

The Jewish Community

The history of the Jews in the town is connected with the history of the Jews in Volhynia. This part of the country was annexed to Russia in the partition of Poland among Russia, Austria and Prussia which took place in 1793. The town belonged to Russia for 122 years and the Jewish community was connected to the large Jewish centres in Odessa, Kiev, Moscow and Peterburg. They were part of the two million Jews, the majority of the Jewish people, which at that time had been annexed to Russia.

The Volhynian Jews were active in Jewish cultural life as an active part of Russian Jewry until the First World War. At the end of that war, Volhynia was partitioned, the eastern half going to Russia, and the western to Poland. After having passed from hand to hand several times, Rozhishch became Polish. Connections with the Jewish cultural centres in Russia were severed. New ties were developed with Warsaw and the west, however, all this lasted only about 20 years.

In 1939, Rozhishch, like all Volhynia, was transferred to the USSR, as provided for in the Molotov-Ribentrop agreement. In the Second World War, it was captured by the Nazis, and the entire Jewish community was slaughtered on 10 Elul 1942. Now the town belongs to the USSR, but there are no Jews at all left there.

The Jews of Volhynia had developed a special way of life, their own accent in Yiddish and Hebrew. There was Hassidism but without fanaticism and a special method of study in the Yeshivas. They excelled in their industry, their simplicity, and their honesty. They were active in all streams of stormy Jewish political and spiritual life of the end of the last century and the first four decades of this century.

Haim Nachman Bialik, the Hebrew poet-laureate, in whose work nature, the rebellion against Jewish ways of life in the Diaspora, and the awakening of nationalism heralding a new way of Jewish life are reflected, was a native of a village near Zhitomir. The author, Eliezer Smoli, is a native of Rozhishch.

The pre-World War One Rozhishch had two faces — the religious and the secular. There were the various Hassidic movements on the one hand, and the enthusiastic disciples of the Revolution on the other. And above all, the Hebrew Zionist movement, the Hechalutz movement — those who spoke Hebrew and those who loved Yiddish. They immigrated to Israel in all periods, with the Chibat Zion movement at the end of the 19th century, with the Second Aliyah at the start of this century. They now live in cities, villages and kibbutzim in Israel — they have helped in the struggles, the wars, the building of the state and in laying the foundation of Israeli society.



EDUCATION

The Jews in Rozhishch aspired to give their children the best education they were capable of. Although there was a Russian school in the town in the days it was under Russian rule, parents did not like to send their children there because studies took place on the Sabbath. However, there were no illiterates among the Jewish population as differentiated from the Gentile, in which the rate of illiteracy was high. All the Jews were able to read and write Yiddish, a little Hebrew and to pray. Girls were generally sheltered, not being allowed to study outside of their own homes, so that it was mostly the daughters of the more well-to-do families who studied under private tutors. Boys studied in Yeshivas and Heders.

In the twenties traditional education underwent a serious crisis. The Yiddische Folkschule and particularly the Tarbuth school, influenced by the awakening of Zionism, attracted most of the children and the Heders and the Yeshivas were emptied. It was sad to see the pained learned men who had prepared generations of children for the Torah and good deeds watching their pupils leave them for secular education, which in their eyes, was "evil influences" and "depravity" — but the movement could not be checked, nor could the clock be turned back.

Most of the children studied in the Tarbuth school which was organized and conducted in the Zionist pioneering spirit. The school was supported by fees paid by the children and by special activities they organized in order to balance the budget and pay the teachers' salaries. These activities included theatrical productions by Zionist troupes, collections of donations, draws, etc. The Polish government did not allocate any funds whatsoever to assist this school, although free education was available in the Polish governmental schools.

The groups of Zionist-inspired youth, including Yitzhak Zisskind,

The Tarbuth School, 1929: pupils, teachers and members of the Parents Committee.



the Fleischer brothers and Avraham Pelzman, first started founding a Hebrew library, with Lamdan's "Massada", Mapu's "Ahavat Zion" and books of that nature being the foundation stone of the library. Children, whose education was even more secularly oriented had studied in the Folkschule, but with the developing streams of Jewish thought taking form, Yiddish learning was the realm of the Yiddishists — the Bund — popularly known as the "leftists". The registration in the Folkschule declined, with more and more pupils enrolling in the Tarbut school.

This school was the centre of activity of all the Zionist parties. The library attached to the school ensured that Hebrew books published in Warsaw, Berlin and Jerusalem would reach the youth who looked forward to their arrival as to that of a dear, welcome guest, and these books often served as subjects for discussion in small groups.

Although the language of the Jews in the town was Yiddish, the youth enthused with the Zionist ideal spoke Hebrew amongst themselves. As Volhynia was remote from the large centres of either Russian or Polish culture, there were only a few who knew Russian in the period before the First World War, and fewer still knowing Polish in the inter-war period. Thus, a Jewish nationalist awareness and a rich independent way of Jewish life developed without the assimilationist influences which were rife in Poland at the time.

THE ZIONIST MOVEMENT

As has been said, Rozhishch was very alive to and aware of all the trends in the mainstream of eastern European Jewish thought in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. Naturally, therefore, the town's youth were



Haim Pfeffer (second right) working as a Halutz in the Goldberg orchard in Ramat Gan in 1925.



The old Jewish orphanage.

swept away on the intellectual waves of revolutionary thinking. There were two socialist Zionist movements at the turn of the century, the Socialist Zionists and the Poalei Zion (Workers of Zion). Ze'ev Ehrlich describes the manifestation of October 17, 1905, the day of the granting of the constitution — with the masses demonstrating, carrying guns, and red flags and singing the Marseillaise. He says further that with the repression of the revolution, and more particularly with rumours reaching them of pogroms in Zhitomir, the movement dispersed and many of the youth left Rozhishch to pursue their studies in larger centres and abroad.

As an indication of the polarity in Jewish thought of the time, he relates that in 1902—1904 when pogroms raged through eastern Europe, self defence movements were established by the youth. In Rozhishch the Zionists set up their own self-defence unit while the left wing Bundists set up their independent unit. Even in this vital area of Jewish life, these groups were incapable of finding a common language.

A few years after the repression of the revolution, the Zionist movements again became active. Youngsters gathered in order to discuss their Zionist dreams, to collect Shekels, to listen to lecturers brought in from the outside, with anyone having come from Eretz Israel receiving special welcome and rapt attention. They purchased Hebrew books and organized many activities.

YOUTH AND HECHALUTZ MOVEMENT

The Hebrew chapter on the Hehalutz and the Zionist movement contains some rather fascinating descriptions of the degree of hardship these youngsters were prepared to suffer in order to fulfill their Zionist ideals, particularly in the Hachshara or training camps. These are interesting descriptions of Jewish youth undertaking heavy physical labour in order to finance the Tarbut school, their training farm or other Zionist projects. Much is made of how important it was for them to change the image of the Jew from that of the traditional middle man of the caricatures to the hard-worker prepared to do any physical labour at all. There are descriptions of the generation gap — traditional life in Poland versus the dream of Zion. Some parents are won over; others, use all the stratagems at their disposal to prevent their sons, and most particularly their daughters, from reaching the Holy Land, or bringing them back after they had already reached their destination.

The battle of the generations relating to the Zionist ideal and its tragedy is inherent in the stories of those many Rozhishch youngsters who did not see their dream of Zion materialize. Those who remained in Rozhishch because of difficulties encountered in making their Aliya (shortages of certificates required by the Mandatory regime, and others), or those who acquiesced to the wishes of their parents, who for reasons mostly related to the orthodox religious opposition to the movement, did not want their children to immigrate to Eretz Israel, and remained in Rozhishch.

One very touching case is related at length in the Hebrew portion of this book. Eliezer Braker ran away from the high school in Vilna where he had been studying in 1913. On his arrival in Eretz Israel he worked in Ben Shemen with Berl Katznelson, Rahel Ben Zvi and other founders of the Labour movement in Eretz Israel. However, his father became ill. Some said because of anxiety for his son. And one year later young Braker was persuaded to return to his sick father. Unfortunately, he was caught up in the turmoil of the First World War and escaped together with his family to Odessa, where he was later imprisoned by the Stalinists for his Zionist activities. He spent many years in Siberia in conditions of dreadful hardship. Word of him reached Israel through a former prison mate who had been repatriated to Germany, and eventually, letters from Braker himself started reaching former colleagues and friends in Israel. These letters, written in beautiful Hebrew, very poignantly expressed his sorrow that his great dream had not



Eliezer Braker, Prisoner of Zion, (right with hat on knee) in Ben-Shemen in 1913. In centre, second from left, Berl Katznelson, one of the founders of the Labour Zionist movement.

materialized and the hope that it could still be fulfilled. The torch was being kept akindle, despite repression by the Soviet dictatorship. Unfortunately all contact with Braker ceased in 1966. It has since been learned that he died a few years ago.

BETAR AND THE REVISIONIST MOVEMENT

In the final years of the Polish rule, many of the Jewish youth who had finished their primary schooling and who were looking for a way out of the distress caused them as a result of the restrictions on immigration to Palestine and the shaky economic situation in Poland, were attracted to Zionist party activity. It was in the party clubs that they found their social peers, and it was through party activity and arguments over a better future that they found their outlet. As Rozhishch reflected all the mainstreams of Jewish thought of the period, many found their way to Betar. The Betar group was active in the controversy which broke out in the Zionist camp between the Hehalutz and the Revisionist movements. This very sharp controversy augmented the activities of both splinters of the Zionist camp. As the Hehalutz movement strengthened so did Betar, and the Brith HaHayal (the soldier's alliance). The quarrel which Jabotinsky had with Weizman and the leaders of the Zionist movement found its echoes in Rozhishch.



The quarrels and differences of opinion were many and sharp. At one point when the Zionist Hehalutz set up a training camp in an abandoned part of a Jewish orphanage, Betar, having found out about this, sent a group of their people, squatted at the site, and refused to leave, claiming that they were entitled to and would retain possession of half the space available.

Arguments were lively and heated amongst the youth of Rozhishch but it was only in those between Betar and Hehalutz that they spilled over into fisticuffs.

As well as being politically active, the Betar boys were also sports enthusiasts and formed one of the three football teams in the town.

A member of the Betar Hachshara was Shlomo Ben Yoseph (Tabachnik) of Lutsk who was to be the first Jew executed by the British in 1938. He had reached Eretz Israel as an "illegal" immigrant in 1937. Several other Betar members became involved in underground activities in Israel against the British.

