

## Jewish Theatre

In the second half of the 1920's (following the First World War), when the economic situation of the Jews in Poland gradually began to normalise, a certain revival also began to be noticed in the theatrical profession. In almost all the larger cities, permanent theatres were established, apart from the touring troupes.

In Częstochowa, a good theatre-city where, until then, the best Jewish troupes had appeared, but only for limited performances, a theatre company, directed by actor-entrepreneur Izrael Białkowicz, performed successfully almost all year round, although there were difficulties in finding a suitable hall with a stage.

Izrael Białkowicz belonged to the provincial actors who had come to terms with the idea that their chances of being engaged in a central city were very small. Exactly like others in his category, he therefore lovingly took upon himself the heavy yoke of organising and directing provincial troupes at the theatre for all his years.

The troupe consisted of the union members Riwke Lubartowska, Chane Rozencwajg, Lea Librowska and her young daughter Rayzel (the current wife of Max Bożyk), Liola Goldsztajn, Leib Winer, Max Pokój, J. Dziubak, Abram Blatt and Adolf Liberman. The repertoire was a mix of drama, melodrama and operettas. On one and the same poster were advertised Sholem Asch's "*Motke the Thief*" and Joseph Lateiner's "*Chinke Pinke*" - An-sky's "*Dybbuk*" and Boris Thomashevsky's "*Shliomke and Rikel*".

The troupe showed a special affinity to their performances in Częstochowa. The theatre director, Sam Blumsztajn from Warsaw, was engaged and the orchestra was enlarged. Special decorations were also painted for each piece and, when a piece was liked, it continued running many times. A "great hit" was the operetta "*Dos Chazandl*" [The Young Cantor], with the very young, talented Rayzel Librowska in the title role.

Over the course of a season, others were also invited to perform - the prima-donna Malwina Joles from Lemberg [Lwów], Anieli Borisova, Rabinowicz and Poliakow of the Kompaniejec Troupe (Just as these lines are being written, the tearful news has reached us that Aron Poliakow, the highly accredited and beloved actor, has died in Paris, at the age of 70.), the "Heldentenor" Benny Abelman with his Goldfaden repertoire and the "amateur singer" Michał Trylling.

The troupe was very well liked. At the time, the "*Częstochower Zeitung*" wrote:

*The troupe puts forth the best that a provincial city can have. We, in Częstochowa, may well be proud of their achievements.*

At the same time, the newspaper very strongly criticises the repertoire and is also displeased with certain actors.

Here, too, the administrative authorities, thanks to the efforts of the local Polish theatre, began making difficulties for the Jewish troupe. Performances were required to be censored by the Home Office in Warsaw and had to end no later than eleven o'clock. Also, the Polish text on the posters

needed to be in larger letters than the Yiddish text. The objective was to push the Jewish actors out of Catholic Częstochowa.

In order to “tear up” the decree and to help the troupe stand on secure financial foundations, the administrator of the Jewish Actors’ Union, Mark Juwiler, came to Częstochowa. Following a series of conferences with various communal and professional institutions, a theatre-committee was set up here also, with the participation of J. Rozenberg, Aron Percec, R. Federman, J. Sak, Z. Szyller and others. The committee took it upon itself to be in constant contact with the troupe and to support it morally and materially. R. Federman, a member of the local City Council, also became the representative of the Jewish Actors’ Union in Poland for the theatrical troupes’ professional affairs.

The administrator of the Jewish Actors’ Union, Mark Juwiler, also held a conference with the mayor. As result of the intervention, the troupe was immediately freed from paying municipal taxes and, soon, the Jewish theatre even received a subsidy from the City Council. The subsidy, for which the theatre committee had also helped to fight, was quite pitiful amount (twelve hundred *złoty*ch), but in that anti-Jewish atmosphere, it was considered a moral victory and an acknowledgement of the Jewish theatre.

The Częstochowa troupe would also, from time to time, perform successfully in the neighbouring cities.

But, in these cities, they often encountered wandering, non-unionised troupes, who allowed themselves to do such deeds that damaged the Jewish theatre’s image, both morally and materially. It often reached even using denouncements.

When the Częstochowa troupe came to Sosnowiec with the operetta “*The Polish Wedding*”, a non-unionised troupe appeared there at the same time and began performing at a second hall. Wanting to compete against these “*Częstochowers*”, the non-unionised troupe’s actor-entrepreneur, after their every performance, agitated from the stage against the Częstochowa union-troupe, urging Jews not go due to political reasons because, and here he swore on his glued-on “beard and sidelocks”, “*the Actors’ Union is a “Communist gniazdo [nest]”*” (the source – in the theatrical archives, YIVO, New York).

The anti-union entrepreneur also handed out fliers throughout the streets, which said, verbatim:

*Jews, don't go see the Częstochowers!!! They cheat!!! Their “Polish Wedding” is not the correct wedding. In the correct “Polish Wedding”, it must be seen how the bright angels sing in heaven and how the black gypsies sing and dance in their tabor [camp; caravan], and other effects.*

*The Częstochowers cannot show such a performance, because it's not a troupe, but an old folks home!*

*Don't let yourselves be deceived and come to us at the theatre, where we'll show you everything!!!*

(The source – in the theatrical archives, YIVO, New York).



The successful, first stable season in Częstochowa meant that, in the following year, a troupe should be stationed there in rented [premises], under directorship of the renowned actor-entrepreneur Szlojme Herszkowicz, in partnership with the local theatre-personality, Szlojme Kajzer.

At the head of the troupe stood the extremely talented, temperamental operetta actress Regina Cukier, who was intensely loved and popular with the broad masses, not only in Poland. She performed in the various cheap operettas, in melodramas, not acknowledging the most elementary stage-disciplines and was therefore crowned with the name "The Queen of Trash". In serious theatre, but with a proper stage-manager, such a Regina Cukier would have doubtlessly held a respectable position.

Her partner in Częstochowa was the well-known actor and singer Michał Klein, who had started his stage career at the Warsaw Muranów Theatre.

The ensemble also comprised Malwina Weiland, Fania Laszer, Ruta Kalisz, Adela Gotfryd, Julia Hochberg, Hersz Hart (the distinguished actor and theatre-activist suddenly, recently, died in Tel-Aviv, sixty-odd years old), Karl Cymbalist, Leon Gelticherman, Izaak Gotfryd and Szlojme Herszkowicz.

The pieces were directed by Regina Cukier's husband, Karl Cymbalist. The orchestra was conducted by Sam Blumsztajn and dances were arranged by ballet master Adolfini. Just as the "Białkowicz Troupe" had done the previous year, they too performed in neighbouring cities and made good deals.

Częstochowa, as a stable city, was then a real boon for Jewish theatre. It was one of the first, not large, cities where a production could maintain a troupe for practically the whole season.

(Częstochowa remained "A City and a Mother" to the Jewish actor, until the great destruction, which put an end to the Jews and to all they had created and possessed!)