

W^ÍWARSAW INSTITUTE

— SPECIAL REPORT —

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POLES AND JEWS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE 1918 – 1948

The partition of the Polish state in 1795 by the three powers neighboring Poland: Russia, Prussia and Austria, was a tragic turning point in Polish history. The Polish nation never reconciled itself to the loss of its statehood. Throughout the entire 19th century, the Polish Nation tried fighting to recover their lost independence.

National uprisings served this purpose. Influenced by defeats suffered and sacrifices made, it seemed that the concept of armed struggle was completely abandoned in favor of working within the system. At the beginning of the 20th century however, joining the armed fight against a tsarist Russia shaken by revolutionary tremors, were battle groups of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), the leading irredentist party that challenged the Romanov Empire. In one of the issues of the

because in fighting for independence, we will not delude ourselves as to their value. Only with such tactics can we count on more serious gains, even if for now we cannot gain independence.”¹

The Russian partition was not the only area where Polish independence organizations were active. Between 1908 and 1910, in Austro-Hungarian Galicia (formerly a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) both open and secret paramilitary structures of the Union of Active Struggle and the Riflemen’s Association began to emerge. They were tasked with preparing Poles for an anti-Russian uprising, which was supposed to erupt in the Russian partition. At their head stood a veteran of the socialist movement, a Siberian exile, and organizer of many PPS combat actions, Józef Piłsudski. Piłsudski believed that an indispensable condition for Poland to regain independence was having its own armed forces. Hence, just after the outbreak of the First World War, he proceeded to form Polish military units bearing the name of the Polish Legions within Germany and Austria-Hungary. His cooperation with the central states was the result of the conviction that the main enemy of Poland was tsarist Russia, which occupied the largest part (80%) of the territory of the former Commonwealth. Led by Piłsudski, the legionaries of the first Brigade heroically fought on the eastern front, gaining well-deserved respect from both enemies and allies. Their dedication was noticed in Vienna and

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The Worker, which was the publication arm of the Socialists, the goals of the ongoing fight were described this way:

„The struggle must be conducted under the banner of an independent democratic republic, our entire revolutionary action must aim for an uprising that cannot have any goal other than independence. A constitution and self-government cannot be our goal,



JÓZEF PIŁSUDSKI WITH THE POLISH LEGION'S SOLDIERS DURING BATTLE OF KOSTIUCHNÓWKA IN 1916. SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA

Berlin. As a result, counting on the possibility of gaining good and valiant soldiers, in 1916, Germany and Austria-Hungary announced the Act of November 5, which included the declaration of the restitution of the Polish state. This initiative became the beginning of the “bidding up” of Polish affairs in the international arena and also resulted in recognition by Great Britain and France of Poland’s right to self-determination. Also, The President of the United States Thomas Woodrow Wilson, in a presentation to Congress on January 8, 1918, of a peace plan to bring about the end of the Great War, included a stipulation to rebuild the Polish state.

The fight by the Poles for independence, won in November 1918, became an example for other nations seeking to build their own statehood. The Jewish nation was one of them. It was they who, almost 30 years after the rebirth of Poland, achieved similar success

in 1948. The Jewish state was born in bloody struggles with both the British Empire and the Arabs of Palestine. During their march to freedom, the Jewish fighters for Eretz Israel

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tried to learn from the Polish experience. It was understandable, because a large part of Israeli citizens came from Poland. Alina Strasman-Lubińska stated years later:

„With deep gratitude I attribute my entire healthy, national, Jewish development to the fact that I was raised as a child on the legend of Pilsudski’s Legions.”²

On a personal level in the Jewish community,

Józef Piłsudski was particularly esteemed and respected, and was not associated with anti-Semitism. The Marshal was surrounded by a halo of success connected with Poland regaining independence in 1918. Włodzimierz Żabotyński, leader of the Revisionist Zionist movement, saw him as the embodiment of sublime idealism and romantic thought, but above all the victorious leader in the Polish-Bolshevik War. Józef Piłsudski's ideas on the struggle for independence based on the force of arms were near and dear to the Revisionist Zionists. Ze'ev Jabotinski, like Piłsudski, believed that paramilitary formations were an important component of the independence movement. He believed that they fulfilled not only defensive or offensive functions, but, above all, supported activity on the diplomatic front. Hence, he repeated the slogan: „Jews, learn to shoot.” The leader of the New Zionist Organization (NZO) saw the necessity of instilling in the Jewish people a military element. From then on, the Jew was

„We had a man of ideas before us, like our Piłsudski, his words about the necessity to fight and sacrifice blood to win freedom were close to us, because there were few of us who did not participate in the battles for independence.”³

An expression of the attachment to the personage of Józef Piłsudski within the ranks of the Revisionist Zionists was an urn sent by Betar after the Marshal's death, containing earth from the settlement of Tel Hai, destined for Piłsudski's Mound in Krakow. It contained the following dedication:

„To the beloved leader of the Polish nation, Marshal Józef Piłsudski, earth from the battlefield of the hero of the Jewish nation, Joseph Trumpeldor, is presented by the Jewish national movement, striving towards the liberation of the nation and homeland.”⁴

It was a symbolic gesture, because in the Tel Hai settlement, in March 1920, the first clash between Lebanese Bedouins and Jewish self-defense groups took place, led by Joseph Trumpeldor, who was fatally wounded there. As he was dying, he still managed to say the words „it is good to die for our country”. After the death of Piłsudski, in the circles of the ruling Polish Sanation movement members, a fundamental, ideological rebirth took place, towards the adaptation of nationalist ideas. This fact did not interfere with the establishment of contacts between the Polish Government and NZO. The aim was to cooperate in the development of the Jewish state. Support for this postulate was expressed in 1937 at the VI Commission of the League of Nations, by Poland's representative, Tytus Komarnicki:

„Palestine must be the seat of the Jewish masses.”⁵

A similar position was expressed in 1938 at a conference attended by representatives of the Jewish paramilitary groups Haganah and Irgun, by Wiktor Drymmer, Director of the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland:

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to be synonymous not with a trader or banker, but a warrior-soldier who, weapon in hand, could fight for his country. Writing about the similar mindset of Piłsudski and Jabotinski, after a meeting with the head of the NZO on September 9, 1936 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was the head of its Department of Immigration, Apoloniusz Zarychta:

„Our position is completely in line with the views of the Revisionist Zionist Jews and their associated organizations. It was contained in the sentence: an independent, Jewish Palestine, as large as possible, with access to the Red Sea. [...] the efforts of independence organizations should be supported in a comprehensive manner, with money and combat training.”⁶

The main beneficiaries of the organized training were Irgun fighters (Irgun Cwai Leumi – The National Military Organization), an underground freedom fighting group affiliated with NZO. Arthur Koestler wrote about the ties to the Polish tradition that the commanders of the organization had:

„Irgun’s leadership consisted of young Polish intellectuals raised in the knightly tradition of romantic, independence and revolutionary uprisings.”⁷

The first course for forty Irgun members was conducted in the summer of 1938 in Zofiówka in Volhynia and Poddębín near Łódź. The next one, lasting four months, took place in the spring of 1939 at the Andrychów training ground near Wadowice. Twenty-five Etzel fighters took part. The training took place under the guidance of instructors from the Polish Army. The program included courses in sabotage, diversion, conspiracy and urban guerrilla warfare. The guardian of the course in Andrychów on behalf of Irgun was the poet-fighter from Suwałki, Abraham Stern, killed in May 1942 in Palestine by the British police. It was he in 1940, when Irgun discontinued anti-British action, who established the new underground structure Lehi (Lohamei Heruth Israel – Fighters for the Freedom of Israel), and just as Piłsudski did in 1905 to tsarist Russia, threw down a challenge to the British Empire. The leaders of the “Stern Gang”, as the group was commonly called, believed that through their determination and their will to fight, they would, like Poland, get their country. Lehi fighters (formerly from Irgun) saw the support given by Warsaw to their struggle. After years spent in Brazil, Lehi member, Benjamin Gepner, expressed his

thanks to his Polish mentor Marek Apoloniusz Zarychta in a letter, writing:

„We, the Polish Jews in Israel, feel that the help given by the Polish Government to our cause of freedom is a pearl in the crown of Poland, proof that what we learned at our school benches about Kościuszko and Mickiewicz is not a cliché – but tradition.”⁸

According to NZO estimates, 700,000 Jews were to leave Poland within 10 years. In reality, by September 1939, about 6,000 Jewish citizens of the Second Polish Republic left.

Apart from participating in the training process, the Polish authorities assisted Jews in illegal emigration to Palestine. NZO wanted to settle a large number of Jewish emigrants from Europe, including from Poland, in Palestine. According to NZO estimates, 700,000 Jews were to leave Poland within 10 years. In reality, by September 1939, about 6,000 Jewish citizens of the Second Polish Republic left. The route set for the transfer led through Romania, specifically through Constanta to Haifa. A special railway line to the Romanian port was launched by Polish State Railways (PKP), while the sea route was taken by the passenger ship Polonia. An important form of assistance for the Revisionist Zionist resistance movement was financial aid. Documents deposited in archives include receipts signed by Jabotinski himself, indicating that the sum of 212,000 PLN was transferred to him. It was not the only financial transfer. Soon enough, the Revisionists received another sum of money, this time in the amount of 300,000 PLN. The Warsaw government also supported the Irgun militarily. A building located in Warsaw at 8 Ceglana Street, warehoused weapons for



**BEGIN AFTER BEING ARRESTED BY NKVD IN SEPTEMBER 1940.
SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA**

Etzel. The Polish authorities smuggled them through Romania and Bulgaria to Palestine. It was possible to transport them in three shipments: in the autumn of 1938, in the spring of 1939 and in the summer of 1939. In total, around 20,000 rifles were sent as military assistance. Unfortunately, a part of the stored weaponry did not reach its recipients due to the outbreak of World War II, started by the German Third Reich and the Soviet Union (around 100,000 Jewish citizens took part in the battles of 1939 as part of the Polish Army). The armed conflict launched in September 1939 did not interrupt Polish-Jewish cooperation. Collaboration took place in the publishing field. In Lehi's secret printing houses in Palestine, the *Bulletin of Independents* was produced, a publication of Piłsudski followers critical of the policy pursued by the Government of the Republic of Poland in exile, led by General Władysław Sikorski, initially based in France then in Great Britain. Formed after the signing in July 1941 of the Sikorski-Mayski Agreement

(between Poland and the Soviet Union), the Polish Army in the USSR was a last resort for Jews who wanted to get out of Soviet Russia, such as refugees and prisoners of the Gulag. The fact of having Polish citizenship allowed them to enlist in the Polish Army and to go with it in the summer of 1942 to the Middle East. While there, 2,297 Jewish soldiers deserted en masse. They swelled the ranks of the Palestinian Police, the Jewish Brigade and the Haganah, Lehi and Irgun fighters. One of those who did not desert and was legally released from the ranks of the Polish Army, was a reserve officer cadet, a pre-war leader of Betar in Poland, a prisoner of the Soviet labor camps, and later Israeli Prime Minister, Menachem Begin. He assumed the leadership of Irgun, which began a war with the British on February 1, 1944. This confrontation, thanks primarily to diplomatic actions backed by terrorist activities, ended at 4pm on May 14, 1948, with Israel's declaration of independence, to which, it is worth remembering, Polish help to

the Jews was instrumental.

¹ A. Błotnicki, *Przez Rewolucję 1905 do Legionów 1914*, Lwów 1929/1930, 20.

² W. Pobóg-Malinowski, „*Najnowsza Historia Polityczna Polski*”. Okres 1914-1939, Gdańsk 1990, 819.

³ W. Michałowski, *Teki Sarmatów*, Pruszków 2009, 157.

⁴ M. Wójcicki, *Podstawy teoretyczne ideologii rewizjonizmu syjonistycznego oraz ich wpływ na kształt myśli państwowej ruchu*, „*Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*”, 2007, nr. 3, 300.

⁵ A. Patek, *Żydzi w drodze do Palestyny 1934-1944. Szkice z dziejów nielegalnej emigracji żydowskiej*, Kraków 2009, 95.

⁶ E. Kossoy, *Żydowskie podziemie zbrojne w Palestynie i jego polskie powiązania*, „*Zeszyty Historyczne*” (Paryż), 2006, z. 153, 66.

⁷ Vide <http://www.focus.pl/artukul/jak-polacy-stworzyli-izrael>; accessed: Nov. 17, 2017.

⁸ Vide <http://www.focus.pl/artukul/jak-polacy-stworzyli-izrael>; accessed: Nov. 17 2017.

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