

The Torah Personality

A Treasury of Biographical Sketches

Collected from the pages of

The Jewish Observer

*by Rabbi Nisson Wolpin,
Editor*

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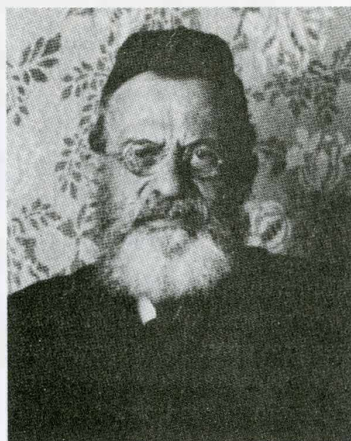
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2019

The True Lomza

*remembering
Lomza, Poland
before its
destruction in
World War II —
and a
commemorative
volume that
violates the
truth*



by Chaim Shapiro

The Last Rav of Lomza
Rabbi Moshe Shatzkes זצ"ל

THE ZOHAR says that even a *Sefer Torah* must have *mazal* — in some we read often, in others only on *Simchas Torah*. It should be no surprise, then, that European communities also fared according to their individual *mazal*. Some will never be remembered, while others will find their way into the awareness of posterity as Jewish centers of Europe, if they are memorialized in a *Yizkor Book*. Over 500 such books have already been published. Most are in Yiddish, others in Hebrew or a combination of both; some even include English in their text.

They usually begin with a historical background: when, where and how the city was founded; when and why Jews settled there; followed by chapters about the rabbis who served there through the years: their biographies, their greatness in Torah (that chapter, it seems, is the pride of every town, and the book lingers over every detail). Then follow institutions of learning, the spiritual centers of the town — the *batei midrashim*, associations, charity societies. On to the economic pictures — types of work, political parties, vignettes about personalities, groups, or a profile of the entire city. The final chapter is always the same: the destruction of the Jewish community, and stories of survivors.

The purpose of all these books is certainly not for the survivors; rather it is for posterity, for future historians that they are written. So we ask: do these books really give us a true picture of their cities? Or do the editors sometimes bend the truth in order to grind their own ideological axes? Churchill once said, "History will be good to me, because I will write it." — Are these histories only good to their historians? I can not evaluate a book dedicated to a city I have never even visited. But there are three books that I can discuss with some knowledge; they immortalize my two hometowns, Tiktin and Lomza. *Sefer Tiktin* published in Hebrew (Tel Aviv, 1959), *Sefer Zikaron Lekehillas Lomza* in Hebrew (Tel Aviv, 1952), and *Lomza* in Yiddish (N.Y. 1957).

☛ The Lomza Distinction

Sefer Tiktin (606 pages) is the pride of my library. To my great sorrow, I can not say the same about the two books on Lomza. Neither the 371 double pages of the one nor the 377 pages of the other give a true picture of my town.

Certainly credit is due to the editor, Dr. Yom Tov Levinski, for a superior technical job. The detail and organization of historical material in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish shows painstaking research, with limited materials available.

Everything, indeed, did seem faithful to my Lomza until I came to page 120, where suddenly the truth took an unexpected twist. After an excellent description of the last and most beloved rabbi of Lomza, the Gaon Rabbi Moshe Shatzkes (later Rosh Yeshiva in Yeshivas Rabbi Yitzchak Elchonon in New York), the editor adds the following comments: "With the outbreak of the Second World War, the Rabbi forsook his flock and escaped to Vilna, his birthplace ... His escape in such hard times was a great blow to the Jewish community. Often they complained 'We have no rabbi; no leader; we are lost!'"

A few paragraphs later: "When Rabbi Shatzkes left Lomza, the community was left like sheep without a shepherd. With a heartbreaking sigh, they would tell of Rabbi Yehuda Leib Gordon who risked his life many times under the Czars. They remembered their Rabbi, Elya Chaim Meisels, who was constantly concerned that no Jew be drafted into the Czar's army. Now there is no one to help."

Now let us look at the facts: In 1939, the Germans (far more deadly than any of the Czars!) bombarded Lomza mercilessly because it was the first major city near the East Prussian border.

The inhabitants left town and spread out through the surrounding villages and fields. When the German army came, they found all the Jews in the fields. They placed machine guns around a field full of people and shouted orders to keep their faces to the ground. Then they started shooting over their heads. Several people raised their heads only inches, and were killed. Then the Germans tied the rabbi to a tree, and aimed a machine gun straight at him. A Jewish refugee who had been an officer in the Kaiser's army pleaded with the German officer to spare the rabbi's life. The German officer pulled out half of the rabbi's beard, relishing his painful screams, and then he released him.

With the Stalin-Hitler pact on the division of Poland, no one expected Lomza to be transferred into Russian hands, since it was so close to the East Prussian border. Yet on *Hoshana Rabbah*, the Soviet tanks rolled into town. The first worry on everyone's mind was the welfare of the Rav. A spellbinding orator, he had often condemned the Communists from the pulpit. The older generation knew the Bolshevik's policy of keeping records on every personality — with their men in every town and village, it was no difficult feat for them.¹ So the community leaders pleaded with Rabbi Shatzkes to hide, or if possible to escape, before he would be arrested ... And these "historians" have the audacity to criticize him!

Saved from Bombardment

In the heavy bombardment, three quarters of the city was destroyed, including our home and business, but the impressive buildings housing the Yeshiva and the Talmud Torah were unharmed. The Rosh Yeshiva's house, located next to the Yeshiva and across from the Talmud Torah, was also undamaged. So my family and those of my two uncles moved in. (The Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yechiel Michel Gordon, was in New York at that time.) The Talmud Torah housed ten grades, 500 children learning *Aleph-Bais* on up to those studying *Gemara* independently. The entire third floor was assigned by the *kehillah* to the Rabbi for his personal use: a *bais din shtub* (rabbinical court and receiving room), library, and a spacious apartment for his family.

The Bolsheviks immediately confiscated the building for use

1. When the Rosh Yeshiva of Kamenitz, Rabbi Reuvain Grozovsky applied for an exit visa in Vilna, the Bolsheviks showed him their dossier on him, listing all his activities since he left Minsk from the time of the Bolshevik revolution. The same with Rabbi Aharon Kotler.

as a public school. And we watched helplessly as the children were indoctrinated in Soviet ideology.

Once, a delegation of local dignitaries accompanied by the Commissar for Education of the White Russian Republic (from Minsk) visited the school. (Lomza was incorporated into White Russia; a Commissar is the counterpart of the Secretary of Education in the U.S.) In the class of my little brother Shimonke, then age ten, the Commissar took out a kaiser-roll² from a bag and presented it to my brother. The child hesitated for a moment but the Commissar insisted "*Vozme sinnok, pokushay*" ("Take it child, eat"). The boy took the roll, put on his cap, and said the *brachah* in front of the Bolshevik delegation, and half the class answered *Omein*.

The principal and the teacher turned white; the Commissar turned red. He grabbed the roll out of the child's mouth and screamed: "What did you say? What language was it? Not Yiddish?" The boy replied. "It's a blessing in Hebrew: Jews give thanks to G-d before they eat anything."

The Commissar shouted further: "Stalin sent you that roll, not G-d! Did you ever see G-d? *Chapukha!* (nonsense) There is no G-d! Stalin, the father of all labor people, the sunshine of the world — he gave you that roll!"

He then turned to the faculty: "Is that how you raise Soviet children? Religion instead of Marxism, Leninism and Stalinism? Whose hand is involved in this? Tell me and I'll cut it right off!"

The principal replied, "We know whose hand is involved in it — that cleric who used to live upstairs. If we could only get hold of him, we would take care of him ourselves, but he escaped to Vilna."

That same day, my father — fearing arrest — took off for Bialystok until things would blow over. As the news hit town, every Jew raised his eyes to Heaven: "Thank G-d our beloved rabbi is in Vilna!" And now these learned men, safe and secure in Tel Aviv and New York, criticize our beloved rabbi for forsaking his flock!

❖ The Party Paragraphs

I turn more pages ... So many familiar faces, photos and names — apt descriptions of places and events I knew — it breaks

2. In poverty-stricken USSR, white bread or rolls was eaten only on holidays. In Poland, we would eat white bread and rolls every day, and *challah* every Shabbos. But to a Commissar in those days, a kaiser-roll was a big prize.

my heart. So many institutions of learning and charity. Only 12,000 Jews out of a general population of 30,000, and look at what they had accomplished in spite of being surrounded by anti-Semites! In spite of meager means, they accomplished more than the Poles did, in every field of community life — an achievement unrivaled by any other people.

I read the chapter on *chinuch* and education, and not a word on the Bais Yaakov school for girls (organized by my aunt Chana Shapiro).

I reached the chapter titled "*Miflagot*" (p. 215: political parties; in the Yiddish edition — "*Partayen*" p. 145). Living — rather, existing — in a hostile environment is difficult. The government made it official policy to shut out Jews from every source of livelihood, telling them to emigrate. But where to? Palestine was closed by the British; America had a quota system and a waiting list of years; and the rest of the world, totally closed. Government jobs were closed to Jews. There was not one single Jewish mailman, policeman, or janitor in all of Poland. There was indeed one way to obtain a government job — by converting to Roman Catholicism. In spite of poverty, there were no applicants.

In response, a variety of political parties was born within the Jewish community, each with its own program of how to help the people. The party-spectrum ranged as follows: (1) Agudath Israel, (2) Mizrachi (Religious Zionists), (3) General Zionists (Chaim Weizmann's group — in Israel today, they form part of the Likud); (4) Zionist-Revisionists (Jabotinsky's party, which gave birth to the Irgun — Jabotinsky's best known disciple is Menachem Begin); (5) Poalei Zion (Labor Zionists who combine Zionism with Socialism — their Israeli counterpart is the Mapam); (6) The Bund (anti-religious, anti-Zionist — they wanted to build a better society with pure socialism, uniting with proletarians of all nations. As for the Jews, they naively sought to build a Jewish autonomous society, based on Yiddish language and Yiddish culture — such as the tales of Sholom Aleichem and the history of Shimon Dubnow); (7) Communists (dialectical-Marxists, split into two factions: Trotskyites and Stalinists. As for the Jews, they envisioned a Jewish socialist culture where they would assimilate into the local population and live happily ever after. They hated religion as "the opiate of the masses," and Zionism as a fascist-nationalism for Jews). The Communist party made strides among the naive youth. They represented the USSR, as a heaven for Jews: no discrimination, neither rich nor poor

classes, free education; heaven, indeed, in comparison to the bitter reality of anti-Semitic Poland.

Now let us examine how the party spectrum is recorded for posterity and history in *Lomza*: Agudath Israel fared with exactly twenty and one half lines; 162 words (in the Hebrew text, 29 lines). The Mizrachi did a little better with three-quarters of a page, plus six photos of its youth organization, Hashomer Hadati, forerunner of Bnei Akiva. General Zionists got eight pages plus fourteen photos. Zionist-Revisionists — twenty-three lines plus one picture. Poalei Zion (Labor Zionists) — fifteen pages plus twenty pictures. Bund — twelve pages plus fifteen photos (in the Yiddish book, twenty pages plus the pictures). The Communists got four pages and three pictures.

Is this my hometown? I don't recognize it! Was this deliberate falsification or simply lack of material? And look who writes an article on the Socialist Zionists: a familiar face — how can I forget him? He was a part-time geography teacher in Talmud Torah. Then one day he didn't show up for class. Rumors had it that he skipped town, charged with a crime unheard of among Jews, namely, sexual assault. Somehow he made it to *Eretz Yisrael* — and now his photo is decorating this book!

❖ § The Lomza Party Structure — As It Was

The Jewish community was organized in a *kehillah*, which supervised every phase of communal life and represented the Jews before their neighbors and the government. The board was elected in democratic, secret-ballot elections. The thirteen members of the board (each one was called a *Dozor* or *Parnes*) elected a president called the *Rosh Hakahal*. The Agudah and Mizrachi always formed a united religious block for the election, winning a majority with ten members.³ By agreement, the two would alternate the presidency. At no time ever was there a *Rosh Hakahal* from any other party. In fact, the very last *Rosh Hakahal* was Reb Mendl Kalinski (Agudah) — a soap manufacturer, a Gerrer Chassid who dressed in Chassidic cap, beard, and *kapota*.

And Agudath Israel was recorded in the book with twenty lines!

Before the Germans organized a *Judenrat*, the *kehillah* still

3. In one term the board included: my father; my uncle, Reb Yechiel Kamchi; Reb Y. Boruch Mishkovsky (the son of the Stavisker Tzaddik and brother of the Krinker Rav); and Reb Nechemia Rabinovitz (secretary of the Lomza Yeshiva and son of Rabbi Akiva Rabinowitz, Rav of Poltava and publisher of *Hapelles*); also Reb Zvi Mark (see later).

represented the Jews. The Nazi commandant once requested fifty Jews from the *kehillah* for one week, to do various jobs for the German authorities. The *kehillah* obliged. Next week he came for another fifty Jews, even though the previous group had never returned. Only two members of the board, Mizrachi leaders, were in the *kehillah* office. They demanded to know the whereabouts of the previous fifty Jews.

"It's none of your business," the Nazi replied, and went on to warn them, "If you don't supply me with another fifty you will be shot immediately."

The two refused and with proud heads held high, Reb Yaakov Tablicki and Reb Yankl Gelcinski הי"ד marched off to their death. And no Jews were given.

Mizrachi did not even rate one full page in the book!

❖ The Bund and the "Tregers"

The Bund and the other parties claimed to represent the working class — the proletarians. The symbol of the proletarians in Lomza were the *tregers* — the stevedores who unloaded and carried anything and everything on their strong backs. (They used to say "the heavier the load, the easier it is to carry.") Without a trade, they were the lowest on the pay scale — "*Amcho*." Let us examine how close they were to the Bund, the Communists, or other Socialist parties ... And who knows more about the *tregers* than I? I was practically raised on their knees.⁴

Their base was located in front of our store, which was in the center of town (across the street from the Magistrat-City Hall). While waiting for a job, they would sit on the front steps of our store. We made two benches for them, to keep the entrance to the store free. ... Looking at the photo, I see the first one from the left on the bench — the *Meshugene Dveire*, as he was known. He hated children, but he had to tolerate us four Shapiro boys. One summer day (I must have been nine or ten), I stepped inside the Chevrah Tehillim to daven *Minchah*.⁵ There he was, sitting and saying *Tehillim* (Psalms). He motioned to me, and hesitantly I approached him. He placed his huge arm around me and asked me to say *Tehillim* together with him. He must have just unloaded a

4. The local ruffians knew that to lay a hand on the Shapiro boys meant the *tregers* would twist their arms off.

5. In Chevrah Tehillim (a *Polush* from the big *shul*, located one block from the City Hall), *minyanim* would daven from sunrise until midnight. The beggars there were called "millionaires," for in one day, they would acquire *Omein's*, *Borchu's* and *Kedushah's* worth a million. In between *minyanim*, people would say *Tehillim*.



The "Tregers": "Meshugene Dveire" at extreme left, "Moshiach" third from left, with Reb Yude to his left.

wagon of flour because he was white all over, and the dust got onto my clothes. When I got home, my mother was ready for me: "What have you done to your clothes?" I had the best excuse; "You won't believe it! The Meshugene Dveire put his arm around me and made me say *Tehillim*."

"You mean Reb Shloime said *Tehillim* with you!" (That's how they were called — always "Reb" in front of their names.)

The fourth from the left is Reb Yehuda. His wife and daughter visited us almost every Shabbos, for tea and cake. His son, Meir, became the business agent of the *tregers*. Each morning, he would walk up to his father in front of everybody and roll up his sleeve to prove that he had put on *tefillin*.

The third from the left was called "*Moshiach*." He was their king — the tallest (close to seven feet), the strongest, and the biggest mouth of them all. Moshiach had six sons and three daughters, all tall and strong. Some followed him in the trade. When the *muzinik'le* was born, Moshiach decided that he should be a rabbi. He sent him to Talmud Torah through all ten grades. He was my brother Lazar's classmate, and both graduated with honors. Together they were admitted to the Lomzer Yeshiva and they became *shutfim*.⁷ The pride would glow from Moshiach when he talked about his Yude'le. With esteem, he would address

6. A *muzinik'l* means the youngest of the children, or a *ben z'kunim*.

7. In Lomza, a *chavrusa* (study companion) was called a *shutef* (literally "partner").

my father ever so often: "Reb Alter, your Lazer'ke and my Yude'le are *shutfim*. Please test him to see how he's doing in the *Gemara*." He would constantly boast, "My *muzinik'l* is a *chaver* (colleague) of the Kolaker's⁶ *einik'l*, can you believe it?"

Then one summer day, the two boys (age fifteen), both excellent swimmers, went swimming in the Narew River. They had rented a row boat, and out on the river it ran into a high current and turned over. My brother made it to the shore but "little Moshiach" (as we called him) did not. What a tragedy! What a funeral! My brother knew that Yude'le had been copying the *Rebbe's shiurim*. He also wrote Torah of his own. My brother found Yude'le's notebook in his *shtender*. He didn't have the heart to deliver it personally, so he sent it to the parents with me. With love, Moshiach pressed the notebook to his heart, telling his wife, "This is our Yude'le's Torah."

Then the Rosh Yeshiva, Reb Y. Zelig Ruch, came with some of the directors of the yeshiva to offer their condolences. The moment the Rosh Yeshiva opened the door, the giant man fell to the floor, grabbed the Rosh Yeshiva's both feet, and between sobs said, "*Rabbi, ich bin an erlicher Yid. Farvos hob ich nisht zoche geven tzu zen a zun a Rav?*" (Rabbi, I'm a sincere Jew. Why did I not merit seeing my son become a rabbi?)

The *treger*s had their own *shul* called *Poalei Tzeddek*. A Rabbi taught them *Chayei Odom (halachah)* and *Ein Yaakov (agaddah)*. Moshiach made sure that their Rav was paid every week from the *treger's* meager income: "We carry on our backs and we want to get paid. The Rabbi carries the Torah in his head and tries to teach us *grobbe kep* (lunkheads). Why shouldn't he get paid?" No one dared contradict him.

Are these the revolutionaries, the socialists, the anti-religionists, the Bundists, the Communists, the Zionist-Socialists, that these historians talk about?

In 1935, the first Jewish port opened in Tel Aviv (Jaffa was

6. A "*poretz*" (pl. *pritzim*) was a big land owner. Under the Czars, there were many Jewish *pritzim*. My grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Velvl Szeniak, was one of them. He was a *talmid chacham* who had a daily *shiur* in *Rambam*. He was the owner of an entire village called Kolaki (located between Lomza and Zembrovo). When the peasants began their uprising against the land owners, the first to be attacked, naturally, were the Jewish ones. Zeide realized this, and moved his family to Lomza just in time. He bought property and established a big business. There he became known as "the Kolaker", and we the "Kolaker's *einiklach*" (grandchildren of the Kolaker). Interesting to note, in 1965 a report came through London that the city government of Zembrovo unveiled a monument for 5000 Jews killed by the Nazis, in the village of Kolaki. Little do they know that legally this is my land, for I'm the only survivor. I'm even named after my Zeide.

an Arab port). The Jewish stevedores of Salonika⁹ came to help in the operation of the new port. The *tregers* of Lomza immediately sent off a telegram: "We are just as strong and willing as the stevedores of Salonika."

Are these anti-Israel Bundists?

45 The Mark of Falsification

I keep on turning the pages: four pages for the Communists. — What a travesty of justice! — What a lie! *Wait, here is a familiar face; what do you know, Berl Mark!*

Reb Zvi Mark lived in the third house from us. He was my father's friend. They once served together on the *kehilla* board. He used to *daven* and learn in *Chevrah Magen Avraham*. He was a *gabbai* in the *Hashgochas Yesoimim*¹⁰ and a member of *Mizrachi*. Reb Zvi somehow became a *maskil*. This eventually rubbed off on his two intellectual sons and both secretly became Communists (the Communist Party was illegal in Poland).

After the war, I found out that his son Berl was still alive. He had spent the war years in Moscow, a leader of the Polish Communist Party. He was a prominent member of the committee that organized the new Polish Army in the USSR. And when the Communist regime was finally established in Warsaw, he returned, together with the other leaders. He could have gotten any position with the government, but chose to be the head of the "Jewish Historical Institute" of Warsaw, because he was a Yiddish writer before the war (perhaps he was too "Jewish" for the Poles).

In those days, no one was able to emigrate from the USSR except Polish citizens, who could return to Communist Poland. I needed some help on behalf of a relative who was not permitted to leave Russia for Poland. I then wrote to Berl at the Historical Institute. My name alone evoked his memories, and he promised to do his best, as he had excellent connections in the Polish Embassy in Moscow. A deadline was established for the returnees by an agreement of the governments of USSR and Poland. Yet there was no action on my case even though the final day was approaching.

In the meantime, the Polish foreign minister arrived in Washington. According to the newspapers, he invited a Baltimore

9. The port in Salonika, Greece, was closed on Shabbos, for all the stevedores were *Shomrei Shabbos*.

10. An orphanage for boys. There was a *Kinderheim* and a separate orphanage for girls.

industrialist — the late Jacob Blaustein (vice president of Amoco, and Standard Oil of Indiana) — for a meeting about oil business in Poland.

With great difficulty I got an appointment with the multi-millionaire and he promised me to take up the case with the Foreign Minister. The Pole tried to butter up the oil man: "Mr. Blaustein, you are a member of the US delegation to the United Nations. You are a national and international personality. Why do you get involved in private cases of this kind?"

But Mr. Blaustein did not fall for the flattery. "Your excellency," he replied, "this is a democracy. Every individual counts and free movement of people, free emigration is basic to democracy." While the result was nil, it did have some repercussions in Warsaw, for I soon received a letter from Berl Mark: "Please do me a favor. Stop writing to me." Such a request from behind the Iron Curtain means the person's career or life is at stake, so I stopped writing.

Then my *landsman* became Professor Berl Mark, and he began publishing books like *Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto*, *Uprising in the Bialystok Ghetto*; all kinds of pamphlets and "scientific papers" — all following the party line: The Communists and their fellow travelers organized all the uprisings, helped by the Communist "People's Army" and Soviet partisans ... while all other parties within the Jewish community were cooperating with the Nazis.

I knew that the Poles¹¹ falsified history to fit their line of propaganda; that's *their* business. But falsifying *Jewish* history as head of a Historical Institute hurts. So I sent off a letter to him, against his wishes. And if it would hurt him, so be it: "I don't know where your father is buried — Is he together with my father¹² and uncle Reb Yechiel Kamchi, and our old *dayan* Reb Avrohom Yoseph Cynowicz in the Felciner forest? If so, Reb Zvi Mark is ashamed before his life-long friends because of the lies his son is writing about the religious parties of which your father was a member. — Did he die in Auschwitz? Then his ashes must be twisting and turning in the wind, in shame of the falsifications

11. The Soviet encyclopedia and the history of the USSR and the Bolshevik party is rewritten every so often. What was true in one encyclopedia becomes false in the next. The current official Polish history is totally false, doctored to fit the Party line.

12. Before there was even a ghetto, the Germans arrested 150 prominent people. Among them were my father, my uncle and the old *dayan*. Later they claimed that someone had committed sabotage by cutting the telephone wires. All 150 were taken out to the Felcine forest near the city and shot.

his son is trying to establish as historical facts."

And Professor Berl Mark — photograph, writings and all — graces the pages of the *Lomza Yizkor* book!

☛ From Prison to the Book

I keep on reading: there is a photo of Hershel Smoliar. Who is he? It turns out that, actually, he is not from Lomza, but from Zembrowe (15.5 miles from Lomza — 25 klm), but he spent a number of years in the famous Lomza prison for Communist activities. I guess that makes him a Lomzer.

But that's not all. There is more to his "*Yichus*." The party and the government of the Polish People's Republic appointed him as head of all the Jews in Poland. And in that capacity, like a faithful dog, he followed the party line to the letter, above and beyond the letter. The Arabs were "progressive elements" to him, Israel and its Jews a gang of Fascists. His campaign against *Yiddishkeit* and against Israel was the most vicious in all of Poland. He did all he could to stop Jews from leaving Poland. He threatened the few remaining Jews into staying to build the new Socialist fatherland. But no decent Jew would want to build a new life on a cemetery. (And what was Poland, if not a huge Jewish cemetery?) So they found a way out, in spite of Smoliar.

Most interesting: when things got too hot for the Jewish Communists in Poland, Hershel Smoliar forsook his "Socialist fatherland" and escaped to — of all places — his "Fascist" motherland — namely, Israel. And Mother Zion opened her arms to welcome her renegade sons, who had spit in her face for so long. All those Communists who were rejected by the party only because they were born Jewish, found refuge in Israel — including the widow of Berl Mark.

☛ The Alef Encounters

The book carries more names of "Communist leaders" who are still building the "Socialist fatherland" to this very day. Names I never head of. *But wait! there is one I do know: Colonel Gershon Alef. How could I forget him!*

It was right after the war. My tank battalion was stationed in Osoviec, near the town Novi Dvor, close to Warsaw. At every opportunity, I would go to Warsaw to look for fellow Jews. I could not tell this to my Russian colonel, so I used to go without a pass and spoke and saluted only Russian style even though in Polish uniform (with full hand, as opposed to the Polish two-fingered

salute). The Soviet MPs thought I was a Russian officer attached to the Polish army, while the Polish MPs did not dare question me, thinking I was a Russian officer.

One day, while still in working uniform and tank helmet, I hitched a ride with a Russian military truck and got off on a Warsaw street, full of the debris of the war's destruction. I noticed a ship-shape Polish colonel at the other end of the street — a pencil pusher, in shiny boots. Normally, I would have totally ignored him, for men of battle resent desk officers; but I was without my medals and battle insignia, and I did not want to start an argument. I gave him the Soviet salute, and to my surprise he returned it, identically! Our eyes met for a split second, and after we passed one another, we both turned around. He was a Jew from back home — Alef, whose parents lived at the other end of our street! Military protocol demanded that I wait for him to speak first, for I was outranked — but how could I? It was my very first "regards" from home. Just to be sure, I said in Polish, "*Panie Pułkowniku, zdaje mi się, że Pan pochodzi z Łomży*" ("Sir colonel, it seems to me that you are from Łomża). He smiled and replied, "*Pewnie Panie Poruczniku*" (Certainly, Sir Lieutenant). Overwhelmed, I was sure now that it was indeed Alef. I dropped all formalities, stretched out my hand and showered him with questions in Yiddish:

Shalom Aleichem, Alef, Recognize me? Have you been in a ghetto or in Russia? Thank G-d, you are alive! The first Jew from home I have ever met!

He shook my hand and said in Polish, "*Bardzo przepraszam ja się spiesze*" (I'm very sorry, I'm in a hurry). He saluted and marched off.

I was mortified. The first Jew I met from home and he won't even speak to me! I sat down on the heaps of rubble. If not for my shame of people passing by, I would have cried. Why didn't he speak to me? Was it my speaking Yiddish in public? Does the name of G-d irritate him? Why didn't I chase after him?

I never saw him again, but I heard and read a lot about him. He served with the Partisans, under the name "Bolek" or Bolkoviak, where apparently he earned his rank of Colonel. He was later appointed Polish Military Attache in Washington. No military expert, he served as the eyes and ears of Stalin. That was later obvious, for as soon as Tito began his revolt against Stalin, Col. Bodek was transferred to Belgrade. As soon as Marshal Tito made his final break with Moscow, the first one to be expelled

from Yugoslavia was the Polish Military Attache, my *landsman* Colonel Bolkoviak.

He married a non-Jewish woman, and while most Jewish Communists left Poland, he remained there to build the Socialist Peoples Republic, to this very day. *And that infidel is in the pages of Lomza!*

Every nation is entitled to its share of renegades and traitors. We Jews, because of our circumstances, are perhaps entitled to a larger share. But do we have to enshrine them for posterity?

5 A Yom Tov for Our Enemies

When I read the *Lomza* book for the first time, I was so enraged that I sent off a letter of protest to the editor, Dr. Yom Tov Levinski. He replied that he understood my anger, but let's face it; because of the economic conditions in Poland, the Communists did make strides among the youth. Besides, he said, "In a way I was forced." His last words puzzled me. Who forced him? Berl Mark may have been forced to follow the party line. Or perhaps he felt he was preserving documents in the only way he could hope to save them — by publishing them before the Poles destroyed them. But who could force an editor in Tel Aviv?

I had a second look at the publishers and editors of *Tiktin* and compared them to the publishers of *Lomza*. In *Tiktin*, I found Reb Yosef Pines (my uncle's brother), who left his fortune for the establishment of a *kollel*; Rabbi Shulman (now a chaplain in the IDF), an alumnus of Baranovitz and Kamenitz; Rabbi Ravitz (member of the *Bais Din* of Tel Aviv); Rabbi Pinie Levinsohn, Brooklyn.

On the other hand, most of the members of the *Lomza* publication committee are unknown to me. They probably arrived in America before I was born. However, I do know the editor, H. Sobotko. He was a leader in the Bund back home, and in America, he was an executive member of the Forward Association, which is the local fortress of the Bund.¹³

Could that be the answer to my puzzle? The final analysis seems to indicate: On reading a *Yizkor* Book, first check the ideology of the editors and writers. You can be sure that they will

13. Until recently, the *Forward* was still decorating its mast-head with the slogan "Proletarians of all nations unite!" Nowadays, in tune with the sentiments of its religious readership, it has changed its slogan to: "Freedom for all people," "Freedom for Jews to lead a Jewish life," "A secure *Medinas Yisrael*," and "A free labor movement." Gone is the hatred of Zion, gone is the hatred of religion. It even quotes from the *Parshah* of the week and the *Daf Yomi*!

twist the facts to their fancy, to suit their ideology. How can you check further? If the editors or writers personally write in detail about the leftist parties, you know for sure that the book is not a true mirror of the town. Those who never were in Europe will never understand. So don't try to become an "expert" by reading one or two *Yizkor* Books ... After all is said and done, it may be best to stay away from the subject completely.