

SOMETHING ABOUT HA-SHOMER HA-ZA'IR AND ITS "NEST" IN NOVI SAD

After 50-60 years it is difficult to write about a *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir*, the Jewish Youth Movement, with no documents, or any other written material, except for a single booklet (1). The memories have faded away. The undersigned is not sure any more whether the events he remembers were actually experienced or they were told him by somebody, who would know who, in which occasion or when. Meanwhile, the real events have completely faded, become foggy, vague. Twenty years ago he endeavored to write about the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* much as he could have remembered and even then all his writings were already very incomplete and deficient (2). He quoted there the literature on the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* he had used and he has not come to any new sources since. And if he has nevertheless accepted to write something about that movement now, he has done that only on insistence of the associates of the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade. The facts given, those that were not recalled from memory, have been taken from the above mentioned booklet.

Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir (A Young Guardian) is a Jewish youth organization created after the First World War in Poland which later gradually included the Jewish youth in a number of countries. In Yugoslavia it appeared in the thirties and soon we found it in Novi Sad. Its first premises were in the Josif Runjanin street, in an alley behind today's theater, than it was moved in a yard building in the 4 Pavao Papo street (where a multistory building stands today), next to a yard building behind the former Jewish School, when the activities in the "nest" were the most vivid, and finally, after two or three years, in 1938-39, it was located in the upper floor of the Jewish House of Culture in today's Petar Drapšin street (now a school building).

There were other Jewish youth organizations in Yugoslavia, most of them joined into the Union of Jewish Youth Associations with the head office in Zagreb; before the First World War the

Zionist movement was the most active in Croatia and the center of Zionist movement remained in Zagreb even after the creation of Yugoslavia. Those organizations were, for example, *Tekhelet-Lavan*, *Kadima*, *Betar*. The first two were attracting the Jewish youth mostly in the smaller townships and by their way of action and organization they were more or less a faint "copy" of the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir*, in a certain sense "preparing" their members for their future participation in the Zionist organizations of civil, liberal determination. In Novi Sad they were not of greater significance. *Betar* was a Zionist-revisionist youth organization whose activities were in many ways characteristics for a military organization. As the revisionists left and broke off from the World Zionist Organization, so the *Betar* was not a member of the Union of Jewish Youth Associations as this Union, although maybe not formally, was a member of the Yugoslav Zionist Association and eventually the World Zionist Organization.

The main goal of the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* was to educate, to prepare Jewish youth for the hard, pioneering work of building a Jewish state in Palestine, a bi-national homeland of the Jews and Palestinian Arabs. This work, as seen by the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir*, could be carried out only in a collective, in the kibbutzim — the most convenient form of life for farmers, the people which were the most needed in the country — where there was no private property but everybody would be given a chance to engage in the activity chosen as the most suitable in respect of possibilities and requirements of the kibbutz.

In consideration with expected future life in the kibbutz, the work in the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* was more or less permanently connected to a *ken* ("nest" or home), to the premises representing a center of the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* life in each place where the movement existed. The volume of work and living in the *ken* was extremely rich. Nowadays, in our conditions, it is difficult to imagine such a richness of activities.

A starting point was, and there was no compromise, that the building of state of Israel ("Erez Israel"), as Palestine was called, required a whole individual completely pervaded with the Jewish values. In one place (3) it is said: "...The aim of this organization is a physical and psychical preparation of the Jewish youth for their settling in Palestine, their participation in its reconstruction, as well as in building of a socialist society within agricultural organizations..." The *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir's* goals, as described in the "Guide" are in accordance with the fact that this movement "... is

aware it being tied to the Jewish and international proletariat and its destiny" (p 13) and further on "..... the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* taking as its base the Borocho's (4) application of Marxism on the Jewish question brings into its activity a strong socialist note that is not exhausted in a romantic rebellion against the present world... but is turned into action: the building of a Hebrew working Palestine." adding (5) that "the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* has been more and more directed toward finding a solution to the social problems of the future Palestinian community." As a distinctive member of the left wing of the World Zionist Organization, and disturbed by the advancing fascism in Germany, the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* held the views that Jewish question could be solved only by the peaceful building of a socialist homeland on the territory at that time known as Palestine.

In addition to an unmistakable Zionist education, the Jewish youth in the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* was gaining, as can be seen from the above quotations, a substantial Marxist education; "A Red Guide", for example, quotes the literature that was considered compulsory: Marx, Engels, Plehanov, Adžija, Cesarac, Kautsky, Feuerbach etc. (p 62 etc.). It should not be forgotten that this was in 1932: hence the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* was in the contemporary police files registered as a "communist-suspected Zionist organization".(5)

The organization of the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* is centralist. A basic organization in one place is *ken*, and *ken* is made of *kvucas* (unit, group). One *kvuca* has rarely more than 12-15 members as a higher number is considered unsuitable for educational work. The *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir's* members are from 9-10 to 22-24 years of age. The members below nine were not admitted because working with them in the spirit of the movement would have been difficult to perform. One age group makes a *shihva* (education level). The youngest members in *ken*, aged 9-11, are called "The Sons of the Desert" (Bne Midbar). Those a bit older, aged 12-14, are "Kfirim" (The Young Lions), and those between 14 and 15 are "Cofim Cairim" (Young Scouts), between 16 and 17 "Cofim" (Scouts), from 17 to 18 "Cofim Bogrim" (Mature Scouts), and above 18 "Bogrim" (Matured). Every *kvuca* has its name, usually after some historical figure (for example Bar Kohbe, leader of uprising against Romans) or symbols (for example Solel, the road builder).

A *kvuca* has its leader, a head of class (*menaheh*), two to three years older than those who are in his "charge." Up to level of

"Cofim," there is usually a separate *kvucim* for boys and girls, but in upper ages they are mixed. The last *shihva* has no *menahe!*, but organizes its work and life by itself.

The movement has its special getup, with a broad scarf around the neck tied in a special way: the getup and scarf slightly differ depending on the age.

The extent of work in the *kvuca* differs according to age. For example in the *shihva* "Bne Midbar," a "travel" through desert, that made a greater part of Palestine of that time, is done with help of stories that a *menahe!* takes from the Bible, history, fiction and in that way children become familiar with the geography, history, past and customs of the Jewish people, so that pupils in a *kvuca* become gradually aware that their life changes, that they are becoming a part of the community, of *kvuca*, the movement. The meetings ("*sihot*," discussion) are held 2-3 times a week, and once or twice a week, whenever it is possible, a picnic or a walk is organized. With older ages the *sihots* are more frequent, and with adults they are daily. Every *kvuca* has a very rich and various cultural, political, educational, sports and scout activities, cherishing a high ethical (but by no means ascetic) collectivist spirit.

Work in a *kvuca* is especially intensive during, it almost could be ventured to say, the compulsory sojourn (as it goes without saying) in the summer, rarely winter, gathering-camping (*mahano!*) of the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* from all over the country.

Considering that the most important, a basic aim of the movement is to serve in the restoration of the Jewishness, the Judaism is the starting and closing idea of all efforts, all the fields of life and all activities. The whole atmosphere in the *ken* serves this purpose, and hence the efforts to make the teaching of Hebrew (Ivrit) as intensive and as rapid as is possible.

Gradually, the *kvuca* becomes a genuine living community, a firmly connected circle of friends who are determined to go to Erez Israel, prepared and ready to participate in the reconstruction of the country. For such a purpose, with aim to develop the personality as fully as possible, in the older *shihva* a history, especially the history of Jewish people, particularly history of Zionism, has been studied seriously and intensively; tradition, above all in regard to holidays, is given great importance, but it is by no means connected to the religious teaching. The wall newspapers are made, the plays and choir-talking performed, the walls are decorated with various emblems and declarations by public figures and

writers, not just Jewish. The accent is to be equally informed about the literature on Jewish themes as well as the Yugoslav and world literature in general, and at the *sihots* specially intended for such activities, the vivid debates on the books are frequently held. There are discussions on other themes such as sociology, dialectic materialism, psychology, psychoanalysis. The undersigned, since his early youth in the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir*, when 16 or 17 years old, read at one *sihot*, for example, his paper on the British immigration policy in Palestine regarding the relationships they had, as a mandatory power, with the Arab rulers and, in another occasion, on difference in understanding of Freud's and Adler's psychoanalyses. At age of 16 or 17 ! Others, of course, also had their reports on various themes. The intention is to treat all planned themes equally so that everybody has a chance to read his report and at the same time to discourage those readers who would like to take the floor constantly: in the *kvuca* with *menahel*, he is the one who is trying to clear up the shady issues and to ensure that a joint attitude is not imposed but a result of joint reasoning.

In order to achieve this purpose, the *ken* has a library — not only the *ken* in Novi Sad — with books which many a today's library would be only too happy to possess (for example the complete Nolit editions).

Kvuca represented a sort of collective that would be difficult to find today. Members of a *kvuca* for example have no "individual" money — *kvuca* has a cashier who is given all the money, pocket money or money earned or obtained in some other way, and the cashier would take care of all non-school or outside expenses (as the cinema or theater tickets — in Novi Sad the theater was very popular before the war, especially the plays with social themes — then for excursions, ice-cream etc.). *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* in Novi Sad, as in most other places in Yugoslavia, included mostly the middle-class or wealthy high-school students, so the pocket money was abundant and it never happened that anybody with no imaginable motive would keep a cent for himself — something like that could not even be thought of because that would mean isolation, boycott and expulsion from the movement, from the community.

At ages 20-22, with the completion of high school education, the preparation (*hakhshara*) began, which meant sojourn at some agricultural estate or learning a craft. One of such estates was the Golenić, near Podravska Slatina, where members of the movement from all over Yugoslavia got their practical training, while one

of the *hakhsharot* for craft teaching was in Novi Sad. During such a training, either agricultural or the crafts, the participants lived and learned in a collective of a *kibbutz* type for two or three years, until manual labor was well learned and possibility created to leave to Erez Israel, to Palestine, in order to establish new kibbutzim on a barren swampy or desert soil.

It should be again stressed that *hakhshara* was not just a school to teach crafts or farming but at the same time it was a school of collective life in the commune in the most literal sense of this word. Just like in the *kibbutz*, there was no personal property except for the things for personal use and hygiene. Everything was common, there were no salaries but all the earnings were given to the cashier, and everybody was given, as agreed, as much as needed within the means of the collective.

Members of the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir*, the *shomerim* (guardians) strictly respected the "laws" of their movement, which did not order, forbid or punish anything, because observing those "laws" was considered natural and hence the only possible. Those "laws" were the following (the comments are partially excerpts from the already cited "Guide"):

1. A *Shomer* loves the truth and cherishes it faithfully

In an adult's life struggle there is a lot of conventionality, insincerity, untruthfulness. A *Shomer* will not lie to himself nor others. A *Shomer's* word is sacred, he is sincere to everybody.

2. A *Shomer* is a pioneer of his people, his language, his homeland

A *Shomer* is a pioneer in restoration of the Jewry, clearing a path for the people. He is everywhere wherever there is a need to do something for restoration of the Jewish people, Ivrit, Erez Israel.

3. A *Shomer* is active, hardworking and is able to live by his work

A *Shomer* prepares himself for toil since his childhood and strives to become a true son of the Jewish working people.

4. A *Shomer* fights by his deeds to achieve a life of justice, brotherhood and freedom in a human society

The *Shomerim* are brothers to each other and to every man. A *Shomer* does not recognize the false authorities, in his domain reigns the freedom of thought and labor.

5. A *Shomer* willingly helps and lends a hand

There can be no community without mutual help and for restoration of the Jewry a great strength and mutual help is required, so he is ready to offer help whenever it is needed

6. A *Shomer* is loyal to the *Shomer's* community and obedient to its leaders

Without loyalty a community can not prosper and perform its tasks. A *Shomer* wants to be disciplined not because he must accept discipline but because that is what he chooses. It is not a blind discipline; he obeys and tries to understand.

7. A *Shomer* loves nature, knows it and is familiar with it, knowing how to live in it.

The Jews were for a long time living in ghettos. The restoration of the Jewry means a return to nature, to the land, field, garden, forest. A *Shomer* does not go blindly through the nature. What we do not know we can not love, what we do not love we can not know.

8. A *Shomer* is brave, full of good spirit and brisk

The restoration of Jewry requires courage, natural character, good will, cheerfulness and vividness. He is not ashamed to ask his comrades for help. Brisk in any situation, full of good spirit even in the worst moments, brave all his life through.

9. A *Shomer* is strong-willed and is improving himself spiritually and physically

A *Shomer's* will is firm. He wants to realize the ideal of the Jewish restoration and that's why he works on his complete improvement without slowdown.

10. A *Shomer* is pure in his thoughts, his words and his deeds.

Jewish people need healthy posterity, as a hard pioneering work in Erez Israel could be endured only by those who stay away from alcohol, tobacco, gambling, sexual impurity (at the *ken*s a song was sung: *shomer doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, shomer doesn't go to an inn, shomer keeps his morale...*)

However, life in the *ken* is not just the intellectual work, walking, picnics. By no means. Everybody used to know many songs in Ivrit, and in every afternoon or evening, when most members are present, the songs were sung, and music, especially accordion, played. A songbook was prepared and, using a simple technique, published. It is especially vivid during excursions, camping, around camp fire. The youth is youth in the *ken* too. There are *zugots* (pairs) that become married, and there are unrequited loves. As it is everywhere. In the last years before war the accent was given to gymnastic which was performed in the sport society "Maccabi," which ensured rooms for this purpose, or on track and field, at the "Maccabi" playground (today's "Vojvodina" stadium), but other sports were played too as, for example, table tennis.

The life span of the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* in Yugoslavia was brief, barely ten years in all. The same was in Novi Sad. With deporta-

tion of the Jews the members of the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* vanished too. In some surroundings, for example in Croatia, it was even before the mass deportation and extermination of the Jews had begun. But even in this short period of its existence, the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir* provided much. It provided, among many other things, a core for setting up two kibbutzim in Israel. The future People's Heroes of Yugoslavia and future high military and state leaders of Yugoslavia and Israel came from its ranks. Although their members were so to speak children, they behaved as mature persons. Although they were not prepared for the trying days to come, they behaved as mature persons. In the trying days of war, they knew their place. The fact is that members of the movement have never betrayed the ideas, the principles of the *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir*. They have not dishonored neither their names nor the name of the movement they had belonged to and in that special way, they repaid the movement for all they were given by it. And that was much, very much.

(1) *Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir*, Library "Hanoar," Book Three, Zagreb, 1932 (5692). The publication — probably not unintentionally — bound in vivid red cardboard covers and that's why in the everyday speech of the *Ha-Shomer ha-Za'ir* it was called "A Red Guide."

(2) *Some reminiscences about the Ha-shomer ha-Za'ir in the first months of occupation in Novi Sad*. Collection of the Jewish Historical Museum, No 3, Belgrade, 1975, pp 213-222.

(3) Romano J.: "The Jews, Health Workers of Yugoslavia 1941-1945. Victims of the Fascist terror and participants in the National Liberation War." The Jewish Historical Museum, Collection 2, Association of the Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, 1973, p 95

(4) Borochow B.: *Klasse und Nation*, Berlin, 1932

(5) Milin V: *Pap Pal elit utja*, Forum, Novi Sad, 1969, p 19