

The *Shtetl* Żarki in its Traditional Ways

(Memories, Impressions [and] Experiences)

"No doctrine without a house of fathers is a doctrine¹³".

No culture without a house of fathers is a culture. No popular movement, unless it is like foam on the water, is a foundling – and it looks to its house of fathers.

"Know from whence you came and where you are going¹⁴" – is not solely a moral dictate, but a mighty necessity – we have a need to seek out the roots of our being, [and] to find out about our origins. And even if we receive no reply – we shall never cease asking.

**(Berl Katznelson, from his preface to
Sefer Ha'Gvura [The Book of Bravery],
published by *Am Oved*, [1944])**

Raising a Memorial to the *Shtetl*

As we set upon bringing up the memories of childhood years from the abyss of forgetfulness and immortalising the characters and the ways of life from which we distanced ourselves [even] while the town was still standing - that same town which was disdained by all seekers of culture and progress from the days of the Enlightenment and up to Zionism - the question stands before us: What are the spiritual motives pushing us towards this? It is not only the destruction of the town and the horrific holocaust that was poured upon it that demand we raise a commemorative monument in its memory. There are other reasons which push us to wonder about our origins and our past.

Two new Jewish centres have risen in the current century - and they were established mainly by the Jews of the *shtetls* in Eastern Europe - one in America, which has conquered prominent positions within the economic, political and cultural life amidst the general American populace and the second, in the Land of Israel, where they have been able to attain their political freedom and to live as a sovereign state.

These developments in Jewish history put before today's generation - which has a part in creating this new history - the question: What source did this generation draw forth and drink from? What was the spiritual and physical environment in which this generation was educated and raised?

Describing our parents' material and spiritual life is as we remember it - a realistic depiction of their struggle for their economic existence, on the one hand, and their strict upholding of their spiritual identity on the other - will provide us with an answer to the question which stands before us.

My *shtetl* Żarki - a Jewish community of some three thousand souls, which was obliterated and erased from under the heavens together with all the other Jewish communities in the land of Poland, on whose soil I was born and also raised, in whose bosom I absorbed all that is good and

¹³ [TN: Quote from the Jerusalem Talmud (Pesachim 39b and Shabbat 87a), meaning that no dogma or creed in Judaism has any halachic validity – even if Scripture or logic dictate it – unless it has a precedent in the traditions of our forefathers.]

¹⁴ [TN: Pirkei Uves (Avot), ch.3, mishna 1.]

beautiful in Judaism and where a window to the wide world was also opened to me - I shall remember the kindness of thy youth¹⁵, and I shall endeavour to raise for you a memorial monument.

I shall not tell of the great ones among [the People of] Israel who, from your loins, surged forth. I shall also not tell of the prominent events which took place on your soil during the centuries of your existence. There are no writers of chronicles who tell of theological quarrels and of the Talmud being burnt and not even of the blood libels within your boundaries. And it appears that our forefathers found, in you, a refuge and haven without excessive turmoil. They were lucky enough to be able to peacefully weave within you the heritage of their lives.

Four cemeteries, where the local residents found their eternal rest, bear witness to the centuries of the existence of a Jewish community in Żarki. The last and fourth in number was inaugurated at the beginning of the current century. The one preceding it was spread over a wide area and from its gravestones - which were all cut from stone and fashioned by a master craftsman - one may estimate the *shtetl's* opulence in the previous century. There is one tombstone worthy of mention, which sprawled at the edge of the plot, adjacent to the fence and which was shaped like an iron box, with a casting of a head on top, which could be rotated. Back in the day, a legend went about among the children, that when one gyrated this head, it announced and proclaimed, "I ate a chicken with butter" - which shows that, in the 19th century, there were already Jews in our town who violated the prohibition of "*Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk*"¹⁶ [Exodus 23:19].

The second graveyard was also located in the vicinity of these cemeteries, its headstones not protruding above the ground. It would appear that, in those times, they did not use many stone tombstones. This cemetery was near an area where there was yellow sand. Even in my times, it was the custom to sprinkle yellow sand in honour of *Shabbes* on the floors of the houses which did not have wooden flooring. The chore of fetching the sand fell upon the children, who fitted out small wagons with crates and then went out in convoys to the place outside the *shtetl*, and take the sand from there. Thanks to their search for nice sand, the children once discovered a gravestone which was then over two-hundred years old.

Returning to the first graveyard, which was called "*der Alter Beis Oilem*" [the Old Cemetery] - this was now situated in the heart of the locality, surrounded by houses, which demonstrates that the town was initially further away than its current position (near the village of Jaworznik). This was on a higher elevation and the residents only later descended to the valley. From this is also derived the locality's name [in Yiddish] "Zhurik", from the Polish word "*dziura*", which means "hole" or "hollow".

Żarki is located in south-west Poland, between Częstochowa and Zawiercie. It did not have its own railway station, but there was one in the neighbouring *shtetl* - Myszków. The distance from the train caused our town to not develop much in the later period^{*)}, although it served as a centre for smaller towns in its vicinity, such as Koziegłowy to the south-west, Janów and Złoty Potok (the estate of Count [Walentyn] Potocki¹⁷) to the north and Lelów to the south-east. The town of Lelów gained a reputation thanks to *Rebbe* Duwid'l of Lelów, who is renowned in the Chassidic world and of whose ways and unpretentious outward appearance the town elders were able to tell. Reb Duwid'l used to go out and make souls for Chassidism. In Żarki, he found a young man whom he brought into the confidence of the disciples of the Seer of Lublin, where they predicted, for him, a Chassidic

¹⁵ [TN: *Jeremiah, 2:2.*]

¹⁶ [TN: *The biblical prohibition only includes the meat of animals which produce milk and not fowls, but the Sages widened the precept to include fowls as well, due to the similarities between different kinds of meat.*]

^{*)} According to the all-Russian census of 1897, there were in that year already 2,559 Jews in Żarki (from the *Jewish Encyclopaedia* in Russian, volume VII).

¹⁷ [TN: *A purported Polish nobleman who converted to Judaism and became known as Abraham ben Abraham, for which he was burnt at the stake in 1749.*]

leadership. This, in fact, did come to pass - and he became *Rebbe* Icchok, the founder of the renowned Vurke [Warka] dynasty. Each year, on the anniversary of the death of *Reb* Duwid'l, multitudes of men and women streamed to his tomb, to pray that he should intercede for them in the Heavens. Our study-hall served as a gathering point for them and, from it, they would set out, before dawn, in a convoy to his tomb in Lelów. This day falls on the 7th of Shevat [usually in January-February], when blizzards rage, making the roads indistinct and travelling to Lelów in winter carts was certainly deemed dangerous. More than once it transpired that it was necessary to send for the locals to rescue those on their way to the tomb of *Reb* Duwid'l.

A legend circulated among the believers that, prior to his death, *Reb* Duwid'l prayed that, on his *yuhrzeit*, snowstorms should disrupt the roads, so that people should not be able to come to his grave. Just as he had been a hidden *tzadik* in life, thus he wished to remain also in death.

Architecturally, the *shtetl* was compressed and crowded. In its centre was a spacious equilateral square, from which streets stretched out in all four directions. There were also two other parallel streets, on either side of the square. At the town's entrance was another square, which was called "*der Nayer Mark*" [the New Market]. This square was meant to serve as a new commercial centre of sorts. This was the gathering place for all the carts which transported passengers and freight from the train station, which was a distance of about seven kilometres from Żarki.

All the commerce and the numerous shops were concentrated in the big square. On its eastern side rose a large Christian church surrounded by walls. Chestnut trees stood next to the church. The children would gather the chestnuts, with which they made decorations for the *sukkah*. At some distance from the church, in the middle of the square, a small area was fenced off and, at its centre, [stood] a statue of the Virgin Mary with her son in her arms. The Christians would bring their deceased there, to hold funeral services.

In the summer, when the rains failed and drought threatened the fields or, conversely, when the windows of heaven were opened and there was a danger that the grain in the fields might rot, pious Christian women would come and kneel before the statue in the evenings, pleading pitifully for the fields to be saved.

In the middle of the square, there were two wells, which supplied the residents with water. The water was drawn with manual pumps which, of course, frequently broke down - especially in the wintertime. Here, we should mention Awreme'le the water carrier, a small, wiry Jew who carried a pole with two buckets on his shoulders and supplied the Jewish houses with water. Sometimes, he hauled his buckets cheerfully but, at other times, curses poured from his mouth as if from a sack full of holes.

Craftsmen and all kinds of labourers lived on the side-streets. On one of the streets, parallel to the square, next to the stream (*rzeka*), was a concentration of all the religious buildings - the *mikvah*, the two synagogues, the two study-halls, a few *shtieblech* and a public lavatory¹⁸.

From this spring, the waters flowed into the town, following a wide and, in some places, quite deep course. The local people utilised the stream for different purposes. First and foremost, this "living water"¹⁹ was used to fill the *mikvah*. New [metal and glass] kitchen utensils [acquired from a Gentile] were immersed in this stream before one began using them, and their immersion in this stream also

¹⁸ [TN: This would be considered a "religious building" due to the fact that it is forbidden to say any prayer if one needs to attend the call of nature, and - unlike nowadays - there were no facilities inside synagogues, etc.]

¹⁹ [TN: Viz. naturally flowing water; see Leviticus 15:13.]

acted as a charm to protect them from breaking too soon²⁰. From here, at sundown, water would be drawn for the baking of *matzos*. This water was called “water that has slept”, because it was kept indoors overnight, covered with white cloth.

On *Rosh Hashana*, all the townspeople, great and small, surged there for *Tashlich*²¹. In this, the *Chassidim* surpassed everyone - they performed the ritual singing melodiously, going all the way to the stream’s northernmost point, where they turned their pockets inside out and shook them.



Going to Tashlich

In the summertime, boys and girls bathed there. And, in those days, there were as yet no swimsuits, so the girls covered themselves with full-body smocks. Were a boy to approach their bathing area, their screams reached the heavens.

The stream encircled [sic traversed?] the *shtetl* from its north-eastern edge to its south-western one. The source of the stream was the spring in Leśniów, a small suburb populated exclusively by Christians. This spring was named “Stok” [?]. This was a sacred site for the Christians who, next to it, erected a great church. Sometimes, in the summer months, Christian pilgrims came from the entire surrounding region and they called these gatherings “*odpust*”²² in their language. These were days of great revenue for the Jewish merchants.

When the windows of heaven were opened and copious amount of rain fell, or when the snow melted in the spring, the stream would burst its banks and flood various zones of the *shtetl*. The ones who suffered from this were mainly the residents of the western part, which was called “*Inter die Rzeka*” [Under the River].

²⁰ [TN: The immersion of this type of utensils is a halachic requirement – it was certainly not done for the sake of the supposed “charm” of this stream.]

²¹ [TN: Ritual of “casting” one’s sins into the water.]

²² [TN: Lit. “indulgence”; local annual festivals held on the feast day of the patron saint of a given parish.]

Around the river, all the town's tanneries were clustered - except that of Icek Bratman. The northernmost tannery was Szlomke Tenenbaum's, then Szlojme Rottenberg's, Szlojme Zalcer's, Mordche'le Warszawski's and, finally, that of Nissim Jonisz.

The stream also powered the town's two large flour mills.

The material situation of the residents was stable and quite well-established and, for a semi-urban locality, its financial structure was fairly strong and normal.

The economic structure of the Diaspora *shtetl* has been a tendentious theme in our literature of the *Haskala*, Zionism and the Revolutionaries. If I wish to remain loyal to my memory and to my impressions, I am unable to point out characters like [Sholem Aleichem's] "Menachem-Mendel"²³ in our town, because the vast majority of the *shtetl* was [comprised of] active traders or labourers and craftsmen.

A substantial proportion of the population engaged in commerce. There were small shops there - like that of Ester'l Flumbaum²⁴ - and there were also wholesalers, such as the shops of the Goldberg brothers, Aba'le Szytybel, Szymon-Akiwa Rozencwajg and others. This commerce catered to the rural farming "hinterland", supplying it with the necessary industrial products and also acting as marketer of its agricultural produce. Jewish commerce [also] served, not only the Jewish community itself which numbered over three-thousand souls, but also the local Christian community which lived at the edges of the town.

The rest of the population - the majority of them - were engaged in physical labour - in the leather industry, as coachmen, as porters and other things. Two families were involved in finance - Jechiel Herszlikowicz managed a small-scale banking operation and the renowned publisher and patron of the arts, Abram-Josef Szytybel, began his business career as his clerk. The second was Szymon Szporn, with whom widows and housemaids entrusted their savings and who gave out loans to the *shtetl*'s merchants.

There were nine families of "holy vessels" in town. They were:

- the Rabbi, Reb Symcha'le,
- the three *shochtim* [ritual slaughterers],
- the cantor at the Main Synagogue,
- the synagogue's *shames* [deacon] who, among his other duties, was also tasked with waking the people on *Shabbosim* [i.e. Saturdays] and holidays with the cry of "*In Shil arayn!*" (To the Synagogue!),
- the *shames* of the study-hall, who was also the Rabbi's personal attendant and the bailiff of the rabbinical court;
- the bathhouse attendant who leased the *mikvah* and lastly –
- Lajbisz the gravedigger, who lived at the entrance to the cemetery and was also caretaker of the funerary paraphernalia. Another role was also reserved for him - to walk at the head [of wedding processions] to the *chuppah*, carrying a great lantern with many candles, as he led the bride and groom to the courtyard of the synagogue, accompanied by the ensemble of Bere'le *Kleizmer* [traditional folkloric musician] and his sons. There, the Rabbi would officiate the *chuppah* and *kiddushin* [wedding ceremony].

²³ [TN: The archetypal "*luftmensch*" – viz. a person who indulges in impractical or unrealistic plans; an impractical dreamer (Oxford Dictionary).]

²⁴ [TN: "*Lumbaum*" in the original, without an F – a surname which apparently does not exist.]

In our parents' way of life, the wedding, with its preparations and arrangements, occupied a prominent position. And how typical it is of the worldview of former generations, that they assigned two diametrically opposed roles to the one man, Lajbisz the gravedigger - and this was in order to fulfil "*I have set Death always before me*"²⁵.

Without going into detailed descriptions of our parents' [day-to-day] existence and way of life, and without assuming any position regarding the substantial content of this existence, we must note that our parents were able to assign, to all these things, set patterns which took shape and became hallowed by the traditions which were passed from mother to daughter and from father to son. The *Shulchan Aruch*²⁶ encompasses the life of a Jewish person from the day upon which he is born until the day he dies, on weekdays and on *Shabbosim* and holidays, in his days of joy and in his days of grief - it was what created the way of life shared by the entire Diaspora Jewry. There was, of course, a place within the general framework of life for adding one's individual touches. It is true that there were differences between the structure and lifestyle of a Torah scholar and that of the common Jew, but these small dissimilarities did not diminish the general picture of the traditional way of life shared by all.

Grandfather z"l

In 1920, when I reached the age of 16, there came a turning point in my life. That year, my mother Hinde'le, the daughter of Reb Srul [Izrael] Turner z"l, died on me. Whenever I mention Grandfather's name, my heart swells with pride. The survivors from the *shtetl*, who knew him, are nowadays scarce. He had a tobacconist's shop at the centre of the marketplace and was considered a wealthy man by the standards at the time. [He was] noble and gentle of soul. He ran his business fairly and honestly. He was [counted] among the *Chassidim* and, in his youth, he travelled to the *Vurker Rebbe*. In his middle age, he travelled to Ger [Góra Kalwaria], to the author of *Sfas Emes*²⁷ - and I find it amazing that despite his distinct Chassidic upbringing, he also spoke and wrote fluently in the official state languages. He passed away in 1915. His death was brought about by the soldiers of the Austrian Army, who were billeted at the time in our town, and who looted his shop and also caused him bodily harm.

In the eulogies and in the stories that were told publically after his death, his character emerged as one with the character [of the *Rebbe*] which I.L. Peretz described in his famous tale *If Not Higher*²⁸. Influenced by what he had heard from the *Vurker Rebbe* on the verse "*When thou takest the sum of the children of Israel after their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul*" [Exodus 30:12], which he occasionally repeated, he had taken it upon himself to do charity anonymously - either through others or by his nocturnal visits to the homes of orphans, widows and the elderly, among whom he distributed notable sums.

My Mother Hinde'le z"l

My mother, who inherited many of his traits, also excelled in extending aid to the needy. It has become etched in my mind that, when at the start of the First World War, an epidemic of typhus fever broke out. The sick were hospitalised in a large building in the town's suburbs, where the Leśniów summer camp was, and my mother and other women would cook hot food and bring it to the sufferers. She received a secular education and, besides Polish, Russian and German, she also

²⁵ [TN: The author intentionally changed the original verse which reads "*I have set the Lord always before me*" (Psalm 16:8) in order to make his point.]

²⁶ [TN: Jewish religious legal code.]

²⁷ [TN: Lit. "Language of Truth," posthumously published works of the Gerer Rebbe, Rebbe Juda-Aryje-Lajb Alter (1847-1905).]

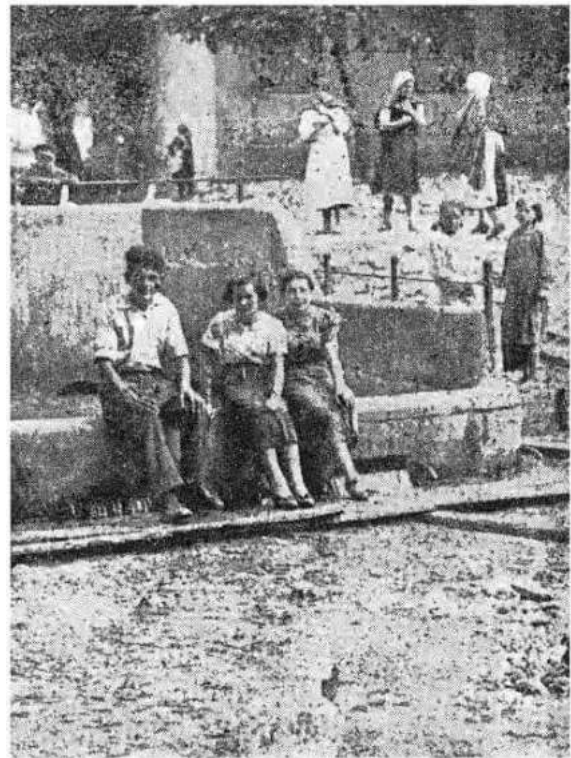
²⁸ [TN: See here: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/i-l-peretz/> regarding this story.]

studied French. Together with other women activists, she made great efforts for a [secular] public school be opened in the *shtetl*, thus incurring the wrath of the *Chassidim* - and she was blamed in no small measure for my own abandonment of religion.

With the death of my mother and my father's remarriage, I was tasked with the management of our carbonated beverages factory. This gave me some level of independence, which led to a decrease in my visits to the study-hall and the discontinuance of my participation in the Talmud lessons of the *shtetl*'s Chief Rabbi, Reb Symcha'le z''l. I was one of those who sat in the dust of his very feet and he had a large role in shaping my spiritual character - I therefore do not consider myself free from the obligation of telling about him.



*A boy and a girl in those days
(Pinchas and Szajndla Wajnberg²⁹)*



The hospital next to the spring

Reb Symcha'le z''l

Many, amongst the younger generation, regarded him as the personification of unworldliness, because his spiritual world was confined to the tight sphere of Halacha and distinct religious zealotry. Although Reb Symcha'le was also the official rabbi, he did not know the language of the land - for which he suffered in no small manner whenever the Polish authorities came to see him. Many jokes went about the *shtetl* at the expense of his poor grasp of the state language. His hands were unsullied, he loathed greed and it was the *Rebbetzin* [viz. his wife] who took upon herself the yoke of the household necessities.

²⁹ [TN: Apparently the author of this article and his sister.]

The Third *Shabbes* Meal with the Rabbi

The *shtetl's* Aleksander Chassidim, among whom my father was also counted, used to come to the Rabbi's house for social gatherings and on *Shabbosim* for the *Third Meal*.

I do not know what youths nowadays feel on *Shabbes* at dusk and if this hour of transition moves them in any way. But as for us, the *shtetl's* youth, when we were gathered at the Rabbi's house on *Shabbes* at sundown, twilight enveloped us as we sat huddled in one of the corners, telling all sorts of tales from storybooks, such as *Shivchei Ha'Besht*, *Kahal Chassidim*³⁰ and the like.

The adults, too, huddled closely together and poured their hearts out in melancholy song, filled with wistfulness and dolour, during the moments of transition from the sacred to the mundane. This hour of spiritual uplifting was a holy experience, which left on one a long-lasting impression. Today, when I call to mind all those experiences, it seems to me that [all] the tragedy of life - which is, in fact, a long chapter of transitional periods until we pass through it - all that yearning for the holiness of the never-ending life³¹, and all those innermost aspirations to shed the bodily trappings and delight in the radiance of the spirit, found their expression in the lyrical song and in those verses of "*Members of the Sanctuary, who yearn to behold the radiance of the Divine Presence...*"³².

A Talk with the Rabbi on Current Issues

I very much enjoyed the sermons the Rabbi delivered on the *Shabbes* preceding *Pesach* and the *Shabbes* between *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*. As had been the custom for generations upon generations, the Chief Rabbi would deliver a sermon on these *Shabbosim*. His eulogies were [also] particularly good. At one of these eulogies, I heard, from him, an idea that became engraved in my mind and which has, more than once, helped me to understand [certain] social, psychological phenomena and it is his interpretation of the verse "*Why should ye be stricken anymore? Ye will revolt more and more*" [Isaiah 1:5] in this manner: the fact that you are being stricken, provides you with an excuse to revolt more and more and, instead of learning your lesson and bettering your ways, you find a justification for your deeds.

When the slander, that I had joined the town's Zionists, reached my father's ears, he asked the Rabbi to call me to him, to try and put me back on the right path. I heeded the Rabbi's summons and I must say, in his praise, that he received me in a fatherly manner. He spoke to me in a gentle and pleasant tone and his rebuke was in line with the interpretation of [the commentator] Rashi on the verse "[*Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart:*] *thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, [and not suffer sin upon him.]*" [Leviticus 19:17³³], and was focused on three points - a) Zionism; b) respecting one's father and c) the essence of the secular books.

As regards the first point, he tried to convince me by telling me that, although it was true that settling in the Land [of Israel] is [considered] a good deed, and many proverbs praising one who did so were scattered throughout the Talmud, yet what business was this for a young lad, whose only obligation is to swim in the Talmudic sea? The nationalistic basis for Zionism, as explained by Borochof, with which I was concerned myself with at the time, did not enter the scope of his mind.

³⁰ [TN: In *Praise of Ba'al Shem Tov*, and *Gathering of Righteous Ones*, respectively; Chassidic "fairy-tales" about the founders of Chassidism. Both books were usually printed together in one volume.]

³¹ [TN: Viz. the Messianic times.]

³² [TN: בני היכלא דכסיפין למחזי זיו דזעיר אנפין; hear the *Vurke/Amshinov* version of this song here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7_fQkwmeA&ab_channel=AzamraMusic. The tune sung in *Žarki* was probably very similar.]

³³ [TN: Rashi, there, says: "and not suffer sin upon him" – You will not embarrass him in public.]

On the second point, he expressed his opinion that the commandment to respect one's father took precedence over that of settling the Land [of Israel] and, if by joining the Zionists I was causing my father sorrow, then it was better to "*sit and refrain from action*" [*Talmud Bavli, Brachot, 20a*]. Here, I replied that the obligation to respect one's father does not include things which are in the realm of beliefs and ideologies, and this is ratified by the behaviour of our forefather Abraham towards his father Terah.

All he had to say regarding the third point was this: "*What is all they write about in those filthy books? A girl, a girl, a girl...*" At the time, I had not yet read the *belles-lettres* and my thoughts were focused on writings about contemplation, history and journalism. I therefore dismissed this remark as utter nonsense. Nowadays, when I read foreign *belles-lettres* and, of late, even Israeli ones, which are filled with erotic - and even pornographic - descriptions, I think to myself, "If only someone could uncover the dust from Reb Symcha'le's eyes [for him to see this]".

Religious Zealotry

The people of the *shtetl*, with the Rabbi at their head, stood guard in every way that there should be no transgressors among them, and they had no qualms about using any means possible against those attempting to make a breach in the traditional lifestyle. I recall two events that I witnessed in my childhood, which show with what zealotry they fought to maintain the town's religious character.

On the night following the Seventh [Day] of *Pesach*, while the *Chassidim* were still at the Rabbi's house, celebrating³⁴ the end of the festival with an abundance of toasts, drinking, singing and dancing, they notified the Rabbi that one young man had lit a pocket-torch and shone it in the faces of those promenading in the large square.

This lad worked for one of the horse dealers - Wolf Klizman. A great tumult arose among the *Chassidim* and the Rabbi sent his attendant to bring the offender and his employer before him. They both appeared. There was a large crowd surrounding the Rabbi's house and the young man's friends, who had come to show their support for him, were also among them. The Rabbi demanded of him to publically confess in the synagogue and to proclaim that he would not repeat his offence - on pain of being sacked from his employment and banished from the town. His employer, Wolf Klizman, promised, on his behalf, that he would do so.

"Achdusnikes"

In the *shtetl*, there was quite a large faction who engaged in exporting horses to Germany and Upper Silesia [Górny Śląsk]. This type of people was distinguished by special characteristics - their attire differed from that of the rest of the residents. Some of them wore hats like those of the German huntsmen. Their religious observance was feeble and, from among their ranks, came participants in the 1905 Russian Revolution - they were called, for some reason, "*Achdusnikes*"³⁵. They prayed in a separate synagogue, which we called "*Die Kleine Shil*" [The Small Synagogue] or, alternately, "*Die Deutscher Shil*" [The German Synagogue], because they constantly came into commercial contact with the Germans.

³⁴ [TN: Most likely a reference to the "Messiah's Banquet" or "Ba'al Shem Tov's Banquet" which some Chassidim hold at the close of Pesach.]

³⁵ [TN: According to the yet untranslated Yizkor Book "Gqbin – The Life and Destruction of a Jewish Town in Poland" (p.170), these were members of an early secret society named "Achdus" (Unity), that had close ties with the Bund, and which was comprised of young atheist-revolutionaries.]

The congregation of this synagogue set its heart on writing a Torah Scroll and he, who has not seen a parade celebrating a scroll being brought into a synagogue – “*has never in his life seen a parade*”³⁶.

At the front of the procession rode horsemen, headed by the leader of the town’s horse-trading faction - Lejzor Krzanowski. They were all dressed up, riding beautiful horses, decked out in colourful trappings. The tricks which they performed on the horses impressed everyone. In the middle of the square, barrels of beer were set up - there was much drinking and great rejoicing.

The honour which they showed to the Torah Scroll made up, in the eyes of the *Chassidim*, for the fact that they did not diligently observe all the 613 commandments written in that same Torah.

The *Shtetl*’s Social Strata

The town’s social differences found their expression in the places of worship specific to each faction. Let us make a round of the houses of prayer and, such, we will become acquainted with the worshippers.

All those infected with the spirit of progress congregated in the Small Synagogue. Besides the already-mentioned horse-traders, one could also find there Torbeczko “*Die Feldscher*” (the paramedic), who would only visit it on the High Holidays.

Those familiar with the literature describing *shtetl* life are familiar with the barber-surgeon character. If truth be told, we must note that our Torbeczki was already on a higher level, as he had completed his studies as a medic. He executed all procedures - from putting a leg in a cast to pulling teeth.

The classic *shtetl* barber-surgeon type was represented by Reb Aron “*Feldscher*”. The second representative of progress, who prayed in this synagogue, was Mojsze “*Der Fryzjer*”³⁷ (the barber). He would sometimes extend the weekday commonness of Friday into the sanctity of *Shabbes*.

He knew how to give a haircut a nice shape³⁸. Any young man, among those who frequented the study-hall and who went to him for haircuts, was considered “*a gechapter*” (one seized³⁹) - like [the story in the Talmud, in which the sage Ben-Zommah] “*glimpsed* [at the Divine Presence] *and was harmed*”⁴⁰.

The Big Synagogue

Just a few paces across from it stood the Big Synagogue - a large, beautiful edifice, decorated with different frescoes, such as the twelve signs of the Zodiac, the four species [of *Sukkos*], the heavens and the stars, etc. This synagogue was built in my childhood on the ruins of the Old Synagogue, which had burnt down in the fire that started on the night of *Yom Kippur* in the women’s section. This blaze left a horrifying impression on the townspeople, because many Torah Scrolls were burnt, as well as one of the residents named Elchunon [Chuna] Fromer, who risked [sic. gave?] his life attempting to save them.

³⁶ [TN: Ref. to *Sukkah*, ch.5, mishna 1: “They have said: He that never has seen the joy of the Beis Ha’Shoevah has never in his life seen joy.”]

³⁷ [TN: Polish spelling; from the French loanword in German “*friseur*.”]

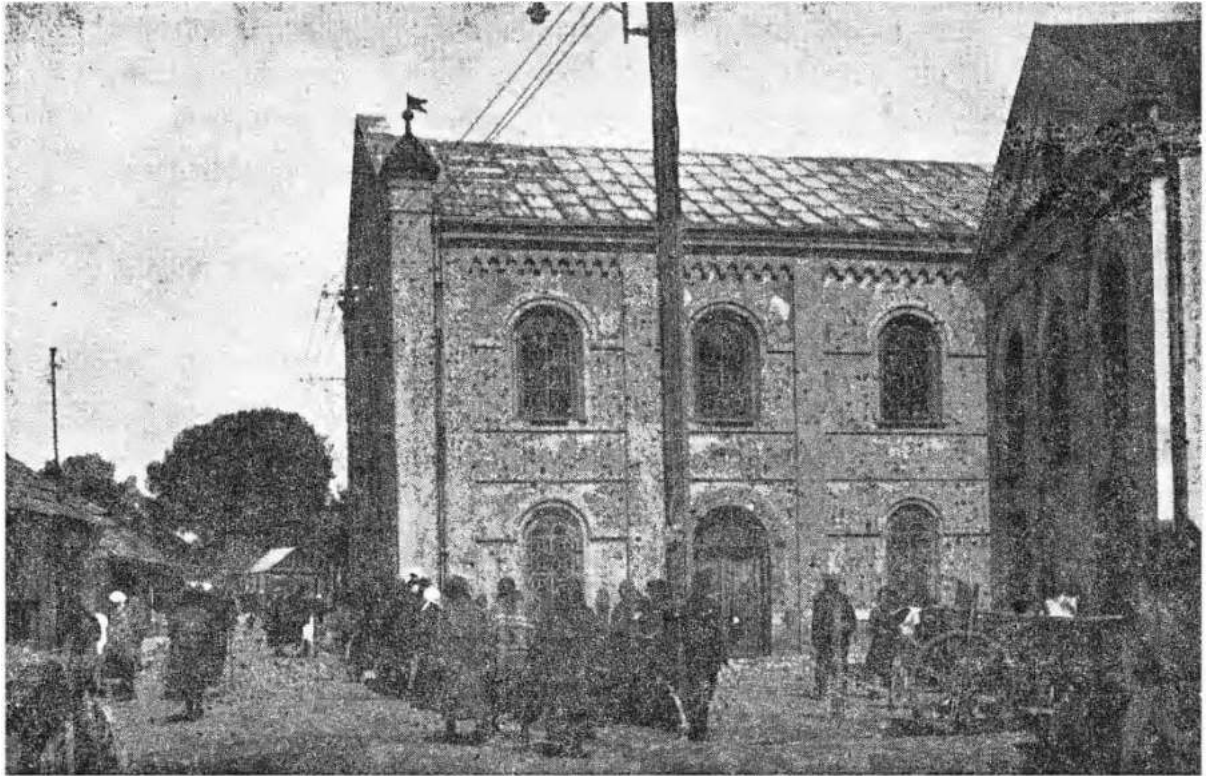
³⁸ [TN: Traditionally, a men’s haircut was simply to shave all the hair on the head except for the sidelocks – without any attempt to “give it a nice shape.”]

³⁹ [TN: Meaning one who had been exposed to new ideas, and was seized with doubts, etc.]

⁴⁰ [TN: Viz. lost his mind; see the tale in Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 14b.]

As a result of this catastrophe, a rule was made that the women's section would be closed to the women on the night of *Yom Kippur* and how very sad it was to see our mothers scurrying about dressed in white and with their headdresses, to find themselves a place to pray.

The whole synagogue gave the impression of having been shamed and punished, because the large candles in the crates of sand, which added glory to the sanctity of all the houses of prayer, were set in the outer section (the foyer) and not inside the synagogue itself.



The Big Synagogue

Several hundreds of worshippers gathered in this synagogue, most of whom were working people - cobblers, tailors, carpenters, hatters, tinsmiths, tanners, peddlers and smallholders, porters and coachmen. Our town was seven kilometres from the railway, which passed through Myszków, and many families earned their livelihoods from the transport of passengers and freight to and from the train station. And, although the coachmen were not organised in a cooperative and no stewards were employed to organise the work, they kept to the rules and order without fights and quarrels.

The Synagogue also served as a place for emergency meetings. If the *shtetl* was hit by a hard winter, and the poorer folk suffered for lack of potatoes and coal, the town's public activists would, on a certain *Shabbes*, close all the *shtieblech* and call their [attendees] to come pray in the Synagogue. They would split the Torah reading up into [minimal] three-verse sections and honour all the men of means with being called up to the Torah and, in a special "*Mi shebeirach*"⁴¹ blessing, they would vow [to donate] hefty sums to the relief cause [after *Shabbes*].

⁴¹ [TN: "He who blessed..."; a public prayer or blessing for an individual or group, most often recited in synagogue when the Torah is being read.]

For generations, this had been the accepted method for raising funds from the residents for different causes.

The Study-Hall

Next to the synagogue stood an old building - the Study-Hall. On weekdays, the majority of the local residents attended morning and evening prayer services in the Study-Hall. It also served as a hostel for the bachelors and for the young married men receiving room and board from their in-laws, and also for those who simply studied Torah all day. On *Shabbes*, the burghers, with [some] literary knowledge of such books as *Ein Yankev*, worshipped there, as well as the small traders and craftsmen who were members of the Psalm reciting society⁴².

A wave of experiences surges up whenever I call the Study-Hall to mind. After all, we spent the better part of our adolescent years there and, in it, our spirit was forged. On *Chol Ha'Moed*⁴³, a considerable section of the *Chassidim* would attend the morning service at the Study-Hall, although they usually had their separate houses of worship, which were called "*shtieblech*" [lit. "little houses"]. Most of the local merchants were *Chassidim* and all the most important Chassidic dynasties in Poland were represented in our *shtetl*, such as Ger, Aleksander, Skierniewice and Radomsko. The *Rebbe* of Żarki had his own separate study-hall, to which we shall give special mention in due course.

As youngsters, on *Chol Ha'Moed*, we liked to gather in the Study-Hall for prayers. These days of *Bein Ha'Zmanim*⁴⁴ filled us, *cheder* pupils, with a festive spirit and a sense of liberty and freedom, because these were our only days of vacation after a hard winter with long nights, or after the scorching summer days. On one such *Chol Ha'Moed*, I came upon a number of people in the Study-Hall, who were putting on their *tefillin* [phylacteries]. As is known, one does not put on *tefillin* during *Chol Ha'Moed* - however, one who was forced to carry out labour for the benefit of the public, such as butchers, coachmen, etc., did have to put them on, which caused me sorrow, because these people were thus stripped of their holiday feeling. They were also placed in a discriminating position through this [Halachic] rule because, while the law permits the merchant to conduct his business as usual on *Chol Ha'Moed*, and the only thing he is required to do is to use the other end of his quill when writing, one performing physical labour was required to put on *tefillin* - and in public.

Desecration of *Shabbes*

One labourer, from out of town, who was employed, was the baker from Będzin (*Będziner Beker*). One *Shabbes*, people came before the Rabbi and bore testimony that they had seen this worker smoking a cigarette. At once, the Rabbi sent his attendant to summon him and, when he did not heed the Rabbi's summons, the Rabbi, the *shochtim* and the *kehilla* representatives went to him. The worker panicked and fled. I remember how the Rabbi, with Duwid Turner and Reb Ruben *Shochet* at the head of a huge crowd, pursued him all the way to ul. Kozięłowska. But, since they had reached the *Shabbes* limit⁴⁵, they returned home. The transgressor never showed his face in town again.

⁴² [TN: Even the most uneducated Jews who were unable to study any book, would organise societies for the collective recital of Psalms, which is considered a form of prayer.]

⁴³ [TN: The weekdays of the festivals *Sukkos* and *Pesach*, which have partial holiday status, as seen subsequently.]

⁴⁴ [TN: "Between the Semesters"; the three vacation periods in religious educational institutions, two of which coincide with the festivals *Sukkos* and *Pesach*.]

⁴⁵ [TN: The area enclosed within the "eruv" boundary which denotes the locality's limits, outside of which it is forbidden to walk on *Shabbes*.]



The "Shomrei Shabbes" [Guardians of the Sabbath] group

Duwid [Dawid] Turner z''l

Duwid Turner, whom everyone called "Duwid *Roysher*" (Boisterous), was tall and strong, with a yellowish beard. He swayed his arms when he walked, with the hems of his caftan flapping in the wind. He had a hand in public affairs. The Big Synagogue was also built at his initiative and under his supervision.

He was not an intellectual, but his kindness and readiness to come to the aid of one in need was boundless. He was the most archetypal and assiduous of visitors to the sick, through which he gleaned knowledge of diagnosing diseases and treating them. Whoever had a sprain or a fracture and required treatment, found in him a loyal carer. I remember that, during the typhus fever epidemic which claimed countless victims, it was he who visited the sufferers, made the diagnosis and administered a special medication - a type of powder of his own concoction. Eventually, the hand of the disease struck him also and he passed away.

Today, with the development of medical science, it is difficult to appreciate how greatly important was the aid that these lovers of mankind proffered.

Reb Ruben Shochet z''l

Of the *shtetl's* three ritual slaughterers, he was the one with the most seniority and experience. Second to him was his son Jechaskiel [Chaskel] - they were both *Aleksander Chassidim*. The third was Reb Icze'l Shochet, a *Gerer Chassid*.

They had not reached this unequal arrangement easily. There was a rather long-running dispute between the *Aleksander* and *Gerer Chassidim* regarding this matter.

Reb Ruben Shochet was a tall and powerful man, with bulging, piercing eyes - a strict man who struck awe in everyone. He would silence anyone who dared disturb the silence during the Torah

reading with a rebuke of “*Shkaaatz*”⁴⁶! Despite all his severity, his home was open to all and the [Aleksander] *Chassidim* would meet at his house for social gatherings and on the anniversaries of the deaths of the *Rebbes* [connected to the Aleksander dynasty]. [On these occasions], the *Shochet*’s wife would serve fried calf spleens.

The Clash between the *Chassidim*⁴⁷

Sometimes, when my mind travels back to distant days, I am preoccupied with this question, “What was the reason for the hatred that reigned among them, causing prolonged disputes and quarrels in all of Poland’s localities?”

A person adopting the philosophical theory of materialism, which views society’s spiritual phenomena as a structure dependent upon physical circumstances, will find it difficult to explain this social phenomenon. Both *Chassidic* groups emerged from one economic standing and they also drew from one spiritual source - there was not even a difference between them in their customs and lifestyle. Surely, it cannot be that the customs the *Gerer Chassidim* had of holding the *Shabbes* morning service at daybreak⁴⁸, or of saying “*Borchu*”⁴⁹ after “*Mogen Oveys*”⁵⁰ in the Friday evening service, constituted a logical explanation for the strained relations that prevailed between them.

It is therefore no wonder that, when the *Court of Ger* adopted the German “*Agudas Yisroel*”, which was founded by the Rabbis [Dr Emanuel Shalom Menachem] Carlebach and [Dr Pinchas] Kohn⁵¹, the Aleksander *Chassidim* refused to join it and that [instead], we find them within the framework of the religious Zionist organisations.



[There is no text caption in the original book.

Upper lines read
“*Agudas Tzeirei
Emunei Yisroel*”
(Union of Young
Jewish Believers)
- the *Agudas Yisroel*
youth movement.

The last line is
unclear, except
“*Zhurik*”.]

⁴⁶ [TN: Most likely an amalgamation of the traditional Yiddish shushing “*Shaaa!*” with the term “*sheigetz*” or “*shkutz*,” meaning “impure infidel” – viz. “Shush, you infidels!”]

⁴⁷ [TN: According to historical sources, the feud between *Ger* and Aleksander raged from 1907 to 1937, and there are even reports of bloodshed and burning down of each other’s *shtieblech* during that period. *Ger* and Aleksander were, by far, the largest *Chassidic* groups in Poland, each numbering many tens of thousands of followers.]

⁴⁸ [TN: Most *Chassidim* in Poland delayed the morning prayers until well after the conventional hour; in some extreme cases, the morning service began nearing sundown.]

⁴⁹ [TN: “*Bless...*”; part of the liturgy of the morning and evening services, recited at the beginning and at the end of these services, in which the prayer-leader calls out “Bless the Lord, the Blessed One,” to which the congregation answers “Blessed is the Lord, the Blessed One forever and ever.” In the vast majority of communities, this prayer is not said at the end of the Friday evening service.]

⁵⁰ [TN: “*Protector of the Forefathers*”, aka “*Me’en Sheva*” (Seven-Faceted Blessing); a blessing which the cantor recites at the end of the Friday night service.]

⁵¹ [TN: Carlebach and Kohn were joint rabbinical advisors to the German occupying forces of Poland in 1916. As such, they were the first to give the hitherto politically uninvolved Polish *Chassidic* population a voice, by convincing some of them (namely *Ger*) to join the new “*Agudas Yisroel*”, thus creating great havoc amongst the existing secular Jewish political parties.]

An Epidemic in the *Shtetl*

This typhus epidemic reached the peak of its spread. All the measures which the townspeople and the authorities took to contain the spread of the disease - such as isolating the sick, means of disinfection and all the medications available to medical science at the time - were to no avail. All the *cheders* and houses of prayer were closed down and there was no place where to gather for prayer and to recite Psalms for the sick.

As one, who sat in the Study-Hall, I more than once witnessed heart-rending spectacles, when a sufferer's womenfolk infiltrated the Study-Hall⁵², opened the doors of the Holy Ark and, whilst the Torah scrolls were unveiled for all to see, the women poured their hearts out in howls and wails before the Torah scrolls, pleading that these be [considered] messengers of virtue before the Heavenly Throne.

All the young men closed their Talmud books and organised a collective recital of Psalms. This was a submissive and heartbroken recital and we were filled with feelings, focusing our hearts and thoughts on the plight of the sufferer to whom we were bringing redemption.

Magical Procedures to Stop the Epidemic

Due to the havoc wreaked by the epidemic, the community's elders decided to employ radical means, which they found in the sacred books - in the books of Practical Kabbalah. They were burning incense, and bringing a bachelor and a maiden from society's lowest echelon, who were of marrying age, under the *Chuppah* - in the graveyard.

The burning of the incense - how [was it done]? The community's prominent members gathered, headed by Reb Ruben *Shochet* who, in his hands, held the book *Ma'avar Yabbok*⁵³ (the book which contains the *Tziduk Ha'Din*⁵⁴ [prayer]), and they went outside the *shtetl* and walked around its borders. On each of the four cardinal points stood a group, all reciting a specific passage from this book. There was also no lack of back-and-forth to determine the exact location of the cardinal points.

A Wedding in the Cemetery

One, attempting to set down the details of this event, needs to possess a distinct, literary talent. One has to describe the episode of the negotiations with the intended pair, before they agreed to become a couple and the manner in which they were wed.

The groom and bride put forth demands and conditions regarding their lodgings and the furnishings thereof, as well as the tailoring of their accoutrements (*aussteuer*) [trousseau] - for they considered the entire *shtetl* as their future in-laws. I remember the wedding procession with the groom and bride, which passed through the entire town, until it reached the graveyard, under a sea of coloured lights and accompanied by Żarki musicians. The *chuppah* was erected next to the *ohel* [mausoleum] of the Chief of the Rabbinical Court, Rabbi Yehosua'le [Szyja Szwarcberg] *ztz''l*, and tables with refreshments were set up inside the cemetery. This was a night shielded [from all evil], upon which

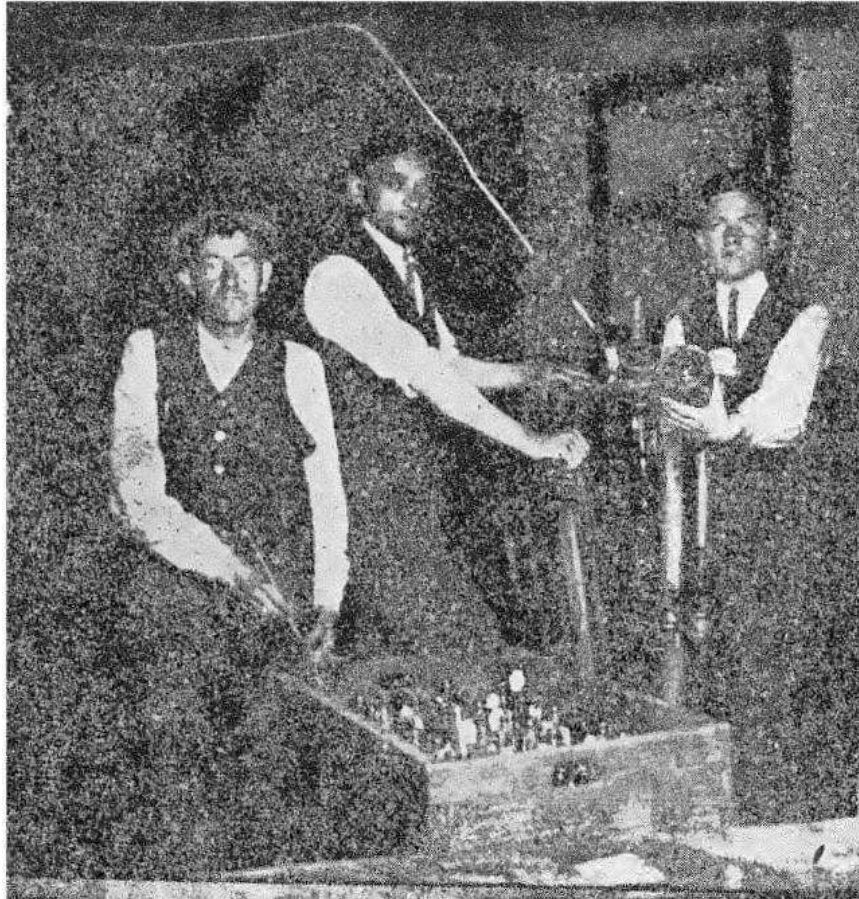
⁵² [TN: Under normal circumstances, it would have been unthinkable for women to enter the men-only study-hall, and had they done so, they would certainly have been asked to leave at once.]

⁵³ [TN: "The Crossing of the Jabbok" by the Italian cabalist Aaron Berachia ben Moses of Modena (Mantua, 1626).]

⁵⁴ [TN: "Justification of (Divine) Judgement"; a prayer recited at a Jewish funeral, immediately after the grave has been filled. The prayer affirms that the Divine Judgment is righteous and perfect.]

all went about freely, without fear, in the graveyard, without even checking whether their *tzitzis* [tassels] were tied correctly or not⁵⁵. But the joy was mixed with sorrow because, from among the tombs, the wails of the widows and of the orphans prostrating themselves on the graves of their fathers broke through.

And even though the couple did split up after three months - after reaching its peak, the disease was [finally] beaten.



The carbonated beverages factory.
From R. to L.: P. Wajnberg, A. [x] Kartuz and “the groom” Awreme’le

One, who judges these past events from a historical viewpoint, having witnessed them himself, is certainly allowed to ask himself, “Were our parents truly so ignorant as to believe that, by employing these means, it was possible to scare the typhus fever bacteria away and to fumigate it?” If truth be told, we must note that many of them viewed this with scepticism. But a person of faith, who does not attribute life to a fatalistic and blind course [of events], is unable to accept the concept that it is beyond the hands of man to influence the passing of life’s evils – and, if they had been unable to contain the disease through the natural measures they had implemented, they turned to irrational, mystical and magical means. One has to admit that this measure - viz. having a wedding in the cemetery - was extremely effective in the psychological sense. This was a direct provocation, as it

⁵⁵ [TN: Orthodox Jews purposely wear a four-cornered garment in order to be obliged to tie tassels to each corner according to Scripture, thus fulfilling a commandment. These tassels are habitually exposed, in order to show one’s pride in fulfilling this dictate. However, according to Halacha, when one is in a graveyard one must hide one’s tassels, because, by displaying them, one could seem to show disrespect for the diseased ones who are no longer able fulfil this commandment. By the author’s account, it seems that there was also some superstition, amongst Polish Jews, regarding entering a cemetery in the night at all and that, even if they hid their tassels, they would check if they were properly tied before walking among the graves at night.]

were, in the face of the looming Reign of Death - to breach the eternal unresponsiveness and peace which envelops the Cosmos, in order to display the urge for existence - the will to live - being the *chuppah* - the uttermost expression of these qualities.

Jechaskiel Shochet z''l

Jechaskiel *Shochet*, the son of Ruben *Shochet*, was a handsome man, and an exceptionally diligent *Chassid*. He was extremely strict within his own household and had no qualms about humiliating his adult son in public, by slapping him in the face in the Study-Hall, when [once] he found him in bad company. There were similarities between him and the ritual slaughterer in [Mordechai Ze'ev] Feiemberg's book *Le'An* [Whither]. With all his severity, he was kind-hearted and sentimental. I remember how he burst out weeping, with tears streaming from his eyes, when the news reached him that the *Aleksander Rebbe* - the *Yismach Yisrael*⁵⁶ - had passed away.

As my *bar-mitzvah* days approached, I was imbued with religious ecstasy - in the most sublime sense of this term. A feeling of holiness and purity enveloped me. In the Silent Prayer, I poured myself out with such devotion, that I became one with the celestial powers. To this day, whenever I yearn to detach myself from the greyness and corporeality of our lives, I bring up, from the abyss of forgetfulness, the emotions and experiences of those days. On the *Shabbes* I was called to the Torah, after saying the blessings following the *Haftarah* Reading⁵⁷, I stood by the table, all excited and alert, while Jechaskiel *Shochet* stood in front of me, staring at me relentlessly for a long time. This was a gaze that pierced the depths of my being, as if he were searching my heart and looking into my future.

Jechaskiel *Shochet* and my father z''l were bosom friends. One winter, my father contracted pneumonia. In those days, this was considered a serious illness and, among the other treatments, wet compresses were applied to the sufferer's back. Jechaskiel *Shochet* was an expert at wringing out the towel used as a compress and he was, therefore, my father's main carer during his illness.

Those days of sickness, which were fraught with concern and apprehension, also brought much light and warmth into our home, because my father's friends - the *Chassidim* - did not leave his side, day or night, while he was still in jeopardy.

This characteristic of the *Chassidim*, back then, should be noted as a symbol and a model for posterity.

A Dispute Regarding the Authority of the *Kehilla*

With the establishment of the Polish State and the organisation of its democratic institutions, in the Jewish street, too, the time came for the *Kehilla* Council to be elected by way of secret ballot.

Previously, the election of the *Kehilla* representatives was carried out via a simpler manner - the local residents used to gather in the Study-Hall and elect the councillors by show of hands. During the election, there was also no lack of those serving drinks. It seems that then, like today, they knew that serving refreshments is a convincing mode of influence.

Following the election of the first democratic *Kehilla* Council (it should be mentioned that, this time, a representative from among the craftsmen - who constituted a significant percentage of the town's

⁵⁶ [TN: "Israel Shall Rejoice," referring to the book's co-author Rebbe Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchok Dancyger of Aleksander (1853–1910).]

⁵⁷ [TN: A selection from the books of *Nevi'im* of the Hebrew Bible, which is read following the Torah Reading on *Shabbes*, holidays and fast days.]

populace - was also elected for the first time), the question arose, "From where would they draw the funds with which to cover the *Kehilla's* expenses?" So it was proposed that the *shechita* [ritual slaughter] be transferred to the *Kehilla*. This proposition was, in fact, close to the idea of the nationalisation of the *shechita* – viz. making all the proceeds from the *shechita* over to the *Kehilla*, from which the *shochtim* would receive their monthly wages.

When the *Kehilla* Council stood, for the first time, before the necessity to establish the level of the monthly salary, it had no standard by which to measure this, as there was no one in our *shtetl* who subsisted on monthly wages (one of the immense differences between the social structure then and now!). In order to get an idea, they asked the *shochtim* to prepare a list of their families' monthly expenditures. While I was in the Rabbi's presence when they were checking the list, the *Shochet's* wife came running up and declared that she had forgotten to include, in the list, different spices. I found it necessary to bring this account before the reader, in order to demonstrate that the issues of determining the household budget and the cost of living, over which our own generation deliberates, were also known to our parents - which teaches us that all generations are basically the same.

Tensions between the Members of the *Shtiebel*

The proposal to bring the *shechita* under the authority of the *Kehilla* was viewed by the *shochtim* as revolutionary and it gave rise to embitterment and opposition on their part. This dispute caused the first breach in the social cohesiveness of the group of *Chassidim*, who were in close contact with the *shochtim*. It was as if two [different] classes had arisen. This was the first opportunity I had to recognise and to comprehend how financial factors influence social relations.

During a discussion regarding *shechita* affairs, Reb Ruben *Shochet* made a vow not to speak Yiddish on *Shabbes*, but only the Sacred Tongue [i.e. Hebrew], and also not to engage in mundane matters⁵⁸. However, he was not fluent in the Sacred Tongue and his replies, to those addressing him, were therefore disjointed and also sometimes made people laugh.

The discussions about the *shechita* were held at the Rabbi's house, where the Aleksander *Chassidim* held the Third Meal and I, therefore, had the opportunity of being present during these deliberations.

The *shochtim* were also invited to one of the meetings on *Shabbes* afternoon. Two came, but the third, Reb Ruben *Shochet*, did not accept the invitation and he explained his refusal with fragmented syllables in the Sacred Tongue. His non-compliance to appear before the *Kehilla* leaders and the heads of households aroused anger, together with disdainful remarks.

The jeering tone, which those assembled took with Reb Ruben *Shochet*, caused me sorrow. I regarded this as an injury to his personality, which we had been accustomed to treating with reverential awe.

In the vow of silence on *Shabbes* which Reb Ruben *Shochet* took upon himself - an anti-*Chassidic* act in its very essence (his house had always been open to all the *Chassidim*) - one could see an expression of the emotional crisis through which he was going. After his dignity and status had been injured, the desire to isolate himself and distance himself from those close to him, which was hidden in his heart, manifested itself - the fruits of his disappointment with society, which is sometimes cruel to the individual.

⁵⁸ [TN: This vow limited him to only speaking the words of prayers or Torah study in Hebrew on *Shabbes*, thus effectively cutting him off from any normal conversation with his friends at the *shtiebel*.]

As is often the case, time did its part. The transfer of the *shechita* to the authority of the *Kehilla* was not upheld and a *Kehilla* tax on *shechita* was implemented instead. Relations between the people of the *shtiebel* slowly went back to normal.

Electoral Tactics

I shall not refrain from relating one misdeed, from the standpoint of public morality, which the Aleksander *Chassidim* committed.

In the elections for the *Kehilla* Council, when the time to present the lists of candidates came, the Aleksander *Chassidim* struggled to find a suitable candidate of their own. The *Gerer Chassidim* had a long-standing representative from the days of the Russian Tsar, whose name was Majer [Dawid] Alterwajn, or “Majer *Titnmacher*” as he was nicknamed, due to the fact that he manufactured [paper] bags. To avoid supporting the candidate of the *Gerer Chassidim*, they went and contacted a candidate who did not belong to the Chassidic circles, but who was one of the worshippers in the Small Synagogue mentioned above. They did not do what they did light-heartedly. I remember the many consultations with the participation of the Rabbi and the agreement which they signed between them, as well as all the commotion surrounding this event. Things are the same the whole world over.

Springtime in the *Shtetl*

Springtime in Poland is a time when nature is renewed, following a winter of slumber for all that grows. With the advent of spring comes the reawakening of life. When every tree and every meadow donned a mantle of green, Jewish youth in the *shtetl* were not given many opportunities to take part in the sense of freedom and juvenescence, for a Jewish child was brought up under the yoke of Torah from the age of three and would spend most of his days within the walls of the *cheder*.

The thing that, to this day, awakens in me the memories of springtime is the baaing of lambs. Spring is also the lambing season, when the ewes give birth. There was a large area in our town, which was especially set aside for the sheep and horses market. It was called “*Schepsenmark*” [Yid. Sheep Market]. Farmers brought their sheep and lambs there to be sold and their bleating touched one’s heart, and not only that - this baaing would intermingle with the outpouring of my father’s soul and his melodious reading of the morning “*Sh’ma Yisrael*” [Hear, O Israel]. “*I thank the Lord who searches the heart, singing together with the morning stars...*”⁵⁹

The *Cheder*

The *cheder*, in which we spent our childhood years, needs to be mentioned - for good or for bad. Even though much has already been written about it and there would not appear to be anything to add, I still think that we should not make generalisations, because each *melamed* [teacher] had his uniqueness - in his outer appearance, his pedagogic methods and the mode of punishment he employed.

⁵⁹ [TN: From the liturgical poem “Ode Le’El” by Rabbi Shmaya Kosson (16th cen. North Africa).]

As we come to survey the events of the past, we must not forget the general conditions prevailing at the time. We must take this approach also in our appraisal of the old *cheder*, with its different *melamdim*.

Living conditions in the *cheders* were not very different from those of the local residents, who were in a similar financial situation. Also, the *melamed's* attire was no different from what we were accustomed to seeing with most people in the *shtetl*. We would be wide of the mark of historical truth were we to establish our attitude towards the *cheder* by comparing it with modern-day schools, with their teachers and furnishings.

Teachers of the Smaller Children

In my time, there were two *melamdim* for the smaller children aged 3-5. One was named Szaja Piski - a Jew small in stature, with a blonde beard, bleary eyes and missing fingers for some reason. There was no floor at all in his *cheder*. We sat on planks which rested on bricks. This was the lowliest possible *cheder*, even according to the standards back then. I was enrolled in this *cheder* for one semester (viz. six months) and I later found out that, even this, had only been out of pity for the *melamed* because, looking back, my father z"l lamented the fact that I had wasted six months. The second *melamed*, and the more important one with whom the majority of the local children studied, was Reb Jankel Dancyger.

The *cheder* was next to the stream (*rzeka*) and, in it, were two quite spacious and well-lit rooms. He was a tall, handsome man, who inspired respect in his pupils and who was able to maintain discipline not only by using physical punishment. With him, we learned to read and also the Pentateuch. The first book which we began was Leviticus, due to the well-known reasoning - "*Let the schoolchildren, who have not sinned, come and redeem the sins in place of the sacrifices*"⁶⁰. His voice was pleasant and I have fond memories - especially in the way he explained the episode of the selling of Joseph and how he revealed himself to his brothers in the house of Pharaoh. What touched us, in particular, was the episode when our forefather Jacob apologised to his son Joseph for having buried his mother Rachel on the way to Bethlehem and not in the Cave of Machpelah [Cave of the Patriarchs]. He taught the verse "*And as for me, when I came from Padan...*" [Genesis 48:7] with a melancholy tune and in a heart-wrenchingly dramatic manner. We studied at this *cheder* to approximately the age of six.

There was one more *cheder*, which showed the beginnings of an "*Improved Cheder*"⁶¹ - the *cheder* of Abram Frank. The children from the non-Chassidic factions, who did not plan to go on to Talmud study, learned there.

Sandel Melamed z"l

From Jankel Dancyger's *cheder*, we went on to Sandel Melamed - a Jew who was tall and gaunt, with a protruding Adam's apple. Sandel Melamed used to visit the house of my grandfather z"l every *Motzei Shabbes* [Saturday night, after the close of *Shabbes*], wearing a well-worn satin caftan, with a great red kerchief hanging out from his back pocket, a large yarmulke on his head and the *lulka* (pipe) in his mouth. They drank much tea and had long talks on Chassidism and politics, while they stuffed pinches of snuff up their nostrils.

⁶⁰ [TN: Reference to Midrash Tanchuma, Parshas Tzav, siman 14: "Rabbi Asya said: Why is it that schoolchildren study the book of Leviticus? This is because all the sacrifices are written in it, and because they are still pure and do not know the taste of sin and crime. Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: Let them first begin with the order of the sacrifices - let pure ones come and occupy themselves with acts of purification, wherefore I shall consider it as if they were standing and offering sacrifices before Me".]

⁶¹ [TN: A Zionistic *cheder* in which the study was carried out in Hebrew and the focus was on Jewish History and Zionism.]

With Sandel *Melamed*, we studied Pentateuch, without skipping anything, and we began learning the Talmud, [starting from] the chapter *Which Found Items* [*Bava Metziah*, 21a-33b]. In this chapter, we studied the dispute between Abaye and Ruve [aka Rava] regarding whether “despair that is not conscious⁶²” is considered despair or not. I sometimes wonder how our *melamdin* succeeded in explaining these abstract problems to children of such a young age. It is therefore my opinion that anyone, coming to set down memories and impressions from the *cheder*, cannot suffice with a general superficial description, but must dwell on its contents and on its unique pedagogical approach.

The curriculum in the *cheder* was based upon the assumption that the brain of a child, in his younger years, is quick to grasp and comprehend abstract studies, and that precisely what one learns at an early age is well preserved during his whole life, according to the dictum “*Knowledge acquired in one’s youth is not forgotten*”⁶³.

The ages, from three to six, in the life of the child which, in our times, are set aside to engage in games and impart values through amusements and artistic activity, was the appropriate age, according to the perception of our predecessors, in which to teach reading without *nikkud* [vowel signs], Pentateuch or any other thing.

Without taking a stand on these opposing points of view, one must appreciate the pedagogical skills of our *melamdin*, who were able to pass on the art of reading to such small children.

In the scholastic system of the little ones, the *bahelfer* [pol: belfer, eng: teaching assistant] also occupied a prominent position. To translate his role into modern-day concepts, he was a nursery teaching assistant of sorts. Some of his duties were to gather the children, take them to *cheder* and to bring them back home. If a child obstinately refused to go to *cheder*, the *bahelfer* took him on his shoulders like a lamb. In the morning, it was he who said the [Morning] Blessings with the children.

On *Lag Ba’Omer*⁶⁴, he went with the children on an outing to the woods and the fields outside the town. This was the only day on which the *cheder* boys spent out-of-doors in nature’s bosom. With *Lag Ba’Omer* are entwined dim memories of Jewish militarism [in antiquity] and these were represented by the bow and arrow. The children, who were blessed with manual dexterity, fashioned them and wore them on their shoulder. On the days leading up to *Lag Ba’Omer*, the children were busy making “*fliterlech*” [decorations, in this case] from coloured paper, which were shaped like little flags. When we ran in the streets, the “*fliterlech*” fluttered, as if in proclamation of the upcoming day of freedom.

When one of the boys’ mothers was lying in *kimpet* [post-natal convalescence] at home following childbirth, the *bahelfer* would, at dusk, take the children every day of the seven days before the *bris* to the lying-in mother’s house for “*Krishme-laynen*”⁶⁵. A renowned *bahelfer* in his time was Chaim Zielonka, who later became a prominent artiste.

⁶² [TN: See there, p.21b: “איש שלא מדעת אביו אמר לא הוי יאוש ורבה אמר הוי יאוש”; elucidated translation: “With regard to one’s **despair** of recovering his lost item **that is not a conscious** feeling, i.e., were he aware of the loss of his property, he would have despaired of its recovery, but he was unaware of his loss when the finder discovered the item, **Abaye said: It is not** considered **despair**; the owner maintains ownership of the item, and the finder may not keep it. **And Rava said: It is** considered **despair** and the finder may keep it.” (from the William Davidson Talmud).]

⁶³ [TN: Based on Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b, and Rashi’s commentary there.]

⁶⁴ [TN: Festivity on which bonfires are lit honouring Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.]

⁶⁵ [TN: Yid. “Reading the Sh’ma”; the recital of a liturgy including the “Sh’ma Yisrael” prayer by small boys to fend off all evil from the newborn baby before his circumcision, after which they are given treats.]

In those days, the occasions of death at childbirth were not very infrequent - due to the lack of certified physicians and midwives. And the births were at home. Our predecessors saw, in these deaths, the hand of demons and evil spirits, which surrounded the new mother. As a charm against this, on the four walls of the *kimpeturn's* [lying-in mother] chamber, they would put up Songs of Ascent⁶⁶ and other verses capable of scaring away the malefactors. In every *shtetl*, there was a woman who specialised in receiving the new-borns. She was called a "*haybam*"⁶⁷. Who among us does not remember Miriam "*die Haybam*", with whose aid we, the children of Żarki, saw the world for the first time?

"Chumash"⁶⁸ Drosha⁶⁹"

In those days, not many parties were held for children. [In the Jewish world,] the custom of celebrating birthdays had not yet taken root. It was the custom, however, to throw a party in celebration of one's beginning *Chumash* studies. This festivity was called the "*Chumash Banquet*". The celebrant would give a speech, which we called a "*Chumash Drosha*". This address was delivered in the form of questions and answers. I still remember some parts of it.

Before the start of the speech, the five-year-old boy would be made to stand on a chair, whereupon his *melamed* would take him by the chin and ask him in a childish singsong⁷⁰, "*Wus lernsty yingele?*" (What are you studying, little boy?), to which the child replied, "*Chymeszt!*" – "*Wus hajst Chymeszt?*" (What does "*Chymeszt*" mean?), the *Rebbe* then asked. "*Chymeszt iz finf - Chamiszu Chymszaj Toyru*, (*Chymeszt* is five - the five books of the Torah)", the boy answered. "*Wi hajsen zaj?*" (What are they called?), and the child replied with a fine tune, "*Berajszis iz ajns, Szmos iz cwaj...*" (Genesis is one, Exodus is two)" and so on and so forth.

The parents, the mother in particular, would just melt with contentment.

Josel "*Glutzer*" [Wide-eyed] z"l

Under my teacher Josel "*Glutzer*" (he received this nickname for his weird stare), we studied the art of writing in Yiddish and German, as well as the four [basic] mathematical operations. He had beautiful handwriting and he was also strict regarding that of his pupils. The girls also learnt the prayer-book from him. He wrote letters for grooms and brides, using the popular "*Briefensteller*" [letter-writing manual].

Talmud Teachers

In the *shtetl*, there were four Talmud teachers. One was named Chaim'l Kaminker. He was a Torah scholar and he demanded much from his pupils. He would teach the lesson at the beginning of the week and, on the following day, he would begin the examinations - each day, he tested a different pupil. He did not command respect and the boys tormented him, taking advantage of his short-sightedness, even though they took lashings from him with a strap.

⁶⁶ [TN: Title given to Psalms 120-134, which all begin in this manner.]

⁶⁷ [TN: From the Ger. "*hebamme*," or midwife.]

⁶⁸ [TN: Lit. "*a fifth*," viz. one of the five books of the Pentateuch, which is printed with the proper nikkud, the Onkelos translation to Aramaic, and the commentaries of Rashi.]

⁶⁹ [Ed: A "*drosha*" is a sermon or a learned speech.]

⁷⁰ [TN: The subsequent back-and-forth is presented in the original in Yiddish, with a Hebrew translation in parentheses. In order to retain the originality of the account, and to provide the reader with a historically accurate "*soundtrack*," I've rendered the Yiddish exactly as it was pronounced in Poland, using Polish orthography, as it lends itself more easily to precise transliteration than standard English spelling.]

When I was nine, I was brought to his *cheder*. On the first week, we began studying the chapter *One Who Steals Wood* [pp.93b-111a] in the tractate *Bava Kamma* and, in accordance with his aforementioned method of studying, he tested me on the lesson on the following day. When I failed my examination, I took a beating from him. I wept copiously. This has been so deeply ingrained into my being that, to this day, when I open this page in the Talmud, or when I ponder on the treatise of *One Who Steals Wood*, a shudder runs through my body and I am enveloped by the memories of that frightening experience.

The second and third *melamdim* - Reb Szlojme'le Cohen [Kon] and Reb Josse'le Pardes - will be mentioned later, on another occasion. The fourth was Reb Icchok *Lajzer'le's* [son], whose father was a poor tailor and who, thanks to his capabilities, achieved the status of a renowned *melamed* in the vicinity. He also maintained a boarding-school of sorts, because lads from Dąbrowa [Górnica] and Sosnowiec lived and studied with him.

Educational Objectives

The *cheder*, whose main objective would seem to have been religious studies, concurrently strove to impart edifying values in different fields and, despite the changes that have since then taken place in our views and in the reality of our life, we can still find relevancy in them today. My teacher, Reb Icchok *Lajzer'le's*, did a great deal of this.

Several of his remarks have been preserved in my memory, each of which holds its own significance:

- a) We were studying the meaning of the words of the Friday night Silent Prayer. Suddenly, he put a question before us: "Why does one need to eat?", to which we replied, in order to be able to work and to engage in commerce. "For what does one need to work?", he then asked. "To earn one's bread", we answered. "If so, what is the end goal?", and he answered this himself, in a triumphant tone, "*You sanctified the seventh day for Your name's sake, as the culmination of the creation of heaven and earth*"⁷¹ - this means that the end goal of Creation and Man's doings during the weekdays - is the **sanctity of Shabbes**.
- b) On *Shabbes* afternoons, we studied *Pirkei Uves* [Ethics of the Fathers]. [Once,] we heard, outside the window, the bleating of a nanny goat going through labour pains. When her cries intensified and it touched us very much, the *Rebbe* presented an argument before Heaven, asking, "If Eve sinned by eating an apple from the Tree of Knowledge and was cursed – '*In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children*' [Genesis 3:16] – then what sin has this nanny goat committed?" And, here, he introduced us to the problem of the suffering of all Creation.
- c) In the tractate *Yuma* [p.81b], we learned that "*Anyone who eats and drinks on the ninth [of Tishrei] and then fasts on the tenth [viz. Yom Kippur], the verse ascribes him credit as though he fasted on both the ninth and the tenth*". And, here, he praised the Jewish People profusely, saying, "Just imagine if the Gentiles were told it was a *mitzvah* to eat and drink. Would they not all end up rolling in the gutters? And we, the Children of Israel, the Chosen People, have been commanded to eat and drink, yet we do not become inebriated." (A lesson in Jewish consciousness.)
- d) In the thick of the First World War, messianic hopes progressively intensified on the Jewish street. Many saw, in it, the War of Gog and Magog, after which the Messiah son of David

⁷¹ [TN: Quote from the liturgy they were learning.]

was to arrive. Those “versed in the Secret Knowledge” found hints of this in different cabalistic books, and we particularly pored over the commentary of the *Malbim*⁷² on the last verses in the Book of Daniel: “*Blessed is he who waiteth and cometh to the [thousand three hundred and five and thirty] days. [But go thou thy way till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days. (Daniel 12:12-13)]*”.

In this atmosphere of messianic tension, in the summer of 1916, we studied the weekly *Haftorah* from the chapters of consolation in the Book of Isaiah. When we came to the verse: “*And kings shall be thy nursing fathers and their queens thy nursing mothers...*” [Isaiah 49:23], the *Rebbe* gave free rein to his imagination and, before us, depicted the *Messianic Era and the Age to Come* with delightful descriptions. We were extremely excited and we considered ourselves fortunate, because we would be among those welcoming the Messiah. He would work himself into such an ecstasy, that he tweaked one pupil’s thigh, nearly tearing off a piece of flesh.

Perhaps those of his former pupils, who are now in Israel, owe him some credit for their Zionist consciousness.

Neglecting Torah Study

One of the pillars, upon which traditional learning was based, was diligence in not wasting [time which could otherwise serve for] Torah study. Even on Imperial Russia’s Tsar’s [holi]days⁷³, when those *cheders* which operated under licence from the government were closed, we did not remain idle, but ran with our Talmud tractates to the Synagogue, where we studied all day (the comparison with today’s lengthy vacation periods simply begs to be made). In the summer, after 15th Av, when the days begin to shorten⁷⁴ and the sun’s strength wanes, our teachers did not settle for a shorter day of school - so we began studying in the evenings also.

Following the afternoon prayer and before class in the evening, we would run from the *cheder* to a family, which lived next door, in order to buy pears. The head of the household was called Pinchas’l the Tailor, or by his nickname - Pinchas’l *der Schnüffler*⁷⁵. The name “Pinchas’l” [Little Pinchas] did not fit with his external appearance very well, because he was a large, broad-shouldered man with coarse features and a wide nose. The name “Pinchas’l” was probably in reference to the “little tailor” in him, for he was a country tailor - meaning that he made the rounds of the villages, taking tailoring work from the farmers.

He also sometimes engaged in the sale of fruit - mainly the cheaper varieties of pears, such as [those called] “*Cukrówkes*”⁷⁶ for being as sweet as sugar, which were red in colour. People would call a girl with red cheeks “*Cukrówka*”. Pinchas’l [also] sold another variety of pears which were called “*Leżelkes*”, from the Polish word *leżeć*, which means to lie [recumbent]. This shape of this pear was akin to that of the Israeli loquat. They were harvested green and then kept in straw until ripe.

⁷² [TN: Rabbi Meir Leibish ben Yechiel Mechel Wisser (1809-1879). It is, however, highly doubtful that the Aleksander Chassidim in Żarki would have read his works, as Chassidim were generally opposed to Malbim, due to his leaning towards the Jewish Enlightenment. Furthermore, he was an expert on Hebrew grammar, and is not considered a cabalist at all.]

⁷³ [TN: Public holidays which were established in honour of solemn events in the life of members of the Royal Family.]

⁷⁴ [TN: This date falls in July-August, and even at its earliest it is several weeks after the actual summer solstice.]

⁷⁵ [TN: Ger.; one who snuffles constantly, or speaks in a nasal voice.]

⁷⁶ [TN: “*Grusza Cukrówka*” in Polish, or “Sugary Pear”.]

The Days of Elul⁷⁷

It is not, by their own right, that I mention these pears here. Pears are but a means whereby to resurrect the experiences and impressions of their season - the month of Elul.

A child's soul is in constant need of new impressions and experiences. In those days, too, despite the monotony of life and the lack of planned amusements within the *cheder* walls - gymnastics, outings and such - we were still able to turn every change in the daily routine into a source of interest and into an event.

The days of Elul were an unfailing source of experiences for the *cheder* boy. They did not only instil in him the fears of the approaching Day of Judgement, on which "*all who come into the world pass before Him like legions of soldiers*"⁷⁸ [*Rosh Hashana* 1, Mishna 2]. The weather that was beginning to change, the leaves that were already falling, the flocks of geese which were brought from the countryside to the town with their deafening honking - [all] heralded the loosening of the tension and severity which characterised the summer days in the *cheder*.

In the days of Elul, Talmud study took on a new shade - no more the matters of what is prohibited and what is permitted⁷⁹ from the tractate of *Chullin*, or matters of [personal and financial] damages from the three tractates [called] "*The Buves*"⁸⁰, and no more matters of divorces and betrothals from the tractates *Gittin* and *Kiddushin*, but matters pertaining to the holidays [instead] - the festiveness permeated our studies.

Our studies in the tractate *Rosh Hashana* regarding, "*There are four New Year days*" [Ch.1, *mishna* 1], the description of how they sanctified the new month⁸¹ in the courtyard [in Jerusalem called] "*Beis Ya'azek*", [and] how the witnesses were examined in Rabban Gamliel's upper chamber [there, Ch.2, *mishnas* 5-8]; the lighting of torches, mentioning the names of the mountains [atop which they were lit], from which they made the *Kiddush Ha'chodesh* known to the Diaspora [there, *mishnas* 2-4]; the description of the order of the *Yom Kippur* services at the Temple, which we learnt in the tractate *Yuma* - all these completely blurred the chronological and geographical distances between the aforementioned events and the time and place where we were studying them. Herein, perhaps, lays the answer [to the questions of] who is it that instilled, in our hearts, the love and yearning for Zion and how these were nurtured!

The Days of Selichos⁸²

The days of *Selichos*, too, were filled with an abundance of impressions and experiences. We rose at midnight and at dawn, with the chill of autumn penetrating our bones. This may be perceived as laying a heavy yoke on a boy's soft shoulders. One might contend that a Jewish boy in the Diaspora was perhaps never just a boy, but also a "*klein Yide'le*" (small Jew), upon whom the yoke of fearing God was heaped and who, at a tender age, was pulled into the problematics of sin and repentance. This is, indeed, how we viewed these matters and how we evaluated them when we strayed from the path, in the days when our spiritual integrity was damaged and our eyes turned to the wide

⁷⁷ [TN: The twelfth month of the Hebrew calendar, which leads up to the High Holidays celebrating the New Year.]

⁷⁸ [TN: Or flocks of sheep, according to another interpretation.]

⁷⁹ [TN: Ritual slaughter of kosher animals and dietary laws in general.]

⁸⁰ [TN: Pronounced "Bavot" in modern Hebrew, meaning gates in Aramaic - Bava Kamma, Bava Metzia and Bava Batra, or the First, Middle, and Last Gate respectively.]

⁸¹ [TN: In antiquity, the Jewish month would begin after two witnesses testified before the court that they had seen the new moon, whereupon the court would declare the start of a new month. This is called "*Kiddush Ha'chodesh*" - sanctification of the month.]

⁸² [TN: Special penitential prayers which are recited daily in the period leading up to the High Holidays.]

outside world - [when] we craved to give free rein to our effervescent, youthful stamina. Yet, in its day, when our hearts were filled with undivided faith, a great light enveloped the *Selichos* days. It is in this light that these days appear in one's memory. Now, as then, I can still see the synagogues, the study-halls and the *shtieblech*, which were almost all clustered on one street and which were brimming with men and women. I can still see the light shining through the windows of the houses of prayer, which also illuminated one's soul. I can still hear the pleasing and tearful melody to the words "*The soul is Yours, and the body is Your doing, have pity on Your work*"⁸³. I can still see, standing before me, the participants in the *Melave Malka*⁸⁴ banquet which was habitually held at the Rabbi's house following the *Selichos*, at the close of the *Shabbes*. I can still hear, echoing in my ears, the clatter of the feet of those scrambling, in the middle of the night, to the shops of Wolf Szmied or Lajbisz Wajnryb to fetch a barrel of beer for the *Melave Malka* banquet. I can still hear the yearning melodies of the *Melave Malka* songs: "*This is the banquet of David, the Anointed King...*"

The Study-Hall

During my adolescence, the educational framework of the town's youth had not been disrupted and retained the shape it had taken over the course of many generations. Upon reaching the age of *bar mitzvah*, a boy left the *cheder*. Some started working and others went on to the study-hall in order to continue studying the Talmud until reaching the age of marriage. Usually, when a boy started attending the study-hall, he was already able to study a page of Talmud on his own (this was called "*lajnen*", from the word "*alajnen*", which means to do something on one's own). If there was a *yeshiva* in the locality, he would attend a lesson there and then study on his own. In other cases, the older lads studied with the younger ones. During my three years of learning at the study-hall, I, too, learned Torah from three older bachelors and I shall show my gratitude by mentioning them - because they all perished in the Holocaust, leaving no trace.

Mojsze-Jankel Pławner z''l

The first was Mojsze-Jankel Pławner z''l [b.1900], the grandson of the *melamed* Reb Szlojme'le Cohen [Kon]. His parents had a shop of ready-to-wear linen, which they had made themselves. Like many of the small traders, they travelled to the fairs in the nearby localities and, on more than one occasion, they were waylaid by bandits on their way back from the fair and robbed of all their takings. Several times, their very lives were in peril. Of folk such as these, the poet said, "*At the risk of his life he earns his bread*"⁸⁵...

Mojsze-Jankel was a sensitive soul. He had a tendency towards religious extremism and mysticism. Over the course of time, he began to study less Talmud and would hide away in isolation poring over books of theoretical and practical *Kabbalah*. The *Chassidim* - the members of his *shtiebel* - noticed the change in him and warned his grandfather of it. They also chastised him, for the "men of deeds" did not view, favourably, bachelors who occupied themselves with this type of literature and, indeed, their instincts had not deceived them. His proclivity towards mysticism took its toll upon him, as he gradually stopped studying, secluded himself lost in his thoughts, obsessed with ritual hand-washing and excessive diligence as regards dietary laws and one could see that his soul had turned into a battlefield. In the middle of the Silent Prayer, he made movements with his head, as if trying to banish the emissaries of Satan lurking to catch him in their net.

⁸³ [TN: From the *Selichos* liturgy, First Day, Ch.2.]

⁸⁴ [TN: "Escorting the Queen"; banquet held at the close of *Shabbes*, viz. Saturday night, in order to see off the "queen" - the presence of the Sabbath.]

⁸⁵ [TN: From the "*Unesanneh Tokef*" poem in the liturgy of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.]

The Silent Prayer, during which one is commanded not to let one's thoughts wander, was at the same time a no-man's-land open to the invasion of all manner of unwelcome thoughts. I remember that I, too, struggled in no small measure during the Silent Prayer with the most extreme heretical ideas which had entered my mind during the period of my spiritual crisis. Head movements served as a means of battling these invaders.

Jechiel, the Rabbi's Son z''l

The second, with whom I studied, was Jechiel, the Rabbi's son. There is nothing to note about him. His Talmudic knowledge was superficial. This did not prevent him from being haughty and stubborn. His gestures were nervous and he bit his nails until he bled.

Janke'le Bulwik z''l

The third was Janke'le Bulwik, our *shtetl's* most diligent student. Almost all his family was wiped out in the Holocaust and all that remains of him is one grandson named Fuchs, who lives now in Israel. The family's elder, Reb Mojsze-Josel Bulwik, was one of the richest men in town - a wholesale grain merchant. He prayed at the Aleksander *shtiebel*, but was not one of the "keenest" *Chassidim*, meaning that he did not frequently participate with the other *Chassidim* in different celebrations and social gatherings. He was among the subscribers to *Ha'Tzfira* [The Siren; a Zionist newspaper]. His son-in-law, Janke'le's father Reb Mordche-Mendel, who took his father-in-law's surname Bulwik, was a dear soul. He was humble and unassuming and never took part in any quarrels. At the *shtiebel*, he would stand in one spot, shrouded in his prayer-shawl without moving, except for the Torah Reading (as he was the reader), or for the Priestly Blessing - as he was a Cohen. All the worshippers considered it an honour to be blessed by his hands.

In the last years, with the death of the old Bulwik, their financial situation took a turn for the worse and they were plunged into economic distress. The people from the *shtiebel* sought ways to aid them, but all relief was turned down by the head of the household. They were forced to let out part of their spacious residence and the *Rebbe* of Trisk moved in with them.

Sheva Bruches⁸⁶ with the Chassidim

In my childhood, in their house, the Bulwik family celebrated the wedding of their eldest granddaughter. [One of] the *Sheva Bruches* fell on the *Shabbes* before *Pesach*. This was a big day for the Aleksander *Chassidim* - a day during which they never stopped singing. The groom, who was a fine songster, brought with him a tune to the words "*And it is this which has stood by our ancestors and for us⁸⁷*" - a melody which had hitherto been unknown in our *shtetl*. (It is still sung to this day in Israel). It was a day of uninterrupted dancing and this is how they danced - old men and young, hands on each other's shoulders, arm over arm, in circles - rings within rings. (We, the children, also made a circle inside them). The dance was accompanied by up-and-down movements of the head, and twisting the body right and left.

The circle now broadened and now narrowed and when, in their song, they reached the verse "*But the Holy One, Blessed be He, delivers us from their hands*", they turned their eyes devotedly up to Heaven.

⁸⁶ [TN: "Seven Blessings" - festive meals held during the week-long celebrations following a wedding, during which seven blessings are recited.]

⁸⁷ [TN: From the *Peisach Haggadah*. The rest of the song is: "For not only one has risen up against us to destroy us, but in every generation they rise up to destroy us. But the Holy One, Blessed be He, delivers us from their hands."]

Their Eyes Were Not Dim⁸⁸

Sometimes, our parents' jealousy creeps into my heart, because they did not know the curse of age-related differences and because they enjoyed a mental and emotional longevity and old age did not affect their spiritual activeness.

Through the eyes of childhood, I can see the different characters in their alertness: the elderly Mojsze'le Cohen [Kon], the lion of the group of prayer-leaders, who led the *Mysef* [Additional] prayer service on the High Holidays, without knowing the meaning of tiredness; Ruben *Shoichet* with his mighty voice [and his son] Jechaskiel *Shoichet* with his lachrymose one; Icchok *Lajzer'le's* with his pleasing voice; Srul-Icze Studenberg, who was the long-standing leader of the singing during the Third Meal at the Rabbi's house, and the new forces: Chaim'l Slonimski, Abram-Lajb Klajnman's son-in-law, who stormed right through to the position of Main Cantor at the Big Synagogue⁸⁹; Berisz Szlifka, who had a lyrical voice (he led the prayers on the Three Pilgrimage Festivals⁸⁹); Icchok-Mendel *Kohlenhandler* (Coal-dealer) who, despite being an excellent prayer-leader, had to fight for the right to go before the pulpit in the *shtiebel*, due to the fact that, in his youth, he had not been overly devout.

And how could one not remember Alter *Blima'le's*? (It is worth mentioning that he was nicknamed "*Blima'le's*" for Blima [*née* Rozencwajg], the owner of a wholesale haberdashery shop where he was employed, because her husband Mojsze Lewenberg was incapable of taking part in running the business - he was apathetic and always looked asleep, and his sobriquet was "*Mojsze Peffer*" [Sleeper].) [Alter], joyful at all times, always danced indefatigably and made others also dance. When the typhus disease hit him and his family and brought him to financial distress, this did not affect his joviality and playfulness.

[The aforementioned] Janke'le Bulwik, already in childhood, gained notoriety as a young prodigy. He was assiduous in his learning - he studied day and night. By the time he agreed to my father's request to study a lesson with him [sic me], he had already completed the entire Talmud twice with [Rashi and] *Toisfes*⁹⁰. An interesting fact - as a result of studying alone for many years, he practically lost the ability to hold a conversation, for speech had become difficult for him and his bashfulness was extreme.

And here is a rather unpleasant incident in connection with his shamefacedness:

The Talmud, as is known, has no qualms about dealing with those matters which are "between him and her" - whether to establish the *Halacha* [law] or for the sake of humour. In one of the last chapters of the tractate *Shabbes* [on p.140b], it is told, in the name of one of the Sages [Rav Hisda], how he taught his daughters proper behaviour with their husbands during moments of intimacy. When he reached this place, the bashful Janke'le burst out in laughter and, for a while, he was unable to compose himself and stop giggling.

⁸⁸ [TN: Said of Moses in Deuteronomy 34:7, meaning that he retained his youthfulness even in his extreme old age.]

⁸⁹ In those days, prayer-leaders were sent from the *shtieblech* to the Synagogue to be cantors on the High Holidays, and this was *without* payment.

⁸⁹ [TN: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkos.]

⁹⁰ [TN: Aka "*Tosafot*," i.e. Additions; commentaries on the Talmud which are considered more advanced than the more elementary Rashi commentary.]

The Secret of the Study-Hall's Power

If you wish to know why the study-hall was the source, during so many generations, from which our forefathers drew forth courage, mental fortitude and [the ability to] overcome all hardships, then look closely at their Talmud, its contents and the manner in it was studied. The Talmud, with its different treatises - the back-and-forth, be it regarding problems which have a bearing on the here-and-now, or ones which will only be relevant in messianic times, or ones which are purely hypothetical - played a great part in developing our people's intellectual capabilities. Thanks to it, we stood fast and overcame our foes. The method of study - which aimed not only to educate the boy in the writings, but also to develop in him the will to raise questions - gave him the feeling that he was a partner in creating the *Halacha* and establishing it.

The Talmud accustomed the Jewish man to abstract thought, based upon the attributes of logic, and prepared him in many ways for the difficult war of existence in which he had always been placed. And not just that - the study of Talmud, accompanied by the well-known melody - that melody permeated with devotion and melancholy, yearning and mystery - also met the youngster's emotional needs. The craving and longing for the unknown, which fill a boy's spirit during his adolescence, found their outlet in this melody. The study also brought spiritual enjoyment and a sense of fulfilment. Rocking himself by the Talmud, wrinkling his forehead and propping his head up when concentrating on a difficult treatise, took the boy away from the material world and conveyed him to a spiritual sphere. As we have witnessed, the study-hall did not only give rise to men of deeds and Halacha experts, but it also gave rise to men with sublime sensitivity, an imagination and a vision.

Behind the Study-Hall Oven

The place where the range was set in the study-hall, being at a distance from the central features such as the Holy Ark and the *bimah*⁹¹, served the people of the *shtetls* for generations as a central rendezvous for discussing different worldly matters and as an academy of politics and preparation of military strategies.

The discussions behind the study-hall oven have been utilised as examples of typical *shtetl* idleness, and the Jewish expertise in the most critical affairs of politics and warfare, on the one hand, and as materials for admonishment and moralising on the other. At this juncture, it is fitting to quote a passage from the book *Chemdas Yomim*⁹², which was printed in Izmir [Turkey] in 1731^{*)}.

This phenomenon among Jews in all the eras - to converse in houses of worship and even during prayers - is not at all coincidental, but rather is directly correlated with the attitude of familiarity regarding the house of prayer and the basic perception of godliness in the Jewish faith (characteristically, even the *Shulchan Aruch* [religious code of law] only prohibits speech during prayers in certain parts of the service, which must not be interrupted).

⁹¹ [TN: Raised platform from which the Torah scroll is read.]

⁹² [TN: Pronounced "Chemdat Yamim" in Sephardic Hebrew – *The Delight of Days*; work by Rabbi Israel Yaakov Algazi (1680-1757).]

*) And in these times, many among our people come on the hallowed night [of a *Shabbes* or a holiday] to the synagogue, and stay there to desecrate the sanctity of our God's house [with idle chatter], and to add insult to injury, they do not go to sleep before converging, as if in the marketplace square. No one is spared the rod of their tongues, and they expound at length on kings and their wars – how this one falls and another rises: every man finds some fault in he who fell vanquished, and some praise for whom rose to power; every man proclaims his advice to those standing before him, and anyone who knows tales of war or history lets them be known.

(According to Dr [Israel] Zinberg, [A History of Jewish Literature], Vol. III, p. 138.) [TN: Vol. IV, p. 421 in the original, Yiddish, first edition.]

Those visiting the study-hall and the *shtieblech*, and even the synagogue, treated them as sacred places - but not in the manner accepted in other religions.

The whole external and internal architecture of the houses of worship, the walls of which were not adorned with icons and such and had plain furnishings - none of these inspired the Jewish person with a sense of holiness and awe, and no feel of mystery enveloped anyone entering the house of worship.

A Riot in the Study-Hall

The disturbance, which we will recount here, was not caused by "*Hajdamacy*"⁹³ or other Gentiles, but by the very Jews who studied in the study-hall.

The maintenance of the study-hall was in the hands of the custodian, and a special attendant was tasked with maintaining cleanliness, lighting the lamps and candles and fuelling the oven in the wintertime. From whence they drew the monetary means, I do not know. I only remember that, sometimes during the cold winter days, the range was not kindled daily, because funds had run out and the lads, who sat in the study-hall, reacted in an extremely, fierce manner, which bordered on rioting.

So, early one morning, those who prayed in "*dem ershtn minyan*" (the first prayer quorum) found all the study-hall's doors and windows wide open and the entrance blocked by a barricade of upturned tables and benches. Unable to gain entry, the worshippers gathered in the dark corridor, [which] made a depressing and acutely embarrassing impression.

The interesting thing is that, on the following day, the oven was kindled and a solution to the financial problem was found. This is a social phenomenon which we witness also in our times when, in proportion to the fierceness of the reaction, solutions are found to situations which, as it were, have no solution - and this invariably occurs *after* the reaction and not before it. Once more, we learn that all generations are basically the same.

At a Crossroads

In those same days of spring, with which I began this article, I was standing at a crossroads. My ties to the former spiritual world began to loosen, although religious sentiments still ruled my consciousness. In those days, most of my reading was concentrated on "*broszurky*" (booklets) published by the Zionist Organisation, such as [Leon] Piskier's *Auto-Emancipation*, Izaak Grünbaum's *Atchalta De'Geulah* [The Beginning of the Redemption] and others like them. I was [also] already a faithful reader of the daily Hebrew newspaper, which appeared at the time in Warsaw.

The First Newspaper Supplier

The reader may well ask, if we did not yet have any kiosks or bookshops, who then supplied us with newspapers in the *shtetl*? There was on,e large family in town named Siwek. They all worked in plate metal and in tarring roofs. One scion of this family was Zvi [Hersz] Siwek, who had sons and daughters. They were an honest and hard-working family and, although the parents were very religious by working-class standards, a certain atmosphere of liberty was felt in this house, because it was entirely imbued with the spirit of the love for Zion. They were among the first to buy the

⁹³ [TN: Ukrainian Cossack paramilitary groups comprised of peasants, craftsmen and impoverished noblemen.]

“Zionist shekel⁹⁴” and, up on the wall, next to the “Rabbi Meir Ba’al Ha’Nes⁹⁵”, they also hung up a box for *Keren Kayemeth Le’Israel* [Jewish National Fund].



The Siwek family, at the tomb of the head of the family [Abram Zvi]

The family had a young son named Jehoszua [Szyja]. His heart was not drawn to study or to the family profession, because his thoughts and reflections were focused on Zion. Seeing as how, in that period, Zionism was synonymous with agriculture, he bought himself a goat, in order to train himself in farming, and he cared for it affectionately - like a Jew handling a sacred religious object.

As the number of local youth, who joined the Zionist ideal, increased, the necessity for a Zionist newspaper was felt. Only a few received the paper in the post and it was Jehoszua who took it upon himself to distribute it to the young people. He saw himself in this role as one performing a sacred duty and fulfilling a Zionist mission.

That young Zionist may now be found in Israel - he is an experienced farmer among the settlers of Kfar Hess and his name is [now] Yehoshua Ben-Zvi.

The Yearning for Secular Literature

It was reading the Zionist material which gave me the impetus to strive for more knowledge and to become acquainted with the spiritual problems of humanity, as a whole, which were not within the religious world’s scope of interest. I came to the realisation that the time had come to join the library.

⁹⁴ [TN: Yearly membership fee to the Zionist Organisation.]

⁹⁵ [TN: Charity organisation founded in Poland in 1796 by the Jewish religious leaders to support their countrymen who had emigrated to the Land of Israel. Practically every religious household had one of this organisation’s charity boxes.]

One obstacle prevented me from carrying out this decision and, on the face of it, it was just a technicality. In the same courtyard where the library was located, there lived one neighbour whom people called “*Der Grobber Ejzel*” (The Fat Ejzel). Near him lived the Kartuz family, whose eldest son, Abram-Icek, worked at our carbonated beverages factory. The youngest son, Szmil-Burech, had been my schoolmate in *cheder* and in the study-hall. I therefore frequented their house, where I also had the opportunity to pore over secular books which I had hidden with them. Ejzel had a step-son named Lajbel, who also often visited this house. The discussions among us aroused Ejzel’s concern that I would be a bad influence for his son and he would call me “*meisis umediach*”⁹⁶. I therefore avoided entering the library, fearing lest Ejzel should take note of it and inform my father.

Ejzel was childless. In those days, medical science was not yet able to establish the causes of male infertility, wherefore the locals attributed his sterility to a punishment from Heaven for a sin he had allegedly committed.

What was his transgression and against whom had he perpetrated this offence? [I shall return to] that afterwards.

The Head of the Rabbinical Court, the Rabbi Reb Jehoszua’le [Szwarcberg] ztz”l

In 5665 (1905), the head of our *shtetl*’s rabbinical court, the rabbi Reb Jehoszua’le, passed away. He had a strong personality and was an authority figure. He wrote five books entitled *Beis Jehoszua*, *Chomas Jehoszua* [House and Wall of Joshua, respectively], and *suchlike*.

The First Zionists in Town



Reb Icek Ajzykowicz

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, Zionist groups began to organise in Polish localities. In our *shtetl*, too, there were a few who were drawn to the Zionist idea, and among them were Abram Frank, the modern *melamed* whom we have mentioned above, and Icek Ajzykowicz (the father of the three brothers who live in Israel - Mojsze, Lajbel, and Sruлик).

He spent his last years in kibbutz Ramat Rachel, [where] he still had time to work in his profession before passing away at a ripe old age.

Our rabbi became a zealot, who fought by different means not only against the Zionists under his jurisdiction, but also against the Zionist idea in general. He published a booklet entitled “*The Opinion of Rabbis*,” in which he quoted the words of rabbis who decried the Zionists for subverting tradition.

If truth be told, we must admit that, despite their limited understanding of the question of the Jews in the Diaspora, nevertheless, their assumption that

⁹⁶ [TN: Heb., “inciter and seducer”; a Halachic term used in reference to one who leads others astray to worship pagan gods.]

Zionism would play the role of a destroyer of tradition was, in fact, proven over the course of the years - for the Zionist ideal merged with that of the changing values and, just like [the Scroll and the Sword, they] “descended intertwined⁹⁷” into this world.

Many years after his death, people in the *shtetl* continued telling how, when he had regained full consciousness on his very deathbed, he asked for his *shtreimel*⁹⁸ and water with which to purify his hands, and delivered a Torah *drosha*. His voice could be heard down below in the street, where a great crowd assembled around the house.

The Dispute Regarding the Rabbi’s Replacement

Following his death, discussions began regarding a candidate for the post of Chief Rabbi. Some proposed that his grandson, Reb Symcha’le, should inherit his place, but many of the local residents did not deem Reb Symcha’le as worthy of this position - he was still quite young and people had not yet recognised his capabilities. They eventually decided that Reb Symcha’le would be appointed as a Halachic authority⁹⁹ and that the position of Chief of Rabbinical Court would remain vacant for the time being. Meanwhile, the Radomsko *Chassidim* proposed that the *Rebbe* of Kromolów¹⁰⁰ (a small town near Zawiercie) be appointed Chief of Court. The *Rebbe* of Kromolów was a descendant of the Radomsko dynasty, which was founded by the author of *Tiferes Shloime*¹⁰¹.

In those days, the sons of *Rebbe* Jankew-Leiba’le [Twerski] wandered from Trisk [Turiis’k] in Wołyn (descendants of the *Trisker Maggid*¹⁰² and [his paternal grandfather] *Rebbe* [Menachem-]Nuchem of Chernobyl¹⁰³) to Western Poland. Their birthplace could no longer sustain the entire dynasty, which had more sons than ever. There were those who proposed accepting one of the sons - Reb Aron-Duwid’l - as Rabbi [of Żarki], who would [also] act as a Chassidic *Rebbe*.

The local residents, it would seem, wished the rabbi, filling Reb Jehosua’le’s position, to concurrently serve as *Rebbe* as well.

The great Chassidic dynasties of Poland also branched out into sub-*Rebbes*, as it were. The [prominent] disciples of the *Rebbes* of Ger, Aleksander, etc., despite being among those visiting their *Rebbe* themselves, also acted as independent *Rebbes*. One such was Reb Jehosua’le, who was a follower of the Aleksander *Rebbe*, but nevertheless used to hold his own “*Tisch*”¹⁰⁴ and *Chassidim* came to him in times of trouble for advice.

As a consequence of this proposal, a dispute flared up which reached scandalous proportions. The Radomsko *Chassidim* fought with extraordinary zeal and had no qualms regarding different acts of sabotage.

⁹⁷ [TN: Reference to Midrash Sifrei Dvarim, paragraph 40: “Rabbi Eliezer says: A scroll and a sword descended, intertwined from heaven. God said to them [viz. the Children of Israel]: If you observe the Torah written in the one, you will be saved from the other; if not, you will be smitten by it.”]

⁹⁸ [TN: Traditional fur hat worn by Chassidim on Shabbes or other festive occasions. It is unclear whether the Chief Rabbi requested his *shtreimel* because it happened to be a day on which one is worn, or because he regarded his imminent passing as a festive occasion.]

⁹⁹ [TN: A de facto rabbi in everything but the title itself.]

¹⁰⁰ [TN: Rebbe Nusen-Chaim Rabinowicz, the First Rebbe of Kromolów; see Sefer Częstochowa, Vol. I, col. 597-600.]

¹⁰¹ [TN: Glory of Solomon; by Rebbe Szlojme HaCohen Rabinowicz.]

¹⁰² [TN: “The Preacher of Trisk”; Rebbe Awrum Twerski.]

¹⁰³ [TN: A prominent disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov, and one of the founding fathers of Chassidism.]

¹⁰⁴ [TN: At all Chassidic courts, it is the custom that, on special occasions, a great table is set up in the study-hall or synagogue and the Rebbe and his followers share a festive meal. The Rebbe speaks about the specific holiday etc. and there is much singing, dancing and merry-making. This tradition is simply called “Tisch”, i.e., “Table”.]

The Aleksander *Chassidim* stood beside the *Trisker* - this was due to their private agenda as a group. The candidate from Kromotów was a greater scholar than the *Trisker* and, the fact that the *Kromotówer* had supporters from his own Chassidic group in the locality, viz. the Radomsko *Chassidim*, gave the Aleksander *Chassidim* great cause for concern that the *Kromotówer* would overshadow the young Reb Symcha'le, and that he would forever remain just a Halachic authority.

Those, who backed the candidate from Trisk, brought Reb Aron-Duwid'I to our town, as a means of gaining supporters. He was put up temporarily with us at our house and, later, with Reb Pinches Fajfkopf – the place was abuzz.

The Family of Pinches [Pinkus] Fajfkopf

Reb Pinches Fajfkopf was a *Skierniewicer Chassid*¹⁰⁵ and not among the strictest ones. He was a friendly man and a wealthy trader in skins. His home was open and his residence spacious. His wife Dwojra-Itta [*née* Goldsztajn], a handsome and tall lady, managed an opulent and fine household. The family was blessed with numerous sons and daughters and they constituted the foundation of the local Zionist Movement. Some of them perished in the Nazi Holocaust, together with their parents. I am overwhelmed with sorrow whenever I call to mind their young, delicate and beautiful daughter Hinda, who was tortured and murdered by sullied hands. Four of the family's children are in Israel - [Cypora] Fajgla, who of her three children was only able to bring her son Mordche to Israel, who died while working in the Dead Sea in 1939*), Eliszewa, one of the first from our town to emigrate to the Land of Israel and Zysel and Aron.

Reb Aron-Duwid's presence in the *shtetl* stoked up the fighting so much so that Reb Pinches Fajfkopf's residence, where he was staying, was even vandalised.

On one occasion, when the *Trisker* went to the *mikvah* (and it was his custom that no one was allowed to be with him inside the pool during his immersions), "*Der Grobber Ejzel*", who was a *Radomsker Chassid*, was in the water. He refused to leave the pool and a quarrel ensued - which even came to blows. For this deed, he was punished from Heaven and he remained childless.

As is known, immersion in the *mikvah* has an important place in Chassidic life. One *Yom Kippur* Eve, before dawn, after the "*Kappures schlugen*"¹⁰⁶, and before reciting the *Selichos* which contain the words "*This sign will take place tomorrow*", my father took me to the *mikvah*. When we entered the pool, the water was very hot, so I remained standing on the upper steps. And here voices came from above - "*The Rebbe has arrived!*" Everyone hastened to immerse their bodies three times, but I, despite my father's urging, did not dare enter the steaming water. My father took me in his arms and quickly immersed me. A scream escaped my lips, because I had been scalded.

Reb Aron-Duwid'I of Trisk becomes the *Rebbe* of Żarki

After years of disputes and fights, the *shtetl* quietened down. The *Trisker* prevailed over the *Kromotówer* and put down roots in the locality. He also conquered the vicinity and attained a large following.

¹⁰⁵ [TN: Follower of Rebbe Szymon Kalisz, a grandson of Rebbe Icchok of Warka.]

*) See [chapter] *In Memory of the Departed* [p.196].

¹⁰⁶ [TN: Ritual of atonement in which a live chicken, which is later slaughtered and given as charity to the poor, is waved over one's head. Some communities do the same with money instead of a chicken.]

Our town was fortunate because, thanks to the *Rebbe* of Żarki, many would come to know it. He did not involve himself in local affairs and, over the course of the years, it was forgotten that Reb Symcha'le had only been appointed as a Halachic authority and he served as [actual Chief] Rabbi.

The Ways of *Trisker* Chassidism

At a glance, and without delving deep into its theoretical foundations, one could identify the differences between Polish Chassidism and *Trisker* Chassidism. The former emphasised profoundness, shrewdness and devotion on the one hand, and on the other humility and simplicity of ways on part of the *Rebbe's* court (the *Rebbe's* wife did not appear among the *Chassidim*, and the *Rebbe* did not travel from town to town to visit his followers). The *Triskers*, already back in the days of their ancestor *Rebbe* Mordche¹⁰⁷ the *Maggid* of Trisk [sic Chernobyl], stood out for their external flashiness and for conducting impressive ceremonies and [also] the *Rebbe*, himself, would travel from locality to locality to make souls for his court.

Reb Aron-Duvid'l, too, conducted his leadership with great magnificence. [He was] of average stature, handsome and with noble features. His raiment was entirely of silk and spotlessly clean. He was not a great Torah scholar and his addresses at the "*tisch*" were based mainly on Gematria. His voice was pleasant and he would employ two [different] tones. He was endowed with theatrical talent. His *hakufes*¹⁰⁸ on *Simchas Torah* attracted multitudes. He danced inside a circle [of dancers] holding a Torah scroll in his arms and each circuit would take exactly fifteen minutes. The *Chassidim* accompanied him with thunderous singing and clapping of hands. His prolonged shaking of the Four Species on *Hoshana Rabbah*¹⁰⁹ was a true work of art. The splendour and magnificence reached their peak at the Passover *Seder*. Separate tables were set in his study-hall for the men and for the women, who were headed by the *Rebbetzin*. The tables were laden with many silver and gold vessels.

A boy like me, upon entering there, received the impression that he was in a royal palace. I have often wondered - How is it that the descendants of the poor and humble, Reb [Menachem-]Nuchem of Chernobyl, came up with such concepts and from whom did they learn this lifestyle?

The way of life at the *Trisker* court and its success should also be attributed, in no small measure, to the *Rebbetzin*. This woman was natural-born royalty. Her countenance shone like the moon and her beauty was not a worldly, corporeal beauty, but one that emanated from the upper spheres, and her demeanour was filled with dignity.

Quite a few *Chassidim*, and especially the younger ones, came [to Żarki] for the holidays in order to delight in the radiance of her features (and this is not meant as slander in any way).

His son-in-law, Reb Awrum Szapira, also added to the very impressive ceremonies. He was tall of stature and sang well, and would sing *Modzitzer*¹¹⁰ melodies, especially Modzitz's famous "*Bemotzuei Yom Menyche*" [After the Day of Rest].

Before the First World War, the *Rebbe* married off his daughter Rajzla, who was mute from birth. Incidentally, his son Jochanan was also mute and grew up in an institution for the mute. He was

¹⁰⁷ [TN: The son of Rebbe Menachem-Nuchem of Chernobyl, and the father of Rebbe Awrum the *Maggid* of Trisk.]

¹⁰⁸ [TN: Pronounced "*Hakafot*" in Israeli Hebrew, i.e., "circles". At the end of the festival of *Sukkos*; on *Simchas Torah*, the custom is to take the Torah scrolls out of the Ark and to encircle the reader's platform with great joy, singing and dancing.]

¹⁰⁹ [TN: Aramaic, "Great Supplication"; this is the last day of the High Holidays, on which evil decrees for the year may still be changed. "Circuits" are made, carrying the "four species" used for the festival of *Sukkos*, which are shaken to emphasise the prayers.]

¹¹⁰ [TN: Polish Chassidic dynasty renowned for its melodies which derives its name from Modrzyce, one of the boroughs of the town of Dęblin.]

talented and surprised the children with different juggling tricks. Her grandfather together, with the rest of his sons who had by then settled in different locations, came to Rajzla's wedding. A great multitude then surged to the town, until it could not contain them all.

The wedding, and the festivities during the week of the "*Sheva Bruches*" [Seven Blessings], were held with great pomp. Klezmers and jesters entertained the guests. Here, we should mention the anonymous *Chassid*, whose custom it was to be present at every wedding and at every large Chassidic gathering, where he stood wordlessly on a bench with a great jug of water strapped to his midriff, with two cups attached to it, from which he gave drink all those who were thirsty.

Reb Nuchemcze Twerski

Reb [Aron-]Duwid's younger brother Reb Nuchemcze, who had settled in Warsaw (his son is the writer Jochanan Twerski who lives in Tel-Aviv), used to leave a strong impression after his visits to our *shtetl*. What set him apart was the way he recited the "*Long Tachanun*"¹¹¹ on Mondays and Thursdays, when he went before the pulpit [as prayer-leader]. When he came to visit his brother, he would lead the prayer service. The local residents - old and young, and women as well - would flock to the Big Synagogue to hear him say *Tachanun*.

When, with a special intonation, he uttered the verses "*Gaze down from Heaven and see that we have become an object of scorn and derision among the nations; we have become considered like sheep led to the slaughter, to be slain, to be obliterated, to be stricken and to be disgraced*", it seemed as if the entire two-thousand-year-old Jewish martyrdom found, in him, its expression.

Who knows? Perhaps his heart prophesied to him that he, himself, and his brother Reb Aron-Duwid would be led like sheep to the slaughter - as both of them perished in the Holocaust.

A Handshake on Grandfather's Tomb

My determination to join the library grew stronger and I set myself a date upon which to fulfil this "*mitzvah*". However, on the morning of that very day, I was awoken by my brother Chaim-Fiszl, who had come to visit us from his place of residence in Będzin. [He was] a long-bearded, young, married man, a *Gerer Chassid* and an activist of *Agudas Yisroel*, or "*Szlojmej Emunej Yisroel*"¹¹² - as they called themselves. He perished with all his family, apart from his youngest daughter who lives in Israel.

He had come to tell me that Grandfather *z"l* had, in the nights, appeared to him in a dream, bewailing his lack of rest in the grave, due to the fact that I was keeping company with bad friends, and for his concern that I would stray from the path. He, therefore, demanded that I go with him to Grandfather's tomb and shake his hand there that I would discontinue any connection with these friends of mine.

One factor should be mentioned at this point which will, in some measure, reflect the stance of [Jewish] Polish Orthodoxy in those days as regards Zionism, and the idea of emigrating to the land of Israel in itself - and that it is a cultural problem.

¹¹¹ [TN: "*Supplication*"; a prayer of atonement primarily instituted to evoke Divine compassion for the Jews during the era of exile. An extended version is said on Mondays and Thursdays.]

¹¹² [TN: This name is taken from the verse in 2 Samuel, 20:19, which is rendered in the King James Bible as "them that are **peaceable** and faithful in Israel", but the original Hebrew "*Szlojmej*" (from the root שלום) implies both peace and wholeness or perfectness and, thus, for those versed in biblical Hebrew, the name of the organisation would automatically have taken the self-righteous and, therefore, despicable meaning of "**Perfect Jewish Believers**".]

When he emigrated to the Land [of Israel] in 1925, after some time, my father wrote to my brother Chaim-Fizl, telling him to also emigrate. He refused and, among his arguments he quoted a *mishna* from *Pirkei Uves* [The Ethics of the Fathers] (Chapter 6, [*mishna* 9]:

Rabbi Yosey ben Kisma said, "Once I was walking by the way when a man met me and greeted me and I greeted him. He said to me, "Rabbi, where are you from?" I said to him, "I am from a great city of sages and scribes." He said to me, "Rabbi, would you consider living with us in our place? I would give you a thousand times a thousand denarii of gold and precious gemstones [and pearls]." I said to him, "My son, even if you were to give me all the silver and gold, precious stones and pearls that are in the world, I would not dwell anywhere except in a place of Torah."

The "Bad Friends" ...

Who were those friends whose friendship with me disturbed Grandfather's repose in his grave? As it turns out, there were few instructors and trailblazers in our locality for the youth growing up in my time.

Back in the day, one of these was Joel, the son of Jakow Krzański [?] (currently of Moshav Neta'im), who brought the word of Zionism from the Łomża Yeshiva where he studied and emigrated to the Land [of Israel] just before the First World War.

Kopel Minc

One of the trailblazers to Zionism, and the lion among them, was Kopel Minc. [He was] the son of a skins trader, who was an Aleksander *Chassid*. Of his vicissitudes and uncertainties as a young man, I have no knowledge. At a young age, it appears, the inclination to learn the details of someone's past is not developed within us. Otherwise this would have aroused my curiosity. I met him in the *shtetl* at the end of the First War, when he had already returned from his wanderings. For a while, he was a Hebrew teacher in Zawiercie. Before the War, he had fled from Poland to London and had been among the assistants of Josef-Chaim Brenner in printing *Ha'Meorer*¹¹³.

Once, he told us how, when he arrived in London and approached Brenner with a letter of recommendation that he had in connection to his placement there, Brenner responded, "A young man, who knows chapters of the Hebrew Bible¹¹⁴ by heart, has no need for recommendations". He also told us that Brenner could quote entire pages from the *Zohar* from memory.

I do not know from whom he learnt Hebrew Bible, for in our *shtetl* people did not study it much. In *cheder*, we browsed cursorily through the first books [viz. Joshua, Judges, etc.], and through the chapters connected to the weekly *Haftorah*. We studied them with the commentaries of the *Metzydes Duwid*¹¹⁵ and the *Rada''k*¹¹⁶.

¹¹³ [TN: "The Awakener"; Hebrew periodical published in Whitechapel only between 1906-07. This indicates that Kopel Minc did not flee Poland directly before the Great War, but almost a decade earlier.]

¹¹⁴ [TN: The emphasis here is not on the Pentateuch, with which every Jew with a religious background would have been extremely familiar due to the weekly Torah Reading, but specifically with the Books of the Prophets and the Writings, which were eschewed by the Chassidim due to the fact that these books were great favourites of the Jewish Enlightenment Movement, and were therefore deemed "dangerous".]

¹¹⁵ [TN: Aka "Metzudat David" – "The Fortress of David"; commentary by Rabbi David Altschuler of Prague (1687-1769).]

¹¹⁶ [TN: Acronym for "Rabbi David Kimchi" (1160-1235), a French scholar.]

A young man, who studied the Hebrew Bible with the commentary of the *Malbim*¹¹⁷ (let alone with [Moses] Mendelssohn's *Bi'ur*¹¹⁸), was viewed with suspicion by the *Chassidim* - and in the majority of cases, this impression did not deceive them.

Kopel Minc's Place of Residence

Kopel Minc took his lodgings at the edge of town, in a Gentile area (we must note that the town, except for on its edges, was clean of Gentiles and this could, perhaps, explain how it maintained the religious, traditional and conservative character which was not easily breached). He lived in a large house, which was only partially inhabited and which was known by its nickname "*Dikutlarny*"¹¹⁹, which cast fear upon those who passed it, as if ghosts, Lilith and Asmodeus, had made it their dwelling and were lying in wait to devour them.

The house stood at a crossroads. Winds and blizzards howled there in the winter. On the left, the road led to the Christian cemetery (*cmentarz*¹²⁰), which for the Jews - and especially for youngsters like me - was an area we avoided for several different reasons.

When I was older, I found out that this spot was, nevertheless, a rendezvous point for [unwed] couples who were afraid of being seen.

To the right, the road stretched to the village of Jaworznik and, by its side, stood an ancient tree which many remember - a tree with thick boughs, cloaked in the majesty of old age - and, had it been given a mouth and a tongue, it would certainly have told about the amorous whisperings of the couples in love who, for generation upon generation, found protection under the shade of its branches.

A Hebrew Lesson with Kopel Minc

One winter night, while snowstorms were raging, I found the courage to sneak out of the study-hall and run to Kopel Minc's lodgings to take part, for the first time, in a Hebrew lesson. In this lesson, he recited to us the poem by Bialik titled *Tsafirim* [Morning Spirits], which begins with the words, "*Was it my mother's kiss, was it the swallow with its chirping, that broke off my sweet dream?*" When he finished the poem, he perceived that I was rather puzzled by its contents and he turned to me and said, "Surely you wish to ask what it means", to which I replied, "Indeed, this is very much the case".

To this day, I remember his response and these were his words, "This poem is not a passage in the *Maharshu*¹²¹ or the *Rashbu*¹²², which needs to be elucidated and, just like one who passes by a house from which the sounds of a violin emerge, does not ask himself '*What does this mean?*', but simply enjoys the notes. Thus is the approach to a poem - you need to hear its notes and enjoy them."

¹¹⁷ [TN: See above, p.41, footnote 71.]

¹¹⁸ [TN: "The Explanation" (1783); translation of the Pentateuch and other parts of the Bible to German, with some commentaries. Mendelssohn was among the founding fathers of Jewish Enlightenment.]

¹¹⁹ [TN: Most likely from the Polish word "Kotłownia" or boiler-house.]

¹²⁰ [TN: The reason the author felt compelled to include the word in Polish, is probably due to the fact that a Jewish cemetery would have invariably been referred to in Yiddish with a euphemism, such as "Beis Ha'Chaim" or "Beis Oilom" - The House of Life or Eternity, respectively.]

¹²¹ [TN: Aka "Maharsha"; acronym for "Our Teacher, the Rabbi Shmuel Eidels" (1555-1631), a scholar from Kraków who wrote a famous commentary on the Talmud.]

¹²² [TN: Aka "Rashba"; acronym for "Rabbi Shlomo ben Avraham" ibn Aderet (1235-1310), a Spanish scholar.]

Before us, to some extent, this echoes the literary dispute which renews itself from time to time, which is - Does literature have a purpose? Should one seek for a moral in literature? Or is the purpose of literature perhaps just art for art's sake?

His Speech in the Study-Hall

Kopel Minc was a wonderful orator. Following the pogrom in Lwów (when Poland regained its independence), he delivered a speech in the study-hall next to the Holy Ark. This was his first triumph in our *shtetl*, where he had been hitherto persecuted. The *Chassidim* used to call him "*Avi Avoys Ha'Tymme*¹²³".

Of this speech, one segment has remained in my mind, which is, "Times will come when the ground will sprout forth thorns and thistles, and skewers will rain down on us from the heavens, and we will be crushed between them." May we not consider these to be words of prophecy?



The first group of Zionists, with Kopel Minc in the centre

At home, with his children, he spoke in Hebrew with Sephardic pronunciation¹²⁴. He, himself, was unable to emigrate to the Land of Israel, because he died after an operation. His children and disciples are in Israel.

¹²³ [TN: "The Father of the Fathers of Impurity", a term employed in rabbinical literature in reference to the original source of ritual impurity, viz. a corpse, which makes objects or people touching it impure, who in turn make others impure. In the context at hand, the term simply means "the source of all evil."]

¹²⁴ [TN: The pronunciation which was eventually adopted by the State of Israel as its official language, which differs greatly from the Ashkenazi tradition and that of Poland in particular.]

Mojsze-Wolf Gotlib (Ahuvya)

The second person, with whom I became close, was Mojsze-Wolf Gotlib. His surname in Israel is [now] Ahuvya [God's Beloved] and he has lived in Tel-Yosef from his arrival to this day. His father was a scrap merchant and prayed at the study-hall - a Jew virtuous in his ways, who observed tradition with the severity that originates in guilelessness.

Mojsze reached adulthood during the First World War - during the course of which his parents managed to amass some capital. When his parents died, he was the sole heir, being their only son.

He did not think to continue in his father's line of work and prepared himself for *Aliyah*. He devoted his free time to public matters. He was the Zionist youth's "*kulturträger*" (culture carrier). His pockets were always full of booklets and periodicals and, when he came into the study-hall, we would converge on him behind the oven.

Every application for a permit to carry out a Zionist or cultural activity, which was presented to the authorities, was made in his name. On one occasion, he was tried for collecting funds for Keren Kayemeth Le'Israel, whereupon the central office in Warsaw sent the solicitor Alschwanger in his defence.

It was in his name that, in its day, the "teahouse" was opened. It was a sort of club, where the first members of the "Ezra¹²⁵" Zionist group in our town used to gather. One evening, my feet crossed the threshold of this teahouse and, by the following day, this had already become known in the *shtiebel*. To this day, I do not know who was following me.

One character was connected to Mojsze-Wolf, this person not actually coming from Żarki, but who does nevertheless have some links to the locality, as he propelled its development.

In the summer of 1920, in the town, a tall, handsome young man appeared, wearing a broad-brimmed hat and cloaked in a black overcoat. He was missing one arm. Different stories circulated about him. This was Burech Prywer, one of the Second Aliyah [1904-1914] immigrants, who now lives in Kfar Saba. He had come from the Land of Israel to visit his parents in Sosnowiec and, due to the fact that our town served as a summer retreat, he, too, eventually found himself in our midst, connected with the youth and his soul became bound with theirs. He exuded mystery and the ebullient life in the Land of Israel and the youth, who thirsted for any new word from the new world, found a background for the mutual interconnection between them. To this day, Burech Prywer sees himself as being connected to the people of Żarki.

Awreme'le Fajner

The third person, with whom I became close, was Awreme'le Fajner, whom I met by chance. He was from Poalei Zion¹²⁶ circles. He and his family belonged to the craftsmen's class, their profession being shoemaking and the preparation of shoes for sale.

A substantial part of the populace made its living from the leather trade, starting from dealing in hides and processing them in tanneries, through to manufacturing shoes - some for the local market and others for export.

¹²⁵ [TN: A youth group founded in Germany in 1919, which had some original affiliation with Agudas Yisroel party.]

¹²⁶ [TN: "Workers of Zion" – The Jewish Social Democratic Labour Party.]

Fajner's parents, and his uncles also (the Fajner brothers in Ra'anana are his uncle's sons) were among the worshippers at the study-hall. They were decent folk, who diligently kept the traditions, and were loyal members of the Psalm reciting society. This society reserved, for itself, the privilege of being the ones to keep the vigil on the "yuhzeit" (death anniversary) of Our Teacher Moses, peace be upon him, which falls on 7th Adar. On this night, three hundred and forty-five candles were lit in the Study-hall - to fit the numerical value of משה [Moses] in Gematria - and Psalms were recited all night long.

Once the local youth - the children of merchants and the *petit bourgeois* - had grown up and a General Zionist Organisation had been established, Abram Fajner also joined them and became one of their leading speakers.

In those days, a labourer had no concept of an eight-hour workday, or even of a ten-hour one. In the summertime, he worked until sunset and, in the winter, until ten at night.

More than once, I shared in my friend's feeling of misery because, while the youth (mostly the children of the merchants) would get together and have fun in the evenings, as is the custom in youth groups, Awreme'le Fajner would sit, crouched over his cobbler's stool, pounding nails with his hammer, removed from society.

Passing by in the street on *Shabbes* in my Chassidic garb, I sometimes met him and he would stand and chat with me. I still remember how he once told me, "Continue your studies at the study-hall and do not relinquish them", although he was not among those who sat there himself.

He was a gentle and sensitive young man, and a true idealist. What a pity that he did not have the strength to cut his ties to the Diaspora and live, here, with us in Israel. Among the six million Jews who were killed and burned by the foes of mankind, he, too, found his demise. Blessed be his memory!

Jakow-Icchok Rozyner

The very last was Jakow-Icchok Rozyner, son of Nusen and Chanale Rozyner - a family which lived in our neighbourhood. Our house and that of the Rozyner were separated by the house of Reb Nuchem Halpern, a tall man and a natty dresser, who was the proprietor of a manufactured goods shop. People said that, in his house, one could find Nachum Sokolow's [newspaper] *Ha'Tzifra*¹²⁷.

His son Jojneson was extremely talented. He was ordained rabbi at a young age and great things were expected of him. He married a woman from the town of Jędrzejów and he moved there. Over the course of time, rumours reached Żarki that Jojneson Halpern had renounced his faith and that he had become a complete unbeliever, flaunting it publically - thus incurring the wrath of the people of Jędrzejów, which was known as a Chassidic town. I dimly recollect how they whispered in our house about this "catastrophe". He met an untimely demise. His son is the writer and member of the Editorial Board of [the newspaper] *Davar* [Word], Jechiel Halpern.

There was a great friendship between my family and the Rozyner - especially the mothers. On *Shabbes*, the women of the neighbourhood would come together and sit on the steps in front of the houses, or on a bench they had put on the pavement, and talk about this and that. The Rozyner family was blessed with numerous children of all ages and their house served as a meeting place for

¹²⁷ [TN: The exact meaning is unclear; it has been rendered as "The Siren" and also "The Morning" - from the Aramaic "tzafra."]

many youngsters. The parents were quite easy-going and, besides, they were not always at home, as they were both were busy with commerce - and we, the children, felt quite free in this house.

Their son, Jakow-Icchok, who was older than me, had already been through the “parents-children war”. His father was a *Skierniewicer Chassid* and, when his son began to stray from the path. he resorted to drastic measures, until the son locked himself in the attic for several weeks and did not come down until his father had not made peace with him. From then on, a period of development and education began for him, through letters which were published by a teacher from Kraków named Szewach Wolkowski, with whom he studied Hebrew, Polish and German. He had a talent for languages, his style [of writing] was light and his handwriting was incredibly beautiful. He was, perhaps, the only one among the youth who could write well in Polish, although with speech he, too, struggled.

The Struggle between the Jewish and Polish Agencies

With the end of the First World War and the renewal of Poland’s independence, relief institutions were set up there, which administrated aid from America.

To ensure the Jewish side was not short-changed, a Jewish committee was elected, upon whom it fell to fight the local Christian authorities for a fair division. Great and lengthy memoranda were then written and sent to the appropriate institutions and Jakow-Icchok was their author.

In the wording of the memoranda one could discern the differences of approach between the old generation, which had been brought up to be [obsequious in their] intercessions, and the new spirit pulsating in the new generation. This was at the time when the temporary National Council was established in Warsaw at the initiative of Izaak Grünbaum, who had returned to Poland from Russia.

Szlojme (Szlomke) Tenenbaum



Szlojme Tenenbaum

A typical representative of the [traditional] method of intercession was the local resident Szlomke Tenenbaum. For many years, he was the Jewish representative with the local authorities and was also an honorary member of the Polish fire brigade. In those days, he was wealthy and owned a plant for [processing] hides. He was magnificent of countenance¹²⁸ - his white beard was so well groomed that one could count every single separate hair. His was an aristocratic household, not a plebeian one and, even though his grandsons Mojsze Tenenbaum (now in Belgium) and Izrael Bornsztajn (who was head of the Judenrat in Hitler’s days) were my friends, I only rarely entered this house. One needed a sort of special mental preparation and great efforts to cross its threshold.

To the credit of Nusen Rozyner, one of the members of the joint relief agency, it should be said that he was a proud fighter against the Polish representatives, and

¹²⁸ [TN: Expression traditionally used to describe an impressive beard, from the Talmud in Shabbes, p.152a: “The glory of the face is the beard.”]

that he expressed himself adamantly. Once, I was present at a meeting which took place between the two factions at the entrance to the Polish *konsum* (co-op), which had then been opened and which cast anxiety upon all the town's traders. At the head of the Polish delegation stood the local priest - a short, florid man and a confirmed antisemite. I do not recall what the Jewish demands consisted of. The only thing that has remained in my memory is the humiliation this priest's retorts caused the Jews. Incidents of this type also had a huge influence on the development of nationalist sentiments among our youth.

Abram-Josef Sztybel¹²⁹

Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, Abram-Josef Sztybel returned to Warsaw, after having gained notoriety through the Sztybel Publishing House¹³⁰, whose founder he had been. This publisher needs no special mention from me, because any reader of Hebrew in that period will recognise what impetus this publishing house gave to the development of Hebrew literature and language.

Abram-Josef Sztybel was born in our *shtetl*. He stemmed from the Chassidic circles and his family made their living from the leather trade. He received a religious education and was among those who studied at the Study-hall - a pupil of Szlojme'le Kon, *melamed* of the older boys. Abram-Josef Sztybel revered his teacher and supported him in his old age.

Reb Szlojme'le Kon's scholastic method differed from that of Reb Icchok *Lajzer'le's*. The former dedicated more time to the study of the Hebrew Bible. He also knew some grammar¹³¹ and his study of the Talmud was in depth - not superficial¹³². He was extremely strict and impatient. The latter was more focused on dispensing large amounts of Talmudic material.

Any boy, who studied with Reb Icchok for three or four years, was able over that time to become acquainted with most of the important tractates and to know them¹³³.

The pupils of the two *cheders* competed against each other. All wanted to prove that his teacher was better than the other - and all the more so, as the two *melamdin* belonged to rival Chassidic groups.

Szlojme'le Kon was also the local eye-doctor, as it were. He concocted his own extremely abrasive eye-drops, which he administered to anyone suffering from conjunctivitis. Well, at least no one was blinded by them...

The Library is Established

Abram-Josef Sztybel, when he remembered his hometown, decided to found in it a project to help elevate the educational level of his townspeople. Initially, it was his intention to establish a

¹²⁹ [TN: Mentioned above on p.22.]

¹³⁰ [TN: A Hebrew-only publishing house established in Moscow in 1917, which printed not only original works in Hebrew but also translations of many works in other languages, such as those of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Heine, Oscar Wilde, Rabindranath Tagore and others.]

¹³¹ [TN: Just like the study of the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar is one subject Chassidim always eschewed, due to deep interest the Jewish Enlightenment showed in it.]

¹³² [TN: This, too, was very much atypical in a Chassidic town, as Chassidim habitually endeavoured to get through a large quantity of material superficially, in direct (and very much intentional) contrast with the method of the anti-Chassidic Lithuanian Jews, who could spend weeks on end poring over one single page of the Talmud, engrossed in impossible casuistry.]

¹³³ [TN: A very great feat by today's standards (as of 2020).]

“Tarbut¹³⁴” Hebrew school there. The more progressive amongst the local residents supported this proposal and, in order that it should be realised, a delegation, comprising Kopel Minc (who was to be the school’s headmaster) and Jakow-Icchok Rozyner as secretary of the delegation, travelled to him in Warsaw.

This plan was not carried out and the reasons why are unknown to me. Instead of this, he established a library dedicated to Zysla-Malka Szybel, who had perished in tragic circumstances.

Many of the locality’s remnants, who drank from this live spring, make favourable mention of his name. I am afraid that there was not a single serious, secular book in the town before this library was established. It included books in all fields of thought. Jakow-Icchok was the librarian and, together with Rywka Rotenberg-Studenberg, made the first catalogue. At the house of Jakow-Icchok’s parents, which I frequented, all the new books, which he had not yet had time to add to the library, were always to be found. I was therefore given the opportunity to peer into them. In this house, I heard for the first time the populist and revolutionary poems of A. Reyzen, Sh. Rozenfeld and David Edelstadt, which inspire me to this day.

This house constituted a breeding ground for my spiritual development and it is no wonder that my brother, and later my father also, sensed the danger it posed to my religious integrity.

My brother’s original proposition - to shake hands at Grandfather’s tomb - came to me as a bombshell. I feared lest my father should hear of it and I was not prepared for a direct confrontation with him, because I was in a state of fierce, inner conflict. This trait of character, to avoid direct confrontations, was the reason why, even when I was later an active member of the Zionist youth, I nevertheless forbore from taking part in various activities which bring one a sense of fulfilment in the years of adolescence and so, on the outside, I continued living the same religious lifestyle as before.

A Brief Character Sketch of my Father z”l

I deem it worthwhile to bring, before the reader, one rough incident in the relationship between my father z”l and myself. This, too, will, to a certain extent, reflect the older generation’s world views on the one hand, and which difficulties the revolutionary generation had to overcome in the Jewish *shtetl*, on the other.

One summer morning, I was washing my face with regular soap¹³⁵. My father passed next to me and, upon seeing this, he began to castigate me and also slapped me in the face. Once his fury had abated and he felt a pang of conscience, he turned to me with an explanation for what he had done. These were his words, “Do you think I do not know that to wash one’s face with soap on a regular weekday is not a sin? But since you did not see this with me or your grandfather, this means that washing your face with soap comes from the fact that you are already *somebody else* - that your thoughts differ from those of your parents – and, of cases like these, the Sages say, *‘That is the craft of the evil inclination - today it tells him do this and tomorrow it tells him do that, until it tells him to go worship idols, [and he goes and worships]’* [Talmud Bavli, Shabbes, 105b]”.

In quoting this statement, my father was, in other words, expressing the idea that there is an imminent set of rules governing every development and progress [one makes]. The first deviation

¹³⁴ [TN: “Culture”; a network of secular Zionist educational institutions that functioned in Poland in the interwar period; the language of instruction was Hebrew (From the YIVO Encyclopaedia).]

¹³⁵ [TN: Chassidim used to wash themselves with soap only on Friday in honour of Shabbes, or on the eve of a holiday.]

from the accepted official line inevitably conduces, by virtue of internal logic, to more serious deviations.

My heart was, more than once, filled with pity for my father's naivety because, while he continued making sure that I dipped the chunk of bread in salt after making the *Ha'Moytzi*¹³⁶ blessing, to uphold the "Covenant of Salt"¹³⁷, and he checked among the clothes at my bedside to see whether the *tallis kuton*¹³⁸ was among them - I was [by then] already doubting the essential principles of faith itself.

I Cross the Library's Threshold

I did not grant my brother's wishes and I did not shake hands with him over Grandfather's grave. But a day of great spiritual turmoil passed over me - a day of internal struggle between various urges and inhibitions. With dusk, my decision was made - and I found myself at the library's door. This was in the twilight hours which, in Poland, do not pass in the blink of an eye, as in "*this one enters and that one leaves*"¹³⁹. The sun was still setting and the last of its rays played upon the backs of the books which filled the entire room. My eyes - accustomed to the shelves at the study-hall that were crammed with volumes without any order, dilapidated by their extensive usage - were surprised and impressed by the sight of the rows of books in their beautiful covers, so finely arranged. I felt as if in a lounge.

The room was enveloped in the twilight of the sun's dying lights. One man sat by the window, engrossed in a book. This was Mojsze-Wolf Gotlib. For a brief moment, I stood irresolutely by and Mojsze brought me near him and read to me from his book. This was a monthly literary publication in the Polish language (I do not recall its name). The passage he read to me was from Feuerberg's novel *Whither*.

This was a coincidence, for Mojsze did not know that I had just been through a day of vacillation as regards answering the question of "*Whither?*" And I received the answer that very same day.

Whither? To the book!!!

Pinchas (Pincze) Wajnberg

¹³⁶ [TN: "Blessed are You, Adonoy our God, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth"; blessing made over the bread at the beginning of a meal, which encompasses all the other foods eaten throughout the course thereof.]

¹³⁷ [TN: Chassidim, in stark contrast with their Lithuanian opponents, strongly discouraged asceticism. Instead, they attempted to bring godliness down into every aspect of physical life, wherefore they viewed mindfully and piously consumed food and drink as being the equivalent of a burnt offering consumed by the divine fire at the Jerusalem Temple, and as a replacement of the Temple services in times of its absence, and regarding these sacrifices Scripture states: "And every oblation of thy meat offering shalt thou season with salt; neither shalt thou suffer the salt of the covenant of thy God to be lacking from thy meat offering: with all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt." (Leviticus 2:13).]

¹³⁸ [TN: "Little Tallis"; small four-cornered woollen garment with tassels worn by orthodox Jews under their outer clothes solely to fulfil the Biblical precept of tying tassels to one's four-cornered woollen garments. Its purpose is only ritual – it has no practical use.]

¹³⁹ [TN: Reference to Talmud Bavli, Shabbes 34b: "Rabbi Yosey says: Twilight does not last for a (quantifiable period of time; rather, it is like the) blink of an eye: This (night) enters and that (day) leaves, and it is impossible to calculate it due to its brevity." This was said regarding sunsets in the Middle East.]