

KUTNO WITHOUT JEWS

by A. SIEDLECKI

There was once a Jewish town named Kutno

Before the war, Kutno had twenty-five thousand inhabitants. The number of Jews was over a third of the general urban population. Kutno was one of the oldest Jewish communities in Poland. The cemetery, which stands ruined and desolate, is already over 400 years old. The old synagogue dates back five centuries.

In Kutno, a full-blooded Jewish life flourished, and in all areas. Now it is swept away.

On ancestral graves

It's a sunny Sunday morning. Kutno was joined by the surviving Kutno Jews, who now live in various cities across the country – in Warsaw, Łódź, and Wrocław, – those who had recently returned from the Soviet Union. All of them took part in the mourning celebration on the 4th anniversary of the Holocaust in their hometown.

I am striding across the streets of former Jewish Kutno, it is quiet, the shops are still closed, the shutters are still closed. The streets are cleared. It reminds of the Shabbat rest-peace in a Jewish town. I look at the gates of the courts and think – maybe the additional-soul Jews will show up; the Jews, who have been hailed in literature by the Kutner Shalom Asz.

Yes, Shalom Asz's town remained intact (Kutno suffered little from the war operations), but no *Shlomo Nagid*, *Ezekiel Gombiner*¹. Kutno is without Jews.

We pass the two-story red brick building. Here lived the great genius and scholar R' Yehoshua Kutner, who brought so much glory to the city. Shows us: here was his courtroom, his bedroom, the *yeshiva*...

We are moving forward. Here is Holcman's palace. A wealthy Jew. And here was Szlajfer's mill. The Germans burned it. And here lived Rabbi Shabtai, here Chaim David, Moshe Ein – and so on and on. This heart becomes torn from worry and woe. Where are the Jews?

On area of ghetto

On a ruined site in the corner of town, opposite the railway ramp – we were informed – was the Kutno ghetto. On June 16, 1940, the Germans forbade the Polish population to leave their homes. On that day the transfer of the Jews took place. All the Jews were driven into a secluded place where the "*Konstancja*" sugar factory was once located. Here, in the half-destroyed sugar factory facilities and in the neighboring four buildings, lived 8,000 Jews!

At the end of March 1942, the liquidation of the Kutno Jews began. Hundreds of men were taken out every day to Chełmno. There, they were gassed. The action lasted until the end of April.

The mourning-manifestation

The small hall of the Jewish community on Mickiewicz Street is crowded with people – several hundred Jews, this is the remnant of the city of Kutno and its environs. Jews from the neighboring towns of Krośniewice, Żychlin, Ozorków, Konin, and Włocławek also attended the mourning ceremony.

In the middle of the room, on a catafalque lined with black, lies the urn with ashes, brought from the Chełmno death camp, where the Jews of Kutno perished. Around burning candles, the chairman of the committee, Dr. Finkelsztajn, reads the story of the Holocaust in Kutno. Afterwards, speeches will be given by the *Staroste*, the Vice-Chairman of the Municipal National Council and a representative of the military garrison. They sympathize, they know what Hitlerism has brought with it. Even today, Hitler's spirit still works among us... It needs to be burned to the ground. Then, in a depressed mood, another Kutno Jew speaks, G. Fogel. He tells what happened once... The cantor chants *El Maleh Rachamim*...

A mourning procession forms itself, a funeral. The urn with ashes is carried on a catafalque. The procession



The memorial stone – from the other side

¹ TN: characters from Shalom Asz's books.

is led by the Polish Military Chief Rabbi Dr. D. Kahana, and the chairman of the Łódź religious community, Yosef Atlas, who especially came to participate in the ceremony.

The funeral procession stops in the empty space of the synagogue, which the Germans burned and left no trace of. A speech by Rabbi Kahana was given to the assembled urban population.

The urn containing the ashes of the Kutno martyrs was buried in a Jewish cemetery. A tombstone was placed on the tomb with the inscription: "A monument to the holy community of Kutno that was destroyed and eradicated by the German murderers."²

In front of the open tomb is a touching, mourning Yosef Atlas. Rabbi Kahana says the Kaddish. The crowd breaks out into a large wailing.

The cemetery in Kutno also did not escape the fate of the Holocaust. The tombs were desecrated and the tombstones were torn down. The tombs of R' Yehoshele Kutner, of R' Moshe Gostyniner³, and of other good Jews with whom Kutno was heard, were desecrated. The

cemetery also contains mass graves of people who died in the ghetto and those who died in the killings, which the Germans made in the city itself. There is a mass grave of fifty abused Jewish girls, who were tortured to death by the Gestapo chief. And when the same German murderer came back in a couple of days asking for more Jewish girls, supposedly for taking them to work, the president of the *Judenrat*, Bernard Holcman refused to give any. "As long as the first fifty girls do not come back, no one will go to work for you!" he explained.

For this bold speech, Holcman, like his comrade Sender Falc, paid dearly: the Gestapo took them to the cemetery, forced them to dig a grave for themselves, and buried them alive...

Such and similar stories of Jewish pain were told on the graves of Kutno Cemetery...

("The New Life", Łódź, June 1946. Sent to the Book of Remembrance: Aharon-Henech KOENIG, Paris)

² TN: this tombstone was broken a few days later, by Poles.

³ TN: Moshe Gombiner, the father of Shalom Asz.