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CHARITY AND THE CHARITY SOCIETY (*KHEVRA KADISHA*)
IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF SWARZĘDZ*
IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

In Jewish society, charity (in Hebrew: *tsedekah* or *gmilat khesedim*) is one of the pillars on which the world stands. In *Pirke Avot*, a tractate of the *Talmud*, it is written: "Simon the Righteous (...) used to say, 'The world stands on three pillars: the *Torah*, prayer in the service of God, and charity'"¹. But the seventeenth

* **Swarzędz** (Germ. Schwersenz), in the beginning called also Grzymałów, is situated in Wielkopolska (Great Poland), 10 km eastwards of Poznań (Posen). Swarzędz was a private noble property, first a village, and in 1638 located as a town. In 1621 the owner of the village, Zygmunt Grudziński, made an agreement with authorities of the Jewish community in Poznań. This agreement allowed the Jews of Poznań to migrate to his properties (at that time a number of possible settlers was considerable because of the overcrowding of the Jewish quarter in Poznań). From its very beginning the Swarzędz community was connected with the Poznań community as its branch community. As a branch, the Swarzędz community was obligated to follow the orders of the principal community, to present elected officials for confirmation and to pay taxes. In poll-tax register from the year 1676 Swarzędz was the seventh largest Jewish centre in the Poznań voivodeship. Swarzędz had then 119 Jewish tax-payers what made about 20 % of the total number of tax-payers [Z. Guldón, J. Wijaczka, *Ludność żydowska w Wielkopolsce w drugiej połowie XVII wieku (The Jewish Population in Great Poland in the Second Half of the 17th Century)*, in: *Żydzi w Wielkopolsce na przestrzeni dziejów*, eds. J. Topolski, K. Modelski, Poznań 1995, p. 29]. A census made in the years 1764–1765, which was one of the administrative and fiscal reforms in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, recorded in Swarzędz 1,024 Jews above 1 year (J. Kleczyński, F. Kulczycki, eds., *Liczba głów żydowskich w Koronie z taryf roku 1765 (The Number of Jews in the Crown according to Scale of Charges of 1765)*, Kraków 1898, p. 6]. If we add the number of infants and hidden persons (6.35% and 20% as suggested Rafał Małler) we obtain 1,390 persons. The census carried out by the Prussian authorities after the second partition of Poland in 1793, recorded in Swarzędz 1,373 Jews [J. Wąsicki, ed., *Opisy miast polskich z lat 1793–94 (Polish Towns of 1793–94)*, Poznań 1962, part I, p. 483].

¹ *Pirke Avot*, I, 2.

century chronicler Natan Hanower mentioned six such pillars: *Torah*, prayer, charity, law, truth, and peace². Entries in the records of the Jewish community show that these “pillars” were used to categorize the community’s regulations, attesting to the universality of this understanding of the order of the world. Inscriptions on poor boxes in synagogues, usually Biblical citations, also offer interesting examples of the role of charity. For example, written in stone on the border of the poor box in the Old Synagogue in Cracow are the following inscriptions: “A gift in secret subdues anger” (*Proverbs* 21:14) and “For the throne is established by righteousness” (*Proverbs* 16:12). On the poor box in the Remu synagogue, also in Cracow, we can read the following: “Offering for the peaceful rest of the Remu, may his memory be blessed”.

This broader understanding of charity is also evident in the entries in the records of the Jewish community. Matters connected to charity appear often in the regulations of the electors of the Poznań *kehillah* (Hebrew for the official governing body of the Jewish community; in Polish: *gmina żydowska*). In addition to the basic motivation of “quieting the tears of the poor,” the electors also gave other reasons for their interest in charity. It is a “righteous act for God”³ and it provides “help for the souls of our ancestors”⁴. We read elsewhere: “the *kehillah* will consider the problem and, to spare ourselves the complaints of the beggars and the poor, we will watch over them — may God provide for their needs! — and increase their days and the days of their sons”⁵. Charitable people can also rely on the charity of God, since “each who shows mercy to others receives the mercy of Heaven”⁶. Another regulation of the electors concludes with the statement: “Charity draws us nearer to the days of our redemption”⁷.

² Natan Hanower, *Jawein Mecula*, in: *Kroniki, cpisy i elegie hebrajskie z czasów Chmielnickiego* (*Chronicles, Relations and Hebrew Elegies from Times of Chmielnicki*), ed. M. Bałaban, *Ruś I* (1911), vol. 4, p. 409.

³ *Acta electorum communitatis Judaeorum poznańskiensium (1621-1835)*, ed. D. Avron, Jerusalem 1966 [hereafter, *AE*], N° 204⁷ (1720). The number in parentheses following the *AE* citations refers to the date of the record.

⁴ *AE*, N° 1815 (1703).

⁵ *AE*, N° 623 (1650).

⁶ *AE*, N° 2176 (1746).

⁷ *AE*, N° 1490 (1684).

Charity, then, fulfilled many functions besides support of the needy; it also worked to assure harmony in the world and bring help to the souls of the dead. Moreover, it was a religious act that secured grace and prosperity and brought nearer the arrival of the Messiah.

Charitable activity encompassed the maintenance of the poor, orphans, and widows; care for the impoverished sick; support of poor students; the assurance of dowries for poor girls; the offering of hospitality to travelers, etc. Occasionally, charity was directed to Jews outside of the local community. For example, funds were collected for the poor in the Holy Land or for the ransom of prisoners. Primarily, though, charitable activity was concerned exclusively with local needs.

Fulfilling the obligations of charity rested with the leaders of the *kehillah*. The responsible officials for charity within the *kehillah* (fulfilling the role of managers or treasurers, known in Hebrew as *gabaim* or *gabai tsedakah*) were among the most important in the makeup of the *kehillah*. In Swarzędz, three to six managers were chosen every year; in 1733, substitutes were also elected in order to assure the continuing of charitable work during the absence of the managers in the city⁸. The basic tasks of the managers were to care for the poor and to verify the list of names of the needy, eliminating those who were getting some kind of outside income or profit and adding new names in turn⁹. In addition, the managers supervised the ritual bath and slaughterhouses. The names of female managers (in Hebrew: *gabaot nashim*) can also be found in some of the documents. They occupied themselves with charity among women and collected donations from women living alone. The funds for charity (in Hebrew, *kupat ha-tsedakah*) were separate from those for the *kehillah*. Its main sources of income were the following: fees from honors in the synagogue (such as the summons to read from the *Torah*); fees for occupying a place in the synagogue; gifts from the synagogue poor box; fines; court fees; and individual gifts.

A regulation of the electors of the Poznań *kehillah* forbade the poor from begging door to door, on the grounds that the beggars would embarrass the residents. At the same time, they brought back the managers' old custom of soliciting personally from door

⁸ Jewish Theological Seminary (New York), 3652, p. 168.

⁹ AE, N° 1845 (1705), 1886 (1707).

to door and collecting gifts for the poor. They solicited money in this way three to six times a year (at *Hanukkah*, *Shabat Hanukkah*, *Shabat Nacham*, the night of the Fast of Esther, *Purim* and *Shavuot*)¹⁰. Certain limitations also applied to solicitation by the female managers: in Poznań, the *kehillah* granted them a certain fixed sum for each of the three pilgrim holidays (Passover, *Sukkoth*, and *Shavuot*), thus forbidding them from walking and soliciting door to door¹¹. This institutionalization and centralization of charitable activity gave rise to a certain tendency to control among the *kehillah* leaders. This tendency led to a gradual contraction of private charity from individuals.

Money for charitable goals was also collected during the religious feasts held for special occasions such as weddings, circumcisions, etc.

In the Poznań *kehillah*, and most certainly in the Swarzędz *kehillah* as well, the managers often complained to the electors or other senior leaders of the *kehillah* about the lack of money in the treasury for charity. As a result of such complaints, the managers were generally granted a certain part of the taxes collected by the community or given the right to part of the fees the community assessed (for example, for grain, ritual slaughter, taxes from salt, or court fees)¹².

Initially, the managers of the *kehillah* occupied themselves with all kinds of charitable activity, but special societies gradually took over part of their tasks. The society for charity was the most important of these and is thought to be the oldest¹³. Literally, it was known as a burial society (in Hebrew: *khevre kadisha* or *khevre (kadisha) gmilut khasadim*). The society for schools (in Hebrew: *khevrat Talmud Torá*) provided for the instruction of the poorest children and concerned itself with charity connected to education. Trade guilds also conducted charitable activity, though primarily for their own members — impoverished or

¹⁰ AE, № 2047 (1720), 2149 (1736).

¹¹ The Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem [hereafter: CAHJP], PL/Po 1a, p. 254v (no date).

¹² AE, № 623 (1650), 1342 (1677), 1490 (1684), 1508 (1685), 1815 (1703), 1981 (1715), 2068 (1722), 2075 (1723).

¹³ I. Schiper, *Wewnętrzna organizacja Żydów w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej (The Inner Organization of Jews in the Old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth)*, in: *Żydzi w Polsce Odrodzonej (Jews in the Reborn Poland)*, ed. I. Schiper, A. Tartakower, A. Hafftko, Warszawa [1932], p. 98.

disabled craftsmen, their widows, etc. At least theoretically, the leaders of the *kehillah* controlled the activities of these societies and guilds.

Charitable societies existed in the early modern period in all the major Jewish communities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Their activity concentrated above all on the care of the sick and dying as well as on activities connected with the preparation for funerals.

A ledger from the Swarzędz charitable society has been preserved and is now located in Jerusalem¹⁴. This book contains various entries from 1732 to 1818: election protocols of the society's leaders; regulations relating to the functioning of the society; records of income and expenses; and other entries, such as records of bequests to the society.

Elections for the leadership of the *khevera kadisha* were held annually, during the time of the free days during the Passover holiday. Occasionally, it is noted that there were three free days of Passover; this was most likely immediately after the elections of the *kehillah* leadership. Elections of the society leadership were indirect: five (in exceptional cases, four) electors (in Hebrew: *ksherim*) chose the officials. Throughout the years, the number of the chosen officials varied from nine to eighteen people; there appears to have been no real standard.

The following officials were chosen:

1. managers (in Hebrew: *gabaim*) — from 4 to 9;
2. alternate managers (in Hebrew: *bimkom gabaim*) — from 1 to 3;
3. trustees (in Hebrew: *naanim*), in charge of the treasury — from 2 to 7;
4. election officials (in Hebrew: *naanim de-klafei ktana*) — from 1 to 4;
5. overseers (in Hebrew: *mashgikhim*) — from 1 to 3.

As it happened, the electors placed themselves in these positions. It is also clear that many of the managers were simultaneously in leadership positions of the *kehillah*, and often in the most important and more prestigious positions. Even if they were not on the lists in a given year, often both in earlier and later years they are to be found in the leadership of the *kehillah*. They comprised the elite of the community.

¹⁴ CAHJP, PL/Sw 46.

Besides the above officials who provided their services voluntarily, the society also engaged functionaries paid from its treasury. One of them was the *shames* (sexton or attendant), who performed many helpful functions commissioned to him by the leadership of the society. These included the relaying of information, the summons for prayer, etc.

In the regulations of the leadership of the society, the tendency to limit the reception of new members is clear. In 1759, it was decided that the reception of new members would occur once a year, on the seventh of *Adar* at a gathering of the society's managers and trustees¹⁵. Other charitable societies received new members only after a two to three year practicum period¹⁶; most probably this was the situation in Swarzędz. The newly received members paid an initiation fee, usually a minimum of three zlotys¹⁷. In 1796, it was decided that the reception of new members could occur only with the knowledge of all members of the society, during the group's gatherings or on the seventh of *Adar* or on *Shemini Atzeres* (the last day of the holiday of *Sukkoth*). Any reception of members in any other way would be considered invalid¹⁸.

One of the records in the Swarzędz ledger of the *kheura kadisha* includes interesting information about the internal conflict of the society. Conflicts and quarrels, which are described only as having been brought about by hatred toward the society's managers, caused the leaders of the *kehillah* to intervene and led to the suspension of the functioning of the society. The later leadership of the *kehillah* withdrew this order and returned to the earlier qualifications for the managers. Nobody, not even the rabbi, had the right to interfere with these decisions, which could not be reversed. Anyone who spoke out publicly against the managers distanced himself from the society; moreover, that individual was subject to a penalty and ban (in Hebrew: *kherem*), and his name was publicly announced in the synagogue¹⁹.

¹⁵ CAHJP, PL/Sw 46, p. 66v.

¹⁶ *Pinkas bractwa pogrzebowego i dobroczynnego w Zamościu* (*The Minute-book of the Burial and Charity Society in Zamość*), ed. E. Kupfer, "Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego", N° 1, 1951, pp. 55-80.

¹⁷ CAHJP, PL/Sw 46, p. 66v.

¹⁸ CAHJP, PL/Sw 46, p. 180 (February 28, 1796).

¹⁹ CAHJP, PL/Sw 46, p. 114 (no date).

The obligations of the members of the Swarzędz *khevera kadisha* included sitting up with the sick both day and night, watching over the corpse, cleaning the corpse, and preparing the body for the funeral. In unfortunate cases, each member of the society was obligated to take a turn performing these services; lot determined the order of turns. If the manager did not have free time, he had to find a substitute, paying the substitute from his own pocket. If the manager was not home, then someone else was designated to serve and the absent one was then the first to be summoned later when another was absent. Such a specific arrangement of responsibilities was established out of a desire to avoid conflicts and controversies among the members of the society.

Special duties fell to the members of the *khevera* leadership — as more obligated than others, they were obliged to hurry to the sick or dying and to not pay attention to the status or property of the needy individual. It happened several times that persons who did not participate in the work of the society were denied nominations for *kehillah* leadership. These denials were based on *Proverbs 27:18*: “He who tends a fig tree will enjoy its fruit.” This was cited to emphasize the necessity of participating in the cleaning of the corpse.

The members of the society were also charged with the task of taking care of the mourners, especially during *shiva* — the period of strict mourning lasting for seven days after the funeral. A record of a bequest indicates that the dead offered the society a *Torah*, together with a small cabinet as well as a silver pointer (in Hebrew: *yad*). Until this time, the custom was to carry the *Torah* from the synagogue (or from the prayer and study house) to the mourners; from this time on, the *shames* was obliged to take these other donated objects to the home of the mourners as well. In exchange for a gift, the society would remember the anniversary of the deceased donor and his late son by the burning of candles²⁰. Other donors left bequests of fifty zlotys for the *khevera kadisha*, in exchange for the gathering of a *minyán* on the anniversary of the deceased’s death and the saying of the prayer *El mole rachamim* in memory of the deceased’s soul²¹.

²⁰ CAHJP, PL/Sw 46, p. 121v (November 11, 1774).

²¹ CAHJP, PL/Sw 46, p. 12 (no date).

A special day for the *khevera kadisha* was the seventh day of the month of *Adar*, accepted as the date of the death of Moses, the patron of the society. On this day, members of the society were obliged to fast. According to an entry in the Swarzędz ledger, a majority of the communities of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth observed this practice. However, other communities marked other days as fast days. For example, the members of the *khevera kadisha* in the community of Warsaw suburb called Praga fasted on the twentieth day of the month of *Elul*²².

On the day before the fast, the *shames* of the society had to go to the homes of the trustees and other members of the society to remind them of the fast and that each should begin the fast after noon. If the seventh of *Adar* fell on the Sabbath, then the fast was delayed. During the period of fasting, the society members gathered three times in the synagogue for a service, to say penitential prayers (in Hebrew: *slichot*), and to read the appropriate fragment of scripture. After the morning service in the synagogue, the ten men making up the *minyán* were obliged to go to the cemetery, where they were to circle the graves of the righteous and ask forgiveness from the dead. At that time, they prayed the following prayer preserved in the ledger of the society:

“Lord of the Universe, Lord of all our souls, You are one and Your name is one — Mighty God, mighty and terrifying, who created and made everything. He who by his word and speech created the light and darkness, created the heart and kidney in the goodness of his great wisdom, knows all thoughts and secrets, and darkness is before Him as light. He is master of life and death and a doctor giving medicine and help. (...) All of our words are not sufficient to thank You in even a small degree. (...) From our great love for You and from our respect for You, which fills our hearts and souls, we long to lift up and sanctify Your Name — in order that we may ally and unite ourselves before You, Lord, our God and the God of our fathers, in glory, thanks, prayer, requests, and supplication — we, members of a charitable society [taking care of] the dead, lead them from life by the words of Your holy *Torah* and provide for their burial; in these ways we show mercy to the dead. This mercy includes burial and the saying of prayers [*kaddish*] and still our wise men said — may their memory be

²² CAHJP, PL/4. *Księga Bractwa Pogrzebowego na Padze 1785–1870 (The Minute-book of the Burial Society in Praga)*, p. 6.

blessed! — to add to this mercy — if in general one can add to the mercy of God, since it is he who is the consuming and frightening fire — in order to go in his steps and fulfill his commandments. And what is charity and the burial of the dead? It is the burial of Moses our teacher — May he rest in peace! — we too may [participate] in his deeds — may our deeds be included! So then we gather and return our attention to the fulfillment of this *mitsvah*, as a group, fulfilling this promise. We occupy ourselves with this *mitsvah* and we now worry that — God forbid! — we do so in sin, because it may be that we do not proceed appropriately in the light of the dead one among us; we may transgress his honor or do him offense and embarrassment during the carrying of the corpse or during the laying on of the shroud or during the cleaning [of the corpse], the marking, digging, and cleaning of the grave as well as the raising of the stone²³ and laying of the stone on the grave or in placing it on the grave — this may not have been done in accordance with his honor or in accordance with the law and *Torah*. Or the measuring of the steps for some grave with a secret burial may not be appropriate and may lack a guardian of the spirit, or there may be sins, offenses, oversights or mistakes unknown to us and not evident to our eyes. And for all these reasons we have taken steps in order to ask forgiveness from the dead, who, having died and left us forever, are buried here. And now our God and the God of our fathers — You, who are the merciful guardian for thousands [of people] — show Your mercy to the living and the dead. We have come before You with a great request as well as with numerous prayers and supplications — during the time of the fast, when we are obligated to fast on this one day, regularly each year. And in this way may our prayer and request be blessed before You, in order that we may be absolved, freed from sin, and forgiven for all that should be forgiven: all our sins and sufferings which we have undergone. And during this day we place before You our fear and trembling. May our actions soon merit the descent of our just Messiah and the rebuilding of the Temple in our days! Amen”²⁴.

²³ This most likely concerns the stones placed on the corpses in the graves.

²⁴ CAHJP. PL/Sw 46, p. 6v.

The entry from 1732 attests to certain explanations for the offenses mentioned above. This refers to the offenses of Hirshel, the *shames* of the Swarzędz *khevera kadisha*, who at least once inappropriately buried the dead. The rabbi and rabbinical court, together with the leaders of the community and leaders of the *khevera kadisha*, fined him, with the admonition that the dead deserve significantly greater respect than the living. At the same time, Hirshel was made to swear in the great synagogue that in the future he would perform his tasks appropriately: among other responsibilities, he was obligated to refrain from burying the dead on the road adjoining the gravesites; he could only bury inside the cemetery. He also did not have the right to mark the place of a grave, and the manager of the *kehillah* on duty for that month had to accompany him when he marked the grave. In addition, a manager or trustee of the *khevera kadisha*, or a designated person knowing the law and customs, had to be present with Hirshel at the digging of the grave. It had happened earlier that a grave had been prepared at an incorrect site, and, as a result, the corpse of another had been profaned. The oath also obligated the *shames* to take a deposit from the members of the society who were designated to dig the grave and inclined to procrastination. In addition, the *shames* had to take care not to send unmarried youths to perform this activity, but only married men. If Hirshel did not adhere to these new policies, he was subject to the loss of his position as *shames* as well as to the loss of his citizenship in the *kehillah*²⁵.

After finishing the fast, the leaders of the society were obliged to meet to balance the accounts²⁶. A regulation from 1744 limited excessive expenditures of the managers and trustees of the *khevera* on the night after the conclusion of the fast²⁷; to compensate for the earlier period of fasting, a sum was specifically earmarked for the arrangement of a grand feast.

Accounts and balances make up a significant part of the Swarzędz ledger. Each year the income and expenses were itemized and calculated. Income came from the following categories:

²⁵ CAHJP, PL/Sw 46, p. 11.

²⁶ CAHJP, PL/Sw 46, p. 6.

²⁷ CAHJP, PL/Sw 46, p. 28.

fees from burials; money from the repayment of debts; fees from synagogue readings; fees for the gathering of a *minyán* or the borrowing of the *Torah* during the period of mourning; and donations to the society. Among the most common expenditures were gifts or loans for the poor and needy, especially the sick, widowed, or wives whose husbands were ill. The costs incurred by the society for the care of the sick and the preparation of funerals made up another category of expenses. These included payments for taking care of the sick, for the digging of graves, for the repair of utensils belonging to the society (for example, shovels), and payments for doctors and medicine (above all, for the poor in poorhouses). The society also remunerated its own *shames*. Other expenditures included small amounts given to guests; their place of origin is usually noted. Most often, guests came from other communities in the region of Great Poland: Leszno, Kalisz, Głogów, and Międzyrzecz, or from the German states (in Hebrew: *Ashkenaz*); but at least once there was a guest from Jerusalem. Occasionally, the profession of the guest was also noted, especially if the guest was a distinguished one, such as a preacher or a teacher. Annually, the section of income and expenditures closed with a balance, a summary of all income and expenditures in a given year; often, the sum remaining from the previous year was added to this accounting. In a large majority of the cases, this balance was positive; expenditures exceeded income only a few times in the course of a given period.

The Jewish sources examined here show two sides of charity. On the one hand, the giving of charity is a praiseworthy deed, a *mitsvah*, and the obligation of each community. On the other, though, charity was an immense burden on the budget of the *kehillah*. Good intentions clashed with the reality of charitable activity. Jewish communities attempted to curtail expenses for charity, trying at least to limit its range to local needs. For example, those from outside the community had only limited access to the community's charity. The list of obligations of the second *shames* of the *kehillah* in Swarzędz in 1789 included the following: "must take care of poor guests, who do not have the right to be here longer than twenty-four hours; moreover, if they arrive on Thursday — even if they arrive before night — they must leave from here on Friday morning, in order not to burden the sons of our community, because we would be forced to be here

until Sunday"²⁸. Poznań, in light of the great influence of beggars from other communities and cities, set a maximum sum of fifteen *groszy* that could be given to such beggars. If the foreign pauper was especially honored and wanted to give a public sermon, the leaders of the *kehillah* agreed to treat him in a special way²⁹.

It also happened at regional councils of Jewish communities and at the Sejm of the Four Lands that neighboring communities were either warned not to send beggars to other communities or told that because of general poverty, the poor from outside the local area could not count on assistance³⁰.

(Translated by Sean Martin)

²⁸ Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu, Gmina Żydowska Swarzędz [State Archives in Poznań, Jewish Community of Swarzędz] 1, p. 34.

²⁹ CAHJP, PL/Po 1a, p. 241 (no date).

³⁰ For example, the administrative orders of the Poznań electors from 1672 (AE, N° 1205).