

Jews of Częstochowa
The Days of Remembrance Project
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History tells us about the ups and downs of civilizations, nations, political and social systems, of states big and small. The gigantic proportions of these struggles make the fate of one family, or a single person, go by almost unnoticed, like a dust in the wind. A look back at a recent history is all the more evocative with the amount of oral tradition passed from its witnesses to the next generation. Documents, scholarly studies, and press articles provide us with more or less dry descriptions of historical facts, whose interpretation shows some degree of objectivity. The oral tradition, on the other hand, is laden with strong emotions, such as come from individual or family stories, from the tales of a town or a village. Still, it contributes significantly to the picture of the past. Sometimes our contemporary perception is more impressed by such a picture than by lengthy learned works in bulky volumes. The past events and their interpretations as communicated from generation to generation have a major impact on the social attitudes towards other societies, peoples, civilizations, i.e., cultures and religions.

Many events of the twentieth century have gone by unrecorded. It could have hardly been otherwise. The deadly machine, set by the Nazi Germany to liquidate the Jewish nation, was working for years. Its operators, faced with imminent total defeat, strove to remove the evidence of their crimes in the form of official documents, reports, and the like products of German bureaucracy. It is impossible now to trace every act in the agony and death of the Jewish communities of towns and cities from the few extant German records dispersed in various archival collections. The memories of those, who were lucky, as they say, to survive the Holocaust, are the priceless source on the Jewish sufferings.

The wartime efforts to record the facts and even analyze them in a scholarly manner (as in the Ringelblum Archives) resulted in the testimonies of the struggle for survival and of desperate attempts to avert the vision of total oblivion, into which the victims would fall. These Jewish records, diaries, and reports were like a desperate cry addressed to next generations, urging them not to forget, not to let the evidence of the crime be obliterated, preserve the memory of the agony and death as a warning.

The more we know about Jewish everyday life in prewar Poland and about Jewish contribution to our society, culture, and science, the more acutely aware we become of the terrifying scale of the crime and of the loss to Poland and to the humankind. It seems as if a new world has been opening before our eyes, so thriving with religious traditions, customs, culture, and language, all of which was almost incomprehensible to the contemporaries of that civilization.

Any coexistence of nations should be preceded by getting acquainted with each other. Getting acquainted is the first step towards understanding, understanding – another step towards recognizing the other's distinctiveness and accepting it. These basic foundations of tolerance have been so often blocked by the fear of the other, unknown culture, tradition, or religion. This fear and the ignorance of the neighbor's ways have been repeatedly manipulated by politicians and propagators of various ideologies, as an effective tool to achieve their less than noble goals. People say "let bygones be bygones". The 19th and 20th centuries are, in fact, gone, yet the problem of intolerance is not. It is also for us to fulfill the last will of those perished in the Holocaust by learning about their culture, about other cultures, in order to advance mutual understanding and tolerance.

The seeds of hostility were planted centuries ago, but at the threshold of the 21st c., the accumulated prejudice, bigotry, things unsaid, and half-truths are still bringing the bitter fruit of resentment. When dominated by oral tradition and subjective interpretations, our view of the history is more easily distorted by negative stereotypes of the others and of related social or political phenomena. Ideological emotions, which were kindled decades ago, haunt us again, echoed in contemporary propaganda. Intolerance and lack of respect for the other people's right to live in dignity have always been the evil spirit inspiring the fire of hatred. Despite its disastrous effects in the past, the enemy-oriented thinking is recurring, making people revive old stereotypes and look for illusory solutions of their problems or for the ways to overcome their own weaknesses in the confrontation with those who differ in race, class, religion or otherwise.

Reflection upon the past was a starting point for the project of the Jews of Częstochowa Remembrance Days. Yet, far from being just another commemorative occasion, the aim of the project was to inspire a reflection on the future. The documented historical facts and studies were to provide a narrative background for a perception of coexistence, tolerance, and interpenetration of cultures as factors advancing the development and civilization progress. Thorough and systematic queries in the archives and libraries of Częstochowa, though not exclusively, were to solve the crucial question about the remnants of the Częstochowa Jewish community, whose members used to contribute to town's history for over two hundred years. The exhibition, cultural events, and meetings of Częstochowa-born Jews with nowadays inhabitants answered another question, concerning the present disposition of Częstochowa people to the local Jews, in particular to those, who perished in the Holocaust. Both the joint trips into the past and present day talks, were a significant lesson for Jewish guests from all over the world as well as for contemporary Częstochowa citizens. Brief manifestations of the dormant evil spirit could not disrupt the meetings. It was forced to retreat when faced with the rational view of the Polish-Jewish relations.

The Remembrance Days were the first cultural occasion focused on Częstochowa Jews and organized in town on such a scale after the tragedy of the Holocaust. And this occasion was also meant to inspire societies of the future, whose groundwork should include the recollections of the past events. The knowledge of the Polish and Jewish past should result for the two communities in learning about each other and reflecting upon their common history.

For the former Jewish inhabitants of Częstochowa, who visited the town between 21 and 23 April, 2004, the three Remembrance Days were much more than a series of cultural events and meetings. It was their return to the land of the earliest memories, marked by the tender motherly and fatherly care, by playing and arguing with siblings and cousins, by numerous family occasions, to the land of their adolescence in the center of Polish Catholic cult, but also of thriving Jewish tradition with all religious festivals and ceremonies. The streets of Częstochowa, buildings, Jewish cemetery, all these painfully bring to mind the lost world that was most brutally destroyed. One cannot but reflect upon the remains of the past, material evidence of the Polish-Jewish coexistence. All sites are subject to destructive forces of time and nature. What has survived and in what condition? The historical buildings were once tenement houses and courtyards buzzing with life and children's voices. And what about human memory? Do Częstochowa folks still remember those who left or were forced to leave? What do they think of Jews?

Today's inhabitants of Częstochowa were interested and looking forward to meeting former Jewish inhabitants and their descendants. For all people born after the war, a multicultural society, with its multiethnic, multilingual crowd in the streets, is just

an image pictured in the reminiscences of the elderly. Thus, the arrangements for the Days of Remembrance aroused curiosity and keen interest. Memories were enlivened, books on the pre-Holocaust period were read, even Jewish-related movies attracted more watchers.

The Jewish cemetery, once located at the outskirts and now struggling against the expansion of industry, against relentless laws of nature, and human vandalism, became a center of feverish activity. It started several months earlier, following the visit of Professor Elizabeth Asch Mundlak, a granddaughter of Rabbi Nachum Asz, and most importantly, of the principal sponsor of the project, a former inhabitant of Częstochowa and prisoner of the HASAG labor camp, Zygmunt Rolat. Today the cemetery symbolizes the Jewish presence in town prior to the tragedy of WWII. The municipal government, headed by the Mayor Tadeusz Wrona, have managed to surmount the “impossibility”. The bushes and trees growing wild on the lanes have been grubbed out, a driveway and parking lot have been built by the main entrance, the gate and some sections of the wall have been renovated. The Jewish cemetery regained its character of a sacred resting place, in accordance with Jewish tradition.