

Harry Klein

How Jewish Life Looked in Częstochowa¹

Back in the “good” years [before the War], Poland was “blessed” with *Endekes* ([members of the] National Democratic Party). They were the greatest opponents to Piłsudski’s Sanacja Party, and also the most hard-bitten haters of Jews. This “plague” gained particular strength within the city of Częstochowa.

Between the two World Wars, the wealth and poverty in Jewish life in Poland - as a community and as individuals - on the one hand, and the government’s anti-Jewish policies on the other, demanded a wide area of work from the *Kehilla* and made its existence necessary. Both these aspects gave content to the *Kehilla* organisation and determined its autonomous character. Częstochowa’s Jewish life created a wide field of work for the *Kehilla* organisation, which had to set the pace of Jewish life in Częstochowa.

Everything is deeply engraved in our memory. Before your eyes stand, as if you had just seen them yesterday, the city’s streets, [with] the hundreds of Jewish houses, which were built through Jewish initiative and energy. There were synagogues and study-halls there, educational institutions and *yeshivas*, commercial [and] professional unions, political parties, economic and social institutions, and financial establishments.

Most particularly, Jewish Częstochowa prided itself on its spiritual Jewish leaders, in the religious sense. Besides the great prodigy Rabbi Reb Nachum Asz, who adorned the city, Częstochowa also had a whole line of Halachic authorities and judges, as well as regular [Torah] scholars, of great repute. I will mention [only] a few of these here, such as, for example, Reb Josse’le *Kira* (or, as he was called, “Josse’le Prokosz²”), who was one of the Halachic authorities upon whom the rabbi could always depend; or the Halachic authority and judge Reb Nachum Grinfeld, Reb Josse’le Klajnplac and Reb Josef Rubin (the *Rebbe* Reb Awigdor’s son-in-law).

It is not easy to write of the last weeks of the Częstochowa Jewry, on the eve of the Second World War - everyone thought that no misfortune could befall him.

Friday, 1st September 1939

In the early morning hours, Nazi Germany attacked Poland. Already on the third day, on Sunday 3rd September, at nine o’clock in the morning, Nazi motorised units began to penetrate Częstochowa and, one day later, the first slaughter began, which has received the name:

¹ [TN: Most of this article consists of excerpts from different pieces by various authors in the books “Czenstochover Yidn” (1947) and “Czenstochov” (1958).]

² [TN: His actual name was Rabbi Josef Prokosz, and he was nicknamed Reb Josse’le “Kira”, or Austrian, because he was a native of Austrian-controlled Galicia.]

“Bloody Monday”

The first three days of Nazi rule over Częstochowa were marked by bloody murder and looting. Jewish economic life was completely paralysed. Repressions and regulations poured down like hail, the aim of which was to psychologically suffocate Jewish life.

It was barely four months after the Germans occupied Częstochowa when, on the night from 24th to 25th December 1939, German Christians, assisted by dark elements from among the Polish populace, perpetrated one of their most disgraceful deeds against the Jews in Częstochowa.

Suddenly, on ul. Garibaldiiego (formerly ul. Spadek) the wild clamour of Polish youth intermingled with yells in German was heard, directly followed by [a hail of] stones hurled at the windows of the Jewish houses. This was the first portent of something evil. A few minutes later, one could already see German and Polish hooligans throwing incendiary bombs into the New “German” Synagogue at the corner of ul. Wilsona and ul. Garibaldiiego.

The blaze quickly engulfed the *Shul*’s interior fittings. The pews, the *Shulchan* [Heb., Table³], the Holy Ark with the Torah scrolls, and all other components of the house of prayer were obliterated by the fire, which spread more and more. It was only at about three o’clock in the morning that the fire burnt itself out, consuming the last remains of the once great Synagogue. Today, its walls are [still] standing, in memory of the Częstochowa [Jewish] community’s former glory.

The pulsating, colourful life of the populous Jewish community in Częstochowa was disrupted the moment the Second World-Slaughter broke out, and Hitler’s legions marched into the city. The great disaster had begun, which ended in 1942 - with the catastrophe on the entire Jewish settlement in Częstochowa, which was severed by Hitler’s murderers, may their name be obliterated!

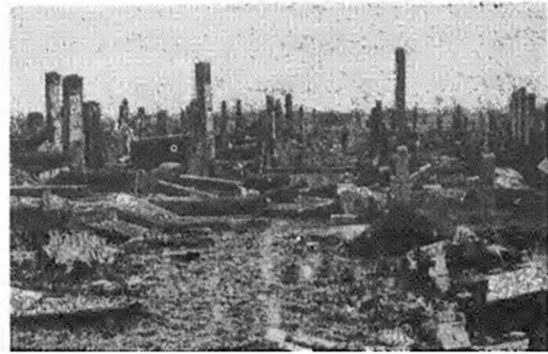


The Old Synagogue



The Częstochowa railway station

³[TN: Viz. the platform from which the Torah is read.]



This is what the destroyed Jewish cemetery in Częstochowa looked like in 1946