

KUTNERS IN FRANCE

by Henech SZLAJFER, Paris
translated from the Yiddish by Shoulamit Auvé-Szlajfer

The Beginning

Following the example of dozens of hometown societies who organized in Paris with the arrival of the first large groups of immigrants from Jewish cities in Poland, our compatriots also formed the Kutno "Société.

From the start of the 1930s, there was in Paris a few dozens of people who had recently left our hometown Kutno and, through legal and illegal means, arrived here and found livelihood. Here, they built their new homes, here they created their own family life and over the years, with hard work and effort, they settled down and created a livelihood from the big world city – some more, some less.

Both in the professions they had in Kutno and in the new jobs that they found here.

The number of Kutners has grown with each passing year. Incomers were families and individuals. The boys became married and the young couples became families with children, but none of the people could forget the city of their birth and the families and colleagues who remained there, the abandoned unions and societies. They lived in Paris with only the memories of the youth of the past, of the cozy alley, of the courtyard, of the well-known gardens, fields, and woods, which represented for them a whole world, as one group of children fought with another and it was called – wars, as they fought with made up swords and spears and guns, with which they also armed

themselves in Lag b'Omer and Tisha-b'Av, when people remembered the wars that the Jews had to wage against their enemies, who were attacking our land – *Eretz Israel*.

The influx of immigrants from France, beginning in the early 1920s, brought with it a socially mature element that was nurtured in Kutno by various parties and organizations from all walks of life; they brought here the Kutno unrest, the enormous desire for collective activity and not to allow themselves to be dominated by the day-to-day worries. What really united them was their innate familiarity, the closeness of home, the place of their family lineage, and the nagging longing for everything and everyone who had one name – Kutno.

Thus, in the 1930s, the "Union of the Compatriots of Kutno and the Surrounding Area" was formed. In French: "Société de Secours Mutuel – Les Amis de Kutno", established according to the then membership cards in April 1938. In fact, the establishment took place much earlier and the date given is probably only the date of legalization. The first members and organizers, according to the order given, were:

Y. M. Bild, Gershon Szapszewicz, Yehoshua Lamski, Yosef Kam, Henech Sztajn, Zalman Bild, Moshe Strykowski, Henech Chabus, Sh. Kohn, Meir Elias, M. Fogelman, L. Pinkus et B. Poncz. The "union" tried to

involve all the Kutners, and even then, some Krośniewicers and Dąbrowicers (of the Hoffman families) joined the Kutners, and with this the name "Kutno and its surroundings" was justified. Meetings, gatherings and entertainment were held, the main topics of the conferences and discussions were about Kutno, Kutno's wonders and anecdotes, Kutners' genealogy and importance, the past and the present. People shared greetings and told the latest news and events: who had married, who had children, who died sadly, and most importantly we rejoiced with the newcomers who were received with joy and warmth. At such meetings, the countrymen felt better than at home, the joy of meeting old, good acquaintances from childhood dominated. Here, all the stories were unpacked. And memories, words, and wit that each one possessed. Here the characteristic types and personalities were revived, here Kutno was revived – together, everything was seen here from a distance and the party disputes, the divisions that divided and divided the beautiful, pulsating Jewish life in Kutno were forgotten.

Of the scarcely a hundred descendants of Kutno, some forty members-families were organized (more came to the entertainments). This can be assumed to be a significant figure, as no logbooks, member lists and financial reports were found after the war. With full



In front of the memorial of the martyrs from Kutno and surroundings, at the Parisian cemetery of Bagneux.

certainly we can say today that the activity of the society was the bold expression of the hometown affiliation, which warmed the Kutners and they moved to stay together and united in one organization.

Until the war

It continued like this until the outbreak of the most terrible of all wars, World War II. The terrible storm that spread across Europe, the black clouds that darkened the French skies, the savage Nazi beasts that ravaged France – did not spare our community. France was occupied by Hitler's troops and a hurricane swept away the foundations of the Jewish community. The Holocaust and mourning spilled over into Jewish homes. Jewish life was destroyed, many Jewish families were totally wiped out and many more suffered incurable wounds, which still make life bitter even today.

In the titanic struggle for life and death that was unfolding at that time, our nationals fought with all their might, with all the little they possessed, with the hope and the sole objective of surviving the mortal enemy, to save what was still possible and by defying all enemies, to return to a peaceful, human life

The tragic return

Dark and sad was the return of the Jews to Paris after the fire that ravaged the world. It was difficult for the survivors of the catastrophe to convey the horrible news, each more terrible than the other, which fell like heavy stones on our heads and revealed the terribly tragic picture of this unprecedented misfortune, of this catastrophe. Every Jewish family was hard hit. Jewish homes were bereaved, steeped in pain and grief. Many Jewish doors remained closed because there was no one to open them: parents were looking for their lost children, and children had become totally or semi-orphans. And, above that – the terrible news of the annihilation of Jewish life in Poland and the total extermination of the Jewish population of our beloved hometown of Kutno. Everyone felt like the sole survivor, the lonely bereaved, who had to start all over again. But how can one recover from such deep pain, from such great sadness. People met with faces full of sorrow and eyes filled with tears, we spoke to each other in half-words, the answer was always the same: nothing more, disaster, extermination...

The first yearly commemoration

The first gathering of members of the fellowship after the war will be remembered for a long time. About sixty of us came – our balance of survivors. The atmosphere was very gloomy, a deep sadness oozed everywhere, everyone felt that they had come to remember an enormous, inconsolable misfortune, the greatest catastrophe that had befallen the Jewish people, the annihilation at forever of our hometown, and the forever destruction of our community – Kutno.



Member-card of Society "The Friends of Kutno" in Paris

In heavy silence the President, Comrade Henech Szlajfer, opened the first memorial service. On the table were six lighted candles and, after a long minute of silence during which all were standing, he spoke of the ocean of pain and suffering that we had endured during the so cruel occupation by the Hitlerite assassins during the Second World War. In particular, comrade Szlajfer dwelled on the large number of Kutners deported from France and Belgium and exterminated nationals of surrounding towns and paid tribute to all those who perished as martyrs. Comrade B. Poncz spoke about the importance of Kutno in our lives and education, the importance of Kutno among the communities of Jewish Poland, how the city is engraved in our flesh and blood and he concludes with the impossible forgetting of Kutno and our Jews, if only for a minute of our lives.

Comrade B. Hoffman, the current president of our association, himself a former deportee, talks about the Kutners in the death camps, their terrible difficulties and their martyrdom. It also recalls the "society" before the war. He talks about Kutno, Krośniewice and Dąbrowice and other surrounding small towns – and ends with the great crime that was committed against the Jews in the 20th century. Appalling was the moment when E. H. Koenig read the long list of victims of Nazi assassins, deported and exterminated in the camps, men and women, old people and children, relatives, friends and acquaintances who had died. Each name made the atmosphere heavy and shudders and tears brought a lump to all throats. Obviously, they were our parents and children, our own sisters and brothers, why such an end? How can one forget all this?...

Friend Zolni recited "*El Malei Rachamim*" and recalled the suffering and pain of the city of Łęczycza and the horrible great catastrophe.

Attendees listened to words of comfort from friend Gustyn, President of the Citizens' Association of Kutno in New York, who brought warm greetings from our Kutners of America.

In the fight and the Résistance

When we remember the enormous blood price our Kutners paid in World War II, we must also remember that in the defensive struggle that went on for five full years,

we did not stand idle. Already before the outbreak of the war, some of our people, French citizens, had been drafted into the army, even some sons of Jews from Kutno had been mobilized. Some even, still foreigners, have mostly volunteered. They were integrated into the regiments of the Foreign Legion or the Polish army in France and led many and hard fights against the German invasion. Later, when the Résistance took shape, many of our Kutners took an active part in the underground struggle, often in dangerous operations and aided in the victory over mortal enemies.

It should be noted that already during the First World War, some Jews from Kutno had joined the French army as volunteers, one of them fell in the field of honor. Also, during the Spanish Civil War, two of our compatriots (Wajnberg and Ciolek) fought alongside the Republican army.

After the victory over Nazism, our comrades, Yehoshua Lamski, Berel Poncz and Henech Szlajfer, were among the founders of organizations of Jewish veterans in France and still today occupy managerial positions there.

After the liberation

At the end of the war, it became clear to us that we had to organize ourselves into a Kutners' association, whose main task would be to preserve the memory of Kutno and bring out the values that were created there, to make known the role of the Jews of Kutno in the life of the population of the former brilliant Jewish community in Poland.

This is what actually happened. Every year, at the end of March, our Kutners gather in front of the monument we erected in memory of the martyrs. In a few words, are recalled the dark years of barbarism established by Hitler and the abominable crime against our people. We remember the massive massacre of our Jewish Kutno, the neighboring towns and villages and the deportations in considerable numbers of our compatriots. A prayer is said to further recall their holy memory.

Kutners from the French-speaking provinces of Belgium and even England often participate in this annual commemoration in Paris. Likewise, our friends Max Gustyn and his wife, when in Paris, attend Remembrance Day.

If this day of commemoration is respected with fervor, it is nevertheless not our only activity. Every year we organize a Chanukah party, to which the Kutners come with their children and grandchildren; the program is prepared especially for children, we sing, we rejoice and we remember the heroes of Israel of yesterday and today. At general meetings, in addition to current business, serious general matters are also discussed in which we interest the Kutners. Among the speakers we have invited are well-known Jewish personalities: Yosef Milner (RIP), Yitzhak Pugacz, Dr. L. Bernard, Shlomo Szwiecer, Domankewicz L., Dr. L. Kurland, Dr. Szatan, H. Poznanski, Moshe Szulstajn, E. Wogler, Tea Arciszewska, Efraim Kaganowski, Henech Kohn, Hersh Grossbard and others. We miss no opportunity to receive our Kutners during their visit to Paris: Mirel Erdberg-Szatan from Canada, Mr. Gustyn from New York, Yeshayahu Trunk, Moshe Pietrikowski from Brazil,



Memorial ceremony in Paris



Committee of the association of former residents of Kutno and surroundings in Paris

Menashe Kac from Brussels, Mrs. Plocer and Mr. Kleczewski from Israel, and others. We celebrated the seventieth birthday of our veterans: Menachem Kenig and Max Moszkowicz (RIP) and also for many years, Henech Chabus and E. H. Kenig, in whose honor we planted seventy trees in the forests of Israel. Recently, we also celebrated the sixty-fifth birthday of: Sh. H. Ciolek, Yitzhak Kac and Menashe Kac of Belgium. We organized a beautiful banquet for the *aliyah* of Nachman Buki and his family. After the death of our great writer and native of Kutno Shalom Asz, we organized an evening of public mourning, during which, in addition to speeches, the works of the writer were also read. Almost every year we celebrate the anniversary of his death with a special evening. We also did not forget our quasi-citizen Beinish Zylbersztajn (who died in deportation). For the publication of a book of his poems, we organized a public evening, in which participated the writers: Moshe Szulsztajn, B. Szlevin, Yosef Manicz and Elchanan Wogler. The widow of B. Zylbersztajn, whom we also helped to distribute the book, came especially to this evening. A large number of Jewish writers and cultural figures attended the evening. By the way, this was the only evening in memory of Beinish Zylbersztajn.

Present activity

In addition to the other activities that we have organized, we often participate in social actions of a mainly Jewish and Israeli nature. Even today, our

meetings are devoted to the time of remembrance and the stories of our past lives in and around Kutno. More colleagues participate in conversations and discussions, poems are often recited by comrade David Wachtel (Łęczycza).

Thanks to its continuous important societal activity, our fellowship has acquired a good reputation in the eyes of the public and the reception we receive from all Jewish circles is sympathetic. Relations between members are friendly, in some cases we provide members with social assistance. Unfortunately, we are very limited and the financial possibilities and our goodwill are therefore also limited.

Like other Jewish societies, we have our own grave plot, thanks to the important first help of Mrs. Gustyn from New York. In the tomb square is the monument – a beautiful marble stone with the inscription: "Yizkor! To the eternal memory of the eight thousand Jews of Kutno and its surroundings – victims of German barbarism", with the names of the deportees, natives of Kutno, and the names of many missing victims in the Kutno ghetto and in Chełmno.

The existence of our fellowship has done a lot to boost the morale of the members, we have to a large extent driven away the loneliness and despair that reigned in each of us after the horrible hardships of the war and certainly after the war, when we realized the immensity of the loss and the pain. The Kutno society is like a family reunited – the first time after the exodus and the second time as

survivors, saved from the Great World Fire and Hitler's crimes.

All our attempts to increase the number of our members, involving the natives of the surrounding villages, have so far yielded little results. Nevertheless, we find ourselves in a cordial community with the people of Łęczyca, Krośniewice and Dąbrowice. We still kept the hope that the Jews of the other villages, which did not organize themselves, will find the way to join our fellowship. So together we will then form a large association of the three counties that once made a common constituency: Kutno – Łęczyca – Łowicz and perhaps also Gostynin, where a large number of Jews lived then.

Through the press

To conclude our assessment of the activity of the Kutno Society in Paris, we attach below some excerpts from Jewish newspapers in France where, in the form of press releases and reports, are mentioned the activities of the "*Société*".

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... Following this, President Bernard Hoffman invites Vice-President H. Szlajfer, friend Lamski, and the former co-founder of our Society B. Poncz to the rostrum, he announces the sad news coming from the States States that the president of the local Kutno Society, Mr. Gustyn (Kostinski), is deceased.

After referring to the latter's first contact with the members of Paris in 1947, during which, in addition to his moral encouragement, he also provided financial assistance which enabled the purchase of a "*caveau*"¹, and later contributed to the erection of a monument to the annihilated community of Kutno and surroundings, the President calls for a minute of silence in his honor.

After giving a brief account of the activities of our association during the past year, he declared that within the limits of our modest possibilities, we have carried out a very substantial and useful work. In the budget, we decided to participate in a fundraiser, for a Jewish memorial and for the children's colony in Israel. We have also done a tremendous job in preparing the materials for the Yizkor Book which will soon be published in Israel. We also raised a substantial amount of money for this purpose, but it now turns out that we still need a big effort to be able to reach the amount necessary to complete this book.

The president therefore calls on all Kutners to contribute as much as possible. Friend Lamski, who has now returned from a long visit to Israel, conveys the greeting during his contact with the Kutners there. He is proud, he says, of the Kutners' activity in Israel. The Kutno Society of Israel is very large in number of participants and there are among it very eminent personalities of the country and even some members of the Knesset. Very important personalities are involved in the publication of the Yizkor Book and we can have full confidence in them,

he said. He also mentions the warm welcome they gave him and his wife, and wishes that all Kutners make an effort to travel to Israel and meet our Kutners there.



Near the memorial *matzeva* in Paris (cemetery in Bagneux)

The meeting then turns into a day of celebration, when the president announces that today we are celebrating a very important event. Namely, the high distinction of *Légion d'Honneur* awarded to the native of Kutno B. Poncz, for his role in the *Résistance*. He introduces him to new members, reminding them of his active role in the founding of the Society before World War II, and later, after the Great Holocaust, in the reestablishment of the present Society of Kutno and surroundings.

Speaking of the high honor that friend Poncz had recently received, he felt that it was a great privilege for the Society to have a member who had received such an honor. The President also mentioned the great happiness he himself felt, after four years of passing through the seven levels of hell in the Nazi death camps, to have the opportunity to see his long-time friend date recognized by the French government through this appointment to the rank of *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur* and wished him to proudly wear this distinction in a world of peace.

Vice President M. Szlajfer, a childhood friend of B. Poncz, is greeted with a word of welcome. He recalls the participation of Jewish fighters at all times and in all

¹ TN: French, "cemetery vault".



Committee of former residents of Kutno and surroundings in Paris

countries alongside those who fought for justice and equity. But the real heroism was that shown by the Jews when it came to defending their own Jewish state. Here too, our Kutners have greatly participated.

Talking about the distinction received by B. Poncz, he says that it is a very important event and that the Kutners will always be proud of this honor.

Then his friend Yehuda Sztajn greets him, recalling the high qualities of B. Poncz and wishes him more happiness.

After the assembly had toasted and feasted on the delicious dishes prepared with so much taste by Mmes. Sara Sztajn, Szlajfer, Szkolnik and Wachtel, the floor returned to the guest of honor B. Poncz. It is difficult for him, he says, to speak at such a time, when he is still under the influence of all that has been said here about him. He is very touched by the warm welcome he received. He considers this a great privilege. He states that if we talk about his distinction, we must also remember all the anonymous heroes who fought for the same goal. And the journey that separates Kutno from Paris appears to him as a sort of relationship, of sharing, in today's party, because if he hadn't obtained the organizational training in his small town – he maybe wouldn't have arrived at this level.

He thanked the committee for this evening which gave him great pleasure.

Friend Wachtel entertained the crowd very well and he deserves big congratulations.

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Excerpts from the eulogy delivered by Secretary of the Society of Kutno and surroundings in France, H. Hoffman, on the occasion of the 23rd anniversary of the extermination of our martyrs in front of the monument in honor of the Kutners in the cemetery of Paris.

Dear compatriots and friends!

Since the last Holocaust, we have come together year after year to remember and honor our tragically departed families.

For hundreds of generations and years, the Jews suffered mourning following wicked laws and various persecutions, which took place both in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. However, no one could or wanted to believe that in the 20th century, this world, which claims to be civilized, cultural and humanistic, would inflict such mourning on us following a barbaric holocaust, unlike any other in the history of Humanity.

However, we do not have the right to confine our generation to the memory of these sad events. Our revenge, our existence, our "not to forget", will only have consistency when we transmit the savagery towards the Jewish people to our children and to future generations, so that the indifference that reigned before the last is not repeated. holocaust. When Hitler, may his name be erased, wrote his infamous book "*Mein Kampf*", in which he openly proclaimed his sadistic plan to eradicate the Jewish

people, the world greeted him with indifference and casualness, until the sad facts that the world scandalously ignored and which allowed the extermination of six million Jews, happened.

We must never be indifferent and keep silent about antisemitic provocations or assassination plans, which Israel's enemy, the modern pharaoh, Nasser, is still preparing today. He too openly calls for the destruction of the State of Israel. He thus wants to win over the antisemites of all countries.

This commemorative book, which we publish with the participation of our compatriots from all countries, wherever they are, is a monument to the holy memory of our tragically deceased martyrs. We perpetuate their names, which will be a sanctification for us, engraved in our hearts and in the hearts of future generations.

As we gather here today, I turn symbolically to the monument inscribed with the names of our slain brothers. With the engraved words of Zalman Shneur on a monument honoring the victims of the Białystok pogrom:

Stand strong and be proud, you pillar of sorrow.

*Do not melt in the blood of the holy martyrs
beneath you*

Nor dissolve into a flood of your tears...

*Strike fear into them at night, hover over them like
a curse...*

*A cold witness shall you be, telling what occurred
to the children who will come after us.*

Today, gathered here for the 23rd anniversary, we bow in respect to our departed martyrs.