

## CULTURE AND PHILANTHROPY

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Jewish cultural life in Kutno about 50 years ago stood on a very high level. There were two active libraries: *Y. L. Perec* and *Ahad Ha'am*. The *Perec* library was founded in the very early years. The *Ahad Ha'am* library was founded later, through the Zionist organization.

The two libraries were very often visited by the Warsaw Jewish literary society, and they invited writers and poets to Kutno who conducted lectures on various literary topics. Large numbers of people attended the lectures. They told me about the visits of Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky, Hillel Zeitlin, Y. L. Perec, Shalom Aleichem and Vladimir Medem.

I remember a visit during my time by Leon Finkelsztajn, who enjoyed great success. He lectured about philosophy.

Almost all of the Jewish writers and poets visited Kutno. In the Literary Society on Tłomackie Street<sup>1</sup>, there was talk about the great success the writers had in Kutno.

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Since Shalom Asz was a member of the Central Committee of the *Joint*, Kutno received money to establish a Benevolent Society Bank to distribute loans without interest. This work virtually saved people from economic



Shalom Aleichem in Kutno, 1914

<sup>1</sup> TN: street in Warsaw, where there also was the Great Synagogue.

downfall. The rabbi of Kutno, Rabbi [Yitzhak] Yehuda Trunk, of blessed memory, was also a member of the committee of this bank. The middle class strongly advocated for his continuance, especially during the times of Grabski's<sup>2</sup> tax-politics. A special commission proclaimed a voluntary contribution from the Jewish population for the benefit of those who were affected. Members of the committee were the most prominent citizens. Among them was the rabbi who was very active.

There was also an active society that ensured that there was some food in the poor homes. For this purpose, the Jewish population would pay money weekly. I had an opportunity to visit these community activists who did their work quietly, without fanfare. They were called "Faithfully taking care of the needs of the public".



A house in the old marketplace in Kutno

There was a woman who specifically dedicated herself to *Hachnasat Kalah*<sup>3</sup>. This sounds strange and naive today. However, during the era we are portraying, young couples did not have the basic needs necessary for building a family.

In addition, there was also a society which ensured that the poor and sick would not be left alone and lonely. According to a list of volunteers, people visited and spent

time with the sick. The sick person had help for an entire 24 hours. When the sick person was in a very serious state, the responsibility was everyone's. I remember that they used to send telegrams to the rabbi. I know of a case when a telegram was sent to the Gerer rabbi for him to pay for the sick person. If money was needed to summon a prominent doctor, two women would quickly collect the necessary expenses.

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My parents lived in the old marketplace (*Stary Rynek*). After the murder of Pieracki<sup>4</sup>, our street was named after him. This was a very broad square. There was a pump (well). Here, twice a week, the town market was held.

There was a very large house in the town marketplace, virtually aristocratic, which beautified the plain market. The owner of the house was a Jew, Yehoshua Rasz. When moving pictures began, a Yiddish film was shown in Rasz's house. I think it was *The Sale of Yosef*.

Ordinary Jews lived in the marketplace. It was a vibrant, full-blooded Jewish life. On market days, there were to be seen Jewish tailors, hat-makers, shoemakers, and small merchants. They negotiated, bargained and worked hard for the little bit of money.

During my time, there was still a town drummer who called together the populace when the government or magistrate had something to report to the citizenry.

The synagogue was not only a place in which to pray. If anything of importance occurred in Jewish life, it was played out in the synagogue.

I remember the fiery scandals of the Jewish butchers. Everybody gathered in the synagogue. There was talk that preparations were being made for an oath which the butchers would take about selling non-kosher meat. At the very last minute however, it all fell apart.

When the Jewish Artisans' Union created a new flag, this celebration also took place in the synagogue. The rabbi participated in this celebration.

The celebrations of the Polish national holidays – the Third of May and Independence Day – also took place in the synagogue. I would go to the synagogue with my father, of blessed memory, twice a year – on *Shabbat Tshuva* and *Shabbat HaGadol*, where the rabbi would deliver a sermon.

<sup>2</sup> TN: Władysław D. Grabski (7 July 1874 – 1 March 1938), Polish National Democratic ("Endek") politician, economist and historian. He created the Bank of Poland and the Polish złoty.

<sup>3</sup> TN: Providing for the Brides society, allowing poor brides and grooms to start a family.

<sup>4</sup> TN: Bronisław Wilhelm Pieracki (28 May 1895, Gorlice – 15 June 1934, Warsaw), Polish military officer and politician. He was assassinated by a member of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists.