

RELIGIOUS LIFE IN OUR TOWN

by Meir HOREIN (BECHLER), Haifa

On the map of the Jewish cities and towns in the state of Poland, Kutno was considered, in the last decades before the outbreak of World War II, an enlightened city. Life was marked by the "storm and eruption" of the period and the stamp of modern culture was imprinted on them. Freedom slogans shouted over red flags and a national revival of blue-and-white flags. And within this secular life remains a small circle of atlas silk carried by the Jews of Shabbat-Yom-Tov. They characterized the uniqueness of Polish Jewry, its way of life and way of thinking.

For many generations, the Jews lived among their Gentile neighbors, with the farmers met in the shops and near the stalls in the market. They were familiar to each other and would shake hands with them. Despite this, not a single thread connected them with their neighbors. As guests staying for the night under the foreign sky. They were there and not there. They are sons of a nation-world, that is, a people with its own world, a people that lives in isolation from its neighbors.

The scholar and philosopher Prof. A. Heschel¹ from the United States (grandson² of Rabbi Abraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apt) said: Ashkenazi Jews would build temples while Polish Jews would build bridges, our lives would create a bridge between the human heart and their heavenly Father. These are the Jews that Heschel meant, and we shall discuss about them here.

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There were three types of houses of worship in Kutno. The Great Synagogue, which was a little temple, solid on the outside and magnificent on the inside, one of the most beautiful in the area; opposite, the great *Beit Midrash*, where many windows were broken and innumerable books covered its walls, and houses of worship of chassidim. In the synagogue, the Jews "homeowners" in the city prayed: the Zionists and the educated, the white collars and those with ties, the able merchants and the "spokespersons" of the community. The sparkling top hats also stood out on the holidays. Here came the lords of the city: Simcha Zachlikowski, owner of a flour mill; Mordechai Manczester, a wealthy iron merchant; the Holcmans – forest and timber merchants; Wolf Asz, who sheltered in the shadow of his brother the writer Shalom Asz; the doctors and the assistant-surgeons. The eastern wall was adorned by Rabbi Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk, the grandson of Rabbi Yehoshua, a man of spirit who was separated by an invisible wall from his community members. On Shabbats and holidays, the cantor with the evening and clear voice, Yeshayahu Polakewicz, passed in front of the Holy Ark, surrounded

by a large choir, and while the Torah was being recited, his voice made the *shamash* curl, when he was making a long call to one of the community's dignitaries to "rise" to the "*A-m-u-d*."

In the Great *Beit Midrash*, the "ordinary people" prayed: shoemakers and carpenters, peddlers and petty merchants, tailors and butchers. Psalms' Jews and "righteous" Jews in archaic Yiddish. Here passed before the ark, without a choir, the old butcher Mr. Mordechai Welcman, adorned with an elegant, long beard whose end split into two "wings".

From here, Mr. Nate the *shamash* went out on Shabbat eves, close to the time of lighting the candles, to pass through the city streets, knocking on the doors of the shops.

Here Mr. Meir the blacksmith, symbol of innocent faith and Jewish perfection, prayed.

We should dedicate a few lines to him.

Mr. Meir was small, his face adorned with a short white beard. But in spite of his extreme old age, he would stand in its smithy "in the back street" ("*unter-gasl*"), stood by the blower and kindled fire in the coals, knocking on the sledgehammer once – the long tapping – on the hot iron and twice – the short tapping – on the anvil; he ironed horseshoes for horses and installed wheels for carts. Whereas at night, in winter and summer, at the beginning of the third part of the night³, he would come to the *Beit Midrash*. Outside, still in darkness, the winds blew hard and snowflakes blurred the paths leading to the *Beit Midrash*. But Mr. Meir would not be deterred by snow and wind. He was the first to kiss the *mezuzah* of the *Beit Midrash*, the first to light a candle in the dark, to go to the "*amud*" with a trembling hand holding the lit candle and, in the flickering light of its meager flame, he sang the chapters of King David⁴ in a pleasant voice, the sounds of which would spill out into the space of the *Beit Midrash*.

Before dawn, one by one, Jews arrived at the *Beit Midrash*. Strong, healthy, upright Jews. At first, they resembled individual cobs, but gradually became a small congregation and then, when stripes of light were seen through the east windows, the old man would mumble in a different melody: Blessed are you... who did not make me a gentile; Blessed... who adorns Israel with glory...

We were boys then, we surrounded the old man and asked him about the secret of his old age. Mr. Meir put a smile on his weary lips, his eyes would light up playfully and he replied: a small glass of schnaps 96% and a chapter of the Psalms prolong a person's years.

¹ TN: Abraham Joshua Heschel (January 11, 1907 Warsaw – December 23, 1972, New York, NY). He was active in the civil rights movement.

² TN: in fact, his great-great grandson: Rabbi Abraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apt was born in 1748, 150 years before the birth of his descendant.

³ TN: according to Judaism, the night is divided in three watches.

⁴ TN: in the Book of Psalms.

In this *Beit Midrash*, Mr. Yaakov Comber ruled. He was a cheerful Jew and had a chassidic spirit. All his life he served as head of a *Mishna* study group. Between *Mincha* and *Maariv*⁵, he was sitting near the *Shulchan Aruch* in the *Beit Midrash* and his voice, a mighty voice, conquered a large community of popular Jews. Around the other tables sat *yeshiva* young men, who were quibbling and diving into the depths of the Talmud, while Mr. Yaakov Comber was not a great debater and wasn't investigating things too much. He interpreted Talmud in a simple way, for all to understand. He poured out a sweet parable, told a nice story, and sometimes also some joking, and all to attract the hearts of the common people to the Torah.

While studying *Mishna*, bearded Jews who during the day were preoccupied with the burden of earning a living, surrounded his table. One from a shack in a village and one from a stall in the market; one from iron and scissors and one from a shoemaker's counter – they're now immersed in another world. For a short time, Mr. Yaakov Comber brought them out of the Valley of Weeping; for a little while they forget the bitter exile and the angry gentile, the degenerate poverty and the sorrow of bondage.

In these moments, the Jew returns to himself, to his uniqueness and to his inner world.

In the "*shtiebelech*" of the chassidim the scholarly levels, the sharp minds, were concentrated. Here they forged the "together". This made it easier to bear the burden of exile. In the houses of the chassidim there were no marked seats, no partitions between rich and poor. The scale by which the man was measured was different here; it did not matter that the shelves of his shop were full of goods which he had earned respect for; it was not the scholar who had his belly full of the six orders of the *Mishna* and religious law literature, but the follower with a high level of faith, with fear and love of God.

The chassidim did not erect solid buildings for themselves, their "*shtiebelech*" lacked any external splendor. They would rent a modest apartment, set up two or three wooden tables and a few benches along the walls; A simple curtain covered the Ark, without the decoration of lions. Two barrels of water for washing hands and a towel – and here is a prayer house for the chassidim. The only ornaments are: the "*Shiviti*" on the "*amud*", the eye-catching boards of "*Modim D'Rabanan*", "*KaGwana*" and "*Brich Shmei*" prayers – which were scattered on the walls. Cantors with well-groomed voices did not pass here before the Holy Ark. Here, they make sure that the public messenger is God-fearing and clean-handed – that is – an honest Jew...

In the *Beit Midrash*, too, there were Jewish worshipers who went to the Rebbe, but they were not chassidim in atlas silk, just ordinary Jews, wanderers, who in hard times would travel to Gostynin, to Rabbi Yechiel

Meir, the "good Jew" (the central figure of Shalom Asz's "Salvation"⁶) to be blessed by his mouth.

Many in Kutno were followers of various groups of *Admors* of Congress Poland. But the groups of followers were no more than three: Gur, Alexander, and Skierniewice. Gur (Ger) was the most popular. Their large chassidic house was located on the main street, on Królewska Street. A saying was prevalent in Poland: Gur – smart; Sochaczew – Torah; Alexander – *frumkeit* (piety); and Skierniewice – Honesty⁷. The Gur chassidic house had learning centers in the city. Here the two *dayanim*⁸ prayed: Mr. Pinchas'le and Mr. Zelig'le. To the former, women turned to resolve doubts about (non-) *kashrut*; to the latter, learners would turn, to decipher for them complicated passages in the *Mishna* and Arbitrators. Here Mr. Yaakov Bromberg, the nobleman among the chassidim, and Mr. Abraham Fishel Zandberg, the respected merchant, and a God-fearing Jew, would pray.

Generally, the chassidim lived in a closed group and their influence was not great on the life of the congregation. But each group of followers had its own "politician", who ran the organizational side of the community and the "*shtiebel* politics". Among the chassidim of Gur, this role was played by Mr. Itshe Meir Zaklikowski, the witty and shrewd among them.

The educational-theoretical institutions of *Agudat Israel* – the "Elementary Torah" schools for boys and the "*Beit Yaakov*" for girls – were the result of the work of this Mr. Itshe Meir.

Among the followers of Gur, Mr. Leibel Mamluk stood out in his personality. A short Jew without an external appearance, and yet the "most beautiful Jew" among the community. Poor and destitute was Mr. Leibel, steeped in trouble and a chain of wounds would haunt him. In the house the poverty whistled in all its corners in full force and power. His son, the "philosopher" David, was obsessed with bitter thoughts; his wife was always sickly and confined to her bed, but when Mr. Leibel entered the *shtiebel*, a spirit of reverence entered with him that was difficult to grasp.

Not because of his learned scholarship – chassidim do not just value scholars – but because of his righteousness, because he was a Jew with high soul. He was always immersed in distant worlds. His mind was almost reaching the sky. He was like hovering over the city rooftops – a figure descending upon us from a Chagall painting. He never remained idle. There was always the *mitzvah* "*v'hagit*", and the chassidim would say that he never distracted himself from the Creator, he was always a thinker in the Torah. As he walked the streets of Kutno, his mind floated in distant places – to Nehardea and Pombadita in Babylon, or to the mysterious worlds of the "*Zohar*." He was a great expert of the *Kabbalah*, and the only one of Gur's chassidim who knew how to decipher a

⁵ TN: i.e., between afternoon and evening prayers.

⁶ TN: Yiddish, "*Der Tehilim Yid*" ("The Psalm Jew"), 1934.

⁷ TN: meaning wholehearted service of God, Torah and mitzvot.

⁸ TN: religious judges.

difficult chapter in the book "Language of Truth," which is the classic book of Gur's chassidim.

Second to Mr. Leibel Mamluk was Mr. Moshe-Pinchas Kalczewski. His women's clothing store was located in a dark, narrow basement. There his pious wife ruled. She was the one conducting the bargaining with the non-Jews while he, her husband, was the aide instead of her – taking the cloth off the shelves without looking up from the table. He was a symbol of honesty, sure of himself and his Creator. When the Gentile buyers did not bother him, he immediately sat down by an open *gemara*, and already heard with him the melody: "Oy, said Abaye." Meanwhile, his wife went out into the street with a handkerchief in her hand, to collect charity for the needy. Sometimes, in the days of the "fair", in the hustle and bustle of the negotiations with the boys and girls of the village, some young men would go down to the basement to ask Mr. Moshe Pinchas the meaning of a complicated passage in the *Tosafot* or Commentaries, then he would let the gentiles to his wife, himself going to the bedroom next to the store, stayed there a while then got out with a bright and happy face – he had found the right answer.

Mr. Moshe Pinchas was very hospitable. His small apartment served as a hostel for Jews who were trapped in Kutno for various purposes. He made tea with his own hands for them, and offered them the bed. On cold nights when snow was blowing outside, he would go to each bed to see if it was hot for the guest himself.

Mr. Shlomo Bechler, my father, a loyal merchant and a true chassid, also prayed here. Our house served as a house for the chassidim. During a night of intermediate festival days, some chassidim would occasionally gather and secretly applaud a person who had his properties seized, and the measures to be taken to rehabilitate him, through respect. During the holidays, especially on *Simchat Torah*, *Purim* and *Pesach*, the house was wide open to all. Crowds of chassidim burst into the apartment, emptying everything in the cupboards and kitchen and after soaking their hearts in the favorite drink of Gur chassidim – hot punch – they would go out in a dance that shook the house and the sounds of singing and singing resounded at midnight across the "Old Market" (*der alter mark*) and put a little joy into the hearts of the Jews who awoke from their deep sleep.

In the house of the Gur chassidim, Mr. Abraham Orner, a man of modesty, prayed. His wife gave birth to eleven sons and one daughter. The apartment was not spacious, but was never narrow for the guests. He was hosting two teachers from Żychlin – Mr. Asher and Mr. Gershon. How did they find room? That is a riddle we cannot solve.

Mr. Abraham Orner was the secretary of the Merchants' Association. The small merchants came to him to pour their hearts out. More than once he took out of his pocket his last gold coins to pay taxes for one of the merchants whose property was confiscated by the Polish

treasury. What would happen if he himself lost all of his assets in the end?

In my memory, a chassidic figure, a relic from the Kock House – Mr. Shalom Kronzylber – pops up and rises. He was tall and broad-shouldered. His forehead, broad and bright, with a majestic face and a long, elegant white, silver colored beard. At the chassidim house, we would dedicate a place of honor to Mr. Shalom at the eastern wall near the *amud*. Despite his extreme old age, he remained fresh. He was known for his sharpness of mind and his tongue was razor sharp. Always pensive and a look of seriousness on his face, but this man knew how to encrypt his seriousness and contemplation under the guise of mischief. On *Yom Kippur*, between the Musaf prayer and the closing, he sang Russian songs whose content I did not understand; but I know that the souls of the fasters would be lifted up by them.

There was another house of the Gur community, especially for young students, who were close to their father-in-law's table or who had recently stood on their own. There was a big rule among the Gur – young people do not interfere with the old. Here, however, in the "*shtiebel*" of married student-chassidim, the passion was different, chassidic life was more intense. The students were staying in Gur more than in Kutno. Each of them was, whether before the trip to Gur, or after, or between trips. On *Shavuot* and *Rosh HaShanah*, this house of chassidim was completely closed⁹. They all went to the Rebbe. Chassidic life was perfect, there. There, they had meals together that deepened the friendship between the chassidim and increased their closeness.

Every Saturday night when the streets of Kutno and the New Market square (*der neuer mark*) were full of walking couples, they would make their way, silk-wearing *yeshiva* students dressed in Shabbat clothes and *shtreimels*¹⁰, with plates and pots in their hands. They then hurried to the ritual dinner of Shabbat 'queen' departure. Everyone brought with them the leftovers from Shabbat food, one brought a slice of challah and another a piece of fish, one brought chicken legs and another a bottle of schnaps. And Mr. Israel Rak, the leader of the group, would collect the remains, mix them in one plate, and place them in the middle of the table. Each of the participants snatched from it, like an olive or an egg. They sang "He was a chassid" and did not go out for a long time, and on the main street there were impressive cheerful echoes – Gur's style!

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More modest in scope was the house of the Alexander chassidim. The Alexander and Gur chassidim avoided each other and there was almost no contact between them. The spirit of Alexander chassidim was less militant. Their temperament was quieter. Here, too, there was rustling of atlas silk coats on Saturdays, yet these were pleasant walks. Mr. Yerachmiel Shochet and Mr. Isser Wiszinski were Jews who adhered to the Torah and *chassidut*, but did not seek to impose their authority on the

⁹ TN: because they all went to Gur (Góra Kalwaria).

¹⁰ TN: fur hats.

public. Alexander's followers even found a common language with the Zionist camp in the city.

One chassid stood out in this chassidim house, and that is Mr. Yitzhak Kowic. A skilled scholar of the *Mishna* and Arbitrators. Proficient, sharp and witty. His scholarship inspired terror to Gur chassidim. "Mr. Yitzhak cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand." Because his wit and cleverness were exercised at the rabbi's right side. The eldest son of Mr. Yitzhak was among the first pioneers to immigrate to Israel in the mid-1920s.

Skierniewice chassidim were not many in number; But they earned recognition thanks to the dedication they showed to each other. A family spirit was present among this community. No one hid anything from the other. One's trouble was everyone's trouble and the joy of the individual was the joy of the whole. They did not skyrocket. Their ways were simple. Simple love for Israel and human dignity were the qualities that characterized the followers of *Beit Warka*. They moved away from the political cauldron. Their main concern was to educate their children as good and godly Jews.

Their house of chassidim was narrow. Mr. Yaakov Bromberg assigned them a narrow room in his big house. But in this little room, there was love, brotherhood, peace and cheers.

Typical of the chassidim of Skierniewice was the figure of the *shochet* Mr. Shlomo Hochgelernter. He was described as having the qualities of rabbis Mr. Moshe Leib of Sasów¹¹ and Mr. David of Lelów¹², who would disguise themselves as farmers and shouldered sheaves of straw for a sick woman. Mr. Shlomo served as an address for all the failing and miserable. He took care of the earthly needs of any Jew who was in material distress. He respected everyone and that's why everyone respected him.

Mr. Aharon Shlomo Elberg also belonged to the Skierniewice congregation. He was the non-conformist in the chassidic camp. His horizon was wider than the rest of his comrades, so even standing inside the camp, it seemed as if he was standing outside. He was completely passionate about the love of the Land of Israel and imbued with an unspeakable national feeling.

Mr. Aharon Shlomo, like Mr. Leibel Mamluk, saw himself as a foreign plant in the city. As his feet tread the streets of the city, his spirit hovers elsewhere. Only one difference differentiated between the two. While Mr. Leibel asked for another heaven above his head, Mr. Aharon-Shlomo also sought another land under his feet – his homeland. That is why he loved Herzl as he did a chassidic Rabbi. It is no wonder, then, that the chassidim indeed treated him with respect but did not recognize him

¹¹ TN: today, Sasiv, Ukraine.

¹² TN: small town 40km southeast of Częstochowa, Poland.

¹³ TN: possibly David Metal.

¹⁴ TN: "*Yeshuot Malko*" was a book written by the grandfather Israel Yehoshua Trunk, but was published by the grandson Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk.

¹⁵ TN: Yitzhak Leib Perec (May 18, 1852 Zamość – April 3, 1915 Warsaw), Yiddish and Hebrew writer.

¹⁶ TN: Shalom Asz. Yiddish and Hebrew writer, born in Kutno.

as a chassid, with the exception of the followers of Skierniewice. It is worth mentioning Mr. David Mottel¹³ z"l and his son Mr. Zelig, may he live a long life, noble figures who blessed their small but elite community.

At the house of Skierniewice chassidic community, I gave to friends and students the first lesson in the Talmud before I left the city and headed for *Eretz Israel*.

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In the synagogue and in the *Beit Midrash*, Rabbi Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk was the sole authority, but the chassidim were not subject to him. The source of their ideas was not in their city, the authority that shaped their way of life resided elsewhere, in Gur, in Alexander, in Skierniewice.

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems that the chassidim did injustice to the personality of the rabbi. Rabbi Yitzhak Yehuda, grandson of the *Gaon* Rabbi Yehoshua, was a spiritual aristocrat. He was not in the same league and above all the people of his city. And not only from them. He was not made for them at all. In my youth I was privileged to be one of his students. I regularly attended his classes, visited him at home and I stood by his deep knowledge of the Talmud (his book "*Yeshuot Malko*"¹⁴ is one of the deepest books in Talmudic literature). There was an abyss between the world of this leader and the world of merchants and chassidim alike.

I was attracted to the figure of the rabbi back when I was still young and one of the pages from those days will be told below.

This happened forty years or more ago. Judaism (*Yiddishkeit*) was then on a steep decline. The teeth of time began to erode the wall that separated the Jewish world from the foreign world. The winds of progress and its slogans swept the Jewish youth in a tremendous stream. The Socialist and Zionist movements destroyed foundations. Everything was marked by a rebellion against the past. New songs and new names were heard: Perec¹⁵, Asz¹⁶, Zeitlin¹⁷, Segalowicz¹⁸, Bialik¹⁹ and Ber Borocho²⁰. The forces of youth erupted in force. At that time, the rabbis from the district gathered in Kutno to summarize advice on how to stop the youth from fleeing Judaism. The conference was held at the *Talmud Torah* house in the courtyard of the *Beit Midrash* and was attended by about a hundred rabbis. The topics of discussion were dropped from my memory. Apparently, I also did not understand their meaning. But one argument remained etched well in my mind, it was the argument between the Rabbi of Kutno and the Rabbi of Ozorków. The words of our rabbi were said quietly, and he logically analyzed the flaws of the generation by saying that if the

¹⁷ TN: Hillel Zeitlin (1871, Korma, Belarus – 11 September 1942, Warsaw), Yiddish writer.

¹⁸ TN: Zusman Segalowicz (February 26, 1884 Białystok, Poland – February 19, 1949 New York), Yiddish poet and author.

¹⁹ TN: Chaim Nachman Bialik (January 9, 1873 near Żytomierz, Volhynia – July 4, 1934 Vienna), Yiddish and Hebrew poet.

²⁰ TN: Dov Ber Borocho (July 3, 1881 Złotonosz – December 17, 1917 Kiev), politician, founder and leader of *Poalei Zion*.

rabbi engages in improvement and otherwise, he will lose control of the Jewish street. While speaking, the rabbi uttered this sentence: "*Ich bin nisht kein pupik-rav. Zu pipkes zenen do dayanim!*" ("I am not a smalltime rabbi, there are *dayanim* for ruling on questions of kosher-non-kosher"). This utterance went down like a blow to the heads of the honorable rabbis. Then the Rabbi of Ozorków stood up and called out to Rabbi Trunk: "*Kutner Rav! Der pupik iz undzer shtolz, mir haben awekgegebn undzere beste yorn zu lernen dem pupik.*" ("Rabbi Kutner! These smalltime matters are our pride, we have given away our best years to learn what is kosher and what is not.")

As mentioned, that was forty years ago and more. However, if the chassidim had reservations about the Rabbi of the town, their appreciation for his grandfather, Rabbi Yehoshele, was nevertheless deep and he was treated with reverence in his memory.

Mr. Meir Zandberg recounted: Once, two *yeshiva* students from Warsaw, the capital, came to Kutno to see Rabbi Yehoshele. They introduced themselves as envoys from a famous *yeshiva*. The *yeshiva* – they said – is in a very bad material condition and they are looking for help. They asked the Rabbi of Kutno to help them raise money. Rabbi Yehoshua immediately gathered the town leaders and asked them to go in the street and knock on the doors of the generous people. After less than an hour, they returned to the rabbi and happily announced that they had succeeded to collect what was needed in that short time. Rabbi Yehoshele thought a little, and requested from the *shamash* to immediately call the two Torah students.

While they were alone in the room, Rabbi Yehoshele said to them: "I urge you to tell me the truth – who are you?" The Rabbi's rebuke shocked them and trembling out of fear they admitted that they were nothing but emissaries of a missionary order in Warsaw.

It was immediately published in the city and everyone saw it as a miracle, a divine inspiration. Meanwhile, Rabbi Yehoshele called the patrons of the community and said to them: "I know from experience how many obstacles pile up on the way to the observance of a *mitzvah*. Had the money been destined for the Torah, it would not have been collected so easily. But since you said that you succeeded at collecting such a large sum in a short time, I knew that it was only sinful. It was a matter of instinct. Success must be credited to us. Go and return to each one the amount you received."

These dear Jews are no more. Everything was wiped off the face of the Earth. Their pure souls float over the world and their dust is scattered by the wind on fields and rivers. The splendor has turned to ashes.

The poet Byron said:

The bird has a nest
The animal – a den
The man – a house
And the Jews – the cemetery.

And the poet did not foresee that days would come when Jews would have no cemetery.

For a thousand years we were in exile in Poland and our home there was our grave.

May God avenge the blood of our martyrs!