

I. The Family Alperowitz

Like most families who were classified as Russian when they arrived on these shores, the Alpert-Cohen immigrants had traveled from lands that had become part of the tsarist Empire only a few decades before their departure. As residents of the Lithuanian province of the Polish Commonwealth, which was a hybrid of the old Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland, they had fallen under the rule of the tsars with the final partition of Poland in the last decade of the 18th century.

Although Polish control had been a fact of life in Lithuania for over two hundred years prior to the Russian conquest, close ties had existed between Poland and Lithuania since the 14th century when the Polish gentry and Lithuanian aristocracy obtained rights in each other's country. A political alliance was formed in 1401 which was followed by the establishment of a single dynasty fifty years later. Separate civil structures and armies were still maintained but after another in a series of wars with Muscovy (Old Russia) left Lithuania's treasuries depleted, political unification with Poland became complete. The Union of Lublin (1569) established a common legislature and government, but allowed Lithuania to retain the status of a separate duchy as well as its own laws.

By the end of the 18th century the economic and political condition of Poland had deteriorated to the point that the commonwealth's revenues were forty times smaller than those of France and ten times smaller than those of Russia. When other monarchs were creating effective systems of taxation and large armies, the kings of Poland had an inadequate budget and a small army and thus were unable to stop the military advances of Austria, Prussia and Russia. In three actions between 1772 and 1795 Poland was divided between her more powerful neighbors, with Russia taking almost 62 percent of the land and 23 percent of the population.

Theoretically, the tsarist government allowed Poland to maintain autonomy as an independent kingdom with Polish continuing as the official language, but with the local administration employing pro-Russian Poles. The long term strategy, however, was to fully integrate the Poles into the Russian mainstream - an objective that was impossible to achieve if for no other reason than the historic antagonism that existed between the Polish and Russian nationalities. Poland's large Jewish population was especially problematic for the tsarist government in that Jews had not been allowed in the Russian Empire for over two hundred years. This policy originated during the 15th century when Russia, which had been a collection of warring principalities, consolidated under one ruler and one religion. The result was that Muscovy, which had adopted Greek Orthodoxy, came to regard herself as the one repository of True Faith in the world and as the successor of both Judaism, which was held in contempt, and Catholicism, which was viewed as degenerate and corrupt. A succession of tsars then issued a variety of edicts designed to prevent the admission of alien elements into their society. Vladislav (1610-1613), the last of the tsars to be elected, agreed in advance that no churches of the Catholic or

any other non-Orthodox denomination would be allowed in Russia and that Jews were not to be admitted to the Empire whether on business or for any other purpose, whereas Elizabeth Petrovna (1741-1762) expelled the few thousand Jews that were absorbed with the annexation of the Ukrainian and White Russian territories.

At the first partition of Poland in 1772, Catherine II (1762-1796) issued a proclamation welcoming her new subjects and promising the continuation of all the rights they had enjoyed under their previous rulers. For the Jews, the most important of these were immunity from enserfment and the privilege of maintaining their own laws and tribunals under the *Kahal*, a self governing body established by a Polish charter in 1551. By the third partition (1795) the legal and social autonomy represented by the *Kahal* was no longer acceptable to the Russian government; however, since this organization, which also acted as the tax collecting authority in Poland, contributed enormous sums to Russia's treasury it was allowed to survive, but only within a designated area. In view of this and to placate merchants who protested business competition from newly arrived Jews, the stage was set for the establishment of the notorious Pale of Settlement.

The Pale was, in effect, a giant ghetto comprising some 386,000 square miles, or 5 percent of the Empire, to which Jews were restricted to living. Alexander I (1801-1825) originally retained the old code of laws of Lithuania within the Pale, hence the shift in government did not have noticeably harsh effects. Jews were allowed to live in two districts outside the Pale, could buy land and were allowed into schools. After the defeat of Napoleon those circumstances changed. First, Alexander initiated actions to limit Jewish economic activities in the hope that this would break down their historic isolationism, then old restrictive laws that had been loosened were suddenly enforced and Jews were expelled from the regions they had been invited to occupy only a few years before.

The accession of Alexander's brother, Nicholas I (1825-1855), initiated an era of ultra-reactionary rule. Firmly dedicated to the principles of Orthodoxy, autocracy and the national way of life, Nicholas imposed numerous measures, including strict censorship, to stop the influence of Western ideas. Believing that military duty would break down the separatism of alien groups, Nicholas required twenty-five years service from all males above the age of eighteen. Jews, who had been exempt from service until 1827 by payment of a special tax, were also liable on a selective basis for an additional six years duty at special training camps which commenced at age twelve. In a confidential memorandum, Nicholas wrote that "the chief benefit to be derived from the drafting of Jews is the certainty that it will move them most effectively to change their religion."¹ But the Jewish reaction to this policy was to resist even more stubbornly the tsarist intrusion into their way of life. In the words of historian Simon Dubnow, Jewish life was "dominated by rigidly conservative principles.

The old scheme of family life, with all its patriarchal survivals, remained in force. In spite of the law, embodied in the Statute of 1835, which fixed the minimum age of the bridegroom at eighteen (and that

of the bride at sixteen), the practice of early marriages continued as theretofore. Parents arranged marriages between children of thirteen and fifteen. Boys of school age often became husbands and fathers... The slightest deviation from a custom, a rite, or old habits of thought met with severe punishment. A short jacket or a trimmed beard was looked upon as a token of free thinking. The reading of books written in foreign languages, or even written in Hebrew, when treating of secular subjects, brought upon the culprit untold hardships. The scholastic education resulted in producing men entirely unfit for the battle of life, so that in many families energetic women took charge of the business and became the wage earners while their husbands were losing themselves in the mazes of speculation, somewhere in the recesses of the rabbinic (literature).

In Lithuania the whole mental energy of the Jewish youth was absorbed by Talmudism. Mentality, erudition, dialectic subtlety were valued above all else. Yet, as soon as the mind, whetted by Talmudic dialects, would point its edge against the existing order of things, or turn in the direction of living knowledge, of "extraneous sciences", it was checked by threats of excommunication and persecution. Instructive in this respect is the fate of one of the most remarkable Talmudists of his time, Manasseh ben Joseph of Ilya.

The rabbi, born in 1767 in Smorgon, was a disciple and intimate of the Vilna Gaon (see below) which alone would have qualified him for renown, but he went on to become famous in his own right. Dubnow writes that "while keeping strictly within the bounds of rabbinical orthodoxy, whose adepts respected him for his enormous erudition and strict piety, Mannaseh endeavored to widen their range of thought..." His was an unconventional voice, advocating social responsibility and the teaching of mathematics and the sciences in religious schools during a time when such ideas were violently opposed by the ultra-orthodox rabbinate. Manasseh's literary debut in 1807, *The Solution to the Problem*, gave "vent to his grief over the fact that the spiritual leaders of the Jewish people kept aloof from concrete reality and living knowledge." When the book appeared, many rabbis burned it and made every effort to suppress it. This was just the beginning of his troubles. "Ten years later," writes Dubnow, "while residing temporarily in Volhynia, the hot-bed of hasidism, Manasseh began to print his religio-philosophic treatise, *The Teachings of Manasseh*. But the first proof sheets sufficed to impress the printer with the 'heretical' character of the book, and he threw them together with the whole manuscript into the fire. The hapless author then managed with difficulty to restore the text of his 'executed' work, and published it at Vilna in 1822. Here the rabbinical authority pounced upon him."² The book had not yet left the press when the rabbi of Vilna demanded that unless certain revisions were made the book would be publicly burned in the synagogue yard. Manasseh relented; however, during his final years he published two pamphlets in which he harshly criticized the shortcomings of Jewish life, the early marriages, the one-sided school training and the fear of modern knowledge. Manasseh's last post was as rabbi of Smorgon in 1827, but he resigned after a year,

refusing to be involved in the conscription of Cantonists.³ He died in 1831 and his writings were lost in a fire which broke out in Ilya in 1884.

The battles that raged between the few progressives such as Manasseh and the traditionally orthodox rabbinic were mild compared to the uproar caused by Hasidism, which espoused a more emotional and less intellectual approach to religion. Beginning in the mid-18th century this revivalist movement, initiated by the charismatic Israel ben Eliezer, who became known as the "Baal Shem Tov," swept through Eastern Europe and was embraced by millions of Jews. But Hasidism never gained many followers in Lithuania where the forces of rabbinic Judaism were the most entrenched. Besides introducing what Vilna's rabbinic establishment regarded as all kinds of heresies into religious practice "many (Hasidim) punctuated their prayers with shouts and shrieks and worked themselves up to such a state of exaltation that they danced and sometimes even turned somersaults."⁴

Controversies between religious factions often assumed regional lines, and these formed the basis for important distinctions between Lithuanian and Polish Jews of a hundred years ago. As Lucy Dawidowicz observed in her memoirs of Vilna, "aside from the distinctive dialect of their Yiddish speech which immediately identified them... Lithuanian Jews also fashioned a temperamental typology, which the Vilna Jews embodied *par excellence*."⁵ These characteristics were strange and annoying to the Polish Jews who were more disposed towards Hasidism. Jacob Maratek (1883-1950), a Polish village Jew who had only met one Litvak prior to his conscription into what he calls "Fonya's [the tsar's] army," recorded his impressions of the Lithuanians this way:

For a Jew in Fonya's army I could hardly have been better situated. Yet, I must tell you, I felt very much estranged in my new position. Why? Because most of my new comrades were not at all what I was accustomed to think of as Jews. What they were was Litvaks, Jews from Lithuania, and not only did they seem to me, in my Polish innocence, not to *look* like Jews, but at first I had such a hard time understanding their nasal crabbed Yiddish, I preferred to converse with them in Russian. But my problems went deeper than that.

Back in Warsaw, you see, almost the only Litvak I had ever known was this professional labor organizer, a man as cold blooded as any gentile, who had taught me how to arrange work stoppages, lockouts, strikes, acts of sabotage, and even how to intimidate (that is, beat up) such class enemies as strikebreakers and stonyhearted bosses.

Exposure to such a hard-boiled character had of course done little to erase my childish prejudices, born of such expressions as "I saw two Jews and a Litvak," or "a Litvak has a cross in his head" (based on the suspicion that the Litvak's rigorous emphasis on study and religious observance, without the Hasid's sense of mystical joy, would one day surely lead him to apostasy); either that or, on the ungenerous charge that a Litvak is so calculatingly pious, he repents even before he sins.

But the most painful social barrier between the Litvaks and me arose from the unhappy fact that - in contrast to myself, a runaway from

yeshivah at age twelve - there wasn't one of these fellows who couldn't learn.

I don't mean just the Five Books of Moses with the commentaries of Rashi, with which, thank God, I was as familiar as a Jewish child nowadays is with the baseball scores. But the only "learning" my Litvak comrades considered worthy of the term was a total immersion in the labyrinths of the Babylonian Talmud...

For an adult observant Jew to have remained as unschooled as I, of course, was not merely a challenge to them, but a provocation, and, in their one-track-minded Litvak way, they were resolved to elevate me to their own level. Thus, for instance, one time while rushing to get ready for rifle inspection, I momentarily misplaced my watch, and one of the Litvaks found it.

...don't ask what I went through before they'd let me have it back. After all, how *could* they return my property until due determination had been made whether or not it constituted a "found object", that is whether I had dropped it or deliberately put it down, and whether on private property or in the public domain, and what unique identifying marks, if any, I had placed upon it, and whether the loss of my watch was analogous to the legal fiction concerning lumber displaced by the tides of a river, and whether or not I could be reasonably supposed to have already "despaired" of finding my lost property - in which case it would have been rendered *hefker*, ownerless.

They were not sadistic; they merely fell like hungry wolves upon the slightest pretext to relate their learning to a real-life situation.

Far from being brutalized or corrupted by Fonya's army, these wretched Litvaks, even at bayonet practice, on the rifle range, or on cross country rides, would unreel talmudic pros and cons as lightly as a blacksmith hammering horseshoes. And they had yet another intolerable trait. Not one of them was descended from anything less than a rabbi. For no amount of money would you have found among them one man who would admit to descent from ordinary Jewish parents.

Worst of all, as my brother Mordechai resignedly pointed out to me, they were probably telling the truth. Their part of Lithuania indeed was renowned as a district where, as they say, even a dog could "learn", and every Jew was as steeped in ancestral merit as a pig is steeped in mud.⁶

Just how enduring the differences between Polish and Lithuanian Jews were may be judged by a portrait of a 19th century Lithuanian town in *Worlds That Passed*, whose author dedicated an entire chapter to defending the townspeople against Hasidic detractors. The author states that "the Lithuanians indeed hated the hasidic rabbis... They regarded them either as lunatics or as swindlers who exploited the ignorance, stupidity and superstition of the simple folk." But this was because "the scholar of Lithuania was by nature a sober man with a logical head, and he weighed in advance the pros and cons

of his acts. For a man of brains with a keen intellect he had deep respect. He would ever give precedence to the man of intellect over the most God-fearing man, who runs to the Mikvah (ritual bath) every little while and imagines that he has thereby become the intimate of the Almighty." Moreover, "it is a gross error - and the adherents of Hasidism have fallen into it - to assume that the Lithuanian Jew naturally was a cold-blooded and dry individual, a man incapable of enthusiasm or exaltation. The Lithuanian Jew is capable of ecstasy and exaltation as is the most ardent Hasid, but he grows enthusiastic over a nice point of casuistic interpretation that calls for great mental effort..."⁷

The dimensions of the conflicts surrounding Hasidism were far more divisive than can be recounted here, except to note that the Gaon of Vilna, Elijah ben Solomon, who was regarded as the spiritual leader of 18th century Lithuania, forcefully opposed the influence of Hasidism; and that the Gaon, whose character type was the exact opposite of the Baal Shem Tov's, was known as an ultra-rationalist. (Gaon is a title that means "eminence." Historian Israel Cohen observed that "in range of knowledge, profundity of learning, intellectual grasp and originality of research, [Elijah] towered not only above all his contemporaries but also above all rabbinic scholars of five centuries before him; and he has not been surpassed or approached since."⁸) The influence of the Gaon's teachings endured in the religious character of Lithuanian Jewry for many decades after his passing and thus it seems likely that the traits of dryness and intellectualism which continued to be associated with the Litvaks, even after rabbinic Judaism had eroded, originated at least in part with him. Indeed, this perception of the Litvak continues to this day for as one contemporary author states, "the word [Litvak] has a pejorative or ironic ring, and it usually refers to personality traits popularly associated with the Lithuanian Jew: skepticism, coldness, rationalism. Sometimes the word is used for a person bearing those traits even when he is not from Lithuania."⁹

The threat of heresy that Hasidism represented may have preoccupied the religious authorities, but this was overshadowed by the much greater threat to the survival of Jewish youth posed by the prospect of twenty-five years service in the tsar's army. Military life in Russia incorporated hardships that were unknown elsewhere in Europe, with the army in many respects operating as a reformatory institution. (Nicholas believed that the army was a perfect environment to iron out the wrinkles in wayward Russians, including the Jews who were forced to provide conscripts at a rate far greater than their proportion to the population as a whole. Horror stories abounded of forced conversions where the use of torture to induce victims to be baptized was commonplace.) Baron van Haxthausen, a Prussian military man who spent 1843-4 traveling through Russia, observed that the army was composed of criminals first, "then stupid, lazy, and infirm persons; and last of all respectable workmen. The recruitment thus, as it were, removes the scum from the country, and transfers it to the army; but all these classes of recruits have one thing in common, that none has the slightest inclination for their new heroic career."¹⁰ In the early part of the 19th century a 50 percent mortality rate among first year recruits led to the Russian peasant proverb "When your son goes into the army, bid him goodbye, because you will never see him again." In fact, service