

Dr Zvi Cohen

The Zionist Movement in Częstochowa

General Zionists

The Zionist movement was strongly represented in Częstochowa in all its shades, beginning from the far right, the *Mizrachists*, the General Zionists who stood in the centre, through to the far-left groups such as S. S. [Zionist Socialist Workers Party] and the left-wing [faction of] *Poalei Zion*. A great proportion of the youth, and no less also from the bourgeoisie, belonged to this or that Zionist faction. In the parties and groups, one could find people from all strata - from the poor, uneducated masses, to the most highly-educated Jewish intelligentsia and also no less from amongst the rich Jews, who constituted Częstochowa's business class.

In order to have a small picture of the Zionist activity, we shall go the very beginning and see how Zionism came to our city. This was in 1898, following the first Zionist Congress which was held in Basel one year earlier, in the summer of 1897. The Zionist Congress, at that time, appointed *murshim* [agents], i.e. representatives of the Zionist organisation in different parts of the world.

In Poland, as the *murshe* of the Łódź region up to the Polish-German border near Sosnowiec, the [reform] Rabbi **Dr R.** [sic. Izrael] **Jelski** was appointed. He was the rabbi and preacher at the "German Synagogue" in Łódź. Jelski was a brilliant speaker and a blazing, fiery Zionist. He also took pains to have representatives throughout the entire area over which he was the *murshe*. According to the plan which he had worked out, he wished to have such representation throughout the entire Zagłębie region (Częstochowa, Dąbrowa, Będzin, and Sosnowiec). Regarding this matter, he approached the Rabbi **Reb Nachum Asz**, who had first become Rabbi of Częstochowa not long before. Back then, Rabbi Asz was not as yet a confirmed Zionist and, not knowing what to do, he turned to the Chief Rabbi of Łódź, the Rabbi **Reb Eliaz Chaim Majzel**, regarding the issue. Rabbi Majzel, who was an opponent of Zionism, at once replied to the Rabbi of Częstochowa that he was not to [even] consider sympathising with that bunch of heretics and dissidents, the Zionists, and that he should not let them into his city. At this period, in Częstochowa, there were already many devoted Zionists. One of these, who frequently talked with the rabbi about helping to spread the Zionist ideal in Częstochowa, was the future popular public activist, **Reb Natan Gerichter**. When the response from the rabbi Reb Eliaz Chaim Majzel to the Rabbi of Częstochowa arrived, the result was that the rabbi Reb Nachum Asz did not wish to start any activity for Zionism inside his city., Reb Natan Gerichter said to the rabbi:

If you, Rebbe [My Master], have fear – I have no fear at all! I shall establish the first Zionist organisation here.

At once, at his house, he convened a group of Jews, fine burghers [all] - and the first Zionist organisation in Częstochowa was born. Reb Natan also saw eye-to-eye with Dr Jelski and was in contact with him during long years regarding Zionist activity in Częstochowa. Later, Reb Natan also travelled to several Zionist Congresses.

Zionist activity in Częstochowa expanded intensively. Later, the Rabbi of Częstochowa, Reb Nachum Asz, also came to side with the ideal – especially once *Mizrachi* was founded by the great prodigy Reb Icchak Jakob Reines, the Rabbi of Lida [Belarus].

The *Mizrachi* Organisation

The *Mizrachi* organisation celebrated the foundation of its branch in Częstochowa in 1906. The founders were the city *maggid* **Reb Josef Szymon Koblenz**, **Reb Szmul Goldsztajn**, **Blechsztajn**, **Finkelstein**, **Reb Ajzyk Mendel Epszajn**, **Reb Chaim Weksler** and **Reb Juda Engel**.

They immediately began intense activity in Częstochowa in order to draw all the Jewish burghers into the movement.

But this did not come to the group easily. Many of the Chassidic elements - true and false zealots - fought against them fiercely. In this work, they were also greatly aided by the *Rebbe* **Reb Awigdor'1***, besides which directives came to the *Chassidim* of Ger, Sochaczew, and Aleksander, from their *Rebbes*, that they should fiercely fight against the new Zionists - the *Mizrachists* - who were just as heretical as the old Zionists, only concealing themselves behind a mask of religiosity. This was a very heavy battle, which was waged until the outbreak of the First World War. Only after the First World War, once the Balfour Declaration had transpired, did the struggle weaken and many of the Chassidic elements themselves were drawn into the *Mizrachi* movement.

In 1920, the youth of *Mizrachi* decided to separate themselves from the older elements with whom they could not live together peacefully and so *Ha'Poel Ha'Mizrachi* was born. The founders were D. Bratt, Abram Dancyger and Jankel Berman. The new organisation immediately expanded and, in 1922, they decided to create a farm-school to teach the youth agronomy there. The farm-school was on ul. Warszawska 27 (Kotlicki's Square). The *Mizrachi Sejm* [Polish parliament] deputy, Herszel Farbsztejn, travelled to Częstochowa for the opening of the farm-school. At that time, a large part of the *Ha'Poel Ha'Mizrachi* youth also studied at the Crafts School, with the aim of being able to travel to the Land of Israel with a profession in hand. The Crafts School, even back then, already had a pioneering spirit and made an effort to prepare the youth to be able to do useful work in the Land of Israel. Many of the *Poalei Mizrachi* youth, who had completed the Crafts School, did in fact travel to the Land of Israel. Most of them learnt to be carpenters. From them emerged many leading personalities in the State of Israel such as A. [sic Szlojme Zalman] Shragai and Jakow Leslau, who are active in various spheres in the country.

At the *Mizrachi* premises, almost all *Shabbes* sermons were delivered by the city preacher **Reb Josef Szymon Koblenz** or by the other preacher, the brother-in-law of the city's [Chief] Rabbi, **Reb Mojsze Halter**. Reb Mojsze would also teach *Chumash* every Friday evening in his unique style and the audience truly licked their fingers with his clever interpretations. Over time, Reb Mojsze became a dedicated leader of religious Zionism and also visited the Land of Israel - after which he never stopped agitating that every Jew should travel to the Land of Israel at least once in his life and see this land with his own eyes.

The speeches of the two *maggidim*, Reb Josef Szymon Koblenz and Reb Mojsze Halter, had the effect that the entire middle-class public came to stand by *Mizrachi*. A great many of the Chassidic elements also joined *Mizrachi*. Mainly in the 20's and [sic] in the [time of the] Chassidic *Rebbes'* opposition to Zionism, it became much harder. But once the public already saw that Zionism does not lead anyone astray, which was what the propaganda had previously been, the situation was reversed. They saw that many extremely, pious Jews were nevertheless good Zionists. This had the effect that belonging to *Mizrachi* became an honour and, even those who had previously stood afar, later came to support religious Zionism and joined the *Mizrachi* organisation.

* [TN: See the biography of this Rebbe in "Sefer Częstochowa," Vol. I, col.577.]

In the Twenty Years Between the Two World Wars

In the twenty years from 1919, when Poland became a state, until 1939, when the Second World War broke out, all strata of the Zionist movement, from the extreme right to the extreme left, particularly interested themselves with an array of activities, which sometimes found resonance on the Jewish street but, at other times, provoked a storm of protests against them.

In general, we may say that these twenty years are marked with three great campaigns. The first was the creation of the Jewish National Council, which was founded by the *Sejm* deputies Izaak Grinbaum and H. Hartglas, who set themselves the goal to defend the interests of the Jewish minority in Poland. This new organisation, which had subdivisions in the province, also had its representatives in Częstochowa, who constantly gathered material and facts concerning all hindrances, restrictions, attacks and insults which the Jewish masses had to endure just for being Jews.

The second campaign was already born later, in 1922, when Dr Chaim Weitzman, together with other leaders of the world executive board of Zionism, came to Poland for that purpose. This was the *Keren Ha'Yesod*, which was the forerunner of the various types of fundraisers which are now conducted in different countries to collect funds for the Jewish State. This became the principal instrument of funding for the Land of Israel and such divisions were established in all cities of Poland. In Częstochowa, too, the *Keren Ha'Yesod* bureau was very active and frequently brought important Zionists in from Warsaw and would hold a function to this aim. Among those who often came to Częstochowa was the President of the Zionist Organisation, Dr Izaak Sziffer, and the leader of the *Keren Ha'Yesod* bureau, N. Gerbowski.

The third campaign was the most popular. This was the Palestine Bureau for emigration to the Land of Israel, which was created in 1925, and lasted until the outbreak of the Second World War. This was due to the fact that the Jewish masses, who in the *New Poland* were oppressed both economically and spiritually, felt that they must leave their home, the place where their cradle had stood and wander off elsewhere.

Straight after the end of the First World War, a great Jewish emigration from Poland began. At that time, the stream was toward the West, to various Western countries, above all to the Americas (North and South). At that time, more than half a million Jews from Poland left their homes and emigrated elsewhere to build themselves new nests, where there would be no danger of them being disturbed by Jew-hating hands.

However, when America began closing the country's gates [and] quotas for immigration to various countries were instigated, and the Jews saw that the number of those who managed to obtain a visa was very small, and that one would have to wait many years to receive it, everyone began turning their eyes to the East, to be able to travel to the Land of Israel, and the activity of the Palestine Bureau, which distributed the Palestine certificates, commenced.

However, with the Palestine Bureau also, Jews waited months and years before finally having the good fortune to receive such a certificate. It soon became much harder to obtain a certificate from the Palestine Bureau to travel to the Land of Israel, than it was to receive a visa from the American consulate. Consequently, each time a Jew received a certificate to travel to the Jewish land, it was considered a great joy and, each time a group of emigrants left Poland on the way to our homeland, it was celebrated as a great event for all Jews.

Rejoicing like this ensued in Częstochowa, as we see in the newspaper *Unser Weg* when on, 12th October 1934, eleven hundred emigrants left Poland, among whom were 137 Jews from Częstochowa.

It was a joyous occasion for the entire Zionist camp and all parties, from right to left, participated in it.

As to other activities of the various Zionist parties and groups, they made an effort to penetrate Jewish life in all things and to play the main role in all questions that should arise therein, but they did not always succeed.

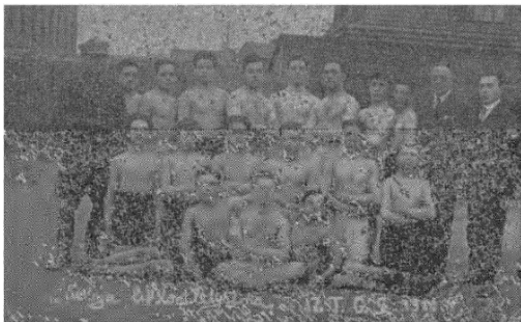
The first time we see this is in the 1920s, when two factions were created within Polish Zionism - that of *Al Ha'Mishmar* [*On Guard*], under the directorship of Izaak Grinbaum, and *Et Livnot* [*A Time to Build*], under the directorship of Dr Gotlib. This was also played out in Częstochowa, where the *Al Ha'Mishmar* group found its representative in Dr Bram and *Et Livnot* in Abram Gerszonowicz. Both, at a sign from above [as it were], scrambled to become the leaders of Jewish Częstochowa. They therefore conducted an intensive campaign in all *Kehilla* elections and in all other activities that took place in the city.

In the *Kehilla* Council, the Zionist elements of all factions were strongly represented. But there, they usually united with the members of *Aguda* and formed a reactionary force which put itself in opposition to the demands of the radical elements, who demanded funds for Jewish secular schools, for the Jewish library and other secular Jewish causes. But this was not after their own hearts. It therefore turned out that the radical opposition, headed by the Bund through the Councillor Raphael Federman and others, was forced to wage a tenacious battle for its stances. They were also often threatened with losing their offices. The Zionist councillors from the right-wing gave moneys in abundance for Jewish religious affairs, such as ritual slaughter, the *mikvah*, the cemetery and education, but never to the secular Jewish causes.

The National Fund was also an important part of the Zionist camp and the office in Częstochowa always arranged a "Night in Tel-Aviv", which was the annual ball, the entire proceeds of which went to the Jewish National Fund.

Together with other cities, the Zionist Organisation also arranged protest rallies against the English government, for distributing the number of certificates for emigration to the Land of Israel with such a miserly hand.

In all these activities, Jewish Częstochowa participated equally with all other distinguished Jewish cities in Poland.



The athletics division of the Jewish Gymnastics-Sporting Association, Częstochowa 1928



The cycling division of the Jewish Gymnastics-Sporting Association "Olsztyn," Częstochowa 1928

The Revisionists

The Revisionist flank of Zionism was very strongly represented in our city in all its shades.

The Revisionist group was founded by **Niemirowski** and **Janowski**.

As regards the different subdivisions of the Revisionists, we are able to recount the following:

The Betar group was created by **Perec Lasker**, **Zvi Kantor** and **M. Jużewicz*** (he ended up as a pilot at the Lod Flying School [in Palestine] and received a medal as the first Jewish pilot).

The “Jewish State” group (Meir Grossman’s party) was led by **Eliasz Ickowicz**, **Michał Ruzewicz**, **Efroim Bratman** and **Izraif Tiberg**.

The founder of the “Akiva” group was **Fizman**. The “Herzliya” group was founded by **Gustaw Epszajn**.

The group under the name “Zionist Youth” was founded by **Dawid Kartuz**, **Zamek Oderberg**, **Blechsztajn** and **Efroim Horowicz** (the latter, together with his wife (née Fizman), perished at the hands of the Nazis).

There was also a “Kadima” [Onwards] group, a “Gordonia” group, “Brit Ha’Chayal” [(demobilised) Soldiers’ Alliance], “Brit Ha’Kanaim” [Alliance of Radicals], the “Ha’Tzohar” [Heb. acronym of “Revisionist Zionists”] group and the women’s group called “Reviza” [?].

The *Ha’Shomer Ha’Tzair* group was established by the lawyer **Gitler** (perished at the hands of the Nazis) and the engineers, the brothers **Lajbel** and **Szmul Horowicz**, **Pinkus Birencwajg**, **Mania Birencwajg** and **Lajbel Leslau**.

Often, as a guest speaker for the Revisionists was **Mr Józef Klarman**, who lived at the time in Sosnowiec.

The Betar group would hold musters every Saturday at the “Iron” [Factory] Square, or at the “Klejarna,**” with commands [in Hebrew]: “*Achat, shtaim, shalosh, arba...*” [One, two, three, four...]. The zealots viewed this as a desecration of the Sabbath and would make scandals for the lads and girls. More than once it happened that, just as the Betar youth were beginning to make their musters, a camp of Aguda people would come up running, making a commotion and yelling “*Chilul Shabbes!*” [desecration of the S.], and would begin beating the lads and girls. But these young fellows did not remain silent and more than one beard was torn and more than one fanatic left that square with pummelled eyes.

But, even if the Revisionist youth was able to stand its own against the zealots, they had a very hard battle to endure on the part of the working elements – the S.S., the Right *Poalei Zion* and the Left *Poalei Zion*, who regarded the Revisionist youth as fascist forces - especially after these same Betar adherents began wearing brown shirts, exactly like the fascists in Italy and also started repeating the same slogans as these. They were soon labelled as “reactionary chauvinists” and the revolutionary working youth agitated everywhere, that people should keep away from them.

The Revisionist youth was a very good element and were truly committed Zionists, who were literally willing to give up their lives for the Zionist ideal. They all greatly admired the main leader, Vladimir

* [TN: In “*Sefer Częstochowa*,” Vol. I, col.235, he appears as *Abram Józefowicz-Yosfi*.]

** [TN: *Unknown; perhaps a glue factory.*]

Jabotinsky and looked up to him. But, within the Revisionist Party itself, there was no domestic peace. Various factions formed inside the party itself, which did not work out well for the youth, as they themselves did not know what they wanted and, therefore, different groups fought amongst each other and what one said was good, the other said was of no use. Be that as it may, the fact is that Częstochowa radiated all camps and shades of Revisionist Zionism and had representatives of each individual faction.