



SARAH SCHENIRER  
Founder of the Bais Yaakov Movement

# THROUGH THEIR EYES

20th Century Perspectives on the Holocaust



**Yehudah Leib Orlean** (1900-1943) was born to a family of well-off Gerer Hasidim in Warsaw, studied in the Gerer Bet Midrash, and remained a fervent Gerer Hasid to the end of his days. To his traditional religious learning, he added the philosophical thought of Hirschian neo-Orthodoxy, the radical Orthodox ideology of Nathan Birnbaum, and a broad knowledge in secular philosophy, pedagogy and psychology.

In the early stages of his career as an Agudah activist, he was among the founders and major ideologues of Po'alei Agudath Israel, which organized Orthodox workers and campaigned for social and economic justice among Orthodox industrialists and other wealthy religious Jews; he wrote two major works on this theme: *Tsu zate un hungerike* [To the Full and the Hungry] (1929), and *Der farshvunderner gan-ayden* [The Lost Eden] (1931).

Along with his activities in the Po'alei Agudath Israel, he also served as director of the Bais Yaakov full-day school at 37 Twarda St., turning it into the flagship Bais Yaakov in Warsaw. But after negotiations between the Gerer Rebbe and Jacob Rosenheim about the suitability of hiring a man to direct the Kraków Teachers' Seminary, Orlean (who was called Mr. Orlean by his students) was appointed director there in 1933 (formally taking over from Sarah Schenirer), and he turned his attentions to leading the seminary and standardizing the curriculum and other practices of the Bais Yaakov system. He was a soft-spoken but charismatic and beloved teacher, who wrote a number of important Bais Yaakov texts: the 1935 textbook *Yidish leben* [Jewish Life], the biographical essay "Sarah Schenirer," the 1938 *Kultur-program far Bnos Agudas Yisrael*, a long essay on Nathan Birnbaum, and others.

After the September 1, 1939, outbreak of war (during the seminary's summer vacation), the seminary closed for good, but Orlean worked to maintain connections with teachers and other leaders of Bais Yaakov and Bnos, corresponding with and supporting them and organizing children's homes and soup-kitchens, where underground instruction also continued. After a severe beating in January 1940, Orlean fled to Warsaw, where he was nursed back to relative health by Bais Yaakov teachers. There he began to hold classes, at first underground and in 1941, openly.

In advanced classes, Bais Yaakov teachers struggled along with him on the difficult theological issues of the day; he also helped found the five Bais Yaakov schools that operated in the Warsaw Ghetto, leading two himself—others were headed by Eliczer Gershon Friedenson, editor of the *Bais Yaakov Journal*, Rifka Alter-Rapoport, and (jointly) by Mrs. Ravitz and Ehrlich; these schools also served as soup kitchens.

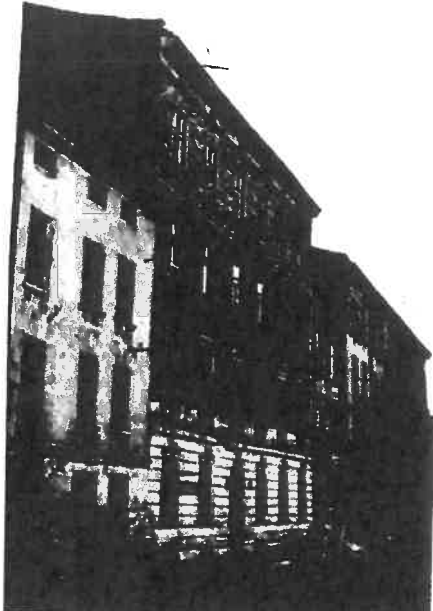
Yehudah Leib Orlean was murdered in Birkenau.

## C. Rabbi Yehudah Leib Orlean

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Orlean was a teacher, educator, and well-known principal in the Beit Yaakov school system.

He was born in Warsaw in Shevat 5660 (January 1900) to a family of Gerrer *chassidim*. He attended *cheder* and then studied in a Gerrer *shtiebel*, but he also had broad secular knowledge, especially in education, psychology, and general philosophy. He was among the founders of Po'alei Agudat Israel, and he served as its first president and chief ideologue from 1922 to 1932. He was the principal of a *Beit Yaakov* school in Warsaw, and in 1935, he was appointed director of the *Beit Yaakov* Teachers' College in Krakow. Rabbi Orlean established a center that not only trained teachers, but also maintained educational ties with graduates of the college who were working in *Beit Yaakov* schools.

After the Nazis invaded Poland, Rabbi Orlean continued teaching and even reestablished ties with *Beit Yaakov* teachers that had been disrupted at the start of the war. Following a violent search of his home in early 5700 (1939), Rabbi Orlean moved to Warsaw. His wife and six children remained in Krakow and later went to Wegrow.



Beit Yaakov School for Girls, located at 30 Augustianska Street, Krakow, Poland

Rabbi Orlean joined the clandestine educational system established in the Warsaw Ghetto and taught many classes on *Mishlei*, *NACH*, and *Mussar*.

He was also involved in educational activities for the ghetto children. On April 20, 1941 (23 Nisan 5701), the Germans granted permission to open a school in the ghetto, and Rabbi Orlean, along with **Rabbi Alexander Zisha Frydman**, A. M. Rogovy, and Rabbi Joel Ungar, headed the *charedi* school system in the ghetto. The system included schools for boys and five *Beit Yaakov* schools for girls, two of which were headed by Rabbi Orlean himself.

Rabbi Orlean maintained a correspondence with teachers in provincial towns, and he was involved with the soup kitchens established for needy people in the ghetto.

When the big deportation from the Warsaw Ghetto started, Rabbi Orlean was given a clerical job in the community archives; this job saved him from deportation to the Treblinka death camp. After the deportation, he found out that his wife and five of his children had perished; only one daughter who was with him in the ghetto was still alive. On Simchat Torah 5703 (1942), Rabbi Orlean was active in the holiday prayers at Rabbi Menachem Ziemba's house. In Shevat 5703 (January 1943), some friends managed to send him a Paraguayan passport. Jews with foreign citizenship had been promised that they would be exchanged for German nationals. He was taken to the ghetto jail (Pawiak) and from there he was sent to Bergen-Belsen, where he continued to teach. On Simchat Torah 5704 (1943), the holders of foreign passports were sent to the Bergeneu camp, where all trace of them vanished.

She continued to teach classes on Torah and Judaism in her home in the ghetto.

Her students traveled long distances on foot to attend classes at her house. In Elul 5704 (August 1944), she and her father were deported to Auschwitz, where they both were murdered.

Before the war she [Feiga Zelicka] taught at the Sarah Schnirer Teachers' College in Krakow. She was young, not much older than her students, but she had the ability to open up a new world before us; never before or after her have I experienced classes like hers. It seemed as if she were speaking only to me when she gave her lectures. She was answering only me, the questions that tormented me and demanded answers. But there were others who felt the same way. She formed a connection, a sort of unmediated contact, with her audience and with each individual in it.

F. Zelicka's classes were more than mere vocational studies; they were education, education every step of the way. We learned about the Exodus from Egypt in the Book of *Shmor*; we learned the Book of *Devarim*; we learned chapters from the prophet Yeshayahu; we studied *Tehillim*; we learned Luzzatto's *Mesillat Yesharim*; we learned *Pirkei Avot*; we read some of *Horeb* by Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch—we learned a lot, and it wasn't quantitative, but qualitative. There was light in these studies that could brighten up the darkness of our days.

She lived on Mianowskiego Street, on the edge of the ghetto, and we would all go to her house, even from the other end, on rainy, cold, and frosty days, despite the long trek along Dworska Street, full of puddles and mud. It was a hard walk, and we would slip on the bumpy ice. Many of us, including myself, wore wooden shoes that made walking on the ice exhausting. We helped each other, gave each other strength, and supported each other, and that's how we made it to her house for the class. And there, in her miserable apartment, the roof leaked, and there were bowls set out in her room to catch the rainwater that came in. There weren't enough chairs for all of us, so we sat two to a chair. It was so cold that we didn't take off our coats, because the room wasn't heated. As we sat there for a long time, our feet fell asleep and caused us agony, but we didn't dare make noise by stamping our feet, because it would have been a shame to miss a single word of her lecture....

Her personality played a significant part in molding our character. I myself feel that nothing in my life has influenced my outlooks, my feelings, and my overall view of life as much as Feiga Zelicka.

How beautiful were the chapters of *Tehillim*, such as "How long will You hide Your face from me?" or "My G-d, my G-d, why have You abandoned me?" How well they expressed our feelings! And the episode of the Exodus from Egypt—with F. Zelicka's elucidation—was wonderful; the readiness for redemption had a lot in common with our times. And *parshat Ha'azinu* in the Book of *Devarim*. Our teacher connected us to the past so that we would understand the present better and be able to believe in the future. She taught us *Megillat Eichah* and didn't spare us when she described the destruction; she even had no qualms about delving deeply into the pain of previous generations, in contrast to the tendency prevalent at the time that held: Why should we lament the destruction that occurred then? Isn't the destruction of our own times enough for us?

Feiga Zelicka's classes were not a flight from reality; she taught us to feel the pain of reality. Her reasoning was that pain is a sign of life for the individual and the nation alike. As long as we are in pain, there is hope that we will recover. The biggest danger is apathy.

We would, therefore, descend with her deep into the darkness of our times, of our troubles, and elucidate the most painful sources. We would touch the wounds of insult and disgrace and emerge from this contact purified, better. She showered us with the light of her personality and her influence was evident every step of the way, because things were easier for us after we had contact with her. It was even easier to overcome the hunger, to restrain ourselves and not to eat the portion set aside for the next day.

Sarah Zalwer Auerbach, *From the Window of My House*, pp. 46-48 (Hebrew)

in the camps, and what are you doing for them today when they reach Eretz Israel?<sup>97</sup>

Two months later, they held a general conference of Beth Jacob survivors.<sup>98</sup> The character and determination of these young survivors raise questions, as stated, about the education that shaped their path in life, as well as about the crystallization of their tight-knit group during the Holocaust, which gave them the support and courage they needed both to write the letters and to promote their initiatives among the survivors. Through these questions, we will trace their lives before they wrote the letter on which this half of the chapter is based.

#### CRACOW-AUSCHWITZ--BERGEN-BELSEN

To find out where these young women got their strength, we have to look first and foremost at the Beth Jacob movement in Poland, founded in Cracow toward the end of World War I (the first class opened in 1917) and encompassing 225 schools with 35,000 students, according to reports from 1994/95.<sup>99</sup> We will not discuss the uniqueness of this system and the revolution that it effected in girls' education and in strengthening the Jewish world. We will, however, mention a few details that may clarify the educational atmosphere that the young women in the group had imbibed.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>97</sup> *Kol Yisrael*, no. 1229, July 7, 1947.

<sup>98</sup> An article on the subject by Rivkah Horowitz appeared in *Das Yiddische Shitme*, Sept. 11, 1947.

<sup>99</sup> In addition, there were eighteen schools in Czechoslovakia with 1,550 students, similar numbers in Romania, and sixteen schools in Lithuania with 2,000 students. Schools were founded in Hungary, too, despite the opposition of extremist groups. Based on these figures, some people conclude that on the eve of the war approximately forty thousand girls attended Beth Jacob schools. Presumably, tens of thousands more were affiliated with the organization via Bnos Agudath Israel. See, e.g., Friedenson, "Barei Sefer le-Yanot," 61. Friedenson, in "Ha-Tenua me-Reshita," estimates that there were some eighty thousand students affiliated with the movement on the eve of the war. In Lithuania there was also the Yavne network, founded by Rabbi Yosef Leib Bloch of the Telz yeshiva and attended by girls from a range of religious groups. This network was not affiliated with the Yavne network run by the Miztrahi movement in Poland. See Kahane, "Mif'al ha-Hinuchi," 83ff.

<sup>100</sup> On the early years of the Beth Jacob seminary and the figures active in it, see Prager, *Sara Schiner*; Friedenson, "Barei Sefer le-Yanot"; Friedenson, "Ha-Tenua me-Reshita"; Jacobson, "Mizrah u-Maarav Nifgeshu"; and the memoirs of the first teachers in Cracow: Grunfeld, "Bi-She'it mi-Maarav le-Mizrah," 8; Rothenberg-Gora, "Ba-Yaniam ha-Nifla'im ha-Hem"; 12-13; Rothschild (Weingarten), "Mi-Yemid Bereshit." See also Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, "Sara Schenier"; Weissman, "Beit Yaakov."

Sara Schenier, the founder of the movement, wanted to give girls a broad, in-depth education that would strengthen their connection to Judaism and to Jewish life through knowledge of the Torah and its commentators, the Prophets and Writings, Jewish law, and Jewish thought; and pride in being part of the Torah-observant community. The education of girls, which had previously taken place within the family or in a Polish school, had led to— or been unable to prevent—large-scale alienation from the study of Jewish texts and from Jewish ways of life and had pushed them toward ideologies that were becoming increasingly popular among Polish Jewry, especially the various shades of Zionism and the Bund. Sara Schenier drew attention to the pressing need to stop the trend:

At midday fathers locked their shops  
And shamed-faced called for all to meet.  
Neither hasid nor scholar but a Jewish woman  
Had seen the fire raging in the street!<sup>101</sup>

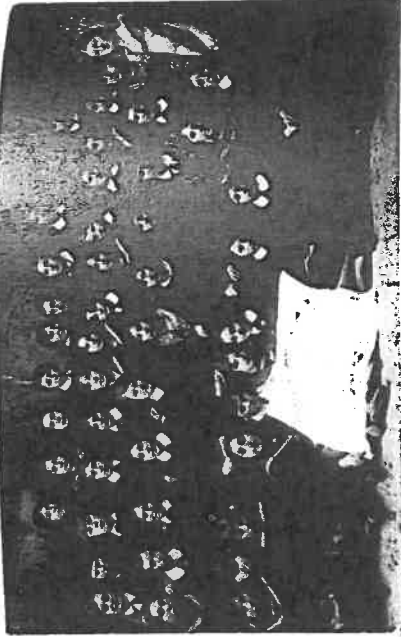
The new project soon received the blessings of the leading rabbis in Poland, especially the Gerrer Rebbe (Rabbi Avraham Mendelchai Alter) and the Chafetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan of Radin), and it was approved as part of Agudath Israel's Keren Hatorah project (established at the Agudath Israel convention the year before). The journal *Beit Yaakov*, edited by Rabbi Eliezer Gershon Friedenson, first came out in 1923 and became the movement's ideological organ. The system included various types of schools,<sup>102</sup> but the most important was the seminary in Cracow, which most of the young women in the group that sent the letter had attended. The leading figures in this institution, in addition to Sara Schenier herself, were Rabbi Dr. Shmuel Deuschlander and Rabbi Yehuda Leib Orlean. Rabbi Orlean, director of the Cracow seminary from 1935 (after Sara Schenier's death), was a prominent intellectual whose educational influence on the students and personal relationships with them played an important part in molding their character. It was he who designed the curriculum. The system was created *ex nihilo*—with no foundation of personnel and study materials on which to build—and in the early years it suffered from a severe shortage of teachers and books. Sara Schenier wrote:

<sup>101</sup> Steier, "Sara Schenier." The poem was written in the 1930s and printed in *Beit Yaakov* 70 (1-11 Adar 5725 [February-April 1965]), 25. Steier was one of the editors of the Agudath Israel newspaper *Das Yiddische Togblat* in Warsaw.  
<sup>102</sup> For instance, there were day schools, especially in the big cities, afternoon schools (after the school day in Polish or vocational schools), and special seminars for vacation and the summer months.

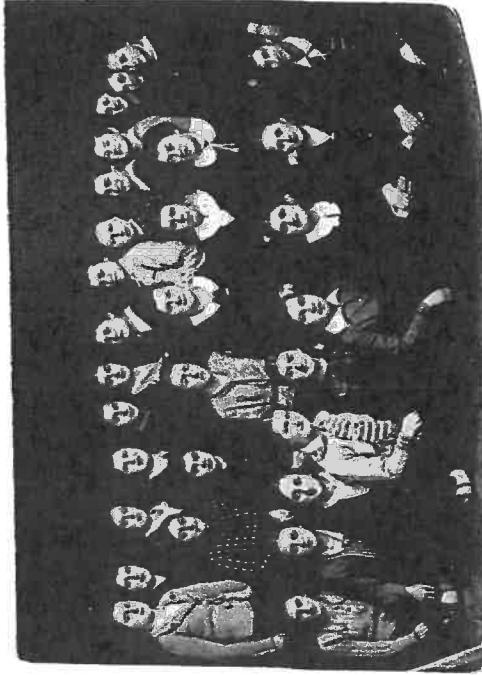


## A world full of life

Beth Jacob in the town of Ostrowo, 1930 (Beth Jacob Archives, Jerusalem)



The group of older girls. Standing at right: the teacher, Bella Dan Kehati Back row, left: Mrs. Rosen, the head of the local chapter of Bnos Agudath Israel



Students of the Cracow seminary. In the middle row are the teachers: Rebbeztzin Hanka (Hanna) Grossfeld (Biegun), and Bella Fastag (Gross) Left to right: Lacia (Leah) Wacracz (Szarainska), Rebbeztzin Gittel Fass, Judith Bamberg

all week in order to avoid desecrating Shabbat, was active in Rabbi Orlean's classes in the ghetto, offered relief to the especially needy, and boosted the morale of women and girls.<sup>107</sup> In the Vilna ghetto, "the rabbi's daughter Feigel"—daughter of Rabbi Beigel of Trokheim Brud, Volhynia—took charge of teaching the girls. She recruited teachers and alumnae from Cracow who had come to Vilna as refugees, and they organized sessions in the ghetto that included prayer, study, and social action.<sup>108</sup> In the Łódź ghetto, Feiga Zelikca, a teacher from Cracow, assumed responsibility for the girls' education and taught classes for women, too.<sup>109</sup> In Piotrków, Bnos Agudath Israel engaged in relief activities, cooking, distribution of kosher food to refugees living in the ghetto synagogue, and a campaign to have people adopt refugee families by offering them a meal one day each week. Among the organizers was Mrs. Lau, the town rabbi's wife. This activity forged closer ties between the refugees and the community. After they were deported to the Starzyńsko-Kamienna labor camp, girls from Piotrków created a Jewish calendar in order to keep track of Shabbat and the festivals.<sup>110</sup> We also know of Beth Jacob activity in the Cracow ghetto, the Kovno ghetto, Będzin, and elsewhere. In various places, contact with the Warsaw ghetto was maintained as long as possible. Letters were sent especially to Rabbi Orlean, who, as stated, headed several schools there and taught religious classes, particularly on the book of Proverbs. He, in turn, sent his students guidance on questions that they asked him.<sup>111</sup> His students in the free world tried to get him out, but were unsuccessful.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Seidman, *Warsaw Ghetto Diaries*, 146–147; See also Sternbuch and Kaneler, *Gutta*, 76–86.

<sup>108</sup> See, e.g., Foxman, *Banavovitch*. Foxman spent some time in Vilna and personally witnessed this activity.

<sup>109</sup> Granatstein, *Ha-Gomra ha-Ahava*, 237–238. Chaya Guzman (Eidanger), testimony given to the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Jerusalem, 1997.

<sup>110</sup> Granatstein, *One Jew's Power*, 213–214.

<sup>111</sup> Joseph Friedenson, the son of the editor of *Ber Ya'aleh* in Poland, was with Rabbi Orlean in the Warsaw ghetto and attested to this. He personally saw a letter to Rabbi Orlean from seminary students asking for his assistance: They told him that they were teaching classes in the ghetto but had a shortage of books. Although Jewish law could be taught even without books, the same was not true of Yiddish and Hebrew, and they were asking their venerated rabbi and teacher what to do. Rabbi Orlean sent written lessons to his students in various places. See Friedenson, "Ha-Tenua me-Reshit," 25, 30.

<sup>112</sup> Students in Switzerland tried to send him a South American passport; see Sternbuch and Ben Yener Zayr. The author of this article, an alumna of Beth Jacob in Cracow, was sent from the Warsaw ghetto to the Vittel camp in France and was one of the few people there to survive. After the war she married Recha Sternbuch's brother-in-law. See Sternbuch and Kaneler, *Gutta*.

<https://thebaisyaakovproject.religion.utoronto.ca/>

*Carry Me in Your Heart: The Life and Legacy of Sarah Schenirer, Founder and Visionary of the Bais Yaakov Movement*, Pearl Benisch

*Sarah Schenirer and the Bais Yaakov Movement*, Naomi Seidman

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