

About the *Shtetl* of My Birth

Żarki was among the hundreds of little *shtetls* in Poland, which were relatively unknown to the country's broader population. However, among the Jews of the surrounding area, such as for instance, those of Zawiercie, Będzin, Sosnowiec, Częstochowa and other cities, the Jewish community of Żarki was very popular for various reasons.

First and foremost, the youth in Żarki possessed the strongest Zionist inclination in the entire region. We were the first to revolt against the stunted growth and backwardness in the *shtetl*, against the oppression on part of the Jewish clerics [and] against the zealots, who hindered the development of the Jewish national awareness amongst Jewish youth in those times.

In Żarki, we had fine and healthy youth, who took up the fight for the ideas of national liberation even against their own parents. We were the first pioneers, who tore away from the crippled, unproductive life of the little Diaspora *shtetl* and began a new chapter.

We studied the Hebrew language with great assiduousness, travelled to training and emigrated to the Land of Israel. In this, we had the aid of many progressive parents and committed Zionists.

The first and best among them was Kopel Minc z''l, a Hebrew teacher. He did a great many things to educate the youth of the *shtetl* in the national spirit and to teach them the Hebrew language. Later, following his premature death, the work was done by my father z''l, who stood at the head of the *kehilla* on part of the Zionists. My late father was not afraid of any threats from the extremist religious circles and continued fighting for the Zionist cause. He always took the side of the Zionist youth against the Aguda/Orthodox factions - for a healthy national upbringing of the town's youth.

September 1939

On 15th September 1939, I was to be released from the Polish Army, where I was doing regular military service in an infantry battalion. This is the happiest moment every soldier awaits - to finally write home, requesting that they send him his civilian clothes. One desires to be freed of the hard life of discipline in the barracks and one begins to think about the future in civilian life.

For me, being released from the military had an important significance. It meant that I would be able to realise the dream of my earliest youth onwards - to travel to training, to make the proper pioneering preparations and to emigrate to the Land of Israel.

Fate, however, wished otherwise. It put an end to all my aspirations and dreams.

On 1st September 1939, a fortnight prior to my release, the Germans attacked Poland and, over the course of mere days, crushed the whole Polish Army. The Polish military continually retreated further and further away until, from the other side, the Soviets appeared. I was then not far from the new German-Soviet border, by the river San.

In that period, a wandering in all directions ensued. Some decided to go over to the other side, to the Soviets. Others began returning homewards. I was in a huge dilemma and knew not what to do. Going home meant going to the Germans, to Hitler, which I had no desire to do - even though, at the time, we did not yet know what Hitler was preparing for the Jews. Yet neither could I make up my mind to go over to "the other side", to the Soviets, for I felt a strong pull to my parents, to my sister,

to my *shtetl*, where I had passed my best childhood years [and] to my friends, together with whom I had woven my Zionistic dreams, sung pioneers' songs, gone on excursions to the mountains and held discussions at the meetings until late into the night.

No. I could not suddenly forget all this and tear myself away from it. I had a difficult struggle with myself, as "the other side" had a strong pull for me. I did not yet know about the *Iron Curtain*.

For a fortnight, I wandered on foot, half-starved. I slept in peasants' homes and hid from the Germans on the roads. I covered hundreds of kilometres through fields and woods, until I finally fought my way to my home of old - to the *shtetl* of my birth.

Sorrowfully, it did not last long. Now, all that remain are old memories. The town of Żarki still exists - but without Jews. The majority of them are no longer here. Only numbered individuals managed to survive, to recount the mournful past.

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