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***Lira* & the Jewish Literary Society**

The *Lira* literary-musical society in Częstochowa was founded in 1908. Its founders were Zionists, among whom were Mojsze Zandsztajn and Leon Kopiński. To this work, they attracted a part of the assimilated intelligentsia and regular cultural activists.

Abram Wiewiorka, Leon Kopiński, Cantor Abram-Ber Birenbaum and Zaks took part in the discussion regarding a name for the Society. The Zionist side proposed "*Ha'Zamir*" [The Nightingale], and the assimilationists – "*Lira*" [Pol., Lyre]. The latter won.

For a long while, the assimilationist spirit prevailed in *Lira*. The ruling language was Polish. The choir, however, under the directorship of Cantor Abram-Ber Birenbaum, also sang Hebrew songs in addition to those in Polish. *Lira* estranged itself from Yiddish. In any case, *Lira* limited its influence, during the first years, to just a small group.

As a result, the Jewish Literary Society, which was founded in Częstochowa as a branch of the [St] Petersburg society under the same name, drew the greater part of the Jewish youth and the Jewish democratic intelligentsia from the very beginning.

The founders included Dawid Borzykowski, A. Chrobolovsky, Wolf Lewenhof, Raphael Federman, F. Szmulewicz and Jakow Kopiński.

Finding the first three accountable burghers, in whose name the Society could be legalised, came by with difficulty. The three, who took the legal responsibility upon themselves, were the teacher Ufner from the First *Aleja*, Icze-Majer Erlich – in whose sausage shop the youth would spend time in the evening – and Jakow Wajnsztok, the owner of a paper shop and an active figure of the Society.



A group of singers in the Lira choir; among them. They include: Warmund, Herberg, Grabiner, Welgryn, and Owieczka

management committee was elected.

Fervent work began at once, which left deep traces in the life of Częstochowa.

According to the Society's constitution, the management committee needed to be made up of ten individuals, no younger than twenty-five years of age. The management committee comprised Gelbard, Chaim Dawidowicz, Lurie, Erlich, Leon Goldberg, the dentist Perek and others.

From the workforce, A. Chrobolovsky was elected to the management committee.

Two enthusiastic general meetings were held at the Harmonia Hall. At the first, the foundation of the Society was announced. At the second general meeting, the

The Society's first evening was held at the Harmonia Hall. Among others, Abram Wiewiorka read out loud his two sketches, *Chaikl the Drunkard* and *The Hunchback*. The evening brought in the rich proceeds of twenty-five roubles.

The second undertaking was an extravaganza in Wolberg's garden, [on the] First *Aleja*, which yielded an income of over a hundred roubles.

The Society's premises were at *Aleja* 8. A reading room, with newspapers and magazines, was created. A choir was founded, directed by the conductor of the choir at the "German" Synagogue, as the New Synagogue on ul. Dojazd, or ul. [Prawe] Wały¹, was known. The choir's soloist was in fact his little son. The choir sang Jewish folksongs in Yiddish and Hebrew. One of the choir's classic numbers was *Hallelujah*.

The great significance of the Literary Society consisted not only in that a legal cultural centre had been created for almost all the Jewish youth of Częstochowa, but also in that all the parties worked here in unison for Jewish culture.

Apart from the abovementioned names, in the Society, others active - be it in the choir or the drama section - were Mojsze Weksler, Dwora Szycter, Jetta Pakuła, Gordyn, Jankel Kopiński, Lajzer Berkowicz and Mendelson (now in New Rochelle, NY).

A. Perc headed the drama section. Among others, Aronowicz, Szmulewicz, Jetta Pakuła, Majer Fajnrajch, [and] Raphael Federman also participated. Some thirty people belonged to this section, but there were few women amongst them. The drama section did not only stage acts, but also got together often, mainly on Friday nights, to recite poems by Jewish poets.

The drama section's first performance was held on 6th April 1911 at Wolberg's garden. They staged *Bechoisem* [sic *Bochurim*²] by Icchak Katzenelson and *The Eternal Song* by Marek Arnstein.

The Literary Society's greatest public appearance was the concert of Jewish folksongs, performed by the [St] Petersburg opera singers Medwediew, Rozowska and N. Janowski, accompanied by the composer A. [x] Potnoker [?]. Two years later, on 25th January 1913, *Lira* held a concert with the same artists.

In that same period, two individuals arrived in Częstochowa, who were noted for their communal activity.

One was Józef Aronowicz, a pupil of the renowned Wilno Teachers Institute. He had been sent to Częstochowa by the Russian government as a teacher from a Russian primary school for Jewish children. He was a Bundist. His first appearance in Częstochowa was a lecture about Lev Tolstoy. This was during the time when Tolstoy had fled to a monastery, where he spent the last hours of his life.

The second was Jakób Rozenberg, with his wife, whom people called "*Higiena*" [Hygiene]. He wore a beard and had the noble countenance of an intellectual. He, too, was a Bundist. He was originally from Łódź and came to Częstochowa from Warsaw, sent by an association as an employee of the

¹ [TN: As Professor Jerzy Mizgalski has explained to us, this is the one street which crosses the *Aleja*, near the railway station. On one side, it was once called "Dojazd" (nowadays ul Piłsudskiego), and on the other side of the *Aleja* it was called "Prawe Wały" (nowadays called ul. Wilsona), where the New Synagogue once stood.]

² [TN: Although the title mentioned in the original (בחורים) is an actual word in Hebrew, meaning "(sealed) with a seal," this play apparently does not exist. It is therefore most likely that this is a misprint of the similar-looking word "Bochurim" (בחורים), or "Fellows," which was the title of a well-known comedy by I. Katzenelson.]

Wulkan metallurgical plant, where many Jewish personnel were employed, among them Eng. Ratner, Ajzenberg, Kisin, [and] J. ['] Szwarc.

At the initiative of Lewenhof, Dawid Borzykowski, and Hersze'le Fajwlowicz, a youth group, with literary inclinations, attempted to publish a literary journal in Częstochowa. With the assistance of Chaim Dawidowicz and other sympathisers, one issue [of] *Der Fackel* [The Torch] was printed. The journal was edited by Lazar Kahn in Łódź.

Grandfather Mende'le's³ seventieth⁴ birthday was celebrated by the Literary Society with a homely and intimate banquet. Due to the *Grandfather's* frailty, the Society was unable to bring the esteemed birthday celebrant to Częstochowa. A mimeographed copy of a treatise on Mende'le Moycher Sforim by Sz. Niger was sent by the [St] Petersburg Central. We sat, in high spirits, around covered tables. Local orators spoke about the *Grandfather's* significance. Hersze'le Fajwlowicz, who was a comical talent and knew how to make rhymes, composed a special ditty in Mende'le's honour, which we all sang in unison.

The song went like this:

*We drink another kende'le⁵
In honour of Grandfather Reb Mende'le,
Because to everyone it's indeed clear,
That Grandfather's turning seventy years.*

*Oy Reb Mende'le, oy Reb Mende'le,
You write so wonderfully well indeed;
Oy Reb Mende'le, oy Reb Mende'le,
You write so wonderfully well indeed...*

Raphael Federman, being a bit in his cups [tipsy], recited the ode *To The Stars*, in honour of *Grandfather* Mende'le's great anniversary.

Frequent lectures were held at the Society, two of which were by Raphael Federman - one on the theme *Yiddish* and the other on *The Cross*. Both themes were based on the articles in Dr Zhitlowsky's journal *Dos Naye Lebn* [The New Life], which was published in America. At the first lecture, a discussion was held with the Hebraists, who were represented by Leon Kopiński. The second lecture dealt with the question that Dr Zhitlowsky had brought up at the time, regarding reassessing the Jewish attitude towards Christianity.

A smaller audience was drawn to Chrobolovsky's lecture, *Sholem Asch, the Prophet of the Soil*, which actually gave expression to the profound aspiration of a large part of the contemporary youth to return to working the land. Both Zionism and Territorialism embodied these aspirations.

The Literary Society's last and greatest achievement was the founding of the first legal, Jewish library in Częstochowa. The primary sum of one-hundred roubles was contributed by ten members of the management committee, at ten roubles each. The names of all of them are to be found in the

³ [TN: Ref. to Mende'le Moycher Sforim, the "grandfather" of Yiddish literature.]

⁴ [TN: Being as the "Grandfather" was born in 1835, his 70th birthday would have been in 1905 – two years before even the mother branch of the Jewish Literary Society was founded in St Petersburg. It is therefore quite certain that the birthday mentioned here was his 75th one, in 1910 – just a year before the Society was dissolved by the Russian government.]

⁵ [TN: Little ladle.]

Literary Society's minutes book, which has remained somewhere in Częstochowa. The only names that I remember are Erlich, Chaim Dawidowicz, Lurie, Gelbard [and] L. Goldberg.

Raphael Federman and Gelbard were appointed to travel to Warsaw to purchase books in Yiddish and Hebrew. Another commission was tasked with cataloguing the books. The first librarians were Raphael Federman and Jankel Kopiński.

Over the course of time, Ufner, the Society's first founder and its chairman, resigned his position. Thanks to the efforts of the management committee to put well-to-do, bourgeois and "kosher" individuals at the top, the position of chairman was occupied by the wealthy timber merchant Radoszycki and Besser, the owner of a large building on the Second *Aleja*.

At the end of the summer of 1911, the Jewish Literary Society and all its branches were closed down by the Russian government. The Częstochowa branch received orders to liquidate itself. At this point, the members of the Literary Society had the idea to unite with *Lira*. The manager of *Lira* at the time was Józefowicz. It was settled that all three languages - Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish - would share an equal status and that a joint management committee would be elected. A group, headed by Raphael Federman, was against joining the assimilationist *Lira*. However, the majority, headed by A. Chrobolovsky, were for it. At the Literary Society's last liquidation meeting at the Harmonia Hall, it was decided, by a large majority, to join *Lira*. Thus began the *Lira* epoch in the cultural activity of Jewish Częstochowa.

Those elected to the unified management committee were Henryk Markusfeld - Honorary President; A. Perec - Chairman; Alkona Chrobolovsky - Secretary; Józefowicz - Manager; Markus Herszlikowicz, Rozenberg, Lurie, Wajnsztok, Chaim Dawidowicz, Leon Kopinski, Józef Aronowicz [and] Henryk Szmulewicz – Management Committee members.

Lira constituted a multi-coloured mosaic - the assimilationist intelligentsia, with the well-known Dr Batawja, Zionists and bourgeois youth and, together with them all, the "Yiddishists" from the former Literary Society. Sporadic flare-ups - particularly with the manager Józefowicz, who represented the assimilationist element - did not hinder the joint work. The choir, conducted by Cantor Abram-Ber Birenbaum, sang Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish songs. The "Yiddishists" participated in Zionist evenings and the Zionists took part in all the cultural undertakings in Yiddish.

The most idealistic among the Zionist youth was Mojsze (Maurice) Goldberg, who later went off to London. After the First World War, he returned and set up a branch of a banking house in Warsaw, where he died at a young age shortly afterwards.

Other members of *Lira* were Wajtenfeld, now in Palestine; Mojsze Oderberg, a leading *Poalei Zion* member, now in Chicago; Szyferklas, a sympathiser of the SS [Party]; [and] Jankel Kopiński, a member of *Poalei Zion*, now in New York. Szymon Chajutin and Lutek Gajzler were also active in *Lira*. We must also mention two individuals, who ran the buffet in *Lira* and served tea and a bite to eat to the members. One was Mrs Frymorgen and the other – Borensztajn.

Leosza Frymorgen (during *Lira's* initial period), Gucia Bem (later Henech Szmulewicz's wife), Grabiner, Edelist, Mojsze Waga and Bem distinguished themselves as male and female singers in the choir.

One of the *Lira* choir's organisers was Berisz Dawidowicz, nowadays in New York.

The Lira was located on the corner of ul. Dojazd and the First *Aleja*, above Błaszczyński's sweets shop. The theatre hall's large windows looked out on ul. Dojazd, or the ul. Stacjowa [later renamed ul. Piłsudskiego].

Lira's big days were I.L. Peretz's three visits in Częstochowa.

His first visit took place in the spring of 1912. Following the lecture, during which he read from his yet unpublished folktales, a festive banquet was held in *Lira's* spacious reading room. The "face" of Częstochowa and almost all the aware Jewish youth were present at the banquet. Józef Aronowicz greeted the folkloric poet on behalf of the former [group], and Chrobolovsky on behalf of the latter. Józefowicz and Broniatowski (the dentist) were in charge of the order [of events]. Champagne was drunk. The order was exemplary. The joy and enthusiasm, which also found an expression in song, were indescribable.

The second time, I.L. Peretz came to Częstochowa was on Saturday, 21st October 1912, for the opening of the Jewish library in *Lira*. This was actually the library that had been created by the liquidated Jewish Literary Society. After lengthy preparations and negotiations, *Lira* had now renewed the library under the name of the "Henryk Markusfeld Library", and it was now headed by Fajtel Szmulewicz.

Tickets for this evening had already sold out eight days before [the event]. People paid huge prices [just] to be able to stand on the side.

A bookcase with books, draped with a white and blue sash, was set up on the decorated and well-lit platform.

The evening was opened by the Chairman of the Management Committee, the dentist A. Perec, who gave the chairmanship over to the Honorary President, Henryk Markusfeld. Eng. Ratner, Dawid Wolfowicz, Landau and Goldberg were invited to the presidium.

Józef Aronowicz, in his introductory speech, gave a brief outline of history of *Lira* and the newly-established library. At the end of his address, he presented President Markusfeld with a gift from the Society - an album that symbolised a Jewish book, which was made by the Częstochowa artist Perec Willenberg.

Eng. Ratner congratulated the inauguration of the library on behalf of the Częstochowa Craftsmen's Club. Congratulations also arrived from the Nowo Radomsko and Łódź youth, from the Częstochowa *Reklamen Blatt* [Advertisements Page; a newspaper], from the Będzin *Anonsen Blatt* [Advertisements⁶ Page], and from a few [chapters of] *Ha'Zamir*⁷ [The Nightingale].

Henryk Markusfeld declared that, of all the institutions which he had founded, *Lira* was his most beloved - because the youth, the source of life, was to be found there.

I.L. Peretz, who was then given the floor, warmly shook Henryk Markusfeld's hand repeated times, as a sign of his acknowledgement of his words. As regards the Jewish book, Peretz said that the library's obligation was to procure as many historical books as possible, because we know little of our history. We are spread out across the entire globe and all the soil is drenched with our blood and moistened with our sweat - and if you knew the history of our people, you would know that here too, in Poland, every bit of ground [and] every stone is wet with our blood and sweat, [and] enriched

⁶ [TN: Both the Polish/Russian "reklama" and the French "annonce" are used for "advertisement" in Yiddish.]

⁷ [TN: Network of Jewish choral chapters, the first of which was founded in Łódź in 1899.]

with our physical and spiritual work, and that we are not welcome guests here. We are equal citizens, who have made the country wealthy with our efforts and toil, and we deserve full equal rights as human beings and as Jews.

I.L. Peretz was also given the honour to conduct the ceremony of opening the library. The librarian presented him with a gilded key (made by Mojsze Weksler) on a cushion and scissors with which to cut the ribbon.

At this evening, I.L. Peretz read two of his yet unpublished folktales - *King Solomon* and *Motl Prince*. After the evening, a banquet was held and the assembled tarried at the rich table with toasts, singing and dancing.

Grojnem Frank decorated the hall and the stage, [and] the lighting was arranged by the electro-technician Landau. The manager of the evening was the photographer Henech Szmulewicz. The evening made a great impression and left all the participants with the most beautiful memories.

Peretz appeared in Częstochowa for the third time on Saturday, 14th November 1913. His theme, this time, was the rewriting of the *Song of Solomon* into Yiddish verse. We read of this evening in the *Częstochower Wochenblatt* [Cz. Weekly] №41:

The hopes to hear the rewriting in verse of the Song of Solomon from the poet's mouth – were not fulfilled.

Our language is too poor, our concepts too narrow, [we have] too little feeling for the healthy, physical beauty of the body, [and are] too much detached from the broad and free natural life, for one of us - even an artist like I.L. Peretz - to be capable of rewriting this for us in Yiddish. [What] he gave us [is] the key to the Song of Solomon. This time, the poet was our Rebbe⁸.

And like a Rebbe – a teacher – he sat at the little table and, with his clear speech and rich thoughts, learned the simple meanings of the Song of Solomon with us.

This evening, too, was a great success, and brought much inspiration into the life of Jewish Częstochowa.

Other well-known personalities who appeared in *Lira* included Hillel Cajtlin, Izaak Grünbaum, and H.D. Nomberg. Grünbaum spoke on the topic *The Ultimate Outcome of Jewish Assimilation in Poland*. The lecture was very successful and drew a great audience. H.D. Nomberg, whose origins were in the neighbouring city of Nowo Radomsko, also appeared in *Lira* with a lecture. It was after his visit to America, and his theme was *Our Brethren in America*. The most important part of his talk was:

The Jews in America distinguish themselves with their enormous organisations and the discipline that prevails inside them; with their laboriousness and sobriety, and with their physically developed younger generation. But their success within the country's social, communal and cultural life is even greater.

The poet Z. Segalowicz, the humourist Josef Tunkel (*Der Tunkeler* [The Dark one]), and the renowned publicist Sz. Rozenfeld also appeared at *Lira*.

⁸ [TN: The term is used in its original sense, viz. a teacher of children at cheder, and not the leader of a Chassidic group.]

Lectures [were] were also delivered at *Lira* [by] the Zionist activist [Rabbi Nathan] Mileikovsky, Lurie from Łódź on the poet Sz. Rozenfeld, Zygmunt Majorczyk (pioneer of the SS [Party]) on the theme *The Jewish Prophets* [and] J. ['] Abramson, the editor of *Częstochower Togblat* [Cz. Daily] until the First World War, delivered several lectures on Jewish literature and on Dostoyevsky. Eng. Ratner, Leon Kopinski, and Józef Aronowicz also delivered lectures.

In the realm of theatre, *Lira* made many good endeavours. Besides the productions of the local drama section – which carried out an entire array of performances, as may be appraised from the photographs printed – such renowned actors as Mark Schweid, Mojsze Zylberkasten, and Miriam Izraels were brought to Częstochowa. All of them stage-managed and acted themselves in the [more] important productions. *Lira* also put on several plays of the well-known operetta troupe from Łódź directed by Mark Arnstein.

Eventually, Cantor Birenbaum left Częstochowa and his position was occupied by the renowned musician Bensman. Besides his classical music works, Bensman was a pioneer of the Yiddish folksong. He rehearsed a few of the folksongs which he had composed, such as *Der Parom* [The Ferryboat], with the *Lira* choir. Under his directorship, *Lira's* choir changed completely and became more Yiddish-centric.

Among the amateurs who acted, several of whom distinguished themselves in various shows, were Jetta Pakuła, Dora Szacher, Fajtel Szmulewicz, Sz. Frank, Aronowicz, D. Krak, Werner, Pola Mauer (the talented amateur), Awner, Miss Szapiro, Sobol and Kromołowska.

The first sports group, to which Gonsiorowicz, Bram, Krak, [and] Awner belonged, was also organised in *Lira*. This group organised a performance in *Lira* in order to raise finance and made efforts in Piotrków concerning the legalisation of a sporting union in Częstochowa. As always, Henryk Markusfeld also took this group under his wing.

Lira's last historic undertaking was the visit of Sholem Aleichem. While it was mostly the youth who rejoiced with Peretz, the whole Jewish street - all the everyday Jews - idolised Sholem Aleichem. In the great theatre hall, there was not even place to stand.

A huge multitude of Jews gathered at the railway station. Precisely at the time of his arrival, a downpour came down, but the Jews were unaffected by this. Sholem Aleichem, accompanied by his wife, met the Jews and the rainstorm with his usual humour, "Rain is good fortune and a blessing", he said.

The mass of Jews accompanied Sholem Aleichem to Behm's hotel, where he was staying. A delegation of the youth, together with Abram Wiewiorka, delivered an address to him, which had been composed by Abram Wiewiorka.

Among those who gave their greetings on the stage was Warmund, who spoke in Hebrew and actually for a very long time. After his speech, Sholem Aleichem told a story about a cantor who had a very fine voice, but who had just one fault - *once he started singing, he forgot to stop*.

In the evening, a banquet was held at Behm's hotel. Sholem Aleichem, however, was unable to enjoy the food that had been prepared, due to his gastric ailment - and this, too, he brushed aside with a fine joke.

Shortly afterwards, the First World War broke out and a new chapter began in Częstochowa's communal life.

