

Sz. Z. Shragai

A City and Mother in Israel!

[2 Samuel 20:19]

(Of Częstochowa, that is no more)

Częstochowa was regarded as “a city with everything in it” [Talmud Bavli, Chullin, 52b]. It also contained “galbanum” [a spice with a disagreeable odour, mentioned in Exodus 30:34]. Nevertheless, galbanum too was blended in with the fragrant perfumes and became absorbed into them. Against the “evil inclination”, which also fortified a position in Częstochowa, the spice of Torah stood and left its mark on the city’s Jewish character and its Jewish inhabitants.

Częstochowa was a city of Torah-scholars in the full meaning of this word, starting with the Rabbi, the prodigy, Reb Nachum Asz, whom Reb Yehoshuale of Kutna referred to as “one of the Torah prodigies in our generation and a man of exemplary character traits”, through to Halachic scholars, Chassidic leaders, pious men and those of [great] deeds [see Mishna, Sukkah 5 m4], [simple] townspeople - whose occupation was commerce and the Torah their lives, day and night, when walking on the way, lying down and rising up [from the *Shema Israel* prayer, see Deuteronomy 6:7]. It was impossible to find any social affair, be it dealing with public needs, Zionism, education and [or] social life in which there were no men of Torah and of exemplary character traits. They were the influential ones and, sometimes, the decision -makers and directors of the matter.

Częstochowa also excelled in this - in [its] awe for a Torah scholar, in admiration for those of exemplary character traits and [as] a courtesy towards men of learning and enlightenment. Every father wished and aspired that his sons learn Torah, so that they may “be able to come among people”, come among people - the meaning was not necessarily knowledge of Polish (this sin was committed particularly by the Chassidic circles, against the girls, whom they desired to have excellent knowledge of the language of the Gentiles), but on the contrary: that he be able to mingle with people, to partake in the casual conversation of Torah scholars and not to sit dumbly among them, as an ignoramus.

Częstochowa was a city of Jewish communal activity in all areas of life - in Torah study and *yeshivas*, in the Chassidic study-halls and prayer-houses, ritual bath-houses, Rabbis and judges, institutions of charity and goodwill, *kashrus* and observance of *Shabbes*, culture and art and in financial institutions. There were parties whose main activity was in financial life and not necessarily the Jewish one, and there were parties mainly active in the area of Jewish life. They were the religious parties - “*Ha’Mizrachi*”, General-Zionism and Socialist-Zionism. There was also Jewish journalism. There was hardly any area of Jewish life in which the great activity of these circles went unnoticed. Jews also participated in financial life. Indeed, the congregated Jewish community in Częstochowa was a “holy congregation”, “a city with everything in it”, but the supreme connector was - our holy Torah.

As a consequence, it was not affected by alienation or a will to disconnect from the Jewish people, even amongst the extreme assimilators, even amongst the Jewish workers, who set their eyes on the redemption to come from the Socialist revolution. Even they knew that, until the revolution, their place was within the Jewish community of Częstochowa, and they desired to be among them.

Therefore, we never met animosity towards [the] Torah [or] hatred against Judaism; spiteful people made up a minority-of-a-minority.

A place at the head of all Jewish public activity was held by Zionism. It is not an exaggeration for me to state that Jewish Częstochowa was mainly Zionist, and, inside Zionism, the lead was taken by religious Zionism – *Ha'Mizrachi*, *Ha'Mizrachi Youth*, *The Mizrachi Pioneer* and *Sons of Mizrachi*.

Częstochowa was a city full of Torah scholars and many of them stood at the head of "*Ha'Mizrachi*". This fact caused numerous circles in Judaism, keepers of the Torah and observant of the precepts, to support "*Mizrachi*": townspeople and *Chassidim*, Rabbis and Halachic scholars, *yeshiva* students. Even the "*Aguda*" [ultra-orthodox political party] members in Częstochowa and their youth were not of the extreme fighters against religious Zionism, respecting the obligation to redeem the land [of Israel] and to emigrate there.

The noble figure of the "*Maggid*", Reb Yosef Shimon Koblenz, who was an outstanding Torah scholar, with a virtuous and moral character, whose dealings in public matters and his private life were without a blemish, radiated onto all of "*Mizrachi's*" works and the entire city.

It may be said of him, that he was the Jewish-human conscience of the whole city. They knew that all his words and actions were in heaven's name - hence his great influence and everyone's love for him. They would come to hear his words, which were always repeated again and again by his audience and became the topic of the day.

For many years, he stood on guard at the study-halls, at halls and at assemblies and called to unity, [to] not separate oneself from the community, to share in the misery of others through acts of charity, to study Torah and to implement it and respect its vessels, and, at the centre of it all, stood in his words the Zionist action: "A religious Land of Israel, as the Land of Israel for the People of Israel in accordance with the Torah of Israel." He was also one of the first activists and inciters, who stood at the right of "*Ha'Chalutz Ha'Mizrachi*", for its training and emigration to the Land of Israel.

At his side was a body of public figures - Torah scholars, Rabbis and burghers, old and young, who did "*Ha'Mizrachi's*" day-to-day work, especially in communal life. Of them, we may mention but a few, for it is impossible to enumerate them all, as they are many - Szmul Goldsztajn, Chaim Weksler, Anczel Warszawski, Abram Enzel, Grinfeld, Finkelsztajn, Reb Mojsze Halter, Izrail Plocker, Józef Blechsztajn, Ickowicz, Jungster, Jakob Leslau, Sz. Z. Shragai, Chune Plai, Szmul Koblenz, Dov-Ber Goldberg, Abram Danziger, Abram Pik, Izaak Majer Kac [and] Herszel Granek.

"*Ha'Mizrachi*" did not just preach nicely, but practiced nicely too. Many of its members emigrated at the end of the Third *Aliyah* [1919-1923] and at beginning of the Fourth *Aliyah* [1924-1928] - among them [some] with positions in the "*Ha'Mizrachi*" movement and [in] "*HaPoel Ha'Mizrachi*" and, as whose representatives, they sit in municipal and governmental institutions and at the Jewish Agency. The blueprint of Częstochowa, a city and a mother in Israel, the city of Torah scholars, is apparent in their stamina and standing.



The city's Chief Rabbi, Reb Nachum Asz, contributed a decisive part to the fortification of "*Ha'Mizrachi*" and the growth of its influence on Jewish life. He was loyal to "*Mizrachi*" with all the filaments of his

vitality and soul and, although he did not take an active part in the party's practical and day-to-day work, all his spoken words were indeed filled with love for the religious Zionism, in which he saw a blessing-holding vessel, both for the Jews, while they remained in exile, and especially as a movement paving the road to redemption and to the nearing of the Messiah's coming.

A special personage was Reb Faywel Fajwlowicz, my uncle, brother of my father and son of Reb Juda Leibisch of the Kock-Izbica *Chassidim*, who left Kock and went with the Rebbe of Izbica, when he was still a youngster, for [maybe should say "whilst"] his eldest brother Reb Itchale *Ostrovtsker** remained in Kock and afterwards joined Ger**.

Reb Faywel was a Torah scholar in the full meaning of the word, with a vast knowledge of the Hebrew language and grammar. He specifically wished to be "*melamed*" and educator. Together with the poet Ch. N. Bialik, he established a school in Sosnowiec. When this did not work out well, he opened a *cheder* in Częstochowa and, here, he succeeded in teaching Torah and its precepts to Jewish boys. It may be said that, if in Częstochowa there were no ignoramuses and boors, it is largely thanks to Reb Faywel. He knew how to explain, how to give a pupil possession of the matters, instilling in him love for Torah study and arousing in him contempt for ignorance.

At his *cheder*, they learnt Hebrew Bible, Hebrew and grammar, Mishna, Talmud and Halachic laws, as well as general studies. In it was nurtured a love for the Land of Israel and a craving for redemption.

If Rabbi Asz and the *Maggid* Koblenz influenced the city's burghers, then the "*melamed*" Reb Faywel Fajwlowicz influenced the youngsters of the generation.

Thus, the city donned a Zionist-religious character, despite all the other phenomena not in accordance to the spirit of religion, although these too did not combat religion and did not wish it to disappear, God forbid. On the contrary, they took pride in that the city was filled with Torah and religion, as well as in enlightenment and general culture and they did not fight each other.

There were also Jewish-Socialist parties in the city of course. They did not believe in the Torah and opposed Zionism and conducted social and cultural activities. But these were not those who formed the city's character. It was formed by religious Zionism, "*Ha'Mizrachi*" and general Zionism across its spectrum.

To strengthen the Religious-Zionist character of the city, the "*Aguda*" [ultra-orthodox political party] also helped involuntarily. It contained Torah scholars, righteous men and doers of [good] deeds and, despite "*Aguda*" being opposed to Zionism and "*Ha'Mizrachi*", they increased the power of the religious movement and being as Zionism stamped its seal on our city. Incidentally, the Religious-Zionist spirit in it was invigorated.

The Chassidic *Rebbs*, who were in Częstochowa, also added to the religious, communal character of the city and its residents.

"*Ha'Mizrachi*" was, therefore, the subject of our city's social, communal and public life.

* [Translator's note: This was not his surname but his provenance, i.e., that he was either born or lived in Ostrowiec Swietokrzyski]

** [Translator's note: After the death of the Kotzker Rebbe in 1859, most of his followers chose Rabbi Izaak Majer Alter, the founder of the Ger dynasty, as their new Rebbe.]

Were someone to come and remove religious Judaism and Zionism from the map of Częstochowa's Jews, it is doubtful as to whether Częstochowa would have retained its Jewish character. Thus Częstochowa was a city and a mother in Israel, in the full sense of this term. Torah and *mitzves* [precepts], good deeds, Zionism and an effervescent communal life were, indeed, important parts in Polish Jewry.

(This Częstochowa passed from the world, together with the entire Polish Jewry, in the great destruction that Hitler brought to the world. May the image of the city of Częstochowa remain as a symbol and model for the life of historical Jewry in Poland).