

S. Wirstel

The Jewish *Gymnazjum*

The Jewish *Gymnazjum* [high school] in Częstochowa was founded in 1917. The school's opening made a great impression in Częstochowa. In that period, the interest in Hebrew grew strongly, in connection with the Balfour Declaration and the possibility of a large *Aliyah* to the Land of Israel.

Pupils from all echelons of the Jewish populace began streaming to the *Gymnazjum* - children of Chassidic parents who had just finished *cheder*, children of half-assimilated parents who were not even familiar with the shape of [the letter] Alef [because] they had only studied in Polish schools and, obviously, children of nationalist Jews and Zionists.

It was called the "Jewish *Gymnazjum*", but absolutely no Yiddish was taught or spoken there at all¹. Both teachers and students always used the Polish language, even outside study hours. If a pupil allowed himself to speak in Yiddish during recess, they looked at him askew. Even the Hebrew studies were limited to a few hours a week. The only ones who knew Hebrew were the teachers and the pupils who had arrived from a *cheder*.

The Hebrew teachers were particularly pleased with these pupils, and they received the best marks in Hebrew, religion, Hebrew Bible and Jewish history.

The *Gymnazjum* was established on ul. Jasna. One year later, it moved over to its own spacious building on ul. Szkolna 10.

At first, there were only classes A, B, and C, as preparatory classes. Afterwards, there were years one and two, for boys and girls separately. Then, every year, higher classes were added until [there were] the full eight *gymnazjum* classes which entitled one to study at university.

Just like the Polish *gymnazie* in Częstochowa, the Jewish *Gymnazjum* had a special uniform - in the form of a cap. The cap of a pupil at the Jewish *Gymnazjum* was of dark blue cloth, with a blue and white stripe.

The *Gymnazjum's* first headmaster was Dr Szymon Brysz, a tall man with a little, trimmed beard and a permanent smile on his lips. The pupils loved him, because he carried out his duties as headmaster devotedly. After a short time, he was forced to relinquish his position due to an illness, and he was replaced by Professor Majer Bałaban, today a holy martyr of Polish Jewry.

Prof Bałaban was a very energetic man. He elevated the *Gymnazjum* to a much higher level than previously. He hired competent teachers and gave more time to Hebrew studies. He increased the number of Hebrew teachers and introduced the study of religion and the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew teachers of our class were Janowski, Rubinsztajn, and Wajnberg. For Jewish history, [the teachers were] Brawer and Miss Stobiecka.

Our Hebrew teacher, Janowski, would frequently invite us to his home and lent us books of the modern, Hebrew literature from his valuable library.

¹ [TN: The name of the language – Yiddish – means literally "Jewish", thus the school would have been called "Der Yiddische Gimnazja" in Yiddish.]

Gymnastics at the Jewish *Gymnazjum* were led by an experienced professor, a Christian. Prof Perec Willenberg taught drawing.



*A group of students from the Jewish gymnazjum
with Director Dr Dawid Einhorn*

Besides the teachers mentioned above, I also remember Mokraujer and Assorodobraj. Of the female teachers, I recall Werchowska, Geun, Wolf, Wajs, and Lotrynger.

My closest colleagues were Aron Luksemburg, Dawid Lewit, Jakób Żeryker, Geniek Zytnicki, Ajzner, Wolman, Lajzer Rozenberg, Hochman, Lewkowicz (the last two are in Argentina), Rotbart, Gryndman, Kongrecki, and Berliner.

After Prof Bałaban was invited to [join] the Tachkemoni [Rabbinical] Seminary and the Askola *Gymnazjum* in Warsaw, he was replaced by Dr Dawid Einhorn, a learned man, who in the later years occupied a prominent place in the Jewish literary world.

In his time, the *Gymnazjum* developed as regards general studies, but it was adapted to the government curriculum for middle schools to such an extent, that the Hebrew studies were reduced to a minimum. The Hebrew language was spread outside the *Gymnazjum* by Zionist youth organisations, especially *Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair*.
