

Eglė Bendikaitė

Intermediary between Worlds

Shimshon Rosenbaum: Lawyer, Zionist, and Politician

Shimshon Rosenbaum (1859–1934) grew up in a Lithuanian-Jewish community in what is now Belarus. As a lawyer and politician, he campaigned throughout his life for Jewish rights. He worked in Minsk, Vilna, and Kaunas. In independent Lithuania, he served first as deputy foreign minister and then as minister for Jewish affairs. A moderate Zionist, he maintained contacts with Jews around the world and tried to modernise East European Jewry. Disappointed by growing antisemitism in Europe, he immigrated to Palestine in 1924. There, he remained active on behalf of Lithuania as general consul in Tel Aviv.

Rosenbaum was a law unto himself.... with difficult character traits and ways of behaving.... an experienced man with a youthful outlook, quick powers of comprehension, an impish smile, persistent, up-standing, and prudent.

Di yidishe shtime, 20 November 1924

Shimshon Rosenbaum was born on 3 September 1859 in Pinsk (Minsk Guberniia), a centre of Jewish culture within the Russian Empire. He grew up in a traditional Orthodox, Lithuanian-Jewish environment and made his way through the customary schools and rights of passage. As a pupil at the yeshiva in Volozhin (today, Valozhyn, Belarus), he studied Torah, Talmud, and other Jewish religious texts closely. Having prepared on his own, he took his school leaving examinations in Czernowitz Austria (today Chernivtsi, Ukraine) in 1883 and then went on to study law in Vienna and Odessa. He received his doctorate in Novorossiisk in 1887.¹

Rosenbaum was sworn in as a clerk at Minsk District Court and later went on to work as a private lawyer.² He was small in size and wore a beard and pince-nez; his sharp

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¹ *Evreiskaia Entsiklopediia*, 13 (St. Petersburg 1912), p. 579; *Trumpos Steigiamojo Seimo narių biografijos su atvaizdais* (Klaipėda 1924), p. 48; A. Banevičius, *111 Lietuvos valstybės 1918–1940 politikų veikėjų* (Vilnius 1991), p. 111; *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 17 (Detroit and London 2007), p. 433; *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2 (New Haven and London 2008), p. 1,592.

² On Rosenbaum's taking his oath as a lawyer, see Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (LCVA), f. 1,743, ap. 1, b. 879, p. 3.

mind and logical reasoning as well as his political engagement quickly brought him professional success.³ As a student, he had already become enthralled by the idea of a renaissance of the Jewish people and involved himself in the Jewish national movement. While in Odessa, he had met notable leaders of the movement *Hibat Tsiyon* (*Love of Zion*), such as Moses Leib Lilienblum and Leon Pinsker, who were to play a key role in determining his future activities.⁴

Full of energy and optimism, Rosenbaum helped spread Jewish national consciousness. No sooner had he arrived in Minsk than he was a key figure in the local *Hibat Tsiyon* movement. He brought together members of the older generation of the Hebraic movement and the national-minded Jewish youth, which was to produce several famous figures within the Jewish community and the Zionist movement, such as Yehuda Leib Berger of the bank Jewish Colonial Trust and the Jewish National Fund (the agency for purchasing land in Palestine) and Eliezer Kaplan of the Zionist World Congress and the Israeli Knesset (1949–1955).⁵

Rosenbaum tried to convince Jews to emancipate themselves from their own rigid traditions without giving up their Jewish identity. As a moderate Zionist, he adapted his goals to geopolitical changes. When the Russian Empire collapsed, he saw it as his urgent task to support the Jews in independent Lithuania. Later, he saw the possibility of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine and concentrated his energies on creating a new homeland for the Jews there without relinquishing his engagement for the Jewish diaspora. When he joined *Hibat Tsiyon*, it was clear to him that Jews were going to need a lot more convincing before they came to see themselves not just as a religious community but as a nation as well.

Rosenbaum was also active outside of Minsk. He travelled through many towns and *shtetlekh* and called on the Jews to take part in making the national ideal a reality. More than once, he had his lawyer's robes brought to the train station so that he could go straight from the train to his job at court. As a result, many of his clients gained the impression that he was not paying enough attention to their interests and thus turned to other lawyers. In turn, a growing number of Zionists began calling on him for his services as a lawyer.⁶

Rosenbaum was soon known throughout the northwest of the Russian Empire. In 1897, he was sent to the First World Zionist Congress in Basel as a delegate for Minsk and remained a permanent member of the Congress until 1923. He was elected to the General Council of the Zionist Organisation in 1900. Rosenbaum considered the work of Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, to be very important and regarded him as a charismatic leader, but he repeatedly criticised many of Herzl's proposals at congresses.⁷

Rosenbaum stood at the forefront of the Democratic Faction, which took shape at the turn of the century to counter what was seen by some as Herzl's dominance in the Zionist movement. At the Sixth Zionist Congress (1903), Rosenbaum fiercely op-

³ Daniel Persky, "Shimshon Rosenbaum", in Shelomo Even-Shoshan, David Kohen, eds., *Minsk, ir va-em, korot, ma'asim, ishim, havai*, 1 (Jerusalem 1975–1985), pp. 345–349, here p. 345.

⁴ Moses Kahan, "Roznboym als tsionist", *Yidishe Shtime*, 20 November 1924.

⁵ Persky, "Shimshon Rosenbaum", p.348.

⁶ Kahan, "Roznboym".

⁷ *Ibid.*

posed Herzl's plan to create an autonomous Jewish district in Uganda.⁸ Although Rosenbaum was not a great orator, he is said to have possessed enormous powers of persuasion and used his calm tone to gain the trust of his audience.⁹ Herzl's Uganda plan was consequently rejected.

In 1902, Rosenbaum convened the Second All-Russian Zionist Conference in Minsk. He was a co-founder of some of the first groups of the socialist movement *Po'alei Tsiyon* (Workers of Zion) and worked on the statutes of both the Jewish Colonial Trust and the Jewish National Fund. At the Third Congress of Russian Zionists in Helsinki in 1906, he joined in adopting a programme that called for the promotion of Jewish immigration to Israel and the intensification of "work in the present". The latter meant the struggle for Jewish civil and minority rights in the various countries where Jews were living.

Rosenbaum's interests included not only the Zionist Organisation, but also the living standards of his co-religionists in the Russian Empire. He campaigned not only for Jews' right to their own country, but for their political and civil rights as well. Rosenbaum did not shy away from politically motivated court cases. He represented the victims of pogroms as well as Zionists who were accused of "actions that threaten state order and social stability".

Following his election to the State Duma in March 1906 as a representative for the Minsk Guberniia, Rosenbaum joined the parliamentary group of the Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadets) and initiated legislative proposals that would give Jews political equality.¹⁰ Following the dissolution of the Duma four months later, he and other members of the Kadets parliamentary group signed the Vyborg Manifesto, which called for civil disobedience to tsarist rule and the withholding of taxes. As a result of this action, Rosenbaum was given a prison sentence in St. Petersburg.¹¹

Politician for Lithuania in Vilnius and Kaunas

In 1915, during the First World War, Rosenbaum moved to German-occupied Vilna. He was already familiar with the city, because he had been accredited by the Vilna District Court as a defence lawyer in 1903 and named a court examiner the following year.¹² With the increasing persecution of the Jews at the hands of the tsarist authorities, Vilna had become headquarters for Russia's Zionists. In his capacity as a member of the All-Russian Zionist Organisation's Central Committee, Rosenbaum had also stayed in Vilna many times starting in 1905.¹³

⁸ Persky, "Shimshon Rosenbaum", p. 345.

⁹ "Rozenboym", *Yidische Shime*, 20 November 1924.

¹⁰ Boris Goldberg, "Di yiden bay di ershte politishe valen in Rusland", *Dos yidische folk*, 15 May 1906.

¹¹ Trumpos Steigiamojo Seimo, p. 48.

¹² On Rosenbaum's appointment as court examiner, see LCVA, f. 1743, ap. 1, b. 879, p. 3.

¹³ Lietuvos Valstybes Istorijos Archyvas (LVIA), f. 378, ap. p/s 1907, b. 50, p. 3, Otnoshenie Vilenskomu, Kovenskomu, Grodnenskomu general-gubernatoru nachal'nika Vilenskogo okhrannogo otdeleniia, 22 October 1907; Yitzhak Broides, *Vilna ha-zionit ve'askaneah, sefer zikhronot u-te'udot al peulot hovvey zion veba-zionim be-Vilna (mishenat 1881-1924)* (Tel Aviv 1939), pp. 301-302.

After his formative years in Minsk, Rosenbaum's decade of visits to Vilna represented a qualitatively new stage in his life. Events were slipping beyond control. Shortly after his arrival in Vilna, Rosenbaum became spokesman for the local Zionist movement and was soon a recognised public figure. Here, too, he directed his attention to social problems confronting the Jewish population and defended its interests against local anti-Jewish policies and propaganda.

After the First World War, when the Russian Empire collapsed and new countries were founded, causing Lithuanian, Polish, and Belarusian political forces and aspirations to clash with other, Lithuanian Jews were also forced to think about how they envisioned the future of Jewish life in the region. The Executive of the Zionist Organisation, which at the time was headquartered in Germany, repeatedly sought out Rosenbaum as one of the most important contact persons in the Lithuanian territories for encouraging cooperation between Jews and Lithuanians. Towards the end of 1917, Rosenbaum, together with like-minded individuals in the German-occupied Lithuanian territories, convened a Jewish National Congress, which – unlike the Lithuanian Conference (*Vilniaus konferencija*) – was not sanctioned by the German authorities.¹⁴

A Zionist meeting on 14 October 1917 showed clearly that the war had changed nothing in the Jews' desire to have a political homeland of their own. Rosenbaum emphasised this in his speech:

The question of equality belongs, like the tsarist Empire, to the past... alongside other questions, the war has once again raised the Jewish question, not, however, as a question of an individual community, but as a united nation with all its attributes.¹⁵

Thanks to Rosenbaum and other leading Zionist figures in Lithuania, such as Jakub Wygodzki, the political party General Zionists decided a year later to support the founding of a Lithuanian state and to participate in the Lithuanian Council (*Lietuvos Taryba*), which had emerged from the Lithuanian Conference. In his speech, Rosenbaum said:

the Jews have to stand by the Lithuanians and support the interests of an independent Lithuania, because only then will they have the opportunity to develop freely themselves.... Belarusian interests must also be protected, for the Lithuanian Jews must not be divided and alone the term Lithuania encompasses more space than the Lithuanians themselves could imagine.¹⁶

Rosenbaum feared that the historical community of Lithuanian Jews would otherwise be torn apart by new national borders. After Lithuania's northeastern border was established, Rosenbaum made an attempt to justify Lithuanian territorial claims to the southeast on historical and legal grounds. Together with Juozas Purickis, at the time

¹⁴ Šarūnas Liekis, "On the Jewish Participation in the Taryba in 1918", *Lithuanian Historical Studies*, 4 (1999), pp. 62–82, here, pp. 71 and 75.

¹⁵ "Tšionistishe miting in Vilne", *Letste naves*, 16 October 1917.

¹⁶ Mokslų Akademijos Biblioteka, Rankraščių skyrius, f. 255–929, p. 31, Lawyer S. Rosenbaum's speech at the Zionist conference in Vilnius.

Lithuania's minister in Berlin, he wrote a memorandum in French on the territory of Lithuania. A summary of this memorandum, which included ethnographic, historical, and statistical information, appeared in Paris in 1919 under the title *Les territoires lituaniens. Le Gouvernement de Grodno*.

On 11 November 1918, Rosenbaum was elected to the Lithuanian State Council (*Lietuvos Valstybės Taryba*) as an independent and immediately appointed deputy foreign minister for a one-year term.¹⁷ He represented the Jewish minority as a member of the Lithuanian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.



Shimshon Rosenbaum

¹⁷ Mokslų Akademijos Biblioteka, Rankraščių skyrius, f. 255-1,089, pp. 1–13, Žydų kooptavimo klausimu Lietuvos Taryboje, 11 December 1918.

Although Rosenbaum represented moderate, realistic policies, political forces in the new capital of Kaunas sought to marginalise him, because he allegedly acted on his own accord. But because Rosenbaum had good contacts in international Jewish organisations and persuasively countered misleading reports disseminated by the Polish side about the situation of the Jews' in Lithuania and other political issues, he was able to keep his post.¹⁸ Despite this resistance, Rosenbaum also earned considerable respect outside Lithuania in his negotiations abroad. He became the leader of the Lithuanian delegation for peace negotiations with Soviet Russia and was responsible for drafting the resulting peace treaty. On 10 July 1920, Rosenbaum, along with delegation members Petras Klimas, Juozas Vailokaitis, and others, signed the treaty with Russia as well as an agreement on the return of refugees.¹⁹

When the Polish Army marched into Vilnius on 9 October 1920, the Lithuanian government was forced to flee to Kaunas. A year later, when Poland announced its intention to hold parliamentary elections in the contested Vilnius region territory, which Warsaw called “Central Lithuania”, Rosenbaum went to the Polish-held administrative centre with Max Soloveitchik, minister for Jewish affairs, to persuade the Jewish community there to boycott the elections. Rosenbaum also made a private trip to Warsaw and met with Polish Foreign Minister Konstanty Skirmunt – a move criticised by Lithuanian politicians and the Jewish community in Kaunas.²⁰

Rosenbaum did not forget Jewish national interests or Zionist activities as a result of this excursion into international politics. At the 1918 conference of the General Zionists of Lithuania, Rosenberg said:

the Zionists pursue a Jewish policy, but not a policy for the Jews... because the constitution still does not guarantee any rights, it is necessary that the Jews themselves be [among the] framers of the constitution; therefore there absolutely has to be a struggle [to ensure] that Jews are represented at all levels of power.²¹

On 5 January 1920, representatives of Lithuania's Jewish community elected a National Council of the Jews in Lithuania at their first congress. Rosenbaum chaired this body until it was dissolved in 1924.²² He campaigned for the strengthening of the secular, democratic communities, the *kehilot*, and opposed Orthodox critics of the “forced” subdivision of the Jews into religious communities, explaining that the nation was something more than a religious community, and that it had to be decided whether it was more important: “to assimilate oneself and be Jewish only within the

¹⁸ LCVA, f. 383, ap. 7. b. 7, p. 37, Lietuvos delegacijos posėdžio protokolas apie Baltijos komisijos posėdį, 8 July 1919; LVCA, f. 383, ap. 7, b. 2, pp. 72–73, Seinų krašto ir apskrities gventoj pareiškimas Lietuvos delegacijai prie Paryžiaus taikos konferencijos, 8 September 1919.

¹⁹ Jonas Aničas, “Žydai diplomatinėje kovoje už Lietuvos pripažinimą”, *Lietuvos Jeruzalė*, 3 (1993).

²⁰ “P. Rozenbaum taikos balandžio rolėj”, *Socialdemokratas*, 8 December 1921; Nuliūdęs Rozenbaum ir milaširdingi krikščionys, *Socialdemokratas*, 15 December 1921; “Der onheib funem sof”, *Vilner vokh*, 3 December 1921.

²¹ Mokslų Akademijos Biblioteka, Rankraščių skyrius, f. 255–929, p. 31, Lawyer S. Rosenbaum's speech at the Zionist conference in Vilnius.

²² Leib Shimoni, “Jidishe natsionale farzamlung in Lite”, *Lite*, 1 (New York 1951), pp. 252–272.

religious community, or to grow in strength to become an independent people with a national autonomy anchored in institutions.”²³

As chairman of the National Council, Rosenbaum encouraged Jews to use their voting rights in parliamentary and local elections, to close ranks with one another, and to run as candidates for political posts.

Rosenbaum was elected to Lithuania’s Constituent Assembly, which was convened on 15 May 1920 as a representative of the United Jewish People’s List, and on 5 July 1923, he was elected to the second Seimas, the Lithuanian parliament, as a representative of the United Zionists’ List.²⁴ In his parliamentary work, he dedicated particular attention to laws concerning the form of government, the political system, and the executive as well as the consolidation of freedom and civil rights in the constitution. Most of his speeches in the Seimas were not recorded by the stenographer or were rudely interrupted as soon as he began because he did not speak Lithuanian.²⁵

When the ninth government of the Republic of Lithuania was formed under Ernestas Galvanauskas on 29 July 1923, Rosenbaum became minister of Jewish Affairs, for he was equally well known among Lithuanian Jews and Lithuanian politicians. As minister, Rosenbaum made it his goal to promote “the co-existence and co-operation of the organisations representing Jewish interests”.²⁶

Rosenbaum, however, had little influence in general Lithuanian politics, which had not developed in a way beneficial to the Jewish population. When the budget for his portfolio was eliminated in 1924, he resigned as minister in protest. After the government restricted the activity of the National Council of the Jews in Lithuania that same autumn, and the Seimas took up debate on a new “Law on the Jewish Communities”, which in practical terms meant the abolition of the *kehilot*, Rosenbaum resigned from the Seimas and decided to leave Lithuania.²⁷

Intermediary between Worlds in Tel Aviv

In the eyes of Rosenbaum’s colleagues, it was logical that he would immigrate to *Eretz Israel*. On 19 November 1924, the Jewish community and Lithuanian émigrés gave Rosenbaum a warm reception in Tel Aviv. Although the Lithuanian government had deeply disappointed him, and although he doubted that Jews in Lithuania would ever enjoy cultural autonomy, he continued to impress those around him with his unshakeable optimism: “One should not think that the Jews in Lithuania are without hope. They are organised, hardened in battle, and will survive difficult, perilous times. Nobody doubts anymore that united in strength, even when the future is not easy, they will help build a free Jewish homeland.”²⁸

²³ “Di fir kashes”, *Yidishe Shtime*, 3 December 1919.

²⁴ “Steigiamojo Seimo narių sąrašas”, *Lietuva*, 15 May 1920; “Steigiamojo Seimo narių sąrašas”, *Vyriausybės žinios*, 30 May 1923.

²⁵ See, for example, the 29th Session, 21 July 1920; the 41st Session, 15 September 1920; the 60th Session 4 February 1921; the 180th Session 8 March 1922, etc., in *Steigiamojo Seimo Darbai* (Kaunas 1920–1922), as well as the 2nd Session, 8 June 1923 and the 9th Session, 30 June 1923, in *II Seimo Stenogramos* (Kaunas 1924).

²⁶ “Baym nayem yidishn minister”, *Yidishe Shtime*, 2 July 1923.

²⁷ Arkadijas Bliuminas, *Žydu frakcija Lietuvos Seimuose 1920–1927 m.* (Vilnius 2003), p. 35.

²⁸ “Dr. Sh. Roznboym in Eretz Israel”, *Yidishe Shtime*, 7 December 1924.

Immediately upon arriving in Israel, Rosenbaum began working for the supreme Jewish peace tribunal, but only for a short period. He remained active both within society and the Zionist movement and co-founded the Tel Aviv School of Law and Economics.

After emigration, Rosenbaum maintained his links to Lithuania. On 17 February 1927, Lithuanian President Antanas Smetona appointed him Lithuanian Honorary Consul in Palestine, and on 1 July 1931, he became acting Lithuanian General Consul. Rosenbaum was the first consul of independent Lithuania in Tel Aviv and the first Jew to hold such a high rank in the Lithuanian diplomatic service.²⁹ As Lithuania's representative, he followed political instructions from the Foreign Ministry in Kaunas, including an order not to establish diplomatic contacts with Poland. New arrivals from Lithuania, said Rosenbaum, "should not allow their bond to Palestine affect their loyalty to Lithuania".³⁰

Though Rosenbaum spent the greater part of his life in Jewish Lithuania, his international work in bringing together the Jewish communities of Eastern and Western Europe went far beyond the Baltic states and Russia. Rosenbaum dedicated his whole life to spreading and realising Zionist ideas and campaigned tirelessly for Jewish civil rights and Jewish participation in the political process wherever they lived. His example shows that Jewish and European cultures are compatible, and that Jews in the diaspora must not necessarily decide in favour of one or the other. Rosenbaum shared traditional Jewish ideals and values as well as modern European ones. He encountered foreign cultures and convictions with esprit and developed his own worldview.³¹

Shimshon Rosenbaum died in Tel Aviv in 1934 at the age of 75. The year 2009 will mark the 150th anniversary of his birth and the 75th anniversary of his death. He deserves respect and recognition not only for his historical merits as a leading Zionist and Lithuanian Jew, but also for his efforts as a Lithuanian politician during the interwar period and as a intermediary between different cultures, peoples, and countries.

Translated by Mark Belcher, Berlin

²⁹ LCVA, f. 648, ap. 1, b. 344, pp. 4, 6, and 55, Susirašinėjimas dėl S. Rozenbaumo paskyrimo garbės generaliniu konsulu Palestinoje, raportai apie įvykius Tel Avive ir Jeruzalėje, 13.1.1927–10.7.1931.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–39 V.

³¹ "Rozenboym" *Yidishe Shtime*, 20 November 1924.