

My Birth Town



Częstochowa is in Ruins

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Can we, on the day of our tragic *yuhrzeit*, remain calm?

Are we capable, today - when inside the four cubits¹ within which we reside, where the air we breathe is laden with a profound sorrow, soaked in blood and tears - to take our agony out from the depths of our soul?

Why was I not in Częstochowa on that bloody Yom Kippur, when my father, sister, brothers and nearest were struggling in the last hours and minutes of their lives? Where was I on that gruesome Simchas Torah, when the Degenhardts and other Nazi hounds became the rulers over the lives of our dearest?

Many consider the survivors to be fortunate. Can there be a greater misfortune than to be the sole survivor of such a large, gigantic environment?

Where were you in those fearsome, dark days? How can one breathe calmly, how can one speak calmly, calmly walk and stand, calmly smile - when your consciousness is pervaded with grief, when, in your heart, lie dozens of living graves?!

You cannot shed a tear, because you are not the only one! You cannot shed a tear, because your lachrymal glands no longer function. Your source of tears has run dry! Is there, then, anything more tragic?

And the thought - how did you die? Did it take the gas long to suffocate you? Did the bullet, which found you, give you much pain? What did you think in that moment - the moment to go? In the hours of your death? Who else accompanied [you in your] *Sh'ma Yisrael*?²

And where was God then?! The great, almighty God, who raised His people to the level of being able to suffer and, yet, still not to the level of total annihilation? Where was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah? Why is it that He sent them first - those who feared him - to the gas chambers and crematoria?

We must not ask - it is better to remain silent! Why rebel against the Almighty? But, where were You, the Almighty, when the smoke from the ovens brought You, every day, new thousands, tens of thousands, of Your best children? Why did You render their lives *hefker*?³ Did they give too little to charity? Did they not keep the sacred Sabbath? Did they not rouse their children, before the days of Rosh Hashana, to get up for *Selichos*?⁴ Dear Lord, did they disgrace Your Name?

The best and dearest, Torah scholars and prodigies, givers of charity and God-fearing men, those who loved God with all their 248 limbs⁵ - gas and fire became one with them!

We must not ask, not question? But why have You left living graves inside the hearts of men?

Częstochowa

How cherished was this town of my childhood and youth! I did not enjoy promenading in the *Aleje*. I did not go into the park - neither the new nor the old.

On the *Aleje*, the third house from the railway bridge was my home - the home which raised me, the home where hundreds and hundreds of Jews would come to my father to ask his advice or to resolve a difficult *pilpul*⁶, the home where *yeshiva* lads would come on *Shabbes* afternoons to study a page of the Talmud and eat *Shabbes* fruits.

Little did I go for strolls in the *Aleje* and parks. But I knew every stone on the way to the New Market [Nowy Rynek] and the Old Market [Stary Rynek], to *Garncarska*, *Targowa* and *Nadrzeczna*. Those uplifting Jewish streets, where every poor Jewish home was clean and a plush tablecloth lay on the table. Who is then able to encompass, with his thoughts, the whole glory and shine of bygone Jewish Częstochowa? What modern-day historian of our city will now sit down for years, in order to describe every little corner of our Częstochowa, of that *City and Mother in Israel* [2 Samuel 20:19]?

There was in Częstochowa a Reb Lajbe'le Landau - my first

¹ [TN: Four cubits (about six feet) is, in Halacha, a person's minimal personal space.]

² [TN: Ref. to the verse "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord:" (Deuteronomy 6:4), which Jews traditionally call out in cases of impending death.]

³ [TN: Heb., "free for the taking".]

⁴ [TN: Heb., prayers of atonement.]

⁵ [TN: Expression akin to "with all one's bones"; from the mishnah in Oholoth 1:8: "There are 248 members in a man etc."]

⁶ [TN: Heb., from the word "pilpel", or "pepper"; a form of Torah study, which the Encyclopaedia Britannica defines as a "casuistic type of Talmudic dialectic".]

In Częstochowa, there was a Reb Lajbe'le Landau – my first *melamed*⁷. Who did not study with Reb Lajbe'le Landau? Who, then, from the last three generations, does not remember his long *cheder* on ul Mostowa, with the broom⁸ and the poor, legless invalid, who sat in his low wagon directly by the cheder - the one with the green hat with pins.

How could one forget Reb Pinches Orkusz, the *melamed* for the wealthy children, where besides Torah one also received a general education, with a “censure”⁹ for every half year?

How could one forget Reb Icze-Majer *Amstower*¹⁰ and Reb Motl – those with whom young lads already studied a page of *Nedurim*¹¹ with the RaN¹², or even completed *Chullin*¹³?

As a fortress in Częstochowa stood the “Kesor Torah” [Crown of T.] Yeshiva, with its deans, Reb Reuve'le Rechtman and Reb Michal Szwarcbaum, with its classes and levels, where half of the city's young men, later and modern-day *Maskilim*¹⁴, *gimnazjum* students and intelligentsia, took in incredible portions of Talmudic knowledge and sharp-minded *piłpul*.

And the Jewish Gimnazjum - the glory and pride of the city - with its Directors, Prof Bałaban and Prof Forst, with its wonderful pedagogues, with its Rabbi Prof Hirszberg, Janowski, Lauer and others, and others. A world of pupils, numbering in the thousands, emerged from it!

Proud Jewish Częstochowa, with its dozens of institutions, all in service of the Jewish community, with its marvellous *Kehilla*, with its prodigy, Rabbi Nachum Asz, with its Berl Bocian - the first publisher of the first [Częstochowa] Yiddish newspaper - with its *Maggid* [Heb., Preacher] Reb Mojsze Halter, with its Mendel Fogels and Szmol Goldsztajn¹⁵, with its proud and wonderful youth in all areas - from Axer's [secular] *gimnazjum* to the [ultraorthodox] “Machzikei Ha'Das” [Upholders of Religion], which was headed by Reb Szyja Zeligman (the son of Hersz! Szyja)!

Who is able to calculate the entire pedigree of our incredible *Kehilla* of Częstochowa? Who is able to go back to the times of Reb Duwid'l Lelówer¹⁶? Who is able to encompass, within the narrow framework of an article, all these pearls – I would say the crown of Jewish communities – of Jewish Częstochowa? What did it not have? What did it not include, finding a fusion for all its citizens? There were no run-of-the-mill institutions in our city. In all parties, in all organisations, in all societies, in all clubs, in all associations, in all *shtieblech*, in all study-halls and synagogues, in all [courts of] Rebbes - everywhere, the earnestness of the thing being done enveloped all those who had a part in it.

There was not a single Party Central, from the Bund to the Revisionists, which did not have its representatives there. Everywhere – in all the parties' central institutions – our Częstochowa Jews were in the most revered positions.

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Częstochowa! How beloved and dear it was, this Jewish town, to the Jewish people. Ul Kozia and ul Warszawska, the Meat-market Street [ul Targowa] and the New Market, ul Krakowska and the *Aleje* – all, all the streets, where a Jewish life pulsed, where Jews were living, were close to your heart. Jewish life, Jewish thought and creation enveloped the city in its *tallis* [Heb., prayer shawl].

Jewish Częstochowa is no more! No more is the “*alte rande*”¹⁷, no more are the Old and New Synagogues! No more is ul Kozia, no more is Reb Lajbel Landau's ul Mostowa. No more is the “*Getzevize*”¹⁸; there is no longer a Jewish Gimnazjum, no trace has remained of Axer's Gimnazjum, no more is Izrael Plocker¹⁹ – there is nothing!

Bygone Częstochowa can no longer sprout forth. Also, no replacement for bygone Częstochowa can blossom. Perhaps the *Aleje* and the parks will still stand for centuries, ul Berek Joselewicza and ul Garibaldiego - [but,] there will be no Jewish Częstochowa. In the dwelling of my father Reb Lajbel, no more *Shabbes* guests will be taken in. No more lads will come to be tested in learning. The Wilno [Edition of the] Talmud will no longer shine from the large, broad bookcase. The children will no longer sit each one at another table, preparing their homework for tomorrow at school. Poor people will no longer come to receive *Rosh Chadesh*²⁰ money. No longer will the *Radomsker* Chassidim come in on *Shabbes* [after the morning prayer service] for a *Kiddush*²¹. No longer will the *Umaner* Chassidim²² dance and sing.

Jewish Częstochowa is no more! Neither the orthodox one nor the secular one. No more are the great *Częstochower* spirits, which enriched a world. No more are the giants and titans, each of whom was unique in his whole generation!

The last pride of my birth town has also fallen - the rebellious youth! The youth who were unwilling to go like sheep to the slaughter. The youth, who decided – if to fall, it would only be in battle against the enemy!

Częstochowa is one of the communities where the Nazi bandits were forced to pay a price for Jewish life. The account was too late and too little - but, nevertheless, a reckoning was attained!

My birth town is in ruins. No other will sprout forth in its place! Any new [Jewish] community in Częstochowa is only a miniature of what [once] was.

My birth town Częstochowa has been destroyed. *Yisgadal v'yiskadash*!..²³

Honoured be the Fallen Heroes!

⁷ [TN: Heb., teacher in a cheder (religious primary school).]

⁸ [TN: In his book “Churban Czenstochow” (p.384), Dr Benjamin Orenstein explains that Reb Lajbe'le Landau would make pupils who misbehaved stand in a corner holding the broom as punishment.]

⁹ [TN: From the context, this word appears to mean “report card”.]

¹⁰ [TN: Viz. from Mstów.]

¹¹ [TN: Heb., “Vows” (also known by its Sephardic pronunciation – “Nedarim”); a particularly difficult tractate of the Talmud.]

¹² [TN: Acronym of Rabeiny (Our Teacher) Nissim, an influential medieval talmudist from Gerona, Catalonia. The RaN was the first to write a complete commentary on the tractate of *Nedurim*.]

¹³ [TN: Heb., “Ordinary (Things)”, referring to animal and birds consumed in non-consecrated contexts; “Chullin” is also considered a very difficult tractate of the Talmud.]

¹⁴ [TN: Heb., followers of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, or secularism.]

¹⁵ [TN: Mendel Fogel was President of Agudas Visroel and dozor [representative] in the Kehilla Council; Szmol Goldsztajn was President of the Częstochowa Kehilla during the First World War.]

¹⁶ [TN: Rebbe Duwid Biderman (1746-1814) was a famous Chassidic master who lived in Lelów, near Częstochowa.]

¹⁷ [TN: *Yid.*, “old border”; as explained at the beginning of *Sefer Częstochowa*, Vol. I, the “*alte rande*” was a gateway located in the Stary Rynek, which led through to the Jewish neighbourhood.]

¹⁸ [TN: We have not been able to ascertain this word's original spelling or meaning; Chaim-Lajb Szwarc writes in *Czenstochover Yidn*, p.33, that this was the name of the ghetto, viz. the Jewish Quarter (in the 1880's).]

¹⁹ [TN: Long-standing editor of the newspaper “Częstochower Cajtung”.]

²⁰ [TN: Heb., “Head of the Month”; the first day of each Hebrew month is a time when more charity than usual is traditionally given.]

²¹ [TN: Refreshments and appetizers before the *Shabbes* midday meal; named for the “*Kiddush*” blessing ceremony performed at the start of the event.]

²² [TN: Followers of Rebbe Nachman of Bracław (1772-1810), who died and was buried in Uman, Ukraine.]

²³ [TN: Opening words of “*Kaddish*”, the Mourner's Prayer.]