

OUR SHTETL ŁĘCZYCA

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translated from the Yiddish by Shoulamit Auvé-Szlajfer

Our former town of Łęczyca is located in one of the most fertile regions of Poland. The Jewish livelihoods in the city depended on the surrounding peasant population. Virtually all shops belonged to Jews. During the market days (twice a week), the Jews without shop spread their



Mr. Henich BROSZ,
Cantor of Łęczyca z"l

goods on tables and, on the other days of the week, went on markets in the neighboring towns. Some Jews were also village traders, buying and selling whatever they could get.

Our craftsmen were usually tailors, cobblers, shoemakers, bakers, blacksmiths, watchmakers. Not all craftsmen had a livelihood for a whole year, so they had to

look for other jobs during the summer months. They worked in the orchards of the surrounding villages and left the city for a whole summer. There were also Jews who increased their revenues as tenant farmers (*pachciarz*). A *pachciarz* had his horse-and-cart, each traveling in the morning in the village, bringing milk and distributing it among the Jews in town. They also made butter and cheese – and from this led a modest life.

There was also a group of unskilled workers in the city, such as porters and carters. This was the poorest class, especially the porters. They went out into the street early to look for work and did not have a few pennies for their wife to cook something for the children. Also, the carters worked on long distances. Years ago, when there was no train between Kutno and Łódź, they had relatively large incomes, but later, when the train and buses started running, their situation became difficult. They lost their sources of income – and found no other.

The children of all these hardworking Jews learned trades and became skilled workers. Since Łęczyca was not an industrial town, the young people learned the trades from Jewish artisans, mainly tailors, renowned for their skills. Unfortunately, there was no job for everyone in the town, many traveled to Łódź, some also emigrated to the United States, England and France, where they succeeded materially but never forgot their families at home, still supporting them. Moreover, some workers emigrated not for material reasons, but political ones. It was so after the



The synagogue on fire (1942)

failure of the revolution in 1905, when they were threatened by tsarist repression.

The Jewish workers in Łęczyca had an appetite and an attraction for cultural and political activity. They have with their activity. Their activities brought about a revival in the city, they were the creators of the Jewish theater in Łęczyca. They also created the workers' political movement in the city, a Communist Party, a left-wing *Poalei-Zion* movement. Political party activities began during World War I, after the victory of the Russian Revolution. Speakers from all the workers' parties came to us from Łódź and excited the workers of Łęczyca. Thanks to the impact of the Russian Revolution, the Communist movement gained considerable influence. After the end of World War I, workers' councils were formed (Polish and Jewish workers together), but this did not last long. The councils were abandoned from power because they were under communist influence. Poland began to wage war against Russia.

The only Jewish trade union that existed in Łęczyca was the Needle Union. For political reasons, the tailors did not want to be attached to the Warsaw federation. The founders of the Needle Union were Moshe-Leibl Bornsztajn (killed by the Germans), Berel Szkolnik (now in Paris) and the author of these lines.

The Needle Union's activities have been successful in the professional, political and cultural fields. We have

carried out successful actions for better wages and fewer working hours. A library with many books was established at the association. Weekly lectures, discussions, moneybox collecting nights were organized and an Esperanto group was formed there, led by an expert teacher from Łódź. In the same premises, the "MOPR" (to help the political prisoners) was also working. Packages were prepared for the detainees in the Łęczyca prison and, through us, the detainees were in contact with the outside world. The doors of the Needle Union were open to all workers who came for help.

We kept in touch with the organized progressive Polish workers and, thanks to this, prevented a pogrom in our city.

This was in the 1930s, when the economic situation in Poland was very bad. The Polish fascists exploited the situation to provoke antisemitic outbursts. Also, in Łęczyca, the endemic hooligans wanted to provoke a pogrom, targeting a market day, when Jews displayed their goods on the tables. The hooligans, however, were repelled with the help of Polish workers, with whom we had good relations.

The same year, a large May Day demonstration took place and several speakers denounced the provocations. The author of these lines spoke on behalf of the Jewish workers...