

# Ella Amitan-Wilensky

## **ESTHONIAN JEWRY A HISTORICAL SUMMARY**

Dedicated to the memory of my parents,  
Joseph Michael and Rachel Wilensky,  
who were murdered by the Nazis in Esthonia  
at the end of 1941,

### BEFORE THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

THE State of Esthonia was founded in 1919 and consisted of the former Russian Government District of Estlandia and half of the one-time Government District of Livonia. At the height of its development the Jewish community of this little country numbered about 5,000, or some 0.4% of the total population, which amounted to rather more than 1,125,000. In spite of their scanty numbers compared with the Jewish populations of Latvia and Lithuania, however, the Jews of Esthonia constituted a kind of *multum in parvo*.

The first Jews in Esthonia were the *Kantonists*: Jewish boys who were kidnapped from their homes while still children in order to serve in the Russian army for twenty-five years (from the time they reached military age). They underwent terrible persecutions on the part of those to whom they were entrusted, in order to "persuade" them to convert to Christianity. Only a small proportion of the boys succeeded in remaining true to the fate of their fathers. Most of them converted or perished.

In addition to the *Kantonists*, Jewish soldiers known as "Nikolai's soldiers" (so called after Tsar Nikolai I) served in the garrisons of Reval (Tallinn), Dorpat (Tartu) and Pemau from about the time of the Crimean War. At the end of their period of military service, which might also last up to twenty-five years, these Nikolai's soldiers were allowed to marry and establish families, which were maintained by the Russian army. They and their offspring were permitted to live in any of the cities of Russia outside the Pale of Settlement; and they constituted the foundation of many communities which came into being in Esthonia.

Thus the basis of the modern Jewish community goes back to the middle of the Nineteenth Century. However, the names of individual Jews are found in the Archives of Reval as early as the Fourteenth Century. Nor was it a matter of chance that the names of individual Jews were recorded in these Archives during the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries.

### *Towns & People*

The Reval District was for a long period the property of the Danish Crown, which treated Jews in a more humane fashion than the Knights of the Livonian Order; who then ruled the Baltic countries and mercilessly persecuted not only occasional Jews but every Christian who was not a Roman Catholic.

With regard to the Kantonists it should be mentioned that most of the boys who were taken to Russian army camps in Esthonia were themselves Esthonians. The number of Jews was smaller, while Russians proper were very few indeed. David Epstein, a Kantonist who reached Esthonia in a group of several thousand Jewish boys, relates that not more than fifty of them remained Jews. The others converted to Christianity or died while they were still children.

As remarked, many Jewish Kantonists converted to Christianity because they could not withstand the cruel persecution of their army chiefs. When the first group of Kantonist boys, who had numbered several thousand, arrived in Reval in 1828, only about fifty Jews were left. The others had converted or died. But the authorities still suspected that many of the Jews had converted only in appearance and were continuing to observe Jewish practices in secret, Ordinances providing for this contingency were published as early as 1786. Every Jew who changed his faith and became a Christian had to proclaim the fact publicly in Church. An Order was also published that in cases involving Jewish converts Jews might be brought as witnesses only if there were not enough Christian witnesses. In Reval, 110 Jews converted to Christianity during the year 1844.

Sweden ruled over Esthonia from 1621 to 1710. In accordance with an Ordinance published in September 1621, the presence of Jews was not to be tolerated in the country, as being harmful to the local inhabitants. Even earlier, in 1595, the King of Poland who then ruled over Southern Esthonia issued an Order forbidding Scots (who were then beginning to make their way into Muscovite and neighbouring territories) and Jews to reside in the regions of Dorpat, Pernau and Wenden. However, the local authorities did not act in accordance with this Order and so an even stricter one was issued in 1598. This prohibited the presence of Dutchmen, Scots and Jews in the aforesaid regions.

The fact that this prohibition was issued serves to indicate that by the end of the Sixteenth Century there were already Jewish peddlars in no small numbers to be found in Northern Livonia (South Esthonia). This is also shown by an Order of the Commissioners for the King of Poland

### *The Jews in Latvia*

dated 1598, prohibiting Scots and various other peddlars, Jews and vagabonds of whatever kind to be present, as remarked, in the Land of Livonia unless they were provided with authorisations from the cities of Riga, Dorpat or Pernau. The Order also specifies that the presence of all these peddlars and wanderers was not to be tolerated, and they were not to be provided with lodgings or refuge, because they harmed the local merchants.

At the end of the Seventeenth Century, when trade between Sweden and Poland was on the increase, Jews played an important part as middlemen and were under the protection of the authorities, having the status of what were known as "Schutz-Juden" (Protected Jews). In the protocols of the Municipal Archives of Reval (the present-day Tallinn) we find the formula of an oath that were specially composed for Jews. The following is a special formula quoted in connection with the oath to be taken by the Jew Elias Salomon in 1783, when he and the Christian craftsman Hornschach were authorised by the Russian Government to prepare seals for the latter. The two craftsmen were ordered to take oath that they would not abuse the privilege granted to them. However, the Christian took a brief oath whereas the Jews Salomon swore at full length:

"Adonai who created Heaven and earth, Thou who didst create me and all mankind, I, Elias Salomon call upon Thee by Thy Holy and all-powerful Name to confirm these my true words: That apart from the seals which I shall prepare in accordance with the royal authorisation granted to me, I shall prepare no other specimens of the said wares, I shall not abuse this authorisation and I shall not prepare similar specimens of seals like these, either by myself or at the hands of others... So help me God.

"And if I act deceitfully and misuse my authorisation — then let me be accursed forever, may the fire that consumed Sodom and Gomorrhah consume me, and may all the curses written in the Torah be fulfilled in me ...

"And may the Lord of Truth never stand any more at my right hand..."

As late as 1830 the Jew Ber Gottlieb had to take a similar oath in Reval. His oath contained additional curses such as: Let the earth swallow me up as it swallowed the followers of Korah, etc., etc.

Early in the Eighteenth Century the Russian Tsar, Peter the Great, conquered the Baltic countries, and from 1710 until her Proclamation of Independence more than two hundred years later Esthonia belonged to Russia. Peter the Great granted many Jews the right of residence in Es-

thonia, since he needed them for commercial and building purposes. These were "Schutz-Juden" whose presence depended on the good will of the rulers. However, the Tsarina Elisabeth his daughter treated the Jews cruelly, and according to a Decree which she issued in December, 1742, Jews were forbidden to dwell within the boundaries of Russia and were all to be expelled. This Decree was carried out to the full, and Jews were expelled from Esthonia as well.

Greater comprehension as to the part played by the Jews in the development of trade and industry was shown by the Empress Catherine the Great, in whose reign Jews returned to Esthonia, although illegally for the greater part. The Archives of the Reval Municipality towards the end of the Eighteenth Century contain letters from Jewish merchants living in the cities of Shklov and Mohilev who had close trade relations with the Christian wholesalers of Reval. These Jewish merchants sometimes even had branches in Leipzig and London, and frequently visited the cities of Esthonia, thanks to special permits. Even if these visits were occasionally against the law, the police officials preferred to disregard them on account of the great benefits which the city enjoyed thanks to this trade with the Jews.

The general population of Esthonia, particularly in the villages, adopted a friendly attitude towards Jews and not infrequently helped them to conceal themselves from the authorities. It should be noted that the Christians of Esthonia were less anti-Semitic than their Latvian and Polish neighbours. This may possibly be due in part to the influence of their other neighbours, the peoples of Scandinavia. And this in turn may help to account for the relatively considerable number of mixed marriages between Jews and Esthonian girls during the Twentieth Century.

And so we come to the Nineteenth Century during which the Jewish Communities of the country were founded and firmly established. An Order issued by the Military Commander of the Estlandia District in 1807 shows that he permitted Jewish gold and silversmiths, whose residence period in Esthonia had expired, to remain in that territory until the annual fairs had been held. The Esthonian villagers told legends and tales about the bravery of Jewish peddlars or merchants, who forcibly resisted the confiscation of their property and their expulsion from the country.

In the Nineteenth Century, during the reigns of Nikolai I, Alexander II and Alexander III, three different types of Jewish communities came into being in the country. The first consisted of the offspring and descendants of the Kantonists and Nikolai's Soldiers, who were mostly craftsmen and very largely destitute of Jewish learning in spite of their religious fervour.

### *The Jews in Latvia*

Second came Jews of Kurland, who moved to Esthonia and were marked by their devotion to German culture and speech. Third were Jews who came from Lithuania, from the Pale of Settlement and from Latgale. These were mostly Jewish scholars; and despite the fact that most of them were poverty-stricken they showed a certain contempt for the well-to-do but unlettered offspring of the Jewish soldiers. This lack of homogeneity among the local Jewish communities continued in the Twentieth Century as well.

During the Eighteen Thirties Jewish patients from the Pale of Settlement were given special permission to come for treatment to the hospitals of Dorpat, which had an excellent medical reputation. Later many Jewish students from the Pale of Settlement and Inner Russia also came to this famous University City. The first Jewish student known in Dorpat was a certain Alexander Wulfius, who was there in 1840. After he graduated in laws he converted to Christianity and remained in Dorpat permanently. At the same time he maintained his friendship with Jews and helped those of the city considerably in their communal and cultural affairs. He also made large-scale contributions to the Community. It is interesting that he was popular and highly respected by Jews and Christians alike.

During the second half of the Nineteenth Century, as remarked, there was an increase in the number of Jews in Esthonia. Apart from merchants and hawkers there were now many craftsmen, including shoemakers, tailors, tinsmiths and, above all, shingle-makers. These craftsmen came from Lithuania, Poland and Kurland. Like the hawkers and peddlars they found that they could make an easier living in Esthonia than in their former dwelling-places, although they had no right of domicile. In 1865 Tsar Alexander II granted the right of residence in the Baltic Provinces to Jewish craftsmen who were engaged in their specific occupations. However, in accordance with an Order dated 1842, those Jews who had the right of residence in Esthonia were forbidden to employ Christian workmen. Thus we read that in 1859 the Jewess Hannah Meirovitch of Reval was accused of employing a Christian female help to work in her home, and was sentenced to pay a fine of 5 roubles for every twenty-four hours of such employment. The total fine she had to pay was 450 roubles to the Municipal Treasury. If she was unable to pay this amount she was to receive 55 strokes of the rod (!) from the Police.

The German merchants of Dorpat also displayed their hostility towards Jewish peddlars and hawkers. In 1841 they applied to the Mayor to forbid the Jewish peddlars to engage in trade since the activities of the Jews unfavourably affected the material condition and standing of the German

### *Towns & People*

merchants, which was declining in any case. They also proposed that peddling should be prohibited for Russians and Esthonians as well.

Alexander II granted rights of residence in Esthonia and the whole of Russia under the Order of 1865 not only to craftsmen but also to the families and descendants of Nikolai's Soldiers, to merchants of the First Guild, and to university graduates. In 1856 there were already about 60 families of Nikolai's soldiers in Reval, and about 10 such families in Dorpat. These may be regarded as the pioneers of the Jewish Community of Esthonia.

Nikolai's Soldiers, who included several scholars with rabbinical diplomas, were in Reval by order of the army. Almost completely unknown to the general Jewish public, they established a small synagogue and Jewish cemetery during the Forties. In order to find the necessary money with which to erect a fence around the cemetery the soldiers sold their rations of bread and food.

In the Eighties the Nikolai Soldiers, whose numbers in Reval had reached almost 800, resolved to have a Torah Scroll written from their own resources. For this purpose they invited a special Torah scribe to the city. The military authorities approved of this step, and the traditional ending of the Scroll was celebrated with much pomp and circumstance.

At the meeting of the Reval City Council, the local Jewish corset-maker Jacob Kuklinsky, who represented the soldiers belonging to the local community, announced that they had selected a certain Semyon Cohen to be the representative of their Community. This Kuklinsky is met with again on account of a denunciation against him brought by a convert, to the effect that the said Kuklinsky had spoken contemptuously against the Christian faith and against Jesus when he tried to persuade three Jews *not* to change their faith.

In December 1870 the Ministry of the Interior issued a permit for the erection in Reval of a Synagogue for Jewish civilians residing in that city. As remarked above there was already one synagogue for the soldiers, but it was far from the centre of town and lay near the military barracks. In any case both synagogues together were too small to contain all those who came to pray. In 1882 the foundation stone of a large, spacious and handsome synagogue was laid, and it was officially dedicated a few years later.

At this period the position of Reval Jews was satisfactory, particularly after 1876, when Jews were permitted to purchase real estate.

A "heder" (old-style Hebrew school) was set up by a Hebrew teacher among the Nikolai soldiers in Reval, and teachers also taught general sub-

### *The Jews in Latvia*

jects there. During the Seventies this became a Jewish elementary school for the children of Jews of restricted means. Wealthy Jews, however, used to send their children to Christian schools.

#### THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

##### *Jewish National Cultural Autonomy*

On 12th February 1925 the Parliament of the Esthonian Republic passed a law providing cultural autonomy for all National Minorities in the country, including the Jews, with permission to use the national language of the minority for all cultural activities. Even the Jews of the neighbouring Lithuania and Latvia never achieved such full autonomy, for which the only requirement was that the minority should consist of not less than three thousand residents of the country. As a result the Jews of Esthonia were placed on an equal footing with the Russian, German and Swedish minorities. The statement issued by the Esthonian Government informing the Jews of their full cultural autonomy was issued at the celebration of the first decade of the country's independence, and was published in both Hebrew and Yiddish. This document, which is to be found in the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem, is *sui generis*, being the first and only one of its kind issued during the two millennia of exile in which official use was made of both Hebrew, the national language, and Yiddish the Jewish vernacular.

The institutions of Jewish cultural autonomy began to function in 1926, and included the following :

1. A *Kultur-rat* or Cultural Council of 27 members, who were elected for three years;
2. A *Kultur Verwaltung* or Cultural Administration of 7 members, who were elected by and from the members of the Cultural Council;
3. Local Committees which were concerned with rates and taxes and schools.

The income of the autonomous institutions derived from the rates levied on the members, subsidies granted by the Government and municipalities, and other sources. Elections to the Cultural Council were general, direct and secret.

The question of the language of instruction in the Jewish schools led to sharp differences of opinion until a compromise was reached whereby the two languages, Hebrew and Yiddish, were given equal rights as languages of tuition.

### *Towns & People*

In 1926 a Society was established for Jewish schools. In Talinn it founded a Yiddish kindergarten and elementary school. Later the Jewish schools in Talinn united and provided parallel classes in both Hebrew and Yiddish.

In 1932 there were 204 Jewish children attending secondary schools, of whom 115 studied in Hebrew or Yiddish classes, 19 in Esthonian schools, 25 in Russian schools and 45 in German schools.

Details about the Jewish school in Dorpat, which was founded as early as 1875, will be found below.

The cultural autonomy introduced fresh vitality in the Jewish Community of Esthonia, where there were soon a large number of cultural, educational, sport and entertainment societies — a number that was indeed surprising when the size of the local Jewish population is taken into consideration. Naturally most was done in the two major cities Reval (Talinn) and Dorpat (Tartu), which competed with one another for the hegemony over the Jews of the country. Reval was the largest city and the capital, with a wealthy Jewish community, while Dorpat prided itself on its University, Jewish students and student institutions.

A few statistics on the Jews of the country between the two World Wars are given here. According to the official population census of 1922 there were 4566 Jews in the country, constituting 0.4% of the total population. Almost all of them lived in towns, practically half in the two major cities Reval (Talinn) where there were 1,203 Jews, and Dorpat (Tartu) containing 920. They constituted about 1.3% of the urban population. There was not a single Jewish representative in the Esthonian Parliament.

In 1934 a total of 1,688 Jews were active in economic life. Of these, 514 were engaged in trade, 409 as clerks or in services, 249 in various crafts, 233 as workers, 158 as members of the free professions, 26 landlords and 16 Jewish religious functionaries. Most of the Jews had small or medium-sized shops.

Of the 249 Jewish craftsmen 77 were tailors, 40 furriers, 39 tinsmiths, 33 leather-cutters for shoes, and 16 technicians. There were no shoemakers among them. Most of the craftsmen worked alone, without any helpers.

Jewish physicians constituted 8.9% of all those in the country. In 1932 there were 85 Jewish physicians, of whom 65 were men and 20 women. They did not all engage in their profession. In fact no more than a few did so as there was no need for so large a number of Jewish physicians, to whom Christian patients hardly came at all. As a result they worked in



### *The Jews in Latvia*

the businesses of their parents, and in many Jewish shops one might be served by a "Herr Doktor".

In Reval, Dorpat and Narva there were Jewish Cooperative banks. In 1936 all three of them together had 610 members. There were also Jewish industrial plants in the country, of which the largest, ETK, manufactured paints and cosmetics.

The following is a list of some of the many Jewish institutions to be found in Reval (Tallinn) in the year 1928 :

A religious communal administration; Management of the Jewish National Cultural Autonomy; The Public Jewish Society; The Bialik Literary and Dramatic Society, founded in 1928; The Zionist Organisation; The Maccabi Sports Association; The Charity Society; The Burial Society; The Society for the Study of the "Ein Yaakov" (a work containing all the non-legal sections of the Talmud); The Hanoar Pupils' Zionist Organisation; etc., etc.

Between the years 1871 and 1925 the number of Jews in the city rose from 412 to 2,352.

There was no Yiddish daily, but the Lithuanian journals "Yiddishe Stimme" and "Dos Wort" used to publish a weekly supplement dedicated to Esthonian Jewry.

#### *The Dorpat Community*

Reference has already been made to the friendly competition between the communities of Reval and Dorpat. The latter was given vitality by its Jewish University students and the Institutions they established.

Until the introduction of the numerus clausus in secondary and high schools of Russia in the year 1887, the University of Dorpat was a centre of attraction for Jewish students, who numbered 235 in 1886.

#### *Juedische Studenten Kasse (Jewish Students' Fund)*

The University of Dorpat was more liberal and easygoing towards Jews than other Russian Universities. Life was relatively cheap, it was close to Jewish centres, and at the end of the Nineteenth Century the language used was German which did not constitute an obstacle for Yiddish-speaking students. The Medical Faculty was of a very high standard, and as a result the University attracted Yeshiva students from Volozhin and other centres of Talmudical studies. Most of these had no means of their own, and in order to ease their studies at the University the "Juedische Studenten Kasse" or Jewish Students' Fund was founded in 1875. Its original name was "Unterstuetsungskasse fuer unbemittelte Studierende in Dorpat" (Fund for

### *Towns & People*

the Support of Persons without means studying in Dorpat). At its first Meeting the Fund had 22 members. It received a monthly grant from the Society for the Dissemination of Enlightenment. Each member paid his membership fees every semester.

#### *The Jewish Elementary School in Dorpat*

Besides providing support for Jewish students without means, the Fund played an active part in the life of the community. As long ago as the Seventies of the last century Jewish students began to teach, free of charge, poor Jewish children in Dorpat whose parents did not have the means to send their children to the general school. A certain Eliezer Perkin applied to the Ministry of Culture for the establishment of a Jewish School in Dorpat, and a favourable reply was received. However, the community was too poor to satisfy the Ministry's condition of paying 300 roubles a year to the Government, in return for which the latter would open the school for the children. So the students came to the aid of the community. Several public-spirited Jewish students called a General Meeting attended by communal representatives, at which it was decided to establish an elementary school with two shifts. The girls would learn in the morning from 8 to 1, while the boys who attended Heder in the morning would go to school from 2 to 6 p.m. The course of studies included : Russian, German, Arithmetic, Geography and Jewish History. The students undertook to teach free of charge, while well-to-do householders undertook to provide the money to hire premises, buy books, instruments, etc. And so the Jewish school came to be opened. It should be noted that the members of the Students' Fund paid not only their membership fees but also a certain sum in support of the school, which they administered until the year 1907.

In addition to clubs, large libraries and various groups and societies, Dorpat also had an institution which crowned its communal activities. This was the "Akademischer Verein fuer Juedische Geschichte und Literatur" (Academic Union for Jewish History and Literature), which was founded in 1884 on the initiative of a number of students, including Dr. J. Bernstein-Cohen. The Society was established in order to foster comradeship among its members, and even more in order to permit the thorough-going study of Jewish History and Literature, spread Jewish culture among the masses and make them nationally conscious. The Society had a considerable influence on the cultural level of the community. Its meetings and lectures were open to the general public, were very popular and always attracted a large audience. The lecturers included the Hebrew poet Saul Tscherni-

### *The Jews in Latvia*

chovsky who called Dorpat "The Heidelberg of Russia", Dr. Alexander Goldstein and other notable personalities. Many former members now live in Israel as physicians, teachers, clerks, workers and kibbutz members. In Israel there are also two women writers born in Dorpat who were members of these Society. These are the poetess Ella Amitan-Wilensky and the writer Ida Priver-Bakst.

All one-time members of the Society remember it affectionately as part of their youth. On occasion they have met together in Israel to celebrate its anniversaries. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century the meetings and lectures were held in the home of the Gens family, six of whose seven children were university graduates and members.

It is possible that the Society was originally intended to be a Jewish version of the numerous Christian Student Corporations of Dorpat, but it turned into a small-scale spiritual centre for the Jews of the city, and far beyond. It also had a large library.

In 1926 there were 188 Jewish students at the Dorpat University. From 1934 on the University maintained, as part of its Faculty of Philosophy, a special Chair for Jewish subjects (History and Philosophy) headed by Dr. L. Gulkowitz, who had formerly been Professor of Philosophy in Leipzig. This was possibly the only University in Eastern Europe which had a special Department for Jewish scholarship.

In 1934 the number of Jewish students declined to 94.

Apart from institutions connected with the student body, the Dorpat Community also maintained the Societies, etc., that are usually to be found in Jewish Communities, such as the Synagogue, Burial Society, Charitable Society etc. Of these the more important included: The Religious Community; The Autonomous Cultural Administration; The Academic Society for Jewish Literature and History; Three Student Societies, one exclusively for women, one assimilationist in trend, and a third consisting of Zionist supporters of Jabotinsky; The Zionist Organisation; Democratic Club; Maternity Home; Society for visiting the sick; Societies for the study of the Mishna and Ein Yaakov; Friends of the Yiddish Language, founded by Payensohn and J. Gens; Society for the expansion of Jewish Scholarship at the Dorpat University; Hehalutz; Dorpat Society of Jewish Youth for History and Literature, founded by the students Leo Wilensky and Jacob Gens.

The Jewish population of Dorpat rose from 616 in 1879 to 920 in 1934.

### *The Zionist Movement*

The Movement engaged in widespread activities, chiefly in Reval and

*Towns & People*

Dorpat. During the Hovevei Zion period, in 1890, a Society was established in Dorpat with the aim of providing material support for settlement in Eretz Israel. Membership grew from year to year, and by the middle of the Nineties it sent an annual sum of 100 roubles towards Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel — a by no means small amount for such a small community in those days. "Hehaver" was a lively and active Zionist Society in which Leo Wilensky and Jacob Gens played a considerable part.

In 1917 a special Childrens' Library was established in Dorpat in memory of the wellknown communal worker Dr. J. Eiges, and received about 250 books from the Library of the Literary and Historical Society.

The Zionist families of Dorpat included: Uswansky, Baksht, Wilensky, Gens, Zalmanowitz, Kruskal and Rubin in Reval. Some of their children came to Eretz Israel. In the guest room of my parents' home the portraits of Herzl and Nordau were hung besides the portraits of Tsar Nikolai II and his family.

The Jews of Esthonia were relatively fortunate, as about 4,000 of them were evacuated into Central Russia during 1941 before the German Occupation. About 1,000 remained behind and were exterminated.

In the present Soviet Esthonian Republic there are now close on 4,000 Jews once again.

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