

WEEKEND

'My teacher makes aliyah and I remain in the Diaspora, sad'

Letters written in Hebrew in the 1930s by Jewish-Polish schoolchildren to their beloved teacher, who had left for Palestine, were discovered decades later and are featured in a new book. The youngsters had their heart set on joining the teacher in the Land of Israel – but most were murdered in the Holocaust



Pupils in the Tarbut school in Nowy Dwor. The school was also a community center, offering Zionist-oriented and other activities "to enable the children 'in some way' to live the life of the Land of Israel."

Courtesy of Zvika Plachinski

Ofer Aderet

In early 1935, Dov Sashinski, a schoolboy in Poland, wrote an emotional letter to Menachem Ussishkin, a leader of the Zionist movement and chairman of the Jewish National Fund. "I am afraid, but I have no other option. When I remember that I am writing to Mr. Ussishkin, my hand trembles, my eyes shed tears, my heart aches – but what shall I do? This is the fate that has befallen me. But I think our hope has not yet been lost," he wrote at the start of the letter.

Dov took pride in speaking and writing in Hebrew, "our holy language," described himself as "a little boy" with "a pioneering heart," quoted Theodor Herzl's "If you will it, it is no dream," and declared his ardent desire to live in the Land of Israel. "Whatever happens, I shall go to work, as long as I know that I am working in the Land," he wrote. "I have heard already about many villages that have just been established... Is there not a shortage of workers? Of course there is... I will work twice as much as anyone else," he promised. "And therefore, I request very much that Mr. Ussishkin will arrange this. And so – Greetings! May we see each other in the land we aspire to. May we meet together, and may we be strong and may we be strengthened," he concluded.

A letter in a similar spirit was sent to Ussishkin at around the same time by Dov's classmate Yosef Schlang. "I have great skill in handicrafts and painting. I can make things out of plaster, wood and more. Here in Poland I will not be able to work as I can in the Land, for I am a Jew. And therefore, I want to travel to Bezael, and I promise to be a good student," he wrote, referring to the art academy in Jerusalem. "I want only to be in the Land... not only to come and afterward forget to whom I've come and where. I promise that I will not be like that... Work is in my heart and my hands are attached to the soil," he added. "I ask you to take our situation into account and to send me a reply that will make me happy," he concluded.

The two 10-year-old boys, who lived in the town of Nowy Dwor, near Warsaw, attended fifth grade in an elementary school affiliated with the

Tarbut (Culture) network of Zionist educational institutions in Poland and Lithuania. Some of their letters were found a few years ago in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, in the framework of a pioneering research project conducted by two scholars from Tel Aviv University: Prof. David Assaf, an expert in the culture and history of Jewish society in Eastern Europe, and Prof. Yael Darr, whose research focuses on Jewish children's culture, particularly in pre-state Israel.

The two ultimately examined dozens of letters sent by children in that one class in a Polish school to Mandatory Palestine in the 1930s, a few

'Teacher doesn't need a stove, because the sun warms [him],' wrote Shafir. 'Here there's still a bit of frost, but there it's surely hot. The sun is shining, the pioneers are working, plowing,' Kosover wrote.

years before they were murdered in the Holocaust. The letters were recently published (in Hebrew) in a book entitled, "Hope We Meet Again: Jewish Pupils' Letters from Poland to Eretz Israel Between the Two World Wars" (Magnes Press).

The disparity between the children's moving words and Ussishkin's rather dry, technical reaction to them is difficult to grasp. Ussishkin forwarded the letters to Henrietta Szold, who headed the Youth Aliyah organization in Palestine, noting that "handling these children is your job. I received the attached letters from two children in Poland who are seeking advice and wish to come here. Please reply to them as you see fit." Szold wrote the boys: "When you grow up... and if it will be possible for you to make aliyah, we will be able to help you."

Dov Sashinski didn't relent. Two years later, in March 1937, he wrote Szold directly. His letter has disap-

peared but her reply was found: "I read your heartfelt words... I understand well your powerful yearning for the Land of Israel, but I must explain to you that, regrettably, there is no hope that I will be able to help you make aliyah," Szold informed the boy, and added, "It is a mistake to think that I have any sort of influence on aliyah matters. My activity in connection with Youth Aliyah is necessarily limited to youth from Germany only, and I have no authority of any kind to exceed that limitation. I regret that I can only offer this negative reply, but it is best to present things as they are and not be deluded by hopes, which in our present situation are false hopes."

Sashinski wrote Szold once more, in June 1938. "Again I, the undersigned, am writing a letter of request to my dear lady. I am the boy from Poland, the valley of dark exile, whose Hebrew heart is beating within him, who still hopes to see the land of mother earth and to work it – the homeland of the Land of Israel," he wrote, going on to mention their previous correspondence and asserting: "The time for help has come... Everything depends on you!" What stood in the way of leaving Poland was money, he noted. "Capital is needed for this... and I have no money. Father is out of work, the material and financial situation in my home is bitter beyond description. A Jewish lad is not accepted as a craftsman here, especially one who graduated from a Jewish school."

Sashinski went on to issue a dark threat: "So the question arises of what to do. Jump into the water? Hang myself? What to do?" He noted that skills were "being awakened" in him that he could use to help the Jewish people "to fight for freedom of land, people and language, for a working Land of Israel... Oy... how bitter things are for me, how difficult, is there no one to help me? I have no money and I have no other way, and if I will not have this way [aliyah], who knows what will become of me?" Still, he ended on a hopeful note. "See you in our homeland, amen! Awaiting a satisfactory reply, blessings on Zion and the redeemed land, and farewell."

"It's a heartbreaking letter," Prof. Assaf says in an interview with Haaretz, on the occasion of publi-

cation of "Hope We Meet Again." "Sashinski comes across as an extraordinarily mature boy. He is an impassioned, ideological youngster, imbued with the Zionist spirit – all he wants is to make aliyah, because he feels he has no future in Poland." A few years later, it emerged, Sashinski perished in the Warsaw Ghetto.

'Do not forget us'

The impetus for the scholars' research project was an email sent in 2015 to Assaf by Erez Lev, who works in high-tech but is deeply interested in history. "I don't work/study in any academic institution. I got your name from a list of experts," Lev wrote. "I am contacting you in the wake of a treasure that has come my way... If you are interested, please contact me as soon as possible."

Not long before, Lev, on a visit to his parents' apartment in an assisted living facility in Hod Hasharon, had tried to help them search for an old contract. The document wasn't found, but among their pension slips, certificates of appreciation and medical prescriptions, lay a true historical treasure: a parcel of yellowing pages bound by a rubber band. "The papers looked very old, delicate, almost crumbling. They piqued my interest and stirred my imagination," he writes in an article included in the new book. "Heart beating strongly, I removed the rubber band, and thus a treasure trove of letters was revealed to me."

A perusal of the letters revealed that they had been sent by Jewish schoolchildren from Nowy Dwor in Poland, to their teacher and principal, Zvi Pleser, who had settled in Palestine. Some were included in a farewell album Pleser was given before he left, in 1934; others were sent to him in Palestine. In the 1960s, Pleser, who continued to teach in Israel, handed the letters over to Erez Lev's maternal grandfather, Yosef Shmirkovitch, who was also from Nowy Dwor and was helping to edit a memorial book about the town's Jewish community that was published in 1965 (but did not refer to the letters). Pleser died soon afterward, and the letters gathered dust in a box until 2015.

"I felt a sense of holiness when I perused the original letters of the children, most of whose lives were probably cut short in the Holocaust.

I was seized by the impulse of a mission which spurred me to inform the families about the letters and to publish them," Lev writes. "They may well be the sole material remains of these children, and they seem to cry out: 'Do not forget us.'"

At first Lev hoped to track down and organize a reunion of the letter writers, by means of the Channel 10 morning show hosted by Orly Vilnai and Guy Meroz. When that proved unproductive, he got in touch with David Assaf, then head of Tel Aviv University's Institute for the History of Polish Jewry.

"He showed me the letters and I realized that I would not be able to deal with this material on my own,

Prof. Darr: 'The letters are an example of the research potential of the 'students' letters' genre, which through close reading can uncover emotional worlds of childhood not revealed in other documents.'

because you have to know what to ask when using children's texts in order to get correct answers," Assaf recalls, adding that he then solicited Prof. Darr's help in researching the writings. They soon concluded that there was little chance of locating the writers of the letters. "They were 10 years old in 1934, which would mean they would now be 100 years old. To the best of our knowledge, only two survived the Holocaust, and neither is still alive," Assaf notes.

The collection consists of 80 letters in Hebrew, varying in length from a few lines to a page or two. The pupils mention the goings-on in their class and school, including the arrival of new teachers and special events, but also reveal personal and private stories of their world and their culture, relationships with friends and family, their daily routines, their longings and fears and other emotions. They describe leisure activities – the games and songs

they liked, the books they read, the plays they staged – as well as how they celebrated various occasions and how they envisaged their future. The letters also shed light on social tensions, complex relations among the classmates, and in general between pupils and their teachers, gaps between rich and poor children, and life outside the classroom: friction in the greater Jewish community and problematic ties with the non-Jewish milieu, manifestations of antisemitism and even the impact of the death of Poland's leader, Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, in 1935.

Zionist terminology pervades the writings. Particularly notable is the comparison between the Jewish Diaspora in Poland, which is painted in gloomy colors, and the Land of Israel, the children's fondest hope, which is depicted as being virtually utopian. This aspect of the letters reveals a great deal about the activities and influence of the Tarbut educational network during the interwar period.

"We find [in the letters] a mirror image of the school's values, which were imparted to the student body with impressive success," Assaf says. "The school is a sort of hothouse that tries to sell the children an idyllic reality of values and a worldview that do not always correspond to the actual situation outside the school." The trials and tribulations of real life in Palestine/Land of Israel, rife with complexity and difficulties, are not particularly mentioned in the letters, but iconic images – of oranges, sunshine, dancing and tilling the soil – are frequently cited.

Dov Sashinski and Yosef Schlang, whose letters to Ussishkin have been mentioned, also wrote their former teacher. "It must be so good to be in the Land of Israel now. Certainly the sun is shining and the vines are blossoming," Schlang wrote Pleser. And, in other letters, "I am so sorry that I can't sit with Teacher and devour oranges together with [him]." Or, "There it is now light and warmth, white snow is falling here. There is frost on the window. It's cold outside... you don't have that there. There the sun is shining and the vines are blossoming, it's the complete opposite. Oy! I long for the Land of Israel. Give me wings, I would fly to my favorite teacher. Things are bad here," the boy adds. "But what can we do? I think our hope is not yet lost. But you, my teacher, have left this Diaspora... It weighs me down to be in this Diaspora... It's not good for us in the Diaspora."

"Frost on the windows, everyone sitting next to the stove, and Teacher doesn't need a stove, because the sun warms [him]," wrote classmate Shmuel Shafir. "I think people devour oranges there like potatoes here," Yisrael Larich noted in one letter. "Here there is still a bit of frost, but there it's surely hot. The sun is shining, the pioneers are working, plowing," Aryeh Kosover wrote.

Shlomo Shafir wrote: "Now it's winter. We are sitting by the stove and warming up, and Teacher is sitting in the warm land and feeling warm." "This year," Yisrael Shtoltzman explained to Pleser, "we're not having a nice summer, only rain and more rain. And there's no hot sun or clear skies like in the Land of Israel anywhere in the world... a land that is so far from me and very, very close to my heart." Another pupil, Shmuel Yarzhambek, wrote: "My favorite teacher goes to the Land of Israel, and I hope things are good for him in our lovely land... And I remain behind in the Diaspora, sad." And Gabriel Fried's letter said, "After all, Teacher knows that there is one prayer in our heart: to return to the land of our fathers and rebuild it."

A letter from Moshe Kaufman contains the only significant reference to the fact that even in the Promised Land all is not rosy. "What's doing there in the Land of Israel, in the so faraway and yet close land? Do the cruel Arabs not allow the Jews to work and earn a dry slice of bread?" he asked. For his part, Joseph Schlang aptly captured the disparity between ideal and reality, after discovering that Pleser, who had preached a doctrine of working the land, was living in the city. "I heard that [you are] already teaching in Tel Aviv. I didn't think that Teacher would go to the city, I thought [he] would go to a village and till the soil. Teaching is also work, but not as beloved."

In their imagination, the children apparently pictured Pleser as traveling around the country. They were familiar with its landscapes from maps in their classrooms, photographs the teachers showed them, children's newspapers and songs. They knew Jerusalem as a holy city that represented tradition; Tel Aviv as a large, modern "Hebrew" city; Tel Hai in the Galilee as the place where Joseph Trumpeldor fought and was killed; and Kibbutz Mishmar Haemek and the Jezreel Valley as symbols of land settlement, rural homes for pioneers and builders of the land.

"I am in the Diaspora and Teacher is in the Land of Israel now. I imagine how Teacher is now traveling in the land, to places we learned about from geography. And Teacher is now really in those places," Shlomo Shafir wrote. "Was my teacher in the places we learned about in [lessons about] the geography of the Land of Israel?" Moshe Kaufman wondered. Esther

Zukor: "Teacher will go to the Land, to lovely Jerusalem, to big Tel Aviv, teacher will write me letters from our lovely land, from Mishmar Haemek, from the Jezreel Valley." Eliezer Tsini asked Pleser "to write me letters about Jerusalem, about Tel Aviv our Hebrew city, about the life of children in our land." Similarly, Esther Melman wrote: "I would like Teacher to write me about the Land of Israel, about Haifa and Jerusalem, and about all the streets where Teacher will visit."

In his former pupils' letters, the attitude toward Pleser and his immigration to Palestine ranged from love, admiration and the childish hope of reuniting with him in the homeland, to anger at his departure, disappointment at his decision to live in the city, envy of his new students and in some cases general frustration and despair. "I think that Teacher will have other and better children in the Land. But I want to request of Teacher that when he is in the Land of Israel with other children, he will not forget us," Yisrael Larich wrote. "Now that I see that Teacher is making aliyah to the Land of Milk and Honey, I feel the most envy possible."

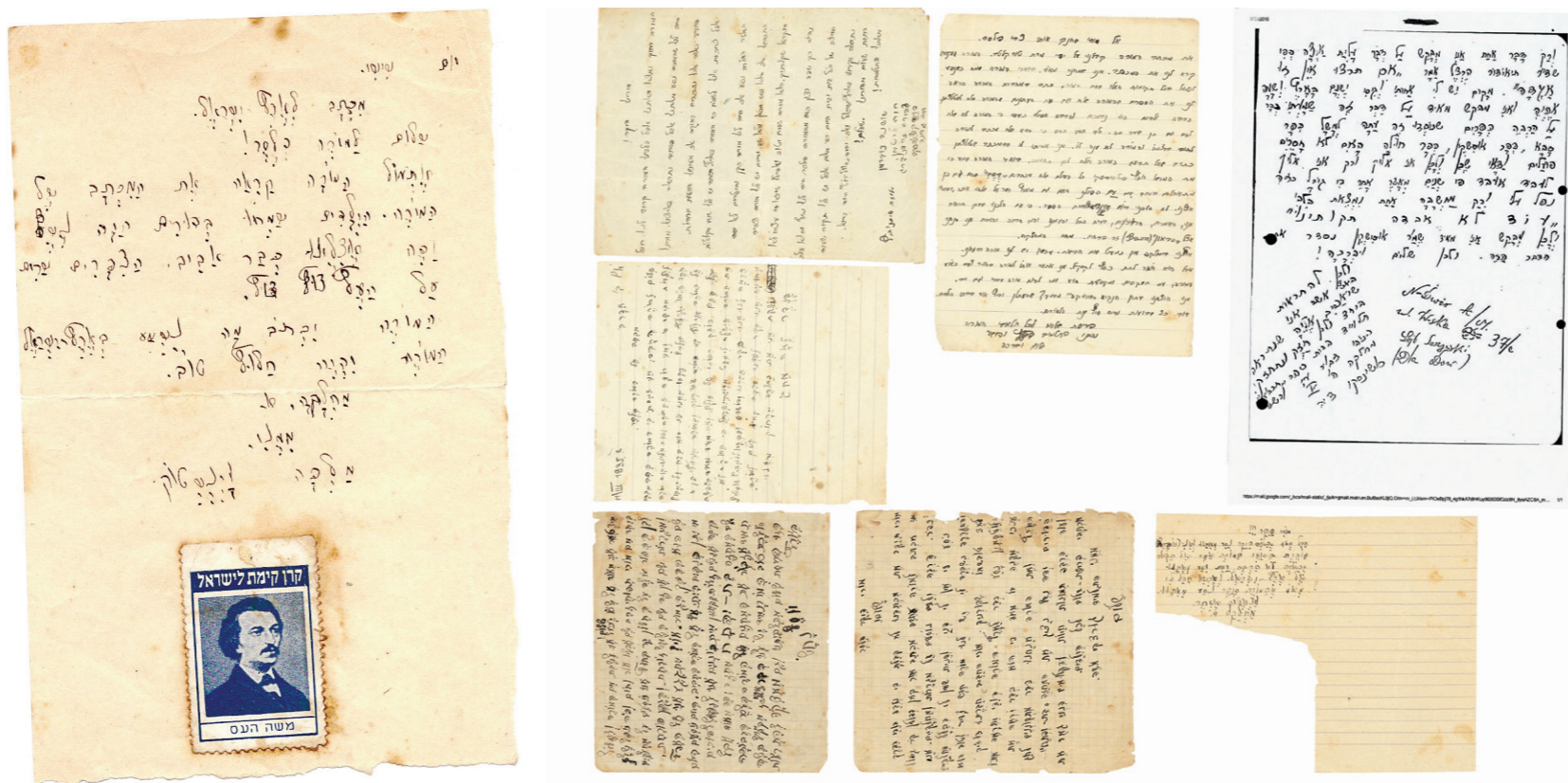
The letters reflected the intimate atmosphere that apparently existed in the class, which, under Pleser's tutelage, became a sort of family during the two years he taught them. "When I take pen in hand and when I start to write a letter to Teacher, tears come to my eyes," Eliezer Ravitski wrote. "And when I start to remember, I remember that Teacher was not only a teacher, but also a father, a beloved father, and when Teacher left, it's as if he took my right hand and my whole life from me."

The pupils mention the goings-on in school, but also reveal personal stories of their world and their culture, relationships with friends and family, their daily routines, their longings and fears and other emotions.

Rivka Don expressed especially warm feelings for Pleser, writing, "I think Teacher has already forgotten me. I have not forgotten Teacher... I think about this always, and always I say to myself that never again will there be a teacher like Teacher." For one, Esther Zukor scolded him for not answering her. "My dear, lovely teacher, I am very angry at Teacher because he did not send me a reply. I don't want too much, just two words, [and then] I would forget my anger... Let Teacher [not] forget me, because I will never forget Teacher all my life... A big, warm kiss."

Some of the writers updated Pleser on relations between the sexes: "In class there is still the same politics between the boys and the girls," Moshe Kaufman noted. "The girls tell secrets about the boys and write in memory books," Zvi Finkelshteyn added, in an apparent reference to diaries in which the girls "told all" about the boys.

Says Yael Darr, "Documents that reveal children's authentic voices are coveted by scholars who research childhood." To which her colleague Assaf adds, "Such sources are extremely rare, because children don't usually generate such documentation. In regard to Jewish children in Poland between the wars, such documents are particularly rare. The Holocaust and the physical destruction of Jewish cultural assets during that era also eradicated the little that there was."



Some of the letters from the Polish pupils that were discovered, held together by a rubber band, in a Hod Hasharon home.

The Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center

Grown-ups' testimony

Indeed, research about Jewish children's culture in Poland during that period is mostly based on memoirs that adults – parents and teachers, for example – wrote about their own childhoods, or on recollections by adults that have appeared in textbooks and children's literature. The authentic voice of children themselves had hardly been heard. One exception is a collection of 350 autobiographical texts written in the 1930s by young people from Poland aged 16 to 22, which were submitted to a writing competition organized several times during the 1930s by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Twenty of those texts were collected in a 2011 book edited by Ido Bassok (in Hebrew), "Youthful Plots: Autobiographies of Polish-Jewish Youth Between the Two World Wars."

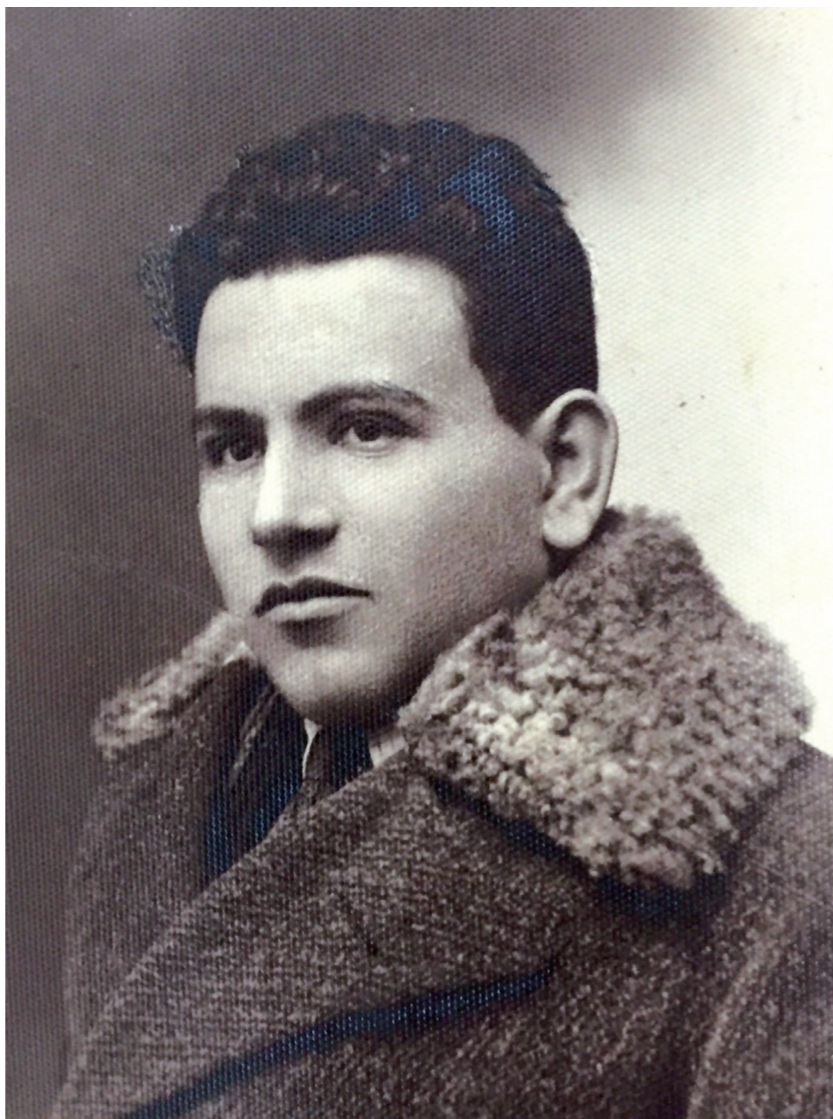
However, the Assaf-Darr effort is different. "We are speaking here about 10-year-old children. It's very rare," Assaf says, to which Darr adds, "When reading the pupils' letters, you have to understand the constraints of the genre. It's necessary to understand what stems from relations of authority with the teacher and what is authentic; where the children express themselves and where they are 'paying dues' to the teacher or to other children," she explains. "We've learned how to read this genre and what to extract from it."

Assaf: "The great methodological problem in studying children's letters – as distinct from texts by adolescents and adults – is that in many senses they are a type of mirror that repeats itself, reflecting what the children heard in school or at home. On the face of it, the letters constitute an unreliable source of information, because the children parrot what they heard. We discern in them stereotypes and uncritical echoes of things they have heard. That is a limitation we must take into account."

Still, he notes, "we decipher much about the writers' childhood experiences from the letters, and when they are read with sensitivity, one also hears personal voices, criticism, anger, disappointment and other feelings."

Darr: "These letters are also an example of the research potential latent in the 'students' letters' genre, as historical and cultural documents, which through close reading can uncover emotional worlds of childhood that are not revealed in other documents."

The researchers note that they were



Teacher Zvi Pleser. The letters from his fifth-graders reflected the intimate atmosphere that apparently existed in his class.

Courtesy of Israel Pleser

surprised to find between the lines also testimony of corporal punishment meted out by their teacher. "We had an image of educational institutions like Tarbut as being advanced, progressive and liberal, and suddenly you find a story of physical punishment and you read letters of schoolchildren who ask the teacher to forgive them for making him get angry at them and striking them," Assaf says.

"Although I received many blows, they [the blows] taught me to speak Hebrew. In our lovely country [the] Hebrew language rings out everywhere," wrote Shmuel Yarzhambek. And, according to Mordechai Lands-

man, "Every blow I took from Teacher was dearer to me than a kiss, because [it was] for my own good, so I would learn well... I ask Teacher to forgive my sins against him. I feel that they are very many in number." Similarly, classmate Tzipora Zajdenberg mentioned being struck by Pleser. "If he hit me, I must certainly have had it coming. But we will not pay attention to the fact that Teacher hit us." Added Yisrael Larich: "I think that Teacher didn't hit without any reason, but because of something Teacher wanted us to learn – because of that Teacher hit us."

"The apologies pupils expressed in

their letters transformed the blows from efforts to intimidate and impose authority by the older teacher by force into a legitimate means of education, whose logic was also understood by the children who bore their brunt," Assaf and Dar write.

Hebrew in a sea of Yiddish

In the early 1930s, Nowy Dwor had a population of about 9,400, of whom 42 percent were Jews. Along with a traditional religious way of life, modern secular culture also flourished in the shtetl. Also, during this interwar period, the Jews suffered from want and poverty, and coped with rising antisemitism. "Antisemitic incidents were an inseparable part of the shared way of life of Jews and Poles in Nowy Dwor," Assaf stresses.

Zvi Pleser, the teacher, also referred to this phenomenon. "In 1933, displays of hatred for Jews increased in Poland. The air was saturated with the poison of fierce loathing... The newspapers were filled with reports about pogroms against Jews. Here and there, in various towns, attacks on Jews increased on market days," he wrote at the time. "Not far from Nowy Dwor, the Polish government established a Polish youth camp... In this camp there was incitement against the Jews. Every evening, when these youths would show up in town, they would hunt for Jews and beat them savagely. They broke the windows of Jewish shops. There was great fear in the city; every morning the children would tell stories about the deeds of members of the youth camp... Hitler's influence throughout Poland was felt more with each passing day, and all this strengthened my desire to go on aliyah to the Land of Israel quickly."

The local Tarbut school, with a student body of about 200, was established in 1930 and shut down in 1939. Pleser began teaching there in 1932, at the age of 23. The school also functioned as a community center: Zionist-oriented activities were held there, including Shabbat and holiday celebrations and special events such as plays staged in Hebrew with the participation of the pupils.

The purpose of such activity, according to Pleser, was "to enable the children 'in some way' to live the life of the Land of Israel." Apparently, the school was successful in this regard, despite the paucity of materials and facilities. "The conditions were very poor," Pleser wrote. "The school was located in two

rented rooms on the second floor of a house, and there were two small rooms in the yard. We had no teachers' room at all."

The Nowy Dwor school was part of a network in which tens of thousands of Jewish children were educated throughout Poland and Lithuania, prior to World War II. "The Tarbut network was one of the impressive achievements of Hebrew schooling in Poland," Assaf says. Tarbut offered diverse frameworks – kindergartens, primary schools, gymnasia (high schools), teachers' seminaries, evening classes for adults and lending libraries – that inculcated a modern Jewish education, incorporating Zionism and secularism, Torah and *derech erez* (etiquette), general and Jewish learning, and above all love for, identification with and commitment to the Land of Israel and the Hebrew language.

"It was an island of Hebrew-speaking in a sea of Yiddish and Polish, just as it was a secular island in a sea of religious schools," historian Ezra Mendelson wrote of the network.

The Tarbut teachers related to the Land of Israel as a concrete entity, not as just an abstract concept. Assaf: "An effort was made by the educators to make it accessible to the students as a place where children like them live and where they themselves would find their future someday." This idea was instilled within the children via lessons in geography, history, Bible, literature and Hebrew. Emissaries and teachers from the Yishuv (pre-state Jewish community in Palestine) also came to Poland.

Pleser obtained a certificate to enter Palestine from the British Mandate authorities in 1934. In November that year, a few weeks before he left Poland, a farewell event was held for him at his school. He took with him the album created by his students, which includes some of the letters contained in the new study. He continued to receive letters from his pupils in Nowy Dwor for months, and kept them as well.

"This is not only a study," says Prof. Assaf. "It's also a memorial to children who longed fervently to go on aliyah and weren't able to do so. In the wake of my research I became much more of a Zionist."

When World War II broke out, the Germans invaded western Poland and bombed Nowy Dwor from the air. Hundreds of its Jewish inhabitants were killed, and homes and public buildings were destroyed. Many local Jews fled to nearby Warsaw, while others, who were young and enterprising, made their way to the Soviet Union. The 1,500 or so Jews who remained behind were concentrated in a ghetto and afterward transported to Auschwitz. At the end of the war, about 450 of the town's Jews were still among the living. Only a few returned to their homes afterward.

After their discovery in the Erez's apartment, the original letters, scanned in the new book, were deposited in the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center at Tel Aviv University.

"We were driven by the desire to give a voice to children who did not get to grow up – to allow them to tell about themselves," Darr says.

"This is not only a study," Assaf adds. "It is also a memorial to those children who longed so fervently to go on aliyah and were unable to do so. In the wake of my research on the book I became much more of a Zionist. I feel authentic Zionist passion, which many of us have lost."

A few millimeters above death

The constant reminder that the Jewish people rose up after the Holocaust gives us strength to keep going under harsh circumstances. But it also forces us to make do with too little

Ofri Ilany

When I was in junior high, a student a few grades above me hanged himself. That day, during history class, our grumpy teacher taught us the following lesson: Any time you feel so terrible that you consider ending your life, think of the Holocaust. He presented that as a very effective method for getting over suicidal tendencies, as well as depression in general.

After that I encountered the same saying elsewhere. A few years ago, a meme in that same vein circulated online, and people shared it and said it was surreal. What's sad is, this method actually works. Even if we try to deny it, many of us act in accordance with this mechanism, even if we wouldn't phrase it so crudely. This, if you will, is the fuel that gets us out of bed every morning. It can be encapsulated in a sentence: "No matter how bad things get, it's still better

than the Holocaust."

This motto hovers over everything in Israel. For a few years, it seemed as though the country had begun to distance itself the Holocaust experience. The subject wasn't raised as much on a daily basis, and it appeared as though Israel was becoming a hedonist, smug, perhaps Levantine society. But the past few months have shown that this veil of normalcy was actually very flimsy. Our consciousness is very morbid. Every experience in this place grows from death. I've heard people talk about how members of their family were slaughtered in Eastern Europe while cutting into a piece of steak. Those same survivors have managed in the meantime to settle down, build homes and travel the world. But deep down they've remained hungry survivors. Even while drinking coffee with oat milk, at the very core of their being, they are drinking it with the black milk of dawn that Paul Celan wrote about in his poem "Death Fugue."

Seeing as today's Israel is a very capitalist society, the phrase "it's still better than the Holocaust" underlies many consumer experiences, and even culinary ones – like a hidden clause in a contract between a business and a customer. The croissant you ordered was cold? It's still preferable to the Holocaust. The walls of

After experiencing genuine existential dread, and feeling vulnerable and exposed as never before, it appears that Israelis have peeked out of their hiding places and come to the following conclusion: 'This is still not it. We're alive. This is no Holocaust.'

the bed-and-breakfast were moldy? It's still better than what was going on in the ghetto. This is the secret engine of Israeli capitalism. Of course there are countless jokes that play on the contrived comparison to the Holocaust. But no matter how much we joke about it, the mechanism is still at work: Despite everything, this is not the Holocaust.

If only this mechanism was limited to consumer experiences. The hidden clause is also included in the contract between the citizen and the state. It has been felt in a fairly palpable way in recent months, in much more tragic contexts.

Much has been said about the way the October 7 massacre has reawakened Holocaust trauma. That trauma was indeed triggered by horrifying descriptions from survivors of the massacre, and then amplified and made more powerful by politicians and people in the media. But after seven months, the connection between the Holocaust and current



Israeli students taking a virtual tour of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp at a Holocaust museum in Nir Galim, on the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, earlier this week.

Oded Balilty/AP

reality can be described in a different way. After experiencing genuine existential dread, and feeling vulnerable and exposed as never before, it appears that Israelis have peeked out of their hiding places and come to the following conclusion: "This is still not it. We're alive. This is no Holocaust." Restaurants have been filling up and parks are crowded. The line for chef

Eyal Shani's new ice cream place in Tel Aviv is 40 minutes long. More than 1,000 Israelis were murdered? There are those who remind us: "That isn't even one day at Auschwitz." On news websites reporters interview Holocaust survivors who are sending their grandchildren to the army, and say:

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