

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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Tiktin, Poland

by Chaim Shapiro

The Early Years

TIKTIN was founded in the year 1437. In 1522, ten Jews from Grodno, Lithuania, petitioned for permission to be the first Jews to settle there. At that time, Lithuania, the last pagan state on the continent, was a vast country, three times the size of Poland, stretching from the Baltic almost to the Black Sea, including areas known today as White Russia (where Minsk is located) and Ukraine (Kiev). Even though Tiktin was on the Polish side of the boundary, the Jews of Tiktin considered themselves "Litvakes," speaking a pure Lithuanian Yiddish, betraying their Grodno origins.

Rabbanim

In America, the contemporary rabbi tends to mold the congregation in his image. By contrast, in Europe of old, the reflection worked in reverse: the *kehillah* selected a Rav in its own image. As a result, one could gain a good insight into the workings of a *kehillah* by the personality of the Rav and his stature in Torah.

Thus, we take note of the appearance of the name of the first Rav, Reb Mordechai (1538), as judging a *din Torah* (legal case) together with the renowned *Maharshal* (Rabbi Shlomo Lurya) sixteen years after the first *minyan* had settled in Tiktin. In 1590 we find a record of a *takanah* (ordinance) regarding the rabbinate signed by Benjamin Aaron Charif, Rav of Tiktin, together with the *Maharam M'Lublin*, Rabbi Mordechai Yeffes (הלבושים), Rabbi Ephraim Lunshitz (כלי יקר), Rabbi Yeshaya Hurwitz (של"ה), Rabbi Yehoshua Falk (סמ"ע) and Rabbi Shlomo Eidlish (מהרש"א). On other documents are found other rabbis who served as Rav in Tiktin: the *Maharam M'Tiktin*,¹ then the *Maharsha*, and the *Pnei Yeshoshua-Moginei Shlomo*.² These are followed by: Reb Moshe

1. במוקי יוסף, יבמות, חרושי אנשי שם מוהר"ן שפירא — מהר"ם מטיקטין שליט"א.

2. That is, *Sheilos Uteshuvos Pnei Yehoshua*, grandfather of the *Pnei Yehoshua* on Shas.

Zev (מראות הצובאות, ואגודת אווב) and the *ba'ar* היטיב who served as *dayan* there. From 5609 (1849) to 5613 (1853), the Rav was Rabbi Yehoshua Isaac Shapiro, known as "Reb Izele Charif," who published eleven *sefarim*, including the עמק יהושע ונועם יהושע. From Tiktin, he went to Slonim and became known as "Reb Izele Slonimer." In 1689, Reb Aryeh Leib, the son of the *Taz* and the grandson of the *Bach*, became Rav, to be followed by Reb Moshe Ziskind Rutenburg, who left Tiktin to become Rav of the famous three *kehillos* Altuna-Hamburg-Wansbeck, where he served together with the *Chacham Zvi*, Rabbi Zvi Ashkenazi.

In our generation, Rabbi Avrohom Kalmanowitz was Rav, from 1931-1937.³

How did Tiktin merit such outstanding *Rabbanim*? Perhaps the following legend may shed some light on the matter: In the early days of Tiktin, various members of royalty would sell, trade, and lease huge tracts of land; indeed, they owned literally dozens of towns and villages. On one occasion, the legendary Count Potocki was involved in a trade with Count Barnicki and they could not come to terms. Finally Count Barnicki made a wager with Potocki:

"I'll accept your price if you'll find one Jewish home dark on Thursday night in Tiktin!" The old Pole knew his Jewish citizenry — Thursday nights, every Jewish home was illuminated, for in every house in Tiktin, someone was learning a *mishmar* (an all-night Torah session).

✽ "Vaad Arba Ha'aratzos": The Committee of Four Lands

In the fifteenth century, the Polish Kings granted autonomy to the Jewish communities, recognizing the organized *kehillos* as both the internal authority and the representatives of the communities vis-a-vis the King. The rabbis also gained the authority to enforce judgments in money matters and to punish sinners. The country was divided into four lands; "Great Poland," with its seat in Posen (Poznan); "Small Poland," seat in Cracow (Krakow); "Podolye," seat in Lemberg (Lvov); and "Vollin," seat in Ostrog (Vladimir).

Then Polish Queen Jadwiga married the Lithuanian Great Duke Jegello, thus establishing the Jagello Dynasty in Poland, eventually becoming the Polish-Lithuanian Union (and the conversion of pagan Lithuania to Christianity). Lithuania followed

3. Rabbi Kalmanowitz is well-known as the founder of the Mirrer Yeshiva in Brooklyn after World War II.

the Polish example, granting the autonomy to its Jewish communities: A committee of five lands was established, representing the *kehillos* of "Brisk," "Vilno," "Grodno," "Pinsk" and "Slutsk." Hence Grodno and Tiktin were for the first time paying taxes to the same king, resulting in friction between the two communities.

In those days, individual taxes were unknown. The *kehillah* collected taxes from member-families and paid a lump-sum tax to the king. The more member-families, and the more communities in a province, the lighter the individual tax load. Grodno wanted Tiktin to belong to her "land" as part of its tax-base. But Tiktin had developed spiritually and financially, and was invited to be part of the Committee of Four of Poland proper. Rivalry increased between Tiktin and Grodno over four smaller *kehillos* located between the two communities, each one claiming them for herself.

Representatives of all these "lands" and their representative rabbinate would convene at the yearly *yarid* (international fair) where they drafted *takanos* (ordinances) for all member lands, and major *din Torahs* (disputes) would be adjudicated. The dispute of Tiktin vs. Grodno was brought to the annual *yarid* and the decision was in favor of Tiktin. Grodno bickered and hesitated in accepting the *psak*, but the threat of *cherem* was enough to force the issue. Thus, Tiktin became recognized as a major *kehillah* in Poland.

❖ The Psak of Reb Chaim of Stuchin

One of the Committee of Four Lands' *takanos* limited a local Rav to deciding on *din Torahs* not exceeding 500 gulden. A case of greater magnitude was to be brought before the district *bais din*. A *kehillah* was founded in Stuchin (in the Tiktin district) by Rabbi Chaim Shenberg. A recognized *talmid chacham* and wealthy businessman, he served temporarily as Rav of Stuchin. Reb Chaim once decided a *din Torah* of 800 gulden and was immediately summoned before the *bais din* of Tiktin, to explain his breach of conduct. Reb Chaim justified his actions as follows: "The judiciary in *Klal Yisrael* was organized on the advice of Yisro, Moshe Rabbeinu's father-in-law. Notice, Yisro advised 'They shall bring every *great* matter to you, and every *small* case they should judge themselves.' However, Moshe Rabbeinu ordered, 'Every *difficult* case be brought to me.' Why the change from *big* to *difficult*? Yisro had planned that Moshe's *psak-gelt*

(legal fee), based on percentage, should yield him more money. However, Moshe Rabbeinu's concern was elsewhere. He knew that the same legal principle applies to a penny as to a hundred gulden. The amount at stake does not make *psak* difficult, it is the *halachah* (legal principle) that can be formidable."

"I," concluded Reb Chaim, "concur with Moshe Rabbeinu."

☛ The Shul

Tiktin offered many places for *tefillah*. Every *chevrah* had its own *bais hamidrash* — for Torah study and prayer. In addition to the *Chevrah Shas*, which met in the big *bais hamidrash*, Tiktin had a *Chevrah Mishnayos*, *Chevrah Chumash*, *Tehillim*, *Chayei Adam* (later switching to *Mishnah Berurah*). Even the butchers had their own *minyan*, called *Zovchai Zevach* where a rabbi would teach *Ein Yaakov* every day. But the crown of the city was the 400 year old *shul*, one of the oldest in Poland.

It was a huge building, shaped like a fortress, with a long spiral staircase leading to a roof-top turret for scouting approaching enemies. Entering the *shul*, one had to descend three steps, corresponding to the words: 'ממעמקים קראתיך ה' "From the depth I called to You, O G-d!" Four more steps led to the *amud* — totaling seven, representing the seven letters of the word *ממעמקים*. The *shul* had a brick floor surrounded by white walls, covered with various *tefillot* and verses from *Tehillim*. Next to the entrance, the wall had a wide slit covered with iron bars, which was the opening for the *tzeddakah* box. Over it was posted a poem by the Ibn Ezra:

אדם רואג על איבוד דמיו,
ואינו רואג על איבוד ימיו.
דמיו אינן עוזרין לו,
ימיו אינן חוזרין לו.

צדקה תציל ממות!

*A person frets over the loss of his money,
But does not fret over the loss of his days.
Yet, his money will not help him,
And his days will not return to him.*

Charity redeems from death!

Came winter, no one *davened* in the huge central hall, for it would have been impossible to heat up. The front room, called "the *polush*," had entrances to smaller rooms that were a beehive of activity. One led to the *vaibersher shul* (ladies' section), which

had small curtained windows looking out into the *maariv* (Western) side of the *Shul*. A small room to the side, furnished with a low bench and a leather strap, was used only on *Erev Yom Kippur*. In earlier times, when the *bais din* sentenced offenders to *malkos* (flogging), the *shamash* would execute the *psak* in that room, using the leather strap. In our days, people would come there voluntarily before the *Erev Yom Kippur Minchah* to perform symbolic *malkos*, saying *Vidui* (the confessional prayer).

The *mizrach* wall contained *kameyos* (scrolls containing mystical inscriptions) built in by various *tzaddikim*. One *kameya* was placed above the huge *aron hakodesh* by the *Maharsha* when he was *Rav* in *Tiktin*. Many miracles recorded in the official records (*Pinkes Tiktin*) are credited to those *kameyos*. Among them: A huge bronze chandelier, branching out with a hundred candle-holders, hung from the center of the ceiling. One *Kol Nidre* night, when the *shul* was packed to capacity, the chain snapped and the chandelier crashed down — yet, no one was hurt!

The city of *Tiktin* — strategically located on the *River Narew*, crossed by important bridges — was a battleground in numerous wars. Since the *shul's* extraordinary thick walls provided protection during the attacks, the *shul* served as a shelter for the Jewish population. During *World War I*, the *Bolsheviks* attacked *Tiktin* with a heavy artillery barrage from across the river. While the Jews said *Tehillim* before the open *aron hakodesh*, a number of shells hit the *mizrach* wall. The *Torah* scrolls shook as in an earthquake, but not one shell penetrated the walls! The many cavities on the outside of the *mizrach* wall remained as a remembrance of these miracles; throughout all the renovations and exterior paintings that were performed, the holes were left as they were. From the window in my grandfather's house facing the *shul*, I would often gaze at the amazing holes in the *mizrach* wall.

✿ Governing the Kehillah

Although the Jews lived for generations under the tyranny and the absolute rule of the Russian Czars, and later under the semi-fascist government of Poland, democracy reigned within the Jewish community.

Annual community elections were held every *Chol HaMoed Pesach* for a *Rosh Hakahal* (president of the community) and a number of *parneisim* (councilmen). They were charged with directing the *kehillah's* affairs as well as representing the com-

munity to the outside authorities. Selecting a Rav was another matter. A committee of *talmidei chachamim* travelled to all corners of the land, interviewing and *reden in lernen* (discussing Talmudic subjects) with the candidates, and then made their decision... (The elections of a rav described by law of the Polish fascist government, insisting on "democracy" among the Jews, was merely a formality.)

The *kehillah* would determine the Rav's salary according to the size of his family. In addition, he was provided with a spacious apartment equipped with a *bais din shtub* (hearing room for litigations) — rent free. The *kehillah* budget was funded by a family head-tax and a *shechitah* tax, sufficient to pay the Rav, *dayan*, *shochtim* and *chazzanim*, plus funds for various charitable activities. In Eastern Europe, it was customary to supplement the *rav's* income with G-Z-E-L-L-A-H! That is, certain items could only be purchased from the Rebbitzin. "Gimmel" for gazze (kerosene), for their lamps; "Zayin" for zaltz — salt, a staple in every home; "Yud" for *yayin* — wine; "Lamed" for *licht* — Shabbos candles; "Hey" for *heivin* — yeast, a must for home-baking. For centuries, no one ever dared to invade this franchise. Different communities selected different items to reserve for the Rav. For instance in Tiktin, only yeast was franchised to the Rav. Most *Rebbitzins* would subrent their monopoly to one or two grocery stores for a fee.

Hence the popular joke: "A Rav lives from *g'zeilah* (literally, 'robbery')."

❖ Recent Events: World War One

□ *And where was Dinah? Yaakov hid her in a chest ... lest Eisav cast his eyes upon her — Rashi to Bereishis 32:23.*

During wartime, when cities and villages often changed hands, Jewish girls would hide in their attics or basements. Not until the fighting front-line-troops passed or martial law was established would a Jewish girl dare to show her face in the streets. Because of this guarded behavior, many an army suspected the Jewish community of being hostile.

During World War I, my grandfather Reb Shmuel Leib — called *Panie* (Sir) Shmulke by the non-Jews — was *Rosh Hakahal*. The Czar's general mobilized civilians to dig trenches, so my grandfather pleaded with the Commanding General to free the Jews from digging on Shabbos, offering Sunday instead. The arrogant Russian officer had him arrested at once, for interfering

with the war effort, to be tried by the military. His many Polish and Russian friends organized a delegation to assure the general of his patriotism, honesty and religious devotion, and thus saved their "beloved Shmulke."

The Russian army retreated and Germans occupied the town. In those days, the Germans were better educated and considered more humane than Russians or Poles. However, they had two major problems, communication and provisions, and these drove them to extremes. The further East they penetrated, the less they could communicate with the local population, except for the Jews who were able to make do with Yiddish. As for food supplies, Germany imported food during peacetime; during the war the army was all the more dependent on local sources.

When the Germans occupied Tiktin, the first order was to rebuild the bridges over the Narew River, destroyed by the retreating Russians. Again Zeide, who spoke German fairly well, went to the German commandant to plead for the Jews that Sunday be substituted for Shabbos. He even offered a number of Jews to serve as translators on Shabbos, but not to labor. The German officer, although polite and less arrogant than the Russian general, had refused the exchange and ordered Zeide arrested. No charges were specified, but he spent two days and nights in a military prison. No one was left to intervene, so the Jews resorted to their last line of defense and said *Tehillim*. While the heart-rending sound of the prayers poured through the open windows of the *shul*, two German Jewish officers passed by and inquired as to the cause. Then they went to the commandant who had Grandfather released.

A few days later, the German Commandant summoned Zeide into his office, demanding that the Jewish community supply food for his men. Zeide explained that city-folk do not grow food. Farmers no longer gave them credit because the currency was worthless; as a result supplies diminished, and the people themselves went hungry. When the German nodded his head, Zeide thought the case closed, only to discover otherwise the following day — Friday.

An elderly Jew was arrested while checking the *eruv* (a wire enclosing the city to make carrying permissible on Shabbos), charged with espionage: supplying the enemy information through the *eruv* wires! The Commandant set the hour of execution for 10 a.m. Saturday. The town was in shock, the ridiculous charge was obviously trumped up to pressure the community into

delivering food supplies to the army — but how could they do so?

Again Zeide appealed to the Commandant: "You *will* kill an innocent man and food will still not be forthcoming. That deaf old man is as much a spy as I am!" Zeide then asked permission to leave.

The German, realizing the Jews would be more responsive if the life of their leader were in danger, turned to Zeide in anger: "You have just confessed to spying! You are under arrest!" He then sent the old prisoner home, and advised him to let the family of "Herren Shapiro" know that he'd be shot the next morning at ten. The whole town was in a turmoil, and again people gathered in every *shul* to say *Tehillim*.

My grandmother, known variously as "Feigel the business-woman" or "Faigel the *tzaddeikes*," had her own special methods of reaching Heaven in an emergency. There was no time at all for niceties, for she had to act swiftly.

She entered the big *bais hamidrash*, shocking the men saying *Tehillim*. She took Zeide's *Gemara* and placed it inside the *aron hakodesh*. Then, burying her face in the *sefer Torah*, she sobbingly prayed that in the *zechus* of his learning Torah, of his *gemilas chessed*, and of his children and grandchildren who studied Torah, her plan would succeed.

Without a word to anyone she marched off to the Commandant's office where, as the wife of the prisoner, she was admitted. Casually she explained that she had a house full of hungry children, and that when she had been on the way to her favorite farmer-friend to get some supplies, she heard of her husband's arrest, so she came immediately. Her pained heart sent off a prayer to Heaven that the officer should swallow her bait. He turned to her with a conniving smile: "*Ach so, Frau Shapiro*, you have hungry children to care for. You must not wait. Go at once. When you will return home, your husband will be there waiting for you."

She walked out pretending to be unaware that she was being followed, all the while praying and saying *Tehillim*, until she reached the house of Jan Syzmanski in the outskirts of Tiktin. Mr. Szymanski, the most vicious Jew-hater in town, who prided himself that no Jew ever crossed the threshold of his house, owned a big farm and a large house. Bobbe Faigel walked up to his front gate, opened it halfway, and then turned around suddenly. "Discovering" the sergeant and the two armed soldiers, she quickly closed the gate and continued along the dusty farm road. A deep sigh went up to Heaven that they, too, should swal-

low her bait — and they did. They would not be misled by that stupid old Jewess who did not want them to know who her supplier was. Running through the fields and side streets, she made it home where she found *Zeide* waiting for her.

No one ever knew the amount of food confiscated from Szymanski, but for the next six months he was in bed recuperating from the terrible beating from the German soldiers. When he finally appeared in the streets, supported by two crutches, the Jewish citizens could not suppress their smiles. And my grandmother gained yet another title — “*Faigel the Chachamah* (the wise woman).”

🌿 Rosh Hakahal and Mayor

Since Tiktin was 75% Jewish, it could have elected a Jewish mayor. But the anti-Semitic Polish Government gerrymandered the districts in Tiktin to include neighboring villages, ensuring that a Pole always be elected. In my time, however, the vice-mayor was Jewish — Reb Yisroel Cohn, a *talmid chacham* and a well-to-do businessman who also was a great *anav* (humble person). Everyone called him “Srolki Kadishes” since his father’s name was Kadish. No sooner was Srolki elected *Rosh Hakahal*, but the Polish Mayor became ill and died and Srolki Kadishes succeeded him as Mayor; and he wore both crowns with characteristic humility and dignity. One might expect the two independent positions to overlap or conflict, but he kept them independent of each other, as the following incident illustrates:

One summer, on the way home from Baranovitch (where I was studying in Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman’s Yeshiva), I stopped off at Tiktin to see my uncle Reb Shlomo Pines who was a *parnes* in the *kehillah*. Uncle Shlomo was on the way to a meeting of the *Kehilla board* in the *bais din shtub* and he invited me to come along “so you could talk to the Rav, Rabbi Kalmanowitz.” When I had been learning in the yeshiva in Tiktin, the entire class would report to the Rav for oral examination. The Rav would begin by asking a few questions, then the *Rosh Yeshiva* in him would take over and the *bechinah* (exam) would turn into a *shiur* (lecture). But now I was all by myself, and petrified.

While the meeting was taking place in the *bais din shtub*, I was in the next room, preparing myself. After the meeting adjourned, the Rav entered my room in all his splendor: tall, erect in a colorful silk house coat. His pointy *yarmulka*, plus the knee-high boots shining to a glow, with the pants tucked in them, all

added to his height. Combing his long gray beard with his fingers, he said: "Chaim'ke come here! You're learning *Tagrei Lud* (a very complicated subject), eh?" He then inquired about Reb Elchanan Wasserman, my father, and the family. Before closing the door, he called out to the *shamash*, "Go to the *Magistrat* (City Hall) and tell the mayor that if he doesn't send in the rent by Friday, I shall have the community school evicted."⁴ The *Rebbitzin* called out from the next room, "Srolki Kadishes was just here. The Rav couldn't tell him that in person?"

With authority in his voice, the Rav replied, "When Reb Yisroel Cohn is in my *bais din shtub*, or in the *bais hamidrash*, or in the streets of Tiktin, he is the *Rosh Hakahal*. Only when he is in the *Magistrat* is he the mayor."

• "Yachsonim" and "Vertlach"

Many cities in Poland had nicknames, which give a fairly accurate reflection of its inhabitants. Here are a few examples: Warsaw's "*Varshever Ganovim*,"⁵ Lomza's "*Lomzer Balonim*," "*Kolner Peklach*," "*Bialystoker Kuchns*" ... and Tiktin's "*Tiktiner Yachsonim*," for almost every one in Tiktin considered himself a *yachson* (of an aristocratic lineage). Yet they seldom intermarried, for they knew too well the other's *yichus* and it was always below theirs.... When asked after an out-of-town marriage how they managed to assess an outsider's *yichus*, they would reply: "The Jews made the Golden Calf — why? Because they presumed Moshe to be dead. So what? They could still have chosen a leader like Aharon, Chur or Koleiv. Why settle for a calf? But they felt — let it be a calf as long as it comes from the outside."

• Getting Married in Tiktin

In Tiktin, every *chupah* took place on Friday in the backyard of the *shul*. After the *chupah*, the procession would dance to music through the streets to the house of my Uncle Shlomo. His living room was the largest in the entire town and was always

4. In Poland, elementary local education was obligatory (grades 1 to 7, ages 7-14). The city government was required to furnish a building and pay for the teachers. In Tiktin, the Jewish children would not attend school together with non-Jewish children. The *kehilah* owned a school building, for which city hall paid rent and teachers' salaries.

5. Warsaw was famous for its flim-flam operators and pick-pockets. A Lomzer was called a *ba'alon* (shopper) because he was always interested in buying anything. The round, flat *kuchens* called "*bialys*," so popular in New York's Lower East Side, originated in Bialystok.

available for the reception-*kiddush*. Big receptions and large dinners were strictly forbidden. On Shabbos morning, the *chassan* and *kallah* walked to *shul* together, and then after *davening*, followed by a dancing crowd, they went to the *kallah's* parents for *kiddush*. Once a poor widow sold her last pillow in order to cover the costs of the morning *kiddush*. When the Rav heard about this, he enforced a new *takana* (ordinance): only the immediate family members were permitted to participate in that *kiddush*. Such *takanos* were strictly upheld. Thus, much to the amazement of visitors, the parents of the *kallah* stood in the doorway greeting all well-wishers, responding to their *Mazel Tov's* with an invitation: "Come in, you are one of the family." Yet, no one would enter.

Chevros

A boundless love for one another thrived among the Jews in Tiktin. This found expression in both personal relationships and institutional life. Thus, there were numerous charitable *chevros*, where besides paying dues, the members donated their services. In addition, a special *Shabbos* every year was dedicated in all *shuls* to appeals for funds for each *chevrah*. *Someich Noflim* (Support for the Fallen), the fund which secretly aided families in need, had their *Shabbos* when *Behar* was read, which included the passage: "And when your brother falls...you shall surely help him" (*Vayikra*: 25:35). *Linat Hatzedek* and *Bikkur Cholim* (Helping the Sick) had *Beshalach*, which includes: "I am the L-rd your Healer" (*Shemos* 17:25). The functions of these two were clearly defined: *Linat Hatzedek* would provide all types of medical equipment and drugs. In those days of primitive medicine, ice was a major cure. It would be placed on the ill person continuously, until the crisis was over and the temperature dropped. The members would volunteer in winters to cut the river ice, which was stored in specially equipped cellars for the entire year. The members of *Bikkur Cholim* volunteered to care for the sick overnight while the family rested, cooked for the family, and fed the children.

In addition, there were *Shabbosos* for the Talmud Torah, the yeshiva, Bais Yaakov, *Hachnosas Orchim* (Traveler's Aid), *Hachnasas Kallah* (Financial Aid for the Poor Brides), and of course, *Hekdesh*. The *Hekdesh* served as a shelter for the indigent, the elderly, and the incurably ill.

One should bear in mind that Tiktin's Jews supported all

these charities in the days when the term "tax deductible" was not yet known.

☛ Personalities

Telling of Tiktin without mentioning some of her outstanding personalities would be a sin, indeed! Each one was an institution, and besides being of interest on their own, shed light on Tiktin as a whole. Among them were:

□ Srolki Kadishes (whom we have met earlier), a successful business man and *talmid chacham* who had studied in the Yeshiva of Volozhin. He had served as both *Rosh Hakahal* and Mayor. When the Chofetz Chaim visited Tiktin and urged everyone, especially the *Kohanim*, to study *Kadashim* (the section of Talmud which deals with sacrificial order) in anticipation of *Mashiach's* coming, Srolki Cohn and my *Zeide* (both *Kohanim*) convened a daily two-hour session before *davening*, dedicated to studying *Kadashim*. Srolki always carried large sums of money with him, stopping boys at random, asking: "Show me your *tzitzis*," or "What is the *Omer* count today?" A positive reply would earn a handsome cash reward.

□ Reb Yanke'le Levinsohn, a *tzaddik* and *ba'al mofes* (miracle worker), had undertaken to support Torah students and scholars in need. Once Reb Yanke'le approached two childless well-to-do families in Tiktin. "Last night I dreamed about a baby in a cradle. Give me one thousand rubles (a fortune in those days) for the yeshiva, and I guarantee that you shall have a child." One family rejected the offer, the other accepted. Exactly one year later a boy was born to the second family.

□ Rabbi Yerucham Barash was the town wine maker, but no one knew when he made the wine, for most of the time he was in the *bais hamidrash* with two fingers stuck in his ears so as not to be distracted from his studies. When the government declared a monopoly on all alcoholic beverages, he was arrested and convicted to a one-year prison sentence. In jail he went through *Shas* twice. After his release, he commented, "Every Jew must serve in jail once in his life. One year is not enough — at least, two, preferably three ..."

□ In a town full of *yachsonim*, my grandfather Reb Shmuel Leib Shapiro was the *yachson* of them all. He spelled his name with a *shva* under the *Shin*, not a *pasach* — which, according to tradition, was a sign of a true *Kohen*. He studied in the Chofetz Chaim's *Kollel Kadashim* and knew *Kadashim* by heart. As a suc-

cessful businessman, he would often return to Tiktin from a trip late at night, never going home, but straight to the *bais hamidrash* to study until *Shacharis*, the next morning. While the Jews referred to him as "the Pike'ach," for he was extremely wise, the non-Jews called him "*Panie* (Sir) *Shmulke*," for he knew the civil and criminal law as well as their own judges. Before standing trial, they would often come to him for advice.

He was frequently involved in court cases with Polish land owners, hardly ever losing a case. As the District Court was located in Lomza, he was a frequent visitor in our house. Rabbi Yechiel Mordechai Gordon, Rosh Yeshiva in Lomza, once told me, "When your *Zeide* arrived in town, I knew he was occupied in court. Yet he always found time to come and visit me and ask a few *kushyos* that would take me a month to answer."

Rabbi Ravich of the Tel Aviv *bais din* told me, "Your *Zeide's* place of study was behind the *bima*. Once when he walked away for a few minutes, some pranksters turned his *Gemara* upside-down. When he returned, he continued studying out loud for three hours without straightening the *Gemara*. We then realized that he had become blind in his old age."

□ The last *Rosh Hakahal* of Tiktin, my uncle Reb Shlomo Pines,⁶ was a *talmid chacham*, businessman and a *Lavnik* (member of the executive of the city council) — a most honest man, trusted by Jew and Gentile alike. When the Jewish merchants opened their first commercial bank, they did not have a safe to store the cash on hand, so it was delivered daily to Reb Shlomo. Every merchant eagerly awaited Friday, the market day. Reb Shlomo, however, donated his living room for every wedding reception, which usually took place on Friday. Neglecting his own business, he personally welcomed the wedding party to his home. When the Tiktiner Societies of New York and Chicago sent funds for the poor twice yearly (*ma'os chittim* before Pesach, and money to buy firewood and potatoes for the winter, before Succos), the checks

6. His youngest daughter, Menucha, wanted desperately to enter the Seminary in Cracow, but she was only twelve and the minimum acceptance age was fourteen. When he refused to falsify her age and told her to wait two more years, she complained to our *Zeide*. *Zeide* went down to City Hall, ordered a new "birth certificate" written to specification, and she was accepted. When she graduated, Sara Sheneirer sent her to Frampol (near Lublin) to open a *Bais Yaakov* school. How could a mere fifteen year old impress a community and its Rav, and win its children? A tall girl, she put on heels and fixed her hair in a mature fashion, and succeeded. She was then dispatched to Chelm to strengthen the *Bais Yaakov* there, and later to Sokolov. She returned to the Seminary every summer for more courses, given by Dr. Deutschlander. In 1940, she escaped to Jerusalem where she taught in *Bais Yaakov*.

were addressed to him and made out in his name.

□ Zir'l Lisansky, the midwife who delivered all babies, also the *gabbai'te* of the local *Chevrah Kaddisha* (burial society). People said: "She brings them to this world and she returns them." A midwife possessed special status in town — since the time the author of the *Sefer Ma'aros Hatzovos* served as Rav in Tiktin. When he had found an increase in the number of halachic queries in *she'eilos nashim* especially after confinement, he dismissed the midwife serving Tiktin and imported a replacement from Germany. Ever since, a midwife in Tiktin was professionally trained and skilled, and no obstetrician could ever get established in Tiktin.

□ Beile Dvora Shulman was the wife of Reb Simcha Shmuel Shulman, who had received *semichah* (ordination) from the *Aruch HaShulchan* (Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein), beginning with the words: שמחה במעונו ושמואל בקוראי שמו. Yet he refused to accept a rabbinical position, and became a manufacturer. After he died at forty, his young widow dedicated the rest of her life to raising her eight sons and one daughter to a life of Torah. In spite of all sorts of difficulties, she realized her goal: Some learned in the Lomza Yeshiva (they ate Shabbos and *Yom Tov* meals in our house for years), some in Slobodka, some in Kamenetz. One of them, Reb Mordechai, married the daughter of Rabbi Isaac Sher of Slobodka, and became Rosh Yeshiva in the Yeshiva Slobodka in Bnai Brak, Israel.

□ My grandmother Faigel was a millionaire in *mitzvos*. Every morning, she was ever consulting the clock, for she knew the exact minute when she could catch a *Kedusha* in the *Chevrah Chumash Bais Hamidrash*, a *Borchu* in *Chevrah Mishnayos*, an *Omein-Yehei Shmei Rabbah* in *Chevrah Tehillim*. By the time she opened her store at 8 AM, she already had a stock of *mitzvos* that would take someone else a month to accumulate. She ran the business to permit Zeide to spend more time in the *bais hamidrash*. While she was active in all charities, her pet project was the *Hekdesh*, where she was *gabbai'te*.

She had strange kabbalistic ways for meeting all emergencies. When my father was a little boy, he became very ill and the doctors gave up on him; yet, she knew exactly what to do. First, she went to the cemetery and measured the entire length of its fence. She donated the same length of linen to the *Hekdesh*, which she made into sheets and pillow cases. *Shuls* and *yeshivos* recited *Tehillim* on his behalf, and he was given the additional

name of "Alter" to signify that he should live to a ripe, old age. She vowed to give a year's supply of meat for Shabbos and *Yom Tov* to the *Hekdesh* in his merit ... To the shock of the local doctors, the boy recuperated. Previously, the boy was considered to have a *grobbe kop* (to be thick-headed), for his *Rebbe* could scarcely teach him the *Aleph-Bais*, but after his illness he developed into a near-genius. He went on to study in Radin, then to Slobodka where he learned *be'chavrusa* (in partnership) with Rabbi Reuvain Grozovsky. He became a *talmid* of the *Alter* of Slobodka who sent him later with Reb Reuvain and eight others to save the yeshiva in Mir. There he became a *talmid muvhok* (prime disciple) of Reb Yerucham Levovitz.

Rabbi Avraham Kalmanowitz in his *hesped* (eulogy) on Tiktin writes ... "When I arrived in Tiktin I met *ba'alei battim* (laymen) who knew a number of *mesechtos* in *Shas* literally by heart. Just to mention a few: Reb Shmuel Leib Shapiro, his son Alter, and all his sons-in-law; Reb Berl Glickman, a relative of the *Sfas Emes*; and Reb Naftoli, my father-in-law ... "