

Jerzy Mizgalski
Żydzi Częstochowanie



One of Poland's largest and most vibrant Jewish communities lived in Częstochowa up until the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the ensuing Holocaust. From 18th century, followers of traditional Judaism, Hasidic Jews, Protestants lived together in relative peace. Until its devastation, Częstochowa Jewry was famous for its business, cultural, social, and patriotic activities. The city was also renowned for its religious faith and scientific advances. The massive deportations of the Częstochowa Jews to the Treblinka death camp, in September and October 1942, took a toll of 40,000 victims.

The earliest evidence for the presence of Jews in Częstochowa is found in the reports of royal inspections from the years 1620 and 1631. A few decades later, in 1705, the Council of the City of His Royal Highness took a loan from Mosiek, a Jew, in order to pay a tribute imposed on the city of Częstochowa by the Swedes. In return, Mosiek was allowed to reside in Old Częstochowa until the city repaid its debt to him.

How many Jews lived in Częstochowa until the middle of the 18th century, remains obscure. We know that there were 75 Jews in 1765. According to certain sources, a synagogue existed at that time at the junction of Nadrzeczna and Mirowska streets. Other sources associate the first house of prayer with the period of the Prussian Partition.

In the year 1798, Częstochowa Jews decided to separate from the community in nearby Janów. At that time, they established a Mikveh (ritual bath house) and temporary synagogue, probably in the Berman house at 15, Old Marketplace (Stary Rynek). Between the wars, the chief Rabbi of Częstochowa, Rabbi Nohum Asz, initiated the construction of a larger and richly decorated bath house on grounds belonging to the Jewish Community, on 18 Garibaldi Street.

When the Jews separated from the Janów community, the necessity arose for them to establish their own cemetery. Official permission was obtained in 1798. However, the cemetery did not come into being until a year later, because no Catholic would sell the Jews a plot to for this purpose. The first funeral of Izaak, son of Moszek took place in 1800. For over two years the tomb was guarded for fear of its profanation.

In 1805 the Częstochowa Jews were granted an official construction permit to erect a synagogue. Three years later, during the period of the Duchy of Warsaw, they were allowed to establish a separate Jewish Community. Among other activities, the Community maintained its office, the synagogue, the cemetery, and the Mikveh. It supervised ritual slaughter, arranged for social welfare, and collected taxes. Initially, only 495 individuals were allowed to belong to the community although the Jewish population far exceeded that number. At the time there were 3,349 residents in the growing city.

In the 19th century, when Częstochowa was part of the Russian Partition, the Jews had to struggle for their identity. They boycotted the order of Tsar Nicholas I, in 1825, for all Russian citizens to abandon their national costumes and to dress like Europeans. Policemen equipped with scissors stopped the Jews in the streets and cut their beards, sidelocks and gaberdines. Wigs worn by Jewish women were stripped off. One Saturday, when several police officers stood in front of the synagogue to examine the appearance of the worshippers, the Jews remained in the house of prayer until late in the night.

Another source of conflict with the authorities was the Tsar's order to give names to all the citizens of the Russian Empire. The Jews, despite administrative pressure, would not respect this order. Consequently, the municipality - in a high-handed manner - forced surnames on all the Jews in 1824. As a result, there were 31 Bermans, 29 Haimans, and 28 Landaus living in Częstochowa at that time. In many cases they were not related.

In the nineteenth century, Częstochowa was transformed into an important multi-variatiated industrial center of including extractive and metallurgical works and the

manufacture of textiles, toys, and devotional articles. In the 1880's, next to Łódź, Częstochowa was the second largest industrial city of the Russian Partition. It had the country's third largest population - after Warsaw and Łódź. Later, Częstochowa became one of the most industrialized cities of the independent Poland. In 1925, 136 factories including 17 big textile plants operated in the city.

The Częstochowa Jews were not only active in developing local industry but were frequently among initiators of the process. In 1828, David Kronenberg, who earlier owned a dozen or so weaving workshops, established the first textile factory of hand-produced goods. Among the biggest factories established by the Jews until the 1850's there were: the Warta Factory of Jute Products, owned by Henryk Markusfeld and Szymon Neuman; the Gnasyńska textile plant; the factory owned by Izidor Sigman and Roman and Zygmunt Markowicz; the Langhamer's picture factory and two factories manufacturing spoons owned by Kohn and Landau; the printing house owned by Szymkowski and Oderfeld; and the match factory owned by Sperber.

The Jews were unrivalled in the field of toy manufacturing. At the turn of the 19th century all toy factories (as many as 15 altogether) in Częstochowa had Jewish owners. Business and forwarding enterprises, warehouses, intermediary agencies, etc. of various sizes developed around factories. New lines of business and professions were emerging. Many Jews also held onto their traditional occupations in handicrafts and commerce. Jewish craftsmen established their own guilds, such as those belonging to tinsmiths, roofers, hairdressers, wig-makers, cap makers, furriers, metalworkers, bakers, confectioners, upholsterers, and brush makers. In 1897, the renowned Craft School for Jews was established. It trained skilled workmen, such as carpenters, locksmiths, mechanics, and electricians.

In the middle of the 19th century, mutual relations tightened between Jews and Poles, particularly between Jewish industrialists and the emerging Polish intelligentsia. The Jews and the Poles were connected, thanks to growing business relations and their common engagement in patriotic, scientific, and cultural activities. Daniel Neufeld, founder and headmaster of the Jewish grammar school with Polish language instruction, organized patriotic events before the January Rising, and was an outstanding advocate of Jewish-Polish rapprochement. The Częstochowa Jews, despite severe repression, took part in all the struggles for the independence of Poland. After the 8th of September Uprising in 1862, tsarist troops attacked the Old Town inhabited by Jews. Many Jewish homes were set on fire and there were many casualties.

In the last decades of the 19th century, only poor Jews remained in the Old Town, inhabiting tenement houses on the Targowa, Garncarska, Nadrzeczna, Senatorska, Kožia, Gęsia, Ptasia, Mostowa and Spadek streets. Wealthy people abandoned the confined area of the Jewish quarter and moved to the city center. Roomy, large style apartment houses were erected along the I Najświętszej Marii Panny Avenue, in the Aleksandrowska (now Wilsona) Street as well as in the Odjazd (now Piłsudskiego) Street.

Wealthy, open-minded Jews built the so-called New Synagogue on the Aleksandrowska Street. In accordance with to the ideas of the Haskalah or "Jewish Enlightenment," they sought to combine secular knowledge with religion. They chose outstanding scientists and scholars to be religious leaders, such as the historian Mayer Bałaban. Cantor Abraham Birnbaum founded the renowned cantorial school that was attached to the New Synagogue. Its graduates found success and admiration in the United States. He was also the first person to start a Union of Cantors. In his compositions he combined traditional Jewish themes with the elements of contemporary European music.

The New Synagogue existed for only 46 years. Devastated and robbed of all precious objects, it was set on fire by German military policemen and their 'Volksdeutsche' henchmen on Christmas Day, 1939. The Judaic library with its rich music collection was decimated along with the building. In the sixties a philharmonic hall was built on its ruins.

In an earlier period, Polish Standards from the Napoleonic era were stored in the Old Synagogue. Soldiers returning from Russia in 1813 handed them over to the local Jews to be hidden. One of the standards was used as a parochet, or curtain for the Aron Hakodesh, the altar cabinet where Torah scrolls are kept. Afterwards, the standards were taken by the Assimilationist Jews from the New Synagogue. The existence of these precious relics was discovered in 1916, during the First World War, when Russian troops withdrew from Częstochowa.

After Poland regained its independence in 1918, patriotic celebrations took place in both synagogues on the anniversaries of important events in Polish history. In the 1920's, Rabbi Nahum Asz initiated thorough renovation of the temple. It was carried out according to the design of painter Perec Willenberg, who fashioned magnificent symbolic ornaments. He also painted Polish coats of arms on the walls. On the 25th of September 1939, Germans, dressed in their uniforms began to demolish the Old Synagogue. They were joined by Volksdeutsche and the local mob. After three days of looting and devastation, only the walls, shattered windows, and broken floors remained. Apart from synagogues, there were many Hassidic siblekh in Częstochowa, including four houses of prayer connected with the Tsadik from Góra Kalwaria.

In keeping with the charitable principles of Judaism, the Częstochowa Jews arranged for care of the sick, aged, orphans, pregnant women, and others in need. The "Dobroczytność" (charity) association and the "Towarzystwo Dobroczynne dla Żydów" (charitable association for the Jews) were the largest and most respected charitable institutions.

Thanks to the philanthropists, a home for the aged, and a day nursery for poor pre-school age children were established along with summer and holiday camps. In 1913, a modern hospital with 50 beds was erected on Mirowska Street. This hospital was open to anybody in Częstochowa without regard to religion.

Schooling was also a religious obligation. At first, the Jews were educated in numerous cheder schools (there were 32 cheder schools in 1912) and yeshivas that offered mostly religious education. Before the outbreak of the Second World War, Jewish children attended nine primary comprehensive and public schools, two secondary schools, a grammar school, and several trade schools. The experimental gardening farm situated at 89, Rolnicza Street was a teaching institution of special importance. Here, children and young people were prepared to live and work in Palestine. Instruction was given by the members of the WIZO, the International Zionist Women's Organization.

WIZO was one of the many Zionist organizations active in Częstochowa. From the 1880's on, the Zionists argued with the Assimilationists about total polonization. High hopes for harmonious coexistence with the Poles were raised when Poland regained its independence in 1918. Anti-Semitic excesses, however, weakened the position of those who supported assimilation. At the dawn of the Second Republic, on 28th of May 1919, a bloody pogrom with participation of soldiers of General Haller's Army - took place in Częstochowa. Seven Jews were killed and many wounded.

Anti-Semitic aggression among university students increased in the second half of the Thirties as a result of the propaganda fuelled by the National Democratic Movement. Anti-Semitic incidents that took place in Częstochowa in 1937 had wide repercussions. The synagogue was set on fire, and 46 Jewish shops and 21 flats were demolished. A feeling of danger and uncertainty over the future was growing among Jews.

All important events in politics, culture and sport were reported and discussed in the local Yiddish language press. As many as six Jewish daily papers, ten weekly magazines and one biweekly magazine were published in Częstochowa before 1939. Yiddish was the primary language of most Jews in Poland.

The German army seized Częstochowa on Sunday, the 3rd of September in the early morning. At noon the next day, they brutally brought the city to submission. Several hundred people were killed (some sources report one thousand victims)

including many Jews. In the following days the persecutions continued, and, in part, specifically directed at the Jewish population.

At the beginning of the occupation, the Germans immediately ordered all Jewish schools closed. Military and police units moved into some school buildings. On orders of the occupation authorities, a Jewish representative Council of the Six was established on the 16th of September 1939. Later, on the 1st of October 1939, it was transformed into the Judenrat, or Council of the Elders, composed of 24 members.

The task of the Judenrat was to administer the affairs of the Jewish population and to, execute all the orders of the occupation authorities unconditionally.

In the face of resistance by the Polish municipality, nearly the entire burden of services on behalf of the German functionaries and administration fell upon the Judenrat. The Council was obliged to prepare fully furnished flats and office premises. By order of the Germans, the Council was also forced to supply manpower free of charge. The Council was also compelled to accommodate Jews deported to Czestochowa from Berlin and other parts of Germany, and from the annexed territories. Meanwhile, more and more Jews, displaced or escaping from neighbouring places, were flooding into Czestochowa. From the beginning of the occupation, the Germans took over Jewish enterprises, blocked bank accounts, and robbed Jews of their possessions. There were many murders, beatings and cases of physical and psychological persecution.

In September 1939, several Jewish political activists were arrested by the Gestapo and deported to the Buchenwald concentration camp. In April 1941, the Germans drove the Jews into the Czestochowa ghetto. Its borders were delimited by the railway line and the wall stretching along the track. German checkpoints were set up on the approach roads to the closed area.

The Jewish community did not remain passive. In September 1939, the Society for Jewish Population Health Protection (TOZ) continued to function, fixing its attention on malnourished children and youth. Efforts were also made to provide them with education. They also tried to offer medical care to the entire Jewish population.

Various underground military activities and resistance were attempted. However, the deportations of the ghetto residents to Treblinka that began early morning on the 22nd of September 1942 put a stop to everything. The Germans, with all perfidy and cynicism, chose the most important day on the Jewish calendar – Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) – to liquidate the Czestochowa ghetto. Around 40,000 women, children and men, in five transports, were deported to gas chambers of Treblinka.

Anyone who offered resistance, along with the weak and sick, were killed on the spot. Children and pregnant women were marched to the Kawia Street for mass execution. Murdered people were buried in two common graves. At least 2,000 Jews were murdered in Czestochowa alone at that time. Deportations continued until the first days of October. It was at the time of this bloody operation that a Jewish resistance movement began, made up mostly of young people.

During liquidation of the ghetto, the Germans picked out a group of 856 men and 73 women and transferred them to the HASAG Apparatenbau plant where wood distilled gas generators for trucks were manufactured. An ammunition factory was also set up there. The Czestochowa plant of the HASAG (Hugo Schneider Aktiengesellschaft) arms concern was established in the former Pelcera textile factory. Some of the ghetto residents were employed in HASAG Eisenhütte – former Polish Pelcer's steel works. Survivors were settled on the premises of other enterprises. The so-called small Ghetto was established for the Jewish prisoners. 5,185 people including 35 children were placed there. Around 1,500 Jews, together with little children, still remained in hiding. Jewish fighters under Machel Birencwajg's command smuggled these people into the Small Ghetto, where they had to hide in bunkers and in the attics, since capture meant certain death.

The liquidation of the Small Ghetto began on Monday morning, on the 4th of January 1943, when the Germans and the Ukrainian police surrounded it. Women,

children, and men were gathered in the Small Marketplace (the Ryneček), herded on to lorries, and transported to the Jewish cemetery where they were shot. The first act of military resistance was recorded during the selection, Mendel Fiszlewic, a fugitive from Treblinka and a member of the battle group, and a young woman of unknown identity. They attacked the German officers that were commanding the selection. The action (watched by many people including the young boy who observed it from hiding) undertaken by these brave young people failed, and they were shot on the spot. In revenge, the Germans shot every fifth person (20 people altogether) among those who were present in the Ryneček at that time. All who were killed on that day, later called Bloody Monday, were buried in a common grave.

On the 20th of March 1943, during the so-called "Purim Operation", the Germans shot members of the Judenrat, along with their families, in the "kirke" (the Jewish cemetery).

On the 23rd of March 1943, after a long night of torture, the Germans shot the six fighters who were arrested on the previous day, at 34 Wilsona Street. A grave with the engraved names has remained to this day: Flamenbaum, Moniek 21 years old; Herszenberg, Olek - 25 years old; Krauze, Janek - 23 years old; Rychter, Heniek - 19 years old; Rosenblat, Jerzyk - 18 years old; Szajn, Szlamek - 27 years old.

After the liquidation of the Small Ghetto, most of the 4,000 survivors were driven to forced labor camps attached to the HASAG factories. Wooden barracks, surrounded by an electrified, barbed wire fence, were erected on the grounds of the HASAG Apparatenbau. The Jews had to work in the HASAG ammunition factory, where artillery ammunition cases, brought from the front, were reconditioned.

On the 20th of July 1943, German foremen and the woman-supervisor Koch, notorious for her cruelty, carried out a brutal selection of workers - men and women and Jewish children from the Kinderkommando. Around 260 people were condemned to death. Several hundred Jews from beyond the HASAG were added on the next day. More than 500 people were shot in the Częstochowa Jewish cemetery at that time.

In January 1944, transports of Jews from the Łódź Ghetto and the Płaszów camp started to arrive in Częstochowa. More ammunition factories were established. HASAG, the Częstochowianka and HASAG Warta, as well as new camps for Jews, were attached to them. In July 1944, Jewish prisoners were moved to Częstochowa, together with the equipment from the HASAG Concern ammunition factories that were closed down by the Germans in Skarżysko. Eleven thousand Jewish workers were then at work in Częstochowa. On the 14th of December 1944, the HASAG camps came under the authority of the SS. This resulted in further deterioration of the already inhuman living conditions.

On the 15th of January 1945, the Germans ordered the evacuation of the HASAG prisoners to the "Reich." To avoid deportation, individual groups of prisoners (including a large group led by Leon Silberstein) left the camp and awaited liberation. Consequently, the Germans managed to deport only half of the eleven thousand Jews working in the HASAG camps.

On the day Częstochowa was liberated from the German occupation, around 5,200 Jews were left in the city, including 1,518 people who lived here before the war (including 1,240 people who were born here).

The Jews coming from other Polish cities left Częstochowa within three months after liberation. At the same time, 1,195 Hungarian, Czech, Romanian, French, Dutch, Austrian, Yugoslav, and Belgian Jews, and one Jew from Greece, arrived from German territories seized by the Soviet Army. A few weeks later, they, too, left the city.

Rejoicing in the liberation did not last long. Thousands of survivors were homeless and without means of subsistence. They were without their families and loved ones. Dozens of disabled persons, and hundreds of seriously ill people - people suffering from physical and mental disorders - were in desperate need of help.

Children presented a particularly serious issue. More than a hundred were

orphaned and without protection. The chairman of the Cześćochowa Bund organization, Liber Brener, wrote: "Children from the camps, children taken back from their Polish protectors, children from the convents, children who survived as herdsmen in the villages and the children wandering through the towns and villages were often in a very bad physical, spiritual and mental shape..." Many children had to be found and then bought back. Many young people were sent to school, and an orphanage was set up in the building at 23 Krótka Street, where the Peretz School stood before the war. Sometimes, these orphans were given to substitute families

Thanks to domestic and foreign financial aid, a rest home for convalescents and the physically exhausted was established near Cześćochowa. A Regional Jewish Committee was also organized in Cześćochowa. The Committee was composed of the representatives from the Bund, the Poaley Tsion and the PPR. Thanks to the support received from the Municipal Housing Commission, most of the Jews in Cześćochowa found shelter. Financial help and food was distributed. A common lodging-home for Jews returning from labor camps was set up. The homeless could also find shelter and food there. Shared flats for young people as well as a school for children and youth were established. A health-care institution was also brought into existence. Religious life was reborn after the liberation. A room of prayer and a kosher canteen were created in the Mikveh building.

When the Jewish community started to revive, tragic events in Kielce in 1946 dramatically changed the situation. In spite of the courageous attitude assumed by Bishop Kubina, the local Jewish community felt threatened again. Jews were given firearms and were stationed at night in front of the orphanage. Surviving Jews began to leave Cześćochowa. Around 400 Jews lived in Cześćochowa in August 1956.

In spite of these events, the Club for Children and Youth was established in the residence of the Markowicz family at 36 Jasnogórska Street. The Club was also attended by adults. Activities included courses in Yiddish and Hebrew, amateur theatre, photography, and fine arts. The Club had been active until the antisemitic campaign in 1968, at which time, most of its members dispersed throughout the world.

At the beginning of the Nineties, the people of Cześćochowa decided to commemorate the murdered Cześćochowa Jews. At the suggestion of Dr. Tadeusz Wrona, the Mayor of Cześćochowa, commemorative plaques in Polish, Hebrew and English, were fixed on the walls of the Cześćochowa Philharmonic Hall, the Zawodzie Hospital, and in the Bohaterów Getta street (former Ryneczek). At the same time, the Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna (Pedagogical College) in Cześćochowa organized an academic conference. Papers delivered during the Conference were published in the book "Dzieje Żydów w Cześćochowie" (A History of the Cześćochowa Jews) edited by Dr. Zbigniew Jakubowski.

I am not Jewish. I am against chauvinism and racism. I deeply respect all nations and societies which in peace build the future for generations to come. The Days of Remembrance are most of all for the young. Let the history teach us tolerance, peaceful coexistence of nations, and mutual understanding, so we know better our neighbours and in the future we can creatively develop what is or what was good, and neutralise these aspects, which the history of the human race verified and rejected. I sincerely hope, that this project will contribute to a better understanding between Poles and Jews. Therefore I direct this message especially to the young generation. I want to show them how important was the contribution made by Jews into the building of our common home, which until the tragedy of Holocaust, was Poland, and within it, our little community of Cześćochowa. This message highlights these elements, which in the past helped to build bridges between the Polish and Jewish nations. Let us create something, which will make us think deeply about the past and the future, and will clearly and loudly announce right now, one week before Poland's entry into the European Union, that the future of Poland and of all other nations should and must be based on mutual understanding and tolerance.

Jerzy Mizgalski