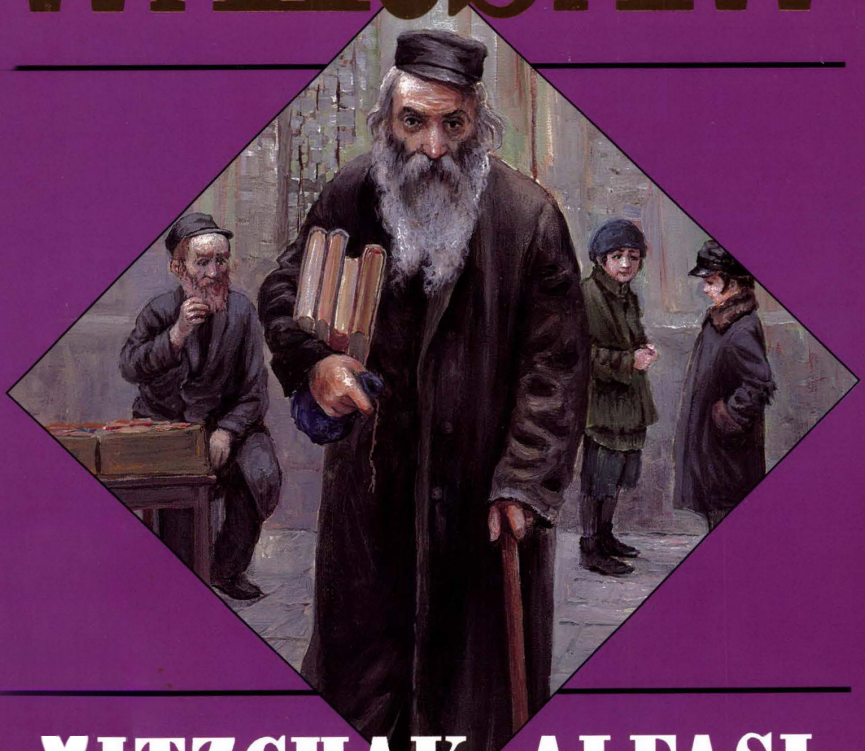
JEWISH WARSAW

Glimpses of



YITZCHAK ALFASI

JEWISH Glimpses of WARSAW

RABBI Y. ALFASI

translated and edited by

RABBI AVRAHAM YAAKOV FINKEL

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JEWISH WARSAW

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Publisher's Note

One of the great strengths of the Jewish people has always been their superlative sense of community, of caring for each other and relying on each other, of commonly shared joys and sorrows, of each individual being a component of a much larger social organism, the whole of which is much greater than the sum of its parts. Two thousand years ago, when the bulk of the Jewish people still lived in the relatively small geographic area of Eretz Yisrael, unified by the *Bais Hamikdash*, Sanhedrin and shared political, cultural and social conditions, the significance of the ***kehillah***, the local community, was relatively minor. But even then, the flourishing communities in Iraq, Egypt and the European centers of the Roman Empire already foreshadowed a divergent development among widely scattered locales.

With the destruction of the *Bais Hamikdash* and the subsequent Dispersion (Diaspora), this became the common

experience of all the Jewish people. From that time on, the Jewish communities were no longer guided by a central Torah authority. Their customs, methods of study and applications of the Law to new circumstances began to differ widely according to geographic location. Instead of sharing one history, they were now swept along by the peculiar political, social and economic conditions that affected their respective host countries. And although the basic elements of the Torah and the Talmud remained amazingly resilient and inviolate, geography began to play a predominant role in the character and form of Jewish life.

In the broadest sense, the Sephardic Jews of the Middle East and North Africa differed greatly from the Ashkenazic Jews living in Europe. In a narrower sense, the Jews of Western Europe differed from the Jews of Eastern Europe, the Jews of Lithuania differed from the Jews of Poland, the *chassidim* differed from the *misnagdim*– although they all shared more features with each other than they did with Sephardic Jews. In an even narrower sense, the Jews of one city differed from the Jews of another city, so that the character of Jewish life in Warsaw, for instance, differed from the character of Jewish life in Cracow. Similar subdivisions, of course, developed in the Sephardic world.

The underlying structure of Jewish society became the *kehillah*, and while the wisdom and leadership of universally revered Torah sages were widely accepted and heeded, the functional social unit was the independent local community, and the personalities and leadership qualities of the local rabbis and *parnassim* (lay leaders) often had a more profound impact. Even such temporary regional organizations as the Vaad Arba Haaratzos (the Council of the Four Lands), which governed Polish Jewry from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, only dealt with broader issues and did not submerge the independence of the *kehillah*.

As a result of these new conditions, and over the course of

many centuries, Torah-true Jewish life assumed myriad external forms, each founded on the rock-solid twin foundations of the Written Law and the Oral Law, becoming a veritable *kesoness passim*, a single "coat of many colors." The cultural traits, historical experience and religious and social customs of every single Jewish community in the world are holy and precious, and while each Jew must follow the particular customs and practices of his family tradition, the endless multi-hued variations are all integral parts of our priceless common heritage.

Recent history, however, has taken a different direction. In the aftermath of the holocaust, many of the renowned communities have simply ceased to exist, and their invaluable legacies are in danger of being lost. And even among the survivors, the system of numerous independent, geographically distinct *kehillos* has gone into decline, to be replaced by a system of megacommunities which tend to blend and homogenize their various components.

With this in mind, C.I.S. Publishers feels honored and privileged to launch this new series of short historical sketches of illustrious Jewish communities, of which *Glimpses of Jewish Warsaw* is the inaugural volume. We have chosen Warsaw for our first venture in this project because, although its history is comparatively short, it was, by far, the largest and most vital community of pre-War Europe. Furthermore, this phenomenal growth was a direct result of the turbulent winds of change that led many diverse elements to seek refuge in Warsaw, so that Warsaw became a microcosm of Polish Jewry. Future volumes offering glimpses of Vilna, Brisk, Cracow and Frankfort have already been assigned and are in various stages of preparation. We also welcome submissions of manuscripts or proposals from authors who would like to undertake similar treatments of other prominent Jewish communities anywhere in the world.

The inaugural volume in a series, not having a prior format

to follow, is always the most difficult, and we would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to the following talented people who have made the dream into a reality: Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi, the popular and learned Israeli author, who prepared the original Hebrew manuscript; Rabbi Avraham Yaakov Finkel, who translated, edited and enhanced the work with a high degree of professionalism and consummate skill; and Rabbi Aaron Perlow, who initiated, guided and coordinated the development of the work through its early stages. Their stellar efforts are manifest in this volume and have set a standard of excellence for all future volumes. We would also like to acknowledge the "in-house" efforts of Art Director Deenee Cohen and Typographer Nechamie Miller, whose combined talents are reflected in the elegant production of this book.

In closing, we would like to express our humble gratitude to the *Ribono Shel Olam* for blessing our efforts in this important endeavor with success. We pray that our work bring honor to His Name and that our future efforts be blessed with equal success.

Y.Y.R.
Iyar, 5752 (1992)
Lakewood, N.J.

JEWISH WARSAW

Glimpses of

Prologue

This is the story of Warsaw—Jewish Warsaw—the Warsaw that was once the metropolis of Polish Jewry, the residence of the largest Jewish community in Europe. Sparkling with Jewish spirit and creativity, it was home to three hundred and fifty thousand Jews who transformed their home town into a center of science and technology, business and industry, and above all, into a stronghold of Torah and *Chassidus*, an *eer v'aim b'Yisrael*, a city which, like a mother, lovingly nurtures her children and shapes their character. Its teeming streets and alleys were hallowed by the eminent rabbis and hidden saints—angels in human form—who trod on its roughhewn cobblestones. People would say that Warsaw's very atmosphere was permeated with the Divine Presence; one could sense a sanctity that was almost palpable.

Tragically, all this glory has faded into oblivion. Jewish Warsaw has gone up in flames. Its *tzaddikim* and *chassidim*

are no more. Gone are its synagogues, *shtiblach* and *yeshivos* that resounded around the clock with the sounds of Torah and prayer. Desolation and ruin abound where once there was a vibrant community, pulsating with brilliance and energy. Where once there was ebullient life there is now only an enormous shadow of death.

In a higher sense, however, the *kedoshim* (martyrs) of Warsaw have not perished. Their memory lives on in their *sefarim* and in their spiritual heirs who relate their thoughts, insights and good deeds. By recounting the history of the Warsaw community, its struggles and triumphs, the achievements of its rabbis, communal leaders and common folk, we perpetuate their memory to serve as a shining example for us and future generations.

Chapter One

THE FLEDGLING YEARS

Although Warsaw was the largest Jewish community in Poland, it was by no means its oldest. The *kehillos* of Cracow, Lemberg, Posen, Lublin, Brisk and many others were established well before the first Jews settled in Warsaw in the Duchy of Mazovia. The earliest mention of a Jew living in Warsaw can be found in a court record which tells of a certain Eliezer who, in the year 1414, brought legal action against a Warsaw resident named Piotr. Without a doubt, this Eliezer was not the only Jew in Warsaw at that time, but there is no evidence of any Jewish communal life. All we know about an early Jewish settlement comes to us from non-Jewish sources. There we read of a Jewish presence and a wide range of activities on the part of Jews in the field of commerce, particularly in international business. Reluctantly, a Polish historian is forced to admit, "Whether he likes it or not, an unbiased researcher of the Jewish question must concede that

their talents and skills were the source of Poland's prosperity."

The first indication of rudimentary communal life appears in 1428, in records which mention a *kehillah* and *gabba'im* (officers). By 1460, the Warsaw community had developed sufficiently to appoint its first rabbi. The earliest rabbis of the *kehillah* known to us were Rabbi David, Rabbi Aharon and Rabbi Moshe. Except for their names, no other details are known about them. From the sparse records that are available, we can piece together evidence of an active communal life; in addition to the rabbis, there were medical doctors, shopkeepers and businessmen who carried on lively commerce with Jewish trading partners in neighboring towns.

But Jewish history has always been inseparably linked with persecutions, pogroms and expulsions, the *leitmotif* of our long exile. Warsaw was no exception. The first expulsion, accompanied by violent attacks, burning and looting, took place in 1455. Gradually, Jews returned to Warsaw, only to be driven out again in 1483, but before long they were living there once more, growing into a sizable community. In 1493, they were the victims of a monstrous killing spree after which they were banished again. Deplorably, the site of the burned down synagogue was turned over to a Pole, and the first Jewish cemetery of Warsaw was appropriated by the Catholic Church, which saw fit to erect a bakery on its grounds. Apparently, Warsaw had no need for Jews.

The anti-Semitic litany continued. In 1527, the city obtained the official privilege of *de non tolerandis Judaeis*, authorizing it to close its doors to Jews. In spite of this, Jews would frequently come to stay in Warsaw temporarily, on a so-called "daily ticket." In 1570, King Sigismund August issued an edict prohibiting Jews "to dwell, trade or work as craftsmen" in Warsaw and in an area of fifteen kilometers (about ten miles) around the city limits.

Yet Warsaw held a strange fascination for the Jews, and

somehow they managed to gain entry into the city through the back door, by way of Praga, a suburb of Warsaw where Jews were permitted to settle. A census taken in 1765 records that Warsaw had a Jewish population of 2,519.

In 1768, a wave of tragedy struck the Ukraine as the Haidamaks carried out savage attacks against the Jews. The Haidamaks were roving bands of armed peasants and Cossacks who assaulted defenseless travellers and the Jews of smaller towns in Polish Ukraine. These marauders would beat and rob their victims or take them prisoner and sell them to the Tatars, who in turn would sell them into slavery to the Turks. The first such Haidamak pogrom occurred in 1703 against the Jews of Bielaya Tzerkov (then Poland). They attacked again in 1734 and 1736, and in 1768 they mounted a brutal pogrom against seven Polish-Ukrainian towns. Thousands of Jews in Uman were massacred in the synagogues, which were then set on fire together with desecrated Torah scrolls. Many Jews from this region, fleeing from the Haidamaks, found refuge in Warsaw, so that by 1792 the Jewish population of that city had increased to 6,750.

In 1775, and again in 1790, Warsaw was the scene of street attacks which forced the Jews to escape to Praga, the Warsaw suburb.

Strange as it may seem, notwithstanding oppression, chicanery, murder and incessant persecution, Warsaw Jewry flourished and thrived. It was the acumen and know-how of these downtrodden Jews that was largely responsible for transforming Warsaw from a backward city into the financial and business center of Poland.

Chapter Two

UNDER FOREIGN MASTERS

Over the last four centuries, Poland suffered many reverses, and for much of this turbulent period in its history, the country has been under foreign domination. After reaching the height of its power during the 1500s, Poland went into a steady decline, and by 1772, its neighbors Austria, Prussia and Russia, taking advantage of Poland's vulnerability, divided large chunks of Polish territory among themselves. As a result of this first partition, Poland lost about one third of its land. In the second partition, in 1793, Russia and Prussia seized additional territory in eastern and western Poland. This second partition prompted the Poles to rise up in 1794.

Under the leadership of Thaddeus Kosciusko (who had fought against the British in the American Revolution), Polish forces revolted against the Russian and Prussian occupying armies. The Jews supported the Polish rebellion, fighting valiantly alongside the Polish troops, and a number of Jews are

remembered in Polish history as national heroes. One of these, Berek Yoselewitz, organized a Jewish legion and later was killed in the war against the Russians near the town of Kotzk. To this day, a magnificent statue commemorates his daring exploits.

When the Polish rebellion was crushed, the Russians vented their rage on the Jews. Going on a wild rampage, they killed thousands of Jews in a brutal massacre. One of their victims was Rabbi Shlomo of Karlin, the famous *chassidic* leader who was murdered while praying. In 1795, the pogroms spread to Vilna and Warsaw, where many Jews were slaughtered in cold blood. Yosef Shmuel Zbitkower, a wealthy government contractor, saved thousands from certain death by paying a large sum of money as ransom, using his excellent political connections.



Yosef Shmuel Zbitkower

No sooner had the rioting subsided than a delegation of Poles approached the Russian governor requesting him to expel the Jews from Warsaw. This was the Polish gratitude toward the Jews for supporting their uprising!

Austria, Prussia and Russia carried out the third partition of Poland in 1795, dividing among themselves what remained of the country, and Poland ceased to exist as a national entity; it would not be until 1918, in the aftermath of the First World War, that Poland would again emerge as an independent country. As a result of this final partition, Warsaw passed to Prussia in 1796, and its Jewish population became Prussian citizens. Under the new rulers their situation improved considerably; the prohibition against living in Warsaw was lifted,

ushering in an era of growth and expansion. The Jews of Warsaw were permitted to establish an official ***kehillah***, as well as communal institutions such as a synagogue, a hospital and an orphanage. On the other hand, they were subjected to a variety of discriminatory taxes and regulations. For example, only Jews who had lived in the city prior to 1796 were allowed to stay; the others were permitted only temporary residency. (It was at this time that it became obligatory to adopt surnames.) Under the Prussian rulers there was a large influx of German-speaking Jews from Prussia, Silesia and other places to Warsaw, and the Jewish population increased from 7,688 in 1797 to 11,630 (comprising 17.4 % of the total population) in 1804.

In 1805, the mighty French conqueror Napoleon led his troops into Germany, capturing an Austrian army at Ulm and demolishing the Russian army at Austerlitz. In 1806, Prussia joined Russia in a new campaign against Napoleon, but Napoleon's legions defeated them and captured the Prussian sector of Poland. On July 7, 1807, Napoleon named this sector the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, and in 1809 he enlarged the duchy by adding to it the provinces of western Galicia, Lublin and others, while the eastern part of Galicia was annexed by Russia.

Napoleon's invasion had a powerful impact on the Jews of Poland. Wherever his forces advanced ghetto walls crumbled and Jews were granted equal rights. Ecstatically, some Jewish leaders hailed Napoleon as the precursor of Mashiach, while others adopted a more cautious attitude. A delegation representing the Warsaw community presented Napoleon with a Hebrew hymn entitled *To the Most Exalted One.* Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rymanov, the famous *chassidic* master, considered Napoleon's string of conquests the fulfillment of the prophecies of the wars of Gog and Magog before the arrival of Mashiach, and he prayed for Napoleon's victory. When his disciple Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz lamented that

thousands of Jews had perished in the wake of Napoleon's campaigns, Rabbi Menachem Mendel replied, "'The sword always takes its toll.' (*Shmuel II* 12:25) Let them walk in blood up to their knees, as long as the end will come."

Others, including the Maggid of Kozhnitz and the Chozeh (the Visionary) of Lublin, felt that Napoleon's victory would have a negative effect on the Jews of Poland and Russia by promoting gradual assimilation. Some went so far as to attribute Napoleon's defeat to the fervent prayers of the Maggid of Kozhnitz. Another of the early masters of *Chassidus*, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Baal Hatanya, actively assisted the Russian war effort against Napoleon in the strong belief that the liberalizing effect of a victory by Napoleon would be detrimental to Torah observance.

Initially, Napoleon granted civil rights to the Jews of Poland, but this entailed the dubious "right" to serve in his army. In order to be exempt from this "privilege," the Jewish community was forced to pay 700,000 rubles to the treasury, a levy which was subsequently raised to 1,400,000 rubles. In spite of this, the Jews were grateful to the French appointee Duke Poniatowsky and composed a special prayer for his welfare.

A change occurred in 1809 when Napoleon issued his "infamous decree," in which restrictions were imposed on Jewish rights for ten years and heavy taxes were levied. Still, many Jews served in the army of the Duchy of Warsaw, including the son of Berek Yoselewitz.

After Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig in 1813, Poland once again came under Russian domination.

The Napoleonic era coincided with the growth of *Chassidus* which spread from its origins in Podolia toward Poland and Galicia. The pioneers of the movement who planted the seeds of *Chassidus* in Poland were the Chozeh of Lublin, the Maggid of Kozhnitz, Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel of

Apta (the *Oheiv Shalom*) and Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. They encountered fierce resistance on the part of the *misnagdim*, opponents of the *chassidim*, who suspected that the Baal Shem Tov's teachings deviated from tradition. A celebrated public debate was held in the Praga suburb of Warsaw in 1781 between Rabbi Avraham Katzenellenbogen of Brisk, as the spokesman of the *misnagdim*, and Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, representing the *chassidic* ideology. Rabbi Avraham, convinced that he had won the disputation wrote a book about it entitled *Milchamos Hashem*. His "victory" proved to be ephemeral, however, for *Chassidus* spread with unprecedented vigor.

Without a doubt, the driving force behind the rapid growth of *Chassidus* among the broad masses of Warsaw was Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev who visited the city a number of times while serving as Rabbi of Zhelikhov. The personality responsible for introducing the Warsaw Torah scholars to *Chassidus* was Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, author of *Chidushei Harym*, who lived in Warsaw before he moved to nearby Ger to become the Gerrer Rebbe. A charismatic leader of prodigious Torah greatness, he attracted most of the learned young men of Warsaw to the ranks of the *chassidim*.

Chapter Three

THE SPECTER OF SECULARISM

The Napoleonic era introduced the new ideas and aspirations of the French Revolution to the Jews of Warsaw. They got a taste of *haskalah* ("enlightenment"), and the French revolutionary slogan of "liberty, equality, fraternity" made inroads among some of the young people. Jewish tradition and Torah values were assaulted by the forces of *haskalah* and assimilation. The self-hating, groveling *maskilim* of Warsaw stooped so low as to identify themselves as "Polish citizens of the Mosaic faith, faithful and dedicated to the Polish fatherland." To be sure, their circle comprised no more than twenty members, but because of their wealth and influence they played a dominant role in the administration of the *kehillah*. One of these assimilationists openly declared that he wanted no part "of the futile religion which is based on the belief of the return to the Land of Israel." It is not surprising that most of the descendants of these *maskilim* did not

remain within the Jewish fold.

In November of 1815, after Napoleon's defeat, Poland was again divided among Austria, Prussia and Russia. The czar proclaimed a self-governing Kingdom of Poland under Russian control. It was called Congress Poland because its borders were defined at the Congress of Vienna by the nations that had fought against Napoleon. It lasted a full century until 1918 when Poland gained its independence.

Under the rule of the Russian czars, the Jews of Congress Poland made remarkable strides. The Jewish population grew by leaps and bounds. In 1816, the Jewish population of Warsaw numbered 15,600. By 1864, it virtually quintupled to 72,800. By 1882, it had doubled again to 130,000. By 1910, it had more than doubled to 306,000. By 1914, in just four short years, it had risen another ten percent to 337,000, which was 38.1% of the total population of Warsaw.

In 1826 a government-sponsored rabbinical seminary was founded in Warsaw. It was run by *maskilim* who set its tone and its curriculum. Needless to say, no traditional *rabbanim* graduated from this institution. It produced nothing but assimilationist and reform clergymen, and Warsaw Jews aptly called the institute a "school for *meshumadim* (apostates)." Rabbi Avraham Abele, the chief judge of the Warsaw *bais din* spoke out forcefully against this seminary.

In 1831 the Poles rose up against the Russian regime. The Jews supported the revolution by contributing money and manpower. When the Russians suppressed the rebellion, the Jews were made to suffer for aiding the rebels through a series of harsh and discriminatory decrees.

In 1846, Sir Moses Montefiore, the legendary Torah-observant philanthropist and advocate of Jewish causes, visited Warsaw in an attempt to intercede on behalf of the Jews and negotiate a relaxation of the restrictions. There he met with two outstanding *chassidic* leaders, Rabbi Yitzchak Kalish, the Rebbe of Vorki and Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, the *Chidushei*



a crowded Warsaw courtyard

Harym, who were the official spokesmen for all groupings of Polish Jewry, particularly for the interests of Torah-observant Jewry. Regrettably, Sir Moses' intervention had only limited success.

Chapter Four

THE EARLY RABBIS

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Lipschitz

The first official rabbi to serve Warsaw was Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Lipschitz, renowned for his responsa and novellae *Chemdas Shlomo*. One of the most eminent rabbis of Poland, he had served in the rabbinate of Praga, Posen and Nashelsk. Warsaw was greatly impressed by the vigorous battle he launched against the assimilationist *maskilim*, against *chilul Shabbos* (desecration of the Sabbath) and other violations of the Torah.



Although personally a

misnaged, he greatly respected the *chassidim* and joined hands with them in all his undertakings. Rabbi Shlomo Zalman was beloved by the entire Jewish community, *chassidim* and *misnagdim* alike, and when he died on 11 *Nissan,* 1839, it was decided that as a sign of mourning women should not wear any jewelry for four weeks, not even on *Pesach* which fell during this period of mourning. During his tenure, Torah and tradition enjoyed high popular esteem.

Rabbi Chaim Davidsohn

After the passing of the *Chemdas Shlomo,* the *Chidushei Harym* (Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, the Gerrer Rebbe) was invited to serve as the new Chief Rabbi of Warsaw. He turned down the offer, suggesting as a worthy candidate Rabbi Chaim Davidsohn, a prominent Torah scholar and prosperous businessman who had given liberally to the poor, worked diligently for the community and taught Torah to a wide range of students. In his later years Rabbi Davidsohn had fallen on hard times and lost his fortune. The leaders of the Warsaw community decided to show their recognition and appreciation by choosing him as their rabbi and providing him with a very generous salary.



During the fifteen years he officiated as rabbi, he led the Warsaw ***kehillah*** with wisdom and a strong hand tempered with mercy. Despite his advanced age, he successfully rebuffed all attempts of the modernists at introducing "religious

reforms." It is noteworthy that Rabbi Davidsohn, in conjunction with the Gerrer Rebbe, the Vorker Rebbe and Rabbi Yeshayah Mushkat of Praga issued a proclamation calling on all Jews to engage in agriculture. He died in 1854 at the age of ninety-four.

Rabbi Berish Meisels

After Rabbi Davidsohn's death, the *Chidushei Harym* was once again invited to serve as the Chief Rabbi of Warsaw. In declining the honor, he proposed that Rabbi Berish Meisels, the Rabbi of Cracow, be considered for the position. By electing Rabbi Berish Meisels as its chief rabbi, Warsaw gained not only a prodigious Talmudic scholar and a tireless communal worker but also a serious Polish patriot. For one thing, Rabbi Meisels spoke Polish fluently, a capability that would stand him in good stead as the Chief Rabbi of Warsaw, since he had to represent in government circles the full spectrum of Polish Jewry in all its nuances.



Indeed, Rabbi Meisels earned the respect and admiration of the Polish establishment, and with their support he was elected as a delegate to the Lower House. Rabbi Meisels did not bow to assimilationist pressures who had supported his candidacy but resisted them forcefully and cooperated with the *Chidushei Harym* in devising strategies to thwart their designs.

The Russian overlords who were aware of Rabbi Meisels' friendly relations with the Polish patriots arrested him in

November, 1861. Only upon the intercession of Rothschild, the Austrian consul in Warsaw, was he set free. On February 13, 1862, Rabbi Meisels was forced to leave Warsaw, accused of being a Polish national hero. After settling in Katowice, he moved to Vienna. In November, 1862, he received permission to return to Warsaw where he resumed his activities on behalf of Polish independence, becoming one of the leaders of the Polish national revolution of 1863. Once again he was banished from Warsaw, but he returned a few months later.

In his final years he devoted himself entirely to the study of Torah. It was at this time that he wrote his work *Biur Mahardam*, a commentary on the Rambam.

Rabbi Berish Meisels died in 1870, and by order of the Russian imperial authorities in retribution for his fight for Polish independence, no eulogies were delivered at his funeral.

Rabbi Yaakov Gesundheit

After Rabbi Meisels' passing, Rabbi Yaakov Gesundheit was appointed as the new Chief Rabbi of Warsaw with the approval of the Russian authorities. Rabbi Gesundheit was a native of Warsaw, an outstanding Torah scholar and an independently wealthy financier who led a prominent *yeshivah*.



Unlike the previous Warsaw rabbis who, while themselves *misnagdim,* maintained friendly relations with the *chassidim*, Rabbi Gesundheit did not establish a good rapport with the

chassidic community. This gave rise to friction and discontent and caused the *chassidim* to defy the authority of the Chief Rabbi "who had been appointed by the government." Eventually, Rabbi Gesundheit was forced to resign from the rabbinate and then devoted himself to teaching at his *yeshivah*, which he supported at his own expense. His responsa and novellae were published in his work *Tiferes Yaakov*. He passed away in 1878.

The Council of Rabbis

After Rabbi Yaakov Gesundheit's resignation, the Warsaw *kehillah* did not appoint another chief rabbi. Instead, a council of rabbis was elected, whose chairmanship rotated on a monthly basis.



Rabbi Shmuel Zeinvil Klepfish

Among the foremost personalities who served on this rabbinical committee were Rabbi Yeshayah Mushkat of Praga, Rabbi Shmuel Zeinvil Klepfish, Rabbi Nosson Spiegelglass, Rabbi Yehudah Segal, Rabbi Pesachyah Hornblas and Rabbi Avraham Tzvi Perlmutter.

While all these personalities were illustrious *geonim*, special mention should be made of Rabbi Nosson Spiegelglass, a disciple of the *Chemdas Shlomo* and author of a brilliant *sefer* of responsa and novellae entitled *Meoros Nosson*. This work has been widely acclaimed by the great *chassidic rebbes*, such as the *Chidushei Harym* and Rabbi Yechezkele Kuzmirer. His descendant and namesake, Rabbi Nosson Spiegelglass affectionately called Reb Noske,

was a saintly personality and one of the foremost *marbitzei Torah* (disseminators of Torah) in Warsaw before the Holocaust.

Chapter Five

A PERIOD OF GROWTH

With the establishment of Congress Poland in 1815, living conditions worsened for Warsaw Jewry. The area of the "Jewish quarter" was restricted, and the system of "daily tickets," which had been abolished in 1811, was reintroduced. By this system, newcomers to Warsaw were granted only temporary residence. In 1846, a decree was issued forcing Jews to wear modern-style European dress. Polish Jews would rather have sacrificed their lives than bow to this nefarious command which they saw as the first step toward losing their Jewish identity. In the face of the vehement opposition, the decree was rescinded.

The year 1859 brought a marked improvement. In *chassidic* folklore the period from 1859 until 1866 is called "the seven years of abundance," 1859 being the year in which the Gerrer Rebbe, the *Chidushei Harym*, was chosen to be the leader by the majority of the *chassidim* of Kotzk, upon the death of

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk.

In 1862, the restrictions imposed on the Jews of Congress Poland were lifted, and this marked the beginning of growth and development for Warsaw Jewry, and when Poland mounted a rebellion against Russian rule in 1863 the Jews of Warsaw took an active part in it. A Jew named Vladislav Epstein was a member of the provisional Polish government. However, as with all the previous uprisings, this one was also crushed by the Russians. It is interesting to note that the first Jewish publishing houses date back to this very same period. Prior to this time, Hebrew books could be printed in Warsaw only by non-Jewish printers; the first licenses to Jewish printers were issued during the second half of the nineteenth century.

In 1881, a revolutionary threw a bomb which killed Czar Alexander II. The frightened regime blamed the Jews for the assassination and incited the people to riot massively against the Jews. Pogroms swept across all of Russia, triggering a bloodbath. The head of the Russian Orthodox Church formulated the intent of the anti-Semitic government policy, expressing the hope that "one third of the Jews will convert, one third will die, and one third will flee the country." The anti-Jewish riots continued on and off for three years, spilling over into Poland.

On December 25, 1881, pogroms erupted in Warsaw and throughout Poland. In a wild orgy of destruction, nearly two thousand homes were devastated, and the damage inflicted on Jewish property was estimated at over seven hundred thousand rubles. Miraculously, only twenty-one Jews were injured, and one died of his wounds.

Yet in a classic replay of the story of the Exodus, "the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out" (*Shemos* 1:12), Jews began to prosper. Throughout this time, Warsaw Jews played an increasingly dominant role in the economy of the city, conducting flourishing businesses

and becoming leading financiers and industrialists. Of the twenty bankers in Warsaw in 1847, seventeen were Jews. Jews were instrumental in the construction of the Polish railroad system. They also held the monopoly for the sale of salt and alcoholic beverages and, in 1849, constituted over fifty percent of all the persons engaged in business in Warsaw.

Chassidus spread rapidly in Warsaw, new *shtiblach* springing up everywhere, so that by 1880 two thirds of the synagogues in Warsaw followed the *chassidic* tradition. It was at this time that the swelling tide of immigrants who escaped Russia in the wake of the pogroms of 1880 arrived in Warsaw. Many of these "Litvaks," as Polish Jews good-naturedly called all newcomers from Russia, also became ardent *chassidim*.

Unfortunately, there was a down side to all this growth. The prosperity many Warsaw Jews enjoyed led to their gradual acculturation and eventual conversion to Catholicism, the passport to acceptance by Polish high society.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, seventy prominent bankers, manufacturers and leading businessmen, fifteen publishers and twenty government officials had converted to Christianity. This proved to be of no help to their descendants, who ninety years later, were sent to the gas chambers by Hitler along with their full-blooded Jewish brothers.

In the early years of its existence, the leaders and representatives of the *kehillah* were elected by those members who had paid the costly *kehillah* tax. As a result, the Warsaw *kehillah*, which was predominantly Orthodox, gradually came under the control of the wealthy *maskilim*. Unpalatable though this was for the Orthodox members, they learned to live with it since the secularist leaders did not interfere at all with religious issues, such as the rabbinate, *kashrus* and education. The *maskilim*, many of whom were of distinguished rabbinical lineage, like the Eiger and Bergson families, contented themselves with the honor of contributing

liberally to charitable causes. Even the *chassidic* community supported the assimilationist leadership of the *kehillah* since they were given a free hand in running their own communal affairs.

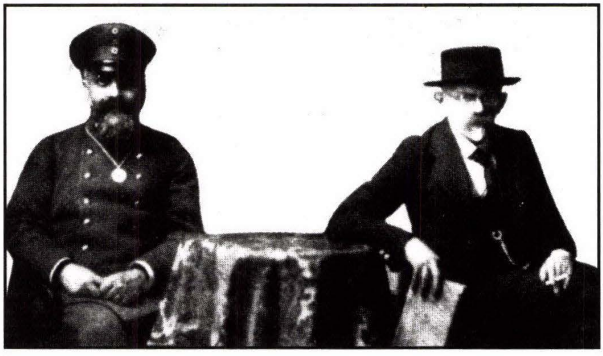
Chapter Six

WORLD WAR I AND ITS AFTERMATH

World War I began with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria and his wife in Sarajevo on *Tisha b'Av,* in 1914. It sparked a series of major upheavals which rocked Polish Jewry to its foundations. In the wake of the Russian defeat at Tannenberg, the German army occupied Russian Poland, including Warsaw. The Russians sought to blame the Jews for their losses, and tens of thousands were exiled to the Russian interior. In the aftermath of the war, 60,000 Jews were killed during the Russian Revolution.

As a result of the turmoil, Jews from Galicia fled to Czechoslovakia and Hungary; Jews from Congress Poland, running away from villages and small towns, poured into the urban centers. During this period, Warsaw absorbed tens of thousands of refugees, so that by 1917 the Jews of Warsaw numbered 343,000, or 41% of the entire population of the Polish capital.

The German occupation, generally, brought relief from the hardships Polish Jews were made to suffer by the Russians. The German military command designated two Orthodox rabbis, Rabbi Dr. Pinchas Kohn of Ansbach and Rabbi Dr. Emanuel Carlebach of Cologne to serve as army chaplains in



Rabbi Dr. Pinchas Kohn and Rabbi Dr. Emanuel Carlebach

Poland. Deeply impressed with the Polish *gedolim* with whom they consulted, these rabbis used their influence with the German authorities to help the community of Warsaw and Polish Jewry. They did much to fill its material and spiritual needs, and they took an active part in promoting the fledgling Orthodox movements of Agudas Yisrael and Bais Yaakov.

Economically, things were going from bad to worse. Poverty was rampant, and personal income declined to the point that in 1933 a full 35% of the Jewish work force was unemployed. Indeed, driven by grinding poverty, wave after wave of Polish Jews left the *alte heim* to seek a better life abroad. While many of them emigrated to the New World, a very significant number settled in Eretz Yisrael where they made important contributions to the new *yishuv* (settlement). For example, Warsaw Jews, organized by the Warsaw-born Reb Yitzchak Gerstenkorn, were among the pioneer

builders of the town of Bnei Brak. The migration to Eretz Yisrael had the enthusiastic support of the Polish *chassidic* leaders, notably the Gerrer Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter, known as the *Imrei Emes*, and Rabbi Yitzchak Zelig Morgenstern of Sokolov-Kotzk. The latter's father was Rabbi Yisrael of Pilov, known for his great love of Eretz Yisrael. In his *Sefer Shelom Yerushalayim*, he advocates a program for the transfer of one thousand *chassidic* families to Eretz Yisrael. Indeed, it was a group of Warsaw *chassidim* who founded and built the town of Kfar Chassidim in Eretz Yisrael.



Rabbi Yitzchak Zelig Morgenstern

The end of the First World War also brought with it an influx of *chassidic rebbes* to Warsaw. With the phenomenal growth of the *chassidic* movement, Warsaw became the residence of many well-known *chassidic rebbes*. As a rule, *chassidic rebbes* preferred to settle in small towns, such as Ger, Alexander, Radomsk, Radoshitz and the like. After the end of World War I, however, Warsaw attracted a number of *chassidic rebbes* who chose to establish their "courts" there. Their move to Warsaw brought about a marked change in the spiritual climate of the city. Among the famous *rebbes* who moved to Warsaw were such *rebbes* as Rabbi Klonymos Kalman Spira of Favyanitz, Rabbi Yisrael Spira of Grodzhisk, Rabbi Uri Elchanan Yehoshua Asher Ashkenazi of Parisov, Rabbi Eliezer Shloime of Volmin, Rabbi Menachem Dov Taub of Kozmir, Rabbi Moshe Yehudah Taub of Zvolin-Kozmir and Rabbi Yerachmiel Taub of Zvolin.

In addition to these great *chassidic* personalities, many

scions of famous *chassidic rebbes* found refuge in Warsaw, so that with the passage of time every street in the Jewish quarter could boast a *rebbe* of its own. There were about fifty such *rebbes* who were identified by street names; there was the Nizka Street Rebbe, the Mila Street Rebbe, the Pavia Street Rebbe and so on.

Chapter Seven

BETWEEN THE WARS

At the close of World War I, with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1918, Poland regained its independence. The Warsaw *kehillah* now became the focal point of Polish Jewry and the foremost community of European Jewry. As such, it was able to attract the most distinguished rabbinic leaders of the time to serve in its rabbinate.

The roster of the leading rabbinic figures of the post-World War I period reads like a page from the Who's Who of the Torah world. These personalities included, aside from the publicly elected rabbis of the *kehillah,* a large number of *geonim* who did not serve in an official capacity and did not receive a salary from the *kehillah*. Nevertheless, these towering Torah scholars were recognized as *poskim* (deciders of *Halachic* questions) by the public who consulted them for answers to their *sheilos* (*Halachic* questions), for decisions concerning financial disputes and for their wise counsel

regarding personal or family problems. These "unofficial" rabbis included both *chassidic* and non-*chassidic* sages. With the passing years, the differences between *chassidim* and *misnagdim* faded away, and the two groups, inspired by a common love of Torah, blended into one another.

The following personalities served in the rabbinate of Warsaw before the traumatic events of World War II:

- Rabbi Yaakov Meir Biederman, son-in-law of the *Sfas Emes* (Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, the Gerrer Rebbe). Rabbi Biederman's daughter was the second wife of the *Imrei Emes* (Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter of Ger).
- Rabbi Chaim Yehoshua Gutschachter
- Rabbi Meir Warschaviak
- Rabbi Avraham Weinberg
- Rabbi Yaakov Zamtchick
- Rabbi Aharon Naftali Zablodover
- Rabbi Yaakov Silberstein
- Rabbi Menachem Ziemba, the illustrious *gaon* of Poland, a Torah authority of world-wide acclaim and leader of the observant Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, where he perished.
- Rabbi Shlomo David Kahane, a preeminent *Halachic* authority, who was saved from the Holocaust and became the rabbi of the Old City of Jerusalem.
- Rabbi Tzvi Yechezkel Michelson, eminent historian and writer of biographies of rabbinical personages. No serious research of Jewish history is possible without the help of his monumental books. He also wrote many responsa, such as *Bais Yechezkel*, *Pinos Habayis* and *Tirosh Veyitzhar*, which attest to his wide-ranging erudition in the field of *Halachah*. Before coming to Warsaw he was the Rabbi of Plonsk.
- Rabbi Efraim Maimon
- Rabbi Shlomo Marker
- Rabbi Yehoshua Plato
- Rabbi Eliyahu Fettman



Rabbi Yaakov Meir Biederman



Rabbi Menachem Ziemba



Rabbi David Schapira



Rabbi Shimshon Stockhammer

- Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Kanal
- Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Rogoshnitzky
- Rabbi Yaakov Rubinstein
- Rabbi David Schapira, who miraculously escaped the Holocaust
- Rabbi Shimshon Stockhammer
- Rabbi Professor Dr. Moshe Schorr, who officiated in the largest and most magnificent synagogue in Warsaw at Tlomatzka Street. Although its services were conducted and its interior layout arranged in accordance with *Halachah*, it was shunned by the strictly observant Jews, since many of the worshipers were not *Shabbos* observers. The famous *chazzanim* Gershon Sirota and Yitzchak Kussevitzky officiated in this synagogue.

Warsaw, the nerve center of Polish Jewry, was the seat of the headquarters of Agudas Harabbanim (the Association of Orthodox Rabbis) of Poland, with a membership of more than one thousand rabbis. The organization was headed by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Alter of Favyanitz; its vice-presidents were Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Kanal and Rabbi Meir Warschaviak.

Chapter Eight

EDUCATION AND CHARITY

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a young boy in Poland started his Torah education at the local *cheder* (elementary Torah school) at the age of three and continued to study until his *bar-mitzvah*. Some youngsters carried on until they were sixteen or seventeen years old, while only the most promising and dedicated young men remained as full-time Torah students, studying under the guidance of the local rabbi. A few truly outstanding *talmidim* left their home town to study under the great Talmudic masters of Lithuania, Poland or Hungary, eventually to be ordained as rabbis. Under the pressures of *haskalah,* the so-called "enlightenment," this system of Torah education was seriously threatened, and Talmudic scholarship began to decline.

In 1803, Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner, the famous disciple of the Vilna Gaon, recognizing the perils inherent in "enlightenment," founded the Yeshivah of Volozhin, the first centralized

and structured institution of its kind. This *yeshivah* served as the model for a large number of similar Talmudic academies that first sprang up in Eastern Europe and later throughout the world.

In Warsaw, the first *yeshivah* in the Volozhin mold was established in 1919. The new *yeshivah*, called Mesivta, attracted the country's most prodigious students, and the high level of its lectures and its demanding schedule combined to produce Poland's most outstanding Torah scholars.



a yeshivah building

The system of elementary Torah education also underwent a marked change. In 1912, the Agudas Yisrael World Organization was founded in Katowice, Poland, with the aim of safeguarding the interests of the Torah-observant Jews. (Initially, the movement was called Agudas Ha'ortodoksim, and later, the name was changed to Shlomei Emunei Yisrael.)

As one of its early achievements, Agudas Yisrael brought about sweeping changes in the educational system by organizing a network of centrally administered *cheder* schools under the name of Yesodei Hatorah. Instead of learning in cramped,

dimly-lit, decrepit, one-room schoolhouses, the children were instructed in spacious and airy new Yesodei Hatorah buildings by a staff of highly qualified teachers, who taught a supervised program of studies. While the physical aspects of the *cheder* were improved, the traditional *cheder* curriculum remained unchanged.



Jewish boys going to yeshivah

There is general agreement among historians that the overwhelming majority of Warsaw Jewish children received their education in traditional Torah-oriented schools. Toward the middle of the 19th century, ninety percent of the city's Jewish students attended Orthodox schools. In 1896, Warsaw had 433 officially recognized *cheder* schools augmented by a substantial number of unofficial *cheder* schools.

The first government-sponsored elementary schools offering secular education were opened in 1920, but no Jewish students attended these schools. While there was an abundance of *cheder* schools for boys, no such Torah schools were

available for girls. Regrettably, Orthodox Jews—even *chassidim*—sent their daughters to government-sponsored schools, under government pressure, where they were indoctrinated with Polish culture and the non-Jewish values and ideologies of the modern age. Many Jewish girls grew to despise and scorn the traditions of their fathers, a tragedy which led to bitter rifts and the break-up of many families.

In response to the urgent need, Sarah Schenirer started a small school in Cracow to teach traditional Jewish studies to girls, with the assistance of Dr. Leo Deutschlander. The school, called Bais Yaakov, grew rapidly and set a new trend in Torah education for women and girls. It was the beginning of the powerful new Bais Yaakov movement which today maintains schools and seminaries in all the major cities of the world, providing traditional Jewish education to tens of thousands of women and girls.

The first girls' school, founded in Cracow by Sarah Schenirer in 1917, was expanded into a network of Bais Yaakov schools for girls and women which literally saved an entire generation of Polish girls from falling into the hands of the anti-Torah forces. There was not a town in all of Poland that did not maintain a Bais Yaakov school. At a later stage, Agudas Yisrael opened Chavatzeles, an Orthodox college for women, as well as a Bais Yaakov High School for girls.

The Warsaw *kehillah*, under the leadership of *gedolim* of the stature of Rabbi Menachem Ziemba, excelled not only in the field of education but also in its administration of social services. It maintained a Jewish hospital, a home for the aged, an orphanage, shelters, free kitchens and many other *chessed* (charitable) institutions.

But the simple Jews of Warsaw did not want to delegate to a committee a *mitzvah* as great as *tzeddakah*. In their desire to have a personal share in this *mitzvah*, a multitude of private charitable enterprises emerged. One of these, bearing the

quaint name of "*Gut Shabbos, Yiddalach!*" was made up of plain and simple Jews who collected food for the needy. They would make the rounds knocking on doors, and all they would say was, "*Gut Shabbos, Yiddalach!*" The householder would understand and fill their basket with groceries and fruit which they would distribute to the needy—of which there were many. Then there was the Chevras Mevakrim, people who would visit the sick at home or in the hospital and see to their needs.

Shabbos in Warsaw was simply indescribable. The spiritual dimension of pleasure and revival was reflected in the radiant faces of young and old. Worry and distress were banished as a heavenly serenity descended on the Jewish neighborhoods. Business throughout the city came to a halt, and even trading on the Warsaw stock exchange came to a standstill, since no Jews showed up to buy and sell. The *oneg Shabbos* had an almost tangible quality.

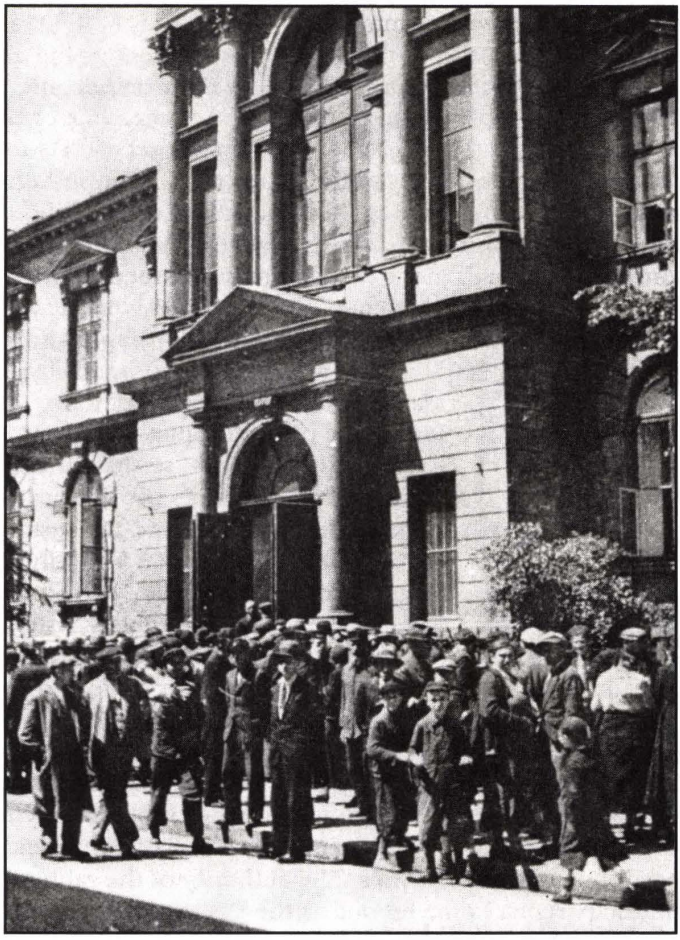
Chapter Nine

POLITICAL STRUGGLES

As far back as anyone could remember, the office building of the Warsaw community had always been at 26 Gzhibovska Street, an address familiar to every Jew in Poland as the place where he could direct his requests and problems and receive a satisfactory reply.

Among the early presidents of the community are counted Michel Ettinger, Shlomo Posner, Leib Samuelson and Rabbi Shlomo Eiger (the Rabbi of Posen, son of Rabbi Akiva Eiger). With the passing years, control of the *kehillah* administration shifted into the hands of the wealthy Warsaw financiers and industrialists who predominantly belonged to the assimilationist circles. The assimilationists did not interfere with the religious affairs of the *kehillah*, entrusting such matters as education and *kashrus* to the rabbinate. This policy changed drastically when the *maskilim*, secularists and later, the Zionists tried to grab the reins of power of the *kehillah*.

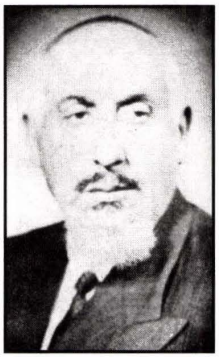
It was their ambition to transform the traditional character of the *kehillah* by appointing rabbis with a more modern outlook and establishing schools with secularist tendencies,



the community building at 26 Gzhibovska Street

thereby to win over the masses to Zionism, socialism or secularism, whatever the case may be. Unabashedly they called their program *kibush hakehillos* (conquering the communities) and waged no-holds-barred political campaigns for control of the Jewish communities.

After World War I, the Polish government made the election laws of the Jewish communities more democratic by abolishing the poll tax and granting every member of the *kehillah* the right to vote. No longer were the secularists able to capture the presidency of the community. Yiddish rather than Polish became once again the language of the *kehillah* administration, and *chassidic* representatives in their traditional garb took part in the decision-making process. The last presidents of the *kehillah* were Heschel Farbstein (1926-1931), representing Mizrachi (religious Zionists) and Eliyahu Mazur (1931-1937), an Orthodox lay leader and philanthropist, representing Agudas Yisrael. Both settled in Eretz Yisrael after surviving the Holocaust. Heschel Farbstein became the head of the *kehillah* of Jerusalem and Eliyahu Mazur became a member of the first Kenesset representing Agudas Yisrael.

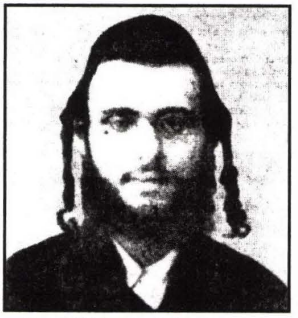


Eliyahu Mazur

Three epochal events—World War I, the German occupation of Poland and the Russian Revolution—ushered in an era of all-pervasive abject poverty coupled with a disastrous decline in adherence to traditional Torah values. An avalanche of powerful forces of change was set into motion enticing Polish Jewry with blandishments of secularization, radical socialism and other theories. The authority of the rabbinate and the parental home eroded as the Eastern European bastion of Torah came under siege by the false gods of the modern age. In the ensuing spiritual debacle, many abandoned Torah

observance, turning their backs on the age-old traditions.

Having gained their independence, the Poles, blaming the Jews for their misfortunes, took out their vengeance on them in a series of pogroms. The Germans, on the other hand, while they were in power displayed a benign attitude toward the Jews and helped them organize under the banner of a political party. Following suit, Polish Jewry established three umbrella organizations—a religious, a Zionist and a socialist movement.



Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Levin

The religious party, Agudas Yisrael, had such outstanding leaders as Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Levin and Reb Alexander Zisha Friedman. Representatives of Agudas Yisrael held seats on the board of Warsaw municipal administration and in the Sejm, the Polish parliament. Among the Sejm deputies of Agudas Yisrael were the celebrated *geonim* Rabbi Meir Shapiro of Lublin, founder of the famous Lubliner Yeshivah and initiator of the *Daf Yomi* cycle (the daily study of one folio of the Talmud), and Rabbi Aharon Lewin of Reisha. The foremost activists of Agudas Yisrael in Warsaw were *chassidim* of Ger, and the movement enjoyed the wholehearted and enthusiastic support of the Gerrer Rebbe, the *Imrei Emes* (Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter).

With the passage of time, Warsaw also became the center for the publication of Hebrew and Yiddish periodicals, including daily newspapers and weekly and monthly journals. As far back as 1862, the weekly *Hatzefirah* appeared, a journal for news, science and literature, published by Rabbi Chaim Zelig Slonimsky. Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, the Gerrer Rebbe, gave the impetus for the publication of the first Orthodox-oriented newspaper. A few years later his idea became reality with the



the Gerrer Rebbe

appearance of the daily *Das Yiddische Tagblatt*, published by Agudas Yisrael, and a number of weeklies such as *Haderech*, *Bais Yaakov* and many others. In 1913, the monthly rabbinical journal *Hapardes* was founded by Rabbi Shmuel Aharon Pardes. It published scholarly articles on Talmud and *Halachah*. Later on, Jewish publications in the Polish language also appeared.

Chapter Ten

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

On the morning of September 1, 1939, the Germans launched their full-scale invasion of Poland. As part of the all-out offensive, the German air force bombed Warsaw in the first indiscriminate air raid in history. The Polish army tried to offer resistance, but its cavalry, fighting with outdated equipment, was no match for the German motorized armored divisions. The Poles, who did not even have enough uniforms to clothe their fighting men or effective small arms and ammunition for their defense forces, held out for three weeks before being overwhelmed. After the surrender, about two million Polish Jews came under German rule.

The horrors of the bombing of Warsaw foreshadowed the atrocities that were in store for the Jews of Eastern Europe. With pinpoint accuracy the Germans aimed their bombs at the Jewish quarter, sowing death and destruction in their wake. The first bombing attack on Warsaw claimed over

2,000 Jewish victims and left the Jews shocked and traumatized; no one believed that the "civilized" Germans were capable of such inhumanity.

The initial bombing raids on the smaller towns set into motion a mass migration of Jews to Warsaw. Refugees streamed into the city by the tens of thousands; they came from Katowice, Bendin, Posen, Kalish, Bidgoszcz and Bilitz, under the illusion that in the Polish capital they would be secure.

The prominent members of the Warsaw Jewish community and its intellectuals who stood at the head of the battle against the Germans were the first to run away. Well-known personalities, such as communal activists, journalists, writers, party officials, Meisels, the president of the *kehillah*, Yitzchak Guterman, the chairman of the Joint Distribution Committee, delegates to the Sejm (Polish parliament) and members of the Warsaw City Council all abandoned the city.

In spite of the *en masse* desertion by its leaders, Warsaw valiantly attempted to resist the German advance, but in the face of the massive bombardment which threatened to wipe out the entire population, the city was forced to surrender. On September 29, the first day of *Sukkos*, 1939, the German forces marched into Warsaw, getting into their clutches 400,000 Jews, representing approximately one-third of the city's population.

Moshe Prager, in his book *Yevein Metzulah Hechadash*, calculated that the material losses suffered by the Jews of Warsaw amounted to one and one half billion zlotys. Even at this early stage of the Holocaust there was not a single family in Warsaw where there was no dead, and many people were unaccounted for. Within a few days, eight thousand Jews were buried in the Warsaw Jewish cemetery, and because of the urgency, many graves were left unmarked. A great number of Jews who were crushed under the debris of their devastated homes were buried in communal graves among the ruins of the ghetto.

On this first *Sukkos* under German occupation, word spread like wildfire that Reb Meshullam Kaminer, the president of the Warsaw *kehillah* and one of the leading figures of Agudas Yisrael, had in his possession a *lulav* and *esrog* which he had received from Eretz Yisrael before the outbreak of the war. In an incredible display of *bitachon* (faith), Jews from the far corners of Warsaw streamed to Reb Meshullam's residence on 11 Pawia Street. Hour after hour, an endless line of people, traumatized in body and spirit, stretched from Reb Meshullam's door. Waiting quietly and patiently they slowly moved forward in fervent anticipation of taking the *lulav* in hand and reciting the *berachah* over it. Rumor had it that among those awaiting their turn there were thousands of non-observant Jews who drew inner strength and comfort from performing the *mitzvah* and showing solidarity with their observant brothers.

The first measures the Germans adopted in their war against the Jews were what might be called bloodless pogroms. Soldiers and SS men would enter Jewish homes and stores, pilfering systematically anything they laid their eyes on—silver, jewelry and many other valuables—while amusing themselves by harassing the terrified residents. Jewish men, women and children were beaten. Beards and *peyos* were cut off. The Jews were rounded up and put to work at hard labor. Anyone offering the slightest



S.S. soldiers cutting off a Jewish man's beard

resistance was shot on the spot.

The Poles, who only yesterday were fighting alongside the Jews against the common German enemy, now revealed their true face. Polish riffraff happily volunteered to point out to the Germans the homes of wealthy Jews where they could make a good haul.



the Jewish tramway

The next stage in the program leading to the "Final Solution" was a spate of anti-Jewish decrees. Business dealings with non-Jews were forbidden. Any travel on the railway or other public transportation was forbidden. All Jews between the ages of fourteen and sixty were required to work as slave laborers in the rain, snow or mud, without tools. They were forced to clean the streets, load and unload freight at the local railroad depot or build high-



Jews forced to clean the streets

ways. All Jews were required to wear a white arm band with a blue *Magen David.*

One of the most distressing aspects of this phase was the



Nazi searching for hidden valuables in the lining of man's coat

roundup raid. In October, 1939, the Germans appointed a Judenrat, a Jewish community council made up of leaders of the community who were to act as a liaison between the German commandant and the Jewish population. The Germans used the Judenrat as their lackeys to help them carry out their nefarious plans of collecting heavy ransom payments, assemble the Jews for labor battalions and fill the quotas for transportation to the slave labor camps. The members of the Judenrat obediently carried out the orders of their German masters, thinking that they would thereby save their own lives. Ultimately, after the Judenrat people outlived their usefulness, the Germans killed them along with the Jews they had sold out.

The Judenrat was ably assisted by the Jewish police, which was made up of members of the Jewish underworld. The Jewish policemen who wore a German-style militia uniform were armed with billy clubs which they used liberally in enforcing the German decrees. Whoever did not show up for work was ferreted out by the German SS aided by the Jewish police. They hunted down their prey by cordoning o ff a street

and making a house-to-house search. All able-bodied men were rounded up and driven like cattle to an assembly point while being kicked with heavy police boots and pounded with rubber truncheons; often their beards and hair were pulled out. The knowledge that the abuse was inflicted by fellow Jews was even more painful than the beating itself.

Chapter Eleven

THE WARSAW GHETTO

The next phase in the German campaign to exterminate the Jews consisted of herding them into ghettos in the large cities where they were made to live under intolerable conditions. Terrible overcrowding coupled with starvation and unsanitary conditions bred rampant disease, so that as many



sign forbidding Jews entry

as thirty percent of the ghetto population died of malnutrition and epidemics.

In April, 1940, the Germans began erecting a wall to enclose the future Warsaw ghetto. On October 2, 1940, the Warsaw ghetto was established for all Warsaw Jews and refugees from the outlying provinces. The ghetto covered an area of about 840 acres from which 80,000 Poles had been evacuated. Within six weeks, 150,000 Jews were squeezed into these vacated homes, their possessions confiscated and turned over to Poles and government workers. As the Germans gradually reduced the area of the ghetto by moving the walls, living space was further reduced.



families moving their belongings into the ghetto

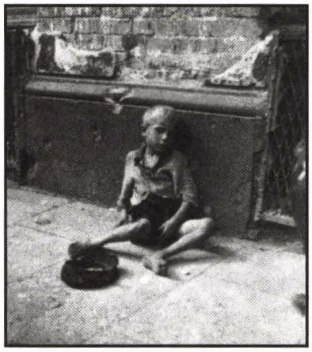
Living conditions in the ghetto were horrendous. For example, the building on 17 Krochmalna Street housed 1,029 Jews, and in the house on 35 Nalevky Street "lived" 1,885 Jews!



hungry children in Warsaw

Even before moving the Jewish population into these cramped quarters, the diabolical Germans sapped their strength and snuffed out their will to resist by starving them. The ration cards they received entitled

each person to 184 calories per day, while Poles were allotted 634 calories and Germans 2,310 calories per capita per day. The food allocation for the Jews was further reduced until it amounted to 10% of the minimum amount of nourishment required to survive. On the average a Jew received four pounds of bread and half a pound of sugar a month. The bread dough was mixed with sawdust and potato peels.



Jewish child in the ghetto

Hunger pangs became the all-pervasive factor of ghetto life, and the children were the ones suffering most acutely. A mood of hopelessness and despair gripped the majority of the ghetto inmates. Escape was impossible; anyone caught outside the ghetto walls was shot on the spot. The prophecy of the Torah was fulfilled in the Warsaw ghetto, "Outside, the sword shall deal death, while inside there shall be terror." (*Devarim* 32:25)

Under such conditions it did not take long before epidemics of typhoid fever and tuberculosis erupted on a wide scale. The death count climbed alarmingly to fourteen times the normal rate. Death took its toll especially among the recent arrivals to Warsaw from the out-



Jewish child who fainted from hunger

lying districts. Out of every 1,000 such refugees, 987 died in the ghetto, virtually amounting to total annihilation. Corpses were scattered throughout the ghetto streets–victims of starvation and disease–and by the summer of 1942 over 100,000 Jews in the ghetto had died of disease and starvation. The ghetto represented the German attempt at solving the "Jewish problem" by "natural means," well person who fainted from hungerbefore the introduction of the "more efficient" genocidal methods of the extermination camps.

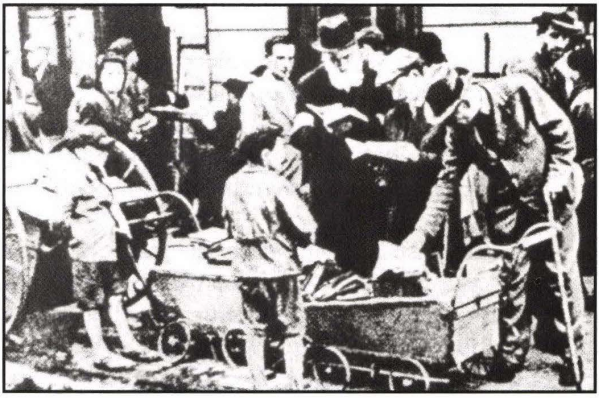
Yet in spite of the abominable living conditions, the spirit of Torah and *chessed* thrived in the ghetto. In this confrontation between the "voice of Yaakov" and the blood-stained "hands of Eisav," the spirit of Yaakov emerged triumphant. There existed in the Warsaw ghetto an active Jewish community which maintained a number of social and welfare institutions. Surprisingly, there were free public kitchens and food distribution centers which were supported by the Joint Distribution Committee. In May, 1941, there were 212 such kitchens supplying daily meals to over 100,000 persons. The 80,000 refugees who had sought shelter in Warsaw early in the war were housed in synagogues, public buildings, factories and warehouses. Clothing was distributed to the needy, in particular to Jewish veterans of the Polish army who had to discard their uniforms. There were "Jewish Emergency Committees" and "Building Committees"



feeding hungry boys

who cared for the needs of destitute residents. The oppressed Jews of the ghetto even maintained a Free Loan Society. Important relief work was rendered by the Social Assistance Center, one of whose leaders was Rabbi Alexander Zisha Friedman.

The indomitable Jewish spirit could not be subdued by the nightmarish torments of the hell that was the Warsaw ghetto. Contrasted by the depraved character of the German oppressors, Jewish unselfishness and morality shone all the more brightly. People living on the brink of starvation organized trade schools, maintained underground classes and seminaries for students, wrote books, published newspapers and



Jews crowd around a Jewish bookstand

collected Torah scrolls and ***sifrei kodesh*** (holy books) for safekeeping. Under the guise of an "***Oneg Shabbos***" organization, an enormous amount of documentary material was assembled on the heroism and martyrdom of Polish Jewry under the German occupation. This material was placed in secret archives which were discovered after the war and which told the true story of the heroic struggle of Warsaw Jewry.

Above all, the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto kept their *Yiddishkeit* with utter self-sacrifice. In spite of the prohibition against any prayer meetings, they maintained daily *minyanim*, held classes in Torah and Talmud and meticulously observed the *mitzvos*. There was even a group of young Torah scholars who steadfastly refused to shave their beards and cut their *peyos*, risking their lives every moment of the day.

In September, 1939, the Germans established the Judenrat of Warsaw, which was made up of twenty-four members headed by Adam Czerniakow, a Jewish engineer. The council members naively thought that they could intercede with the Germans on behalf of the Jews and improve their lot.

Mistakenly, they reasoned that without a Judenrat the Germans would unleash their unbridled fury on the Jews and that through Judenrat intervention they would tame the wild beasts. When the men of the Judenrat realized that the Germans shrewdly were using them as puppets to do their bidding and facilitate their program of annihilation of the Jews, it was too late.

The Germans also appointed to the Judenrat Professor Meir Balaban, Avraham Gefner, Y. Jashinsky, Senator Moshe Kerner, the attorney Hartglass, Arthur Siegelbaum, Baruch Rosenthal, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Levin and others. A large number of the Judenrat members, recognizing early on what the Germans were up to managed to escape.

The Judenrat set out to fulfill its task, hoping to act as a buffer between the Germans and the Jews. However, when the Germans demanded that its members supply Jews for transports to the Treblinka extermination camp, its president Adam Czerniakow committed suicide on July 23, 1942, rather than act as an accessory to the German murderers.

There is unanimous agreement among historians—not only among Torah-observant scholars—that the Jewish police, the so-called *Ordnungsdienst*, played a shameful role during

the entire Holocaust era and that its leaders, without exception, were assimilated Jews. Sad to say, the members of this Jewish police force treated their fellow Jews with contempt, callousness and even with undisguised outright hatred.

Levinson, the author of *The History of the Jews of Warsaw*, states emphatically, "To the undying honor and glory of Warsaw Orthodox Jewry, it should be pointed out that there was not one Orthodox Jew on the roster of the entire Jewish police force."

Chapter Twelve

DEPORTATIONS AND UPRISING

When Jews were not dying fast enough as a result of starvation, disease and mass executions by *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile murder squads), the German "master race" launched the next phase of the Final Solution, namely, mechanized murder in the death factories. On June 1, 1942, the infamous Treblinka extermination camp was opened. There, Jews were gassed to death in small chambers in which diesel engines from obsolete Russian submarines had been installed. It was here that the Jews from the Warsaw ghetto were to be killed.

On July 22, 1942, the first deportation took place. Many Jews never knew what fate was awaiting them, and even during their final moments, when they were standing in the gas chambers, they continued to hope. How could a Jewish soul conceive of the depth of infamy to which the German monsters had descended? The deportees of the July 22 transport were drawn from the refugees who had come to Warsaw



round-up for a transport to Treblinka

from the surrounding region, and the Judenrat raised no protest. However, when the Germans required the Judenrat to furnish 7,000 Jews for daily transports to Treblinka, its president Czerniakow, unable to bear the thought of being a partner in the killing of his fellow Jews, committed suicide, as mentioned above.

His successor, Lichtenbaum, also an engineer, agreed to follow the German instructions and issued a proclamation inviting people to come voluntarily to the *Umschlagplatz*, assembly point. Anyone volunteering for transport "to the East" would receive three kilogram of bread (six pounds) and one kilogram of marmalade. Tempted by the promise of food, and thinking that "transport to the East" meant living and working in freedom, the starved Warsaw Jews came to the *Umschlagplatz* in droves. They were herded onto the waiting trains by the Jewish police to be shipped straight to the Treblinka gas chambers.

A few deportees who managed to escape the Treblinka death factory brought to the ghetto the true story of what lay in store for the Jews of Warsaw at the end of their journey, namely, agonizing death. People feverishly began to build bunkers in their cellars, by digging holes in the ground to

provide shelter for their family and camouflaging it, making them virtually undetectable. During a raid, they planned to hide there until the danger would pass.

On August 9, 1942, a section of the ghetto was liquidated. During this first major *Aktion*, which lasted from July 22 until September 12, 1942, more than 260,000 Jews were deported, the majority of them to Treblinka. This number is based on official German documents; most probably, the actual count is considerably higher. After a nine-day pause, another transport of 2,600 Jews was shipped to the gas chambers of Treblinka. The transport was comprised of the families of Jewish policemen whose services were no longer required. This was the reward they received for their dedication beyond the call of duty and a job well done.

Among the deportees in the first transport there were such outstanding personalities as Avraham Mordechai Rogovy, the publisher of *Das Yiddische Tagblatt*, David Flinker, who later moved to Eretz Yisrael, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Alter of Favyanitz, president of Agudas Harabbanim and Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Kanal, the patriarch of the Warsaw rabbinate. When the Germans came to take him to the *Umschlagplatz*, he refused to go, whereupon the Germans shot him to death.

Initially, the Germans exempted from deportation people working in ghetto workshops and members of the Judenrat and Jewish police, as well as their families. This started a run on permits to work at such "protected" jobs. However, frequently the Germans would conduct "selections," grabbing anyone in sight to fill the quota for the daily transport to eternity.

On September 7, all Jews who were still alive in the ghetto—a total of 120,000—were ordered to assemble at certain designated points. Anyone remaining at home would be shot to death. The people assembled at the *Umschlagplatz* and there the Germans carried out a "selection," deciding who was to live and who would die. Hillel Zeitlin, the great

baal teshuvah and famous thinker and writer, arrived at the *Umschlagplatz* proudly wearing his *tallis* and carrying a *Sefer Torah*. After speaking inspiring words to the young people and urging the people to fight, he was shipped to Treblinka on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*.

Many people, after making the proper preparations, went into hiding in their bunkers and did not appear at the "selection." Others escaped into the Aryan part of Warsaw. Among these were the famous Agudas Yisrael activist and learned historian and author Dr. Hillel Seidman, who immortalized the memory of Warsaw in his awe-inspiring works entitled *Yoman Ghetto Varshah* (*A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto*) and *Ishim Shehikarti* (*Personalities I Have Known*), in which he offers a series of moving biographies of celebrated figures of the Torah world who perished during the Holocaust.

The survivors realized that their days were numbered. Any day now there would be another "selection," and then it might be their turn to go to Treblinka. It was futile to hope for an improvement in the situation; by now, everyone knew that the great community of Vilna had been annihilated and that the death factories of Treblinka, Majdanek and Sobibor were operating at full speed. At that point, it was decided to create a Jewish Fighting Organization. Yet, even at this critical moment, the Bund (Socialists) refused to join, demanding to wait until the Polish uprising would begin. Later on, however, the Bund did enter the organization, at first only in Warsaw and later throughout Poland. Agudas Yisrael was represented in the Jewish Fighting Organization by Zisha Landau.

On January 18, 1943, the Germans launched the second wave of deportations by breaking into the Warsaw ghetto, surrounding many buildings and carrying the inhabitants off to Treblinka. They entered the hospital, shot the patients and deported the staff. The Jewish Fighting Organization, although inadequately armed and poorly trained, offered its first resistance to the Germans who were dragging people

from their homes. The fighting which lasted for four days was the first case of armed resistance in all of occupied Poland and established the Jewish Fighting Organization as the dominant force among the ghetto inmates. The Germans, afraid that the resistance might spread to other parts of Poland, stopped the deportations. Instead, they lured the people to come voluntarily with promises of transferring them and their families to labor camps with pleasant working conditions and abundant food. The underground, on its part, spread the word about the Germans' real intentions. As a result, the German deportation *Aktion* succeeded in dispatching only 6,000 persons to Treblinka. Giving vent to their rage the Germans killed 1,000 others in the ghetto itself.

The final great ghetto uprising began on April 19, 1943, the first night of *Pesach*, 5703. A heavily armed German unit under the protection of tanks and artillery entered the ghetto in order to resume the deportations. The German force ran into a barrage of small arms fire from the Jewish fighters. Within minutes, fifty Germans fell, and in spite of their overwhelming military superiority, the attackers were forced to retreat. When they resumed the assault, they were repulsed once again with very heavy losses, as German bodies littered the streets. The Germans, having failed in open street fighting, changed tactics. Avoiding face-to-face combat, they began systematically burning down one house after another, using powerful flamethrowers and dropping bombs from airplanes. The entire ghetto was burned to the ground in one gigantic bonfire, which killed all the inhabitants.

Afterwards the Germans used dogs to search the ruins for people hiding in underground bunkers, killing them by hand grenades and gas. The resistance lasted until June, 1943. While most fighters were killed, about eighty of them escaped, making their way through the city sewers to the Polish part of Warsaw. They continued to fight the Germans in the forests as partisans, but only a few of them survived the war.

One of the inspiring figures of the Warsaw ghetto was the illustrious *gaon* and Chief Rabbi of Warsaw, Rabbi Menachem Ziemba. He declined offers to escape and was killed in the ghetto during that fateful month of *Nissan*. As one of his last official acts as Chief Rabbi of Warsaw, he declared *Erev Rosh Chodesh Nissan* as a day of fasting and repentance in view of the imminent doom. He was buried in a marked grave, and after the war, his remains were transferred to Eretz Yisrael.

The obliteration of the Warsaw Ghetto marked the end of Warsaw Jewry. Jewish Warsaw was no more.

Chapter Thirteen

THE POST-WAR ERA

On January 17, 1945, the Russian army liberated the main part of the city of Warsaw. All that was left of the vibrant, teeming multitudes of Warsaw Jewry was a pathetic remnant of about two hundred survivors who had been hiding out in the non-Jewish sector of the city. Of the hundreds of synagogues, *shtiblach*, *yeshivah* buildings and institutes of learning only the Nozhik Synagogue and the building of the Institute for Jewish Culture and Science remained standing, as well as the Jewish cemetery which will be the subject of a separate chapter.

The Nozhik Synagogue on 6 Twarda Street, which seats six hundred worshipers and has an *ezras nashim* (separate women's section), survived the Holocaust and is used for daily and *Shabbos* services. It is named after Zalman and Rivkah Nozhik, the gracious donors who in 1919 funded the construction of this synagogue. Restored in 1977, the first service

in the renovated house of worship was held on April 18, 1983.

During the occupation, the Germans used this synagogue as a stable for horses and a silo for hay. Rumor has it that they did not burn it down because it is located across the street from a Catholic church, and it was feared that the sparks might set the church on fire.

The Great Synagogue on Tlomatzka Street did not fare so well. After crushing the Warsaw uprising, the Germans blew up the magnificent edifice on May 16, 1943 as a token of their "victory."

On the site of the Great Synagogue a high-rise building has been under construction for the last thirty years! One construction company after another was forced to abandon the building project when a series of mysterious accidents such as cranes overturning and walls collapsing caused fatalities among the workers. Whispers are making the rounds that a curse had been cast on the site, and any construction project was doomed to failure. Recently, a Norwegian company has undertaken the task of completing the construction after agreeing to set aside an area in the building to be used as a synagogue. To date no untoward incident has occurred, and the building is scheduled for completion in 1991.

After Germany's defeat, a small trickle of Jews began to return to Warsaw. Some of these were survivors who had been hiding out on the "Aryan" side during the war years. Others were former partisans who had fought the Germans in the forests around Warsaw, while some of the returnees were survivors of the various concentration camps. There were also a number of Jews who had escaped to the Soviet Union and who were now returning to Poland. Warsaw was predominantly a way station for people who had been uprooted by the Holocaust and were seeking to build new lives elsewhere. Still, a considerable number of Jews remained there, and by the end of 1945, approximately 5,000 Jews had settled in Warsaw.

The groundwork for a rudimentary Jewish community was laid when the United Jewish Council and various other Jewish organizations were founded. In 1962, the Jewish population reached 7,000, and its cultural life centered around the Jewish Historical Institute, which was engaged in research into the history of the Jews of Poland, with particular emphasis on the period of the Holocaust. Religious observance and Torah study were at a very low ebb.

Many Warsaw Jews left Poland in 1946 and 1947 after the Poles went on a murderous rampage in the great pogrom in Kielce. Another wave of emigration occurred in 1967-1968 when the Polish government sponsored an official anti-Semitic campaign. Those who remained were mostly aged people and Jews who had intermarried and were totally assimilated. By 1979, there were 4,500 Jews in Warsaw, most of whom had blended into Polish society and considered themselves Poles rather than Jews.

As a result of the recent improvement in the political climate in Poland, Warsaw Jewry has seen a renaissance of sorts. This is due mainly to the initiative of Rabbi Chaskel Besser of New York, a member of the presidium of Agudas Yisrael and the chairman of the Polish division of the Ronald Lauder Foundation. Through Rabbi Besser's tireless efforts and the generous support of the Lauder Foundation, Rabbi Menachem Joskowitz, a kindhearted and dedicated man with a firm commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*, has been appointed Chief Rabbi of Warsaw. He is recognized by the Polish government as the official spokesman for Polish Jewry and enjoys its full backing and cooperation. He inspires the *kehillah* to greater Torah observance and leads the community with a firm but gentle hand. Under Rabbi Joskowitz's guidance, daily *minyanim* are held at the Nozhik synagogue. On *Shabbos*, the rabbi invites out-of-town guests to his home to enjoy his homemade *cholent*, and he conducts an inspiring *shalosh seudos* (third meal), offering *zemiros* and Torah insights.

Poland has become a focal point for many businessmen and tourists: *chassidim* who want to visit the grave sites of their rebbes, people who want to visit their home towns and young people who want to learn about the Holocaust by visiting the sites of the notorious extermination camps of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek, Sobibor, Belzec and others.

In spite of these welcome sparks of revival, it is clear that the Jewish Warsaw, the vast reservoir of Torah and rich source of *Chassidus*, is gone. It is following the pattern of Spanish Jewry, which during its Golden Age produced such Torah giants as the Rambam, the Ritva, the Rashba and the Ramban, yet after the expulsion of 1492, Jewish life in Spain came to an end and to this day has not reawakened.

Chapter Fourteen

MONUMENTS AND MEMORIES

The only place where the Warsaw of the past can still be seen is the cemetery. There you will find "our Warsaw of old." In today's downtown Warsaw, you won't encounter many rabbis or *chassidic rebbes*. Gone are the warm-hearted simple Warsaw Jews who would greet you with a twinkle in their eyes, a smile on their faces, always ready with a quip or a wisecrack. They are gone without a trace. It is only at the cemetery that you can get an inkling of "our Warsaw" of a bygone age. It's a miracle the Germans did not destroy it, since most cemeteries in Poland were leveled by them. It seems that in Warsaw they did not need the tombstones for paving roads.

People used to call it the "Gensher *bais olam*," the cemetery of Gensha Street, as it is located at the intersection of Gensha and Okopowa Streets. At the present time, the only entrance is from Anielewicza Street. It was established in 1806, and about 400,000 people are buried there, an immense

number which does not include the many thousands who were buried in mass graves during the Holocaust and whose identity is unknown.

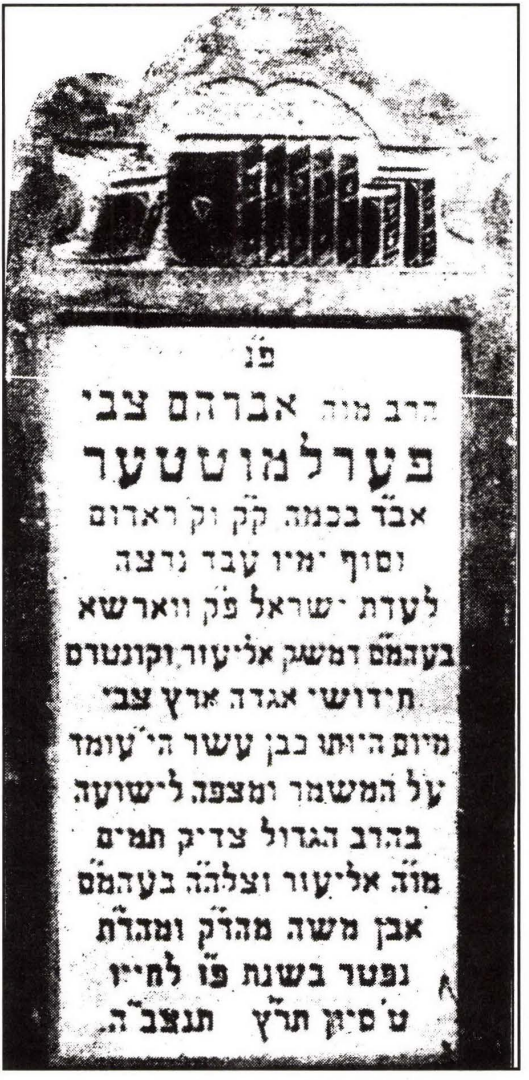
As you come into the cemetery you think you are entering a huge forest—a forest of tombstones and trees. You are suddenly struck by the reality of the Biblical verse, "*Ki ha'adam eitz hasadeh*—For man is a tree of the field." (*Devarim* 20:19) Indeed, the trees are the tombstones for the millions who were killed and were not granted a Jewish grave. Some of these trees soar to heights of more than one hundred feet.

In the 1970s, many tombs of prominent *chassidic* leaders were vandalized by Polish grave robbers who expected to find hidden treasures. Soon thereafter, the damaged graves were restored by the followers of these *rebbes*.

The cemetery is crisscrossed by avenues and paths to enable the visitor to reach the graves. Ten wide avenues and seventy-two narrow walk-ways divide the area into sections. The last administrator of the cemetery before the Holocaust was Reb Meshullam Kaminer, a Gerrer *chassid* and an extremely popular and dedicated communal leader. Before him, this position was often held by secular Jews. This is evident by the rather bizarre juxtaposition of the graves of great *tzaddikim* and saintly personages alongside those of totally assimilated Jews.

The first grave in the first row is that of the *Chemdas Shlomo*, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Lipschitz, Warsaw's first chief rabbi; it is marked by an *ohel* (mausoleum). Next to his grave is that of Rabbi Avraham Tzvi Perlmutter, the Rabbi of Radom. While Rabbi Avraham Tzvi was an ardent *chassid*, his father Rabbi Eliezer was a *misnaged*, who ironically gained fame for his work *Even Moshe,* the only *sefer* in the world that bears the *haskamah* (approbation) of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, the illustrious Kotzker Rebbe.

Near the entrance to the *ohel* is the grave of Rabbi



kever of Rabbi Avraham Tzvi Perlmutter

Avraham Luftbier, a matchless *gaon* whose Talmudic knowledge was simply breathtaking. His method of study was a synthesis of Polish *bekius*, wide ranging knowledge, and Lithuanian *amkus*, analytical prowess. The *Ohr Sameyach*, Rabbi Meir Simchah Hakohen of Dvinsk, the towering giant of the entire generation, chose Rabbi Avraham Luftbier to be the husband of his only daughter. He died childless in 1920 at the young age of forty-nine but gained immortality through his *Sefer Zera Avraham,* a famous responsa work.

Alongside of him you find the *matzeivah* of Rabbi Yaakov Gesundheit, the last Chief Rabbi of Warsaw, who passed away in 1878. In the same section you find the white marble *matzeivah* of Rabbi Dov Berish Meisels, another Chief Rabbi of Warsaw.

To the right of Rabbi Meisels is buried Rabbi Chaim Davidsohn (died in 1870), a Chief Rabbi of Warsaw; to the left lies Rabbi Nosson Spiegelglass (died in 1873).

Not far from Rabbi Meisels you find the *ohel* of Rabbi Yeshayah Mushkat, the Rabbi and Rebbe of Praga, the suburb of Warsaw. Next to his grave is that of his father Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Mushkat, an outstanding Warsaw personality and one of that city's first *chassidim*. He was a member of the inner circle of *chassidim* of Rabbi Yisrael of Kozhnitz, the Kozhnitzer Maggid, (1740-1814, one of the early *chassidic* masters, a disciple of Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk and Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev).

The most imposing and strikingly beautiful monument in the Warsaw cemetery is the *matzeivah* of Berko Bergson, the wealthy magnate of Warsaw. The monument, which is built like a tall statue, is regarded as one of the most exquisite pieces of sculptural art from the beginning of the 19th century in Central Europe. Although some of the bas-relief art work has eroded, clearly legible is the Hebrew inscription of the verse, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down, there we wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows nearby we hung up our

harps." (*Tehillim* 137:1) Underneath, is engraved a river and a bridge surrounded by towers. The grave of his wife Tamarl is a short distance away. An astute businesswoman, Tamarl conducted many of her husband's commercial affairs and donated liberally to *chassidic rebbes* and Torah institutions. Rabbi Simchah Bunim of Pshis'cha (1767-1827), before becoming the famous *chassidic* leader, was employed by her as the manager of the lumber and forestry department.

In the next row, you come upon the grave of Rabbi Yehudah Leibush of Chelm, who was the business manager of Berko Bergson. It is interesting to note that there exists a letter by the saintly Chozeh of Lublin, addressed to Rabbi Yehudah Leibush, in which the Chozeh opposes his plan to leave his employment with Bergson in order to go into business for himself. The Chozeh writes, "I want you to know that I pondered the matter on *Shabbos* night after *Havdalah*. Your present job is beneficial both to you and to your employer, but Heaven forbid, if you resign, it will be detrimental to you and to the Bergson company."

Walking along you come to the grave of Rabbi David of Sochatchov (1878-1943), son of the *Shem Mishmuel* and grandson of Rabbi Avraham of Sochatchov, author of the celebrated *Avnei Nezer* and *Eglei Tal*. He founded a network of Yeshivos Bais Avraham. When the Germans entered Lodz he fled to Warsaw where he died on 8 *Kislev*, 1943. He wrote *Chasdei David*, a commentary on the *Haggadah*.



Rabbi David of Sochatchov

Further on, you encounter the grave of Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter (died in 1855) the son of Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Ger, the famous *Chidushei Harym* (1799-1866). He was the father of the illustrious Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, the *Sfas Emes* (1847-1905). A short distance away is the

grave of his son Rabbi Shloime Alter.

Near the tomb of Rabbi Avraham Mordechai are the graves of the well-known *chassidim* Rabbi Aryeh Leibush of Bilgoray, Rabbi Shmuel of Chmelnick and Rabbi Feivel of Kaminetz. The inscription on Rabbi Avraham Mordechai's *matzeivah* describes him as a "pious person, a man who was a saint from birth."

Legend has it that no space could be found for Rabbi Avraham Mordechai's grave. When the problem was presented to Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Ger, the deceased's father, he said, "His friends surely will make room for him." Indeed, when you look closely you will note that Rabbi Avraham Mordechai's monument stands at an angle, protruding outside the row, as though it had been forced into its place.

Further down is the grave of Rabbi Yechiel Efraim Fishel Hakohen Levin, the brother of Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Levin, the famous leader of Agudas Yisrael and the son of the Rabbi of Bendin. Close by are the graves of Rabbi Yitzchak Zelig Morgenstern of Sokolov and Rabbi Menasheh of Kozhnitz. As you walk down the path, you see the monument of Rabbi Chaim Posner, a member of the Rabbinical Council of Warsaw; over there, you see the *matzeivah* of Esther, the mother of the *Sfas Emes*, and that of her daughter Devorah Malkah who died seventy-five years later, both resting in the same grave. As you look around, you see a large number of graves of members of the Gerrer dynasty, including the grave of the sister of the *Chidushei Harym*, Yocheved, wife of Reb Henach Sterling.

In the Warsaw cemetery, you find the tomb of Rabbi Yehoshua of Ostrova, the son of Rabbi Shloime Leib of Lintchna. You will be surprised to find the area around his grave to be completely vacant. This was done in compliance with his will that no one be buried close to him. Adjacent is the grave of his son-in-law and successor Rabbi Yitzchak Yaakov Rabinowitz of Biala. Next to him is the tomb of Rabbi Meir

Shloime Yehudah of Mezritch, the son of Rabbi Yitzchak Yaakov of Biala who died during the Holocaust, on the 17th of *Adar,* 1942. The family who still had the opportunity to place a *matzeivah* on his grave inscribed on it an apology for burying the deceased within four cubits of his grandfather's grave, in spite of his express prohibition. The inscription explains that "the prohibition not to inter anyone within four cubits of his grave was not intended to exclude his grandson."

In the Warsaw cemetery, you find the restored white *ohel* of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vorki, the Vorker Rebbe (1819-1868), who was a leader of thousands of *chassidim*. Even today his grave is visited frequently, and the numerous *kvitlach* (notes with requests) bear witness to this. Known as the "silent *tzaddik*" he was the son of the *chassidic* luminary Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorki and a student of the Kotzker Rebbe. Next to him lies his son-in-law Rabbi Yaakov Yehudah of Nadrzin (died in 1888), author of *Yashresh Yaakov*. The Vorker *chassidic* tradition is perpetuated today by the Amshinover *rebbes* of Eretz Yisrael and Brooklyn who have established flourishing *chassidic* centers and *yeshivos*.

Alongside the *ohel* of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vorki, you see the tomb of Rabbi Emanuel Weltfreud of Pshedburzh. In the same row is the grave of Rabbi Yaakov David Biederman of Vishigrad and next to him—in the same



kever of Rabbi Yaakov David Biederman

grave—his grandson Rabbi Yaakov Meir Biederman, son-in-law of the *Sfas Emes*. He died under the German occupation but still received a Jewish burial. Close by is the grave of Rabbi Yoel Sofer, the son of Rabbi Shimon Sofer, the Rabbi of Cracow and a descendant of the illustrious Chasam Sofer of Pressburg.

Walking along, you come to the grave of Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Morgenstern of Pilov, author of *Medrash Moshe*. He is the son of Rabbi Yisrael of Pilov, author of *Shelom Yerushalayim*. Next to him is the *ohel* of Rabbi Yosef, the last Rebbe of Kotzk. In the adjacent grave lies Rabbi Yaakov Taub of Yablona.

The Warsaw cemetery is also the final resting place of two of the most illustrious *geonim* in the world of Talmud of the last century—Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik (1853-1915) and Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (1817-1893).

Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, affectionately known as Reb Chaim Brisker, an outstanding Torah scholar, was the *rosh yeshivah* (dean) of the great Yeshivah of Volozhin. In his Talmudic discourses, he introduced a new method of studying Talmud, based on a penetrating analysis of the subject under discussion, searching out the principles on which each law was founded. His approach is extremely helpful in reconciling apparently contradictory statements of the Rambam, and today his *sefarim* are avidly studied in all *yeshivos*.



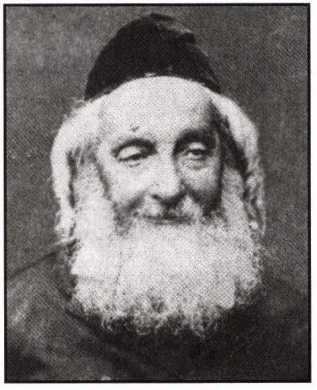
Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik

After World War I, Reb Chaim Brisker moved to Warsaw where he captured the hearts of the *chassidim* through the

phenomenal scope of his knowledge of Torah and his piety. Although his Lithuanian method of learning was diametrically opposed to the Polish method of *pilpul*, he galvanized the *chassidic* scholars with the power of his personality and the purity and nobility of his character. In his presence, the gap that separated *chassidim* and Lithuanian *misnagdim* melted away.

Warsaw Jewry took great pride in having a *gaon* of the stature of Reb Chaim settle in their midst. The love he displayed toward *chassidim* was fully reciprocated by them. Indeed, he made an indelible imprint on Warsaw Jewry. His son-in-law Rabbi Hirshele Glickson, a prodigious Torah scholar in his own right, established a *yeshivah* named Toras Chaim in his memory. Through this *yeshivah*, the methodology of Talmud study introduced by Reb Chaim gained progressively more acceptance among *chassidic* scholars.

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, popularly known as the Netziv (the initials of his name), is also buried in the Warsaw cemetery. An eminent Torah scholar, he married the daughter of Rabbi Yitzchak, son of Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner. In 1854, he became *rosh yeshivah* of that renowned institution, a post he held for forty years. Under his leadership, the *yeshivah* grew and attracted over four hundred outstanding students from all over the world, who admired him for his erudition and his fatherly love. He firmly opposed all attempts by the *maskilim* (secularists) at introducing secular studies. This ultimately led to the closing of the *yeshivah* by the Russian government in 1892. The Netziv



Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the Netziv

moved to Minsk and later to Warsaw. His most popular work is *Haamek Davar*, a commentary on the Torah in which he demonstrates the unity of the Written and the Oral Torah. He also wrote *Maishiv Davar*, a responsa work.

Many of the *rebbes* of the Amshinov dynasty are buried in the Warsaw cemetery. Here you see the tomb of Rabbi Menachem of Amshinov, grandson of Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorki. Further down is the grave of Rabbi Menachem's son Rabbi Yosef of Amshinov and that of his son Rabbi Yaakov David of Amshinov who perished under the Germans in 1942 at a young age. He is buried in his father's *ohel*. Next to this mausoleum is the *ohel* of Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Spira of Blandov, a descendant of the Kozhnitz dynasty.

In the sixth wide avenue, you find the *ohel* of Rabbi Yaakov Aryeh Guterman of Radzimin (1792-1874), a prominent student of Rabbi Simchah Bunim of Pshis'cha and Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorki. The Rebbe of Radzimin was one of the great *chassidic* miracle workers and the author of *Bikurei Aviv*. In his *ohel* lie also his grandsons Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Siratchin and Rabbi Aharon Menachem Mendel of Radzimin. In the same *ohel* rests also Rabbi Nechemia Alter, the brother of the *Imrei Emes* of Ger, who died during the Holocaust.



Rabbi Alter Yisrael Shimon Perlow

In this section are the graves of many other members of the Gerrer dynasty. Nearby you find the grave of Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, son-in-law of the *Imrei Emes,* who was killed during the German bomb attack on Warsaw. Not far from his grave is the *ohel* of Rabbi Alter Yisrael

Shimon Perlow of Novominsk (1874-1933) and his brother-in-law Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Heschel of Novominsk.

In the Warsaw cemetery, you find also the grave of Rabbi Yisrael of Modzhitz (1849-1921) whose *niggunim* (melodies) have inspired and thrilled the entire Jewish world and are chanted to this day. He composed his famous *niggun* for *Ezkerah* while undergoing surgery without the benefit of anesthesia. He wrote *Divrei Yisrael*, *chassidic* commentaries on the Torah.

As you go down the line, you find the grave of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Strykov. Next to him lies Rabbi David Weidenfeld, brother-in-law of Rabbi Yisrael Alter of Ger, the *Bais Yisrael*. Next to him lies Rabbi Moshe David Morgenstern, son of the Sokolover Rebbe.

The names which are mentioned here represent only a fraction of the eminent personalities whose tombs can be found in the Warsaw cemetery. The names of many *tzaddikim* and *kedoshim* are unknown as their final resting place is in one of the mass graves.

Our Sages stated that when the Torah was burned at the destruction of the *Bais Hamikdash* only the parchment was consumed but the holy letters soared on high. The same took place in our age. The cruel enemy burned Warsaw to the ground; its pure and saintly sons and daughters gave their lives *al kiddush Hashem*, for the sanctification of G-d's Name. Yet the indomitable spirit of Warsaw lives on. The love of Hashem, the Torah and Yisrael that inspired the Jews of Warsaw lives on forever in the hearts of future generations.

May the memory of these *kedoshim* endure forever. May their merit protect us and all Yisrael.

One of the great strengths of the Jewish people has always been their superlative sense of community, *kehillah*. The *kehillah* cared for the needs of the individual, providing rabbis and teachers, *shuls* and *yeshivos*, *kashrus* and charitable funds, and a framework in which Jewish life could prosper and flourish. Over the years, individual communities in far-flung geographical locations developed their own particular histories and distinctive customs and traditions, so that Torah-true Jewish life assumed myriad external forms, each founded on the rock-solid twin foundations of the Written Law and the Oral Law, becoming a veritable *kesoness passim*, a single "coat of many colors."

Glimpses of Jewish Warsaw is the inaugural volume in a new series of short historical sketches of illustrious Jewish communities of the past. Although its history is comparatively short, the Jewish community of Warsaw was, by far, the largest and most vital of pre-War Europe, incorporating within itself so many diverse elements that it became a microcosm of Polish Jewry. From the pages of this work emerge images of teeming streets and hundreds of *shuls* and *shtieblach*, of brilliant rabbis and Talmudic scholars, of great *chassidic* rebbes and their devoted followers, of learned laymen and pious, hard-working merchants and tradesmen, and on the other end of the spectrum, of secular Jews, Zionists, Revisionists, Bundists, Socialists and Communists. It was a community rich in history, traditions and Jewish flavor, a community which met its tragic end amidst the flames of the Warsaw Ghetto. Future volumes offering glimpses of Vilna, Brisk, Cracow and Frankfurt have been assigned and are in various stages of preparation.

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