

Herszel Epsztajn

## From Nowo Radomsko to Los Angeles

(Pages of Memories and Notes)



I came to Częstochowa often, to work for just a few weeks. Sometimes, it was for a full six months. The city of Częstochowa, therefore, became like my second home-town. I was in Częstochowa during the years 1904-1908. I joined the ranks of the SS Party and frequently listened with excitement to the speeches of Aron Częstochower (Singalowsky), Comrade Aleksander (Leibisch Lehrer), Józef Number Two\* and others. I used to bring these speakers to Radomsko, where they would appear before a large audience at the clandestine meetings.

The two members' rooms, in which I mostly spent time with other members, were the houses of Mendel Pakuła and Dawid Gerichter.

In 1908, due to police persecution, I left Częstochowa and fled across the Austrian border to Kraków. In the days until I had the opportunity to be smuggled across the border, I hid in the house of my comrade Dawid Gerichter. Dawid's whole family displayed the finest comradely behaviour towards me. In Kraków, I soon found work in my profession of shoe-stitching. There, I already found some close comrades from Częstochowa, who had also fled the Tsarist police - Raphael Federman, Herszl Gotajner and Michał Alter. Later, Comrades Mendel Szuchter [and] Szlojme Jakow Minkow\*\* also came to Kraków - on their way to America. From Radomsko, Comrades Szlojme Bugajski, Szlojme Dynier and Szapiro were there. Of these comrades, the closest to me was Raphael Federman. We often spent time together and I learned a great deal from him.

In 1909, I was already able to legally return to Poland. In 1913, I travelled to America and wound up in Chicago. My bride-to-be (my current spouse) lived there, with her sister Jetta Berliner.

After about just six months, many of my Radomsko *landsleute* [fellow townsmen] began arriving in Chicago - Berisz Kugel, Mendel Beker, the brothers Aron and Szlojme Bugajski, Abram Wajsberg and Nusen Witenberg. It was a year of crisis and the only one who found work immediately was Mendel Beker. Mendel also lived with the Berliners. He made an agreement with the Berliners that they should allow one of the unemployed *landsleute* to sleep in his bed at night, while he worked at the bakery. Mendel would also bring home-baked breads every day - rye and pumpernickel, as they call it here (it reminds me of the whole-wheat bread back home) - and distributed these breads among the hungry *landsleute*. Other *landsleute* (whose names I have forgotten) - those who had work - also shared their meagre earnings and aided the unemployed *landsleute*.

Thus we, fellow townsmen, helped one another in the times of need.

Every Saturday and Sunday, we gathered at someone else's house. During this period, I married. My young wife Sara and I lived in a basement apartment. But we did not complain, because in this

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\* [TN: Józef Rabinowicz from Warsaw; see *Czenstochover Yidn*, p.116.]

\*\* [TN: This is most definitely the Szaja-Jakow Minkof who is mentioned in this book on pp.261-262, although both names appear side by side in the index at the end of the book.]

basement, it was always merry. This dwelling of mine, in the cellar, was the *de facto* "Central" for all the *landsleute*.

Eventually, each of the *landsleute* found work, although the wages were miserable. The majority of the *landsleute* were as yet unmarried - "boarders", as they used to call them. Over time, we moved to a larger apartment, where we felt a bit better than in the basement.

That year, we joined a Cześćochowa *Landsmannschaft*<sup>\*1</sup>. At the same time, we also joined the Warsaw Branch 519 of the *Arbeiter Ring* [in Chicago]. Mendel Szuchter was then the Financial Secretary. We were often each other's guests, with the friends from Cześćochowa - Mendel and Szajndla Szuchter, John and Jetta Grylak, Rajzla and Motl Szaprek [?<sup>\*2</sup>], Josel and Molly Berliner and Mojsze and Jetta Berliner.

The homiest and friendliest house in which we got together was that of Mendel Berliner's<sup>\*3</sup> Fanny. Despite being poor herself, the table was always set for us and there was no lack of food. We shall never forget beloved Fanny.

At the time, Chicago had a fine group of SS (Socialists-Territorialists). Their members included Icchok Gordon (Icchok the Black), M. Mendelsberg, Mendel Szuchter, Abram Pat and an entire array of other interesting and intelligent people. I felt spiritually uplifted amongst them, albeit my material situation was a bad one. I seldom worked and, even when I did work, I earned barely seven dollars a week.

My wife talked me into travelling to California, to her sister Jetta. We sold our few possessions and I set out on my way.

This was in 1917. California was then not as settled as it is today. All one saw were swathes of land. This was so in the city of Los Angeles, also. There were hardly any workshops where to work. At first, I peddled - I sold things. After six months, I began to make money and had a livelihood. My wife Sara came. Jewish life was only just beginning to take shape and we became active in the *Arbeiter Ring*, which gave some contentment to our lives - and does to this day.

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In 1944, we again met with our friend Raphael Federman, who had just saved himself, first from Warsaw and then from Soviet Russia, and had arrived here via Japan. Federman had come on behalf of United Czeństochover Relief, in connection with the *Czeństochover Yidn* Memorial Book which was going to be published. The *Czeństochover* and *Radomsker landsleute* welcomed Federman. Federman's visit in Los Angeles greatly aided the local relief society in becoming more active. The society was immediately enlivened and Josel Berliner was elected as Chairman.

When the book *Czeństochover Yidn* was published, we, the Radomsko townspeople, together with those from Czeństochowa, helped to propagate this magnificently beautiful book, in which a world of work and effort had been invested. When friend Raphael Federman came to Los Angeles a second time, we organised a mass gathering, which was carried through with great success, both in terms of finances and morale.

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<sup>\*1</sup> [TN: *Yid.*, *Ger.*; association of refugees/immigrants coming from the same region.]

<sup>\*2</sup> [TN: In the index, the surname appears as "Szaprech." We've been unable to find either of these versions in official records. The closest surname found is Czaprak.]

<sup>\*3</sup> [TN: It is unclear whether she was his wife/widow or his daughter; the former is likely.]

By then, we were already aware of the great destruction of our Jewish cities in Poland, those same cities which we had always aided in maintaining their numerous institutions. Our sorrow and pain were huge and, to this day, there is no consolation for the immense disaster which found our people - the Jews in the cities and *shtetls* of bygone Poland!

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In 1952, with my wife, I visited the State of Israel. Our joy was great. The State of Israel is truly a great consolation! In Israel, we found twelve brothers and sisters, who were miraculously saved, from amongst a family of over two hundred. Among them was my nephew, the son of my brother Abram z''l, from Częstochowa. My brother Abram shared the same tragic fate of all the Częstochowa Jewish martyrs.

I spent two months in the State of Israel. My wife and I were given the honour to inaugurate two buildings for newly-arrived immigrants, which the American *Radomsker landsleute* had helped to build with their funding. By the way, we are now collecting money to build another building.

Our townspeople in the State of Israel number, *keinehora*, 800 souls, and they are organised into two organisations - one in Tel-Aviv, and the other in Haifa.

The only old comrade we found in Israel was Dawid Krauze. We met many children, whose parents had been annihilated by the murderous Nazis in Częstochowa and Radomsko.

We visited many historical sites in Israel and marvelled at the new building of the country. We wondered how our brothers still had the courage, strength and idealism to work and to build, following such a great mass catastrophe.

On our way home, we stopped in Paris. We arrived precisely on Bastille Day, 14<sup>th</sup> July! We saw thousands of citizens marching to the tune of the famous *La Marseillaise*, the song which we had, with such enthusiasm, been sung in the years of our youth!

The number of Radomsko townspeople in Paris before the war was 250 – now, only about 100. They welcomed us very heartily.

On our way home from Paris, we stopped in New York, where we spent a couple of days and met with so many friends, whom we had not seen for a long time. From New York, we travelled to Toronto. There, we met a few old comrades - Majlich Grossman and Isrulke Hammer. By the way, my sister's son is in Toronto - my nephew Motek Rozenberg. He is the only surviving member of an entire family. In Poland, he was a Bund activist. Now he is Secretary of the Bund in Toronto and is also active in the local *Arbeiter Ring*.

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Until 1948, we, the *Radomsker landsleute* in Los Angeles, numbered some thirty families. Now, we are fewer. Lately, Berisz Kugel, Mendel Beker, his wife, Joel Kaminski, Hofman, Fiszel Gliksman and Mendel Dawidson have departed from us to their eternal rest. Honoured be their memory!

To our joy, several new *landsleute* have joined us recently - Josel Rozenbaum, Harry Rozenbaum, Chana Boidems [?], Paul Kulka, the two Zalcman brothers, Koniempolski and Waksman.

They have all settled here and are living well. Of these new arrivals, only Chana Boidems and Josel Rozenbaum attend our sessions. The others keep rather to themselves. A pity - we pinned many hopes on them. Let us hope that they all will grow closer to us and our organisations.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I consider it an honour and a benefaction to now have the opportunity to salute the beloved comrade of my youth, Raphael Federman, for his fifty years of social activity. My wife and I, our children and all our *landsleute* wish Comrade Federman many more years of productive life, together with his dear wife Genia!



*From the right: Jancze Pakuła-Gray, Alkona Chrobolovsky, Szajndla Pakuła-Szuchter*



*Administration of the "Shtetl" youth organisation in Częstochowa. Glikzman, Mojsze Lewenhof, Malka Glikzman, A. Chrobolovsky. All the youngsters perished*