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## ***The Shtieblech of the Ger Chassidim***

Among the dozens of *shtieblech* in town, the four belonging to the *Gerer Chassidim* were undoubtedly the most prominent. The first [was located] at ul. Nadrzeczna 36, the second at Nowy Rynek 2, the third at Aleja 31 and the fourth, at Aleja 6.

We shall attempt, here, to present memories from these four *shtieblech*.

The large *shtiebel* at ul. Nadrzeczna 36 led all the Chassidic *shtieblech* in town with its size and quality. This *shtiebel* had the good fortune of being inseparably connected with the two magnificent homes of Reb Chaskel Fiszel and Reb Józef Dziubas - owners of the soap factory known as "*Dziubas & Fiszel*". The two houses rose like bright jewels in the crown of the Częstochowa community and were renowned as two fortresses of Torah, Chassidism and spiritual greatness, together with good deeds, [as is said in the Talmud:] "*Torah and greatness in one place*" [Gittin, 59a].

These two buildings, which were hidden away on an out-of-the-way street, were nevertheless well-known in town as buildings whose gates were wide-open to all sufferers and to those in distress and were rightly referred to as "Royal Chassidic Houses".

On the grounds of these two houses, next to the factory, was the beautiful large *shtiebel* of the *Gerer Chassidim*, among whose regular members they [i.e., the owners] were. The *shtiebel* consisted of a large, spacious hall and two other rooms, and it always resounded with the voices of the multitude of worshippers and those studying Torah. [Some] prominent figures from [were] among the city's best Torah scholar. They included the great scholar Reb Henech Bryll, who was astute and witty (the brother-in-law of the *Rebbe* of Ostrowiec [Świętokrzyski] *tz"l*); Reb Menasze Margulies, who was mindful and generous and his son-in-law Reb Bencion (the son and successor of the Rabbi of Otwock), who was deep-minded and sharp; the elderly Reb Icze *Soifer* [scribe], one of the last *Vurke Chassidim*; Reb Benyumin *Melamed*, an old man of about eighty, a sharp and witty *Kock chassid*; Reb Aron Elio Rotenberg, a descendant of the "*Chidushei HaRim*", pleasant in conversation and with a welcoming countenance; the elderly Reb Duwid Szmil Warszawski, who blew the *shoifar*; Reb Nachman Kryman, wealthy and impressive, who stood a full head above all others; Reb Awrum Henech Finkelsztajn, Reb Józef Dziubas' son-in-law, who was a "basket full of books" – scholarly, enlightened, a thinker and a great man; the respected wealthy men Reb Jankew Hersz Fajerman, Józef Dziubas' second son-in-law; Reb Awrum Mojsze Kuczynski; Reb Mojsze Kopl Koplowicz (my father); Reb Zundel Zultobrodzki; Reb Anczel Warszawski, Reb Chaskel Fiszel's son-in-law, as well as his son Reb Józef Fiszel and, with them, about another two hundred *Chassidim*, God-fearing and impeccable Torah scholars, with their sons and sons-in-law.

Apart from the prayers at the *shtiebel*, which were always carried out [as it is written -] "*In the multitude of people is the king's honour*" [Proverbs 14:28; i.e., with a large attendance], the clamour of Torah study was also heard there. Between prayer services, the *Chassidim* would sit at the long tables and study, some alone and some together, until the echoes were heard from afar. The *shtiebel*, as mentioned above, stood on the grounds of Reb Chaskel's and Reb Józef's houses. Many threads, both overt and concealed, were spun, woven and stretched amongst the milieu of the *shtiebel* and that of those houses. Both houses were always open to *Chassidim*. There they gathered

on holidays and for any festive occasion or even to just sit with Reb Józef or Reb Chaskel, where they were guaranteed a drink from the best of the best.

On *Shabbes* mornings, on their way to the prayer service, the more elderly *Chassidim* used to stop at Reb Józef's or Reb Chaskel's house for a hot drink before the prayer. The three copper boilers, set permanently in the walls of Reb Józef's kitchen, which were specifically installed for hot water and coffee on *Shabbes* for the people in the vicinity, both close and distant, worked at full capacity. The household members stood ready to serve the guests and the steaming cups of tea or coffee were passed from hand to hand with incredible speed, so as not to delay the service at the *shtiebel*. Reb Józef, with his patriarchal features, sat at the head of the table with the elders of the *Chassidim* around him and shone with pleasure. Between cup and cup, someone would repeat some fine saying from the "*Sfas Emes*" or the "*Chidushei Ha'Rim*" on the weekly Torah reading.

The quill cannot describe the Purim joy of the *Chassidim* at Reb Józef Dziubas' house, when Reb Benyumin *Melamed*, the old *Kotzker chassid*, would appear in fancy dress with an old flute in his mouth. Reb Benyumin played the flute and dozens of *Chassidim* cavorted, sang, danced and made merry around him. The lady of the house, the renowned righteous woman Mrs Ester, graciously served pies, jam pastries and drinks, all abundantly, with a joyous and beaming countenance. The *Chassidim* drank and became inebriated, to fulfil that which is written: "[A person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim] until he does not know how to distinguish between cursed [is Haman] and [blessed is Mordechai]"; (Talmud Bavli, *Megilah*, 7b.).

The large *shtiebel* was also known for its cantors – the distinct leaders of prayer, at the head of whom stood Reb Menasze Margulies, who in all his ways gained the respect and esteem of the entire congregation. Reb Menasze was endowed with a pleasant and soothing voice, which was mainly manifest in his *Mysef* services on the High Holidays and he served as leader of the prayer at the *shtiebel* for decades. Reb Menasze's prayers were famous throughout the city and the surrounding area. It was conducted with spiritual ecstasy, an outpouring of the soul and a warming pleasantness. Around him, by the pulpit, stood a choir of assistants. All were wonderful singers, with pleasant lyrical voices and they were directed by Reb Srul Plocker and his son Luzor (in his youth). And whoever has not heard Reb Menasze Margulies' prayer, has never heard a lyrical, sweet, heartening, alluring and uplifting prayer in all his days.

Second to Reb Menasze was the elderly leader of the morning service, the eighty-year-old Reb Icze *Soifer*, who carried out this task for about fifty years. Reb Icze, a typical *Vurke chassid*, was among the old disciples of the "*Sfas Emes*" *tz"l*. His entire being radiated virtue and purity. In his gait, speech and dealings, he was like a relic from bygone generations. When Reb Icze went before the pulpit, he was as a son pleading with his father. His prayer was all appeasement, mercy and supplication. The words pierced the heavens, penetrated the depth of the souls of those who heard them, softened their hearts and stirred their beings. Reb Icze's prayer was an experience. In his last days, he became blind and prayed from memory, fluently and flawlessly - as are the things learnt in one's youth. This prayer carried a special weight, coming from Reb Icze's mouth.

The large *shtiebel* offered a distinct experience. The atmosphere was encouraging and alluring, which attracted even progressives and youth, who became regular worshippers at the *shtiebel*.

While the distinctive factor of the large *shtiebel* on ul. Nadrzeczna was a foundation of "fear and love in the service of God", the second *shtiebel* at the Nowy Rynek 2 was founded on the [study of] Torah.

This *shtiebel* was called “the young men’s *shtiebel*” and comprised the sharp-minded Chassidic young married men, the scholars and deep thinkers among the *Gerer Chassidim* of Częstochowa. Among them were also [some] of the sons and sons-in-law of the *Chassidim* from the large *shtiebel* on Nadrzeczna, such as Reb Chaskel Fiszel’s son-in-law, Reb Wucze [Uszer Wolf] Piotrkowski – a tall scholar; Reb Józef Dziubas’ son-in-law, Reb Awrum Naftuli Horowicz – great in Torah and Chassidism, a relative and confidant of the *Rebbe*; Reb Józef’s sons, the brothers Reb Simche and Reb Icze Majer Dziubas, and many other young married men, who were great and Torah and “overturned mountains” with their sharpness, such as Reb Mojsze Bram (Wolbromer), Reb Nuta Rajcher, Reb Mendel and his brother Reb Akiwa Fogel, Reb Herszel Tamar, Reb Herszel Besserglik, Reb Duwid Icchok Edelist, Reb Luzor Horowicz, Reb Noach Edelist (now in Israel) and, above all others, the prodigy famous in the city and country, the Rabbi Reb Wolwiz Borensztajn *ztz”l*, one of the great men of Torah in Poland, a disciple of the *Rebbe* of Sochaczew, who also set his place in this *shtiebel*, due to the quality of its congregation. From this *shtiebel* came the majority of the city’s ultra-orthodox public figures and representatives, such as Reb Mendel Fogel, Reb Duwid Icchok Edelist and Reb Simche Dziubas, who were delegates and members in the Częstochowa *Kehilla*. This *shtiebel* was rightly crowned the glory of ultra-orthodox Judaism in town.

In the last years, a third *shtiebel* was established at Aleja 31, when the writer of these lines was already in the Land [of Israel]. The vast majority of this *shtiebel*’s congregation were “progressive *Chassidim*”, merchants and men of action who, due to the atmosphere [of the two other *shtieblech*], did not feel at home there and founded a third *shtiebel* for themselves. The leader of the *Mysef* service on the High Holidays at this *shtiebel* was Reb Srul Zajnwel Koplwicz (my brother).

A few remaining survivors from this *shtiebel* are with us now in Israel, such as the Goldberg brothers and others in Bnei-Brak. Hopefully, someone among them may rise to the occasion and give us a full description of this *shtiebel*.

And, finally, I should also mention the fourth *Gerer shtiebel* at Aleja 6. Its *gabay* was Reb Nuta Klajner and, among the prominent worshippers there, were Reb Icze Majer Krel, Reb Szmul Goldsztajn, Reb Chaim Weksler, Reb Szlojme Rodal, Reb Duwid Markowicz, Reb Herszel Trajman and Reb Józef Blechsztajn.

(Great spiritual treasures, hidden and mysterious worlds were concealed inside the walls of the Chassidic *shtieblech* in Poland. A great wealth of godly and human wisdom was destroyed, annihilated, has disappeared and is no more. Who could replace them?)