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Fragments of Jewish Life in Częstochowa on the Eve of the Second World War¹ (a chapter of memories)

In many respects, Jewish Częstochowa could serve as a model of a beautiful Jewish life, both with its institutions and with those who headed them. Jewish Częstochowa possessed an entire array of personalities, who were always prepared to do something for the public good. In the best possible manner, they regularly devoted their time and energy to organise the Jewish life of this large and respected Jewish city.

In normal times, Częstochowa had a population of 135,000, of whom only about 35,000 were Jews. But nevertheless, this ethnic minority occupied the forefront in the city's financial life. The Jews developed industry, creating jobs for many thousands of Christian workers.

The city of Częstochowa played a unique role in Polish history. There were times when this city was considered as the holiest religious-national relic that Congress Poland possessed. In the times of the bygone independent [Kingdom of] Poland, the name Częstochowa was always glorified, especially during the moments of the historical fight for existence as a nation. This was mostly during wars, when foreign armies stormed the fortress of Częstochowa, which was the gateway that opened up the heart of Poland - Warsaw. But, when such wars ended with a victory for the Polish Army, this "miracle" would be ascribed to the "merit" of the sacred icon of Mary, which is in the monastery of Jasna Góra, or "Klarenberg", as it was called in almost all Western European geographies and guidebooks.

Over the course of time, the Częstochowa monastery became so famous throughout Poland that people travelled there not only to pray, but also to do a little looting. The gifts to the church increased and fantastic rumours spread of the treasures of gold that were to be found there. In 1430, a band of Polish noblemen attacked the monastery and carried off some of the valuables, including the "sacred icon".

According to the legend, written in the monastery's unprinted chronicles, when the robbers took away the icon, "the picture began to weep". The robbers were startled and, whether in rage or in fear, they began cutting the picture with a sword, and [then] fled, leaving the icon behind, not far from Jasna Góra. Those, who had robbed the treasures, were captured and sentenced to death.

¹ [TN: Most of this article consists of excerpts from Dr Jakow Szacki's article in "Czenstochover Yidn", "The Jews in Częstochowa to the First War World" (pp. 3-31).]