



Gaon of Rogatchov also occupied a rabbinical seat there for half a century. There was never any dispute in Dvinsk between Hassidim and Mitnagdim; the only difference lying in a few synagogue usages and details of prayers recited by the respective groups. They lived together without any barriers between them. The Gaon Rabbi Meir Simha was the rabbi of the Mitnagdim, while Rabbi Joseph Rosen the Gaon of Rogatchov was the rabbi of the Hassidim. They were vastly different in their temperaments, way of living and spiritual worlds, but they were very close in their great scholarship and spiritual authority.

Rabbi Meir Simha was regally tall and erect, honoured and respected by all who saw him. He was friendly, easy-going, spoke carefully and was welcomed and venerated by all, including every non-Jewish community in the city without exception. The latter believed that the Rabbi had some magical powers. I remember a flood when the Dvina overflowed its banks and threatened to flood the city. Gentiles and Jews alike swore by all that was holy to them that they saw Reb Meir Simha mount the embankment, gaze at the swirling waters for a moment, murmur something very quietly and — the waters withdrew and the danger passed.

He had been a merchant in his youth, and so he knew how to smoothe differences over since he was familiar with the problems of daily life.

On the other hand the spiritual leader of the Hassidim, the Gaon of Rogachov, was short and nimble with a fine ascetic face and a head covered with white curls down to his shoulders, who left an unforgettable impression on all who saw him. He remained secluded and all his activities had something in common with his works, as represented by the best known one, "Tsafnat Paaneah" (Decipherer of Hidden Things). The great Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik spent some time with him and said later: "From the brain of the Rogachover it would be possible to make two Einsteins. There is an incomparable uniqueness about him and he must be regarded as a great spiritual asset of the Jewish People. If his erudition and knowledge could be systematically and scientifically exploited our culture would be enriched by dozens of valuable creative works. If it were possible to draw upon the Talmudical resources in his brain it would be possible to create a comprehensive culture."

That was what Bialik said after one hour's conversation. Indeed, Dvinsk was privileged to have great scholars of the age dwelling in its midst.

#### *The Synagogues of the City*

The Jews of Dvinsk were not extremists in their faith and religious practice like certain sections of Polish Jewry, and were most assuredly

worlds apart from such groups as those of Mea Shearim in Jerusalem. At the same time most of them were traditionalists and observantly fulfilled commandments without wearing unusual clothing. They did not wear either *Shtreimel* (fur head-pieces) or *Kapote* (long robes), although synagogues and prayer-groups were plentiful and were always full of persons reciting their prayers. The "Chor-Shul" in Petrograd Street in the centre of the city was a magnificent lofty building with a splendid internal structure. It attracted many people who wished to hear the Cantor and the fine choir. This was the centre for the more "secularist" believers.

If a famous cantor came to Dvinsk he would be heard in the Chor-Shul, where he would have to pass the exacting standards of the local experts. On the other hand the "Planover Minyan" (Planov Quorum) where the Rogatchover Gaon prayed, attracted scores and hundreds of persons, who repeated their prayers in rotation every day from before dawn until noon. The building was always full of those who prayed, one prayer quorum ending and another beginning.

Similarly the "Koholisher Bel-Hamidrash" (The Congregational House of Study) was the spot where Reb Meir Simha chose to pray. Here everything was quiet and reserved. There were fewer people and prayers were more restrained. Rabbi Meir Simha prayed lengthily, and the congregation would wait with awe and respect until he completed the "Fifteen Blessings" and took the traditional three steps backward; entirely unlike the Rogachover Gaon who would be the first to complete his prayers, and would then hasten back to the Torah on which he meditated by day and night.

Those were the most aristocratic centres of prayer in the city. In addition there were dozens of prayer groups, such as that of the Butchers, the Tailors' Synagogue, the Dyers' Minyan, the Green Synagogue, etc., etc., all of them crowded day by day. At the High Holidays the voices would burst forth, so that in the words of the Bible the people could see them; and the whole city was transformed into one vast prayer bursting forth from the heart and sweeping everything away in tears. Such was Dvinsk, the City and Mother in Israel, on weekdays and on festivals.

Dvinsk also had a Yeshiva (Talmudical Academy) where about a hundred lads and young men studied by day and night. They had many keen minds among them. The Yeshiva was headed by "Der Kovner" (The Man from Kovno), a fine-featured scholar who won the hearts of his students. The Yeshiva bore the name of the wealthy philanthropist Reb Sotse Horvitch, who maintained it at his own expense.