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YITZHAK KATZENELSON IN VITTEL AND HIS LAMENT FOR THE YIDDISHLAND

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Yitzhak Katzenelson – a pedagogue, playwright and poet from Łódź – and his work on the epic poem *The Song of the Murdered Jewish People* written in Vittel and published in Paris in 1945. The Vittel internment camp for foreigners served as the first destination for Polish Jews with travel documents from Latin American countries, obtained primarily in the Warsaw ghetto in the so-called ‘Hotel Polski Affair’. Their final destination was Auschwitz, where they perished on arrival in May 1944.

KEYWORDS: Yitzhak Katzenelson, *The Song of the Murdered Jewish People*, Vittel Camp, Hotel Polski, Yiddishland.

On May 22, 1943, Yitzhak Katzenelson with his only surviving son Zvi¹ arrived in the Vittel internment camp for enemy aliens of the German Reich in the second transport of Polish Jews. He spent there the last eleven months of his life. On April 18, 1944, together with Zvi, in a group of 160 Jews from Poland, he was sent first to the Drancy transit camp and two weeks later in convoy 72 to Auschwitz², where they all were murdered in a gas chamber in the night of their arrival: April 30– May 1.

For Katzenelson, a Litvak born in 1886 in Karelichy³ but from early childhood a resident of Łódź, the internment in Vittel was a temporary reprieve, a stay of execution. That was, however, not obvious at the time of his arrival. It could seem that he reached, from the deepest rings of hell, what looked like heaven: a model camp located in a group of hotels on the grounds of a well-known spa with access to a large park, and with a steady supply of food from parcels delivered by the Red Cross.

¹ His wife Chana and two younger sons, Benzion and Benjamin, were captured on August 14, 1942 and perished in Treblinka.

² There were 77 convoys from occupied France, in which around 76,000 Jews were deported. The lists of the convoys were compiled by Serge Klarsfeld (1978); the names of deportees are searchable from: Klarsfeld online.

³ A hamlet featuring in the Polish national epic poem *Pan Tadeusz*: ‘Jednego [Soplicę] podpalilem w drewnianym budynku / Kiedyśmy zajeżdżali z Rymszą Korelicze’ [I set on fire one Soplica in a wooden building / During a foray with Rymsza against Karelichy] (Mickiewicz II, 350–351; [no date], 32), Gerwazy informs the Count.

Katzenelson had been sent to Vittel from Warsaw, *Hotel Royal* on 31 Chmielna Street, after a stay in an underground hide-out, the *Kryisia* bunker, prepared with Jewish funds on the ‘Aryan’ side, where he was kept in relative safety after the outbreak of the Ghetto Uprising. *Hotel Royal* was the first venue of what would become known as the ‘*Hotel Polski* affair’, since the operation was later moved to larger premises on 29 Długa Street. There are conflicting interpretations of this black-market commercial venture – sale of foreign passports and travel documents – coordinated by two Jewish Gestapo collaborators: Leopold ‘Lolek’ Skosowski and Adam Żurawin. Hence, a few words about its prehistory are in place⁴.

The operation was linked to a Jewish rescue effort initiated in Switzerland by Yitzhak and Recha Sternbuch who were able to send since late 1941 several thousand identity documents to Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto and elsewhere, presenting them as citizens of Latin American countries. Some of these documents reached Warsaw before July 22, 1942, when the mass deportation (*Großaktion*) from the Ghetto to Treblinka started, saving the lives of those recipients, lucky ‘foreign nationals’, whom the Germans had interned three days earlier in the *Pawiak* prison. This group, the first transport from Warsaw of some 200 people including Miriam Wattenberg⁵, arrived in Vittel on January 23, 1943. Most of the documents, however, never reached their intended owners as they had been already murdered either in the ‘big deportation’ or the ‘small deportation’ starting on January 18, 1943⁶, or finally in the Ghetto Uprising which broke out on April 19. A group of survivors, with Katzenelson and his son among them, presented their foreign papers to the Germans in *Hotel Royal* and set off in a transport to Vittel on May 18.

The remaining papers, stored on the shelves of the ghetto post office, were used by Skosowski and Żurawin for the racket. It is not known whether the affair was initiated or merely supervised by the Germans, but they certainly took the lion’s share of the profits. Jewish resistance organizations presented it as a trap, a mop-up operation to lure the remaining Jews out of their hiding places. That was the dominant interpretation until recently when the affair has been placed in a wider context of German efforts to secure ‘assets’ for exchange in order to liberate Germans interned by the Allies (the Vittel camp as a whole also played this role). The latter view is corroborated by the fact that Jews with Palestinian (i.e. British) papers, generally considered to be worthless in Warsaw and often given away for free, were most likely to survive: since their documents were recognized by Britain, they could be exchanged for ‘the Templers’, German settlers in the Holy Land (cf. Wawrzyn 2013, esp. ch. 11). In July, more than 2,000 Jews from *Hotel Polski* were sent to Bergen-Belsen; most of the remaining ones – about 400, who were left behind when the supply of travel documents had run dry – were executed by the Germans in the ruins of the ghetto.

⁴ The following account is based primarily on Haska 2006 and Bloch [no date].

⁵ Her diary from the Warsaw Ghetto and Vittel was published in the USA as *The Diary of Mary Berg* (1945). Mary’s mother, like a few other Jews sent to Vittel, had a genuine American passport. The family was released from the camp on March 1, 1944 to travel from Lisbon to the USA – in exchange for Germans interned by the Allies – on board of the ocean liner SS Gripsholm.

⁶ The transport with ‘foreign nationals’ from *Pawiak* to Vittel had been sent away in the early hours of that day, before the deportations to Treblinka started, see Berg 2006: 211.

The arrival of the Polish Jews in Vittel – especially the second group, witnesses of unimaginable atrocities and the total destruction of the Warsaw ghetto – created a stir in an otherwise well-regulated camp. It was first intended for about 2,000 British women⁷ moved in May 1941 to the relative comfort of the Vittel spa from the barracks in Besançon, where they had been kept in terrible conditions after the French defeat in 1940. The transfer was apparently due to Churchill's threat that, otherwise, he was ready to move German POWs close to the Arctic circle in Canada. Next year, after the USA had declared war on Germany, the camp was extended to house about 300 American women. Since some families were united and elderly men were also admitted to the camp, it numbered as many as 2,500–3,000 inmates. However, with wartime conditions in mind, one could say that life there was almost idyllic. The commandant, Otto Landhäuser, was courteous to those who did not oppose his regulations and was willing to grant various privileges when cooperation was assured. When he met opposition, he was ruthless, especially when inmates tried to intervene on behalf of Jews with foreign papers. Solidarity with the Polish Jews – who often were not able to communicate in Western languages and kept to themselves – was rare (antisemitic attitudes were more common), but when their deportation became imminent, some brave souls did their best to help. Three women – Sofka Skipwith, Elsie Tilney and Madeleine Steinberg-White – were awarded for their efforts the title of Righteous among the Nations more than half a century after the events, posthumously (cf. Skipwith online, Tilney online, Steinberg-White online).

Katzenelson's stay in Vittel can be divided into two parts, with the caesura falling on December 9, when a group of German officials sent from Berlin confiscated and declared invalid the travel documents presented by the Polish Jews. From that moment, it became obvious that chances of salvation were minimal. This is how Katzenelson summed up the situation in a note appended to Canto X of his greatest poem: "Who knows if I will finish these words of lamentation, since all the Jews in the Vittel camp, a thin and poor remnant, are filled with fear of being sent back to Poland; I feel sorry for them and my son"⁸. He did finish the lament on January 17, 1944, but he was right about the tragic outcome.

When he arrived in Vittel, Katzenelson was in the grip of depression, a result of tragic circumstances and survivor's guilt. He came with an intention "to write a memorial upon a nation that had been led to the slaughter" but (as he relates in his *Vittel Diary*) "I broke off my writings because I feared that I would go insane and commit suicide" (Katzenelson 1964: 47). As a man of the theatre – he used to be a playwright, actor and director all his life – he started instead to write in Hebrew a historical play *Hannibal* but he gave up after the first scenes. On the eve of the first anniversary of the big deportation, July 21, he returned after two months to his diary and, in an excruciating 'work of mourning', he recollected the death of his nearest and dearest – Chana and the boys, his brother Berl with family, his long-time friend Mrs. Esther Dombrowska and her family – but also the death of his illustrious friends and acquaintances – writers, painters and composers – as well as the annihilation of the Warsaw ghetto and the Jewish people. To any reader of

⁷ This category included many nationalities with British papers, also French women married to Britons and their daughters.

⁸ Katzenelson's poem is written in Yiddish but this short note is in Hebrew. I'm grateful to Moshe Shner for translating it into English.

these obsessive jottings⁹ it is painfully obvious that Katzenelson was indeed on the verge of mental collapse. Hence, it is all the more awe-inspiring that he was able to take a grip on himself and, on October 3, began to write down his lament, a tombstone for the massacred European Jews and the annihilated Yiddishland.

There are two conflicting accounts of the writing process and the subsequent efforts to save the text provided by two Jewish women, inmates of the camp. The dominant story, which has grown to almost mythical proportions, was narrated by Miriam Novitch, a guardian of Katzenelson's legacy in the Ghetto Fighters' House. This kibbutz in Western Galilee was established by the fighters from the Warsaw ghetto, Yitzhak 'Antek' Zuckerman and his wife Zivia Lubetkin, who chose Katzenelson (a friend of the couple) as its patron. The other account was offered four decades after the events by Ruth Adler-Goldberg, first to Halina Birenbaum (1988: 10), a Holocaust survivor who was 13 years old during the big deportation, and then to Wolf Biermann (1994: 185), a translator of the lament into German.

Ruth Adler was born in 1919 in Dresden. After Hitler's rise to power in 1933, her family emigrated first to Britain and then to France. As a deeply religious teenager Ruth made *aliyah* to Eretz Israel (i.e. she settled in Palestine) in 1936. She was arrested in Paris in 1940, when she was visiting her parents, and subsequently was interned as a British citizen in Besançon and Vittel. In her account, Katzenelson asked to meet the Palestinian Jews interned in the camp and was directed to her and her friend Benzion Chomsky. Since she had a Hebrew Bible, they met in the park to read it. Then she decided to move from *Grand Hotel* to *Hotel Providence*, where the Polish Jews were housed, to be close to him – commandant Landhäuser complied. She assisted Katzenelson when he was writing the lament. When the poem was finished (January 17) and Katzenelson produced a clean copy, she buried the manuscripts in the park with Chomsky's help. Shortly afterwards (January 26), she was selected by the Germans to leave the camp – she was to be sent to Palestine in exchange for German 'Templers'. Since this was a great opportunity to smuggle out the lament, she dug it out, again with Chomsky's assistance, so that Katzenelson could copy the text on thin leaves of paper. When the new manuscript was ready, it was placed in the handle of Adler's suitcase, while the remaining manuscripts were buried again in the park. This operation probably took place between January 26 and February 4, because by the latter date Adler was to be prepared for the journey. In fact, however, her exchange took place much later: the transport from Vittel set off on June 30 to arrive in Haifa – via Istanbul – on July 10. In the meantime, on March 20, all Polish Jews were transferred to *Hotel Beau Site*, separated from the rest of the camp, to make their subsequent deportation easier. Katzenelson and Zvi were transported to Drancy on April 18, while the remaining Jews – on May 15. Except for three persons, who managed to escape on the way, all of them perished in Auschwitz. After her arrival in July, Adler delivered Katzenelson's lament with a letter addressed to his relatives in Eretz Israel: Berl Katzenelson and Yitzhak Tabenkin, important Labour Zionist leaders. In this 'testament', as the letter is known, Katzenelson wrote:

⁹ Katzenelson wrote in a thin notebook, hence the journal's Hebrew name *Pinkas Vitel* (Katzenelson 1943). Apart from the English translation, there is also a French one (Katzenelson 2016).

Only you and my cousin will read this Lament for our people slain in its entirety, with its infants and its babies in the wombs of their mothers. Do not publish this Lament in its fifteen chapters or print it, as long as the curse of man still rages upon earth. If both of you find it proper and necessary that this Lament should be translated into other languages in order that the nations should know what they too have done to us, since they, too, have been used by and helped this abomination of the nations, the Germans, in the murder of our whole people, not only the Lithuanian and Ukrainian murderers... then keep the translations with you as well until the end of the War. I do not believe that I shall live until that day. (...) Print the Lament with a dedication to the soul of my Hannah and my brother Berl, who were killed with their families and with my whole people, without any grave (Katzenelson 1958: 27).

Miriam Novitch was born in 1908 in Yuratishki near Grodno¹⁰. On her Polish *matura* diploma from a gymnasium in Vilno (1926), she is named ‘Masza Marja Chławnowiczówna’. She emigrated to Paris where she became qualified as a teacher of Russian and German. She socialized with left-wing Jewish youth and married a Palestinian-born painter Moshe Castel. The marriage was short-lived (Moshe Castel returned to Eretz Israel in 1940) but she used her married name ‘Marie Castel’ later in her life in official documents. According to her account, she joined the Resistance and was arrested in July 1943. After a stay in Fresnes prison, where she was interrogated, Castel was sent in August to the Vittel camp – apparently with Palestinian (British) papers. She claims – like Adler – that she met Katzenelson on a daily basis and belonged to a close circle of his friends including the family of Nathan Eck, a teacher and historian, who was Katzenelson’s colleague from Łódź and the Warsaw ghetto, as well as the families of Alexander Landau and Samuel Szenberg, who helped him to survive in the ghetto. What is beyond doubt, she participated in an attempt to smuggle Jewish children out of the camp: Eck’s daughter Raya and a new-born baby were saved. She also assisted Gutta Eisenberg and her family on April 18, 1944, when they hid in an unused oven in the underground kitchen, while the Germans were loading the first transport to Drancy (cf. Sternbuch, Kranzler 2005: 128).

It is, however, unlikely that she assisted Katzenelson in burying the manuscripts that she so vividly describes and which is quoted in most editions of the lament: “The poet placed the writings in three small bottles. I produced a knife and a small cinder rake. We chose a pine tree that had a cleft in it – actually the sixth in a row of pines, near the football field. Katzenelson stood guard while I dug up the ground” (Cohen 1964: 38).¹¹ She may have learnt about the hiding place from Chomsky, as Adler suggests, after the latter left the camp for Eretz Israel on June 30, 1944. She certainly recovered the manuscripts of Katzenelson’s works before or after the liberation of the camp by Americans on September 12 and took them to Paris, liberated almost 3 weeks earlier. Nathan Eck, who had stayed there in hiding since May after his escape from the transport, typed the manuscript of the lament and prepared it for publication. He could not correct the final proofs – apart

¹⁰ The following account is based on Geva 2015 and ‘The estate of Miriam Novitch: personal documents’ online.

¹¹ This introduction to *Vittel Diary* is a translation of excerpts from several articles in Hebrew written by Even Shoshan, Antek Zuckerman and Miriam Novitch.

from the first two cantos – because he was invited to visit New York, where *Dos lid fun oysgehargetn yidishn folk* was publicly recited by well-known Jewish writers in commemoration of the victims of the Shoah (cf. Ek 1964: 34–35). The first edition of the text appeared in Paris in 1945 (Katzenelson 1945). Sixty years later, a French translation was published by Batia Baum (Katzenelson 2005)¹².

As for Marie Castel, her contacts with Katzenelson – whatever their extent and nature – proved to be a turning point in her life. We may believe her when she said that “thanks to [Katzenelson’s] influence I had found my own soul, and that henceforth I would remain a truly loyal daughter of Israel. From now on I shall devote the rest of my life to searching out our past and doing my share in building our future” (Cohen 1964: 33). We do not know if she had actually told him that, as she claims, but we have proof that she changed her identity – that of a fully assimilated Jew – and her name. An ‘attestation’ produced on January 22, 1945 by the Secretary General of *La Fédération des sociétés juives de France* informs all recipients that “*nous chargeons Madame Miriam Novitch (Marie Castel) de recueillir temoignages et des documents sur les atrocites commisee par le Nazis*”. Subsequently, she became the curator of the first Holocaust Museum in the world – established in the Ghetto Fighters’ House in 1949, four years before Yad Vashem – and was true to her mission for the rest of her life.

The Polish Jews in Vittel were commemorated after the war by a plaque on the wall of *Hotel Providence*, where Katzenelson stayed with Zvi in room 107:

Ici furent internés (janvier 1943 - avril 1944)
300 Juifs de Pologne
Qui après de cruelles pérégrinations
Périrent à Auschwitz le 1^{er} mai 1944
Victimes de la barbarie nazie.
Parmi eux se trouvait
Le grand poète Itshak Katzenelson

Plaque apposée par la
Fédération des sociétés juives de France
6 février 1955¹³

On top of the plaque there is a Hebrew inscription, the second part of an acronym placed on Jewish *mazevot*: תנצב"ה – “May his/her soul be bound in the bundle of life”. The first part: ‘Here is buried’ is missing. In his lament, written in Vittel, Katzenelson laid a gravestone for all murdered Jews ‘without any grave’ – including himself – and for the Yiddishland.

¹² More on this translation see Sitarz 2024/1 [to be published].

¹³ A photo can be found at: <http://www.ajpn.org/internement-camp-de-vittel-215.html>.

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