

The *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* Cell in Żarki

How moved I am, as I come to recall memories of our life in the town which we left when we emigrated to the land [of Israel]. We saw ourselves as a scouts preceding the troops, as trailblazers for the great multitudes who would follow in our footsteps. But - oh, [grief]!!! Most of them were left there in despondency, subjected to robbery, pillage and annihilation at the hands of the worst enemy to rise against our people in its long days of exile.

From afar, we witnessed and heard the death throes of the Jewish People in our *shtetl* and in thousands of other cities and towns, Mothers in Israel¹ - and we were unable to save them. There is only one small consolation - that remnants of the House of Israel, like brands plucked from then [sic the fire] and, among them, some of our townspeople found their way to our country - our last hope - and are building their lives in it.

I should [now] like to mention a few particulars describing the town's *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* cell, where we spent some of our best years. We dreamt the dream of the homeland which was being built and we impatiently anticipated the day which we would have the fortune to join the builders. In those days, when we were boys, we thought that history began with us – that, before us, there had been chaos and emptiness², and that we were the only ones who had been lucky enough to witness the beginning of the Redemption. Now that we have a few white hairs, however, we realise that we were preceded by people in the *shtetl* who prepared the ground for our activity, and that we were following in their footsteps, albeit under new conditions and in a more consistent manner.



Group of Keren Kayemeth Le'Israel activists in Żarki

¹ [TN: Reference to 2 Samuel 20:19: "I am one of them that are peaceable and faithful in Israel: thou seekest to destroy **a city and a mother in Israel**: why wilt thou swallow up the inheritance of the Lord?"]

² [TN: Reference to Genesis 1:2: "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep."]

By this, I am alluding to the older generation, our parents and those [a bit] younger than them, who were active in the different Zionist organisations [and] who gave generously to the National Funds – from *Keren Kayemeth Le'Israel*, *Keren Ha'Yesod* [United Israel Appeal] and *Kupat Poalei Eretz Israel* [Workers of the Land of Israel Fund], to the *Ha'Chalutz* and *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* Funds. What passion they put into these endeavours of theirs! How selflessly they fought against the religious zealots, who objected to anything new and who, in their great blindness, clung onto the past – not even shrinking away from availing themselves of the aid of the governmental authorities to hinder a Zionist speaker from addressing the Jews in the Study-hall.

I shall not mention the many activists by name, but I cannot avoid evoking the memories of some of them - Szymon-Kopel Minc, Abram-Josef Szybel, Mojsze Rotsztajn and others. Who among us was not extremely proud of the large and wealthy library dedicated to Zysla-Malka Szybel, which we received, by surprise, through Abram-Josef Szybel's generous donation? And it was our pride that the great patron of the arts, who sponsored new Hebrew literature, had come from our remote *shtetl*! A poor, young man had gone out into the big, wide world and made his fortune. However, he did not sink into materialism and he desired to do something for the public good. He laid the foundations for large publishing houses in [St] Petersburg, Warsaw and New York, when Hebrew literature was still in its infancy and could not sustain itself materially on its own.

How the heart rejoiced with every new [Hebrew] original or translated book and with the thick *Ha'Tkufa* [The Period³] books, which were usually edited by Dawid Frischmann, who was Szybel's right-hand man in this project. And, indeed, the meagre knowledge which we acquired came to us in no small measure thanks to him. I remember that, when I came to the training [course] and wanted to praise my hometown a little in front of my new friends, I boasted about Abram-Josef Szybel and it made [quite] an impression!

The town's residents had the opportunity to show a little of their admiration, when he came to visit the *shtetl* prior to the Second World War. I was unable to participate in that reception, but I am sure there was no exaggeration [in the account given to me] of this enthusiasm. What we have here is the pride of the inhabitants of a *shtetl* for their big brother, who had gained fame amidst the general Jewish public.

More a man of the people and nearer [at hand] was Szymon-Kopel Minc - the local Zionist leader and the *shtetl*'s first Hebrew teacher. And what great authority he had! How fiercely he waged war against those in the town who resisted enlightenment! And he was, indeed, like thorns in their eyes.

We - those of my age - were too young to grasp the scope of his activity. We were more impressed with the fact that he was an excellent Hebrew teacher. How novel it was of him to give his children Hebraic, biblical names, such as Naomi, Saadia, Ezra and so on! Some of us, especially the older ones, studied Hebrew with him - which gave us the key to our people's ancient-new culture.

I rightfully consider him my master and teacher, for I learnt from him many chapters and in many fields. And if our cell stood out for its Hebrew "*Ha'Shomer*" [viz. scouting] spirit and our influence in the region was greater than our numerical share, this was in no small measure thanks to the knowledge of Hebrew that Szymon Minc z''l had instilled in us. At the end of his days, he moved to the county town Zawiercie. He died prematurely and was unable to fulfil his dream to make it to the land of our forefathers.

³ [TN: A Hebrew literary quarterly published by Szybel in Moscow, Warsaw, Berlin, New York and Tel-Aviv between 1918 and 1950.]

The cell was first formed in 1925 or thereabouts. This period is known as the Fourth *Aliyah* which, at the time, streamed to the Land [of Israel]. In connection to the Polish Jewry, it was referred to as “[Władysław] Grabski’s *Aliyah*”. This [Prime Minister and] Treasurer of Poland, dug deep into the pockets of the Jews and extracted every farthing from them by creating new taxes each morning. The Jews despaired and many attempted to emigrate to the Land [of Israel] and gain a foothold there. Few succeeded in this - many retraced their steps. From our town, also, a few individuals set off to spy out the land⁴ and returned empty-handed. [Nevertheless,] the longing to make *Aliyah* did not wane. Several young people, who had decided to cut themselves a path to the Land [of Israel], became organised, stole across borders and, after many adventures, reached the Land of Israel via Vienna. If I am not mistaken, these were Messrs Rottenberg, Ajzykowicz, Ben-Tzvi (Siwek), Elizewia Fajkopf, Gotlib, etc. And, indeed, this act of theirs served as a beacon to many who aspired to follow in their footsteps - for only a few had been able to do so!



Zionist Scouting youth

At first, we were a Zionist scouting youth movement, whose duties and aspirations had not yet been clearly defined and whose ties with the Centre were still loose. The situation was the same in all the movements and factions that later merged into the *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* movement. With the development in the Land [of Israel] and as the political-ideological strife intensified, the aspirations and duties of the movement in the Diaspora were clearly spelled out.

The founders, some 30-40 youths aged 17-18, studied Hebrew assiduously, met in the groves which surrounded the *shtetl* (“*Be’cheik ha’teva*”⁵, as we always used to say), read and discussed books,

⁴ [TN: Reference to Numbers 13:16: “These are the names of the men which Moses sent to spy out the land.”]

⁵ [TN: “In Nature’s bosom”; flowery expression for “outdoors.”]

sang yearningly, for hours on end, songs in Hebrew and Yiddish and engaged in sports and scouting games.

Here is the place to mention a member, who did much in the cell's organisation and instruction during that period - Lajbel Horowicz (his younger brother is a long-standing member of the "Mishmar Ha'Emek" kibbutz). He was the son of the owner of a metal factory in Częstochowa. Lajbel Horowicz came to town twice a week and engaged in the instruction of the older and younger groups.

When we are mindful of how little political and organisational work is done voluntarily in Israel nowadays, in all parties from left to right, we may appreciate this relatively, not-so-young member's willingness to set aside his personal affairs and come to a small town, about a two hours' journey away, to instruct a few dozen adolescent boys and girls!

I remember what a spirit of happiness and joy of youth this member instilled in our lives, how much he succeeded in engaging our thoughts around every topic about which he spoke, the fervent dances to exhaustion and the impassioned singing! Indeed, a new spirit had come to the remote roadside town!

As the cell evolved, meetings were arranged, from time to time, with different groups from the Częstochowa cell. We, the little ones, always crowded round them - fiercely jealous and impatiently awaiting the day when we would be allowed to join this organisation.

Amidst the group of founders, two members stood out, who did much for the development of the cell and the *shtetl's* Zionist life in general - Mojsze Rotsztajn and Berisz⁶ Frank z''l, who are both no longer alive.

Mojsze Rotsztajn was an only son, who was deeply attached to his parents. He was naturally talented and cheerful and was one of the cell's leaders over a prolonged period. He was distinguished for his explanatory skills. With a developed sensitivity and a tendency towards sentimentality, he was able to stimulate our spirit and imagination. Due to the fact that he was accepted by wide circles in town, he succeeded in mustering aid from different sources - and we truly needed a great deal of assistance and support!

Firstly, we suffered due to our lack of legal recognition. Even the main leadership in Warsaw was not yet permitted to open branches. We were like a thorn in the eye of the local police, which hounded us with everything they had and embittered our lives. We tried functioning under the guise of "Tarbut" Hebrew courses, even though we did not have that licence either. And thus Mojsze did succeed in keeping the cell in existence, albeit through no small suffering on his part. He eventually stood aside, because he could not make the decision to embark on implementation, viz. to go to training and make *Aliyah*. He felt too responsible for the fate of his parents and their future.

According to a resolution that was in place in the Movement, anyone of age, who had not gone out for implementation when his time had come was ousted from the cell. We refrained from drawing conclusions. We knew how much the member was suffering and we availed ourselves of his aid⁷. From what I learnt, he was killed by the Germans during the town's ghetto period. After they had humiliated and mocked him, he was led in his underwear through the *shtetl's* streets to the

⁶ [TN: Subsequently invariably referred to as *Perec*.]

⁷ [TN: This sentence is rather cryptic in the original Hebrew; the author is probably trying to convey that instead of banishing him from the cell, they continued requesting his assistance in their matters, in order to make him feel better, because they knew that he was suffering due to the fact that he wished to make *Aliyah* but could not bring himself to abandon his parents.]

cemetery, where they shot him. May the name and memory of those who tormented a pure soul be obliterated! Tragic indeed was the fate of this member who dreamt, yearned, but did not achieve his goal. May this be a candle to his memory!

For his great vigour, quick perception and leadership skills, Perec Frank z"l stood out from the moment he joined the cell. There was almost no age difference between him and the members of the first group that was placed under his instruction. Cheerful and witty by nature, he could tell a good popular joke and it was very enjoyable to be in his company.

With virtuosic ease, he overcame the provinciality within which we were steeped. Audacious in expressing progressive, radical ideas - be it in the realm of the perception of society or that of sexuality - he was, for us, a provoking and stimulating factor.

In no small measure, he suffered at his parents' house due to his belonging to the cell. In this, his case was not exceptional - most of us had the same problem. Our parents saw no purpose in our activities in the cell. Their whole mentality was opposed to the direction in which we were developing. The obstinacy of their antagonism, however, varied in level. There were those who, over time, came to terms with it and were even secretly proud that their son or daughter was engaging in important things from which they themselves might also reap some benefit - such as making *Aliyah*. Over time, they, too, had come to view emigrating to the Land [of Israel] as a favourable path in life. But there were some who never accepted it [and] who were not shy in making difficulties and scandals - even in public - and they made their lives bitter. Nevertheless, Perec did not capitulate and he continued doggedly to pursue his path. He served as Secretary of the Jewish *Kehilla* for some time, with a small salary. He did many favours to people in need, composing letters of appeal to the authorities regarding taxes and licences **free of charge** - a rare trait among the people of the *shtetl*.

He was very good at writing letters and memoranda. I recall one petition which he sent on behalf of the cell's leadership to the *Kehilla* Council, requesting aid for the summer camps project. What convincing wording, which spoke for itself! With what iron logic he proved to them that they needed to support the camps project in every way! I, in my naivety, "promised" him the letter would, without doubt, have its desired effect. We were extremely disappointed when we received a negative reply, explaining that there was no money. And, indeed, this was the sad reality in our town. They were mainly concerned over religious matters - *Kashrus*⁸, *Shechitah* [ritual slaughter], and *mikvahs*.

I think that he was the only one in his group who went out for training and made *Aliyah*. As for the rest - they ran out of breath. They dropped off along the way, whether due to the necessity to provide for their parents or due to the lure of an easier life in the *shtetl*. Perec underwent his training in Siemiatycze. He worked in a plywood factory, where they laboured arduously under primitive conditions. He wrote passionate letters from there. Shortly after returning from training, he made *Aliyah* and joined his group "*Ein Ha'Kore*"⁹ in Rishon LeZion. He was active within his group and carried out tasks laden with responsibility, both inside it and amidst the local workers. He was a member of the *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* faction and active in the Workers' Council.

Together with his group, he moved to the *Sha'ar Ha'Golan* [Gate of the Golan] settlement, in the Jordan Valley. How delighted he was when the *kibbutz* enabled him to learn to drive and also put an

⁸ [TN: Upholding the dietary laws; this entails, among other things, hiring an inspector.]

⁹ [TN: *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* group of immigrants from Czechoslovakia and Poland, who settled temporarily in Rishon LeZion, until establishing a *kibbutz* of their own in 1937 - *Sha'ar Ha'Golan*. They took their name "*Ein Ha'Kore*" from a place named in Scripture (Judges 15:19) - unrelated to either Rishon LeZion or the Golan Heights - which is interpreted either as "*The Spring of the Partridge*" or "*The Spring of Him That Called.*"]

automobile at his disposal! Being loyal to the Movement's motto of "*First of all, hands!*", he viewed this as a victory over the "*batlunes*" [unworldliness; lack of practicality], which had stuck to us in the *shtetl*. And let us not view with levity this matter of being the driver of an automobile in the first days of the *kibbutzim* in the Land [of Israel], when the money for the motorcar was saved up from the farthings the members earned through back-breaking labour in the orchard and in construction work - a trifle indeed! He travelled about extensively on the roads during the period of the riots¹⁰, until the outbreak of the [Second] World War. In 1940, he fell, when the Italians bombarded the refineries at the port of Haifa. This was while he was contributing to the war effort by transporting wooden crates with canisters of petrol and benzene, which were to be air-dropped to the Allied Forces preparing to wage war against the Nazi troops in the deserts of Libya.

We could hardly overstate the value and the importance of the cell in our *shtetl*. Even those who objected to our ways recognised the project's value and there was no lack of opposition – due both to religious specifications and [also because they simply] opposed anything new. At first, they viewed our endeavours as a children's game. Over time, they realised that this game was a serious one. We began taking part in the summer camps [and] travelling to meetings and seminars - something which entailed spending money and missing a day of work. And we must remember that most of the cell's members belonged to working-class families, and that the vast majority of them helped their parents to earn their livelihood - and that the parents could not do without this aid. It is in this background that, more than once, fierce conflicts erupted between a son and his family, and not everyone was able to withstand these quarrels. There were those whose conscience did not allow them to treat their kinsmen "cruelly" and they did not have the daring to continue with the Movement and go to training - only a few stood by their stubbornness. Over the course of time, once our parents had despaired more and more of the chances of a normal life for their offspring in Poland's exile, together with the news from the Land [of Israel] that there was sustenance there, that one could make a good living there, their objection weakened - but it was a bit too late. The Second World War was looming in the horizon.

All the same, they embraced us with their longing for a different life against the background of the gloom of *shtetl* life. In us, they found some hint of a more beautiful life, although they did not always understand our aspirations. Who does not remember how they saw us off, for example, when we went off to celebrate *Lag Ba'Omer* in the nearby groves? A small band [marched] at the head of the parade. We all wore uniforms and held scout sticks in our hands. And how they awaited us when we returned in the evening! Literally, the whole *shtetl* waited for us and they were impressed with our orderly stride. The young ones envied us and looked forward to the day when they would be able to join us. And as for ourselves – our hearts overflowed with joy and self-esteem! Moments like these intensified our desire to continue, despite all the difficulties and hindrances.

To us, the cell was like a lighthouse, like an oasis in the desert to which we escaped from all the drawbacks and depressing things out there. In it, we sought an answer to all the questions that were troubling us. Let us not forget that it was everything for us - including a school, in the exact sense of the word. There were some who could not even complete their primary school studies because, after a few years in *cheder*, they were sent by their parents to learn a trade. The crafts of shoe-stitching, shoe-making, tailoring [etc.] did not have the power to excite young people - and here, their eyes were opened. Here, they received the beginnings of an education and the possibility to access the world of knowledge and science. They began to forge their views on life and the world. After a long winter day of work at the workshops, they would make a beeline for the cell's hall, [where] they gathered in little groups, each in a different corner. The group leader would give a talk on some cultural topic - Zionism, the history of the Jewish People, the Land [of Israel], the *Kibbutz* [Movement] or a talk on some literary subject that was at the centre of interest [at the time], or a

¹⁰ [TN: The 1936–1939 Arab revolt in Palestine.]

probe into [some] social [phenomenon]. And there was no lack of these - the years of adolescence, with their great sensitivity and mental tension, invite many misconceptions which need to be dispelled.



The Ha'Shomer cell in Żarki

Before every talk, we sang to exhaustion and some danced the *Hora*. Who does not remember the tumultuous circles of dancers, the enormous enthusiasm, as in – “*All my bones shall say!*”¹¹ And sometimes, it happened that, on a winter evening, we would go out to the road to perform drill exercises. Everything all around was frozen and covered with a carpet of white snow. With the snow squeaking underfoot, we marched energetically, our mouths filled with song. The tiredness, following a long day’s work, disappeared. We forgot the grey day which awaited us on the morrow, and our hearts widened, yearning for the good days to come.

In the summer, we usually gathered “in Nature’s bosom”. Members surely recall the “defile” on the Jaworznik road, the abandoned quarry or the tree, with the dense foliage, next to the ruined granary - which the townspeople called “*Die Fir Vent*” [The Four Walls] - or the Saturday afternoons at the grove in Leśniów, drinking water from the spring and then sitting in a circle listening to the counsellor. Of a summer evening, we would sit in the dark, the stars blinking above - our imagination reaching for the skies, sorting out Life’s questions, planning for the future.

The crowning glory of life in the cell was the summer camp. Here, one was able to distance oneself from the daily routine inside one’s family, to be only with the *Ha'Shomer* family for two or three weeks.

We received a taste of freedom, as we cooked our own meals and made our own beds, a long way from the din of the *shtetl*, free of any yoke and restriction. We did not come by this easily. We accumulated the means for the camp with the sweat of our brow. We began stockpiling provisions many weeks before going out to the camp. Each brought a small bag of rice, groats, sugar, beans, coffee, tea, etc. Collecting cash money was more difficult. We held an internal fundraiser - one who came from a wealthy family committed to bringing a larger sum and those, who did not possess the

¹¹ [TN: Psalm 35:10: “*All my bones shall say, Lord, who is like unto thee*”; the founder of Chassidism, the Ba’al Shem Tov, taught his followers that “*the dances of a Jew before his Creator are prayers,*” quoting this verse.]

means, brought whatever they could or were made exempt altogether. The summer camps gave us the opportunity to meet with *Shomrim* from other cells in the vicinity. Horizons widened, intimate friendships were struck up, a sense of belonging to a movement, which encompassed youth from the whole country [and] from wherever our People were dispersed throughout the entire globe, was created.

There were [some] very uplifting hours which the heart cannot forget - for example, getting up early on Saturday mornings for a walk to the grove with a book in hand. The sun's first rays are casting their light. You pass through the streets and alleys. After a hard week of work and exertion, the Jews lay deep in slumber. Peace and absolute silence reign all around. You come to the grove, spread your coat out on the bed of pine needles and begin reading. The birds awaken and begin to sing. If you are reading a book of poetry, the contents of the poem merge with what is happening around you. [But] mostly we read books of science and literature with a socio-ideological content - the works of Engels, [Piotr] Kropotkin, [Isaac] Babel, [Karl] Kautsky, Borochoy, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Sh. Asch, I.L. Peretz, etc. Bit by bit, the number of visitors in the grove increases. It becomes noisier. Once tiring of poring over the books, you enter into a conversation with the reader next to you. One waited for these hours all week long.

And who could express the great emotion upon seeing off a member, who was emigrating to the land [of Israel]? A multitude of members take their places in open wagons or on sleds in the wintertime. We travel the seven kilometres to the railway station in Myszków in full song – joyous that we have been able to send a member to join the camp of those realising [Zionism] in the Land [of Israel]. The many envy the member who was able to overcome all the difficulties and obstacles and they dream of the day that they, themselves, will make *Aliyah*. The parents shed a tear, having the presentiment that perhaps they would never see their son again. And the sorrow was great. However, we must tell the saddening truth - the cell was not fortunate enough to reap the fruits it deserved. There were few who went off to training and even fewer who were able to make *Aliyah*. Those were the days in which the British invader blocked immigration¹² and, only with the onset of the *Aliyah Bet*¹³, were several members able to come to the Land [of Israel].

It was not my intention to record the history of the cell in our town. I do not possess the required material. After all, I left there in 1934 - while the cell continued to exist until the outbreak of the War and also during the Nazi occupation. Żarki also served as a point of rendezvous and communication for the Movement's survivors, who hoped to gain a foothold in it and hold out there, in order to become ready to resist and fight the cruel tyrant. Details on this period may be found in the booklet written by our friend Aron Brandes, titled "*The Loss of the Zagłębie Jews*"¹⁴.

My intention was to call up a few memories from this cherished period of life, which we passed in the *shtetl* - to raise, at least, some small monument to several personalities and friends who were not fortunate enough to make it this far.

[And] to our town Żarki, where we were born and spent the best years of our lives, where a vibrant Jewish life, with its light and shade, flowed during hundreds of years, until the bitter and precipitous day, when they were banished with horrific cruelty by the cruellest foe to rise against us in the history of our martyrdom.

Woe to us, that the town, and everything connected to it, have become history!

¹² [TN: Probably reference to "The White Paper of 1939," which limited Jewish immigration to Palestine to 75,000 persons a year.]

¹³ [TN: Code name for the illegal immigration to Palestine, which was carried out in two stages: 1934-1942 and 1945-1948.]

¹⁴ [TN: We've been unable to find a booklet with this exact title; there is, however, a 1945 booklet by Brandes titled "The End of the Jews in Western Poland" (קץ היהודים במערב פולין).]

And if there is some small consolation, it is that a few survivors from our town were able to come together and make it to a safe haven - to Israel. Be it those who had the fortune to arrive before the War or those who toiled and reached it after years of terrible suffering and wanderings throughout the globe. The hope that they would someday make it there and meet someone close to them, gave them the strength to continue along the arduous path and to fight against the bitterness of death!

We have, indeed, returned to our roots - the cradle of our people. Let us set roots down in it and never relinquish it!

Pinchas Laudén
Ein Ha'Shofet