

IN MY HOMETOWN

by Yeshayahu TRUNK, New York

translated from the Yiddish by Shoulamit Auvé-Szlajfer

I have been in Poland for a long time and I still have not visited my town. Something unknowingly hindered me from fulfilling my passion. Now that this visit has taken place, I understand the reason – it was the unknown fear of the strong psychic upheaval.

I'm off the train on a beautiful May morning and have long wandered the streets of my hometown. Everything is so familiar, so close to my heart and at the same time so foreign. Is this the town where I spent my

childhood, the years of adolescence, where I fought with myself and those around me? The town where, on the hill, my grandfathers and grandmothers lie in the cemetery? Did I already get lost?

I walked the streets and alleys I knew so well and did not recognize them. It seems, the same walls, the same rows of houses along which I walked a thousand times – and yet completely different. They looked to me silent and foreign.

The town has lost the essential element for me – its human landscape, the unique color given to the town by her Jewish inhabitants. They – the Jews – belonged to her characteristic elements, they were as much of an essential part of her landscape as is the square market, from which the streets and alleys stretch away, like the river that flows through the town, like the small sleepy houses broken down by age. My hometown without Jews! It was really hard for me to imagine that. To my ingrained association of ideas, these two concepts were inextricably linked.



KUTNO, POLAND, SHOWING THE MARKET SQUARE. A CENTRE OF THE SUGAR INDUSTRY, IT FELL TO ZHUKOV, WITH LODZ, ON JANUARY 19, 1945.
 Artillery of the Red Army and the Polish Army, after the liberation of Kutno (January 1945)
 [this is an edition mistake: the picture represents war booty of Russian cannons by Germans, dated 11 November 1914, during WW I.]

I wandered around the streets and alleys, looked into the well-known small stores and stalls and from their dark interiors, death looked out. This Jewish death accompanied me step by step. It was my shadow upon my wanderings over the ruins of my town. In order to see the Jewish death, one does not have to go to the cemetery first. I went to it. It lived in my childhood memories with its mournful funerals, with the whining of women on *Tisha-b'Av*, with the boys' *cheder*, with the gay weddings during epidemics r"l¹ – I did not recognize it. On its edges, near its destroyed walls, were the abandoned fragments of tombstones. The field was dug up, overgrown with wild grass and bushes (the Germans had deliberately planted a young forest there). It gives the impression of a battlefield after a difficult battle. The "master people" fought on this battlefield their last historic battle with the Jewish dead. In my hometown three years ago, there was a general vengeance not only against the living Jews, but also with their hundreds of years' deceased ancestors. A vengeance against the old *gaon*, whose tomb was razed to the ground, and against the teacher R' Leibl Tsibies who, as is well known, sought world domination in order to enslave the German people.

¹ TN: Aramaic, "רחמנא לצלן", God forbid.

² TN: from the liquidation of Kutno ghetto.

And according to the German practical method, that any annihilation of the enemy of the Aryan race should bring to the Third Reich not only fame but also material use, the Jewish gravestones were used to pave the streets and for other urban purposes. Miserable barbarians!

Their diligent local students have tried to continue this historical account settling with the Jewish cemetery, and they can boast to their 'rabbi' about such a 'good' deed as the profanation of the modest monument, under which was buried a short time ago a few ashes from the Chełmno death camp, where 7,000 Jewish people were killed².

This desecrated cemetery remained, by an irony of fate, the only evidence of life that once pulsated in my Jewish town.

On the site of the former synagogue (built in the late 18th century), which competed with the high Gothic church in the cityscape (from a train window, these two buildings used to stand out) – an empty space, and how small and shrunken it became. Now the church is unrivaled over the entire provincial landscape.

The *Beit-Midrash*, from whose high windows resounded the sad *gemara* melody of ascetic and sadly absorbed, studying *yeshiva* boys, and the naive-cheerful song of Simchat-Torah at *hakafot*³, the *Beit Midrash*, whose four walls covered the entire spiritual history of my town, is today a garage for the city firefighters.

Incidentally, the *Ner-Tamid*, which once burned in this *Beit Midrash* and which is known to have been determined to set the Aryan world on fire, was put out by others who have begun their firefighting activity by setting fire to their own Reichstag.

In fact, who needs a *Beit Midrash* in the town, when only about 20 Jewish people live there, the modern maroons, the "Aryans" already included?

Jewish history stubbornly and conservatively repeats its old dramas. Over a span of 6 years, we have repeated in a condensed form a couple of hundred years of the Middle Ages' Jewish history in all its variants; yes, it exceeded it a hundredfold during the strong development of human culture and civilization, and in parallel with it.

The remains of the split in the spiritual heritage of my hometown are found today in the attic of a Polish teacher, a connoisseur of the Hebrew language, even of "Hebrew-meaning" (as she calls it in Yiddish). A mystic who seeks the "*Zohar*" and the "Book of Creation" and especially a Jewish teacher, who should assist her in her Jewish studies. In her home, you will see various editions of *Siddurim* and *Mahzorim* (foreign editions), the "*Midrash-Tanchuma*" and "*Ein Ya'akov*", individual volumes of the "*Eshkol*" encyclopedia and of the Russian St. Petersburg encyclopedia, as well as copies of the Yiddish and Hebrew secular literature. Besides this she knew precisely the advertising martyrology of the provincial Jews. She was in the ghetto with the Hebrew teacher, who had been her mentor for some time. When I

³ TN: traditional procession going round seven times around the *bimah* with the Torah scrolls and the four species during *Hoshana Raba*.

suggested that she donate this treasure to the Central Jewish Library, naturally to a proper material equivalent (she is a lonely, already grown-up woman and a teacher does not live in Poland very easily today), she did not even want to hear it. "I cannot be bought," she said, almost indignantly. She bought the books from a Polish shoemaker and they are necessary for her Jewish studies. She donated a couple of Talmudic tracts to the local Jewish committee. As a result, this wonderful Slavic daughter became the guardian of the spiritual remains of my hometown.

*

In town, there was a fair. The market was filled with stalls and on the site in front of the former synagogue stood peasant couples. It is forbidden to drive on the synagogue grounds, but this prohibition is not strictly observed.

Before my eyes arose the vision of former city fairs, with Jewish "looks", with the shopkeepers in the small shops,

with the busy small merchants wearing their caps on the back of their heads, turning around the shouting peasants, the economic connection between the small-town Jew and the peasant. A covenant, whose history went over half a thousand years – that was now broken in a catastrophic manner, now goes on in this calm and serene fair. The Jewish merchant power and Jewish nervousness weren't anymore – so Jewish death also tormented me in this fair.

Outdoors, one could feel May, with fresh lilacs and daffodils. Children played carefree in the sun. The scent reminded me of the *Shavuot* from the old times. I could not, however, rid myself of the thought that in many places of Poland the smell of fragrant lilac was mixed with the smell of rotten mass-graves of my brothers and sisters. When I sadly left my hometown, I felt that this place was the closest to me and at the same time the most foreign in the world.