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The Formation of the National-Religious Movement in Częstochowa

(Little Pages of Memories)

The “elders” living among us, still well remember well what was involved in communal work generally and Zionist [work], in particular, in bygone Poland. Until the outbreak of the first World War in 1914, Poland was under the Tsarist regime, which lay its heavy paws on the so-called “*Privislinsky Krai*” (the land by the Vistula), which encompassed as many as ten *gubernias* (governates), among them that of Piotrków, to which Częstochowa also belonged administratively.

Any Zionistic work was then strictly forbidden and needed to be carried out illegally and very secretly.

The ruling Russian power reacted particularly harshly, following the revolutionary years of 1904-1905, in which Jewish youth had taken a significant part. In the Jewish street, there arose, then, the Jewish socialist parties “*Bund*” and “*Poalei Zion*”, which it persecuted extensively and, incidentally, [it] also persecuted the non-socialist parties – the Zionist Union and the “*Mizrachi*”. Everything was forbidden and even such “innocent” work as distributing *shekels* or collecting money for “*Keren Kayemeth Le’Israel*”, were among the severest transgressions against the law and the “ruling power”.

These activities were not only frowned upon by the Russian government, but also by the *Chassidim*, for whom the Zionist ideal was tightly bound with the unburdening of the yoke of Torah and its precepts.

They strived to ensure that their children, the study-hall youth, should not be ensnared, heaven forbid, by the tempters and instigators. They checked every move the boys made and made certain that they were not, heaven forbid, reading the impure and illicit brochures and leaflets propagating Zionist and “*Mizrachist*” ideology.

The small number of Zionists and “*Mizrachists*”, who wished to do something for Zionism and the Land of Israel, were forced to do this conspiratorially - literally hidden away.

The city’s few *Maskilim* obtained their information on Zionism from the Hebrew press. They also distributed, amongst themselves, the little amount of *Haskala* books, which they had acquired through great effort. Furthermore, echoes reached them from the Zionist Congress and they also discovered that well-known great rabbis, true lovers of Zion, had participated in it, who then created “*Ha’Mizrachi*”, around which religious Jews, who strove for the redemption and building of the Land [of Israel] in the spirit of Torah and tradition, would have to gather.

This work was not easy because, at that time, all the Chassidic *Rebbes* were opposed to the Zionist and *Mizrachist* ideology and they required all their *Chassidim* to distance themselves from the “forcers of the End [of Days]”, even if they were god-fearing and impeccable, who observed all the precepts of the Torah and even dedicated time to Torah study regularly. But these chosen individuals did not content themselves with loving [the People of] Israel alone and, in their hearts,

there burned a love for the Land of Israel. They dreamed of becoming the followers of the era of Ezra and Nehemiah.

I pass by details regarding the establishment of "*Tzeirei Mizrachi*", because others have already written about this for "*Sefer Częstochowa*". So I shall move on to telling of my memories from the other areas of the religious-nationalist work in our dear Częstochowa.



The abovementioned repressions against the social and, above all, against Zionist and nationalist enterprises in Częstochowa, ended after the First World War and with the rise of a liberated independent Polish State.

The contemporary Germans, in one of their first proclamations, which they threw from their aeroplanes and which were addressed "*to the Jews in Poland*", promised imminent equality, open organising and permanent liberation from the Russian yoke.

The occupation-force did not sympathise with Zionism, which was then based on the English orientation. Consequently, German orthodox doctors-rabbis - Kohn and Carlebach – were brought to Poland, so that they should pull the broad Jewish masses from Zionism and organise the religious elements of Poland along the lines of "*Agudas Yisroel*", which was, as shown, opposed to Zionism. It nevertheless allowed the Zionist parties of all shades to widely develop their ideas and to conduct open, legal and undisturbed Zionist work.

But, at the same time, the orthodox elements were also greatly strengthened and received a free hand and so a fierce war with the Zionists began, with "*Mizrachi*" in particular, and hindered it in its work.

At the head of "*Mizrachi*" stood our beloved and approved-by-all rabbi, Rabbi Nachum Asz, and together with him, the most respected public figures, who distinguished themselves with their proper conduct, the love of the Torah and its propagators, such as the "*Maggid*" Rabbi Reb Józef Szymon Koblenz, Reb Mojsze Halter, Reb Abram Mendel Lipski and Reb Abram Henoch Finkelsztajn, and afterwards, when the heads of the *Kehilla* were those active in "*Mizrachi*", Reb Szmul Goldsztajn, Reb Chaim Weksler and Reb Izrail Mendel Zilberberg. But [despite] all that, it was still not enough for people to be unafraid of persecutions and to proclaim themselves as "*Mizrachists*".

Great was the plight of the religious-nationalistic youth, which literally tore itself to "*Ha'Mizrachi*". They were simply forced to come into conflict with their parents and spiritual guides and, since they were - as I've already mentioned - study-hall students and so-called "daddy's-boys", they did not possess even the "couple of *groschen*" to pay their modest membership contribution.

But the Chassidic *brenn* [ardour], which they possessed in a large measure, strengthened their will and, in their rich fantasies, they saw before them the fine historical figures of our national heroes – the disciples of the great sage Rabbi Akiva, the military legions of Bar Kokhba, the Hasmoneans and the great heroes of Masada, who so heroically fought against the foreign lords for the freedom of the Jewish folk in their land, as well as against the impious haters who abandoned traditional Judaism. These young men saw themselves as the heirs of those heroes, who must lead [the way] to the redemption of the People and the Land [of Israel].

On Chanukah 5677 [December 1916], the Częstochowa "*Mizrachi*" held a general assembly, with the participation of the Rabbi of Gąbin, Rabbi Reb Juda Leib Zlotnik, and Rabbi Isaac Nissenbaum. After

these two important guests had, with their brilliant speeches, literally electrified the ardent audience in favour of “Mizrachi” and Zionism, a group of religious-nationalist youth, who had already long been carrying the “Mizrachi” ideal buried deep inside their hearts, made the decision and, at the “Mizrachi” premises at ulica Ogrodowa 14, proclaimed the founding of the “Tzeirei Mizrachi” movement in Częstochowa.



The “Tzeirei Mizrachi” council (photograph taken 18th Sivan 5678 [29th May 1918])
Sitting (from right to left): Ze’ev Wiewiorka, Izaak Rywkind (delegate of the central leadership),
Chune Plai and A. Enzel.
Standing (as above): Zvi Minc, Oberman, Zvi Granek, Szmul Koblenz and Mordka Gold.

The founders were Mordka Gold (Zahavi), the brothers Jakob and Szmul Koblenz, Abram Bajgelman, Zvi Granek, Ze’ev Wiewiorka, A.N. Sztencel, Abram Enzel, Dov Goldberg and Jakub Chune Filik (Plai).

They were later joined, as active members, by Jakob Leslau, Jakob Lewenhof, M. Danziger, M.Ch. Tiberg, Chaim Fajnsztadt, A.Z. Rozen, the brothers Berkowicz (Barkai), Jakob Szyia Kohn, Sz.D. Kaminski and Izaak Kac.

The temporary council soon set about their organisational and cultural work. It arranged courses for the study of Hebrew Bible and Hebrew, as well as a Talmud lesson, which was held daily, immediately following the prayer service.

Special committees were created within the council for the *shekel* [and for] “*Keren Kayemeth Le’Israel*”.

A reading hall and a library were opened and lectures on Zionistic, cultural and social questions were held often. A special committee dealt with the recruitment of members for “Tzeirei Mizrachi”. “Tzeirei Mizrachi” also participated in national and district conferences. At the first “Tzeirei Mizrachi” national conference in Łódź, three Częstochowa delegates took part - Gold (Zahavi), Koblenz and the writer of these lines.

Our work proceeded normally until the Polish-Bolshevik war which, at the beginning, halted all communal work because the majority of the Jewish youth were either mobilised into the Polish military, or had left the country.

Following the rise of the independent Polish State and after the mandate for the Land of Israel had been approved, energetic, intensive work began which was, mainly, carried out by members Jakob Leslau, Dov Goldberg (Achiyahu) and J.Ch. Filik (Plai).

Apart from them, many of the members mentioned already, who had succeeded in emigrating to the Land of Israel and who, there, helped with the development of "*Ha'Poel Ha'Mizrachi*" and its institutions, also participated actively in the work.

This particular *Aliyah* was much aided by the *Land of Israel Bureau* (the so-called *Palestine Bureau*), which had, in every town, opened local offices in which all the Zionist parties were represented, including "*Tzeirei Mizrachi*". Through them, a horticultural farm was created in Częstochowa, where our male and female members completed their training.

We also organised courses for steel and concrete works. At that time, Mr Sz.Z. Shragai (nowadays Director of the Immigration Department of The Jewish Agency in Jerusalem), came to us for a certain period and also helped us very much with the work. The "*Ha'Chalutz Ha'Mizrachi*" was also then created.

Częstochowa also had the privilege, from time to time, of being the most suitable location for different party district-conferences, not only of our party, because Zionist and communal life here pulsed strongly and this was used by the central committees of all Zionist parties.

(Sadly, only a fraction of these activists and dedicated members were able to emigrate to the Land of Israel. The rest - and this was the larger part - were destroyed by Hitler's murderers, may God avenge their blood!

"*Sefer Częstochowa*" is a modest living tombstone for our martyrs).