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The Renaissance of the Jewish Worker in Częstochowa

The year 1903 can be considered the year of the awakening of the Jewish workers in Częstochowa. Young workers began appearing and new slogans were heard on the Jewish street. There was a new doctrine, as it were - the worker must be organised, needs to cultivate himself and, above all, be united, in order to attain acceptable, living conditions.



Notices appeared in the papers regarding the labour force in Łódź, which had already utilised means that were still completely foreign to us in Częstochowa. They threatened to strike - this system was to our liking.

Seeing as how there was, a yet, no workers' movement in the city, a certain number of Jewish workers joined the "S.D" [Social Democracy] and "P.P.S" [Polish Socialist Party], although, for the Jewish worker, they smelt of assimilation.

Only in 1904-1905 was the first Jewish party organised in Częstochowa. This was the "Poalei Zion" party. A bit later, the "Bund" was founded; and even later, the "Zionist Socialist Labour Party", which referred to itself by the acronym "S.S." [Russian initials]. The "S.S." became, over the course of time, the largest party in Częstochowa and played a large role in all areas of the Jewish worker's life in the city.

The first pioneers of the "S.S." party were Dawid Malarski, who was an expert on the theory of socialism and, at the same time, an energetic fighter and was capable, with weapons in his hands, to protect the workers' interests, if it was required.

The second was Mendel Szuster, a talented agitator for the broad masses. He came from a very poor family, had a fiery head and, with his own means and under the most difficult conditions, studied and developed himself.

But both of them, at the beginning of the revolutionary years, the end of 1905, left Częstochowa and emigrated to America. Young men then appeared on the Jewish street, sons of the bourgeoisie, almost from the "richer" circles, brought themselves to the workers [and] visited the workers' locales. As an intellectual element, they had great influence on the workers and, in time, became their organisers and representatives. They enthusiastically spread revolutionary and socialist theories. The first place among them was occupied by the member Józef, the now-famous Dr Józef Kruk from Jerusalem, who was the son of a wealthy Jew from assimilationist circles, and Izaak Gurski (lives in America), Grinbaum, Herschel Gotajner, Mendel Asz - the Rabbi's son, Dudek Szlezinger, Michasz Alter and many others whose names I cannot recall.

The Zionist-Socialist party grew progressively and exerted great influence on almost all areas of the Jewish peoples' lives in our city. This, understandably, did not go down well with the Russian police. But, the so-called "Good Boys Gang" also, of which Częstochowa too was unfortunately not free of,

* [Translator's note: This was one of various Jewish organised crime syndicates in Poland, who dealt in extortion, theft etc.]

saw the party as a danger to their “autocracy” and they began helping the police to catch and arrest whomever they could.

Thanks to their help and devotion, the “Bakers’ Union” committee was arrested and all its members were sentenced to six months in prison.

At first, the party tried to fight these “Good Boys” with information propaganda, and even managed to influence two of this gang to, afterwards, actually “repent” and become good members of the party.

But this incited the thieves very much against the party and, together with the police, they attacked the places where the workers used to meet and also showed the police whom to arrest.

The party was forced to take energetic and drastic measures.

On a certain day of the month of May 1905, it organised a counterattack against the “Good Boys” gang, which operated in the Old Market Square amongst the fruit-merchants. They attacked them from all sides and, after a “war” which lasted around an hour-and a half, they fled, leaving behind a badly injured “comrade”.

From that time, not only did the workers’ circles revive, but the poor fruit-merchants were also able to breathe freely.

From time to time, the party’s Central Committee, which was located in Wilna, sent professional agitators, who helped to organise and lead the party-work in the city. Among the guests who visited Częstochowa, should be mentioned Leibisch Lehrer, David-Levin from Homyel', one of founders of Jewish self-defence in Russia, Yaakov Rubinstein (is [now] in Soviet Russia), Dr Aaron Singalowsky, a first-class agitator who, in later years, became leader of the celebrated “ORT” (society for the propagation of work and crafts throughout the entire Jewish world).

The theorists of the “Zionist Socialist Party”, at that time, were Dr Latsky-Bartoldi, S. Niger, Yaakov Lestschinsky, as well as Moishe and Yosef Lestschinsky.

The revolution years began following the tsarist manifest of October 1905. Many of our members were forced to leave the country. Some went to America and Canada and a small part crossed over to Germany and Austria. Among them were Izaak Gurski, Herszel Gotajner, Max Dankewicz (Koniarski’s son-in-law) and many others, whose names I no longer remember.

At that time, the remaining members dedicated themselves [to] cultural work. The “Jewish Literary Society” was founded in [St.] Petersburg. At the initiative of our members, a branch was also opened in Częstochowa. Members Rafail Federman, Elkune Chrobołowski, Szmul Frank, Faitel Szmulewicz, [and] Mojsze Weksler (the latter two died in Tel-Aviv), worked actively for the Society. Lectures were organised on the Jewish classics [by] Mendele Moycher Sforim, Y.L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem and others.

The “drama-section” put on plays such as “*The Weavers*” by Gerhart Hauptmann, “*Jean and Madeleine*”^{*} by Octave Mirbeau, “*The Jews*” by Chirikov, and many one-act [plays] by Y.L. Peretz, “*The Eternal Song*” by Mark Arnstein and “*The Boys*” by Yitzchok Katznelson.

* [Translator’s note: The reference is to “*Les Mauvais Bergers*” (*The Bad Shepherds*).]

At the World Territorial Conference in Vienna, members Rafail Federman and Simche Kulka (the printing-press worker whose life ended in N.Y, his last place of residence) from Częstochowa, participated as delegates.

(The outbreak of the World War further marginalised and dispersed us. The S.S. Party was incorporated into "United", until it was completely liquidated.)