

A.Chrobolovsky

Professional Union of Commercial Employees

The Union of Commercial Employees occupies a separate chapter in the history of the professional unions in Częstochowa.

The Union was founded in 1907 under the name of the “Association of Mutual Aid for Commercial and Industrial Employees” and its membership comprised, mostly, of assimilated Jewish employees in the large factories, as well as a few Christians. No one even thought about defending the employees against the owners - the larger and smaller manufacturers. At the annual general meetings, only one question was on the agenda: the burial fund – funds and aid for the widows and orphans of the deceased members.

In 1913-14, Jakób Rozenberg, A. Chrobolovsky and R. Federman joined the Union and began a struggle for the Union to obtain better conditions for the commercial employees and for Yiddish to be allowed at the general meetings. At that time, the fight for Yiddish was conducted in all the associations and unions which were under assimilationist leadership. Raphael Federman, in the *Częstochower Tageblatt*, dated 29th May 1914, recounts the following details, which are characteristic of the spirit of assimilation which reigned at the time in the Union:

When a member requested, at a general meeting, that he be allowed to express his opinion in the Yiddish language, they set upon him with abuse for this unheard-of impudence. That same member also permitted himself to request that the association, 80% of whose members are Jewish, should also provide, in its reading-room, Yiddish newspapers amongst all the others. In response, our well-known public activist Dr Zaks, and the director of the Riger Bank¹, argued that were Yiddish papers to be allowed in the reading-room, this would only demonstrate that the Częstochowa commercial employees were at a very low cultural level. Needless to say, this greatly frightened the meeting and they rejected the proposal.

At the time, the “Association” was located on ul. Dojazdowa.

During the First World War, under the German occupation, the SS Party (Territorialists) established another professional union for commercial employees, which had its premises in Szlezinger’s building on ul. Spadek.

The situation in the “Association” began to change immediately following the First World War, after an entire row of Socialist activists and regular Socialist members joined it.

In 1919, after a long and difficult struggle, a resolution to turn the “Association” into a professional union for commercial and office employees was successfully passed at a general meeting. A clause was inserted into the Union’s constitution to the effect that those who employed others could no longer belong to the Union.

But changing the Union’s name did not automatically change its character. There were two sides in the Union: the “Impartial”, headed by Kurland, Fogelbaum, Goliński, Faust and others, and the Socialist factions, who fought against the Union’s club-like character and who wanted a truly professional union of commercial employees.

¹ [TN: According to *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. I, col. 427, the director of the Riger Bank was named Maurycy Ruff.]

On 27th November 1921, a decisive general meeting of the Union was held. All the groups in the Union mobilised their supporters and prepared for the "battle." Three lists of candidates ran for the proportional [representation] elections of the administration, which was supposed to comprise eleven people:

- 1) the "Impartial" (the old [political] direction), with Fogelbaum, Goliński, and others;
- 2) the *Vereinigte* faction, with the following candidates: R. Federman, Henech Nirenberg, Rajzla Berkensztadt, Mojsze Kremski, Herman Herberg, Mojsze Elster, Dawid Jelen, Cesia Alter, Zalman Federman, [and] Jakow-Icek Żarnowiecki;
- 3) a joint list of the factions Borochof [*Poalei Zion*], Grosser [Bund] and Reds, with the names: Horowicz, Zylbersztajn, Brum and others.

The *Vereinigte* fraction proposed that the following be added to the agenda:

- 1) the question of aid for those starving in Soviet Russia;
- 2) bringing the Union under the auspices of Central Council of Professional Unions.

The Red fraction brought in a point concerning the fight for an eight-hour working day.

The meeting was opened by H. Senior, the Chairman of the Union and two candidates were nominated for the chairmanship - Szapiro from the "Impartial" and R. Federman from all the proletarian factions. The first is given over one hundred and thirty votes – the second, eighty-odd votes.

As a result of the tumult that ensued when R. Federman began speaking in Yiddish, he introduced a proposal to the effect that each person should be allowed to speak in the language that is accessible to him, including Yiddish. The Presidium should [then] translate their speeches into Polish for those who do not understand Yiddish.

At the roll-call vote on this proposal, 146 votes were cast for and 78 against. With this vote, the Union's sixteen-year tradition of not permitting Yiddish to be spoken at the general meetings was broken.

The voting for the candidates to the management had the following results: list №1, "Impartial", 132 votes - 6 members; list №2, *Vereinigte*, 45 votes - 2 members; list №3, Borochof, Grosser, and Reds, 49 votes - 3 members.

In 1926, the Union joined the Cultural Bureau of the Jewish Professional Unions.

In the last years, those who belonged to the Union were merchants' clerks, bank [employees] and a small number of commercial employees - only from the smaller firms. The more assimilated members (employees at the larger factories) left the Union.

Those who had influence over the Union were the Bund and the Communists. Raphael Federman was Chairman, and Herszlikowicz Secretary. The Union's premises, with the Cultural Bureau, was located at the *Aleja* 20.

Following the departure of Chairman Federman to Paris, the Union is controlled by the Communists. The departure of Secretary Herszlikowicz from Częstochowa also brings about the gradual dissolution of the Union, so that, in the last years, the Union was no longer active.

