

Abram Litman

A Chassidic Demonstration

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It was after the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. German military had settled in Częstochowa and had begun implementing the “housekeeping” of the city. Public notices, with directives, began to appear, one after the other - this is permitted and that is forbidden. There were much more things “Forbidden” than were “Permitted”.

The Germans knew that they were in enemy-territory. German militarism had taken the entire Polish territory into its iron paws and had implemented a military dictatorship which held the Polish populace in great fear.

The taking of Poland had come with the loss of little German blood, because [Grand Duke] Nikolai Nikolayevich, head of Tsar Nikolai’s armies, ordered the Russian military to retreat “deep inland”. The Russians ran and the Germans always followed behind.

The German General Staff’s objective was to take Ukraine, the land plump with food, which could protect the “Beloved Fatherland” from hunger.

But what were they to do until they reached Ukraine? Who knew when they would drag themselves there? The German General Staff did not think long and issued an order to:

“... to take the produce of Poland’s fields - the grain, the beasts, the fowl, the butter and the cheese – for the Fatherland needs be sated! No hunger must be suffered in Germany.”

Częstochowa immediately felt the taste of Kaiser Wilhelm’s politics - shops were empty of food - there were less and less foodstuffs. People began starving. Hunger brought all kinds of illnesses - abdominal typhus, spotted typhus [viz. fever], swollen abdomens, jaundice and other calamities. The mortality rate was so high, that the German authorities feared for their own troops, which were streaming incessantly into Poland.

“What should be done to prevent the Kaiser’s troops from being subjected to the epidemics?” – the German General Staff racked their brains - the suffering of the Polish population was the least of their concerns.

Firstly, the German commander in Częstochowa took to the expedient which was called “hygiene”. The entire city - and the people - was to be washed and scrubbed. Every day, another section of the city was closed off and the people were led into the baths. Hair was shaven off heads and old and young were disinfected.

For Jews, going to the *mikvah* [bathhouse], in honour of *Shabbes* or a holiday, was no new thing. But to be dragged to the baths in such manner on regular weekdays? *That*, from the time the city had first appeared on the map of Russian Poland, Częstochowa had never seen.

The German authorities very well knew that cleaning and scrubbing the population was practically to no avail in stopping epidemics in the city. Meaning that, besides hygiene measures, it was also

necessary to see to it that the populace should not starve, that they should have something to eat – even if only bread and potatoes.

The leaders of the German Ministry of the Economy were racking their brains - What to do to prevent the German Army from catching the typhus bacillus? The whole army could end up in hospital, instead of marching on [St.] Petersburg. What could be done against the epidemics?

The population in occupied Poland had no food. “That’s true, because the Fatherland has very simply taken away all the food from Poland, you know ...”*

It was decided in Berlin’s “high windows” that the Polish populace were to receive allocations of bread and potatoes in order to keep body and soul together.

Upper class people in Poland did not have much to worry about. They managed well enough in the black market, where they procured not only bread and potatoes, but also geese, butter and cheese. The prices were exorbitant, but anything could be purchased for money. But what was to be done with the workers [and] the paupers?

The population was divided into districts, within which bread and potatoes were sold at affordable prices. True, the bread was as black as coal, or yellow like clay, because the flour was mixed with maize and other devilries, but the queues to receive bread stretched the entire width and length of Częstochowa. Wherever one went, and wherever one stood, one saw queues, queues, queues ...

The Częstochowa City *Elders* implemented a system to enable the purchase of potatoes: once a week, each inhabitant of the district was required to stand in line to receive his allocation. If one failed to come to get the potatoes on the appointed day, one could only come the following week and, until then, starve.

The following episode once took place in our Częstochowa:

While the *Rebbe* Reb Awigdorl’s *Chassidim* were standing wrapped in their prayer-shawls praying the *Shabbes* [morning] Silent Prayer, a Jew woman ran in with great wailing and cried out in high tones, “There is a great calamity in town! Jews are desecrating *Shabbes* in public! How can you pray, when Jews stand in line and buy potatoes on *Shabbes*? *Rebbe*, why do you say nothing?”

A tumult [and] stampede ensued in the study-hall. The *Rebbe* had not yet completed the Silent Prayer. He waved his hands about. One Jew, with a black beard and large hands, ran to the table, banged on a *Chumash* [individual volume of the five Pentateuch books], and said the following:

“Jews! We cannot allow this! It’s a desecration of God’s name! What good is our praying, if Jews are sadly desecrating *Shabbes* in public?”

Soon a shout was heard, “Let’s go, in our prayer-shawls, to the rabbi Reb Nuchem Asz at the synagogue, for he should intervene with the authorities so that the Jews should not need to desecrate *Shabbes* - it’s the end of the world, *Rebbe*!”

The *Rebbe* concluded the Silent Prayer. The tumult heated up. The *Chassidim* ran into the study-hall, from one bench to another, not being able to settle down. And in the

* [TN: With quotation marks in the original; apparently in German, not Yiddish.]

commotion, I heard the *Rebbe* say to my father, “Majer-Jojne, what do you think we should do? Should we perhaps go to the rabbi about this issue?”

My father began arguing that [the Talmud says that] “*The law of the kingdom is the law*” [Bava Kamma 113a], that the laws of the country apply to Jews as well, that it was a question of life and death [which takes precedence over all the commandments], [that] the Jews were starving and they were therefore, sadly, forced to buy the potatoes on *Shabbes*. If the commander could be persuaded to annul the decree, it would be good, but who knew if that was possible?

At this point, the *Chassidim* cut off my father’s words. They went up to the *Rebbe*, took him by the arms and thus led him out to the street. The crowd pressed forward behind the *Rebbe* and began marching, in their prayer-shawls, to the Old Synagogue - to the official rabbi, Reb Nachum Asz.

I went along with the congregation. Father held me by the hand. He was talking with the crowd the entire time, “How is this the rabbi’s fault? After all, it’s a *German* decree. There is nothing that we can do. It is a question of life and death”.

When the demonstrators reached the synagogue, they forced themselves inside and ran to the table. A great tumult ensued. They shouted, clamoured, gesticulated and waved their hands about at the rabbi that he should give some answer.

Reb Awigdor’l climbed the steps to the Holy Ark [and] brought his claims with tears in his eyes.

The rabbi stood pale-faced, stroking his long, white beard and spoke with the *Rebbe*. The *Rebbe* silenced his followers. It became as quiet as before *Kol Nidrei* and the rabbi raised his hands, smoothed his beard and with a trembling voice murmured, “It is a governmental decree - I shall do everything in my power to annul this decree. It is wartime now - bear that in mind. May God help me succeed in persuading the commander. I shall, gentlemen”.

The *Rebbe* began leaving the synagogue. The *Chassidim* followed the *Rebbe* with broken hearts.

That was the first time when I, a lad of thirteen, had participated in a demonstration against the government.