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## The Influence of Polish National Heritage on Modern Jewish Nationalism

On 10 August 1935, thousands of members of Betar and Brit Hahayal (the Jewish veterans of the Polish Army) participated in a large parade held in Kraków in memory of Marshal Józef Piłsudski (who died on 12th May of that year), at the end of which Zeev Jabotinsky, the leader of the Revisionist Movement, delivered a passionate speech. In his speech he compared the two 'Yozefs' – the dead leader of the Polish Republic and the first hero of the Zionist national ethos, Josef Trumpeldor. He stated that on the following day, when Betar members would take a small symbolic sack of earth from Trumpeldor's grave in Tel Hai to Zwierzyniec, the two heroes would converse about the love of one's homeland, the eternal sacrifice for its sake and a life dedicated to the national interest. The next day a festive prayer service was held in the Old Synagogue in Kraków, in the presence of the city's dignitaries, and the parade marched to Wawel Hill. Officers from the Betar commission carried a small sack of earth in the form of a cannonball, wrapped in a blue and white flag, along with a scroll bearing the words, in Hebrew and Polish: 'To the adored leader of the Polish people, Yozef Piłsudski, the National Hebrew Movement, which aspires to liberate its people and land, brings earth from Yozef Trumpeldor's battlefield.' At the end of the ceremony, the head of Betar in Poland, Aaron Propes, emptied the sack of earth onto Piłsudski's grave, and the assembly stood to attention for five minutes. The Revisionist

newspaper, *Hayarden*, which reported the ceremony, wrote that when the participants returned to their homes throughout Poland, an 'indelible impression' remained in their hearts.<sup>1</sup>

This ceremony can be viewed either as a pathetic expression of the Revisionist Movement's identification with both the Polish state and the Polish nation, or alternatively as evidence of its firm belief that there was not only cooperation but also a political alliance between the movement and Poland, and thus the Polish destiny. This belief apparently continued to exist even during the post-Piłsudski era, during the four fateful years of the so-called 'Colonels Reign'. Even the Jewish-Hebrew poet-visionary (pol. *wieszcz*), Uri Zvi Greenberg, a radical Revisionist who described Poland in the bleakest of terms as a 'land of the Slaves, the forest of affections', a country whose anti-Semitism, in his view, was deep, eternal and murderous and dreamt of bringing total destruction upon the Jews, and who in 1923 prophesized that 'poisonous gas would seep into its [Poland's] castles', identified with Polish nationalism and Polish patriotism and wrote in 1936: 'Poland has been revived and her White Eagle is screaming from the shores of the Baltic to the Black Sea'. Moreover, he perceived Poland as the model from which Zionists should learn their patriotic nationalism, their readiness to fight for a Jewish State in Eretz Yisrael and its 'territorial intactness in its historical boundaries'.<sup>2</sup>

What was the source of this profound identification with Poland's fate, and what was it that gave rise to the belief that Poland was a faithful ally of Revisionist politics and aims? And does not this ardent identification contradict the view that many Polish Jews expressed, the anti-Polish attitudes, indeed even the hostility towards the Republic, and the fact that 'large parts of the Jewish press, as well as many Jewish political leaders and Jewish groups, became outspokenly critical of Poland'? If this assertion is true, and the Polish Jews lacked any sense of solidarity with the Polish state and with Polish aspirations, how could the Jews be influenced by Polish nationalism and Polish national heritage, and more than that, 'borrow' Polish national motifs

<sup>1</sup> Jabotinsky addresses The Revisionist Youth, *Hayarden* (25 August 1935).

<sup>2</sup> U.Z. Greenberg, 'The Time Will Come?', in: *The Book of Indictment and Faith* (Tel Aviv, 1937), 111 [in Hebrew].

and symbols in order to convert them into 'authentic' Jewish motifs and symbols? Was the Revisionist stand an exceptional one based on 'pragmatic' considerations, or, perhaps, was it a result of the movement's 'romantic nationalism'?

Polish Jewry was a heterogeneous society, and hence the Jews' contacts with different sectors and components of Polish culture varied greatly. Moreover, it is crucial to distinguish between the influence of the intellectual and cultural climate in Poland on individual Jews such as, for example, Nahum Sokolow or Isaac Greenbaum, on the one hand, and the influence of this climate on large collectives such as movements, parties or youth organizations. In the latter context, the influences are not given expression solely in the world of ideas, but also in the world of symbols and praxis. If this is the case, it is only logical to assume that Poland's history, historical experience, political culture and nationalism have had a certain degree of influence on the development and nature of modern Jewish nationalism. The reason for this assumption is the fact that Zionism as a national mass movement developed in Poland, within the intensive process of Poland's modern state-building (*państwowość*) and nation-building (*społeczeństwo*), with various Jewish organizations participating in the Polish political arena. Since Poland during the inter-war period was the center of Zionist activity in the Diaspora, where Zionism had a free hand to both organize politically and take action, it is also logical to assume that modern Jewish national ideology emerged and developed not only under the influence of West European national ideas, but also under the influence of Polish nationalism and Poland's national struggle. The Jews in Poland were considered a national minority, and given minority rights to organize politically and to act as a recognized national minority with national self-interests in political and cultural spheres. It is logical, therefore, to assume that they were inspired by a Polish version of European nationalism. Poland was a multinational, economically backward, highly nationalistic country, whose Jewish communities were rooted in an autonomous Jewish culture and religion but were also involved in the modernization process, and thus

Poland provided a natural environment for the growth of Jewish nationalism and was well-suited for Zionist expansion.

In his *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland*, Andrzej Walicki writes that 'Polish ideas influenced such thinkers as Mazzini, Michelet ... and others', and it 'seems justified to treat the Poland of this time [the 19th century] as a classical country of romantic nationalism, and to claim that the Polish national liberation movement, together with its intellectual counterparts, played an important role in the 19th century European history'.<sup>3</sup> Almost in the same spirit, Zeev Jabotinsky described the atmosphere in Poland between the World Wars as 'romantic and tragic'. Thus, it is only logical to assume that Jewish nationalism, which emerged and grew in inter-war Poland, would be inspired by Polish romantic nationalism. Indeed, as Ezra Mendelssohn writes in his *Zionism in Poland*, 'in a general way, Polish nationalism exerted a tremendous influence on Jewish-Polish youth and pointed a large number of Jews towards Zionism'. Thus, while a small number of Jews became Polonized nationalists, the majority shaped their own new national identity under the influence of Polish nationalism. According to Mendelssohn's observation, the development of a Jewish national consciousness was a response to the failure of young Jews to gain acceptance within Polish society: 'Identification with Jewish nationalism was among other things a way of trying to gain respect in the eyes of Poles'.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Polish nationalism wore a 'Jewish garb', or, vice versa, Jewish nationalism wore a 'Polish garb'.

Now, if indeed the Polish type of nationalism exerted, as Mendelssohn claims, 'a tremendous influence on Jewish-Polish youth and pointed a large number of Jews toward Zionism', was it only the so-called Zionist right wing, that is the Revisionist Movement, which far more than any other Zionist group declared its affinity to a Polish state, Polish nationalism and national messianism, that was influenced far more than other Zionist groups by Polish national visionary litera-

<sup>3</sup> A. Walicki, *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland* (Oxford, 1982), 2.

<sup>4</sup> E. Mendelssohn, *Zionism in Poland: The Formative Years, 1915-1926* (London, 1981), 345-346.

ture, by Polish national politics and by the historical experience of the Polish national armed struggle?

While the national worldview of the dominant Labor parties was crystallized before Poland became an independent state, Revisionism emerged, spread and was shaped in inter-war Poland as a 'highly nationalistic' movement. All its branches willingly, even consciously, embraced Polish national symbols, converting them into authentic Jewish national symbols, at the same time consciously stressing this 'take-over'. Some of the first hostile responses to the appearance of the Revisionist Movement in 1925 indeed criticized it as being steeped in the spirit of Polish Romanticism, medieval chivalry and romantic literature, such as Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Ogniem i mieczem* [With Fire and Sword] and *Potop* [The Deluge]. The Revisionist political style and spirit, the 'Revisionist mentality', were described as 'Polish Romanticism' to the core. However, in a yet unpublished article, Marcus Silber claims that more than a few Polish Socialist-Zionists were also inspired by Polish national ideology and literature, but were reluctant to admit it. He also points to the fact that this affinity was based on mutual influences, that is to say, the fact that Jewish biblical motifs were integrated into Polish literature, such as the works of Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, Stanisław Wyspiański (his play *Wesele* [The Wedding] was translated by a Hebrew teacher in Łódź in 1938), Stefan Żeromski, Eliza Orzeszkowa and others. This fact made it easier for nationalistic Jews to appropriate certain Polish national and messianic ideas and symbols.

However, in the writings of members of the Labor Movement, there was an increasingly ambivalent attitude toward Poland, an attitude that became more and more negative during the 1930s. The Zionist Labor Movement perceived Poland as a land characterized by soldier-worship and national Romanticism. The Labor Movement instead followed the Polish Positivism of the 1870s, which called for a gradual development of the Polish culture, economy and society. There is more than a casual resemblance between the positivist ideology of 'work on the foundations' (*praca u podstaw*) and the Zionist-Socialist concept of 'constructivism', a gradual building of the foundations of the new Jewish community in Palestine. After Poland gained its independence, the Zionist

Labor Movement showed little sympathy towards Pilsudski's autocratic regime, in almost total contrast to the warm words of appreciation that came from Jabotinsky and his movement.

It is in the Revisionist Movement one encounters an intriguing case of acculturation. In this case, 'Polonization' did not simply mean an effort to integrate into Polish national society and culture; it meant constructing a completely new system of Jewish national self-awareness, symbols, life-style and the like, which would serve as an equivalent or similar counter-part to Polish nationalism.

In his earlier days, Jabotinsky was not a great admirer of Polish romantic nationalism. In 1906–1913, he wrote in the Jewish-Russian newspaper, *Rasviet* [The Dawn], several anti-Polish articles. Only after 1926 did he begin to appreciate Poland under Pilsudski's rule, and saw the 'Grandfather' [Dziadek] as the model of a great statesman, who considered that state institutions are vital forces in the building of a modern nation-state within a short period of time. Jabotinsky considered him a leader who put 'independence above and beyond social process and economic classes'. 'I know all the dark sides of Poland', he wrote in 1933, but 'I also know the other side of the Polish nature'. One of the main positive elements in Poland was Pilsudski and his followers. He also stated: 'Were I a Polish Jew I would say: My friends, Marshal Pilsudski's group, his faithful followers, are your last hope of finding honest allies...'. In the eyes of the more radical Revisionists, Pilsudski was perceived mainly as a freedom fighter, a terrorist who became, 'without changing his personality', a 'great nation-builder of liberated Poland and the legislator of its national constitution'. Even when he was a 'terrorist', 'he was not a criminal but rather was loyal to the supreme law of the motherland'. On 9th September, 1938, 'Jeruzolima Wyzwolona' [Liberated Jerusalem], the Polish language organ of the I.Z.L. (Irgun Zvai Leumi – National Military Organization) printed a collection of Pilsudski's sayings entitled 'Polityka Walki Czynnej' [The Politics of a Practical War] – 'How to Educate for a National War of Liberation'. The slogan of the I.Z.L., 'rak kach' – 'Only thus', which made its first appearance in J.W., was a literal translation of the Polish slogan, 'Tylko tak'. No wonder, then, that one of the leaders of the Lehi (Fighters for the Freedom of

Israel or Stern Gang), an underground or even terrorist group, declared that 'we, the students of Pilsudski's Poland, have not forgotten [his] lesson', and it is also not surprising that the I.Z.L. journal in Palestine, 'Bacherev' [With a Sword], published a series on the life of Pilsudski entitled 'From the Lives of the Great Revolutionaries', and that on 8th August, 1938, 'Trybuna Naradowa' [The National Stage], published a large picture of Pilsudski on its front page, together with an article on 'The Lesson of August the Sixth', which was the day Pilsudski's First Brigade had set out for a battle across the border with Russia.<sup>5</sup>

However, 'Poland' provided something beyond merely being a model of a struggle for independence. The sight of a detachment of Polish soldiers in Palestine in 1941 inspired this observation by the radical nationalist thinker, Abba Ahimeir, concerning the differences between Russian, German and Polish types of nationalism:

[...] It is indeed a great error that our generation absorbed so little of the 19th century Polish culture. This was not the culture of all mankind (like the Russian culture), or the individual (like the German culture), but rather the culture of the nation. Goethe, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy poisoned us. The sons of a people fighting for their national survival, with the superb writers and poets of Polish literature, could have invigorated us.<sup>6</sup>

Achimeir's conception of German and Russian nationalism, needless to say, is misleading; at the same time, he neglected the fact that, to quote Norman Davies, 'there were as many different Poland's as there were people who cared to perceive it'.<sup>7</sup> And to this can be added, different types of Polish nationalism. However, in Achimeir's view, and it is not only his view, Polish nationalism was an 'organic' national culture, based on patriotism and on the concept of territorial integrity, and this is the common ground between it and, needless to say, the Revisionist type of Jewish nationalism.

<sup>5</sup> Y. Shavit, 'Revisionism and Polish Political Culture', *Journal of Israeli History*, vol. 6, Issue 2 (Autumn 1985): 229–246.

<sup>6</sup> A. Ahimeir, 'Poland in Palestine', *Hamashkif* (24 January 1941) [in Hebrew].

<sup>7</sup> N. Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland. 1975 to the Present* (Oxford, 1981), 8.



Thus, one can claim that the Revisionists' type of Zionist nationalism borrowed its ethos, rules of behavior, symbols and rhetoric from Polish nationalism. The Polish experience also taught the Revisionists that a national movement needs heroes and a romantic-heroic mood, and indeed, the Revisionist Hebraismus militantis was crystallized in a Poland with national romantic motifs, national heroism and national eschatology, fluctuating between desperation and messianic expectations; between a realistic national policy and dreams of greatness and glory that might compensate for generations of humiliation, repression and suffering. The Revisionist intelligentsia, who had been educated in Polish schools, and some of whom had attended Polish universities and served in the Polish Army, were more responsive to this atmosphere than any prior generation of Polish Jewry.

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A year before the outbreak of the World War II, Jabotinsky wrote:

Until two months ago the world believed that there was one huge fist of steel which could destroy everything and no one could stop it. And then one country stood up, and not the biggest of countries either, one country, and this will certainly be engraved to its credit and glory in the chronicles of history, and said: 'We will fight back'. And by doing so it finally pierced a hole in that fist.<sup>8</sup>

The fist is Germany's and the country that stood up against it is Poland.

The tragic story of the Revisionist Movement's identification with Poland, its hopes and its futile relationship with various Polish factions, its baseless assessment of its political and military power is manifested in a telegram Jabotinsky rushed to send on 2nd September, 1939 from France to the Polish President, Ignacy Mościcki:

Whether Germany's suicidal aggression be destined to end in military debacle later, or in moral collapse now, it will remain engraved in history that Poland's resolve has saved Europe. In the name of the movement which years ago was the first to realize Poland's mission as one of the world's greatest powers and conceived the Providential Connection between the renaissance of the Jewish Palestine state and the triumph of Poland, I humbly call God's blessing

<sup>8</sup> Z. Jabotinsky, 'Zion Sejm', in: *Speeches* (Jerusalem, 1958), 327-344.

upon your country, her Marshal, her soldiers of all creeds united in loyalty and sacrifice.<sup>9</sup>

From 1935, the Revisionists faced a dilemma. On the one hand, they recognized the danger looming for the Jews of Poland because of Polish anti-Semitism, both the popular and state versions. On the other, they still identified with Poland, and in particular, believed that cooperation was still possible between the Polish Government and the Revisionist Movement for the purpose of encouraging an organized emigration ('evacuation') of Polish Jewry and their illegal immigration to Palestine, as well as to receive aid in the form of arms and training from the Polish Army. As a result, they identified both with the Polish state and Polish nationalism. The Revisionist premise was that the Jewish national minority differed from the other national minorities, since they had no national aspirations, that is to say, neither political nor territorial claims, and thus could identify with the Poles' claims that Poland is a 'Polish national state'.

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In 1932, the poet Aaron Zeitlin wrote in his visionary mystery play *Esterke*<sup>10</sup> (written in Yiddish: 'Poland, your night and mine have intertwined'.<sup>11</sup> On the night of 31st August - 1st September, 1939, a dark night fell on both Poland and the Jews, putting an end to around 1000 years of Jewish civilization in Poland).

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In Israeli scholarship, it is common to claim that Jewish immigrants from Poland, mainly in the mid-1920s, brought with them a lower-middle-class lifestyle. In fact, they played a central role in shaping the urban society of Jewish Palestine. Moreover, from the Zionists' perspective, between the two World Wars, the Jewish communities in Poland and in Palestine constituted two elements of one political system, because Poland was a decisive playground in the struggle for political hegemony in the Zionist movement, as well as in Palestine. It was in Poland that Zionism became a political mass movement, and

<sup>9</sup> Doc. 2/29/2/1A, Jabotinsky Institute Archives, Tel Aviv, Israel.

<sup>10</sup> *Esterke* was the legendary Jewish mistress of King Casimir the Great.

<sup>11</sup> A. Zeitlin, *Esterke* (Warszawa, 1932) [in Yiddish].

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began to use intensive modern and populist methods, such as popular newspapers, election campaigns and so forth.

For many years, Israeli scholarship discussed the German or Russian influences on the nature of modern Jewish nationalism, ignoring the Polish influence. The reason for this negligence is not only the dark shadow of Polish anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, but also the 'poor image' of Polish culture that took root in the Israeli worldview. Only recently has this image begun to change, and studies on the rich, modern cultural life of the Polish Jewry have been published. Nonetheless, it seems that this culture does not receive the credit it deserves.