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Częstochower Coalminers

On a hot August day in 1914, the Tsar 's Cossacks fled and the Germans entered Częstochowa. The factories came to a standstill. The workers wandered about aimlessly in the streets.

The first week of the First World War brought Częstochowa into a semi-carnival-like atmosphere. Both Jews and Poles were elated with "Nikolayka's¹" downfall. It was expected that the German men of culture would soon reopen the factories and bring bread and freedom. This was no trifle - Germany, with its cultural treasures, inventions, the *Reichstag*, Social Democracy...

To be sure, it was not long before notices appeared in the streets, in these words:

Two thousand workers, as well as professionals, needed for work in Silesia [Śląsk]. Favourable conditions, food is good and inexpensive. [Applicants] may present themselves at ul. Dojazd, opposite the railway station.

Within two hours, working Częstochowa was all abuzz. That is exactly what they had been waiting for - work, money and bread. The quota of required [workers] was filled in one day, and one group after another travelled away to work in Germany.

The thousands of others, to whom the news had reached too late, were already denied the privilege of travelling to Germany and they remained in Częstochowa - to continue starving and wandering about idly, envying those who had been taken away to work and gazing up at the "dead" chimneys of the *smolarnia*, *klejarnia*, *kapelusznia*² and dozens of other "arnias" and smaller factories. One week later, the news of the "golden opportunity" in Germany began to arrive. Instead of humane work [conditions] - slavery. Instead of an apartment in which to live - barracks with Prussian discipline, and instead of freedom - captivity.

Notices requesting labourers once more appeared in the streets, but everyone decided that it was better to eat a chunk of dry "popularka"³ than to go to Prussian labour.

So, the Germans discarded their "cultured gloves" and applied themselves to the task [at hand]. They closed off streets and seized 50-100 people in one go, packed them into [railway] horse wagons and sent them off to labour.

There is a small town in Oberschlesien [Gorski Śląsk] - Chorzów. All at once, this little *shtetl* became a part of Częstochowa. *Częstochower* workers and just regular youth - both volunteers and those who were seized - were sucked two and three hundred metres down into the earth where, under the shouts and threats of the Prussians, they dug for coal in the old, dark coalmines, lit by small, carbide lamps

People, who yesterday were cap-makers, gaiter-stitchers, celluloid workers or tailors, were suddenly transformed by Prussian militarism into coalminers through hunger, floggings and beatings.

¹ [TN: Diminutive form of Nikolay, used as an irreverent nickname for Tsar Nicholas II of Russia.]

² [TN: Tar, glue and hat factories, respectively.]

³ [TN: As mentioned above in the article "Częstochower Cooperatives" (p.111), "popularka" was a cheap bread baked with plenty of potato skins and little flour.]

Tired, broken and barely dragging their feet, they left the coalmines late at night to go home to the *Schlafhaus* [dormitory], where the food consisted of a chunk of German *Kommissbrot*⁴ and watery soup, for which one was charged a fine price.

The end of the month was “*Zahltag*” [payday], which everyone was waiting for in order to be able to send a couple of marks home to hungry wives, children and parents in Częstochowa.

How great the disappointment was when, instead of money, they received an account like this one:

20 workdays @ <i>ℳ</i> 4.50 -----	<i>ℳ</i>90.00
30 days food @ <i>ℳ</i> 2.00 -----	<i>ℳ</i> 60.00
1 coalminer’s lamp -----	<i>ℳ</i> 5.00
1 shovel -----	<i>ℳ</i> 4.00
HMO -----	<i>ℳ</i> 4.00
Insurance in event of death -----	<i>ℳ</i> 3.00
Penalty for not filling the quota -	<i>ℳ</i> 5.00
Dormitory -----	<i>ℳ</i> 15.00
Taxes -----	<i>ℳ</i> 2.00
Total -----	<i>ℳ</i>98.00
Remains owing 8.00 Reichsmark to the Chorzów Bergwerke [Mines]	

A hunk of coal dropped down from the supports - perhaps the timbers were rotten. [Or] maybe gas had seeped through - who could ascertain this? At any rate, a *Częstochower* Jewish worker, Jelen, was crushed to death, somewhere in a mine in Oberschlesien.

The *Częstochower* workers - the coalminers - flocked around the dead man like lost sheep. They did not know what to do, how to give him burial. Only late at night did the Chorzów Bergwerke send some *Deitsche*⁵, who presented himself as *Rabbiner*. Ten men were permitted to accompany [the body] to the cemetery. The *Rabbiner* changed into a black robe, a tall, black skullcap and a large, white cravat, and sang out in a Gentile-like accent, “*Adonay natan [ve’]Adonay lakach*”⁶. Ten grown men wept like children. The Chorzów-Werke [Works] sent a letter of condolence to an address on ul. Garncarska and 50 marks as “death insurance” for the father who had been killed.

⁴ [TN: Bread given as rations in the German army, usually baked with additives such as chestnut flour and sawdust.]

⁵ [TN: “Little German”; sobriquet used by Eastern European Jew in ref. to German Jews, whom they considered deficient in religiosity.]

⁶ [TN: “The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away” (Job 1:21); this verse is not quoted in the original Hebrew, but written in Yiddish with vowels to denote that it was sung in Hebrew as pronounced by the Sephardim, which sounded alien to the Polish Jews, who would have pronounced it “*Adoynoy nusan ve’Adoynoy lukoch*”.]