

Noach Edelist

Religious Jewry in the Holocaust

Jewish Częstochowa, which numbered about 35,000 souls, was renowned for its exemplary communal organisations and its wide cultural activity - in its primary and secondary schools, in the *cheders* and *yeshivas*, in the “*Beis Yaakov*” schools for girls and in the technical schools, [institutions] in which thousands of children studied.

The city was blessed with hundreds of synagogues, *shtieblech* [and] study-halls in which thousands of Jews worshipped and studied the Torah. They were engaged in Torah, [religious] precepts and good deeds - day and night. These places served as spiritual centres for the multitudes of the House of Israel and were under the influence of the Chassidic *Rebbes* and the local rabbinate.

Despite the prohibitions, perils and the grave circumstances, the Jews of Częstochowa began organising in order to continue the age-old traditions. The schools functioned clandestinely. The *yeshiva* students continued studying in hiding and the synagogues were full of worshippers.

This, sadly, did not continue for long. From the very beginning, the Nazi invader began persecuting and arresting the city's Jewish leadership. The first victims also included the rabbis, who were detained in order to put pressure on the Jewish population and to extort vast sums of money as ransom. With [various] decrees, the Germans robbed the property of the Jews [and] impounded all the financial institutions, such as banks, charity funds, etc. which were in Jewish hands. The owners of factories and businesses were stripped of their assets and, in their places, trustees were installed - [either] Germans or ethnically German Poles (*Volksdeutsche*). By these means, the Germans were able to quickly cut off the Jewish population's sources of livelihood and employment. The city's plight increased with the inflow of refugees, who came from different parts to Częstochowa, thinking that the situation in our city was better. In a short time, the city's Jewish population reached 60,000 and the over-crowding, as well as the poverty, became unbearable.

The Nazi invader was not content with stripping the Jews of their livelihoods and [imposing] forced labour, but also initiated terror operations against the Jewish spiritual centres. In the month of Kislev 5699 (1939), the New Synagogue on ul. Garibaldiego was set on fire. Refugees were housed in the majority of prayer-houses, *shtieblech*, synagogues and study-halls. All the schools were closed and, due to the prohibition on public assemblies, public prayer entailed great dangers. Despite this, the Jews continued praying in private prayer-groups and they put their lives at risk to organise their religious and cultural life. Instead of at the schools, which had been closed by German orders, the children studied Torah in lessons and sermons which were delivered before masses of Jews, who attended them to find solace in their words. The *Rebbe* of Pilica, the rabbi, righteous man and prodigy Reb Henech God Justman *hy''d*, paid no heed to the emergency situation and continued teaching Torah and going every morning to his study-hall, despite the Germans having forbidden going outside in these morning hours. Until the year 5702 [1942], secret meetings of the religious Jewry's leaders were held at the *Pilcer Rebbe's* dwelling, to plan charity events¹ and prayer rallies to annul the Evil Decree. The *mincha* service for *Yom Kippur* Eve was prayed on a daily basis, with weeping and entreaties, recitation of psalms, etc.

¹ [TN: “Righteousness [i.e., charity] delivereth from death” (Proverbs 10:2).]

Despite the forced labour which all men were required to do, a group of young *Gerer Chassidim* was organised. They dug themselves a cellar on ul. Przemysłowa and studied the Torah day and night, without going out to the street at all over a very prolonged period. At first, Reb Awrum Naftuli Horowicz *hy''d* saw to their needs and, after his death, the writer of these lines took an interest in them. In all those years, these young men did not change their attire, cut their sidelocks off or shave their beards - despite the perils this entailed.

One of the city's Torah scholars, Reb Szaja Lewenhof *hy''d*, lectured at the *Chevra Kadisha* hall on the Halachic aspects of martyrdom² and particularly on the booklet on this subject, which was received from the rabbi and prodigy Reb Aryeh Lajb Frymer³ *hy''d* of Roźniatów, one of the deans of the Sages of Lublin *Yeshiva*.



*At the destroyed tomb of the Rebbe of Pilica, Reb Pinches Eluzor Menachem Justman ztz''l
and his son Reb Icze Majer z''l*

² [TN: Being killed for one's religion, viz. in which cases one must give one's life and in which not.]

³ [TN: Aka Aryeh Tzvi (or Lajb Hersz in Yiddish) Frumer.]