

A. Chrobolovsky

## ***Częstochowa Becomes a City***

by Chaim-Leib Szwarc\*

The book *Czenstochover Yidn* is, in its origins and to a great extent also in its realisation, connected to the same group of people - not, Heaven forbid, from any wealthy houses and tall windows - who participated both in the fight for freedom in 1905 and, also later, in Jewish cultural work. This same group also created, in Częstochowa, the local Jewish press. Their names are recorded in the book. In this same book, *Czenstochover Yidn*, the best pages - and by "best" I mean lifelike depictions - were written by simple men of the people. Two of these are *Częstochowa Becomes a City*, by Chaim-Leib Szwarc and *There was Once a Shtetl Działoszyn* by Mary Rosen. Both pieces are a testimony to the treasure of Yiddish the people has and what creative powers a Jewish man of the people possesses! How deeply-rooted life, in the old home, has remained in the people's memory! That old home from whence we came.

Chaim-Leib Szwarc's *Częstochowa Becomes a City* may, in fact, serve us as an example.

Chaim-Leib Szwarc left Częstochowa in about 1902, when he was twenty-one years old. He roamed the world! He was in Austria, Germany, England and Canada. He travelled throughout America - he was in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Honolulu, Seattle (Washington) and in Oregon. He was drawn to writing. He wrote poems and prose. Some of them were printed. But, from the countless pieces in prose which he left behind, it is difficult to glean a picture of his life in all those places where he lived and even attained citizenship. All his plans to write books resulted in nothing. His only success was the narrative *Częstochowa Becomes a City*, which he wrote from memory in the city of Seattle, at the age of 70.

One can imagine how deeply rooted, in his memory, were the images from his childhood and youth, as they were not wiped from his recollection and they did not become lost in the great tangle of his life in the course of all the years, to his ripe old-age.

He had better luck with poetry than with prose. His verses sound good, albeit raw and unprocessed. He wrote about his life [and] about his experiences in the years of his wanderings. Here, he writes a poem about a liquor distillery, one about Honolulu, Hawaii, where he was once a cook for the Governor himself, here he writes a poem about Oregon State - and one about death. And had Chaim-Leib received any education at all to develop his talent, he would definitely have accomplished something.

Nevertheless, Chaim-Leib left us - besides a few good poems - one work which will live on after him and after us, and this is the piece *Częstochowa Becomes a City*. Talent was needed in order to vividly describe, depict and recount, and to create a living panorama of a Jewish city, statically and dynamically. Yes, the author of this narrative was our *landsmann* Chaim-Leiba'le - the boy from Getzevizne<sup>\*1</sup>, the child of Goats Street [ul. Koźia], the frog<sup>1</sup> of the New Market, the heir [viz. son] of Awigdor the *brukarz* [paver; cobblestone-setter].

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\* [TN: Chrobolovsky leaves many details out in this review. We have supplied those details which we deemed indispensable from Szwarc's original account in *Czenstochover Yidn*, pp. 32-46, in brackets and in footnotes.]

\*<sup>1</sup> [TN: We have not been able to ascertain this word's original spelling or meaning; Chaim-Leib Szwarc writes in *Czenstochover Yidn*, p.33, that this was the name of the ghetto, viz. the Jewish Quarter (in the 1880's).]

<sup>1</sup> [TN: According to his biography in *Czenstochover Yidn*, *Who's Who* section, p. CII, "Frog" was Chaim-Lajb Szwarc's nickname as a boy.]

That was how it had begun, thus the Jewish part of the city had expanded. The lowest and poorest part was the River Street [ul. Nadrzeczna], on the very bank of the River Warta. When the river rose, it seemed as if an ocean had penetrated the low-lying little houses with the clay floors. The Potters Street [ul. Garncarska] was already a bit more cheerful - with the Jewish shops, with the incoming travellers - harmonica players, readers of cards, those who warded off the evil eye, conjurers, musicians and regular, poor folk. The Meat-market Street [ul. Targowa] was populated by the "Good Boys" [criminal gang]. People used to call it "The Robbers Street". The Goats Street was [then] still settled by Gentile shepherds. Fat cows would enter the little street. Housewives stood with pitchers at the ready, waiting for the Gentile women to finish milking the cows. The small ul. Senatorska was filled with young homeowners, Chassidic children with little, long caftans, merchants, brokers and cane-twirlers [viz. idlers].

Many *shtreimels*<sup>\*2</sup> were seen here on *Shabbes*. On Kozia, Garncarska and in the Old and New Markets, new houses arose - large *kamienice* [tenements] with courtyards - an entire *shtetl* of cobblers, tailors [and] shops, with an inn, a mangle<sup>\*3</sup> and a Chassidic *shtiebel* at the front. In the Old Market new used clothes dealers, cobblers, fruit sellers arrived [and] herring and grains shops [opened]. The Nowy Rynek had quite a status - on a Tuesday [Auction] Day, it was full of stalls and merchandise - earthenware pots, dishes, baskets, trunks, beds, cupboards, lime, rope, pasta boards, troughs, graters, paint shops, fine fabrics, lamps and wine shops. The Jews built on ul. Ogrodowa, ul. Warszawska, ul. Krakowska, ul. Strażacka, ul. Wały, the First *Aleja* and on ul. Teatralna, with large buildings with banks and large shops on the Second *Aleja*.

There were [also] the factories which the Jews built, mostly for Christian workers. The exceptions were Wajnberg's factory on ul. Wały, in which many Jewish workers and Jewish girls were employed; Grosman's mill (paper factory), with the beautiful garden next to it; Markusfeld's *Malarnia*, *Kapeluszarnia* [and] *Klejarna* and Werde's needle factory, also with Jewish workers. And there were numerous smaller celluloid, toy, metal and mirror factories, in which many underage Jewish children worked.

And there is a scene from the corner of ul. Targowa, in front of the "*Tymme*<sup>\*4</sup>" - blind beggars by the church wall screech out Jasna Góra melodies on their fiddles. [There is] Nuchem Jankiel Fridman, with the tall bird over his head, wrapped in a red turban, selling lemonade and playing the part of Hotzmach<sup>\*5</sup>; Welwe'le *Dziekán* ["The Dean"] with his stout stick, the town fool, declares, "I am the King-in-Council of the whole of Germany!" Hersze'le Beatus sings a little song, dances a little jig and then snatches up the coins thrown [to him] and runs away; and Szaja Szliten plays "за что мне мать родила?"<sup>\*6</sup> on his street organ.

The great occasions in the city are when the Dragoons depart and the *Ułan*<sup>\*7</sup> arrive, when the monument honouring Tsar Alexander II is unveiled [and the populace discover that the emperor's statue] is standing with its back to *Matka Boska* [the Blessed Virgin] and when the Fire Department inaugurates its [new] fire-fighting equipment with a false alarm<sup>\*8</sup>.

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\*2 [TN: Traditional Chassidic holiday fur hat.]

\*3 [TN: Large roll weighted with stones for pressing water out of laundry.]

\*4 [TN: Heb., impurity; term by which religious zealots referred to the church.]

\*5 [TN: Character in Abraham Goldfaden's play "The Sorceress."]

\*6 [TN: Rus.; "For what did Mother give birth to me?"]

\*7 [TN: Uhlans; Polish-Lithuanian light cavalry. There, on p. 33, Szwarc writes the opposite: that the Dragoons had arrived, and the Uhlans had left.]

\*8 [TN: An unannounced fire-drill which awoke the population late at night, causing pandemonium.]

And here is a view of the aftermath [of the parade of the incoming Dragoons] on the *Aleje*:

With the buzz of the *chrząszcze* [beetles], the [bugle call for the soldiers' bedtime] *povierka* [Rus.; roll call] is heard. Then, officers in light blue cloaks, holding *spitzruten*<sup>\*9</sup> and, with powdered ladies on their arms, stroll about along the First and Second *Aleje*. The carriages are lit up with lanterns, the white blossoms of the chestnut trees are scattered on the ground like a white carpet, the ice cream man with the white [robe and Turkish] hat yells, "*Ice cream!*" and, from the distance, the "*Tymme*" shines with the thousands of oil wicks in honour of Green Thursday [Pentecost].

The entertainments on *Shabbes* were at Jaworski's or at Peczka's [?]. Servant girls, Jewish soldiers [and] young cavalymen came together and sang Jewish or Little Russian [viz. Ukrainian] songs. The melting frost, from the window panes, dripped onto the sand on the windowsill. In the sand, [there were stuck] paper cones filled with cotton wool and secured with coloured paper. The silk shawls and the [St.] Petersburg galoshes came off and the girls told stories of their opulent [employers], of marital propositions and of their *shtetls* and villages. These were poor children from foreign locations. But the "Good Boys" had no control at all over these girls - as long as they had somewhere to go.

Finally, they danced a polka, a *csárdás* [Hungarian folk dance] and a *Broyges Tantz*<sup>\*1</sup> - "*Perhaps you desire a kiss from me - For another, yes, but not for you...*"

The "*Shabbes* pleasure" looked completely different on the meadow - [draft horses] rested from the heavy burdens they dragged all week long, separately from them a few "aristocratic" horses of the Jewish hackney carriages also grazed - during the week, they transported posh passengers.

Certainly, there were also other bourgeois, wealthy and Chassidic Jews who celebrated their "*Shabbes* pleasure" [differently], but Chaim-Leiba'le very much felt at home amongst his own kind and he did not climb up to the high windows. He even lacked the winged words with which one flies about in the "broader" heavens of the Cosmos. His vocabulary is the simple vocabulary of the "simple Jews", but they constituted a black, fertile soil - the healthy foundation of life.

This is what *Rosh Hashana* looked like in town:

The Meat-Market Street and the Old Market are cleaned. The peasants from the surrounding countryside know that it is a sacred day for the Jews and they do not come to town with their rural goods. The street organs in Szaja Szliten's courtyard come to a rest. The shutters of Moryc's "little house" [viz. brothel] are closed - the girls will not be winking at the passers-by from the balconies. Men with faded, well-worn [black] robes rush to synagogues and *shtieblech*. The [religious married] women wear *Rosh Hashanah* bows in their wigs, the older ones - headbands. The women of the Nowy Rynek and *Aleje* wear long gold chains around their necks, pearls, broaches with diamonds and thick gold bracelets on their wrists.

The synagogue is lit by a hundred candles, long strings of water [molten wax?] stream down the walls. The fine burghers with their gold and silver *atures*<sup>\*2</sup> occupy the forefront. The simple Jews sit nearer to the antechamber - those who haul sacks and crates about, factory workers, bakers, tailors, cobblers...

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<sup>\*9</sup> [TN: Ger., also spelt "*Spießrute*"; a wooden rod used in the military punishment of "running the gauntlet", in which a soldier was made to run between two rows of soldiers who beat him with rods.]

<sup>\*1</sup> [TN: Traditional Jewish "Dance of Anger (and Reconciliation)" performed at weddings.]

<sup>\*2</sup> [TN: "Crowns"; long strips of embroidered material, often with precious metals, which mark the part of the prayer-shawl which covers one's head (orthodox Jews cover their whole body and head with a large prayer-shawl).]

But it is not always *Shabbes* and holidays or even [all that] peaceful in the weekdays. There were also hard, bitter days and years. Cholera [struck] once in the 1870's and the second time in 1894. The first time, Majer Biczner, on a white horse and with a sword, tried to cast the Angel of Death out of the city. The second time, there was already a hospital with Jewish doctors, medics and a Jewish nurse. [There was] hunger and inflation in 1889 and a great deal of charity on part of the wealthier residents. And [then], the perpetual Jewish misfortune - the first pogrom in 1902. But they endured everything - the city grows and the Jews multiply.

There are already a great number of Jews in the city - a world of Jews. Chaim-Leib does not fail to say a good word about any of them (besides one, whom people called "a spiteful apostate"), starting from the City Fathers - Markusfeld, Gajsler, Ginsberg, Majer Lajb Helman, Awreme'le Suberda and Neufeld, Imich - [down] to the impoverished girl, Gitla Zygas, who became a medical nurse. Even the "Good Boys", according to Chaim-Leib, protected Jews when they were attacked by Gentiles. Chaim-Leib's Jews, *keinehora*, are so plentiful - and all with [such] dear, "unique"<sup>\*3</sup> names - that it is difficult to enumerate them all. They are, however, to be found in a list of names taken from the book *Czenstochover Yidn*, which a surviving grandchild of Chaim-Leib's city, Motusz<sup>\*4</sup> Berkowicz, has taken the effort to compile.

And yet, [despite his positivity towards everyone,] the protest against social injustice and against the abyss separating the poor from the rich, it interweaves itself like a crimson thread through Chaim-Leib's city. At the synagogue on *Rosh Hashana*, the burghers with the silver and gold *atures* occupy the forefront, and the simple Jews sit near the antechamber. There is a further "*Ha'Meilech*"<sup>\*5</sup> [viz. dissonance] between the ladies of the Nowy Rynek and the Aleje, with the gold chains on their necks and the women of the lower streets, with the bows in their wigs. The wealthy housewives go shopping for the holiday with their maidservants and the poor ones [go] with their little baskets. The rich purchased *schmaltz*<sup>\*6</sup> herrings and roe, [while] the poor - little herrings with lots of milt (*mleczak*<sup>\*7</sup>), to have something to chop up together with onions and vinegar, for after the *Shabbes* [morning] prayers. During the cholera [epidemic, a manufacturer's mother, who oversaw the girls working in his workshop and who liked to be called] "The Mother" sits in a chair modified [due to her obesity], incessantly pouring tea with lemon into herself [as a remedy against cholera], and she advises the girls to wait until they come home [in the evening, where they should] boil up a [large] kettle of water, and use vinegar if they had no lemons. The statement that "on *Rosh Hashana* the girls from Moryc's 'little house' would not be flogged and the 'Good Boys' would not beat them" is a man's outcry against the inhuman brutality and the debasement of life.

There lies a world of ridicule in the description of how "Uncle Moryc, with a gold chain dangling on his fat belly, tightly holds his prayer-shawl pouch with a large prayer-book under his arm, and marches to ul. Krakowska, to the Faktor<sup>\*8</sup> *shtiebel*". At the end, there is a depiction of the new postal building - "where the higher, Russian officials lived [and] from [whose] windows could be heard pianos playing Tchaikovsky's, Mozart's and Schubert's music. [It is no wonder that] when a child from the poor Jewish street (a Chaim-Leiba'le, for instance [reviewer's note]) sometimes wandered over there that, in his mind, he compared [everything that he saw and heard] with the [suffocating] poverty of the poor

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\*3 [TN: Many do not appear in the official records available to us.]

\*4 [TN: This is the same Motl Berkowicz who penned the article "A Jewish House in Czenstochowa" in this book, p. 32. These lists of names are the indexes included at the end of this book.]

\*5 [TN: "The King"; first words the cantor calls out loudly in the *Rosh Hashana* morning prayer service, which create a dissonance with the hitherto silent prayers.]

\*6 [TN: *Yid.*, fat; "fat herrings" are caught just before spawning, when the fish's fat is at its maximum.]

\*7 [TN: Probably Yiddish, from the Polish *mlecz*, or milt, i.e., the semen of the male fish.]

\*8 [TN: See *Sefer Czenstochowa*, Vol. I, col. 530 regarding this synagogue.]

street that sold milk [from a farmer] for a three-piece coin, chicory for a *kopek* [(they did not know about coffee)] and two sugar cubes for one *grosz* - strange thoughts awoke in his head...”.

It did not take long before this social protest emerged openly in the world and the days of the 1905 Freedom Movement began.

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Life goes on. The city becomes larger and more beautiful. Electric lighting is introduced. A Polish troupe performs *Małka Szwarcenko*. Jewish youths [who had no tickets] would steal their way inside or peer in through the cracks in the fence. With a group of children, [Jakób Ber Zylber,] the lame *staluch*<sup>\*1</sup>, begins to rehearse the theatrical production [*The Two*] *Kuni Lemels*<sup>\*2</sup>. Troupes from Łódź come, who put on [*King*] *Achashverosh*, *Shulamis*, *Bar Kokhba* [and] *Beggars and Hungers*. The interest in Yiddish literature awakens. Yiddish translations of American novels are read, people read Shomer<sup>\*3</sup>. Books by Mordechai Spektor and Mendele Moycher Sforim appeared - *Die Klatsche* [The Mare (by the latter)] was particularly popular. Translations of Émile Zola appeared. Częstochowa becomes a cultural centre, influencing the surrounding Zagłębie region.

A Jew appeared with a box with rubber tubes from which one could, for three *kopeks*, hear singing. Afterwards, a white sheet appeared with the various tricks, which Jews took to be black magic, but the lads of the Jewish street already knew, from American publications, that these were [Edison's] gramophones and *żywe obrazy* (living pictures<sup>\*4</sup>).

In 1900, labourers from Piotrków and Łódź arrived. They brought with them new songs and new pieces. Workroom songs, appropriated from America and London, were already being sung [at that time]. The lame *staluch* already staged *Uriel Acosta*<sup>\*5</sup> with his troupe. Chaim-Leiba'le, by then already an artist, painted the decorations.

Things began to stir in the little factories in which adults and children worked twelve hours a day. The words “bourgeois” and “proletariat” crept into the workers’ mouths. Together with this, a stir also ensued with Zionism, Dr Herzl and the Land of Israel. Young fellows acquired new friends - students and intellectuals from middle-class homes. Secret meetings took place and things began to stir, as one says.

Here, Chaim-Leiba'le concluded and we began. Thus life continued, until the Great Destruction. As soon as new heroes appeared on the stage, they travelled across the *Seven Seas* and others took their places.

This image of the foundation, development and blossoming of a Jewish community, is the history of many cities and *shtetls* in Poland. Chaim-Leib Szwarc was not a great artist, but he did provide us with a living description of a living city with Jews. He was not a cultural historian, but he presented us with a graphic picture and a chapter of Jewish cultural history. It would seem as if a hidden force, which

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\*1 [TN: At the end of *Czenstochover Yidn*, p. LXV, it is explained that he earned this nickname when he broke his knee in childhood, and people began calling him “The Lame Staluch” after a well-known lame “*stelmach*” (cartwright) in town. “*Staluch*” was a mutated form of “*stelmach*.”]

\*2 [TN: *Operetta* by A. Goldfaden; “*Kuni Lemel*” is the name of the protagonist. The four other plays mentioned subsequently are also by Goldfaden.]

\*3 [TN: Pseudonym of the writer Nahum Meir Schaikewitz.]

\*4 [TN: “*żywe obrazy*”, or living pictures, is the art form known as “*tableaux vivants*.” However, from the context in Szwarc’s original account, it is obvious that he was referring to motion pictures, or film.]

\*5 [TN: Classic early Yiddish theatre piece, later adapted by A. Goldfaden.]

remains unrevealed to us, had preserved this life-treasury and had kept it alive in the memory of a man, so that it should remain for us as a live image, which no murderous hand may wipe out.

This is the legacy that Chaim-Leib has left us. He was a man of sharp contrasts and had many opponents in life. Now that he is no longer among the living, let us not forget what he kept for us, what he left us - Chaim-Leib Szwarc recounted to us how Jewish Częstochowa was founded and how it became a city [with] a large, Jewish cultural community.