

The Town in Its Years of Awakening

Preface

Twenty years have passed since I left you, Żarki, a few days before the outbreak of the Second World War – at the very last moment before the great blaze. We ran in panic, without looking back. We already felt the gunpowder in the seams of our clothes. Crossing Poland's borders, a small number of individuals amongst us left the town and took the circuitous route to the land [of Israel] - while its gates were still "locked"!

Thus, Poland's Jewry was left to be torn apart by Nazi claws. The War broke out. A dense night descended upon us all. And, thus, we were separated into two worlds.

We were left on our own. We abandoned parents, brothers and sisters to their bitter fate. Who could have imagined that Destiny would be so cruel to our poor people? Who envisaged that the bitter end would come so abruptly and that only a few would survive?

When I arrived in the Land [of Israel] on 1st September 1939, the news of Hitler's invasion of Poland reached us. The Germans entered Żarki on Saturday 2nd September. Devastating bombs were dropped on the *shtetl* and many of its houses were destroyed. Many Jews were killed. And the town's Jews dispersed and wandered on the roads.

The murderers did not spare or take mercy on any Jew - woman, elderly person or infant. All were taken like sheep to the slaughter, while the "enlightened world" kept silent. And the gates of the Land [of Israel] were locked!

And thus the Nazi devil continued to annihilate and destroy, like the poet says, "*The sun shone, the acacia bloomed and the slaughterer slaughtered!*" [Ch. N. Bialik, *In the City of Slaughter*]

Twenty years have passed since then.

And, as I come today to call up memories from the recent past, it is difficult for me to free myself from the terror of the days we currently live in. Is the world, once more, facing a new Holocaust - having lost its hope and way, without a conscience and a compass?

Will it remember what happened just twenty years ago? Will we stand here in this land - our people's last stronghold - alone, against all the evil waves which are rising? Or will the great Holocaust of twenty years ago serve as a lesson to the leaders of the world?

Childhood Days

I came to Żarki as a boy of eight from the city of Łódź, where I was born. But, in that large city, with so many Jews - and so many children that no one took notice of me - I had always felt superfluous. My heart was always drawn to my mother's parents, who came from a small town and who were kind-hearted, warm-tempered emotional Jews - and not to the cold Jews from Łódź, who were always busy and spoke little and, when they did speak, the topic was invariably business and commerce. I even remember how, at the age of six, I got lost in Łódź, because I was trying to travel on foot to my grandfather Mojsze-Symcha Wajsbard who lived in Żarki. For an entire day, my parents looked for me in the streets of Łódź, until they found me.

With the death of my father, I was glad that we had moved to the town of Żarki. Here, I felt fine and free and I walked the streets without a worry, without the fear of buses, trams or other vehicles.

There was no noise and commotion, or smoke and whistles of factories. Peace and quiet - woods and streams all around. One could roam and run about with mates, playing in the streets with balls and stones - especially without my father to watch over me. And my mother was nice and not strict with me. And thus I became a permanent resident of the *shtetl*, until the day of my *Aliyah*.

I spent my childhood days like the other children my age - in various *cheders* - with *Rebbe Kamyker*¹, who had six fingers on his hand and used the sixth one - his thumb - to give us veritable whacks; later on with *Rebbe Wolwe'le*, who was a more modern *melamed* and who introduced "novel equipment" to the *cheder*, such as a bell with which to mark the beginning of the studies and their conclusion. He also introduced the "official" recesses of ten minutes every hour, which was regarded as "heresy". He also implemented the grading system: "Good", "Very Good", "Excellent" and so on and so forth. And then came the "higher studies" with Reb Symcha'le² at the *yeshiva*³ of the *Brzeziner*⁴ - at the Study-hall by the range! These are the days of winter - the *shtetl* is in darkness. Nobody even thinks of electricity yet. The nights are long and cold. Shadowy figures move about on the street and, even up close, it is difficult to discern who is approaching. Here and there, people appear, one holding a lit candle [and] another with a tin and glass petrol lamp. They light up the darkness of the night a little. In the winter nights, each pupil was required to bring the *melamed* candles or to pay "candle money" in addition to the tuition fees, and his wife would put all the candles in little piles.

The winter in the *shtetl* was as long as the *Gules* [Exile]. Only when it snowed did the town take on a new and fresh character - more light, more radiance [and] even the narrow alleyways, next to the Old Cemetery, received a new appearance. The squat houses were girded in a belt of white and only the windows peeped out from under the snow. The children played with snowballs and put up snowmen in the middle of the marketplace to taunt the Gentiles emerging from the marketplace church

As spring approaches, pure and pungent air from the adjacent woodlands - the delightful fragrance of lilac, jasmine and fruit trees in bloom - pierces and entices one's nostrils, heralding the coming of spring. The snow melts and the sun's rays penetrate and bathe the houses, the windows and the street. A great deal of water pours from all corners of town, filling wells, yards [and] low houses, making its way into every hidden cranny - including the hole in one's shoe. And we splash about in the mud and water and sail paper boats in every puddle.

The days before *Pesach* are good. These are the days of anticipation, the days of the twofold Redemption - redemption from Egypt and redemption *from the old clothes*! This is the dream of every household, of every child and adolescent - new clothes, the most delicious *Pesach* foods, the *Seder* Night and [singing] "*Ma Nishtanu*"⁵.

He, who never has seen the joy of the *shtetl*'s children in the days before *Pesach*, has never in his life seen joy - the faces radiant, the attires gleaming and the shoes squeaking happily! Who is like them

¹ [TN: As "Kamyker" does not appear as a surname in the records, we may assume that the *melamed* was from the town of Kamyk, and his surname is not given.]

² [TN: Assumedly the Town Rabbi, Reb Symcha-Eliasz Szwarcberg.]

³ [TN: The term is used humorously, as there was no *yeshiva* in Żarki.]

⁴ [TN: Below, on p.102, the "Brzeziners" are one of several Chassidic groups mentioned there. We have as yet been unable to ascertain the existence of any Chassidic dynasty in Brzeziny, although Rebbe Fiszle of Stryków had a son there.]

⁵ [TN: Also pronounced "Ma Nishtana"; the first two words of a phrase meaning "Why is tonight different from all other nights?" which is traditionally sung by the youngest, capable child attending the *Seder*.]

and who is their equal⁶? Thus passed the days of childhood - in joy and in sorrow, in anticipation and in consternation, year in and year out.

New Faces in Town

There were ordinary days in the *shtetl* - the days following *Pesach*, [with] a springtime sun. It was stuffy inside the *cheder*. We had no desire to study. We felt like going outside to run, jump and play. And, here one morning, we awoke to a strange trumpeting in the town's streets. We scrambled out of our beds in alarm towards the noises, which were coming from the edge of the *shtetl*. How surprised we were when we saw Jewish lads and girls traversing the town with drums and trumpets, strangely attired - wearing shorts and coloured ties, holding long sticks and, from their mouths, a mighty song. They marched to the rhythm of a Hebrew melody and to the command "*Achat-shtaim, achat-shtaim!*" [One-two, one-two].

On this day, studies and work were cancelled. Women, old folks and infants stood at the doors of their homes, their eyes streaming with tears. And we ran after the entire procession, until they reached the neighbouring village, where they set up camp for the whole day. This was on *Lag Ba'Omer*. It was the first time that I had witnessed a spectacle of this kind and that day became engraved deep, deep in my memory. For many days afterwards, we relived that unforgettable *Lag Ba'Omer* event which, from then on, was repeated every year. We looked forward to the day the procession would pass through our town, when we would reverently accompany it until it disappeared!

The Struggle Begins

These were days of internal and external strife. I felt as if new winds had suddenly started to blow inside ourselves - as if the locality had suddenly become too small for us. I felt as if we were at the world's end, completely isolated - as if "there", outside the *shtetl*, grand and strange things were happening, while we were unable to participate in the making of these events. Word had reached us of a different type of youth - of pioneers and scouts, of the distant land we knew from prayers and the Bible which was not just an imaginary fairy-tale, but actually existed. Also some of our own flesh and blood, people of our own town, had been among the first to make *Aliyah* - the Rozyner, Wajnberg, Siwek and Fajfkopf families, as well as others were already there. University and *yeshiva* students left their schools and emigrated to the Land [of Israel], where they became simple workers - farmhands. Something happened inside us - but not everyone was ignited by this flame. Some hesitated, some fought back and some retreated due to the excessive audacity [entailed] or due to the stubborn opposition of parents, rabbis and other religious figures, who regarded Zionism as the utter renunciation of one's faith, idolatry [and] going astray like the followers of Shabsai Tzvi, who tried to bring the Redemption by force! A fierce struggle ensued between the old generation and the youth.

In each and every household, there were arguments and, sometimes, even fights between the supporters and opposition. Only a few joined the youth movements and even they did so hesitantly. Some met clandestinely, in the woods at the edge of the *shtetl*. But nothing could suppress the spontaneous drive which had awakened in the youth and in me also. We wanted something new. We did not yet know what this new thing was, but we could no longer accept the old, the inactivity [and] the lethargic slumber of the *shtetl* youth. We aspired to go out into the open!

⁶ [TN: Expression adapted from a verse in the "Nishmas Kol Chai" prayer recited as part of the Shabbes morning service: "Who is like You and who is Your equal?"]



The Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair scouting group

And so, a special corner for the town's youth was established. This was now a Zionist club, a "ken"⁷ of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* – a "nest", containing only a few baby birds, tender nestlings whose bodies were still covered in a coat of soft down. It was extremely audacious to found a club of this type within our town's environment. Against this "nest of insurrection", all the forces in the *shtetl*, which on any other day of the year were divided over internal disputes regarding *Kehilla* representatives and *gaboim*⁸, rallied forth. Against these "Shomrim" [boy scouts], all the *shtieblech* united forces - from the *Chassidim* of Ger, Aleksander and Radomsko to the *Triskers* and *Brzeziners* and, from the tops of all the platforms in the study-halls and houses of prayer were heard speeches and threats against them and anyone who supported them.

Nonetheless, consciousness had already crept into the hearts of the youth and some of the more progressive among the parents - and all attempts to sabotage the cell and destroy it proved fruitless. The youth began surging towards the *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* club in great numbers and mighty singing and *Hora* dances echoed in the *shtetl's* streets. And, instead of the traditional caftans, new attire appeared in the town - green shorts, scouts' shirts, ties, insignia, and even the first leather jackets.

I remember when I first joined the cell. It was on a wintery Saturday evening. I circumvented the town, passing stealthily through the fields so that my family should not follow my movements. I entered a long and dark passageway that led to the "*Kotlarnia*". This was away from town, near the Christian cemetery. Jewish people avoided this "unholy" location, which instilled fear in all passers-by. In the wall, holes from the First World War still remained, through which the Polish soldiers shot at the Germans and Russians. Dozens of tales and legends were told of this place.

⁷ [TN: In Hebrew, this word means both "cell" and "nest"; throughout our translations this word is invariably rendered as "cell" in the context of political movements and as "nest" in reference to wildlife. Here, however, the author uses the word's double meaning as a pun.]

⁸ [TN: Administrators of religious societies and institutions, such as synagogues and charity funds.]

The building, where the cell resided, had initially been a public primary school. The vicinity was exclusively Christian and Jews did not frequent it. There was also a large garden there, belonging to a Polish nobleman, which had strange and frightening sculptures. The main road leading to the nearby villages also passed through this place. Along it, every Wednesday, the peasants arrived in their carts to sell their produce in the town's market. The Jews were expeditious and would rush out to meet them in the middle of the highway.

I stepped inside the cell irresolutely and bashfully, while dozens of eyes followed me, staring at the odd clothes I was wearing.

I stood silently for a moment, observing the children and youth gathered there. Round and round circles danced the *Hora*. A group of teenage boys and girls were reading [Simon] Dubnow's history. Another group was singing Hebrew songs in a dubious pronunciation, which was neither distinctly Sephardic nor Ashkenazi. And thus, once I crossed the cell's threshold, I never left it again - to this very day!

Few of us went out for training in preparation for a pioneering life in the Land [of Israel]. The majority of the youth stagnated and devoted themselves to a life of atrophy and philistinism. All persuasion was to no avail, especially due to the [British] Mandate's policies on immigration and the locked gates. Not many were willing to immigrate illegally. I remember that, one month before the onset of the War, when public protests were being held against the British Government's "White Paper"⁹ decree, I was asked to address the townspeople on this matter in the Synagogue and I said, "Distinguished gentlemen, here we stand now, before locked gates in the Land of Israel - but nothing will deter us from breaching these gates. One must immigrate by any means possible - do not tarry! You have little time left! Do not delay!"

And to the older generation I said; "You, too, are to blame - you did not allow us to be pioneers. You saw us as stubborn and rebellious people, who dared hasten the Redemption and now all of us, together, are protesting against this decree". As I descended from the platform, my teacher Reb Wolwe'le came over to me and said, "*Yasher koyach*"¹⁰ for your words! Indeed, we were wrong about you [fellows] – and I was wrong about you, too. We've done deeds that should not be done. Forgive us!" This encounter with my former teacher from the *cheder* chilled me exceedingly.

I felt many things when the first news of our town Żarki reached me with the outbreak of the War. Indeed, all us were in error - and no one can right this wrong!

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⁹ [TN: Policy which limited Jewish immigration to Palestine to 75,000 persons a year.]

¹⁰ [TN: "Thank you," or "Well done!"]