

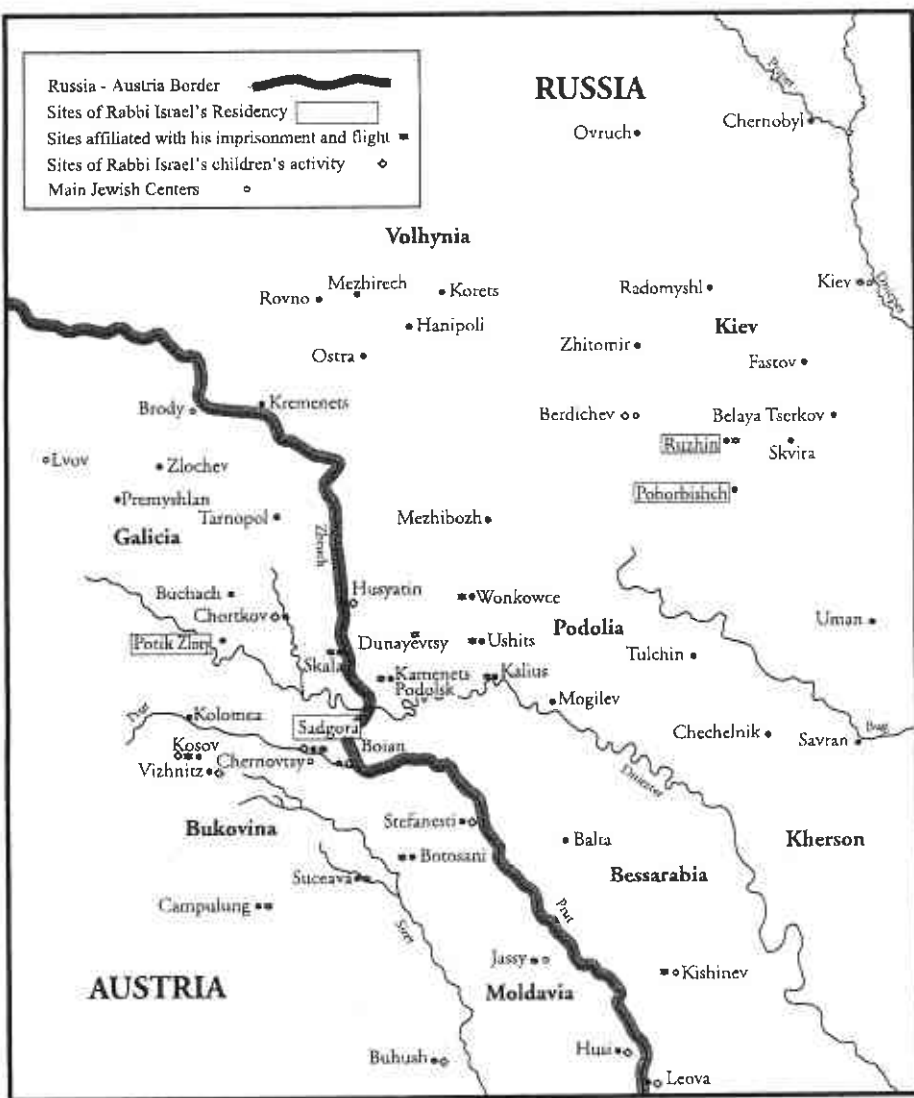
Introduction

I. Method

My object in this volume is to reconstruct the unique life of the famous zaddik Rabbi Israel Friedman of Ruzhin (1796–1850) and to determine his place in the history of the hasidic movement during its period of rapid growth. Both during his lifetime and since his death, Rabbi Israel's colorful personality and turbulent life, short though it was, have aroused widely differing evaluations of his character and identity as a person and as leader of one of the largest and most important hasidic courts of the nineteenth century.

In his monograph on Israel of Ruzhin, the hasidic biographer Abraham Isaac Bromberg asks: "Wherein lay his strength and greatness, his ability to attract tens of thousands of hasidim from many countries and from different classes and gather them all around him?" And his answer is: "He was a thinker of genius and a holy man, not only in his actions but also in his thought, and thereby he earned his renown throughout the Jewish world of his time. . . . The *admor* of Ruzhin was the thunderbolt who showed his and the coming generations the way to realize the practical world in holiness and purity."¹

This romantic, idyllic attitude cannot, of course, be squared with the critical, scientific point of view aptly and brilliantly expressed by Gershom Scholem, who highlights Rabbi Israel's ambition and lust for power, as well as the constant tension between these qualities and the conservative



for spiritual leadership. Taking that idea to its extreme, Israel seems to be saying that although his unique upbringing kept him from receiving a normal education ("I had no rabbi"), that in no way affected his special position as zaddik. On the contrary, it enabled him, as it were, to draw his wisdom and his learning informally, directly, from God Himself ("the very Source of Life"). No one since Moses had achieved this level, receiving the Torah through revelation, and it was this unique quality that invested Israel's teachings with everlasting value—even in the messianic era, although the world order would change and all the teachings of those considered as "great in Torah" would disappear, Israel's Torah would persist.

V. Conclusion

Was the pattern of leadership represented by Israel of Ruzhin an exception in Hasidism?

Joseph Weiss has aptly defined the leadership of the hasidic zaddik as a charismatic leader, not necessarily possessing intellectual excellence:

The zaddikim of Hasidism, the bearers of the new religiosity, are charismatic figures. The zaddik, by definition, does not have to be proficient in Torah. A knowledge of Torah is a personal asset and many *admorim* professed such knowledge, but the zaddik's overriding concern was not to know or even to excel in Torah; intellectual prowess indeed enhanced his charismatic qualities, but it did not create them.⁶⁵

Jacob Katz writes in a similar vein:

The movement's central figures acquired their status as leaders on the basis of new criteria that were diametrically opposed to those by which traditional Jewish society had picked its leaders up to then. Halakhic erudition was no longer an essential qualification for leadership. Of course, Hasidism never denied the value of Torah study; it could not, since it had not rejected the halakhic basis of Judaism. And, of course, it was advantageous for a hasidic leader to add great scholarship to the list of his other qualities. . . . Nevertheless, it is clear that halakhic erudition was not one of the basic marks of the hasidic leader. The primary and ultimate prerequisite for leadership was an individual's ability to achieve communion with God and ecstatic contact with the divine sphere. This was a personal talent that could not be acquired through rational study.⁶⁶

These definitions are wholly appropriate for the case of Israel of Ruzhin: his leadership, too, did not derive from scholarly ability, as was the norm in traditional society, and it did not need the legitimization of scholarship. Its power and authority came from distinguished lineage, personal charisma, irrepressible self-confidence, and the many hundred hasidim who confirmed his position by their adulation. The hasidim, who flocked to his court out of free choice, not out of institutional coercion, were attracted to

the spontaneity and charismatic element in his personality—the very element that effectively compensated for his lack of "Torah" and his scholarly shortcomings.

But these and other similar observations⁶⁷ need some amplification. It is true that a revolution in leadership patterns enabled such charismatic figures as the Besht and Israel of Ruzhin, despite their deficient erudition in the traditional sense, successfully to assume leadership. The Besht, however, compensated for his lack of learning by the mystical part of his personality and the magical practices that gained him fame as a *ba'al shem*. There was no such compensation in Israel of Ruzhin, a charismatic leader who was neither scholar nor mystic. One should not think, however, that Israel (or other, similar, zaddikim) expressed through his leadership any deprecation of the traditional value of Torah study. On the contrary, throughout the nineteenth century, it was still a universal axiom in all sectors of traditional Jewish society in Eastern Europe—including hasidim and their leaders, the zaddikim—that the supreme criterion of achievement was, as always, scholarly ability. It did indeed occur in Hasidism, particularly in the later generations, that the dynastic element outweighed all others, so that the validity of the Torah-study criterion might be weakened temporarily. In general, however, the basic pattern of the social hierarchy was molded by that criterion alone. Even from Israel's personal viewpoint, the precept of Torah study was still the main experience that shaped the Jewish "agenda," although it had lost its exclusiveness as the basic trait of hasidic leadership.

The new Hasidism of the Besht and his disciples had begun to broadcast its message at a time of profound crisis in traditional Torah learning; Hasidism was not the cause of the crisis but, to a considerable degree, its outcome. The collapse of the scholarly ethos had its institutional and economic manifestations: the old, traditional institutions of learning, such as the community *yeshiva*, were in decline, giving way to institutions that were disseminating a new, semi-formal kind of Torah knowledge, such as the hasidic *beit midrash*, or community study societies. The crisis also manifested itself in the religious and intellectual field; Torah scholars lost some of their social prestige and status; study techniques (mainly the casuistic method of *pilpul*) were criticized; and there was a feeling that, in view of "the dryness and unfruitfulness of rabbinical studies"⁶⁸—as the contemporary Jewish philosopher Solomon Maimon described the background to the emergence of Hasidism—the obligation to study the Torah should be extended to new fields of knowledge and new study techniques.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, despite this unrest, the learning experience (whatever its substance: Talmud and religious-legal works, or Hasidism, Kabbalah, and ethics), still topped the accepted scale of values in all strata of traditional society, although the responses of those strata to the crisis took very different forms.

Binenfeld, who personified a combination of Hasidism and modernity, as their representative; and the extensive network of intercessory activities that the Polish zaddikim directed inward, at nonhasidic scholars and the wealthy, assimilationist Jewish oligarchy in Warsaw—all these were indications that the spokesmen of traditional society had launched a two-pronged operation; (i) intercession directed outward, at the gentile authorities—a highly effective type of action, reserved for professional Orthodox *shataadlanim*, or emissaries working for the public benefit (like Binenfeld), or people from outside the world of traditional society (such as Montefiore), who were “allowed” to act in an “irregular” fashion; and (ii) inward-directed intercession, aimed at uniting disparate sectors and camps within Jewish society—this was the preferred method of the zaddikim. Figures like Montefiore, as well as maskilim and non-observant, even assimilated Jews, were considered a legitimate object of such activity; it was permissible to appease and even to flatter them in order to enlist their efforts on behalf of the Jewish people as a whole.⁷¹

Rabbi Israel’s preliminary letter to Montefiore, referred to in the letter from the Polish zaddikim, has not survived; but a second letter, sent on September 24, 1845, only a few days after the Polish leaders’ missive, notes that it repeats the message of the first:

Behold, I venture to speak, to arouse His Excellency’s good heart, that he should agree . . . to intercede in favor of our brethren, the Children of Israel, who are in distress. I have therefore come once again to plead with His Excellency. Let him not hearken to the noisy voices of slanderers, who invent in their imagination things that do not exist. Let my words be believed . . . as they are spoken in truth and in innocence for the good of the public and the individual. . . . And inasmuch as our brethren the Children of Israel in Russia are steeped in the darkest gloom, overwhelmed by troubles and hardships . . . their hands are tied and they are unable to write, and they are powerless to voice their distress.⁷²

Rabbi Israel went on to describe the sufferings of Russian Jews, explaining the measures being taken by the hasidim to intercede and noting, no doubt in light of his own experience as a former prisoner, that the Russian authorities were open to such activities, and particularly to bribery: “For I know the customs of that country and salvation [of its Jews] may be achieved by way of intercession. . . . It has been thus many times.”

In order to convince Montefiore, the prime figure in these plans, of the justice of their plea, the Polish zaddikim instructed Binenfeld to travel to London. He set out from Krakow around September 22 and arrived in London, carrying the letters from these zaddikim and from Rabbi Israel. He immediately approached Sir Moses in writing, requesting an audience. At the same time, he met with the British chief rabbi, Nathan Adler, and received from the latter a letter of recommendation to Montefiore, who

agreed to receive Binenfeld on November 16.⁷³ On his way back, Binenfeld brought a letter from Montefiore to Rabbi Israel (which has not survived). The latter was quick to write a reply, which he sent on January 29, 1846, by mail together with “copies of the harsh decrees . . . both those already issued in this country, and there are further decrees that are still being planned by the rulers and could not be copied.” Rabbi Israel’s letter contains an interesting statement, which is typical of the new Jewish Orthodoxy then taking shape in Eastern and Central Europe:

Indeed, some of them are decrees, which, as His Excellency says, seem to be for the good, such as the decree relating to the schools. But I, observing from afar, am sure that the decrees are specifically intended to damage and violate the law of our holy Torah, to cause desertion of the Jewish faith. In particular, for our sins, in these times, when the sinners of Israel themselves desire this. For we have seen this recently in regard to a slight decree promulgated to change Jewish clothing, which the rulers are doing in relation to the law of the holy Torah, and how much more so with other decrees.⁷⁴

In other words, while Montefiore was not supportive of the view of the zaddikim, believing some of the reforms to be positive and indeed necessary, the fact that the Russian authorities themselves, enjoying the support of the maskilim (“the sinners of Israel”), saw a connection between this “slight decree” and the Jewish religion as a whole was a warning signal and should have shown that the hasidic position was correct. The uncompromising stand of the hasidic camp on what sometimes seemed like insignificant reforms stemmed from the assumption that, once such compromises were accepted, the road would be open to utter destruction of the basic tenets of Judaism.

The hasidic efforts to secure revocation of the “Clothing Decree” ended in complete failure. The attempt to enlist a broad coalition of all Jewish circles in Warsaw, then the center of political operations, was in vain. Opinions even as to the need to put up a fight were divided, not only between the hasidim and the more moderate who favored the reforms, but also within the hasidic camp itself. Prominent zaddikim, such as Menahem Mendel of Kotsk, argued that the struggle had no chance of success. Moreover, the real meeting with Montefiore was a great disappointment: they found that, contrary to their expectations, Sir Moses was very much in favor of the initiatives to reform traditional Jewish dress.⁷⁵

The decree instructing Jews to modernize their clothing was published in Warsaw on July 2, 1846. Jews who might find its implementation difficult were allowed a few years of grace (until the end of 1849), but were required to pay a special annual tax. However, religious functionaries, the poor and the elderly were exempted to some extent (for example, they