

Konstanty Gebert
The Two Lines



My prayer book is 140 years old. Its sturdy paper survived the test of time without turning yellow, and so have the words of its Hebrew prayers, repeated by Jews for ages. And the Polish words of these prayers, translated by Daniel Neufeld, have also passed this test. My prayer book was the first in which the Hebrew text was accompanied by a Polish translation. In 1865, Neufeld already knew that there will be Jews for whom Polish will have become the mother tongue, and that there will be more and more of them. For them he published his “Syfse Yesenim, or Ancient Prayers of the Israelites for the Entire Year” and it is thanks to him that I, almost a century and a half later, can turn to God with the words of our prayers, even though Hebrew was not given to me in our childhood.

Neufeld, though he loved the Hebrew language, considered the assimilation of the Jews as both appropriate and desirable. His translation, still the most beautiful to my ears, was not intended to replace the words of the holy language in the mouths of the faithful, but only to help them where their Hebrew was lacking, and to encourage them to deepen their knowledge. In the Poland he dreamed of under the partitions¹, Jews would become full-fledged citizens, speaking Hebrew in the shul and Polish on the street. His opinions eventually led him into the ranks of the Polish patriotic underground, for which he paid when exiled after the failed anti-Russian uprising of 1863. He propagated his ideas on the pages of “Jutrzenka” [The Dawn], a weekly in Polish which he had founded to promote the idea of civic cooperation between Poles and Jews, and which the Tsarist authorities eventually shut down. But it had educated an entire generation of Jews, assimilationists and patriots, proud of both their identities, convinced that in the future independent Poland there will be for them a worthy place. And though Częstochowa was not the most important Jewish center in the part of Poland under Russian rule, it was here that, for twenty years, Neufeld had run a Jewish school, educating its students in this very spirit.

I would have liked, when thinking of the Polish-Jewish history of this town, to draw a straight line from the pious Jew Neufeld to the pious bishop Kubina, who under the German occupation had helped Jews, and also later had the strength to oppose barbarism and condemn the Kielce pogrom in 1946. And from bishop Kubina to the 1986 Conference of the Polish Catholic Episcopate, held here, at the Jasna Góra monastery, which had set up a sub-commission for dialogue with Judaism, thus initiating in Poland the Christian-Jewish dialogue, developing since fruitfully, though not without problems. And from that Conference, *toutes proportions gardees*, to this one, which for the very first time brings back, on such a scale, the legacy of Częstochowa Jewry. Neufeld would have been proud of us. And one would like to believe that the particular spirituality of Częstochowa, radiating from the Jasna Góra monastery, had contributed to the drawing of that line, clear and clean, and inspiring hope.

But this is not the only way of looking at the history of Częstochowa Jewry. Another line can be drawn through it, a dark and sinister one, starting with the bloody pogrom committed in 1919 by soldiers of general Haller’s army², in which seven Jews were murdered, and dozens wounded and humiliated. The Memory Book of Częstochowa Jewry records an incident in which Haller’s soldiers caught a poor Jew, Yossl Shternberg, and cut off half of his beard for fun. This would not seem to be much, compared to the murders committed on that day, and to the bitter fighting over Poland’s borders, and the accompanying massacres, in which dozens of thousands of Poles and Jews, Russians and Ukrainians lost their lives. But those who loved Yossl Shternberg remembered his half-shorn beard. Not only because the victim was someone they loved. Also because the perpetrators were compatriots. And there were also the stones, smashing windows in Jewish homes after Jasna Góra Easter sermons. And later, after the next, even more

horrible war, attacks on the rare Jewish survivors of the German genocide. And then history was over, for the Jews were no more. By the late Forties the Communist regime had banned most Jewish organizations and institutions, and the city's remaining Jews were forced out after the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968³. It is true that Poland bears no responsibility for the actions of the Communist regime. But can one be surprised that some Jews see this as a logical sequence?

Both those lines, the clear and the dark one, criss-cross on the pages of the history of Częstochowa. It would be a mistake to say one is true and the other false. Both are true. We cannot change history to conceal its dark pages or to vent prejudice. But it is up to us to decide which line we shall draw into the future. In the Poland that could finally be as in Neufeld's dreams, we have also to remember the Poland that Yossel Shternberg saw otherwise the dreams will remain dreams only. For Poland will never be as Neufeld had wanted: the Jews murdered by the Germans did not get the chance of checking if they would have, this time, fared better than Shternberg did. We shall not face the challenge of reality. But we do still face the challenge of memory.

This conference is one attempt of dealing with that challenge. It should restore to the town the memory of its Jewish citizens, who for ages had been part of it, and now are no more. This memory is not simple, for neither is human history. Alongside the pious rabbis and daring entrepreneurs, eminent activists and simple people struggling for their daily bread, there were also the con men and the thieves. Alongside the patriots and heroes Gestapo agents and UB⁴ functionaries. There was bishop Kubina and there were *shmaltzovniki*⁵ too. There is no reason to pass them under silence, out of concern for the pedagogical impact, and there is no reason not to speak about the dark line in Częstochowa's history, either out of fear of supplying arguments to people unfriendly to Poland, or out of fear of the reaction of those, for whom this line is not dark at all. History can defend itself provided it is the full history. A lame history would be indefensible.

This conference will help us find out what we do know, what we do not know, and of what we do not speak. It will be a success if it opens the way for new questions, and especially if, in the minds of the inhabitants of Częstochowa, it will rebuild the memory of their Jewish neighbors. If when listening to a concert in the Philharmonic they will at times think of the building that used to stand there⁶. If, when finding a slanting incision in the doorframe of an old building, they will not blame the builders for a sloppy job. If Daniel Neufeld will become for them an important figure from a shared past, and not an obscure historical curio. All this, of course, will not happen at once, if it happens at all. But, as Rabbi Tarfon says in Neufeld's translation of the Talmudic treatise Pirke Avot (2:21): "Nie ty sam winienesz kończyć robotę całą, ale też nie możesz się całkiem uwolnić od jej wykonania"⁷.

I am glad to be able to recall his words here, for immodestly I consider myself one of his late students. And I await with hope the day when it will no longer be necessary to recall either them or him for they will have found a lasting place in the memory of Częstochowa.

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¹ Poland, partitioned between her neighbors Russia, Prussia and Austria in the late 18th century, was to recover independence only in 1918, after 123 years of oppression.

² A nationalistic Polish military unit, known for both its bravery on the Russian front, and for the violence it repeatedly committed against Jews.

³ This campaign, organized by the authorities as a reaction to Israel's victory in the Six-Day War and to an almost contemporaneous, but unrelated, student movement for democracy, in which some activists were Jewish, ended with the forced emigration of some 14 thousand remaining Polish Jews.

⁴ Acronym of the Polish Communist secret police.

⁵ Name given under the German occupation to Poles who hunted down Jews.

⁶ The Częstochowa Philharmonic stands on the site of the Great Synagogue, burned down by the Germans.

⁷ „You are not required to complete the task, yet you are not free to withdraw from it”. In: Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Complete Art Scroll Siddur*, New York 1984, Mesorah Publications.