

## KUTNO IN JANUARY 1945

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translated from the Yiddish by Murray Citron

As a captain in the Polish army, I spent the war years in the camp of the Polish military, which had established itself on Soviet territory, in Lenino<sup>1</sup>. On the approach to Polish land, after hard and bloody battles with the retreating Germans, my heart began to beat faster, and I was drawn to the one-time home, to Kutno, where I was born, and brought up, and became an adult. The ruined cities and burned settlements, the murdered Jewish populations, readied me for the same scene in my hometown, Kutno. But a spark of hope always flickered: maybe some among my relatives survived the bloody flood? Had I not, on our painful road, met chosen individuals, though broken and sick, who had succeeded in saving themselves? Why should such a miracle not also happen in Kutno?

### In liberated, but ruined, Poland

In August, 1944, the general staff ordered me to install a military administration in liberated Chelm. I was still depressed by my visit to the synagogue in Kovel<sup>2</sup>, where in their own blood the tormented Jews had written on the walls, "Jews, take revenge for our blameless spilled blood!" I could also not forget the Jewish town of Kiwerce<sup>3</sup>, where an old Christian woman warned us not to drink the water from the well, because the Germans had hidden bodies of Jewish children there... I ordered some soldiers to take out the decaying little bodies and brought them to the Jewish cemetery.

With such a mood, I arrived in Chelm, where a Jewish committee was soon formed and registered the refugees. I didn't find any Kutno names in the list...



Kutner survivors during the erection of the memorial stone in the cemetery (1946)

<sup>1</sup> TN: probably the one in eastern Belarus.

<sup>2</sup> TN: Today in Ukraine, 160km north of Lviv.

<sup>3</sup> TN: Kivertsi, today in Ukraine, 13km northwest of Loutsk.

After Poland was liberated up to the east bank of the Vistula, in January 1945 we forced Poland's largest river. The first city, Radom, which once bubbled with Jewish life, was now *Judenrein*. The same fate as other cities where the German murderers ruled. On the sidewalks stood masses of people, greeting the liberating army. In the multitude I did not see a single Jewish face.

On the sixteenth of January I had to go to Łódź. Happiness and sorrow ruled me. Nearer to Kutno, but I already knew the fate of Jewish Łódź. In the big city I had to take charge of all the former German offices. On the seventeenth of January the radio and the press reported the liberation of Kutno. I would have liked to take wings and fly there, but my military rank and uniform compelled discipline. On the twentieth of January I was required to go to Warsaw. There, in the capital city, without any difficulty I obtained from Vice-Minister Mietkowski leave to travel to Kutno.

The railway station-master gave a special compartment to me and my orderly. Our travel order stated that we were travelling on a special, important mission. The train moves, the wheels clang, and there comes to mind Julian Tuwim's well known song "*Stoi na stacji lokomotywa*"<sup>4</sup> There arise in memory the names and sights of all the places that we are passing. Everywhere – a space empty of Jews. Does the same wait for me in Kutno?

### In the desolated home

At last – the well-known inscription on the station: Kutno! Difficult to leave the train. The crowd in the carriages and corridors is extreme. My ordinance has to climb through the window with the suitcase. Now, finally, I also am on the platform. Many, many people—but where are the Kutno Jewish shipping agents, the merchants and

market-travelers? Where have gone Leibish Finkler and Asz?

Barely got out of the terminal – a narrow spot, like sardines in a can. Grabbed something at the buffet, where they showed us the way to the military post. We go there to find a night's lodging. The duty officer orders two militiamen to accompany us to Mr. Starnawski, the pharmacist, because there must be a good lodging for the Mister Captain...

Mrs. Starnawski opens the door and has no choice but to begin at once to prepare a separate room for us. While we wait, I have a chat with the proprietor. I ask him, "Where are the Kutno Jews, who lived here, around you?" He stares at me. "You know me?" "Of course." – I answer calmly. "I was your neighbor, lived across there..." He calls to his wife: "*Zobacz, to syn Moszka Wajchselfisza, co mieszkał naprzeciwko*" ("Look, this is Moshe Wajchselfisz's son, who lived across there"). And bursts into tears. I am not ashamed to say to him that he was never a friend to the Jews. He tells about the fate of the Kutno Jews, remembers a few names, knows how to give details of the great disaster.

In the morning, I walk the Kutno streets...

Here is the New Market, where the well-known workers and merchants are. Perhaps Frenkel with his ironworks is there? And Rabinowicz, with his sharp, mischievous head... There hurries Mr. Abraham-Fishel Zandberg, he pauses for a quick chat with another Jew.

But these are all hallucinations. The familiar buildings, sidewalks, businesses and dwellings, called up in my mind those living forms, who were well etched in my memory from before the war. Now the war is over. Hitlerism is defeated. After he slaughtered a third of our people. Among them – our Kutno Jews. No, they will never be seen again at the New Market, at the Old Market, never come



The memorial stone in memory of the Jews from Kutno murdered by the Nazis

<sup>4</sup> TN: "The locomotive is waiting at the station", first verse of poem for children "The Locomotive", still widely known in Poland.

back from where they were driven, to *Konstancja*, and then – to Chełmno.

Here is the synagogue site –empty. Not exactly. Only of Jews is it emptied. Peasants' horses and wagons stand there sheltering and resting. The Germans turned the *Beit-Midrash* into a firefighters' shed. On the right the *Talmud-Torah* house stands orphaned. Maybe there will appear there the well-known Jew Arbuz, or Shmuel the bricklayer? Strange figures pass by. I come to Królewska Street. Maybe someone is left here? I go from house to house. On this street I grew up. I knock at Celemski's house. No answer. From Lichtenstajn's home there comes out a Polish stranger. I apologize to him. I made a mistake... The same happens at the house of my relative Sonia Kronzylber. The clock shows 8:30 am. The store is open. I go in with confident steps and ask where is the proprietor? The present owner stands confused, does not know what to answer. Finally, he says, "I bought this as German property." In a broken voice I answer, "This is Jewish property" – and go away.

I come to our one-time house and shop at 14 Królewska. Nothing to do here. I pass the shop of Abraham-Fishel Zandberg, the soda-water shop of Abraham Opatowski, the alley of the Kirszbaums. I turn back to our house. The caretaker recognized me, became flustered and asked me and the orderly to sit down. With tears in her eyes, she tells what Kutno went through in the dark years 1939-1945.

From Królewska, I go to the Old Market. I have a look at the business of our neighbor Shaul Zakarski, glance at the cellar of Ester Frydman and at Stuczynski's butcher shop. There is the shop of Henech Walter, where the peasants used

to buy soap and laundry-powder. I remember the joker Gorszkowicz the barber. He was also a klezmer and party-maker. How he used to play his trumpet at weddings and celebrations.

Absorbed in thoughts, I went toward the Old Market. The ordinance wants to get me out of this state, he begs me, almost in tears:

— Captain, we have to eat something, drink a glass of tea.

I don't answer. My distracted glance notices in the sidewalk a funeral-stone inscription: Avraham Lifszic z"l. What is this? Was the cemetery carried over to the Old Market? Around that inscription – more tombstones, stones from the cemetery. Ha, now I know! The German barbarians destroyed the cemetery and paved the sidewalks with the memorial stones. Seen such things in other cities. The vandals did the same in Kutno.

Enough! Impossible to go further in the city. My steps are getting heavy; my head feels as if it is filled with lead. Barely dragged myself back to my lodging at Mr. Starnawski's.

During the evening meal, the Pole talks about the occupation-time. He lacks words to praise the honorable and self-sacrificing actions of Mr. Bozhikowski, of barber-surgeon Aspersztajn. He also recounts some memories of his Jewish neighbors: Avraham Mroz, Meir Łęczycki, the Wolcman family, Szajnrok, Bender, Warecki. The conversation continued into the late-night hours.

#### **At the cemetery and in the *Konstancja* ghetto**

On my second day in Kutno I decided to visit the Jewish cemetery. Headquarters gave me a horse and



E. Wajkselisz and I. Pasirsztajn, wearing Polish Army uniform, among carriers of stretcher with ashes of victims. The Rabbi Kahana (on the right) says the prayer "*El maleh rachamim*"

carriage and accompanied by two soldiers and a militiaman I went to the cemetery. Here also the brutal hand of the German barbarians had reached. The tombstones were knocked over, the enclosing wall torn out. The ohel of the righteous Reb Shie'le Trunk was destroyed.

On the empty and defiled field cattle grazed. The shepherd, a young Polish lad, ran over to the militiaman to explain that the cattle had got onto the field by themselves, he had pastured them in another place. The militiaman warned him to take more care, if not he would be punished...

Only the tombstones of R' Berish Chassid and Rusk remained undisturbed. (I took a photograph of them). Later, I asked the commander of the militia and the chief of the security police to help the returning Jews as much as possible.

In the afternoon, I went to *Konstancja*, to the ruined sugar-factory, in which the Kutno Jews were confined in the year 1941. Now, my eyes saw only half-destroyed walls. If they had been able to speak, I would have heard from them one of the worst and most horrifying stories of the last road of our Kutno Jews. *Konstancja* was the last, but hardest step on the road to martyrdom. I felt that the naked walls of *Konstancja* cry out only one word, which the wind carries all over Poland and perhaps over the whole world: Revenge!

And I make a vow: to bring some ashes from Chełmno and bury them in the Kutno cemetery. May the ashes of the martyrs rest in the Jewish cemetery.

With this in mind, I left Kutno on January 25.

After my departure from the city, the following returned: the landowner and agronomist Ajzik Wassercug, Tola Stuczynski with her sister-in-law and others. I also meet Abek Aspersztajn, who served as a medical officer in my regiment and later left to study medicine. Also to Kutno came Mordechai Zandberg, Falek Tajchner, Dr. Finkelstein, Shmuel Weintraub, Płocker and others. A Jewish committee was organized in Kutno.

During my meetings with surviving Kutno Jews in Łódź and in Warsaw, I raise the question of erecting a memorial stone for the murdered Jews of our city, together

with bringing ashes from Chełmno. The committee undertook to realize this plan. The militia promised help.

### **The symbolic funeral**

After all the preparations were made for the funeral and for putting up the monument, the Kutners Celemski and Weintraub were sent as delegates to Chełmno, from where in a black casket they brought ashes from the crematorium.

In the ceremony of bringing the ashes to the Kutno cemetery there took part representatives of the Central Committee of the Jews of Poland, the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish soldiers in the Polish Army, Colonel Kahana and his assistant, the members of the Kutno City Council with the mayor Brosz, party-workers from the district office. In emotional speeches, they described the last road of Kutno Jewry and gave final honors to their ashes.

The casket with the ashes was carried by two Jewish officers of the Polish Army: Zvi Cohen and the writer of these lines. The procession marched past the main streets of Kutno, to the synagogue. There, the eulogy was delivered by Rabbi Kahana. His Kutno son-in-law Atlas said Kaddish. Weeping and moaning was heard from the congregation. The broken hearts could not hold themselves in.

The procession continues. We come to the cemetery. The ashes are buried and at the same time the monument is put in place. During the unveiling, Rabbi Kahana gives a moving speech. Again, tears and sighing. Of the 8000 Kutno Jews, there remain only a handful...

Polish vandals could not bear that the survivors honored the martyrs of Kutno Jewry with a monument. Two days after the funeral, I received a telephone message in Łódź that the gravestone had been broken... Dr. Finkelstein, Tola Stuczynska and I addressed the city council about carrying out an energetic investigation and punishing the guilty.

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Such are my memories of Kutno after the liberation.