



## JEWES IN ESTONIA

There is little information on the first Jews to arrive in Estonia. Isolated mentions of Jews in the 14th century (1333) can be found in archival records, but these cannot be viewed as indicators of permanent Jewish settlements. The first mention of a Jewish congregation in Tallinn is in 1795, but this congregation was short-lived. Jewish settlement in Estonia actually began in the 19th century. By 1829, 36 Jews had settled in Estonia, a process that grew rapidly during the 1840's and 50's. Immigration into Estonia (as defined by the Republic of Estonia 1920 borders) was granted in 1865 by Czar Alexander II, based on the following criteria: only "cantonists" of Czar Nicholas' soldiers, merchants and artisans of the first guild may settle in Estonia. These were the Jews who established the first congregation in Estonia, the largest of which was in Tallinn from 1830-1941. The Great Synagogue in Tallinn was completed in 1883 (on the former Maakri Street) and was destroyed in the 1944. Since then there has not been a synagogue in Tallinn, only a prayer house.

It must be mentioned that prior to the creation of the Republic of Estonia in 1918, the Jews' rights had been curtailed with respect to land ownership, vocation choices, travel freedom and others. In spite of this, Jews managed to ensure a stable existence for themselves, largely thanks to their work ethic. The majority of Jews in Estonia at the time belonged to the social classes of small entrepreneurs and artisans. Their cultural activity was not particularly dynamic. Jewish university students in

Tartu did much to propagate the cultural aspect. The university students' association "Akademischer Verein" (Academic Society), established in 1884 and dissolved in 1940, deserves special mention. Their involvement helped to establish a Jewish elementary school (with limited courses) affiliated with the Tallinn congregation.

Jews participated in the Estonian War of Independence with 68 volunteers and 110 mobilised soldiers. The creation of the Republic of Estonia in 1918 marked a turning point in the life of Jews in Estonia. From its inception, the new Republic adopted a loyal stance toward all peoples on its soil, and the government tried to find ways to overcome racism. Within this framework, Jewish cultural and political activity heightened. On the 11-16 of May, 1919 at the first Congress of Jews in Estonia, where questions concerning Jewish ethnicity were focused on, the ideas of cultural autonomy and the opening of a Jewish secondary school in Tallinn were generated. Jewish associations and societies were also founded. The largest of them were the H.N. Bjalik Tallinn Drama Literature Society, and "Achdus" in Pärnu. Associations were also established in Viljandi, Narva and elsewhere. The "Makkabi" sports association, which was key to furthering Jewish participation in sports was founded in 1920. Competitions were participated in, in Estonia and elsewhere. Sara Teitelbaum, a member, set 28 records and was Estonian track and field champion 17 times.

Dominating Jewish cultural activity were the H.N. Bjalik Society and "Liht" Society in Tallinn and "Achdus" in Pärnu. University students' academic societies in Tartu also flourished: the aforementioned Academic Society, the sorority "Hazfiro", the fraternities "Limuvia" and "Hashmonea" and the "Jewish Student Treasury". Each organisation had its own library and contributed to Jewish cultural and social activities. In the 1930's, 96 Jews studied in Tartu (including 44 in law and 13 in medicine). In 1934, a Chair for Jewish studies was established in the philosophy faculty. Political organisations were also established. The youth Zionist organisations "Hashomer Hazair" and "Beitar" were prominent. Many members left Estonia to create the Jewish nation, and among the founders of the Israeli kibbutzes "Kfar Blum" and "Ein Gev", are Estonian Jews.

In 1919, the Tallinn congregation's Jewish elementary school was founded, and in 1923, the first class graduated. The students' parents' initiative led to the opening of the Tallinn Jewish secondary school, VII and VIII grades in September 1923 and January 1924, respectively, with a first year enrollment of 223 students. The new school-

house at 16 Karu Street, completed in 1924, was built solely by the funds and debts of the small Jewish community. From founding until its closing, the school director was Samuel Gurin. After 1941, the schoolhouse no longer belonged to the Jews. Until that time, however, the secondary school was a central place for Jewish culture in Tallinn and Estonia: "Makkabi" sports activities, lectures, social evenings, balls, theatre performances, song and dance celebrations were held here. Soon the cultural autonomy dream was realized as well, through the Republic of Estonia passing a cultural minorities' rights law' on February 12, 1925. The Jewish community immediately began vying for cultural autonomy rights, and informed the government of their intentions. Statistics were presented: 3,045 Estonians were Jews (a minimum of 3,000 was required for official minority status), and thus Jews gained minority status. The Jewish Cultural Council was elected in 1926, and at the Congressional Session the Council declared Jewish cultural autonomy in Estonia. The implementing body was the Jewish Cultural Government and, until its liquidation, it was headed by Grigori Aisenstadt (repressed in 1949).

Minorities' cultural autonomy was an exceptional phenomenon in European cultural history, and thus, Jewish cultural autonomy in Estonia caught the attention of the world Jewry. The global Jewish organisation thanked the Estonian government with a recognition certificate. In 1936, the 10th anniversary of Jewish cultural autonomy was celebrated.

Cultural governing bodies were created in Tartu, Valga, Narva, Pärnu, Võru, Rakvere and Viljandi. Three schools functioned: Tallinn Secondary School, Tartu Junior High School, and Valga Elementary School. In 1930, 352 students, or 55 % of the eligible students, attended the Jewish schools. In the urban centres where the number of students was small, extracurricular Hebrew and Jewish history lessons were given by local governing body members. Jewish kindergartens were located in Tallinn, Valga and Narva. Libraries were in Tallinn, Tartu, Narva and Pärnu. Estonian Jews had two synagogues (Tallinn and Tartu) and three prayer houses (Valga, Pärnu and Viljandi).

By 1934, 4,434 Jews lived in Estonia (0.4 % of the population). The largest groups were in Tallinn (2,203), Tartu (920), Valga (262), Pärnu (248), Narva (188) and Viljandi (121). Of these, 1,688 Jews participated directly in the national economy as merchants (31 %), office workers (24 %), artisans (14.5 %) and workers (14 %). Some of the larger Jew-owned businesses were: the leather tannery of Uzvanski and Sons in Tartu, Ginovkers' confectionary

in Tallinn, pelt tannery of Ratner and Hoff and forestry development of Sheins, Judeikins and others. A Jewish entrepreneurs and industrialists' society was also founded and Jewish banks functioned in Tallinn and Tartu. Jewish freelancers were small in number (9.5 % of employed Jews). These were mostly medical doctors (80), pharmacists (16) and veterinarians (4). A post-secondary education was held by 11 % of Estonian Jews, a secondary education by 37 %, an elementary education by 33 %, and a "homespun" education by 18 %.

Small Jewish communities also established their governing bodies, organized by the Tallinn Jewish Charity, affiliated with the synagogue. Tallinn rabi was Dr Gomer who, during the 1941 German occupation, was ruthlessly humiliated, and whose burial place is still unknown. In Tartu, a Jewish Charity Union functioned, and similar organisations were created in Narva, Valga and Pärnu.

The Estonian Jewish community's peaceful activities were suddenly halted by the Soviet occupation in 1940. Jewish cultural autonomy was abolished in July 1940, and in July-August of the same year, all organisations, unions, societies, associations, fraternities and sororities were shut down. Mass Jewish repressions were held on June 14, 1941. The German occupation of Estonia in 1941 brought with it the mass execution of all Jews who did not flee to the Soviet Union. In 1942, occupied Estonia was declared to be "Jew-free".

Post World War II, Jewish cultural rebirth in occupied Estonia did not transpire, as an inevitable result of Soviet ethnic politics. The Soviets' intolerance of Zionism, and identification of all Jewry with Zionism, made Jewish cultural growth impossible, and the culture faded. A new generation has grown up in occupied Estonia (several generations in the Soviet Union) who know nothing of their mother tongue, cultural history, religion, literature, etc. It is for this reason that in 1988, the Jewish Cultural Association was founded in Estonia: as an effort to re-establish the ethnic memory, to bring Estonian Jews back in touch with their cultural roots.

Eugenia Gurin-Loov