

## ASSOCIATIVE LIFE, JEWISH COMMUNITY, MUNICIPALITY

*by Aharon MENDELEWICZ z"l, Tel Aviv*

I came to Kutno from Brzeziny<sup>1</sup>, in the end of the year 1916. At that time, a Zionist Organization was active in Kutno, which was located in the house of Wolf Asz (Shalom Asz's brother). Active members included: Sender Falc z"l, Abraham Erdberg z"l (Hebrew teacher), David Kalman z"l, Timkowski z"l and Yehuda-Leibish Grinbaum. As I still belonged to the movement in Brzeziny, it was natural to join the organization in Kutno.

The city was occupied by the Germans, who generally allowed the Jews to engage in social activities. The *Keren Kayemet* was publicly and legally funded, organizing lectures and various activities.

### Parties and institutions

In 1917, during the Passover holiday, a general meeting of the Zionists was held in Poland. In the printed report of the meeting, the positions of incomes and expenditures did not concur... As an accountant, I did not like that kind of accounting and, having the floor, I strongly criticized the committee and reminded them about the legend, which is well-known among Jews, that when the Messiah comes the Christians will walk on an iron bridge and... fall into the water, while Jews will cross a paper bridge and nothing will happen to them. I finished my critique with "The paper report that was presented

today is a great failure. It carries with it many dangers!". In the committee, completely new candidates were selected: the teacher Yonah-Baruch Kac, Yehuda Riftin, the writer of the lines and others.

Yehuda Riftin died in the early thirties in Warsaw, in his brother's apartment. Several dozen Jews traveled to his funeral from Kutno. The writer of these lines eulogized him.

In 1915 (or 1916) the community established a kitchen for the poor.

The kitchen served the poor and was run by the community. As in any philanthropic institution, there was a demand for dedicated workers. And such were: Margulis, a son of a manufacturer of agricultural machinery in Płock, Timkowski, Władysław Hirsberg. And the women: sisters Lipa and Pola Bromberg, Jadwiga Opatowski, Ruzha and Mania Rabinowicz, Hela Elbaum, Hinde Majranc, Sabine Sztrom-Halbersztat, Sala Kibel (wife of Dr. Goldman), Berta Moszkowicz and Rebecca Benenson.

For the meals, no one paid, space for the kitchen was given free of charge by Y. Majranc. Only one cook received a salary. About one hundred meals were served

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<sup>1</sup> TN: town 20km east of Łódź.

דין וחשבון הכספים  
של האגודה הציונית בקומנה  
מן א' תשרי תר"ע  
עד א' תשרי תר"ע.

[illegible]

## Financial report for the Zionist Association in Kutno for the year 1916-1917

daily. Until the Germans left the city, it was the only Jewish kitchen for the poor and needy. Later, during the Polish rule, a number of institutions created kitchens that served *yeshiva* students, *cheder* youngsters, school children, and the poor.

Before the Germans left Kutno, I am reminded of such an anecdote: at a meeting of a committee of the Zionist organization, the upholsterer Aharon Fuks came up with the proposal that one could buy from the Germans a number of guns. He even brought a gun to show. The committee decided not to buy any arms. However, this did not stop the Poles, as soon as they established their government in Kutno (November 1918), to carry out a house search at the Zionist Union, attempting to find concealed arms there. Sender Falc told the senior police officer that he wanted to attend the entire house search, which also needed to be done at the kindergarten, in case

they would plant something... They did not find any weapons.

Of the philanthropic institutions, it is still worth mentioning the Society for the Visiting of the Sick, at the head of which stood Mr. Yonatan Majranc. The Society provided free medical care to the needy Jews. Later, the administration decided to charge a fee: 10 pfennigs for a note to the doctor and 10 pfennigs for each prescription. On the other hand, the management paid the doctor one mark for a visit and the nurse, 50 pfennigs. After establishing the fee, the number of sick to the doctor fell by half...

The cultural needs of the Jewish community were also taken care of. On Królewska Street, in Moszkowicz's house, was a library that had been originally founded by the Zionists, but ruled by the "*Bund*". It is believed that permission to open the library came from St. Petersburg, before the war, in the name of David Kalman z"l. It is



possible that the Petersburg Society for the Promotion of Culture<sup>2</sup> made the request for the license.

In 1926, when a Zionist library was established, people turned to the "*Bund*" to publish at least the Hebrew books but the answer was negative.

During the German government in the town, a Jewish-Polish folk school was established, which in Polish times was transformed into the "*Powszechna*" school number 3 ("*Szabasówka*")<sup>3</sup> for Jewish children. The Jewish-Polish school was founded by the community, mainly by Mr. Aharon-Shlomo Elberg. The first teachers there were: Zundel Comber, Esther Goldman (a refugee from Kalisz), Hinde Majranc-Mendelewicz, who taught handicrafts, Yehuda Riftin, a teacher of Hebrew and later of Jewish religion. Finally, the school was located in the building of former Russian barracks of the 4<sup>th</sup> regiment, on the old market.

To conclude the chapter of the German rule in Kutno until 1918, I would like to add that in the town court as a lawyer was the Jew Yonatan Majranc (my father-in-law), the chairman was a German, lay judges ("*lawniks*") the Pole Starnawski, a pharmacist and midwife, who was also a municipal councilor with the Germans.

### The Jewish Community

In 1919, elections to the Jewish community took place for the first time. Twelve *dozórs*<sup>4</sup> were elected to the community council: 4 Zionists – Aharon Mendelewicz, Aharon-Shlomo Elberg, Naftali Rabinowicz and Yehoshua Falc. 2 of "*Bund*" – Herman Kirszbaum and Ajzman, 2 Craftsmen – Szpajer and (?), Populists – Zundel Comber and Yaakov Mamlok, from the "*Agudah*" – Yoel Sztajnfeld and Abraham-Fishel Zandberg.

Until 1924, the Polish supervisory authority, not happy with the outcome of the elections and the composition of the community council, did not convene the elected instances. All community-affairs continued to be led by the four *dozórs* from German times. After a series of interventions by the Zionist councilors in local and higher power, the Constituent Assembly was convened for the first time, 4-5 years after the election.

To ensure the fruitful activity of the community administration, a coalition of Zionists and *Agudah* was formed. The block was set up on the initiative of the Rabbi. He elected a board of eight *dozórs*, with the Rabbi, who legally belonged to the community board: Mendelewicz (Zionist) – president, Abraham Fishel Zandberg, Yankel Bromberg (of *Agudat Israel*), Yankel Mamlock of the Populists, Kirszbaum of the *Bund*, Shaye Falc, Naftali Rabinowicz (Zionists).

The highest Jewish municipal tax fee was up to 100 zlotys. The new community administration increased the budget to 2,000 zlotys. The Jewish municipal tax had to be

paid by every Jewish resident in Kutno, whom the community recognized as eligible. The decision also applied to the Jews, who had their businesses or immovable property in town and beyond.

The new community administration, taking over an empty coffer, began vigorously collecting the above-mentioned old Jewish municipal tax debts. Following the drafting of the new budget, certain requirements for *Eretz Israel* were also taken into account and a certain percentage was set for the positions (one third for *Keren HaYesod*, one third for *Keren Kayemet* and one third for *Keren HaYishuv* of the *Agudah*), or the entirety just for *Keren Kayemet*. It is clear that the *Eretz Israel* budget items did not appear under their real name, but under a general designation "support for emigration to *Eretz Israel*".

I am reminded of a certain case; not every Jew living out of Kutno, on whom the community imposed its Jewish municipal tax because he ran businesses in the city, was willing to pay the tax. They did everything possible to get out of the Kutner tax. In the case of one such Jew living in Warsaw, the Warsaw municipality's secretary came to him on behalf of the Kutner Jewish community, to collect the tax. He could not do anything because the wife showed him a notarial deed of intent<sup>5</sup>. This prompted me later, at the handing over of the Kutner Staroste and in the Warsaw Voivodeship to approve the budget and Jewish municipal tax, that to each sequester's order should be added the remark "to be recovered from husband or wife". My argument was that since the wife belonged to the Jewish community, the duties rested on her. (Aforesaid Jew later had to pay the interest and debts, no longer able to hide under the name of his wife... If I am not mistaken, this was the first case in Poland that people were not allowed to evade paying the Jewish municipal tax, even when the property was transferred in the name of the wife...).

Searching through the documents in the Kutno Municipality's Office, I came across a budget of the Jewish community from 1840, approved by the governor of Warsaw. The budget was signed by three *dozórs* (one of them – Yosef Sloma – a grandfather of previously mentioned Y. Majranc).

In 1924, it suddenly became apparent that a number of community objects and buildings were not listed as property in the inventory. True, the synagogue, the *Beit Midrash*, the *mikveh*, and the new cemetery, figured in the mortgage as property of the community, opposite the old cemetery and the building where the Jewish butcher shops were located were, from a formal legal point of view, "without fathers"... The butchers took advantage of this situation and did not pay any rent money. It so happened that at the end of the last century, while building the butcher shops, they made an agreement with a Jewish

<sup>2</sup> TN: founded in 1863, active until 1926-1929. Also called "Society for the Spread of Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia".

<sup>3</sup> TN: Polish, state school for Jewish children, closed on Shabbat.

<sup>4</sup> TN: Polish, government-appointed supervisors of Jewish communal affairs.

<sup>5</sup> TN: meaning the wife was the owner of the business, not her husband.

judge, an employee of the community, that the kosher butcher shops would be located on a community site on Warsaw Street – for a certain annual fee. After that, the contract was lost somewhere and the butchers did not pay anything.

The house of the movie theater "Polonia", which also housed an inn ("*zayazd*"), was registered as a perpetual servitude for the community, amounting to several hundred rubles annually – by previous owners of the house. The community-management in independent Poland, did not want to accept such an ownerless condition regarding its property and also wanted to benefit from a source of income. All my efforts before the mortgage judge in Kutno, Mr. Lorzinski, had not yielded any results. He said it would pay well to just check the mortgage books.

While in Warsaw, I went to the Central Office of Mortgage and to my great surprise and delight found there written, in the books, that the "*Yevreyskoye Kladbishche*"<sup>6</sup> ("Jewish Cemetery") is the property of the community, Lorzinski was surprised and... disappointed by my revelation. Now there was no doubt that this cemetery belonged to the Jewish community. I also came across an old map of Kutno, where it was once noted that the "*Szpital żydowski*" ("Jewish hospital" – that was the name of the house of the Jewish butcher shops, because there was once a poorhouse for Jewish patients) – was a property of the community...

### About Kutno Municipality

The first elections to the Kutno City Council in independent Poland took place in 1919. Then, as these elections gave the Jews a majority (13 out of 24 councilors), it was annulled and decided by the central government, or the Warsaw Voivodeship, that the inhabitants of Kutno must once again elect their "town-fathers." No problem, this time several neighboring settlements were included in the city of Kutno to secure a Polish majority. In the second election, which took place the same year, 11 Jewish representatives were elected: 6 from the Zionist Bourgeois bloc, 2 from Populists and 3 from the "*Bund*" (in the first election, a representative from *Poalei-Zion* was also elected – Eliezer Elberg, a younger brother of Mr. Aharon Shlomo Elberg n"y<sup>7</sup>).

The constituent meetings of the newly elected city council took place in late 1919, or early 1920, only after it had previously been canceled 2 or 3 times due to lack of a quorum. The composition was as follows: 6 bourgeois Poles, close to the *Endecja*<sup>8</sup>, and 7 of the Polish Socialist Party – P.P.S. But at the inauguration of the mayor, his deputy and the lay judges, the 7 councilors of P.P.S. and 5 Jews (3 from the *Bund* and the 2 Populists) left the meeting, which was again left without a quorum. On the first subsequent meeting, when only one of the populist

councilors, Comber, together with P.P.S. and the "*Bund*" left the meeting and the second populist, Abraham Marcus, remained in place, it was possible to elect a mayor.

The policy of P.P.S. and the "*Bund*" was clear: by failing to elect the constitution of the new City Council, new elections would have to be called, in which they had every chance of getting a left-wing majority. Abraham Marcus was not sure, however, that in a third election, his party, the Populists, would win two seats again. Therefore, he did not show solidarity with the councilor of his faction, Zundel Comber.

At the aforementioned meeting it was therefore possible, albeit with the presence of only 13 councilors (6 bourgeois Poles and 7 Jews), to elect the administration of the city council in the following composition:

Mayor – Tomasz Klepa; Vice-Mayor – Petka, owner of an agricultural machinery factory in Kutno. After his resignation, the high-ranking official Pałowski was appointed in his place; 3 lay judges – Chlebicki of the Bourgeois Poles, Umerski of the P.P.S. and the writer of the lines, as a representative of the Jewish-Bourgeois bloc and of the Zionists. Two years later, Chlebicki resigned and was replaced by pharmacist K. Starnawski. In 1925, Engineer Nowakowski of Płocker Street was appointed to Starnawski's place of lay judge.

The Jewish councilors at that time represented virtually all social forces in the city, according to the composition: lay judge Aaron Mendelewicz, the councilors David Kalman, Hersz Wajnsztajn, Yitzhak Weber – Zionists: Nathan Wajnsztajn – chairman of the retailers' association; Yaakov Bromberg and Abraham Ajzman – of the *Bund*. While the first was a Gur chassid, the second belonged to Alexander chassidim. Zundel Comber – teacher; Abraham Marcus – bakery owner, representative of Populist Craftsmen's Association. To the Bundist faction belonged the local leader of the party, Herman Kirszbaum, a boots sewer; Moshe Chaim Tiger – elder brother of *Poalei-Zion* activist Nathan Tiger z"l, who immigrated to Israel in the 1930s and was active in the cultural department of the *Histadrut*. He died several years ago in his kibbutz, Yagur; Yitzhak Cohen – by trade a *trepiaż* (wooden boots worker).

After a few months, Tiger resigned and his place as councilor was taken by Ewa Fudałowicz, the later wife of councilor Herman Kirszbaum. Her name was later Ewa Fudałowicz-Kirszbaum<sup>9</sup>.

In 1922, councilor David Kalman passed away. Eliyahu Szajnrock, a representative of the merchants, took his place in the city council. It is also possible that Kalman's place was taken by Yitzhak Weber and that Szajnrock was chosen from among the first councilors. I write these pages from memory, nearly 50 years later and I am possibly mistaken.

<sup>6</sup> TN: in Russian, "Еврейское Кладбище".

<sup>7</sup> TN: Hebrew, "Nero Ya'ir" – "May his candle shine" (or "May he live a long life").

<sup>8</sup> TN: the National Democratic Party (abbreviated N.D., hence "*Endecja*"). Extreme right and mostly antisemitic.

<sup>9</sup> TN: she was born Ryvka Jochevet Landau, 21 Sep 1895 in Łęczycza.

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In the article of our Yizkor Book titled "Jewish-Polish Relationships in Kutno 40 Years Ago" (pp. 115-131<sup>10</sup>), D. Sztokfisz describes in detail the activity of the Jewish councilors in Kutner City Council, as well as my fight Jewish rights as a lay judge in the Municipality. My principle was to defend the Jewish interests as a whole, without consideration of party and status, as well as the interests of each Jew – in particular. To illustrate this, I will briefly recount some episodes from that time.

By the summer of 1920, during the Polish-Bolshevik war, the Russians had occupied Płock, 40 kilometers from Kutno. The Polish authorities arrested, among other "suspect elements" in our city, the three Bundists and detained them in a camp behind Cracow for several months. But even after they had just returned from camp, several town council meetings were held without their participation. As it turned out, they were not sent invitations at all, even though they had already been in town and no one had taken their rights as counselors. Therefore, it was a big surprise for everyone, when the three federal councilors suddenly appeared at a city council meeting... uninvited. Only then did it get out of control and a series of interpellations, protests and scandals began.

The antisemitic councilors of the *Endecja* suggested that "since the representatives of the '*Bund*' were disloyal to the Polish monarchy, given the evidence that they were interned in a camp as suspect elements, they should be excluded from the City Council". Interestingly, the councilor of P.P.S. drank some water and did not react at all to the proposition of the *Endeks* and so there was a danger that he should accept it. Such a decision at this time could easily have turned into accusation against the Jewish population in general. I asked for the floor and sharply attacked the *Endecja* proposition, pointing out that an accidental, administrative arrest based on wartime draconian exemption of laws is not the same as a standard court ruling, especially after detention in a camp with not even an appeal in a court of law. I expressed my doubts about the validity of those decisions of the City Council, which were adopted in the absence of the Bundist councilors, especially after their release, when it was not considered necessary to send them invitations to the meetings.

Councilor Zundel Comber, too, opposed the final proposition, which was not on the agenda at all, but only came up suddenly in the current meeting.

This was followed by a "compromise proposition" from Mayor Klepa, who demanded from the Bundist councilors a public declaration of loyalty, at the meeting. I sharply replied to the Chairman that such a declaration of loyalty to Poland would further suspect the Bundist councilors in the eyes of the power and the public – and suggested that all 24 councilors, including the Mayor, the Vice-Mayor and the lay judges, should deliver a

declaration of allegiance to the Polish Empire... No one would suspect such a declaration.

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I once discovered and pointed out to the Municipality that Poles, guild masters who had carried out certain works for the city, had misappropriated municipal funds and tricked us with their work. For example, a Christian carpenter undertook to create floors in the Public-School no. 3 for Jewish children (the "*Szabasówka*") on Płock Street. Based on a letter from a municipal councilor, the craftsman obtained the necessary number of boards in Itsche Holcman's wood warehouse. When I looked at the account of the warehouse, confirmed by the carpenter, I expressed to the mayor my suspicion that too many boards had been used for the floors and the rest of the wood he had taken for himself.

The mayor instructed the guild management (to which, incidentally, no Jews were accepted) to investigate the matter and they confirmed that my suspicion was justified. The craftsman took twice as many boards as he needed. No lawsuit was filed against him, but a certain amount of money was deducted. At the meeting of the Commission, the chairman of the Polish carpenters told me, that he was ashamed by the actions of his carpenter-master, who wanted to defraud the Municipality and enrich himself at the expense of municipal funds. And the fraud was discovered by a Jew...

After that event, Jewish artisans also received work from the Municipality, such as the painter Opoczinski, the bricklayer and furnace maker Shmuel Wolsztajn, the watchmaker Haller, and others.

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At the end of 1925, or the beginning of 1926, the teacher of the "*Am HaSefer*" school, Moshe-David Grinberg z"l, approached me with a request that since he and his family wanted to immigrate to *Eretz Israel* and as a teacher he would not get a certificate, but that he would on the basis of an official confirmation that he is a worker or craftsman – so I proposed him to officially contact the Municipality about issuing the necessary confirmation. We really managed to get an official document, adorned with the stamp of Kutno Municipality and signed by the mayor, that M. D. Grinberg is by profession a... carpenter. We understood that the ease with which Mr. Klepa signed the document was certainly a result of the will of the Poles that more and more Jews should leave Poland...

In 1926, the teacher Grinberg came from Kutno as a craftsman, a carpenter, and settled in Raanana, where he became the director of a public school. In 1960, he retired. He passed away a few years ago in Tel Aviv. Hundreds attended his funeral. Students, countrymen and worshippers. He was buried in Raanana.

Shortly after his arrival in the land, he changed his last name to Megged (initials of Moshe-David Grinberg). His two sons, Aharon and Mati Megged, are today two prominent Hebrew writers. Thus, I indirectly made a modest contribution to contemporary Hebrew literature...

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<sup>10</sup> TN: of the original book.