

Personalities & Ways of Life

The Household of Reb Szlojme Rottenberg and Szajndla-Laja z''l

It was a bustling and lively household with many sons and daughters (eleven in total) - an opulent yet unsophisticated Jewish home of both Torah and labour. The father, in his working attire, laboured as a tanner during the day and, in the evening, you would find him [sitting] by the Talmud. The mother - his *ezer kenegdo*¹ - managed everything in the household and the business. This house produced the *shtetl*'s first Zionist youth and the first to emigrate to the Land [of Israel] - my friends Mojsze and Mordche Rottenberg. I shall return to this family subsequently.

One of the characteristics of the town's sociological background was that the differences of class and the ladder of social importance were not fixed in place and a family's prestige was not passed down from generation to generation.

It may [well] be established that the cultural level of each epoch is not evaluated only according to reality, but also by the aspirations and wishes with which the people of the period are infused. In accordance with this assumption, we may state that, although in reality a great part of the *shtetl*'s population was made up of craftsmen and labourers, the parents' aspiration was for their sons to be *Bnai-Toire*² and merchants, and for their daughters to marry *Bnai-Toire* from families which were referred to as "*Soicher'ische, nugid'ische hajzer*" (Houses of merchants and *negidim*³).

There is absolutely nothing in the literature of ethics - from the most ancient writings to those of the latest period - to support this aspiration. Quite the contrary - one encounters so many words in praise of the working man, that all the proverbs scattered throughout the literature in corroboration thereof, are far too numerous to quote. Suffice it to cite the words of *Chaza''l*⁴: "[*Rabbi Yehuda says:*] '*One who does not teach his son a craft, teaches him banditry*'". [Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin, 29a]

This idealisation of commerce in the last few centuries did not originate just for financial reasons or for the comforts of life. In many cases, the financial situation of the craftsmen was better and more comfortable than that of the smaller traders and especially of the tiniest shopkeepers. The roots of this aspiration must therefore be embedded in the spiritual developments which took place amongst the Jews of Poland and Lithuania over the past few centuries.

This development expressed itself in both branches [of Ashkenazi Jewry]. One [expression] was that which enveloped the Jews of Lithuania above all and that is the [intense] study of the Talmud and casuistry⁵. The other, which conquered the Jews of Poland and Galicia, was Chassidism. Both spiritual currents, which were contradictory when they first appeared, found their merging in the Jews of Poland in the last [viz. 19th] century. We cannot state that all Chassidim were *Bnai-Toire* - but seldom did we see, in our vicinity, *Bnai-Toire* who were *not* Chassidim. This was so to such an

¹ [TN: "*Helpmate for him*" (Genesis 2:18).]

² [TN: Lit. "*Sons of Torah*" - viz. *scholarly men versed in Torah study*.]

³ [TN: Plu. of Heb. "*nagid*" (pro. "*nugid*" in Yid.) - *wealthy and influential person*.]

⁴ [TN: Heb. acronym for "*Our Sages of blessed memory*"; in ref. to all Jewish sages from the last 300 years of the Second Solomon Temple to c. the 7th century AD.]

⁵ [TN: Lithuanian *yeshiva* students - with their teachers - are rumoured to have sometimes spent an entire month just over one page of the Talmud. Polish Chassidim, too, were much inclined to Talmud study (more so than Chassidim in other lands), but their focus was more on reading through vast amounts of material to gain a general knowledge, rather than on miniscule theoretic casuistry.]

extent, that the very term “*Misnagedim*”⁶ almost disappeared from our locality and was replaced by the sobriquet “*Prostakes*” (simple folk) for those who were not Chassidic.

These patterns of spiritual and cultural life were neither comfortable nor suited to the conditions in which a man of labour found himself. The study of the Talmud in the *yeshivas* and study-halls swallowed up most of adolescence - which by no means prevented one from going into commerce after one’s marriage, once the years of “*kest*” [room and board] had finished. Quite the opposite - the study, which sharpened the brain, even served as a professional training of sorts for the field of commerce. This was not the case with craftsmanship. The years of learning at the study-hall did not teach the youth any trade. Learning a profession in those days, before the advent of technical schools, demanded huge efforts and a great deal of time - an apprenticeship took several years. As a result, no way was found to merge the ideal of raising a son to Torah, whilst maintaining the original [positive] attitude towards craftsmanship.

The way of life of the Chassidim, which was consolidated in the past century - learning at the study-hall, travelling to the *Rebbe* for *Shabbosim* and holidays, frequent gatherings among friends and many, many other things - was all also made possible to them thanks to their women, who took no small part in running the businesses. Who does not remember our mothers and grandmothers, standing in the shops from morning until late in the evening, in the heat of the summer and the cold of the winter? Who does not remember them blowing into their hands, to warm the frozen tips of their fingers, and the pot with burning embers (“*fajer top*”), which served to warm their feet and bodies?

Indeed, the Jewish woman had a large part in shaping a *shtetl*’s spiritual and cultural patterns. But craftsmanship is unlike commerce. The craftsman could not [just] leave his workshop and go spend time in the company of the Chassidim studying, drinking or chatting idly, because he had less free time for all this and his wife could not take his place.

It is no wonder that, from this [type of] spiritual atmosphere, a preferential attitude emerged towards the man engaged in commerce. These two substantial foundations upon which the town’s social hierarchy rested - Torah and commerce - prevented a class of blue-blooded Torah scholars, whose status passes from generation to generation, from being formed. Torah [wisdom], as is known, cannot be inherited and the rabbis, rabbinical judges, ritual slaughterers and educators did not constitute a significant part of the *shtetl*’s economic structure.

If we follow the lineages of many of the town’s families, we will find that their standing in society changed from generation to generation and [that they] were in a perpetual process of passing from one social stratum to another.

I shall illustrate this with a few examples:

My Teacher and Master, Reb Icchok *Lajzer’le’s*⁷, was one of the most prominent *Aleksander Chassidim* - [while] his father [Reb Lajzer’le] was a poor tailor. In addition to his tailoring work, he was also a singing assistant to the town’s cantor, Reb Szmul-Burech. At weddings and circumcisions, it was Reb Lajzer’le who said the “*Mi Shebeirach*”⁸ and, when he reached “may He bless”, he cupped his ear in his hand and trilled the words, making head movements. This earned him the nickname “*Lajzer’l Dal-dal*”.

⁶ [TN: “*Opposers*”; term used widely throughout the Ashkenazi Diaspora in ref. to non-Chassidic Jews.]

⁷ [TN: See above, p.41, regarding this individual.]

⁸ [TN: “*He who blessed...*” - a public prayer or blessing for an individual or group, in this case the groom and bride, or the bris celebrant.]

The cantor Reb Szmul-Burech's appearance is dim in my memory, as he passed away in my early childhood. But I knew his descendants well. His daughter Chana'le was married to Szymon-Akiwa Rozenchwajg⁹, the owner of a large haberdashery shop. [Theirs was] a wealthy Chassidic household with an opulent lifestyle. His son, "Srulcze *dem Chazan's*"¹⁰, as he was called, had a paralysed hand and also a slight limp, in addition to which he was afflicted with certain mental disorders, may Heaven preserve us. There was a bit of clownery and mischievousness in him and perhaps even hidden heresy, which stemmed from a rebelliousness born of embitterment. There was once an incident - one day, during the Torah reading at the Study-hall, they found a flaw in the Torah scroll - it had been erased in several places¹¹ - and the *shtetl* was astir. Suspicions fell upon one of the leaders of the Zionists and heretics in those days - Kopel Minc. I am unable to recount the entire sequence of events, as I did not witness them myself. But to the good fortune of the contemporary small group of Zionists, it was discovered that it had been Srulcze, the Cantor's son, who had committed this offence.

He used to teach girls to read. He acquainted them with the alphabet by ascribing tangible shapes to the letters, such as ם [Beis] - an open window; ך [Gimel] - a staff with a wallet; ה [Hey] - a table with a broken leg, and so on.

Let us now make mention of one more of those characters, whom we nowadays refer to as "psychopaths". In those days, to distinguish the odd ones among them, they called them *nar* [Yid., fool], idiot, *tzidraiter* [twisted/screwy], *gechapt oifn kop* [seized in the head], etc. Who in our *shtetl* did not know Mojsze Boom? He was the son of a respected family - [that of] Ester'l Lumbom¹²; perhaps that is the origin of the nickname Mojsze "Boom". He was short of stature and had a yellowish beard. He hung about the Study-hall all day long, waiting for the opportunity to play some prank, such as pinching an ear [or] tapping a head, after which he would hide among the worshippers. His main activity in the Study-hall was to put the books in order on the shelves during the breaks from study. The younger lads in the Study-hall made good use of his jocularly. When we were studying the tractate *K'sives*¹³, we would get him to go ask the older ones to explain the meaning of "*I was struck by a piece of wood*"¹⁴ and similar things.

The Germans killed him together with the rest of the townspeople.

This description of the mischievous deeds of psychopaths compels one to note the difference between the criminal acts that are committed by deranged individuals in our times - such as debauchery, rape, and arson - and the misdemeanours of those days, namely erasing letters in a Torah scroll, pinching an ear, provoking adults with salacious questions and so forth.

Daughters were, in most cases, the drivers behind a family's change of status. If a girl from a *balebatische*¹⁵ family was pretty, she had every chance of marrying a *Ben-Toire*.

⁹ [TN: This couple are almost certainly the **Szmul-Kawa** Rozenchwajg and Chana **Staszewska** who appear in the Żarki records as having been married in 1895, making Reb Szmul-Burech's surname **Staszewski**.]

¹⁰ [TN: Israel the Cantor's (son); there is indeed an Izrael-Jakób Staszewski in the Żarki records.]

¹¹ [TN: According to Halacha, if even one single letter is missing from a Torah scroll, it is rendered unusable (until corrected).]

¹² [TN: לומבאום in the original (Yid. spelling); possibly misprint of Linbaum.]

¹³ [TN: Aka "K'tubot" (Marriage Deeds).]

¹⁴ [TN: Regarding a man who marries a woman thinking she is a virgin and, upon discovering that she is not, takes her before a rabbinical court, the Mishna (there, Ch.1, Mishnah 7) states: "She says, 'I was struck by a piece of wood', and he says, 'No, rather you have been trampled by a man,' Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Eliezer say: 'She is believed,' and Rabbi Joshua says: 'We do not live by her mouth, rather she is in the presumption of having been trampled by a man, until she brings proof for her statement.'"]

¹⁵ [TN: From "balebos," or homeowner; the "balebatische" class were respectable, often well-off, working-class people, who - despite being strictly orthodox - did not live a life of secluded Torah study, and were therefore considered "commoners" by the scholarly elite.]

The watchmaker Szulim-Majer¹⁶, a working man who prayed at the Study-hall - a simple Jew with a respectable appearance - had two beautiful daughters and they were wed to a pair of cousins who were true *Bnai-Toire* - Josse'le¹⁷ [Ha'Levi] Pardes and Szmul-Aron [Ha'Levi] Pardes. Both sons-in-law "ate *kest*". The watchmaker, Szulim-Majer, scrimped bread from his own mouth in order to provide his sons-in-law with everything in abundance. Josse'le Pardes, his eldest son-in-law, became a Talmud teacher for grown boys. His pupils were mainly the sons of *Radomsker Chassidim*. After living a few years in the *shtetl*, he moved back to his hometown of Zawiercie, because the locality apparently could not sustain four Talmud study *cheders*.

His second son-in-law, Szmul-Aron Pardes, even when he was still receiving room and board from his father-in-law, already became famous as a sharp-minded man greatly proficient in *pilpul*¹⁸. He founded a periodical on *pilpul* entitled "*Ha'Pardes*" [The Orchard]. Afterwards, [in 1924,] he emigrated to America. This periodical continued to be published in America by its founder until recently. He passed away in America [in 1956], after years of productive work in the realm of *pilpul*.

Josef Rusin was a *balebatische* Jew - a wealthy, wholesale grains merchant. He was away from home all week long on business and only came back for *Shabbes*. When he returned home on Fridays, his grandchildren and I (we were cousins) would run after the cart, which raised clouds of dust, to receive presents from him (like [Reb] Shmuel [sic Shloyme] Nogid in the book by Sholem Asch¹⁹). He would give us sweets and coin-shaped chocolates.

Josef Rusin had three fine-looking daughters and they all married *Bnai-Toire* husbands. One of them, Rywka'le Rusin, was wed to my uncle Icze-Majer Turner²⁰, a *Ben-Toire* and a great merchant. He died at the end of the First World War. Following the death of her husband, his wife Rywka, who was an "*aishes-chail*"²¹, managed their tobacco business all on her own. She made *Aliyah* in 1925, together with my father z"l, as his second wife. This was our town's first middle-class family to ever emigrate to the Land of Israel. She lived a long life and died at a ripe old age.

Reb Szlojme Rottenberg (with whom we opened this article) was a native of Będzin. He married Szajndla-Laja [Warszawska (b.1874)], the daughter of Chana *Rude's*²², who owned a tannery next to the Big Synagogue. The husband of Chana *Rude's* died in his youth and she managed the enterprise with the aid of the children who had, in the meantime, grown up - Mordche'le Warszawski and Szajndla-Laja.

As one who sat in the Study-hall [as his sole occupation²³], Reb Szlojme Rottenberg was promised [full] "*kest*". Indeed, he sat at his mother-in-law's table for thirteen years. These "*kest*" years did not pass over him in idleness - he spent the first years of "*kest*" at the Study-hall, [during which] he was able to bring to this world seven children - [both] boys and girls.

¹⁶ [TN: *Salomon-Majer Kirszenbaum* in the records.]

¹⁷ [TN: *Manas-Josek* in the records; married *Sura* Kirszenbaum in 1895.]

¹⁸ [TN: From Heb. "*pilpel*," or pepper; critical analysis and hair-splitting; casuistic argumentation especially among Jewish scholars on Talmudic subjects (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).]

¹⁹ [TN: Protagonist of Asch's 1913 book by the same name: "*Reb Shloyme Nogid*."]]

²⁰ [TN: The brother of Hinda Wajnberg née Turner, the author's mother; both were children of Reb Izrael Turner, of whom the author tells above, on p.22.]

²¹ [TN: "*Virtuous woman*"; from the verse in Proverbs 31:10: "*Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.*" Invariably used in traditional Judaism in ref. to a dexterous and pious woman.]

²² [TN: Chana, the daughter of Ruda (surname as yet unknown).]

²³ [TN: The special status of those whose study is their sole occupation may be gleaned from the Talmud Bavli (*Shabbes* 11a), regarding "*the likes of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai and his colleagues, whose Torah is their vocation.*"]

From Reb Nusen Rozyner, I heard that Reb Szlojme Rottenberg used to learn with many young men at the Study-hall and that Abram-Josef Szybel was among those who listened to his lessons, and that he came and went about freely in Reb Szlojme's house.

Rottenberg's sons say that, when Abram-Josef Szybel came to study a lesson with their father, he took part in putting the little ones to bed by rocking their cradles.

The cradle occupied a prominent position in the furnishing of a Jewish home and in its familiar atmosphere - it did not leave the home, from the first year of marriage and until the couple became grandparents. Quite often, one could find a son, together with a grandson, in one crib or an uncle with his nephew. The shape of this crib can only be seen in an illustration in a dictionary²⁴ - it is like a little bed on two curved rockers, thanks to which the cradle rocked at the slightest touch. As the mother stood by the cooker, sat at the table or darned socks, she kept one foot on the rocker, rocking the crib until the baby fell asleep. The problem was that babies, who became accustomed to it, demanded to be rocked even in the middle of the night. We sometimes found our mothers leaning on the crib and falling asleep from exhaustion while nursing the babies. In the chronicles of the *shtetls*, there are instances of babies who were smothered by the pressure of their mothers leaning on them.

The older children would help their parents quieten the babies and put them to sleep by rocking the crib. In those days, in towns, there were as yet no playgrounds with swings for the older children. They would sit at either end of the cradle and rock it so fast that the baby sometimes flew out of the crib.

The cradle - just like the craftsman's workshop - served as a source of folkloric song. In her song, the Jewish mother expressed the musings of her heart to her son and her wishes for his future. The popular lullabies, sung by our mothers, very well reflect the period, the murmurings of their hearts, their joy and their sorrow.

Once Reb Szlojme Rottenberg's "*kest*" days were over and the time came for him to separate himself from his in-laws' table and become independent, he had no other recourse but to continue his wife's parents' business (even though he had trained as a *shochet*).

If truth be told, his wife Szajndla-Laja was not too keen on this course of action, because she knew her husband's abilities in this profession and she feared that the entire yoke and burden of running the business would fall upon her own shoulders (as it, in fact, turned out). But, having no other way out, she came to terms with the idea. Next to his in-laws' tannery was another one owned by a man named Godl, which was sold to the Rottenberg family - and thus Reb Szlojme Rottenberg became one of the more prominent tanners.

When new winds penetrated our *shtetl* and the foundations, upon which the way of life had for centuries been based, were shaken, when the echoes of the call to "change values" also reached the town's Chassidic families, the Rottenberg household was among the first to be breached and a gaping hole was opened in it. The firstborn, Abram-Dawid, joined the youth that was drawn to the Zionist cause and thus the tradition was passed from the eldest to the youngest, among them Eliezer Rottenberg, who is now in Israel.

This family, with many children, was split up - some are in Israel. Those who remained in Poland were burnt alongside their mother at the Nazi stake.

²⁴ [TN: Apparently, rocking cradles were no longer popular by the time this article was written.]

Blessed be their memory!

Pinchas Wajnberg