

A. Litman

Częstochower Branch 261 Arbeiter Ring in New York

Thirty-seven years ago (in 1909), a group of twenty-eight Częstochowa young people, who had settled in tumultuous New York, founded a branch of the then still young workers' order - the *Arbeiter-Ring* [Workmen's Circle].

These young people were the children of Częstochowa's poor streets, whose parents had toiled in the workshops or traded and gone about peddling in the markets. The fathers and mothers had dreamt that their young ones would perhaps find something better and, with broken hearts, they parted with their children, as they accompanied them to the railway station from where they travelled overseas, to the end of the world - to unknown, distant America.

Upon arriving in the gigantic city of New York, the young *Częstochowers* looked for a corner at which to spend time, to meet one another and to discuss local and world problems.

True, they had already heard that all kinds of organisations and societies exist here, where *landsleit* come together and one feels at home. The religious Jews built synagogues in which to pray and study a chapter of *Mishnayos*¹. The ordinary, non-religious Jews founded "lodges" and "societies"² - *chevras* [societies] which sought to aid the sick, make arrangements for a tomb after 120, [etc.]. These *chevras* grew like mushrooms after the rain and they confused the circles of the newly-arrived immigrants in New York.

What did the immigrant, who in Częstochowa had been a craftsman - a tailor, a carpenter, a cap-maker, an upholsterer [or] a baker - think of this? Here, he ended up in a sweatshop, where he suffered and slaved from the early hours to late at night, and lived in the tenement districts, in the narrow, stuffy little rooms, without air and without sun. Strikes would break out. These strikes were prolonged and bloody. The labourers often lost the strike. But, when they returned to the workshops, they did not lose their courage and did not give up their hope to improve their bitter situation.

The *Częstochower* working immigrants then came to the decision that they needed to found an organisation of the sort that would take an interest in their situation, help the workers organise themselves into unions and protect their interests. At the same time, they also sought a progressive, friendly atmosphere. They heard the song that the poet J. Adler (B. Kovner³) had published about the foundation of the Arbeiter-Ring, which was then only nine years old. This song resonated in the Jewish working street with a fiery passion. It was called "Our Tree" and was sung as follows:

*One grey winter night,
No stars were shining;
Then good men
Planted a little tree for us...*

¹ [TN: Plural form of "Mishna," the first rabbinical text and precursor to the Talmud. As the text of the Mishna is relatively simple and straightforward, and anyone with even a basic cheder education would be familiar with it, it is often chosen as the subject matter for a public lesson between the afternoon and evening prayer services in synagogues.]

² [TN: These two words are in English in the original, thus the quotation marks and the subsequent clarification.]

³ [TN: Jacob Adler (1874-1974) was a Yiddish humourist whose contributions under the name of B. Kovner were a regular feature of *The Jewish Daily Forward*.]



The first, who thought of founding a Częstochower branch of the Arbeiter-Ring, were the following twenty-eight young men from Częstochowa: Leon Frydlender, Abram Montag, Maurice Rozencwajg, Harry Szerman, Harry Frajman, Dawid Feucht, Louis Goldman, Rubin Fajersztajn, Izrael Inzelsztajn, Pinches Gotlib, Maks Szajer, Sydney Glazner [sic Glazer], Kalman Gross, Ab. Herszkowicz, Herman Szczekacz, Hymie Gotajner, Mojsze Bornsztajn, Sam Silverstein, Louis Besser, Abram Warmund, Louis Ajzner, Louis Rafalowicz, Harry Brzeziński, Szmul Lefkowicz, William Gryn, Mojsze Kraus, Louis Ufner and Aba Kaufman.

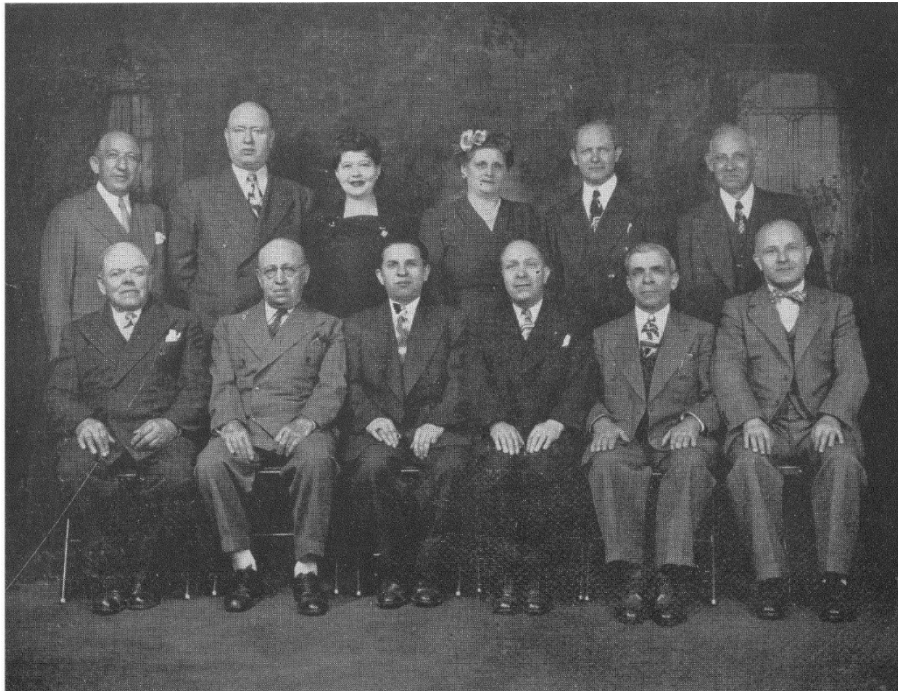
On 8th February 1909, they gathered at Mrs Szajer's house on 712 East 6th Street, New York, where the founding meeting was held.

The history of the *Częstochower* Branch 261 Arbeiter-Ring is actually the history of every branch and of the Arbeiter-Ring in general.

The founders of our branch, thirty-six years ago, were governed by the same ideals and set themselves the same tasks as our mother organisation, which by then had already existed for nine years.

The Arbeiter-Ring and Branch 261

There was a time, when our branch breathed with communal life. There was a time, when the branch carried out various plans aimed at making the members' financial situation easier in times of economic need and in the event of an illness. A fund for local sickness benefits was created which, in the beginning, paid three dollars a week and, later, raised it to four dollars a week. We also formed a loan fund, a fund to make good the bills of those members unable to do so due to necessity, and an old age fund to pay the bills of members who were no longer able to work. In general, a democratic spirit and friendship between one member and the other reigned in the branch and all were like one family.



Częstochower Branch 261 Arbeiter-Ring

*Seated (R-L): Ab. Litman, S. Richter, J. [?] Szubin, M. Fajner, A. [x] Goldfinger and H. Brzeziński;
Standing (R-L): M. Wilinger, M. Sztern, F. Szwajcer, A. [x] Kop, M. Kop and M. Gotlib*

A Civil War Breaks Out in the Branch

All quarrels within an organisation have a destructive effect, inhibit its growth, cripple its activity and demoralise the members - and the paw of destruction gets the upper hand.

When the branch split up, thirty-six members officially left the branch. But the storm tore many members away in its wake, who were lost to the Arbeiter-Ring and ended up in the bourgeois societies. The branch would perhaps have entered a state of complete discouragement and forlorn, had there not been a few of the older active members and also younger members who, during the time of the dispute, had stood aside and were not active in the branch, but who, after the schism, became once more active, with a will to revive the branch and to renew its activity. They were, however, greatly hindered by the economic crisis that had started rampaging in the country at the time.

The Branch Begins to Return to Itself

In order to once more revive our branch, we applied ourselves to various plans. Two of these plans were, firstly, that our meeting place should be relocated to the Bronx, instead of Downtown, as two thirds of the members lived there. The second plan was to unify ourselves with another branch of the Arbeiter-Ring. The first was carried out immediately. The second was put off until later.

As it would seem, the "*Meshane mukoim*"⁴ worked. The members began attending the meetings, we took in a number of new members and we also admitted the wives of several of our members to the branch. With satisfaction, we note that they are performing good work for the branch. Over the course of the last few years, the branch has been conducting cultural work and holds lectures on various issues. The branch holds a theatrical function annually for the benefit of the sickness fund. Lately, it has again become able to pay local sickness benefits. For the past three years, the branch has moved to an apartment downtown, on 14th Street and Broadway.

The Branch Supports All Workers' and People's Organisations

Over the course of these thirty-six years, the branch has supported the following organisations: Jewish children's schools, Arbeiter-Ring branches, the Young Circle League, unions and strikes, kindergartens, sanatoriums, convalescent homes, old age homes, day nurseries and hospitals, the Socialist Party and its press both in America and in Europe, the [YIVO] Institute for Jewish Research, ORT, the Jewish Labour Committee, HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society], the kindergarten in Częstochowa, political arrestees in America and in Europe, the Bund in Poland, Romanian workers, the Spanish Popular Front, the Czenstochover Relief, Jewish children's schools in Poland, cooperatives, workers' lyceums, the Young People's Socialist League, the Debs [Memorial Radio] Fund⁵ and a number of other organisations.



In order to give an idea of what kind of dough the *Częstochower* Branch 261 kneaded⁶ and who its founders and builders were, we shall only present the biography of one of them, who died in 1927. His name was Mojsze-Icek Szuchter (Szwajcer), a brother of the former Labour leader in Częstochowa

⁴ [TN: Heb. "He who changes his place"; first half of a traditional Hebrew saying based upon Talmudic sources – "He who changes his place changes his fortune" (מיִשְׁנֵה מְקוֹמָהּ מִשְׁנֵה מַזְלָה).]

⁵ [TN: Fund named for Eugene V. Debs, which made possible the establishment of the Socialist WEVD radio station that operated from Woodhaven in the New York City borough of Queens from 1927.]

⁶ [TN: Fig., viz. what types of activity they engaged in.]

and later in America – Mendel Szuchter. He was a builder and activist of our branch to the last day of his life.

In Częstochowa, he had been a baker. He emigrated to England and lived there for ten years. He helped found the Bakers Union in London. He arrived in America in 1907. He immediately joined the local Baker Union's Local 305, where he was active for many years and was the Union's delegate. He was respected and appreciated by the members for his idealism and readiness to fight for the masses. He fought for unionism, picketed and went on strikes - even though there was no bread at home for his wife and children. He was torn away from his activity in the Labour Movement at the age of fifty-four, and died at his post in the fight for the bakery workers.

Our Branch in the Fight Against Fascism

Long before the world was ignited by the Nazi barbarians in 1939, our members realised that Fascists, across the globe were uniting to drown the Labour Movement in blood. We, therefore, supported the underground fighters against fascism both in Italy and in half-Fascist Poland. And, when the bloody war broke out in Spain, our members supported the Loyalist combatants with life and limb.

When the global wrangle with fascism broke out in 1939, our branch immediately threw itself into the fray. Our branch is able to proudly point to the fact that, although we are just a small family of seventy-three households, we gave the American army and navy *eighty* young combatants in all the fronts, and purchased \$50,000 worth of war bonds.

Branch 261 and the Czenstochover Relief

The members of the *Częstochower* Branch 261 have written a beautiful chapter in the activity for our home of old – for Częstochowa. Our members were the founders and builders of the Relief. All of the Relief's great works were successful thanks to the fact that the members of our branch did their part.

The Arbeiter-Ring Branch 261 gave the Czenstochover Relief not only monetary support, but also leaders and guides. The Relief's Secretary-Treasurer, Josef Kaufman, who has served the organisation devotedly and loyally for the last decade, is a member of the Arbeiter-Ring Branch 261. Raphael Federman, the secretary of the Book Committee of the book *Czenstochover Yidn* and a member of its Editorial Board, has been a member of our branch since 1941⁷. An array of other activists of the Relief [sic branch], such as M. Fajner, Maks Wilinger, Sam Richter, M. Gotlib, Ab. Herszkowicz, the late Majer Rembak and others, also worked with the Relief. The branch's current Financial Secretary, M. Sztern - although not a *Częstochower landsmann* [himself] (he is actually from Tomaszów) - over the course of these six years during which he has been in office, has always lent a hand in the work for the Czenstochover Relief. The writer of these lines, Abram Litman, who has been active in the Relief since his arrival in America, took upon himself the special task awakening the *landsleit* through the press to not forsake their hometown Częstochowa.

When, in 1937, the mournful reports arrived from Częstochowa to the effect that hooligans had run amok and perpetrated a pogrom upon the poor Jewish population, killing five Jews and wounding several hundreds, our member Abram Litman appealed, on behalf of the Czenstochover Relief, to the Jewish Labour Committee to come to the aid of the victims - whereupon the Jewish Labour Committee donated \$500 to the Jewish victims in Częstochowa.

⁷ [TN: According to this, Federman would have joined the branch very soon after arriving in the US from Japan in early 1941 (see above, p.272).]

Let it also be hereby noted that Arbeiter-Ring Branch 261 also particularly aided the kindergarten in Częstochowa, and factually financed the orchestra of the school in Częstochowa.

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In this historic hour, the *Częstochower* Arbeiter-Ring Branch 261 will certainly do anything it can to assist in the sacred duty of rebuilding Jewish Częstochowa's Surviving Remnant.