

E. Ben-Moshe

The “Machzikei Hadas” Cheder

One of the most important institutions which brought great benefits to the religious education of Jewish children – especially those from the religious and poorer circles – was the “Machzikei Hadas” cheder, about which we are able to present some interesting things in our Memorial Book.

We have found an original balance sheet (from 1st April 1925 to 31st March 1926), which we print - due to its specific character - at the end of the material, in connection with the “Machzikei Hadas” cheder*.

We also reprint an article by E. Ben-Moshe (Jakubowicz), which was published in the “Częstochower Zeitung” No.7, dated 12th February 1937, which contains interesting impressions of his visit there on Sunday, 7th February 1937. He reports:

On a frosty Sunday morning, a few of us journalists went to “Machzikei Hadas” to see how the several hundred cheder children live there.

Once there, we found the manager Mr Zeligman, who sat engrossed in his books, writing and calculating, preparing the balance sheet for the institution’s approaching Annual General Meeting.

Mr Zeligman received us very warmly [and] informed us on the cheder’s situation.

He tells us that about 400 children study now at “Machzikei Hadas”, the majority of whom come from the lowest strata of the local population. He goes on to tell us that “Machzikei Hadas” is now divided into six classes. The children study in two shifts - those attending “Powszechny” [Public] schools in the afternoon, learn until noon, and those who learn at the public schools in the morning, come in the afternoon.

All the “melamdim” are first-class professionals, with many years of pedagogical experience. For their hard work they receive minimal wages - no more than 120 złotych per month. Yet they work intensively and with great commitment, striving to instil, into the minds of the children, besides Torah, also much knowledge from our ancient repository and good breeding.

When we asked by whom the expenses of “Machzikei Hadas” are covered, Mr Zeligman explained that the budget is covered by various sources of income, such as regular monthly contributions from the members, pledges, donations and other conferrals, as well as special donations made on yuhrzeits and other occasions.

Characteristically, the largest contributors are from the orthodox circles.

* Note from the Editors:

After printing the “balance” from the published “document”, we checked the numbers and found that they are incorrect... we are unable to explain this. We are printing the “balance” nonetheless, as it was published over 40 years ago...

We took a stroll amongst the children in the different classrooms and we gained the impression that they come from the greatest poverty and want that prevail in the Jewish street. The majority are the children of porters, cobblers and just paupers.

It is also interesting to mention that many of the schoolchildren's parents are secular people, some are even Bundists, many of them have very radical leftist views - and yet they send their children to the cheder. One wants someone to say "Kaddish" after him, another just wants his child to know some Yiddish and to have a concept of the Jewish People and its past.

Sadly, most of the children only learn up to the first two or three classes. Those who continue studying to the 6th class, remain - in most cases - religious, and go on to study in yeshivot and study-halls.

The operation of feeding the children is a separate chapter. It is no easy feat to feed nearly 400 children!

Mr Zeligman takes us to the first floor, where the kitchen is located. We find some dozens of children eating there, for they do not eat altogether, but in groups. Several women, who do the cooking and serve the children, are around them as they sit and eat. Sadly, they are ragged and tattered. The lacklustre eyes peer out from the pale and withered faces and, although they have no coats, stockings or shoes, we see that here they are somewhat content. After all, it is warmer than at home, where one becomes swollen from cold and hunger. Here, they warm their little insides and a little flame of joy still flickers in their eyes...



[Text on photo: Breakfast - bread and hot drinks for the pupils at the "Machzikei Hadas" cheder, 5677 - 1917. Phot. "Rembrandt"]

As Mr Zeligman informed us, the entire feeding and clothing operation is carried out by the doctor Mrs Lipinska. Nobody knows from where Mrs Lipinska brings the money. There is, of course, a circle of women who help her in her noble endeavour and Mrs D.Sz. Erlich also collaborates extensively. It should be mentioned that, even in the great frosts, when people rarely went outdoors, Mrs Lipinska came running every single day to "Machzikei Hadas", bringing with her food and clothing for the children.

It is truly a wonder how Mrs Lipinska toils indefatigably, without support from any institution or association (barring some small aid from "TOZ").

For her superhuman efforts and her great work in aid of the poor Jewish children, this public activist truly deserves our warmest thanks.

Mr Cemach Gonsiorowicz has also taken a fine task upon himself, helping in the kitchen to feed the children, to which he dedicates several hours every day.

At the end, Mr Zeligman also noted that the current administration is one of the most energetic and that, thanks to it, they had succeeded in securing the budget.

The wages for the “melamdin” and the rest of the staff were paid in full.

This year was “Machzikei Hadas” 25th anniversary. One hopes that such an instrumental Jewish institution, which supports the children of the poor Jewish masses with “flour and Torah¹”, should be able to keep up its great work and receive the support of the entire Jewish population.

Ezriel Jakubowicz, in his description of the activities of “Machzikei Hadas”, also mentioned the fruitful work of Mrs D.Sz. Erlich - a member of the management of the “Machzikei Hadas” cheder in Częstochowa.

We reprint an article of hers, titled “He May Be Redeemed” [Leviticus 25:48], which was published in the “Częstochower Zeitung” No.20, dated 20th May 1938:

“He May [i.e., should] Be Redeemed...

(On the bailout campaign for the “Machzikei Hadas” cheder)

The name “Machzikei Hadas” cheder is well enough known. All Częstochowa Jews know that there, for over 26 years, Torah education is given to children from the poor broad Jewish strata, who cannot allow themselves to send their children to paid cheders. Without this cheder, these children would have remained in their ignorance for the rest of their lives, without even the most basic Jewish learning. They would not have even been able to say their prayers.

Everyone also knows that in the building of the cheder, there is also a study-hall, where the same poor broad Jewish elements have a place to come to morning and evening, on weekdays as well as Shabbes and holidays, to pray to the “Master of the Worlds”. It is a true joy for every Jewish heart that we have an institution of Torah and prayer for the masses, in our own fine building - large, tall, wide and beautiful rooms. But, not everybody knows that a heavy external burden lies upon this building - a debt of 10,000 złotych, which we owe to the local “Credit Association”, the so-called “Towarzystwo Kredytowe”.

During the years when things were as they should be and the cheder received subsidies both from the municipality and the Kehilla, it was quite easy to pay the half-yearly instalments and, even later, when the subsidies were stopped and paying the instalments became truly like the parting of the Red Sea, we still did not find the necessity to ring any alarm-bells, because we knew that the President of “Machzikei Hadas”, Mr I.M. Krel, was also the director of the municipal “Credit Association”, which gave us the hope that things would not come to foreclosure, as indeed they did not. Each time, the eminent President Mr Krel used his influence and did not allow a foreclosure. We would pay a part and the rest was prolonged without interest, and thus we managed - as one says - to pull through.

¹ [TN: See Pirkei Avot, Ch. 3, mishna 17: “If there is no flour, there is no Torah; if there is no Torah, there is no flour.”]

But now, this situation, as is known to all, has changed radically. The Jewish influence on the "Credit Association" has been stopped. We may no longer rely on any miracles and, if we do not pay the instalments on time now, our building faces immediate foreclosure.

To avoid this teary event, a decision has been made, at a meeting of the board with the city's notabilities, to conduct a "bailout campaign", as it says in the current weekly portion: "He may be redeemed", i.e., that the Częstochowa Jewish population now has the obligation to redeem the building and be rid of this debt once and for all. Each one of us must bring his donation to this "bailout campaign".

We believe that the local Jewish population, which is renowned for its highly developed social sense – as is proven by the many local institutions they have created, the most recent being the construction of the magnificent building of the Jewish high school - this same population will surely not stand back, when efforts are being made to retain the only Torah institution in our possession in which nearly 400 children study. The Sages teach us that the roof of the synagogue must be higher than all the other private roofs, meaning that we must put the spiritual before the physical and the fact that the local Jewish population has done so much in the material field, gives the best hopes that it will surely value the spiritual - the Torah study for the poor children - highly, and fulfil the Torah's precept: "He may be redeemed."

We have also received the report of the last "Machzikei Hadas" Annual General Meeting which was held on Sunday, 17th June 1939.

We quote this report here. It was published in the "Częstochower Zeitung" No.25, dated 23rd June 1939:

The "Machzikei Hadas" Annual General Meeting

Last Sunday, 17th June 1939, the "Machzikei Hadas" Annual General Meeting was held on their premises.

The President Mr I.M. Krel opened the meeting, chaired by Mr Isuchor Moszkowicz. Also at the presidential table were Messrs Duwid Pelc and Awrum Częstochowski and, as secretary, Mr Szyja Zeligman.

Mr Krel delivered the Annual Report and the Balance Sheet, which reached the sum of 14,313.23 złotych.

Following the discussion regarding the report, in which Messrs Częstochowski, Moszkowicz, Pressman and others took part, the report was approved, printed and entrusted to the administration.

The budget for the new year, of 18,000 złotych, was unanimously approved.

The following proposals were also approved:

- 1) from Mr Klajnman - to introduce teachers for secular studies;*
- 2) from Mr Tenenberg - to recruit new members;*
- 3) from Mr Jarkowizna - to distribute "Machzikei Hadas" charity boxes to all Jewish households.*

It was also decided to create a sub-committee of ten members to help enlarge the income of "Machzikei Hadas".

Messrs Jechiel Landau, Menasze Margulies, Duwid Kohn and Herszel Wajnbaum were elected to the new administration, replacing those leaving.

(Three months prior to the great misfortune of the Polish Jewry, Częstochowa public figures were still holding an Annual General Meeting, electing new council members, approving budgets and believing that they would be able to carry out their plans.

The bitter reality destroyed everything! No more "Machzikei Hadas", no more anything!).

But not only did the Częstochowa Jews know nothing of the bloodbath that awaited them three months into the future. Just three weeks before the outbreak of the bloody Second World War - **on the eleventh of August, nineteen-hundred and thirty-nine** – a dear Częstochowa Jew – a dedicated "Machzikei Hadas" activist - printed an alarm-article in the "Częstochower Zeitung" (No.32), under the title: "**We Must Somehow save "Machzikei Hadas!"**", [with] the following passionate words:

Yes, regardless what one's attitude may be to the "Machzikei Hadas" cheder, we must certainly conclude that it is an important institution, which we must not allow to go under!

Up to 400 children, from the poorest elements of the population, study at this institution. One may disagree with some of the teaching methods, but it is a fact that, had this institution not existed, several hundred Jewish children would receive no education at all.

Years ago, "Machzikei Hadas" - through the efforts of its supporters - received its own building. But this is not enough for the institution to also maintain itself. The institution is under various debts and there is a threat that the building may be sold at auction to pay off the debts, leaving the energy and efforts of long years in ruins.

The "Machzikei Hadas" administration is doing everything to save the institution, but the entire Jewish population, regardless of ideology, must come to their aid, for "Machzikei Hadas" is a possession of the Jewish folk of Częstochowa and it is the obligation of us all to support it!

Meetings of the town's worthies [and] the "gaboim" of the Chassidic "shtieblach" and "minyanim" were called, at which the "bailout campaign" was planned.

A large sum must be gathered in a short time and a public fundraiser will be held to this aim.

Every Jew is required to pay a one-time toll for the bailout. We must redeem the institution from its debts. The smallest contribution must be of at least one złoty, in order to free the building from its debts once and for all!

Disappointingly, not all parts of the Jewish population have this understanding. Many "gaboim" and public activists, who were invited, did not come. But we think that no one would want to take the responsibility upon himself that, due to his neglect, this important institution should go under!

The campaign for "Machzikei Hadas" is already starting now - may none of you fail to bring your donations!

Yeshivot from various cities and shtetls take enough money out of Częstochowa. We should remember the teaching of our Sages: "The poor of your city take precedence" [Talmud Bavli, Bava Metziah, 71a] - the poor children of our city come before anyone else and we must support them!

"Machzikei Hadas" must not be liquidated - this must be a question of prestige for every Częstochowa Jew.

The knife is on the neck and we must save "Machzikei Hadas", no matter what!

(A mere three weeks before the disaster, this activist saw that the knife was on the neck of the "Machzikei Hadas" institution. How great is the sorrow and anger that this knife slaughtered almost the entire Jewish People in Poland!

The carers of the small schoolchildren were slaughtered, together with their sinless charges!).