

OUR TOWN BEFORE ITS DESTRUCTION

by Dvora KRAUT-KOHN, Mexico

translated from the Yiddish by Mindle Crystel Gross

In 1937, my husband and I were living in Paris. We suddenly received a telegram informing us that my mother had become ill with a lung infection. We did not have to give much thought before deciding leave for Kutno to see my sick mother.

On July 17, 1937, we left Paris by train. The route went through Germany. Arriving at the first station of the "*Third Reich*", we immediately felt the stinking atmosphere of the "*new order*". Black uniformed SS bandits on every station, drilling into each passenger with their furious looks, searching each car and questioning. Each stop at a German station affected our health. How lucky we finally were to arrive on Polish territory. We hoped at least to breathe a little freer.

In Poland, we received our first disappointment. Since a few hours still remained before the train departed for Kutno, we also encountered in the Poznań station pointedly hateful looks from antisemitic Poles. They were even prepared to beat my husband who had the appearance of a Jew, but thanks to our speaking French, we avoided an attack and much unpleasantness.

We finally arrived in our hometown. Today, I think that at that time it did not occur to me that I would someday have to write about and mourn the destruction of Jewish Kutno, the best and spiritual center of a vibrant Jewish cultural life.

I still remember very well the beautiful welcome by the students of the Michalewicz School in honor of our

arrival. The school even had its own building. I see before me the beaming faces of the children of the Hebrew high school in Kutno. I remember the bright faces of the children and youth who came to borrow books in our libraries. Thousands of books, an entire treasure of knowledge, culture and history was prepared for them. The libraries matched each teacher with the appropriate books.

And who does not remember the discussion evenings, box-conversations, lectures and readings, gatherings and meetings, and the clear explanations of international problems and Jewish topics.

And the older generation? Although emotionally depressed, always busy with worries, earning a living, family matters, they never lost their faith in better times. Observant Jews believed in the coming of the *Messiah* and hoped that He who lived forever, would never desert them in a time of trouble. Zionists tied their dreams and future to *Eretz Israel* and the national home which was being created there, and the Socialists were certain that the world would be rebuilt upon a new and just foundation.

And so once again, we inhaled the spiritual, national and world liberating atmosphere of Jewish Kutno during our visit to our hometown. Still today, I ask myself more than once, how was it possible in such poverty to elevate one's self to such a spiritual Jewish life? Surely, their strength gave them courage and endurance on their last way.

Honor their memory!