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High Holidays 1943-44 at the HASAG-Pelcery Concentration Camp and the Biographies of Two Young Częstochowa Cantors

The High Holidays of 1943 and 1944 were tragic, historic dates for European Jewry, in general, and for the six thousand enslaved Jews in the HASAG-Pelcery concentration camp in Częstochowa, in particular. By that time, most European Jewry had already been utterly obliterated by the Nazi beasts, death squads and destroyers of all kinds. Both the “big ghettos” and also the “small ghettos” had already long since been liquidated. The Jews, who were then still alive, were imprisoned and enslaved, performing forced labour in concentration camps fenced in with barbed wire and guarded by Nazi tyrants.

The Jews in the concentration camps constituted lonely and broken branches of the tree of the Jewish people. This was a time when all national dreams, hopes and aspirations of European Jewry had been upset and destroyed. The heroic uprisings in the ghettos of Warsaw, Wilno, Białystok, Częstochowa and all the others had been stifled in blood and fire by the cruel brutality of the Nazi regime. All the shining stars in Jewish life had been extinguished.

Generally, the lives of Jews in all the concentration camps were accompanied by terrible persecution and hounding, malicious repression and savage terror. The merest trifle was considered sabotage and punished by shooting.

Under these conditions, two young cantors, Isroel-Josef Kutner and Efrogim-Nechemje Trombkowski, organised two houses of worship, to enable the Jews to pray [as a group]. These houses of prayer were:

- 1) at barrack №7, on the camp grounds, and
- 2) in the hall where potatoes were peeled, also on the HASAG factory grounds.

At barrack №7, the cantor was Isroel-Josef Kutner, who was distinguished for his delightful *Ivri*¹ diction, as was Efrogim-Nechemje Trombkowski for his God-given lyrical tenor voice. Through their mouths, the prayers received a living *tikkun*². The [words] “*On Rosh Hashanah will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur will be sealed*”³ were received by the worshippers with spasmodic weeping. These worshippers presented emaciated, consumed bodies, from which eyes protruded like the last sparks of a dying candle.

This prayer was an act of self-sacrifice and religious heroism. Both cantors and the congregation had abandoned their workplaces and left without the knowledge of the Nazi German masters. The Nazis could use this [to claim] that Jews were committing sabotage, thus causing many victims. It is a remarkable fluke that, in the days of the High Holidays of 1943 and 1944, there were no victims.

The prayer service was terribly crowded. It seemed as if the souls of the annihilated were filling the space, and that the prayers were rising up to the heights and storming the heavens, reaching the

¹ [TN: Not to be confused with “Ivrit”, or modern Hebrew, “Ivri” is the term used in Yiddish in ref. to the liturgical Hebrew of the prayer-book.]

² [TN: Heb., lit. “amendment/improvement”; this sentence might be rephrased as, “In their mouths, the prayers received a new meaning.” We have retained the literal wording due to its uniqueness.]

³ [TN: Part of the moving “Unesanneh Tokef” liturgical poem recited on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which goes on to enumerate “how many will pass from the earth and how many will be created; who will live and who will die; who will die at his predestined time and who before his time; who by water and who by fire, who by sword, who by beast, who by famine, who by thirst, who by storm, who by plague, who by strangulation, and who by stoning etc.”]

Throne of God. All the worshippers recited *Kaddish*, because everyone had been orphaned, and there was no one who had not lost his nearest and dearest in the Nazi carnages.

Who were these two remarkable and unique cantors, who displayed so much courage, energy, self-sacrifice and true religious heroism, setting up two houses of prayer in the HASAG-Pelcery concentration camp?

1) Isroel-Josef Kutner

Isroel-Josef Kutner was, without doubt, one of the most interesting figures and representatives of religious Jewry in Częstochowa under the brutal Nazi regime.

He was born in 1916 and, from the first minute of his life, he became an orphan - his mother died in childbirth. From his first living moments, he was the embodiment of suffering, gloom and sorrow and, at the same time, to everyone's amazement, he had a sharpness of mind that bordered on the pinnacle of human genius. As a boy of four, he read *Ivri* fluently and began to learn *chumash* [Pentateuch]. While children of his age were playing and being cuddled by their mothers, he devoted all his time to study.

At the age of nine, he attended the renowned Radoszyce Yeshiva [Talmudic academy] in Łódź. The Rabbi of Radoszyce was amazed with the genius pupil, due to which he took him with him to Radoszyce, where he taught him privately. At the age of twelve, he received a rabbinical diploma⁴ and continued studying, day and night, personifying Ch.N. Bialik's character "*Ha'Masmid*"⁵, who had formed a perpetual bond with the study-hall and the Talmud. At the age of seventeen, he married the daughter of the *shochet* [ritual slaughterer] of Kaminka⁶, and learned *shechitah* [ritual slaughter] from his father-in-law.

During the period of the mass slaughters and deportations, his wife and three fine, small children perished in the Treblinka gas chambers. His heart ached and bled for the general tragedy of the Jewish people and also for his personal tragedy. This could be read in his pale, brooding countenance. In the period of the "Small Ghetto", he worked in the workshops, thus avoiding working on *Shabbes* [Saturday]. He lived with a group of religious Jews on ul. Nadrzeczna, where he organised a *minyán* [prayer quorum]. This prayer group held public services and studied a *Daf Yomi*⁷ every day.

On 1st May 1943, the "Small Ghetto" was guarded more vigorously than usual, and no one was let out to work. Everyone sensed that the end had arrived. At any moment, the SS destroyers could arrive and deport everyone to the gas chambers in Treblinka. The Combat Organisation was in a state of alarm, ready to take on the final battle. Anyone, who only could, dug hideouts, built bunkers and sought means to protect himself. In those restless moments, Rabbi Isroel-Josef Kutner sat by an open tractate of the Talmud and studied. When people asked him, "Do you not see what is happening? What are you planning to do?", his response was cool and collected, "If that is the will of the Creator of the World, I shall not oppose it. I am no better and no worse than the Jewish brothers and sisters or my family - if destiny wishes me to give my life, I am ready."

⁴ [TN: It is quite unprecedented that a mere child should be granted a certificate to serve as a rabbi.]

⁵ [TN: Heb., "the assiduous (student)".]

⁶ [TN: Probably Kamionka in Polish; as there are fifty localities with this name throughout Poland, we have not been able to ascertain which of them was the one in question.]

⁷ [TN: Heb., "Daily Page"; a daily regimen undertaken to study the Babylonian Talmud one folio each day.]

Rabbi Isroel-Josef Kutner's courageous comportment not only constituted religious heroism, but also a *Kiddush Ha'Shem*⁸. We must take into account that this situation did not last minutes or hours, but three whole days and nights – three days and nights during which every minute seemed like a year.

What actually happened in those three days from 1st to 3rd May 1943? The SS wanted to annihilate the six thousand Jews of the "Small Ghetto" and to declare Częstochowa "*Judenrein*" [clean of Jews]. However, the management of the HASAG munitions concern - which had branches in all the countries occupied by the Nazis - needed working hands. They, therefore, did not wish to annihilate the Jews from whom they could have the power of unpaid labour. This dispute crossed the boundaries of Częstochowa and reached the headquarters in Radom, and possibly even higher authorities. The result was that the management of HASAG won out, for the time being, and on 4th May, the Jews were sent back to work. This was a very rare phenomenon, when one takes into account the conditions at the time, which have been correctly appraised by Gerszon Fogel⁹, to the effect that the Nazis sought the utter biological extermination of the Jewish race, [and] even the great productivity from unpaid Jewish slave labour in the ghettos and camps, which made the German enterprises wealthy, was only of secondary importance (see: *Ghetto Litzmannstadt, Keneder Odler*, 7th September 1962).

For the time being, a ray of hope for temporary life, for the price of arduous labour and toil, was shining for the Jews of the Częstochowa "Small Ghetto". Either way, the "Small Ghetto" did not exist long and, at the end of June 1943, the "Small Ghetto" was liquidated, during which a heroic resistance battle, by the Jewish Combat Organisation, took place.

Following the liquidation of the "Small Ghetto", Rabbi Isroel-Josef Kutner was barracked in the HASAG-Pelcery concentration camp, where he was the pillar of religious life. In barrack №7, he arranged a prayer group, where public prayers were held morning and evening and also a *Daf Yomi* was studied. It sounds like a fantasy, but it is a fact that Rabbi Isroel-Josef Kutner, under the piercing eyes of the Nazi guards, managed to smuggle, into the camp, all the necessary religious artefacts, such as prayer-shawls, *tefillin* [phylacteries], a Torah scroll, a *megilah*¹⁰, a *shofar*¹¹, prayer books, *machzorim*¹² and even tractates of the Talmud. This fact may be attested to by the thousands of Jews who were in the camp and, first and foremost, by those who were part of his close circle, namely Rabbi [Isroel-Mojsze] Olewski¹³, who lives in the United States, Rabbi Benjamin Borzykowski, Dean of the Meor Ha'Golah *yeshiva* in Montreal, Canada, Reb Nojeh Edelist in Israel and an entire array of others.

When [the writer] Jacob Pat was in Częstochowa after the Second World Slaughter, following the collapse of the Nazi regime, he was gifted the *shofar*, which had been saved from the criminal hands of the Nazis.

On 15th January 1945, Rabbi Isroel-Josef Kutner was evacuated from the HASAG-Pelcery concentration camp in Częstochowa to Germany, going through the path of suffering like all the others in the Buchenwald, Dora and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps. On 15th April 1945 the camp was liberated by the British and, already on the third day, to everyone's amazement, he had a pair of *tefillin*. How

⁸ [TN: Heb., "sanctification of God's name"; Judaic term used in ref. to those who display their Jewish faith publicly, literally at the risk of their own life.]

⁹ [TN: G. Fogel was the leader of the Bundist committee in Łódź in the immediate aftermath of WWII; he subsequently emigrated to the US, where he contributed extensively to the Yiddish press. (Various sources)]

¹⁰ [TN: The Book of Esther in scroll form, which is read on Purim.]

¹¹ [TN: Ritual ram's horn blown on the High Holidays.]

¹² [TN: Special prayer books for the Jewish holidays.]

¹³ [TN: Rabbi Isroel-Mojsze Olewski (1916-1966) was the rabbi of Radziejów, Poland prior to WWII. In 1950, he emigrated to the US, where he became a leading figure of the Ger Chassidic group in Brooklyn, NY.]

this was possible is truly inexplicable. No one had ever been let out of the camp yet. So how could this be? On top of that, he guaranteed that they were kosher *tefillin*¹⁴.

This enigma was [only] fully clarified thirteen years later. In 1958, a book by Rabbi¹⁵ Leslie H. Hardman [and Cecily Goodman] was published, entitled *The Survivors: [the story of the Belsen Remnant]* (London 1958). Rabbi Leslie H. Hardman was the first Jewish [army] chaplain to enter Bergen-Belsen with the British forces. In his book, in chapter 10, entitled *The Symbol and the Sign*, on pp. 79-83, Rabbi Hardman describes, in detail, the story of his giving a pair of *tefillin* to one fervently pious young man, who put them on that very minute, reciting the blessings in a loud voice, with profound religious exaltation, and prayed the entire service by heart. This chapter and this episode are written in a particularly moving manner, because the story was not so straightforward. Rabbi Leslie H. Hardman, just amazed at such an ardent prayer, was already unable to refuse Rabbi Kutner's entreaty to pray with the *tefillin* every day. In the end, he granted him his request and gave him the *tefillin* as a gift.

As soon as it was possible to exit the camp, Rabbi Kutner and his friend Rabbi Olewski organised Jewish religious life in Celle, near Hannover. They took over the former synagogue and founded a Jewish *kehilla* [community management committee]. Rabbi Olewski became the Chief Rabbi of the British Zone in Germany and Rabbi Kutner [served as] cantor and *shochet*. Rabbi Kutner did not rest. He organised the kosher *shechitah* in the entire British Zone. He travelled all around the newly-established Jewish communities, such as [those in] Hannover, Bergen-Belsen, Lüneburg, Kaunitz, Hamburg and anywhere Jews lived, in order to provide everyone with kosher meat.

On 14th [Elul] 5706 ([10th September] 1946), he married his cousin Bronia Abramowicz. Ten days later, travelling in his car to Hamburg to fulfil his duties as *shochet*, a catastrophe took place. The vehicle hit a tree and Rabbi Kutner was killed in the accident. He was brought back to Celle and, in the same synagogue which he had organised and where he had served as cantor, he was eulogised by his colleague and friend, Rabbi Olewski. Rabbi Kutner departed from this world at the age of thirty and was brought to burial at the Jewish cemetery of the bygone "*Kultusgemeinde*" [Ger., religious community] of Celle. Eternal be his soul and memory.

2) Efrogim-Nechemje Trombkowski

Efrogim-Nechemje Trombkowski was one of the modern [orthodox] figures and representatives of religious life in Częstochowa. He was born in Częstochowa on 4th July 1921 and came from an illustrious family. His [maternal] grandfather was the halachic authority and ritual slaughterer in Kłobuck.

When the Nazis attacked Poland, with which the Second World Slaughter broke out, Efrogim-Nechemje Trombkowski was eighteen years old. At the time, he was still too young so as to be known to everyone. He [first] appeared on the horizon as a cantor in the sorrowfully renowned HASAG-Pelcery camp. When all were embittered, physically broken and struggling with pain and suffering, Efrogim-Nechemje Trombkowski appeared before his brothers and sisters and sang,

*"A time is yet to come,
Israel shall be free!"*

In the general apathy of the 6,000 Jewish inmates in HASAG-Pelcery, he brought in a ray of hope by singing his beloved songs - *The Exile Song*, *The Little Fish*, *Jewish Mother*, *Dudele* and *Częstochower Mame'le* [Little Częstochowa Mother]. He obtained of a prayer-shawl, a skullcap and a *machzor* and

¹⁴ [TN: Meaning that the leather casings had been opened and the parchments contained inside them had been checked for errors or incorrect formation of the letters, which would have rendered them unfit for use.]

¹⁵ [TN: Although an orthodox rabbi, Hardman's official title was "Reverend".]

became the *de facto* cantor. How he obtained these objects is truly inexplicable. There is only one plausible [explanation] - that Rabbi Israel-Josef Kutner z"l gave him those items when he smuggled all the religious artefacts into the camp. It is a characteristic fact that, in the one single wedding which took place in HASAG-Pelcery, Efrogim-Nechemje Trombkowski was the one who officiated the marriage. This was a remarkable happening in the camp, which also had to be held in secret.

The happy chance was that Efrogim-Nechemje Trombkowski was not evacuated and was liberated in Częstochowa on 17th January 1945. He could not remain in his hometown of Częstochowa, where all his family, relatives, friends and Jewish brothers and sisters had been exterminated by the Nazi murderers. He moved to Łódź, where the rabbinate appointed him as the official cantor and ritual slaughterer.

At the beginning of 1946, he left Łódź and came to Schwandorf, in the American Zone in Germany, where he served as cantor. Due to the fact that in Schwandorf there was a very small number of Jews, he was immediately engaged as town cantor in Bamberg, where there was already a sizeable Jewish community of the *Surviving Remnant*. He contributed a great deal in the religious arena. The synagogue became the meeting place for all the Jews and, during the prayer services, it was packed full.

There were many reasons which caused this. Firstly, everyone [needed to] say *Kaddish*¹⁶. Secondly, the thought of religion was developing intensely because, after years of religious persecution, the Jews simply felt an inner delight in being able to worship without terror and without fear in the beautiful synagogue, with a cantor's lectern, a *bimah*¹⁷, a Holy Ark and Torah scrolls. Thirdly, Cantor Efrogim-Nechemje Trombkowski's prayers were a delight to hear. The [Jewish] chaplain of the American army heard him pray once and, since then, he came every *Shabbes* with his Jewish soldiers. In his sermons, he always stressed the fact that both he and his soldiers derived the greatest enjoyment from hearing such a God-gifted cantor, who unified profound religiosity, tradition and music within himself. The Chaplain, Rabbi Shapiro, in fact made every effort to provide anything that was necessary for the synagogue.

On 30th January 1946, Cantor Efrogim-Nechemje Trombkowski married Fela Blogier from Radomsko, and led a quiet, comfortable life.

An inner driving force pushed him to complete himself in the field of vocal training and he studied diligently, making constant progress. All those, who knew him, foresaw a great, famous future for him in the world of cantorial singing and music. He graced all Jewish festive occasions [with his presence] and officiated at the wedding ceremonies of all the couples who married in Bamberg. His external appearance was that of a man of fine presence and elicited great deference towards him.

He also gained great renown for his *[El] Moleh [Rachamim]*¹⁸ at the many memorial ceremonies at which he appeared. On 20th October 1946, he appeared at the central [memorial] service of the *Częstochower landsleit* in Landsberg, in the American zone in Germany. Then, he performed with all his glory and splendour, with his prestigious appearance and wonderfully lyrical tenor voice, which elicited amazement and tears from everyone.

At the end of July 1947, he closed his eyes forever at the blossoming age of twenty-six. Two [sic three] months after his death, on 24th October 1947, his wife gave birth to a son, who bears the name of his father who died young, Efrogim-Nechemje Trombkowski.

¹⁶ [TN: The Kaddish prayer for the souls of the departed may only be said publically, in a quorum of at least ten adult males.]

¹⁷ [TN: Heb., platform to read the Torah scroll.]

¹⁸ [TN: Heb., God Full of Compassion; memorial prayer.]

This is the story of the lives of two young cantors who, with self-sacrifice, religious heroism and *Kiddush Ha'Shem*, organised houses of worship, during the High Holidays of 1943 and 1944, in the HASAG-Pelcery concentration camp in Częstochowa.

This is the story of the lives of two colourful personalities, two young cantors and religious martyrs, who departed so prematurely from this world. Eternal be their names and memory.