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**TRACING
THE 'JEWISH FREEDOM FIGHTER'**

**THE LEGACY OF NAFTALI BOTWIN
AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A TRANSNATIONAL
CULT OF JEWISH HEROES**

Gerben ZAAGSMA

Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary
and Digital History (C2DH)

INTRODUCTION¹

News about the fatal shooting of Naftali Botwin came in the first months of 1926 and exploded like a bomb among both the Jewish youth and the Polish workers of our city. A big meeting was held in “Dom ludowy” [House of the People] which was attended by many Polish workers and almost all the town’s Jewish youth. Speakers came from Warsaw and also from Żyrardów.

Despite the threat of strong police repression, the workers went into the street after the meeting and gathered in a giant demonstration that took them from the House of the People, in the market square, to the train station. The meeting and demonstration made a deep impression. One had the feeling that a party which could create heroes like Naftali Botwin must harbor in itself a great, noble truth.

Leybl Tiger, 1961, p.195.²

On 6 August 1925, a young Polish-Jewish communist named Naftali Botwin was executed by the Polish authorities in the city of Lwów, following a trial in which he was convicted for assassinating a police infiltrator in the ranks of the Polish Communist Party (KPP). Botwin’s deed and subsequent fate earned him the status, albeit modest, of a revolutionary hero in interwar Poland. Yet as a communist of Jewish descent that status was far from simple, even if his act was politically motivated and unrelated to his Jewish origins. Botwin represented different things to different people at different times and in the decades following his death, he would variously be remembered as a communist of Jewish descent, a *Jewish* communist and a Jew; in all three cases these labels were imbued with both positive and negative connotations and meanings.

For many, Jews and non-Jews alike, Botwin’s act was nothing but ordinary murder; for the KPP and for Polish workers it symbolised revolutionary self-sacrifice for what they saw as a just political cause; for many Jewish youngsters, however, his act also served to prove so-

1. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their critical feedback and insightful comments. Given my lack of Polish reading skills, this article does not claim to be complete. Rather, the emphasis is on the resonance of Botwin’s deed in the Yiddish-speaking, pre- and postwar, world.

2. See the online version here: <http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/Zyrdardow/zyr188.html>. I cite the latter translation with some minor revisions.

nothing else. Living in a post-WWI reconstituted Poland that was in the process of redefining the position of its minorities, many young Jews, particularly in industrial towns, were attracted to radical politics. Botwin, a hero from among their midst, proved that existing prejudices in Poland about Jews as being submissive, cowardish and 'dodging the fight' were wrong. Botwin's act thus could provide an emancipatory model of action and it seems no coincidence that so many Jewish youth attended the rally, organised in his honor, that is mentioned above.

Political motivations and ethnic connotations merged during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) when the Jewish Naftali Botwin Company was created within the 13th Polish Dombrowski Brigade that was part of the International Brigades. As the brigades were organised by the Communist International, and Botwin being a Polish communist of Jewish descent, he was an ideal symbol for a Jewish military unit to be named after. Yet the company's creation also illustrated how Botwin's legacy was appropriated in multiple, and sometimes contrasting ways in the years following his death. Having died a communist, he would now be cast as a prototypical *Jewish* fighter on the Spanish battlefields in Jewish communist circles. After WWII, the Botwin Company became a *pars pro toto* for all Jewish volunteers who had fought in Spain in much discourse, and Botwin's legacy inextricably tied to debates about Jewish resistance against fascism and Nazism.

In this article I will discuss how the legacy of Naftali Botwin acquired multiple meanings and was appropriated in very different ways in the immediate aftermath of his death and the subsequent decades. The focus will be on the trial and its aftermath, the Spanish Civil War period, as well as Botwin's post-war legacy, whether revolving around him personally or centering on the Botwin Company. More than the details of the trial, which have recently been dealt with extensively (Piotrowska, 2017), the focus here will be mostly on the resonance of Botwin's deed within those Yiddish communist circles from which he originated, and the transnational networks

and spaces of political activity and communication that they created and sustained.

THE HERO IN JEWISH (RADICAL) HISTORY

Concepts of heroism within the Jewish context often go back to biblical times and focus on the military prowess of legendary figures and warriors such as King David, the Maccabees and Bar Kochba.³ During the 19th century the “Maccabean image could be linked with any number of Jewish political orientations,” while an emerging modern Jewish historiography began to draw parallels between contemporary Jewish military engagement and its biblical antecedents (Penslar, 2013, pp.69-70). The second half of the 19th century also witnessed the rise of mass left political movements in Europe. Within this context, Mendelsohn speaks of “three ‘models’ of heroic political activism with great appeal to Jews, mostly young and more or less secular East European Jews”; the Zionist ‘pioneer’ and ‘soldier’ models, and the leftist and non-Zionist universalist model whose attraction lay in its advocacy of “cooperation with the oppressed of other nations in order to create a better world (Mendelsohn, 1993, pp.105-107; see also p.96). The combination of an older strand of veneration of biblical heroes with its emphasis on male military prowess and this new leftist zeal produced a potent amalgam with a powerful attraction for young Jews in Eastern Europe.

If Max Nordau’s call for a *Muskeljudentum*, influential within the German-Jewish and Central European context, was by and large about changing Jewish self-perceptions and mentalities within the context of persistent stereotypes of Jewish men being unfit for battle, the Jewish self-defense movement that emerged in Russia in the beginning of the 20th century addressed very real physical threats to Jews (Presner, 2006, 2007). And that movement’s ethos, in turn, “went hand in hand with the penetration of the impact of revolutionary currents on the Jewish street, and Jewish avengers began to

3. For an excellent introduction to the theme of heroes in Jewish history within a transnational context see Micha J. Perry and Rebekka Voß (2016).

make an appearance” (Shapira, 2005, pp.86-102, 98). It is within this broader context that Botwin’s deed should be situated.

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF NAFTALI BOTWIN

Naftali Botwin was born near Kamionka Strumilova in Eastern Galicia (today Kamianka-Buzka in Ukraine) on 20 February 1905, when the region was still a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. In the aftermath of World War I and the collapse of the empire, a Polish-Ukrainian war for control over the region and its capital Lemberg took place and Lemberg eventually became the Polish city of Lwów. During the fighting, Jews stayed neutral but were effectively caught in between the warring parties. Polish suspicions of support for the Ukrainian side resulted in the November 1918 pogrom in which almost a hundred Jews lost their lives.⁴ Despite this troubled history, Lwów would develop into an important centre of Jewish life in interwar Poland in the years that followed. By 1930 over 30 % of the town’s population was Jewish (*Deuxième Recensement Général de la Population du 9 Décembre 1931*).⁵

Botwin came from a poor Jewish family of six to eight children and lost his father when he was three years old.⁶ He left primary school after the third class and became a gaiter maker at the age of thirteen. His political activism began with a brief involvement with the Jewish-socialist Bund before becoming a member of the communist youth organisation in 1923 and a full party member in 1924. He was also a member of the leather workers’ union and apparently it was another union member that approached him and gave him the order to shoot Josef Cechnowski, an infamous police provocateur

4. See for a detailed account of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict in its broader context Anna Veronika Wendland (2003, pp.83-102).

5. According to the census 33% of the population was Jewish and 24,1% of the population spoke Yiddish.

6. Unless indicated otherwise, most of the biographical information is based on: ‘Botvins erklerungen farn shtand-gerikht’ (*Ovnt Kuryer*, 1925a, p.2); Kwaterko (*Folks Shtime*, 1986, p.6); Ber Grin (1935). The number of children in the family is variously given as six or eight.

whose activities had seen many a communist jailed or executed. For this reason the KPP that was illegal at this time and subject to severe repression, wanted him to be eliminated. As Jaff Schatz has pointed out, police informers were regarded as the “ultimate enemies” within the communist universe (Schatz, 1991, p.112).

On 17 July 1925 a first, and failed, attempt to assassinate Cechnowski was made in Warsaw by Władisław Hibner, Henryk Rutkowski and Władisław Kniewski. Subsequently, Botwin was asked to perform the killing by the party and was supplied with a revolver—a statement he retracted initially during police interrogations but maintained during the trial itself (*Ovnt Kuryer*, 1925). On 28 July 1925 Botwin shot Cechnowski in Lwów in broad daylight and was immediately arrested. He was tried by summary court on 5-6 August 1925, condemned to death by firing squad and executed on 6 August in the courtyard of the Brigidki prison.

The summary court system through which Botwin was tried was a legacy from Habsburg times. The system limited the possibilities for a proper defence while a case could last for 72 hours at most, thus greatly reducing a defendant’s chances of receiving a fair trial. If convicted, the defendant faced the death penalty. The fact that Botwin was given a summary court trial was hardly surprising. He was a member of an illegal party who had killed a police officer. Moreover, the Polish authorities in Lwów were highly suspicious of ‘internal enemies’, whether Ukrainian nationalists or communists. Given Polish suspicions of Jews siding with the Ukrainians during the struggle for control over Lwów in 1918, Botwin’s Jewishness did not bode well for his legal chances (Melamed, 2008).

While Botwin’s trial was first and foremost of a political kind, it needs to be seen within a larger legal context in which Polish-Jewish relations were very much at stake. On 5 September 1924 an assassination attempt had been made in Lwów on Polish president Stanisław Wojciechowski. A young Jew named Stanisław Steiger was arrested on the spot and accused of having thrown the bomb. Steiger was brought before a summary court where, to his luck, a decision

was made to transfer the case to a regular court. The trial, that took place between October and December 1925, resulted in Steiger's acquittal.⁷ One offshoot of the Steiger affair, however, was another trial against several Jewish citizens of Lwów who were accused of having conspired to prove Steiger's innocence (*Jüdische Rundschau*, 1925a). This trial was being held during the same days Botwin appeared in court and, like the Steiger trial it generated significant international attention and put the focus firmly on Poland's dealings with its Jewish citizens, with several newspapers calling it Poland's Dreyfus affair.⁸ Indeed, Lwów's police chief Łukomski tried to convince the court that Steiger had acted on behalf of all Poland's Jews (*The Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, 1925b).

Botwin's trial in early August seems to have attracted many people on the streets while a number of delegates from the Polish Justice and Defence ministries were present in the courtroom itself.⁹ Botwin's lawyers immediately tried to have the case referred to a normal civil court, without success. Botwin confessed to the crime and explained how he had received an order to kill Cechnowski. He also added that he had shot him because Cechnowski had testified against a certain Pańczyszyn, a communist who had been accused by Cechnowski of having attempted to assassinate the Polish president in the so-called Steiger trial.¹⁰ The combination of a summary court and Botwin's confession made the final verdict inevitable though his lawyer tried to appeal for a civil court once more, citing Botwin's poor family background and young age.

On the morning of 6 August, Botwin was condemned to death, the verdict to be carried out within two hours. An appeal for mercy was denied by the court but Botwin was allowed to say goodbye

7. On the Steiger trial: see Barbara Letocha (2001, pp.32-37) and Melamed (2008).

8. See for instance: *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle* (1925a, p.10). Non-Jewish newspapers joined in using this description, see: *New York Times* (1925, p.6).

9. Most of the trial details given here are based upon: *Ovnt Kuryer* (1925a).

10. This is an interesting detail: while Cechnowski apparently tried to pin the crime on a communist, Lwów's police chief Łukomski, as we have seen, tried to put the blame squarely on Poland's Jews.

to his mother and two sisters. Despite his mother's insistence he allegedly refused to say *viddui* to a rabbi (the prayer before death to confess one's sins to God) while denouncing religion (*Di Yidishe Shtime*, 1925, p.2). Several sources describe how he refused to be blindfolded while supposedly singing revolutionary songs. He was then executed by firing squad, a fate that would also befall Hibner, Rutkowski and Kniewski on 21 August in Warsaw.

RESPONSES TO BOTWIN'S TRIAL AND EXECUTION

The various responses to Botwin's trial and execution need to be seen within the context of the abovementioned mix of trials involving Polish Jews, all of which took place in the same period. They can be mapped along a communist/non-communist and Jewish/non-Jewish axis. Unsurprisingly, the communist press, national or international, focused on all four trials related to Cechnowski's assassination (Botwin and 'the three'; Hibner, Kniewsky and Rutkowski) but with a discernible Jewish/non-Jewish focus. While Jewish communists focused on Botwin, the Polish and international communist movement concentrated on Hibner, Kniewsky and Rutkowski who were executed two weeks after Botwin. Organisations such as the Communist International, the International Red Aid and the Red International of Labour Unions, for instance, protested all four trials but mostly focused on the fate of 'the three'.¹¹ An appeal in *L'Humanité* to rescue Hibner, Kniewsky, Rutkowski and Botwin from court martial and a certain death penalty, signed by a number of French intellectuals, was actually published two days after Botwin's execution (*L'Humanité*, 1925b).

It was only within this broader context that Botwin's trial and execution received (limited) attention in the international Jewish press as examples from the German Zionist weekly *Jüdische Rundschau* and *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle* show (*Jüdische Rundschau* 1925b; *The*

11. See the declarations published in: Grin (1935, pp.42-47).

Canadian Jewish Chronicle, 1925a)¹². Reactions in non-communist leftist Jewish circles were somewhat ambiguous; the *Bund* for instance was relatively neutral, criticising the summary court but also declaring itself against “political terror”, a position decried by Jewish communists (Grin, 1935, pp.31-35).

More difficult than mapping these responses is to establish the precise scale or intensity of public indignation as most information on the trial comes from press sources that sometimes contradict each other. It seems clear that local reactions were strong: non-communist reports suggest that during the two days of the trial and execution thousands of people were out on the streets of Lwów (*Di Tsayt*, 1925; *Di Yidische Shtime*, 1925). According to communist sources, the outcry following the execution in workers' and communist circles in Poland, both Jewish and non-Jewish, was significant and stories exist of demonstrations in several cities and factories in Poland.¹³ There were also some calls for revenge (*Ovnt Kuryer*, 1925b).

Contradictions really arise when analysing reports about Botwin's intentions and his attitude during the trial and execution. *L'Humanité*, for instance, noted that even the Polish bourgeois press was impressed by Botwin's attitude in prison, and asserted he had made no confession to the police (*L'Humanité*, 1925a). This is in direct contradiction to the detailed trial report that appeared in the *Ovnt Kuryer* from Vilnius which offers the most detailed trial report available. Clearly communist sources try to depict Botwin as the somewhat stoic hero whereas the non-communist Yiddish press reports indicated how nervous and frail looking he was during the trial. A commemorative booklet about Botwin, published by the Jewish Bureau of the American Communist Party (CPUSA) in 1935, asserts that after the first botched attempt to kill Cechnowski Botwin volunteered to do the job (Grin, 1935, p.6). This was repeated in post-war Yiddish leftist publications such as *Yidische Kultur* and, once again, contradicts the trial report from *Ovnt*

12. *Jüdische Rundschau* was the official *Organ der Zionistischen Vereinigung für Deutschland* and had a high circulation.

13. See assertions to this effect in Abraham Kwaterko (1986).

Kuryer which has Botwin telling the court he acted on orders of a comrade and the party (*Yidische Kultur*, 1960, p.43). Obviously, making Botwin appear as having volunteered made him look more heroic.

Communist mythmaking also seems to be at work when comparing various accounts of his execution. Botwin's refusal to have his eyes blindfolded clearly made an impression of great courage. But while *Di Tsayt* from Vilnius simply related that he was subsequently executed, a lengthy article on his trial in the *Folks Shtime* from Warsaw that appeared in 1986 adds some remarkable detail (*Die Tsayt*, 1925; Kwaterko, in: *Folks Shtime*, 1986). In this account, Botwin's refusal is said to have had such an effect upon his executioners that two firing squads refused to perform their duties and it was the officer in charge who finally performed the execution by shooting Botwin with his own revolver.

BOTWIN AS A JEWISH RADICAL HERO

In the years following his death, Botwin's legacy lived on mostly in Yiddish communist circles in Poland and Jewish émigré communities elsewhere. He was the subject of several Yiddish plays, most notably that by Soviet-Yiddish poet and playwright Abraham Wiewiorka whose *Naftoli Botwin* was first performed by the State Jewish Theatre in 1927 (Astro, 1998, p.18). It was subsequently published in 1929 and was followed by a special version for youngsters in 1932 (Wiewiorka, 1929; 1932). The play was also performed by the New York based Yiddish Proletarian Theatre Artef in 1930 (Kerler, 1998, pp.129, 144).¹⁴ Botwin also became the subject of several songs and poems. The Belarusian Yiddish poet Moyshe Teyf (1904-1966) wrote a poem in 1930 in which he promised to recant his poem at Botwin's monument in Warsaw.¹⁵ Several other poems were published in the above-mentioned CPUSA booklet which also shows that Botwin's *yortsayt* (lit.: year time, the anniversary of his death) had become an

14. A stage photograph can be found in Zalme Zylberweig (1937, p.59). For more on Artef in general see Edna Nahshon (1998).

15. Whether or not a monument did exist in Warsaw remains unclear (Teyf, 1960).

established part of the Yiddish communist calendar. A common trope in all these representations is the emphasis on Botwin's sacrifice for the working class and party; his Jewishness is never explicitly addressed.

Botwin became part of a larger pantheon of Jewish radical heroes who were revered among Jews in the communist movement.¹⁶ One of the most famous of these was Hirsh Lekert, a Bundist who shot and wounded the governor of Vilnius, Victor von Wahl, in May 1902 (Levin, 2010). Though Lekert was a 'Bundist' hero, and not an uncontroversial one at that, he also became widely accepted in communist circles.¹⁷ The well-known revolutionary Esther Frumkin, a Bundist herself until 1921 and then a member of the *yevseksyie* or Jewish section of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU), even got into trouble because of the booklet she wrote in memory of Lekert (Gitelman; 1971, p.279). Like Botwin, Lekert had also been the subject of a play performed by Artef in New York (Schechter, 2008, p.16).

Indeed, the two were often mentioned together within the Yiddish communist context. Thus, during the First Congress of Soviet Writers, held in 1934, the Jewish writer Yasha Bronstein pleaded for the creation of a new body of folklore and songs about revolutionary heroes like Lekert and Botwin (Robin, 1985, p.247). Following the Botwin Company's creation during the Spanish Civil War several years later, *Naye Prese* editor Adam Rayski similarly highlighted that Botwin followed in Lekert's footsteps, adding that the company fighting in Spain for his 'ideals of fraternisation' was his monument (Rayski, in *Naye Prese*, 1937e). In early January 1938, the Polish International Brigades magazine *Ochotnik Wolnosci* published an article entitled 'Carrying Botwin's name with dignity and honor' in which the assertion was made that Botwin followed in the footsteps of revolutionary heroes like Lekert, among others.¹⁸ Both Lekert and Botwin were also part of

16. Schatz points out that most of the heroes of his interviewees were Jewish (Schatz, 1991, p.12).

17. On the Bund's ambiguous attitude towards political violence perpetrated by individuals in relation to Lekert see: Daniel Mahla's MA thesis (Mahla, 2006, pp.53-54).

18. For the Yiddish version see: « Mit koved un honor trogen Botvins nomen » [Carrying Botwin's name with honor], 7 January 1938, RGASPI 545-3-311.

the pantheon of heroes which the Argentinian IKUF (Federation of Jewish Cultural Institutions of Argentina) ‘endorsed’ (Svarch, 2010). All of these examples underline the transnational dimensions of the heroic cults of Lekert and Botwin that were sustained across borders through the exchange of literature, theatre pieces, news discourses and so on, and provide a clear example of what has been called the ‘communicative construction of a (in this case Yiddish communist) transnational political space’ (Albert and *alii*, 2009).

Yet the Bundist and Jewish communist heroic pantheons were segregated: while Lekert was accepted by communists, the same was not true for Botwin in Bundist circles. Botwin, then, was first and foremost a revolutionary hero of Jewish descent within communist circles. An important question is obviously whether or not his Jewishness mattered at all and, if so, in what sense? Clearly, Botwin was a useful hero for the KPP given the percentage of Jews in the party (Schatz, 1991). For Jewish youth, moreover, there was a specific subtext: Botwin had proven that Jews could fight and were not cowards. Thus, for non-Jewish party members his act might have been an act of political self-sacrifice, but for Jews it could also symbolise an act of defiance and non-submissiveness in the face of existing prejudices. This would become particularly evident during the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, if Botwin had been predominantly remembered as a communist hero of Jewish descent in the decade following his death, the years of the Spanish Civil War saw a marked change: still a communist hero, his Jewishness now became central to his legacy and its appropriation.

THE BOTWIN COMPANY DURING THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

On 12 December 1937, the Naftali Botwin Company was formed within the International Brigades that fought on the Spanish battlefields in support of the embattled Republican government and had been initiated by the Communist International (Comintern) in September 1936. The company was not new, but a renaming of the already existing 2nd company of the Palafox Battalion of the 13th Polish Dombrowski Brigade. Botwin was a logical choice to name a Jewish company after as

he symbolised both communist and Jewish sacrifice for the cause within a Polish setting.¹⁹ Other names had been contemplated too, notably that of the legendary Jewish military hero Bar Kochba, whose name resonated much more widely in a Jewish context. Yet Bar Kochba was also an explicitly Jewish *national* symbol for Zionists and for that simple reason problematic in a communist context.²⁰

The Botwin Company published its own front newspaper called *Botvin*, that was characterised by the American Yiddish-communist newspaper Morgn-Frayheyt with the following words:

*A peculiar newspaper. From its pages shines a new type of Jewish hero that has already during its life become a legend, the Jewish freedom-fighter.*²¹

The formation of the Botwin Company coincided with that of the Ukrainian Taras Shevchenko Company within the battalion, thus providing the numerically largest minorities within the newly formed Polish brigade with their own military units. The decision to create these units was in line with the way in which the International Brigades were organised; along national/linguistic lines. The brigades, initiated by the Communist International (Comintern) in September 1936, were, after all, a multinational army, in which around 35.000 volunteers with more than 50 nationalities would fight in the course of the war. Moreover, many of the national or ethnic groups within the brigades, whose numbers constantly fluctuated, were vying for attention or recognition in the form of separate units and the IB staff was keenly aware of their propagandistic potential. In the case of the Botwin Company there was, however, also a more specific reason to create a Jewish unit: within the context of national in-fighting in the brigades, anti-Semitic prejudices alleging Jewish cowardice reared its head. In addition to propagandistic reasons, concerns about the relations between Jewish and non-Jewish volunteers in the brigades, and a

19. There were other possible names too (Schatz, 1991, pp.112-113). Interestingly Schatz does not name Botwin among his mini-pantheon of Jewish communist heroes.

20. On Bar Kochba, see Shneiderman in *Forverts* (1986). Samuel Shneiderman was a Jewish journalist who reported from Spain for several Yiddish newspapers during the civil war.

21. Quote as reprinted in *Botvin* 5, 3 November 1938, p.31.

wish to rebut old anti-Semitic stereotypes, thus fed into the creation of the Botwin Company. And only the convergence of these two factors in late 1937 allowed for the establishment of a Jewish military unit.

In the course of its existence around 200 volunteers, not all of them Jewish, fought in the Yiddish-speaking Botwin Company, whose creation was the result of lobbying efforts undertaken by Yiddish-speaking Polish-Jewish communists in Paris. The company subsequently became the prime symbol for the participation of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades on the pages of their daily Yiddish newspaper *Naye Presse*.²² If it was too complicated for Jewish communists to cast the Botwin company as part of a chain of Jewish ‘national’ military heroes, the Spanish-Jewish past provided ample opportunity to historically frame the Botwin Company for a general Jewish audience. Thus, invoking the times of the Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, *Naye Presse* cast Franco and his supporters as the heirs to the medieval inquisitors, especially in the first months of the war.

The trope returned during the summer of 1937 when the Parisian Jewish communists opened a small exhibition about Jewish volunteers fighting on the Spanish battlefields. Its opening image was a photograph of the Rambam, acronym of the famous Spanish-Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204). In an intriguing article, which described a dialogue between some visitors of the exhibition, *Naye Presse* had one of them describe Maimonides as “the first Jewish fighter who had fought in Spain against backwardness, darkness and barbarism” (*Naye Presse*, 1937c). Maimonides was thus cast as a secular Jew *avant la lettre* who had dared to stand up against the same evil that was now confronted by his Jewish ‘successors’, the Jewish volunteers fighting in the brigades. Thus, not only the Franco-led so-called Nationalists came from a long Spanish tradition going back to the (dark) Middle Ages; the same was true for their Jewish opponents who defended another, very different, Spanish as well as Jewish tradition.

22. For an elaborate discussion of the creation of the Botwin Company and the Parisian Jewish communist context, see Gerben Zaagsma (2017, Chapter 2).

Following the formation of the Botwin Company, the newspaper also published an interview with Jacques Kaminsky, a Polish-Jewish communist and secretary of the so-called Friends of *Naye Prese*, who had been instrumental in the lobbying effort to create a Jewish military unit within the brigades. Kaminsky explained that its fighters were prolonging the struggle of the 'Jewish heroes' in the Paris Commune and the October Revolution, thereby cloaking their participation in a tradition of Jewish radical action and simultaneously invoking a Jewish, French and communist historical framework (*Naye Prese*, 1937d). And *Naye Prese* also knew how to employ a rhetoric that did have a much more particular resonance for its Jewish readership, most clearly so when it described the members of the Botwin Company as "chosen fighters of the Jewish people" (Y. Lekhter, in *Naye Prese*, 1938b).

Beyond propaganda, however, Spain became something much more on the pages of *Naye Prese*: a place where Jewish volunteers could prove themselves to be worthy fighters and counter age-old stereotypes of Jewish cowardice. Polish-Jewish relations in the International Brigades formed the backdrop of many reports which, for example, stressed how Polish volunteers had revised their negative opinions about the fighting capabilities of their Jewish comrades having now seen them in battle (M. Matsyak, in: *Naye Prese*, 18 April 1937a). To furthermore underline the point, *Naye Prese* did not only stress the experiences of the 'Jewish heroes' on the Spanish battlefields but also paid consistent attention to the opinion of non-Jewish, specifically Polish, officials regarding Jewish volunteers (T. Elski, in: *Naye Prese*, 1938c). In a special page devoted to the company on 1 January 1938, its first commander Karol Gutman explained in a letter, addressed to a friend in Poland, that within the Dombrowski Brigade a Jewish company had been created and he wondered:

I am curious how the different parties in Poland will react to this. What will the Endek Dziennik Narodowy write? It will be hard for them to misrepresent. The anti-Semites will certainly not have the courage to write about Jewish cowardice. [...]

*You should see what kind of friendship exists between Jews, Poles, Germans, Spaniards, between individuals of different peoples. Even Polish workers, who were convinced that one cannot fight with Jews and that they run away when they hear a shot, have altered their opinion here in Spain. When they hear news of a pogrom they are no less shocked than we, the Jewish fighters.*²³

Karol Gutman, in: *Naye Prese*, 1938a.

Anti-Semitism within the International Brigades was not the only issue, however. *Naye Prese* was also very much concerned with anti-Semitism among Polish migrants in France and sought to rebut anti-Semitic accusations in the Polish-Jewish migrant press in France, which included allegations of Jewish communist cowardice in relation to Spain. The Polish newspaper *Sila* (published by the Société des Ouvriers Polonais en France), for example, made the following accusation: “We are convinced that not a single Jewish communist fights in Spain. The Jews just shout everywhere and repeat: ‘We, the heroes’. They sent others to the front in Spain and remain in Paris themselves” (quoted from *Sila* in: *Naye Prese*, 1937b). Thus, the Parisian Jewish communists effectively found themselves fighting one of *the* classic anti-Jewish prejudices, specifically in Eastern Europe, now raised again in a Polish-Jewish context in France. The figure of the ‘Jewish freedom-fighter’, modelled after Naftali Botwin, became a primary means to achieve that aim, in France as well as on the Spanish battlefields.

Participation in the International Brigades thus acquired an emancipatory dimension, akin to the experiences of Jewish soldiers who, in the past, joined the military as a way of emancipating into their nation’s society. Naftali Botwin was the perfect symbol to encapsulate this effort: a Polish Jew and a communist who had made the ultimate sacrifice for the communist cause and shown that Jews were ready to act when called upon to do so. Whatever political objectives were involved, a Jewish migrant reading *Naye Prese* in the days after 12 December 1937 was continuously reminded that in Spain his brethren were not only fighting for the cause of Republican Spain but earned equality through struggle *as Jews*.

23. The “Endek” was the nationalist right-wing National Democratic Party of Poland.

All of this came against a background of mounting pressures on Jewish migrants in France, and the threat of war looming over Europe, especially after the Austrian *Anschluss* and Munich crisis in March and September 1938 respectively. As Jewish volunteers were presented by the editors of *Naye Prese* as heroes and the 'best sons of the Jewish people', who fought united on the Spanish battlefield irrespective of their political backgrounds, they were set as an example that should be followed by Jewish migrants and their organizations in France, whose unification Jewish communists were trying to bring about. Indeed, the participation of Jewish volunteers, symbolised by the Botwin Company, provided an emancipatory example and served as a means to empower Jewish migrants in France. If Jewish volunteers could show that activism earned respect and equality so too could Jewish migrants assert their position among their French brethren, at a time when a secure future in the French state seemed increasingly at stake.²⁴

RESONANCES OF BOTWIN AND THE BOTWIN COMPANY DURING AND AFTER WORLD WAR II

During WWII, Botwin also continued to be an inspiration for some of the former Jewish volunteers who ended up in the German extermination camps. Both former Botwin Company commander Emmanuel Mink, and another former Botwinist, David Szmulewski, were deported to Auschwitz during the war and became part of the camp underground resistance movement.²⁵ In his memoirs, Szmulewski relates how former Jewish volunteers established contact in Auschwitz and gradually formed a network that became the backbone of the camp's underground movement. Szmulewski talks about "Spanish 'Botwin'-traditions in the camp" using 'Botwin' as a label for all Jewish volunteers who ended up in the Auschwitz underground.

24. The best example of the use of the Botwin Company for domestic political purposes was during *Naye Prese's* annual outing in the Parc de Garches close to Paris on 12 June 1938 (Zaagsma, 2017).

25. Szmulewski gained postwar fame because of his involvement with the so-called Sonderkommando photographs, the only pictures to have been taken by inmates in Auschwitz-Birkenau to document the Nazi killing operation (Stone, 2001).

In a similar vein, Bernard Mark, director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw after World War II, emphasised the historical significance of the Botwin Company (Mark, in: *Morgn-Frayheytt*, 1956). Mark was a lawyer who had published several works on Jewish resistance and the Warsaw ghetto uprising. A former member of the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee in the Soviet Union, he encouraged the collection of material on Jewish volunteers and research on this aspect of the “Jewish struggle against fascism”. He reminded his readers that the Warsaw ghetto uprising had been preceded by the participation of Jewish volunteers in Spain and the formation of the Botwin Company. In his book *Der Aufstand Im Warschauer Ghetto* Mark had also related how the communist inspired underground resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto, organised by former volunteer Pinkus Kartin, held lectures about Lekert, Shulman and Botwin (Mark, 1959, pp.61-62). A similar lineage was expressed in several articles by Abraham Kwaterko, editor of the Yiddish newspaper *Folks-Shtime*, the official organ of the Social-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland (TSKZ) (Kwaterko, in: *Morgn-Frayheytt*, 12 January 1977).²⁶

In the wake of emerging debates about wartime Jewish responses during the Holocaust, in part the result of the writings of Raul Hilberg, Hannah Arendt and Bruno Bettelheim, but also shaped by the appearance of resistance as an object of scholarly attention around the 1970’s more generally, Jewish participation in the International Brigades became more and more framed as the first armed Jewish resistance against fascism, Nazism, and (for some) ultimately the Holocaust. Jewish volunteers, who were often symbolised by the *Botvintses*, now became the prototypical armed Jewish resistance fighters (Zaagsma, 2017, Part III).

All of this is not to suggest that the pre-Spanish Civil War Botwin cult, which centered on the person of Naftali Botwin himself, came to an end after WWII. In 1946, for example, a Botwin cooperative was founded in a Silesian town in now communist Poland (A. Grosman, *Morgn-Frayheytt*, 13 June 1969). Several streets were also named after

26. On the history of *Folks Shtime* see: Moshe Shklar (2008).

Botwin, some of which still exist, though for how long remains to be seen.²⁷ These, however, were local initiatives that did not reflect a 'national' consensus. On occasion of the 25th anniversary of their trial in 1950, a commemorative stamp was issued for Hibner, Kniewsky, Rutkowsky, an 'honour' that did not befall Botwin although a book was also published in the same year dedicated to all four 'heroes' (Juryś, 1950).²⁸ Indeed, Botwin's memory was predominantly kept alive by Poland's Jewish community. Thus, in order to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Botwin's execution in 1965, the Workers' Cooperative of the Jewish Cultural Association in Wrocław decided to name itself after Botwin.²⁹

The events of 1967-1968, often referred to as the anti-Zionist campaign, changed all this.³⁰ Many Polish Jews, party members or not, were purged from their positions and jobs and many, faced with the choice of staying in a country where they were under constant attack or leaving chose the latter (Schatz, 1991, p. 311). In an article with the title "Was Botwin a 'chauvinist'?" A. Grosman explained the reasons for many Jews leaving Poland in this period, including one of the Botwin Company's commanders, Emmanuel Mink (Grozman, in *Morgn-Frayheytt*, 1969). As an example of the anti-Jewish sentiments that were unleashed in the country, he related how the non-Jewish chairman of the cooperative named after Botwin in 1945 had proposed to rename it since Botwin smacked of Jewish "national-chauvinist" sentiments. In an intriguing twist of history, the Botwin

27. In accordance with new legislation (known as the "de-communization law" n°744 of April 2016, it was announced in 2017 that the Botwin Street in Ząbkowice Śląskie, to give one example, was to be renamed. See: <http://zabkowiceslaskie.pl/aktualnosci/zmiana-nazwy-ulicy-naftalego-botwina-staje-sie-ulica-szkolna-4476.html> (date of access, 2 /11/2018). The one in Rembertow, Warsaw, was already renamed to Bochenski Street in June 1998.

28. Similarly, the current Polish Communist Party listed the date of their deaths on its website's "history" page, mentioning Botwin while focusing on 'the three' "Towarzysze rozstrzelani" [Executed comrades]. See: <http://kompol.org/historia/08-21.html> (date of access, 3 March 2011). The current website does not feature this page anymore.

29. *Folks-Shtime* 123/3237 (year unknown; 1965 or 1966), p.3.

30. Good (English) overviews are: Jaff Schatz (1991, pp.282-312) and Dariusz Stola (2006, 2017).

Company's former political commissar Eugeniusz Szyr got caught up in the drama. Szyr who had become a member of the Polish politburo and was vice-premier under Gomulka, managed to stay in the country but was not re-elected to the politburo (Wein, 1969; Lauen, 1969, p. 350). The journalist Samuel Schneiderman later alleged that there were bitter feelings towards him among Polish-Jewish veterans who claimed that Szyr had forbidden them to remind anyone about his role in the Botwin Company (Schneiderman, in *Forverts*, 1986).

As had been the case before the war, commemorations of the anniversary of Botwin's death continued in Yiddish communist publications all over the world.³¹ Moshe Teyf's earlier mentioned poem was reprinted in 1960 in the periodical *Yidishe Kultur* from New York on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of Botwin's death. In Australia, the bilingual *Australian Jewish News* erroneously reported in 1969 that the Botwin Company's last commander, Karol Gutman, had left Poland in 1968 (*Australian Jewish News*, 1969). Gutman, however, was the company's first commander and died in Spain in February 1938 during the battle of Extremadura; the last commander, Mink, did indeed leave Poland in 1968 as we saw. And as late as 1986 the *Folks Shtime* from Warsaw published an elaborate article on occasion of the 60th anniversary of Botwin's execution (Kwaterko, 1986).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As might be clear, the heroic cult that developed around the legacy of Naftali Botwin had two strands that were inextricably linked. Both revolved not just around his deed itself, but especially around what it came to symbolise within a Jewish context: a negation of Jewish submissiveness and inaction. One strand relates to Naftali Botwin himself and the ways in which he was commemorated and how his

31. On postwar Yiddish publishing and its transnational aspects see, among others: Zachary Baker (2004); Jan Schwarz (2016). As Baker and Schwarz show, Yiddish publishing remained a decidedly transnational affair and became even more so after the war as Yiddish readerships had dramatically diminished and the importance of transnational networks and audiences thus greatly increased.

deed resonated within Yiddish communist circles. The other relates to Spain; it was still loosely related to the figure of Botwin but was characterised by the transfer of the symbolic meaning of his deed to those (Eastern European) Jewish volunteers that fought in the Botwin Company. If the Botwin cult in the former sense never transcended the Yiddish communist world, no matter what it signified, its resonance with regard to the story of Jewish volunteers in the brigades was much more significant; here, Botwin's legacy ultimately became tied up with postwar debates that sought to negate the myth of Jewish passivity during WWII and the Holocaust.

The example of Naftali Botwin thus shows the fluidity of the 'heroic' and the ways in which it can be redefined and appropriated in changing circumstances and contexts across space and time. Having died a young communist of Jewish descent in interwar Poland, Naftali Botwin became the ultimate *Jewish* communist hero and the Botwin Company a key symbol of Jewish fighting prowess in Jewish communist circles during the Spanish Civil War. Come 1986, the Botwin Company had become, for many, the prime example of a Jewish and Leftist contribution to armed Jewish resistance against fascism and Nazism in the dark years of 1933-1945.

The Botwin cult though, could never fit into a more generic Jewish military, and *national*, heroic tradition. Nonetheless, it could serve to inscribe part of the history of the Jewish Left, so often relegated to the sidelines of Jewish history, into the larger narrative of Jewish history by underlining and emphasising its contribution to the struggle against one of the most pernicious anti-Semitic stereotypes of old: that of Jewish submissiveness and the Jew as a coward. Within that larger context, the history of Naftali Botwin and his legacy can be seen as emblematic for the much wider question of Jewish auto-emancipatory efforts in the modern age.

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