

A. Gotlib

The Craftsmen's Union and Its Guilds

In the book "*Tshenstokhover Yidn*", which appeared in N.Y. in 1947, I published a detailed article about this union. Here, I shall present the essence of the article for our "*Sefer Częstochowa*", which is now being published in Israel.

The movement to organise Jewish craftsmen, with the aim of improving their economic situation and, simultaneously, raising their spiritual development, began some years before the outbreak of the First World War.

This was at the initiative of the prematurely deceased Jewish engineer, Jan Kirsztrot, one of the small group of graduates from the Warsaw University of Technology, who were taken with the Zionist idea and who led the tone later with leaders of Polish Jewry, such as Izaak Grinbaum (lives in Gan-Shmuel), Dr Noach Dawidson, Apolinary Hartglas and Eng. M. Kerner (died recently in Tel-Aviv).

Jan Kirsztrot also had a part in the foundation of the Craftsmen's Union in Częstochowa.

At the beginning, the Jewish craftsmen used to assemble their own "*minyanim*" and prayer-houses. There, they also dealt with their specific questions and there they also held their celebratory events.

The head organisers of the Craftsmen's Union in our city were Eng. Assor-Dobraj [?], the director of the already existing Crafts School, and Kuna Chrobołowski.

Besides those mentioned above, the following were elected to the organising committee (alphabetically [in Heb.]): Ber Balsam, Leib Goldszajder, Wolf Gostynski, Szlojme Librowicz, Misza Tenenbaum and Szlojme Krauskopf.

Also, among its founders, were Mojsze Weksler, Simche Kulka, Jonatan Rozenzon, Aron Rotszyld, Józef Rubinsztajn, and the writer of these lines. The foundation-meeting took place at the "*Lira*" hall.

A group of workers, graduates of the local Crafts School, also enlisted as members.

The first Board of Management was elected and comprised Artur Broniatowski, Ludwig Goldberg, Leibisz Goldszajder, Wolf Gostynski, Stanisław Herc, Mojsze Win, P. Zalcman, Mojsze Tenenbaum, Szlojme Librowicz, Eng. Assorodobraj, L. Cymerman, Szlojme Krauskopf, Eng. P. Ratner and Jakób Sztajer.

Henryk Markusfeld was elected as *Prezes*.

The Union opened a club and also saw to the spiritual development of its members, arranging lectures, theatrical performances and gatherings of members, where various issues were discussed.

The board of management endeavoured to create sections for the different professions but, in the beginning, this did not succeed. This was also caused by [the fact] that the club was forced to move from its large, spacious premises at Aleja 11 to a smaller one at Aleja 27. Later, due to its further financial difficulties, it moved to Ogrodowa 22.



The Central [Bureau] of the Craftsmen's Union in Częstochowa (in 1930)

The 1st row (R-L): L. Katz, B. Szybel, A. Działowski, Dr H. Geisler, Sz. Niemirowski, H. Braun and M. Blum. 2nd row: A. Grinberg, S. Mitler, Sz. Granek, Sz. Katz, J. Goldberg, A. Wajs, A. Frydman, M. Katz and J. Ciaciura. 3rd row: J. Lewkowicz, Sz. Gonszerowicz, M. Fajgenblat, Z. Działowicz, W. Gostynski, A. Grajcer, A. Gelber, M. Ortman and A. Gotlib. 4th row: J. Wajnholc, J. Wajs, J. Szenwald, Sz. Luria, M. Działowski and L. Zajdman. 5th row: J. Bulba, M. Frajermauer, M. Blumenfeld, H. Ofner, M. Goldberg, M. Jarkowizna and A. Winer.

Until the First World War, the Union was headed by Eng. Assor-Dobraj [?]. with Vice-Prezes being Dr Hipolit Gajsler. Over long years, the secretariat was led by Aba Winer.

The War also brought about a great decrease in the Union's activity but, thanks to members W. Gostynski, Eng. Milsztajn and Szlojme Krauskopf, the work was renewed.

Due to the hard economic situation in wartime, the material standing of the craftsmen greatly worsened and the union, as a result, soon opened the first Jewish cheap kitchen for craftsmen and their families. In this work, young members M. Asz, M. Szajewicz, A. Bornsztajn, D. Krauskopf and M. Mokrauer particularly distinguished themselves. They also pulled other people to them and, through this, also widened the relief operation for other needy people, not necessarily craftsmen.

In 1917, still during the time of the German occupation, the work and professional activity of the Union was renewed by activists (alphabetically [in Heb.]): Kopel Urbach, Szaje Granek, Dawid Wolfowicz, Herszel Win, Abram Frydman, Mojsze Katz, Szmul Katz and Z. Krug.

At the time, great unemployment prevailed in Częstochowa, especially among tailors and bakers. It was precisely they who were the first to receive any possible material aid.

In 1918, after the rise of the independent Polish state, the Union, thanks to the large material aid from the American *"Joint"*, broadened its activity and also opened a loan fund for widows and orphans.

That same year, it also opened a children's home, where the poor children found a "home" for themselves. Teachers aided them with their lessons and different games. They were also provided with sufficient food and drink.

In 1919, the activity of the loan and savings fund was revived, which helped create and broaden the net of cooperatives, such as the food cooperative *"Selbsthilfe"* [Self-Help] and the raw-materials cooperatives for tailors, cap-makers and gaiter-makers.

At the time, the Union already had 530 members and it also spread its activity to include the poor *shtetls* of Kłobuck, Kamyk, Koniecpol and Krzepice, where it established branches of the union.

A year later, cooperatives of shoe manufacture and furniture production were created.

A patronage [scheme] was also created, which saw to the professional education of apprentice boys and organised eleven separate sections, for them, in various professions.

It was not until 1921 that the Polish government approved the Union's statutes, under the name *"Jewish Craftsmen Resource"*, whose task was "to defend the craftsmen's interests".

(According to the new status, only independent craftsmen could belong to the union, as well as patrons.)

The profession-sections, within the Union, conduct independent activity in the professional field, although they are under the supervision of the General Craftsmen's Union. The sections delegate their representatives to the management of the General Craftsmen's Union.

Among the Union's active figures during 1917-1923, we should also mention the dentist M. Grejniec, who was *Prezes* of the Union for a certain period, and his three [?] vice-*Prezesi* Abram Działowski, Daniel Działowicz, Herszel Wnuk and Jakób Sztajer, as well other active figures Michał Ajdelman, Mojsze Berman, Naftali Deresz, Szmul Hofnung and Jakób Fisz.

In 1924, the Union contested various elections with its own lists and introduced their candidates

- into the City Council: Dr H. Gajsler and J. Goldberg;
- into the Jewish *Kehilla*: J. Granek, A. Działowski, A. Liberman and A.Z. Fridman;
- into the board of the *"Bank Spółdzielczy"* [Cooperative Bank]: Dr H. Gajsler, Sz. Luria and B. Szybel;
- into the board of the *"Sick Fund"*: M. Ajdelman (dentist), M. Grejniec and A. Jarkowizna; and
- into the management of *"TOZ"* – J. Goldberg.

The Guilds Law

In Poland, there existed a law of old, according to which every craftsman was required to belong to a guild and receive a certificate from his guild, which gave him the title of "master".

Guilds were only designated for Christian craftsmen. No Jews were admitted as members and, as a consequence, they were not given any certificates. They therefore were not permitted to run any workshops or to openly work within their professions.

There were only a few guilds in the smaller towns in Poland which, for good money, gave certificates to some Jews, while at the same time did not admit them as guild members. Jews were thus forced to conduct their work without being certified and inscribed within the Polish guilds.

The Grabski government, which strove to “empty” the coffer of Jewish merchants and craftsmen with its high and unjust income taxes, which were known by the pretentious names *Obrotowa* [Revenue] and *Dochodowa* [Profit], at the same time wished to take away Jewish livelihoods. To this end, it brought before the *Sejm* a bill regarding guilds, according to which any work done by people not belonging to the guilds, which were, as already mentioned, locked to Jewish craftsmen with ten keys, was to be strictly forbidden.

In 1927, Jewish members of the *Sejm*, with the deputy A. Hartglas at the head, began a fierce struggle against this bill, which threatened to take bread away from tens of thousands of Jewish craftsmen in Poland.

The Grabski government convinced itself that it had “overdone it” and the bill was thus amended such that existing profession-divisions of the Central Craftsmen’s Association were also transformed into legal guilds, with the right to issue the guild certificates to their members.

But the Polish authorities continued to attempt to limit rights, by demanding that these certificates only be issued by those craftsmen who, during all the years since the establishment of the Polish state, had bought “craftsmen patents”. This was a harsh decree for the craftsmen in the general public.

Finally, it was decided that five years was sufficient in order to receive a “craftsman card”, without any exceptions.

In Częstochowa, the execution of this procedure, as well as the elections for representatives to the Regional Craftsmen’s Chamber, was given over to members A. Gotlib, J. Goldberg, A. Działowski and S. Katz. The latter was also later elected as the Jewish representative to the Craftsmen’s Chamber in Kielce, in which representatives from the province, local government and two certified masters from each profession also participated.

All the Częstochowa Jewish craftsmen soon clambered to the “exams” (those who had no material five-year proof concerning their work in the profession, of course) to receive their “master’s certificates”.

All guilds became centralised and encompassed the following professions: [in] tailoring: *chalupniks* [cottagers working from the home], trouser and waistcoat tailors. Metal guilds included locksmiths, engravers, clockmakers and goldsmiths.

Together, all the guilds of differing tendencies, organised impressive celebrations at which the various guilds marched under their own fine banners.

In 1928, when the Częstochowa Craftsmen’s Union celebrated its 15th anniversary, the Union numbered 1,200 members and all participated, with their banners, in the celebratory demonstration

of Częstochowa united and well-organised Jewish craftsmen. Additionally, the very active participation of Szmul Niemirowski and his services to the craftsmen must be laudably mentioned.

The Union's management also published a fine anniversary edition, in which was told the history of the Union and its divisions.

The idea for the anniversary edition and the main work on it must be attributed to Szmul Niemirowski.



The story of the *"Craftsmen's Ha'Chalutz"*, which was founded in 1934, is told in a different part of *"Sefer Częstochowa"*.



The Jewish Craftsmen's Union in Częstochowa, which displayed such a great measure of social education and which, thanks to its activity in almost all Jewish social institutions where it was represented, raised the image and prestige of Jewish craftsmen.

(Sadly, all this was burnt in the great fire that the Nazi blood-enemies so cruelly set to the Jewish people in Eastern Europe!)-