

THE KUTNO BURIAL SOCIETY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 19th CENTURY

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translated from the Yiddish by Mindle Crystel Gross

A picture of Jewish cultural life in a Polish town at the beginning of the 19th century

At the beginning of the 19th century, Kutno was part of the largest Jewish communities, and in the Warsaw department to which Kutno belonged, it is, with the exception of the capital city, Warsaw, the largest community. So, for example, in 1800, the Jewish population consists of 1,401 souls, whilst the Christian only 887.¹

In addition, her wealthy residents play quite a large role. We hear that reb Moshe Szmulewicz of Kutno is chosen in 1807 by the Warsaw town president to be the Jewish community syndic (a person who manages the business affairs of a large community) for Warsaw.²

And yet, the history of the Jews in Kutno, as in almost all Polish towns, has not yet been documented by our historians.

May this small picture of our life in one town serve as encouragement for our young historians to write about the history of their cities and towns, in order to have a general picture of the life of our past in all of its shades and nuances.

The *pinkas* (book of records) from which we glean all of our knowledge actually begins in 1808. In the introduction, the anonymous author says that the old *pinkasim* have disappeared "because of their age (from most periods) and various fires which our community suffered." But also in a second place (in this copy, it is mentioned twice

¹ Hotsche: Geographie und Statistik von West- Süd- und Neuostpreussen, Berlin 1800, part II.

² Warsaw, 1904, p. 180, Konis Komisja rządząca w r. 1807.

more) in a bit of secret language, that the old *pinkas* was taken away from us "for secrecy reasons". Maybe it means the earlier Prussian regime to which Kutno belonged from 1793 until 1805 and which attempted to destroy all community life; but it is more than certain that what the author means here is internal disagreements which were a constant in our communities.

The second description is even more certain because there survived a couple of pages, fragments, of earlier years up to 1755.

However, no matter what the case may be, we can say with certainty that:

- 1) "new" *pinkas* begins in 1808, and
- 2) there were earlier *pinkasim* which regrettably, have vanished.

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It is understandable that the *pinkas*, which concerns the life of the *Chevra Kadisha* (Burial Society) from 1808 (possibly 1755) to the present day, can provide much material not only for one part of community life during the entire period. However, we want to concentrate now only on one part, with the characteristics of the *Chevra Kadisha* at the beginning of the 19th century, i.e., we take into consideration only the charter, the regulations which were entered in 1808 and also several fragments which make our picture clearer.

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The *Chevra Kadisha* set for itself the task of visiting the sick, taking care of the dead, and also, at holiday-time, distributing honors and pensions.

In order to attain the first goal of supervising the care of the sick – the caretaker is required to spend the first night at the side of the sick, and then the others at the discretion of the trustee of the month (more about him later) who sends around raffle tickets. Each person who comes to visit someone who is sick must see that the patient has food, drink and all medicines, so that he not be in need of anything.

Later, the *Chevra Kadisha* had its own hospital (*hekdisch*, poor house)

The second responsibility consisted of being present at the time of death in order to give the deceased his right – cleaning him and ushering him in, eventually, to his burial.

The *Chevra Kadisha* has in its purview all that is connected with this, the place of burial and also all necessary instruments.

Beside this, the *Chevra Kadisha* pays monthly subsidies to indigent people, widows and cantors, teachers, caretakers and others holding ecclesiastic office.

(According to a report from 1811, the monthly payments amount to 88 Polish gildn.)

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This raises the question: from where did the *Chevra Kadisha* receive its monies?

The *pinkas* supplies the answer in several instances:

- 1) from an entrance fee from every new member;
- 2) from "*biks*" (collection boxes) at every funeral and every Friday;
- 3) from monthly payments for the poor which members were required to contribute;
- 4) from the revenue of the *mikveh* (ritual bath), and
- 5) the most important revenue: from the money for the burial ground.

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The responsibility for all of this lay in the hands of an administration, which was officially comprised of the wardens of the synagogue and many representatives who were elected to a one-year less eight-day term, but actually, the *kosherim* also had influence.

The elections took place in the following manner:

The first day ("*Isru Chag*") after Passover (absolutely no later) the general gathering at which the previous wardens present a report of the state of their funds and the accounting is confirmed by the representatives. Afterwards, the votes take place. The names of those fully entitled members are tossed into a hat, and five slips are withdrawn. Those who are worthy of their fate are called *kosherim*.³ All the members have the right to participate in the ballot except those wardens from the previous year, poor men and recipients of a pension, as well as junior members (more about them later.)

The elected take over the funds, fulfil the functions of the wardens until the first of Iyar, i.e., within eight days (absolutely no later), they elect to the administration three wardens and representatives to whom they turn over the funds, the *pinkas*, and so forth, and the newly-elected wardens begin to discharge their duties.

It is understandable that the *kosherim* can elect as wardens whomever they want (it only seems so), but it is forbidden to have pity and to take the crown for themselves under the threat of losing the right to participate in the ballot forever. But after electing the next wardens, the competence of the *kosherim* does not end, they have the same right as the wardens to accept new members and enter decisions into the *pinkas*, and so forth.

The right which belongs exclusively to the wardens is that of managing the funds and sending raffles to the members. This is taken care of every month by a different warden who is called warden of the month – e.g. the elder of the month in every community administration.

But also with regard to the money there was little trust of the wardens, so that for instance, when one buys a grave, there must be present at least his representative (excluding a grave for a child up to the age of four.)

However, when an important Jew dies, there must also be present at his burial ceremony other members, and

³ I put this picture together from one copy of the *pinkas* which belongs to the *Chevra Kadisha*. Regrettably, it is not a copy in the full sense of the word because it was put together according to the understanding of today's Kutner rabbi, Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk, and there are in it fragments which were changed, repeated and even some which do not even exist in the original.

Nevertheless, the Kutner rabbi is owed a *thank-you* because due to his effort, the public has had the opportunity to acquaint itself with this *pinkas*, which up-to-now was kept from anyone's view by the *Chevra Kadisha*. This copy is in the archives of the Kutner community.

when the warden sometimes commits a swindle, he must pay the damages out of his own pocket.

This is also applicable to the expenses, e.g., when putting together a list of the poor who receive the monthly disbursement there must be present more important members.

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But not all members have the same rights. During the first three years, each new member is called a "*młodszy*" (junior member) and has no rights whatsoever to participate in any decision-making, the ballot box and so forth. Just the opposite, he is required to obey the older members, watch over the sick and dead, and be prepared to respond to every summons from the wardens.

After the first three years, he no longer has to keep watch, just as a fully-entitled member. He can now participate in decision-making as well as in the community, but he cannot be elected as a warden or any other position.

He becomes a full member only after six years.

With regard to important Jews, i.e., scholarly members, wealthy members, and so forth, an exception is made: they are also junior members for a period of six years, in other words they have neither active nor passive election rights, but they do not have to perform the duty of watching any more than a member in full-standing.

The members bear the responsibility to enroll their young sons for whom they pay entrance fee of only ten Polish gildn (a stranger pays more), but their junior membership begins only after their marriage.

The members, however, have other rights. As we have already seen, with every important matter, such as disbursing or collecting monies, the agreement of the members is necessary. Also, decision-making cannot be accepted without their agreement. However, they do not have the right to enter something into the *pinkas* – let alone to oppose or protest against that which was already written into the *pinkas*. That is why, when a member dies, besides the honors which all members ushered him, he pays for his grave no more than ten Polish gildn, no matter how rich he was.

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An important part of the *Chevra Kadisha* was the *shamash*. He must spend the first night at the bedside of every sick person. He informs the warden about every sick

person and deceased person. He announces in the Jewish streets to usher out a deceased, digs the graves, guards the inventory, and so forth.

That is why he receives:

- 1) the entire revenue from the *mikveh*;
- 2) what he gathers in the donation box every Friday, and
- 3) 30 Polish gildn each year.

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From the above, we see:

1) that the *Chevra Kadisha* was involved in all philanthropic functions which usually belong to the community.⁴

2) not permitting unimportant people to join, i.e., no merchants, and accepting only sons of members, removing voting rights from members who are poor – all of this indicates to us, that the *Chevra Kadisha* consisted throughout of aristocratic-plutocratic character;

3) The plutocracy was fearful even of its own elected wardens, let alone of the *koshers* who, after all, were drawn by lot. Therefore, we see that every important function was strictly limited (must have the control of many members), and to this very day, the term of office is strongly guarded, and so forth, and

4) The same people who were at the head of the *Chevra Kadisha* were those elders of the community. I do not have specific proof of this, but a light is cast upon this because of a protocol from 1791. Therein it is stated that the wardens of the *Chevra Kadisha* three years prior, had partially freed a neighboring village Jew from head-tax for three years because he gave up the 300 gildn loan that he had granted for the purchase of a parcel of ground for a cemetery.

This shows us, that the wardens at the least joined with their *Chevra Kadisha* activities in the functions which should belong exclusively to the community administration.

Also, the fact that the *mikveh* belonged to the *Chevra Kadisha*, that they paid money to have it repaired, that they paid a monetary subsidy not only to the poor and widows, but also caretakers, teachers, cantors and other religious, this also leads to the thought that the *Chevra Kadisha* and the community were most certainly at that time, very closely-joined institutions.

("Young Historian")

⁴ Other larger communities such as Posen and Cracow have elected commissions for philanthropic functions. See: Bałaban, Fajlkenfeld and Schorr.

The elections for the community administration usually took place during the warm days of Passover. There as well, were elected *koshers* and they elected other positions. See:

M. Bałaban: *Dzieje Żydów w Krakowie I na Kazimierzu*; W. Feilchenfeld: *Die innere Verfassung der jüdischen Gemeinde zu Posen in 17 u. 18 Jahrhundert*. Zeitschrift für Provinz Posen, 1896; M. Schorr: *Organizacja Żydów w Polsce*. Kwartalnik historyczny, 1899.