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Dr Jakub Szacki's Contribution to the History of the Jews in Częstochowa

*He kept inside him, in [his] heart concealed,
A bright reflection of a highborn generation,
Martyrs, fighters, dreamlike figures,
From an immortalised and bright reality.*

(H. Leivick, *Lieder fun Gan-Eden* [Poems from Paradise], N.Y., 1937, p.124)



Dr Jakub Szacki

Dr Max Weinreich, the academic director of YIVO, in his book *Images from the Jewish Literary History* (Tamar Publishers, Wilna, 1928, p. 1) expresses the following idea:

Both an individual and a group may only be understood through the surroundings from which they originated.

In order to understand Dr Jakub Szacki, it is necessary to, first of all, become acquainted with his biography and his surroundings.

Jakub Szacki was born in Warsaw in 1893. He was orphaned at a very young age. He began working early on as a commercial employee and afterwards as an office clerk. He served in the army with an officer's rank, under the leadership of the future [First] Marshal [of Poland], Józef Piłsudski. In 1918, he was appointed specialist on Jewish issues for the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He did not hold this office for long - he resigned in 1919. The reason was a general-national one [viz. pertaining to the whole Jewish People]. He was tasked with carrying out an investigation into the persecution of Jews in Poland. All his investigatory material was filed away and the Ministry did not react [on his report]. He therefore resigned his post.

Dr Jakub Szacki's first education was a strict, religious one. He attended *cheder* and studied with private tutors. He was a frequent visitor to the library on [ul.] Tłomackie in Warsaw and, with a deep thirst for knowledge, he read and studied books of a secular content. In 1913, he received his *matura*, which is "Bachelor of Arts" according to the American grading system. In 1922, he graduated from the University of Warsaw as a Doctor of Philosophy. His dissertation [title] was on "The Jewish Question in the Kingdom of Poland during the Paskiewicz Era 1831-1861".

Dr Szacki's surroundings was Jewish life, with all its nuances - the economic and spiritual struggle, the battle for Jewish existence, the battle for Jewish self-esteem [and] the impact of all the political and cultural currents. Dr Szacki was not just the observer of and listener to all these phenomena, but a direct participant and a researcher of all these changes - socio-economic, political, and cultural.

Dr Jakub Szacki took in all these issues, which were an integral component of his personal being and, as a result of thorough research, he enriched Jewish historiography with valuable works, which serve the current generation and will serve the future generations, as study and research material.

S. Nigier characterised Dr Szacki very much to the point, writing of him:

Dr Szacki's historiography is a multifaceted one. He does not concentrate [solely] on one historical factor. He does not suffice with giving us [just] the financial or the political factor or the ideological background of the event. He endeavours to paint for us a full picture of the historical setting, with all the forces working in it and on it - the physical as well as the spiritual. As regards his way of writing history, he does not give up too much space to general descriptions and explanations and therein lies his uniqueness. He is mainly interested in facts, [in] episodes of day-to-day life. He is very concrete - he tells us what happened and why, but mainly - what.

(*Der Tog-Morgen-Zshurnal*^{*}, Sunday 4th April 1954)

The only thing which needs to be added to S. Nizer's evaluation is that Dr Szacki did not limit himself to just answering the questions of *what* and *why*, but also [*where,*] *when*, *how*, and *who*, meaning that Dr Szacki always, in his historical research works, sheds light on each affair from the following standpoints - where the event took place, when, how, who caused it and why it happened.

Just as Prof. Simon Dubnow had started his career as a book reviewer and by writing historical treatises, so began Dr Jakub Szacki's identically. And upon his arrival in America in 1922, he began to publish books.

Dr Szacki was, first of all, a Polish Jew, a representative of "a highborn generation, of martyrs, fighters, and a generation of dreamlike figures". Jewish affairs always interested him intensely and therefore it is the Jewish affairs that take the foremost place in his creations. [The affairs of] Polish Jewry, that is.

It is enough to mention *The History of the Jews in Warsaw* (in three volumes), *The Politics of Jewish Education in Poland from 1806-1866*, *Haskala in Zamość*, *History of the Jewish Press*, *Jewish Politics in Poland Between the Two World Wars* and, besides these, hundreds of articles, reviews and treatises in various newspapers and periodical, and, in the first row – in the yearly publications of the *YIVO Blätter*. [He] obviously also [wrote] about general themes, such as two books on Baruch Spinoza, on Jewish theatre and many other [topics].

At the time of the Second World Slaughter, Dr Jakub Szacki was in New York. Polish Jewry, with which he had been engaged all his life, had been destroyed. So, he began to accompany Polish Jewry through *Kaddish* and *Yizkor* [funerary prayers; viz. commemorative writings]. How fitting the expression "accompany Polish Jewry" may be gleaned from the fact that he was the editor of the book *Pinkas Mława* [The Record Book of Mława]. In Hebrew, the word *melave* means to accompany [companion]; this is characteristic of Dr Jakub Szacki, peace be upon him, and symbolic.

A very great accomplishment, which deserves a special mention, is Dr Szacki's historical treatise *The Jews in Częstochowa to the First World War*, published in the book *Czenstochover Yidn* (published by the United Czenstochover Relief Committee and Ladies Auxiliary, New York 1947).

The importance of this work lies in that, in only twenty-nine pages, he presents all the episodes of Jewish settlement in Częstochowa, from its establishment to the First World War. These are painstakingly gathered historic episodes, based upon authentic documents and material [both] published until now, and unpublished, which constitute a comprehensive, complete historical work.

Writing the history of Polish Jewry, in this case, that of the city of Częstochowa, belongs among the [more] complicated challenges, due to the fact that Poland was constantly involved in wars, which

^{*} [TN: *The Day-Morning Journal* was a Yiddish daily in New York formed through the merger of *The Day* and the *Jewish Morning Journal*.]

resulted in various invasions and various financial, cultural, [and] political structures, which brought about specific conditions for the Jewish settlement in all fields of Jewish life.

Dr Jakub Szacki, with his work *The Jews in Częstochowa to the First World War*, made an important contribution to the research of Jewish history in general and lit an eternal flame for the annihilated Jewish community in Częstochowa in particular.

Dr Szacki occupied a most respected place in Jewish historiography. He enriched the history of the Jews with a large number of books and works. Metaphorically speaking, we may say that he was like a floodlight which shed colourful lights on various subjects and, namely, as a historiographer, editor, encyclopaedist, archivist, bibliographer, reviewer and cultural activist.

Częstochowa Jewry had the good fortune to be immortalised in Jewish historiography by Dr Jakub Szacki, peace be upon him. His memory will remain sacred and dear to Częstochowa Jews. He will shine as an everlasting light in the history of Częstochowa Jewry.