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My Impressions of Częstochowa



The city where I was born* and where I spent my younger years was, according to our Polish perceptions, far away from Częstochowa. We boys and the adults, too, were also under the impression that Częstochowa was a city of exclusively monks, nuns, churches and other Catholic facilities.

Częstochowa was, in our perception, associated with extreme Catholicism and it smelled a bit of "those" things, to wit - the Inquisition, bonfires and libels against Jews.

What gave us this impression was the fact that, from time to time, we would see processions with crosses, banners and icons passing through our city. The marchers were mostly poorer folk - peasants [and] craftsmen. Many of them walked barefooted and it was said that they were going on foot to Częstochowa - the location of Jasna Góra, with the holiest churches of the Catholics.

It was, therefore, unpleasant to even mention the name Częstochowa and it instilled terror in oneself. We did not believe at all that, in such a city, any Jews lived. I do not think there was any Jew in our city who had ever been to Częstochowa or who had even been in a written correspondence with this Catholic city.

In the 1920's, however, when I was already a Bund activist, the Central Committee sent me to Częstochowa to deliver a lecture and, at the same time, to also strengthen the party's work. Even though I was already a grown man - a journalist - and had seniority within the socialist movement, I felt odd regarding the Catholic city of churches and crosses and I found the whole business of travelling there for a Jewish lecture quite disagreeable.

However, already, with my first steps in Częstochowa, on my way from the beautiful, elegant railway station - inside the city - I was pleasantly surprised. I immediately perceived that Częstochowa was a *Jewish* city!

At first, I was a bit confused. It even occurred to me that, perhaps, it was a mistake. Maybe I had lost my way and had arrived in a different city altogether. But I became convinced that I was [indeed] in Częstochowa and in *Jewish* Częstochowa.

And, why deny it? I truly had pleasure and much joy, once I became more closely acquainted with Częstochowa and with its Jews - above all, naturally, with the Jewish Workers' Movement.

Częstochowa was a city of Jewish liveliness, Jewish freshness and Jewish diversity. It was seething with Jewish life. There was a well-organised Workers' Movement there, with a network of institutions, of which the crown was - the school for Jewish children.

One evening, at a session of the school's management to which I had been invited, I met Comrade Raphael Federman for the first time. He still belonged to *Vereinigte* at the time, which was the

* [TN: Siedlce.]

successor of the bygone SS Party. At once, I noticed that Federman was liked by all [workers' parties], including the Bundists and *Poalei Zion*. As far as I recall, the battle of the parties on the street of the Jewish worker in Częstochowa was not such a fierce one, and it was far from embittered. Comrade Federman contributed greatly to this.

During the few days which I spent in Częstochowa, I did not sit idly - for even one hour. They continuously took me around the various institutions and organisations, but I spent the most time at the Jewish school, among the children. This school was truly exemplary.

When I was already about to depart, I remembered that I was, after all, in Częstochowa - the Catholic centre. How could I travel off without visiting Jasna Góra? I asked the comrades to take me there. Well, we went to Jasna Góra. The hill with the churches was at the city's edge. Silence reigned there, like in a cemetery. It did, in fact, smell of days of old, of the Middle Ages, with the church-incense which penetrates one's nostrils, awakening memories of "*auto de fé*", of people being burnt [and] of monks and Jesuits, in their black garb.

There was an immense difference between Jewish and Catholic Częstochowa, exactly like between a lively, fresh city and a cemetery! Here, with us, were life, hope, courage [and] idealism, and *there* - a frozen stillness pervaded the entire precinct and the edifices. There, it smelled of antiquity.

Several years went by and it came to pass that my city actually made a match with Częstochowa - and the matchmaker was the Jewish children's school. As a teacher, Częstochowa engaged one of the most marvellous and most intelligent girls of our city. Her name was Rywka Cuker and, in Częstochowa, she became the wife of Raphael Federman. We had become "in-laws".

And Jewish Częstochowa blossomed and grew. Jewish life [and] Jewish culture took root. The Jewish Workers' Movement expanded. The majority of *Vereinigte* members, with Raphael Federman foremost, switched over to the Bund. Other labour and bourgeois parties also conducted fruitful work in all fields. Częstochowa was one of the finest, most spirited Jewish cities in Poland.

Until the German murderer, may his name be obliterated, came and uprooted everything.

But Jewish Częstochowa, just like all the hundreds of Jewish cities and *shtetls*, which the German destroyed, will live forever in Jewish memory [and] in Jewish consciousness.