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The State of Częstochowa Jews' Theatre Culture¹ and its Research Perspectives

In research conducted over recent years, the dominant trend has been to portray 19th and early 20th century Częstochowa as a multicultural city. That view is justified, since demographic data relating to this period clearly indicates that the inhabitants of this city were a very diverse group, both with respect to ethnicity and religion and also due to the size of the Jewish community². Of course, such a large community, standing out due to, among other factors, language and religion, led it to create its own institutions, both social and cultural. One of the most interesting and least documented forms of Jewish cultural life in Częstochowa was theatre.

Research into this part of the cultural life of the local Jewish population has already been the subject of scholarly dissertations – the most important work of which is that of Marta Meducka, Anna Kozłowska and a paper by Anna Wojtysiak³. However, the result of a limited availability of source materials⁴ still makes it difficult to create a detailed sketch of Jewish theatre in Częstochowa.

Reaching for the local press makes it easier to recreate the history of any cultural institutions – especially in provincial centres – where all events in the city were eagerly recorded. The same was true for Częstochowa. In the local press, one could read about the number of patients staying in the hospital, about births and deaths, burglaries, fights, about dust and dirt on the streets, as well as about artistic events taking place in the city. Unfortunately, in the Częstochowa press published in the Polish language before 1939, information appeared rarely about performances by Jewish artists. Other valuable sources are archival documents within the state administration. These, however, contain information of an official type (e.g. consent to

¹ This article is a supplement to the issues raised in the chapter on Jewish theatre culture in the book: *Zjawiska kultury teatralnej i filmowej w Częstochowie do 1939 roku*, Częstochowa 2016.

² Zob. F. Patrzyk, *Studia nad rozwojem stosunków ludnościowych Częstochowy w XIX wieku i I-ej połowie XX wieku*, Częstochowa 1955; H. Dominiczak, *Częstochowa i jej mieszkańcy 1918–1939*, [w:] R. Szwed (red.), *Częstochowa. Dzieje miasta i klasztoru jasnogórskiego*, Vol 3: W czasach Polski Odrodzonej i drugiej wojny światowej 1918–1939, Częstochowa 2006.

³ M. Meducka, *Kultura Żydów województwa kieleckiego (1918–1939)*, Kielce 1993; M. Meducka, *Prowincjonalny teatr żydowski w Królestwie Polskim przed 1914 rokiem (na przykładzie Kielecczyzny)*, [w:] M. Adamczyk, A. Notkowski (red.), *Życie społeczno-kulturalne ośrodków lokalnych ziem polskich w dobie powstaniowej (1864–1914)*, Kielce–Warszawa 1993; A. Kozłowska, *Żydowski ruch teatralny w Częstochowie*, „Biuletyn Instytutu Filozoficzno-Historycznego WSP w Częstochowie” 1996, No. 7, pp. 45–49; A. Wojtysiak, *Z życia kulturalnego i artystycznego Żydów w Częstochowie w latach 1918–1939*, [in:] J. Mizgalski, M. Soja, *Tożsamość i stereotypy. Żydzi i Polacy*, Częstochowa 2014, pp. 264–284; On the internet one can also find sites dedicated to this topic (e.g. <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/pl/article/czestochowa/8,oswiata-i-kultura/39449,zycie-kulturalne-czestochowskich-zydow/?action=viewtable&page=1> [accessed: 01/09/2016]

⁴ One of the publications in which Yiddish memoirs were collected, from Częstochowa Jews, concerning the most important aspects of life in the city (R. Mahler (ed), *Czenstochower Jidn*, New York 1947), for many years it was difficult to access. Recently, it can be found on the Internet with texts partially translated into English, <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Czestochowa1/Czestochowa1.html#TOC66> [accessed: 01/09/2016].

perform specific plays or statistics regarding the size of audiences) which does not fully reflect the nature of the phenomenon being researched.

However, even with this small base of source material, it is still worth trying to recreate the history of Jewish theatre culture in Częstochowa, for at least two reasons. The first, quite obviously, is the need to preserve the memory of this form of the Jewish community's cultural activity. The second, equally important, reason is to present the diversity of theatrical life in Częstochowa. For many years, there was no permanent stage. But, thanks to the visits of prominent actors and theatre groups and also the cinema, audiences could have constant contact with the arts. It was precisely due to the lack of a permanent theatre that caused the Polish population, together with the Jewish population, to fill halls and rooms where performances were held, not only by Polish artists, but also, over the years, by Jewish artists, especially when they were stars like Ida Kamińska or Zygmunt Turkow.

Jewish theatrical activity is worth looking at because it also testifies to the cultural changes that occurred within this community (and also throughout the city). By the end of the 18th century, *Haskala*⁵ had loosened religious rigours and introduced many changes into traditional Jewish culture, which became open to new trends and tendencies. One of these "novelties" was the theatre which, using the traditions of Purim⁶, had a chance of reaching the broad masses of the Jewish community. However, those circles which supported integration, looked upon the activities of the theatre with critical eyes. Performances were in the Yiddish language, considered as jargon, and were looked upon with widespread disdain. Obstacles and objections, especially from within the community, resulted in the history of Jewish theatre only beginning in the years 1860–1876 and was linked with the activities of the so-called Brodzki singers⁷. Of course, political conditions also impeded the development of Jewish theatre. Russian policy, and the Polish censorship of the time, frequently prevented the works of Jewish authors from being performed, seeing within them images of immorality, denunciation, nationalist antagonisms, the spreading of anti-state sentiments or the fighting against Christian principles⁸. All these restrictions meant that the Jewish theatre movement in Poland began much later and is worthy of a closer look⁹.

In the case of Jewish theatre in Częstochowa, one can consider its beginnings to have taken place at the end of the 19th century and to reveal the three elements which constituted it – amateur productions, the professional theatre and guest performances. Before amateur ensembles began in Częstochowa, performances were given by quite random groups of people for whom the most important factor was to raise funds for specific charitable purposes. In 1899. The

⁵ Haskala (Jewish enlightenment) – an intellectual-social movement which was started in the second half of the 18th century by Moses Mendelsohn, intending for Jews to be open to their non-Jewish environment as well as improving education levels by the teaching of the history of the Jewish people and the Hebrew language.

⁶ Fancy-dress masquerades were used to celebrate Purim, in which there were humorous parodies of prayers, sermons and Talmudic texts. For more, see: <http://www.jhi.pl/psj/purimspile> [accessed: 22/09/2017].

⁷ The Brodzki singers were a group of travelling Jewish singers who performed in wayside taverns. Their performances were accompanied by comic skits and dance. The group was founded by Berl Morgulis, pseudonym Broder (1815–1880).

⁸ The National Archives in Kielce [APK], Akta Urzędu Wojewódzkiego Kieleckiego I, Ref. 3169 (Supervision over the activities of Jewish cultural and educational societies 1930–1934).

⁹ The history of Jewish theatre in Poland to 1939 is described in the 1992 monographs of *Pamiętnika Teatralnego* as well as in, for example, A. Kuligowska-Korzeniewska, M. Leyko (ed.), *Teatr żydowski w Polsce*, Łódź 1998. For an overall view: E. Nahshon (ed.), *Jewish Theatre. A Global View*, Leiden–Boston 2009 ("Studies in Judaica" 8).

Piotrków Trybunalski *Tydzien (The Week)* reported on a performance given for the benefit of the Jewish Benevolent Society:

*On 22nd April, an amateur performance was presented in Częstochowa, the proceeds of which went towards protecting Jewish children. The presentation was performed by young amateurs who comprised the entire cast. The instigator of the event was Mrs Markusowa Gradstein. The net income was 102 rubles and 30 kopeks*¹⁰.

Another charitable event was held in 1899, together with Polish artists from the Felicjan Feliński troupe, which was a performance of Edward Jacobson's *O chlebie i wodzie (Of Bread and Water)*¹¹.

Researchers¹² agree that the beginning of Jewish theatre in Częstochowa dates back to Jakub Ber Sikwer's children's troupe's performance of *Die Zwej Kuni Lemel*. That group, as they grew up, became the first troupe of Jewish amateur actors and, in 1905, performed Karl Gutzkow's *Uriel Acosta*. Those in the troupe¹³ included Jakub Ber Sikwer, Dawid Zitman, Perla Rubinsztajn, Mosze Sandler, Emanuel Klajnmann and Wolf Majorczyk. Almost at the same time, a second society of amateurs started, which comprised: Nachum Jankiel Fridman, Kopel Lamer, Hela Bida and G. Montag. It worked together with a professional group led by actor S. Ornsztajn. Another initiative began in 1906, when an amateur group was created within the Zionist Socialist workers' Party *Ferainigte*. It staged two plays at the Municipal Theatre (Aleja NMP 19) - *Jean i Madeline* and Czirikower's *Żydzi (Jews)*.

Two years later, thanks to the efforts of two Zionist activists, Mojżesz Zandsztajn and Leon Kopiński, the "Lira" Musical-Literary Association became active¹⁴. Its membership rapidly grew to include those with a "progressive" attitude and who favoured integration into Polish society. "Lira" contained a drama section, the repertoire of which was influenced by the views of the board, which also affected its place in the Częstochowa environment. "Lira" was active until the outbreak of World War I. Regarding the plays it performed, Marta Meducka writes:

*"Lira's" drama section also knew its limitations – it did not undertake full-scale productions, but performed one-act plays which were easier to produce and which allowed the creation of a richer offering for theatrical evenings. It should also be added that the repertoire was selected carefully and thoughtfully, avoiding populist, at the time, dross. The public also most certainly impacted the decisions – the bourgeois-intelligentsia, progressive in their taste. So that I.L. Perc's*¹⁵ *one-act plays were performed.*

¹⁰ *W Częstochowie, Tydzien* 1899, No.18, p. 3.

¹¹ See K. Olszewski, *Z kronik teatralnych Zagłębia i Śląska*, Krakow 1960, p. 228.

¹² See M. Meducka, *Udział Żydów częstochowian w kulturze miasta*, [in:] J. Mizgalski (ed.), *Żydzi Częstochowianie – współistnienie, Holocaust, pamięć*, Częstochowa 2006, pp. 186–197; A. Kozłowska, *Żydowski ruch teatralny w Częstochowie*, op. cit., pp. 45–49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁴ For more on the society: F. Szmulewicz, A. Khrobolowski, *Lira and the Jewish Literary Society*, [in:] *Czenstochower Jidn*, pp. 87–92; as well as W. Malko, *Działalność koncertowa stowarzyszeń i instytucji muzycznych w Częstochowie (1906–1910)*, [in:] R. Szwed, W. Palus (ed.), *Życie codzienne w Częstochowie w XIX i XX wieku*, Częstochowa 1999, pp. 301–322.

¹⁵ M. Meducka, *Udział Żydów częstochowian w kulturze miasta*, op. cit., p. 190.

The rise of interest in the theatre amongst Częstochowa Jews was probably the result of the establishment of the *Żydowski Towarzystwo Literacki (Jewish Literary Society)*, being a breakaway faction opposed to the socialist sympathies of “Lira”. Its structure also contained a drama section, which was particularly active between 1911 and 1913. However, little is known about the subject.

Interesting statistical data is provided by lists of performances, these lists being prepared for the provincial authorities in Kielce by the Częstochowa district authorities. The records provide details of the number of performances and audience sizes in each year. In 1914, there were 26 performances with audiences totalling 2,800. In 1918, there were 10 performances with audiences totalling 2,000¹⁶. The outbreak of war did not change cultural habits and people continued to attend the theatre eagerly, although less often. They not only attended local amateur groups, but also visiting troupes. During the War, these included the amateur Friends of the Jewish Arts, under the leadership of Hersz Gotajner, which performed comedies, one-act plays, “living pictures”, as well as a serious dramatic repertoire in Częstochowa and the surrounding area¹⁷. As Meducka writes¹⁸, the repertoire selection testifies to the desire to provide Jews with entertainment in their native language. It was also an important tool of emancipation.

In the independent state, Częstochowa amateur Jewish theatre did not achieve the status it had prior to 1914. Performances took place only on holidays and anniversaries. They were hastily arranged by amateur troupes, comprised of school pupils (e.g. students at the I.L. Percz School) or by members of trade unions. However, this did not mean the disappearance of Jewish theatrical life. What is more, even on the basis of sparse announcements in the Polish-language Częstochowa press, we know that the local Jewish community was keenly interested in ongoing theatrical activity¹⁹.

In 1930, the Friends of the Jewish Arts wanted to return to the idea of amateur dramatic theatre. One of its aims, in accordance with its constitution, was to promote and popularise the arts, with a particular focus on the Jewish arts – theatrical, musical, vocal, painting and sculpture²⁰. However, today, there remains no evidence of this activity. However, the official records prepared for the provincial authorities in Kielce by the Częstochowa district authorities show that, between 1919 and 1929 in Częstochowa, there were at least several dozen Yiddish-language performances, well-attended by the local public. The numbers were: 1919 – 22 performances and audience 5,000, 1920 - 14 and 3,600, 1921 - 24 and 6,200, 1922 - 49 and 9,100, 1923 - 61 and 9,700, 1924 - 87 and 8,900, 1925 - 80 and 7,600, 1926 - 65 and 12,000, 1927 - 96 and 14,000, 1928 - 60 and 11,000 and in 1929 - 60 performances to a total audience of 11,000²¹. These numbers indicate just how popular were the performances.

¹⁶ APK, Akta Urzędu Wojewódzkiego Kieleckiego I, Ref: 3235 (Lists of shows, theatres and artistic societies in 1929).

¹⁷ M. Meducka, *Prowincjonalny teatr żydowski*, op. cit., p. 79.

¹⁸ M. Meducka, *Udział Żydów częstochowian w kulturze miasta*, op. cit., p. 190.

¹⁹ Zob. *W sprawie teatru żydowskiego*, “Express Częstochowski” 1929, No. 51, p. 3.

²⁰ APK, Akta Urzędu Wojewódzkiego Kieleckiego I, Ref: 3169 (Supervision over the activity of Jewish cultural and educational associations 1930-1934).

²¹ APK, Akta Urzędu Wojewódzkiego Kieleckiego I, Ref: 3235 (Lists of shows, theatres and artistic societies in 1929).

The Częstochowa District authorities also informed the Kielce Governor²² that, within the city limits, there were two Jewish theatres – one, from 1925, under the direction of Hersz Hart and the other, from November 1928, under the direction of Mordka Chajm Epsztajn²³. However, Marta Meducka, quoting from the memoirs of Jews who once lived in Częstochowa, writes that Epstein established a revue theatre only in the mid-1930's. His permanent base was Częstochowa but, in fact, it was a travelling theatre²⁴. Today, it is difficult to state if this was another Epstein initiative or whether it was an error in the memoirs regarding the date of the establishment of the theatre.

In September 1928, the local press also reported about the opening of a new theatre:

On the 16th of this month, on the site of the "Warta", a permanent Jewish theatre opened under the experienced management of Mr. S Herszkowicz who, in the previous season, was well received by the public as the troupe's leader and as a great performer of character roles. It should be noted that Mr. Herszkowicz has retained only the best artistic elements from the previous troupe. (...) The planned theatrical repertoire will include not only operettas, but also the latest in folk plays and dramatic works with deeper ideological and artistic values. The hiring of a talented painter-decorator guarantees that every play in the theatre will have a decent decorative setting. The word from Director Herszkowicz is that we are entering a new theatrical season under the most favourable of circumstances²⁵.

Today, there is virtually no further information about this troupe although, occasionally, the "Express Częstochowski" contained announcements of artistic events and briefs reports²⁶. But, today, it is difficult to form a judgment on their quality and how well they were received by local audiences.

Another page in the history of Jewish theatre in Częstochowa contains the visits of travelling theatre troupes, both amateur and professional. Already, in the summer of 1883, a troupe of Jewish artists arrived in Częstochowa, about which, although not without malice, the Piotrków "Tygodnia" correspondent wrote:

(...) However, even funnier is "Spiwakowski and Berger's" troupe of dramatic artists which came to us for acclaim for two performances. And thank heavens that there were only two! You could be listening to the gibberish of a hawker in the old city and then take your aching ears home. Then, going out onto the Aleja, I see a big red poster - Oh! Comedians! But they are "dramatic artists of the Mosaic religion". But I have to see the four acts in nine performances of the excellent play, "applauded" in Warsaw, entitled "Kune Sinel" or the five acts in nine performances of the tragic-comedy, Szajkiewicz's (Szumar), astonishing titled "Jüdischer puritz". Scratching my head due to the higher

²² Ibid.

²³ APK, Akta Urzędu Wojewodzkiego Kieleckiego I, Ref: 3168.

²⁴ M. Meducka, *Kultura Żydów województwa kieleckiego (1918–1939)*, op. cit., p. 138.

²⁵ *Nowa placówka teatralna w Częstochowie*, „Express Częstochowski” 1928, No. 210, p. 2.

²⁶ Zob. np. *Inauguracyjne przedstawienie w Teatrze Żydowskim*, „Express Częstochowski” 1928, No. 214, p. 3.

*than normal price for entry, I enter the theatre. The fair and the jargon dominate here also. The curtain finally falls and I hurry off home*²⁷.

During times of harsh restrictions against Jews, artists were banned from performing in that language. This was the policy of the partitioners until it changed in 1905. They were officially registered as German troupes, but plays were performed in Yiddish. The relaxation of the regulations, and the resultant increase in the number of Jewish acting troupes, enabled them to have a greater mobility and Częstochowa, containing a large Jewish community, was a point of particular interest. As Meducka writes:

*Częstochowa audiences were amongst the most attractive for travelling troupes - their numbers and their frequent attendances ensured a profit and, due to the political diversity, level of education and degree of assimilation, they also guaranteed success for both operettas and melodramas, as well as for serious, social drama. So that the city was not bypassed by any travelling troupes. On the contrary, they intentionally headed there to play, especially since they were expected. The Częstochowa public fell in love with the theatre, although it aroused a dislike amongst the Orthodox*²⁸.

We know that, prior to 1914, the Kuprin troupe from Pola Portnoj and the Mosze Zyberkast troupe²⁹ visited the city. During World War I, Jewish artists came to Częstochowa as guest artists. In March 1915, the artist-satirist Sch. Kutner was invited for one show to perform humorous couplets in Yiddish³⁰. Also, at that time, „Goniec Częstochowski”³¹ reported on a request to the relevant authorities for permission to organise performances in that language³². Unfortunately, there is no further information as to whether consent was given.

During the Second Polish Republic, Częstochowa already had review theatres – the „Ararat” and the „Azazel” - and the Cimbalist troupe and Regina Cukier’s troupe. However, troupes playing a serious repertoire readily visited, such as the Wileńska Troupe and the Habima Troupe. There were also performances by well-known, visiting, Jewish actors such as Estera Rachela Kamińska, Ida Kamińska, Zygmunt Turkow, Jakub Adler, Diana Blumenfeld, Juliusz Adler, Rachela Holcer and many others³³.

Visits by well-known and recognised guests were sometimes announced in the Polish-language press, sometimes even posting reports of the shows. Following a performance by the Wileński Troupe in March 1929, the „Express Częstochowski” wrote:

Yesterday, in the „Warta Theatre”, the first show took place of the operetta-dramatic Wileńskie Troupe, performing Kalman’s operetta „Bajadera”. The premiere showed why

²⁷ Zygzak, *Z Częstochowy*, „Tydzień” 1883, No. 32, p. 3.

²⁸ M. Meducka, *Udział Żydów częstochowian w kulturze miasta*, op. cit., p. 191.

²⁹ A. Kozłowska, *Żydowski ruch teatralny w Częstochowie*, op. cit., p. 45.

³⁰ Zob. reklama Teatru Corso, „Goniec Częstochowski” 1915, No. 60, p. 1.

³¹ Zob. *Teatr żargonowy*, „Goniec Częstochowski” 1915, No. 101, p. 2.

³² Following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, repressions were intensified against the empire’s subjects. From 1883, these included a ban, by the Russian Ministry of the Interior, on any performances in the Yiddish language. With the passing years, this ban was partially relaxed, but was not lifted. This resulted in promotional posters stating that shows would be performed in German.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

*this Wilno ensemble deserves to be rated as first-class. The great acting, excellent music and diligent direction earned the admiration of the audience. We do not doubt that the Wileńskie troupe will attract broad sections of the Jewish community and will enjoy success*³⁴.

Sometimes, although a rare occurrence, longer reviews were posted, with more than just a summary of the play performed. This was the case with performances at the Polish Teatr Rozmaitości and Teatr Kameralny. Following a performance of Halper Lejwik's *Golem* by the Wileńskie Troupe, with stage direction by Marek Arnstein (more widely known as "Andrzej Marek"), the following was written:

*A large audience gathered, yesterday, at the "Warta" thanks to a great poet, who found a congenial director in the person of Mr. Andrzej Marek and they joined together in a higher, more noble level. This was not a more or less usual evening of theatre, but a lively, vibrant experience. Deep, imaginative thought, a princely poetic spell, the picturesque moments and scenes under the director's iron baton – enchanted even that part of the audience for whom Jewish language and literature are completely alien. On the stage, the spirit of a martyred nation burned in huge flames. The living voices rose in complaint and sobbed in an ungainly lute of messianic longing, escaping from earthly oppression into a beautiful and comforting dream of a hero-miracle worker, a saviour – in a word – the Messiah. (...) The star of the performance was Mr. Grodner in the role of the Golem, who perfectly recreated the heavy lumpiness of this amazing figure and its bizarre amalgam of affection. Mr. Kadysch, as Mahra, shone through with the true dignity of pain and love. Mr. Chasz played the madman with a great force of expression*³⁵.

Performances of Jewish theatre were, initially, held in Jewish halls, such as those which were usually hired for weddings and other traditional celebrations. Over time and with the increase in popularity of this form of entertainment, other premises began to be utilised – the fire brigade, the "Lira", the "Lutnia" and the "Warta" Sports Club (the permanent Jewish theatre had its base here), as well as the Teatr Miejsowy (later the Teatr Paryski), the Teatr Rozmaitości, the "Odeon" cinema, the "Corso" cinema and, above all else, the hospitable stage located in the Wolberg Garden³⁶.

Over many years, the goal was to create their own theatre, not only for the troupe, but also a building to accommodate this type of activity. That idea came especially close to being realised in 1927, when Councillor Rafał Federman obtained a subsidy from the City Council for this purpose. But, in the end, these plans could not be implemented³⁷.

The short history of the Jewish theatre, as well as the difficult road to awareness and recognition of it amongst the members of the community, influenced the specificity and repertoire of this theatre. Secular theatre, not tolerated by the orthodox Jews and despised for its

³⁴ *Pierwszy występ żydowskiego teatru wileńskiego w "Warcie"*, "Express Częstochowski" 1929, No. 58, p. 5.

³⁵ M. Łaski, *Golem H. Lejwika*, "Express Częstochowski" 1929, No. 65, p. 3.

³⁶ More: J. Sztumski, *Kulturotwórcza rola społeczności żydowskiej w Częstochowie*, [in:] Z. Jakubowski (ed.), *Żydzi w dziejach Częstochowy*, Częstochowa 1991, p. 72.

³⁷ M. Meducka, *Kultura Żydów województwa kieleckiego (1918–1939)*, op. cit., p. 138.

language and “assimilationist” tendencies, found recognition amongst the least educated, who also appreciated its carnivalesque functions.

Public demand obviously determined the repertoire of Jewish theatre. Genres borrowed from the United States also had an influence. These included farce, vaudeville, boulevard comedy and melodramas. The Jewish intelligentsia finally noticed the possibilities offered by the theatre – through the creation of narratives containing themes drawn from biblical history and that of the Jewish people, as well as didactic content, which reached the least educated sections of the community and built a sense of community identity. An excellent example of this is Abraham Goldfaden’s creation of the “historical operetta” genre, which enjoyed great popularity and contained elements much appreciated by the public. Another interesting part of Jewish theatre repertoire was the adaptation of European and world classics (e.g. the *Jewish King Lear*) by Jakub Gordin.

The educated Częstochowa Jewish public participated in the city’s cultural life together with the Polish public and took part in Polish performances. However, a Polish repertoire was rarely encountered in Jewish theatre. However, the “assimilationist” tendencies, prevalent in this environment, expressed themselves in March 1915 with the establishment by Michał Bałucki of the *Klub kawalerów*, aimed at providing courses for the illiterate at the Crafts School for Jews³⁸.

Meducka writes about the repertoire tastes of the Częstochowa audiences in this way:

There were many intellectuals, officials and industrialists amongst Częstochowa residents whose artistic ambitions went far beyond farce. So, according to the memoirs of a diarist, the troupe of A. Berman, Michalesco and Hendelist came to the city. They could count on full houses, eager to see J. Gordin’s “The Jewish King Lear”, “God, Man and Satan” or “Oaths. At the beginning of the 20th century however, Częstochowa audiences preferred operetta, brought from America and already fashionable in Poland. So, theatre entrepreneurs also put on “Amerykanka” (performed under the title “Dziewcza z Zachodu”), A. Schorr’s “Dora” and “Śpiewaczkę uliczną”, J. Zolotarefski’s, “Męża mojej żony” and similar repertoires³⁹.

The repertoires prepared and performed for Częstochowa Jews were diverse, so that everyone could find something which appealed to them.

A separate issue is the use of Jewish themes in Polish theatre. Jews, who were deeply rooted in Polish history and culture, were often portrayed as second or third rate heroes in plays. However, it did happen that directors of provincial theatres, being aware of the Polish-Jewish mix in their audiences and wanting to cater to them, presented plays in which protagonists were Jews. This was the case, for example in 1895, when the Czesław Janowski troupe visited Częstochowa and staged Karl Gutzkow’s *Uriela Acosta*, which was well received by the local public. Changes in world-views and politics in the 1930’s resulted in a performance of the

³⁸ *Teatr amatorski*, “Goniec Częstochowski” 1915, No.76, p. 2. The aim of the courses was to increase knowledge of the Polish language amongst the people.

³⁹ M. Meducka, *Prowincjonalny teatr żydowski*, op. cit., p. 75.

Jewish author's work being met with harsh criticism in the press, not only locally, but also nationally⁴⁰.

In order to create a holistic image of Jewish theatre culture in Częstochowa, it is worth looking at the audiences who attended performances, even though, again, there are gaps in the documentation from that era. The Częstochowa District report, mentioned earlier, gives the numbers in the audiences, but it does not answer the question as to what types of audiences they were. The local press reports of tightly-filled halls are equally enigmatic. As I have already mentioned, Poles also watched Jewish performances, but we also do not know from which circles they came. It can only be assumed that a broad cross-section of the repertoire – from light and pleasant works through to socially-engaged dramas – attracted a wide audience – both those in the theatre looking for light entertainment after a hard day's work, as well as those who wanted deep experiences and emotions. As Meducka writes:

So, above all, the theatre was a place in which there was a certain collective experience, not consistent with any social reality, but providing a gathering of people the opportunity to experience common emotions, provided by the same author and adopting the same patterns⁴¹.

Theatre, when it finally gained the recognition of the majority of the Jewish community, became a loved and popular pastime. But it also had to be readily accessible as the majority of the Częstochowa community was not that wealthy.

In order to complete the picture of Częstochowa Jewish theatre, it would also be worth taking a closer look at those who created it – both the artists and the amateurs. Despite the fact that some of the names of the visiting actors who performed here became a part of Polish theatre history, we lack even the basic information regarding the majority. After all, if it was not for their involvement, they would not have had the possibility of participating in this type of culture and entertainment.

What has been presented above regarding the theatre culture of Częstochowa Jews reveals various directions in which one could conduct further research. This is because the knowledge which we currently have is full of "blank spots". A shortage of archival material, the small number of press articles and only a handful of memoirs all make it difficult to create a holistic picture. Perhaps some information could be provided by searching Częstochowa archival or maybe even looking through nationally-published, Yiddish magazines. But, so far, no researchers have taken up this challenge⁴².

Częstochowa was, and remains to this day, a provincial centre and so the local artistic life has never been as rich as that in Warsaw or Kraków. However, it is still tempting to create a holistic picture of the theatre culture of the local Jews, if only out of respect for its creators who,

⁴⁰ See *Z Teatru Miejskiego: O sztuce narodowej. Koszmarne "Wesele". Nowa premiera*, "Gazeta Narodowa" 1933, No.9, p. 2; *Z teatru kameralnego. Estera, żona Rapaporta. Obraz z życia chasydów J. Gordina. Przekł. A. Marka*, "Słowo Częstochowskie" 1933, No.16, p. 2.

⁴¹ M. Meducka, *Z życia teatralnego Żydów w województwie kieleckim*, op. cit., p. 178.

⁴² This task seems to be easier to implement now, since selected titles of Yiddish newspapers have recently been digitised and published in "memory books" on the internet. Some have also been translated into English.

despite many shortcomings (in stage and set decoration), strived to not only to provide entertainment and education, presenting the greatest achievements of literature, but also who sought to arrange, usually successfully, visits by the best Jewish artists. It is equally important to remember that pre-War Częstochowa was a city whose culture was influenced by all the ethnic and religious minorities who lived here. Efforts should therefore be made to research, as diligently as possible, all aspects of the local artistic life and to build, on this base, a sense of pride in our own diverse and multicultural city.