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## The “Chevra Kadisha”

Even before Jewish public life had reached a state of community organisation, the *Angel of Death* did not ignore the first Jews who had settled in Częstochowa. Therefore, they would transport the deceased to neighbouring Janów, which had public institutions, including a cemetery.

When the residents of Janów and its leaders began to weigh down on the people of Częstochowa by demanding from them exorbitant payments or by delaying the burial of their dead, our townspeople decided to establish a cemetery of their own and a “Chevra Kadisha” was then also established.

It is quite possible that the distinct liberality and easy-going approach of the local “Chevra Kadisha”, in relation to those in need of their aid, came directly from the fact that they wished to prove that there was now no place for the difficulties that the Częstochowa Jews had faced, in the past, from Janów community leaders and from its “Chevra Kadisha”.

Another factor that hastened the arranging their own cemetery was the distance of the location and the bad state of the roads in autumn and winter and, above all, the strange incident that had once occurred while transporting a body to Janów. This is the story, as told by the members of the “Chevra Kadisha”:

*One of the bodies was strapped to the wagon upon which it was carried in order to ensure its safe transportation to Janów for burial. The undertakers had carelessly failed to put the strap ends inside the wagon. During the journey, it became wrapped around one of the wheels and pulled the corpse with it, who then seemed to “sit up” in the wagon. The escorts were startled and fled - only after one of them recovered [from the shock] and returned to the wagon, did they all understand that the corpse had not risen and then continued on their way.*

At the “Chevra Kadisha” that was established, it was the custom that, when sad tidings came of a sick man on his deathbed, they would immediately send a vigil to sit with him. That person would take care to be by his side at the time of death, reciting psalms and the customary prayers.

A black carriage was purchased for the bier and two horses, draped with black mantles, pulled it to the deceased’s residence. The two drivers were also dressed in black uniforms, with top hats on their heads, and they marched on foot in front of the carriage.

All bodies were transported on this bier, wealthy as well as poor, save for exceptional cases - when a Chassidic *Rebbe*, a rabbi or a distinct scholar had died. They would carry these important deceased on their shoulders. Obviously, they avoided passing, with the bodies, near any churches.

The funeral procession always made its way, slowly, slowly, on foot until it came to the bridge crossing the Warta River, which was next to the Old Synagogue and the study-hall. There, the carriage would stop and the entire public would approach the bier to ask the deceased for forgiveness.

Important and eminent people were always represented in the "Chevra Kadisha" - both Ashkenazim [adherents of the German Jewish rite] and Chassidim. There were no Misnagedim [orthodox opponents of Chassidism] at all in Częstochowa.

Once a year, on 15<sup>th</sup> Shevat, it was the custom to assemble in order to issue regulations and to supervise the "Chevra Kadisha's" affairs.

It was also the custom in [the "Chevra Kadisha" of] our city, to hold, twice a year, a "Kiddush" [post Saturday/Holiday morning prayer-service social event with refreshments] at the house of one of the *gabayim* [wardens] and to preach on matters pertaining to the season - on the holiday of "Shmini Atzeret" [the last of the High Holidays, following *Sukkot*] and on *Shabbat Bereishit* [first Saturday after the High Holidays]. On "Shmini Atzeret", the members would gather for prayer at the *gabay's* home and, afterwards, hold the "Kiddush" and sermon. It was every member's obligation to attend the Old Synagogue on *Shabbat Bereishit* for prayers, as this was where the city's rabbi also prayed. For the Chassidim in the association, who were used to praying in the "*shtieblech*" [small Chassidic prayer-rooms] and not according to the "Ashkenaz" rite, this was an inconvenient matter. On the day, they only called members of the "Chevra Kadisha" up to the Torah. They would end each reading after just a few verses and even ending with the word "Veyomot" ["and he died"]. There are many such verses in the *Bereishit* [Genesis 1:1-6:8] weekly section, on which the readings do not normally end in this manner. After the prayer-service, they would all go together to the *gabay's* house for the "Kiddush".

A special assembly was held on the day that new ground was consecrated to expand the cemetery. In our times, this happened on 28<sup>th</sup> Sivan 5681 [4<sup>th</sup> July] (1921). Then, a great crowd of our townspeople gathered at the cemetery, together with the members of the "Chevra" and, with the *gabayim* at their head, they circled the ground intended for the new cemetery seven times, while saying psalms and "tikunim" [kabalistic passages recited as a liturgy]. The rabbi, Reb Nachum Asz z"l, the local rabbi, as well as Reb Józef Szymon Koblenz z"l (the *maggid* [religious itinerant preacher] and Reb Mojsze Halter z"l delivered sermons relevant to the event.

(The cemetery at Kucelin in Częstochowa, where Jews were buried for generations upon generations until today, including the victims of the horrific holocaust who were moved there - is now, according to the plans of the Poles, to become a municipal park or to be annexed to the surrounding industrial zone. Many tombstones have been removed and tombs destroyed. Who knows what will happen? We pray that the verses "*He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces*" [Isaiah 25:8] and "*God shall avenge before our eyes his servants' shed blood*" [based on Psalm 79:10] be fulfilled upon ourselves).



**A partial list of "Chevra Kadisha" members in Częstochowa from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the Holocaust:**

**The "gabayim" before the First World War:**

Reb Abraham Hamburg, Reb Jakob Dawidowicz (Kleinhendler), Reb Jakob Grylak, Reb Mordka [Mordche] Markowicz, Reb Nusen Gerichter and Reb Fiszel Wajdenfeld.

**Members:**

Reb Rubin Imich, Apter, Baumatic, Majer (Bychner) Baum, Reb Dawid Burnsztajn, Reb Józef Behm, Reb Szmul Goldsztajn, Reb Chaim Leib Goldberg, Reb Majer Leib Helman, Reb Mojsze Leib Habercfeld, Reb Szymon Woznica (*der geler* Szymon) [Simon the Yellow (Blond)], Reb Anczel Warszawski, Reb Szaja Windman, Reb Itche (Furfer) [?], Reb Berysz Zeryker, Reb Berysz Tiberg, Reb Michał Lipski, Reb Szlojme Józef Fajnsztadt, Reb Pejsach (Greber) Percik, Reb Fischele (*klein* Fischele) [tiny little fish], Reb Szmul Cygler, Reb Isrulke Częstochowski, Reb Berysz Częstochowski, Reb Józef Szymon Koblenz, Kopinski, Reb Jakob Rubinsztajn, and Reb Haskel Rozenwajn.

**Female members:**

Mrs. Rudla Efroim, Mrs. Chana Haskel's [wife of Haskel] Gerszonowicz, Mrs. Perl (*die gele*) [the Yellow] Smursz, Mrs. Fajga Minca Częstochowski, Mrs. Malka Rubin's [wife of Reuben] Szwarcbaum.

***Gabayim* who served until the Holocaust:**

Reb Mojsze Halter, Reb Chaim Don Lypszyc, Reb Mordka Sudowicz, Reb Berl Potaszewicz, Reb Kalman Sztal and other members whose names we do not remember.