A Note on Raphael Lemkin (1900-1959), the originator of the concept of Genocide

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In The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies (2010) Dirk Moses asserts that Raphael Lemkin ‘was never a Zionist’ (p.24). As this is a book which will be utilised by a wide readership and the statement will mislead future biographers of Lemkin, I want to adduce the evidence to support my contention that, on the contrary, Lemkin was deeply involved in the Zionist movement in pre-War Poland and that this background helped to shape his concept of cultural genocide.¹

Lemkin grew up in Wołkowysk in eastern Poland (today Vawkavysk in Belarus), where the commitment to the Jewish nationalist cause was strong and where he attended a modern reformist heder, in which Hebrew was taught as a living language. Before every Jewish Holiday Lemkin was in the habit of sending his former teacher a greetings card ‘in clear, precise Hebrew’. While studying at the University of Lvov, Lemkin translated a short story by Chaim Nachman Bialik (Noah and Marinka) from Hebrew into Polish in 1926. Ezra Mendelsohn has pointed out that ‘Polish nationalism exerted a tremendous influence on Jewish youth’, and it is likely that Lemkin followed the same phase of attraction to Polish nationalism before he renewed his adherence to Zionism. In the introduction to the pamphlet, Lemkin mentioned Mickierwicz’s epic Polish poem but praised Bialik as ‘our national poet’, who ‘endeavoured to wake the nation from its slumber and showed it the brightly lit path to a free, happy future on its liberated soil’.²

Between the two World Wars, Lemkin lectured in law at Tahkemoni College from 1927 until 1939. It was a rabbinical seminary sponsored by the Mizrachi organization, a Zionist body with a Modern Orthodox Ideology. He also wrote a column in Haynt, the leading Zionist daily newspaper, answering readers’ legal queries. He was a close friend of Yitzhak Gruenbaum, the leader of the General Zionists in the Sejm, the Polish Parliament, who championed equal rights for minority groups in Poland in the 1920s and national autonomy for the Jews.³

Since the publication of my study of Lemkin in 2008, I have discovered an article in Unzer Weg (Our Way), the Displaced Persons journal, on 28 June 1946, in which Lemkin told the reporter that ‘he had been the general secretary of a Zionist organization’ in pre-War Poland.

Ignoring this evidence, Dirk Moses makes a spurious claim without any evidence in support that Lemkin was a follower of the Bund, the Jewish Social Democratic Party. For some Bundists the attainment of Jewish minority rights in Poland was a no less important political goal than the triumph of socialism, others only paid lip-service to the cause of Jewish minority rights. On the other hand, the Zionists allotted paramount importance to cultural autonomy for Jewish communities in Poland and Palestine, from which Lemkin later developed the idea of cultural genocide, if such rights were seriously challenged. No doubt Lemkin admired the writings of Simon Dubnov and Karl Renner on minority rights, but this did not make him a member of the Folkist Party or a Social Democrat. In the light of this, it is to be hoped that the appropriate correction will be made to the text of the new edition of the Genocide Handbook.

¹ The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies ed.s Donald Bloxham and Dirk A. Moses (Oxford, 2010) and John Cooper, Raphael Lemkin and the Struggle for the Genocide Convention (Houndmills, 2008).
² Cooper, 12-13 and 16.
³ Cooper pp.19 and 21.