

The Zionist Priorities in the Struggle for Lite, 1916–1918

Before the beginning of World War I, the leaders of the Zionist Organization (ZO) not only formulated the basic guidelines of putting the Zionist ideals and the Basel program¹ into perspective, but also approved of the “here and now” principle of activity. This principle provided for a transition from passive observance to active struggle for the political, civic, and national rights and interests of Jews living in the diaspora, by combining a vision of the future with the solution of concrete urgent tasks by way of compromise.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Zionists as a political movement were still under formation, it was at that time they had to establish their relationship with the newly arising factors—the Lithuanian, Polish, and Belorussian national movements, and the new national states rising from the ruins of the Russian empire in the late 1910s. The Zionists did not intend to stay in the role as observers, and their political position was not stagnant. Lithuanian Zionists, whose solutions for the most part depended on the position of the Zionist leaders in the central headquarters in Berlin, Hague, or Copenhagen, discussed various future prospects of so-called Lite (Jewish Lithuania) and the existence of Jews in it, while looking for allies in achieving their national interests and political aims. On the other hand, the strategy of Lithuanian Zionists was concentrated in the hands of several people and often depended on their personal views and fixed priorities.

“One for All”

At the outbreak of war, the ranks of Lithuanian Zionists considerably shrunk. Because of the intensified persecutions of the tsarist regime, part of the activists fled to Germany before the beginning of the war, while others retreated into the depths of the empire by the order of the Russian military administration. Here they joined a group of Russian Zionists concentrated in Saint Petersburg and actively contributed to the publishing of the Zionist press.² With regard to

¹ A declaration adopted at the first Congress of the world Zionists in Basel in 1897 became the official ideological program of all Zionist organizations, which proclaimed the main goal of establishing a publicly and legally assured home for the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael, and strengthening the Jewish-national feeling and consciousness in the diaspora.

² Having retreated from Lithuania to Russia and having transferred their central committee to St. Petersburg, the Zionists together with other Jewish refugees who studied in Russian universities during or after the war (e.g., A.

the leaders of the prewar generation, Vilnius was still home to Jakub Wygodzki (who soon fell into disfavor of the Germans and spent the war years in prisons of war), Josef Regensburg (who had briefly become the chairman of the central committee of the Lithuanian Zionist Organization in Vilnius immediately after World War I, and later was an active figure of the Zionist movement in Poland), Isaac Rubinshteyn (the Vilnius Rabbi), Moses de Shalit, Israel Nisan Kark (who later became the leader of the religious Zionists “Mizrachi” in Lithuania), Abraham Virshubski, and the well-known Zionist Shimshon Rosenboim (who arrived to Vilnius at the end of 1915, when the city was already under German occupation).³ The Lithuanian Zionist Organization as an independent subject did not exist in the country, and did not perform any purposeful well-coordinated activity. The relationship between its center in Vilnius and the small groups that existed in the province was very complicated because the links had been cut and infrastructures destroyed during the war. The entire activity was concentrated in the circle of its most active members, led by Rosenboim. He explained his influence on the Jewish community by objective circumstances, that is, the retreat from Lithuania of expert Zionists, whose political and social influence on the Jewish community was very strong, his authority of a former Duma deputy, and his merits as a barrister in serving the remaining local Jewish community and Jewish refugees.⁴ He also emphasized that the other members of the Zionist movement in Vilnius had enough good will, but lacked energy, initiative, and influence. The young Zionists who propagated specific Zionist activity, deserved respect “for their vital energy and sincere faith,” but because of their lack of experience their activity did not produce expected results.⁵ Rosenboim’s personal achievements contributed to increasing the influence of Zionism, and his engagement in solving the common Jewish problems guaranteed a solid position and support for this movement on the *Jewish street*. Quiet often the Zionists would manage to present their position as the standpoint of the entire Jewish community.

The correspondence of the ZO shows that Rosenboim’s opinion and influence on the Jewish community was highly esteemed. Drs. Arthur Hantke and Paul Nathan, the leaders of the Zionist movement in Germany and intermediaries between the Zionist groups operating in the

Idelson, J. Brutzkus, M. Soloveichik) made a considerable contribution as members of the editorial boards of the Zionist press and themselves publishing informational and propaganda articles.

³ I. Brojdes, *Vilna ha-zionith* (Tel Aviv: Histadruth ‘ole Vilna weha-Galil, 1939), pp. 301–302.

⁴ Rosenboim’s Report to the Central Zionist Bureau in Berlin, 22 March 1916, Central Zionist Archive in Jerusalem (hereinafter CZA), F. Z3, File 509, n.p.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Oberost territory and the leadership of the ZO, who had in their hands the larger part of the inner correspondence of the ZO coordinating the plans of action between Berlin and Vilnius, considered Rosenboim the most important contact person, the most reliable partner, and executor of the Zionist policy in Lithuania. Rosenboim was addressed regarding various political, social, and cultural issues, and issues related to exclusively Zionist welfare activity—support for Palestine.⁶ On the other hand, though taking into account the weakness of the Zionist forces in the occupied zone and the importance of personal relations, attempts were made to maintain direct contact by regularly inviting Rosenboim to Berlin and Copenhagen, and by sending their agents to Vilnius.

“The First Victim of War Is the Truth”⁷

The changing events in the front line had direct influence on the determination of the Lithuanian Zionists as to which side they should support. Together with community leaders and social figures who had remained in the country after the mass deportations into the depths of Russia from March through May 1915, the Zionists were focused on the problems of mutual aid, social issues, and often issues of physical survival, and the struggle against the role of an enemy informer and ally incriminated to the Jews by the propaganda of the changing administrations. In historiography an opinion prevails that Jews regarded the German occupation as a lesser evil, and because of their professional activity and language skills became successful intermediaries between the Germans and other social groups in the country.⁸

The favorable attitude of Jews toward the German military administration was caused by the policy of equal rights principle, which was called a “magical trick” suddenly allowing “Jews to stop feeling like pariahs,” and rather “to launch a vigorous struggle for their political, civic, and national rights.” According to the report on the Jewish situation in Lithuania, which reached the Central Zionist Bureau in Berlin in 1916, the highest officials of the occupational administration were not philosemites (those knew little about the Jewish national aspirations),

⁶ Correspondence of the Central Zionist Bureau, CZA, F. Z3, File 131, 133, 135, 824, 825 et al.

⁷ A German proverb.

⁸ V. Vareikis, “Vilniaus žydų gyvenimo ir politinės orientacijos bruožai XIX–XX a. I pus. (lietuviškas požiūris),” *Vilniaus žydų intelektualinis gyvenimas iki antrojo Pasaulinio karo*, Tarptautinės mokslinės konferencijos “Vilniaus žydų intelektualinis gyvenimas iki Antrojo pasaulinio karo” medžiaga (Vilnius: Mokslo aidai, 2004), p. 74; L. Stein, “Der geyresh fun di litvishe jidn in faier fun der ershter velt milkhome (1914–1918),” *Lite*, vol. 1 (New York: Jewish-Cultural Society, 1951), pp. 104–105, 107–108; D. Levin, *Trumpa žydų istorija Lietuvoje*, pp. 67–70.

but treated representatives of various nations as equals. Neither in the front zone nor the territory occupied by enemies did Jews have to be afraid of pogroms or be “publicly whipped or declared spies and informers without any grounds, be hanged without court, or sent to Siberia.”⁹ This was Jews’ feelings for the last 150 years, when they were subjects of the Russian empire, and as the “masters of the country” were retreating, the situation got even worse.¹⁰ The catastrophic economic situation, unemployment, and famine during World War I were outbalanced by the possibilities of quite intense cultural and educational activity and the absolute freedom of the political thought. Proportional representation of the interests of the Jewish community in various commissions and municipal organs, and eight out of twenty-one seats foreseen in the Vilnius City Council that planned to be elected despite the harsh opposition of the Poles, increased the favourable attitude of Jews toward the German military administration.

The pro-German political line of the Vilnius Zionists, which treated the Germans as liberators from the oppressive politics of tsarist Russia rather than aggressors, and eulogies to the freedom of the cultural and political life of Jews, which gave hope for a new status of Jews in their living territory—particularly at the beginning of the war—reflected in the Zionist reports, would be logical and understandable. However, when the fact became clear that the Lithuanian Zionists maintained very close contact with representatives of the occupational power, it was still unsure whether these were the actual views of the Zionists or just an outcome of German censorship and propaganda.

In January 1916, postal communication between the Vilnius Zionists and the Central Zionist Bureau in Berlin was renewed. Correspondence, which reached Berlin in one day, was sent by the channels of the German military administration.

⁹ Rosenboim’s Report to the Central Zionist Bureau in Berlin, 22 March 1916, CZA, F. Z3, File 509, n.p.

¹⁰ A. Chayesh, *The Expulsion of the Jews from Lithuania in the Spring of 1915: The Case of Ziemelis*, available at www.jewishgen.org/Litvak/HTML?OnlineJournals/expulsion.htm.