

THE SCHOOL, *LINAT ZEDEK*¹ AND THE MERCHANTS' UNION

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translated from the Hebrew by Sara Mages

Now only the memories remained, memories bathed in childhood dew, the glow of youth, the end of life and staring glance of childish eyes.

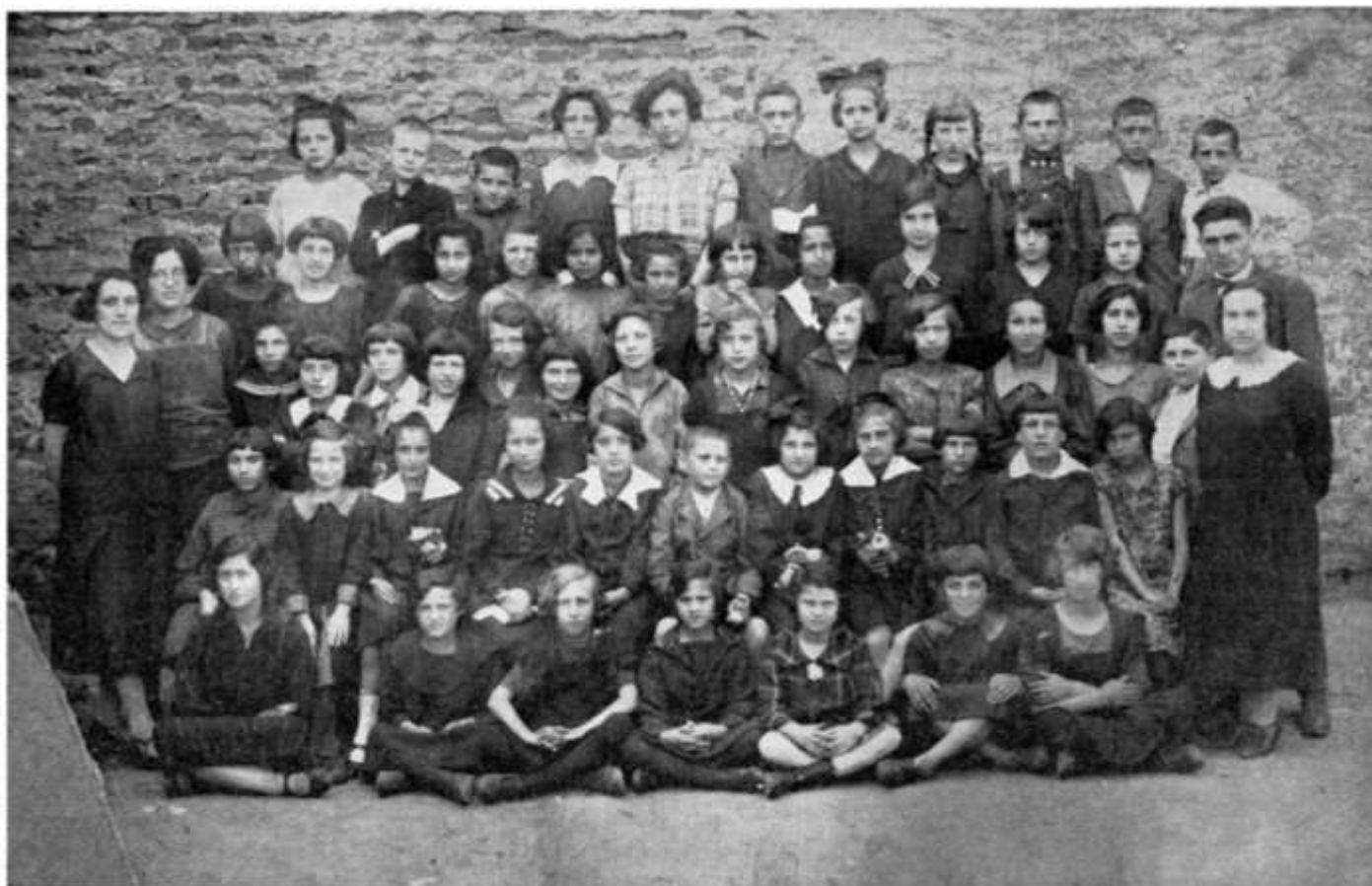
Here is my mother z"l standing in the morning by my bed, handing me the clean clothes she has prepared for me for school and urging me to get up so I would not be late for my studies. I take the book bag and I'm already on Królewska Street. The street is like every day. I meet on my way the same figures that, every morning, at this fixed hour, make their way toward the Gur Synagogue, to the "small Gerer *shtiebel*." As is their custom, Chaim Yaakov Walter and Chaim Rabbe stand next to their shops and, as usual, joke about someone or something and their faces express their satisfaction. As I pass by one of them, he lets me pass only after a pinch on my cheek as a sign of affection they imprint on me... and the redness is staying on my cheek all day so that I will not forget their love for me... and so it repeats every day, they pinch, and I let out a scream in pain as a token of gratitude for their expressions of affection...

After I manage to leave them, I approach the empty lot next to the school. Here, there is still enough time for the students to snatch a light game until the teachers arrive. Suddenly, the bell rings. The principal, Klapper, appeared! All the children are frantically pushing towards the classrooms.

School number 3

I do not remember exactly the year our school was opened, but according to the documents that are in Mr. Shlomo Elberg's possession, the school was established in the years 1916-1917 thanks to his hard work, his stubbornness and energy. However, I do not remember its early years because I have not studied there yet, and I only remember the period of my studies.

Then, the classrooms were scattered in two places in the city. Some were housed at the Kovet house and the others were housed in the school building on Kościuszko Street. Our classroom was already equipped with modern equipment as in the Polish schools. When our classroom



The elementary school ("*Powszechna*") number 4 – the students and the teachers

¹ TN: volunteers' organization spending the night beside the beds of sick people so that their families could get some rest. The organization also gave the needy medicines and financial aid for recovering from an illness.

teacher, Mrs. Kurzniak-Altman, entered the classroom we received her with the Polish song, "*Kiedy ranne wstają zorze*,"² as demanded by the Polish Ministry of Education in those days.

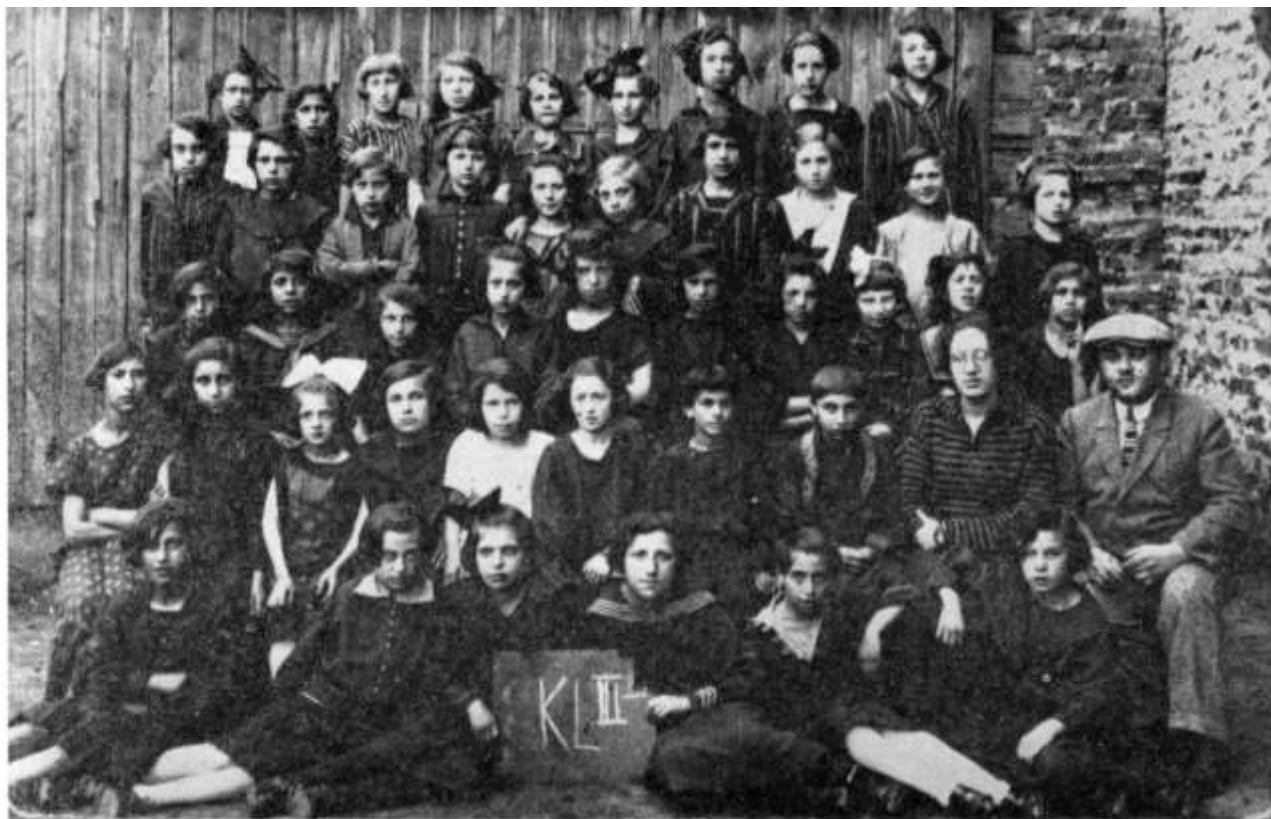


A class in "Am HaSefer" school

Indeed, many boys wanted to acquire a broader Jewish education, but the Hebrew school – "Am HaSefer" – was the only Hebrew school in our city and it could not absorb all the students. Therefore, many of them flocked to our school which also provided Hebrew education in addition to the general education of elementary school. The level of study in our school was high and the teachers demanded a lot of the students. As a result, many elementary school students were easily accepted into high school. There was a pleasant and serious atmosphere of study in it since the students studied diligently, with

interest, and its discipline was exemplary. In addition to the studies, the students showed great interest in other fields: they published a student newspaper, "*Chayenu*,"³ and also founded a dramatic club which performed during Chanukah and Purim. The club was organized by the teacher Taub who, in addition to teaching at our school was a member of the Zionist movement, taught Hebrew in evening classes, organized the Berek Joselewicz Association, and also taught the Bible and Talmud. I remember that during one of his classes Rabbi Trunk, the government inspector of schools and the principal of our school, suddenly visited us. They sat in the classroom and listened to his lesson. Afterwards, Rabbi Trunk told him that he was very pleased with his teaching and explanation. As noted, the teacher Taub was also a loyal Zionist and made sure that his students were educated in the Zionist spirit.

On one of the days of *Lag BaOmer*, which was dedicated to the festivities of the youth movements, we asked the principal of our school, Klapper, to release us from school for this day, but he did not approve our request. Also, the intervention of the teacher Taub in this matter did not help. All we had left was to leave for the forest without permission. The next day, on *Lag BaOmer*, as we passed in a procession, in unified rows next to the school, the principal, Klapper, stood there and registered all the students who participated in the trip and were absent from school... When we returned to school the principal did not allow us to enter the classrooms, adding mockingly "maybe today is also *Lag BaOmer*." After the



State elementary school ("Powszechna") – 1930

² TN: Polish, "When the aurora rises in the morning", popular song.

³ TN: Hebrew, "Our life".

intervention of the parents, the counselors of *Beitar* and our teachers Taub and Szapszewicz, the incident was eliminated and we continued our studies. Since then, the activities of the youth movements have been uninterrupted, and we no longer had to act underground in fear of the evil eye of this principal. Klapper perished in the holocaust together with all the city's Jews.

The teacher, Taub, was one of the teachers who were not natives of Kutno. They arrived to our city after the First World War and easily integrated in the life of our city. They were the teachers: Szapszewicz, Apelast and Altman. They were loved by all, students and parents alike. We were proud of our teachers because we loved them and appreciated their dedication to teaching and to their students. The teacher, Szapszewicz, the mathematics teacher, knew everything about the lives of his students, he took an interest in them and took care of their safety. The teacher, Altman, came to us immediately after his service in the Polish army. He integrated in the city's life and also married the teacher Kurzniak. They were involved in the Jewish community. Both survived the Holocaust. Today they live in Israel and continue teaching.

The teacher, Kurzniak, was an excellent teacher and educator and knew how to endear her subjects, history and literature, on her students. She survived the slaughter, immigrated to America and recently visited Israel. The teacher, Tacz, who was also a good teacher, taught us the Polish language and its grammar. She perished in the Holocaust. May her memory be blessed.

And last but not least, the music teacher, the only non-Jewish teacher in our school. He was a Christian and much can be told about him and his help during the terrible days that haunted the Jews of our city. He was a Righteous Among the Nations. More than once he went to the barbed wire, which surrounded the ghetto, to bring to his students, and their parents, a little food or something of other value that the unfortunate Jews needed during their terrible distress. He suffered together with the Jews and wanted to help them in every way.



"Am HaSefer" trip to Zakopane

*Linat Zedek and Bikur Cholim*⁴

Linat Zedek occupied a distinguished place among the Jewish institutions in Kutno. Its activities were supervised by Abraham Yehuda Zandberg, May God avenge his blood. He acted and activated others for this institution. Even though there was a list of volunteers, who were assigned to sit in shifts by the hospital bed, each case was referred to Abraham Yehuda Zandberg, and he arranged for proper arrangements for the patients. The medicine storehouse and other medical equipment were also found in his home. There were also different types of medicine in his home to help the patient to recover after his illness.

It should be noted, that *Linat Zedek* was active before the First World War. It was headed by Yonatan Majranc who was in charge of distributing aid to the sick. He referred the patients, who had contacted him, to private doctors.

Indeed, the people of our town have always known what mutual assistance is, generously supported every patient and the institution *Linat Zedek*.

Merchants-Union

In 1918, when Poland became independent, its entire economy was destroyed. The sharp rise in inflation has meant that cheap items of daily use were being bought for millions of marks. Regardless of the fact that the main victims of such a fatal economic situation were the Jews,

Ruch członków i udziałów			
	Liczba członków	Liczba zaszk. udziałów po zł. 100	Suma wpłaconych udziałów
Na początku roku było .	101	134	Zł. gr. 11,520.00
W ciągu roku przybyło .	20	142	15,385.00
Pozostaje na dz. 1/1 1929	121	276	26,905.00
Kapitał gwarancyjny 276,000 zł.			
Sprawozdanie			
z rewizji przeprowadzonej przez Radę Nadzorczą			
W dniu 31 grudnia 1928 roku przeprowadzono szczegółową rewizję portfeli i dokumentów oraz stanu kasy, zaś w dniu 23 lutego 1929 roku sprawdzono zamknięcie r-ków i ksiąg.			
Stwierdzono, iż wszystko prowadzone jest w należytych porządku i że w działalności swej Zarząd kierował się przepisami statutu.			
Kutno, dnia 23 lutego 1929 r.			
Prezes: (-) J. Opatowski			
Wice-Prezesowie: (-) J. Bromberg (-) W. Anz.			
Członkowie: Sz. Babe, A. Bożekowski, A. Blumstein, Z. Metal, A. Szajarok, I. Weber, N. Weinstein, Sz. Zylberberg, S. Żelechowski.			

Report of the Committee Supervising the Operations of the "Trade Bank" (1928)

⁴ TN: Hebrew, "visiting the sick."



Staff of the "Bank Kupiecki" ("Trade Bank") in Kutno. Sitting at center – the Rabbi Trunk

the Polish antisemitic government placed all the blame on the Jewish population.

During the first years of Poland's independence, a special commission was active in the country to combat speculation. As in all places, such a commission also worked in Kutno. And, as everywhere else, in our city they also punished mainly the Jewish merchants, retailers and craftsmen. It was enough for two Poles with files under their arms to show up in the street – and the panic among the Jewish shopkeepers became great. Soon the city became quiet, the Jews closed their doors and went away. They knew that as soon as the commission's officials visited a Jewish business, it would mean an official report and a large fine.



"Trade Bank" ("Kupiecki" – 1929)

But how long can such a cat-and-mouse game last among a large part of the Jewish population with the commission to combat speculation?

All the Jewish merchants of Kutno gathered in the "Modern" cinema hall and out of it, with a cry – that is, Jews, we are lost! It is necessary to reorganize – otherwise it's the end...

The keynote speakers were Yitzhak Opatowski and Yitzhak Szymonowicz who, thanks to their initiative, made this meeting happen. I still remember the strong attack of Y. Szymonowicz z"l, who called on the Kutner merchants and retailers to mobilize to fight against the various decrees – and only in this way will more enemies reckon with the Jewish population.

It was under such circumstances that the Kutno the merchants' union arose. In the first administration were selected: Yitzhak Szymonowicz, Yitzhak Opatowski, Levin, Wajchselfisz, Zandberg and Łęczycki hy"d. The first task of the administration was: to introduce a uniform price curriculum for all merchants, based on official accounts. The epidemic of protocols by the commission to combat speculation has been weakened, but as prices were steadily changing, new prices were published every Monday and Thursday in the newspapers.

The merchants' union was busy with work when the taxman began to press the Jewish shopkeeper and merchant. As a result of this tax policy, the influx of members is also increasing. Interventions, petitions,

advocacy – are the main work of a union. Szymonowicz with Secretary Opatowski work in the tax office. At the head of "Urząd Skarbowy"⁵, for some time, was the Kutner Pole Yaworski, who knew everyone – the work was easier.

With the rise of Hitler's power, anti-Jewish propaganda in Poland intensified. On the walls and in the newspapers the slogans were written down: "*Nie kupuj u Żyda*" ("Do not buy from a Jew"), the antisemitic leaflets and most importantly – the pickets at the Jewish shops, in which hooligans armed with sticks prevented entry of Christian customers – also causing clashes and beatings.

In the years 1934-1935, large taxes were imposed on the Kutno Jewish merchants. In order to repeal the decrees, or weaken them, a representative of the tax commission was sent by the merchants' union. He faithfully served the interests of Jewish merchants. The task of such a public messenger was very difficult, his Yaakov voice needed to be heard by many Esau, who wanted to do evil to the Jewish merchants.

When the Germans occupied Kutno, Opatowski, Levin and Łęczycki carried out some interventions with the military authorities for the benefit of Jewish merchants, but the rope around the Jewish merchants in Kutno was increasingly pulled by the Hitlerite assassins. Before they killed the victims, they had to rob them first.



"Trade Bank" of Kutno, financial report

⁵ TN: Polish, "Tax Administration".