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## The Bygone Częstochowa Community

The bygone Częstochowa community - with the tragic inference of these words - like many other communities in Eastern Europe, was built and developed over the course of centuries, with each generation adding its own layer, drawing from the roots of its predecessors and passing on to the next generation, in the sense that “*each generation speaks with the other*”<sup>57</sup>.

This said, I think that it would not be an exaggeration to state that the Częstochowa community was set apart by the distinct characteristic of being multifaceted, meaning that all the currents of the public sphere and all of the distinct elements of a consolidated national [viz. Zionist] group, were well represented within it. This phenomenon was manifest both in the social arena and in commercial and cultural life.

Perhaps this development may be attributed, to some extent, to the very special circumstances of the city being a focal point and a centre for Christian worship which, in turn, gave birth to diversified modes of defence against the hostile environment. And maybe the geographic location - between two large cultures - also contributed its share. But whatever be the reason, the final result was that the life of the community incorporated currents and tendencies which were similar to each other, together with those which stood in opposition to one another.

Unlike other localities in the Eastern European Diaspora, where one encountered monolithic groups – here *Chassidim*, there *Misnagedim* and so forth - Częstochowa did not lack any of the essential elements of community life, which had a place in the life of the European Jewry.

It is impossible to cover, in full detail, all this effervescent Jewish community’s social and cultural activities, which were reflected, among other things, in the mighty currents of expression, in writing and in speaking - preachers, *maggidim* and Halachic authorities on the one hand and men of letters and writers on the other - with, at the centre of attention as regards the everyday interest in written material, **two widely distributed weekly periodicals**, which regularly brought together and reflected the life of the community, their events, news and innovations. We should mention that one of these two weeklies represented a clear Zionist agenda.

### Youth Groups

In all its facets, the National Awakening flourished in the pre-War years, starting from educational-cultural activities and culminating in multi-branched political activism.

The first days of the organised National Revival already found, in Częstochowa, a small nucleus of activists and the city was among the first in the *Tzeirei Zion* movement.

Youth groups, the Zionist and others also, which had concentrated within them the best of the student and working youth, deserve to be remembered favourably. This chapter should also include the *Ha’Chalutz* movement, which was the tree from which sprung forth the branches of the settlement of Israel, with their currents and political parties. In fact, the welcome youthful ebullience actually began

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<sup>57</sup> [TN: Popular aphorism from the Jewish Haskala movement.]

at an even earlier stage. In the city's public schools - named after Sienkiewicz and Traugutt – the Jewish students were the ones who distinguished themselves and excelled the most, both in their studies and in the many youth groups, from which future activists grew, who eventually came to fill all the ranks in the wide public sphere - in all its diversity.

Their *Song of Life* continually wove dreams, embroidered plans and nurtured aspirations, while the years, in themselves, brought experience and [taught] lessons.

### **Public Life**

In the public arena, the involvement of Częstochowa Jews in all fields of life - the national and the political - reflected [the fact that they were] a racial minority - in the local municipal framework and more.

I shall set forth a few lines to describe the tapestry of society. We shall start from the circle of people who were distanced from tradition. Although they had assimilationist tendencies, they remained fiercely connected to their origins and the only manner they perceived in which they could extend aid and alleviate the plight of the masses, was through philanthropy and the provision of welfare. Several prominent, public figures also arose in Częstochowa from within these circles, who laid the foundations for the establishment of Jewish public projects within the city.

Even though these public figures were distanced from the masses in the national and cultural sense, their passionate interest in their People and their feelings of concern for their fate, grants them the historical right to be acclaimed.

On the other side of the camp, equally conspicuous, was the religious community, with its many houses of prayer, numbering hundreds and thousands of worshippers. These circles were known for their wide and effervescent activity, in the numerous institutions which gushed forth Torah and knowledge.

Both factions rise before our eyes, as if from a fantastic legend. Like a string of gleaming pearls, the characters rise above the horizon of life - one for personality, virtues and characteristics and the other on account of deeds, ways and customs - a multi-coloured mosaic of figures, striding at the head of the camp, chosen from among the multitudes, spiritual shepherds, scholars, rabbis, halachic authorities and *Maskilim* – on the one hand - and “everyday Jews”, who distinguished themselves in this way or another - on the other. All as one, and all together, they are as if interwoven in a tale which is far away and yet so close to our hearts.

The sages stated that “*there is no earlier and later in the Torah*<sup>58</sup>” and such is also the case when we come to enumerate Częstochowa's worthies, who lived and were active each one in his field - religious people, Enlightenment circles, trusted voluntary civil servants, thinkers and fighters for the ideals in which they believed with all their souls and might.

### **Reb Awrum Naftuli Ish-Horowicz**

First and foremost, we shall set forth, here, a character who was known to many, many - the scion of prodigies and righteous men, linked to the *Gerer* Chassidic court and the famous Dziobas family - Reb Awrum Naftuli HaLevi Ish-Horowicz, the son of Reb Srulke Horowicz of Piotrków, who was the brother-in-law of the *Gerer Rebbe*, Our Teacher [*Rebbe*] Awrum Mordche Alter, of righteous and sainted

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<sup>58</sup> [TN: *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim, p.6b*; meaning that there is no absolute chronological order in the Torah, as events that occurred later in time can appear earlier in the Torah.]

memory. This Reb Awrum Naftuli, who had found his calling in Torah study for its own sake, would rise every day, even before dawn, to engage in study and would continue late into the night. As if this was not enough, he would “steal” from the hours of the day and night some “extra hours” for Torah study and contemplating Chassidism. It is therefore no wonder that his uncle, the *Rebbe* Reb Awrum Mordche Alter ztz”l, regarded him as the “silken young man”, the finest of all the young, married men.

One special chapter in Reb Juda [sic] Naftuli’s magnificent life was that of the good deeds he did for individuals and for the public, whose main purpose of which was that they be done secretly.

In this area, he was greatly assisted by his wife, the modest Mrs Pesel *hy”d*. Their house was wide-open to any person requiring their aid. This home was truly a “wayfarers’ hostel”, in which every hungry person ate his fill, found clothes to wear - and was also given money generously.

Being an insightful and sharp-witted man, circumspect and diligent in his actions, Częstochowa Jewry and their public figures set their eyes on him and found him to be the appropriate man to stand at the head of various public institutions, including in the lists of the “*Agudas Yisroel*” party, which had been founded by his uncle, the *Gerer Rebbe* ztz”l.

During the Holocaust, his house literally became a shelter for refugees and all despondent souls found assistance, as well as financial and moral support there. However, the suffering of the times broke his spirit, as well as his robust constitution. He fell ill and, on the bitter and untimely day, 18<sup>th</sup> Adar 5702 [7<sup>th</sup> March 1942], he returned his soul to its Maker, to the great sorrow of all those who had known him and held him dear, when he was only about 62 years of age.

### **The Engineer Reitzes**

The polar opposite, as it were, was the figure of Eng. Reitzes, the categorical representative of the assimilationist circles. With the increase of antisemitism, he came closer to his own People and even developed great activity in the fields of culture and sport. Among other things, he founded the “Jewish Intellectuals’ Club”.

And another personage from within this rich mosaic, one of the outstanding characters, unique in his qualities, was Reb Wolwicz Borensztajn z”l, who dedicated himself to fulfilling the precept of publicly propagating the Torah, by teaching hundreds of *yeshivah* pupils.

This arrangement was made possible by the acquiescence of the large Gold family to take upon itself the yoke of providing fully, in a dignified manner, for his family, in exchange for their share in the merit of maintaining this Torah institution.

All the currents of Chassidism in Congress Poland also belonged to this section of society and all the *Rebbes*, with their courts, were represented in Częstochowa.

The city counted, within it, four Chassidic courts, to which different parts of the religious population, with all its diversity, swarmed to find protection and refuge, or for advice and instruction in their practical, spiritual and emotional necessities.

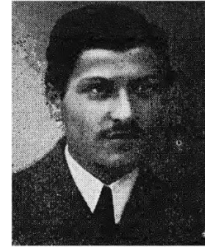
Many activists emerged and arose from within these circles, who dedicated themselves to ample activities and who were also noted for their extraordinary social and political adroitness.

We shall now mention one family from this section, whose three sons excelled in Torah, wisdom and secular studies as one. This was:

## The Fogel Family

In those days, the eldest of these sons, Leibel, achieved the highest possible level of formal legal education. This was fiercely characteristic of his generation in the Polish Diaspora, which could not come to accept the area it had been allotted, and aspired to much wider horizons.

It is important to stress that this man's character had embedded, within it, the favourable trait of not coming to terms with circumstances and it is this that caused him to come into a conflict with an armed guard at the Skarżysko camp, in which he lost his life.



*Leibel Fogel*

In the camp, he was actively connected with the P.P.S. Resistance. This proud man could not withstand the human humiliation and he paid for his human dignity with his life. He was one of the most prominent sharp-minded intellectuals of Częstochowa's young generation and people predicted he was destined for greatness. Some say the Resistance intended him to fill the lofty office of a minister, once liberation had come.

The third faction which was very prominent in the last period before the War was the Nationalist-Zionist current to all its branches, which was known by the general epithets "Zionists" or "Mizrachi". Both these movements had numerous personalities of spiritual greatness and stature.

## The Bagel-Seller – "Like a Clock"

We shall also include, in this list, one colourful character from among the myriad of "simple folk" who contributed - in his special manner - to the city's unique style.

Today's numerous and diverse, technical appliances have made it so that finding out the correct time is a triviality. One has but to pick up the telephone or turn on the radio and receive the answer immediately.

Not so in bygone years. In those days, people would rise to the whistle of the train or to the nearby factory's siren and so on and so forth.

The Jews of Częstochowa, too, had a similar "siren" of sorts, in the form of the bagel-seller, who would make the round of the city's streets, calling out, in his hoarse voice, "*Heisse beigel!*" [Yid; Hot bagel].

It is doubtful whether anyone knew his name. To many, he was certainly anonymous, yet his entity was of paramount significance to those who linked his appearance with their "needs of the hour". This man appeared in the courtyards of the city's buildings - every day - at exactly the same time and, upon hearing his voice hoarsely advertising his wares, people would set their clocks.

This dear Jew, who so devotedly took care to carry out his good deeds "for God and for people", would rise early each morning to worship with the first prayer group, in order to have enough time to dedicate most of his day to acts of charity and goodwill.

Once, it happened that he was compelled to enter the study-hall straight from his daily occupation and, seeing himself dressed in his work apparel, he became thoroughly embarrassed, feeling as if he had mixed the holy with the profane, and his soul found no solace, before standing humbly before the Master of the World, and begging forgiveness for his "terrible impudence".

## Institutions

[Now] we shall make mention of the institutions which were established and developed with a faithful hand (we are unable to mention all of them, for they were many, but we shall take note of some among them).

The Jewish Hospital served, in fact, as the medical centre, in the circumstances of the times, for the local community and the close vicinity. And having mentioned the hospital, it is impossible not to call to mind the memory of one of the *Righteous Among the Nations*<sup>59</sup>, Dr Mikulski, the hospital's chief surgeon. A Jewish sense of mercy stuck to Dr Mikulski to such an extent, that he seemed as one of our own brethren, a Son of Israel. Many instances are known during which he visited the houses of poor people and, not only did he not require any payment, but he would leave money for medication and for coal to heat the dwelling.

In this golden chain of halls of Torah and Knowledge, [and] cultural-educational enterprises and institutions, a favourable mention should be made of the *Keser Torah Yeshivah*, which was part of a comprehensive nationwide network, from which emerged hundreds of sharp-minded Torah scholars, experts in all the treatises of the Talmud.

We have described but the smallest bit of the wide and diversified circle of cultural enterprises and institutions, in order to demonstrate the fact that, in our city, no part of the Jewish population which had nationalist [i.e. Zionist] tendencies was left without the opportunity to take part in the bustling nationalist life and to draw emotional and spiritual satisfaction from it.

## The Hebrew Centre

It is no exaggeration to state that the "Hebrew Centre", which included a wonderful library named the *Biblioteka Judaistyczna* [Pol.; Judaic Library], became, over the course of the years, the spiritual centre for Hebrew culture and Zionist activity.

Within the walls of this famous library was one more magnificent enterprise of the Bund movement, which established marvellous institutions, in order to instil spiritual values in the Jewish working masses of Częstochowa, who saw this movement as the "Jewish point" in their general world view.

An event, which took place during the Holocaust, in connection with this library, merits special mention. The centre was managed and also organised, by Mr Turner. At the beginning of the War, the library was packed up into crates and concealed in the building's cellar.

Once the first tempest had died down, Mr Turner concluded - probably after consulting other activists - to reinstitute the library and to resume operating it, by returning the books to the shelves, according to the catalogue. One may glean to what extent this matter touched his heart, from the fact that, one week prior to the burning of the synagogue, I met him by chance and, on this opportunity, he told me with recognisable satisfaction of his great success in reopening the library. He was filled with passion regarding the great benefit it would bring to the public in the "special" circumstances. Indeed, Turner had had no premonition that, just one week later, the building would be destroyed and all its contents burnt, as in fact happened. Only the outer walls and the fence built around it remained as a reminder of the disaster.

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<sup>59</sup> [Editor's note] *The Yad Vashem Database of the Righteous has no record of him, nor does the POLIN Museum, in Warsaw, have any record of him having been awarded this title.*

## **In Financial Life**

One of the well-known Jewish contributions was to Poland's economy, particularly in the fields of wholesale and retail commerce, but also in industry and craftsmanship. This contribution of theirs, very sorrowfully, turned against them over the course of the years. Their success, and no less so the very fact that they were involved in these arenas, gave rise to a wave of envy and hatred, which brought, in its wake, acts of antisemitic instigation, accompanied by brutal measures [such as] pogroms, persecutions, etc.

But, as much as the haters of Jews aspired to cruelly drive the Jews out of various financial arenas and to tear them away from their sources of sustenance, they did not have the power to change the facts themselves, which were - that the Jews had been the pioneers of small and medium industry in Poland. Their part was particularly noticeable in Częstochowa, in the areas of metal and celluloid, to the development of which they had contributed greatly.

It is impossible to name them all, but we shall mention the more active and prominent people who were the leaders in their fields, such as Pinkus Landau's factory [and] the Horowicz, Rozensztajn and Ickowicz families - in the field of metallurgy; the Lewit family in textiles; the Kopiński family in timber and others. Besides having made a great contribution to the life of commerce and finance, all were also popular within both Jewish and non-Jewish financial circles and were invited to participate in financial deliberations and decisions, as they constituted an integral part of that general fabric.

As stated, the involvement and contribution to industry and commerce of Częstochowa Jews were only one part of their fruitful and diversified, general activity in all fields of life. And, as much as they were allowed to do so (for they were, after all, an oppressed racial minority), they enriched and developed, with their talents, capabilities, inventiveness and commitment, each and every field to which they turned and in which they invested their might and means.

## **A Manifestation of Pure Humanism**

As we have set forth, here, the unforgettable characters from our city's rich panorama, it is impossible not to recall one personality, one of the most familiar and famous - that of the medico Kijak, whose elevated way of life, customs and deeds inspired admiration and esteem in all the social strata.

This man, who saw in his occupation, above all, a mission to bring healing to human afflictions, combined his deep knowledge with the everyday, Jewish quiet-wittedness with which he was endowed, which enabled him to find the perfect synthesis with which to penetrate the inner recesses of a patient's mind, in order to bring him the desired relief.

Those in need of his services came to trust him in an unlimited manner and to also consider him as the family's medical advisor. Even after having turned to doctors and received medications, they did not use them before having the medico Kijak voice his opinion of them. Another distinctive feature was his loyalty to his elemental viewpoint that his occupation was, first and foremost, to extend aid to those in trouble. He viewed the issue of honorariums as a completely marginal matter, as if "by the way".

This same medico Kijak was also a Torah scholar, who had never forgotten the studies of his youth and who was proficient in them to his last days.

In his world views, he was a passionate Zionist, and he also brought his children up in the spirit of loving the Jewish People, instilling in them the consciousness of the nation's revival by returning to the land of our fathers.

Our townspeople were both diverse and unique, each living according to his beliefs, conscience and customs. But one thing united them all - they were loyal servants to their people. They all drew from the same source - the glorious past – and, from it, they desired to build a bridge to a better future for their people.