

## KUTNO FIREFIGHTERS

by Abraham LUSTIGMAN, Holon

translated from the Yiddish by Mindle Crystel Gross

More than once, Kutno firefighters were fooled by both small and large fires. There were many wooden houses located on the side streets where the Jews lived. A small fire could wipe out an entire street, so it was important that among the firefighters there should be devoted Jewish members who would not be late in putting out the blaze...

Among the active firefighters were to be found several Jews: Pasirsztajn – a buttonhole maker, Yechiel Szuster, Benjamin Szmate – a porter, and several others whose names I do not remember. There were also several Jews in the firefighters' band. During a fire in the Jewish streets and lanes, they virtually risked their lives to save Jewish belongings. Even more important was the fact that among the firefighters there were Jews, and this had a great psychological impact on the people.

The majority of the firefighters was middle-aged and from the working class – artisans, mostly shoemakers. At the head of the fire brigade was Chief Szymanski.

Whenever there was a Jewish festival or a *galuwke*<sup>1</sup>, he went out into the street dressed in his parade uniform with

the gold buttons, red epaulettes and the elegant officer's boots which reached to his knees. On his hands – snow-white gloves. He carried himself stiffly, a tall, a good-looking person. His long black beard gave him the appearance of a general, and also caused... Jewish troubles.

Chief Szymanski was not a friend of the Jews, but he did receive some blows like a Jew – because he had a "Jewish beard".

This occurred in 1919-1920 when the antisemitic *Halerczyks*<sup>2</sup> were raging in Poland, beating Jews and cutting off their beards. At the Kutno train station, they encountered Chief Szymanski who happened to be dressed in civilian clothes. They attacked him and wanted to cut off his beard, but they were very disappointed when this supposed Jew put up a strong defense, fighting and protecting his beard. From the blows which Szymanski rained down upon his attackers, they realized that these were "the hands of Esau"<sup>3</sup>.

The gathering-place of the firefighters was in the courtyard of the theatre. They met there every Sunday, marched, practiced. In this large courtyard, there stood a tall

<sup>1</sup> TN: birthday or anniversary in the Czar's family.

<sup>2</sup> TN: Polish Legion's soldiers in WW I, under General Jozef Haler, who continued the fight in Poland against the Soviets.

<sup>3</sup> TN: "The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's," Isaac said. (Genesis 27:22), meaning some kind of deception had happened.

wooden tower with glassless window openings. They would climb on the hanging ladder all the way to the top of the tower, and lower themselves on ropes or jumping over broad linen sacks. At the same time, the band stood on the theatre balcony and played.

All the firefighters' equipment was to be found on the other side of the courtyard – on the Podrzeczna Street or, as it was called, the Shoemakers' Street. The fire brigade owned several sorts of wagons: ladder wagons, wagons with water barrels, wagons with large water hoses, long wooden poles with iron points, pitchforks, shovels. Chief Szymanski wanted everything always to be at the ready – the barrels of water, the water hoses dried and coiled, the ladder wagon in the front, so as to be the first to go. If necessary, they took horses from wherever they could find them.

This inventory was guarded by a watchman, the old, angry Pole Wiszniewski, an ugly antisemite, who enjoyed catching a Jewish child and beating him until blood ran. This angry Christian had the duty of sounding the first alarm when a fire occurred. He lived near where the firefighters' uniforms were kept. As soon as there was a fire, he ran to the big bell which hung from the wooden cross in the corner of Shoemakers' Street, and began to ring it so violently that

a deaf person could have heard it. Immediately, a commotion ensued. Firefighters ran from every corner of town, already wearing their copper or brass helmets, dark-blue shirts with wide leather suspenders upon which hung axes and other tool kits. They quickly pushed the wagons out, harnessed horses from any wagons they encountered, but nobody protested this. Many Jewish draymen themselves ran with their horses. The first was always Tiger, called "the Polish Jew". He would come running with his two "eagles", snapping his whip – "*hayda*" – like a real Cossack. Also Moshe Yantshe the redhead was among the first to come running, riding on his "bears", as he called his horses. Masses of adults and children came out into the street, running to the fire.

However, when a fire broke out in a neighboring village, it was an entirely different matter. It took quite a while until our fire-fighters gathered. When they arrived in the village – it was too late. The huts with the straw roofs were burned. They found a small glowing fire around which there was ash. There were also cases in town when a fire broke out in the middle of the night, and the firefighters were late. In their praise, it must be said that they were devoted to their responsibility.