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The "S.S." (Zionist Socialist Party) in Częstochowa

(From My Memories)

The "S.S." (Zionist-Socialists) in Częstochowa, just like in other cities and *shtetls*, went through four metamorphoses. They were called: 1) "S.S.", 2) "United" 3) "Independent" and, finally, the "Free Country League", about which I do not write in my memoirs.

The beginning of "S.S." in Częstochowa was in the year 1902 when, in Minsk, the first group of Workers-Zionists arose. They did not believe in a future for the Jewish People in tsarist Russia and were political.

Dr Nachman Sirkin organised the first Zionist-Socialist group, then under the Hebrew name "*Cherut*" [Freedom].

At that time in Częstochowa, the "S.S." was led by: Józef Kruk, Aaron Singalowsky and Izaak Gurski, who possessed a distinct aptitude for organising the Jewish workers in the workshops and small factories.

They were helped by Alex Tempel, Hela Buchman-Gurski, Bronia and Mendel Koniarski, Max Dankewicz, Matvey Dawidowicz (an engineer on the Herby-Kielce train line), Szaja Lewenhof, Jakob Goldsztajn, Dawid Szajkewicz and D. Akerman.

A little later, they were joined by Nuchem Singalowsky, a student at the business-school.

All the aforementioned came from intellectual circles and were children of the bourgeoisie. They led the party-work.

As the second row of activists, the following may be considered - Herszel Gotajner, Michail Alter, Kuba Goldberg, Natek and Anya Bornsztajn (both from Zawiercie), Jozsek Finkelsztajn and Ch. Kac. The majority of them were students at the business school, which was also open to Jews.

There was also a sort of third category, made up entirely of male and female workers. The most active among them were Mendel Szychter, Kopl Gerichter, Mojsze Weksler, Faitel Szmulewicz (died in Israel in 1963), Jakub Icek Zarnowiecki, Szaja Jakub (later – S. Minkow in America), Max and Jossel Berliner, Dawid Lewenhof, Frajdla Bratt, Zacharia Lewensztajn, Mordka Altman- "Kostek", Icek the locksmith, Szmul Ajzner and Owieczka.

Dawid Guterman (Jezierce) and Nuta Szwarcbbaum also took an important place in the party.

All these listed were agitators in the workplaces (workshops and small factories) and were leaders of the most active circles in the organisation. However, the real main forces of the party were the broad, nameless masses, which followed their leaders in a disciplined manner.

In 1906, Warsaw delegated the following to lead the party - "Aleksander" (Leibisch Lehrer) and "Benjamin" (Yankel Levin) from Mogilev. The latter was killed by the Bolsheviks in Birobidzhan.

Such was the situation following the split in the Zionist movement into “*Tzeirei Zion*” and “Ugandists” – the representatives of the Territorial movement.

Following the conferences in Świder (near Warsaw) and in Odessa, the Territorial workers’-group took the name “S.S.” and introduced, into their program, the revolutionary struggle against tsarist autocracy, something which stood in contradiction to the decisions of the “*Poalei Zion*” in Minsk.

At that same time, the “S.S.” organisation in Częstochowa began a broad propaganda operation for the founding of a Jewish self-defence [structure]. This was following the Kishinev Pogrom and the publication of Bialik’s poem, “*In the City of Slaughter*”.

The “*Poalei Zion*” and the “*Bund*” then also organised their members towards the same purpose.

At the time, Rumours were often spread about preparations for pogroms against Jews. The self-defence [unit] stood on alert and, often, also sent its groups to the surrounding *shtetls*, where a fear of pogroms reigned.

Sadly, the Jewish self-defence [unit] was sometimes forced to use its power even against...Jews.

In Częstochowa, the “Good Boys” gang rampaged. They terrorised poor merchants and demanded from them various payments. After an energetic battle with these outcasts, they were liquidated.

The Reaction also intensified at that time and began to persecute the workers’-parties and their leaders.

Our party was also not spared. Aaron Singalowsky, Józef Kruk and Izaak Gurski were forced to leave Częstochowa. The party-work was limited to “*schadzki*” [Pol.; private meetings], without public processions.

In 1912, a Territorial conference was held in Vienna with the participation of Częstochowa delegates Rafail Federman and Simche Kulka.

In the difficult Reaction-years of 1912-1914, the “S.S.” organisation’s political activity was very limited, but it very actively participated in different cultural works of the literary society “*Lira*”, in which, at the time, worked members of all the workers’-parties, as well as those of the Zionist youth. All the differences between them were cleared.

During the First World War, all workers’ organisations, despite being under the German occupation, were revived and organised under diverse names. The “S.S.”, again, became the largest masses-party, being organised around the “Educational Association”.

In that period, many professional unions were organised through the “S.S.” – united under a central management. [They] established a workers’-kitchen, a cafeteria, a bakery and, nicest of all, a “children’s-home” named after Y.L Peretz!

The “S.S.” clubhouse was opened on the 2nd Aleja 43 (in Liberman’s building).

At the end of the First World War, Częstochowa contained almost a whole “S.S.” kingdom, ruled over by Rafail Federman, as chairman.

The board of management was comprised of Herszel Gotajner, Szyia and Henoch Nirenberg, Michail Alter, A. Wagner and Jakub Icek Zarnowiecki.



On Saturday, 4th January 1919, a festive assembly was held, at which the "S.S." proclaimed that, in accordance with the decisions of the Warsaw conference, its name would be changed to "United", due to its unification with the so-called "*Seymists*"* and it announced that, besides continuing with its program on territorialism, it would, on the ground, give more support to the foundation of the power of the local Jewish masses.

In connection to the war that the Polish legions were then waging against the Ukrainians and Lithuanians and the pogroms in Lwów and Wilna, on 20th May 1919, a pogrom also took place in Częstochowa, during which five Jews were murdered.

That same year, three types of elections were held in Częstochowa - to the Workers' Council, to the City Council and to the Polish *Sejm*. To the Workers' Council, from the total of 1,786 Jewish votes cast, "United" received 941 and 19 seats, the Communists 312 votes and 6 seats, the "*Bund*" 277 votes and 5 seats and "*Poalei Zion*" 256 votes and 6 seats.

To the City Council, from the 6,417 Jewish votes, "United" received 2,259 votes and put through four Council members - Rafail Federman, Szyia Nirenberg, Herszel Gotajner and Michail Alter.

The "*Poalei Zion*" put through another two Council members - Aleksander Bem and Szymon Waldfogel, after whose death in 1920, his place was taken by Judl Danziger.

The "*Bund*" only gained one Council member - Józef Aronowicz.

To the *Sejm*, our candidate, Józef Kruk, did not receive the necessary amount of votes. His counter-candidate, around whom all the Zionist parties and bourgeois elements concentrated, also fell through. The electoral regulations to the *Sejm* were thus "tailored" so that Jewish voters should have a very weak chance to put candidates of their own through.

Rafail Federman led the "United" faction of the City Council and always fiercely went out and fought the antisemitic politics of the *Endecja* majority against the Jewish burghers.

Our faction, together with the "P.P.S" Council members, protested energetically against the arrest of the "*Bund*" Council member Józef Aronowicz, during the Polish-Bolshevik war, and brought about his release.

The energetic stance of our Council members caused a series of persecutions against our party.

In 1920, the police impounded our party's locale and, afterwards, also liquidated it. Later, it also impounded the locales of the professional unions. The Polish government shamelessly adopted the disgraceful ways of the tsarist enslaver. [It] interfered greatly with the arrangement of assemblies and concerts, not allowing to Yiddish to be spoken or sung.

The Częstochowa organisation strove with all its might to combat these interferences.

* [Translator's note: *Seymists* is a nickname for the Jewish Socialist Workers Party, or "SERP".]

However, in 1922, the downfall of "United" in Częstochowa sadly began for various reasons.

A strong emigration began, which took with it the most active forces. The economic crisis hit the working masses first. This also caused splits – especially at the Centre in Warsaw. Some of the leaders went over to other parties – to the "Bund" and to the Communists. Many of the latter left for Russia and were killed there, as Polish spies.

At the end of the summer of 1922, a unification-conference with Bolesław Drobner's group (the former "P.P.S.", under the name "Independent Socialist Party") was held in Częstochowa, at the "New World" hall (formerly a workers'-kitchen). The Jewish workers in that party constituted themselves into a separate faction. The party, as a whole, recognised the need for concentrated emigration, industrialisation and agriculturisation of Jewish workers.

Sometime earlier, a few of the leading members had wanted the party to unite with the "Bund", on condition that the "Bund" should accept "United's" emigration program. Obviously, the leaders of the "Bund" did not agree to this.

In 1923, when I travelled to America for the first time, I saw to it that the "Częstochower Relief" should ensure the existence of our schools.

Dudek Szlezinger took over the leadership of the organisation. He was very popular, both with the Polish and with the Jewish workers. Members Szyja Nirenberg, Wolf Fajga, Abram Bratt, Leibish Berkowicz and Motek Plywacz actively aided him.

At the end of summer of 1925, I returned to Częstochowa and remained there for two years.

The Częstochowa organisation "United" continued conducting a lively, intense activity amongst Polish and Jewish workers for a number of years. At the "New World" hall, mass-assemblies and lectures were held in Yiddish and Polish.

Under the party's "legal" protection, many communists infiltrated it. The secret police, of course, "smelt" this at once and began repressions. Searches and confiscations were carried out often, not only at the locales, but also in private dwellings. Even private letters were seized and inspected.

Dr Józef Kruk, who came often to Częstochowa and lectured there, was arrested and incarcerated for some time at the Piotrków and Częstochowa gaols.

I, also, experienced the bitter taste of gaol in Liberated Poland.

Upon my return from America, I printed an article headed "The Silent Murder", which I wrote regarding the closing of the schools of the Bundist association, "Unsere Kinder" [Our Children], by the Polish government.

The Reaction in Poland intensified from day to day.

Prior to the start of the Second World War, the Polish government liquidated the party and Dr Józef Kruk was sent to the infamous Kartuz-Bereza concentration camp, from where he was extricated – after great efforts, mainly from his friends abroad – barely alive.

When Dr Kruk joined the "Committee for Working Palestine", former "S.S." leader Jakob Icek Zarnowiecki, also joined. He had experienced all our party's transmutations. He was one of the first martyrs to be murdered by the German killers.

([For] his death, as [for] the death of hundreds like him and the thousands of men, women and children, who were killed by the blood-thirsty murderers and their helpers in Częstochowa itself and in the crematoriums of the death-camps, the extermination and destruction of Jewish Częstochowa, which generations of Jews had built and created, may the murderers never be pardoned and never be forgotten!)