

GREETINGS FROM SHALOM ASZ'S SHTETL

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translated from the Yiddish by Mindle Crystel Gross

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We were in town – and in Shalom Asz's town – in Kutno.

That is where the writer was born. The wooden, one-story little house stands to this day adjacent to Y. L. Perc Street. The suggestion to name a street in Kutno after Shalom Asz was rejected¹ but not because of bad intentions. Kutno is actually an exceptional town. The Jewish-Polish relations were, for the most part, tolerable. The mayor's principles do not permit the naming of a street after a living person.

But regardless whether or not there is a Shalom Asz Street in Kutno, traces of Shalom Asz are evident; while he was still alive, he became a legend there. Memories are retold. People upon whom Asz based his characters are pointed out. Many have already passed away, others – many left for *Eretz Israel*. Entire families, long-time residents, left our homeland and exactly as before, another family took their place.

*Motke Ganav*² – they tell me with a smile – also became a victim of urbanization, or as it is said in the provinces *churbanizatsie*³, the collapse of the home. *Motke* himself is in trouble.

Ah! – It is no longer the town of the past, the idyllic, the celebrated in song. It is no more than a tree whose branches cling to the stem like children. Now there are class and race battles. Storms of the times find their way in.

And visiting the town – is like visiting many other towns, like a cross-section of Jewish life. We know so little about the province, mostly from the humorous side, while life there is frighteningly serious, bound up with self-sacrifice.

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Outwardly clean: developed, built with squares, with much greenery, but separated from the non-Jews. Even before we heard the word ghetto, years ago Poles had already built up a separate section in the prettiest and best

neighborhoods of town. On the slightly hilly side, officials, thanks to the help of state loans, built beautiful cooperative houses for themselves, airy and sunny.

And the Jewish section of town – congested, old-fashioned, ghetto-like.

However, Jews did not have the feeling, meanwhile, that they were living in an old town, with much past history. So the old town was rebuilt. They repainted what had been painted previously, and the ordinary painter discharged his duties quite well.

I am told that a *Keren Kayemet* [Jewish National Fund] box was cemented into a wall of the synagogue. Enraged Orthodox, on a Shabbat, tore out the *Keren Kayemet* box, smeared tar over the words and took the money – but immediately returned it. It was an ideological attack, but now, even the Orthodox are ashamed of their bravura. Not one of them was capable of requesting a donation certificate. The community hands out subsidies for *Eretz Israel* purposes, and also for local cultural purposes.

Kutno was the first town in Poland to give a subsidy for the Jewish Scientific Institute [YIVO] in *Vilna*.

But yet – Shalom Asz's town – and attempts are made to improve.

Kutno is fortunate in regard to its community leaders. Work even for its own sake costs and even opponents have respect for the Zionists.

In town, one can sense how one energetic person can accomplish much, change, enliven. More than one town collapses because of the lack of committed public workers.

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I have been told: Kutno has a gymnasium [high-school] for Jewish children, a community institution. The gymnasium is a Hebrew one, but most of the courses are taught in Polish.

There was once a discussion about a subsidy being given by the town council for this gymnasium. The Bundist council members were absolutely against this because of the Hebrew and Zionism. Straightaway, a non-Jewish woman, a leftist, allowed herself to be convinced and changed her mind in favor of a subsidy.

¹ TN: there is, today, a Shalom Asz Street in Kutno. A Shalom Asz Festival is also organized every other year.

² TN: character from Shalom Asz's book "Motke the Thief."

³ TN: from Hebrew "churban", destruction, and Yiddish "urbanizatsie", urbanization.

There was once an incident: Bundist community leaders refused to officially greet Shalom Asz on the occasion of his anniversary jubilee because he had joined the Jewish Agency, and the Kutno rabbi explained the moral of this to them. I don't know if the rabbi's reproof had any influence on the Bundists or not. The fact remains that the community did greet him and Shalom Asz was elected as an honorary member of the community – and his picture hangs in the meeting hall.

One cannot argue too long and too harshly in Kutno. Even language there is mollycoddled and spoilt, and they say in a refined way: "a spoonsy, one bowlsy". I once met a Bundist in Kutno on Shabbat eve, and we had a heated and heavy discussion about religion and class struggles. Suddenly, this Kutno Bundist leaves me in the middle of the discussion, saying to me: "I have to run home this minute to say Kiddush⁴ for my mother..."

Even the Bundist there is less stubborn in his opinions. It isn't for no reason that in that town the idyll was written and the cult of the mother in Jewish literature was created, so that even the language is babied.

The saying: *All of Kutno under one prayer shawl* belongs to folklore and came about because of a landowner who seriously needed money, and therefore instituted a heavy tax on prayer shawls. So the community's solution was to pray under one prayer shawl.

Ah!, long-ago times, long-ago tax officials! Today it is different – pray, don't pray – wonderful!...

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The cemetery in Kutno. Ancient, walled-in. Graves of long-ago saintly men who were associated with legends. One of these graves belongs to the saintly R' Berish and the headstone was a plain one. Forty years he slept under this hard rock until someone ordered that they make it into a headstone for him. Observant Jewish women come to this grave, leaving notes asking for help.

At the Ohel of R' Yehoshele Kutner

There is a treasure in the Kutno cemetery of the old Jewish art of ornamentation. The young artist, the autodidact [Chaim] Tyber⁵, who had already had an exhibition in Warsaw, and upon whom is pinned great hope, accompanied us to the cemetery, pointing out the examples of old Jewish folk-art. There once was a family of headstone-carvers, the Sats family from Spain. They were religious *Zohar* [Radiance] Jews, and they carved their faith into the headstones and because of a desire for excellence and artistic desire, carved both sides of the headstone Leiblech, Hershelech, letters of love. A researcher of Jewish art and Jewish style should not ignore the Kutno cemetery, a treasure of primitive beauty. It is worthwhile discovering who the creators of the work were.

In the Kutno community

7,000 souls, 100,000 zlotys per year municipal taxes – and we remember with pride that the Kutno community gives to *Eretz Israel* and cultural purposes.

There are concerns: we need to build our own building for the gymnasium, and we need to have an artisans' school. In all towns, entrepreneurs strive for productivity. We know that we cannot do what we used to do, we cannot depend on miracles or the rich. From the windows of the community hall we can see the marketplace, Jews working hard, trying to earn a living. Peasant and Jew live together peacefully – but new reports make their way in. There is talk about moving the market, and we also see that selling is not the best way to earn money. They want an artisans' school and a school for agricultural workers. As it happens, there is a possibility: a wealthy Jew, who has an estate owned by the family for many generations, received a suggestion to divide it into separate plots. If they would create a school for land development there, much could be accomplished. The world would be wide open for agricultural-workers. Money is needed, a small amount. This is, after all, the best way to achieve productivity.

On the walls of the Kutno community building hang portraits the honored: Shalom Asz, Herzl, Bialik, Weizman and Dr. Bernard Kohn. I don't know if they asked the honorable Dr. Kohn for his permission to have his portrait hang between Herzl and Bialik because Dr. Bernard Kohn certainly has feeling for distance, most especially when a portrait of a [Louis] Marshall or a [Louis David] Brandeis does not hang there. The naïve Kutno Jews! They don't know that together with Paul Nathan, before the war, he led the fight against instituting Hebrew in the Haifa Technion – and Eastern Jews fought hard and bitter for their little *Eretz Israel* and little bit of Hebrew – and they were victorious.

Much water flowed and fires broke out and once again, they burn – and Eastern Jewry continues to battle for its own unique cultural life, for the right of the Kutno Jews to produce for itself, and the world, a Shalom Asz. Dr. Bernard Kohn has much to say and has influence in these matters. And his innermost attitude changed greatly since that battle, along with Paul Nathan, in 1913 for the cultural needs of the Eastern Jews. Dr. Bernard Kohn is a very honorable, devoted and conscientious worker but hanging his portrait in a community building near Weizman and the honorable Kutner, Shalom Asz, pure Polish-Eastern Jews, immersed in spirituality and the Jewish state – naïve Kutno Jews! He would certainly not have permitted this, and the head of the opposition was certainly correct when he remarked to me: If it will continue along these lines, there will not be enough walls for the pictures.

Careful with pictures – a picture is also earned. It has to serve for honoring a hero and accept him without question. And one must have a feeling of distance.

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A visit by the family of Shalom Asz which was wrapped in the sorrow of the mother's death

And we hear some family chronology about Shalom Asz's lineage, about his father R' Yechezkel Gombiner⁶, who was an important sheep-merchant, had many employees all over Poland. He sent many ships and trains

⁴ TN: sanctification prayer over the wine on Shabbat eve and holidays.

⁵ TN: see article on page 279 of the original book.

⁶ TN: a character from Shalom Asz's novel, obviously representing his father Moshe Asz of Gąbin.

abroad filled with sheep. The business supported generations, put them on their feet. And the mother, the recently deceased woman of valor – religious in her way. Her son was the apple of her eye.

Years earlier Bismarck had issued a number of edicts, and the sheep trade, with a single stroke of a pen – vanished. Many children, the sturdy oak trees and relatives, had to wander off to America, and from there, the prototypes of

*Uncle Moses*⁷ and other characters of the new world developed.

Shalom Asz, the strong man who embraced with his arms the old and the new worlds, writes it down, and leaves an account.

Shalom Asz lives in his town and he brought his town to life for the world.

⁷ TN: another novel of Shalom Asz.