

Jewish Częstochowa - on the Eve of the Second World War

The remembrance of the destruction of the Częstochowa Jews pierces and tortures the heart and mind incessantly.

From the mist of memories, which are drenched with blood and extermination gas, the names of streets, where once only Jews lived, peel away.

Located there were synagogues and study-halls, educational institutions and *yeshivot*, commercial-professional unions and political parties, and financial and communal institutions.

In Częstochowa, the Jewish manufacturers, large merchants, craftsmen and retailers played a great role in general commercial life.

The jewels of our local Jewish culture were the Jewish periodicals, libraries, courses and cultural institutions.

All this is deeply etched in the memory. Before your eyes, as if you had just seen them yesterday, stand the city's streets, the hundreds of Jewish houses which were built by Jewish initiative and energy. Jewish manufacturers, such as Dr Zaks, Wajnberg, Neufeld and others, were the pioneers of industry and large trade in Częstochowa.

There were industrial enterprises in our city, which were among the most highly regarded in their field in Poland, such as the Warta *papiernia* (paper-factory).

The Jewish, small-scale industry literally "uncovered" [i.e., brought fame to] Częstochowa with its production in the sectors of celluloid, ceramics, bicycle parts and Catholic ritual paraphernalia.

All this, together with over 33,000 Jews, was destroyed by the murderous, cruel Nazis.

1. Hitler's Rise to Power and the Polish Jews

The deeply-rooted and multi-branched Jewish settlement in Częstochowa became, just as with all Polish Jews, terrified upon hearing of Hitler's rise to power in 1933.

Hitler's Jew-murdering and extermination policies, sadly, found sympathy with the greater part of the Polish politicians.

Before this, too, Jews in Independent Poland had suffered from financial, political and cultural adversities. But these troubles became much more serious once Hitler had risen to power in Germany - the "*Owszem*"²¹¹ policies of the reigning Polish Prime Minister, General Składkowski, then began to be implemented - a period of intense discrimination and persecution.

²¹¹ [TN: See above, p.407.]

The activity of the “Ozon²¹²” Party, which was founded by the *Sanacja*²¹³ movement, and of its leader, *Pułkownik* [Colonel] Koc, was aimed at giving themselves over to the anti-Jewish economic riddance policies - not just of the “*Endecja*”²¹⁴, but even of the hooligans that ran alongside them, the “*Narodowcy*” [Nationalists], who set up pickets in front of the Jewish shops and, in addition, carried out cruel and murderous physical attacks on Jews.

The Polish sky cast a dark shadow on Jewish life in Poland, including that of the Jews in Częstochowa.

Exactly like the Jews in other cities in Poland, the Częstochowa Jews also sought means to save themselves - financially and politically.

To this end, divisions of the nationwide Polish “Jewish Economic Committee” were established, whose principal goal was to strengthen the existing, small industry and craftsmanship with the aid of machines [and] credits, and by assisting in the export of goods produced by Jews.

The most prominent representatives of Jewish industry and craftsmanship, headed by Mr Engel, took over the management of the committee. They were extremely active and conducted their activity energetically and with the utmost responsibility.

In order to organise the work better, a regional assembly was formed in Częstochowa. A precise registration of the craftsmen and manufacturers started to be conducted. A special commission, with Eng. Lewkowicz at its head, composed a list of their machines, inventories and the credits that they had received.

A branch of the “Ort²¹⁵” organisation was created, which was also headed by Eng. Lewkowicz.

This organisation, in coordination with the Wawelberg Crafts School, took charge of the productive elements of the Jewish population, and the youth in particular, and, as part of this activity, created courses for electricians and for motor-winders.

There was a plan to also create mechanical workshops in which to train Jewish machinists for the wood, textile and metal industries.

At the same time, political activity was also not neglected. The Jewish political parties organised, as the result of the Beck-Hitler alliance, an imposing protest rally against Hitler’s extermination policies. The mass protest took place on the “ramparts”, because an appropriate location in the city centre was not received.

Dr Bram’s proud words, at this protest, ring in my memory to this day. He likened Hitler’s blood-
orgies to the Crusades in the 11th century.

A second action against Nazism was to create, under the management of Mr Sztyller, a boycott committee of the Merchants Union against the German goods which used to be brought to Częstochowa.

²¹² [TN: Acronym of *Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego*; *Camp of National Unity*.]

²¹³ [TN: *General Piłsudski’s “Reform” Party*; see above, p.81.]

²¹⁴ [TN: *National Democratic Party*, see above, p.73.]

²¹⁵ [TN: Acronym of *Общество Ремесленного Труда*, *Obchestvo Remeslenogo Truda*; “*Association for the Promotion of Skilled Trades*”.]

On 10th May 1935, the General Jewish Committee of the political parties and financial organisations, under directorship of Professor Saks, organised a large protest assembly against the Nazis' medieval-style "*auto-da-fé*" in Berlin, the tearfully famed "*Kristallnacht*", in which were burnt down the finest achievements of Jewish and non-Jewish, but liberal, creators of culture.

At this assembly, in a detailed report, Dr Batawja described the great contribution of Jewish artists and scientists to global human culture and science, in general, and in Germany in particular.

Dr Batawja also mentioned several Jewish-German scientists whose origins were in Częstochowa.

All this was burnt at the stake by the German barbarians on "*Kristallnacht*", to the sound of the bestial song with the words "*Wenn das Judenblut vom Messer spritzt*" ["When the Jewish blood sprays from the knife"].

Jewish society had imagined that, with these palliatives of a boycott and protest rallies, it would be possible to undo, or at least weaken, these inhumane, barbaric extermination policies of the Hitler hordes.

2.

Dark tidings reached Częstochowa from around the world - ships of Jewish refugees from Germany wander from sea to sea, the lands to which they turn not granting them entry. The English Mandate power in Palestine was particularly troublesome in this respect.

Zionist organisations sought all possible and impossible means to bring Jewish youth to the Land of Israel, but this could not be done, for priority was given to the most urgent task - to save the German Jews from their burning inferno. The certificates for countries such as Poland, automatically, became more and more scarce.

Despite all strenuous efforts, the three-and-a-half million Jews in Poland, among them the more than 33,000 Jews of Częstochowa, in the last years leading up to the Second World War, took very little part in the legal and even the illegal *Aliyah*.

At the end of October 1938, Polish Jewry became terrified by the brutal act of the German government, which banished thousands of Polish Jews from Germany to the borders of Poland, among them even those who had lived there for many years or who had actually been born in Germany, but had remained Polish citizens.

One dark and rainy night, the Nazis herded these Jews and, like cattle, herded them across the Polish frontier.

After many great efforts, the Polish government established a camp in Zbąszyń (near Poznań) in which the expelled Jews were concentrated.

Jewish Częstochowa, just as the Jewish communities in other Polish towns, created a relief committee, with Dr Hirszenberg at its head. The committee did everything to aid the wretched, homeless Jews, among whom were also wealthy manufacturers, bankers and merchants.

The aim of the operation was to offer first aid, both to the refugees who were able to make their way to Częstochowa, as well as to those who still remained in the Zbąszyń camp.

It impossible to describe the tribulations and pain that the refugees experienced.

3.

Hitler's dark hurricane continued spreading and flooding incessantly. In the aftermath of the political "*Anschlüssen*²¹⁶", which were supposedly voluntary but, in truth, took place under heavy military pressure, the Jews were always the first victims.

Not all the Jews had the possibility to go wandering, even in the manner the German Jews had done. The unhappy Jews, living in the annexed territories, fled as if from a horrific fire.

Under these circumstances, some of the escaping Jews came, in a terrible state, to the border-cities of Katowice, Sosnowiec, Będzin and Częstochowa.

Although the Częstochowa Jewish community was in a deplorable situation [itself], great monetary means were mobilised to alleviate the plight of these transient refugees.

Later, Częstochowa's relief activity was coordinated with the aid organs of these abovementioned cities.

But all the mustered moneys were like spitting into the ocean. They were insufficient and could not help Hitler's tortured and pursued Jewish victims.

4.

There was great joy in Polish governmental circles due to the Beck-Hitler agreement. The "masters" of the *Sanacja* were convinced that Hitler was a politician who would definitely spare the Poles. They believed he would not make any territorial demands of Poland and as proof, [they stated] that, at the "Great Happening", viz. on Göring's and Goebbels' visit to Poland, not even a hint was heard regarding this.

True, Goebbels, may his name be obliterated, did say at the University of Warsaw:

If certain "noble-minded" men in Europe are opposed to the Germans exterminating Jews, who are living human beings, then why do these same "noble-minded" gentlemen exterminate fleas, which are also living creatures?

The *Sanacja* press was inspired by this fiendish comparison. Those "great" politicians presumably imagined that they would, in Poland, take an anti-Jewish course of action, such as would be to the liking of their "noble" friend and neighbour, Germany.

They thought that this would give the *Sanacja*, and the other bloodthirsty antisemites, the opportunity to completely eliminate the Jewish population from political, financial and social life.

But this "joy" was short-lived. The *Sanacja* politicians were unable to rejoice long in their small-minded, political conceptions.

The Jewish side repeatedly warned *Sanacja* politicians that their policies were leading Poland to a horrific catastrophe. They were constantly told

²¹⁶ [TN: The annexation of other lands (such as Austria) to Germany.]

Instead of cementing all Poland's forces against this one greatest, murderous enemy, your idea is to just throw the Hitler-hound a Jew-bone.

And, indeed, it soon emerged that Hitler made demands of Poland, which were similar to the actual facts and occurrences of the attack on Poland in 1939.

Shortly before Hitler's invasion, placards were to be seen in Poland in a tone conspicuously contradictory to the elation at the time the "Beck-Hitler" agreement had been made.

These placards openly proclaimed: *Hitler is a bloodthirsty beast of prey.*

But regarding the policies on Jews, the *Sanacja* did not change in the slightest. The old plan of all the Polish antisemites remained in place - to distance the three-and-a-half million Jews from economic, political and social [life] in Poland.

In higher education, the power-wielders continued applying the same systems of "ghetto benches"²¹⁷ and "*numerus nullus*" [Lat., "none at all"] with regards to Jews. They encouraged the sombre agitation of the Jew-devourer Mrs Pistor. They intensified the battle against the Jewish market-stalls - a battle which led, usually, to open pogroms, such as in Przytyk, Częstochowa and other Polish cities and *shtetls*.

Even worse, *Sanacja* politicians openly demanded that the "*Arierparagraph*"²¹⁸ be implemented. Precisely on the eve of Hitler's invasion, the antisemitic propaganda intensified.

Częstochowa, naturally, was not the last to join in with these slogans. The Polish street-flyer "*Goniec*" ["Messenger"], which was published in Częstochowa by the leader of the [local] *Endecja* [National Democratic Party], Mr Wilkuszewski, openly preached boycotting Jews and distancing them from having any influence in financial or social life.

This same leaflet truly became the "standard" of the local *Sanacja* governmental circles.

Characteristic of the Nazi-antisemitic atmosphere in these circles is the fact that the *Starost* [Gov. of the province] Kyn, as a principle, would not greet Jews.

The general associations of doctors, engineers and large-scale industrialists in Częstochowa by then endorsed implementing the "*Arierparagraph*".

The subsequent fact is particularly characteristic of the atmosphere in those days. The General Doctors' Association of Częstochowa was then celebrating its 25th anniversary. Dr Zalman Bychowski from Warsaw was sent to the function as representative of the central administration of the Polish Doctors' Association.

At the festive banquet, which was held at the "Polonia" hall, antisemitic activists within the Częstochowa Doctors' Association arranged things so that the Jewish members should sit separately at a table on the left side of the hall.

As one may well imagine, the Zionist activist and proud Jew Dr Zalman Bychowski sat among his Jewish colleagues.

²¹⁷ [TN: Viz. separate sitting section for Jews at universities.]

²¹⁸ [TN: Ger., "Aryan Paragraph"; a clause reserving membership and/or right of residence solely for members of the "Aryan race". Ironically, this clause excluded Slavs as well as Jews.]

At the opening of the banquet, the chairman Dr Szaniawski forbade Dr Bychowski, the delegate from the Central, to occupy a place of honour at the presidential table - to which the guest replied, "The place of honour is where Dr Bychowski sits." Dr Bychowski did not forsake his Jewish friends.

Even a blow to their morale such as this, did not deter the aforementioned associations from putting the "*Arierparagraph*" into effect. They excluded their Jewish colleagues, despite the fact that some of them were the founders and the most active members of these associations.

Furthermore, around that same time, a plaque was put up in the home of Dr Biegajski, on which the names of the deceased and fallen doctors were engraved. This plaque did not include the names of Jewish doctors*.

This fact displays vividly how "sacrosanct" it was for these gentlemen to dance in attendance on Hitler and his animalistic hatred for Jews.

In this period, the Jewish intelligentsia, throughout the whole of Poland, established their own associations. In Częstochowa, too, an "Intellectuals' Club" was founded. This club was of a markedly assimilationist hue - the word "Jew" was not mentioned, Heaven forbid!

Certain Jewish intellectuals, such as Drs Bram, Lewkowicz [and] Kagan did not join this club, in protest.

5.

As I mentioned already, the financial situation of the Jewish population, in the years before the outbreak of the Second World War, was a very difficult one.

This was caused by several factors - the open boycott, the pickets in front of Jewish shops and serious physical assaults on Jews - all these things literally paralysed Jewish financial life in all of Poland, and no less so in Częstochowa.

On the military-political front, the *Sanacja* government was already, on the eve of Hitler's invasion, brandishing a sword.

The gallantly uniformed officers, headed by Marshal Rydz-Śmigły, famously made the laughable declaration, "We shall not yield even a single button [of our overcoats]."

Although this was a tragic time for Poland, the attitude towards Jews did not only not improve but, on the contrary, it greatly worsened!

The Jewish representatives on the City Council were forced to wage an extremely fierce battle both with their overt enemies, such as the members of *Endecja* and *Chadecja* (Christian Democracy) and the newly-fledged *Sanacja* antisemites.

Very often, it was necessary to escort Neufeld, the proud Jewish representative, on his way home. He was an old man and there was a fear of him being attacked, by hooligans from the antisemitic circles, for his stalwart defence of Jewish rights.

The other Jewish council members shared similar fears.

* Only in 1946 was this plaque altered to include the Jewish names.

The activity within the Jewish *Kehilla* was very intensive but, sadly, it was able to provide only very little constructive aid to the local Jewish population. The relief work was focused almost exclusively on the refugees from Germany and the territories which the Nazis had occupied.

Opportunities arose for some of the exiled German Jews to have a part of their possessions returned to them. But a huge sum of money was demanded in every such case. The *Kehilla* was compelled to mobilise extremely large amounts of money to this purpose, in order to help them. The required sums were raised - from local and foreign sources - and efforts were made to extend aid to all needy Jews.

Jews were hopeful - based on the opinions of "well-informed circles" - that there would be no war. The Polish government also "lulled itself to sleep" with such frivolous dreams, setting elections to the municipal councils for the summer of 1939. These elections were held in Częstochowa too, in mid-summer of that year.

Needless to say, the Jewish population needed to prepare itself especially well for this election, in order to attain a proper, Jewish representation on the City Council. It was clear to every Jew what sort of struggle the Jewish representatives would have to put up at City Hall to defend even the most elementary Jewish interests, during such particularly troubled times in Poland.

Ten Jewish lists presented themselves to the elections - all the Jewish parties and financial associations put forward their own separate lists.

It was obvious that with such internal discord, and with such inauspicious electoral regulations, the Jewish votes would be wasted and they would be unable to put appropriate candidates through.

To the honour of the Częstochowa Jewish settlement, it must be mentioned that, after some brief negotiations, it was decided to create only two electoral blocks - one block encompassing from "*Agudas Yisroel*" to "*Poalei Zion Right*", and the other being comprised of the "*Bund*" together with "*Poalei Zion Left*".

A General Committee was chosen to approve the list of candidates, according to the following line-up:

- The Zionist Organisation - A. Gerszonowicz;
- *Mizrachi* - L. Bromberg;
- *Agudas Yisroel* - M. Fogel;
- Democrats - M. Asz;
- Merchants' Union - J. Galster;
- Craftsmen - D. Koniecpoler;
- Retailers - D. Filipowicz;
- "*Poalei Zion Right*" - J. Zarnowiecki.

I still vividly recall the tragic fact that such proficient Jewish activists like S. Goldsztajn, for example, were no longer able to contend. It was necessary to send younger representatives from the capable certified Jewish intelligentsia in their place.

We needed to elect them as our candidates so that they would be able to properly deflect the dark attacks of the antisemitic representatives on the City Council.

They did, indeed, fiercely protect our Jewish financial and political interests.

Three of those, who helped create these two Jewish blocks, are still alive today - Rafail Federman, who lives in America, Abram Brum, who lives in Jerusalem and the author of these lines.

But this City Council did not have time to come to fruition - the Second World War began. But it is nevertheless important to note the very fact that Jewish Częstochowa still possessed a healthy, political sense.

6.

It is not at all easy to write about the last weeks of the Częstochowa Jews, on the eve of the Second World War.

Everyone thought that, seeing as how Polish Jewry so deeply rooted within Poland's economic life, no misfortune could touch them. Each one told himself that, although we would suffer financially, this would not be the first time that the Jews of Poland were tested in life.

This opinion prevailed not only among the Jewish provincials in Poland, but even the most acclaimed Jewish public figures saw it thus.

But, meanwhile, one decree was being issued after another - and they were all against Jews. I shall recount several facts:

In the summer of 1939, the leadership of the Polish military realised that the Polish air force did not stand, at all, at the required level.

For this purpose, the Polish government instituted a "voluntary" (but, in truth, compulsory) monetary contribution.

The Jewish population was then subjected to many inhuman chicaneries. They [i.e., the government] sent highly-respected Jews from town to town, for them to gather as much money as possible from the Jews there. Thus, for instance, they forced Reb Chaim Weksler to travel to Kielce to induce the local Jews to give as much money as possible to the air force.

A second occurrence:

General Składkowski, the then Prime Minister and Internal Affairs Minister, had no greater worries at the time, but to "prettify" the external appearance of the houses.

This same decree created many troubles for Jewish homeowners and community activists at the time. I recall one instance:

One Friday afternoon, *Kehilla* President Jakób Rozenberg was suddenly arrested. The following day, on *Shabbes* morning, he was conducted, under a heavy police escort, to the *starostwo* [district office].

He was held there until afternoon for a *starostwo* official to explain to him that the *Kehilla* buildings were not aesthetically pleasing.

The impoverishment of the Jews was increasingly growing and the government extended no substantial aid.

The portfolios of the unpaid vouchers in the banks and the lists of the needy in the philanthropic institutions became fuller and fuller.

From time to time, the Polish government published public communications and bulletins with "hints" as to Hitler's demands from Poland.

On Thursday, 31st August 1939, the Polish government issued an order for mobilisation. The mobilisation orders caused pandemonium in the Jewish street. Those, who had the merest opportunity to do so, packed up whatever they could and fled wherever possible. People even escaped on the train in the direction of Warsaw. But very few were able to do so.

Already, by Friday, 1st September 1939, Częstochowa was lightly bombarded. On the Polish side, rumours were spread that these were aviation training exercises by the Polish air force.

People began digging trenches in almost every house.

On that same Friday, our situation was already more or less clear.

In the evening, there was already no trace of the Polish army. Hundreds of Jews each took their pillow [as protection] and wrapped a shirt around their neck and abandoned the city - to wherever their eyes took them.

Very many Jews were killed by the German bombs, which chased them in their panicked wanderings. Some were able to find their way to the new eastern border. The rest returned - broken, tortured or wounded.

A Few Words on Jewish Częstochowa

Jewish Częstochowa, to a significant extent, portrayed in a miniature scale the essence of Polish Jewry in all fields [of life].

But the Jewish group in Częstochowa also formed its own spiritual individuality - this same individualistic streak was a product of Jewish Częstochowa's localised development.

Jewish Częstochowa could not pride itself on an ancient lineage. But it embodied a wonderful, harmonic development, based on financial-commercial initiative and creativity, on friendliness and cultural achievements [and] political awareness of the workers and the masses.

During a certain period, Częstochowa Jewish youth took a significant part in the awakening, general socialist and revolutionary movement in the city and its vicinity.

Jewish Częstochowa put into practice - not just preached - the *produktywizacja*²¹⁹ of Jewish youth.

²¹⁹ [TN: Pol., to make someone become productive.]

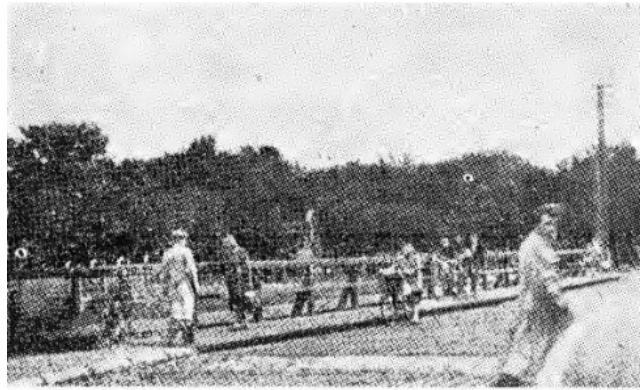
(Jews of Częstochowa!)

You were proud in life. You were hallowed and pure when you were cruelly vanquished.

May an eternal curse be cast upon all who participated and all who assisted in your annihilation.

May my words be a wreath of flowers on your graves, which are in all the roads and paths, in the ash from the gas-ovens and crematoria that the wind has blown - to the East and West, to the North and South.

Yisgadal v'yiskadash sh'may rabbah!)²²⁰



***This bridge over the Warta leads to the Jewish Hospital in Zawodzie. Immediately behind the synagogue, were the separate Jewish and Polish quarters.
Of course, this was all once.
Nowadays the Poles have everything.***

Remark from the Editors:

The author of the article "Jewish Częstochowa - on the Eve of the Second World War", in his very detailed article on the period of the Eve of the Great Destruction, was unable to avoid mentioning Hitler's preparations for the gruesomeness [to come], which we [always] present in parentheses. Unfortunately, it was technically impossible to do this here. We have therefore presented (in parentheses) only the last lines - his heartfelt words to the Jews of Częstochowa, hy''d.

²²⁰ [TN: Aramaic; May His Great Name become exalted and sanctified. Opening words of Kaddish, the mourner's prayer.]