

# EVENTS AND CHARACTERS IN THE COMMUNIST PARTY

by Yosef KAM, Lyon

translated from the Yiddish by Murray Citron

The following lines do not pretend to describe the detailed history and development of the Communist Party in our city, but only to bring out some recollections of events and figures which helped to shape in Kutno the local organization of the Communist Party, the sufficiently important factor in the general Jewish labor movement in and around the city.

## The 'misfortune' comes into the house

It is now almost 30 years since I left Kutno (in 1937), and since I was freed from the infamous internment camp Kartuz-Bereza<sup>1</sup>, where I was confined for 5 months. I earned that punishment by my activism for Jewish workers and as secretary of the professional union of the needle-workers in Kutno. I was freed thanks to the unceasing efforts of my father, may he rest in peace, and the advocate Henrik Erlich, may his memory be a blessing, the leader of the *Bund* in Poland between the two world wars.

Our great fellow-townsmen Shalom Asz once wrote that, "Though we are miles away from our hometown, something pulls us back." My great distance in time and space from Kutno has even today not blurred in my memory the picture of the *shtetl*, with its beautiful countryside, the velvety green forests and the green meadows where we held our conspiratorial meetings; I remember well the hometown with her 30,000 residents, a third of them – Jews. Although Kutno was not a center for heavy industry, she was still well known for her agricultural machines, her 7 to 8 mills, oil plants, and above all as a great railway junction on the line Warsaw-Poznań.

Kutno Jews were for the most part tradesmen: tailors, shoemakers, bakers, porters, coachmen, leather-cutters and *trepiarz* (as those were called who worked on the wooden shoes, "clappers" in the years of the First World War).

I come from a successful chassidic family. My father was a merchant. In our house there were twelve children. In "those years," after the 1905 revolution, there came into our house the new winds and ideas. I remember that my oldest brother was the recognized leader of the *Bund* in Kutno. My father would complain that he had brought misfortune into the house, meaning my brother... My older sisters belonged to the *Achdutniks*<sup>2</sup>. In fact, the whole family went over to the *Bund*, except for two sisters – Zionists, who are now in Israel.

## From "Zukunft" – to the communist-youth

In 1923, as a boy of 16, I joined the Bundist youth-group "Zukunft", became active there, a member of the

leadership. At that time the Communist Party was also active, with important influence among the Jewish and Polish workers in the city. Among their activists I remember Aharon-Henech Kenig (now in Paris), who founded the "*ComBund*", the first representative of Jewish workers in the city council; Comrade Kac, who as a Communist, in his twenties had to flee to the Soviet Union (now in Paris); Aharon Skrobek (David Kutner), who came from the neighboring *shtetl* Żychlin, who developed later into a recognized activist of the Communist Party of Poland, a delegate in Warsaw to the Council of Workers and Soldiers, who was detained for 17 months in Kartuz-Bereza, and who since 1936 has lived in Paris, where he edited the "*Neue Presse*"<sup>3</sup> and later, during the World War II, in illegal circumstances. He was deported in 1942; also, the Warcki family had its honored place in defending the interests of the Jewish population of Kutno; and the Szlenk family, especially the "*wujaszek*"<sup>4</sup> ("uncle").

From the beginning of the 1930s there was wide discussion in the *Bund* and in *Zukunft* of the problems of socialism, the Jewish question, the Soviet Union, and so on. The discussions were sharpened when Henri Barbusse<sup>5</sup> suggested holding in Amsterdam (Netherlands), an international congress for peace. Yes or no, whether or not to take part in the congress, became the central theme of discussion with which the Kutno "*Bund*" was occupied during a special assembly, with the participation of Arthur Ziegelbaum from Warsaw. When I spoke, I supported the idea of the congress, and as a result I had the honor of being heckled by Ziegelbaum, who said, "You are standing already with one foot in the Communist Party..."

It didn't take long till I was over with the other foot also into the Communist Youth.

## In the struggle against antisemitism

The Party entrusted me with a series of important posts and missions, such as Secretary of the Needle-Union, the biggest Jewish trade organization, member of town and district committees, instructor and lecturer in the surrounding province. After an appearance on the First of May, in Żychlin, in the *HaShomer HaZair* hall, I was arrested. I also visited the surrounding villages, where the Party had influence. In 1934, I travelled together with Nathan Moszkowicz as a delegate from the Kutno Needle-Union to the national congress of all clothing-workers in Poland, which took place at that time in Warsaw. Comrade Moszkowicz represented the Bundist section of our union.

Meantime a wave of antisemitism inundated Poland. The pogroms in Przytyk and in Mińsk Mazowiecki showed the real danger. We approached the P.P.S. and the "*Bund*" about a joint protest-action. On the

<sup>1</sup> TN: today, Białystok, Belarus.

<sup>2</sup> TN: members of "*Achdut Ha'Avoda*" (Hebrew, "Unity of Workers"), faction of the Labor movement in Israel.

<sup>3</sup> TN: "New Press", a Yiddish newspaper.

<sup>4</sup> TN: Polish, "wujek" is a maternal uncle.

<sup>5</sup> TN: French Communist.

synagogue street, not far from the old market, a great meeting took place – one of the best manifestations of worker solidarity. Appearances were made by Herman Kopel, Juzek Kirszbaum, Leibish and Zalman Kam, Nathan Moszkowicz.

After the meeting there were arrests. Over sixty people were arrested. Later only Juzek, Gutshe Zelmanowicz and I remained for a longer time under arrest.

A second demonstration for worker-unity, and resistance against the antisemitic agitators and pogromists, was in the year 1936.

One Saturday night there was a knock at the door of our house. My brother Leibish answered. Herman Kirszbaum appeared and said that he had a sure report, according to which the Endeks<sup>6</sup> were preparing for the morning, Sunday, a pogrom in Kutno. It was necessary to prepare for self-defense. In the middle of the night there had been a consultation and it was decided that at 6 in the morning there would be a bigger meeting at the Bundist house named for Beinish Michalewicz. I and Yechiel Zauerbach represented the Communist Party. On that day nobody worked. Jewish tailors, butchers, porters and coachmen, as well as Polish factory-workers, waited in battle-readiness for the Endeks' provocation, in order to smother it at the outset.

I was responsible for the Podrzeczna Street.

Just at sundown the police came to the Michalewicz house and asked that all patrols be removed from the streets.

I still remember a united action with the "*Bund*", following the establishment of the Popular Front in France and after the suppression of the Socialist uprising in Austria. In the Michalewicz House there was a joint meeting, under the chairmanship of Leibish Kam. Nathan

Moszkowicz spoke in the name of the "*Bund*", I – as representative of the Com-Party.

As is known, the Communist Party in Poland worked in conditions of illegality. In Kutno, however, it was possible for us to go on with the forbidden work using the framework of the professional unions.

### **Let us make their names eternal!**

The three Zylber brothers greatly helped the Party. One of them, who was in good circumstances, with his money and home address, made things easier for the comrades in their party work. A daughter of the Zylbers, Golda, devoted herself to "MOPR"<sup>7</sup> activity (aid for the political prisoners). When I returned from Kartuz-Bereza, and she brought Dr. Kleinerman to examine me.

Zigmunt Gradom – one of the first Jewish communists in Kutno, a son of a Kutno religious judge, came into the movement right out of the *Beit-Midrash*.

Chana Kenig is still alive to my eyes. She lived by the Old Market. A gymnasium-student, she would appear with fiery speeches, moving the youth. She was killed in the Sieradz prison.

Gutshe Zelmanowicz, a tailor-worker, active in the communist youth. Killed in the Łęczyca prison.

Goldman sat five years in Wronki prison. A son of a *dorożkarz*<sup>8</sup>, he was active in the party.

Yitzhak Wecler, active in the "Red" faction of Needle Union. A committed Party member. I believe he lives in Poland today.

Also remembered should be: Mendel Rak ("Paye"), the Zandberg brothers, Moshe Rozenbaum, Chaim Zakszewski (sat a long time in the Płock prison), the Rozen sisters of the Old Market, Ite Kenig (Falc), whose address was available for our use.

They all dreamed and fought for a better life...

---

<sup>6</sup> TN: members of the "National Democracy" party, right-wing, nationalist, antisemitic.

<sup>7</sup> TN: Russian acronym for "International Red Aid".

<sup>8</sup> TN: cabby.