

Zvi Rosenvein, New York

Dr Benjamin Orenstein

In 1956, the United Czenstochover Relief Committee, in New York, decided to publish the book *Czenstochov*, which appeared in 1958.

As Secretary of the Editorial Committee, the first person who came to my mind, as the only one who could contribute extensively to this book, was Dr Orenstein and, especially, when dealing with the Holocaust epoch. Each work, which arrived from Dr Orenstein, was immediately read with the greatest attention by all the members of the Editorial [Committee] and, on each occasion, I was given the duty to write him a thank-you letter for his important contributions.

At the start of 1957, a piece entitled *Czestochower Landsleit in the DP Camps in Germany* arrived from Dr Orenstein. I could not tear myself away from this work by any means. I felt every word written there as a part of my life. Everything, that had to do with the miraculously saved *Czestochower landsleit* and their contribution to the Jewish life of the Surviving Remnant, passed through my mind. The first funeral *akademia*, which was held on 26th June 1946 in the Feldafing DP camp in connection with the uprising in the Czestochowa "Small Ghetto" and its liquidation, passed before my eyes.

Despite the fact that Dr Orenstein adheres firmly to the historical theme with accurate facts, he is, at the same time, endowed with an extremely elevated literary language, in which he describes each historic event in all its singularities. I relived all the events which he describes there (any of you may read the piece in the book *Czenstochov*, pp. 62-66).

But the most important thing was my first meeting, after the War, with Dr Benjamin Orenstein, who came at the time to the memorial service, as a representative of the Regional Committee of Franconia and the Editorial [Board] of *Unser Wort* [Our Word].

Besides the flaming, fiery speech he delivered, he also read, aloud, pieces which he had written in the HASAG-Pelcery concentration camp, which were received with great acclamation. After the *akademia*, he presented himself to me and we had a brief conversation. I observed him closely, [with] his tall figure, hasty, impulsive movements, good-natured, deep, blue eyes and, above all, his unusual idea at the time.

He said to me, no more and no less,

"I want to publish a large historical book on the Holocaust in Czestochowa. I am aware that you possess a large quantity of material about the Czestochowa Ghetto - write it down and send it to me!"

I responded with nothing. I was sceptical of the entire plan. With my insights, I attempted to penetrate the psychology of this Jew. He only hears a history. Barely a year has passed since

the greatest destruction of the Jewish people and in the history of mankind. A thousand years of Jewish life and Jewish cultural treasures had been destroyed.

All the Jewish spiritual values, all the messianic dreams and *End of Days* ideals were so brutally trodden upon and destroyed. At a time when the life of the Surviving Remnant has been forever ruined and disrupted, a Jew arrives with thoughts of writing books. Whom would these books be for? For those who lived through the Holocaust, whose hearts are filled with the living graves of their nearest and dearest who were annihilated? Would these books be for them? Or would the books be for the outside world, which had looked on, in indifference, at the misfortune of death, annihilation and devastation? From my silence, Dr Orenstein comprehended, at once, that I was not too inspired by his idea.

Orenstein, however, is not one of those who are influenced by a negative opinion. He is one who, [once he] sets himself a plan to execute, he will carry it out with the greatest precision and diligence.

To my great astonishment, when I got home (if one could call it a home - I was living in the Ainring DP camp), I already found a letter from him and, afterwards, also telegrams. The letter and telegrams all said one thing,

"Write it and send it directly."

Meanwhile, articles by Dr Orenstein began to appear in the press. The truth is that everyone was captivated with his articles. Reports, containing the highest praise, were regularly printed in the newspapers regarding Dr Orenstein's lectures in the DP camps, which were under the auspices of the Central Board for Culture and Education.

The highpoint of realising the plan of publishing the book was at the central *akademia* in Landsberg, held on 20th October 1946, [where] Dr Orenstein proclaimed the idea of publishing the book *Churban Czenstochow* in the presence of 1,200 *Czestochower landsleit*. This time, Orenstein thundered, from the stage of the large theatre hall in Landsberg, and demanded that the entire scroll of Nazi atrocities in Czestochowa be unrolled. He did not forget the innocent blood spilt and called for a trial against the Nazi murderers.

Orenstein's call touched the deepest feelings of all those miraculously saved *landsleit* and all, as one, supported the idea. For the majority of the Surviving Remnant, the sentiment of [wishing to] bring the Nazi murderers to trial was the only remaining goal in life. They could simply not imagine, prior to that, beginning a normal life after everything had been destroyed. It is, therefore, no wonder that Orenstein, at the first convention of the *Czestochower landsmannschaften* in the American Zone in Germany, was unanimously elected Chairman of the Cultural Committee of the Central Administration, and the work on the book progressed from day to day.

Dr Orenstein immediately put himself in contact with all the *landsleit* throughout Germany, including myself. I became a warm proponent of the book and, first of all, sent in a poem that

I had written during the period of the resettlements¹ under the title *"You Shall Not Forget"*, and systematically sent in materials on the Jewish resistance.

By 1947, the book was already fully typeset but, due to the incredible difficulties of procuring paper, the book, after waiting for so long, was published in 1948. The 3,000 copies of this edition were simply snatched up. This book became the pride of Cześćochowa Jewry and, to the general satisfaction of the Central Administration, the book became a model for all the other larger *landsmannschaften* and respected authors of how a book on the Holocaust should be produced.

The book *Churban Czenstochow* was provided with two introductions - the first by the main researcher of the Holocaust era, Dr Filip Friedman, and the second by the Chairman of the Central Administration of the *Cześćochower Landsmannschaften*, Dr Cwi Kantor, who nowadays lives in the State of Israel. What Dr Filip Friedman writes about the book is characteristic:

"This work by B. Orenstein depicts the Destruction of Cześćochowa in the dark years of our greatest national catastrophe in exile.

The author set himself the task of encompassing the tragedy of the Cześćochowa Jews as comprehensively as possible. He described it in the tone of the pulsating Jewish life in Cześćochowa prior to the War. In his work, he analysed every aspect of Jewish life, and the struggle and annihilation during the Hitler era. He presents us with a systematic image of the Judenrat and its activity, as well as of other institutions under the supposed 'self-government'.

We learn very interesting details regarding Jewish labour and the Jewish Arbeiterrat [Workers Council] - a rare institution during the period of Nazi tyranny. The barracks and the various workplaces, the characteristic distraction of the 'dangerous' Jewish working elements by the Germans - all this is described in detail. The information regarding the Jewish underground movement and the personalities of the individual combatants is very important.

The depictions of the 'akcje' [operations] and selections are horrifying. The author also dwells upon the subsequent fate of the transports deported from Cześćochowa - which he follows on their sorrowful path, with his quill and with his feelings, to Treblinka, Buchenwald, Gross-Rosen, Dora, Ravensbrück, Bergen-Belsen, and so on.

He ends his detailed images with the depiction of Cześćochowa's [Surviving] Remnant following the Liberation - from the first sprouting of an organised Jewish community in Cześćochowa after liberation, and also of the surviving Cześćochower landsleit left in Germany.

¹ [TN: Viz. deportations to Treblinka.]

Orenstein built his work, in addition to his own experiences and the events through which he lived, on a great abundance of diligently collected material from testimonies and official documents.

It is a work which constitutes an important contribution to the historical research of the era of destruction, and is concurrently a worthy and earnest memorial to the Jewish community of Częstochowa - to the 'City and Mother in Israel' [2 Samuel 20:19] that was destroyed in sanctification of God's name."

Dr Cwi Kantor, Chairman of the Central Administration of the Częstochower *Landsmannschaften* in the West Zone in Germany, writes of this book in his introduction:

"It began with words. I, myself, was sceptically inclined, when Flw. Orenstein proclaimed the idea to publish a book on the destruction of Częstochowa. It is fortunate that Benjamin Orenstein, as the leader of our landsmannschaft's Central Administration's Cultural Department, was the one who took this task upon himself, because only a man with an unprecedented stubbornness and a strong, indomitable will could have been capable, despite hindrances from all sides, to complete his honourable and arduous work.

Today, the book 'Churban Czenstochow' lays before us completed. Only one, who has looked closer and wormed his way into the hidden cells of Benjamin Orenstein's 'laboratory', is able to appreciate this great achievement. It was no easy thing to gather all the material from people, who live in all corners of Germany, to sort them, to elaborate upon them and, finally, to present them before the reader in an accessible and chronological form, as Benjamin Orenstein has done.

With this book, the author has introduced his method of current historical research. He, firstly, processed all his personal experiences and observations, and sent out dozens of copies to those who could bring something new into each chapter, strike out inaccuracies, make corrections or voice an opinion, accepting each of the comments made by sixty individuals with great gratitude. After receiving these comments, once more, he processed the material and, again, sent out the newly elaborated manuscripts, until a uniform, complete picture was formed. It is no wonder that 25,000 typewriter pages were used up in putting the book to print.

This book was published for the current generation and for those to come. For generations, who will need to immerse themselves into the gruesome tragedy of a generation who lived in the most evil era of [all] times, in an era of robbery and murder, in an era of civilised devourers of men [and] in an era of when the symbols of a government were barbarism, death and annihilation.

Benjamin Orenstein, the leader of our Cultural Department², deserves warm thanks for his indefatigable work in publishing this book. If the readers shower him with letters of gratitude and acknowledgement, as well as comments and supplementary information for the new edition in Yiddish characters, then this will constitute his reward for his labour and efforts."

I was a disciple of Dr Filip Friedman and consider this a great merit. As a result, I knew him very well. He was one of the rarest objective historians and a very sharp critic. He demanded of his students the maximal proficiency in the themes with which they were dealing and, if Dr Filip Friedman gave such a thorough evaluation of Orenstein's book, it is not only a great achievement for the author B. Orenstein, but also a pride for the entire Cześćochowa Jewry throughout the globe, that their history has been written by such a competent historian as is Dr Benjamin Orenstein.

Let us also hereby note the fact that, [in his foreword,] Dr Filip Friedman dwelt specifically on the issues of the *Arbeiterrat* and the Combat Organisation in the "Small Ghetto". Dr Benjamin Orenstein was the first to give expression to these matters in a fitting, factual and objective manner, to the effect that Jews were not apathetic in the face of the Nazi cruelties, but fought against the murderous Nazi powers by all possible and impossible means. These issues aroused great interest in serious and objective historians, such as Dr Raphael Mahler, who includes a whole series of quotes from the book in a larger work. I shall only quote one sentence which Dr Raphael Mahler wrote:

"Like a great beam of light, the description [sic of the] activities of the Arbeiterrat weaves itself through the book 'Churban Czenstochow'."

This response belongs among the great merits that Dr Orenstein has achieved.

M. Ginzburg wrote in the *Keneder Odler* of Montreal:

"Benjamin Orenstein produced this book in a systematic manner, with a sense of responsibility. It is a book that deserves attention. This only takes into account the colossal efforts [he made] in gathering so much material, facts, biographies and memoirs, that we may appreciate the great energy with which Flw. Orenstein has been endowed."

Dr Wolf Gliksman wrote in the book *Czenstochov* (New York, 1958), p. 205:

"B. Orenstein overlooked almost no aspect of ghetto life, which had developed over the course of those tragic years. He depicts the marching in of the Germans, "Bloody Monday", the establishment of the Judenrat, the forced labour, the Jewish Police, life in the "Big Ghetto" and "Small Ghetto", the Resistance Movement, cultural life, the tragic selections and deportations, life in HASAG and other circumstances brought about by life in the ghetto. An interesting chapter is the description of the Arbeiterrat

² [TN: In Dr Cwi Kantor's original introduction, this sentence begins "Benjamin Orenstein, the disciple of Szalag (Szmuel-Lejb Gordon, etc.)."]

[Workers Council]], which was created and which ushered in a fine moment in the dark ghetto life.

The author went with the Surviving Remnant from HASAG to Buchenwald, to Dora and to Bergen-Belsen. The description of these events, during those last days, constitute an important contribution to the chapter³ 'Transport of Prisoners in Sealed Wagons', in which Death took a hefty share."

These high opinions of the book *Churban Czenstochow* cover one aspect of the issue - viz. in a worthy manner, the immortalisation of the life, struggle and destruction of Cześćochowa Jewry. [But], as Chairman of the Cultural Committee of the Central Administration of the Cześćochower Landsmannschaften in Germany and the factual representative of the Cześćochowa survivors, another completely different task lay upon Dr Orenstein. This task was that, through this book, the murderers of Cześćochowa Jewry be brought to justice and actually be given the punishment they deserved. The 1,200 *landsleit* - Cześćochowa Jews who had been saved from fire, gas and the sword - unanimously granted Dr Orenstein the mandate to realise this with his book.

Did Orenstein achieve this goal? The answer is truly astounding. The book was published in October 1948, and was immediately demanded by the Chief Prosecutor in Leipzig for the trial that was called "The Great Cześćochowa Trial". A [entire] book could be written just on the role which the book played in the Leipzig trial. We shall, therefore, bring only one quote here that the lawyer Etera Epstein (she is nowadays Mrs [Przerowski] Pratt and lives in Los Angeles), a native of Cześćochowa who appeared at the trial as an expert and a witness. The citation is taken from the *Keneder Odler* of Montreal, dated 10th August 1949, which reports the following⁴:

***"Benjamin Orenstein's Book 'Churban Czenstochow'
as an Incriminating Document in Leipzig Trial***

In Leipzig, in the Soviet Zone in Germany, in the months May-June 1949, a great trial was held against twenty-two Nazi criminals. These Nazi criminals had been masters [viz. foremen] at the HASAG factories in Cześćochowa, where they tortured the Jewish forced labourers and, by carrying out selections, brought about the deaths of hundreds of Jewish men and women.

A large number of Cześćochower landsleit from the American Zone in Germany, who had lived through the torments in the HASAG camps, participated as witnesses. Among others, the former General Secretary of the Central Administration of the Cześćochower Landsmannschaften in the American Zone in Germany, lawyer Etera Epstein appeared as an expert and as a witness, [as well as] her sister Tamara [Greenspan née] Epstein and a entire series of others.

³ [TN: Viz. the chapter in history, not in a particular book.]

⁴ [TN: The author of this article, Zvi Rosenvein, opens the excerpt with quotation marks but fails to close it. Having no access to the original newspaper article, we have been unable to determine where exactly it ends. We think it very likely that the quote from Etera Epstein is part of the article itself, but we are uncertain as to whether the sentence – "Four were sentenced etc." – also forms part of the article or was written by Rosenvein.]

Over the course of the trial, three prosecutors, headed by the Chief Prosecutor, studied Benjamin Orenstein's book 'Churban Czenstochow', thereby establishing the dates and gruesome deeds of the twenty-two accused.

During the accusation speech, the Prosecutor held the book in his hand and continually cited fragments, which gave expression to the Jewish destruction in Cześćochowa in which the twenty-two accused had taken part.

On 13th July 1949, lawyer Estera Epstein wrote,

'As a witness and as an expert in the Cześćochowa Trial in Leipzig, I utilised the dates and facts from Orenstein's book 'Churban Czenstochow'. The Prosecutor-General put this book before the court and built his accusation speech upon the facts and dates in 'Churban Czenstochow'.'

Four were sentenced to death and eighteen to lengthy terms in prison.

Besides in Leipzig, an entire array of trials took place and the book played an important role everywhere.

The book, on its own, is a historic work, which has elicited great acknowledgement from the most significant historians in this field and has, concurrently, served the national interests of the Jewish people [in general] and of every individual Cześćochower *landsmann* in particular.