

Abram Litman

Hersz-Dawid Nomberg in Częstochowa

- dedicated to my townsman and comrade, Raphael Federman

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When the news became known in Częstochowa that the renowned writer Hersz-Dawid Nomberg had come to town and that he had become Editor of the daily *Częstochower Tageblatt*, most Jews felt uplifted. Particularly proud and festive were the *Maskilim* and the more radical youth in the city who were ardent followers of Nomberg and had read everything which he wrote. His poem *The Prophet*, his tales *The Rabbi and His Son* [and] *From a Polish Yeshiva* and the revolutionary poem *Black Clouds Race and Rush* lay on everyone's lips. The name Nomberg, in those times - in 1915-1916 - was uttered in the same breath as Icchok Leibisch Peretz, Sholem Aleichem and Sholem Asch.

Nomberg's takeover of the editorship in Częstochowa aroused fears in the town's public activists. The *dozores** of the *Kehilla* and the *machers* in the various institutions shuddered. They feared lest Nomberg's mordant pen should start tearing them to shreds.

When Nomberg took over the reins of the newspaper, it became lively and merry in the *shtetl* [fig.]. In his *Chatting With the Readers* and *From Shabbes to Shabbes* articles, he picked quarrels with the very "Face" of the city. Those hardest hit were the assimilated Jews - the wealthy, the Germanised *Yahudim*** , who were the owners of the city. They were the ones with the money and also with the say. Nomberg also did not spare the orthodox public activists - the *Aguda* people, the *Gerer* and *Radomsker Chassidim* - who wished to control Jewish life in Częstochowa. In the Jewish *gmina*, inside the *kehilla* chamber, a Holy War raged between the "Germanised" Jews - the *Yahudim* - and the orthodox, between the craftsmen and the merchants [and] the Zionist *Mizrachi* Jews. They fought there forever, with debates and resolutions.

When Nomberg visited one of these meetings, he said, "[Now] I have a whole pocketful of themes for the paper". He "dished it out" with a generous hand to all sides - to the *Yahudim*, to the orthodox and also to the *Mizrachi* people. The pictures and feuilletons which he published in the *Częstochower Tageblatt* were written with such humour and sarcasm, that the City's Providers went about as if they had received a beating. They would come to the Editor's office, complaining that the Editor had failed to comprehend what they, poor things, desired to do for the Jewish People. But Nomberg would reassure the "suffering" *Kehilla* providers with a smile. "I shall meet with you at the next meeting", he would say and, meanwhile, he [continued] "beating" them over the head, as if with a bludgeon.

These articles and feuilletons by Hersz-Dawid Nomberg aroused strong discussions amongst the Jewish public in town. The newspaper was snatched up like water for matzos^{*1} and the publisher, Berl Bocian, even feared the evil-eye. He pleaded with Nomberg to perhaps deal the *dozores* milder

* [TN: From Pol. *dozór*; the official committee in charge of Jewish religious institutions.]

** [TN: Intentional mispronunciation of the Hebrew "Yehudim" (Jews), probably in a German accent. This was a derogatory slur for Jewish renegades and traitors.]

*1 [TN: Expression analogous to "like hot cakes." Special water is used for baking matzos and people scramble to acquire it before Pesach.]

blows. To this, however, Nomberg replied, “A *chalef* [ritual slaughter knife] must be sharp, otherwise it cannot slaughter beasts and fowl”.



Hersz-Dawid Nomberg

At the time, I was learning the profession of typesetting at the printer’s, at the First Aleja 6, from where the *Tageblatt* was issued. The Editor, H.D. Nomberg, lived in front of the printer’s, in a fine, modern hotel. The owner of the printing press would send me very frequently to the hotel, to receive from him his articles for setting. Nomberg would be busy all night long and would sleep until late in the afternoon. It was necessary to go to him in the hotel and “pull” the articles from him in order to fill the paper.

For me, it was a great honour to “carry” Nomberg’s articles. ALong the way from the hotel to the printer’s, I would look at the pages, laughing, delighting in what the Editor had dealt to the City Fathers, the opulent ones.

“Why does it take you so long to bring the article, Avreml?”, the owner would shout. “You surely must’ve read the manuscript on the way! Tears of laughter streaming, just look at him. Some heavy *heaving* he has.”

Once, when I was waiting in Nomberg’s hotel for the main article, he called out to me, “Avreml, I’ve heard that you’re a fine lad [and that] you’re a member of the Poalei Zion and active in the Workers’ Home. Is this true, eh?”

“Yes, Mr Nomberg”, I replied tremblingly, with reverence. “I read the Yiddish and Socialist literature and, from time to time, I send correspondence to the *Arbeiter Zeitung* in Warsaw regarding the working life in Częstochowa. I have one such report now on me, Mr Nomberg. Would you perhaps care to read it and give me your opinion?”, I asked quavering, all in a sweat.

“Let me look at it, Avreml”, he told me, with a laughing, cheerful face.

As he read through my four pages in great haste, his features were beaming. He tapped the manuscript and took me gently by the arm, “You are not one of the *Amshinover chanyukes*^{*2} – you are a true worker. You hate the current arrangements and you fight for a more beautiful world. It’s written in quite a lively manner, with heart. Not bad! You’re still a young lad. Stand by that more beautiful world - it’s well worth fighting for.”

I left the hotel in a fever. My cheeks were ablaze and my heart was literally leaping with joy. A trivial matter, that! - H.D. Nomberg had said a good word about my correspondence.

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H.D. Nomberg was partial to living it up, “like God in Odessa”. One Saturday afternoon, when I was sitting with friends on a bench in the Aleja, H.D. Nomberg passed by. Upon seeing me, he motioned with his hand and called me to him. I felt as in seventh heaven.

“Listen, Avreml”, Nomberg called out, “I need ten marks until this Friday. I am very hard-pressed. Could you perhaps help me out with a *gmiles chessed* [charitable loan]?”

^{*2} [TN: H.D. Nomberg grew up in a Chasidic family in Mszczonów, or Amshinov in Yiddish. “Chanyuke” is the Chasidic equivalent of mollycoddle and very similar to “batlen.”]

I just did not have such a “measly” sum in my pocket and I was ashamed to look into his face. At the time, ten marks were a treasure for me, a possession. I earned [barely enough for] “water to make porridge with” and I needed to bring every mark home to my parents, where we were simply starving.

“What to do?”, I thought. “It would be such a great honour to help Nomberg with a tenner.”

“I have no money on me right now^{*3}”, I told Nomberg, “but I shall be able to help you out tomorrow. I shall definitely do this for you, for sure.”

“Let it be tomorrow, [then,] but don’t forget.” He pressed my hand, and went with hastened steps to the Second Aleja.

I did not tell my friends what Nomberg had spoken with me about but, later, I went to a well-to-do cousin of mine and borrowed from him ten marks. The following day, I handed the ten marks over to Nomberg.

Truth be told, I did not believe Nomberg would pay the loan back even in a year’s time, unless he were to win the big prize. But I was proud that I had been able to help the great Yiddish writer with a *gmiles chessed*.

I waited and hoped, counting the days. Maybe, [after all]

Seven days later - exactly on Friday - Nomberg came into the Editor’s office. He went about his work as usual and, at a certain point, summoned me to him.

“Avreml, I wish to see you immediately after work. Wait for me.”

Once the typesetters and the writers had gone, I was the only one left. Before long, Nomberg called out to me, “Now we can leave, Avreml. You have nothing to fear”.

We went out onto the Aleja. Jews were hurrying from work, tradesmen were closing the shops [and] *Chassidim* were returning from the *mikvah* [ritual bathhouse], preparing to welcome *Shabbes*. We went on to the Second Aleja. As we came up to the “bar”, a large restaurant, Nomberg cried out, “Here, we go in. Don’t be ashamed, your caftan is really quite Jewish, but that doesn’t matter. You can hold your Jewish cap^{*} in your hand - you’re a *worldly Jew*, [is what] I mean.”

I hesitated to go inside, lest someone should see me and bring the news to my father. Besides, how could I enter such an aristocratic restaurant? Who knows how much money one would have to pay there? I assumed that Nomberg would expect me to pay for a meal and perhaps also hand over another *gmiles chessed*. But Nomberg pulled me to himself and, in unison, we were already inside.

A waiter came up. Nomberg told him to bring two servings of [fowls’] livers and gizzards, with *Tzimmes* [sweet carrot stew]. We ate the meal and washed it down with a glass of beer. Nomberg paid for the food, gave the waiter money for the drinks and we made for the door. Here, Nomberg took ten marks from his vest pocket. As he stuck them into my hand, he said, “Avreml, this is how Hersz-Dawid pays up his debts - you understand? Remember that!”

^{*3} [TN: It was the Sabbath, on which one may not carry or handle money; the author was apparently still religious at the time, as seen subsequently from the fact that he dressed in Chassidic garb.]

^{*} [TN: Kepi-style “kaszkiet” cap worn by Chassidic Jews in pre-Holocaust Poland (not a yarmulke).]

We went out onto the Aleja and parted warmly. I felt dazed. I did not walk home, but ran as if an angel was carrying me on his wings.

That Friday night, I could not fall asleep. I was thinking, "Hersz-Dawid Nomborg is not only a great Jewish poet, he is also a great man."