Chapter 4

The Garment of Torah: Clothing Decrees and the Warsaw Career of the First Gerer Rebbe

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In the late 1850s, while researching the Hasidic movement for his planned history of the Jews, the Polish writer M.P. Sawicki decided to pay a visit to Rabbi Isaac Meir Alter, the future “Gerer rebbe,” who at the time resided in central Warsaw. Sawicki had heard a good deal about Hasidim, followers of “charlatan, miracle-working, neo-prophets.” In the Kingdom of Poland, he informed his readers, their capital was the town of Kotzk, home to Alter’s master, Rabbi Menahem Mendel. Tens of thousands of Jews were said to continually stream towards Kotzk bearing gifts for Rabbi Menahem Mendel, who spent most of his time reading the Zohar and smoking his pipe in an attempt to scare off demons. Sawicki heard that on every Sabbath eve the wealthiest Jews would sit around the rabbi’s table, receive his blessing, and then dive towards his plate to grab the fish and bread he had just blessed.¹

But Sawicki wanted to learn about the Hasidim first-hand, and without having to travel as far as Kotzk. So he decided to pay a visit to Alter, the famous disciple and likely successor, in Warsaw. Sawicki arrived at Alter’s residence at 1015 Krochmalna Street and took a seat in the dirty, litter-filled reception room, where an unkempt woman was cooking near a group of young men (“philosophers”) with extremely long side-locks, until at long last he was conducted towards the Rabbi. Along the way, a group of fifteen or so traditionally-clad Jews stood around making absurd grimaces [probably praying]; in the next room bound and unbound pages written apparently in Hebrew were strewn across a long table. Suddenly there stood before him “an Israelite of advanced years with a gray beard, a tall frame, quick and penetrating eyes, a handsome face, and a solemn, meditative bearing” smoking a long pipe, surrounded by several young attendants. It was none other than the famous Rabbi Isaac Meir

¹ M.P. Sawicki, Żydzi: ich dzieje ze względu na stan obecny Polski mieszkańców wyznania Mojżeszowego (Warsaw: Nakładem Księgarni J. Błaszkowskiego, 1865), 336. Many thanks to Levi Mendelow, Shaul Stampfer, and Gershon Bacon for their help at various stages of preparation of this chapter, as well as the National Endowment for Humanities Senior Scholar fellowship at the Center for Jewish History for vital support.
Alter himself, “revered by one hundred thousand Hasidim” though not yet crowned as rebbe.2

When asked what he desired Sawicki replied, “until now no one who has written on the Hasidic sect has spared it curses and censure whereas I, a writer about Jews and Hasidism who wishes to carefully examine the topic and do it justice, beseech Pan Rabbi to send me a disciple who might accurately explain everything.” Upon receiving Alter’s assent (in German), Sawicki was led out. On his way, he inquired about the unbound books on the table and was told that Alter was the sole publisher of Hasidic books in Warsaw which, Sawicki was surprised to learn, was his main source of income. Several days later, Sawicki was visited by three of Alter’s followers. Nothing the Hasidic emissaries said during the two hour interview seemed at all fanatical to Sawicki; in fact, he found them to be profound thinkers and ethicists.3

This episode provides a window onto Alter’s leadership style, which is not at all what we might expect from the founder of a Hasidic dynasty that has come to be associated with ultraorthodox insularity in our own day. Rather than ejecting the curious outsider, Alter seized the opportunity to explain Hasidism to a Polish readership by means of his most worldly and articulate followers. This accommodationist style was to characterize Gerer Hasidism down to the Holocaust, manifested inter alia in its modern modes of political organization and communication, its sponsorship of the political party Agudat Yisrael and the Beis Yaakov school system for girls, and its publication of newspapers like Dos yidishe vort, Der yid, and Dos yidishe togblat.4

But accommodation to modernity had its limits; and some of Alter’s tactics had clearly become a source of embarrassment to Gerer Hasidim by the interwar period. While Gerer court historians could craft chronological accounts of their movement and its leaders so rich in detail as to resemble products of modern historiography, the finest example being Abraham Issachar Benjamin Alter’s Meir eyene ha-golah (Warsaw, 1932), their yearning for a more heroically militant past tended to overwhelm their dedication to the historian’s craft when it came to their dynasty’s progenitor. In their hands, R. Isaac Meir Alter was transfigured into a passionate, defiant personality ready to endure

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2 Ibid., 337–8.
3 Ibid., 338–9.