

AN EXAMPLE OF A SMALL AND UNIQUE COMMUNITY*

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Translated from the Hebrew

1. The Late and Unique Establishment of the Community

Estonia is the most northern and the smallest of the three Baltic States -Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. It is situated on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. More detailed information on Estonia and the history of its Jewish community is found in the volume *Pinkas Hakehillot - Latvia and Estonia*, Yad Vashem, 1984 (Hebrew).

Unlike Lithuania and Latvia, where Jewish immigrants began to establish communities in the 15th and 16th centuries, this was only possible in Estonia in the second half of the nineteenth century during czarist times and through the initiative of Jewish soldiers (popularly known as Nikolai's Soldiers or cantonists). Most if not all were kidnapped as children from their parents' homes in the Pale of Settlement and were forced to serve for dozens of years under brutal conditions in the ranks of the Russian army. Those of them who survived after serving in garrisons in various Estonian cities such as its capital Tallinn, Dorpat or Tartu and Pernau were permitted to establish local synagogues, cemeteries and other Jewish institutions. To fill their religious and other needs a number of functionaries such as rabbis, shohtim (slaughterers of meat), Mohalim, teachers etc. as well as craftsmen from Lithuania, Poland, and the Courland region of nearby Western Latvia, were given residence permits.

Similarly, the University of Dorpat, which was hoped would become an important academic center for all of Russia and was noted for its liberal atmosphere, was open to Jews. The Jewish students, the majority of whom came from outside of Estonia, struck roots in the life of the community and helped establish various institutions such as the first Jewish school in 1875, the Academic Society for Jewish Literature and History in 1884 and others. At that time, the number of Jews in Estonia totaled some 4,000. Tartu (Dorpat) had the largest number of Jews followed by the capital Tallinn. The Jewish community of Estonia was composed of three main groupings: (1) Nikolai's Soldiers and their descendants, the bearers of Russian culture; (2) the Jews of Courland among whom German culture was dominant and (3) the Jews of Lithuania who were noted for their deep-rooted Jewish culture.

2. Between the Two World Wars

With the establishment of the independent Estonian state at the end of World War I, the Jewish community grew to number 4,556, 0.4% of the population. Some 250 Jews fought in the Estonian war of independence. According to the census of 1934, 98% of the Jews lived in the cities of Tallinn, 2,203; Tartu, 920; Valga; 262; Pernau, 248; Narva, 182, Viljandi, 105, Rakvere, 100 and others. Their occupational breakdown was divided as follows: commerce, 30.4%; clerical and administrative, 24%; craftsmen, 14.8%; laborers, 14%; professionals, 9.5%; factory owners, 5%, estate owners, 1.4% and religious functionaries, 0.6%. The general economic situation of most of the Jews and especially those who were self-employed was relatively good and only a few depended on community assistance. In Tallinn, Tartu and Narva there were co-operative banks with 625 members.

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Like other national minorities, from 1926 Estonian Jews enjoyed wide cultural autonomy. In order to administer the Jewish cultural and educational network, in the framework of the autonomy law a Culture Committee (Kultur-Rat) numbering 27 was set up. Their affiliation follows: General Zionists, 17; Socialist Zionists, 3; Yiddishists, 4- Commercial List, 2 and Progressive List, 1. Local communities set up councils that were concerned with strengthening their own cultural and educational institutions as well as collecting taxes to supplement the budgets for communal needs. More than half of the Jewish children attended the three Jewish elementary and two high schools. In some places, there were schools for adults and for children who attended non-Jewish schools. The choice of language in these institutions led to a bitter fight between the Zionists who demanded Hebrew and the Yiddishists, who also included left-wing activists, who naturally demanded Yiddish. The dispute was usually settled by compromise, for example, by holding parallel classes in both languages in the same school and other similar arrangements.

In this tiny Jewish settlement several cultural and political groups functioned actively, among those promoting Yiddish were the Kultur League and the Bund and the nationalists who encouraged Hebrew supported the General Zionists, Socialist Zionists, Hashomer Hatzair and Betar. The handful of Jewish communists, the party being officially banned by the government, operated within a legal cultural framework such as through the Licht Club and others. Impressive political, cultural and social activities were conducted by the Hatsefira, Hashmonea and Limuvia student organizations.

A significant step in the furtherance of Jewish culture can be seen with the establishment in 1934 of a Chair in Jewish Studies at Tartu University. Until its closing in 1940 nearly fifty Jewish students majored in Jewish studies and some were awarded doctorates. (Pinkos Hakehillot - Latvia Estonia, Levin, 1986) In addition to what is cited above, cultural, social and religious life flourished in nearly every community on the initiative of local institutions such as the Hevra Kadisha Bialik Verein [the Bialik Organization] and other similar groups. In the absence of local Jewish newspapers Yiddish readers made do with dailies from Latvia and with weekly Estonian supplements published in the Lithuanian Yiddish papers such as the Zionist Di Yidishe Shtime and the Folksblat of the Yiddishists.

In addition various local bodies, especially in Tallinn, produced some two hundred publications in Yiddish, Hebrew and assorted foreign languages (Gens, 1937). One of the most important of them appeared on the eve of World War II and was an alphabetic listing of all of the family and personal names of the 3,944 Jews of all ages who lived in the eighteen Estonian Jewish settlements. This important material was based on the July 1934 census conducted on the initiative of the cultural administration of the autonomous Jewish minority in this country (Gurin, 1936).

3. Critical Events during World War II and Afterwards

At the end of the 1930s there was an increase in the activities of Estonian nationalistic organizations such as Vaps, those who fought in the Estonian war of independence and other groups. Some subsidized by Nazi Germany distributed anti-Semitic propaganda and also took part in clashes against local Jews. Incidents such as these and others of a similar nature alarmed the Estonian Jews who until then had lived in tranquility.

Among those who greeted the entry of the Red Army in June 1940, the small group of Jews from the communist camp stood out. One of them even raised the red flag over the city's citadel. During the sovietization of the economy, those of the Jews that were primarily

affected were owners of property, stores and factories. Several Jews, especially those of communist or proletariat origin were appointed to government positions including the institutions of internal security. However, the majority of the Jewish public was distressed by the revolutionary incidents and especially in light of their loss of autonomy from which they had tangible benefits and about which they took great pride. Only the two schools in Tallinn and Tartu continued to function and instruction in Yiddish, although restricted, continued (Levin, 1968/1969).

Moreover, in addition to the suppression of Jewish organizations with the entry of the among the Jewish political leadership as they did among the Estonian leadership. Among those arrested were the leader of the Revisionist Zionists in Estonia, who was later executed, and some of the Bund and Betar activists. In the middle of June 1941, on the eve of the Nazi invasion, Jewish industrialists, storeowners, Zionist leaders, veterans of the Estonian War of Independence and others classified as "dangers to society" were arrested. Including their families and numbering some 500 people, they were exiled to the far reaches of the Soviet Union. Many of them perished from hunger, disease and accidents that occurred during the harsh labor forced upon them.

When the German army invaded Estonia in the fall of 1941, at least 120 Jews fought against them totaling 1.1% of the Jews who comprised 3% of the total population. Along with this, many Jews sought opportunities to flee from the Nazi conquest to the interior of the Soviet Union, especially after the government declared an organized evacuation of certain sectors of the civilian population. While the government generally encouraged evacuation, in reality it required great effort and resourcefulness to obtain the desired exit permit.

There were Jews, who did not take advantage of the opportunity to flee whether because of age, illness, infirmity, etc., but there were those who hoped that they would be able to somehow manage under the German occupation. Some 3,000 people comprising 75% of the Jewish population did manage to escape whether on their own initiative or within the framework of the organized evacuations. This is the highest rate of survival of any of the Eastern European countries during the Holocaust! (Levin 2002).

Approximately two hundred of the evacuees served as either officers or in the ranks of the Estonian Eighth Corps of the Red Army. Many of them fell in battle and especially in the battle to liberate Estonia at the end of 1944.

Of the more than one thousand Jews who remained after the Nazi conquest of Estonia, at least 929 were arrested and murdered – 805 in Tallinn, Tartu and Pernau. The book by Eugenia Gurin-Loov (1994) contains a detailed list of the 949 names of these victims as well as additional Jews along with their addresses.

Most of the arrests and murders were carried out by units of the Omakaitse (Civil Defense) and the Estonian police who operated under the supervision of the Sonderkommando. Except for the few in hiding by January 1942 there were no longer any Jews in Estonia and it was declared Judenfrei - Free of Jews.

Between 1942 and 1943 in various stages more than twenty thousand Jews, mostly from the Ghettoes of Vilna and Kovno in Lithuania, and from other places in Europe - Czechoslovakia, Transylvania and Soviet Prisoners of War from Finland were moved to Estonia. Some were murdered immediately on arrival and others were held in dozens of forced labor camps where they worked for the most part in mining shale oil. The majority of them died of disease, terror, starvation and cold. (Dvorzhetski, 1970)

As the Red Army advanced towards these camps about 3,000 surviving Jews were evacuated to the Stutthof Concentration Camp in Germany and other places. Only a few hundred managed to survive until the end of the war.

With the liberation of Estonia at the end of 1944 some 100 Jews were discovered, remnants of those transported from other countries mostly in the Klooga and Lagedi camps. Most were spared at the last minute from the massacre that the Germans perpetrated on the eve of their withdrawal. From among Estonia's pre-war Jewish population, very few survived under the Nazi occupation.

A very large portion of Estonia's Jews who were refugees in the Soviet Union and those who survived after completing service in the army had already returned to their country in 1944/1945 and concentrated for the most part in Tallinn, the capital. Later some of those who were exiled returned and finally many Jews from various parts of the Soviet Union arrived.

According to the 1959 census there were 5,436 Jews in Estonia comprising 0,5% of the total population. One thousand of them, 19% of the Jewish population, listed Yiddish as their mother tongue. It can be assumed that most of these latter individuals were prewar residents of Estonia. In 1989 in the time of Perestroika a Jewish cultural center and school were established in Tallinn. A periodical (in Russian) called Hashahar - The Dawn, began to appear. With the reestablishment of independent Estonia in the beginning of the 1990s, 622 Jews, mostly Estonia natives left with the majority going on Aliya to Eretz Yisrael. This trend continued and by the year 2000 only 2,500 Jews remained. A large portion of the Jews who came in the meantime from Russia succeeded in striking roots here.

In conclusion, I would like to point out some of the unique characteristics of the Estonian Jewish community.

- It was small in numbers and the only Jewish community that was established by the cantonists - Jewish children who were kidnapped by czarist soldiers and pressed into military service for many years.
- Jewish students from all over Russia studied medicine at Dorpat University, the Heidelberg of Russia, and made a very significant contribution to the community.
- Jews enjoyed significant cultural autonomy, unique in all of Europe, even after World War II began, lasting until 2 June 1940.

Jews participated in all Estonia's wars -Independence in 1918, in 1941 and in the Estonian unit of the Red Army 1942 to 1945.

Of importance to genealogists: thanks to the cultural administration we have the names of every Jew of Estonia from the time of their birth on. Following is a selection of typical family names used by Estonian Jews - some of them original Hebrew names - that I gathered from pre-war publications:

AMITAN, BOLOK, EIDUS, ELYON, HAITOV, HOZOK, KATZEV, KLOMPUS, KROPAN, MA-NOIM, MARGOLIUS, MATZKIN,

Bibliography (See the Hebrew section for the complete bibliography).

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Professor Dov Levin was born in (Kovno) Kaunas, Lithuania in 1925. From kindergarten through high school he received a traditional Hebrew Zionist education. After the Soviet Union annexed Lithuania in 1940 his formal education ceased, as did his involvement with the Zionist youth group Hashomer Hatzair, which was banned by government order. He was in the Kovno Ghetto during the Nazi occupation along with his father Tzvi-Hirsh LEVIN, his mother Bluma nee WIGODER and his twin sister Batya, none of whom survived. He joined the partisans fighting against the Nazis and their local Lithuanian collaborators. At the end of 1945, under the auspices of the B'riha movement he arrived in Eretz Yisrael participating in the founding of the state and the War of Independence. He studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem receiving a PhD in History. He was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Chicago and Director of the Oral History Division of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A known authority in the field of Eastern European Jewry, particularly the history of the Baltic Jews, he has published 520 articles and 14 books in Hebrew and English. Among the English titles are Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis 1941-1945 (1985); Baltic Jews under the Soviets (1994); The Lesser of Two Evils: 1939-1941 (1995) and The Litvaks: A Short History of the Jews in Lithuania (2000). He is married to Bilha nee DEUTSCH and the father of two daughters and a son.

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