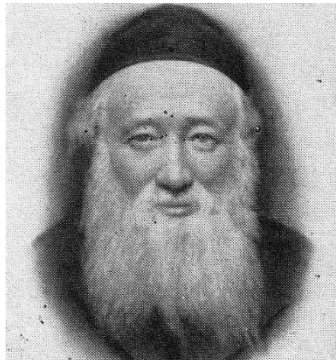


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Personalities and Figures from a Destroyed World¹



Rabbi Josef Prokosz ztz"l

Rabbi Josef Prokosz was, and to this day remains, a symbol of the Częstochowa Jewish spiritual, scholarly and religious elite.

Częstochowa Jewry showed great deference and respect towards Rabbi Josef Prokosz during his lifetime, as have done the Częstochowa survivors, following his death in the sanctification of the Name [of God] and the People [of Israel].

Rabbi Josef Prokosz represented spiritual Częstochowa, for over four decades, as a *halachic* authority and as a leader of public prayers. He was distinguished for his sweetness as a cantor, and as a religious judge and arbitrator.

Rabbi Josef Prokosz was born in Galicia in 1872 and, already as a child, gained a reputation as a young prodigy with a phenomenal memory. As the *yeshivas* in Galicia were no longer suited to his elevated knowledge, he travelled to the then world-famous *yeshiva* in Mstów, where he was ordained as a rabbi. In Mstów, he was wed to Dwojra, the daughter of Reb Hersz-Joel Amsterdam [sic Amsterdamer]. Following his nuptials, he moved to Częstochowa and, there, became a permanent resident.

Rabbi Josef Prokosz made himself very well-liked in Częstochowa as a *halachic* authority. He was extremely guarded, when deciding upon *halachic* questions. The word "*treifah*"² almost never came out of his mouth.

Rabbi Josef Prokosz was given the nickname "Reb Josse'le Kira". This name is characteristic and stems from the [Hebrew] abbreviation KY[R]H, which is short for "*Kisar yarum hodo*" [His Majesty the Emperor]. The name originates in the fact that Rabbi Josef Prokosz was a native

¹ [TN: This article was originally published on pp. 289-292 of the book "Czenstochover Landsmanshaft of Montreal".]

² [TN: Heb., lit. "torn by a beast of prey"; *halachic* term used in ref. to "any food, food product, or utensil that, according to the Jewish dietary laws (*kashruth*, q.v.), is not ritually clean or prepared according to law and is thus prohibited as unfit for Jewish use. *Tereifah* is thus the antithesis of *kosher* ('fit')." (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)]

of Galicia, which was part of the Austrian crown, and various [tales] were told of Emperor Franz Joseph's good deeds. Therefore, this nickname characterised both Rabbi Josef Prokosz's origins and his good deeds³. It is a fact that many *Częstochowers* are unfamiliar with the name Rabbi Josef Prokosz, but they are able to relate countless [stories] about Reb Josse'le Kira, the greatly assiduous scholar and benefactor.

Let us hereby recount but a few episodes:

Whoever passed, in the late-night hours, through [the courtyard] of ul. Ogródowa 27, which was a passageway to ul. Krakowska 14, would hear the singsong of Reb Josse'le Kira's study. The same also occurred in the very early morning hours. Nobody knew when Reb Josse'le Kira slept, because he was always engrossed in study. In the cold, frosty nights he would sit by his Talmud book wearing a fur coat, because it was cold in the house - it was not heated. Next to his Talmud stood a little petrol lamp with a rounded, sparse, little wick, so as not to consume excessive fuel.

But was Reb Josse'le Kira so great a pauper, that he could not allow himself a large petrol lamp and a little heating for his home? After all, he was the city's halachic authority⁴ and, following the demise of the rabbi and prodigy, Rabbi Nachum Asz, he served as town rabbi. He was the official representative of the Jewish faith before the state courts in Częstochowa, which would refer to him an entire array of matters to settle by accepting a religious oath. Furthermore, he also performed as judge and arbitrator in various affairs that people brought to him from different towns - all of which should have brought him a very large income. How may it be explained, then, that Rabbi Josef Prokosz was unable to afford a little petrol or heating for the house?

The answer is as follows:

Reb Josse'le Kira would not let the [Jewish] litigants, referred to him by the [state] court, to actually come to swearing an oath⁵. These were mostly affairs concerning small rings, chains and watches, with which one side had swindled the other. For instance, one had purchased a gold necklace for the official price, and it had turned out to be just a piece of common metal that had been gilded. Reb Josse'le Kira considered that, beyond the civil trial, the accused could also be subjected to a criminal trial and require imprisonment, which would be detrimental to Jewish honour. Therefore he, himself, would offer to personally purchase the bit of worthless metal for the same price which the plaintiff had paid. The sides, as was the custom, signed a paper to the court to the effect they had settled their differences and had no claims against each other, and they requested that the court to cancel the trial.

There was one such affair, which was the subject of all kinds of jokes, involving an antique. This antique consisted of a gold watch, which was wound with a little key. Once the buyer became convinced that this was no golden antique but just a worthless "*tzibe'le*"⁶, he was

³ [TN: The abbreviation KYRH (pronounced "Kira") appears in older Yiddish dictionaries as a general nickname for anyone from Austria – it was not specific to Rabbi Prokosz.]

⁴ [TN: Rabbi Prokosz served alongside Rabbi Josef Klajnplac as deputy rabbi to Chief Rabbi Nachum Asz.]

⁵ [TN: "The taking of a vow in Judaism was not encouraged by the Talmudic rabbis, unless it was to be used as a last resort." (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vow, Religion)]

⁶ [TN: Yid., "little onion", viz. just a dud.]

prepared to have the other side put away in prison for years. In a bid to prevent bloodshed and evil consequences, Reb Josse'le Kira purchased the "antique" for 250 złoty - a huge sum at that time. However, he did not have such a colossal sum to pay. He [therefore] issued - for the first time in his life - a promissory note due a few weeks [later]. But Reb Josse'le Kira could not rest- he had signed a promissory note and was compelled to fulfil his obligation. His entire household was mobilised to borrow money with which to pay the note. The money was raised that same evening by way of various loans, and the note was settled.

The greatest Torah scholars considered Rabbi Prokosz a prodigy. At the same time, he was [also] a master of Aggadah⁷ – what would nowadays be called a folklorist. With his allegories, examples, fittingly-chosen words and pearls of wisdom, he elicited delight and interest.

Reb Josse'le Kira was a great philanthropist and would donate above his means. He ostensibly gave "loans" to everyone, but no one ever paid him back. These were mostly small traders, who could not make ends meet, crushed by the extraordinary taxes, and whose shops were often wrecked and destroyed by Polish hooligans. They would come to Rabbi Prokosz for a loan, and he never refused anyone - Heaven forbid! He never had much money and, if someone came to him requesting fifty złoty, he would naively reply, "But it would be too difficult for you to return such a sum. I shall therefore only lend you half - 25 złoty." The band of borrowers were already well aware of this - so they would always state double the sum which they actually needed and thus received the necessary amount.



The Second World Inferno broke out. The Nazis, may their name be obliterated, occupied Częstochowa. The arrows of the Nazi murder machine were pointed, first and foremost, at the religious Jews. Despite the continuous persecutions and repressions, the destruction of houses of prayer and the annihilation of religious figures, Rabbi Josef Prokosz did not desist from his sacred work. With increased energy, already above his physical strengths, he ran the Częstochowa Rabbinate and led a struggle for the bolstering of religion, mobilising the best forces. This is proven by the fact that the son of the great Rabbi Nachum Asz served as Secretary of the Rabbinate, with a staff of thirty-six functionaries.

[Despite all this,] Rabbi Josef Prokosz did not cease to study day and night, engrossing himself in the issues of reward and punishment. He could not imagine [why] the misfortune was so great and so near. His senses told him that he was breaking down under the heavy burden of Jewish troubles and pain, from which he was unable to find any way out. His patriarchal white beard turned even whiter. His high forehead, which showed his wisdom and genius, became covered in deep furrows. His pale, noble features became even paler and more sunken. His blue eyes blazed like fires, along with the feelings in his heart, expressing profound belief and faith.

⁷ [TN: "Those parts of rabbinical, or Talmudic, literature that do not deal directly with the laws incumbent upon Jews in the conduct of their daily life." (Encyclopaedia Britannica)]

Rabbi Prokosz fell ill and became a patient in the Jewish Hospital. Two of Rabbi Prokosz's daughters were at the hospital - one was Mrs Gwendla Goldberg-Prokosz, who was working there as an accountant, and the other was Ester, who was hiding in the hospital, thinking she would thus avoid the Nazi massacres.

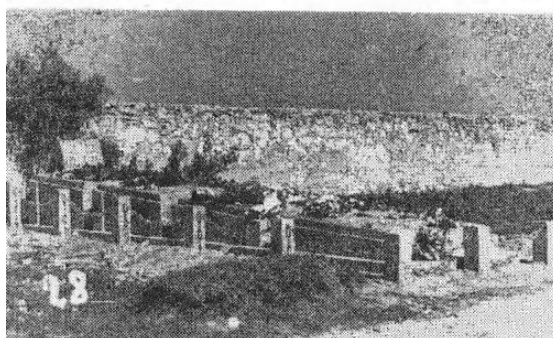
As is known, the arch-murderer of Częstochowa Jewry, the Nazi killer Degenhardt, issued orders to kill all the patients, using injections of poison. As reported by the nurse Helena Majtlis, who currently lives in Poland, Rabbi Prokosz, like all the other patients in the hospital, was killed by an injection of poison. His two daughters, Gwendla and Ester, also perished.

Rabbi Prokosz's family consisted of six offspring - two sons (Joel and Szmul) and four daughters (Gwendla, Ester, Ruchla and Chana). His wife, Dwojra Prokosz, died in 1935. Rabbi Josef Prokosz, his son Joel and his three daughters, Gwendla, Ester and Ruchla, perished at the hands of the Nazi murderers. Szmul Prokosz and Chana Boruchowska-Prokosz survived, living now in Montreal.

The main pillar of Częstochowa's religious Jewry, Rabbi Josef Prokosz of blessed and sainted memory, along with the large majority of his family, perished at the hands of the Nazi cannibals on the altar of the Jewish faith and the sanctification of the Name [of God] and the People [of Israel].



The new wall enclosing the Częstochowa cemetery, built after the Destruction, with the aid of the New York Czenstochover Relief Committee



The mass-grave of doctors, dentists and other professionals killed on Purim 1943