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Chanukah Party of the “Brit Ivrit (Hebrew Covenant)” Union in the ghetto

- Study the poster. What about ghetto life can be learned from it?
- What questions does this poster raise?

“5 December, 1942

“[...] We’ve already written, frequently, that the ghetto is very careful about safeguarding traditions. Every holiday is enthusiastically celebrated here, regardless of the situation. On Thursday, December 3, an evening to celebrate Chanukah took place at the theater hall, organized by the police.

“[...] An additional Chanukah party was organized here by the religious movements [...] in the ghetto it was permitted to light only one Chanukah candle for all eight days. The reason given was that candles were precious and people could not allow themselves to use them up.

“[...] on the 13th of the month, the children organized a Chanukah play at the ghetto theater. At six on that same day at the theater hall, a Chanukah party took place filled with artistic programming.

“On Friday the 11th of the month, the children’s club organized a Chanukah party with latkes.’ The evening transformed from a Chanukah event to an impressive event of Vilna’s children from both religious and secular schools. To enable participation, many events were planned in the ghetto. But this last event turned a Chanukah miracle into a miracle of youth, who thirsted for a new life of freedom.”

Herman Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania. Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939-1944* (New Haven: Yale University, 2002), pp 422-424.

“On the evening of Simchat Torah I came, by invitation of the rabbi, to the hakafot [circuits made with the Torah on the Jewish festival of Simchat Torah] in the house that served as the synagogue and was now the music school. Remnants of the yeshiva boys and Torah-learners gathered, including some children. They sang and danced... Here, amidst this anguished group, in a destroyed synagogue, we joined the congregation of Israel – not only those with us that day, but also those who had died, in the congregation of the holy and pure. Thousands upon thousands, as well as with the previous generations. With this joy, we acknowledged the previous generations, the beautiful generations, the generations that were worthy of life. We felt on that day, with our songs of praise, that we were sanctifying God as our forefathers did. And I, an errant soul of Israel, feel my roots here... I know that the nation of Israel is alive and will live.. It is enough that we merited to be of this people, and each day that God gave us in His kindness this absolute gift, we receive with thanks and gratitude to Him.”

Zelik Kalmanovitch, Diary of the Vilna Ghetto and Writings Found in its Ruins (Heb.), (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1977, p. 83.

- Why, in your opinion, did people in the ghetto celebrate holidays?
- Did holidays gain special significance within the ghetto?

“... the goal of the ‘Hebrew Covenant’ – was to create within the ghetto, by means of the living Hebrew language and with inspiration from the vision of a free life in the homeland of Eretz Israel, an uplifting disconnect from the miserable ghetto life.”

“... its first parties were held in the hall of the public kitchen – known as “Tzioni” – at Strashun St. 2, in the presence of dozens of members. Initial events were dedicated to the memory of Josef Trumpledor and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda.

“Quickly these events caught on among the wider public, many of whom thirsted for the Hebrew language and the distant celestial voice from the Land of Israel. Demand grew, and the events were hosted in a larger facility: the ghetto theater. At times, the audience numbered as many as 600. Gatherings of the ‘Hebrew Covenant’ served as a stage for ideas from the resistance movements, many of whose members belonged to the ‘Hebrew Covenant.’ Parties were held for Passover (Moshe striking the Egyptian)... Shavuot (Receiving the Torah), Chanukah (the Hashmonian Rebellion), Purim (the fall of Haman), Masada (the War of the Desperate), as well as gatherings in memory of Bialik, Herzl and Ahad Ha’am. One party was dedicated to contemporary Hebrew poetry. Each party included one or more lectures, choral singing, readings from the Tanach and Hebrew poetry recitations.

“In difficult times, when heavy clouds covered the ghetto, Dimantman [a Jewish educator] would say to his fellows: ‘Until the ghetto’s very last day, the sound of the Hebrew language should be heard.’”

Meir (Mark) Dworzecki, The Jerusalem of Lithuania in Revolt and in the Holocaust (Heb.), (Tel Aviv: Mifleget Poalei Eretz Yisrael, 1951), pp. 229-230.

Meir (Mark) Dworzecki: a Jewish doctor in the Vilna ghetto. During World War II, he served in the Polish Army and fell captive to the Germans. After escaping from a POW camp, he returned to Vilna. In addition to his work as a doctor, he was a member of the ghetto underground, but before he was able to escape to the forest and join the partisans, he was sent to a forced labor camp in Estonia. At this camp, he attempted to save sick prisoners who were liable to be murdered by masking their illnesses. After the war, he made *aliya* (immigrated to Eretz Israel), where he worked to commemorate the efforts of Jewish doctors to save lives during the Holocaust. As an established historian, he also endeavored to document the Nazis' medical war crimes. Dworzecki, who testified at the Eichmann trial, died in 1975.

This poster, written in Hebrew, differs from other posters written in Yiddish, reflecting the various political and ideological strains that began many years before the war and remained intact during the war years. The "Hebrew Covenant" Union was founded in the fall of 1941 to expand the study of Hebrew and instill Zionist content in educational and cultural activities. The creation of this union was accompanied by political struggles within the ghetto between Zionist and anti-Zionist factions about how to educate youth.

- Why did Dimantman think that "Until the ghetto's very last day, the sound of the Hebrew language should be heard"?
- What was the significance of holding Zionist activities in the ghetto in Hebrew?
- What, in your opinion, caused the growth in the number of participants in Zionist conferences and other events?
- Does this poster gain added significance after reading these testimonies?