

# Dapei Kesher

Beit Theresienstadt Theresienstadt Martyrs Remembrance Association



“Hehalutz” at Theresienstadt



## The Jewish youth movements in Czechoslovakia

Jitka Radkovichov

“If you ever need a helping hand you can find it at the end of your arm” – with this slogan I began several years ago to explore the activity of different groups that belonged to Jewish Zionist youth movements during the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938). These were groups whose definition included the word “Scouts” – in their founding documents or in the movement’s laws. In time I understood that this was probably the motto of all Zionist youth until their bitter end.



A group of Hashomer Kadima at a camp in Vyhne (1927)

Aside from several exceptions, the unique Zionist youth organizations, which included Tchelet Lavan, Hashomer Kadima, Hashomer Hatzair, Maccabi Hatzair, Bnei Akiva, Brit Trumpeldor, Brit Metzada, the Jewish Junák – Scouts (Junák is the Czech Scouts organization established in 1911), Hanoar Hatzioni, El Al, and Hatzofe, joined the two largest organizations, the Czechoslovak Junák – Scouts Association and the Federation of Czechoslovak Scouts. Tchelet Lavan objected to the military nature of Scouting activities under Baden–Powell, founder of the World Scouting Movement, and in 1924 they joined the more left-wing Federation of Czechoslovak Scouts. Hashomer Kadima and then Hashomer Hatzair, in contrast, joined the Czechoslovak Junák – Scouts Association in 1926. This association was also joined by Brit Trumpeldor in 1931, Brit Metzada a short while later, and Bnei Akiva in 1932. Hanoar Hatzioni was already a member of the association. Maccabi Hatzair, apparently due to pressures from their surroundings, joined the association only in June 1938.

Inspired by Herzl’s ideology, all the Zionist youth movements gave first priority to the immigration of their members to Palestine, and their agenda was determined accordingly. The Scouting activities were considered a means of realizing their goals, in the belief that the primary duty of Zionists is to immigrate to Palestine and to take part in establishing a state in which Jews would not be considered inferior human beings. For this reason, activities included learning Hebrew, Jewish history, and geography of Palestine, as well as activities in support of various Zionist projects. The external marks of the movements included designated uniforms, badges, as well as slogans, greetings, and anthems.

For example, members of Maccabi Hatzair would greet each other with the salute “Hazak Vehagshem” (i.e., be strong and fulfill) and their anthem was “Kadima Maccabi” (forward Maccabi). Other movements used the phrase “Hazak Ve’ematz” (be strong and brave). Members of Brit Trumpeldor greeted each other with “Tel Hai”, to remind themselves of the movement’s role model and ideological leader, Joseph Trumpeldor. Their anthem was the “Beitar song”. Most Zionist youth also recognized the song “Techezakna” (i.e., be strong, also known as “Birkat Ha’am”,

greeting of the people, by Bialik) as their anthem. The different movements often sung “Hatikva”, which subsequently became the anthem of the State of Israel. The salute that accompanied the greeting by movement members consisted of raising the right hand with the thumb supporting the pinky, symbolizing support for the weak. The pinky represented the weak. The three middle fingers pointing upwards meant

the three pillars of Judaism: people, state, and language. This differed from the Scouts salute, where the thumb does not support the pinky rather hides it, meaning protecting the weak rather than supporting them. The three lifted fingers represent the three elements in the Scouts vow and the three principles of the Scouts (duty to God, duty to others, and duty to self). The color of the Scouts uniform was usually blue; each group chose a different shade. Members of Maccabi Hatzair and Brit Trumpeldor wore dark brown shirts symbolizing the earth of Israel. After World War II this changed, as the color resembled Mussolini’s brown shirts.

Due to the condition of Czechoslovakia’s Jews in the late 1930s following the German occupation, the Zionist idea acquired a central place in the youth movements. After World War II the movements attempted to renew their activities following a period in which they had been almost completely obliterated, but not all of them managed to do so. Hashomer Hatzair gathered its forces and opened a branch under the Jewish Scouts in Bratislava, and Maccabi Hatzair, Tchelet Lavan, Brit Trumpeldor, and Bnei Akiva also managed to renew their activities. Jewish youth sought once again to join the Scouts association. In fall 1945 a meeting was held in the presence of President Edvard Beneš, which included discussions on the future of the Scouts movements. The meeting was also attended by a delegation from Hashomer Hatzair. Their question concerning the renewal of the Jewish Scouts movement received a surprising answer – renewal of the religious Scouts associations, including Jewish organizations, was not anticipated. All Scouts organizations were to operate under the Junák association. Representatives of Hashomer Hatzair considered this decision discriminatory and this put an end to their attempts to unite with the Czech Junák organization.

From 1945–1949 most members realized their vision and immigrated to Palestine/Israel, with a consequent decrease in the activity of Jewish organizations in Czechoslovakia. After the rise of the communists the activities of the youth movements were further reduced until they were forbidden completely. In the ideology of the communist regime, Scouting was a bourgeois tradition. Jewish Scouting was considered “Zionist”, which made it even more problematic, and as a result Jewish youth movements terminated their official activities completely until 2016. ■