

THE HEAVENLY KUTNO

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By the term heavenly Kutno, which we use here, we mean the Kutno before the Holocaust, when our city lived and existed. We would like to highlight here chapters reminiscent of Kutno, which has to do with the spiritual realm of community life, a life sanctified and that stood higher than anything else in private life.

In fact, in all our sanctified communities, it is difficult to divide the roles between spiritual and material life, because in all areas there has been a burst of spiritual and practical deeds.

It is even more difficult to come up with an accurate estimate of our destroyed communities. It is impossible to put into words the uniqueness that each city has created. Natural properties, which have been shaped over the centuries. These are priceless treasures, which cannot be evaluated by the human eye, escaping the concept of understanding.

"As the heights of heavens and the depths of the earth, the widths of a wise heart are beyond research". With these words, the divine scholar Yedaya HaPnini Bedersi¹ begins his famous book "*Bechinat Olam*"². And the same words can be applied to our communities. Just as we cannot reach the heights of heaven and the depths of the earth, so are we unable to appreciate the immense spiritual possessions of our immortal communities, for

each of the smallest detail of the town was "a little that means a lot."

These words were uttered even about the ordinary, daily life that had taken place throughout the years in Kutno, all the more so when we want to look with our distant memory into the Holy of the Holies in our city, the Temple of the Kutno Synagogue, which still stands today in our memory as a living, spiritual figure. And the second holy building opposite the Synagogue, the Kutno *Beit Midrash*, which was the spiritual center for the Torah youth in Kutno, where the greatest scholars were hammered out and forged, the greatest rabbis and greatest personalities that have come from Kutno.

About the Kutno Synagogue and the *Beit Midrash*, I would like to show the features by which the two holy places were different one from the other. Generally speaking, just as once in the Temple there was holy and holy of the holies, the places were different in their degree of holiness – it was the same also for our synagogue and the *Beit Midrash*. We remember the synagogue, which breathed with holiness and Torah, was isolated from external life, devoid of mundane. It required a special preparation to enter synagogue. The customs and formulas there had to be observed with the utmost rigor, the synagogue was not to be used for the trivial use, only for



Beit HaMidrash in Kutno: there studied Nachum Sokolow, Shalom Asz, rabbis and head of *yeshivot* under rabbis Shie'le Kutner and Eliyahu Welcman (Kaliszer)

¹ TN: Yedaya ben Abraham Bedersi (1270, Béziers, France – 1340), Jewish poet, physician and philosopher.

² TN: Hebrew, "Examination of the World".

a sacred thing, so that the synagogue gave the impression of a sacred monument, a *matzeva* to the memory of previous generations, reminiscent of the distant past. It is also worth noting another interesting thing that has to do with the synagogue, how Jews used to call the seats in the synagogue by the funny expression "cities". Every landlord there had a "city", and this "city" was inherited from generation to generation. All this has to do with the general character of the Synagogue, which was like a separate world by itself; This created the so-called "cities", with a higher meaning than the ordinary and natural city.

In contrast to the synagogue, the *Beit Midrash* was more popular and cozier. With motherly warmth, the *Beit Midrash* welcomed everyone, whether they came in to pray or just to warm themselves by the oven, or to spend time. Jews with their everydayness "caught up" in the *Beit Midrash*, without any preparation. The *Beit Midrash* was used as a "House of the People", where various celebrations were held and as a resting place for regular guests. The *Beit Midrash* also served as the place for Torah study in the city – in other words, the *yeshiva*.

Kutno had a *Talmud-Torah* for poor children, also a *cheder* called "*Yesodei HaTorah*", but all this was for younger children, up to a bar-mitzvah age and a little more. However, as a young man grew older and no longer had a place in *Talmud Torah* and in the *cheder*, his further pursuit and his development in learning was the *Beit Midrash*. And let a really interesting remark be made here: we know that, from time immemorial, Jews have had *yeshivot* who played an important role in Jewish life, as we see in different periods, in the places the Jews settled on their way to exile such as Spain, France and Germany. Jews settled in the city where the *yeshiva* was established, and students from other parts of the world flocked to study there. The great *yeshivot's* chief rabbis, studied with them and gave them a way to teach, so that every well-known scholar and genius taught in a *yeshiva* and his way to teach was similar to that which he received from his rabbi.

For Kutners, it is enough to remember our great and righteous Rabbi Yehoshie'le Kutner ztz"l, who was considered the rabbi of all the exiles, whose rulings in *halacha* were decisive for the whole of the Jews and at the same time was a follower of chassidism. According to his grandson, the last Kutno Rabbi Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk, in a book, "*Yeshuot Malko*", a summary of the history of the righteous, his grandfather, Rabbi Yehoshie'le, spent six weeks in Kock, with the Kocker Rabbi, who was at that time the focal point of chassidism in Poland. It is also worth mentioning another famous *gaon*, who was a rabbi in the Kutno area, in Krośniewice, and a later Rebbe and rabbi in Sochaczew, R' Abrahame'le Bornsztajn.

The approach to Torah, not based on the *yeshiva* character as before, had brought excellent results in the field of spread his Torah among Jews. For the past 200 years, Torah study has been gaining ground among the masses, and Polish Jewry has been at the forefront in this field. From the simple masses, from merchants and artisans, grew famous Torah Jews and great scholars.



Cover of book "*Zeit Ra'anon*", second part, by *HaGaon* of Kutno Moshe Yehuda Leib Zylberberg, who made *aliyah* to Jerusalem and died there

In this respect, our city of Kutno was no exception. The general impression was of a scholarly city. Many of our Jews were considered great scholars and had a reputation, aside from those belonging to the clergy officials, such as: R' Yitzhak Kowic. R' Mendel Neeman (Elbaum), R' Shlomo Shochet (Hochgelernter), R' Chaim Hirsh Hiller (his two sons, Moshe-Michael and Benjamin-Wolf, live in New York) were also from the landlord world, famous scholars, such as: R' Leibl Mamluk (his grandson, Mordechai Fogel, lives in New York), R' Moshe Pinchas Kleczewski, the son-in-law of R' Pinchas Dayan z"l, his two sons, Simcha and Mordechai, R' Israel Rak, the son-in-law of Rabbi Yerachmiel Shochet, was known among Ger chassidim in Poland as Israel Kutner, the brothers of Rabbi Chaim Bechler and, may he live a long life, the Rabbi Shlomo Bechler, who is in Israel today. His children were among the learning youth in the *Beit Midrash* in Kutno. Also, the Zandberg family, Perec family and many others. There were also those who did not belong to the landscape of the town, but were hidden "under-furnace Jews", who possessed a great deal of knowledge of the Torah, such as for example: R' Itshe Kenig, whom was found in the *Beit Midrash* warming himself by the furnace. His memory was phenomenal, there was nothing in the Torah that he did not know, was immersed in books of research and knowledge. And so

were many others who belonged to this category of extreme scholars.

As is well known, the system of chassidism stems from one root: the founder, R' Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov ztz"l, founded the chassidic movement 200 years ago, and over the years, the followers of this system have grown, and penetrated significant strata of the people. At the same time, this root gave rise to many branches, a number of rabbis and disciples, different ways, styles and customs were formed, which divided the chassidic camp into separate groups. The so-called chassidim-*shtiebels*, with different names, were formed.

In Kutno too, there were chassidim from different circles: Ger, Alexander, Sochaczewer, Skierniewicz and others. Ger was the largest one. They had two buildings. One building, a large hall, where hundreds of Jews used to pray, and a second one, smaller, where the "sharp" chassidim used to pray. The Alexander chassidim, who were much smaller in number, had one *shtiebel*, yet they behaved aggressively and sometimes clashed with the Ger, playing an equal role.

In the Kutno community, no chassidic party dominated. Neither Ger nor Alexander have held any position in the community. All the clergy was independent, unrelated to any chassidic party. Thus, in Kutno, there has never been a dispute between Ger and Alexander over a position in the community. The frequent

frictions between the two groups were not material, just ideological.

The *Beit Midrash* in Kutno, which belonged to the community, was strictly neutral. The strife in the chassidic *shtiebels*, between Ger and Alexander, did not exist in the *Beit Midrash*, so it was the appropriate place for a place of Torah for all adult students in Kutno who continued their studies (after finishing the *cheder*).

The large, massive tables in the *Beit Midrash* were densely populated by dozens of grown-up students. The mode of study for the most part was alone, by oneself, or together with a comrade. They studied all day, until late at night. Thus, the *Beit Midrash* in Kutno presented an image of a true *yeshiva*.

In the late twenties and early thirties, R' Israel Rak stood out among *Beit Midrash* boys in Kutno. We have mentioned his name before among the scholars of Kutno. He was a son of R' Henekh Rak and the son-in-law of R' Yerachmiel Shochet. Being a son-in-law on financial support, he sacrificed many years, day and night, without any reward, to study with the grown boys in the *Beit Midrash*. Being a great scholar and pedagogue, he greatly contributed at that time to the success and growth of the students in *Beit Midrash*. In those years, the rabbi of our town also became very interested in the students of the *Beit Midrash*. From time to time, he used to listen to the students and engage with them in learning.

The above years can be considered as a high-learning period of Kutno *Beit Midrash*. Its students had a great future, occupying an important place in the rabbinical world, if not for the war that destroyed it. At that time, the famous Yeshiva of the Sages of Lublin was opened in Lublin. This *yeshiva*, which was the largest and most popular among Jews, aroused the interest of thousands of young men from all over the world, to be accepted in this *yeshiva*, which had a limited number of places. Therefore, only the most excellent, with exceptional qualifications in Torah knowledge were accepted. In order to find these excellent ones, gatherings of the boys were arranged in different places. Each city and town belonged to a certain circle, and great rabbis came down from Lublin, who listened and tested the young men. Kutno and surroundings belonged to Włocławek. Kutno *Beit Midrash* students came to Włocławek for this purpose. As a result, five young boys from Kutno have studied in the "Yeshiva of the Sages of Lublin". Moshe Welcman, a son of R' Hirshel Shochet and grandson of R' Mordechai Shochet, Mordechai Yehuda Lubart (the writer of these lines), Zysia the scholar, son of R' Shlomo Shochet, Hirsh Rozenberg, son of R' Israel Isaac Rozenberg, and Wolf Szczerbinski.

Due to the influence of the last Kutno rabbi on the students in the *Beit Midrash*, which helped them to be admitted to the "Yeshiva of the Sages of Lublin", he felt a closeness to the aforementioned Lublin students. In 1938 (according to the Jewish calendar it was 28 Sivan 5698 [27 June 1938]), the Kutno rabbi came to Lublin to visit his students. I had a picture taken of him then, standing on the



Cover of book "*Milchamot Yehuda*", by Mordechai Yehuda Lubart



Rabbi Trunk, Efraim Fishel Zandberg and Mr. Zaklikowski – During their visit of the 'Yeshiva of the Sages of Lublin', with Kutno students (1938)

balcony of the *yeshiva* with some Kutners, may he live a long life, and with us.

These memoirs, which I have noted here, are until the end of 1932, because I left my hometown of Kutno afterwards and went to study at the "Yeshiva of the Sages of Lublin".

I was in Lublin until the outbreak of the war. It was not then possible to reunite with my mother, sister and brothers (my father had died a few years before the war), who were then in Kutno.

From Lublin, I ran to Vilnius, Lithuania, and then to Russia, Japan and Shanghai, where I spent the whole time of the war.

In 1941, until around Passover, I continued to have a weak contact with them. I also got a picture of them, which I noted in a notebook, but later all contact ceased.

The heart bleeds and tears flow when one thinks about the reason for their sudden silence. It was the German assassins, may their names be blotted out, who put an end to their young lives, killing them along with the entire Kutno community, *hy"d*.