

Warsaw Ghetto underground press: Hechalutz-Dror and Gordonia

Summary

Nineteenth volume of the Ringelblum Archive publication series contains the underground press published by Hechalutz-Dror and Gordonia, two youth organizations politically affiliated with the Labor Zionism, the left-wing, non-Marxist current of Zionism.

Dror (Hebr. Freedom) was formed in 1938 as a union of Hechalutz Hatzair – the youth branch of Hechalutz movement, and Frayhayt (Yid. Freedom) – the youth section of the reformist Poale Zion Right party. Poale Zion Right opposed the Communist International and belonged to the Labour and Socialist International. Of the press published by Dror in the Warsaw ghetto five titles were preserved in the Ringelblum Archive: “Le Madrich” (“To the Instructor”, title Hebr., paper in Yiddish, one issue, 1940); “Dror” (“Freedom”, title Hebr., paper in Yiddish, five issues, the last one being a double issue, 1940–1941); “Dror-Wolność” (“Dror – Freedom”, paper in Polish, one issue, 1941); “Yedies”, first series (“News”, title Hebr., paper in Yiddish, one issue, 1941); “Yedies”, second series (title Hebr., paper in Yiddish, eight issues, 1942).

Two of these issues are incomplete (“Le Madrich”, “Dror” no. 5) but were complemented by the copies preserved in the archive of Beit Lochamei Hagetaot (Ghetto Fighters’ House, GFH). The GFH collection contains also the copy of the last issue of “Yedies”, second series (no. 11), which was not preserved in the Ringelblum Archive. We are most grateful to the keepers of the GFH archive for their kind permission to include the documents from that collection in the present volume.

Some issues were preserved in more than one copy (“Dror” no. 4, “Yedies” nos 4–10). Supplementary copies (or single pages) of particular issues can be found in the Ringelblum Archive as well as in the Central Archives of Modern Records (Archiwum Akt Nowych, Warsaw), Hersch Wasser Collection (YIVO, New York), and the archive of the Ghetto Fighters’ House.

First issue of “Yedies”, second series (26.03.1942), has been reconstructed from two complementary, heavily damaged versions, both preserved in the Ringelblum Archive, and is published here for the first time.

The clandestine press of Dror was edited by Yitzchak Zuckerman (all the titles except for “Dror-Wolność”), Marek Folman (“Dror-Wolność”), and Mordechai Tenenbaum-Tamaroff (who joined Zuckerman to work with him on “Yedies”, second series).

Gordonia was founded in 1923 by Pinchas Lavon as a youth organisation affiliated with the Hitachdut, political party strongly influenced by the ideas of Aharon David Gordon, after whom Gordonia took its name. In its activities it based on scout methods. Of the press published by Gordonia two titles are preserved in the Ringelblum Archive: “Słowo Młodych” (“The Word of Youth”, paper in Polish, four issues, two of them double, 1941–1942) and “Oysdoyer” (“Endurance”, paper in Yiddish, one issue, 1941). The last issue of “Słowo Młodych” (no 11) was preserved in two transcripts: one in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, another in the Yad Tabenkin archive.

“Słowo Młodych” was edited by Eliezer Geller and Natan Eck.

Dror and Gordonia both belonged to the Hechalutz movement, the Zionist pioneering umbrella-organization, which united youth organizations of various ideological backgrounds: from Marxist Hashomer Hatzair to traditionalist Akiba. The aim of Hechalutz was to train pioneers (chalutzim) and prepare them for work in agricultural collective farms in Palestine. The central value of Hechalutz was personal fulfillment of the pioneering ideal through aliyah, and participation in the collective living and labor in Eretz Israel.

Those members of both organizations who made the aliyah, joined the kibbutz-communities in Palestine. The communities affiliated with Gordonia were united in Khaver Hakvutzot federation, while Dror was associated with the federation of Hakibbutz Hameuchad. Dror and Gordonia both maintained a close relationship with the Histadrut, the syndicate federation in Palestine. The Palestinian perspective was widely acknowledged in the underground press in the ghetto. Every detail of the activity of Khaver Hakvutzot and Hakibbutz Hameuchad as well as Histadrut, their meetings, decisions, successes and problems, was carefully reported in the journals. “Oysdoyer” and first series of “Yedies” seem to have been particularly focused on the issues of the Jewish community in Palestine. “Oysdoyer” was very keen to underline every example of peaceful coexistence and even cooperation between Jewish and Arab communities.

Publishing the underground press was a part of wide clandestine activity of the two organizations in the Warsaw ghetto. Their first task was to rebuild the groups disintegrated during the first months of war and occupation, not only in Warsaw, but also in other towns of occupied Poland. The emissaries, young women mostly, among them Fruma Płotnicka, Chawa Folman, Lea Koziebrodzka, Sujka Erlichman, travelled incessantly to organize local cells of the movement. Their effort was reported in the press, although, obviously, both their names, and the toponyms, had to be reduced to the initials. In 1942 their reports together with the letters sent by the comrades from the local groups, became one of the primary sources of information about the mass extermination that had already been taking place. The relations were published in the clandestine press and handed over to the Ringelblum Archive.

The primary objective of the rebuilt organizations was to undertake the educational and formative activities addressed to the youth – isolated in ghettos, deprived of education, striving to survive. The organization must have become a school, a cultural centre, and most importantly a friendly and supportive community that would be strong enough

to attract young people and reinforce them. Dror has succeeded in creating such a community on 34 Dzielna Street in Warsaw. The problems of education became one of the most important subjects the press dealt with. Eliezer Geller of Gordonia tried to invent new forms of scout activities that could be carried out within the walls of the ghetto. The texts published in the press may have also been used as a basis for the discussions during the meetings of the groups.

The most important part of activity was however the reinstatement of the agricultural training farms which would prepare young chaltzim for aliyah. Both Dror and Gordonia managed to organize a number of such farms. The idea of hachshara (preparatory training) was strongly supported, and re-conceptualized in the new situation which called for a clear distinction between the free, creative labor so much advocated by Gordon and the destructive forced labor imposed by the Nazis. This issue was widely dealt with in the clandestine press.

The other necessity was a reassembling and self-development of the group of young instructors (Hebr. madrichim – guides, leaders). As a result of the forced resettlement to the ghetto, many libraries were lost, and the lack of fundamental texts, both literary and political, was most disturbing. The press reprinted some of them, Dror has even created a specific journal, “Le Madrich”, that was meant to become a sort of anthology. The first issue, the only one preserved, dealt with the “national question” and included fragments of writings by most important political thinkers: Ber Borokhov, Chaim Zhitlovski, Nachman Syrkin. This wide range of texts was presented to encourage the discussion rather than to fix one’s own political position.

Dror has also organized the Seminars for the leaders of the movement. The detailed timetable of one of the Seminars can be found in handwritten “Notebook of lectures and individual activities” prepared by Yitzchak Zuckerman after the third seminar and preserved in the Ringelblum Archive. The “Notebook...” has also been published in the present volume.

Apart from the above-mentioned journals, Dror has also published inner newsletter addressed to the instructors of the organization: “Inerleche Korenspondentz”. In the only preserved issue, of May 1942, the activity of Dror in the war years has been summed up. In spite of the fact that it was not preserved in the Ringelblum Archive, it was included as an Appendix in the present publication.

The political life in the Warsaw ghetto was very intense, and the press was also a forum for vivid discussions. Gordonia’s “Słowo Młodych” took firm political attitude. It reprinted the writings of A.D. Gordon as well as the essays of Pinchas Lavon who criticized the legacy of the orthodox Marxism, especially its determinism and the concept of class struggle, and advocated the idea of personal fulfillment within the working collectives. “Słowo Młodych” also engaged in the current political debates – mainly with Hashomer Hatzair, whose ideological positions Geller rejected in a long article “On the Trail of the Bankrupt Phraseology”.

“Dror”, especially when compared with “Słowo Młodych” was much less politically fixed. It was rather looking for the common ground for the Zionist left-wing youth movement. Thus it focused rather on the pioneering ethos of Hechalutz. Of the political writers two were reprinted willingly – Berl Katzenelson and Moshe Beilinson. Both were editors and columnists of “Davar”, the journal of Histadrut federation.

Less interested in purely political discussion “Dror” published rich collection of literary texts and was particularly attentive to the artistic forms of expression. It searched for the new ways of articulation that would make it possible to speak out the unspeakable, to comprehend the incomprehensible. The pivotal figure of this quest was undoubtedly Yitzhak Katzenelson who published in “Dror” his poetry as well as translation of Bialik’s “On the Slaughter” and essays on Bialik and Mendele (the latter on the 105 anniversary of Mendele which had been celebrated by many clandestine journals) where he attempted to re-read the great classical literature and confront it with the new dreadful experience.

In the autumn 1941 the information of mass murders in Białystok, Vilnius and Słonim reached the Warsaw ghetto. At the beginning of 1942 a report from the extermination camp in Chełmno (Kulmhof) was received. The character of the underground press changed. Yitzhak Zuckerman decided to stop publishing “Dror” and to start second series of “Yedies” instead. “What was the difference between *Dror* and *Yedies*? We started getting involved in everyday reality. No longer an educational newspaper, not ideas, but the naked Jewish reality, as reflected in the information in the paper.” (Y. Zuckerman, *Surplus of Memory*, p. 159).

“Yedies” published the earliest information about the extermination camps in Sobibór and Treblinka. The first facts concerning Sobibór were delivered by two emissaries of Dror, who visited the region of Hrubieszów (and Dror’s hachshara farm) when the mass deportations began there.

In 1942 the accounts of the mass murders were also reported in “Słowo Młodych”, among them the relation from the extermination camp in Chełmno, received by the Ringelblum Archive group. In the same paper the information about the armed Jewish resistance in Nowogródek appeared (its accuracy is uncertain or even doubtful). This information, which has also been published in “Yedies” and other clandestine journals, seems to have been the first expression of a new idea – that of an armed resistance.

On July 22, 1942 the mass deportations from the Warsaw ghetto to the extermination camp in Treblinka began. Confronted with the extermination of hundreds of thousands of people, the youth organizations decided to stop their publishing activity. New forms of resistance were needed. Zuckerman engaged in creating the Jewish Fighting Organisation. Geller joined it few months later, after some period of activity outside Warsaw. Both fought in the April Uprising of 1943. Płotnicka co-organized the insurrection in the Będzin ghetto, and Tenenbaum became a leader of the Jewish Fighting Organisation in the Białystok ghetto.