

# Palestine on the Right Bank of the Vistula River

**24 August 1940 Adam Czerniaków, chairman of the Warsaw Judenrat, visited a halutz (pioneer) farm operating in Grochów. The boys and girls working on the farm proudly showed him their new stable, two horses, and a borrowed cow. They also prepared refreshments – sandwiches and borscht with potatoes. In turn, chairman Czerniaków thanked them for... making the trip from Egypt to Palestine possible.**

## Zionists in Grochów

Although Adam Czerniaków's visit took place before the ghetto was closed in November 1940, even then the idyllic and agrarian atmosphere of the kibbutz made an impression on the guests arriving from central Warsaw. From autumn 1940, the kibbutz was a real oasis. Working outdoors provided respite from the confines of the closed and overcrowded ghetto, and farming, albeit hard, still made it possible to obtain additional food.

Chairman Czerniaków's thanks had a hidden meaning. The farm was run by Zionists from the He-Halutz organisation. Their goal was to prepare young people to move to Palestine. They were trained in professions that would prove useful in the emerging society of the future Jewish state. In kibbutzim such as the one in Grochów, active learning of farming and husbandry was accompanied by Hebrew language and Jewish culture courses.

As such, this was not just a matter of being able to get out of the Northern District or grow vegetables – a much-needed commodity for Warsaw Jews during the occupation. The pioneers

also pursued their plan to actively prepare for a new life in Palestine while growing asparagus, rhubarb, onions, beans, cabbage, and sugar and fodder beets.

### A progressive farm instead of a cemetery

With a total area of 30 ha, the Grochów Kibbutz was set up in 1919 on land that was purchased before World War I to set up Warsaw's third Jewish cemetery (apart from the ones in Bródno and Wola). As the local residents resisted the plan, the cemetery was never established. After Poland regained its independence, the Jewish religious community donated plots of land on the present Grochowska Street to the Zionist organization He-Halutz. At the kibbutz, the young people not only learned to work and speak Hebrew, which was the language of their daily communication, but also participated in various cultural initiatives. The movement's ideological basis was socialism; as such, the farm was organised as a commune. All profits earned by the kibbutzniks and even packages received from home were put into the communal coffers.

Some found it difficult to comply with this rule. Recalling his life at a kibbutz in the 1930s, Tzvi Berzeli described searches for "private" property conducted by the kibbutz management members. Various hidden items were typically discovered during those, including bread, challah, cigarettes and money. This was risky as violating the communal property rule could be grounds for expulsion from the commune.

### The Pioneers of Grochów

Although He-Halutz's offer was aimed at young people from cities and towns – primarily physical workers – young people from various social backgrounds belonged to the kibbutz as well. Their choice was not always accepted, especially in conservative families. To explain how difficult such

decisions truly were, Tzipora Ritov recalls a story about one of her aunts going to her grandfather's grave so that the ancestor's spirit would influence Tzipora and end her obsession with Zionist ideas. This was not just about a political agenda, though. It was difficult to accept a social model in which women lived under one roof with men and worked the fields wearing pants. The farm's beginnings were modest. In the 1920s, about twenty pioneers stayed at the kibbutz at any given time. By the 1930s, nearly a hundred kibbutzniks worked there, and before the outbreak of World War II, as many as 200. There were literally not enough places in the bedrooms, with up to three people having to share a single bed. The development of kibbutzim was linked to Poland's economic crisis, unemployment, and anti-Semitism. It is worth noting that in 1938, a group of Zionist youth expelled from Germany also came to Grochów.

### Blocks of flats replaced by greenhouses

The farm was situated on what is now 43 Witolińska street, but it is difficult to find any remaining evidence of its existence. Where the pioneers had set up greenhouses and plowed fields now stands the Ostrobramska housing estate and the King Cross shopping centre.

During the early stages of the farm's existence, the pioneers only had wooden farm buildings available so they lived in houses rented in the Grochów district. By mid-1925, a brickwork barn was erected, and in 1928, the construction of a masonry house with two sleeping rooms, a dining room and a community room was commenced. Its outbuildings housed sewing rooms and a shoemaker's shop, which produced clothing for the commune's members. The pioneers moved in there in 1934, and the completion of the construction work was made possible by the generosity of such donors as Henryk Doktorowicz, a well-known philanthropist from Warsaw.

### Harvest festivals among blocks of flats

Since young people arriving in Grochów typically had no farming or even gardening experience, an agronomist was hired to assist them. Thanks to Aron Krynski, who oversaw the kibbutz's economy since 1931, it was nonetheless possible to establish a functioning farm. Interestingly, while Aron Kryński himself did not hold Zionist beliefs, he was an excellent manager with background in agriculture. It was he who introduced such solutions as an 8-hour workday. What crops were grown in Grochów? According to the sowing plan for the 1934/1935 season, the crops planted included tomatoes, rhubarb, lilies and other flowers, asparagus and cauliflower. The commune's former members recall having as many as 120 species of roses, with the flowers grown at the kibbutz also receiving awards at florist exhibitions in Warsaw. Other plants grown included rye, barley, lupine, potatoes, beets and other vegetables; meadows were also cultivated for hay. The crops were sold at fairs and at the Warsaw vegetable market. Animals were kept at the Grochów farm as well, including cows, poultry and horses. While horses were primarily used for fieldwork, riding lessons and races were also held. However, the kibbutz's most special festivity was the harvest day, which was attended by many visitors. As part of it, huge haystacks were built and vegetables were arranged into fanciful shapes.

### A time of rapid development

The 1930s were the period in which the Grochów agricultural farm truly thrived – and not only because of the plants grown at the kibbutz's fields and greenhouses. Social and cultural life flourished as well, with Friday and Saturday dances that were famous throughout Warsaw, as well as a choir and theatre troupe giving performances also outside the kibbutz itself. Guests from both Poland and abroad came to visit Witolińska street in droves: the future Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir, danced the horah with the pioneers and Miss Judea, Zofia Ołdak, took pictures with cows.

Beginner Jewish farmers occasionally turned to their neighbours for help, taking advantage of farming advice or engaged in helping with harvesting or potato-lifting. Pioneers also worked at a tannery and brewery outside the kibbutz proper. Additionally, policemen from the 17th precinct,

where the farm was located, would sometimes come for tea. Neighbours also bought vegetables, flowers, milk and eggs. As time went on and the Jewish farm developed further, they would also inquire about farming experience, particularly about new seed varieties sown at the Grochów fields.

## A time of unrest

The second decade of Poland's interwar independence was also a period of rising anti-Semitism, which affected the pioneer collective's relations with its surroundings. It must be noted that none of the plots of land around the kibbutz belonged to Jewish institutions or private owners. Threats against members of the collective became more and more frequent, with the residents upset about farm work conducted on Sundays, as well as girls wearing pants. It was not infrequent for the latter to be harassed in a rather pushy manner, and as such, women rarely ventured outside the farm grounds alone. The pioneers recall the locals calling them "Palestinians" with contempt and even pelting them with stones. As time went on, the attacks became increasingly vicious – up to acts of terror committed with a gun in hand. In May 1935, a group of attackers shot up the main building and threw a bomb inside. Frida Wołkowyska, a kibbutz member, was killed in the attack. The perpetrators were never found and their victim was buried at the Jewish cemetery at Okopowa street (the tombstone has survived until this day). From that point onwards, self-defence courses were organised in Grochów and the farm members were granted permission to possess firearms, which they also carried during fieldwork.

## Farmers do not leave the land behind

The kibbutz area was bombed in September 1939, and members of the commune left the farm: those who had family in the area simply returned home. Others followed the appeal of the

authorities to evacuate from Warsaw to the east: they set out in the direction of Kovel and Vilnius, some even managed to get to Palestine. The kibbutz was disbanded and Izaak Cukerman, who reached Grochów in search of food, recorded that the buildings, abandoned and destroyed in the bombing, were completely looted. However, the chalutzim returned to the farm and toilsomely rebuilt the kibbutz. It was done by members of the youth Zionist organisation called Dror, affiliated with the He-Chalutz movement, but other youth organisations were also invited to join. It was not only about the food supply, so desperately needed in the time of war, but rather about creating a cultural and educational alternative for young people who were demoralised by the war. Even though, in the end it was not possible to restore the scope of pre-war activity, in the spring of 1940, there were about 40 pioneers working on the farm. They were aided by supporters of the movement who lobbied for it within the structures of the Judenrat, including Janusz Korczak. Admittedly, the Old Doctor reproached the pioneers for leaving Grochów at the beginning of the war and “a farmer who leaves the land behind does not deserve any help.” In the end, he was successfully persuaded to support the restoration of the farm.

### Kibbutz during the occupation

In the first period after the restoration of the farm, the occupiers viewed the whole enterprise favorably. Their interest was at times slightly cumbersome to those involved. “Supporting” the farm in Grochów consisted, for example, of giving orders to the Judenrat to provide the farm with additional livestock which under wartime conditions was not an easy task. As pioneers reported thefts, the idea arose to give them more police protection. In this case, the members of the Judenrat had to go to great lengths to make this plan of “help” fail. They did not want to put a strain on relations with their neighbours. When in November of 1940 Warsaw ghetto was closed, pioneers were initially forbidden to live on the right bank of the Vistula River. This decision was successfully revoked.

The situation of the kibbutz changed in 1941. This is when the farm got a new manager and the

relationship with him was rather poor. He did not allow Jews working on the farm to feed on the crops they grew, and in 1942 ordered them to leave the farm and return to the ghetto.

## The lost archive

The kibbutz was one of the most important places for Jewish conspiracy: it was used by liaison officers maintaining contact between the main cities of the General Government. Later leaders of the ghetto uprising such as Zivia Lubetkin, Yitzhak "Antek" Zuckerman and Mordechai Anielewicz were associated with the agricultural collective in Grochów.

After the collapse of the uprising in 1943, the insurgents made their way to the kibbutz in search of temporary shelter. Yitzhak Zuckerman managed to hide there the wartime archives of the Dror organisation and the works of the poet and playwright Itzhak Katzenelson. The buried documents were never found after the war. A Polish watchman met by Zuckerman at the site in 1945 claimed that they had been dug up by the Red Army soldiers. After the end of the war, attempts were made to recreate the Grochów kibbutz. This did not succeed in Warsaw. However, in Lower Silesia, near Korfantów, a Jewish farm was established bearing the name "Grochów".

## The Grochów kibbutz in an old cinema

Walking in the footsteps of the pioneers of Grochów is not easy, as the area of the former farm has changed beyond recognition. On the website of the Stowarzyszenie Imienia Szymona An-skiego (Association named after Szymon An-ski) one can find an elaborately compiled plan of the kibbutz with the location of buildings and places where archival photographs were taken. Old photographs captured images of smiling chalutzim doing farm work and beautiful crops, so

one can try to imagine greenhouses in the place of today's blocks of flats and car parks. The kibbutz in Grochów also starred in a film, as in the 1930s part of the site was leased to the producer of hit Yiddish films, Joseph Green. A film town was then created with sets evoking picturesque shtetls, where large parts of "The Jester" (1937) were filmed.

Memories of the Jewish farm are also preserved in the ceilings of pre-war Grochów tenements. One of the buildings on the farm was rented to the Klein company, which wove large reed mats used in the construction industry. Reed mats backfilled with sand formed the ceiling filling. Such technology was used, for example, in the construction of the building at ul. Czapelska 44. When renovation work was carried out on the property in 2010, a description of which can be found in the book "Ruda, córka Cwiego. Historia Żydów na warszawskiej Pradze" (Ruda, the daughter of Cwie. A history of Jews in the Praga district of Warsaw) by Adam Dylewski, the foreman supervising the work said, "Typical Jewish work" when he saw an exposed plaited mat in the ceiling.

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The text uses material from the website of Stowarzyszenie Imienia Szymona An-skiego (www.anski.org)

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