

Halina Wasilewicz<sup>1</sup>

## My Life in Częstochowa

**M**Y name is Halina Wasilewicz. I am a *Częstochowianka* and am the descendant of *Częstochowianin*, Jankiel Wasilewicz, and Brandzel Cwajghaftik who, in March 1944, was transported from the Łódź Ghetto to the Hasag-Pelcery labour camp. Both were among the around 5,200 Jews left in Częstochowa on the day of liberation.

The joy of liberation was incomplete. Those rescued had no livelihood, added to which they had the harrowing thoughts of the loss of those nearest to them. For a certain time, my parents lived at the so-called “Kołchoz” (collective farm) - a tenement, at 19 Garibaldi Street, which had been abandoned by the Germans. After that, they began life from scratch in a small cubbyhole at 2 Krótka Street. They acquired a sack for a mattress, a stool, a spoon. Then, at the market, my father said, “Look Bronia! These are candlesticks like we had at home. Maybe they’re mine. Buy them.”

Those rescued were terribly, psychologically scarred, being deprived of those closest to them. Their needs were great. They needed somewhere to live, food and medical attention. The Jewish Committee in Częstochowa dealt with this. Thanks to financial help from the Central Jewish Committee, help from Częstochowa Jews in the USA and in Argentina, as well as support from the city authorities, they organised a rest-home so that the physically exhausted could convalesce and the Children’s Home for Jewish orphans. There were attempts to return to normal life. For example, ten Jews, one of them being my father, established the Shoemaker and Uppermakers Cooperative. This was the forerunner of the future Piasecki Cooperative.

Religious activity was revived. A kosher canteen operated out of the former mikvah, there was a *shochet* (a kosher slaughterer) and a Jewish Faith Congregation was established.

The tragic events of Kielce in 1946 had a great influence on the situation of the Jewish community in Częstochowa. Self-defence began in order to ensure safety. My father (a former member of ŻOB – the Jewish Fighting Organisation), together with other armed men, stood guard on the Children’s Home. My father stated his position clearly. Since the period of Nazi occupation when people were being transported from one end of Europe to the other, he had survived in his Częstochowa – and this is where he intended to remain, because a *Częstochowianin* should return to Częstochowa or should, at least, make themselves known. (The subtext here was that perhaps one of those dearest to him might return, maybe one of his daughters).

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So, he lived in Częstochowa and, with those similar to himself, he tried to lead a normal life. In 1950, the Social-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland (TSKŻ) came into existence from the merger of the Central Committee of Polish Jews and the Jewish Cultural Society. One of its branches was in Częstochowa. Over a period of ten years, the number of Jewish residents in Częstochowa declined dramatically:

- December 1946 – 1,235
- December 1947 - 862
- December 1948 - 612
- August 1956 - 400.

Jewish poets, writers, journalists as well as actors from home and abroad were speakers at the TSKŻ clubrooms. The children had eurythmics and the so-called “living word”. Adults were able to take ORT trade courses. For the generation which had experienced the Holocaust, we, namely their children, were their most precious. As far as possible, parents wanted us to have the best conditions under which to develop. In the beginning, they didn’t speak to us of their experiences because it wasn’t easy for them to do so. They spoke amongst themselves, mainly in Yiddish which, for them was obvious. They also spoke that way in the TSKŻ clubrooms, as they talked about books published by the *Yiddish Book* or about articles published within the *Folkshtimme* or about the political situation. They lost themselves in their discussions and they would continue speaking in Yiddish as they left the clubrooms. We used to say to them “Speak properly!”. Today, I am immensely ashamed of that.

The clubroom’s wonderful location – a villa and two gardens – created the possibility for rich, day-long activities, every day of the week. The TSKŻ clubrooms were a second home for our parents and for us. It took the place of our lost families. None of us had any real uncles and aunts. None of us knew our grandfathers or grandmothers. There was always a noise around the clubrooms and the garden as we, the children, spent all our free time there.

One of the first youth clubs active within the TSKŻ was established in Częstochowa in the beginning of the 1960’s. Our youth club, which in 1962 was named in honour of Janusz Korczak, gave us the opportunity to pursue our interests and, at the same time, brought us closer to our roots, our traditions, and to Jewish art and literature. There was a drama group within the club conducted by actors, Bolesław Weroński and Ryszard Nadrowski. The photography group was led by Jan Kukliński. The graphic arts group was run by, among others, Jerzy Duda-Gracz, who was then a graphic arts high school student. There were also music and gardening groups. We learned languages – Yiddish, Hebrew and English. We began to understand what our parents were speaking about – about those

things from which our parents wanted to protect us. We grew up. We asked more and more questions. We drew closer to Jewish history, culture, religion – and to our dead relatives and friends.

At the same time, life went on. Unbreakable relationships and friendships were born, which have lasted until today. We all had similar experiences. We felt wonderful being together. We didn't need to explain our families' histories. We understood and words were not needed. But was it possible for others to understand us?

Normal voluntary and forced waves of emigration caused a further reduction in the Jewish environment. The severest was in 1968. The older generation regarded this as their home. They were settled and, for years, everything was fine. But, in March 1968, with the explosion of anti-Semitism, fear had been revived within all Jewish families. The events of March 1968 most greatly affected that generation which didn't know the rough and tumble of the pre-War years and who didn't remember Kielce. From the few hundred people, over a short time only a few dozen remained. There was a moving symbolic piece written in the youth section of our magazine, "Unfortunately, the club no longer exists, even though the TSKŻ remains. It's a shame, because now we truly have nothing to do. Will we ever have a club again? We don't know. There is only a little youth and no children. There are no children left aged between five and fourteen. It's hard to bear the separation from our best friend – the club."

For this reason, everyone was sad. The threat of being wound-up hung over the TSKŻ branch. Then, fresh from my studies, I reported to the Branch Social Secretary. I remember the statements of some of the members of our Branch, older people, "Even if we can't come to the clubrooms, let us know about all the meetings. Do everything you can so that the Branch is not wound-up". In the majority, we were *Częstochowianczycy*, descended from families who, for generations, had been connected with this city.

I agree with Rabbi Mark Kiel when he says that our parents and ancestors live within us. We know their history from their stories and from the wonderful *Yizkor* books. I still see the image of my father who, during the final years of his life, took himself to the Częstochowa Jewish Cemetery every day by leafing through the pages of the book "*Częstochower Yidden*" (Częstochowa Jews). Whereas, to this day, as I walk along Częstochowa's streets, I think, "Renia lived here, Basia lived here, Lusia here and Ignac lived here. I see my childhood friends only in the club photographs in the TSKŻ because, in 1968, my entire youth departed.

The history is there – that of Jewish Częstochowa as well as my own Jewish *TSKŻ Republic* at 36 Jasnogórska Street. Many Jews who left Częstochowa have not forgotten their city – in fact, memory alone is not enough for them. The *World Society of Częstochowa Jews and Their Descendants* was formed - two Reunions have already been held, this is the third.

Thanks to Mr Zygmunt Rolat and other friends, in 2007, we were able to progress in the next stage of our work in the newly, renovated clubrooms.

The task for our current, small group of Jewish residents of Częstochowa is “to remember and to constantly tell the story” in accordance with *Częstochowianka* Irit Amiel’s *Eleventh Commandment* which states, “Always tell our story to the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Always! Forever!”

