

The Destruction of Częstochowa Jewry

Every year, from Yom Kippur to the days of October, we feel a profound grief - a grief that takes our thoughts to the place from which we stem, to the place where we were born and raised, to the place where our generations were raised for centuries and to the place where we witnessed how our closest ones and families, with everything they had created, were annihilated.

A city existed, where one third of the general population was Jewish. The name of this city was Częstochowa. Jewish energy, Jewish spirit and Jewish enterprising forces were present in all corners of the city, building up the industry, developing commerce and working hard - thus helping to build the country in which we were settled.

We always sensed hateful eyes around us, looking at us askance. Even though we were surprised there from time to time by the Polish populace with their outbursts [of violence] against us, which cost Jewish blood, nevertheless it was our home. That was where we and our ancestors had built institutions, with which the Jewish population was bound.

There existed two Jewish *gimnazja*, every year, which produced students for universities. [There was also] the Crafts School, which produced dozens of craftsmen from its classes every year - metalworkers, carpenters and electricians, some of whom continued studying and went on to become engineers. We also had a horticultural school, which gave the world Jewish gardeners and workers of the land. Many of them settled in [the Land of] Israel, where they were among the first pioneers. We had kindergartens and primary schools, where children received their modern Yiddish instruction. There were *minyanim* [Heb., prayer quorums], synagogues, study-halls, *cheders* and *yeshivas*, where Jewish children received their religious education.

There was an entire network of Jewish charitable institutions, such as the Jewish Hospital, *Bikur Cholim*, *Hachnuses Kallah*, *Hachnuses Orchim*, *Malbish Arumim*, *Moishav Zkeinim*¹ and many others.

We had unions of all [political] tendencies - Zionist, bourgeois and socialist - sports unions, an actors' circle, and singers at the renowned *Lira Society*. There were [also] Jewish newspapers in Yiddish and in the language of the land - Polish.

In our town, there were important individuals from all strata of the Jewish population, who headed all these societies, institutions and unions in an honourable and successful manner. There were public activists and philanthropists, who had what people need to have in order to fulfil themselves in life spiritually and culturally. All this had been built by generations before us, by our parents and by us ourselves.

¹ [TN: Heb., *Visiting the Sick*, *Aid for (Poor) Brides*, *Hospitality for Guests*, *Clothing for the Naked* and *Retreat for the Old*, respectively.]

ALL THIS IS NO MORE. NO MORE ARE THE PEOPLE, NO MORE IS THEIR CREATION.

We have lost everything. Our families were torn away from their long-established homes and from us to their annihilation, by way of the most horrifying deeds of violence and in the most hideous manner.

We, the survivors, have been punished by nature to be the witnesses and fellow-sufferers of the entire process of enslavement and extermination – and, as long as our eyes are still open, we shall remind the world of these sorrowful events.

After three years of draconian laws, on the part of brutal Nazi rule, we had been led to utter abasement and impoverishment.

In the night, at the close of Yom Kippur 1942, the modern-day Huns commenced their march of slaughter to annihilate us for once and for all - according to a plan that had been meticulously worked out in advance. The bloodthirsty *Hauptmann* Degenhardt, as master over the life and death of the Jews in Częstochowa, along with his *Ausrottungskommando*, fell upon us like wild beasts and drove us out of the houses, beating us and shooting at us while so doing.

Frightened and despondent, sad and teary, lines of Jews stretched out - one with a bundle on his shoulder and a child at his hand, a second with ageing parents or an ailing sister, and a third with an elderly grandfather. Whoever had acquired a work card beforehand gripped it firmly in his hand, in order not to lose, Heaven forbid, the document which ensured not being deported. Families - wife and husband, father and son, mother and daughter - held onto each other, in order to be together in the last minutes and to aid one another during the calamity.

Families, who had lived under the same roof for generations, having inherited the Jewish houses and continued the traditions of generations, cast their last glances at their homes and, with tears in their eyes, bade farewell forever to the walls, which had much to tell. The hopes of being together were very quickly dashed. Trained killers were waiting for their victims in front of the *Metalurgia*, and the Dance of Hell on this earth ensued. “No work cards are valid here!”, yelled the savage SS men at the Jews, who were holding their hands aloft, clutching the “insurance papers” clearly proving that they were necessary for the German economy. Here, the Jew was in a vice - in the power of the Devil in the shape of an SS officer.

Families are separated. Small children are torn away from the hands of their mothers and fathers, [as is] a husband from his wife, a sister from her brother and a relative from his family. [There is] a mixture of voices - the screams and groans of those shot and dying, [along with the] killing, wildness, sadistic relish in murder and animal-like thirst for blood. No explanations are to any avail here [as to] who, what and when. Whoever dares to say anything is mercilessly shot.

Jews, who yesterday set their hopes on the sanctity of Yom Kippur, [today] voice their grievances against God - [while] heretics cry out “*Sh'ma Yisrael*”. Shooting is heard in the ghetto. These are the SS men, shooting those who were in hiding places. The people in hiding were in the hundreds, and practically all of them shared the same fate.

Five such *akcje* took place at intervals of every few days, and the same scenes were repeated on every occasion. Degenhardt and his aides pointed at the rows of Jews marching by - whoever to the right – *l'chaim* [Heb., to life], and whoever to the left – *l'muves* [Heb., to death²]. Each time, victims fell from those in hiding and from the German savagery. Each time, thousands were pushed into the cattle wagons to be destroyed in the Treblinka gas chambers.

Our emotions are filled with sorrow for our tragically annihilated and tortured families and friends. We turn our thoughts to the known and unknown graves and the mountains of ash, which have been left after them in the fields of Treblinka, Majdanek, Oświęcim and other death camps.

We pay respect to the memory of the heroes of the resistance movement and of the partisan units - to those who brought honour and pride to our city and our people.

We pay respect to the memory of the sick in the hospitals, who were killed with injections of poison and delivered to the Angel of Death.



The first victims of the Nazi regime were our fathers and the Torah scholars.

[This is] Reb Lajbel Kantor z"l - an industrialist and Torah scholar.

He perished in Treblinka. Of his entire large family, only one son was saved -

Dr Cwi Kantor, who lives in the State of Israel.

² [TN: Both "to life" and "to death" are in Hebrew in the Yiddish original; ref. to the "Unesanneh Tokef" liturgical poem recited on Yom Kippur enumerating the individual fate of every Jew judged by God on Yom Kippur – "On Rosh Hashanah will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur will be sealed – how many will pass from the earth and how many will be created; who will live and who will die etc."]