

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND ITS MEMBERS¹

translated from the Yiddish by Murray Citron

The Situation of the Jewish Population

Kutno had more than 33,000 people, and Jews made up about 25 percent of the population.

The city had a whole set of factories, mostly doing alterations, connected with the town. Along with the agricultural-machine factory, the city had a few mills, an oil factory, a tannery, a sugar-refinery, a distillery, a match-factory, and others. The whole of Przemysłowa Street was built up with factories, workhouses, and workshops, and, renowned throughout the whole country and Europe, "Rozlewnia" – an oil-refinery, whose production even Hitler-Germany bought. This did not however prevent the Nazi airplane pilots, while bombing the city, from striking the underground cisterns, creating a giant conflagration in the entire area.

All these factories and important workplaces were, with some exceptions, closed to Jewish workers and tradesmen. The Jewish owners of the mills and other enterprises also closed their doors to the Jewish toilers, under the pretext of not profaning the Shabbat. Besides that, there was no shortage of other excuses, such as that the Jewish worker was a bit lazy, too clever, and too weak to lift a heavy load.

As a result, it is no wonder that Jewish workers were engaged in specifically Jewish occupations, such as tailoring, baking, hat-making, brush-making, clock-making. A large part of the Jewish population was occupied in small business on the market – haberdashery, textiles, kitchenware, confections, and so on, not to mention the Jewish stalls with greens and fruit and the Jewish female market-vendors.

Especially strongly developed was the clothing business. There could be seen attractive well-equipped enterprises. This branch (like others) had as its foundation the toil of Jewish home-artisans. With the onset of the season, Jewish tradesmen did not see the outside world. From dawn to late at night they worked, harnessing the entire household, in order to earn a livelihood; also in the dead season, when the workshops were closed for cleaning, the floors sprinkled with sand...but even in mid-season, the pay was such that it scarcely sufficed to support a family of four to six people. It is no surprise that need was a regular resident in many Jewish homes in Kutno.

Surrounding the rich streets, where the small wealthy part of the Jewish population lived, were found the streets and alleys of the Jewish poor and unemployed, like Senatorska, Podrzeczna, the *groats*-lane. The Jewish toilers, who for the most part worked in their own homes, had almost no support from unemployment assistance. If it happened that City Hall sometimes created an opportunity to work openly, Jewish people could not take part, either because of their own *frumkeit*, or because of fear of the Jewish clergy. When the worker Meir Kenig, of

the *Left Poalei-Zion*, had the boldness to go out on Saturday to work, along with the Christian workers, the religious Jews made a frightful uproar: "How can it be that a Jew goes out on Shabbat with a shovel in his hand?!"

Kutno, the birthplace of Shalom Asz, was a long way from being the patriarchal-romantic *shtetl* of Mr. Yechezkel Gombiner, in whose broad hospitable courtyard "all were at home..." It was closer to the *shtetl* of Mendele Mocher Sforim, burdened with troublesome social contradictions.

Crowded into the narrow Jewish specialties, where the mostly poor tradesmen from dawn to midnight tried to drive out the seventh sweat in order to work up a bit of bread, their struggle against the rich Jewish merchants had often a tough, bitter outcome. Further, the Jewish toilers were compelled, in hard struggles, to yield such achievements as the laws of the state had ordered for the great private undertakings. But the Jewish workers, between the discriminatory policies of the Polish reaction and the anti-Jewish politics of the Jewish manufacturers themselves, had no access.

Social Conflicts, Clashes, Strikes

The trade associations in Kutno, and especially the strong needle-trade-union, always under difficult political conditions, had to carry on a struggle for the eight-hour day, which was never fully realized, especially in the framework of small workshops and seasonal work. Jewish workers had to tear from Jewish employers with their fingernails the possibility of benefiting from medical help from the sick-funds. At the same time the Jewish unionized workers carried on a stubborn struggle to support the younger workers against exploitation and chicanery on the part of the employer, against the mediaeval custom of three-year unpaid drudgery while learning a trade, against holding back for months the hard-earned wages, against not paying bills for delivered work... All these difficult, stubborn, long-dragged out struggles, were carried out by the Jewish toilers on the initiative of the left-wing workers' movement, together with the Bundists and the *Poalei-Zion* workers.

The strike in the tailor-workshop of Alter Hazenfeld was not a single case, but may serve as an example of the conflicts that we went through. In that workshop around 15 men worked – one of the biggest workplaces. The frequent conflicts were in part resolved through the needle-union, led by the communists, the *Bund* and the *Left Poalei-Zionists*. But whenever the employers felt that the union was weakened, they began to attack the workers' gains. In the workshops of Mroz and Falc serious happenings broke out, as the result of spying and provocations by the police. So, Mendel Zhurowski was brutally beaten (not a tailor, by the way) as the result of a provocation. So, also the tailor Abram Holcman was

¹ From materials of deceased activists, such as Leon Izbicki, Nathan Klar and others, collected and arranged by Chaim Grinbaum.

sentenced to a year in jail when the employer betrayed him as a communist during a conflict.

In the year 1932 this was the status of the Jewish workers: wages not paid on time; the workers not enrolled in the sick-benefit-funds; work given out to non-union home-artisans, Jewish and Christian; disrespectful attitudes by the bosses. All these together created an atmosphere loaded with dynamite. The outcome was unavoidable. The needle union at that time was weakened. The comrades Henech Chabus and Yitzhak Wecler (communists) declared, so long as we don't get paid what is owed to us, we don't work. The bosses wanted to shut these comrades out of the work. But the collective was united, and the bosses didn't succeed. We declared an Italian strike², but the employers had already prepared strike-breakers, precisely from the hooliganish Endeks³, known antisemites. This enraged the workers still more. In the moment when we took a determined stand, the police intervened and dealt out blows with rubber truncheons. Later – taken to the police station. And at the same time the police neglected to get the bosses to pay the workers what they were owed. Then, when we were being held under arrest, other comrades carried out an action.

All the workers abandoned the workshops, which were then boycotted by the entire Kutno working class.

Very interesting was the conduct of the Jewish house-proprietors, who picked Friday night exactly as the time to evict poor tenants from their dwellings.

Party-Activity

In Jewish Kutno were active the "Marxist Group," with Shaul Rozanski, Yehoshua Moszkowicz, Yenkel Jakubowicz, Rusak, Aharon Szuster, Fishel Sztajn, and others. This group, which had split off from the *Bund* and *Zukunft* ("the communist *Zukunft*") above all with Yenkel Kilbert, Gradom Zyskind, Zoshe Gradom, Hersh Kersz. These two groups in the year 1921/22 joined the rising Communist Party of Poland (one of the first secretaries of the united Communist Party organization in Kutno was the well-known Yiddish poet Beinish Zylbersztajn).

The political activity of the Communist Party was difficult because of its illegality. This did not however deter the enthusiastic Yenkel Kilbert and the self-sacrificing Zoshe Gradom from carrying on a broad campaign of enlightenment among the Jewish home-artisans.

The Kutno party organization developed a large and active project in organizing illegal mass meetings in the streets, or in closed locations, with secretly printed material, calls to action, newspapers, in secretly pasting on the walls actual party notices in connection with local and wider events, or in celebrating proletarian holidays by hanging banners on electric cables, and so on. In addition,

Kutno was the location of the district committee of the Communist Party, and on the Kutno organization fell the task of serving the surrounding villages.

Especially intense was the work of the comrades on



Gutshe ZELKOWICZ

the eve of the proletarian holidays, the First of May, the anniversaries of the deaths of the "three L's" (Lenin, Luxemburg, Liebknecht), the Seventh of November (October Revolution). The police were active on those days, many comrades were dragged out of their beds, or captured in illegal work, and thrust into prison, often for long years. More than once was there also terrible torture, even to death. So, in fact, were Chaim Zakszewski, Tova Klar, Rusak, Ruben Goldman, Andrzej Kenig, Rutke Rozen, and other comrades, sentenced to long prison terms. And the refined, gentle, charming, beautiful black-haired daughter of workers Gutshe Zerkowicz was sentenced to long years in prison, endured terrible tortures for not giving up her comrades in the struggle, and, in the year 1937, she was murdered in the Łęczyca prison because she had undertaken, as a political prisoner, not to wear prison clothing, meant for criminals. Her funeral was associated with a mighty protest-demonstration against Sanation⁴-police terror. Thousands of workers, Poles and Jews, marched together through the streets of Kutno, giving the last honor to the fallen Jewish fighter. The police agents, with Szuda at their head, stood helpless in the face of such a powerful solidarity-demonstration, though later in the night they had who to drag from their beds...

The captured comrades however were not abandoned. On the loose, there was an active organization of international help for political prisoners (MOPR), which organized legal and material help for the arrested persons and their needy families by sending food-packages into the prison, hiring lawyers, collecting money and so on. All this was done very much undercover, with the help of many non-party sympathizers. In Kutno there were many bourgeois people, who regularly contributed to

² TN: over-zealous respect of safety rules, refusing to work overtime etc., in a way that impedes productivity.

³ TN: supporters of the antisemitic *Narodowa Demokracja* Party ("National Democracy"), abbreviated as ND, hence "Endeks" for their supporters.

⁴ TN: Polish coalition of parties, authoritarian, mostly right-wing and antisemitic, based on Józef Piłsudski's ideas. It came to power after the *May 1926 Coup d'Etat* and remained until WWII.

MOPR, setting only one condition, that their names should not, God forbid, be mentioned or written down.

People of the left were for many years the most active workers in the union movement. Some Communist workers were for their devoted professional activity sent to the infamous concentration camp of Bereza Kartuska⁵. One of those comrades, Yosef Kam, today lives in France.

The Bloody First of May of 1932

With frequent searches a few days before the First of May the Police used to "create an ambience," instilling fear by dragging from their beds the most active comrades, in order to disorganize the preparations for the May-Demonstration. But the Left workers also worked out their own strategy: on the eve of the First of May the activists didn't sleep at home. The same thing was repeated every year. On account of the growth of opposition moods in the country, we were prepared for greater May-demonstrations, but for such a mass-participation and for such embitterment of the demonstrators we had for a long time not been prepared, as happened in 1932.

Seven o'clock in the morning the workers began to gather at the designated points. Communists gathered at the local of the "Koło," by Yaakov Fuks. Some of the comrades addressed the people about the meaning of the proletarian holiday. Suddenly a stranger leapt up on the table and put a question:

— "Do you want to hear from a Deputy of the Communist *Sejm*-faction?"

At length he began to recall the most important May-demonstrations of the C.P.P. against the regime, which was carrying out a bloody pacification in the Crescent⁶. The police on the scene began to use force on the people, who moved away to the old theatre, where were gathered hundreds of workers with their red banners. It didn't take long till the mass marched up the hill, in the direction of the church. The police blocked the way. The demonstrators forced their way through. On the way hundreds of people joined and on the main street a great mass of thousands of people gathered. At the City Hall the police erected large barricades to keep the demonstrators from reaching the prison. A great clash followed, and a battle with flags, wooden and iron clubs, and shafts from the peasants' carriages. There was a great uproar. The peasants wanted to harness their wagons and leave the battlefield, but the huge throng prevented them.

At last, the police began to shoot in the air. The demonstration separated into two parts – one part confronted the police, while the other marched on to the prison, from which were heard revolutionary songs and May-slogans. Soon there came police reinforcements and there was a clash. At the same time in the market there was a bitter battle between the attacking police and the demonstrators. All were jumbled together: peasants, unharnessed horses, customers. The police, not seeing

how else to control the situation, began to shoot into the crowd. In the result of the battle, a Jewish woman fell.

In these events, which reverberated in the foreign press, many Jewish workers and students participated, and among them there were many arrests. The bloody May-days in Kutno had an effect on the Jewish student youth. The students Mietek Buki. Wajnberger, Baum, Lipszic, Shaye Szatan, and others, as a result joined the Party. Some later enrolled among the fighters of the Republic in the Spanish Civil War (in 1936). Szatan, himself a former Bundist, is the author of a brochure against the *Bund*.

Hunger-Demonstration in the Year 1934

When support for the unemployed was suspended, a group of youth went to the train station and took some coal to warm the cold homes. Police began shooting and wounded a young person, who remained an invalid the rest of his life. From the railway station the demonstration marched on to the City Hall. Just then came a wagon of bread, which was meant for the shop across from Witkowski's kiosk. The worker Juzwiak jumped up on the wagon and gave out the bread among the hungry workers, including Jews. One of the Jews, Nachman Treger, also found himself among those arrested. Juzwiak was sentenced to a year in jail.

The Kutno Prison

The Kutno prison was well known to all the people, children and grown, big and small, because when going to the Jewish cemetery or to the Christian one, like it or not, one had to pass the prison building, which was surrounded by barbed wire on a thick wall, to which was added broken glass. But what was going on behind the wall was known only to those who were boarding there...

From time to time, political prisoners were held there, awaiting sentence. So, for example, Rutke Rozen (now Ozhel), with Ruben Goldman, when organizing the Pioneer movement⁷, were taken into prison and shared the same cell with criminals. The relations were very good. The political prisoners succeeded in arousing in the criminals' sympathy and respect. When the guards, not rarely, displayed brutality, especially to the criminals, all protested together. And when the political prisoners undertook a protest against preparing food in dirty vessels, left over from tsarist times, and demanded to be heard by a high official of the prison, the criminals supported the action.

After Rutke Rozen was received by the high jail officer, the vessels were scrubbed and the food was more tasty and cleaner. This was an important gain, but more important than the food, was the united stand of all the prisoners together. The political prisoners were once allowed to wear their own garments. But later that privilege was liquidated. The political prisoners more than once undertook protests against the brutal regulations of

⁵ TN: now in Western Belarus.

⁶ TN: western parts of Ukraine and Belarus, which were still Polish between the two World Wars.

⁷ TN: organization for children operated by a communist party, modeled on the Scouts movement.

the prison administration. In consequence of these struggles the Comrade Gutshe Zelkowicz was transferred to Łęczyca and in her underwear confined in a dungeon. In the process she was beaten on the kidneys – and murdered for not wanting to put on the prison-clothes.

Unity Actions of the Worker Parties

As is known, the Communist Party of Poland, throughout its whole history, was bitterly fought against by the ruling regime, which saw in it the greatest danger to its survival. But so were the other workers' parties, on the Polish as on the Jewish street, fought against by it, by all methods... Things began to change when the Piłsudski-regime began to tread on the feet of the *Bund* and the P.P.S. Gradually the idea began to grow of uniting against the common enemy.

I recall an episode, when the leader of the C.P.P. in Kutno, Ankersztajn, in the 1930s, together with the Bundist worker Herman Kirsbaum, held an illegal mass meeting at a corner of Królewska-Old Market. Many members of both parties attended. When the police came, nobody was there anymore. Later there were a lot of arrests, but for want of evidence, all were released after 24 hours.

Here is a second characteristic episode from the infamous days of Składkowski⁸ and his "*owszem*"⁹-policy:

Once on a market-day, when the Jewish small traders had brought out their bit of goods and placed them in their stalls, there suddenly appeared antisemitic "picketniks", who did not allow the peasants to buy their needs from the Jews. This happened just before the Christmas holidays, when the peasants come *en masse* into town.

The worker-parties had been informed that antisemitic actions were being prepared. In the true spirit of the unity-front, a self-defense was prepared to protect the Jewish property. In the morning, at Hirsberg's and Rabinowicz's, groups of workers gathered with clubs and iron bars. When the first "picketniks" appeared and began to shout, "*Nie kup u Żyda, swój do swego!*"¹⁰ the defenders chased them away to where the pepper grows... Once again at this time, the police showed their antisemitic face, but did not intervene, fearing that with the resistance of the workers, it would come to a bloodbath.

In this way the Communists, Socialists, and Bundists – workers, porters, Bundists and tailor-apprentices – defended the interests of the Jewish population.

"You Old Bolshevik!..."

Just at that Old Market, in an apartment with two not very big rooms, on the second floor, lived Man Zylber, a tailor, a home-artisan with his family – a wife and five children. The windows of his dwelling looked out on the

market. Man's home was however not devoted only to living in it and working, but also for other things: not thinking about any dangers, he committed his home to the Communist movement.

What then did not come to pass in that home? Deeply conspiratorial meetings of Jewish and Polish activists, and always – a table set with drinks and hors d'oeuvres; in the attic there was a whole warehouse of illegal literature, which was intended to be distributed in the surrounding *shetlech* and towns. Not concerned that Man's apartment was under steady observation by police agents, people from the province came regularly to collect the literature intended for them and the related notices, because the attic had a double exit.

The police agent Flichte more than once warned Zylber:

— Remember, you old Bolshevik, you will rot in jail...

But that did not in the least frighten such a brave comrade as Man Zylber was. It often happened that in the back room Rutke Rozen was sitting and leading a cell, while in the front room the police were sitting, waiting for guests. The frequent searches led to this, that the apartment always had a new shape... The police on purpose did not let him work, in order to compel him to give up the apartment. The police agent Szuda ground his teeth, seeing how the old Communist Man Zylber observed the First of May, and right in the front rows...

Mietek Buki

The youthful Mietek Buki studied in a Gymnasium in Kutno. In one of the History classes, he stood up and said to the Professor that he was misstating, that it didn't happen as the Professor had told the pupils. Buki then gave a complete exposition of the Marxist standpoint, to the amazement and discomfort of the Professor and the students. The result of Buki's intervention was expulsion from the Gymnasium. From then on, he devoted himself completely to the movement. In the year 1932, he was arrested in Poznań and brought before a court. He abstained from having a government lawyer, and defended himself...

It is worthwhile to underline, that after the verdict the judge went to Mietek's mother to say it was sad that such a talented person could not use his abilities to better purposes than in Communist work. The mother, a widow, wept with joy and pride at hearing such an opinion about her son, but at the same time she was heartbroken that he had been sentenced to a year in jail. After serving his sentence he came back to Kutno and was again active in the Party. He published two books of poems, just before the outbreak of war.

⁸ TN: Felicjan Sławoj Składkowski, 28th Prime Minister of Poland (June 9, 1885, Gąbin – August 31, 1962, London).

⁹ TN: Polish: "indeed". Składkowski said he opposed physical violence against Jews, but added "*but economic struggle [against Jews] – I indeed [support]*".

¹⁰ TN: Polish: "Don't buy from the Jew, each to his own!"

Chaim Zakszewski

Chaim Zakszewski came from a family of small businessmen, but even in his youth he turned to the Leftist movement. A tailor by trade, he worked together with his brother in Hazenfeld's workshop, and took part in the whole struggle that took place there. Whoever knew him from the area knew that he had a stormy character, with great obstinacy, and a firm belief in the cause of the working class. As his father's youngest son, he was greatly loved in his family, and his brother did everything he could to protect him from dangers. Chaim did not yield to the pressure from his family, especially from his beloved brother, to ease somewhat his activity in the movement, to stop making himself so visible. Nothing helped. He believed in the holy cause of Communism, for which he was always prepared to give his life. His audacious character constantly brought him to the most dangerous places, until he fell into the hands of the police. His arrest disturbed the whole city. What did his brother not do, to try to get him out of his trouble? He brought from Warsaw the best lawyer and moved heaven and earth, but Chaim was sentenced to five years in prison.

His eventful life was ended in the struggle with the Hitlerite murderers. In 1941 he volunteered for the Red Army and in 1943 he fell in the defense of Moscow. After his death his wife Salye received a decoration for his heroism. His grave is in a Belarussian town.

His wife Salye Rozen was also an activist and spent time in the Polish prisons. Now she lives in Poland.

They Also Fought

A major activity was shown by Hersh-Feivish, the brother of Man Zylber, whose home was also a location for the left elements of Kutno. Like his brother, he was constantly under observation by the police-agent Szuda.

Yankel Zandberg was active among the factory-workers, both on the Jewish street and the Polish street. It

was not an accident that in our town, antisemitism had a meagre effect. This was the result of the education work in the factories, schools and other places, including the Polish military... Here, beside the Polish comrades, worked Chaim David Klingbajl, Malka Frenkel (deported from France with her husband and son), Abraham Sztift and so on.

These heroic comrades are no longer living. Klingbajl died in the Soviet Union during the World War, Malka Frenkel was killed in a death-camp, and Abraham Sztift fell in battle against the German forces.

Yankel Kilbert – a founder of the C.P.P. of Kutno, a man of great education (born in 1902), was murdered in 1939.

Gradom Zyskind – also among the founders of the C.P.P. (together with Kilbert), stemming from a traditional Jewish home, studied in a *yeshiva*. As a young man he joined the movement and later worked as a functionary in the Leftist needle-union in Lodz, killed in 1939.

Fishel Sztajn – a son of a working-class family, a tailor, later went to Danzig and there became one of the most devoted party-workers.

The students: Mietek Buki, (joined the movement in the 1930s), became very active.

Salek Wajnberg – fought in Spain, today lives in France.

Lipszic – fought in Spain.

Bauman – stemmed from tailoring home-artisans, devoted party worker, did much for the youth.

In the Kutno Jewish sport-organizations were active many comrades and sympathizers:

Shaye Fajber, Freunt, the brothers Dukat, Bricman, all together, with the previously mentioned comrades Klingbajl, Sztift, Rutke Rozen, Abek, were active in the Jewish sport-clubs *Ż.T.G.S.*¹¹... Maccabi, later in "*Morgensztern*," in the left sport-club "*Iskra*"¹².

Honor to their memory!

¹¹ TN: Polish "Żydowskie Towarzystwo Gimnastyczno-Sportowe", "Jewish Association of Gymnastics Sports."

¹² TN: Polish "Spark".