"Pincas"

The Polish Occupation and the Jews.

By Sh. Gordon

The Polish army entered Wilna under the banner to free the country from the Bolshevist yoke. These "good aims" of the Polish troops brought great distress to the Jews. April 19, 1919 the day of freedom for the Poles was converted into a very bloody day for the Jews.

The Poles accused the Jewish population in communism, in firing from houses on Polish troops, notwithstanding the fact, that the Jews suffered from the Bolsheviki none the less than others. All Jewish houses were searched (they looked for arms) and everything handy was taken. Arrests, beating and killing were a common occurrence.

A great part in these bloody April days was played by the Polish school boys. Parties of them used to guide Polish military detachments in search for communists or their associates. With the cry "catch the Jews" they attacked every Jew on the street and in large parties brought them to the soldiers on the squares, calling on the latter to kill the Jews. And often the arrested Jews could see how Polish soldiers fired into the windows of Jewish houses. Among such witnesses were Rabbi Binstein, Dr. Shabad and others.

It has to be mentioned, that there were cases, though very seldom, when the Gentiles protected Jewish lives.

All old grudges came out and the Jews paid for everything with their blood. So died Israel Bensky, his wife and their niece. They were victims of revenge. On the last day of Passover (Easter) a grenade has been thrown into their house, legionares (Polish soldiers) came right to their house, took them to Lipovki (a Wilna suburb) and shot them. At the same Lipovki, 67 other Jews were shot without any trial - some were forced to dig their own graves and some were buried alive.
Apart from Lipovki murder, many Jews were killed in other places. So on Peschanne (Sand Street) the writer Isaac-Mayer Revelishky (A.Weiter) was taken from his house and shot; 5 Jews were killed near Antokol (a Wilna quarter), Jews were forced to buy on the Wilie bank near the Jewish hospital. 1 Jew and 2 Jewish women (are yet alive) 4 Jews were killed and buried in Rose. And a long time after that the authorities would not allow to bury all these victims according to the Jewish Ritual, fearing that the Jews may take photographs of the victims and disclose it to the world.

Besides many killed there were thousands arrested, among them the writers Leip Jaffa and Sh. Meyer. They were taken to the railroad station, where they had to witness under insults the bloody April days Their lives were in danger all the time of the imprisonment.

Under the pretext that some quantity of beans had been stolen from the Antokol Hospital, what was later proved to be a lie, 32 Jewish nurses and sanitars were gathered, all were searched, beaten and sent to jail. One sanitar, Stolov, was shot on the way; another one Breisenstok shut in the Lukishki jail; others of the sanitars got sick of typhus and one of them a medical student Liatzky, died.

The whole Jewish population was terrorized and there was nobody to say a word for them. Hunger was reigning; even those who had money to buy food, were afraid to go out from their houses - as Jewish life was in danger. And in the meantime prices grew to the utmost. A pound of bread - 18 Czars Rub. potatoes 7 Czar's Rub. a pound. Active life was paralyzed, there were in Wilna at that time 30,000 people, who were in great need of help. And even later there were many cases when thousands of women, children and men used to force their entry to synagogues crying for bread.

1) Mr. L.Jaffa is at present in Palestine a contributor in the daily Hebrew newspaper "Haaretz."
2) Mr. Sh.Meyer in New York contributing to Yiddish "Tog" and others.
On May 6, 1919, when the situation got a bit settled, when a Jew could come out on the street to be only insulted or beaten, or that day the Jewish Kehillah after a long intermission, began its functions. All parties and classes were united. And let it be said to its honor, that at that critical moment the Kehillah stood up firmly to protect and defend Jewish honor, life and property.

At the meeting of May 6, 1919 the following resolution has been passed:

The Jewish population of Wilna was shook with the insults, robberies and killings that took place in the days following the 19th of April 1919.

Many peaceful Jewish citizens, without having any connection with the fight between the Poles and Bolsheviks, were without trial put to death.

Hundreds of people, without respect to age or sex, were insulted or beaten in the streets.

Thousands of Jewish houses were robbed of all they possessed.

Thousands were arrested and kept in jail for days without food or water. And has been proved later nothing could be shown against them. Hundreds were sent away to places, that nobody knew where they were.

The situation did not change even when the authorities were notified about all what was going on. Under such circumstances the population got to understand that Jews are outlaws and everything can be done with them.

The Kehillah expressing its sharp protest against all these lawless against the Jews demanded:

1) All these persecutions against Jews to be ceased. Jewish life, honor and property to be guaranteed. And suitable conditions to be created as to give the Jewish population the possibility
to return to their peaceful life.

3) To return to town all those Jews, who were sent out without definite reason for it.

3) Legal conditions to be found for the arrested Jews to prove guiltlessness.

4) The immediate release of all those who were arrested without any ground for it.

5) Immediate measures to be taken to return all the property robbed from the Jews and the guilty to be punished.

The Jewish Kehillah in Wilna declares, that the Jewish population in Lithuania will continue its fight for civil, political and national rights until such rights will be obtained.

This declaration provoked irritation among the Poles.

The Wilna local counsel answered:

The protest of the Kehillah is poisoned with provocation against the Poles and this may become a danger against the Jews themselves.

And the counsel asked the Government to punish the authors of this protest for spreading insinuations against the Polish nation.

Copies of this resolution were sent to the Chief of State, Pilsudski gave out a proclamation to the Wilna population on April 22, 1919 assuring equal rights to the whole population.

But this proclamation did very little for the benefit of the Jews.

A long time after that proclamation Jewish young men could not pass the street without danger to be arrested. It was enough for any Christian or Jew (in this respect Jews had equal rights) to accuse a Jew in communism, and the latter would be imprisoned for months. Violence against Jews could be seen everywhere. Here and there Jews were beaten in the street. On May 14, 1919 Jews were forbidden to pass Stephen Street; Polish young men would not let Jews buy anything from peasants, etc.
Polish legionnaires and militants made it their business to catch in the streets only Jews for any forced hard and dirty work. So, for instance, Jewish young men were caught in the street to dig the mutual grave for the fallen Bolsheviks. And when the grave has been dug already a Jew, who passed by, has been thrown into it and if not for Mrs. Vilayshis (a Lithuanian) he would remain there.

Patrols of soldiers used to beat and whip Jews in the street before large crowds of Poles and no consideration has been given to age or sex of the victims. A woman was beaten so hard that she died under their hands.

There were no Jewish officials in the township's institutions, including the military. More than that, Jews who were engaged on any government work were systematically discharged. Thus 600 railway workers were discharged. And the same happened to the only Jewish assistant surgeon in the jail hospital, notwithstanding the fact that the latter was engaged for a long time.

The only consolation in those hard days was the brotherly help which came from the other side of the ocean. The first time the Wilna Jews heard from their American brothers was on May 23, 1919 through Sholom Asch, who brought with him material help from the American Relief Committee (450,000 East Marks). Later on there came delegates from America. These people arranged some contact between Lithuania and America. Letters, money and tickets came to many and this taken together helped a good lot to improve the situation.

Mr. Gibson, the American Ambassador to Warsaw, came to Wilna on June 13, 1919. He invited the presidents of the Kehillah, Dr. Shabad and with the mediation of Dr. Bogen had a long conversation with the representative of the Kehillah. Mr. Gibson also invited to the Kehillah L. Jaffa and Sh. Meyer, to talk to them concerning their arrest – as details about it were asked for in influential circles.
of Europe and America.

After the visit to Wilna, Mr. Gibson wrote a report to the American Government, stating that the pogrom reports were exaggerated. As the Polish press stated this report has been signed also by Dr. Bogen, but the latter denied the fact.

In the meantime the excesses of the Poles against the Jews still were going on though not with such a force as before.

So on June 17 the Landvarover Rabbi was attacked in the street and beaten.

On June 18, Polish soldiers came to the Jewish cemetery in order to search for arms and gold. They did not find anything but many graves were destroyed.

On the same date the Jewish agricultural Colony "New Lhuravize" (under the ORT) has been attacked.

On Saturday, July 19 (at 3 in the afternoon) a shot has been fired near the Rabbi Rubinovitz's house. A crowd of Polish youngsters pointed out to the Gendarmeries that the shot came from the Rabbi's house. The Gendarmeries searched the house, of course, they did not find anything, but they made a lot of damage in the house and arrested everybody they found there. To this house came the president of the Kehillah, Dr. Shabad with Mr. Herman Bernstein (of New York). The latter seeing a cartridge on the floor asked the Gendarm about it. The answer was that "this is nothing" and the Gendarm quietly put the cartridge in his pocket. At that moment another shot has been heard. And when investigated it has been found, that a rifle of a militant fired a shot by itself.

On Saturday, July 26th, Polish legionaries attacked the Jewish crowd gathered in the park at a concert, beat and injured many.

There is an old cemetery in Wilna - the "Shnipishker Cemetery". It is a great historical antiquity of "Jerusalem de Lita", for over
four centuries great scholars of Judaism found their eternal rest there. This cemetery was many times in danger to be destroyed but always was spared. Great danger threatened the cemetery in the great war. But even the Czar's war commanders spared this antiquity. And what these people did not dare to do, has been easily accomplished during the Polish occupation. The little houses on the "Tsadikim" graves destroyed and the holy graves molested and profaned. They kept horses and pigs in the cemetery. There is a group of 5 old graves under which distinguished Jews are buried - and on this spot a privy has been put up.

At the meeting of the Wilna Kehillah on May 22, 1919, a representative of the Polish Government came and ordered the meeting to be continued in Polish. But confronted with a vigorous resistance from the Kehillah the Poles abolished the order.

A strict military censure has been enacted on July 22, 1919. This measure depriving the Jewish population of publicity, made conditions worse.

Ambassador Morgenthau's Inquiry Commission.

The Commission arrived at Wilna on July 29, 1919. On the next day the Commission received in the Hotel Bristol the President of Wilna Kehillah, Dr. Shabad, the Rabbi from Lida (who witnessed the Lida pogrom) and Advocate Finkelstein. The Jews greeted the Commission as emisaries of the great humanitarian, President Wilson. And expressed hopes to find justice from them. The official interpreter of the Commission was appointed the Catholic Priest Areashkeivich.

On July 30, 1919 the inquiry started. Together with Ambassador
Morgenthau, there were in the Kehillah building (when the inquiry took place) Rabbis Rubinstein, L. Jaffa, Sh. Meyer, Dr. Vigodsky and representatives of the Warsaw press.

First witness was Mrs. Pilikovsky (Pivna Silberman's house). The witness lost her 43 year old husband and her only son of 16 years.

Next came the 21 year old widow of the killed Moshe Nota Goldberg (at the same house) and the daughter of the killed Avia Lak (at the same house).

The photographer Grossman and Rabbi Kareliz relates the impressions they received while reburying on the Jewish cemetery the killed and buried on Lepovka. Everybody could see that the victims were tortured before they were killed.

The Rabbi from Lipnishke told the Commission the story of his town. How he was kept ready to be shot, because "the Jews do not give out their arms," how before his eyes a couple of Jews were killed without any trial and how the officer who was in charge of the firing party in the Rabbi's house forced by beating with a stick the pregnant woman to kiss his boots. This woman in 2 days later gave birth to a sick child.

The last witness of that day was Mrs. Shifra Levinovich, whose husband was shot on April 20th.

On the next day the Commission was divided into three subcommissions. The center of the inquiry was the murder of A. Weiter. The actress Sherman related how Weiter, Meyer and Jaffa with their families lived in "those terrible April days." How Weiter and the witness were called out from the house and how Weiter was murderously killed. Morgenthau was interested to know, of what attitude was the late Weiter towards Bolshevism. As an illustration the writer Jaffa said, that once he proposed to Weiter to go to Palestine, the latter answered, he would go under the conditions, that "G. Marx will not be brought to Palestine."
Attention has been given to the witnesses who were forced to bury the Milled of Lipovka.

A deep impression made the witnesses, who "in those days" were forced to bury in the Wilna bank a man and 2 women.

The 3rd day (Aug.1) of the inquiry started with the frightful case of the 28 year old Chaim Varnian. This victim was fastened to a horse's tail and pulled on a stretch of 5 kilometers.

Among the witnesses was the Rabbi from Landvorov (a town near Wilna) who produced a picture of a Jew with a burned beard and injured face. This Jew arrested together with the Rabbi died shortly after that.

Mr. Versatzky, pointing to his 80 year old father said: this old man was arrested and kept in jail for a long time. And when Mr. Morgenthau asked what was the old man accused of, he received an answer that the old man was accused of spreading Bolshevist proclamation among the Polish troops.

There were also two Gentile witnesses. One stated that he saw how soldiers and civilians plundered Jewish shops. The second one (a woman) witnessed the terrible fate of the Bensky family in Shkaplerne.

On August 2nd, 1919 in the absence of Morgenthau the inquiry was carried on.

Advocate Trotzky told how in the market places civilians and soldiers were selling goods.

Capt. Gross (a member of the Morgenthau Commission) listened with great interest to the sad story told by the children of a murdered woman, how their mother was killed (a shop-keeper on the corner of Wilna and Preobrajenski streets). After the mother was killed their house was three times plundered, without paying attention to the...
screaming of the children, who were lying on the dead body of their mother. This story made a very deep impression upon Capt Gross and he said to the nearby standing editor of the Warsaw "Gazeta Warshawska" "I am ashamed for my co-religionists."

On Saturday (Aug. 2) Mr. Morgenthau visited the Chief of State Pilsudski. The latter expressed his opinion, that the Wilna situation has been exaggerated by the Jews and this fact caused a good lot of trouble to the Poles. Pilsudsky admitted that there were some excesses against the Jews in the beginning of the occupation, but later on the town has been controlled by Polish authorities. He also promised to do everything in his power to regulate the condition.

Count Tishkevich honored Morgenthau and the members of his Commission with a rout given on Aug. 2, 1919.

On Aug. 4th Morgenthau left Wilna. The other members of the Commission remained in Wilna and continued the inquiry.

On Aug. 5 the Commission heard the witnesses in the case of killing Mrs. Sheiniak (Mostova Street) and also about the two young men (Sovisky and Rontal) killed through a window on the Deutsch Street.

Before the Commission left Wilna, Mr. Morgenthau had a conference with the representatives of the Jewish press. A question came out at this conference. If the ruined Jewish population can demand indemnities for the lost lives and property. Mr. Morgenthau asked "Who is going to pay?" The journalist's answer was "The responsible government." "There is no indemnity in war time," was Mr. Morgenthau's answer.

The report of the Morgenthau Commission addressed to the American Peace Delegation became public on Jan. 12, 1920. The word "Pogrom" is not even mentioned in his report. Here are some quotations concerning Wilna.
"Wilna was taken by Polish troops after three days street fighting on April 19, 1919. At the same time 56 Jews lost their lives. It has been proved that all of them were in no contact with the Bolsheviki whatsoever. Among the victims were four women and eight men over 50 years of age. Eight Jews were taken out of town and killed there without any sign of trial. The balance of the victims were killed by soldiers while plundering the victims' houses.

Over 20,000 Jewish houses and shops were robbed estimating to a loss of 10,000,000 Rub.

Up till Aug. 3, 1919 when the Commission was in Wilna, none of the guilty persons were punished nor was any inquiry made to find them out.

Samuel's Inquiry.

Before the report of the Morgenthau Commission was published, Britain decided to send its own Commission to inquire into the Jewish-Polish question.

A certain ago the British Ambassador in Warsaw sent in a report to his Government stating, that in Wilna were killed only those who fought on the Bolsheviki side against the Polish army. This report has been protested by the Jewish press. The late writer Ansky published an open letter to the British Ambassador energetically protesting against his statement. And it is believed that this protest called forth the Samuels Commission.

The Commission arrived in Wilna on Nov. 13, 1919.

Being disappointed with the Morgenthau Commission the Jewish population did not expect anything from this new one.

Samuels as the most of foreigners first of all was interested if the excesses against the Jews was on the ground of Jews being on
the Bolsheviki side.

Samuel came to the Wilna Kehillah and in the presence of Capt Right (a member of his commission) he showed to the Wilna Kehillah members the following document:

Explanations:

The undersigned members of the Danish Legation in Petrograd explains, that they were eyewitnesses on the 19th of April 1919, when organized Jewish young men were firing at the Polish troops from the windows.

Warsaw
April 25, 1919

Signed: F. Saksenberg, Dr. Klein, A. Ernst.

The copy certified by:

Lieutenant M. Slabodski
E. Dobatshevski

The original is among the effects of the Warsaw Commandant.

This document was a great surprise. But after communication with Copenhagen it has been proved:

1) That those mentioned in the agreement are not members of the Danish Foreign Ministry.

2) That the members of the Danish Legation in Petrograd did not pass Wilna on their way.

The main aim the Samuel delegation wanted to reach was to bring about peace between the Poles and the Jews. But the accomplishment of this mission was just as questionable as the results of the previous ones.

In the meantime the conditions between the Poles and the Jews did not change much.
Much trouble caused the Jewish population the system of the Polish legionnaires of catching Jews on the streets for enforced labor. The Kehillah protested against it. The result of this protest was an invitation of the Kehillah representative to the Chief of the Wilna Government, who threatened him with arrest for such protests.

On December 8 in the middle of the day 60 Jewish expressmen and drivers were gathered from around the railway station, demanding passports from them. Twenty were released, but the remainder were taken out of town, where they were ordered to run a few miles. And later the whole party was beaten and whipped. Among them were a youngster of 13 and an old man of 75.

Travelling on the railways offered to the Jews great difficulties from the Poles.

On Dec. 18 the Commercial Employee's Union was surrounded and 24 were taken and sent to Lukishka jail.

All Rabbis were warned that they would be punished if they would not be pro-Polish. So Rabbi Gordon was accused of having a speech against Poland.

Everybody on the streets could see how Polish "heroes" stop old Jews and cut or tear their beards. So was held up the Rabbi from Lida, but 400 Hks changed their plans.

On Feb. 28, 1920 the office of the Wilna EKOPO and Dr. Shabad's house were searched and 7 persons were arrested.

On Feb. 25, 1920 as a Jewish funeral passed by the 6th Police station on Zarechi, Polish legionnaires came out, stopped the funeral and under the pretext of searching for gold or silver, opened and molested the dead body. Those who protested were beaten.

On the first anniversary of the "April days" the Jewish press for mentioning the names of the Jewish victims.
And when the Poles celebrated the anniversary as their victory, marching through the streets, there were no Jews among them. The Jewish population feared that the "April days" may be repeated.

Dr. Vigodsky in the name of the Wilna Kehillah, sent to the Wilna Commissary the following note on April 1920:

The Polish Government in Wilna often prints and posts its orders to the inhabitants of the town. These orders posted all over the town, are printed only in Polish.

It is well known that the Jews, forming 50% of the town's population, do not know Polish. Therefore the Government speaks to a half of the population in a language which is not understood by them. Those who are not complying with the orders are to be punished. This state of things creates abnormal conditions.

Even the Germans during the occupation learned to print their orders also in Yiddish.

The first Polish proclamation from the Chief of State was printed in Yiddish also.

Therefore the Jewish Community is asking the Commissary to print all his orders, which are to be posted, also in Yiddish.

--------

Anti-Semitism was also widespread among the Polish labor and socialist circles.

--------

On May 14, 1920 came to Wilna the 3rd foreign Commission. This time it was a Commission from the Second International headed by the French socialist Renaudel and German Oscar Ken. They had a conference with the Kehillah leaders, with representation from the Poale Zion and Bund.

But the Government continued its old policy. The only Jewish
agricultural school "Vielitshani" has been requisitioned by the Government. A full description of everything in the colony was made by the Government and the manager had to sign that everything will be handed over to the Government on October 1, 1920.

"Courier Warshavski" writes:

"There are two parts of Jewish population in Wilna. One - The Yiddeshists, the second - the Litvaki. The number of the latter is growing on account of the first. The Russian language is thundering on the Wilna streets, which no doubt is heard on the Bolshevist front and also the Russian signs on the Jewish shops can be seen from there."

May 25 and 26 were hard days for the Wilna Jews. Newly arrived Polish soldiers attacked Jews in the streets, beat them and cut off beards. A good number of Jews were wounded and shops were plundered.

The Government took some measures to stop it, but it did not help much.

Similar disorder occurred also on May 29.

But notwithstanding all this suffering, the economical situation was much better now than before. The credit for this improvement is to be given to the help received from America."