

tell you what I heard in my early childhood, both at home and in my whole neighborhood, where Jewish scholars, Jews of Torah, spoke about R' Yehoshie'le with outrageous respect: that he is a *Gaon*¹, a great Torah scholar, with self-understanding, a knowledgeable and sharp man, second to none. He is proficient in the Torah in depth and breadth, swims in it with such ease, as a good swimmer in a quiet, calm river. And that people come to him almost from all the Jewish Diaspora, with harsh Torah questions. His word is accepted as the final arbiter...

There were enough reasons for me to hear it all, to know it. And as a child of three or four years, absorbed in myself my first and most important life impressions. Indeed, we lived in the synagogue street, in the house of Abraham Chlap. This was the first house near the *Beit Midrash*. This meant being the first neighbor of R' Yehoshie'le. Because the rabbi lived in those years in a community house, which was in the second half of the *Beit Midrash*. Every day, I had various opportunities to see R' Yehoshie'le and hear conversations about him and his greatness. The Jews of Kutno were proud of their rabbi and uttered the name, "R' Yehoshie'le" with trembling smiles. It would probably not be an exaggeration to say that this was felt, or at least expected, from a large part of the city's Christian population and they also showed this at every opportunity, giving him, R' Yehoshie'le, great honor, with due respect for "Rabbi". It was most noticeable when R' Yehoshie'le walked around the long synagogue street every day, around three o'clock in the afternoon, accompanied by his *shamash*, R' Hershel Naman. Of course, as many Jews were living in the synagogue street, they came out to say, "Good morning, Rabbi!" and at the same time wished him eternal life.

My mom, too, was out in the street every day, with me perhaps no more than a two-three-year-old child, pointing out:

— See, Moshe'le, this is R' Yehoshie'le, may he have a long life. Repeat my words, she told me, because we all live thanks to him. He is a great righteous man!

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the few Christians who lived on the synagogue street, did the same. They watched him for a long time, many took off their hats and reverently crossed themselves. The words: "*Rabin idzie, wielki Rabin*" could be heard from every mouth. In Yiddish it means: "The Rabbi is coming, a great Rabbi!".

And as soon as the carriage of a Gentile arrived, the foreman seeing from a distance R' Yehoshie'le, with a sable *shtreimel* on his head, dressed in the long black atlas overcoat, with a belt wrapped around him, slowed down. And getting closer, he was completely on one side, to make way for "Rabbi." He watched him for a long time, crossed himself and muttered his prayer, moving his lips.

When it ever happened that Yehoshie'le, deep in his thoughts, had wandered into the non-Jewish part of synagogue street, the tall, well-built colonel (whom he then called "General" because he knew he should have

A COLLECTION OF MEMORIES ABOUT RABBI YEHOSHE'LE KUTNER

There must have been something phenomenal in R' Yehoshie'le Kutner, for me, a secular Jew, to still remember him. It has been over seventy years since he died and I see him quite clearly before my eyes, as he stood and walked in street, in the *Beit Midrash* of his permanent eastern city, near the Holy Ark. And in his own courthouse, sitting on his large, rabbinical chair, swaying over a pile of books. Of course, I chose not to give a scholarly review here, but a few memoirs. I just wanted to

¹ TN: Hebrew, "genius".

been promoted to a higher rank) always came out and greeted "Rabbi" in a military manner, raising his right hand on the "chest" and at the same time stretched out straight, like a soldier for a general, or a general for the emperor. R' Yehoshie'le naturally answered, with a shake of his head and with his always gentle smile. Quite often the general's wife, a young lovely girl, looked out of the front window and greeted, shaking her head, this dear visitor – and they both watched him for a long time, as he slowly moved forward, step by step, with something of a divine spirit.



Rabbi Shie'le Kutner with community leader Manczester

It became true expression of adoration, when R' Yehoshie'le became ill. The general then ordered straw to be strewn all over the street, between the *Beit Midrash* and the synagogue, so that there would be no noise if anyone crossed it or passed by, in order not to disturb the rest of the sick. In addition, the municipality's officer placed a policeman on both sides of the street. They did not let anyone ride in a cart with noisy iron-covered wheels, only carts on a rubber-covered wheels but they had to ride step by step, so as the rustling of the horses would not be heard. The heavy carts were directed by the policemen to drive through a street on the other side of the synagogue.

The whole time R' Yehoshie'le was sick, there was no normal life among the Jews in town. It was a mess. One would hardly work and even trade. And in the *Beit Midrash*, they lit candles for days and Jews kept on reciting psalms, begging the Lord of the universe to send a miracle cure for the sick. The women ran to the cemetery, stormed to the graves of the righteous, that they should pray to the Lord he should have mercy on them and save their R' Yehoshie'le...

But as it turns out, R' Yehoshie'le no longer had any years – and after a long illness, he exhaled his holy soul...

On a Tamuz morning, around ten o'clock, R' Yehoshie'le died². As an expression of grief, people immediately stopped studying in all *chederim*. And the whole city was filled with great sorrow. Each and every one ran to and entered synagogue street. The street, wide and quite long, was quickly filled with Jews, "Is it really true?!" – one asked the other – "No more R' Yehoshie'le?" Hearing the answer, "*Baruch Dayan HaEmet*", they simply pulled their hair from their heads in great sorrow. And the women cried out in a great commotion, which made the stones of the street weep. Even a certain part of non-Jews came into the synagogue street, looked for a long time at R' Yehoshie'le's apartment, at the large crowd of devastated Jews and left with their heads bowed.

The Jewish poor felt completely like real orphans. For R' Yehoshie'le always approached the poor with the same gentle smile as the rich. And when R' Yehoshie'le was with the congregation in the *Beit Midrash* and in the synagogue during the winter, coal and potatoes were immediately carried away to the poor' cold houses, so that the poor children would not be left freezing and starving in the winter cold.

R' Yehoshie'le never wanted to take any money from anyone. He kept telling his visitors, "Give away to charity, because the world stands on charity." And when people left certain sums on one side of the table, he did not even touch it with his hands but called his *shamash*, R' Hershel Naman, to take it and give it away to charity.

Many Jews flocked to the city on R' Yehoshie'le's death, more than it could handle. Of course, there were many Rabbis among them, from all over Poland. A special new funeral bier had been made for the holy dead, as well as new purification tools. The purification was not performed by the *Chevra Kadisha* staff, but by the greatest Rabbis. They also admitted a number of *cohanim* to the purification. The Rabbis had declared that R' Yehoshie'le was a pure-dead person and that the learned *cohanim* should and may engage in the purification ritual. I remember as if it was today, that my own father, a *Cohen* and a scholarly Jew, despite the deep sorrow, felt very exalted to be allowed to participate to the purification.

The funeral took place on the next day. It began early in the morning, perhaps seven o'clock, with circles seven times around the *bima*³ in the *Beit Midrash*, while both doors of the Holy Ark were wide open and the Torah

² TN: Israel Yehoshua Trunk died on 25 Tamuz 5653 (9th of July 1893).

³ TN: Hebrew, "dais".

scrolls, clad in their silver crowns (also in mourning), looked out with all their holiness on the pure dead. The bier was carried by rabbis and prominent *cohanim*. The funeral procession was large, it is impossible to tell how many people were there – a packed crowd, impossible to count. In front of the bier, all the Jewish children of the *chederim* went and said aloud: "Righteousness is before you" and other appropriate verses of Psalms. The bier was open and high, with boards on both sides, which made it look like a bed. All the way, Jews, and perhaps even Gentiles, kept throwing in wish notes. If I remember correctly, my father, being one of the bier-carrying *cohanim*, dropped a note saying that R' Yehoshie'le should pray to God, that he should send a miracle cure to my sick mother, and of course also livelihood. This was probably the wish in all the other wish notes.

The funeral lasted an entire day, until well into the night. If I remember correctly, R' Yehoshie'le was given a tomb as a *Cohen*.

A shudder seized everyone, and the great crowd wept as it approached the open grave. The congregation realized the truth, that already, R' Yehoshie'le really left us and we remain without him like sheep without a shepherd...

At the first shovel of earth, which he had dropped into the tomb, and with a great sigh, was also heard in a loud voice the words: "*Mazal Tov!*" This is how the Kutner community has informed R' Yehoshie'le, through a "*Mazal Tov*", that it was taking as Kutner Rabbi his only son, Rabbi Moshe Pinchas, in his place, to be his successor.

And his son R' Moshe Pinchas really became the Kutno Rabbi.

For a whole week after the funeral, the *Beit Midrash* was packed with Jews and Rabbis, who one after another performed eulogies from the very morning until late at night. They also sat *shiva* in the homes. And as in the *Beit Midrash*, candles were burned in every Jewish house, in deep mourning for the great leader and *Gaon* R' Yehoshie'le, whose whole life was for them a light, whose divinity illuminated their way of life...

Long after the death of R' Yehoshie'le, the life of the Jews in the city was not easy. There was a commotion in every corner, where only a few Jews gathered, or a minyan in the *Beit Midrash*, or in which there was a chassidic *shtiebel*, there was no talk of anything other than R' Yehoshie'le – whether about his death, which has so disturbed the Jewish world, or his exalted life, which has radiated our city with all that is beautiful and good. That's why it was really not easy to make peace with the idea that R' Yehoshie'le was truly away from us forever...

As a native Kutner, I may allow myself to say that both Rabbi R' Moshe Pinchas ztz"l and Rabbi R' Yitzhak ztz"l, a son of R' Moshe Pinchas and a grandson of R' Yehoshie'le, sitting on the Kutner rabbinic chair, wore for years the crown of R' Yehoshie'le's greatness... The generation of Kutner Jews who remember R' Yehoshie'le well, looked at them as the children, the heirs of their great father and grandfather, the *Gaon* and sharp R' Yehoshie'le Kutner...

M. Y. SZATAN, Montreal