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Bialystok Transplanted and Transformed

JOSEPH CHAIKIN

The Jewish community in the United States has no monopoly on the "Landsmannschaft" form of organization—it may be found among the Germans, the Irish, the Poles and others—but in no other immigrant group are the Landsmannschaften so deep-rooted, so persistent and so widespread as among the Jews who settled here from Eastern and Central Europe. There are about 3,000 Landsmannschaften in New York City alone, with a membership of half a million, and perhaps an equal number in the rest of the country—though here no reliable figures exist and estimates are dangerous. Most of these groups have endured through three generations, long after the impulse and the need that gave them birth have disappeared, so that many a younger member has never seen or hardly remembers the town that gave his society its name. These associations still perform a useful function—philanthropic or social, a fact that is acknowledged by their representation in the councils of such large national organizations as the Joint Distribution Committee or the American Jewish Congress—and they perhaps merit more attention than is usually accorded them.

Eastern and Central European Jews found their way to this country even during the Colonial period. Haym Salomon, who made such a significant contribution to the cause of the American Revolution, was a Polish Jew, and there were others. Their number was increased in the 1848 wave of German immigration; many of the German Jews who migrated to this country at that time stemmed from Eastern Europe. The real mass migration of Eastern European Jews began, however, in the eighties, in flight from the Czarist persecutions.

America was hospitable enough to the new immigrants and remained hospitable almost up to the time of the First World War. Immigrants in good health and moral character were admitted without question; passports and visas were not required. Even the initial restrictions against imported contract labor did not affect the Jews, for they were neither...
they came at their own risk and had to make
their own individual adjustments, which were always difficult. They
were aided in transit by charitable groups of Jews in Germany, Austria,
France and England. In this country the established German-Jewish
groups came to their assistance, but the flood was too great to be channeled
and in the main the newcomers had to depend upon themselves.

It was only natural that the immigrants, ignorant of the language and
the ways of their new home, should band together for mutual assistance
and turn first to the people they knew—their landsleit, who came from
the same town in Eastern Europe, from Vilna, from Grodno, from
Kovno, from Bialystok. The landsleit who had arrived earlier became
the guides and guardians of those who came later. The first night's
lodging, an introduction to the first job, credit for the first supply of the
peddler's pack, or pushcart load, was furnished through the aid of the
landsmann, though he might have preceded the newcomer to this
country by only a few months. Ties of gratitude and mutual assistance
were thus established, and have in many cases endured to this day
through the children and the grandchildren of the early immigrants.
These formed the early basis of the Landsmannschaften and may help
explain their survival to the present day.

But as the tide of migration rose ever higher, the problems of the
newcomers could not be solved within the means of individual landsleit.
Those who had been aided were not disposed to deny aid to others, but
it was now necessary to organize a pooling of resources and of collective
experience. Landsmannschaften grew in size and number; the fact that
the Jewish immigrants were urban dwellers and came largely from the
same communities made organization easier and more natural.

We may trace the beginnings of the Eastern and Central European
Landsmannschaft organizations among the Jews back to 1848 in the
larger cities, but their real development came with the rising tide of
immigration. The societies grew both in number and in the scope of
their activities. Material assistance to the newcomers, important as it
was in itself, was not the only reason for the formation of the Lands-
mannschaften. The urge to reconstitute in the new land at least a part
of the life of the old—the only life that was familiar—was strong among
the immigrants, and expressed itself most strongly in the desire to meet
in prayer with familiar faces. Small, mushroom congregations sprang
up—the Anshe, or the "men" of such and such a town. Separate plots
were fenced off in Jewish cemeteries, for the exclusive use of these congregations and societies. The Landsmannschaften ministered to the material, religious, and social needs of the immigrants on a more intimate basis than could the existing social service organizations. Nor did their services end with the help they gave in this country. Relatives in the old country, in the original communities now depleted of the younger men, were assisted in large measure by the organization of Landsmannschaften. As the newcomers became established, their charities abroad increased in volume and overshadowed their work in this country.

It is our purpose to trace the history of the Bialystok Landsmannschaft—one that has gone through all the stages of organization and reached the peak of its development—in the hope that a close scrutiny will afford us a picture of the whole Landsmannschaft movement in the United States.¹

II

Bialystok, before its occupation by Hitler, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, September 1, 1939, was an important industrial city in the White-Russian section of Poland. It was not an old city, by European standards. The original settlement of the village, Bialy, on the banks of the river of the same name, dates back to the beginning of the fifteenth century. Some Jewish settlers must have lived there by the end of the seventeenth century, since there are records of the revival in that region and at that time of the ugly “blood-accusation” against Jews.

The official beginnings of the Bialystok Jewish community, however, date back to 1749. In that year, Count Branitzky, a Polish feudal lord, owner of the village of Bialy, and of much surrounding territory, succeeded in obtaining a township charter for Bialystok from the Polish King, Augustus III. Count Branitzky invited Jews to settle in his domain. He even built a number of frame houses near his castle, and offered them rent-free to the original Jewish settlers. Fourteen years later, he built a synagogue for the community. But as the Jewish population grew, he made the settlers pay heavily in taxes for his favors and hospitality.

During the second partition of Poland, in 1793, Bialystok was first awarded to Prussia. Sixteen years later, the town reverted to Russia.

A serious study of the Landsmannschaften in this country, from 1840 to 1939, was undertaken by the Yiddish Writers’ Group of the Federal Writers’ Project, Works Progress Administration, and published by the Yiddish Writers’ Union (Peretz Verein) of New York.
it became part of the re-established Polish State. Under all its
previous rulers, the Jewish community of Bialystok grew and prospered.
In 1840, Germans introduced the first textile factories there. Ten years
later, Jews followed the example of the Germans and established successful
textile works of their own. In 1859, Bialystok was connected with the
outside world by railroad, and the town’s growth was assured.

The religious and cultural life in the Bialystok Jewish Community
was on the upgrade from the beginning of the nineteenth century. In
1805, the first Jewish printing press was established in Bialystok. It
prospered until the Russian Government, for reasons of censorship,
closed down all Jewish printing shops in the Empire, except one in
Poznań and another in Slavuta. The community developed industrially,
such an extent that in 1877 to 1878, the first important strike of
weavers in Russia occurred there, lasting several months. The growing
socialist character of the Jewish population of the town even influ-
enced some of the local gymnasium students in the direction of Social-
nism. The first Socialist agitator and journalistic propagandist in Hebrew,
Mordecai Lieberman, began his activities in his Bialystok home, before
emigrated to London and the United States, in the eighties.

Unlike many other growing Jewish communities in Poland, Bialystok
is always better known for its industries and commerce than for its
singing. To be sure, it had its quota of synagogues and talmudic stu-
dents, and even boasted a number of outstanding rabbis. Rabbi Samuel
Schli Moore, the forerunner of modern Zionism, the orthodox leader who
sold Jews in interested Baron Rothschild in Palestinian colonization,
is for many years the chief rabbi of Bialystok. But the town acquired
greater reputation as a center of Jewish workers in textiles, tobacco
and the building trades.

The Jewish population of Bialystok increased greatly during the
latter part of the nineteenth century. The census of 1897 reports
100,000 Jewish inhabitants, representing 66% of the entire population.
In brutal pogroms of 1906 and 1907, in which several hundred Jews
were killed, a thousand injured, and much Jewish property destroyed,
with a great migration of Bialystok Jews to America, and the community
thereby a considerable portion of its youth. The First World War,
the oppressive economic policy of the Polish Government in the
twenties and thirties was also not conducive to a revival of Jewish life.
The census of 1931 showed only 31,000 Jewish inhabitants in Bialystok,
using 45% of the total population.
Until the outbreak of the Second World War, the Jewish community of that city nevertheless continued to furnish its quota of important men. Dr. Ludwig Zamenhof, the originator of Esperanto, achieved world fame while he worked at his practice as an oculist in his Bialystok home. Dr. Joseph Chazanowitz, who labored early and late ministering to the physical needs of the poor in Bialystok, was the founder of what is now the Jewish National Library and University in Jerusalem. The late Prof. Leo Wiener, of Harvard University, a famous linguist, began his scholarly career in his native Bialystok. Maxim M. Litvinov (Meyer Wallach) was born and obtained his early schooling in the home surroundings of his orthodox Jewish family in Bialystok. Ossip Dynow, an outstanding Russian short-story writer and dramatist; the famous opera star, Rosa Raisa, and scores of other celebrities in various fields of endeavor, carried with them in their careers the world over the cultural heritage of their home town.

This, briefly, is the background of some 75,000 Jews who migrated from Bialystok during the period of the 1880's, to the beginning of the Second World War. Of this number, at least 50,000 settled in the United States, about half of them in the metropolitan district of New York. Their Landsmannschaft organizations and institutions form a cross section of the immigrant Jewish community in the United States. By and large, their migration was actuated by the same economic necessities, religious, social, and political compulsions, that were the major reason for all Jewish migration from Eastern and Central Europe. Their experiences here did not differ much from the experiences of migrants from Warsaw, Vilna, or any other Jewish population center in Slavic countries or Rumania. They brought here approximately the same skills and knowledge. And they shared also the material poverty and rich cultural heritage of their fellow immigrants.

III

The first organization of Bialystok Jews in this country was the Bialystok Benevolent Society, chartered in New York in 1864, but longer in existence. The Congregation Beth Haknesseth Anshe Bialystok of 5 Willet Street, New York City, was organized in 1878, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1928, and continues to be the recognized synagogue of the Bialystok Landsmannschaft despite the fact that very few of the landsleit still reside on the lower East Side.
Other secular organizations, in New York and elsewhere, were organized by immigrants from Bialystok in the following order: Ahavath Achim, 1884; Somech Noflim, 1886; Brotherly Love Association, 1890; Bikur Cholim, 1897; Bikur Cholim in Brooklyn, 1898; I. O. B. A. Lodge, 1901; Unterzizons Verein, Brooklyn, 1902; Bricklayers Benevolent Association, 1905; Branch 88, Workmen's Circle, 1905; Young Men's Association, 1906; Branch 127, Workmen's Circle, Chicago, 1906; Branch 137, Workmen's Circle, Philadelphia, 1906; Branch 121, Workmen's Circle, Paterson, N. J., 1907; Branch 256, Workmen's Circle, Newark, N. J., 1908; Ladies Aid Society, Harlem and Bronx, 1909; Arbeiter Unterzizons Verein of Newark, N. J., 1912; Bialystoker Center, New York, 1919; Relief Committees, Chicago and Paterson, 1919; Bialystoker Center, Chicago, 1922; Ladies Auxiliary, N. Y., 1923; Ladies Auxiliary, Chicago, 1925; Ladies Auxiliary, Newark, N. J., 1927; Ladies Auxiliary Bikur Cholim, Brooklyn, 1928; Bialystoker Social Center, Los Angeles, 1928; Bialystoker Center and Home for the Aged, New York, 1931; Bialystoker Credit Union, New York, 1933.

The names of these organizations, as well as their dates of origin, indicate a general pattern. Mutual-aid, assistance to the needy, and care for the sick, houses of prayer, even an organization of building tradesmen, were among the first institutions. All these organizations, if should be noted here, were replicas of similar groups in Bialystok.

"Old timers" who landed in this country in the middle eighties still recount the difficulties of adjustment during their first years of residence in America. Most of them were weavers, but when they arrived here, they took up cigar making. The few landsleit who preceded them were cigar makers, and could not help their friends to find employment in weaving establishments. Later, in the nineties, and at the turn of the century, when they were more Americanized, they found their way into the textile industry of New York, Hoboken, and Paterson. In Paterson they were eventually instrumental in developing successful textile establishments. Some acquired considerable wealth in their new ventures. But this happened only after a few landsleit moved west.

European training in various trades, particularly in the building lines, soon enabled the Bialystok men to come into their own in their new home. Building booms in Harlem, Brooklyn and the Bronx, as well as in many other cities throughout the East, furnished ample opportunities for Bialystok carpenters, bricklayers and other building workers,
to prosper. The newcomers also adapted themselves successfully to other trades and professions in this country.

In the cultural field, their contribution was no less notable. Jacob Sapirstein and Sigmund Kanterowitz, the outstanding Yiddish publishers in New York in the nineties, were both from Bialystok. They began their careers here as publishers of popular works of fiction, in weekly serial pamphlet editions. Mr. Kanterowitz, whose ambitions were more literary, even attempted to establish the first Yiddish intellectual monthly, Der Neier Geist, in the late nineties, with the philologist and author, Alexander Harkavy, as his editor. The venture was a "moral" success only. Mr. Sapirstein turned from pamphlet publication to the creation of a Yiddish daily press. His Abend Post met with uneven success at the turn of the century. He founded the Jewish Morning Journal in 1903, with another Bialystok Landsmann, the historian, Peter Wiernick, as his editor-in-chief. This conservative Yiddish morning newspaper is still an outstanding journal of opinion in the Jewish community.

IV

The peak of its activity was reached by the Bialystok Landsmannschafft in 1919, with the establishment of its first federation of organizations, known as the Bialystoker Center of New York. Led by a young newcomer, David Sohn, who subsequently became the leading spirit of his community, this federation of townsmen raised substantial sums for relief of Bialystok Jews abroad. Soon after the Armistice, five representatives were dispatched, in rotation, two of them on repeated missions of charity, from the Landsmannschafft of Bialystok to the people of their old home town. These men proved to be capable and self-sacrificing. They traveled from America to Bialystok at quarter-year intervals between 1919 and 1922, distributing $625,000 transmitted from American Jews to relatives in Europe, plus $66,000 as a general contribution to the charities of the Jewish Community of Bialystok.

The collective cost of these transmissions was under 4%. The service was popular with the people of the Landsmannschafft here, as with their relatives in Europe, and the Center continued to serve a transmitting agency, without the intermediary of private banks, from 1922 to 1932. During that decade, five million dollars was sent by the landsleit to their native city, and only the depression cut short this activity.
The Joint Distribution Committee is reported to have heartily approved this “separatistic” service of the Bialystok Landmannschaft, on the theory that the remittances sent through this special agency were of particular value because they were carried on by people who were well acquainted both with the financial status of the senders, and the particular needs of the recipients. The Second World War has put an end to this work for the time being. Active workers, therefore, encourage their organizations to raise substantial funds for the day when help can again be sent across. But they also urge their followers to take advantage of the well-organized apparatus of the Joint Distribution Committee.

In the meantime, activities of the Bialystok Landmannschaft in this country continue along the established lines. The most important local institution of the Landmannschaft is its Home for the Aged, a modern ten-story structure on East Broadway, in the heart of the old East Side, which has been functioning since 1931. It houses over five hundred old men and women, and has an annual budget of $100,000, raised by its own membership. The office of the home is also the center of other charitable activities, distributing $10,000 a year in small sums to needy families and individuals. The most important feature of this service is that it is carried on in the unprofessional manner of mutual help, maintaining the ancient Jewish tradition of tzedakah.

The Bialystok Center has published for twenty-four years a well-edited monthly magazine, The Voice of Bialystok. This publication was originally all in Yiddish, but since its fourth or fifth year, it has been found necessary to add an English section, which is growing in size. The editor, David Sohn, is also the superintendent of the Home for the Aged, and is assisted in his editorial duties by Jacob Kirepliak and other Yiddish writers in the Landmannschaft.

The process of Americanization is gradually changing the language of the Landmannschaft organizations, both in New York and in other cities, from Yiddish to English. The majority is still Yiddish-speaking, but English is becoming the growing medium of communication at meetings, social gatherings, and conferences. It is symptomatic that the list of donors printed in the official magazine is chiefly in English. The number of English communications to the editor is also on the increase. However, the important literary material of the publication is still in Yiddish.
The Bialystok Landsmannschaft organizations in New York, Newark, Paterson, Chicago, Los Angeles, claim a collective membership of 10,000, or about one-fifth of the estimated 50,000 Bialystok immigrants living in this country. Their influence, however, extends beyond mere numbers. They represent perhaps the most enterprising of all Landsmannschaften. As far back as 1919, the societies, united under the auspices of the Bialystoker Center of New York, attempted to form a miniature “World Federation” of their own. Thus they encouraged after the Armistice an organization of Bialystok refugees in Berlin. They established connections with Bialystok pioneers in Palestine and contributed liberally to the assistance of both groups, in Germany and Palestine, for several years. At the same time, they established connections with societies of Bialystok immigrants in Buenos Aires. The leaders of the Landsmannschaft in the United States at one time even entertained a notion of an “International Conference” of their own.

The first step in that direction was made in June 1934 at a national convention in New York, attended by sixty-two delegates from Bialystok organizations in nineteen American cities. A second convention was held in New York in 1939, with an increased body of delegates and organizations. The war destroyed all these ambitious plans of the Bialystoker Landsmannschaft.

Leading men of the Landsmannschaft still hope, however, that it may be possible to assemble delegates of their organizations in the near future for the mobilization of resources toward the immense undertaking of help and reconstruction abroad after the war. They look forward to a complete co-operation with the Joint Distribution Committee in this effort, but they are certain that even under the aegis of the J.D.C. they will prove the usefulness of their particular group, as a solidifying force in the Jewish community of America.

(1) The Holocaust destroyed the source.
SEFER BIALYSTOK

An Everlasting Memorial
to the
HEROES AND MARTYRS OF ANNIHILATED BIALYSTOK

Published upon the 20th Yahrzeit
1943 – 1963

Volume One
April 1963

Section Two
BIALYSTOKER COMMUNAL LEADERS IN CHICAGO

Harry Lapinsky
Well-known educational and cultural leader, secretary of the Bialystoker Social Club and the inspiring force of the landsmanshaft.

Israel Mines
President of the Bialystoker Social Club, Chicago, and prominent communal leader and benefactor.

Nathan Miller
Progressive labor leader and prominent personality in the landsmanshaft.

BIALYSTOKER IN DETROIT
כיאליסמטיקער שפימן

1979-80
In 1931, the grand opening of the Bialystoker Center and Home for the Aged featured an impressive parade of landsleit and a marching band.
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