

OUR HOME

In the dear memory of my father, the Rabbi Israel Moshe Wajchselfisz, and my mother, the unforgettable Tamar daughter of Yosef Dymentsztajn, descendants of Rabbi Akiva Eiger.

Do I have the strength to put on paper things and memories about my father's house and in particular about my father z"l? These were only about seventeen years ago, a time of threat on our world, leaving Kutno fallen and trampled by Nazi boots. No, it is not easy at all, but a mitzvah is to present a tombstone to the father and mother who ascended to sainthood in the blood of these days and not even knowing the day of their death and the place of their burial. I did not mourn for them, and I did not visit their grave because, like millions of other members of their people, they were victims of the raging Nazi beast.

And I was just a boy. I did not often see them in their lives, but in all my wanderings, in all my ways and struggles for life, their image was always before my eyes. They are my upbringing and education and their blessing has accompanied me in everything I do.

My Father

My father, Mr. Israel Moshe, came to Kutno in 1916, from his hometown of Łódź, where his family had lived for generations. My father's grandfather, Mr. Israel-Moshe, was a resident of this city and was one of the first industrialists in Łódź, his name is mentioned several times in Prof. Philip Friedman's book on the history of the Jews of Łódź (p. 192), and played a part in the development of industry in this city. One of the sons of Mr. Israel-Moshe, Fishel Wajchselfisz, married the daughter of Mr. Eliyahu Welcman (Mr. Eli Kaliszer) from Kutno. After the marriage, Mr. Fishel, my grandfather, returned to Łódź and began trading in wires.

My father Mr. Israel Moshe was the youngest son of my grandfather and when the day arrived to stand on his own, he married Tamar, daughter of Yosef Dymentsztajn, granddaughter of the late Rabbi Akiva Eiger. These were, however, the days of the First World War and the city of Łódź could not support the young family. After consulting with family members in Kutno, my parents decided to move to Kutno. They arrived there in 1916. When he arrived at his new place of residence, he opened a textile and haberdashery store at 14 Królewska St.

Dad soon acclimatized to his new place of residence and it was not long before he began public activities in Kutno. In fact, it is worth noting that this was not an unusual activity at all, since in Łódź, the city from which he came, Dad was involved in public life. He did not do many things but was always multitasking, enterprising and active by nature but also a scholar, a smart student full of Torah, Arbitrators, Gemara, Mishnah and *Rambam*. He also wanted to pass on all these spiritual treasures to us and to walk in his ways and teachings. But he did not only want to impart the heritage of Judaism to us, but to

everyone who was created in His image, regardless of origin and occupation, and indeed this doctrine and its influence is felt among us to this day, because he himself was a tolerant, kind-hearted man and his ways were pleasant.

As stated, he was a father in his faith, a member of a privileged family and a descendant of Mr. Eliyahu Welcman (Kaliszer). However, his piety did not stand in the way of his life, he was an activist and a member of the witness organization of the merchants' organization in our city and a fighter for the rights of the merchants. Along with him, the Merchants' Committee also included Meir Opatowski, Abraham Szymonowicz and others. In his spare time, he looked at Hebrew newspapers of those days, since he spoke Hebrew. A closet full of books stood in our house, these were books he purchased at his choice and added to them after coming to Kutno. There were many books: Talmud, books of morality and books of chassidim, Commentators and Arbitrators, Torah and Gemara, books of religious philosophy and the writings of Maimonides, and only *The Guide for the Perplexed*¹ did Dad strictly forbid touching. And just plain non-religious books.

Father z"l was also active in the synagogue and in *Mizrachi* – the religious-Zionist party. Together with R' Meir Łeczycki, Royer and Mr. Aharon Shlomo Elberg. But our house was a house-committee for all lovers of Hebrew culture and public life. The house was always open to anyone who had the Zionist idea close to his heart. With joy in my heart, my father accompanied every immigrant who immigrated from Kutno to *Eretz Israel*. I remember that even after we left Kutno in 1935, Dad would return to it to accompany the Kutno sons who immigrated to *Eretz Israel*. But he himself did not get to fulfill the dream of his life. He did not come to Israel.

The war broke out that wreaked havoc on our home and on the whole house of Israel. Like many of the Jewish youth, I was forced to flee from the Nazi killers. In saying goodbye to my father in the city of Lipno, where he had moved, he blessed me on my way, and the last words I heard from him were: "Remember my son that you are a Jew!" And bitter tears flowed from his eyes. At that moment, I remembered an experience from my childhood, as a baby when I was two or three years old. Dad carried me in his arms to the synagogue, probably on the occasion of a solemn event held there, he embraced me and I was sure that he would always protect and guard me from all evil, but Dad knelt under the ax of Nazi murderers and his sons were scattered around the world unprotected and homeless.

My Mother

My mother, Tamar Wajchselfisz, was born to Mr. Yosef Dymentsztajn, a rabbi from Łódź before the First World War, in 1893 and was the granddaughter of the late Mr. Akiva Eiger ztz"l of well-known rabbis in Israel from the chassidim of Kock-Warka². Mother z"l was a devout woman in her faith, but not bigoted. She saw that the world

¹ TN: book originally written in about 1190 by Maimonides.

² TN: Two towns in Eastern Poland.

was changing and there were no ways for her, like in the days of her ancestors. The younger generation should not be required to continue to be faithful, without any change, to the world of their ancestors. And although she understood all the changes that took place around her, she could not completely accept in her heart that her sons would "deviate" from the path of her ancestors, so she asked that at least one of them continue to study Torah. Indeed, my brother Yosef z"l bought³ Torah at the famous Yeshiva of the Sages of Lublin, where he was also ordained a rabbi. We, her younger sons, received a religious-traditional and national education, and we studied at Kutno's high school "*Am-HaSefer*".

Mother never sought to justify the assertive and authoritarian, always standing at the side of the deprived and weak and demanding apologies for insults. She also pitied wandering animals and did not forget them because they were hungry.

Mother z"l used to tell us stories and legends from our people, especially she reminded us of the story of Chana and her seven sons, whose morality was: in all conditions and under all circumstances, be proud of your people and do not bow to false idols in all generations.

For many hours, on summer and winter evenings, she would devote herself to extending relief and help to every poor person and did not spare her trouble and strength if she believed that her help might be of little use.

One request she always asked: to win and see her sons build a house in Israel, but she did not win. But all human and national values in light of which I lived all the days of my life – I inherited from her. Her character and memory have not gone unnoticed in all the upheavals of life since we left the dear and good father's house.

May her memory be bundled in the bundle of life.

My brother Yosef z"l



Yosef Wajchselfisz

Yosef was born in the city of Kutno on the Sunday of Passover 1917⁴, to his father Mr. Israel Moshe Wajchselfisz and mother Tamar née Dymentsztajn, descendants of rabbis and of Rabbi Akiva Eiger ztz"l.

As a child, he studied in the *cheder* "*Yesodei Torah*" in Kutno, where he stood out as one of the most diligent and talented students.

When he reached the age of *mitzvot*, Yosef already knew by heart entire pages of the Gemara and knew how

to explain them sharply. To the chassidim of Skierniewice, he was Kutno's prodigy. From Kutno, he went to the Gur chassidim *yeshiva* in Łódź and from there moved to the Yeshiva of the Sages of Lublin. At this *yeshiva* he received ordination to the rabbinate from famous rabbis, including the Rabbi from Gur and from Skierniewice.

Yosef was one of the young men who published the Torah monthly *Zichron Moshe*. In the same group was also the son of the butcher Mr. Shlomo Hochgelernter z"l. The monthly appeared in Kutno and Yosef, although living in Łódź, left his mark on it and was one of the decisive forces in the editing of the monthly. Yosef also showed great interest in public affairs. He was one of the founders and organizers of the *Agudat Israel* youth organization in Kutno. In 1937, despite living in Łódź, he appeared as the Kutno representative at *Agudat Israel* Youth Conference.

The young people of Kutno loved and respected him for his great devotion to public affairs and for his great vigilance in the life of the Jewish public in Kutno.

His mother was a guide in his life; after her death, Yosef was completely broken and was in mourning and depression. In his conversations, he compared his private catastrophe with the suffering of the nation and its hardships, which came to it in the wake of the destruction... and he would say: trouble for many is half



Discussions on the Torah, in memory of Yehoshua Moshe, son of the Admor of Skierniewice

³ TN: meaning, "learned".

⁴ TN: 8 of April 1917.

consolation. When an individual is in sorrow together with all others, it is possible to comfort him... but who will comfort a miserable young man in his sorrow?... And it was hard for him to console himself for a long time.

During World War II, Yosef traveled to his father and from there to Żychlin.

From here he was transferred to forced labor in the camps.

Eyewitnesses told his brother in Italy that Yosef worked for a German farmer in the village, near Poznań. While trying to escape, he was apprehended by the Nazi-German police and killed on the spot.

Yosef was a builder of *aliyah* for the young Jewish generation in Kutno.

May his memory be blessed!

Characters

Characters and events of the life of our city pass before my eyes, lights and shadows of Jewish reality. A man who has not lived this life, who has not felt the pulse of town life, does not know and will never understand what we have lost. And indeed, it was only yesterday.

Kutno is rightly proud of her important personalities who glorified her name and earned her a worldwide reputation. Indeed, she is proud of Rabbi Yehoshua Trunk, the founder of the Kutno rabbinical dynasty, she is proud of its sons, the great Jewish writer Shalom Asz, of the writer Singer-Bashevis⁵, and more and more renowned people who have added respect and value to our city. But with all the respect these personalities have instilled in our city, they do not reflect the Jewish community within it, the masses of *Beit Israel*, the "everyday" Jews, some of whom were in the daily war for their existence and the existence of their families, the constant struggle not to lose their human and Jewish image...

Indeed, the Shabbat was the day that restored to them the feeling of self-respect, for on that day they knew, that they are the sons of a king, the sons of a people of virtue. All expected all days of the week for the knocks of Nuta HaShamash⁶ ("Nuta Krajer") on the door or shutters of the house with the entry of Shabbat, before lighting the candles that he was announcing, that one should prepare for the work of the Creator. To this day, Neta HaShamash's muffled knocking resonate in the ears. For they symbolized the transition from secular to holiness, from the murky reality to a world that is all spiritual, all transcendence even for a short time, for one day. Indeed, the synagogues, the *shtieblech*, and the Jewish study halls were full of people who prayed to the Lord of the worlds, before whom they prostrated their supplication for their own redemption and for the redemption of all the people of Israel. And after the prayer on Shabbat or on the holiday, the Jews, dressed in black silk capes and *streimelech*, return to their homes to dine around the arranged and solemn table. However, before they arrived at their homes, the Jews would be allowed to receive hot water for tea at the nearby bathhouse.

And here at some distance from here stands the slaughterhouse that works all days of the week, and especially on Shabbat eve and holidays. Here officiates master slaughterer, Mr. Shlomo Hochgelernter. The "*shochet's* knife" between his teeth, his left hand holds the chicken's wings, the right one pulls its head back and that's it, the chicken is slaughtered. And the knife is still between the *shochet's* teeth. But suddenly a woman's voice was heard: "Mr. Shlomo, slaughter my birds!". Mr. Shlomo looks around him and asks the shouting woman: "How many birds do you have?"

— "A little chick", the woman answers...

Sometimes the children of the "*cheder*" also came with the chicken to the slaughterhouse, their mother sent them on Shabbat eve or a holiday, for fear that she might not have time to finish the preparations before lighting the candles. The "*cheder*", the *Talmud-Torah* and the slaughterhouse were located in a single yard.

More than once, "wars" broke out between the children of the *cheder* and the children of *Talmud-Torah*. Then the old housekeeper, the Russian-Christian Smyrna, who was always equipped with a broom, would try to make peace between them with the help of this broom, but did his labor was not rewarded. On the contrary, when the old Smyrna appeared with the broom in his hand, the children forgot the quarrel between them and "with joint forces", with a common "front", they started to tease the old housekeeper. But this is not how they greeted their teacher Mr. Zandberg hy"d, who was the director of the *Talmud Torah*. At the sight of his majesty and his deep, calm voice, there was silence among the hawkish children, all entering their classrooms, excited and sweaty, with in their hearts a determined decision to end the "war" next time...

But the boys will not live on the Pentateuch alone... they had a big and interesting world outside the walls of the "*cheder*" as well. Here, for example, the blacksmith's workshop of the Litvak, near the train station. The blacksmith stands there from morning to evening, forging horses' hooves, cart wheels, iron hinges and yarns, his heavy sledgehammer going up and down, sparks of fire rising high, his muscular arms moving at a steady pace, and the children standing around him with gaping mouths their eyes will never get tired of the juggling that the blacksmith does so amazingly. Their admiration for the blacksmith is especially great, seeing how he wisely knows how to convince the stubborn horse who by no means agrees to be shoed. So, the Litvak blacksmith approached him and whispered in his horse's ear, stroking his stomach and back, and here was another horse in front of them. It's not the same horse anymore! Obedient, submissive, lowers his head to the ground, and his foot is given to the hand of the blacksmith. And even after the end of the ironwork "care", the horse's leg remains hanging in the air, as if he wanted to thank his benefactor for his dedicated care. After the horse is forged, the coachman was also ready. He harnessed his horses among the

⁵ TN: Singer was not born in Kutno, so this seems strange.

⁶ TN: Synagogue assistant.

carriages, tightened the straps, took the reins in his hands, and he was ready to go his own way, to toil his day. Indeed, proud were the carters, scaring all the Gentiles in the town. They were muscular men and not shy. In the morning they went to work and in the evening they returned home. But not only them got up early. The baker, Berl the dirty, was already seen at dawn in the Old Market, his ax and saw on his shoulders as he sawed trees for his bakery oven. After him, the Mekhel the carrier hurried to Yoel Sztajnfeld's warehouse, this is his workplace and it must be guarded.

The whole town is already awake and ready for a new day, for yesterday's worries will be added today, but do not despair. Your people Israel is used to worries and troubles but its spirits will not be broken. There is a God in heaven, a watchful eye and will not forsake his faithful people.

Only the children of Beit Rabban are still carefree. These are the children, the little student boys, who study in the *Institute Katzap*. Mordechai the Teacher lives in the house of Hinech Brot, on Królewska Street. He has two rooms for Mordechai: in one he teaches and the other serves him as a bedroom. There were no wardrobes, the underwear and clothes were scattered in all corners of the room.

Only his Shabbat clothes did he treat respectfully – they hanged on the wall, wrapped in a sheet, as befits clothes intended for a holy day. Mr. Mordechai was chubby, short and heavy with flesh and a black beard adorned his face. Teaching was not a pastime, for him. He saw it as a mission, a vocation that filled his whole heart. When a child was distracted from learning and sank into reveries and dreams, Mr. Mordechai would return him to the dull reality.

— "Do you think that your father pays me for nothing?", he told in the ears of the distracted child, "And what will happen to you? No Pentateuch, no Rashi, just like a Gentile!"

And in order to give more validity to his preaching, he told us about his service in the army of Czar Nikolai, where he was given the nickname "Katzap".

His wife was an assistant, against his will. She was a good woman. During the breaks, she made sure that the children ate their pitas; if a quarrel would break out between the little ones, she tried to make peace between them, reconcile and calm the crying child. That is why everyone remembers her fondly to this day.

There was another Jew named Mordechai in the town – Mordechai the Psalmist. Who will not remember Mordechai sitting on the threshold of his house in the basement, the Book of Psalms in his hand and day and night, saying psalms? The concern for livelihood rested with his wife and three daughters. On market days they set up a stall for their wretched merchandise, ran around like persecuted animals to bring a piece of bread to their home. The rest of the week they "traded" at home, in the basement.

Eva and Herman Kirszbaum

Until the war, this combative Kirszbaum couple was well known in Jewish Kutno. Their activity in the "*Bund*" put them at the forefront of Jewish social life, on a mission for the party. For a time, Herman represented his party in the community and in the city council.

The fate of the war sent them to Warsaw – and only after the liberation of the Polish capital, I was able to deal with the burial of Herman, who fell like a soldier, with a gun in his hand, on the Żoliborz⁷ front during the Polish uprising of General Bor-Komorowski against the Germans (November 1944).

Eva and Herman Kirszbaum belonged to the organized resistance movement in occupied Warsaw, taking an active part in preparing for the uprising. Arriving in Warsaw after the liberation, I met Eva Kirszbaum, who told me about the last years of Herman's struggle and heroic death. She had already applied to the Central Committee of Jews in Poland for the exhumation of his body and burial at the Genscher Cemetery.

One day, a Central Committee car, along with several delegates, including his wife, Eva, and the writer of the lines, drove to the temporary tomb on Żoliborz, where the inscription "Herman Kirszbaum" was written on a piece of paper. Just before we arrived, an incident happened. Before entering the tunnel from the Gdańsk



Herman and Eva KIRSZBAUM

station, Mrs. Eva Kirszbaum had a heart attack and we had to take her to a doctor. She then stayed at the home of B.

⁷ TN: Żoliborz, northern district of Warsaw.

Szefner's wife, the well-known journalist of the post-war "People's Newspaper". The exhumation and second burial took place without Eva.

It took a lot of hard work until we were able to reach the grave through thick snow. The Polish people of Żoliborz gave the fallen fighter in their suburbs the due honor. Then our car drove over empty fields and completely destroyed streets of Warsaw until it reached the Genscher Cemetery⁸. There, Herman Kirszbaum was brought to Israel's grave. In moving words, he was greeted by Salo Fiszgrund⁹ of *Bund* and the writer of these lines.

After the mourning, we went to see Mrs. Szefner to enquire about Eva's health condition. Unfortunately, Mrs. Szefner was barely able to convey to us the sad news that Eva Kirszbaum was no longer among the living. Her sensitive soul did not bear the experiences of the years of war, the death of her Herman. Her heart could not stand the prospect to exhume his dead body and bury it in the Genscher Cemetery. Death united them both as they had been in their lives.

Honor their memory!

Efraim WAJCHSELFISZ, Tel Aviv

⁸ TN: Warsaw Jewish Cemetery on Okopowa St.

⁹ TN: Salo Fiszgrund, a main *Bund* leader in the interwar period, born in Sułkowice on September 7, 1893, died March 4, 1971 in Tel Aviv.