

Żarki My Town

It is neither a history that I intend to write nor a regular story, but a brief sketch of “those days”.

When I am reminded of Żarki, all those place, where we dreamt and where we wove hopes of a better future, pass before my eyes. I remember the large marketplace and the Jaworzniak road with the defile (*Der Tul*). It is to this defile that we would escape on Saturdays at daybreak, or to the large forest on the way to Kozięłowy, to secretly read literature which was forbidden at home. This was all, at the time some of us lads were studying at the Study-hall, and we knew that there was, in Żarki, a library of exemplary size which belonged to the Zionist Organisation. But, we were also aware of the local attitude towards this place. And there was a common saying that anyone who [even] touched the library door was beyond the point of no return. I shall therefore never forget how I entered the library for the first time, in my traditional Jewish garb, to sign up and receive a book to read. It was a book by [Mordechai Ze'ev] Feuerberg (*Whither*). With what reverential awe and sense of thrill we read this book and discussed its contents!

During this period, several friends and I began secretly studying Hebrew with the distinguished and admired teacher Kopel Minc z”l. This was an experience which is now difficult for me to describe - the Study-hall lads going outside the *shtetl* (*Kotlarnia*) to study with the known Zionist and heretic - Kopel Minc. It was he who introduced us to the new literature and that of the Zionists in particular. How can I describe the impression that reading *Yizkor*¹⁷⁸ and *Dreamers and Fighters*¹⁷⁹ gave us when we were gathered in that same defile? And, when we visited Zawiercie [and watched] the film about the pioneers in the Land [of Israel], we all returned with the clear resolution that their way was ours. It was also then that we founded the first *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* group within the Zionist Organisation, under the name “Ezra”.



**Standing from R to L: Izrael Majtlis and Chaim Fajner;
Sitting from R to L: Izrael Markowicz z”l, Mojsze Rotsztajn z”l,
Berisz Frank z”l, Lipa Hirsztajn and Icek-Hersztajn z”l**

¹⁷⁸ [TN: Most likely reference to the 1915 publication of that title by David Ben-Gurion and Yitzchak Ben-Tzvi.]

¹⁷⁹ [TN: 1922 book by Yaakov Ya'ari Polskin.]

We were the youngest group, and, for some reason unknown to me, we were nicknamed “The Bruisers Group”. Our password was “*Chazak Ve’ematz*¹⁸⁰” – “*Nahalal*¹⁸¹”.

In Tamuz [June-July] of that year, an evening commemoration was held for Dr Herzl¹⁸² and, on that evening, a group from *Ha’Shomer Ha’Tzair* in Łódź showed up - an orderly group with military discipline. What impressed us the most were the songs in [Modern] Hebrew. That evening, following the ceremony, we all went with Josel Rottenberg z”l to the leader of this group and requested help in the organisation of our own group. His response was that, in one month, they were emigrating to the Land of Israel, but that he could refer us to Częstochowa - the branch nearest to us - and that, from there, we would receive all the assistance we required. The next day, two of us journeyed to Częstochowa and met with Brother^{*}) Lajbel Horowicz. He was one of the Movement’s local leaders and, that very evening, it was decided at the Częstochowa branch that he would also be our counsellor in Żarki, until we were able to “grow” our own forces. There are still some who may recall the first meetings which were secretly held in the defile with Lajbel Horowicz. I remember the first song he taught us and, for the benefit of those who participated in this clandestine meeting back in the day, I shall relay the first verses of this song¹⁸³:

*From the field arose
The mighty song of reapers,
The yellowing stalks
Standing tall in a row.*

We began our practical work with drilling practice and reading the writings of the renowned English scout Baden-Powell¹⁸⁴. Over the course of time, we established a girls’ group named “*Chavatzelet*” [Lily] and other youth groups, until we became a large and respected branch. There are only a few of the members of the first group now in Israel and they are Lipa Hirsch, Izrael Ajzykowicz, Jehoszua Ben-Tzvi, Bracha Rottenberg, Jehoszua Turner, Itka Rozyner, Rywka Rozyner (Eifa), Batya Wajnberg, and the author of these lines. From the second group [only] Chaim Fajner and Josef Herszlikowicz remain. From the younger groups, there are people scattered throughout Israel in various *moshavim* and *kibbutzim*, such as Ein Ha’Shofet, Merhavia, Mesilot, Tel Yosef, Giv’at Chaim, Gal On and Negba.

My brother Szymson was among the first members, but was unable to make *Aliyah*.

May their souls be bound in the Bond of Life!

Izrael Majtlis
Ra’anana

¹⁸⁰ [TN: “Be strong and of a good courage” (Joshua 1:9).]

¹⁸¹ [TN: The settlement of Nahalal, founded in 1921, was the first “moshav ovdim” (workers’ cooperative agricultural settlement) in Mandatory Palestine.]

¹⁸² [TN: Herzl died on 20th Tamuz 5664, or 3rd July 1904.]

^{*}) In those days, they did not use the appellation “Chaver” [Comrade/Member] in the [Jewish] Scouting Movement, but “Ach” [Brother] instead.

¹⁸³ [TN: The first three of the following verses are a nearly verbatim rendition of a poem in Yitzhak Katznelson’s play “Ha’Navi” (The Prophet; Sefer publishers, Łódź 1922); the last verse is entirely different from Katznelson’s version, although it fits well enough within the stanza. It is unclear whether the author misquoted the poem, or whether in the early days there was actually a song with these exact words.]

¹⁸⁴ [TN: Lieutenant General Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, 1st Baron Baden-Powell.]

