

## Icyk-Mendel Epsztajn

Icek-Mendel Epsztajn was one of Częstochowa's worthy communal activists. He was born on 8<sup>th</sup> February 1873 in Wolbrom to Lajbisz-Josef and Sura-Itla née Ryterman<sup>1</sup>. The family is descended from the Rebbes of Pińczów.

As a fourteen-year-old boy, he left home and studied in a series of *yeshivas*, such as in Płock, Łódź and others, concurrently learning the trade of "*Weinküferei*" (winemaking). At the age of twenty-one, he was mobilised into the cavalry of the Russian army, serving in Połtawa and Charków. He also played the clarinet in the army orchestra.

After military service, he came to Częstochowa where, in 1900, he married Frajdla-Hinda, the daughter of the jeweller Abram Zylbersztajn. He opened a wine shop at Stary Rynek 14, in Gajsler's building and, later, at Nowy Rynek 2. He established two factories, where liqueur was produced - one in Łódź on ul. Kilińskiego and the other in Jędrzejów.

Being financially well off, he took an interest in all communal issues, spending large sums of money towards these purposes. He belonged to the *Mizrachi* Party and was its representative on the *Kehilla* Council. As founder of the Retailers and Stallholders Union, he represented the association in the assessment committee of the Taxation Bureau, acting extensively in this arena. In recognition of his contributions as president of the union and for his work in the assessment committee, he was awarded a gold medal.

His family consisted of six children, four sons and two daughters, one of whom is today's lawyer, Estera Epsztajn. She also worked in the union as a legal advisor and held popular talks on the [legal] codes of commerce and obligations [thereof] at the union's specially organised courses, headed by Dr Filip Axer.

Icyk-Mendel Epsztajn, with his tall stature and long, patriarchal beard, was the personification of a communal personality. He contributed financially to the establishment of the Jewish Gimnazjum on ul. Dąbrowskiego and was a member of the parents' committee, because his children studied there.

As a strictly religious Jew, he truly sacrificed himself for two institutions - the *Hachnuses Orchim* [Hospitality to Wayfarers] on ul. Garncarska and the ritual bath on ul. Garibaldiiego. When the *Hachnuses Orchim* building was constructed, the names of the founders were written on a [piece of] parchment. This parchment was put inside a bottle and, when the laying of the cornerstone was celebrated, the bottle was built into it. Among the names of the founders was the name of Icyk-Mendel Epsztajn. Marking the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institution, the longstanding president was presented with a gold medal. Photographs were taken of the management committee, from which a collective picture was made and hung in the *Hachnuses Orchim* and in the homes of the members.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: The surname appears as such in the Częstochowa records available on JRI-Poland, but once as "Ryter" and once as "Fiterman" (probably an error in transcription) in the Wolbrom records.]

He was [also] one of the founders of *Beis Lechem* [House of Bread] and was its president for many years. He was also active in *Linas Ha'Tzedek*<sup>2</sup> and the *Dobroczytność* (Charity) Society.

In 1920, when *Hallerczykes*<sup>3</sup> perpetrated pogroms and cut off the beards of Jews, Icyk-Mendel Epsztajn prepared himself for resistance, setting up big, heavy champagne bottles behind the sideboard in his wine shop at Nowy Rynek 2 as a means of defence. When the Jewish butchers found out about their president's preparations, they also organised themselves appropriately. The *Hallerczykes*, who arrived in great numbers, encountered a proper resistance on the part of the butchers and, realising how things stood, they disappeared, never to return.

When the Nazi forces conquered Częstochowa, they took the picture from *Hachnuses Orchim* and sent it off to Julius Streicher, who printed the picture in *Der Stürmer*, with the following caption: "*The greatest Jewish murderers and criminals in Częstochowa*".

During the period of the War, Icyk-Mendel Epsztajn recognised the tragic Jewish reality and, therefore, rejected every proposal to work together with the *Judenrat*.

When the tragic *akcje* were taking place, he took with him his white *kittel*<sup>4</sup>, prayer-shawl, phylacteries and a *machzor*<sup>5</sup>. He refused to hide in a bunker, declaring, "I shall die sanctifying the name [of God] and the [Jewish] people; with my sacrifice, I shall redeem the young generation".

On the day of *Simchas Torah*, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1942, he was taken from the *Hachnuses Orchim* building to a selection on ul. Nadrzeczna, which was conducted by the murderer of Jews, Rohn. He, the sixty-nine-year-old Jewish communal activist and his sixty-five-year-old wife Frajdla-Hinda were then sent away to Treblinka.

Of his six children, one son - Gustaw (Gutman) - died of natural causes, and three sons were shot - Jakub and Duwcie (Majer-Dawid) in Częstochowa and Nuchim (Natek) in the Dora concentration camp. The two daughters survived – the lawyer Estera Epsztajn, who is a judge in the central honorary court of the Association of Liberated Jews in the US Zone in Germany in Munich and her sister Tamara Epsztajn.

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: Heb., lit. "Lodgings of Righteousness"; according to *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. I, col.390, "This institution set itself as its main task to recruit members who were capable and also willing to take upon themselves the great mitzve of visiting the sick, and to participate in the "night watches" in the hospitals, as well as in the private homes of the severely ill, whose families were themselves no longer able to deal with their illness, day and night."]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: Polish troops under the command of Józef Haller.]

<sup>4</sup> [TN: Ritual robe worn on Yom Kippur.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: Special prayer-book with the holiday liturgy, which differs from the everyday one.]