

Chapter 2

“The Happiest of Ghettos”

A. The Miracles of Częstochowa

During the Wehrmacht’s attack on Częstochowa, around the world, rumours spread that the Germans had bombed the Catholic monastery of “*Jasna Góra*”, where the famous, miraculous image of the “Black Madonna” was located. The Germans denied the rumours (which were not true), but the affair illustrated to them the global importance of Częstochowa as one of the centres of the Catholic religious movement. When the final border between the Reich and the *Generalgouvernement* was determined, Częstochowa remained an enclave within the *Generalgouvernement*’s territory. In conversations with the Poles, the Germans used to remark that it was the “Black Madonna” that had saved them from annexation to the Reich.¹

Did the miracles also happen regarding the Jews?

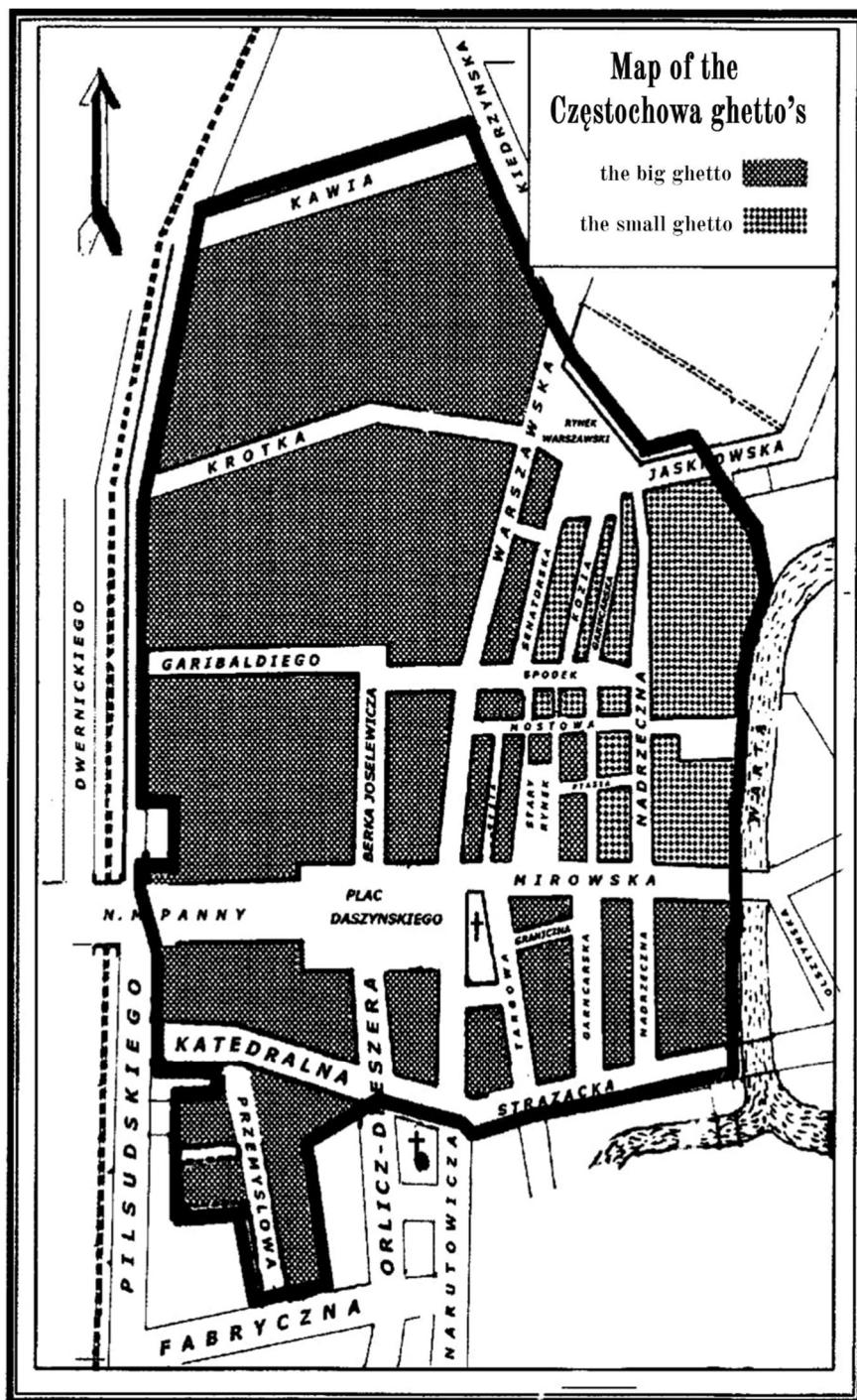
In 1946, a commemoration was held in Landsberg, Germany, on the day of the liquidation of the Częstochowa Ghetto and, in her speech, the chairwoman of the “organising committee,” the lawyer Ester Epstein, emphasised that, until the time of the deportations in the autumn of 1942, “Częstochowa was one of the happiest cities in the *Generalgouvernement*, in the sense that, compared to other cities, fewer Jews perished here...”² It is a well-known fact that the Częstochowa Ghetto was considered a place where it was possible to live. If this was the case, what was the nature of the “miracles” with which the local Jews were blessed?

The *Judenrat* was established in Częstochowa as early as September 1939. It was to manage the organisation of the life of the community of 30,000 people.

From the first moment of the occupation, all the same decrees were imposed on it, that were the lot of all Jews - killings, imprisonment of hostages for ransom and theft of property. Chaos ruled the city. In the meantime, the Polish local administration began to work to restore regular supplies to the city’s residents. And the Jews? “The Jewish population was still in chaos”, wrote Jeszajahu Landau in his memoirs.

¹ Stanisław Rybicki: *Pod znakiem lwa i kruka-Fragmenty wspomnień z lat okupacji*, (Warszawa: PAX, 1965), p.75

² Przemowa Przewodniczącej Komitetu Organizacyjnego Koła Częstochowian, Estery Epstein na Akademii żałobnej w Landsbergu, 20.10. 1946, YVA, M-1/E/513, p. 1 (16)



Source: Żydzi Częstochowiania, Współistnienie - Holokauст - Pamięć

wyd. WSP, APCZ, w Częstochowic, ŻIH, 2004

“All eyes were fixed on the arrangements that the new representation (i.e. the Council of Elders) would succeed in organising under the authority of the new government.”³

That is how most Jews in Częstochowa reacted to the establishment of the *Judenrat*.

Dawid Sandler adds,

“In our city, the *Judenrat* managed to organise itself in such a way that it was really like a government, with police, offices and a labour exchange. The leaders of the *Judenrat* managed to establish close ties with some of the leaders of the Gestapo or senior officials of the *Generalgouvernement*, and they promised that it would be good...”⁴

The head of the *Judenrat* was Leon Kopiński, about whom Natan Ek writes,

“In the city, he had a reputation as an intelligent Jew and as a decent, clean-handed man. I have heard only good things about him.”⁵ Kopiński formed the *Judenrat* Council, which eventually numbered twenty-four members, including an executive composed of well-known public figures.⁶

Officially, the Jews were subject to the authority of the city’s civil governor, Dr Richard Wendler, who already in November 1939, imposed a contribution of one million złoty on the city’s Jews under the threat of executing 120 hostages.

Only thanks to bribery did he agree to reduce the amount and release the hostages.⁷ The Polish researcher Jan Pietrzykowski rightly wrote that Wendler “skinned the ghetto Jews.”⁸ In the work of extortion and robbery, Wendler had competition on the part of German policemen, officers of the Security Police (SIPO – *Sicherheitspolizei*) - who were called “Gestapo” by the Jews - Wehrmacht soldiers and members of the SS.

³ Testimony of Jeszajahu Landau, YVA, 0.3/5868, p. 15.

⁴ Testimony of Dawid Sandler, YVA, 0.3/9740

⁵ Natan Ek, *The Wandering in the Paths of Death, Life and Thought in the Days of the Destruction*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 1960, p. 80.

⁶ Benjamin Orenstein: Churban Czenstochow, (Yiddish), (Central Farwaltung fun der Czenstochower Landsmanszaft in der amerikaner Zone in Dajczland, Bamberg 1948) p. 255

⁷ Liber Brener, O pracy przymusowej ludności żydowskiej w Częstochowie w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej, Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (BŻIH), Nr.21, (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, March 1957), p. 46

⁸ Jan Pietrzykowski, Hitlerowcy w Częstochowie w latach 1939-1945, (Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 1959), p.41

All the shortcomings did not damage the good name of the Częstochowa community, which became a city of refuge for many refugees. Thus, for example, in May 1940, an order was issued in Kraków requiring all Jews without proper permits to leave the city. Hundreds of Jews then arrived in Częstochowa legally and many also infiltrated illegally.⁹ Since then, the Kraków refugees also became partners in the fate of the Częstochowa Jews.

Under these conditions, the *Judenrat* was forced to manoeuvre between the incessant demands of the authorities and the needs of the community, and this situation was further exacerbated with the establishment of the ghetto in April 1941. This was the **Big Ghetto**, in the northeast of the city, on the streets where many Jews had previously lived, including: I Aleja, Kawia, Krótka, Nowy Rynek, Stary Rynek and Nadrzeczna.

The ghetto was cramped and overcrowded, as its population was steadily growing. According to the records of the Częstochowa municipality, the number of ghetto residents reached 40,000 or even more.¹⁰ With the establishment of the ghetto, the Jewish police was also established, which in 1942 numbered 250 people and was commanded by Henryk Parasol.

Helena Szpilman wrote about the behaviour of the police officers:

“Some of them were decent, viz. they did not beat and tried not to go to ‘snatchings’ (for forced labour), but most of them did not excel in decency.”¹¹

The *Judenrat* also moved to the ghetto, which already included twenty-one departments. According to the testimonies of contemporaries,

“The *Judenrat* worked to organise life and help people and had a great influence... It took care of arranging housing, established a hospital, a health department, a social assistance department, an orphanage, organised soup kitchens for the needy... The *Judenrat*’s attitude towards the Jews of the ghetto was quite good, considering the difficult conditions in which life was conducted in the ghetto. It was composed of the most important people in Częstochowa.”¹²

In view of the worsening hardship, the idea took shape to centralise social assistance in all areas of activity under one umbrella organisation, which was established in July 1941, and was the “Jewish Municipal Sponsorship Committee” (Żydowski Komitet Opiekuńczy Miejski – KOM) under the auspices

⁹ The Częstochowa archives contain, among other things, a list of Kraków Jews who arrived from January 1940 to February 1941.

¹⁰ See note 8, *ibid.*

¹¹ Testimony of Helena Szpilman, YVA, 3289/M-49/E

¹² Testimony of Efroim Majerowicz, YVA, 32/M-49/E

of the “Jewish Self-Help Committee” (Żydowska Samopomoc Społeczna ŻSS) which had its headquarters in Kraków.¹³

The ŻSS Central Bureau in Kraków maintained extensive correspondence with the Jewish institutions in Częstochowa about aiding the needy, whose number was constantly increasing, especially among the refugees. There was also mutual assistance on private initiative. In the eyes of those unfortunates, who had become destitute refugees, every plate of hot soup and slice of bread, which they received in a food bank, became a real asset.

Generally, during 1941, “there would be arrests and serious incidents in the ghetto... All of this caused depression and concern about the future. However, it still did not affect the current economic situation, which remained more or less stable.”¹⁴

And what was the secret of stability?

That year, the ghetto in Częstochowa was opened and, although there were police officers at the exits of the streets connecting it with the “Aryan side”, no wall was erected. Jews were not allowed to leave the ghetto without proper authorisation but, on the other hand, given the ghetto’s location close to the city centre, the authorities agreed **to allow the city’s Polish residents to pass through its streets**, on their way from one side of the city to the other (see the map of the ghettos in Częstochowa).

Although Poles were not allowed to linger in the ghetto or to buy from the Jews. But who paid any attention to such details? In the eyes of the Jews, this was truly a miracle! Close trade relations developed with the Poles and the Jews were not content with just selling their property, they were also able to provide various services or products from craftsmen.

In their struggle for survival, the Jews found all sorts of tricks.

The Herszlikowicz family had a delicatessen, where you could buy ice cream, but there were no cakes, because the Germans forbade Jews to bake cakes.

“So, they called a Polish pastry shop owner who agreed to sell them a few cakes. When the Germans discovered the cakes during an inspection, they were explained, with the appropriate receipts, that the cakes were not baked by the shop owner, but had been bought from the Pole.”¹⁵

¹³ Ältestenratin Tschenstochau, 31.01.1942, Korespondencja z Komitetem Miejskim ŻSS w Częstochowie, 1941-1942, Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego w Warszawie, (AŻIH), sygn. 211/326, p.7

¹⁴ Majerowicz, YVA, M-49/E/32.

¹⁵ Testimony of Frieda Herszlikowicz, YVA, 0.3/8791.

Ruben Monowicz, from a Chassidic family, tells of his father, who was a grain and flour merchant. Upon moving to the ghetto, the family was left without a source of income. Fortunately, their new apartment bordered Aryan territory.

The father managed to establish contact with Polish merchants, who would bring sacks of flour or grain on bicycles at night and throw them over the fence to the Jewish side. For a while, a Jewish gang operated on this street, seizing any goods thrown from the "Aryan side". But they had great respect for Reb Chaim Monowicz and did not touch his goods.¹⁶ Was that not a miracle?

But the Jews of the ghetto did not live on flour alone.

With the elimination of all educational and cultural activities, it seemed that the spiritual life of the community had ended. But recovery came quickly. The vast majority of Częstochowa Jews belonged to the religious community in all its forms, who wanted to preserve religion and tradition. The Jews would gather in homes to pray and study Torah and, despite all the restrictions, the ghetto residents tried to observe all the holidays.

It was more difficult to organise an educational framework for children and youth from secular families. Zygmunt Rozenblat [ed: later Rolat], a student at the Jewish Gimnazjum, was sent by his parents to a study group, which was organised by two teachers, sisters Irena and Madzia Horowicz, and was held in their apartment.¹⁷

For the fifth-year pupils of the Gimnazjum, the educator Tania Wajnberg-Wajnman established a study group, in which Miryam Lewkowicz and her friend Rut Sztern also studied, who wrote in her memoirs, "I continued my studies all the time, which cost a great deal of money. But my parents were not willing to give it up under any circumstances." Rut continued to study with Lonia Rozencwajg, a well-known teacher and devout communist who, in her home, organised "enrichment programmes" for students.¹⁸

The students of the upper grades also studied in classes run by the gimnazjum teachers.

In his book, Jerzy Ajnhorn mentions the course of Professor Mering, who made sure not only to preach Torah, but also to give out grades to his pupils.¹⁹ Cultural activities also took place in the ghetto. There were performances on current topics, organised by several drama clubs. Many songs, sketches and hymns were written, all of which went down the drain together with their creators. There were concerts by artists and a children's choir. All the youth movements in the city organised meetings with lectures and debates.

¹⁶ Testimony of Ruben Monowicz, YVA, 0.3/10366, p. 15.

¹⁷ Zygmunt A. Rolat, "Jakby to było wczoraj", in: *Żydzi Częstochowianie, Współistnienie, Holocaust Pamięć*, wyd. Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna w Częstochowie, APCZ, ŻIH, 2004, p. 1 (YVA, 0-33/6775)

¹⁸YVA: Rut Sztern (Cyter) 0-33/6847; Miryam Lewkowicz (Szajkowicz) 0-33/6856

¹⁹ Jerzy Einhorn, *Wybrany aby żyć*, (Gdańsk: Marpress 1996), p. 65

Not only did the *Jewish Newspaper (Gazeta Żydowska)*, which was published by the authorities, come to the ghetto, but also, despite the strict ban, German and Polish newspapers.

As the economic situation worsened, relations between the *Judenrat* and the ghetto population also deteriorated.

This was expressed in the satirical magazine “Rasta” (short for Rada Starszych – *Judenrat*), which was distributed underground in the ghetto. Its editor was Dr Adam Wolberg, and his goal was propaganda against the *Judenrat*, which, according to Benjamin Orenstein, “had become a tool in the hands of the Germans.”²⁰ He was particularly indignant at the social injustice regarding the arrangement of forced labour. There is no doubt that, along with the supply of food and relief operations, the problem of labour was extremely important to the ghetto residents.

²⁰ Churban Czenstochow, pp. 200-203