

## H. Jelen

# Kamyk

Of all the *shtetls* surrounding Częstochowa, Kamyk was almost the smallest, but it distinguished itself for its rich history and its lively youth.

Kamyk's Jewish quarter was separated from the Polish one by flowing water. This divide had been planned - by whom, only God knows. But the *Kamyker* Jews, apparently not wishing to be suspected of having created a "ghetto" for the Gentiles, positioned all the religious [institutions and] officials - the Synagogue, the Rabbi, the *Mikve* [ritual bathhouse] and the *Shames* [sacristan/custodian] - in the Polish quarter.

The Jewish populace of Kamyk consisted of a hundred families, mostly cattle dealers and butchers. They would go out to the surrounding villages to strike some bargain, or travelled to the markets in other *shtetls*.

Of course, Kamyk also had a few Jewish shops, a few *melamdim*, and a couple of cobblers and tailors, who clothed the nakedness of Kamyk's population.

Almost every family had its own small field, which was sown with patches of potatoes, rye, wheat [etc.] and this supplemented their livelihood.

In the old days, the youngsters, immediately upon being let out from *cheder*, would go with their fathers into the village or travel with them to the markets and, over the course of time, became "utter" merchants. However, with the advent of the new times, this changed. The youth began to be drawn to the large city, Częstochowa - a distance of two hours away on foot. The first step was taken by the cobbler and tailor [apprentice] boys. Thoughts of becoming better cobblers or tailors than their fathers were had come up in their heads. Besides that, the big city - where one lives differently, entertains oneself differently, and grows up differently than in the *shtetl* - drew them like a magnet. Bands of youngsters began wandering off to the big city Częstochowa, where they worked, grew up in an urban environment and met new people, new friends and comrades. In 1905, the *Kamykers* in Częstochowa were already taking an active part in the Freedom Movement, or "*Achdus*" [Unity], as it was called.

Kamyk also had its own industry - tanning. At first, coarse leather (*konina*<sup>1</sup>) was processed there. In the later years, the tanneries were built. Several factories were erected, better specialists were brought in from the larger cities, a better type of leather was produced and the whole industry took on broader, urban proportions.

Kamyk was also notorious for its fires - they were called "*Kamyker* burners". Every Monday and Thursday<sup>2</sup>, a blaze would lay waste to an entire street, or several streets in one stroke. After every fire, families with eight or ten children would wallow about in barns and stables with the cows and chickens for weeks and months, trembling before a new blaze.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Presumably ref. to horsehide, as "konina", in both Polish and Russian, means "horsemeat."]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: The expression is used in Judaism to denote a regularly reoccurring event, as every Monday and Thursday a portion of the Torah is read during the morning prayer service.]

Kamyk believed the fires were a punishment from God - until it emerged that they were the doing of the small-*shtetl* "good boys" [gangsters<sup>3</sup>].

A Jewish lord resided in Kamyk - Zandsztajn. He conducted himself in the same manner as all the Polish noblemen in the vicinity - with a courtyard almost like a palace, surrounded by a fruit and flower garden, with many fields, meadows, woods, cattle and horses, and with a sawmill and a mill that were powered by steam. The mill and sawmill brought life to Kamyk. Wagons brought timber from the forest, the sawmill cut the planks and sent them into town - and Kamyk earned a living.

The *Kamyker* Jews, as is usually the case, aggrandised themselves with the Jewish lord in their *shtetl*, even if they felt wronged and insulted that, on their part, the Jewish noblemen kept themselves strictly isolated from the poor Jewish populace, and the courtyard watchmen, who fiercely guarded everything that belonged to the courtyard, looked at everyone with angry eyes.

At times, the Jewish nobleman gave out potatoes. This would happen in the winter and in times of great need.

Kamyk celebrated *chinuchs*<sup>4</sup> in a unique manner. It was mostly the *Chevre Tehilim* [Society (for the recitation of) Psalms], which celebrated the completion of several Torah scrolls. Each *chinuch* was a true festival in the *shtetl*, lasting for several days. Young and old would take part in the great joyous occasion, with musical orchestras, food, drink, song and dance.

The festive holiday feeling of these *chinuchs* would leave a profound yearning after it, once everything returned to weekday life.

The *Chevre Tehilim* also celebrated frequent *Melave Malkes*<sup>5</sup>, and they would end *Simchas Torah* with dancing and singing. They went to the Synagogue for the *hakufes*<sup>6</sup> with illuminated processions.

Kamyk was also surrounded by natural beauty. The most beautiful was the renowned *Nysn-Barg* [Nut Mountain]. The youth, who in the summertime would come home for *Shabbes* after a week of work in Częstochowa, refreshed themselves in the sea of green in which the whole *shtetl* with its fields, woods, streams and meadows was immersed.

But the *Nysn-Barg* was most beloved of all. That is where they headed on *Shabbes* after the *chulent*. When the work-weary *shtetl* sank into slumber, the youth would go out to the *Nysn-Barg* with a newspaper, a book or an illustrated magazine and lay down there and feel as if they were in an enchanted palace. Once one reached the mountain's summit, it seemed not only as if Częstochowa lay at one's feet, but as if the whole world was literally to be reached with the hand.

Two individuals stood out in the foremost ranks of the *Kamyker* youth - Berl (Benny) Jelen and Hersze'le Erlich. They were two separate bodies with one soul. They were both the "dreamers of Kamyk" and those who, within their limited possibilities, realised their dreams through actions.

First of all, they formed a youth circle around themselves and made efforts to procure reading materials for them - from newspapers and magazines to a philosophical works. When the circle

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<sup>3</sup> [TN: These Jewish gangsters, who are frequently mentioned throughout the contemporary literature, ran extortion rackets and would not have been above setting fire to a business which had refused to pay them protection money.]

<sup>4</sup> [TN: Plural form of the Heb. "chinuch," meaning "education/dedication/inauguration"; in this case, the inauguration of a newly-written Torah scroll, as follows.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: A "Melave Malka," lit. "Accompanying the Queen," is a festive meal held on Saturday night to see the Shabbes off.]

<sup>6</sup> [TN: Heb., lit. "circles"; at the end of the festival of Sukkos, on Simchas Torah, it is the custom to take the Torah scrolls out of the Holy Ark and to encircle the reader's platform with great joy, singing and dancing.]

expanded, they set out to create a youth organisation named "*Chevre Bucherim*" [Society [of] Bachelors], with its own *minyán* and its own Torah scroll.

However, the *Kamyker* [religious] fanatics smelt that, under the *Chevre Bucherim*, with its own *minyán*, something else was hidden and a war flared up in all corners of the *shtetl* - in the street, in the Synagogue, in the *shtiebel* and even in the *mikve* – everywhere, people spoke about the calamity that was bearing down on Kamyk.

But the youth won. The *Chevre Bucherim*, with its own *minyán*, became a reality. The first *Simchas Torah* that the lads celebrated surpassed [that of] the *Chevre Tehilim*. When the *Chevre* held the "march" in the streets, with lights and singing, candles were lit in every window for their sake. Kamyk had never yet seen such a picture. Even the Gentile neighbours rejoiced along with them on this festive occasion.

With the outbreak of the First World War, all the factories and workshops in the towns and *shtetls* came to a stop. The *Kamyker* youth returned home from the cities - to their parents for bed and board. The youth circle, with its two leaders, did not neglect this opportunity and held frequent gatherings and meetings, which held the youth together and developed their sensitivity for communal issues and an interest in literature. They often brought in representatives of the Labour Movement from Częstochowa, such as Raphael Federman, Szmul Frank, A. Chrobolovsky, Herszl Gotajner, Mojsze Berkenzstadt and others.

With the end of the First World War, Kamyk's financial situation did not improve, but worsened. Most of the Jewish population was starving. Children went about naked and barefoot. Thanks to the efforts of the leading youth group, which had connections to the Częstochowa SS, later Vereinigte, Kamyk received aid and food which America had sent for Poland. A kitchen was opened for children, where they received several meals a day. Some clothes was procured and, at the end, the most beautiful thing was created, in which all Kamyk rejoiced and took pride - a kindergarten named after I.L. Peretz.

Needless to say, without the aid of Częstochowa, the CISZO (Central Yiddish School Organisation) and of friends from America, this would have been impossible. The kindergarten's soul was the first teacher, Fajge'le Berliner. With her love for the child and selfless devotion, she raised the kindergarten to a very fine level. The *Kamyker* children, just like the whole Jewish population of Kamyk, repaid her with love and respect.

On the second school year, a Year One primary school was opened. Flw Berl Jelen was, by then, already in America and he supported the work with all his might.

When the delegates of the Czenstochover Relief in New York came to Częstochowa to create the I.L. Peretz building, they also visited Kamyk and gave \$100 to the Kamyk school.

With the assistance of the Częstochowa drama circle, performances, lectures and dance evenings were held, which would bring in financial aid.

The kindergarten also had a Parents Committee, and parents' meetings would be held often. Orthodox Jews, who had recognised that their children would be brought up better in a modern school than in an old-fashioned *cheder*, were [also] represented on the Parents Committee.

Kamyk participated in the electoral war in independent Poland and a great number of the Jewish voters supported the progressive socialist candidates.

Overall, with its fighting youth, which charged forth towards a better life, Kamyk moved to the forefront of the *shtetls* around Częstochowa and led the little *shtetl* along with it. Kamyk must not be forgotten.

