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The “Lira” Society of Music and Culture

The “Lira” [Pol.: Lyre] institution for music, literature and culture was founded in our city, back in 1908, by Zionist activists Mojsze Zandsztajn and Leon Kopiński, who, in order to widen the scope of its activity and influence in our city, endeavoured to also include, within it, people of culture from amongst the intelligentsia, who were already standing on the threshold of assimilation.

This was not an auspicious action, for immediately when the question concerning the name of the Society arose, and the Zionists suggested calling it “HaZamir” [Heb.: The Nightingale] – as institutions of this kind were named in Warsaw, Łódź and other cities in Poland – those in the assimilationist circles insisted that the name of the society should be “Lira”, a name that did not reveal its Jewish character. In order to not dissolve the Society right at the beginning, the Zionists agreed to their opinion and it was given the name “Lira”. It was also dominated by the Polish language!

Among those active in the Society were the writer Abram Wiewiorka, the cantor Abram Ber Birenbaum and Mr Zaks and they were those who strove to dissipate the atmosphere of assimilation that prevailed in this Society at the time.

In those days, a branch of the “Jewish Literary Society” (*Jüdische Literarische Gesellschaft*), whose centre was in [St.] Petersburg (today – Leningrad), had opened in Częstochowa, which set itself the same goals for which “Lira” was created.

At the head of that branch were Dawid Borzykowski, A. Chrobołowski, Ze’ev Lewenhof, Rafail Federman, Jakób Kopiński and P. Szmulewicz.

This institution developed a comprehensive [range of] cultural activity. It held lectures on literary and cultural subjects. It organised choirs and also founded a rich library. There was a sort of competition between it and “Lira”. This Society particularly broadened its activities when Józef Aronowicz (from Wilna) and Jakób Rozenberg and his wife (from Łódź) settled in Częstochowa. They dedicated much of their time to its activities.

Meanwhile, the Tsarist government decided, for some reason, to terminate the activities of the *Jüdische Literarische Gesellschaft* in [St.] Petersburg and in all of its branches in the country.

This happened at the end of the summer of 1911.

Activists of these two societies, therefore, decided to merge and a joint committee was elected for the “Lira” Society which comprised: Henryk Markusfeld (Honorary President), Aron Perec (Chairman), Kuna Chrobołowski (Secretary), Józefowicz (Coordinator) and, as committee members, Józef Aronowicz, Chaim Dawidowicz, Herszlikowicz, Wajnsztok, Luria, Markus, Leon Kopiński, Rozenberg and Henryk Szmulewicz.

“Lira” then became the centre of cultural life in the city. It encompassed the best of public forces in the city, from all parties and strata, and it became a meeting-place for our city’s enlightened and public figures, and for all devotees of Hebrew and Jewish culture in it.

“Lira” often held lectures by the greatest of writers and journalists on literary, cultural and political subjects and also arranged practical discussions on the questions of the time.

It should be mentioned that, at “Lira’s” invitation, I.L. Peretz visited Częstochowa (three times over the course of one year!). Our city was also honoured by the visit of Sholem Aleichem, [which took place] a short time prior to the outbreak of the First World War.

“Lira” also organised lectures by Izaak Grünbaum (who lives in Gan-Shmuel), Y. Tunkel (*Der Tunkeler* [Yid.: The Dark One]), Luzer Kohn (who edited the first edition of “*Der Fackel*” [The Torch] – a literary periodical that was to appear regularly in Częstochowa at the initiative of “Lira” activists (Z. Lewenhof, D. Borzykowski, Ch. Fajwlowicz and Ch. Dawidowicz), Ch.D. Nunberg, Z. Segalowicz, Hillel Cejtlin and Szmul Rozenfeld.

“Lira” also established a choir of male and female singers, among whom the ladies G. Bem-Szmulewicz and L. Frymorgen, and the men Edelist, Bem, Mojsze Waga and Grabiner especially distinguished themselves.

Among the members of “Lira’s” dramatic group, which was directed by A. Perec, Mrs Awner, Paula Maujer, Itta Pakuła, Dora Szacher, Mrs Kromolowski and Mrs Szapira, and the men J. Aronowicz, Werner, Sobol, Sz. Frank, D. Krak and Faitel Szmulewicz distinguished themselves in particular.

“Lira” also established the first sports team in our city, headed by Awner, Bram, Gonszerowicz and Krak.

