

Częstochowa's Avenues

- Reflections -

Every Jew, who was born and raised in Częstochowa, recalls its *Aleje* [Avenues] with a sacred, inner tremor. Memories are awakened of the bygone life, of the lives of parents, relatives, friends, comrades and of the entire vicinity. The gnawing, unquenchable yearning for the rich, glorious, pulsating Jewish life, which is bound with the memory of the Częstochowa *Aleje*, is once more awakened. At the same time, we shudder at the thought that all this has vanished forever - forever.

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The Częstochowa *Aleje* include two monumental churches- one in the New Market Square, at the heart of the bygone Jewish quarter, and the other is the world-famous Jasna Góra. The first is at the beginning of the *Aleje* and the latter at their end. On whichever side one was, the tall church spires, with their glittering and menacing crosses, were in sight.

Chassidic Jews averted their gaze to the ground, in order to avoid seeing the *tymme*¹ before them. Devout Chassidic little boys, from the poor, dusky alleyways, who sometimes desired to see the beautiful *Aleje* with their blossoming trees, crossed over to the other side of the pavement of the little street, that connects the Old and New Market Squares, where the church is located, to avoid committing the sin of catching a glimpse of the *tymme*, Heaven forbid!

Hard-working Jews, after a full week of arduous labour and no less hungry and cold, would emerge on Saturday afternoons from their cellar and loft dwellings, from the low, stooping little houses of the Kozia backstreets, and make their way to the *Aleje*.

Other Jews just went to breathe in a little fresh air and to admire the beautiful, majestic *Aleje*. Some went to their Union and others to their Party, to meet with fellow workers and share troubling thoughts and also to, occasionally, hear words of commiseration and encouragement of a better and more beautiful world to come.

Jewish youngsters went to their youth organisations, which were on the *Aleje*, to dream their youthful dreams. Other youths, dressed in their best clothes, caroused in the *Aleje*, giving expression to their spirited youthfulness.

Revolutionary songs of mankind's progress blended with the hum of Talmud study emerging from the Chassidic *shtieblech*, and both were drowned by the laughter and singing of the children and youngsters which, together, created a resounding, unforgettable heavenly symphony.

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¹ [TN: Heb., "impurity"; term by which the local religious Jews referred to the church.]

Evil, terrifying winds began to blow, which promised nothing good. As hatred of Jews and terrorism increased, people began confining themselves and concentrating in a tighter area. They went no further than the Pazderski clock, up to the end of the Second *Aleja*. Then the tightness became even worse - on a Saturday evening, or just any regular summer evening, it became literally impossible to pass through there.

If a dreamy, young couple felt the urge to escape the crowdedness and attempted strolling on to the Third *Aleja*, nearer to the sacred monastery, or if they wished to sit down in a peaceful corner of the park at the end of the *Aleje*, they would instantly get a taste of the Polish hooligans' cudgels, to remind them that Jews were not allowed to enjoy the park.

Later, in the times of "*Owszem*"², Polish rioters filled the *Aleje* with loud yells to boycott the Jews, shouting the basest insults at them. The Jews witnessed this in pain and in grief, and were compelled to remain silent. One by one, Jewish shops on the *Aleje* closed down, where there had formerly been almost exclusively Jewish shops. Polish shops began to open, changing the Avenues' appearance. Furthermore, one saw shops open on *Shabbes*, creating a dissonance with what once had been. It had been, after all, the Jewish pulse that had forged the character and aspect of the *Aleje*.

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When the Nazi troops marched in, on the third day following the outbreak of the War, the appearance of the *Aleje* was completely altered. The populace was struck with a mortal tremor before the overwhelming, demonic forces that had descended upon it. A Polish woman, in a state of shock due to the catastrophe, was standing in the middle of the *Aleja* with her arms outstretched - like Jesus on the cross - and, at the sight of the beasts marching by, turned her eyes towards the Jasna Góra and loudly prayed to the Sacred Mother to deliver the holy city.

On the following day, Monday, 4th September 1939, we already witnessed the beginning of our destruction. Under the false claims that Jews had shot at the Germans, the Nazi bandits attacked the Jewish population. Then, pools of the Jewish blood of men, women and children already drenched the *Aleje*, and the dead bodies of victims lay by every building. In many places, one could see a mother murdered together with a small child.

After the first storm, subsequent decrees ensued - the closing down of Jewish shops and the mandatory order to wear armbands.

The *Aleje* took on a different, dark, shadowy appearance. The Jewish party premises, communal institutions and banks were shut down, and very different [bodies] were introduced into their establishments in order to serve the Gestapo in exterminating the Jews. These premises, which had formerly been the source of effervescent Jewish life, became the fountainhead and valley of tears. Now, one could see, at these establishments, Jewish forced labourers wearing wooden clogs and torn paper clothes/rags, marching to slave labour. Young

² [TN: Reference to a declaration made by PM Felicjan Składkowski, stating that whilst violence to Jews was deplorable, boycotting and shunning them - *Owszem!* (Of course!).]

Jews were also dragged from these establishments to the concentration and extermination camps.

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It is heavy, tragically heavy, on the heart, when these last images of the *Aleje* - these visions of destruction and annihilation — pass through one's mind.

Five to a row they march, the Jews of the little Garncarska, Targowa and Nadrzeczna streets, dressed in their best holiday clothes, with or without bundles on their shoulders, holding children in their arms and by the hand, and everything is pervaded by a sacred, tremulous stillness. They march to the end of New Market Square, at the end of the First *Aleja*. There, they must march in three single rows past the selection point, where the Nazi destroyer Degenhardt is standing with his aides - they decide who goes to the left and who to the right. To the left are sent the elderly, infirm and children, and to the right are sent a small percentage of the young people, who are fit for work are retained for slave labour. Those on the left are led to the marketplace and, from there, to the waiting wagons which transport them to death and obliteration - to the gas chambers. Those on the right are led in the direction of the *Aleja*, through ul. Wilsona to the square at Landau's factory on ul. Krótka.

It is difficult to say what those on the left, who knew they were sentenced to death, were thinking in their desperate helplessness, and what came to their minds upon seeing the world during their last moments - seeing the sun that was shining so gloriously at the time, seeing the autumn that was so marvellous then, for the last time, seeing the town of their birth, their *Aleje* and also their lone nearest ones - their sons and daughters, whom fate had ordained to go to the right, to continue the struggle for life. What were the condemned to death thinking then? What furious curses did they direct, shaking with deadly rage, towards the heavens, the world and mankind, for their lives being cut short prematurely?

Among those on the right, who were standing lined up in the First *Aleja* and had not yet realised what had just happened, and that they were now separated forever from their spouses, children, parents and siblings, there were also outbursts of tears of happiness at the joy of seeing a sister or a brother among the lucky ones, who had been saved for the time being.

Could anyone, today, grasp this highest measure of joy, which pervaded the people at the time upon perceiving next to them another member of their own family? They "forgot" that they had just now cruelly and tragically lost their parents, siblings and families. All they thought about was the joy of, at least, having one close family member. Could anyone convey the emotions and thoughts of the six hundred Jewish men and women who, on that same evening, were taken from Landau's square to the *Golgota* cinema, which was next to Jasna Góra? In rows of five, they marched, guarded by the villainous *Volksdeutsche* [ethnic-German] *Sonderdienst* [Special Services] men, accompanied by blows from rifle butts and insults, and by the spiteful laughter of the hundreds of Poles out promenading.

Just over yonder, in the First *Aleja*, is blood and ruin. And here, at the other end of the *Aleje*, the windows are bright with light, and the sounds of dancing-music emerge from the parlours

of entertainment, and malicious glances [are cast] at those delivered from death and condemned to the pain of slavery.

Is it possible to convey the first night at the *Golgota*, [with] the tragic, spasmodic outbursts of the orphaned, cursing the day they were born, despairingly bashing their heads against the concrete foot baths and their subsequent hallucinations of seeing the outstretched hands of their nearest pleading for aid, who by then had already arrived in Treblinka and were facing death in the gas chambers?

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Jews also march along the *Aleje* later. They are led out of the gate of the “Small Ghetto”, along Krótka, Wilsona and the *Aleje* to their designated workplaces. Everywhere, scenes of destruction are seen. By the *tymme* at the New Market Square, we see a tall mound of utensils taken from Jewish dwellings. Silken caftans lay strewn about. On a different spot, we see *sfurim* [religious books], jumbled together with linen. Everywhere, we see large puddles of blood, intermingled with various homewares. All the houses are empty, cleared out. A dreadful lament blows from all around. Where are the thousands upon thousands of Jews who lived here? What black spirit could have conceived turning the effervescent Jewish life into a cemetery?

Heavy are the thoughts of the marching Jews, whose own lives and the lives of their nearest have been forever destroyed.

A few of the marching [Jews] tear away from this atmosphere of slavery. Some, who go, seek the path to the forest, while others desire to steal across the border.

Those, who decide to escape from the rows, are also treading their hometown’s last road, where on all sides lurk thousands of deathly perils, along the *Aleje*. They cast their last glances at this part of the city, with which their most beautiful and sorrowful memories are bound. They take in these last views of the *Alej*, and take them around with them on their subsequent troubled life of wandering.

