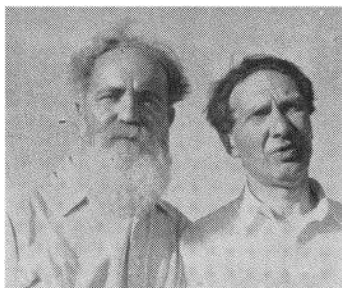


**Dr Josef Kruk (Jerusalem)**

## The End

Generations upon generations of Jews worked hard, fought and often willingly gave their own lives so that “their city” - our unforgettable, cherished Częstochowa - should progressively develop, always be enriched with ever-new spiritual treasures, be ever more free and become more beautiful and refined.



*Dr Josef Kruk and Zerubavel*

To this purpose, they directly or indirectly united with the best and most progressive elements in the Polish population, for they comprehended that, despite all their differences, the city was, after all, a concern of all its burghers and inhabitants. They were often - all too often! - oppressed and wronged, yet they fought with dignity and boldly for a general and Jewish national equality and emancipation. The Częstochowa Jewish masses, therefore, always supported all beneficial and progressive municipal initiatives and assisted in carrying them out. Częstochowa owed much - quite an incalculably great deal - to Jewish support, assistance and even Jewish initiative.

In parallel with the work in favour of the general institutions, the Jews created a bounty of exemplary Jewish institutions in all fields of economic, social, political and cultural life.

Every class, every group [and] every party can proudly enumerate its institutions: kindergartens [and] national [viz. Zionist] progressive schools, the model Crafts School, the renowned “farm”, which later became not only one of the best in Poland, but in the whole of Europe, as regards their development of the visionary pioneers’ training [programme], the large Jewish Gymnazjum, orphanages, [the] aged care home, the new Jewish Hospital, craftsmen’s associations and a network of powerful professional unions.

And the [political] party life! Ideologically, we often fought amongst ourselves. But how much willingness to [make] sacrifices, idealism and nobility were invested in these parties! – Zionists of all tendencies, Territorialists, Folkists<sup>1</sup>, [and] Socialists of all shades and nuances: the Zionist Socialist Workers Party (SS), Bund, *Poalei Zion*, the United Jewish Socialist Workers Party ([merger of] SS and JS<sup>2</sup>), Communists, *Ha’Shomer Ha’Tzair*, the Independent Socialist Workers Party, [and] for some time – even Anarchists.

How many libraries, clubs, newspapers, sports organisations and different cultural circles they created! And they devoted all their strength, time and energy.

The old generation still remembered the active participation of the Jews in the Polish Uprising (my grandfather was one of its leaders in the Częstochowa woods<sup>3</sup>) - and how much vigour was expended in the Polish and Russian<sup>4</sup> revolutions! How many Częstochowa Jews - workers and intellectuals, old people and young - went to the jails and prisons and to forced labour in Siberia, from whence more than one was never to return!

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<sup>1</sup>[TN: “*Jidisze Folks-Partaj*” (Jewish People’s Party); political party which sought Jewish national autonomy in the Diaspora.]

<sup>2</sup>[TN: Jewish Socialist Workers Party, nicknamed “Seymists.”]

<sup>3</sup>[TN: As Dr Josef Kruk was born in 1885, the uprising to which he alludes and in which his grandfather took part must be the “January Uprising” of 1863.]

<sup>4</sup>[TN: Most likely ref. to the “First Russian Revolution” of 1905.]

And how many were injured and shot on Częstochowa's streets, when they loyally and courageously demonstrated under the red flags of social justice, political freedom, human fraternity and international peace, and of the unification of peoples and countries!

And how many - old and young - were forced to leave their hometown, their families, comrades and friends, and set out to wander across remote lands, often working under sweatshop-like conditions? They knew what awaited them, but they willingly and conscientiously strode upon the path of thorns - in order not to renounce the ideals which had grown organically inside their souls.

And even in these distant cities and countries - in peaceful Swiss Zürich, boisterous Paris, romantic Amsterdam, "diamond" Antwerp, exotic Argentina, tropical Australia and South Africa and, first and foremost, in the various larger and smaller cities of the United States of North America and Canada, and in Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, Haifa and the various *kibbutzim* in the Land of Israel - the Częstochowa Jews, wherever they were, would frequently call to mind, with affection, the years and struggles of their youth "there".

There - in the *Stary Rynek* or the *Nowy Rynek*, the First or Second *Aleja*, the *Warszawska*, *Nadrzeczna*, *Strażacka* and *Ogrodowa* streets, at the "Three Crosses" and on [?]<sup>5</sup>, in *Częstochówka*, on *ul. Krótka*, at the Old or New Synagogue, on *ul. Tylna*<sup>6</sup> or *Teatralna*, in the park, on the peaceful banks of the familiar *Warta*, or in the green *Wały*<sup>7</sup>.

And [they] even [called to mind] the cemetery behind the city, across the Old Bridge - where their relatives and closest ones, their father and mother, or their intimate comrade and friend, lay.

*Częstochowers*, from their new homes, lovingly and loyally supported every sort of communal institution - the libraries, kindergartens and schools - in their home of old, so that those remaining in the old home should develop in a free and dignified manner and live more happily.

And the Częstochowa Jews responded to the love of their *landsleit* [fellow townsmen] overseas with warm affection and, thus, the threads of Częstochowa stretched across the entire globe. These unique and remarkable threads added courage in the often so very difficult conditions of life, and strengthened the vigour to continue fighting against all manner of dark, reactionary, antisemitic and counter-revolutionary forces for general and Jewish liberation.

Now all this is no more!

Jewish Częstochowa has been completely destroyed. The entire Jewish populace - men, women and children - have all been murdered by Hitler's hangmen.

"The wish is the father of the thought"<sup>8</sup> and, consequently, we did not wish to believe that all the Jews had been killed. We knew that Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Dr Goebbels, Göring and the Russian Black Hundreds' member, the Aryan-Germanic [Alfred] Rosenberg, were murderers. We prepared for horrendous times. We knew that many would fall. But that the *entire* Jewish population could have been slaughtered - this, we did not want, and were not able, to believe!

At the outbreak of the War, I was in Warsaw, when many Częstochowa Jews arrived there - some of them on foot, carrying their children in their arms. We knew that Częstochowa, near the border, would be one of the first cities which the German armies would occupy. The refugees from

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<sup>5</sup> [TN: The meaning of the original Yiddish "Fuschen" (בייִפּױשען) is unclear; it is possibly a reference to a surname, or even to *ul. Focha*.]

<sup>6</sup> [TN: "Back" Street, or *ul. Strażacka*.]

<sup>7</sup> [TN: Presumably *ul. Wały*, which is described above (p.70) as having been "a clean and sparsely populated street."]

<sup>8</sup> [TN: German proverb said of one who wishes to see a certain thing as he imagines it and not as it actually is in reality.]

Częstochowa hoped that, in Warsaw, they would be able to save themselves and “wait until it was over”.

Together with us all, they lived through a terrible period during which the Warsaw civilian population, practically without any aid from the central government, heroically defended itself on its own for weeks on end. Hitler’s heaviest cannon shot at the civilian population all day long without interruption and, at night, Göring’s aeroplanes, with the black swastikas, with Aryan scrupulousness, systematically and regularly torched the surrounding area and towns with their defenceless inhabitants. More than one Częstochowa Jew perished there.

I remember two touching moments in connection with *Częstochowers*.

When the German aeroplanes murderously bombarded the small, but famous, peaceful sanatorium in Otwock and [sic in] Świder<sup>9</sup> (near Warsaw), they hit a row of small houses and villas, killing defenceless people and small children. During one such airstrike, Mrs Renia Kempieńska (formerly a music teacher at the Częstochowa I.L. Peretz Primary School and Kindergarten for several years) ran up to the small villa, where we were then living. With tears in her eyes, she pleaded my wife, as a physician, to save her gravely ill child.

The Kempieńskis had been living in Częstochowa. When the German military approached the city, she seized hold of the child and fled Częstochowa with a group of Jews. She lost her husband on the way. When they entered the city [Warsaw], many streets were already burning.

Once more, she took up the child and fled to Świder, Otwock. Along the way, the infant caught cold and fell severely ill. Świder was already almost unpopulated. I had just then liquidated my archive and was about to travel back to Warsaw. But how could one not assist a desperate mother?

Her villa was far away, deep inside the pine forest. The infant lay with a high temperature. Everything, all around, was already empty and desolate. Even the pharmacy was already closed. “What shall I do? Where shall I go? Could I remain here? And how can I go on the road with such a seriously ill child? And where is my husband – will he ever be found?”

There was already no one in the entire large villa, and also in the neighbouring villas and clinics. The tall pines stood rustling mournfully in the late, cold autumn wind. We helped the despairing mother and her little sick child in any way we could. We remained with her for several hours. “Why have I come here - unlucky me? It would already have been better to remain in Częstochowa - even death would have been better there”, she lamented.

Afterwards, I went on foot to Warsaw, where we lived through the whole period of siege and burning.

And now, I call to mind one of Częstochowa’s most delicate young women, who dedicated much time and energy to the Jewish and general workforce, their struggles and their cultural endeavours – Helencia Pływacz.

Once the official war operations in Poland had ended, and with both Częstochowa and Warsaw lying in Hitler’s hands, this [Miss] Pływacz made the greatest efforts to come from Częstochowa to Warsaw to find out how her sister, a young student at the University of Warsaw, was doing.

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<sup>9</sup> [TN: A neighbourhood in Otwock.]

How shaken she was when she saw that the building, where her beloved sister lived, had been completely destroyed, and when she discovered that her sister had been burnt alive there together with all the tenants.

I spent a long time with her, but we kept silent - because what could we say under such circumstances? And we knew that the real bloody, merciless war against the defenceless Jewish population was now only beginning.

I helped Helencia Pływacz travel back to Częstochowa - and such a journey was an extremely difficult and hazardous undertaking at the time. Upon parting company, we shook hands warmly, "Greetings to all the comrades and friends. We must keep our spirits up - perhaps we shall see each other again in better times!" She had tears in her eyes. For a long time, I gazed at her silent steps, as this delicate, educated young lady left from ul. Leszno to Częstochowa. "Will we ever see each other again?" She was one of the last people from Częstochowa whom I saw in Warsaw, when they returned to the city of our birth.

We assisted an array of *Częstochowers* to return to Częstochowa. After all, Warsaw was the most destroyed and burnt city in all of Poland. Perhaps, in Częstochowa, it would be easier to live through those most difficult times - [or so] we thought.

And the small, always silent Hersze'le Erlich from Kamyk-Częstochowa ("Bontshe the Silent"<sup>10</sup>), whose room had been destroyed, and was miraculously saved, just in his shirtsleeves, from an exploding bomb, even gave several of the Częstochowa refugees in Warsaw - often formerly men of wealth or respected intellectuals - a "bonus" for a lunch at a workers' kitchen. A "lunch" meant a little soup and a chunk of black bread.

In Warsaw, the first kitchen to give out bread for lunch was on ul. Pawia, and this was partly thanks to Hersze'le Erlich's assistance. He met an acquaintance of his - a baker from Częstochowa - in a bakery and, through a series of illegal tricks, we obtained the first two hundred breads for the diners at the kitchens. What a sensation, and what a pride it was, that the first one who decided to [take] risky illegal measures and made fools of Hitler's murderous administration - was a native of Kamyk-Częstochowa.

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Subsequently, evil tidings would arrive from Częstochowa. Yet, in comparison with other cities, the situation there was still somewhat more bearable. Less horrific reports of killings came than from other cities - and most importantly, the Jews of Częstochowa had not been deported as from hundreds of other towns. On the contrary - Jews, from an array of Polish towns, were being sent to Częstochowa, where they laboured arduously but, nonetheless, were alive. Hence, there was hope ...

But in the end, our Częstochowa Jewish population shared the same fate as the whole Jewish People in Poland and in the Soviet Union's conquered territories.

Murder, murder, continuous murder - of men, women, the elderly, the sick and children.

In the summer of 1943<sup>11</sup>, a group of (exchanged<sup>12</sup>) Jewish women arrived in the Land of Israel and, with them, was also a renowned public activist from Piotrków - Mr [Jakow] Kurc<sup>13</sup>. He brought us

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<sup>10</sup> [TN: Protagonist of 1894 short story by I.L. Peretz of that same title.]

<sup>11</sup> [TN: Dr Kruk emigrated to Palestine in 1940.]

<sup>12</sup> [TN: It is likely that they were exchanged for German nationals held by British authorities in Mandate Palestine.]

horrific news from Poland regarding the Nazi “Extermination Commission<sup>14</sup>”, which was purposely travelling around Polish cities and murdering the Jews *en masse*. He told us about Piotrków and Radomsko, and also gave us horrific greetings from Częstochowa, from whence numerous trains with Jews had already been sent off to Treblinka. In Poland, we had first discovered that Treblinka was a death factory only thanks to a young Częstochowa tailoring worker, whom the Nazis had transported there alongside thousands of other Częstochowa Jews. At the last moment, he had managed to escape from there and he recounted the terrifying mortal truth with which he had already been acquainted face to face.

Kurc’s accounts shook everyone to the very depths of their souls, and a day of protest, public fasting<sup>15</sup> and general strike was then declared throughout the whole Land of Israel, in an appeal to the Free World - to the parliaments, governments, churches, universities, trade unions and parties - to rescue the remnants of our hapless folk.

In the late summer and beginning of autumn 1944, after extraordinary efforts, two young fighters, who had been in Częstochowa and the vicinity - such as Żarki, Radomsko, Zawiercie and Będzin - arrived in the Land of Israel and brought, what was then, the very latest news from Częstochowa.

They were Aron Brandes and Abram Izbicki. I already knew them back in Częstochowa. They visited me several times and told [me their stories]... These were the last greetings from the last *Częstochower* Jews!

It was not easy to recount what they had seen and experienced and it was only with great efforts that they told episode after episode of that most horrifying hell.

As we listened to them, we bit our lips and our hearts wept and bled. Our fingers clenched themselves into fists. As hard as it was to hear, we still wanted to know more and more - all the new facts. It is exactly as how one arrives after the death of close and dear ones, and one wishes to know how they lived in their last minutes, what they thought, said and felt, and what testament they left for us.

Brandes (now over thirty years old), belongs to the youth of the left-wing Socialist pioneers, *Ha’Shomer Ha’Tzair*. He was also active in this movement during Hitler’s times. His brother [Cwi] was part of the High Command of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and fell in an extraordinarily heroic manner. Aron Brandes also took part in the underground work and the Jewish anti-Nazi resistance operations. He had been in Częstochowa, Żarki and Radomsko several times - and how he travelled there and back, and there and back once again, is in itself an epic poem about the hopes and experiences of the Jewish masses who were sentenced to death.

The twenty-eight-year-old Izbicki had lived in Częstochowa throughout the entire period. From childhood, he had been brought up in a combative environment, in a radicalised family. His mother belonged to the United Jewish Socialist Workers Party (SS and JS) and, later, to the Independent Socialist Party. He belonged to the Zionist-Socialist “*Hitachdut Poalei Zion*<sup>16</sup>”. His upbringing helped him hold out longer, and eventually - through a series of life-threatening measures - to dash over to

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<sup>13</sup> [TN: For further details regarding this individual and the book he published in Palestine in 1944 about his experiences in Piotrków during the Holocaust, see “Czenstochov” (1958), p.71.]

<sup>14</sup> [TN: Evidently ref. to the German term “Vernichtungskommando” (Extermination Squad).]

<sup>15</sup> [TN: In Judaism, public fasting is viewed as an extremely powerful spiritual intercession with the “heavenly powers,” in the same manner that public sacrifices were held in antiquity to avert “heavenly decrees.”]

<sup>16</sup> [TN: “Union of the Workers of Zion”; see the article “The Zionist Labour Party ‘Hitachdut’ in Częstochowa,” in *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. I, col. 226, for more information regarding this movement.]

Będzin-Sosnowiec, where there were still Jews after the Jews in Częstochowa and other cities had already been murdered. He fought - alongside Brandes - in the Jewish revolt in Będzin.

Once it was "all over", they wandered - truly miraculously - across villages, cities, borders and kingdoms, until finally arriving in the Land of Israel.

Both Brandes and Izbicki lost their extended families and all their friends and those closest to them. It was hard for them to tell us this. But it was also not easy [for me] to write. I took down, verbatim, everything they reported, in the manner in which they said it<sup>\*)</sup>. Several times, I was forced to interrupt my writing, for it was beyond my power to keep myself from weeping. I met with them and wrote the protocol in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, in the old, hilly *kibbutz* Kiryat Anavim and in the even higher, fortified young *kibbutz* Ma'ale Ha'Chamisha (where mostly pioneers from Łódź live). It took several weeks until I was able to complete the writing and they personally signed their historical declarations as to how the horrific end of the Częstochowa, Radomsko and Żarki Jews had come about.

This is their statement at the end of the report:

*Thus, after generations of work, struggle and self-sacrifice, the end of the Częstochowa Jews came, of whom only small remnants survived.*

And just as we have, more than once, had the opportunity, by the gravesides of fallen, close comrades, to swear loyalty to the liberation and the revolutionary struggle – thus today, we swear a triple oath - not to rest until we wreak vengeance upon all the Nazi-Fascist murderers of our dear martyrs.

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<sup>\*)</sup> Compare the reports of Brandes and Izbicki [above, pp.201-206 and 206-212].