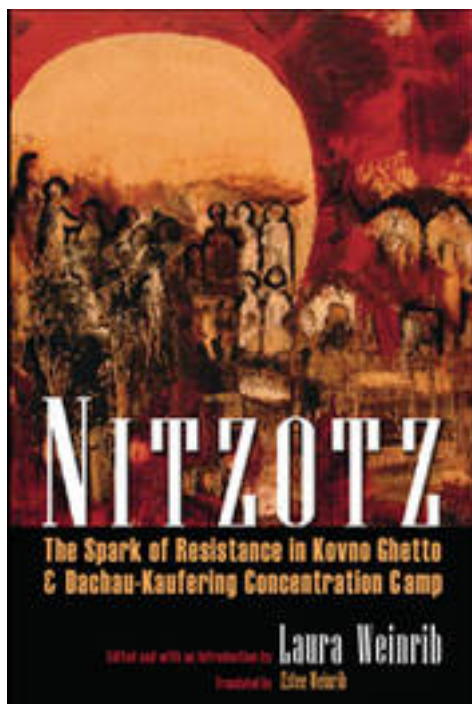


A Zionist Journal in the Concentration Camp

31.12.2010 | Julia Brauch

Nitzotz. The Spark of Resistance in Kovno Ghetto and Dachau-Kaufering Concentration Camp. Edited and with an Introduction by Laura Weinrib Translated by Estee Weinrib

Syracuse University Press 2009



"We are the heroes! Slavery's last race. The first race of liberation!" "This line from a poem by Haim N. Bialik was quoted not only once in the last year of their incarceration in Dachau-Kaufering by the authors of the Zionist underground journal Nitzotz: daily they defied suffering and death, believing in their final liberation and in a new life in Eretz Israel.

The journal Nitzotz (the "spark") was founded in Soviet-occupied Kovno (Kaunas) in 1940 and later appeared in the Kovno Ghetto, and after its dissolution of September 1944 in the Dachau concentration camp Kaufering – until liberation and beyond. Publishers and authors of Nitzotz embodied an attitude of resistance, that did not find expression in physical action, but in the intellectual-political work for the future of the Jewish people which, even after the annihilation of much of European Jewry, would determine its own destiny in the Jewish state, in Eretz Israel.

In historical research literature only Dov Levin in *Beyn Nitzotz le-Shalhevet* (1987) and Ze'ev W. Mankowitz in *Life Between Memory and Hope* (2002) have so far dealt with the topic in more detail. Yet, in many reference works (such as the second revised edition of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2006) one searches in vain for this Zionist journal, which is without precedent in the underground literature of the holocaust.

It is thanks to Laura M. Weinrib, the granddaughter of Shlomo Frenkel (Shafir), the last chief editor of Nitzotz, that the journal will now for the first time be presented comprehensively in its historical context – together with an English translation of the last five Nitzotz issues, which were still

published in Kaufering. The other issues of the 42 in total have to be considered as either lost or destroyed.

This slim book is not only a tribute to the grandfather of the author, but mainly a scientific work that benefits from the author's personal relationship with the former protagonist and later historian, and precisely through this relationship she is enabled to open a deeper insight into the topic.

Shlomo Frenkel was from the very beginning active in the underground movement of Irgun Brith Zion (IBZ) in which mainly young Zionists were politically and culturally engaged. Most members followed a moderate socialist course, but also religious followers of Bnei Akiva and some more right-wing nationalist revisionists joined the IBZ. What united secular and religious members, was the goal to prepare a future in Eretz Israel, and the awareness of living in the continuity of Jewish history. This lived unity of various groups within the Zionist movement was remarkable to its contemporaries, even "unique," as Shlomo Frenkel wrote in Nitzotz (No. 3, 1944).

The annual cycle of Jewish festivals along with the interpretation of the Jewish experience, constituted the framework to which all were able to relate. Chaim Alexandrovitz (under the pseudonym "Chet-Tzadik) wrote in the Nitzotz issue for Passover 1945 how this festival of freedom had strengthened the Zionist perseverance. "Along with the holiday, spring returns. Nature dons a green coat and comes back to life, and so do we. We Zionists have always loved this holiday above all others, because it has stirred us and bolstered our will to continue fighting and to reconquer the land from which we were exiled." (Weinrib, 130)

In the third issue of 1944 (No. 38), on the occasion of Chanukah, Shlomo Frenkel puts the experience of Hitler's extermination into the larger context of the persecution of Jews, Jewish perseverance and resistance:

"There is no difference between Antiochus Epiphanes and Adolf Hitler. Anti-Semitism may have reached new heights with the Nazi movement and the physical extermination of 6 to 7 million European Jews, but it must be traced to the period when Judah the Maccabee waged war on the Hellenic invaders and their world view. Two thousand years ago, a few rebels were able to withstand an enemy seven times their size. Today, too, we have faith in the recovery of the She'erit Hapletah and its moral and spiritual valor." (Weinrib, 87f.)

In Soviet occupied Lithuania, the first issues of Nitzotz appeared in up to one hundred copies. At first they were duplicated by Stencilprinter and later with carbon paper. Before the Soviet and later German occupations Kovno was the de facto capital of independent Lithuania, while the actual capital, Vilnius, had come under Polish rule. Jewish life flourished here – 200 Jewish organizations were registered in 1938, nearly 30 percent of all Lithuanian institutions (Weinrib, p. 20). The Zionist activities that took place in the Ghetto, partly in secret, and partly tolerated, stood in this tradition. At the time of the Ghetto, 28 issues of Nitzotz were published, then still under the publishers Chaim Tikin, Shraga Aharonowitz and Yitzhak Katz.

After the dissolution of the ghetto in July 1944, the members of Irgun Brith Zion came to Stutthof, where men, women and children were separated. The men were sent to Dachau Kaufering, a sub-camp of Dachau concentration camp. Abraham Melamed, one of the older members of the IBZ, suggested as early as September, that Shlomo Frenkel should continue the publication of Nitzotz. It was he, who from now on, made sure that the journal did appear. He translated articles from German and Yiddish and under various pseudonyms wrote many of articles himself.

In an astonishing continuity the articles dealt with the Jewish future. Not the unbearable living conditions, disease and death were the concerns of the the authors in Kaufering, but questions like: what will become of the survivors of the genocide, the She'erit Hapletah? Would there ever be enough Jews to establish a Jewish state? Or would one, facing the tremendous loss of people, be

set back to the "small" solution of Ahad Ha'am, to create only a cultural center in Eretz Israel? Even Shlomo Frenkel doubted sometimes, whether the conditions for mass immigration would still exist:

"We can no longer discuss a mass aliyah, because there are no longer Jewish masses ready to leave. (...) Zionism has now reverted to the tragic situation it faced at its inception: Zionism without Jews.(...) The Jewish question has already been solved by Adolf Hitler. "Undoubtedly, he succeeded and achieved his goal. Though he did not completely obliterate world Jewry, he reduced the size of the nation to such an extent that we question whether it will ever recover its strength of ancient times. (...) Instead of saving Jews – the *raison d'être* of political Zionism – our task today is saving Jewry. We are forced to return to Ahad Ha'am. In lieu of massive population transfer, it is necessary to save the refugees in Eretz Israel in order to secure and perpetuate the existence of the Jewish nation." (Nitzotz, Issue 3, 38, Chanukah 1944, Weinrib, 94f.)

Yet, however great such doubts were, almost all who contributed articles to Nitzotz, were convinced that after liberation an entirely new political constellation would be experienced that they – as part of the Zionist avant-garde would jointly shape. Their work for Nitzotz was not only spiritual resistance as an end in itself, but the concrete political preparation of this future. Not least, their work would qualify them morally and intellectually for future leadership roles. And so it happened: Samuel Gringauz and Zalman Grinberg became active leaders of the She'erit Hapletah, and Shlomo Frenkel became Secretary General of the Zionist movement in Germany. In short, the old circle around Nitzotz played a crucial role in the reorganization of the Zionist forces among the survivors in Bavaria.

From the immediate environment of the Holocaust death sites Nitzotz is most likely the only publication that dealt in this radical way with the Jewish future, and thus put life above death. It is the blinding out of physical pain and humiliation, the unswerving, perhaps paradoxical focus on political and ideological issues that made Nitzotz into a unique source. The much-quoted phrase from Jean Améry in "Beyond Crime and Punishment" (1966), "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured. Torture is indelibly burned into him, even when no clinically objective traces can be demonstrated" – did not apply to all survivors. The commitment of the Nitzotz writers to a Jewish, Zionist future under the most hostile circumstances sets a counterpoint to the experience of many mentally broken Holocaust survivors, whose brokenness is often perceived as the only conceivable condition. A reading of Nitzotz by Laura Weinrib opens our eyes to an incredible, yet successful attempt to preserve – in the face of destruction – by means of the political word, people's humanity and will for the future. This experience involved perhaps only a few. Yet there were just these few who after liberation prepared the way for the emigration of the survivors to Palestine, and thus also prepared the way for the establishment of the State of Israel. They did this not as victims but as free people.

Translated from German by Fritz Voll.