

Dr Zvi Cohen

## The *Częstochower Rebbe*, Reb Awigdor z"l (a portrait of a "Good Jew", who was unlike all others)

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Colourful, Jewish Częstochowa had a little of each classification in Poland's bygone Jewish world. All branches of the Jewish bourgeoisie were to be found within its perimeter. All types of National [viz. Zionist] factions, as well as all divisions of the radical wing, there were Jews of all types there including, as is only natural, an assimilationist group. Thus, when a stranger came to Częstochowa and spent some time there, he could glean an accurate concept of all the factions and groups that the Jews had in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

To complete this picture, Częstochowa had, apart from the *Chassidim* who travelled to other *Rebbes*, such as for instance, *Gerer Chassidim*, *Aleksander Chassidim*, etc., there were also followers of its own *Rebbe*, a *Rebbe* of Częstochowa, who came from a grand bloodline and who was, in his leadership, different from all the *Rebbes*.

This *Rebbe*, who lived in Częstochowa for many years, where his father and grandfather had also lived, was not named the "*Częstochower Rebbe*" (such as other *Rebbes*) after the city, and not because of the title of a book he had published (such as the *Sfas Emes* [Language of Truth\*]), but just with his own name, only slightly elongated. His name was Reb Awigdor Szapiro. The people called him "Reb Awigdor'l". He did take *kvitelech* [notes with petition prayers], but he only accepted redemptory donations from one who had the means. He refused to take one *grosz* from poor people and, to those who were very poor, he would even discreetly give a "redemption" himself.

This *Rebbe* had a noble countenance and he would pierce one with his penetrating eyes. Yet the *Rebbe* did not wish anyone to fear him, but quite the opposite, that they should be close to him. He had a crowd of craftsmen, tailors, cobblers, joiners and bakers. He used to say to them:

*I wish you to come to me like you leave work! You need not smarten up for my sake! To me, your clean souls are more important than the finest clothes.*

The *Rebbe* also used to scold those who sometimes came out with a malicious word against a Jew who was not very religious, or even a Gentile. He used to say:

*All humans were created by God! If we hate someone, we hate God's creation!*

He particularly enjoyed keeping company with little children, whom he used to call *maluchimlech* [little angels]. He would have the children from the *cheder*, which he had established, called to him. He would tell the little children to sit around him and he would hand out sweets and other treats to them, spending time with them in a childlike manner. This was his greatest delight.

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\* [TN: By the Rebbe Reb Juda Aryje Lajb Alter of Ger (1847-1905). The book was published posthumously; during his lifetime he was simply called "The Gerer Rebbe."]

In this respect, he was likened to his great-grandfather, the great *tzadik* [righteous man] Reb Duwid of Lelów, who was famed as the great lover of the Jewish People.



Reb Duwid of Lelów was one of the founders of Polish Chassidism. It was he who travelled throughout Poland in a “booth” [half-covered wagon] and, wherever he arrived, he spoke to the crowd about Chassidism. It was also he who “made” many new *Rebbes* in Poland. Firstly, the “*Yid Ha’Kudesh*” [The Holy Jew; *Rebbe* Jakow Icchok Rabinowicz of Przysucha (1766–1813)], then Reb Icchok of Vurke [Warka] (the later *Vurker Rebbe*) and, later, Dr Bernhard of Piotrków who, thanks to him, became a repentant sinner and a *Rebbe*.

But Reb Duwid *Lelówer* excelled in another particular quality, with which only a number of individuals in the Chassidic world were blessed, and this was his great love for all men and, especially, for Jews. Until then, only one such *Rebbe* had been known in the Chassidic world - this was Reb Lewi Icchok of Berdyczów, who is known as the “*Ohev Yisrael*” [Lover of Israel\*]. For Reb Lewi Icchok, such a thing as an evil Jew was utterly impossible. “Every Jew”, he said, “is a redeemer. Each one is a Messiah.” Reb Lewi Icchok used to say that, when a Jew enters the synagogue in the morning and positions himself and calls out “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord*” [Deuteronomy 6:4], he thereby not only sanctifies God’s name over the entire world, but he himself also becomes great with this. He has become an emissary from God and, even if he committed some sin, God already forgives him, just for the fact that he calls out God’s name over the world.

Reb Duwid *Lelówer* walked in the path of Reb Lewi Icchok of Berdyczów. For him, the trait of love for Jews was the main foundation of Chassidism and he also practised this in [real] life.

Reb Duwid *Lelówer* was born in 1746 in the village Biała, near the town Lelów. His father, Reb Szlojme Cwi, was a great scholar, but also extremely poor. Winter came and his Duwid’l needed a warm garment. But he had no money to go to the tailor to have such a coat made for him. He therefore economised on his own sustenance, *grosz* by *grosz*, to be able to achieve this. Eventually, he took his Duwid’l to the tailor, who took his measurements, and then fashioned such garment for him. When Duwid’l came the following week to *cheder*, he saw a boy sitting there, dressed in rags. Without thinking too much, he took off the new garment and gave it away to that boy. When he came home, his mother asked him where he had put his new coat [and] Duwid’l told his mother the truth.

“Go put on your old coat and run back to *cheder*, because Father will have great sorrow over this and he will beat you.”

“Well, good”, Duwid’l replied to his mother, “let Father beat me. Maybe this way, his sorrow for me giving away the new coat will stop”.

Already as a boy, Duwid’l would run off to the forest and hide in fields, where he would ponder on the ways of God and of life, and on how to better understand God. He would also sit and study entire nights, all by himself, in the study-hall and in the *shtetl* it was said that a new [Torah] prodigy was growing among the Jews.

At the age of thirteen, when he became *bar-mitzvah* [i.e., an adult according to Jewish religious law], his father married him off, as was the custom in those times, to the daughter of a Jew [who was] a

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\* [TN: *Rebbe* Lewi Icchok of Berdyczów was actually known as “*Sanegoyrom shel Yisrael*,” or the Jewish People’s “defence attorney.”]

scholar, but just as poor as himself. A grocery shop was set up for the young man, but Reb Duwid'l was unwilling to sell each day more than he required for his sustenance, so as not to take away the clients of the other merchants of the *shtetl*.

But it was not long before it became known in the *shtetl* that the young Reb Duwid'l was a holy Jew, a hidden *tzadik* and [people started] coming to him with requests to help [viz. intervene with God for] a sick one or regarding other troubles. At the beginning, Reb Duwid'l tried to extricate himself from this, saying that they were mistaken and that he was no *Rebbe*. But, once, when a group of *Chassidim* from Lelów were with the *Rebbe* of Lublin\*, he said to them, "You need not come to me – in your *shtetl* shines a great sun, but you are unaware of this. Go home and look there for the little Duwid'l – he is a great *tzadik*". When the *Chassidim* returned, they made this public and henceforth Jews from the entire region came to him, literally besieging his house.

Reb Duwid then gave up his grocery shop and settled in Częstochowa, where he already stayed for many years. From then on, Reb Duwid Lelówer would travel around throughout the cities of Poland, speaking of Chassidism and telling everyone to travel to the righteous man of Lublin. Later, when the "Seer" had passed away, he told the public to travel to the "*Yid Ha'Kudesh*", Reb Jakow Icchok of Przysucha, whom he had crowned as a *Rebbe*. Now, all the righteous men of the generation came to Reb Duwid'l, but Reb Icchok of Warka, who later became known as the *Vurker Rebbe*, adhered to him in particular.



A very interesting legend circulates in Chassidic circles, regarding how the *Rebbe* Reb Duwid'l Lelówer, with just one sentence, caused a great doctor, who was foreign to Judaism, to become a repentant sinner and, later, even a *Rebbe* among Jews.

The story is told as follows:

In the town of Działoszyn (Piotrków *gubernia*), there lived a physician named Bolesław Bernhard. The doctor was the son of a great Polish nobleman who had doted upon him, given him an aristocratic upbringing and, later, sent him to the University of Kraków to study medicine. Once Bolesław Bernhard had completed his studies at university, his father sent him to a military academy, from which he emerged with an officer's rank. He subsequently became a colonel in the Polish Army and, afterwards, the personal physician of the Polish General [Józef] Zajączek, the representative\*\* of the State.

What the young officer and doctor did not know, however, was that he actually came from Jews and that his [biological] father was, in fact, a Polish Jew, who lived in a village in the Kraków region, where he ran a tap room. This is what had happened, according to the Chassidic legend: The nobleman, who was supposedly his father, was childless and, upon seeing a beautiful three-year-old child in the house of a Jew, Reb Isuchor Ber, the child found such favour with him, that he ordered his attendants to abduct the boy and bring him to his home - and they did so.

It then came to pass, continues the legend, that the young officer and doctor became enamoured with a beautiful maiden named Helena, who was the governess at the general's house. Helena, however, rejected his love. The young physician was distraught and suffered greatly for it, as he had become extremely fond of Helena. He finally insisted that she tell him why she did not want him.

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\* [TN: *Rebbe* Jakow Icchok HaLevi Horowitz (1745-1815), aka "The Seer of Lublin."]

\*\* [TN: General Zajączek was the *Namiestnik* (or *Viceroy*) of the Kingdom of Poland.]

When Helena saw that this caused him terrible agony, she revealed to him the secret that she was a Jewess and that she had vowed to her father not to marry a Christian, and not to renounce her faith.

Upon hearing this, the young officer said to her, “Helena, you are dearer to me than anything in the world. I am willing to become a Jew for your sake, but you must first promise to marry me”.

Helena vowed to do so. He then went to a rabbi, to whom he confided that he wished to become a Jew. The rabbi told him that if a Christian desired to become Jewish in order to marry a Jewish girl, he could not, according to the [religious] law, be converted. “But”, the rabbi said to him, “come round [again] in a few days”.

Now the story continues thus - the young doctor’s deceased mother came to him at night in a dream and to the rabbi also, and told them that they should know that the young officer is a Jew. He is the child of a Jewish house who, at the age of three, was abducted from his home and that the mother was therefore asking the rabbi not to hinder him in becoming a Jew again. The rabbi told this to the young doctor. Dr Bolesław Bernhard conducted an investigation regarding the matter among the servants at the nobleman’s house and it was corroborated. He now became a Jew once more, left the nobleman’s house, left the Polish Army also, and was wed to Helena, who now began to be called “Hadasa”.

Dr Bernhard now began practising medicine and lived isolated from everybody. He took a small fee for a visit to him but, when a poor person came, he would even give him money so that he should be able to buy medicines.

Once, the *Rebbe* Reb Duwid’l of Lelów fell ill [and] Dr Bernhard was sent for. The doctor arrived, examined the patient and wrote him a prescription. The ailing Rebbe called out to him, “You have written for me a prescription for the healing of the body. But you, Doctor, are in need of healing for your soul”.

The doctor departed, but the *Rebbe’s* words pervaded his mind and he was no longer able to rest. He began pondering on his life and became a repentant sinner. He and his wife smashed all the *treif* cooking vessels and instituted a kosher household. Doctor Bernhard, himself, let his beard and sidelocks grow and became ever more pious. He would come frequently to Reb Duwid’l Lelówer, who showed him great favour and who later told him that he, himself, could be a *Rebbe* and instructed him to take on followers. And he himself gave him the first *kvitel*.

In this manner, the physician and officer became a *Rebbe* among Jews. On *Shabbes* he wore a *shtreimel* [traditional festive fur hat] and would conduct a *tisch*\*. Later, it is told, his real father came to him and this was, for Dr Bernhard, a very joyous occasion.



Reb Duwid’l Lelówer was a pillar of Polish Chassidism and his influence over his contemporary *Rebbes* and “Good Jews\*\*”, as well as those who came after him, was immense. His method of love for Israel was later further developed by Reb Awrum Szyja Heszal of Opatów, who due to his great love for Jews was called “*Der Ohev Yisrael*.” In his [viz. Reb Duwid’s] footsteps also walked the later *Rebbe* of Warka, Reb Icchok Kalisz, a colleague and friend of Reb Mendel of Kock, the famous *Kotzker Rebbe*.

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\* [TN: Yid., lit. “table” – a communal banquet held at a large table at the head of which the Rebbe sits.]

\*\* [TN: The term is used in reference to a recognised righteous man who rejects the trappings of serving as an official Rebbe.]

Reb Duwid of Lelów passed away on 7<sup>th</sup> Shvat 5574 ([28<sup>th</sup> Jan.] 1814), at the age of 68. He left three sons - Reb Mojsze, Reb Nechemie, and Reb Awigdor. Reb Duwid's *Lelówer* arranged a match with the *Yid Ha'Kudesh* of Przysucha and his son Reb Mojsze became the *Yid's* son-in-law. Reb Mojsze "conducted a *tisch*" following Reb Duwid's death and, when he was 70 years old, he travelled to the Land of Israel, where he lived no more than 70 days. The *Chassidim* say that he was gifted with an extra day for every year of his life. Reb Nechemie, too, acted as *Rebbe* and had a following who travelled to him. The public, however, was especially fond of his son Reb Awigdor, whom they called Reb Awigdor'l. He acted as *Rebbe* for many years and a very large following travelled to him.

Reb Awigdor'l had a son whom he named after his father Reb Duwid, who was also *Rebbe*. Reb Duwid's son was the *Rebbe* Reb Awigdor'l, who was in Częstochowa and who was named after his grandfather.

Despite belonging to *Aguda*, and thus being opposed to Rabbi Asz's Zionist activity, Reb Awigdor'l nevertheless showed the City Rabbi great respect, because he knew the rabbi was a great prodigy - one of the greatest Talmudic experts of the time - and also, due to the fact that he was aware the rabbi was a truly God-fearing man, who guarded [himself] not to commit the slightest [sinful] thing, and who sat day and night studying, besides being always prepared to sacrifice himself for Jews. The friendship thus continued for a long time and, once the rabbi Reb Nachum approved that Reb Awigdor's son-in-law Reb Josef Rubin should become one of the [official] Halachic authorities of Częstochowa.

Later, however, this friendship was discontinued. This was due to an incident during the First World War, when the populace was starving. At the time, the Germans arranged a potato sale on *Shabbes*. The followers of Reb Awigdor'l, together with their *Rebbe*, went to the Rabbi at the synagogue and requested that he announce that it is forbidden to buy potatoes from the Germans today, on *Shabbes*. The rabbi, for whom the suffering of the Jews was very close, was [not only] unwilling to do this, but the exact opposite - he authorised purchasing the potatoes on *Shabbes*, on account of it being a matter of life and death<sup>\*\*\*</sup>. The *Rebbe* then burst out with a harsh word against the Rabbi. The Rabbi did not respond to him but, since then, they no longer spoke to each other. (The whole story is written in detail in the book by the Częstochowa *landsman*, A. Litman.)

But, even though Reb Awigdor'l was a member of *Aguda*, he was not a zealot. He understood the new times and spoke in favour of all Jews, whoever they may be. He followed the rule of his great-grandfather Reb Duwid *Lelówer*, that there are no evil Jews at all. "Jews do not sin", he would say, "Sometimes it happens that a Jew is led astray by the Evil Inclination. It seems to him that, by committing a certain sin, he will reap a benefit, and he stumbles. But, ultimately, the Jew realises he has strayed from the straight path and he repents. A Jew does not die a sinful man. Every Jew repents before his death." That is what he used to say.

Reb Awigdor'l passed away at the age of 52, in the year 5697 (1937). He left six offspring - three sons and three daughters - the eldest, Jossele (Josef Burech), Reb Jakow Icchok and Majlich. The daughters [were] Perele, Jochewed and Fajgele. The latter is married to the Satmar [Satu Mare] *Rebbe*, [Reb] Joel Teitelbaum. The rest of the family were all annihilated in Treblinka. May God avenge their blood.

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> [TN: Saving a life annuls the Sabbath (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, siman 329).]