

BETAR

Within the framework of Zionism, a special movement for *Erez Israel* developed as a global, political and ideological aspiration of the Jewish ethnicity in Diaspora. Its different course of development in the struggle for the same idea and after numerous, significant acts and counteracts with the matrix, it nevertheless remained a secondary one. Under the general title of REVISIONISM, this movement evolved as a reaction to the "impotent" policy of the leadership of the world Zionist movement in solving the problems in Palestine and was to be concretely realized through the political activities of its large Zionist youth group - BETAR - the members of which were the base of Revisionism.

Betar was founded in 1923 in Riga (Latvia) as a variant of the Zionist youth movement adopted and spread widely among Jewish students and young workers, mainly in Eastern Europe. Although *Betar's* political goal was identical with that of other Zionist organizations, that is, emigration to Palestine and creation of a Jewish state, certain differences occurred in the programmatic sense which, with time, became more and more pronounced. At the very outset, *Betar* was founded on the psychologically attractive combination of Jabotinsky - Trumpeldor with Jabotinsky appearing as a charismatic leader and powerful figure who with his militant views developed a new style in Jewish behaviour. Josef Trumpeldor, on the other hand, was a symbol of its soldierly abilities as well as a symbol of the Jewish tragedy. In the positive attempt to forge a truly vital link between intellectual and physical capabilities, needed for the difficult task of "returning home" after centuries of wandering, *Betar* stressed the importance of learning the national language and culture, but coupled with self-defence methods. These young people whose activities launched the growth of *Betar*, considered themselves to be a part of the "Jewish legion" which was to consolidate itself in Palestine (future Israel) and among other actions also to gain skill in agricultural production and in the orga-

nization of hakhshara for emigration to Israel. This enthusiasm resulted in immigration into Israel via the *Betar* movement in the years 1925 to 1929. However, the constant presence of the word "legion" proved to be an excessive dimension to the *Betar* plans for the creation of a Jewish state. The nationalist enthusiasm which is not hard to understand in view of Jewish history, the hostile Arab elements in Palestine and around it with its intricate political situation, gave rise to a certain aggressive activity (if needed, of course) that overshadowed a possibly much more necessary skill at the time, namely, that of diplomacy.

Vladimir Zeev Jabotinsky was a Russian Jew born in 1880 in Odessa which had a large Jewish community at that time. Talented and well-educated, Jabotinsky as a very young man was noticed in his milieu as a writer, publicist and journalist and as a speaker of foreign languages with exceptional talent for translation and style of the Russian language. He was also engaged in publishing and editing a large number of reviews and newspapers in Russian, English, German and Hebrew. His stormy career was especially marked by his political activities. He joined the Zionist movement while still very young and already by the age of 25 he became one of the most prominent representatives of Russian Jewry. The seeds of Revisionism appeared early in the First World War which found Vladimir Jabotinsky in Copenhagen (Denmark) where he founded and published a review proclaiming the viewpoints that Jews, just as other oppressed and threatened peoples, should fight for their national and state integrity. In this sense, the basic tenet of Vladimir Jabotinsky was that Jewish legions should be formed which would fight with the Allies for the liberation of Palestine, under the Jewish flag. This would make it possible at the Peace Conference to demand a free Jewish state. The enterprising Jabotinsky succeeded in 1915 in organizing the first Jewish volunteer detachments in Alexandria who fought under the command of Captain Josef Trumpeldor and under their flag with the *Magen David* symbol. They also fought in the arduous battle at Gallipoli. He also managed to obtain from British authorities the permission to officially call upon the Jewish emigrants in London to volunteer for participation in creating a Legion - the *Gedud* (Hebrew). The Legion (a Jewish infantry regiment) was a highly successful military formation that displayed exceptional valour in the battles in Palestine and in 1918 it won the Jordan River valley. Together with Jabotinsky, who bore the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and earned the recognition of the high English officers, a special role in all these activities was played by the Legion's Captain Josef

Trumpeldor, whose exceptional military abilities (prior to this he had been the only Jewish high-ranking officer in the Russian Czarist army) and his personal tragic fate, were to stamp the Revisionist movement as seen clearly in the name of *Betar - Berit Trumpeldor*. And while Trumpeldor was the symbol of the new spirit of the Jew as warrior, Jabotinsky was the iron-fisted, rational figure of the "new Zionism".

At the end of the First World War, the Jewish Legion was disbanded. Two years later, when the Arabs demonstrated against the Jews settling in Palestine, Jabotinsky organized armed Jewish self-defence units. The illegal possession of arms nearly cost him fifteen years in gaol under a sentence passed by the Palestinian Military Tribunal. But he was pardoned and in 1921 he became a member of the Executive Board of the Supreme Zionist leadership. However, cooperation was not possible. Ideological and political differences between the World Zionist Organization, on the one side, and Jabotinsky and his associates on the other, were so great that Jabotinsky left the Supreme Zionist leadership. It was only in 1923 that the Revisionist movement was formed, that is, *Betar*. Opposition that the political conception of *Betar* as a right-wing faction of the World Zionist organization felt for the general socialist-Zionist political orientation, led to open conflicts both in Palestine and in the countries of the Diaspora which resulted even in physical clashes in the thirties. The Zionist socialists viewed *Betar* as an organization with a Fascist character particularly due to the brown shirts they wore and demanded that it should be distanced from public life. The representatives of *Betar* explained that the mentioned colour was a symbol of Israeli soil and that it had no connection at all with the symbols of which they were accused. Regardless of the poor acceptance among other Zionists and the risky policy of the "sword", *Betar* acquired adherents and, in proportion to its membership, it may be said that it was exceptionally active. As early as the thirties, thanks to Yirmiyahu Halpern systematic defence training of *Betar* members was introduced in the Diaspora countries. This included courses in self-defence, handling of light arms, participation in street fighting, boxing and learning army tactics. So-called work brigades were formed in Palestine that later grew into networks of disciplined units, stationed in the settlements in Upper Galilee and later elsewhere. The first *Betar* school for instructors was set up in Tel Aviv in 1928 and its recruits were the following year already active in defence of the city during an Arab rebellion. Also organized was a maritime unit in Tel Aviv while the central navy school of *Betar* was in Civitavecchia, in Italy,

where a considerable number of cadets were trained. *Betar* functioned relatively clandestinely manifesting growing inclination to terrorism as a way of fighting for the rights and for the state of the Jewish people. Although they were sworn Zionists, loyal to just the same idea common to all the world's Zionists, the Revisionists were considered a constant threat and possible hazard in the realization of the final political goal - the creation of the state of Israel. The rift was unbridgeable.

The first world conference of *Betar* was held in 1931 in Danzig. Eighty-seven delegates from twenty-one countries were present. They formulated the political principles, aims and rules of the Movement according to which defence exercises were the primary duties of every member as well as two years to be spent in the special work brigades for those who were ready to go to Palestine. Vladimir Jabotinsky became the head of *Betar* (*Rosh Betar*) and authorized to designate the whole leadership. The very pronounced political awareness of the Revisionist movement and *Betar*, within the frame of the World Zionist Organization, could not be accepted as such. A definite rift occurred two years later at the Zionist Congress in Prague which dealt with the final goal of Zionism and how this was to be achieved. The violent political conflict was likewise abetted by the decisions adopted early in January 1933 when the Honour Court of the Zionist organization condemned the independent political activities of the Revisionists as well as the linking of them into a separate grouping within the Zionist organization. It was decided to disband the Revisionist association and to have their members join local Zionist organizations. On this point, the attitude of the Zionist Jewish public in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia as a mainly socialist-oriented group and in harmony with the principles of world Zionism, can be seen from the following quotation: "... This atmosphere makes understandable the provocative tactics of the Union of Revisionists. There is no other way to explain their intention to conduct their own external policy actions, alongside the Zionist organization and even in this particular case, against it. There is no forum or institution which could allow such a gross violation of its foreign political prerogatives. This unique case in the Zionist movement was now condemned not only by large sections of the Zionist movements, but also by the Honour Court of the Zionist organization." (*Židov*, No 2, 13 January 1933, article entitled "Sharpened Relations Between the Zionist Organization and the Union of Revisionists".) However, the answer of the Revisionists was unswerving - the independent political work would be continued. At the Zionist Congress in

Prague, the Revisionist Party resigned from the World Zionist Organization. Vladimir Jabotinsky formed the so-called New Zionist Organization which he headed up to his death in 1940.

At the same time, the activities and stands of certain Yugoslav Jewish circles in various parts of the Kingdom (Serbia, Macedonia, Croatia) were also based on Revisionist ideology. During the stormy year of 1933 while "swords were crossed" in Berlin and Prague, the New Zionist Organization was established in Novi Sad, as a part of the already existing Revisionist Union of Yugoslavia (the *Hacochar*) headed by Dr. Julius Dohany. In the same year, *Betar* also appeared among the youth movements in Novi Sad as a Zionist-oriented youth organization of the nationalist type, headed by Viktor Štark who was the first "*natziv Betar of Yugoslavia*", then by Amir Franja Ofner and finally by Stevan Hajnal. The Novi Sad *Betar* published two papers - *Tagar* and *Ever Hajarden*. In Skoplje and Bitolj, in Macedonia, *Betar* had a small membership but which was nonetheless very active. Their militancy and frequent marches in the streets in close ranks under the blue and white flag and singing marching songs, did not overly attract the peaceful and quiet Jewish population, but it was noticed. At the head of the firmly organized *Betar* leadership of Skoplje was Viktor Avraham Kasuto. The Yugoslav Zionist Revisionists published the *Malhut Israel* which was the *Betar's* official organ.

At the second World Conference of *Betar* in Cracow in 1935, Vladimir Jabotinsky proposed a codified text of the *Betar* ideology called

Ha-Neder (the "Oath") which stipulated the rebirth of the state of Israel with a Jewish majority, on both sides of the Jordan river. One of its basic tenets was a monistic conception in Zionism, that is, the rejection of any fusion with other political and ideological teachings, especially Marxism and Socialism. It also urged the inculcation of a mode of thought and deed which Jabotinsky called *Hadar* and defined as "beauty, respect, self-esteem, politeness and faithfulness".

There were, it is true, many mutual attempts for the World Zionist Organization and the New Zionist Organization to overcome their dissensions and achieve cooperation. Even a separate group of the Zionist organization - the *Haolam* - was organized. From March 1935 onwards, it was engaged in regulating relations between the Zionists and the Revisionists but without success. Political rivalry also included financial rivalry so that besides the

official national funds *Keren Kayemet* and *Keren Hayesod* collected by the World Zionist Organization for the future state, there was also a Revisionist fund, the *Tel Hai* which caused serious argument. While the Zionist Organization considered it an auxiliary fund for the use of defence sports, the Revisionists contended that the main purpose of the *Tel Hai* was the establishment and management of the colonization of Palestine. The conflict over the status of these funds showed the Revisionist party's struggle for domination in Zionism. The legal settling of Palestine by Jews and the complicated diplomatic resolution of the issue of the state of Israel on which the World Zionist Organization worked, was undermined by the Revisionist - *Betar* militant style which implied everything, including even the illegal action of settling Palestine which in many cases resulted in specific consequences. The World Zionist Organization thoroughly and constructively solved the problem of the final formation of the state of Israel and succeeded in this for good. Yet, regardless of all the mistakes of the "new Zionists" and even deviations (as in 1936 when Jabotinsky proposed to the Polish government to evacuate the Jews from Poland to Palestine which was in fact a call to anti-Semitism) and political fallacies, it is very difficult to pass judgement upon the *Betar* and Revisionists. One should perhaps bear in mind the century-long fatigue of inferior status of their own people as well as the basic lofty Zionist ideals to which the eyes of *Betar* were also directed and a series of positive, concrete actions such as the settlement of several thousand Jews in Palestine via *Betar*, up to 1939. If we recall what happened with the Jews after 1939, one cannot help thinking: "Well, what if they did do that illegally ..."

An inclination to extreme attitudes and behaviour and a series of compromising errors, seriously harmed the hegemony of the Revisionist system which in its breadth and militancy failed to offer clear and direct plans for the creation of the longed-for state. The leadership and Jabotinsky received negative criticisms from various parts asserting "much talk and little work", although Revisionists did not even conceal that their struggle was exclusively political and that other Zionist associations should deal with the practical matters. This was quite an unpopular attitude not suited to attracting new adherents and winning broader support.

Vladimir Jabotinsky visited Yugoslavia in August 1935 and held public meetings in Novi Sad and Zagreb. His intention was to draw greater public attention to the First Conference of the New Zionist Organization that took place in early September in Vienna. To go by the detailed negative newspaper reports in the well-known pub-

lication the *Židov* (The Jew) dating from the period of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the public was disappointed, even though Jabotinsky's political meetings were well-attended. Jabotinsky explained the reasons why his party had walked out of the World Zionist Organization and presented its principles and goals which were largely identical with those being dealt with by the World Zionist Organization, which was slowly working towards the affirmation of its demands. It may be that the public expected to hear something new and something more, as it was a question of a "new" Zionism.

Various criticisms of Revisionism and *Betar* were nothing new. But there was a striking period when dissension and a rift occurred among the membership itself. At an Assembly of Revisionists in Vienna in 1937, the participants openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the leadership accusing it of passivity and incapability to cope with the political difficulties in Palestine. In urging re-activation, this Revisionist group formed an oppositional faction inside the New Zionist Organization calling itself the *Halohmim* ("Action"). However, a much greater crisis cropped up in the ranks of the Revisionists and *Betar* in 1940 when dissension split the New Zionist Organization into three groups. The first represented the official leadership's political orientation. Its views were proclaimed in the daily publication *Hamash-Kif* insisting it was the only original revisionist policy. The second group consisted mainly of workers with a revisionist orientation within the framework of the National Workers Federation. This group called itself the *Front* and rallied a considerable number of Palestinian Revisionists. The *Front* published the *Doar Horer* with revisionist-oriented but moderate political attitudes and urged the formation of a common labour institution to represent all Jewish workers regardless of party affiliation. In connection with the position of workers in the New Zionist Organization, the *Front* accused the leadership of causing dissension among the workers by dividing them into Revisionists and the rest, and by underestimating them and exhibiting concern only for their own interests. The *Front* declared itself for peace and cooperation with other political currents. The third group, the *Kitrug Ve-Emuna* ("Accusation and Faith"), in contrast to the reasonable and moderate *Front*, was characterized by extreme political attitudes towards the official leadership and to the *Front*. It put out various pamphlets and bulletins of which the most prominent was *Our Struggle* expressing a vigorous separatist policy in all directions and against the World Zionist Organization, the *Histadrut* (the labour unions), the "lethargic Revisionism.

Most of the European branches of *Betar* were destroyed in Holocaust. A few thousand members escaped by joining the Partizans. By consistently retaining its militant spirit, *Betar* and other Revisionist units in Europe, took part in the tragic ghetto uprisings in Warsaw, Vilna and Bialystok, while *Betar* members in Palestine volunteered for the British Army units and later joined the Jewish Brigade. With the mass loss of European Jewry, after the Second World War, Israel became the center of *Betar* organization. From 1948 onwards, when the state of Israel was formed, up to the late 1960's, *Betar* in cooperation with the *Herut* movement, established twelve joint settlements some of them in potentially "turbulent" border areas. In addition to Israel, *Betar* has members in about thirteen other countries, mainly in Latin America, the United States, South Africa and Australia.

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