ESSAY: THE YOUTH MOVEMENTS IN EASTERN EUROPE AS AN ALTERNATIVE LEADERSHIP*

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Abstract — Zionist youth movement leaders in many ghettos in Eastern Europe assumed communal leadership at the stage of revolt. The continuity of leadership in these movements, together with their being cut off from the guidance of adult advisors and emissaries from Palestine, helped the movements develop independently. Their increasing communal involvement, together with their accurate understanding of the all-inclusive intent of the Nazi murder operations begun in 1941, led them to offer the ghetto populace an alternative to the policies aimed at an illusory survival. They offered armed resistance, without rescue, knowing that it was no way for survival.

The term alternative generally implies a choice between two proposals, two methods, or as in the case at hand, between two different factions who contended for leadership. Alternative also refers to a certain group of ideas, new people and methods which seek to replace or repress the incumbents.

In considering the leaders of the youth movements during the Nazi occupation of Eastern Europe, it seems that the term alternative is not commensurate with the sense of responsibility and strong principles which left these people no option but to take the initiative and act against developments which they interpreted correctly. Moreover, the term alternative does not take into account the challenges that these people were forced to meet, nor the objectives that they attempted to accomplish.

The role played by the youth movements is sometimes interpreted as a natural outgrowth of the extreme circumstances of the period. In times of crisis and major upheavals, history has often produced bold and revolutionary movements and people whose significance was not properly appreciated until much later. However, neither age, per se, nor the audacity of youth can sufficiently explain the communal leadership of the youth under consideration. Rather, the answer can be found both in the sequence and dynamics of the events, and in the youth movements’ ability to sustain their vitality in spite of the surrounding crumbling and decay.

It is well known that almost the entire Jewish leadership of Poland left the country during the first months of the war.1 Graduates of the youth movements were among those who fled, and together with the many escapees they reached the eastern districts of interwar Poland that were annexed to the Soviet Union. But members of the youth movements, in contrast to the recognized leadership, felt that responsibility dictated the return of a number of their leading activists to German occupied territory, in order to carry on their work and lead the movement in underground activities. People such as Mordechai Anielewicz, Zivia Lubetkin, Yitzhak Zuckerman, Yosef Kaplan and Tosia Altman all returned to their duties.

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It would be incorrect to assume, however, that the return of a number of leaders of the youth movements constituted an alternative form of leadership or filled the vacuum that had been left. In effect, a leadership was established under the aegis of the German authorities, although one can debate whether the Jewish Council (Judenrat) was as effective as its name implied. It is also debatable whether the Jewish Councils maintained continuity, or rather, broke from the traditional Jewish leadership. In any event, it is a fact that the Nazis' first order for the establishment of the Jewish Councils stipulated the formation of a 'Council of Elders', 'which, as far as possible, is to be composed of the remaining authoritative personalities and rabbis'. An examination of the members of the first Jewish Council in Warsaw or Lublin reveals many formerly prominent Jews on both the municipal and community levels. The many who agreed to serve on the Jewish Council were, of course, unaware of the future developments, and in spite of the letter of authority which explicitly dictated that their function was to carry out all the orders of the German authorities, it was assumed that the Jewish Council would be able to guard and defend Jewish interests as they had successfully done in the past while serving under hostile authorities who had also determined the character and composition of the Jewish leadership.

We must now examine the character of the youth movements and the significance of what we refer to today as 'the leadership of the youth movements'. The majority of organized youth belonged to the Zionist youth movements, who removed themselves from the mainstream of political ferment in what has been termed 'the Jewish Street', or 'the Jewish Sector' of various countries during the inter war period. The concept doikeit, meaning 'working for the present', was the professed policy of the Zionist parties since the Zionist Conference in Helsinki's in 1906. By contrast, the youth movements directed their energies towards the eventual fulfillment of their aspirations in Eretz Israel and hence avoided participating in local affairs or involving themselves in everyday communal matters. This position was maintained by all the Zionist youth movements, including the youth sections of the established parties. However, it was particularly pronounced among the pioneering youth movements, who viewed their movements and agricultural training farms as merely a preliminary stage to the fulfillment of kibbutz life in the Land of Israel. In essence, they believed in an ideology which superseded their youth and was to give them purpose in their future lives.

The return of a small number of youth movement leaders to the German occupied territories was not synonymous with the immediate establishment of a recognized leadership in these areas. For youth movements who were not under the auspices of political parties, such as Hashomer Hatzair, emissaries from Palestine had actively determined the ideological line of the movement prior to the war, and were essential in determining internal dynamics as well as the policy regarding outside elements. This group of Palestinian leaders left Poland in the wake of the occupation, thereby severing the local movements' ties to the soul of the movement, Palestine. The realities of their isolation from Palestine and from Jews in the free world resulted in the involuntary transformation of the youth movements into independent and non-affiliated bodies, whose foremost leaders were now forced to chart their own path and independently solve problems of the greatest importance. In addition, their authority, as well as the power to dictate orders and the willingness of the members to accept orders, were forged by the work in the underground. A surviving leader of one of these youth movements admitted that in light of the circumstances, being on their own was a blessing in disguise. He doubted whether the youth movements' underground activities and the revolts in the ghettos could have taken place under the supervision of a cadre of emissaries and adult advisors.
It is evident from the initial activities of the returning heads of the youth movements, that they had no intention of being the leaders of the general population. This is clearly reflected in the underground newspapers of Warsaw, the most extensive and important body of documentation of the youth in existence today. In the first stage, the youth movements' newspapers dealt with internal affairs, policy questions arising from a wartime situation (i.e. war and resistance; educational problems) and nurturing the ties to their ideological roots in Palestine.

As one, all the movements addressed the internal circles of their own membership. The style of writing clearly bears the particular stamp of the various movements and rings with the particular slang understood only by insiders.

In the second stage which began approximately at the end of 1940, there was a noticeable change in the content and style of writing of these newspapers. Alongside the material intended for the movement, much space was devoted to news from the front; commentary relating to the military and political situation; attitudes towards the Jewish Councils; the reality of the Jewish situation; and controversial issues involving their opponents in the underground as well as other groups. In the last stage, from the fall of 1941, an additional change became apparent when the internal party aspect was much reduced or disappeared altogether, to be replaced by a singularly unequivocal political writing which uncovered the mass murder campaign and its import, and finally called for active resistance.

The movements' underground newspapers' circulation was, from the beginning, very extensive (until the middle of 1941 approximately half of all the newspapers and leaflets in Warsaw were issued by the youth movements, and of these some two-thirds were issued by the pioneering youth movements) and grew larger as time went on.

A gradual process evolved, consequently, in which the content of the paper sharply changed from reporting internal organizational activity to reporting activity related to the ghetto population at large. On 25 September 1941, Zivia Lubetkin wrote in a letter from Warsaw to her colleagues in the United States: "Besides our educational activities we have to turn our attention to matters which we had never previously considered. We have established both elementary schools and high schools. We travel to maintain contacts even though this matter is not at all simple... We have never been as much recognized, nor as appreciated as we are at present."

The youth movements did not come into direct, sharp confrontation with the Jewish Councils until the stage of deportations and mass murders. The youth movements vehemently criticized the Jewish Councils and their policies and in a number of instances refused to obey the Councils' orders. However, they did not suggest that the Councils be replaced with a different public body, nor did they consider the dissolution of the Jewish Councils as a possibility, in the light of the prevailing circumstances which required them to perform certain functions. It was only natural that the youth movements sought support, guidance and public backing from the underground political parties and especially from those parties with ideologies similar to their own. The youth movements were disappointed by the parties' lack of receptiveness which only increased the movements' feeling that they had no one on whom to depend and which further fostered their sense of independence. The Hashomer Hatzair newspaper, Neged Hazerom (Against the Current), of May 1942, stated: "the role of the movements as a social factor in the ghetto did not come about as a predetermined plan but rather as a result of: (1) The intensity and the momentum of the internal affairs; (2) the publications and activities; (3) the collapse of the Jewish political parties. The political parties which did not have clubs, legal publications, public activities
or a recognized leadership became limited circles of members who directed their attention to welfare and mutual aid, which they distributed to their own members as their special prerogative.

The youth movements were the major factors by which the underground was able to break through the walls and boundaries of the ghettos. The couriers and emissaries, especially the young female members of the youth movements, forged the connecting thread not only between the branches of the movement and its central body but also among the isolated Jewish communities of the major ghettos.

The literature on the Jews of Kovno during the occupation reveals that the first courier who brought news of the events taking place in Warsaw, Vilna and Western Poland to the Jews of Kovno and the underground was Irena Adamovicz, from the Polish Scouts, a Catholic youth movement. Prior to the war, these Polish Scouts had courageously aligned themselves with Zionist youth movements, and in the course of the war Irena and a number of her fellow Scouts served as loyal couriers for the pioneering youth movements operating in the underground.

Another vital aspect in our understanding of the issue of youth leadership is the significant undermining of the social and spiritual world of the individual by the phenomenon of the ghetto, and the war period as a whole. The underground press constantly highlighted the process of deterioration in their radical proclamations, such as: 'the masses are starving, and for them the only thought and content is bread.' The youth movements attempted to the best of their ability to immunize the youth against the blight of the times by sustaining their spiritual stature as a future reserve who at the war's end would be ready to fill responsible positions in the social and national spheres. The vitality and strength of the youth movements were preserved and maintained in spite of the constant and overpowering deterioration in their midst. Surprisingly, this was not often discussed in the underground press or in the internal clandestine meetings. The movements were preoccupied with the challenges of the time and only rarely did they allow themselves a pat on the back or express self-satisfaction. The movements' major achievements were the rejection of the harsh reality surrounding them and the maintenance of their values and ideas, in spite of the reigning brutality and moral decay. By refusing to acknowledge or come to terms with what the latter, their unique structure more often than not persisted, strengthened by their ideology, and their steadfast clinging to ideas, stories, images and spirit of a rich past. This unusual ability, evident in even a cursory glance through the period newspapers, begs to be explained. It appears that the source of this strength was derived from the past, a development of programs and actions over the years, a solid foundation. In addition, the clubs served as a sanctuary from the bleakness of the home and the street, which were mired in distress, from the shadow of death that hung over everything, from the depression, despair, pessimism, and helplessness that befell everybody.

Emmanuel Ringelblum, in his biographical sketch of Mordechai Anielewicz, writes that the commander of the Jewish Fighting Organization regretted that so much valuable time had been wasted on educational work and on the spiritual development of the youth, when from the onset, the time could have been better used to prepare for the test of battle and to train the people towards this goal. A similar regret was expressed by Yitzhak Zuckerman when he came to Israel and gave his moving report to the Kibbutz council at Naan. Today, with the perspective of time, it is possible to disagree with their views. It is not surprising that Anielewicz, in his race against time on the eve of the revolt, and Zuckerman, in his account of the period, regretted each day that was not directly dedicated to the goal of combat. However, even if we accept the view that the resistance and the revolt did not
merely serve as a climax to the overall underground activities, but rather were the primary and the most important events, we must still conclude that it would not have been possible to prepare zealous combatants in both purpose and action, without a preliminary period of learning the cause’s ideas.

The stage in which the youth movements were the major force leading towards the underground with their adoption of armed resistance in both idea and deed resulted in confrontation with all the organized bodies in the ghetto: the Jewish Council, the Jewish police, and in most cases with the underground connected to the political parties, and with the general public. All elements of the Jewish population, including the underground bodies, were united in the need to insure their physical survival against systematic German attrition and physical debilitation, until the Einsatzgruppen killings which began with ‘Operation Barbarosa’ in June 1941. The internal ghetto debate always revolved around the methods necessary for survival and the distribution of the burden among the different classes, but never questioned the basic Jewish objective of survival.

This loose consensus splintered and eventually fell apart entirely. The first step in the new direction was an awareness, an analysis of the situation. On the night of 31 December 1941 (the night between 31 December and 1 January), the members of the pioneering youth movements in Vilna heard the proclamation written by Abba Kovner, which stated “Hitler aims to destroy all the Jews of Europe. The Jews of Lithuania are fated to be the first in line.” It is beyond the scope of this essay presently to deal with the sources of this bold assumption. However, it is clear today that it was a correct reading of the events. Many opposed this analysis as being totally invalid and far fetched. The Jews of occupied western Poland, including the underground political parties, believed that the massacres of the Jews in the Soviet territories were an unintelligible tragedy occurring in the hinterlands, having no connection to the occupation of territories or to what was happening within those territories. The Jews, including members of the general underground, who resided in the areas affected by Einsatzgruppen murder campaigns did not deny the facts, but they refrained from drawing more general conclusions from them. They viewed the mass murders as a passing phenomenon whose renewal could be prevented by the Jews’ integration into and greater efficiency in German war industries. Central to our topic is the fact that the youth movement leadership, both in the territories where the mass murders were taking place and in western Poland, generally accepted the conclusion that an overall plan of mass murder existed.

The realistic assessment and awareness of the events taking place indicated the first aspect of change, while the second was manifested in Kovner’s statement in Vilna: ‘Let us not go as sheep to the slaughter! It is true that we are weak and defenceless, but resistance is the only reply to the enemy!’ This statement invoked not only the birth of a brazen new truth, but also the determination to choose an armed struggle without the promise of rescue or salvation. By adopting this policy, the underground centres of the youth movements in Poland effected the ghetto revolt. The order was issued for the imprisoned Jews to fight, the only possible means of revenge.

This turning point, together with the increased activities of the central bodies of the movements in Warsaw, produced what can be termed ‘the alternative of the youth movements’, or of the youth leadership movement. The youth movements’ dictum and enactment was no longer a private internal issue, nor an operational plan relevant only to the underground, but rather a fateful and decisive line of action for the entire Jewish population. Consequently, an unavoidable conflict arose between the Jewish Councils and the youth movements’ leadership; between groups of the Jewish political resistance and the
armed branch of the youth movements; between the general public in the ghetto, or a great
dominion of that public and the plan of action represented by the youth movements and the
fighting organizations. In most areas the Jewish Councils professed that work was the
means of salvation; important elements in the underground could not come to terms with
the general forecast of total destruction and ‘no escape’; and the tormented public
would not accept a course of action which did not allow for hope or a chance of survival.
Consequently, in mid 1942 the underground youth movements in Warsaw began a new
chapter in the struggle with the formation of a battle unit, and in their pursuance of support
and acknowledgement.

An overview of the general situation reveals that the fighting underground was at a dis-

tinct disadvantage in seeking support from the masses who chose deception and steadily
preferred to delude themselves. In a number of areas confrontations with the Jewish
Councils developed into open disagreement and violent conflict. In Vilna armed confronta-
tion erupted when the masses sided with the Jewish Councils. Warsaw, due to a particular
combination of factors, experienced singularly different developments; the youth move-
ments’ fighting organization successfully paralyzed the Jewish Councils and the police,
persuaded the various sections of the underground to adopt their position, and established
a state of cooperation with the surviving Jewish public during the months of January
through April, 1943. Hence, the revolt in the Warsaw ghetto was a comprehensive revolt,
popular with both the fighters and the masses of Jews who participated in it, strengthened
and supported by Jews who refused to obey the Nazis, and who would not surrender.

NOTES

1. Among those who left Warsaw immediately upon the outbreak of the war and during the first
months of occupation were the recognized leaders of the Zionist groups, Moshe Kleinbaum and
Apolinary Hartglas, the leaders of the Bund, Heinryk Ehrlich and Victor Adler, the leading spiritual
leaders of Orthodox Jewry, and the activists of the radical left.

2. See the full text of Heydrich’s ‘Schnellb¨rief’ of 21 September 1939, in Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael
Gutman and Avraham Margaliot, eds., Documents on the Holocaust (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem,

3. Almost the entire collection of the clandestine press of the Warsaw ghetto underground was
preserved in the Ringelblum Archive (known as the ‘Oneg Shabbat’ Archive). Yad Vashem initiated
the publication of this material in six volumes in Hebrew. Three volumes have appeared to date.

4. Quoted from Michtavim min Ha-ghettaiot (Hebrew — ‘Letters from the Ghettos’), collected by
Bracha Habas (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1944), p. 15.

5. Yad Vashem Archives, Underground Press Division, Neged Hazerem (Against the Current),
15/4 (May 1941).

6. See the biographical essay of Anielewicz in Emmanuel Ringelblum, ed., Ksovim Fun Ghetto,


8. For the complete text of the proclamation see Documents on the Holocaust, op. cit., p. 433.

9. Ibid.