

## The [*Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*] Movement at the Beginning of the War

Once the connections, which have been severed during the first months of the War, are re-established by Tosia [Altman], who returns from Wilno, the Warsaw cell renews its activity. The work intensifies, particularly when Mordche [Anielewicz] and Szmul return from Wilno. In the summer of 1940, the cell reached the peak of its activity.

Every single day, the members meet on ul. Leszno (between ul. Karmelicka and the Great Synagogue), between six and nine o'clock until the gates are closed. The meetings are held clandestinely at the house of one of the group's members. After a while, the frequent gatherings in this street arouse the suspicions of the authorities and the cell moves to ul. Nowolipki (between ul. Karmelicka and the corner of ul. [Ludwika] Zamenhofa).

In March 1940, the leadership set about establishing the first [training] *kibbutz* in Warsaw. It is made up of the members of the *Karit* and *BeMa'ala* (Warsaw) and *Ha'Galil* (Warsaw-Praga) troops, together with members of the Wloclawek cell, who are in Warsaw. The young *kibbutz's* first group (twenty men and women) go out in April 1940 to engage in agricultural labour in a farm in Pniewy, which is next to Grójec. The *Judenrat* in the nearby town of Tarczyn, which until now provided the workers for the farm, welcomes the group enthusiastically and even promises financial aid. Nevertheless, the group was not long-lived. The owner of the farm - one Halik who, before the War, had been an officer in the Polish Army - was in fact impressed with the young Jews who carried out the heavy farm work, but this impression did not stop him from making them work like slaves for 14-16 hours a day, for meagre wages and rotten potatoes. Despite the efforts of Josef Kaplan, who put much effort into organising the farm, most of the members were forced to abandon the place after a few short months and return to Warsaw.

At the same time that it organised the *kibbutz* ("*Ma'apilim*" was its name), the leadership also set about preparing the first ideological council. The difficulties on the way to Warsaw, both from the *General Gouvernement* and from the territories which had been annexed to the Reich, were large and numerous, due to the captures on the trains and roads. Notwithstanding, the emissaries arrived from the provincial cities and, in May 1940, the Council assembled.

The meetings were held in different locations:

- at the farm in Grochów<sup>1</sup> (which was already under the Commissioner's supervision),
- on the premises of the former *Tarbut* school on ul. Graniczna,
- at the *Ha'Chalutz* locale at ul. Dzielna 34 and also
- in one of the public soup kitchens on ul. Gęsia.

The Council dedicated its sessions to:

- a) political questions connected to the situation that had been formed (in particular, the minds were troubled with the questions regarding the USSR [and] its home and foreign politics), and
- b) the new educational problems that had arisen once the Movement had gone underground.

Invited guests from other Zionist organisations were present at the opening session, headed by Bloch, Director of KKL [*Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael*] in Poland prior to the War. Józef<sup>2</sup>, Szmul and

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: A residential district in Warsaw.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Most likely Józef Rabinowicz, who is mentioned in *Czenstochover Yidn*, p.116.]

Mordche gave speeches. After the lectures, a lively discussion develops regarding all the issues. Mordche responds to the conflicting sides in a summing-up address, which last four hours, and which dictates the Movement's course of action in the days of the War. He expounds on the questions concerning the politics of the USSR, dispelling the many false rumours that have spread among the public. But, at the same time, he sets the Movement's course in a clear and cutting manner. He says:

*"With all our admiration for the USSR, we reject its policies on Zionism and the Land of Israel. The day will come when the USSR will acknowledge Zionism and the value of settling the Land [of Israel]. Until then, we shall fight for our path. In the USSR, the Movement continues its activity. And we continue here. We shall not relinquish the Land [of Israel] under any conditions or circumstances."*

Subsequently, the Council dealt with the educational problems. The accounts of the representatives painted a gloomy picture of the situation of Jewish youth throughout the country. The Jewish schools had been shut down by the German authorities. There was no work - the youth had been put into a state of general apathy and moral degradation. Clandestine studies [and] illegal schools hidden from the view of the police - all these were quite rare sights. "We will live today, for tomorrow we will die!" – that was the slogan of the day.

The Movement was confronted with the need to broaden its activity in the midst of the unorganised youth. On the other hand, the severe underground conditions weighed upon its activity. The idea came up to organise wide circles of youth within various anonymous frameworks, the kernel of which would consist of members of the Movement. After broad and exhaustive scrutiny, this idea, too, fell through due to the difficulties which were revealed as a result of the examination. It was decided to resume the organisation and the educational and ideological activity of the Movement's existing nuclei, while putting the youth, who had matured, into positions.

Differences of opinion arose regarding the questions of training. The multiple obstacles, due to which the *Ma'apilim kibbutz* group in Pniewy had failed, aroused doubts in the hearts of many - "Are we able to maintain a training point under the new conditions?" On the other hand, others argued that it is precisely in the severe conditions of war and enslavement that as many people as possible should be concentrated in the training *kibbutzim*, which will support members in the difficult war of life and the entire Movement in its fight. A decision is made that says:

*At all costs and under all conditions, the Movement will continue to establish the training kibbutzim, which constitute a fundamental way of life for the adult generation.*

Shortly after the Council, the Warsaw cell convenes for its first Annual General Meeting during wartime. The gathering is held in the hall of the former school at ul. Prosta 5. Besides the group of alumni, 600 male and female members attended. It was a festive function. It was managed by Mordche, while Josef spoke, on behalf of the main leadership, about the Council and the upcoming tasks facing the Movement.

As a result of the intensive educational work in the Warsaw cell, the need arose to organise an educational seminary for the *Tel-Amal*, *Benir* and *HaGalil* troops. Three boards of instructors were organised from [within] these troops. The seminary was run by Mordche, Juda Wengrower and also by a few other members of the *BeMa'ala* troop. The troop leaders are people of the *Merhavia* and *Leshichrur* [groups]. Publishing began in that same period, firstly as the newspaper of the Warsaw cell, the Movement's paper - *Neged Ha'Zerem* [Against the Current]. It was written on a typewriter and printed on a copying machine. The newspaper was devoted to questions relating to the

Movement, education and ideology, and to general political questions as well. The number of pages reached ten to fifteen. Over time, the paper expanded to include articles sent from the provincial cities. The editing and publishing of the paper involved many difficulties, due to the necessity of tight secrecy. With the development of events, the newspaper *Neged Ha'Zerem* (which appeared only from time to time) became too small to contain all the extensive material that needed to be presented concerning the Movement. A hidden radio was then set up in Mordche's room at ul. Leszno 8. Every evening, news from English and Soviet broadcasting stations were caught on this apparatus. In the morning, Szmul Bresław edited the news and Szymon (troop *Merhavia*) printed it. The daily bulletin comprised some 1.5-3 pages. It appeared every day at 12:30 sharp and was distributed to special members, whose duty it was to disseminate it and also to see to it that all the flyers were returned in the evening to the place from where they had been taken that noon.

After the training company of Kibbutz Ma'apilim returned from Pniewy to Warsaw, the leadership embarked on the organisation of the kibbutz in the city. After many searches and efforts, the leadership obtains a large flat at ul. Nalewki 23, where thirty members of the kibbutz are concentrated. The members usually work for the Germans - the wages are so small that they do not suffice for even the most meagre of food necessities. Despite the difficulties, the leadership set about organising a younger kibbutz, from the Merhavia and Leshichrur (Warsaw-Praga) troops. The young kibbutz is named "Galon" - it, too, is housed in the flat at ul. Nalewki 23, which is divided into two.

At the beginning of 1941, the Jewish Society for Social Welfare (*ŻTOS – Żydowskie Towarzystwo Opieki Społecznej*) organised a large enterprise of "block schools". The intention was to organise a kind of kindergarten in every block of houses, the task of which was to take the place of the educational institutions that had been closed by the Germans. Our movement participates very actively in this project and sends many members to perform this duty. One of the main organisers of this endeavour was Szmul Bresław, who was the Co-ordinator of the Cultural Department of ŻTOS. Enormous efforts were made for the project but, after a while, it failed due to the famine that spread through the city. Meals were also given to the children in the schools. The instructors collected all the food, which the children had brought with them to school, and distributed it equally amongst all of them. The joint portion was declining and the result was that the more affluent children, who still had some bread to eat, stopped coming to the schools - and even the rest dispersed, due to the hunger that destroyed the possibility to maintain a framework of activity of any sort.

The alumni community, numbering about one hundred and fifty members, also conducts extensive cultural activity. A committee is appointed within it, which holds meetings once a week at the *kibbutz* quarters. The best of the city's Jewish intelligentsia come to lecture among us. Thus, for example, the well-known Jewish writer and folklorist Rotblum gave a series of lectures on Jewish literature.

In January 1941, ties were established with Slovakia and the question of sending an *aliyah* company there became a realistic one. A company was chosen from among the graduates. Of the members of the young *kibbutzim* that arose only during the War (*Ma'apilim* and *Galon*), no one goes out. The chronicles of this company (some of whom have made it to the Land [of Israel]) are known in the Land [of Israel] and I shall not add to them.

Day by day, during the winter, the economic situation in the *kibbutzim* worsened. The boys, who worked hard in German workplaces outside the ghetto, returned in the evening and sometimes late at night - broken and shattered. Still, they were the main providers and the main thing was that they

sometimes managed to bring with them some food or coal for heating from outside the ghetto (this always posed a danger to lives).

In the winter of 1940/41, due to the terrible economic situation and the progressively growing hunger, all the Jewish institutions are destroyed and even the Jewish family falls apart. In every family, only chosen individuals work outside the ghetto. Many of them abandon their families, not having the means to support them. It is during this period that the *kibbutz* passes the greatest test of suffering. The members feel, instinctively, that everything that is left of the Movement, of the common idea, is embodied in the *kibbutz* and they cling together zealously to preserve it. Every day, you could see all the members of the Movement at the *kibbutz* table - from the children in the young "community" and unto the oldest. Together, we ate a plate of cabbage soup which, only after eating it, did each one feel the burning hunger. We also helped our friends' families to the best of our ability. Throughout the existence of the *kibbutz* (even though we then already only ate a meagre meal twice a day), we did not relinquish this aid to the families of the members who suffered the most.

It was during this period that debates began about the future of the Jews under Nazi rule and the path of the Movement. At one of the alumni meetings, in March 1941, Juda reviewed the development of things in the ghetto and within Polish Jewry in general. He did not draw any conclusions, but asked the question, "The Jews are heading for annihilation! What is to be done?"

Josef was still optimistic. He believed in the assured stabilisation of the economic situation, thanks to which we would be able to endure. Josef, and many other members with him, also believed in the rumours circulating at the time that Germany would give up the Polish *General Gouvernement* to the Soviet Union.

The development of things during the following year proved that Józef was wrong in his appraisals and in his opposition to the plan of effective action which Mordche had already planned at the time. The demonic plots of the Nazis exceeded anything imaginable.