

## KUTNO'S 'CRAWLERS'

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*translated from the Yiddish by Shoulamit Auvé-Szlajfer*

A large number of Kutno Jews had also, in addition to their first and last names, a nickname which was not recorded in the civil registry or official registers – but was used by friends, neighbors and ordinary good friends.

These unwanted "pseudonyms" reflected part of Kutno's style of Jewish life. Of course, the peculiarity of designating a relative, relative, friend, neighbor, co-worker, even one's own siblings, by an "appropriate" nickname, was also a characteristic of other towns and villages. I think, however, that the Jews of Kutno used a completely different and personal approach, a distinct local method, which was part of the originality of Kutno by which our town stood out and became known.

This was partly because the nicknames were not only related to professional affiliation or employment, nor according to the physical appearance of people (some were, of course), but mainly to purely personal details, which also had to express the essence of the person concerned, be adapted to his character, his attitude and his behavior towards others... There were nicknames that were simple, familiar, respectful, mocking and insulting. If such a name passed to posterity, it was only because the heir did not bring out new character traits, but perpetuated the family way-of-being of his parents.

I'm not going to make an exact list here, or go into an in-depth study of when and how names were created. I just want to remind you that this "fashion" has not spared the big landlords, including our famous native of the country, Shalom Asz. He had a nickname, which he was honored from his youth and is still used today among the Kutners. Likewise, our famous *Gaon*<sup>1</sup> R' Yehoshele Kutner, whom no one would have dared to disrespect, also had a kind of nickname.

In addition to the abundance of nicknames that Kutno Jews competed for, they still found some sort of hyper-nickname for Kutno in general, for the whole community – the Kutno crawlers.

Anyone hearing such a name may get the impression that all Kutno Jews were made of the same dough or that all were dominated by a kind of phlegmatism. This could mean

that, in Kutno, people were not only bored, lazy and limp, but also slow and nonchalant. In a word – crawlers.

I don't know where this mockery came from. Either from a rather lively stranger, who may have had a problem with one of his representatives, or a merchant whose supplier once delivered his orders late; or quite simply from a local joker, who himself did nothing, and – mocked by all or by the jealous Jews of the surrounding towns, jealous of the bubbling, associative and social life of Kutno; and perhaps because, arriving from the train, it was necessary to drag oneself uphill... The fact remains that the name was adopted, literally attached and was disseminated throughout the country of Poland, then well beyond its borders. Wherever the inhabitants of our city have dispersed, the nicknames of "Kutno crawlers" have followed them, when they have not preceded them.

It is also possible that this was done by those craftsmen, for whom Kutno had become too narrow, and would look for work in remote areas, either young people from Kutno who had served in the army in different parts of the country, or sons-in-law that the stepfathers and mothers-in-law had put up in their homes outside of Kutno – and their little wives pretended that they were... Kutno crawlers. Or perhaps just by those traveling barkers, who filled trains and roads and also came to Kutno to place their various goods. About these, the beloved Shalom Aleichem has long told that they are great babblers. Then it was the great flows of emigration across the world, in which our compatriots also wandered. They settled in distant lands, in great cities of the world and made famous there our "crawlers' pedigree".

In truth, Kutno was a very lively and active center. Everything that was needed for this type of town, Kutno produced it locally, in factories large and small, workshops, by workers and contractors – all were diligently created. They have developed all kinds of products, materials and consumables. Intensive trade was established with the surrounding environment. Machines, tools and other manufactured goods that the city did not manufacture – were brought in by local merchants, smart representatives and

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<sup>1</sup> TN: Hebrew, "Genius".

middlemen, who understood how to take advantage of these new sources of income.

The great Warsaw-Berlin railway line, which passed through our city, attracted them a lot and thus contributed to the development of the city. The "Kutno" station, which later became a big railway junction and even an important international crossroads, served a wide area around and seriously competed with other more distant and larger cities, such as: Płock, Włocławek, Łowicz and Łęczyca. It has developed beyond the prefectures and neighboring municipalities. All the neighboring towns had to join our town, which had become a major commercial center and an important economic and administrative area. Kutno Jews devoted most of their efforts, energy and knowledge to the development of the city – much more than one would expect from these aforementioned 'crawlers'.

The Jewish intelligentsia of Kutno and the active elements of our people have to a large extent established the governing bodies of various parties, organizations, unions and institutions – secular, religious, professional, economic, cultural and sporting. From famous rabbis, judges, cantors, teachers and editors of sacred texts – to teachers and educators, schoolteachers, party representatives, leaders of professional unions and trade unionists, sports instructors and youth leaders, music enthusiasts, theater lovers, writers, poets, volunteer teachers and literary scholars, chassidim and *mitnagdim*<sup>2</sup>, pious and non-believers, nationalist and communist Jews, Bundists and supporters of *Poalei Zion*,

workers and specialists, traders and employees and simple intelligent people and scholars of the Torah, all of this required a substantial staff of educated people, of experienced professionals, in all possible and useful fields. Our city has, in all these areas, over-performed to a large extent. While a number of people – apart from Kutners – were employed with us in the city, people from Kutno, to an even greater extent, worked and developed in other places and thus perfected the image of the importance of Kutno.

The associative fabric of Kutno was very diverse and visible. Our natives were good professionals, experienced traders, dedicated businessmen, honest idealists, daring revolutionaries and helpful citizens of their city. And above all – Jews loyal to their people. Even today, many Kutners are involved in leading social activities in many countries.

Jewish youth participated *en masse* in the local life of Kutno. We felt a modern rhythm and a youthful ardor. Our city could still promise and satisfy a lot.

A name as serious and cynical as "crawlers" was malicious and unfair, really invented as a calumny. And though every Kutner heard it with contempt and smiles, it certainly wouldn't have bothered him for a long, long time yet to maintain the closest and warmest contact with our hometown, if the monstrous cruelty, the Nazi barbarism had not destroyed to its very foundation the bubbling and creative life of the deeply Jewish town of Kutno.

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<sup>2</sup> TN: opponents of chassidism.