

**‘My Tiny, Ugly World:’ The Confession of  
Rabbi Yitzhak Nahum Twersky of Shpikov**

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**Abstract**

*This article presents and discusses a rare document in the history of Hasidism: A confession written in 1910 by Rabbi Yitzhak Nahum Twersky of Shpikov (1888-1942), scion of a very prestigious Hasidic lineage of Chernobyl. In this exciting and moving text, he dramatically expresses his troubles, torn soul, and feelings of hatred toward the Hasidic world of his time.*

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Sixteen. But this isn’t the only idea I’ve had. You must understand that every rabbinical family is distinguished by a special talent. We are the philosophers and the rhetoricians among the rabbis. We like to speculate. It’s a marvelous game, but it’s also a trial. It’s like walking on a narrow bridge. One false step, and you fall into heresy. But if the Lord is with you, if you don’t stumble and can keep your Jewishness intact, you cherish your idea doubly, because it achieves union with the Creator who sent it into the world. [...] I like to take walks by myself and think about Hasidism. Faithful to my theory, I try to grasp ideas that will occur to me years later. That’s why my eyes look so much older than I really am. I want to discover things. I don’t like my grandfather’s way and I don’t like my father’s. I don’t like the way of my older brothers. I told Father that I was not too satisfied with his way [...] then he confided in me that he was even less satisfied than I.”<sup>1</sup>

**Shpikov Hasidism**

This confession published here, in the words of its author, “the confession of my life, withered and faded before its time, the confession of my tortured, afflicted soul, the confession of my squandered talents”—is one of the most moving and unique testimonies of its kind in the history of Hasidism. Its author, Yitzhak Nahum (Nachum) Twersky of Shpikov, decided, with great courage, to make a reckoning of his life

and expose the depths of his troubled and confused soul to a complete stranger.

The confession was mailed at the beginning of 1910, when its author was but 22, to the Yiddish writer Jacob Dineson (1856-1919), who was then living in Warsaw. This letter, numbering 27 copybook pages, is written in rich and fluent Hebrew, almost without a single erasure.<sup>2</sup>

Out of the pages of the confession emerges the riveting figure of a sensitive and intelligent young man, an aesthete with poetical tendencies, weary of life in the Hasidic court, lamenting his youth and his talents that will be wasted, filled with fear of what the future may bring, and despairing of the prospect of changing his fate.

Yitzhak Nahum was born in 1888, a son of one of the branches of the Twersky family, which had established the Chernobyl Hasidic dynasty and its many offshoots. From the beginning of the 19th century, this privileged family of *rebbe*s (along with the Ruzhin Hasidic dynasty) ruled over most of the Hasidic communities in the southwestern provinces of the Pale of Settlement. Yitzhak Nahum was born and raised in Shpikov (today Shpykiv, Ukraine), then a small town in the Podolia province, 56 kilometers south of Vinnitsa, very close to Nemirov, Bratslav and Tulchin.

Shpikov Hasidism was then a new and small branch. It was established in 1885 by Yitzhak's grandfather, R. Menachem Nahum (Nachumchi) after the death of his father, the Zaddik Yitzhak of Skvira (1812-1885), thus forcing his sons to divide between them his assets as well as his followers. As was customary within the nobility from among the zaddikim, who always preferred to marry within the extended, distinguished family, Nachumchi married his cousin Sheyndl, the daughter of the famous Zaddik David of Talne (1808-1882). Like her husband, Sheyndl was also the granddaughter of the dynasty's forerunner, R. Mordechai (Motl) of Chernobyl (1770-1837).

Nachumchi died in Shpikov in 1886, before he was able to establish his new court. His only son, Mordechai (Motele), who was at the time 25 years old, succeeded him. Motele, like his father, also married within the extended family, and took for his wife Hava, the youngest daughter of the Zaddik Yohanan of Rechmistrivke (1816-1895), the youngest son of Mordechai of Chernobyl. Yitzhak Nahum, the writer of the following confession, was the son of the R. Mordechai of Shpikov and his wife Hava.

**Rabbi Yitzhak Nahum Twersky**

Sometime around March or April 1910, a short time after writing his confession, the young Yitzhak Nahum married Sheve (Batsheva), the daughter of R. Issachar Dov Rokeach (1854-1926), the revered *Admor* of Belz in Eastern Galicia. This rebbe himself was married to the granddaughter of R. Aharon of Chernobyl (1787?-1871; the eldest son of R. Mordechai of Chernobyl), and after his marriage he remained in the Chernobyl court for about a decade. Issachar Dov of Belz grew to admire this branch of Hasidism and considered it a great privilege to have married into it and made every effort to marry off his descendents to this dynasty as well. Yitzhak Nahum already had been engaged to Issachar Dov's daughter for six years but had still not seen the face of his future bride, though he had heard some rumors regarding her beauty and character. In his confession, he clearly expresses his trepidations about the bride that had been chosen for him without his consent, and his fear of the life awaiting him in the Hasidic court of Belz.

The wedding took place in Belz and, as was customary, Yitzhak Nahum went to live with his in-laws, who provided for his sustenance.<sup>3</sup> The Belzer rebbe, known to be extremely conservative, was a severe opponent of any trace of modernity. It would seem, however, that the youthful rebellion that had been brewing within the breast of the young Yitzhak Nahum, and which was vociferously expressed in the pages of his confession, was assuaged, at least outwardly. The Belz court was famous for its fortified walls made up of the thousands of Hasidim who flocked to it, and we can only guess how Yitzhak Nahum endured his first days within the Hasidic court of which he had been so wary. Moreover, in complete opposition to his expectations, the match was a success; he was fond of his bride and she was of him.<sup>4</sup> According to Hasidic sources, Yitzhak Nahum quickly acclimated himself to the Belz way of life, and the Belz Hasidim greatly honored and appreciated him, "for his nobility and his sensitivity, the beauty of his features and the cleanliness of his clothes, his moderated speech, his respect of others and his hospitality."<sup>5</sup>

"Rabbis who are not from among us, who come to Belz," describes a late Belz source, "are met with by R. Yitzhak Nahum, in order to show them that besides Hasidism, there is also Torah scholarship in Belz. Prominent guests, curious to 'get a whiff' of Belz, find great interest in his home, as he is knowledgeable about all the problems that have come up from time to time in the life of the Jews in Poland."<sup>6</sup>

Four years later, R. Yitzhak Nahum traveled back to Shpikov to visit his ailing father. His father passed away on Passover 1914, and the

Hasidic followers immediately crowned his son the new rebbe, preventing his return to Belz, where his family remained. A few months later World War I broke out. The events of the war shook the Hasidic court of Shpikov as well as other Jewish communities in the Ukraine and Galicia. Shpikov suffered civil war, raids by soldiers and murderous bands, and outbreaks of typhus that ravaged many towns in the Ukraine. R. Yitzhak Nahum, his mother, and his sisters miraculously survived those catastrophic events.<sup>7</sup>

The Russian army also had conquered Austrian Belz. The Czar's soldiers destroyed the town and set fire to the rebbe's court. The Jews of Belz fled their homes and along with them the rebbe and his entourage, among them R. Yitzhak Nahum's wife and children. Initially, the court of Belz moved to Ratsfert (Ujfehért) in Hungary, where it remained for the duration of the war. Only in the summer of 1918, after four years of separation, was R. Yitzhak Nahum able to leave the Ukraine and reunite with his family in Hungary. A year later, in April 1919, the members of the Belz court were forced to relocate once more. This time, they made for Munkatsh (Mukachevo) in the Carpathians, where they fell into a bitter dispute with Munkatsh Hasidim, led by the extremist Hasidic rebbe Hayyim Elazar Shapira (1872-1937). This controversy escalated from mean-spirited nitpicking into a war of false accusations and slander. In 1922 the Belzer rebbe and his family, along with R. Yitzhak Nahum and his family, returned to Galicia. By then the town of Belz had been completely destroyed, leaving the rebbe and his court to settle temporarily in the nearby town Oleszyce. Only in 1925 did Belz Hasidism return to its original hometown.

In 1926, R. Yitzhak Nahum left Belz and with the help of his father-in-law was appointed rabbi of the town of Rawa Ruska, about 35 kilometers from Belz. The Belz court dominated this town and a large number of Belz adherents resided there. R. Yitzhak Nahum easily could have continued to rule as an *Admor*, but he preferred, as he wrote in the confession before us, to be a *rabbi* and not a *rebbe*. In Rawa Ruska, "he played the glorious role of the aristocratic Hasidic rabbi, who sanctifies the Lord in all his doings."<sup>8</sup> In the beginning of 1942, he and his family met their death at the murderous hands of the Nazis and their henchmen, apparently at the Belzec death camp.

#### **'Freedom, freedom!' The Twersky Sisters**

Why did young Yitzhak Nahum, the rebbe's son, choose to send his confession to Dineson, whose own literary star at that time was already on the wane? Dineson, although famous for his sentimental and sensitive

writing, had written very little in his later years and was known mainly for his activities as the secretary and loyal assistant of the admirable author Y.L. Peretz. The explanation for the surprising connection between Twersky and Dineson must be found not through R. Yitzhak Nahum, but rather through his older sisters.

Yitzhak Nahum was the first son born to his parents after four daughters. At the time he wrote his confession, three of his sisters were married already and apparently all were living in Shpikov. The oldest sister, Feige, married R. Shalom Yosef Friedman of Buhush (1868-1920) in the summer of 1897. Her husband, the only *Admor* of the Ruzhin Hasidic house living in Russia, set up his own court in Shpikov alongside that of his father-in-law, and Ruzhin adherents living in Russia frequented it. As far as is known, one court did not impinge on the other, and their relations were friendly.

The second sister, Haya (Haykeleh), married a family relation, Menachem Nahum Twersky (1874-1942), the grandson of the Zaddik Abraham of Trisk (Volhynia), who was also a son of Mordechai of Chernobyl. She was famous for her erudition, and from a young age she was attracted to Haskalah literature and to a life of emotion and imagination.<sup>9</sup> Her marriage was not particularly successful. Her husband, who had wanted to continue the Hasidic lifestyle, never became accustomed to his wife's free spirit. After years of mutual discontent and separation, they divorced. Haya, who retained custody of their children, lived for a time in Warsaw, where she became acquainted with Y.L. Peretz and Jacob Dineson. Haya returned to Shpikov before the beginning of World War I. After the war she moved with her children to Berlin (1921-1926), from where she immigrated to New York. Her husband, Nahum, returned to Trisk and began to wander between various towns, trailing after the Hasidim of his father (who died in 1918). He remarried and settled in Warsaw. After the Nazi invasion he apparently returned to Trisk, where he was murdered in the summer of 1942.

It seems that Mirl, the youngest sister, was the most unusual of the sisters, and it was she who negotiated between her brother and Dineson. Like Haya, she too was drawn to the world of literature and Haskalah, and she even wrote some poems that she sent to Dineson, who seemed to encourage and nurture her talents.<sup>10</sup> In 1902 she married Asher Perlow (1885-1942), the oldest son of the Admor Israel of Stolin (Belarus), who was known by his nickname the *Yenuka* (i.e. a child officiating as a zaddik). R. Asher (Asherke) did not become a rebbe. Like the rest of his family, he had innate musical talent, and under the influence of his wife he traveled to Berlin to study music at the conservatorium. Without a

doubt, this was an unusual feat in the conservative Hasidic world. Asherke went to Germany without his family's permission, and they, not liking the "scandal," tried very means of bringing him back home. It seems that in this instance as well Mirl's free spirit could not conform to the family's pressure and her husband's Hasidic upbringing: Asherke returned to Stolin, divorced Mirl and remarried. Hasidic lore recounts that with the son's return his father threw away the violin and decreed that because this holy instrument had become desecrated it must never be played again in his court. From that moment on, the *Melave Malka* feasts in this court were accompanied with song, but without musical instruments.<sup>11</sup>

After her divorce, Mirl returned to Shpikov. The letter that Mirl wrote to her sister Haya, after the latter was finally awarded her long-awaited divorce, reflects the special nature of the sisters and the spiritual intimacy between them and their brother Yitzhak Nahum:

Hurrah! You have won, my dearest! Who would have seen even in their dreams that this happy and good moment would arrive? Freedom, freedom! Praises for your bravery, that you have traversed this dark hell with your head high! How we danced, went out of our minds, Haykeleh, we were like crazy people. I don't exaggerate. We kissed, laughed, jumped, ran from one room to another.<sup>12</sup>

The correspondence between Mirl and Dineson began at least a year before the writing of the confession, in 1909. Yitzhak Nahum mentioned this correspondence at the outset of the letter, and though he did not mention his sister Mirl by name, there can be doubt that it was to her that he referred. It seems that in one of her letters Mirl had mentioned her young brother's doubts and Dineson, in his reply, asked that she not show her brother his response in order that he not be offended. Notwithstanding, Mirl showed Dineson's letter to her brother, and it appears that his response so challenged Twersky that he felt compelled to strike up a direct connection with the Warsaw author. Prior to sending his confession, Twersky sent Dineson his photograph, so that the famous writer might see the terrible disparity between his external appearance and his internal world.

It is worthwhile noting the place of Yitzhak Nahum's sisters in his world. He himself testifies that in his sisters' rooms, where he can speak with them about "life and literature," he finds refuge from the suffocating life of the court. Indeed, it is not surprising that in this traditional

society, it was the women who first absorbed modernity and secular values. They learned to read and write in foreign languages from teachers who were themselves partly maskilim; they were allowed to read for pleasure in their spare time, including French and Russian books; and in general, supervision of girls always was more lax than it was for boys. In his memoirs, the writer Yohanan Twersky (1900-1967), Yitzhak Nahum's nephew, recounts that the women in the Shpikov court, including the *rebbe'sin* Hava, Yitzhak Nahum's mother, used to read secular books brought to them by a traveling bookseller who sold books to the court. Among his collection of books were the novels of Nahum Meir Shaykevitsh (*Shomer*), Ozer Blaustein, Yitzhak Yoel Linetski, Ayzik Meir Dik, and the like.<sup>13</sup> We can assume that Yitzhak Nahum also may have been familiar with these kinds of books; as he himself stated, he enjoyed spending time with his sisters.

In addition, it seems that Yitzhak Nahum was unsuccessful at covering up his inclinations. In town, tales were spread that alongside his Torah studies, he also studied secular works.<sup>14</sup> According to a reliable source, within the Shpikov court was a 40,000-volume library that R. Yitzhak of Skvira left to his son Nachumchi. In this library, in addition to the biblical, talmudic and rabbinic classical works, were many old manuscripts and books of Kabbalah and philosophy. Mordechai Glubman, who for a short period of time was Yitzhak Nahum's tutor, recounted that over the course of an entire year he and his students organized the books "to place it in proper order" and "in a proper list." Yitzhak Nahum's work within this great library must have opened new horizons for him as well.<sup>15</sup>

Even after Yitzhak Nahum settled in Belz and his rebellious spirit was somewhat tamed (at least outwardly), he still kept up his correspondence with his sisters. Thus, for example, we know that on his way to Marienbad, the popular spa of the Galician rebbes, Yitzhak Nahum traveled to Berlin to visit his sister Haya and her children. Her son, Yohanan, was then learning philosophy and psychology at the University of Berlin, and Yitzhak Nahum quizzed him about his studies and the innovative theories of Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, and Kurt Lewin.<sup>16</sup>

#### **'A Sacrifice on My Mother's Altar:' The Value of the Confession**

The main importance of Twersky's confession is its literary and psychological content; its value as a historical document that might shed light on the history and development of Hasidism is marginal and problematic.

His criticism of the haggling and costermonger nature of contemporary Hasidism, the traditional dress, the fanaticism, conservatism, and the Hasidic indolence, is in fact very severe. At times it is as if Twersky read and absorbed the satiric style of writing of the 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-Hasidic maskilim and their followers, who became the first generation of researchers of Hasidism. Both they and he showed great disdain and contempt for what they perceived as the vulgar manifestations of Hasidism. Twersky's comic-grotesque description of the customary dress and the primitive behavior of the Belz Hasidim in Galicia, as well as his solid judgment of the atrophied Hasidic court in the Ukraine, might have originated from the sharpened pens of Joseph Perl or Isaac Ber Levinsohn (Ribal). Even the terminology Twersky uses—"the idiotic costume," "hallucinations and nonsense," "wild motions and customs," "degeneration," "atrophy"—is taken from the vocabulary of the maskilic and anti-Hasidic critical lexicon. His criticism of the institution of matchmaking and marriage to a woman whom he had never even seen—situations that do not, in his words, fit anymore to the 20th century—also are repeated over and again in the Jewish Haskalah literature of the 19th century.

Beyond his own complicated soul, which led him to a life of internal conflicts, missing from his criticism of Hasidism is a systematic ideological critique. It goes without saying that one should not expect that this intimate genre of confession would offer a systematic ideological or historical theory. Nevertheless, the overall impression is that his debate with Hasidism is only in the layer of personal experience. In his entire letter, there is no echo of theoretical criticism of the religious and ideological foundations of Hasidism or doctrine of the zaddik. He also does not suggest an alternative to the Hasidic ways or a cure for its rehabilitation and revival. Beyond general reflections, in which the aesthetic aspect is especially emphasized, he does not clearly explain what he seeks and what he hopes to achieve regarding the desired future of Hasidism. The problem of external appearances bothers him greatly, and he also repeatedly expresses his views about the ugliness of the traditional Hasidic costume; the same is true of his attitude toward the beauty of nature, which he believes Hasidism ignores. Yet one must question whether this criticism, justifiable as it may be, indeed goes to the core of the real problems facing Hasidism at the turn of the 20th century. He protests, loudly and clearly, against the degeneration of Hasidism, but he is unable to understand the roots and the causes of its present circumstances.



Yitzhak Nahum also lacks a mature historical perspective, and his approach to the mythic past of Hasidism in general and to his family in particular is typical (after all, he was then only 22 years old). As a product of traditional society, R. Yitzhak Nahum was taught to look at history through apologetic glasses of self-disparagement on one hand and awe and admiration on the other, in the spirit of the famous saying of the Sages: “If the first generations are like angels, we are like human beings” (BT *Shabbat*, 112b). The crisis that he identified in the Hasidism of his day was not, therefore, connected with the founders of the movement, the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples, and not even with Twersky’s grandfathers’ generation, the founders of the Chernobyl dynasty, to which he himself belonged. The breakdown happened, in his opinion, in the last decade of the 19th century, in his father’s time:

For some twenty years, since my grandfathers, the famed zaddikim of Skver, Talne, and Rotmistrivka<sup>17</sup>—all my ancestors—and their brothers, the standard-bearers of Hasidism in our province, who commanded thousands of faithful Hasidim, died [...] Since then, the light of Hasidism has dimmed and its glory has gone into exile, and it has atrophied [...], until now it is little more than a debased coin, a name devoid of real content.

And the main reason for this degeneration was indeed connected to the decline of the generations’ concept:

My ancestors did not leave after them sons like themselves, men of understanding and intelligence, who might influence and impart of their spirit to the congregation of Hasidim.

However, this historiographic theory derives from Yitzhak Nahum’s internal world of his family’s conflicts and not from the factual history known to us. After all, the critical writing on 19th century Hasidism considered, whether rightly or wrongly, Mordechai of Chernobyl’s eight sons, the great-grandfathers of Yitzhak Nahum, to be the prominent representatives of the degenerative symptoms that plagued Hasidism. In the eyes of many maskilim, this dynasty was a symbol of the establishment of the courtly rule of Hasidism, of the greed for wealth and glory and the neglect of the original values of Hasidism. And here, R. Yitzhak Nahum is actually proud of his oligarchic descent; he only blamed the zaddikim of his generation for Hasidism’s deterioration.

Twersky's attitude toward his parents is surely a deep psychological issue, which we cannot discuss here. Therefore, we should not be surprised that his "cold-natured" father is hardly mentioned in the confession and does not play a significant role in his decisions. His mother is the one close to his heart, and it is only his warm feelings for her that prevent him from breaking free from the chains that bind him and changing his fate. But his love and compassion for his mother also could be interpreted as a sign of self-indictment and self-victimization: "I shall bare my soul, explaining the obvious truth to you: A sacrifice am I, a sacrifice on my mother's altar." Grasping on to his mother as the reason for his inability to take his own fate in his own hands actuates his sense of disparagement and dependence. In such a dramatic moment of his life, when he feels so hopeless, he explains his impotence in his love and care of his mother. "My compassion for my beloved mother," must be interpreted as self-compassion.

It is noteworthy that R. Yitzhak Nahum does not see himself as an apostate and does not even consider secularism as a possibility to solve his existential crisis. Doubting religiosity in and of itself is not his point, even though one cannot ignore the surprising fact that the name of God is not mentioned even once in the entire letter. He chooses to remain in the world of traditional society but wishes to break free from the constraints of Hasidic society, which he believes no longer fit his needs.

Yitzhak Nahum's troubled soul and spirit that yearns to be free are trapped in the confines of the compulsory Hasidic togetherness, from which it is so difficult for the individual to break away and redeem his own identity. He feels that all his attempts to break out of the circle are hopeless and doomed to failure at the outset. Like a lamb to the slaughter, he is unable to change his fate. He cannot get up and run away from his Hasidic identity, which he so detests, not only because of his emotional commitment to his mother's fate and his feelings of pity over the embarrassment his actions would cause her, but also because of his inability to cut himself off from his conscious status as the son of a *zaddik*, as a leader on whom many Hasidim hang their own hopes:

What is this? What am I? Is it possible that I am naught but a hypocrite, a sham? Am I permitted thus to deceive people? [...]And besides, that step would be final proof that I am a heretic, a sworn unbeliever, and that in vain I have misled all those who know me, letting them think me faithful to God and to His holy ones.

This sincere statement reminds us of the famous scene in Y.L. Peretz's 1903 drama *Hurban beit Zaddik* (collapse of the zaddik's house), known also in its later Yiddish version as *Di goldene keyt* (1907), where the zaddik's son cries with a broken heart before the open ark:

I am the last link of the chain. I am the last one here [...] show yourself, reveal yourself, give me a sign that I'm not deceiving and cheating the people. Because if you won't show yourself and won't reveal yourself and won't give a sign, that means—I am a swindler...

And if I am a swindler—my father was a swindler too...

Also my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather too...

The entire dynasty, the entire chain!<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Twersky consoles himself on the off-chance that the damage may be minimized if the crucial step of crossing the lines takes place after he marries and settles in Belz. But, as we know, this step was never taken.

We may find of special interest his indirect criticism of neo-romantic trends that began to develop at that time towards Hasidism, mainly among writers such as Y.L. Peretz, M.Y. Berdyczewski, Yehuda Steinberg, Martin Buber, and others. These writers' approach to Hasidism was at the time described as romantic, as if they saw in Hasidism and its values a source of inspiration that might awaken and refresh the Jewish nation, even those that stood outside the Hasidic camp. But it seems that this evaluation is not completely accurate and it is better to describe the complicated attitude of these authors (at least some of them) to Hasidism as reflecting a patronizing attitude that derived more from the anti-Hasidic world of the mitnagdim and the maskilim than from the world of the Hasidim. In this way Twersky was accurate in characterizing Berdyczewski's double standards towards Hasidism. He appreciates their world, beliefs, and way of life just so long as he doesn't have to live with them:

Well I remember what I read in Dr. Berdyczewski's book *The Hasidim*, where, after heaping copious praises on the Hasidic theory, he concludes with a heartfelt cry, "May I be so lucky as to share their portion!"<sup>19</sup> [...] And, recalling that exclamation,

I cannot hold back my laughter. Indeed, *Herr Doktor!* How right you are! But how convenient it was for you to utter this exclamation, on your lofty chair at Heidelberg University, far removed from the Hasidim and their masses.<sup>20</sup> But what would you say if it really fell to your lot to be among them always? Methinks you would have spoken differently then, a very different call would have issued from your heart, and together with me you would have cried, “May I be so lucky as *not* to share their portion.”

Even in this criticism, Twersky was not alone. His words, spoken from a deep familiarity with the daily realities that contradict the convivial descriptions of the Hasidic courts, have much in common with the mocking comments of other contemporary writers who condemned the romantic authors. Here, for example, follows a quote from the Galician maskil, Mordechai David Brandstetter (1844-1928), reflecting the same criticism:

What does Peretz know of the Hasidim? And how much do Berdyczewski and Steinberg know about the life of the Hasidim? Did they live among them as I did? Do they know of their persecution of their opponents, of those who dared to change a bit from their style of life? I saw all this from up close. I lived among them. I resided with them and got to know them inside out! If the Hasidim were still in power—we would still walk through the dark until today! And to this day I still speak with them and hear their conversations! Hasidism is based on false beliefs, on worship of the zaddik—blind worship! [...] Peretz, Berdyczewski and Steinberg’s stories are poetry, and the best of poetry is its falsity. There is no connection between this “Hallelujah” poetry and the reality. They see things from the beatings of their hearts.<sup>21</sup>

**‘The Current of that Generation:’ The Context**

Come mothers and fathers  
 Throughout the land  
 And don't criticize  
 What you can't understand  
 Your sons and your daughters  
 Are beyond your command  
 Your old road is

Rapidly agin'  
Please get out of the new one  
If you can't lend your hand  
For the times they are a-changin'  
(*Bob Dylan, The Times They are A-Changin'*)

The literary impetus into which this young and gifted zaddik poured out his heart, his rich and engaging Hebrew, which could have turned his letter into a manifesto—it could have been a voice to many sensitive and delicate young men who, growing up in the lap of Hasidism, had tortured themselves in an hour of personal soul-searching with the biting question of their future path. They fought with their tormented souls, tried to escape their world, but they were not always successful. Yitzhak Nahum Twersky did not, however, intend to be a trumpet for the masses. He wrote an intimate confession with the intention that it remain a secret between him and his pen pal, the writer Dineson.

Even though he may have felt lonely, Twersky was not. Besides his two sisters, who were active participants in his double life, he also mentions a group of “young friends and acquaintances” he would meet frequently, and together they would read and talk “about life and literature.” They did not understand the depths of his inner soul but were aware enough of his conflicts to share them with him.

In many ways, Yitzhak Nahum Twersky is part of a special rank, a small number of exceptional sons of zaddikim who grew up in the aristocratic Hasidic courts during a period of dramatic changes in the history of Eastern European Jews. The deep rift within traditional society profoundly affected them. These young and gifted sons, who were exposed to the varied manifestations of modernity, who were able to escape beyond the thick walls that bordered the Hasidic court, could not remain indifferent to the powerful temptations and potential for creativity that were engendered by the Haskalah, modern literature, nationalism, aesthetics, romanticism and philosophy, Jewish studies, and even secularism. They reacted as did other elite members of the Eastern European Jewish Orthodoxy—some with fanatical objection, some with embarrassment and despair, some attempting partial fulfillment in both worlds, and some by escaping to the enticing world outside. There were children of zaddikim who were drawn to socialism, Zionism and even communism, and of course there were sons and daughters who went far to the extreme and rebelled, leaving the fold and abandoning their family and religion, filled with anger and a sense of revenge, completely rejecting tradition and the world of commandments. Naturally, these

phenomenon were downplayed or covered up in the internal Hasidic historiography and therefore have not been fully researched. We may refer to the words of Aaron Ze'ev Aescoly in his essay on Hasidism in Poland at that time:

There wasn't a house in which its sons and daughters were not swept away into the current of that generation [...] Moreover, this phenomenon—combined with the move of Hasidic courts into the cities—did not pass over the houses of the zaddikim. Against the background of city life, exhaustion which joined indolence, the houses of the zaddikim could not resist the spirit of the times. The sons and daughters of the zaddikim were the first to feel that there was no future for them in the path of their fathers, and they went out to look everywhere—from the *Mizrahi* to the communist party, all of which were a negative phenomenon in the minds of the Hasidic essence. From this generation one may conclude one interesting rule: In all the Hasidic dynasties the eldest son, the *inheritor*, remained in the fold, but the rest of the family, who did not have a hold on the horns of the altar, left Hasidism and the paths of their fathers.<sup>22</sup>

Rabbi Yitzhak Nahum Twersky is, therefore, a clear example of the bewilderment and despair experienced by many children of Hasidic rabbis at the turn of the 20th century. Awareness of the deep spiritual crisis facing Jewish Orthodoxy in general and Hasidism in particular; the great attraction of modern Jewish culture; the hopelessness of the individual battling against the powerful direct and indirect pressures of family and social milieu; the inability to extricate oneself from the “old” world—all these are the significant signs of this pattern, which also are the building blocks of modern Jewish identity.

**‘The Confession of My Tortured, Afflicted, Soul:’ The Text**

Sunday, [the week of parashat] Terumah

January 24, 1910,<sup>23</sup> Shpikov

Dear friend and beloved author, Mr. Jacob Dineson!

For a whole year now I have been endeavoring with all my will and strength to write your honor a letter. For there is none other to whom I can lay bare my mind and reveal the secrets of my life or, better, the gloomy life of my environment; and there is none other who possesses a warm, sensitive, feeling heart, that might fittingly resonate to all the spasms and tremors of my soul. For behold, throughout that whole year,

since becoming acquainted with you and your gentle, delicate soul, I have been consumed by an innermost need to correspond with you, to reveal to you all that is hidden in my heart, to unburden before you all that is concealed and confined in my soul. I imagine always that my soul will then find solace, unburdened of a heavy load of stones. My stifled thoughts and unspoken words will find proper expression in my letter, and they will surely achieve their object, for in your honor they will find a person who will understand them and sense them.

Thus I thought, and thus I desired all year. But not merely one thought and one desire do I harbor in my heart and hollow them out a deep grave therein. Much have I experienced in such matters. All my life is one long chain of suppressed desires, concealed ideas, shattered cravings and wishes. And indeed I was forced to do so with this particular desire as well. Thus dictated the circumstances of my accursed life, and who shall oppose them.

But now the opportunity has beckoned, and I have sent you my portrait; far be it from me to deny that, apart from sending my portrait to you—a person whom I think of as a dear and highly respected friend, deeming it a great honor for myself if my portrait should be in your possession—apart from that, I had another, covert, intention. I wished you to see and recognize all the duality and two-facedness of my world, to apprehend the great difference and distance between my inner world and my outer world. I thought, therefore, to let your honor gaze at my portrait, see all the wretchedness and ugliness in my clothing, and conclude there from by logical analogy as to the whole picture, all the external trappings of my life. I wished you to recognize all the darkness and gloom around me, to inspect at once my external appearance, in all its fearful darkness. I will then come to your honor in my letter—for I felt that, despite all the obstacles, it will no longer brook any delay; for as lava bursts forth from a volcano, so shall my letter burst forth from the conflagration of my blazing soul, surging forth and carrying all obstacles before it—then shall I stand before you in the fullness of my inner portrait, remove the veil and discard the black mask from my face; I shall reveal to you the depths of my soul, the light hidden there. And then a new world will open before your eyes, a world full of song, a world full of light and radiance, a world full of sublime ambitions and lofty hopes. In contrast, I shall also picture for you my second, other, outer world, in all its blackness—the blackness of the portrait is naught in comparison. I shall not use many colors, nor heap words upon one another. Only a window shall I breach into that terrible, awful gloom, to enable its darkness to be seen in all its horror; and then, against the radi-

ance and brilliance of my soul, the darkness in my outer world shall be seen in all its terrible obscurity; and against the background of this awful, gloomy darkness, the light of my inner world shall shine forth in all its radiant loveliness. And then, when your honor should perceive the terror in that darkness, and the magnificence and magic in that light, in all its fullness and depth, then shall you understand the extent of the sorrow and the pain of that welter and chaos of light and darkness or, better, of the light that is usurped by darkness; and then shall you apprehend the whole depth of the rift in my soul.

Such was my intention in sending you my portrait, and that is what I planned and wished to do. How great then, was my amazement that your honor had truly understood, or better, sensed, all this even before I had time to write you my letter, and perceptively expressed this in such fitting words in your letter to my sister.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, there is much, very much, that remains locked away and concealed from you in my soul, concerning which you wish to know, and you address this question to my sister. These words and questions of yours have further fanned the flames of my craving to write your honor a detailed letter, in which I shall present myself whole and all of my environment without embellishment. That I shall do in this present letter.

But before proceeding to the main body of my letter, let me forestall your complaint to my sister that she disregarded your warning and admonishment not to show me your letter. Presumably, your honor thought and supposed that your words would pierce my heart like daggers, and therefore was loath to distress me. Please believe, then, what I am now telling you, that, quite the opposite, the impression your words made upon me was the reverse of what you might have thought. Your words could not distress me, because they in no wise surprised me. I might have been aggrieved only by words that surprised me, by new words, the like of which I had never heard before, new ideas the like of which had never occurred to me. For example, had I been calm and composed, stoical about the conditions of my life, finding nothing amiss with them, and your honor had addressed me with sharp words and proved the reverse to me, then surely would the pain have been great and awful, the distress deep and profound. For with such words your honor would then have been demolishing all the lovely castles and magnificent towers that I had erected in my mind, evicting me from my own world where I had already found myself a good place and thought it calm and restful, by showing me that my own world is not good and not beautiful, that there is another, more beautiful world, more fascinating and appealing. Like a man sitting in the dark, having never seen light in



his life, the thought having never occurred to him that darkness is not good but harmful, and suddenly another person appears and opens up for him a window into the light, to show him its goodness and beauty—would he ever be able to reconcile himself to his darkness?

But that is not my situation. Never have I been content with my narrow, dark, gloomy world, and always am I aware of the contrast between the great, beautiful world and my tiny, ugly world. And always I say, *'The place is too crowded for me.'*<sup>25</sup> Could your words astonish me, of all people!? Could they cause me grief and pain!? On the contrary, I felt myself consoled by your words, realizing that a great man like yourself sympathizes with me and feels the wretchedness of my world. The very opposite—had your honor not told me such things, had you proved to me that even a life like that which I am living is not bad, then should I have felt myself wretched and depressed. Could there possibly be any person who would say about such a terrible life that it is good?—So let you honor's mind be at rest. You have not caused me any grief; on the contrary, I owe you gratitude for your letter and your sympathy. Therefore, my sister, who knows me well and who well understood your honor's intention in your admonition, knew that there was no point here for such concern, and allowed me to read the letter. And that is, then, my answer to your letter.

Does your honor know the state of Hasidism in our time and in our country?—In our country in particular! For in Poland and Galicia the situation is very different. Do you know its essence, its content, and its nature? I shall not be far wrong, I believe, if I answer in your name: "No!" Perhaps your honor is familiar with the state of Hasidism in the early days of its flowering and its growth, in the time of the Besht and his disciples, and later too, in its heyday, in the previous generation, when Hasidism itself was still a kind of "system," and the Zaddikim who bore its banner aloft were still imbued with the spirit of Hasidism, still exerting considerable influence on the people.

As to Hasidism and its standard-bearers in those days, surely that your honor has read the many monographs that have been written about them in our literature. Surely your honor has personally perused the books of Hasidism and extracted the precious pearls scattered here and there in that literature, among the heaps of ashes of hallucinations and nonsense. Thus your honor surely knows about the origin of Hasidism and its state in the first and second period [of its existence], although your knowledge is not perfect but involves some errors and misconceptions; for hearsay is quite different from eyewitness evidence, and a person who has been reared and educated in the innermost circle of

Hasidism, with masters of the movement all around him, familiar with the development of the movement from its beginnings to this day, with all its faults and merits, cannot be compared with a person born and reared in an environment foreign to Hasidism, all of whose knowledge is derived from books alone, from legends, not from life itself. And most of the books, in particular those of our latest authors, who have begun to deal in recent years with Hasidism as a system and a movement, are so remote from life and from reality; they are so openly tendentious that a person consulting them to trace the roots of Hasidism from them alone, be it only through popular legends which are mostly very beautiful but far from the truth, might liken the false luster of rotten wood to a brilliantly glittering gem, and an ugly sight in this movement to a splendid, charming revelation. But nevertheless you have at least some idea concerning the Hasidism of those times. But as to the Hasidism of our times and our provinces, surely you have heard nothing, for the literature makes no reference to it at all, and in life you are very, very remote from us. Your honor resides in Warsaw, the capital of Poland, where Hasidism still has all its power and its influence is still tremendous. So let me describe to you, quite briefly, the state of Hasidism here, in our province, the province of Ukraine.

In saying here “Hasidism,” I use a metaphorical name, for that name is entirely inappropriate to present-day Hasidism and has been so for some twenty years, since my grandfathers, the famed Zaddikim of Skver, Talne, and Rotmistrivka—all my ancestors—and their brothers, the standard-bearers of Hasidism in our province, who commanded thousands of faithful Hasidim, died or, as the Hasidim say, departed this world. Since then, the light of Hasidism has dimmed and its glory has gone into exile, and it has atrophied, continually declining, continually diminishing from day to day, until now it is little more than a debased coin, a name devoid of real content.

The reasons for this are many, more than can be listed here, for in order to explain them one would be obliged to delve deeply into the history of its development from its beginnings until today. But such is not my object here, for not to tell the story of Hasidism have I come, but only that which affects my person, my life history. Nevertheless, there are two main reasons: First, my ancestors did not leave after them sons like themselves, men of understanding and intelligence, who might influence and impart of their spirit to the congregation of Hasidim. [Their sons were] either men who, though indeed great masters of Torah and pious, proficient in the works of Kabbalah and Hasidism, were weak, exhausted, and uncivilized in all their ways. Little knowledge

have they of the world and of men, they lack any sense of beauty; ugliness rules all their doings, their clothing, their speech, all their motions; Or they were common men, faceless and nondescript, neither masters of Torah nor knowledgeable and virtuous in the ways of the world, their only claim to fame being their ancestry. That is one reason.

The second is the intellectual development of our province. In the last twenty years, our part of the world has taken such enormous steps forward that it has almost overtaken even Lithuania.<sup>26</sup> A new generation has arisen, a generation that knows not—and does not want to know—its old ancestral traditions, a generation that thirsts for [secular] education and longs for freedom. This young generation has influenced the older generation and imbued them with its spirit. The generation looks completely different. The old type of pious, patriarchal Jew of the previous generation is no more, almost completely disappeared, displaced either by the completely free-thinking Jew, or by the simple, bourgeois Jew, neither very pious nor free-thinking, just an ordinary Jew, no longer with the perfect, simple faith of the Jew of the previous generation. While there are still many old people of the former generation, but solitary remnants are they, few in number in every city, and they have no influence on the march of life, a few lost souls. They sit, each in his own corner and shaking their heads in disgust, heap their curses upon the new generation that has left them behind, advancing far, far beyond them. Upon such arid ground, of course, Hasidism cannot possibly bear fruit, and so it has gradually degenerated, until there is almost no trace of it here.

Those old Hasidim, in whose hearts the memory of the first Zaddikim, the forerunners, still live, could not communicate with the sons who succeeded them. Sorrowfully they look and gaze from afar upon those who have come to occupy the throne of their masters and teachers. In their grief, they have retreated into themselves, delving deeply at least into the books of the Zaddikim, contenting themselves with tales and memories of the good old days, that they tell each other upon meeting. And a new generation of Hasidim, who do not recall the “founding fathers” and will make do with the sons, has not arisen, for the new generation is far removed from Hasidism.

In short, that first Hasidism, whose name at least was fitting, has wholly perished. Instead, a new Hasidism, which might more precisely be termed “wheeling and dealing,” has appeared. For the new Hasidism is little more than shop-keeping. A Jew who enters the *Rebbe's* house does not come to be admonished, to learn some virtue, to hear a good word, for such Hasidim are no more; they come to the *Rebbe* in his

capacity as a wonder-worker, begging him to demonstrate his miracles for them, to save them from misfortune, in exchange for the money they pay him for the miracle.

And it is self-evident that such people are most brutish people, whose very boorishness is their Hasidism. For lo, the great legacy our ancestors bequeathed us, all the virtues of that heritage—albeit for those who considered these qualities as virtues—all its splendor and magic, have been totally swept away. And this alone the house of the *Rebbe* in our parts retains as a heritage from our ancestors—all the refuse left over from its ancestral customs. All the wretchedness and ugliness, the idiotic costume, all the wild motions and customs, these alone remain to them, they are sacred and untouchable to this very day. Such is the state of Hasidism in our time and in our province, such are the Hasidim, and such is the image of the house of the “*Rebbe*.” And in such a time, in such a house, was I lucky enough to be born.

I imbibed piety with my mother’s milk, I was reared on the well-springs of Torah and Hasidism, and no foreign spirit penetrated our home to dislodge me, God forbid, from my place. But nevertheless, since the day I attained maturity I was imbued with a different spirit, I was different from all around me. Of course, that was within the hidden depths of my mind; outwardly—the less said, the better. I felt that my world was small and tiny, constricted, choking and strangling me; and in my innermost being I longed so much for a different world, a beautiful, wide world, that would give me enough air to breathe. I despised the people around me, loathed their way of life, and was drawn upward as if by a hidden force. There, in the infinite expanse, above the swamp in which I was immersed.

How did such ideas occur to me even in my infancy? What moved me to despise my surroundings, to hunger with all my heart for a different world? I myself know not, for who knows the way of the spirit? But one thing I do know: I have a delicate, poetic soul. A yearning soul, that could never reconcile itself to its gloomy, dark condition, but has always longed and pined for another life, more beautiful and far more interesting.

I remember the impression made upon me by my frequent hikes, when in my youth I would go out in the summer, with my teacher, to the forest outside the town, along a path meandering between green meadows. Leaving the house, with its all-pervading stifling air and stifling spiritual atmosphere, and my encounter with nature. Free, living, blooming, nature; the enormous contrast between our house—our house in particular—and Creation. All these had such an enormous influence

upon me that in the first moments I felt drunk, intoxicated with life and its joy, intoxicated by the magnificence and magic of nature. I forgot the whole world, forgot the house and its duties that I had left behind, the narrow surroundings and everything that I hated, and was seized by only one strong sensation—a sensation of pleasure and life. All those sleeping life powers within me, that had flickered deep within my heart, burst forth with overwhelming force. I desired then to embrace the whole world, to kiss the world—the fields, the forest, the birds flying over my head—with one kiss. To satiate my burning, life-desiring soul.

But this mental state was not long-lived. Slowly but surely, the joyful feelings began to evaporate, to be replaced by muted sorrow. My memory began to resurrect my duties at home, my way of life, the chains that shackle my spirit. I remembered that no son of nature am I, to rejoice in nature's joy is not my lot. I remembered how far I am from nature—the very opposite, I am far removed from free, honest, and simple nature, which knows no cunning or falsehood; for I, hypocrite that I am, dissemble and deny. I do what I desire not to do, say what I think not, and I am entirely unnatural. I love nature, all that is good and beautiful, but I myself, in my dress, my actions, my movements, embody the antithesis of both good and beautiful. Such sorrowful thoughts and bitter feelings filled my mind as I ended my outdoor walks, returning home always with pain in my heart to discharge my “duties” and to live my “life.”

Thus I grew up and thus I lost my way, my heart a burning hell and fiery furnace, but outwardly behaving as if everything was as it should be, a child of my environment. And so I became what I am now.

Much Torah have I studied in my life. Much have I racked my brains over weighty volumes of Talmud and legal codes. I have also pondered books of our philosophers, kabbalists, and Hasidim. Thereby have I earned a place of honor among the Torah scholars of my town, and acquired a reputation throughout my neighborhood. And all the Torah scholars and the Hasidim—of the old type, proficient in the books of the early Hasidim, who served under the old Zaddikim—come daily to visit me. One comes to me troubled by a weighty problem of the Talmudic text that he wishes to discuss with me and hear my opinion of the matter; another comes with a perplexing passage of Maimonides; and yet another wishes just to sit with me, regaling me with his tales and recollections of the early Zaddikim, to hear a pleasing adage from such-and-such a book that I have seen, and to tell me something of what he has read and seen. What shall I tell your honor? The sufferings of the dead in the grave, if such indeed exist—as the faithful tell us—are

naught compared with the mental anguish and heaviness of heart that these visits occasion me.

I am young in years, bursting with youthful energy and life forces. My ideas are ideas of life, and my ambitions, ambitions of life. But my bitter, harsh fate forces me to spend most of my days among old men—whether old in years or in attitudes, what matter?—mummified, dismal, whose God is not my God, their views not my views, all their thoughts, goals, and desires foreign to me. In such circles am I obliged to spend my days, to partake of their rejoicing, to sympathize with them in their sorrow and grief, to be considered as one of them.

Imagine, if you will, your honor, the scene: a beautiful, clear, summer's day, the sun bathing the whole universe and world in its rays. Waves of light stream through the wide window into my room, and I am seated at my table, the thick tomes open before me, but my thoughts and feelings are not for those tomes at all. I glance outside, I see the blue sky above my head and the abundance of light outside; and hushed, secret, longings seize me. I pine for, dream of a beautiful, magical, world, under a pristine pure, blue sky, its brilliance unmarred by the smallest cloud, radiant with brilliant light, not the slightest shadow darkening its expanses. Thus I sit pining and dreaming, my imagination bearing me on its wings to the farthest reaches. Suddenly—a knock at the door. I open, and there before me stands the local rabbi... He wishes to delight me with a novel point that he has made in his Torah studies. And immediately I am torn away from my pleasant dreams. It is as if I had fallen all of a sudden from the heights of magical imagination to the depths of bitter, black reality. And then the sharp, hair-splitting, discussion begins, objections and solutions flying back and forth. An onlooker might believe me wholly engrossed in this give and take; but how bitterly is my heart weeping in secret, for the ruin of my world, for the theft of my youth's dreams, that I am forced to exercise the best of my powers and talents in empty, dry, casuistry about the minutiae of the dietary laws, in conversation with Hasidim about the Divine Presence in exile—by God! Do they understand, feel, the meaning of “Divine Presence?” And what is “exile?!”—or about so-and-so the Zaddik who performed such-and-such a miracle, and some *Rebbe* or another who worked some kind of wonder.

Well I remember what I read in Dr. Berdyczewski's book *The Hasidim*, where, after heaping copious praises on the Hasidic theory, he concludes with a heartfelt cry, “May I be so lucky as to share their portion!”—that is, that of the Hasidim. And, recalling that exclamation, I cannot hold back my laughter. Indeed, *Herr Doktor!* How right you are!

But how convenient it was for you to utter this exclamation, on your lofty chair at Heidelberg University, far removed from the Hasidim and their masses. But what would you say if it really fell to your lot to be among them always? Methinks you would have spoken differently then, a very different call would have issued from your heart, and together with me you would have cried, “May I be so lucky as *not* to share their portion.”

Duplicity, two-facedness, the cleft in my soul—whoever has never experienced them cannot possibly imagine their bitterness. Is there any greater sorrow, stronger pain, than the need constantly to strangle one’s dearest thoughts, one’s most sacred feelings, lest they be detected outwardly, God forbid, and some harm come to one? Constantly to see one’s most cherished hallowed ideas trampled by others, and to profess happiness, as if in agreement with them?

I constantly have free thoughts, but I am obliged to observe my ancestors’ most minute stringencies of observance; I have good taste and love beauty, but I am obliged to wear the clothing of the uncivilized: a long silk *kapota* down to my feet, a *shtrayml* of fur tails<sup>27</sup>—that is the “badge of shame” imposed upon us by our haters for generations, which has become holy to us Jews, enamored of the hand that beats us—with a skull-cap beneath it, and other such “ornaments” as well. What would your honor say, were you to come suddenly, not knowing me, and see me standing among the praying congregation, clad in this tawdry finery, swaying and praying, what would you think of me then? Surely you would hold me to be ultra-Orthodox, a devout fanatic. Never would it occur to you that I am different from all around me, and that under this showy trumpery of clothes hides a beautiful soul, dreaming, longing, and pining, just as it would never occur to any of those who know me—with the exception of those of my young friends of like mind—and who consider me to be a Haredi. And how my heart aches when perchance I hear my praises sung, whether in my presence or otherwise, that I am a God-fearing, perfect person. A terrible thought pierces and gnaws my mind: What is this? What am I? Is it possible that I am naught but a hypocrite, a sham? Am I permitted thus to deceive people?

Thus do I live out my life here, a dark, gloomy life, without a spark of light, without a shadow of hope, all darkness about me. Nevertheless, even in my life here, despite the all-pervading darkness, sometimes a glimmer of light breaks through. At times of leisure, free of my environment and its obligations, I repair to the “left wing” of our home, to my sisters.<sup>28</sup> Then does a new world open up to me. I cast off the dust covering me, distance myself from the filth, from the grime in which I am

immersed all day. Some freedom indeed reigns there, in contrast to the chains and shackles in our home, freedom that my sisters have earned “with their sword and with their bow,” freedom from that fine company that surrounds me all day. There I meet young friends and acquaintances, and we read and speak of life and literature. In brief, there I live my real life, there I remove the mask from my face, to be what I really am, without dissembling. Although even there the shadows overcome the light—as you already know well of this “life” from my sister’s letters—and even there I cannot breathe freely, even there the air is full of sorrow and grief. But in comparison with my own “life” in my room, that too may be called a life. So here there is still a gleam of light illuminating me within the darkness.

But what a terrible thought, to think now where I am going. To the blessed town of Belz in Galicia! For I have to settle there, in their “harem.” I underline that word to emphasize my intention, that I am being married by coercion, against my will. For me [to marry] a woman from there—my gloomy life here, with all its black darkness, will pale in comparison with the life awaiting me there. First, I am marrying a woman from there, a woman who has been destined these six years to be my bride, but even so I have never ever had sight of her face and I have not the slightest idea of her, her beauty, intelligence, and understanding. And with such a maid, of whom I know absolutely nothing, I am now being led to the bridal canopy!

Can your honor, a cultured person, living in the twentieth century, possibly understand and conceive of this? When I think on it—and when do I not?!—I am seized by trembling. I am entering a new period in my life, the most important period in human life—and whom have they given me as a life partner, to be my wife, with whom I am to spend the rest of my life, sharing my happiness and my sorrow, my joy and my woes? I know not. One thing only do I know, that there is a certain town somewhere, Belz by name, and there lives a young maiden, as unattractive as can be—this I have indeed been told by people who have been sent to see her visage—and she is “my bride.” What is the sign that she is “my bride”—that I know not, but that is what people are saying, and there is the proof, for now I am being led to the bridal canopy with her. What is the nature of this maid? That I know not, and neither do all those who have gone there to see her and have tried to investigate her character. For how much can be determined from fragmentary information, acquired in a few days, and moreover by a stranger, who knows not what to say and what to ask, and I cannot extract from him a proper sentence about her? Having now to approach her to make her my life’s part-



ner, I am relying on accident. Perhaps accident has indeed ordained a suitable match for me. And it is equally possible, very easily, that it has matched me with my very opposite. At best, however, what might I expect of a “Belzian” maid? What spiritual development could she have had in such an environment, in such an atmosphere, where such a simple, innocent thing as learning to write is a serious offense in a young maid, at most a luxury. “A woman’s wisdom is confined to the spindle”...!<sup>29</sup> What hope is there for me, why should I delay any longer? The greatest fortune would be if, at least, she were not already entirely imbued with the usual Belzian ideas and desires, if her heart were still lively and open to other human ideas and desires as well. And if the saplings of humanism that I shall try to plant in the soil of her heart, bear fruit and do not find arid ground—that would be my greatest happiness.

That is one of the “good” things awaiting me in the near future. That is the central point, and if the center is naught, what could the circumference be?—Even less than naught.

And the circumference, the environment, what of it? If ten measures of extreme religious fanaticism, ignorance, and vulgar stupidity came down to the world, Belz has received nine, and one the rest of the world. If your honor should wonder at my non-modern dress, being so remote from this ancient world, he will marvel a thousand-fold at the Belz customs and will despair of even understanding them with his mind. Let me tell you now a little of their capers, a drop in the sea of their deplorable ways of life, for my feeble pen is powerless to provide a faithful, complete picture of their doings. That would be a task worthy of a witty belletrist’s pen. May your honor gaze and marvel, hear and not understand, and you will think that I am leading you far, far away, from the cultured lands of Europe to the uncivilized lands of China or India, for there, only there, can one view other pictures like these.

In addition to the stringent and precautionary measures that every Jew has around him, Belz have adopted further such restrictions that have no sanctified source, nor have they issued from the legal decisors, they originate solely in “ancestral” customs. Left and right, upon one’s every step, one finds and stumbles over a custom established by “the ancestors.” So uncivilized, so obstructing and disturbing the free course of life are these customs, that one cannot imagine how a person—even a person like myself, accustomed to strange life practices and precautions, but who thinks always of one way of life—could survive in such a stifling atmosphere, in which every move, every wink of an eyelid, every innocent thought, any action, the most proper action imaginable, in line

with Jewish Law, will be met with ponderous objections, on account of “custom.”

Here are some examples. The bridegroom on his wedding day must shave his head with a razor. And the bride? That goes without saying, for all women there have shaved heads, for that has been decreed by custom.<sup>30</sup> And a wig—which in our provinces is the custom even of saints and pious people, and most women go about with their hair uncovered—is considered there a greater abomination than swine. In all the town of Belz you will not find even one woman wearing a wig on her head, but all wrap their shaved heads in a kerchief. And on Sabbath days and festivals they wear a kind of old-fashioned veil, which, if I am not mistaken, is the very veil with which the Matriarch Rebecca covered her head. [The veil] must conform to this fashion, it cannot be otherwise, and all according to the custom and decree ordained by the ancestors of my future father-in-law,<sup>31</sup> the Zaddikim, the leaders of the town and its environs; and he—my future father-in-law—being their representative, enforces them, and by virtue of his tremendous influence not one tittle of them may be omitted.

Picture, your honor, if you will, the following scene. Imagine that myself and my “intended” are being pictured. A young couple—“He” has his head shaven, and “She” has her head shaven. He wears a *shtrayml* and a skull-cap on his head, with all the other finery—as you will see later—and she wears a magnificent scarf on her head with all other female trumpery from Chmielnitzki’s times.

A nice caricature! Good candidates for a museum of antiquities! Were it not that this matter concerns myself, I could laugh most heartily at the sight of such a picture. Unfortunately, however, the matter is so close to me, so relevant to me, that it may arouse in me not laughter but only tears, tears over my ill fortune, the fortune that fate has declared for me in this inhospitable land.

Trousers are now fashionable, but anything fashionable is strictly forbidden there. So the men wear long *kapotas* down to their feet, and the *kapotas* must be sewn from a single piece of fabric, and they may be from any kind of fabric, from silk to choice linen. But not a woolen weave, which is forbidden for fear of *sha’atnez*.<sup>32</sup> And under that long uniform they wear their long winter underwear visibly, white as a “pavement of sapphire.”<sup>33</sup> And their ear locks are long, O how long—down to the navel and more, for that is an immutable decree: “It is forbidden to cut the ear locks of the head and to shorten them, from day of birth till day of death!” And those long, thick, ear locks, spread over the face and swaying here and there, wherever the wind blows them, and

they seem as if attached by glue to the white, shaven, head—and why is that?—To mar man’s handsome visage, “God’s image.” And in this beautiful costume one has to go about all day, not only during prayers, girded with a sash.

No lamp will you find in their houses, only candlelight to illuminate the dark. Now in this generation of ours, a generation of great technical discoveries, a generation served by electricity day by day, when the human spirit, unsatiated, is blazing new trails and new paths, striving hard to find new inventions. In this generation, at this time, there is a dark corner, in the heart of Europe, where even a simple lamp is not yet used, even one that might today be considered an antique, and the dark light of a tallow candle satisfies them.<sup>34</sup> O, people who live in darkness! Beautiful furniture and household utensils are a luxury. A mirror is considered as leaven [on Passover], to be banished from the house. Galoshes over the shoes are an abomination—“Everything that walks on four is an abomination,” an explicit proof from the Bible!<sup>35</sup> A newspaper, even in Hebrew, or in Yiddish—not to speak of a volume of the new literature—is condemned to be removed and banished.

Those are some of the uncivilized customs that prevail there, a few small details, which your honor will be able to put together and thus to conceive a full, accurate idea of all their ways of life there. And these customs are supervised by my future father-in-law, the Grand Inquisitor,<sup>36</sup> who watches over the slightest move of the members of his family, his town, and his Hasidim in general. And woe betide any person who dares to infringe even one of all these “customs,” who deliberately disregards one of them. He will be pursued and beaten with cruel wrath, with all their burning, wild, fanaticism. They have one refrain: “Eat and drink, study and sleep,” for that is the whole man!

They are far from the world and from life. The voice of the sun’s orb, traversing the heavens and announcing that time is passing and will not stand still, that the times are changing and with them man too—they hear not that voice. They are frozen, fossilized, standing constantly on the same level as our ancestors in Poland three hundred years ago. And if they have developed, if they have taken a step forward and gone farther than their ancestors, they have done so only in the sense that they have heaped more restrictions on their ancestors’ restrictions and added stupidity to their stupidity. That is the blessed Belz, such is its visage, in miniature. In that Belz, in that locality, am I to settle now.

And if all the happy things in store for me there were not enough, my father-in-law-to-be is a strong, hard man, one who likes everything to proceed according to his will, strict, intimidating all those around

him, à la Stolin—your honor is surely acquainted with the picture of Stolin through my sister.<sup>37</sup> I shall have to submit to him and bow to his authority, suppressing my will in favor of his. And I am so enamored of freedom—I do not speak anymore of freedom in its broad sense, but at the very least freedom for myself, in my innermost soul, not that another person should trample my soul with his coarse sandals—I am so unable to relent, to submit, to bow to authority! Those are my great prospects for the nearest future. Even now I drown in mud up to my neck, and now I am being dragged to drown entirely in mire, in a pool of sewage. Indeed, a terrible idea, and the reality is seven times worse!

I know that, upon reading this confessional letter of mine, your honor will think of many questions that you will labor to solve, and first and foremost, one central question that pervades the whole letter: “If you are so remote from and abominate the life that you live; if you so feel and understand how terrible the new life that is awaiting you, if you so understand the depth of its tragedy—who is it, what is it, that forces you to persist in that miserable life? Sever, in one blow, the bond that binds you to it, break out into the great, wide, world, that you so love, for which you so yearn and pine!”

Yes, yes, your honor is absolutely right in that question. That is the question I am asked by many of my young friends, who cannot understand my mind, to whom my psychology is foreign, who only see the terrors of my outer life. They, not knowing my mind, ask me such a question; I dismiss them with a brief answer that says nothing, and they retreat. But before your honor I shall bare my soul, explaining the obvious truth to you: a sacrifice am I, a sacrifice on my mother’s altar.

As difficult as it is for me to sever the thread of my life, as helpless as I am in that respect, nothing would hold me back, nothing would withstand my burning passion, the fire of my aching soul, and I would indeed have taken such a step. With my last remaining strength I would cast off these shackles, abandon my home, my family, my place of birth, all the habits I have accumulated since my youth, and travel to a big city, to study there, complete my education, to live another life. I would reconcile myself indifferently to poverty, sorrow and suffering. I would accept everything in love, provided only that I could save my soul. Nothing would prevent me—save just one hidden power in my soul which is stronger than all these combined, which holds me back with tremendous force and will not loosen its grip—the power of compassion. This feeling, which I have to a high degree, is what will not allow me to carry out my plan—my compassion for my beloved mother.

This wretched soul, who has had nothing in her life, all of whose life is one terrible tragedy, and I, I alone, am her only hope, her heart's desire, I am her comforting salve. My sisters have never given her much pleasure, only in me does she put her trust, I am her sole support in her life. So how could I bear to see the evil that would befall my mother, how could I, with my own hands, shatter her only hope and cause her such overpowering disappointment, such great sorrow and grief? I shall not investigate the question logically, whether that is how things must indeed be, if I must indeed abandon my future world, which is still beyond my reach, for her world which is already old and withered, for her life which is already behind her.

I shall not investigate—because I cannot investigate. Where emotion reigns, there is no logic, everything is molded by instinct. That is why I have suffered in silence till now, and that is what now forces me to take this new step of marrying into Belz and settling there. Why do I have to settle there, of all places? Why can I not live here even after my marriage? For a very simple reason: My parents lack the means to support me, to sustain me and my wife in their home, to supply all our needs. So I have no choice but to live there.

To think of the possibility of leaving there and making my own way, that too I cannot do, for if so there are only two roads open to me: To be a [Hasidic] *rebbe*, or to be a rabbi. The first alternative is of course out of the question. And the second alternative too, apart from the fact that it is not to my liking, it could never be realized, because to be a rabbi I would need authorization from my future father-in-law—who by then would be my father-in-law—and if he were opposed, I could of course do nothing to oppose him, for he is stronger and more influential than I, and no community would accept me against his will. But I would never receive such authorization, because he wishes to keep me under his wing for a few years, who knows how many? And even were he to grant me authorization, I would then have to be a “rabbi” according to the Belz style, so what would I gain? Once again the same slavery, the same wretchedness and the same ugliness.

So I have absolutely nothing to hope for, there is not a single glimmer to light my way, the way of my future, only darkness, awful darkness, profound gloom await me. And when I throw myself into the waves, the angry, flowing, current of life, where shall they carry me as they flow? I know not. I hope that at long last the waves may bring me to some shore, for if not for that hope, how terrible life would be! I hope that this Belz will be no more than a way station, a stopover on the way to a more beautiful, better life, to that life that I so desire and yearn for!

Indeed a difficult stopover, but nevertheless only a stopover. One cannot reach Paradise without first passing through the departments of hell.

Belz as a way station—how is that to be? Listen and I shall tell you. As long as I am here under my mother's authority I can do nothing. I stress, always *my mother*, not my father, for my father is cold-tempered and will not feel such pain. But my mother—she is a warm, feeling, person, and I must take her into consideration. Were I to take such a step as I intend to take—to depart from here, from her, before my wedding, she would be burdened with all the responsibility; all the “What will people say?”—the questions she fears so much—would fall upon her. The noise, the public commotion, would be too much. Here I was, and all of a sudden—I am gone. The embarrassment, the uproar, the questions all around, from all the townspeople, all our acquaintances, the talk, the gibes, the wagging of heads, how shall she bear all these? And besides, that step would be final proof that I am a dissolute, a long-standing unbeliever, and that in vain I have misled all those who know me, letting them think me faithful to God and to His holy ones. Why else should I have taken such a sudden step? This proof, which would be public knowledge, would be difficult for my mother, most difficult. So everything would be lost, everything: “This one too, my son, in whom I have put all my hope, he too has become a disappointment, and so what is left for me in my life?”

So I cannot possibly take that step from here, it being so abrupt and so public. Not so if that were done from there, from Belz. My mother herself knows and senses the great difference between myself and Belz, and however much she does not know me in all respects, she knows me more than others and is therefore aware, how different I am from Belz and its life. Moreover, she is worried lest I dislike my bride, since she is not very good-looking and may also not be to my taste in other respects, and so think many other townspeople as well. She is therefore apprehensive and worried, lest I be unable to reconcile myself with Belz, and go to war there; and she, instinctively, realizes the possible results of that war... And more than once she has told me of her fears. Nevertheless, she comforts herself, in the hope that perhaps that will not happen, and I will accustom myself to Belz ways; and perhaps I shall like my bride and things will turn out for the best. But all the same, she fears the other side, the other aspect, and that step would not come to her as a surprise. And any pain, strong as it might be, would therefore not be new, it would be expected and foreseen, and so less acute, not so painful and stinging. The public aspect would also not be so obvious here [in Shpikov], for only an echo of that step would be heard here. Only frag-

mentary information, wrapped in secrecy, would reach our town here, insufficient to arouse such a commotion. And moreover people might find some justification for my action—“Who knows what forced him to take such a step, surely he could no longer bear it.” And the shame would not be so great, and above all, responsibility for my action would not rest with her, my mother, because I shall already have left her home. Therefore, her pain would not be so unbearable, and that would make it easier for me to take the step.

So in the final analysis, every cloud has a silver lining. Perhaps through Belz I shall be able more easily to achieve my goal, my long-standing heart's desire, and perhaps, taking the step from there, I shall have better means at my disposal.

Such is the situation now, that is what I am doing and thus I think. Darkness surrounds me, but one spark glimmers in the darkness. I intend to fan the spark and ignite a great fire that will light my way in life; but possibly, before I am able to make it into a flame, it will flicker and die out completely, and I shall remain standing alone, solitary in the darkness. I fear that possibility, but find strength in the hope that it will not go out, that I will be able to make it into a great light, an illuminating light.

I hope, for without hope what worth is life? And out of that hope I am now about to take the first, difficult, step, of marrying into Belz.

That is my confession, the confession of my life, withered and faded before its time, the confession of my tortured, afflicted, soul, the confession of my squandered talents. I began to write it several weeks ago, but could not complete it until now. The harsh conditions of my life have brought me to this. I have been writing it for a very long time, one quarter-hour each day, and upon beginning to write I have been forced to stop midway, obliged to hide the letter for fear it might be seen by someone. Your honor will realize from my unclear writing in what state it has been written. A word here, a word there, page put together with page, until the letter was complete. Were I able to write my letter with the requisite peace of mind, it would be different, more solid and coherent, from beginning to end, one continuous narrative. But since I have not been able to do so, it consists only of disconnected ideas, fragments, convulsions of my mind. And now, if your honor should wish to reply, I beg you to reply quickly, to reach me immediately during the first week of my wedding. You may send the letter care of my sisters, and they will send it on to me.

With admiration and respect, hoping against hope for your answer,  
Yitzhak Nahum Twersky

## NOTES

\* An extensive and detailed Hebrew version of this article was published in *Alpayim*, 14 (1997), 49-79 and will be published again as a chapter in my forthcoming book *Ne'echaz Ba-svach: Pirkei Mashber u-Mevucha be-Toldot ha-Hasidut* (Caught in the Thicket: Chapters of Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism). I would like to thank David Louvish, who translated the Hebrew text of the confession into English, and to the Yoran Schnizer Foundation (Tel Aviv University) for its support.

<sup>1</sup> Jacob Glatstein, *Homecoming at Twilight*, translated from the Yiddish by Norbert Guterman, New York, 1968, p. 145-46.

<sup>2</sup> The letter is preserved in the Dineson collection at the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, Department of Manuscripts, V.879/17.

<sup>3</sup> For a short description of this wedding see Yohanan Twersky, *He-Hatzer ha-Pnimit*, Tel Aviv, 1954, p. 220-21. This wedding probably was portrayed in Israel Joshua Singer's famous novella *Yoshe Kalb*, New York, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> His nephew Yohanan Twersky, who also wondered at his cousin's acclimation to Belz, attempted to explain: "How did he acclimate to Belz which is in its entirety made up of prohibitions, both internal and external? Maybe because the Torah became the center of his life, maybe because he was fond of his wife, and maybe because he, the youngest, approaches everything with grace, not with judgment. All of these sweeten his hard time there" (*He-Hatzer ha-Pnimit*, p. 243).

<sup>5</sup> Meir Wunder, *Meorei Galicia*, III, Jerusalem, 1986, p. 14-16; Isaac Lewin (ed.), *Eleh Ezkerah*, IV, New York, 1961, p. 133.

<sup>6</sup> *Sefer Zikaron le-Kehilat Rawa-Ruska ve-ha-Sevivah*, Tel Aviv, 1973, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Yohanan Twersky, *He-Hatzer ha-Pnimit*, p. 243-54.

<sup>8</sup> Wunder, *Meorei Galicia*, III, 16. For some information about his time as a rabbi in Rawa, see also: Twersky, *He-Hatzer ha-Pnimit*, p. 263; *Sefer Zikaron le-Kehilat Rawa-Ruska ve-ha-Sevivah*, p. 89-90, 187-88.

<sup>9</sup> Her son, the writer Yohanan Twersky, noted in a short autobiography that in 1906, when he was 6 years old, his mother took him to Odessa and presented him before Haim Nahman Bialik, asking him to read her son's poems (G. Kressel Collection, Twersky file, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, Department of Manuscripts).

<sup>10</sup> Twersky, *He-Hatzer ha-Pnimit*, p. 219-20, 231.

<sup>11</sup> *Pinsk: Sefer Edut ve-Zikaron*, II, Tel Aviv, 1967, p. 270.



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<sup>12</sup> Twersky, *He-Hatzer ha-Pnimit*, p. 234.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 160. On the role of women in propagating modernity, see Iris Parush, *Reading Women: The Benefit of Marginality in 19th Century Eastern European Jewish Society*, Tel Aviv, 2001 (Hebrew).

<sup>14</sup> Twersky, *He-Hatzer ha-Pnimit*, p. 212.

<sup>15</sup> Mordechai Glubman, *Ketavim*, Jerusalem, 2005, p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Sefer Zikaron le-Kehilat Rawa-Ruska ve-ha-Sevivah*, p. 89. This visit took place sometime between 1922 and 1926.

<sup>17</sup> This refers to three of Mordechai of Chernobyl's sons who led important Hasidic dynasties: his grandfather's father, R. Yitzhak of Skvira; his grandmother's father, R. David of Talne; and his maternal grandfather, R. Yohanan of Rechmistrivke.

<sup>18</sup> Y.L. Peretz, *Hasidut*, Tel Aviv, 1960, p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> Refers to *Sefer Hasidim*, published by Berdyczewski in Warsaw 1900. The preface of this book (*Nishmat Hasidim*) indeed ended with the statement: "Only one short prayer being heard there in the depth of my heart: Sovereign of the World! May I will share their portion!" (p. 20).

<sup>20</sup> In fact Berdyczewski never studied at Heidelberg, but in the universities of Breslau and Berlin.

<sup>21</sup> Zevi Sharfstein, *Haya Aviv ba-Aretz*, Tel Aviv, 1953, p. 291-92.

<sup>22</sup> David Assaf (ed.), Aaron Ze'ev Aescoli, *Ha-Hasidut be-Polin*, Jerusalem, 2000, p. 128 (emphasis added).

<sup>23</sup> The date is according to the Julian calendar, which was used in Russia until 1917. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was 13 days earlier than the current Gregorian calendar. Thus, this later actually was written on February 6, 1910. The Hebrew date is 27 Shevat 5670.

<sup>24</sup> Refers to his sister Mirl, who had corresponded earlier with Dineson.

<sup>25</sup> The use of this phrase in Hebrew "*tsar li ha-makom*" (emphasized in the original) reflects the influence of M.Y. Berdyczewski's short story "*Me'ever La-nahar (Zikhronot Ozev)*" [Beyond the River (A Memoir of a Abandoner)]. In this story Berdyczewski describes the agonies of a young groom who escaped from the suffocation of the old *beth midrash* for the free and heretical world of the enlightenment, yet he still feels committed to the world he abandoned. Berdyczewski's hero used the exact same phrases. See: *idem*, *Mi-bayit U-mi-Huts*, Piotrkov, 1899, p. 50-52.

<sup>26</sup> It is noteworthy that Twersky has an image of 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Lithuania as a place where modernity and enlightenment (as opposed to Hasidism) surpass that of the Ukraine.

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<sup>27</sup> *Kapota*—A long black coat traditionally worn by observant Jewish men in Eastern Europe; *Shtrayml*—an expensive round hat made from sable or foxtails. Its origins are obscure. Over time it became a beloved symbol proudly worn by pious Jews. It is usually given as a wedding present, and the groom cherishes it throughout his lifetime.

<sup>28</sup> He probably refers to his two sisters, Haya and Mirl, who lived with their families in a special wing inside the court. The third sister, Feige, lived in the nearby Hasidic court of Buhush.

<sup>29</sup> BT *Yomah*, 66b.

<sup>30</sup> On the Belz custom of shaving the groom's head with a razor and shaving the entire head of the bride, see: Yisroel Klapholtz, *Minhagei Raboteinu mi-Belz*, Bnei Brak, 1982, p. 73-4.

<sup>31</sup> Rabbi Issachar Dov Rokeach of Belz.

<sup>32</sup> *Sha'atnez*—A Torah prohibition not to wear a piece of clothing that combines wool (from sheep) and linen (from flax) in the same garment.

<sup>33</sup> See Exodus 24:10.

<sup>34</sup> For another testimonial about the objection to electricity in Belz, see: Joseph Rubin (ed.), *Belz: Sefer Zikaron*, Tel Aviv, 1974, p. 65-76. For more examples of the fanatic conservatism of R. Issachar Dov, see Mendel Piekartz, *Hasidut Polin*, Jerusalem, 1990, p. 111-12.

<sup>35</sup> Leviticus 11, 20.

<sup>36</sup> This phrase is noteworthy. It was indeed the title of the Spanish monk Thomas de Torquemada, but it is probably a reference to the famous story in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). This book was not available at that time in Yiddish or Hebrew translation and Twersky probably absorbed it from a secondary source.

<sup>37</sup> Refers to his sister Mirl, who was married to R. Asher Perlow of Stoln.