

DĄBROWICE, NEAR KUTNO

by Hanoch-Henech HOFFMAN, Paris

translated from the Yiddish by Leon Zamosc

*Today after the catastrophe,
That has befallen us
The Hitler catastrophe —
There are no words
That can describe it,
There are no words, nothing...*

H. Leivik

A symbolic matzeva

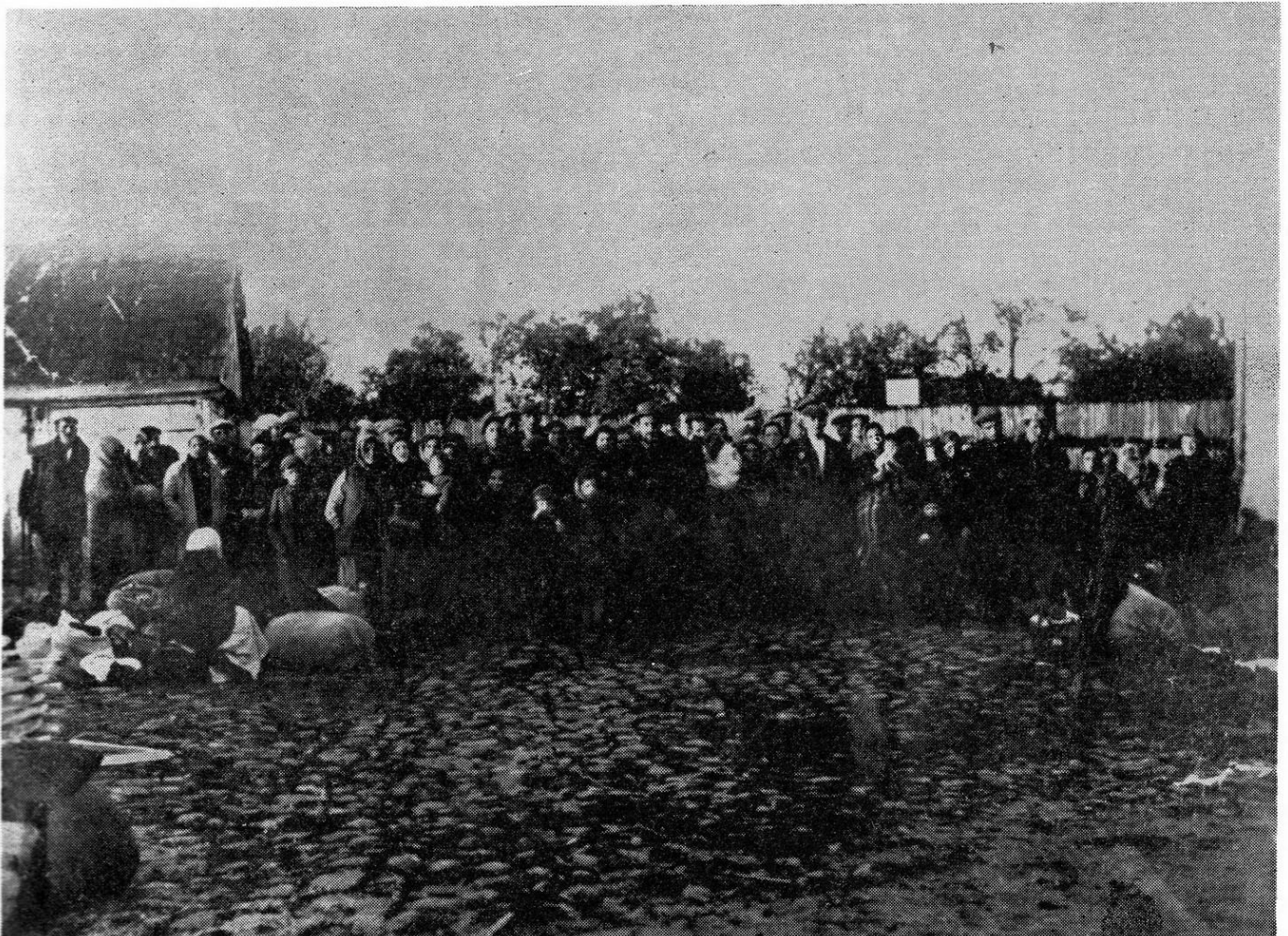
We Jews, have endured persecutions, pogroms, riots, and slanders for generations, but never on the monstrous and cruel scale of Hitler's slaughter.

Our previous experiences of persecution had, to a certain extent, a local character. It happened in a city, a region, or a country. But it never reached the level of the planned annihilation of European Jewry that was attempted during the years 1939-1945. Those were years of devastation and destruction of Jewish communities, from the largest to the smallest.

In the history of Jewish martyrdom, stone monuments were never erected to honor our martyrs and heroes (except for a few exceptions and during the recent post-war years). The Jews, the people of the book, always immortalized them in *pinkasim*. And now, after the catastrophe, the *landsmanshaftn* are producing a huge, monumental remembrance literature in the form of Yizkor books that memorialize the victims and the vanished communities.

We, the survivors of the town of Dąbrowice, are fulfilling our sacred duty of perpetuating the memory of the holy martyrs of our small Jewish community, one of the tiniest in Poland. They perished together with six million other Jews in *Kiddush HaShem*, murdered by the German Nazis.

In his book *Shtetl*, Shalom Asz wrote: "Jews are one people, they have one God, and they all wait for one Messiah. But every town has its taste." In Dąbrowice we did not have geniuses, nobles, or personalities who were famous outside of the town. We had ordinary Jews, among



The Jewish families of Dąbrowice were evicted from their homes and deported to the Kutno ghetto in *Konstancja*. Later, they were deported again to the Żychlin ghetto and, from there, to their deaths at Chelmno extermination camp.

them some learned Jews, but mostly craftsmen and shopkeepers. Not chassidim, but pious in the traditional Jewish ways. They toiled to make a modest living, always busy with two main concerns: faith and livelihood.

We will remember and honor their simplicity and their customary way of life.

History, geography and topography of the *shtetl*

How old was the community? Hard to know. There were no archives. As far as we can deduce from the memories of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers, Jews settled in Dąbrowice before the Polish uprising of 1863. The food and clothing needs of the surrounding rural population attracted Jews to this small town.

Dąbrowice is located 20 km from Kutno, 5 km to the left of the Warsaw-Kutno-Włocławek railway line. Geographically, it has two streets (in Yiddish and in Polish they were called "the Dąbrowice alleys"). The overall population before the war was about 2,000, among them 140 Jews that made up a community of about 40 families. The connection with the neighboring towns was by earthen roads, muddy in winter and sandy in summer.

The center of town was one long street and two market places. The long street, which connected with the road to Krośniewice, was paved with primitive stones. On both sides there were low, whitewashed rustic wooden houses, mostly covered with straw roofs. The beginning of the street was inhabited by three Jewish families. There was a big two-story building constructed with large square-arched hammered stones in contemporary style, with tall arcaded windows. From the roof rose a high tower that ended with square battlements in the style of the former Prussian fortresses. This was the Town Hall. From there the street continued with the synagogue and a row of Jewish houses of urban appearance, which extended to a second, large, market square. The neighboring towns were Chodecz, Przedeck and Lubień.

The religious ways

The small cluster of Jews had their organized *kehila* and abided by all Jewish customs, maintaining a synagogue, a rabbi, a *shochet*, a *shamash*, a cemetery with a *Chevra Kadisha*¹, and also a *Chevra Tehilim*². In addition to the usual religious observances, from time to time a *maggid*³ would come and give a talk after evening prayers. Next morning, he would go from house to house collecting a couple of *groschen* for his sermon.

A great sense of devotion surrounded the *cheder*. With their meager livelihoods, people supported teachers who came from other towns for periods of six months, a summer, or a winter. The parents of the *cheder* boys took turns receiving the teacher in their homes for meals. For poor children, whose parents could not pay tuition, there was a *Talmud-Torah* fund that was collected every Friday afternoon.

Most of the boys went to the *cheder* until *Bar Mitzva*, after which they were placed as apprentices with a craftsman, a tailor or a shoemaker – the only crafts that could be learned in the town. Depending on the parents' means and aspirations, there were those who continued to study – such as Uzer Szumraj, about whom I will say more below. For this purpose, a teacher was brought to the town and paid a salary. This was the case of Reb Lipman Sendziejewski, a son-in-law of Akiva David Kenig, a teacher for young children from Kutno. Reb Lipman was a Jew without a degree, a student of large *yeshivot*. He came to Dąbrowice from Zduńska Wola and set up his study room in the style of a *yeshiva*. The students had to wear belts and behave like *yeshiva* students. He was very strict about discipline and the students trembled before him – even when they met on the street.

Every Friday night the members of the *Chevra Tehilim* gathered around a long table in the home of Israel Yitzhak Szumraj. By the light of a kerosene lamp, Reb Lipman taught them the series of the week. He pleased the common people with his great talent for reciting the verses and commenting on the parables.

(His son, with a daughter, lives in Israel today).

Types and figures

While some Jews were more learned than others or had more distinguished ancestors, the differences were not as marked as to distance them from each other. The greatest believer was Reb Leibish Jachimowicz, originally from Kutno. He had been living in Dąbrowice for many years and considered himself a devout chassid. He was the *mohel* of the *shtetl*, had a lovely voice, and was the master of morning prayers and *Kol Nidre* during the High Holidays. A tall, broad-shouldered, middle-aged Jew with a long, broad dark-blond beard, he had a sternly authoritative look that put you on notice about the consequences of doing anything against Judaism. On Friday evening, before the candles were lit, he would walk all dressed up to the synagogue through the whole long street. Those who were late in closing their stores because they still had customers, were constantly on the watch for Reb Leibish. When he was seen in the distance, the doors slammed shut. Otherwise, he would shout loudly: "Go home to prepare for Shabbat!" He also had a grocery store.

I remember the following episode. In the town lived a Jew, a poor man, a village peddler who was also a *shamash*. He had difficulties earning a living from both occupations. When his daughters grew up, they went to work in Kutno. When the time came for one of them to get married, the housewives of the "*Hachnasat Kalah*"⁴ society (Chana Golda Szumraj, Chana Hoffman and Golde Jachimowicz) collected funds and prepared the canopies. Nobody wanted to embarrass the bride's parents because they were not rich. Everybody came to the wedding, including two carriages of relatives and friends of the groom from Kutno. After the festive meal, everybody rose

¹ TN: Hebrew, Burial Society.

² TN: Hebrew, Psalm Brotherhood.

³ TN: Hebrew, itinerant Jewish preacher.

⁴ TN: Hebrew, charity to dower a bride.

from the tables and benches getting ready to dance. Reb Leibish shouted:

— I will not let boys dance with girls!

The people from Kutno ignored him and started dancing. He angrily planted a chair in the middle of the room and sat down...

— I say that there will be no dancing!

It was quite a scene, with the Kutners shouting back at Reb Leibish: "We want to dance! Even the sons and daughters of your brother Mendel Trepiarz want to dance. We want his opinion..."

It was a hot summer night. The flash-lamps added heat and the crush was great. Reb Leibish, who was wearing a velvet hat, sat there with a cloth, wiping the large drops of sweat that drooled over his face and neck. Outside in the dark there was a crowd of Jews and Christians looking in through the open windows, waiting to see what would happen. It got late and it would soon begin to dawn. The crowd grew tired and gradually disappeared. Reb Leibish's stubbornness succeeded – there was no dancing. People talked about the episode for several days. Even those who sided with him were unhappy.

Reb Leibish used to light a candle in the synagogue in remembrance of his father. One night, something went wrong with the candle and a fire broke out. When the cries for help were heard, the synagogue was already burning. All the town's Jews ran to the place. They still stand before my eyes today, raising their hands, crying with bitter tears and shouting "*Shema Israel*." Nothing remained of the synagogue – just a ruin with black-smoked, sunken walls.

There was a very sad mood in town. Everybody saw it as God's punishment for some sin.

Feeling terribly guilty, Reb Leibish left the town and went around requesting donations to rebuild the synagogue. The fire had made an impression in all the surrounding towns. With their help, a new synagogue was built. But it was destroyed again during the war by the German thugs, who left behind just an empty place.

In general, few Dąbrowice Jews had contact with other towns, except for some shopkeepers and craftsmen who sometimes traveled to purchase goods for their trade. Newspapers rarely arrived. The news of the world, and especially Jewish news, was brought by Reb Asher Chełmiński. He was the "telegraph-agency" of the town. With his horse and cart, he rummaged the neighboring villages buying and selling old rags, a business that took him to Kutno, from where he brought the news. As soon as he got home, barely able to pull in the horse, he went out to report the news he had heard. During evening prayers there was talk in the synagogue about Reb Asher's news, which he delivered with a serious face, especially when they did not look good for the Jews. He had been mobilized during the Russian-Japanese War and told many stories, including that he had personally seen Czar Nicholas and gave him a blessing. He was a simple Jew, a chubby man with a long, thick and round beard, not a big fan of books. But on *Tisha b'Av* he was always in the synagogue. He put aside the lectern, sat down as if to take

an oath, recited the lamentations, and wept aloud. Big tears fell on his beard, as if he were mourning a personal misfortune that had just happened...

(In later years, the image of Reb Asher Chełmiński crying in the synagogue came vividly back to my mind when I read that David Wolfson, the second president of the World Zionist organization, had said that he became a Zionist when he saw his father weeping over the destruction of Jerusalem on *Tisha-b'Av*.)

He was the second-*gabbai* of the *Chevra Kadisha*. The first-*gabbai* was Reb Shlomo Hoffman, a Jew who really mastered the Torah backwards and forwards. The chairman of the community always came to him for general advice and also to settle disputes. He led the daily evening prayers and the davening of the High Holidays. *Simchat Torah* was the main celebration of the *Chevra Kadisha*. They drank vodka, ate gingerbread, and danced and sang in the streets until they entered the synagogue.

There were two Jews in the town who busied themselves with butcher's job: the brothers David-Yosef and Peretz-Meir Szumraj. We say "busied themselves" because they were not real butchers. They inherited the job from their father Shmuel Zemach, who taught them to do it in his old age. David-Yosef was a Torah scholar imbued with fanatical piety. He was the greatest opponent of the youth who showed an inclination for secular ways. Peretz-Meir was a Jewish scholar who, apart from the butcher shop, had a grocery store.

Same with bakers. That profession was also inherited. Shlomo and Leib Brzostowski taught bakery to their children. Other youngsters did not learn the trade. Here, too, we will mention Meir Kuczynski and Bertshe Lubinski, two simple Jews who had a unique trade. They bought a special breed of dairy cows in faraway cities and sold them in local fairs. Meir Kuczynski, or as he was called, Meirke the Merchant, always turned the brim of his hat to the right or the left. He paid commissions to a non-Jew who went to the markets to buy the cattle. Bertshe went to the fairs on foot. Once, he walked for eight days, which was the source of this anecdote in the town:

There was a fair in Piotrków Kujawski during the days of Chanukah. Bertshe was tempted: "It is a pity to skip a fair, since we are famous for selling these animals. But I cannot miss Chanukah... Should I go or not?" He came up with an idea. He lit all the Chanukah candles eight days earlier ... and then he went to the fair.

Relations between Christians and Jews

As already mentioned, the Dąbrowice Jews constituted a very small community. They lived in the midst of the much larger population of Christians who inhabited the town and the nearby villages. The attitude of the Christians towards the Jews was to a certain extent tolerant. In some cases, Jews and Christians had apartments in the same buildings. So, the Christians adapted – or had to adapt – to the Jewish religious customs. On Friday evenings they stopped working on the fields as early as possible in order to be able to do their shopping before the Jews closed their stores for Shabbat.

The same with milk. The Jews did not buy milk unless they were present when the farmer did the milking. There were farmers that called their milk cows "Ruchelka" or "Esterka" (a Polish adaptation of Yiddish female names).

Although living together had been a habit for generations, the Jews did not have much faith in their Christian friends. One could always hear an insulting word against a Jew. More often than not, the Jew had to stay silent and content himself with a helpless whimper: "What can I do? I am living in exile..." The case of Shmuel Glogowski was a typical example. He had a store in town and he would go around with his horse-cart and scale buying furs and clothes in the villages. A conflict developed when the Pole Jaskulski opened a shop for the same kind of business near Shmuel's store. One day, when Shmuel was out on the road, he was attacked and severely beaten. He was left lying on the cart and screaming from the distance. The horse knew the way and came into town. Everybody knew who the perpetrator was, but nobody did anything about it. There were no witnesses and Shmuel had to keep his mouth shut to avoid inciting the hatred of the Gentiles.

The incident sparked fear among Jews. The next time that such an attack happened, a couple of years later, the town's rabbi was left dead on the road.⁵

During the First World War (1914-1918)

When the First World War broke out In August 1914, the Russian General Staff selected our region as a strategic defense battlefield. They occupied the surrounding fields, besieging the towns and villages with foot soldiers and Cossacks. In no time the Cossacks began to ravage the Jews. It was heard that they had hung three men on their own balconies in Kłodawa and that the victims were forced to provide the rope themselves. The event caused panic in Dąbrowice, where the number of Jews was so small. The Poles took advantage of the situation and assisted the Russians. There were rumors that they were preparing to arrest eight Jews including the rabbi. It was necessary to find a police officer who would intervene and stop the decree. From the Poles, people learned that Russians wanted to arrest Jews because of their apparent connections with the Germans. And to justify the step, they had included a *Volksdeutsche* (a local ethnic German) in the list of the suspects – Kiesewetter and his son.

Frightened by what had happened in Kłodawa, the Jews talked in whispers about the decree, fearing that if they were heard the negotiations and bribing of the antisemitic officers would be disrupted.

I remember sitting by our house's window on that awful evening, afraid to say a word. Suddenly the door swung open and the rabbi came in with frightened eyes, wrapped in a large cloth, from which he took a couple of

silver candlesticks, placed them on the table, spread his hands and with a trembling voice said:

— "Reb Shlomo, save!"

Three Jews from the list, Reb Leibish Jachimowicz, Reb Shlomo Hoffman and David-Yosef Szumraj, were able to negotiate through the mediation of a Pole. I do not remember the amount they spent bribing the hooligans. The *Volksdeutsche* Kiesewetter and his son were dragged somewhere and they never came back.

In the first days of November, the German offensive began. After a battle of two days, the Russians withdrew. Here, it is worth mentioning that our town's Jews had a role in that battle:

As the Russians retreated, a large number of casualties remained on the battlefield. The peasants of the surrounding villages scavenged the place searching the pockets of the dead. Among other things, they tore out the *tefillin* of Jewish soldiers and left them scattered in the fields. When the town's Jews learned about this, the *Chevra Kadisha* requested and obtained the German military commander's permission to collect the bodies of the Jewish soldiers and bring them to town for proper Jewish burial. Reb Asher Chełmiński was put in charge of the task. As mentioned before, he was one of the leaders of the *Chevra Kadisha*, he had the experience of the Russian Japanese war and he knew how to act in such situation. Above all, he considered it his duty and *mitzva*. He harnessed his horse, took some of the young men with him, and rode out to the battlefield. He found the bodies of five Jews, brought them to the town, and the *Chevra Kadisha* did what they had to do in the customary Jewish manner.

One of the dead soldiers had a letter from his wife, who had given birth to a child. His name was Moshe Goldberg from Grodno, where he worked at Szereszewski's tobacco factory. There was no postal connection with that area and it was not possible at the time to contact the wife. By chance, a couple of years later, I met a Christian from Grodno who needed a favor from me. I promised him, with the condition that he would deliver a letter to the Grodno rabbi. Eventually, a letter arrived from the rabbi of Grodno asking the rabbi of Dąbrowice to write a letter with three signatures confirming the death of Goldberg, so that the woman would not remain *agunah*⁶. The rabbi wrote the letter, which was signed by him and by Reb Shlomo Hoffman and Reb Asher Chełmiński as leaders of the *Chevra Kadisha*.

During the war our town began to change. The shortages of food in the cities boosted agricultural production in the rural areas around the town. The connections with the larger cities created new jobs and livelihood opportunities. At the same time, because of unemployment and lack of food, many people from the big cities resettled in the small towns.

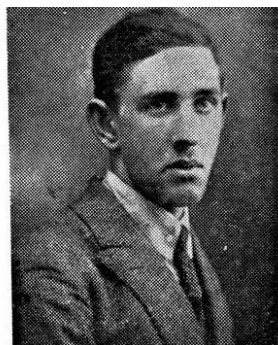
⁵ TN: see article on page 460 of the original book.

⁶ TN: Hebrew, "chained". A woman that cannot remarry because her husband is missing and not proven dead (or denies divorce).

A significant number of Jewish families from Łódź came to Dąbrowice and some stayed on as permanent residents after the war, including the family of Meir Wyszogródski, who appears among the signatories of the letter to the American Joint that we are including in this book.



Rachel Szumraj



Yehoshua Szumraj, student at the Łomża *yeshiva* and later a Bundist, perished at Chełmno.

The youth, too, were overwhelmed by the wish to see changes in the town's way of life.

It was a time of Jewish-cultural revival in all the cities and towns of Poland. After the failed revolution of 1905, the Czarist regime had banned all cultural and political activities. Now, under the German occupation, all the political groups could legalize themselves as cultural societies. Libraries, sports clubs and other social organizations were established all over Poland, something that resonated in our town. But we had not yet been able to open our own library. Our youth was not independent. They worked with their parents, and it was not clear what they could do if their left their families. Seeing what was going on in the neighboring towns, some of us wanted to read and do public work. We were three young people: Katriel Zontag, Yehoshua Szumraj and myself. We enrolled in the Jewish library of neighboring Krośniewice and borrowed three books that we then exchanged among ourselves. Then, we went to Krośniewice again to borrow three new books. Over time, we began to think about having our own library in the town, because some young people were already working independently. We approached Betzalel Chojke and Eliyahu Michalski. We were interested in them not so much as readers, but as donors. Then we had other people who contributed money in secret. One of them, the largest donor, was Yaakov-Leib Szumraj. Although younger than us, he was inspired by his older brother Uzer, who was then studying in Chodecz.

One of the Jews who had come from Łódź, Zeinvel (whose family name I do not remember), was an activist of the Zionist Socialist Party. He was a very conscientious

person. He spent the whole week in Łódź earning his livelihood and came home to Dąbrowice for Saturdays. We met with him and planned the foundation of the library. We requested a license from the German authorities in Kutno. They demanded to see a list of the books. We showed them the list of the books that Zeinvel purchased in Łódź. They gave us permission, but they deleted a book from the list – *The Bloody Hoax* by Shalom Aleichem. The reason was that "youth should not be allowed to play with blood". The officer did not have a clue about the contents of the book – the title just sounded unpleasant to him...

In June 1917, we celebrated the opening of the library. The daughter of a well-to-do family from Łódź, whose name I don't remember, delivered a beautiful speech.

People dressed up and came to the event. The elders of Dąbrowice could not figure it out: "What? A holiday in the middle of the week?" The biggest opponent was David-Yosef Szumraj, who did not have any children among the "young rascals" and for him, it was a disgrace and a shame that children should be given money to buy thrifty books, they were just Jewish criminals...

Other Jews took it more graciously, pointing out that in Kutno it was much worse: "There, the youth are eating *kielbasa*⁷ and smoking on Shabbat."

Soon, however, they got used to it and left us alone. On that opening day we had 18 members. For those young people, who had been raised in the old traditional ways, it was a beginning – indeed, a reversal. The most popular books were those by Yankev Dinezon, Shalom Aleichem, Shalom Asz, and Jules Verne. With the help of our friends in Krośniewice we also brought speakers who gave talks on various literary topics.

Our first visitor was Boaz Bischofswerder⁸, an intelligent young man from Lubień who lived in Krośniewice. He read to us David Friszman's Yom Kippur story "Three Who Ate"⁹ and other stories by Shalom Aleichem. Another speaker, Luria¹⁰, came to us out of curiosity. He was interested in seeing the small town where youngsters had opened a library and were organizing cultural activities with so much spiritual energy. His talk was about "The Book and the Reader". He was interested in the books we had. As he looked through the catalog, he noticed the books by "Shomer"¹¹ which in literary circles were considered trashy literature.

In his lecture, the speaker Luria strongly criticized us for this. But Zeinvel liked those kinds of books...

We also organized lessons on philosophical topics and social and political issues. Most of the speakers were from nearby cities and towns. One of them was our friend

⁷ TN: Polish, non-kosher sausages.

⁸ TN: German rabbi and composer (25 February 1885, Lubień or Lublin – 28 June 1946, Malvern, Victoria, Australia).

⁹ TN: 1929, story of the Rabbi of a synagogue in a town in which a plague has spread insists that his congregation eat on Yom Kippur in order to maintain their strength and not fall victim to the plague, saving their own lives.

¹⁰ TN: Yosef Luria (1871, Kovno, Lithuania – December 3, 1937, Jerusalem).

¹¹ TN: pseudonym of Nachum Meir Schaikewitz, (December 18, 1849, Nesvizh, Belarus – 25 November 1905, New York City) Yiddish and Hebrew novelist and playwright.

Leizer Domankiewicz¹², who today is the editor of the Yiddish literary magazine *Unzer Wort*¹³ in Paris.

The beginnings of Zionism

During the summer of 1917, there were rumors that the war would not last long. The Zionist World Organization stepped up negotiations with the eventual victors: America, England, and France. It was about getting a national home for the Jews in the Land of Israel. In Poland, there was a struggle for influence on the Jewish Street among the Zionists, the *Bund* and the Folkists. The level of activism in the Zionist camp was particularly intense.

On the eve of the Balfour Declaration, a strong effort was needed to express the support of the Polish Jews for a national home in *Eretz Israel*.

At the time, our friend Uzer Szumraj z"l was studying with the Chodecz Rabbi. Unhappy that his son was hanging around with the boys of the library, his father had decided to take him from Lipman and send him to Chodecz, but Uzer managed to stay in contact with us. Eventually, he joined the Zionist youth movement and came up with the idea of trying to establish a branch of *Zeirei Zion* in Dąbrowice and join him in Chodecz and go together to Włocławek. He sent us Zionist pamphlets, newspapers, and the forms that needed to be filled out.

In the end, we were not able to launch the movement at that point, but we won supporters and Uzer succeeded in creating an atmosphere that was favorable to the Zionist idea. Thanks to that, the Zionist movement would later develop. I should also mention that Uzer's grandmother, Bina Eckert, was a loyal Zionist who helped nurture the national spirit.

Our friend Uzer Szumraj z"l was a devoted Zionist from his earliest youth. *Eretz Israel* was his dream. He knew that the conditions in Palestine were difficult, but that did not stop him from going there in 1920.

He had never done any physical work, but in *Eretz Israel* he learned a trade and worked hard. Later on, he moved in with his two sisters and a brother (we are still in touch with one of the sisters, Zipora). Unfortunately, Uzer fell ill and died prematurely. But he had the privilege of seeing the realization of his ideal – the founding of the State of Israel. He was the first immigrant from our town.

The development of different political parties among the Polish Jews did not affect the management of our library in Dąbrowice. We continued to develop our cultural activities gradually: purchasing books and organizing cultural evenings and entertainment events. We even dared to stage a one-act play with the theatrical director Kapke, who came especially to Dąbrowice.

One day we got the news that Vladimir Medem¹⁴, a well-known intellectual of the *Bund* party, was going to give a lecture on "San Remo¹⁵, Zionism and the Jewish working class" in Kutno. The lecture was on a Saturday. To attend, we had to travel to Kutno. Breaking the Shabbat was considered a serious offense that was unprecedented in our town.

After much hesitation, we decided to take the bold step. It was a beautiful summer day. We had lunch and went to Ostrowy¹⁶ to catch the train to Kutno. When we got back to Dąbrowice after the lecture, it was already time

Hirsh Brzostowski of Dąbrowice, distinguished himself as a writer for literary magazines in Warsaw and in the United States.



for *Havdalah*. In the town, the fact that we had violated the Shabbat going to Kutno was a half-secret. Not everyone knew about it, and those who knew stayed silent. There were no expressions of outrage. It was not that the convictions of the religious Jews had changed. It simply meant that they had made their peace with the idea that times had changed and life was no longer the same as before. They had obviously seen that we did not walk in crooked ways and we were not criminals. In fact, some Jewish parents were surely happy that their children were not as apathetic as they once had been – they now read books and knew what was going on in the world.

In independent Poland

By the winter of 1918 the war had ended and Poland had regained independence. Preparations began for the first Polish elections. All the Jewish parties issued ballot papers. We, the young people, did not yet have the right to vote, but we did take part in the election campaign. We distributed pamphlets and put up posters in the synagogue and the *Beit Midrash*. The most influential political groups in town were the Zionists and *Agudat Israel*, the party of the orthodox religious Jews.

The meetings of *Agudat Israel* took place in the *Beit Midrash*. They were attended by the chassidic Jews of Kutno, who called people to vote for the party.

We held our meetings in the library, with Yaakov Mamlok (the red-haired Yaakov) from Krośniewice and Yaakov Brzostowski. They represented opposite

¹² TN: 1896-1973.

¹³ TN: Yiddish, "Our Word", daily newspaper published in Paris from 1944 to 1996.

¹⁴ TN: Politician and ideologue of the *Bund* (July 30, 1879, Liepāja, Latvia – January 9, 1923, New York City).

¹⁵ TN: San Remo Conference (19-26 April 1920), where the status of Middle East territories taken from the dismembered Ottoman Empire was to be decided, especially those corresponding to the future Palestine.

¹⁶ TN: small town where the closest train station is, 10 km from Dąbrowice and 8 km from Krośniewice.

tendencies: a right-wing nationalist and a left-wing revolutionary. Yaakov Brzostowski, the son of Leib the baker, had returned home from the Russian army. Prior to his military service, he had been active in the illegal Zionist movement *Achdut* in Włocławek. When he came back, he was a radical revolutionary organizer of bakery workers. He did not hide his heresies and he was certainly not loved by the Orthodox Jews. Then, the communist movement boycotted the local elections, so Yaakov called people not to vote. After marrying, he opened a bakery in Lubraniec. I later learned that he had become a prominent businessman and went to the synagogue, where he stood next to the rabbi during the services. He died in the camps of Poznań.

In the summer of 1919, the railway workers of Krośniewice organized a May Day demonstration inviting all the workers of the region. It was the first May Day demonstration in independent Poland. The workers of the sugar factory in Ostrowy joined the event along with the activists of the Polish Socialist Party. Part of the Jewish youth of Dąbrowice also went to the demonstration in Krośniewice, together with the Bundists of Krośniewice.

One after another, the speakers stood on a table and addressed the crowd. Finally, a man with smart looks and a short-pointed beard took the stand. With an oratorical gesture, he raised his hand and proclaimed: "Poles beware, Poland is a milking cow, but it is milked by the Jews. Don't buy from the Jews. The devil will soon take them away."

There were shouts: "Provocateur!" The organizers hastily removed him from the stand, avoiding an incident that could have had serious consequences.

That same year marked the outbreak of the Polish-Soviet war. The youth was mobilized and everything was taken up by the military. Some fled, going abroad to avoid the draft. The younger generation was not ready to take over and continue the cultural activities. After a while, everything stopped. When the war ended, the returnees reopened the library. But I did not return to Dąbrowice. From the news I got from the distance, I learned that our efforts were not lost.

The underprivileged youth became readers and leaders of the library. They inherited a plowed field, picked the fruit that we had sown.

After the end of the Polish-Soviet war Katriel Zontag, Yehoshua Szumraj and other comrades were demobilized. They came back and resumed the activities. The number of young members increased significantly. The fact that the library existed allowed them to continue reading books after completing their basic education in the *cheder*.

A dramatic section was also formed. Various plays by prominent writers have been performed with great success. We also began to deal with political parties' problems. On the political front, the struggle for minority rights stimulated the will to fight among all the Jewish sectors. The Zionist parties stood for civil and national rights for the Jewish minority. The activists of the *Bund* demanded national cultural autonomy, with Yiddish as the

language of instruction in state-sponsored schools for Jewish children.

Katriel Zontag, founder and leader of the Bund's youth group in Dąbrowice. Perished in Chelmno.



Other Jewish parties, such as *Poalei Zion* and the Folkist party, also presented their platforms. There was a spiritual and political surge in the Jewish street and our town was no exception.

Partisan groups were formed, with frenetic activity. The Zionists were led by the already mentioned Mrs. Eckert, who organized meetings and various kinds of activities.

Yaakov-Leib Szumraj led the *Beitar* group, whose activists wore military-like uniforms, had their own clubhouse, and were members of the Krośniewice organization. Katriel Zontag and Yehoshua Szumraj formed a bundist group that included Rivka Hoffman, who organized a local branch of the *Bund's* children's association "*Skif*" to teach the little ones to read and write Yiddish.

In 1925, when the whole world was protesting against the death sentence imposed on Sacco and Vanzetti, the Jewish youth organized a demonstration. After hearing the speeches of activists from Dąbrowice and neighboring towns the activists, they adopted resolutions and telegraphed them to the United States.

As I said at the beginning, the Jews of Dąbrowice were ordinary Jews who toiled to make a modest living. Their situation, however, deteriorated quickly as a result of the economic hardships and the heavy taxation of the times. With the help of the American Joint Distribution Committee, a *Gemilat Chessed* fund was established in the town to provide interest-free loans to the poorer families. The fund was administered by Reb Leibish Jachimowicz, Reb Shlomo Hoffman and Reb Asher Chelmiński. This was a great help for the community in a time of need.

The destruction of Dąbrowice

Dąbrowice was located in the western part of Poland that the Nazis directly annexed to Germany – the so-called Warthegau province. In their murderous plans, this would be the first area to be "cleansed" of Jews.

In September 1939, the murderous soldiers occupied Dąbrowice. They immediately began to take anti-Jewish measures, dragging Jews from their homes for forced work on the streets and roads. They savagely beat and cut off the beards of their first victims: Leib Zlotigurski and Hershel Herberg (son-in-law of Reb Leibish Jachimowicz). Hershel's face was so damaged that

he had to lie in bed for a long time. Out of fear, the Jews shaved their own beards and stopped wearing their traditional hats.



Wyszogródka, activist
of *Beitar*.

Then the Germans looted the Jewish stores. They completely destroyed Bina Bibrik's fashion store and killed Chana, an elderly woman, in a horrible way, tying her to the tail of a horse and chasing it until she lay dead.

On *Rosh Hashanah*, while the Jews were praying, the vandals entered the synagogue and clobbered them. They went on a rampage, leaving the synagogue a ruin. Fortunately, the Torah scrolls were recovered, placed in boxes and hidden away. These local Germans, the so-called *Volkdeutsches*, greatly contributed to the Holocaust.

The wild terror lasted until June 1940. Since the number of Jews in Dąbrowice was small, the Germans decided that it was not worthwhile to create a ghetto in the town. As soon as the Kutno ghetto was ready in the sugar factory *Konstancja*, the Dąbrowice Jews were taken there. They were only allowed to bring a few possessions and given just a few hours to pack. Then, the Germans huddled them in one place, loaded them onto previously prepared wagons and sent them to Kutno. In the warehouses of *Konstancja* there was not enough space. They had to stay out in the open and cook their food on bricks. From *Konstancja* the Germans sent them to Fabianów, the smaller of the two ghettos that they had established in the nearby town Żychlin. The place had been a brick factory in the outskirts of the town. There were less people there, but the lack of food and the sanitary conditions were appalling.

The situation deteriorated from day to day until March 1942, when the Germans liquidated all the ghettos of the region. They took everyone to Chełmno, gassed them inside trucks, and burned them in open pits.

Let us honor, with great reverence, the memory of Katriel Zontag, youth leader; Yehoshua Szumraj, a former *yeshiva* student in Łomża who later settled in Kutno. There, he became the spokesman of the Bundist "*Volks Zeitung*"; Haggai Glogowski, the library's secretary, who as a Polish soldier defended Warsaw until the last minute and also perished in Chełmno. I should also mention Rivka Hoffman, who settled in Brussels with her husband Hersh Brzostowski before the war. They both died in Auschwitz. Their proud Jewish daughter, Rachel Szumraj, was hiding in Rozhev¹⁷. A German discovered her bunker and made

[illegible]

Letter from the Jews of Dąbrowice, sent from the
Żychlin ghetto.

¹⁷ TN: Rozhiv, Ukraine.

her a "love" advance, promising to leave her alive. She preferred to share the fate of her parents and spit on his face. We should also remember and honor Beyle Rivka Wyszogródski, who was literally the mother of the town. Everyone came to her for help reading and writing letters and she always obliged – a woman's righteous deed.

Finally, I would like to remember with reverence our young compatriot Leib (Arie) Grinbaum, son of Chaim Zatler.

After surviving the German concentration camps, he went to *Eretz Israel* and joined the Kibbutz Heftziba. He was only 22 when he fought for the independence of Israel and heroically fell in the Negev.

The obituaries of the kibbutz and the army testify to his heroism¹⁸. Honor his memory!

REMEMBER

With pain in our hearts, we remember all the lost relatives and friends. With reverence we pay homage to

you – humble Jews of our town. In our minds, your images pass by. We see your pale, sorrowful and frightened faces, your bewildered eyes. We hear the cries of the mothers and children. You will be always in our memory! We will never forget you. Future generations will always remember the horrific murder of our people, who were slayed in *Kiddush Hashem*.

Our wrath will never be quenched. Our cry "the people of Israel lives" will never cease. In this memorial book, our weeping will be inscribed on a symbolic matzeva. In the words of our great national poet Chaim Nachman Bialik¹⁹:

*And as a reminder of today's clouds
There will remain for you a new "By the Rivers,"
For Him to overturn the sky and the earth.
Happy is He, and blest shall He be,
Who will make your tears eternal,
Holy, two-thousand-year-old tears.*

¹⁸ TN: see article on page 314 of the original book.

¹⁹ TN: thanks to Mr. Murray Citron for the translation of this poem from the Yiddish.