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Our Community and Its Institutions in the Last Generation Before Its Destruction



Others have already written about the history of the Jewish community in Częstochowa since its establishment. In this article, therefore, I shall deal with matters relating to the period from the beginning of the 20th century until the horrendous destruction in which Częstochowa Jewry and its institutions were annihilated.

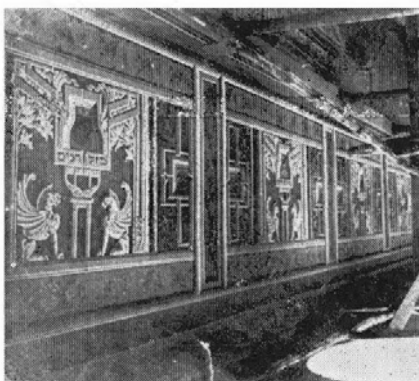
A. The Horticultural Farm

In 1900, the Jewish community ("*Die Jüdische Gmina* [Pol. Jewish Community Council]", as it was called) bought eleven acres (and, in the course of time, six more acres) and set up a horticultural farm that became famous throughout Poland. It also allocated a budget of 3,000 rubles a year for its maintenance - a vast sum in those years. The remaining expenses of the farm were covered by the ICA (*Jüdische Kolonizacja-Organizacja* [Jewish Colonization Organisation]), which dealt with the settling of Jews in different lands, from the estate fund of Baron Moritz [von] Hirsch.

Tens of young people studied at the horticultural farm, according to the established educational plan and, in it, they received a thorough training in agriculture and in gardening, as well as a general education, of course.

Many of them immigrated to Palestine as pioneers and, with their professional knowledge and experience in working the land, brought a blessing to the agricultural settlement in the country.

A testimony to the extent of the school's pupils' expertise is the fact that, in 1907, when the national gardening exhibition was held in Poland, the farm received second prize, which caused the Poles to become angry towards the honest judges - a hatred and jealousy that they had conceded giving *Żydzi* [Pol. Jews; here meant derogatively] such a great honor.



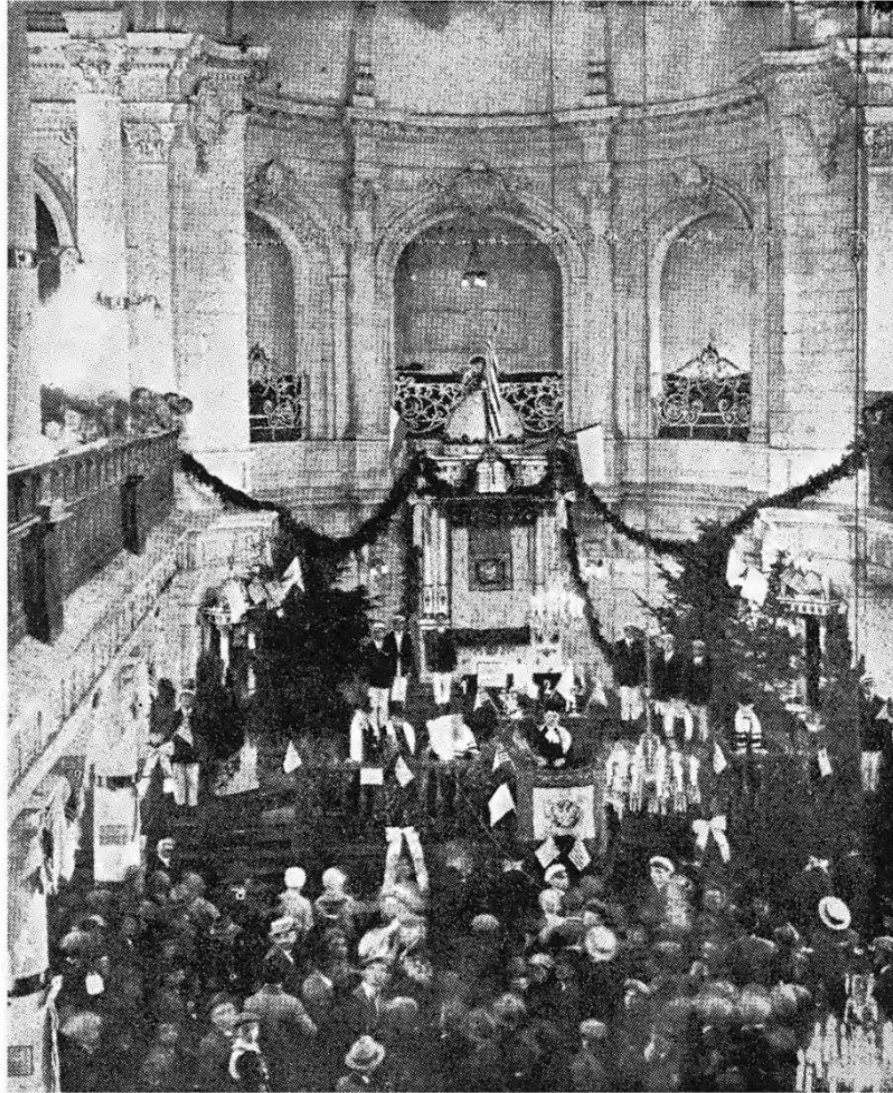
Marvelous artistic paintings on the walls
and ceiling of the Old Synagogue by
Professor Wejnberg

B. The Crafts School

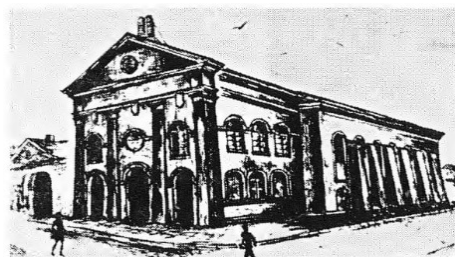
In 1910, the renowned philanthropist Henryk Markusfeld and his family founded, with their money, the large school for crafts, which was equipped with everything such schools require. Some of the best craftsmen it was possible to find, at that time, were invited to be the school's directors and teachers in all its departments.

Hundreds of young Jewish men from the city and its vicinity, who studied at this school, emerged from it as professional experts in all

branches of technology and crafts and found their livelihoods in different professions, bringing benefit to the city and to the entire country.



The New Synagogue during the 150th United States Independence day celebrations in 1926. The cantor Fiszal is heading the prayer



The Old Synagogue, as drawn by L. Kuszniir from memory

C. The Old Synagogue

In 1928-1929, the Old Synagogue (which was built in 1855) was renovated.

[This was done] according to plans created by Professor Willenberg and which excelled in authentic Jewish character and with a wonderful artistic decoration of the letters. It praised by all.

(This synagogue, of which our community was so proud, was destroyed in 1939 by the Nazi marauders at the beginning of the war.)

D. The New Synagogue for Progressives

At the beginning of the 20th century, several public figures from the progressive circles decided to build themselves a special synagogue, following the example of their enlightened brethren in Western Europe.

A Building Committee was chosen, at the head of which stood Markusfeld and with him Henig, Tempel and others, who donated large sums. This also caused other philanthropists to contribute and they erected a magnificent building of which the city could be proud.

At first, the building was legally listed in the names of these public figures. However, at H. Markusfeld's suggestion, the contributors and worshipers of the synagogue elected a "Synagogue Committee" to which the legal ownership of the building was transferred. Markusfeld explained this step thus:

- a.) There was no guarantee that the sons of the supposed "owners" would not, over the course of time, come to regard the synagogue building as their private possession and they could be liable to change it to a different purpose, not according with their parents' intentions.
- b.) It would be impossible to transfer ownership of this modern synagogue to a Jewish community, which might also, one day, be opposed to the election of instructors and leaders by its worshipers as they wish, according to the spirit of the time and not according to the tendencies and opinions of the leaders of the community that established it.

And truly, thus it was - the worshipers searched for and found spiritual leaders from among the most important of the Jewish academic community in Poland (the renowned historian, Professor Majer Bałaban and after him - Dr. Ch. Z. Hirszberg).

It is noteworthy that Dr. Hirszberg, while he lived in Częstochowa, also laid the foundation stone for The Jewish Academic Institute; he established a rich library for Jewish academics. He organised lectures at which Professor Mojsze Szor, Dr. M. Broda and others lectured.



Following the 150th United States Independence day celebrations, Rabbi N. Asz stands next to the New Synagogue's gate and by him are seen: S. Goldsztajn, Ch. Weksler, M. Asz, M. Sudowicz, D. Filipowicz, J. S. Koblenz, B. Bocian, J. Kopin, A. Sigman and guests from the U.S

E. Reb A. B. Birnbaum's Cantorial School

Next to the New Synagogue, the famous cantor and man of Torah and wisdom, Reb Abram Ber Birnbaum, established a cantorial school. As one of the creators of original Jewish liturgy, he propagated his teachings and ordained acclaimed cantors, who secured distinguished positions, not only in Poland and Russia, but also throughout the Jewish Diaspora. In the last years before the Second World War broke out, our Jewish Community Council planned to transfer the New Synagogue to its ownership, seeing as how it supported the synagogue heavily from the Council's budget.

(On December 24th 1939, the Nazis burnt the building down and all its contents were incinerated. Only the soot-covered walls remained. The ruins of the synagogue then passed through various permutations. At first, they were used as a storage-room for scrap iron. Afterwards, it became a place for the collection of stolen Jewish property (linen, clothes, shoes and the like). Finally, in 1955, the municipality's "pity" was aroused. It had been freed of "its Jews" and adapted the remains of the deserted synagogue for a "municipal philharmonic".)

F. The Bathhouse and the "Mikvah"

At the same time during which the New Synagogue was built, at Reb Nachum Asz's initiative, the Jewish Community Council established both a bathhouse and a purification *mikvah* [ritual bathhouse].

The building was built on a size, scale and in accordance with sanitary and hygienic standards not to be found elsewhere throughout Poland.

G. Charitable Institutions

Our city also excelled in institutions for social welfare. The generous hands and kind-heartedness of its philanthropists in charitable matters allowed it to establish important institutions and to raise them to an exemplary level.

On 27th March 1899, an organization was founded. It carried the name *Dobroczynność*. This institution, which was approved by the authorities under the Polish name (which actually means, “good deeds”), was worthy of its name under which it began. Its welcome activities would benefit the poor and helpless in all areas of social welfare

H. The Jewish Hospital

One of the first and most important functions of the Jewish Community Council was to building a Jewish hospital in which the patients would feel at home and where they would be treated by Jewish doctors, nurses and sanitation workers.

The land had already been purchased on 5th December 1900. For various reasons, the building permit was postponed until 28th September 1908.

Plans were drawn up by the engineer Mankowski with the aim of making possible a [future] expansion.

The “Building Committee” comprised Dr. Józef Markusfeld, Dr. Batawja, Dr. Alexander Wolberg, Herman Ginsburg, Markus Gradsztajn, engineer Karp, Izydor Frajnd, Ludwig Tempel, Stanisław Herc and Leopold Werde.

The “Building Committee” collected funds for the building, its furnishing and, above all, for the purchase of the very best medical and surgical equipment.

Four wards were built, which enclosed reception and emergency rooms, a clinic, a dispensary, two operating rooms [and] four inpatient rooms for the internally ill, contagious diseases and the mentally ill. There was [also] a kitchen, a washhouse and apartments for the hospital workers, who needed to be always near the hospital.

Dr. Batawja was appointed as the hospital’s Director, with the head of the surgical department being Dr. Broniatowski. As internal physicians, doctors Edward Kon, Waclaw Kon, Stefan Kon (gynecology) and Mrs. Dr. Etinger were appointed. The main paramedics were Torbeczko and S. Zelten.

Over the course of the years, other doctors also worked at the hospital but, in our list, are only those, at the time it was founded, are mentioned.

I. Aged Care Home and Orphanage

With his own money, Leopold Werde, one of our city’s great philanthropists, established large buildings in which dozens of elderly were place and where all their needs were provided.

He also provided for homeless, orphaned boys and girls.

Among the female public workers, who dedicated themselves to these unfortunate ones, Mrs. Salomea Sztarke distinguished herself.

J. Children's Home

The philanthropist Leopold Werde did not content himself with his generous and exemplary works, but also, with his own money, constructed a large building that became a Jewish "children's home".

Dozens of boys and girls were plucked out of the dilapidated houses and the horrific cellars of the slums, in which they were born and lived, and were transferred to the spacious and beautiful rooms of the "children's home". This was a place where a healing sun shone for them. It warmed their tender hearts and allowed them to inhale fresh air in the marvelously, well-kept garden.

Teachers, with vast pedagogical experience, taught the children and prepared them for a better and more productive life than that in their poor parents' homes.

Mrs. Wierzbicka and Mr. W. Gostynski especially distinguished themselves in their devotion to this institution.

K. "*Hachnoset Orchim*" [Hospitality for Guests]

At the initiative of simple, ordinary people, and with the help of *Rabeinu* [our rabbi; master], Reb Nuchem Asz, a house, containing twenty beds, was built to accommodate poor wayfarers.

The same building also housed as a prayer-house and a *cheder* for the children of poor religious circles.

L. Jewish Educational Institutions

After the First World War, with the monetary aid of our brethren in the U.S, a school named after Y.L. Perec and a children's home for the children of workers were opened. During that same period, the public Hebrew high school was established and opened. It concentrated the best of the Jewish intelligentsia and even pupils from among assimilationist circles.

The high school's management was in the hands of public Zionist figures such as M. Neufeld, city-council member Felix Szapira, Leon Kopinski, Dr. Mering and others.

The first pedagogic headmaster was Dr. Szymon Berysz and, following his leaving his position due to an illness, Professor Majer Bałaban took his place. He brought in a staff of teachers at the highest level and also saw to the expansion of the study of Scripture and the Hebrew language. The school was fitted out with the best equipment of modern secondary schools in Europe and its good name travelled far.

M. Renovation of the Study-Hall

At the initiative of Rabbi Nuchem Asz and with the help of the Jewish community and a group of public figures and philanthropists, the study-hall was rebuilt and stood out in its beauty and size.

Years afterwards, after *Rabeinu's* death, it was decided to name the study-hall, after the great deceased one, "*Ohel Nachum*" [Tent of Nachum] [and] further renovations were introduced, which added to its glory.

(With great sorrow and anger, we mention here the shameful behavior of our good Polish "neighbors": after the prayer-house was miraculously spared from the vile hands of the accursed Nazis and remained standing, the "Polish authorities" (already after the War) decided to demolish this wonderful building for "urbanistic" reasons...).

N. The Jewish Community Council Committee

As a rule, the best and most important of the [city's] residents were chosen for the community's leadership and, of course, Henryk Markusfeld sat at its head. But, the Council lacked a democratic character and the wealthier residents gathered around - those from assimilationist or semi-assimilationist circles.

Only after the First World War and the resurrection of an independent Poland, did Marshall Józef Piłsudski decree democratic foundations for Jewish community councils.

It was then that, for the first time, including in Częstochowa, elections for the Council were held and Mr. Szmul Goldsztajn, one of the foremost figures of "*Ha'Mizrachi*" [a Zionist movement], was elected Chairman of the Committee, and, as Chairman of the Jewish Community Council, Chaim Weksler was elected. He was also one of "*HaMizrachi's*" prominent public figures. They both carried out their duties for a period of eighteen years.

During this entire period, all the civic parties were represented on the Council - the "*Bund*" and the "*Poalei Zion*" [Jewish Marxist-Zionist movement] workers' parties, as well as all the financial institutions.

As a leader of the community, after Goldsztajn left his post, Jakob Rozenberg was elected. He retained this position until the Holocaust.

during its last decades of existence, various reasons caused the Council's activities to be limited to religious matters only - Halachic queries to rabbis, judges and ritual slaughtermen, and also regarding the cemeteries and a few questions also concerning the different types of *cheiders*. It was not given the possibility to expand and to become a true autonomous representative of all Jews.

Three reasons can be provided for this:

- a.) The number of wonderful type of Jewish philanthropists, who aspired to commemorate their parents' memories with grand acts of charity as the establishment of a hospital, old folks' home, orphanage and such, diminished until almost disappearing from the world.
- b.) The ample amount of "representatives" from all sorts of abundant currents, parties and organisations, and their strict stands on their demands and recommendations, "robbed" time with their empty arguments and prevented real and productive work.
- c.) And this is the main reason - the Polish authorities, who did not wish the development of Jewish self-government to reach a stage of demanding autonomy for a ethnic minority, were pleased to see how "the intelligent Jews" argued amongst themselves about trivialities and enclosed themselves in their narrow religious issues.

It stood to our city Częstochowa's great merit that, in the bygone "good days", all the necessary public institutions were established, which were under independent public management, outside the Jewish community's framework.

(Indeed, its merit did not stand in its times of trouble and, when the Nazis came to annihilate Polish Jewry and its institutions, the killers fell both upon us and the institutions we took pride in.



The Jewish Community Council building, decorated in honour of the visit of Poland's President, Professor Mościcki; on the balcony: members Win, Blumenkranc, Zeligfeld, Mrs. Futerko and Józef Kelerman.



Rabbi Nachum Asz (with a Torah scroll in his arms), the community leader S. Goldsztajn and Council Chairman Ch. Weksler, and next to them, the commander of the army, welcoming the president.

The permanent and industrious Jewish citizens of Częstochowa numbered 33,000. Another 20,000 of our brethren, who had been expelled from their homes, gathered in our city, hoping yet to see the downfall of that known evil entity.

But the greatest *Asmodeus* [king of demons; destroyer] of all generations - may his name and memory be obliterated - overcame them too, as the rest of our six million martyred brothers and sisters, may God avenge their blood, and celebrated his Satanic victory.

They are no more. Our dear and beautiful Częstochowa - is also no more!

Please, God, avenge the blood of thy servants that has been shed! [from Psalm 79:10])