

THE OLD MARKET

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translated from the Hebrew by Carole Turkeltaub Borowitz*

We couldn't possibly imagine Jewish Kutno, which lived by the Torah and toil, without mentioning the old market and its people. The market was not only a large open square with buildings, shops, stalls and workshops around it – it was a concept enclosing a whole world inside itself. Here, in the market, small-scale Jewish manufacturing and trade was concentrated. If we were going to form an impression by the market and its people alone, it would be all wrong, because Kutno is a brilliant Jewish town. Over there lay the houses, the shops, the stalls, the little huts and all sorts of workshops belonging to traders and peddlers, the hawkers and the hucksters, all Jewish, although the number of Jewish craftsmen was not

great. The tailors, the cobblers, the carpenters, the hatters, the furriers, the watchmakers, the tinsmiths, the glaziers, the seamsters, the shoemakers and others – hiding in their workshops and work places that were in basements and attics in the yards of the houses. The "ordinary people" of Kutno – "Jews of the scissors and the hammer" – were not only producers: they were also the suppliers of essential products to the town and the neighboring area. They blew the breath of life and vitality into the market. Here Jewish families battled for a crust of bread to take home. Here better days to come were dreamt of and longed for. Here plans were devised for the wedding of a marriageable daughter, or how to provide schooling and a religious

education for a son. This is the place where the interests of the merchants and the Jewish craftsmen were interlaced and combined with those of their town and village customers.

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The market was a square, shaped like a crate, with its start next to the church. To its left, a long building, that in the past served as a barracks, and was later on turned into a school and finally became a casino for army officers. A little distance from it stood the farm house of Rabbi Kaplan. He settled in Kutno after the First World War, bought some fields and worked the land by himself. During the period of independent Poland, the Rabbi's farm served as a training camp for pioneers from Kutno and other places.

Among the grocery shop owners, the most popular was the giant Melech and his tiny wife Chana'le. In Kutno it was said that she was the shortest of all the women in the town. The produce merchant Grinbaum and the inn kept by Baruch Bild were also part of the market "landscape". There both Jews and Christians feasted to their heart's content off hot lentils with a jug of beer and warm goodies... Nearby was the furniture store of Yidel Kraut. Because, during his time in the Russian army he served as a drummer in the military band, he got stuck with the nickname of "*Yidel Poyker*¹". Next to this store were the butcher's shops of the Nosal brothers, butchers who were well-known in the town.

The bicycle shops of Goldberg and Luks hired out these means of transport to the Jewish youngsters when they went out on trips. Frequently, the kids came back from these outings sore, hoarse and chilled (tired out, of course, went without saying). The anxious and angry parents turned on these shop owners, complaining to know why they were harming their children.

Market days in Kutno were held twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, which gave the Jewish tradesmen dealing in cheap stuff an opportunity to sell off the remnants of their stock. The Kozak brothers, Itshe, Mordechai and Michael, were well-known among these tradesmen. The three looked exactly like each other, like three peas in a pod – of short stature, skinny and light-haired. They were shrewd merchants and energetic traders. All at the same time they managed their workshops, served at their stalls on market days and also visited the fairs outside Kutno. On market days the stall hucksters and the hawkers busied themselves in persuading the farmers, by words or force, to drop into the brothers' shop. The farmer who passed over the threshold of the brothers Kozak's shop was hard pressed not to go out empty handed.

The five Lajchman brothers and their housewife mother Freida Necha were included among the untrained craftsmen. Due to their appearance, they were nicknamed "*Burtzikes*²". The brothers Leib Ber, Mordechai, Leibish, Pinchas and Yaakov all worked selling at their stall in the market. They called out their wares and grabbed passers-by and sometimes even dragged a buyer over to their stall from one nearby, and because of that more than once a

squabble and a fight broke out. The principal sales person was the mother herself, Freida Necha, wearing a cloth purse hanging round her neck; she would slip the day's takings into it.

Among the dealers in cheap stuff, the most respectable we remember were: Lasman, Łęczycycki, Moszkowicz, Ita Babe, Osowski, Pope Lula and her daughter, and Zakrzewski. If the women were traders, then the men were the tailors, or took the place of the women when they went off to Łódź to buy raw materials or finished goods. They journeyed to fairs taking their kids with them, so that the little ones could act as "hawkers" or "hucksters" to attract buyers to their mothers' wares.

A worthy woman such as these would also sell merchandise from her house on days when there was no fair. Mainly, the women did this on the Christian holidays when buying and selling was strictly prohibited by the authorities. Also, the Christian farmers from the neighboring areas would drop in at the houses of the Jewish women after Sunday prayers at the Christian church in Kutno, in order to buy various commodities from them. Although, at that time, the police force would keep a sharp eye on the Jewish houses lest there was trading going on there, and should they catch a Jew breaking the prohibition, he would be punished severely. However, even on those days, Sundays and holidays, a buyer would be captured and conveyed to the house of the Jew. Once, because of something like this happening, a serious row broke out between the craftsman Beinish Moszkowicz and Ryvka Lasman which ended up at the court room. But, after an apology from Moszkowicz, Mrs. Lasman withdrew her complaint.

Among the merchants and peddlers at the market was also a collection of agents (working on commission) which was a special group by itself. Since they did not have access to independent capital for trading or production, they would sell on commission ready-made garments that they got from the merchants or artisans. If they were not successful in selling the clothes, they returned them to where they came from. These agents were treated with contempt and disdain, and even abuse, and buyers were not allowed to go near their stalls. Some of them were forced to give up trading and become small artisans or market "hucksters".

The shop of the textiles dealer, David Metal, was also located in the old market. He was good hearted, supported the small artisans and other needy folk by giving loans or anonymous donations.

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Among the "subcontracting" manufacturers (the small-time workers), who were never famous for being rich, were the hat makers. The attics or basements where they lived also served as their workshops. Their hard-earned living came to them from sewing new hats, not only to Jews and peasants, but first and foremost – to the primary and high school children. While the hatters Klajn or Mroz, produced hats, selling them in the market, the hatter Gajst made hats for the army, especially for officers.

¹ TN: Yiddish, "drummer".

² TN: Yiddish, "little beetroots".

These customers gave him higher standing in his line of work.

We especially remember, from all the traders in the old market, the following people: Moshe Bild, Yitzhak Szymonowicz, Hirsh Braun ("*zeluch*"), Shaye Blank ("*faake*"). Their circumstances were satisfactory, even though they were stall keepers in the market. However, they usually "grabbed" buyers from among the farmers of the countryside. At the shoemaker Eizyk Szapszewicz's hung a long stick, with two big shoes tied on to it. He used to travel to fairs and markets around Kutno; his nickname was "*Yilech*". Later on, Poles began to go into the trade of shoemaking.

Famous in the old market were the barbers Klar and his two sons, and David Pakulski (of blessed memory) who used to work for them. On market days they had their hands full, working. A small distance from the market, in Królewska Street, was the barber's shop of Gerszkowicz ("*Kashliaf*"). In addition to hair cutting and shaving, he also used glass cups for bloodletting, leeches and enemas for anyone who needed... On market days, when his barber's shop was invaded all at once by about ten farmers, he did not lose his cool. He would sit them down on a long bench, and with a bucket of soap suds, left and right and right and left, lathered their faces and let them sit there... And when he noticed that the patience of the soapy ones was wearing thin, he would suddenly cry out: "Orchestra!". Then the soapy farmers would leap up and rush outside to see the band... The people outside would burst into laughter and everyone would be amused at the sight. Even those just hanging around looked forward to market day, so that they could watch this entertaining sight. Meanwhile, the foamy farmers had forgotten why they were standing in the street. Only when they went back into the shop did the barber start shaving them. At that time, he played in the Maccabi band at the cinema (when a silent film was showing), and at weddings. Owing to his knowledge in first aid he was a member of the committee of the charity *Linat HaTzedek*³. He was a cheerful, friendly and pleasant Jew.

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Two greengrocers were part of the "human scene" in the old market. Even on days when the farmers from the countryside brought loads of vegetables to sell in the town, the townspeople did not forsake these sellers, cadgers many times over, and continued to buy a few vegetables from them – carrots and onions, radishes and cabbages.

Among the haberdashers' shops in the market, we will mention two who lodged in the house of Aba'le Braun. One of them seemed nice at first sight, but its shelves were full of empty boxes. On market days, when a customer was inside a shop like that, the shop keeper would urgently send his son to another shop to get the required item and meanwhile chat with the buyer in his shop. In contrast, Mira'le Mroz and her daughter exhibited on their stall "samples" only: shoe laces, shoe soles, handkerchiefs, belts and many empty boxes. They also attempted to keep

the customer talking until the product was brought from another shop.

The leathers merchants included: Menche, Kolaszinski, Perce Kenig, Erdberg. The shoe makers included: Płocker, Shaya Kuczyński, Gutman, Epszajtajn. The garment decorators: Yaakov Mroz.

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A miserable little wooden hut in the old market served as the kiosk of Y. Zak. There you could get hold of soda water, ice creams and candies, all homemade. That's why he got the nickname of "cold ice cream" (*zimne lody* in Polish). The youngsters used to get together there; there, they argued heatedly and after lots of arguing they had to wet their whistles and drink soda water, made by Y. Zak. He was a member of the *Chevra Kadisha* committee, and took his position very seriously.

In Kutno there were a dozen bakers of various sorts: cakes, bagels, bread and rolls. Head of the all was Nisen Grinbaum who was called "*smoluch*" (disgusting). It is interesting, that he got his nickname since his bakery was outstandingly clean and was inspected by the authorities, and did not operate in a basement. But because he was so proud of the cleanliness of his bakery, he was given the nickname "*smoluch*". But he knew how to stoutly defend the interests of his Jewish friends at the general bakers' guild. And the baker Wajzman was known throughout the town for his delicious cakes which he sold successfully on market days.

The square was a world of its own and closed into itself. In the middle, like a fortress standing guard over its surroundings, stood the large red brick building of R' Michael Shaye Rasz, father of eight daughters and one son. He was the owner of a well-to-do house and in addition was a sort of Jewish landlord. There was a time when he ran a large country farm, and if he was not exactly the owner, he had it on a lease. In the huge cellars of his house, he used to pickle different vegetables, especially cucumbers and cabbage, which were now and then sent to markets abroad. His daughter, Genia, was his right hand "man". She was the wife of Zalman Kirsztajn (of blessed memory), who was shot by the Nazis at the beginning of the war.

The first cinema in Kutno, which also served as a hall for parties and weddings, was set up by R' Michael Shaye, in his house. After the First World War, when halls and new cinemas were built, the center for entertainment and culture moved over to the new square. Then R' Michael Shaye turned the spacious hall into roomy living quarters at the request of his relative, R' Abraham Fromer, whose wife, Frymet, the daughter of R' Moshe Aharon Menche, was close to the Rasz family.

R' Abraham used to supply cloth to all the workshops round the square. There was almost not a single tailor who would turn to another supplier, for instance, R' Yaakov Opatowski and R' Shmuel Asz. The tailors in the square remained loyal to R' Abraham and enjoyed almost unlimited credit. According to what was prevalent in the town, R' Abraham ran a big business. His brother-

³ TN: charity clinic association.



Renovation of the synagogue in 1934

in-law R' Moshe Skorka, a Gur chassid, worked with him. His daughter, Luvtzia Skorka, was one of the first Jewish girls from the square to receive a matriculation certificate from the national high school. Two of his children also worked in the business – Yaakov and Chana, and Menche kept the account books. On market days one could see R' Abraham's youngest son, Simcha, eleven or twelve years old, wearing a gymnasium pupil's cap walking among the market stalls with a list in his hand, collecting debts from the traders.

The cloth was brought from Łódź. The wagon of Moshe Yantshe the carter, harnessed with two sturdy horses, would pull in to the big yard of R' Michael Shaya Rasz every Tuesday and Friday morning. Rolls and parcels of cloth and materials that had travelled like this on the long road from Łódź to Kutno would be dismantled from the wagon, despite the excellent railway connection.

The shop of R' Hershel Płocker, the wine producer, stood almost in the middle of the row of shops. Who did not buy wine for the Shabbat eve from him? Impatiently, they would shower R' Hirsh with questions; When would the "Ein Gedi" wine arrive already for the Passover service?

The square was usually dirty. Open channels of sewage carried the rubbish of the area from here to there. But on the Shabbat eve the square changed completely. A stranger who happened to be there would not believe that he was in a Christian state. The whole square was decked out for a festival. The shops were closed up and all work was at a standstill. Towards the Shabbat the traders covered up their stock and tools in a corner of the single room which served for living and work. The floor was swept, washed and strewn with a fresh layer of yellow sand. The men folk changed their tattered everyday clothes for clean Shabbat garb. On the Shabbat morning everyone went off to the synagogue. After prayers, at noon, the children went to the

baker's, to take out the *cholent*⁴ and *kugel*⁵. A guest from the synagogue would accompany the better-off citizens, to be honored with a Shabbat meal. After a nap, the families would go out for a stroll around the square and the streets coming off it, or pay a visit to relatives and have a glass of tea. Then, the square was cloaked in tenderness and beauty – a picture that certainly served as a backcloth and inspiration of romantic expression about the town in Yiddish literature in the Diaspora.

Completely different faces could be seen in the square on Sundays – the Christian Shabbat. From Shabbat morning the municipal street sweepers were already out, cleaning the whole square of the dirt that was left over from Friday's market day.

With the tolling of church bells, Sunday took over the town. Already the ordinary folk started rushing by foot, the posh ones in their coaches, the local farmers and landowners in their carriages, decorated with their aristocratic emblems. The ladies and gentlemen entered the church, the coachmen waited outside and refreshed themselves with a glass of spirits in the inns belonging to Szymański or Bild that were in the square.

Extraordinary celebrations were seen in the square on special festivals. On the eve of "3rd of May Constitution Day"⁶, windows, balconies, and house entrances were adorned with the national flag and carpets, and pictures of the Polish President. On the evening of the holiday, a company of the 37th regiment stationed in the town marched past, headed by the military band (one of the best ones in Poland) playing popular music, surrounded by torches the length of the square, all along Królewska Street and up to the New Market square.

The next day, the holiday, an army parade took place. The army, armed military organizations – among them a



A group of worshippers at the "Ein Yaakov" synagogue

⁴ TN: slow-cooked stew with meat, potatoes and beans.

⁶ TN: established in 1791.

⁵ TN: baked pudding or casserole, with egg noodles or potatoes.

section of Jewish "*Gadna*"⁷ – called after Berek Joselewicz⁸, armed with rifles and led by Jewish commanders, the rifles drawn ready in their hands. The police also took part in the procession, and the fire brigade, youth movements, the scouts (but not the Jewish organizations) and the schools. Each group had its own flag and sometimes its own band. Before the procession there was a military inspection with an entire ceremony, mostly accompanied by a speech on parliamentary matters given by one of the town's dignitaries from the central balcony of the Fromers' house. On days such as these the square was the focal point of interest. An inquisitive audience from all corners of the town, and from outside it, crowded on the pavements all around the square, friends and relatives reserved places for themselves in houses overlooking the square, so that they could watch the festive parade.

We can remember the following craftsmen: the carpenter Abramowicz, whose family had been in Kutno for generations. His brother also worked in that craft. They became famous thanks to a special cupboard that they put together for the flag of the 37th regiment which was stationed in Kutno. This flag was donated by the Jewish community of the town and was proudly displayed in Zinger's shop window. A gold key was fixed on to it, and on the golden plate that was put on to the flag the donor's name was inscribed: "The Jewish Community of Kutno". One of the Abramowicz brothers was the representative of the Jewish carpenters' guild. This man even visited *Eretz Israel*.

Chaim Zajdenwar ("Lepek") came to live in Kutno before the First World War. His three sons and daughter were active in various Zionist organizations; the father himself distinguished himself by his worthy activities for the Zionist idea, visited *Eretz Israel* several times as an emissary and emigrated to Israel with his whole family in 1937. In Kutno, he always fought against divisions among the Jewish tradesmen who belonged to two professional organizations – the Zionists and the "Bundists"⁹. Since the Christian carpenters' guild did not want to acknowledge even one of these two organizations (or even merged together into one), Zajdenwar, together with Płock, Kanał, Abraham Mroz, Kleczewski and Łęczycki, travelled specially to the centers of these parties in Warsaw, to try to combine the two organizations in Kutno. Mr. Czerniakow and Mr. Rak came from Warsaw for this purpose. The amalgamation ceremony included the establishment of an independent synagogue and the dedication of the flag with the powerless participation of the Polish authorities.

As is usual, the various representatives honored the nailing up of the flag – the representative from the municipality, the Polish trade union and the Jewish community.

A special blessing was said by the Rabbi of Kutno, Rabbi Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk, at the opening ceremony of the synagogue.

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In the middle of the market, like some sort of island, stood the commercial center. On one side were the shops and on the other – warehouses. Two water pumps beautified the place – the house of Moniek (Michael Yehoshua) Rasz also stood there. The Orner family lived there – eleven sons and one daughter. The father was occupied selling haberdashery items, all sorts of jewelry, and picture frames. He was also the secretary of the traders' union and even wrote out requests to the tax offices from the Jews of Kutno.

In addition to merchants, peddlers, market-traders, hawkers and hucksters, there were craftsmen in the old market – Jewish workmen who crafted by hand. They were laborers and small artisans and among them were respected public servants, party leaders, people with authority: such as Mroz, the Leibish brothers, Benjamin Piotrkowski (left-wing *Poalei-Zion*); Efraim Frajnd of the tailors' union, Moniek Rasz (the small merchants' union), Perek (secretary of the Community Council), Manes Zylber (communist party), the son of Rabbi Kaplan (the new Zionist trade union), Yitzhak Lidauer (revisionist party), Yitzhak Szymonowicz (leader of the small traders' union), Nathan Wajnsztajn (delegate of the community), Pryn (active with the *Am HaSefer* school and *Brit HaHayal*¹⁰, Orner (*Brit Yeshurun*¹¹), Gdalyahu Kowalski (founder of young *Agudat Israel* – the religious party), Płock (active with the *Am HaSefer* school), A. Sh. Metal (young artist), and many others whose names we have forgotten.

We have not yet squeezed dry the list of names of public figures. The names mentioned here are those people who were associated with the old market. But, in Jewish Kutno, there were many from the various political parties, associations and institutions, who were active and busy. A few of them can be mentioned here: Aspirsztajn – he came to Kutno in the year 1932 from Płock. He was a paramedic and dentist, and among the most active in the *Linat HaZedek* clinic and *Bikur Holim*¹², and even gave his home for Zionist association activities. One of his sons survived the Holocaust and currently lives in Poland. He is a doctor.

Yaakov Opatowski – he was a textiles merchant and was born in Kutno. In his youth he was active in the Zionist movement and also in the traders' union.

Yitzhak Opatowski – born in Kutno, graduated from the high school in Kutno. Was secretary of the small merchants' union for many years.

Abraham Opoczyński – born in Kutno, painter and outstanding artist. In 1931 he took on himself to paint the great synagogue in the town, and earned much respect by his beautiful paintings. In his work he was assisted by Chaim Yosef Tyber, Abraham Benet and A. Sh. Metal. After many months of exhausting and devoted labor, the Kutno synagogue which was built in 1799, was renewed.

⁷ TN: abbreviation of Hebrew "*Gedudei Noar*", a premilitary service training for youth.

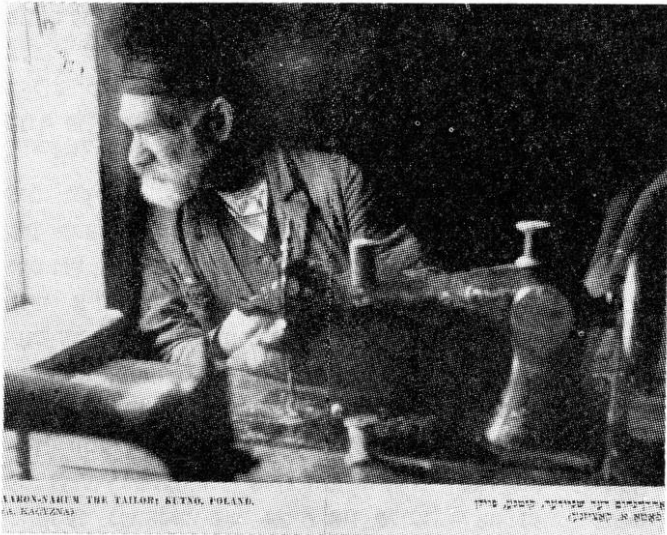
⁸ TN: Polish Jewish colonel of the Polish Army during the Kościuszko Uprising (17 September 1764 – 15 May 1809, Płock).

⁹ TN: secular, non-Zionist socialists.

¹⁰ TN: a revisionist Zionist association of Jewish reservists in the Polish army, founded in 1932.

¹¹ TN: a religious revisionist association set up in 1933.

¹² TN: association for visiting the sick.



Aharon-Nachum, the tailor



Mechel the carrier – drawing by Chaim Tyber



Poultry seller – drawing by Chaim Tyber



Mr. Michael Yehoshua Rasz



The managers, worshippers and donors from the Artisans' Synagogue, in front of the Holy Ark