

Perec (Berisz) Frank



Berisz Frank

His Life History¹

Perec Frank was born in 1909 in the small Polish town of Żarki, in the Będzin district, which was a typical Diaspora *shtetl* – quietly weaving its life, producing generations of preoccupied Jews, with brows furrowed by so many worries of livelihood and seeking a future for their children. Like all other Polish *shtetls*, most of Żarki's income was from the trade with the Polish farmers in the vicinity. Besides this commerce, the engagement in the crafts of tanning, tailoring and shoe-making occupied an important position in the *shtetl*. For most of the year, Żarki lay dormant. But, once summer came, a window to the wide world was torn open - thanks to the transit of vacationers surging to the Leśniów holiday resort, which was next to the *shtetl*.

It may very well be that this summer movement had no small influence on Żarki's youth. The yearly contact with holiday-makers from the city doubtlessly left its mark on the town's youth. This youth was naturally drawn towards open space - the "unknown", which lay hidden behind the *shtetl's* narrow horizons and their tendency was to take in fresh ideas coming from the greater world.

Perec was the family's only son. His father [Abram] was a teacher in the "Improved *Cheder*"², which had been established in town. It differed favourably from the other *cheders* due to the progressive winds which blew there. Already in childhood, he stood out for his talents and sagacity. He could read and write at a very early age. It is interesting that Perec, who in adulthood showed such dexterity and know-how in taking up the wheel and serviced machinery with such expertise, did not display in childhood any tendencies to play with different working equipment and was drawn exclusively to the book - where he found an interest and a source of amusement and entertainment. This tendency endeared him to his parents and the neighbours [also] esteemed him greatly and pinned great hopes upon him. Besides his assiduity in study and reading, he also stood out for his ability to convey the things which he read to others - and he delivered his lesson with great clarity. This is one of the outstanding qualities which distinguished him throughout his short life.

In 1919, he entered the Polish primary school which was founded at the time, but he did not complete it. The general atmosphere in this school, the contemptuous manner of the teachers towards the Jewish pupils and, above all, the low scholastic level - all these things pushed him away from it. For some time, he studied with private tutors, among whom was a young priest who, within a short while, provided him with knowledge of the Polish language and mathematics. And, as foreign languages habitually came to him with ease, he [also] acquired knowledge in several of them. But the bulk of what he knew, he acquired thanks to his studiousness and his thirst for learning and knowledge.

When he was about twelve, his father began thinking about his future and decided to provide him with the tailoring profession, which was widespread in town and which was considered the best of

¹ [TN: See more details on Perec Frank, including the circumstances of his untimely death in 1940, above on pp.82-84.]

² [TN: This *cheder* and the teacher Abram Frank are mentioned above on p.38.]

all trades. But it soon emerged that he was useless at this profession, as his heart was not drawn to it.

In 1924, a cell of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* was established in Żarki. The initiative came on the part of several members from the Częstochowa cell. Percec was among those who laid the foundations for this cell. He soon attained distinction as a manager, who was capable and was loved by his trainees. His natural vivacity and cheerfulness, [together with] his knowledge and studious qualities, elevated him to the highest position. He had spent a childhood devoid of youthful joy and he strove to rectify this with his charges. He was [also] loyal to the Movement's dictates - he had learnt Hebrew himself and now taught the language to others. Those of the cell's trainees, whose parents could not afford to send them to school, studied with Percec absolutely free. He was true to the commandment "The *Shomer* [scout] is helpful and devoted".³

Just around that period, he worked as a clerk for the Jewish *kehilla* and, later, he became its technical secretary. During this period, he used his influence and possibilities to help the needy obtain aid from the *kehilla* - a referral to a physician, etc. Anyone in need of advice and who had matters to tend to with the authorities turned to him - and was not disappointed. And being a well-liked individual, he would approach parents, who refused to allow their children to join the cell, and explain the Movement's educational values to them, thus winning them over. He comprehended that one could not come to the child only with the [Ten] Commandments of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*, and that it was necessary to prepare the *shtetl's* children for a more humanistic life - and he did a great deal in this direction. True to these values of his, he acted extensively in aid of the local library which, thanks to his stamina and devotion, was improved, becoming the pride of the town. He was also active in the drama group and engaged in much work in benefit of the funds and undertakings of the League for the Working Land of Israel.

In 1926, the cell experienced a major crisis and fell apart. This was in the period during which the Movement was consolidated in Poland. The Movement set forth on the path towards the implementation of pioneering [ideology] and adopted Socialist-Marxist world views. A fierce ideological war ensued, amongst the graduates of the cell, regarding its path and future - and it crumbled.

During this period, for a while, Percec moved to Częstochowa, where he worked in his uncle's workshop. People spoke ill of him then, saying that he had strayed from the path and had disassociated himself from the Movement. But they soon found out that Percec had remained loyal to the *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair* movement with all his might. As soon as he returned home, he began building up the ruins of the cell. He and a few other former cell members devoted themselves with all their soul to their task and the cell rose again and, once more, began to broaden. Youths from all social classes streamed to it and its work branched out. The cell became the initiator of every Zionist and cultural activity in town and Percec occupied the foremost position in all of them. In 1928, he went to train [at a centre] in Siemiatycze - by taking this step, he was the first in the cell to blaze the path towards personal realisation⁴.

As busy as he was with his preparations for *Aliyah*, Percec still managed to remain loyal to the cell's life. Upon returning from the training, once more, he dedicated himself completely to the educational work. And, in this area, he was for a time one of the only people who managed to merge their life, with all their worries and uncertainties, with the process of the Movement's development. And, indeed, his influence on the life of the cell was great during that period. From the training, he brought with him a spirit of seriousness and an in-depth approach to every phenomenon. He fought

³ [TN: One of the "Ten Commandments of *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*."]]

⁴ [TN: Training and eventual *Aliyah*.]

against provincial tendencies and manifestations, urging the youth to develop themselves. In that period, he organised summer camps. He was active in the [Movement's] regional leadership and acted extensively in aid of the regional [summer] camps. Yet, before his eyes, the highest goal of [his] vision hovered - emigrating to the yearned-for land, to join a *kibbutz*.

Once more, he went off for training in 1932 and, at the behest of the Council of Graduates, he brought all the members together [there], the majority of whom were on their own at the time. At the end of that year, he was finally able to fulfil his greatest desire and make *Aliyah*.

A.L.



A party honouring Perec Frank on the eve of his Aliyah