

JEWISH WORKERS' PARTY "POALEI ZION" AND YOUTH PARTY "JUGNT"

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When writing about the activities of the Party of Workers "*Poalei-Zion*" in Kutno, I have to give some details.

First, everything that is mentioned here is only from memory and is described with the help of comrades Menashe Kac (Belgium) et Berl Poncz (Paris). Other sources are unavailable.

Second, all the old comrades of that time, who participated to the early years of "*Poalei-Zion*", are gone forever.

Third, the author of these lines is not himself of this generation, which would be in a position to transmit his experiences linked to a now distant past. For these obvious reasons, no precise date or exact order of the emergence of the "*Poalei-Zion*" can be assured here.

Let us therefore assume that this is a modest testimony on the history of Kutno Jews, which will perhaps one day incite the interested researcher to conduct in-depth research on the facts mentioned here.

However, I consider it my duty to describe in this memorial book, in general terms, the existence, the activity et le development of the Zionist-Socialist movement in our town.

1

Zionist ideas permeated our city from the very beginning of the appearance of the Zionist movement in Poland. As in other cities under the tsarist, despotic and antisemitic regime, the nostalgia for a national awakening manifested itself in Kutno. As usual, the first "infected" by these new ideas were Jews, progressive local intelligentsia, prominent landowners and young people with an awakening conscience who sought purpose in life and were deeply concerned about the future of the Jewish people.

Kutno had the great privilege of having his own delegate to the Minsk conference¹. The presence of a representative from Kutno at such a historic global gathering certainly had the greatest impact on the awareness of national liberation in and around the town. The Jews of Kutno thus had direct information about great Jewish personalities, their influence in the world, the questions and aspirations of famous activists, about the conferences, discussions and decisions of the largest and most important Jewish-world's modern assembly, whose goals were clear and unequivocal – to create a national home for the Jewish people.

2

A prominent landowner, Matityahu (Mates) Goldman, in agreement with other staunch Zionists in the

town, took on the task of being the town's delegate to the Minsk conference. The impression that his mission and his return made to the town was incredible. It was, surely, the first public manifestation of Zionist activity, and also the clear proof of the existence of an organized Zionist movement.

The very creation of such a movement, with its clearly formulated program and the privilege of having its own representative in Minsk, has certainly been a stimulus for a deeper rooting of Zionism in the Kutno region and a good opportunity to expand national awareness. It has also helped to gain a lot of prominence with central Jewish institutions in Poland.

Some time later, the "*Bund*" of Kutno also set up its first foundations.

The socialist currents that flooded the entire Tsarist Empire, the general drive towards political rights and democracy, found a resounding echo among the persecuted Jewish masses. The revolutionary waves, which made the slogans of equality and fraternity spring up, carried away the peoples, who "tasted" the Tsarist yoke. It is therefore easy to understand that the Jews, too, were contaminated by the ideals of freedom and were enthusiastic about the idea of fighting absolutism and oppression.

The Bundist arguments were simple and straightforward: Socialism is good for the Russians, for the Lithuanians and for the Poles. Among all peoples, the number of fighters for freedom and justice is increasing – this must also apply to the Jews. No "over there" is and never will be – that was the Bundist argument. Their fight was mainly about daily needs and everything related to "here". With such propaganda, it was easy to find companions.

The *Poalei-Zion* party was just being formed. *Poalei-Zionism*, based on the ideology of socialist Zionism, had hardly recruited its first adherents – that people were already found in Kutno, who accepted the ideas of socialist Zionism. They immediately realized that the synthesis of Socialism and Zionism was the natural solution to the painful problem of Jewish workers, that the special situation of the Jewish people and the specific needs of the Jewish workforce demanded more than the simple translation of socialist slogans into Yiddish. A Jewish Labor Party must, in its program, seek to create a broad response to the interests of Jewish workers and must not lose sight of the tragic consequences of the deep sense of Jewish inferiority. It is therefore necessary to create conditions of existence in which the Jewish worker must find his place and his role of builder of a class of the

¹ TN: September 4-10, 1902.

Jewish nation, to prepare the national gathering of the Jewish people.

It was not easy for the early comrades of *Poalei-Zion* to explain these ideas to the Jews of Kutno. And it was even more difficult in workers' circles. The "*Bund*" had already firmly established itself in the Jewish community. The demands of the proletarian world had also become its demands. The socialism of the "*Bund*" required no explanation. It was enough to add the formula "national-cultural autonomy" – and to rely on the future just order, which will change the individual, and therefore also the Jew. So, it will be the end of the lack of rights of the Jews and other feelings of inferiority. On the contrary, it was necessary to study and explain the foundations of workers' Zionism. It took a long time for the doctrine of *Poalei-Zion* to penetrate people's minds, for it to be understood and to gain supporters and sympathizers.

3

The first group of *Poalei-Zion* in Kutno was already known in the region at the beginning of the present century. This is certain since in 1906 Kutno received a visit from the envoy of the center, Comrade Salomon (now known as Mr. Yarblum). Other senior officials are reported to have come from Warsaw and Łódź.

In 1907, during the elections to the Second Duma, the *Poalei-Zion* group from Kutno actively participated in the electoral campaign.

The first members of *Poalei-Zion* in Kutno are famous names: Abraham Erdberg, Yechiel Rajfeld, Shimshon Gajst, Eliezer Elberg, Tuvia Bozhikowski, Yaakov-Meir Frenkel, etc. They were staunch idealists with a sharp vision of labor issues in general and that of the Jews. The essence of their activity consisted of a very animated discussion with the Bundists on the final goal and the solution of the Jewish question.

A. Erdberg was the personality who animated the group. A local intellectual and teacher in the Hebrew college in Zarchin². He taught Hebrew and Jewish history. Shimshon Gajst was a printer, E. Elberg a commercial employee, and Y. M. Frenkel a sock maker. They were all filled with knowledge and wisdom.

Until the outbreak of the First World War, the group did not develop strongly. These were years of heavy police repression. People were often arrested and deported to Siberia. The work was low profile and restricted. It was not until Kutno was annexed by the German army that the situation improved markedly.

Today it seems very bizarre to say that under German occupation Jewish social life has resurfaced. Despite legal obstacles, companies and unions began to develop. Jewish parties, in various forms, have developed a large number of activities. The majority of the Jewish workforce has become involved in societal activities. From that moment on, the outlines of each trend fluidified.

During this spring of Jewish societal outburst, *Poalei-Zion* occupied a prominent place. At that time, a number of families arrived from Russia, Warsaw and especially Łódź. Among them were quality people who elevated Jewish life to a high standard. Yaakov Wajslic with his wife and their very young daughter Mila settled in Kutno. He founded and directed with a theatrical circle of good quality, which often put on good plays. Beinish Zylberstajn's parents have also arrived. He himself was still a young man, taking his first steps in Yiddish poetry, with his younger comrade Yosef Turko (known as Joseph Okrutny). From Russian countries came, among others: the Riftin families (the parents of Yaakov Riftin), Szapiro, Szuster, Szajnrok, Levitin, Elbaum (the parents of Shiya Elbaum). Among those who came from Łódź, we had very active militants.

4

In 1916, in the midst of World War I, comrades Szapiro, Yaakov Mroz, Y. M. Frenkel, Menashe Kac (now in Brussels), Shiya Apelast, Reuven Jablonski – formed the renewed *Poalei-Zion* party in Kutno. They have been joined by a splinter group from the "*Bund*" – their names are unknown to me. The new generation of *Poalei-Zion* now consisted of A. Szuster, B. Zandberg, Ruth Szajnrok, Sochaczewski, Miller, Fishel Grinbaum, Chaim Sztajn, Sara Baran, Sara Apelast and her older sister, the three Kuczynska sisters (the eldest became the wife of friend Yaakov Mroz; with her father, Shiya Kuczynski, they were called "Shiya and his daughters") and Chava'le Erdberg, the younger sister of Abraham Erdberg, etc.

They found a place and immediately started to work: meetings, conferences, question-and-answer evenings, discussions. There were speakers from the region and from the central committee. Party literature and press began to appear. We collected for the "Palestinian Workers Fund". The various events attracted a large audience of workers, intellectuals and young Jews. In a short time, the party has grown into a large massive organization, with great support and enthusiasm. Institutions have been formed, the number of members and supporters has greatly increased.

Poalei-Zion in Kutno had every chance of becoming a decision-making force in the Jewish community. I remember the successful performances of comrade Menczes. He had just arrived from London, bringing with him the experience of a world traveler. He was a good orator and an active member of the English labor movement. His collaboration and dynamic nature have greatly contributed to our activity.

After World War I, comrade Israel Tajchman arrived in Kutno as a teacher in the Judeo-Polish college. He was a man with all kinds of knowledge, great teaching skills and extremely sympathetic. His arrival in Kutno was associated with an unexpected happy period, from which the party and the youth were able to profit wonderfully.

² TN: maybe refers to Żychlin.

Israel Tajchman gathered around him all the Jewish teachers in the city. The local *Poalei-Zion* committee endorsed this common-sense act. The "evening classes" were immediately created, in which the teachers agreed to collaborate. As for the premises, we had access to the Universal Jewish School. Many young people have participated in these courses. The young people listened to the lessons with all their ears and liked the teachers. The evening school was run by comrade Tajchman. He was assisted by Professors Szapszewicz, Apelast, Kibel's daughter, and others.

The "evening school" company has been a blessing for the city and happiness for *Poalei-Zion*, as all activity has taken place under the protective wing of the institution. The comfortable premises have also been used in other areas of social work. It was the most beautiful period for the *Poalei-Zion* of Kutno.

5

The development and rapid growth of the party demanded the appropriate conditions to be able to assume all the tasks that fell to such a movement. But there were also obstacles which undermined the beautiful tree and dried up its branches.

The Jewish population of Kutno was not rich. Of course, there were a few rich people, merchants, quality Jews. They took little interest in social life, as did the few assimilated ones who kept their distance from other Jews. There was also a large middle class, which consisted mainly of religious, quasi-religious, traders, artisans, hawkers, occasional merchants. The majority of these people were poor and modest, having barely enough to live on. There were several factories in Kutno – but all closed to Jews. The members of *Poalei-Zion* were mostly from the poor class.

The premises of *Poalei-Zion* were rented, and even sublet, inconvenient and expensive. The premises were semi-legal, we did not feel safe there. The deplorable conditions immediately jumped out at visitors. Supporters began to walk away.

Soon came yet another scourge – emigration. After the end of World War I, the borders opened little by little and the Jews started to emigrate.

This phenomenon hit the *Poalei-Zion* party hard in Kutno. As soon as a group of militants was formed, it immediately dispersed due to the constant emigration of members. Then came the unfortunate split that divided *Poalei-Zion* into "left wing" and "right wing". A number of members have left the party. They carried out a specific activity as the "League for Workers of Israel". After the split started the discussion about the famous 21 conditions of the Comintern. The discussion mobilized a lot of energy and ended with the departure of a group of activists.

After that, the Polish-Soviet war began. Most of the members have been mobilized. All the premises were closed immediately. Everything suddenly lost all relevance.

After a while, things passed into the hands of the younger ones who, with dedication, kept the flame alive, looking forward to better days.

6

After Poland's independence, I remember three election campaigns in which *Poalei-Zion* took part in Kutno – twice in the Diet and once in the city council. It seems to me that we had one elected to the first municipal council. This was made possible thanks to the bloc formed by *Poalei-Zion* and the Independents. The city councilor was Eliezer Elberg, from *Poalei-Zion*. If I am not mistaken, we also had a representative on the community council later – comrade Szwarc.

The strong *Poalei-Zion* organization in Żychlin was of great importance to us. Unlike the situation in Kutno, the "*Bund*" had no influence there. Contact with neighbor Żychlin was more frequent, warmer and more useful.

Poalei-Zion repeatedly participated in the May demonstrations under his own banner. In the professional unions, we were in the minority. The "*Bund*" was predominant there.

I remember the death of comrade Priwe Kuczynska, the Secretary of the party section in Kutno. Her death had a big impact in the city, both because of her cut-short life and because she refused to retract before she passed away and had insisted on having a funeral without religious ceremonies. For the first time in Kutno, the oath of *Poalei-Zion* was sung over her grave.

When the cooperative movement developed strongly in Poland, the *Poalei-Zion* opened their own bakery. The administrator was comrade Szuster. It was Chaskel Kac's bakery. However, it didn't exist for long.

In 1926, an event took place at home which gave some hopes of strengthening the ranks of the party. A group of ten *HaShomer HaZair* members approached *Poalei-Zion* to join the party. They were greeted with open arms, but the joy did not last long. The "*Shomers*", from bourgeois homes, did not feel at ease in the ranks of the *Poalei-Zion* in Kutno, whose comrades mostly came from working-class homes. They also didn't want to be in tune with *Poalei-Zion*'s ideology based on Borochovist thought. The group's leader was Yaakov Riftin – who would be a MAPAM's deputy in the Knesset.

7

The creation of the youth movement was of great value and importance for *Poalei-Zion* in Kutno. The young members enthusiastically welcomed the teachings of *Poalei-Zion* and contributed to all actions and undertakings. Although organizationally this was a separate training, there has always been close collaboration. The "*Jugnt*" group represented a reservoir for the party and its members. As soon as he reached the age of eighteen, the young member joined the party. This fact contributed to many successful actions and supported and prolonged the existence of the party in Kutno.



The League of Workers for Israel – 1935

Kutno's "*Jugnt*" was a branch of the "*Jugnt*" organization, which had grown throughout Poland.

Toward Purim 1917, Berel Poncz, Eliyahu Klingbajl, Priwe Kuczynska and Levitin (nicknamed "the handsome Lithuanian") came together and formed a new youth movement.

The name "*Jugnt*" was still unknown to me at the time. I was still a small young man, in a long frock coat, a shoe-stitching apprentice at "The Yellow Crest". My older brother, Shalom Szlajfer, already belonged to the Zionist Youth. He took me to their young people, who were called "Flowers of Zion". I didn't find any friends there, no one was like me. It also lacked warmth there.

One day, I meet Eliyahu Klingbajl who explains to me what "*Poalei-Zion*" is. The word "Zion" has always had a magnetic force upon me. I immediately agreed to join it. At the first meeting, various matters were discussed about our future activities. I wrote a note for comrade Szapiro (the President), on the issue of the training we desperately need.

I was flabbergasted when he suddenly exclaimed – "Comrade H. Szlajfer has the floor." I didn't know where to put myself. Hesitant, blushing, I stood up and repeated the question on education: "How do you plan to do it and when?" Comrades Szapiro, Menashe Kac and Yaakov Mroz answered my question: "We will do this together with you".

I saw that people were taking the issue seriously and taking it over. It was my first "performance" at a meeting. My speech was successful. From that moment, I became a member of the youth committee. We immediately started

a recruitment campaign. Starting with siblings, family members, near and far relatives. This campaign was a great success. We felt like a growing force and indeed became the finest youth organization in Kutno. The *Poalei-Zion* room suddenly became too small. We understood that to develop the campaign, we had to start thinking about having our own premises.

Flyers, newspapers and instructors started arriving from Warsaw. We were already in contact with the outside world. Frequent visits by colleagues from Włocławek, Łódź and Żychlin helped the organization to prepare us for the first national conference of the "*Jugnt*" movement.

We were treated to a delegate at the conference. We were preparing for it, like grown-ups. Comrade Berel Poncz was elected. He proudly represented the Kutno organization at the convention.

8

Among the first activists, I remember my comrades: B. Poncz, E. Klingbajl, Priwe Kuczynska, Yosef Celemenski, Fishel Fogelman (a famous cantor in America), Pinchas Terzmil, Ite Salomon, R. Kroczyk, Levitin, Henech Sztajn, Hinde Sztajn, Wolf Abramowicz, Sh. Osowska, Z. Opatowski etc. Then came the next generation: Leibush and Benjamin Pietrikowski, Mordechai Sztajn, Shiya Elbaum, Chana Abramowicz, Nathan Kac, Abraham Kac, Abraham and Zelig Lustigman, Arie Lustman, Chana Apelast, Abraham Frizler, M. A. Kowalski, Yosel Ciolek, Wajntraub, Szajnrok and others.

At that time, I was working at Płockern, with the famous Bundist Herman Kirszbaum, with Reuven Pukacz

and Moshe Aharon Menche – a young man who by his imagination alone made a radio set in 1919.

Pukacz once told me that Leibowicz wanted to talk to me. After a few conversations, Leibowicz explains to me that he wants to join our youth organization. He was a precious comrade for us. He came from the very eminent Comber family. His grandfather was the secretary of the city rabbis. He also held the honorable position of Director of Municipal Newsletters. Through Leibowitz, we were able to access the library of his uncles (the Combers). Later, the library moved to our premises. I went to Warsaw and bought a few books. With great joy we opened the "book cupboard" – made available to the youth of Kutno. The library has grown. It became the second in the city (after the Perec library). With this newly created institution, our prestige has grown.

The director of the evening school, Comrade Israel Tajchman, had a fatherly relationship with our fellow



The author of these memories during his visit in Kutno, 1935 (first row, second from left).

students. He set up and specially adapted the program to the level and knowledge of the different students. The other teachers also used better methods and tried to make the studies understandable in a simple way.

However, political life in Poland has changed rapidly. The intensification of the police persecution forced our central authorities to divide the movement into three districts: Warsaw, Łódź and Crakow. We belonged to the Łódź district. A conference was organized in Łódź to develop and publicize the new system. We sent comrade Klingbajl to the conference. On the third day, the police found out where the conference was being held. They invaded the premises, arrested many delegates. comrade Klingbajl managed to escape. With his return to Kutno, a new surprise awaited us.

We held the debriefing meeting in the woods near the park. Just then, Polish nobleman Zawadzki felt like going for a ride in his horse-drawn carriage – and he saw the gathering in the woods. He obviously didn't tell us anything, but immediately reported to the police. In a few minutes we were surrounded. We were arrested, lined up,

searched, and then all taken to the police station along Kolejowa Street.

No suspicious material was found on anyone. During the meeting, I was in charge of the guard – and I managed to slip away and bring the news to town. Comrade Klingbajl's father, a man full of understanding for the actions of children, immediately had an interview with a policeman he knew. He did us a favor and the matter was settled.

Shortly afterwards, a large-scale arrest took place in Włocławek. More than forty comrades were imprisoned. Some of them remained in prison for long months. As a result, the work of the Włocławek secretariat was disrupted. In the city of Koło, there was a problem. The police broke into the premises of our unions, raided the *Poalei-Zion* cooperative, as well as the bakery, arrested several prominent activists. As a result of this event, the district secretariat moved from Włocławek to Kutno, regrouping with the comrades: Klingbajl, Leibowicz and myself.

From Warsaw, Comrade Yaakov Kenner wrote that we should send someone to Koło (Koyl) to find out what's going on there. I went there, found out what was going on and immediately relayed a report to Warsaw.

We also reorganized the work immediately. We no longer held general meetings. We have divided the organization into sixths – each sixth with its leaders. We set up a small administration made up of some of the leaders and continued to work with conspiratorial and totally different methods.

We have been informed by Łódź that a conference was being prepared. But this time in Crakow. We absolutely wanted to send a delegate. Especially the expense for such a long trip was a big problem for us. A special "delegated fund" enabled us to overcome this problem as well. I have been appointed a delegate for this conference. I arrived in Crakow on Friday evening, but after the blessing of the candles. My religious uncle, who lived there, had already gone to pray. When he came home and saw me, I was given a hell of an earful.

The conference was well prepared and went well. Koło's delegate was comrade Bornsztajn. Comrade Fishel Wolfman (deceased in Paris) and I were the youngest delegates (under 16). Thanks to the conference we visited Crakow, saw the Old Synagogue, the Old Hospital, the Maharal's Tomb³ and the Wawel Castle. I returned to Kutno having had great spiritual satisfaction. For the first time I had been a delegate to a conference. There, I got to know the central leaders of the *Poalei-Zion* party and the "*Jugnt*" movement.

9

After the Polish-Soviet War, the fine sports movement "*Sztern*" flourished in Poland. In most towns

³ TN: Probably that of the "*Remu*" of Crakow (Rabbi Moshe Isserles). That of the *Maharal* (Judah Loew ben Bezalel) is in Prague.

and villages, football teams, gymnastics, table tennis, swimming, running, walking and boxing sections have been formed. The "*Sztern*" sports clubs were the finest Jewish sports organizations. The captain of the "*Sztern*" club in Kutno was Yehuda Sztajn (now in Paris).

Finally, I want to mention one more interesting episode:

The lack of premises has always forced us to different experiences. The majority of our comrades were among the leather stitchers and apprentices. So, they got to know Polish shoemakers. They had a room where their union was located. We took a look at the local. More than once we have asked them to hold our meetings there. Once, during a strike, the shoemakers had a meeting at the same time as us. However, they finished earlier. To get out, they had to go through our room. When they entered and saw the meeting, they stood there gaping their mouths, eyes wide open and asked in astonishment: "Are these the kids who asked us for the premises?" Stunned, they observed the participants, almost childish in appearance – and behaving like adults: with votes, discussions and resolutions. You could tell in their faces that they too wanted their children to be so serious.

Since then, we have obtained the premises more often. I also remember how we received guests Daniel Lajbel⁴, Dr Emanuel Ringelblum⁵, Chaim Turner, Yaakov Peterzeil⁶ and others.

I didn't have the opportunity to be in Kutno for much longer. Six months later, I moved to Włocławek. But I kept in close contact with Kutno. Almost every Saturday I was at home.

In May 1925, I embarked on a distant journey – to France. A distant semi-illegal journey. Two months later, I arrived in Paris. Even from Paris and until the outbreak of World War II, I kept in touch.

In December 1935, after eleven years of emigration, I came to visit Kutno. There, I met a group of friends from *Poalei-Zion*, as well as Yaakov Mroz – the veteran. They were no longer doing much activity. We are together, have reflected on the situation. I gave them some advice, encouraged them and asked them to keep up the work with all their might.

I was very kindly received by the "League of Workers of Israel". I had the opportunity to give two conferences, which were very successful. These sessions were chaired by my good friend Chaim Żychlinski.

It was my last contact during my lifetime with my hometown, with my unforgettable family. It was also my last meeting with the rest of my dear friends from *Poalei-Zion* and "*Jugnt*", and with the sadly exterminated Jewish community – our Kutno.

⁴ TN: Zionist, Labor and Bible scholar, died in Israel on February 23rd, 1967, at age 75.

⁵ TN: historian, politician and social worker (Buczacz, Ukraine, November 21st, 1900 – Warsaw, March 10th, 1944). leader of the "*Jugnt*". Author of "Ringelblum Archives", part of which

was recovered after the war, hidden in metal milk containers, a collection of documents describing the life of Jews under Nazi occupation.

⁶ TN: leader of the "*Jugnt*".