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The Fight to Save the Jewish Cemetery in a Town Without Jews

When the last remaining survivors from the camps and Russian gulags returned to their Polish towns and shtetls of birth, they quickly became convinced that they needed to move away as soon as possible and find themselves new homes.

We remember those first post-war days - the meetings with our Christian neighbours, who had not taken into account that Jews were still alive. We have not forgotten the insecurity on the trains, the slayings by the AK¹ people, the horrifying pogrom in Kielce on Pesach 1946, and the panic and fear of the refugees in Częstochowa. We prepared to set out on the road. All that was left was the Jewish cemetery behind the city, where it was perilous to enter and say goodbye to the tombs. Our families, parents and siblings were not there - they had perished in Treblinka.

The Częstochowa Jewish cemetery, until the Holocaust, was over a hundred years old. My grandfathers and grandmothers had their cherished headstones there. At the entrance, in the very first rows, was the prominent headstone of my great-grandfather Icchok-Hersz Kieńczygłowski, one of the community's pioneers. We remember the marble monuments of the industrialists and philanthropists, the *ohalim* [Heb., mausoleums] of *Rebbes* and rabbis, and the tombstones of scholars, common people and [special] individuals, who perished in sanctification of the Name [of God]. There were large mass graves there, [of those] killed in the pogrom of 1919. During the Holocaust period, new mass graves were added from the *akcja* on children, the intelligentsia shot at the cemetery, the HASAG selection, and the grave of the partisans.

On ul. Kawia, there is a mass grave of the two thousand Jews killed during the great *akcja* in 1942. That is all that we have left of the wonderful city, Jewish Częstochowa where, during the "Big Ghetto" period, there were still 50,000 Jews - men, women and children.

Of our effervescent Jewish life, with two [main] synagogues, study-halls, two Jewish *gimnazja* [Pol., secondary schools], a *Ha'Chalutz*² horticultural farm, organisations, choirs, libraries, political parties, Chassidic *shtieblech*³ and *Rebbes'* courts, a Peretz primary school, and a living, melodious Yiddish language, was silenced in the days of the Holocaust.

All that remains of all this is a neglected Jewish cemetery, which gives no repose to our townspeople, and particularly to the second generation, who live in America, Israel and other countries. They come to their ancestral tombs, seeking the traces of childhood years - the alleyways and houses where their parents lived, the ghetto, the *Aleje*, the club located on the site of the spacious synagogue that was blown up, the new *mikve* [Heb., ritual bathhouse] on

¹ [TN: Acronym of the Pol. "Armia Krajowa", or "Home Army".]

² [TN: Heb., "The Pioneer"; Zionist pioneering movement to prepare Jews for emigration to Palestine and life there, mainly agricultural.]

³ [TN: Yid., "little houses/rooms"; special prayer houses belonging to a specific Chassidic group.]

ul. Garibaldi, and the sorrowful Martyrs' Square. Others come to visit a Polish family which rescued a Jewish child, or someone hidden in a bunker.

They tell of large, modern buildings, factories, ironworks, new railway stations - Częstochowa is unrecognisable. But for the Jewish visitors, it is an unfamiliar city. The cemetery, with its headstones, is all that reminds one that Jews once lived here. Behind the cemetery is an ironworks, and the management, the engineers, needed this "good place"⁴ for all kinds of purposes, and primarily for the outflow of polluted liquids that the foundry discharges. The Częstochowa municipality even gave a deadline for the Jews interested in transferring the bones of their relatives to the Land of Israel or elsewhere.

More than one actually did so. But what is to be done about the remaining graves? There were hundreds of headstones still left, even though many had been pulled up by the Germans and Poles. Our *landsleit*, indeed, did not rest. They raised the alarm, knocked on all the doors, and petitioned the Mayor and the higher authorities in Warsaw – but it was to no avail.

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Upon leaving Poland forty-three years ago, we thought of Spain. In our time, we did not even declare a boycott on Germany. Each individual made his own decisions as to how to proceed. I promised myself that I would not tread the soil that had soaked up the blood of our families. I have never had the desire to visit Poland. But not everyone feels this way, especially the younger ones and the children of the *Surviving Remnant*, who seek the roots of their heritage.

I was by no means able to convince my daughter in Israel not to visit Poland. She was drawn to seeing the house where she was born, the dwellings of our parents, the ghetto and the children's convent, where she was saved as a Christian child - and, above all, the Jewish cemetery in Częstochowa. In the Israeli journal *Ariel*, she described the forsaken "good place" - the graves strewn with refuse and overgrown with wild weeds. She photographed tombstones, but there was no trace of my ancestors.

A Polish woman from the vicinity complained to her that the Germans had robbed the best headstones, leaving only the cheapest.

This state of affairs continued until the last months of 1989. Now a change took place. The attitude of the government and the local officials became more sensitive to the most painful Jewish wrongs and claims. Not only did they become friendlier, but they were cooperative and were prepared to cover the expenses together with the Jewish donors from abroad. As friends tell me, the cemetery in Częstochowa is nowadays cleaned and looked after, and one has access to the tombstones.

At the latest memorial gathering of the *Częstochowers* in New York, Harry Rapaport, the son of one who escaped from Treblinka, gave an account of the fight and endeavours on part of the *landsleit* to save the cemetery. He showed large photographs of himself working alongside

⁴ [TN: Yiddish euphemism for graveyard.]

Polish labourers at the cemetery, the mass graves and various headstones, and of him saying *Kaddish* over his grandfather's tomb.

He also found a great number of Torah scrolls⁵ and brought them to New York. A great many Torah scrolls - [both] good ones and torn - still remain there. The Secretary of the Czenstochover Society of New York found *sforim* [Heb., (religious) books] and Yiddish books at the *mikve*. [And] they are not the only ones who come in search of traces of their past, the cultural legacy of families that perished.

⁵ [TN: A Torah scroll is one of a Jewish congregation's most prized possessions. Besides their religious value, Torah scrolls are extremely costly to produce, as it takes an expert scribe about a year of full-time work to complete just one.]