

Education – My Life

Memoirs of a Hebrew teacher

Alexander C Levin

Translated from Hebrew by Michael Belling

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Histadrut Ivrit in South Africa in Johannesburg,
South Africa in 1954 in Hebrew, as
Bema'agalot Hachinuch
Autobiography of a Hebrew Teacher
By Alexander C Levin

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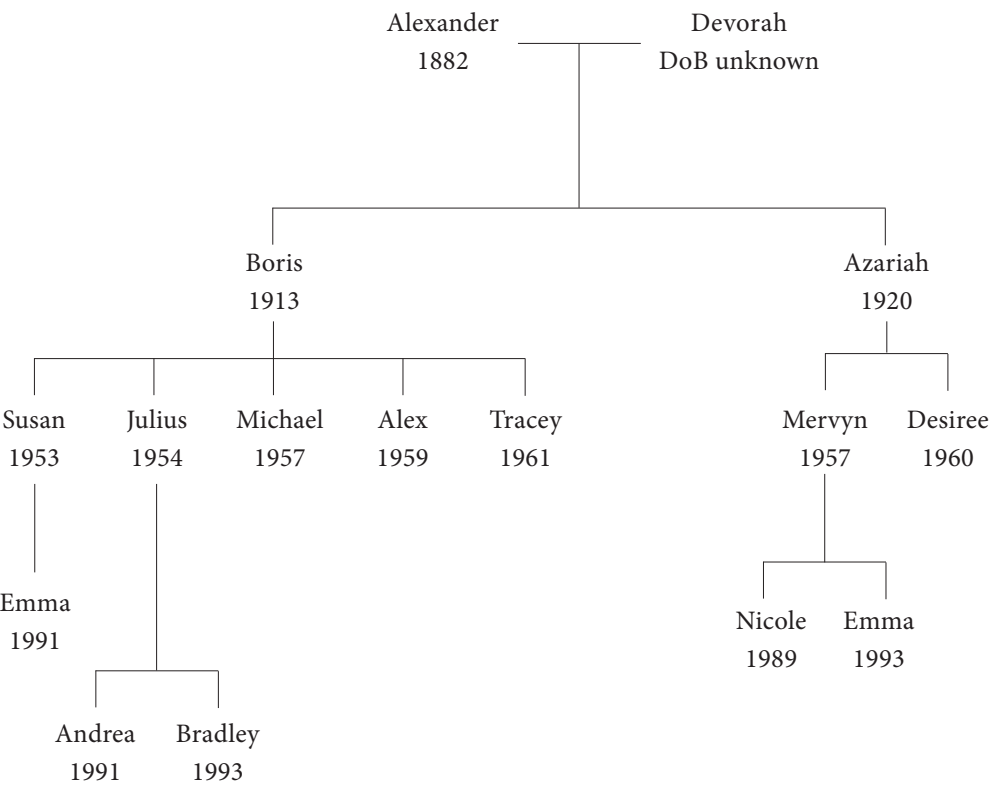
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*Dedicated to
Devorah, may she rest in peace,
my dear wife,
an enlightened woman of valour,
my right hand,
by taking my heart
to overcome the obstacles
on the difficult path of the Hebrew teacher.*

The Author (Alexander C Levin)

Levin & Lewin Family Tree*



** On arrival in South Africa, the Immigration Officer spelt the Levin surname incorrectly and the family decided to maintain Lewin.*

Living descendants of Levin & Lewin Family (2019)



From left to right: Mervyn, Nicole and Emma* with the original book by Alexander Levin



From left to right: Susan, Andrea, Alex, Emma**

From left to right: Andrea, Susan, Emma**, Alex



From left to right: Julius, Michael, Desiree, Tracey, Bradley

* Emma Levin, daughter of Mervyn

** Emma Opitz, daughter of Susan

Translator's notes

This memoir provides a challenge to the translator. The style of writing is highly literate and often very beautiful, the Hebrew in the style and often with the vocabulary of the early modern revival of the language. It is also the language of a hugely learned man, steeped in the historical writings of the Jewish people, from the Bible, the Talmud, rabbinical writings, through to the works of the nineteenth-century Zionist pioneers and those who revived Hebrew as a modern, everyday tongue. Every effort has been made to reflect this manner of writing in English.

Sometimes the Hebrew has no real equivalent in English. Frequently traditional terms from classical sources are used, with concepts that have no exact parallels when translated. In some cases, I have taken what I consider the necessary liberty of using standard English to convey these words and concepts. Common terms, such as *beit midrash* and *cheder* have been retained, with an explanation added in the text.

I have avoided the use of footnotes, which would break the flow of the narrative. Sometimes, a brief explanation is inadequate. For example, the term *Mussar* literally means morality, but has far broader connotations in nineteenth-century Jewish religious history. Detailed explanations in such cases would have made the text too long and distorted the original style of writing.

Another word frequently used by the author is *maskil* or *maskilim* in the plural. The literal meaning is enlightened person, used to describe those who left the traditional religious fold during the Enlightenment. The accepted translation of the term in English, however, is intellectual and this has been used in the book.

The Hebrew is written using both past and present tense at different times. For convenience, consistency and conventional English usage, the past tense has been used throughout.

Michael Belling

Foreword

South African Jews often describe two features that lend a distinctive air to Jewish life in this country. The first are the common Lithuanian origins of a significant portion of the Jewish population. With the mass arrival of immigrants in the two decades before and after the dawn of the twentieth century, South African Jewish life became infused with a Litvak spirit. Tragically this diasporic offshoot became a surviving remnant of a rich and wonderful civilisation otherwise destroyed between 1941 and 1945.

The second feature that is often heralded by South African Jews today as distinctive is the elaborate school system that educates the majority of Jewish children in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Though Herzlia and King David have the largest share of students, they compete with an array of Jewish schools of different stripes. As it often does in hindsight, this pattern now has the air of inevitability. But it certainly was not the case when immigrant Jews first began to eke out a living on these shores, and indeed was not the case until well into the second half of the twentieth century.

This memoir, recovered from obscurity through the tireless efforts of Mervyn Levin and the evocative translation of Michael Belling, connects these two features of South African Jewish life through the life, work, and words of Alexander Levin. In fascinating detail and lively prose, we rediscover a lost world of Lithuania, learning of the education of a man whose path took him from Kozlova to Cape Town, with many waystations along his circuitous route.

The first two sections of the memoir provides a first-hand account of Alexander Levin's schooling in a world that was in flux, buffeted by political discord within and without the Jewish community, disruptive economic change, and ructions within the Russian Empire. The third section carries his story across the ocean, first to South Africa, and then finally on to Israel.

Levin's experience of immigration was like that of so many others from Lithuania. But his career in South Africa set him apart from his peers. While his travails as a transient Jewish educator in a poor immigrant community could easily represent that of others of his ilk, he ultimately departed from the more typical path of disillusionment and poverty by playing a leading role in establishing a Jewish day school in Cape Town.

His account roots the history of Jewish education in South Africa into a much longer and larger story. In doing so, Alexander Levin offers us a new way to understand and appreciate the cultural legacy of Lithuanian Jewry on these shores, and how strands of this legacy are still enmeshed with us in the present day. It is a fitting tribute to all that made the present possible.

Adam Mendelsohn
Director of the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies

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Preface

My journey to translate the autobiography and understand my roots

This has been an immensely fulfilling and thrilling project since the chance discovery of my grandfather's autobiography in Hebrew only three years ago. The original text was inaccessible for me, as unfortunately, I cannot read the language.

My curiosity was sparked by the synopsis and some personal research which showed that when published originally in 1954, the book was praised by influential contemporaries. It was distributed at the time to leading library collections in South Africa, Israel, the UK and US where it remains available – and it remains a moving experience to leaf through.

It therefore gives me great pleasure to have brought this translated autobiography to publication more than a half century later. The richness of the content has greatly exceeded my expectations.

The book has led to much personal thought and reflection, which I'm pleased to share with readers. Sadly, when Alexander Levin died in 1960, I was too young to have any living memories of him.

For me, the book is important for several reasons:

Shining throughout the narrative is his profound intellect with superb recollections of the diverse range of people he met throughout his life across many countries. His in-depth observations and perspectives on education, community and Jewish life convey a curious, bold and challenging mindset facing wrenching changes and upheaval in the societies where he lived and visited.

Alexander's vivid and incisive insights and first hand experiences of the joys and tragedies of Eastern European life in the first quarter of the 20th Century are eloquently expressed. The interaction between memory and history and how they impact each other leave an enduring legacy of these often tumultuous times.

The autobiography is also a unique and authoritative contribution to the establishment of Jewish education in South Africa. His pioneering role, written with great humanity and in beautiful prose, describes people, themes and events in impressive detail.

Wherever he taught, Alexander did not shrink from challenging the status quo. He stimulated innovative approaches to pedagogy with inspirational leadership, influencing countless teachers and pupils by his teaching methods that were radical at the time.

His meeting with a leading pre-War South African statesman and moving experiences on a visit to early post-independence Israel further exemplify an active and rewarding life.

This is also a man who displayed emotional restraint towards family and other relationships, which was typical of the times. Being quite tight lipped and reserved seemed to be a prevalent characteristic of a generation that experienced pogroms and the Holocaust. The feelings expressed reveal a complex, honourable and kind personality – a mensch.

His experiences in Eastern Europe and playing a key founding role in the development of Jewish education in South Africa and especially as the first Principal of Herzlia School in Cape Town, are valuable gifts – and an outstanding and priceless legacy to the local community, historians, his descendants and future generations.

Through their different lenses, readers will doubtless identify the relevance of history to understanding the present.

My fervent hope is that the publication in English will achieve wider dissemination than was possible with the original text over 50 years ago.

Overall, I have learnt much about my roots from the book. Alexander's memoirs provide a more meaningful context, both historical and personal.

It has also, I think, changed me somewhat, both in gaining a deeper appreciation of my heritage and achieving greater self-understanding.

The instinct to question assumptions and to contest ideas, which characterises much of my interactions in my professional and often personal life too, is shared with my grandfather. I only now realise that such traits have been directly transmitted between generations.

My grandfather has become a personal role model for inspiration and stretching boundaries, both in his approach as an educator and in his travel adventures. I have been able to follow in his footsteps only partially, emulating the passion to explore by having visited some 65 countries to date but fall short of his great wisdom.

The book has reaffirmed that for me the key to a fulfilling life is balance: understanding the past, living in the present and contemplating the future.

Mervyn Levin
February 2019

Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to many people in several countries for active, as well as behind the scenes support and encouragement, in helping to make the book a reality.

Certainly, the project could not have been achieved without a strong team effort, encouragement and support - both moral and material. I benefited from the helpful advice of many on approaching philanthropic sources, gaining sponsorship, as well as the production and logistics in bringing the project to birth.

Michael Belling, the book's Johannesburg-based translator, has done an outstanding job conveying with consummate skill and flair the spirit and essence of my grandfather. His specialist knowledge of the historical contexts in which Alexander Levin lived, together with his background as a journalist and author, give the reader a meticulous, sensitive and nuanced account of his interesting life. It was always a pleasure to work with Michael on the project.

Geoff Cohen, Director of Education at Herzlia, has from the outset been very supportive of the project. He and his colleagues recognise that the current success of the school and its thousands of alumni are built on the contributions of the founders and leaders such as Alexander Levin, the first Principal, who guided Herzlia through its nearly 80 years of very proud history. I am deeply grateful to the school for administering the fund and making available resources to profile the autobiography to the wider Herzlia community of past and present pupils.

Solly Kaplinski, an Israel-based social entrepreneur who is Executive Director, Overseas Joint Ventures, Joint Distribution Committee, and a former Headmaster of Herzlia, immediately saw the value of translating the book. He became my generous mentor and wonderful matchmaker, guiding me on funding pitches, making connections and securing funding from philanthropists. Without Solly's access to the international funding ecosystem of which I had no prior experience, together with his strong endorsements for the project, the funding goal would not have been achieved and the project would not have materialised. He was always at hand with wise counsel.

Adam Mendelsohn, Associate Professor and Director of the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, at the University of Cape Town, was the initial champion of the project, providing anchor funding. The strong academic endorsement gave the project legitimacy in my search to source additional funding. This provided independent evidence that translation of the autobiography has wider and more substantive merit than as a mere family testament. As an alumnus of UCT, I was also particularly gratified to receive the funding. Janine Blumberg, also of the Kaplan Centre, was of invaluable support in navigating the challenging journey from the translated manuscript and original illustrations to publication. I greatly appreciated her on-the-ground knowledge and stoicism.

I'd also like to thank family:

The descendants of Azariah, my late father, who was Alexander's younger son: Desiree, my sister, who found the book, Nicole and Emma, my daughters, and my dear wife, Alicia.

The descendants of Boris, Alexander's elder son (named Baruch in the book): Susan, Julius, Michael, Alexandra and Tracey, and their children, Emma, Andi and Brad, and families.

Susan's husband, John, as a retired geneticist and editor of an associated journal, was the ideal person to do the proof reading. I am immensely appreciative for his painstaking attention to detail, together with the close support of my daughters in finalising the edits.

Another heartwarming aspect of the whole project is that it was instrumental in bringing together the family spread over several continents.

The following organisations and individuals contributed financially to the project:

UCT Kaplan Centre

Dubbi Rabinowitz on behalf of Berdun Charitable Trust

The late Eliot Osrin on behalf of Isidore, Theresa & Ronald Cohen Charitable Trust

Herzlia School

Gerald Diamond on behalf Kurt & Joey Strauss Foundation

Levin and Lewin Family

There are many others who contributed valuable steers, input and advice, production expertise and administrative support to the project. These include:

Camilla Frankl-Slater, who produced the artwork for the cover, Amanda Zar, Lisa Leemans, Jacqui Rogers, Dr Shirli Gilbert, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, David Benatar, Ronnie Gotkin, Professor Glenda Abramson, Rabbi Johnny Solomon, Rabbi Shalom Z. Berger, Marc Falconer, Noaa Barak, Dorron Kline, John Orosa, Rabbi Yossi Pikel, Gwen Podbrey, who typed the book, Linda Bester, book layout designer, Daniel Kudenko, Nigel Grizzard, Professor Charles Oppenheim, Clair Heaviside and Solly Berger. The latter is the sole living contact I have come across who remembers Alexander from his school days as a toddler.

I am eternally grateful for all their goodwill.

Mervyn Levin

February 2019



Alexander C Levin

PROLOGUE

In April 1951 the well-known poet S Halkin of the Hebrew College in Jerusalem came to Cape Town.

His lectures on national-cultural topics fascinated me. I went to tell him so. During our conversations we discovered common friends and acquaintances who played significant roles in literature and science.

We considered and discussed educational questions from various perspectives in the countries in which the Jews were dispersed.

Then the poet made surprising suggestion to me: because he claimed I was an expert in the development of Jewish and Hebrew education over nearly half of the twentieth century, he advised me to describe it in the form of a memoir. He said he felt I would do well to begin this project at once. The way he spoke to me made me feel that he believed I would succeed.

Throughout my lifetime devoted to Hebrew teaching and education for over forty five years I was keenly interested in what was being done in this field and so I started to write.

My manuscript was read by highly-skilled teachers: My colleague, the pedagogue Z Ribaka; my friend, Dr M Nates, who has a reputation as an outstanding educator; the director of the Transvaal Education Board, Mr Y Goss; who discusses educational problems in his important articles. They all recommended that my memoirs should be published in book form, on the assumption that anyone who had his educational development close to his heart would read it with interest.

My sincere gratitude to these friends for their encouragement and effort.

I then submitted my manuscript for critical review to Rabbi Israel Abrahams, the Chief Rabbi of Cape Town and professor of Hebrew at the University of Cape Town. He not only undertook this task willingly, but also agreed to write the preface to my work, approving it for everyone who reads it.

When I went to Israel he provided me with references to prominent educationists there, who also gave my manuscript their consideration.

I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to the Chief Rabbi for his great courtesy towards me and his great value of what he did for me.

The Israeli experts:

Professor EA Simon, director of the department of secondary and higher education at the School of Education at the Hebrew University and the Ministry of Education. He wrote to me as follows:

“The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 4 Iyar 5713 – 19.4.1953

To Mr Alexander Levin – Haifa

My Dear and Very Esteemed Friend

. . . What I feared most has happened: I could not put your book down and in spite of the huge amount of work I have, I could not let it out of my house until I had finished reading it. Although I only had time for it after midnight, I read it for about half an hour every night. I only have about 30 pages to go and I think I will then be able to let you have my opinion on it.

This is undoubtedly an interesting and engaging book that deserves to be published. The style is very good and reveals the author as a genuinely learned man who draws from the original sources of our language. . .

He added some further comments, which I noted, and ended by saying:

. . . And if you agree, after I have read your entire manuscript, I will submit it to the Teachers' Union publishing house, possibly with this letter, a copy whereof I will send to the Chief Rabbi Prof Abrahams in Cape Town.

With sincere collegial greetings

Prof E Simon

The manuscript was also sent to Dr Y Katz, lecturer in education at the same university.

Some time after my return to South Africa Dr Katz sent his introduction, which included his evaluation of my book.

My sincere and grateful appreciation to these reviewers.

The writer Ben-Or in Tel Aviv, my childhood friend from Grodno, an experienced author guided and taught me. I am very grateful to him.

Prof S Halkin greeted me with open arms when I went to visit him, in spite of not being well. He showed how glad he was that I had heeded his call, like another teacher from Boston in the USA, to complete the same task – writing

cont/

about the development of Hebrew education. He wished me every success. When I left, I prayed – as I still do, from the depths of my heart - for his speedy recovery and to return to good health and to his work, that provides heavenly inspiration for his many admirers, myself among them.

May he be well!

* * *

In expressing my heartfelt gratitude, it is also an honour and pleasure for me to acknowledge not only the encouraging artistic criticism I was given to help compete my task, but also tangible, material help from cultural bodies and true friends.

They brought up the idea of establishing a fund for the publication of this book “Bemaagalot Hachinuch”. They are:

The Histadrut Ivrit Centre in South Africa, which undertook to the lion's share of financing this fund;

The Cape Town branch of the Histadrut Ivrit which stood beside me with concrete support;

The Cape Board of Education also supported the work of the fund.

May these institutions and prominent people be blessed for being a part of the publication of this book.

The Author

PREFACE

By the Chief Rabbi, Prof Israel Abrahams

Everyone can compile at least one unique creative, artistic work, containing something that is important for the present generation and also for future generations, something eternal. The material for this work is drawn from the story of the life of that person himself: his adventures, ambitions and dreams, achievements and failures, victories and defeats – they make up the raw material for the work. All that is necessary is the ability required to process the material, to combine the personal details into a single entity that has universal human value, to breathe life into the narrative, to make the dead past come alive, to provide the story with soul – a spark of the soul of the writer, creating an artistic work, an immortal literary property that differs from every other autobiography, just as one person differs from another.

Life provides everyone with an opportunity for such lofty creation; however, it is clear that only those who have the mental ability and cultural capability can put this into practice, even on a low level. This lack of ability has led us in every generation to lose innumerable potential works. They remain like abstract winds blowing among the pages of the heavenly columns of life, like incorporeal souls, deeds without writing to save their memory.

But my friend Alexander Levin, the author of this work, belongs to the talented group. He has lived an active and fruitful life, and in his wonderful memoir he has recorded details of the events that occurred to him and his environment during his lifetime. He is, moreover, blessed with a quick writer's pen, expressing himself clearly in a stimulating style, in which the characteristics of the sage and veteran reader of modern Hebrew literature combine beautifully and harmoniously. As a talented teacher, he knows how to engage the reader's attention from the beginning of his story to the end.

The central idea, the centre of gravity of this chronicle, is the ideal of Hebrew education to which the author has dedicated his whole life with exceptional fidelity. This book is not only an autobiography, but can serve as an important source for the historian of Hebrew education during the last half-century; the final chapters in which Mr Levin describes the development of Hebrew-Jewish education in South Africa is particularly valuable, a subject which very few have dealt with up to now. In truth, the current situation in our schools cannot be understood, the educational achievements in South Africa as a whole and in the Cape, in particular, cannot be appreciated without paying attention to the difficulties faced by the pupil of the Grodno method, the success he achieved in spite of all the obstacles he faced and the opposition to the way in which

he taught. As a pedagogic expert, from time to time he also raises general educational matters. His criticism of the way examinations are conducted in government schools in this country is worth quoting:

“Is it possible to consider in Europe – even Eastern Europe – the examination method that prevails here? A three-month school term – it is time for the examinations, in other words, the end of the months of the study course; preparations must be made soon and after the examinations are over, it is time for rest. The result is that the main thing is not the studies, with methodical peace of mind, but an agitated state of mind associated with the period immediately before the examinations themselves and shaken off afterwards.”

Nobody was listening to these correct statements.

I shall end by expressing both thanks and congratulations. I thank the author for the many good things and vitality he brought to the field of Hebrew education in this country in the south. The point and counterpoint of his excellent work found fertile ground. He was given unripe fruit and with his outstanding ability and enthusiastic dedication, he made it sweet with praiseworthy results.

And congratulations are in order: as much as you have blessed us, my friend, may you be blessed. You have brought up a Jewish generation that is dedicated to its people and loyal to the holiness of its Torah – you deserve praise, happiness and much satisfaction. If in the past you have suffered from the lowly situation of the teacher, your reputation will grow in the future as someone who helped lay the foundation of Hebrew education in South Africa.

With regard to your book, the chronicle of your life and the memoirs of your deeds and achievements – may you have many readers who read it with delight!

INTRODUCTION

By Dr Yaakov Katz

Education Lecturer at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

. . . Mr Alexander Levin's memoirs will attract readers and admirers from various perspectives, as a candid autobiography, a reliable description of various places where Jews settled and an instructive evaluation of people the author has met during his long life. But the book carves a special place for itself as a source of the history of Jewish education in modern times. Mr Levin is one of the pedagogues of the previous generation who came from the old intellectual world: from the cheders and yeshivas to the world of education in the modern Hebrew school in Israel and the countries of the dispersion. This transition from the old to the new came upon us unexpectedly. A new generation, that had not yet orientated itself in the values of the accepted tradition, founded institutions whose world was filled with new educational ideals. But before this change in the world of pedagogic work, there was a decisive change in the views of the people who founded these institutions. If the history of these institutions can be written relatively easily, the internal history of creating their new character generally lies in the world of the past. This is where Levin's book reveals a little of this vanished world. The story of his life is a description of the life of the new generation of educators who devoted their energies to the new educational ideal, the ideal of the national Hebrew intellectual.

Whether we still cling firmly to this ideal, or regard it with more or less stringent criticism, we are still required to try to understand it. Such an understanding is possibly only through the historical analysis of the background that led to this ideal being developed at the time. In order to do so, we have to examine the views and motives of the first people who adopted it thoroughly. Alexander Levin's autobiography is a book about one of these early people and those of us who came later are grateful for what he revealed and his version of the historical truth itself.

Yaakov Katz

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

7 Cheshvan 5744 – 16.10.1953 Merhavia, 5 Palmach St, Jerusalem.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

IN THE VILLAGE

The time of my birth is known in the history of Russian Jews as a period when anti-Semitism grew and flourished after the murder of Czar Alexander II, who was regarded as a liberal ruler in comparison with his predecessors. Alexander III inherited the crown in 1881; as a result of his hatred of the Jews, he proclaimed his slogan: "Russia for the Russians".

The pogroms began and spread to many Jewish villages in the Jewish Pale of Settlement – an area containing fifteen districts plus the entire vassal region that covered ten districts from the conquest of Poland – and also the cities of Odessa and Kiev. After the pogroms, restrictions were placed on the rights of Jews, in order to deprive them of a means of livelihood by closing off the ways they could earn a living, such as forbidding settlement in villages, prohibiting involvement in working the land and closing the professional schools where they learnt skills.

The efforts of the Jews to revoke these harsh edicts by the authorities or to reduce their oppression were fruitless. The official response was: The only thing the Jews have open to them is the western border of Russia, the way to leave the country. Mass emigration began to North America. Many went there to find a new "homeland".

In 1882, the idea of a Return to Zion began to take hold among the Jews, spurred on by the popular booklet of Dr YL Pinsker, *Auto-Emancipation*.

Two years later the first meeting of the committee of the *Hovevei Zion* (Lovers of Zion) in Katowitz laid the foundation for the building of Zionism even before the advent of Dr Theodor Herzl at the end of the nineteenth century. Herzl headed this national movement, and breathed new life into it - vigorous and practical, Western and modern. The First Zionist Congress in 1897 in Basel included the Jews from Eastern Europe and Western Europe.

The conditions under which the Jews lived in the area in which I was born, in the vassal province, were easier. The prohibition on settling in villages was not as severe as it was beyond this area and Jews were also permitted to work the land. The wave of pogroms under Alexander III after he acceded to the throne did not reach the north-western provinces of Russia and did not affect the Jews of Poland and Lithuania.

On a clear morning, on the second day of Shavuot, 5642 (May 25, 1882), I came into this world, in the wake of brothers and sisters born before me in the village of Kozlova, near the town of Pilvishok, in the Slovaki region.

From its manner of speaking, customs, dress and the other external attributes, the Jewish settlement in that region was considered completely Lithuanian, even though from an administrative and official viewpoint it belonged to Poland.

As an only son (my brothers born before me had died), I was brought up as a “privileged” child who was regarded as special in the eyes of my parents and my other relatives, more significant than the value they attached to my sister, who was three years younger, the only daughter, Sarah Ita. I was regarded as a “disquieting” son, to whom a temporary name, Alter, had been given, in order to conceal my real name – a portent for the long life of a child whose brothers and sisters had died in infancy – to barmitzvah age, as I heard from my parents. It is said that some people are so strict about this that they use this name until the child gets married . . .

I was alone in my play and, in particular, in my studies and my entire education. My father, the late Elazar Baruch, was for many years my teacher in *Chumash* (the five books of Moses), early and later prophets, Rashi and *Gemara*, until I reached the level of a *yeshiva* student whose teacher has gained a wide reputation, but only for a single “term” – when we moved to the town of Pilvishok.

I began learning to read almost without any systematic teaching from anybody, apart from isolated instances by my father, and the same applied to writing. I had a writing “textbook” from which I learnt a lot until I became an expert in writing letters to my Aunt Hannah, my mother’s sister, who had emigrated with her husband and four daughters to Philadelphia in the United States – in my name, but mainly in the name of my late mother, Sheina. I remember that my mother would demonstrate her maternal pride to her relatives that “Alterkeh” had received a few dollars from her Aunt Hannah as a reward for the letters to her, as she remembered me as a small child and here I was writing to her, saying things so well in a good handwriting . . .

My father performed the ritual slaughter for the district. He carried out this duty in the surrounding towns, particularly before the Sabbath and on Jewish festivals, led the additional service in the synagogue on the New Year and Day of Atonement as the voluntary cantor and also taught boys who came to our house or lived there. He was also an excellent reader of the scriptures in the synagogue.

In addition, he owned a small grocery shop, which was closed from the outside in the cold autumn and winter. When somebody needed to buy

something, such as box of matches, herring or a bottle of paraffin, the purchaser would come from the inside, through our house, to purchase his goods, and would then leave.

My late mother would bake bread and the Sabbath loaves, cakes, rolls and bagels for the farmers who would come on market days and holidays to the Catholic place of worship to sell their village produce and crops.

I was also a diligent and competent salesperson, selling all the types of goods in our shop, earning praise from the purchasers.

Initially, I had no fixed times for the study of Torah, but I would learn when my father was free to teach and when I, the only son, spoilt at times, wanted to involve myself in Bible study.

Twice a year my father would travel to the nearest district city, the wholesale centre, Kovno, in order to stock our shop. He was absent from home for a few days. I never enjoyed any official holidays, on predetermined dates, so long as my father and teacher was involved in my studies.

I had no close friends of my own age. Only occasionally would I join up with boys from the area. Then we would play war games and, in our imagination, we saw ourselves as fully-fledged soldiers, hardened in battle, bearing arms, performing heroic deeds in the fray as attackers and defending ourselves . . . Various kinds of sticks, long and short, chopped off or smooth, were strapped onto our backs and used as rifles and spears, attached to our sides like rattling swords that inspired us with the courage and strength to give orders, to scream and to attack . . . An hour or two of this kind of game was tiring and satisfying. As the victors, we would remove our weapons and run quickly to a place where we could rest and relax.

We really enjoyed the proper order and good discipline of these games. They also contained an element of educating ourselves. But these were exceptional instances. The terrors of Gehinnom would frighten me and make me very depressed.

It was only very seldom that I managed to obtain interesting and stimulating books like Shemer's novels.

I spent my childhood years mainly in depressing solitude, until the age of eight or nine. I was denied a varied environment, bubbling over with rich life, full of interesting toys and games, mischief and competition in studies.

Then came the day we moved to the town of Pilvishok. My father stopped serving as a rabbi, as he had had enough of it. The source of his income took on a secular form and he also was no longer my main teacher. He placed me in the cheder of the teacher, Rabbi Lieba, whose pupils were among the

leaders of the village. Rabbi Lieba held an honoured place in the town among the adults and children.

There was a significant change for the better in my lonely life – an awakening to an active social life, intellectually fascinating and physically pleasant.

CHAPTER 2

MY SHTETL

For years I regarded Pilvishok as my ideal place. It was a typical small town in Lithuania. The two rivers on which it was built, going through and around it, made it pretty, with natural beauty and orderliness.

The Pilve River running through it had two bridges crossing it and the space between them would fill up with water when the tide was high in spring. The road over the bridges on the plateau of the hill, paved like a pretty and shady boulevard, made for pleasant walks between the branches of the high trees and led to the “upper-class” Antonov Street. The large river, the Sesupe, flowed through the centre of the city. After the Pilve discharged into it, they became one – the rafts of the wood merchants would sail along it to the Neman River and onwards to Prussia. This was very efficient when the snow melted and the ice thawed, when the rivers rose above their banks and long barges would be carried on them for several weeks with various kinds of trees that would be floated and pulled out of the country.

I would watch these boats with huts on them in fascination as they moved quietly and sleepily, making their way by themselves, carrying people. At night their dim lights would gleam from a distance, hinting at their mystery.

The Sesupe curved near the *beit midrash* (place of Torah study) which stood in the centre of the village, and a long, high bridge suspended over it connected the *beit midrash* to a small “suburb”, with a few houses on the other side.

The eastern wall of the school faced the square with the market spread out on all four sides between the finest houses, including some double-storey brick homes, with the only hotel in the village and the important shops and offices.

Four roads went out of the market. One led to the railway station and the second, in the opposite direction, to rural settlements. The third short road ended at the large bridge over the river in the direction of the district town

of Vilkavishki, and the fourth was the exit to Antonov Street by way of the bridges over the Pilve and the boulevard between them.

This “upper-class” road contained most of the government and public offices, including the local government officials’ building, the *Gemeine*, headed by the chosen *vit*, assisted by two officials, a secretary and a clerk. Near it the rose beautiful Catholic church and across from it, the gentile school for Lithuanian children and the pharmacy with the “giant” window illuminated with a large light, owned by a Jew. Right next to it, as neighbours, stood our house in which I lived for many years. The doctor, a Christian, lived in the same street (if he was called out to a patient at night, it was essential for him to empty several glasses of liquor into his mouth before he got to the examination). The post office was at the end of the street. The large signs on the walls of the government buildings were crowned with the symbols of the great Russian Czar, whose power was unlimited, the double-headed eagle, leading passers-by to have respect and feel fear. People going for walks were particularly fond of this street., particularly on Shabbat, at the time between the “third meal”, that followed the afternoon service, and before the evening service on weekdays. On Sundays, it was filled with gentiles who gathered in front of their church after changing their clothes and dresses and putting on their shoes – on their way from their villages, they would come barefoot.

There was also an attitude of respect towards the people who lived in this street. The Berkman brothers, leaders of the community, who did business with Germany, lived in a brick house. More of them lived abroad than in Pilvishok. On Sabbaths and festivals, these wealthy people would arrange a private service in one of their homes, so they would not have to walk a long way to the *beit midrash*, particularly in the muddy seasons in autumn and winter. This was so well known that “an order was given” from on high to put paving stones on all the streets. The Berkman would only come to the services with the entire congregation on the High Holy Days, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Sometimes my father and I would join the *minyán* (the Jewish religious quorum of ten men required for communal prayer) of these wealthy people.

Our street led to the Antonova estate – which gave its name to the street. The *poritz*, the squire of the estate, made beer and wine on the property and he would sometimes travel to show his authority in a carriage hitched to four horses – on occasion with a woman at his side, probably his wife, along this road to the station. This really gave the road an air of nobility . . .

When we sat down opposite the church, I would often look at the worshippers walking around it every Sunday and at the splendid ceremony on their Easter night. But I had a strong desire to see what was done and how it was done inside, its beautiful mystery, but my desire to go inside was never fulfilled. It is stated explicitly in the Bible: “You shall utterly detest it.”

As a resident of Antonov Street, I found many things of interest. Among them was the pharmacy which adjoined our house and sparkled with its cleanliness and light in the evenings. The male nurse in the *shtetl*, a Jew with a prominent beard and belly, would spend his days waiting for business – for the opportunity to help sick people. He took his place next to the large window, with a Russian daily newspaper in his hand, which he would read for hours. Sometimes doubt would creep into my heart and I would ask whether he would understand what it contained. It seems to me that he never told anyone the news coming from the capital city, St Petersburg, or the world at large. I enjoyed spending a long time watching him . . .

The nurse was seldom missing from his place – the residents of the *shtetl* did not know his first name and everyone called him “The Nurse” – on the chair next to the window which showed all the passers-by what was happening inside the house, with pleasant smells permeating it. This was a sign that the nurse was called to perform medical duties and this brought in a little money for his wife and daughter to spend on what they required for the Sabbath. I never managed to see the members of his family.

The meetings next to the administrative offices also attracted me – the government of the *Gemeine*. The head of the *vit* would place an item on the agenda, relating mainly to taxpayers and would order the drummer - the town crier – to convene the meeting, generally in the afternoons. He would come out beating his drum to attract the attention of the people outside and those hidden in their houses and proclaim in a loud voice that they were summoned to participate in an important meeting.

The building was too small to contain everybody, so they would all remain at the entrance and the person in charge, with his assistants next to him, would explain the matter being considered. The people there would speak in public, each talking loudly. How the chairman could understand the views of the “speakers” and base his opinion on the view of the majority – all of them Jews – was an unsolved riddle for me.

Sometimes the government office would attract my attention on an ordinary weekday. A member of the police force would bring a prisoner by in order to put him in the “clink”, as he had been drunk or accused of some illegal act. I would then try to see the prisoner. Occasionally, it was a Jew, arrested because he did not want to pay a fine imposed on him, preferring to spend a day or two in prison in friendly conversation with the people who came to the barred window, or with the rest of the unusual prisoners. During his rest hours, he would be released to go to the railing, where he would “relax” for a few hours.

I remember one incident. One of the *yeshiva* students, who was born in

Vilna, failed to renew his passport in time and was fined. His punishment was to pay money or spend a day in jail. When I heard about it, I went to the window of the jail, that faced the Christian church. I was allowed to contact the prisoner and for most of that day, I sat next to him and listened very carefully to his stories from European literature, which he seemed to read a lot. These stories had been translated,

The people who lived in our street were eager to receive letters – and years later, also the Yiddish newspapers sold to a few of them – those first in the queue. Distribution of the letters by the postal authorities was done by Reb Itzhak, the “letter-carrier”. He was an old, very quiet man, whose wispy beard seemed to spread anger all around him, particularly on the practical jokers who stared at him – but he was actually a very dear and good-hearted man. He would always arrive early at the post office in our street, even before the sound of the steam whistle of the train drawing into the station, and eagerly await the return of the official with his parcels.

Other officials were also among the early arrivals. A permanent driver with his wagon and its one horse was ready at the opening of the post office about an hour before the journey in the direction of the station, while the train was only leaving Kovno, a distance of fifty kilometres from the P-ki station.

Reb Itzhak would sort the mail with fierce concentration and give it to Maryesha, his daughter, who had also arrived in the meantime to help her father. He would deliver the most important items of all, the letters and Russian newspapers addressed to the Berkman family, and then leave, return to his house for his late breakfast and from there he would go to the *beit midrash* to read a book in silence.

Maryesha would distribute most of the letters and receive a pruta for a postcard – in those days, the Jews would often write postcards, as each cost only three prutot, compared with seven, for a letter in an envelope – and two prutot for a letter, whether it arrived from inside the country or from America, for example, from Aunt Hannah.

Green parks and some rural houses belonging to a few Jews were at the end of the street. Beyond that was an area of several kilometres of fields owned by Jews from the *shtetl* itself.

The “fairs” and sales of goods on market days were in the square in the centre of the village, where the leading commercial enterprises were.

The roof of the *beit midrash*, towering above the other buildings, was built in two storeys, both joined and separated from each other. The building faced the eastern side of the market. The synagogue was also the public place of study for local students, like the *beit midrash*, for the *yeshiva* students, who

came from elsewhere, as well as married students from other countries who had left their wives to become exiles studying Torah, which they wished to learn. They would survive through “eating days”, with each of them spending a day in the home of one of the people who lived in the *shtetl* and living in rooms where they were not required to pay rent. Some would also engage in teaching, boys who had completed their studies in *cheder* and were sent by their parents to the *beit midrash* to study *Gemara* with a veteran teacher among the students in the *beit midrash*.

The community of P-ki, with its quiet ways, numbered approximately three hundred people. About ten minutes’ drive by wagon away was the railway station leading from Kovno to the Prussian border. The Jewish residents made a living as shopkeepers, small traders and also land-owners, whose land was worked by non-Jewish employees. Their work was done by others – which was unusual among people who worked land that provided them with a living.

There were also traders in P-ki in a special branch of business. They dealt in the purchase of geese in the Ukraine and sold them in Prussia. In the goose season, the summer months and right through autumn, P-ki was filled with the shrieks of these flightless birds, as they were taken in a line of carriages prepared for them, as they passed through the station, and sometimes as they waited there and were fattened up while resting from their long journey – day and night their calls were deafening . . .

The *shtetl* was peaceful, with no divisions, strife and controversy, not separated into parties and “sides” of people who held religious office. There seemed to be no especially significant differences based on class or wealth, particularly on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. The *beit midrash* was for many years the only place for prayer and studying Torah, but later the community considered the need to rebuild the synagogue. This possibility had been raised some time earlier and implementing this important project would adorn the entire *shtetl*.

Could anyone even have considered the terrible thought that within a few decades, both people and bricks would be destroyed together, to totally ruined, and that nobody would be left to handle the Jewish communal events from near or far, as not a single remnant was left?

P-ki did not depart from its regular, normal life in any way that was either particularly newsworthy or disgraceful – and, in fact, it had a good reputation in the entire area.

The *shtetl* had learned religious men and intellectuals. The leaders of the community included members of Bible and Talmud study groups and also

ordinary, everyday G-d-fearing people. The rabbi of the community, Rabbi Yaakov Meir Levin, modest, generous and dignified, studied all the time. He lived near the *beit midrash* and would go out only occasionally to get a little fresh air at twilight on a warm summer day. His living was based on a tax imposed by the community on preservatives: the rebbetzin would supply them to the *shtetl* bakers and on Thursday during the day and throughout the evening to the housewives, who would bake *challahs* for the Sabbath in their ovens. And sometimes members of the household who were sent to collect them, or the women themselves, had to wait their turn to purchase a portion of their preservatives.

When a preacher arrived in the *shtetl*, many people came to listen to his moral tales. If he had made a name for himself and gained fame – or, sometimes, was a “prodigy” (*ilui*) – the *beit midrash* would fill to overflowing and even the rich would attend. I remember one time an *ilui* came. One Friday afternoon, notices were put up that this *ilui* would deliver a learned address the following Tuesday in the *beit midrash* at four o’clock in the afternoon. A lot of shops were closed at that time and the *beit midrash* was completely full. Those leaders of the community who did not attend prayers, even on the Sabbath and festivals, were present. The *ilui* delivered a very enthusiastic sermon, and his yarmulke would shift every time this expounder of the Bible moved his hand on his head, to the left and also to the right in the opposite direction. I doubt whether even a small number of those listening to him were able to comprehend fully what the preacher was saying, full of unforgettable expertise and insights – but not one person left his place before the end – the Rabbi’s *Kaddish* (a prayer in praise of G-d, recited after study). . . They treated a visiting cantor the same way. At no time were they denied the enjoyment listening to a sermon or beautiful singing.

The number of young boys and *yeshiva* students who went away from home to study the Bible was not large. Most of them would travel to a *yeshiva* for two to three years and then return, saying it was enough. They then helped their parents at work, or simply lived in their homes. A minority reached adulthood in a *yeshiva*, specialising in learning, or going to teach, thereby hoping to find their purpose in life. Did any *iluim* come from P-ki? One did. He became well known, married and settled in another town, where he was always known as “the Pilvishok *ilui*”. I found out about this from a letter to either *Hatsefirah* or *Hamelitz* from the eighties.

I recently learnt that a renowned Bible scholar, now living in the State of Israel, who earned a reputation as an *ilui* in his youth, was also referred to by the name of his *shtetl* - Rabbi SS Bialovlotzki. He became famous after I left the *shtetl*. Two well-known authors in America, Dov Isaacs and Aaron David Markson, were also from Pilvishok. Markson died young. They were

my old friends, my seniors in learning and age. On the Sabbath and Jewish holidays, before the afternoon service, the *beit midrash* would fill up with people studying the Bible. Apart from people in the Talmud societies, young men and women were also present who would study sections of the *Gemara* they wished to learn. Everybody studied, some this and others that, and the words of the teachers giving the lesson or the weekly portion could be heard. Holiness permeated the entire room. Even those who had broken away, as it were, and distanced themselves from Jewish life, far from their parents' homes, used to come to the *beit midrash* at this time, when they visited their parents in the *shtetl* for the festivals. They came to study the Torah and to "peruse" the holy books. There was a popular saying among the older generation: "It is necessary to study the *Gemara* in order to derive benefit from it on the Sabbath afternoon" . . .

The study leader in the Talmud society, Rabbi Zalman Rashgolski, was an outstanding scholar and an unassuming man. He had a lasting influence on his listeners. He was the father of the well-known poet, Hillel Bavli, who is still active and living in New York, where he too has become well known as a great scholar.

Rabbi Zalman was one of the three sons-in-law of the late Mr Ushpitz and his brothers-in-law were Rabbi Avraham Pinchas Klewanski and Mr Plansberg. Rabbi Klewanski preferred studying alone, learning not only the details of the Talmud and rabbinical authorities, but also ethics and books by G-d-fearing people. He kept himself apart from other people until 11 o'clock in the morning, so that he would not be disturbed while studying the holy writings. Mr Plansberg, the third son-in-law, was the son of a leading rabbi in the town of Shaki and a foremost Torah authority.

Then there was Rabbi Grodzinski, who served the rabbinate for many years in America before deciding to return to his family in P-ki, as, in his view, life in the United States was no better in the religious sense. He remained and studied all the time in his home . The duty of keeping the family was imposed on his wife. She was a shopkeeper who accepted the burden readily, wanting only to provide her husband with the possibility of studying Torah.

(Their son, who became an assistant pharmacist, distanced himself from his parents' way of life. When he came to visit them on one of the festivals, he was "terribly well dressed", spending his time in the pharmacy and speaking only "pure" Russian.)

And Rabbi Tzvi Itzhak, "who had left his wife behind to go and study", was also well known for his broad learning. He lived under the weight of poverty. One of the ways he tried to earn a living was selling the daily newspaper,

Der Freund, to some people. It is easy to guess how few purchases there were in the small village and how little income he earned from this business. Several years later, when he died, this source of income was available to someone else and the Jewish postman took his place . . .

These were the leading members of the Torah intelligentsia in the *shtetl*. There was also a group of people who understood the Talmud and were among the passive members of the Talmud Society and other similar societies – in the Ein Yaakov society and more.

And last in line were the ignorant people, but there were few of them.

There was one particular person I liked to observe when the congregation reached the last part of the weekday prayer. His name was Avaka, an agent who travelled to Kovno. Almost every day, he would carry letters, orders and lists of goods from shopkeepers and return by train in the evening. He could not read or write. He would not buy train tickets, but would wait for the ticket collector to approach and hide under the bench until the danger had passed . . . Then he would come out and sit comfortably on the bench, talking to the passengers. The ticket collectors knew him and realised he was cheating them, but because they all knew him so well, they left him alone without paying him any attention.

With his keen intuition, this agent was able to distinguish one letter from another, although he could not read the address written on it. He would not switch them or mix them up. Only occasionally would he approach somebody and ask: “Is this meant for N and this for S?” And he was not wrong.

The only part of the daily service he did not know off by heart was the *Tachanun*, the prayer for supplication in the afternoon service. When he prayed with me in the congregation, I would always see him pretend in the part where the congregants leaned down on their arms. He would keep one eye on the *Siddur*, the prayer book, so that the others would not notice. He was afraid they would suspect he did not know everything by heart and would not continue to send their letters with him – something which could harm his livelihood . . .

Deaths in the *shtetl* were not frequent and were mostly from natural causes. The first time somebody died after I went to live there, it made a major impression on everybody. The “hero” of the event was Mr Bertzik, a very old Oriental Jew who used to study *Gemara* before and after the prayer services. A modest man, he kept himself apart from the congregation, did not interfere in its affairs, but everybody regarded him highly and respected him. Almost everybody in the *shtetl* attended his funeral and his death was deeply mourned.

A dreadful funeral took place a few years later, when a woman and her small son were buried. They were murdered one night. The woman, a miller, came from another village to live with her family opposite the Jewish cemetery. Her husband was not home on the night of the murder. The funeral was delayed by the authorities. They looked for the murderers, performing examinations and taking various measurements, but never found them. The emotional weeping and wailing of many women pierced the air at the funeral three days after the murder.

There were hardly any criminals to be found among the Jews in the *shtetl*. The few who were criminally inclined offended repeatedly and failed, were arrested and sentenced to exile in Siberia, never to return to P-ki. The biblical precept, "So shall you put the evil away from the midst of you", was applied to them ...

One incident, however, seemed to be pathological in nature. A boy, Itzke, was the son of a simple, honest clay potter. Everybody regarded the boy as normal. He stayed in the *cheder*, behaving and developing well, his talent and characteristics in no way inferior to others. But a perverse spirit took hold of him. When he was between fourteen and fifteen, he began to set fire to houses. To what end? Why? He found ways to get fuel to set the fires and, as those who saw him found out, took pleasure in it. He acted in the dead of night, in winter, and deliberately also on Friday nights, Sabbath nights, causing damage, making people afraid of the danger hanging over them. Eventually he was caught red-handed, sentenced and sent into exile. Itzke was a riddle. He never returned to P-ki and people forgot about him.

My *shtetl* was not a place for great things. Political revolutions were not devised there. The older generation lived a tranquil, traditional, religious life, wanting to educate the young to grow up in the same way, guiding them along the same roads paved for them.

But when the Jewish revival movement spread and grew, there was a rise of Zionism and nationalism flourished. The new winds began to blow in P-ki as well. There, too, new songs were heard, breathing a spirit of life into the youth, rousing them to action, renewal and reawakening.

CHAPTER 3

THE *CHEDER*

The Hebrew school was known as the *cheder*. It belonged to a private person, the teacher-rabbi. He would go to the homes of the parents before the beginning of each school term, on the intermediate days of Passover or Succot, to get pupils for his *cheder*, with the agreement of their parents. There was no special building for a school of this kind – it was in the rabbi's house or in his rented apartment, in which he lived with his family. A special room, *cheder* in Hebrew, was set aside for learning, the best and biggest in the home, which is why it was called a *cheder*.

There were three levels in the *cheder*: a) The beginners' class, in which they learnt the alphabet and reading the prayer book (Hebrew) – a simple effective method did not exist for young schoolchildren, with their limited reasoning, to grasp the content and form of the material taught.

The way the young pupils were taught to combine the letters and vowels – the points (the Hebrew alphabet has no vowels; the vowels are traditionally indicated by a system of points above and below the consonants that show how to pronounce the words correctly) – in a way that was difficult, lengthy and unclear. These are totally different from the modern methods used today, which are effective in conveying the reading process simply and directly. Small children in the class quickly grasp the mechanics clearly and comprehensively, both the “secret” of the combination and understanding the verbal content. The material they read is interesting and entertaining.

In the old *cheder*, the rabbi had to do a lot of hard work and the results were not the same for all his pupils. Young men, employed as assistants, would teach the beginners how to read the prayer book without understanding the contents, without translation, through persistent repetition – burdening the weak memories of the young children. The helpers were expected to equip the pupils with a complicated skill, until it became an independent routine.

The helpers also had to put these very young children on their backs to bring them from their homes to the *cheder* and to return them to their parents, carrying their living load through the swamps on the muddy lanes and paths in the *shtetl*.

(b) In the second level of the *cheder*, the pupils were seventeen years old. The material was explained and translated into the spoken language – Yiddish – not according to the context, but primarily taking each and every word of the

text separately, with the translation next to it. This, the accepted and rigid method in most *cheders*, indicated a clear and frequent interruption in the flow and progression of the idea, the description of the hero and the story. It had a very adverse effect on its completeness of the story, not to mention the effect on the understanding and comprehension of the students.

In addition, the most widely-used translation contained old and obsolete words. Their meaning was insufficiently clear even to the rabbi himself. A common form of traditional language was used for translation in the *cheder*, a special type of style that obscured the content of what was taught and concealed its essence. As a result, the translation or explanations were not designed to clarify or explain the details of the material being studied, but only to drum it into the pupils according to a tradition that had been accorded some hazy sanctity, even if the translation was into the mother tongue, Yiddish. Because the language was not simple and the translations only partially understood, interesting stories and descriptions were largely ruined and not up to standard.

Both these aspects led to the biggest delay in understanding artistic, intellectual and descriptive depth of the material, firstly, because every word was translated separately, without reviewing the whole piece or the verse and, secondly, because the work was read without any explanation of important items and significant points, or going into the relevant details or overview required to highlight a subject and the intention of the text. For this reason, from a modern pedagogic perspective, it appears that the great value of studying our Book of Books was much diminished for young children at a tender age in the old *cheder*, but that was typical in its time.

The subjects taught at this level were *Chumash* (the five Books of Moses), the weekly portion with extracts from Rashi and the “twenty-four” (the twenty-four books of the scriptures), the Prophets – early and late Prophets – and the Writings (the Bible excluding the five Books of Moses).

The students spent about two or three years divided into classes according to their knowledge, until they moved to:

(c) The third type of *cheder*, the highest level, in which the rabbi taught the *Gemara*. There, in addition to the Bible, the students would also learn the *Gemara* in the original Aramaic, with the Rashi commentary. After making considerable progress with *Tosafot* (annotations to the Talmud) – *Gemara*, Rashi’s commentary and *Tosafot* – this kind of *cheder* would serve as a preparatory class for the *yeshiva*.

A special ceremony accompanied the arrival of the child at the *cheder* for the first time, sometimes at a very young age of between four and five years old.

The father would cover the child in a *tallit* (prayer shawl), carrying the child in his arms, accompanied by the mother. When they arrived at the *cheder*, the rabbi and the pupils would receive the new entrant with open arms.

A beginner who made good progress in his studies and read the prayer book fluently, without stumbling, would receive gifts. The most common was a coin, dropped from above his head onto his reader. It was thrown to him – as the “examiners” of the small reader explained to him – by an angel from on high, as a reward from heaven for his diligence and skill in religious studies.

I entered the *cheder* after I had already learnt *Gemara* from my father. While in the *cheder* of Rabbi Lipa, all that was taught was the Holy Writings, the portion of the week, with abbreviated extracts from Rashi and later Prophets, apart from the Talmud, the *Gemara*. I was happy to go to the *cheder*, to which my father sent me, after he entered into a contract with Rabbi Lipa. I said: “My boring solitude is coming to an end”, as I would find company I liked, colleagues and friends I wanted in the *cheder* of this teacher, who had gained a reputation as the best in the *shtetl*.

The rabbi greeted me warmly. I introduced myself to him very politely. His words flowed in a low voice, with a gentle smile on his face. I learnt later that he was not quick-tempered, like what I had heard about others. He did not mistreat his pupils and was polite to them. The way he taught was new to me, in comparison with the way my father taught, especially as the conditions were conducive to his method. He had fourteen students – no girls among them – divided into three classes, even though there was not a great difference among them in terms of knowledge. For example, if one was studying Jeremiah, another would learn Ezekiel from the later prophets. I was placed in the intermediate class, where I soon made friends, particularly one boy, Yankele, Reb Isaiah’s son. Yankele was regarded as my neighbour, in a way, because a path from my street led to the village in which he lived, where his father worked the land.

The study programme in the *cheder* was more or less as follows: In the morning – complying with the obligation of the morning prayers, for which the pupils themselves were responsible – they were allowed to pray alone, at home, or in public, in the *beit midrash* or the *kloyz* next to it in the same building. A time was fixed to study the weekly portion with Rashi. One would read a verse, the second would read the next verse and the third would continue. The verse was translated and explained while everybody listened. In the second reading, one would read and the rest would repeat it in a chant and go on to Rashi. In this way, the subject was broadened and a verbal story was also added. The rabbi would sometimes add a personal touch, making the chapter studied more interesting. Rashi or other commentators were not

studied with the Prophets. The main thing was the text, what was written in the book.

When the rabbi was busy with one class, the pupils in the other two were not idle, but studied and read themselves. The rabbi knew the secret of keeping discipline in this orderly way. He had no assistants in the *cheder*; they were only with the very young children who required help with memorising the lessons and also with being transported from their homes to the *cheder* and back.

The *cheder* was furnished with a table for the top class, with the rabbi's place at the head. There was a bench to its left, made like those found in actual schools, with five places. The second was next to the wall, opposite the table. That was my place in the intermediate class, by age, opposite the higher class. Another bench was placed as a continuation of the table, with four places for the boys, who for some reason were considered inferior. Among them were the son of the rabbi and Avraham Pratzke, a boy from another *shtetl*, whom the teacher did not appear to like.

Where Rabbi Lipa sat at the head of the table, a well-polished wooden cane peeped out from under his book, thin and shiny, with a small, smooth, bright handle – ready and prepared to deal out punishment to the “naughty boys”. Although most of the cane was concealed, it made the pupils a little nervous, although we did not dare create a disturbance or go against the rabbi's orders.

The teacher seemed to be in pain, which sometimes made him angry. He would vent his anger with “murderous blows” on his son, a pupil in the lower class, or on Avraham Pratzke, the strange and slightly thick-headed boy. The infrequent severe punishments were handed out only to those two, irritating everybody there and leading them to complain about the cruelty and injustice of the otherwise calm and straightforward rabbi towards the “scapegoats”, although very little of his anger was directed at them . . .

Progress and “modernity” were outstanding features in our *cheder* and there were nothing else like them in P-ki. We had two special teachers for general studies: Hebrew and Russian language and other important subjects. Once a day, for an hour before lunch, the well-known teacher Mr Yekutiel, “Kushel – the teacher”, the expert in external learning, would come to teach us: arithmetic, Hebrew and foreign languages.

How did arithmetic come to be taught? It was not really studied fully within the scope of school activities, but the subject was always special: adding and subtracting numbers, particularly the kind that had gone out of use relating to weights. This was given to every pupil individually, in his own notebook, after the teacher's private explanation. When the “problems” were solved,

the pupils gathered around the teacher to show him the results – at most, two lines of writing.

And what did Hebrew mean? The teacher did not do much “damage” – meaning he was an expert in the language. The pupils had copies of the book *Pedagogic Exercises* by A Mapu, from which the teacher would explain a little to each pupil individually, mainly the meaning of words and the duty to learn and write. The pupils did not make much progress in this subject either. For example, I understood nothing in this “dry” book or the way Mr Yekutiël taught, or his method of showing the wisdom of arithmetic.

What was the nature of the foreign languages, the third subject in the secular studies? This was simpler. The teacher regarded addresses on envelopes used for letters sent to relatives or for business purposes to America or Germany, as very important. Here, the need and the ability combined and the pupils almost saw their “toil” in a positive light. Was there any house from which letters were not written to relatives in America? Almost all the boys knew how to write in Latin letters – not in Gothic German – and most of them were skilled in this branch of learning. The difference was only in the names of the cities: one version was “New York” and the second “Berlin”, while I wrote to my Aunt Hannah in Philadelphia. I had no idea why there was a brief addition to the name of the city, PA, and the teacher also could not explain it . . . The teacher Yekutiël’s doctrine was mainly the Written Torah and it could be taught orally.

The second teacher, Mr Polski, who taught Russian, would appear for the last hour in the evening, sometimes walking with heavy steps in the rain on the path covered with deep mud. He had a particularly beautiful lamp. Its bright rays lit up his difficult way as he walked with his high galoshes – and started speaking Russian to us. As we were not fluent in the language, the strident voice of the teacher cut through the small, narrow space of the room on its own, with no response whatsoever. The “community” of pupils simply listened. He apparently did not plan what and how he was going to teach us during this unusual hour. There was not much difference in the ages and knowledge of the pupils. So what, in fact, did he do? He adopted the method of teaching in public, treating all of us as a single audience. At the beginning of the lesson, he would teach a bit of grammar, the declension of nouns, and used to repeat the same examples without making any progress until, let’s say, getting to a verb, afterwards. In his practical and concrete pedagogic way, he would propose devoting our time to “training” in Russian speech. As only he spoke it well, he told us what he thought would be interesting and “instructive”. If the pupils would only listen very well, their ability to speak Russian would improve by itself, anyway. Then, suddenly, there was a story about a ship sailing on the sea. As everybody knows, there are sailors on a ship.

There was a great tragedy: a sailor got up and jumped overboard into the water, miraculously descending to the bottom of the ocean, right to the floor . . . Some additional details described the tragedy – and suddenly it was over, as if it had never been. And again, a story about the sea and a ship sailing on it. It had many passengers, as well as a monkey and a parrot. One of them sprang up and grabbed a hat from somebody's head and almost sank it in the sea. And so it went on and on. The teacher filled us with these types of tasteless stories, with no real or artistic merit, and repeated them – sometimes he came up with the idea of asking us questions about the details of the story. We were sick and tired of these tales.

Suddenly, he would turn to one of the boys and order him to go to Rabbi Lipa, sitting inconspicuously in his corner, to ask him the time and to find out whether his watch was not giving him the incorrect time because it was slow. And this was where the Oral Torah ended, because in his view there was no time left to deal with writing in the *cheder*. . . The “hour” had passed. Mr Polski put on his galoshes to protect his feet from the mud, lit his “marvellous” lantern and, with a happy farewell, disappeared from view.

During the “external” lessons, devoted to general secular subjects, Rabbi Lipa would sit far away, curled up in a corner, so that his presence did not disturb or influence the lessons, their direction or method. Throughout the entire “term” of the six months of study, there were no changes to the fixed tradition of their form or content. . . Rabbi Lipa would rouse himself after Mr Polski's lesson, come over to us, indicating it was time for us to leave and go home. We prepared our paper lanterns to light our dirty and muddy way home. But if it was a cold and pleasant winter's evening, with the river covered by sparkling ice, we already knew for certain that on our way back, we would take our time on the path over the river, where we would skate along on our own, in public, meeting other people, extending hands in greeting or bowing down. Only when we felt tired, our bodies warm and our ruddy faces glowing, would we return home with a ready excuse, should we be asked why we were late, that the rabbi had delayed us with another legend for the coming Sabbath . . .

On our way, we would meet Chaim the “fishmonger”, who owned the house in which the *cheder* was situated. He would find an opportunity to return slowly to his empty house and creep inside. He had no family. He did not like to be with young people because of their noise and loud voices, which put him in a strange mood. He would begin to shout to himself because of the “madness” from which he suffered, but took care not to “go crazy”. The people in the group did not annoy him intentionally, as they knew this old Chaim and his disability well. Chaim was the only supplier of fish to the residents of the *shtetl* for the Sabbath and festivals.

THE *BEIT MIDRASH* AND THE SCHOOL

I only did one “term” at the *cheder*. It had no great effect on me, nor did it leave a marked impression on me or on others. There was no enthusiasm felt in the study of the Torah and Prophets and no stimulation experienced in these subjects. The beauty of the Bible stories - and their piercing light - had only a small, weak influence. The people involved in them, in their innocence, righteousness and great deeds, did not come close to really becoming part of me and remained strangers to me. I was not particularly interested in the majestic splendour of the matriarchs and patriarchs and even the wonders they performed for the Jews. Only seldom did epics and stories full of wonders, outstanding in their simplicity, strength and grandeur, with tales from the jewels of the Haggadah (homilies), have any effect on the imagination and vision of the young students. The restrained way the rabbi taught, clarified and explained matters, bordered on formal coldness. His manner of translating a verse was not clear in form or image, remaining static and fixed. There was no comprehensive and complete overview that showed the full stature of the hero, presenting his living portrait. On Thursdays as well, when the weekly portion and chapters from the Prophets for that week were rehearsed, there were no innovations. No details were explained in clear, typical and characteristic outline, in a way that would attract special attention, while the teacher and the students studied them in depth. Rabbi Lipa was completely satisfied with their knowing the meaning of the words in the weekly portion with dry clarity, without a hint of fresh feeling.

I believed there were outstanding teachers, described in our literature, who were talented, with a tremendous desire to provide the students with divine inspiration in their studies. They were able to listen at a very high level, developing their feeling and understanding of the lofty subjects, with great and undoubted educational value. But I was not destined to learn in such an environment.

The old-fashioned ways of teaching the Bible were not interesting. The resultant lack of effectiveness made the objective of the *cheder* even less attainable. The same applied to Jewish studies and even more so to the subjects taught by the general studies teachers. They did not engage the boys. The rehashing of arithmetic, concentrating on weights, writing addresses in Latin letters and the very pitiful teaching of Hebrew by Mr Yekutiël, were absolutely worthless. It was the same with the stories of the second teacher, Polski, about the monkey and the parrot that could imitate human speech,

and the tragedy of the hat that almost drowned in the sea. These were told to ensure the “purity” of the Russian language, to transmit it in this way to pupils who were fluent only in their mother tongue .

My father considered this poor educational situation. Bearing in mind that before entering the *cheder* I had “learnt” *Gemara*, simple *Chumash* studies, he decided to move me to the *beit midrash* to delve into the treasures of the Talmud and turn me into a “scholar”. I did not oppose this change: I had no strong link with the *cheder*. Shortly afterwards, Rabbi Lipa also “retired” – he left his *cheder* and sat at regular times in the *beit midrash* in the corner next to the clock. Many people approached it early in the morning to set their watches by it, certain it would not let them down.

The quiet, modest Rabbi Lipa would sway backwards and forwards while studying his book, without following the detailed and intricate reasoning of the rabbis and also not attracted by the innovations of the “Lizhenka sages” – the “cauldron” – but concentrated on the ideas and visions of his past and perhaps also his future .

In the *beit midrash*, I was placed under a reclusive *Chassid*, a middle-aged man who moved around a lot. He had an open face, covered by a round beard that looked combed and had a clear and penetrating voice. Two colleagues – one of them a student in the *cheder* and my close friend – joined me. We started with the *Baba Metzia* tractate in the Talmud – I had learnt the previous tractate, *Baba Kama*, from my father. There were two hours of study with the rabbi in the morning and two towards evening, but we had to spend the entire day repeating the lessons inside the walls of the *beit midrash*.

The Bible and Hebrew were not included in the programme. Is there a need – our rabbi would ask – for people studying *Gemara* to involve themselves with the Prophets or with the holy tongue? I suspected that this Chassidic rabbi was not an expert in these subjects. However, a few weeks later, we began to go over the weekly portion for an hour or two on Fridays, without spending too much time on the contents – reading and translation. Sometimes a question would be asked on something that was not particularly clear. It was explained – and that was the end of that.

The way the rabbi explained *Gemara* was quite interesting. It was clear that he did not teach from inner conviction or a strong desire to achieve outstanding results, but in order to fulfil his obligations, to earn a livelihood. He liked to go for walks in the meadow, a spot surrounded by the river. As soon as his lesson was over, he would go out for walks – to breathe fresh air. It appeared that he was bothered by living in foreign parts, separated from his family and sought to relieve his distress in the arms of nature.

In general, my life was full of boredom and lack of interest. I longed for books to read, but they were hard to find. Only by chance would I come across some little book, story, folk tale, in Yiddish or in Hebrew, from a passing bookseller. I devoured it like hot cakes . . . Although, when I lived in the village, I found *Shevet Hamussar* (a book on ethics and faith by the eighteenth-century Turkish rabbi, Elijah) and *Menorot Hamaor* (a classic fourteenth-century work by Rabbeinu Yitzchak Apelhav, on the *Haggadah* in the Talmud), with a translation into Yiddish, in the *beit midrash*. I would spend time alone with them between the afternoon and evening services and at night for leisurely reading. However, in the period after I left *cheder*, I was not drawn to them. Fiery lashes and the Milky Way with the terrors of *Gehinnom*, for which evildoers were destined, such as the heavy drinking of the righteous, to whom the whole world was promised, did not particularly arouse my interest. I no longer sought this type of book. I then got the idea of establishing a library in our *shtetl* that would also benefit others who were reading enthusiasts. I spoke to one of my friends, Alter Aminadav Godstein, I suggested that he go round to the houses every Friday and collect small change for this purpose. It did not even occur to me that there would be people who opposed such a “simple” idea. I don’t remember why it was never implemented, but the idea of the Hebrew library that grew in my thoughts was never put into practice.

With considerable effort, I was, however, sometimes able to obtain books to read on the Sabbath, but not regularly.

I found solitary study every single day increasingly dreary (apart from Friday, when an hour was devoted to the portion of the week, in a casual way) – *Gemara* study - and my father saw fit to send me to the beginners’ school to learn Russian properly. Mr Polski, with his uniform with the shiny buttons, would agree to give discounts and make concessions to the boys who were visiting the *cheders* and teach them in the morning, so that they could be released at 11 o’clock to go to their rooms. The same Mr P was the headmaster of the Russian school and its only teacher for all the standards, the classes for young boys and girls – the girls were in the large majority – but he could not divide them or distinguish among them by their levels of knowledge. He also could not maintain orderly and methodical studies. However, he did control them and they did not disturb his teaching, but they did not feel they gained much benefit from this school.

The education authorities were not particularly interested in this institution. At only one time, at the end of the year, some member of the “intelligentsia” would come to listen to the examinations, prepared in advance for the predetermined day. He would distribute book prizes to the outstanding students. Nobody took care of the financial situation, order, the number of

visitors or the money. The principal handled them as he wished, without particular authority or worries.

After I started going to the general school with other boys, I realised it was nothing but a waste of time. I was seldom called upon to read, once in a blue moon, as an advanced student – and my presence there served no purpose. Then my father contracted with Mr Polski to teach me privately for an additional payment. He agreed and I had to come a quarter of an hour before the beginning of class, when he would see me alone. What did he teach me? He gave me a set of nouns to decline orally and in writing. The next day, he would question me a little and order me to move to the next example, and so on. Months passed and we got no further than nouns, but I had to chew the cud. The day came when the contract was cancelled and my visits to the school came to an end. My progress in the language of the country was halted for several years. It was later taught in various ways, as it were, in the *cheder*, in a special school for it, by the same teacher – unsuccessfully .

I stayed on to learn only in the *beit midrash*. For the next term, I was transferred to another rabbi, also from a different place, who struck me as being lazy, longing with all his heart for his family. His body was “long” and in his long *kapota* (a long black coat worn by *Chabad Chassidim*), he seemed taller than tall. His face was “cloudy” and expressionless, revealing no spirituality . This time just one of my friends was with me, Yankele Ishaies. The rabbi selected the tractate *Ketubot* from the order *Nashim*. Like our previous teacher, he, too was the one who spoke, read, explained and clarified, while we, his pupils, remained passive. We would only repeat a section that had already been studied.

I did not like the tractate and the issues it raised. Matters of matrimonial status were not to my taste. I was sometimes embarrassed to listen to the rabbi’s explanations of aspects that were discussed in detail, which I found repugnant.

Why did the rabbis-teachers, the ones who had left their families at home, regard this in such a way that they selected this type of topic for young people? And I was still very young, not even thirteen, not even *bar-mitzvah* age.

CHAPTER 5

THE YESHIVA

As my studies progressed under my various teachers, I realised, even if not clearly, that I was wrong about the way I was being educated – it was not my fault, but the fault of those who could be said to be misdirecting me, not maliciously, but in error. I did not enjoy the flavour of the pleasures, games and happiness of childhood or boyhood. In fact, I was regarded as small by my parents and teachers. On the other hand, I did not feel I was growing up, developing and broadening my knowledge. My studies concentrated only on the dry Talmud – often without paying attention to the islands of *aggadah* in this sea, which could have brought a fresh breeze.

The way in which my teachers transmitted the *Gemara* depressed me and also embittered me to an extent. I felt in my heart that these studies added nothing to me, but detracted from me. I expected some change to take place in my impoverished life, a revolution, a miracle. It did even take a few months before it happened.

My father's uncle, from the town of Rasein, Rabbi Shmuel Yosef Levin, a sharp person, came to our house. He was sharp in two senses: in his learning and his nature. He had not seen my father for many years and did not know me. He first turned his attention to me, doing so cleverly, "feeling my pulse" without my realising he was testing me. I was not alarmed. My father also showed him what I had written, my first attempt in Hebrew, if my memory is not deceiving me. As a result of my uncle's observation of the vessel called Alter, he did not feel satisfaction, but – on the contrary – he expressed his reaction by pouring out his wrath on my father. "Scoundrel!" he said aloud. "This Alterke of yours is a good boy, so why do you keep him at home? Send him to the *yeshiva* to be with people, to where we both come from, especially there!" My uncle's anger abated after a while and he began to explain the matter according to his detailed programme. "In the 'life of a *kloyz* person' there is a *yeshiva*, of Rabbi Dov Maryams, a great and well-known scholar, a rabbi, a man of action, famous throughout the city and province of Rasein. Young men flock to the *yeshiva*, not only from the city itself, but from the entire province. There is no time to waste. The decision and the action in its wake must be taken immediately – without delay . . ."

The question of my upkeep outside the home was solved easily. Both the rabbi of the large town and the leaders there were our relatives, family members – and which of them would not want to feed Alterke one day a week? They all

knew my father, because he was born in the town. My grandmother was also there, Michala Miriam, the communal worker. Everybody respected her. She took care of poor brides and arranged their weddings. She would determine where I lived and the days for the meals as she saw fit – and, most of all, she would keep a watchful eye on me to ensure that I did not leave the straight and narrow path.

And so it was decided. I knew in advance that my father would comply with the request of his resolute uncle – and soon. A short time later, my mother packed my clothes in an suitable wooden box for a wandering *beit midrash* student and gave me orders and advice about when and how to use my things. My father braced himself and went with me on the train to Kovno. From there it took six hours on a steamboat on the Neman. Afterwards, we travelled in a wagon covered by a large canvas dome, harnessed to three horses which pulled their “large” load of passengers all night on their way over the swampy ground. In the morning we reached our destination, Rasein.

My maternal grandmother, a short, thin woman with a sullen face, was busy, always rushing somewhere, to an appointment with her close friend, Malka, the wife of the rabbi – or his daughter – to finalise the matchmaking for an orphan girl and to fix the marriage date with the groom. Everybody knew my grandmother, Michala Miriam, would comply with reasonable requests, but left no room for compromise. Her husband, Rabbi Leib Zisles, had left her widowed many years before. He was a very learned man who taught *Gemara* when he wanted to and was prominent in the community. She had not seen my father for very many years and did not know me, her grandson, at all.

As soon as we had arrived safely, she rushed to see us. She did not spend long on welcoming us, or show many signs of affection, but immediately got down to practical matters. She ordered me to stay with her in her rented room and told me that the next day, Tuesday, I had to come for my meals to the home of Freda Malka, a widow who managed her large business very ably. Sunday was arranged with Uncle Avi, Friday at the home of his sister, the wife of Rabbi Aryeh Nurok, the old local ritual slaughterer. I would spend the Sabbath at the home of a relative who lived in the neighbourhood with my uncle, and so it went on for the rest of the week.

As soon as my eating days had been set, grandmother brought me to the *yeshiva*. It was headed by Rabbi Bertzik Maryams, an old man with a thin face on which, it seemed to me, no smile ever appeared. He spoke in a slightly angry voice that went silent after a fit of coughing. His beard was singed, like his moustache, from his cigarettes, which he used to roll and prepare with his own hands.

I found that the boys in the *yeshiva* were all like me, of a similar age, with only a few of them having reached *bar-mitzvah* age. They lived in Rasein or in nearby cities and towns in the area. Within a short time I managed to get close to many of them, but was not allowed the opportunity to talk to them – the “weak” rabbi exercised his strong authority to require that they studied and only studied.

The first lesson in which I participated, on a new tractate (or new section), was “revealed” by the rabbi, as was the norm in a real *yeshiva*. He interpreted, asked questions and resolved contradictions, reading the text and then going back to the issue in Rashi’s commentary, sometimes with some simple “additions”. The students had to pay careful attention and were only seldom granted the opportunity to participate when one of them raised a question or difficulty. In the process of explaining, the head of the *yeshiva* would weave in his own arguments, ask difficult questions and resolve contradictions that were generally very interesting. This addition to the subject studied in the *Gemara* and its interpreters was called: “The Torah (teaching) of the rabbi”.

This method was more appropriate, in terms of what was generally accepted in a real *yeshiva*, but here, too, there was a lack of balance between the two sides, the teacher and the students. Only he was active and the latter passive, sometimes “insignificant”, bearing an external burden.

Rabbi Dov was similar, finding complete satisfaction in the role of the head of the *yeshiva* – spiritually as well as materially and physically. There was a great deal of doubt about how many groats he and his wife required for breakfast and lunch. It was assumed that probably only a few would be enough for him – and even more so, his wife. I had the impression that mortification was the outstanding characteristic of their lives – although I never saw his wife.

My father spent a few days in Rasein and left for home on the Saturday evening. It was hard for me to part from him. The exile to which I was sent, a place where the burden of Torah and good manners was imposed on me, struck me as being too heavy to bear.

My studying in the company of friends in the *yeshiva* did bring about change in my life. Even the possibility of talking with them as much as I wished was not allowed and I had even less opportunity to associate with them at fixed times when we were free: “Fatten him like a bull” – the quantity laid down by the rabbi for the students. This was a rule from ancient times that Rabbi Dov adopted unequivocally. We had to sway while studying, singing and chanting over the *Gemara*, with the objective of “infinite” repetition, from morning to evening.

If somebody interrupted a lesson by whispering in the ear of his neighbour, the rabbi would rebuke him with a glance and, if that did not suffice, with a blow

on the head or shoulder of the person causing the disturbance, using his weighty *Gemara*, with its thick, heavy binding. The head of the *yeshiva* would supervise classes himself, but in the time between the afternoon and evening services, a supervisor was appointed to this post – the beadle, Reb Shabtai, a tall old man, strict, quiet and ill-tempered. He would fix his eye on students to keep them quiet when their impulses got the better of them, making them start a brief conversation or move a little from their obligatory bent seating positions. Reb Shabtai would quickly light his “lightning lanterns”, a clear hint that Rabbi Dov’s students should carry on. As a result, even at twilight, which was a good time for a break, the students were forced to learn.

There were, however, exceptional cases when we were allowed to approach the “warm oven” of the company and tell each other stories, most of them outdated, as our stores had long ago been exhausted. We were sometimes ordered to gather to recite psalms for the healing of a sick person, donating a copper coin to charity for each one. I would also sometimes listen to Rabbi Azriel, a ritual slaughterer (the friend of Rabbi Aaron, the son of Rabbi Aryeh Nurok), who was the rabbi of the Psalms Society. He read in very good taste in front of the congregation: his diction was clear and pleasant, and his explanations interesting and acceptable – until the beadle knocked on the bimah, the raised platform in the centre of the synagogue, where the person leading the prayers stands, to indicate that it was time for the evening service. Only after supper, which was usually eaten in some haste, and study for a further hour or more, did we obtain relief, freedom from our *yeshiva* for the whole night.

I would spend most evenings in the home of Rabbi Nurok. His son, Rabbi Aaron, was known as a diligent student. After supper he would hurry to the *beit midrash*. His keen devotion was the force that always drew him to the house of study. The daughters, five of them – only the eldest was married and living with her husband – would stay home. Because of them, students from the municipal schools would come to spend some time in their company – myself included. I was jealous of their gaiety, the natural *joie de vivre* that bubbled within them. While they were also busy with their various studies and exams, they never attracted such a hard and oppressive taskmaster as we *yeshiva* students did.

I enjoyed their jokes and stories about everyday matters and listened to them carefully. And then my grandmother arrived in haste. As usual, she looked at me disapprovingly for “almost always being in the company of the girls”. She came up to me with a small jug and a cup in her hand, ordering me to drink some of the medicinal “herbs” she had prepared for me to ease my cough. But it was a total fabrication. I was not coughing at all and did not

need any drugs. But she stood firm. The medicine was necessary and had to be taken and there was no way to avoid drinking it.

After I complied with her wishes, she hurried out, intimating to me openly that I should definitely not delay. I should go home and get into bed. I was truly imprisoned in my room. She would sometimes return much later, only after she had finished all the things she had to do that day and evening.

I awaited Nissan (April) eagerly, because at the beginning of the month, G-d willing, I was due to return home to my parents for the Passover festival. I would not long to return to the *yeshiva*, to the life it demanded.

The *Chayei Adam kloyz*, with the people who prayed there and its *beit midrash* students, pupils of Rabbi Dov, were quickly erased from my memory. They left no marked impression once I had departed.

But two unforgettable characters from that prayer hall, *kloyz*, have not been erased from my memory.

One of them appeared to be well off, one of the leaders of the city. As far as I was aware, he never spoke to anyone. He only came to pray. With every prayer, particularly when he got to the *Shmoneh Esrei*, the eighteen benedictions in the daily *Amidah*, he would start calling out loud: "My head! Oh, my head!" How would that stop somebody reciting the *Shmoneh Esrei* prayer? It made me really wonder. I would always look at him – he sat in the corner near the Holy Ark containing the Torah scrolls – and came to the conclusion that he was actually sick, but was his sickness physical or mental? I have yet to answer that question.

A tall, thin, bent man prayed in the corner at the other end, where he was completely isolated from people. He, too, did not speak to anyone. He prayed with great devotion, completing the *Shmoneh Esrei* shortly before or after the *Kedusha*, during the cantor's repetition of the prayer. After the prayer he would depart. Who was he? I only knew a few details about him. His name was Reb Shmuel, an extremely observant man, who was reluctant to talk about everyday things. He even studied at home and not in the *kloyz*. He had small children and was fearful for them, watching over them so that they did not touch their bodies with "unclean" hands in the night. What did he do? He would bind their delicate hands in cloth, tie it and fasten it very well so that it would not fall off or move from their hands until they washed them in water in the morning. He did not send them to *cheder*, but taught them himself, so that they would not, G-d forbid, come into contact with others. Purity and solitude were the principles of the practical Judaism of Reb Shmuel the Chassid.

In Nissan, I returned home. The *yeshiva* was left behind and put out of mind.

CHAPTER 6

IN KOVNO

I returned to my parents' home from Rasein for the Passover holiday. Under their roof, I saw myself as more grown up. The great affection shown to me on my return by my mother, as well as my father and sister, who would sometimes belittle and infuriate me, raised me up in their eyes and consequently in my eyes as well. I seemed to be a genuine guest, who deserved to be treated with respect and politeness by them and, even more so, by the neighbours, who came to greet me on my return and also to "grab" a little news. The ceiling in the house had become lower above my head and I felt very much more important and significant. I would come after spending the entire winter far away, spending time with different people, seeing a fair share of the "world", Kovno, the district city, and Rasein – which was nothing like Kovno and possibly even more important. In addition, I had become a person who could stand up – and travel – by himself and for himself; I was the master of my actions all the way: on the wagon with its cover, on the steamship, as well as in the cabin of the wagon in Kovno, on the train. I bought travel tickets myself, I looked after my things, everything went so well and smoothly.

Is it distressing that what I learned on such a long road, with its many twists and turns and experiences, was neither appreciated by most of the shtetl residents, even the older people, nor did they benefit from them during their festivals? My worth grew thanks to my travelling alone, without taking into account my life, my actions and conduct as a resident of Rasein, the city with its excellent reputation, even among those who had yet to hear the sounds it made. I became even more "distinguished" in their eyes when they learnt that I had many uncles, aunts and cousins there, that the city was full of relatives, family members – further clear proof that Rasein was in fact a major metropolis.

The day after my return, when the *beit midrash* service was over, many people surrounded me, even community leaders whom previously I did not know personally. They shook my hand in friendly greeting. They asked politely about this and that and also enquired – incidentally – about news of the outside world, edicts and restrictions placed on the Jews, particularly additional laws relating to "cleanliness", in the sense of sanitation and hygiene – *tshistata* in Russian – a burden that rested particularly heavily on the necks of our Jewish brothers. In terms of a new particularly strict legal provision, they were now required to keep their shops and bakeries absolutely clean. If they did not do so, they would face severe punishments and fines.

It did occur to me to calm the people who were scared of the cleanliness, because it would come of itself with the many preparations for Passover, in terms of the laws of *kashrut* that required the removal of leavened bread on the eve of Passover, but I avoided doing so. From a distance, I saw the “learned” clown, the tall Itzhak Bar, our neighbour, walking around and “sniffing” the scent of the news, tasting it. When he heard my explanations, he would curl up his nose and say: “What’s that got to do with it? What has my son got to do with my father-in-law? It’s amazing. I am amazed.” He would preach to me about what the one thing had to do with the other . . . to hear criticism in the presence of the leaders of the community, who regarded me jealously because their children had not experienced the broad issues of the world as I had. I didn’t want it; I thought highly of myself and I didn’t want anybody to denigrate that. I left the group and went to my house.

Even before I returned, my father knew that Rasein and all the highly respected people there, my grandmother, Uncle Rashi, Rabbi A Nurok, Rabbi Dov Maryams and our many distinguished relatives, would not be able to draw me back there in the future. I had already hinted as much in my letters to my father and also indicated to him that in future I wished to study in Kovno, in the *yeshiva* of Rabbi Shmuel Chaim. It had been highly commended to us by a reliable person. When I was in Kovno, even before *Pesach*, my father made the arrangements I wanted, even accommodation for me in the home of the Kovno teacher in Pilvishok, in a room not far from the tailors’ *kloyz*, where the *yeshiva* was. I came to my parents’ home as a returning guest, with a guest’s privileges. While I stayed with them, I behaved as though I was ready to leave them again after the festival. The festival itself has a particular character that lends itself to hospitality. In the words of the Passover *Haggadah*: *Let all who are hungry enter and eat and all who are in need – come!* And Elijah the Prophet is like a blessed guest who has come to drink the special cup of wine for him. On Passover, all the well-dressed and adorned family members also feel that they are like guests. The delicacies of the festival, the special foods and the new clothes make this feeling even stronger.

I went alone on my way to the *yeshiva* in Kovno, not long after the beginning of the month of Iyar (May), like a seasoned traveller whose way has been prepared and who would reach his destination without problems. The journey from my home to where I would live in Kovno took a little more than two hours by train and in the carriage. I put my case down, arranged my things and looked forward to the *yeshiva*.

It was a clear day, the sun shone with all its spring light. I enjoyed the entire journey because of the precious beauty of the day and became even happier on my way to the *yeshiva* because I had come to a busy city, full of life and movement which invigorated me.

The head of the *yeshiva*, Rabbi Shmuel Chaim Yanchok, made a good impression on me. He was a man of close to forty, medium height, portly, with a full face and a pleasant expression. A smile sometimes appeared on his lips as he spoke quietly. He wore black and walked with small steps and rather careless movements – everything about him indicated a brilliant scholar.

He had a brief conversation with me when I reported to him. He informed me that studies began at 10 o'clock in the morning, after the meal and the lesson by the head of the *yeshiva*. The class lasted for two hours or more. At one thirty, there was a break for lunch and anybody who wished to do so could eat at the rabbi's table, set specially for the students at a minimal price. I was not examined, because there was no need to establish which class I would be in, as was done in the *cheder* - in the *yeshiva*, everybody studies the tractate in one lesson for everybody.

I got hold of a *Gemara* and came to learn. The *beit midrash*, the *kloyz* of the tailors, was new and spacious. The students, about twenty in number, were scattered throughout the room. Everybody's voice trilled as he studied the *Gemara*, using his own tune, moving his body in his own way, according to his inclination. Everybody moved "on the spot", a sign of deep meditation while singing, concentrating, swaying the body, using various facial expressions. The school benches in the classroom were arranged in the form of the Hebrew letter *chet* (U-shape), with a small table at the top for the head of the *yeshiva*. The tractate chosen by him was *Pesachim* (the laws of Passover) from the Order *Moed* (Seasons). Rabbi Shmuel Chaim understood that the boys who intended learning by themselves, without the assistance of the rabbi, wanted to get used to early "reading" to understand the issues, reviewing them in depth themselves. The subjects for study in the tractate *Pesachim* were easier for this purpose, not as difficult as those in the Orders of *Nezikin* (Torts) and *Nashim* (Women).

If this view is correct, the head of the *yeshiva* deserved high praise for trying to find a way to make it easier for the students to achieve the desired goal.

The heads of the *yeshivas* did not concern themselves in any concrete manner with teaching methods or measuring progress among the *beit midrash* students by adopting ordered and precise teaching methods for this purpose. The people who taught the Oral Torah – the Talmud and its commentaries – did not consider the principles of teaching methodology, imparting knowledge through gradually developing the abilities of the learners or adapting the subjects and examples to them through setting subjects and tractates for study. They had no desire to maintain the teaching of our sages: *At age five, the Bible; age ten, the Mishnah; and at fifteen, the Gemara*. Are our rabbis and teachers and their pupils in recent generations superior to the generations of

early teachers who prescribed the sequence: *Mishnah*, *Gemara*? Why did the head of the *yeshiva* prefer the *Gemara* and the tractate he liked most? Perhaps because it contained richer material for argumentation and hair-splitting. He imposed it on the students, some of them very young and unprepared, just because it was part of the monetary laws or from the Order of *Nashim* – so that they could “butt up against each other” and struggle with an inappropriate background for their intellectual development.

The sequence of *Mishna*, followed by *Gemara*, is also much more appropriate in terms of the pedagogic step-by-step method of teaching with regard to its form – its style – including the aspect of its contents. It was customary in the *yeshivas* rather to be more demanding. Whoever did not have the “head” for the *Gemara* was automatically pushed and thrust outside the camp of the “guardians of the Law”.

Only a few of my new friends there were from Kovno. The majority were from cities and villages in the province. I was one of the youngest in this Company (with a capital C). There was one other person from my town, two years older than I, whom I was surprised to meet.

The rabbi would come in and go out, casting an eye over the students, to establish that they were not wasting time talking or daydreaming. Two of the students were appointed to reinforce supervision, one from the southern half of the *kloyz* and the second, from the northern half, to bestir the students to learn if they had stopped. The supervisor was instructed to warn and caution the students. If that did not work, he had to note the “rebelliousness” on a piece of paper (to give to the person in charge at the end of the week of “supervision”), using the following terminology: (a) IL – meaning “idle a little”; (b) VI – “very idle” and (c) 0 – a small circle – an indication that the person causing the disturbance did not accept the authority of the supervisor.

The supervisor would bring the written “report” to the head of the *yeshiva*, using wording such as: from Botriman – IL; from Plotishk – VI; from Nomaion – 0; and from Prenan – VI, etc. While the list was not long, the rabbi overlooked nothing in dealing with it. The judgment, after a hearing-conversation between the rabbi and the student, was almost always known in advance. The IL punishment was a mild reprimand (or severe, if it was a repeat offence); VI – a warning, the rabbi’s chastisement and anger; the circle, which was the mark of a “serious offence” – the discussion ended with a slap on the cheek of the person being punished and sometimes, for a rebellious person, even two, with the offender being sent to the furthest corner in the *kloyz*.

It was interesting that when the person punished had his turn to be appointed as supervisor, he, too, would be strict and not necessarily lenient.

On one occasion, Dov-Leib, from the same town as I was, placed my name on the list with “VI”. This was overdone. I was careful to obey the supervisor and, if I was disrespectful, it was only to the extent of “IL”. But I saw that he wished to annoy me, to show that he was superior to me in worth, power and perhaps also family. His father, who lived close to us in P-ki, owned property and was wealthier than my father (but not more learned). For some reason he sought vengeance, in spite of our open friendship, and noted that comment. Because he had no reason to “take vengeance” on me, I could not find it in me to forgive the injustice done to me. Innermost feelings can play a large role among boys and, at times, particularly among them.

When my turn came, I was called to the head of the *yeshiva*. He knew me well and understood I was not the kind of person who deliberately would behave badly towards the supervisor – perhaps he also understood that some personal animus was the reason for my “VI”. Accordingly, he gave me only a slight reprimand, without a warning, and let me go, calling one of the people who received a circle to take my place. My name was not mentioned again on the black list.

There was a significant difference in the teaching “methods” of Rabbi Dov in Rasein and the head of the *yeshiva* in Kovno. The former would go into detail, debate the law to a greater extent and liked going into depth about the subject by asking questions and finding solutions of his own. This was not the case with the head of the *yeshiva* in Kovno. He tended towards literal interpretation, did not “build castles in the air”, but “related”, interpreted, explained and went from topic to topic, spending time on problems and questions mainly raised by the students, whose participation grew as the lesson progressed.

There were two particularly diligent students – the oldest in the group – one, very poor, from the “Mountain Road”, a suburb of Kovno, called “the Mountain Man” by his friends, and one from Parena. In addition to being diligent and studying for more hours more than the prescribed time – the “order”, in the words of the head of the *yeshiva* – he was also a person whose illogical explanations raised laughter in the auditorium.

When the head of the *yeshiva* handed out report letters for delivery to the parents of the students at the end of the term on the students’ progress, he would make special mention of those who had been diligent in adding hours to holy studies on their own initiative, over and above the “order”.

Once I asked a question in a class that appeared to be very difficult. The head of the *yeshiva* did not manage to answer. Everybody saw that I had “stirred up” – stopped – the rabbi and that was unusual. It caused confusion.

A student who “achieves” in this way becomes a topic of conversation among those who know him and is to a degree regarded as a “hero” in the eyes of his colleagues, yet I was sorry to see my rabbi, whom I respected, confused because of me. After a lengthy pause, the rabbi postponed the clarification of the issue to the next lesson and moved my question on to the “agenda”. There was no room for the Bible and even less for the Hebrew language and the like. The primary objective was to get to the “top of the ladder” of expertise and learning, and preparing the argumentation that was prevalent in the great and famous *yeshivas* of Slobodka and Telz.

The head of the *yeshiva* supported studying *Mussar* (a 19th century movement among Orthodox Jews in Lithuania that became a trend in *yeshivas*, focusing on the educating of the individual about strict ethical behaviour in the spirit of Jewish law). He wanted to instil it in the hearts of his students. But his ideas were not as extreme as the head of the *Mussar yeshiva* in Slobodka. He did not bring *Mussar* books for regular study, but contented himself with discussions that interested his listeners and students. When it got dark after Sabbath, he would gather them in the “hall” of the *kloyz*, take his place next to the table – the small bimah. His students gathered round him, standing and sitting pressed up against each other and draw near to the rabbi. He would begin speaking in a confidential whisper. In the large *kloyz* and the new *beit midrash* nearby, the evening service had been completed and the prayer distinguishing the holy Sabbath from weekdays had been recited. The rabbi continued to admonish us, telling us stories laced with appropriate parables, giving vivid descriptions of the Garden of Eden and *Gehinnom*, providing evidence and proof of the greatness of the reward for righteous people and the punishment of wrongdoers in the next world. The boys would listen, swallow the words, their hearts beating with a heightened sense of awe, holiness and very active imagination. Everybody was frozen in their seats, enchanted. They were comfortable in knowing that their prayers at the end of the Sabbath were postponed to a later time – according to the belief in the *Aggadah* – to delay the return of evil spirits at the end of the Sabbath until after the last holy prayer and the first weekday prayer. We were happy, privileged by the great merit of delaying the Divine voice declaring: “Let the wicked go down among the dead!”

The very significant effects of these discussions – almost every week we would engage in the Torah and mitzvot with real heartfelt happiness – lasted until after the Sabbath, when it grew dark, beginning with the dusk of evening. The gathering darkness was not felt because of the internal light of the soul.

Officially our *yeshiva* was called a *cheder*. This was what was written on the small sign hanging on the courtyard entrance gate. The law requiring payment of three roubles a year for the teaching licence issued by the

education authority applied to the head of the *yeshiva*, who was called a *melamed* (teacher).

From time to time, a visitor would come to keep an eye on the punishment meted out in the *cheder*. One of the people appointed to this post was an assimilated Jew, by the name Rodman, with a broad and strong body. He ate unkosher food. He was a Jew hater, according to the people who spoke badly of him – the headmaster of the government school for Jewish pupils next to the *yeshiva*.

Once he came in suddenly in the middle of a class, like a person entering a private room, which he had left shortly before. We were all alarmed. The rabbi wore a *yarmulke* in any event and the students quickly removed their hats, except one who had a large, discoloured spot on his head. We were panic-stricken. The inspector, who seemed a coarse person, did not have a smile on his face. He sat for a while fixing his piercing eyes right through everyone. Very angry with the boy who did not take his hat off, he mouthed a few words to the head of the *yeshiva* and, to our relief, went out without saying goodbye.

We felt at the time that Jew-hatred from a Jew was more difficult to endure than the hatred from somebody who was not a Jew.

We had very little for our upkeep. The custom of “eating days” was not accepted in Kovno. Each student would receive support from his parents to buy food required for breakfast and supper; a number of students would come to eat lunch at the home of the rabbi. There, the rabbi’s wife prepared a soup cooked with bones and bread that provided everyone with as much as he wished. The bones, some of them “with brainy properties”, were given as an additional portion to one of the people having the lunch, as the person in charge of the meal saw fit. He was a quick-tempered and irritable relative of the rabbi. He would honour the person who found favour in his eyes that day with the portion. Many times, one day after the other, this portion was given only to those he favoured. Payment for the meal was very low. Only on the Sabbath would the rabbi designate a house in which each student would eat as a guest, if he wished.

In order to cut down expenses, some boys volunteered to give up the places in private homes where they slept and went to sleep in the *kloyz*, spreading their cushion and clothes on the hard wooden bench. There was a section in the *kloyz*, a kind of small hall, which belonged to a group of worshippers who practised the same trade, tailors, but younger – this section was very popular among the boys who slept in the *kloyz-yeshiva*.

Among those who occupied the *kloyz* at night was an old man from another town, the father of the respected author in Israel, Mr Ben-Eliezer. We hardly

came into contact with the outside world, apart from occasional walks in the quiet streets of the city, on the banks of the Neman, or near it, and sometimes in the lovely main street with its wide boulevards, full of strollers towards evening and particularly on the Sabbath.

One person from another town who studied in the *kollel* in Kovno (a place for advanced Jewish studies for married men). It supported eminent scholars who wished to enter the rabbinate and for this purpose, the "yeshiva students" would leave their families and come to Kovno. He would come to the "small hall" at sunset for a few hours to study together with another learned *yeshiva* student. He was popular among the boys and some of us became close to him. On a few evenings, he told us about Dr Herzl, his ambitions and work. We listened carefully. He himself secretly followed the movement Herzl created and enjoyed its progress. I was very grateful to him for opening my eyes to a new phenomenon in the life of our nation.

Two bookshops were not far from the *kloyz*. I would often go to one of them to borrow books to read for a weekly payment of a few *prutot*. The time and place of my "external" reading was a secret which I hid from the head of the *yeshiva* and most of my friends there.

One fine day in spring, my father came to the *yeshiva*. I did not notice him when he arrived. I was leaning on a pillar facing the eastern wall. He came and stood behind me. A friend pointed him out and I turned my head and saw my father looking at me, while I was involved in Torah study. He was open in expressing his pleasure at seeing me there.

At the end of the term, I would return to my parents' house for the festival in that season and bring the report letter about my diligent studies and the progress I had made. This resulted in great satisfaction for my mother and father.

I studied at this *yeshiva* for a-year-and-a-half. Within myself, I did not feel that I managed to perform anything wonderful and told myself that the time had come for a change, to go somewhere where I would receive the training I required for self-study, without the assistance of a rabbi. I decided that I should return to Rasein, to the *yeshiva* of Rabbi Shmuel Chanoch, which had earned a good name, being headed by a famous scholar with many achievements. This rabbi had gained a similar reputation to the rabbi from Kovno, the head of the *yeshiva*, but I believed this one would bring me closer to my goal and I would achieve it.

CHAPTER 7

THE MEETING PLACE FOR STUDY

The village of Slobodka, on the outskirts of Kovno, became very well known in all the countries where Jews lived because of its *yeshivas*. Most of the young men there were *yeshiva* students.

One of them, the most humble, was the *yeshiva* of Rabbi Herschel. Its students were divided into classes according to their level of knowledge and age and learnt from their rabbis – but I aspired to learn by myself. The *Mussar* was an important principle in the *yeshiva* of Rabbi Herschel, for study and in practice, especially among the students who separated themselves from life outside and their natural inclinations. The white glaze on the windows of this seminary made the windows fairly opaque, preventing the students from looking outside and watching what was happening beyond the four walls of the Torah. I found this conspicuous feature oppressive. It pushed me away from the building and distanced me from it.

One of the *yeshivas* for students who studied by themselves was known as the highest centre of extreme *Mussar* adherents. After the moderate version of *Mussar* taught by Rabbi Shmuel Chaim, whom I respected very highly, I had no inclination to join them. I considered the second *yeshiva*, in the old *beit midrash*, named after the late Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan, but I was not yet old enough for it. Many of its students had already studied at Telz, the main *yeshiva* in Russia, and they were very strong in their argumentation and disputation. I was hesitant to join their company.

My negative thoughts regarding the Slobodka *yeshivas*, so close to Kovno, strengthened and reinforced my decision further to return to Rasein to further my self-study in the *yeshiva* for the “great scholars”. However, I was firm in my view that with regard my way of life there, there would be major changes, really basic. I would no longer live with my grandmother in one room. As I had already explained previously to my father, I did not want to be a burden or a nuisance to her. “Eating days” had to be cut down to the minimum – only on the Sabbath and a few other days, possibly in the homes of close family and only if I was required to have a meal there. I did not just eat to meet this requirement. I came to the view that it would be best for me to eat my bread, salt and milk alone in my room.

With regard to Rabbi Shmuel Yosef, my father’s uncle, I would be no more subservient than good manners required and the same applied to the home of my cousins’ parents, Rabbi Aaron Nurok. In the meantime, this family

had grown smaller: the old Rabbi Aryeh died and two of the daughters were married, and life in the home was substantially reduced.

I made these “new” conditions known in advance: when I arrived, I was received as an independent person. My grandmother did, however, protest that I was keeping my distance from her, but quickly accepted my view that it was not good for me to be a burden on her – a concession to my opinion.

In partnership with another three students of the head of the *yeshiva*, Rabbi Shmuel Chanoch – the head of the Rasein *cheder* – we hired a loft and the four of us moved in to live in one room. The furniture was notable for its simplicity: four beds, kinds of couches and a sort of bed along the walls on the two sides were where we lay down and sat; a small table next to the only window; and two worn-out chairs. These filled the room. The small stove in the corner next to the entrance was hidden as a pleasant addition. It was heated only from time to time, so that we did not freeze from the cold.

When we had to go up to our room, we rang only once at the entrance on a long string drawn out of the window with a stone tied to the bottom. Sometimes we threw a small snowball up to the window as a signal to the person inside to open the entrance door. As a result of this independence, the people who knew us regarded us as “big” and we really saw ourselves that way – we had reached the level of maturity.

My grandmother, Michala Miriam, however, did not want to ignore me or take her eyes off me. What did she do? She would come secretly – not during the prayer service, but specially for that purpose – to the women’s gallery, crouching down next to the window opposite the eastern wall. With her head covering pulled down over her eyes, she looked through the latticework and watched her Alterke to check and find out whether he was learning diligently or was sitting idly having a pleasant conversation with his friends. She was certain that I could not see her from my place on the eastern side, but I could always feel her piercing eyes. In her honour, at that time I would be filled with the courage and desire to devote myself particularly diligently to the study of Torah and pretended to be delving deeply into a serious subject. Satisfied with what she witnessed, she would leave for her public duties. And when she met her friends outside, she would let something slip in praise of her grandson, the only son of her only son, who was studying very diligently, in her opinion, in the *yeshiva* of Rabbi Shmuel Chanoch at the *beit midrash*..

The *yeshiva* was situated in the large *beit midrash* in Rasein and was highly regarded throughout the entire region. The students gathered there had come from different places, with well-developed and advanced knowledge of the Talmud. The head of the *yeshiva*, Rabbi Shmuel Chanoch, was superior in my view to those who preceded him and seemed a very distinguished person.

The way he taught, “narrating the lesson”, was generally not very different from the way his colleagues taught, but to me it seemed that he was more learned than they were and had greater depth and broader views. But he lacked the educational and pedagogic means to draw us into an intimate intellectual relationship with the subjects studied. For this reason, I assume, our development remained rather slow, although we were being taught by him directly on a daily basis.

On the other hand, however, it is beyond doubt that growing up does a lot on its own, particularly in a friendly and desirable environment. A healthy and permanent feeling of responsibility was aroused in us, the students. We no longer required special supervision with regard to proper behaviour and allocating time to studies.

The head of the *yeshiva* noticed our significant progress and derived satisfaction from it. My notes from this period are fairly extensive and I have rich memories of what they contain. I was impressed by the general environment in this *beit midrash* and unforgettable images and pictures were engraved on my heart.

I regarded this *beit midrash* as holy in the fullest sense of the word. The people who came to pray there, the students and the its customs lent it a form of reverence. The prayer shawls of the people who came there were decorated with “heavy”, beautiful and sparkling crowns. Their owners were covered to below their knees. While standing during the Eighteen Benedictions, they moved with moderation, without exaggerated enthusiasm, but with awe and feeling, as if they were saying: “And rejoice with trembling!” The beadle, a dignified old man who was respected by the congregation, and his assistant, a learned man in the prime of his life, would fulfil their roles politely and skilfully. Knocking on the podium table led to respectful behaviour among the congregation, which included veteran scholars. They might have been no more than traders, but sitting at the table of the Talmud and Mishna Society, their attitude to the people giving the lesson showed that they knew the subjects being studied and discussed and understood them correctly. And on the Sabbath, when the building would fill up with hardly any empty places, the entire public was imbued with truly holy feelings for the day and the place. It seemed as if the Holy Spirit covered the entire area of the building.

The various groups of G-d-fearing people differed from each other in looks and characteristics and their individual ways. But there was no difference among them in how they sat, got up, stood and listened in the house of prayer. They all behaved as one. Conversations during the cantor’s repetition of the Eighteen Benedictions or when the Torah was being read had no place in that wonderful *beit midrash*, and even comments, questions and answers relating

to what was written in the Torah, the verse or the commentators, did not break the silence the cantor or the reader imposed for the Torah. The very worthy conduct of the fathers had a good influence on the young children, youth and babies brought there to be educated in the Commandment of the House of Prayer – where there was no hint of anything untoward.

I grew to enjoy being in the *beit midrash*, both on the Sabbath and on weekdays. The rabbi, Alexander Moshe Lapidot, of blessed memory, the rabbi of the Rasein community, was a great and well-known Torah scholar. He was blind in his last days when I studied there. A tall man, with a wonderful beard, wearing a *streimel* on his head and sporting a magnificent fur coat with a wide goatskin collar, he took his place next to the Holy Ark, on the north side. After the morning prayers, he would fix a time for the study of Torah and the *Gemara*. This rabbi had a wonderful memory, and his expertise in the entire Talmud enabled him to select and learn every tractate and every subject by heart. A single young man, one of three brothers who were excellent and experienced Talmudic students, was the only person sitting to the right of the rabbi, with a thick, leather-bound *Gemara* open before him. He listened to the voice of the rabbi reading and interpreting the text without any failure or mistake on his part. The young man was not required to point out any errors. Everything was correct, clear and discernible to this outstanding and lofty man. Seldom would the rabbi turn to the person checking what he said, with a minor question and receive confirmation in reply.

Almost every morning for two months, I would sit at a respectful distance opposite the two of them, gazing in wonder at the marvellous abilities of the blind rabbi swimming in the sea of the Talmud, drawing from it pearls and jewels with a light touch and deep feeling, and no ordinary storm or any wind had the power to delay him or to move him aside in any direction to which his face was not turned.

At the end of the period of study, the *Gemara* the young man was following would be closed. The rabbi stood up, rose to his full height and showed himself a head taller than those still in the *beit midrash*, turning to face the door. There his young granddaughter waited for him and sometimes the rabbi's queen herself – and Rabbi Alexander Moshe Lapidot would leave. Everyone who saw him depart would stand and watch him in admiration.

The head of the *yeshiva* would remain in solitude in his home, where he prepared his lessons, while my father's cousin, the head of the *yeshiva*, would usually remain in the *beit midrash* after the prayer service to study his lesson on his own. He was more learned than the members of the Talmud Society. Our distant relative, Reb Aryeh, the undertaker, could be seen on the south side, learning his lesson when he was not busy with his job. The deputy beadle would lean on the podium on his *Gemara* and study his text, as would others.

All of them would continue reading until after the short morning lesson of the society was over, and the Talmud Society had already dispersed.

There were eight houses of prayer in Rasein. Their magnificent synagogue rose up next to the *beit midrash*. It was not closed even during the winter. A permanent *minyan* of synagogue stalwarts prayed there morning, noon and night, so that the holiness of the prayers would never cease, although they did not take too long on cold days, when the chill grew still more severe.

The other houses of study and prayer were called *kloyzes*. One of them, Chayei Adam, contained the *yeshiva* of Rabbi Dov Maryams, my *yeshiva* head when I studied in Rasein for the first time. The second was named after Rabbi Shmuel the Chassid, a well-known, wealthy man. In the third, the main *gabbai*, the leader of the synagogue, was the “Berlin” *maskil*, Rabbi Fischel Bar, the author of a Hebrew book. His appearance, dress and the spectacles on his nose fastened with a black cord to one of his ears, made him look as if he had only just come from the *beit midrash* of Moses Mendelssohn – a man who combined enlightenment and Torah well and was highly respected in Rasein. One highly observant man, with vast knowledge of Hebrew, lived there as well. He was known beyond the borders of Rasein and made a good impression with his prominence. He was one of the opponents of Zionism in later years and wrote a book, *Or Leyasharim*. He was Rabbi Zalman Landa, who subsequently moved to Kovno.

I visited every *kloyz* and looked at their Holy Arks and artworks and the writings on the walls. In one of them, I found some lovely verses engraved in large letters. I was informed afterwards that it was a poem by ADM HaCohen.

I did not avoid going to hear preachers. On one occasion, I heard several sermons by one of them. When he went from one *kloyz* to another, I followed him. I was very surprised by what he said, as it was word for word what I had previously heard, with the same inflexion, the same emphasis and stress to the end. He did the same with his second sermon, which he delivered so fluently without even a slight change to it, not even in the finest detail. I really wanted to know how good his memory was and I listened to the third sermon. It flowed as if it were coming out of a printing press. As a result, his speeches made less and less of an impression on me, rather than more. I felt he was nothing but “an infantry preacher”, rehashing old ideas and what he said had no value. This preacher lacked the Holy Spirit, because what he said did not come from the heart and therefore did not enter the heart of the listener – it lacked the frisson of creativity.

Moishele, the cobbler, a unique character, lived in Rasein. He did not know how to read (at least not without the vowel signs), but was distinguished by

his wonderful memory and exceptional diligence. He loved delving into the *sheimos* – the store of old, tattered holy books in the synagogue that were no longer in use, but too sacred to be destroyed – particularly to find material in them on “Jewish geniuses, people of prominent lineage, well-known people throughout the country whose Torah learning and wisdom was renowned, rabbis and teachers who served in their positions in the Jewish diaspora, and writers of books”. The following paragraph is from the story of Moishele, written by Benzion Eisenstadt, a rabbi and preacher in the Jewish community in Brooklyn, author of books and more.

“For his notes, Moishele would rely on the help of boys, whom he asked to write down on paper some reference to a great person. He would approach leading rabbis themselves with a request that they write for him a very brief story of their lives and the contents of their writings and the like. He would collect and preserve these pieces of paper, which he had in large quantities. They served as material for him to write a big book in several parts – *Name of the Great Scholars*.”

The cobbler author was miserably poor, as he neglected his trade. His wife would always demand forcefully that he should maintain her and the family. He was known popularly as Moishele “the Expositor”.

I saw him when I was in Rasein for the second time. He was below average height, wearing frayed and sometimes torn clothes. His small beard was always tousled and his hair grew wildly. He used to move around next to the podium of the large *beit midrash*, which held a treasury of *sheimos* under it. He was totally immersed in searching for the ideas of prominent personalities and did not talk or come into contact much with the people around him. Everybody knew him and, while they marvelled at his “research”, they did not treat him as an odd and memorable type at all, because they were used to him. At the time I met him, he was already involved in his writing. In Cape Town I came across a booklet written by Moishele from memory containing the *Order of the Rabbis*, learned in the Torah, cantors and ritual slaughterers in Rasein and many other towns. In this booklet, I found a very detailed family tree relating to my relatives as well: the history of my cousin Alexander Levin, rabbi and preacher in a synagogue in New York; my father, Shmuel Yosef and his father; and the history of the Nurok family, now headed by Rabbi Dr Mordechai Nurok, an Israeli Member of the Knesset, who was appointed Minister of Posts and Telegraphs in the current cabinet (in 1952).

(By the way, I remember that when he served as the rabbi of Mitau in Latvia, he was also a member of parliament in that country. There was a government crisis and the president proposed that he should appoint a new government, but he declined this honour.)

I also found interesting details in the booklet on Rabbi Berchik Maryams and Rabbi (Shmuel) Chanoch-Henich Eiges, my heads of *yeshiva*.

The booklet appeared in Warsaw in 1913 and gave details of the “Third Name of the Learned Rabbis”, in two parts.

At the end of the winter, when the first buds of spring began to appear in nature and the beginning of the month of Nissan arrived, I departed cordially from Rasein and returned for the Passover festival at home.

After Passover, I had to go via Rasein, on my way to Kelme, which was then famous for its unique *Mussar yeshiva* - named after Rabbi Simcha Zissel, the great *Mussar* leader - and the group of adult learners who studied by themselves in the *beit midrash*. It was not the *Mussar* institution that attracted me to Kelme, but the group under the supervision of the municipal rabbi, Rabbi Oppenheim, to complete my matriculation. The community rabbi taught the group and managed it, but the students were independent in regard to their studies and their curriculum. Even the tractates were selected by each one as he saw fit. This was an environment of young people. Older students, with years of experience and expertise in their studies, were absent.

We had family members in this town as well. One of them, Rafael Greenberg – “Polly” – had a large business and was a fervent supporter of *Mussar*. He would invite about twenty-five students from Rabbi Simcha Zissel’s institution for a meal once a week. My father wrote a letter to him, in his beautiful Hebrew style, of course, which he gave me. I presented it to his widowed sister during my stay in Kelme and was invited to her house on the Sabbath. On weekdays, I would eat in the room I hired at my own expense, without having to depend on anyone else. The money for my support was sent to me by my father.

A period of excessive liberty began for me in this *beit midrash*. I was free to do what I wanted, in my education and studies, without shackles. I told myself that these conditions were not what I wanted and would not last long.

In my second week of study in the Kelme community, in the large *beit midrash* a solidly built man came up to me. In his thirties, with a sun-tanned face adorned with a long, broad black beard, he held a small, thin *Gemara*, the kind used by the *cheder* students. It was open in his hand and he had a request for me.

I had seen him the first time I entered the *beit midrash*. He attracted my attention with his powerful voice, like a lion roaring, as he leaned on the reader’s stand with the *Gemara* on it. His place was near the Chanukah menorah above. He swayed in every direction and studied incessantly. Covered by his *tallit*, and his *tefillin* (phylacteries) on his head and left arm,

he engaged in study enthusiastically, stirring everything up loudly. He seemed like a solitary, noisy island among the people learning in the *beit midrash*.

He would remove his *tefillin* at three or four in the afternoon and would take off his *tallit*, stopping his roaring studies for a while. After washing his hands quickly, he would eat in haste from a plate or pot brought to him by a young girl. She would come with a younger brother or sister and wait in shy fear, sucking hard on a finger in her mouth, until her father finished. The thin soup, whitened with some drops of milk, was quickly drained from the vessel and the slice of bread was swallowed, the important part of his meal, no doubt his first that day. When he had finished, he recited the grace after meals with intense concentration, dismissing the people who had brought his food and sending them home to their mother. He himself returned to his previous place – his reading stand and *Gemara*, with even greater power, with redoubled animation from his food, until the afternoon service, when he covered himself again with his *tallit*.

Only occasionally, on a hot day, he would rush out at the end of the afternoon service for a walk, desiring, as it were, “to breathe” a little air quickly, so that he would not be late for the public evening service.

I wanted to know who he was and what he did. I was informed he was a carpenter by trade. He only learned a meagre amount of Torah in the *cheder*. When he grew up, he married and was the father of five boys and girls. A year earlier, he left the trade through which he maintained himself and his family, abandoned his children and devoted himself to the *beit midrash*. He yearned for the Torah.

This desire was the main cause of his internal upheaval – from carpentry, he went on to the Talmud culture. In a sense he became “connected” to the *Gemara*. He studied without the assistance of a teacher and learning cost him a great deal of effort. He found reading of the text difficult and understanding each subject even more so.

How did he manage to make progress and succeed? He would look at one of the *yeshiva* boys, go up to him obsequiously, totally submissively, and ask him to explain what he had found difficult to understand. He was completely attentive, imploring the boy to explain over and over, until he grasped a little of the explanation. The subject discussed was not at all difficult, but his perception was limited, undeveloped. When he felt he had grasped what he had not understood previously, he was extremely happy, thanking the young “rabbi” from the bottom of his heart. After being assisted and helped by the “senior” person’s explanation, he would depart to his corner with a smile of pleasure.

A day or two later, he would again approach the same learned youth with a plea to help him. The conscientious student would stand bowed and bent before the boy “rabbi”, who understood that this man from another town was sacrificing his entire spiritual and physical being on the altar of Torah, but was making only minimal, slow and poor progress in relation to the time he devoted to his studies.

When this man came up to me, I was aghast. Hearing his request that I explain something in the *Gemara* to him confused me, but when I saw what he was asking me to interpret, I immediately understood what it was about – the issue in the tractate *Baba Kama* of a bull that has gored three times and a bull that was not known to gore – and I answered him gladly.

He was very happy when he grasped the essence of the issue and realised what it meant. He was also glad to meet a new young person who, along with his previous advisers, would be able to help him in his studies for which he gave his lifeblood.

This is what happened day after day and week after week - in his *tallit* and *tefillin* studying, repeating and learning. Subjects that appeared to be clearly explained became unclear again. He made very little progress, but his fervent desire did not diminish, his efforts never ceased, like drops of water wearing away a stone. His days of studying increased his great wish to know and understand, while raising himself completely on the altar of his burning desire for the Torah.

What did this “carpenter-scholar” get out of all this? What happened to him? I heard nothing about him after leaving Kelme – I received no revelation.

Recently, after having lived in South Africa for about fifty years, I tried to find out what had become of him. I approached acquaintances from Kelme. Reliable people, who knew him there at the time, said he had attained a high level of scholarship. One of them added that this student-carpenter had qualified as a rabbi and taught Torah in public.

At the end of Sivan (May), or the beginning of Tammuz (June), I left Kelme and returned to my parents’ home. I encountered a flood of anger from my father for returning in the middle of the term from a place of Torah. He regarded me as having lost my way. I did not spend time telling him the real reason for my return. The defect was in the congregation, but the blame was mine, that I chose to go there. This was not a desirable place of Torah for me. The studies, the discipline associated with them and the responsibility to others – and, particularly towards myself – were lacking there.

CHAPTER 8

WANDERINGS

When I returned to my parents' home in the middle of summer, I felt as if I had been shipwrecked in the middle of the ocean and safe shores were far removed. As I had long ago risen to the rank of a local *yeshiva* student, they no longer felt I belonged in my *shtetl* or in the *beit midrash*. If I were to try to spend a few hours in the day studying *Gemara*, I feared I would get a reputation as an idler in the company of the two or three older students there. It was as though I were sitting on a hornet's nest. I did not feel I should find myself a new *yeshiva* in the second half of the term, as I did not have a sufficient reason for applying so late.

When the High Holy Days arrived, one of the *yeshiva* students from the *beit midrash* suggested to my father that I should travel to Lunze, where there was a famous *yeshiva* I would like – and it would make no difference if I came a bit early between the New Year and the Day of Atonement. I was willing to do so. My preparations did not take long and I travelled on the highway in the direction of Lunze, on the St Petersburg-Warsaw road where there were comfortable and frequent carriages for travellers going from one town to another, until I arrived at my destination.

I spent an entire day in Sovlaki, our regional town, which was a stop on my way. I looked for *batei midrash* there to find a place of Torah in case I did not manage to settle in Lunze, a Polish city. The very fact it was in Poland discredited it in my eyes from the outset. This was not the case with Sovlaki. In its way of life and customs, it was considered a Lithuanian town, even though officially it was in the Polish province of Visalia. I also spent a few hours in the district cities between Sovlaki and Lunze.

On the eve of the Day of Atonement, I arrived in Lunze and quickly discovered its Polish character – the customs in the streets, the homes and prayer houses were very different from those to which I had become accustomed in Lithuania.

The scene at the house of prayer was something I had never seen before and made a huge impression on me. The leaders of the community walked around before the *Kol Nidre* prayer with the Torah scrolls in their arms. They made three circuits, not only circling around the podium, but around most of the congregants, calling out in stentorian tones, proclaiming with a sad cry penetrating the innermost recesses of the soul in a completely depressing way:

Light is sown for the righteous and joy for the upright in heart. This festive procession made everybody in the congregation clearly aware that someone in awe of the Torah and keeps its commandments is blessed, will merit a year of happiness and life in the next world, and woe to him who does not keep to the righteous and upright way. He will not receive the light, G-d forbid!

Then the public prayer began, with eyes closed, wailing, laments and pleas by the cantor and the congregation for our prayers to ascend, in the order laid down in the *Machzor*. A man stood in the north-western corner, with his face to the wall, enveloped in this *tallit*, which covered his head as far as his eyes and even below. He prayed “alone” in a voice that many others could hear, paying no attention to the congregation around him. He enunciated every word and verse clearly, in a monotonous rhythm, as if making a string of pearls, with fierce concentration, paying no heed to the melodies of the cantor and the choir or the fixed order of the prayers – he submitted to the congregation only in the Eighteen Benedictions by lowering his voice and whispering, as well as for the *Barchu Kedusha*. He did not move from his place as he swayed his body, standing from the confessional prayer on the eve of the Day of Atonement until the evening service after its conclusion the next day. I looked at him and saw not only a simple, G-d-fearing man, but someone with a strong will and deep feeling that few other people possessed.

The distinctions were apparent in everything: the foods, the way they were prepared and tasted; the great difference in the dress of the strictly observant people and *yeshiva* students. The contrasts between Lithuanian and Polish Jews were very clear, among both men and women and were apparent to any observer.

The following day, I went to the *yeshiva* building and was informed it was a stronghold of the followers of *Mussar* in Poland. The exterior of the *yeshiva* impressed me in several ways. The beautiful new building was specially constructed for this institution, for the study of *Mussar*. It was brightly lit, spacious and well furnished. Inside, in the south-western part of the building, there was a special sanctuary for the head of the *yeshiva*, bearing the seal of “Holy of Holies”, as it was called by the *yeshiva* students. The head of the institution lived there as if he had been elevated – apparently deliberately – to the rank of “High Priest”. Everybody who came to knock on its door wanted to be granted a brief interview with the holy person. Seeing his face was like becoming one with the Holy Spirit.

The place of study in the institution during the evening was a large, comfortable room, which was definitely “earthly”. The *yeshiva* students would spend some time there reading out loud, shouting stridently, swaying their

entire bodies over their *Mussar* books, trying to express their intellectual afflictions, if such a thing was actually possible. This “afflictedness” did not affect me at all, just as I was not devoted to the holiness of the head of the yeshiva, who isolated himself in the “camp”, as it were. The enthusiasm did not touch me: on the contrary, I was increasingly cool to it.

All the *yeshiva* students, without exception, wore long coats down to their knees or below, with flat, round hats on their heads and waves of long, curly sidelocks in ringlets sprouting under the hats. These were the external signs of Chassidut which jarred my aesthetic sense.

In a corridor of the yeshiva I met a young man, more or less my age, from Aleksoti, a suburb of Kovno, and we became close, firstly, from the way we spoke, with our Lithuanian accents and, secondly, our shared views on the yeshiva and its characteristics. Like me, he could not get used to them after spending over a month in Lunze. He did not dare take off his summer coat the entire time, so as not to reveal the short clothes he usually wore under it. I saw this as conclusive proof of my assumption and decision on how I had to behave if I wanted to be accepted by the yeshiva. I regarded wearing outer clothes, while the weather was still warm, even during meals, as a peculiar and unnecessary burden and I hated it.

I was to be examined on the Sabbath during the week of Sukkot – being required to demonstrate my abilities in self-study of the *Gemara*, rabbinic authorities and *Tosafot* (annotations to the Mishna). The supervisor was the examiner; the place, the podium. In the hour before afternoon prayers, the supervisor received me with open coldness, in full view of all the yeshiva students, because I suppose he sensed in me a Lithuanian he did not like. When he “dealt” with me, his expression was reproachful. With his negative approach to me, I felt that he would be happy if I failed. Maliciously he would also place obstacles in my way. This depressed me and made it impossible for me to concentrate properly on the subject matter of the examination and devote the appropriate attention to it. I left there in anguish. Without even waiting to hear the results, I made up my mind I would not join this yeshiva, its rabbi who stayed in the “Holy of Holies” and its angry and miserly supervisor, with all their appendages. I would leave them alone.

On the first of the intermediate days of Sukkot, I got up and left, travelling away from Sovlaki. On Hoshana Rabah, I arrived in a village where I decided to celebrate Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, the last two days of Sukkot. I made myself comfortable in the *beit midrash*. About two hours before sunset, a man with a horse whip in his belt came up to me and politely requested me to go with him to his village for the period of the festival and also to be the

rabbi for his children during the winter. I would be paid generously. I knew nobody in the village and was glad to have the chance to travel with this man from the countryside for the last few days of the “time of our rejoicing”. In the meantime, I would consider his teaching offer.

Signs of autumn were already clearly apparent: nature freezing, wilting and dying. After the harvest, the ground seemed uncultivated. The fields and gardens which had been emptied of their produce, grains and fruits, were gloomy and neglected. The boys and girls, members of the family in whose company I celebrated the festival, were very ignorant, lacking good manners and learning, with coarse qualities and behaviour. Among them, I felt as if I had been transported into the conditions prevailing in ancient times. The desire to be paid, to earn money, even a substantial sum of over twenty-five roubles for one winter, all inclusive - as much bread, milk, butter, cream and meat as I wanted, the capital I would build up through the teaching fees - all seemed valueless to me by the time I had spent the two days in that village.

When I saw on the evening after the festival that the man and his wife were loading a wagon with fruit – apples and pears – to take to town for the market day in the regional centre of Maryampol, I asked them to take me with them. I sat on the wagon full of fruit the whole way, a journey of over three hours. Although I had eaten nothing at all since dawn, I was not even given an apple to relieve my hunger. When I reached the market, I bought a cup of tea and some cake, which revived me. I was not in the least sorry that I had cancelled my teaching “business” in the village, on the assumption that these people would promise much more than they would deliver, even with regard to my daily upkeep.

It took three hours to travel by wagon from the regional town to my shtetl, but I swore I would not move from here, I would not return home and would remain here for the winter, no matter what.

I came to the *kloyz* next to the “hostel”, a lovely new building. I was offered either a special room or a room to share with someone from my shtetl, who had for some time “guided my footsteps” and now lived there. I chose to be alone in the room. I began a new way of life, preparing a three-part programme: studying *Gemara* to increase my learning; studying the Russian language, using the textbook that used the Ohlendorf method; and reading Hebrew books.

Fortune favoured me in all these endeavours. I worked hard and did well. A student in the *kloyz*, my senior both in years and learning, a real scholar, Ya’akov Horoshanski, from the town of Slonim, agreed to study with me

in the evenings as my partner. We studied the tractate of Nedarim (Oaths) with the commentary by Rabbeinu Nissim. I was happy to have found this wonderful opportunity. He was a very decent person and we quickly formed a real, loyal and worthwhile friendship. He wanted me to make progress and helped me develop. I would devote about two hours in the evenings to reading and writing, copying and translating from Ohlendorf's book in Russian. I made good progress studying both *Gemara* and the language. With regard to reading Hebrew, there was a bookshop and a library next door to the place where I lived. I first devoted myself to reading *Sefer Habrit*, a book on the secrets of existence and natural phenomena from a religious perspective, that would interest anyone. I then quite literally began to devour the books *Emek Ha'Arazim*, *Daniel Deronda*, *Zichronot le'Beit David* and many similar works, which I really enjoyed. I was busy almost the entire day and night reaching new heights.

My luck went beyond only the spiritual, to material matters as well. I was made a teaching offer, which meant an income. I was asked to teach Russian, for a fee of over half a new rouble. After a time, I found my work was flourishing. Then somebody else approached me, a painter who had no work in winter and suggested I should teach him the Mishna. I agreed readily.

As a result, my monthly income improved appreciably. As if that were not enough, later I was also asked to teach Chumash and Rashi. My students were a fairly well-developed boy, who suffered from epilepsy, which delayed his parents' emigration to America to join their well-off children and his sister. Both of them did well and I felt I was a real teacher, making progress in my work, almost a "professional" in this area.

My late father supported me. From time to time, he would send me money for my upkeep. I remember an occasion when one of the leaders of my shtetl, Pilvishok, knocked on my door while I was still in bed. He asked how I was and sent me warm regards from my parents. While he was speaking, he put his hand into his breast pocket and carefully withdrew a coin wrapped in paper and handed it to me, saying: "Your father sent this to you as 'bathing money'." I received the gift with gratitude and thanks. When I took a closer look, I saw it was half a gold Imperial, worth five roubles, a gift from my father, presented with a generous heart and an open hand.

I already earned "a fortune" and, being "an achiever" in a practical sense, I decided to order myself a real winter coat, made from excellent cloth in the latest style and, most of all, with very deep pockets. I approached an excellent tailor, who assured me he would have the coat ready within two weeks, at most. But the only way he fulfilled his undertaking was with distress and irritation.

He worked nearby and every time I came to him at the appointed hour for the “real” measurement, near the completion date, he would postpone it from day to day and from week to week. On one occasion, I went to him with a friend and demanded, very firmly: “Do it, or my money back!” And he did. Ten days later, the coat was ready in all its elegance. It fitted me very well and was sewn with great skill. I “displayed” it at the beginning of Shevat (January).

My Mishna student served as my “adjutant”, helping me choose a well-known, good silver watch and negotiating the price and a written three-year guarantee, if my memory serves me. After that I walked around dressed up and polished “in my finery”. As a result, I was then nicknamed “the landowner”.

My substantial progress that winter, materially and, mainly, spiritually – particularly in Talmud – was due to my good and helpful friend, Ya’akov Horoshanski, whom I have never forgotten, although we lost touch after we parted.

My circle of friends and acquaintances was very narrow. The person from my town made money as he became an “assistant” in one of the cheders and was busy from the morning until late at night. He was not interested in anything and became a capitalist in his views and actions – we only managed to exchange a few words with each other very infrequently.

Another young man came to our *kloyz*, a student and interpreter. He neglected the Talmud, devoting himself to making time for general education and preparing for the examinations. He would drop in, open the *Gemara* from habit, but did not study. He liked to open a conversation on “external wisdom”, on geography and history, to which he devoted himself, to demonstrate to us, my friends and me, how much he knew about these subjects – and particularly to show off to us his great “strength” in general studies. It did not take long for what he said and his new material to become burdensome and we no longer paid attention.

I returned home for the festival of Passover. After my wanderings to Lunze and back, I had managed to achieve a lot. I arrived reinforced and encouraged in my aspirations, having realised them to a large extent, being ready to swim in a stronger current.

CHAPTER 9

IN THE GREAT YESHIVA

Slobodka, a suburb of Kovno on the other side of the Vilya River, is well-known for its *yeshivas*, including:

- (a) The *yeshiva* of the opponents of *Mussar*, *Knesset Beit Yitzhak*, in the old *beit midrash*, named after the late Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan, the rabbi of the Kovno community. It gained an excellent reputation throughout the Jewish diaspora;
- (b) The *yeshiva* of the *Mussar* supporters, *Knesset Israel*; and,
- (c) In the *kloyz* of the “butchers”, the *yeshiva* of Rabbi Herschel, which had some disputes with the *Gemara* the students had learnt from their rabbis, until they themselves were co-opted to teach and to move to one of the above *yeshivas*.

Until the end of the previous century, there was one high *yeshiva*, *Knesset Israel*, named after the late Rabbi Israel Salanter, the *Mussar* leader, where the study of *Mussar* was considered an extremely valuable principle. With the passage of time, *Mussar* became a bone of contention between the heads of this *yeshiva* and its students. There was later an official split: a large number of the students abandoned the *beit midrash*, together with the people leading this institution, the heads of the *yeshiva* and the supervisor, separating themselves as *Mussar* supporters in the *kloyz* of the butchers. Years later, a beautiful building was erected specially for *Knesset Israel*.

Most of the students in the *beit midrash* remained in the same building after the split, as opponents of the study of *Mussar* in the *Knesset Beit Yitzhak*, fulfilling the wishes of Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan, who followed his method.

While I was still in the *yeshiva* of Rabbi Shmuel Chaim in Kovno, also a *Mussar* follower, who tried to instil some of its spirit in us, his pupils, I tested its theory in a practical way. After going into depth in *Mesilat Yesharim*, I realised that it was preaching “breaking the desire”. The basic principle of this “philosophy”, in the most widely circulated book among the *Mussar* followers, was distancing oneself from the pleasures of the world through total allegiance and overcoming the evil inclination even before any temptation arose to commit an offence, avoiding it without the need to pass the test.

I decided to adapt my behaviour to this system. I made my way from the *kloyz* of the tailors, in which the head of the *yeshiva* resided, to my home on

the outskirts of the city, not on the king's highway, the main road full of men and women, but walking on a parallel road along the banks of the Neman River, where there were few passers-by.

I told myself to guard against looking at a woman's face and avoid passing between two women and, G-d forbid, any thoughts of an offence, realising "the suppression of desire" until I had subdued it completely.

Because I began to cover my body and protect it from failure by sinning, I stopped paying attention to my clothes and my external appearance, deliberately ignoring them even when I passed through alleyways with no people. In this way, I would not adorn myself or make myself look good, while provoking the evil inclination, as I was endeavouring to overcome it.

After a few days, I wanted to give myself a report to show whether my restraint was a mark of heroism and progress or, on the contrary, a sign of deliberate decline and negligence. My internal feeling gave rise to a negative attitude towards the whole matter and I told myself it was not what I wanted.

After about a week or ten days, I devoted myself to this test, to my tremendous struggle, greatly desiring to "break the inclination" into pieces. I came to the conclusion that if I adopted this system permanently and loyally, I would not find anything to hold onto that would avoid my reservations. My exaggerated obsession would not stop pushing me up the *Mussar* slope until I reached the stage of extreme separation from people, the world, life.

Then it occurred to me: many strictly observant Jews do not withdraw from life, on the basis of what is written in the Torah: *And live by them* – not die by them, according to the interpretation of our sages – so the only good thing for me would be to return to the human way, which did not lead to extremism. And the followers of *Mussar* who regarded people as perpetual sinners, who had to repent endlessly, even before sinning, were making excessive demands, thereby humiliating the person, whom they regarded as a long-standing offender in his movements, glances, thoughts, entire system of ideas and, even more so, in his deeds and actions. As a result there is no purity of Judaism or spiritual holiness in this, but – on the contrary – its outstanding feature is a flawed dredging that humiliates and demeans the oversoul.

I still remember the *Mussar* institution in Lunze very well. Its shadows still hover, as well as the impression of the sounds of excited study with the objective of realising practical asceticism in the area appropriate for it. It drove me away by its fervour, casting aside the tender soul of the young person inside me.

This, it seems to me, is the way I thought in the period when the war was raging in my heart day and night, until I said: "No more!". My experience in

the battle called “breaking the inclination” came to an end with my completely giving up the victory, which struck me as false and not worthy of the name.

Accordingly, when I arrived in Slobodka, I kept my distance from the *Mussar* followers, from their *yeshiva*, from their theory, from their behaviour and views on wrong, misleading education and upbringing, which could severely cause a young person great harm by denying him free choice and a clear viewpoint. He had to distance himself from this direction. This spiced-up morality dominated him with noisy and boisterous zealotry, taking care to avoid an incalculable future loss. I set my face against *Knesset Beit Yitzhak*.

The *beit midrash* stood on the banks of the Vilya River, which flowed into the Neman on the slopes of the city of Kovno, where the *Knesset Beit Yitzhak* rested on the ruins of a synagogue that had gone up in flames a few years before, although its walls remained standing. The two rose up opposite each other, in the form of high, sharp white triangles, whose reflection was visible in the depths of the Vilya, with their profile standing out, visible from a distance on the other side – in Kovno.

Students from across the length and breadth of Russia studied at this *yeshiva*. Some of them, who specialised in learning after spending years in the Telz *yeshiva*, in its highest class, the fifth, came to “rest” in the quieter Slobodka from the noisy, sharp debates there. Some of the young people had already studied by themselves for a year or two. The students had enough understanding and knowledge to learn from the argumentative books accepted in this *yeshiva* and would study the *Ketzot Hachoshen* and *Hanetivot*. Those younger than they were studied the little thin book, small in quantity and great in quality, *Shav Shematata*, through which they sought to learn more about the popular disputation in “conversation in study”. In this regard, the younger students would be assisted by older ones, experienced in debate and also learned and sharp-witted in this method and its procedures.

These people arguing about the fine details of the Law would spend hours in discussions based on “distinctions” between matters that, on the face of it, were similar in form and in logic, but with the assistance of deductions and proofs, evidence hanging on a “hair”, they would find points that distinguished and differentiated among them.

This was the characteristic and striking way of learning through disputation that sharpened the mind and strengthened the ability to understand in depth – and the many arguments and disputes were a source of great and unique pleasure to those participating in them.

In Telz, this disputation (*pilpul* in Hebrew) was the most important thing of all; in Slobodka, in *Knesset Beit Yitzhak* – one of the fundamentals.

It was led by the head of the *yeshiva*, Rabbi Chaim Rabinowitz, who gave a complex lesson, full of *pilpul*, once a week for about two hours, supplying material for questions and answers during the lesson and afterwards throughout the day or even over days. At the beginning of each month, the local rabbi, the late Rabbi Moshe Danishevski, would give his lessons in the method he adopted.

Study times were from the morning until the evening prayers, with a break for lunch. The supervisor, who took his place between the door and the stove, spent the entire day in the *yeshiva*, constantly supervising the students, ensuring they attended regularly, did not waste their time in talking and did not go outside the *beit midrash* too much.

The students received monetary support of a maximum of two roubles a month for students at the highest level, according to the time they stayed in the *yeshiva* and their scholarship, as well as two pounds of bread every morning, for each person receiving support. The young and more recent arrivals would receive the bread, but less money, approximately half. This charitable gift – *chaluka* in Hebrew – was the term used for the support by the *yeshiva*, but was not enough to sustain its recipients. Only the lucky students, who received more from their parents, could make up what they lacked. Those whose parents were unable to support the *yeshiva* students had to maintain themselves with what was given to them by the institution.

Not everyone who came to the *yeshiva* was registered as a student in order to benefit from the material rights. Everybody had to know the rule in advance: anybody wanting to be accepted at the *yeshiva* had first to apply on a folded postcard – the fold was for writing the response from the *yeshiva* to the applicant: Is this person from that city entitled to come? Is there a place open for him? Generally, the answer would depend on the number of people from that town or village in a particular *yeshiva*; if somebody from that village was already there, the answer was negative. Two or three were accepted from a larger town – depending on the size of the town and the amount of money that the “emissary” collected there for *yeshiva* funds. Based on this, the supervisor would calculate the number of permits or the negative responses, such as: “Will not come”, or even, sometimes, the words: “Do not dare!”¹

When I went to *Knesset Beit Yitzhak*, I was the first and only one from my village and I did not ask permission, knowing that there were no grounds to turn me away or fail to provide support to the one representative from

¹ Representatives, known as emissaries (*meshulachim*) , sometimes including preachers, would go on behalf of the various *yeshivas* to all parts of the diaspora to raise money for their maintenance and support. They made these trips every year.

my *shtetl*. After Passover, I packed my bags and went on the way prepared for me, an hour and a half by train to Kovno and from there to the suburb, via the Vilya on a boat, because the bridge over the river had been deliberately destroyed before the ice melted, so that it would not break apart by itself, thereby avoiding sections being carried by the current of the Vilya and on the surface of the Neman to the Baltic Sea.

I arrived at the river on a bright, pleasant spring day and saw a stream of exiles making their way to the Torah centre, sailing across the river on boats from one bank to the other. I joined them. The non-Jewish person in charge of the boat would approach some of us, including me, with an invitation: "Patron, into the boat!" In Slobodka, particularly on the banks of the river, "patron" meant, "idler," "loafer," "good-for-nothing". People often used this description with regard to *yeshiva* students in particular. When each patron came to the boat, he was exempted from paying the *pruta* for using it, because the proprietor had ordered it. He owned the bridge and the vessels and was a good Jewish man from Kovno, a leader of the community, a Jewish intellectual, Mr E Wolf.

My appearance before the supervisor, the only administrator of the *yeshiva* and its registrar, was unsuccessful. After a dry greeting and a double question, "Who are you and where are you from?" he saw immediately that my name was not on the list of new students. He asked again, "Do you have an answer indicating that you have permission to come here?" I replied that I had not written, as I was the only one from my village; I was certain I would be admitted, because I was not replacing anybody. The supervisor pulled a face, which I took as a negative response. He justified it by saying that a postcard had to be written. If I had not sent one in advance, it was my fault and I was to blame. "Unfair. No compromise," I thought. Yet, this was the decree and because I had not complied with it, there was nothing I could do. I was viewed as someone who would not be a student at the *yeshiva*. Nothing, however, prevented me from sitting and studying within the walls of the *yeshiva*, but my receiving material support could not be mentioned!

However, if I "behaved myself" in my studies and met with approval as a volunteer, going about things in the "right way", then, possibly, in the future I would earn a place among the students receiving support. For the present, I was at liberty to do what I wanted: I had no duties and no rights.

The supervisor treated me coldly, reluctantly, or, more correctly, he rejected me firmly, like a clerk, with no understanding, sympathy or feeling for a young person leaving his parents' home for the *yeshiva*. He did not offer to shelter me under its roof or reach out to me.

I told myself the two supervisors, from Lunze and Slobodka, were alike, both overweight, with black beards, nothing soft in their voices, no smile or warm expression on their faces for this foreign, peripatetic young man visiting them. I had to distance myself from them. I realised that my efforts to consolidate my position with the Slobodka supervisor were in vain. I wondered whether supervisors were all created to look the same and made from the same mould.

Dejected and depressed, I went to find a room for myself. After walking to the end of the long street I found one, in the last house, far from the *yeshiva*. I then bought myself a reader's stand that cost me thirty kopeks, if I am not mistaken. I also bought myself a *Gemara* and *Shev Shemateta*, which is used by most of the younger generation of students. I found a place for myself and my reader's stand in the *beit midrash* and sat down to learn, broken in spirit.

In the third row, opposite the western wall, I found a seat I wanted. A young man sitting next to me made a favourable impression on me. We got to know each other through some brief conversations and became friends – I was from Pilvishok and he from Tatarski. Our names were printed in large letters in pencil on our reader's stands, our private property. A *yeshiva* student is not referred to by his first name or family name, but by the name of his place of origin.

I began to look at the environment in which I had to put down roots as a “new resident”. Several people attracted my attention. Two of them sat in the south-east corner, both from the same city, close friends, one tall and well built, the other short, almost reaching the shoulder of his friend, with quick movements. Both of them studied very diligently for the whole day and walked around for a while talking about their studies before returning to their places. They had no time to chat about the news or hold a friendly discussion – studies filled their very essence.

In the corner to the left, near the Holy Ark, two young men from Kalisha had found themselves seats, brothers who also devoted themselves to study, but they did so peacefully and quietly. They did not seem very good students. They came from Poland, as indicated by their typical flat, round hats, and – to an extent – also their curly side locks. They were the only couple from Poland. In this country, the Lithuanians assumed no great erudition had taken root there, nor were there great scholars, known for their expertise and sharp minds, particularly among the young.

Not far from them, on the other side of the Ark, a man from Lapitza stood next to his reader's stand, swaying incessantly, with his blonde beard dishevelled, as was the hair on his head. He had worn clothes and shoes with patches. With a happy smile on his face, his entire being was consumed

with lofty ideas hovering over the world, as he discovered wonders and came up with marvellous innovations in his studies. He was very learned, but lived a life of suffering and want in this lower, wretched world, which he regarded with contempt.

By contrast, an older student came in, with a very elegant beard and moustache, fine clothes and dazzlingly white collar and cuffs. He had a reputation for taking pride in his external appearance, while also being considered one of the outstanding students, who understood virtually every intricacy in the system of *pilpul*, argumentation. His brother looked very different, but was like him, saying he was a simple person, but his outstanding talent and wonderful knowledge exceeded even his brother's. They were the brothers from Radvilishki, Osher-Nissan and Azriel.

The heads of the *yeshivas* – both of them – encouraged the students to wear short, clean clothes like everybody in the younger generation, making them look like busy working people, as it were, who would not leave *yeshiva* and their studies looking like “unsuccessful idlers”, exposing them to derision and scorn. The heads of the *yeshivas* would insist on this and help those who could not afford the clothes, provided they also wore a paper collar – popular at that time – and a tie, as was appropriate for every “good” boy.

There was no lack of exotic characters. In the centre on the other side, to the north, sat a Caucasian student, *Cherkes* (Circassian), as he was called by his friends, who stood out because of his unusual clothing: his long, wide, dark cloak, with many folds in its lower part; his belt, adorned with various kinds of decorative stones, fastened to his waist, and short daggers attached to the entire width of his chest, tied to their sheaths by sparkling white chains. He wore a high hat made of black goat skin that was grey on the crown and his feet were clad in shiny boots. He looked like an armed soldier, ready and prepared for war, but the way he spoke and conducted himself created the impression of a pleasant, refined and well-mannered person. His soul yearned for the Torah and he isolated himself in its tent. After his arrival from the lofty Caucasian mountains, he “laboured” in his studies, carrying their heavy load.

Not far from the other *yeshiva* students, sat an older student, Eliezer from Riteve, who had very rapid gestures. He would come in, go out and return to his place frequently. His brisk movements clearly revealed he was lame. He was openly Zionist, in constant contact with the nationalist workers in Kovno. He did not “put on airs” in front of the supervisor, who – while twirling his moustache constantly – regarded this Zionist with respect and “exaggerated” good manners, just as he did with a second student who did not come to the *yeshiva* on time. He was an intellectual, liked by the students. Many people

listened to him, while the choir of the people there would sing the traditional melody used for reciting Torah verses. He would criticise the “great scholars” and fearlessly give his opinion of the people at the head of the *yeshiva*. Even the supervisor would try to please him, sometimes by starting a conversation about Achad Ha’am and praising his work, some of which he had read several years earlier, even before he became known as a Jewish writer. There was also the poet, David from Chaslavitz, who was greatly respected by the students at the *Knesset Beit-Yitzhak* and was also well known beyond its walls. This Zionist had not yet become an open fighter, but he was a rebel by nature, waiting for the appropriate time, which had not yet come.

CHAPTER 10

EXPERIMENTS AND FAILURES

When I started at the *Knesset Beit Yitzhak*, I could attend classes freely, in accordance with my legal situation – an irregular student, an “exception”. But this was a result only of my sin in not applying on a folded postcard to obtain permission to come to the *yeshiva*. I am certain that had I written, I would have received a positive response and, therefore, been numbered among the students entitled to support, because I was the first and only one from my village with this right. Yet the supervisor, Rabbi Moshe Parkowitz, from Geitz, saw fit to apply his official reasoning strictly, blocking my admission, leading my application to fail.

I arrived at the *yeshiva* every day precisely on time. I never missed any of the times set for daily study, but whenever I passed by the supervisor, who sat next to the entrance, he regarded me as “invisible”. He could see me, but pretended he could not, as if I did not exist. This happened several times a day, every day. As a result, I saw him as less important to me and lost respect for him.

While he was in charge of several hundred students - some of them well-known scholars, as well as being fine, upright young people making their way at the *yeshiva* –he was an obstacle to many of them making sacrifices on the altar of Torah. His own stature was no more than mediocre compared to those pleasant students. I was not the only one being deprived, remaining

outside the camp, but was considered part of an entire group of detached people, like me. The supervisor deliberately ignored them, not as a result of behaving badly, but because to him they were prohibited from joining the *yeshiva* community, in spite of their great need for the support and charity.

I drew close to this group of isolated people and made friends among them. One of them was an agent of *Hamelitz*² and those of us outside the camp were his subscribers and readers. Our subscription charges depended on when we read it – on Sunday, Monday or Tuesday, after the paper had been received, and also on the time: morning, afternoon or evening, everything according to these times – from forty prutot for three months to twenty. The young man, the agent-distributor of *Hamelitz*, also managed to earn a little from this business for his upkeep. He had already spent more than one term at the *Yeshiva*, but Rabbi Moshe Parkowitz had not seen fit to include him as a recipient of the charitable donations. Student looked sad with his thin face and the way he dressed, but he still had a spark of the holiness of a genuine *yeshiva* student.

As for me, my humiliation and resentment increased from week to week. I totally despaired of getting close to the head of the *yeshiva*, Rabbi Chaim Rabinowitz, or the town rabbi, Rabbi Moshe Danishevski, neither of whom wanted to learn about their errant and lost flock. I made up my mind that I would still study in the prescribed way and attend the lessons, but would also not overlook my general education. Most of the people who had been rejected were well-behaved. They also turned to the Hebrew language, but were careful not to bring this “change” to the attention of the people in charge of the institution.

It was not easy for me to find a spot I liked where I could rest and relax on my own. The first place I stayed was at the end of the street, far from the *yeshiva*, and did not provide me with what I wanted. But it was convenient enough: a special room with a window facing the street; “real” furniture; a comfortable place to lie down and a table in the centre; a cupboard; two chairs, all old, but still fit for use. I was alone, by myself, in my room and sometimes it seemed to me, in the entire house. I hardly saw people there. Yet the food I would prepare and leave for my next meal – because it was usually more than I needed for one meal – was usually largely consumed when I went to the cupboard to take it out, with the lion’s share of the bread “devoured” and only a few remnants of the butter left. This happened every day, before every meal. I had nobody to ask, nobody to whom I could complain or protest – nobody was home. When the footsteps of the woman of the house could be heard, they were like a cat pacing and disappearing. When it was late, I was

² One of the two Hebrew newspapers that appeared in St Petersburg, the Russian capital

no longer able to allay my hunger. The shop was already closed and my pocket had been emptied earlier. I was not able to remain there for even a week.

I abandoned my special room and moved to another house, also at the end of the town, on the other side. There was a young man there, older than I, very tall, who was busy with everyday matters. We would leave together in the morning: he for the world of business and I with my *Gemara* and my *Shev Shemateta* under my arm. I walked boldly and vigorously down the long road to the *yeshiva* named after the leading rabbi of the generation, who was viewed with great affection and admiration by Jews wherever they settled. But when I approached *Knesset Beit Yitzhak*, my disappointment increased: on meeting the supervisor, we did not greet each other or even say, “Good morning”, although this was common among the “superfluous” students in the *yeshiva* . . .

Following the failure of my first accommodation, there was also some difficulty in the second, although it started very slowly. This time I thought the very tall young man was the cause of it. At the end of the month, I moved to the centre of the town, near the *yeshiva* of the *Mussar* followers, to the house of Rabbi Moshe Eliezer. He was the old ritual slaughterer who I soon discovered had taught my late father about ritual slaughter. He remembered my father, telling me about his characteristic behaviour.

He was an easy-going old man, not interested in what the young people did. When he saw me arrive with three issues of *Hamelitz*, spreading them on the table and reading them, he paid no attention to it. At the same time he swayed as he delved into the depths of a significant subject in his *Gemara*, also placed on the table. These “clashes” were very rare. His wife, however, would sometimes ask me, angrily or mockingly, how I managed to get through so much material so quickly in such large issues of the newspaper, while even a learned man spent hours on one page of *Gemara* that he had already studied several times before. This question contained a “sting”, but not a very painful one. I slept in the dining room, which was also large enough for a second tenant, a short and stocky young man from Vohilan. He studied at the same *yeshiva*, not very successfully. I had nothing in common with him, apart from his offering me nuts fairly often. He received them in large quantities in parcels from his parents. The eldest daughter of the ritual slaughterer was married to a person who had gone to study in another town, visiting his home only for one festival, Shavuot, while I stayed there. His wife was noteworthy for her strict observance, greater even than her parents’ and her husband’s. Only her younger sister behaved to an extent in the spirit of the times and her piety did not bother me so much. I found this home generally congenial, although it was also numbered among the failures.

The heavy *Gemara*, the thin, light pages of *Hamelitz* and sometimes a non-

religious book of mine on the same main table, created disharmony that I did not like either. I therefore moved to a house in the part of town in which the common people lived.

In my new home, the fourth, I found neither external comfort, as it was situated in a densely populated neighbourhood, nor internal comfort as the apartment was small and confined, but I liked a neighbour from Kalshachil who lived in the same building. An observant Jew with broad knowledge. He had a sound character and was open and optimistic in his ways. He was also a grammar expert, who explained wonderfully in his clear voice and pleasant diction. These latter virtues stood out when he taught a young boy the Hebrew language twice a week in the evenings, using the *Language Teacher textbook*. At that time most people in the *yeshiva* went for a walk outside Slobodka and the best students used to gather around the head of the *yeshiva*, who also went for a walk. I enjoyed my neighbour's Hebrew lessons when I listened to them, as if by chance, and I found his company very pleasant, including his argumentation in the *yeshiva*. I regarded him as a desirable friend, loyal and dedicated guide, older than I was. This time, I regarded moving house as a successful experiment.

I learnt about the Hebrew library in Kovno from my colleagues outside the camp. It was open for an hour in the early afternoon, managed by an old bachelor, an intellectual, Mr Friedland. This was not a convenient time for the Slobodka students, as only late afternoon or evening would suit them and nobody would take the trouble to alter their study times, so the situation remained unchanged for a long time. I girded myself and went at the hottest time of day to the library to borrow books. But there was no reading in the library. I was no literature expert, yet the librarian did not help me choose books – he handed out what was requested, doing his duty. The first book I chose was *The Story of Shlomo Maimon* by TP Shapira, which was difficult and I did not find it easy reading. Many people in my circle of friends were able to suggest appropriate books to me. They made a list for me and asked me to “subscribe” for them as well, as they were unable to go to the library while they had to be at the *yeshiva* – they did not want to endanger their charitable donations, which they hoped would continue in future as well.

After that, I often left my reading stand in the *yeshiva* to go out to the library to exchange books, using the list prepared for me and the students from Postava, Buska (the student from this town read a great deal), Shakuda and Brisk, and more for a half dozen of them in turn. When I went openly in daylight on my way from Slobodka to Kovno, bearing a large load of books, I met people on the bridge over the Vilya linking the *yeshiva* centre with the cheders on the other side, the “external” schools that were expressly forbidden to the *yeshiva* students. The people I met included the supervisor,

who was walking along contentedly, cheek by jowl with others on his way from Kovno, or the head of the *yeshiva*, Rabbi Chaim, who would cast angry glances at me. They regarded me as the link between the library and “their” students, leading astray the boys who read the books in secret, concealing them cunningly. They did not dare rebuke me or try to shift the blame for the transgression to the messenger, because I was independent of the charitable donations, beyond their sphere of supervision and authority.

I carried parcels of books several times a week to one place or another, in spite of the protestations of those who from the outset should have been my “educators” and because they were unable to provide me with any benefit, as a result of their distortions. I had no intention of provoking the head of the *yeshiva* and the supervisor, but in retrospect, they did spark a grudge in me, a desire for revenge that I did not regret. Many of the friends I helped by supplying the books they requested also harboured this hidden feeling.

Soon the foundation was laid for my orderly reading. The classic authors passed before me one after the other, led by A Mapu. I tried to read his books in the place they were written, on the Aleksotas mountains, with their wonderful natural beauty, and in Napoleon’s hut, which still stood. There the holy spirit inspired the great writer, with a view of the confluence of the Neman and Vilya Rivers at the foot of the mountains, rising to the left of the Neman and the Oshmyanka that empties on the right of the Vilya. And after him, Yehuda Leib Gordon, RA Brodes, Peretz, Smolenskin; anthologists; calendars *Ahi Asaf*, *Sifrei Hashanah*, *Knesset*, over several years – all of these and books published by Tashiah also held my attention and interest. I managed to read a lot, while not stopping my studies at the *yeshiva*. This experiment was successful.

The long, enervating summer days arrived. The temperature rose and drained the students, who walked around next to the *yeshiva* on the banks of the river and debated, but with less strength. They looked sweaty and tired, without any desire to continue with their studies or discussions. There were secular discussions on the Fourth Zionist Congress that was about to take place in London and the issues engaging the attention of the Zionist world, but these took place underground, so that the supervisor would not notice them. Sometimes even he reconciled himself with joining the people discussing Jewish political subjects and showed his depth of knowledge and his “discerning” views on various problems.

In Slobodka, hardly any representatives of the police or even non-Jews were seen. But, late one afternoon, when the heat was abating, a policeman suddenly appeared on the threshold of the *yeshiva* with a file full of papers under his arm.

He gave a polite salute to the supervisor, who looked shamefaced and shocked. The students, who surrounded the unexpected visitor, also did not know what this non-Jew with the buttons wanted. Everybody was confused until one of them pointed his finger towards the student from Malanik, sitting in the second row on the left side, gesturing towards him immediately. Without fear, the student walked up and began to talk to the policeman in his own language, in common parlance, and immediately things became clear: the policeman had come on an errand, to bring a passport for one of the students. He wanted the student to receive the document and sign for it. Many of the others looked on and listened, understanding very little, but some of them tried to solve the riddle and decipher the code using their “common” sense.

The designated student was found, the passport delivered to its owner and the tumult ended. The *gorodovoi* (policeman) saluted in thanks and farewell and departed on his way with appropriate importance. Conjecture still continued for a while in the *yeshiva* about what really happened until quiet returned and the storm abated.

The spectacle was not tragic, but aroused compassion for a figure of fun – it was not even a comedy. In a student community of over two hundred, most of them young, standing on the threshold of economic, cultural and social life, there was only a single exception among all those who remained impenetrably silent, who was able to resolve a simple question asked in the language of the country. The “hero” of the day was Moshe Fishman, from Malanik - whose name has since become well known – nobody suspected he was able to converse with the “man with the buttons” without any fear or trembling. It became apparent that this student also belonged to a group outside the camp at the *yeshiva*, and from the time of the “great event” Moshe from Geitz began to respect and admire Moshe from Malanik, the “hero” and changed his mind about this “heretic”, the knowledgeable “intellectual”.

In my letter to my father that week, I tried to show why it was necessary to learn Russian with a teacher, following a particular method – not like I had done then, when I was young, in the town of Mariyampol. My reasons and explanations were stated with good taste. I was very surprised to receive my father’s reply. Written in his usual good style, like a prophetic statement, he expressed his agreement to support me in this regard. I estimated that this “business” would cost me at least thirty roubles a month. He agreed and my joy knew no bounds. Immediately I arranged an interview with Moshe Fishman and he agreed to teach me Russian three times a week: reading, writing, speaking, grammar and the good words involved in learning a foreign language.

At the time when the *yeshiva* students went out for a walk in their numbers to the fortress at the edge of Slobodka, between the afternoon and evening

services, the two of us, Moshe and I, would sit in my room and learn Russian, with which he also had some difficulty. He spoke with an effort and grammar was studied from a long book in Yiddish, with a large number of exercises for translating Yiddish into Russian and *vice versa*. My roommate, the Hebrew teacher from Kalshachil, deliberately absented himself during these lessons, so that he would not interfere. I did my own “hard labour” and performed very well, because I had a teacher who stood out from the several hundred in the *yeshiva* and was the only one with the status of a “gatekeeper” in the *yeshiva*. There was therefore no doubt that the experiment went well. Did the supervisor find out my secret? This question was not answered and I did not pay particular attention to it. (Moshe Fishman is currently a retired education inspector in Haifa.)

Not even a few weeks later, there were sensational events at the *yeshiva*, each causing turmoil, not only at the time, but for some time afterwards. At *Knesset Beit Yitzhak*, Zionism was officially regarded as completely prohibited. It was neither permitted nor approved by the supervisor and those behind him. By contrast, while the students did not involve themselves publicly in Zionism, they were either neutral or well-disposed. It was very doubtful whether any of them opposed it from conviction. One clear day, the book *Or Leyesharim* (*Light for the Upright*) by Zalman Landa, distributed by Ya'akov Lipschitz, was brought to the *yeshiva*. Lipschitz was a former secretary of the late Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan, who had a positive attitude towards *Hibat Zion* (*Love of Zion*, a nineteenth century movement to build the Land of Israel) and to the revival of the Land of Israel. He was known as a supporter of the modern nationalist idea. After the death of the rabbi, Lipschitz became an extreme opponent. When political Zionism flourished, he was the moving spirit in the “black office”, centred in Kovno, which spread its net throughout Russia in a vigorous publicity campaign against Zionism. As a writer with a good Hebrew style, he regarded his opposition to Zionism as holy, something that outweighed all 613 Commandments. He would write articles, distribute pamphlets, one of which was *Or Leyesharim*, which got into the *yeshiva*. The supervisor did not interfere with the students, who began to transfer it from hand to hand, leafing and browsing through it.

Eliezer from Riteve, the official Zionist in the *yeshiva*, was made aware of what was happening and watched from a distance as the pamphlet made its rounds, as if he was preparing for a furious attack. Suddenly he grabbed the book, looked at the people gathered round him, his eyes flashing, and began tearing it into tiny pieces, crushing and pulverising it in a way that left not even a single word intact. He scattered the pieces, throwing them angrily into the air. They floated down slowly, covering the heads and shoulders of everyone there, eventually drifting to the floor, turning it white.

The supervisor did not dare – in his usual flowery language, he used the Hebrew term “would not be so bold as” – to insult the stormy and volatile student from Riteve, but bit his lower lip in silence, twirling his upper whiskers in controlled anger, without uttering a word. It was as if he curled up in fear lest “the lame one” (from Riteve) would attack him and accuse him of behind the bringing of the pamphlet. He almost turned into a bag of bones.

None of the students protested against tearing up the anti-Zionist pamphlet. On the contrary, all the observers treated the incident as though they consented to it, while remaining completely silent and giving willing approval. Thanks to this significant event, Zionism increased in importance and its status was reinforced in the *yeshiva*, in spite of the student from Geitz and his supporters, who promoted his views among them.

The vigorous campaign against the opponents of Zionism within the walls of the *yeshiva* took wing and received publicity beyond the *yeshiva* and the borders of Slobodka, making a great impression. On the other hand, many in various circles came to regard Zionism as more significant. The failure of the “black office” among Biblical scholars led Zionism to stand firm.

A short while afterwards, the *yeshiva* became the stage for a sensation of another kind, lowering its prestige among the people familiar with it and its admirers. People started complaining about a student, very learned in Jewish law, who had studied at Telz, from where he came to Slobodka. He went to swim in the Velya River on Shabbat, in public. This was a provocation and a very serious charge. The accused, however, was not interrogated officially. One Wednesday afternoon, Rabbi M Danishevski, the local rabbi, burst into the synagogue unexpectedly. It was unlike him just to appear there, on the first day of the month on which he gave his lesson to the *yeshiva* students, before the meal. He rushed to the eastern wall on the left, looked around for the accused, who was rumoured to have bathed and swum openly on Shabbat in the Velya, near the *beit midrash*. Without saying a thing to him, or to the congregation of students around them, the rabbi raised his right hand and hit the “suspect” in the face once, twice. With all his strength as an old man, he began to pull him in the direction of the door. When the rabbi and the terrified student reached there, the humiliated scholar was dismissed and sent out of the entrance, removed far from the *yeshiva* so that he would not dare return to it. The ugly, unrivalled spectacle made everybody tremble and anxious. They all remained silent. Nobody opened his mouth to object – feeling ashamed and abused.

When the rabbi had finished his duty of being zealous for the Sabbath and for the *yeshiva*, he retraced his footsteps. The expelled student no longer came to the *yeshiva*. Questions were asked. Was a thorough investigation conducted at

the time? Was evidence collected and was it proved that the suspect desecrated the Sabbath and deliberately impugned the honour of the *yeshiva*? These and many other similar questions remained unanswered, with no reason found to justify the conduct of the rabbi against the student from Brisk.

Another shameful event occurred at the *yeshiva*. A student there from Yekaterinoslav, by the name of Ravan, was among those “outside the camp”. He visited the *yeshiva* regularly. Many people knew him and openly treated him warmly.

He was tall and well built, in his early twenties, with a sparse black beard over his entire face. He wore clean clothes that suited him well. People assumed he came from a well-off family. I thought he was an only child, which was quite common in the case of somebody from Yekaterinoslav, the famous commercial and industrial centre in the south of Russia.

He received no support from the *yeshiva* as he did not need it at all.

One day this giant fell into bed. It soon became clear that he was suffering from typhus and was in a serious condition. In spite of the doctor’s prohibition on visiting the patient in his private room, several bulletins reached the *yeshiva* each day.

The day of the crisis came and the sad news quickly spread that his life was in danger.

A few days later, he breathed his last in the presence of his family, who had hurried to his bedside.

The grief was very great when this student was cut down at a very young age. The pain was unbearable.

Dozens of *yeshiva* students attended the funeral. Only the supervisor and the heads of the *yeshiva* did not. They did not mourn, nor did they comfort the mourners.

In the meantime, the end of term was approaching. It had begun in the middle of Elul (August), when those students who did not live far away left for their holidays. I also prepared to leave. I plucked up courage and approached the supervisor with a question: “Am I admitted?” This was on a postcard from home, but on the spot, from the *yeshiva* itself, before I left at the end of the term. It was a verbal approach, clear and candid: would I be accepted for the next term and, G-d willing, be numbered among the full-time students, entitled to the support I deserved? And, in the meantime, nobody else was coming from my village.

Parkowitz twirled his moustache, showing some feeling. He began to heap accusations on me, trying to show I had not behaved properly and was not *kosher* (fit) to come under the wings of the *yeshiva*. “The books, yes, those books, the Hebrew books, they trouble me . . . Fine. Learning Russian, the language of the country, that is a practical requirement for every citizen and proper student.” This was a “right” – obligatory, in his view. One had to know the main language of the country in which one lived. But Hebrew! Reading and distributing Hebrew books containing heresy and apostasy, works that undermined Judaism and its very existence? The Hebrew language does nothing but increase atheism and beyond any doubt is very dangerous, particularly among *yeshiva* students. No! The people who plant atheism, nurture it and make it flourish – they will not set foot in the *yeshiva*.

He gave me a specific negative answer. I did not deserve to be accepted to the *yeshiva* because of spreading Hebrew. Even “future repentance” would not serve any purpose, whether in theory or practice: I would not be accepted as a student and I was not entitled to be supported by charity – no! I had to be aware of this negative response up front, at the outset, before I came to the *yeshiva* again. No and no! Experiment – and the height of failure!

CHAPTER 11

ACROSS THE RIVER

After Sukkot, I returned to Slobodka. My place in the *yeshiva* was predetermined, even before I departed for my holidays at the end of the previous term. I was in the “external group”, with no chance of being numbered among the senior students. I then determined my own programme for myself: I would attend the classes given by the rabbi who headed the *yeshiva* and also participate in them, but my main studies at the *Knesset Beit Yitzhak* would be limited to the evenings. A whole group of students in the same position came to the same conclusion. When we took our seats, from then mainly in the south-western part of the *beit midrash*, we made a definite impression. The supervisor would often cast an angry glance in the direction of our “camp”, while grinding his teeth silently – but did nothing more at that time.

I returned to the *yeshiva* in spite of the unfavourable conditions, but not because I wanted to overcome the severe obstacles blocking the way towards my objective. I never thought my highest aim in life would be realised by becoming a rabbi, although that was what my late mother hoped when she sang her lullabies to me. Her secret longing was to see with her own eyes my attaining rabbinic ordination, which would bring great satisfaction and pleasure to her and her family. That was not my ambition. Ordination as a rabbi was not regarded as the pinnacle of erudition in the *yeshivas* of Slobodka, Telz and other great *yeshivas*. On the contrary, only those who did not manage to excel in *pilpul* - making “distinctions” through their expertise in the Talmud or the sharpness of their minds, as a basis for forming independent opinions and views on serious subjects in the Talmud - would setting the limits of their own scholarship, by studying the *Arba'at Haturim* ³ - The *Four Columns*, or *Four Sections* – to present themselves for the examinations for the rabbinate to receive ordination. These students were considered to be of lesser status by the students of the large *yeshivas*, the top rank. These lower-ranking students sought a convenient and easier purpose in life for themselves, while anticipating assured success by going in this direction. Ordination for a “scholar” was not a mark or indication of distinction, but, on the contrary, proof of deterioration.

³ The four parts into which books on Jewish law are divided, being: *Orach Chaim* (Way of Life – worship and ritual observance), *Yoreh Deah* (Teaching of Knowledge – ritual prohibitions and dietary laws), *Even Ha'ezer* (Rock of the Helpmate – marriage, divorce and family law) and *Choshen Mishpat* (Breastplate of Judgement – civil law). (Translator's note: The Four Turim are a later codification of Jewish law, not as extensive as the Talmud itself and the various commentators, all studied in detail by the “serious” students.)

I had a negative attitude to the rabbinate as an objective in my life. In the views I held from a young age, “hating” the rabbinate was an important principle. I had no inclination to see myself as a spiritual leader in a congregation, or even to the seat in the “east”, with the congregation and the cantor waiting for me to complete the Eighteen Benedictions as I took three steps backwards as a sign of finishing it and the cantor could then start his repetition. The rabbinate would not pursue and possess my soul,

I felt it was precisely at the *Knesset Beit Yitzhak yeshiva* that I wished to spend several years devoting myself to studying according to its methods, until the age for the army call-up. This desire was not to be and the obstacle to my moving in this direction did not take long to reveal itself, probably in a way that could not have been anticipated.

My additional general education studies came from the “underground”, while I was still visiting the *yeshiva* every day. I found someone, Mr Zemel, who had been registered as a teacher. He was good at his job and covered a broad syllabus. A student, the son of the rabbi in the town, joined me as a colleague to study the subjects the teacher selected for our benefit. Three times a week, in the mornings, we went, to his house in Kovno. I soon realised the teacher was guiding us on the correct path: he spoke to us only in Russian and we did well. However, my colleague’s slow progress resulted in our partnership being dissolved. I could not afford the fee for the lesson alone, subsequently experiencing delays and difficulties in preparing for the examinations I had set out to take.

I tried to study with my neighbour in the room we shared, but studying together with him did not go well. My progress in my studies distanced me even further from him. I sought a better and more suitable opportunity. When I moved to Kovno, I was able to make proper arrangements, getting private lessons, finding a good teacher at a reasonable price. I knew, however, that if I moved to Kovno from where I lived in Slobodka, I would have to abandon my fixed hours of study in the *yeshiva*, so I delayed moving, saying: “The time has not yet come.”

In the meantime, the number of students who “came to study and left” increased substantially. In other words, after studying for many years and devoting themselves to becoming scholars and experts in Torah, they left the *yeshiva*, abandoned it. Some of those who remained in Slobodka were influenced by the enlightenment movement in Kovno. Others crossed the Viliya and settled on the other side of the river in Kovno. They were followed by a few of the younger people who stopped going to the *yeshiva* because they were disappointed when they stayed there because of the supervisor.

The influence of Zionism grew and spread among the students at the *beit madras*. It was given tangible expression. The older students said they were founding a society called *Dorshei Zion* (Seekers of Zion). It was initially based in Slobodka, but quickly crossed over to Kovno. Meetings were held every Saturday at three o'clock in the afternoon, generally in the home of the Hebrew teacher, Mr Lapidot. About a hundred members belonged to *Dorshei Zion* and were active and involved participants in the meetings, where they would read articles dealing with matters on the agenda – literary, nationalist-Zionist, most of them from *Hador* (*The Generation*), edited by D Frishman – and discuss them.

The society was active in its Zionism, with speakers and lecturers, as well as different groups and meetings. The young members society made a great progress. Reading the new literature was a pleasant and valued duty.

The stage after reading was speaking. *Dorshei Zion* members decided to revive the Hebrew language in practice, by speaking it among themselves and beyond their limited circle, promoting it in public by obliging members to take their Sabbath walks on the main road. There the students walked in pairs talking in Hebrew. In that way, they became accustomed to speaking living Hebrew and learning it, demonstrating in public the need and possibility of reviving our national language – an important principle in our national movement that was becoming stronger and adopting firm positions. Hebrew was on the most solid ground.

The proposal was accepted gladly and the following Sabbath, pairs of students could be seen – young people who had not yet joined the society and its Hebrew speakers – walking and discussing, trying to debate, making an effort to talk, telling stories and “interpreting” in Hebrew, even though not always correctly or particularly clearly, but they used only Hebrew that “looked” and sounded alive, vibrant and ringing.

There were also severe birth pangs and many delays, but the will to overcome the obstacles and difficulties performed wonders: about fifty couples would fill the main street in Kovno, particularly the part known as “the New Structure”, protected by magnificent, wide columns of trees, an improvement made by the municipality. They planted tastefully, their natural beauty covering an area of several miles. There, among the different tongues of the hundreds of walkers, particularly Yiddish and Russian, the ancient-modern language, that was being revived in the mouths of the “idlers”, the “patrons”, the people who “came to study and left”. It was heard by many people, who were surprised and amazed, making a great impression.

With the passage of time, people were chosen: students got together to go for a walk, knowing with whom they could conduct fluent, easy and interesting

discussions. Sometimes they taught someone who was not doing well, speaking slowly and hesitantly in Hebrew, trying to help in a constructive way. The guide and teacher also derived great benefit, both as helper and the person being helped. Progress was excellent. I remember once walking with a friend, both of us deep in our Hebrew discussion and two cavalry officers passed in front of us, with their swords at their sides dragging noisily on the pavement. The way they moved made people afraid of these armed men,. Such people often picked a fight with unprotected citizens. We were a little scared. One of them turned to me with a polite salute and asked: "Please tell me, what is this language the Jews have started speaking?" "This is the language of the Bible," I replied. I did not want to explain to him that we were trying to revive the language and therefore kept my comments very brief. The officer was satisfied with my answer. He clicked his boots, his spurs jangled happily as he saluted with a grateful smile. His colleague standing to his left was also satisfied.

Close to that time, a *Bnot Zion* (Daughters of Zion) society was established in Slobodka, to which almost all the unmarried young women in the city belonged. Every Saturday they would gather to listen to a lecture, take part in a discussion, or read. They were influenced passively and were not active in practical Zionist-nationalist work.

On one occasion, when the women learnt that David from Chaslavitz would be the speaker the following Saturday, they all appeared and there were also new faces. He was very popular and had become well known by his family name, Mirenburg. He was a good speaker, as well as an excellent versifier, very well liked among the members of the Zionist committee and in Zionist circles. That Saturday, Mirenburg spoke about national values, the real revival, the obligations it imposed on anybody who wanted to play a useful part in it. He demonstrated that reviving the language and knowing it were among the main foundations of the movement and Jewish reconstruction. This was a summary of his lecture – he knew the secret of moving people and igniting their spirits. As a result of this speech, by the next day, Sunday, all the Jewish shops in Kovno were sold out of every copy of Grasovski's textbook, which was used at that time by beginners to learn Hebrew. None remained.

Society members were divided into groups and teachers, including me, were appointed for each of them. Jewish girls in Slobodka began to learn Hebrew with genuine enthusiasm – they really liked our reviving language.

I often had to read and lecture on Zionist topics. On Saturdays in the women's society in Kovno, I read chapters from the books in Russian by Dr Sapire: *Zionism*, the *Shulchan Aruch* of Zionism (the *Shulchan Aruch* is the authoritative code of Jewish law). There was also a translation into Yiddish

and a popular explanation. At that time the book was distributed widely in Zionist circles and was an important work in the theory of the modern nationalist movement. I had to read and translate literary topics written in Hebrew. I undertook these assignments satisfactorily, with the participants showing interest and listening carefully.

I found the name of a good teacher in Kovno, who gave me private Russian lessons. He did not charge, reciprocating my teaching Hebrew in the Bnot Zion society. I found myself learning and teaching most of the day until I arrived for my “fixed times” of Torah study at the *yeshiva* in Slobodka.

There was a sudden change in my way of life. It might not have been outwardly radical, but it affected me painfully, causing me anguish. This event motivated me to move over the bridge and settle across the Viliya River in Kovno.

The change occurred close to the end of the theatrical winter season, before the beginning of the “great” Catholic fast seven weeks before Easter. A provincial Russian troupe performed in Kovno, as it did every year, attracting a large number of Jewish spectators. At the end of the season, they said there would be two performances the same day, usually on a Saturday, for the price of one ticket. In other words, anybody purchasing a single ticket would be entitled to go to the theatre to see the day performance, as well as the night performance, or could give the ticket for the second performance to a friend. There were many takers for these tickets. On the last Saturday before the season closed, there were two plays on Jewish life, *Dr Cohen* or *Two Worlds*, by M Nordau, and *The New Ghetto* by Dr T Herzl.

In the *Knesset Beit Yitzhak*, students jumped at this windfall, to see a play about Jewish life by such a famous Jewish author, presented in a Jewish environment, at half price.

A number of tickets was purchased, with the bolder people going to the theatre on Saturday afternoon. I was in the group that went after the Sabbath to see *The New Ghetto*. Our group greatly enjoyed it. After the performance, on our way back, debates and arguments broke out about various aspects of the play, the main and most important lines, how the actors performed in their roles— just as good, experienced “theatrical” people would do.

The next day, however, saw heated exchanges and turmoil. Moshe Parkowitz soon learnt of the “very disgraceful act”, becoming agitated even before he went to the *yeshiva* in the morning. As the supervisor, as he had already discovered what had happened. He pretended innocence, listening attentively from afar. He began to glance at the suspects, studying their faces, as though collecting material for a charge sheet, as it were. His anger grew. “How” – the serious

question was posed by him – “did so many *yeshiva* students dare to do that, even if they were only the people in the ‘external faction’, who belong outside of the camp?” “Could they be so impertinent as to go to the theatre in public? And when? On the Sabbath?” He began to speak to those who had committed this terrible offence. He had not previously contacted them or spoken to them, but he knew full well who each of them was and addressed them by the names of their towns: the one from Skuoda, from Shavel, etc. Because he knew who the guilty people were, he had no doubt that they would not dare deny their participation in the offence. In words full of indignation and anger, he showed that the visit to the theatre was a transgression that could not be remedied. “A woman’s voice is a serious prohibition,” the supervisor reasoned after chastening them (hearing a woman’s voice at a performance is prohibited in Jewish law). “In addition, there is the threat of blasphemy on the part of entire ‘gangs’ of *beit midrash* students, students of a *yeshiva* that is famous throughout the world. Its name was desecrated so disgracefully by them!”

The judgment was prepared and the punishment each of the accused was decided in advance. In the case of some of them, he settled for a sharp, piercing reprimand and a serious warning. Others, the minority, were punished by expulsion – ordered to leave the walls of the *yeshiva*. They were considered the most corrupt, causing great damage to their environment, incorrigible.

He hardly reprimanded me at all, perhaps because, he had already, on another occasion, admonished me about my earlier transgressions; on the other hand, I assumed it was possible he could have recognised the injustice of his turning me away when I approached him with a request that I be regarded as “penitent” at the end of the previous term, before going home. He did not cause me much harm. He also knew that I did not go on the Sabbath, but only after the Sabbath had ended.

Those sentenced to expulsion did not refuse to go, nor did they delay their departure. Although that sentence did not apply to me, I too, decided to go. It was impossible for me to remain close to that “educator” from Geitz, who ruled over the “spirit” of the youth and drove them out to some desolate place with his own hands.

I found a decent room for myself in Kovno, sharing with a *yeshiva* student of fine character, a great scholar who studied at Telz. We became friends for many years – he was from Lukanik, the late Mr Azriel Silpert. I crossed the river and then drew the curtain on *yeshiva* life - its conduct and ways, leaders and “upholders” were taken from me. I no longer looked inwards anxiously, into the *yeshiva*, – it was over!

CHAPTER 12

ACROSS THE RIVER

Quite a few young people did not swim with the new flow from the beginning of the present century. They were not swept up in it. Many *yeshiva* students could have been regarded as casualties of education or, more correctly, victims of the specific culture of the *yeshiva*. The youth there lacked any rational method of study and, to an even greater extent, of education, in the sense of intellectual and spiritual training. There was no step-by-step treatment or care, but spread, flourished and grew by itself, from the “vain” pages of the *Gemara*, from religious and moral books – in theory and in practice – from positive commands and prohibitions. It was completely ossified.

The *yeshivas* did not absorb a particular type of student – the people who did not manage to specialise as outstanding Torah scholars. They spat them out. And the students became unfortunate and desperate – in many cases, their abilities and even strengths came to nought. *Yeshiva* leaders neglected the youth over the generations, failing to develop effective pipelines to influence the youth in their hands. It seemed that the distress of the youth neither occurred to them nor was it felt by them. They were neither concerned nor anxious about the difficulties they encountered nor how they expressed their innermost problems and feelings. The heads of the *yeshivas* were not moved to assist them in paving a way in life. The “pupils” therefore remained like stray lambs, with no way out to take the straight path, with no help or guidance.

Such students were pushed out of the gushing new stream apathetically and negligently, unable to become part of it in the season of rebirth. If they were swept along by it, it was unwillingly.

In contrast to the people lacking the will to make their way in life by adapting to an active environment, there was a positive type of “external” students, who devoted themselves to a particular objective when they left the *yeshiva* – furthering their education, in spite of hurtful nettles and thorns strewn along their path. They isolated and distanced themselves from public life and from the Zionist movement and almost “killed themselves” in attempting to study, clearly aware that it required strenuous effort. Their objective was clear to them. They had a strong desire to overcome obstacles, even if it meant leaving the country of their birth to travel and move around to realise their aspirations. Such forlorn students were found in many corners of Kovno, with some living in isolated attics and small rooms in Slobodka. However, most

of those who “came to study and left” became part of the national revival, joining the movement, playing an active role. Some even reached the level of “professional Zionists”, travelling to different places to promote it. But this work did not fill their entire lives. Because they read Russian and other languages or translations, as well as Hebrew, they also found areas of further modern learning and continuous reading that became a significant element in their advancement and development. Whenever there was a literary event, such as a visit by a well-known writer or a political occurrence in the life of the Zionists, such as important meetings to help spread the Zionist message, these workers would be busy arranging it or assisting in the success of the project, promoting Zionism.

I was among those completing my education and helping with the required work, but I never considered myself one of the glittering communal workers, who came up with plans of action and moved heaven and earth with their driving initiatives.

Meanwhile, I was bothered by a private concern: the question of my discharge from army service, although it was not yet due. The loyalty of Russia’s Jewish citizens would not have been in any doubt, nor that they were wholehearted subjects of the country of their birth, were it not for the denial of their human rights by the authorities. Widespread persecutions and alarming decrees affecting entire ranks of our people hardened the hearts of the Jews and turned them away from supporting the government. Many developed a negative attitude to military service that “consumed” four or five of the best years of a young man’s life, at the time he was establishing himself, even though his future prospects were not at all good. The only way to make progress was by emigrating. There was a widespread view that it was preferable to emigrate early, without wasting time on making progress in Russia, and prepare the ground for the future beyond the borders of the homeland – in the United States or in the south of Africa.

Towns and villages on the eastern border were being emptied of their sons when the time came for them to join the army. They would avoid this duty by crossing the border secretly, taking a calculated risk, usually successfully, and escaping across the seas and oceans.

And those who did not want to desert their parents’ homes and leave the country of their birth would find other stratagems. One of them was to be “registered” in an area populated by Jews, where emigration was foreign to them and flight from army service unknown – in the Ukraine. Their material situation was excellent, they enjoyed life and made a good and even a splendid living, eating of the fruit of the land – and there were many Jews there.

Bearing in mind that not everybody of army age was called up for service, but only some, many were given the opportunity of freeing themselves of this obligation. Apart from the sick and disabled, who were exempt, people who fell into any of three categories were also not liable for army service. These included only children of their parents, those who supported the family and those who drew a high number by lot, one that was above the number of those called up by the authorities.

Jews also enjoyed the same rights as others drafted from places with a large population. And so a “saviour” was found for me via an agent, an acquaintance from a regional town in the Ukraine, who undertook to redeem me from the “hands of the non-Jews”, to use the accepted terminology among Lithuanian Jews. He had me “registered” in his region so that the highest right would apply to me. I would be released as an only child. Of course, when the “deal” worked, he would get his reward and, in the meantime, settled for a deposit. He also advised that I should not wait the two years until my turn came, but should begin to arrange matters immediately and complete them in the next season – the following autumn. In the place he selected for this, he applied on my behalf to the army official who determined the date of my being called up to the army. The application was completed after I was registered there as a citizen. After a short time, experts estimated my age – “according to my external appearance” – based on the official formula. As I was tall and well-developed, the judgment was: fit to “stand” for the army this year. I had to wait only a few months until autumn arrived. Anyway, I recall, a *gordovoi* met me in the street and asked my name. When I told him, he informed me that he had a passport for me, which he gave me. I signed the receipt. This reminded me of the time the guard who came to the *Knesset Beit Yitzhak*, and his appearance caused so much confusion. This time the meeting made me laugh as I recalled this incident.

During my official stay in the army, I spent some time in the district town of Priloki in the Ukraine. There I got to know the Hebrew teacher in his “modern” cheder. He was also something of a writer. He introduced me to local Zionists and invited me to attend their meetings. These aroused my curiosity and, for the first time, I was drawn to them. They met once every two weeks, if I recall correctly. The day – Sunday, before the afternoon service (in summer); the place – the women’s gallery; the agenda – the misery and poverty of the Jews of Lithuania and the need to acquire the land of Israel or part of it – settlements – in order to transfer “our needy brothers” from Lithuania to settle there. The procedure of the meeting: reading the minutes of the previous meeting in great detail about matters that should be remembered, what one person said and what another spoke about, the opinion of Reuben and the opposing view of Shimon until Levi proposed

a compromise and nothing was left to tell Yehuda – this was done every time. The chairman was a respected teacher, the father of the “modern” teacher. The precise formality was unparalleled in its gravity and serious attitude, even on minor and unimportant matters. There was a glittering dish at the head of the chairman’s table. It attracted special attention – the bottom was covered in coins dedicated to the funds of the society.

At these meetings, I regarded myself as a city-dweller who had strayed into a village. I felt there was a huge distance between Kovno, with its meetings, the attitude of the participants to questions under discussion, their views on the problems engaging the attention at the leaders of the Zionist world, and the “village” in which avowed Zionists gathered as very observant Jews for public prayer. As was customary, they offered their *prutot* for the dish very humbly – each carrying out the commandment of redeeming Lithuanian Jews from their poverty and humiliation. At the end, the meeting closed without introducing even a slightest innovation. The participants left with the same knowledge of Zionist theory they brought with them when they arrived.

After some time, a man from that city appeared, Dr Marshov, who had studied medicine in Koenigsburg. This European “citizen” was given the honour of being the speaker at the meeting. But, on his arrival from Germany, from Western Europe, where Zionism was flourishing, he, too, spoke on the subject of “the depressed economic situation in Lithuania, from which the Jews are suffering severely and they require radical help. The remedy is nothing but actual Zionism in the land of Israel for the benefit and advantage of these brothers of ours . . .”

The Hebrew teacher suggested that I should teach Hebrew to a teacher of general subjects, a Jewish woman who wanted to introduce into her private school the “language of the Zionists”, which was spreading among the Jewish public. I agreed. When I arrived at the lesson, there were arguments in the family about our national questions, on the land of Israel and the chances of our rebirth. I was known as a Lithuanian and regarded as an authority on various matters, including Zionism. Once, when I went to the synagogue between the afternoon and evening services, I sat down to study the *Gemara*. A man who had helped support me entered. When he saw me with the *Gemara*, he looked at me in surprise and wonder. That evening, he asked me whether I had studied Talmud and understood it. After a day or two, I went through the rows of shops in the market and saw Jews talking to each other about me, whispering in curiosity, saying something like: “Look at that young Litvak, he is not only capable, but also capable in the *Gemara*.”

While most of the Ukrainian Jews were the children of migrants from Lithuania, even the parents who came from the Ukraine seemed to be, in the main, ignoramuses.

I attended fewer and fewer meetings of the local Zionists, until I stopped altogether. I returned to my parents' home that year even before the Ten Days of Penitence. I was due to report to the army in the autumn. My agent believed I could have remained in Kovno and waited for the news of the discharge. But events took an unexpected turn. My father became very ill and the doctors in Kovno urged him to travel to Koenigsburg to consult with some professors. He complied. While he was away from the house, I knew nothing of my situation with regard to my "being in good standing" with the army. I had no papers with me. The agent, like my father, concealed what was happening. Then one evening at the end of November, I met my father at the entrance of a relative's house, while the rain was coming down in torrents. He had just arrived by train from Pilvishok and showed me a telegram he had received from the agent, in which he demanded a fairly large additional sum of money to complete my matter. "I was attached to the army, but my number was very high and it would be good." The number 17 was written in the body of the text with the numerological value: good (the numerical value of the Hebrew word *tov*, meaning *good*, is 17).

After the professor had examined my father several times and used him as a case for students, the professor ordered him to return home. My father realised there was no cure for his illness. As a result he soon came to see me, suggesting that I should desert and travel to the border from there – and go far away, to the United States, to my Aunt Chana and her family. A solution would be found with regard to the cost of the trip. I therefore had to come to a decision – and immediately. The sooner the better.

I refused to accept this suggestion. I was not prepared "to go to America" (the Hebrew literally means "walk to America" and they used to say, "Walk to America from Lithuania"). I believed that eventually I would be discharged from my army duty, so there would be nothing better for me than to remain in the area of Russia as a whole, and in the centre of Judaism in this country, with its excellent reputation, and Kovno, in particular, for which I had a special liking. "Walking to America" – so I thought – was only for young people, boys who had nothing at all to lose by leaving here. Emigrating and going to a new country, starting there "like a newborn" – in my view then – was something with which I could not reconcile myself.

I remained in Kovno and continued to hide there. My father returned to his home. He was ill and my "stubbornness" depressed him. He took to his sickbed. Six weeks later, he passed away. I was called to participate in his funeral and immediately I put dust on my shoes, as the rabbi had ordained, returning to my "underground", where I spent the seven days of mourning. May my late father's memory be blessed in his names: Mr Elazar Baruch – (The names literally mean: Elazar – G-d's help; Baruch – is blessed).

This happened on 8 Shevat (January). On the seventh day of Passover, I received a telegram with the news that I had been released from army service because of two rights from which I benefited: I was an only child and had drawn a high number, higher than the numbers of the people who had been called up. I was also informed, however, that because I had not appeared when my name was called by the relevant official, a punishment of three hundred roubles had been imposed on me. This was the law of the land. If a person was called up to the army and did not respond, he had to pay a fine, even if he was subsequently discharged from military duty. If he could not afford to pay it, his father or mother were responsible for the payment, or else the movables in the house would be taken to pay it.

From then on, I waited for the blue certificate (proof of discharge because of my family situation as an only child). On the other hand, I had to ensure the Sabbath candlesticks and any other valuable movables were concealed. My widowed mother had to beware of the possible attachment of her property by government representatives.

But then a miracle occurred. At the end of the summer, the Russian Czar had a son, an heir to the throne, after four daughters. As an expression of the great joy at the event, a celebratory manifest was issued providing for sentence reductions for prisoners and others subject to punishment. One of them was the cancellation of my punishment in the amount of three hundred roubles.

CHAPTER 13

TOWN AND COUNTRY

In the meantime, national public affairs started making even greater waves in the lives of Russian Jews. Strong winds caused by an external storm shook their very foundations.

The Kishinev pogrom was the start of a new period of Jew-hatred on the part of the Czarist authorities. Their pent-up hatred was expressed openly, in full view of the world, causing an upheaval in the lives of Jews throughout Russia.

The crisis was broadly and profoundly reflected in the angry and indignant words of the greatest of our poets, CN Bialik. The Kishinev pogrom served only as a prologue to a long line of events and actions, leading to persecution on the part of those pursuing national and political devastation during the years the Russian people rose up against their cruel and reactionary rulers. The Czarist government chose the Jews as the scapegoat on the altar of the revolution it put down with blood and arms.

Jews suffered many harsh and bitter experiences. They had to express their feelings in various ways in response to the actions of the hostile government. On the one hand, they pointed out that they were loyal subjects of the authorities and, on the other, they protested against the negative attitude to the Jews, who were making great sacrifices for the homeland.

Looking through the lens of my memories at the movements and shifts in the years 1903-1905 and what happened later, my recollections are still with me. This period still evokes strong and powerful feelings in me, even though half a century has passed.

On Passover in 1903, the storm hit Kishenev, spreading terror among all of Russian Jewry. The slaughter was marked in Kovno with national mourning. The people in this city adopted this outwardly as well: for several months, they did not attend concerts or listen to music in public; the municipal park which in the summer months was usually full of Jews walking around to the sounds of the municipal orchestra, was similarly in mourning, empty and silent, and the municipality was forced to stop the performances of the public orchestra there.

That year, the authorities issued a decree against Zionism. Until then, Zionist gatherings, meetings and public speeches by Zionist officials were regarded as legal, acceptable and permissible, although they were prohibited in the case of other parties. But in the summer of 1903, the Ministry of the Interior sent a letter to every regional governor, prohibiting all types of Zionist gatherings and the police had to ensure compliance with this order. This was a “blow” to Russian Jewry, without bloodshed.

In the summer of 1903, some of the Jews felt renewed happiness and dignity – happiness that the storm had abated, following the visit by Dr T Herzl for an interview with the old Jew-hater, Von Plehve, the Russian Minister of the Interior.

On his way back from St Petersburg to the border, Herzl stopped in Vilna, where he was treated like a king. A reception was arranged and an old, very observant ecclesiastical court judge carried a Torah scroll in his arms with festive devotion and great, heartfelt happiness. The crowd grew to thousands,

expressing their deep admiration for him. Dr Herzl visited impoverished suburbs in Vilna and saw how the unfortunate poor people lived, in an economic sense. He then spent some hours at a villa outside the city with one of the leaders of the community, surrounded by Jews who came in their masses when they learnt where the meeting would be held. But the situation suddenly changed: the heavy hand of the police came down on the Jews arrayed along the streets leading to the railway station. The people accompanying Herzl were scattered forcefully and violently by the police, wielding the *nagaika*⁴. They “cleansed” the railway station of Jews.

The order went out prohibiting Herzl from spending time in Kovno. Only while the train stopped at the station for a few moments did some of the Zionists manage to stand before one of the people accompanying Herzl, Mr David Wolffson. The official guest of the Russian Ministry of the Interior was subject to the ruling that he was not allowed to meet the Jews of Kovno, to see them or have them see him. The privilege and honour of the Vilna Jews was turned into a prohibition and insult for the Kovno Jews.

The content of the conversation between Herzl and Von Plehve was not made available to the newspapers after the interview, as is done now. It took some time for the rumour to spread that in Von Plehve’s opinion, which he gave to Herzl, the problem would be solved in this way: (a) one-third of the Jews of Russia would be destroyed in pogroms and would die; (b) one-third would emigrate to other countries; and (c) one-third would assimilate with the Russian people – a view that had already been expressed by Pobidonishev, the head of the Synod during the reign of Alexander III.

It was not long before another pogrom took place in the town of Gomel, in spite of the publicity the many protests received, the heartfelt petitions against the Kishenev disturbances by leader writers, researchers and communal officials, including Russian authors, who were very influential in the country’s life and literature. Railway workers participated actively in the event. The government was able to demonstrate that not only wild and unruly mobs were guilty of the organised public killing of Jews – their hatred was a result only of ignorance and illiteracy - but that even the workers, with their proletarian consciousness and conscience, were suffused with hatred for the Jews, “the internal enemy”, as defined by senior officials in the great and powerful Russia.

War broke out between Russia and Japan at the beginning of 1904. In many places, Jews arranged patriotic demonstrations – in the Pale of Settlement and particularly in the capitals of St Petersburg and Moscow - showing their

⁴ *Nagaika* – a metal-tipped whip used as a weapon by the Cossacks under the rule of the Czar.

dedication and loyalty to their homeland when it was threatened.

Jewish doctors were recruited in Kovno for the war, including two of the local Zionist leaders, Dr Schwartz and Dr Lapin. A massive demonstration was arranged in their honour: thousands of Jews of all classes in the city accompanied them from the railway station, showing admiration and affection for the recruited doctors when they left for the campaign to carry out their duty, the obligation of good subjects to sacrifice themselves on the altar of their homeland.

Everybody felt, however, that it was not the official authorities who deserved the credit for this honour. It was an expression of the warmth towards the heroes who were the subjects of the legal and compulsory recruitment, for the personality of the well-liked and popular communal leaders, who had earned a reputation through their fruitful work in the field of Jewish nationalism. The shining star of the creator of political Zionism was extinguished in the same year, as its great leader suddenly left the stage of history. Dr Herzl died unexpectedly in his prime, just as he had appeared, with no prophetic vision foretelling his arrival. For the broad community, the bereavement and loss were a catastrophe, even before anyone could have known of the terrible disaster that lay in the future. The Zionist world was in great distress.

The hero of Jewish revival was active for only a very short period, less than ten years, from the time of the publication of his book *The Jewish State*, to 1904, the year he died. His like had not been seen since the days of Bar-Kochba. In spite of his great personality and actions, subversive opposition penetrated familiar circles. Kovno, where the “Black Office” was situated, the stronghold of the zealots, the opponents of Zionism, was part of it. In this city nobody mourned the death of Herzl and no Orthodox synagogue would eulogise him, until Dr Melamed from Dvinsk was invited. It was decided the eulogy would be delivered in the *maskilim* synagogue, *Ohel Ya'akov*.

In general, the Zionist youth was active and its response was clear at the time of the anti-Jewish pogroms. The actions and attitude of the youth proved very valuable, particularly with regard to defence. Jews were often fearful and suspicious in the wake of the pogroms, particularly at the time of the 1905 revolution, that inundated the Pale of Settlement in southern Russia and the central cities. This destructive storm, however, did not affect north-west Russia, but young Zionist Jews were ready. Many of them were armed in preparation for the shadowy violence lying in wait.

In those years, I was busy with my own external learning, to the extent I did not allow public Zionist matters to interrupt or disturb my regular studies. At the time, I lived in the centre of the city, sharing a room with my dear and

true friend, Azriel Silpert. Our room was on the third floor and once or twice a week it served as a centre and hiding place for a group of Bnot Zion busy with a systematic course in political economy. The lessons were given by a young man who had studied and left his home town, an expert in this subject.

From there, we both moved to a large room on the bottom floor of another house, called the *Hamantasch*, because of its triangular interior. The name was given to it by one of our friends, who visited us often. It was convenient for meetings of our friends because it was possible to come in from the main road at any time and the windows faced the synagogue of the enlightened Jews, in a quiet, pleasant street, from where there was another entrance. We stayed there for over two years.

Our friends would get together in our room, particularly on Saturday mornings, for a chat or a discussion on various issues and current political affairs. Together we would buy the local Russian newspaper to read the news of the war campaigns. One of the reports which caused great excitement covered the loss of limbs as a result of a bomb thrown at the General-Governor from Moscow, Grand Duke Sergei Nikolaievich, the uncle of the Czar, a well-known Jew-hater with a reputation for cruelty. After a short time, a feuilleton was published in *Der Fraynd* in St Petersburg on the whip, the lash, shaped like noodles (*lokshen*), that was always ready for flogging - a clear reference to the sceptre of the ruler, the emblem of the minister who was killed in Moscow. The censor did not understand the pointed sketch and its penetrating jibes against the senior Russian authorities who would eventually be removed. Jewish readers, however, understood the intention of the feuilleton, published under the heading *The Noodles*, and were very pleased it appeared without delay.

We would go out for a walk past the trees on the magnificent main street and after often lengthy discussions and arguments, the group would disperse at lunchtime. Most people in the group had studied and left their home towns, becoming *yeshiva* students who had turned “heretical”. They were excellent students, most of them outstanding intellectuals who were known as reputable Torah scholars. Many of them subsequently gained fame as communal workers and writers. This author was the first to publicise the writer Ben-Israel, whose articles on Judaism and Christianity in *Hashalach* gave rise to fierce arguments in the newspapers. Born in Telz, he was a student in the *yeshiva* in that city. His surname was Poppes.

After the failure of the attempted revolution in Russia in 1905, the government used a heavy hand in ruling the country. Punishment expeditions spread out over the length and breadth of the land, causing fear among the populace. They were followed by total repression, the “quiet” – complete tranquillity as a result of the reaction throughout Russia.

The general repressive situation made its mark on Jewish public and nationalist life. Zionist activity was reduced and confined. Some steps were taken in self-study circles towards social revival by starting further courses for the study of Hebrew and arranging Bible and literature lessons. Although it started off well, this new initiative did not last long. The Bible teacher, an intellectual well suited to the position, attracted learners for months, but then they grew fewer. I have never forgotten one particular episode. A suggestion was accepted to engage in the practical study of the language as well, in other words, to write and discuss lectures and, while doing so, to introduce grammar. The people in the auditorium were required to write essays on any subject they wished, primarily on stories from well-known textbooks.

I chose a topic from *Children's Eden*, by YH Taviov and handed in my essay. After a few weeks, the whole "business" faded away – the classes were cancelled. Once my friend Poppes, Ben-Israel, visited my room, asking whether I knew who had signed his essay with the nom-de-plume "*Chazal*" (the Hebrew acronym for our Sages, of blessed memory). He wanted to know who the "author" was and make his acquaintance, because he liked his writing. He wanted to tell him that and make some comments. I revealed the secret to this critic, who subsequently became a well-known writer. I was the author. The next day, he came and brought me my notebook. We opened my notebook and started analysing and clarifying the essay. I was surprised to see that more was crossed out in red ink than was originally written. I asked him: "Was it worthwhile dealing with this? There is several times more crossing out in red ink than there is in black ink." He replied: "Your essay is set out very well and for that very reason I wanted to see the writer. But what is the red ink? It is also proof that I liked the way you wrote and I dealt with it, but I also wanted to show you how I would have written this story. There it is in front of you in red ink."

Ben-Israel was well-liked and respected by his friends and acquaintances in Kovno. He saw a future for himself as a writer and was sent to Switzerland to study further through funds provided by the philanthropist, KZ Wissotzky. There he became mentally ill. The remedy, suggested by the doctors was that the patient should travel through the country with physical exercise, in other words, on a bicycle, and this would perhaps restore his health. He was able to do so. But before long, when this sick traveller reached the Rhine, he threw himself into the river and drowned. I learned of Ben-Israel's suicide only many years later. May his memory be blessed.

During the time of terror and the tyrannical authority that spread through the ranks of all Russia's Jewish citizens, they were frightened and deeply concerned about their immediate future. This led to nationalist movement activities that resulted in its banning. I was hard-pressed materially, with

limited possibilities to engage in further studies. I decided I had to move elsewhere to improve my economic circumstances and to go to “the condition”, meaning to serve as a teacher in a village for the children of the “farmers”.

I then introduced myself to the prominent Vilna writer, Ben-Eliezer, the editor of the paper *Hashachar Hechadash* (*The New Dawn*). He suggested a good, comfortable place for me, where he had spent a year or two himself as a teacher. I went to the “estate”, to devote myself to further studies and to spend most of my time teaching a group of students from one family. Initially my pupils were four brothers, but another was quickly added, a cousin. I agreed to this. This “addition” was beneficial for me and useful to the other students, as his very courteous conduct showed all the characteristics of good students: application, ability and a great desire to make progress.

I became a universal teacher as well: apart from the religious and nationalist subjects, I also had to teach general studies – including history and geography. The students differed, firstly and naturally, in their ages, in their knowledge, and in their attitude to their compulsory studies. I derived satisfaction from the cousin in the group, “the addendum”, who later achieved greatness. In spite of a severe illness, inherited from his mother, and his early death, he managed to complete his curriculum at the university with distinction and had a successful professional career. This young man, the son of older parents, made very good progress with me but, because he seemed confused and stuttered, he was hated by the family – yet he was the one who made exceptional progress and developed to a greater extent than his cousins, who were also talented. I had many different experiences in the year and a half I spent in that village, which was known as an “estate”.

In the period of the “legal” attacks and violence by the tyrannical regime, I had a “hiding place” in that village, a desirable secret spot.

My link with Kovno was not broken. “Between terms” I would spend a week or two in the city. People felt a kind of emptiness there, particularly the young. It was as if the voracious reaction had also consumed us, the younger generation, penetrating our very essence.

One of my friends, E Karon, worked very hard until he managed to publish a hectograph pamphlet, *Hashofar* (*The Ram's Horn*), and distribute it among Zionist supporters as a form of ammunition against the “Black Office”. *Hashofar* appeared three times before publication ceased. The owners of the “Black Office” arrogantly distributed their own leaflets, full of poison against the national revival. And in the south of Russia, the *Peles* (*The Scale*) appeared, published by Rabbi Akiva Rabinovitz, who despised Zionism after participating in one of the congresses as a delegate. He, too, spread poison and a hatred of Zionism in his newspaper.

Everybody adopted a custom, including *yeshiva* students. It was not forgotten for a long time: when one of them met Ya'akov Lipschitz, the secretary of the "Black Office", he would stand up and say to him: "*Zakazanoa!*" – a Russian word meaning "registered with liability", referring to a letter sent by post. The reason for this, apparently, was that the office would frequently distribute manifestos and pamphlets by registered post. Then he would always respond: "*Effentlich - richtig*" (Yiddish for "Openly – correctly"), mocking the Zionist formula adopted at the congress in Basel. Each of the young Zionists considered it a duty to challenge Ya'akov Lipschitz and provoke him, while felt it his duty to reply in a clear and precise Ashkenazi accent: "*Effentlich – richtig.*" He persisted in responding this way, even to people he encountered walking under the trees on the main street – this valiant man in his sixties was not ashamed to reciprocate measure for measure – provocation for provocation, even if it was only to an urchin.

I thought I would travel from the "estate" to a new, great centre of learning, by the sea, the city of Odessa. But I changed my mind after calculating all the expenses I would have to meet and the amount of money that would remain in cash in my pocket to sustain me in foreign parts, without work and with no income. I decided I would travel to one of the cities in the south, where there was a chance of making temporary provision for myself and more or less ensure my economic sustenance. That would not be in the noisy Odessa, which would consume more easily than it would satisfy an appetite, a desire. I therefore turned my face towards the town of Poltava. There, I said to myself, I would achieve my objective in life, whatever it would be.

CHAPTER 14

TOWARDS THE OBJECTIVE

My journey to the south started after Passover, at the beginning of spring in 1907. I knew a little about what the Ukraine was like from the days I had gone there to get myself released from army duty. I spent some months in one of the district towns in the Poltava region and visited other towns in the same province. As soon as I arrived, I felt that this was not the great, busy Odessa, famous for its wealth and entertainment and great cultural influence on the entire south, Russia's "worldly city". Poltava was no more than a town settled in its sediment, with sweet slumber spread over it, a provincial town.

Its roads were long and so wide that most were not paved over their entire width, but only partially, as pathways for people travelling on both sides of the wide boulevards often planted with broad trees spreading shade over the passers-by on the pavements and hiding the houses on both sides of the street. Walking, and even riding on the unpaved roadsides was uncomfortable in summer because of the large amounts of dust that rose with every small movement. On rainy days, because of the mud on the black ground and the large amounts of oil and gum on our shoes, it was difficult to pick up one's feet. The distance from the one end of the town to the other, such as between the Kiev cemetery and the Kharkov cemetery, was very great. It felt as if travelling by carriage between them lasted an entire hour or longer.

While the houses and shops were close to each other in the streets, arranged in a way similar to a real large city, they occupied only part of the centre of the town. The wide open spaces completely embraced many areas in unlimited comfort. Trees, parks, flowers and vegetables proliferated in that area.

The sky at night was high and dark, blue and dusky; the stars set in the sky shone and twinkled with very fine rays of light, hinting at unending secrets and riddles.

The richness of nature, its beauty and magnificence, can broaden the minds of people who enter its embrace.

The Jewish population gave an impression of economic security and stability. Their views and actions revealed great freedom. There was no sign of the melancholy found among the common people in Lithuania.

I arranged my things somehow and went out to see the centre of the city. The first institution I encountered was the Jewish community library. It had a wealth of books, well ordered, with a reading hall next door. Readers were already there in the morning, most of them young, of both sexes. There was only one type of book – in Russian, new, the latest editions. They were collections that appeared at that time, whose readership increased at the expense of political activity. Reading on questions of gender, religious issues and searching for divinity – a trend that spread more widely because of the painful disappointment in the unsuccessful revolution – were the subjects that occupied the “eastern wall” in the reading rooms. There may well have been books on Jewish subjects in the library as well, but they were not prominently displayed.

I was surprised by an unexpected meeting with Mr Alter Shapira of Kovno, whom I knew well. He owned a private library and *yeshiva* students used to receive books to read there at no cost, selected by the owner, who had good taste and knew how to choose the correct book for the reader in Hebrew or Russian. I was one of the readers in his library.

It turned out he was a schoolteacher in one of the district towns and came for a day or two to Poltava. I was very pleased to meet in this “foreign world” an acquaintance from the same town, a Lithuanian like me.

After a short time, he left his post and settled in Poltava. We hired a room for ourselves, where we lived together. Mr Rubinov, the writer who published novels in the Russian-Jewish weeklies and was a delegate to several congresses in Basel, would say, when he visited us: “I came to the Lithuanian colony.”

My room-mate also soon became a writer. His sketches were printed in *Hazman* (*The Time*) and in *Hashelach* (*The Weapon*). He was involved in private teaching, like me. Sometimes the teacher, his fiancée, the daughter of a rabbi from Slobodka, would come to visit him. She had replaced him at the school, a young intellectual who knew Hebrew perfectly. I considered her, Miss Rabinowitz, as the second most outstanding woman in respect of her knowledge of our language and literature – among my many Jewish acquaintances – after the writer, Deborah Baron, whom I met in Kovno. Then, for an evening or two, we had the “pleasant society” of Lithuanians in the town in which we regarded ourselves as “total strangers” . . .

Poltava was the birthplace of good Zionists who were well known in the movement. My friend and I met Mr Borochoy, a pillar of socialist Zionism, still a very new idea because of its seemingly contradictory make up. I used to see him at the other library, the Jewish one. We also sometimes met with Mr Ben Zion Dinaburg, born in Horol, a suburb of Poltava, whom we appreciated. Today he is Mr Dinur, who has been the Minister of Education in Israel since 1952. We used to debate while taking short and long walks, real walks in the streets of the town. Mr Ben-Zvi, the second President of Israel, was also from this town.

We were also in touch with some people involved in day-to-day, practical Zionism, but our permanent dwelling place was our isolated room. Rabbi Akiva Rabinovitz, the editor of *Peles* (which the Zionists called *Hapesel* – inverting the Hebrew letters to form the Hebrew word for “idol”) – did not interest me. Although I stayed in Poltava for about six months, I never saw him.

I was involved in private teaching, although I found it neither materially nor spiritually satisfying. My students paid lip service to learning Hebrew, being forced to do so on the instructions of their nationalist parents. In one house, for example, I had to teach in the large dining room. Sometimes strangers were present during my lessons, talking about everyday matters.

I often tried to find an answer to the question: how would it all end for me? How would I get on in life? I did not see – in my mind – any occupation apart from teaching, although I did ask whether I was equipped for it. I had received

no training and doubted whether I was capable of it at all. Craftsmanship required study and training; artistry required special talents – so what, therefore, was teaching and who deserved to do it: a craftsman or an artist?

In thinking about it, I would expand on the subject while asking myself: if education was the main part of teaching, bringing up the young generation through adopting a national and realistic view, who deserved to be a teacher and involve himself in it? We had no schools that merited this kind of accreditation. Sermons by various kinds of preachers, public lectures, meetings, conferences and societies were not enough to bring up a knowledgeable generation, one that understood and had a feeling for national issues. They would rouse people to bring about a revival, with a vibrant, living, supported and motivated national awareness. Who, therefore, would equip the younger generation for this? Which would be the appropriate means to lead to this great and lofty objective?

Intricate and enthusiastic debates took place on the variety and directions of Zionist ideals, as well as on social change that already occupied an important place in Zionist plans. However, most important of all was how it would be implemented, the pipeline through which our ideals and enthusiasm would pass into the tender hearts, the delicate souls of the youth, not yet capable of receiving the inheritance from Zionists who adapted to their Zionism “by themselves”, “by instinct”, as a bequest from “ancient generations”. It seems to me that they paid no attention at all to this cardinal problem.

I knew about the Society for Spreading (later: Increasing) Education among Jews (SEAJ), whose committee was active in the capital city, St Petersburg. Its influence encompassed most of the Jewish communities, but the nature and content of its activities was not clear from a practical, nationalist viewpoint – with regard to Hebrew education.

On the other hand, there was a desire to establish modern *cheders* for Jewish children. Their founders were scholars who taught Hebrew in Hebrew – teaching, clarifying, explaining, with great zeal, only in Hebrew. Over time, this became known as the “natural method”, but it was very doubtful if it was natural, as scholars used it on their own initiative, without being trained in it from the outset. There were, of course, exceptional examples of the success of the method on the part of inspired teachers with a natural bent for teaching – but this could not be regarded as a solution to the problem of education from a general theoretical or practical viewpoint.

The only qualified teachers were those who had completed their curriculum at the Government Teachers’ Institute in Vilna.

From its foundation, this institute was a rabbinical training college. There

was one in Vilna and a second one in Zhitomir. The latter was closed after a few years, but the one in Vilna became the Teachers' Institute, with a four-year course, for government schools for Jews. It continued at government expense until the great revolution in Russia (1917).

In spite of the comprehensive course provided for Hebrew language and grammar, as well as Bible study, under the management of the well-known linguist, Yehoshua Steinberg, the teachers studying at the institute generally had a negative attitude towards these subjects, because they were "Russifiers", who followed the Russian language, culture and spirit. They did not want to know about Hebrew language and literature, and even less so to teach them to their Jewish pupils in their schools.

(When the Zionist movement began to grow again, with the youth becoming increasingly aware of it, Zionism even penetrated the "barred and bolted" Institute for Jewish Teachers boarding school. Groups of its students were inspired by the new national spirit. They would come to my house, where I was turned into the perfect teacher, on the Sabbath – the only day of the week the pupils were free and permitted to leave the walls of the building – to study and learn more modern spoken Hebrew and literature. At their own risk, they deceived the management.)

It was assumed that Russian Jews wished to provide their children with general learning – not necessarily education! – but this caused great difficulty, because of the effective limits in the middle schools for Jewish pupils. Non-Jewish schools were open to them, while some were open only to Jews. In the classic or real gymnasium (secondary school with classic or natural science trends), only 10% of the places were available for Jews. Only in girls' schools did these limitations did not apply.

In the years after the first revolution (1905), the Ministry of Education eased its restrictions on Jews by increasing the level for them to 50%, but only in certain schools - trade schools, which were called "for trade", at the lower level, and "commercial" schools, at the higher level, in which classes were provided as a middle-school course. There were very few commercial schools. Most were classic gymnasia. There were fewer real gymnasia. The modern commercial schools remained rare. If Russian parents wanted to give their children a middle-school education, they sent them to the gymnasium. Trade school did not attract them at all.

What did the Jews do? They felt that a trade education would provide at least partial relief, so they considered this solution. A Jew would automatically be registered, but only if a non-Jew entered the school. The way was paved by the previous generations – just as a traditional "Shabbas goy" would serve

our forefathers, a modern “non-Jewish education” could be found in this way.

Every large building had a porter. If he had a son, he had to be persuaded to place the son in a school and the home-owner would pay his fees. This “rich man” would not only pay the study fees, but would also clothe, feed and provide drink to the pupil, the son of the porter, even adding pocket money or giving a permanent salary, not only to the pupil, but for the maintenance of the entire family, which could then benefit and eat from the milk of the land. By virtue of the non-Jewish porter, a wealthy Jewish boy could benefit from a middle education.

If the porter had more than one son, perhaps three or four, other Jewish “homeowners” could benefit by placing as many of their sons in the school as there were “pupils” from the home of the porter. In this way, the Jews would give their servants something in return: by taking care of the future of the porter’s children, they helped the servants ensure the future of the children of their masters.

The formal dress – the uniform – of the modern school was very attractive. A pupil at the classic or real gymnasium had thin white or yellow stripes on his hat; the sparkled only a little. This was not the case among commercial school pupils. Their hats were a prominent part of what they wore, with a broad light green stripe, six times wider than that of the gymnasium student. Each of the buttons on their clothes, top and bottom, front and back, was a golden yellow. It was possible to see the sunrise in the button.

The privilege of beautifying and kitting out the pleasant “Vasia”, or the congenial “Volodia”, was very expensive, but it was fair and worthwhile.

It may be correct to assume that at that time, the period in which the Russian Minister of the Interior made concessions to the Jews, a large number of people still sighed, saying: “Happy are those whose sons wear green and woe to him whose only son wears narrow white stripes . . .” (So long as a Jew is in the Diaspora, he will always find something to complain about, even if it is only as a result of envy.)

While I was living in Poltava, a school was founded there that, in a way, was the two rolled into one: a trade school devoted to the purity of the Russian language, with a Hebrew school attached to it that used the method of teaching Hebrew in Hebrew. Not private, but public. It started at the beginning of the academic year, at the end of July.

The formal opening was attended by Zionist workers, well-known speakers, guests and people from the town. Many parents also came. The building was beautiful and the rooms full of light and furnished appropriately. The school

was centrally situated, making it easy and convenient for pupils to attend regularly, without breaks.

I can still recall the essence of what the teacher of the religion of G-d (the exact literal translation should be: "law of G-d") said at the opening ceremony. He quoted our great poet, Yehuda Leib Gordon, who stated, "Be a Jew in your tent and a person when you go out".

The speech gave the impression – and even the pretty young women appointed as voluntary assistants, without pay, as well as the young children, could understand the point clearly – that when a Jew left his home and family, he was obliged to conceal his Jewishness very deeply in one of his secret pockets, appearing outwardly to people who were not Jewish as a fine, cultured, gentleman and graceful person. It was simple, clear and comprehensible even to someone without a brain in his head or feeling in his heart

The applause attested to this being the case: it was so good, it was accepted and sanctified for the current generation and the youth who were beginning to insinuate themselves onto the lap of recently renewed education.

After a few days, I approached my friend, the Hebrew teacher at the school, and asked permission to visit his department, as I wanted to see how they taught Hebrew there. He kindly agreed.

I found the school in good order externally. Close to half a dozen young women supervised the small number of pupils. During the classes, they were standing redundantly in the classroom, without knowing where to put their idle hands. In fact, their presence was an interference, their situation was inappropriate, and ineffective.

I took my place in my friend's classroom. I immediately saw that he took great pains not to utter a single word that was not in Hebrew. He was armed with various toys, such as cups, buckets, a small drum, a ball and other similar items. He persevered, working hard. He spoke a lot, with great seriousness, sat on the floor, leaned on his one hand and then on the other, returned with difficulty to a seated or standing position, as he explained all these items or, more correctly, told the small pupils, who remained passive all the time. They saw what he did, following it and wondering about it, without the reason for it being clear to them. He would talk, but they did not understand what it was about or why it was said. They could not grasp the unusual explanations. Some of them were ready to burst out laughing, but the supervisor stopped them with a sharp glance and they managed to restrain themselves. Many of them were already simply weary and bored.

The teacher again rolled around on the floor, sweat covering his face.

Suddenly he jumped up, grabbed a glass, poured water into it from the bucket next to him and filled it again with water, poured it out and then poured it back – water without end. And he was terribly tired! I was sorry – simply upset looking at him and seeing his face. I cast my eyes down. There was no way I could leave in the middle of the lesson without humiliating him. The class went on and on! I even felt sorry for myself, watching the Sisyphean labours of the teacher, who wanted to do well, but was unable to do so. And for the young women, who stared into space without seeing anything – until the “happy” moment arrived: the bell rang, the external signal at the modern school, conducted using the most modern methods.

My curiosity was satisfied, but my disappointment increased seven-fold because I had expected something very different. I felt sorry for the teacher who, in my view, was working in vain. I shared the sorrow of the pupils, who had to accept bitter authority, without making progress, and I felt shame at the insult to our language.

A few weeks later, I received a letter from another friend, the owner of the “*Shofa*” in Kovno, Aharon Karon. He informed me that Mr Bezalel Yaffeh, the Zionist representative in Grodno, had worked very hard to obtain the consent of the Society for Spreading Education in St Petersburg to establish a Hebrew teachers’ training college, where highly qualified lecturers would teach and train teachers and educators in the national Hebrew spirit. It was hoped the government would issue a permit and the matter was arranged.

For me, this was very welcome news. Very soon afterwards, Karon informed me he was already in Grodno and involved in the administration of the new institution. Things were looking good and if, as he knew, I also wished to be admitted to the institution to study as a Hebrew teacher, I should be ready to come when I received an official invitation.

After the autumn festivals, I was asked to come to Grodno for the examinations. Each day my belief grew that the project would succeed. I knew that Karon was not given to worthless imaginings, but took practical action, and I also knew that Bezalel Yaffeh, the quiet one among the representatives, was a real man of action. I went on my way with my heart full of hope that eventually I would find what I sought and achieve my objective in life, the one I dearly desired. My life, working in Hebrew and Russian, was now changed retroactively. Would it pave the way to my objective?



Aharon Cahanstam (1859 – 1920)

PART TWO

THE THRESHOLD OF THE TEACHERS' TRAINING SCHOOL

I arrived in Grodno at the beginning of October 1907. My meeting with Karon encouraged me greatly. It was close to the time for the examinations. I came to the place where the examination candidates had gathered to study further for their admission. At the time of the tyrannical reaction against the Russian rank and file that had previously been active against the regime, our young people had a strong desire for a revival through action. Even if this action was not against a broad political background, it would be within a narrow and limited circle – the area of education at school, in the family. This aspiration was highlighted by all kinds of young people arriving from all parts of Russia. Some appeared strong, certain of obtaining good results. They looked down disdainfully at the people preparing for the examinations in that busy environment. There were also those loaded down with Bibles and grammar books, who would learn and repeat rules, expressions and verses out loud, as they ran quickly back and forth among the people talking and joking proudly. Others were completely idle, incorrigible. Those gathered there also included some who, like experienced leaders, reviewed the crowd, the “masses”, with a definite and specific attitude. They stood firm against waves of criticism by opponents and no wind, matter how extraordinary, could move them from their position in society. Then there were those who were the quiet and hesitant, concentrating on their ideas and feelings. They were not drawn into everyday discussions, looking forward with special persistence to what was about to happen and waiting impatiently for a signal to get together, to be called in for the examination. In the meantime, people were getting acquainted with each other, approaching one another in a friendly manner. The great “world” was divided into groups and factions – and the noise of an unrestrained mass rose above everyone present. The tumult already filled the entire building, with its several rooms, although I cannot remember the building well.

I learnt from Aharon Karon, who was in charge of administration, that several hundred people had written letters with requests for information on the purpose of the institution, its objectives, the obligations it would impose on its students and the rights it would grant them. However, only around one hundred and fifty were invited to the examinations. Thirty of them would be selected. They would serve as the basis of the institution, realising the concept of a teachers’ training school, the ideal to which the Society for Spreading

Education and the excellent Zionist communal officials aspired – to solve the question of national education by modern means and methods.

The day everybody anticipated finally arrived. Individual candidates were called to the office, one after the other. Each was examined closely. The examinations were not general, but completely individual.

Experts in secular and Jewish subjects sat at the table – with the latter being regarded as more important. After a conversation with the candidate there were the reading of a text and questions relating to his subject. The answers were recorded precisely as they were given, in the form used by the respondent, whose fear and trembling at the test filled him with dread. His tongue might have been fluent and even sharp throughout the year, but now it stuck to his cheek, fastened as if with tongs. Nevertheless, the faults and deficiencies did not have a great effect on the value of the answers, as the examiners were experienced pedagogues and understood the person answering the questions, even if he did not hit the target as he would have liked. In their reckoning, they concentrated on how he came to his conclusions. Without going far wrong, the examiners passed judgement on the fearful person for good or bad. Their faces could not in any way convey their attitude to the candidate – the person “placed” on the chair – as they conducted themselves towards him politely, pleasantly and respectfully.

On the second or third day after my examinations, a simple long list was placed in the corridor, with the results – the list of candidates who were accepted as student teachers, in alphabetical order. My name, beginning with “L” for Levin, was in the centre of the happy group.

This was early in the morning. Young men streamed from all sides to the list of names of successful candidates. Some of the faces, the minority, lit up as they rejoiced quietly; others expressed their ecstatic happiness out loud. One person gave vent to a hysterical reaction. On the one side, a group of people gave each other heartfelt congratulations, while those in another corner avoided and evaded the others in despair, withdrawing from the campaign, moving away without saying goodbye to those who remained, after spending a week or more together with them as a group.

Then management announced a few days’ break, an opportunity to prepare and make the necessary arrangements for students to find places to stay, winding up their private affairs and also to allow the institution to get ready for the beginning of studies.

The new institution had no ringing name that incorporated the objectives and character attributed to it. Its primary objective, in essence, was determined

in advance – to be a teachers’ training college, in which students would be trained to teach all subjects, Hebrew and general – they would be educated to be complete teachers, with extensive theoretical and practical knowledge, able to teach both arithmetic and the language of the country, the history of the homeland and general history, as well as geography, natural science and physical education. This was in addition to a broad and deep knowledge of Hebrew language and literature: ancient, classic and modern. The teacher, a student at this college, would not only teach, but also provide his students and pupils with a basic national, human-Jewish and secular education. The institution therefore had to be the most important and valuable of all in this direction.

The government, however, had a very different and totally negative attitude to solving this question from the one the founders of the teachers’ training institution would have liked. The licence awarded limited the training class to a minimum, particularly with regard to the course of study and times, but after a long, long time, approval was given finally for “the Hebrew pedagogic courses – bi-annual – in Grodno”.

And so, with this description, the school opened and carried on, following this official ruling, with interruptions because of the First World War and ten years of wandering from place to place. Some explanation is required: the first steps had already been taken within the walls of the institution for intensive and widespread work, work that was also totally illegal from the standpoint of the authorities. This strenuous, persistent and pleasant task, therefore, yielded incomparably important results and achievements.

The opening of the institution in Grodno was a major event. People came from all parts of Russia, the young, the intelligentsia, *yeshiva* students (only a few were not students of the *beit midrash*, the college, in its accepted meaning), some were teachers at schools and also political activists, “almost leaders” where they lived. This was a place both of honour and where their masters resided. In this way the school earned a reputation among Jews throughout the entire country.

Many residents of the city fulfilled the commandment of extending hospitality to the newcomers, treating them courteously – providing them with accommodation in their homes, letting rooms to them. Karon, who already knew the city a little, found two rooms in the house of a widow that could accommodate four tenants. He offered them to me and two other students, who soon became our good and trusted friends – the late Yitzhak Yaffeh, the son of a rabbi (who died a few years ago in Beit Hakerem in Jerusalem) and Mordechai Fisher, who specialised in the public reading of

the works of Shalom Aleichem. The four of us moved into those rooms, which later became known as the “commune” of the people taking the courses. Being very active by nature, and with great initiative, Karon did not stop at placing us in appropriate lodgings, near the Neman River. It was quite far from our courses, but he regarded this as a great advantage: the distance would lead to walking, to movement, to breathing fresh air, even if we were very busy with our studies and had no time for walks. He proposed a permanent joint arrangement for the four of us, a kind of co-operative, for breakfast and supper. We would all share a single purse and our sustenance requirements would be purchased jointly. We would eat as friends and make the payments in equal shares. In any event, we had only one source of income, the stipend (the money allocated for our support) from the courses. His suggestion was accepted gladly and from that moment, Aharon Karon willingly took upon himself the management of the partnership and the large amount of trouble it involved. From then on, he, the one who found and brought in our maintenance, would take care of all of us. Breakfast, served before 8. A samovar was prepared in the school building for anybody who wanted to use it and we would come early, so that we could manage to drink tea and also to eat the breakfast we required. Karon would bring a packet of warm cakes for the four of us. After that, he devised means to provide us with tasty Hamantaschen at this meal. He found a place in the “excellent” town of Grodno where cakes of this kind could be obtained throughout the year and I grew to like them very much. In this way, he had food prepared for the suppers. As our major domo, he rose to the rank of Minister of Supplies. At the end of the month he would provide us with a financial report and require a certain sum in cash from each of us. He knew our budgets well and would always try to tie up the loose ends of income and expenditure successfully. Being the financial guardian, Karon would do his calculations about ten days before the end of the month. If he found our commune faced a deficit, he would immediately suggest that we stop spreading butter on bread at supper time. Conversely, if there was a surplus, he made sure to purchase theatre tickets in advance.

Our lunch was also arranged co-operatively for all of us, his students, in a private house owned by a Mr Feigelson. He would feed us at minimal cost, as he said, *bulgusin* (potatoes) and seasoning, in the greatest quantity, giving off thick steam and also stimulating a large appetite for the thin portion of meat taken from the soup and delivered – with more than enough bread to eat.

The menu was fixed, repeated every day, with changes made very seldom.

The owner of the house, who would stand over us in order to fulfil our wishes, would relate lofty words of learning: a Talmudic saying, religious subjects, a joke from an ordinary discussion of learned men – and we would also enjoy these “delicacies”.

Our commune existed for a whole year. Its manager would present the demands of the “coursists” – as they were known in Russian – for an addition to their stipend. The senior top course management complied. Their superiors were based in St Petersburg and, mainly, in Paris, because the JCO company⁵ in France was giving money to support our courses.

In our two rooms, we felt that we were in our private property and the owner of the house and his daughter maintained a friendly relationship as good neighbours with us. We received tea in the evenings, as arranged, at supper time and it was always ready on time, with the glasses. The conductor of the evening meal was the same person who managed our commune.

He also made an arrangement with the barber, who agreed to serve the “coursists” at a reduced price, by purchasing regular tickets for it in advance.

I regarded myself as independent among the commune members; I was the only one who went to bed very late, “in the small hours”, as the English say. When I felt real inspiration, when I wrote my essays in Hebrew or in Russian, it was only in those hours that they came to me easily and well. None of my comrades in the commune protested against this behaviour. The person who shared my room would turn to the wall or cover his face with a blanket and allow me to sit under the light of the oil lamp for as long as I wished.

And Karon, the head of our commune, was also the first to go to the Land of Israel – just two years after he completed the course curriculum. He worked as a teacher, first in Yavniel and then in Rishon Lezion. (When I was in Israel, I visited him and enjoyed seeing his outstanding work in Rishon Lezion, where he was a successful headmaster of a school in which he realised the Grodno ideal of excellent education.)

The holidays before the studies began passed quickly. Those who went to their towns and families returned and one Sunday, early in the morning, all the students gathered for the first lesson in the temporary building. It was not large, and we had to find what we required. Our needs flowed not from the comfort of the building, but from other fountains from which we began to drink in happiness and joy.

⁵ The initials of the Jewish Colonisation Organisation, the company that inherited the wealth of Baron Hirsch.

CHAPTER 16

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

The opening of the institute by the principal, with only the students participating, was simple, without ceremony or speeches, approaching the work practically – realising the fundamental goal.

The principal, who we hardly knew except from seeing him and hearing his brief words at the time of the examinations, began with introductory comments to pave the way for our mutual relationship. This formed the basis of a permanent tradition over all the years we remained in contact with him.

He told us his name – in the accepted way among Russian speakers – using the patronymic, Aaron Moiseyevitch – Aharon Ben Moshe. He called each of the students by their surname, adding “Mister” – *Gospodin* – for example: *Gospodin Yaffe*, *Gospodin Rubin*, etc.

One of the students did not understand this well. He put up his hand, wanting to ask a question and said: “Gospodin Aaron Moiseyevitch...” The class laughed politely while Aaron Moiseyevitch’s eyes sparkled as he looked down at the book in front of him, with a broad smile on his face. He allowed the questioner “to adapt” and the principal’s answer was given with love, but also officially.

Then the first lesson began. Aharon Ben Moshe opened a book. When he saw that everyone was listening, he began to read in an ordinary speaking voice. After the second sentence, the previous questioner interrupted him – he seemed exceptionally provincial, although we soon discovered that he was well-versed in Hebrew grammar – and suggested: “Please speak louder so we can hear better.” ABM (the initials of Aharon Ben Moshe) looked seriously at the questioner, stopped reading, and took a few steps backwards until he reached the wall. From his new position, he checked that the class was still listening carefully and continued reading from the book, from the place where he was interrupted. He used the same tone, without even raising his voice a little. The subject was an interesting short story. When ABM realised from the general silence that the matter had been understood sufficiently, he suggested the students reflect its contents in writing. Paper sheets were distributed to all those present.

This was the first class given by the principal of “the Hebrew Pedagogic Courses in Grodno”. ABM, who delivered the courses, came from the city of St Petersburg, where he was the principal of a *Talmud Torah* (a religious

school) and had previously served in a similar position in the city of Lodz in Poland, gaining a reputation as an expert pedagogue. The committee of the “Spreading Education in Israel” company placed him at the head of the teachers’ training college it established through the financial support of the JCO in France, with the consent of Zionist leaders in Russia and leading pedagogues in that country.

The first lesson made a huge impression – on me, at least. I saw a personality before me. This teacher-principal did not like external ornamentation – the work began without any formal signal whatsoever or speech by the principal welcoming the students. He established lasting mutual relations from his first step, from which no-one was allowed to deviate. As a teacher, he regarded his students with a critical educator’s eye, although they were grown up, older – he was there to teach and educate and, above all, without wasting time. He knew how to stick to his opinions, which he expressed clearly and firmly – and immediately. He was quiet, well-liked by his students, did not lose his temper, had a sharp eye and, when he wished, showed warm feelings – affectionately, while making sure he kept order and discipline.

All these characteristics were apparent during the short lesson that Sunday, from which I drew my own conclusions. Perhaps I did not grasp all the details of these characteristics at the time I arrived as a student to the first lesson, but they were summed up in my impressions accumulated over a fair length of time, from what I learnt of him. No aspect of any of these traits I have mentioned were ever in any doubt. This was the main reason for my establishing a relationship of respect and admiration with him. I was not alone. All my colleagues quickly became attached to him, hearing the principles behind his views and following them in total agreement and submission.

All aspects of the work began, “full steam ahead”, in spite of major obstacles. The building was small, totally unsuitable. The lack of suitable furniture and teaching equipment was another serious and possibly irritating obstruction. Teachers were also a serious issue, as they were still absent. The principal himself was becoming popular among the students – the people attending the courses. He knew how to “mend torn things” and fill gaps. He would prepare several lessons in different subjects on his own and no class was cancelled because of the absence of one or other expert teacher. In fact, the work grew, spread and expanded with the awareness that “the task is great and the day is short” and the workers, G-d forbid, were not lazy – not at all.

While the number of students was not great, only three *minyanim*, thirty people, every single one bore the mark of the *yeshiva* – on his student’s past, whether nearer or already more remote. As a community, however, the students were diverse and varied, independent people with their own

views. Some of them had even gained teaching experience and, to an extent, had done public and political work in society. It is correct to assume that their shared desire to be trained as teachers brought them together in the institution, but each had a different concept and approach to this issue from the others. They neither could nor wished to abandon the ideas they had absorbed. But they were asked to sit at a pupil's desk, something that was foreign to their spirit, or, required to do so as part of their being there. They started many things again from the beginning and provided innovative views of the Torah in order to accept and preserve it. It is no surprise, therefore, that there were some opposition, doubts and disagreements in discussion of ideas that were already fixed and deeply rooted in their minds and world view. These concepts were now presented as new, in a different way, and possibly were contradictory at their core. It was very difficult in the auditorium of this *beit midrash* to lay down one basic viewpoint, with a common approach to the actual work, where the material provided would serve as suitable dough for modelling uniform images and elements, similar, or even identical in their essential foundation, form and implementation.

In fact, in the initial very short period, some students even tried to demonstrate and illustrate their theory and understanding of the material in terms of their perceptions and knowledge, in a way to show that they were scholars with the right to hold a different opinion from the one presented, which might have been only the view of the principal or a sage on whom he was relying. In this way, a student holding a different opinion could show he had his own philosophy, one that he had "digested". As for his student-colleagues, they also had their own views and doubts, but were not yet sufficiently well armed to pose a difficult question or refute an opinion - "the time had not yet come".

The principal of the *beit midrash*, however, was a wonderful pedagogue, an intelligent teacher, wise and understanding in his views and a skilled educator. A profound psychologist, he really understood others and through love of his work others followed him. He also had a great talent for making his views acceptable to his students. He was a lively and industrious person with incomparable energy and initiative. He was also known for his gentle spirit and warm heart.

Through the magic of his tremendous influence on his students, he understood the secret of conquering their hearts. With his well-established method, he aroused a tremendous desire in his students for further learning. Most of all, he established among them harmony and compliance, balance and the desired attitude towards the curriculum.

Dissension and indecision, argumentation and rebuttal all grew less in class until they disappeared altogether – the tendency to be stubborn and argue just for the sake of argument stopped completely.

The principal of the *beit midrash* succeeded in establishing a cohesive group that followed in his footsteps with quiet, ongoing enthusiasm, loyally dedicated to the ideals of the respected principal. His sublime devotion to the objectives of educational excellence was revealed in his deep sense of joy and self-sacrifice, as if the students were all *kohanim* (priests) – not the work of the principal alone, offered like holy incense. It must be said that he, Aharon Ben Moshe, was victorious, but it was his pupils who shared the victory, who triumphed over themselves when he defeated the overwhelming majority of them.

“He would say...” This is what the people who followed the path of the principal of the *beit midrash* would recall. He did not like talking a lot. He did not preach or moralise, especially in theory. He had short, sometimes abbreviated slogans, firm rulings that became “fixed” in the minds of his listeners.

“Yes, we know a little” . . . “We must know a lot: that is what is required and it is our duty – and we can do it” . . . “We must learn a lot in order to grow and teach our future students” . . . “We, we.” He and his students together. *“Time and work – these are available to everyone” . . . “I do not know the meaning of the expression: no time” . . . “Work – yes, we work; there is always something to do; if not for now, then it must be completed for the future..”*

His writings are incomplete, unfinished, but well thought out. In them, he expresses simple truths, profound ideas. The principal of the *beit midrash* was not blessed with a brilliant, polished style. Sometimes, even during his classes, which he prepared in writing in advance, he lacked the *bon mot*, the emphatic words. But the idea, in spite of all this, was always expressed clearly and sublimely, in an understandable way, with feeling that penetrated right into the hearts of his listeners, where it took root.

Mr Kahanstam’s spirit inspired other teachers, his colleagues in the courses. Most of them were only educators, who did not know the art of teaching, but it was not possible to find pedagogues with the stature and weight of the principal of the *beit midrash*, because they were rare. Only one of them appeared after a time. To those who heard him, he was considered an appropriate colleague of the principal – the late Dr SY Tsharna.

He often used to visit the classes of his fellow teachers, sitting himself down on the last bench, so that his presence would not “interfere” with the lesson. Sometimes he would look at a book or pretend that he had fallen asleep in order not to embarrass the teacher, to whom he turned his face from his bench. After that, he would sometimes laughingly apologise to the “listeners”:

"I am a little tired and I don't have time to sleep That is why I fall asleep when I sit in the class during the lesson." Everybody understood that the principal enjoyed pranks. Was it possible to assume that he would really fall asleep during a lesson? And he would look carefully at the people listening to his apology and ask: *"Do they really believe that?"*

At the end of the lesson, whether his own or that of another teacher, if he was not in a hurry he was prepared to listen to some joke. He and the teacher would almost always part happily, laughing – particularly during the big break. The principal particularly loved the company of his students, who were as dear to him as his sons.

His comments after the lesson to the teacher whose class he visited were directed towards the didactic method the principal wanted. His approach was appropriate, endeavouring not to offend the teacher. He, of course, knew how to require teaching to be done in the way he wanted. An alert teacher would pay attention to what the principal said and sometimes we, the students, would sense improvements in the teaching methods of the teacher whose class was visited.

The students' affectionate nickname for the principal was "The Old Man". When we met him, he could not yet be considered old, as he was under 50 (he was born in Plotzk in Poland in 1859). Possibly it was only because of his bald head, some grey hairs in his small, round beard and the lines on his forehead. However, in spite of them, he was full of life and movement and his eyes sparkled happily. And even younger people could not keep up with his vigour. The principal was blessed with a huge capacity for work. He was always busy with something, never requiring assistance, because he did everything himself, on his own, precisely and in exemplary fashion in his office, with his various cupboards of books and equipment and there was nothing incomplete anywhere around him. *"Everything must be completed"; "Care must be taken that nothing is put where it doesn't belong." "The teacher must always serve as an example to others, and even more so to the students; he cannot only preach, but must also practise."* The teacher, in his view, was responsible for everything. He would utter these sayings and slogans almost in passing, in brief, but always hitting the target. He told us that his motto was engraved on the gateway to the main entrance of the *Talmud Torah* in St Petersburg: *"The teacher brings about everything."*

He required students to avoid involving themselves in anything but completing the work and undertaking duties the institution gave them. When they were busy with self-study, they had to distance themselves and avoid any publicity, such as articles or correspondence in the press and from holding public office – their entire time was devoted to study, to preparations for teaching others. These were sacrosanct. And afterwards when they had

completed their special duties, they had to involve themselves in public affairs, over and above teaching, in an attempt to influence the way of life in the town or *shtetl*. There, as teachers-educators, they should make their mark on communal life, provided they were worthy of doing so. For this reason, they had to take heed only of their requirements at this stage, aligning themselves with the lofty and distant objective for now, bearing its weight – rather than future activities.

The conduct of the students in the town had to be unexceptional, proper, without attracting, attention, even with special clothing, a school uniform (something only very few of them wanted) – full of humility and modesty, with devotion to the work of completing their education during the courses.

The “Old Man” kept a close eye on the behaviour of his students-children. When he noticed some slight deviation, even through naivety, he would refer to it or make a suggestion. If this did not work immediately, he would demand that the student stop, cease, refrain. His was obeyed by the students. The principal was very mindful of the honour of the institution and its students; public opinion had to be absolutely comfortable with them.

When he felt it was necessary, he would also make a light-hearted comment about the external appearance of the student, to prevent any critical glance by an outside eye. He would also advise his students, who went out to breathe some fresh air in their free time, to walk as far as “their feet took them”. Physical education was introduced as a compulsory subject in the curriculum. Everybody was obliged to do it and a specialist teacher was appointed for this.

When our working year began, on 8 November, a trip was suggested, to be led by the physical education teacher, with a race and games. We did not dare neglect our study hours for this “commandment”. We had regular classes, according to the daily timetable, and extra classes, as well as additional classes. As we soon found out for ourselves, these “meetings” were not optional, but compulsory, at three in the afternoon and four o’clock as well, almost continuously, without exception. The trip was therefore set for a day on which the extra classes ended early. The weather was grey and the sky copper or rusty metal. The wind portended rain or snow. It was neither cool nor warm, but the atmosphere was very unpleasant.

We formed up in lines, like soldiers, two by two. The “Old Man” was with us when the march began. The commander was the specialist teacher in his subject, Mr H Kaplan, who was also fat and overweight. Our procession went for about three kilometres and we reached a wood outside the city. After a brief rest, Mr K began to arrange the race, to be followed by the games. In the meantime, the skies above our heads became even more leaden and daylight dwindled. We ran, each chasing after the other in the competition, without

success. Very few reached the objective. We were not used to exercise of this kind. While we were still standing around and discussing the results, there was sudden and utter chaos. We were surrounded by policemen and soldiers under the command of an officer, who became our commander. We were ordered to form up in a line and a search for weapons started. Then the question was thrown out: "Who is in charge?" Mr Kaplan stepped forward, with his chest out. They checked his pockets, the seams of his clothing, but found no weapons. "And who are you?" the Old Man was asked discourteously. He gave his name. "Who are you? What is your position? Passport!" He replied: "I was trained as a jurist and here I am the principal of the courses. Here is my passport." They also examined him very thoroughly. They took a small notebook out of his pocket with some slips of paper containing a few notes written on them. After the examination, the order was given to stand and then: "Advance!" The "Old Man", Mr Kaplan and all of us were led as prisoners to the police station. We passed through a large part of the town by the light of the night lanterns. Many of the shopkeepers and passers-by stood and watched us in concern and fear. We were brought into the main police station.

Only the people in charge of us were questioned, the principal and Mr Kaplan. We, the students, "inherited Daddy's sickness" – a common expression in Lithuania. The time passed -seven o'clock and then eight. Suppertime had already gone; our tongues stuck to our cheeks, there was no desire to speak: we had to shift from one side of our body to the other on the dry, hard bench. In the meantime, we saw the communal officials, including Bezalel Yaffeh, coming to speak to the police commander, to attempt to explain matters on our behalf. "It all went very badly", or as is often said in Israel: "The whole thing stinks."

It was very late before we were eventually released – the intercession worked. We were not arrested and the next morning we arrived at our classes as usual. The "Old Man" looked at the faces of everyone present - nobody was absent – with a small, reserved smile, eyes sparkling happily, indicating: "*This is not the time for a discussion.*" With a fleeting glance in his notebook, he repeated one or two sentences from the end of the class the previous day and continued talking about the same subject. The lesson started as usual, as though nothing had happened.

A couple of months later, with some of my friends, I was called to the police. There they gave me back my pocket book and papers, because those were our only weapons.

The arrest incident quickly passed out of mind – the principal mentioned it to us in one of the breaks, almost incidentally, as a good joke. Lessons were not again disturbed or interrupted. Only the venues of the courses were changed,

for the better – once or twice that year. Then we received the comfortable new benches ordered for us, a bench for two – from Finland, the centre from which furniture was sent to different schools in Europe.

The principal himself found and also thought up extra study hours for us, but they were not all lessons. There were only lectures that, in his view, were necessary for teachers wherever they were. They were held in the evenings, initially only three a week from eight o'clock. The number of hours and our time spent in general were particularly advantageous: we also had independent work, preparing homework, such as various essays in languages and mathematics, and preparing charts and the like, apart from the timetable, from eight o'clock in the morning. We sometimes finished, with breaks for meals and rest, close to ten at night. There were never any complaints about the amount of work but, on the contrary, we said how glad we were for every addition and increase of this kind. The evening lectures covered very interesting subjects: law; the constitution; referendum (customary in Switzerland) and intellectually stimulating modern philosophical methods. Who, therefore, would dare suppose that they were unnecessary, particularly when the lecturer was the principal, who knew how to select and use good and appropriate material, allowing some time for questions to clarify an issue thoroughly and understand it well, in depth? The only time left for anatomy classes, given by the specialist, Dr Wolf, was Saturday evening. Students were fortunate to be able to study with and learn from the principal. He was a genuine and experienced pedagogue, who often visited pedagogic institutions and different schools in Europe – he spoke German, French and English. He was interested in schools for disabled children. He travelled several times to Jena in Germany, for further study of its pedagogic background and also visited England. He taught the courses in psychology, pedagogics, didactics and methodology – subjects he liked, in which he specialised, and also natural science, which he loved. He was also able to convey this appreciation to the students; only chemistry and physics were given to a teacher specialising in these subjects. Art studies were also compulsory, apart from the rest of the secular studies – drawing and modelling, singing and playing, exercise and physical training. *"The teacher must know everything and learn everything"* was one of his slogans. *"Even a person who is not an expert must teach and study further so that he is able to instruct."* He practised this himself. Even though his tertiary qualification was as an advocate, he knew enough about nature study to transmit it to his listeners.

A long year, full of a lot of work, fruitful, enjoyable, drew to a close. The holidays approached. All the students equipped themselves with varying kinds of books the "Old Man" very generously lent to them, and went to different places to rest and relax before the next year of work, with its responsibilities and heavy load, whose significance lay mainly in its quality.



Dr SY Tsharna (5639 – 5692; 1878 – 1932)

A CONVENIENT TIME

At the end of summer, we were rested before returning on the pre-determined day to Grodno. The second academic year began with a pleasant surprise – a change of teaching staff. The literature teacher, Dr S Bernstein, left us, preferring to do research in the field of medieval literature, the subject in which he gained his reputation. His articles soon began to appear on aspects of this period – in the Scandinavian countries and the United States of America.

He was replaced by a skilled pedagogue, the late Dr Lechimia Shalom Yona Tsharna, who had experience in various institutions. He taught us Jewish history, all branches of Hebrew language and literature: ancient, medieval and modern, as well as chemistry and physics. He was the pioneer of the revival of our language, the first to teach secular subjects in the Hebrew language, although this was totally prohibited by the education authorities. Like the students, he was warned that they had to be ready to switch immediately to Russian if an official inspector came to visit the class during a lesson in either of these subjects.

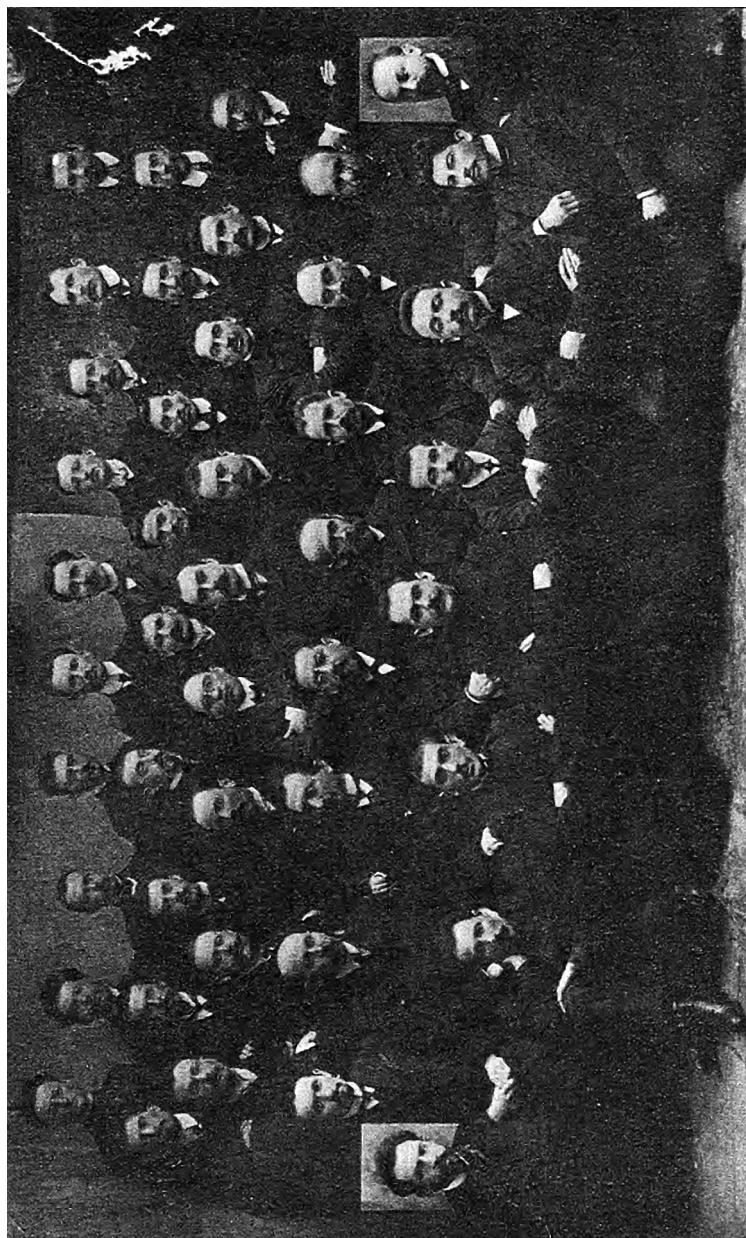
At the memorial gathering on 12 Tishrei 5692 (23 September, 1931), the thirtieth day after his passing at the age of 54, some of his pupils and admirers who had sat at his feet and knew him well, praised his nobility in the following terms: *“A walking encyclopaedia with great ability, an idealist, modest, industrious, renouncing the world in the tent of Torah. A learned man who did not elevate himself in Torah matters and did not impose his opinion on others.”* . . . *“His characteristic modesty, demeanour and speech all showed awe and fear to ensure that he did not drive the Divine Presence away.”* (Y Spibak, *“Rishonim”* (*“Forerunners”*), *Collection*, 1936). This was an accurate portrayal of this great personality by the admirers and supporters of Dr SY Tsharna.

His name was known thanks to his great and varied activity over thirty years in the field of Hebrew education. He was the author of many books, pamphlets and articles in which he revealed new ways and methods to teach the Talmud, the importance of Rashi, psychological topics, teaching Jewish history and also his special subject, chemistry, and more. He left literary and pedagogic assets as a precious legacy in our literature.

When he came to Grodno, he was actively involved in shaping and developing Hebrew education courses. His learning and authority in Hebrew

Teachers, Board members and students of the pedagogic courses in Grodno, 1907

The teachers and students of the first class and Board members.



From left to right, second row from front, seated: S Levin (teacher), Ipp (from the Board), Gildin, Katznelson (teachers), Aharon Cahanstam (principal), Tsherchinsky, HA Chazan (teachers), Doppelberg (Board member). Inserts: Dr Wolf (teacher), B Yaffe (from the Board). **Third row:** M Mensevitz, Zalzmanovich, Mardochowitz, Dr S Bernstein (teacher), R Kaplan (teacher), Y Yaffe, M Rudnitzki (Adir), Saberski, Wolman. **Second row:** Zachar, M Zaslianski, Brusilovski, Heller, Yochbidowitz, Rovnitz, Mazia, Hendin, Karlitz. Top row: E Golomb, Bey, Kadischewitz, Elischewitz, Tshernikowski, Fisher, A Kopman, Shochetman, A Levin, Gamarov. **Bottom row:** Rubin, Notowitz, A Karon, Leibowitz, Ginsberg, Gogol.

culture made him a leading personality. He and Aharon Ben Moshe became the two great lights of this important institution.

It took only a few weeks for Dr Tsharna to endear himself to the students, as if they had known him for years. On his part, he also showed open affection for the members of the Torah community, who were there to glorify the sacred books. He wished to disseminate Torah knowledge in public and embed it in the tender hearts of the youth. He regarded himself as blessed with strengths he shared with the students, striving to the best of their ability to realise the lofty aim they shared with him in the way he most desired. His audience appreciated and greatly admired his attitude to them. His influence grew as he stimulated particular interest in the courses in Hebrew cultural sources and their treasures. The head of the *beit hamidrash* derived spiritual enjoyment and great pleasure when he saw the harmony between the rabbi and his students, who followed his teachings.

One of the main parts of the second-year curriculum was arranging practical classes in general and Hebrew subjects. These were later termed “model classes”, four for each student, part of the compulsory subjects for the courses. The secular lessons were held from the outset at the government school. Its principal, Mr Katznelson, a polite man and a good Jew, who taught us Russian for a time, was prepared to assist in this matter. However, there was also a modern *cheder* in Grodno, a school “for Torah and Testimony”. The teachers who worked there held official teaching qualifications. With leading local Zionist officials, headed by the late Mr Bezalel Yaffeh, they turned it into a school for general studies. It acquired a good name. The course director was also appointed the principal of the “Torah and Testimony” school and strong links were forged between these two institutions. Mr Katznelson, the headmaster of the government school, became a member of the supervisory committee of the new school, which became a model school, where students’ practical classes were arranged. The teachers at the school, very decent people, viewed these classes positively and enthusiastically, willingly assisting and guiding the students, while the students felt they were in a family environment with them.

Preparing model lessons required great concentration on the part of a candidate. Before visiting the class in which the lesson would be given, he selected a topic that would not clash with the lessons given in the class. This was done with the agreement of the course director and the subject teacher. The purpose of the class visit was to allow the candidate to get to know the pupils and become acquainted with them and their development. The person who gave the one model lesson was not left to grope in the dark – his path was clearly indicated, to help him succeed in the project. A day or two before

the class, the candidate would submit a detailed overview at a conference of the teachers involved with the lesson. He would arrange the details of the material, for example: the opening, the way he would explain, anticipated questions and, if necessary, the discussion before the lesson as well. This would include an analysis of the material, to highlight the main idea (using a literary subject), a summary of the material and general answers from the class, etc. These were all prepared in advance, with the changes required being made up front. The overview approved at the conference before the lesson would be available to him, the temporary teacher, to use during the lesson.

This test was difficult, both because the candidate had no previous experience of teaching and especially because the person being examined had to change many of his existing habits and methods – which were not determined by the new methodological theory. The class was in a hall. The students took their regular places on their benches. All the course participants sat in rows behind them, armed with stationery, ready to note every phrase and expression coming out of the mouth of the person “serving as the model”, every movement he made. Every line and point was written down, serving as a “type of material” for discussion, argument, and, sometimes, angry attacks when the “time for criticism” arrived after the event. This took place at the conference that followed the model lesson. All the candidates went through it like sheep, in front of the class and subject teachers, headed by the most “senior”.

Then came the time for the performance. The commander-conductor facing trial broke the silence, while the others listened attentively. Even the small pupils seemed to be aware of their role, as helpers or, possibly unintentionally, as people causing delay and failure. But in practice they were “loyal”, because of the presence of their regular teacher, who demanded order and proper discipline on their part. He was on guard, if necessary.

All the tangible observation objects were ready, arranged as the “demonstrator” wished, in accordance with his written plan. And then he began, with a movement, a word, a question, hesitant, doubtful and forgetful, even after consulting his overview, designed to “make him wise”. It was fortunate if a person’s ideas came together, were expressed properly, in the correct tone, in the direct way they were prepared. And woe to him who felt that from the very beginning he did not recognise his own voice, which struck him as a kind of strange distant echo, who was not aware of his movements and did not understand what he said. Woe to him!

His colleagues focused their gaze on him, possibly angry and piercing, starting to treat the subject under discussion with a small, mocking smile, or

with pity as they shared his misfortune. It was preferable for the person giving the lesson to avoid paying any attention to the expressions of his colleagues and focus only on his pupils during this time, engaging in the solution to a series of problems that suddenly arose as he was standing at the teaching table. In the meantime, he became a little confused.

And the head of the yeshiva sat in his place, not far from the small table, looking on from the side at the teacher at this “painful” time, and at the class, but less at the listeners. He often lowered his head in order to avoid revealing his expression to those watching him in an attempt to “track” his opinion on the matter.

At times, when everything was going well and the lesson was reaching its high point, the “examiner” would suddenly ring the bell, bringing the lesson to an end, just at when it was most lively and particularly interesting. The primary and fundamental idea had not yet even been expressed, but was suddenly cut off, while there was so much more material prepared. Yet it was impossible, forbidden, to continue. So far and no further! Alternatively, the lesson was continuing somehow, with the commander making mistakes and pondering his disaster, his failure. He, the ostensible conductor, was controlled largely by the students, who led a discussion that was not on the subject at all and whose questions bore no relation to the overview. He, the teacher who was himself being examined, “*became a ball thrown from pupil to pupil and from corner to corner*” – in terms of a definition used by the head of the *beit midrash*. This was after deviating from the route planned at the outset, not knowing whether it was to the left or to the right, although in truth, by this time it did not matter at all. And then, suddenly, the bell rang. The candidate was very happy about this “miracle”, the opportunity to get out of his difficulty. It was so good, this time, to finish. “Next time,” he deluded himself hopefully, “it will be fine and even his most severe and extreme critics will like it, he will improve his performance, make amends.” . . . “The failure was not his fault, it was a lapse of memory, stage fright. And it takes a hero to overcome it.”

The conference dealing with the model lessons, analysing and reviewing them, often criticising everything about them, lasted a full week, from Sunday afternoon. The notebooks of the colleagues participating in the courses and the class teacher were opened and they read from them. The voice of the prosecutor could be heard stringing together the mistakes one by one, the deviations from the methodology, from the rules laid down in the teaching theory of our instructor and headmaster. The comments were piercing, sharp and painful.

There were, however, also statements designed to defend the person facing the criticism, pleading his cause. While different views were expressed, all

were intended for the sake of heaven. They listened carefully to the views of the subject teacher, which usually tended towards compromise. Yet the head of the *yeshiva* was the presiding judge, giving his verdict totally impartially. He always managed to find the correct path. He was the one who saw that the examinee had not succeeded because he understood and recognised the reasons for it. He looked thoroughly at the spirit and nature of the candidate, explaining that the failure could not be attributed to “malice” on the part of the person being criticised. On the contrary, he was able to justify it, by finding merit in him and encouraging him, lifting the depressed spirit of the “*person being slandered by his colleagues*”. A just sentence of this kind was very valuable. It mitigated the impression left by the serious, sometimes even exaggerated accusations, presented with some mockery and a little “cruelty”, a common subconscious phenomenon. An educated person should control this type of impulse.

The head of the *yeshiva* was able to calm the storm within the failed candidate. He did so on the assumption that “*everyone can err*” and, as the adage has it, “*the person who does nothing makes no mistakes*”. The post-lesson conference ended in a place of healing, loving care, complete ease.

I remember most the negative side of my model classes. I prepared for everything – for an arithmetic lesson. The form and content of the questions was drawn up briefly and precisely, linked and combined with no fault or defect. My overview was approved without argument. The pupils took their places. I knew all of them by name and was familiar with their characters, as if I had become accustomed to them a long time ago. It seemed everything was in good order.

Even the head of the *yeshiva* was already seated in his permanent place, deliberately not looking at me. The board was ready, with the chalk on the shelf below it. The curtain would soon rise and I would appear in my role. Yet I lifted my head, to have another look, to check that everything was as it should be – but found a kind of black hole, unlike anything I had ever seen before. It was daytime, not night, so where did this terrible and alarming darkness come from? In my field of vision I did not find faces showing satisfaction or happiness, not the faces of the friends and colleagues I expected, but a shapeless, formless hole, full of darkness and gloom – an almost palpable darkness.

I girded my loins and began my lesson. I called one of the students to come up to the board and read the first proposition of the problem. It was well written – in numbers. A second pupil wrote down the second proposition. In total, there were five or six propositions. It seemed to me that the list was complete and I called a pupil to explain the problem from the beginning and

solve it. But suddenly, distressingly, something was absent, missing. There was absolute silence in the hall. I was perplexed and so were the pupils. There was no getting away from it and no avoiding it. Almost a quarter of the lesson had passed and I was in difficulty. I overcame that and had a look at my overview, which I had not touched until that moment, because I was certain I knew it well – and in the blink of an eye, it became clear to me that I had forgotten one proposition. It was not listed on the board, leading to the error and the remorse.

Then my class and I quickly got back on track. The wheels of the lesson started turning and went well from this point on. The pupils participated in the work – one of the important principles of a good lesson – with enthusiasm and interest. The problem was solved satisfactorily. The bell put an end to my agitation when the time came for the end of the lesson. When it over, I saw that the black hole was not a hole at all, but a group of people, friends, who wished me well.

Sunday arrived, the day for criticism of the lessons of the week. I asked permission to speak, so that I would be the first person criticised. I explained the situation, my mood – the great fear that assailed me, the teachers' stage fright that surrounded me with weapons of sticks and pencils. During the criticism, I was rescued from "complete destruction". I myself demonstrated the defects in my lesson that perhaps could have been avoided. But I acknowledged and recognised them. I did not seek any recognition for the possible positive aspects of my lesson, not even in the coin of praise. After that, nobody opened his mouth to discuss my lesson. The head of the yeshiva summed it up briefly, explaining the forgotten "proposition" that resulted in my confusion with the entire arithmetic problem. He encouraged me with a compliment for the future. "This kind of thing would not happen to me again," I thought. "I was tested and it was horrible, but this time I would already be 'immune'."

I gave, another lesson, in Russian. I chose an artistic story by LN Tolstoy. It contained suitable material for a discussion with the students before reading the text. The overview was approved. I got to know the students in the class well, not the same class in which I faced disaster. When the lesson began, I saw bright, clear expressions on the faces of the students, teachers and colleagues. The discussion began and everything went well. Questions and answers were satisfactory. Questions were asked by pupils, showing their interest in the subject. I felt "in my bones" that things had gone well, without blemish.

Suddenly the door opened and the director of government schools, Mr Timinski, walked in with quick steps. A man with a large stomach, he

wanted the courses to go well, tried to ensure that their licence would be put to good use. I was told he knew Hebrew. The director appeared in his official garb. He went up to Aharon Ben Moshe and they greeted each other with a handshake. I was totally preoccupied and immersed in my “function”. I was startled and a little confused by the appearance of this senior official and I failed to instruct the pupils to stand up in his honour. Some did so on their own, but not all of them, as they should have done. By the time I realised my mistake, it was too late.

The confusion lasted only a few moments. I got hold of myself and continued with the lesson, which was not bad at all. When it was over, many of my colleagues complimented me and, if I am not mistaken, even the visiting director himself did so.

On the day of the criticism, again I asked for leave to speak first. I voiced my self-criticism. My friends and colleagues were left with nothing more to say.

From time to time, from the beginning of the first year, course participants were subject to “social” and “individual” criticism, without being prepared in advance for examinations of this kind. However, the negative aspects hardly featured prominently, but, on the contrary, the criticism was at times more positive. This led the person being examined to feel spiritual enjoyment and real pleasure. These “examinations” would take place when the exercise books were returned and the class analysed the written essay after it had been proofread and corrected by the teacher. The criticism took different forms. It was sometimes a comparison of isolated sections drafted by the students from various perspectives. There were cases in which the contrasting views of the writers were clarified. On occasion, good descriptions, original ideas and images of the heroes involved were highlighted. There were also evaluations of language and style and general lecturing methods. The teacher very often read from one, two or three exercise books containing mediocre essays, followed by good ones and finally the analysis of the excellent pieces.

The essay was read without disclosing the name of the author. However, as the reading progressed, it was not difficult to ascertain who the “person concerned” was, by the expression on his face, his reaction to the reading and the style of the writer and his approach to the subject. This method of critical analysis was very effective. Many interesting approaches and points were expressed by the writers. When the essays were read out correctly and meaningfully by the teacher, having been prepared in advance, it created the desired impression and the value of the essay would go up in the eyes of the author himself. The writer would receive great pleasure from his “work”, which had gained approval. One author might be good at describing

an historical event, another would be better at literary description, while a third would excel in expressing the internal emotions brought to the fore in the story. Three types of teachers used this interesting method: the head of the *yeshiva*, who wanted to clarify the views of the students on a particular historical period, and language and literature teachers.

Two particularly interesting analyses remain in my memory. One was about a boy beggar. He would run after passers-by to get them to give him something. The approach by one of the students appeared to be completely negative from an educational perspective, yet, on the other hand, it included another element, necessity. Poverty at home and perhaps an illness of a beloved mother, with a hungry infant sister ... Two conflicting emotions: a strong feeling of abhorrence, as well as a sense of compassion, arousing sympathy.

The only time allowed to write about the subject was the period in class, forty five minutes – class work, done quickly, without any time to prepare one's thoughts. The essay was well done and was read in a very interesting way.

A comprehensive essay was suggested, with some time to prepare it: "Railroads", their value in transportation, nutrition and civilisation in general, as well as the negative aspects. Shortly before it was written, an express train accident occurred in Germany. The impact threw it off the rails. Russian delegates to the eighth Zionist Congress were on board, including Gepstein from St Petersburg, the permanent assistant at the Russian Jewish weekly. He was one of the victims cut off in the prime of their lives. The terrible catastrophic accident was described in the essay, including the dismemberment of the delegate who was killed, the tragedy of his family and the mourning of his fellow Zionists in Russia. This part was written with feeling and almost with talent. When it was read out by the teacher in class, it made a great impression on the listeners and especially on me. Both these essays were written by me.

That year the number of students attending the courses doubled. When we moved up to the second course, the second year had room for the first course and another thirty people were admitted. The vast majority of them were the same types as the previous course participants and our circle of friends widened. We became firm friends, like the members of a single family. Life became more interesting with shared opportunities, especially in games, trips, parties and festivals. These had a special character, particularly when arranged by the students, with an original effect, full of interesting content creating a lasting impression. They were genuine festivities, enjoyed by those close to us as well: "the Old Man", the head of *beit midrash*, and Dr SY Tsharna.

Sometimes visiting guests from the committee in St Petersburg would come

as well, pedagogues and teachers who were present in the lessons. We, the students, were not impressed by them at all, as we had the “*great lights*” with us, the head of the *beit midrash* and Dr SY Tsharna.

A guest also came to visit us from the JCO, Mr Meyerson, from Frankfurt am Main. He did not interfere with the studies or come into the classes during lessons. He confined himself to discussion with the principal in his office, which at the time was a small, narrow and gloomy room. We, the students, were not even aware of the presence of the visitor. I was the only one who had to go to the principal’s office, I think, at his request from the previous day. When I entered, I saw a well-groomed old man, with a venerable round grey beard. I completed my task and returned to the class.

At lunchtime, Mr Meyerson came to our dining room to see our meal. Mr Feigelson, our “provider”, was informed somehow of the visit of the important and prominent guest. When the visitor appeared, the steam rising from the potatoes on the “loaded” plates on the table intensified - two for each of the people eating – and the steam rose sourly in his face from the plates, a little pickled by the visitor. But there was no need to inquire about the “essence” – “What is the essence this time?” It remained in the tradition of yesterday.

Mr M stayed for a couple of days before departing. The head of the *beit midrash* did not talk much about him, as the whole purpose of the visit did not concern us. But in passing, he did say that when I came into his office, I was the first student Mr Meyerson had seen. He then asked the head of the *beit midrash*: “Aren’t your students *chareidim* (ultra-Orthodox)?” “Why?” the head of the *beit midrash* asked innocently. In his German accent, Mr M expressed his surprise that I was “shaved”. A smile never left the face of the head of the *beit midrash* when he spoke to us, the same laughter that appeared on his face in response to the surprise of Mr Meyerson.

It is worth mentioning that the head of the *beit midrash* demanded absolute precision from the students. That day, when I was seen to be “shaven” in the eyes of the guest, the word “cleanly” should have been added, because as a rule, it was “What do you prefer?” – you either grew a beard if you did not, but you did not grow one in instalments – this characteristic would offend the aesthetic sense. Some students started stroking the beards they had grown for some time. They realised that their precision was lacking in this regard and seemed to resolve to be more vigorous about it.

The fact should also be mentioned here that Frankfurt Jews saw to Hebrew education in Russia, deciding to prepare teachers for the Jewish settlement in Russia and train them to teach modern religious education. To this end, some years before the courses were started in Grodno with JCO funds, a seminary

for young people was established in Frankfurt am Main for young people from Russia, with an extensive course in secular studies, including teaching Russian and, of course, German. The seminary official invited students to come from Russia to learn and further their teaching studies, with all their expenses being met by the institution. The students did not have to worry about their upkeep. While some young people answered this call and went to study for several years in the institution, when they left they were not teachers. Only two or three, in any event, returned to Russia, to Vilna, and I knew two of them. One did not adapt to teaching while the second, an intellectual and Talmudist, decided to go to Palestine, where his activities bore fruit.

In Russia itself, nationalist communal officials and those involved in the Spreading Education Society pondered the question of teacher training. They tried to find ways to do so and concluded there was a need to arrange groups of young people who knew the Torah and were imbued with Hebrew culture. They would receive support, provided they prepared for the examinations towards a teaching qualification from the education authorities. The experiment was conducted in two places, first in Vilna and subsequently in Grodno. In both, it was not in a special institution, but, as already mentioned, in groups, with teachers from the Spreading Education Society in charge. Many of the *yeshiva* students in Vilna wanted an education, but the experiment did not succeed at all, with very few teachers emerging from it. Most of them either stopped their studies, or continued with them as external students who were swept up in the flow of general education and in different movements.

In Grodno, the experiment did succeed to a greater extent in quality, but very little in quantity. The communal officials and few teachers who received the required training managed to establish the *Torah and Testimony* modern *cheder*, in which general studies were included successfully. Only later did the idea emerge of pedagogic courses. Grodno was selected as the appropriate place for them, for a variety of reasons.

* * *

The time of the final examinations arrived. With one or two exceptions, the students completed their curriculum.

After two years of intensive and hard work, shared by expert educators, qualified students set out to sacrifice themselves on the altar of Hebrew education. They were on standby to go into action, into the field: to plant, sow and grow strong and fruitful plants.

CHAPTER 18

FIRST STEPS

End of June, 1909. Each of the students could select a quantity of books for an amount he wished to pay in advance. This bundle was a form of spiritual equipment for the pedagogic path to future actions and deeds and also a farewell gift as the students “to date” separated for the holidays. After the vacation, the work we had done, for which we had laboured, would begin, with a place being found for each one by the course management.

The parting from our beloved institution and our outstanding and admired teachers, Aharon Ben Moshe and Dr SY Tsharna was not marked by any celebrations or external trappings of official and impressive enthusiasm, but with a heartfelt, simple “Shalom”, goodbye, a very warm handshake and the hope of ongoing co-operation with the dear institution.

When the teacher training had been completed, requests came in from various places for teachers. It received no special publicity and no advertisements were printed. An article by me appeared in the Russian-Jewish weekly in St Petersburg on the completion of the course studies and the examinations that had taken place. It seems as if this aroused the institutions requiring teachers – particularly the *Talmudei Torah* – in the Jewish centres, the towns and villages, to approach the course management in Grodno with their requests.

In terms of their curriculum, the *Talmudei Torah* were public schools for Hebrew and general studies that received the majority of their budget every month from the committee of the Spreading Education Society in St Petersburg.

On my return from my vacation in my *shtetl*, I received an offer from the course management to travel to Sovlaki about a post. A Hebrew teacher was required for the newly-established private Jewish gymnasium. A similar gymnasium had existed for two or three years in Vilna, the first of its kind. Jewish boys streamed to it from all over Russia, as its curriculum was in accordance with a real gymnasium, including a Hebrew programme, with no limitations. Its founder-director, PY Kagan, an energetic intellectual with broad learning and full of youthful energy, knew how to place this new institutional on a firm foundation, which flourished, giving great satisfaction to pupils and their parents.

In Sovlaki, Dr Schwartzman was moved to establish a similar type of gymnasium. It was small – only up to standard four – and had very few pupils. The situation of the centre did not appear to be particularly suitable either.

After a day's journey by train, with stops, and then from Mariampol, on the "King's Highway" linking St Petersburg and Warsaw, on comfortable buses, I arrived in the city of Sovlaki. I had no trouble finding the home of the principal of the Jewish gymnasium. Our first conversation was not formal. Dr Schwartzman did not examine me on my ability to fulfil my role as a teacher. In this regard, he regarded me with complete confidence, as I had been sent officially by the management in Grodno. Over a cup of tea he introduced a matter I felt was very close to his heart and he raised it very cautiously. He indicated what he wanted, more or less in the following terms. At present, there were only four classes in the gymnasium. Their teachers taught at the government gymnasium in the city, none of them Jewish. The programme was broad and rich. I would be the teacher for Hebrew subjects. (It seemed to me I would be alone, although there was a qualified teacher in S, middle aged, whom I befriended within a few hours.) As usual, there was a pedagogic council at his gymnasium. Obviously, the Hebrew teacher would also participate in it. But Dr Schwartzman wanted and felt it proper that the Hebrew teacher would not raise questions relating to his teaching, would not touch on them or place them on the agenda. The Hebrew teacher should not assert himself in the company of the other teachers at council meetings. He should remain passive with regard to his problems, as if they were his own and his responsibility. "Does Sir understand?" he asked for confirmation. He, Dr Schwartzman, went on to clarify the matter, softening his reasoning, wanting to get me to agree through such responses (which were not uttered by me): "Yes," "Of course," "Correct," "As you say, sir." And when he was unsure whether I would behave as he wished, in terms of his instructions, went on in his correct, very precise Russian, that rang a little strangely: "Do you see?" Translation from Russian, etc.

After lunch we arranged an interview to go and see the gymnasium building. I felt the sun's rays were unable to penetrate the structure, even during the long summer days. In addition to the chill among the school benches and their surroundings, there was a kind of slight degeneration and pervasive decay from unseen deprivation. Everything was so simple, amounting to depressing poverty. We also walked for a while in the yard and he, Dr Schwartzman, asked me for my views on modern Hebrew education as a whole. I was happy to do so and told him that because the holidays were drawing to an end, I intended returning home the following day, but before leaving I would let him have what he had requested in writing. Because the first bus leaving in the direction I wanted to go departed at eight in the morning, I wanted to be a passenger on it. He would find the pages containing the views that occupied me on education in his letterbox. He told me very politely that he would meet all my travelling expenses and that I should attach an account to what I was writing. He would send the travel expenses should we not come to an agreement.

He felt that with regard to his main issue of my self-denial as a Hebrew teacher, as a “member” of the teachers’ council, with their shiny buttons, I would not waive my rights. We parted with cool, ostensibly pleasant amiability. I spent the last hours of the day in the company of the well-known Hebrew teacher discussing old acquaintances (we continued to correspond with each other for several years after that).

After going for a walk on my own, which on occasion I particularly enjoyed doing, I returned to where I was staying. I spent an hour setting down my thoughts on education and placed what I had written in Dr Schwartzman’s post box. My sleep was interrupted that night by gloomy thoughts of the demands of this European intellectual, immersed in the solution of the Hebrew national question from a broad and “comprehensive” perspective, while, on the other hand, taking great care not to let a single word slip that was not in the government language. What he required from the Hebrew teacher managed by him was that he, the Hebrew, would shrink and confine himself to the extent of giving up his essence in the presence of the “colleagues” of the principal, who himself was standing guard over the nation and the revival of its culture and language. I was disgusted with myself. I drank my morning tea early, with a very light meal and at eight o’ clock, I left Sovlaki, never to return.

Observing my surroundings on the way, I heard how the Lithuanian language had changed when spoken in the modern way. It had absorbed many new words, particularly technical terms, leaving out those from the neighbouring Polish and Russian languages and, in general, also innovations in sentence structure. I found out from a conversation on this subject that the movement for the revival of the language in fact started in Vilna, where a weekly and monthly publication appeared, edited by priests intent on moving towards the revival of the Lithuanian language, which was spreading in its modern garb and form.

Three days later I received a telegram from Dr Schwartzman, who asked about my decision on the position. I responded negatively by telegram. The same day I wrote letters in Russian to the head of the *beit midrash* and in Hebrew to Dr SY Tsharna expressing my disappointment about the main reason preventing me from working in a special gymnasium for Jews. The obstacle placed in my way as I took the first steps towards realising this desire stopped me from surrendering.

After another three days, I received a cheque for the amount I had spent on my journey to Sovlaki about the position offered to me there.

I received an offer of another position from the course director in Grodno, in a *Talmud Torah* in the city of Bialystok, near where the courses were offered.

Industry in that city was regarded as second only to Lodz and in its private and public affairs, like a miniature Warsaw. Dr SY Tsharna also wrote to me specially on this matter, indicating that the rabbi who was the principal of the *Talmud Torah* was his childhood friend. He advised me to accept the position, hoping that I would satisfy them and find it satisfactory, particularly as his friend the rabbi would certainly be an influential pipeline for my benefit and well-being. Tsharna had already recommended me to him.

I contacted the director of the *Talmud Torah* in Bialystok and arranged a date for my arrival. I did not even think of refusing an offer supported by Dr Tsharna, because of my very close relationship with him.

I arrived in Bialystok at the beginning of August 1909. I was impressed by the beautiful exterior of the *Talmud Torah* building, in a large, clean courtyard with grass growing inside it. The director lived in the same building, in a pretty and comfortable apartment specially for his family. My first meeting with the director, Samson Yakovlevitch Grossman, was not very pleasant for me, although he was very polite. He spoke only Russian, which I assumed was his only language and dear to him, in his dealings with anyone who came into contact with him in a town where everybody spoke Yiddish – with the parents, his pupils and Hebrew teachers, the lay officials, etc. Until his arrival there, he had served as the director of a *Talmud Torah* in one of the southern towns, where Russian was spoken more. His wife, son and daughter, all of them, it seemed, were conceived and born using only Russian. It even went so far as the large yellow dog that grew up in their home, “Kado”, which understood nothing but Russian. In his attempt to imitate a real non-Jew, the director spoke with particular emphasis, as if every word in his language had particular importance – especially within the walls of the *Talmud Torah*, when the entire environment was saturated only with Yiddish. In speaking this way, which gave him particular pleasure, he raised himself in his own eyes to be superior to the masses of the “common people”, the “ordinary people”, and even more so in the eyes of the intelligentsia.

Mr Grossman became very close to me. From the moment I stepped onto the threshold of his home, he offered me food, drink, a place to stay – and also companionship. Such hospitality surprised me, but I felt it was a burden, particularly in company that was strange to me and confining because of the barrier between me and this family. I avoided sleeping over altogether, but sometimes I had meals there. He tried to involve me in different discussions, as classes had not yet started. After a few days, it seemed to me that some kind of trap had been laid for me in this environment.

The director offered, or more correctly, invited me to make an official visit to the home of the rabbi and be introduced to him. Shortly afterwards, the rabbi came to the office and then I was invited to participate in the discussion.

With regard to the Hebrew teachers in the *Talmud Torah* – one of them a well-known writer – I was told explicitly that I should not associate too much with them and warned not to stay in the spacious home of one of them, in which there was a room to rent. I left the hotel and moved to a permanent room in the home of a Hebrew teacher, who ran a modern *cheder* – a place where I was allowed to stay and one that Mr Grossman even found desirable.

In the meantime, Mendele Mocher Sefarim came to the town and a party was arranged in his honour for his seventieth birthday. I had never been fortunate enough to meet the doyen of our writers and I regarded the opportunity to see him face to face with particular pleasure. However, Grossman arranged matters in such a way that I was unable to go to this celebration. I complained, got annoyed, gnashed my teeth – I suspected there was a hidden motive.

Pedagogic matters were never the subjects of our discussions, which surprised me. He asked me to teach his son Hebrew, for a fair fee. I was extremely nervous. And these private lessons did not last long. I wanted to get to know the institution before I started working there, but did not manage to do so. The director did not respond to me on this. I wanted to get to know the classes: how many there were, the standard and type of students, the curriculum, in order to prepare in advance, but my efforts came to nought. I found the answers to these questions myself, but only in my classes, in the course of my work.

In the meantime, another general studies teacher arrived, a friend of the director from the south, Mr Baran. The director and his wife took him into their home until Baran's wife arrived with their baby child and they could find an apartment. The teacher, a young man, impressed me as being very decent, with pedagogic training, who had studied at the Teachers' Institute. He held leftist political views, but did not participate in any movement. Notwithstanding the great difference between our views, mine and his, we soon became friends.

The school finally opened and many pupils came. There was a great uproar. Teachers also arrived in their "masses": the two Hebrew teachers, two for general studies and one more and myself who were new, me the Hebrew teacher and Mr Baran, the "non-Jew", whose face reminded me of "Jesus".

The director presented the "parties", paying lip-service to them, while the barrier separating the three types of teachers was felt. They looked at one another coldly, with hostility, suspicion, ostensibly respectful and friendly, divided in this way:

- a) *Enemies-opponents – the two Hebrew teachers: the writer Pesach Kaplan and Rakovski, on the one hand, and the director on the other.*

- b) *Friends and partners, who wanted to work and make progress – Mr Baran, the director and me – in one camp.*
- c) *Teachers who had neither cool nor warm relationships: Manchovski and Lieberman, both of whom were subjugated and the director was the subjugator.*

One was a part-time teacher, a kind of exception, the headmaster of his government school, more senior than all the other teachers in the *Talmud Torah*. The director was his honoured friend.

From the outset it was apparent that there was no unity among all the teachers in the institution, but division, broadened by one person's particular efforts.

The director informed me briefly that he had assigned the first class to me, the lowest – there were no classes for beginners at the *Talmud Torah* – and the fifth class, the highest at the school.

The rooms were spacious, well lit and generously furnished, with a high chair for the teacher. But the pupils for whom all this convenience was “created” were the cause of totally inappropriate disharmony. They appeared wild, unruly and noisy, maliciously and provocatively causing a disturbance, poorly trained. They all attempted to “try” the new teacher to see how strong he was. There were about twenty-thirty in the first class. It was difficult to maintain silence and hear what they were learning and the names of the books. The director did not bother to take me in, to present me to them or inform me of the level of their studies. My loftiest aim was how to keep order and keep them quiet.

In the top class, the fifth, there were fourteen-fifteen pupils. When I was able to discern their character, I found some of them were talented; I discovered later that all of them, with two exceptions, were bright and understood, but their behaviour, too, was ill-mannered and vexing. I obtained advice, I sought ways and means. The director knew very well that it was difficult to establish good relationships among us. I did not like the advice he gave me and did not adopt the measures he suggested. I decided to pave a pedagogic, educational and possibly ethical way for myself, one that would work. After a long internal struggle, I managed to overcome my despair. Taking careful steps, I found the correct and proper approach to my classes. I selected interesting reading material, attractive discussions – with infinite patience. And the pupils realised they would also benefit if they put up with me – listened and participated actively. Over time, my victory grew greater. It was not my victory over the pupils, but our victory, shared by all of us.

I felt that in the other teachers' classes, as well, great agitation prevailed and

there was “pandemonium” in all of them – except the class of the director himself. But he did not have classes in the *Talmud Torah*, he was exempt from teaching. Only rarely would he substitute when a teacher was absent. The place where Mr Grossman taught (five-seven hours a week) was in the well-ordered trade school in the same neighbourhood. Adjoining the courtyard of the *Talmud Torah*, it was also a lovely building, erected by the same philanthropist after whom the *Talmud Torah* was named, KZ Wissotzky, a well-known benefactor in Moscow.

The director liked walking along the broad corridor. He would listen outside the class, sometimes putting an ear to the door – he certainly knew of the “wind” or “storm” blowing inside that “animated” the spirit of the pupils. He was the master of everything and sometimes he would hold a kind of whip or rod in his hand as an adornment and threat. He would speak ceremoniously, in the tone of a commander, more appropriate for an army officer than the head of a school. In this way, he would dominate the children and create a feeling of contempt and hostility among the teachers, particularly his opponents.

Mr G was a graduate of the Teachers’ Institute. He was far from having any knowledge of Hebrew and Judaism in general. However, the way he spoke, his voice, his behaviour and facial expressions lent him the force of a ruler, and he used them to influence the people over whom he had authority. In the eyes of the members of the committee and the people responsible for the institution, he was considered a perfect pedagogue, and he knew how to make himself appear to be a skilled teacher.

Once I asked his permission to visit the class when he was giving his lesson, standing in for an absent teacher. I was a new teacher, full of doubt and very much wanted to see how experienced teachers conducted their classes naturally. One morning he agreed to let me come into the fourth class and I spent the entire hour of the lesson there. The class did not allow me to get to know and see its face, because total silence reigned. The teacher did everything: spoke, preached, chastised a little, related stories, read – and it was all absorbed as if in a chasm. He did not get a sound or response from the class. The pupils were not asked and did not answer, none of them opened his mouth. In spite of all this, the order and discipline in the class were truly “exemplary”. The content and purpose of the lesson were to fill the space with words, which would automatically be absorbed in the ears of the pupils and also perhaps steal their way into their hearts or minds. The reading material the director used was not taken from the class reading book, but was a long extract from a Russian newspaper, with a detailed report on a leading doctor, a well-known specialist of Jewish stock, who made a wonderful discovery while doing great things for practical medicine in Paris – its object was to

extend the lifespan of people through effective surgery. And the director “extended” what he was saying until the bell rang at the end of the lesson.

From this lesson I learnt what should not be done, that one should really be careful – I saw a lesson indicating the “don’ts”, the negative commandments taught to us by the head of the *beit midrash*. I clearly recall that he would say: “It is worth reading the Jesuit books and understanding their method in order to know how to avoid adopting it, and not do what they do.”

I still had to supervise the discipline of the pupils in the fifth class, particularly a few of them. Some were very talented, fourteen-fifteen years old, but sometimes, pretending innocence and insincerity, they were still accustomed to behaving badly and disturbing the process of even the best and most interesting lesson. Nevertheless, within a further month of my starting to teach this class, some of them had repented. In front of their colleagues, in public, they stood up and undertook to behave properly in future, promising to stop talking and disturbing the class and to do everything I required them to do. Expressing regret for the past and acceptance for the future, with short breaks between them, with a sense of genuine contrition, some of them promised to behave. And the whole class submitted in a short time and its work became productive, with great progress, felt and enjoyed by the pupils themselves. They did well in Hebrew, which was taught successfully, using the natural method, in grammar (a practical comprehensive course), Bible – the Later Prophets – and *Chronicles*.

For a long time the director did not deem it necessary to come and visit me in my classes and see my work. However, on November 8, he came into the fifth class. He took his place on the last bench. I asked one of the pupils to give him a book and show him the place we were working – a chapter in the Later Prophets. The words of the prophet had a great effect on the class. Everybody paid attention and was interested until the spirit of the prophet actually descended on them. The principal was impressed. He remained until the end of the lesson, when he got up, came up to me and thanked me aloud for the great pleasure I had given him in my lesson. As a sign of solidarity and appreciation for my effective class, he shook my hand warmly. He wanted to increase my standing in the eyes of the pupils, who were already listening to me and obeying.

I had two to three lessons in this class each day. I would come to each class with a journal under my arm. After the lesson, I would write down my comments and remarks relating to order in the class (the director advised me to do this, as he saw it as a means of threatening the pupils and forcing them to behave well). I clearly remember the day I informed the class that I no longer had any need to use the journal, except in the first lesson to list

the students who were present and absent (which was rare). I was completely satisfied with their conduct and my notes on it were being abolished from that day on. The students received this statement gladly. This was on January 21, which I remember as a happy day in my life of instruction as an inexperienced teacher. That day I saw myself in the role of realising my ambition in practice, by conforming to the teaching principles I received from my teachers.

The rabbi also came to visit me in my top class. He looked around, reviewed the class, and asked me about the curriculum. When he saw the progress and results of my work, of which he had been told by the director, he could not find sufficient words to express his praise for the class. The rabbi was Dr Yosef Mohilever, the grandson of the late great Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever. (Years later, he breathed his last in a middle school in Jerusalem when he reached the verse: *"From Zion shall go forth the law..."*)

When classes commenced at the beginning of the year, I volunteered to devote an hour each day to exercise and to introduce it to most of the classes. Grossman agreed gladly. The courtyard was large and very suitable for exercise, races and all kinds of training. The director, however, suggested that I do the exercises with the students in the attic. It was large, but full of dust. We started there, but the large amount of dust covered us all over and made it difficult, as the exercises would be enjoyable and pleasant only in an open space. After about two weeks, I realised I would have to give up this objective. I was not allowed to set up an exercise area in the large open courtyard, under the sky, and I reluctantly had to remove it from the programme.

There was no pedagogic council. The teachers never met to discuss the studies, the curriculum, the objectives and the like. They were all left to the discretion of the director, who did not attempt to introduce any uniformity, common purpose or any kind of co-ordination in them.

In the middle of the year, shortly before the winter recess, the director decided to employ another teacher. He approached me to select one of my colleagues who had qualified in the courses. One of my friends came, E Golomb, who had been employed in a *Talmud Torah* in Vitebsk. Working conditions were not at all ideal anywhere, yet we, graduates of Grodno, wanted to implement our aspirations, using our abilities without hindrance from any side, or from outside and particularly not from the management of the school. Assuming conditions at my school were better than those prevailing in his *Talmud Torah*, he responded to my call. He came to have a look at the institution. He discussed his impressions with me and gave his opinion, as if inhaling a scent, saying: "I am not jealous of your situation. No! I do not intend leaving where I am there to come here, even though it is also not wonderful." He departed from the director and from me and returned.

The director begged me and I called on another “expert”, who arrived. He wanted to move and accepted the post in Bialystok. The director therefore reinforced the group around him and was very pleased about it. Was he preparing for war, which would definitely come, and wanting to fortify his position? Possibly. I sensed a hidden “political” plot being devised.

And then when my colleague from Grodno, Israel Heller, joined our team, I was allocated the teaching of Russian and arithmetic in the third class and my first Hebrew class moved to the new teacher. This combination allowed the director to weaken the position of an unreliable teacher, who was appointed according to the wishes of the director to teach general studies. The director would then move him to Hebrew studies – and so on and so forth. He would use him like a ball, because that teacher, Mr Lieberman, was burdened by a large family and his age, while the way he taught was not particularly successful.

Relations among the “flocks” of teachers were not warm at all. The two old Hebrew teachers would complain, get angry and upset, but not in public. They wanted to form an “underground” from where they could attack the director and then enter the campaign for open war. We, the two new Hebrew teachers, were offered a higher salary, the same as that of the secular teachers; our salary was brought to the same level by adding another 150 roubles a year, or twenty percent. But this was given only to us, the two new teachers. The old teachers remained on the previous salary. My colleague, Y Heller, from Grodno, did not agree to this discrimination. This was also apparently a step to reinforce the director’s group, as opposed to his opponents.

Two events angered the teachers. Grossman decided to expel a pupil in the higher class from the institution. While his conduct was not good, it did not merit the punishment of expulsion from the *Talmud Torah*.

What did the director do? He made a “gesture”. He gathered all the pupils in the *Talmud Torah* hall. Parents were also invited. He began his talk in dramatic tones – he threatened, preached, and was even able to draw tears of sorrow and sadness (he had some acting ability). He suddenly got up from his chair, pushed it aside, raised his voice again and declaimed once more – everything in Russian (which also frightened the parents, who did not understand it) – and the boy was expelled in disgrace. The principal demanded that they be present for this – despite the opposition on the part of all the teachers – and they erupted in fury at this libel.

Subsequently, the director required a stage performance – not in terms of a decision of the teachers’ council. He maintained that the time had come to stir up public opinion about the *Talmud Torah*. There were very few like it under the supervision of the committee of the Increasing Education Society. It was therefore necessary to put on a major performance in the

theatre, before a large audience, with drums beating. He suggested that I select an artistic play and begin to teach it in the highest class until it could be presented magnificently. He permitted me to abandon the curriculum for a month or two until the “play” could be prepared. The singing teacher was required to come every day to train the class and raise the standard. This required not only one lesson, but two or more. I did not agree to this suggestion to prepare the play during class time, as it was neglecting the study of Torah - “one does not neglect schoolchildren even for the construction of the Holy Temple”. I immediately stated I would not do it. To me, the nature of the whole thing seemed to flow from the minor ambition of one individual, without the consent of the other teachers. However, the singing teacher began to implement the director’s order: he would come every morning, take the pupils out of all the classes and teach them choir songs for an hour or two. The clock was put back an hour or two to pacify the teachers, but they could barely contain their anger as they were being treated dishonestly. The director would walk up and down the corridor, hold up the singing teacher and not let him move on – the bell had not yet rung. This was abusing everything: studies, teachers, pupils – throughout the institution.

Eventually even we, “the friends and favourites” of the director, realised that such a situation could not and would not be tolerated. We met to consult and discuss measures to adopt. There were five of us: the three new teachers and the two local teachers. The latter knew far more facts and the actions that should not have been taken, apart from the two earlier ones. They also knew more about the relationship of the committee with the institution and its director. They made us aware of them. Two teachers, who were in a weak position vis-à-vis Grossman, were also invited. The two of them participated in one of our meetings, then there was only one of them, and eventually he also stopped coming. The director was made aware of all our “secrets” and he prepared for open warfare. Practical decisions were taken at our meetings on: a) our resignation at the end of the year and b) publishing this decision without delay in open letters in the press, not only local papers, but the widely circulated general Jewish newspaper in St Petersburg, as well as those appearing in Vilna and Kovno – in Russian, signed by the five of us. The objective was to force the committee to hold a meeting, with the participation of the teachers to clarify the situation, which was just bringing disaster outside the wonderful institution.

The teacher and writer, Pesach Kaplan, wrote a critical article that was published in the *Heint* paper and an article appeared in *HaOlam*, published in Vilna. The matter spread beyond the borders of the city of Bialystok and the committee of the *Talmud Torah*.

I would often go to Grodno for the Sabbath or the celebrations in honour

of Hannukah and Purim, etc. The head of the *beit midrash* and Dr Tsharna, understood that we were not happy in our work, but I did not discuss the details with him until the time was right. He knew only that I did not want to continue my work in Bialystok the following year.

I travelled to Vilna for *Shavuot*. There I met the editor of *HaOlam*, A Druyanov. He asked me to give him details about what was happening at the *Talmud Torah* in Bialystok. Based on what I said, he wrote a strong article to influence public opinion to put the matter right.

A few weeks before the end of the year, the leaders and the teachers began to meet because of the pressure caused by the publicity in the newspapers. The members of the committee were important communal workers who did not know what was going on in the institution they supervised. The main speaker was the teacher P Kaplan. While much was clarified, we did not reach agreement. Apparently the committee felt it was beneath its dignity to accept the views of the teachers.

The five of us resigned. The two teachers who did not join us stayed on, because they depended on the goodwill of the director, being tied to him because of their livelihood.

I travelled to my mother's home to rest. This time, I did not stop in Grodno on my way. In the meantime, an investigation and enquiry started in different directions. The "epic" was brought before the head of the *beit midrash*. Dr Tsharna and Bezalel Yaffe also took part in the examination of the issue to pass judgment. The matter was also handed over to the authorities, the government education authority. I was required to see the inspector of government schools, but I stayed on after his investigation into my competence that was conducted in my absence. When I came to him, he received me politely. The only thing that disappointed me was that I did not find it necessary to present myself to him when I started work as a new teacher in my position as a junior teacher – and I was permitted to return to my vacation. But my friend, Baran, the Russian teacher with leftist views, was called to the highest authority, the provincial supervisor in Vilna – and was disqualified from teaching. He was a victim of the director. This was the general view among the teachers, although it was not proved.

I did not see the director in Bialystok again. I avoided speaking to the teachers, my local comrades in battle. Alone, angry and embittered, I returned home, but I soon learnt that a boycott of the *Talmud Torah* was declared on behalf of the Hebrew and general teachers, beyond Bialystok as well, and the teachers involved avoided speaking to Grossman or greeting him.



The author in 1910

JERUSALEM OF LITHUANIA

Education was very disorderly in those days, when we Grodno graduates set out as pioneers, campaigning to improve and upgrade teaching in line with modern pedagogic requirements.

When I set out, the first city to which I went, a major Jewish metropolis, contained a magnificent building, externally a true temple to education, but completely rotten on the inside.

The person who initiated and founded it can serve as an individual example, perhaps not of the entire community, but a large part of it.

The defects in the *Talmud Torah* to which I came were basic and fundamental. The education there was inferior and there was great, destructive and ruinous disorder. When I saw how much of a disgrace it was in my field, I said to myself: "We are teachers armed and equipped with modern methods, with clear and defined aspirations, looking towards lofty aims, but what we found, or at least many of us did, was infertile and barren ground." We therefore had to prepare the ground, dig it up, plough deeply and render it fit for sowing and planting. We also had to gain the support of everyone who could assist in the planting and sowing activities.

There were some visionary communal officials at that time, who wished to take education out of the narrow framework of the old *cheders*, in "modern" *cheders* and *Talmudei Torah*, a common type of public education institution. They started planning for Hebrew education on new foundations, to deepen and broaden it and attract the youth. These remedies began to take effect in two directions: individual initiative and publicly. At that time, a special gymnasium was founded for Jews in Vilna that followed the complete intermediate government school course (which is called high school in the Anglo-Saxon countries), with the addition of a national and Hebrew curriculum covering Hebrew language and literature and Jewish history. Pupils came from all parts of Russia to this gymnasium which, was a great success and rose to great heights. A private individual initiated and founded the school - Pavel Iskovitz Kagan, an energetic, active and vigorous man, blessed with leadership qualities.

Dr Schwartzman followed suit by establishing the same type of institution in Sovlaki, which he moved to Warsaw some years later. Mr Eisenbat founded a similar gymnasium in the capital, St Petersburg.

In popular, non-Zionist circles as well, people began to seek ways to increase the national foundations of the new type of lower schools, on a public basis. Their objective was also to include Hebrew studies in the curriculum.

In Vilna, the authorities gave an assurance of permits for such schools for boys and girls, giving preference to girls. A “society for the supervision of children” was organised and undertook to establish the first modern school: independent of the government and totally controlled by the public, it would take care of its material upkeep and its spiritual nature.

The chairman of the committee of the society was Dr Guratzi Ossipovitz Kuvarski, a non-Zionist, who was very active in shaping the image of the school. It was established with the assistance of various groups: Zionist, non-Zionist and *mitnagdim* (“opponents”, Jews, many of them in Lithuania, who were opposed to Chassidism). A diverse pedagogic council was formed, with education committees. The chairman of these committees was PI Kagan, the owner of the Hebrew gymnasium and a good Zionist. Its members were Sofia Markovna Gurevitch, an anti-Zionist who maintained a women’s gymnasium - after a few years, she also introduced Hebrew as a subject in her institution - and Messrs Brandsburg and Goldman, both headmasters of government schools for Jews, remote from Zionism and, I believe, from national Judaism. Most, if not all committee members were real educationists. The headmaster, Akim Semyonovitch Ribesman, was appointed to head the pedagogic council. An older, skilled pedagogue, with a great deal of experience, known by all as a “Russificator”, he distanced himself from Jewish matters, but as a teacher, he was totally devoted to education and teaching, clinging to the old ways.

By contrast, an excellent class teacher, Mrs Elisheva Rabinowitz Pines, was appointed at the school. She was familiar with modern teaching methods, including in Hebrew and Russian, who was effective and had a major positive influence on the pupils. She held nationalist views and acted in accordance with them. (She was the daughter of the Hebrew writer Shaul Pinchas Rabinowitz – whose *nom-de-plume* was the Hebrew acronym of the initials of his name, Shapar – he translated Graetz’s *History of the Jews* from German to Hebrew. Her husband was the writer-pedagogue, Noach Pines, today a teacher in Israel.) Most of the other members of the council were professional teachers with tertiary education and made a name for themselves in teaching, but their views were leftist, some of them extremely so (one of them, Helena Hatzkels, a Yiddishist, in later years became the head of the Kovno Yiddish cultural movement in Lithuania).

The Hebrew teachers were in the minority: initially, only Miss Elisheva and I. We were joined later by Mr M Ayarov, the second teacher of Hebrew studies. The spirit of Pavel Iskovitz permeated everything. We worked as one,

in harmonious partnership, truly wishing to educate, teach and develop the pupils and improve their abilities and resourcefulness. There was another teacher, who taught music, but was also an expert in mathematics. He had leftist political tendencies.

Mr Ribesman supervised the teachers from different streams and hues. His experience as an educator enabled him to ensure compatibility, even among teachers with fixed, clear and specific views, or even opposing views, as the main aim was to help the youth and the institution as a whole move forward. The institution became increasingly successful, becoming very popular, acquiring a good name. The number of pupils grew steadily. The parents and everybody else involved in this educational institution were pleased and satisfied.

But its exterior was most unsatisfactory: the building was too small for all the classes and the location was not good – the building that housed the school under a contract for several years was uncomfortable.

Mr PI Kagan approached the course management with a request for a teacher at the school. He did not succeed in the first year, but in the second year, after I got out of the crucible of Bialystok, the post was offered to me and I accepted it gladly.

I liked Kovno and I used to call it my second birthplace. Vilna, known as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania”, enchanted me with its huge variety, its colourful public life, the fruitful creativity of its political parties, and as a central city, it was very influential.

And that was how I came to settle in the Jerusalem of Lithuania. However, when I arrived at the school, I felt as if I had been placed among strangers. The first glance IS Ribesman gave me revealed no confidence in me. With conservative views, he was not enthusiastic about the new curriculum for teaching the Hebrew language, particularly after the failure of an unsuccessful teacher the previous year. Himself a graduate of the old *cheder*, he saw advantages and positive aspects in the *cheder*, something he stated when he gave his opinion in a lecture to the teachers and officials about the outmoded institution. Being an excellent teacher, with very few equals, and knowing the modern streams in teaching, he still remained an older man who clung to the old method in his pedagogic concepts, particularly with regard to the Hebrew language. His knowledge of Russian had become famous in Vilna. They would say that if there was any doubt or question relating to Russian grammar or style in the home of the district governor or of the governor-general, they would immediately approach IS and he would resolve it at once in the best way possible.

He reacted negatively to the new, natural method of teaching Hebrew from the outset and, as I found after his visit when I first started working in my class, even with the little derision he allowed himself, in spite of his being meticulous about politeness in the school, particularly as headmaster. And what was the thing itself? He once came to my class with two members of the Education Committee, headmasters of government schools in which the Hebrew language was completely foreign. When he saw that I had reached an issue that required extensive clarification with the natural method, which was a little long, he whispered something to his colleagues and afterwards to a pupil, translating the word for her into Yiddish, which immediately made her laugh. He saw from the way I looked at him that I considered his “disrespect” a disturbance and he stopped.

He was disrespectful in the Pedagogic Council when criticising the “Hebrew in Hebrew” method, particularly the innovations in the language relating to technical words and expressions. I explained it from the point of view that language experts adopted the modern method and many of the innovations had been made with great success. Mrs Elisheva Rabinowitz-Pines, a progressive and intelligent teacher, stood by me. After one or two of them touched on this subject critically from their own perspective, and encountered methodological pedagogic opposition from Elisheva and me, he stopped doing so and then he, too, would participate in discussions with the respect due to our newly-revived language and its place in the school directly managed by him. In fact, he realised that the students in all the classes found studying Hebrew enjoyable.

At the end of summer, when the academic year started, the building became too small to accommodate all the pupils studying there and another, more suitable building was found, but we had to wait until it was vacated and made ready for its purpose. In the meantime, its studies had to be curtailed. Subjects were identified that had to be cut down by half until it became possible to study them in full according to the set curriculum. The headmaster found it possible to curtail Hebrew even further, discriminating against it. However, when I expressed my unwillingness to agree to this unjustified measure, he did not continue with it. On the contrary, he soon began to assist and raise these studies to the desired level. He changed his mind, adapted it to the new conditions and agreed.

The rest of the teachers, each an expert and experienced in her subject, rose to the pedagogic occasion and the school flourished and bore fine fruit. I familiarised myself with my class, the teachers’ room and the Pedagogic Council. There was no question of any lack of discipline during class or any need to improve conduct or not completing homework I gave. But my

work was not easy because of the number of pupils in the classes, which actually should have been divided into two or even three parallel groups. However, the lack of active elements – the teachers – and the small number of classrooms made it impossible to split the classes. I had fifty-four pupils in the preparatory class, in a fairly large room, with the benches arranged in four rows, but in a second class, there were sixty-eight students! The room was long and narrow, and the benches were in two rows. Being short-sighted, I could not see the pupils sitting in the last rows properly. I sometimes felt my work was difficult and very hard, but my great satisfaction from it made it pleasant and heart-warming.

The one hour a day allotted to Hebrew seemed too short to engage the student population we were blessed to have in a large quantity, and I therefore had to adapt. The pupils wanted to learn Hebrew and I was given dedicated assistants in this fruitful work. Their success and progress encouraged them to labour happily and this was the secret of the development of the institution and the strong links between the pupils and their teachers. They valued and liked the Hebrew language.

When I had settled properly into the school and it was permanently housed in premises prepared for it, I felt I should visit the classes of other teachers. I first visited the class of the principal – in geography. I greatly enjoyed sitting in the class. The design of the material, preparation, division, approach and the actual lesson were the work of a highly skilled person, a real pedagogue. When he dealt with the closed “boot” of Italy, it seemed to me that it would soon actually start walking, as if it had a real leg in it.

After a while, I attended a history lesson. The heroes of the period who were the subject of the lesson were brought to life for the class and the events were explained and clarified as if they had occurred last year, although the historical perspective was preserved. Everybody present in class was involved in the story, in the excellent description of its variety, highlights and main points that cast clear light over the fog of past generations. The pleasure of the class was also the pleasure of the teacher.

I also visited some classes of Mrs Elisheva. She handled the small children practically and with games. At the beginning there was an interesting and entertaining story relating to the material selected for the lesson. Within ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, the teacher had brought the very young children into the world of literature, while learning arithmetic through a game. This section ended suddenly, with a discussion by the class leader on a subject dealing mainly with physical exercise, with the children enjoying moving their limbs while their brains relaxed for a while after the story and literature. Then came a story whose heroes were animals and birds

that moved around, combined with a procession walking around and the hour passed. The class ended with the young children still moving around and going towards the door, going out for the break, as the bell had rung in the meantime. Everything this excellent teacher did was a highly skilled educational, spiritual and physical act, with tremendous influence, great value for the educational benefit of the children.

The rest of the teachers also knew their “job” and purpose there very well, making excellent progress in the subjects to which they devoted their labour and talents.

All the pupils in the highest class did well. They all had possessed excellent abilities. They studied Hebrew using the natural method, but Jewish history, as provided from the outset in the curriculum, was taught in Russian. After a few months, I proposed to them that they attempt these studies in Hebrew as well. They were hesitant, fearing they would find it difficult because there was no textbook prescribed for this subject. I relied on the familiar Russian idiom: “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” – let’s see how it goes. If we don’t succeed, G-d forbid, so what? This kind of innovation was not in accordance with the written curriculum. Without bringing this question to the council and without consulting the principal about it, I began the experiment.

At that time, a certain woman began to participate in our council meetings, a special, exceptional privilege as she did not teach at the school. She was a well-known teacher, a communal official working in the field of Yiddish culture and the author of an arithmetic textbook. She went blind at the age of twenty-three, but did not stop teaching in the south of Russia. She was about fifty when she came to Vilna. Her name was Vera Matvayevna Kuperstein. She was a fierce opponent of Hebrew, but in our school, she was unable to influence the course of events in this regard: she did not dare resist PA Kagan and even Dr GE Kovarski would not have supported her had she wanted to make changes to the curriculum, even though he was not an enthusiastic Hebraist.

This woman discovered the secret of my deception in completing my programme: in one subject, the Hebrew language replaced Russian and the council was misled without being aware of it. How was it deluded into “accepting” this mystery? Very simply. A pupil in that class, a clever and diligent girl, would lead and go with VMK from place to place and also from the school to her home. That girl was happy to tell her that the class had begun to learn Jewish history in Hebrew as well – and that it was interesting. That was where the trouble started. This woman said nothing to me at all, but prepared the blow for me when the council meeting was held – and then, wow! Perhaps some other teachers who agreed with her would support her, particularly the extreme “Yiddishists” among them, such as YN Kamentezki.

The day for which she had waited – for the sudden attack on me – arrived. AS Ribesman was very precise and pedantic in his views and he found this outside intervention in the internal matters of the institution unpleasant. But who would be there to oppose the activities of VMK? Even AS, who held firm views, would not risk it, as VM had many admirers on the left.

When the attack commenced, I was shocked, but not alarmed. “In my opinion,” I said, “one can try. All education is increasingly based on experiments – trials – and for this reason, there is an experimental education method. Why, therefore, should I as a Hebrew teacher be denied my part in ‘doing an experiment’? If it does not work this time, I will stop – and try again, later, but under conditions that require changes to be made, in the same way experiments are done . . . The entire matter of teaching Hebrew using the modern method is nothing but a successful experiment . . .” The attack did not meet with the approval of those present. My rebuttal was victorious.

(Miss Kuperstein and I remained friendly, although we held opposing views. She would recognise anybody with whom she came into contact by his voice, even if he was far away or in a hall full of people. She had a wonderful memory. I will never forget this characteristic of hers. Four or five years later, when I was a teacher in St Petersburg, VM came to establish a school there for the children of the refugees – in Yiddish, of course. This was after the Germans conquered Lithuania. When I found out that VM had arrived in St Petersburg, I had to welcome her. I phoned her and she answered, immediately calling me by name, even though she did not know that I was living in St Petersburg. She began to speak to me, having no doubt that I was the one at the other end of the line, recognising my voice.)

One day I was reminded of my past in Bialystok. An inspector from the Increasing Education Society came into my class, Mr Fialkov, an expert in pedagogics, a good friend of Mr Grossman, the headmaster in Bialystok. The inspector sat down until the end of the lesson, went into another class and departed from me coolly, just as he had met me coldly, after the great “event” in Bialystok, where I, too, was one of the rebels – and he asked me to come and visit him at his home. So, I thought, he intended to attack me, and assail me strongly, and punish me severely.

I went fearfully. When I entered at the appointed time, he greeted me as if he had never met me or heard of me (I remembered very well that Mr Grossman said he had told this Mr Fialkov, who was visiting Bialystok when I was a teacher in a *Talmud Torah* in Jena, about me and about my “wonderful” teaching, that I was an excellent teacher, etc). I sat and waited. He showed me no affinity, but also demonstrated no anger or that he bore a grudge. He only made a few simple comments regarding my lesson, just to fulfil his

duty, stating a few fairly obvious things, without admonishing me about what I did in Bialystok. We parted as strangers and I thought: "This is also for the best!" In time, the "ban" in Bialystok was forgotten and there were teachers who "breached" or ignored it, intentionally or otherwise, and Mr Grossman remained the headmaster, becoming "well known".

The school of the Society for the Supervision of Children was highly praised and its Hebrew Department widely commended. One day I chanced upon Ya'akov Markowitz Halperin, a good Jew. An old, timid person, he held high office for many years in the Justice Ministry in the capital, with the official title of councillor, the only Jew with this title in Russia. He was the moving force in this ministry. Halperin excelled through his wonderful professional talent and also his respect for Jewish matters and Judaism, as a Torah Jew and distinguished intellectual. He was also the deputy chairman of the Society for Increasing Education (the Chairman was Baron de Gunzberg).

He came to visit the school and see a class while it was learning Hebrew. I knew nothing before his arrival. Suddenly the door was opened and with great respect, an old man was escorted in, short, with a thin face, who sat down on the first bench to my left together with the young Debora Heidekel, a blonde girl of about seven. In awe, PA Kagan, Dr A Kovarski, AS Ribesman and a few other members of the retinue stood next to the guest.

I was busy with a lesson from the textbook on candle lighting, using the natural method. Two small candlesticks and candles were prepared on my table. Before reading from the book, there was a discussion about the Sabbath, the mother, on the eve of the Sabbath lighting her candles that sanctify the Sabbath, and the like. Questions were asked and answers given and the class of fifty-four pupils showed interest. This was followed by reading the text, the catechism – questions and answers and the story of the pupils in two or three sections. Together they gave the impression of a very successful lesson that ended at the set time. I was introduced to the guest and while discussing our method, we went to meet the teachers. He was introduced to the entire teaching staff, but the guest was unable to remain and visit another class. He turned to me, praising me highly, commending my method and expressing his pleasure at the lesson for the young children, complimenting me sincerely and departed.

A year later, a provincial, or national, meeting was held in Vilna of ORT-OZE ⁶. One overcast morning – it was in November, in the middle of autumn

⁶ ORT is a name formed from the Russian initials of the Society for the Encouragement of Handicraft. OZE is a name formed from the Russian initials of the Society to Maintain Health (among the Jewish population). The two societies merged after World War I. They were very active and became popular under their double name.

– the door of my class, in which sixty-eight pupils were sitting in two long rows, was opened a second time and guests entered: one, two . . . ten . . . and more, all new faces, delegates, worthy and honourable people. I moved away into a corner, making room for the guests, who were still entering in a procession. The room filled to overflowing and there was hardly place for the escort or even for me. And I continued teaching.

The pupils were neither nervous nor shy, but participated in the question-and-answer work. There was overall interest shown in the class, which was alert, happy and lively – and the lesson passed, making a great impression.

I still do not know the names of those who arrived as guests. Many of them thanked me, expressing their enjoyment. After the lesson, the pack departed, but not to other classes. It was Hebrew that attracted them.

I had many individual visits by fellow teachers and a visit from the head of the *beit midrash*. My work was appreciated. It seemed to be regarded as really good and effective and even I felt that myself. In my third year at that school (1912-1913), the quantity of classes and number of students grew. I was unable to teach all of them by myself. Another Hebrew teacher was added. This was my good friend from Grodno, from the second class, Menachem Mendel Ayarov. The nationalist section of the pedagogic council, therefore, had been strengthened to our benefit.

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The level of the Hebrew subjects did not remain static, but rose appreciably, thanks to the increase in the number of pupils coming into the school.

There was no clash with regard to the Hebrew nature of the school, neither internally, on the part of the leftist forces that participated in a principled manner in its work and development, nor from outside, external politics, that then seemed to be growing generally. None of this penetrated the walls of this educational institution.

I was also given work at the Jewish gymnasium of PA Kagan and, as a result, was invited to teach at Yehudiah. This was a special kind of institution of its kind in Vilna.

It was headed by the well-known teacher, the late Mr David Notik. He was one of the authors of “Plain Text” on the Bible. He was given the post of principal

– potential, but not actual – and the communal worker, Mrs Rachel Goldberg, the wife of the Zionist, Rabbi Yitzhak Goldberg, took Yehudiah under her wing and saw to its financial maintenance. Many people admired Yehudiah, and particularly its pupils, for representing an original Vilna character. They were the pupils from various gymnasia who went there for further their Hebrew studies for an hour a day, every day – and made great progress.

Adult classes, known as evening classes for older people, were established at the beginning of autumn of each year in Lithuanian centres. A hundred people would come enthusiastically to study, but usually, ten would leave (according to the rule stated by our sages). From much experience, this seems a common phenomenon to me, but it was very different in the case of Yehudiah. It was an enduring institution. The pupils would make progress and move from class to class over years and those who reached maturity in their knowledge were likely to become Hebrew teachers. Two of them teaching there when I arrived had graduated from Yehudiah. It was an ornament to the beautiful Vilna.

I was once privileged to receive a visit from an important guest: Mrs Goldberg came with the late Z Jabotinsky to listen to a lesson. He himself was still furthering his studies in the Hebrew language. A few years later, Jabotinsky came to St Petersburg, where I was teaching, in connection with setting up the Jewish Legion. One evening I phoned him and requested an interview. “Who is speaking?” he asked. I replied: “The teacher A Levin from Vilna.” “Indeed? I will be very glad to see you tomorrow at eleven in the morning – please come. I enjoyed your lesson at Yehudiah very much at the end of *Parashat Shemot* (a weekly Bible portion in Exodus).” He then briefly repeated the contents of the lesson he had heard, which made an impression on him. The main characters in the lesson were mentioned: Moses – who initially refused to obey the voice of G-d and undertake his mission to Pharaoh, who decreed that the Jews had to make more bricks without giving them more straw; the officials came and shouted at Pharaoh and later, excited and angry, they turned their anger on Moses and Aaron; the disappointed and desperate Moses complaining to the Holy One about the “difficulties” He caused. Generally, furious and angry events and incidents. It was only G-d Himself, Who was long-suffering, Whose faith was strong, Whose purpose would definitely come about; and Pharaoh would not only agree to let the Jews go, but *with a strong hand would drive them out from his land*. We spoke at length, including imagined detail emphasized in our telephonic conversation. Jabotinsky reviewed the dramatic conflict between G-d and Moses, whom G-d wanted to make a leader and chief of His people, whom He would redeem. Jabotinsky spoke enthusiastically, with deep understanding, from memory and imagination, on the segment he had heard five years earlier.

There was a sad event I will never forget, one that will always have a place in my heart. *Lag Ba'Omer* was approaching. We prepared for a trip. Everything was prepared and arranged the day before we were due to leave. The doctor, Dr Wolf Gorfein, came and examined the pupils – these were regular examinations – some of whom were asked not to come to school the next day because they were not going on because their health would not allow them to walk a distance of several kilometres. The day before the trip, I spoke to the classes and told them of the historical importance of *Lag Ba'Omer*, in a way that was appropriate for the level and development of the class. In one of the classes, after I explained the customs of the day and its value for the youth, one pupil stood up and said that it was a major festival in her family, the day her father and mother were married. “And *Lag Ba'Omer*,” she continued, “is also my birthday. Tomorrow I will be 13. I am the only daughter of my parents. It is really a wonderful day. I’m very pleased to hear that this is a festival for children, a festival for all Jewish children.” This is how Leah Rabinowitz, a diligent and popular student, spoke in class. The girls complimented her exuberantly and a few minutes later, the lesson was over. I also complimented her.

The next day, Tuesday, light rain fell. The servant, Stanislav, had all the equipment for the trip ready and also appeared sober – he stopped drinking, although he had drunk regularly in recent weeks. He looked up at the sky and said confidently: “The rain will stop, we can leave.” The objective was a holiday out of the town, about an hour’s walk away.

We set off slowly. All the teachers took part, even those who taught handiwork and art. There were four teachers with us, the headmaster, Mr Ayarov, the music teacher and I, while Mrs Elisheva supervised the procession. When we reached our destination – the skies had cleared in the meantime and the rains had been forgotten – some of the girls began to play, running around, among them Leah R. Mrs Elisheva told them to wait, to sit down and rest. “All of you rest now,” she said, “later we can play and sing and have a good time.” And then it happened! Even before everyone had quietened down, Leah fell on her face in a faint. My colleague Ayarov and I began to give her artificial respiration, with no result. There was a summer house nearby belonging to a well-known communal official. I ran there with somebody to use the phone to summon help, but the telephone was not working and it was a long way to town. The only way to get there was on foot and Stanislav was sent quickly. The headmaster, Ribesman, looked terrible. He saw the catastrophe coming, the terrible disaster. He ran up and down, sighed, confused, totally unable even to utter a sound. He despaired totally and a doctor was required for him as well, but there was none present. Help! There was no-one to respond. I was very depressed, particularly after listening to her yesterday, to this pupil with

such a pleasant demeanour, about her history which she related with much feeling. Elisheva supervised the pupils.

I had no idea how we returned to town, when or where the doctor was found, but I had no doubt that Leah had breathed her last – that she had been taken in the purity of her young childhood. She was sickly. Her heart was weak and she should not have been allowed to take part in the hike. The doctor did not feel that way or made a mistake and did not examine her. As a result, she was not prevented from going on the hike. The mistake was fatal for Leah, her bereaved parents, the teachers at the school and its four hundred pupils. The whole town was in deep mourning. A crushing sorrow enveloped Jewish Vilna. Many men and women attended the funeral and Ribesman continued to walk around lifelessly, uncomprehendingly.

I soon settled in Vilna. There, I found happiness, the joy of my marriage. In this city I met my late, adored Devorah. There my two children, Baruch and Azariah, were born.

I spent three years working at the girls' school of the Society for the Supervision of Children. When the time had come even earlier to open a boys' school of the same kind, a permit was not granted by the education authorities and this institution never came into being – like a fleeting dream.

When I was offered the post of headmaster of a school in St Petersburg by the course officials in Grodno, I accepted. PA Kagan was surprised when I told him about my decision and he and the principal, AS Ribesman, became angry with me. But I craved change. I hoped that as a headmaster, I would find greater scope for work.

I was bitterly disappointed in Bialystok. At first the conditions seemed to be conducive to teaching Hebrew, but the end result was very different. I found myself on a path strewn with hurdles and obstacles. When I started at a school established solely for the purpose of an exceptional experiment, I doubted very much whether it would succeed. Yet it was there that I managed to take control of my path and move up, even raising the pupils to a high level, providing great satisfaction and spiritual enjoyment. I managed to take an important position in a dangerous battlefield for the revival of our language. Even its opponents admitted that. I said to myself that in Vilna, “the bed was still too short for me to stretch out”, as my teaching time was too limited. Going out on my own as headmaster, I would broaden the scope and achieve the results I most desired. Accordingly, I made up my mind to leave Vilna and go to St Petersburg instead.

CHAPTER 20

TO ST PETERSBURG

The writer Zalman Epstein, who was known by his *nom-de-plume*, Shlomo Haelkushi, was the person who had approached Grodno requesting a headmaster in the “sandy district” in the capital. When I agreed to be the candidate for this post, it was suggested that I should contact Mr Epstein and negotiate directly with him. I had been informed that this was an institution where boys – not girls – had general and Hebrew studies and the local society in that district was responsible for its upkeep. Mr Epstein saw to improving Hebrew studies at the school.

Apart from the questions of management and teaching, there was another particular problem, the right to stay in the capital. A Jew was permitted to live only in cities and villages within the “Jewish Pale of Settlement”. The only Jews who enjoyed the right to live anywhere in Russia, including the capital cities, St Petersburg and Moscow, were those who held a diploma from a university or higher education institution in specific subjects or highly qualified artisans working in their trade, as well as simple Jews, serving in the army as active soldiers, whose regiments were stationed in the Russian interior, outside the Pale. But not after their release. A teaching certificate was insufficient to obtain the right to live “beyond the Pale”, an artisan certificate was necessary. And the holder of an artisan qualification also had to work in his trade. If he did not, he was not permitted to live there. As a result, finding a solution required deceit and a stratagem to obtain the required certificate. In Russia at that time, there were three institutions (administrative offices) supplying official certificates to craftsmen or artisans who had completed their training as an apprentice over a fixed number of years.

I therefore had to get the certificate without knowing the craft. A teacher is presumed to be familiar with books, so there is no better craft for him than bookbinding. But the institutions issuing the document to craftsmen were far away. Travelling expenses were heavy and the price of the “award” was high. I was assured that the school committee would compensate me fully, provided I achieved this objective, which would grant me the right of residence in St Petersburg, so that I would be able to take up the post offered to me.

One of the three institutions was in the Crimea, in the city of Kerch. At the beginning of the holidays, I chose to go via Odessa and from there, over the Black Sea, to Kerch. I was not pressed for time and really wanted to see the sea and sail on it in a ship. This was also more convenient and cheaper, even if I used the St Petersburg-Odessa express train that went through Vilna every morning.

I spent two or three days touring around Odessa. My ship set sail at sundown. When I arrived at the harbour, I was told of a group of Jewish teachers who had gone on a trip to Crimean cities on another ship led by the inspector of the Spreading Education Society, HH Fialkov.⁷ I was sorry that I was too late, because had I known earlier, I would have joined this group.

The passengers on the ship held different nationalities, but I did not pay attention to them. I stood on the deck of the *Nicholas II* looking out at the beautiful city of Odessa, with its thousands of lights twinkling, showing its beauty and magnificence, until I suddenly had to go below to find my cabin, and on my way to sit down and stretch out on a bench I found, because the sea had turned stormy and my head spun. I was overcome by a strange nausea. Lying down, I had to get used to the hard bench, because I had not managed to open my luggage and take out my pillow and blanket. It was hard for me to pick it up even to where I was sitting.

The ship's officer, Ivanov, moved hither and thither, from side to side, but certain of his ability not to stumble or fall. He passed in front of me several times, looking at me with a sympathetic smile, but it never occurred to him to help me in any way. How much I longed for a glass of cold water!

I woke up from a deep sleep at dawn. I hastily went up to the deck of the ship: the sea was completely quiet and tranquil and seemed lifeless, still enveloped in the sweetness of sleep that ruled over it and dominated it completely, to the extent that it would not be able to arouse itself or even let a small wave out. It was also in the grip of slumber.

People were sprawling over the entire dirty deck, their heads to one side, their legs and arms bent, their faces twisted, exhausted, without any natural happy expression that sleep could bring to them. The signs of the seasickness from which they suffered were still apparent, spreading throughout their bodies and weakening them, contorting their bodies and giving them a tortured look.

The officer Ivanov arrived and began to clean the lower deck of the ship, with the help of his assistants. People woke up slowly, rousing themselves from the miserable situation in which they had been from the time the storm came. They opened their eyes, yawned and burped, tried to get up, straighten their clothes and prepare to wash themselves, polish themselves up and clean themselves.

It was a clear, beautiful day with the sun swimming and floating on the calm and wonderful sea. The ship moved away from the coast and the land vanished as if it had never existed.

⁷ In Israel, I saw a building, the "Teacher's House" in Tel Aviv named after him.

Everybody enjoyed their first meal in comfortable conditions and ate heartily after bobbing around in the waves earlier. Conversations began among the people eating, who got to know each other, as if they all felt at ease with one another. They showed this through their smiling faces, sometimes without saying a word, feeling satisfied and comfortable.

I spent hours observing the maritime environment, completely restfully and my clear observations surprised me with natural discoveries that were totally new to me. The ship was delayed near the city of Yevpetoria, a long way from the shore. The passengers who left and the new ones who came on board were put in boats. The city did not appear as it actually was, but could be seen as a whole, without the possibility of distinguishing houses or streets and people in them.

A few hours later, our ship approached the fortress city of Sevastopol. In an area some distance away, various types of large warships were anchored. The railroad wound around the coast, actually touching the shore on smooth, firm rocks. The city was spread out as if it were on the palm of a hand.

When I learnt that our ship would be delayed in the harbour for about three hours, I decided to go ashore and visit the city. I knew nobody who could go with me, so I went alone. My first impression was that there were no houses, but only stone buildings and statues, with parks between them. Only a few people could be seen. I looked at the memorials, the images, the inscriptions and realised they commemorated famous warriors who were heroes in Russian history.

I sat down to rest and look at the beautiful park next to the steps leading from the shore to the city. I walked around. Statues surrounded the park on all sides. I saw a light blue “toy” tram coming to the shore and I climbed on board so that I could see the city. When it started moving, I was the only passenger left. Later an army officer got in and sat a long way away from me. On my way I saw a low building with a group of people carved in stone around it. I realised this was an important monument. I approached the officer and asked him if he would be so kind as to explain what it was. He looked at me, gave me a contemptuous glance – and did not say a word.

I travelled the entire line in this trolley car and then got into another, which also had no passengers. I went around the beautiful fortress city, without learning any details. I did not dare approach other army officers and virtually no people were dressed in ordinary civilian clothes. I hurried back to the harbour, to my *Nicholas II*, which still waited for me. Compared with the dreadnoughts berthed in the bay facing the sea, my ship seemed like a little boat.

I sat on the deck of the boat sailing not far from the coast, parallel to the

land, enabling me to look at the Crimean Peninsula, with its pleasant climate and beautiful scenery. Not far from me and a couple of other passengers a man was looking through binoculars at the mountains rising up from the coast, telling his wife their names: “The Swallows Nest”, the well-known “Aya Petri” Mountain and more.

Nearby, the Alufka and Alyutsha villages were visible between the rock cliffs. Wealthy Jews liked to go there to spend the summer.

At dusk, the ship approached the slope of the mountain embracing most of the hilly area in Crimea, known as Yela, with the magnificent walled city of Yalta at the foot of the mountains. This was where the Czar and his family had their Winter Palace. The governor of the city – an administrative unit that ruled the area for several years – was the notorious Jew-hater, Dombadza, who forbade any Jew from setting foot in Yalta, even if only to visit for a short while, passing through on a ship, even for a brief stay.

There was a rumour that gendarmes were stationed on the shore and when they saw a Jew, they would stop him and immediately return him to the ship. I tried my luck. I went on shore abuzz with luxury carriages and smartly dressed tourists speaking different languages, filling the level road up to the shoreline. I managed there. Possibly it was because I was not recognised as a Jew by my features or the evening was dark. I walked along the main road for about half an hour without meeting Dombadza or seeing his subordinates. Then I fled.

I stayed on deck to sleep. I looked up at the azure sky and its concealed stars. When I turned on my left side, I glanced at the land, which was close to the sea and they seemed to have a friendly relationship. Both of them brought sleep to my eyes. When I awoke I had to get ready to disembark at the town of Theodosia, my last stop on the Black Sea. The entire region was in the Jewish Pale of Settlement, with the sole exception of Sevastopol and Yalta, which the governor removed from the Pale on his own initiative. But both were already behind me.

Many ships from different countries were docked in Theodosia, most carrying cargo. It was not a large town. It contained many ancient ruins that people had preserved well – caves and spaces with drawings from Greek culture, that looked as if they had been restored, without their beauty being harmed.

The Jews living there looked different from Lithuanian Jews, being more like other peoples and strange to me. I knew that Crimea was where the Karaites lived, but they were concentrated in the city of Yevpetoria, where their *Chacham* (rabbi) lived. I did not meet them either in Theodosia or Kerch.

In the morning I bathed several times in the sea, holding onto a large rope tied to the piles on the land, in the company of other people, without venturing into the deep wahter close to the shore – I did not even attempt anything that could endanger my life in the depths without holding onto something firm. A few days later, I travelled by train to Kerch.

There I looked for a Jewish man who knew the head of the Institution for Craft Education well. I found him and told him why I had come. He welcomed me and assured me he would assist in obtaining the necessary document for the “sacred objective” at a reasonable fee and advised me to wait until it was arranged. One Friday morning, he invited me to the beach, where I visited him often. An ordinary-looking Jew came out of one of the houses, but he was the person I needed. We exchanged some polite words and I realised he was prepared to help me get what I wanted in return for a certain payment.

In the meantime, I was free to do as I wished. I toured the city, which was interesting historically and geographically. I saw an ancient synagogue deep underground and also caves containing original drawings. I would walk up a hill that appealed to me and one clear day – clouds were the exception – I cast my gaze over the very broad Kerch separating Crimea and the Caucasus, the peaks of the Caucasian mountain range, whose ringing name seemed to be from a magic country. I spent most of the days and evenings on the busy and noisy shoreline, pounded by the waves that pursued each other in never-ending succession.

A month later, I again met with my non-Jewish benefactor. I placed a hundred-rouble note in his hand and he gave me a scroll. This was a long document written on high-quality, heavy paper, in my name, stating that I had become an expert bookbinder. The wording that began: “By order of His Majesty” in large gold letters, with the signatures of the chairman and secretary at the foot.

The certificate gave me strength and courage. I was qualified to live beyond the Pale and even in the holy city – “Saint” Petersburg. I was very satisfied that my wanderings by sea and land – which, incidentally, provided me with great enjoyment because of all the sights I saw – enabled me to achieve my objective.

I gave the intermediary the amount due to him for his “trouble”, but suddenly realised that the money for my expenses was running very low. I went back to Vilna using the shorter route – via Kharkov on the train, giving up travelling back on the Black Sea. I stayed in Kharkov for one day, meeting two of my friends there from my time in Grodno. I realised that the summer holiday was almost over. They were already making preparations for the new

academic year.

I cut short my stay at my home in Vilna, because I wanted to get to St Petersburg as soon as possible to examine the situation of the school “on site” and resolve my doubts, which were giving me sleepless nights.

My conversation with Z Epstein did not provide the details I needed. On the contrary, I gained the impression that the school was far from being in good order. The teachers had not been appointed and they were awaiting the arrival of the secular studies teacher. He advised me to present myself to the chairman of the committee. He also suggested that I make the acquaintance of the communal rabbi, Dr Moshe Elazar Eisenstadt, as the institution was close to his heart.

I enjoyed my interview with the rabbi, but it did not help me much. He was a former teacher himself and close to the Hebrew teachers, but he was very busy in St Petersburg, with its large congregation, which imposed an extremely heavy burden on him. The type of school I was appointed to lead was not clear to him either, although he knew a lot about what was done there. I also went to present myself to the chairman, one of the wealthiest men in the city. His office was in his private home, which rose up magnificently in the main street, Nevsky Prospekt. After greeting me warmly, and having a brief discussion with me, he extended hearty good wishes for my new post and saw me to the door.

The chairman of the school was the kind of communal official who arrived at the general meeting of his society once a year, made an enthusiastic speech about the importance of the institution he headed – in this instance an educational institution – and expressed his appreciation for the assistance of all the members of the committees and their helpers who contributed in practical ways towards achieving its lofty aims. As soon as he had finished speaking, while the applause was still filling the hall, he was already on his way to the car and, saying, “I shall see you again”. He promised to appear once more the following year, G-d willing.

My initial efforts to find a place to stay failed, after a great deal of trouble and a lot of errors and mistakes. Many of my friends and acquaintances, who had already made arrangements as artisans, failed to assist me directly. The reason, apparently, was the fear that if someone else were to break into their limited area and penetrate their space, their own “suitability” would break down. They were scared this would endanger them, as “charity begins at home”.

Eventually I met with one of the members of the committee who explained to me in great and precise detail, what I had to bear in mind to arrange and

implement my right of residence. Firstly, I had to find somebody involved in my official occupation who wanted to employ me. A certain member of the committee would agree to his – a wealthy person who was influential in the Trades Office. We had to enter into an official agreement stating that I would work for him. I then had to contact the “passportist” and determine the fixed bribe according to the general rate. Then I would receive my passport, which would be brought to me by the main guard of the building in which I lived. This would be practical confirmation of my residence permit, as if I were a real artisan.

I am still very grateful to this friendly Jewish man, who at the time showed me the correct way to reach the destination I wanted and smoothed my entire difficult path – I was saved from the difficulties I faced as a result of my lack of experience.

The contract with the person giving me work was not signed by me in his presence, but was arranged. At eight o'clock the next morning, the day things were going to change for the better, I found my way to the entrance easily. It was marked by a small, but prominent sign, bearing the name Nikolai Ivanovich Grodzinski, the person responsible for the passports in the police district in which I had to live.

The passport officials bearing this title were appointed only to check the right of the Jews beyond the Pale. They had to check that the passports of Jews who were not allowed to live beyond the Pale would be returned. The holders of these passports would be arrested and taken in an “*eitap*” with criminal detainees who would walk great distances on foot, through snow, swamps, cold or hot weather, until they were returned to the place where they were allowed to be in terms of their official documents – and not where they had lived, if they had settled elsewhere.

The lowly passport official, who earned a minimal salary, would usually agree to treat Jews who were involved in trade or employed in positions kindly, without making them move elsewhere, in exchange for a fixed reward at the time. A fiver (a five-rouble note) the first time and afterwards, for Christmas and Easter, and in the event of a break as a result of leave during the year – a “triple” (a three-rouble note) on each of these “festivals” or “events”.

I already abhorred this bribery from my time in Kerch, but in St Petersburg, it was the way things were done. In spite of the way I felt, I adapted to these conditions.

I rang the bell. A maid opened the door and Nikolai Grodzinski appeared a few moments later. Our discussion was extremely short and very pleasant.

He understood the purpose of my visit from the first handshake, when I pressed a concealed “fiver” into his hand – and we parted like old friends. I was glad I did not encounter any competition, because only this hour, between eight and nine in the morning, was available for guest interviews. I heard stories that if two people arrived at the same time, the first would hide from the second guest in the clothes cupboard. Two or three cupboards were visible in the small apartment, with a mobile chair between them, taking up a large amount of space in the centre of the room – and what for?

(It was a known fact that for many years, the poet S Frug was forced officially to serve as a caretaker for a lawyer so that he could have the right of residence in St Petersburg.)

The next morning, the main guard looked at me enthusiastically and respectfully in the corridor and asked: “Isn’t it late to be going to your ‘slozhva’ [job]?” This was a clear indication that everything was in order with the police and therefore the time had come to give him, “the faithful servant”, something.

While my residence permit in the capital city was being arranged, I spent sleepless nights, plagued by serious concerns.

One of them was my confidence and assurance about handling my post, ready to penetrate the fundamentals of my work as far as possible and getting a true picture of the character of the school. I had crossed the Rubicon to the capital and was concentrating on the essence of my objective. I met the teachers at the school, who would be my colleagues in the near future. However, I felt that there were grounds for some uncertainty about whether they would be my partners in this creative endeavour or, at least, agree with me on what I did.

I met the new teacher Rochel Ilanisha Frumkin. In a conversation that day with Z Epstein, I informed him that I was not accepting the office of principal and it would be better to give it to a teacher who made a better impression. After all, I was just a young teacher with only four years’ experience, and doubted whether I could adapt to management in a place where working conditions differed from those in Vilna or in Bialystok, not what I was accustomed to. I therefore wanted to see how things developed. There were lengthy negotiations on this matter. The teacher, Frumkin, was offered the post of headmistress and, to my satisfaction, she did not refuse it.

CHAPTER 21

BEYOND THE PALE

On the face of it, I had earned the promotion – from Vilna to St Petersburg, from the position of a teacher to the rank of headmaster. This was the impression in Grodno and the view of my friends when they learnt of the important change in my type of work and location. But this was not really the case. I regarded it as a kind of demotion. I did not become headmaster and had no regrets about what I had done. In any event, from the outset, St Petersburg was not a city and environment I regarded as beneficial to my work. It seemed to me that I had moved out of my area, my Pale, and had shifted beyond the Pale. I felt that I was outside the camp.

The school had several classes, each with only a few pupils. The curriculum provided for almost the same number of hours of study for Hebrew and secular subjects, but it lacked the pulse of movement and life in teaching, advancing its pupils and, in general, fruitful activity of the teachers.

RA Frumkin, the teacher who was appointed as headmistress, acquired much expertise in her subjects through experience and wanted to enrich her teaching. The teacher who was second in seniority, however – and I was not wrong in my assessment – settled for quantity rather than quality. Even her educational abilities, to my mind, were doubtful. Another teacher, who was apparently a methodical expert in general studies, had written a national reader in Russian for Jewish pupils. He also measured the material taught only in terms of the time allocated. The fourth teacher, a student at a particular high school, had no teaching experience and had no idea of how to control his students and did not manage to do so. These were the general teachers.

Six staff members were involved in teaching Hebrew. Apart from me, one had a good knowledge of Hebrew and appropriate educational views. Another wanted to further her studies in practical teaching. Two of them were “reverends”, one a rabbi of a small community in one of the suburbs, who was excessively observant, and the second was a kind of “holy vessel”. Both were far removed from Hebrew theory and teaching. Their role included teaching the students “old” Hebrew and prayers, laws and customs. The language of instruction was spoken Russian – the pupils were not familiar with Yiddish – and because these “learned men” were regarded by their pupils as “stammerers”, they did not have much of a positive influence on their classes. Another teacher would come for an hour or two to teach a class which had absorbed students like a “city of refuge”. The students were different ages

and did not have the same levels of knowledge. They were there for “any kind of education” in Judaism. This teacher gave the impression of being an intellectual and was a good disciplinarian in class.

I saw myself in an environment of a large teaching staff for the classes, with few pupils in the school, which had more shade than light – its faults beyond repair or fundamental improvement, in spite of the great care and attention on the part of the teachers and educators who were worthy of the name.

The committee showed interest with significant devotion and wanted the school to survive and develop for the good of the pupils and their parents. One of the committee members, a businessman and intellectual, would participate in council meetings, representing the committee, taking part in the discussions in a pleasant way. However, the soul of the institution appeared tarnished.

Rabbi Dr MA Eisenstadt would sometimes visit the classes in good taste, showing them much affection.

The pupils’ attendance was generally fairly good and their attitude was reasonable. However, the mothers and fathers never came to enquire about the progress of their children, as if they did not care at all about their education and studies. It seemed as if the northern cold prevailed there.

Even though it was not in their presence, I spoke out in defence of the parents. They could have sent their children to government schools for the purpose of secular studies alone. The only thing that attracted them to our school was what they saw as its “Jewish” content, in spite of their indifferent attitude to it.

I had the impression that some kind of organic disease was gnawing at the school and it was difficult to tend the weak points of the institution. The number of pupils neither decreased nor increased, as if cast in stone from the six days of Creation.

I felt that my wings had been clipped after my arrival from Bialystok and Vilna. I tried to bring some inspiration into my environment, but for months it did not progress as I had wished. Nevertheless, after a long time, the attitude of my pupils towards fulfilling their obligations improved, their interest grew and they made good progress – spiritually and mentally elevated, even though it was slow.

At the beginning of the academic year, at the time of the High Holy Days and the autumn festivals, I devoted several lessons to their content and essence, their holiness and value in Jewish life. One typical event revealed to me a little

of the mysterious lives of the Jewish children in St Petersburg. When I told the top class of the importance of complete rest on the Sabbath, of the holiness of the day of *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement) and how the Jews related to it in awe and reverence, all the pupils paid careful attention. A twelve-year-old boy sat on the first bench to my right. He was passive, with a sad, lean face, quiet. During the discussion of the holiest day of the year, this swarthy boy raised his hand as if he was requesting permission to speak. He stood up and told the entire class: "But my father, a tailor, sat all the time on Yom Kippur last year 'at the table', as he usually did every day and every evening." He was clearly speaking the truth and it made a deep and depressing impression.

When I would spice up something being studied in the Bible with a stimulating legend, spreading light on an idea or adding or explaining something about the character of the hero of the story, a boy of thirteen or fourteen whose face clearly showed that he had already witnessed a lot in life and been hurt, would come out with a statement such as: "I do not believe it, I don't like legends." It seemed that his life was bitter and feelings of despair and disappointment were not foreign to him. He would push away from his imagination any hint of fancy, something unreal, like an embittered old man.

I saw this pupil as a type of boy who grew up in a large city without an environment that nurtured and educated him and who came into contact with life in all its starkness. Nevertheless, in his class he behaved politely, with self-restraint and paid serious attention to his studies.

In looking at unwelcome phenomena among my pupils, I would place the blame on the peculiar conditions prevalent outside the "Paleness" to which we were subject. That, in fact, was what caused the abnormality and perhaps also the demoralisation and delay in unalloyed and progressive development.

The Jewish community in the capital city, which usually enjoyed a comfortable material life, was not religiously observant and its deficient national identity revealed a clear and prominent tendency towards assimilation – which led to excessive indifference to the problems of Jewish education.

I felt I had to accept the idea that there was no appropriate ground in St Petersburg to grow the desire for an educational revival, for the rebirth of our language and increasing national feeling through original Jewish views among the youth of school age, who seemed "detached".

But my efforts in the direction of a spiritual awakening and preparing the young hearts were not lost altogether; they began to flower and became fertile, flourished and were crowned with satisfaction, in the context of the local conditions and the period.

Apart from my work at the school, I was also involved in private teaching

in the homes of well-known communal officials, who saw to it that their children received a Jewish education, such as the lawyers Slyuzberg and Bramson, the latter a Member of Parliament, as well as in adult groups who wanted to further their knowledge of Jewish history and Judaism in general from a modern viewpoint.

The tidings of the war, which broke out in 1914, terrified Russia and even more so, the Jews living there. In 1915, when the flow of refugees arriving from Lithuania, Poland and White Russia in the interior of Russia and its capital cities increased, the government itself destroyed the enclosed region that confined the Jews within its narrow borders and their situation changed completely. Russian Jews were totally shaken after being uprooted from where they lived, but plucked up courage and a new spirit as the waves of war died down. The spiritual, national and public revival struck deep roots and there was a reawakening in all areas of public activity, particularly against the background of education.

In the wake of the expulsions as a result of the war, burning internal questions arose in this new historic period, with heart-wrenching and searing pain and humiliation.

As a result of informers in the general population, who falsely accused the Jews, particularly in Poland, of spying for the enemy, the army supreme command accepted the shameful libel without investigating or checking it. Openly suspicious of the Jews, they adopted firm measures to suppress the “Jewish espionage”, taking prominent civilians hostage, who were executed without trial. One of them was the Plotzk rabbi, who was “sentenced” to death after being accused of making contact with the enemy with gestures of “bodily movements” when he was praying on the porch of his home while covered in his *tallit* and *tefillin*.

Then the expulsion of Lithuanian Jewry was decreed. All the residents of the Kovno province had to leave within a day and the same thing happened in many places in Poland.

These exiles, refugees because of the defenders of their homeland, had to uproot themselves from their homes and move far away, to the interior of Russia.

Mercilessly persecuted, the refugees abandoned their homes and all their immovable possessions, taking with them only the movables, but these were scattered, lost and stolen on the way – even the rich and well-off were ruined.

The old, the sick, women and children suffered severe hardship – shortages, hunger. Most of the refugees, particularly those from the Kovno region, were

loaded onto railway carriages. When they passed through towns whose Jewish residents had not been affected by the expulsion decree, those Jews came out and generously extended assistance to them. However, the authorities did not permit this help to be granted.

The military command instructed the Yiddish and Hebrew press to stop appearing throughout Russia, even before the defeat of the Russian army and the great retreat of its soldiers in the height of the flood from the Western front. The Russian Jewish press remained only in St Petersburg, and censorship wrought havoc on entire pages that were left empty and white, even in those sections containing the list of Jewish soldiers who had distinguished themselves in battle.

Public opinion, however, was fortified in meetings and conferences. This was done through a very influential element in St Petersburg and Moscow that affected the Jews of Russia in general. At the conferences, they discussed various matters of great significance to Judaism, particularly the Jewish Renaissance. These subjects arose with regard to uprooting many communities and rebuilding them on a new foundation.

The children of the refugees were a severe problem. Their education had to be arranged by establishing schools for them. Yet a severe shortage of teachers was felt. In some centres in the southern towns, the Increasing Education Society started quick, short courses, during which they prepared teachers who were absolutely necessary to instruct Jewish children. Schools were set up in Tambov and other towns on the banks of the Volga, whose Russian residents could not believe their eyes when they met a Jew and saw that he, too, was a human being, actually created in their image. A Jewish spirit began to hover in places where Jews had been totally forbidden even to set foot – by virtue of the simple words of schoolchildren.

I remember well one of the conferences in Petrograd,⁸ in which our great poet, the late HN Bialik, participated. There he declared his watchword, his desire to see Jewish children whose *“voice was the voice of Jacob and life was the life of Esau”*.

In the meantime, as the defeats and retreats of the Russian army on the battlefield increased and the numbers of dead and wounded grew, there were more frequent conscriptions. People who had been released from their army work twenty years earlier were called up, as well as young people who had not reached army age, eighteen. These “calls” caused confusion and dread among fathers and sons, Jews, who sought every artifice to get out

⁸ The name of St Petersburg was changed to Petrograd when the war broke out

of being recruited, but could not find them easily.

I, too, had been released when I was called up because of a particular privilege, as an only child maintaining his family, but was now called up. I was still hopeful I would be released because of my short-sightedness.

I went to a leading specialist, who examined me and concluded that I should not be attached to the army. I received an extremely important document describing my defective eyesight from Professor Bilirminoff of the Government Military Academy in St Petersburg, named after His Majesty, the Emperor of all the Russias, etc, etc.

The place of my enlistment was the public baths, which had insufficient appropriate space for the number of people. It had no furniture, apart from three or four tables and chairs for the doctors. The room was full of recruits from the years set out in the recruitment declarations. An army officer, a short man with eyes like a rat, his face full of anger, lost his temper as he glared at one of the doctors who took some time to find a chair on which he could sit for his work. He turned to the doctors, announcing: "Only a person who needs transport to his funeral today may be sent for a medical examination, but not somebody whose grave is being prepared for tomorrow!" I can still remember every detail and aspect of this order.

Shocked at these words of the officer, I was the first to approach the doctor in the centre. I told him about my poor vision. After hearing the order of the commanding officer, he didn't know how to behave towards me. For my part, I gave him the certificate from Prof B. The doctor was confused and approached the officer hesitantly: "This man has a certificate from the professor at the academy named after His Majesty..." The officer interrupted the doctor with an order: "For medical examination!" But the recruit standing to my right, who complained about his heart disease, was pushed by the doctor to the group of people able to serve in the army.

After spending four days in the hospital as a "patient", I was examined by a well-known Jewish doctor, a member of the Increasing Education Society committee – we knew each other "a little" – and he informed me that I had been disqualified for army service.

A few weeks later, I had to go to the army office - it occupied a grandiose building in the centre of the city - to receive my white ticket (instead of the blue I had previously), that released me from the army because of a disability. I then paid attention to new recruitment notices for a date in September on which Yom Kippur fell. The results of the previous recruitment in favour of those called up had been cancelled.

I soon learnt that Section 37, dealing with short-sightedness, had been repealed and they were recruiting again. Rumour had it that this decision was still in dispute, because some of the leading specialists in St Petersburg and Moscow maintained that the German custom of recruiting people who wore glasses was unacceptable. There it was possible quickly to supply all kinds of glasses required for soldiers whose spectacles had been broken or damaged, which was not the case in the Russian camps. In addition, people who wore glasses in the rain or mist were likely to fall, causing failure among many suitable soldiers who had been taken out of their regiments, or undesirable delays in movements that could not be stopped for tactical reasons.

I appeared on the day set for my call-up and a stamp was placed in my passport that I had to appear on 24 October. I departed, caught between hope and despair.

Then I learned the fact that the mayor, Count AA Tolstoi, a liberal, had made representations to the military authorities and managed to have teachers at municipal schools excluded from the recruitment and to have those who were already in the campaign returned to their posts, as without them, teaching would fail completely.

I spoke to my inspector about this and he gave me a non-committal reply. The matter was brought to the Ministry of Education, which was able to act in the desired direction, but the Jew hatred of the main official in the department, Stankowitz, a Pole, did not permit him to release me and my other colleagues, including Yechezkel Han (a member of the Knesset who died in the Nissan (April) 1952. In 1953 I participated in the ceremony to unveil his tombstone. May his memory be a blessing.)

Then Rabbi Dr Eisenstadt intervened and made representations to the municipality. The interview was on *Simchat Torah* and for that reason, he came to the synagogue after the *hakafot* (going round the synagogue with the Torah scrolls on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles), but to no avail. The version accepted by the officials was that headquarters did not intend to extend this benefit to the Jewish schools.

I heard a rumour from a trusted source that there was a town in Russia where Section 37 remained in force, Tzaritzin on the Volga – now Stalingrad. Because the repeal of Section 37 still had very influential opponents among the specialist professors, I said to myself that until the matter was decided, possibly leniently, I would travel there to try to obtain a release.

On my way I arrived in Kozlov, a large junction, where I had to change to another line to go to Tzaritzin. An official came up to me and, for a fee of

three roubles, offered to put me in a carriage where I could sit. I soon saw that the train on which I had to travel was chock-full of people, even on the couplings between the carriages. I quickly paid the amount required and was brought in through a broken, open window.

I felt like a foreigner among the people of “Greater Russia”, but I became accustomed to them during the day-long journey.

Three stops before Tzaritzin, my destination, a gendarme entered to examine the passports of the passengers. I was the exception on the bench, the fifth after four places taken up not only by the people sitting there, but also by their heavy parcels. Half my body stuck out and anyone passing the people sitting in my compartment was sure to notice me in the narrow passage between two sections.

The passports of those travelling with me were in good order, as their holders were “pure” Russians, above the age of fifty, close to sixty. But me! The stamp my passport bore specifically stated that I had to appear before the officer in charge of the army recruits late in October in St Petersburg – or Petrograd – but I was travelling through Russia in the middle of November in spite of the specific “order”. Was it even possible to think I would not be arrested as a deserter from army duty and handed over to a military court? I don’t remember where my heart was then and in which universe my ideas took flight, but it seemed to me that my soul had departed from my body.

Yet something exceptional, very unusual, happened. The gendarme kept his eyes open, concentrating fiercely on every passenger in my compartment, but his piercing gaze passed me by and this meticulous examiner did not take my presence into account. He walked through without asking me anything. This “simple” event was, for me, a great miracle that occurs only once in a lifetime.

I continued on my way, feeling so happy I could almost not contain it, until my arrival in Tzaritzin. I found the school easily. Its principal, Mr Dubrovski, who was known to me as a result of the rumour, was the person who had replaced me in the *Talmud Torah* in Bialystok after the cancellation of the “boycott”.

We met like old friends. When I told him why I had come, he said I had done well. Everything would be arranged properly – today still, at three o’clock in the afternoon, he would see the secretary of the army office. All I had to do was give him a three-rouble note to hand to the secretary “for his trouble” in registering my name among the recruits for enlistment during the next session at the beginning of the month. It was a pity I had not arrived a few days earlier, before the list of recruits, which appeared twice a month, had been drawn up. Had I arrived at the beginning of the previous week,

I would already have been free, but not to worry. If I wanted to go to his house that evening, I would meet teachers, some of whom would certainly be friends and acquaintances. The next day, when I would go to the school, I would be honoured by delivering a lesson in one of the classes.

We spent the evening in the company of various teachers who came to Moscow from Kiev and guests from the four corners of Russia. The next day, I went to the Jewish school. Its pupils were the children of refugees from many places in the Jewish Pale, young people with feeling and understanding, small Jews in high and exquisite spirits. I particularly enjoyed being in their company every day in the lesson, in conversation and in serious study.

There was a fairly good Jewish troupe in the town. Their frequent performances were well-known and enjoyable, because, “may the evil eye have no power”, there were many Jews there. It did not take long to become acquainted with people, at the first meeting and in a brief discussion: “In the glass business?”, “What is the rate – good?”, “No reduction?” In the home of every well-off and not so well-off family, there were guests for a week or two. They were different types; in some cases fathers came with their sons to avoid the call-up.

I enjoyed going around the town, which was not particularly large, and walking on the banks of the wide Volga, the mother of Russian rivers. There were many converts in this town, who had a special house of prayer. Their prayer books were translated into Russian and they prayed in this language. They observed the commandments more strictly than the Jews. To the Jews, they were like gentiles who observed such precepts. Our sages said of them that they kept the Jewish commandments more scrupulously and to a greater extent than Jews. Many of them owned wagons and carriages. I heard it said of them that on Fridays, they would stop their work in the afternoon because of the holiness of the Sabbath. Very few of them knew Torah or understood the spirit of the religion. There was no spiritual closeness between them and the Jews because their origins and material standards were a barrier.

On Friday, at the beginning of December, the date set for the enlistment, Jews began to stream to the army office opposite the market on the banks of the river. The non-Jews regarded them curiously. I heard one of them ask another: “Excuse me, please tell me, where do so many *Zhids* come here from?” (*Zhid* is a pejorative term for “Jew”).

I reached the table of the chairman, with the officials around him, including the doctor. On hearing I had come from St Petersburg, they asked me why I was appearing there to fulfil my army obligation in their town, travelling such a long distance. I replied that as a teacher, I wanted to be useful to the

children of the refugees, as there were not enough teachers in this town, so I came to settle there.

When I handed in the certificate from Bilirminof, the doctor looked as if he wanted to salute him, or at least rise a little from his seat in honour of this high institution, under the protection of His Majesty. I was ordered to go to the hospital at eleven o'clock and the eye doctor would examine me. When I arrived there, we introduced ourselves and became friends. "Please be so kind as to tell me," the doctor asked, "how can this phenomenon of so many short-sighted Jews be explained?" I replied: "We had a custom of placing children in the *cheder* when they were very young, about four. They did not have suitable benches. They sat on high chairs next to uncomfortable tables. Sitting like this caused damage not only to the eyes of the children, but also to their spine." After a friendly discussion, he informed me I had been released from my service in the army. This decision had to be entered in my passport, that was like a booklet, with several pages. This did not satisfy me – I wanted to avoid a contradiction, as one of the pages of my passport contained a stamp from Petrograd indicating that I had not responded to my army call-up that had already been ordered two months earlier. Mr Dubrovski placated me by saying that if I paid a "triple" the secretary would provide me with a special discharge certificate, independently of the passport. I agreed and it was arranged the very same day, enabling me to leave the town on the Saturday night. I prepared supplies, not only for the trip, but for my whole house for several weeks, as in Petrograd there was already a shortage of groceries and various food requirements. I parted cordially from my many acquaintances and went home, glad that I had achieved my objective.

My happiness, however, did not last long. Information reached me that two weeks after I received my release, the situation had changed completely. Everyone who went for the call-up was handed over for army service: the repeal of Section 37 was approved in Tzaritzin as well.

As the certificate issued to me in Tzaritzin had lost its validity there, and even more so in other places, I felt disquiet. Nevertheless, I no longer despaired. When they told me that the best place for being released was the Caucasus, I did not waste time in going there. I knew that this region was like Finland, with far better conditions, as if it was outside the borders of Russia and beyond its control – in any event, both these districts were far from the troubles of war and its concerns.

The frequent call-ups in the large country did not reach the Caucasus (Finland was completely exempt from the enlistment). The men were not sent from there to the battlefields, nor even called up to serve in the army during the war. The same applied to money. When the notes and coins disappeared

after being replaced by stamps and papers of lesser value, this exchange did not apply to the Caucasus: new, shiny silver coins were minted, with the date, 1916, and the notes were in the previous form and shape.

I received a travel permit again from my school, which made the required arrangements without me during the emergency.

The road to the Caucasus was very interesting. I departed from the severe and heavy winter in Petrograd to the area of Kharkov, which was covered in deep snow and the train was delayed for a few hours until the track was cleared. In Rostov-on-Don, torrential rain fell and the ground was covered by thawing ice. I spent about three hours in this city walking around, looking at the beautiful buildings in the main streets and I also walked to the Don, reaching the spot where it ran into the Azov Sea. I returned in a carriage and boarded the train heading south, to the Caucasus region. At dawn, I alighted to find some hot water for my kettle and I felt the change in climate. There was already no hint of snow, which was visible only on the tops of the high mountains, and the air was refreshingly warm with its spring pleasantness. I reached the city of Baku on the Caspian Sea after midnight, on the first of January 1917. The windows of the train station were wide open, allowing the chirping of the birds to enter. The birds were also enjoying the beginning of spring. The trees, however, were dry from the sun and withered by the heat. I had no idea whether this was because the rains had stopped, or it was an ordinary, natural phenomenon.

I found the local Hebrew teacher, Mr Shapira, easily. I told him why I had come. He went to a Jewish man to ask him to register me at the police station with my passport and this registration would give me the right to live in the Caucasus, something even more strictly prohibited to a Jew than in other regions in the interior of Russia and even in the capital cities. The Jewish man was equipped with a banknote that had a fair value, to be presented as a gift to the official in charge of registration. However, as soon as he saw the police stamp of the city of Petrograd in my passport, he looked no further and asked no questions. He registered me immediately, because the holder of the passport, me, appeared extremely well connected and the banknote given to him was returned without being used – and also without achieving the desired objective.

I realised that the new “discharge note” was an impossibility for me. I spent about a month in Baku. I looked at the local Asian and European customs, the old city and its new section, built in the modern style. These areas divided the population as well. Everything seemed strange and different in my eyes.

I did not go into Jewish life there in any detail because I was not given the

opportunity. Anyway, there were very few Jews.

I also managed to visit the oil fields, which I found most interesting.

I gave all my attention to the north, to the capital. Even in November it was full of storms portending a revolution. I read the newspapers eagerly - they reached Baku three days late. Many clear signs of cracks were visible already in the absolute government - although there was a parliament which by that time served as an opposition to this regime. The government began to collapse, declining with the frequent replacements of its leaders, but then rising again, only to fall further.

I returned home in February. On my arrival in Petrograd, I went to the home of a relative, Meron Horwitz, who returned the same day from the Baltic region, having been only partially discharged. He then came to my house. We waited until we both felt secure in our homes.

For over two weeks, I would leave my house early in the morning, spend time at the school and with relatives, friends and acquaintances, until ten o'clock at night, when I returned to my family. This was a way of hiding from the main guard, from the police, when there were no grounds for me to fulfil my military obligation. My friend and relative, M Horwitz, did the same.

One clear day at the end of February I was amazed to see hundreds of people from the ranks of the workers walking slowly on the pavements of the Nevsky Prospekt, as if they had nothing to do. In the middle of the wide street, there was a long line of electric trams and the file grew longer by the minute. Was this what had caused the traffic jam?

I arrived not far from the Kazan house of prayer (the Sobor) (the Cathedral of St Isaac of Dalmatia). Its massive golden dome glinted in all its glory in the sunlight, while a group of demonstrators, most of them women and young people, appeared across from it, in a disorderly manner, bearing small red flags made from women's headscarves tied to simple sticks. There were three to four hundred of them. They moved as they chanted in low voices: "Bread!", "Bread, please!" The people walking on the pavements stopped in total passivity to look at the demonstrators, without taking part.

From a distance, I saw Cossacks gathered on the Kazan square, led by officers, and behind them, gendarmes with their officers. The Cossacks were always loyal to the government and could impose order, stop the people causing a disturbance and behaving in an unruly manner. They were known for persecuting and abusing the people, lashing out with cruel enthusiasm with their whips in the event of an uprising or the suspicion of a revolt, while the gendarmes were the strongest and firmest among the peace employees

trained to act energetically and punish the masses and political criminals.

The demonstration progressed slowly and almost imperceptibly because of the small number of people and uninspiring movement, but it did move forward. The commanding officer of the Cossacks began to scream, writhe and stand up in furious anger on his horse, giving orders to his people: "Attack!" The demonstrators deserved to be trampled, until there was the peace of destruction. The others, in the meantime, made ready to pursue the masses "holding a procession", but not with the Cossack fury. When they drew near to the "marchers", they surprised the people watching them by not attacking, but suddenly standing still. Lines were drawn across the road in order to "swallow" the demonstration, quickly formed up in rows, or, more correctly, in one line along the length of the road, very carefully moving into the midst of the people calling for bread, one after the other, without harming anybody. The demonstrators, including many women, suddenly realised the Cossacks were not coming to trample them under the hooves of the horses, but were unexpectedly being friendly, which they demonstrated by hand movements. The Cossacks, for their part, also began to show the crowd signs of calming down and all the people on the pavements burst out into very enthusiastic applause. The Cossacks were surrounded by the demonstrators and thousands of the people walking on the pavements. They all joined together with open affection, the persecutors and persecuted, becoming a single camp, calm, quiet and seeking peace.

Then the gendarmes, armed with swords and rifles, broke ranks, following their own inclinations, riding their horses drawn up in lines right across the width of the street and began pushing hard and pressing the grandiose procession in the direction of the Nikolaev Railway Station. After passing over the Anitchkin Bridge, it began to disperse along the side roads.

Everybody realised, however, that it was not the gendarmes who dispersed the people by force, but the Cossacks, who joined with the women and the youth demonstrating and with the large crowds. In this way, the gates of the Nevsky Prospekt were breached and the flow of the Russian Revolution began quietly, almost restfully, with a sense of the majesty of victory sprouting and blossoming, growing and flourishing over the vile and the rotten.

When the curtain was lifted again on the background of the revolution, it was found that the main part in the first act was played by the Cossacks, the most reactionary element in the army. The decisive stage came about because of the uprising of the Lithuanian (Litovsky), the Volhynian army regiments and one other whose name escapes me. In a huge procession, with tens of thousands of participants, including the teachers, there were Plekhanov, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, who had returned from exile,

and Kirpichnikov, a non-commissioned officer, who raised the banner of revolution against the rule of the Czar – and the revolution reached its peak. Both of them embraced and kissed in this procession next to the residence of the British representative, Sir Buchanan, the ambassador in Petrograd, who spoke to the crowd from his balcony, congratulating the Russian people on the success of the revolution.

There were many moments of happiness, when the people were reborn into a new life, to a constitutional, modern government, to idealistic activity and constructive creation. But the great Russian “bloodless” revolution lasted only a few months. A tremendous national awakening occurred in Jewish public life. The removal of their “legal” restrictions opened the gates to them across the length and breadth of Russia, a great and fruitful Zionist Congress in Petrograd – all these aroused many pleasant hopes among the Jews in the areas of trade, industry and freedom of movement, as well as national opportunities beyond the boundaries of Russia and a general improvement of their condition. In the city park in our neighbourhood, I once met with NA Grodzinski, who used to deal with the passports, walking around doing nothing at a time when he was usually in his office, while he was still employed. It was now clear that he had been dismissed, as the post had been cancelled when completely equal rights were granted to Jews. I saw that he was not only out of work, but the left half of his body was paralysed. We recognised each other. Our mutual morning greeting was “silent”, without a word, but without a hint of hatred.

The fear of enlistment also passed. It was ordered again and everyone who was called up responded, but those previously “unfit” for service, like me, were totally disqualified.

My school faced a crisis that brought it near to closing. Intensive Zionist work began in the capital and I was called on to accept the task of being the secretary of the Municipal Zionist Committee. Its chairman was Dr Alexander Salkind, who also served as the chairman of the Petrograd community (elected on the basis of the new election legislation) and I worked together with Mr R Rubinstein from Kovno. The offices were in a beautiful, comfortable building and the working conditions were pleasant, until the Bolsheviks rose to power. Then Zionist activity began to shrivel.

The Second Revolution, of the Bolsheviks, was in October. It brought many disappointments and a counter-revolution, both of which wrought terrible destruction among the Jews.

They were followed by the famine that worsened every month and every week. So long as food parcels were received from my sister in the Ukraine

(she was expelled with her family from Kovno), from the town of Romny, the question of survival was not particularly serious. Later, my younger sister, who came to me during the war and settled well in Petrograd, was the one who supported us with staple foods, particularly for the young children. And when she was unable to assist, we decided to leave the Russian capital.

In July 1918, I happened to be with a Jewish nursing sister who was planning to move with her brother to the Ukraine (which was under German control, together with the Ukrainians), and she offered to help us to cross the border.

Frequent searches were made on behalf of the new regime in the homes of the citizens of Leningrad (as it was then called, after the names St Petersburg and Petrograd had been removed by the Bolsheviks, who governed there). They left only the subjects of other countries alone and did not confiscate their food. I was thinking of returning to Poland, to Vilna, that had been annexed to it. I obtained a protection certificate from the Polish charge d'affaires, Ladnitzki, who lived in Leningrad, and was considered safe from unwanted visits from the authorities. (This certificate later proved very useful to me in Vilna.)

Before our departure, Dr Eiger approached me with an offer to remain to be in charge of a school he was going to establish, *Beit Shmuel*. He was an enlightened Jew and had become a public official a year or two earlier. He was optimistic in his view of the new regime. He believed it would not last long and the "Jewish ember" should be preserved so that it was not extinguished. The capital of Russia should not be left without a Jewish school. The Jews would soon return and Jewish studies would start again. I did not agree with his view on the political situation. On the contrary, my despair grew.

Our final decision was to travel, to leave Russia. I went to the treasurer of the municipal committee to return to him the documents and the money that I held— to balance the accounts. He lived far away and by the time the matter had been completed, it was already two hours past midnight and the electric transport stopped at eleven. I therefore had to walk a long way, for three hours, when I was very tired. I had to pack the things we were going to take with us early in the morning and arrange for those that would remain. We abandoned almost everything, a rich library, furs, mine and my wife's, and the furniture. I knew we would never return to the capital and the people who were looking after our possessions without payment would never return them to us.

After a difficult journey and thanks to the assistance of the "sister", we arrived in Ursa, a town on the Russian border and the post across from the border, controlled by two commandants: German and Ukrainian.

There, in the Ukraine, I obtained bread, two warm loaves, that had been taken out of the oven and could be spread with delicious butter and eaten – enough to upset an empty stomach, over-eating.

At that border post, Devorah, my wife, was informed by her cousin, who had arrived in Moscow, of the death of her parents – I had known this secret for two years already – and she fainted and could not move from the bench at the border post until after midnight.

This was followed by a string of troubled adventures: first to Hümmel, where the family of my wife's uncle had found shelter. In this city, we found a beautiful new building erected by the community and there were also Jewish educational institutions from kindergarten to gymnasium. Dr A Salkind, who had left Leningrad and returned to his birthplace in Hümmel, offered me a good teaching post on very acceptable terms, but I did not want it. I believed that the place of the revived Jewish spirit was outside both Russia and the “independent” Ukraine, that was in fact under German rule. From there, we travelled to Kremenchuk, where the uncle lived, and on to Holta-Bogopol-Olyopol, three villages – described with great skill by Sholem Aleichem – that are one. And back, in the hope of receiving a travel permit in one of those places on the “*ashlon*”, a train for refugees returning to the places where they had lived before the war. With great difficulty, I managed to obtain such a document in Kremenchug.

In the meantime, my basket, which had been sent as freight from Leningrad, had not been returned to me. After investigating and enquiring about it, the clerk at the station advised me to ask for my basket in Kharkov.

When I arrived there, I received no clear answer about it, but only a comment: “Go away and come back tomorrow.” I was not the only one engaged in such searches. I met dozens of people whose property had gone astray on the railway. I was offered a basket similar to my own, but when it was opened to show me its contents, I saw it was full of pieces of leather prepared for making shoes, worth over several thousand roubles. One man, who had also spent weeks visiting the station, turned to me and told me he had been offered a basket that he assumed was the one that belonged to me. The official assisted us in clearing up the mistake and exchanging our baskets. I received mine back and he received his. When my “comrade” in this distress found out that I had not agreed to take his basket instead of my own, he became emotional and said he would give me several hundred roubles in appreciation of my honesty, which had spared him a loss of many thousands. I thanked him, but refused to accept it, saying I wanted no reward for being honest.

After my return to Kremenchuk, sitting on my basket in the luggage carriage

day and night, my foot was swollen from the lack of cleanliness on the train, in which more people travelled than a “coop” full of chickens. When I had regained my strength and my ability to walk, we left for Hümmeľ and from there, in a long train, with carriages bearing numbers: 8 horses; 40 people. An unsorted surplus was added to this, as well as many parcels of people imprisoned in our carriage – but the train did not move. When will it depart, when will we reach our destination on the way to Pinsk-Bialystok-Vilna? Nobody knew the answer. Carriages were missing and now steam engines were lacking. The reason – a revolution had broken out in Germany and the Russian armies had to be transported to the border – that was what they were whispering, but nobody knew when it would be possible to leave the carriage to get provisions.

Eventually the train moved and for three days it was dragged along and brought to the Luninč Station. There we stopped for a few days. A delegation of women went out to entreat the station commandant to order the train to move, to rescue them and their babies from hunger, thirst and the unclean pollution. One man, a refugee from Vilna, never left the carriage, placing his full body over his parcels. When it became necessary to close the carriage doors, the stench was unbearable. We finally arrived in Pinsk. There we were stopped by the Germans and placed in quarantine for three days. I demanded an exit permit for a passenger train. I was punished for my “impertinence” by being denied my portion of food for an entire day. The permit was eventually given to me in spite of the German official. We departed in a comfortable passenger carriage thirty-six hours later. We arrived in Vilna where every inch of the city clearly showed the privations of the war.

CHAPTER 22

VILNA UNDER THE STEAMROLLER...

On October 18, 1918, the three of us returned to Vilna: Devorah, Baruch and me. There were still Germans in the city. They had been defeated in the war, which had reached its end.

The city gave the impression of being derelict and abandoned, deserted by the Jews, the best of the citizens. The shoes of the women and children, with clattering wooden soles that echoed from a distance and laces like grey strings or thin cables, were a clear sign to me of poverty and misery. There

were many such signs. The conquerors emptied the city of many kinds of goods, which they sent to Germany. Many of the German soldiers traded in government property, which they sold cheaply: flour, sugar and the like, in quantities of sacks. It seemed that with the occupation coming to its end, everybody was hurrying to make money to squander. Long lines of people stood in queues in the streets next to the grocery shops to obtain bread stolen by the German soldiers and distributed at a fixed, minimal price.

We had no older people in our family; Devorah's parents were no longer alive, as she had been informed at the Ursa station by her relative, who gave her this sad news, which had already reached me some time before. When we were received by her elder sister and her husband, and the younger sister, who had married in the meantime, and her husband and brothers, we were all in deep mourning for the loss of the dear souls because of the war.

The day after we returned to Vilna, one of my pupils from Ribesman's school, who had become a teacher in the meantime, came into our house. She had seen me when we returned to Vilna and, on behalf of a communal worker who had been given an important post during the occupation, came to invite me to visit him for a discussion. He made an offer to me to manage the orphanage named after the *Gaon* of Vilna, Rabbi Eliyahu, on the occasion of the centenary of his death. The official was the chairman of the institution. I assured him I would consider it and was in contact with the teachers at that institution.

The situation of public institutions was generally very poor. Many of them suffered shortages because of the poverty in the city during the occupation, yet, on the other hand, many other important institutions were established thanks to the wartime conditions, and developed well. There was much desolation in the orphanage, which was in an unsuitable temporary building.

I was soon called into the education department of the community, where I found people I recognised from a distance. The teaching officials advised me not to make a hasty positive decision with regard to the orphanage, as there was another possible position for me.

In the street I met young people wearing hats with white stripes on which the letters "GI" appeared prominently. They informed me that they were pupils at the Hebrew Gymnasium (*Gimnasia Ivrit*), named after Dr Yosef Epstein. Dr Epstein had arrived in Vilna during the occupation and was a pioneer in the field of Jewish education under German rule, founding the gymnasium. He had to make great sacrifices of his energy, time and hard work to convince parents to participate in establishing the institution, until eventually he managed to implement his lofty idea, with very little means and

with great effort. As the gymnasium made progress, the number of people who appreciated and supported it grew, as did the number of admirers of its founder. However, to the great regret of those who held Dr Epstein in high regard, he did not manage to see his creation flourish, as he died in the midst of his medical and communal activity devoted to Jewish education. There were very few like him left. He effectively created the modern Jewish "culture" in Vilna and this educational movement spread from there to regions near and far. In Lithuania, it reached Kovno, Grodno and Bialystok and went as far as Warsaw, apart from the country towns and the towns near Vilna. This development came after the return of the Lithuanian refugees. In the period in which the "culture" grew in Vilna, there were two institutions there, the gymnasium and the non-Jewish schools, the pillars of the movement for the revival of Hebrew in education. These had to serve as a basis for the form and content of a model culture, as concrete examples of establishing an effective and practical way for schools that would be established in the future.

I was invited to the gymnasium with one of my teachers from Grodno - the famous Hebrew linguist and great mathematician, Chaim Arie' Hazan (who died at the hands of Hitler's murderers in Ponar) and with the writer Tribush, as well as teachers of my own age who had heard my name and offered me teaching work at this gymnasium.

About a week later, I received an official offer on behalf of the Jewish community to be the headmaster of the Dr Epstein Elementary School for Girls. Once again, fundamental changes and radical improvement were required in the way it was organised. This seemed the most suitable of all the posts offered to me.

The school was not on a firm base. The teachers were temporary, inexperienced and even though there was a fair number of pupils, the educational level was not high and many changes were required. The first thing I wanted to do was to place it in the correct cultural position. The curriculum was prepared and set, steps were taken to renew and multiply productive forces both among the teaching staff and the number of pupils. Within a short time, the male educationists and teachers E Orinovski (the writer Ben-Or), Avraham Levin, Yaakov Levin, Lipschitz, and the female teachers Kadishewitz, Pasker, Pressman⁹ and others were attached to the school, apart from the art teachers: drawing, singing and crafts, as well as physical exercise. It was also decided to open the gates of the school to pupils who amounted to less than fifty percent of all the pupils, and their number grew to over 250.

⁹ The writer Ben-Or, Avraham Levin (Dr Eilon), Yaakov Levin (Advocate Yaakov Halevi) and the teachers Pasker (now Amitai) and Kadishewitz are active in teaching in Israel, except for Yaakov Halevi. Pressman was killed in Vilna by the Nazi murderers.

After their visits to the classes, the community inspectors pointed with great satisfaction to the progress of the school in quantity and quality. Its achievements were praiseworthy. Thanks to the many internal and pedagogic reforms, the institution had risen to a higher level of significance.

Official authority remained in the hands of the Germans until January 1919. Then the Poles rose up, most of them local, having obtained a small quantity of weapons. With tremendous audacity they expelled the Germans, who in reality had already begun leaving the region some time before. Military assistance from beyond Vilna did not manage to reach the Polish partisans, to enable them to reinforce their control there and within a few days, the Bolsheviks came with a large military force and took Vilna and its province.

The Jews who were still under German control established a democratic community with the participation of political parties and all the institutions in Vilna moved under its authority. The community did not have full control over public education, charity, social assistance authorities, etc. It was responsible to the community and for the salary of the officials under its supervision, as well as the management of all administrative and financial matters.

It received its financing from the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), that was termed the “DDK” in the Yiddish newspapers, the initials of its official name, using Hebrew-Yiddish letters, or “Dzoint” (Joint) for short. This committee provided much support for the population suffering from the war in Poland and Lithuania, not only the Jews, but also the local population – and granted it huge cash amounts, as well as food, staples and groceries, clothing and shoes. All this real support was given into the custody of the Vilna community, which for a period of a year or two had no financial concerns whatsoever in funding its institutions and all the complex and widespread applications of this supreme body.

A strong parliamentary and democratic public ethos developed in this period. It was expressed materially and practically by the community, in which parties contended and fought and the government was made up of them, based on proportional representation: their fights were holy wars for the good of the people, for the benefit of the community in terms of the concepts and views of each party. This was the situation in Vilna and its province.

In Russia liberated from the yoke of the Czar, the background for this kind of activity was impossible, a kind of absolute prohibition. There the idealistic Bolshevik spirit and its programme of action penetrated every aspect of life among the various peoples, by way of an official “government and party determination” that was accepted, whether willingly or through

compulsion. A “war between brothers” and counter-revolutions broke out in various places. These destroyed the entire good part and “remnants” of the “Great Revolution” in the east of Russia, much of which was increasingly occupied by strong “White” attackers, who undermined the Bolshevik “Reds” with all their might. There was also endless and very frequent conflict in the wide, fertile land of the Ukraine. The counter-revolutionary attacks in this country led to awful devastation among the Jews, with terrible riots – pogroms – in which hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed and innumerable communities totally ruined and destroyed.

A wonderful regime was established in the Kovno part of Lithuania. At the end of the war, the Lithuanians returned and built their independent state in the boundaries of the Kovno province. Vilna had been torn away from Lithuania by the Poles and it was only the Bolsheviks, after some time, who returned this city to them.

The Lithuanian Republic granted complete autonomy to the Jews in their cultural life: religion, education and all their public affairs, with all costs – their entire sustenance – being borne by the government. In order to implement these privileges, a Jewish ministry was set up, headed by Dr M Soloveichik. He managed and was responsible for everything done relating to the Jews. The Jews had members of parliament representing them proportionally.

A “Jewish parliament” existed in the Vilna community, thanks to support from the Joint and the generosity of Jews on the other side of the ocean. This House of Representatives was regarded for a while as exciting, causing a stir throughout the Jewish population. As teachers, we sometimes felt the strong impulse of the internal struggle of the parties and their views against the background of education.

The Germans brought their dominion to the school network, which had a Russian flavour until the Russians left Vilna. They introduced their curriculum, method, ways of teaching and, incidentally, their meticulousness. But the Jews, particularly in Vilna, more than in other places, began to fight for their own national, Yiddish curriculum, demanding that Yiddish be introduced to the Jewish schools, while the Poles wanted to revive their language and did not want to speak the dominant language, German. The struggle was difficult, lengthy – and successful.

The Hebrew movement found its standard-bearer in the late Dr Y Epstein, who established the Hebrew gymnasium and the girls’ elementary school on the basis of the modern “culture” through his enormous efforts.

Schools of the *Talmud Torah* type in the city and suburbs existed as national

religious institutions under the “United Committee” Centre and were later known by the name of the “Tachkemoni” organisation – all of these came from one direction. There was also an insignificant number of schools, *Talmudei Torah*, for extremely observant Jews, *Chareidim*, that remained under the auspices of their special centre. When the community accepted responsibility for education, it recognised the *status quo*, the existing situation of the Yiddish schools’ network, that included lower institutions – elementary – and also high schools – gymnasia – of “*Tarbut* (Culture) of the “Special Committee” of the Orthodox. These four educational streams were protected externally by their centres. Their committees, teachers and budget were determined for each centre proportionately in relation to the number of pupils and classes. The controversies, friction and clashes among the streams from their very beginning were subsequently resolved. But nothing lasts forever and the strength of the community, which was not financially self-supporting, began to wither.

The reasons for this were mostly external. The wave of changes of government did not end. As a result, the cost of living went up while the value of money went down – and there was not enough to meet their needs. Support from abroad also showed signs of lessening. The teachers’ salaries did not arrive on time, when payments had to be made, they were delayed, late and also decreased. The reasons for this irregular situation were clear and real.

It is worth spending some time on the political and military alterations and changes that very frequently shook the Jews in Vilna.

The Germans left and the Poles came in their stead for a short time in January 1919. Their temporary occupation was ended by the Bolsheviks, who damaged the community severely and would in the future act against the Jewish educational institutions, abolishing them. But all this did not succeed, as the Poles arrived (on April 19, 1919) in great force and the conflict between them and the Bolsheviks ended in a Polish victory, as well as a terrible storm of killings and murders of Jews, the “Free Pogroms”, as if permitting the youth to mock Jews and behave towards them as they wished: with murder, robbery and pillage.

The game ended with many victims among the neutral element – Jews – on the seventh day of Passover and over the following days. On that day, E Viter, S Neiger and Leib Yaffe were taken for execution. The first was murdered in cold blood “on the spot”; the other two were saved miraculously.

My brother-in-law and I, along with two others, a young man who went to get medicines for his sick mother and another, who came from a nearby village to take his mother home, were caught. The four of us were robbed –

my money and gold watch were stolen – and taken out of the town, because we were regarded as supporters and helpers of the Bolsheviks, as it were, to punish us severely.

A miracle occurred for us. In my pocket there was a certificate from the Polish chargé d'affaires, Ladnitzki, testifying that I wished to return to Vilna as a Polish subject so that I could be saved from the Bolsheviks; and in the pocket of my brother-in-law, who was born in Vilna – certificates proving his correct behaviour in the entire period of his activity as the owner of a printing press, which he had never left, signed by the Russian governor of the Vilna province.

General Rydz-Smigly, a liberal, who was close to Marshall Pilsudski, the Polish ruler, was the commander-in-chief of the army fighting in Vilna. He was camped in the village of Lipovka, three kilometres from the city, and saw from afar that the people he led and who accompanied him were abusing us. He rebuked them, returned our documents to us and ordered that the four of us be returned immediately to town without being touched. But many people were exiled in the same way to concentration camps, some becoming sick and dying and only a few returning, at great risk to their lives.

The late Rabbi Rubinstein and Dr Vigodzki, the chairman of the community, were severely injured by the Poles on their way to the army commander to intercede to save the Jewish citizens.

One of the teachers, the late Lazar Horwitz, was taken out of his home in the school inside the community building and forced to dig his own grave, in which he was buried alive. The number of those murdered came to 55 000 - 66 000, apart from those who were tortured, beaten and exiled as concentration camp prisoners.

The “game” lasted for more than a week, completely paralysing life in the town. When I had to go into town, I would lead my little Baruch by the hand feeling that, as a baby, he would protect me from the cruelty of the Poles, large and small. Almost all of them, even young men and women, wore national hats with a grey metal Polish eagle pinned on them declaring their distinction with pride: “Who is like me? Who can compare with me?”

Life eventually returned to normal, but only for three months. In the middle of July, many Russian regiments were marching in organised military fashion on Warsaw, via Vilna. While they were still in Polutsk, a rumour reached them that the Poles were preparing to slaughter the Jews before they retreated. This news was delivered to Dr Y Rubinstein and Dr Vigodzki by people in the municipality, with a friendly warning from people who liked the Jews.

The Bolshevik cavalry made haste to send help to the people who were still in danger of being slaughtered in Polutsk, not even stopping to eat or drink on their way. They arrived two days before the date designated for the slaughter of the Jews by the Poles. Those riders of the small, quick horses began to cut off the tails of the Poles, who were retreating in haste, fearing for their lives, casting off their ammunition on the way to the last train waiting for them at the station. The pursuing Cossacks managed to bring down many casualties among those fleeing on foot – I saw this with my own eyes from the window of my flat.

This time Vilna was taken again by the Bolsheviks. The city often fell under the steamroller of a new conqueror. It is no wonder, therefore, that sources of income were depleted altogether and the font of American support began to wither and dry up.

Relief came in September, but only for a very short while, in terms of the Riga peace treaty between Russia, represented by the Jew, Yaffe, and Lithuania, represented by S Rosenbaum, the Zionist. In terms of the treaty, Vilna, the “ancient” capital, was returned to the government of Lithuania after the country had been confined to the area of the Kovno province, without insulting anyone. The army commanders on both sides met officially in Cathedral Square in Vilna, making speeches full of praise and compliments from the one state to the other. For thirty-six hours, the Bolsheviks took huge quantities of goods from the shops of the bourgeoisie Jews. Trucks loaded to the brim emptied the extremely valuable stocks of goods over two nights and an entire day.

Early one Friday morning at the end of August I went to the centre of the city to watch the establishment of a new, small state that had become “great”, returning to its former, forgotten “glory”.

All signs of Russianness in notices and orders on walls and pillars were totally erased, with no hint of the situation that had applied in Vilna just the day before. A new and restored world sprang up and blossomed.

A few days later, the Jewish minister arrived with all his movable goods, chattels and treasures, officials and servants, followed by his managers and clerks and they settled at No 26 on the main road. Jewish autonomy had arrived, tender and delicate, with legislation containing thick volumes full of laws and regulations enacted in a short time for our people – everything so pleasant, heart-warming.

The teachers were overjoyed. The community would no longer economise on their salaries, and would settle the debts to the teachers. The government

would pay their salaries absolutely on time, without delays or false promises.

The ministry did not intervene in internal educational and teaching matters. A committee of specialists met, the headmasters of the schools, including me, headed by Rabbi Y Rubinstein and communal officials, to determine the expertise of the teachers and set the level of their salaries accordingly – officially – for our ministry and, by implication, for the supreme government. Was it short of money? But everything had to be arranged fairly and justly. We were certain of its healthy budget and sound situation.

Within a fairly short time, they began to deal with the lists of teachers and paying their salaries. To this end, the secretaries of the centres met, with the participation of the headmasters at the Tachkemoni School in Truki Street in the city centre. A large room was made available to them and they began to arrange and examine the lists.

On Sunday, one examination. The next day, another. On Tuesday, the previous day's list was approved while something else was completed as well. I went on Wednesday, and the same thing happened. On Thursday, although I was next door to that new office, I put off my visit with a wave of the hand.

In all the previous visits, everything was in good order, fair and settled, so why, therefore, waste time by going through all the examinations again?

On Friday morning, I went to the school, a fair distance from my home. I saw unusual movement in the streets. While there were many farmers in the city on Fridays, this time I was surprised by the number of people moving around, as well as military people on foot, on horseback and travelling. What did this mean? It was an uncommon sight. At the corner of two streets, I saw a notice with a heading in huge letters, in Lithuanian and French. I did not understand everything, but the main points were clear: Warning, take care, be prepared. The crowds grew on my way. I went into the school and concentrated on my work. The lists of salaries also reached me, with the other school expenses that perhaps still required “massaging” and examination.

At two o'clock, when I left the school, I saw great confusion in the streets. People were preparing for a new “outbreak”. Throughout the day and night – my home was near the railway line – it looked as if the army was “evacuating”; the army was leaving, removing its property and weapons.

The next day, on Saturday, the first after the festival of Sukkot, on October 9, I went to see what was happening on the main street. The headquarters were there, places where the delegates of the great powers met in hotels, with Finnish, French and other flags flying over them. I saw great excitement and

as I drew near to one of the government institutions, I heard an order: "Out!" "Move away!" This meant nobody was allowed to draw near.

I felt I should return home without walking through the streets, where there could be danger. It emerged that the Lithuanian government and army were retreating, but from whom? Who was the new attacker? The Russians? No, as a peace treaty had been entered into with them a few weeks earlier. The Poles? No! So who? The answer was given a day or two later: General Zeligowski, a Polish partisan who had a Polish army, came to conquer "Middle" Lithuania of his own accord, and possibly also as a rebel against the supreme Polish regime. In his view, the Kovno part of Lithuania could exist as an independent government, but "Middle" Lithuania required its own government that would make laws with regard to language, legislation and parliament of this region.

When I went back to my school a few days later, after the Lithuanian retreat, I found the government had not left the salaries of the teachers in the Jewish schools for almost six weeks' work under its rule and did not promise to pay this debt.

Not only did we fail to receive a salary, but the school had also lost some teachers – four, if I am not mistaken – a large part of them, the best among them, "retreated" on the Saturday together with the Lithuanian army on foot, directly for Lithuania. They had no desire to remain in Poland, even to become naturalised.

Zeligowski's attack met no opposition – it was not strong – even from Lithuanian headquarters. He encountered no interference from the Polish side and was not reprimanded. The rebellious general conquered Vilna and the surrounding rural areas. A parliament was soon elected that lasted for some months. The question was raised in one of its sessions: should the parliament, the representative of the "Middle Lithuania" brigade, be attached to the Polish parliament in Warsaw?

The question was answered in the affirmative. An official "humble" request for annexation was sent and everything ended well. The Jews, such as Dr Vigodzki, who was offered a ministerial post provided he joined the Poles - he declined the offer - did not agree to this entire dramatic "spectacle". The real, patriotic Poles said: This region has become and will remain Polish, not because the Jews wanted it. But so be it, the annexation will take place in spite of them, even if they do not want it.

The annexation occurred close to the middle of 1920. The Vilna parliament was voluntarily swallowed by the one in Warsaw, without realising it was going to its grave.

The financial crisis in the country grew. At times it was particularly severe in Vilna and its province, because of the decline in the value of money and frequent increases in the prices of foodstuffs and other staples.

As a result, the teachers responded by agreeing to a strike. This was accepted as suitable and appropriate by the various communal institutions. As a teacher and educator, I was completely unable to accept the idea that it was worthwhile and correct to use the strike “weapon” in schools. It undermined the elementary foundations of education. I thought: No! The end does not justify the means, even if it is very noble, pure and refined. In truth, this was not a war against the “masters of the situation” who were not paying the salaries of employees. These masters had no money, unless it arrived from overseas, from America. They could not be suspected of malevolence or undesirable intentions. As for the teachers, how could they explain to their pupils the requirement and permission to cancel classes “maliciously” because the teachers’ material demands were not being met by the “lay leaders”? The lay leaders lived in the community, but its purse was empty.

Was it even possible to consider allowing the destruction of the character of education, which is regarded as holy, never to be harmed? Or that a strike could be declared in a hospital without extending permanent, continuous and immediate medical assistance to those requiring treatment from the doctors and their assistants? Harm to the delicate spiritual elements of school pupils would lead to incurable blows, wounds and illnesses.

I remember that very many teachers and those close to them gathered in a large hall – I estimated I saw hundreds – to discuss a material situation that had become serious because negotiations with the community had not led to the desired results, with salaries not having been paid for some time. Hunger could afflict children and their families and even some of the parents themselves. The strike had already been in full swing for two weeks.

Accusations increased against those who remained firm in their opinions. The bitterness of the protesters reached a searing, insulting peak.

It was necessary to make sure that the strike would continue with all its strength and force, because it was feared that strike-breakers – particularly from the right-wing bloc of the extremely religious – would teach in secret, as had already happened once or twice. The strike-breakers were caught – without the knowledge and permission of the teacher “dictators”. As a result, there were several almost continuous teachers’ strikes.

I myself was a “dictator” in one of the strikes, as the representative of the Hebrew teachers, as was my deputy from the Yiddishist camp. Both of us were

responsible to the community of teachers for whatever was done relating to the strike. A large crowd attended the mass meeting on Sunday afternoon. It lasted from two to three hours, under the chairmanship of the author and leader Yaakov Patt.

One episode is engraved in my memory. Negotiations were being considered with the representatives of the community, lasting many days or even weeks. The teachers' delegates lost patience, representatives of all the four centres, and they delivered a firm ultimatum: "We will wait until nine o'clock in the morning," it stated, "and if the reply is unsatisfactory, a strike will be declared." The response was to be sent to the Dr Y Epstein Elementary School, 21 Zavlana Street. I was the headmaster of this school in the centre of the city, a convenient spot for the headmasters of all the schools to gather and take a decision after the official answer was received.

We waited a long time. No response had been received by ten o'clock. It was decided to declare a strike. I, therefore, had to go from class to class and inform the pupils there that day for their studies. It was usual to tell them not to come the following day when there would be a strike. They sat with quiet impatience at their places, watching me expectantly and fearfully, as they knew that many headmasters were in my office. I entered the classes to send the pupils home, because the teachers would not teach them. Many of them understood the situation and even appreciated the "mood" of the teachers in their own way. They might also have been sympathetic to our strange behaviour. But I felt inner fear and shame for myself and my colleagues, who might be behaving "childishly", as it were, in cancelling classes because it was convenient for us, the headmasters and teachers in the city of Vilna.

I refrained from explaining. I told the people looking at me curiously whatever came to mind in my confusion. The pupils asked no questions and made no enquiries, took their bags and quickly departed for their homes as if ashamed.

* * *

While I was making various successful changes to improve the school, two of my colleagues and I suffered a kind of mishap.

The full scope of the work was continuing. We were on the threshold of the Passover holidays. On the Friday before *Shabbat Hagadol*, the Great Sabbath

before Passover, a pupil, Chaya Weiner, came to me to get some things for herself or her class. We had a brief discussion, but the moment she left, I felt as if something had affected me and I was troubled.

Suffering from a terrible headache, I reached home somehow. Without making *Kiddush*, the ceremonial blessing over the wine on *Shabbat*, and without eating the Sabbath meal, I went to bed. I woke up late the next morning and saw my friend from Grodno and my dear brother-in-law, Mayer Zaslansky, who had heard I was sick and came to visit me. Although we had a warm and close relationship, I did not talk to him much this time. I ate only a little of the Sabbath food and returned to my bed.

The next time I woke up, it was Sunday. Our doctor sat next to the table after he examined me and spoke to himself or to my late wife: "It is still too early to know what kind of typhus this is: recurrent typhus, epidemic typhus or typhoid fever, because all of them are currently spreading in the city. But this patient is well built, his heart is fine and he will get better." I fell asleep again.

When I woke up again, I saw a health worker, a nurse, next to my bed. He knew what he was doing. He was a well-developed young man from a good family, the grandson of the author of the book *Tur Zahav (Golden Column)*. His family name was Zeilingold. I was told later that I seemed to enjoy his interesting conversation, even though I was not aware of it afterwards. My consciousness was floating in other, different worlds, but I knew nothing of what was happening around me.

When I woke up a day or two later, I saw Dr Zemach Shabad, a communal official, one of the leaders in the city and a well-known doctor, walking up and down in my room. His head was down, with a sorrowful expression on his face. As he walked around, he repeated words I heard clearly: "This is the lot of the Jewish elementary teacher, this is his fate: a serious illness, suffering. But a salary? Payment for his teaching work? Not at all!" He thought I could not make out what he was saying and spoke to himself. But I heard what he said and, with difficulty, began to speak to him on the situation of the community and its finances – I think he was then the chairman of the community. He was pleased that I was alert. At the end of our discussion, he requested my wife to inform Dr Jaspan, our regular doctor, that he, Shabad, would pay me another visit and wanted them both to be together at my bedside.

I did not see their meeting there. I was still only partly conscious. Nevertheless, I often started talking to nurse Zeilingold, who was taking excellent care of me. Some people close to us suggested that prayers be offered for my recovery, psalms recited and also to give me an additional name,

or more correctly, “to change my name” so that the Angel of Destruction would not recognise me. This was done and the name Abraham was added to my two names, Alexander Chaim. A dream and its interpretation were added to this “trusted remedy”, useful in getting a patient out of his sickbed. Early one overcast morning, a husband and wife came running to tell our relatives that my late father-in-law and mother-in-law had appeared to them, like trusted friends, and spoke to them in their vision. They said: “They knew that the danger of an illness was hovering over me, but I would definitely recover. But they wanted several pounds of candles to be donated so that their light could be used for prayer and study in the nearby *kloyz*, where they used to pray when they were alive” – the *kloyz* of Yosef Mates, in the courtyard of the house in which we lived. This wish of the dead was fulfilled with great precision.

The teacher Avraham Levin, a dear friend, came to visit me. He also suffered from typhoid fever, like me. A young man from Vilna, he was transferred to the hospital and from there he used to send me notes, although I read only a few of them. His mind did not become confused by his high temperature. Dr Hirschowitz, the school doctor, also came to visit me. He was a pleasant and likable person, who had been sick like me. They were already ambulatory, but when they came to visit me, I was still bedridden and very weak. Dr Hirschowitz suggested that we raise a glass of wine to “celebrate” our recovery, the recovery of all three of us after all of us had been sick for two or three days, one after the other. I agreed, although my speech and particularly my laughter was not on their level. I barely recognised my own voice, it was so different.

We found out about it later. Dr Jaspan also treated the Weiner family in Ashkenazi Street. When she spoke to me, Chaya Weiner, my pupil, infected me with the typhus germ that was prevalent in her house, where two people were suffering from the illness, but she did not stop attending school. That Friday before *Shabbat Hagadol*, when I came into contact with her, I was infected by her with the very serious and dangerous typhus strain.

Dr Z Shabad’s words were relayed to me, the teacher who had been infected at the school while working there doing his duty. He said this impressed him greatly. He was not a sentimental person at all. What he said affected me deeply and I have never forgotten it. With these words, I felt the truth, my attitude to fulfilling my duty and his appreciation – my reward and punishment as a teacher and educator of Jewish boys and girls. I saw that an important communal official understood the situation of a teacher. Very few people appreciated the true value of a teacher as he did, and the esteem the teacher deserved.

CHAPTER 23

AT THE CROSSROADS

After it had been given the role of the capital city of the geographic state of Lithuania, Vilna's historic governing role was torn away from it and it was annexed to Poland for dozens of years as an integral part of this new state. Initially the Jews felt that from a political-economic viewpoint, it would be worth adopting the rule: "Be a tail to lions and not a head to jackals." Lithuania was not a very important state and its chances were not good. It would be preferable, therefore, for Vilna to have trade relations with Warsaw, Lodz and Danzig, rather than be the head of a very small body of Kovno and its region. This calculation, however, was a mistake for us, the Jews.

Polish politics were neither healthy nor strong. Economically, it was like Germany, suffering massive inflation and the taxes imposed by the Polish government on shopkeepers and traders were too heavy to bear. Poland was in a state of rapid and continuous decline. Even a poor person seeking any opening would not bother to pick up a hundred-zloty note or, soon afterwards, even a five hundred- or one thousand-zloty note lying on the ground. Within a short time, thousands became small change. The value of money fell every day. In the morning, when you bought a newspaper, it cost ten thousand and a haircut, if you needed it, cost even more – that was how it went every day. Jews became impoverished millionaires: their property, their goods continually decreased in value. Those who sold goods were unable to refill their shops with the same quantity for the money they had received. They shrank to half, a third and a quarter. Incessant financial distress progressively landed on them harder. Sound trade was conducted in Russian gold coins and the American dollar.

They swarmed into the black market. This was conducted in modest surroundings, in hidden alleys and street corners. The police not only went after the people trading in the market, but would hunt in various streets, catch and arrest passers-by who were totally innocent of trading in the black market and hundreds of people were taken to the "police yard". There the police would search their clothes and shoes for hours, looking for foreign coins and American notes. Once or twice, I was also among those arrested and waited for about three hours until my turn came, the turn of the people the police regarded as "honest", who were examined first, in order to be released first.

The "loyal" and authorised money-changing business began to flourish

everywhere. Dozens of banks opened, not only on the main, important streets, but in alleyways and yards, far from the movement of traders and people purchasing goods. It seemed that banking beset all the Jews of Vilna, apart from the students in the *batei midrash* and *yeshivas*, schoolchildren. The founders of the banks were unable to find quarters for themselves on the lower floors and began to climb up the balconies and upper floors. They sprouted like mushrooms in polluted alleys. Signs with large, clear letters were placed on cast-off, broken sticks, "Bank of", "Bank for", "..... Bank", with a striking name, unlike anything ever heard before. In general, the world of Vilna was filled with banks dealing with all kinds of exchange, currencies, types of securities and notes. They determined the rate of money, increased or decreased prices, making them more expensive or cheaper. Our Jewish bankers actually competed with the currency markets in London and New York – and in this north-western corner of Europe.

Were the safes of these financial institutions full? Securities robbed from creditors? Was there strength only in their loud and boastful external signs and was their vain weakness burdening their owners from within? These were like close secrets that were revealed to everybody.

The banks did not last long. Just as their appearance was marked by surprising suddenness, they disappeared as if a destructive storm had swept them away and began to disappear and close up completely. All that remained were the large signs that were now totally meaningless. The excessive and overdone banking did not take root and was swept away as if by a breath of wind.

Then, more or less in the same period, a completely different type of institution began to spread and flourish, bringing its benefits to Vilna. These were the gymnasiums, each with a different character. Private gymnasiums, not the familiar, regular types of school network of an established institution. People with initiative made "educational" calculations, saying, "Jews have always been ready and willing to send their children to gymnasiums, even at personal sacrifice." In their view, many would jump at the chance of post-primary education, even if it were not necessarily original, independent, nationalistic. On the contrary, such characteristics could be a disadvantage. This was good and worthwhile gymnasium education, real, genuine, European, the kind on which non-Jews, who had experience in this area, left their mark. Government gymnasiums did not open their doors wide to Jewish students. For years they had imposed limits on the numbers of entrants among the reconquered Jewish Polish citizens – even if not explicitly in theory, at least in daily practice. The gymnasiums with ideal aspirations, national and Hebrew, such as those of the classic *Tarbut*, and the one founded after it, the *Realia*,

or that of the Yiddishist TBK (*Tzentral Bildungs-Komitet*), that wished to revive Yiddish as the pure spoken language and the language of education, did not attract the following of most of the Jewish parents. But these two streams, the Hebrew and Yiddish, held the flag of revival high with true dedication and warm enthusiasm. Yet for many, the desire for revival was the “fly in the ointment”, a mixed blessing.

Only a few of the “common people” who were consciously aware of the need and necessity for the revival – Hebrew or Yiddish – sent their sons and daughters to receive their education “first-hand”, from educators inculcated an awareness of the objective of the revival of our people in the Land of Israel or in the Diaspora. The majority, including the wealthy and the well-off, proved incapable of abandoning “external” education. They wanted to “cram” their young with education whose form and content were built on imitating “all the nations”. It did not matter to them that this kind of education was foreign and in conflict with the spirit of the young people. It was full of hatred and contempt that penetrated the tender soul of the pupil, and poisoned it.

First a gymnasium was opened by a Jew from Poland, devoted to observing all aspects of “Polishness”. It was initially housed in a low-level *Talmud Torah*, with few rooms, yet in the afternoons many were knocking on the doors of the “restricted” Polish gymnasium. The following year, it was housed in a large building and many classes were added. Subsequently the founder encouraged teachers from the Russian “regime” and they also opened Polish gymnasia. There were also Yiddish gymnasia, but they were not “extreme” and received no support from the community. They were self-supporting. There was even a gymnasium where the language of instruction was Russian. This language had been driven out of Vilna about ten years earlier and the authorities and the non-Jewish population reacted with open contempt to it being spoken in public. Our parents, however, the conservative aristocrats, could not resist the temptation, thinking that the cycle of history moved backwards, returning them to bygone times, to the customs and habits of “the good old days” and more. Those clinging to their outdated views came to life again. Full of great happiness and pleasure, they sent their children to this “fundamentalist” gymnasium – the older generation would greatly enjoy this “obsolete” classic spirit.

Gymnasia and pro-gymnasia for women were also established. Each introduced some innovation in the curriculum, provided the parents were happy to be caught up in their net, and the girls as well.

It seemed at the time that the wide variety and quantity of these institutions were beyond the absorption capacity of the Vilna Jewish community, yet all of them, all the various gymnasia, lasted for years, succeeded, produced graduates and were able to accommodate themselves to the requirements

of the education authorities – or, more correctly, adapted to them, as they grew ever more stringent.

There was no shortage of teachers, gymnasium teachers. Some of them, not many, deserved a teaching post, were expert educationists, experienced and knew what they were up against. Most had doctorates, from Galicia, the state in which every third young Jewish person or *yeshiva* student was counted among those who held a doctoral degree. They inundated Vilna, where they spread their teaching of various subjects in which they were undoubtedly experts, knowing them thoroughly and able to teach their pupils.

Some Hebrew-speakers among them felt they were qualified to teach their subjects in this language and bring the studies and the language of teaching to the appropriate level.

The teachers' association of the post-primary schools, the gymnasia outside *Tarbut*, TBK and the United Committee, was large, with a significant number of members.

The internal ravages of communal schools increased greatly. Sources of support diminished and dried up. Salaries were not paid on time. Strikes could no longer serve as a decisive means of forcing the community to fulfil its obligations, while the community's influence on the public shrank considerably. The organised community ceased to be the focus of the community and public opinion.

School headmasters would frequently go to the community to listen, "sense" and find out whether there was any chance of receiving a salary or salary arrears. The educational controversy in the community would "rage" among the headmasters, who would neglect their institutions and go to "feel the pulse". It reached a stage where the director of the department, Dr Y Berger, approached the headmasters, requesting them not to come to the community during class times. Their visits were arranged in the afternoons, but even that was not a propitious time for the visitors, who would usually depart empty-handed.

Expenses were saved and cut. In the years of prosperity and plenty, working hours were arranged generously in the schools: positions of class inspectors (internal), class instructors, were created – as was done in the Russian gymnasia – for elementary schools as well. Their purpose was to manage the diaries, supervise their order and be with the pupils during breaks. There was a need and desire to attract and train teachers, particularly women teachers, in the school environment. For this reason, they were given these "duties" – inspection and guidance – and salaries were set for weekly hours for this work.

In my view, these were completely superfluous from the outset. They could easily have been supplied by the teachers, with the headmaster supervising all the time. But because some disagreed with my view, I went along with the “need” that was created. Yet working these shifts was cancelled when expenses were cut, but such minor cuts could not “satisfy” the body of elementary school teachers in the institution.

Matters came to such a pass that the community felt compelled to end its moral and material obligation to the educational institutions and its financial responsibility for their continuation. The parties arrived at the essential solution that the educational centres were subject to the community and dependent on its views materially and spiritually, with each accepting responsibility for its network of schools and their maintenance. In this way, the United Committee brought all the *Talmudei Torah* in the city and its suburbs, including the girls’ school, under its control. The late Rabbi Y Rubenstein, the head of this sector, had to find a source of money and maintenance for this large number of schools.

The honeymoon was over. The *Talmud Torah* teachers did not receive their salaries for months, including the festival period from *Rosh Hashanah* to *Sukkot* and sometimes they did not even have money for Passover. They had no comrades-in-arms sharing their difficulty who could go on strike. This was very far from a real possibility and even then, what would it achieve?

Dr Yosef Regensburg, a well-known doctor, born in Kurland, who also held a doctorate in philosophy, a modern Hebrew intellectual, an important national and public communal official, arrived in Vilna at the time of the German conquest. He was at the head of the *Tarbut* centre. He devoted much of his time and energy to *Tarbut*, as well as his money. He was also a lecturer at the Hebrew gymnasium. He took care of the *Tarbut* institutions and was in constant contact with the *Tarbut* centre in Warsaw, making its chairman, the late Dr Klumel, aware of the activity for the benefit of the Vilna *Tarbut*. The teachers received promises and sometimes the crumbs of their salaries. Dr Regensburg died young, from a minor mishap while eating – a fish bone stuck in his throat and poisoned his blood. Although he managed to reach Berlin, his life could not be saved. His memory is dear to all those who knew him.

The centre had two gymnasias, two elementary schools and a kindergarten. Paying the teachers was even more difficult for them than parting the Red Sea was for Moses.

The TBK had other sources and channels for maintaining its schools. Dr Z Shabad used his good offices for the benefit of the Yiddish schools. They, too, of course, preferred to be alone, without partners and colleagues in the battle for material existence.

The public educational activity of the community shrank, focusing on two institutions that seemed to be one, teachers' seminaries, the Hebrew seminary, with the *Tarbut* curriculum, and Yiddish for the TBK. The communal *cheders*, emptied and vacated, were taken over by the seminary classes. The public pulse of the community was no longer heard in its spacious building. It was delivered almost entirely to the control of the teachers and students who were to become teachers, and they were the only ones the community paid.

It is worth mentioning here that the community was authorised by the authorities to impose taxes on the public on behalf of the government and, if it wished, to make tax collection compulsory, using government forces, if necessary. But the community settled for determining the taxes in accounts sent officially to members of the community, waiving its claim to collect them by force. In any event, government taxes were already too heavy to bear.

In the Kovno part of Lithuania, the situation was better. The financial crisis was not felt there particularly. In fact, political living conditions of the Jews were very good for several years before the political reaction. There was Jewish autonomy and the national revival flourished. Guests who arrived in Vilna circuitously, via Germany and Poland, saw it as the vestibule of the Land of Israel. The Hebrew *Tarbut* entered the hearts of most of the youth, Hebrew was spoken by the younger generation and in the streets, above the doorways of shops, signs could be seen written in excellent Hebrew.

Soon after the Lithuanian retreat from Vilna, I received a telegram from my friend Avraham Levin, who had been a teacher at my school. He had also left Vilna for Kovno with the Lithuanian army. The telegram came via Berlin, Danzig and Warsaw (for years there was no direct contact between Vilna and Kovno). In the telegram, he invited me on behalf of the Jewish ministry to come to Kovno with four or five other teachers of my choice. There were good jobs there for us, with pay and guaranteed spiritual satisfaction.

I showed the telegram to some of my close colleagues, asking them whether they would come settle in Kovno with me. They answered both "yes" and "no", and the "yes" was very weak.

I told myself the crisis would definitely pass and Polish Jewry would revive and be rejuvenated. And if this reawakening was still covered in mist, it was not far off and would definitely arrive. Poland itself was renewing its youth, even though this was accompanied by severe and dangerous "birth pangs", but it was good to see the vision of revival.

My vision, however, did not materialise. The general situation and my personal situation grew steadily worse. My responsibility, particularly material, troubled me greatly and decided I should stop working as a headmaster. My wife was

familiar with the business of convalescent homes, in which she worked in partnership with her pharmacist sister. We decided that I would also try to join this business. I would receive a salary for my work and see how things went. I therefore retired and another headmaster, a doctor from Galicia, replaced me at the school.

After only a few days, an old, experienced teacher came to see me. He offered me a good post at a gymnasium he was opening (another one, in addition to the others already in existence in the city), with his wife, a good and experienced teacher. The fundamental content of the curriculum was based on the *Tarbut* principle, but its attraction would be the new subject that would be included – “extended” French as a compulsory subject, making the gymnasium ultra-modern in its *Tarbut* (Culture) and Frenchness. Dr X would be the director. He had managed a well-known cultural institution and would make a *Tarbut* impression on the new gymnasium. We would then all find what we sought, guaranteed success and a salary for which the founder of the gymnasium would be responsible in “hard cash”. I agreed on condition that I would be able to work in my own “cultural” corner as I wished.

The owners of the new “education business” did well. A fair number of pupils attended and I found some among them who had a spiritual leaning towards *Tarbut*. I spent only one year at this gymnasium and moved as a teacher to the real *Tarbut* gymnasium.

It was headed by my good friend, the chairman of the Hebrew Teachers’ Union, the late Moshe Olitzki. An optimist, as a headmaster he encouraged his teaching colleagues with his belief that with the fees paid by the students and the positive attitude on the part of the *Tarbut* centre in Warsaw, we would be able to continue with the institution, particularly after English was introduced as a compulsory subject, bearing in mind the increased emigration of Jews from Poland in general, and from Vilna in particular, to Palestine, which was under the British Mandate. The elementary school of the gymnasium served as a feeder platform for pupils coming to the gymnasium, which was then likely to continue to survive.

The headmaster, with his optimistic outlook, made blatant errors: his financial accounting mistakes were too frequent and further removed from reality than he realised. However, there was not much free time to devote attention to material matters only. Mr Olitzki, with the assistance of the local *Tarbut*, waged war on the Polish education authorities, which required the general teaching of geography and history in Polish, instead of Hebrew. The battle spread as far as Warsaw, to the members of the Polish *Sejm* (parliament). Dr Tahon and Yitzhak Greenbaum gained a temporary victory, postponement of the decree for two or three years.

The specialist general subjects teachers among the teaching staff called the doctors “Galicianers”, casting some doubt on their educational abilities, apart from some exceptions and students from the University of Vilna, who were born in Poland. One of the students, in his final year of medical studies, taught Polish language and literature like a real authority in the field. English language was not planted in the hearts of the pupils in a quiet and fruitful way. He wanted to give and feed his listeners more than they could absorb.

I derived “selfish” satisfaction from not having to worry about others. When I was responsible as headmaster for the salaries of the teachers, it was not in my nature to be able to seek and ask for sources of funds.

With the passage of time, emigration to Palestine increased in 1924-1925. This was soon followed by bitter disappointment that brought many back to Poland. They returned as “spies”, as it were, speaking ill of their “homeland”. We inherited this disgraceful characteristic from the period of the slander perpetrated by Joseph’s brothers and, subsequently, the essential wandering from the desert to the Promised Land by divine command, relating to the same country.

A time came when I felt myself compelled to divide my day: one half to study, teaching and education at the school and the other to private work at my wife’s shop to earn a living. I was struck by the jealousy among my friends and acquaintances on both flanks: my teaching colleagues would tell me, “How fortunate you are. You have become a businessman and the poison of worrying about earning a living has been removed from you, because a teacher’s salary is basically awful”; and, on the other hand, acquaintances from the business world would state, “How fortunate you have been and how pleasant your lot. You are a teacher and you can make up any trade deficit through your income from teaching, which does not cause any loss. You only earn from it, without having to spend anything to acquire goods in that subject, for a price that continually increases. As a result, you are free of many worries”. Some of them would also explain the particular advantages of teaching work, several months of paid leave during the year, with no reduction in salary, even in the period I was not working. These two “factions” did not realise that I was definitely far removed from the well-being of the wicked and closer to the anger of the righteous, towards both extremes at the same time.

I sometimes received letters from my friend and relative, M Horwitz, from Leningrad. He would express astonishment and surprise that I was unhappy with my situation in Vilna, in “free” Poland. “Does anyone know,” he asked, “when and where he could despair to such an extent because of the conditions of the time and place, because of the conditions under which he lives?” “Is anyone qualified to consider the full essence of evil, its total malice, more

than the writer?" These words could possibly have provided readers with a "glimpse" into the way of life in Soviet Russia, when there was no way out, no escape, no help or assistance from outside, no hope of even slight relief.

I decided to get in touch with my dear childhood friend, the well-known poet Hillel Bavli, who had lived in the United States for many years. I outlined my situation in Vilna and my hidden desire to be free. But entry to America was limited, with an immigrant quota and I had no chance of being entitled to a visa.

His quick and specific response in November 1923 surprised me. He attached an official invitation to me from the Jewish Folk University in New York to join it as a lecturer. The page containing the invitation bore the names of several prominent Jews: researchers, poets, authors, lecturers, including Hillel Bavli, my friend, in all the Jewish subjects. They were teachers at this higher institution. I had the great honour of being invited to join them. The document entitled me to obtain an entry permit to the United States without any hindrance.

How should I have responded to this fortunate invitation? It was obvious! I should have started to pack my bags without delay and prepare to embark on the journey. Yet some internal impulse, whose nature I did not understand then, evil, G-d forbid, or perhaps good, prevented me from doing so.

My justification to myself and to the members of my family was that the situation here was not yet that desperate, the time had not yet come. Let us hope that we could build on the ruins here. Was it easy to emigrate? To go to a new country, under new skies, to be reborn? I vacillated, fearing I would be like a new-born baby. Without doubt, I would be a burden on others and a hardship for them, and in any event, for myself. These misconceptions came between me and the emigrants – colleagues and friends – who had gone before me successfully and achieved more positive results than they could ever have imagined or dreamed. Passivity dominated me and I remained in Vilna.

In the meantime, years passed. No salvation came, hopes of changes for the better were not realised. On the contrary, disappointment grew and bitterness increased. The situation in Poland deteriorated even further. Jew-hatred, even in government spheres, no longer remained concealed, but burst out, open and more active. In one town, Pashitik, disturbances began and did not stop. Pashitik became the symbol of incessant pogroms against the Jews, which spread to many towns and villages on market days, holidays and ordinary weekdays. The authorities adopted no measures to stop the incessant attacks on the Jews, the assaults and robberies that accompanied the continuous destruction.

Not only did the Polish government fail to ensure the safety of its citizens and protect the lives and property of its Jewish subjects, it did a great deal on an international level, where it sought to serve as an example and model for other countries to follow by acting in this praiseworthy and meritorious manner.

At one of the sessions of the League of Nations in Geneva, the Polish representative announced on behalf of his government that from that day forward, his government would no longer recognise the rights of national minorities, a principle adopted and incorporated in the Versailles Peace Treaty, approved by the League of Nations and observed in practice for many years.

The declaration of the Polish representative at the League of Nations was received enthusiastically in his country. National flags flew with official formality on the beautiful buildings in Warsaw and other large cities for several days. Poland was not interested in the views of other nationalities and paid no heed to their response. It acted on its own initiative and there was no going back. While there were minorities in Poland from different countries, Ukrainians, Germans and also Lithuanians, it would not have dared to try to deprive Christians of their rights. The main intention was to deny and deprive the Jews, a persecuted minority, of their few rights by different ways and means. This was a daring and calculated step and a typical approach in the relationship of the central Polish authorities to its three-and-a-half million residents, its citizens of the Jewish religion, comprising ten per cent of its population.

It was a “good” sign and a “shining” symbol of the period of revival, peace and freedom, all on the wings of war – ideals that spread among peoples subjugated and humbled by stronger forces and when they were liberated, they subjugated the Jews. Lithuania also adopted this method after it repealed the total autonomy it had granted its Jews for several years. A reaction of demoralisation, hatred and anti-Semitism, all on a government scale, spread everywhere, causing havoc among the Jews.

Over time, spirits fell into an increasingly general flood of despair. Attempts to improve the situation in the years of general decline did not succeed. A curse rested on national education. It was cursed just at the time when we had hoped for good tidings.

External circumstances, particularly economic, with their low spirits and inactivity, were negative factors against the background of public education.

Although the Zionist movement existed, it was weak. It sometimes showed signs of revival. There was occasional propaganda as well, with marches and

demonstrations. But these were of no great value in the face of methodical, quiet internal and spiritual education. The general public was negatively affected by material concerns, the agitation of strikes, demands for charity and donations in the boxes of the “centres” that funded the institutions – in our eyes these were shameful and worthy of derision. The life of minor patronage, degrading and tenuous small philanthropy was repulsive.

This degraded period in public and national education lasted too long. In general it disillusioned me as an individual, as well as many of my colleagues in the cultured Vilna, the “Jerusalem of Lithuania” that, until the war and for some years afterwards, had served as an example and model for other communities to follow and imitate. We became despondent. Our work and aspirations, our efforts and achievements, we said, had been blown away in the wind.

The question arose of whether it would be worthwhile to seek new places and find new ground to conquer. Was there an appropriate place for that in the United States, on the other side of the ocean? Maybe, possibly. But I was too late, I had missed the chance four or five years earlier.

What about South Africa? They said that this country of immigration could also absorb teaching and culture and not only *Talmud Torah* education. It was worth trying.

Once, in a conversation with my friend Mr Z Rybko, in the Great Synagogue, during the cantors’ repetition of the *Eighteen Benedictions* on a festival, we touched on this question. He told me that there, in South Africa, a Hebrew teacher could earn forty pounds, which was two hundred American dollars a month. This was an incredible amount in Polish currency.

Entry to this country was readily available. Its gates were still open to immigrants, even idlers like us, Hebrew teachers. There life could be found in both meanings of the word, material and spiritual.

My friend, M Olitzki, from the *Tarbut Reali* Gymnasium, became aware of it and agreed to “wander off” to South Africa and offered to join me if I was ready to take this step.

In the meantime we had heard that the communal rabbi in Vilna, Rabbi Yitzhak Rubenstein – then a delegate in the *Sejn* (Parliament) or a member of the Senate – was going to travel as a delegate to the Fifteenth Zionist Conference to be held in September 1927 in Basel.

My friend and I approached him with a request to investigate the situation of teachers in South Africa, should he meet delegates from that country in Basel.

We asked whether he would be able to assist our emigration there through his influence. It is worth mentioning that Rabbi Rubenstein, although he was the head of one of the educational centres in Vilna and knew the value of the teachers there, did not oppose our leaving Vilna. He knew the situation there full well and therefore did not attempt to delay our taking that step.

In Basel, Rabbi Rabinowitz spoke to Dr JL Landau, the rabbi from Johannesburg, who sent us a letter we felt was very valuable. Firstly, he wrote that good and experienced teachers were required in Johannesburg, where they would do well in their work (by “doing well”, he also appeared to refer to its material meaning) and secondly, he stated that the letter he sent to us would serve as an entry permit to South Africa should we experience difficulties in this regard. It was settled. Our estimate of the wonderful situation of Hebrew teachers in the land of gold mines was officially and encouragingly confirmed.

Z Rybko left very soon, in 1927. I was next in the queue and departed at the beginning of 1928. Only Olitzki, a sickly person, postponed his departure several times until the gates of South Africa were closed to immigrants in 1930. (He died in the Vilna Ghetto at the hands of the Nazi murderers.)

I began to get my papers together. There were a few obstacles in my way, but I overcame them easily, finalising everything in front of a polite official. He asked me: “Sir, are you travelling to the south of Africa, a country so far away?” His words struck me like a prophecy from his mouth about my intentions. A thought occurred to me: “Is there something wrong with the distance? Or should I perhaps rather interpret it favourably?” I answered these questions myself.

On the Saturday before I left, when everything had been prepared, I stood with my brother-in-law, Meyer Zaslansky, in front of a large map, examining the country to which we were going, its cities and Jewish centres. Our conversation again revolved around the “distance”, how far South Africa was from Vilna. However, I accepted the “decree” to go to the distant desert and travel around in it, because five years earlier, I had lacked the courage and energy to take me to New York, the largest city in the world, that produced modern Jewry and made it blossom

Two years later, my brother-in-law Meyer arrived with his family to the shores of Cape Town on the last boat before the gates of South Africa were closed to immigrants.

Delegates from the Western Cape Province to the 20th South African Zionist conference, November 9, 1945



From left to right: Front row, bottom: M Schachat, Mrs Katz, S Schach, R Egert, Mrs F Rabinowitz (Raphael), Sachar. **Second row:** Mrs Eberlin, Dr E Birnbaum, Dr Y Resnekov (the first chairman of the Cape Board of Education), J Gitlin, Mrs M Segal, B Gering (Vice Chairman of the Zionist Federation), F Winokur, V Miller. **Third row:** AC Levin, Mrs S Shapiro, Mrs A Meisel, Mrs Idinski, Mrs Comay, L Segal, E Kluk, Dr YM Hurwitz (Chairman of the Board of Education), L Porter, L Stern. **Fourth row:** Mrs Berold, J Bitnun. **EN Wilk, M Berolski. Fifth row, top:** S Peires, B Senderowitz, D Dektor, K Zevuv, Y Katz, Karabelnik, Mrs Katz, SM Levin.

PART THREE

CHAPTER 24

FAR AWAY

Moving to a different country is nothing less than being uprooted from the emigrant's plantation, in which he has struck root. It is leaving the motherland, the place he grew up, his environment – the life whose flavour and colour, scent and variety, have been thoroughly absorbed into the recesses of his soul. A person uprooting himself from his environment is like a withered plant, devoid of leaves and fruit, no longer serving any purpose. The person replanting himself in unknown territory depends on success requiring divine help, like relying on miracles. The immigrant to a new country relies on chance alone.

The night before I left Vilna, late, with a full moon shining with a clear silver light, I returned home from my last visit before departing. Like a tourist, I walked through the labyrinth of narrow streets and alleys in the old city of Vilna, whose names and correct directions I never knew by heart. This was in the wholesale centre, with no passers-by at that late hour. If isolated steps of someone hurrying home were heard on the paving stones, their echo carried into the air, clearly audible, with the tiniest of gaps between the sound of the footfall and the echo imitating it. I suddenly caught a small part of a conversation between young voices – quiet, serious, intense.

The style was clear, modern, precise, in measured phrases and idioms, with the fluency of people with some learning. The language was Yiddish, fostered and spread in the modern Yiddish schools established in Vilna serving as a model for the people reviving this language – both for the youth and the teachers who followed in the footsteps of those who built the spoken and literary language.

I told myself how pleasant it was to be present at the recovery of Vilna, in the different directions of its revival, against this background as well. Vilna, the “Jerusalem of Lithuania”, its renewed spirit and youthful vision, would spread to the entire region, to the whole country and also to the neighbouring countries with the greatness of its influence, in quantity and quality. This indirect meeting for me was a sort of pleasant parting gift before I left the beautiful city. I thought this friendly discussion would certainly increase my longing for Vilna when I was far removed and separated from it by a distance of thousands of miles.

The farewell at my school was intimate – a simple meeting one evening over a cup of tea, but very cordial. The teachers and pupils said goodbye with

feeling, gave me gifts I treasured as souvenirs and accompanied me to the train station as I left to go abroad. The name of the country frightened me to an extent. For this reason, I did not mention it to many of my acquaintances to avoid creating unnecessary confusion among them – as had happened to me with the official who expressed his amazement that I was travelling to Africa, so far from Europe.

I left Vilna on 31 January, 1928. During the night I reached Warsaw. I knew the city a little, following my visit there on a family matter soon after my return from Leningrad. I was also there in 1921 as a delegate to the first *Tarbut* conference in Warsaw with three others. The conference lasted four or five days and I spent over a week there getting to know the character and external nature of the beautiful Polish capital that had hardly been damaged in the war.

I was extremely vigilant with my financial transactions, particularly with regard to exchanging Polish currency for pounds. I had become aware of attempts made by those assisting me to obtain an unjustified “profit”, that in the view of the moneychanger a “greenhorn” could and should provide, by overpaying for receiving foreign currency. For him, the value had to be greater than the rate in the official financial market. In the evening, after I had completed my arrangements for my journey, I found that my caution had proved itself and the exchange dealers’ fee at the bank was not excessive.

At seven in the evening, a coachman stood in front of my hotel. He loaded my basket onto the platform of the wagon and placed his feet on it. I sat on the wagon and the submissive and disciplined horse began its steady trot in the direction of the Vienna station. The train would take me from there to the Polish-German border and on to Berlin.

At the border post, the customs officials recognised me as an emigrant, believed what I told them and made no thorough examination of my possessions, all of which were packed in my plain wicker basket. Its cheap and simple plainness stood out among the many good and expensive suitcases of various travellers moving from train to train, with me among them. Early in the morning, I saw the bustling city of Berlin, particularly its trains, above the parks. An hour later, I reached the centre of the city.

I had written down an address previously and found the hotel with ease. I thought the hosts were Jewish. It was in Friedrich Street, near one of the main roads, Unter den Linden. My room was gloomy, particularly on that overcast day, but large enough and comfortable. I ate breakfast quickly, arranged my hand luggage and went out to see the city. While I was in Warsaw, I had gone to the German Consul and requested a permit to stay in Berlin for three days. It was granted.

I passed many areas on foot, looking at beautiful buildings and saw the university, the parliament and many other government buildings. (I travelled back on a tram.) I managed to see a lot that day. Many temporary signs were particularly prominent, declaring “white weeks”, referring to the sale of goods, particularly underwear, at cheap prices after the festive season, Xmas and the civilian new year. It was the beginning of February. I was drawn by the boldly displayed bargains and even bought a few.

One of the Germans suggested I should go to the planetarium, where the sun and moon and orbits of the stars and planets were illustrated in a popular manner. I went there, and learnt many “concrete” things, enjoying it very much.

I was extremely tired after a night of travelling on the train between Warsaw and Berlin and walking for hours in the streets. I returned to my hotel on the corner of Friedrich Street and Unter den Linden at eight in the evening. I was almost falling asleep walking. With some effort, I went up to my room, lay down flat on my bed and without taking off my clothes, fell into a deep sleep, until seven the next morning, when the weak daylight came through the window and woke me. After being so tired, my sleep was sweet and refreshing. Invigorated, I got up, stretched and after gulping a quick cup of tea, I began to bathe, something I had let slip the previous night and now had to do in the morning. I did so very energetically. Slowly I became aware of a quiet humming from one of the rooms nearby, a melody I knew and liked. I was so fond of it that I began to sing it myself – a sad and pleasant tune, moving up and down pleasantly, one that my *beit midrash* had imbued in me and was part of my longing. It was a popular tune from *The Dybbuk* by S Ansky. The play was performed in Vilna by the Hebrew theatre company, *Habimah* (The Stage) from Moscow in 1926. I can still recall an interesting detail. A magnificent reception was arranged at the Vilna railway station for a troupe of actors who arrived by train from the Latvian border. A large youth orchestra arrived and to the sounds of their trumpets, the members of *Habimah* alighted onto the railway platform. At the same time, Pilsudski, the president of the Polish Republic, left Vilna for Warsaw in a special train standing on a track far from the station. An army band accompanied him. Then the two bands joined forces, ours, the Jewish band, and the army band. There was much excitement and great enthusiasm among the large crowd in the area of the railway station – ourselves and the Poles. And the same morning in Friedrichstrasse, in Berlin, the two voices united in humming the tune from *The Dybbuk*, of people who did not see each other, Jews who were far away, strangers, unknown – one from the East, myself, and the other from the West – and *The Dybbuk*, without our knowledge, bound us together.

(The first performance of *The Dybbuk* was attended by over twenty Polish professors from the university in Vilna and many Christian students who,

of course, did not know Hebrew, but the performance made a huge impression on them.)

Touring Berlin, I met a passenger on the municipal train. When he heard I was headed for London, he began to insist that it was vital that I first visit the British Museum, because it was so significant historically, artistically, archaeologically – and there was much to learn there.

I had an address and without much trouble, I found the home of two of my excellent pupils at Riebesman's school. They were studying to be teachers in Berlin. I was glad to hear their assurance that they would not neglect Hebrew subjects in their teaching. They wanted to give me tickets to the Russian Artistic Theatre, known in Berlin for its first-rate actors. It was leftist in its leanings. To the regret of the three of us, it soon became clear that tickets for that evening, the only one I could still spend in Berlin, had already been sold out a week before.

The way from Berlin to Dover was short and interesting. However, I managed to take in only very little of the environment on the ship transporting passengers from the coast of France to the opposite coast, across the English Channel. It was cloudy, with a strong wind and I suddenly felt the sea-sickness I recalled from sailing on the Black Sea from Odessa. One of the sailors passing by saw my discomfort. He pushed me quickly and gently, making me lie down on one of the sacks. I closed my eyes and soon fell asleep. It was only after the ship anchored that I went below, or, more correctly, went up onto the dry land. My train journey to London, was quick, lasting about three hours.

A man came to welcome me on behalf of the *Orchim Lamehagrim* Synagogue, the Shelter. I felt that he put on airs about immigrants, about improving their lot and the great kindness that he, the official of the Shelter, performed for the green immigrant from some obscure town or countryside. In his opinion, the official deserved a particular reward – at very least, exceptional gratitude. On the way he pointed out important places and buildings. Like an expert, he explained their value in ludicrous Yiddish, which he spoke only to “please” the person with him, for whom everything was strange and foreign, addressing a less cultured creature.

Berlin makes a tremendous impression as the capital of Europe. It has wonderful and beautiful buildings. At night, it glows with electricity that illuminates almost like daylight. The men and women dress beautifully and their faces express the satisfaction of “loyal subjects”, while they carried themselves in a manner expressing complete spiritual and material satisfaction. The war ended with total victory of the Allies over the Germans. In future, there would be no further war and for that reason, military people,

soldiers, were not found in Berlin. During my stay there, I saw, perhaps, half a dozen people wearing low-ranking military uniforms, because in terms of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany had only about two hundred thousand soldiers left to protect the government, the *Reichswehr*, and no more at that time.

The British metropolis, however, was completely different in its external appearance. It is gloomy, has no sunlight, the buildings are drab, without variety, in dull colours. The lighting at night is dark and the streets remain half-shadowed. Fog dominates London day and night. Men in festive suits could sometimes be seen, with shiny top hats on their heads and they carried umbrellas. They were the upper classes, members of the government and the nobility. The city was busy, particularly next to one of the bridges as officials came out of their offices in their thousands. Rushing to get a tram, they snatched the evening newspaper on their way. It seemed as if the dominance of the fog penetrated the people and their spirit as well. There was much heavy traffic, particularly noticeable at certain times on the trains in the depths of the earth, but this did not appear to be the pulse of exuberant life, but automatic and necessary speed, driven by an external force.

I went around the city with the largest population in the world, wandered through its streets, went to the West End, after going through the East End with its large Jewish population. I saw the Houses of Parliament, the many monuments around it, the bridges, government offices. Oxford Street is regarded as the leading thoroughfare. I saw a great deal and tried to make sure I remembered the famous sights and palaces to be able to recall them when I read of them in newspapers or books. I visited the British Museum twice, but truly understanding its character and value requires several lengthy visits. I managed to see London in the three days I spent there, as it is, with its typical weather, misty, smoky and foggy.

In the East End, I met some Jews with whom I talked, without learning much from them. I also did not see much of the Jewish institutions. In the late afternoon, I came across a funeral. The participants wore top hats and tails. It was only after I asked what kind of procession this was – I could not see the coffin of the deceased, as it had already been swallowed by the fog – I received the correct answer.

On February 9, I was due to set sail by ship to the south of Africa. I left the Shelter in the company of the same person who was “covering” me from the time I arrived by train at Victoria Station. He treated me with a little polite hesitation, as he did not want to “extort” a reward for what he was doing to help his immigrants – but he did not stop pestering a woman with her four or five sons, travelling with me in the same carriage to the harbour, the entire way until she eventually saw fit to escape his importunity by giving him half a crown.

The train wound its way through the suburbs for over an hour *en route* to Tilbury, where the ship was berthed. The centre of the city was already behind us and it was typical that just on the day we left the huge city, the sun shone brightly, almost reluctantly spreading its light and bringing a pleasant warmth. I made progress towards my objective, starting at the port of London and ending on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, where another Genesis awaited, in the historic story of my life, a safe haven for me.

The P & O vessel, the *Benalla*, linked England to Australia via South Africa. It was ready to accommodate me during the three-week journey. I boarded it courageously, as the prophet Jonah did in Jaffa, to spend my entire journey on the ocean that stretched to Cape Town.

The eleven-thousand-ton *Benalla*, as I saw from the deck, took all my movables on board, with my light wicker basket standing out clearly, bound with ropes. Along with handsome suitcases and parcels, my basket was swallowed up in the belly of the ship, disappearing from view. My cabin was towards the rear of the boat, on the second level down from the deck, with four occupants, one for each of the bunks. I had the top bunk.

The first day was quiet and pleasant. I spent part of it in the port. After breakfast the next morning, I went up to the deck until lunch, taking with me the book *Shechiot Hachemdah (Delightful Treasures)*, by Dr M Soloveichik, who was the Jewish minister in Lithuania. It was given to me as a souvenir by M Zaslansky. I was totally relaxed as I read it.

A man walked past and glanced at my book. When he realised it was not written in his language, asked me what it was about. I replied in English, in which I was still “fluent” from my time in Vilna: “Biblia” and “Jerusalem”. It seemed to me that he understood well enough and I immediately saw his appreciation for the book and, perhaps, also the person reading it.

I went up on deck again after lunch, but I found it difficult walking there because I felt I was staggering like a drunkard. I quickly returned to my cabin and lay down on my bunk with a book that was easier reading. As soon as the sea began to affect me, a sailor came up to me and put a container – a kind of bucket – next to my head. The next time he passed by, he looked at me sympathetically, declaring as if he were rendering a judgement: “Sea-sick!” At first I did not understand what the word meant, but my neighbour explained it to me.

After that, I had nobody to take care of me, commiserate with me, support me in my illness with appropriate food or drink. I felt my fate was sealed already and I was among those who were, G-d forbid, approaching certain

death, or I might be spared to live for a very long time. But there was no sign of medication, treatment or care. I was unable to decide whether I was already beyond despair or was undergoing a health transformation process, stable, immunised and vital.

I did not know how my neighbours in my cabin were. It seemed to me that only one lay on his bunk and tried to speak to me. Either I did not understand his language at all or failed to do so because I was so weak. Whatever the case, I fell into a blessed sleep, that transported me into a different world, one new and foreign to me. Nightmarish visions did not alarm me. All I remember clearly is that I was put into some kind of place of prayer, where there was much singing and chanting of praises and requests for mercy. It was as if the melody bore witness to their sounds coming from angels on high – so sweet to hear, pleasant on the ear, with heartfelt song and vibration. On the one hand, I thought there was great danger hanging over my head and on the other, wonderful redemption would come soon. The congregation gathered there poured out its heart in cries of despair, while expressing hopes for the rescue of the congregation worshipping with great devotion, deep feeling and infinite faith. Various strange feelings and emotions filled my being with confusion, a storm.

When I woke up and my head cleared. I came to the “real” conclusion. There were always very strong storms on this “Biscay”. They affected people sailing in ships. As a result, I was afflicted by sea-sickness on the second day of the journey.

On this stormy day, when horrors awaited, all the passengers were forced to take to their bunks because of sea-sickness. On the Sunday, when most of them had recovered, they got up and went to the dining hall for public prayer. Their supplications and prayers rendered in poetry and song were aimed at getting the storm to abate, to quieten it or, at least, to remove it from the *Benalla*.

These were the tunes, confessions and praise songs that had reached my ears so pleasantly and beautifully while I slept.

A few days later, I was better. My mind cleared totally. I became ravenously hungry, urgently demanding that I be fed to still my raging appetite. I no longer suffered from the motion of the sea that moved body and soul. I sat down firmly as if I was on dry land. The ship’s movement changed only when it approached the shoreline at the Cape of Good Hope, when the winds and storms grew stronger.

Virtually none of the passengers were my co-religionists – most of them

were on their way to Australia and only a small number to South Africa. There was only one Jewish family among them, from Lodz in Poland. A mother and daughters aged thirteen, twelve and five. They were travelling to her husband, a tailor, in Australia. The girls were uneducated, moving around among the passengers, making a totally unnecessary noise and row. Their annoying racket stopped when they were severely reprimanded.

A woman from Yugoslavia and her daughter, a girl of about fifteen, were among the passengers. An intelligent person, she spoke correct Russian and lived in the town of Benoni in the Transvaal. She was on her way back from a tour of Europe. She knew a lot about life in South Africa and Europe. I learnt a lot from these discussions. She gave her views on emigration in a tone that brooked no dispute. Starting a new life in South Africa was not easy, but whoever managed to succeed in that country could no longer leave it. Even if a person decided to leave and resettle in Europe, he would eventually return to South Africa and remain there for the rest of his life. Life in South Africa was good and pleasant and the people who lived there were connected by strong ties.

I shared a dining table with this woman and her daughter, a pleasant English couple and an Englishman who was a captain, as well as some other high-ranking people. The English husband asked me whether I played chess. I played with him once or twice, but avoided doing so later, because playing against a novice was difficult for me. I spent time alone reading books.

Two years later, after I had settled in Cape Town, I was introduced to the rabbi from Somerset West who sometimes came to visit me. He was a very old, noble person, a scholar and enlightened man. In one of our conversations, he told me he had heard of me even before I came to the *Talmud Torah* in Cape Town and knew my “conduct” was good. Before I arrived at the shores of this city? How? An important person in his town, a member of the Christian intelligentsia – a lawyer or a judge – told him about the Hebrew teacher who had travelled with him and was in his company all the way. According to his description of the passenger, it could only have been me.

Twenty-one days on the boat, three continuous weeks on the sea, when entire days passed without my having discussions on the wide world, people and their experiences, was a burden to me. The company in which I found myself throughout my journey was pleasant. But when, an hour before we went to sleep, the cheese portions were served on the table, the passengers would gather “in its honour”, waiting eagerly, and would always fall on it like prairie wolves on innocent lambs. Everyone would grab as much as possible in their hands, more than a lot, without shame. This was exactly how they would “gain” by grabbing fruit rudely, mainly apples, served after lunch in large quantities on a platter, enough for everyone there. Ugly grasping: I took

pity on the honour of the people grabbing in that manner, who humiliated themselves to such an extent!

About two days before the ship arrived in the port of Cape Town, the captain disappeared from his place at our table, and was no longer seen. The Yugoslav woman from Benoni told me he liked a drink and was sharing one with the captain of the ship, after the two of them became friends.

Seagulls were already flying around the ship for two or three days. On the Friday, we could see Table Mountain on the Cape Town horizon. Afterwards, we could make out the houses of the city, small, climbing the mountains and hills and coming down from them – toy houses. But the large Table Mountain, with comparatively slightly smaller mountains around it, was wonderful and lovely. It drew my eyes towards it, as was the case with many other passengers. The clear, transparent clouds were particularly beautiful, covering it and descending in rolling waves. It was a beautiful vision: the clouds rolled and twisted, pursuing one another, trying to reach the lower slopes of the mountain and the ground. The verse from the Five Books of Moses at the time of the giving of the Torah came to mind: “And a thick cloud upon the mount” (Sinai). Was it because it was already thick on the mountain that the cloud was coming down to earth, now to here, in South Africa, on an ordinary Friday? Was this a divine revelation? I saw a special vista, unlike any I had seen before – and there was nothing like it. This was just one of the wonders of the new country on whose shores I had arrived. The Yugoslav woman told me the names of the mountains.

We approached the shore. The boat anchored at three in the afternoon. Many blacks came onto the deck and began to carry the passengers’ suitcases and parcels. It crossed my mind for a moment that they were robbers attacking the Europeans and stealing their goods from them. The woman saw my surprise and put my mind at rest by saying that these men, the natives, were honest and one could rely on them – nothing placed in their charge went missing.

I was called to the Immigration Office. They asked about my occupation and when I replied that I was a teacher, they looked at my passport. My reply was confirmed and they asked me nothing further. Mr Krassov was one of the officials I later got to know well.

After leaving the Immigration Office, Mr Heyman came up to me and invited me to come to his boarding house. When I came down to the dockside, I saw the wife of the captain who had “disappeared”. His mother had come to welcome him, but he was terribly drunk – he could not stand on his feet. We travelled a short way together on a tram. He stood close to the entrance, embracing his wife and asking her forgiveness, while she shed copious tears.

He saw me, but did not return my greeting, pretending not to recognise me after we had met twice or three times a day, morning, noon and night, for weeks. He was very depressed by his intoxication.

When I came out of the harbour building, the Yugoslav woman alluded to him, saying: "Take a good look at how far a good man has fallen through his excessive corruption." Then we parted. I stepped onto African soil on 2 March 1928.

On Friday night in the boarding house, I was shown some "segments" of Jewish life among Lithuanian Jews in South Africa. The way they kept the Sabbath and the customs of the parents – the old people. The children, the youth, marching towards progress, showed – or perhaps only tried to be seen as – progressives, modern, particularly with the English they spoke and the way they referred to keeping the commandment of the Sabbath, which for them was not a fixed, internalised custom. There was a clear difference between the fathers and sons. Although they tried to preserve mutually peaceful and harmonious relations, they seemed artificial. The young still needed to respect their mothers and fathers, who saw themselves as being forced to give up and abandon their ways as the way the children wished. The children were still obedient, but not because of any psychological understanding and need: rather through the goodness of their hearts, to satisfy the wishes of their parents. The breach is clear. It was still slow, but would eventually expand. The concessions by both parties were only temporary, external.

The spirit of holiness that the Sabbath inspires in a traditional Jewish home, bringing its "extra soul" to its threshold, struck me as wanting and defective in South Africa, and the "basic" soul was therefore also not particularly aware on the holy days.

In the evening, I went out to look around the town a little. I was in a poor quarter, where most of the people were natives of the country, blacks. The wind blew up a storm. I could hardly stand against it. Not far from me, I saw an old woman blown to the ground by the wind. Only a short while later, the same thing happened to a young girl, blown away by the force of the gale and falling on her face. I was not used to seeing such strong and furious winds. I was astonished and a little depressed.

In the fruit shops, which were open in the evening and well lit even when they were closed, varieties of fruit found only in the south were displayed, including grapes and bananas. I had already tasted bananas when the *Benalla* anchored at the island of Madeira. The pears were large, but not as tasty as our pears there, in Vilna.

I went to the synagogue on Saturday morning. The building is marvellous, in a beautiful, traditional style. It is centrally situated on the avenues of the wonderful city. The perfect harmony of the building reached upwards with its domes and towers soaring skyward, well situated to impress the eye of the beholder. The interior of the building lifted the spirit of the visiting Jew. The synagogue is well appointed.

In the order of the service, I found much of the traditions and customs of the synagogues and *batei midrash* in Lithuania, as well as innovations, but not many. The clear, comprehensive line appeared from the dominant official language, primarily used by the rabbi in his Sabbath sermon, based on some of the “pillars” of the weekly portion. And this was dazzling and polished English, as is customary among good Jews when they do not use their own language, but the neighbours’ language, with its imitation by our Jewish brothers being almost better than the original of the people who created it.

A foreign language in a holy place was something totally new to me, although I knew about it from what I had heard and read. Now I saw it with open eyes and listened with attentive ears. (I had completely forgotten the Russian used in the synagogue in St Petersburg, which resulted in my paying no attention to the rare sermon of the rabbi – not every Shabbat.) I asked myself the question: Did using the foreign language impair the holiness and dignity of the intimate Jewish content?

But this can be argued both ways: people were here in large numbers going down the path paved by our forefathers and taking new steps – in the House of the Lord – as opposed to the few innovators.

In the afternoon, I went to visit some relatives I had not met previously. I found their home easily. We had a long discussion over a cup of tea and a walk through the nearby municipal garden. We spoke about the homeland and the new country, the recent past and the chances for the future: my exposition lasted more than two hours. In parting, we decided to meet on Saturday evening and go to the Zionist Forum for a meeting in memory of Joseph Trumpeldor. It was a few days after the anniversary of his death at the hands of Arabs.

At the hall, I hoped to meet someone for whom I brought warm regards from the family of Dr SY Charna. I understood absolutely nothing of the speech about the hero, whose name will never be forgotten by nationalist Jews. The speaker was a Member of Parliament, Mr Kentridge, who spoke English. I can no longer recall whether anything was said in a language I understood. After the meeting, I met some recent arrivals from Vilna. I also found Mr Rubik, a lawyer, an active Zionist official, an outstanding Lithuanian intellectual and distinguished scholar – I had a message for him from his friend, Dr Charna.

Mr Rubin introduced me to Mr and Mrs Barzinsky in the hall. He was the head of the orphanage and she was the matron. The couple invited me to their home the next day, Sunday, and I gladly accepted. From the first moment I felt we would become close friends. They immediately showed me warmth and affection.

They were from Bialystok and had spent some years in the Land of Israel. He was the head of an educational institution in Cape Town, having arrived with his wife to settle in the orphanage two years before my arrival. They were good-natured and well-mannered, wholeheartedly wishing their friends well. Our acquaintance led to real friendship between us. I said: These are people who will rescue me in this strange country, my new exile.

During breakfast on Sunday, I happened to be at the table in the boarding house with an old man who was my *landsleit*, from Lithuania, and we began to talk. He was born in Ponovezh, but had spent most of his long, successful life in South Africa. He was proud of people who had come from Russia, which he had visited a few years earlier and seen his relatives who remained there. The way he saw Russia, Ponovezh and Moscow were concepts on the same level and he showed this when he spoke.

He asked me about what was happening in Russia. How were the Jews there? I answered: Over the years we had suffered much hardship, trouble and oppression. There was a long and bloody war. Then the revolution came, it cost us a great deal of blood and there were terrible pogroms against the Jews, causing devastation among them – a huge number of victims. And now, as a result of the war, which broke out in 1914, the situation was still difficult and serious in the territories of Russia itself and the countries that broke away from it.

He listened to me incredulously, as if what I had said was insignificant and greatly exaggerated. And then, with affected triumph, he said,: “Pshaw! Wars, rebellions, revolutions! There in Russia, you are all afraid of the *strazhnik* [the village police constable], everything is terrible, frightening and terrifying for you. War? There was war here in South Africa! In 1922. There was a terrible rebellion. Johannesburg was under siege. The strikers stopped all the traffic. For three days it was impossible to go out into the street because it was dangerous to move from house to house! There were no foodstuffs and some people said, even bread, actually bread, was impossible to obtain because of the disturbances! A real war! The workers and employers felt a tremendous war. It is estimated that there were dozens of dead and wounded. For three days, one after the other, including at night! And there in Russia you are crying out: War! War! Enough! Get out of my sight!” This man, from the Russia of Ponovezh and Moscow, had acclimatised himself and adapted to

South Africa and its style. Yes, it was a special style. Those who adopted this style said, "People who are 'green' will always remain 'green' and embitter our lives". "Here everything is different, even war and rebellions." This man, who had put down deep roots in South Africa and, in his view, become one of its pure-bred sons. And when Russia was again discussed with him – he himself had acquired the special mirror commonly used in his environment, the typical, original characteristic South African environment.

The same day, I visited Mr and Mrs Barzinsky at the orphanage. We met as old friends and acquaintances. Our conversation covered details of our families, our present life and ambitions. And speech led to action. Mr B decided to approach his acquaintances at once to arrange for all of us to meet. But it did not happen immediately. He phoned the director of the *Talmud Torah*, Mr Ezra Homa, but did not receive a clear response. In the evening, I returned to the boarding house.

The owner of the boarding house, with whom I had become friendly, told me that Reverend Bender (the minister at the Gardens Shul) was very active in the general Cape Town community. He reached out to the immigrants and was able to make arrangements for them. The following day, therefore, on Monday morning, I should visit him. He tried to convince me to listen to his advice.

It was a grey, overcast day, with some light rain. I met him, although no interview had been arranged in advance. I went to Mr Bender's home and my reception made a strange impression on me. From the outset, he was disappointed to see a Hebrew teacher from Eastern Europe there. He did not particularly like the Jews from there. I got to know this from some of the jokes and anecdotes he told me in broken Yiddish about Russian rabbis – without insulting them, G-d forbid, but saying they were different from people imbued with the spirit of European culture. He offered me a cigar, which I declined, as I was not used to smoking them. Then his attitude to me changed suddenly, overall being very fair, and he said: "I am writing a letter to the director of the *Talmud Torah*, Mr Homa, and you must go straight to him. He will certainly do everything in his power for you." I did as he said. A few moments later, Mr Bender's letter was in my pocket and our interview drew to a close.

I went from his home to the fruit market. I bought grapes – I felt a particular need to restore my outcast soul, broken for some reason, and I swallowed the fruit hungrily. Then an idea crossed my mind, and with it I decided: I could not return to Vilna, nor did I want to do so. I had to make my way here – to overcome the obstacles and difficulties of all types and kinds! To overcome – no matter what!

With slow, weak steps, I set out for Hope Street, where the *Talmud Torah* was situated, to present myself to the principal and ask for work. The *Talmud Torah* building was old and neglected. Very ugly. The main entrance was closed. I turned left, towards the courtyard, and saw a guard walking around. I asked for Mr Homa. He replied: "Mr Homa? He is dead!" Was this the case? Was it true? He repeated his words sadly: "Yes. Mr Homa is dead." I saw somebody approaching the *Talmud Torah* and I spoke to him. He was a gentleman (eventually, a year later, I was told that this was Mr Cheideker), who was also able to confirm the sad fact that the head of the *Talmud Torah*, Mr Homa, had died.

I went to a public telephone and called Mr Barzinsky and gave him the bad news of the death of the principal. He was shocked. And then – I do not know why – I phoned Mr Rubik, who was also very shocked that Homa had died suddenly. Very few people knew about it and I felt I had to let his friends and acquaintances in that narrow circle know.

This was on the day of the Fast of Esther (the day before the festival of *Purim* in February). The funeral was to be held on the morning of *Purim*. I spoke to Mr Barzinsky and we were invited to go to the home of the deceased to participate in the funeral. The tragic event was very depressing, making me very sad – I saw the principal of the *Talmud Torah* only after he had died.

Barzinsky spoke to the education officials and introduced me to them, both in person and when I was not there. Rabbi MC Mervish agreed to meet with me and we spoke in Hebrew, a pleasant surprise in Cape Town. I had spoken Hebrew to the Barzinskys from the time we met, but they were different because they were involved in teaching and came from Israel. But an Orthodox rabbi, of the older generation, who spoke Hebrew, was not easy to find or meet.

The Barzinskys and I became good friends. They really wanted me to settle down well in Cape Town so that we could remain close, living in the same city, in the same environment. However, the chances of this faded every day.

I then considered the invitation from Rabbi Dr JL Landau in Johannesburg, to find what I was looking for in that city. My new friends were sorry to hear of my decision, but were forced to accept it. After spending eleven days in Cape Town, I set out for Johannesburg. The parting was difficult for us, for me and my good friends. But there was the fervent hope we would soon see each other again, G-d willing, realising our desire to be physically close as well.

SOUTH AFRICAN STYLE

The train journey from Cape Town to Johannesburg took me two nights and a day. The tracks passed through dry land, scrub, empty terrain, isolated houses and small villages far from each other, where there were no men or beasts except after breaks of several hours. This showed the country was very large, but sparsely and thinly populated. Taking into account the population density in Western Europe, it would seem that this country could have absorbed dozens of millions of people who could make a living there, as it was considered fertile – for its crops, orchards and all types of produce. The main cities are separated from each other by distances of hundreds of miles. The Europeans, with a white skin, are a minority in South Africa, amounting to twenty percent of the original local native inhabitants, including tribes originating in Asia who had come to live in South Africa and settled there.

I arrived in Johannesburg in the morning. I managed to find where my friend, Z Rybko, lived. He had come to this country several months before me. He was not home. I was informed that he had gone on a trip as a Zionist worker. He came to southern Africa as a Hebrew teacher and taught in a *Talmud Torah* for a few months. Although he had gained a great deal of experience in this work in Vilna, he found the conditions unbearable in his new surroundings and left his post. Luckily, he found a better, more suitable job, visiting cities and towns to gain support for the Zionist idea.

When I arrived, his job at the *Talmud Torah* was still available and was offered to me. Rybko's room was empty. He had to travel all the time and only occasionally came back to town to receive instructions and would then return to his circuit as determined by the Zionist Federation. I was given practical advice – become a tenant in Rybko's room and live with him while he was in Johannesburg, as that was probably what he would have wished. But what was this about? I was looking to settle in Johannesburg as a Hebrew teacher, not wanting to turn to trade or "business", which people in this country felt would be more beneficial to the new arrivals in this country. In their view this was worthwhile even for a good teacher. I remained in the room and was Rybko's neighbour in his absence and when he arrived and found me there, he was happy about my decision.

After taking a few days' break, I felt I should introduce myself to Rabbi Dr Landau. On my own initiative, without getting in touch with him first, I went

to visit him one Sunday morning. His house was not far from where I stayed, but when I set out I had no specific directions to find the address easily, and I went a little wrong.

I crossed several roads without finding anyone who could show me the way. I met only a small girl, skipping along and repeating in a soft sing-song voice, letters I recognised as CAT. I learnt something very significant from this little girl, how reading and writing was taught in English, a theory small children had to practise to know how to read, speak and write the language, with its strange, but correct and accepted forms.

I found the character of the language to be a concrete symbol of the character of the country and its inhabitants – the duality: the expression is different from the form. The idea is dissimilar from the way it is expressed. Before I had been in this country for long, my view in this regard, based on linguistic and philosophical foundations, was proved correct and accurate – from my observations and, primarily, my adaptation to everyday life.

I reached my destination, arriving at the home of the rabbi-doctor. My introduction to the main spiritual leader in this country was in Hebrew. My host recognised me as the man he had invited, with my friend, to Johannesburg. I was informed that a post was available for me (the one Rybko had left).

During our discussion, I received some advice, suggestions designed to guide me for my benefit. The main one was practical: to establish my position here, I had to try to master the English language perfectly, so that I was fluent, and this would pave my way in my new life. The practical interview ended and I left, hoping to strengthen the friendly links with Dr Landau in future.

Rybko soon arrived for a few days. We had a pleasant meeting. He gladly agreed to share his room with me. Talking generally with him, about Vilna, travel, Cape Town, South Africa, we went on to discuss the Hebrew teacher's situation and what it involved here. He able to express it correctly and accurately. Now that I had taken his place, without waiting for a post to become available after several weeks or months, he tried to provide me with all the details of the teaching post and conditions in Johannesburg with regard to the syllabus and the basic method used in the school, a *Talmud Torah* (only two schools in the entire country were not *Talmudei Torah*: the Hebrew High School in Johannesburg which, as it happened, closed in my time and the government school in Oudtshoorn, where they learnt Hebrew in the morning). He also described the attitude of management to the teaching staff and the relationships among the teachers and students, office-bearers and Hebrew teachers.

There were four hours of teaching a day, between three and seven in the evening, after the pupils' general school classes. They attended Hebrew studies classes at the *Talmud Torah* for two hours a day, with a short break between classes. On Fridays, studies were shortened, from three to five in the afternoon. Even if a teacher had many years' experience in model schools in Eastern Europe, his previous work was not taken into account and the basic salary of a teacher starting in South Africa was £20 a month.

My friend Rybko did manage to find some encouragement for me: after working there for three or four months, he had requested an increase in his meagre salary and was promised an additional "fiver" (£5) a month. Although he left his post before this increase took effect, he said I might be able to obtain the "fiver" for which he had fought.

I then started thinking about friends and acquaintances who might be in Johannesburg. I began to look for them. The first one I came across, because he lived in my neighbourhood and close to the building where my room was, was my friend from the *Knesset Beit Yitzhak* in Slobodka – Shlomo Feinstein. At that time in Lithuania, neither of us was still studying. For about a year, we shared a room and participated in further Russian studies in subjects taught in Russian as part of a pharmacists' course. He received financial support from his father in South Africa. Soon afterwards, he also went there. After he left, our friendship continued through an exchange of correspondence.

In Johannesburg, I found him settled with his family. He was influential and a member of the committee of my *Talmud Torah*, part of the United *Talmudei Torah* in Johannesburg. Rabbi Dr Landau was its president. The committee had about ten members..

Our meeting took him totally by surprise – after 25 years! He welcomed me with open arms, renewing our friendship. From him, too, I got to know how Hebrew teachers were regarded in Johannesburg, not the veterans, the established teachers, but the new foreign teachers, strangers like me. He advised me to adapt to the local conditions. Adaptation was the secret of his philosophy, as I understood it – the secret of existence, particularly for a teacher, exactly how to do things. Learning a little of the essence of the South African style aroused revulsion in me.

Later I met my cousin, Benjamin Alexander Lipschitz (Lifner), from Shkodvil, who was under the supervision of a yeshiva student at the old *beit midrah* – *Knesset Beit Yitzhak* – in Slobodka. He was happy to meet me unexpectedly. He was involved in his private business – a bachelor and far from public affairs. He would often visit me and take me to his old father, who had been a South African citizen for many years.

Then I happened to meet Levi Chaim Gershater, whom I knew from Vilna. His sisters had studied at the school where I was principal. I had known his father, an impressive man with patriarchal looks, from the Great Synagogue in Vilna, where he was the Torah reader. I also knew his wife and her parents. Her sisters were pupils at the Hebrew Gymnasium.

Levi Chaim had come to South Africa several years before. He earned his living teaching Hebrew. I remember that when we were both teaching in Johannesburg *Talmudei Torah*, he, the citizen, would encourage me, the foreigner, when I felt disheartened by the insulting attitude of those on my back, and I took heart.

He completed his education and later was appointed editor of the *Zionist Record*. He succeeded in publishing his journalistic efforts and writings in the Palestinian press. This led to the discovery of his talents as an accomplished author in Hebrew and English.

Other good teachers, but “green”, according to the South African version, were then in Johannesburg. They shared similar views. They were: Y Kalachka, a former teacher at the Hebrew Gymnasium in central Lithuania; Mr Lurie and his son, who came from Mariampol; L Melamed; Mr Y Klevansky and the teacher Z Lederman.

My friend Rybko took me into my *cheder* (classroom) at the *Talmud Torah*. I taught my class there, but was cut off from the main building, which housed the other classes. As a result, I was separated reluctantly from the group of teachers, as there was no direct contact between them and me for the entire time I taught at that institution. When I went into that *Talmud Torah*, it was as if a heavy burden had been imposed on me. I felt and feared that in this new educational and teaching environment I would encounter many obstacles, but realised that in my situation, there was no going back or sideways. My destiny, imposed on me by fate, was Hebrew teaching – without it I could not survive, or, more correctly, exist! The bridges behind me were destroyed on the ocean and I had no other way. I told myself: I will remain strong, make the effort and perhaps manage to succeed.

I began my work on 1 April. One day, Rybko came to meet me when the afternoon classes ended – on a day when classes were in the morning because of general school holidays. On our way, we met one of the *Talmud Torah* officials, who served in the synagogue. Rybko introduced me, the “new teacher”, to him and then, as usual, told him my name. He shook my hand and without paying any real attention to the kind of person I was, began to speaking out loud: “Ah! Hebrew teachers are fortunate! They begin work and then the holidays jump at them. The festival of Passover is coming! [That year,

it fell on 10 April, if I am not mistaken.] Paid leave – this kind of thing is not common in the life of a businessman, but it is among Hebrew teachers.” He emphasised the word “Hebrew”. He left us with feelings of envy, particularly towards “lucky” me, entitled to leave before even starting work.

This monologue expressed the African version and its way of life. And Rybko, who had got to know the way the Africans behaved better than I did, agreed with me.

I worked very hard at the *Talmud Torah*. I felt unique depression in this institution. There was no pedagogic council, no tradition or trace of an advisory administration that could show the way to a beginner. I, therefore, had to search intensively, through trial and error, experimenting in different ways, to find a common language with the pupils - I had no summary of their studies prior to my arrival and the language used was only a translation into their spoken language – English. The translation incorporated the method of teaching content and information. This principle was revealed to me through what others did.

I was given two classes. The lower class was a kind of first grade, children who knew how to read and write and had to begin the Five Books of Moses. My higher class studied the Early Prophets in the original. In this class, I “took the bull by the horns”. After I found pupils who had developed well in class, were talented, and understood the subject well, I began to use the natural method – teaching them Hebrew in Hebrew. The best pupils accepted this innovation gladly, followed by the average pupils and the experiment went well. There were, however, “cracks” in the class – I saw interference coming, as if from a concealed and hidden hand – from outside. As an experienced teacher, I did not complain about poor discipline in my class because, in this regard, I knew my students and they paid attention. In this regard, however, in my new *Talmud Torah*, I encountered some strange phenomena: without any clear rhyme or reason, pupils dropped out of my class and did not return – particularly some of the good ones. The motives behind this were neither examined nor explained to me, the person concerned. I felt discipline was being undermined with bad intentions – to use “scientific” terminology, I would call these disturbances “sabotage”, and I did not know why it was committed.

Only a few weeks later, I was taken by surprise – a complaint was made to the chairman of the board, Rabbi Dr Landau. I was called urgently to the *Beth Din* (the ecclesiastical court). A serious accusation was levelled against me before the court: I did not obey the school management . . . no more and no less – and I had to show the reason for my guilt or innocence.

No accuser-prosecutor-complainant appeared. The party making the claim or accusation was not present. The only people there were the members of the full bench and me, the accused. The presiding rabbi himself fulfilled the role of accuser.

I saw in this “spectacle” a clear indication of the lifestyle in South Africa, against the background of education and characteristic in South Africa conduct or, in brief, the style of this country. Although I was thoroughly angered by it, I was not perturbed. The result was my being summoned as the accused and ending up as the accuser. I was asked: Is this the case? Is it correct that I did not obey management – and, if so, what was the reason for it? I spoke very quietly, not as though I were making an argument. Had I been given the chance to express my opinion on the type of educational institution the *Talmud Torah*, in which I worked, was, I would have wondered about the total absence of management and supervision of studies there, the lack of a permanent or temporary curriculum and, certainly, their faults, which definitely had an adverse effect on implementing the lofty objective – the aim of the *Talmud Torah*. I had heard that there were over two hundred pupils and five teachers, including the headmaster, all bearing this workload together with no real direction or supervision provided by management. The principal was also busy and occupied with his classes throughout the teaching hours. How, therefore, was it possible for him to take an interest in what was done in the other classes, for which he was responsible, to supervise them, for better or worse, to criticise – advise, analyse, provide direction for completeness, improvement and real progress? I said there was, therefore, an absolute need to release the principal from one hour of teaching every day so he could devote himself to good management, not through others, directly. In this way, he would not be groping in the dark by saying the wrong thing, by forming insufficiently founded and incorrect opinions or conclusions.

One of the members of the court, who had recently arrived from Lithuania and had heard about the modern methods used there in education, was glad to hear my views on the desired and necessary administrative arrangements at the school, in particular, the *Talmud Torah*. Agreeing with my suggestions, he proposed be heeded in practice and without delay. The presiding judge made a note of what had been said, with a promise to examine my suggestions and find the desired remedy. And, thank G-d, I came out of the religious and educational tribunal innocent of the crime of “rebellion”, not guilty and blameless with regard to the lack of discipline slander with which I had been defamed.

I did not succeed in my efforts to remedy the South African version at the school. Nothing changed after my arguments before the ecclesiastical court on this matter, until the year was over.

I do not recall exactly whether it was before I was summoned to the court for a breach of discipline, as it were, or after that, but I was informed, unofficially, yet correctly, that my proposed salary increase had been placed on the board agenda. The decision went against me by a small majority. I was denied the “fiver” promised to my friend.

New acquaintances were added to the friendly relations I established with *landsleit* from the environment of writers, outside the camp of teachers who belonged to the *Talmudei Torah*.

I can see their images in broad outline:

Mr YS Yudelowitz, a well-read man, a scholar and an expert in both the written and oral Torah – with an excellent memory, “a plastered cistern” from which nothing escaped, according to the *Mishna*. This outstanding scholar spoke very well in public lectures and his pen was very powerful, as a well-known writer of innumerable articles on different subjects. He was a towering intellectual, with a comprehensive knowledge of our literature, and had read widely and deeply on our national subjects, as well as general European subjects.

His words were spiced with the sayings of our sages and non-Jewish scholars, proverbs and jokes. Even his casual conversations were worthy of study, rich in anecdote and humour. A meeting with him was always worthwhile and never cut short for lack of time.

The writer YM Sherman was a student in a *beit midrash* in his youth. As a young man, he devoted his powers and abilities to Hebrew poetry and prose. He developed well as a writer and became well known as an author of Yiddish fiction.

His heroes were not only subjects from Jewish life, but characters and problems in the life of people born in this country and non-Jewish Europeans.

He edited compilations at various times, including the monthly *Drom Afrika (South Africa)*. When I was bored, I liked to go to his house. I visited him fairly frequently to talk about politics, literature or just public affairs.

The late Chaim Polski. He was a very pleasant person. He left Lithuania in his youth and made his way to London. There he worked day and night to complete his education. He was known as a *belle-lettrist* writing stories and portraits of the lives of Jews and creating characters from that world. Threads of beauty and pleasantness, of tender and modest refinement, run through his creations.

He was the editor of the weekly *Der Afrikaner (The African)*, to which he devoted much of his energy, time and strength, in spite of the meagre material rewards it brought him.

Mr Polski fulfilled the commandment: "And you shall love the stranger." He liked to reach out to immigrants who were alone and wandering around this country, giving them words of encouragement and good cheer, as well as hope for their chances of a better future. May his memory be blessed.

The new kind of Hebrew teachers in Johannesburg – newly arrived in this country – were a unified group, with one type of ambition: but foreign and strange to the local teachers, the guardians of the status quo, rooted for many years in African ground, citizens loyal to the Jewish public in the country. The latter grew to hate the superfluous "strangers" who came, as it were, to undercut Hebrew education, with its traditional methods and uproot it completely.

We, the greenhorns, decided it would be good and worthwhile to try to unify all the teachers and amalgamate them, raise their status in society and improve education. I managed to see the curriculum of the United *Talmudei Torah*. It was unclear, printed on a thin sheet in a distorted style and with little content – a very pitiful curriculum, defective in all its aspects.

The only members of the central committee of representatives of all the *Talmudei Torah* were lay leaders, the masters of the institutions and the commanders of the teachers. Their role included drawing up the curriculum and its actual implementation. These lay leaders would consider and decide any teaching and educational questions *No teachers served on the education committee* whose existence was doubtful anyway – *there was no foothold*.

The new teachers, therefore, proposed that if all the teachers of the *Talmudei Torah* of the committee came together, we could demand appropriate representation, present our views in the special educational committee elected – what to adopt and what to reject – and work out a curriculum that would be accepted willingly by the teachers responsible for implementing it. Then the teachers would not simply be doing the will of lay leaders, who were not teaching experts, but would be jointly responsible with the teachers for the revival and success of the education.

Two general meetings of teachers were held, where there were fierce arguments, but not on practical matters. Opposition was firmly expressed: to the name and the objective; to the innovations, tearing down the old walls of education and, as it were, undermining the traditional acceptance and the rot – and also just for the sake of opposition.

Eventually it was decided to send five teachers as a delegation to take the matter up with the board and, before doing so, to arrange an interview with the head of the board, Rabbi Dr Landau.

The members of the delegation were: Gershater, Levin, Lurie (the father), Melamed and Kalichka. It was received at the home of the rabbi on Saturday evening and its spokesman then – in English – was Gershater. The rabbi was a little taken aback on hearing our demands and asked whether we wanted a “trade union”. Was this type of union appropriate for Hebrew teachers? Our aspirations were clarified during the quiet discussion and before it ended, an interview was arranged for us with the board at one of its next meetings.

Upon receiving confirmation of the interview, the same delegation arrived at the appointed time and had to wait a long time in uncomfortable conditions. This time, I was selected as the spokesperson – in Yiddish. I demonstrated the important responsibility the teachers were prepared to bear in order to improve the general educational situation. At the same time, they had to realise that without their consent or if they opposed the curriculum on principle, the work would be unlikely to bear fruit, whether for the benefit of the pupils, the gratification of the teachers or the satisfaction of the board members. The curriculum had no value if it was drawn up without the participation of the experts in the field and the people who would have to implement it. Our actual proposal, therefore, was that a curriculum committee be appointed by the board. One-third of its members would be teachers, representatives of the teachers’ union, with voting rights. There was no hint of financial claims, such as an increase in salary. We demanded only a share in drawing up, creating and implementing the educational and spiritual area of the *Talmudei Torah*. My words were logical, clear and popular and everybody understood them. There were no questions or discussion. When I had finished, the president said we would receive a written response on the matter and politely bade us, “Good night, gentlemen”.

About two months passed and the contents of the brief written reply were: Two of the teachers’ delegates were allowed to be representatives on the education committee, in an advisory capacity (without a vote).

Well done! Truly the South African version and style. In any case, the whole thing came to nought even before the response arrived. Opposition grew, the senior teachers held a special meeting with their “quorum”, without the participation of the innovators, in which they discussed a festival for the pupils and who would arrange it.

Then there was activity of another kind – meetings of Hebrew-speakers in which the new teachers and young people participated, all recent arrivals.

It was as if the teachers’ union had never seen the light of day. In the meantime, preparations began for the establishment of a board of education, and this was soon done. This board was above the local *Talmudei Torah*

committee boards. The question of the curriculum and similar matters would now be resolved by the board of education and the teachers, too, would be subject to it, as people obeying its orders.

The well-known Jewish intellectual and communal official, Mr Harry Lurie, was appointed president of the board and Dr – in later years, but at that time Mr – David Mierowsky, communal workers and teachers were invited to the first meeting of the board of education in which its objectives, aspirations and the way these would be implemented were stated, but the people who opposed the innovators refrained from taking part.

Over time, a union developed that became the nucleus of the *Histadrut Ivrit* (Hebrew Association) in South Africa. Its work bore fruit within a few years and it was very active in the fields of culture and education. Branches of the *Histadrut* spread to other centres. Evening adult Hebrew classes were started for adults in the evenings and became a major factor in spreading and reviving our language.

A monthly Hebrew newspaper was also started, *Basat*, which then changed its name to *Barkai* (*Morning Star*). Its editor and publisher, Mr Y Rubik, sacrificed a great deal to keep it running for twenty years.

There was another unsuccessful attempt to create a Hebrew periodical. Three years ago, *Dapim* (*Pages*), the mouthpiece of the *Histadrut Ivrit*, appeared under the editorship of a leading intellectual, Mr Jonathan Batnitzki.

* * *

A whole series of inspection visits were made to my class. As far as I recall, they took place even before the meetings of the teachers and the other “great” events in my life, in particular, and local education, in general.

In my isolated room, I did not know what was going on outside. If, for example, the inspector arrived, I did not know whether he was there in my classes only in my “honour”, or whether it concerned the entire school. Then, one day, an assertive man came into my class. He did not introduce himself properly and signalled that he wanted to examine the pupils.

Examinations! An unpleasant surprise. These were conducted in the South African style. Overall, they were regarded as being very valuable in the general South African schools as well. Was it possible in Europe - even Eastern Europe - to consider the examination method generally used here? A school term – that was the “time” for the examinations. In other words,

after two months of the course of study: early preparations had to be made and when the examinations were over, there were holidays. As a result, the primary purpose was not systematic tranquil study, but an agitated mood pending examinations, the examinations themselves followed by “shaking them off” during a break when there were no classes.

Were they worth it? Showing the exact marks, which were quite unnecessary, and determining the places of the pupils in class – frequently, four times a year? This method is anti-pedagogic, harmful and absurd. It was abandoned a long time ago in countries where education is based on modern, scientific foundations.

In the *Talmudei Torah*, examinations were a means of testing the teachers, each of whom was skilled in the classroom, and if not, perhaps there were more convenient and effective means of hitting this target? However, the lay leaders were not inclined to make improvements in this area either.

The gentleman who came into my class stood in front and began to give the pupils work. He instructed one of them, on the first bench, to read and then, after he had heard a few words, ordered another pupil: “Go on!” He moved with his instructions from one road to another and from one bench to another – until he reached the tenth, the twelfth. His questions did not relate to the essence of the matter, the substance, the content, but only to the translation of words.

When the “circuit” had been completed, with its dry, verbatim translations, with no story or explanation of what was being read, the “tough” examination came to an end and the examiner left. I don’t think he ever got to know my name. I learnt his name from the pupils, who knew him from the general school. I have absolutely no recollection of how he departed or the way he did so, but it was not particularly polite. This was a clear and explicit example of the “South African style”.

After a while I heard that this inspector-examiner had been dismissed from his post and a new inspector came to my class, a cultured rabbi, a member of the *Beth Din*, the late Rabbi Lipschitz. I had an opportunity of meeting him and getting to know him. When he arrived, we regarded each other as warm acquaintances and our meeting was polite and friendly. What did he do when he went around my class? First of all, he watched my teaching, how I explained the study material in words the pupils could understand (he was surprised by my use of good English, as he told me after the class), in writing on the board to explain things. He later told me he was suggesting questions for the class that had content and relevance. We were both satisfied with his visit.

Both inspection visits were to my lower class. Then, one cold, grey winter evening, Rabbi Dr Landau himself appeared in my classroom, accompanied by Chaim Peretz Goodman, one of the senior teachers in the city, who only taught privately. He was among those, perhaps the only one, who reached out to the “greenhorn” teachers who had recently arrived from distant countries (I subsequently found out that he came from a small village near my *shtetl*, but had come to South Africa over forty years before I did). I was giving a lesson then in the higher class.

The visit of these honoured guests surprised me. With the assistance of two pupils, I found them chairs and they sat down and first listened to the subject of the lesson – the conquest of the Jebusite city in spite of the boast by the king, who said to David: “You will not get in here; even the blind and the lame can ward you off” (*Samuel* 2:5:6). The format of this lesson was not simple, but its content was interesting, with Hebrew taught in Hebrew, which the pupils understood well and it left them with a positive impression. My inspector guests also enjoyed it. They stayed until it was over, listened to an explanation from the pupils and were able to evaluate the level of development of the class thoroughly, leaving with a warm greeting. I saw in this lesson, in the presence of my visitors, a sign of my victory, in spite of the obstacles in the form of the “blind and lame” in my path. After a while, I was called to Rabbi Dr Landau. He gave his opinion on my class, expressing his satisfaction about it, foreseeing good prospects for me in this country as a Hebrew teacher and educator.

He also told others what he thought of his visit to my class – members of the board, one of whom was Mr S Feinstein, and some of my friends, as well as Levi Chaim Gershater.

It is worth mentioning that the principal was not present at any of the visits by the inspectors-guests and I did not hear his opinion of them. It seemed to me that we were like temporary passengers on a train or on the same boat and there was nothing we were working on together.

I derived satisfaction from my progress in my class. In the higher class, my method triumphed completely and it seems to me that I was the only one then campaigning, in the United *Talmudei Torah* system, using the “weapon” of Hebrew in Hebrew. But the lower class was exchanged for another in the middle of the course. I was not asked about it, nor was I informed of the reason, but the exchange came unexpectedly – was it to make things more difficult for me and not, G-d forbid, as I assumed, to make things easier? However, I adapted easily to teaching the new class given to me.

In the meantime, examinations were approaching in all the classes throughout the United *Talmudei Torah*. Did others prepare for them in advance and

was the time set for them? In any event, I was not informed of anything. In fact, when the time for the examinations arrived, written tests came first. This was the case in my class as well, but no examinations were set by me. I accepted this, as every pupil had already been examined several times by the inspectors. I very much wished to know what was happening in other classes, to get an idea of the prevailing or accepted teaching method – and, if possible, to discuss the method adopted in the United *Talmudei Torah*. What were the aspirations, the curriculum and the means to realise the objective?

A rabbi inspector came to the examinations. I approached him with a request for permission to allow me to leave my class for an hour, so I could go to one or two other classes run by other teachers and see the examinations there. In my innocence, I believed the examiner setting his examinations, in accordance with the existing curriculum, would do so in a way that could highlight the characteristics of the teaching method.

The inspector agreed to my suggestion and the principal concurred. When I came into the class, I saw that the principal had placed the inspector in a seat to his right and the teacher to his left, while he himself conducted the examinations. I found a place for myself on one of the benches in the last row, so as not to distract the pupils.

The chairman and board members of the Cape Town Talmud Torah, 1931



The examiner had a bewitching smile and a honeyed tongue. Sweet drops of questions fell from his lips, which became a flowing current. The subject of the examination was the first part of the *Book of Genesis*, but it was difficult to ascertain the scope, as there was more jumping backwards than forwards, with no regard for the association of ideas or apperception. The first question stuck in my memory – what is “current money”? Followed by: “flaming sword”? “The great light”? “Fat places of the earth”? “Breath of life”? “For the full price”? “A light for the Ark”? “Shake his yoke”? “Tree of Knowledge”? And more. The questions were asked in this order, using this method and in a deliberate direction. The story of an event, the action of a hero, his status or character – none of these occurred to the examiner and did not need to concern the pupils either. The translation of the words, in this case in the form of an idiom, an accepted expression, remained like glittering broken glass with no connection or relation to the clarification or story, the substance of the matter from which it was “snatched”. It was still valuable because it could throw light on the content of the subject and explain it. And it was surprising that answers were given to these questions that satisfied the teacher after she had devoted so much effort to it, but it was nothing more than a waste of time and energy. Was it worthwhile for the pupils to memorise these answers to appear clever, resulting in pleasing the examiner and placating her in the best way possible? Clearly the class teacher had become accustomed to this method-non-method that also satisfied her completely.

In a short time, I learnt what “current money” was in the pedagogic world of South Africa. I found out in a real and concrete way that the African version was current money also for intellectuals, Jewishly observant people who tended towards modern opinions and views, as it were. I tried to find some opportunity to escape this educational “hocus pocus” that certainly had to be stopped. I escaped from the class and from an examination method that showed how teaching was done using it and other similar methods in institutions of the same type. My observation visit ended.

It was good that they did not come to examine my pupils using this method: I would not have permitted this form of clever questioning.

Soon after this experience, an advertisement was published in the newspapers that the *Talmud Torah* in Cape Town was seeking a principal and the basic salary was good. My friends, the Barzinskys, with whom I kept up correspondence after I left Cape Town, sent me a letter in which they suggested I submit an application to the secretary of the *Talmud Torah* and attach a *curriculum vitae*.

At that time, I also learnt of vacant posts for principals: in Benoni, Bulawayo (Southern Rhodesia) and Oudtshoorn. Somehow, negotiations began

between me and the Oudtshoorn representative. One of the senior teachers in Johannesburg heard about this and I met him over a cup of tea. He tried to persuade me to go where I would feel comfortable, where there would be an appropriate salary and that I could do no better than to accept becoming principal in Oudtshoorn – if I still intended remaining a Hebrew teacher, without approaching my relatives and friends to assist me to go into business. I realised that I was tending towards moving from Johannesburg and living and working elsewhere.

I looked towards Cape Town. During the few days I had spent there, I much preferred this city to Johannesburg, where I had been for ten months. In the meantime, the Board of Education started going into the details – the director wanted to arrange the new teachers in various centres, with a dual purpose: to find appropriate posts for good teachers and to introduce suitable principals in reputable communities, to improve their Hebrew education.

My negotiations with Cape Town immediately assumed concrete form. It was suggested in a telegram to me that I should come to Cape Town for face-to-face discussions. The day of my departure for this interview was set for 1 January, 1929 and I began to prepare for the journey.

A group of friends and acquaintances had arranged a trip by car that day outside the city and I was invited to go with them. My train was leaving for Cape Town in the evening, but I did not want to run any risk of not returning in time and I declined. Dozens of people left at the appointed time in the morning in cars they had hired for the trip. After a few miles, there was an accident, because the first driver was not sufficiently qualified, and many of the passengers – also those in the car behind it – suffered light injuries and had to return in the middle of the journey. I saw my not participating in the trip as a sort of miracle, because had I also been hurt, I would have been denied the possibility of making my way to Cape Town in time.

When I arrived in Cape Town, the Barzinskys and I shared our pleasure in our meeting. Barzinsky did a lot and was very successful in arranging the interview. I arrived in Cape Town on Friday morning and my negotiations with the board were set for Sunday evening, after I had met with some of the board members. The main issue revolved around setting the salary. While it was fixed for three years – with an increase of £5 a month after the first year – the board now wished to reduce the basic salary by £10. The delegate authorised to negotiate with me was an intellectual, a learned man who had recently been a teacher – one of the best-known. He found no fault with me, apart from my citizenship not being “complete”, as I had only been in this country for a year. I replied in the negative to the proposal to reduce my basic salary, in contrast to what had been suggested initially.

After some four hours, my throat was dry from the heat and I was unable to get a “good cold glass of mineral water” as we did in Vilna. I returned to my hotel at eleven o’clock to meet with the board members and come to a final decision, positive or negative. At three o’clock I went to one of the offices in the centre of the city. Three of the board members were there, with me on the other side. We resumed our discussions, but I remained firm in my position: to return to the previous teaching conditions would not be good for me. Going somewhere else – who could foresee the difficulties and obstacles there? I liked Cape Town and I would, therefore, agree to a compromise. It would be good if we could reach a compromise, but if not, I would not concede, as this would impugn my honour and be humiliating exploitation, which would not have a good impact on my employment.

The discussion was very short. After I said the amount offered to me was definitely not what I wanted, I added that if we could meet half way, I would consider the matter and give my answer within a day. I was then empowered to give the final decision as I wished, and I was happy with my victory. The following day, I sent a telegram at the same time to Mierowsky and informed him of my appointment as principal of the *Talmud Torah* in Cape Town.

I returned to Johannesburg (for two weeks) as a stranger, feeling that I was a resident of Cape Town. The rumour took wing that I had managed to conquer the important fortress of Cape Town. Many were happy with my victory, but there were also those who told me that this was temporary and I should not regard it as permanent.

In the meantime, the following appointments were announced, all principals: Gershater in Bulawayo, Rybko in Oudtshoorn, and Kliachka in Benoni. Lederman was sent to Upington, in the south-western part of the country and Lurie, the father and son and Melamed remained in Johannesburg.

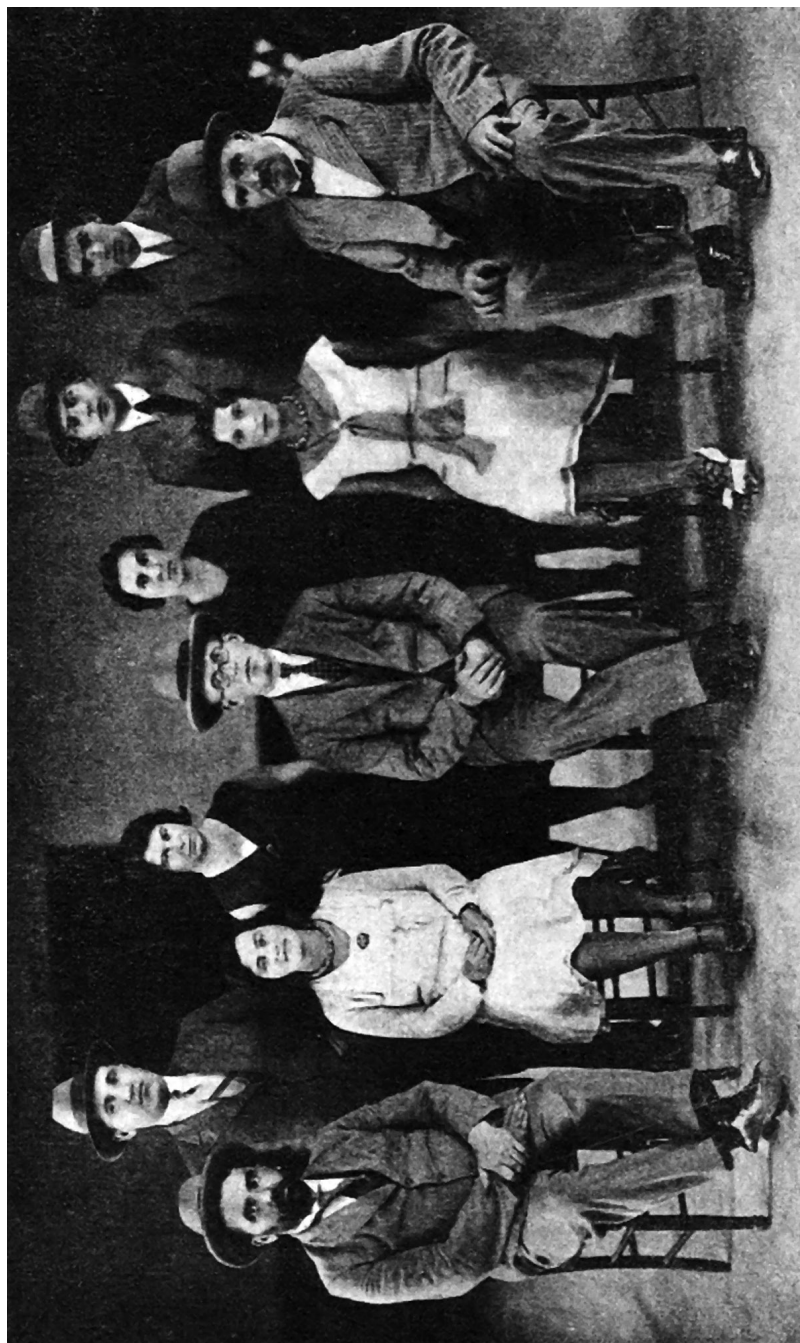
Shortly before my departure, a formal farewell was arranged for me. It took me so much by surprise that I could not believe what I was seeing, with many people attending. I was asked to come into a room with a long table, set with food and drink. All the guests’ places were taken. There were speeches. The senior teachers included the late Rabbi Azriel Ram, as well as Mr Per, Miss Rabinowitz, Miss Eidelson, outstanding teachers, Mr Klevansky and others. A nice memento was given to me – gold cuff links, tastefully engraved, showing to whom from whom. They were given on behalf of the Hebrew Teachers’ Union in the Transvaal by Mr Eliezer Zadikov, my most extreme opponent in the chapter of my life called: “Johannesburg 1928”.

My teaching work in the *Talmud Torah* continued from the beginning of April until the end of the secular year. My salary was paid until the end of December,

but I did not receive any leave pay, even *pro rata* for nine months' work. The reason given was that I had disappointed the board by leaving and therefore my right to leave pay had fallen away. I argued that in terms of the verse: "You shall work for six days and on the seventh day, you shall rest", both the rest and the pay for it that came after the work remained valid, more so than the injustice. This "great" exploit made my departure from Johannesburg and from its education officials even more pleasant.

My close friend from Slobodka-Kovno, Rabbi Azriel Silpert, as far as I knew, was in South Africa, but my investigations and letters in this regard did not bear fruit. One day before leaving Johannesburg, travelling in a tram from town to my home, a woman stopped me, calling me by name. She told me who she was and I recognised her immediately – Miss Silpert, who used to be my Hebrew pupil in Kovno. I was very glad to see her and our friendship was renewed. I soon met both the families – we met face to face in Cape Town.

Talmud Torah teaching staff, Cape Town 1930



From left to right, seated: Rabbi M Morenstein, U Homa, A Levin (principal), S Epman, S Rabinowitz. Standing: A Levita, AG Jaches, Moller, Y Abitz, Z Avin

CHAPTER 26

GRODNO STYLE

The 1929 academic year in the *Talmud Torah* began on 22 January, a Monday, the same day classes started at all the government education institutions in the Cape Province. A day earlier, on the Sunday morning, the chairman of the *Talmud Torah*, Mr Morris Rosen, came to introduce me to the members of the teaching staff there as their new principal and wished us success in our joint work for the benefit of the *Talmud Torah* and its pupils, to the satisfaction of the members of the board.

Some of the teachers remained after we met and I went to look at the building and what it contained. The more I looked and saw, the more negative my impressions. The rooms serving as classrooms, apart from the “hall”, were mostly unsuitable for their purpose. The walls, as well as the ceilings and floors, were in poor condition, neglected, and the old benches were even worse, with all kinds of carvings on them. The windows looked awful, as did the entire building, converted from a private house to a school. I was informed that the roof had so many holes that the rain came through into the classes, pouring down on the pupils during their studies.

The chairman of the *Talmud Torah* was the official I knew best. He was friendly, very unpretentious, reliable and dedicated to his public office. He treated the views of community leaders as particularly important, especially those of Rev Bender. He had been chairman of the synagogue several times and chairman of the *Talmud Torah* four years running. As I came into contact with him officially, he treated me in a very friendly and fair manner. On one of the first days after I took office, he said to me that he believed I would be “the right man in the right place” – although I was a “greenhorn” in terms of my understanding and views, as well as the English language. He commended me to Rev Bender before introducing me to him, wanting to obtain his agreement to my appointment. Then we met in a special interview. When the two of them came to an agreement, they paved my way. Bender took a lenient view of Hebrew teaching, wanting to keep it to a minimum – only to fulfil an obligation, but without making it too difficult for the pupils.

The Orthodox Rabbi Moshe Chaim Mervish was one of the first people I met in Cape Town. Our initial conversation was in Hebrew. He told me he had been very active in the field of education and had taught many pupils in Lithuania, before taking up office as a rabbi in Cape Town. However, his teaching method, as I soon discovered, was extremely religious and conservative in essence and he wanted to influence me to adopt his method.

Rabbi Baruch Jacob Chidekel stood as the central pillar between these two spiritual leaders of the Cape Town community, whose views on Hebrew education were truly opposite extremes on the subject. As a respected communal official, particularly in the field of education, he represented an interesting, perfect type. A learned man himself, who followed Orthodoxy, he had enlightened views on education and enjoyed listening to modern pedagogic views. It is no wonder that he made an impression and was also influential among the groups of zealots, as well as in the company of people who held liberal views. I found him to be a person with whom it was possible to compromise on matters of important educational principle, as he would agree with me, saying I demonstrated the correct aspirations and work.

There were discussions and debates on the desirable educational methods, trends and tendencies that should govern the *Talmud Torah* Board of Education. It met frequently, once or twice a week. The chairman was Rabbi Moshe Chaim Mervish and the secretary Rabbi B Chidekel. Its members included Rabbi Moshe Helfand, who conducted the long and difficult negotiations with me on my salary from the board during my first visit in Cape Town. A learned intellectual, who understood education well, he was a Hebrew expert and had been a well-known Hebrew teacher at one time. Mr ZS Friedland was also a member of the board, an outstanding Talmudist, who held progressive views on education. Apart from them, two or three others were also members, some of them intellectuals, having a general education, or Talmudists who were capable of dealing with Hebrew education matters, including A Aaronson,

The extremism of the rabbi who chaired the board was predominant and influenced its direction and spirit and all its discussions. I had to defend my pedagogic and didactic positions, developed in Grodno, strongly and convincingly. The battle was hard. I was able to agree to compromise and make concessions, but only minimal, temporary ones. In the campaigns of this war, with only rare ceasefires, I was on guard, always mobilised and armed for defence. However, Mr Chidekel would often attempt to turn the scales in my favour. This tactic of his must therefore be mentioned to the credit of this important public official, because he was of great help and assistance in many of my victories.

On the morning the *Talmud Torah* was going to open, I called a meeting of the teachers. I wanted to get to know them better – to learn their views on teaching, their methods and what could be done to impart my views to them. I asked myself whether conditions would suit my aspirations.

I immediately found out that a teachers' council at the *Talmud Torah* was a new concept for them. They were not accustomed to it at all and their attitudes

to it differed. Some were interested in the “new” phenomenon, while others considered such a thing unnecessary, simply superfluous, while there was also a third view, opposing it for the reason that it was nothing but a waste of time or “neglect”, as who knew – they thought – the purpose of this kind of “creature”?

Three factions stood out in the teaching staff, whose number grew to six. The young teachers constituted the one faction. Apart from their knowledge of Hebrew language and literature, their pedagogic experience was weak and not based on teaching theory and practice. However, they were aware of the examination and discussion of questions relating to teaching guidance: they agreed, therefore, to the idea of an ongoing pedagogic council in the *Talmud Torah*. The second faction, of two young teachers, was completely satisfied with the assumption that there was no need to know more than the amount of “Hebrew” they, in their personal view, were able to convey to their pupils. They did not share the “curiosity” of the others in this regard. The third faction comprised “dialectician” teachers, whose years of experience had provided them with a definite tradition. They felt they were completely exempt from tests and examinations in such matters, particularly because there might be some suspect modernity that could cause pointless disputes – “childishness”!

One of the last group did arrive on time for the teachers’ meeting, giving me a kind of official document. He wanted me to recognise it and exempt its holder from participating in the meeting – this was a telegram in which the recipient – the teacher concerned – was requested to assist immigrants coming into Cape Town and tell them what to do.

Talmud Torah teaching staff, Cape Town 1931



From left to right, seated: G Laden (secretary), F Smolensky, A Levin (principal), AG Jaches, D Rosen. Standing: Y Abitz, Z Avin, Y Sadowski.

I released him from this meeting, but said I had to know what he had been doing in the *Talmud Torah* up to that time and would he prepare for those who were starting the new academic year. The curriculum would be drawn up by the council, which would be a permanent institution, with its very important meetings held at pre-arranged times.

We gathered for the meeting. I began to look into the essence of the studies, the curriculum and the textbooks used. It became clear to me that there was no fixed method, but this was a controversial issue between the two rabbis who wished to guide the *Talmud Torah*, with its teachers and pupils. The one wanted beautiful, pure English and the other, while he agreed to Hebrew in Hebrew, sought a quantity of study that was beyond the ability of the pupils under the conditions there and, in particular, in the limited time of an hour and a quarter a day - after general classes in government schools, when the young pupils were already tired out from devoting as much time as they could to studies. (In Cape Town, they would divide the time between 3-7 among three classes, not like Johannesburg, where they divided them into two.)

The *Talmud Torah* was called “united” because a number of years before, it consisted of two schools, the one, “Hebrew in English” and the second, “Hebrew in Yiddish”. But there was no stability, in spite of many unsuccessful attempts. In the last year, the temporary principal tried a new way. In the class that had reached the level of studying the Bible, he introduced the *Book of Prophets* and began to teach the reading of the text, as well as the translation and an explanation in “pure” English. The original Hebrew version was omitted totally, without trace.

The beginners’ textbook was *Tal Boker (Morning Dew)*. I knew this book from Johannesburg. It did not warrant being used in class at all. I therefore proposed to exchange it for another, modern book, written according to the natural method. I also found it necessary to exchange the other textbooks used in the *Talmud Torah* for different ones, more appropriate – and particularly to introduce, gradually and steadily, the method of Hebrew in Hebrew.

With regard to Bible studies, the assumption was that there would be two courses. The primary, abbreviated course was for beginners in this subject and the second, broader programme, was as complete as possible pedagogically and technically for the developed classes – in the original.

The younger teachers listened carefully to the discussions and debates of this kind, as they had a healthy sense and clear awareness of the need to improve the curriculum on pedagogic foundations. But the female teachers did not grasp the matter and one of the so-called “experienced” teachers saw it as a “clash” in Hebrew education and therefore did not agree with it.

At the next meeting, the same week, after I had managed to look at some more suitable textbooks than those on sale in Cape Town bookstores, I suggested them to the council. The teacher who did not participate in the previous meeting was present at this one. When he saw the children's reader I proposed – *Alef-Bet (ABC)* by P Shragorodskaya – he was very upset and declared he was absolutely opposed to this change. Without entering into debate on the matter, he stood up in protest against “this act” and left the meeting. The women teachers also tried to pour scorn on the proposed changes, but did not know how to justify it. I found a common language with the two younger teachers, because they realised that what I intended to do was to make progress on the necessary changes. I believed that clarifying the situation from a pedagogic, didactic and practical point of view was the only correct means to raise the teachers' mood to the peak of modern teaching theory through practical activity. These two were Zalman Avin and Joseph Abitz.

I gathered information on the pupils from the teachers and also observed them myself. I found that most of the classes were not properly graded and classified, both in terms of development and quantity. For example, I saw that two parallel classes had a little over ten pupils, unnecessarily divided in two, while well-attended classes should have been split.

I got to know the two “senior” teachers who were set in their teaching ways, with no hope of getting them to change direction.

One of them purported to be an intellectual, as it were, who managed to receive a postcard containing a negative response from the editor of *Hatzefirah* about unpublished correspondence. The postcard gave off a mouldy smell, as did his clothes and his essence. He was stingy. His money was deposited in the bank and he lived the life of a miser both externally and in his views.

When I went to visit his class, he welcomed me with artificial cordiality, presenting all kinds of questions and problems to me in an attempt to show his deep knowledge and cover up his teaching method, until I was forced to leave him to do what he wanted in the class. I found that his “teaching” was not worthy of the name. It was hopeless.

The second one was always busy smoking his cigarettes. In his classes, his anger and indignation never ceased, even in the presence of the principal. And he never stopped shouting loudly: “Wrong!” “Lie!”

In terms of his method, the class had to be completely quiet while two pupils, selected by the teacher, were busy engaging with each other, the one asking questions and the other answering. The dialogue between the questioner and respondent went on pointlessly and endlessly, with no disturbance allowed

at all, while the teacher interrupted by calling out angrily: "False!" "Repeat!"

This teaching method was one of the elements and principles of the lesson.

Fear and trembling ruled in the class. The teacher was both the "principal" and the person collecting study fees, small change from the pupils every week. He gave receipts to those paying the fee.

This education took place in a branch of the *Talmud Torah* in a poor area, under dismal conditions. It was in the centre of a black neighbourhood, in a filthy room, with broken windows, whose floor had not felt a broom for several weeks, the pupils crowded onto old benches, that screeched annoyingly when they were moved, dirty children who studied with two or three of them using one book and learning from one of the two "expert" teachers. The three classes were changed during school hours with no chance of improving the hygiene or pedagogic situation.

I tried to show the members of the board the harm this branch was causing education, particularly to the poor, who would ensure our spiritual future, but only under better conditions. Yet this institution maintained its autonomy because of the fear of changing "the natural ways and the firm foundations". Its continued existence attracted two teachers, until the last of them was discharged from his work with a small annual pension. The branch was closed. Its pupils were transferred to the central *Talmud Torah*.

After I paid a series of visits to the classes, I suggested each teacher select a subject or matter for preparing a lesson in all its detail at a fixed time and I would be present at the lesson. If a difficult question required clarification or a solution, I was prepared to solve it in advance so that there would be no obstacle when the lesson was given. The teacher would therefore understand the characteristics, content and form of the lesson so that he or she could deliver it as completely and in the best way possible. Afterwards all the details were discussed only by me and the person concerned. We analysed and discussed where necessary and examined it clearly to see what should be accepted or dismissed when the lesson was given in class. This would provide complete clarity to the teacher and the pupils.

When we broadened the discussion on the subject, it became clear that the teachers' progress in their work gave them great satisfaction. The class made progress, did well, there was greater interest in it. In this way, the issue of disciplinary problems and the lack of punctuality on the part of the pupils disappeared by themselves. Progress by a few classes improved the level of others, of all of them, the entire school, including those participating in the creation of Hebrew education, the teachers themselves.

There was also great benefit in another respect: just when lack of time or opportunity for leisure were limiting, the youth themselves and, of course, their parents, who had “compassion” for their children, became increasingly aware of the need for sacrifices on the altar of education. This strengthened us all - greatly so.

The efforts of the teachers in the model lessons, as I suggested, showed signs of success. Perfection, of course, was impossible and could only be achieved through repeated effort, over and over again, but eventually the results had to be positive, desirable – I was certain of that, with confidence flowing from my belief in the effectiveness of this sound method, based on experience.

The rest would be completed, in discussions of books, their contents, setting the quantity and quality of the curriculum for a term, such as three months or half the academic year. Everything was done in the teachers’ council from the outset and at the end of the quarterly or six-monthly course, there was self-criticism. By doing so, in seeking ways and means and additional subjects to be included in the curriculum, we broadened the circle of our own views and the views of our pupils. Their desire to learn increased and developed, enabling them to acquire more important and very valuable, in-depth and broader knowledge.

In this way, we would make progress and help the pupils advance. *Barmitzvah* age would not be the time of their national Hebrew graduation, the boundary completing their education, as was the case up to that time. They would continue to study, to involve themselves in our Torah, our nationalism and their position in both, building our own future and the present and future of our nation together.

Success in this direction became clear. Its buds could be seen through the mind’s eye. There was much difficult, complex work. I also had to stand up and fight the battle I shared with the board of education of the *Talmud Torah*. Its primary defect was shown clearly by the instability of its educational and pedagogic views and principles, in spite of the official “authority” given to it by the board. I came into contact with various members of the general board and spiritual leaders outside the board. It was not easy to convince people who held differing views on education, teaching and old-fashioned schooling. Once, in conversation with one of the lay leaders who was among the original founders and had considerable material influence on the institution, I heard him say something like: “Anybody who is not able to sell eggs when he goes begging from door to door becomes” - and for my benefit, he added: “he becomes a Hebrew teacher.”

In the *Talmud Torah*, I was still like a foreign plant and a tender shoot that

had not managed to put down roots in the earth. The storm that burst around my head, one that could have uprooted me totally, would soon come.

The agreement, particularly sharing in the gradual implementation of the pedagogic style and spirit, was based on the Grodno tradition – not only the studies, but also the educational trend aimed at including pupils and teachers together, which resonated among those who were aware of it. However, only a minority of the teachers responded by co-operating actively in the area of self-education through regular effort, which required energy, work and a large degree of independence. The majority regarded it with suspicion, derision and negative opposition. This is proved by the principle that the best in society, the public and the environment are in the minority. Moses highlighted this concept when he said (*Deuteronomy* 6:7): “The Lord did not... choose you because you were more in number than any people; for you are the fewest of all peoples.” He took this to be the view of the Holy One Himself.

Only a few months after I became principal, I faced a small-scale Korach-type rebellion, with an internal call to the board about me. The intention was clear: “You have gone too far” – “For ye are all holy” (a reference to the Biblical rebellion by Korach against Moses). This meant that I was undesirable, as was my method – to whom? The flag of rebellion was raised by one of the teachers and her followers started parading in her wake, saying: “Holy” in their hearts.

One Friday, without telling me anything, the rebellious teacher did not come to the *Talmud Torah*, leaving me with classes without work and disorder that could have undermined discipline. This was so sudden, it created difficulty. The supporters of the strike, which came out of the blue, might have known it was coming and were happy about it – but I took action. The teachers who had a negative attitude towards the revolt divided the classes with me and, with their assistance, the storm abated. This took place internally, but externally the confused and frightened lay leaders arrived quickly, appearing to blame me – accusing me. Those who knew of my aspirations and what I had already done also seemed angry and were very concerned. A few days went by without the rebellious and striking teacher coming to work at the *Talmud Torah* and failing to fulfil her obligations. This spoilt teacher, who felt she was a favourite child with a coat of many colours in the eyes of one of the lay leaders, managed to slander me to many of them. I tried to quieten things down. I suggested that a meeting be called, an extraordinary meeting of the board, with the participation of all its members, all the teachers and myself – without exception. For their part, they could come and complain about me as they wished and I would put my point of view and then the matter would be decided. Everyone, all the parties, would see, hear and know.

The emergency meeting was set for Good Friday, during the Christian Easter

week, an important festival. Because of it, classes were cancelled that morning and everybody had an opportunity to be present – without exception. The date of the event on the calendar was 29.3.29. Even members of the board who did not attend meetings regularly were there. The striking, rebellious teacher was seated near the chairman and his deputy, and not with the other teachers. Were the leaders of the board joking by showing their support for the so-called “injured” party, or did they really think she required protection by placing her under the wings of their “Divine presence”?

The prosecution began on behalf of the complainant. Her prosecution colleague encouraged her. The teachers who did not depend on the opinion of the principal and had murmured and complained about me, singing the same melody against me, were completely silent this time at the Good Friday meeting. The complaints against me were so weak, insignificant and valueless that the judges gathered there did not even argue about them. They were jarringly absurd and it was not worth my while responding to them. I had good grounds, however, to complain about dishonest teaching behaviour, such as shortening lessons or cancelling them “without my approval” – an experienced teacher disappearing during her fixed working hours and other breaches of trust of this kind, but I overlooked them in “pleasant” silence and moved on to my principles.

The management responsible for the *Talmud Torah*, under whose rules I had actually operated for two months, had a clear objective from the time I started, aspiring to educate the younger generation through applying modern and convenient teaching methods to the youth. This is still not accepted in this country, which operates according to the outdated mould that settles for minimal knowledge of Judaism, contributing nothing to the pupils, neither to their lives and behaviour, nor to their views.

The local youth deserves to receive much more, greater quantity, in an appropriate, worthy, convenient and enjoyable form. This was both necessary and possible. But I was unable to implement it and achieve it by myself. I needed the dedicated and loyal participation of the teachers over whom I was principal. We – all of us – had to build, erect a structure, print on a blank page, building education on a firm foundation in honour of the new generation and the generation of the fathers and communal officials who took care of it – so that it would be worthy of the name.

One could no longer settle for the outdated earlier method, which would not bear fruit. We could not allow ourselves to place an unbearable burden on the neck of the youth, but had to provide them with teaching and knowledge, leading them to develop healthy national feelings of self-respect and a desire to make sacrifices on the altar of education.

I firmly believe there was progress in this direction – and we succeeded. But everybody working with me as principal was required to commit to being a full partner with me in this enterprise. It was not easy. It required dedication to work, further study of subject taught and remaining completely loyal to these aspirations. Only then could we succeed.

I was prepared to give practical assistance to anyone working with me, through advice, management and guidance, so that we could achieve the desired objective. Anyone who did not acknowledge my method was unable and unlikely to come with me along the road I was paving. We had to move upwards. Our institution would be a source of blessing for all of us, pupils, their parents, all the communal officials working in education. We were moving towards a lofty objective.

I was not agitated when I spoke, but remained calm. Nevertheless, I spoke with internal conviction and an attitude of belief and certainty, without a hint of reluctance, threat or ultimatum. It was clear to all those present that if there was no agreement with my views, the result would be clear: and if not – then not. It would be without me! My views might have been extreme, my statement undesirable. If so, let anybody they wanted come in my place. I would not take it or occupy that place against the will of a force opposing and interfering with me. My mind was made up totally. It seemed to me that the people at the meeting were aware of that.

I do not remember all the details of the end of the meeting, but I realised that my statement resulted in complete victory for my position and approach. While it was not stated explicitly, it was implied. One of the elderly members of the board turned to the complainant – who was in over her head – as if to a naughty child, patting her on the shoulder, reprimanding her openly and saying that from now on, she had to know and understand the ways of discipline and fulfilling her obligations as a young adult, who appeared to be grown up.

On the Sunday morning, the pupils arrived as usual, as did the teachers. Regular classes were renewed. The atmosphere at the school resembled the situation after a period of oppressive heat, followed by a refreshing storm that brought relief. The younger teachers had learnt a good “lesson” and benefited from it. The female teachers apparently accepted the strict letter of the law – to obey, listen and behave well, as they were required to do. It seemed to me that the teachers with the “incontestable” experience had softened, with a friendlier expression, although I had no hope they would be able to use my method and I left them alone. They continued to follow their path, but any development on their part towards the revolutionary modernity I required remained quiet and still.

I was not wrong at all in my reckoning. The more enlightened and aware teachers began to reveal the effectiveness of my management method with their first steps.

As for the group of teachers, it was a long road, but it led to the objective I wanted, even if slowly. After the twists and turns of the rebellion, it proved useful. The Grodno version would be honoured in the future – in its own time.

Then a miracle happened: eight months later, one of the senior group left his post and returned to Lithuania. He had taught in the branch in a poor neighbourhood, in Constitution Street. On his departure, his colleague took his place – and he was therefore far from the central *Talmud Torah*, remaining virtually on his own and continuing to strike out – in both senses!¹⁰ – with his theories as he wished.

The curriculum – for building modern education – was constructed slowly, by observing the spirit of the child and adapting the study material very carefully to the young people, as required by the methodology and general didactics, according to the way our subjects were taught. Theoretically and practically, we would seek to protect the pupils in the ways the material was studied and absorbed. Consideration was given to our joint intensive work and there was active initiative, moving forward and great progress. Many of the changes and improvements were not visible to the outside observer – but we certainly saw them and were aware of them in guiding the first steps of the children. We would pave the path for them so they could walk on it easily. We had to inspire them with heartfelt interest and a desire to make progress in new studies of a language that was foreign to them. Initially it was not spoken, but began to flow, giving the young children additional strength, revealed in new games and in their relationships with parents and friends.

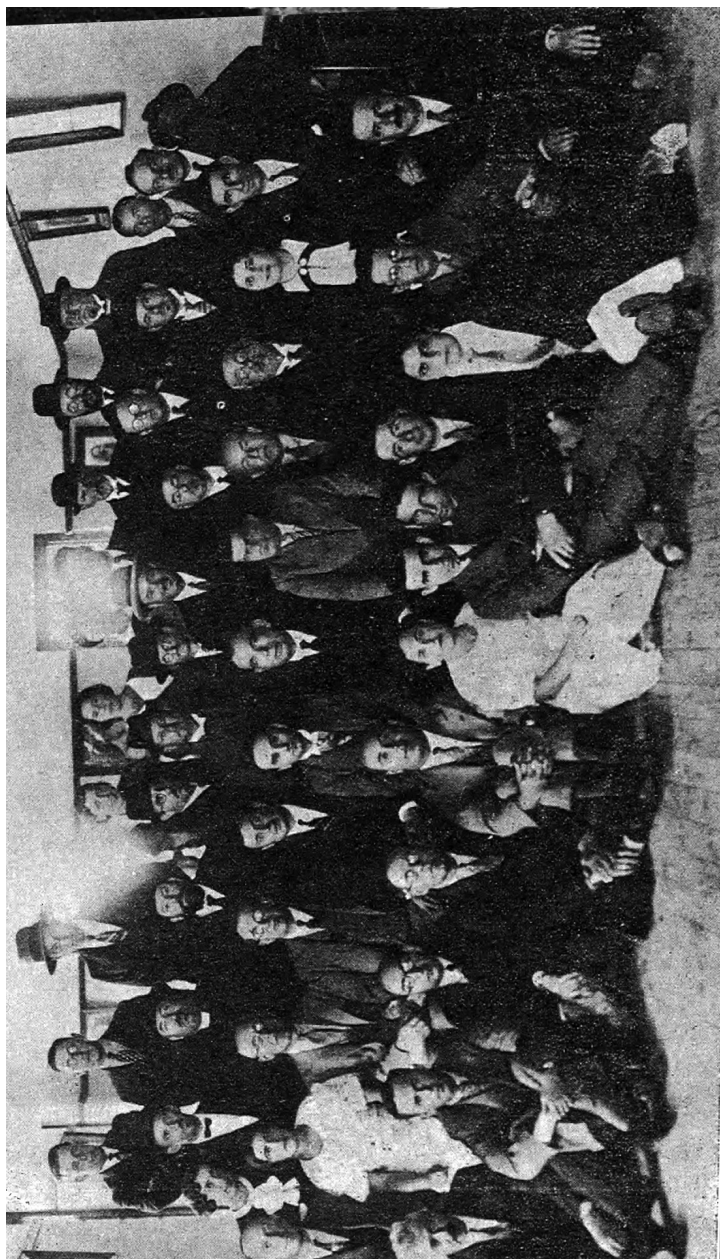
This proved, therefore, that the method of teaching beginners had to be absolutely perfect and implemented by a female teacher, who was more suitable than a man, in marching towards very interesting content – the *Chumash*, the Five Books of Moses.

It was both necessary and possible to draw from the font of stories of the creation of the world, of the patriarchs and matriarchs and other heroes of our people who are so attractive to the impressionable hearts of our small children.

When the class started learning the *Sefer Torah*, from the outset the text had to be abbreviated and its style adapted in a popular way that did not adversely affect its originality. There is a beautiful pearl available to the teacher, one that

¹⁰ In both senses: 1) Spreading and imparting Torah; 2) Hitting, striking.

Hebrew teachers' conference in Cape Town, December 1933



From left to right, second row from bottom: M Lazar (school principal), Mrs Solomon, the author, M Kleinman (editor, Haolam), H Barzinsky (director of orphanage), Dr Y Resnekov (Chairman of the Board of Education), J Gitlin,, Dr E Rosenfeld (Hebrew principal, Israel), Dr E Rosenfeld, Dr E Brinbaum (director of education), Rabbi BY Chidekel, Dr and Mrs Mavshan. **First row, bottom:** U Silpert, Domes, Dr M Natas, M Gershater, M Volozhinski, Mrs U Homa, Z Avin, Potashnik, A Ziv, Mrs Y Berkowitz (Kaplan), Z Lederman, T Lerma, Ephron (Rev.), Yosepovitz, Melamed (Rev.), N Cohen (Rev.), S Cassel, Kaplan, Frank (Rev.), Gordon (Rabbi), D Rosen, Abrahamson, ?, Y Sadowski, Lipshitz (Rabbi). **Top row:** Golis (Rev.), Wolf (Rev.), Dorogov (Rabbi), Mrs Kluk (Berman), Mrs Lipshitz, ?, ?, Rubinstein (Rev.), Z Isaacson (Rabbi), ?.

has no like in the most modern literature – the Bible. A good teacher will not only find wonderful stories in it, but will be able to convey them to his pupils in an appropriate way, things that fascinate people who study them, from the age of six – up to old age.

The manner of teaching, the ways that make it pleasurable and bear good fruit for the pupils, whose seeds and shoots are planted diligently by good teachers, can lead to surprising, wonderful and splendid results.

As Cape Town *Talmud Torah* teachers, we realised that, particularly here, in this unformed land, this void environment, there were so many disturbing elements. One natural element, time, is limited, and constitutes the essential counterbalance. The times set for the *Talmud Torah* were a very serious hindrance, in the afternoon, when the pupils were worn out after spending so many hours studying at the general school. And there were also “artificial” hindrances on the part of the parents, who refused to “tire out” their young children through Hebrew education. In spite of these many obstacles, there were many excellent results and achievements in this education.

Consider the number of study hours in an academic year here, compared to the old *cheder* in the villages of Lithuania and Poland. As a rule, pupils there had no general school and no childish “distractions”, such as sport and the cinema, which was not the case here. Yet you would find that our *Talmud Torah* pupils had much greater understanding of the wisdom of Torah and strength of learning than the pupils of the previous generation, of the old *cheder*.

A calculation will show that here in Cape Town, we taught our pupils for as many hours as possible in the week, six days a week, usually for an hour a day. The year was divided into four terms, each with an average of nine weeks. Total study hours amounted to six times nine = 54 in a term and over four terms, 54 times four, 216 study hours a year.

Let us compare this with the number of study hours in the old *cheder* in Lithuania. If we deduct six weeks for all kinds of leave during the Jewish holiday seasons, it brings the total to 46. There were six days of study every week – Friday and the Sabbath were together the equivalent of a complete weekday – giving us a total of six days times 46 = 276. Every pupil devoted at least ten hours a day to the *cheder* – or to its environment – providing a total of 2 760 study hours a year. Here we had only 216, less than ten percent of the number there.

Comparing the level of results “here and there” and “from then to now”, it seems surprising that they favour the *Talmudei Torah*. And if you were to say that there the students learned *Gemara* and excelled in their “scholarship”

– it must be pointed out that even students of this kind had almost no idea of the Bible, the language and more. But it was the quality that counted: the lecture, story, description of a historic event, of a hero of the period, verbally or in writing. Here, after seven years of study from the age of six until they reached *bar-mitzvah* age, the pupils, did very well in Hebrew, Bible and literary education, which was not the case with a pupil from the old *cheder*, who devoured scholarly knowledge, but was not developed, did not learn a language or a language in which to write. Against this background, he also lacked both imagination and vision. Let us assume that both of them had the same ability, but the main element was the method, the ways of teaching, the manner of learning – and these tipped the scales on the side of the pupil and *vice versa*. I was reminded of the slogan of my rabbi and master, AM Kahanstam, the principal in Grodno, who would say: “The teacher is the lubricant for learning.” From my experience in South Africa, I would permit myself to emphasise this element here as well, that an effective teaching method does lead to what is good and significant.

On the other hand, in the old yeshiva they did not deal with fixed studies at all. They were not required there, while in our *Talmudei Torah*, it was necessary to devote a lot of time to them as important educational elements. Would a teacher in the old *cheder* have had any need at all to deal with prayer? It was learned by itself, in the *beit midrash* and in the synagogue, three times a day, in public or individually. In our *Talmudei Torah*, it was necessary to teach it in every year of study to make it something pupils read fluently from the prayer book and the readings on weekdays, Sabbaths and festivals, as well as the prayer book used on *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*. The time for prayer here was at the expense of other studies.

There, in the *cheder*, it was considered unnecessary to devote effort to reading the *Haftarah* (the chapter from the Prophets after the Torah reading in synagogue), when the pupil approached *bar-mitzvah* age. Every schoolboy was familiar with its intonation – but that was not the case in our *Talmudei Torah*. Here, in our city, most parents did not recite prayers at home and did so even less in the synagogue, even on the Sabbath and festivals. Where would our pupils, therefore, acquire these skills without special training during their studies for *bar-mitzvah*? In Lithuania, the boy, the *cheder* pupil, would be called to read the *Haftarah*, even before reaching his religious majority, simply as one of the worshippers. But here a *bar-mitzvah* was considered the time for the boy to be the “hero of the day”. He would read the *Maftir* and *Haftarah* (part of the Biblical portion and the *Haftarah*) at a particular time in a particular synagogue – and the event publicised in the classified advertisement section in the newspapers. It required a great deal of study, sometimes extended learning.

The number of pupils making excellent progress at the *Talmud Torah* in Cape Town increased over the years. When they reached *bar-mitzvah* age, they did not “end their Hebrew curriculum” on their own initiative, particularly those in the higher classes – most of them decided to continue their Hebrew studies until the day they matriculated at the general school. In this way, they also obtained a Hebrew matric.

In the beginning, standard 7 was the highest class. After a few years, standard 8 became the top class. When the Chaim Lieberman High School was opened, standard 8 was regarded as the end of the “youth” course and standards 9 and 10 were devoted to “matric” studies.

Only force of circumstance prevented pupils from continuing with their studies until they reached the summit of the course. It included many significant portions of the Later Prophets, Rashi’s commentary on the weekly portion from the Bible, Writings, *Ethics of the Fathers*, *Mishna* and also a start to the *Gemara*.

It was not easy extending the course, providing greater depth and raising it to great heights. It was often necessary to offer an inducement to the pupil, who was on the threshold, ready to leave the *Talmud Torah* in terms of the popular “tradition” of previous years, when he entered adolescence legally, something which had the effect of releasing him from the burden of the Commandments.

The inducement was offered to the pupil and often even more so to his parents, who persisted in their refusal to ease the burden of “the inheritors of Judaism”. It would appear that here, the “*bar*” of *bar-mitzvah* actually meant “outside” of the *mitzvah*, in other words, when the young man reached religious maturity, he was permitted to remain outside the sphere of his religion.

The custom of continuing after *bar-mitzvah* spread, the main reason being that the pupil was already attached and connected to Jewish studies and it was hard for him to leave them. As the person reaching matric level learnt more, the connection became stronger and more precise, so much so that it became impossible to break. In any event, the child became stronger as he went up from level to level, from the youth report, when he finished standard 8, to the matriculation certificate on completion of standard 10. And even at the end of the academic year, usually in June, those graduates would extend the year to December by adding a further six months of study.

It was not only boys, but also girls who were interested in everything the boys studied: Rashi, *Mishna*, etc. I remember very well some difficult questions posed by girls while learning the *Talmud*.

Such facts gladden the heart: not only were the higher classes fairly full, with a sufficient number of pupils, but on some occasions there were also parallel classes because of their large size; there were girls' classes, some of them additional upper classes, with a larger number of pupils than in the boys' classes, not because there were so few boys, but because there were so many girls.

In addition, even after completing their matric curriculum, some volunteers, including students already at university or working in commerce, would come to classes for an additional course in order to learn more of our language and literature – ancient, medieval and modern – no less than twice a week. This included young men and young women.

This clear fact was particular proof of the graduates' dedication to their "Hebrew". When the blacked-out nights came during the war and the darkness could almost be felt in the streets and remoter areas of Cape Town and its suburbs, classes were not cancelled at sundown. They were held between 5 and 7 for two of the regular lessons for adults. While it became necessary to arrange transport to and from their homes – by car for the students after the second and third lesson – this did not involve all those who attended during those hours. It seemed difficult to find a solution to this problem, but the male students did so. What did they do? They approached me and informed me that they, the "men", could come and go on foot using torches – which, in terms of the security regulations, had to be pointed downwards. They walked every time to every lesson. The places they made available in the few cars (which belonged to private individuals) transporting people to class and back were made available to the female students who required safer and quicker transport.

And because of the blackout, it lasted a long time, the entire winter – and then for a second winter afterwards – yet not a single lesson was cancelled. Only a minor accident in which one of the cars was involved, made some of them to come late, arousing their parents' concerns, in addition to disturbing my mood, although everything went off peacefully after some unfounded fears.

On the internal front, inside the *Talmud Torah* itself, my position was strengthened by our success in partnership with those senior teachers who wished to further their own education themselves. They managed to improve the image of the *Talmud Torah* education greatly. This was also the case in the immediate environment of the *Talmud Torah*, in the Board of Education. I was fortified by always being ready and armed to fight in defence of my achievements.

The abridged Bible for beginners was studied according to the natural

method. For the older students this course included extracts from Rashi, arranged in the original, throughout the Bible by Shmuel Leib Gordon, a Bible commentator. But the view was still current on our board that quality should not be set off against quantity. Yet suddenly the slogan was heard: "From panel to panel", in other words, from the first panel of the binding of the Five Books of Moses to the last, with nothing left out, even for a child of 7-8 years old, who was actually meant to hold the entire Five Books of Moses both under his arm and in his head and memory. This meant the Five Books in large format, that included both Rashi and the Onkelos translation. I maintained that the Torah had to take into account the ability, time and age of the pupil and that if we went against this, the child would have to learn everything from the beginning, as was done in the old days, in unsuitable conditions, and we would, G-d forbid, suffer a double loss, both the Torah and the pupil studying it. This view bore fruit in the end.

Over time, our school became the main place to prepare for the government girls' school Hebrew examinations, on completion of Standard 8 and for matric at the end of Standard 10. Prior to that, it was based in one of the general central schools. The number of pupils choosing this subject grew from year to year, leading to an improvement in the curriculum by including modern Hebrew and more interesting subjects in this course.

Our pupils, who formed part of groups going to Israel to further their Hebrew studies for a year, saw themselves as sufficiently prepared for this purpose, having acquired a broad knowledge of our national tongue and its literature. They adapted quickly and easily to speaking living Hebrew in our country. These pupils continued with this programme arranged for them, which was amended four to five times.

Even earlier, our pupils who had served in the army and visited Palestine, derived great satisfaction from their visits, as their achievements in Hebrew were very useful to them, giving them real pleasure because of their practical knowledge.

HEBREW EDUCATION CENTRE

In reviewing the evolution of the *Talmud Torah* and its internal development to its peak, I was able to consider only its own growth and not its influence on various other educational institutions established later while the *Talmud Torah* continued to exist during its period of decline. In truth, however, its domain expanded in the directions set out below:

a) The Teachers' Union

Relying on the internal concentration of excellent teachers in the *Talmud Torah* and their attitude towards educational problems, which were examined constantly, in an effort to improve teaching and solve pertinent questions about it, I managed to establish a teachers' union, which a good number of members joined. I, therefore, saw in practice the realisation of my aspiration in Cape Town, one which did not materialise in Johannesburg. We had frequent meetings. The union was educational and cultural in nature, with the result that meetings were dedicated to questions of teaching and pedagogic, didactic and technical discussions in the difficult conditions we faced. They aroused great interest and, of course, also activity. The union developed well and its value increased greatly with the establishment of the Cape Board of Education, particularly in the period of the successful annual teachers' conferences (particulars below).

b) Day school

Work in the *Talmudei Torah* required great effort and incessant toil. We were all rewarded by satisfaction from the continual progress, particularly the teachers, who adapted to their lofty objective through real devotion. Thanks to this, it became possible to consider an expansion in scope through establishing an internal branch. This would bring about fundamental changes to the basis of the *Talmud Torah* and the direction of its development, leading to a more normal and natural kind of situation. The idea was raised of opening a day school that would provide all the secular and Hebrew studies: learning about Judaism and Hebrew literature would be an integral part of the curriculum and would no longer be treated as an exception, pushed into a time that was neither day nor night. The subject of Hebrew in all its aspects would no longer be down on the lower slopes, but its place would in the upper regions.

The idea of complete education was born in 1930. That was when the act of establishing the new institution began. It was very important of itself, but it

was not easy. It was primarily for the good of the young children, to ease the burden of learning and work, but where would these young children come from? In the eyes of all the parents, the general school came first, with the *Talmud Torah* being only secondary and not everybody regarded it in the way it deserved. Parents would not want to hear what we said or make even the smallest sacrifice on the altar of Jewish education for the benefit of their children in a way that did not accord with their views. After considering this serious question, we concluded that we should “act cleverly” – declare that young children would be admitted to a Hebrew education institution, a kind of kindergarten. We would also start with the “non-Jewish” teaching. The children would only be five and not yet in the general school. When the experiment succeeded and parents saw the progress their sons and daughters were making in the official studies as well, they would want to allow them to continue with us. In this way, we would take hold of their hearts and capture them in our place of learning.

The beginning went well. We found appropriate general studies teachers. One term passed and then another – and most of the pupils remained with us. But some left and were lost to our new institution, particularly those whose parents realised what were actually doing. But the institution carried on and even developed. Things seemed calm and the outlook was encouraging.

However, some members of the board and some lay leaders expressed their strong opposition to these “luxuries”. “For us” – one of them said in his deep-rooted conservatism – “the *Talmud Torah* is enough for poor children and we do not have to see to the finest ‘vintage wine’ for them to drink. When they grow bigger and reach the age of the *Talmud Torah*, they will start there and learn ‘Judaism’ – and that is enough. Who has to take care of financial issues which would never occur to practical people? Who would volunteer to pay another few hundred pounds a year to increase the budget of the *Talmud Torah* which, in any event, is too much to bear, particularly when teachers demand increases in their salaries?” The responsibility for this kind of waste was placed on my shoulders. I was, therefore, instructed to end the matter. In spite of my working on the matter for several additional hours a day without extra pay, my arguments in favour of the existence and development of this new orchard were not effective.

The Board of Education, most of whose members did not support my view, surrendered to the order from “on high”. After two-and-a-half years, in June 1932, the edict was issued to remove the day school from the *Talmud Torah* and from the world – it died without even completing its third year. Seven-and-a-half years were lost before it was revived in a new vibrant and strong form in 1940.

c) Cape Board of Education

The examinations were a serious problem in the *Talmudei Torah*, because of the “modern” approach for which the Board of Education was fighting. The examiner had to be an expert Hebrew pedagogue, who would adapt his requirements to the students’ methods of study and not surprise them with things that were difficult to understand from a methodological viewpoint – and avoid acting like the local examiners.

The local examiners’ methods conflicted with ours: on the one hand, there was the stricter approach that genuinely measured the characteristics of the pupil, but could be an obstacle for him; on the other hand, there was the more lenient approach, making it quicker and easier for the pupil, with the examiner settling for one or two questions that explained and clarified nothing.

It was therefore necessary to find a neutral, expert examiner who could satisfy both sides, the examiners and also the teachers and pupils. It was difficult to select a suitable expert and resolve the question in a way that would not offend those who wished to serve in this responsible post themselves.

Eventually a solution was found by inviting an appropriate examiner for this purpose from outside the *Talmud Torah*, meaning outside Cape Town. Such a person was chosen once or twice in accordance with my suggestions and it worked well. Subsequently, a local board of education was established in Cape Town. Then the situation changed – the question of the examinations was solved completely.

The South African Board of Education was founded in Johannesburg in 1928, but its activities were not felt throughout the country. The director, Dr D Mierowsky, did come to Cape Town often and arranged examinations. These were dry and official. He would write reports on them, inform our branch in Cape Town about what was happening in other *Talmudei Torah*, but the substance of this work seemed ineffective and fruitless for the members of the local board affiliated to the centre in Johannesburg. Then the idea was proposed of forming an independent board of education in the Cape. (Before this board was established, various communities in the Cape Town region approached the committee of my *Talmud Torah* with requests to allow me to come and examine their *Talmudei Torah* and review their situation, something to which I often acceded.) One of the main factors in the establishment of a special board for the Cape Province was, therefore, our *Talmud Torah*. Communal officials came to the view that it could serve as an instructive example and model for other institutions, with its marked progress, and that there could be nothing better than increasing the influence of an autonomous local body, independent of Johannesburg.

The chairman of the local branch, Dr Yechezkel Resnekov, was very active in the field of education. As chairman of the board, he had wide scope to realise his lofty aspirations against this background. He devoted much of his energy to this great enterprise – the board of education, which became worthy of the name.

Baruch Y Chidekel was a member of the board of the *Talmud Torah* and its board of education and also became part of the board of education. He was a diligent public official with a pedagogic feel and understanding, who devoted himself totally to this activity.

The secretary was Sarah Leah Cohen, an active public official, well known for her activity in several Zionist and public organisations. She did not waste time on insignificant matters, but did great things. She was the motivating and moving force on this board (she was previously also a member of our Talmud Torah committee).

Jacob Gitlin was also a member of the board of education, the builder of Zionism in this country, a great leader and developer, with tremendous devotion to the national movement. He did wonderful things for the movement. Gitlin's views were regarded as very important in Zionist circles outside South Africa as well. He was very valuable in any active community, all the more so as a Torah Jew and intellectual on a board of this kind. He was subsequently also co-opted onto the *Talmud Torah* committee and the education committee, which were close to his heart. His activities bore fruit for all of them.

Judge Herstein was one of the founders of the board of education and a member for several years. The activities of the board of education in the Cape Province extended and spread to all the educational institutions in it, having a desirable and positive influence. The role of examiners was given to Mr Chidekel and to me. It was a pleasure working with him. He learnt to adapt to the pedagogic requirements and form, by putting questions to the examinees. He excelled in this work. He would take the trouble to draw up a report, which he showed me, and when I concurred in most of his opinions, he would complete it for my signature and send it to its destination. It was only very seldom that a replacement was found for me, because of my involvement with internal work.

d) Pedagogic conferences

Even before the board of education was properly established, pedagogic conferences were called for the Cape Town *Talmudei Torah* during the summer holidays. Muizenberg, a Cape Town suburb with excellent swimming facilities, virtually unequalled, not only in Africa, but even in the famous European resorts, always attracted many visitors for their holidays, to regain their strength in the healthy and refreshing seawater. The visitors included Hebrew teachers from various centres.

The teachers' union in Cape Town, whose work concentrated mainly on improving teaching through adopting modern methods, broadened its activity by starting the teachers' conferences. The board of education was also made a partner in this project. Their programme included lectures on various educational subjects, primarily clarifying and discussing theoretical aspects, both didactic and methodical, as well as arranging model practical lessons.

Different teachers from Cape Town and the surrounding areas volunteered to give model lessons, classes arranged with pupils from our Talmud Torah under good conditions using the modern method. People observing the classes would learn to teach in this way and regulate how they taught in accordance with the modern teaching methods.

Two to three lessons a day for a week or ten days were prepared in advance, attended by many of the teachers and guests from towns throughout the country, including teachers from Palestine and other important centres. After the lessons, meetings were held on their nature, essence, advantages and disadvantages, with open discussion on new trends and innovations and their effectiveness. This theoretical activity with lectures and practical activity in model classes improved the image of education and teaching and illustrated it in a concrete manner. The value of the conferences increased from year to year in quantity and, of course, also in quality.

When well-known teachers or artists from other countries were present, they gave us loads of work, people such as Dr A Rosenfeld, the head of the World Histadrut Ivrit, or the famous Habimah artist, David Vardi from Israel, the editor of Ha'olam (The World), Moshe Kleinman, and more. These conferences were very effective in drawing the teachers closer to each other and creating strong ties of friendship and collegiality.

This hard and responsible work took up the greater part of my leave, because I had to do most of it as chairman of the union and principal of the *Talmud Torah*, arranging lectures and classes for the lessons – whether as a result of my role as chairman, or because my friend and colleague, C Barzinsky, was head of the union, and I would always gladly assist him. There were loyal and dedicated assistants in this important matter, headed by Dr Moshe Nates, the secretary of the union, or Mr Z Avin, who had an important assignment – editing all the conference material and archiving the rich and interesting conference material over several years.

The Board of Education, as I have already mentioned, would participate in the teachers' conference by arranging a reception for the guests or farewell drinks – magnificently. The Hebrew Teachers' Union made the activities of the Board of Education much easier. The board found an organised group with the same opinions and views on educational problems.

The question of appointing a director to manage education in the Board of Education's institutions, such as supervision, curriculum planning and examinations, was placed on the agenda. This would be a permanent position to deal with all these matters on a regular basis. In our *Talmud Torah*, the issue of the examiner became a "burning" question every year (in our *Talmud Torah*, the examination season was set from 8 June, to avoid clashes with examinations in the general schools at the end of November and beginning of December). Relations between the South African Board of Education, based in Johannesburg, and the board in the Cape, which was already independent, grew weaker, until they stopped altogether, even with regard to examinations. The local board decided on its own initiative to invite an examiner and Dr Arie Birnbaum from Johannesburg was invited to Cape Town.

Dr Birnbaum proved an expert pedagogue, who acquired his educational tradition in the teachers' training seminary in Jerusalem. He was a Talmudist, the graduate of famous yeshivot, with a broad Hebrew and European education – and, above all, an experienced teacher, equipped to guide others.

When the Board of Education considered a candidate for the post of education director, he was found to be the most suitable person, after examining the Talmud Torah pupils officially. Negotiations with him went well and Dr Birnbaum was appointed as director. A new, permanent and very desirable educational resource was added in Cape Town. The burden of being the examiner, which I had borne for several years, was removed from me – I was set free.

Our school gained a good and substantial reputation among the many guests from Europe and the Land of Israel who came to visit it, including great writers, such as N Sokolow, leaders such as Dr Weizmann, S Brodetsky and Rabbi Meir Berlin (Bar-Ilan). They all praised and commended our Talmud Tora, terming it exemplary, not just as the only one on the continent of Africa, but because they felt there were few like it in Europe or the Land of Israel. They expressed the essence of their comments in writing, in letters praising our work, commending our institution. We had many prominent guests and their statements strengthened our resolve to improve the precious institution and make it as good as possible.

e) **Important improvements**

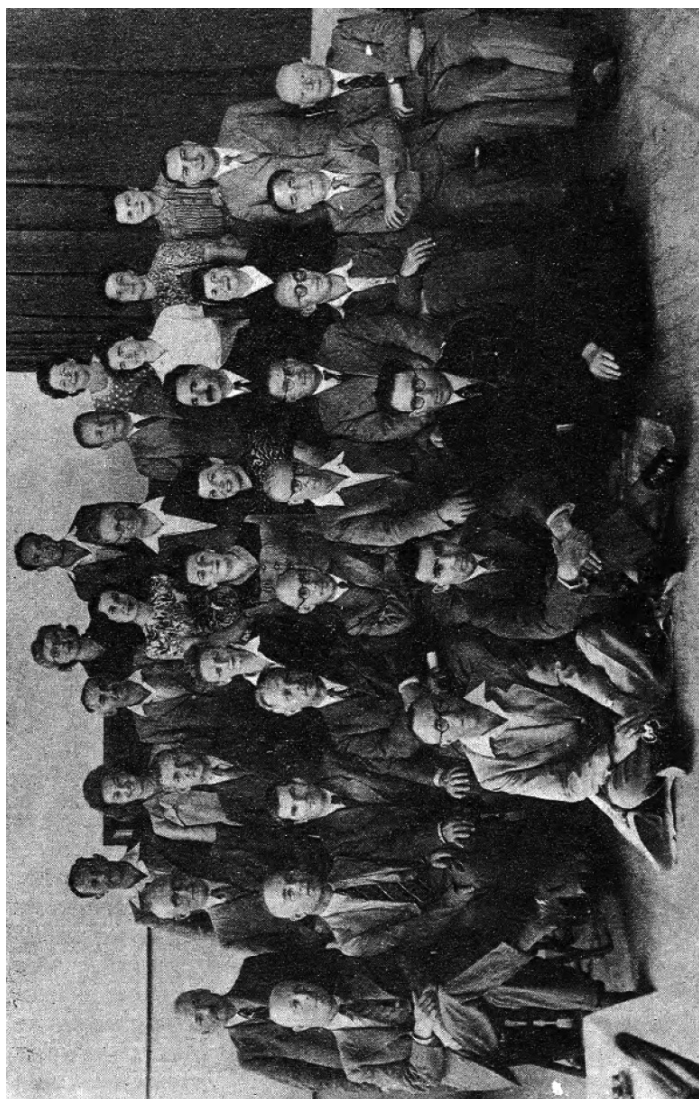
Substantial efforts were made over the years to implement two very important aspects: material and spiritual. The first was a necessity – erecting a new building to replace the dilapidated old one, whose external appearance, with its many blemishes, truly shamed its interior. And a magnificent new building was erected in 1938, in the convenient style of a modern school with a good number of classrooms and offices and new furniture specially ordered in terms of our

requirements. This accorded completely with the internal value of the institution.

f) **There was also an important spiritual change**, which served as an example for others: the revival of the day school and its rebirth in 1940, with the curriculum of a modern general school, including all the general and national studies required for Hebrew pupils.

These victories were not gained easily, without a fight. A substantial sum of money was left by the estate of a communal official, Mr Chaim Lieberman, who had served as mayor of Cape Town and was a popular figure. The high

The first conference of the Histadrut Ivrit in South Africa, Muizenberg, January 2 – 5, 1941



From left to right, second row, seated: M Lazar, Dr Birnbaum (director of education), Dr E Rosenfeld (Hebrew principal, Israel), Z Lurie, Y Blumenthal (chairman), E Miztrachi, Z Infeld, C Sachs, Z Rybko. **Third row, standing:** U Silpert, the author, Z Zohar, Mrs Lurie, Mrs Blumenthal, Y Lerman, Mrs Zlotnik, Y Abitz. **Fourth row:** Domes, ?, Blizovski, Mrs Rechelovski, Y Bitrun (ZS), Z Golis (Rev.), Mrs Weinstein. **Top row:** ?, Mr Konvisser, Mrs Tuch. **First row, seated:** M Ostrinski (ZS), Z Avin, Schwartz.

school, with the higher classes, standards 9 and 10, was named after him. But there were many complex formalities in the administration of the estate. Board members looking to derive the benefit from the estate worked very hard, eventually succeeding. With additional money from other sources, the amount was almost doubled and the project was crowned with success. This was an important element in the revival of the day school that was sentenced to “extinction” for a period of seven-and-a-half years (in June, 1932).

Nevertheless, the entire school, which was completely “ours”, encountered opposition from public opinion this time as well, particularly from parents who felt there was nothing better than sending their sons and daughters to government schools, where they felt their children could be part of the “shared life” with the children of our Christian neighbours. According to this “enlightened” opinion, this would rescue them from their harmful segregation. Those parents – with the exception of an outstanding minority – were unable to appreciate the truth of the more natural freedom felt only under conditions of independent growth and development. Only when pupils have that freedom of action are they able to attain perfection in accordance with their fundamental characteristics, with no external and oppressive pressure from an environment serving to delay and limit their physical and spiritual growth and fulfilment. But, as always happens in life, it is necessary to overcome obstacles, especially those we ourselves, our brothers, our parents and the like, place in our paths and the efforts to overcome them succeeded. And so the Herzlia day school began, showing signs of life and progress. When our pupils, educated for a certain time at that school, were sent to continue their studies at general schools, because of the small number of classes at our school, they were welcomed there with open arms. The headmasters got to know that our pupils were well prepared and developed. They were likely to do well in future. Many of the schools grabbed our pupils who registered with them because it was impossible for us to introduce new classes quickly in our schools, as was done in ordinary schools. This was a sign that “benefited” the existence of Herzlia, as even parents who initially refused to agree to the experiment, saw with their own eyes that it was succeeding.

Now, as I put this down on paper, Herzlia has a record number of pupils – so much so that the full primary school course has been completed already. It now has to move forward to the middle school for the young people and matric, in Standards 7-10, but this has been postponed for the time being because of a lack of space, as even the new building is too small to accommodate such an institution. At the beginning of the year, pupils, both boys and girls, came to Herzlia in sufficient numbers to open three parallel classes at the same time for beginners, but, as I have said, the “bed is too short to stretch out”. In the meantime, a suitable property has been purchased for a possible new building.

It is gladdening that a school of this type has not remained unique: two or three years ago, the Board of Education in Johannesburg also founded a day school that is making good progress. "Day school!" – this is the slogan people advocating education use everywhere and at all times when educational problems are discussed in public, in various meetings and conferences. The issue is no longer in dispute and its opponents are decreasing everywhere.

g) Sephardi pronunciation

It should be mentioned that when Herzlia was opened, the Sephardi accent was accepted there. After some argument and hesitation. It has been used there ever since, in spite of the difficulty in changing the usage in each of the three branches of our institution: 1) Herzlia with the beginners; 2) The Talmud Torah, where the pupils used the Ashkenazi pronunciation; 3) In the Chaim Lieberman High School (Standards 9 and 10), whose pupils also grew up using the Ashkenazi pronunciation. Initially there were obstacles in writing, but recognition of the need for a living link between Hebrew-speakers in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora served to win the day.

h) The library

When the new building was erected, the idea of a library at the Talmud Torah was implemented. A suitable hall was devoted to this in the new building, well furnished with glazed bookcases, containing convenient shelves. Most of these were filled with books of interest to young children and pupils of various ages, as well as a good quantity of reference books for teachers, in two languages, Hebrew and English. The library proved very valuable and useful to many people. Books were added to it from time to time. The library was named after Mrs Miriam Harris, a relative of well-known South African communal workers and philanthropists who provided the funds for its establishment.

i) Practical religion and nationality.

These two aspects of education in our institutions require particular attention, with a great deal of time and regular care devoted to them as educational principles. The Talmud Torah was given the role of educating the "home", the Jewish environment and the family. Deeds and views, behaviour and actions, founded on religion, belief and custom, seemed to have been totally uprooted from the Jewish environment. Society's apathetic attitude was undermining them, as they were no longer preserved or existed in it and through it and fell away as a result. They are all based solely on observation, imitation and maintaining the usage accepted by mothers and fathers.

The Talmud Torah, therefore, had to fill this gap through tangible education. First and foremost came the prayers. They were not said at home and special practice and learning were required in all the classes, with time devoted to

study the routine of the blessings, weekday, Sabbath and festival prayers, ending in the upper classes with the reading of poetry and prayers for the ten Days of Penitence, usually with clarification and translation in the classes.

This was not enough to satisfy the need. It was necessary to introduce practical training, expressed in the Minyan Yosef – founded by the previous principal, Mr Yosef Ezra Homa – at night and using the Sabbath and festival texts. Changes were made over time, such as setting the prayer reading with special emphasis in public, and sections of the Shema reading, singing different sections in the Kabbalat Shabbat (prayers on the eve of the Sabbath), morning prayers and the additional service on the Sabbath and festivals – convenient ways to obtain the active participation of those attending the minyan. The most important activity was people passing before the Ark, those leading the prayer and cantors, who accustomed themselves to these roles, learning the text, the traditional melody and leading the congregation, while they were no longer hindered by stage fright. The girls, who also attended our public prayer services, were moved as well.

Reverend Bender liked to see a large crowd of young boys and girls coming to the Mincha service on the Sabbath at the Great Synagogue, where he would deliver a sermon on various subjects, in particular, dwelling on affairs of the day in the life of the school, the city and the like. In his “flowery” language, he would repeat his descriptions of beautiful scenery in some lovely area nearby. His assistants would also participate actively in this service, with the public reading of an appropriate section from the Psalms or Prophets.

Our pupils, boys and girls, would come to study for six continuous days a week. They would also come, dressed in their Sabbath finery, to the Sabbath evening service and the morning and afternoon services, sacrificing many of their hours of rest, while general schools had only five days a week of study – and were satisfied with that! Pupils of this kind deserve only the highest praise.

The prayers were not the only thing provided in the curriculum. It included a study of laws and customs as well, because these were ignored by parents for various reasons. Special lessons were provided to explain the customs of the festivals, fasts and all those that had a national content, including heroes, great personalities of our nation, its leaders whose deeds and actions were described and explained. Events relating to a specific time were clarified by a historical review, as were the important new periods of living Zionism. The school dealt with them in the same way as events in the distant past.

j) **Jewish National Fund (JNF)**

A prominent practical aspect was developing the Jewish National Fund – active national education through daily projects.

The Blue Box was introduced in every class after 1931. Since then, our pupils have learnt and understood its value. They were interested in it and its element of a small sacrifice, donating some small change. On the eve of the Sabbath, there was regular awareness of this pleasant duty, developing through competition among individual pupils, as well as among classes. A good habit spread of emptying the boxes on the eve of every festival, arousing enthusiasm, with happiness in the class that emptied the largest amount, proportionately, from the box, in comparison with the others. This class occupied the place at the head of the list published in the school. Places were also given on the detailed list for each of them according to the pro rata amount. Other customs spread as well, such as the price of the blessing for the box when a family friend, father or mother celebrated an event, or an official greeting from the JNF on the birthday of a pupil.

When sufficient money had been collected to purchase a Golden Book certificate, which cost £20, it was presented to an important communal worker, whose name was inscribed in it. If in the first year an amount was set for one certificate, over time the number of certificates was doubled and trebled in a single year. Certificates were presented not only to local communal officials, but many were given to national leaders, such as Dr Weizmann, the first president of the Jewish State, Mrs H Szold, the Hanita settlement and more. At the appropriate time, certificates were sent in to show admiration for the people inscribed.

It is worth mentioning that certificates were also dedicated to non-Jewish leaders: one who loved Jews and was a friend of Zionism, the South African prime minister, General Jan Smuts; and the Minister of the Interior, Education and Finance, a Righteous Gentile and a lover of Israel, an admirer of our country and the work done to build it – Jan Hofmeyr. I can recall the details of the presentation of these certificates to the people whose names were inscribed in them. Smuts was very busy and unable to come to our school. It was decided that delegates would present them to him in his office in Parliament. Two children were chosen from each school, Herzlia, the Talmud Torah and the C Lieberman High School, and the chairman of the Board of Education, Jacob Gitlin, and its secretary, Mr Latan, accompanied me. We were welcomed warmly. Smuts paid particular attention to the young people and a seat was found for each of them. When Smuts received the certificate, he looked at it carefully, turned it towards the light from the window to read the inscription and see what was drawn on it. He thanked us sincerely and started speaking, while seated in his chair.

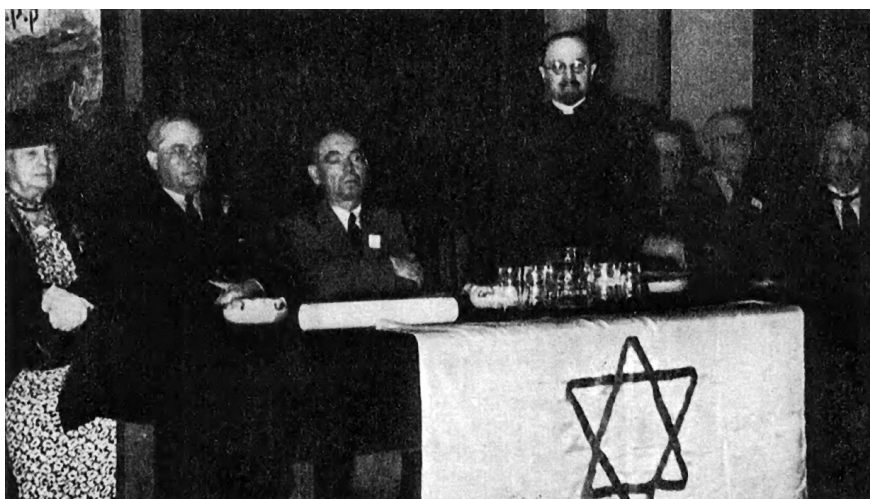
The meeting took place in the week of Easter and on our intermediate days of Passover. The subject was the idea of freedom, the festival of Passover,

which was celebrated on generally similar lines. He was deep in thought and thinking out loud, expressing his views on the closeness of both our religions and beliefs, and on the shared aspirations for peace, brotherhood and love. He expressed many beautiful ideas in that small, intimate group, with rousing, lofty emotions.

The ceremony lasted for almost an hour and we departed from the old general, who was full of life and movement, cordially and in close friendship.

Two years later, the Golden Book certificate was presented to the minister, Jan Hofmeyr. When he arrived, he was accompanied by his mother, with whom he usually appeared in public. The *Talmud Torah* hall was filled to capacity with pupils. Rabbi Abrahams and some of the board members were present. The chairman was J Gitlin and the certificate was presented by a boy and girl. Hofmeyr received it enthusiastically and began to speak about the Holy Scriptures and the country in which the Bible developed and was observed, holy and precious to peoples holding different beliefs, expressing many beautiful and lofty ideas and the sublime, unequalled morality of the Book of Books. It made a tremendous impression on everyone there, particularly the youth. It was a pleasure to accompany him and his mother when they left the *Talmud Torah* hall. Dozens of Golden Book certificates adorned the walls of the institution. The pupils were proud of them and anybody looking at them shared that pride.

Presentation of Golden Book certificate to Minister Jan Hofmeyr April 5, 1944.



From left to right: Mother of J Hofmeyr, J Hofmeyr, J Gitlin (chairman), Chief Rabbi Prof Abrahams (standing) Y Mauerberger, A Levin (Talmud Torah principal), M Rabie (board member).

I have already mentioned in passing that our academic year ended in June, when the annual examinations were held, in order to avoid a clash at the end of the civilian year with examinations in the general schools. It was not desirable for the pupils to be required to prepare and do additional special work for simultaneous examinations on “two fronts”. This straightforward compromise was greatly appreciated by the pupils, who added to the time devoted to holy activities by sacrificing a week or more of their winter holidays, only half the length of the summer break, in order to prepare, with the required peace of mind, for examinations to progress from one class to the next or the final examinations.

The examinations for the lower classes were held first, before they went on leave. The pupils in the intermediate and higher classes used to accept fair conditions, with the time of their examinations being set in terms of their age and class level – at later stages. In this way, the older pupils would devote part of their short winter holidays to assist the younger pupils. This became a regular custom and was repeated each year, with no complaints from anybody, but in a spirit of sacrifice as a positive gesture – a good sign of a cultural exercise.

The end of the academic year was celebrated magnificently with a Hebrew party: an interesting performance, poetry, recitations and songs by pupils of different ages. Many attended – in the presence of members of the board and invited guests. Final certificates and prizes were awarded to graduates – many of them very generous – and to outstanding pupils in all the classes. The celebration was arranged over a day or two before all the branches of the institution closed for the long summer holidays – which lasted for seven weeks.

There were between 22-25 classes, with 400-450 girls and boys. Beginners' classes at the *Talmud Torah* and at Herzlia – the day school – began twice a year, in January and July. There were also parallel classes, particularly when two were sometimes established at the same time. The classes started with Sub A, followed by Sub B – each with six months of study – and the highest class in Herzlia now reached Standard 6, in which the primary school course was completed. In the *Talmud Torah*, the highest class was Standard 8 and in the Chaim Lieberman High School – Standard 10. This meant that a pupil who entered the *Talmud Torah* or Herzlia at the tender age of six could study Judaism and Hebrew for eleven years in succession, until matriculation age at the general schools. Many also actually completed their secular matric and Hebrew studies in the same year.

A statistical calculation in our institution showed the percentage of female pupils. It reached 40%-45%, a good sign for the educational situation, which was not confined only to the many pupils who had to participate in the services and celebrate their religious maturity – *bar-mitzvah*. This is an appropriate place to point out that curriculum for the religious majority of girls, *bat-mitzvah*, was established at the Cape Town *Talmud Torah* and this beautiful custom was extended from there, becoming widespread throughout the country.

* * *

From the time I started working at the *Talmud Torah* (between 1929-1937), the most active communal officials, who saw to the material requirements of the institution and its development, as well as heading it (apart from those who were active on the Board of Education and dealt with the internal affairs of the *Talmud Torah*, who have been mentioned above on page 221) were:

Mr Wolf Harris, a communal official who was very influential in the conduct of the public work of the Cape Town community and headed various institutions over many years, as well as the *Talmud Torah* and the C Lieberman High School, to which he devoted time and effort to bring about and establish.

Mr Morris Rosen, the chairman of the Great Synagogue and the *Talmud Torah* for four years in succession, a modest and pleasant person. Hebrew education was close to his heart.

Mr Israel Mauerberger, who love public communal work and served as chairman of the *Talmud Torah*, where he was an active member for its benefit.

Over time, active members were added: educational expert Jacob Gitlin, a very dynamic force in many projects and a leading figure in South African Zionism.

Dr Yechezkiel Resnekov, head of the Cape Board of Education for 18 years, who was indefatigable in his wonderful devotion to Hebrew education. He was taken before his time in 1950 – may his memory be blessed.

When the new building was erected in 1938, new faces were added to the committees of the *Talmud Torah* and its branches. Although the number of committee members was reduced in order to improve the allocation of work in the field of education, their value grew in kind and nature, as can be appreciated from the following list:

The Chief Rabbi of Cape Town, professor of Hebrew at the University of

Cape Town, Rabbi Israel Abrahams. No sooner had he taken up the rabbinical post in Cape Town (1938), he devoted himself to public work in general and Hebrew education in particular. He was appointed chairman of the C Lieberman High School education committee and participated actively in resolving questions relating to this school, such as those of the *Talmud Torah* and Herzlia, founded two years later (1940). The Chief Rabbi used all the channels of influence over parents and youth for the benefit of complete Hebrew education in the meetings at the *Talmud Torah*, his sermons in the Great Synagogue – and every public or social opportunity - to gain adherence to our human and national education, in the framework of Hebrew culture.

Supporters of the ideal of the resurrection of our nation joined the board of the *Talmud Torah*, the high school and their boards of education, to work together with the members who preceded them. They were:

Mr MH Goldschmidt, head of the Board of Deputies, with a broad Hebrew and European education, industrious in his public work; Dr Joseph Harte, a distinguished Hebrew intellectual and active national communal worker, currently chairman of all the branches of our institution; Dr Aryeh Birnbaum, the director of education, who helped advance teaching through his expertise as a result of his traditional and modern pedagogic views. He died suddenly at the age of 53 in 1949. May his memory be blessed.

The Cape Town Talmud Torah committee, 1941



Dr A Moar was appointed as director to replace him. He was an expert in his profession, an experienced pedagogue, who had specialised in medieval Talmudic literature – he had published articles on it – and modern Talmudic literature. He also wrote a great deal on current issues.

On the death of Dr Y Resnekov, the chairman of the Board of Education, his place was taken by the active Zionist public official on the committee of the *Dorshei Zion* Society and its chairman, as well as a member of the board of education, a man who valued and esteemed Jewish education greatly, Dr YM Hurwitz.

The teachers were the internal driving forces in our institutions, as my partners in their creation and development, working shoulder to shoulder with me for many years:

Mr Zalman Avin. Born in Latvia. After four years of teaching in the country of his birth, he began his work at our *Talmud Torah* as a young teacher in 1927. He absorbed much of our literature. He has a rich library, containing many new books of great value and importance.

When I left management, he was appointed as principal.

Mr Joseph Abitz, a graduate of the Dr Y Epstein Hebrew Gymnasium in Vilna. He began his Hebrew teaching in our institution in 1927. He was appointed deputy headmaster of Herzlia after my resignation.

Mr David Rosen, an experienced teacher from Lithuania. He was a yeshiva student and a Hebrew intellectual who knew much of our ancient and new literature.

Mr Jacob Sadowsky. He started in 1930. The son of a rabbi, he was educated in a yeshiva. He had been a teacher in Vilna.

Miss AG Yachas. She was a teacher holding a diploma in general studies. She obtained her teaching certificate from the local Board of Education to teach Hebrew subjects. Her work at the *Talmud Torah* and Herzlia has continued since 1930.

Temporary teachers:

Mr A Levita, a teacher with a diploma from Lithuania with teaching experience. He worked for three years in the *Talmud Torah* and was appointed an inspector by the board of education in Johannesburg.

Mr Mayer Zaslansky, my late brother-in-law, a teacher (*par excellence*), my colleague from the Grodno *Beit Midrash*, a well-known teacher in Vilna who worked for a year in our *Talmud Torah*.

Rabbi Moshe Morgenstern, a man of great erudition, learned and sharp-witted, an intellectual with an inquiring mind. When there was a shortage of teachers, he volunteered to teach special subjects in the higher classes.

A long list of other teachers worked in our institution and did well, all of them standing on pedagogic heights. They were teachers with experience obtained before coming to our institutions or while working in them. Their work bore fruit in both Hebrew and secular subjects taught at Herzlia.

It should be mentioned here that since Mr G Laden accepted the post of secretary of the *Talmud Torah* and its branches (1931), he has worked with great diligence and real dedication. He is always vigilant and sees to it that even with the fairly frequent financial difficulties of the *Talmud Torah*, the teachers receive their salaries on time and will not feel the institution's lack of money. He deserves praise for this "great" achievement.

CHAPTER 28

EXPERIENCES AND EPISODES

The characters of the many board members differed. Some claimed to be my friends and loyal to me. There were, of course, those who were opposed to me and complained about me to my face, and even more so not in my presence. The people "close" to me bestowed on me anecdotes and facts about their past lives, to show me, the "greenhorn", that they were fortunate, clever, sharp business people, who had risen high and achieved public office on the level of the presidency of an educational institution – their power and the strength of their hand won them this wealth.

Some of them would tell endless tales of their past, full of hardship, and of a present that was as clear as a sunrise in all its strength. Sunday morning was the "day designed for trouble" with the tales, when the high office bearers felt it was their holy duty to visit the *Talmud Torah* to see and hear what was going on there and, primarily, make themselves heard. When I went to my class to teach, one of these "friends" stopped me on my way, between the threshold

of my office as I came out and the doorway of my classroom, opposite it, and began to enrich my imagination with a description of his hard and bitter life in some forsaken corner twenty or thirty years earlier, as he made his way from difficult circumstances to the pinnacle of his happiness.

He paid no attention to the fact that I was in a hurry, with my diary in my hand, to fulfil my obligation in my waiting class, nor did he want to understand it, and that, as a result, I had no time to lend an ear to what he was saying. But knowing that I would not dare interrupt him, he would stand and penetrate my very core with his incessant talk, hollowing it out. Dumbfounded and confused, I stood in front of him, with one leg raised to walk forward – but he remained there. It put me in a bad mood, enraging me.

And he had not finished. The following Sunday, he continued working on my imagination and bothering me. He approached me without any preliminaries, as if I were already waiting for him to continue to “entertain” me, beginning a new “interesting” chapter from that same old period – his primitive period – provoking me to the point that I wanted to explode. Eventually, I grew wise, without showing myself to him at the “crazy” time. When once again I spotted that fellow in the guise of a senior official from a distance on Sunday. I disappeared from view, hiding from him and concealing myself in my classroom – until he stopped his frequent visits to the *Talmud Torah* at the same time in the mornings.

Another senior official, not from our institution, but from another society, was busy distributing *ma’ot chitim* (charity given before Passover to help the needy purchase *matzah*) for the poor in the form of a donation of baked *matzah*. This distinguished society – I had not yet learnt its name at the time, as I had only been in Cape Town for about three months – found it necessary to send one of its representatives to “occupy” the *Talmud Torah* office by expelling me, the principal, and the secretary, for an entire week – or ten days – to distribute the *matzah*. So there was a ruling and I had to comply with it. But I could not endure one particular aspect.

That “senior” official would open the door of the office, a respectable place, during class time, gathering the pupils by calling out loud and bestowing the *matzah* on them. When they received the “treat”, they responded noisily, shouting. They were sent to bring other pupils to get *matzah*. The children receiving it were not hungry – they would taste a little of the *matzah* and with overdone boisterousness – to which the distributor contributed, with his facial contortions – broke it up into crumbs in the corridor and then went on their way.

Classes were cancelled at the school because of the wild game this official enjoyed so much, to “please the youth”. I was furious, but bit my lip and

ground my teeth. I was still living at the *Talmud Torah* and did not dare protest. I thought that even this unpleasant incident would pass after a day or two and the evil decree would end.

But it did not happen as I imagined. The following year, the spectacle was repeated shortly before Passover and I said: "Enough!"

I quickly went to Mr Rosen, the chairman of the *Talmud Torah*, and complained bitterly, with fearful words, about the strange phenomenon that was wasting our time and infringing the prevailing good manners and politeness at the school. Mr Rosen agreed with me and the next day, the clown appointed to distribute *matzah* to poor people and *Talmud Torah* pupils disappeared – never to be seen again.

There was another incident with a different person, who was never elevated to the level of president, but arrogated to himself the authority to appear before me as if he already held such a position. It happened, I think, at the beginning of an emergency campaign to raise money for the new *Talmud Torah* building. He felt his primary duty was to present me with "some kind of material", his opinions and views on the need for "obedience" – which he termed discipline – on the part of the pupils. "They must behave really well." "The principal must make sure of it – to the extent that every pupil would highlight his good behaviour, which would be clear and apparent to any ordinary person." And here began the practical chapter with laws: how such "good manners" should be made part of the pupil's conduct.

This person, a complete ignoramus, made his fortune in business, but left his occupation behind to instruct me about the rules and laws of teaching, bringing up children, training etc, as he intended to donate a whole "fiver" to the campaign.

At that time, when we discussed the building and its design, everyone expressed his opinion as if he were an expert in this kind of architecture. Was there nobody, particularly if he had a friend who was a contractor and builder, or he himself had previously been involved in this occupation, who was not an expert in the appropriate design of a *Talmud Torah*? When the discussion with him moved to this subject – he was one of the senior lay leaders – I mentioned that we had to pay attention to good security on the outside of the building, so that street children and other locals would not be able to see what was being done inside, as was the case with the old *Talmud Torah*. Should the windows not be high enough, then – I said – it would be necessary to place a high fence around the building so that the school would be private property in the full sense of the word. The official, who knew everything, did not want to accept my opinion and said, "It is an act of

the Supreme Ruler: And if not, you, the principal, must see to it. Here, in this country, it is simple – you call a police officer and he does it – removes the people who look in from the outside.”

In terms of this answer, I therefore had to equip myself with a whistle, hang it around my neck and be ready and prepared to blow it for a policeman, because this was the enlightened suggestion of this lay leader. This is what I was meant to do. And as far as my main duties were concerned – he had no interest in them at the time of this discussion.

Another “broad-minded” lay leader argued with me about new benches I had ordered without consulting him. He had a liquor business, but regarded himself as an expert on this subject as well – the posture of young children sitting on school benches made in a way that would not harm their spines, allow them to see properly and ensure that their feet would not hang in the air, without a footrest. This tired me out. He was furious with me for going on my own to the factory of the contractors used by the government schools and discussing the proposed design changes we wanted. The director, an expert in these matters, agreed with me totally.

“The lay leader knows best” – this is a rule that many people of this kind adopt in dealing with an official, particularly when instructing “an idler” and a greenhorn.

I shall end the list of “tales” of this kind with some that struck me as the most piquant. There are many of them and I can only mention a few.

One of the “progressive” lay leaders, a communal official not only in the Jewish community, but in general politics as well, would come to me “by chance” on a weekday as well, when I was temporarily not busy, between one class and another, for a discussion I would probably find pleasant and in his view, he would as well.

Something happened to me with that person. One morning, the day before a two-day festival, when there were no classes at the *Talmud Torah*, I went out for a walk heading towards the beautiful, large public library in Government Avenue, a wonderful spot in Cape Town.

I intended to spend some time browsing through newspapers and journals from England and select books I wanted to read. The weather was pleasant. I was in the mood to enjoy a walk, alone and free to do what I wanted, strolling at a leisurely pace.

As I went along, this same gentleman and communal official appeared in

front of me, stopped me by greeting me, politely suggesting that we talk. I had not even managed to sit down on one of the benches in the avenue when he immediately went on to what he wanted to talk about.

There was always a valuable political “document” in his pocket from one of the country’s main leaders. He gave it to me to read – I had already known its contents for some time. He did not stop talking about one thing or another.

He described a particular period in his life, forty years earlier – when he had served as the principal of a government school in a large city in one of the Baltic states that had lost its independence under Russian rule after the end of the First World War. He gave me many details from that period. Without pausing, he moved onto a new story and began to describe his internal organs. I remember he said a lot about his kidneys, moving on to other ailments – and with all of them, it was a case of “thank G-d”.

But this made my head spin. I was overcome by weakness and felt myself becoming faint.

I clearly remember that when I opened my eyes, I saw a schoolboy from SACS, a nearby school, standing in front of me, a tall young man, not Jewish, holding a glass of water and pouring it over my face to bring me round. Two or three other students, English people, were next to him staring at me. The one holding the glass bent over me as I was lying prone on the ground in the avenue and asked me how I felt and what he could do for me. I looked around and the person I had been talking to, with the well-trimmed white beard, the former principal, the current communal official who was getting over his kidneys, was like a figment of my imagination. The pupils around said their big midday break had arrived. The same person had cared for me, therefore, for about two hours, since we had met at ten. I was exhausted from standing and listening to his tiring words, which had become a heavy burden for me, making me feel bilious, striking me dumb while I politely and involuntarily accepted it.

I asked the young man if he would find me a taxi and it was done. When I arrived home, transported in a strange car, I realised I was still alive, as shown by my movements: walking and talking like a real person.

* * *

I have another kind of memory – favourable criticism in meetings and opinions of visitors. A few examples are given here.

Mr Chidekel realised the *Talmud Torah* had an image of a flourishing institution whose progress should be publicised among those involved in it, its ideas and development. With a habitual dismissive gesture, he tried to show the positive facts to people who were interested in it and understood it, so that they could come and see for themselves the achievements of the institution and the level it had reached.

One outstanding Talmudist, a learned pedant, had a very negative attitude towards my *Talmud Torah*. Once Mr Chidekel came with this scholar, Mr Y Yaffe, to my class. After being introduced to me, he sat down to listen to the lesson. The subject was one of the later chapters in the Bible, taught using the natural method. The pupils read carefully, asked relevant questions and listened well, relating to the contents with understanding and feeling. Mr Yaffe sat and watched and I noticed his amazement and surprise. When the lesson was over, he came up to in a friendly way, shook my hand and said, "I have actually seen something I did not want to believe my ears were hearing. They are learning religion and philosophy with you, using a method and way that is very enjoyable for anybody who understands it. I am very glad to know that our youth has been placed in trustworthy hands. Well done, Mr L, from now on I am a friend who truly appreciates your work."

We remained close. He wanted me to visit him often at home. When he was confined to his sickbed, his condition worsened and I was asked by Chidekel to come and visit him before he left this world.

One of the parents visited me unexpectedly on Shabbat. After the service at the *Minyan Yosef*, my senior class remained for a special lesson, devoted to studying the weekly portion, with Rashi. It ended in the afternoon. The father, a learned man, came to take his son home for the Shabbat meal. I invited him to sit down and wait until the end of the lesson. While he waited, he listened very carefully and with interest. During the reading, we would pause with the pupils to analyse the grammar of the verse or the pronunciation in order to explain it. After the lesson, my guest approached me and said: "Sir, I do not know your grammatical theory, but I understood and was very interested in your explanation. The clarification of the weekly portion and Rashi was definitely a pleasure to hear. I will come to these lessons in future as well." At times he was as good as his word, keeping his promise.

Another typical incident occurred at the time of the annual examinations in June. One overcast morning, I sat with my highest class – the other classes had already been released for the holidays at that time of year, after their

examinations – and we were dealing with an examination rehearsal. Torrential rain fell outside and heavy clouds covered the skies. Winter was in full swing.

I suddenly saw through the window that Reverend Bender's motor car was parked in front of the *Talmud Torah*. I went out to meet him and brought him to my class. When he came in, he began a superficial conversation with the pupils, as was his wont, showing the affection he had for all young people, and sat down to listen. We were studying the *Mishneh Torah* (a major work by Maimonides). The turn of one of the students came and I indicated that she should give her opinion on her sections. With a pleasant smile, she began to recite:

“Remember the days of old . . . ask your father and he will tell you – your old men . . .

“For the portion of the Lord is His people, Jacob the lot of His inheritance.”

Mr Bender asked about the meaning of some words and expressions, saying: “Enough from her – let's move on.”

Then another girl got up and continued:

“. . . As an eagle stirs up her nest, broods over her young,” etc.

When she had completed her lovely rendition of the text by heart, the guest suggested I should go with him to my office, which was close to the classroom. There he asked me for the names of the two pupils, took his cheque book from his pocket and said: “Please give my prize to these girls – beautiful! How beautiful!”

He came again the next day. He asked what else they were learning. I replied: “*Mishna – Ethics of the Fathers*.” “Is that so?” Were they spending time on the statement, “Do not talk much with women”? He laughed as he said this with scorn for such an unfair and impolite attitude to women. I told him we were using an abridged book for our studies, adapted well for young people. Some inconvenient parts had been deleted from it. He asked me to show him the book, perused it a little and changed his mind about this study as well – positively.

Because it was cold and daylight was weak that morning, he suggested that the pupils in the class should go to my office and sit more comfortably at the table. Study began on the *Ethics of the Fathers*. The boys read and explained, while the girls also demonstrated extensive knowledge of this subject. Before he left, he came into the classroom, asked for the names of two of them who had done particularly well and wrote out cheques for them in the amount of a guinea each.

Mr Bender was one of the fiercest opponents of the *Talmud Torah* and its

modern method, particularly because it was modern, something in which he did not believe. He liked the translation into classical Biblical English. But when he saw the teaching actually done completely in Hebrew and that the boys and girls enjoyed it, he also began to regard it as important, viewing the principle in a more positive light. He stopped his negative criticism altogether and became increasingly interested in the *Talmud Torah* and its development.

* * *

My heavy workload after the day school started, from nine in the morning until seven at night, with a break for lunch, exhausted me and drained my physical strength, to the point where I left the management and activity of the *Talmud Torah* and its branches – after 16 years of work and effort.

Then in December 1944, I was given a lifetime pension. At the end of the academic year a lovely farewell party was arranged in my honour, with the participation of many of the communal workers in education, our friends and acquaintances. I was given a beautiful present on behalf of the institution as a souvenir, as well as gifts from the teachers and pupils.

My son Baruch was also present at the party. He had returned from imprisonment in Germany two months earlier. Azariah was there as well, after being demobilised from the army six months before.

CHAPTER 29

BELOW THE LINE

I had many friends and companions. My family, the family of the pupils, girls and boys, who I regarded as sons and daughters, was broad and large. The satisfaction of the parents with their offspring, my pupils, was also my satisfaction. I felt I was their full partner and credit myself with the complete extent of their pleasure from their children, without, G-d forbid, diminishing the role of the parents. In business partnerships, if the percentage of one party increases, the share of the other party decreases and is reduced accordingly. However, this is not the case when dividing the relationship in spiritual matters, such as satisfaction from children and pupils; here equal shares mean up to a hundred per cent for each participant, without any loss to anybody.

And, conversely, if pupils upset their parents and teachers, I also became a partner in that. There were friendly relationships with the teachers, with shared aspirations that drew us closer. They were my creative partners and volunteers in educational activities – not only in the school and its branches I managed, but also in the teachers' union, against a broader background.

I had very many concerns and limited free time. Nevertheless, we, my wife and I, had a circle of real friends and we used to visit each other and we had a close affinity with them.

In the beginning our closest and warmest friends were the Barzinskys. Such loyal associates are rare in everyday life. Our hands remained in theirs in everything we did, every matter, idea or action – and vice versa.

We met by chance, but from the first interview, our friendship took root, never ceasing. While I was still in Cape Town alone, before my family arrived, they already loved them and were firmly attached to them. They encouraged me to bring my family out and supported me in different ways and means to carry out this very valuable “project”.

They provided many important and effective benefits for my entire family. The loyalty of our dear friends the Barzinskys was demonstrated most clearly when we were notified that our son Baruch was missing after the fall of Tobruk. The official telegram from military headquarters did not give any indication of the possibility that he had been taken prisoner – it said: “Missing,” and that was all!

We, the parents, were then on holiday, before our return to Cape Town for the start of classes in the *Talmud Torah*. Our acquaintances who had been informed of the telegram and the loss of Baruch in the army kept this

“information” from us and did not know how to tell us. Only Mr and Mrs Barzinsky, undertook this serious task. They took every precaution, such as asking a doctor to be ready at any moment to give us assistance. There was increasing concern about Devorah’s situation. The terrible news was likely to have a serious effect on her delicate health.

They revealed the secret, the truth, to us with love and sensitivity. The news enveloped us in spiritual and bodily despair for days and nights. They treated us with compassionate and soothing care that touched the depths of our grieving hearts. Weeks passed before the official notification was received that Baruch was alive, but in enemy captivity.

One evening, after 28 months, from June 1942 to October 1944, we received the news directly by telephone from Baruch himself, from a ship on the coast, about his return to Cape Town. The Barzinskys were the first to share in our great joy, by arranging a party for many friends and acquaintances.

There is an interesting detail from this experience. A few days before the prisoner returned, I was on my way to work at the *Talmud Torah* on a Sunday morning. It was a cloudy day, with light rain falling, and I was sheltered by an open umbrella. A man whose face seemed familiar came up to me, but his name escaped me. He greeted me warmly, saying: “You should know, Mr Levin, an entire town, the whole city is sharing your great joy.”

We had good neighbourly relations with the Burt (Berezowski) family. For ten years we had lived in adjoining semi-detached houses, sharing a roof. Our mutual relationship was well known in the entire neighbourhood and city. All our acquaintances knew us as “good neighbours”.

We had close relationships with several other families in Cape Town and beyond, including the family of Dr A Birnbaum, the director of education.

Mayer Zaslansky, my brother-in-law, with Pesel, his wife and their daughter Esther, spent some time in Cape Town when they arrived from Vilna. After they moved to Bloemfontein, they would come to visit us often until 1934, when this dear relative and friend of mine died. His family then came to Cape Town.

When I left the *Talmud Torah*, the Barzinskys also retired from the orphanage. They were offered the posts of principal and matron at the Johannesburg Board of Education boarding school. It was difficult parting from them. However, a month or two later, when they were already settled in their work, they called us to come to settle in Johannesburg and we followed them. We moved to their neighbourhood and lived close to them, as we had in Cape Town. In Johannesburg, we found friends from years before: the family of U Silpert, who was a teacher there and the family of S Feinstein, my friend from Slobodka, Rybko from Vilna and his family – he became well known as an important writer and prolific journalist – and other friends among the

teachers who had moved from Cape Town, the Marlon family, the brother of my wife, and Dudi Lipschitz, whose son studied with me in Slobodka. We also made new friends.

In Johannesburg I found interesting teaching work at the *Histadrut Ivrit* and also pupils who learnt Hebrew with me privately according to my method. I did well and they gave me great satisfaction.

Azariah also arrived there, as did Baruch after completing his studies in London as a surgeon. Baruch settled in Johannesburg, finding work in his profession and as a university lecturer, but Devorah and I had to return to Cape Town after spending three years in Johannesburg – Devorah's illness grew worse and the doctors said the Cape Town climate would be more suitable for her.

Even before we left Johannesburg, the Barzinskys went to settle in Australia. This was a very painful parting for us and they, our dear friends, were also deeply saddened by it.

In 1949, when I went to the doctor with what I thought was a minor complaint, he discovered I had a serious illness. He got in touch with my son, his friend from London, and instructed me to go to Johannesburg. I was delivered into the care of a well-known specialist and told I had to have an operation. It was dangerous, but very successful. It became clear that my visit to the doctor in Cape Town was a kind of miracle. Had I delayed going to him for a month or two, the operation would not have worked and would have been fatal.

After this event, Devorah's illness worsened. Her symptoms became more concerning and disturbing. Baruch came and she was put in hospital. She remained there for four months and passed away on 5 Heshvan 5711 (16 October, 1950) and our family went into deep mourning. May her memory be blessed.

I was no longer able to do tiring teaching work at school.

* * *

Those years were stormy, with tremendous unrest, not only in our individual lives, but also in the history of our people and country – truly historical days for the nation and the state.

Our victory on the issue of our country at the United Nations in November 1947 came to us as the realisation of an astounding dream. On the night of the sensational news of the resolution in our favour, feelings of joy and happiness predominated – like the waves of a stormy sea among the Jews of Johannesburg and South Africa as a whole.

Then the battles started – a defensive war and assaults on determined enemies attacking us, rising up against us to remove us entirely from the country the UN had returned to us. And then we saw miracles and wonders in the form of victories on the battlefield – many fell into the hands of a few. “Maccabees” and “Bar-Kochbas” appeared in our campaigns, people who soon flew in to assist from all over, from different countries. The young people were borne as if on the wings of angels from all corners of the world to fight a holy war, the war of the people of Israel for the Land of Israel. They came with a heroic spirit, courageous in their aspirations to frustrate the strong and powerful enemy swarming like locusts on the land of our forefathers. They had a strong desire to make it the country of our heritage as in ancient days. This heroism, this huge desire and self-sacrifice, became the body to revive the soul of the people, the most elevated wonders, impossible to conceive beforehand.

The revival of our youth, its sudden awakening, its daring vitality – such a miracle did not occur even with the exodus from Egypt, which is considered a glittering period. This latest historic event did not have a single Nachshon (in Jewish tradition, the man who did not wait on the shore for the Red Sea to part, but with complete faith waded in up to his neck and then the waters divided), who sprang into action on the instructions of Moshe, acting by Divine command, but thousands. On their own initiative, with a strong internal desire, a sense of responsibility towards this august, dangerous, decisive historic moment . . .

And there is nothing similar in our past, in our first exodus to freedom, with the rest of the miracles.

Which of the conquests was more important: was it the hearts of our stellar youth, our Bar-Kochba youth, or of the country that was abandoned by the Arab refugees, whose confusion when they abandoned the country was more terrifying than death or destruction?

The youthful pioneers of our day were courageous enough to come happily and gladly to the aid of the people during the country’s War of Liberation. They went there prepared to share the suffering of the nation being born to a new life, a difficult one, believing with courageous and powerful certainty in removing all obstacles in the way of directly building of our wonderful nation in its free country, which gave light to the nations and other peoples.

It is good, therefore, that we have young men and women in this country as well, in South Africa, who savoured the flavour of our past through learning about our heroes and about examples of oppression and persecution, of people who gave their lives for the sanctification of their nation and land.

It was worthwhile for us, the educators, to instruct and encourage the young generation to cling to our language and our Torah written in that language,

to the ideas of our prophets and visionaries, our great leaders in many generations over two thousand years and the vision of a glittering future in which we would be raised from our national humiliation.

Was it decreed in advance that the people of Israel would make great sacrifices that shook the recesses of their soul in terror, so that there would be new pioneering as a result, as a consequence of the cruel killing, destruction, torture, humiliation and abuse? Must the spontaneous awakening of our youth be regarded as a kind of compensation for the loss of the best, the most beautiful, noble, pure, holy and chosen of our people?

Yet the fact remains that young men and women from fifty or more countries – including a fair number from this country – were quick to go to the assistance of Israel when it was endangered by the enemy siege and in economic distress. But in the generation in which national aspirations, hidden for hundreds upon hundreds of years, are being realised, in a period of moulding deeds that could not be imagined in advance, there is no escaping that they will lead to disappointments.

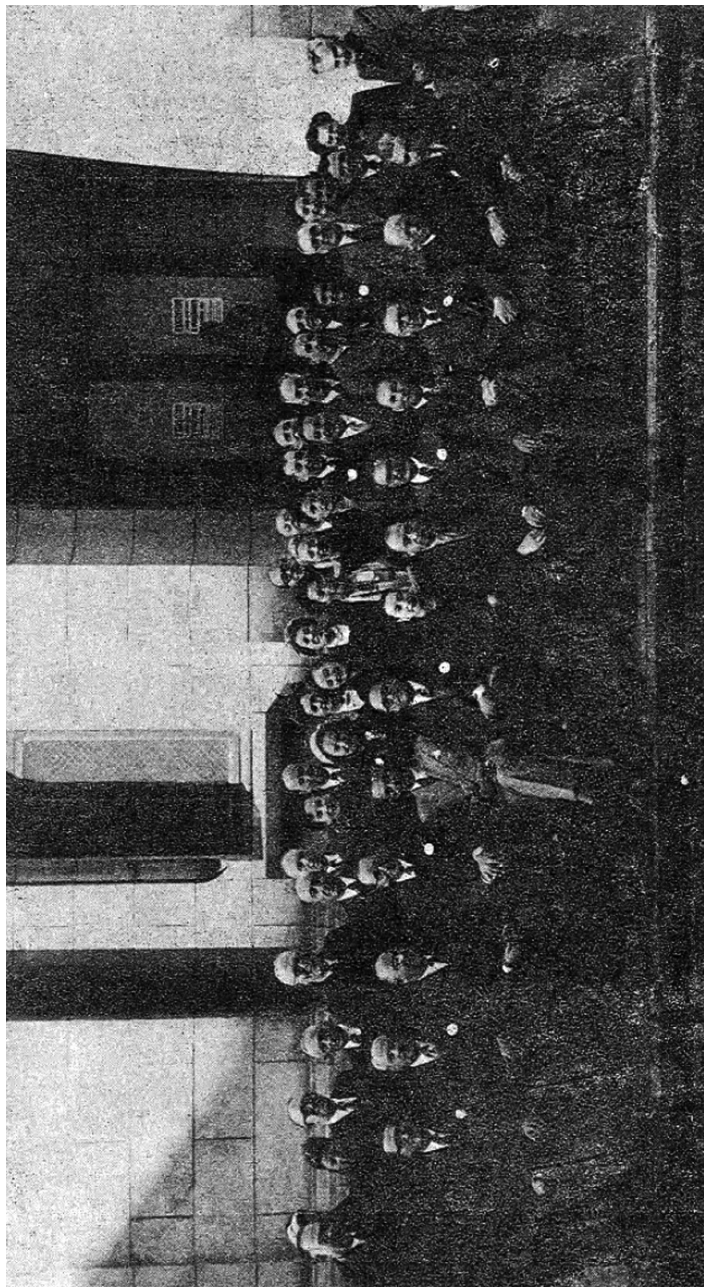
There are historic stages: after miracles, there are trials, which increase with the need to withstand experiences, in order to move forward and make progress.

The attitude in the transitional years to repeated and painful obstacles will lead to exaggerated demands on the new state. However, eventually the desired and necessary development will definitely be achieved. The nature of Israel will spread to all the countries in the Diaspora and, in any event, will govern the state itself and even the countries of the dispersion.

Our Hebrew language will be one of the means of training and for our youth in the Diaspora to communicate with the life of Israel itself and beyond.

It should definitely be assumed that in the area of education, the desire for national completeness will grow and be realised by the establishment of modern, normal schools providing Hebrew and secular schooling with the desired and required balance for a generation to grow up knowing general subjects and Torah at the same time. Its prototype was created in Cape Town and now it could spread throughout the whole country, as its foundations served to support a sound edifice, a school with a genuinely comprehensive course in the primary school which is already progressing to the “higher” levels in the “metropolis” of Cape Town. Recognition of the need for a school of this type is growing and many communal officials in the field of education in Johannesburg and other centres are demanding a similar outcome, the only one that is both necessary and possible. It succeeded from the beginning and will end up spreading throughout the country and flourishing.

Delegates and guests at the Histadrut Ivrit conference in Johannesburg, June 27 – 28, 1953



From left to right, seated: Y Batnitzki, S Reuveni, E Eilon, Israeli consul, Laks, Dr U Carlebach, S Borochowitz, Mrs R Rappoport, M Rutstein (chairman), E Mizrachi, E Hechter, Y Bitnun, Z Rybko, Z Avin. **Standing:** Mr R Schalit, Mrs Goldberg, Mr Levitan, Mr Katzen, Mr A Levin, Klaff, Rever, Mrs Rootstain, Mr Domes, Mrs Coblenitz, Mrs Zlotnik, Mrs Lurie, Mrs Mindel, Mrs Green, Mr D Feltson, Mrs S Bila, M Lazar, Mrs Leibowitz, Cantor D Propis, Mr Myers, Rabbi Gordon, Y Ahron, M Ben-Moshe, Mr Silbermann, Miss U Yudelmann, Y Ahron, Mrs G Eisenberg, Mrs Lazarus, Mr E Bakst, Mrs Burt, Mrs Yudelmann.

CHAPTER 30

IN THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Since 1914 I have been among those looking forward to seeing the country of our forefathers, a period of forty years minus one. In that year, the teachers studying in the Grodno *beit midrash* considered going in convoy to tour the country and I was one of them. Everything was ready and arranged, but when the date set to implement this noble idea arrived, I was prevented for family reasons from joining this company.

Other opportunities were also denied me. Two groups of teachers, tourists from South Africa went for a visit, but I was unable to join them because they went in the rainy season in Israel and I was compelled by a doctor to confine myself only to spring. This season was, therefore, set for me in 1953 to realise my ambition and vision.

Technical problems delayed the plane and we arrived at Lydda after midnight on the Sabbath.

Tremendous impressions overcome the entire being and spiritual essence of a person going up to Israel, from the moment he lands at the airport, with a beating heart when he takes his first steps on Israeli land, reborn into an independent state. It is difficult to clothe this feeling in words or describe it in writing. It is revealed and felt only by people who directly share their experiences.

There was a very pleasant and enjoyable reception after leaving the customs authorities, when the meetings with friends and acquaintances began. The same applied to the guidance of Avraham, a pleasant young man from Jerusalem, the official from the South African Zionist Federation in Tel Aviv who came to fetch us.

In fluent, polished and popular Hebrew, he explained many things and in the thick darkness covering the area, my eyes and heart were opened wide to absorb the many impressions, facts and events that might have been known, but were renewed in their phenomenal actual reality.

In the hotel in which a room had already been prepared for me by my friend Sam Levine, the head of the Federation, I got to bed at around four in the morning. However, I decided to hurry up and see Tel Aviv as it woke from its sleep on the holy Sabbath day.

The majesty of our weekly holy day was revealed to me as I awoke when the sun came up that morning and saw the vision of Tel Aviv in its special majesty.

There was a noble silence in the streets. Here and there, a Jew could be seen adorned in his Sabbath dress. Walking along, he carried his *tallis* in a square bag under his arm – a clear sign that in the Jewish city, there was an *eruv*, a designated area in which certain items may be carried from place to place on the Sabbath. An old lady was moving towards him, covered by a huge Turkish shawl, unlike anything I had seen for years. Both he and she were walking slowly, with the equanimity of spiritual relaxation, moving in opposite directions towards their synagogues. The absolute silence filling the space of Tel Aviv excited me and broadened my experience. There was no movement of cars or wagons – total rest reigned in the street. The large shops, full of different goods, were closed and sealed because of the Sabbath.

The street corners proudly bore white and blue signs with clear, pretty letters showing the street names: Geulah, Yarden, Yona Hanavi, Har Sinai, Yehuda Halevi, Frischman, Hakovshim . . . a sublime idea. These clear signs commemorated major events and the historic fame of great people, who did great things, wise men. Let every one of our people know and remember them, the innumerable people, the essence of each one, his value and stature. Let our youth everywhere see our national wealth, collected in our treasures, our spiritual fortune. It is not only we, the Jews, who are proud of it, but learned people from the nations of the world acknowledge the value of our great people, whose lustre has not been dimmed over the course of centuries.

Events whose memory will never leave our hearts, phenomena that endure from generation to generation – these were the powers that lay concealed within us until our present generation awoke, rose up and elevated its people and land to great heights, miracles and wonders, rich in heroism and mighty wonders. All this made us feel both respect and appreciation for the way it was all achieved so wonderfully five years earlier, with the birth of our revived homeland, when the people girded themselves to create, in a sense, something out of nothing – after its physical strength was exhausted and, to an even greater extent, its spiritual strength. A nation lost in cruelty, a nation whose only sin was its existence did, in fact, arise and avenge itself on tyrannical enemies. The desire to revive its original character is without parallel in the thousands of years of our history. Did this wonderful fact not deserve the highest admiration, practical assistance and real support from those who appreciated this great act of creation, to lead it to perfect and final implementation?

Going further on my way, my sense of hearing became very keen, so that

it, too, could absorb the modern historical character being developed and improved in the State of Israel. Hebrew speech reached my ears, increasing with the number of passers-by in the street making their way to the synagogues. But this was not the Hebrew heard in the plane or in the customs house at Lydda: that was accompanied by a Hebrew translation. Here in Tel Aviv, our living language sparkled, flowing from the mouths of fathers and sons freely and naturally, fluent Hebrew spoken for the enjoyment of those using it, gushing like an inexhaustible fountain.

A building came into view, with a large dome towering above it, green by the light of day, with a giant Chanukah candelabrum in the right-hand corner, facing the main road. I stood in front of the great synagogue and went inside.

There I saw much of what had been commonly accepted and customary in the famous synagogues of Lithuanian and Russian communities. But some details surprised me with their innovation, such as the priestly blessing on the Sabbath and when the cantor repeated the morning prayer, etc.

The dominant language among the congregation in the synagogue, both for religious matters and everyday affairs, was Hebrew, with its sweet sound.

When I went out into the main street again, it was full of people walking around slowly, among them different types of Jews. Some wore a leather *shтреimel*, a kind of fur hat, and wide girdles on their strange clothing. Some of them had curly side locks, like none I had ever seen before. Fine young men and boys, with pale faces, whose side locks were looped and plaited, bearing themselves with an original grace.

There was no movement of carriages, particularly close to the area of the synagogue. Two small signs attached to signposts on both sides of the road where it intersected with other streets declared: "No entry." A policeman kept watch from a distance so that this prohibition would not be breached.

Most of the people walking around were carrying their *tallises*, leading their children by the hand, talking to them with open affection between fathers and sons. The number of women grew: mothers pushing the prams in which their babies and infants were lying or had been placed. The stream on the pavements broadened and grew and the road contained all of it. The movement was directed towards the beach that lay at the end of the road. And Hebrew was the predominant language in the large, flowing group of people.

I went up to the policeman standing guard, almost hidden, and asked him where Yosef Savirski, my friend from the teachers' college in Grodno, lived. In correct Hebrew, he showed me the way, pointing out clear landmarks so that

I would not get lost. I found the address I sought easily. Unfortunately, I found the apartment locked. At that moment, a neighbour came out of the adjoining apartment with her daughters and I was told, in a good Hebrew, that the owner and his wife had gone to a religious celebration after the synagogue service.

I soon realised I was standing next to *Ohel Shem*, a place where *Oneg Shabbat* parties were held (Sabbath celebrations and study). The late Hebrew poet HN Bialik was often the main speaker there. I went in. A congregation of men and women sat in the hall with books of the Prophets and Writings in their hands, listening to a chapter from the *Book of Job*, read with a tasteful scientific-popular explanation by the writer Ben-Or, another friend from that teachers' college. I listened gladly until the end of the lesson. Our meeting was a very pleasant surprise for both of us. (We had become friends in Vilna through our educational activities and our relationship was renewed during my visit to Israel.)

The skies turned overcast. It was almost afternoon and a fairly long way to the hotel. I said I was in a hurry. Suddenly, large drops of rain began to fall and I proceeded more quickly. On the way, I met a grey-haired man walking slowly, paying no attention to the rain, gently humming a pleasant melody: "Oy, oy, holy Sabbath, oy, oy!" He did so twice in Hebrew and the third time in a Yiddish translation, as if he were reading the scriptural portion of the week twice, once in Hebrew and once in translation. The high spirits of this man, relishing the Sabbath, paying no heed to the rain soaking him, amazed me. He went on his way slowly, to avoid desecrating his celebration by taking large steps. I saw in him a person totally dedicated in heart and spirit to the holiness of his Sabbath, to the Sabbath within his people. He was totally assured of it, never even considering any possible external disturbance. He was wrapped up in his holy and lofty world.

I got to Sheinkin Street and saw a large crowd around two cars that had been in a collision. A policeman was laying down the law, but the person accused of causing the accident was contradicting him and arguing. In the meantime, another policeman arrived and the two of them managed to end the argument, with the one concluding with a clear and incontrovertible statement: "All right! Everything is all right." Self-evident, in pure Hebrew.

The two cars had to take care to avoid transgressing the Sabbath driving prohibition, but the drivers did not manage to avoid the collision – their private desecration was revealed openly. The crowd dispersed, discussing the "successful" accident emotionally, in the fluent, common language – Hebrew.

On the same street, Geulah Street, in the direction of my hotel, I overheard a conversation between two young girls, who were visible from the balconies

of the third floor of their buildings on opposite sides of the street. Their words rang out clearly.

Question: "What's up? Why don't you come over?"

Answer: "When my mother is sick in bed, I don't want to go.

You should know that."

A typical and characteristic style. This brief dialogue showed that slang, the mass dialect, was taking root in our language. Slang should not be regarded as anything other than conclusive proof that our language is alive, developing in its individual way. It was like a large river with tributaries branching out from it in various streams – an almost routine phenomenon in every vibrant spoken European language.

I came across a group of girls charging out of a building, making a huge racket. Their laughter burst out to the skies and their enthusiastic chatter shook the walls of the nearby buildings. This seemed to be a response to their being set free, released after study or play, when tight discipline held them and reined them as they listened carefully. Their voices were strident, but their spirit resonated in pure and natural Hebrew, even while they were screaming.

The Sabbath meal was good. The first course of chicken contributed an excellent taste to all the other foods, even the vegetables. The hotel waiter, who recognised me as a tourist from South Africa, served me an outstanding meal, because he knew I had foreign currency in my pocket.

In the meantime, the skies cleared and I set out again in the direction of Feuerberg Street, where my friend Yosef lived. After parting in Vilna twenty-five years earlier, when our families were close friends, our sudden meeting was exciting. After a most interesting discussion, my friend suggested I go with him and his wife to the *Oneg Shabbat* at the nearby *Ohel Shem*. There was to be a lecture on an interesting subject by a famous writer. I gladly agreed.

My friend was a member of the *Oneg Shabbat* committee and he introduced me to some of the active participants. I was seated at the main table and surveyed the hall. There were pictures on its walls of modern leaders, bringing back beautiful memories. There was one simple, empty chair, moved from place to place so that nobody would sit on it, because of the black inscription on it: "The chair of the late HN Bialik." After the public singing of the Sabbath songs, which is customary at a party of this kind, the important lecture was given, which I enjoyed greatly, as did everyone there, as far as I could see, men and women, because of its outstanding content and form in rich, vibrant Hebrew.

I was really looking forward to a spiritual and artistic experience, something I had anticipated during the many years I was in South Africa, far from all the Hebrew centres with their varied and uplifting content. That evening I wanted to go to one of the theatres, *Habimah*, which I had liked from the time it was founded in Moscow and when I saw it at its peak in Vilna, the modern *Ohel* (Tent), the *Kameri* (Chamber), which had earned a good name, or, at least, the *Matateh* (Broom) or *Li-La-Lo* – the last two essentially providing comedy and humour. However, I was told that if I did not already have a ticket for one of these five, particularly for a Saturday night, there was no chance of my getting in – and the same applied to the good cinemas as well.

A large crowd, therefore, filled the theatres and entertainment houses, but there was also a crowd outside: hundreds of men and women walking around, going to the pavement coffee houses where many chairs and tables were laid out conveniently for the large number of visitors. There, too, Hebrew was the spoken language, used in the public environment.

Bus transport resumed after the separation between the Sabbath and the weekday, with every bus as full of people as a hen-house. Even on the giant new buses that had recently arrived from abroad, with room for many passengers, some people were actually hanging in the air because of the congestion and pressure. I pushed myself onto one of the buses, scared I would be hurt, but even in those chaotic conditions, I noticed that the driver spoke Hebrew from where he sat, as did the conductor in his seat, and the entire large mass of people between the far ends of the carriage, where our language predominated as well.

Then I was back in my hotel room. I summarised seven of the many experiences of my first Shabbat in Tel Aviv, one by one, and noted my clear and real impressions of the miracle of the revival of our national language, an indisputable, real fact – living Hebrew was a reality.

It reigned strongly in the synagogue, it governed in the street, it was planted in the depths of the family and home, particularly among the boys and girls, both big and small, from the babble of small babies, who laid its solid foundation. Our language was spoken in hotels, elevated and ringing in theatres and prevalent among passengers. Our language penetrated the public, surrounding it and beyond it, extending to the individual in society – it was heard and prevailed everywhere.

Many outstanding aspects indicate our general renaissance, the revival of the people and the country, but the most striking is the expression of our mouths, the language in the mouths of babes and sucklings and through them, also in the speech of fathers and mothers.

Our language, wonderful in its triumph,
The Jewish people, its youth renewed.

JERUSALEM

After spending a few days in Tel Aviv, I wanted to go up to Jerusalem, the three thousand-year-old historical royal city, the capital of our government and the location of our legislature in the modern State of Israel. But the late spring prevented me from doing so. In Nissan (April), the weather was cold, with strong winds and in Jerusalem there was some snow. I had been warned about their adverse effects. The Knesset (Israel's parliament) soon closed for the Passover recess.

My friend Yosef, in whose house I was staying in Tel Aviv, used to go up to Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage festivals (*Pesach*, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot*) and invited me to join him when he went on the second day of the festival week. I was very pleased by this suggestion. But the weather was not at all clear, with fog in the sky indicating impending snow. Still, I was determined not to miss this opportunity. My friend had been in the country for twenty-five years and had done much for its development, as one of the orange-growing pioneers, an influential person, very familiar with all the places, as well as the ups and downs of the recent past. He would be an excellent guide for me on our journey. His son drove us in his car, passing different places, settlements and kibbutzim. We came to Mount Herzl in Jerusalem. In the meantime, the rain poured down even more forcefully. The path leading to Herzl's tomb was covered in thick mud and mire. We were the only visitors at that time.

The grave, with its magnificent heavy stone covering, surrounded by flowers, makes a great impression. Many thoughts come to mind next to the tomb of the outstanding and wonderful man who rose to lead his nation.

Even Moses, our first saviour, who turned his people into the chosen of G-d, being their Redeemer and Master, did not earn the right to be buried there as he drew near to the land for which he had longed for forty years. This contrasts with the short modern period, when our state was established for the third time. The Bible says of Moses: "And no man knows his grave to this day." But Joseph, the ruler in a foreign country, had his bones brought to rest in the land that was promised to his fathers.

And Herzl came out of the recesses of the Diaspora, from the depths of assimilation to Jewish nationalism – was that perhaps the reason he was privileged to be brought up to its land? Who, therefore, can fathom the riddles of our history and the pathways of our people?

We saw other graves there and the skies wept over them, shedding tears on the dead buried on that hill.

We then went to Mount Zion. I did not go up because of the strong wind and the rain. Only the father and son went up, while I remained in the car waiting for them – I was afraid I would catch cold and get sick, as a temporary tourist in Israel.

But many people went up the stairs, in spite of the bad weather, including women with babies in their arms.

After lunch, when we ate the food the wife of my friend had brought with her, I left the group, because I decided to remain in Jerusalem. I booked into a hotel recommended to me by the tourist office in Agrippas Street and concentrated on the glorious traditional Jerusalem, the new cultured city.

The next day, I went to visit Mea Shearim. I saw the residents of this suburb, *Neturei Karta* (Guardians of the Walls), who struck me as guardians and avengers of the Holy City, in a negative sense. They chose to speak Yiddish, intentionally, to fulfil a commandment – “to provoke deliberately”. They pray and study Torah a lot and also recite psalms, but the content of the posters pasted on the doors of their synagogues is revolting, vipers’ poison and incantations against the State of Israel, its government, the “Zionists”, and loathsome invective and scorn. I wanted to copy the contents of one or two of these posters as a souvenir, but my hand shook and wrote nothing of their wording that was so “contemptible” it could not even be touched.

On the Friday of the intermediate days of Passover, I made appointments for interviews with Jerusalem residents, whose acquaintance I wished to make. That morning, a trip was arranged for tourists led by a guide and I joined them. The programme included the environment, Mount Zion, the borders, the view over our territory outside them, *Binyanei Ha’uma* and the various charitable funds. The walls on Mount Zion, with their many breaches and cracks, demonstrate the results of the acts of our desperate volunteer youth in their difficult struggle, in their retreats and the wonderful triumphs they our youth achieved, the boys and girls, with self-sacrifice, daring, dedication, with few reinforcements. But the armed Arab sentries looking into the city from the borders set by the military at the time of the ceasefire, aroused feelings of satisfaction and sorrow at the same time.

In your gates, Jerusalem, the distant and near past kiss and the present testifies to the result in our favour – the restoration of our land, the revival of our state.

And then we were at David’s tomb. Many people were studying there, reading

psalms, with charity boxes next to them, “David-Jebus” (Jebus was an ancient name for Jerusalem, the city of the Jebusites), and I was “right inside” Jerusalem.

We were taken to the Holocaust basement, where many items and objects showed and demonstrated, told and revealed the chapter of torture and affliction, cruelty and abuse, suppression and humiliation, intolerable and insufferable for any human being. Torah parchments made into clothing, partially burnt and singed *tallitot*, bones and human skin that served as material for tools and commodities, as well as clear examples of how our enemies felt, what they made and their attitude to the Jews. A Yeshiva student, who had been rescued from Hitler’s ovens, appeared before us. He was trying to recall events, facts and experiences. It was heartbreaking, making one’s knees tremble, fail and weaken.

I was moved by unfathomable grief and depression. I was not alone – the people with me were as well.

We were taken to the JNF building, to the Herzl room. The gloomy distress I felt in the basement remained with me in that room as well. I sat on one of the chairs, listening, but absorbing very little of what the guide in that section said. She spoke English. I said to myself it would be preferable for me to come again when I could look at the articles from the estate of Herzl, who declared the aspiration for redemption, and I would be able to listen.

All the interviews arranged in advance for that day were postponed or cancelled. I walked around the city a little, bought a copy of *Ma’ariv* (a Hebrew afternoon newspaper), but had difficulty reading it. At my hotel, I lay down on my bed – until the evening. I do not remember whether I ate lunch or the Friday night dinner. I also gave up on the radio news, which I so much wanted to hear in Hebrew.

When I woke up in the morning, I saw it was a clear day and went to the *Yeshurun* synagogue. My attention was drawn to the building on which two national flags flew proudly and magnificently. Marvellous! Flags adorning a synagogue. I had never seen anything so wonderful.

On my way, someone came up to me and asked: “What do you think of the news?” I wondered about his question and he explained that he was referring to the good news from Russia – the accusation and sentence against Jewish doctors who had been arrested in Moscow had been withdrawn. While he was speaking, somebody else came up to me with the same question, but worded slightly differently. I immediately realised that a genuine festive spirit encompassed the news of Jerusalem on that Sabbath of the intermediate days of Passover, following the false libel against Jews in Russia.

In the *Yeshurun* synagogue – in contrast to others – the congregation prayed with reverence. Talking during the prayers or the Torah reading was totally prohibited. The people there avoided everyday conversations and with a gesture stopped anybody who tried to do so. In *Yeshurun*, the spiritual benefit of the exalted holiness, the Jerusalem holiness, is palpable.

After the service, I was introduced to Rabbi Simcha Assaf, a judge of the Supreme Court, famous rabbi and author of important books on education. He very courteously invited me to visit him at his home at four o'clock. He told me it was not far from the synagogue to where he lived at 1 Shlomo Molko Street in Rehavia.

The number of my acquaintances increased at lunchtime and we had many different and interesting conversations – until I left for my visit to the home of Rabbi Assaf. Our conversation revolved around current problems in Israel and the past of Jewish Russia. I was enchanted by the company of this dear and great man.

The same day, I also visited the home of EA Simon, a professor at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He showed me great warmth, which he also expressed for my book, *Bema'agalot Hachinuch (Education – My Life)*, and we have kept up our friendship ever since through correspondence.

I really wanted to visit the home of the poet Prof S Halkin (also in the same area). When he was in Cape Town in 1951 he encouraged me to write my book on Hebrew education as a memoir. As a result, I wanted to tell him that I had listened to him and the manuscript of my book was with me – and to express my thanks to him for his encouragement and support for this task, which has been a source of great blessing for me. To my regret, because of his illness, I had to postpone the interview until I arrived in Jerusalem before leaving Israel. When we met, I saw how very glad he was that I had written this work on education.

At the time of writing, I was shocked to hear that Rabbi Assaf had gone the way of all flesh. Both his appearance and speech gave me the impression that he was healthy and involved in his fruitful activities – and now he had been taken from us. It was a sad loss!

In Jerusalem, I made very important friends, well-known people, and I was impressed by what I experienced there and my heart beat because of its noble excellence – “right inside Jerusalem”.

When I went for the second time to the opening of the Knesset after the Passover recess, I found my way paved for me. Rabbi Dr M Nurok, a member

of the Knesset and a relative of mine, who I met face to face when I came to Israel and when I visited him in Tel Aviv, obtained a ticket for me. When the first session opened, I was present in the Knesset throughout the three days of that week. I was able to see our great figures standing at the controls of the government: the president of the State of Israel, the chairman of the Knesset, the prime minister and other members of the government. I had the pleasure of listening to many of them speak, as well as the speeches of well-known people, whose names have become familiar in the Diaspora as well.

The first short speech I heard in the Knesset was in polished and beautiful Hebrew, by the Communist representative, A Wilenski. During the debates, I also heard Mrs Ada Maimon, who stood at the podium as a scholar, arguing for an improvement in the educational conditions in the settlements and also making jokes with modest attractiveness.

The form, content and friendliness of the prime minister's speech on unemployment, which he delivered sitting at the cabinet ministers' table, made a deep impression on me.

I also heard the speech by Moshe Sneh. It was not particularly sensational and I felt I had heard it some time before.

The speech of the Arab delegate, Kassem, delivered as if provocatively, in Arabic (translated later into Hebrew), was in what seemed to be an aggressive tone towards the government. I also heard speeches by right-wing delegates and representatives of the other streams, including many with practical content, particularly those of government ministers.

When the delegates entered and left and in what they all wore – including the chairman – there was great simplicity, not like in the Parliament in which traditional English manners prevail.

When I left the city, I said: "Happy is the eye that has seen all these things."

HAIFA

After my first visit to Jerusalem, I travelled by train to Haifa. Its outstanding beauty enchanted me, similar in many typical ways to the city of Cape Town, where I had lived for over twenty years.

During my two visits to Haifa, I stayed on Mount Carmel and in Bat Galim on the beachfront and I clearly remember it, having seen it both by day and night. I saw its beautiful scenery from every angle. It was a joy to behold.

In this city as well – to an even greater extent – I found friends who were teachers, people who had worked with me when I was a principal in Vilna. I also found relatives who were either forgotten or I had never met.

My second visit was for the parade on Independence Day.

This was an unparalleled, inspiring and uplifting experience of national rebirth.

The parade was on a Monday, but I arrived in the city on the Friday morning. Even from a long way outside the city, next to the Victory Gate, where the military armed parade would start, a host of national flags was flying – endless flags, a sea of our national colours on them. They were blowing and fluttering in a quiet, caressing wind, to the sound of angels' wings hovering in the air of the festive environment, with the spring growth bringing tidings of the rising spirits of the celebrating and rejoicing nation. The large number of multi-coloured decorations in the streets of the city – with pictures of the president, the prime minister, the military leaders – all added a much splendour to the face of the city full of the noise of the many people who had come there.

The festival was not limited in scope to the day set for the celebration. Its nature and characteristics took on concrete forms in its brilliance three days before the Independence Day was celebrated.

“Independence Day” – the name suggested for it from the outset – in which commemoration ceremonies were held in the military ceremonies for the heroes who fell in the campaigns of the war, on the battlefields – candles, memorial lights and torchlight parades were arranged on the mountain-tops throughout the country, from Eilat to the end of the Galil.

The joyous day arrived. From early in the morning, eager people came to take up positions, where they had a reserved view over the rocks, bushes, tree branches, roofs of houses and tourists, myself among them, on comfortable balconies with benches and chairs laid out for them.

Cars and other vehicles made a noise, blowing their hooters and whistles, moving past loaded with passengers, half of them standing bent over and cramped and some seated – all going to Jaffa Street, where the march would pass, after leaving the Victory Gate where our leaders and guests parked, the representatives of various countries and states – at the starting point of the vanguard.

Special trains for this journey transported many men and women hurrying to Haifa, to see the march, people who would fill the streets. One ship carrying hundreds of guests from overseas, tourists, was delayed because of a storm at

sea and would reach the coast only in the afternoon.

“*Chag sameach!*” was the festive greeting everybody gave everybody else with a joyful expression, national pride, in high joy . . . “*Chag sameach!*”

It was after nine when the parade began. The march was led by a retinue of senior army commanders. The tens of thousands of spectators followed the soldiers marching behind their officers, passing before the crowd with confident and courageous movements. The spectators burst into lengthy acclamation, showing their admiration for the strong and popular army. But the crowd showed restraint and discipline.

So many different marchers took powerful strides, infantry, paratroopers, communications units, navy, mountain units, with different types of weapons borne by oxen and all types of vehicles suited to their purpose; carriages loaded with medical supplies and dressings, defensive weapons, mortars, explosives; and the noise of the planes flying above in battle order; combat units in order sailed on the sea. *Chen* soldiers (*Cheil Nashim* – Women’s Corps) participated with great charm in many companies.

The rear guard of the great camp stretched over an area of several miles for a few hours, appearing in the form of heavy tanks (some of them had passed previously), and there were differences of opinion among the spectators about what type they were. Some said: “These are Sherman tanks,” and others disagreed – “No, Churchills.” The decisive voices near where I was sitting were those of children of 9-10 who were such experts in all kinds of weaponry, until the adults, some of whom had served in the army, concurred.

One woman was among the spectators. She had come with her family from Tel Aviv to stay at the home of my friend, where I was being accommodated. It soon became apparent that we had many mutual acquaintances. She herself came from Poland, where she had completed her studies at the Hebrew Gymnasium and one of her teachers was a friend of mine. And now, in the “campaign”, she was only a short distance from where I was. She cupped her hand towards my ear and called out to me in a penetrating voice: “Everything is so wonderful and beautiful – but if only we didn’t need all this!”

In the late afternoon, a party was arranged by the mayor, Abba Houshi, at the magnificent *Gan Ha'em* (Mother’s Garden) on Mount Carmel and the entire community was invited. Refreshments were available for everyone there and the “world” enjoyed the sweets and non-alcoholic beverages. A large number of men and women arrived, including many of my acquaintances, people from my country and my town. The joy was simple, close and genuine – everything was celebrated happily.

The dancing and celebrations in the streets by groups of youth and many members of the public lasted until midnight – and perhaps even until dawn the next day.

The national spirit rested on young and old, rich and poor – on the State of Israel that celebrated its victory, the victory of liberation from the yoke of occupation, from the people who hated us – of the total triumph to the revival of independence.

* * *

On leaving the Galilee, I passed through Acre, close to Haifa.

I had a strange feeling when I came to Nazareth, where there were few Jews, as any passer-by can see.

I spent two days in Tiberias on the enchanting blue Sea of Galilee. There is a lovely view on its shore, where wonderful plants grow – banana plantations, laden with bunches.

The mountains, including Mount Hermon, had a covering of snow that could be seen from afar, making them look very beautiful. I viewed the surroundings, for a long way, from Mount Canaan.

Degania impressed me greatly among the agricultural centres. It was the mother of the collective settlements (kibbutzim), the cradle of those settlements. It had many very beautiful buildings and the workers' houses were very pleasant and agreeable.

The convenience of the children and their excellent education amazed guests and visitors from very cultured countries. The children were strong and happy, our continuation and future, growing up in this corner of terrestrial paradise, in which they were provided with advanced training, from a young age, for a life of work and responsibility, as well as games and sport.

The baths designed for cows, which enjoyed using them, were an interesting feature.

As a guest for meals at a party of residents of the settlement in the beautiful large dining hall, tastefully arranged, I ate and enjoyed the milk and fruit of the land flowing with milk and honey.

My hosts when I slept over were the courteous school principal, Aminadav and his wife Shoshana, educators worthy of the name, who made great progress in bringing the youth up as they grew naturally on the ground of our homeland.

The graves of leading rabbis from the time of the *Mishna*, the *Tanaim*, lie in the centre of Tiberias – I went to see them up close. I also looked at its famous asset – the hot springs of Tiberias.

Safed stands out in its natural antiquity. I also saw synagogues, Torah scrolls and their arks that had been there for many generations.

There I saw the results of the Arab disturbances before the War of Independence – the graves of the martyrs D Gruner and his colleagues, close to it. There are memorial signs in the streets of the city engraved on tablets affixed to the walls of buildings that had been renovated after their destruction. The signs begin: “Here fell . . .”, in memory of the heroes of the recent War of Independence.

I visited Mikveh Israel with a group of tourists. There we heard about growing and cultivating the many kinds of oranges, whose quality is unmatched anywhere in the world. We not only saw them, but were given some to taste.

In Rehovot, the director of the Weizmann Institute told us of the great value of the scientific development in its various departments.

There we saw the home of our first president, Chaim Weizmann, and his nearby grave, reminiscent of the prophet Samuel, who was buried in his house (1 *Samuel*, 25:1).

I was also in Rishon LeZion, where my friend Karon built a model school. There I saw where they produced wine and liquor and our lengthy discussion, with many reminiscences, ended at Hanadiv Boulevard.

I saw the life and work at the Yochanan Smuts (Jan Smuts) village in Usha – which were being developed well and also Givat Brenner, which has a wonderful hall named after this hero and writer – and also a rich library.

I attended various classes at famous schools and listened with great enjoyment to lessons on the Writings and Prophets, language and literature, and secular studies. I participated in teachers’ meetings and other important meetings.

I also enjoyed plays and performances in theatres. I liked getting close to *sabras* (native-born Israelis), Yemenites and immigrants and talking to them.

I saw a great deal, but even more than what I saw, I was impressed and got to know typical conditions, outlines, sketches – both positive and negative – and saw for the first time all the very important places and points that were more significant than my impressions.

In going up to Israel, I saw myself as a son going to meet his mother, whom he had only envisaged before that. I clung to her, as she endeared herself to me so much, and I left her with deep regret to return to the Diaspora.

I spent ten weeks in Israel, where I felt hale and hearty. It was as if my strength grew and was renewed, not only in the physical sense, but also in the mental and spiritual sense. I absorbed some of the spirit of the country and was perfumed with its scent. It served to exalt my spirit and increase my Jewish knowledge.

I also met a whole group of students from the Grodno Teachers' Training College, friends from my class (the first) and also some of them whom I met in Israel. Virtually all of them were grey-haired, with a rich and successful past full of pedagogic activity that contributed a great deal to the effectiveness of educational projects in the Diaspora and in Israel. For my part, I think – and I found proof of this – that Hebrew education is the most important factor in the revival of our language, the main layer in the building of our country.

On the Sabbath before I left Israel, my friends – with whom I was in contact even in Vilna – M Adir (Rudnitzki) and Dr Y Rivkai – organised a farewell get-together at the home of Adir, with the participation of most of the people from Grodno. (The only people who did not attend were those unable to come.) An intimate and friendly discussion “renewed and served as a reminder of our days” – the Grodno days – as of old and was very pleasant for all of us. Our parting was warm, with real affection.

I experienced some real longevity, thanks to Israel, where I celebrated the festival of *Shavuot* in the year 5713 (1953). My birthday falls on the second day of *Shavuot*, but according to the Israeli calendar, this day does not exist (in Israel most religious festivals are celebrated for only one day, while in the Diaspora they are celebrated for two). This meant, as a result, that my birthday in 5713 was deferred for twelve months and I gained a magnificent year, 5714 (1954) with its two months of Adar (these two months are known as Adar Alef and Adar Bet – adding the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet to the name of the month. A full month is added in a Jewish leap year).

