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## PREFACE

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### “THE BIRDS LEFT EARLY”

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On Monday, September 4, 1939, the management of the Tel Aviv Zoo announced the birth of a female fawn and the arrival of a desert rat (also called a gerbil). In addition, the zoo acquired seventeen hoopoes in a pitiable state: they were rescued from an Arab who had captured them and plucked their wings, and were therefore unable to fly. The authorities confiscated the birds and handed them over to the zoo. The children’s newspaper *Davar Leyeladim* wrote: “The hoopoes and the other birds were captured in our country on their migratory route from Europe. This year the birds left early for the warm countries, perhaps indicating that winter has come early this year. And maybe the birds are also fleeing the war in Europe?”<sup>1</sup>

About a week earlier, at the end of August, Brunia Reitberger, a housewife from Tel Aviv’s Mazeh Street, and Sarah, her ten-year-old daughter, traveled to visit the mother’s family in Piotrków Trybunalski, a town sixteen miles south of Łódź, home to around 18,000 Jews (which amounted to about a third of the town’s population). Worried relatives, friends, and neighbors tried to dissuade Mrs. Reitberger from going: everyone knows that a war is about to break out any day now! But she insisted. They were only going for a short family visit and will return right after the holidays. Ahead of the trip they got Sarah a new red coat and a red velvet hat and filled a suitcase with presents for the relatives. The mother and daughter sailed on the ship *Har Zion* to the port of Constanta in Romania, and on the night of September 1 alighted at Warsaw’s train station.

The platform was packed with people looking for a way to get out of the city. One of them turned to the mother and said: “Madame, go back to Palestine. Now!” She did not follow his advice: they were so close to their destination and would not turn back. On the morning of Saturday, September 2, 1939, not a living soul was waiting for them at Piotrków’s train station. The mother and daughter traveled by cart to 5 Old Warsaw Street, where they received a chilly welcome; no one noticed Sarah’s coat and velvet hat: “Why did you come now? A war has broken out and the Germans are bombing us. It’s dangerous here and we must leave.”

The flight from the town had already begun, and the road to Sulejow was jammed with “innumerable carts,” which were attacked from the air. Sarah found herself on a horse-driven wooden cart packed with family members, pillows, and quilts. “What happened? Where are we going? [. . .] There was no answer.”<sup>2</sup> Piotrków was taken by the German army on September 4. In the following days, around 2,000 Jews managed to flee eastward, only to be replaced by a large number of refugees from the neighboring towns. Approximately 25,000 people were crammed into the first ghetto in Poland, which was established on October 8. The process of transferring them to the ghetto continued until the end of January 1940.<sup>3</sup> Sarah and her mother had to endure three months of terror and hardship before they made it back to Tel Aviv.

At the beginning of September, a few hundred women and children from Palestine were waiting at the port of Constanta in Romania for ships to take them back from their summer visits to see their families. Among them were Dvora Gertz and her five-year-old daughter Dalit, who had visited the parents of Dvora’s husband in Białystok. They got to Constanta by train because they could not find seats on the flight from Warsaw to Lod, Palestine, and had to wait at the port for three days. Far away in Kalisz, Mr. Freger soothed his frightened wife, saying that the Germans were only trying to terrorize Poland, “but the Poles are strong enough to withstand these German attempts.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1938, at the request of the New Zionist Organization, founded by the Revisionist Zionist movement (which three years earlier had seceded from the Zionist Organization), a lawyer from Krakow, Dr. Yohanan (Jan) Bader, one of the leaders of the Revisionist movement, prepared a “working paper” on the Evacuation Plan—a plan for an organized mass emigration of Jews from Poland to Palestine to be carried out over ten years, until 1948. Now Bader heard from some military people that the pace of the fighting armies’ movements would be similar to that of the First World War; that is, a slow pace. Confident of the Polish army’s ability to defend the border, Bader believed that the German army would divert most of its forces to the western front. Therefore, “it would take a while before the enemy gets anywhere near Krakow,” and he had enough time to decide what to do.<sup>5</sup>

Another leading member of the Revisionist movement, Dr. Wolfgang (Binyamin Zeev) von Weisl, who had been among the passengers on the airship *Graf Zeppelin* flight from Germany to the Middle East on Purim in March of 1929, acted differently. Von Weisl was a journalist and a prolific writer who had served as an artillery corps officer in the Habsburgian army

and was awarded the Iron Cross for his service. When he heard the Austrian chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg announcing on Austrian radio that there would be a referendum on Austria's future, von Weisl told his wife: "Pack the suitcases immediately, take what you can, tonight we go with the children to Paris." His surprised wife replied: "You must be running a fever!" and Dr. von Weisl answered: "Never mind." The von Weisls and their two young children left Vienna for Paris with no luggage on March 12, 1938, the day after the Nazis entered the city. The following morning, Gestapo officers knocked on the door of their house on 48 Kirschengasse, but found their apartment empty.<sup>6</sup>

In his autobiography, Bader reflected on why he did not leave Poland like von Weisl, despite the warnings of Zeev Jabotinsky, the founder and leader of the Revisionist movement, who foresaw what was in store for the country's Jews, and confessed: "Maybe I was also too busy with my professional work, with the matters of the movement and the weekly, with photography, with reading books and with going to cafés and to the theater, and forgot the main thing: Jabotinsky's warning. I deluded myself: we still have time."<sup>7</sup> He did not believe that Poland was destined for a similar fate as Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Wiktor (Avigdor Wilhelm) Chajes from Lviv (Lvov, Lemberg), a banker, loyal Polish patriot, a leader of the Jewish community, and political wheeler-dealer who defined himself as "both Jewish and Polish," and who at the beginning of the 1930s was awarded several distinguished honorary decorations by the Polish government, wrote on August 16:

We seem to be on the verge of a historic moment. War? Revolution? If so, where? It has to be said that among us the situation is tense, but there is no nervousness. Everyone is ready to defend. Hitlerism is running riot. Hurling insults, lies and threats in the press and on the radio. Adolf himself is secluding himself in Brechtesgaden and keeping silent. Holding talks, making plans, preparing something. In the last month I've been reading *Mein Kampf*. He wrote it about fifteen years ago and has been systematically paving the way for his theses and doctrines. He is consistent. The more I read his *Mein Kampf*, the more I fear him. But he will lose, he will surely lose.<sup>8</sup>

Two days later, on August 18, Dr. Willy Cohn, a historian and teacher in Breslau, put the blame on tensions in Poland. (In February he wrote in his diary, "I cannot say that Germany, in its fight to obtain living space for itself, is unjust."<sup>9</sup>)

Jabotinsky, the leader of the Revisionist movement, was relaxed: "There is no reason to believe in the possibility of a war. [ . . . ] The world looks a peaceful place from Pont-Aven, and I think Pont-Aven is right."<sup>10</sup> Illa (Lili) Lubinsky-Strassman, a member of the Irgun (Etzel) delegation, visited him in the town of Vals-les-Bains, where he was vacationing, on her way to the Twenty-First Zionist Congress in Geneva. She was worried that if war broke out she would not be able to return to her family in Warsaw, but Jabotinsky soothed her: "There is not the remotest chance of war. Nobody wants it. [ . . . ] See you in a few days in Paris and we will go on a spree (*fera la bombe*)."<sup>11</sup>

On August 29, in Dresden, Victor Klemperer, a converted German-Jewish scholar, wrote: "The last few days pulled and still pull too much at my nerves. The unconcealed mobilization without any mobilization being announced (people, cars, horses), the pact with the Russians and the incredible turnabout, confusion, the incalculable situation, the balance of forces *after* this volte-face. [ . . . ] The maddest thing was the hand-in-hand picture of Ribbentrop and Stalin. Machiavelli is a babe in arms by comparison."<sup>12</sup>

"It seems that Poland allows itself anything under England's auspices," wrote Willy Cohn on August 26 in Breslau, fed by the German propaganda, and two days later he added that Poland was not ready to give up the corridor or Danzig without a war.<sup>13</sup>

On August 30, Chaim Weizmann, president of the Zionist Organization, wrote from London to his brother Feivel in Haifa: "We all live on a volcano and every minute expect the appearance of enemy aircraft over London or Paris. It will be as Providence decides. Personally, I am calm and do not believe in a final catastrophe. However, nerves are on edge."<sup>14</sup>

The Palestine press reported the signs of imminent war: the express train from Vienna and Berlin failed to arrive in Paris on August 29, the streets of the French capital had been darkened, the schools were getting ready to evacuate the pupils to the provinces, and even the animals in the zoo at Bois de Vincennes were transferred to zoos in provincial towns. Despite these signs of war, an ad published in the Palestine newspapers on August 30 invited tourists from the country to take a dream vacation in France: "Visit France, the land of beauty. It offers convalescence in its warm spas, relaxation in the mountains, joy of life on the beaches and in its sea resorts. Details, brochures and hotel prices can be found at any important news agency."

When the Twenty-First Zionist Congress in Geneva dispersed, Dr. Moshe Kleinbaum (Sneh), leader of the Zionist movement in Poland, flew to Lon-

don, despite his fear that if war broke out he would not be able to return home. Every day he visited the offices of the Polish airline LOT, where he learned that the flights to Warsaw were full and that there would be no available seats for the next few days. On one of his visits he got lucky: he heard that a seat had become unexpectedly available on a flight leaving for Warsaw on Thursday, August 30. In a letter to Nahum Goldmann, Kleinbaum explained that he had decided to return to Warsaw despite the dangers, because he was “too attached to Poland and to the Jews of Poland, I cannot become an emigrant.” Kleinbaum left for Warsaw on August 30, on the last flight from London to the continent. After a few stopovers, he arrived home on the evening of August 31 and rushed to join the military unit in which he served as a physician.<sup>15</sup>

The historian Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, a delegate at the Twenty-First Zionist Congress for the Poalei Zion Leftist party in Poland, wrote in his diary about the grueling journey that he and his friends had to endure on their way back from Geneva to Warsaw: “We are on a thirty-hour train ride in a sleeping car to Warsaw. Air raid siren. [ . . . ] Hanging on the cars, on the roofs. Some are trying to break into our car. Manifestations of antisemitism in the country. Civic awareness made us decide to return to their country. Those who wanted to stay in the country.”<sup>16</sup>

At 4 p.m. on August 29, a LOT Polish Airlines plane landed at Lod Airport, having taken off from Warsaw at 1 a.m. Worried citizens were waiting for the ten passengers who got off the plane near the offices of Orbis, the company representing the Polish airline, on Montefiore Street in Tel Aviv. The passengers reported that the Polish population showed courage, and that the general attitude was that Hitler must not be surrendered to and that not even one inch of Polish land nor the merest Polish stake in the “corridor” to Danzig (Gdansk) conceded.<sup>17</sup> You could feel the tension in the air, they told the waiting people, who were yearning for firsthand information, but there were no particular signs of panic. Life in Poland was not disrupted, there was no shortage of food supplies, the banks were open, and Jewish organizations took part in preparations for air-raid defense.<sup>18</sup> *Hazofe*, the Hamizrachi religious national party newspaper, proudly informed its readers that “hundreds of orthodox Jews with beards and earlocks are working shoulder-to-shoulder with Polish citizens” in digging protective ditches.<sup>19</sup>

Early in the morning of September 1, Nazi Germany’s armored columns crossed the border into Poland. The Second World War had begun. It is hard to avoid the shadow of the “end” — which in August 1939 was impossible to foresee — that hangs over this month with all its weight. It is also difficult to

ignore the heavy cloud of accusations and counter-accusations that hangs over this month: whose eyes were blind, even on the eve of war, to the impending disaster? Who was naïve, and who was completely in the dark? What could have been done and was not, and why?

August 1939—as well as, of course, its preceding months and years—looks like a voyage on a “ship of fools” whose passengers are occupied with needless quarrels and useless arguments, absorbed in everyday trifles that the events following September 1 would reveal in all their futility and pointlessness, even shamefulness. An almost obvious question arises: how is it possible that in the course of that month Jews in Palestine and in Poland carried on with their ordinary lives? One explanation can be found in a letter Berl Katznelson (a leader of the Labor movement) wrote from London at the beginning of October 1938: “We live here from one upheaval to the next. Not every upheaval erupts, not every decree that we face sees the light of day, but here you live every calamity, even before it materializes, and even when the calamity is miraculously postponed, either for one hour or for a long time.”<sup>20</sup>

**T**his book serves as a sort of collective diary of statesmen, social and political activists, and ordinary people whose first-person eyewitness accounts were recorded in personal diary entries, letters, and memoirs, along with daily newspaper accounts. These accounts are a record of what they knew, thought, and felt in “real time.” In their focus on the vicissitudes of everyday life, rather than on the big questions of the hour, they bring to life this crucial moment in Jewish history and illuminate more effectively than some traditional histories the events that lead up to World War II and the Holocaust.

We do not intend to describe the events by reading history backward. We have tried not to read the story from its endpoint, but rather to tell it as much as possible in the “present.” Before August 1939, as well as during that month, no one really knew what was in store. It is only a retrospective reading that determines that the events moved inexorably toward an unequalled calamity and that it was impossible to halt their course. A fog of uncertainty and lack of knowledge shrouded that month. And in any case, even if everyone had known where history was heading, they would have been helpless to divert the ship toward a safe haven. The processes that preceded the breakout of the Second World War have been reconstructed and analyzed in numerous books, some of them recording and reconstructing the behind-the-scenes occurrences that were unknown to people at the time. The his-

tory of the Jewish people, the Zionist movement, and the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, in the 1930s have been the subjects of an extensive body of literature. This book could not have been written without consulting it.

**T**he reader of this book will find almost no German Jews in it.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, it will not discuss the fate of the Jews of Romania, Hungary, or France, for example. The choice to focus on Polish Jews seems obvious to us. Poland was home to the largest Jewish population in the world—around 3.5 million Jews in 1939—and after 1924 it was the main source of Jewish emigration across the Atlantic and to Palestine. From 1921 to 1938, more than 400,000 Jews left Poland. Initially, most of them went to the United States, but from 1924 onward the rate of those immigrating to Palestine increased. Between 1929 and 1935, Palestine absorbed around 43.7 percent of the total Jewish emigration, whereas the United States absorbed 10.9 percent.

If in 1929 Palestine took in less than a tenth of Jewish emigration from Poland, then in the years prior to the Second World War it became the principal destination for that emigration. In 1935, Palestine absorbed around 80.6 percent of the emigrants, and in 1937, 32.2 percent.<sup>22</sup> Between 1919 and 1939, around 140,000 people emigrated from Poland to Palestine—around 35 percent of its total Jewish population. During the Mandate period, Poland was thus the large source of immigration to Palestine and the main source for the Yishuv's demographic growth. In addition, a large part of the private capital that was imported to Palestine belonged to Polish Jews, who made a considerable contribution to the national funds (the "national capital").

In the middle of the 1930s, as the pressure to leave Poland grew and Palestine became the almost exclusive destination, the British government imposed new restrictions on Jewish immigration. As a result, the country's gates were shut to many who wanted to emigrate to it. The Zionist movement and its institutions had to lay the bridge on which at least some of the Polish Jews would cross over to Palestine. The Yishuv's political future and its power were now intertwined with the fate of Polish Jews. The fate of Polish Jews, however, as opposed to the fate of German Jews and later that of Jews under the Third Reich, was not on the public and international agenda. It did not occupy any place in British or international policy considerations, because Polish Jews had not been expelled and did not become asylum-seeking refugees. The countries of the free world had no interest in resolving Poland's internal problems by opening their gates to a large Jewish immigration.

The Zionist movement found itself in a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, putting the need for Jewish emigration from Poland on the international agenda was welcomed. On the other hand, directing this emigration to different countries in Africa or South America meant that Zionism would become irrelevant. In October 1936, for example, Weizmann wrote to Moshe Shertok (Sharett), director of the Jewish Agency's political department, that Poland had put the question of Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe on the international agenda. "The recent pronouncements of the Poles have made a very great impression. The Polish problem transcends the ordinary boundaries and makes it patent to everybody that our misfortunes will soon grow to a first-rate international calamity for which we cannot take the responsibility and which may affect vitally the state of affairs in the East and South East Europe."<sup>23</sup>

This led to the conclusion that it would be possible to spur the governments and the world's conscience to see finding a solution for the Jews' plight as a lofty conscientious duty. This was also accompanied by a belief that the power of the Jewish world could not be reduced to its plight. Weizmann, however, did not mean that putting the subject of Jewish emigration on the international agenda would include alternatives to Palestine. He — and others — believed that when it would become clear that there were no such alternatives, Palestine's status as the only destination would be reinforced.

However, it would be a mistake to describe the history of Polish Jews between the two World Wars only from a Zionist or a Palestinian perspective. Most of the Jews in Poland were not Zionists, and many of them opposed Zionism or were indifferent to it. Nor did many Zionists show an urgency or eagerness to immigrate to Palestine. Polish Jews had a rich and multifaceted existence as an integral part of Polish life and under its influence. The shadow of a possible war weighed on them without being necessarily tied to the future of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine, and even in isolation from it.

At the end of a dinner held on February 22, 1938, at the house of Leopold Amery, the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs from 1924 to 1929, Ben-Gurion told Sir Harold MacMichael, who was appointed High Commissioner for Palestine in 1938 (and held the position until 1944), that the Zionist movement wanted "to save the young generation of Eastern and Central European Jewry — and it's possible. It's a question of two million Jews." MacMichael replied that the Jews were "rushing things." Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary: "And again I saw that we are hitting a wall. The Englishman doesn't know what time means for us."<sup>24</sup>

What was the Zionist “dimension of time” in the 1930s? Can we distinguish between rhetoric and plans of actions, wishes and means? The research literature, and even more so the political and public debate, have been suffused for over fifty years with a bitter disagreement around the question to what extent Jews in general, and the political leadership of the Zionist movement in particular, were aware that time was pressing. Did the “awareness of time” change between 1935 and 1939? What was done under the pressure of time in order to break through the “wall,” and did the Jews of Poland and of the Yishuv share the same “concept of time”?<sup>25</sup>

Various plans and solutions were mooted and discussed publicly and behind closed doors, stirring up the debate and creating polarization. Plans can testify to the sense of time and to a will to act. But they do not indicate that those who thought up the plans had the power and the means to carry them out. As will become apparent in the narrative that follows, individuals and organizations within the Zionist movement feared for the fate of the Jews of Europe and did what they could within the fog of uncertainty and with limited resources. Once the war broke out, however, the fate of European Jewry was virtually sealed.

The 1930s found European Jews and the Yishuv on two sides of a chasm, over which only a very narrow bridge could be laid. From the end of 1939 they lived in different worlds. Only the migrating birds could leave Europe as if there were no borders in the world as a war down on earth unfolded like none before it.