

Introduction: The Jews of Częstochowa **Antony Polonsky**

Eyleh Ezkerah: And for all these, and all that was, I weep, disconsolate.
Yom Kippur liturgy

This important and valuable collection of essays is the product of the remarkable exhibition and scholarly conference on the history of the Jews in Częstochowa which was organised in that town in April 2004. The significance of the occasion was highlighted by the presence at its opening of the Stanisław Nowak, Archbishop of Częstochowa, Dr. Tadeusz Wrona, the Mayor of the town, Gerald C. Anderson, the Counsellor at the United States Embassy in Poland Ambassador, David Peleg, the current Israeli Ambassador in Poland, Ambassador Shewach Weiss, his predecessor and former Speaker of the Knesset and Sigmund Rolat and Alan Silberstein of the International Landsmanschaft of Częstochowa Jews and their descendants.

The event had not only a moral but also a scholarly dimension. Writing about the problems of investigating the history of the Jews in Poland, one of its pioneers, Mojżesz Schorr wrote in 1903:

The main failing of the method which has been employed up to the present in investigating the history of the Jews in Poland is that general questions have been approached before the detailed problems were resolved. Scholars have attempted to describe the history of Jews in the whole of Poland before research had been done on the history of individual towns . Attempts were similarly made to describe the general history of the Jews before the specifics of individual periods had been illuminated.¹

This is still very much the case today. Although we do have valuable studies of the history of the Jews in towns like Warsaw, Łódź and Kraków, the life of Jews in medium-sized towns, of which Częstochowa is a good example, is still a somewhat neglected topic. A starting point has been provided by the book *Dzieje Żydów w Częstochowie*, edited by Dr. Zbigniew Jakubowski, which was the product of an earlier conference organised by the Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna in Częstochowa. This collection of essays adds still further to our knowledge.

Częstochowa is, of course, primarily renowned for the Pauline monastery erected in 1382 on Jasna Góra, which houses the Ikon of the Black Madonna, the Queen of Poland and which was one of the last centres of resistance to the Swedish invasion of Poland in 1655. It was in the large open space in front of the monastery that Pope John Paul II celebrated mass in the presence of more than 1.5 million people during his visit to his homeland in the summer of 1978—an event some regard as having initiated the process that led to the negotiated end of communism in Eastern Europe a little more than ten years later. It is particularly important sign of reconciliation efforts between Poles and Jews, that the exhibition on the history of the Jews in Częstochowa was held in the museum space on the grounds of the Jasna Gora.

The establishment of the Kingdom of Poland in 1815 began a new period in the history of Częstochowa, which became the third commercial and industrial centre in the Kingdom after Warsaw and Łódź. From 1846 the town was connected to both Warsaw

and Vienna by rail and in 1870, when iron ore was discovered in the environs, a steel mill, the Huta Częstochowa, was established along with several textile and paper factories. Other factories produced toys and devotional articles. By 1897, when the first detailed census was taken, the town's population had grown to around 40,000, of whom nearly 12,000 were Jews. After the First World War the industrial base was undermined by competition from Upper Silesia but some attempts were made to create new industries. By 1925 there were 136 factories including 17 major textile plants in the town whose population on the eve of the Second World War reached nearly 138,000, with Jews numbering over 28,000. During the war the town, which was part of the General Gouvernement while the areas south and west of it were incorporated into the Third Reich, suffered severely. The prewar policy of industrialization was continued after 1944 by the new communist government in a misguided belief that if the town could be made into an industrial centre its role as a Catholic and national shrine would be undermined. Today the population of the town is around 256,000.

A Jewish presence in Częstochowa dates back at least until the early seventeenth century. A comprehensive account of the atmosphere of contempt in which Jews were held in the eighteenth century in Poland-Lithuania is provided by Andrzej Zakrzewski, in his examination of the anti-Jewish writings of Gaudenty Pikulski. The nature of the archival sources for the history of the Jews of Częstochowa is described by Elżbieta Surma-Jończyk while the way *matsevot* (Jewish tombstones) illustrate aspects of that history is examined by Jacek Mróz. It was only in 1798 under Prussian rule that an organised community began to emerge in Częstochowa. In 1805 the first synagogue was built and in 1808 a *kehilla* organisation was given legal recognition by the authorities in Kalisz in the recently established Napoleonic Duchy of Warsaw. At this stage Jews made up over 500 of the town's total population of around 3,400.

Jews played an active role in the industrial development of Częstochowa. Among the leading Jewish entrepreneurs were David Kronenberg, Izydor Singer and the brothers Roman and Zygmunt Markowicz, who established textile plants, and Henryk Markusfeld and Szymon Neuman, who established a jute factory. Jews also owned a printing plant, two cutlery factories and a match factory and were pre-eminent in the local toy industry. It was these industrialists who played the key role in the local communal organisation the *dozór bóżniczy*. There were also many Jewish artisans and in 1897 a Jewish Craft School was established. The use that can be made of wills to elucidate the history of the Jews in the town at this time is well demonstrated by Dariusz Złotkowski while Juliusz Sętowski provides a fascinating account of the activities of the Markusfeld family as industrialists, philanthropists and social activists.

The 1830-1 Uprising aroused little interest among the Jews of the town. The attitude of the revolutionary Sejm to the question of whether Jews should serve in its army is discussed by Ryszard Szwed while the larger question of Jewish military service between 1795 and 1945 is investigated by Tadeusz Dubicki and Grzegorz Łukomski. As in Warsaw, the acculturated Jews in Częstochowa participated in the patriotic upsurge which preceded the 1863. A particularly important role was played by Daniel Neufeld, the founder and headmaster of the Jewish private school in the town in which students were taught in Polish. Neufeld, a graduate of the Warsaw Rabbinic School, was also the editor of the Polish-Jewish weekly *Jutrzenka*, founded in June 1861, which was closed in 1863 by the tsarist censors when Neufeld was exiled to Siberia as a 'Jewish

revolutionary'. The treatment of issues relating to Częstochowa in *Jutrzenka* forms the subject of the article by Janusz Fałowski. During the uprising Tsarist troops occupied the Jewish section of the town causing significant casualties and damage to property.

In the second half of the nineteenth century after the restrictions on where Jews could live were abolished by Viceroy Aleksander Wielopolski in May 1862, the wealthier and more acculturated members of the Jewish community moved out of the Jewish area in the Old Town into the centre of Częstochowa. In 1893 they were able to erect a modern synagogue, similar to those on Tłomackie street in Warsaw and on Spacerowa (now Kościuszko) street in Łódź. Financial difficulties meant that it was only opened in early 1897. In the summer of 1896 Herman Neumanowicz expressed his hope that it would soon open and would be 'the third orderly synagogue in the country'. With the support of the local Jewish elite and of those who had emigrated from the town he was convinced that its financial difficulties would soon be overcome.² Like the synagogues in Warsaw and Łódź, the 'New Synagogue' in Częstochowa retained a basically Orthodox character while introducing some innovations, most notably a sermon (in Polish) and a male-voice choir. Since these changes were identified in the eyes of the more conservative members of the community with the German origins of the Jewish enlightenment (the *haskalah*), the synagogue was referred to in Yiddish as 'di dayshe shul'. The members of the synagogue hoped their example would speed the acculturation of all the Jews in the town. They were therefore alarmed by the influx of more religious Jews from the surrounding *shtetlakh*. According to one of them, Salezy Maimon, the modern character of the community was threatened 'by the influx of conservative or, indeed, fanatical elements from the surrounding villages, settlements and small towns'.³

The New Synagogue prided itself on its beautiful liturgy. Its first cantor was Abraham Birnbaum who had already acquired a considerable reputation. He established a cantorial school attached to the synagogue and himself produced a number of cantorial compositions which combined traditional elements with innovations based on nineteenth century European music. Birnbaum was succeeded by Avraham Fiszel who also taught music at the town's Jewish high school.

The bulk of the Jews in Częstochowa adhered to a more traditional form of Judaism. Their leader was Rabbi Nachum Asz widely known as 'the Gaon of Częstochowa' whose religious rulings were respected throughout Poland. Rabbi Asz was born in 1858 in Grodzisk, near Warsaw the son of a renowned talmudic scholar. After studying at yeshivot in Koło and Kalisz, he received rabbinic ordination and was appointed rabbi in Nieszawa. In 1889 he was offered the post of rabbi of Częstochowa, a position he held with great distinction until his death in 1936. He enjoyed good relations with the Bishop of Częstochowa, Teodor Kubina (a bishopric had been established in the town in 1925) and these links may have had something to do with Bishop Kubina's condemnation of the massacre in Kielce in July 1946.

Rabbi Asz was an early supporter of Zionism and a member of the religious-Zionist party, *Mizrachi*, which made him rather unusual in Orthodox circles in Poland in which a more reserved attitude to Zionism was the norm. On the occasion of the establishment of the Hebrew University in 1925 he delivered a speech in Hebrew and a brochure containing his teachings in Yiddish was published to mark the occasion. He was also president of the Committee to Aid Pogrom Victims created in 1904.

One of his main achievements was the remodelling of the Old Synagogue in the town. We do not know the date of the construction of this building which was located at 32 Nadrzeczna street but it was probably erected in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was expanded in 1872 and renovated in 1928-9. On this occasion the Warsaw-based Percec Willenberg designed an ornate new interior covering both the ceiling and walls with paintings. In addition to the New and Old Synagogues, the town also contained many hasidic *shtiblekh*, including four connected with the Gerer rebbe with his seat in Góra Kalwarja near Warsaw.

The Jewish community also had a large range of charitable institutions. Of these the largest were the *Dobroczytność* (Charity) association and the *Towarzystwo Dobroczytnne dla Żydów* (Charitable Association for the Jews) which had come into existence at the turn of the century when the Tsarist government relaxed its regulations on the creation of such bodies. The *Towarzystwo Dobroczytnne dla Żydów* reported in *Izraelita* in 1902 that it had taken over the care of the sick, the old aged home, the support of the poor and several loan fund organisation from *hevrot* (brotherhoods) which no longer had the resources to carry out their activities.⁴ Rabbi Asz himself organised the establishment of a *hachnasat orchim* – a refuge for the destitute which contained a religious school and prayerhouse. There were also a home for the aged and a day nursery for poor pre-school age children along with summer and holiday camps. In 1913, a modern hospital with 50 beds was erected on Mirowska Street open to all residents of the town without regard to religion.

Educational institutions were also well-established. At first, the Jews were educated in numerous *hederim* (there were 32 in 1912) and *yeshivot*. From the late 1850s there was a Jewish private school with Polish as the language of instruction and in the 1890s a private Jewish girls' school was also established in the town.⁵ Before the outbreak of the Second World War, Jewish children attended both the state schools and the well-developed system of Jewish private schools both religious and Zionist. In addition there was a *hakhshara* farm where young people were prepared to live and work in Palestine.⁶

The establishment of an independent Polish state in which political and cultural life was much freer than before the war facilitated the evolution of the Jewish community. There was an active political life in the town with deep divisions between the Zionists, the Bundists, the assimilationists and the Orthodox. These conflicts were well reflected in the Jewish press mostly in Yiddish. As many as six Jewish daily papers, ten weekly magazines and one biweekly magazine were published in Częstochowa before 1939.

At the same time the impact of anti-Jewish agitation particularly in the period of the establishment of the frontiers of the new state between 1918 and 1921 and after 1935 was painfully felt. Thus on 28 May 1919, a pogrom took place in the town with the participation of soldiers of General Haller's Army. Seven Jews were killed and many wounded.

Antisemitic agitation increased after 1935. One of its manifestations was the law of 1936 limiting the sale of kosher meat to Jews. On this occasion Rabbi Asz took an active role in defence of ritual slaughter publishing a book entitled 'In Defence of Ritual Slaughter' which went through three editions and was sent to all members of the Sejm and Senate. Anti-Jewish violence also increased. In the summer of 1937 the synagogue

was set on fire, and 46 Jewish shops and 21 flats were demolished. The history of Częstochowa's Jews in the interwar period is described in three articles, Robert Szwed's account of their involvement in municipal government, Zbigniew Grządzielski's description of Jewish education and Marta Meducka's discussion of their contribution to the town's cultural life.

The Nazi occupation ushered in a new and tragic period for the Jews of Częstochowa. As early as 1 October 1939 a Judenrat was established and in April 1941 Jews were forced to live in a ghetto. On Christmas Day 1939 the Nazis and their Volksdeutsch collaborators burnt down the New Synagogue. Cantor Fiszal attempted to continue services in the basement of the ruins. According to some sources, he died in Treblinka in 1942. However, other accounts state that, when he was caught conducting services by the Nazis, he was made to run through the streets in front of a Nazi motorcycle. When he was exhausted and could run no further, he was stood against a wall and shot. In 1962 a concert hall was built on its site, which is often referred to locally as 'The Synagogue' and where many of the events of connected with the 2004 exhibition were held.

The first major deportation started on Yom Kippur (22 September) 1942 and led to 40,000 Jews – not only those from the town but from surrounding settlements and from the Third Reich who had been resettled there – being sent to their deaths in Treblinka. A 'small ghetto' with around 5,000 inhabitants was now established as a forced labour camp. Many of those confined there worked in plants established by HASAG (Hugo Schneider Aktiengesellschaft). The liquidation of the small ghetto began in January 1943. It was at this stage that the Old Synagogue was destroyed. The liquidation led to some resistance when two of those being selected attacked the German officers organising the selection. The Germans took brutal reprisals and subsequent attempts by the Jewish Fighting Organisation to organise resistance proved unsuccessful and a number of its leaders were shot. After the liquidation of the small ghetto, most of the 4,000 survivors were sent to forced labor camps attached to the HASAG factories and there number grew to 11,000 in 1944. On 14 December of that year, the HASAG camps were placed under the control of the SS which resulted in a further deterioration of the already inhuman living conditions. By now the Red Army was approaching and on 15 January 1945, the Germans ordered the evacuation of the HASAG prisoners to the Reich. Individual groups of prisoners now fled the camp so that they were able to deport only half of the Jews working in the HASAG camps. Several articles in this collection deal with the history of the Jews of Częstochowa during the Holocaust. They include Wiesław Paszkowski's general analysis of the present state of research on this topic, Felicja Karay's description of the expansion of the activities of Hasag in the area and Feliks Tych's account of the relevant material in the archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

When 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. A combination of bitter memories, anti-Jewish prejudice and a dislike of the increasingly repressive communist system which was fastening its hold on the country made the re-establishment of Jewish life in the town difficult. At the same time the moral stance of Bishop Kubina who strongly condemned the anti-Jewish violence in nearby Kielce in which at least forty Jews were murdered should be remembered. Bishop Kubina's

appeals on this topic are described by Father Jan Związek . The fifties and early sixties created a degree of stability for the small number of Jews who chose to remain but the 'anti-Zionist' campaign of 1968 led to their departure of most of them. Today the local branch of the Towarzystwo Socjalno-kulturalne Żydów (the Social-Cultural Organization of Jews) has only 37 members.

Jewish life may barely survive in Częstochowa but there is a strong desire on the part of many present and former inhabitants of the town to preserve the memory of contribution of the Jews to the town's history. At the beginning of the 1990s commemorative plaques in Polish, Hebrew and English were placed on the walls of the Częstochowa Philharmonic Hall, the former Jewish Hospital and in Bohaterów Getta street (former Ryneczek). In the words of Dr. Jerzy Mizgalski, historian and dean of the Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna in Częstochowa whose impressive and extensive account of the history of the Jews of Częstochowa forms a central part of this volume:

I am not a Jew ...My personal message resulting from this project is to change the

stereotypical ways in which Jews are still perceived by Poles... by Poles. I want to demonstrate to the youth the great role played by the Jews in the building of our hometown until the tragedy of Holocaust. My aim is to highlight those elements of our common history that can help build bridges between Poles and Jews.

Let us create something, that will make us think about the past and the future, and that will send a message that the future of Poland and that of other nations must be based on a common effort of mutual understanding and tolerance.

Responding, Rabbi Mark Kiel a son of Jews from Częstochowa did not ignore the difficult aspects of Jewish life in the town and in Poland generally. Speaking 'for myself, for my people, and for what we call the Second Generation, the children of survivors who recreated their lives after the war' he provides a deeply felt account of what Jewish Czenstochov means to him and those like him. As he asks poignantly, referring to the title of the conference *Czenstochover Jews, Coexistence and Memory*, 'What, in fact, do we mean by "coexistence?" Was it harmonious or antagonistic? Were we not practically two separate, nearly isolated, peoples?'

Yet as he pointed out speaking in Yiddish:

...I am a Czenstochover Jew, and so I shall remain, because I have been raised among the saved remnant of this city. Our parents and ancestors live in us. We know their stories, not from what remains here—which is dust and decimation—but from all their tales and from their excellent Yizkor books that cite the Czenstochover names, addresses, their occupations, their glory, their trials and tribulations.

Since I was a child I have looked into these volumes, written in Yiddish and Hebrew, and recently in English, as if they were holy books. Now, finally, Poland has begun to tell our history too. And for that we are thankful. But the work of Polish historians is just beginning and they will have to read the sources in our languages if they are to truly understand us, and who we were. It will now have to be a collaborative effort between Polish and Jewish scholars just as white and African-American historians are working together and writing a history that is authentic to both.

This is the task which the organisers of the exhibition and conference and the contributors to this volume have set themselves. It will not be an easy one to achieve. It is for the reader to judge how far we have succeeded.

¹ Mojżesz Schorr, *Żydzi w Przemysłu do końca XVIII wieku*, L'viv 1903

² *Izraelita*, 6/18 September 1896

³ *Ibid*, 21 April/3 May 1895.

⁴ *Ibid*, 25 January/7 February 1902.

⁵ *Ibid*, no. 21, 1898.