

Józef Aronowicz

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[He was] born in Wilno [Vilnius]. At the start of the 20th century, he entered the famous Wilno Teachers' Institute, which he completed in four years. At that time, he also joined the Bund, with which he remained connected to the end of his life.

Aronowicz moved to Częstochowa as an honoured Bundist activist, arriving there in 1910 or 1911. He was actually sent to Częstochowa as a schoolmaster for a Russian primary school for Jewish children. He arrived with his wife Masza. [Once] settled in Częstochowa, in the early days, he became surrounded by a circle of Polish-speaking Jewish bourgeois intellectuals. Józef Aronowicz wore spectacles, had an intelligent appearance and spoke a good *Wilno Yiddish*. Even the assimilationist Jewish intellectuals, who hated the Yiddish language and regarded it as vernacular, took a liking to his Yiddish.



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Aronowicz becomes involved in the Częstochowa branch of the [St] Petersburg Jewish Literary Society, but it was dissolved by the authorities. In 1911, the Literary Society merges with the existing literary association *Lira*, which had an Assimilationist-Zionistic character. The schoolmaster from Wilno, too, is elected to the administration. The battle for the recognition of the Yiddish language intensifies and Józef Aronowicz becomes one of the most active members. He makes a strong impact both with his presence and with his content-rich public appearances. In the spring of 1912, when I.L. Peretz visits the city of Częstochowa for the first time, the first to greet him is Józef Aronowicz. I.L. Peretz visits Częstochowa for the second time in October 1912, in connection with the opening of the library, and Józef delivers the inauguration speech. He later holds a series of lectures on various literary themes. He becomes the stage-manager of a drama circle and takes part personally, [both] as an actor and as stage-manager. On 10th June 1916, a memorial meeting for the great writer Sholem Aleichem takes place. Aronowicz speaks about Sholem Aleichem, reads the monologue *Die Gimnazja* [The Secondary School] and performs a role in Sholem Aleichem's comedy *Menschen* [People].

In 1913-1914, Józef Aronowicz joined a large organisation for commercial employees under the name of the "Society of Mutual Aid for Commercial and Industrial Employees". This organisation was a stronghold of the assimilationist intelligentsia. Although he himself was a teacher, he collaborated in the fight against the reigning assimilation and for the Jewish proletarian character of the union. His fight had great effect. In 1926, the union incorporated itself into the Cultural Bureau of Jewish Professional Unions, where the Bund had the [main] influence.

In 1916, he is chosen as a delegate to the foundation conference of the Central Association of the Jewish Sporting and Gymnastics Societies, which was held in Łódź. There, too, he fights for the recognition of the Yiddish language. Thanks to his struggle, the Częstochowa Sport and Gymnastics Association remained outside the Central [Association] for some time, because the Association's regulations were not satisfactorily approved.

At the time of the German occupation during the First World War, when a social revival had begun, the Bundist organisation in Częstochowa also displayed more activity. The Grosser Club* was established and Józef Aronowicz became the [Częstochowa] Bundist organisation's First Secretary and its most respected leader.

In [post-War] independent Poland, Aronowicz already spoke Polish well and was the leader of the Bundist faction in the *Arbeiterrat* [Workers' Council]. His appearances were strong and rich in content. In 1919, Józef Aronowicz is elected as [the] Bund's councillor. At the Town Hall, too, his speeches have the desired effect and even the opposition listens to them with great attentiveness. His address regarding the proposition of protest against the pogrom on Jews, which took place in 1919, made a huge impression. Aronowicz then delivered a declaration on behalf of all the Jewish councillors and [then] all the Jewish councillors left the hall in protest.

As a result of the strong declaration which Józef Aronowicz had delivered against the Polish-Soviet War and his speeches which expressed the Bund's views on an array of political and social issues of the city and the country, he and the entire Częstochowa Bund Committee were arrested. They were all sent to a concentration camp in Dąbie, where they were held until the end of the Polish-Soviet War. The candidate of the *Vereinigte* [United (Party)], the writer of these lines, put a proposition to the City Council that it demand the release of the detained Councillor Aronowicz in order to enable him to continue fulfilling his functions as an elected representative of the populace. The PPS councillors supported this proposition with their signatures. Notwithstanding the reactionary majority within the City Council, and the reactionary *Bacchanalia* which was reigning in the country at that time, the proposition was accepted. This shows the good attitude of even those who opposed Józef Aronowicz. But the proposal remained on paper, because the release depended on the Central Government. Józef Aronowicz was only set free once the Polish-Soviet War had ended. Aronowicz returned to Częstochowa, but he was not permitted to return to his post as a schoolmaster in Polish governmental schools. He was compelled to leave Częstochowa.

When, in 1925, the Socialist factions decided to quit the City Council due to its reactionary politics and for illegally prolonging its term, the Bundist faction said, in its declaration before leaving, among other [things]:

Simply for belonging to the Bundist faction in the City Council and for his open activity in City Council matters, Councillor Józef Aronowicz was interned in a concentration camp and only after eight months - under pressure from the Socialist councillors - did the City Council decide to approve a decision regarding his release. Eventually, he was forced to leave our city altogether.

From Częstochowa, Józef Aronowicz returned to Wilno and settled there with his wife and two children - a son and a daughter. There, he was tied and bound to the Bundist Movement. He was a respected activist in the Bund, in the professional unions and in the secular Yiddish School Organisation (TSBK [*Tsentraller Bildungs Komitet*; Central Education Committee]). He also participated as delegate in various conventions and conferences. We see him at all the Bundist conventions as an active delegate. One of his difficult experiences, when he was in Wilno, was that his fine, little daughter perished in an unnatural manner while on an outing with children.

In Wilno, too, he suffered from repressions. The first [State] Jewish Real Gymnazijum engaged him as a teacher. After working there for several years, the Polish scholastic authorities forbade him to teach at the school, due to his involvement with the Bund. With even more vigour, Aronowicz throws himself into the Party's work. He is elected representative of the Jewish workers in the

* [TN: A Bundist workers' club named for the deceased leader Stanisław Grosser. See *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. I, col. 328.]

Medical Insurance Council, *Parnes** of the Wilno *Kehilla* and councillor on the City Council. [As] a man of extensive knowledge, an outstanding orator and a practical activist, he also wrote well. During this entire period, he was on the Wilno Bund Committee and also within the leadership of the Professional Movement. [During] 1935-38, he was the Secretary of the Central Education Committee, which was in charge of the large, secular, Yiddish scholastic body in Wilno. Day and night, he was busy and absorbed in communal activity.

The Soviet regime put an end to the fruitful labour of this loyal and tireless Jewish workers' activist. During the Second World War, in October 1939, I arrived in Wilno. I had hoped to meet with my comrade and friend. I only found his extremely worried wife Masza and their son. Together with an array of other Bundist leaders and activists, Józef Aronowicz was already sitting in a Soviet prison.

Let it be recorded here, for [future] generations, how the Soviet regime, which advertises itself as desiring to liberate humanity and bring happiness to it, tortured an idealistic man and an effective workers' activist. Regarding this, Comrade M.K.** , who sat with him in the Soviet prison, recounted [the following]:

At the end of July 1940, I was transferred from the jail in Grodno, where I had been with Comrades Leibel Szifres and Berl Abramowicz, to the jail in Minsk.

In a corner, among a group of Wilno social activists, lay Comrade Józef Aronowicz. A shudder passes through me when I recall how Comrade Józef looked at the time - half-naked, in tattered, filthy linens. His body was full of wounds from which pus was oozing. I settled down next to him, thanks to the cell's chief, Roszkowski, a lieutenant in the Polish Army from Grodno, a PPS sympathiser, a relative of the Pepesowiec [member of PPS] Roszkowski, the secretary of the Professional Unions in Grodno. Seeing as how I had brought a parcel of things with me, I gave Comrade Józef a pair of linens and also a pair of trousers, because his attire had been stolen from him in the prison baths. Comrade Józef's medical condition worsened from day to day.

Next, there was a series of nonsensical accusations and outlandish fabrications. A fortnight later, Comrade Aronowicz's interrogations began.

The first night, he was dragged five times to a cold room, in order for him to write his autobiography. The second night, it was for him to write the Party's programme. [On] the third night, they began questioning him. At this point, Comrade Józef requested that the interrogation be interrupted, as he was feeling quite unwell. Furthermore, [he said] that he would not answer unless given permission to write a letter to his family, because he had been arrested on the street in Wilno, and his wife and children know nothing of him.

The interrogator replied that only after the interrogation would he be allowed to write. Aronowicz stood his ground and refused to answer the questions asked. A couple of days later, the interrogator permitted him to write a letter and guaranteed he would make efforts for the authorities to allow it to be sent.

During questioning on 15th November, he was asked whether he admitted that:

- 1) The Bund is a counter-revolutionary and nationalistic party;*
- 2) The Party had received funds from various countries, including the Polish Government, in order to destroy the Workers' Movement;*

* [TN: A *parnes* (lit. provider in Heb.) acts as head of the *kehilla* for one month, in rotation with 3-5 other members.]

** [TN: M.K. was a writer for the New York "Unser Zeit", in which this article was published in the July-August issue of 1951.]

- 3) *The Party, together with the PPS, had disbanded the Professional Movement in accordance with a demand from the Polish Government;*
- 4) *It had accepted money from factories to break up strikes;*
- 5) *It had created national professional unions, so as to disrupt the unity of the working class;*
- 6) *It had submitted lists of the members of the professional unions to the Polish Defensywa (Secret Police);*
- 7) *It had called the workers to war against the Soviet Union;*
- 8) *It had aided General Żeligowski to capture Wilno;*
- 9) *The PPS and the Bund had collaborated in the creation of the concentration camp in Kartuz Bereza;*
- 10) *The Bund had called the workers of Poland not to surrender and to carry on waging the war (of Poland against Nazi Germany);*
- 11) *The Party had collaborated with the followers of Piłsudski and with the Sanacja, and had assisted in preparing [for] a war against the Soviet Union;*
- 12) *The Bund and the PPS had sent spies to the Soviet Union in order to cause disquiet and to disrupt factories, etc.;*
- 13) *The Party had sent provocateurs into the Communist Party in Poland;*
- 14) *Erlich and Alter, who are the leaders of the Bund and also representatives of the [Labour and] Socialist International, are spies and paid agents of the bourgeoisie.*

And then came the verdict:

Seeing as you, citizen Józef Aronowicz, have been an active Bund activist and a member of the Wilno Committee, and also a representative of the Central Committee, etc., you are charged, according to articles 66, 76, 86 and others, of the penal code of the Byelorussian [Soviet Socialist] Republic.

To Comrade Józef's inquiry as to the punishment he could face on those charges, the judge replied, "Eight years to life imprisonment - in exceptional cases, execution. You may submit a confession admitting to the aforementioned crimes and then the penalty could be decreased".

After hearing the accusations, Comrade Józef declared that, for himself and also for the Bund to which he had the honour to belong, it was insulting to have any discussion at all regarding these blundering accusations and that he would no longer answer any questions. Furthermore, he was a citizen of Poland and that the Soviet authorities had no right to try him.

Following his declaration, the court officers threw themselves upon him with drawn revolvers. "We'll shoot you now like a dog! Out of [this] room!", they roared.

Over the course of one week, he was dragged out every single night and held in a cold room, stripped naked and barefoot. When he categorically refused to sign a record of interview, they threw him into a dungeon. For five hours, he stood knee-deep in cold water. When returned, he looked like a corpse - utterly broken and depleted. In that dreadful dungeon, in which I personally had also found myself upon my arrival from [sic to] Minsk, I noticed that, on the bloodied stones, the names of the tortured arrestees had been scratched, among which were also the names of Bundists.

Shortly afterwards, following the last torture, Comrade Józef gave a talk in our cell, to a large group of friends and [party] members from Wilno, Białystok and Grodno (short speeches

were delivered in this manner by different detainees throughout the entire period). Comrade Józef, who had splendidly mastered the Polish language, spoke in Polish, so that the Poles should also understand. He called for fortitude and to not be broken. He sharply attacked the Polish ruling party - the Sanacja and concluded [by saying] that fascism would be done away with, along with all dictatorships and that we would live in a free world. Upon finishing, he fainted.

A professor from Wilno, who was among us, revived him. He examined him and determined that his heart was quite weakened and if he did not receive urgent aid, [the outcome] would be very bad. I then made all efforts to see the prison physician. With the assistance of the cell's chief, I visited the director and made him aware that Comrade Józef was in a perilous medical condition. Comrade Józef was transferred to the prison hospital. We found out from a nurse that his condition was extremely serious.

Even if he received a verdict from the [NKVD] troika^{}, as we all did, I am certain that he could not be released. He presumably died in prison.*

Thus was cut short the life of our dear, noble Józef Aronowicz - a man who dreamed of a world more beautiful and just and who sacrificed himself for his ideal.

^{*} [TN: People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD); a group of three who acted as judge and jury and issued sentences in such cases.]