

The *Shtiebel* of Aleksander Chassidim



The Aleksander *shtiebel* at ul. Krakowska 7 (at the house of Reb Zajnwel Szwidorski who, at the end of his days, made it over to their name) was considered among the largest in town. The majority of the Chassidim dealt in commerce, industry and crafts. Among them were scholars, men of deeds and those of exceptional character.

On the eastern wall, to the right of the Holy Ark, hung a letter from the “*Yismach Yisrael*”¹ to his followers and, by the north wall, stood two tables, around which people sat and studied on weekdays and especially on *Shabbes* and holidays. Their studies varied. Some studied the Talmud with its commentaries, whilst others delved into Chassidic literature. On *Shabbes* and holidays two prayer services² were held, the first at 8:30 am and the second at 10:30 am.

At the *shtiebel*, Aleksander Chassidism fully expressed itself - in Torah study, good deeds, love, joy and seriousness as well. Those *Chassidim* avoided becoming involved in the politics of the Jewish parties in Poland. But the youth among them were involved with the parties and some of them were active within “*Tzeirei Ha’Mizrachi*”. Their path was not an easy one. They were in a difficult struggle. They were not called up to the Torah, even on *Simchas Torah*. It was only just before I emigrated to the Land [of Israel], that I received the privilege of being called up to the Torah.

Periodically, the *Chassidim* travelled to their *Rebbe* - to Aleksander - some for *Shabbes* and others for holidays. Upon their return, they would recapitulate the *Rebbe’s* Torah addresses. Those who could sing would teach the new melodies that they had heard in Aleksander. Reb Ezriel Dancyger was one of the more frequent travellers. He was the *Rebbe’s* kinsman - his father Reb Mendel was the First *Rebbe’s* second cousin. It is told of Reb Ezriel that, as a younger man, when he travelled to Aleksander, he would take a few *Chassidim* who could not afford a journey to the *Rebbe* with him, at his own cost.

I remember, from my childhood days, that at a Festival of *Sukkos* celebration, a number of *Chassidim* gathered at a private home and decided to open a separate *shtiebel*. Then and there, Reb Józef Grin, Reb Emanuel the *Melamed* and the youths Benjamin Karmazin and Józef Gonzwa were ordered to take out a Torah scroll from the *shtiebel* on ul. Krakowska. I also went along with them and we arranged a prayer-house on ul. Rzeźnicka. Following the death of the “*Yismach Yisrael*”, [some of] the “dissidents” returned to the old *shtiebel*. Some left and joined Biała [Rawska; a Chassidic group], and some even travelled to Stryków.

Among the prominent worshippers at this *shtiebel*, I remember Reb Aron Hersz Aronowicz and his sons. Among the elite, there was Reb Srul Sofer who, when leading the prayer, would pray with great passion and in a strong and pleasant voice. Reb Fajwisz Kurland, of noble features and black eyes, who was always deep in thought, as if not from this world and who eventually became a *Rebbe* [himself] and Reb Jankew Wolhendler, a Jew who was the embodiment of happiness, a cheerful man

¹ [TN: “*Israel shall Rejoice*”, title of the book by Rebbe Rachmiel Srul Icchok Dancyger (1828–1894), founder of the Aleksander dynasty.]

² [TN: For two separate groups.]

who brought cheer to all. On Simchas Torah, he would dance on an empty barrel with all the *Chassidim* around him and sing the song “*Yuvoy Adir Bim’hayru*” [May He Come Soon] (in Hebrew and Yiddish), with the *Chassidim* repeating each verse after him, and then he would sing “*Om Ani Choymu*” [I am a Wall; liturgical poem] (in Hebrew and Yiddish).

People said of the Aleksander *Chassidim* that they were drunkards. And they did indeed drink heavily on joyous religious occasions or on holidays. But, while drinking the glass and while holding it, they were bent down and immersed in discussions on Chassidic treatises from the “*Yismach Yisrael*” or the sayings from Vurke [Warka] and Peshischa [Przysucha³], and one could see in their faces that they had left the physical world well behind. The “*shtreimel*”⁴ was slumped to one side as they burst into wordless song, filled with passion and joy. From moment to moment, the fervour and enthusiasm grew, and the feet levitated, [as is mentioned in Chassidism, that] “*dancing raises one a handbreadth above the ground*”. Arm in arm, shoulder to shoulder, they would go out on a Chassidic dance, in spiritual ecstasy and passion, the house filling with joy and everyone singing in Yiddish.



A great grief befell the Aleksander *Chassidim*, on 29th Teives 5670 [10th January 1910], with the death of the “*Yismach Yisrael*”. All felt the great loss. All eyes dimmed, as if the sun had been snuffed out in midday. All hearts were tormented by the question of how to live now? To whom should they turn after him? The study was not study, prayer was not prayer and life was not life. The *Rebbe* was no more, gone.

I remember the night of 29th Teives at the *shtiebel* - candles were on the pulpit, above the Holy Ark and also in the windows. The house was filled with light. The tables were set and, on them, bottles of liquor and glasses, *challes*, bread, knives, spoons and forks [and] honey-cakes – made by Reb Józef Ber. The *Chassidim* sit at the table for a festive *mitzvah* banquet –in honour of the “*Yismach Yisrael’s*” *yuhrzeit*. From time to time, new faces arrived. The *Chassidim* drink a *lechaim* [To Life; a toast] and their souls rise up, together with the flame of the “soul candles”⁵. During the banquet, they recapitulate the [Rebbe’s] Torah addresses and discourses, tell of his ways and demeanour, from eyewitness accounts and hearsay, and then they all burst into ecstatic song, and Reb Ezriel tells stories and anecdotes from the *Rebbe’s* life.

The eldest member in the group, Reb Srul, said:

We were in the Rebbe’s study-hall for the High Holidays. The doors were wide-open, [people] arrived and entered from every side - tens, hundreds, thousands. The study-hall was full from one end to another. A festive countenance, a congregation of followers, as if the Holiday Spirit was flapping its wings. The Holiday had been consecrated in our study-hall!

Reb Jankew Frager (the renowned singer-composer at the Aleksander court) went before the pulpit⁶ to lead the Mysef⁷ service, and began “Yisgadal”⁸, with a physical detachment of his soul, full of spiritual ecstasy. Following the silent prayer, he began the repetition. Reb Jankew sang with the voice of a nightingale, which from its throat utters forth sublime melodies,

³ [TN: The “*Yismach Yisrael*” was a disciple of Rebbe Icchok Kalisz of Vurke, who was in turn a disciple of Rebbe Simche Binem of Peshischa.]

⁴ [TN: Festive fur hat worn by married Chassidic men.]

⁵ [TN: Memorial candles that are lit to “lift up” the deceased one’s soul.]

⁶ [TN: In Judaism, the pulpit faces not the congregation but the Eastern Wall, and the leader of prayer conducts the service with his back to the congregation.]

⁷ [TN: Also pronounced “*Musaf*”, “*Addition*” in Heb.; second part of morning prayer service, which is only “added” on Shabbes or holidays.]

⁸ [TN: First word of the “*Kaddish*” preceding the “*silent prayer*”, which is then followed by an out-loud repetition by the cantor.]

sweetly, and the melody spread over all [our] limbs, feeding the soul from the High Table, the sound of rejoicing cherubs. And the heart yearned; the spirit was pulled, pulled. And, with a strong and mighty voice, he concluded the blessing "Mechaye Ha'Maisim" [He who Revives the Dead], and went on to "Atu Kudoish" [Thou art Hallowed], but instead of saying "Le'Dor Vu'Dor"⁹, he finished the blessing with "Hu'Ail Ho'Kudoish"¹⁰. The crowd of worshippers was astonished. The [entire] study-hall was shocked - an unseemly act. All eyes turned to the "Yismach Yisrael". He suddenly left his place and entered his private chambers. All comprehended at once how serious the matter was. A harsh and imposing silence [ensued]. The Rebbe tarried in his Holy Sanctum. Moments passed and each moment seemed like an hour. The Rebbe eventually returned and he motioned, with his holy hand, to Reb Jankew to continue the service. But the occurrence made an impression on everyone, and became the talk of the day.

At the close of the holiday, an awe-filled silence [prevailed] in the great chamber. All stood tightly crowded, with inspired hearts, and waited in line. And here the Rebbe's face appeared, his countenance like that of the sun in the heavens. His eyes - flashes of fire. He stood for hours, receiving his Chassidim. They entered his room one by one, to receive his farewell blessing. When Reb Jankew's turn came, the Rebbe asked him why he was in such a rush to travel off and did not bid him farewell. This was a hint that he should remain at the "court" in the Rebbe's midst and not go home. Days after days passed. Reb Jankew went in, but the Rebbe stood by his refusal.

Weeks went by and Reb Jankew became uneasy. His patience surpassed its limit and he began saying that he didn't know why he was being held up and why he wasn't being allowed to go home. When his words reached the Rebbe, he stood up from his chair, raised up both hands and said, "[May he] travel, traaaavel." Reb Jankew travelled, and shortly afterwards – he died!

And Reb Srul continued:

"He [i.e., the Rebbe] loved [the People of] Israel. His love and compassion for any Jew were limitless and they became the main component and incentive in his service [of God]. He instilled this quality in us as well. All his deeds came mostly from his great love for all Jewish souls, which filled every crevice of his heart and soul. As for ourselves - how fortunate we are to have been able to huddle in his shade, to take up the dust of his feet and to receive some of his Torah and attributes.

And he concluded with:

To this, we should indeed drink "le'chaim"! The Chassidim poured the glasses and began drinking "Le'chaim! May his merit protect us! Le'chaim!" "May we be redeemed and consoled!

On the eve of *Rosh Hashanah* at the *shtiebel*, the congregation gathered for the holiday prayer service while it was still daylight. The house was full from one end to another. Tables and benches were set even in the corridor. Reb Awigdor Gonzwa opened the holiday, leading the prayer with extreme fervour and reached the peak of his passion on "*Mizmor Le'David*" [A Psalm of David; Psalm 29]. All fell silent to a knock on the table. The *gabay* announced, "The Rebbe, long may he live,

⁹ [TN: "For all Generations"; a liturgical poem which is specific to the Rosh Hashanah service at this point.]

¹⁰ [TN: "The Hallowed God", the weekday ending of this section; meaning that Reb Jankew had made a mistake and, instead of reading the specific liturgy pertaining to Rosh Hashanah, he had simply continued as on a regular day.]

blesses us with a *ksive vechasime toive* [may you be inscribed and sealed for a good year]", upon which everyone joyfully blessed each other with "may you be at once inscribed and sealed for a year of good life".

On the morrow, the leader of the morning service (after the death of Reb Duwid Burech "Amshinover"), Reb Mojsze Mordche Klajner, who excelled with his clear and pleasant voice, went before the pulpit. On the second day, the morning service was led by Reb Duwid Tobiasz.

The Torah reading on the first day of *Rosh Hashanah* was carried out by Reb Jankew Józef Wajsblum, an experienced reader with an accurate pronunciation of the cantillation and vowels, all in a clear and fine voice. On the second day, the reader was Reb Herszel Skowronek ("Kłobucker"), who put more emphasis on the holiday [cantillation] melody.

The [*shoifar*¹¹] blower, the *mohel* Reb Szlojme Wajcman, stood by the Holy Ark, always smiling. He read the blessings preceding the blasts with a trembling voice, stressing the words "to hear the sound of a horn", "who has given us life" and the congregation's response of "amen"¹². All listened with awe to the sounds emanating from the horn. After the longest blast, the Torah scrolls were returned to the Holy Ark and an atmosphere of great preparation for *Mysef* was felt, and complete silence reigned in the prayer-house.

Reb Awigdor approached the pulpit with awe and fear and recited, "*Here am I, poor in deeds*¹³". His voice was not heard, only the silent weeping of one ingratiating himself before his Creator, pleading that his prayer should be accepted. The entire congregation was deep in reflection. Here and there, a groan was heard. At the end of the prayer, he turned his face to the congregation, as if asking them to help him. Reb Awigdor began, "*Yisga-a-a-da-a-a!*" passionately and his emotion increased with each subsequent word. His three sons helped him and Reb Mojsze Mordche Klajner directed those who knew how to sing, among whose voices the pleasant one of Duwid Szlojme Kaminski stood out. Following the silent prayer, he commenced the reader's repetition. Each word was sung with both sweetness and spiritual ecstasy.

He recited the [three special blessings] "*Sovereignty, Remembrances and Sounding of the Shofar*", which made the audience quiver with great expertise. The melody, filled with yearning to the words "*Is Ephraim my dear son?*" [Jeremiah 31:19], still rings in my ears and, with song, he also explained "*A man's origin is from dust*¹⁴". Each and every word tore the heart. On "*May all Your Servants Come*¹⁵", the entire congregation enthusiastically joined in and helped with the special tune. And thus transpired all the prayers, intertwined with the traditional melodies of the Vurke court and some of Reb Jankew Frager's tunes. "*Today You Shall Strengthen Us*" and "*Kaddish*" were sung with melodies filled with joy and confidence, that we had been blessed with a "good seal".

At the Mention of Souls on *Yom Kippur* and the Three Pilgrimage Festivals¹⁶, once the congregation had finished saying "*Yizkor*" [Memorial Prayer], Reb Awigdor read a special blessing in the *Rebbe's* honour and, after the congregation had said "*El Mulai Rachamim*¹⁷", Reb Awigdor mentioned all the *Rebbes* who had passed away, from the First *Rebbe* of Vurke to the "*Tiferes Shmiel*¹⁸".

¹¹ [TN: Horn, usually a ram's one.]

¹² [TN: Pronounced "umain" in Poland.]

¹³ [TN: A liturgical poem recited by the cantor prior to Musaf on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.]

¹⁴ [TN: From the liturgical poem "Unesanneh Tokef" ("Let us Speak of the Awesomeness ").]

¹⁵ [TN: A liturgical hymn.]

¹⁶ [TN: Sukkos, Peisach and Shavuos.]

¹⁷ [TN: "God full of Mercy"; also a memorial prayer.]

¹⁸ [TN: "Magnificence of Samuel", by Rebbe Szmil Zvi Dancyger, the brother and successor of the "Yismach Yisrael".]

This Reb Awigdor was a unique character - a pious and humble man, who was always content with his lot, despite the fact that he passed his whole life in suffering and pain. He always sat deeply engrossed in a book. More than one person asked, "From where does such a weak body receive such strength?" No one could compete with his "Mysef" on the High Holidays. Over thirty years have passed since I last heard his "Mysef" and it still rings in my ears and my heart stirs inside me.

Reb Awigdor left no one to say "Kaddish" after his death. He did have sons and daughters, but they all died in their youth, among them his first-born son Józef – a youth of Torah and good attributes. Reb Awigdor's spirit still hovers over those who heard his prayers. All those who prayed with him, and for whom he pleaded well, have remained loyal to his spirit and, during prayer services, they recall every prayer with the melody that emanated from his pure heart. And during the Mention of Souls for kinsmen and martyrs, they would mention his name with the proper honours.

There were several unique characters at the *shtiebel* whom I would like to mention here - Reb Icze Pankowski, a blind man, and one of the last remaining people who had huddled in the shade of Kock; Reb Szmul Goldsztajn, a public activist and chairman of the *Kehilla* for many years; Reb Majer Wilczyński, a *chassid* filled with enthusiasm and with a sharp mind; Reb Berisz Lewi, a former ritual slaughterer, who was an expert on military strategies, which he would explain to the *Chassidim*; Reb Duwid Tobiasz, the leader of the morning prayer of *Rosh Hashanah* who, during the month of Elul [the month preceding the High Holidays], wrapped his throat in a cravat so as not to become hoarse; Reb Lewi Haberfeld, who was overly fastidious and would douse the floor with water from time to time, to prevent dust; Majtlis, a wealthy man, who was the only one in the *shtiebel* who wore short clothes - he only came on holidays.

Of the *shtiebel's* members, the following made *Aliyah*: Reb Berisz Tiberg, Reb Duwid Aron Wolhendler, Reb Srul Kaminski, Reb Mendel Benyumin Gelberg, Reb Mordche Menachem Kromołowski, Reb Ezriel Dancyger z"l, and (still alive) Reb Chaim Hersz Kohn, who is steeped in Torah study and teaches [at a *yeshivah*] in Holon.

In Adar 5685 [February-March 1925], I bade the *Chassidim* at the *shtiebel* farewell and made *Aliyah*. But I am still full of memories from that life, and everything appears as if alive before my eyes, and I am filled with longing. (You are very, very dear to my heart; you were innocent and honest all your lives, and absorbed in dreams of the future: some dreamed of [a better] material existence, some of *mitzves* and good deeds, and some of the Land of Israel. At the end, on your last road, together with the Jews of Częstochowa, [you were] driven by that villain and his helpers into pits, furnaces and annihilation in the valley of death. Where are the city's men of worth, its righteous and virtuous ones and those of pure ways? How could you have been destroyed?)



(In painful silence, with burning sorrow, tearfully, I have written these memories. The wound is deep in my body and, in my soul, it shall not heal!)