

Dr Benjamin Orenstein

Częstochowa Folklore During the Nazi Period

The general term “folklore” denotes all kinds of traditions - spiritual, cultural and material creations - everything that the folk created - superstitions, fantasies, imaginings, legends, parables, witticisms and specific expressions.

In the current era, folklore has grown into a subject [of study], which is a component of the science called “Ethnology”.

Folklore is a young [branch of] research. The first book in this field was published at the end of the 17th century, in 1696, by John Aubrey in England. Almost all peoples have their representatives in the realm of folkloric creations - in Spain - Fernán Caballero, in Italy - Conte [Count] Angelo [de Gubernatis], in Poland - the renowned ethnologist [Kazimierz] Moszyński, who published a detailed work [entitled] *Slavic Folk Culture [Kultura Ludowa Słowian]*, which encompasses all Slavic peoples.

With Jews, folklore holds a most respected position. There is a sea of folklore both in the Pentateuch and in the Talmud. This is testified to by the various works which have been published, such as, for example, Rabbi J.L. Zlotnik’s book *Chumash [Heb. Bible] Folklore* and L. Taubes’ work: *Talmudische Elementen innem Jüdischen Sprichwort [Talmudic Elements in the Jewish Proverb]*. Within this field, the Jewish people has produced talents as Nojach Pryłucki and an entire *pleiad* of other folklorists.

During the Nazi period, it was necessary to establish a distinct folklore, which would make communication possible such that it would be incomprehensible to the Nazis. At the same time, the folklore also needed to serve in elevating Jewish morale and Jewish spirit.

In general, Jewish folklore in the Nazi period was manifested in several forms: -

- cryptonymous, which served for secret communications;
- political;
- humoristic-satirical;
- symbolic;
- nicknames, witticisms, [and]
- folkloric songs and narratives.

All these forms of folklore were spiritual expressions of the struggle and [the] revenge against Nazism.

Częstochower folklore contributed its own distinctive, regional expressions to general Jewish folklore.

Just as every Jewish folk saying contains some profound wisdom, so too is the wisdom of the people manifest in the sayings of the Nazi era. Let us take, for instance, the unique expression [used] in HASAG-Pelcery. Dr Bresler was referred to as “the doctor from AK”, due to the fact that all he dispensed were two home-made powders - aspirin and “Kogutek*”. He gave every patient either aspirin or a “Kogutek”. What does the wisdom here, in this witticism of “the doctor from AK”, consist of? It lies in that the Polish Underground Movement was called AK (Armia Krajowa [Home Army]) and it was useless - Dr Bresler’s medications, [too], were useless - [they] were as helpful as cupping [ed: a natural therapy] a corpse.

* [TN: Brand name of an inexpensive, commonly used headache medicine.]

In Częstochowa, Hitler was called "Kreier" [?]. Where was this taken from? The Germans [already] knew the term "Führ*" to mean the "Führer", may his name be obliterated. The Jews, therefore, began using the appellation "Drier**" and, from "Drier", it mutated into "Kreier".

Every foreman at the HASAG concentration camps had a nickname, with which all the camp's inmates were familiar. It was enough for someone to say "Fajkë!" [(tobacco) pipe] for people to know that Niziolek, the foreman of the Recalibration Department, was approaching and that one needed to be careful. Likewise, on hearing the name "Morsz", or "Hemer'" [Little Hammer], one knew that Oppeln, the foreman of the Construction Department, was coming.

Why would Niziolek be called "Fajkë?" Very simply, due to the fact that he smoked a pipe. Oppeln was called "Morsz" because, every morning after roll-call, he would take his group of labourers, make them stand in a single file and give them the order to "morch" [instead of "march"]. He also had the nickname "Hemer'", for beating those selected out to death with a hammer. Each appellation characterised the foreman it was given to. For example: "Achashverosh" [Ahasuerus (real surname - Steinpuccer)] - was a great fool; "Boxer" [Arndt] - gave beatings using boxing; "Lumer Yid" ["Little lame Jew"] - the leader of the factory security force Klemm, because he limped a little, and so on.

The expression "getokt" [Yid.; turned (on a lathe)] was used for buying off a German. "Turned [him] inside the hand" meant that one had placed [the German] in one's palm - bought [him] off, silenced [him] with money.

"Himmel Kommando" [Commando of Heaven] - it was said of those killed, annihilated, shot [and] deported to the death-camps, that they had been "sent to the *Himmel Kommando*".

"Szmalcownikes" [lard-lover] - the expression was known in all the ghettos and also in Częstochowa. The term denotes the Polish degenerates who gobbled up money from Jews who held Aryan papers or who hid with Poles. They would denounce them to the Gestapo and, consequently, many Jews were killed through their informing. The term originates in that, when this type of degenerate would stop a Jew on the Aryan side, the first thing he would say is, "Daj na smalec" [Give me money for lard]. The *Szmalcownikes* used to demand "Gurales". "Gural" [Hillbilly] was slang for the largest banknote in Poland, which was that of 500 *złoty*. Other idioms for money were "soft" and "hard". Soft meant paper money, while hard - gold coins.

Of special significance are the songs which were composed both in the ghetto and in HASAG-Pelcery. The majority of these songs were carefully compiled and published in the two publications of the Central Administration of the *Częstochower Landsmannschaft* in the American zone in Germany, in the book *Churbn Czenstochow* and in the journal *Unser Yuhrzeit*, both published in Bamberg in 1948.

In songs of a folkloric character, one does not seek elevated poetry and artistic forms, especially not in songs which were composed in such abnormal conditions as in the Nazi era, in the ghetto and in concentration camps. In songs of an artistic character, which are termed "formal parallelism", lyrical conventions are the determinants - rhythm, rhyme, assonance, kennings, metaphors and hyperboles - but not the logical content. The artistic form triumphs over the logical content. In folkloric songs, the exact opposite is true. The deciding factor is the logical parallelism, i.e., the logic of the content, and not the artistic norms - the formal parallelism.

* [TN: To lead, but also sounds like "Vier," viz. "Four."]

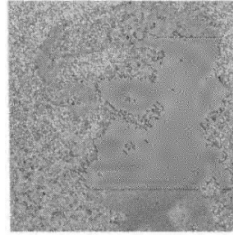
** [TN: From the word "drei," or "three," thus the connection to the former nickname of "Four," but also means "trickster" or "swindler" in Yiddish.]

In this particular, the songs composed in the Częstochowa ghetto and in the HASAG-Pelcery concentration camp stand out. They are unique, original and express the feelings and mood of the time. The mouth of the Jewish People reacted through folkloric creations and combated all the negative phenomena in life, awakening and encouraging to fight and [take] revenge against Nazism.

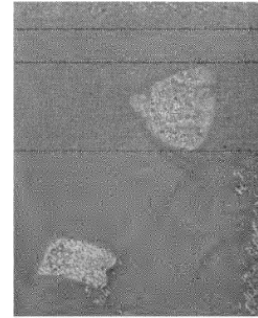
Częstochowa Jewry contributed to the general Jewish folklore of the Nazi era and to its [own] specific and unique expressions and compositions, [both] of a regional and of a general nature.



Częstochowers at the Buchenwald Nazi camp



The Częstochowa townsman with the number 14838, Bernard Fajtek, now in the USA



Walter Lubinski; young, with a [Star of David] mark, in the ghetto