

THE SMALL GERRER SHTIEBEL

by Abraham LUSTIGMAN, Tel Aviv

Our town was blessed with many chassidim, who grouped together in the Great Gerrer *shtiebel*, the Small Gerrer *shtiebel*, the Sochaczewer, Skierniewicz, Alexander, Karliner, Zgierzer and other *shtiebels*.

The biggest start was really the "Great Gerrer". Sharp chassidim have been praying and teaching there. Chassidim with zeal, devotion and enthusiasm, attaching great importance to the smallest details; fanatics who used to hang out. On the other hand, in the Small Gerrer *shtiebel* it was always a matter of affinity. The chassidim from there were more homely among themselves; also, modest, behaving like one's own family. One helped the zealot in need. There was always warmth and love in the air from one to the other.

My father, R' Menachem Mendel Lustigman z"l, was gabbai in the *shtiebel* for a couple of dozen years. So,

I was surrounded by all these Jews, often saw them in the *shtiebel* and at our house, knew their ways of praying, heard their sighs, took part in their joys and knew their cares. I was always attracted to them. Their holy figures now hover before me. I loved these dear Jews, do not forget them and mourn their tragic fate.

Where did it all end up? Where is the whole area, the large courtyard behind the *Beit Midrash*? – the courtyard where the entire Kutno sanctuary was located, the *yeshiva*, *Talmud Torah*, *cheders*, hospitality, the *mikveh*. Judaism has always been teeming with it. From the windows of the *yeshiva* and *cheders* came the singing of the learning children. Cheerful boys used to roam here. Jews used to gather and start a conversation. Pious women used to raise their hands to heaven. On Friday and the eve of the holiday, Jews came here, entered the *mikveh*. On the

eve of Passover, the dishes were koshered there. During the winter, boys used to glide on frozen ice on the river, near the *mikveh*, and in the summer, they snatched apples and pears in Fajst's garden and therefore they received slaps from the Rabbi.

... Everything has gone in smoke. Everything has been cut off!

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Our house was also blessed with rare good prayer leaders: R' Yonah Sztrum, a tall, beautiful Jew, with a broad beard and wise, kind eyes. His prayer was accompanied by a melodic weeping voice. His singing and screaming "*Kol Nidrei*" moved to tears.



Yonah SZTRUM z"l



Zalman Aba TEMERZON z"l

R' Zalman-Aba Temerzon, a cheerful Jew with a yellowish beard. Also, a prayer leader. R' Zalman-Aba always used to be cheerful, often making a *kiddush*. The two Jews, R' Shmuel-Noah and R' Zalman-Aba, were always in a good mood and thus passed it on to others. R' Zalman-Aba was a son-in-law of R' Yonah Sztrum. His four children used to help their father. R' Zalman-Aba's eldest son, Yehuda, was a noble fellow, later a rabbi in Gąbin.

R' Henech Rak, or Henech Sausage-maker as we used to call him, had a glorious musical voice. His prayer "*Neilah*" was so enchanting that it was thought he was tearing up the heavens. R' Henech was a tall Jew with dreamy eyes. Always been dependable, despite living in hardships. His small sausage stall in Starnawski's attic did not bring him any money.

Shmuel Noah Szpira had a wonderful voice. A Jew a teacher, always a cheerful, a "joyous beggar". With living eyes. He never complained. His prayer provoked excitement. Moreover, he was a wise man, and very beloved because of his beautiful singing. Where there was a joy, a *kiddush* – he was happy. A good chess player, welcomed everywhere.

R' Benjamin. I do not remember his surname, but his rare tenor voice still reminds me of a good master of prayer, whose prayers had a thousand flavors.

Because we had such prayer leaders, Jews who had long since stopped praying used to come to the *shtiebel*. But they were drawn to our prayer leaders.

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In addition to all the master prayers, we had in our *shtiebel* lovely, dear Jews with numerous virtues:

R' Pinchas Rabinowicz, a beautiful Jew with an open, generous hand. Gave charity, helped poor Jews. Always cheerful, loved to have fun with the kids in the *shtiebel*, pinch their cheeks and after every pinch – a kiss. Children often like to be petted on the cheeks. R' Pinchas had a beautiful sukkah with colorful windows, at his house. On Sukkot, we used to sit by him and receive treats. At times, R' Shmuel Noah would enter the sukkah, and when he "presented" a psalm, it was a pleasure to hear.

R' Katriel Welcman, a handsome Jew with a white-silver beard, dreamy eyes. A Jew, a wise student and always with a joke, or a story. He used to distribute candies to the boys. On Purim, he was very joyous, throwing nuts and pears on the ground, loving to see how the little kids were scrambling to catch them. Loved sharing glasses of beer and singing in public with the children.

My uncle, R' Chaim-David Lustigman, seldom came to the *shtiebel* because he lived far away in Nowe Kutno¹. But on Purim, he had to come, as he loved to be happy. He placed a large barrel of beer, shared fruit, nuts and cookies. And was dancing alone. On Sukkot, he also used to come to R' Pinchas Rabinowicz in the Sukkah, to drink with a "Cheers!"

R' Leibish Kilbert – a handsome, modern Jew, an accountant, a bit of an aristocrat, a secular man with a lot of knowledge, whom everyone respected. He rarely came to the *shtiebel*. But he was interested in what was going on there. When my father was ill, for many years, he often came to our house. My father used to consult with him on business matters. R' Leibish was in fact his advisor in matters of commerce.

R' Eliezer Zandberg, a modern Jew, always a well-groomed, serious, silent and punctual. He attracted everyone's attention. He remained in that environment, mainly because of his habit of being with Jews.

R' Bunim-Mendel Chassid was the only Jew who did not fit into the environment. He had a big, thick beard and paws, his eyes almost did not protrude. A fanatical Jew, even angry, very pious, prayed with closed eyes. When he used to shout "Hear, O Israel!" – the walls shook. We thought that the heavens would open immediately... R' Bunim-Mendel used to cause the young people great trouble, even slapping them. Most of all, he teased Mendel Rak. This R' Bunim Mendel destroyed the harmony and coziness in the small Gerrer *shtiebel*.

Menachem-Mendel Lustigman or R' Mendel Gabbai, as he was called, devoted his entire life to the small Gerrer *shtiebel*. That was a piece of his home, the people – his family. I, his son, need not write much about him. I leave it to others who knew him.

¹ TN: village 11km outside Kutno, on the way to Krośniewice.