

Ida Merżan

## The Children's Home in Częstochowa

Just recently, the children's home received a new two-storey, well-lit building at ul. Jasnogórska 36, surrounded by a garden with hothouses and cages for pigeons, chickens and rabbits.

There are forty children in the home, aged 3-15. The younger attend the technical school [sic pre-school<sup>1</sup>] on premises, and the older ones – the city's *gimnazja* and primary schools.

The children sleep in spacious, well-lit bedrooms. They have a large dining room, magnificent bathrooms and a room for study and play.

The food is served by the supervising-children in a pleasing and aesthetic manner, and it is nutritious and tasty.

The children are dressed appealingly - the clothes suited to their growth and gender. The Częstochowa children's collective is one big family, with the feeling of a homely atmosphere. After breakfast, the little ones go to pre-school and the older ones to school, but they spend the early morning and the evening together. The older girls find time, not only to do their homework for school and do their own coiffures (all are beautifully and fashionably combed), but to actually occupy themselves with the little ones. They dress them, wash them, teach them how to keep things tidy, how to clean, etc.

Things are lively with the boys, too. The oldest one is already studying to become an electrician. He loves his profession and is always doing new experiments. He has already installed a night lamp in his bedroom. Now he wishes to make a projector – a "*stojak*"<sup>2</sup>. I am unable to find out [much] about his project, but the fellows are ecstatic. The older ones help. The little ones look on in wonderment and envy at this marvel. And when the lamp is lit, the older ones smile with satisfaction and the little ones shout with euphoria.



**At the children's club in the Jewish Committee's children's home**

But now it is autumn. The children are going to school. A timetable must be in place - the participation of each child in the household chores needs to be limited and scheduled and, as a result, the children now have shifts. Chores are shared out - the children replace one another in the work. Quietly and calmly, they pass the shift from one to the other.

[Another] happy phenomenon for us educators is also the children's joyous mood. We have come to [attend] a performance. All the children are busy

sewing, washing, preparing decorations - entire days are taken up with rehearsals. For us, the guests, there is no time at all - they do not even look at us. And it is precisely due to this that we

<sup>1</sup> [TN: The Yiddish words for "technical school" and "pre-school" look very similar – פארשול, פאכשול – hence the obvious misprint.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Pol., "stand," apparently meaning a projector on a stand or tripod.]

sense the joy that fills the children's hearts. There is singing in the children's home, a great deal of singing. They sing while they wait for the soup and they sing under their breath, while ironing clothes. And the little ones?! Each time, another runs to the centre of the hall and dances a little jig to the tune of a song. Sometimes, I recognise a fragment from the performance and, at others, it is a free improvisation.

The children's home resembles our [Bundist] secular Yiddish schools – and this is no coincidence. Comrade Mrs Brener<sup>3</sup> (the *Województwo* [Province] Committee's officer-in-charge of child protection), a much seasoned Yiddish teacher, spends all her free time at the children's home. She also divides her working hours such that most of the time she is at the children's home.



*J. Pat's visit to the children's home, 9<sup>th</sup> February 1946*  
*Seated (R-L): M. Lederman, Z. Weksztajn, J. Pat, L. Brener, M. Edelman (guest from Łódź),*  
*J. Ajzenberg and Itta Brener*

Comrade Brener, (a teacher) Committee Chairman, often comes to the home. He knows all the children and lives with them through everything that happens in the home.

The programme is a varied one – “*Yiddish Numbers and Works*”. This is reflected in the conversations of the youngest in their bedroom. “What type of job does a cat have, and why has it got four legs?”, and also in those of the older ones, “We are trying to become the best pupils in school!” I was there for two days and, apart from one girl who was suffering from toothache, I did not see a single child going about idly or groaning. When they were not working or doing their homework, they were reading a book.

The programme is [indeed] a diverse one - numbers in Yiddish and Polish - but the leitmotif is the same:

*“Strengthened be the calloused hands and the sweating brow”<sup>4</sup>.*

The words of the hymn, with which the children left the stage of the Częstochowa theatre, “*An ode and a song to toil and labour! Sing, greet them from your hearts with affection and warmth!*”<sup>5</sup>,

<sup>3</sup> [TN: Liber Brener's wife, Jadwiga (Itta) née Szajn.]

<sup>4</sup> [TN: Both this verse and the forthcoming one are quoted from “The Workers Song” by Simon Frug, originally written in Russian.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: In the Yiddish, the last word of this verse – “warmth” (וואַרְמְט) – is misprinted, and “hate” (וואַס) appears in its place.]

continued echoing in my ears for a long, long time - and perhaps actually not just the words, but precisely the understanding, the profound conviction of the children and their sentiments and enthusiasm for labour and workers.

And the collective at Częstochowa's children's home has [also] managed to resolve another important educational issue - that of the contact between the home and the [rest of the] city.

This was one of our most painful problems in children's homes even prior to 1939.

The doctors forbade contact for health reasons. They shuddered at the influences of the street and the [private] home upon the child's soul. Before the War, the children in our orphanages were cut off from life and all its events.

The children's home in Częstochowa has bravely broken with the old tradition of closing the home to guests. Every Sunday, a small festivity is held for the children of the school and just regular children from the city. They have tea with pastries and read the wall newspaper. The children present a couple of numbers from their amateur acting activities.

The guests and the children of the school and the city attend these entertainments most eagerly.

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