

# LIFE AND DEATH OF ESTONIAN JEWRY

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The history of the Jewish communities in Estonia in itself is an insignificant and small chapter in the history of the Jewish people and a small page in the annals of the Estonian people. From the present vantage point, however, one finds some significant historical lessons in the treatment of national minorities by the Estonian government as compared with the recent treatment of Jews in the U.S.S.R. and in the role the Baltic Jews play now as the avantgarde in the struggle for civil and human rights in the U.S.S.R.

Permanent Jewish settlements in Estonia are of reasonably recent origin. It was only under Tsar Nicholas I (1825-1855) that Jews were permitted to settle in Estonia. But Jews had lived in Estonia many centuries earlier. The first mention is of a baker, Johannes the Jew, in Reval (Tallinn), in 1343 and in 1383. Also in 1411 and 1413 did a Jew live in Reval, as well as in 1685.<sup>1</sup> The first mention of larger groups of Jews in Reval occurs in 1717 and 1720.<sup>2</sup> From decrees expelling Jews from Reval and Dorpat (Tartu) during the 17th century and the entire 18th century we know that Jews have lived in Estonia on temporary permits, but under constant threat of being expelled and having their property confiscated.<sup>3</sup> The only economic activity Jews were permitted to carry on was peddling during county fairs, when the local authorities usually took them under their protection against the attacks of the German guilds who demanded the expulsion of Jews from any economic activity.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of persecutions, a small number of Jews managed to stay in Reval throughout the entire 18th century. They even had their own synagogue there. Among them were teachers of the local Hebrew elementary religious school, clergymen, peddlers, traders, craftsmen, and small and large merchants.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the outright hostility toward Jews by Peter I, Anna, Elizabeth, and Catherine II, Jews were continually expelled from within the Russian Empire, with the exception of Courland and, occasionally, Estonia. The dukes of Courland and the local German authorities in Estonia tolerated the Jews until the end of the 18th century.<sup>6</sup> By 1820 nearly the entire Jewish community in Reval was expelled as a result of the anti-Jewish decrees of Catherine II and Alexander I.<sup>7</sup>

However, the first larger legal Jewish settlements in Estonia emerged in Reval and Dorpat around 1830 because of the special privileges accorded to Jews who were Cantonist and those who had completed twenty-five years of military service.<sup>8</sup> Beginning with 1846 the Reval Jewish community had its own synagogue as well as a religious school, the Chedder.<sup>9</sup> Between 1870 and 1883 the Reval Jewish Community even had two synagogues, one attended by the Cantonists and military personnel of Jewish faith, the other by civilian Jews.<sup>10</sup> Outside Reval Jews lived in Dorpat, Narva, and several villages. Most of them were small traders, peddlers, and various craftsmen.<sup>11</sup>

During and after the Crimean War many Jewish soldiers settled in Estonia. Alexander II permitted Jews with university degrees and merchants of the third guild to settle anywhere in Russia, and several hundred settled in Estonia.<sup>12</sup> Thus by the end of the 19th century there were nearly 800 legally-established Jews in Reval, nearly 200 in Dorpat, and about 100 in Narva, Valga, and other smaller towns.<sup>13</sup>

During the reign of Alexander II economic conditions of Estonian Jews were good. Culturally, however, the Estonian Jews lagged considerably behind their brethren in Russia, because they had no trained Jewish religious teachers, and the level of teaching in the several religious schools in Reval and Dorpat was very low.<sup>14</sup>

The Jewish situation in Estonia changed radically when Alexander III ascended to the throne. His anti-Jewish laws, expelling Jews from most Russian cities, decreased the number of Jews in Reval to less than half—about 300. The persecution of Jews all over Russia and the rise of revolutionary activities attracted many Jewish Estonian youths into the stream of the Russian revolutionary movement, both the social-democratic as well as the socialist-revolutionary. Particularly strong were the revolutionary activities among the Jewish students of Dorpat University. Many of the latter were arrested and imprisoned, together with their Russian, Latvian, and Estonian co-students, for revolutionary activities.

The pogroms against Jews in Russia during the 1880's and 1890's led to the birth of a new movement—Zionism—and many Estonian Jews joined this movement.<sup>15</sup> Also nationalism among young Jews grew, which led to the establishment of a new national revolutionary Jewish organization, the "Bund," formed in Dorpat in 1904 by Jewish students and workers.<sup>16</sup>

The 1905 Revolution had its repercussions among the small Jewish population. When Russian "Black Hundred" groups attempted to organize pogroms in Reval and Dorpat, the Jewish population organized self-defense groups and thus prevented large-scale murder and destruction with considerable assistance from Estonian and Russian revolutionary youths. After the defeat of the 1905 Revolution many Jewish intellectuals were arrested, tried, and confined to prisons.<sup>17</sup> The harsh measures of the tsarist police against revolutionaries in general and Jews in particular paralyzed the revolutionary movement among the latter until the outbreak of World War I.

As a result of systematic anti-Jewish persecution by the last two tsars, Alexander III and Nicholas II, the new political movement, Zionism, spread rapidly among the Russian Jews. In Estonia, too, Zionism became the leading political movement, and the majority of Estonian Jewish youth in Reval, Dorpat, and the provincial towns joined this movement.<sup>18</sup> During World War I, Jews in Estonia suffered greatly. As "dangerous elements," hundreds of them were forcibly deported by the tsarist police into the Russian hinterland, and the Estonian Jewish communities lost both in size and strength.<sup>19</sup>

During the War of Liberation of the Estonian people against the Bolsheviks (1918-1920), many Estonian Jews took an active part as volunteers in the Estonian army. Especially the Estonian Jewish youths from Tartu University and from the high schools were actively engaged in fighting for the Estonian cause. During their brief occupation the Bolsheviks meted out severe punishment not only against Estonians who opposed them but also against the Jews, several dozen of whom were murdered in Tallinn, Tartu, and Narva.<sup>20</sup>

The emergence of a democratic Estonian republic was warmly greeted by the Jews, because they had actively participated in the struggle for Estonia's independence. As part of Estonia's democratic constitution, many Estonian Jews

received full citizenship and even more: those Jews who had actively participated in the War of Liberation received land and other benefits accorded to military combatants.<sup>21</sup>

Difficult economic conditions during the first decade of Estonia's independence affected also Jewish economic life, but no anti-Jewish sentiments or anti-Semitic movements developed. The Estonian Jews struggled together with the rest of the population against economic hardships without being discriminated against in political or economic fields. The Communist offensive on the eve of 1 December 1924 and the following *coup d'etat* in Tallinn did not affect the economic or political status of the Jews, since there were no Jewish communists who participated in the coup.

The economic development of Estonia continued despite many difficult adjustments. Having been a country with a considerable industry—metal and textile—geared to the Russian market, it suffered immensely because of Soviet economic policies of not trading with Estonia. The growing number of unemployment in the major cities caused economic misery among the working class and to a smaller degree among the small businessmen. Radical ideas of Communism and chauvinism began to spread among the discontented masses. These were fostered by Communist agents in labor unions and by a new ideology coming from the West: German National Socialism.<sup>22</sup>

During these difficult times the economic position of the Estonian Jews was, on the whole, not threatened. The small number of Jewish businessmen did not seem to threaten the Estonian middle class. The young Estonian intelligentsia— although slightly drunk from the birth of the Republic—was still imbued with the old ideals of socialism and humanism, which it carried on since the days of the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, and it was not yet chauvinistic toward its national minorities. Likewise, the small Jewish minority of about 4,500<sup>23</sup> did not seem a threat to the economic and political independence of the Estonian people: very few Jews were active in political life, and those few played insignificant roles. Therefore, the Jews felt secure as citizens until the depression of 1929-36 and the coming into existence of two factors, the growing nationalism in the governing Estonian circles and the emergence of the *Vabadusliitlased* (Veterans of the War of Liberation). With the rise of Fascism in Europe and the emergence of Nazi Germany, the *vapsid*, as they were commonly called, became increasingly chauvinistic and openly anti-Semitic.<sup>24</sup>

During these years anti-Semitic actions against Jews became frequent. In public gatherings, in resort places, Jews were often openly barred by signs saying things like "Jews cannot live here." In Tartu the "Athena" restaurant openly announced that its premises were closed to Jews. There were also occasional beatings of Jewish youths—in dark alleys, on beaches—by Estonian youths. The Estonian government did not encourage these anti-Jewish excesses, but it did not openly denounce them. The growing conservatism of the government fostered chauvinistic attitudes among the Estonian intelligentsia and the Estonian youth, particularly among the staunchly-nationalistic governmental youth organization *Noored Kotkad* (Young Hawks). These attitudes and excesses against the small Jewish minority made the latter feel insecure, and until 1935 the Jews were in physical fear for their very existence.<sup>25</sup> Then, thanks to the active suppression of the combatants by the President of the Estonian republic, Mr. Päts, this threat was completely removed; during the last five years of Estonia's independence, Estonian Jews carried on their usual cultural and charitable activities.

Even though on the surface the Jews had all the political rights of Estonian citizens, in

reality their economic situation was continually worsening. This was due to a number of circumstances. During the brief period of independence the Estonian people developed an excellent and most progressive educational system with the astonishing result of suddenly becoming a nation with an overabundant middle class, particularly of college and university graduates. There were simply not enough positions for all educated Estonians in the small republic of one million. The immediate result of this overabundance of Estonian intellectuals was a strict governmental as well as private policy of racial discrimination against minorities. Germans, Russians, and Jews could not get any positions with governmental agencies; nor could a non-Estonian teach in public elementary and high schools or colleges or serve in the Estonian armed forces above the rank of corporal, etc. This created a problem of tremendous consequences to the young and aspiring generation of every minority: they were simply cut off from the economic advantages. The only possibilities open were in business and the free professions, provided one could get into the university within the strict, though non-official, quotas for minorities.

Restlessness among the minorities grew steadily and found its expression in many ways. For the young and educated Jews there were only two options: be condemned to unemployment, or emigrate. The first led to the radicalization of many Jewish youths who found their way into the illegal Socialist and Communist parties. The majority, however, began to look toward Palestine as the only solution to their problem. Thus Zionism became the strongest political movement among Jews in Estonia, and Jewish young men and women emigrated to Palestine, either legally or via the so-called "underground railway". The result was a gradual decline of the Estonian Jewish population.

The Zionist groups ranged from the extreme left, the *Hashomir Hazoir*, an orthodox Marxist group; to a General Zionist group; to an extreme rightwing group, the *British Trumpeldor*. There were also adult Zionist groups, such as the *Histadrut*, a reformist socialist organization; the "General Zionist"; and the rightwing Revisionist Zionist.

In Tartu, as a university city, there was an active Jewish student association with nearly eighty members whose main concern was to assist poor students in their pursuit of academic careers.<sup>26</sup> There were also three Jewish student fraternities: the revisionist *Hasmonea* and the nonpolitical *Limuvia*, both consisting strictly of male students; and the Academic Union, which was coeducational and the most liberal of the three.

Since the Jewish communities could elect representatives to the Estonian Parliament, there were heated political campaigns before every election with two basic groups fighting it out: the liberal, progressive, and socialist; and the Zionist, both left-wing and right-wing. During the last five years of Estonian independence the major struggle between the two groups centered around the language of instruction in the only two Jewish schools.

Jewish elementary religious education existed in Estonia wherever Jews lived. Religious schools operated without much interruption in Tallinn since 1846, in Tartu since 1885.<sup>27</sup> These schools were maintained and supported by voluntary contributions from the local Jews. Neither Russian nor local governmental institutions contributed anything to Jewish education; on the contrary, they often passed ordinances against the Jewish congregations, thus limiting their pursuit of promoting religious Jewish education.

Since the establishment of independent Estonia, the situation changed radically in favor of Jewish education. The Estonian government pursued a policy of noninterference in educational affairs of the local minorities, which became a

tremendous boon to the development of public Jewish education. In Tallinn, Tartu, and Valga, elementary bilingual schools were established, both Hebrew and Yiddish, and maintained by the local Jewish communities.<sup>28</sup> In 1922 the Jewish community of Tallinn maintained its own gymnasium; in 1925 Tartu reached the same goal. The Valga Jewish community developed a full elementary school by 1928.<sup>29</sup>

With the promulgation of the Law of Cultural Self-Government for National Minorities on 12 February 1925, the Estonian government established a precedent in the history of the treatment of minorities: it was the only European nation that fully supported the education of all of its minorities in their own national languages.<sup>30</sup> The Law of National Minorities gave them the right to maintain their own cultural institutions, such as schools, charitable institutions, libraries, as well as to maintain a fully independent cultural and religious autonomous organization fully accredited and partially supported by the Estonian government.

In 1932 the only university in Estonia, the State University in Tartu, established a special Judaica Chair, where Hebrew, Yiddish, and Jewish history and religion were taught—first by its founder, Dr. Jacob Nodel, and later by a German-Jewish professor Gulkowish, who for that purpose had been brought by the University from Nazi Germany.<sup>31</sup>

In spite of their small size, the Jewish communities carried on a very active social, cultural, and political life. A Jewish theatre ensemble was organized in Tartu by Dr. Jacob Payenson in 1917, called the Tartu Jewish Dramatic Circle. It played in every major Estonian city (e.g., Tallinn, Tartu, Narva, Võru, Valga) and produced over one hundred plays. Tallinn had its own Jewish theatre ensemble, "Licht," founded in 1919.<sup>32</sup>

The first meeting of the Jewish Cultural Council in charge of the Jewish Cultural Autonomy met 23-25 April 1926 in Tallinn. After lengthy discussion, it was agreed to pursue a course of building a bilingual, Hebrew and Yiddish, school-system where both languages were equally represented.<sup>33</sup> The principal of the Jewish high school of Tallinn, Mr. Gurin, worked energetically in building up the school with the active help of all local Jewish organizations. The Tartu Jewish community hired Dr. Jacob Nodel, from Vilno, in 1926 to become its first principal. Ably assisted by his assistant-principal, Mr. Levitin, the school grew both physically and academically.

In both major cities, Tallinn and Tartu, as well as in Valga and Narva, the local Jewish communities showed great cultural vitality: clubs, evening courses, and charitable organizations grew and developed. The small Jewish community of less than 4,500 was actively engaged in building vital organizations that fulfilled its long-neglected cultural and social needs as a minority. This happy trend lasted only eight years. Then long-existing forces from within caused a rapid decline that nearly destroyed the cultural autonomy of the Estonian Jewish community.

There were several factors from within the community as well as outside factors involved in the decline. The first and outwardly the strongest factor was the growing battle between the Hebraeists and the Yiddishists.<sup>34</sup> With the spread of Zionism among Estonian Jews during the late twenties and early thirties, the language problem became the number one issue among the various political factions of Estonian Jewry. The Zionists, looking toward the ultimate settlement of many, if not most, Estonian Jews in Palestine, insisted that Hebrew must become the cornerstone of Jewish education, with Yiddish, the language most Estonian Jews were

using as their daily language, relegated to the second place. This view was opposed with growing ferocity by the Yiddishists, who insisted on the opposite: that most Estonian Jews will remain in Estonia and thus Yiddish, their mother tongue, should get preferential treatment.<sup>35</sup>

This battle grew hotter with every year for two reasons: first, the leading Jewish community organizations became increasingly dominated by the Zionists, who by sheer democratic majority pushed Yiddish into second place; second, after the emergence of the authoritarian regime of Konstantin Päts, it openly supported the Zionist cause.

Why did the Päts government support the Zionists in their struggle against the Yiddishists? On the surface it is hard to pinpoint the reason that put the Estonian government on the side of Estonian Zionism. The only explanation for this stand could be found in the political makeup of both Zionists and anti-Zionists. The former were primarily interested in preparing the Estonian Jewish youth for a future life in Palestine: the right-wing Revisionists for a capitalist Palestine, based upon military strength; the middle-of-the-road Zionists (General Zionists) for a capitalist Palestine with the help of economic concentration of Jewish capitalists there; and the left-wing Zionists for a socialist Palestine. The Yiddishists, on the other hand, were predominantly socialist in their ideological constellation, and many of them belonged to various Estonian liberal and socialist groups. It was the very distaste for the left-wing leanings of the Yiddishists that tilted Päts' government toward supporting the cause of the Zionist majority.<sup>36</sup>

The other factor, outside the control of the Jewish community, was the Law on Cultural Autonomy. It provided that each national minority had to maintain a national list of membership—a national *Kadaster*, as it was officially called. The law also provided that a member of any national minority had the freedom to join it, but could not be forced to do so. This last provision opened the door to many Yiddishists who simply left the Jewish *Kadaster*, withdrawing their children from the Jewish school as well as discontinuing payment of their Cultural Autonomy dues to the local Jewish communities.<sup>37</sup>

The result was nearly instant disaster. With dwindling incomes, the Jewish communities could not maintain a full program in their schools where pupil enrollment declined steadily. An additional factor weakening the entire fabric of Jewish community strength in Estonia was the gradual departure of many young Jews for Palestine. Between 1936 and 1940 nearly 500 young Jews left Estonia. The Estonian Jewish community was doomed to becoming gradually a community of old people. However, this trend was abruptly halted through the annexation of Estonia by the Soviet Union.

With the establishment of a Soviet Estonia in June 1940, all Jewish cultural and social life came to an end. The new Estonian Communist Government, by order from Moscow, abolished the Law of National Minorities. All Jewish communities were dissolved, Jewish schools were closed, and every Jewish organization, even charitable, was declared illegal.

But the heaviest blow was yet to come: in July 1940, and on a larger scale in May and June 1941, hundreds of Jews were forcibly deported, together with tens of thousands of Estonians, to Siberia.

The last, and most tragic chapter in the history of the small Jewish communities in

Estonia came with Nazi Germany's attack upon the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. During the months of July and August, when Estonian Jews had the opportunity to escape the Nazis by going East to Russia, nearly half of them did so.

Most of the young men of military age either were drafted into the Red Army and sent deep into the U.S.S.R. or joined the paramilitary civilian defense units. The former were eventually reorganized into Red Army Estonian Units, and more than a third perished fighting against the Germans. The fate of the latter was much worse: most perished at the hands of the so-called "Forest Brothers" (*metsavennad*), Estonian anti-communist military units, who attacked them from the rear and during battles between them and the invading German armies. The fate of the remaining nearly 2,000 Jews—mostly women, children, and older men—was predestined by the Gross-Wannsee Resolution of 20 January 1941: they were all killed.<sup>38</sup>

There is no logical way in which one can explain why the 2,000 Estonian Jews chose to stay, although they knew well about Nazi atrocities both in Germany as well as in Lithuania and Latvia: thousands of Latvian Jews who fled through Estonia during the end of June and during the month of July describe them vividly to many Estonian Jews who had helped them with shelter, food, and money in their flight to the U.S.S.R.

Within a month from the day of the Nazi occupation of Tallinn and Tartu, most prominent Jewish males were summarily arrested and then shot. Small temporary ghettos were established in Tallinn and Tartu; from there gradually most Jews were deported to nearby concentration camps where they were shot, beaten to death, or sometimes burned alive.<sup>39</sup> Thus ended tragically the life of one of the smallest Jewish communities in Europe. Together with six million other Jews that were brutally exterminated by Nazi Germany, the Estonian Jewry contributed its own blood to the martyrdom of the Jewish people.

At the end of World War II nearly all Estonian Jews who had escaped to the U.S.S.R. returned—except of course those who had died in exile, from disease or hunger, or in Soviet concentration camps and those, nearly four hundred young Estonian Jews, who had died on the front fighting Nazi Germany. Thus from 1945 until 1960 nearly 1,500 Estonian Jews returned to Estonia, most of them settling in Tallinn. An additional 1,500 came from various other parts of the U.S.S.R., predominately from Latvia and Leningrad, and settled in Estonia.

At the present time there are more than 3,000 Jews in Estonia. Unlike in the rest of the U.S.S.R., where Jews are discriminated against, Estonian Jews are treated well by local Estonian authorities. Culturally, however, they live sterile lives, not being permitted to have their own cultural and religious life. In this respect the Jews in Estonia are worse off than the Estonians themselves, who are permitted their own churches, schools, and other cultural institutions.

The militancy of the Estonian Jews, together with the Latvian and Lithuanian Jewry, is rather of recent vintage. Until 1971 Baltic Jews kept a very low profile indeed—far lower than the native Baltic population. But because of world public protests since 1971, particularly in the United States, Baltic Jews have begun to voice their unhappiness. Raised in the tradition of political democracy during the twenties and early thirties, Baltic Jews of today dare to challenge the mighty Russian Communist State, regardless of the harsh punishment they receive such as loss of jobs, housing, and even exile and imprisonment in Siberia. Like their fellow Estonians, the Jews are totally disillusioned with the Soviet system. But unlike the native Balts, the Estonian Jews have one advantage—Israel, which is their distant beacon in the darkness of

Communist Russia. In their daily protests the Estonian Jews get strong moral and personal support from the Estonian people who consider the struggle of their Jewish fellow-citizens against Soviet totalitarianism a struggle for their own liberation.

#### NOTES

- 1 Nosson Genss, *Zur Geschichte der Juden in Eesti* (Tartu, 1933), pp. 9-10.
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- 3 Ibid., p. 11.
- 4 Ibid., p. 12.
- 5 Ibid., p. 13.
- 6 Leonid Arbusow, *Grundriss der Geschichte Liv-, Est-, und Kurlands* (Riga, 1908), p. 237; and Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* (Philadelphia, 1916), pp. 246-278.
- 7 Genss, p. 13.
- 8 Hirsch Druk, "Di Yiddishe Kibutzim in Estland: Establishment of Present Jewish Communities in Estonia" (MS, n.d.), p. 21
- 9 Genss, pp. 14-15.
- 10 Ibid., p. 15.
- 11 Druk, p. 24.
- 12 Ibid., p. 27; and Kopl Jokton, *Di Geshichte fun di Yidn in Estland* (Dorpat, 1927) pp. 8-26
- 13 Druk, pp. 31-33.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 37-39.
- 15 Ibid., pp. 42-45.
- 16 Jokton, p. 53.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 51-52.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 50-51.
- 19 Ibid., pp. 59-61.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 62-64.
- 21 Druk, pp. 37-38
- 22 Arbeter Gedank, Riga, 17 February 1934, p.3
- 23 Mark Wischnitzer, *Die Juden in der Welt* (Berkley, Cal., 1935), p.72
- 24 Frimorgn, Riga, 11 March 1934, p.4; and 2 February 1935, p.5; *Folksblat*, Kaunas, 3 July 1936, p.3
- 25 Frimorgn, Riga, 7 April 1937, p. 6
- 26 Der Yiddischer Academischer Farein Far Yiddische Geschichte un Literatur - 50 yor yovl 1884-1934 (Tartu, 1934), pp. 3-4
- 27 Druk, p. 33
- 28 *Folksblat*, Kaunas, 18 September 1934
- 29 Ibid., 8 June 1934.
- 30 Evald Uustalu, *The History of Estonian People* (London, 1952), p. 220
- 31 *Folksblat*, 18 September 1934
- 32 Tswantsik Yor Yiddish Teater in Tartu (Tartu, 1937), pp. 1-3
- 33 *Dos Folk* (Tallinn, n.d.), pp. 3-7
- 34 *Folksblat*, Kaunas, 18 January 1935, p. 4.
- 35 Ibid., 26 June 1936, p. 5
- 36 Nosson Genss, "Der Untergang fun Yiddische Bildung in Eesti," (MS; Tartu, 1936), pp. 11-16.
- 37 *Folksblat*, Kaunas, 4 January 1935, p. 5.
- 38 Gerald Reitlinger, *The Final Solution* (New York, 1953), p. 95.
- 39 Ants Oras, *Baltic Eclipse*, p. 217; and 12000: Materials from the trial of the Massmurderer Juhan Juriste (Tallinn, 1963) pp. 29-30, 37, 48, 82, 88; and also: *People Be Watchful!* (Tallinn, 1962), pp. 46-50, 220-221, 226-240, 247-260.