

Isroel¹-Josef Kutner z''l



Photo №.56

Isroel-Josef Kutner z''l was, without doubt, one of the interesting figures and a representative of the religious life during the era of extermination under Hitler's brutal regime.

He was born in 1916 and, right from the first minute of his life, he became an orphan - his mother died in childbirth. From his first living moments, he was the embodiment of suffering, gloom and sorrow and, at the same time, to everyone's amazement, he had a sharpness of mind that bordered on the pinnacle of human genius.

As a boy of four, he read fluently and began to learn *chumash* [Pentateuch]. While children his age were playing and being cuddled by their mothers, he devoted all his time to study. At the age of nine, he attended the renowned Radoszyce Yeshiva [Talmud academy] in Łódź, distinguishing himself from all the pupils. The Rabbi of Radoszyce *shlita*², amazed with this pupil, brought him to Radoszyce, where he diligently studied the Talmud and, at the age of twelve, received a rabbinical diploma³. He continued studying, personifying Ch.N. Bialik's character "*Ha'Masmid*"⁴, who had formed a perpetual bond with the study-hall and the Talmud.

¹ [TN: We have rendered his name verbatim as it appears in the Latin-character original, which is written according to the Lithuanian Yiddish pronunciation, but in Poland he would have definitely been called "Srul-Josef".]

² [TN: Heb. acronym meaning "may he live many long and good days"; its use here implies that said rabbi survived the War and was alive when the book was printed in 1948. However, we have found no record of a Rabbi of Radoszyce who survived the Holocaust. There were two brothers with the surname Finkler – Reb Icchok was the Rebbe of Radoszyce and Reb Kalman was the rabbi thereof – but the former was executed in the Skarżysko-Kamienna labour camp and the latter in Treblinka.]

³ [TN: It is quite unprecedented that a mere child should be granted a certificate to serve as a rabbi.]

⁴ [TN: Heb., "the assiduous (student)".]

At the age of seventeen, he married the daughter of the *shoichet* [ritual slaughterer] of Kaminka⁵ and learnt the practical aspects of this profession - *shechitah* [rit. slaughter]. Until the outbreak of the War, he engaged in commerce, studied day and night and was a frequent guest of the Gerer Rebbe.

The War breaks out. He does everything possible to provide for his family - his wife and three fine little children. During the period of the extermination of the Jews in Częstochowa, he loses his wife and children, who are sent away by Degenhardt, along with thousands of others, to Treblinka. His heart bleeds and aches for the general tragedy of the Jewish people and also for his personal tragedy. This can be read in his pale, brooding countenance during the period of the "Small Ghetto". He works in the workshops as a sock-maker with a small circular [knitting] machine, with which he is "covered" from going to work in the HASAG factories, where everyone is terrorised and victimised. He forms a *minyán* [prayer quorum] and, every single day, prayer services are held at his home on ul. Nadrzeczna, where they also learn a *Daf Yomi*⁶.

During the tense days of 1st, 2nd and 3rd May 1943, when everyone was seeking ways and means to evade the impending peril⁷, Isroel-Josef Kutner sat by the Talmud and studied. When they asked him what he planned to do and how he could sit unperturbed, he replied calmly, "If that is the will of the Creator of the World, I shall not oppose it. I am no better and no worse than my brothers and sisters. If destiny wishes me to give my life, I am ready".

Following the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto" he is barracked in HASAG-Pelcery, where he is the pillar of the religious life. He arranges a *minyán* for prayers and a *Daf Yomi* is studied every day. He bakes *matzos* for Pesach, obtains a Torah scroll, a *megilah*⁸, prayer-shawls, phylacteries, an *esrog*⁹, a *shofar*¹⁰, he builds a *sukkah*¹¹ and carries out the functions of cantor, Talmud teacher and rabbinical judge.

On 15th January 1945, along with all his supporters, he is evacuated to Buchenwald. Tragic days come – it is worse and more bitter every day. It becomes impossible to bear the spiritual and physical pain. Together with other Częstochowers, he is sent on to Dora[-Mittelbau] and works in the large tunnel as a transport labourer, hauling carts with cargo. There is already a lack of heart and physical ability to withstand the pain. Isroel-Josef Kutner comforts everyone, [telling them] that liberation would come quickly. He made a promise that, if he survived and the Nazi defeat came, he would become more religious than he had been until then.

On 1st April 1945, he is evacuated to Bergen-Belsen. He is together with everyone in the cattle wagons for eight days and eight nights, without a bite of bread and with no water. On 15th April 1945, liberation comes. On the third day, following Hitler's defeat, to everyone's

⁵ [TN: Probably Kamionka in Polish; as there are fifty localities with this name throughout Poland, we have not been able to ascertain which of them was the one in question.]

⁶ [TN: Heb., "Daily Page"; a daily regimen undertaken to study the Babylonian Talmud one folio each day.]

⁷ [TN: As mentioned above on p.241, "On 1st May 1943, he [Degenhardt] ordered the ghetto to be surrounded with a large number of guards and that no one be let out to work. His intention then was to annihilate the last Częstochowa Jews."]

⁸ [TN: The Book of Esther in scroll form, which is read on Purim.]

⁹ [TN: Heb., citron; one of the four species – palm branch, myrtle, willow and citron – which are bound together and waved in a special ceremony each day of the Sukkos holiday, excluding Shabbes. Citrons are particularly hard to come by, even in peacetime.]

¹⁰ [TN: Ritual ram's horn blown on the High Holidays.]

¹¹ [TN: A temporary hut constructed for use during the festival of Sukkos.]

amazement, he acquires a pair of phylacteries and, a shortly after, a prayer-shawl. He gradually obtains all the [religious] paraphernalia.

He arrives in Celle near Hannover and builds up the Jewish religious life, serving as cantor and *shoichet*. He sets himself the goal of providing the Jewish population in the British Zone with kosher meat. He organises the kosher *shechitah* in the entire British Zone and travels around all the Jewish centres, such as Hannover, Bergen-Belsen, Lüneburg, Kaunitz, Hamburg and any location where Jews live, to fulfil the task he set himself.

On 14th Elul 5706 ([10th September] 1946), he married his cousin Bronia Abramowicz and, ten days later, travelling in his own car to Hamburg to provide his brethren with kosher meat, a catastrophe happened, in which he paid with his life. He was brought to Celle, where his friend, the Rabbi of Celle, Rabbi Olewski *shlita*, eulogised him in the synagogue. Isroel-Josef Kutner was buried in Celle on Friday, 24th Elul 5706 ([20th September] 1946).