

OUR SCHOOL "AM HASEFER"

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translated from the Hebrew by Sara Magee

After many years I return, in my mind and imagination, to our Hebrew school in our town of Kutno. I try to pass before my eyes the figures of my beloved teachers and neither the mind, nor the emotion, can perceive that, indeed, they are all gone, because they were all destroyed by the Nazi murderers. The school, its teachers and students, the Hebrew and Zionist atmosphere that prevailed in it, was a precious asset for us all. Its leaders, teachers and students protected it, nurtured it as much as they could, and not once it was necessary to breathe life into it because its financial situation was never satisfactory.

All the teachers pass before my eyes starting with my first teacher, Rachel Riftin z"l, who married the teacher Yitzhak Szor. However, Rachel Riftin wasn't only a teacher, she was also the school's secretary – a role that involved administrative responsibility for the school. And here is the young teacher, Priwa Trunk, and her brothers – the sons of the town's rabbi. And after them appear before my eyes the teachers: Feld who was elegantly dressed and always clean shaven, the serious teacher Cincinatus with his wild hair, the teacher Mrs. Feinberg who was fair-haired and graceful, the teacher Horowicz, the teacher Flugler and her husband Tshechi, the teacher of Hebrew subjects. After my emigration to Israel, I corresponded with them for many years, and deep ties of friendship bound me to them. And here is the teacher, Minc, who taught Latin and also served as the school's principal, the teachers Rosenbusz, Frost and many more.

Of course, we were boys like all boys in schools around the world. Mischievous, at times lazy, "squinting" at a friend's notebook during a test, teasing girls our age, sometimes pulling the braid of a graceful girl, or just



The school "Am HaSefer"

provoking them to cover up our embarrassment at the age of adolescence. And the truth must be told, that the teachers' impression of our behavior was not always "satisfactory," and there were also "misunderstandings" between us and them because, after all, we were young boys like all the boys of the world. At this age we didn't always know to appreciate the "importance of seriousness" in the teachers' eyes. Nevertheless, there was a partnership and identification between us and the teachers regarding the school, because it was our school, the Jewish and Zionist, which, in addition to its purpose as a school for



The state public school ("Powszechna") – 1930



Teachers of the Hebrew Gymnasium "Am HaSefer"

the study of general subjects, instilled in us the love of people and the love of *Eretz Israel*. It educated us to values of pioneering and Zionism. In all ways they sought to educate us to be Jews with Zionist consciousness, for immigration and self-realization. The teachers not only fulfilled their obligation at school, they also met us after school, in group activities, in the preparation of celebrations, in plays and in many other activities that were not included in the framework of their regular work. They invited us to their homes for talks, for a joint reading of a newspaper from *Eretz Israel*, etc.

In school, they demanded appropriate achievements from us because we had to prove ourselves more than the Poles in order to please the Polish government

commissioner. And indeed, we tried not to disappoint the teachers and to achieve the required level, and we managed to do it well.

However, we always we felt that we were "strangers" in this country. This is not our country, its holidays are not our holidays, its flag is not our flag, and also the green field is theirs, and the river and the forest, even the playground and the ice-skating rink are not ours!

We had ill-feelings toward the gentile children, especially on the days of their national holidays, when their national pride was expressed in attacks on us, provocations and beatings.

We found some consolation within the walls of our school. There, we found a good word from our teachers, or an encouraging and friendly smile whether thanks to academic success, or even because of the shortening of the school day during the winter due to the lack of coal for heating the classrooms. We had nice days at school during our holidays – on Chanukah and Purim. Queen Esther avenging the oppressor of the Jews, the Maccabees, liberators of the people and the homeland, were exemplary figures of fighters for the dignity of the nation and its freedom. After all, we did not imagine that the Maccabees' plot would return quickly in our time! We went to the forest with a bow and arrow, *Lag BaOmer* is a holiday for children. The *Lag BaOmer* trips have given us a lot of satisfaction and pleasure. Preparations for the trip began before Passover and many plans have been made on how to spend this day. The teachers did their best to make our trip pleasant. They told stories, prepared games, and even



Graduates of "Am HaSefer" together with the new classes (1932)

told us jokes. Indeed, it is not for nothing that this day is etched in our memory.

We also took longer trips, not only to the forest about six kilometers away. We reached Warsaw and Craków as well. However, it was not easy to make such a trip because it was involved in great expenses and not every father was able to bear the expenses of his son's trip to such a remote city. However, the trip to Craków, after the death of Marshal Piłsudski, is engraved deep in my memory. It was an unforgettable experience. Indeed, it is possible that, here and there, the students did not always observe the "forma" and the proper behavior of schoolchildren, because the trip enabled us to loosen the daily discipline and helped us to unload some of the burden. However, it seems to me that the teachers understood our spirit and forgave us. The trip was a topic of conversation for a long time and our experiences were also written in the school newspaper.

The number of students in the school was never great and financial distress accompanied it throughout its existence. At the beginning of the year teachers and students hoped that new students, who graduated from

elementary school, would enroll in our school. Although, a quiet competition for the title of outstanding student took place between the old and new students but, with that, we wanted them to join us because every new student made it easier for the school's financial distress. Many left school and did not complete their studies because they could not afford to pay the tuition despite the discounts they had received.

Toward the end of the year, the tension and anticipation of the certificate receiving ceremony increased. Many were disappointed (they deserved "more"), but accepted the "judgment" with a peace of mind and were even encouraged by the unexpected good grades. With the certificates we burst out laughing! The "great vacation" has arrived! Now we can unload the burden! We will be free! But the longer the days of freedom continued, the boredom increased, and in the depths of our heart we asked – may the long-awaited freedom will come to an end and we can return to our school which, indeed, was not one of the most luxurious, but it bestowed upon us from its spirit, and many thanks are owed to it by all those who, in their youth, have studied there.