

Urn Shames

In Częstochowa, a special role was played by the *shamoshim*. One of the most interesting was Urn *Shames* (Aron Pelc). He was the city of Częstochowa's living ledger, who remembered the entire history of the city since its beginning. He was on familiar terms with everyone, having participated in all their circumcisions and having known each of them from childhood. He remembered everyone's *yuhrzeiten* (death anniversaries), and would make the date of the *yuhrzeit* known to them [i.e., the mourners].

Every *Shabbes*, at sundown, he would fall into a state of ecstasy and recount remarkable stories about the city. He was a master storyteller and would often drive his listeners to tears or laughter.

Regarding the establishment of [Jewish] Częstochowa, he recounted that, at the start, it was [just] a small provincial *shtetl* and when, there was a deceased person there, they had to be taken to Janów, a distance of twenty-four kilometres from Częstochowa. One Saturday night, the *Chevra Kadisha* was transporting a body in a handcart, the *tachrichim* [burial furnishings] became entangled in one of the cart's axles, and the corpse rose from the dead¹. The *Chevra Kadisha* went to the rabbi to discuss matters, and it was then decided to establish a cemetery of their own.

He accurately demarked the boundaries of the Jewish ghetto from the 18th century - namely, there was a ghetto gate between the houses of Kalman Rajcher and Gwircman. Once, a tremendous fire broke out in the ghetto and, when the flames reached the house where the great Torah scholar [Reb] Iczke *Soifer* [scribe] was sitting, the fire stopped by itself. [Reb] Iczke *Soifer* did not leave that house till the day he died.

[He also recounted that once,] a cholera epidemic broke out in Częstochowa. A multitude of people perished. The Russian Cossacks, wishing to avert the catastrophe, quite simply buried the sick while they were still alive. [Then] Urn *Shames* came up with an idea, according to the Jewish custom, to hold a wedding in the graveyard. They sought out a poor groom, Icek-Majer Mic – a Jew with a long, black beard, who could hardly walk on his feet, because they had been frozen near Shanghai in the Russo-Japanese War. He knew Chinese well and busied himself with collecting alms. He would stand by the Synagogue, by the Study-Hall, and on 1st Elul at the "Good Place"². The "in-laws", who arranged the wedding, were the old Pankowski and Icek-Mendel Birenholc. After that, the epidemic stopped.

Urn *Shames* liked to sometimes "lay hold" of leading a prayer service from the pulpit. He would wrap his neck with a scarf and recite the *Thirteen Attributes* of the *Sliches* with heart and passion, and he also liked to lead the *Minche* prayer on Yom Kippur. It sometimes happened that one of the *balebatim* would "snatch" the prayer from him. Urn *Shames* would get annoyed, and take revenge on him during the *Hakufes*³. Urn *Shames* was the one who

¹ [TN: Viz. was pulled upright in a sitting position. See a slightly different version in *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. I, col. 137.]

² [TN: Euphemism for cemetery.]

³ [TN: Heb., "Circles"; on *Simchas Torah*, the custom is to take the Torah scrolls out of the Ark and to encircle the reader's platform with great joy, singing and dancing. All those present are called to the Torah for a short reading, by their name and father's name.]

called to the *Hakufes*, because he knew everyone's name, that of his father and even that of his grandfather.

He was fond of the little fellows who came to the prayer services, and especially those who pushed their way to the front. He would give the children wine from the *Kiddush*⁴, and they both respected and loved him.

He kept the records of the Jews and knew exactly where each person was buried - in which lane, which row, and the number of the grave.

Urn Shames had also been a crony of the Jewish revolutionary from 1905 - Icek "*Shlize*" ["The Slippery"]. He had died in battle and a revolver was carved on his headstone. Urn *Shames* would tell stories about him in connection with the fight for freedom⁵.

It is a pity that Urn *Shames'* stories were not immortalised [in written form] and that these remarkable episodes in the Jewish life in Częstochowa vanished with his death. Urn's successor was his son-in-law, a progressive man with experience in political activity in the leftist *Poalei Zion* Party. He had begun to follow in the footsteps of his father-in-law – but the War destroyed everything.

⁴ [TN: Ceremony with food and drink held at the synagogue following the morning service on Shabbes and Holidays.]

⁵ [TN: In the book "Czenstochov" (1958), in "A Letter to the Editors from Dr Benjamin Orenstein", the author writes the following: "In my book, on p.360, it is stated that Icyk "Shlize" fell in 1905 as a revolutionary. This is incorrect. What should be, is that Icyk "Shlize" was a ruling figure of the underworld – a "Good Boy" [viz. gangster] – who caused huge troubles for the organised Jewish movement [early Socialists]. He collaborated with the [Tsarist Russian] Secret Police, [and] was the cause for the arrests of organisers of the movement for the fight against Tsarism. The SS [Zionist Socialist Workers Party] Movement undertook a war against the informers – issuing death sentences upon them. A death sentence of this kind was issued against Icyk "Shlize." The sentence was carried out, and Icyk "Shlize" died as a traitor – not as a revolutionary. It is worthwhile to note that those who carried this assassination out are now alive, and they live in the US. (Clearly, the circumstances do not allow us to publish the names of the assassins.)"]

