

Liber Brener

The Jewish Settlement in Częstochowa After the Second World War^{*)} (1945-1956)

*"What need has the sheaf to swell itself with grain,
If it is destined that a storm should buffet it in its heart?
For what has God blessed my mind with fruit,
If it was not destined for me to bear it?"*

Full of sorrow, the Jewish poet L. Olitzky thus cries out after the Great Destruction. With that very same sentiment, we - the more than five thousand Jewish prisoners in Częstochowa saved from the Hitler camps – took up the new life in freedom.

Częstochowa was the only city in Poland in which, after all the deportations, four camps were established, where there were 10,990 Jews. Of these, 3,490 were from Częstochowa itself and 7,500 from other cities and small towns in Poland. Częstochowa was also the only city in Poland where 5,194 Jews were saved, having been liberated, on 16th January 1945, by the Soviet Union's victorious army.

Just as it is difficult to find an idiom in the human lexicon by which to express our great sorrow as a nation, so is it equally difficult to find an expression through which to convey our feelings in the first days of the Liberation. Each one of us constantly asked, "Is it true that I am already a free man? Is it true that I may move about freely? Is it true that we are no longer subjected to abysmal abasement, to horrifying physical and spiritual pain? To be whipped, or even shot, without reason or warning? Is all this actually true?"

We wish to rejoice in the freedom, but somehow, we cannot! A hard feeling gnaws. We blunder about, looking for any sign of the general and personal bygone times - those bygone times, when the populous, Jewish settlement in Częstochowa gushed with a beautiful, colourful life. Who would gladly suffer physical pain, to numb that profound, gnawing and tormenting sorrow - the sorrow of not being able, even from our memory, to bring out the images of those so tragically ripped from us and annihilated? We err about apathetically, and cannot find any support.

But the practical, everyday reality dictates that we should start taking to life like normal people. The apathy begins to gradually disappear and its place is filled with the consciousness that, in order to live, we must work - in every field of life. With this new sentiment, we started building the new life. A life no longer as slaves, not forced [to work] by fascist murderers, but voluntarily, for oneself and for one's wife and child - if one had had the fortune of such having survived. But we are pushed up against colossal difficulties, which are the consequence of the post-War abnormalities and demoralisation.

The newly-created situation forces former underground, as well as pre-War, political and social activists to gird up their loins and ease all the emerging problems. A body is established under the name of the "Jewish Committee in Częstochowa", which sets out to immediately organise the new

^{*)} Elaborated according to the archival materials from the former Jewish Regional Committee and of the current Cultural-Social Association in Częstochowa.

life. Local communal, as well as regional, governmental agencies in the new Poland, come to the aid of the Jewish Committee.

Difficult, unimaginably difficult tasks stood before the Jewish Committee:

- thousands of Jews without a roof over their heads, without any means of sustenance
- over one-hundred children without guardians
- over two-hundred young people (mainly girls), without any means of support, who were liable to fall into a net of demoralisation
- dozens of disabled, and
- hundreds of severely ill and physically exhausted.

With the serious support of the authorities [and] with the sparse material means borrowed from our brothers and sisters overseas, the Committee set about resolving the problems standing before it. The committee was also granted representation in the municipal National [?] Council and in the municipal Housing Commission. This made it possible, first of all, to solve the difficult question of housing for the majority of the Jews in town. Material aid and food are distributed to those most in need. A building with sleeping accommodations for wandering Jews from various camps, a place to stay for those still temporarily homeless, a collective lodging and stopping point for youngsters and a school for the instruction of children and youths are organised. With the active collaboration of two young Częstochowa physicians, M. Przyrowski and B. Rozenowicz, a medical aid point is also opened. The orphans are transiently put up with private families, where they are fully provided for and attentively cared for.

Soon, the Committee began to receive larger monetary funds from the Central Jewish Committee in Poland which, at the time, still had its headquarters in Lublin, as well as substantial aid from *Częstochowers* overseas, especially from the Czenstochover Relief in New York, in Philadelphia and also from Buenos Aires, Argentina. Thanks to this, the Committee's activity steadily broadened. In a village next to Częstochowa, a rest-house was organised for convalescents and the physically exhausted. The crippled are provided for, not only with full maintenance, but also with papers, cinema, theatre and the required arm and leg prosthetics. Each of them learns, according to his capabilities, an adequate profession. Numerous youngsters are enrolled into normal scholastic institutions. The orphans receive a fine and very orderly children's home, which is set up in the building of the former Y.L. Peretz School.

The question of the children posed a very, great problem. Besides the fact that many of them had to be searched for and found, and then be paid for, the question of their physical, spiritual and psychological situation also presented itself - children from camps [and from] from bunkers, children taken from Polish guardians [and] from clerical institutions, children who had survived as shepherds in the countryside and children who had wandered about in cities and towns as vagabonds. Some were nervously disturbed, some were in a state of shock, some did not wish to be identified as Jews and there were even some who displayed hatred towards Jews and Judaism. There were children with a strong inclination towards debauchery and theft, as well as children who were religious Catholics and who, even when they were already in the Children's House, before going to sleep and upon arising, would kneel down and pray to a picture of the "Holy Mother", which they would conceal from the eyes of their educators. This is a difficult problem to solve, even for the most seasoned pedagogues and most capable psychiatrists. In order to resolve this issue, the most experienced educators and devoted friends of children were mobilised, those who possessed large hearts and great devotion towards this hard and responsibility-filled task. After many months of exhausting work, this most painful problem was partially solved.

Already, on 13th June 1945, the children's first public appearance took place at the firefighters' hall. By 20th October of that same year, the second appearance of the children ensued in the city's largest theatre, which overflowed with Jewish and Polish attendees, who marvelled at their achievements and showered the children with flowers and chocolate. With satisfaction, all recognised that the children had been torn away from a horrifying abyss to a normal life and that, on their frail shoulders, they carried the heavy yoke of gruesome suffering. In years, they were children in years, but were old through their tragic experiences. But they had found their childhood anew. Moreover, with time, many of them had found close relatives and several - even their fathers or mothers, both in Poland itself, as well as outside Poland's borders. Also, the responsibility-laden work with the handicapped was crowned with full acknowledgement, to which bears testimony a farewell letter to the Committee from the invalids before they left Częstochowa. The disabled write:

It is our desire, dear fathers, to part company with you in writing and to thank you for your care and devotion from the first day onwards, when we were still half-dead. You arranged a home for us, with all the comforts and full maintenance, exactly like parents caring for their unfortunate children.

The staple aid for the needy was also broadened. According to the Committee's report, dated 14th April 1945, 2,440 individuals enjoyed regular monthly aid in the form of small monetary stipends of 50 złoty per capita (in the later months - 2,000 złoty per capita) and allocations of food. The rations were as follows:

- 1.) For healthy former prisoners: 4 kg. bread, 0.7 kg. sugar, 0.05 kg. salt and 1 kg. marmalade.
- 2.) For ailing former prisoners: 15 kg. bread, 30 eggs, 15 lt. milk, 0.4 kg. butter [and] 0.8 kg. sugar.
- 3.) For children with their parents: 16 kg. bread, 16 eggs, 0.25 kg. butter, 0.8 kg. sugar and 15 lt. milk.

According to that same report, at that time [and] with the Committee's cooperation, cooperatives of barbers, painters, electrical technicians, a cooperative mechanical workshop, and others were established. Altogether, by then, 936 people were already employed. A few months later, the Committee also established a tailors' cooperative and a shoemakers' cooperative. Besides these, many private workshops of tailors, cobblers and carpenters were set up. Private shops were also opened and even little factories, which were run by the heirs of former Jewish manufacturers in Częstochowa.

Also, in the cultural and political fields, an intensive activity is conducted. Already, by February 1945, the committee had held the first large gathering of all former Jewish prisoners at the Bałtyk Cinema. On Passover 1945, the first *Pesach* in freedom, a [Y.L.] Peretz [literary] meeting is held. Later and a Sholem Aleichem evening is also arranged. In April 1945, a festive event and an impressive parade, honouring the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, are arranged. Memorial Days of historical dates in the Częstochowa Ghetto are organised and regular, everyday cultural work is conducted amongst the Jewish population in Częstochowa.

Besides the general cultural activities conducted by the Jewish Committee, in which all the political parties which operate within the Jewish populace in Częstochowa, take part, the individual parties also lead a certain political and cultural activity amongst their own members and sympathisers. The Zionist organisations set up temporary *kibbutzim* [communes], where they trained youth to emigrate to Palestine. The Jewish PPR [*Polska Partia Robotnicza*; Polish Workers' Party] led intensive educational and instructional, above all, amongst the Jewish youth. The Bund had a spacious locale on ul. Katedralna, where frequent lectures and entertainment events were arranged. The Bund also founded and operated, on its premises, a large library named after V. Medem. The Bund also ran a

workers' restaurant, where all those without a family, who were unable to fend for themselves, received sustenance for a small fee. Two members of the Bund's Częstochowa committee were representatives on the Bund's Central Committee. The Bund conducted its intensive work in the midst of the Jewish populace in Częstochowa until the moment the workers' parties in Poland unified.

A Jewish settlement had been established in Częstochowa - a small settlement, with all its pros and cons. The Jewish population works, trades, does business, builds and sets in order a life for itself.

The achievements listed above filled each one with the faith that the newly-established Jewish community in Częstochowa would, as time went by, acquire an increasingly healthier and more normal appearance. The situation, however, begins to change. The actions of the country's dark reactionary forces, the psychological state of the Jews themselves, as well as the rise of certain political tendencies in the Jewish street, start to drive in the direction indicating that an "exodus" of the Jews from our city should commence. The settlement in Częstochowa begins to shrink. Shops, workshops, cooperatives and other institutions start to be liquidated. The number of Jews becomes smaller from day-to-day. Nowadays, there are already only some 400 Jews in Częstochowa.

How did this shrinkage take form? To this, we shall find an answer in the following figures:

At the beginning of 1945, 5,194 Jews were released from the camps. Of these, 2,578 were from Częstochowa and the rest from various cities and small towns in Poland. Most of the Jews, who were not from Częstochowa, returned to their hometowns within the first three months. During that same period, large German territories were liberated and from the camps there, on 21st March 1945, 1,195 liberated Jews from there. Their origins were in various European lands: Hungarians - 490; Czechs - 410; Romanians - 197; French - 30; Dutch - 26; Austrians - 19; Yugoslavs - 17; Belgians - 5 and 1 Greek. After staying a few weeks in Częstochowa, they returned to their homelands.

From April to June 1945, 2,679 Polish Jews came to Częstochowa from different German camps. Of these, 652 were *Częstochowers*. The 2,679 persons consisted of 1,615 men and 1,064 women. By then, the Jewish population of Częstochowa numbered 6,143 souls, of whom 143 were children. The makeup of the children was: 8 orphans living with Poles; 2 in Polish orphanages; 53 completely orphaned, who were put up in the orphanage; 38 half-orphans and 42 with their parents. By December 1945, the settlement already numbered only 2,051 souls; in the children's and orphans house - 51; youngsters between ages 14 and 18 - 88, of whom 81 attended scholastic institutions.

By December 1946, there were already only 1,235 Jews in Częstochowa - 452 women and 783 men. Of these, 22 were completely orphaned [children], 15 half-orphaned and 15 with poor parents. These children stayed at the Jewish Committee's Children's House.

Apart from these, 69 Jews lived in *shtetls* near Częstochowa: in Kłobuck, 12 (7 men and 5 women); in Krzepice, 7 (3 men and 4 women) and in Włoszczowa, 50 (33 men and 17 women).

Of the Jews in Częstochowa itself, 182 ran then their own workshops, 84 were workshop labourers, 24 factory workers [and] 247 were employed in governmental and public institutions, of whom 212 were men and 35 women.

By December 1947, there were already just 862 Jews in Częstochowa (498 men and 364 women). Of these, 121 were children under 14 (56 boys and 65 girls).

In the *shtetls* around Częstochowa there were 49 Jews in December 1947: in Kłobuck, 12 (7 men and 5 women); in Krzepice, 7 (3 men and 4 women) and in Włoszczowa, 30 (22 men and 8 women).

From December 1947 to December 1949, 250 Jews migrated from Częstochowa to Niederschlesien [Dolny Śląsk], Łódź, and Warsaw. Thus, in Częstochowa, only 612 Jews then remained (318 men and 294 women). That 612 maintained itself until 1953. In the years 1953-1954, 208 Jews left Częstochowa, the majority of whom settled in other large cities in Poland.

As of today, the Jewish settlement in Częstochowa numbers 404 souls. Most of them are employed in productive work, including also a certain number of women.

This small Jewish community also leads an intensive and fine cultural life, which is directed by the local Cultural-Social Association. Whether this small collective is a healthy cornerstone for a new Jewish settlement in our hometown, the near future will show us.

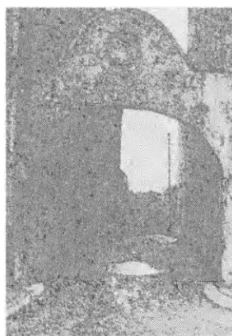
Warsaw, August 1956



The monument in commemoration of the six heroes who fell in battle against the Nazis in March 1943. In the picture – Mrs Flamenbaum



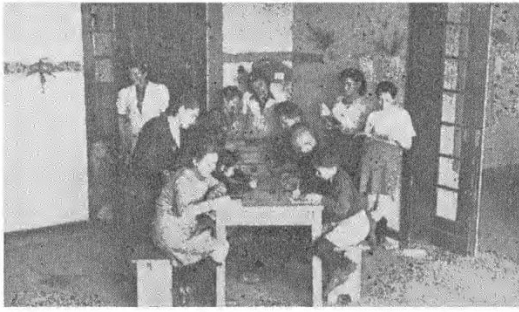
Delegates of the Częstochowa townspeople in Poland, in June 1948, by the mass grave of physicians, dentists, and other professionals who were killed on Purim 1943



*“Die Alte Rande”
[The Old Border]
in Częstochowa,
August 1956*



*The bridge over the River Warta,
which leads to the entrance to the Jewish Hospital,
in August 1956*



Several Jewish children preparing their lessons at the Children's House, in 1946-47, supervised by teacher Anna and Genia Federman and Jadzia Brener.



Jewish children play in the kindergarten in 1946-47. Teacher Genia Federman leads the game.