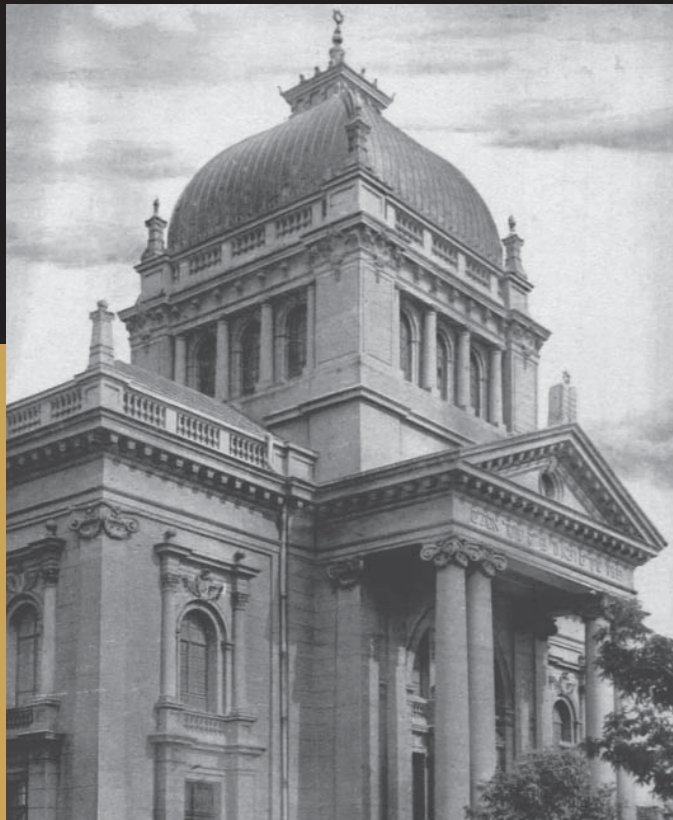




THE JEWS OF CZĘSTOCHOWA

COEXISTENCE • HOLOCAUST • MEMORY



New Synagogue, 1893

The Jews of Częstochowa: Coexistence – Holocaust – Memory captures the essence of a large vibrant Polish community. From a handful of Jews who settled in the early 1600s, a Jewish community grew and flourished in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They established magnificent synagogues, major businesses, cultural and communal services – all hallmarks of a productive Jewish coexistence with their Christian neighbors. The Nazi occupation of Poland from 1939 to 1945 devastated Polish Jewish life and in Częstochowa only one-tenth of its pre-war 40,000 Jewish inhabitants survived. Misfortunes, like the 1946 Kielce incident and the 1968 Communist purge, reduced this number to less than one hundred today. Yet, memory lives in the minds and hearts of people who knew and loved life in Częstochowa. This exhibition honors memory while opening the way to a new understanding and respect for the long and richly textured Jewish chapter in Częstochowa's history.

This exhibition was curated originally by the faculty of the Jan Długosz Academy in Częstochowa and opened in April 2004. It was the first time in Poland that a secular academic institution in this deeply Catholic city initiated a public exhibition to honor the vitality and contributions of its pre-War Jewish community. Documents found in the City Archives and photographs from Jewish survivors became the core of this expression of memory. The citizens of Częstochowa were so moved by the story of their Jewish community that they voted the exhibition as the “Most Significant Event” of 2004.

Central to Częstochowa's history and identity is the Jasna Góra Monastery. Established in the late 14th century, the Monastery is home to the Byzantine icon, the Black Madonna “Queen of Poland.” The heroic defense of the Monastery against Swedish invaders in the mid-17th century enshrined its significance for Catholic Poles as a religious and national symbol and made Częstochowa the spiritual center of Poland.

By the second half of the 19th century, more than a third of the population was Jewish. Christian and Jewish common concerns allowed everyone to live in relative harmony until the German occupation of Poland in 1939 when life changed dramatically.

New Synagogue burned by Nazis, 1939



Hebrew Grammar School orchestra, 1930s

COMMUNITY LIFE

Jews of Częstochowa created a dynamic community and contributed substantially to their city's economic and cultural development. In the 19th century, synagogues, schools and charitable institutions were founded. In the early 20th century, assimilated Jews established the Teatr Kameralny and Polonia Theater which staged plays in Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish and where famous Jewish authors, like Sholem Aleichem, read his works to vast crowds.

There was also the Jewish Old Age Home and Orphanage founded in 1901 and the Jewish Hospital, built mostly with donations from Częstochowa Jews in America. A Jewish Sports Society managed the community's athletic activities while other organizations built affordable housing and gave scholarships to those in need. The Dobroczynosc (Good Deeds) Association supported a children's center and poor women at childbirth.

ZIONISM AND POLITICAL LIFE

The late 19th and early 20th centuries brought changes to Jewish political life and their way of thinking about a future Jewish State in Palestine. There were many Zionist organizations each with its own youth group. The Bund was the strongest political organization in the city fighting for workers' rights and advocating a strong secular Yiddish culture. Zionists were critical of Yiddish, the lingua franca of Polish Jews, and encouraged speaking the nascent Hebrew language. Perhaps the best indication of diversity of the Jewish community is the fact that in the 1930s, six Jewish dailies, ten weeklies and one fortnightly newspaper were published in Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish – all for a Jewish population of some 35,000 residents.

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION

For Jews, education was a religious obligation. Pre-school and elementary level cheders were founded in the early 19th century. As early as the 1840s, progressive Jews ran a school which combined secular and new thinking in Jewish education. By the early 20th century, some 4000 Jewish students attended some fifty cheders while others studied in yeshivas. Almost 5000 Jewish children attended general elementary and mid-level schools, most of them managing dual curricula simultaneously. Trade schools also attracted many students.



Hebrew Grammar School play, 1930s

The Jewish Gymnasium (1917) was the pride of the Jewish community and attracted diverse students. Cheders and yeshivas followed the teachings of their rabbis in Hebrew and Yiddish. In secular schools, instruction was in the Polish language. The educational level of the Jewish community was markedly higher than that of the community at large. Certain faculties had as much as 50% Jewish students. Some universities reacted by adopting anti-Semitic measures, limiting admissions for Jews to ten percent.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Religious observance in Częstochowa changed at the turn of the 20th century as it did in the rest of Poland. Most Jews remained committed to traditional Orthodoxy. However, many of the assimilated and more educated were attracted to Haskala, the 19th century Jewish Enlightenment Movement. In 1893, these “Progressive Jews” built the New Shul which was one of the city’s most impressive buildings. Men and women sat together; a choir sang during services; Polish was widely used. The cantor of the New Shul composed liturgical music combining Jewish themes with European secular music. The cantorial school affiliated with the New Shul was highly respected and its graduates were hired all over the world. This beautiful synagogue was the first to be destroyed by the Germans in 1939.

Still, most Jews prayed in the Orthodox “Old Shul,” a smaller building constructed in the mid-19th century with lavish interior frescoes by Peretz Willenberg. There were also dozens of Hasidic shtiblech, prayer houses, the largest belonging to Ger Hasidim. The Chief Rabbi of Częstochowa from 1889 to 1936, Nahum Asz, was highly respected. His writing defended traditional Jewish ritual animal slaughter for food at a time when the Polish Parliament had considered banning the practice. He was well-known for his educational activities, legal rulings and scholarly works. Respectfully, he was known as the “Gaon (Sage) of Częstochowa.”

INDUSTRY AND ECONOMICS

In the 1800s, Jews in business were principally artisans or merchants who ran most of the stores around the main square, the Rynek. Jewish-owned factories such as David Kronenberg’s first textile factory (1828) and Henryk Markusfeld and



Warta factory, 1920s



Rabbi Nahum Asz, early 20th C.

Szymon Neuman’s jute factory employed hundreds of workers. By the late 19th century, Częstochowa was Poland’s second largest industrial center due, in large part, to businesses like these. The noted philanthropist, Henryk Markusfeld, funded the formation of the City Fire Department and the first concert hall.

Jewish artisans organized 13 guilds, including tinsmiths, roofers, tailors, wig-makers and furriers among others. Before WWII, some five thousand Jewish workers were unionized. In the 1930s, restrictive laws, like one requiring Sunday rest, hurt Jewish businesses, which were often also closed on Saturday. Jews contributed greatly to Częstochowa’s economic development and some Jewish-owned plants which were nationalized after 1945 are still in operation.

GERMAN OCCUPATION

On September 3, 1939, the third day of World War II, Częstochowa was the first Polish city taken by the Wehrmacht. The next day, German troops murdered some 300 inhabitants, mainly Jews. Anti-Jewish regulations were immediately enacted forcing them to wear Star of David armbands. Businesses and real estate were confiscated. Schools and synagogues were closed. Germans set up a Jewish Council – the Judenrat – to implement Nazi orders. On the first anniversary of Kristallnacht, November 11, 1939, the magnificent New Synagogue was destroyed.



Deportation from Częstochowa, 1942

By August, 1941, a ghetto was formed. Living conditions were atrocious. Hundreds died of hunger and disease. Escape from the ghetto was all but impossible and survival outside feasible only with the help of non-Jews. There were heroic Polish rescuers but most people were indifferent or hostile. Resistance was extremely difficult, but underground Jewish organizations were formed. Clandestine religious services were also held.

From September 22 - October 8, 1942, 40,000 Jews were deported to their deaths in Treblinka. The surviving 7000-8000

were squeezed into the “Small Ghetto.” On January 4, 1943, six men from the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB) were captured as they fought the Nazis. Among them was Jerzyk Rosenblat, Sigmund Rolat’s older brother. At 18, he was the youngest. All six were tortured but they never revealed the names of other fighters or the source of their arms.

The “Small Ghetto” was destroyed June, 1943 when remaining Jews were incarcerated in the HASAG forced labor camp, a munitions factory on the outskirts of the city. When the city was liberated on January 17, 1945, only some five thousand Jews remained.

POST-WAR YEARS

Jews in the HASAG labor camp were liberated January 17, 1945, the freed HASAG survivors were joined by other Jewish slave laborers. The Central Committee of Polish Jews set up an orphanage, soup-kitchen, clinic and dormitory with funds from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Religious Jews set up a prayer room in the surviving mikvah (ritual bath) building since all synagogues had been destroyed. It was difficult to be Jewish in Poland after the War. The war-time experience of seeing Jews murdered with impunity by the Nazis fueled the extremist anti-Semitic gangs. On July 4, 1946, in Kielce, near Częstochowa, forty-four Jews were murdered in a three-day killing spree, finally stopped by the army. Częstochowa’s Bishop Tadeusz Kubina publicly and courageously condemned the crime. Although no violence took place in Częstochowa, many Jews fled Poland during summer, 1946.

All Jewish political parties were banned and in 1950, emigration to Israel was forbidden. Modest communal life continued until 1968 when a nation-wide anti-Zionist campaign, organized by Communist authorities, forced the emigration of some fifteen thousand Polish Jews. When Communism ended in 1989, only thirty-seven Jews were living in Częstochowa.

Optimistically, in 2004 a young Częstochowa Jew began his studies at a yeshiva in the United States. That same year, this inspiring exhibition about the Jews of Częstochowa was inaugurated with the support of municipal, academic and ecclesiastical authorities. Hopefully, this exhibition will foster a future in which the true history of Częstochowa Jews will be known to all.

This exhibition was made possible by the generosity of Sigmund A. Rolat and Alan Silberstein.

FROM THE INSPIRATION OF JEWISH CULTURE

The exhibition **The Jews of Częstochowa** motivated the Director of the Jacek Malczewski School of Fine Arts to conceive a series of lectures, workshops and excursions about Jewish culture and traditions. The School of Fine Arts, with guidance from authorities on Jewish culture at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, created a totally new curriculum in Poland. The goal of the coursework is to understand Jewish culture to a fuller extent while also learning about Jewish history, art and aesthetics. Launching this effort in Częstochowa, a city deeply rooted in Poland’s spiritual history, underscored the deep ties between the Jewish and Christian communities. Entitled **From the Inspiration of Jewish Culture**, the project gave students first-hand exposure to an important part of Polish history about which they had known very little. In the course of study, they created their own works of art and design inspired by their learning.

The exhibition of work from the Jacek Malczewski School of Fine Arts won great acclaim at the National Library in Warsaw, the Krakow Festival and at the Festival of Four Cultures in Łódz. On September 5, 2005, the Polish Ministry of Culture incorporated the program **From the Inspiration of Jewish Culture** into the nationwide curriculum of all schools of fine art. This project was underwritten by Sigmund A. Rolat and the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture. 🕎



Illustration for Old Synagogue frescoes by Peretz Willenberg

Those who fail to remember history are condemned to repeat it.
– George Santayana