroz (today a member of Kibbutz Gazit), wrote in the summer

¹ TN: Hebrew, "nest", local branch of a youth movement.

² TN: Hebrew, "The Pioneer".

of 1939: "Despite the tension in the city and the smell of war felt in the air, the *ken* operated as always. In particular there was activity in the following strata: "*Zofim*," "*Zofim Bogerim*," and "*Bogerim*." Because of the lack of a club there was no activity in the young strata. In July, the "*Zofim*" stratum left for a summer colony in Dobrzyń nad Wisłą. Two weeks later the colony was dispersed by order of the authorities on the grounds of public disorder. After our return home it became clear that all the other colonies had been dispersed for security reasons. The stratum of "*Zofim Bogerim*" did not leave for the summer colony, but the *ken* continued to operate and its activities were held in the public parks until September 1, 1939. After the outbreak of the war there were only a few meetings of members and one of them was – aid to the refugees – to the members of the movement who fled from Bydgoszcz, Włocławek, Toruń and Poznań who were on their way to Warsaw."

"On September 16, the city fell in the hands of the Germans. The meetings stopped and after some reorganization, we resumed our meetings. The main activity was how to hide the *ken*'s little property. In a meeting with Dov Tersznil, and members of the '*Zofim*' stratum, it was decided to hide the flags of the *ken* and the scouts' battalions, while the booklets in Hebrew and Polish were to be burned."

"With the increase of the flow eastward, most of the members of the movement left the city, especially the older strata, including me."

The dream of a new tomorrow

The member, Zippora Maron (Kibbutz Gazit), who was a young member of the *ken*, adds: "After the entire graduate stratum fled eastward, we were left with no guidance. We were at a loss and we did not know what to do. From time to time, when circumstances allowed us, we met and reminisced. We lived in the hope that everything

would pass quickly, our members will return home and the life of the movement will be renewed. I am sure that if a few members of the '*Bogerim*' stratum remained, we would certainly have continued to operate in accordance with the conditions created in those days."

In this way we passed the summer, a summer full of worries and decrees imposed on us by the Germans.

In the summer of 1940, the order was given to leave our homes and move to the ghetto. I don't have the strength to describe the ghetto with its horrors and horrific conditions, but we looked for each other and even met together. The meetings were an essential need of all of us, a way to escape for a moment from the hellish conditions and reminisce about the old days. Sometimes we read books and dreamed of another tomorrow. We could not sing for fear of being discovered, we knew very well that the power of singing together can help a person in his grief and sorrow.

"The meetings, which took place on one of the hills inside the ghetto, were only known to our members. We set up guards for the fear that the police would find us and, indeed, they did everything to suppress any spark of organization. Although we did not ignore the danger involved in these meetings, we felt a strong need to maintain contact between the members and, of course, we had no contact with the outside. We were completely cut off from the world"...

Indeed, *ken HaShomer HaZair* in Kutno had written a glorious page in the history of the local youth. His education for change in values, his desire for self-fulfillment and Zionist activity, brought dozens of members to life in a kibbutz in Israel. Today they are in Eilon, Beit Alfa, Gazit, Gal On, Merhavia, Evron, Ein HaChoshesh, Ein Shemer, Ramat HaShofet, and dozens of members are currently active in Israel in various fields and, in this, the achievements and values of *ken HaShomer HaZair* in Kutno.



Group of *HaShomer HaZair* members