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The Obliteration of the Synagogue (New Shule)

It happened on the night of 24th December 1939, barely four months after the Germans had occupied Częstochowa.

On the same night, when Christendom celebrates the birthday of their faith's creator - of he who preached love to mankind, fraternity and tolerance - the German Christians, aided by dark elements among the Polish populace, perpetrated one of their most disgraceful deeds in our city. They torched and destroyed the Częstochowa Synagogue, [which] was known in our city by the name "The New Shule."

The writer of these lines lived near the *Shule*, so he had the opportunity to observe this same disgraceful act¹.

Already in pre-War Poland, on the nights of *Boże Narodzenie* [Christmas], Jews avoided appearing in the street, not wishing, based on the views of the antisemites, to provoke the religious sentiments of the Polish population - because our domestic Polish antisemites looked to use the mood of the Polish masses against the Jews at every opportunity. In the years of the War, when we were under German rule, such "spontaneous" outbursts, on part of the Polish population, could bring about more tragic consequences.



The main entrance to the Synagogue

In constant fear of any provocations on the part of the Germans, people locked themselves up in their homes, even meeting little with the neighbours, so as not to be suspected of holding gatherings and speaking there about politics or against the Germans.

As a result, the Jewish population of Częstochowa, on 24th December 1939, already retreated to their homes and rooms at nightfall, even though, according to the police curfew, one could still show oneself in the street.

Suddenly, on ul. Garibaldiiego (formerly ul. Spadek), a wild clamour of Polish young people and yelling in German was heard, directly followed by [a hail of] stones hurled at the windows of Jewish houses. This was the first portent of something evil.

And a few minutes later, one could already see German and Polish hooligans throwing incendiary bombs into the Synagogue.

¹ [TN: In the original, this sentence ends with the words "appearing in the street, not wishing, based on the views of," which are clearly a misprint, as they appear verbatim in the forthcoming paragraph – obviously their correct place.]

The blaze quickly engulfed the *Shul's* interior fittings. The pews, the *Shulchan* [Table²], the Holy Ark with the Torah scrolls, the candelabras and all other components of the house of prayer were obliterated by the fire, which continued to spread further.

The Synagogue, in which Jewish Częstochowa had taken such pride, the place where we would gather on every festive occasion, the house which had had Ch. N. Bialik z''l as its guest, [and] where the renowned singer and composer Abram-Ber Birenbaum had sung and created - this edifice ceased to exist.

To this day, the cries of the cantor of the Synagogue, Fiszel z''l (he perished during the deportation in September 1942), when the flames drove him and his household from the home which he occupied at the Synagogue, still ring in my ears. A bellow of sorrow and rage burst from his breast. He was weeping for the "Destruction of the Częstochowa Temple".

But it is not only the Synagogue's interior fittings that were burnt that day.

Just like the [Main] Judaic Library at the [Great] Synagogue of Warsaw, such a library also existed in our own Synagogue, which housed religious and secular literature. Częstochowa Jews, religious and secular, old and young, would come there every evening to read, to research, to study [secular subjects] and to learn [Torah]. There, they had a spiritual repose after a hard day of work. In the library, there were treasures of Jewish literature - religious and secular books, [and] manuscripts donated by Jews from around the globe.

The cantorial literature [and] melodies, written by Abram-Ber Birenbaum z''l, were the only existing copies of these types [of documents] – something which is irreplaceable.

It was with a sort of savage, sadistic pleasure that they destroyed the written Jewish word. It was reminiscent of the "*auto de fé*³" of Caliph Omar who, in Cairo, burnt everything that was opposed to the Koran, [only here it was] everything that was opposed to *Mein Kampf*.

The blaze intensifies. The *God of Destruction* takes hold of his victory. The fiery flames spit into the heavens like living beings. It seems as if they are screaming and asking "Why??"

There is a danger of the flames spreading to the adjacent buildings. But the German already "sees to it" that the fire should not spread. Here come the firefighters, with their equipment and tools. Their task, however, is preventing the fire from spreading and engulfing the buildings next to the Synagogue. But, as for the Synagogue itself - it must burn.

At precisely twelve midnight (a symbolic hour), the Synagogue's great spire, with the Star of David atop, collapsed. At three o'clock in the morning, the fire burned itself out [and] subsided. Even so, a small fire was still smouldering and burning the last remains of the once great synagogue.

On the following day, first thing in the morning, the Częstochowa Jews gathered round the burnt Synagogue contemplating, in amazement, the German murderers' cruel deed and mourning over its former glory.

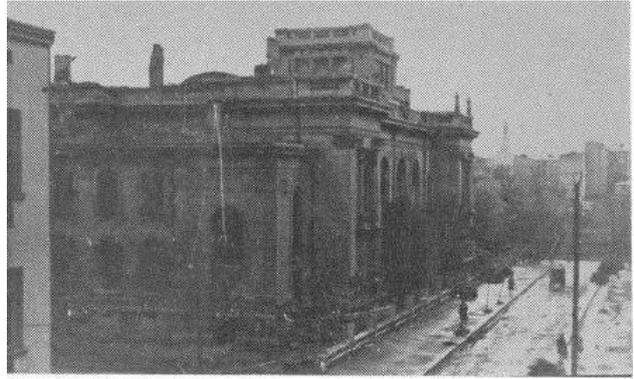
²[TN: Viz. the platform from which the Torah is read.]

³[TN: "Act of faith"; a public ceremony during which the sentences upon those brought before the Spanish Inquisition were read and after which the sentences were executed by the secular authorities (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). The term is used here figuratively.]



The interior of the Synagogue during the 150th anniversary of the independence of the United States (1776-1926)

The writer of these lines had the honour, in the years 1941-1942, through various ways and means, along with the *gaboim* [custodians] Markowicz, Monhajt, Dawidowicz and Mic, of saving the *Shule* from complete destruction, because the Germans were not content with just having burnt the Synagogue - they wished to totally demolish the walls, in order to pull up this Jewish sanctum by its roots.



The Synagogue's outer appearance after the fire

But through the material [viz. monetary] endeavours of the aforementioned Jews and several burghers to whom the *Shule* was dear and beloved, and by the writer of these lines risking his life, we managed to prevent the Synagogue's complete destruction.

Today, its walls are [still] standing, in memory of the Częstochowa [Jewish] Community's former glory, and as a mark of disgrace to the German barbarism.
