

## Perl Prokosz RIP – the Mother of the Shanghai Ghetto



The late Perl Prokosz was the mother of the Shanghai ghetto. How did she come to be in Shanghai? What did her activities consist of, that she should be crowned with such a title? This is a remarkable and unique life history of a Jewish woman during the Second World War.

Perl Prokosz, the daughter of Reb Mendel and Dwojra Kryman RIP, was born in Częstochowa, Poland. She received a Jewish upbringing and a *gimnazjum* education. Her father, the late Reb Mendel, was a pious and scholarly Jew, who took an active part in the charitable institutions and [also] gave to charity in secret<sup>1</sup>.

Perl followed in her father's paths. Before the War, she headed a bacteriology laboratory. In 1937, she married to Szmul Prokosz.

On Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939, Germany attacked Poland. The Second World Inferno broke out and, on Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, at nine o'clock in the morning, the Nazi troops entered the city of Częstochowa with their motorised units, which cast dread and fear upon the entire Jewish populace.

Immediately on the following day, 4<sup>th</sup> September, the first pogrom ensued, which has gone down in history as "Bloody Monday". With every passing day, Jewish life became more uncertain. So, the Prokosz couple decided to tear themselves away from the claws of death, and set out on the wander's road to the Russian zone, to Wilno. Smuggling themselves across the border was no easy feat. The rapacious eyes of the villainous Nazi guards lurked everywhere - especially at the border. Despite the difficulties, they still managed to streak across the border and arrived in Wilno. This was in 1940.

However, in Wilno also, there was no possibility of remaining in the hope of surviving the War. The Nazis were already preparing their aggressive plans. The Prokosz couple set out on a new wandering across Russia, through desolate and ice-cold Siberia, and through Vladivostok, to Japan. In Japan, they began selling whatever they still had in their possession, in order to be able to live and also to help others. Perl Prokosz transformed her small flat into an *hachnuses orchim*<sup>2</sup>.

In Japan life was also unsafe, as it belonged to the Nazi axis - it was bound by a pact with Hitler's Germany and with Mussolini's Italy. After a period of seven months, they moved to

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Viz. without the receivers knowing the identity of their benefactor, which is done in order not to shame the receivers.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Heb., "hospitality to guests".]

Shanghai. In Shanghai, Szmul Prokosz engaged in the production of souvenir items. Here, life was also not easy.

The Japanese were in rule there and a ghetto was established. Those, who did not enter the ghetto on time, were arrested and placed into detention cells. As it turned out, these cells were poisoned with bacilli, and all the inmates contracted a high fever - many of them died. The "lucky ones", who made it to hospital, were at first unable to receive any medical assistance, because the doctors did not know what their illness was or how to cure them. As a result, quite a number of patients perished.

During this time, Perl Prokosz was ferociously active. She was the first to find out who, among the released arrestees, had had a high fever and what was the first symptom of the strange malady. She was the first to ensure that the patient should be admitted to hospital. This was no easy feat. Firstly, the ghetto hospital was overflowing and there was no place available. Secondly, every patient had to pay a considerable sum of money. The majority of the sufferers had no financial means whatsoever.

Perl Prokosz then approached various aid committees to do something to aid these sick people. The response was that, firstly, a meeting had to be held to decide upon the matter. This reply was not satisfactory, because it was a life-and-death question, and they could not wait with the patients for a single minute. Perl Prokosz came to her husband in tears and declared that the sufferers needed to go straight to hospital, and that no time must be lost. From their own modest financial means, the Prokosz couple paid the hospital for the patients who had no financial means of their own, and all the sufferers were immediately admitted to hospital. The number of sick also increased and there were cases of mortality. The Joint came to help and even repaid the money to the Prokosz couple. When Perl Prokosz paid for the sick, she gave no thought at all as to whether she would receive the money back.

Due to a high temperature, the sick were unable to eat anything. What they needed to have were lemons and sugar, which were impossible to obtain in the ghetto. In order to buy this, it was necessary to go to the Japanese quarter, which required a special permit to exit the ghetto, because otherwise it was bound with deadly peril. Perl Prokosz overcame all the difficulties and provided lemons and sugar to make the lemonade, which was the main means of nourishment for the patients with a high fever. Perl Prokosz spent almost entire days and nights at the hospital. They did not succeed in keeping everyone alive and, also among those who perished from the epidemic, was a *Częstochower landsmann*.

During this same period, an incident occurred in which a Russian auxiliary policeman caught a *Częstochower landsmann* and demanded, within six hours, a ransom of five hundred dollars. At the time, the Prokosz couple had no more than three hundred and twenty dollars. Perl Prokosz conducted a negotiation, and the matter was settled for three hundred dollars. The *landsmann* was brought into the ghetto, and was thus saved from the infected prison. He now lives, in good health, in the American continent.

It is for these deeds that she was crowned "the mother of the Shanghai Ghetto". [But,] her activities were not limited to this. After the War, she was widely active for the benefit of the refugees suffering poverty in Shanghai. This emerges from a letter, which the Committee of

Polish Jews, refugees of war, in Shanghai, wrote to Perl Prokosz, in which gratitude and recognition are expressed to her for the 195,000 (one hundred and ninety-five thousand) Shanghai dollars<sup>3</sup> and fifteen American dollars, which she had raised and given over to the Committee. The letter is dated 24<sup>th</sup> September 1946, № 166/46. This letter proves that her title - “the mother of the Shanghai Ghetto” - was well-founded and justified.

In April 1948, the Prokosz couple left Shanghai and arrived in Canada. Here, in Montreal, Perl Prokosz also did not sit with folded hands. She was active in the Ladies Auxiliary of the Czenstochover Landsmanshaft of Montreal. She was the one who displayed maternal and sisterly feelings towards those who felt lonely and in despair, like a ship tossing in a stormy sea. She created a family-like and friendly atmosphere in the activities of the Ladies Auxiliary. She personally contributed considerable sums of money, and collected respectable donations to aid *landsleit* in Israel and overseas. These communal activities, and especially the relief activities for *landsleit*, were her ideal, and she would carry them out with great devotion.

Perl Prokosz was like an institution on her own. She was in contact with friends and acquaintances and would send them financial aid from her own money. This is the highest praise that may be said of a person.

Perl Prokosz died suddenly on the night from Saturday to Sunday, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1961. She left behind, in grief, her husband Szmul and their only son Josef. Her husband Szmul Prokosz planted a thousand trees in the Canada Forest in Israel in sacred and everlasting memory of Perl Prokosz RIP.

Honoured be her memory.

### **Comment From the Book Committee**

At the funeral, Dr Benjamin Orenstein eulogised the deceased Perl Prokosz RIP – and, taking into account the colossal selfless activities of the departed for the benefit of the *Landsmannschaft* and the community in general, the Book Committee has decided to print several short fragments of the obituary in honour of the deceased Perl Prokosz RIP.

*“On behalf of the Czenstochover Landsmanshaft of Montreal, I stand, with a bowed head, before your coffin and part from you, in the name of all the landsleit and the multitude of friends and acquaintances, who have gathered here in great numbers.*

*It is true that ‘Man's origin is from dust, and his end is dust<sup>4</sup>.’ It is also true that ‘One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh<sup>5</sup>.’ These are laws which no man may alter, for such is the order of this world. But, at your young age, and following so many struggles and suffering in the times of the Nazi tyranny, and now when it was already possible for you to live in a free country and under normal conditions, it is truly an agony and sorrow that you have departed from this world.*

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<sup>3</sup> [TN: As it emerges from a contemporary source (the Royal Australian Naval College Magazine, Issue 34, 1946), one USD was the equivalent of roughly 145 Shanghai dollars at the time. If this is correct, the sum of 195,000 Shanghai dollars would come to USD1,345.]

<sup>4</sup> [TN: Verse from the liturgical poem “Unesanneh Tokef”, which is recited on the High Holidays.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: Ecclesiastes 1:4.]

*I shall not attempt to console anyone, for I am living this grief myself, in the depths of my heart, So, how am I to comfort your husband Szmul, your only eleven-year-old son Josef, the landsleit, the friends and those who knew you?*

*Perl Prokosz, who has been united with eternity and will now be taken to her eternal repose, stems from our home of old. She stems from a spiritual environment - the environment of a generation of truth, justice and uprightness; from a generation which valued the individual and the community - a generation which was infused with absolute faith and dedicated to the interests of the individual and the community, guarding the Jewish honour of the individual and the community and, above all, the honour of our nation. Her life was an expression of the highest level of humanity and dedication to others. Her good deeds shone down from her head like a crown. She performed these good deeds with an inner, hearty devotion and a smile on her lips.*

*On behalf of the Czenstochover Landsmanshaft and Ladies Auxiliary and on behalf of all the friends and those who knew her, I express my greatest respect, deference and reverence for the deceased Perl Prokosz RIP - and in the merit of her good deeds and communal activities, and the merit of having represented a generation of truth, justice and uprightness. May she rest in peace, and let us say Amen.*

