

**Yehuda Leib Levitin**  
(1879-1969)

## **Academic Society**

(From the manuscript)

Translated from Hebrew  
by **Sharon Levitan**



A.

Twenty years have passed from the days of Veresajev<sup>1</sup> till my arrival to Dorpat. Many important events occurred in Russia during those 20 years, and those had an impact on the way of life in Dorpat too.

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<sup>1</sup> The Russian writer V. Veresajev studied in Dorpat university between 1889 and 1894. In his memoirs he left a vivid description of local student life. [M.R.]

On the one hand, the Russification that Alexander III burdened his foreign subjects with, had its effects. In accordance with his orders, the official language at the university was changed from German to Russian. The number of German professors was reduced and replaced by Russian ones. The number of Russian students increased too. With the escalation of the Russian factor, Russian culture took a stronger hold and started spreading its roots even among the local citizens. The use of German language was reduced to the Estonian and Jewish lower middle classes who became rich, climbed up the social ladder and thought it proper to speak the German language (usually a broken one) as a sign of their assumed nobility.



The other factor was the first Russian revolution. Although it didn't have a great impact, its traces left a mark. The Barons' authority, which lay heavily on the shoulders of the locals, was significantly weakened. They did not dare abuse the peasants to the same extent they did before the revolution, and that had a negative outcome on their economic situation. As a consequence, also their spoiled children lost their superiority, and the mark they left on university life in particular and on the town in general, faded to a great extent. They remained a small old minority amidst a new majority. They still congregated in their traditional corporations and looked down on anyone who did not belong to their cast, but they did not dare insult the Russians – nor even the Jews - any longer.

## B.

The German playboys of the town, the "enfants terribles", were no longer unique and special. Their strong position faded away. But their corporations as a phenomena still remained. The game went on, but the rules of the game changed, or rather, many new significant ones were added to the old ones. The children of the bourgeoisie, of the merchants, the tradesmen, the craftsmen and even the wealthy peasants, took the place of the backsliding feudals' offsprings. They too started establishing their own separate unions. Each union adapted its own colors according to their taste and inclinations, rented an apartment and hung a flag with their chosen colors on its roof.

The new corporations did their best to resemble the old ones and imitated

them in behavior and mischief. They too had "fuxes" and "elders". They too drank from the same carafe and sang "genuine" union songs. They too noisily celebrated their anniversary in public, and they too practiced boxing and fencing, even though it was completely useless by then – duels were strictly forbidden by the government, and when two students from two opposing corporations started a fight, they would follow their fathers' footsteps, in other words - they would simply use their fists.

In general it should be said, that in spite of the new unions' efforts to resemble the old ones in every exact detail, the resemblance was merely external. In essence they differed even before they existed. The German corporates, the feudalists' sons, regarded themselves as the descendants of the middle ages' cavalry. They remembered them with great admiration, and their spirit and characteristics set an example and a model. The very corporation in its structure and rules was an imitation intended to commemorate the cavalry's order. For better or worse it was the historical progression and heritage that gave those corporations their foundation and meaning.

That was not the case with the new corporations of Estonians (as with the Latvian ones in Latvia and the Lithuanian ones in Lithuania.) Their existence had no meaning or historical basis. They were not founded in memory of old days' sake or on a specific historical basis, but for two other reasons: one – such is the manner of freed slaves- to imitate their former masters; and two – because the game was pleasant and amusing and attracted the young hearts. And the attraction was really great, and not only the Estonians were drawn to it, but also certain Russian groups, and most of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's descendants.

I don't have much information concerning the Russian corporations. But I have a lot to tell about those of our brothers, the children of Israel, and I think it worthy to dedicate a special chapter to it.

C.



There were two types of Jewish students in Dorpat in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century:

a. Local ones. b. Those who came here from Russia.

The first ones grew up on German culture and spoke German-Yiddish. The second were educated in the Russian spirit and language. The two groups did not mingle but existed side by side.

The Baltic kids created their own union and behaved in the corporate manner behind four walls of their own homes (Jews were not allowed to establish their own corporation). Their whole mental being mirrored the one of the German corporates: no interest in political or social issues, no reference to speech manners; even towards the future and fate of their own people they showed complete indifference. Their parents were established and well off and they were sure they too would easily settle here and make progress after they finish their studies. They would have loved to assimilate with the Germans had the latter, who felt sheer contempt towards them, did not reject them. It was not an inner sense of belonging that attached them to their own people but rather an external barrier which prevented them from assimilating. Deep in their hearts they themselves felt contempt towards the Jews, especially towards those whose exterior and behavior pointed out their national belonging.

It wasn't impossible to hear a Baltic Jew remark in the following manner: "Mache doch keine Jüdische Stück!" Shame in their Jewishness was typical to the Baltic Jews, and only when the gentiles offended them were they ready to fight for their honor.

The other type of students were the Jews who came from the "Pale of settlements" and other cities in Russia. They did not establish a separate organization, but mingled with the other Russian students, being close to them not only in language but also in ideology. The Russians accepted them willfully, and many Jews were accepted as member of their union, which existed under the name "The Russian Students' Association." In the seventies our intelligenzia still believed in solving the Jewish problem by affiliating with the Russians (in other words: assimilating). They hoped this was the means to erase former animosity and contempt and create an atmosphere of love and brotherhood between them, regardless of religious or national differences.

The crisis and disappointment came at the beginning of the eighties, when anti-Semitism in Russia increased. The Hebrew students had to leave the "Russians Students' Association". So in 1884 those among them who had initiative founded a Hebrew Students' association under the name "The Academic Association for Jewish History and culture", or, in short, "Academisher farrain". This academic association existed till the beginning of World War II, meaning till

1940/41, and, for a long time, was the only ray of light for the Dorpat Jewish Community.

D.



The Academic association was apolitical. Among its members were people with different political views. The one thing they had in common was a spark of nationalism, that did not die out in spite of the Russification which weighed heavily upon them. That tendency wakened a wish to learn to know their own past and cultural heritage.

Indeed it was not out of pure will they came to that, but were rather forced into it from the outside. But the interest became genuine, and those who were later educated in the Academic Association's spirit remained loyal and devoted sons of their people all their lives.

The association published daily newspapers and monthly magazines and in time its library grew in size and bulk. In it one could find Judaica books in Hebrew and Jewish (Yiddish), Russian and German. Some of them turned out to be rare and precious items later on.

Lectures or discussions on certain issues were held there every now and then, but the serious activities did not rule out entertainment and fun; they would sing, and on occasions get drunk. This cute song which was one of their favorites can testify to that:

נאך די רעפעראטן, איז לידער גוט צו זינגען  
און נאך די הייסע דעבאטן קולטן ביר צו דרינקען

(After the lecture it's good to sing some songs.

And after "hot" discussions, to drink cold beer).

They too celebrated their anniversaries. They respected the Jewish holidays,

maintained a “Seder” on Pesach eve, had fun on Purim etc. But all their celebrations were conducted in the usual accepted manner behind the closed doors of their homes, not publically, as was customary with other corporates.

#### E.

Clearly, throughout its long existence (more than 55 years!) the association could not remain unchangeable and was subject to influence. To begin with, it had a natural cause of change: those who graduated left and new students arrived in their place, so that every cycle of studies brought new faces to the union. But this change happened gradually and was not that evident, since the new ones spent quite some time with the veterans, who handed them down the tradition, and so the latter trod on a well-known path.

It was the world’s political events which clearly had a powerful impact on the Jewish association. They attracted the youth, and the union found it hard to keep its balance and not to favor a left or a right political stand. Hibat Zion (Love of Zion) and early socialism were abstract ideas more than a real movement, a kind of a heart inclination. Therefore they could reside side by side and satisfy themselves with an occasional argument. But when two new forces entered the game – Herzl’s political Zionism and the revolutionary unrest in Russia, they both demanded action, and their cry to act could not be unheeded, it demanded a reply: ‘Are you with us or are you with the devil’?

The tear deepened, and the association was divided into three sections: A. The level-headed ones, or the middle and moderate ones, who preferred to keep it on a pure academic platform, apolitical as before. They backed up their demand on the association’s regulations and on the philisters’ opinion (the title philister applied to any union member who has finished his studies and ceased to be a student. Most of them remained connected to the union, “the Farrein”, and showed an interest in its fate and activities.) B. The Zionists. They claimed that now that the nation is awakening to the call and the idea of returning to Zion requires all the existing efforts and focus, the union cannot step aside and satisfy itself with mere platonic lukewarm nationalism. C. The socialists, (who supposedly followed “The Bund”). They considered Zionism to be an empty hallucination and a petty occupation. One is not supposed to fight for a handful of people but for humanity as a whole. When Socialism will rule the world, salvation will come to all and all who suffer, including “Yehuda (who) will be saved and Israel (who) will dwell safely” (quotation from Jeremiah 23 v. 6) ...in the Diaspora.

The moderate ones, who were the majority, won this debate, but peace did not return, and disagreements among the members continued just as before. To

the inner dispute was added an outside mishap: during the years 1904-1905 the students organized many strikes and demonstrations, demanding political changes. In return the government shut down the universities for an unlimited period of time. The students scattered to all directions. Also the members of the association returned each to his hometown, and the union was shut down. Only 2 or 3 members, from the Gens family in Dorpat, were left in charge. They hired a small apartment, transferred the library and watched over the books.

This situation lasted over a year, till the storm in Russia came to a standstill and life resumed its routine. The university was reopened; the students went back to their studies.

Slowly the former members of the union rejoined. It resembled a patient who had gone through a crisis and is slowly regaining his strength back.

This was the association's state of affairs when I arrived at Dorpat in 1908.<sup>2</sup>

#### F.

From that point on the Union grew stronger, developed itself, the number of members grew every year, and before the war included fifty people. Among them you could find people with special talents and exalted qualities. They, of course, served as the head of the association and its leaders. At large, that generation of 1908-1914 gave the association a unique character and atmosphere, bound with nationalism and intelligence, and their essence and activities added importance and publicity to the association. Unfortunately I don't remember the names of all those excellent members from these days except for several, who left their mark on me. Those were the brothers Bichovsky, widely knowledgeable in the history of Israel and its literature; one of them was especially remarkable. His lectures were always interesting and informative. Another member was Eiges, an honest and delicate soul and a devoted activist. He dedicated himself completely to the needs of the community in Dorpat, and was very useful to the public in general and to the school in particular. When the war broke out he was drafted to the army as a doctor, where he caught typhus and died at an early age. The Dorpat community established a library in memory of this excellent man and called it after his name.

An interesting activity which largely served the Dorpat community was that of a member named Pick. Pick was blessed with acting skills and loved the stage. Each time a ball was held in Dorpat for the benefit of one institute or another,

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<sup>2</sup> During that autumn I was invited there as a guest to hear a lecture on a historic theme (Josephus Flavius). The lecturer was Joshua Goldberg from Libau; the chairman was Wolfson from Lodz.

Pick and his assistant Getz would put up a play from the Jewish repertoire, meaning – from the writings of Shalom Aleichem, Abraham Reisin, David Pinsky, Perez Hirshbein or others. For that task Pick would choose the more talented members of the community and train them. As a result a circle of theater lovers started in Dorpat, which carried on also after Pick left town, and functioned as a Jewish theater. This circle grew, renewed itself and was active till the II World War, when the people of Israel with all their national and public assets were destroyed.

#### G.

Pick would sometimes perform on the stage as a singer. His voice was not very strong, but pleasant and heartwarming. But it wasn't the voice or the tune that mostly mattered at the time but the content. In those days the public developed a great likeness of folksongs (at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some collections of folk songs were discovered, assembled by Ginsburg and Marek, Noah Prolotsky and especially Engel and his friends).

Interest in folklore touched even the 'high ranks', and folksongs became fashionable. The cause of that was the growing Anti-Semitism. Prohibitions and persecutions did not stop. Blasphemy, scorn, false accusations and slander were everyday occurrences. From time to time a pogrom erupted, and as accustomed throughout the course of history, in times like this, when vicious winds blew outside, the Jews would seek refuge inwards. And even those who were ready to quit the battle began turning to their own people, the passionate conceptions they picked up outside cooled down and were now ascribed to their own nation, shining against its eternal light. And many actually found comfort by doing so. For example, when Pick would sing:

אז מען צאפט פון מיר דאס בלוט ארויס,

און מען מוטשעט מיך פאמעלאך,

לאך איך מיר פון מאיינע שונאים אויס,

און גיי מיר גאר א פריילאכס...

(when they are sucking my blood

And torturing me slowly,

I mock my enemies

And break out in a happy dance.)

The entire audience would cheer and feel fortified, regain their hope for a better future, and the spirits would rise. And the persecutions? Eh!... They will pass too, and Israel's remnant will last forever!

#### H.

I would like to bring up another undertaking which took place before the first war. I have already mentioned the difficulties which prevented the youth from entering schools. As for high schools, one could at least study outside the school framework and then take the examinations. There were no restrictions on that route. But entering a higher school was extremely difficult. The percentage who managed to do so was pitiful – 5% to 100 gentiles, while the number of those eager for higher education was a hundred times bigger. There existed only one means to enter – and that was converting to Christianity. The convert would be accepted with no restraints, and some failed to resist the temptation. They would justify themselves by claiming they are only doing it seemingly, for the sake of appearance, and that in their hearts they will remain Jewish all their lives. But most people knew it is a bitter mistake, that the guy is deceiving himself and others, and once done – he has no regress; and that by doing so he causes damage to his people not only by losing a soul, but also by setting an example for others. On the other hand they were also the advocates who claimed that these youngsters, who were forced to do so, deserve pity, compassion and forgiveness, and that necessity cannot be denounced etc. An intense dispute arose round this issue – some agreeing and others condemning. The question arose how to treat such a person: should he be considered a traitor, unaccepted in their circles, or a compelled convert who shouldn't be rejected with both hands lest he might never come back.

This fervent question was brought up also at the academic union, and its leaders decided to turn to a prominent figure for advice. They invited the poet Saul Tshernichovsky, who was seated in Petersburg at the time. He accepted the invitation and came to Dorpat. He stayed with us for three days. Two evenings out of the three were devoted to lectures on literature, and one – to the question of forced conversion. Tshernichovsky regarded the issue with complete disavowal. Obviously a point of view of a man as important as Tshernichovsky affected the members of the union and other youth who attended that evening.

#### I.

There is no shadow without light and no bad without good. As a result of the restrictions and prohibitions, many young Jews remained outside the schools. But the thirst for higher education did not cease. Professors of the academic Russian

circles were well aware of that, and some of them decided to step into the gap and make use of the situation. They therefore established private courses in medicine, a kind of a private college in Dorpat, to which anyone with a high school diploma could be accepted with no limitations. These courses were called after their founder, Prof. Rostovtsev, who was also their principal and chairman. This institution was a win-win deal: an outlet from distress for young Jewish students, and an additional income for the professors.

The institute drew to it many young people craving for high education and a diploma from all over to Dorpat. The courses were open to every newcomer. There was one problem though; the courses, being private, did not supply a staying permit, and the newcomers had to find indirect solutions, which eventually they did, and the number of Hebrew students in Dorpat grew increasingly. Some were accepted as members of the union.

Many more young Hebrews gathered in Dorpat before the WWI (1914-1915). It's hard for me to specify now who they were and where they came from; if they were students in Germany and Austria who were expelled as Russian subjects at the beginning of the war, or simply young Jews from other cities and small towns who took advantage of the new law, which said: In these days of war the Russian authorities find it appropriate to ease some of the pressure off the Jewish population, especially in the field of education. They brought out an order that every youth whose provider was recruited to the war, will be accepted to any school with no restrictions. Many young people suited the description, and those of them who wished to get into university were accepted outside the usual quota of Jewish students.<sup>3</sup>

J.

Most of the new students became members of the academic union and replaced most of its old members and leaders, who were drafted into the army, mostly as doctors, and had to leave Dorpat. This membership replacement changed the essence of the association in many ways. The quiet moderate academic spirit was replaced with troubling tumultuous winds. The lectures, much more frequent now, did not deal with scientific issues but with political ones, especially with the question: How can the nation be saved and what measures should be taken. In those years Zionism had already branched out into different streams, and discussions were characterized by political pungency.

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<sup>3</sup> I too took advantage of this law and was accepted as a pharmaceutics' student at Dorpat university in 1915.

In addition to disagreements on the subject there were also differences of expression. Up until then the accepted language of the lectures was Russian, even for daily talks. That was a clear mark of *inteligenzia*. And here comes Yiddish, raising its head and declaring its actuality and right to exist. Instead of the common Russian expression «Проще слова!» suddenly arose from the “Western angle” a single but courageous voice and said: “איך בעט דאס ווארט!” At first people related to it with humor, but the “Yiddishist” feared nothing and insisted on speaking Yiddish in a clear voice and open fashion. Slowly more people joined in, and so a small number of union members became supporters or fighters for the cause. Their opposers were the “Hebraists” (meaning the Hebrew fans who spoke Russian) who started to reinforce their own position, and so several sections were created: one for history, one in support of the Hebrew language and one in favor of Yiddish. But there were many who didn’t join either group. And in general one should admit, that albeit the differences the split did not prevail, and a sense of unity was felt among all members. The factor that bound them all together was outside pressure.

The great revolution in Russia (1917) rocked the foundations of the old ways of life in every field, including the students’ life in Dorpat. The university was split in two: one part, led by the Russian professors, left Dorpat and established a Russian university in the big city of Voronezh. The other part remained here under an Estonian University. Many Russian students left as a result, and that included Hebrew students too. The exit grew even more after Estonia had separated from Russia to become an independent state. The students returned each to his own

country. The sources that supplied students to the Dorpat university were invalid now, and from now on only Estonians studied there, and a few other students from the neighboring Latvia.



K.

Interesting point; while the number of students decreased, the number of corporations grew, now that there were no restrictions on founding them. The Eestid (Estonians) pounced on the game as if discovering a great treasure, and the Jews did not reject the temptation either. Two Jewish corporations were founded, to

which I shall refer as Corp A. and Corp B. The first had no ideological basis<sup>4</sup>. Its only purpose was the game as is, with no political content or agenda. The second<sup>5</sup> had some kind of a Zionist scheme. And so in little Dorpat three groups of students existed in place of the two former ones.

The atmosphere between these groups was of restrained animosity, or, as they call it now, “a cold war”. There were two reasons for that: ideological and practical. The elders of the academic association, who regarded the corporations as a harmful and deplorable phenomena, were annoyed at the Hebrew students who stuck to these shameful and corrupt manners. “It isn’t fit for a Hebrew”, they would say, “drunkenness and wild behavior, just as it isn’t fit for a man of education to play with kids’ toys such as coloring, sword games etc.” They were especially annoyed with Corp B. “It’s one thing”, they said, “that the empty headed guys of Corp A., who were corporates by nature to begin with, do it. They are only doing in the open what they before



did in secret, behind closed doors. But at least they don’t pretend to be ideological and don’t declare themselves the pioneers and fighters for the nation’s cause. But you, who raise the banner of Zionism and take upon yourselves an important national role, how can you desecrate this sacred purpose with “idol worship” that works counter to the Jewish spirit? The pride of Judaism lies in its culture, and its weapon is the written word – the book. When you choose to imitate the German students’ ways, your nationality is nothing but empty chatter!”

The answer of Corp B. to that was: “The days one would be nourished by spirituality alone are over. A guy these days wants to enjoy life like anyone else his age. If all we will offer him is spirituality, he will leave us. In order to captivate souls to a noble cause you need to combine the efficient with the pleasurable. The games are just a means. Through them we educate the youth in the national spirit, save them from coming to nothing and gain them for our people and purpose. And as for the rattling of swords – this is not an empty thing in our day and age. It’s time to teach the children of Israel ‘to draw an arrow from the bow’.

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<sup>4</sup> Limuvia [M.R.]

<sup>5</sup> Hasmonea [M.R.]

Who knows if the settlement in Israel will not have the need for it. Remember how the sons of Nehemiah and their helpers rebuilt Jerusalem: “one hand does the work while the other holds the dagger.”

The future proved them right, and their promise was not “empty chatter” after all: a significant number of Corp B. members immigrated to Israel.

#### L.

The second factor – the practical one, that evoked constant competition and jealousy between the groups, was the shortage of members. People did not come here from outside the country anymore, and the handful of local youth was hardly enough to occupy three groups. That endangered the existence of the group, because according to regulations, a group needed a minimum quota of members in order to exist. And if the group is even one member short, it must close down. No wonder a secret war was held over every new possible candidate. A kid had hardly finished high school before he was subject to temptations, each group trying to draw him to its lines.

The academic association was the one which suffered the most. The number of its members was reduced drastically. In the end it couldn't keep its neutral apolitical ground and diverted towards the left. A natural choice came into being: The empty headed ones joined Corp.A., the nationalists – Cop. B., and for those who were neither, the academic neutral association seemed appropriate. Slowly a left wing majority was formed, and left its mark on the association. Its elders pretended not to notice and remained loyal to the union in memory of old days.

Its later years were poor and dull. It did not have its first years' scientific solidity and moderation, nor its vigorous fervent temper of 1915-17. Only once did a ray of light flicker through its gray existence and awaken fresh life in the old body. That happened on its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1924). It was held with extraordinary festivity. Many elders were invited and most of them came. But the important guest of all was Dr. Cohen Bernstein, one of its founders, now living in Israel, who came especially from Israel for the celebrations. They lasted three days. On the agenda were serious matters of the hour, to which the members dedicated several meetings, and several decisions were made. Among them was one concerning the association's rich library. The decision made was, that if the association closes down, all books will be donated to the national library in Jerusalem. This anniversary was held thanks to the efforts and labor of its member Jacob Pajenson, who was its chairman at the time.

Ever since there were no days of glory in the life of the academic association. In 1934 they did celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. They held a ball, and guests from around Dorpat were invited. But this time the spiritual uplifting and excitement of 1924 was not felt in the air, and rather than being an anniversary of a live organism, it seemed more like a commemoration of its past glory.

Nevertheless, the association's pulse of life, albeit fable, did not cease to beat until the Second World War broke out and destroyed it all.