

SOME SCHOLARS AND BUSINESSMEN

With reverence, I take the pen in hand to bring out on paper some precious figures of Kutner Jewry, our holy and pure.

Mr. Shlomo HOCHGELERNTER

More commonly known as the Piątek *shochet*¹. He settled in Kutno in the early 1930s. Due to his ancestry in the town of Piątek, the nickname stuck. A Jewish scholar, he lived in the house of Yaakov Bromberg z"l. Day and night he studied in the Skierniewicer's *shtiebel*² – individually and also with a group of his young followers, with whom he had breakfast and, in the evening, was consolidating a lesson. His five sons – Yosef, Beirech, Zyshe, Baruch and Israel –

were known in town as his great followers. Zyshe later went to study at the famous Yeshiva of the Sages of Lublin.

Mr. Shlomo's house was open to those who wanted to study Torah. As it was to those who needed help. His authority and influence in the Jewish community was great. Mr. Shlomo, together with Mr. Yitzhak Kowic and the *shamash* Mordechai Welcman, had the privilege of studying with the Kutner rabbi, Mr. Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk et al.

The previously mentioned Mr. Yitzhak Kowic, thanks to his great scholarship, was the overseer of kashrut in the slaughterhouse, and known as a devout Alexander chassid³. His son Abraham was a well-known as a gifted student.

The slaughterers also included Mr. Mordechai Welcman, the oldest one. His son Hershel inherited the property from his father. The other sons studied at the Yeshiva of the Sages of Lublin.

Of the Kutner scholars, I remember Mr. Leibel Mamlok and Shlomo-Meir Lieberman. Even today it is difficult for me to understand how the two Jews were able to lead and maintain a room.

The watchmaker Mendel Mamlok belonged to the dear, noble souls about whom it is possible to write only good things. The scholar Moshe-Pinchas Kleczewski was studying the Gemara during a whole day, while his wife, a real woman of valor, led a shop in a cellar. Mr. Moshe-Pinchas also studied in Jewish homes and did not hesitate to go and raise money for needy families.

The well-known Ger chassid Abraham Boms carried milk in the houses. His son died from shrapnel at the beginning of the war.

The manufacturing-merchant David Metal and his wife Sara were great benefactors, always fulfilling the *mitzvah* of charity. Their son Aharon-Shlomo (my childhood friend) excelled with his successful painting. Their two daughters and son Chaim-Yosef live in Israel, in Dimona.

Leibish Finkler once belonged to the great merchants, he was called the broker. A respected prayer leader. Hundreds of Jews gathered, for *musaf* prayer during the Holocaust, outside the Skierniewice *shtiebel*. They wanted to hear the good cantor.

I will always remember the great donor with aristocratic appearance, Mr. Simcha Zelechowski. I owe him my survival. In November 1939, he forcibly evicted me from my home, ordered me to leave Kutno and avoid the Germans. Thus, I managed to escape to Russia and survive.

Among the gallery of figures, my grandfather, Mr. Hersh-Ber Strykowski, known as the mirror-maker, occupies a special place. After a day of hard work, he spent the evening away in the *Beit Midrash* and sat for long hours by the light of an oil lamp, studying. On Rosh Hashanah, he was the master of ceremonies – and when he took the shofar in his hand, he trembled with joy and awe. He used to send

¹ TN: ritual slaughterer.

² TN: small prayer room.

³ TN: it was the second largest chassidic group in Poland, after Gur.

me to collect the debts of the Jews to whom he had lent money. I have never seen him get angry at those who did not give me the debt. He has always had teacher-privilege on such Jews.

My father (RIP) Abraham Orner, was a well-known social worker in town. He became an orphan prematurely and was raised in Żychlin by an aunt. Still a young man, he learned the laws of land and engaged in trade. First it went not bad, then – things got worse... We were 12 children (11 sons and one daughter). I remember my father spending his whole life dealing with "Jewish troubles": he was secretary of the Jewish Merchants' Union in Kutno. For hours he would disappear from his own business and help the shopkeepers and retailers in their open affairs with the tax office, in the magistrate, in the banks. He was especially active when the sequester went to a Jewish merchant in Kutno and wanted to take the last bit of merchandise because of unpaid taxes.

I remember such an event: coming into our attic right from my room, I see a lot of customers there. My mother (RIP), being in the last months of pregnancy, she could not give any advice to the customers. She sends me to call Dad, but I do not know where he is. She says that before, the teenager Anshel Blank came – and Dad is certainly somewhere with him. I went to the Kozak's house in the Old Market and met my father, who was arguing with the sequester that he should leave the poor teenager alone. Finally, he turns to Anshel and asks him: "How much do you have to give, now?" I don't remember what was the answer. I just remember my dad taking out 6 złotys, giving them to the sequester as "deposit" – and the clerk left, not taking anything from Mr. Anshel's home furniture. Only then my father went to care about us.

And one more fact I remember from my father: one time he came from Warsaw and brought with him a guest, an unknown Jew. When asked by his mother and children, the father said that he met the Jew at the French Consulate in Warsaw – in despair because he had been denied a visa. The Jew intended to take this own life. My father brought him to Kutno, kept him over until Saturday. On Monday, my father went to Warsaw again and our guest stayed, waiting all day and night by the phone. And the good news came. My father succeeded in obtaining a visa for the Jew and fulfilling the promise he had made him: that he would leave for France.

Such scholars, businessmen, and kind-hearted people our Jewish Kutno had...

Arie ORNER, Haifa.