

## YOUTH MEMORY FROM YOUTH PARTY

by Yehoshua ELBAUM, Givatayim

Let the following words be an anniversary light on the unknown graves of my dear mother, three sisters and three brothers, the comrades and friends, who perished in *Kiddush Hashem*.

On August 1, 1914, when World War I broke out, we lived in Łódź. Just as in times of trouble, wanting to be with our close and our own people, my father, may he rest in peace, Mr. Zalman Elbaum, a native of Kutno, decided to return to his hometown.

My parents and grandparents have been associated with Kutno for generations. The Elbaums lived in the city for about 250 years. My great grandfather, Mr. Yaakov-Leib z"l, was a mohel in the days of Rabbi Shie'le Kutner – and he performed the sacred work only when the great *gaon* in his own right was the godfather. Of course, my grandfather did not get paid for the *mitzvah*.

Over 50 years ago, when we returned to Kutno, there lived: my uncle Abraham and aunt Ryvka Bender, as well as other relatives. Our apartment was located in Sztrum's house, opposite the Great Synagogue. Of the nine children (4 sisters and 5 brothers), seven perished. My sister Ryvka Freund (now in Israel) and I escaped.

### 1

"First of all," as they say, I came to Kutno. Here I grew up in a pious chassidic home. My first *cheder* teacher was Mr. Eli-Gershon Klingbajl z"l. At a long table, behind a curtain, I, the 7-year-old boy, was seated with other such children, was taught *Parasha Chumash* with Rashi. But Rabbi's rigor and his whip did not arouse any strong desire to learn there. I was attracted by public schools, secular studies.

But my father, the Ger chassid, who often used to go to the *amud* in the Gerer *shtiebel* and also teach a class there, could not imagine that his youngest should grow up to be anything else than a rabbi. He handed me over to a teacher from Zgierz, who led a modernized *cheder* ("*Beit Ulpana*"), where he also taught Polish, arithmetic. Several years passed, the Zgierz *cheder* became too small, and I had to go higher – in the yeshiva "*Yesodei HaTorah*", near the *Beit Midrash*.

My complete "*cheder-epic*" took place during the war years. With food at that time which was not so birdish, everything on cards, not a single Jewish family in Kutno was starving. But we, in the *yeshiva*, received a hearty dinner every day, thanks to the products of America, sent by the "*Joint*". In our home, too, people were satisfied, because my father received a concession from the Germans to bake pasta, it goes without saying from the distributed flour. My father was not a specialist in the industry. But what would one not do for a living? A special oven had been set up at home – and there was a job of baking goods. The whole household was occupied with kneading, weeding, cutting and baking. The business prospered and the furnace became too small for such a mature enterprise. We went to uncle Abraham's house, set up a big furnace in the basement – and the whole family had a job and a livelihood.

### 2

My older brother Samuel was a musician, by the way – a secular, modern man. He founded an orchestra with the *Maccabi* and conducted it in the years 1918-19. I remember the big tour festivals on which he performed with his orchestra. He also gave music lessons. Material

independence made it easier for him to deal with his father, to be independent and to progress.

On the other hand, my brother Yaakov-Leib followed in his father's footsteps. A devout fellow, chassidic-dressed, with a beard, he studied day and night in the *Beit Midrash* and later joined the *Agudat Israel*. In a "heretical sea" of brothers and sisters, he was a pious exception. But we have never mocked him. On the contrary, he was esteemed and loved.

The third brother, Aba, had already joined the *Bund*. His profession – a sugar-baker. It turns out that in baking the pasta, he used to taste the product. He shared his political activities in the party with sports in "*Morgensztern*"<sup>1</sup> as a "gymnastic demonstrator".

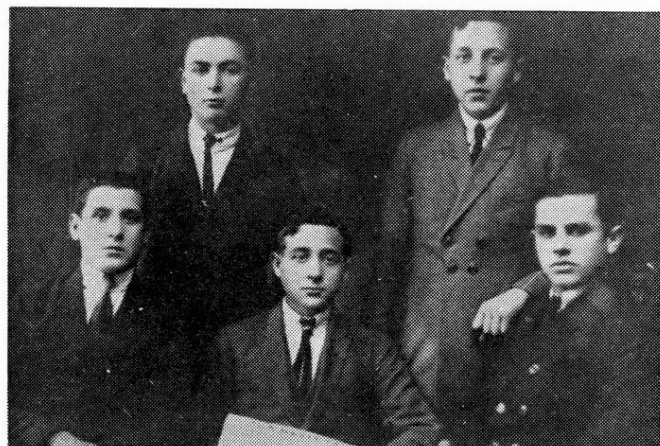
In such an atmosphere and environment, I celebrated my *Bar-Mitzvah*. My father still believed that I would succeed in "avoiding conversion"<sup>2</sup>, God save us" – as he used to claim.

### 3

The liberation of Poland in 1918 is engraved in my memory with the incursion of a Polish military unit into Kutno. Barefoot, incorrectly-dressed, they marched on Królewska Street and sang... antisemitic songs. Later came the "*Hallerczyks*"<sup>3</sup>, pulling and cutting beards of Jews, who became afraid to show up in the street. The antisemitic propaganda was also great because of the shooting of the Płocker rabbi "for spying for the Russians"<sup>4</sup>.

(At that time, I remember, the antisemitic *Poznańczyks*<sup>5</sup> suddenly appeared in the city, attacking the Jews in the New Market, beating the grain-merchant's soul out of Synagogue Street. The hooligans, however, encountered resistance from Nathan Fiszer's son, Stuczyński, Mechl Treger and others. Out of anger at the beating, Shaul Zgerski cut off a piece of his beard at the presidency of the *Chevra Kadisha*).

The national awakening of the Jewish youth in that period, their interest in social and general problems, the "storm-and-urge-period" that accompanied the young Jewish generation in Poland – also had their effect in Kutno. In the year 1922, the breakthrough came to me: I left the *Beit Midrash* and began to study a profession, only an honorable one, accepted at that time, so as not to increase the resentment of my parents, who also had suffered from my interrupting religious studies. Here is what my mother Feiga Malka, a descendant of the Sochaczew court, and my great-grandfather Joseph-Shmuel Klein z"l sent me to learn... upper-boot making. My mother suffered all these years, no less from my father, regarding our heresy, but as a genuine Jewish mother she forgot everything, imagined, indulged, not willingly teasing the father and the children. On more than one



Committee of the "*Yugnt*" branch: standing (from right) – B. Piotrkowski, Y. Elbaum. Sitting: Eliyahu Klingbajl, L. Piotrkowski, M. Sztajn

occasion, my father told her that because of her, the children were away on bad paths, bad culture... but she no less than him experienced the transformations of her sons.

As an upper-boot sewer, I became independent from home. After work, I met with my colleagues, listened and talked about "*Bund*", *Poalei-Zion*, Communists. Most of all, I liked the idea of transferring, making productive, a national Jewish labor center in *Eretz Israel* – which *Poalei-Zion* propagated. I joined the Kutner organization of the left-wing *Poalei-Zion* youth union "*Yugnt*".

But to get started, you had to take a special exam. And this is what I want to say about it:

Leading members at the time were Klingbajl Eliyahu (now in Israel), Szlajfer Henech (now in Paris)<sup>6</sup>. Every evening after work, we young people waited for Comrade Eliyahu. He worked in Lewin's pharmacy on Królewska street. As soon as he got out of there, he came to us, spread out his firm, muscular hands and placed under them as many youths as he could. There was no meeting room yet, so he led us behind the *mikveh*, where the exam took place. First, he gave us a lecture on a current topic, then ordered everyone to turn their faces to the wall and asked questions about the lecture. At the same time, he waved a long stick behind our backs – and whoever was afraid of the stick, not even receiving a blow – was prohibited from becoming a member of a revolutionary youth organization, which conducted its activities in partial conspiracy. We all passed the exam and became active, committed "youth workers".

### 4

The socio-political and cultural work, as with the other parties, proceeded with great vigor and temperament. At the same time, a verbal campaign was carried out to increase the ranks with more and more

<sup>1</sup> TN: the sports club of the *Bund*. See articles on page 223 and 226.

<sup>2</sup> TN: that is, not becoming secular.

<sup>3</sup> TN: Polish armored battalion, using an armored train. Named after General Józef Haller.

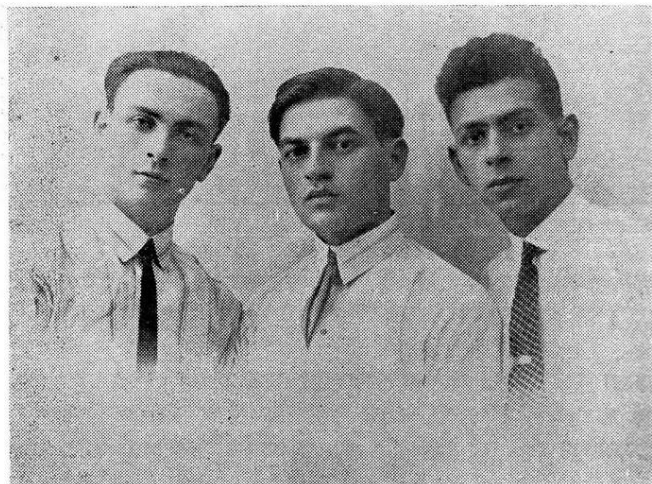
<sup>4</sup> TN: Rabbi Chaim Shapira, 42 and father of five, was executed on 27 August 1920. This was dubbed the "Polish Dreyfus Affair".

<sup>5</sup> TN: another armored train battalion.

<sup>6</sup> TN: both authors of articles, in this book.

young people. And the youth union attracted both people from the sports club "*Sztern*" and from the Society for Evening Courses, with its successful literary and cultural activities, the discussion groups every Friday night.

Moshe Blank (now in Israel) used to remind me of the Saturdays in Kutno, after dinner, when the parents went to sleep, and the youth wandered over the fields and forests around Kutno, plucked fruits in the orchards, strolled and had fun.



Activists of "*Yugnt*" (from right): Kac, Lustigman, Elbaum

"My brother Berish – recalled Moshe – himself a football player in '*Sztern*', once took me to a match. From then on there was also a strong attraction to ball games, although the serious enlightenment work was not neglected either."...

A special attraction for the youth was the dramatic circle at the legalized Society for Evening Course, with the active collaboration of Nisan Frenkel hy"d, Moshe Zaks (now in the United States), Nathan Kac z"l and others.

In the years 1923-25, a stronger growth of the organization was noticed. Of course, the tireless teacher Tajchman helped her grow. The Chanukah evenings in the hall "*Polonia*", the theatrical performances of serious Warsaw companies, the regular and serious cultural-political activity brought the best results. From time to time, "flower-days" were organized to the benefit of the Society for Evening Courses, which brought in a not-so-bad income.

I do not recall that we already had a respectable party-club at that time. People met at the house of Shiya Kuczynski. Their whole family belonged to the party – so they held meetings, organized meetings and assemblies in their homes and discussed. From that apartment we took the *Yugnt*-newspaper "Free Youth", which used to come from Warsaw and also spread among youth workers from other places.

When Eliyahu Klingbajl immigrated to Israel in 1923 and Henech Szlajfer left for Paris, the younger members took over the burden and responsibility for the organization. The new *Yugnt* Committee elected: Leibish and Benjamin Piotrkowski, Abraham Kac, Zelig

Lustigman (all deceased), Mordechai Sztajn, Ciolek Yosef (both now in Paris) and the writer of these lines. At Menche's in the Old Market, we rented an attic room, which was accessed by wooden stairs. It did not take long and a library was set up in the room, not a large one but she got the latest books, which the youth devoured with curiosity and enthusiasm. The box-talks every Friday night attracted a large crowd. Veterans of the *Poalei-Zion* party, Yaakov Mroz, the Piotrkowski brothers and others responded to the questions raised.

A chapter in itself is the fruitful work of our dramatic circle. On Saturday nights, literary evenings took place and the drama circle (under my direction), prepared enactments, recitations and various plays – with light effects and makeup. Nisan Frenkel put a lot of effort and affection into this circle. Of the players who excelled, I remember: Moshe-Aharon Kowalski with his beautiful voice and Chana Sochaczewski (although she stammered, but on stage her language and singing appeared smooth and fluid).

## 5

The activity of the "*Yugnt*" in Kutno had developed so much that the small premises did not correspond at all to the new reality. We all came to the decision that one needs to rent larger premises. But where does one get money? We did not have it and someone throws the idea that we should turn to the youth committees in places like Żychlin, Łęczycza, Ozorków. There were strong organizations there and it was believed that they would come to Kutno for help. But in order for them to move and stir up the action, our messengers had to be sent there. This raised again the problem of travel expenses. Where can I get the money for the train ticket, whether to pay for a bus or a buggy? There was no choice – you have to leave from this place on foot. Zelig Lustigman, Abraham Kac and I, the small one, have taken on the mission. Most of the members of the organization escorted us to the outskirts of the city and when they said goodbye, the "*Yugnt*" oath was sung spontaneously and we felt that the looks of dozens of colleagues accompanied us with envy until they lost sight of us and at the same time, they wished us much success.

The walk was difficult, the number of shocks and blows on the feet increased – but after a week, we returned from the "journey" and rented a new place at Yehuda Nosal, on the Old Market. Only in the vast space did the cultural-educational work take a completely different character and scope. The youth enjoyed the readings and performances of the dramatic circle, as we arranged a stage with a curtain. Such genuine theatrical facility has already prompted us to put on a serious play. No less than J. Gordin's<sup>7</sup>. The main character was a shoemaker there. Comrade Berish Blank had the profession, but not the artistic qualifications. Of course, everyone was amazed when he hit the nail on the shoe with such mastery and sang "*Hemerl, hemerl clap...!*"<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> TN: Jacob Gordin, Russian-American Yiddish playwright (1 May 1853, Ukraine – 11 June 1909, Brooklyn, NY).

<sup>8</sup> TN: "Hammer, hammer, knock...". Song by Avrohom Reisen, published in 1919.

We even allowed ourselves to organize dance evenings, which were no less successful than the serious endeavors...

## 6

A refreshment and encouragement were the spirited lectures of the delegates who came to Kutno on behalf of the Central Committee, such as: Y. Zerubavel<sup>9</sup>, Y. Rozen<sup>10</sup> z"l, Dr. Rafael Mahler<sup>11</sup>, Y. Lev z"l and others. The audience swallowed every word, whispered fresh enthusiasm and courage.

In 1928, I left Kutno and went to work in Łódź. But my link with the town and its people was a more frequent and a firmer one. I came home every holiday for two reasons: first, to see my family, friends and acquaintances. Secondly, I sang for years (as a religious singer) in the Great Synagogue, with such cantors and conductors as Sokolowski, Frenkel and others. I did not want to sever ties with the environment and people.

## 7

As a 12-year-old boy, I started singing with various cantors in the Great Synagogue. The first of them was the cantor Maroko, conducted by Sokolowski, came from Brest Litovsk. A great musician, with a strong bass voice. He also recruited students from the schools, who

performed with great success in various social and national endeavors.

Very popular and well-known in Kutno was our townsman Frenkel. A short man, with a prominent hunch. However, he possessed a great deal of musical knowledge and showed great proficiency in liturgical as well as in modern music. From where he learned the Torah – I do not know, but he was an unconditional musical authority.

He was appointed conductor of the choir in the Great Synagogue, then formed the choir "*HaZamir*", in which almost all singers, including several female singers, sang. The Pranzer sisters excelled in their glorious voices and were indeed the soloists of "*HaZamir*". Of the male voices, I remember the tenor Nachum Sztark, with his "tremolo" voice (today in America), Chaimke – a deeper bass. Not a great know-it-all, but his deep, metallic voice gave him the status of a soloist. Living in the Old Market, in a big room. There the youth gathered in the evenings, learned to dance with him.

Fishel Fogelman sang from an early age with cantors. His resounding voice foretold a great cantorial destiny. He always sang solo. When he sang "I will not die, for I will live"<sup>12</sup> – people held their breath. In later years, he had the habit to push his voice to an upper "C"... He became a cantor in Johannesburg (South Africa), today in America.



The "*HaZamir*" and its leader Yaakov Frenkel (at center)

<sup>9</sup> TN: Yaakov Zerubavel (14 January 1886, Ukraine – 2 June 1967, Tel Aviv), Leader of Left *Poalei Zion*.

<sup>10</sup> TN: Yosef Rozen (13 February 1894, Jedwabne – 30 April 1954, Tel Aviv).

<sup>11</sup> TN: Dr. Raphael Mahler (15 August 1899, Nowy Sącz – 4 October 1977, Ramat Gan) historian, founder of the Young Historians with Emanuel Ringelblum.

<sup>12</sup> TN: Psalm 118:17.

Such singers had in his choir the conductor Frenkel. Whether he also got from this an income – I do not know. He lived in a small cottage, in poverty. Of course, he had a lot of respect and affection from everyone, as a living encyclopedia of Jewish popular music, cantorial words and Jewish cultural treasure. He was proficient in our literature, with purely secular views, although he conducted a synagogue choir.

## 8

Returning to the youth memories, still of Kutno, I must bring out the figures of some colleagues and comrades. The one at the top of the list is without a doubt the comrade Yaakov Mroz, a well-known and beloved leader of the movement.

The house of Shiya Kuczynski, as I have already mentioned, has long served as a meeting place for the members of *Poalei-Zion* and its youth organization, because the whole family was connected with the ideas of Borochoy.



Yaakov Mroz z"l

Mr. Shiya, an elderly Jew, a pious man, lived from his boot-sewing work. He, a widower, was left with numerous daughters and the eldest of them, Rachel, married Yaakov Mroz. Thus, the old Shiya was included, in a family way, in the *Poalei-Zion* circle.

Yaakov was by profession an embroiderer. I remember with what joy and pride he looked at the flag of

the youth that he raised before us. Particularly beautiful were the letters of the caption "Proletarians of all countries – Unite!" The flag was flown during the joint Jewish-Polish demonstration on May 1, 1926, and it was more than symbolic of the fact that Comrade Mroz, who had given body and soul to the *Poalei-Zion* flag – also created it...

Yaakov Mroz has always been at the top of the list of candidates during elections to the Kutner Jewish community and to the City Council. He also appeared at the center of list of candidates to the *Sejm*<sup>13</sup>, for the left-wing of *Poalei-Zion* in Poland.

One of the Kuczynski sisters, Comrade Prywe, was at the time fully active in the *Yugnt*. Because of her



Priwe Kuczynska z"l

constant worry, for all and everyone, she was crowned with the name "Mother". Slim, tall, taken over by the party and family, all appreciated and loved her. She owed a great deal to her father for allowing her to do all the party work at home.

Quite unique was the Piotrkowski family. The father Meir was a widower, short, working day and night at his tailor's shop to support himself and his four sons: Leibish, Benjamin, Zelig and Wolf. Unable to do anything to raise the young children, he remarried to a woman in complete contrast with himself: tall, thin, young and very handsome. Everyone loved her, even the stepchildren, because she was to them like a mother and a good master at home. She also gave birth to three children, but I did not know them.

Leibish Piotrkowski, whom we considered a theorist, liked to refer to literary topics – with a great deal of depth and scholarship. By profession a tailor, he became an erudite through reading and learning. He married Feiga Grinbaum, lived in the old market, in the house of the Kenigs.

Concerning Benjamin Piotrkowski, we considered him a politician and a social worker. He really was such.

<sup>13</sup> TN: Polish parliament.



He managed the boxing-evenings<sup>14</sup>, answered most questions with a lot of talent and knowledge. A tall, noble fellow, by profession a tailor for ladies. He married Ita Zander, later leaving Kutno, emigrating to Paris and joining the local party.

Abraham Kac was a handsome young man, and he loved to be seen. By profession, an upper boot maker. Everyone admired his loyalty and devotion to the idea. He was instrumental in shaping the spiritual face of our "*Yugnt*" organization.

Zelig Lustigman, hailed from a chassidic home, numerous brothers and a sister. He was a shy and honest worker, an upper boot maker. Very active in the "*Yugnt*", he was ready at any call to carry out the decisions of the party.

During the Hitlerite occupation, he was forced to work on the railway in Kutno. The noble fellow was not

capable of hard work, he was beaten to death by the German assassins. In the morning, his cousin, Zelig Lipszic, took over as Zelig Lustigman. Some time later, Zelig was killed by a German with a piece of iron, at railway work.

Years past, years of dreams and hopes, disappointments and transformations. Remembering that time, the close friends and colleagues with whom we longed and fought for a better and better world also come to mind. For most of the young dreamers and fighters, some of whose characters I tried to bring to mind, the year 1939 brought a whole different world: persecution of Jews, ghettos, and tragic destruction in the gaseous cars and furnaces of Chelmno. Even today the wound is deep because of the loss of the people who helped shape my spiritual world, raised me to love my own people and country...

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<sup>14</sup> TN: discussion evenings about current issues.