

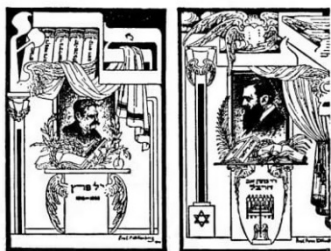
Z. Turkow

## Perec Willenberg (- a Chapter of the Book *Theatre Memories*)



When we arrived in Częstochowa, the city [itself] had already been occupied by the Germans for two years. Jasna Góra, on which was the large cathedral with the famous icon of the “Mother of God”, on the other hand, was occupied by the Austrians. This honour was bestowed upon the Austria-Hungary monarchy due to its leading position in the Catholic life of Central Europe. Pilgrims from all over the country, and even from abroad, would come to this monastery on Jasna Góra. Faithful Catholics arrived to take part in the religious processions to the Holy Częstochowa Mother of God, which is considered one of the holiest relics of Catholicism.

The Częstochowa Jews had been hemmed in ghettos or so-called “precincts”. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these precincts were abolished and the Jews were incorporated into the city’s financial life, which then rose to a very high level. Due to the frequent religious processions from the outside, certain entrepreneurs hit upon the device of manufacturing souvenirs with the images of the Jasna Góra monastery and the Holy Mother, which served as amulets and talismans for the believers.

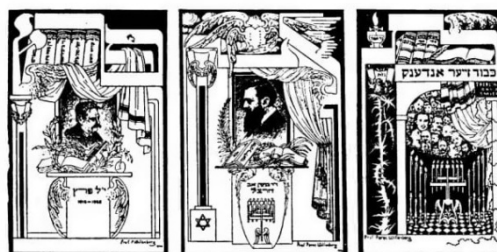


[by] Perec Willenberg

As mentioned, no ghetto had existed in Częstochowa for a long time but, nevertheless, Jews were forbidden from visiting certain locations, with the Jasna Góra at the head. Even if such a ban was not officially issued, the Jews themselves, for reasons of safety, avoided certain “sacred” spots. This, notwithstanding, still did not shield the Jews from frequent pogroms and assaults, for which this city was so noted. However, during the first German occupation, the Jews, too, had a respite from their constant fear and insecurity. The cathedral was then open to all, regardless of creed.

Our guide was the artist Perec Willenberg – an interesting personality with whom we had become acquainted in Częstochowa. Over a certain period, Willenberg has drawn to himself the attention of the greatest painting exhibitions and his portrait of Tolstoy had gained renown in Russia before the First World War.

In Częstochowa, Willenberg was employed as teacher of draughtsmanship at one of the schools and he devoted his free time to Jewish drawing and painting. In his quest for his own, non-imitated Jewish style, he created a series of *witraże* (paintings with glass [viz. stained-glass]), in a bold and very colourful form, based on the four-angled letters of our alphabet.



Perec Willenberg's postcards

The spacious Częstochowa synagogue was decorated with these *witraże* and they heralded a new turn in Jewish art. Willenberg was vexed by the fact that our artists strove to imitate the great masters from various tendencies and schools, and did not find it necessary to find their own path and form of artistic expression.

He argued:

*Countless examples for such quests are to be found on the walls of the old synagogues, in the carvings on the pulpits and Holy Arks, in the incense-holders, Chanukah candelabras, [prayer-shawl silver] crowns, curtains [covering the Holy Ark], in ancient [Pesach] Haggadas, illustrated [Book of Ester] scrolls [for Purim] and in the metal-bound books from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. It pains one to see how our artists have no ambition to become National artists – and they are rendered null and void among the foreigners [viz. Gentiles]. Therefore, my having settled in Częstochowa is a protest against all these self-deniers and, at the same time, a demonstration that precisely, in the vicinity of the Jasna Góra and under the eyes of the Holy Mother, it is possible to seek to cultivate Jewish originality, Jewish style.*

But, as irony would have it, during the Nazi occupation of Poland, on the *Aryan side* of the Warsaw streets, an old man went about with a sign [which said] “Mute Painter”, selling the pictures he had painted of the Holy Częstochowa Mother, the Apostles, the Via Dolorosa [etc.], which the pious Poles purchased with tears in their eyes, to spite the godless Germans. This old “mute” man was [none other than] the Jewish artist Perec Willenberg, who had dedicated his life to find a Jewish style and art. Thanks to these holy images, he survived the Nazi occupation. He feigned muteness due to his Jewish accent.