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Jakub Frank in Częstochowa (an historical chapter)

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The chapter which the Frankists wrote in Jewish history, in the second half of the 18th century, is so alien and contradictory to the Jewish spirit, so unbelievable and incomprehensible, that the mind is utterly unable to grasp how this could have been possible at all. Among the Jews, there had been, at various periods, an array of movements which were incompatible with the Jewish teachings. There was, for example, a cult such as the Karaites, who contested the rabbinical interpretations of the Torah. There were also cults which were involved with mysticism and metaphysics. But never (since the times of the first Temple, when some Jews worshipped several gods) had there been, among the Jews, such a sect in which promiscuousness and debauchery should be elevated into [Godly] precepts and good deeds. And by whom? - by Jewish Torah scholars and former rabbis.

We cannot be but astounded, as we read the contemporary reports of how pious Jews, scholars, Jews with beards and sidelocks who had, until then, dedicated themselves to Torah [study] and the service of God, and who only studied and prayed, suddenly they threw this all away and invited the public to [engage in] sex orgies, and to do so openly, in front of all. It is truly incredible that staunch religious zealots, who were very distant from worldliness and who had until then been careful not to commit even the smallest sin, suddenly became so depraved as to sleep openly with their daughters and to instruct their wives to do the same with their sons, and to generally engage in such wild relationships of passion, that we cannot put it all on paper.



Was this all under the hypnosis of the seducer Jakub Frank? Did he, that depraved soul and empty ignoramus, influence the Jews to such an extent, with his statements, that he was the Messiah? But where were their eyes and where [was] their common sense to see that this soul, who was absorbed in pure lust from his head to his feet, was not a saint and that they must not allow themselves to be led astray by him?

And how far did they go? – to apostasy, indeed. The former rabbi, Elisze Szor, a grandson of the *Tvuos Shor* [The Bull's Fodder], and his [two] sons, also rabbis, all let themselves be misled by this same soul up to the door of the priest in Częstochowa, where he sprinkled them with Christian holy water. And why are just these three [mentioned]? Ten thousand Jews converted in just a short time. Some of them settled in Kamieniec Podolski [Ukraine], while others in Częstochowa - to be near their master.

Had they completely lost their minds? Did they know no boundaries at all? Had everything, for them, truly become a free-for-all? Did this Jakub Frank really have such a hypnotic influence on them? And how can one comprehend that these Jews became denouncers and makers of false accusations, and agitated with the priests that the Talmud should be burned on bonfires in the middle of the day? How can one comprehend that these former zealots ran around throughout Jewish houses, seizing a Jewish [religious] book wherever they could and taking it away to be burned?

More than one great psychologist and expert on the human soul [viz. psyche] toils to grasp what took place here and cannot attain any answer. An explanation of this extraordinary phenomenon

could open a path to understanding how far a person may stumble, how deep a person may fall, due to the unlimited influence of a modern-day sorcerer. Only once we achieve this, can we be able to comprehend many of the secrets of the human soul.



But be it as it may, Jewish settlement in Częstochowa begins with this very same odd and unique phenomenon as in Jewish life in Diaspora lands. From the moment Jakub Frank was imprisoned in the Częstochowa fortress in 1760, and until 1772 when he was released from there, Częstochowa thronged with Jews. Jewish apostates were drawn to it, meaning Jews who had already earlier converted to Christianity and who travelled there to see their master, Jakub Frank. Other Jews also travelled there with the idea of converting there, in the presence of their master. Yet another kind of Jew also came with no intention of converting, but travelled there in order to see their relatives, who were there due to family affairs or for business.

There was a tumult of Jews travelling there and also of those travelling back. During those thirteen years, it was always teeming with Jews there.

This was news [indeed] as, up until then, no Jews had been allowed in Częstochowa. At a time when in all the surrounding towns there had already been Jewish communities for years, there was no such community in Częstochowa. This was due to the fact that the monks did not wish it. Częstochowa was already famed in Christendom as a holy city. Jasna Góra - the little Bright Mountain - on which the monastery had been built, had already become a symbol in the eyes of the departing pious Christian [visitors]. The image of the Holy Mother, which performed miracles, was already popular in the entire surrounding area and it was feared lest the keen Jewish eye should perceive something different, lest it should, at some time, disrupt the legendary holiness.

And just then, the Frankist commotion began. Jews came and Jews travelled away. [There were] Jews on the road to Częstochowa and from it, and some of these Jews remained there. Many settled there - converted, about-to-be-converted and unconverted.

The first to convert were the sons of Rabbi Elisze Szor, who were the leaders of the whole movement. Szlojme Szor changed his name to Franciszek Wołowski [and] Nussen Szor now called himself Michał Wołowski. Jakub Frank himself converted in Warsaw and he wished none other than King Augustus III of Poland to be his godfather. Afterwards, his wife and his daughter Chaja converted. Other Jews, who converted, received the surnames - Dembrowski, Działyński, Wołyński, Zaleski, Brzeziński [or Dobrzyński?]^{*} and many others.

However, many one these Jews had family members who did not wish to convert [yet] and they remained in Częstochowa. The idea was that they first needed to be prepared for conversion. When, after thirteen years, Jakub Frank was released from the fortress, because the Russians who had conquered Częstochowa freed him, he went to Germany. But many of the Jews stayed in Częstochowa and those who had not converted did not think about it anymore. Even those, who had converted, became Jews again or lived lives of "Conversos". They observed Judaism discreetly and brought their children up as Jews, even if they themselves remained good Christians in public.

This explains why, among the Jews, there were many with Polish surnames. They were usually the children of those Frankists who had switched sides. They later regretted this, but it was irreversible.

^{*} [TN: ווארבדזשינסקי in the original Yiddish; almost definitely a misprint.]

As the years passed, many of these families forgot about their great-grandparents, who had let themselves be led astray onto the path to apostasy, and the Jewish community also forgot that sad chapter, and these Jews retained their Judaism, despite their Polish surnames.



However, notwithstanding the whole tumult of the Jewish comings and goings during those thirteen years when Jews began coming to Częstochowa and despite the fact that, according to the testimony of Polish governmental officials and of clerics, many of the converted Jews there returned to Judaism in that period, by the end of the 18th century very few Jews remained in city. Thus, for instance, the small Jewish community of the nearby *shtetl* of Janów had already had, for a long time, a spacious synagogue and its own Jewish cemetery. But, as yet, Częstochowa had nothing - no synagogue, no cemetery, nor any other form of Jewish communal life.

In that period, Częstochowa belonged to Prussia and the Germans ruled there in a Prussian manner. When Napoleon created the Duchy of Warsaw (and Częstochowa belonged to this duchy), Jewish life began in that city. From this time, we have the first mention of a synagogue for prayer in Częstochowa. The activity towards such synagogue first began as late as 1808. Nobody had even thought of a cemetery at that time.

Soon, a new phenomenon emerged, which was very reminiscent of the Frankist days. It seemed as if the seed which the Frankists had sown had produced "fruit". Once again, among the small number of Jews who were there, a conversion movement began in Częstochowa. Many of those Jews who had been followers of Frank and who had decided to become Jews again when Frank travelled away from Częstochowa, later regretted it and returned to Christianity. Still others threw the last bit of Judaism out of their homes and prepared for conversion. The movement was particularly strong amongst the children of the converts, who were raised as Christians and who had had the benefit of very little instruction in Judaism, as the community was a small one. There was no synagogue or any Jewish life to be noticed.

This led many of the Frankist children, whom their parents would have made Jews again or who had themselves become Jews, to relinquish their bonds with Jews and Judaism, and to convert. This plague of apostasy cast dread over all the Jewish communities surrounding Częstochowa and the name "*Częstochower shmadnikes*" [apostates] spread everywhere throughout all the Jewish *shtetls* in the entire region. The *shmadnikes* even introduced a fashion of not changing the Jewish surname completely, but adding the ending "owski". Thus, for instance, if someone named Balsam converted, he gave himself the surname of Balsamowski. Another, named Wislic, would name himself Wislicki, and on it went. In this manner, Jakubowicz became Jakubowski and Icek became Ickowski, and so on with all other names.

The new settlement in Częstochowa was without a leader. There was no rabbi, no [religious] judge, no Halachic authority, no cantor [and] no ritual slaughterer. But all these things were to be found in the surrounding *shtetls*. Therefore, kosher meat would be brought into Częstochowa from Janów. For the High Holidays, they would travel to the surrounding *shtetls* to pray there. In Częstochowa, there was no preacher and no leader. This greatly contributed to the continuation, for some time, of the epidemic of apostasy.

It may be, however, that it was also the plague of conversion which opened the eyes of the small number of Jews who were there to ponder on this. They began making an effort to create a Jewish communal life in Częstochowa.

At the beginning of the 19th century, we see a great change there in a very short time. From a *shtetl*, which greatly lagged behind in Jewish matters, a fine Jewish community grew very rapidly. A synagogue was built and, shortly afterwards, a study-hall. A cemetery was purchased and Jewish communal institutions were established. The first, naturally, was the *Chevra Kadisha*, but it was followed by many others - not only for the dead, but also for the living.

So the following verse may be cited when referring to Częstochowa: *Out of the strong came forth sweetness* [Judges 14:14]. From the evil phenomenon of the Frankists, from their conversion processions to Częstochowa, there emerged the fact that, in the very city in which no Jews were allowed, a great Jewish settlement was formed which, in 1939, before its destruction by Hitler, was the finest in the entire region. From a *minyan* [viz. 10 men] of Jews, Częstochowa became a *city and a mother in Israel* [2 Samuel 20:19] and, with its rabbis and scholars, with its philanthropists and institutions, it gained a foremost place in Jewish life in Poland. This makes the sorrow over its destruction even deeper.