

Chaja Wage-Rotman, A.Chrobolovsky, R.Federman

The I.L. Peretz Workers' Kindergartens¹ & Primary School

*The Foundation of the Kindergartens – The Work Programme – The Rise of the Primary Schools –
The Support from Częstochowers in America – The Foundation of the CISZO [Central Yiddish School
Organisation] Division – The Festive Inauguration of an Own Schoolhouse
– A Difficult Period in the School's Existence – Celebrations & Holidays*

The beginnings of a Jewish secular school system were the kindergartens which were created during the First World War. Their purpose was to save the homeless children and orphans from hunger and epidemics. The first kindergartens were headed by I.L. Peretz [and Jacob] Dinezon and, later, also by the leader of the Bund, Vladimir Medem. Their foundation, however, was love for the Jewish child and not any [sort of] philanthropy. It was precisely due to this, that they blossomed so beautifully and grew so wide, becoming the great wonder in the life and cultural development of the working and poor masses in Poland.

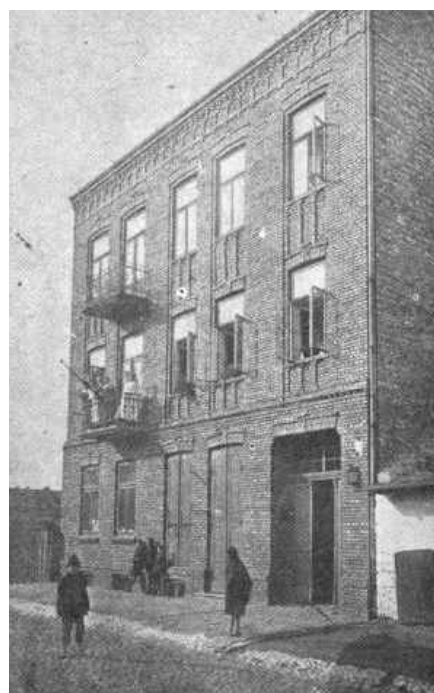
The first kindergarten in Częstochowa was established by the SS [Socialist-Zionist] Party, which had been revived under the German occupation, just like other parties and groups.

The committee appointed to carry the work out was made up of Mojsze Weksler, Chaja Waga, Rywca Weksler, Dudek Szlezinger, Raphael Federman, Rajzla Fajertag [and] Ester Fuks. The first sum of 70 marks was raised from [its] own members. Premises, with five bright, sunny rooms, on ul. Krótka 17 were chosen. This was the most suitable area for a kindergarten, because it was not far from ul. Warszawska, which borders with Garncarska, Nadrzeczna, Kozia, and Senatorska. On the other hand, the locale was near ul. Wały, which was a clean and sparsely populated street itself.

The kindergarten's furniture was bought from a liquidated Hebrew kindergarten, which was located in the granaries at Szlezinger's factory. The organisers themselves carried the "furniture" over to the newly-painted rooms of the kindergarten. Members selected and donated toys. Members obtained utensils for cooking and eating. A piano was selected and the joy at seeing a Jewish children's own home before them was indescribable.

It was hard to find the suitable first teacher. But, God helped and sent Juza Sztam, who had already gained experience in this field in a Hebrew kindergarten. Her approachability, understanding and profound love for the Jewish child elevated her to the status of an ideal pioneer of the Jewish secular schools. At the beginning, she herself was even forced to create Yiddish pedagogic material from Hebrew and Polish.

Her assistant, Chaja Waga, was chosen from among the [Committee's] own ranks. At first, she worked with Juza Sztam as her assistant and, later, became the independent manager of the *Vereinigte* kindergarten, which was opened on ul. Strażacka 10.



The building on ul. Krótka 17, where the first kindergarten was located

¹ [TN: "Kinderheimen" in the original, lit. "Children's Homes"; although some of these institutions did in fact double as orphanages, we have rendered the term as "kindergarten" throughout the book due to the ages of the children there.]

The children, aged between four and seven, came from the poorest echelons of the ghetto. They were starved and physically neglected. They fed them and healed the untreated little heads [and] sick eyes. They cut their hair, washed them and taught them how to keep themselves clean. It was necessary to procure a doctor and medicines - especially *lebertron* (cod liver oil), which every child was given on a daily basis. It was necessary to hold meetings with the parents and talk with them regarding the hygiene of the child. This required so much work and devotion, that it is difficult to describe.

Only one who knew the kindergartens from the first days of their creation, under the dreadful conditions of war and the German occupation, is able to appreciate this work. One needs to have seen how these children looked when they arrived, with little swollen bellies, little bowed legs and all the other calamities that war, hunger and poverty had brought upon them - to later marvel at their development, which was expressed in their dances, singing, performances and work as children.

The children's meals consisted of a "morning tea", prepared in the kindergarten's kitchen, and a lunch which, initially, was brought over in buckets from the Workers Kitchen on ul. Strażacka. The housekeeper, viz. manager of the kindergarten, Comrade Fradel - or "Fradel the Black" - was a true, loving mother to the children. At a later stage, lunch was also cooked in the kindergarten's kitchen.

Music occupied a large place in the kindergarten. The children did their rhythmic exercises, marched, danced and played, [all] to the tones of the piano. That is why the music teacher "Terenie'le" - Miss Terenia Fajgenblat - was loved so much by the children. Music in kindergarten, and later at school, had the greatest effect on the children's artistic development.

The songs the children sang were children's songs and marches, specially written for the kindergartens - songs about spring, summer, autumn, [and] winter, and songs about the Jewish holidays - the tunes of Hanukkah, Purim and other holidays. The singing from the kindergarten carried itself over the poor Jewish homes and streets, bringing joy and encouragement into the difficult, sombre life of the poor Jewish masses.



The first group of children of the Vereinigte kindergarten, together with their educators

The kindergarten's programme consisted of telling stories, relevant talks on every event and practical work with paper, wood, sand, and clay. The development of the child's feel and eye for colours and paintings was one of the kindergarten's important tasks. Love for nature was awakened with frequent walks in the fields, meadows and parks. In the summertime, the children spent most of their time in the garden next to the kindergarten.

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The kindergarten became not only an institution of education, aid and medical treatment for the children, but also a real home. The love of the children for their teachers was indescribable. Some of the children did not leave the kindergarten until bedtime.

The kindergarten was the favourite institution of all the progressive people and workers, regardless of any political affiliation. The labour and professional associations supported the kindergarten in every possible manner.



***The building at ul. Strażacka 10,
where the second kindergarten was located***

At the end of the First World War, following the revolution in Russia and the collapse of Imperial Germany, Poland rose from the dead. New winds of freedom blew from the east and west. The Labour Movement gained strength and expanded and, together with it, the Jewish workers' and working masses' finest creation – the kindergartens and primary schools – also grew and spread.

Shortly after the War, a second kindergarten was opened at ul. Strażacka 10, under the name "*Vereinigte*". The SS Party had [just] then changed its old 1904-05 name to "*Vereinigte*" and everything that was created during this period bore the name of the Party - just like the Bundist institutions were labelled with the name "*Medem*" and the *Poalei-Zion* ones with "*Borochov*".

The dwelling for the second kindergarten was given over to the Party by Józek Finkelsztajn. In 1904-05, he had been a very young SS member, wearing the uniform of a Russian *gymnazjum* student. Like many others, he later disappeared from Częstochowa and returned after the First World War. The flat had been occupied by his grandmother. Following her death, he put all the furniture in Szlezinger's granaries and gave the dwelling over to the Party. This was a very great windfall, as there were no empty flats to be found in Poland.



A group of children at play

Chaja'le Waga took over the leadership of kindergarten number two. Both kindergartens were managed by one board of directors and pedagogical council, in which Rajzla Fajertag-Berkensztadt took a very active part. The housekeeper of the second kindergarten was Malka Bratt, who died at a very young age.

The post of assistant in the first kindergarten was occupied by Fajgla Berliner, a daughter of religious parents, who was noted for her love for children. Under Juza Sztam's leadership, she grew to become an excellent Fröbelian² teacher. Later, together with Masza Kalabus, a

kindergarten teacher who came to Częstochowa from Wilno, she elevated the Częstochowa kindergartens to [become] a model for [all] the Jewish kindergartens in Poland.

² [TN: Friedrich Wilhelm August Fröbel (1782-1852) was the creator of the concept "kindergarten."]

Once the children had grown, a primary school year one class was opened for them, run by Nazca Warszawska and Rajzla Fajertag. She was later replaced as year one teacher by Rywka Cuker from Siedlec. The year two class was taught by one of the Frydman sisters, Pola - also from Siedlec. The other sister, Mania, became a teacher at the kindergarten at ul. Krótka 17 when Juza Sztam left Częstochowa. The year one and two classes of the primary school were alongside the second kindergarten, *Vereinigte*, in the building at ul. Strażacka 10.

In the summer of 1920, when the fervour of the Polish war against the Soviet Union was at its very peak, [our] friend Mendel Szuchter visited Częstochowa. He brought with him aid for the schools, sent by the Czenstochover Relief in New York and the aid association in Chicago. He took back with him Raphael Federman's plan to construct a building for the kindergartens and primary schools.



A group of children at mealtime

In 1922, the two delegates of the Czenstochover Relief in New York, Louis Szymkowicz and Louis Szwarc, arrived in Częstochowa, with instructions to purchase their own building for the kindergartens and primary school. By then, three parties ran [secular] Jewish schools in Częstochowa: *Vereinigte* – two separate kindergartens and three primary school classes; *Poalei Zion*, or the "*Borochovtzes*" – one kindergarten and one primary school class; [and] the Bund, or the "*Grosser Club*", which had arranged for the furniture and was about to open a kindergarten. These parties also had three separate libraries. Nevertheless, a joint distribution committee was already functioning, which divided the sums that had arrived from America among the cultural and relief institutions of all the parties.



The children of the Borochov kindergarten

Under pressure from the delegates from America, a unified board of directors was formed to run all the schools. This board consisted of five *Vereinigte* members, two from *Poalei Zion* and one Bundist. Raphael Federman was chairman of the board.

The delegates from America did not find any suitable building for the schools. They therefore decided, together with the management committee of the schools, to buy the plot with the small house in the courtyard of Krótka 23. An

actual schoolhouse itself would now need to be built. The task of carrying out this plan to construct the building was assumed by Michał Alter.

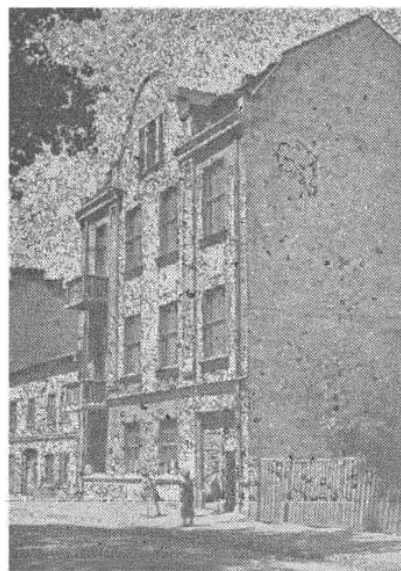
On Sunday, 6th July 1924, the festive inauguration of the building was held in Częstochowa. On Saturday, 5th July, a children's concert in honour of the building's inauguration was held at the Nowości [Novelties] Theatre, at *Aleja* 12. On Sunday, at eight in the evening, a celebratory gathering was held, with the participation of the leaders of the Central Jewish School Organisation in Poland and, on that same night, a banquet was held at the New World Hall.

Leaders of the Jewish workers' parties, such as Dr Józef Kruk, Zerubavel, Bejnisz Michalewicz [and] representatives of many towns and *shtetls* in Poland came to Częstochowa for the official opening. Congratulations arrived from an entire array of personalities. This was the first building of their own that was erected for Jewish schools in Poland.

The new building had wide, bright corridors, [and] spacious rooms with venetian blinds for the classes. Next to the school, a garden was planted with different trees and plants, in order to acquaint the children with botany - which was completely alien to the Jewish child from the poor little streets.

The 1924 school year already began in [the school's] own building with the wide, sunny classrooms. The kindergarten on ul. Strażacka 10 also moved over. The kindergarten on Krótka 17, in the building of Szmulewicz ([the] coffee roaster), was run in the same house as before.

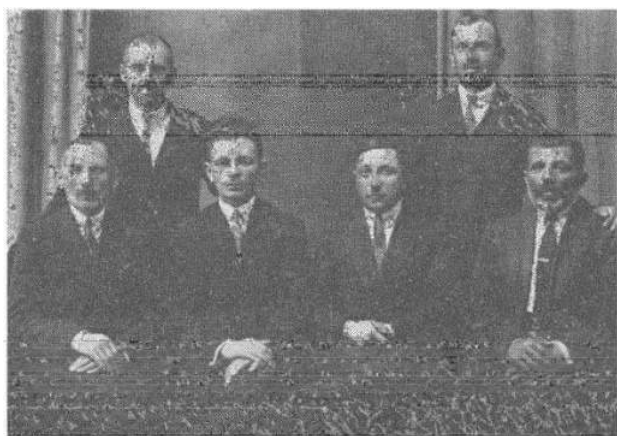
At the end of 1924, A. Chrobolovsky returned from America. The schools already had large personnel of teachers because, with each year, a higher grade was added. The financial situation was a difficult one. The schools greatly suffered from the fact that Raphael Federman had left the majority fraction, which was [by then] already called "Independent". He switched over to the Bund. The school was managed by Michał Alter, [and] the chairman of the administration was Sz. Nirenberg.



*The I.L. Peretz School's building
on ul. Krótka 23*

In 1925-1926, A. Chrobolovsky took over the management of the schools. The beginning of the school-year, to around New Year's 1926, was a very hard one for the schools. The teachers were simply starving and there was a danger the school would be closed down. The Częstochowa Town Hall - this must be mentioned to its credit - at the time, allocated a one-time support of 1,000 *złoty*, which was shared out amongst the teachers. Later, aid began to arrive from Chicago [and] from the Czenstochover Relief and Ladies Auxiliary in New York. That year, the teaching staff received regularly paid wages. The pedagogical management of the schools also improved during the year.

At the end of 1926, A. Chrobolovsky already left Częstochowa forever. The management of the schools was taken over by Abram Bratt, who remained in his position until the Second World War.



*The I.L. Peretz School's Parents Committee; sitting (R-L):
Uszer Himelman, L. Berkowicz, Abram Bratt, and others.*

In 1928, the first group of children, who had spent a full nine years in the kindergarten and school, graduated from it. The names of the children were Frajde'le Berkowicz, Szymson Berkowicz, Gitke'le Rozen, Rajze'le Kricer, [and] Zlatke'le.

The completion of the school-year in the summer of 1929 was a great event. The ceremony was documented in a film, which was sent to the Relief in New York and to other cities.

The situation of the schools once more worsened from day to day. The Depression in America, and the battle between the right and

the left, to a great extent, stopped the aid that the schools used to receive from the Czenstochover Relief in New York. During that same period, the situation in Poland, in general, and in Cześćochowa in particular, became unbearable. The Reaction and the dictatorship of the military clique that had seized power, grew. Decrees incessantly poured down on the schools. All the subsidies from Town Hall, and even the aid of coal that the I.L. Peretz kindergarten used to receive from the municipality, were stopped. On top of that, the threat of the foreclosure of the building came, due to a debt of a few hundred dollars that the administration had borrowed. The situation also became more acute because of the rivalry of parties within the administration - especially between the Bund and the Independents.



The school's first graduates with their teachers



The teachers and a group of pupils of the kindergarten and primary school in 1926-27

As a result, the I.L. Peretz School, with all its seven classes, was shut down. The kindergarten's premises at ul. Krótka 17 was given up and, once again, the kindergarten was moved to the building where the school had been previously. Due to the difficult circumstances, a dwelling in the building in the school's courtyard was also rented out to private individuals. But even maintaining just the kindergarten on its own was difficult, due to the meagre aid from America. In order to generate local aid, a women's committee was formed in Cześćochowa, under the leadership of Mrs Sarna. Mrs Terenia Fajgenblat-Kopińska (wife of Moryc (Mojsze) Kopiński), the kindergarten's leading music teacher, was

also active in the committee.

In 1938, the Independent Party was liquidated by the Polish government. A few active figures of the schools, such as Abram Bratt and Wolf Fajga, joined the Bund. Positive changes then came about in the administration and leadership of the kindergarten. The renowned social activists Aron Perec and Mojsze Berkensztadt were admitted to the management committee. It was not long, however, before the Nazi murderers attacked Poland.

For some time under the Nazi occupation, Jewish refugees from Łódź and Kraków were housed in the building of the schools. Abram Bratt and Wolf Fajga continued being in charge of the building.

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One of the finest achievements of the schools and kindergartens was the children's artistic education.

The mandolin orchestra and choir, conducted by the renowned musician Zaks from Nowo Radomsko, was one of the school's finest achievements. The choir and mandolin orchestra was founded by A. Chrobolovsky in 1926 [and] was later expanded by Abram Bratt with the aid of 150 dollars that the *Arbeiter Ring* [Workmen's Circle] branch 211 of *Częstochowers* raised specifically for that purpose. The mandolin orchestra performed concerts on various occasions and was enthusiastically received by the audience.

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The field of graphic arts was also not neglected. From 1926 onwards, the art teacher at the schools was the renowned *Częstochowa* painter, Perec Willenberg, who also taught painting and drawing at the Jewish *gymnazjum* and the Crafts School.

Celebrations of the holidays and public performances were big days for the kindergartens and primary schools. The traditional Jewish holidays, like *Peisach*, *Shavuos*, *Sukkos*, *Hanukkah* and *Purim* were revived in the school in a new form. In addition there were literary holidays, dedicated to writers such as Mende'le [Moycher Sforim], I.L. Peretz, Abram Rajzen and others. Every year, a memorial function was held on the anniversary of I.L. Peretz's death. Preparations for the performances and holidays took weeks and months. The kindergartens and schools raised talents in the field of song and the art of drama. Szymson, Dina and Ajdle'le Berkowicz (Lajbusz Berkowicz's children), Ruche'le Testyle, and a whole row of others, distinguished themselves in particular. Some of



A thank-you letter from a group of schoolchildren to the *Czenstochover Relief*



The mandolin orchestra with Conductor Zaks at the primary school

them, as children and later at an older age, appeared on stage alongside adults, and were the jewels of the Yiddish theatre.

The elated audience at the shows were mainly the dads and mums of the children and, when the children appeared on stage with their singing, dances, and dramatizations of children's stories, there was no force in the world that could keep the parents in their seats.

The children's performances also had a name in town. Groups of children, with their teachers, from other schools in *Częstochowa*, would come to the performances.

The anthem of the I.L. Peretz kindergartens and primary schools, which was sung at the beginning and at the end of every celebration and performance, was as follows:

*Open wider all the doors –
A good Yom-tov³, [all] is good [with] us!
All, all of us, are marching
To our holiday filled with heart!
All stride in the rows –
One and two, one and two!
All bring good tidings –
Just like this, just like this!
Hand in hand, with joy given;
Tall the row, loud the voice!
Light the feet, here they hover –
A good Yom-tov, they ring out!*

The school's motto was free movement in the open air. In the winter, the children played with snow and with the sledge in the schoolyard. They also took the sledge along on their wintery walks in the *Aleje*. As soon as spring arrived, the children spent a large part of their time at school in the garden on ul. Krótka 17 [and], later, [once the school was] in its own building, at the "Little Botanical Garden", which Michał Alter had so wonderfully arranged. In the new building's yard, the older children also had a little garden, which they themselves had planted and cultivated.



A group of pupils and teachers in the schoolyard garden

camp. The children's camp consisted of a large house with verandas, where the summer accommodations were built, and a large yard. The children spent most of their time in the yard and in the woods. They slept in the house. The management committee of the schools provided the beds for the children, who brought bedclothes with them from their homes. Comrades Michał Alter and Szyja Nirenberg made great efforts in arranging the children's camp and providing the food for them. Comrade [Mrs] Nirenberg

The greatest dream of the school activists and teachers, however, was a summer camp outside the city. The best location for such a camp was the Ostrów pine forest, which stretched long miles to Herby.

Only once, in 1920, was a full summer camp for the children successfully arranged in Ostrów.

The children of the kindergartens and primary schools were divided into two groups. Each group spent four weeks in the



The summer camp in Ostrów in 1920

³ [TN: Happy Holiday!]

was employed in preparing the food for the children. Generally speaking, the summer camp was a difficult and costly undertaking, and required a great deal of energy and money.

As consequence, however, the results were brilliant. The children, many of whom were anaemic or had symptoms of other illnesses, blossomed and received new strengths under the effects of the sun and the scent of pines from the forest.

The teachers at the camp were Juza Sztam, Szoszana Częstochowska, [and] Chaja Waga. The housekeeper was Malka Bratt, with an assistant.

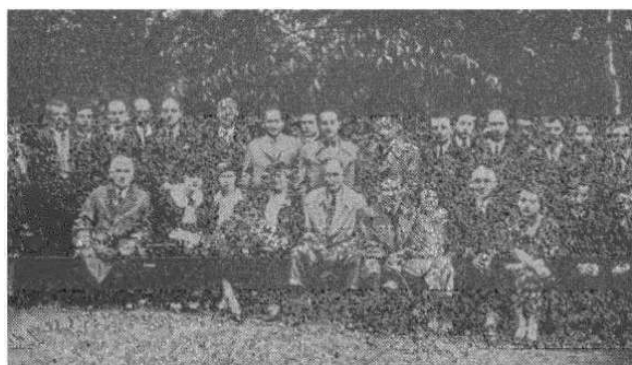
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The kindergartens and schools were visited by an array of friends and relief activists from America. These were: friend Pete Owiecki and his wife from Chicago, who brought a large sum of aid from the Chicago aid association, [and] were present at a children's performance in the Strażecki Hall and at a banquet celebrating the completion of the 1926 scholastic year; friend Nirenberg; friend Gryn z''l; friend Win z''l, who of his own accord let a large number of children be provided with new shoes; friend Szlingbaum; friend Szwarcbaum; friend Jankel Kopin (Kopiński); and Rose (Rywca) Kuperman.

Among the prominent figures who visited the schools were Lord Marley, a delegate of the English Labour Party who visited Poland, Sholem Asch, Dr Chaim Zhitlowsky, [and] Dr Shabad from Wilno.



American guests at the school: J. Kopinski and R. kuperman with the teachers L. Brener and A. Bratt



Guests from abroad at the school; sitting: Dr Kruk and Lord Marley

When the famous singers Moishe Rudinow and [his wife] Ruth Leviash gave a concert in Częstochowa, they also visited the schools and sang especially for the children.