

Chen Merhavia (Jerusalem)

The Jewry of Podlasie and Borderlands Spiritual and practical ties with erez (Land of) Israel

The historical terms, „Ziemia Bielska”, „Podlasie”, represent territories that saw continual political and administrative change (including changes in the private or royal ownership). Generally speaking, neither was a geographically unified entity. Similarly, neither Ziemia Bielska nor Podlasie was the object of special, comprehensive, historical research; the first serious study of the Jews of Ziemia Bielska, by Dr. A. Leszczyński, appeared only in 1980. This study of Dr. Leszczyński laid the foundation for future research, and must win our gratitude for its careful study of materials and documents.

These historical terms, so important for the specialist in the early history of Poland, have less interest for the general historian. They relate to territories having no fixed borders, and lacking both a permanent capital city and the status of a state; constantly, as in 1443, 1520, 1566, 1669, 1764, 1795, and 1844, the political and administrative face of things changed.

The name Podlasie is almost never mentioned in Jewish documents, not even in the protocols of the Councils of the Four Lands of Lithuania. Sometimes, even the official „rejstry” and „spisy” omit the name of Podlasie, giving the names of only the „powiaty”. The *Yewrejskaya Encyklopedia* does have some lines on Podlasie, but modern Jewish encyclopedias have none. Yet, until 1939, a Jewish population could be defined as a national entity by its language, vocabulary, and accent; by its dress; by its cuisine; by its humor and folklore; by its knowledge of Hebrew and its interest in learning and linguistics; by its vigorous and active character; and by its practical talents; it flourished in these borderlands of Poland, Lithuania, and Bielorrussia (dubbed „Rajsn”). This region was also a bastion of the opponents („Mitnagdim”) of *Hassidism*; the socio-religious movement known as *Hassidism* barely penetrated it.

As it is well known (and as Dr. Leszczyński stressed), the dominant and major part of the Jewish population in these areas was of Lithuanian

descent („Litwaks"). (This was true, also, of those areas that had not belonged earlier to Ziemia Bielska or to Podlasie.) This Jewish population was strongly influenced by its intellectual and religious leader, Gaon Elijah ben Solomon Zalman of Wilno (who was born in Selc). This authoritative scholar, who explored secular learning insofar as it furthered his studies of the written and the oral Jewish Law, and who is considered to have been the greatest of Lithuanian Jews of all periods, not only opposed the followers of Hassidism but also ordered their excommunication. His repeated bans (from 1772 on) checked their progress locally.

The territories pertaining to Podlasie included at times the Troki *Gubernya*; the Grodno *Gubernya*; the Department, *Oblast*, and *Województwo* of Białystok; and parts of the Suwałki *Gubernya*; the Łomża *Gubernya*; and the *Województwo* of Nowogródek. (It should be noted that the narrow stream of the Biała in Białystok was, for a time, part of the boundary between Poland and Lithuania.)

When we commemorate 500 years of Jewish settlement in Podlasie, as noted above, we also commemorate 500 years of ties between these Jews and the Land of Israel. The general story is quite familiar: Jews uttered the name of Jerusalem in their prayers and blessings; Jews knew of the Land of Israel from their reading of the Bible; Jews believed in the return to Zion and in the salvation of Israel; Jews dreamed that they themselves, not only their descendants, would be privileged to reach the Land of Israel and, at the least, endeavored to arrange for their burial in the Land of Israel. The Jews of Podlasie were fully aware of these general ties of all Jews to the Land of Israel, perhaps even more aware than other Jews of the Diaspora.

These religious, national, bonds of Jews with the Land of Israel found their expression in the raising of funds for the settlement of the Land of Israel and for the support of its residents, as in the extending of hospitality to visitors from the Land of Israel. The observance of religious practices, such as carrying the fragrant citron and the palm branch during the feast of Tabernacles or the eating of fruits of the Land of Israel on the day of the New Year for Trees, as well as the significant adjustment of the prayers used in winter and summer to accord with the beginning of these seasons in the Land of Israel, also expressed the bonds of the Jews with the Land of Israel.

Most of the Jews of Podlasie were poor. Accordingly, their practical fangible ties with the Land of Israel, which was an expensive and dangerous land sea journey away, were limited and could not develop into a mass movement. However, personal ties with the Land of

Israel have been recorded as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century. It is likely that only a small portion of these connections was ever recorded, or has reached us.

Our present task is to illuminate the connections among the Jews of the borderlands of Poland, Lithuania, and Belorussia, who number several thousands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although the extent of historical documentation is quite scanty, there is evidence from various sources of the continuity, strength, and persistence of their mutual ties.

The internal drive to reach the land of Israel, to live there and die there, did not stem from economic motivations, because the land was then nearly totally desolate and it was hard to earn a living there. The work was difficult and back-breaking and life in general was subject to the Lord's mercy and the mercy of benefactors. The impulse was entirely religious and moral, for people who believed in the redemption of Israel and its land and in the coming of the Messiah. Even under conditions of tolerance and privileges, life in exile was a life of degradation for both the nation and the individual and leaving the Diaspora was for both commandment. Jews frequently suffered from persecutions and libels and attempted to escape them with all their might. They would change their places of domicile and they would wander from country to country. Nevertheless, it must be stated that the Jews accepted the right of the nations to rule over them in their countries as axiomatic and they understood the need to respect the policy of governments to guarantee the security of their countries. One should therefore note that the prayers „Hanoten Teshua” („He who dispenses salvation unto Kings”) on behalf of the country and king were sincere and loyal and not merely an attempt at camouflage and formalistic fulfillment of obligations. The Jews never denied the right of various peoples to their countries and for pragmatic reasons alone, they would have considered themselves obligated to pray for the peace of the country in accordance with the Talmudic saying: „Pray for the peace of the Government, because if it was not for the awe of government one man would swallow up his fellowman”. The prayer on behalf of the government did not contradict the belief in the return to Zion. An interesting illustration is provided by the frontispiece of a Hebrew book that was published (among others) in Grodno (1788), entitled *The Shape of the Future Temple*. It was written by Rabbi Yom Tov Heller and published by the royal publishing house. The frontispiece mentions Grodno's position in the Jewish Committee, his exalted majesty and the date of publication is expressed in a verse from the scriptures which mentions the return to Zion. Let us quote:

Published here at the seat of the Committee the holy community of the capital Grodno, at the press of our master the mighty king, the righteous and wisest of kings Stanislaus Augustus King of Poland, Grand Duchy of Lithuania, etc. etc. may his glory be exalted.

And the verse:

If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land and give it to us.

The continuation is well known:

(a land which floweth with milk and honey)

The aspiration for the Land of Israel as the Land of the Jews did not detract at all from the idea that each nation was entitled to its freedom and to a state of its own in its country. It should come as no surprise that many viewed the right of each nation for a government of its own as absolute. They even participated in movements of rebellion and resistance against oppressors and invaders. One should mention the fighting volunteer, Berek Joselewicz, but no less worthy of mention is the stand taken by Rabbi Dov Beer Maizelsz, the Rabbi of Cracow and Warsaw, as well as the position of the Rabbi of Suwałki and Radom, and subsequently of Białystok, Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever, one of the greatest spokesmen of the Return to Zion. Also noteworthy was the position enunciated by the influential author (Editor of „Hashachar”) Peretz Smolenskin.

We have a first allusion to an attempt by people from the region to go to Israel in a legal record from the year 1539 (400 years before the Hitler War). In the District Court of Grodno, where Jews resided already from the year 1389, (100 years before Bielsk and Drohiczyn), there was mention of a Yosef ben Mordechai and his wife Braine „who were traveling to Jerusalem as the idea occurred to them”. They sold their home and refrained from paying their debts and redeeming a mortgaged fur. That year, rumors spread that Jews were leaving with their property to Turkey and taking with them Christian children (these were to be converted to Judaism and circumcised). King Zygmunt I dispatched investigators and it turned out that one was only dealing with the departure of a few Jews in fulfillment of a vow that they had taken. The matter of this oath, a moral obligation to emigrate to the land of Israel was familiar as a custom in various communities. We do not have much knowledge concerning those emigrating to Zion in the 17th century, but from our knowledge of those residing in the Land of Israel, it emerges without a doubt, that the yearning to go to the land of Israel was a common phenomenon and a number of bold individuals realized their goal and made it to Israel. The oppressions of 1648—9 in the days of Chmielnicki, and on the

other hand the awakening of the Messianic movement, headed by Shabbetai Zevi, which reached its peak in the year 1666, provided a major incentive to embark on a path of wandering irrespective of all circumstances in the effort to reach Zion. Regarding one such person the Grodno community wrote to the community of Zabłudów (1663) that was „the aged and exalted leader... Moses, the son of the great sage, our teacher, Rabbi Avraham, who was a teacher in the community of Brześć”. Undoubtedly there were many others who attempted to take counsel in order to guarantee the fulfillment of their plan to depart on the long journey to the land of Israel. The Grodno community acted on behalf of the aged son of the Rabbinical Court Judge in Brześć, as was customary in Jewish communities (in Europe as well as in North Africa) and requested that the Jewish communities en route should participate in rendering assistance to the pilgrims. The community of Zabłudów, which had become impoverished, was requested to give over 20 gulden „immediately and without any excuses”.

It should come as no surprise that the news concerning the rise of Shabbetai Zevi, the „messiah”, spread and reached even distant Lithuania, and that in meetings that were convened large portraits of Shabbetai Zevi were carried (which were extracted from Christian sources). This occurred in Mińsk, Wilno and Lublin. Gershom Scholem notes that King Jan Kazimierz found it necessary to prohibit such demonstrations of Jewish pride. Believers in Shabbetai Zevi and activists in his movement existed even after his death. Joshua Heschel Zoreff, (the author of *Sefer Hatzoref*) from Wilno, declared himself the Messiah. In Grodno Tzadok (1694—1696), a distiller by trade, appeared and presented himself as a prophet.

Tzadok departed from Grodno to inform the Jewish communities of the tidings regarding the arrival of the Messiah in the year 1695 and even dispatched epistles to various communities to inform them of the news which obligated them to prepare for the ascent to Jerusalem through prayer and mortification. That year Jews sold their property and cattle and purchased provisions for the long journey. Rabbi Tzadok was the precursor of the emigration of Rabbi Yehuda Chassid. Rabbi Yaakov Emden of Altona wrote of him as a simple Jew who arrived to arouse and bring tidings of the Messiah. The topic of the land of Israel and all that was connected with it became a relevant topic in the homilies of the various preachers and orators and in the writings of the sages.

Something novel in Jewish history occurred at the beginning of the 18th century. Professor Dinur views the year 1700 as a turning point in Jewish history. Rabbi Yehuda Hassid, of Siedlce, began organizing Jews who were prepared to emigrate to the Land of Israel. The year 1770 was

the year that group immigration began. The groups of Rabbi Yehuda Hassid emigrated in the years 1700—1708. About 1000 Jews reached their destination to grace the soil of the land of Israel. Another 500 attempted and embarked upon the journey only to fail in their efforts. The brothers Guedalia and Moshe of Siemiatycze took part in the first caravan. Rabbi Zalman of this community also participated. We do not have lists of the immigrants, and likewise of the emigrants from the Hassidic immigration movements in the years 1754 and 1777. Only the names of the leading figures were mentioned, especially upon their death (to mark the date of their passing for the *yahrzeit*). According to the names whose origin was supplied, we can ascertain that many were proportionally from areas east of the Pale of settlement. They came from Karlin, Horodenka, Przemyślany, Witebsk, Kitów and Szklów and elsewhere. Undoubtedly there were those who arrived in Israel from the more southerly and western regions. Guedalia of Siemiatycze carried the word of Jerusalem to the Diaspora in his work *Request the Peace of Jerusalem* which was written in a pathetic style and undoubtedly even if it did not prompt people into a mass immigration, at least it aided those collecting contributions for the Land of Israel. He contended: „It is proper that you should take mercy upon Zion for it is the abode of our life, in order that we shall not be put to shame when it will be rebuilt speedily in our days”. In Rabbi Hassid's group, Rabbi Yosef Bialer participated (apparently from Biała Podlaska) whose daughter Sarah was the mother of Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai (the HIDA), Rabbi and author and one of the leading personalities of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel.

The brothers Guedalia and Moshe of Siemiatycze fought against those suspected of Sabbatean leanings. They viewed the Jews living in the Land of Israel as emissaries of both God and of the Jewish people, and as watchmen maintaining their holy post. There was a famous attempt of the Gaon, Eliahu of Wilno, to reach the land of Israel but for an unknown reason, he did not finish his journey. His disciples fulfilled his spiritual legacy. In the years 1808—1809, three caravans of them embarked under the influence of the Gaon's disciples from Szklów and Pokroi (they were called in Israel: „Prushim”). From Safad, the first center of their settlement, they dispatched tidings and propaganda for immigration in a style tinged with passion and joy. „The land is giving its tidings. The land awakens. What does the land say? I remember the time when I was a mistress over other kingdoms... indeed how wonderful it is to reside in such a good land”.

Rabbis and leaders issued many calls urging return to Zion. This was especially true of those who succeeded in arriving in Israel (Rabbi Elazar Rokeach arrived in 1740; Rabbi Yosef Sofer in 1761, Rav Mena-

chem from Przemyślany arrived in 1764, Rabbi Yisrael from Połoczk arrived in 1767, Rabbi Avraham Haconeħ from Kalisk in 1777 and Rabbi Yisrael Ashkenazi from Szklów in 1809, etc.).

Rabbi Alexander Ziskind of Grodno who authored a book on ethics and behaviour, that sought to inculcate principles of righteousness and sanctification of the divine name and who was most influential, included at the close of his book an explanation on the boundaries of the land and prescriptions for the rebuilding of the Temple. In his testament he wrote „My dear children, may your perpetual desire be to journey to the Holy Land”. Works on the „measurements of the Temple” and the shape of the Temple were written both before and after his time and enjoyed wide dissemination. He died in 1794.

Rabbi Nachman of Braclaw who hoped and prayed to „skip and jump over all the obstacles and hindrances that prevented him from travelling to the Land of Israel, to break down everything quickly and come with great alacrity to the Holy Land” exerted a very important influence (1798).

We can deduce the sources for immigration from notes taken off the tombstones of the deceased. According to the notebook of the Jerusalem Burial Society, „30 of the greatest Ashkenazim” were jotted down. One can assume that we are dealing with the immigrants of the year 1809 who were well advanced in their years when they reached the Land of Israel.

Those mentioned included ten persons born in the region which we are discussing who died between the years 1773 to 1840. It would be interesting to point out that the deceased immigrated from 5 cities: Grodno — 3; Wilno — 2; Słonim — 1; Karlin -- 1; Szklów -- 3.

This list mentions Rabbi Shlomo Tzoref, born in Kiejdany, among the ten original Prushim who settled in Jerusalem „who saved the Ashkenazic patrimony from the Ishmaelites”. He was „ a great man with a great deal of political sagacity”.

It is also interesting that among those who died (according to „Cheskat Mechokek”) during years 1850—1880, about 40 were persons from the region we are discussing, and they came from 15 towns, Augustów, Orla, Białystok, Grodno, Drohiczyn, Wasilków, Wołkowysk, Zabłudów, Tykocin, Łomża, Międzyrzec, Sielec, Suchowola, Siemiatycze, Stawisk (these lists are not complete). Scholars and rabbis were particularly numerous among them.

Let us mention but a few who displayed special activity: Rabbi Aviezer of Tykocin, who arrived in 1832, was active in the Jerusalem community and was one of the heads of the house of learning, „Menschem Zion”, that was located in the courtyard of the Hurba Synagogue.

He authored two important works in defense of the faith as he struggled against the mission (Shaarei Tzedek, 1843; Mishmeret Ha-Brit, 1846), and another work on the subject of prayer and the reciting of the daily „Shma” („Mekor Ha-Bracha”, 1851).

Rabbi Shmuel Salant of Białystok arrived in 1840, and was appointed to serve as a Rabbi in Jerusalem. He was a friend of Sir Moses Montefiore and a central figure in Jerusalem. He initiated the establishment of the Knesset Yisrael (General Assembly), established institutions and erected neighborhoods. He mediated between people and rescinded the ban against Yechiel Michal Pines of Róžany.

In 1841 twenty agricultural families from the vicinity of Suwałki attempted to immigrate to Israel and cultivate the holy soil.

Chaim Pres, who arrived with his father from Białystok at the age of 6 in 1849, was a pioneer of the Enlightenment, a teacher, and a linguist. He was the editor of the Hebrew „Shaarei Zion” (1876—1885) in Hebrew and in Yiddish. He advocated a more productive form of life.

Yechiel Michal Pines (born in Róžany) arrived in the year 1878 after years of intensive activity in the Hibat Zion movement, was a publicist, organizer and representative of the Moshe Montefiore Foundation. He helped revive the community and the Hebrew language.

Eliezer Ben Yehuda, the reviver of the Hebrew language, immigrated in the year 1881 from France (he was born in Błoshkin in the Wilno district). His life's work is well known.

SUPPORT FOR THE COMMUNITY IN ZION

Those who returned to Zion came as individuals and by their efforts four centers arose in the 16th and 17th centuries (they were dubbed the Four Holy Lands). In Safad a community of vast spiritual influence was created (the Kabbalach and the Shulchan Aruch). There the first Hebrew press in the entire orient was established. The Jewish community in Jerusalem grew as did that of Tiberias and Hebron.

The Jewish Community in the Land of Israel was forced to turn to the communities in the Diaspora in order to guarantee the support for Torah institutions as well as for individuals and families, especially the elderly, who came to grace the soil of the Holy Land and persons whose sole profession was the study of Torah. The Diaspora communities regarded support for the Holy Land as an important commandment and observed it willingly, as an ongoing tradition from generation to generation. This was the case even in difficult times, caused by wars and evil suppression. Those who received and transported this assistance

were called the „Emissaries” (Sheluchei Derabanan). They would preach and give oration on behalf of Zion and they would also oversee the collection of the contributions.

The Land Committee (Lithuania) as well as the Committee of the Four Lands, viewed itself obligated to make order in the contributions and collections and thus guarantee that money raised from the contribution would reach its destination. The Committee dealt with collecting the official taxes for the state and guaranteeing the budgets for the communities. Giving charity for the Land of Israel, its sages and institutions, was considered not only as a good deed but as an obligation. By an official act of the Committee, a method was devised for distributing funds in accordance with the Kolleim (Landsmanschafts) and the study-centers of the various regions, the communities and the congregations.

The rabbinical emissary used to arrive at the houses of the congregants and receive contributions from them directly. Likewise, he would receive money from the collection boxes that were placed in the synagogues on the eve of the New Year, Yom Kippur, the Festival of Purim and the Fast of Tisha B'Av, according to a defined arithmetic distribution. Already by 1623, the Committee of Lithuania had decided on a monthly project on behalf of the Land of Israel that would take place every month, and whose purpose was „to assist our co-religionists from the Diaspora, who are scattered over the Holy Land which God has chosen for Himself as a seat of residence”. It was decided that in all the synagogues, on the first of each month, each person who would so volunteer, would make a contribution. Furthermore an appeal would be made each year either on Rosh Hashana or on Yom Kippur. The funds were assembled in Lublin at the Gromnitz Fair. The collectors of Grodno apparently were lax and were warned. „Warnings should be issued to leaders of the Grodno community, to send the money earmarked for the land of Israel that was already in their possession and to appoint functionaries also for the surrounding area, so they will be able to carry out the written law, as mentioned above in the fine imposed on the leaders of Grodno”.

In the year 1637, the Committee decided that the sextons would announce that the money would be earmarked also for the Hebron Congregation of the Sephardic Community, and for this purpose the public was requested to increase their contributions. The activity of the rabbinical emissaries and the assistance of the committees did not cease even during the Chmielnicki Period.

At a meeting of the Zabłudów Committee (1650) it was decided (Decision 462) that all the Lithuanian Communities had to turn over annually

monies that were collected for the poor of the Land of Israel at the Gromnitz Fair in Lublin (The Four Lands Committee) and it was forbidden for them to withhold any sums whatsoever. Two persons from each community would be appointed to collect the contributions from house-to-house for the Land of Israel, a collection that would take place during the next three years every week, as well as collection of contributions in the study halls three times a year. In Zabłudów itself, it was customary to select the person responsible for collecting the charities for the Land of Israel together with those responsible for supporting the religious school and other persons who oversaw general charities during the Intermediate Days of Passover (Protocol of the year 1655).

At a session of the Zabłudów Committee (1664) it was decided (Decisions 558/559) that whereas those who were circulating from city to city, bearing letters requesting assistance on their way to the Land of Israel, and since their real intention was really to gather money for themselves and remain outside of Israel, one should not provide such letters to anybody and if someone should present such a letter, one should tear up this letter and expropriate the money in that person's possessions and turn it over to those entrusted with charities for the poor of the Land of Israel. And this would apply if they did not have in their possession a special letter from the head of the Committee that they were indeed compelled to remain outside the Land of Israel for a period beyond two years.

The activity of the emissaries covered cities and even entire countries. One of these was Uri, the son of the Rabbi Shimon of Biala, who departed Safad in the year 1575 for Italy, Germany and Poland. Another visited Hamburg in the 1666. His name was Rabbi Leib Hahan, „a righteous person from the Grodno district”, previously a member of the Court in Grodno, and an emissary of the Jews from Safad. Other emissaries were active in Lithuanian districts — Avraham Kav Venacki (1683—1693) who operated in Brześć, Wilno and Grodno, and Yitzchak Binega an Ashkenazic Jew from Jerusalem who operated in Grodno (1645—1646).

In the year 1708, Chaim Malach, one of Shabbetai Zevi's adherents, resided in Tykocin and pretended to be an emissary from the Land of Israel. He managed to obtain from the Tykocin Community obligations in the sum of 400 gulden but they managed in the meantime to find out that he had „no connection with raising funds for the poor of Israel” and decided that the obligation was to be paid out only to the „lord overseer for charities for the Land of Israel”, or to „an emissary who will be from Jerusalem”.

In the 18th century, the rabbinical emissaries multiplied including „emissaries who were out for themselves” either covertly or openly.

In the year 1709, the Kabbalist Natan Natta Mannheim who belonged to the group around Rabbi Yehuda Hassid (1700) came to Tykocin. It is not mentioned in the records that the sum of 400 gulden was paid out to him. Apparently he did not possess the note which the community had given over previously to Chaim Malach. In the year 1748, Rabbi Nissim Chaim Yerucham Vilna, the Sephardi, served as an emissary to the Ashkenazi communities and he was an emissary from Hebron. Likewise, Rabbi Eliahu Guedalia, son of Rabbi Nehemiah of Hebron, served in Tykocin in the year 1785. In the year 1752, a decision of the Lithuanian Committee was signed by Rabbi Shalom of Białystok whose father died in Safad. In the year 1756 entries from the Jews in Jerusalem and Hebron were made in the Community Book of Zabłudów.

The „Kolel” in Hebron was composed of Sephardic Jews, and the members of Tykocin obligated themselves to give over to this Kolel one quarter of their charity collections for the Land of Israel. The members of the Tykocin community also pledged themselves on behalf of the Hassidim in the Galilee — in Safad and Tiberias. The emissary of the Hassidim who visited Tykocin in 1886, received the sum of 18 Polish Gulden from the charity box for the Land of Israel.

Eliahu Bialistoker who arrived at the head of a caravan and was a leader of the Mithagdim Community in Safad during the Twenties, was the emissary in 1818 in Russia-Poland in order to receive the contributions of that year for the community. That year he remained in Warsaw and signed an agreement in the name of the Prushim with the Hassidim (regarding the distribution of contributions). He was considered a very effective individual. In 1821(?) Rabbi Shmuel Horodner served as an emissary.

In the years 1826—1827, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman (the son of Rabbi Wolf Hacoheh) and Rabbi Araham Shlomo Zalman were emissaries in the Białystok region in the service of the Mitnagdim.

The emissaries fulfilled religious and public functions and generally were treated with respects by the communities. The emissaries from Jerusalem, Avraham Hacoheh of Łask and Hillel Mizrachi visited cities and towns in Poland and Lithuania and cooperated in the year 1787—1788. In their notebook, tens of places are mentioned and first of all Tykocin. Other places from our region and adjacent are Chomsk, Sielce, Różany, Żetl, Drohiczyn, Malchad, Kamieniec Litewski. In the year 1785, their emissaries reached Zabłudów and received the coins for the Land of Israel. In that year an emissary from Hebron, Eliahu, the son of Rabbi Menachem Guedalia, visited Tykocin and complained that for quite a number of years Tykocin had not turned over even a penny from the revenues of the collection boxes, vows and pledges for the Land of

Israel. The Chief Sexton Shlomo Zalman (son of Shmuel Halevi) wrote in the community notebook of Tykocin, that they had given to Eliahu 36 Polish Gulden and that an additional 20 Gulden had been given over to ransom captives who were imprisoned in Kiryat Adba — Hebron. Regarding the decision to support the Jews of Hebron, emphasis was placed on the aspiration to leave the Diaspora: „We have henceforth take upon ourselves the obligation, without a vow, that if God forbid, we will remain in this bitter exile for an additional period, then we obligate ourselves and those coming afterwards to contribute from the Chalah offering and from the fund for the Holy Land of Israel, one quarter of what will be found in the collection box for the above-mentioned city and that sum will be conveyed solely by these emissaries of the Lord who will bring the booklet here. And even if he tarries, we will still await our Messiah daily and He will rebuild our cities and we will prostrate ourselves on the graves of our forefathers and we will go up to Jerusalem on the three Fests and there we will bring our votive sacrifices, speedily in our day. Amen.” This is what the sexton of the „Kolel” wrote in the name of „the generals, dukes, leaders, officers and famous people of the community”.

Those appointed to oversee the charities for the Land of Israel held some of the most important posts in the Jewish communities. Their appointments were recorded in the community books, together with the other appointments in the communities during the annual meetings. The appointments of the overseers of the charities for the Land of Israel in Tykocin were written down from the year 1685 to 1817 in the community notebook. (The number of annual appointments was not fixed and ranged from 1 to 8).

The Lithuanian Committee and the Committee of the Four Lands were zealous regarding the contributions to the fund of Rabbi Meir Baal HaNess and attempted to obtain the money from the contributions without delay. The monies were assembled from the collection boxes in the synagogues (on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Tisha B-Av, Purim, etc.) and from collection boxes in private houses. Each woman had to put aside, when she baked the Hallah, the sum of one Polish Groschen, in order to care for the sustenance of the poor of the Holy Land (only 1/3 of these sums was designated for houses of study).

Thus we see the special importance which the Jews of the Diaspora ascribed to the settling of the land. They paid attention even to the question of the Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities, as well as to the question of various Hassidic and Ashkenazic sects (1786). The assistance was given to the indigent through organizations that resembled Landsmanschaften and were called Kollelim. Kollel Grodno, including

Białystok, was established in the year 1851, and encompassed the Białystok region and the region of Brześć. It devised a satisfactory method of distribution. This was both a very large and a very important Kollel. Two thousand and five hundred souls were dependent upon it. From the list of those who received fixed support and one-time support, it appears that many of these individuals were scholars who devoted full time to Torah study. I have found notes of those supported who arrived from Grodno, Bielsk and tens of other places. In the year 1886, 35 families and 8 widows from Białystok were supported. The activity of the Kollel was based on income that was received, especially from the fund of Rabbi Meir Baal HaNess. In the year 1911, there were 150 members of Białystok that supported the fund.

The Grodno Kollel aided the Jewish Community in Israel during the years of the First World War. The Jewish community was besieged and in the year 1915, 304 families, comprising 859 souls, were aided by the Grodno Kollel. The fund operated in Białystok up till the Second World War. The last president of the Białystok Fund was Rabbi David Fajans, the last rabbi of the Białystok community.

The Kollel in Jerusalem also performed the religious function of a Burial Society. The deceased in the years 1870—1838 from Białystok and Grodno (and apparently from immediately surrounding cities, as well as one from Tykocin) were brought to burial in an annual number ranging from 2—7.

PERSONAGES IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL IN THE 19th CENTURY

There is a surprisingly large number of these people. Some of them would be worthy in their own right, to be the subject of detailed discussion, even within the framework of our general conference. I will content myself with just noting their names and appending a very brief description. Employing a sense of imagination will enable to project from this catalogue of names in a notebook, scholarly theses worthy of full-time study.

We have mentioned names such as Eliyahu Bialystoker and others. Rabbi Shmuel Salant occupied the position of head of the entire Kahal (by virtue of an official appointment) until his death in 1909. He had the privilege of welding together the Jerusalem community and won an attitude of respect from all the communities and sects and even from the Moslem and Christian communities, as well as from the Turkish and consular authorities. During his time, Rabbi Zvulum from Białystok served as Chief Rabbinical Court Judge in the Jerusalem Rabbinate. In his era, Rabbi Naftali Herz Halevi (Weidenbaum) from Białystok

served as Chief Rabbi for both the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim. In his time, Rabbi Diskin from Brześć, Grodno and Łomża, a bold personage, exerted his authority in Jerusalem. Another interesting and active personality was Rabbi Mordechai Gimpel Yoffe (1820—1891), the Rabbi of Rózany, who arrived in the land in 1888, after extensive activity in the Yishuv Yisrael Company and in the Hibeat Zion Movement and he aided Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever in organizing the immigrants from the Białystok region to settle agriculturally in Yehud near Petach Tikvah (in whose area Kiryat Białystok was established in the year 1951). The part played by the sons of the region in establishing Petach Tikvah, in its renewal and development, is a topic worthy of extensive research.

Among the leading activists in Jewish Jerusalem were members of the Ben-Tovim and Broder families. In the year 1883, the brothers, Dr. Menachem Stein (a physician) and Leon Stein (an engineer) arrived in Israel. They were members of BILU. Stein was the founder of industry in the country and this year we celebrated its 100 year jubilee. Among the first industrialists one should mention Augen Vilbushevitz, the brother-in-law of Chazanovich.

During the course of generation, great men, steeped in Torah and wisdom, served as Rabbis including Rabbi Moshe Amiel, Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, and Rabbi Halevi Herzog (born in Łomża and educated in Paris and London), the Chief Rabbi for the entire Jewish community in the Land of Israel.

Among the early pioneers, the members of the Danin (Suchovolsky) family stand out, a family which has already become the subject of a family saga. Yehezkel, one of the activists of B'nai Moshe (Ahad Ha'am's Movement) arrived in the country in 1886. He then became one of the active members of „B'nai B'rith” and the founder of the public library (1890). In 1903 he was one of the leading activists (and the secretary) in the Conference in Zichron Yaakov for Organizing the Jewish Community. Tens of pioneers in all spheres of activity and creativity reached the Land of Israel from this region during the 19th and 20th centuries. Many of them possessed notable biographies and even chapters in encyclopedias.

INTO THE 20th CENTURY

At the close of the 19th century, political Zionism was created, due to the efforts of Dr. Herzl, and activity on behalf of Zion received a great impetus and new dimensions, thanks to a vigorous central initiative and the spreading out of a camp seeking action and personal involvement through many hundreds of branches and local centers of activity

on all five continents. The idea was no longer a hazy one. Simultaneously a people who had been almost entirely passive, awakened to political and even partisan activity, reflecting political trends that were taking place in the world at large. The Socialists and the Territorialists arose and the vast wandering to the West and across the seas began. The crossroads Israel or America, is not a new phenomenon.

Even in our area, Podlasie, the Land of Israel did not emerge as the victorious alternative among the masses who wished to leave their places of residence and embark on a journey to new and alien landscapes. It appears that, at least proportionally, the number of idealists and pioneers and men of political consciousness who preferred precisely the Land of Israel were more numerous.

Białystok served as the cradle for the birth of the Religious Zion Movement, the „Mizrachi”, through the initiative of Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever, a most energetic, dynamic, and very influential personality throughout the entire Jewish world. He was one of the first to receive Dr. Herzl sympathetically and he dispatched his grandson from Montpelier (where he studies Agriculture) to the First Zionist Congress in Basel (1897) to extend his greetings. Already in the year 1890, he left for the Land of Israel at the head of a mission to investigate the practical possibilities for immigration and settlement. He was most effusive in his belief regarding the return of all the Jews to Zion and in his opinion a Jew residing in the Land of Israel, even if he did not observe the religious commandments, was preferable to a Jew who lived abroad and observed the entire Torah.

If in the 19th century the Białystok people were in the category of a ginger group, within the renewing community, in the 20th century they ranked among the greatest doers who worked to organize the community and to establish public institutions. They were among the chief builders of the new cities of Tel Aviv and Ramat Gan and the new urban neighborhoods. They were the engineers, the industrialists, the investors and builders of new communities (Ramat Hasharon and Jedda). They went to private agriculture (Kfar Uria and Ruchama). They went to build Kibbutzim (Kfar Giladi, Gan Shmuel, Yagur, Ein Ha-Horesh, Givat Ha-shlosha and others). Thanks to their initiative, two national institutions were established: the National Library in Jerusalem (of which Dr. Yosef Hazanovich was one of the founders and builders as he had a natural passion for the subject) as well as the National Theatre, Habima, which was organized and stabilized in Moscow, under the direction of Nachum Zemach, and achieved a great world-wide reputation for stage artistry. First theatrical performances were organized by Zemach in Białystok (since 1909).

GRANDSONS OF THE REGION

Let us conclude by noting names of personages from the region who are major public figures, leaders and senior government officials. This partial list attests not only to their status, but also recall their part in contemporary history; Chairmen of the Zionist Organization — Professor Haim Weizmann (Motele), Dr. Nahum Goldmann (Wiszniewa).

This region was justly described as „the forge of national Judaism”, and indeed its connections with the Land of Israel were close and continuous through generations and the contribution made by its children was immense. Their merits were many in recent generations of struggling for the foundation of the State of Israel, and of its establishing.

Let us call names of fighters and builders.

Heads of underground formations: Hagannah — Golomb (Wołkowysk), Irgun Zvai Leumi — Raził (Smogroń), Begin (Brześć), Lohamei Herut Yisrael — Stern (Suwałki), Shamir (Różany), Friedman-Yellin (Grodno).
Presidents of the State: Haim Weizmann, Prof. Ephraim Katzir, General Haim Herzog.

Prime Ministers: Yitzhak Rabin, Begin, Shimon Peres (Wiszniewa), Shamir.

Speaker of the Knesset — Menachem Savidor (Zambrów).

Ministers: Moshe Shapiro (Grodno), Pinchas Sapir (Suwałki), Ezer Weizman.

Chief Rabbis: Yitzhak Herzog, Isser Unterman (Brześć), Shlomo Goren (Zambrów).

President of the National Academy of Sciences: Prof. Aron Katzir.

Heads of Higher Education: Prof. Benjamin Mazar (Ciechanowiec), Prof. Patenkin (Sokoły), Shlomo Kaplanski.

Military leaders: Yigael Yadin, Yisrael Tal, Ezer Weizmann, Prat, and others.

Żydzi Podlasia i ich więzi z Izraelem

W przeciągu 500-letniego osadnictwa żydowskiego na Podlasiu zacieśniały się więzi Żydów tego regionu z ich biblijną ojczyzną, Izraelem. Były to w przeważającej mierze więzi religijne.

W XVII w. mamy wiele przykładów wyjazdów Żydów do Ziemi Obiecanej oraz finansowej pomocy pielgrzymom. Od początku XVIII w. rabin z Siedlec, Yehuda Hassid, rozpoczął przygotowywać społeczność żydowską do emigracji. W latach 1700—1708 ok. 1000 osób dotarło do miejsc przeznaczenia.

W XIX w. coraz liczniejsze są przykłady emigracji Żydów z tego regionu, a w dokumentach pojawiają się m.in. takie miasta jak: Augustów, Orla, Białystok, Grodno, Drohiczyn, Wasilków, Zabłudów, Tykocin. Szczególną aktywnością odznaczał się rabbi Aviezer z Tykocina, rabbi Shmuel Salant z Białegostoku, Eliahu Bialistoker oraz rabbi Naftali Herz Halevi (obaj z Białegostoku).

Wraz z rozwojem ruchu syjonistycznego społeczność żydowska na całym świecie aktywizowała swoje poczynania na rzecz Ziemi Obiecanej, organizując m.in. zbiórki pieniężne na odbudowę państwa. Białystok był kolebką religijnego ruchu syjonistycznego, tzw. „Mizrachi”, z inicjatywą rabiego Shmuela Mohilevera.

W XIX w. Żydzi z Podlasia byli istotnym elementem ożywczym, wnoszącym nowe prądy do społeczności żydowskiej, a w XX w. stali się aktywnymi współtwórcami niektórych instytucji społeczno-politycznych w Izraelu. Są wśród nich budowniczości nowych miast, inżynierowie, przemysłowcy, inwestorzy. To dzięki inicjatywie niektórych z nich powstała Biblioteka Narodowa oraz Teatr Narodowy w Jerozolimie.

Wielowiekowe związki Żydów Podlasia i ich wkład w odbudowę państwa Izrael są bezsporne. Także wiele osobistości życia społeczno-politycznego Izraela doszukuje się swoich korzeni w tym regionie, który nazywano „kuźnią narodowego judaizmu”.