

# ***Ha'Chalutz* and Maccabi in Żarki**

## ***Ha'Chalutz***

I should like to attempt to draw forth something from the depths of the past - from the period when I was one of those active in the Żarki branch of *Ha'Chalutz*.

Throughout the whole of Poland, the period (1927-1935) was one of blooming and massive growth for *Ha'Chalutz*. Following the 1929 riots in the Land [of Israel], branches of *Ha'Chalutz* and training centres began to pop up in every city and town. The then healthy instinct of many among the Jewish youth in Poland already gave them a premonition of what could happen to the Jews of Poland and that they needed to prepare, with all their strength, to quickly leave this country. And the heart aches, because so few were able to leave in time.



*Ha'Chalutz in Żarki*

As part of this general awakening of *Ha'Chalutz* in Poland, the Żarki *Ha'Chalutz* branch arose and was organised. One of the first steps taken by Żarki's *Ha'Chalutz* branch was to lease, from the factory owner Mr Praszka<sup>1</sup>, a clubhouse in his block of buildings. In the [factory] courtyard ("*Fabrycznie HoiŃ*"), there was an untenanted section and the place suited our purpose, because the rooms were large and spacious [and] the yard was enormous and some distance away from the centre of town. Who among Żarki *landsleit* does not remember the factory yard, which became a household name in the *shtetl*? In the days of summer, youth from all factions flocked to it - some to the stream in order to swim and sunbathe and others to the [factory] grove ("*Fabrycznie Wald*") to stroll and pass the time. And who among us will not recall his days of romance, which were usually connected to this

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Praszkie in the 1929 Polish Business Directory.]

factory grove (the “*Tanzbrücke*” [Dance-bridge])? There were, however, also days of grief and tears for the victims this stream (“*Fabrycznie Teich*”) claimed every year.

As stated, this place was some distance away from the town centre and hardly any Jews lived there, except for Abram *Kleizmer* and one other Jewish family. More than once, Polish youths (“*shkutzim*”<sup>2</sup>) harassed us - usually the girls, of course - to the point that, sometimes, this hounding escalated into a serious fistfight. I remember how glad the girls were when, on such occasions of fisticuffs, Jechaskiel Majtlis<sup>3</sup> appeared. His very presence filled them with [a sense of] security and this was despite the fact that he was quite young at the time - only 17 or 18 – but, just by showing up, he made the “*shkutzim*” feel intimidated - he never retreated or fled from them - and they usually did not taunt us when he was around.

The composition of the youth in the *Ha’Chalutz* branch reflected that of the town’s inhabitants - the children of merchants, scholars, craftsmen, etc. Żarki youth had a name for being industrious, quick-witted, devoted and assiduous and such was the youth who came to the *Ha’Chalutz* branch.

Although we were small-town folk, Żarki youth stood out for their serious appearance, for their intelligence and, especially, for their Hebrew language.

In the branch, each of us found a second home and there were those who spent more time there than at their parents’ home. There was never a day when we did not feel compelled to visit the branch. And do not view this as a trifle, because the youth were, for the most part, a toiling and working youth - some were different types of craftsmen, others engaged in commerce and, in those days, people in the *shtetl* worked ten or twelve-hour workdays. Yet each one found the time - especially in the winter, when the roads were covered with snow - to come every single evening to the branch as, there, he found a corner of light which he lacked at home, as well as good friendship, a common endeavour and hope for the future.

Besides the stream of youths joining *Ha’Chalutz* individually, every two years, there came a wave of whole organised groups, who had been educated and prepared by the Movement and with a considerable amount of Zionist culture. These were the groups of graduates from *Ha’Shomer Ha’Tzair* which, at the time, had the character of a scouting movement. The *Ha’Shomer Ha’Tzair* graduates, as is known, were affiliated with *Ha’Chalutz* and were admitted to it automatically, from where they went on to training and making *Aliyah*.

The first group to arrive was that of Berisz Frank, Mojsze Rotsztajn, Aron Brandes, Juda Bornsztajn, Aron Fajfkopf, Wolf-Ber Hercberg, the Berl brothers, Szymon Snopkowski, Golda Brandes and others. To the branch, this constituted an influx of very valuable, cultural forces. Most of them set about organisational and cultural work with dedication and impetus. Once the majority had left for training, the wave of the second group came. They, too, carried a serious load of cultural and Movement-related preparation. This was the group of Pinchas Lauden, Aron Leber, Szmul Korcfeld, Pejsach Brandes, Gucza Manela, Laja Siwek, Laja Frank, Fajgla Lejzorowicz and others. In my time, the third and last group - which brought no shame to its two predecessors - included several young people who stood out, about whom I shall subsequently stop and tell more at length. This was the group of Cwi Brandes, Szymson Majtlis, Abram Ajzenberg, Lajzer Rytterband, Ester Frank, Nacha Herszlikowicz, Chedwa (Frajdla) Majtlis, Fajgla Szporn, Gucza Najman, Sola Dobska, Rochma Bratman and others.

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: “Abominations”; derogatory term for ruffians.]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: The author himself.]

Some, in this group, rose to become the leaders of the youth and the organisers of the local anti-Nazi underground during the Holocaust. Cwi Brandes reached the position of Member of the *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* Central (or District) Command. As an activist and an organiser in the underground, he was, in later days, in a hideout in Będzin and, not having someone suitable (or perhaps he did not wish to give a perilous mission to another), he personally ran over to Będzin himself to deliver an important communication and, along the way, he was shot and was perforated like a sieve. He was brought to burial by his brother Aron.

Szymson Majtlis<sup>4</sup>, one of the most talented young men of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* and *Ha'Chalutz* in Żarki, completed his training and then went to military service. He wrote to me, to the Land [of Israel], that he was attending a Warrant Officers' course and that he was living a military life that bored him to death. As a commander in the *Haganah*<sup>5</sup>, I hinted to him in my reply that I, too, was engaged in military matters, but that I was doing so of my own free will and as a volunteer, and that he should strive to attain more knowledge on this subject, as this could bring him great benefit in the Land [of Israel]. He well understood the insinuation, as his response to me clearly showed.

The day the War broke out, he was to have been released from the army and immediately made *Aliyah*. At home, his sister Chedwa (Frajdla), who had completed her training and was supposed to join him in his emigration, was waiting for him. The onset of the War prevented him from returning home in time. One day, he passed the town at the head of a retreating regiment (all the battalion's officers had fled) and, being a corporal, he continued to lead them, until all of them fell captive to the Nazis.

He returned from captivity to the *shtetl* and immediately dedicated himself to operations in the underground organisation, together with Cwi Brandes. He was sent, by *Ha'Chalutz*, to the horticultural farm in Złoty Potok, leading a group of fifty young people (*Ha'Chalutz* always watched for any glimmer of hope of emigration and arranged organised groups). The Nazi authorities agreed to this plan for reasons of their own. In that period, the comrades offered to provide him with "Aryan papers", so that he would be able to cross the border. He was unwilling to abandon the group of fifty. Some of them were eventually able to make *Aliyah*. He, himself, was probably lost in the night of the expulsion from Żarki.

In its time, each new group, which came from *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*, brought with it, as mentioned above, a redoubled vigour and a fresh cultural atmosphere. At the branch, proper cultural work was conducted, which took the form of studying the Hebrew language (Mojsze Rotsztajn was very dedicated to this), lectures on Zionism, the Hebrew Workers Movement, the *Histadrut*<sup>6</sup>, etc. We longingly awaited talks by Berisz Frank (he was killed in 1942 in a bombing in Haifa), and hung on to his every word. He had the wonderful skill of connecting with his audience in an unmediated manner and he was distinguished for the intricately well-thought-out structure of his lectures.

Also Juda (Lajbisz) Bornsztajn, Aron Brandes, Aron Fajfkopf, the undersigned and others gave much of their time to cultural work in the form of lectures, talks, reading aloud, literary discussions, etc. We read aloud the newspaper *Ha'Atid* [The Future] - *Ha'Chalutz's* weekly in Poland - in different circles. When needed, we could expertly read Hebrew directly out loud in Yiddish. On most Friday nights, song and dance evenings were held. Our hearts filled with joy when we learnt a new Israeli song. We learnt not just the words and the tune, but we also saw before us the landscape and nature mentioned in the song. *We were like them that dream* [Psalm 126:1]. I call to mind Natan

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: The author's brother.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: "The Defence"; primary Jewish paramilitary organisation in Mandatory Palestine.]

<sup>6</sup> [TN: The General Organisation of Workers in Israel.]

Bistritzky's<sup>7</sup> visit to our branch, during which he taught us new songs and danced with us. It went on for hours - and we would have been willing to carry on in this manner to infinity. And on Saturday evenings at twilight, we would sit until late into the night, pouring our hearts out in songs of love and yearning for hours and hours - and the song surged forth as a spring that ever gathers force. At moments like these, I was sometimes reminded of my childhood years, when I went with my father to the *shtiebel*<sup>8</sup> for the Third Meal, and there, too, the *Chassidim* immersed themselves in wistful singing for the *Shabbes* Queen, who was leaving and would soon no longer be there - and we, the children, huddled then in the dark in a corner of the *shtiebel*, telling each other stories about demons and Asmodeus, all of a tremble and anxious, until everything ended abruptly, when they lit the candles - and the dream evaporated. I thought to myself, "Here we are, the same *Chassidim*, with the same yearning and the same fervour and outpouring of the soul - only in a different style and for a different purpose!"

I shall try to conclude with a number of curiosities and with stories about our pioneers going out to training. All our work and operations revolved around pulling youth towards training and making *Aliyah*. Each one needed to personally discover his own self, but not all had the fortitude to go to the end. There were good lads with many talents, such as Mojsze Rotsztajn or Wolf-Ber Hercberg, who just could not make up their minds to leave for training. Each time the Branch Council warned them that, as central members of the branch, the fact they were not going to training served as a bad example for others, they always found different excuses for putting it off further. They were like those children who, every once in a while, run up to the river, but are afraid to finally take the plunge. By and by, they miss their chance<sup>\*</sup>.

Like them, there were several others, who did not have enough willpower or whose character had not been fully tempered. They went to training, returned home and remained midway – until reaching their bitter end.

Here is an episode which characterises the atmosphere that reigned in the homes in our *shtetl*. It is that of the admission of Frida, the daughter of Icze'l *Shochet*<sup>9</sup>, into *Ha'Chalutz*. Icze'l *Shochet* was known in our town to be as stubborn as a mule, an *Agudas Yisroel* man who was fanatical to the point of insanity. He was prepared to kill and stone all youth who belonged to the Zionist organisations. At every opportunity, he would express and stress this. He ruled his household with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and his family feared him to death. Could one ever imagine his daughter daring to disobey him or expressing views, opposing his own, at home? His daughters studied at the religious *Beis Jaakow*<sup>10</sup> school. My friend Lajbel Poltorak and I befriended his daughter Frida, a beautiful girl full of charm and life. We usually met in dark places so that no one would see us. It would seem that we fell in line with the saying "*Stolen waters are sweet*" [Proverbs 9:17]. After a few meetings and conversations, we influenced her to sign up to the *Ha'Chalutz* branch. The far-off goal was emigration to the Land [of Israel] and that she should perhaps become the spouse of my friend Poltorak, who was extremely drawn to her. Several days after she had registered at the branch, she came to me with tears in her pretty eyes and begged me to erase her from the list. She feared that should the slightest rumour of it reach her father's ears, that he would quite literally murder her. She did not compose herself until she had seen, with her own eyes, that I had erased her name.

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<sup>7</sup> [TN: Russian-born Israeli writer and translator later known as Natan Agmon.]

<sup>8</sup> [TN: The author was brought up in a family of Radomsko Chassidim; see below, p.96.]

<sup>\*</sup>) The account of Mojsze Rotsztajn's demise is presented in the Holocaust section.

<sup>9</sup> [TN: Mentioned above on p.31.]

<sup>10</sup> [TN: "House of Jacob"; network of girls-only ultra-Orthodox Jewish elementary and secondary schools.]

And here is another story, [one] regarding leaving for training. I was approached by Pinchas Rotsztajn, whose mother Salcia *Mindla's* had already been a widow for many years. At home, there were five daughters and one married son and he, Pinchas, worked and supported his family. Since he could not see this situation ever changing, he had decided to go to training and make *Aliyah*. I tried hinting at the responsibility he had for his family, [as] an only son to his widowed middle-aged mother [with] five daughters at home - in which case it is difficult to dodge one's obligations. With plain words, he began proving to me that the situation could not change in one year nor in two years and, were he to accept my take, it would mean that he needed to relinquish his *Aliyah* forever. I became convinced and decided to help him go to training. The day after he left, his mother appeared at my parents' house, bitterly bemoaning her fate and what I had caused her, as I had cut off the source of her livelihood and existence. My parents, of course, were on her side and I, a seventeen-year-old, attempted to pacify her and to show her the responsibility she had for her son. Among the other things I said, I tried to prove to her that, once he made *Aliyah*, he would be able to be more of an aid than if he had stayed, because perhaps he could then send an [official] request for one or two sisters to join him. At first, it was difficult to placate her but, little by little, I was able, with the power of my strong conviction in the rightness of my path, to convince my elders and, as a result, Pinchas is now among us in Israel.

And finally, a little story about my own training. I left for training in 1932, together with a group of lads and girls from our vicinity, to a completely new training ground - in the city of Kalisz. In Kalisz, we were shown an empty flat which suited us and so we rented it. Afterwards, it turned out that the flat belonged to Rabbi [Zeew-Wolf] Mozes<sup>11</sup>, the Rabbi of Kalisz. Josef Kaplan from Kalisz was a *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* member, who aided us extensively with our first arrangements in the locality.

During the Holocaust, this Josef became one of the great personalities. Legends circulated about him amongst the organised youth in the ghettos. The Gestapo offered a huge cash reward to anyone who brought about his capture. He was eventually caught, disguised as an Aryan, and executed.

During our training, our situation was like that in many other training facilities - insufficient food, crowded living conditions, etc.

And then, after we had stayed there for several months, the *Rebbetzin* [Rywka] came to see us and announced broken-heartedly that she had come on behalf of [her husband] the Rabbi, to inform us that the Rabbi could no longer look into the eyes of his congregation for the disgrace and shame that we, the pioneers living in his flat, were casting upon him. *Chassidim*<sup>12</sup> came to him and told him tales about us that made his hair stand on end. We began to inquire as to what these rumours were. We found out - no more and no less - that in our flat, we cooked an entire pig every day, the boys and girls lived together, all kinds of orgies were taking place every single evening, and more and more ...

We began to explain to the *Rebbetzin* that, not only were we not cooking pigs, but that we hungered for bread. And as for the boys and girls, we showed her that we were separated - boys in one room and girls in another. We also tried to make it clear that we were not some debauched people and that our parents were the exact same type of folks who, here, came to the Rabbi to slander us - whilst we were preparing to make *Aliyah*. The *Rebbetzin*, a noble and fine-looking lady, understood our standpoint, but her response was, "You know, my children, I believe you. [Now] come and convince the Rabbi as well..."

As secretary of the training group, I was chosen to go with Lipek (a lad from Sosnowiec, who now lives in Kibbutz Ein Ha'Shofet) to the venerable Rabbi, to try to convince him. We two youngsters -

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<sup>11</sup> [TN: Aka Reb Velvel Mozes (1862-1949); he died in Israel.]

<sup>12</sup> [TN: The Rabbi was a Gerer Chassid.]

just eighteen years of age - came to the Rabbi's home and the *Rebbetzin* informed him that two young pioneers desired an audience with him. The Rabbi came out to us. He was a tall Jew, graced with a white beard, with a noble countenance, a high forehead and clear, piercing eyes. It seemed as if the Divine Presence was resting on him. He told us to take a seat, sat down also and asked us what we wished to communicate to him. We expressed our astonishment at what we had heard from the *Rebbetzin* in the Rabbi's name, and we repeated what we had told the *Rebbetzin* in our defence. The Rabbi listened, without interrupting, and we sensed that his anger had abated. In the end, he parted company with us in a friendly manner. Once more, we see what can be done with the power of pure and honest conviction.

## Maccabi

In the period that I am covering (1928 and on), a general awakening of the youth was felt in our town of Żarki. The youth began to aspire to different life patterns. They did not wish to continue on the same path along which the previous generation had walked, and they no longer viewed this path as an objective and as a future for their further existence. [Sitting and] studying at the Study-hall was the domain of the few - the great majority of the youth wished to raise up its head [from the Talmud] and straighten its back. Most of them found their places within the Zionist youth organisations.

There was also a small part of the common folk who considered the pioneering way too long of a trajectory and who did not wish to leave the land where they, their fathers and forefathers had been born, yet no longer found any contentment in the ways of the older generation - and it was they who made attempts to establish a branch of the Bund in our *shtetl*.

Amongst us, there existed a circle of physically and mentally healthy youth, who were not prepared to commit themselves to "personal realisation"<sup>13</sup> - which was a prerequisite in the pioneering youth organisations - and it was this youth who founded the Maccabi sports organisation. It is to these lads to whom I should, at this point, like to dedicate a number of lines.

In Żarki, Maccabi devoted itself to several kinds of sport, such as table-tennis, athletics and - above all - football. As there was no organised cultural work in their programme, they therefore dedicated themselves to evenings of ballroom dancing instead and, among them, excellent dancers like Josef Krzanowski and his young lady Sura ([the daughter of] Chaskiel *Berek's*), Jehoszua [Szyja] Fridman, and others distinguished themselves.

I shall attempt<sup>14</sup> to introduce, to the reader, some of the lads seen in the photograph of Maccabi, amongst whom are also some Maccabi fans. Back then, Jehoszua Fridman, a tailor by trade, Maccabi Chairman. He was a simple lad, with a strong leaning towards acting, who was also an excellent dancer.

He liked to appear in the street, brushed and ironed, and in the summer one saw him in white trousers and shoes - just like a lord. The team's goalkeeper, Lewi Zurkowski, [was] the scion of a Chassidic family of distinguished lineage - a handsome, towering lad, as tall as a cedar. I remember how proud we were when Maccabi Katowice wanted to "buy" him under excellent conditions - and he refused! Energetic and involved in every [little] matter, he always showed up brimming with boisterousness and activeness. And here is Szlojme'le Hirsz *Klein* ["Little"], who is now in Venezuela - a small chap who, more than once, caused uproarious laughter in the stands, as he speedily passed between the legs of a player taller than him. He was willing to play football day and night. He

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<sup>13</sup> [TN: Viz. training and eventual Aliyah.]

<sup>14</sup> [TN: Sadly, the author gives no indication as to the specific placement of the people he mentions within the photograph shown below.]

yearned to make *Aliyah* and I know not how it came to be that, after the War, he wandered [so] far away.



***The Maccabi [Żarki] football team***

Among the players was also Zalman Broda, a handsome, ever-cheerful youth, who lives now in France. And here is Lajbisz Bornsztajn (*"Pitem"*<sup>15</sup>). He was the team's captain and did much to maintain its existence. He came from a wealthy household. His father Mojsze Bornsztajn (*"Pitem"*) was the head agent, for the entire vicinity, for a factory of home-wares. More than once, Lajbisz'l would deliver a whole carload of goods to clients and the money went to maintain the football team, or sometimes to his not-always-kosher private business endeavours. Lajbisz was a sharp-minded, astute lad, as alert as a wild animal. He loved football and was prepared to do everything to keep the team in existence. I remember that, when we needed to travel to a match and there was no money in the kitty, he paid with his father's money – and if we returned with wreaths of victory on our heads, his happiness knew no bounds, and he would invite the mates to [a round of] all the *cukiernie* [confectioneries] at his expense.

I recall, once, getting into a serious argument with him regarding his world views, his opinion being that we live but once and that one needs to take advantage of every day and each moment to indulge oneself, as in *"Grab and eat, for tomorrow we shall die"*<sup>16</sup>. He viewed my work with the youth as a waste of time. I tried to convince him that, even according to his own viewpoint, my path served a better purpose, because I saw our further existence in Poland as nebulous - but he stuck to his opinion.

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<sup>15</sup> [TN: *"Nipple,"* or very top of a fruit; a rabbinical term mainly used in judging the pristineness of a citron fruit to be ritually used during *Sukkos*. As the wholeness of the fruit's *"pitem"* determines whether the fruit can be used or not, the term *"pitem"* has become synonymous in Judaism with *"the best of the best."*]

<sup>16</sup> [TN: Amalgamation of the verse *"Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die"* (Isaiah 22:13) and a passage in the Talmud Bavli: *"Shmuel said to Rav Yehuda: 'Keen scholar, grab and eat, grab and drink, as the world from which we are departing is like a wedding feast..."* (Eruvin 54a).]

And here is what my friend Lajzer Rottenberg told me about this Lajbisz's last days. He sat in hiding in the loft of his house, with his wife and their small child. He came down at night to procure food and, to his misfortune, he was noticed and reported to the Gestapo. They brought him down from his hiding place, together with his wife and child, and they were immediately taken to the cemetery and shot. Lajzer Rottenberg spoke with the gendarme who had shot them and he told him that he had made Lajbisz lie down on one side, his wife in front of [next to?] him and the child in between - and thus he shot them, with German order and precision.

There were also several other strapping lads, such as Dawid (Mendel [the] Baker's [son]), Jakow "Bube'le" ["Granny"] or Aron Bratman, and, last but not least, [us,] the Majtlis brothers. Only Majer and Jechaskiel<sup>17</sup> are in the photo, but the third brother Szymson also played with us. In the years 1933-1934, the three were distinguished players in the team in their capacity as forwards and, at the matches more than one, the thunderous yells of the fans were heard when the Majtlis brothers moved forward with the ball.



*Three generations of the Majtlis family*

Matches were usually held on Sundays, the Christian day of rest, because the shops were closed then. The Jewish merchants usually met on this day in the marketplace, in little groups, and discussed politics, communal affairs and this and that. Among this company was also our father Mojsze Majtlis z"l, with his group of associates. They were seven or eight partners in a grains and flour business, among whom were also some younger ones, such as the son of Wolf "Gurgel", who were football fans and came to matches. Every Sunday, they urged my father, "Mojsze, come see your boys at a match - you'll be so proud of them!" And my father, a pious Jew ([but] not a fanatic) and an appointed prayer-leader, declined to go - for it was improper for one, who led the *Kol Nidrei* and [the High Holidays] *Shacharis* [morning service] of the Radomsko *Chassidim*, to be amongst the crowd of unbelievers at a football pitch.

I remember how father glowed with delight when he was told, at the *shtiebel*, that from that year onwards, he would lead the *Kol Nidrei* and *Mysef* [Additional] service, instead of *Shacharis*<sup>18</sup>. He

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<sup>17</sup> [TN: The author.]

<sup>18</sup> [TN: Leading the *Mysef* (aka *Musaf*) service entails the highest cantorial skills and piety, and is therefore reserved for the most pious and respected of the congregation's experienced cantors.]



considered this an incalculable rise in prestige. And how elated he was when he was called forth from the *shtiebel* to lead the prayers at the Big Synagogue, with us three sons (just small children at the time) - Srul (the eldest), Majer and Jechaskiel - as his accompanists! During the entire month preceding the Holidays, all spare moments were dedicated to the preparation and the rehearsal of the prayers and their melodies for the High Holidays.

One fine Sunday, at the start of a match, we suddenly saw father with two more of his partners approaching the football pitch. I was sure he had come to call us home. To our astonishment, he stood by with the crowd and silently watched till the end of the game. From then on, every Sunday, he came to the match.

I remember my mother Bajla's concealed and suppressed joy when, the next day, the partners told her that they had succeeded in bringing father to the pitch.

Mother was a worthy Jewish housewife, who took no specific interest in sports, but she was proud when people told her about the "kicks" her sons had landed.

There were a few in Maccabi Żarki who engaged in quieter forms of sport such as table-tennis, with internal tournaments attended by a small number of spectators.

In athletics, I recall a 3,000 metre race together with Christian youth. The starting line was by Nuchem Szarf's *cukiernia*, then through *ul. Leśniowska* to the spring and, from there, through the woods to the Synagogue Street (*Shil-gas*) and back to the starting point. In the second race, the first at the finish line was Majer Majtlis and, upon reaching the line, he collapsed from the effort and passed out.

There were many Maccabi fans who did not participate in any sporting activities and there was also no small number of girls - but their names I can no longer recall.

My intention, in this short overview, has been to raise a memorial to these fit and fine lads - most of whom were talented - who fell at the hands of a cruel foe, may his name be obliterated.

Blessed be their memory!

**Jechaskiel Majtlis**  
Netanya