

## The Book Committee

# Shamoshim

### Reb Aron the *Shames*

One of the most interesting of Częstochowa's *shamoshim* was Reb Aron *Shames* (Aron Pelc). He was Częstochowa's "living register", who knew the city's history from its beginning. He was on familiar terms with everyone, having participated in all their circumcisions and knowing each one from childhood. He remembered everyone's death anniversaries (*yuhrzeiten*) and would make the date of the *yuhrzeit* known to them [i.e., the mourners]. Every *Shabbes* at sunset, he would recount interesting things from the city's history. He was a master story-teller and, more than once, brought his audience to tears or laughter.

He could accurately demark the boundaries of the Jewish ghetto from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to him, the ghetto gate used to stand between the houses of Kalman Rajcher and Gwircman. Once, a tremendous fire broke out in the ghetto and, when the flames reached the house where the great Torah scholar Rabbi Iczke Soifer was sitting, the fire stopped by itself. Rabbi Iczke Soifer never left his home. He also recounted that, once, a cholera epidemic broke out in Częstochowa, may heaven protect us. A multitude of people perished as result of the terrible disease. The Cossacks, wishing to prevent the disaster, buried the sick while they were still alive.

Aron *Shames* sometimes liked go before the [Holy] Ark and lead the service. Before the High Holidays, he would wrap his neck in a cravat and passionately recite the "*Thirteen Attributes*" of the "*Sliches*"<sup>1</sup> and he would likewise lead the "*Mincha*" prayer [afternoon service] on Yom Kippur. Aron *Shames* used to announce the "*Hakufes*"<sup>2</sup>, because he knew everyone's name and father's name. He loved the "little bunch" which came to the service and would offer them "*Kiddush*"<sup>3</sup> wine and the children liked him.

He also managed the list of the Jewish deceased and knew the exact burial location of each and every one.

### Reb Kalman Szczekacz

Reb Kalman Szczekacz, the *shames* at the city's study-hall, was also one of the interesting characters among the *shamoshim* of Częstochowa. Nobody knew how old he was. The most elderly ones remembered him from back in their childhoods, already as an old man with a long white beard. He took upon himself the task of teaching orphans to say the "*Kaddish*" [prayer for the dead] and carried this mission out devotedly. He considered this action a great and sacred *mitzvah* and did not demand any payment for it. Shortly before the War, he taught the "*Kaddish*" to his 150<sup>th</sup> orphan.

Reb Kalman served as a sort of "soul" of the study-hall. In the winter season, during the long nights, the cooker was already kindled at five o'clock and all could come and warm themselves. Reb Kalman

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Lit. "Pardons" in Heb., the "Sliches" are prayers of atonement which are recited daily during the month leading up to the High Holidays. The "Thirteen Attributes" is part of this liturgy.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Pronounced "Hakafot" in Israeli Hebrew, i.e., "circles". At the end of the festival of Sukkos; on Simchas Torah, the custom is to take the Torah scrolls out of the Ark and to encircle the reader's platform with great joy, singing and dancing. All those present are called to the Torah for a short reading, by their name and father's name.]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: Ceremony with food and drink held at the synagogue following the morning service on Shabbes and Holidays.]

already stood there, reciting Psalms. For anyone who needed to say “*Kaddish*” on a *yuhrzeit*, Kalman would organise a *minyán*<sup>4</sup>, at any hour. Services were held continuously. When one *minyán* concluded the prayer, another would begin immediately. Kalman saw to it that the “*balebusim*” [burghers; working men] should not waste much time, such that they should pray and go to their work or commerce.

Kalman *Shames* was also well-liked by the indigent alms-seekers. He would organise them at the door, each one according to his importance and worth, so as to maintain order, unity and peace.

Before the establishment of the “*Hachnosés Orchim*” institution, there was a “*Beis Hekdesh*” [Sacred House, i.e., poorhouse], next to the study-hall, for the homeless. The “*Hekdesh*” was under Reb Kalman’s supervision.

### **Reb Herszel Frajtag**

The name “Herszel Frajtag” was well-known in Częstochowa. He was the *shames* of the “German Synagogue” for fifty years. Before the synagogue was established, he was *shames* in a different *minyán* called “Rajcher’s *minyán*”, at Aleja NMP 10, to which the entire Częstochowa aristocracy belonged, such as Rajcher, Wernik, Henig, Werde, Herc Grosman, Markusfeld, Gradsztajn, Freund and Imich. This *minyán* founded the New Synagogue in 1894 and Henig donated the plot for it.

Reb Herszel Frajtag died in 1935 at the age of 107. (His grandson Godl Frajtag – an active member of our organisation - is now in Israel).

### **Reb Majer Joina Laitman**

[He] was born in Moscow to his father Reb Zajnwel, who was one of “Nikolai’s Soldiers”, who was abducted as a Cantonist as a boy and served in the army for 25 years. [He] was brought to Radomsko in his youth. In 1880, he married Bajla, the daughter of Nysan Zelig Kalka and they had four boys and four girls. In 1900, he settled in Częstochowa and lived there until he emigrated to America in 1920, after the end of the World War.

From his youth, Reb Majer Joina Laitman was attracted to the Chassidic movement and was a follower of various *Rebbes*. In Częstochowa, he was the *shames*<sup>5</sup> of the *Rebbe* Reb Awigdor Szapiro for many years. At the “*Rebbe’s court*”, Majer Joina became the “sworn companion” of the suffering Jews, who sought his aid and condolence in times of trouble.

Also, after he emigrated with his family to America, he did not forget the multitude of “*Amcho*” [simple Jews] that he had left behind in Częstochowa. He did not interrupt for a moment his connection with those who required assistance. He also remained in contact with the rabbi Reb Nuchem Asz, with the “Jewish Hospital”, “*Linas Tzedek*”, “*Beis Lechem*” and the “*Machzikei Hadas*” [Upholders of Religion] *cheder*. Not only did he collect funds for all these institutions from his sons and daughters, townspeople and acquaintances, but he also awoke an interest in the hearts of other Jews for the underprivileged in his city Częstochowa. Every year, he held a concert at the synagogue and sent the proceeds to Częstochowa, for these institutions.

Until his last day, he did all within his power to help those suffering in Częstochowa and he did everything modestly, without noise and without seeking “honours”. In America as well, [at] the

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: Group of ten adult male Jews required for a public prayer service.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: At a Chassidic court, the *shames* is the *Rebbe’s* personal attendant, akin to a butler.]

synagogue where he served as *shames*, [he] was well-liked and respected by all. When he turned eighty years old, the synagogue management held a magnificent birthday party for him.

He passed away on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1943 at the age of 83 and, at his funeral, he was eulogised by the Rabbis Zalman Reichman, A.Y. Shuchatowitz and, by his boyhood friend, Rabbi Weintraub.

### **Reb Chune Gotlib**

[He] was the *shames* for the Jewish *Kehilla*. It is said that before, the elections to the *Kehilla*, Reb Szmul Goldsztajn, *Kehilla* Chairman, would call him to his room and say:

*Here, you see, Chune, you're always complaining to me that you were born under an "unlucky star" and that you have to wait on myself and the rest of the Kehilla delegates, and you envy me – and here, the days have come when I fear they will not re-elect me and cast me down from my seat, while you remain securely in your position, without any fear lest someone should replace you! Your luck is better than mine!*

And this naïve Jew believed that his "standing" was better than that of the President of the *Kehilla*!