

A leather-bound, two-century old *Mishneh Torah* (Maimonides' codification of Jewish law), whose corners were frayed with age and use, was given to Kathryn Berman¹ during the Yad Vashem Graduates Course, in August 1998, in Krakow. Ephraim Kaye² bought the *Mishneh Torah* from a street vendor in Krakow, as a present to Kathryn on the occasion of her granddaughter's birth. At home in Jerusalem, when Kathryn placed the *sefer* next to other *sefarim* (religious books) in her library, one would have thought that the *Mishneh Torah* had come home.

After a more careful examination of the book, Kathryn found the following Hebrew inscription in blue ink on the inner cover, "*Beit Midrash*, Amshinov, Gurna Street, number 22." The names "J. D. Kalisz" and "Menahem Kalisz" were stamped on the book's pages, seeming to testify to the original owner. Kathryn did not imagine she would be able to find the book's legitimate owner, or a surviving relative. Amshinov, formally known as "Mszczonow", was a small town in Poland whose Jewish population was deported to the Warsaw ghetto, and from there to Treblinka.

Following the suggestion of a neighbor that the book may have belonged to the Amshinov *Beit Midrash*, Ephraim and Kathryn met with Chaja Milikowsky in her apartment in Bayit Vegan, Jerusalem. When Chaja opened the book and saw the stamp of J. D. Kalisz and the inscribed address, she realized that the book had belonged to Jacob David Kalisz, her great great grandfather, head of the Amshinov *Beit Midrash* and spiritual leader of the Amshinov Hassidim; she and her family had lived at that very address.

Chaja told her guests, "Jacob David Kalisz's

son, Menahem, was the next Amshinov Rebbe; his son followed in his father's footsteps and was the next Rebbe. My grandfather, Shimon Shalom Kalisz, suffered from ill health. The doctors suggested that the climate at Otwock, a health resort near Warsaw, would be beneficial.



Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*

That is how my grandfather became the Amshinov Rebbe in Otwock, where I was born and spent my childhood," Chaja recalled.

"At school, I studied Hebrew, Yiddish, and *Chumash* (Bible) in addition to the curriculum taught in Polish schools. At home, I spoke Yiddish with my mother and Pessia. Pessia, the family's Jewish cook, always prepared a few extra portions, especially for Shabbat, when many unexpected guests joined our Shabbat table, enlivened by Hassidic *nigunim* (tunes) and songs. That wonderful childhood was abruptly cut short in September 1939, when my family, headed by my grandfather, left relatives, home and belongings behind, in search of refuge.

"This *sefer* brings back my beloved home. My childhood comes to life in its presence: the sweet smell of *challa*, the melodies sung on Shabbat evening, my mother's blessing, the games I played with my cousins and brother. A collection of cherished memories. Whenever I look at the book, I am home."

Chaja traveled a long and arduous road before reaching Jerusalem, her present home. The family's escape route from Otwock, Poland to Vilna, Lithuania was only the beginning. Thanks to the Righteous Among the Nations, Chiune (Sempo) Sugihara, Consul General of Japan in Kovno, Lithuania, the family was supplied with transit visas to Japan, and remained in Kobe for half a year. From Japan the family moved to China where in *Hesbva*n (October) 1945, Chaja married a former student of the Mir Yeshiva, named Haim Milikowsky. Two years later the entire family moved to Brooklyn and established, as it had done in its previous homes, an Amshinov *Beit Midrash*.

"When my grandfather passed away, he was buried in Israel. My grandmother then moved to Jerusalem," Chaja recalls. A few years later, in 1956, the family was reunited in Jerusalem and the Amshinov *Beit Midrash* and yeshiva were re-established. The tradition, the Talmud discussions, and the Hassidic texts that were transmitted from father to son were passed on to Jacob Milikowsky, Chaya's son, now head of the Amshinov *Hassidut* in Jerusalem.

The question of how the book travelled all the way from Otwock to Krakow still puzzles Chaja. However, she realizes that the book has come home to her library, to tell the story of her family and the story of the Amshinov *Hassidim* who perished in the Holocaust.

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