

Moshe Yishai

This is How I Remember my City



Częstochowa – how many memories are linked with it? We came to this city to settle in it on a winter’s day in 1902. My mother’s uncle had been appointed its Chief Rabbi and the family decided that my father should move there to help him in his difficult duties and to serve as Head of [the rabbinical] Court.

Our apartment was in a Jewish house, the landlord – a baker. The building led out to two streets and we lived in the inner courtyard, in front of the bakery. The courtyard was surrounded by two-story residential houses on every side and, only above the bakery, which was in a half-cellar, there were no dwellings. In front of the bakery was a stairwell, which descended two floors down into a cellar, where the flour storeroom was located. We, the children, played in this courtyard, running around the bakery, sometimes listening to the tumult surging forth from within it.

In the winter evenings, we - the boys of the courtyard, sat on the threshold steps and told one another tales of demons and ghosts, pirates, kidnappers who took children to churches and more.

And where would we boys, the Israelite sons of Israelites, learn but in a *cheder*? The *cheder* was far off, on ul. Nadrzeczna Street, and its courtyard was open to the Warta River. In the wintertime, we played, as usual, on the ice. And before the *Rebbe* arrived for the lesson, we all went out to skate on the ice. The *Rebbe* came and did not find us. He then went out through the yard to the river and called us, “Come, scoundrels, to the Torah! You may not lark about at the expense of Torah study!”

We hid behind the clumps of frozen ice on the river and did not come. The *Rebbe* then attempted to come after us, walking with his cane like a blind man. He crossed the river bank and thrust forth his cane - which fell into a hole in the ice, from which the house’s residents drew their water – and he fell flat, sprawling over the entire hole. We all panicked and came out, vociferously, to rescue him. The *Rebbe*, meanwhile, had broken an arm - his right hand. We escorted him, groaning, to his home. We then returned to the *cheder* (we were, after all, not allowed to go home until after seven o’clock in the evening) and, again, went out to skate on the ice.

And where are those days, when the Polish Jewry’s sun had risen? Just in this [one] city, there were synagogues for the burghers, a synagogue for the assimilationists, a study-hall, and countless *shtieblech*; a “*Zamir*” [Heb.; Nightingale] club, a Hebrew club, three Zionist parties and five other parties - and also the Bund and Zionist-Socialists and Social-Democrats; a Hebrew high school, Hebrew schools, a Talmud Torah [municipal *cheder*], crafts schools, a farm for agricultural studies and a daily newspaper in Yiddish; gala evenings in Hebrew and Yiddish, cafés, halls [and] weddings – hundreds – after all, there were thirty-five thousand Jews in this city! And the *Kehilla*? A Chief Rabbi, a Head of Court and three judges, two [Chassidic] *Rebbes*, some ten shoichets [and] a multitude of holy vessels¹. Who could count them [all]?

And who doesn’t remember the Zionist war in the city?

And how great was our joy when we were permitted to celebrate Herzl Day at the assimilationists’ synagogue! The Zionist message in this synagogue, too! And the war of the elections to the *Sejm*? The

¹ [TN: Viz. Torah scholars and prominent religious personalities.]

sun of Polish Jewry was at its zenith. Its waters surged, and they were bountiful waters, like the waters which permeate the fields, causing an abundance of fruits and flowers to sprout forth.

And then we found ourselves in the latter part of the First World War. The Zionist Movement in Poland was at its full force. Dr Thon Jehoszua put forth a four-clause demand for cultural autonomy and, in our city, we requisitioned the *Kehilla* Council to join this petition. With us was Izaak Szwajger (Demiel [a writer]) - he presented the demand and I stood behind him. In those days, when the Germans were retreating from Poland, the Jewish population was in danger, because the country was without a government. [The previous] one had fallen and a new one had not as yet arisen.

Each city organised a militia to maintain order in its own jurisdiction. Polish youth was called to arms. In our city, the editor of the Polish, antisemitic newspaper was a young man who, according to his age, was required to join the "fighting" army. But, for some reason, he preferred to remain a journalist and hammer the Jews. A Security Council was then established for the city, which consisted of three Poles and two Jews. We organised the defence of the Jewish quarter and participated in the General Security Council. The landlord of the building in which we lived, who had a grudge against me, was also voted onto the council on behalf of the Poles.

At night, I could not sleep². My mother's uncle, the Chief Rabbi, lived some five buildings away from the hotel. He had five sons and four daughters. None of them survived, except for three granddaughters and one grandson - from a daughter. The Rabbi's surname had been effaced from the earth.

There was another family in this city with many children - seventeen offspring from one father and one mother. Before the War, three of them had left and wandered off to other lands. All the rest are no more, their memory has been erased. A third family, one of the city's prominent ones - among its first Zionists, industrialists - was completely obliterated. Only a grandson survived - from a daughter - and he is in Israel. There were those prolific in Torah [study], [observance of] the precepts and good deeds - all were struck and obliterated by Satan's hand.

The desire suddenly awoke in me to see everything, to drink the poisoned cup to its dregs. In the morning. I arose with a clear resolve - those who had survived needed to show me every place, each corner where something had occurred, in connection with the memory of our People, who had been there and had been annihilated, who had lived and who were now dead.



"Do you wish to see where the Holocaust began for us? Let us travel to the cemetery".

A carriage tethered to two horses drove me, with two of my companions. From the hotel, we went out on the first *Aleja* [and], from there, to the *Nowy Rynek*, up to the church. Next to it, we made a turn into a narrow and short, little street and reached what had once been the *Stary Rynek*. In those days, the suburb that stretched to the river began here. It was the suburb which was entirely settled by the Children of Israel. Here, my heart broke - from this place and all the way to the river - islands of debris, huge piles of bricks which had toppled over and covered the entire ground around them, just like in the Warsaw ghetto. Not a trace of a house, not a trace of a street - only uninhabited territory, which even the carriage found difficult to negotiate.

"Is this the ghetto?"

² [TN: Henceforth, the author obviously writes of post-Second World War days.]

“Yes, this was the ghetto at the start of the war”.

I then alighted from the carriage, and a *landsleit*, from those days, led me through the piles and the paths between them to ul. Nadrzeczna.

“Here, you see”, said my companion, “this is the street. Here was the *cheder*, here stood the *yeshivah*, which was headed by your father, whom people called *Der Wolier Ruv* [The Rabbi of Wola] (a reminder of the fact that he had previously been a rabbi in Wola, a suburb of Warsaw).”

We continued on the path that had been created amidst the avalanche of bricks along the thoroughfare and we approached the site where the synagogue and the study-hall had been situated.

All around were ruins. Everywhere the eye turned - ruins, ruins - not a trace of residential houses and not a trace of the shops. There was no Jew walking about the city either – no long caftan, no beard, and certainly no traditional hat. The ambience had changed its visage.

From here, we crossed the bridge over the Warta and turned left, towards the cemetery. I walked amid the rows of graves. Lo and behold, some names were familiar - the tomb of Rabbi Asz, his brother-in-law and his sister; that of Chaim Weksler - leader of the *Kehilla* Council, whose only daughter studied medicine, arrived in Jerusalem, and died there in her prime. The tombs of the city’s first Zionists - Horowicz and Gerichter, the Klajnmans - the assimilationist physicians Kohn, Russ, and Broniatowski and the city’s worthies. Who could count [all] their names?

I walked amongst those graves and it was as if I was walking amongst the years of my youth - bygone days, never to return. We went onwards, until reaching the southern wall. Alongside it, I find ten mass burials. Each grave contained twelve bodies. Next to each grave was a small plaque with the names of those who had found their eternal rest there. And these were the first 120, the finest of the Jewish intelligentsia, which Hitler’s troops took, at the start of the War, from the city’s Jewish quarter and, on 20th March 1943, under the guise of transport abroad – to the Land of Israel, they and their households were all loaded onto vehicles and were actually driven here, to this wall, where they were lined up in several rows, with a volley of bullets putting an end to their lives. And indeed, they met “happy” deaths - they had come to a Jewish grave and had not passed through the Seven Circles of Hitler’s Hell, before the destroyer cut them down.

And I read their names³: Dr Alfred Anisfeld; Dr Bernard Epsztein, his wife and two children; Dawid Borzykowski; Dr Mojżesz Blumenfeld, his wife and two sons; Jerzy Bodzechowski; Dr Ajzyk Broniatowski; Mania Broniatowska and her son; Natan Dawid Berliner; Dr Barczyński and his wife; Jeremiasz Gitler and his two children; Dr Leon Gutman; Dr Stefan Gliksztein and his wife; Maurycy [Galster;] [Jerzy Galster; Dr Leon Glater;] Kruza Grunwald; [Dawid] Geszikter– lawyer in training, [and his wife]; Jakub Horowicz and his wife; [Dr Mojżesz] Halleman, his wife and children; Eugeniusz Hamerman; Adv. Marek Weinberg and his wife; [Rachela Weisberg;] Dr Eliaz Wiener, his wife and two children; Dr Wolf Warmund, his wife and son; Jakub Zylbersztein; Dr Hilary Zandsztein his wife and son; [Dr Jakub Zeif, his wife and son;] Wilhelm Żerykier; Dr Pola Chajutin[-Rozenzaft]; Dr Bernard Tenenbaum, his wife and son; Róża Tenenbaum; Dr [Julian] Trauner; Dr Dawid Kagan, his wife and son; Dr Adolf Lewenhof; Eugenia Lewin; Dr Mieczysław Lewin; Dr Zygmunt Lipiński, his wife and daughter; Dr Julian Lipiński and his wife; Eng. Landau⁴; Dr Leon Lampel and his wife; Róża Sobol [-Kopińska] and her son; [Januszek Edelist;] Dr [Dawid] Falk, his wife and daughter; Dr Szymon Pohorille, his wife and two children; Bernard Firstenfeld and his wife; Eng. Henryk Feiner; Stefania Ferster; Dr Stanislaw Praport, his wife and son; Dr Marian Kijak, his wife and son; Leon Kopiński, his wife and son; Maurycy

³ [TN: We have corrected the mistakes of the original Hebrew, and added some victims the author omitted, from the original list in Polish.]

⁴ [TN: Eng. Landau is not in the original list in Polish.]

Kopiński, his wife and two children; Bernard Kurland, his wife and daughter; Dr Henryk Krauskopf, his wife and two children; Rozen, his wife and daughter; [Dawid] Richter; Fela Rotbard; Zelig Rotbard and his wife; Dr Alfred Szykier, his wife and son; Dr Maurycy Sztajnic and his wife; Izio Tatarka; Michaś Szancer [; Roman Szpigielman;].

They were all of my own generation or even younger. Many of them had gone with me to *cheder* and *yeshivah*, and we had been together in the Zionist associations. Together we dreamed and fought and we yearned – together, we awaited the Independence of our Land and an exalted future for humanity!

Here and there were ruined graves, scattered rocks. The hand of desolation and devastation had touched them, too. The carriage hastened to cross the ghetto area and we turned on ul. Warszawska - towards the Street of the Frogs [ul. Żabia]. “Here lie the bones of six thousand souls”.

The yard belonged to a Pole, a vegetable grower. During the War, the Germans had dug there, where the bones of six thousand souls had found their burial. There are no lists. No one knows who is buried there. The *Kehilla* Council, when it was reinstated after the War, approached the Pole with the request that he not sow the plot, as it was a mass grave, to which he replied, “The land is mine and I shall do with it as I please”.

Then, exhausting negotiations ensued with that Pole that he should agree to part with his plot of land, that he should name his price and the sum which he demanded for it was so great, that the *Kehilla* Council, together with the local branch of the Central Council of Polish Jewry, were unable to pay it. So, the Pole continued using the land and the bones of six thousand Jewish victims fertilised his vegetables - they were among the best in town!

We continued onwards and came to [ul.] Wały [ed: he must be referring here to ul. Wilsona] - near the assimilationist synagogue [ed: the New Synagogue]. It was destroyed, only the outer walls remained. How magnificent this synagogue’s interior furnishings and decorations had been!

We [then] came to ul. Spadek - now Garibaldiego – to the building that had been erected on this street by the *Kehilla* Council, not long before the First World War, following the plans of my father z”l and under his supervision - the *mikvah* building. My father worked like an ant to construct this edifice, which became the pride of the entire vicinity - and what was it now? That same building now serves as the Częstochowa *Kehilla* Centre. It contains the rabbi’s living quarters, a school for Jewish youth, a synagogue and also a soup kitchen. The community’s survivors, who returned after the Holocaust and have no bread to eat at home, receive three meals a day there.

The carriage sped onwards and took me, again, back to the *Aleje* – to the First, Second and Third, to the Mayor (who they say he is a Jew from Lwów, but he is a Pole to all appearances) [and] to the Polish lawyer Paciorkowski, who was my teacher in the years 1914-15 and who prepared me for admission to the high school. All through the War, he had been held captive in Germany and he returned crushed and broken. And to the lawyers, the H. couple who, during the First World War, had been in the *Ha’Shomer Ha’Tzair* movement and who had now returned to work to their professions in this city. They took me to a Jewish barbershop, the owner being the barber himself. He remembered me from the old days and I was forced to have a haircut. Of all the Jewish shops which had been on the *Aleje*, this barbershop is the only one remaining. In the owner’s eyes, this was a privilege.

In the afternoon and evening hours, [we went] to lectures. We gathered in the hall of the *mikvah* building’s synagogue. I mentioned forgotten events: the war of the political parties in bygone days - Zionists and Bundists – a generation’s self-examination, Zionism and its achievements and the Bund and its failures. I then came to the dormitory for the youth awaiting *Aliyah*. This dormitory had, in

those days, been the Chief Rabbi's living quarters. Oh! How many times had I been in these quarters! Every room was familiar to me - I remembered each and every corner. Here, we youths had sat. Here we had played cards. Here we had read books. Here had been the prayer group at the rabbi's home and here had been his dining-room, from whose table food was never lacking. Day and night, guests were at his table, whether relatives or friends - everyone had a place, a glass of tea or a drink and "something to chew".

Now, there was a long table in the dining-room and, along its entire length and all around it, were youth waiting to hear news from Israel. I told them about the Second *Aliyah*⁵, of ships capsizing on the high seas, of the yearning of the generation to participate in the project of building [the country] and of the audaciousness expressed by rowing to the beaches of Palestine.

The youth listened attentively and, at the end of the speech, they burst into song: "*Zug nisht az di gaist dem letzten weg...*" [Yid; "Don't say that you are going on the last journey"]

***From the book "Envoy to the Land of the Holocaust"
(Records of a journey to Poland on behalf of the Jewish Agency in 1964)***

⁵ [TN: Between 1904 and 1914.]