



"Strength and courage" – In honor of the emigrants of "HaShomer HaZair" from Kutno

"THANKS TO THE KEN OF HASHOMER HAZAIR"

by Simcha FRUMER

Among the young people of our city – students of the Polish State Gymnasium – came the awakening to Zionism and the national and social problems of the Jewish people, thanks to the *HaShomer HaZair* branch in Kutno.

The very fact that we were students of the Polish Government Gymnasium, which had a Polish nationalist atmosphere and the great influence of the Christian clergy, prevented us from any tendency to problems and ideas that were contrary to the school's mood. But not only that. Even inside, an assimilated spirit was blown in the homes of the Jewish students. The denial of Jewish national recognition in general, and of the *HaShomer HaZair* idea in particular, marked many parents. It is no wonder, then, that their sons – high school students, were distant from the values of Judaism and Zionist national recognition. Moreover, many parents have tried to create an

atmosphere in their homes that will make their sons forget from the very heart that they are Jews, in order to prevent them from coming across "unpleasant" situations when meeting their Christian friends. Many of my friends did not know Yiddish, were far from the folk tradition, its sacred values, its culture and way of life.

At the same time, the Jewish youth sought a framework to which he could belong, to find his satisfaction and most importantly – a framework or organization that would take him out of his loneliness, which was his faithful companion from the beginning of his steps in the Polish school. The number of Jewish students in our school did not exceed three dozen, as it was carefully controlled by the *numerus clausus*. However, our Polish members were organized in various youth movements, such as ZHP¹, Strzelec² and others. They wore handsome uniforms, practiced various sports and

¹ TN: Polish, Scouting and Guiding Association (Polish: *Związek Harcerstwa Polskiego* – ZHP).

² TN: Polish, Sagittarius. Paramilitary organization for boys, branch of the ZHP, merging with it in 1918.

scouting activities, and their public appearance always made a great impression on us – the Jewish youth. But these organizations and movements were closed, and the Jewish youth were not given a foothold there. Many of the Jewish students accepted the discrimination and boycott against them with equanimity, pretended nothing had happened and continued to push into Christian society. But there were others as well. They felt lonely, but could not explain to themselves its nature, due to their young age and lack of understanding of the processes among Polish society. They had no choice but to envy the students of the "Am HaSefer" school, who were far from assimilated influences and educated in a national Jewish spirit.

It is therefore easy to understand that the *HaShomer HaZair* movement was a lifeline for these youth. Although there were other movements in our city as well: General Zionists, *Beitar*, *HeChalutz*, *Poalei Zion-Left*, the *Mizrachi*, but not a single movement paid attention to that embarrassed youth in the Polish Gymnasium and they left him alone. Until *HaShomer HaZair* came. Interestingly, it was precisely this movement that was not popular with parents, with a socialist tone, and far from a petty-bourgeois worldview, precisely this movement tried to bring Jewish gymnasium youth closer to affluent Jewish homes.

Interestingly, a movement like *Beitar* drew its power from the youth of working-class families, while *HaShomer HaZair* turned to youth from petty-bourgeois homes, to gymnasium youth, who were far from a national

Jewish consciousness. Years later, as we grew up, we wondered about this phenomenon. This may have been due to the more serious and profound demand that this movement placed on the Jewish children. It demanded more depth from them, more thought for all the problems of life and society, not accepting agreed and accepted things about anything. Only young people with a higher intellectual level than the rest of Jewish youth in the Jewish towns of the 1930s in Poland.

How did the *HaShomer HaZair* movement operate within the walls of the school? The authorities, who did not approve of *HaShomer HaZair*'s activities at all, banned all gymnasium activities from the movement. There was no other way left but the conspiratorial way. In the upper classes there were one or two who belonged to the movement and they brought the word of the movement to their younger friends, in the lower classes – not to all but to those who were trained, provided that if they did not join themselves, they would at least know how to keep a secret and not endanger their friends by their chatter.

The nucleus was originally founded, numbering about eight students in the second and third grades. They gathered under the guidance of another high school student, Kuba, (now Yaakov Riftin) who talked to them about the problems of the Jewish people and the youth of this people. This group of boys worked hard to learn the Hebrew language, the history of the Jewish people on its literature and its origins. Little by little, the realization began to permeate us that we were an integral part of the Jewish people, and that its fate was our destiny. We recognized that we must first identify ourselves as members of this people, not to obscure our Judaism anywhere and first of all in our Polish school. This is worth emphasizing more emphatically, since the gymnasium has occupied the main place in our lives and our thoughts and everything revolved around this axis whose name was: the Christian Gymnasium in Kutno. More than once we had to defend the dignity of the Jewish people, which the Polish students defamed and slandered. And not only did we stand up for verbal defense, we also tried physical defense against the various antisemites who flooded Poland in the last years before the outbreak of the war.

There were many demands that *HaShomer HaZair* placed before us. It taught us introspection – about our thoughts, our feelings and our way of life. It educated us to love the book, education, it motivated us to continuously train, to understand the processes that take place in the Jewish people and in the whole world.

Not everyone could meet these demands, not everyone was able to change their lifestyle and thinking. Many have fallen out of our ranks. The rest were added to the group of their peers, the students of "Am-HaSefer" and despite the differences in education and lifestyle, the merger between us went up nicely. Inside the gymnasium they began to feel the uniqueness and difference of this group of boys and the other students of the gymnasium. Their answers in tests and lessons in history or literature were critical, as if they sought to analyze the question not only from the visible side but also to reveal what was



In the 'nest'



Adult group of *HaShomer HaZair*

hidden from the eye. Their interest in national and social problems, their proud position as Jews and their dignified personal appearance, aroused suspicion. Therefore, the members of *HaShomer HaZair* had to appear with extreme caution, as they were expected to be expelled from school, as has happened more than once. That is why all the operations took place in secret, without public appearances, without wearing a uniform and even the ceremony of handing over the *HaShomer HaZair* emblem was held in the evening at Eizyk's farm³ outside the city. Despite this, the activity in the *ken* of *HaShomer* did not stop and even expanded, students from the lower grades joined it. Over time, this group of students became the leaders of the *ken*, either as instructors or in the leadership of the *ken*.

Many of them live with us today in Israel, some in kibbutz, some in cities or in villages. But despite the differences in the forms of life and their ways, it is very much that which connects us, thanks to our past and our shared experiences in adolescence in the *HaShomer HaZair* movement. However, it is not only shared youth experiences in the past that unite us, but the foundations of our education, the shaping of our character. Challenging ourselves and self-criticism, respect for others – all these were acquired during adolescence in the *HaShomer HaZair* movement. And these values, the fruit of the education of the *HaShomer HaZair* movement, accompany us all in our way of life, to this day.



Top: group of members of *HaShomer HaZair* in Kutno, in 1926. Bottom: same group in Tel Aviv, 1962

³ TN: the Eizyk's brothers had a rose farm outside the city where the future pioneers could train in agriculture.