

THE TERRORIST AND THE SHOMER

EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1916 the American Poale Zion published a Yiddish volume, *Yizkor* ("In Memoriam"), dedicated to the *Shomrim*—the fallen Jewish guards of Palestine. Borochof's essay, "The Terrorist and the *Shomer*", was published in the same year in the New York Yiddish daily, *Die Wahrheit*, on that occasion.

Yizkor is a record of the men and women who came to Palestine with the second *Aliya* (the immigration stream of 1905-1914) and fell in its defense. Palestine, until the World War, was under the Turkish regime. The isolated colonists were not given any protection by the government, and hence the Jewish colonists were harassed by Arab thieves and murderers. The Jewish pioneers therefore decided to form a semi-professional organization, *Hashomer*, to guard the life and property of the Jewish colonists. (Some of these *Shomrim* came from the Russian Poale Zion of Homel who organized one of the first self-defense groups, which may be considered a forerunner of the *Hashomer*.)

The Jewish pioneers and guards of Palestine felt that that which was produced by the sweat of their hands must be guarded with their own blood. Self-defense was organically integrated into the Jewish labor movement as being as fundamental and noble a task as draining swamps.

In the course of that period, hundreds of men and women fell. *Yizkor* symbolizes their ideals, which are also the ideals of the Jewish labor movement in Palestine: labor, peace, and self-defense.

A SLIGHTLY built peasant, with an unkempt beard and humble gray eyes bespeaking ceaseless toil, was crouching on his prison bed. Hopeless, embittered, he was perhaps dreaming of the broad earth and of freedom. I shared his prison cell in Southern Russia, together with several Gentiles who had been arrested for political activities. Once he turned to me of a sudden and asked:

"Pray, esteemed one, will the two new prisoners be hanged?"

"I don't know. Probably." The answer tore itself out of my burdened heart.

"Why? They were fighting our cause. Is there not enough land for all . . . The governor thrashed all of us . . . we blessed

them when they shot the governor. Why will they hang them and not us? Is that justice, esteemed one?"

Again he became motionless, and I continued to knead the black prison bread into checkers.

"They are our heroes!" His frightened thoughts stopped there, his eyes opened wider, and the unimpressive figure of the village rebel seemed to shrink.

"They are our heroes!" For the first time, the peasant understood that strange word. Now he began to grasp the meaning of the word "hero", which he had heard somewhere but which had meant nothing to him.

"They are our heroes"—that naive and pious exclamation rings in my memory when I pore over the *Yizkor* book. Every line, every picture pulsates with this thought: "They are our heroes." One of those two heroes who was about to be hanged for defending the tortured peasants was a Jewish lad. He gave the ardour of his youth and his life for a strange people, an alien nation. He gave his life for freedom in a strange land. He was neither a deep thinker nor a theorist; he did not participate in any discussions at secret gatherings. A fugitive conspirator, he dropped his own name and gave himself Christian names—a different one in every town. To this day, I have not learned his Jewish name; I only knew him from occasional meetings at which I discussed the Jewish problem with him.

"Oh you chauvinist, you bourgeois—you do not realize that everything depends on the agrarian problem. Give the Russian his land and his freedom and you dispose of the Jewish problem."

This reply used to ring with pleasant firmness. He looked at me as a wealthy philanthropist looks upon an arrogant beggar who spurns his charity. His eyes gleamed with the silent reproach: "I want to offer my life for the cause of freedom, for the land, for the peasants and for you—and you, foolish chauvinist, don't want to accept my sacrifice!"

No. I appreciated his sacrifice, and the sacrifice of hundreds of other Jewish youths like him, who gave up their dreaming

heads for others. But I was not satisfied. They were not *our* heroes.

And many of that wonderful generation of enthusiasts died, surrendering their last breath to the Czar's hangmen. The rest became wiser: they gave up their desire for the welfare of the world and turned to material gains. The erstwhile revolutionists became careerists.

But the spirit of our Jewish youth was not entirely crushed in the pursuit of pleasure and of a career. Somewhere that idealism survived. In the depths of the people's hearts there smoldered that urge for great historical deeds. The national spirit glowed with holy ecstasy. And instead of *their* heroes came *our* heroes who gave their lives for the Jewish land and Jewish freedom.

The condemned Jewish terrorist found a worthy heir in the Jewish *Shomer*. The terrorist denied his Jewish name, and went to the gallows with a Christian stamp on his brow. The *Shomer* changed his ghetto-name to a national name—one symbolic of our past history and future hopes.

Their Berl and Velvel became *Anthony* and *Konstantin*. *Our* new heroes, the Palestinians, come with new names, with names of our own land and freedom—*Shmueli, Achduti, Reubeni*. Today there are hundreds of them; tomorrow there will be thousands. Some of them have already devoted themselves whole-heartedly to fructify the Jewish land, to renew her with young blood and muscle, so that green shoots of Jewish freedom might sprout from her bosom. The *Shomrim* were the first defenders of the Jewish strongholds in Palestine, the guards of the Jewish national treasure. Some of them fell while performing their voluntary duty. The Russian terrorist was ready to kill and be killed because in his zeal he intended to destroy the ancient structure of despotism, to batter down with his own head the towers of falsehood and darkness. The modern Jewish pioneer went to Palestine not to destroy, but to build; not to kill and be killed, but to enrich the soil with his peaceful, fruitful labor. However, under the brutal, stubborn conditions of that desolate land, he was compelled to arm himself against his semi-barbarous neighbors.

Our heroes were the opposite of the terrorists. The *Shomrim* fell with full understanding of the cause they defended.

By the graves of the fallen Jewish workers and guards Jewish youth composed a new and glorious prayer—a prayer of freedom and hope, of pride and dignity, and this prayer was bequeathed to the world in the form of a book. This black-bound book of memories and deeds is known as *Yizkor*. This new *Yizkor* does not bewail the death of these martyrs, it does not wring its hands in the helpless sorrow of *El Malei Rachamin*.¹ *Yizkor* commemorates the souls of the fallen as only a comrade can. The authors of *Yizkor* are not mourners and orphans, but warriors who pronounce a solemn oath at the graves of their fallen comrades.

And on Sunday, the living workers and *Shomrim* will assemble. Then the black-enveloped book will be distributed along with the only bequest of the dead. That bequest is the idealism which the fallen have entrusted to the living.

As we assemble, we shall commemorate the names of those young men who abandoned the crowded cities and narrow towns for the glorious hills and broad deserts of Eretz Israel. And over our heads will hover the silent wings of the immortal spirit of the departed—the spirit of peaceful labor, of an emancipated land.

¹ "God who is filled with compassion." The beginning words of a prayer for the departed.