CHAPTER 1

From “Bichuch” to Warsaw

GALICIA

Was it just a coincidence that more Jewish historians came from Galicia, part of the Hapsburg Empire, than anywhere else in Eastern Europe? Lwów produced Meyer Balaban, Philip Friedman, and Natan Gelber. Tarnów was the home of Isaac Schiper and Salo Baron. Rafael Mahler, Ringelblum’s lifelong friend, and Artur Eisenbach, his future brother-in-law, grew up in the small town of Nowy Sącz. They all came from a region that differed in many important ways from Jewish Lithuania and Congress Poland, just across the Russian border. They were the products of a cultural milieu that combined excellent Polish education with strong Jewish nationalism. Hapsburg rule was milder, educational opportunities greater. During Ringelblum’s formative years, Galician Jewry was undergoing a fateful process of redefinition and self-examination.

Emanuel Ringelblum was born in Buczacz (Bichuch in Yiddish) in eastern Galicia on November 21, 1900. Once a part of Poland, the province passed under Hapsburg rule in 1772 before it became part of the new Polish republic in 1918–19. The area of Buczacz was also known as Podolia.

The Buczacz of Ringelblum’s childhood was a pretty town, surrounded by wooded hills and nestled in a bend of the river Strypa. High up overlooking the town was an old empty castle, “der puster shlos,” where, according to tradition, the legendary Polish King Sobieski staged a daring ambush of Tatar invaders. On Saturday afternoons young couples would explore the countless tunnels that lay underneath the castle. The great Hebrew writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon—Ringelblum’s cousin—grew up in Buczacz and left a beautiful description of his birthplace in the story “B’tokh iri” (In my town).
nating Buczacz was the splendid Ratusz, or town hall, an imposing baroque landmark built by Prince Nikolai (Mikołaj) Potocki in the eighteenth century. Buczacz had long belonged to the Potockis, one of the greatest of the Polish landowning families. Like other Polish magnates the Potockis—eager to further their economic interests—went out of their way to attract Jews. From the very beginning Buczacz was a predominantly Jewish town. In 1870, 68 percent of the population had been Jewish (6,077 out of 8,959 inhabitants); in 1900, the year Ringelblum was born, there were 6,730 Jews out of a total of 11,755 inhabitants—or 57.3 percent of the population. The surrounding countryside was heavily Ukrainian.

Buczacz was a poor town, like most towns in Galicia, with little industry. Jews dominated trade, mainly in grains and other agricultural products, but the low purchasing power of the peasant population severely limited economic possibilities. In time, the growth of both Ukrainian and Polish cooperative movements would deal another heavy blow to the economic position of the Jews. Dim economic prospects served as a powerful stimulus to emigration. Many Jews, including Jacob Freud, Sigmund Freud’s father, left for Vienna. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the future Nobel Prize winner, also left the town at a young age.

Emanuel Ringelblum’s father, Fayvish, a grain merchant, was respected, if not particularly prominent in the Jewish community and regarded himself as a maskil, a follower of the Jewish Enlightenment. Someone who met him during World War I recalled that “he looked like an ordinary Jew [folksmensh], a ‘Jewish Jew’ [yidishlekher yid]. He was dressed half-Jewish, half-European, without earlocks but with a short, red beard.” Ringelblum’s mother Munie, née Heler, died when he was twelve years old. In later years he would use her name as a nom de plume.

Fayvish was determined that his children—two sons and two daughters—have a solid education in both Jewish and secular subjects. As a child, Ringelblum studied in a modern heder (Jewish elementary school)—a so-called heder metukan—and attended one year of the local Polish gymnasium before the family fled the Russian invasion in 1914. He also participated in a Zionist youth organization led by the dynamic Zvi Heller, who later emigrated to Israel. Natan Eck, who worked with Ringelblum in the Warsaw Ghetto, recalled that Ringelblum loved to tell stories of his childhood in Buczacz.

Although he never returned to live in his hometown, he would often refer to his childhood there. In some ways Buczacz was like other Jewish small towns in Eastern Europe, and the young Emanuel grew up in an atmosphere rich in Jewish folk culture. But in other ways Buczacz was different. While East Galicia and Podolia were Hasidic strongholds—the native grounds, af-
ter all, of the Ba’al Shem Tov—Buczacz stood out as a bastion of the Haskala. Hasidim were a minority, and their relative weakness made it easier for strong Zionist organizations to grow in Buczacz before World War I. A third of the students in the local Polish high school were Jews, and they received a solid grounding in classics and exposure to Polish and European high culture. Many of the high school’s most popular teachers were Jews. The town boasted a large Baron de Hirsch primary school, set up to give Jewish students both a general and vocational education. Some of its graduates went on to the gymnasium, others entered trades. By the beginning of the century, several alumni who had remained in Buczacz had already formed a fledgling Jewish labor movement.

Although young Jews received a Polish education, they did not become young Poles. The Galician Jewish intelligentsia, however acculturated, was surrounded by a strong and vibrant Yiddish-speaking folk culture nourished in many places by deep-rooted Hasidic traditions.

Buczacz Jews—like other Galician Jews—considered themselves lucky that they did not live across the border in Russia. They did not have to worry about stiff quotas barring them from high schools and universities. The Polish political elite had built up a network of Polish high schools that freely admitted Jewish students, making Polish the preferred language of educated Galician Jews. The Galician “gymnasium” instilled discipline and orderly work habits. Meanwhile, across the Russian border, thousands of desperate Jewish young people either went abroad to study or wasted countless years trying to pass university entrance exams. Many, embittered and alienated, would join the revolutionary movement. In Galicia, only finances—not legal quotas—stood between Jewish youth and the great universities of the empire. They could choose between a German education in Vienna or a Polish university in Krakow or Lemberg (Lwów). Many attended both. A university degree did not guarantee prosperity; there were too few jobs for university graduates.

Unlike their brothers from Lithuania, Russia, and Congress Poland, Galician Jews—like other Galician Jews—considered themselves lucky that they did not live across the border in Russia.
cian Jewry had also benefited from the more congenial political climate of the Hapsburg Empire. By the 1860s, they had won legal emancipation. Long before the first Duma elections in Russia in 1906, Hapsburg Jews were participants in the political process. When Ringelblum was growing up in Buczacz, the town had a Jewish mayor, Berish Shtern, and a Jewish police chief. Jews in Galicia felt more secure than Russian Jewry, with a relatively free press and a rich organizational life, with more legal safeguards in place. Pogroms were rarer, the resonance of revolutionary politics much weaker. Indeed Ringelblum would later recall how moved he was when, as a young man in Warsaw in 1920, he first came into contact with young Jews from Congress Poland who had participated in battles against the tsar and who had a revolutionary tradition. Nevertheless, Galician Jewry saw its share of political struggle and confrontation, especially during the decade preceding World War I.

Although the Jews enjoyed the political and educational benefits of Hapsburg rule, clouds loomed on the horizon, and the years of Ringelblum’s childhood witnessed far reaching changes that transformed Galician Jewry. The same reforms that brought emancipation to the Jews in the 1860s also placed political power in Galicia in the hands of the Polish nobility. Most middle-class Jews shifted their allegiance from German culture to Polish. Many Jewish leaders also preached assimilation: Jews should become “Poles of the Mosaic persuasion.” But by the time Ringelblum was born, support for the assimilationists had largely collapsed in Galician Jewish society. Even as they spoke Polish at home and sent their children to Polish schools, many educated Galician Jews keenly resented growing Polish anti-Semitism and the refusal to repay Jewish cultural loyalty with full acceptance. According to some memoirs, by the eve of World War I the social gulf between Jews and Poles, especially in East Galicia, had grown enormously. Polish and Jewish high school students would study together but go their separate ways after school.

By the turn of the century much of the non-Hasidic Galician Jewish middle class was turning to Zionism. Zionism in Galicia had less to do with immediate emigration to Palestine than with new definitions of Jewishness. Galician Zionism, which largely conducted its business in refined Polish, symbolized Jewish nationalism, a Jewish self-consciousness that could easily coexist with the adoption of non-Jewish culture. Galicia would anticipate a characteristic development of the interwar Jewish life in Poland: growing acculturation that at the same time rejected assimilation. As tensions escalated between Ukrainians and Poles, especially in Eastern Galicia, Jewish nationalism also became an expedient way of declaring neutrality and avoiding a potentially dangerous crossfire. Aware that they had no hope of attracting Jews to Ukrainian culture, Ukrainians preferred Zionism and Jewish nationalism
to overt Jewish identification with Polish culture and aims. In turn, Polish nobles preferred Jewish assimilationists or pliant Hasidic rebbes who denied separate Jewish national status and obeyed the dictates of the Polish leadership. (In Buczacz, they had long enjoyed a cozy relationship with Berish Shtern, the Jewish mayor.)

In the decade before World War I, two major events sparked Jewish-Polish confrontation and encouraged an intense process of national redefinition: the new 1907 election law and the 1910 census. The 1907 law, which expanded the suffrage, changed the rules of the political game. Zionists now saw their chance to make major gains, and the Polish elite had more reason to fear losing control over a Jewish vote that often held the balance between Poles and Ukrainians. In Buczacz and elsewhere, the elections of 1907 led to bitter charges of Polish intimidation and vote tampering. The 1910 census saw heavy Polish pressure on Jews to declare Polish as their mother tongue and thus bolster Polish claims to predominance in the area; the census authorities refused to recognize Yiddish as an option. In a test case of modern Jewish politics, many Galician Jews, even those who were actually Polish-speaking, demonstratively defied the census commission and declared Yiddish as their mother tongue. In an ironic twist, certain Yiddish-speaking Hasidic rebbes, who detested modern Jewish nationalism, urged their followers to declare themselves as Polish speakers!

All over Galicia, including Buczacz, the census battle became the symbol of Jewish independence from Polish tutelage. By the time Ringelblum entered the Buczacz gymnasium, relations there between Polish and Jewish students had become quite tense.

One by-product of the 1910 census fight was a renewed interest in modern Yiddish culture among a small but growing minority of the Jewish intelligentsia. They could count for support on a nascent Jewish labor movement. The Jewish labor movement was not as strong in Galicia as in Russia; Galicia had barely industrialized. But echoes of the revolutionary battles across the border in Russia certainly raised the prestige of the Bund and the Poalei Tsiyon, the party founded by Ber Borochov in 1906. On the eve of World War I both these parties had well-established organizations in the region.

For workers and students who wanted to combine radical Marxism, Zionism, and Yiddishism, an ideal vehicle was the emerging Poalei Tsiyon. Several students had already broken away from a larger Zionist youth organization, the Tseirei Tsiyon, and joined Borochov’s party. Among the new leaders of the Galician Poalei Tsiyon were two university students who in later years would have an important influence on Ringelblum’s life: Natan Buchsbaum and Isaac Schiper. When Buchsbaum joined the party, he knew
no Yiddish at all. He laboriously taught himself the language and began addressing meetings of tailors and store clerks, whom the party was trying to organize. By 1914 the party was conducting its meetings in Yiddish.

Schiper became not only one of the most important Polish-Jewish historians but also a key leader of the Galician Poalei Tsiyon before World War I. Born in Tarnów in 1884, Schiper already spoke Yiddish well and had begun to take an active interest in Yiddish culture when he read Ber Borochov’s seminal article, “The Tasks of Yiddish Philology,” which appeared in 1913. In December of that same year, Schiper wrote an article in the Lemberg party newspaper, Der Yidisher Arbeter, that elaborated on and explained Borochov’s arguments in favor of Yiddish.

On the eve of World War I, therefore, Galician Jewry had undergone a marked process of political self-definition. Assimilation as an ideology had collapsed; political changes in the Hapsburg Empire hastened the modernization of Jewish politics. For the first time Jewish labor parties were becoming a factor in Jewish politics. A sizable Jewish intelligentsia had emerged, well educated in Polish and German but identified with Jewish nationalism. If Galician Jewry lacked the revolutionary traditions of Russian Jewry, it did possess a large reservoir of well-educated cadres who would play a major role in Jewish political and cultural activity in the interwar Polish republic. This was the milieu of Ringelblum’s formative years.

SANZ

When the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914, Emanuel Ringelblum had completed one year of the Polish classical gymnasium in Buczacz. A heavy Russian offensive in September 1914 broke the Austrian lines and headed into Podolia. Horrified by stories of maltreatment of Jews by the Russians, thousands of refugees began to flee westward. The Ringelblum family joined the stream of refugees. After a brief stay in nearby Kolomeja, the Ringelblums settled in Nowy Sącz (Nay Sanz or Sanz in Yiddish), a town on the Dunajec River in Western Galicia.

Uprooted from his home at the age of fourteen, Ringelblum had to make a painful adjustment to a new life. The family faced desperate poverty. Fayvish, who had remarried, barely eked out a living in the town marketplace. The family of six crowded into a tiny house. One of Ringelblum’s new friends, the then fifteen-year-old Mendl Naygroshl, visited Ringelblum many times and remembered a “poor, depressing place: a small kitchen, a small room and every bit of space taken up with beds. . . . You could feel a quiet sadness in the house, the poverty that had taken hold and the loneliness of uproot-
ed people.” According to Naygroshl, Ringelblum’s new stepmother seemed especially depressed, as did his older sister.\(^{18}\) Despite the family’s poverty, Emanuel continued his high school studies and supported himself by tutoring younger students.

Those who befriended Ringelblum in Sanz left starkly different recollections. Naygroshl remembered the young Ringelblum—his friends called him Edek or Edzia—as sad and serious, someone who rarely laughed.\(^{19}\) On the other hand, the future historian Rafael Mahler, who would become Ringelblum’s lifelong friend, had a more positive recollection. “Edzia,” Mahler wrote, “became the darling of Jewish working-class youth and students in Sanz. The handsome, blond student in his high school cape attracted everyone’s attention. His light, hearty laughter, his Jewish folk songs and socialist songs would echo in the city park where he would spend the summer evenings surrounded by young men and women.”\(^{20}\) Perhaps both Naygroshl and Mahler are correct. It is possible that Naygroshl was recalling Ringelblum’s early adjustment to a strange town, whereas Mahler was describing him after he had become politically active and had more friends.

At first Ringelblum had difficulty adjusting to the cultural differences between Sanz and Buczacz.\(^{21}\) Unlike Buczacz, Sanz was a heavily Hasidic town. Indeed, it was the center of the great Halbershtam dynasty. As in many Hasidic centers, an enormous distance separated the Jewish intelligentsia from the Jewish masses. Another problem for Ringelblum was language. Although he had been educated in Polish, Ringelblum loved Yiddish and seemed surprised by the acculturation of his new high school classmates. Naygroshl recalled that the Jewish high school students there “spoke about Zionism in Polish, they spoke about Jewish national autonomy in Polish, and they even attacked Jewish assimilation—all in Polish.”\(^{22}\) According to his friend, Yakov Kener, Ringelblum immediately began a campaign to try to persuade his new classmates to speak more Yiddish.

This love of Yiddish was certainly a major factor in Ringelblum’s growing interest in the Poalei Tsiyon. One student who also shared this interest in Yiddish culture was Saul Amsterdam, who recruited Ringelblum to the party.\(^{23}\) A few years later Ringelblum and Amsterdam would go their separate ways. Ringelblum would remain in the Poalei Tsiyon, and Amsterdam would change his name to Gustaw Henrykowski and become a prominent leader of the Polish Communist Party (KPP)—that is, until Stalin had him executed in 1938. But when Ringelblum met him in Sanz, he found a friend who combined a mastery of political literature with a great knowledge of Yiddish secular culture. Having been recruited into the Poalei Tsiyon movement himself, by Schiper, Amsterdam knew not only the Yiddish classical writers but could
also converse freely about David Bergelson, a brilliant stylist who represented a new generation of Yiddish writers. He was an excellent speaker and brilliant debater. Rafael Mahler wrote that Amsterdam was the first person in Sanz to speak “literary Yiddish.”

In the local Poalei Tsiyon, Ringelblum made friends that would change the course of his life. When one considers that these friends were all teenagers in an obscure Galician town, their later achievements are quite extraordinary. Mendel Naygroschl became a respected Yiddish poet and attorney in Vienna. Saul Amsterdam went on to lead the interwar KPP. Rafael Mahler, who became one of Ringelblum’s closest friends, and Arthur Eisenbach made their mark as two of the leading East European Jewish historians of the century. (Eisenbach would also marry Ringelblum’s younger sister, Gisa).

As the Hapsburg Empire slowly collapsed under the shock of the war, Ringelblum and his friends in Sanz searched for a political roadmap that would make sense of the upheavals that were changing their world forever. Russian atrocities against the Jewish population in eastern Galicia served as a brutal reminder of Jewish vulnerability in an unstable Europe. In a time of despair and privation, East European Jewry faced an uncertain future and eagerly sought out any sign of hope. Would the end of the war bring the victory of socialism? Would the Jews gain civic equality and cultural autonomy? The first week of November 1917 brought news of two great events—the Balfour Declaration and the Bolshevik Revolution. The former held out the hope of a Jewish national home in Palestine, and the latter promised to eliminate anti-Semitism in a new, proletarian state. Both made a powerful impact on young Jews. Many streamed into he-Haluts, a Zionist youth organization, to prepare themselves for a pioneering life in Palestine. Others looked to Moscow and the new Communist party. The Poalei Tsiyon tried for a long time to combine both: loyalty to the new Soviet state with a commitment to a Jewish home in Palestine.

One year later, in November 1918, yet another upheaval transformed the world of Galician Jewry: the rebirth of a Polish state. The new Polish constitution promised the Jews basic civil rights, but given the worsening trajectory of Polish-Jewish relations, how much would these promises be worth?

In 1920, in the middle of this period of turmoil and change, Ringelblum received a rude shock. He had finished the gymnasium in Sanz and applied for admission to Warsaw University to study medicine. The young graduate quickly learned that in the new Polish state promises of legal equality and civil rights could not be taken at face value. A rejection letter from Warsaw University medical faculty informed him that because of the “numerus clausus”—a quota on Jewish enrollments—he had to look elsewhere to study.
Embittered by this blatant discrimination—which would not have happened in Hapsburg days—Ringelblum contemplated going abroad. In the end, however, possibly for financial reasons, he reapplied to study on the history faculty and was accepted.

**WARSAW**

When Ringelblum first arrived in Warsaw in 1919, Poland’s new capital was a boomtown. Hopeful migrants streamed into the city from all corners of the new Republic, causing a severe housing shortage. In the interwar period Warsaw became the cultural and political center that helped unite the long-divided Polish people. For decades the Russian occupiers had ringed the city with military fortresses and blocked its physical expansion. Now the Polish city symbolized a nation reborn. Its new residential districts, government buildings, theaters, and centers of higher learning reflected the Poles’ pride in their newly won independence.

Warsaw brought together not only Poles but also Jews. Jewish political parties and welfare organizations established their central headquarters in Warsaw. The city became the home of the major Yiddish and Hebrew writers’ organization as well as the most important center of the Yiddish theater. Several Yiddish dailies were based in the city. In 1923 a new Polish-language Jewish daily, *Nasz Przegląd*, began to appear. As Warsaw became the political and cultural center of Polish Jewry, it brought together the different Jewish “tribes” that had been thrown together in the new state. Important cultural differences had developed over the centuries between “Litvaks,” Jews from Congress Poland, and Galicians. Now, in the new Polish Republic, friction and discord were inevitable. Nevertheless a new entity—”Polish Jewry”—steadily took shape.

Ringelblum came to Warsaw with very little money and supported himself by teaching and translating. Together with party comrade Daniel Leybel, he translated Dr. Isaac Schiper’s *Economic History of the Jews in Poland during the Middle Ages* from Polish into Yiddish. In the early 1920s he also taught in the evening schools of the Left Poalei Zion—for a tiny wage. In 1926 he went to Vilna for one year to teach in secondary schools there. The next year he returned to Warsaw and then procured a teaching post at Yehudia, a well-known private gymnasium for Jewish girls. Although Ringelblum would continue to teach at Yehudia until the late 1930s, he earned little and constantly sought extra sources of income.

At Yehudia, Ringelblum met Abraham Lewin, a fellow teacher and historian who later became a close collaborator in the Oyneg Shabes Archive. One
of his former students at the Yehudia, Mrs. Hanna Hirschaut, remembered
Ringelblum as a well-liked but shy teacher. He cared about his students and
encouraged them to continue their education at a time, to quote Hirschaut,
"when women’s lib was not even broached." His students—well-to-do teen-
aged girls from relatively comfortable Jewish families—sometimes made him
the butt of their practical jokes:

Dr. Ringelblum had a habit of coming into the classroom at the last
moment a little perspired, his clothes kind of rumpled. He would always
pick up a pencil holder from the nearest student desk and play with it
and gesture with it. One day he came in and picked up the pencil holder
and found a smelly herring inside. He dropped the whole thing to the
floor and ran out of the classroom. I felt sorry for him, realizing how up-
set he was. He returned after a while without mentioning the incident to
the principal or discussing the matter with us. 26

Despite Mrs. Hirschaut’s fond memories, one infers that Ringelblum taught
at Yehudia more out of financial necessity than conviction. Compared to the
poor workers who came to his evening classes exhausted but enthusiastic, his
students at Yehudia were much less likely to appeal to his idealism and sense
of mission. A privately published book issued by Yehudia alumnae in Israel
suggests that Ringelblum did not make as much of an impression on his stu-
dents as Abraham Lewin or others. Inka Szwajger, who was the daughter of
the headmistress, had recollections of Ringelblum that were much less flatter-
ning than Hirschaut’s. 27

Shortly after he came to Warsaw, Ringelblum met his future wife, Yehu-
dis (Judita) Herman. Four years younger than Ringelblum, Yehudis Herman
came from a Warsaw Hasidic family. She joined the LPZ, and it was there
that she became acquainted with her future husband. 28 In the interwar pe-
riod she taught in Polish government schools and in the Borochov schools,
which were run by the LPZ and formed a part of the leftist Central Yiddish
School Organization (CYSHO-Tsentrale Yidishe Shul Organizatsiye). Their
son, Uri, was born in 1930. Ringelblum was a concerned and loving father.
Hirschaut recalled that when “we wanted to distract him from an impending
test, we would ask how his little Uri was doing. A smile would brighten up
his face, and he would rave about how smart Uri was and how quickly he was
learning.” 29

It was when classes were over at Yehudia that Ringelblum could turn to
what really interested him: politics and history. In the new metropolis Ringel-
blum would find his way, as a young historian and as a political activist in the
Left Poalei Tsiyon.