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## Yiddish Theatre in Częstochowa

The Yiddish theatre in Częstochowa, in its developmental path, shared the same fate of the contemporary Yiddish theatre in Russia and in Poland - it had good and bad times.

Apart from the Russian government's censorship, which after scrutinising every theatrical piece either approved or banned its production, a theatrical performance very often depended upon the goodwill of a local authority or police chief. More than once, it turned out that a piece was advertised - having been staged in Warsaw or in Łódź with the permission of the authorities - and a completely different piece was performed. In such cases, "people" around the theatre, who also made a living from it, helped resolve the difficulties.

The Yiddish theatre in our city had to go through no smaller difficulties in order to receive a suitable hall with a stage. The performances began in Jewish halls where weddings were held and also at the firefighters' hall, which was in the poorer part of town that was densely populated by Jews. Over time, however, the Yiddish theatrical performances were moved over to the halls of *Lira*, the Warta [Sports Club] and even to the building of the Polish municipal theatre.

Almost all the Jewish theatre troupes in Poland gave performances in Częstochowa. In the wintertime, they had even greater material success.

But it was not only the professional troupes that effected the propagation of the art of Yiddish acting in our city. The amateur circles, which existed in Częstochowa, had a very large part in this. With their own strength, dedication and love for Yiddish theatre, they gave very successful performances over a number of years, and produced several directors and talents who later were also part of professional troupes.

It is worthwhile gaining an understanding from which social strata these amateur troupes were recruited. As was characteristic of that period of the rising Workers Movement, the Yiddish amateur circles were also made up, in larger part, from the poorer Jewish echelons in general, and from the working masses in particular. Besides the abovementioned goal of propagating culture among the Jewish working masses, the Yiddish amateurs also wished to develop their consciousness and to elevate their political and social level.

As a result of the destruction of our city's Jewish archives during the Second World War (a large part was handed over to the YIVO in Wilno before the War), we are unable to present an accurate overview of the development of Yiddish theatre in Częstochowa. However, in order to glean a general picture of the Yiddish theatre in our city, we present here a chronological outline, which was compiled based upon documents in the possession of *Częstochowers* in America and on their memories.

### Professional Acting Troupes & Their Repertoire

One of the first theatre troupes to appear in Częstochowa before the First World War was the cooperative troupe of Kuprinow<sup>1</sup>, with [his wife] Pola Portnoy [or Patroni] in the main roles.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Pseudonym of Szmul Kuperman.]

Mojsze Zylberkasten's troupe of actors, which was directed by Wajshoff, spent a long time in Częstochowa. Zylberkasten directed several of the productions and acted himself [in them]. One of his performances was in *Die Neveyle* [The Carcass (1908)] by Perec Hirszbajn.

On 15<sup>th</sup> September 1912, a family evening was held at *Lira*, with the participation of Josef Tunkel (*Der Tunkler*). Sholem Aleichem's one-act play *Mazel Tov* was staged, with the participation of Ms Sem, Jetta Pakuła, Sz. Frank, F. Szmulewicz, [and] R. and M. Bornsztajn.

On 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1913, the Yiddish troupe, under the direction of Madame Tryling and Adolf Berman, performed at the hall in *Lira*. The then-renowned actors Fogelnest, Kutner, Łaźnowska, Gotfryd, Rozen, Gutherc and others formed part of this troupe. H.L. Żelazo was the troupe's director. They performed the three following shows:

- 1) *The Iron Lady*<sup>2</sup>;
- 2) *Doktor Zayfenbloz* [Dr Soap-Bubble<sup>3</sup>];
- 3) *Die Amerikanerin* [The American<sup>4</sup>].

All three performances encountered great success. On 13<sup>th</sup> March of that same year, the troupe performed Jacob Gordin's *The Oath*.

In the middle of the *Sukkos* days of 1913, two Yiddish troupes held performances at the *Lira*. One was directed by Michelson, performing the comic-operetta *His Wife's Husband*<sup>5</sup>. The second was directed by Hendelist, with the plays *Dora* (a melodrama in four acts) and *The Yiddish King Lear* [by J. Gordin].

On 14<sup>th</sup> November of that same year, a Yiddish troupe performed a merry four-act operetta [entitled] "*The Funny Bird*" at the *Lira*.

In 1919, a troupe performed in Częstochowa, under the direction and with the participation of the Yiddish actor [Karl] Cymbalist and the soubrette Ajzenberg. A Częstochowa amateur [actress], Fela Fajnrajch-Biro, participated in this troupe. They put on the pieces *The Street Singer*, *The Yeshiva Student* by [Izydor] Żołotarewski, *Broken Hearts* by Z. Libin, [and] *God, Man and Devil* and *The Yiddish King Lear* by Jacob Gordin.

In the first years of liberated Poland, we see in Częstochowa a whole array of Yiddish theatrical troupes, starring the most revered actors. Thus, in 1922-23, E.R. Kamińska starred with her ensemble performing in three pieces: *The Seven Who Were Hanged*<sup>6</sup>, [and] *The Kreutzer Sonata* and *Mirele Efros*, [both by J. Gordin].

In 1924, the troupe of [Karl] Cymbalist and [his wife] Regina Cuker appeared in Częstochowa. Among others, actors Michał Klajn and Blatt took part. The shows were held at the hall of the Warta Sports Club on the Second *Aleja*. It is worth noting that, in this troupe, the Częstochowa amateur Mojsze Kohn took part. He later became a professional actor and passed the acting examination at the [Yiddish] Actors Union<sup>7</sup> in Warsaw. In 1925, Herman's drama studio visits Częstochowa. Among the then young acting, we see Melnik, Potaszyński and Motl Goldblum. They performed *The Green Fields* by Perec Hirszbajn and *Squaring the Circle*<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: Probably adapted from novel by the same title by "Shomer," or Nahum Meir Schaikewitz.

<sup>3</sup> [TN: We have as yet been unable to ascertain the existence of a play by this title.]

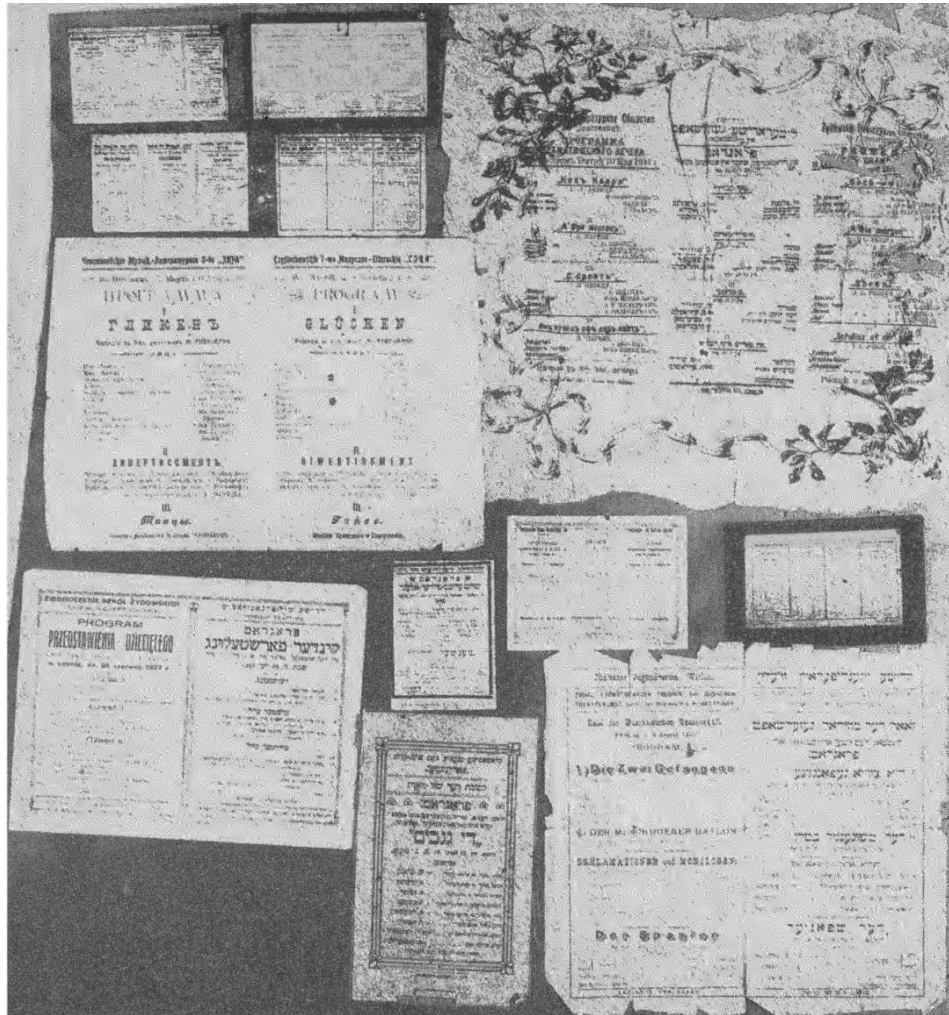
<sup>4</sup> [TN: Alternative title of the musical "The Girl of the West" by Yiddish dramatist Anshel Schorr and composer Joseph Rumshinsky.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: Alternative title of "The Bigamists" by H. Meyzel.]

<sup>6</sup> [TN: Adapted from the 1908 novella of the same title by Russian author Leonid Andreyev.]

<sup>7</sup> [TN: Officially named "Związek Artystów Scen Żydowskich" (ZASZ), or "Association of Jewish Stage Artists."]

<sup>8</sup> [TN: Yiddish translation of the play in Russian by Valentin Katayev.]



Some of the repertoires of the actors' circles

In 1927, for a lengthy period, the troupe of Nechome and Kadish [Chasz<sup>9</sup>] performed in Częstochowa. But from an array of successfully performed pieces and operettas, the one that had the greatest success was the play *The Golem*<sup>10</sup>, directed by Marek Arnstein. The shows were even attended by the Polish populace, which was a rarity in Poland.

These were the first steps towards a permanent Yiddish theatre in Częstochowa. The councilman from the Bundist faction in the Częstochowa City Council, R. Federman, passed a resolution with a decision to subsidise the Yiddish theatre with 1,000 *złoty*. The money was paid to the Yiddish Actors Union in Warsaw.

A committee for the Yiddish theatre was also formed from amongst the Jewish population of Częstochowa, with the participation of J. Rozenberg, Aron Perek, R. Federman, J. Sak, Z. Sztyller and others. An impressive banquet was held in connection with this. At the time, R. Federman was the representative of the Yiddish Actors Union in Poland for the professional theatrical troupes that appeared in Częstochowa.

The effect of these two facts was that touring Yiddish troupes began performing at the municipal Polish theatre's new building on ul. Kilińskiego. When we take into account that the first Yiddish

<sup>9</sup> [TN: Wife and husband, founders of the Wilno Operetta Troupe.]

<sup>10</sup> [TN: Most likely ref. to the 1921 "dramatic poem in eight scenes" by H. Leivick, which is a reworking of an old Jewish legend.]

shows were performed at the halls of the Firefighters', *Lira* or even the Warta [Sports Club] – the fact that the municipal theatre building was given over for a Yiddish performance is a very great achievement.

In 1928-29, the Wilno Troupe, with Miriam Orleska and [Mordche] Mazo, visited Częstochowa. They performed Sholem Asch's *Kiddush Ha'Shem* [Sanctifying (God's) Name] with great success. Jakow Wajslic and Josef Kamień were also Częstochowa's guests.

Among the dramatic artists, who gave performances in our city, as well as appearances by individual actors from *Ha'Bima*<sup>11</sup> and the famous Russian actors' cabaret "The Blue Bird", it is worth mentioning Zygmunt Turkow and [his wife] Ida Kamińska, Jonas Turkow and [his wife] Diana Blumenfeld, Klara Segalowicz, Abram Morewski, Samberg, Aleksander Granach, Julius Adler, Benny Adler, Hersz Hardt, Wiktor Chenkin, Bracha Zefira, Hannah Rovina, Herc Grosbard, Ruchel Holcer, [Lejb] Szriftzecer and others.

All of them presented pieces from European and Yiddish repertoires. A brief look at a programme shows one what the Częstochowa Jewish public demanded - thus [we see that] they performed *Hinkemann* [by Ernst Toller] with Julius Adler, *The Yellow Patch*<sup>12</sup> with Aleksander Granach, *Josie Kalb* [by I. J. Singer (1932)] with the Moryc Szwarz troupe, *Herr Lampertier* [?] with Zygmunt Turkow and Ida Kamińska, in [sic and] an array of other productions from the artistic repertoire.

Amongst the [musical] revue theatres and operetta troupes, it is worth mentioning the Ararat [Troupe], directed by Mojsze Broderzon, with actors Godik, Strugacz, Dzigan, Szumacher (a *Częstochower* son-in-law<sup>13</sup>), Ola Lilith, *Shayne* [Beautiful] Miriam [(M. Broderzon's wife)], Goldsztajn and others. The Azazel [Troupe] also visited Częstochowa. The operetta troupe of Herszkowicz, with Lajbel Winer and Malwina Wajner, also appeared in our city. The popular M. Kipnis and [his wife] Zimra Zeligfeld, Winogradow, Mojsze Rudinow and Ruth Leviash were very frequent guests of Jewish Częstochowa.

We have little information on the entire array of performances that were held in Częstochowa shortly before the Nazi occupation.

### Amateur Troupes and Their Repertoires

The amateur Yiddish theatre in Częstochowa, according to what Chaim-Lajb Szwarz writes in [his article] *Częstochowa Becomes a City*, had its origins in Jakow-Ber Silver's<sup>14</sup> children's troupe. The first piece which they performed was *The Two Kuni Lemels* [by A. Goldfaden]. From this same children's group, the first amateur group was founded in 1905, in which Jakow-Ber Silver, Dawid Zytman, Miss Rubinsztajn, Mojsze Sandler, Emanuel Klajnman, Wolf Majorczyk and others participated. At the time, they presented *Uriel Acosta*<sup>15</sup> with great success. Another amateur group, with the participation of Nuchem-Jankel Fridman, Kopl the Lamé, Gucza-Ruchel the *Yumete's*, Hela Bida and Gucza Montag, already took part in the performances of professional actors from Mrs Arnstein's troupe, which was appearing in Częstochowa at the time.

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<sup>11</sup> [TN: *The Stage*; Hebrew-language theatre founded in Białystok in 1912, now the national theatre of Israel.]

<sup>12</sup> [TN: Yiddish title of "Professor Mamlock" by Friedrich Wolf (1933), the first anti-Nazi propaganda play.]

<sup>13</sup> [TN: As I. Szumacher was born in Łódź, this presumably means that his wife was from Częstochowa, but we have not been able as yet to ascertain her identity.]

<sup>14</sup> [TN: His surname is spelt in two ways throughout this book: Zylber, as it was originally, and Silver, as he spelt it once in the US.]

<sup>15</sup> [TN: Classic early Yiddish theatre piece, later adapted by A. Goldfaden.]



**A group of the first amateur actors; standing (R-L): Chaim the Yumete's and D. Zytman; seated: D. Mendelewicz**

At the end of 1906, the SS [Socialist-Zionist Party] organised an amateur circle under the directorship of Comrade Benjamin, in which Mendel Szuchter, Majer Fajnrajch, Mania and Hendel Szaferenko, Symcha Kalka, Aleksander (Lajbisz Lerer), Alter *Stodoła* [Barn], Lea Herszlikowicz and others participated. They performed *Jean and Madeleine* [?] and *The Jews* by Czirikower [?]. These shows were held at the *Teatr Paryski* [Parisian Theatre], the main venue for theatrical performances by first-rate Polish and Yiddish troupes. This group's show was a great event in Częstochowa.

With the establishment of the Jewish Literary Society and its later unification with *Lira*, a new chapter of Yiddish theatre begins in Częstochowa.

The Jewish Literary Society's drama section's first performance took place, at the *Lira* Hall, on Sunday, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1911. Two one-acts were presented:

- 1.) M. Arnstein's *The Eternal Song*, with the participation of M. Fajnrajch, Miss Muszynska, Miss Burkan, [and] R. Federman, and
- 2.) *Bochurim* [Lads] a comedy in one act by Icchak Katzenelson, with the participation of R. Federman, S. Gradon, M. Zylberberg, M. Fajnrajch, Z. Lewensztajn, J. Zylberman, [and] F. Szmulewicz.

That same evening, other performances included *Countenance* by I.L. Peretz, recited by B. Burkan; *The Madman in The Hospital* by [Nathan] Dranov – B. Dawidowicz; *To The Brothers* by [Joseph] Bovshover – Jetta Pakuła; *Peisach is Coming* by I.L. Peretz – R. Federman, [and] *On The Bosom Of The Ocean* by M. Rosenfeld – Dora Szacher. Aron Perc directed the show.

The Jewish Literary Society's second theatrical evening took place on Tuesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1911 at the municipal theatre (Parisian Hall). Four one-acts by I.L. Peretz were staged:

- 1.) *After Burial*, featuring Madame Miriam Izraels, Jetta Pakuła, [and] Dora Szacher;
- 2.) *An Early Morning*, with Mark Schweid, M. Zylberberg, Miss J. Aronowicz, Dora Szacher, [and] Miriam Izraels;
- 3.) *It's Burning*, with Mark Schweid, Miriam Izraels, R. Federman, [and] J. Zylberman, [and]
- 4.) *Chained in the Synagogue Anteroom*, with Mark Schweid and Miriam Izraels.

The show was directed by Mark Schweid, who spent a certain amount of time in Częstochowa to this end. Miriam Izraels was also brought to Częstochowa by the *Lira* where, with the aid of amateurs, she directed and put on several shows.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1913, the *Lira* held a Sholem Aleichem evening, at which the amateur troupe performed [Sholem Aleichem's] well-known comedy *People*. The show featured Krak, Aronowicz, Mrs Sobol, Werner, Miss Kromolowska, Pola Mauer, F. Szmulewicz, Miss Rajcher and Miss Szapiro. This was one of the most successful amateur performances.



*Miriam Izraels*

Two successful amateur performances at the *Lira* were arranged at the initiative of the Częstochowa Sports Union. The first time, they performed Sholem Aleichem's *Agents*, with the participation of D. Krak, Werner, Szyffer and Prawer. H. Fajwlowicz and Józef Aronowicz also took part in that evening, reciting several monologues. The second time, on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1913, they performed *The Riddle and the Solution* [?], which represented an amateur show, where everyone – the amateur actors, the producer and the prompter – got things mixed up. The performance featured Pola Mauer, Werner and Krak. Gucza Bem – the *Lira*'s soloist – also appeared with the Yiddish folksong *Leben Tur Men Nisht* [We are Not Allowed to Live], accompanied by H. Mokraujer.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1913, the *Lira* Society held a Purim evening. Mark Arnstein's one-act [play] *The Question Mark* was performed.

Up to the First World War, the amateur circles carried through an entire array of productions.

During the German occupation of 1914-1918, an amateur troupe called "*Liebhaber von Jiddischen Szenischen Kunst*" [JSK Lovers of Yiddish Scenic Art] was active in Częstochowa. This troupe comprised Jakow-Icek Zarnowiecki, F. Szmulewicz, Sz.

Frank, Gotajner, Dora Szacher, Fela Rajcher, Cesia Federman, Rubinsztajn, Raphael Federman and Lajcia Gliklich. The troupe's director was Herszl Gotajner. Among an array of pieces which they performed at the time were H.D. Nomberg's *Die Mishpuche* and *The Jews* by Czirikower. The success of their performances in Częstochowa forced the JSK to give an array of performances in the provincial [towns] around Częstochowa, distinguishing themselves as the best amateur troupe in our city.



*The JSK amateur troupe, which performed H.D. Nomberg's Die Mishpuche [The Family]*

The JSK conducted another cultural production on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1916 at the Korso Theatre. This was a memorial event dedicated to the recently-deceased Sholem Aleichem, with the following programme:

- 1) *On The Fresh Grave*, recited by Cilia Horowicz and illustrated with a living picture [tableau vivant] by the artistic painter Perec Willenberg;
- 2) Speech by Józef Aronowicz about Sholem Aleichem;
- 3) *On My Grave*, recited by D. Szacher;
- 4) *Keinehora* [No Evil Eye], performed by Alter Rotbard;
- 5) *The Gymnazjum*, read by J. Aronowicz.

In the second part of the function, Sholem Aleichem's comedy *People* was performed, starring J. Aronowicz, Werner, D. Szacher, Pola Mauer, Rotbard, Miss Gela Rozenberg and Fela Rajcher.

The last years of the War and the first period of the new Poland brought a certain standstill in the activity of the Częstochowa Yiddish amateur circles. But, on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1920, the drama section of the *Vereinigte* Workers Club renewed its cultural work and performed F. Bimko's piece *The Thieves*. The

performance was held at the Polonia Theatre, with the participation of Mojsze Kremiski, A. Wenger, Regina Rozenfeld (Kuperman), Ch. Bendet, Alek Lewensztajn, Ch. Epsztajn and Pola Kostensztajn. Sz. Frank played the main role.

On 11<sup>th</sup> December 1920, a memorial evening was held in commemoration of Sh. Ansky, at the initiative of the newspaper *Das Neue*<sup>16</sup> *Wort* [The New Word]. The one-act [play by Ansky,] *Father and Son*, was performed. R. Federman, who had already played a similar role as Reb Zerach in Sholem Asch's piece *With the Stream*, played the father's role. Mark Schweid acted together with him.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1921, F. Bimko's play *The Thieves* was performed for a second time in Częstochowa. All proceeds went to the Cultural Bureau of the professional unions in Częstochowa. That same year, *The Village Youth* [by Leon Kobrin] was presented, featuring Lewensztajn and Frank.

The children's performances, by the I.L. Peretz primary school and kindergartens, were a special festivity in the Jewish street. In our report, *The Last Year* [pp.183-186], two of these children are mentioned - Ruchel Testyler and Genia Berkowicz. Both of them were saved from the Nazi hell - the former is in Shanghai, and the latter in Częstochowa.

This brief summary shows how much understanding Jewish Częstochowa displayed for Yiddish theatre, for Jewish cultural functions, supporting its own talents and those from elsewhere in full measure.

And just as the eye delights in seeing greenery and flowers growing in a graveyard, which is the strongest sign of life's eternity, let us hope that we shall once more rejoice in hearing again of a Yiddish theatre in Częstochowa.



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<sup>16</sup> [TN: We have used the German spelling, but in Polish Yiddish the words are pronounced "Dus Naye Wort."]