

## **The Zionists' Political Expectations**

Different social groups advanced different political aims, which were influenced not only by their self-determination, but also by the general geopolitical situation in Europe. One of the basic questions, which caused clashes of the views and aims of various political groups, was the future political status of Lithuania and visions of its territory. The Zionists in this situation saw a historical chance to correct the Jewish situation in the country not only by ensuring their political, civic, and national rights in return for their political support for Lithuanians, but also to become lawmakers and executors of law in the formation of the country's administration together with other national groups.

In the Zionist discussions of the issue of political allies, the country's historically formed society was represented as a mosaic of four basic elements: Byelorussians, Lithuanians, Jews, and Poles. The Zionists saw Poles as people of high culture, having a strong national identity and ungrounded visions to rule the country. "Their aims of gravitation are not related only with Congressional Poland; they regard themselves and all of Lithuania as part of Poland, which is the source of all their political aspirations, and they wish to rule the country by themselves, even though being aware that they cannot have absolute power in Lithuania, which they have in Poland."<sup>11</sup> The Zionists considered the Lithuanian Jews as autochthons who lived in Lithuania for centuries in well-organized communities, reached a high level of culture and a well-developed and consciously real-

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<sup>11</sup> Appeal to Mr. Nadolny, Berlin, 19 February 1918, CZA, F. Z3, File 509, n.p.

ized sense of national identity differing from the nationalism of other surrounding nations in its peaceful rhetoric and absence of expressions of aggressive belligerence. The Jews were presented as an attractive ally. Although representing 15 percent of the population, they were not merely a national minority against one solid majority, but equal partners to each of the country's national groups that could not reach mutual political consensus.<sup>12</sup> To generalize the social status of the Poles and the Jews, it was asserted that only these two groups could represent the country's intelligentsia. The Lithuanians and the Byelorussians—which together make up the majority—were peasants, almost without any intelligentsia, which could not even be compared with the Polish and Jewish intelligentsia in its quantity, quality, and a large percentage of illiterates. "The sense of national consciousness existing among the Lithuanian intelligentsia is strong, but tends to break into an angry rhetoric, . . . while seeking to instil the sense of national identity in the masses and using all the energy and means available to promote the mental liberation of the masses and the consolidation of Lithuanian nationalism."<sup>13</sup>

In the balance of power distribution, the opposition between the Poles, on the one hand, and the Lithuanians and the Byelorussians, on the other hand, was obvious due to their long-established social roles, that is, the relationship between a landlord and a peasant, still intensified by the Poles' territorial aspirations and goals of assimilation. The relationship between the Jews and the Poles

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

was described as hostile, even though it was not demonstrated on the Polish side as brutally as in Congressional Poland. Also, the Jews tried to underrate the manifestations of that hostility. The position of the Belorussians and particularly the Lithuanians with regard to the Jews was defined as correct and satisfactory; as the pre-war political events showed, it was possible to find a rational basis for compromises and agreements on the main political questions and in forming a possible common political bloc in the future. However, let us return to the changing situation in the engaged Lithuania.

The liberal attitude of the German administration and the concessions made for the Jewish community did not last long. Germany's strategic plans with regard to Lithuania, which became distinct in 1917—while supporting the principle of the nations' right to self-determination, to promote the goal of the Lithuanians to restore the ethnographic Lithuania, thus building a political formation under their control, resistant to the influences of Russians and Poles, and favourable to Germany's interests in the East—caused anxiety for the Zionists and "corrected" the favourable attitude toward Germany's politics in the Oberost. Rosenboim signalled to the Central Zionist Bureau the growth of anti-Semitism in the spheres where it had never existed, and about the emerging distance between Lithuanians and Jews because of their varying views, which Jews alone were incapable of reducing, unless "they [Jews] rejected their most sacred inherent rights" and the Oberost administration changed its policy.<sup>14</sup> Rosenboim had in mind the increasing sympathies and connivance of the Germans toward the negotiators

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<sup>14</sup> Rosenboim's Letter to Dr. Hantke, Vilnius, 21 November 1917, CZA, F. Z3, File 509, n.p.

representing the Lithuanian interests, and rumours similar to blackmail that the unwillingness of the Jews to contribute to the joint political work in the country, was nothing more than the boycott of Lithuania's plans for independence.

In the summer of 1917, the president of the ZO, Otto Warburg, took steps to promote the issues of founding the organization in Vilnius and legitimizing its activity, which had been raised for some time, but got stuck due to various circumstances. The highest leadership of the Oberost was handed an appeal to allow the establishment of Zionist organizations, such as branches of the German Zionist organization, in the Oberost territory.<sup>15</sup> However, it was not until almost a year later that the organization that had been operating de facto was legitimized.

The Zionists were prompted to act by the growing Lithuanian national aspirations, goals of political independence and autocracy, and the Council elected at the September 1917 Lithuanian Conference, consisting exclusively of Lithuanian members, in which seats for candidates of national minorities were reserved. The representatives of the national minorities had to be appointed by the Council itself, the new members had to support Lithuania's independence, could not have participated in any anti-Lithuanian activity, and had to understand the Lithuanian language.

From 12 through 17 October 1917, Arthur Hantke visited Vilnius on a mission from the ZO, where he met with the local leaders of the Jewish community and needed to form an opinion about the economic, social, and cultural situation of the Jews living in the Oberost territory. While seeking to use his visit for the

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<sup>15</sup> Warburg's Letter to Rosenboim, Berlin, 12 July 1917, CZA, F. Z3, File 509, n.p.

propaganda of Zionist ideas, local Zionists held a meeting in Vilnius on 14 October, which confirmed that the hopes of the Jewish nation to have a National Home\* in its historical lands did not change in the war years, and they did not stop dreaming about Palestine.<sup>16</sup> In his address to the participants of the meeting, Rosenboim stressed, "Zionism has been finally transferred to the domain of the ministry of foreign affairs rather than that of home affairs, that is, in addition to other problems, the war raised the problem of Jews in a new way, not as a separate community, but as a united nation with all its characteristic attributes. At this moment it has become a European problem, a global question that finally has to be answered."<sup>17</sup> The basic idea of the meeting was to emphasize that during these great changes, Zionism could not remain a privilege of only a narrow circle of people, and Jews as representatives of one nation had to understand the necessity of this movement, thus granting the leadership and representatives of the ZO a moral right to act on behalf of all Jews. On 2 November 1917, Lord Arthur Balfour, the then-minister of foreign affairs of Great Britain, announced a declaration, which became one of the crucial points of reference in the history of Zionism and the Jewish people scattered all over the world. By this declaration, the Jews were granted their political rights to the historical land of their ances-

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\* The term "Jewish National Home" used in the Zionist rhetoric was understood as the foundation of the Jewish state in Palestine, while the same term predominant in the statements of the world's greatest powers meant the acknowledgement of the right to self-determination and the historical rights to the land of Palestine for the Jewish nation without additional political obligations.

<sup>16</sup> "Tsionistishe miting in Vilne," *Lezte Nayes*, 16 December 1917.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

tors—Eretz Yisrael.<sup>18</sup> It was a great diplomatic achievement and, above all, the political triumph of the Zionists, which gave much hope for Jews in all countries. Changes that took place on the international arena increased the authority of the Zionists even more, including Lithuanian, on the *Jewish street*.

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<sup>18</sup> A. Ben Cvi, *Geshikhte fun tsionizm fun dr. Herzl biz nokh der Balfur deklaratsie* (Kaunas, 1935), p. 90.