



Królewska Street in Kutno

KUTNO

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translated from the Hebrew by Thia Persoff z"l

Is the Yiddish saying "All Greeks look alike" true? As it turns out, not always does the popular saying hit the nail on the head. Let us test the concept of "Town" as we knew it in Eastern Europe, and particularly in Poland. Over there, the idea that in fact "All the Greeks look alike" was widespread. That is to say, that in spite of differences in local variations, the town exhibits a uniform character, although there are some towns that the common characteristic of a homogeneous nature does not fit them. On the contrary, they are the opposite of it by their uniqueness and quaintness. One of them, without a doubt, is Kutno. If we try to examine its dissimilarity, it is sufficient to compare two great Jewish writers who immortalized the town – Shalom Asz and Y. M. Wajsenberg¹. In fact, already in the first and mature creation of Shalom Asz, the man from our town: "A Shtetl", we sense his unusual talent and artistic perception.

Y. M. Wajsenberg, though, in spite of his complicated style and his pessimism, is more realistic in the objective and factual side of the town. Not reb Shlomo Nagid of the splendid appearance, nor Ozer'l the licentious and his fellows, and surely not Motke the thief and his like, reflect the life of the town. But the jealousies, depression and

desperation of the characters, as Wajsenberg describes them, typify the human landscape of the Jewish town at the beginning of this century.

Literature is not an abstract philosophy, which is why the heroes of Shalom Asz are seen the way they were, lived and worked in his Kutno. Therefore, the question must be asked: what is her uniqueness? How is Kutno so different when compared to other towns?

In one of Poland's regions named Kujawia – that God blessed with fertile land, with fields that yield without end, and with abundance of fruits and vegetables – in the center of its heart stands Kutno, a city or is it a town? Two souls wrestle within her always. On one hand, the roots and traditions pull her towards a town's way of life, while on the other hand, she is being pulled towards the life style of the large world. It is possible that this struggle is her identifying mark. There is not one sphere in the town's colorful life that this struggle did not leave its mark on her.

Many cities were built and flourished on river banks. Kutno, too, had a river of her own, or to be accurate, it is not a river but a stream called Ochnia. Its size is like the tail of a lizard. Somewhere or other the Ochnia joins the river Bzura, which is only a small tributary of the river Vistula.

¹ TN: Yitzhak Meir Wajsenberg, (born 1881 Żelechów – died 13 August 1938, Warsaw). Yiddish writer and playwright.

The fact is that there is a solid and sufficiently strong bridge over the Ochnia that physically divides the town in two, and spiritually symbolizes its split soul. On the one side of the bridge which faces east, roads and highways wind their ways towards cities and villages – to the Kutno district. In this part of the town, the deep-rootedness and traditions, even the streets so typical of a Jewish town, were very strong. And even, on the other side of the bridge, the western, which leads to Kutno's railway junction, new winds already started to blow; here you breathe city atmosphere. It seems that the frequent hooting of the trains, which stop and pass at the station, are just whistles of contempt to provincialism and backwardness. They call and gesture towards the large and open world (by the way, the split is accidental and natural, and has nothing to do with the concepts of "East" and "West" which, nowadays, are routine).

Even though the western side of the town is soaked with big-city atmosphere, it would be incorrect to say that its eastern part is provincial. Most of her buildings and the majority of her Jewish citizens are concentrated here, in Kutno's suburbs. Here the songs and echoes of the new time emerge.

However, let us not "put the cart before the horse".

If other towns have one market – Kutno has two: The "old market" and the "new market".

The new is as its name indicates, though to be truthful, it is not completely modern, but its construction is handsome and up to date, and there are many stores, restaurants and coffee houses. Its appearance has been improved, and it exudes an atmosphere of abundance and bourgeoisie. Young people frequent the coffee houses, and there are signs of political clubhouses.

On the right of the market, long, good-looking streets extend out, leading west towards Europe. That is where a large section of the Christian townspeople lives, that is to say the more cultured folk.

On the left of the new market stretches the long, main street which the Jews called "Broad Street". The Christians called it "Królewska" [Royal]. If a Polish king were to be resurrected, he would certainly not be drenched in pleasure



The author and other Kutners, in Polish Army uniform (1920).

from this street... because Jews owned most of it – its stores and ware houses. However, it does have one non-Jew – the pharmacist. The commerce for the town and Kutno's surrounding areas was concentrated in this street.

In the front were stores and businesses owned by Jews; also in the yards and the upper stories of the buildings – a sort of Kutno Nalewki street² – Kutno Jewish street. At the end of the street is the "Old Market", though it is not at all an old one, as Kutno itself is younger than her neighboring towns.

However, compared to the new walls and houses of the new market, the old one looks pitiful, backward, and worn out. Therefore, it can be assumed that the old market is eyeing the new one with jealousy, even though it has more distinction and still is lovely and charming.

Most of the religious and cultural institutes, belonging to both sides of the population, were concentrated around the old market. Standing out are the building of the Christian community and the monastery, the municipal theater, the high school, and the post office. Somewhat removed from them, closer to the new market, in contrast, stood the grand synagogue and the *Beit Midrash*³. The Kutno synagogue was considered one of the most beautiful in Poland and its holy ark was one of the architectural and historical wonders.

A description of a town from outside cannot, in any way, convey its spirit, its inner world which contains so much uniqueness and features compared to its surroundings, even if not always in a positive way. Not even once have I thought about our Kutno absorbing so many faults and shady aspects of a large city, and losing the charming and pleasant ways of life in the small town. These contrasts fashioned an image of a city, no doubt helped by her railway junction. To be sure, there were many places in Poland that were similar to Kutno – Skierniewice, Koluszki, Lapy, Rejowiec, and others – but they were passed over and were not paid attention to. Kutno, on the other hand, because of the railway junction, turned into a strategic economic and business center, which radiated influence on the town and her surroundings, near and far.

During the First World War, the German general [Eberhard von] Mackensen established his headquarters there. During the first days of the Second World War, one of the largest battles between the German and the Polish armies took place near Kutno. Here the Polish general [Władysław] Bortnowski tried to block the German invasion, and prevent the invader from storming towards Warsaw. Even though Kutno does not have natural defensive lines, like mountains or rivers, both sides of fighters knew that the one that conquers Kutno has an open road to Warsaw and Łódź.

Because of her significance and strategic importance, it was inevitable that the town would develop into a large center of commerce. From here, wholesalers went to the big cities to bring back assorted merchandise for trade in Kutno and neighboring places. Here were large flour mills which milled tens of thousands of tons of grain to supply flour and

² TN: well-known Jewish street in Warsaw.

³ TN: religious seminary.

bread to many regions in Poland. In addition, fodder for animals was sent from here to Poland and East Germany.

For that reason, the importance of the Kutno railway network was greater than similar railway junctions in other places. The train station in Kutno turned into an international station: to Berlin, Brussels, and Paris. Not only the atmosphere of Warsaw, but of Europe, had arrived in Kutno. Thanks to that, Jewish families in Kutno had occasionally "acquired" brides or grooms for their children. Here they did not live in an atmosphere of despair of "From where will my help come"⁴, because the world was opened for the townspeople. So, is it possible to compare Kutno to Serock or Kock?!

After this description it is easy to understand why Ozer'l, the hero of Shalom Asz, behaves with such generosity, while Yankel Szapszowicz whom the heroes of Wajsenberg would surely have stoned, is going about his business in peace. All that separates Kutno – in a negative way – from her innocence and tradition of a small town, while, at the same time, there is much of the positive in her. And the positive is clear and impressive. First of all, she is distinctive in her atmosphere of tolerance. Important and distinguished rabbis lived their lives here in peace and tranquility, because there is no room in Kutno for pettiness and quarrels about over the rabbinate's authority that marked the Jewish towns. Kutno had all kind of chassidim, and each little prayer-house behaved according to its customs. Even the Gur chassidim (or as they were also called, the Orthodox) who were the most active and aggressive among the Jewish orthodox, here in Kutno they were more restrained and controlled, as if they were shy before the wide world. This is not just talk, but also a real idea, a truly wide world.

Distinguished Jews and even *mitnagdim*⁵ were giving donations to establish and support *chadarim*⁶ and *yeshivot*⁷, and chassidim did not go into mourning because of the establishment of a Hebrew high school. The Jewish community gave subsidies to the schools and the learning institutes of the various movements. The "*Bund*" organization in Kutno was strong, but restrictive and restrained; their attitude towards the Zionists was of pity, not hostility... They considered that the Zionist were deluding themselves all their lives with empty Zionist dreams.

The atmosphere of tolerance, and the contacts with the outer world, prepared a fertile base for extensive communal activities; our quality Jewish theater will succeed and a talented speaker will bring in listeners, not only his sworn fans, who hear him without disturbance and without hooliganism. And it was the same when it came to lectures and "literary evenings" on various subjects. The Jewish newspapers attained a large circulation here, and known political leaders return pleased from their visits to Kutno.

Before the elections to the town council, it was tried to publish periodical newspapers. A few libraries made efforts to satisfy the thirst for a book, particularly for fine literature, and by that acknowledged the importance of knowledge among the people. "Increase jealousy – increase wisdom" – in this field the competition among the political parties was a good influence. Various literary circles were established, and even a circle of writers, poets, and local historians: Y. M. Szatan, Mirel Erdberg, Beinish Zylbersztajn, Yosef Turko, Y. Trunk, and Comber. We were amazed, how, in a town where the majority is Christian, so much Jewish vitality in all areas of life can be seen.

As mentioned, the crowning glory of the activities was the Jewish communal life. The sense of communal activity was highly developed. An emissary to Kutno did not give the impression of a good for nothing or, heaven forbid, a mentally unbalanced person. Just the opposite – he was dignified and won sympathy and appreciation from everyone. A businessman, too, would not find it difficult to find the key to the heart of the people, but he must be constantly aware of what is going on, and always be active. His means of livelihood were definitely extensive and great.

There is not a political movement that was not represented in Kutno, our town. Even "the United", a splinter of the former *Socialist Zionists* and the *Seimists* party, who only the select few were familiar with the names of their leaders like Ben-Adir, Zylberfarb and Latzki-Bertoldi, will find their "victims" in Kutno. There is much awareness and excitement here, just like in a large city.

I feel depressed about having to write about all my friends, my companions and foes – I grew up with them, dreamed and struggled. All of them are now standing in front of my eyes, with dignity and pride asking: "Have we not fulfilled our task?" We will not make a reckoning now with those pure and holy people. You, our brothers from *Agudat-Israel*, the Gur and Alexander chassidim, with your beards and forelocks – you did fulfil your tasks; you implanted the fear of God and the love for the Torah in the hearts of the people. And you, dear friends from the Zionist parties – from the *Mizrachi* to the *Poalei Zion Left Wing* – unite with joy, you certainly fulfilled your tasks. Thanks to you, the Jewish state was established. Even you, the "*Bund*" supporters and the Communists – hold your heads up high, you did the best you could, according to your convictions and views – to take the Jewish worker out of the dark cellars and show him the way to freedom...

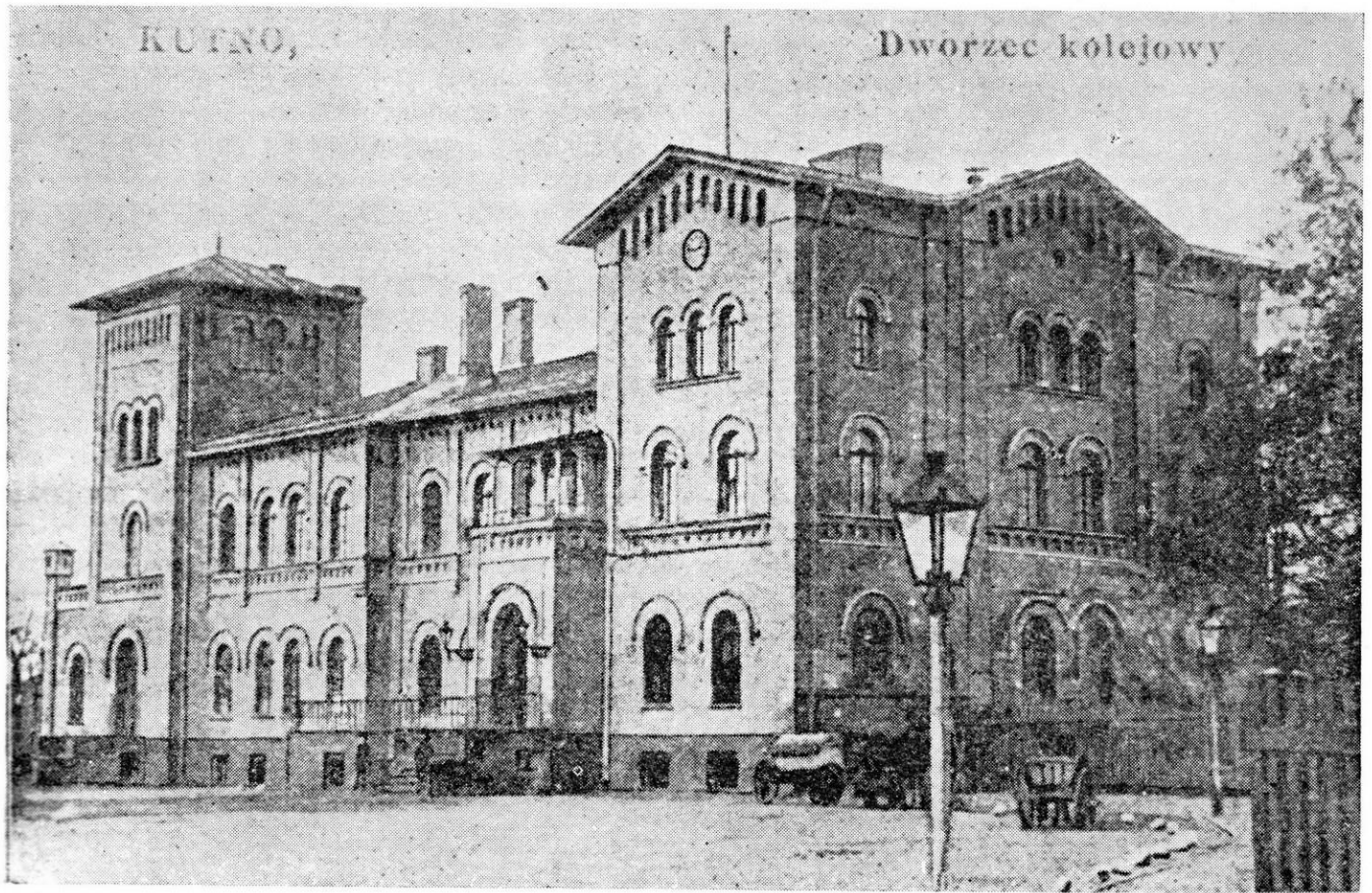
Great is the pain and great is the sorrow that the surviving remnants of the great and glorious Jewish Kutno have to say the mourner's prayer for you – and remember you for eternity!

⁴ TN: Psalms, chapter # 121, 2nd line.

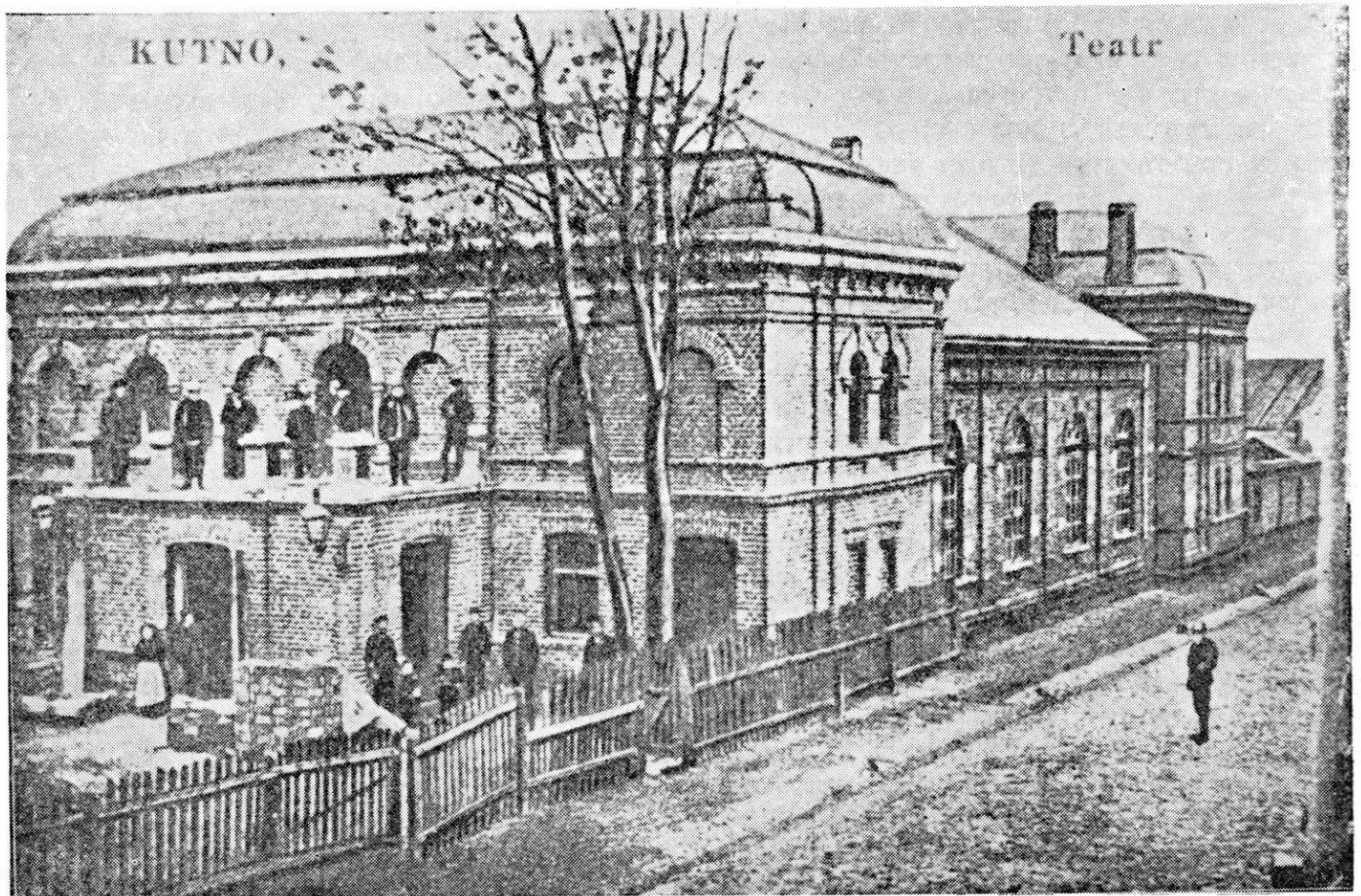
⁵ TN: opponents of the chassidic movement.

⁶ TN: Hebrew, plural of "*cheder*": religious school for infants.

⁷ TN: religious schools for teenagers and adults.



The train station



Theater in Kutno

Members of "*HeChalutz*" in
Kutno, in 1919.

