



that 11 czerwony zloty equal 200 - 2, or 198 zloty. In fact, from 1702 until at least the mid-1740s, the official rate of exchange of golden ducats to copper coins was 18:1.³² Since $18 \times 11 = 198$, the story accurately predicted the money value and the event probably occurred in the 1740s before inflation eroded the rate of exchange.

In contrast, in another story,³³ the Besht asked a man to take a czerwony zloty and donate it as follows: "Give twelve zloty to the members of the kloyz.³⁴ . . . the remaining twelve zloty you should distribute among the poor." This sets a ratio of 24 zloty to 1 czerwony zloty, a value that probably reflects the late eighteenth-century circumstances when the story was retold. Notably, in the one extant manuscript of *Shivhei Ha-Besht*, the text of the same story reads: "and six zloty you should distribute to the other poor," probably preserving the original version.³⁵

A third example is the story about a merchant who had been instructed by the Besht to stay away from his home for a year and was in dire need of a customer in order to earn his livelihood.³⁶ He fortuitously met a man who turned out to be the biblical prophet Jonah ben Amitai, to whom he sold his wagon-load of merchandise for 160,000 czerwony zloty, equaling 2,880,000 zloty. Such a sum would be much more than double the total head tax paid by the 750,000 Jews of the Commonwealth in 1765. Whatever historical kernel this story may have had, the story was reworked into a miraculous tale emphasizing the Besht's ability to perform wonders.

In connection with the Ba'al Shem Tov, Polish sources sometimes introduce information that for some reason was excluded from the Jewish sources or obscured in them. The Polish tax and census lists through the 1760s refer to someone named Szmoylo, or Samuel, as the "stepson" (*pasierb*) of the Besht.³⁷ This is a person who is not explicitly mentioned in *Shivhei Ha-Besht* or in any of the standard sources. According to a little-known, modern Hasidic tradition, one of the Besht's disciples was called *horeg* (stepson).³⁸

There are several possible explanations as to why this person was and how he became attached to the Besht. A story in *Gedolim Ma'aseh Zad-dikim*³⁹ tells that Rabbi Isaac Duber Margoliot sent his sixteen-year-old sick son to live with the Besht for a year in order to be cured. The Besht promised, "Know that he will be a veritable son to me. I will take him with me wherever I go." The young man's name was Samuel. However, the fact that the story emphasizes that he stayed with the Besht for only a year and was very closely attached to his father militates against identifying Samuel Margoliot as the *pasierb*.

In one story in *Shivhei Ha-Besht*, the Besht and Wolf Kuces were said to have taken in an orphan boy and girl and arranged for their marriage to each other.⁴⁰ No identifying signs are given, so it is impossible to say if Szmoylo was the boy in question. A different tradition preserved in *Shivhei Ha-Besht* noted that the Besht's wife Hanna was a divorcée when she married him,⁴¹ perhaps this boy was her son.

The Polish material, then, can aid in separating the legendary from the historical, identifying and describing individuals, and even lead to putting the stories into rough chronological order. All of this, together with a better understanding of the anthology as a whole work, contributes to a more informed perspective from which to engage in historical analysis of the stories. Some sources from Międzybóž relate directly to the Besht and those close to him. They offer new insights into his role in the town and his place in history.

The real estate tax rolls that contain information on individuals connected to the Besht do not usually include the buildings belonging to the kahal, which were exempt from the *czynsz* tax, but a few times they do. These are the occasions when the Besht makes his appearance in Polish sources. One of the tax-exempt buildings in Międzybóž was a house near the synagogue. In the extant tax registers for the period that concerns us, the tax-exempt occupant of this house was listed as follows:

1739: *Dom kahalski wnim Moszko duchowny* (Kahal house in which is Moszko the clergyman).

1740: *Dom kahalski seu kantorski wnim kabalista* (Kahal or cantor's house in which there is the Kabbalist).

1742: *Balsem w domu kahalskim* (The Ba'al Shem in the kahal house).

1758: *Balsam* (The Ba'al Shem).

1760: *Balszam Doktor liber* (The Ba'al Shem, the doctor, exempt).

1763: *Herszko w domie kahalnym* (Herszko in the kahal house).⁴²

Another record that has relevance for the biography of the Besht is the Polish summary of the annual expenses of the Międzybóž Jewish community, to be paid by the *akcyza* (excise) tax arrandators for the year 1743. This document is in essence the budget of the community approved by the Polish administrator, Wolinski. It was these expenses, and not any others, that the arrandators were allowed to cover. By issuing this compendium, Wolinski exercised control over Jewish community finances and ensured that obligations he considered to be important, such as debt

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והגם כי הם כספח סן חים עכ"ן ותקח אוני שמץ
מנהו וכו' ורכו התועלות הנמשכים מזה להלכות
לבות ב"א לעבודתו :

לעמבערג

שנת תרמ"ה לפ"ק

Newfangled people have appeared now who care about money, and God's word is a shameful thing to them. And a man goes around spouting hot air with parable stories and in a joking manner criticizes this people, but they don't speak frankly: "These are vanity; deceitful acts." They are ineffective in clearing the obstacle from my path that I might walk the straight and narrow.³⁹

Scholem assumed that this was a critique of the Besht—the man spouting hot air—who was being accused of pandering to his audience so as to profit financially. Hayyim Liberman demonstrated, however, that Scholem had taken this passage out of context and that it actually was a critique of householders who, out of financial considerations, refused to support authentic scholars and invest in real Torah scholarship but rather made due with superficial moral instruction from popular preachers. The “newfangled people” are the stingy householders; the “man” referred to is a type—the popular preacher—and not a particular person.⁴⁰

To be sure, later writers might have wanted to emphasize how much opposition the Besht faced. For the Hasidim at the turn of the nineteenth century, who were faced with institutional opposition, it was an assurance that they too could prevail. Just as their founder had doggedly and gradually convinced those whom he met that despite their prejudices he was great and his Torah was great, so would they ultimately win over their opponents and gain legitimacy.

For historians, opposition was a sign of the Besht's, and early Hasidism's, importance. If the Besht aroused institutional opposition, then he must have been challenging those institutions with new ones and must have actually founded a movement. If this movement was opposed, then it must have been numerically and doctrinally significant.

The evidence for the respect commanded by ba'alei shem, the status of the Besht at the time he arrived in Międzybóž, the lack of sources indicating institutional opposition, and even the descriptions of the kind of disapproval expressed toward the Besht in the relatively late stories of *Shivhei Ha-Besht* leave little basis for asserting that when the Besht came to Międzybóž he met with general opposition—despite the implication of the story in its setting in *Shivhei Ha-Besht*. He was a qualified mystic, and he did not represent some radical new path in the practice of Jewish religion. The story in *Shivhei Ha-Besht*, with its apparently bona fide historical kernel but lacking fuller contextualization, was presented by its tellers so as to convey a certain message: the Besht was scorned and confronted by entrenched, elitist opposition that he had to overcome. It does not accurately reflect the overall reception of the Besht

in Międzybóž or his status in the community. The use of this particular historical kernel bereft of context can yield an incorrect perception of the place of the Besht in Międzybóž.⁴¹

Plausibility, realia, and even historicity are not sufficient criteria, then, for assessing authenticity. The first step in reading *Shivhei Ha-Besht* must be to accept that it is a work of hagiography, or sacred biography as the current academic lexicon terms it. This means that it was not written to record the biography of a great person in the past but to persuade people in the present to behave in a certain way or to accept a particular doctrine. Hagiography is primarily concerned with turning the exemplary life into a proof text for a position advocated in the present.⁴²

Shivhei Ha-Besht is no exception. The stories it contains were written down and then published because both the compiler and the printer saw their potential for religious edification of the public. The compiler of the stories, Dov Ber ben Samuel, shohet of Ilintzy, stated in his preface,

I wrote it down as a remembrance for my children and their children, so that it would be a reminder for them and for all who cling to God, blessed be He, and His Torah, to strengthen their faith in God and his Torah and in the zaddikim, and so they would see how His Torah purifies the souls of its students so that a person can reach higher levels.⁴³

The printer of *Shivhei Ha-Besht*, Israel Yoffe, added in his preface,

After I received these holy writings . . . I realized the many great benefits which would result from them, especially because it is written in the book that the Besht said that when a person relates the praises of the zaddikim it is as if he concentrates on the *Mi'asei Merkavah* [Mystical Secrets of the Divine].⁴⁴

To make these stories religiously edifying, both the compiler and the printer ordered them in an anthology. This fact is of paramount importance for understanding the stories in the book and their relation to history. *Shivhei Ha-Besht* is an anthology edited at least twice, once by the compiler or “writer” (as he is identified in the text itself), Dov Ber of Ilintzy, and once by the printer, Israel Yoffe. The second redaction subsumed the first within it. One axiom of textual criticism is that an anthology, particularly an anthology of originally oral traditions, tells at least as much about the editors and their readers as it does about whatever the original material is supposed to represent.⁴⁵ In the case of *Shivhei Ha-Besht*, it must be made explicit that the material took its current form in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and reflects the concerns and the circumstances of the people who created it and for whom it was created at that time.

Whatever the Besht may have done during his lifetime, and whatever the content of these stories was during his lifetime or immediately after his death, what was preserved or altered or deleted or added was done so in the service of a vision that came along one or two generations later. Only after we assess how this book responded to the *sitz im leben* at the time of its redaction and publication can we successfully identify the raw material that went into it and that is most closely connected to the Besht of history.⁴⁶

It is instructive, then, to pay close attention to the words of Dov Ben ben Samuel.

Every day miracles dwindle and marvels go away. For in days gone by sometimes . . . [Dov here gives examples of miraculous phenomena that used to occur with regularity] . . . Because of all of these things many would repent, and faith would be strengthened in the heart of every Jew. But now, due to our many sins, the *zaddikim* have decreased and those who see through the windows have dimmed; faith has greatly diminished and several heresies have been spread in the world. . . . I decided to write the awesome things which I heard from people of truth. . . . and I wrote all of this as a remembrance . . . so that it should reinforce faith in God and His Torah and faith in the *zaddikim*, and the faith of everyone who draws near to God and His Torah.⁴⁷

The point is that once miracles happened every day and served as a source for validating faith. Now miracles no longer occur and faith is rapidly weakening. Dov's solution was to tell (true) stories about miracles as a substitute for the miracles themselves in strengthening faith.⁴⁸

In contrast, Israel Yoffe had other concerns. The compiler claimed that the number of *zaddikim* had decreased. The printer said, "There is no generation without famous *zaddikim*." The compiler regarded *zaddikim* as primarily miracle workers. The printer linked them with a leadership role, claiming that God never abandoned his people. In every generation He supplied *zaddikim* as leaders.⁴⁹

The compiler's collection was designed to underscore the Besht's role as a miracle worker. The printer was interested in information about the Besht as a leader. In his editing of the text, the printer added the stories about the Besht's parents, his childhood, his gaining of esoteric knowledge, and his accession to leadership,⁵⁰ shaping the anthology so that the Besht could be viewed as an archetype of the nineteenth-century Hasidic *rebbe* at the head of his court. Rather than emphasize his importance as miracle worker, Yoffe detailed the process by which the Besht qualified to be a leader.⁵¹

For both compiler and printer, the historical details, however accu-

rate, were but raw material to be used rhetorically to prove a theological or ideological point. Their first loyalty was to the spiritual needs of their audience, not to the task of reconstructing the historical milieu of the Besht's lifetime and writing the biography of the Besht.

Being an anthology, *Shivhei Ha-Besht* does not include all of the stories current about the Besht. The 1815 Yiddish translation, for example, contains four stories that were not in the original Hebrew recension (it also deletes many stories). There are also collections of Besht stories that apparently originated independently of *Shivhei Ha-Besht*. Such a collection, stemming from Habad circles, was apparently the source for most of what Yoffe added in the first section of the book.⁵²

GEDOLIM MA'ASEH ZADDIKIM

Another example of alternative traditions is the collection *Gedolim Ma'aseh Zaddikim: Hasidic Tales* (Jerusalem, 1991), which Jacob Margoliot recorded, based on stories told about the Besht by Margoliot's own father and grandfather. These reflected personal incidents that occurred between the Besht and members of the author's family in the generation of his grandfather and great-grandfather, in the 1720s or 1730s.

This collection is much less problematic than *Shivhei Ha-Besht* in that the provenance of the stories is clear, the stories were redacted only once, and the textual problems are minor. It, too, is an anthology that the author declared he wrote in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in response to a request by the Rebbe of Sadigora.⁵³ Some of the traditions recounted in it are not only plausible in content and context but contain few folkloristic elements and supplement information from other sources. They merit examination as possibly containing historical reports.

For example, in contrast with *Shivhei Ha-Besht*, which purports to trace the Besht from his miraculous birth through his hero-conditioning childhood and young manhood, *Gedolim Ma'aseh Zaddikim* does not profess to know anything about the Besht prior to the contact established between him and Margoliot family members in Jazlowiec—an association also attested by Rabbi Meir Margoliot in his own book, *Sod Yakhin U-Boaz*.⁵⁴

The first story in *Gedolim Ma'aseh Zaddikim* recounts how the brothers, Isaac and Meir Margoliot, sons of the rabbi of Jazlowiec, Zvi Margoliot, were attracted to the Besht.

The Besht was then a ritual slaughterer in the village of Kaszelowiec near Jazlowiec. He kept to himself and nothing had yet been heard from him. He