

## AT THE FUNERAL OF SHALOM ASZ'S MOTHER IN KUTNO

(Impressions from our special envoy)

*(Reprinted from a photocopy of the "Today" of Warsaw, where was published the report by Y. Sh. Goldsztajn about the funeral of Asz's mother).*

Receiving Kutno's painful telephone news of the death of Shalom Asz's mother, the editors decided today to send a delegation to the funeral procession to pay their last respects to the mother of a great Jewish writer on behalf of our editorial board. The delegation, consisting of Mr. Nehemiah Finkelsztajn, Y. M. Najman, and the author of these lines, arrived in Kutno Friday early in the morning and traveled to Shalom Asz's brother, Mr. Wolf Asz, the elder of Shalom Asz's brothers, who lived in Kutno and was a prominent landlord and community worker there. The deceased lived with him, in his own house.

In the mourning house, apart from Mr. Wolf Asz, we met the two other sons of the deceased who live in Poland – Mr. Yaakov-Yehoshua Asz of Warsaw, who is one of the most prominent leather importers on Franciscan St and Mr. Melech Asz of Łódź, as well as their wives, children and other relatives. There is a deep sorrow in the home. From every corner comes grief and despair.

With wide eyes, the children tell of the last minutes of their mother, who died at the advanced age of 91<sup>1</sup> and was a type of Jewish woman that is rare to meet. Until the last minutes of her life, she was completely mentally alert, neat, cheerful, independent.

On the last day of her life, her son from Warsaw came to visit his ill mother. Her joy was great. She asked to inform "her Shalom" in America, that he should come because she wanted to see him. When the children asked if he should be telegraphed, she exclaimed "God forbid, no, he would be also frightened and worry that something happened. Just write a letter telling him to come." Half an hour later, she was not alive anymore.

Her husband died 32 years ago. Since then, she lived only for her children. She had given birth to six sons and three daughters, two of whom died – the eldest son and youngest daughter, both in the United States. Two sons and two daughters are currently in the United States, not counting Shalom Asz, who is currently temporarily living there. 35 years ago, she was in America with the children for a few years, later she moved there, but she did not want to leave the children in Poland and so she moved back here.

She was a trembling mother over her children but most of all, she was attached to her great son Shalom Asz, whom she called "my comfort, my jewel". And trembled and worried about him. The love was reciprocal. The great

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<sup>1</sup> TN: Malka Frajda Asz born Widawska (October 1, 1850, Łęczyca – 1938, Kutno), so she was at best 88. She was the second wife of Moshe Asz.

poet literally worshiped her and when he celebrated his fiftieth birthday with a grand parade in Warsaw, eight years ago, he seated his elderly mother next to him and she was honored. At every premiere of Shalom Asz's stage work, she used to come to Warsaw and to Łódź and rejoiced like a little child to her son's success. A few days ago, at the premiere of "*Kiddush Hashem*", the old woman was unable to attend in Kutno and came to Warsaw.



Shalom Asz's mother  
Portrait by a young Kutno painter, Chaim Tyber

How far she was keeping track of her son's greatness can be seen in the way she collected every piece of newspaper clipping in which her son was mentioned, a critique or news about him. She kept it as a sanctuary. A few days before her death, she passed it on to the children, as an inheritance. It was a large package. We unpacked it and found hundreds of newspaper clippings about Shalom Asz's work in "*Today*" and in old newspapers and magazines from decades ago. Each novel was packed in a separate parcel and bound with silk ribbons of different color. She did not miss anything...

... Among the newspaper clippings, we even found an election call to vote in the *Sejm* elections for number 16. On the edge of the paper, Shalom Asz wrote down a word with a pencil and the old woman kept it. On some packages was written in a trembling handwriting: "Your faithful mother, Malka-Frajda".

Half an hour before her death, one of the daughters-in-law moistened a handkerchief with perfume and wanted to perfume her. The ill mother did not let her do it and said, "This handkerchief belongs to Shalom, he forgot it when

last time he came to see me and therefore it should not be touched".

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We pay a visit to the premises of the Kutno Jewish community. The chairman, Yehoshua Falc, tells us:

— Three years ago, the old woman came up to the community premises and declared: "I am afraid that after my death, the community will give me an honorary ground. And I do not want a free ground." With trembling hands, she took out three bags of silver money and said: "Here is two hundred zlotys and give me a receipt for it. My Shalom will choose the land for me." Two years ago, when Shalom Asz was in Kutno, he went to the cemetery with the president and selected a plot of land. But in the middle, he sat up and said: "There is no need. The Almighty will help and my mother will still have long, blessed years..."

We're going to the mourning house.

Many chassidic Jews and young men sit and study *Mishnayot* with a heartbreaking melody. A group of elderly women lead through the purification at the home of the deceased. Two o'clock, the funeral procession begins. Hundreds of people gathered on the street. All came to pay their last respects to the mother of Shalom Asz, who was embraced in the town with great affection and glory. At the head, three men carry the bier on their shoulders. These are the three sons of the deceased. However, the most famous of them is missing, the great Shalom Asz. His place is occupied by a foreign Jew.

Hundreds of mourners follow the bier. The highest dignitaries of the city, town councilmen, the notables of the community, where Shalom Asz is an honorary member, the Kutno rabbi, Rabbi Yitzhak-Yehuda Trunk.

The bier passes in front of the municipal school. The number of followers continues to grow.

At the cemetery, the bier is placed near the gate. The black cloth is removed and in the name of the editorial staff of "*Today*" Y. M. Najman speaks:

— The editors of "*Today*", began the speaker, have placed upon me the duty to say goodbye to Shalom Asz's mother, the mother of a great Jewish writer and a great son of the Jewish people.

Shalom Asz always remembered his mother as a symbol of a torn Jewish heart, which trembles and worries over her children, whether near or away. The deceased was a most blessed Jewish mother, because she gave us a Shalom Asz.

With his work, Asz portrayed Jewish motherhood with great piety, and he took this model from his mother. He carried out her rare qualities and the language she had put in his mouth.

Shalom Asz is not with his mother now. He could not see her, but his heart and soul are now with her, with this woman, in whom Asz saw not only a mother, but a model of a Jewish woman.

It is not known whether Jews are a race or a people, but one thing is certain: the strongest trait in them is the feeling of family, which is inherited from mother to child

and this goes like a red thread across the work of Shalom Asz.

Near this very coffin, we have the feeling that not only a mother gave birth to a son, but a son gave birth to a mother. Shalom Asz shone with his creation and crowned his mother and she rewarded him for it, with her motherly loyalty and love. When the generation of children she left behind will say *kaddish* here, over the coffin of their mother, they will have to remember their older brother, who was not destined to accompany his mother. And as the city and its leaders stand before this bier, they must remember that they stand before the woman who gave birth to a son who made Kutno famous on the world map and made the city a symbol and an emblem.

After the eulogy, the bier is carried to the open grave. The deceased is taken down, according to a Kutno custom, lying on a pillow which is placed under the head – and then the burial begins.

After the burial, the city cantor Polakewicz says an "*el maleh rachamim*" prayer, in the name of all the children, of Shalom Asz and of the editorial staff of "Today".

Returning from the burial, the congregation remains standing in front of the gate of the cemetery and the brothers of Shalom Asz stand up and say *kaddish* with heartbreaking voices, choking on their tears.

The Kutno rabbi, Rabbi Yitzhak-Yehuda Trunk (a grandson of Rabbi 'Shiele Kutner), was also planning to mourn, but due to the fact that the burial took place on Friday afternoon, no one should mourn.

For an entire Friday, Kutno lived under the impression of the funeral. No matter that Friday was market day, from which half of the city draws livelihoods, each and every one abandoned their shops and workshops and came to pay their last respects to the mother of a great poet. Wherever they went and wherever they stood, people spoke about the deceased, about her wisdom, piety and extraordinary energy, which lasted until the last day of her life.

Y. Sh. GOLDSZTAJN