

IN MY KUTNO AFTER THE DESTRUCTION

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1

K—U—T—N—O—O—O !...

The call from the conductor woke me up – not from sleep, but from a weekly dream in which I had been immersed since I got into the car, which was to take me back to the city I had left 28 years ago.

Here I was standing on the platform of Kutno station: the clock strikes 6 in the morning when the train from Poznań to Warsaw usually arrives.

I walked out of the train station, looked around and sought for something familiar, an acquaintance among the few faces.

I had the impression that there was a mistake, that this is not Kutno station, but some rural station, where a few peasants gathered to see a passing train, which happened to stop in their village.

I stood like this in bright outdoors and a shiver went through my body.

... I was still under the impression of the daydream that I had returned as a tourist to my hometown of Kutno, where my long-yearning parents were waiting for me, with my sister Sara who before my departure became a bride with her destined Yaakov Menche. I kissed the picture of her-lovely children.

My good uncle Yeshayahu Zomer was waiting for me with his pious shy wife, aunt Yocheved, I am

surrounded by my friends Israelik Rechenzman and Winer, Avigdor Król and his brother Pinchas.

A little late, my mother-in-law Gitel Salomon arrived, a long way off and with a smile of happiness, seeing again her Moshe, Ittele's husband, her beloved son-in-law to whom she was ready to go, even if the voyage on the sea, which was totally foreign to her with its capricious waves and storms, took three months.

All the speeches, all the stories about the past years that reminded us of such a beautiful time.

The sun warmed the June dawn, but my soul was frosty cold. I kept my eyes closed, I was afraid to open them, so as not to lose my vision. And when I opened them, I recognized the place where I last said goodbye to my loving and kind father; I had the feeling that I heard his silent smiles and many of his fatherly kisses on my cheeks and I can still hear the sound of his last words:

— Remember, Moshe, if you're feeling unwell, you should write and we'll help you come back. Above all, my child, do not forget to write, every week you should write a letter to your parents...

In the first months, I wrote. I have written to my parents, written every week to my wife and once also to a neighbor.

Ittele came, created a home. Livelihood concerns engulfed me every free minute; I was not a great performer, so life was not easy.

When a child is born, it seems one forgets everything and everyone; Mom and Dad are far away, on the other side of the Atlantic; once in a while one writes a few words to show one still cares.

But when days came when there was a worry, people started planning to bring someone close to them, which would reunite with the whole family.

A dictatorial government came to power, which hindered immigration and plans fell apart.

Then came the terrible war and all my near and dear ones fell into the clutches of the murderers, who killed them along with the millions of martyred Jews.

2

I stood with a bitter mood and saw in my imagination, as in a kaleidoscope, the course of years, which have crippled the lives of those who hoped that justice would rule the world.

— *Gut morgen, Herr Pietrikowski!*¹ — Suddenly, I heard my name pronounced in a confused Yiddish.

I looked around and saw in front of me a broad-shouldered guy with a long, emaciated face, two blue-gray sad eyes, which looked at me with a helpless smile, expressing a certain uncertainty.

He stood with his whip in his hand and waited for my confirmation to be really the one he just called by name.

When I asked him who he was and how he recognized me, he told me that he had worked for the Jewish butchers since he was young and that his main landlord was Chaim Nosol, and that the *Swabians*² had sent him to a camp together with thousands of Kutno Jews.

To confirm his words, he rolled up his sleeves from the poorly patched garment, and I saw an old number on his dark skin.

We both sat on the coach-box of his horse-carriage and he, Bolek, told me about the tragic years of the Kutno Jews and, in particular, about the end of his colleagues and landlords.

Big drops of tears roll along his bony cheeks and he ends his description with vainly whipping his poor horse, as if the beast was to blame for the events.

So, slowly, the carriage drags itself through the alley with the old chestnut trees on both sides of the road and we breathe in the fragrant smells of the beautiful surroundings.

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We arrive at the wooden bridge. Bolek stops his carriage, I go to the handrail and look down to the Ochnia, which meanders into the Bzura and the latter carries away the waters to the Vistula, the mother of the Polish rivers.

I look down and remember that only 40 years ago, we were lying on the grass, looking at the still waters of the river and dreaming of a more beautiful and better world. Here I see myself with my youth-friends: the poet

of pain and wrath, Beinish Zylbersztajn and the writer Yosef Okrutny³ (Turko).

Beinish Zylbersztajn, emaciated and always hungry, with two sad longing blue eyes, inserted in his pale-long face, looking up at the sky and soon getting in his eyes the radiance of a fever-sick man; his lips moved as if they were whispering a prayer and his pencil marked lines from a new poem, an improvisation on a pre-determined theme.

Yosef Okrutny, the short blond boy with the serious, thoughtful face of an adult, fills out entire pages of paper, dealing in prose with the same theme on which Beinish writes his poem. And there I see the opposite of them both; a broad-shouldered brat, a naive-laughing man, an always cheerful and vigorous man, holding my pencil and a piece of paper and struggling to adjust the rhymes of my poem.

Beinish, tormented by his father's poverty, left Kutno for Warsaw, the world center of Yiddish and Judaism.

In Warsaw, he became an assistant secretary in the professional Needle-Workers' Union, living on a starvation wage, but this gave him the opportunity to



The Germans lined the old marketplace with the matzevot

¹ TN: Yiddish, "Good morning, Mr. Pietrikowski!"

² TN: pejorative, "Germans" (like "Jerries", in English).

³ TN: Yosef Turko (25 November 1906, Kutno – 1991, Buenos Aires). Son of Chanocho Turko.

become a frequent guest on Tłomackie Street 13⁴ and over time counted as one of the family of writers.

Beinish got married, moved with his wife to Belgium, fleeing from Poland where he was constantly pursued by the police.

In Belgium, Beinish edited a Jewish newspaper, lived happily with his family, until he and his son were shot dead by a criminal Nazi bullet.

Thus ended the life of the poet Beinish Zylbersztajn, who had already achieved an honorable place in Yiddish poetry.

Yosef Okrutny, in his early twenties, as a very young man, moved to Łódź, began as a reporter for the "*Łódźer Tageblatt*", later married his Estherke, published from time-to-time stories in various literary publications, published several books that were warmly received by the literary critics, who saw in Yosef a future vigorous writer. Yosef and his entourage survived the horrific war in the Soviet Union, wandered over the Siberian plains, wandered through Moscow, became a member of the Soviet Writers' Union, and kept in touch with the local Jewish writers.

After the war, Yosef Okrutny and his wife returned to liberated Poland, where he occupied a prominent place in the literary world but in the end, he became a disillusioned and embittered fugitive through various routes to Argentina. I found him in Buenos Aires, as a ripe and acclaimed Yiddish writer, occupying an extremely honorable place in modern Yiddish literature.

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... I crossed the bridge over the Ochnia and stayed at the house of the former banker Bromberg, which played a major role in Jewish life in Kutno. The house – a ruin, no sign of famous photographer and cultural activist Degenszajn, who had his studio in this building.

Degenszajn, the life-loving intelligent man, was among the founders of the first Kutno drama circle. Hard to forget his roles in "David's Violin", "The Eternal Wanderer", "The Robbers" and other plays of Yiddish and world repertoire. Opposite was the large house of Wolf Asz, brother of world-famous writer.

I remember the year 1916, when the Ozorków wonder boy, the chess master Shmulik Rzeszewski⁵, came to Kutno, and in this house, on the third floor, the chess competition of the 10-year-old master with ten Kutno chess-players took place.

This house was especially close and dear to me, because Shalom Asz's mother lived there. I was friends with this glorious and heartfelt woman, despite the fact that I was barely a 12-year-old boy. There was a reason for this friendship.

The premises of the Jewish gymnasium used to be transformed into a synagogue every year during the holy days. The worshipers of this synagogue were mostly parents of the children who studied at the gymnasium. But most of all came to worship Zionists, who are the actual landlords of the school.

Around the Zionists were grouped the more affluent Jews, especially the progressive strata of the wealthiest part. Among the worshipers were also the Litvaks from the *shtetl*, who were notable for their generosity and intelligence.

Litvak Timkowski used to come to pray with a princely manner. But his work was to pour water on the sandals of the priests during priestly blessings, or tie the *tzitzits* of the *tallits* of some devout Jews. However, he donated large sums for social purposes.

A very important place was occupied by the noble and intelligent Litvak Riftin, who was in temperament the opposite of his vigorous countrymen.

Riftin, a Jewish scholar-sage, was similar in appearance to the famous Menachem-Mendel Ussishkin, with his short-cut beard. This kind-hearted and noble man was a Torah reader of the improvised synagogue.

It is worth mentioning a fact that remains in the memory of all Kutno Jews.

It is already an accepted practice that when one hardly reads in the Torah, most worshipers go out of the synagogue to have a conversation. It was different, knowing that Riftin would soon begin his sacred service. None of the worshipers were outside, but on the contrary, Jews from other synagogues and denominations came to hear the master.

Soon, the thin and middle-aged Litvak Riftin grew to the size of Moses, according to the conception of the wonderful Michelangelo. Riftin's ringing and sweet voice evoked respect. There was a feeling that the letters of the sung syllables were floating in the air and rolling towards the throne of glory, and there the Almighty Creator sat with a happy smile and shook his head, as if to say: "Here is a Litvak, as he understands it, penetrating the hearts of the Jews. Here he will perform the miracle, that Jews should once again shout in full ecstasy: *naaseh v'nishma*⁶!"

There was also a ladies' section in this synagogue and among them, the mother of Shalom Asz occupied the place of honor.

In the stories I heard from my Zgierz teacher, Rabbi Israel, about kings and queens, princes and princesses, my imagination painted a picture of a woman who had to look like this and like that.

When I first saw the patriarchal figure of the writer's mother, I thought to myself: "Yes, Moshe! This is what an empress looks like."

⁴ TN: address of the Jewish Writers' and Journalists' Association, where Yiddish writers and artists used to flock.

⁵ TN: Shmul Rzeszewski (26 November 1911, Ozorków – 4 April 1992, New York City). Became a Chess Grandmaster in 1950.

⁶ TN: Hebrew, "We will do and we will listen". Unconditional acceptance of the Torah by the Jews during Exodus.

I looked also for the possibility of touching her satin dress, of touching her elegant hand, and at last offered to carry her *machzor* home for her after davening.

I became a very frequent intruder in the houses of her two sons, who lived in Kutno. Every day, I visited the home of her son Yaakov-Yehoshua, who entrusted me with the task of teaching his two beautiful daughters.

My prestige rose in the eyes of my Empress, which pleased me. I've really been her darling for many years.

5

... We continue and stop at the cottage where the young Rotapel's photographic facility was located, but he is not there, just a blond non-Jewish person standing at the entrance. This is the new landlord, who comes from the town of Piątek and has been living here for several years, carrying out the work of a single photographer in Kutno.

I invite him to accompany me with his camera, in order to capture in pictures everything that I will find necessary to perpetuate from the town of Kutno, which represented a magnificent chapter in the once tumultuous Jewish life in Poland.

All three follow me and the exhausted horse dragged itself with the empty carriage, rocking with its head, to the beat of my sad thoughts.

We arrived at the New Market, where the most beautiful houses in the city were once located.

I remain standing disappointed, considering the surroundings. I have the feeling that I am lost in a big village, where some peasants are moving apathetically.

I invite one of my companions into a *kawiarnia*⁷ to put something in my mouth, and I remembered the elegant Breitszneider's confectionery, where we used to gather in the afternoons and evenings for the so-called "*śmietana*"⁸ of the *shtetl*.

We walk into the confectionery – a shabby hut, inside are two curved tables with some broken benches that stand in front of the former luxury furniture of this famous place.

After a long wait, a sullen goy woman appeared, who offered us a glass of milk with stale bread, for which she asked a good price.

I made my first official visit to the mayor of Kutno.

My companions informed me that the 'father of the city' start working early in the morning and that he went out every day to inspect the city. Knowing that I was a foreigner, he immediately accepted me.

Without doubt I was still living under the impression of the past, pretending to myself that I would meet a potbellied character with a pair of aristocratic mustaches, or one dressed-up man with thin stubborn lips and a pince-nez on his long nose, looking intelligent – and here I saw a very young, blond, medium-height man, very simply dressed.



The new marketplace – after the war

⁷ TN: Polish, "café".

⁸ TN: Polish, "cream".

I had to admit that this character was a clever and dynamic man, originating from a rural environment, who came to town to work in one of the factories. He excelled as a skilled worker and activist and in time was elected mayor.

He told me that there was a total of four Jews in Kutno: two from Galicia and two returning shortly after the war, elderly residents.

I accepted with pleasure his willingness to accompany me.

We sat in the carriage and drove to the cemetery, visited the graves, the tomb of R' Yehoshie'le Kutner ztz"l. and generally saw the situation there.

Driving the carriage to the cemetery was impossible because the road is sandy and the hobby is too weak to carry four passengers.

Finally, we found ourselves on a large field, partly overgrown with grass, where scattered pieces of broken tombstones lie. Difficult to decipher for whom they were placed.

A horse pastured on the grass.

A young non-Jewish woman appeared in the cottage near the entrance. I started a conversation with her.

The woman was talkative etc. She told me about the graves and tombstones that have been desecrated and she described to me the destruction of thousands of Jews.

As we were going to a tomb, the woman told me that a few months after the war, Jewish youths from Kutno appeared. These young men had one day brought an urn of ashes and bones from Chelmno, not far from Koło, where a death camp had been found. In this village, the rest of the Kutno Jews were killed in the specially built gas chambers⁹ and here, in this tomb, the symbolic urn was buried. Immediately, a modest cement monument was erected to commemorate generations of the so-called Kutno community. Only that same day, in the late hours of the evening, criminal hands tore open the tomb with dynamite and now we were standing by the ruined remains.

The mayor assured me that, at the request of the Łódź community to preserve the remains of the desecrated Jewish cemetery, he summoned all residents around the sanctuary and forced them to sign an obligation to preserve the remains of hundreds of years of Jewish life.

Suddenly, I turned my gaze to the hill, where the tomb of a Kutno righteous was once located, who assured me that Kutno will never be destroyed and that Kutno Jews will exist forever and will be protected from all possible misfortunes and storms that will come upon God's world.

There was no sign of a monument, but I saw in front of me a wide strip of grassless ground, yellow sandy ground, that gave the impression that it was being prepared for the erection of a building.

The woman understood my look and she began to tell me:

— The gentleman sees there, that strip of ground? There is a mass grave of thousands of Kutno Jews, there. Among them, children and mothers, fathers and grandfathers, who were gathered by the Germans to dig their own grave. Dug days and nights without interruption, dug a grave, tens of meters in width and in length. The work was done under the blows of the soldiers' rifle butts and lashes from the S.S. until the hangmen, with *Swabian* calculation and accuracy, considered the grave big enough to take in the thousands of bodies. The Christian inhabitants who could see from a distance the murderous work were driven away, so that they would not be witnesses to what would happen next. Dear Sir! Believe me, I still tremble in every limb when I remember the frightful scene that I saw. I was there, in my father's little house, with the windows covered with drapes. I stood behind them frozen to the floor and saw how the German murderers ordered all to undress naked. Old women and men, mothers, helped undress their tiny children. All, all cried a horrible wail and when all were finally naked, I saw how one clasped the other and suddenly I heard shooting from machine-guns and rifles. In masses, the bodies fell into the grave with hands lifted up to the sky, with mothers' hands, which had been holding their children to their hearts. The bloodthirsty *Swabs* had brought over a group of young people from the ghetto and ordered them to cover the grave with earth and lime. Three days and three nights I didn't leave the window, but kept looking at the mound and I saw... vey and vey, what I saw! The hill kept on heaving itself up and down, up and down. I was sure that



Destroyed *matzevot* in the Kutno Jewish cemetery

it was the half-shot, trying to get themselves out of the grave, back to the bright world and with pain cry out: "Why?!" Oh, dear Jesus! How horrible that scene was and I believe that I will not forget it till the end of my life. From then on, no grass grows on that holy place. Therefore, you

⁹ TN: in fact, the Nazis in Chelmno were using gas vans, where Jews were asphyxiated by exhaust fumes.

see, good Sir, that all around there grow dense together the wildflowers, such dainty and bright. People say that they are the innocent little souls of the children who, with their pure bright bodies, have stood up and resurrected, to say to the world that these are the last victims of an evil and dark epoch, which has vanished forever...

Instinctively my feet carried me to the hill, to the holy hill. Mechanically my hands took out of my bag a white cloth, spread it on the golden sand and with both hands I managed to take up two handfuls of sand from this holy earth, which covers up for all eternities my dear and beloved Kutno Jews and among them – my nearest and dearest – my murdered family.

Kneeling, I do the holy service. But when I lift up my hands with sand, I see bones. Thin little bones of children's hands and feet, fine little bones of children's fingers.

Are these the bones of my sister Sarale's children? Are they the children of Kutno's never-grown-up little Jews? Are they the bones of the future *gaons* and true Jews, poets and writers, tailors and shoemakers and maybe singers of psalms?

So, I sit immobile on the earth and think of the treasure that I hold in my hands.

I see no one around me and I had the feeling that I hear the cradle-song of a mother putting her child to sleep:

*Under Yanke'le's cradle,
Stands a golden goat...¹⁰*

Lying in my hands, the golden thin bones of thousands of Moshele and Salomonle, Sarale and Leahle.

We went out in silence from the holy place...

6

Being far from the cemetery, the most worthy mayor reminded me that he wanted to show me different curiosities. Soon we approached the pond behind the prison. Around the water, many trees and planted flowers.

The alley that surrounds this standing water is paved with cement slabs – tombstones from the Jewish cemetery, which the Germans and wicked Polish people brought here.

My host took me to the house that belonged to the Kolski¹¹ family, former owners of the "Modern" movie theatre. The yard of this house was also paved with tombstones.

I bid farewell to my informant and all three of us decided to visit Dr. Kleinerman's house. We drove away to Gostynin Street and came to a beautiful house, among densely grown fruit trees, a bell rang and immediately we heard a loud: "Please, enter!"

I opened the door, the photographer entered after me. We remained standing in a larger hall, with stairs to the upper rooms. On these stairs stood a chubby man, in whom I immediately recognized Dr. Yosef Kleinerman.

Suddenly he addressed me:

— It seems to me that you are descended from the family Piotrkowski, or Pietrikowski?!

These words were pronounced in Polish.

For a long while, I was embarrassed because I did not realize that my host could have such a phenomenal memory.

We got closer to each other, hugged like two old good friends and soon our tongues were freed and we had a two-hours long conversation.

The old-fashioned Dr. Kleinerman, full of optimistic enthusiasm and carries on the conversation in a cheerful manner, told me about his experiences in the Soviet Union; war-time, working in the hospitals – and surviving this way the hard times; and in the end, he returned to Kutno, where he spent most of his life.

He came from Lida, as a young physician. Fell in love with a beautiful Jewish daughter of a very prominent family, who did not agree to the *shidduch* and eventually married a second one, who also belonged to the so-called "*śmietana*"¹². He lived happily with his wife and good-looking daughter, who became all his life. The woman and the unforgettable daughter shared the fate of the Kutno Jews, leaving a deep wound in his heart.

Today he is the director of the municipal hospital, specializing in pediatrics. He is highly regarded by the entire population. Of course, his position is also important because there are very few professionals in his field who can replace him.

We sit at a round table and stop our conversation. On a sofa sits his current, much younger than him wife and on his lap, a 6-7-year-old child, their daughter.

With pain he tells me that the surviving Jews of Kutno, who brought the urn of ashes to burial, made up a blasphemy against him, that he should have shamed himself and become a Christian – and this was because he did not attend the ceremony to erect the monument to the martyrs at the Kutno cemetery, shortly after the liberation.

With tears in his eyes, he assured me that he bore the name Jew with the greatest pride and that he had never in his life felt such closeness and belonging to Jews and, by extension, to the entire Jewish people. He told me about his hometown of Lida, his teenage friends were dozens of students of the famous Lida *yeshiva*, and immediately proved it, quoting some articles from the Talmud.

When I asked him why he did not take part in the committee to erect the monument, he explained to me that he had warned everyone that there was no point in pursuing this work, because there was still a deep-rooted antisemitism in the people. And that hooligans would destroy what is being built with so much energy. The fact is that what he foresaw actually happened.

Finally, we said goodbye as two old good friends and wished to meet again.

¹⁰ TN: "Ayle Lule" Yankele/Under Yankel's cradle/Stands a golden goat/The goat will go away on business/She will bring back/raisins and almonds/Raisins and almonds are very sweet!/Yankele will be healthy and fresh!

¹¹ TN: see the second article on page 296 of this book.

¹² TN: Polish, "cream". Probably referring to the social upper class of her family.

Holding me in his arms, he asked me to convey a very warm greeting to all Jews and especially to those who remember him – the surviving Kutno Jews around the world.

7

It was lunch-time. When we got out of Gostynin Street, going through the Old Market, Królewska Street, New Market and Narutowicza Street, on the way to *Konstancja*, we planned to meet another resident of the former Kutno Jews.

We drove on a wide-paved highway and my companions tell me that to the right of the highway is the ghetto and they show with their hands that there are still signs of barbed wire. Soon we turned left onto a narrow path between densely overgrown trees, until we approached a house where children were playing outside among a tumult of hens, goats, pigeons, ducks. Some well-fed pigs rubbed their backs against the prickly fence.

We were met by a middle-aged man with a dark face, strongly burned by the hot sun, with strong hair and dark brown hair. The unbuttoned shirt revealed his chest with thick hair, of the same hair color as his face.

He approached me with wide open arms. It soon became apparent that he was expecting my visit, knowing that there is a guest from abroad, and indeed a native, a compatriot.

I went down from the porch and we fell into each other's arms, as two brothers who meet after many years of separation. We kiss each other, really like two blood-relatives.

I had just recognized in one of these men, one of the two brothers-gardener – Eizyk.

He led me into an arbor, where we sit down at a table and a conversation begins, which takes us away on a journey from thirty years ago, to the longing once, to the sunny, golden days of our young years with parents, sisters and brothers, good friends and acquaintances.

Eizyk told me that he and his brother got married, ran their village farm together, had good, faithful wives and also successful children.

Came the sad, terrible days. He and his brother were away in the forest as partisans and more than once their lives were in danger in the unequal fight with the Nazi murderers and domestic hooligans. But in the end, they survived the terrible years, with superhuman courage and finally came back to the longed-for home.

"A home? A ruin! No wife, no children. They were cremated in the crematoria of the village of Chelmino. Cremated, yes, turned into ashes..."

We cried for a while, looking for where we could end up, and finally we threw ourselves with our lives into the work of rebuilding our ruined industry.

With our hands and nails, we plowed the field, replanted roses and all kinds of flowers, which for years made the Eizyk brothers famous at the flower fairs in Warsaw, where we used to receive the highest honors."

He was away for a while and his brother got married, became the father of a beautiful son and shortly

after that left with his family to Israel and decided to move into the new home with the same occupation: planting roses on Jewish soil and indeed, only for Jews.

When I asked him why he did not follow his brother's example, he replied pensively:

"Look, Moshe. I live with my flowers, with my mother-earth and with the sweet memories of yesteryear. In the evening, I sit in this arbor, after a whole day of hard work and I have the impression that here I will hear the ringing voices of my lovely children and I wait for my loved, heartfelt wife to call me to the prepared supper."

At the table sat another man with dark glasses, who listened to the conversation.

Eizyk tells me about this silent listener, who has a very noble appearance. His long, clean-shaven face gives the impression that he has suffered a lot in his life. He is the former director of the Kutno municipal post office, a truly Righteous of a generation. Here is the rare good-Christian, today his best friend with whom he does not separate, who has several times endangered his life in order to save a Jew and has not just once tortured by the Germans, receiving lashes on his head and, because of this, became blind.

Understandably, he was no longer able to work, receives a meager pension, which did not allow him to make a living, in addition, he has an extremely clever son who wants to study and his possibilities do not allow this "luxury". Well, he, Eizyk was close to this goy, made him his beloved-friend and by the way, his son learned on Eizyk's sustenance.

Mr. Mieczysław listened to what his friend Eizyk had to say about him, he bowed his head in shame and I believe he was ashamed of the fact that he was one, alone among thousands and thousands of Christians, whose duty was to follow his example towards their neighbors and fellow citizens – even to the point of self-sacrifice, in order to keep the holy commandments. But they were rather indifferent and it also happened that they used to sell a hidden Jew for a kilo of salt.

Suddenly, the blind man took out a packet from under his arm, which was carefully wrapped in paper. He opened it with trembling hands and placed it on the table next to me.

Before me was an album of photographs. These are pictures that he, Mieczysław, took with his primitive camera; He carried out this work in dangerous moments that threatened his life.

They were pictures of tormented Jews: men, women, children, being chased and beaten by German soldiers.

Through slits in the attic, he photographed the horrific scenes and finally the good man managed to capture in the pictures the horrible, inhuman thing that was done to thousands and thousands of innocent Jews.

I tried to negotiate with Mr. Mieczysław to sell me this historic album, put forward a significant amount of money, but was granted a categorical refusal.

— No, my dear friend! No money can convince me to separate from this, which is my whole life.

I embraced the good, honest Mieczysław and kissed him, as if he was my own brother.

Among those present, tears could be seen.

My host relieved the tension by giving the order to hitch up two bay horses to his high-class carriage. All three of us took our seats and headed back into town.

The carriage with the photographer accompanied us.

8

The late-spring day was a delightful one.

We were riding on a well-paved highway, the horses rested, with their shiny-brown skin hopping on the road, as if they were happy to carry in the phaeton such important passengers. We meet very often with people who stop on the sight of our carriage. Men take off their hats and bow down to our side, exclaiming:

— Good day to you, Mr. Eizyk!

I remember that years ago, when Polish nobleman Zawadzki¹³ drove into town, the passing Jews used to take off their hats and bow down to the ground to greet: "Good morning, *jiu jitsu*!"

I looked in the same way at the emaciated Eizyk and his importance grew in my eyes.

Here is a little nobleman. No more nobleman Zawadzki, his place is now taken by the good, willing Jew Eizyk, who is the actual landlord of Kutno, the "father" and provider of all the needy.

We drove this way, in silence, until we reached Narutowicza Street. I asked my friend to stop the carriage at the house where the Riftin family lived.

We are standing by a shrunken old cottage. It is unbelievable that the eminent Litvak Riftin lived here with his noble wife and his two sons and two daughters, who were regarded as the most intelligent young inhabitants of the city.

The two married daughters were teachers. The eldest son was a prominent lawyer and the younger, Kuba, a revolutionary student in the antisemitic state gymnasium, who left in 8th grade and moved to *Eretz Israel*, as the leader of the youth organization "*HaShomer HaZair*".

In the background of this cottage was the building of the Jewish gymnasium. There I spent my finest part of my youth. My parents worked there from dawn until late in the evening. My parents were the first workers during its founding, until the last day of its existence, until the moment the Germans destroyed it – the Jewish gymnasium, together with the hundreds of students and their devoted teachers.

The Jewish gymnasium was founded in 1917. In that year, the famous Zionist tribune Dr. Yehoshua Thon¹⁴ came to Kutno, accompanied by a young student, Abraham Wierzbicki.

The big meeting with the Kutno Jews took place in the "Polonia" hall, to celebrate the Balfour Declaration¹⁵. Wierzbicki excelled as a fiery speaker that evening. This dynamic fellow remained in Kutno and encouraged a group of Jews to create a Jewish school.

Among the founders was a part of the prominent Jews of the city. The most intelligent chairman of the gymnasium was elected, the intelligent and important Aharon-Shlomo Elberg, and he was assisted by the prominent Jews, Sender Falc, Chaim Rabbe, Winer and others.

In Majranc's house there was a nice room, where he also taught secular studies. In particular, "*Makpid*" was published in Hebrew.

The owner of this room was a Jew from Gostynin, Yonah-Baruch Kac.

The newly formed school board invited Yonah-Baruch and an agreement was reached to unite the two schools into one large educational institution, where the scholar-student and educator Yonah-Baruch Kac was appointed as Hebrew teacher and Abraham Wierzbicki as first director.

Among the students of this school were the wealthiest children in town.

The year 1918 came, Poland became an independent kingdom according to the Treaty of Versailles¹⁶. The Germans had left the occupied territories. Those who were in Kutno, too, were feverishly preparing to return home.

At the same time, alarming reports have arrived of pogroms against Jews in Lviv, carried out by liberated Poles; The hooligans were preparing to repeat the attacks in a number of other cities and towns in occupied Poland.

In the building of the Jewish gymnasium a large number of young men gathered and at closed windows held secret meetings, to establish a self-defense, in order to resist the *pogromcziks*, in case it would be necessary.

They got in touch with a German sergeant, Schwabe. This German undertook to procure weapons and at the same time instructed them how to handle guns and revolvers that had been collected in large numbers.

Among the volunteers in the front row were the butchers with the Nosol brothers at the top; the leader was Bernard Holcman.

Fortunately, no more pogroms took place and the weapons were not used.

Hundreds and hundreds of children who received a national-Jewish education grew up within the walls of the Jewish gymnasium. The best teachers were contracted, and the student material was also selected. Upper-class students, boys and girls aged 13-14, have published a trilingual school publication that has gained prominence in all other student circles. An auxiliary union has also

¹³ TN: there was a notorious antisemite in the family. See article beginning on p. 185 in the original book, at p. 189.

¹⁴ TN: Abraham Ozjasz Thon, aka Yehoshua Thon (13 February 1870, Lviv – 11 November 1936, Cracow). Zionist and community leader, rabbi of Cracow.

¹⁵ TN: 2 November 1917.

¹⁶ TN: 28 June 1919.

been established among all students, regardless of age, a student court has worked with judges, prosecutors and defenders.

All night long people sat down with the greatest effort at the hectograph and print the student newspaper.

This school existed until the arrival of the Nazi hordes and the killing of the students, their teachers, their parents, along with millions of other Jews in Poland.

9

We walk along Narutowicza Street and stop at Majranc's house, where the largest number of tenants once lived. The wealthy Majranc family lived in this house. The sons and daughters of Majranc occupied a prominent place in the Jewish cultural and social life of the city. Among the tenants were Jews from all walks of life. In the courtyard lived a Jew, Eliyahu Kac, with his wife Beile and children Moshe and Yente.

Eliyahu Kac was a musician Jew, a good prayer leader. Polish nobelman Zawadzki took all the money he had once brought from America, so that he remained a very poor man. His son left for Russia with his friend Yaakov Osowski, where he disappeared without a trace. The good-looking daughter Yente lives in Israel with her husband and two children, in a kibbutz.

Among the neighbors was another nice, noble Jew, Rechtman. He was once a wealthy landowner, lived on the *Piaskes*¹⁷ and ran a rich house, with its own ground with horses and oxen. His home was known as the home for all the needy. No one left his house hungry and, most of all, with empty pockets.

He sold his house, the land, and came to town looking for a place for the children who grew up. Within a few weeks, he became impoverished and seriously ill.

(I still feel his kiss on my forehead while saying goodbye to him. He loved me, for good reason, no less than his own children).

It's hard to figure out all the neighbors in that house, but I remember them all.

We continue and stand in front of the house where the serious good man, Sender Falc, lived. I told my companions how the Nazi assassins killed this dear, dear man along with the patron of the Kutno athletes, Bernard Holcman.

These two saints became responsible for providing young women for the German beasts. The first shipment was provided and they fell sick. The Germans killed them. The two Jews were again ordered to provide a hundred of healthy beautiful girls, but they made a condition that the Germans should first bring back the hundred sick women, otherwise they will not carry out the order.

As a punishment, the assassins forced them to dig a pit in the middle of the street and buried them both alive.

Sender Falc¹⁸, Bernard Holcman, honor to your memory!

... We entered the new market and stopped at the house of banker Wladek Hirszburg.

Among many prominent Jews who lived there, the barber-surgeon Kincler who was the chief physician of the poor Kutno population.

We arrived at the corner of "Butcher Alley", where Gąbinski's¹⁹ inn once stood. Kutno's intellectuals and "Bohemians" had their meeting place in these premises. At their head with scholar-student Yaakov Meir Frenkel and his inseparable friend Moshe Poncz.

I remember, after the First World War, in the early 1920's, when the news came that our famous townsman Shalom Asz was preparing to visit his hometown, where his mother and two brothers lived. Among the frequent guests of Gąbinski's inn was also the hero of Shalom Asz's novel "Motke the Thief", the well-known underworldist Mordechai Pszorek. When Mordechai heard about the talks in the inn, he came out with the following words:

— What's that? Shalom Sraka²⁰ is travelling here? If he just shows himself in the town, I'll make him dance a polka, I'll teach him to write about me and shame me before the whole world...

The guest came, the small town was boiling. Poor and rich felt exalted. No small thing, Shalom Asz, the famous writer, whom the world, Jews and non-Jews, have recognized as one of the greatest writers.

The townspeople were really overjoyed that Shalom Asz was their townsman.

The sensation was even greater, when they saw walking along the market the famous townsman, arm in arm with Motke Pszorek, in a friendly conversation.

It was said that Motke received a treasure²¹ from Shalom, but those who had the privilege of knowing the writer personally, doubted these comments, as the artist was generous in his work, but therefore stingy – for sure.

We arrive at the place where the Kutno Synagogue once was. There is no mention of the holy place, also the old *Beit Midrash* has been transformed into a place for the firemen.

There is no synagogue, no Synagogue-Street where the geniuses Rabbi Yehoshie'le Kutner, his son Moshe Pinchas and his grandson, the last *Mira-Datra*²², reigned.

We walk along Królewska Street, the lovely shops have disappeared. There's no Brode and Walter, Gajst's lovely stationery and bookstores, Haller's jewelry store, Raven's linen and laundry business, where many bridesmaids have bought their wedding attire. Kopel's elegant shop with articles for cavaliers, the businesses of the Banach brothers and Lewin's pharmacy, Sztajnfeld's wholesale business and Wiszinski's yeast shop and then near it, the gingerbread-baker.

¹⁷ TN: Polish, "haymarket".

¹⁸ TN: the author named him Yechiel Falc in the original text, not corresponding to the name given above. Yechiel Falc, brother of Sender Falc, died in Tel Aviv, in 1968.

¹⁹ TN: the family of Shalom Asz: his father Moshe Asz, a ritual slaughterer, came from Gąbin so his nickname was "Gąbiner" (not "Gąbinski").

²⁰ TN: Polish, "shit".

²¹ TN: i.e., a large sum of money.

²² TN: Aramaic, "Lord of the Place". Nickname for town's rabbi.

Finally, we arrived at Old Market. There is no market, no more groceries, which in the market days sold to the peasants of the surrounding villages salt and oil, sugar and herring. No more any memory of that which once was.

Old Market number 8, Płocker's wine shop, is an old ruin – a tombstone of a house. Even the Christian Church is kind of sunken. The house opposite is also in a state of disrepair. A beautiful building once stood on the corner of the Old Market in Gostynin Street, and once housed the Kutno Philharmonic "Lira", one of the most beautiful and spacious Jewish cultural establishments.

In 1916, young people set themselves the goal of founding an orchestra. They rented the premises, purchased all the necessary instruments, contracted a first-class conductor, and in the evenings all rehearsed.

Majranc's eldest son was the long-standing president of the "Lira". Master Buchner was contracted as the long-standing conductor, who prepared the orchestra to perform the unforgettable philharmonic concerts.

There is a house on the corner of Gostynin Street and no one remembers, but there one heard the sounds of Jewish upbringing, of Jewish-human upliftment, sounds of old Jewish ancestry, chords of glorious and heartfelt Jewish music.

I stand like this with my companions and tell them the beautiful tales of the recent past, which have been transformed into legends, tales of a thousand and one nights.

We stand with our heads bowed and it seems as if everyone's lips were whispering a prayer and a tear is rolling from our eyes...

10

We walk back along the Old Market and Królewska Street, we meet passers-by on the way and it turns out that these are not native Kutno residents, but arrived from somewhere else. Kutno is a dead city and perhaps a large village, where the inhabitants live in a rural place, life lacks the urban impetus, the Jewish noisy gathering, the Jewish tailors and tailor boys, the Jewish youths with their graceful companions are missing in the frequent "flower-days", to raise funds for various voluntary purposes.

I remember the year 1915, when I had just arrived in my father's hometown. I remember the Jewish boys from the wealthy homes, who roamed the streets of Kutno with a white-blue band on their arm and on the band shone the symbolic Star of David. These young people were the ones who cared for the Jewish poor.

In the city, where there was a typhus epidemic, they were the ones who created the means to help the needy with everything possible.

Kitchens were opened where Jewish daughters of the rich, as well as of chassidic homes, prepared free lunches for the hungry and the weak.

The city rabbi²³ became ill, and was guarded by two prominent Kutno landlords and close friends: Berish Kraut and Yehuda Moshe Goldberg. The rabbi recovered, but his guards fell ill and died. Kutno Jews mourned the two saints



Beit HaMidrash in Kutno transformed into a... firefighter station

²³ TN: Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk, in 1915.

who paid with their lives, leaving young widows with very young orphans. My dad Zalman wrote a song and came up with a tune. Then small and big sang and sang this, at that time, tragic events.

11

A special chapter to mention is the emergence of different organizations, parties and groups.

In the beautiful salon, where in later years the movie theater, Polonia, was located, a Jewish cultural association was founded. In this room, when the incandescent lamps were lit, boys and girls gathered to read books, have a conversation, or play chess.

The main librarian was the intelligent Chaim Tiger, from whom I received a flamboyant slap in the face, as I was reluctant to read Shakespeare as a 12-year-old boy and did not want to listen to his advice.

A Jew, Glowński, a tailor with his five sons and a daughter lived in a New Market house. The youngest of the brothers, Israelik, was my school and youth friend.

Hersh Meir Glowński, Eliyahu Glowński, Yosef and Israelik were gifted stage artists and they were among the founders of the famous drama circle in Kutno. Among the first to be found were: the photographer Degenszajn, Liberman, who was at the same time appointed by the Germans as Kutno police chief. Leizer Zylbersztajn, the extremely gifted Nosol, and a number of young gifted Jewish girls, whose names I have forgotten, though one I remember, because she was the prima donna of the circle. Liberman was her name, and she later married Leizer Zylbersztajn.

The repertoire of this drama circle was rich and varied, under the direction of the very young director Yaakov Wajslis, who in later years became one of the main actors in the famous "Vilnius troupe".

I remember the first performances, which were completed with full brilliance. At that time, plays were directed by their own amateur powers but hard to forget the grand theatrical performances: "The Eternal Wanderer", Hauptman's "The Robber" and "David's Violin". Under Wajslis's direction: several one-act plays, and among them "Pietro Carvo", "Rivals" and others. But the heyday came when the drama actors performed "The Empty Inn", "The Seven Who Were Hanged" and finally the masterpiece "The Village Youth", which proved to be the best theatrical productions of Łódź and Warsaw.

Yosef Glowński role was "Yaakov Boyle", Liberman-Zylbersztajn was "Natasha" and the little Max Nosol, who lives in North America, played "Prokop".

For many years this circle was led by the extremely capable Hersh-Meir Glowński. A strong actor was Eliyahu Glowński and my friend Israelik became famous as a good student and as a good reciter.

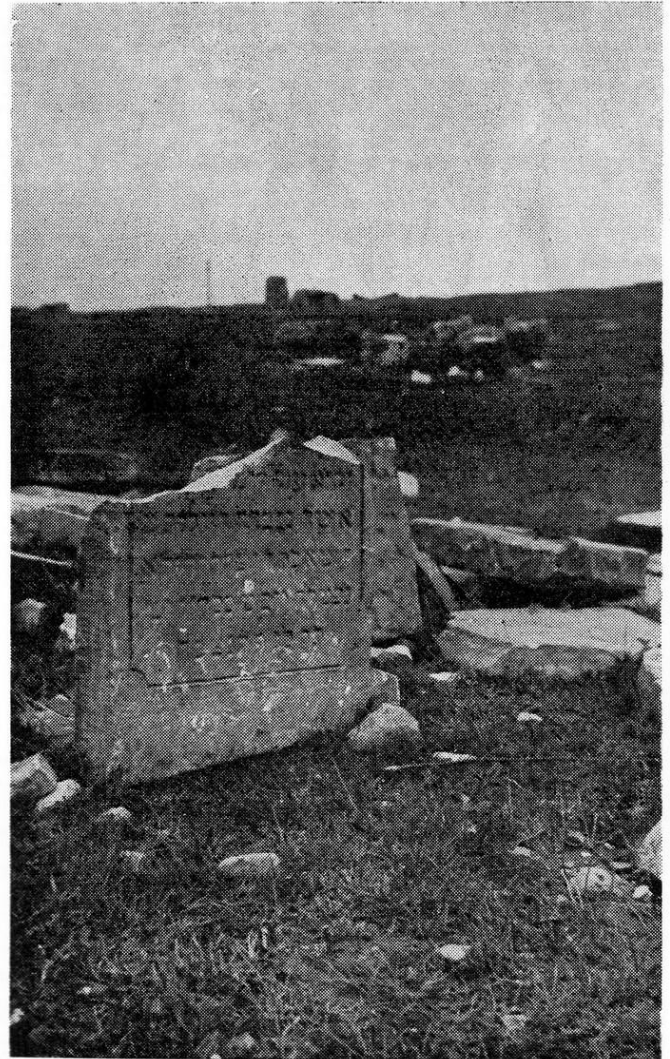
Then came from somewhere a thin and tall Jew with a ringing bass, a musician and good music player. This Jew, whose name was Sokolowski, told everyone that the young society should form a choir, and a group came together; boys and girls in a private apartment and decided to form the later famous choir "*HaZamir*" and invited

Sokolowski as conductor. The "*HaZamir*" sang, fathers and mothers sang, the whole town sang and everyone was happy.

Sokolowski conducted the choir until he was invited by a famous cantor to conduct his choir. The place of maestro was taken by the city composer and conductor Yaakov-Meir Frenkel.

There were also different Zionist groups. 13-14-year-old boys founded the organization "*Prachei Zion*" (under the leadership of the wealthy Zundel Yosef Sztajnfeld), *Zeirei-Zion*, *Poalei-Zion* (right and left).

My Itte'le was a student of Yaakov Zerubbabel and I with a group of working-intellectuals, school-comrades



The broken *matzeva*, the day after its erection

and even chassidic sons, went over to the Communists, to fight for justice and fairness.

These young idealists believed that by fighting to end the rotten antisemitic world and by changing it through a socialist-communist revolution, the world would turn to the justice and equality of all peoples and nations, so that we Jews would no doubt be reckoned among those who have equal rights with all. A large number of these fanatics got long prison terms and did not give up their hopes in the correctness of their idea.

I am reminded of my youth friend Avigdor Król, who sacrificed his best years to the ideals of liberation and

ended as a bitter and disappointed person, left the country for whose liberation he remained an incurable invalid.

The Jewish hard workers, the tailors, carpenters and brush-makers, knitwear workers, organized themselves in professional unions, under the hegemony of socialist "*Bund*".

The leaders of the "*Bund*" in Kutno were a group of labor-intellectuals, under the leadership of the Kirszbaum brothers²⁴. In Kutno, the Bundists had a strong reputation and had three elected councilors in the city council.

12

... We stroll through the half-empty Kutno streets and look at the closed shops, virtually dilapidated houses and somehow, I can't believe that here once existed a small Jewish settlement, which through hard effort and toil built a human life; they lived in constant fear and worries of livelihood, but filled the days, weeks and years with weddings and alliances, mourning-days and joys. Observing the Shabbat with effort and toil, and lovingly celebrated the Friday-night feast – even with the head of a herring.

More than one Jew pawned a cushion in order to rejoice in the holidays and sat immediately in the sukkah. They lived from difficult, hard work and hoped for better times, for a better morning.

The Kutno Jews perished, going into smoke in the crematoria of Chełmno, along with their hopes and beliefs in good people, which had become beasts.

The world watched in cold blood the horrific events; Even us, in the American countries, did not believe in the cruelty of the Nazi-monsters.

Immersed in these thoughts, we arrived at the Kutno railway station.

Finally, I said goodbye to my companions...

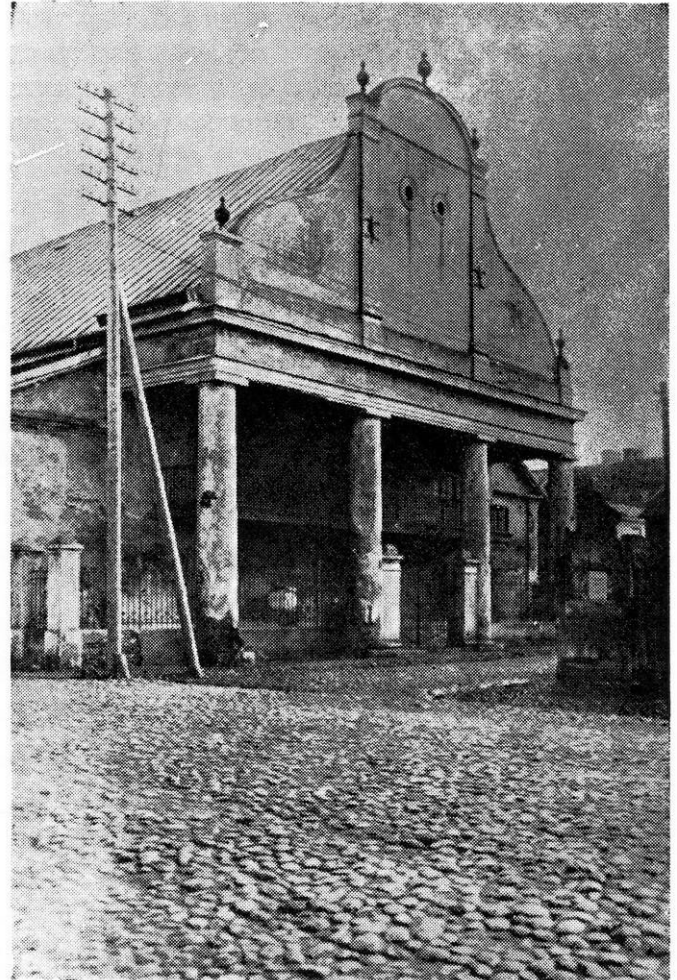
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I still feel the trembling over my body as I hold in my arms the single, heartfelt Jewish man who, with his

person, symbolized an entire city of Jews and among them my deceased parents, sisters and brothers-in-law, nieces and nephews. And generally, all my close friends and comrades.

Even today I feel the brotherly kiss of this heartfelt dear man and Jew – Eizyk...

São Paulo, 30 January 1966.



The synagogue

²⁴ TN: Herman and Kopel Kirszbaum.