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### YOUNG YASHKA

#### I.

**I**N THE MIDST OF THIS CHAOS OF POVERTY, MISERY, bigotry, ignorance and superstition, the Jewish youth of Poland leads a tragic life. The position of this youth is even more tragic than that of the elder generation of Jews. From the very outset of their life all roads toward existence are closed to them.

The Polish youth, when they have no other means for subsistence, embark upon a military career. Jewish young men cannot do that. They are conscripted to serve the customary term in the army, but no Jew—with very rare exceptions—can ever hope to become an officer in the Polish army. Those with a higher education who are legally entitled to enter officers' training schools during their period of service, are "magnanimously" exempted from military service altogether. For Poland "does not trust Jewish officers."

Jews who are graduates of universities—with the exception of a few *Mayofes Yidden*—cannot work for the Government. They are not permitted to teach in Polish schools, work as engineers on the railroads, as

severely anyone attacking Jews but it really does nothing to stop these pogroms.

2.

In view of such a situation what is there left for the Jewish youth of Poland to do? As usual, the problem is one but the solutions offered are many. Besides, they themselves have long since answered this question. The sons of the well-to-do Jews become Zionist-fascists. They join the organization of the Zionist Revisionists, Trumpeldor, led by the Jewish fascist, Vladimir Jabotinsky. These young Zionists proclaim their undying faith in Fascism. They ape the Nazis in every possible way. Some of their main functions for instance, are to throw stones through the windows of Jewish radical newspaper offices or break up meetings of Jews who are anti-Zionist. Or else they parade in their brown uniforms that resemble very much the uniforms of Nazi storm-troopers and sing fascist songs:

Germany for Hitler  
Italy for Mussolini  
Palestine for us  
Long live Jabotinsky . . .

The sons of the workers and proletarianized middle class, on the other hand, are throwing their lot in with Communists. It is a hazardous thing to be a revolutionist in Poland and these young rebels know it. But in spite of all dangers involved there is a powerful underground revolutionary movement in

clerks in the banks or even as workers in Poland's basic industries. Neither are they permitted to study medicine unless they can afford to bestow enormous bribes upon the "proper places."

There is only one thing that Jews are allowed to study—law. As a result, thousands of young Jews, to escape enforced idleness, flock to the universities to study law. But there is a catch to that, too. If one wants to become a practicing lawyer he must first serve a three-year apprenticeship in a Polish court. But Jewish graduates in law almost never get into such a court. At least such miracles have never happened among my numerous acquaintances and schoolmates who have studied law. If it does happen, it is a rare and far-in-between occurrence. In fact, the Endeks\*—Polish National Democrats—anti-Semites as vicious as the Nazis, have at one time suggested in the newspaper *Gazetta Warszawska* that the only thing Jews be allowed to study is law. They realize the futility of it.

Far worse are the frequent pogroms carried out upon Jewish students by the young Polish Endeks. While in Warsaw I met many young Jewish students whose wounds inflicted upon them during the notorious pogroms of 1931-1932 were still fresh. The Government has repeatedly stated that it will punish

\* A group of members of the Endek Party has recently split away and organized a new organization called Nara (National radicals). Although Nara is a very young organization, it is already responsible for the murder of many Polish Jews. An attempt on the part of Polish Jews to organize defense groups to combat the Naras has been met with disfavor and active opposition on the part of the Government.

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The sons of the workers and proletarianized middle class, on the other hand, are throwing their lot in with Communists. It is a hazardous thing to be a revolutionist in Poland and these young rebels know it. But in spite of all dangers involved there is a powerful underground revolutionary movement in

the country, in which the Jews constitute a large percentage. Incidentally, when a Jew is accused of Communism he suffers doubly: as a Jew and as a Communist.

Many of my schoolmates are now serving long prison sentences for their Communist activities. One Ukrainian, I was told, was accused of Soviet "espionage" and hanged within twenty-four hours. His wife was ordered to pay the court and burial expenses. She had nothing to pay it with so her only property—a samovar and two beds—was confiscated.

Those of the young Communists who are not accused of "espionage" and executed undergo horrible tortures in prison. This was recently brought to light by the testimony of a young Jew named Shechter, who was one of fifty-five defendants in the famous Lutsk trial. Together with the other defendants, Shechter was accused of attempting to set up a Soviet Western Ukraine. This testimony was also reported in the *New York Daily Worker*.

"I was arrested," reads Shechter's testimony, "in December, 1930 in Lwow and brought to Lutsk because all the 'evidence' produced in court by the Lutsk political police is fabricated in Lutsk. Such 'evidence' had to be fabricated for not only were there no stores of arms but not even a scrap of paper was found in my room.

"There are towns famed for their parks. There are towns famed for their churches. There are towns famed for their skyscrapers. Lutsk has also its worldwide fame; it is a town of moral and physical torture.

"I was one of the last to be cross-examined and I saw and heard everything suffered by others. By day and by night able-bodied persons were dragged away to be cross-examined; they returned sick, faint and feverish.

"When I was brought before the examining judge, Pan Tkatchuk placed on the table all the necessary instruments for cross-examination and asked me whether I would give my evidence 'wet or dry.' At the same time he gave me records already drawn up, and demanded my signature. When I refused to give it I was bound hand and foot and gagged, my shoes were taken off and while Postovich sat on my stomach [Tkatchuk beat me with rubber clubs on the soles of my feet. I cannot say exactly how many strokes I received. There must have been from 80 to 100 strokes. But as I stubbornly refused to sign the police-drawn-up records, one of the detectives remarked: 'All right then, we will speak Chinese to you.'

"I was stripped absolutely naked, and they began to beat me on my sexual organs. I could not bear this any longer and signed the records. Before taking me to the Public Prosecutor they told me: 'Now you are going to the Public Prosecutor and you must confirm the evidence that you have signed here, otherwise we will beat you to death . . .'

"What I say here now is not to be taken as an appeal for mercy. I am well aware of the class attitude of the bourgeois court towards me and all of us . . ."

Shechter was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment.



The whole group of defendants, taken together, were sentenced to 300 years in prison.

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Such is the life of the majority of the Jewish youth of Poland.

3.

It would be an exaggeration to say that all of the Jewish young men and women tend either towards Communism or Fascism. My friend, Yashka, for instance, sympathized with Communism but he was not a Communist, not in any true sense, while the rowdyism and hooliganism of the Trumpeldors he abhorred. He was just a crushed and bewildered boy. There are quite a few like him in Poland. Many of them commit suicide. Suicide is quite common among the Polish Jews. This is even admitted by the correspondent of the *New York Daily Forward*, Jacob Leshtchinsky.

Yashka, a tall and lean boy, is only twenty-four years old. His hair is ebony-black and wavy; his eyes blue and dreamy. He is a poet. I read some of his poetry: it is sensitive and flowery.

When I left Poland Yashka was fourteen years old. His parents were well-to-do Jews. No one expected then that this dreamy boy, in desperation, would eventually commit the "heroic" act which has recently placed his name on the front pages of many newspapers.

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Yashka's ambition was to become a professor of literature in some university. He loved literature. He studied it assiduously. Both at high school and at the University he was considered one of the best students. His parents, on the other hand, being practical Jews, were convinced that it would be almost impossible for a Jew to become a professor of literature in a Polish university. "It is hard enough," they said, "for a Jew to become a lawyer but to become a professor is even unthinkable." They advised Yashka to study law. They hoped that through bribing in the "proper places" they would have no difficulty in securing him a position in a court.

When, however, Yashka was being graduated from the University, the depression was already in its fourth year and his parents themselves were living on a starvation ration. With a lawyer's diploma in his hands, Yashka, like so many other Jewish young men, was ready for Warsaw's streets.

He began to think of emigrating, of fleeing from Poland. But where could he go, Argentine, Canada, U.S.A., Belgium, France?—All doors are closed to a Polish Jew. Soviet Russia? The Polish Government would never let a young Jew go to Russia. To cross the border illegally, as many other young Jews are constantly doing, was for Yashka then too hazardous an adventure. Palestine? Yes, Yashka decided to go to Palestine. But not all is well with the Jewish homeland either. When he applied for a visa he was asked whether he possessed a thousand pounds. Yashka could only scrape together one hundred pounds. So

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he was politely informed that without so many British pounds he would have to postpone his visit to the Jewish homeland. He was told to wait for the next quota. Yashka waited. He was still waiting when I arrived in Poland.

It was my arrival that was indirectly responsible for his much heralded act of "heroism," altogether amazing as far as this gentle and dreamy boy was concerned, but which proves once more that a human being can only suffer so much and no more.

On the day I arrived at Warsaw I went together with Yashka to send a telegram to the Kresy. The telegraph office was located in the Jewish section of the city. As we entered the office I at once sensed the unfriendly attitude of the telegraph clerk—a young Polish girl with a nose turned up like a fishing hook.

Yashka wrote the telegram out in Polish and handed it to the girl. Having scarcely looked at what he wrote, the girl gave the telegram back to him. "It is no good," she said. "You will have to rewrite it."

"If we weren't Jews," remarked Yashka, "she wouldn't make any fuss about that slight error and change it herself. But that is how they treat us."

He rewrote the telegram and handed it to the clerk. This time she didn't even bother to look at it: "It is no good. You will have to rewrite it." She repeated this little act four times. On the fifth time, I took the telegram and threw it in her face. The Polish Panna became hysterical. She began to shriek at

the top of her voice: "A Jew has insulted me . . . A Jew hit me . . ."

Immediately the office was filled with menacing Poles and cops. It was a familiar atmosphere. It was a pogrom atmosphere. Indeed, were I not an American both Yashka and myself would have fared badly. For a Jew to "insult" a Polish Panna . . . It was just as if a Negro should "insult" a white "lady" in the South.

I explained to the irate Poles that I was a foreigner, an American. I told them that the girl had behaved abominably. "After all," I said, "such acts do not add to the good name of Poland abroad."

It was this appeal to Polish patriotism that saved us. (The Poles are very eager that the name of Poland be respected abroad.)

When we went out into the street, there were tears in Yashka's eyes. He was terribly humiliated. It was then that he decided to leave Poland at all costs.

Two months later he was smuggled out of Poland. He went to Paris and from there by boat to Palestine.

Here is how Yashka describes his voyage to the Jewish homeland and his act of "heroism":

"There were several hundred Jews on the boat. About three miles from the port of Haifa, the boat was stopped, probably for inspection. Immediately rumors were beginning to go around that none of us would be allowed to land, and that those of us who had no visas would be returned to the countries where we came from. The rumor was not altogether un-

founded . . . It was a result of Great Britain's restriction of Jewish emigration to Palestine . . .

"At night when everybody was asleep, I left all my things on the boat and swam to the shore of Palestine . . ."

The next day the Zionist papers carried long stories about the young Polish Jew who had so longed to see the Jewish homeland that he could not wait until morning and braved a three-mile swim. A Jewish hero!

"But," says Yashka, "the truth is that I am no hero. I was merely desperate. I had long contemplated suicide. Here, I thought, was my only chance. If I reach the shore, all right. If not, what of it? . . ."

But to return to Poland? I still remember Yashka's parting words: "I would even go to Africa if they would let me. I would gladly live among the beasts in the jungle only to escape from this hell . . ."