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“Beis Ha’Talmud” [The Talmud House] at the Study-Hall



Poland did not distinguish itself with large *yeshives*¹ as did Lithuania. The study-halls in every town served as Torah centres for youth whose souls desired the pursuit of Torah [studies] and students and seekers of Torah gathered there. And if the Jews of Poland have always been considered as groups of learned and pious men, from whom stemmed famous geniuses and young prodigies, the vast majority of them came from the study-halls.

In Częstochowa as well, the study-hall accompanied the city from its origins until its last day. Its elders yet recall the old study-hall, which was next to the Old Synagogue on ul. Nadrzeczna, with its elaborate columns on the outside and the glory and splendour on the inside, whilst the young remember this study-hall in its last reincarnations, when it was re-located to the yard of the “*Machzikei Hadas*” *cheder* and, later, to ul. Ogradowa 4.

The vestiges of the Częstochowa study-hall, which remain with us today, all speak extensively of the beautiful life, of the noble spirit that prevailed within its walls and of the congenial spirit which emanated and burst forth from this spiritual centre.

The study-hall was crowded day and night with the tens of bachelors and married men who spent most hours of the day in it. The clamour² of study emerged from it and was heard from far off. The study-hall produced an entire row of erudite personalities who became famous as outstanding scholars.

I shall attempt to recount a minuscule part of the study-hall’s life, in the fifteen years leading up to the Holocaust.

Częstochowa was renowned as a modern and progressive city. The leaders of the community and its patrons were partially-assimilated Jews, partially progressive-orthodox Jews – such as Reb Szmul Goldsztajn, Reb Chaim Weksler, Michal Leib Mindycz and others – and partially Jews more fanatical regarding religion, such as Reb Mendel Fogel, Reb Simche Dziobas, Reb Duwid Icchok Edelist and others. Despite their differences in concept and ideology, an exemplary harmony and cooperation prevailed amongst all parts of the house. We should mention the amazing fact that the majority of the city’s religious institutions were cared for and developed during Markusfeld’s period, who was noble of spirit, of a wide soul and generous heart and who was able to make himself liked by all members of the Jewish community.

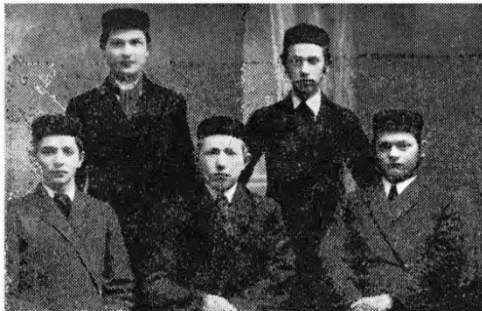
The study-halls in the cities were usually managed by inflexible *gaboim*, who did not understand the spirit of the students and there were, therefore, quarrels between the study-hall students and its custodians, the *gaboim*. At the time of “*Machzikei Hadas*”, arguments took place between the young men and the *gaboy* of the *cheder*, Reb Majer Biczner. This usually happened during the cold winter days, when the *gaboim*, wishing to save on expenses, skimped on heating the study-hall. The young

¹ [TN: A “*yeshive*” is a large official compound with hundreds of students and a large staff dedicated to Torah study, whereas a study-hall, whilst serving the same purposes, is on a much smaller scale.]

² [TN: Torah study, even individually, is always carried out in an audible sing-song manner.]

men grumbled and the *gaboim* exploded – but still the young men persisted: “If you don’t heat the cooker, we’ll heat it ourselves”. Until one bright day, in 1920, young 14-15 year-old lads gathered in the study-hall. They included Fiszal Blumenkranc, Jakób Grinbaum, Szlojme Gerzon (may God avenge their blood), Mojsze Dziobas, Mojsze Chaim Tiberg, Lipman Rajcher and the writer of these lines (all in Israel), and mounted a rebellion against the *gaboim*.

It was decided to abandon the affiliation with the municipal study-hall at “*Machzikei Hadas*” and to establish an “independent study-hall”, without dependency on custodians of the old generation. They turned to the *Kehilla* and demanded direct funding for the independent study-hall. And it was precisely the assimilationists among the *Kehilla* councillors who were first to justify this demand and, after them, the ultra-orthodox *Kehilla* councillors also agreed. A special allocation was approved for this purpose and the representatives of the young men were recognised as managers of the independent study-hall. An administration was elected and the funds were given over to it. We rented four rooms in the city centre, at ul. Ogradowa 4, next to the *shtiebel* of the Pilica *Chassidim*. Things were arranged in accordance with the spirit of the time, with a detailed set of rules. The non-specific name “*Beis Ha’Midrash*” [study-hall] was changed to “*Beis Ha’Talmud*”. The re-location from the old study-hall to the new was accompanied by an impressive ceremony. An inauguration ceremony was held in which, apart from the 150 young men, some burghers and rabbis also participated. A male choir and musicians were specially trained, directed by the locally renowned *Ba’al Teshuva* [repentant sinner] Reb Dawid Windman, who was an illustrious violinist. The programme consisted of a selection of the melodies by city cantor, Ziskind Rozental.



Standing (from right to left): L. Borzykowski [and] L. Fogel. Sitting (as above): Sz. Horowicz, L. Koplowicz [and] L. Piotrkowski

The customary study-hall training was according to the system of studying in pairs, meaning that each seasoned and older lad would adopt one of the younger boys and, together, they would fix joint lessons. More expansive lessons – the majority of which were at a higher level – were given by the city’s Torah experts. These lessons were given to groups of regular listeners, who reached important achievements in Torah study. A lesson was given every morning by the city [rabbinical] judge Reb Józef Kira, who was renowned as a tremendous scholar. Several dozen notable young men participated in his lessons, a few of whom are now in Israel. The prodigy Reb Wolwiz Borensztajn also gave lessons from time to time and a

regular lesson every Saturday, before the prayer service. Reb Wolwiz’s lessons excelled in their clarity, depth and scope.

There was also a younger class among the students at the study-hall. This class was multifaceted: the group of *Maskilim*, with Fiszal Blumenkranc, Leibel Horowicz [and] Szlojme Gerzon at their head; the group of *Masmidim* [assiduous studiers], with Jakób Grinbaum, the brothers Jakób Józef and Leibel Jakubowicz. Many of those who came to the study-hall were seized by the Zionist ideal and some were able to make *Aliyah* and become involved in life in Israel, such as (alphabetically [in Heb.]): Noach Edelist, Leibel Borzykowski, Lipman Berkowicz, the three motel brothers, Szaja and Mojsze Gold, the brothers Mojsze and Aron Dziobas, the brothers Jakób, Eli and Izaak Majer Horonczyk, Mojsze Chaim Wajcman, Mojsze Chaim Tiberg, Józef Żółtobrodzki, the brothers Chaim Józef z’l and (still living) Leibel Jakubowicz, the brothers Izaak and Faywel Kac, Izaak Lewit, Jakób Leslau, Chune Filik, Izaak Kaufman, the brothers Izrail-Eli and Anczel Krymolowski, Dawid Szlojme Kaminski, Chaim Ze’ev Rozen, Nechemie Rotenberg, Rusiecki A., Szlojme Zalman Shragai [and] Rabbi Isachar Tamar. Many among these are public figures, dignitaries, councillors, activists and holders of important positions in the country.

(Life at the study-hall was comprehensive and very interesting. The atmosphere was soaked with cleverness, wisdom and the knowledge of life, with wide horizons in many, very broad fields. The joy of life and the exultation of creation from within the world of magnificence were the lot of those who came to its gates. May the bones of Amalek³ be grinded, who terminated and destroyed this great and dear world which was and is no more. Woe over those who are gone and are no longer found [*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 111a*].)

³ [TN: The Biblical enemy of the Israelites; a euphemism for the Nazis.]