To Be a Jewish Teenager in Poland

Handout: Young People’s Autobiographies

Hanzi
A 17-year-old girl, member of the Betar Zionist youth movement

I became close with members of my class who belonged to Betar. Of course, they wanted to recruit me, and the idea of Jewish national politics interested me greatly. When I asked that they assign me some task, I was given the responsibility of organizing the Betar youth movement. When members of the chapter greeted me on the street with the cry of "Tel Hai," I would feel very self-conscious. It was the first time in my life that anyone paid attention to me . . .

I went to Betar only on days when there were meetings, in order to take care of my organizational responsibilities. I loathed every moment that I spent there. Whenever I returned from a meeting I experienced an internal struggle. On one hand, I felt strong national religious feelings; on the other hand, I thought about the workers, the poor, the victims of war . . .

After almost a year in Betar I still didn’t fit in socially. Everyone there was quite different from me. Most had attended a state gymnasium; they were bourgeois, always well-dressed, and spoke Polish like members of the intelligentsia. I thoroughly despised them. I had only one dress that I was forced to wash every day. It was usually dirty and torn in several places . . .

Rumors circulated in our chapter that Jabotinsky had been in Vilna but hadn’t visited us. This upset me. On Saturday there was a regular chapter meeting, as if everything was fine. Everyone was standing in rows, laughing happily, full of the joy of life. I was the only one whose heart felt empty. I knew that the leader of our chapter had had a private meeting with Jabotinsky. I was extremely jealous. I

---

1 Tel Hai was a Jewish settlement in Palestine, in the Galilee, which was attacked by Arabs in 1920. Among those killed was Zionist leader Joseph Trumpeldor. The attack at Tel Hai became a powerful symbol for Zionist movements, especially Betar, which was named in Trumpeldor's memory.
2 High school.
3 Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky (1880-1940), right-wing Zionist leader and author. In 1925, he established the World Union of Zionist Revisionists, the parent organization of the Betar youth movement.
decided to step forward and ask him to tell us at least what Jabotinsky said. I felt very embarrassed and wanted to change my mind. Everyone will turn toward me, I thought, and laugh at me. None of them will understand how I feel. But I was so agitated that I wasn’t able to stop, and instinctively I did what I had in mind. I blushed. Everyone whispered something to his neighbor, but I didn’t hear what they said. The girl standing beside me also blushed. Our chapter leader agreed to give only a limited account. He said that Jabotinsky is getting older, that he is sick and weak, and that we could help him only if we listened and followed his lead. As he spoke, everyone else in the room was silent. My heart froze, and only afterwards I realized that my eyes were wet.

"The Stormer"\(^4\)

*Member of a Maccabi sports club*

It was my good fortune that the local leader of the Maccabi sports club offered to send me to the mountains for a month-long course in teaching physical education. Finally, I could relax in the fresh air. I became a member of the sports club straightaway. That same month, an instructor came from Lodz to run a three-day preparatory program for the whole club. At the end I was chosen, along with four other boys and one girl, to go to the camp at Skala.

I will never forget the last night before we left. The club arranged a special evening in our honor. All of the members were present, as well as invited guests. It was very pleasant, but, being shy, I sat off to the side. I thought of my mother, sitting at home with nothing to eat; my younger sister, who went to bed hungry; and my poor Uncle H. in Lodz, who couldn’t make ends meet...

The mountains made an indescribable impression on me—a wonderful natural phenomenon. I learned a great deal there about physical education and related subjects.

Once we went to a moshavah\(^5\) run by Ha-Shomer ha-Tsa`ir. I met many of its members, who explained their ideology to me. I thought about it quite a bit afterwards and came to the conclusion that labor, freedom, the kibbutz and Palestine could all become part of my aspirations, which I would realize in the near future.

\(^4\) These autobiographies were collected as part of a contest in the 1930s. Some of the authors used pseudonyms instead of their real names.

\(^5\) A Zionist training farm where young people learned how to be farmers in preparation for moving to Palestine.
I returned home as an instructor in physical education. Back home they wanted me
to work for the Maccabi club and for Gordonia . . . But I refused to do any such
work and started to look for employment . . .

G.W.

A tailor's apprentice who joined Tsukunft

For a long time I had been looking to become involved in an organization that
represented my interests. When I was still in school, I learned of the existence of
these organizations, because many of my friends there belonged to various Zionist
groups. Even then I wondered what these organizations were doing, as the people
in them were always feuding. When my friends invited me to join one of the four
different Zionist groups that were around at the time, I replied that I didn’t see
eye-to-eye with organized movements that all strive toward the same goal and yet
aren’t united but are divided and fight among themselves. Therefore, I couldn’t join
them. At the time it didn’t even occur to me that there was an organization that
was opposed to all forms of Zionism.

Later I took night classes, where I met friends from childhood who had become
tailors or carpenters or were employed in other trades, and who had already joined
Tsukunft . . . They began to recruit me, informing me about the principles of
socialism, and I realized that this was the cause that all workers must take up. I
decided that after I finished night school I would become a member of Tsukunft. I
had three levels of night school during the second year of my vocational training. In
fact, I joined the movement right away; it was still in its early days. Here I
discovered a new life . . . full of belief in the future. It prompted me to think about
describing the evil that I’d had to endure in the workshop, about denouncing
everything that is dark and bleak, bloodthirsty and exploitative . . .

More than a year and a half have passed since I finished my training. During this
time I’ve already been through a great deal. I’ve worked in several shops . . . and
I’ve learned a lot of the things that I didn’t know until now, but I’m still far from
being fully qualified in my trade. I’ve been unemployed for many months, but I
haven’t been sitting around idly. I’ve used this time for my intellectual education. I
read a lot and studied Dubnow’s history of the Jews, then Graetz’s . . . I read
Sholem Aleichem and Peretz, the shining stars of Yiddish literature. I read many
things about the Jewish labor movement, so full of vitality and struggle, and about
our great, devoted freedom fighters. I’ve come to believe in the workers’ cause . . .
I got my younger brother involved in the youth movement, and he, too, is now an active member. He also has the same views as I do . . . At first, he was in the Zionist movement Ha-Shomer ha-Tsa`ir, and then he became convinced that it wasn’t for him and joined Tsukunft. Our next brother in age belongs to SKIF, the Bund’s children’s movement . . .

Young people live with hope and faith in a bright future . . . I think that the old ways will persist until the 1950s, certainly no longer. And then the day of true brotherhood among nations will come, the day of our ultimate belief in a completely classless society will arrive, and people throughout the world will be free.

**Esther**

*From a Hasidic family, member of Bnos Agudas Yisroel*

Although I read a great deal, this didn’t keep me from becoming active in a youth organization. In addition to the classes at Beys Yaakov, the school had a youth organization called Basya. I was one of its first and most active members. I was ready to make any sacrifice to help develop this organization. I recruited members and also served as secretary. I often did my school work late at night because I had so little time. As important as school was to me, the organization rated a hundred times higher . . .

We were promoted from the youth organization Basya into Bnos Agudas Yisroel. We participated in a solemn induction ceremony, at which the speakers repeatedly stressed the exalted nature and significance of our duties. Although their speeches impressed me and made me think, my enthusiasm had waned . . . I couldn’t abide the organization’s extreme restrictions. Bnos had rules that forbade a great deal, preferring restrictions to fresh experience. For example, I loved going to the theater and longed to see real actors, but I wasn’t even supposed to think about this . . . I found such narrowness oppressive . . .

I loved Bnos despite its faults.