

MEMORIES OF THE OLD LIFE

by Shimshon LUSNER

There was once a Jewish town named Łęczyca. Its antiquities make it clear that Łęczyca must be one of the oldest cities in Poland. There is a very old church, two kilometers from the city. Today it is a village called Tum. Hundreds of years ago, the church belonged to the town of Łęczyca. There, King Kazimierz used to perform his prayers when he spent time in Łęczyca. There is still, today, a ruin of a castle. Legend has it that from a castle a tunnel leads directly into the church. It is located under the ground tombs, horses' stables etc. There is also a large garden – "The King's Garden". The church of Tum is one of the oldest churches in all of Poland. It was built when the Poles adopted the Christian faith nearly 1000 years ago.

Łęczyca was once a province (capital-city), to which Kutno, Brzeziny and a number of other towns belonged. From time to time, the Senate held meetings there.

There is a large mountain between Łęczyca and Tum – "Szwedzka Góra": there, the Swedes, at the beginning of the 17th century, occupied the city of Łęczyca. In the Middle Ages, every city had a high wall around it, with a fortress. When the Poles saw that the city was on the verge of collapse, they disguised themselves as Jews and poured hot water from the wall on the incoming Swedish army. Therefore, a terrible massacre broke out, almost all the Jews of the city were killed. Only one woman – the legend tells – survived because she hid in the synagogue behind a thick wall, where she could not be found. That saved her from death...

Jewish life has always been tumultuous. The general population numbered over 13,000, including about 5,000 Jews, most of whom were engaged in trade and craft: tailors, shoemakers, purse-makers, upper-shoe makers, watchmakers and other trades. Łęczyca had not factories. Years ago, there was a cigarette-paper factory belonging to R' Yonah Libke. There was a brewery, two soap factories: one belonged to Sh. Rawicki the second to Sh. M. Lipner; Two mills: a watermill and a steam mill. There was once also a textile-factory; it had no success because of the nearby town of Ozorków with her textile industry. After a short time, the Łęczyca textile factory had to be liquidated.

Łęczyca also owned two churches: the Bernardine was for the devout Christians. There was a window through which a small casket with a child's skeleton could be seen. Behind the casket – a painted picture in color, where Jews with long beards draw the child's blood, to the Passover matza. It was simply a blood libel. (When Shalom Asz once visited Łęczyca, we introduced him there and showed him the picture. It made a terrible impression on him... Years later, Lazar Kohn visited us, we also showed him the picture. He later wrote an article about the horrible picture, in the *Łódź Folks-Blat*). This image later spread to the Poles as antisemitism escalated to provoke more anger against the Jews. And in the second church, the Germans gathered all the Jews of the city before they were sent to the ghettos.

There was also a beautiful synagogue, an ornament for the Jewish population. A terrible catastrophe occurred in this synagogue in 1898, precisely at *Kol Nidrei*¹. There

¹ TN: Yom Kippur evening service. That year, it was on 25 September 1898.

was no electric lighting yet. The pious women were provided a kerosene-lamp, which was overturned. There was an outcry "It burns"!...

The women, in terrible panic, ran to the exit. The doors were closed and it was impossible to get out – 22 women were killed and many fell from the second floor and were found dead. In the morning, the whole city was filled with mourning. At night, after *maariv*, the burial took place. All the victims were buried in one long tomb in front of the cemetery. For many years, people who entered the cemetery could see the long tomb under their eyes. The Germans destroyed the cemetery, tore out the tombstones, and blocked the street leading to the train. Even the *ohel* was destroyed and the field was turned upside down, so that one could not recognize what once was here. Grass grew there and the Christians fed cows and pigs.

Jews had their own a community, with four *dozors*². The competence of the community was only to take care of religious matters. To this end it sustained, a rabbi, judges, ritual slaughterers, a gabbai for the synagogue and a cantor. Cantors – from these times, we remember three: one Lithuanian Jew named Berke. He was a cantor until he was very old. Later came Cantor Menachem Lubelski: in the 1920s he traveled to Belgium, where he died shortly afterwards. After him, arrived to Łęczyca Cantor Henech Brush: he originated from Kleczew; he remained a cantor in Łęczyca until the outbreak of World War II and perished in Chelmno along with many thousands of other Jews.

Jews who paid the municipal tax had the right to vote.

Every three years, there were community elections to choose new *dozors*, but almost every time the same nice Jews were chosen... The city still did not have a water supply. Each house had its own water carrier. Water was taken from the Bzura River that flowed into the town. In the summer, people bathed in the Bzura River.

On Passover, the water-carrier was not trusted, because Jews were very carefully pious. A child had to be

sent to guard the Goy, so that he would not throw any *chametz* into the water.

Jewish artisans sent their daughters to be servants in rich men's establishments. Later, the daughters worked as tailors, hairdressers, hat-makers, or sock-makers!

There were *cheders* with teachers: from a young boy teacher, who taught the alphabet to children, to a Gemara-teacher, who taught the grown-ups. There were different societies, such as: *Chevra-Tehilim*, *Kneset-Orachim*, *Chevra-Kadisha*, a *Beit-Midrash* where young and old always sat and studied.

Every Saturday evening, a scholar Jew taught a lesson to the craftsmen and explained everything in their mother tongue. Other Jews recited psalms and later people prayed at *maariv*...

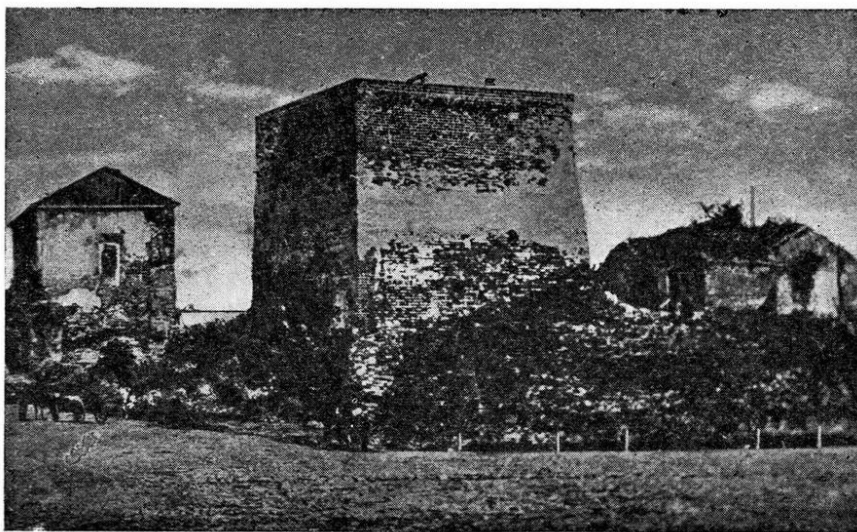
This is how Jewish life went!

Every year, on the 15th of February, the "*prizyv*"³ takes place. When young Poles from all over the province gathered, and when they wanted a party, they robbed Jews of their possessions. However, as Jewish youths broke their bones, the looting and pogrom stopped.

The Łęczyca province belonged to the Kalisz governorate. Łęczyca as originally a Polish city, but most of the shops and houses belonged to Jews. On Shabbat or Jewish holidays, the whole city was kept in a holy silence, except for the sausage shop and the Christian bakery, which were open!

A Jew, Bezalel Panczewski, lived in Łęczyca. He had boys to whom he wanted to give a secular education, and therefore brought a teacher. At that time, it was not acceptable to send the boys to a Christian school, although there were two Jewish teachers: Moshe Lerer, who had his school in his apartment, illegally; The second, Yeshayahu Lerer, was at the same time the *Soltys* among the Jews. He also ran a school in his apartment – but legally.

This Yeshayahu Lerer also had another function: when a child was born, he was given a couple of gold coins to report to the municipality. As he loved hard liquor so much, that he drank the money and did not report the child! But if it was a boy, he realized that it would affect the



The ancient fortress ('Zamek').

² TN: unpaid representatives of the community, elected by the adult Jewish population, under Polish authorities' supervision.

³ TN: Russian Army conscription, under the tsarist regime.

przyw and there would be great trouble... he reported the child years later. This is how it was done: one was registered as older and another as younger, and so on.

The teacher who came to Łęczycza for Panczewski was named Klausner. He was an active Zionist. Soon a Zionist movement organized. Most of the time he went to the students' study hall; this was for him a gratifying element. The Łęczycza Zionists were for the most part General Zionists.

There was also a Revisionist movement, supporters of Ze'ev Jabotinsky. In later years, Zionist youth organizations, "Gordonia" and "Mizrahi", also existed.

In 1904 a dentist, Moshe Kuszner, also a Zionist, came to Łęczycza from Lithuania. With his help and great effort, he succeeded in obtaining the legalization (in 1907) of a Jewish social library. Ten years later, during World War I, already under the Germans, the library celebrated its jubilee with great enthusiasm.

There was also a large chassidic movement, the majority Ger. There was also Alexander chassidim. In later years, the Ger chassidim organized themselves into a party – the *Agudah*, with its own *cheders*, a girls' school *Beit Yaakov*, a youth organization, *Poalei Emunei Israel*. They always went to the polls with the *Sanation*, the governing party. There was also a third chassidic movement, the more enlightened "Mizrahi". They called themselves the Zawiercier chassidim.

Łęczycza also possessed an ancient dynasty of rabbis. Four great rabbis of one family were buried in a tomb at the cemetery. The last rabbi was killed in the Łódź ghetto.

A long time ago, there was in Łęczycza a great righteous. He was, however, a *mitnaged*⁴, the chassidim persecuted him with such gossip and rumors that he was forced to leave Łęczycza and move to another city. His name was R' *Malbi*"m⁵. In 1863, Łęczycza Jews took part in an uprising against tsarist power, for an independent Poland; They later paid a heavy price for it...

On August 1, 1914, World War I broke out. After several weeks of heavy fighting, the Germans occupied a large part of Russian Poland, including Łęczycza.

The plight of the Jews became extremely difficult: those who managed to grab the government bank's rubles were still able to survive, but most of the population was starving. We saw that something needed to be done to alleviate the need. We need to set up a relief organization and make lunches. We approached the commander with a request that he should give out goods. The prosperous Jews were taxed.

We went on this way with help for almost an entire winter.

Before Passover, we agreed to perform a theatrical performance – "The Wild Man" by Yaakov Gordin. This theater belonged to the fire department. We got it for a very small fee.

Shortly after Pesach, we celebrated a glorious day, which brought us a nice income.

In the summer of 1915, we began to think about raising the mental-cultural level of the population, which was at a very low level. Aaron and Samson Lusner, Yaakov-Yosef Wojdislawski, Yehoshua Grinbaum, Zelik Benedik, decided to create workers' evening classes. With the help of Yechiel-Meir Rogozinski (Chemistry Engineering), the courses were performed. Two teachers from Łódź were brought: Karlicki and Ajchner. In addition to the lessons every evening, we conducted science classes on Saturday, such as chemistry, physics, cultural history, and Jewish history, which were well attended. The fee was a small one. Later, over the years, the premises where we held the evening classes were transformed into the city's Jewish public high school No. 4.

Almost at the same time, a fellow by the name of Abraham Gutman appeared in Łęczycza. He was a *Poalei-Zionist*. At that time there was no Labor Party in Łęczycza. With the help of Łódź's colleagues, it was possible to create such a party, which later grew into a large force, with its own premises and a councilor in the town council. Gutmann later settled in Łęczycza, married, lived here until the late twenties, emigrated to Paris, where he died three years ago.

In Łęczycza, there has been a labor movement since Russian times, such as the *Bund*, the P.P.S., the S.D.K.P.L. Each party had its "*bojówka*"⁶. At that time, Łódź political detainees were often sent to jail waiting for their "*wyroks*"⁷ or, on the "prisoners' convoy", to be sent to Siberia – in the Łęczycza prison. In 1906, a Łęczycza girl named Rivtshe, the Mohel's daughter, was brought from Łódź. She worked there as a milliner and belonged to a socialist party. At a rally, she, the speaker, and other colleagues were arrested and sent to Łęczycza, where she was detained for nearly two years and later deported with a party of political detainees to Siberia. From Siberia she later fled to Paris, where she was never heard from again. Her father, a great chassid, cried about her...

It was often heard that someone shot at a "*rewirowy*"⁸ or a gendarme. Suddenly – a tumult in the city: the warden of the prison was shot, while he was accompanied by a Jew, a contractor, Bernard Przedborski. This Jew was not harmed; This assassination attempt was carried out by one Kopaczewski of P.P.S.

On October 15, 1905, after Russia's defeat in the war with Japan, a great revolutionary storm broke out. There have been major political strikes. Apprentices were sent to check that people were not working in the workshops. As soon as they entered in Moshe-Leib's workshop, the ladies' tailor, he called the police and the boys were arrested. They were jailed from Thursday until Saturday.

As the tsarist government issued a manifesto and promised the people of Russia a constitution, we met early

⁴ TN: Hebrew, "opponent" (to chassidism).

⁵ TN: Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser (March 7, 1809 – September 18 1879 Kiev, Ukraine).

⁶ TN: Polish, "raid party".

⁷ TN: Polish, "Court sentence".

⁸ TN: Polish, "military policeman".

Saturday morning at the prison and demanded the release of all political detainees. At noon, the gates opened and all the political detainees were released. A large demonstration with red flags was soon formed, with various inscriptions. Speeches, revolutionary songs, different challenges. Later, they entered a Christian restaurant, drank and ate until midnight, all at the expense of Moshe-Leib...

One Friday night, the Łęczycza Polish population staged a demonstration under various flags, also religious, and called out to the Jews: "Let the unity live!" ..., "Let an independent Poland live!" The tsarist government looked into the situation and abolished the constitution. The reaction was overwhelming. Many fled to the United States, England, France, and Germany. Thus ended the "freedom" that the tsarist government granted to the people!

In the summer of 1916, a terrible typhus epidemic broke out. People, in their prime, were being swept away every day. The disturbance was great... Pious Jews decided to wed a poor guy with a poor girl⁹ in the cemetery...

The whole city of Jews, the most beautiful landlords – were 'in-laws'; they played and danced, gave sermons. The end result was that a couple of days after the wedding, the fellow left his young wife and she remained an eternal *agunah*¹⁰... It helped little to stop the epidemic...

In the cultural sphere, we have done a lot: in the summer of 1918, we celebrated the three-year anniversary of the aforementioned evening classes, with the participation of a guest speaker from Łódź, Freind Rawin. The celebration was very impressive. This was already during Poland's independence.

We formed a choir "*HaZamir*", our own orchestra, which it was conducted by Zajderman. Some successful concerts have been held.

We also organized a sports club, trained in the open field, under the direction of a German soldier. Later we hired a sport-teacher from Łódź. After a while, the work stopped. After a few years, the sports association was reorganized under the name "*HaKoach*"¹¹, with its own premises, a football-*drużyna*¹¹, its own wind orchestra, which was led by Shimon Brodzicki (now in Israel).

There was also an artisans' union, presided by R' Nathan Rogozinski. The Craftsmen's Union was affiliated to the Warsaw Central. Every three years a congress was held and Łęczycza sent her delegates. There were a lot of complicated questions to solve, such as: the artisan card, the exams for new masters.

There was also a merchants' union presided by Moshe Piątkowski – until World War II. A retailers' association was organized with Yaakov Szpigel as President and Yaakov Wiszegródzki as Secretary. Both were hanged by German assassins.¹²

The Retailers' Union did not exist for a long time, as World War II broke out shortly afterwards.

There was also a Jewish loan and savings bank, which in later years was transformed into a people's bank, connected to the Warsaw Central.

In parallel with the popular bank, there was also a charity fund, where a poor merchant or a small craftsman, could obtain an interest-free loan. The charity fund was organized by Moshe Messerszmid, who settled in Łęczycza during the First World War. He originated from Łódź. The charity fund was a great help to the poor!

Łęczycza also had a *bikur cholim*¹³, to which belonged virtually the entire Jewish population – from left to right. The task of *bikur cholim* was to provide medical



Town hall ('*Magistrat*') in Łęczycza.

⁹ TN: Jewish religious custom, also called "black wedding" or "orphan wedding".

¹⁰ TN: Hebrew, "chained woman", married woman who cannot get an agreement to divorce from her husband and thus cannot marry again.

¹¹ TN: Polish "team".

¹² TN: see in pages 440 and 441 of the original book.

¹³ TN: Hebrew, "visiting the sick". Jewish tradition to give company to and help sick people with little or poor family.

assistance to the poor. For this purpose, we contacted a Jewish doctor, in connection with a pharmacy; every month, a doctor and a pharmacist gave consultations.

The Łęczyca town council consists of 24 councilors, a mayor, a deputy mayor and three "*lawniks*"¹⁴. Jews have always carried out eight councilors, including one *Poalei-Zionist*. Therefore, Jews had a *lawnik*. For years, it was David Kopel.

Jews of Łęczyca loved theater. On the world map of theater, Łęczyca occupied an important place. The best actors came to us, such as: Julius Adler, Herman Sieradzki, Esther-Rachel Kaminska, Ida Kaminska, Zygmunt Turkow, Abraham Morewski, Samberg, Rachel Holcer, Yaakov Wajslic, Dżigan and Szumacher¹⁵ from the "Ararat" theater in Łódź, Goldsztajn and also others. We also had a dramatic circle, which was formed after the first German occupation. For many years, the director was Laser Gasz; He later traveled to France – now in Belfort. After his departure, the direction was taken by the writer of these lines, until his departure (February 10, 1939) to Australia. In later years, under the auspices of the Polish government, the dramatic circle was affiliated with the Warsaw Central as a "Jewish Stage", with its own premises. We have performed a number of plays from the Jewish repertoire, as well as from European ones.

The labor organizations have also carried out a feverish activity. They have brought down the best speakers, to various lectures on partisan or literary topics. We have also been visited by Jewish writers, such as:

Melech Rawicz, Z. Segalowicz, Dr. Czerman, Dr. Michael Wajchert and others.

On September 1, 1939, World War II broke out. After heavy fighting, which lasted several days, the Germans occupied a number of cities, including Łęczyca. The situation of the Jews became very difficult: it was not allowed to stick a head out in the street. And he who did not listen to their command was shot on the spot. The synagogue was soon demolished with dynamite. In the middle of the market, they erected gallows and all the Jews of the city had to gather and watch the 10 Jews being hanged. Then they were taken to work, sent away to camps. It did not take long, perhaps a year, for all the Jews to be gathered in a church and sent away to two ghettos: Poddębice and Grabów. Thus, a Jewish settlement a few hundreds of years of existence was wiped out.

To this day, Łęczyca is *Judenrein*. A few Jews from Łęczyca escaped to Russia, anyone but the Germans. All were scattered – to Israel, America, Canada, Australia etc. The Łęczyca Jews who stayed shared the fate of the six million Jewish martyrs.

Some Łęczyca Jews found themselves in Chełmno death camp, where hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed. They worked there as tailors. Before leaving, the Germans took them all to a yard and shot them with machine guns. Among the martyrs: Simcha Wachtel with his son Israel, Yehoshua Juda, Beniek Jastrzębski.

This is how the chapter of the Łęczyca Jews ended...

¹⁴ TN: Lay judges, members of the town council.

¹⁵ TN: Shimon Dżigan (1905 Łódź – 1980 Tel Aviv) and Israel Szumacher (1908–1961), comic duo.