

JEWISH YOUTH ASSOCIATIONS IN YUGOSLAVIA 1926-1941

The Zionost Movement had significant forerunners and ardent adherents in the countries that later united to form Yugoslavia. The student clubs in Vienna, *Bar Giaora* and the *Esperanza* Society, were characterized by a pronounced national orientation even before the creation of Yugoslavia. After returning to the newly-established state, their memebers became the bearers of Zionist thought and also brought the spirit of Jewish revival into the Jewish religious school communities. However, it was only with the establishment of youth societies that also admitted secondary school students, that a genuine youth movement began. It signified a fundamental change and the beginning of a new wey of life for the Yugoslav Jewish youth.

Already in 1919, right after the establishment of the new state, a Union of Jewish youth Associations was formed uniting students and the working youth. Seven years later when in 1926 the first issue of the bi-weekly Jewish youth paper, the *Hanoar*, appeared, the Union already numbered thirty societies within its organization, in all parts of Yugoslavia. These were societies with various names and profiles and were located in Croatia, Slavonia, Vojvodina, Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Dalmatia. They were united by their ties to Zionist thought and organization. The Two basic pillars of this national orientation linking all the elements of such a broadly ramified body were, firstly, the thesis that Jewishness is not only a religion but that the whole of Jewry, although in Diaspora, constitutes one people bound together by a several thousand - year old history, tradition, culture and faith; and secondly, that in order to change the unfavourable condition of this people in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres, a condition that threatened its very existence, it was necessary to create its political organization to struggle for, and achieve, once again the settlement of the original homeland of the Jews - the *Erez Israel* (land of Israel).

Nevertheless, the youth movement was not satisfied solely with these basic ideas of the movement, but demanded much more: the full revival of the collective and individual life of the youth. It was not enough to share convictions, to join the daily political and organizational work of the adults, to collect means for the Zionist funds. It was necessary to personally achieve the ideal of "*halutz-iut*" (pioneers) in *Erez Israel*, by emigrating, by re-training for the so-called "productive callings", by settling and working in agricultural collectives. This meant completely abandoning the former middle-class life, and a total transformation of one's personality in the service of a collective goal for the attainment of a national and social ideal. That all this was profoundly serious is shown by the fact that already in 1919 the *Hakhsharot* were established (rural preparation for work in agriculture) and that they continued until 1941.

II

It is clear that in such a broad circle of youth societies of various levels and composition of membership, it was not easy to attain the highest level of dedication to an idea and to its implementation. A very firmly organized group, the *Ahdut Hatzofim* (Association of Excursionists) transcended by far all others in the intensity of its work, its sincerity and unswerving dedication to its goals. These young excursionists lived in a kind of "magical circle of youthfulness" where there are fresh winds purifying and ennobling one's spirit. The faith in *Erez Israel* steeling themselves as *halutzim*, sincere brotherhood - all these were characteristics defined by the editor of their publication the *Hozer* (a litographed review), in the very first issue of the *Hanoar*. The *Cofim* met daily in their *Kvutzot* (groups) in which the leader of the group was a real guide and inspiration, educator and teacher. These groups were a component of the *ken* (nests) as they were forged at meetings. Their subjects were learning the Hebrew language, history, the colonization and geography of Palestine, with much attention also paid to personal intellectual improvement. But the high point of togetherness, the ecstasy of warm enthusiasm for ideas was mostly achieved in summer camps *mahane*, in natural surroundings and under tents. These summer camps were totally different from present-day youth holidays. One of the first such camps was organized in 1927 at Lake Plitvice. Although far from the railway station and in an uninhabited locality, the young people did all the work themselves. They put up the tents, brought all the materials and food, erected the camp kitchen. Meetings were held each day

in five groups; they performed gymnastic exercises, there was swimming in the lakes and excursions. In the evenings there were music and comedy recitals, songs and dances. The camp fires and dances around them were the peaks of these *mahane* accompanied by a wealth of emotions which were never forgotten. Last night the fire spoke to us in a different language. We spent ten days together, became familiar with natural beauties unknown to us till then. We got to know people whom we known only by name. We were filled with the joy of living as if in that fire all our *Galut* woe, all hardships and all persecutions were burned up. It was as the fire was bringing greetings from the top of Galilee, from the valley of Emek and from the slopes of Judea." This was how one of the camp's participants at Lake Plitvice described the camp in August 1927: "*When one hundred young hearts are united in the harmonious tones of a song, the pale reflections of the moonlight and the hum of the waterfalls... then one hundred hearts beat in unison. One hundred hearts with one will. This is how marvelous Nature will bring us closer together, unite us.*" These were the feelings of another camper at a time when 80 young people from sixteens towns from all over Yugoslavia also participated. Yet, the momentary intoxication of ecstasy had to be underpinned by the stability of ideas. This element likewise was an integral part of the *mahane*. Camping in the open became the most efficacious and most attractive part of the movement's manifestations. Whoever had the opportunity to take part in them, to experience the discussions, hear the never-ending songs and watch the dances alongside the camp fires, took with him long-lasting impressions for his whole future activities as well as inspirations for his whole life. Such campings continued to be held every summer. They were schools of sincere friendship and brotherhood; they deepened one's knowledge and adaptability to collective life and strengthened even more our intensive adhesion to the movement.

But precisely because of this high intensity of collective consciousness, there ensued differences and divisions in the organization. *Ahdut hathofim* had reached an intensified level of work and organization which others could not follow to the same extent. Then the *Ahdut hatzofim* broke away from the Union. The same step was taken by group of *Sephardi* youth from Bosnia who were dissatisfied because their specific problems were not given sufficient attention.

This split led to large-scale discussions. Later on, it was bridged formally but not in essence. It also concerned the question of the so-called Palestine-centrism but not only this. Palestine

was naturally the center of all aspiration but regarded realistically not all youths could accept the demands for *halutziut*. There were also ideological differences regarding the measure of left orientation of certain youth groups.

III

The *Hanoar* publication which at first came modestly printed and devoted more to the movement's issues, continued appearing later as a monthly review and subsequently as a quarterly. This publication was a real mirror of the youth, its movement, its aspirations and ideology.

The columns of this publication were varied. There were articles on vital issues and on the basic problems of youth life. The leaders of the Zionist movement also published their contributions to the review: Aleksandar Licht, Bukić Pijade, David Albala, Joel Rozenberger and others, as well as well-known writers and poets from our communities such as Hinko Gottlieb and Miroslav Feldman. A special role was played by Hebrew and Yiddish writers: H.N. Bialik, A.S. Agnon, D. Frieschman, Sholem Aleichem, Shalom Asch, J.L. Peretz and others. Among others Jewish authors I should mention Ed. Fleg and Srefan Zweig. But the principal place among the various contributors in the *Hanoar* was filled by the programmatic and ideological articles. These put forward the goals facing the youth and of a very broad scope. In fact, there were even opposing views. But nonetheless they all showed a common feature. This meant that it was not only a question of political organization or of the attainment of Zionist political goals or the establishment of the ancient-new homeland in *Erez Israel*, but that rather it was a question of a revitalization of the people and of each individual and their fundamental transformation, lacking, which there would not and could not be an Israel.

One of the movement's main ideologists was Pavao Wertheim who in an address to the Zagreb youth in December 1929, cited who were the four personalities to lead and guide the Jewish youth and that these should be their role models:

Theodore Herzl - founder of political Zionism, the poet of life, the hero of fantasy, the symbol of aspirations towards an absolute act;

Ahad Haam, who had taught us to understand the age-long history of our people;

The honorable old Gordon: "*His call echoed wide: be a healthy and natural people; work on your homeland soil and cultivate it in the sweat of your brow and get to love it*"; and,

Martin Buber: He asks us to sanctify our Jewishness also with our humaneness.

Perhaps at the end of the twenties the closest to the youth was A.D.Gordon. It became necessary to turn the unnatural social structure of the Jewish people back to a normal course, by reverting to nature and the soil which could only be achieved in *Erez Israel*.

Later we meet with writings by Socialist leaders and thinkers such as D. Ben Gurion, Meir Jaari, Ber Borohov, who presented the basic ideas of Zionist socialism. These were the foundations of the *Poale Zion* movement which later became the Israeli Labour Party. Ben Gurion presented the thesis of the need for hegemony of the working class in Israel and the Zionist organization.

In addition to these ideological writings and treatises, *Hanoar* published regular features about Palestine and events there, about Zionist Congresses and their decisions as well as youth, literary and art reviews.

In its earliest issues, the *Hanoar* reflected in a very characteristic manner the attitude of the youth toward Zionism as seen in its replies to a survey: *How has Zionism changed the course of my life* to which two typical answers were: Branko Grosman replied that the basic dilemma of his life became crystallized: it was to leave and realize his ideal or to remain in *galut* (Diaspora). He had already decided it was to be the *aliyah*. Grosman became the president of the Union and then emigrated to Palestine. He spent his whole life in Israel and today in advanced years he still lives there. Avram Laven's reply was: "*Zionism hovers before my eyes a possibility for ethical ascent and the real Jewish and humanistic work.*"

It now remains for me to deal with the principal collaborators of *Hanoar* from the youth ranks. They were mostly the leaders and spiritual inspirers of the youth. Most of them later became leaders of Yugoslav Jewry or prominent workers in Israel. Of the former these were Albert Weis and Otto Centner, while among the latter there were Moše Švajcer, Joel Rozenberger, Branko Grosman, Jakov Maestro, Šmuel Engelman and others who were active in Israel. Andrija Gams and Leon Geršković also collaborated while they belonged to the movement.

Most prominent were two collaborators who both in the content and in the number of articles made the greatest contribution to the publication and to the movement. They were Dr. Cvi Rotmiler (later Cvi Rotem in Israel) and Pavao Wertheim. Cvi Rotmiler studied in the Higher School of Jewish Science in Berlin, filled all the yearly numbers of *Hanoar* with his knowledgeable and intelligent articles whether about political and social science, current affairs, literary reviews, essays or often lyrical compositions. All were graced by a sharp pen and profound erudition. Pavao Wertheim one of the wisest heads in the Movement, with a broad education, highly emotional and a wide spectrum of interests, contributed studies of Spinoza, Martin Buber, O. Weininger. He translated works by Nietzsche, and Heine and wrote lyrical prose. His ideological articles were nationally intoned but also replete with emotion. Rotmiler and Wertheim were at one time co-editors of *Hanoar* and later Wertheim was the sole editor. When he retired, Wertheim designated as his successor and future spiritual leader of the youth Hanan Preger who really became that and in the thirties took over the editorship of *Hanoar*, together with M. Levental.

IV

The social composition of the Jews in Yugoslavia was very stratified and unequal. There were industrialists and big merchants. But the majority belonged to the middle-class and to the small merchant and craftsmen classes. There were quite a number belonging to the professional classes and in some areas there were some very impoverished layers. (See the works of Isak Samokovlija). There were even the "lumpenproletariat" (persons with no profession or property) as for example, in Bitolj. In 1929 the big economic crisis and catastrophic rise of Fascism and Nazism were all reflected on the Jews of Yugoslavia. Up to the very end of the thirties, the Jews were fully equal as to civil rights but with the influence of the Fascist and racist ideas (the racist laws in Germany in 1935, the Crystal Night) they became existentially jeopardized like all other European Jewry.

One of the main motivations prompting the youth to seek new paths was the awareness of the failure of assimilation. This was particularly evidenced in those parts of Yugoslavia which had earlier been a part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Typical of this was a brochure by Milan Obradović of Bjelovar entitled *How Shall We Resolve the Jewish Question?* The brochure asked for the

Jews to be placed in ghettos, a ban on their calling themselves "Croats of Moses' Faith", a limitation of enrolment in all the schools and a ban on physicians, lawyers and educators to treat, represent and teach Christians, and the like. already in 1920 (!) we see a whole arsenal of Hitlerite and anti-Jewish measures. The only thing left out was the Fascist extermination of Jews. (cited by A. Matkovski in *The History of Jews in Macedonia*, Skoplje, 1983). It is unnecessary to enumerate here everything that later ensued: the Ljotić writings, the anti-Jewish decrees, the rise of anti-Semitic manifestations, encouraged, financed and led from Hitler's Germany.

It is no small wonder that the youth became more and more radical and looked for a permanent solution to this impasse. In this the socialist motive was as important as the Zionist one. The old longing for social justice with its deep roots in the Bible was always present among the Jewish people. It is interesting to note that it was precisely the well-schooled children of middle-class families who manifested the greatest social radicalism. This was not the consequence of their social status but, on the contrary, the result of intellectual consciousness. Such a radicalism demanded the rejection of the forms of a middle-class life-style and a fundamental change in one's personal life.

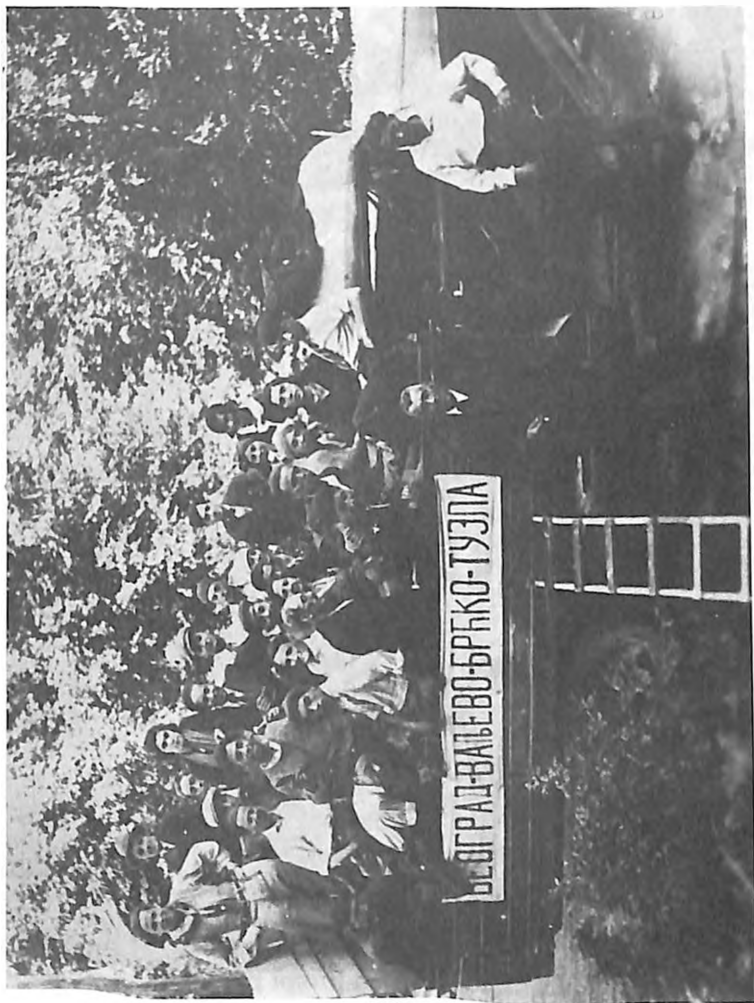
The desire for a complete spiritual and physical renewal became predominant as well as giving one's whole being to an ideal, to a profound faith in its goals and to the readiness to sacrifice oneself. This was demanded unconditionally. The tasks set were: knowledge of *ivrit*, the modern Hebrew language, *Hakhshara* (training for work in a kibbutz), the orientation towards agriculture, the change of one's calling and finally the *aliyah*, emigration to Palestine. Of great importance also was one's personal intellectual formation. Thus, it meant Palestinecentrism and the uncompromising fulfilment of the tasks set out.

As stated earlier, unification in the Union was only formal. A differentiation had to take place. Not all the young people could fulfill these requirements. Therefore, the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir*, the successor of *Ahdut hatzofim*, became a strong and exclusive movement. This organization did indeed remain in the Union as its spine and strongest pillar, but it did separate as a particular body. Members of the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* in Yugoslavia, if they had not been killed in the extermination camps of Jadovno, Jasenovac, Jabuka and others, joined in large numbers the National Liberation Struggle and Liberation Army. Nevertheless, no matter how much

the *Ha-shomer ha-Zair* supported the radical socialist positions, it clearly distanced itself from the Communist Party. The Communists negated Zionism as a bourgeois affair tied up with British imperialism. They denied the Jewish population the attributes of a nation. This was, however, denied by the Soviet Union when it set up a Jewish province in central Asia called Biro Bidjan. but this proved to be a big failure because no one wanted to remain there. Still, a section of the Jewish youth was intensely attracted to the ideology of Communism, for why should the Jewish question be treated separately when the world revolution would solve this issue together with all the others by changing the total social order? The dilemma between Zionism and Communism was the main dividing line of the Jewish youth. Each side deeply believed in its choice and the choice in this dilemma was the vital query for each individual. It also happened that individual leading personalities of the youth movement became Communists (Pavao Wertheim, Leon Geršković). But this did not weaken the Movement. Later, other groups and trends were formed. *Tehelet lavan* (Blue-White) was most widespread in Vojvodina and in Macedonia. Its orientation was just slightly less leftist than the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir*. The *Kadima* an organization of middleclass Zionist youth and the *Betar*, a branch of the "Revisionist" party and a right-wing trend in the Zionist spectrum had as their slogan: "a Jewish state on both side of the Jordan", and were opponents of Socialism and did not agree either with the principles and tolerant attitude of socialist Zionists towards the Arabs. It should, however, be stressed that the dominant majority in the Movement were composed of the organizations with a socialist direction. It would be a big omission to leave out the sports society *Maccabi*, from this survey. The center of *Maccabi* was Zagreb where the society had a fine, large hall. The young people exercised there according to the Sokol system and there were also many very active section engaging in fencing, football, light athletics, and other sports. *Maccabi* had branches throughout the country and was also a member of the world *Maccabi* Movement which was inspired by Zionist ideas. The physical renewal of the Jewish population was one of the postulates of the Movement and *Maccabi* carried this out very successfully.

The role of the youth Movement and of all its successors in its groups and organizations, was of great significance for the Yugoslav Jewish community. During World War II, those young people who managed to escape extermination, actively participated in the anti-fascist struggle and gave a large number of fighters

and leaders to the National Liberation Struggle and the National Liberation Army. After the state of Israel was established, about half of the surviving Yugoslav Jews settled in the new homeland where they have become a highly respected section of the revived national community. The surviving persons of the former resistance movement after the Second World War became leaders of the Yugoslav Jewish community among whom were Albert Vajs, Lavoslav Kadelburg, Eugen Verber, Oto Centner and others.



Izlet beogradskih omladinaca u Brčko i Tuzlu
The Belgrade youth on an excursion in Brčko and Tuzla



Jevrejsko radničko omladinsko društvo MATATJA, Sarajevo
Jewish working youth society MATATJA, Sarajevo