

The First Jewish *Kehile* (an interesting episode)



About 200 years ago [viz. c.1760-70], some thirty Jewish families lived in Częstochowa. They had neither a synagogue nor a cemetery of their own.

The little Jewish settlement was bound to the *Kehilla* of the small *shtetl* of Janów, near Częstochowa, to which they paid a sum of 16 (sixteen) *gulden* a year, as *Kehilla* tax!

For the High Holidays, the handful of Częstochowa Jews would go to Janów because there was no one among them with the capabilities to lead the prayers and “obtain” for them a “good *kvitel*”¹ [note; slip] for the New Year.

Once, at the close of Yom Kippur, when these Jews came out of the synagogue with their wives and children and wished to set off towards home, they noticed that one of their wagons was missing a wheel. This caused an uproar, but the Janów *shames* promptly reassured them, saying that no one had stolen the wheel, but that he, himself, had taken it as a security until the Częstochowa Jews paid him the 32 *gulden* which they owed the Janów *Kehilla*, for two years’ worth of “*Kehilla* Tax”.

They were compelled to send two men home to fetch the 32 *gulden*, for none of them, due to Yom Kippur², had even a *grosz* upon their person. They were forced to spend the night in Janów and only in the morning did the diligent *shames* return the “confiscated” wheel and they set out for home in their *Shabbes* clothes.

This incident, however, brought them good results.

The Częstochowa Jews resolved that “Come what may, we must have our own separate *kehilla*.”

They applied themselves energetically towards this cause. They raised funds, each of them giving above his means and a plot was purchased by the Warta River where, in the course of time, the Old Synagogue, the study-hall and the Old *Mikvah* would stand!

Later, they later also bought a “field”, in the village of Kucelin, on which to establish a cemetery - and thus Częstochowa was “freed” from the Janów *Kehilla* and its “energetic” *shames*!

From year to year, Częstochowa eventually grew to become a large trade and industry centre and, in 1939, 35,000 Jews lived there!

Janów has remained a small *shtetl*, as it was 200 years ago.

I heard the story regarding the confiscated wheel, which caused those few Jewish families to lay the foundations for the large Jewish community of Częstochowa, from Mojsze Moriker [sic.; should say

¹ [TN: People wish each other a “good note” on Hoshana Rabbah, the last of the High Holidays. The idea being that if something negative was written in the Book of Life for an individual on Yom Kippur, then perhaps God will insert a correction on a small slip of paper and paste it in, before it’s “too late” ...]

² [TN: According to Halacha, one may not carry on his person or touch any weekday things, such as money, on the Sabbath or a holiday.]

Mokrajer], whose family was among the first in Częstochowa 200 years ago and which has passed this narrative down from generation to generation.

(It is fitting that this, too, should be mentioned in the Memorial Book of both communities - of Częstochowa and of Janów - which no longer exist!)