

M.Ch.T.

Simple Jews

Our city Częstochowa was famed for its intellectuals, both from Chassidic and the progressive circles. Much is said in our Memorial Book of personalities of different shades and tendencies. But it must also not lack that sort of Jews whom one does not find by the [synagogue's] Eastern Wall, those simple, honest Jews who also deserve to be mentioned and not only because they, too, were among the martyrs, but also due to their modest, decent lifestyle. They toiled heavily and bitterly to earn a livelihood, helped one another and, at the same time, did not fail to go at dawn to the study-hall to fulfil the precept of public prayer. To these simple Jews - some of whom I no longer remember even by name - I dedicate my subsequent lines.

1) Bajer's "Hotel"

[This was] a courtyard ay Nadrzeczna 16, which belonged to the Christian landlord, Bajer. It was a long courtyard, which stretched to the banks of the Warta River. Right by the street stood a two-storey house, whose lower floor lay almost half-sunk into the ground, with the windows barely higher than street-level. Upon nearing them and peering in, one could see a small table covered with boxes of wooden pegs, bits of leather and other shoe-making materials. On the low cobbler's bench sat the cobbler with his sons, working very diligently.

Structures stood on either side of the long courtyard. On one flank were small, one or two-room dwellings, in which lived craftsmen, general labourers, and most of all, carters. On the other side were stables for horses. On top of the stables, "loft-apartments" were erected, topped with slanted, wooden roofs covered in roofing felt. Directly under the roof were the dwellings' tiny windows. In one of these, one could see a woman cleaning and polishing the panes of the minute window, singing a song.

But this did not deter a few *cheder-yingelech* [young boys] from walking about on the sloping felted roof, which no longer showed any signs of tar. They clambered up onto the roof of the neighbouring courtyard, in fear of the tenants because, for a bit of work such as that, they were wont to receive a fine serving of clouts which they did not soon forget. On one occasion, one of them, a boy wearing a long cloak, suddenly discovered he had remained alone. His friends had been able to escape quickly. He trembled at the yells which arose from the courtyard below - "*Listen, you scamp, if you don't come down from there, I'll tear your foot off!*" And, good as his word, he snatched up a rod from his wagon, with which to honour the uninvited guest on the roof. But the boy vanished with lightning speed onto a low, adjacent rooftop and scurried off.

Ulica Nadrzeczna - one of the oldest in town - was very narrow. The distance between one row of houses to the other was very short. The courtyards were also very narrow, so it was almost impossible to turn a wagon around once inside. There was no other option, but to push each wagon in reverse. But directly opposite the gate stood the gruel-maker's house, with the windows at the very front. As is customary, every wagon had a shaft and freight-wagons had very long ones. Reb Leibel Bleszner would unharness his wagon and set the horses free. They already knew the way to the gate and, from there, straight to their stable. Habitually, one would then take hold of the shaft and push the long wagon in reverse. But the owner of the wagon would never perform this task by

himself. A “helper” would always appear - usually a “professional colleague”, for this type of work demanded not just “brawn”, but “brains” as well.

2) “Hard” Water and “Soft” Water

As is known, Częstochowa was blessed with abundant water. There was a pump in practically every courtyard, but the water that was “hard” was used only for rinsing utensils and ritual hand-washing. But when clothes needed to be laundered, “soft” water would be brought from the river. Besides, there was separate water for cooking - “tea water”. This had to actually be fetched from the third street, a chore which was carried out by Reb Berl *Wasserträger* [water-carrier] (Reb Berl Bomba), a tall Jew with an unkempt beard and a yoke on his shoulders, with a wooden bucket on each side, with which he would provide the housewives with both “soft” water and “tea-water”.

Every day, early in the morning, immediately following the prayer-service, Reb Berl would set off from “Bajer’s Yard”, bearing the yoke with the two buckets with which to fill the barrels in the homes. As he did this, he would give the little children a smile and sometimes also a sweet, which made him popular with different Jewish families. He was all the dearer before *Pesach*, when he appeared with his brand-new buckets and poured the water through a silken cloth into the special *Pesach* barrels. Reb Berl’s beaming countenance registered great contentment then, for he was not merely performing a task, but was engaged in a sacred service - in honour of the sublime *Pesach* festival.

3) The “Two Brothers”

When a wagon, harnessed with one or two horses, set off from the courtyard, it understandably made no impression at all. No one regarded this as a novelty. When one saw the “two brothers”, each one leading a horse by its reins, without a wagon, it was still difficult to notice them. But when one later saw them in the street, with the horses trudging in front of a black casket, one knew someone had died. They were both clad in long black greatcoats, buttoned up with large buttons, and, on their heads, they wore soft black hats with broad brims. They were also recognisable by their finely-trimmed little beards. Their two horses also wore the same “uniforms” - black mantles with holes for the eyes.

This is merely a small description of life in one courtyard on ulica Nadrzeczna. Jewish factory workers lived in other streets. Early every morning they would hurriedly run to work, carrying in their hands blue canisters with a bit of food, in order to come to the factories on time. Every morning, noon, and evening echoed with the factories’ whistles. Children used to be able to recognise each factory’s distinct whistle, by which they knew that father would soon be coming home from work.

4) Porters

An exclusively Jewish occupation in Częstochowa was that of the porters. Strong, broad-shouldered Jews would hire themselves out and carry heavy loads around on their backs or on carts. They had one “station” at the Stary Rynek (Old Market), where they would stand with thick ropes coiled around them, in a row, like soldiers. Some had carts, with the shafts pointing towards the marketplace, ready to set out. The second “station” was at the Nowy Rynek (New Market) - from the pavement in front of Reb Mendel Epszajn’s wine shop to “Uncle” Mordche Szwarcbaum’s tobacconists shop. All stood with carts here.

5) “Majer Riz” [Yid., “Giant”]

Majer Riz was a short, stocky little Jew and power literally emanated from his every limb. He was not only a porter, but also the gatekeeper at the “German Synagogue” on holidays or when a celebration was held there or a reception for an important guest. Majer Riz would then position himself on the stairs, in front of the threshold. Seeing him there, no one would any longer attempt to push his way up the steps without a ticket, even when Professor Majer Baľaban held a lecture there, in his voice with the strong accent and his guttural Jewish “R’s” . Here, the desire to gain entrance was very great but, upon seeing Majer Riz standing on the stairs, the “appetite” disappeared and one scrambled back down!

6) “Sojka”

This was not the wealthy Leibel, or Leon Sojka - the great merchant and philanthropist - but a different one altogether. He was not even related to him, but just happened to have the same surname. An older Jew with a greyish beard, it was his custom, on Fridays and holiday eves, to work only until twelve noon. He would not have changed this tradition for any treasure in the world. At twelve sharp, he would snatch up his cart and run home with it at the speed of lightning in order to prepare himself for *Shabbes* or the holiday. He went to the synagogue immediately after lunchtime, groomed in readiness for *Shabbes* and was among the first there! Such was his wont all his days.

7.) “A Son-In-Law with Full Board”

A great stir and clamour ensued among the porters of the Stary Rynek, one morning at the first hour, when one of their colleagues arrived with his new son-in-law. He was a strapping fellow, tall and broad-shouldered, with a ruddy complexion. He wore trousers that were much too short for him. A seasoned professional in the field, he carried a brand-new white rope wrapped around himself and stood on the pavement, together with his father-in-law and the rest of the porters.

The porters approached him with emphatic cries of “*Welcome!*” and “*Mazel-Tov!*”, all the while warmly wringing his hand and inspecting him to see what type of fellow he was. One of them treated him to such a thump on the shoulder, that the sound rang throughout the marketplace. A whack on the shoulder from “*nasz brat*” [Pol., “our brother”] was enough to “revive the dead”, but the son-in-law was not shaken by this, for he too was an expert at thumping shoulders. It was a trifle awkward for him, because he had omitted to ask his young wife what one replies to a “*welcome*”. In due time, he came to know that one answers “*shkoyech*” (*yasher koyach*¹). But he did not lose his nerve and, upon being asked how he was feeling after the wedding, he replied: “*Nishkusher*” (meaning to say - *nisht kushe*²).

His father-in-law was a Jew who knew something good when he saw it and, when negotiations regarding the match had only started, he at once perceived that this was indeed a fine suitor for his daughter and immediately “snatched him up”, not only assenting to the union, but also promising him full board³. The loyal son-in-law could not allow himself to saunter about like an unemployed person and, already during the seven days of feasting [following the nuptials], he went out with his father-in-law to the marketplace, where he was given such a warm welcome.

¹ [TN: Heb., “May it be for strength”; traditional Jewish equivalent of “thank you”.]

² [TN: “Nisht kushe” is half Yiddish and half Hebrew for “not a problem”, viz., “not bad”, whereas “nishkusher” is quite literally “un-kosher”.]

³ [TN: To enable him to study Torah without needing to work.]

Much satisfied with this, the father-in-law invited the entire company for a "*le'chaim*" at Bajnysz's tavern. There, they all agreed at once to also grant the son-in-law the right to stand in the front row on the pavement.

The son-in-law soon found his pace and became something to contend with. He lifted the largest and heaviest loads. And one did not envy the *shaigetz* [hoodlum] who had a quarrel with him or who just got an urge to make fun of Jews. Such a *shaigetz* did not leave his hands in one piece - he would not show his face in the marketplace again.

The father and son-in-law worked together and, while loading a wagon with sacks of flour or grain, they would sing a Jewish song finely.

The father-in-law never did keep his promise regarding the "full board" because, soon afterwards, it was he who received "full board" from the son-in-law.

(All these were dear Jews lived as brothers and sacrificed themselves for other Jews. May their memory be honoured!)