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978-0-521-10373-2 - Bert: The Biography of a Socialist Zionist - Berl Katznelson 1887-1944

Anita Shapira

Excerpt

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**THE ROAD TO ZION,
1887–1909**

Berl Katznelson, the son of Moshe Katznelson and Teivel-Reizel Katznelson, née Nemetz, was born on 25 January 1887 in Bobruisk, White Russia.

The region of his birth, once Polish territory, was conquered in the late eighteenth century by the Russians, and Bobruisk, till then a sparsely populated village, was elevated to the status of district capital in the province of Minsk. The town fanned out from a fortress, built (as part of the Russian network of fortifications against Napoleon) at the confluence of the Bobruisk and Berezina rivers, and was bordered by them on two sides. Before the age of the railway, the waterway was Bobruisk's natural means of transportation. Timber from the surrounding forests – the town's main source of livelihood – was floated down the Berezina, and vessels sailing to northern and southern Russia visited the port. Later Bobruisk became the junction of the railway lines to Minsk and Hommel.

Yet despite the town's importance as district capital with a population of forty thousand, Bobruisk looked like an overgrown village. It was totally devoid of charm, and the only buildings in the entire town which were pleasing to the eye were the two Polish churches. Its streets were unpaved, and during the autumn rains and the spring thaw the town was one vast quagmire, so much so that 'Bobruisk mud' became a byword. Bobruisk was typical of the small towns of the Jewish Pale of Settlement (those areas of Tsarist Russia where Jews were permitted to reside) in general appearance: they all seemed to have been strewn rather than planned.

More than half of the inhabitants of Bobruisk were Jews. Before the enforcement of the decrees of Alexander III, which deprived the Jews of the right to reside in villages (1882), the town was the hub of a Jewish rural area. Like many other small Jewish towns, Bobruisk was a self-contained world. If one can speak of a Jewish condition, it was here, in

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the towns and cities where the Jewish masses crowded together, eking out a living, that it evolved. The non-Jews played an important part in this world, as the authorities, as customers or even, at times, as rioters, but theirs was always a marginal role. Jewish life was conducted within the confines of a closely-knit society and system of values, determined by the Jewish law or in opposition to it. In the years of Berl's childhood and adolescence, Bobruisk, like other Jewish towns, was opening up to outside influences, but the changes were not yet strong enough to undermine the fundamental nature of the Jewish experience, which remained indelibly imprinted upon the sons and daughters of the town throughout their lives, however far they roamed.

In Bobruisk there was a saying that if one threw a stone, one could be sure of hitting a Katznelson. But there were numerous kinds of Katznelsons and Berl's family belonged to an impoverished and humble branch of the clan. His father Moshe had, as a young man, traveled in pursuit of an education as far as Vilna, which was renowned for its *yeshivas*. There he had made a match with Zelda Rachel, daughter of Shmuel Strashun of the well-known and respected Strashun family. They were married in the summer of 1879 in Cracow, where her parents lived, and took up residence there. The young couple enjoyed seven years of happiness, during which a son, Hayim, was born to them, and then Zelda Rachel died. According to family legend (as transmitted by Moshe's second wife to her children), he was inconsolable, and a number of years passed before he yielded to the urgings of his father to remarry. However, the legend is at odd with the facts. Barely four months after his loss, Moshe returned to Bobruisk and took a second wife, Teivel Reizel, the daughter of Yaakov Nemetz.

Berl's mother came from a middle-class merchant family. A headstrong young woman, of marriageable age, she had already rejected a number of suitors. When Moshe Katznelson was introduced to her as a prospective bridegroom she approved of him, finding his melancholy air intriguing. He told her that he was a widower and, in order to test her, said that he had two children. Teivel was not deterred and undertook to be a mother to them, to the chagrin of her father. Yaakov Nemetz was far from delighted at the idea of a match between his young, dowered daughter and a widower burdened with children. But as the level-headed and obstinate Teivel had made up her mind, nothing could sway her; and her father finally capitulated. The couple were married in spring 1886, and the young Katznelsons moved into the large

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Nemetz household. Teivel invested her dowry in her father's ironware shop and worked there every day.

It was in the Nemetz house that their first child, Berl, was born less than a year later. Other children followed at intervals of eighteen months to two years: Israel, Isser, Stishia, Benyamin (who died at the age of one) and Hanna, the youngest, born in December 1897.

Moshe Katznelson lived in his father-in-law's house for more than ten years while he built up his own business. A timber merchant, he traveled in southern Russia in the Yekaterinoslav area, and came home only twice a year, for the festivals. Once his affairs prospered, Moshe bought a large house, and the now affluent family, with six children, finally left the shelter of the Nemetz household.

Teivel, who was considered rather intelligent and knew how to read and write, was neither educated nor particularly attracted to study. Her husband, in contrast, was a scholar and booklover, who had amassed a large library of religious works. In the attic lay volume upon volume of modern Hebrew periodicals, a secular supplement to the bookcases downstairs. Moshe Katznelson was steeped in traditional Jewish learning and the Torah, Talmud and *poskim* (rabbinical studies of halakhic questions) – were the mainstays of his spiritual world. At the same time, however, he did not suffer from a religious narrow-mindedness, possibly because his constant travels had brought him into contact with the spirit of the times and with Russian culture. In any event, works of Russian literature found their way into the household and Berl was later to describe how talmudic works, Pushkin and the novels of the Hebrew writer, Mendele Mocher Sefarim, lay heaped together in his father's study.

The encounter between traditional Jewish values and the new trends was also reflected in Moshe's attitude towards his brother-in-law, Leib Prohorovski, an early Jewish socialist. Moshe and his renegade brother-in-law were linked by ties of deep affection, and stormy debates on socialist issues were carried on whenever Moshe was at home. An air of excitement and intellectual ferment filled the house: the parlor was crammed with visitors, the water in the samovar was constantly on the boil, and the shopkeepers, merchants, and teachers of the town would sit around the table, discussing issues pertaining to Russian society and to the narrower world of Jewish affairs. Palestine and Zionism were also debated.

Berl was the favorite child of his parents, particularly of his father.

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He was a handsome boy, with black curls and intelligent, merry eyes. Intellectually, he was head and shoulders above his siblings and wore the aura of the prodigy. Although he had an older half-brother, Hayim, Berl was treated as if he were the eldest, and Moshe and Teivel Reizel focused on him all the hopes which parents traditionally invest in their first-born.

Berl's mother did not play a significant role in his education; she was occupied in her father's shop, and the children were cared for by a nanny and a maidservant. It was his father who shaped the boy's world, and who selected the *melamed* (infant teacher) whose *heder* Berl attended. When he was at home, Moshe often visited Berl at *heder* and took an interest in his progress, while the child took great pride in his teacher's respectful attitude towards his father. But Berl's character was shaped by the books he read rather than by his formal studies. He was eight years old when his father brought him his first Hebrew book, a collection of stories about the Ten Commandments (or rather nine of them, since one was considered unsuitable for a children's book). Berl became very absorbed in his father's library, where he found Hebrew journals and the literature of the Hebrew 'Enlightenment',* as well as many other works usually considered far beyond the grasp of a child of his age.

Up to the age of ten, Berl was brought up exclusively on the Hebrew language and its literature, at home and at *heder*. When his father was satisfied that the boy had a firm grounding in Jewish culture, he arranged for him to be taught Russian. Berl attacked with gusto the great works of the Russian language, equally attracted to fiction and to philosophy.

He was a rather lonely child; since he was sickly, he was not sent to school or to a *talmud torah* after the *heder* years, but was taught by private tutors at home. He quenched his thirst for knowledge in his father's attic, where the Hebrew periodicals were stacked. He had no friends his own age, except for David Shimonovitz (later the poet, David Shimoni), who was his schoolmate in *heder* and reading companion, and with whom he maintained a lifelong friendship. This was not a natural situation for a child: Berl knew nothing of boyhood pranks, and had no friends with whom to make mischief and conspire against parental

* The Jewish 'Enlightenment' movement reached Russia in the late nineteenth century. Its essence was the creation of a secular Hebrew literature.

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authority. His life centered on two things: the excitement of his father's homecomings, during which he would sit in a corner, eagerly following the fervid adult conversation, and reading, which opened up for him a world of experience and imagination.

A relative who observed him during those years believed that Berl suffered from an inferiority complex because he had no friends, had poor health, and lost his father at an early age. Berl himself often spoke in later years of his suffering as a child, always surrounded by adults, although his perception may have been colored by hindsight. It is probable that so precocious a child would, in any case, have found scant interest in the company of children of his own age.

When Berl was twelve years old, a shattering blow descended on the Katznelson family. His father Moshe contracted bronchial pneumonia while visiting southern Russia on business and died soon after on 1 October 1899. He had not lived to celebrate his 38th birthday.

Widows and orphans were a commonplace in the Pale of Settlement. Berl's father and grandfather had both lost their first wives after only a few years of marriage, and been left with orphan children. But the loss of a husband had more drastic implications, especially in a middle-class family, such as Berl's, where the father was the main breadwinner. The status of the family declined, and it was sometimes reduced to abject poverty. The plight of a widow burdened with children could hardly be compared with that of a widower.

This was now Teivel Katznelson's situation. She who had lived a cosseted life was now suddenly confronted with responsibility for supporting and educating five children, the eldest of whom was twelve years old, the youngest less than two. The shock was more than she could bear and she fell into a deep depression. A year went by before she rallied and was able to take up her yoke. The steely character which had laid dormant during the good years now came to the fore. Her father-in-law, forceful and prosperous Aharon Katznelson, was ready to support his grandchildren and his son's widow on condition that she move into his household and give the children up into his care. Teivel rejected the offer outright, turned her back on the prospect of a secure and comfortable life with her husband's family, and chose the stony path of self-support.

Barely two years later, the family suffered a further set-back: in 1902 a fire broke out in Bobruisk, which consumed most of the wooden houses in the town. The Katznelson home was spared, but the Nemetz

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house burnt down, as did the store in which Teivel's dowry was invested. Grandfather Nemetz became a pauper overnight, and he and his wife were reduced to living in a little hut in their daughter's courtyard. They were both dead within two years.

Teivel bought a small store in the market, where she sold rope, felt shoes and gloves to the peasants of the surrounding area. She maintained her independence despite heavy odds, and her shrewdness and common sense preserved her from the humiliation of poverty.

For Berl, his father's death spelled the beginning of a decade of wandering – both physical and intellectual. The shock of bereavement, intensified by the crisis of adolescence, drove him into a lengthy, tortuous quest for identity.

His father had been a 'Lover of Zion'.* His 'love of Zion' was not grounded in rational argumentation, but was the product of generations of Jewish tradition; it was imbibed with mother's milk, with biblical tales and legends heard in childhood, with the rituals and prayers of Sabbath and festivals. It was entwined with every aspect of Jewish life, from the mourning customs of the Fast of the Ninth of Av, commemorating the destruction of the Temple, to the merrymaking on festivals celebrating ancient harvest in a distant land.

Berl's first conscious awareness of the Land of Israel was connected with his book of tales of the Commandments. One of the stories was about a *zaddik* (righteous man), travelling through the desert in a caravan. He refused to continue the journey on Friday evening, lest he desecrate the Sabbath and was left alone in the desert. A lion came and guarded him all through the night and when the Sabbath ended, he rode on the lion's back until he caught up with the caravan. The story ended with the comment that the descendants of the *zaddik* were still living in Hebron. When the child read these words, he burst into tears – tears of joy that the Land of Israel really existed and tears of regret that he himself was not living there.

Other books helped to reinforce his sense of Eretz Israel as a real place. The news that the Jews had been granted a concession to build a

* Hibat Zion (Love of Zion) was a movement which advocated the return of Jews to Zion, and preceded political Zionism. It began in 1881, with the first wave of immigrants to Palestine, known as the First Aliyah (Going Up). The movement was not marked by practical sense, organizational ability or intellectual depth. At the same time, it deserves credit for initiating the first modern settlement of Jews in Palestine, with the aim of establishing productive, agricultural colonies there.

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railway from Jaffa to Jerusalem conjured up in Berl's mind a Palestine resembling the railway station in Bobruisk from which his father always departed on his journeys to southern Russia. The boy loved the colorful station garden, an unusual sight in muddy Bobruisk, whose Jews considered gardens an unnecessary luxury. 'My ideal was to be a station-master in Palestine . . .' he later wrote. 'Not a policeman and not a soldier. I saw the Jewish state in the image of a railway station . . .'¹

News of the First Aliyah pioneers also reached Bobruisk. The Hebrew periodicals in the Katznelson attic recorded in detail everything that happened in Palestine. And among the visitors to Berl's home was a young Jew who had himself actually been a laborer in Palestine for a year or two, one of the builders of the colony of Rehovot. He was a 'strange character', who insisted on farming in Russia as well, and found nothing shameful about driving a wagonload of manure through the streets of Bobruisk. And though he came from a middle-class family, he married a servant-girl. This man would talk at length with Moshe Katznelson, while little Berl sat, all ears, in his habitual corner.

There was another Bobruisk householder who provided direct news from Palestine, a man whose son-in-law had gone there in 1898 and was working as a laborer. His letters, though full of the problems and harsh conditions which prevailed, helped draw a picture of a country eminently accessible.

Zionism was still in its infancy and had made relatively small inroads into Bobruisk. The rich were interested in their business affairs and the intelligentsia in the Jewish socialist Bund or the revolutionary movement. Zionism was confined mainly to the middle class who read the Hebrew periodicals, *ha-Melitz*, *ha-Zefira* and later, *ha-Shiloah*. They would argue about the views of Pinsker* and Lilienblum†, and the virtues and shortcomings of Herzl‡ as they downed glass after glass of tea.

A glance at the biographies of most of the Second Aliyah pioneers,

* Yehuda Leib Pinsker, 1821–1891, leader of Hibat Zion; author of the famous pamphlet *Auto-Emancipation*.

† Moshe Leib Lilienblum, 1843–1910, writer and prominent figure in Hibat Zion.

‡ Theodore Herzl, 1860–1904, father of political Zionism and founder of the World Zionist Organization. It was he who transformed Zionism into a political movement, employing the instruments of political organization and of modern diplomacy. He was also the first to define the objective of Zionism as the establishment of a Jewish state. He remained the uncrowned king of the movement till his premature death.

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and even those of the Third Aliyah* shows that they came from homes very like Berl's, imbued with an old-style, intuitive, naive and ineffectual 'Love of Zion'. Their Zionism was the product of a new age and a changed atmosphere, but without the background that their homes provided, they would probably never have become Zionists or immigrated to Palestine. For most of them, the transition from small-town middle-class Hibat Zion to pioneering Zionism occurred naturally and smoothly. One finds countless examples of this transition, in the biographies of David Ben Gurion, Kadish Luzinsky† (also from Bobruisk) and David Shimonovitz, to name only a few. For Berl, however, the transition was more difficult. 'By nature I am a believing Zionist', he later wrote. 'It was through despair and through heresy that I won it.'²

The home that implanted in him his instinctive Zionist feelings also brought him to the threshold of socialism. His beloved uncle, Leib Prohorovski, a veteran revolutionary and member of the Social Revolutionary Party (S.R.P.), was forced to flee to the United States to escape the wrath of the authorities. When he returned after several years of exile, he became a partner in Moshe Katznelson's business. Moshe, Leib and the young Berl often sat around the table, arguing heatedly about topical issues, the uncle trying to curb his nephew's 'chauvinistic' tendencies. Bobruisk had a strong revolutionary tradition: the Bund was popular, under the leadership of one Nakhke Yochbid, a talented and energetic young man, who set up an extensive underground, composed of young members of the intelligentsia and Jewish workers. A significant revolutionary incident even occurred in Berl's grandfather's house. Yaakov Nemetz was unaware that the tenants of a three-room apartment in the house were Bundists, and had a concealed printing press there, on which they printed several issues of the underground paper, *Arbeiter Shtimme*, as well as the manifesto of the Russian Social Democratic Party. The Tsarist secret police discovered the press, and Berl, then a child, was witness to the subsequent arrests.

He also learned about the party from a Bundist worker, who handed on to the inquisitive ten-year-old boy all the clandestine revolutionary literature he could get.

It was during these years that Berl also read Russian revolutionary literature – the works of Herzen, Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, Chernyshevsky,

* Second Aliyah 1904–1919; Third Aliyah 1919–1923.

† Later the Speaker of the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament.

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Mikhailovsky and Lavrov, the giants of nineteenth-century Russian political and social thought, with whom he kept faith all his life. Despite the differences between them, the foundation of their socialism was a profound, unshakeable faith in the individual, his rights and his abilities. Their convictions were rooted in liberal humanism, in love of people rather than of mankind. Their brand of socialism made heavy demands – not on the ‘people’ in the abstract, but on living, breathing individuals. They regarded the exploitation and subjugation of the Russian peasantry by the nobility and later by the bourgeoisie as a historical injustice, corrupting both the exploiters and society as a whole. The exploiting classes, who had used serfdom for their own advantage, were under a moral obligation to restore to the masses that which they had taken from them. This obligation was based, not on any immutable and inevitable laws of development, but rather on the basic tenets of human and social justice. Russian youth were exhorted to undertake the education of the masses, arousing them to an awareness of their plight and a readiness to fight to change the social order.

This way of thinking was attractive to young intellectuals precisely because of the rigorous demands it made. It appealed to the best in human nature, to man’s sense of justice, offering the vision of an ideal society. To the classic question posed by the young generation: ‘What is to be done?’ there was now an answer; sacrifice themselves and their lives – if need be – for the future of society. And they responded by engaging in propaganda work and by setting up the Vnarod (Go to the People) movement. Educated young people went out into the countryside to bring their message to the peasants. The peasants reacted by handing over the Narodnik agitators to the authorities, who despatched them to prison in Siberia, where, in many cases, they lost their sanity and their lives. But their fate did not deter others. From the 1870s onward, each decade brought its wave of martyrs, inspired by the moving example of those who had gone before and eager to face a life of deprivation and sacrifice. These young idealists gave up studies, careers, family ties and, at times, their lives – enthusiastically, ardently and even joyfully. Infinite dedication, asceticism to the point of self-negation, and sacrifice freely undertaken were the components of the revolutionary ethos of the movement. They handed it on to their successors in Narodnaya Volya (The Will of the People) who, in turn, bequeathed it to the revolutionary parties, and particularly to the S.R.P.

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The Narodniks resembled anarchists in character. They believed in the individual and in his potential, abhorred coercion from above and all manifestations of authority, and hoped that socialist forms of life would evolve from independent peasant communities, voluntarily organized as free associations – in contrast to authoritarian socialism, in which the state imposed its authority on its members. For them, socialism was the domain of the individual, freely willed, aspiring to achieve total liberation.

When they realized that their methods had failed to awaken the masses and incite revolution and that the Tsar could wield a brutal police force, secret police methods and a biased judiciary against their idealism and dedication, they arrived at the inevitable conclusion that the sole effective weapon was individual terror. The attempted assassination by Vera Zasulich, in 1878, of the governor of St Petersburg, who had been responsible for the brutal flogging of an imprisoned revolutionary, heralded a new era in the annals of the movement. Political assassination now became the chief means of action of the revolutionaries, and their policy culminated in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. Predictably, and as a consequence, they found themselves bogged down in a morass of controversy on means and ends, sacred and profane, revolutionary cadres versus revolutionary masses and statist socialism versus anarchism.

And while the Narodnaya Volya, and later the S.R.P., concentrated increasingly on terror, Marxism was offering an alternative answer to the question of what was to be done. It preached the inevitability of progress, and avowed that the revolution would arrive and socialism be realized by force of dialectical materialism. Iron logic, objectivism, historical inevitability: these now appealed to revolutionaries, who had discovered that idealism and self-sacrifice alone could not bring about the longed-for transformation.

Berl Katznelson was one of these drawn to the stormy and exciting world of impending revolution. At first he found no contradiction between his love of Russian revolutionary thought and his fundamentalist Zionist faith and attraction to the Hebrew language, but after two or three years he found himself 'torn between two worlds', buffeted from movement to movement, from belief to belief.

Berl was apparently about twelve when he first came in contact with circles of the Jewish intelligentsia in Bobruisk. His teacher of Hebrew studies, Y.L. Dubrov, a man of high moral principles and an outstand-