

THE YOUTH MOVEMENT OF "POALEI ZION" ("YUGNT")

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translated from the Hebrew by Ada Holtzman z"l

There remain no documents or certificates, archive or a library from the youth movement ["*Yugnt*"] of *Poalei Zion* in Kutno. All of what was to do with its activities was burnt during the war or buried in the fields and nothing remains, except some memoirs which I shall try to record here.

The youth movement of "*Poalei Zion*", ["*Yugnt*"] was founded after the First World War. It was after the lecture of comrade Zerubavel¹ in Kutno whose main theme was "Peace and Revolution in Palestine". Many young people attended it and were deeply affected. The truth is that although we had previously attended many of the activities of the "*Zukunft*" ["Future"] youth movement of the "*Bund*", we were not influenced by it since in our homes a nationalist Jewish atmosphere prevailed and the "*Bund*" ideas were not accepted. It was therefore not surprising that we were more attracted to the Zionist ideals and *Eretz Israel*. So, we appealed to the members of "*Poalei Zion*" and asked for their help in organizing a youth movement according to its ideals.

Our activity concentrated mainly on discussions on the problems which were extremely important: Communism and Zionism, Antisemitism and *Eretz Israel*, the direction of Jewish youth in the Diaspora and *Eretz Israel*, etc. We spent much time learning about Borochovism² and Socialism. We organized many "Question and Answer" evenings and argued with the other youth movements on the various problems that we were busy with at that time. We hotly debated the ways of the whole world – Esperanto would be the international language of the human race in the future; there will be no borders based on religion and faith between countries; the Workers' International league; every person would be able to be dedicated to his work and profession according to his individual talents and inclination, etc.

Meanwhile we decided to found a library. We organized evening classes for 80 pupils, directed by comrade Tajchman, a teacher from Radom. Also, we distributed the movement's newspaper "For the *Yugnt*" ["*Di*

Yugnt Fun"], which was first published in Warsaw in 1922, among our young readers, and working and studying youth. But not without breakups as everyone knows, and we also had splitting from the right and from the left. There were also informers among us, because the police was watching us and then persecuted us, until we were forced to go



The first committee of "Poalei Zion" movement in Kutno, 1917 – from right: Kac (Belgium), Apelast of blessed memory, Yosef Szapiro (Kiryat Ata, Israel), Mroz of blessed memory, Frenkel.

underground. There was the story of the red flag, which our girl members embroidered day and night, with all their dreams about a better world which that flag was meant to symbolize, when we suddenly heard that the police planned to make a thorough search of our homes. We were already about to burn the flag so that it would not fall into the hands of the police. Then our mothers interfered (*Yiddishe Mummies*). They saw how sad the girls were and hid that flag for us. On May 1st, the flag was carried by our comrades together with the other flags of the workers' parties, but ours was the most beautiful of them all!

¹ TN: Yaakov Vitkin, AKA "Zerubavel" (January 14, 1886, Poltava, Ukraine – June 2, 1967, Tel Aviv, Israel). Leader of *Poalei Zion* and a founding member of MAPAM party in Israel.

² TN: Dov Ber Borochov (June 21, 1881 – December 17, 1917) was a Marxist Zionist and one of the founders of the Labor Zionist movement.

One of the events which left a deep mark on my memory was my imprisonment, together with all the other delegates of the "Yugnt" during a convention which took place in Łódź. While we sat at the convention, discussing the problems of the Jewish and world socialist movement, the resolutions of the 2nd and 3rd International, the agents of the Polish police burst into the hall with drawn revolvers and at the command: "Hands up", caught us, about 60 delegates, and handed us over to the police. We were released from them by a pricey bribe, and each of us was ordered to return to our homes. But the organized butchers from the Baluty district of Łódź thought otherwise. They moved us all to their clubhouse at 5 Brzezynska St, closed the doors behind us and under an excellent guard which they set outside, we delegates continued our discussions. We agreed on some resolutions and the complete convention continued as planned. The whole time our butcher comrades stood outside equipped with their knives, watching, and who would dare provoke them?

When I came to the town on my way home, the head of the political police in town stopped me asking: "Elik, what were you doing in Łódź?" I was alarmed by his question but immediately told him some "fibs". He advised me to be careful "because the days are very difficult now". But the next Saturday we again held a members' meeting in the forest, to report about the convention in Łódź, and we were captured by the police. After much pleading to that head of the political police, Wadman, we managed to get out of the business safely.

Emigration from the town started in the years 1922-1924. Many travelled to France, Belgium, United States, Brazil and also to *Eretz Israel*. Our organization started to

organize agricultural training ["*Hachshara*"] groups, before immigration to *Eretz Israel*. Our members went to work on the surrounding farms but we were not successful.

On top of all this, we were engaged in various activities like: contributions to the Palestine Workers' Fund, parties, and many outings in the surrounding areas. We also kept contact with other youth movements in the region: with Włocławek, Żychlin, Łęczyca etc. Many youngsters from these towns visited us and it was my duty to host them, because, as I worked in a shop and thus enjoyed both Jewish and Polish holidays, I had more free time to do that. First of all, I introduced the main characters of our *shtetl* to the guests, whom the great Jewish writer, (native of Kutno) Shalom Asz perpetuated in his writings: *Motke di Ganav* [Motke the Thief], *Mocni Wojtek*, *Matis Fuks* and others. Then we used to take trips to the nearby forest and park. We bathed in the river and all this was often interrupted by fights with the Poles.

In the year of 1924, I immigrated to *Eretz Israel*. Since then, I've never visited Kutno again. It is true that two years before the war I did visit Poland, but not Kutno. Until today, I've suffered the pangs of a guilty conscience. But who could have imagined that total destruction and liquidation of the Jewish people in Poland? Who could have imagined, even in his worst nightmares, that this would be the end of the Jews, the community of Kutno among them?

May these few words be as a memorial candle for my comrades, the youngsters from the "Yugnt" movement, who lifted up their eyes towards *Eretz Israel*, but perished together with all the People of Israel.

May their memory be blessed!



Fundraising day in Kutno