

J. Kirszenbaum

The *Częstochower Shul* [Synagogue] in New York

All the *Częstochower landsleit* of New York and other cities grouped around the United Czenstochover Relief and Ladies Auxiliary. One of the addresses of *Częstochower Jews* is the Chasam Sopher *Shul*, 8-10 Clinton Street, New York, in the very heart of the *Galicianer*¹ quarter. This synagogue was built with the aid of the renowned [German] Jewish philanthropists, Jakob [Heinrich] Schiff and [Adolph] Lewisohn.

The *Częstochower Chasam Sopher Shul* is now a *Galicianer* synagogue. It belongs amongst the very oldest synagogues in New York. It was once almost a Reform synagogue. Dr Stephen S. Wise's father was the [Reform] rabbi of the synagogue and Dr Stephen Wise, himself, had his *Bar-Mitzvah* there. The rabbi of the *shul* is now the Rabbi Reb Mordche[-Josef] Mayer, a disciple of the *Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin*², where the Rabbi of Piotrków, Rabbi [Majer] Szapira, was dean of the *yeshiva*.

The synagogue's officials [will] tell you the story of the Chasam Sopher *Shul* in simple words. Mr Liber Gril tells us that, in 1886, a small synagogue existed on Columbia Street, which was mainly maintained by Hungarian *landsleit*, named "Chasam Sopher" - in memory of the great Hungarian prodigy³ of the Chasam Sopher *Yeshiva*. The synagogue had two hundred members and, when it became too small, they began to look for a larger sacred space. Following an exhaustive search⁴, they found at 8-10 Clinton Street, what was then the Rodeph Sholom Temple - a true Reform synagogue in the full sense of the word - Jews and their wives would arrive there on *Shabbes* travelling in carriages⁵, an organ played, accompanied by a choir of boys and girls, and so on. This means that an elderly *heimischer*⁶ of ours, and even a younger Jew, would not have dared go inside there and pour his heart out before the *Riboino shel Oilem* [Master of the Universe] in the Jewish manner.

Following lengthy negotiations, the building was bought and was soon transformed into a true Orthodox *shul*, as accustomed. However, over the course of just two years, the congregation dispersed - not being able to sustain the huge expense that a synagogue demands. More than 150 members left the *shul* and founded a lodge under the same name - "Chasam Sopher Lodge". In 1890, the handful of members did everything to maintain the synagogue. But it was impossible to keep up with the mortgages and interests. The mortgager foreclosed the building and the Jews were practically left as if on the street - without a *shul*.

As in all other associations, here, too, there were goodhearted members, who bore more responsibility than others. When the former President Sz. Glik, who is already in the *Oilem Ha'Emes*⁷, saw that the building had already been sold to speculators, and that they had already started to pull bricks from the walls in order to turn the building into a theatre or cinema, he applied himself to the

¹ [TN: *Jews from Galicia in Eastern Europe.*]

² [TN: "Academy of the Sages of Lublin."]

³ [TN: Rabbi Moische Schreiber or "Soifer" in Heb. (1762–1839), known for his main work, "Chasam Soifer" (Seal of the Scribe).]

⁴ [TN: The Talmudic Hebrew expression is used here in the original – "I have laboured and I have found," from Talmud Bavli, Megilah 6b: "And Rabbi Yitzchok said: If a person says to you: I have laboured and not found (success), do not believe him; I have not laboured but I have found, do not believe him; I have laboured and I have found – believe him."]

⁵ [TN: In the original Yiddish, this word as well as several others are written in English with Hebrew characters, and are thus presented within quotation marks. Due to the abundance of suchlike words in this article, we have simply transliterated the English word, omitting the quotation marks.]

⁶ [TN: From the word "heim," or home, viz. an individual from one's own home.]

⁷ [TN: Heb. "World of Truth," viz. the afterlife.]

task and went out into the street in search of associates for the ruined building, going the round of the [different] societies. Within four weeks, he was able to rescue the synagogue.

We should mention that, at the time, the congregation only had forty members.

On a far-flung corner of Sheriff Street [Manhattan], there was a society named “*Częstochower Chevre*” [Cz. Society], consisting of 150 members. Two of them, Brothers⁸ D. Gajzler and Isrulke Broder - may they live long lives - have already been members of this society for fifty years. Disregarding the fact that Hungarian and Polish [Jews] are never such suitable *mechitunim*⁹, the match nevertheless came to be. The aforementioned [activists], following a few conferences with some Jewish communal figures, such as the ex-presidents, the late Sz. Szajkiewicz and H. Wilczyński, Sz. Goldberg and D. Gajzler - [who] are still members to this day, long years to them - were able to come to an agreement. Both societies merged.

With combined forces, they in fact directly embarked upon their sacred duty and, besides the joint assets - a capital of thousands, they also collected donations. As all this was still not enough, they went to [see] the philanthropists Jakob H. Schiff and Lewisohn, both of them pledged \$1,000 each, on condition that the Society raise \$25,000. They [actually] needed \$65,000. They collected penny by penny, even going about in the streets with kerchiefs¹⁰ and visiting societies and unions, who not only gave nothing, but actually did not let the committees in, as is the old custom in New York. The “soldier with the bolt” [viz. doorkeeper], the “inner guard”, said that “No means no”, in name of the General – the President with the gavel. Even the eulogies that were made in the *shul* on *Shabbosim* were of little aid¹¹. But, after great toil, the few members were nevertheless able to raise a sum of \$18,000, and the rest was covered by mortgages. They immediately set about the reconstruction of practically the whole synagogue, which was broken apart and looked like a true ruin.

Now, it is one of the most beautiful and oldest synagogues in the *Galicianer* quarter.

⁸ [TN: Obviously meaning fellow members in the “Chevre.”]

⁹ [TN: Fellow in-laws, viz. the parents of one’s child’s spouse, with whom one becomes partners over the wedding arrangements etc.]

¹⁰ [TN: The Jewish tradition was apparently that one who collected donations for a communal cause from door to door or in the streets would wear a brightly-coloured kerchief (red or white) as a sign; this custom is mentioned several times throughout the literature.]

¹¹ [TN: Donations would presumably have been taken from the mourners for these eulogies.]