

Jakow Kenner

Left-Wing *Poalei Zion*

The beginning of the activity of a Poalei Zion organisation in Częstochowa was in the summer of 1904. Its first activists were Szymon Waldfogel, a tailoring worker who came from the village of Krzywanice, next to the neighbouring *shtete'le* of Sulmierzyce¹; Majer, a local tailor's apprentice, who worked alongside Szymon in the same workshop, and Mojsze Cieszynski, the son of bourgeois parents who – as was the expression back then – “held with the workers”.



A group of the first Poalei Zionists
Standing (R-L): Dawid Borzykowski, M. Berman,
J. Warszawski; Seated (R-L): Mojsze Cieszynski, M. Montag

But the soul of this trio was Szymon Waldfogel who, in the workers' circles, was called “Fajge'le” [Birdie²], for the sake of conspiracy. Szymon had already read up on a great many illegal brochures and he was strongly drawn to the labour movement. However, he had no desire to join either the Bund or the SS (Territorialists-Socialists), because both of these Jewish parties, which had already existed in Częstochowa from before, did not support the Land of Israel, while he, Szymon, as a boy of fourteen, when he worked in Radomsko and was member of a Zionist library, had already dreamt of travelling to the Land of Israel.

These aforementioned pioneers of Poalei Zionism in Częstochowa began, as a trio, to spread the party's ideas at the labour exchange, until they created three little circles with ten people in each one, and each of them led one such secret circle. From these separate little circles grew the Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* organisation which, in 1905, already numbered over one hundred working men and women.

As the youngest organisation, it could not compete in strength with two older and previously well-established organisations - but it was taken into account in the city, in political strikes [and] street demonstrations which, in those days, took place very frequently. *Poalei Zion* had its representatives in the general strike committees. In the great street demonstrations of 1905, hundreds of Jewish workers had marched under the *Poalei Zion* flag, led by Szymon Waldfogel as standard-bearer.

During the Reactionary Period

The failure of the Russian revolution in 1905 brought, with it, persecutions against the labour movement by the Tsarist rule, and the majority of the more well-known activists of all factions were forced to flee abroad. Mojsze Cieszynski travelled to Vienna, Austria, and from there to America. Szymon Waldfogel travelled to Germany and from there to Paris, where he worked in the tailoring [trade] and was active in the local trade union movement.

¹ [TN: 43.5 km. north of Częstochowa.]

² [TN: The surname Waldfogel means “forest bird.”]

During this time, in Częstochowa, just like in all other cities in Poland, the labour movement went through a standstill. The Tsarist reaction was raging and the working masses wrapped up their banners, delaying their public fight for another time.

The Jewish labour movement, which did not have any large factories as bases of activity, particularly dwindled. Organisations, whose [members] had numbered in the thousands, were during those years reduced to a few dozen, and [those with] hundreds turned into little groups. The Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* organisation shared that same fate and was greatly diminished. But it was still active, under the leadership of the young Mojsze Oderberg. In the end, he was also forced to flee abroad.

Soon afterwards, Comrade Jetta Graj [or Grey], who is now active in the *Poalei Zion* organisation in Los Angeles, California, also emigrated to America.

Comrade Mojsze Oderberg is now in Chicago where, for decades now, he has been the leader of the local Left-Wing *Poalei Zion* organisation. Before fleeing from Częstochowa, he had managed to fortify and enroot the organisational and ideological core of Poalei Zionism in his hometown to such an extent that, when Szymon Waldfogel returned in 1913 from Paris to Częstochowa, he was able to put his experiences with the Western European labour movement to use and, once more, build up a strong *Poalei Zion* organisation.

First of all, he busied himself with founding illegal professional workers' unions and, at the same time, within the professional movement, he re-established the political party groups. Szymon Waldfogel, once more in Częstochowa, became the "Birdie" of former days, flying from one gathering to another, and encouraging and awakening the masses everywhere to professional organisation and political activity. He sought out those who were "lagging behind", and brought together those returning from Tsarist exile, rallying the battle-ready around him. Things proceeded thus until 1st August 1914, when the First World War broke out and the political-communal life once more took a blow.

Under the German Occupation During the First World War

In 1915, when Poland was occupied by the German and Austrian legions, the communal forces soon recovered from the sudden blow they had taken from the outbreak of the War. The most urgent task, at the time, was the fight against the hunger and epidemics that the War had spread. Szymon Waldfogel then put all his energy towards organising the relief institutions for the Jewish masses and, with the support of the other *Poalei Zion* members in Częstochowa, a "worker's home" was soon established which was, incidentally, the first Jewish "worker's home" in the whole of Poland – where, all day, a free tearoom and low-priced people's kitchen operated.

But the tearoom and people's kitchen were much more than a place to eat. They turned into the political and cultural clubs of the local Jewish workforce, and they also served as a model for the other Polish provinces. That is where the workers congregated and discussed, amongst themselves, the current news of the War and the post-War problems. That is where migrant and homeless Jewish families, from the surrounding *shtetls*, found support. There, at the *Poalei Zion* "worker's home", political awareness of the Jewish masses was forged day after day. Thus the ground for the later blooming of the Jewish labour movement was prepared. As soon as the German occupant had been driven from Polish soil, the Jewish workers and common masses, with their diverse political, financial and cultural organisations, swam up to the communal surface.

The Poalei Zion Organisation, just like all the other parties, quickly grew into a mass organisation with widely ramified economic³ and cultural institutions. In the first post-war years, the Poalei Zion Organisation in Częstochowa made a name for itself with its produce cooperatives and *konsum* [Pol., cooperative] shops. The bakers' cooperative, where dozens of labourers and employees worked, was of particularly great significance. In the ever increasing scarcity, the Poalei Zion bakers' cooperative was a true blessing for the poor population. The bakery not only gave the workers employment for reasonable wages, but also made it possible for the members of all the cooperative shops to receive the appropriate amount of bread on a daily basis for affordable prices, thus indirectly putting a resistance up against the illegal bread trade in the black market, which at the time was widely spread.



The Poalei Zion Cooperative Management Committee
Standing (R-L): A. Gotlib, W. Landsman, S. Szaja;
Seated (R-L): Mrs Koniczpoler, G. Frajtag, J. Berman,
A. Berkowicz



A group of Poalei Zionists
Standing (R-L): Kotlarz, A. Wajs, Goldberg, Zajdman,
G. Frajtag; Seated (R-L): Turner, P. Tuchmajer,
R. Majorczyk, S. Szaja, A. Litman

The bakers' cooperative, which was founded with the collaboration of the Joint, had its own horse and carriage, with which the bread was distributed early each morning to the cooperative shops, so that the members should not need to stand in long queues.

But the Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* was not satisfied with just providing the Jewish populace with bread. The organisation also established a library, a kindergarten, a drama circle, an evening school [and] a youth club. At the same time, it was active in the political and professional fields (of trade unions).

In 1920, when spotted typhus reigned in Poland, Szymon Waldfogel died in Sosnowiec as a victim of this disease, and his death had a very detrimental effect on the further activity of the Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* organisation.

New activists did, in fact, come forth, but "Birdie's" communal impact - Szymon's broader vision - was missing and, afterwards, the Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* organisation found it difficult to occupy the place in the Jewish life, which the deceased Waldfogel had wished to conquer for it.

The Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* organisation was made up entirely of workers and toilers. Neither at the time nor in the later years, it did not have any professional intellectuals or determined youth. This also made the struggle for positions of power, in Jewish working life, considerably harder. But, as consequence, the Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* organisation always had a strong tendency towards unity amongst workers and, when the unification of parallel workers' institutions in Częstochowa – such as, for example, the libraries, the kindergartens and the professional unions – became an reality, this tendency in the ranks of *Poalei Zion* found fertile ground.

³ [TN: The word "wirtschaftlich" (Ger., economic) is used here in the original, which in Yiddish, besides its primary definition of "economic," denotes matters pertaining to the domestic or communal economy, such as supplying food.]

In the autumn of 1920, when the *Poalei Zion* movement split into right and left⁴, the entire Częstochowa organisation, with all its institutions remained in the ranks of the left-wing *Poalei Zion*. More than once did the left-wing *Poalei Zion* relinquish certain privileges which were theirs by right, in order to, all the quicker, bring about unity among the workers.

The libraries, the professional unions and the kindergartens were unified under general, joint management committees, in which the left-wing *Poalei Zion* had their representation, and they collaborated there loyally until the outbreak of the Second World [War] slaughter. This, however, most certainly does not mean that they yielded in anything of their ideology or their political stance. "Peace on its own and war on its own" - this was their motto in the day-to-day work.

[Although] united in the professional field, they still never passed up any political event without coming forth independently with their own electoral list or their own political slogans - even when they had no guaranteed prospects of a concrete victory. [Although] united in the scholastic system or the library, at the same time and on their own, they still waged war against clericalism, illiteracy [and] fascism, and for Palestinism⁵.

Whilst the older members of the party – under the leadership of A. Prędko, Ch. Birencwajg, Lajbisz Tenenbaum and, later, M. Szwarc and [City] Councillor Abram Blum - were active mainly in the joint management committees of the trade unions, the library and the scholastic system, the youth were lively in the realms of cultural activity, sports, summer camps, anti-clericalism and various other fields.

The writer of these lines had several opportunities to be the guest speaker of the Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* youth at different public functions, and I always returned with a feeling of deep spiritual satisfaction from the enthusiasm and from the profound earnestness with which our youth organisation, there, breathed.

In the early 1920's, the *Poalei Zion* youth was under the leadership of Comrades Baromhercyk and Józefowicz, leather workers, who later wandered away to Paris. At the end of the 1920's, Szulim Kolberg, who later travelled to Canada, became the leader. Afterwards, the youth-work was led by the bakery worker Abram Brum, who saved himself in 1939 by fleeing to the Soviet Union, and is now active in Moscow in the ranks of the Polish Jews; the tailoring worker Izrael Szymonowicz, who perished in a Nazi concentration camp in Mauthausen (Austria), and Dawid Jakubowicz, who survived and is [now] active in the camp of "liberated" Jews in Feldafing (Bavaria).

At this point, please allow me to mention in a few lines, at least a small part of the lively and effervescent activity of our Częstochowa youth, based upon my observations during my visits there.

In April 1926 - a public protest meeting of young workers, in connection with the proposed legislation which the Polish reactionaries had put before the Sejm, that the right to assemble be taken from the youth. Four or five hundred young male and female workers filled the large assembly hall. The hall's entrance was besieged by agents of the secret police. The young activists handed out hectographed⁶ flyers, in which they called upon the youth to the protest against the attempt on the youth's rights.

⁴ [TN: The left-wing faction remained loyal to the party's original Marxist-Communist ideology, which those who split off and formed the right-wing faction rejected.]

⁵ [TN: Ideology which views Palestine as the only location for the establishment of a Jewish state, as opposed to the Territorialists (the Bund).]

⁶ [TN: Made with an apparatus for copying documents by the use of a gelatine plate that receives an impression of the master copy.]

In December 1927 - a large public *akademia* [commemoration] marking the tenth anniversary of Ber Borochov's death, which turned into a fine demonstration for proletarian Palestinism.

In autumn 1928 – a public demonstration against the fact that the left-wing *Poalei Zion* party had been dissolved in the Soviet Union.

In September 1929, when the Organisation was already in its own premises, a celebration [was held] in a forest behind the city in honour of [Communist] International Youth Day, after which dozens of youths marched into town, singing revolutionary songs.

Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* youth, together with the party, especially distinguished themselves in 1929, by selling thousands of declaration cards [?] to the Pro-Palestine Workers Congress that was held in Warsaw, and they sent a corresponding number of delegates.

Every First of May, the Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* - the party and the youth - demonstrated under their own flag in the general workers' march and, in the evening, held their own May celebrations.

The Cultural Activity

The *Poalei Zion* Cultural Society "Evening Courses for Workers", every year during the winter months, would arrange public lectures on the most diverse subjects and, almost every week, brought in lecturers from Warsaw or Kraków. Comrades Dr Burech Ajzensztadt, Dr Rafael Mahler, Mina Abelman and Dr Emanuel Ringelblum z''l very often travelled to Częstochowa to deliver lectures. Comrades Awigdor Bursztyn and Lubek Szmerler, of whom there is no sign of life to this day, would often arrive from Kraków. During all the different kinds of electoral campaigns, Comrades Chaim Brand, Izrael Stoljarski [and] Mojsze Cytrynowski would travel there from Łódź as speakers, and Comrades Zerubavel, J. [?] Lew, N. Buksbaum, the author of these lines and others, frequently came there to the public celebrations or to give political lectures. The Częstochowa Jewish common masses always came to listen with great interest to the *Poalei Zion* lectures, and they always responded sympathetically to every political or financial activity which the Częstochowa organisation was conducting.

An occurrence took place in the ranks of the Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* youth which, at the time made a great impression, and this fact is worth mentioning, because it is very characteristic of the spirit of the Jewish workforce in Poland. A young locksmith worker [named] Eliezer Wajs, a child from a poor family, belonged to the youth organisation. The young Wajs had heard so much at the lectures and in the internal educational circles about the usefulness of education and the lack of the working class' own intelligentsia that, one fine day, he made the decision to stop working in the workshop and take to study. In the economic conditions of the day, this was very hard to accomplish. His plan sounded quite fantastic and his parents, due to financial need, were opposed to this fantasy. But Eliezer Wajs was encouraged to do so by the Organisation, and his elder brother, who was already earning a little, promised to support him financially. Wajs doggedly took to study and, in a relatively short time, completed his *gymnazjum* studies – or received the "*matura*" [secondary school certificate], as it was called in Poland. Afterwards, he moved to Kraków, where, under the most difficult of material conditions, he studied at the Juridical [Law] Faculty of the local university, until receiving the title of Juris Doctor. During the course of all the time he was studying, he never broke with his organisation. First in Częstochowa and later in Kraków, in the evening hours, he was in charge of the educational work in the youth organisations of these cities. He conducted elementary courses for the youth, who came from the small *shtetls* or the villages, and who had no education. With particular love and energy, he dedicated himself to the work for the youth organisations' libraries. Later, he even published a large brochure on how libraries should be run, and the

secretariat for the library system of the Central [Bureau] of the Evening Courses for Workers Society in Warsaw printed 5,000 copies of his booklet.

In Kraków itself, he was chairman of the famous I.L. Peretz Library, which belonged to the Kraków left-wing *Poalei Zion* organisation and, under his leadership, this library quickly blossomed into one of the finest and largest Jewish libraries in Poland. The Central [Committee] of the Evening Courses for Workers Society also organised a special four-week course for librarians, which was run by Dr Eliezer Wajs and where he was one of the most important lecturers. In order to run this course, Wajs was forced to free himself for one month from the private position, which he occupied in Kraków as assistant to a local lawyer. Yet his desire to propagate learning among the working youth and to strengthen the Jewish library system was so intense, that he did not allow any impediments to stop the realisation of his dreams.

The Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* organisation and the local workforce, in general, was very proud of its fellow townsman - of its Eliezer Wajs - who had, in a short time, been transformed from a locksmith's apprentice to a lawyer with the title of "Doctor" and, when he would occasionally come home to his parents for a few days, this visit was always a festive occasion for the organisation, with his lectures, talks and reports.

But this joy was short-lived because, in November 1930, in Kraków, he contracted the flu and, due to complications from a kidney inflammation, he died on 10th November, at the blossoming age of thirty.

The comrades in Kraków immediately telegraphed Częstochowa with the news and, the following day upon which the funeral was to be held, a delegation arrived from Częstochowa, which consisted of his brother and two other comrades, who requested that Eliezer Wajs be brought to a Jewish grave in his [own] hometown. The *Krakówers* yielded to his family's wish. They wrapped the deceased in a red flag and transported him to Częstochowa where, on Wednesday 12th November, a large funeral procession took place. Hundreds and hundreds of comrades left their work and came to pay their last respects to the single intellectual and prominent cultural activist who had grown from within their own ranks. Both members of our own party and the representatives of all the other factions eulogised him by his open grave and afterwards, every year, the Częstochowa left-wing *Poalei Zion* observed the anniversary of his death, always mentioning him with deference and reverential awe.

Dr Eliezer Wajs, however, is not the only respected *Poalei Zion* activist who rests, or [once] rested, in the Częstochowa Jewish cemetery. Next to Comrade Eliezer Wajs there is - or was - also the tomb of another revered left-wing *Poalei Zion* activist - the tomb of the Sosnowiec City Councillor Mojsze Judenherc, who was killed in 1924 at the Częstochowa railway station while boarding a train, at the blossoming age of 36.

For eight years, Mojsze Judenherc was the representative of the Jewish workers on the Sosnowiec City Council, elected from the list of the left-wing *Poalei Zion*. From the tribune of the City Council, he fought with great bravado against antisemitism, for which he was very popular and well-liked among the Jewish common masses throughout Zagłębie and its environs. It is therefore no wonder that, after his tragic death, the Częstochowa Jewish workers and common people, together with the Sosnowiec *Poalei Zion*, raised such a magnificent marble headstone over his grave. While in Sosnowiec itself, a people's library was built in his memory, which functioned until the outbreak of the War.

Under German Occupation During 1939-1945

For the time being, we do not know what happened to the Częstochowa [Jewish] cemetery during Hitler's occupation. We do not know whether the German violators of people and graves perhaps, by chance, spared the generations-old cemeteries of Sosnowiec and Częstochowa, where the bones of Szymon Waldfogel, Eliezer Wajs and Mojsze Judenherc rested, alongside others. But, what we do know is that the Jewish youth in general - and the *Poalei Zion* members of these two cities in particular - not only treated the memory of their deceased guides with piety and deference in pre-War times, but also during the War [itself], under the hardest ghetto conditions, they loyally and impeccably fulfilled the unwritten wills of their three aforementioned teachers.

Let us mention but one fact here regarding the desire and preparedness for battle of the Częstochowa left-wing *Poalei Zion*, from the sorrowful yet also heroic ghetto period of 1943.

When the Warsaw Ghetto was preparing for the famous uprising against the Nazi murderers, the Częstochowa *Poalei Zion* organisation, through secret underground channels, received orders from Warsaw - from the leader of the left-wing *Poalei Zion*, Dr Adolf Berman - to come at once to Warsaw, with weapons in hand, in order to aid the success of the ghetto uprising.

A group of ten young, courageous and physically powerful comrades, under the leadership of the aforementioned Comrades Dawid Jakubowicz and Izrael Szymonowicz, snuck out of the Częstochowa Ghetto and, over the course of days and nights, smuggled their way to Warsaw, until finally reaching one of its suburbs, with the assistance of the leftist [faction of] the Polish underground movement. But it was already impossible for them to force their way into the Warsaw Ghetto, which already stood in flames and which was encircled on all sides by the bands of German murderers.

Having no other alternative, the ten brave heroes were sorrowfully and painfully forced to return to Częstochowa, where they shared the same fate of the entire Jewish population - deportations, active resistance and annihilation. Izrael Szymonowicz was tortured at the Mauthausen slave labour camp - while Dawid Jakubowicz survived and is now in Feldafing, where he is secretary of the left-wing *Poalei Zion* organisation in Bavaria and is, concurrently, its representative in the Munich Central Committee of the liberated Jews in the American zone in Germany.

What happened to the other eight - as well as to all the other members of *Poalei Zion*, old and young - is, for now, unknown to us. But, from the first issue of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, the organ of the left-wing *Poalei Zion* in Poland which is now being printed in Łódź, we do know that, in Częstochowa, the left-wing *Poalei Zion* organisation has now been revived and that it continues to conduct lively activity among, and for the benefit of, the *Jewish Surviving Remnant* in Częstochowa.
