

## A Jewish House in Częstochowa



The building at ul. Warszawska 53 stood by the garden of the Three Crosses. The name is taken from the fact that, years earlier, three priests had been buried there and, instead of headstones, three very tall, large crosses had been erected over their graves. Częstochowa Jews used to say that the three priests had died in the epidemic which had once ravaged the city. The building was comprised of four structures – one in the front, the second further back inside the courtyard and, from either side, two smaller edifices which were used as factories. At the front of the building, on the first floor, lived the *negidim* [wealthy, important people] - in the second structure were the poor people. As it is customary that when one writes, one begins from top to bottom, I shall start from the *negidim*.

The first *nogid*, Mr Lubart, lived on the right-hand side of the stairs, which still looked princely enough, even though the house had already not been new for a long time. He was a factory owner, short, stout, with a red beard, a red face [and] with two long, red sidelocks raked back behind the ears.

Mr Lubart was as wealthy as *Korach*\*. He lacked nothing. In case you do not know, I must tell you that, among Jews in Częstochowa, there was an aphorism - *He's got everything - the only thing he needs is a disease*. And our Mr Lubart had that, too. That is to say, not he himself, but his wife. His wife was a tall, fat *yidene* [Jewess], with a very ample and fat, double chin. Her face was of such obesity, that one could hardly see her eyes peeping out. She was afflicted with asthma. The wealthy women had a propensity for illness. When they got together, they boasted about their maladies. One with the liver, the other with the heart and our lady, *Madame* Lubart, with her asthma. I do not know for certain whether she was truly ill or if she was just following the fashion of the affluent women. To me, it would seem that she actually *was* ailing because, when she went out for a stroll, which seldom occurred, she wheezed through her nose. I do not know whether it was from the asthma, as it could very well be that it was from the excess fat that her body possessed. Then again, it could really be that she was ill and that the whole story with the fat is entirely my own diagnosis, which I am by no means qualified to [make] for I am, as yet, not a doctor. But, either way, one may think anything [one pleases].

Our Mr Lubart also had two daughters. Of them, by whom I mean the daughters, I do know what to say at all, because I rarely saw them and I hardly remember what they looked like. With *us*, as one might imagine, they had no dealings. What I do remember about them is what was not to my liking. We wanted to listen to a concert by the famous Polish singer Jan Kiepura on the radio which Mr Lubart owned already then. I must tell you, by the way, that a radio, then, was still a very great commodity for us. And it was on an early summer evening. Well, one of the daughters closed the windows of their residence, so that the sounds of the glorious singing, for which we so thirsted, should not be heard in the courtyard where we were sitting... So, it is therefore no wonder that I disliked the daughters. I will not take the trouble to describe them and you must not regret this – as, in any case, it would not have been a pretty picture.

The second *nogid* was also a Jew, a manufacturer named Hocherman. His factory, in which he produced mirrors, was actually situated in the same building. Now, Mr Hocherman was a totally

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\* [TN: Legendary biblical rich man; see Numbers 16.]

different type of person - the opposite of Mr Lubart. The neighbours would come to borrow money, to ask for his advice or to just make requests of him. I do not recall it [ever] being told that he had refused to do someone a favour. In his factory, he employed almost only neighbours, but [only] the more grown of the neighbours' children. From what I know, the Jewish labourers in his factory always owed him money because, over the course of the week, they borrowed from him more than what their weekly wages amounted to. He himself was a short, meagre, good-natured man [with] a pointy, trimmed little beard and a full mouth of gold teeth. He was inclined to pinch grown girls - and not on the cheeks. But what of that? Presumably, he derived pleasure from it. As far as I can recall, he did not have much pleasure in his life. He had lost two adult daughters. Since then, he had all at once become somewhat aged and stooped. His habitual [sense of] humour had disappeared. I do not remember ever seeing him smiling, except on one occasion. It was on Purim, when my sister Genia, I and three other friends decided to put on a Purim performance for our parents. (The show was stage-managed by my sister Genia.)

When, on that Purim, we surprised our parents with such a merry presentation, my father requested that we put on that same performance for the Hocherman family, to distract them a little, following the misfortune that had struck them. We agreed to the request and, that same evening, we also enlivened the Hocherman family with a Jewish Purim presentation. Then I saw the Hochermans not just smiling, but even laughing as well. And I remember that, since then, Mr Hocherman with his remaining family, waited every Purim for our Purim-*spiel* [comic play, show]. But we no longer came to him at home.

Very often, Hocherman's wife used to sit in the courtyard on a bench and listen to the neighbours' stories. When she found out that a neighbour or a neighbour's child was ill, she would bring the sufferer a little chicken soup which, people said, was a cure. Hocherman [initially] had three daughters. I already remember them as adults. The youngest, named Esterka, was a teacher of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade at a secondary school. I was actually very fond of her. She was beautiful and kind. I did not see her often, but when she sometimes found me playing in the yard, she would come up to me, ask me about different things and pat me on the head. This made me very happy indeed. I was proud that Esterka had patted me. She died, very sadly, at a flowering age. It was not long at that before the older daughter also died. [She was] already married.

They remained with one daughter. Her name was Różka. I was not so very fond of this Różka. This was due to the fact that she used to go about the courtyard acting like a great dame and send the children of the neighbours out around to the shops to buy different things for her. This would not have bothered me so much, were it not for her commanding tone. I, in fact, greatly enjoyed doing some walking for the other poor neighbours. I understood that they had no time or that they were simply too tired to go themselves. Różka, however, in my opinion, held that she was actually doing me a favour in being willing to send me. [It is] no trifle to have the honour to do something for Hocherman's daughter! Indeed, not once was I willing to go and I told her she should avail herself of a different servant, as I did not wish to be her servant.

The third neighbour was named Bryll. The Bryll family was a mysterious family. The neighbours told entire stories about them. People said, for example, that they manufactured mirrors and that they made their living from that. People said that they were wealthy. But where they made mirrors, and when they made mirrors, nobody knew. It was said that he, meaning Mr Bryll, was a Chassidic Jew who sat and studied all day long. He was only seen from one *Sukkos* to the next, when he went to eat inside the *sukkah*. Once finished eating, he would disappear without saying a word, just as quickly as he had come. One could see that he lived in his own world and that he had no desire to have anything to do with "our" world. How many children he had, I do not recall. I only know of one daughter, who had - may this never happen to you - a rather decent-sized hump. But you will probably ask how I

know that she was Bryll's daughter - [so] I shall tell you. This Bryll family used to travel away every summer to a summer-house in Blachownia, a nearby village. They would rent a dwelling there for the entire summer. But, as these types of apartments contained no furniture, they had to bring their own. And, to be sure, every summer, a peasant would come with a horse and cart to be loaded with all the necessary things and the girl, with the hump, would climb to the very top and keep watch so that no one should take anything away, Heaven forbid! And, as I understood that Mr Bryll would not have entrusted such an important mission to an outsider, I knew that she had to be, in fact, Bryll's daughter. And I must add that the idea to make the daughter sit atop the wagon was a very good one, because if a thief, even the greatest bandit, only caught a glimpse of her, he would be instantly shocked and flee to [the land] where the black pepper grows [ed: Polish idiom].

Yes, I have [just] remembered - I also knew Bryll's a son-in-law. In my whole life, I have never yet seen such thick lips as that on this young man. And he must have been sick, too, judging by his general appearance.

A Gentile also lived on the first floor. How he was [ever] admitted there amongst the *negidim*, I do not know. Perhaps it was due to the fact that he was a policeman. And, as I am only concerned with the building's Jewish neighbours, I shall let the Gentile neighbours rest, although almost more Christians than Jews lived in this building, because that part of ul. Warszawska then belonged to the Polish quarter.

Another affluent Jewish family lived in the building – the Ruziewicz family - a mother, two daughters and a son. From my childhood years onwards, I remember the woman as a widow. Her eldest daughter travelled away to the Land of Israel. She later brought her mother and sister there. The son remained and married a daughter of the mirror manufacturer Hocherman, whom I have mentioned already. His luck, however, did not last long. His wife died not long after the wedding, giving birth to her firstborn. But the child was saved.

These were the building's wealthy. Having concluded with them, I shall descend to the lower floors - to the poor people, that is.

A cobbler lived on the ground floor - Abram was his name. In my life, I have known many poor cobblers, but I think he was the poorest among them [all]. He was always working, but never earned even enough for bread. It was rather a dim sort of luck, as it were. Abram was tall and thin, with two sunken cheeks. He used to sit on his little cobbler's stool and tell stories to his clients. He truly earned little but, to compensate, he told many tales. He had a wife and three small children. His wife was a "cheerful pauper". All day long, she would sit at the neighbours' telling jokes. She always had time, for there was nothing to cook. Putting the few rags she owned in order did not take up much of her time. All day, she would go from one neighbour to the next. Firstly, in order to hide from her children's cries of hunger and, secondly, to tell her jokes. I must tell you, however, that her jokes often made one want to weep, rather than laugh because, with her jokes, she would often bemoan her bitter destiny.

The courtyard was a long and a broad one. On either side were factories. On the left side, a comb factory - on the right, neighbour Hochman's mirror factory. Right next to this factory lived a woman - a widow with four children. I never saw her husband. The woman herself (she was called Ester-Malka) also never spoke about him. She did not like anyone to mention him. As I have heard it told, he was not a fine man at all. What his fault consisted of, I know not to this day, but that is how he was spoken of and it is, therefore, no wonder that Ester-Malka did not wish people to talk about him. Ester-Malka was the "doctor" in the building. When a neighbour or the child of a neighbour fell ill, she would give advice as to what to do, what medicine to buy and how to use it. She would reassure that, with that medication and with God's help, the patient was sure to recover. I remember [that], one time, when

I was ill, she came, Ester-Malka, sat with us for a couple of hours, and told various stories. [She] told us what to do and, following her departure, I did in fact immediately recuperate. I did not take the medication she prescribed me. But I did feel better. Could it be that the stories she told had, in them, some power to help me? Go figure! As soon as I ever fell ill, I bleated for her. Firstly, due to her stories, and secondly – I was almost sure that after her visit I would soon be well again. Strange that she, herself, meaning Ester-Malka, was herself an ill woman. She had so many operations on her liver and had been to hospital so many times, that it is quite impossible to calculate. Among her maladies, she also suffered from asthma. It was due to this same asthma that she could not rid herself of the hospitals. Ester-Malka did not wheeze through her nose, as did Madame Lubart, for example. She only had difficulty breathing and always needed air. It always seemed stuffy to her. She made her living from trading in poultry - chickens, geese, ducks and sometimes turkeys also. She used to work hard and bitter, hauling the birds to the market, where she would stand all day, both summer in the heat and winter in the greatest frost. And when I used to see her hauling the heavy sacks with slaughtered geese, it seemed to me that, at any moment, she would collapse, God forbid, dead and would not stand up again, because she breathed with such difficulty. Her chest heaved so much, that one could literally hear how the lungs, the heart and her entire being were labouring strenuously, truly above their capacity. But she held out. She was, as they say, stronger than iron and she managed, in suffering and in want, to raise her children on her own.

There were also basement apartments in the building. It was, obviously, the poorest of the poor who lived there - the Jewish and three Polish families. One calls it "three Jewish families!" [But,] in one dwelling, which consisted of one room, not a large room, Heaven forbid, lived some 3-4 couples – I never knew exactly [how many] - it was difficult to sort out. Of children, bless them, there was no lack, and I am not quite sure that the mothers, themselves, knew for certain which children were theirs, because each mother thumped all the children, without discrimination. I therefore formed the concept that she did not know exactly which child belonged to her and which did not. But, [as] a couple of wallops, after all, could do no harm, she certainly did not spare any blows.

The chief neighbour in the cellar-apartment was named Kopl. Kopl was a dealer in old rags. He was of average height, emaciated, with sunken cheeks. The colour of his face - yellowy pale, with two large blue eyes. His wife, Ajga - a thin *yidene*, dressed in dirty, torn clothes - her hair always dishevelled. She was continually pregnant. A child would be born and she would again fall pregnant. So, with a small midriff, we never saw her. But, consequently, in her home, one saw an entire camp of little children running about, crying and clamouring all day long, and asking for food. But food, there was not too much of. Well, you can imagine what went on there.

The other families who lived in the cellar-apartments also did not, as far as children are concerned, lag behind. The cellar-apartments were always in a state of pandemonium.

The second family which lived in the cellar was [that of] Froim-Hersz [Gerychter]. He was a porter. He was nicknamed Kittel\*. Why Kittel? This, I know not to this day. But that is how people called him. He was a tall, broad-shouldered and very mighty Jew. He would always drag himself about with thick ropes around his middle and over his right shoulder. He walked proudly, with an upraised head, as if no one was his equal. His wife, Ides [Idessa], when she only caught sight of him, would literally swell [with joy] that her husband was tall and strong. When she, Ides, sometimes got into a fight with a neighbour, she threatened with her strong husband - as soon as her husband came home, he would already settle all accounts.

Froim-Hersz had, as did all poor people, many children and the commotions there reached the Seventh Heaven! Froim-Hersz's dwelling consisted of one room, with permanently sullied windows – so that,

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\* [TN: Traditional white robe worn by men on Yom Kippur, symbolising purity.]

even in the daytime, it was always dark there. I cannot, to this day, comprehend how, in such a small little room, so many souls could live. It will therefore not surprise you that the smells there were not at all invigorating... To enter there, for even a couple of minutes, was a peril... One could really suffocate there.

The third resident of the basement-apartment was blind Sara. As I recall, she was a widow. Regarding her husband, I never heard anything told - not from her, not from her three daughters and even not from the neighbours, who knew everything. Some of the neighbours in the house, such as Ester-Malka or Sara the shoemaker, knew everything that was going on with anyone in his cellar-apartment. They knew even what was going on with each one beneath the heart. But of blind Sara's husband they, too, knew nothing. I, as a child, actually thought that she had been *born* a widow. Blind Sara lived from trade. She, too, dealt in poultry - with chickens and geese. And, blind as she was, she managed to raise and educate her two\*\* daughters. One calls it "to educate" - an education, they attained for themselves on their own - but they lived off that which their blind mother had gained with hard labour and effort.

Several Gentile families also lived in the basement. But better let us leave this basement and go outside to the fresh air, for it has become so heavy on my heart to call to mind these basement-apartments and these neighbours - that, I think, perhaps I've written enough about that.

Just as our Ester-Malka was the doctor in the house, so we had also a neighbour, a [female] medic [ed: in Polish, a *felczer*]. A medic for us was - how should I put it? - a sort of unfinished doctor, someone who could provide first aid. And if they were good medics, they themselves could also heal. The neighbour, the medic, was called Frymet. Her husband was a thin, little man, with two little red eyes. [He was] always angry, for lack of sleep. By trade, Frymet's husband, Majer, was a baker. He would work at night and sleep during the day. One calls it "sleep." How could one sleep when there were, bless them, four little children at home, apart from her children? You are probably wondering why I divide the children into hers and his. I must tell you that he, Majer the baker, was Frymet's second husband and that she had children also from her first husband. I no longer remember exactly how many children Frymet had. Unless I am mistaken, I think five [?]. Reb Majer, as we called him, could not sleep in the daytime, the poor man. He cursed more than he slept. He was, therefore, permanently cross and never uttered a word to anyone. If anybody did ever happen to ask him something, he would start stammering angrily. Reb Majer - may it never happen to you - was a stutterer. From the great annoyance of having been asked something, he would begin to stutter. Until one received from him an answer, one soon already forgot what one had asked him.

This same neighbour Frymet, Reb Majer's wife, was the building's medic. She, too, knew what was happening with every neighbour at home. Whether the neighbour is religious or, God forbid, a heathen, whether he cooks on *Shabbes* or if someone is ill, whether the neighbour earns enough or if he is possibly in need of medicine or indeed a charitable loan.

When a neighbour fell ill, the "house-doctor", Ester-Malka, would first of all instruct to place suction cups on the patient. At once, they would run to Frymet and she would, indeed, soon come and see to it that Ester-Malka's orders were carried out. And if, say, a neighbour was in need of a charitable loan, Frymet would already let it be known where necessary, i.e., the more well-to-do neighbours, and they already saw to it that the one in need should receive a couple of *gilden* [viz. *złoty*]. Frymet herself was small and portly. The black hair on her head was always dishevelled. She did not walk, but ran. She never had any time. Due to the fact that her husband did not make enough for sustenance, she also dealt a little in chickens. Sadly, even with all her trade, there in their [home], it was also not too splendid. She herself was often in need of a charitable loan... Her daughter Kreindel [Krajndla], actually

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\*\* [TN: Above are mentioned three.]

married to Ester-Malka's son, Lajbisz, and also the son-in-law, following the nuptials, settled in Frymet's apartment, which consisted of one room and one cannot imagine how crowded it must have been there. By the way, one of her sons was no longer able to endure the narrowness and actually moved away to Kraków.

I was born in this same building, among these same neighbours, 25<sup>th</sup> December 1919.

