

## The Towns Częstochowa, Krzepice and Lututów

My father Majer was born in the town of Krzepice and my mother Miriam in Lututów. The two small towns Krzepice and Lututów, which are close to each other<sup>1</sup>, lie in western Poland and are about 80 km from the large city of Częstochowa - which is also the foremost Catholic religious centre in Poland. The monastery on the Jasna Góra hilltop houses the Black Madonna icon, which is believed to work miracles. Many Catholics make pilgrimages to the Black Madonna to pray and to ask for blessings of good health and success.

Częstochowa is first mentioned in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The city's Jewish community was established in 1765. At first, some 500 Jews lived there and, in around 1850, the Jewish populace numbered about three thousand people - roughly half of all of Częstochowa's residents. On the eve of the Second World War, more than twenty-eight thousand Jews were living in Częstochowa – about one-fifth<sup>2</sup> of the entire population.

### From where did the Jews come to Częstochowa?

Over the course of the years, and particularly between the two World Wars, Częstochowa became a wealthy industrial centre. In the vicinity of Częstochowa, there were deposits of iron, copper and [other] metals, which constituted the basis for numerous steel factories, which brought about the development of banking and commerce and also the development of a multi-branched network of roads and railway tracks. The inhabitants of the neighbouring cities and towns moved to the big city and, among them, were also townspeople of Krzepice and Lututów – my parents' hometowns.

The movement towards the big city stemmed principally from essential necessity. Engagement in industry and commerce progressively developed. Those engaged in the liberal professions [viz. white-collar occupations] set out to find a larger share of the market; they dealt in banking and administration. The populace became a thriving bourgeoisie<sup>3</sup>. A new world was revealed before the people from the towns – a world of industrial flourishing – and new opportunities in the fields of banking and commerce opened up before them.

Due to the inflow of people to the big city, the Government's institutions were set up there. The residents of the surrounding towns frequently came to the city to tend to their personal affairs, after which they would return to their own town.

This was also an opportunity for meetings between the Jewish inhabitants of the cities and towns around Częstochowa. Thus, new acquaintances were made, which brought about marital connections; many of the lads and girls of Krzepice and Lututów were wed to one another, as well as to the young residents of Częstochowa and the vicinity, of course.

Although I was aware of the existence of Krzepice and Lututów, for many years, I was unable to find them on the map. I also struggled to find information about these towns and on the life of the Jews in particular – in what they had been engaged and what their contribution to the financial life had been.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: The distance between them is 56 km. They are both west of Częstochowa, but Krzepice is much nearer.]

<sup>2</sup> [Ed: It was actually closer to one-third of the city's population.]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: As we very well know, this was hardly the case for the majority of Częstochowa's residents, who worked as simple labourers in all its enterprises, large and small – not to mention the thousands of even less fortunate who inhabited the city's slums. Nevertheless, the residents of Częstochowa obviously seemed quite well-to-do in the eyes of the country folk arriving there seeking a livelihood.]

The old-timers from Poland, whom I approached, had never heard the names of these two small towns and they did not know where they were on Poland's map. Only in 2007 did I reveal details regarding Krzepice and Lututów, as a result of the journey to the extermination camps in Poland.

Following my visit to both towns in July 2009, I found out that, in both of them, there had been a large Jewish population which had developed a unique lifestyle, a social and active life in the realms of commerce, banking and social activities, and that there had also been manual labourers among them.

The two Jewish communities of Krzepice and Lututów, which had flourished and prospered until the outbreak of the Second World War, suffered terribly from the events of the War, from the day it began and until after it had ended. The Jews of the two communities could not return to their homes due to the opposition on part of the local residents, who had taken over their property and did everything they could to prevent their return.

### **The Jewish Community in Krzepice**

Over the course of my years of investigation and, after holding dozens of conversations with natives of the town, I amassed a great deal of information - thanks to the memoirs they wrote, among other things – and they assisted me extensively in finding important details regarding the town of Krzepice where my father was born, as mentioned above.

As I was trying to trace the Jews of the community and lift the veil of fog, I came across a thin booklet which was published by the members of the Committee of Krzepice Jews in Israel<sup>4</sup>. The information in the booklet was written by the members of the committee, in Hebrew, together with Yiddish, which was their spoken language.

The booklet contains eulogistic material, as well as expressions of agony for the loss of the town's Jewish populace. In addition, I also found, in the booklet, details on the activities to commemorate those murdered. However, the committee members were unable to carry out their plan to write *Pinkas Krzepice* – a memorial book for the small town, in which a dynamic and effervescent Jewish society existed for three hundred years, until its deportation and annihilation over the course of the Second World War.

In the course of the conversations I had with the Holocaust survivors, I was given a copy of a document, which Polish Government officials in Warsaw published in 1929<sup>5</sup>. The document surprised me. It contained the names of Krzepice Jews, specifying the liberal professions in which they were engaged. In the listings, I also found the names of my relatives and the names of friends of my father, with whom I was personally acquainted here in Israel, as a young adolescent. The listings were published in two languages: Polish and French.

According to official documents issued by the Polish authorities, Krzepice was established as a royal city of the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and was granted city charter in 1357. According to the municipal by-laws, it is considered a town in the Province of Silesia<sup>6</sup> [*Województwo Śląskie*].

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: See a full English translation of this booklet here: <https://www.czestochowajews.org/history/yizkor-books/krzepice-booklet/>]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: This would be the Polish Business directory of 1929; see here (pp.235-236): <https://iri-poland.org/bizdir/start.htm>]

<sup>6</sup> [TN: This was in modern days – at the time of its foundation, the town belonged to the Province of Kraków (*Województwo Krakowskie*). The Province of Silesia was only created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.]

The fortified castle and the parish church were erected the same year the town was founded, in 1357<sup>7</sup>, by the King of Poland Kazimierz III the Great [Wielki]. His aim was to have the farmers of the vicinity settle there, and to reinforce them with a large Jewish population<sup>8</sup>, which would give the local populace support in the form of banking, industry and commerce.

Being on the Silesian border and with its proximity to the German border, afforded Krzepice a great importance as a border town, with the purpose of deterring any attempt of invasion on part of hostile elements.

Besides the official publication by the Polish Government, I have found accounts written by townspeople who survived the Holocaust, and I put before you the main points:

There was a large Jewish community in Krzepice. According to testimonies found in the church's archives, the first Jews arrived in Krzepice in 1633. They were considered to be the descendants of exiles from Spain.

The actions of the Polish authorities, and the [city] privileges which the King's representatives had granted, as mentioned above, brought about that, in 1939 on the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War, Jewish residents constituted 43% of the town's general population.

In Krzepice, there was no rabbinical "court" representing a specific current in Judaism and there was also no Chassidic *Rebbe* there. The *Chassidim*, who lived in Krzepice, travelled to cities and towns near and far to be close to their *Rebbes*. Among them were followers of Ger [Góra Kalwaria], Aleksander, Pilica and others. The opulent [sic sagacious<sup>9</sup>] ones travelled for *Shabbosim* and holidays to *Rebbe* Mendele of Kock. They spent time with him, dined together with him and listened to words of Torah. Upon their return, they would speak of his sanctity and wondrous [ways].



*The Shule in Krzepice*

The Main Synagogue, the first in Krzepice, was built in 1765. Although I have found no proof of it, I have no doubt that additional synagogues existed, which provided the religious necessities of the town's general Jewish population, and especially in the winter months, in order to save them a long trudge to the Main Synagogue, which was difficult to furnish with appropriate heating due to its dimensions.

As stated [?], the synagogue primarily served the townspeople on *Shabbosim* and holidays, but also on weekdays, many worshippers would congregate there, despite the bad weather and the harsh winter.

The large and ancient synagogue was ruined twice - once during the First World War by the Germans. They removed masonry and other

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<sup>7</sup> [TN: There are several dates for the foundation of the town mentioned in historical sources. According to these sources, the parish church was in fact built in 1357, but the brick castle dates from 1364. It was preceded by a wooden stronghold built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.]

<sup>8</sup> [TN: There is no mention in historical sources of Jews in Krzepice prior to 1633.]

<sup>9</sup> [TN: This paragraph is an almost verbatim transcription of the beginning of the chapter titled "Chassidism in Krzepice," in the aforementioned booklet (p.15 in our translation). The author obviously mistook the Aramaic term "ba'alei-moichin" (sagacious or erudite ones) for "opulent." The Kotzker Rebbe was in fact renowned for his disdain of opulence.]

fittings, and adapted the building to become a stable for horses. The second time, the *shule* was destroyed during the Second World War - again by the Germans. At first, they gathered all the Jews to be sent to Auschwitz and other annihilation camps inside it, after which they demolished the building, leaving only the walls.

In praise of the Polish Government, it should be said that, once they had regained their independence, they conserved the temple - a testimony to and a symbol of the existence of a large Jewish community.



During my visit to Krzepice, I stood in front of the impressive edifice, gazing with reverential awe at the Holy Ark in which the Torah scrolls would have been kept. Before my eyes, the numerous worshippers arise and, among them, are also my kinsmen and my father's friends, who had regarded the temple as a spiritual and communal centre. The routine, however, was severed and life was turned upside-down on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939, with the outbreak of the War.

Krzepice, being [Ed: at that time] on the German border, as stated above, was the first to be invaded. The German army entered the town already in the first hours of the War and set up a headquarters and barracks for the soldiers there.

In the first months of 1940, the Germans established a ghetto of sorts, to which more than eighteen hundred Jews were transferred. The ghetto was managed by the *Judenrat* and the Jewish Police. The majority of the Jews were sent to forced labour. With the liquidation of the ghetto in July 1942, most of the Jews were sent to Auschwitz and to extermination camps. A few were transferred to the Sosnowiec ghetto.

The Polish Government's later publications, concerning Krzepice, do not mention the attempts by Jews to return to the town and resettle it. As mentioned above, these attempts failed - primarily due to opposition on part of Polish rioters and expressions of antisemitism. At the same time, the publications stress the existence of the magnificent synagogue and of the nearby Jewish Cemetery, which is a short walk from it. The synagogue stands next to the bridge crossing the Liswarta River and is situated by the side of the only road familiar to me, which leads to the Jewish Cemetery and which continues outside the town.

Those of my generation, who have visited the site and have stood in front of the remnants of the ancient synagogue, had absolutely no notion that the location of the *shule* is not within Krzepice's [town] limits. The *shule* was actually built in a place called Kuźniczka, which is next to the town. I, too, was unaware of this fact until I met Abraham-Abe Besser, a Holocaust survivor from Krzepice. Abraham is a mild-mannered man, his speech is fluent, and his memory is extraordinary. He was the only one who knew to tell me about the location of the ancient synagogue, and I present this rectification [here] for the first time<sup>10</sup>. (The details of the meeting with Abraham-Abe Besser are presented subsequently, in *Tenth Meeting*.)

### **Following the Traces of the Lututów Jewish Community**

The small town of Lututów is about a three-quarter of an hour's drive from Krzepice. It was granted city charter in 1405. What set Lututów apart from the surrounding cities and towns were the markets and fairs, which attracted many visitors, including Jewish peddlers and merchants.

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<sup>10</sup> [TN: See chapter "The Shule in Kuźniczka"]

In view of the opportunity to maintain commercial relations with the local inhabitants and [especially] once permission was granted to engage in the management of taverns, including the production of non-alcoholic beverages - and even beer and liquor - many Jews decided to take up residence in the town, at first in temporary accommodations, which over the course of the years became permanent. The synagogue and the cemetery, which the Jews established in Lututów, cemented their status as an established community.

The Jewish population expanded and prospered. They began dealing in wool and foodstuffs and developed business connections with numerous commercial centres in Poland, and even abroad. The standing of the Jews also gained importance amongst the Christian populace of the town and the surrounding localities. There was no doubt regarding the local rabbi's status. He was asked, more than once, to settle disputes within the Christian community also.

Improvements to the means of transportation, and the building of new roads which connected all the towns in the vicinity, gave impetus to the commercial and social life. It was possible to transport merchandise from one place to another with great ease and in short lapses of time. The financial situation of the Lututów Jews improved to such an extent, that it was decided to establish the town's first bank - The Jewish Cooperative Credit Bank, which primarily served the Jewish population, but also the locality's other inhabitants. This banking activity constituted yet another tier in the financial development, and in the development of the local commerce, as well as that outside the borders of the province and the country.

The Jewish *kehilla* was managed by *Agudas Yisroel*. Its members joined<sup>11</sup> the Zionist organisations: the General Zionists, Ha'Mizrachi, Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair, Ha'Shomer Ha'Leumi (which was later also called Betar), the Zionist Youth and also the Women's Zionist Organisation. There is no doubt that the Jewish community enjoyed quite a developed, communal life.

Cultural activity also flourished and was mainly focused within the walls of the Tarbut Ivrit [Hebrew Culture] School and within the youth movements which conducted drama groups and, of course, taught the Hebrew language.

My mother, as mentioned above, was extremely proud when she occasionally told me about the achievements of her friends and their activity within the youth groups, when they were required to collect funds from the town's residents and give the money over to the Zionist organisations. This activity met with success not only in the midst of the Jewish populace. According to my mother, more than once, they were able to convince their Christian friends to give donations, and first and foremost the priest – a central and influential figure.

And yet, the fate of the prosperous Jewish community of Lututów was similar to that of the neighbouring cities and towns. Due to its proximity to the border [Ed: at that time], the German troops occupied Lututów already on the second day of the War, on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1939.

The life of the residents was transformed overnight and particularly that of the Jews, who became a target for abuse, oppression and humiliation. Some were driven out from their homes immediately upon occupation, in order to make room to accommodate the German soldiers and to use some of the buildings for storage. The Jews were cruelly taken out of their homes and yet no one among them understood that this was only the preamble to a quest of annihilation, the likes of which had never been in the course of the whole history of mankind.

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<sup>11</sup> [TN: Extremely unlikely.]

The abuse of the Jews was not long in coming. Bearded Jews were made to stand, one in front of another, and to pull out each other's beards. The next phase was the burning of Torah scrolls in the market square. Drunk with their triumph against a defenceless "enemy", the rejoicing Germans celebrated the events of the first days of the invasion, their abuse of Jews and their villainous acts. My own relatives also experienced this type of abuse.

The arrest of the town's worthies - Christians and Jews alike - was a routine procedure. They were taken to the prison in Wieluń and, from there, to the concentration camps. When a few of them returned to Lututów, the marks of the suffering and persecution were acutely evident. Their bodies and souls had been damaged by the abuse and by the slave labour which they had been forced to perform.

The next phase of the Germans' plan was to set up the ghetto. The exact date of its establishment is unknown but, according to testimonies, the number of inhabitants of the ghetto in December 1940 was more than thirteen hundred Jews, some of whom had been brought from nearby towns.

The ghetto was an open area, traversed by a main road. The ghetto's inhabitants were allowed to move about freely, on condition that they had received a permit to do so. They made the best possible use of these permits and they procured the food and essentials which they required for sustenance.

The Jews, who were sent to work outside the ghetto, took a risk when they made contact with the residents who lived near their workplace. In this manner, they were able to smuggle foodstuffs and goods into the ghetto.

The Germans, wishing to get their hands on the property of the Jews, and to loot works of art which remained in their houses, brought some thirty Jews back to Lututów. They were tasked with collecting all the valuable objects and handing them over to the German authorities.

The liquidation of the ghetto began on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1942. Many Jews were shot to death. Others fled and found refuge in the local church, where they barricaded themselves. After several days, and through the intervention of the locality's worthies, they were transferred to the Łódź Ghetto and to forced labour in Wieluń. Over the course of the years, the ghetto's population diminished, until it was liquidated in August 1944.

Only about twenty Jews returned to Lututów after the Second World War. The remnants-survivors stood before an extremely, grim reality. Their houses had been seized by their Polish neighbours. The synagogue had been partly destroyed and what was left of it had been turned into a warehouse for scrap. Later, the building was renovated and converted into an industrial structure. The Jewish school, too, had been destroyed and not a trace remains of the cemetery.

Besides their property having been looted, the returning Jews were treated degradingly and, sometimes, were physically injured by local rioters. The antisemitism continued in full force. It was clear to all that they were no longer welcome. Their place was no longer there.

