

C. Szpaltyn, F. Szmulewicz

The Relief Committee for Refugees from Germany

As soon as the persecution of Jews began in Germany, and especially when they began deporting Jews from there, refugee committees were established in all the larger cities in order to take in the refugees and give them aid.

Częstochowa, which is practically the first large city near the German border, was also the first to establish such a committee.

At first, they would only deport a few individual families from Germany. The pretext was administrative fines, such as, for instance, not paying taxes accurately or conducting business without a "*Hausiererschein*" [peddler's license], and so on. In such cases, a term of fourteen days was given to liquidate one's business and leave the country. The expelled were forced to sell their property and goods for the most minimal prices and to get out of the country. The committees endeavoured to make arrangements for these refugees [locally], or to send them on to other cities, or to assist them to travel overseas.

The situation became very tragic, however, when the mass deportations began – when, overnight, hundreds of Jews were herded together from all corners of Germany and sent to the borders. As Częstochowa is located next to the German border, Nazi Germany did not forget us and sent [us] transports with refugees.

It was a Saturday in autumn. Jewish Częstochowa, as usual, was enjoying its *Shabbes* rest. The Jews at the synagogues and the Study-hall had already finished their prayers, and were strolling along the *Aleja*. In the *shtieblech* and [separate] prayer *minyanim* [quorums], Jews still stood wrapped in their prayer-shawls¹. Suddenly, like a storm, the voice was carried throughout the city [stating] that the Rabbi of Katowice, Handel, had telephoned² the bank director Pruszycki from there, [saying] that a train with Jews from Germany had arrived at the border. The train, which consisted of carriages for horses, was sealed, and it was on the neutral ground between Germany and Poland, or in "no man's land".

The city was on wheels³. Each one assailed the other with a barrage of questions - "Who are they? Where are they? Are there acquaintances or relatives there? Are there sick people there?" A committee was immediately chosen, comprising [Rabbi] Dr [Chaim-Zeew] Hirszberg, Cwi Szpaltyn⁴, [Feliks] Szapiro and Neufeld.

At once, the *Kehilla* appointed several individuals, who were to immediately travel to Katowice and to concurrently intervene with the Polish government in order to allow the refugees into Poland.

When the group, headed by Rabbi Hirszberg (now a refugee himself, in the Land of Israel), arrived in Katowice, at the local rabbi's house, they found two representatives from Beuthen [Bytom], Oberschlesien [Górny Śląsk or Upper Silesia], with the identical news that, on their side of the

¹ [TN: The vast majority of Polish Chassidim would begin their prayer services later than at the main synagogues.]

² [TN: The fact that a rabbi telephoned on the Sabbath, which is strictly forbidden, shows that this was considered a matter of life and death.]

³ [TN: Yiddish expression meaning "in a state of feverish excitement/apprehension."]

⁴ [TN: Co-author of this article.]

border, there was also a train with Jews in the very same situation. As it turned out, there were Jewish transports of this type all along the entire length of the German border.

Meanwhile, all these “transports” stood in no man’s land, and no one could come into contact with them. The local authorities argued that they could not take them in without orders from Warsaw. The telegraphic intercession with the Polish government in Warsaw took an entire day. As night fell, the situation remained the same.

The representatives from Częstochowa and Katowice gathered at the border, awaiting an answer from the Polish government. Each minute was [like] a year of suffering and torment. Eventually, news came to the effect that the Polish government permitted the letting in of the refugees and taking them to the nearby border-cities.

The sealed doors of the carriages were opened and people began falling one on top of the other. The laments and screams of the hapless ones were heartrending. We stood as if petrified, not knowing where to start. Appearing before our eyes were women in their nightclothes, men in pyjamas and slippers, and men in black coats - straight from an orchestra. The children [were] naked and barefoot. People did not know one another. All these people had been herded together - some from their houses, bedrooms and beds, some from the streets and others from theatres, restaurants and other premises. This happened simultaneously in various cities in Germany. The arrested Jews were packed into the horse-carriages *en masse* and sent away to different borders. They separated wives from their husbands, children from their parents [and] brothers from sisters. One did not know where the other had ended up.

After the people had regained their composure to some extent, we went with a transport of 600 Jews into Katowice, where the refugees were registered. Communal premises had been prepared in advance as a night-camp and each one was given something to eat. The most difficult task was soothing their agitated spirits, but this did not come easily. Everyone groaned and wept over their own personal troubles - “Where is my husband? Where is my wife? Where are my children?” Exhausted and shattered, they [finally] fell asleep one after the other.

In the midst of this tragedy, there were also comical moments.

In one of the corridors, a young man, in his twenties, was wandering about among the sleeping refugees wearing a coat and muttering something to himself. To our inquiry, as to why he was not sleeping, he replied that he had no “*Zahnbürste*”⁵ [toothbrush] and did not know what to do. We provided him with a toothbrush and he went to sleep.

The following day, the question of what [to do] next presented itself before us. What would happen when, today or tomorrow, another such transport arrived? We therefore decided to take all the refugees to Częstochowa, in order that Katowice should be vacant in the eventuality of another transport. The decision was transmitted to the Częstochowa *Kehilla* and, soon, vehicles arrived which transported us to Częstochowa.

Częstochowa already had food and a night-camp in readiness. The entire Jewish populace took part in the relief work. The younger gathered sacks of hay for sleeping, the older - food and clothing. Women sewed linen, [and] a kitchen was organised - the women cooked and the men served.

The *Kehilla* registered the refugees and contacted other cities and, over the course of time, many separated families were successfully reunited.

⁵ [TN: In German in the original, which sounds quite different from the Yiddish “tzain-bershte’le.”]

Later, the relief work was organised in a more constructive manner. Some of the refugees were given employment - others received weekly support. Professionals were given the opportunity to work in their profession. Places were created in orchestras for singers and musicians. Tailors, cobblers and other craftsmen were provided with machines and tools. Those travelling away were provided with certificates. We did everything within our power to create a homelike atmosphere for the refugees, so that they should feel as brothers among brothers.

On Hanukkah, an evening with their own talents was arranged. At this evening, gifts were given out and fitting words of consolation were spoken. We assured the refugees that we did not consider what we were doing for them as a favour, but as our brotherly obligation. Overall, the relief work for the Jewish refugees from Germany did not bear a philanthropic character – it was more an awareness that, what had happened to them today, could happen to us tomorrow.

It is indeed a fact that many of those, who took part then in providing for the refugees, are nowadays scattered to all four edges of the globe - some in the Land of Israel, [and] others in Teheran or extremely remote locations. But most of the members of the rescue committee for refugees shared the cruel fate of the Częstochowa community and of the entire Polish Jewry.

A few contributors to the Yiddish press in Częstochowa (for the article *The Yiddish Press*)



M. Ceszynski



R. Federman



W. Lewenhof



A. Chrobolovsky