

Raphael Federman

## Szmul Frank and His Family

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In my book *On the Shores of the Warta and East River*, I tell how with Josef, the book's protagonist, all the children from the *shtieblech* of Rozprza *Chassidim* socialised, due to the fine Cossack dance he performed every *Simchas Torah*. One of these friends was Szmul, who stuck together with Josef, despite being more studious than him.

This Szmul is no longer among the living. His full name is Szmul Frank and who, among the Częstochowa townspeople, did not know Szmul Frank?

In the kaleidoscopic gallery of the Częstochowa Jews there were a considerable number of *Rebbes*, cantors, *melamdim* [*cheder* teachers], philanthropists and community activists from various political parties about whom much has already been written and, presumably, more shall yet be written. They earned it well not to be so hastily forgotten.

One of these unique and popular people, in bygone Częstochowa, was Szmul Frank.

In the city, the young and the old knew him. And what wonder is that? He was an actor, a workers' leader, a community activist and the editor of the Jewish newspaper in Częstochowa.

For many years, I worked with Szmul Frank and so I considered it my sacred duty to tell, in detail, about him and his family.

Szmul's father, Icze Majer, hailed from Truskolasy, three [sic thirteen] miles from Częstochowa. He was the son of Mojsze *Shoichet* from Truskolasy. Szmul's mother was named Alte Chaja and she was a native of Częstochowa. She was the daughter of the renowned *melamed* Icek Ajzik Berkowicz. He was nicknamed "Ajzik *Mirze*" [?]. In those days, when a working-class Jew went before the pulpit to lead the prayer at the municipal synagogue and showed that he knew the meaning of the [Hebrew] words, people would say, "He has obviously studied with Ajzik *Mirze*!"

The Frank family lived in an inherited house on ul. Garncarska 59. This house had four rooms. Icze Majer later set about building a larger house, which contained twenty rooms. Near this building was the house which belonged to the lame Częstochowski. Following the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto" and after almost all the houses on ul. Garncarska had been demolished by the German Nazis, these two houses remained miraculously whole.

Icze Majer was a trader in raw leather, furs and small skins. From the *shtiebel* of the Rozprza *Chassidim*, which was arranged in Icze Majer Frank's building and where I used to pray as a boy with my father, peace be upon him, the prayer-leaders on holidays have particularly remained in my memory. But Reb Icze Majer's beautiful prayers have remained the most intensely in my memory. Reb Icze Majer was a tall [man] and always with a pipe in his mouth. The *Chassidim* looked up to Icze Majer with great deference! Icze Majer had the characteristic of often raising up his brow and meeting us small children with a mock-stern glare. With us little boys, this look of his elicited loud laughter. But we would immediately move out of his way and clear the path for him to pass. Some of the children were scared of his glare and his gait. I was very much afraid of Icze Majer, due to the following incident:

I remember [once], when his eldest son Josel, who was at the time already a grown lad with curled sidelocks, had disobeyed his father in something [and] had received from him such a buffeting that one of his teeth fell out. Yes, Icze Majer was extremely strict with his children, upon whom he literally cast fear with just one look!

From my childhood years, I remember particularly well Icze Majer's two sons - Josel and Szmul. Josel was a studier - a *yeshiva*-lad. He was much older than me and I was, therefore, distanced from him. Nowadays, I see him in the character of the *yeshiva* student Chonon in S. Ansky's [play *The*] *Dybbuk*. Josel left this world, in 1919, at the age of thirty-two. His untimely death was a great tragedy for the Frank family. Among the *Rozprzer Chassidim*, the demise of Josel's the young prodigy was greatly mourned.

Josel left a heir, Srul Mojsze'le, who already, as a child, displayed his father's genius.

Josel had three children. The eldest son, Srul Mojsze'le, born in 1908, was small of build and frail in health. He was famed as a boy with an astounding memory. When he was six years old, it was already known in Częstochowa that he could accurately calculate the days of the Jewish calendar according to the dates of the non-Jewish one, even when he was given a date from years earlier. He was able, for instance, to immediately answer the question, "When was the tenth day of Nisan, fifty-four years ago?" He even answered, exactly, on what day of the week it had been. People said that he grasped Einstein's Theory of Relativity and that he knew when a solar eclipse [or] a lunar eclipse was due and [that] he constantly spoke about the planets. The philanthropist Henryk Markusfeld took an interest in him, when he was still learning at the municipal *Talmud Torah* [public *cheder*]. Markusfeld wished to send him to a [Reform] rabbinical seminary in Germany, so that he should grow up to become a rabbi-philosopher. His uncle Mojsze then took him to the *Rebbe* of Pilica, on ul. Warszawska, for him to bless him so that the Jewish infidels should not have any power over him.

Srul Mojsze'le was ten years old when his father Josel died. Up to his wedding, Srul Mojsze was always engaged in [Torah] study and in reading every book which came into his hands. He frequently won prizes for his correct answers to various conundrums or for playing chess - he was one of the best chess players in the whole of Poland.

Srul Mojsze was married and poor. He ran a grocery store on ul. Mostowa. He was the father of three children - girls. He perished in the *akcja* of the German murderers - he and his entire family.

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Icze Majer's wife, Alte Chaja, was quiet, composed, and small of stature, of an age similar to that of my mother, Gittel. They were, in fact, friends [and] sat together in the women's section of the Chassidic *shtiebel* and later at the Old Synagogue, where they always had a group of women around them, reciting their prayers on *Shabbosim* and holidays. The silent and modest Alte Chaja gave birth to nine children - seven sons and two daughters. Szmul, the second after Josel, was born in Częstochowa in 1891.

Icze Majer Frank died in 1931, at the age of 63. Alte Chaja died at the age of 76, in the "Small Ghetto", where she had been in concealment for some time. Alte Chaja was brought to a Jewish grave on ul. Kawia, where the mass-grave of 4,000 murdered Jewish martyrs is located.

[As for] Icze Majer's other children, Chaim Hersz died when he was one year old. Lajb was as strong as a lion\* and he died at the age of twelve. While gathering the timber when the old house was being torn down, to distribute among the poor, he impaled himself with a rusty nail, as a result of which he died on the second day of *Shavuot* 1905.

Abram travelled to Berlin in 1916. Taking after his father, he was scholarly. He was in Berlin until 1943. What happened to him after that is unknown.

Icze Majer had five more children. His daughter Fajgla, who walked on the same path as Szmul, emigrated to Canada in 1922. A second daughter, Ester, was quiet, shy [and] modest. She was married to Jechiel Gerszonowicz. She perished in Częstochowa, together with her family - [her] husband and two children, on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1943.

Berisz studied only briefly in *cheder*. He went off to a vocational school to learn carpentry. He married Nache'le Kamelgarn. They had a baby boy named him Icze Majer. They\*<sup>1</sup> perished during the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto" in 1943.

On 20<sup>th</sup> January 1945, the brothers, Mojsze and Berisz, met in Buchenwald. They were liberated in Buchenwald on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1945. However, following a severe bout of typhus, Berisz died two months after the liberation, on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1945.

Mojsze, the youngest of the family, [who was named] after his grandfather, the *Shoichet* of Truskolasy, helped his father in earning a livelihood. To the age of 20, he was very religious. Later, he began reading [secular] books.

His first wife, Rywka, *née* Besterman, perished in Treblinka.

Of the Frank family's nine children, those still alive are daughter Fajgla, who arrived in Toronto Canada in 1922, and the youngest son, Mojsze, who passed through and experienced all the troubles of the German reign during the Second World War in Częstochowa, at the HASAG-Raków camp and was later liberated from the Buchenwald concentration camp. From there, at the end of 1945, he returned to Częstochowa and, thanks to his sister Fajgla, in 1948 he arrived in Toronto along with his wife Fajgla - her maiden name was Landau, from Częstochowa. Mojsze is a labourer [and] he is active in the Częstochower Aid Society of Toronto and the vicinity.

Now we return to the life experienced by the most colourful member of the Frank family - my friend Szmul.

When I read, today, *Mentshn oyf Mayn Veg* [People on My Path\*<sup>2</sup>], I. Bashevis' wonderfully depicted characters call to mind my friend Szmul's mother, Alte Chaja, who surely "lullabied" him in the same manner as Isaac's mother had:

*Szmul shall be a Rebbe'le,  
Szmul shall be a Rebbe'le,  
Szmul shall be a Rebbe'le...*

But what did his path in life look like?

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\* [TN: Lajb, or Leib, is "lion" in Yiddish.]

\*<sup>1</sup> [TN: Berisz himself apparently survived the liquidation of the Small Ghetto, as seen consequently.]

\*<sup>2</sup> [TN: A series of stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer, published in "Forverts", starting from 25<sup>th</sup> may 1958.]

When I parted ways with the *shtiebel* of the *Rozprzer Chassidim* and began seeking a window to the gentile world [and] to a secular education, my friendship with Szmul was interrupted for several years. Szmul saw me then as a fop. Only later did we meet again - during the so-called "Renaissance Epoch" of Yiddish literature. Szmul sported short attire then and wore spectacles.

Szmul was thin, not tall in stature and he had one squinty eye. During the period I had been separated from Szmul, he had worked in a toy factory. He had become a proletarian. In those years, he had very quickly succumbed to the proletarian ideas that were then spreading. He became a frequent goer to the SS Organisation's labour exchange. Only once the Literary Society, the *Lira*, was established, was my friendship with Szmul renewed. He revealed a capability for reciting [poetry], reading monologues and singing Yiddish songs. He gradually began to appear at the frequently organised public literary functions. He was very popular with the broad public, giving recitations or reading aloud Abram Wiewiorka's *Die Avayre* [The Sin], *Chaikl Shiker* [Chaikl the Drunkard<sup>\*3</sup>] and others. The organisers of the literary evenings were very surprised when Szmul approached them once with the request that he wished to read I.L. Peretz's *Der Meshugener Batlen*<sup>\*4</sup> [The Mad Talmudist]. They did a rehearsal with him and everyone was astounded by his fine reading and comprehension of Peretz's famous tale.

His performance as the *meshugener batlen*, wearing theatrical make-up, impressed the hundreds of listeners. Szmul's talent as a monologist was spoken of for weeks in the city. He played the role of the mad idler artistically. His [viz. the character's] whole figure, his facial expressions, [and] his diction were as if tailor-made for him, and he embodied a true *meshugener batlen*. Reading *The Mad Talmudist* made him Częstochowa's actor! And henceforth, there was not a single undertaking in which Szmul did not participate. He was the "star" of all the amateur theatrical societies which were founded in Częstochowa. He drew other youths into the literary evenings and taught them recitation and theatrical acting. Understandably, Szmul was given the most difficult roles to play. Even the professional troupes, who performed Yiddish theatre very frequently in Częstochowa, knew about Szmul and, if a contingency arose and one of their actors needed to be substituted, they had in Szmul the best replacement and Szmul would indeed play his part successfully.

Two years prior to the outbreak of the First World War, Szmul received his call-up and, despite his miserable appearance, he was recruited into the army and sent to Helsinki, Finland. Going away to military service was a difficult experience for him. He was separated from his family, friends and also from his sweetheart Rywka. He had had his effect on her and had taught her to recite and she even appeared alongside him in one-act plays which were held, at the time, by the various amateur groups in town. When he said his farewells when entering military service, the most difficult for him was parting from his young lady and he said to a friend, "I leave R. with you. Look after her like an eye in [your] head."

After a year of service in the army, Szmul fell ill there and underwent an operation on his caecum and so was sent home, on leave, from his regiment. However, the First World War broke out and, from then on, Szmul remained in Częstochowa. He did not derive any great pleasure from having returned from the army, because his sweetheart disappointed him severely with her "faithfulness" - she had forgotten him. She was now in love with his best friend M., who was to have guarded her like an eye in [his] head. Szmul took this hard. He suffered for a long time.

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<sup>\*3</sup> [TN: On p.123, these titles are given differently: "Several of Wiewiorka's tales and monologues, such as *Der Shiker* [The Drunkard], [and] *Der Ba'al-avayre* [The Sinner], were very popular in Poland, and they were often read at literary evenings."]

<sup>\*4</sup> [TN: The term "batlen" denotes an unworldly, unpractical man who is an idler, but this particular title has usually been translated as "The Mad Talmudist" in English.]

But life is stronger than various contretemps and Szmul threw himself into communal work, which was then becoming richer from day-to-day, during the German occupation of the First World War. He became active in the Educational Society for Jewish Workers, in the cooperatives, workers' schools [and] professional unions which were implemented at the time by the SS Organisation (Socialists-Territorialists).

Over the period that Częstochowa was occupied by the Germans and later in Independent Poland, the SS Organisation was the strongest in the city. Szmul was given the opportunity to appear at gatherings, demonstrations, theatrical performances, concerts, etc. He became one of the leaders in these bodies. He became a people's tribune, an actor and a folk-singer. He could make everyone weep and laugh. He organised amateur groups and put on theatre [performances] in Częstochowa and the surrounding towns and *shtetls* [with himself] in the leading role. At the party's demonstrations, as well as at the people's gatherings, he became the most popular orator. At festive occasions and banquets, he was the comedian and the singer of popular songs.

In 1922, when the SS-Vereinigte\* merged with the Independent Socialist Labour Party ([Bolesław] Drobner's group), he wanted to switch to the Bund. However, under the influence of Dr Józef Kruk, he remained with the "Independents". But he could not find his place there either. For some time, he was with the Bund and, later, switched to Poalei Zion, but he was no longer as active as he had been. He became a contributor to the *Częstochower Zeitung*, writing his own social articles and feuilletons, as well as in almost all the newspapers issued in Częstochowa - both political and civil. In the last years before the Destruction, he was Editor of the *Częstochower Zeitung* and practically filled the entire newspaper all by himself. He wrote his feuilletons under the titles "What did [I] Hear?" and "What did [I] See?", using the pseudonym "Lewioson".

Szmul Frank was married to Helena Dyskin, a descendent of the Rabbi of Łomża [and] the daughter of Józef Nowinski's sister (not Nowinski's sister, as written in *Forverts* of 11<sup>th</sup> February 1958 by [our] colleague M. Zeder in his article on the Polish scientist, Jerzy Nowinski).

They had a daughter, Hanka (nowadays, a contributor to a Polish newspaper in Warsaw). She has remained close with her surviving family, which is now in Canada.

Szmul did not have an overly happy life with his wife and they divorced. He subsequently wed Sabina Sztlerling from Łódź - a descendent of the Konecpolski family from Mstów.

Upon Hitler's marching into Poland, Szmul and his wife Sonja [?] saved themselves and left Częstochowa, travelling then to the Soviet Union. In the beginning, he acted there with [either Josef or Kaddish] Khash's troupe and, later, lived through all the troubles and wanderings of the Jewish refugees. In 1946, he returned to Częstochowa but suffered from a severe illness - [skeletal] tuberculosis in the bones of the feet.

He served the community of Jewish survivors in Częstochowa with all his strength. We see him appearing at the Bund's anniversary celebrations and other cultural functions, already under the new Communist regime in Poland. But he wished to leave as soon as possible. He writes:

*Help me - I do not wish to die in the ruins of my Częstochowa. [With] me lie manuscripts. I wish to publish two books - one book on the foundation of the Jewish Kehilla in Częstochowa and its activities; the second book on my experiences during the course of the six years I spent in Russia. I have treasure-troves of material.*

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\* [TN: Also spelled Fareynikte (United), the United Jewish Socialist Workers Party resulted as a 1917 merger of the SS Party and the SERP (Russian acronym for the Jewish Socialist Workers Party).]

[It is] a great shame that this did not come to pass. The current, shrunken Jewish community in Częstochowa and friends in America aided him with what they could. Materially, he lacked nothing during the last years of his life. Nor did he lack any medical assistance. However, his dream to leave Częstochowa was not [one] of the easiest things to fulfil. He did not leave Częstochowa!

Szmul returned from the Soviet Union a sick and broken man. He was never himself again. On 27<sup>th</sup> December 1947, he died in pain, fully conscious, with a squinting look at the world, which implored those around him, those at his deathbed, "Do not let me die - I wish yet to live and I still have what to say to the world!"

He could no longer live in his beloved hometown, but he was fated to, at least, lie in the Częstochowa cemetery. All the surviving Jews in Częstochowa attended his funeral. The surviving Częstochowa Jews scattered throughout the globe will remember him for a long, long time.



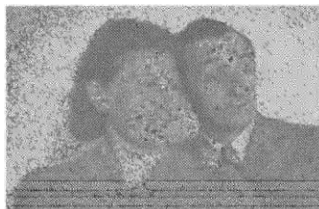
*Sitting: Icze Majer and Alte Chaja.  
Standing: Mojsze, Ester, and Berisz*



*Szmul Frank's sister Fajgla, his  
brother Abram and his wife, in Berlin*



*Szmul Frank*



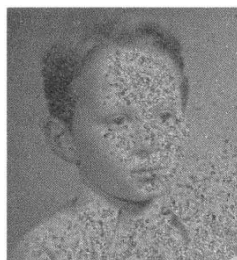
*Szmul Frank's brother Mojsze with his  
wife Fajgla from the Landau family.  
Now in Toronto, Canada*



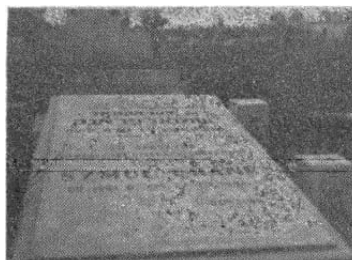
*The child prodigy,  
Srul Mojsze Frank*



*Szmul Frank's daughter  
Hanka with her husband  
Szlojme Wajntraub, now in  
Warsaw, Poland*



*Jurek, Szmul Frank's  
grandson*



*Szmul Frank's tombstone at the  
Częstochowa cemetery*



*Szmul Frank and Raphael Federman  
in 1933*