

Ralph Hershaw

(Rafael (Folja) Hirschovitsch)

Pre-war Jewish Tartu



Ralph Hershaw - Rafael Hirschowitz

Born in Tartu 1918, died in Chicago suburb of Carol Stream, Illinois 2002

Graduated from Tartu Russian High School

Emigrated to USA in April of 1940

In his youth in Tartu was an active member of Beitar movement.

He was a lifelong friend of historian Emmanuel Nodel and friend of Rudy Himmelhoch and Aleksander Kaplan.

While working as a chef at Chicago's Standard Club, the private club for Jewish millionaires, Ralph devoted his free time to arts and poetry. Some of his poems (in English) were published and his art pieces were exhibited at the local venues.

Ilya Meiertal.

This is an unfinished draft of a bigger story about the pre-war Jewish life in Tartu. Many thanks to Ilya Meiertal for the manuscript. The grammar and the style are not corrected.

Mark Rybak

This is the story of the *Shtetle*¹ Tartu/Dorpat. Tartu in Estonian, but the Jews called it by the German name – Dorpat. All Jewish activities were managed by *Kehilerat*², which was an assembly of about dozen prominent Jews. The *Kehilerat* hired the Rabbi, the *Hazan*³ and the *Schames*⁴. There also was a *Schochet*⁵ and a *Gabbai*⁶ appointed by the Rabbi and endorsed by a *Kehilerat*. There also were Jewish butchers and bakers under *Kehilerat* supervision. The *Kehilerat* ran the *shul*⁷ and synagogue, the matzo⁸ factory, the cemetery, the old peoples home, the *Chevre Kadische* (burial society) and also the Jewish grade and high school. The schools were officially licensed by the Estonian Board of Education.

¹ Shtetl – little town (Yiddish) [MR]

² Kehilerat – community council (Yiddish) [MR]

³ Hazan – cantor, a person who sings the prayers in the synagogue (Hebrew) [MR]

⁴ Schames – sexton in a synagogue, a person who looks after the synagogue (Yiddish) [MR]

⁵ Schochet – a person trained to slaughter animals in accordance with laws of kashrut (Hebrew, Yiddish) [MR]

⁶ Gabbai – a person responsible for the smooth religious service (Hebrew) [MR].

⁷ Shul – normally another word for synagogue, but here it means a school – place for religious studies by the synagogue [MR]

⁸ Matzo - unleavened bread eaten by Jews during the week-long Passover holiday. [MR]

The Synagogue / Shul

The Synagogue was a magnificent red brick building in a semi-gothic style. You entered by massive steps and through a huge double door. At the site of the door was a basin with



water to wash your hands. The first room was a long rectangular room with a long table in the middle and benches on the sides of the table. At one end of the table was a huge chair for the Rabbi. This is where a torah study took place all day long. Also where the *Gabbi* gave the lessons to *Barmitzwah* boys. To the left of the room was the entrance to the sanctuary. It was a huge room filled with shiny wooden pews which ran from one end of the room to the front. There were two wide isles running from the back to the front where the *Bima* and the Arc were. The *Bima* was a high plain platform with steps on the sides, so you had to look up to see the Rabbi and the *Hazan* and the *Gabbi* who sat on magnificent chairs next to the Arc. The president of the *Kehilah* sat on the side of the *Bima* on the main floor.



The Arc was a masterpiece of wood carving painted with gold and blue paint. In the center of the Arc was a purple brocaded curtain behind which stood several *torahs*. All of them dressed in gold and silver ornaments and crowns. There were many lights (electric) and a *Ner Tamid*⁹ with a candle

⁹ Ner Tamid (Hebrew) – an eternal light in the synagogue [MR]

hanging from the ceiling in front of the *Bima*¹⁰. There also was a balcony on one side of the room for the women. One year one of the rich men donated carpeting to cover the floor boards; this was a big celebration.

The Bris.

The ritual *Bris*¹¹ was a big event. The boy was strapped to a special board, all the relatives stood around and the board was held high up and handed from one to the other. Then the *Mohel*¹² would say *a broche*¹³ and do the operation. After everybody had *schnapps*¹⁴ and a piece of cake and it was over.

The Matzo factory.

There was a back yard at the synagogue where stood two buildings. The smaller one was for the *shochet* where he killed chickens. The *shochet* would examine your chicken for blemishes and broken bones and if OK pronounce it to be *kosher*. Then he would bend back the chicken's head and make one incision. Then he would throw the chicken out in the yard where it would run around for a while, then he would hang it up by its feet to let the blood run out. The larger building was the matzo factory. Before Passover volunteers would start to work there. It was a big honor to be selected to work there. My father was a worker there. They also made *matzo mehl*¹⁵ there. To get matzo you had to get a ticket from the *Kehilerat*. To get a ticket you had to pay taxes, then you could get all you needed for the family. Poor people got matzo free.

Chevre Kadishe (burial society)

The *Hevre Kadishe* was a voluntary honorable society. My father was a member. All *lehvies* (funerals) were conducted by them. As soon as they found out about a death they would come to the house. They covered all mirrors and brought in a folding wash table to wash the corpse. Meanwhile in another room women would sew the *tachrichim* (burial shroud) and sing psalms. When the body was ready the men would dress it in the *tachrichim* (women for women), then the body would be laid out on straw on the floor and covered with a black funeral blanket. There were two candles put at the feet and the family sat around the body until it was time for the funeral, usually the same day, but not longer than the next day. If the person died on Friday, like my father, the funeral had to be the same day before sun dawn. *Hevre Kadishe* had a magnificently carved hearse which was pulled by two borrowed (from *goim*¹⁶) horses. The body was put into a plain black box, no flowers. Most of the town followed the hearse. [The edges of the box were] lined with boards, standing side on side. The bottom also was lined with boards, no nails allowed. The body was taken out of the box and put on top of two ropes and then lowered into the grave. Boards were laid on top and everybody threw a handful of sand on top. The *Chasan* or *Gabbai* would sing and

¹⁰ Bima – a raised platform for the Torah reading in the synagogue [MR]

¹¹ Bris (Yiddish) – Brit Mila (Hebrew) – a Jewish religious circumcision ceremony.

¹² Mohel – a person performing Brit Mila [MR].

¹³ Broche (Yiddish) – Bracha (Hebrew) – a Blessing [MR]

¹⁴ Schnapps (German Schnaps) – a strong alcoholic drink [MR]

¹⁵ Matzo mehl (Yiddish) – matzo flour [MR]

¹⁶ Goy (pl. goim) – a non-Jewish person [MR]

say a prayer and the son would say *Kaddish*¹⁷. Everybody would go back home to have a bite and a schnapps. The family sat *shive*¹⁸ on low benches for a week and the son said *Kaddish* for a whole year.



Schools

There were a Jewish grade school and a gymnasium (high school). Both schools were accredited by the Estonian government and had regular classes. We had Jewish and non-Jewish teachers. Some of the subjects we had were Estonian language, math, geography, Estonian and world history and also



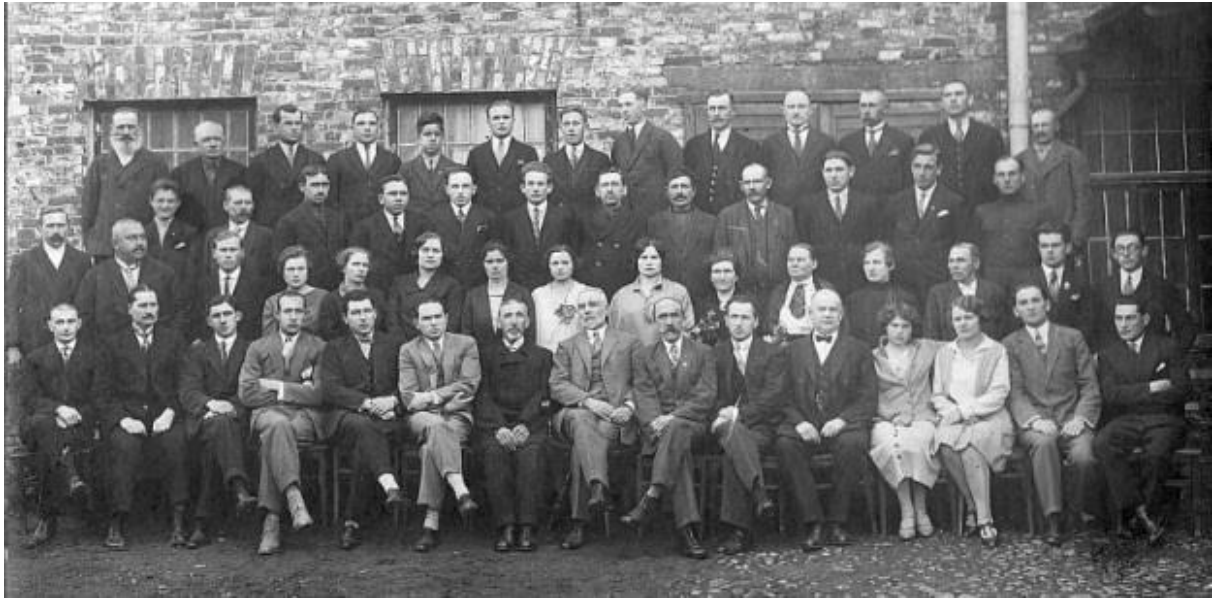
reading of the bible in Hebrew. We also had gymnastics, once a week and a class for woodworking for boys. We had to go to the teacher's shop, who was a toymaker. A lot of kids did not go further after graduating from grade school, but some of us went to the Jewish high school or transferred to Russian, German or Estonian high schools. There also was a large room in the school building with a small stage where we performed short plays by Yiddish writers. We all spoke Yiddish in school and most people in town spoke Yiddish or German. Very few spoke Estonian or Russian at home.

¹⁷ Kaddish – a mourning prayer [MR]

¹⁸ Shive (Yiddish) – from Shiva yamim (Hebrew) – 7 days of mourning. [MR]

Businesses.

A lot of Jews had their own businesses and employed mostly Jewish people. There was a wholesale and retail leather store, a readymade clothing store who had tailors who made suits to order, haberdashers, shoe stores, brush maker, pharmacy and drugstore, shoe factory, jewelry and clock store, watch maker, lumber yards, false teeth maker, batchers, bakers, hardware store, hat maker, fur store, furrier, dentist, doctor, kosher dining room, bank, credit office and in summer pensions (room for rent with meals) in the country. Most businesses employed Jews and non-Jews. [..... missing ...] friendly relations with them. The Germans called us names and after the *Hitler jugend*



Usvanski leather factory workers

started, there were some fights. Some German teachers did not do anything about it. In the beginning of 1940 the Soviet army occupied Estonia. They installed their own government. All private property was confiscated. A lot of rich Jews were shipped to Siberia, the rest all got jobs and a lot of business owners were installed as managers of their own businesses. Life was pretty good until the Nazis started to push into the Baltic States. The Russians organized rescue trains and most of the Jews of Tartu were sent to the Ural Mountains, including my mother and sister and other female relatives. The men had to go in the army. After the war everybody was permitted to come back even some from Siberia. During the Nazi occupation many Estonians helped them to find hidden Jews. After the liberation of Estonia many Estonian are blaming the Jews for being on the Russian side.

Zionism.

Everybody was one kind or another Zionist. In every house was a blue *pushke*¹⁹ for *Keren Kayemes*²⁰ or *Keren Hayesod*²¹. We had labor Zionists with their *Hashomer Hatsair*²² youth group, Revisionists with *Beitar*²³. There also was a far left *Arbeiter verband*²⁴ who were communists, but for a Jewish State in Palestine. They all had their own meeting halls, but once a year there was ball held at the fire house hall where everybody came together to make money for the *Kehilah* and for *Eretz Isroel*²⁵. Our little actors group performed a play and after that was dancing and the women brought out their cakes. One time there was big excitement in town. David Ben Gurion²⁶ was coming to make a speech. The hall was full. The *Beitarniks*²⁷ came early and occupied the front row. As Ben Gurion started to speak they pulled out newspapers and pretended to read them. Ben Gurion made fun of them. Someone even threw a tomato at him. At other time Zabolinsky²⁸ came to town. He came to the school and all *Beitarniks* were lined up in the yard to greet him. He shook hands with everybody and gave a short speech. In the evening he gave a speech at the *Hasmonea* which was a University student association leaning towards the Revisionist Zionists side.



Tartu Beitarists. R. Hershaw – standing at left between the rows. 1932.

¹⁹ Pushke – a little can for donations to Jewish organizations [MR]

²⁰ Keren Kayemes (t) – Jewish National Fund

²¹ Keren Hayesod – United Israel Appeal

²² Hashomer Hatsair – the Youth Guard – socialist Zionist youth movement [MR]

²³ Beitar – the Revisionist Zionist youth movement [MR]

²⁴ Arbeiter Verband – Jewish workers organization [MR]

²⁵ Eretz Isroel (Yiddish) – Erez Israel (Hebrew) – the land of Israel [MR]

²⁶ David Ben Gurion (1886-1973) – the first Prime minister of Israel [MR]

²⁷ Beitarniks – the followers of Beitar movement – see above [MR]

²⁸ Zeev Jabotinsky (1880-1940) – Revisionist Zionist leader [MR]



Beitar membership card of R. Hershaw

There also was the *Limuvia*, which was apolitical and also the *Akademischer Verein* which leaned to the left. There were many Jewish university students even though there was a quota and only so many Jews were accepted to each course, there even was a course in judaica. It was almost impossible to get on the medical course, so a lot of Jews signed up for the veterinary course in hopes to be able to switch later.

Army

All twenty one year old men had to serve in the army for one year. Some Jewish boys after



Soldiers. 1938. Top: Schuja Kropman and Folja Hrschovitsch.
Bottom – Rudi Himmelhoch and Shura Kaplan

graduating from the gymnasium volunteered to go early. I was 18 and was assigned Armored Train division. I served almost 12 months. There was very little anti-Semitism in the army and I was treated well by my fellow soldiers and also by the officers. There also were Jews in the volunteer fire department.

Relations with other nationalities and Russian occupation.

As far as relations with other nationalities they mostly were cordial. There was anti-Semitism, but no vandalism or big fights.