

Cultural Activity

As soon as Częstochowa fell under the German occupation, the entire Jewish cultural life in the city collapsed. All the libraries, schools and *gimnazja* were immediately closed down. The persecutions and decrees, which continually rained down on our Jewish community, made it thus, that everyone was, first and foremost, concerned with saving themselves from physical downfall.

In order to change this state of affairs, at the end of 1939, a discussion of progressive [viz. socialist] cultural activists was held and cultural activity began - semi-legal and illegal. Naturally, not all Labour activists had the possibility to become involved in the cultural activity right away. Those, who had it the worst, were the well-known communist activists, because the former agents of the Polish secret police, and particularly Wiesołowski and Pietrowski ("Pietrik"), vigorously persecuted the communists generally and the well-known communist activists in particular.

Despite this, cultural activity in Częstochowa already began in the first months of the occupation. At the beginning of 1940, the cultural work also took on other forms. The studying youth, younger children and parents began thinking about not wasting any time. At the time, in Częstochowa, there were 208 teachers and 7,576 children and youths of school age⁸². Illegal groups of youth arose who, under the directorship of their former *gimnazjum* professors, continued their courses of study. There were also groups of children who continued their elementary school studies. But the only ones who enjoyed all this were the children of better-situated parents, who had the means to pay the teachers. It was worse regarding the teaching the children of poor.

Consequently, the underground activists decided to turn the TOZ's feeding stations, from which 600 children benefited (and later 2,008 children), into children's clubs, "*światlice*" [day-care centres], where the children would receive, besides three meals a day, education and lessons also. The author, as a former teacher of the ISZO* schools, was given the task of organising and managing these clubs. The first to present themselves for work at these *światlice* were the Fröbelian⁸³ teachers Laja Wajnberg, Różka Gelber, Saba Ginzberg and Rywka Warzecha. In addition, more than sixty youths - mostly girls - reported voluntarily for work, and they threw themselves selflessly into this important work. Those, who stood at the head of this group of young people, were Sala Siwak, Jadzia Mass, Ira Szternzys, the two sisters Pola and Dosza Szczekacz, Awiw Roziner, Icek Fajner, Lili Krisztal, Stefa Haftka, Róża Landau, Zosia Opatowska and the sixteen-year-old Praskiewicz.

With their devotion and temperament, the young people transformed the *światlice* into a warm, bright home, not only for the children who were fed there, but for all the Jewish children who were in Częstochowa - without exception.

⁸² Statistics Book of the *Judenrat*, Vol. II, pp.154 and 190.

* [TN: Usually known as "*CISZO*", the abbreviation of *Centrale Jidisze Szul-Organizacje* (Central Yiddish School Organisation).]

⁸³ Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852) was the inventor of the kindergarten and a pioneer of early childhood education and care.

The children here were divided into groups, according to the level of their knowledge and their ages. In this manner, they continued their primary education. A course of manual crafts was also conducted. An artist, whose roots were in Częstochowa, a certain young lady [named] Mendelson, directed this course.

In order that the new, young and as yet unexperienced educators should have a certain professional approach to those under their care, every Saturday, collective talks would be held on the issues of children's education, which were conducted by the writer of these lines and the [female] professor Lonia Rozencwajg. Besides this, the new educators would share their impressions from the week's work at these collective talks. Model lessons were also conducted, in which all co-workers of the *światlicy* participated.

It was only in 1941 that a few professors from the Jewish Gimnazjum began to assist in the educational work. Of all of them, the work that proliferated the most was that of Lonia Rozencwajg, who took to her new duties in such a manner that she quickly won the trust and affection of all the young club leaders and actively worked with them until the liquidation of the ghetto, whereupon she, along with the majority of the young educators, and almost all the children of the TOZ day-care centres, perished in Treblinka.

The children's performances, which were held illegally almost every two months, belonged to the brightest rays in the dark life of the ghetto. These children's shows brought a little holiday feeling into the unhappy life. The performances of the children were held in Yiddish and in Polish. The songs, by [I.L.] Peretz, [Awrom] Rajzen, Mani Leib and other Yiddish writers, that would be sung at the children's clubs and at the children's shows, would be carried over into all the Jewish homes, where only there were children to be found. A Club Hymn was also created:

Club Hymn

*Come quickly, dear children,
To go into the światlica;
For here it is always happy,
For here it is always nice.
With fragrant, delicate flowers
Everything here is decorated;
To the blue skies
We are being led.
We learn, we work,
We are not alone here;
So come here, dear children,
Rush to come in here.*

*The teachers are on watch here,
We are protected by their eyes;
For here is our home,
Here is our happiness.
On the narrow paths,
We are being shielded;
Over roads of thorns
We are being led.
We learn, we work,
We are not alone here;
So come here, dear children,
Rush to come in here.*

Handwritten musical score on aged paper, featuring four systems of staves. The lyrics are in German, and the notation includes treble and bass clefs, time signatures, and various musical symbols.

System 1:

1. Kommt schneller li-be kin-der in-nan-der her-cum-men do ir doch stehend freylich do
 2. So sa-chen do di le-er es hat um-seh-lich do do ir an-zei-ge-n doch do

System 2:

ir doch stehend sein mit duft-ig car-ten blum-en ir do a-le, be-ist cu di blo-ß
 do ir un-er-glich - Oß di sam-le steg-n - wern mir ge-hit über dorn-en

System 3:

him-len wern mir ge-firt mer-cant mer-act-et men ir do nist a-lein to
 we-gn. wern mir ge-firt

System 4:

1. Kommt zu li-be kin-der Kommt sünd a-her cu-gen 2. 85. 95. 105.

[TN: Translated on the previous page
 from the author's transliteration to Hebrew characters.]

The underground activists were not satisfied with just cultural work for children. They also engaged in cultural work amongst adults. Under the leadership of Jakub Roziner, Ester Roziner, Brener, Fiszl Blumenkranc, Lajb Srebrnik and Szaja Bornsztajn, an adult drama circle and choir was active, which conducted its work under the auspices of TOZ. The [theatrical] director was Mrs Roziner and the conductor [of the choir] was Srebrnik. Some 120 men and women took part in the choir and drama circle. Performances were held at the former cinema at Aleja 12. Machel Birencwajg and Noach Kurland occupied themselves with the technical side of all these shows, and Lajbel Kusznir with the decorative part. The appearances of the drama circle and choir would be held almost every month, mostly with different programmes and, from time to time, also together. Their performances were among the most sublime events in the life of the inner ghetto because, on the days when their shows were held, the feeling in the ghetto was cheerful and holiday-like. Besides serious pieces from our classics, the circle would also enact up-to-date scenes from the former Jewish life and from life in the ghetto. These images were captured and elaborated by the tragically killed, young Częstochowa poet, Fiszl Blumenkranc. Among the strongest things that Blumenkranc wrote, which was performed by the drama circle, was the one-act [titled] *"Zbąszyń"*, in which the tragedy of a mother, who lost her only child during a deportation, was enacted.

Even though the performances were illegal, the cinema was always jam-packed. The crowd would welcome Jeszaja'le Bornsztajn (they would call him the *"Częstochower Dżigan"**) with great acclamation. He made everyone laugh so much with his appearances that, for a moment, people forgot the darkness that surrounded them.

Under the editorship of Wolberg and with the contributions of Konarski, Roziner, Brener, the two Fogel brothers and Mendel Asz, the underground activists published a periodical illegal newspaper entitled *"Rasta"* (*Rada Starszych***). Those, who dealt with the technical side of this publication, were Sura Chliwner (née Okrent), Motek Kusznir, Datner (a son-in-law of the Fogel family) and Ojzer Blechszajn. Lajbel Kusznir occupied himself with the artistic side of the illustrated publication. *Rasta* reflected the life of the Jews under the German occupation, the cruel activity of the Gestapo, *Schutzpolizei* and *Stadthauptmannschaft*, as well as the sorrowful role of the *Judenrat* and the Jewish police.

Of the illustrated publications, we should mention the *"Rasta Caricatures"*:

- 1) *"Hołd Żydowski"* [The Jewish Homage], with the chairman of the *Judenrat* on the throne and all the *Judenrat* elders, with their loyal officials swearing subservience to him. In the background, one official is carrying a banner with the inscription *"Salus Rasta Suprema Lex Est"* (The health of the *Judenrat* comes first);
- 2) bottles of liquor corked with police caps and peering out of each bottle is a different *Judenrat* elder, who were in the habit of enjoying themselves at the eateries;
- 3) *"Hocus-Pocus"* - the treasurer of the *Judenrat* throws little papers into the air, and the little papers turn into money of their own accord, fall into his pocket;
- 4) *"I Have Never Danced in my Life"* - a caricature of Dr Zandsztajn, dancing in front of the Jews of the *Judenrat*. (Zandsztajn was a native of Częstochowa, who had studied and practised for many years in Germany. He thought very highly of himself and his

* [TN: Szymon Dżigan (1905-1980) was a Polish-born Jewish comedian.]

** [TN: Pol., "Council of Elders", viz. the *Judenrat*.]

medical knowledge, strongly ingratiating himself with the *Judenrat*, and aiding it in its operations against TOZ);

- 5) "*Potatoes*" - carriages of potatoes [stand] at the [railway] platform, masses of starving people are standing at a distance with empty sacks and gazing with pleading eyes at the carriages full of potatoes - next to which the former bank director, Pruszycki, currently the *Judenrat*'s provisioning advisor, is standing. With a shovel, he scrapes the bottom of the sacks, which the *Judenrat* men are holding, and words trail from his mouth in the direction of the starving crowd, "Now there are no potatoes for you!";
- 6) a dog with the head of the *Judenrat* treasurer, in front of him - Wolberg, with a TOZ badge, holding a letter regarding subsidies. From the treasurer's mouth, words trail towards Wolberg, "*A jak nie dam, to napiszesz do Rasta?*" (If I do not give them, will you then write to the Rasta?);
- 7) "*The TOZ Dermatological Cabinet*" - Wolberg is sitting on a doctor's armchair. In front of him stands, as a patient, the *Judenrat* member, Adv. Jeremiasz Gitler, with outstretched hands full of boils. From Wolberg's mouth trail words in Gitler's direction, "These hands will never be clean again!";
- 8) "*Evening Prayer*" - Dr Kacinel (the then commandant of the Jewish police, who was notorious for his bad attitude towards the Jewish populace) is on his knees and, with a pleading face, looks up at the picture of a woman which hangs in his bedroom;
- 9) "*Roman Rights*" - a book of laws [codex], which has wrapped around it, the body of a snake with the head of the *Judenrat*'s chief of organisation, Pohorille.

The projects of all the caricatures were developed by the editors. Wolberg elaborated on them and Lajb Kusznir drew them and, later, copied them by the dozens. In this, he showed great interest and talent. Two Poles helped distribute the "*Rasta*" - a certain Kozłowski, who hid the finished copies in his house outside the ghetto, and a certain Kruzel, who would take the finished copies from Kozłowski, take them away to Warsaw and, from there, send them by post in the form of letters to the addresses that were given to him.

The *Arbeiterrat* [Workers' Council], which for some time conducted separate cultural activity among its members, also brought a fine contribution to the field of cultural work. The Council frequently held lectures, reports and members' talks. For some time, a drama circle was active in the *Arbeiterrat*, under the professional directorship of Maks Chraport* and Orbach (both had also been active in the field of drama circles in Częstochowa before the War), who were concurrently active in the TOZ's drama circle. The *Arbeiterrat*'s drama circle performed [Sholem Aleichem's] *The Jackpot* and, later, merged with the general [drama] circle, in order to strengthen the general cultural work.

The library, which was run behind closed doors, had a significant influence on the cultural life in the ghetto. The library numbered approximately 25,000 volumes and, in February 1940, it was smuggled from II Aleja 20 over to ul. Nadrzeczna, to the librarian Rajze'le Berkensztadt, who occupied herself with giving out books to hundreds of readers, groups and drama circles until May 1941, when she was arrested by the Gestapo and the library was seized.

* [TN: According to the book "*Czenstochov*" (1958), in the chapter "*On the Arbeiterrat in Częstochowa*", p.51, the *Arbeiterrat*'s drama circle was led by Chaim Rapoport and Chaim Orbach, and it also had a choir.]

The performances of the drama circles, of the children and of the choir made a great impression in the ghetto. In a bid to restrain this cultural work and to prevent any new embitterment from arising against the *Judenrat*, the presidium of the *Judenrat* demanded that, before every show, be it of the adults or of the children, the material should be submitted to them for censoring. Besides that, the presidium decided to legalise, with the German authorities, its own cultural work amongst the Jews in the ghetto.

First of all, the *Judenrat* applied to the *Stadthauptmann* for permission to conduct professional courses for youths aged between fourteen and eighteen. The *Stadthauptmann* conceded and, on 9th December, the *Judenrat* opened a carpentry and metalworking course for men and a tailoring course for women. The carpentry and metalworking courses only began on 16th March 1941 with forty-six attendees, and the tailoring course began in the first half of May 1941, with thirty-seven attendees. These courses were conducted under the directorship of Przysuski. These courses were not long-lived - they lasted some four months. The official examinations were carried out and the courses were closed. The reasons leading to the courses being closed remained a secret, known only to some of the *Judenrat* members.

The *Judenrat* also tried to receive permission to run a Yiddish theatre. On 5th July 1941, Kopiński appealed, in writing, to the *Stadthauptmann* regarding permission for theatrical performances and concerts. The motive given in the plea was that "since the outbreak of the War, there are in Częstochowa a great number of actors, musicians and singers, who live in poverty and have no other occupations The performances and concerts will [also] serve as a source of income for the needs of the *Judenrat*."⁸⁴ To that, the following response arrived from Wendler on 22nd July, "The request is denied. The actors, musicians and singers are to seek other occupations - their former employments will no longer be taken into consideration!"

On 9th January 1942, the *Judenrat* made another similar request, pointing out that such undertakings would make it easier for the *Judenrat* to create a means of support for children and others in need⁸⁵. Upon receiving another refusal, the *Judenrat* gave up the idea of holding performances.

During that same time, while the *Judenrat* was making efforts regarding permits from the Germans and attacking the TOZ in all areas of its activity. The TOZ, three times, opened three-month sanitation courses, which were directed by Dr Wolberg. The first had an attendance of fifty, the second of fifty-four and the third - of one hundred. The last course ended in March 1941. The *Judenrat* tried to compete and wished to open a dental technicians' course with the aid of the ŻSS - but this remained just as an attempt.

The youth and the directors of the *światlicy* also intensified their activity. There were frequent children's entertainments in the *światlicy* themselves and public appearances with a social content. Among other things, a children's opera [entitled] "*Puppets*" was performed, which showed how puppets revolt against the "puppeteer". This performance, which made a colossal impression in the ghetto, caused great bitterness within the *Judenrat* circles.

⁸⁴ Letter from the *Judenrat* to the *Stadthauptmann*.

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There is no public children's performance that does not start with hundreds of children marching through, singing "*Mir Kumen On*" [We're on the Way*]. As for the activity of the drama circle and choir – it also intensifies. Anyone who can contribute anything gladly presents himself to this work of his own accord. Among others, a young lad presents himself - Jakubowicz, a refugee from Warsaw (his father had been a ticket collector at the Kamiński Theatre until the outbreak of the War) – who shows talent and quickly becomes one of the most important pillars of the [drama] circle. (After the liquidation of the ghetto, Jakubowicz remained alive, was transferred to the "Small Ghetto" and became a singer of our great tragedy. He taught himself to write in Yiddish, wrote everything himself, adapted the melodies to his songs and, at his own initiative, held literary evenings.)

Members of the choir, who had once been in the "Lira", join the choir. They include Henryk Edelist and his young son Ludwig. The strong bass of the old, well-known singer Grabiner echoes once again. Young male and female soloists join in, among them the daughter of the tailor Boruch Baum, the eighteen-year-old Gute, who becomes the public's sweetheart, Roma Nudelberg from Łódź, Poznańska, a granddaughter of Rabbi Nachum Asz and Sławka Zytenfeld share their capabilities. Many of the youth knew no Yiddish - but they learnt, and worthily fulfilled the obligations, which they had gladly taken upon themselves.

The renowned piano teacher in Częstochowa, the assimilated Wanda Kopiecka, also put herself in the service of TOZ. She, herself, appeared in concerts and [also] prepared her [female] pupils for public appearances. Among her former young disciples, the one who distinguished herself the most was the talented pianist Gliksman (Miss Gliksman, thanks to her external appearance, herself following the deportations in Warsaw, had the possibility of concealing herself on the "Aryan side", participating in the military underground organisations and, after liberation, she marched into Częstochowa as an officer in the [Polish 1st Tadeusz] Kościuszko [Infantry] Division.)

Besides the joint cultural work, the communists, the Bundists and the left-wing Zionist groups conducted separate political and cultural work amidst their members and sympathisers. This intensive cultural work, in all arenas, encompassed the majority of the population in the ghetto and increasingly broadened as time went on.

On 22nd September 1942, the great misfortune of deportation took place. Everything was brought to a stop and the building of culture was destroyed, along with the whole of Jewish life in Częstochowa.

* [TN: Bundist children's song from the soundtrack of the 1936 Yiddish-language film by that same name (its English title is *Children Must Laugh*).]