

In his relatively short life, Rav Meir Shapiro was one of the most influential figures in recent Jewish history.

Some people have the good fortune—or the misfortune depending on how you look at it—of living in very turbulent times. Often their lives mean more or have a greater influence than people who live in more tranquil times. Rav Meir Shapiro lived in such times.

He was born on Adar 7, 1887 (5647) in the little town of Shtatz, Romania, which was then

Jews to leave Russia or assimilate. The local populace did not need much encouragement to engage in anti-Semitic acts.

The *maskilim* – followers of the Jewish Enlightenment, the Haskalah—claimed to have the solution to anti-Semitism: become more like our European neighbors. In hindsight, we know that their solution did not work. However, in the 1880s a large section of the Jewish people was convinced that somehow being less Jewish would solve the problem of anti-Semitism.

This understanding is very important

proposed certain far-reaching solutions whose effects are still rippling throughout our world today.

A Child Prodigy

First and foremost, he was an absolute genius and had a photographic memory. He also was a very handsome person, with an aristocratic bearing.

He was raised in a Chassidic family and was a loyal Chassid his entire life, but his influence went far beyond Chassidus. He embodied all of the attributes of Chassidus,

father was a businessman, his grandfather became his teacher at an early age.

Even as a young boy, his reputation preceded him. Rabbis would come from afar to test him. By nine he had taken and passed an exam on the entire *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah*, giving him *smichah*.

A Sense of Mission

At 15, he moved to Chernovitz, another great Jewish center of learning. It did not have a yeshiva in the sense of an organized place for students, but rather a collection



Rav Meir Shapiro

His Life and Times

Rabbi Berel Wein

This month, the Jewish world commemorates the conclusion of the twelfth Daf Yomi learning cycle. When Rav Meir Shapiro inaugurated it in 1923 did he envision it being so popular that it would attract hundreds of thousands of participants and be hosted in a gargantuan football stadium (which, ironically, on fall and winter Sundays is dedicated to the modern form of gladiator entertainment – American professional football)? Knowing the visionary that Rav Shapiro was, perhaps he did. In either event, here is a biography of his truly remarkable life, told by the English-speaking world's premier Rabbi-Historian, Rabbi Berel Wein.



part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and on the border of Russia. The multiple borders offered unique opportunities for business, and it became a center of Jewish commerce as well as Jewish learning and knowledge.

The 1880s were marked by the beginning of institutionalized, government-supported and organized anti-Semitism. Led by the office of the Czar, the Russians embarked on a series of terrible pogroms intended to force

in order to place Rabbi Shapiro's life in the proper perspective. The overriding problem he dealt with his entire life was that a large section of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe felt that the solution to anti-Semitism was being less Jewish. And due to the terrible pressures on the Jewish people, almost any possible solution would find adherents.

For this reason, Rabbi Shapiro's life was destined to be tremendously turbulent. He

including its emphasis on joy and song – and he was a great musician and a poet. We have his poetry in Hebrew, Yiddish and even in Polish. In short, he was not the ordinary person.

His grandfather was the author of the famous *Minchas Shai*, a *sefer* on Tanach. Although known for its emphasis on grammar, it's really a textual concordance for the entire Tanach, reflecting a mind with encyclopedic knowledge. Since young Meir's

of near-genius young men who learned with rabbis in Chernovitz. When he was 19, he married the daughter of Yaakov Dovid Brightman, the wealthiest Jew from the Polish Galician city of Tarnopol, the center of Jewish learning in Galicia. Reb Yaakov Dovid promised that he would support his son-in-law for the rest of his life.

The only thing wrong with that promise was that it was made in 1902. Within 11 years, he would be destitute. The First World

War would wipe him out as it would wipe out most of Europe. However, before then, Rav Shapiro had refused his father-in-law's offer for lifetime support. He said he was going to sit and learn until such time as he felt he needed to assume the mantle of rabbinic leadership.

In reading his writings and speeches one is struck immediately by the fact that he feels that he was born for a mission, that G-d had given him certain gifts and he had to use them for the benefit of the Jewish people,

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and that only by going into public life would he be able to use them. That sense of mission followed and haunted him his entire life.

He was also haunted by a premonition that he would die young, which he did. He had rheumatic fever when he was a young child, which was very common at that time. Apparently, he had a damaged heart and was always prone to colds. He once remarked, "If I live to be 50, I'll be able to lead hundreds of thousands of Jews."

Tragically, he never made it to 50.

Awareness of his mortality was also part of his drive. In his speeches and articles

it comes through. Between the lines, he intimates that the Angel of Death is looking over his shoulder. Despite that, Rav Shapiro's joy, energy, determination, and far-sighted vision only enhance his reputation and give us an idea of his greatness.

20,000 Gold Coins

Just before the First World War began, he received an offer from the small but important Polish city of Galina to become the Rav there. In order to prevent him from taking the position, his mother-in-law did two things. First, she tried to bribe the people in Galina to change their minds. After that didn't work, she tried to bribe him! The story is that she brought 20,000 gold coins, laid them on the table in front of him and said, "Here, this is yours, don't go."

His answer to her was classic. "If 20,000 gold coins can change my mind," he said, "then you're right, I should not go into the rabbinate."

In other words, if one has a sincere ambition to be a real rabbi, 20,000 gold coins should not be able to change his mind. And it didn't. He went to Galina.

Galina

Poland was the bastion of Chassidus, traditional Jewry and Jewish scholarship. At the same time, it was also the bastion of socialism, the Bund, labor unions, communism and Zionism. All of these groups were very powerful, yet inimical to each other, and all were vying for the souls of Jewish youth! Galina had all these elements when Rav Meir Shapiro became its Rav.

From the beginning he needed to be strong, and he was. For instance, despite death threats he did not compromise standards of kashrus with a corrupt Jewish butcher who had a non-Jewish partner connected with the local Polish mafia. On another occasion, he declared that a *kohen* who is not a Sabbath observer should not *duchen*. In Galina, there apparently were *kohanim* who were not *shomrei Shabbos* but who nevertheless went up to *duchen*. The first time they did so, he stopped the

duchening, called out the names of those who were *mechallel Shabbos* and told them to step down. He was similarly unremitting in his war against the *maskilim*.

He was not only strong but beloved for his great warmth and many talents. Among those talents, he was a great orator and could captivate an audience in several languages: Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish. In a time when most rabbis only spoke twice a year, and the public domain was controlled by the secular or Zionist orators, in Galina he spoke all the time. His oratory skills were so refined that even the Polish nationalists invited him to speak at their meetings. In a strange fashion, they thought that he was a Polish nationalist also.

Two Very Different Yeshivas

The First World War broke out and destroyed Galina, like most other towns. It had been occupied alternatively by the Germans, the Austrians and then the Russians. Post-war Eastern Europe, especially Jewish Eastern Europe, was in complete chaos and turmoil. Nevertheless, Rav Shapiro single-handedly rebuilt the town, including not only the *shul*, *mikveh* and *eruv*, but Jewish businesses as well.

He was invited to become the rabbi of Warsaw, but turned down the offer, explaining that he felt that no single rabbi could be effective in Warsaw. It had more Jews than any other city and sported an incredibly diverse mixture of religious and anti-religious Jews and movements. No single personality could make a difference.

He looked instead for a place where he could do something special. When a middle-sized city called Sanok invited him to become its rabbi in 1921, he accepted.

In Sanok he founded two yeshivas, and this really marks the beginning of his career as an educator. One was a yeshiva in which they learned Torah until three in the afternoon. Then, until the evening, they were taught trades and professions: carpentry, printing, etc. He equipped an entire wing of the building with the necessary equipment, and called it "The Yeshiva Torah v'Avodah."



Jews gather outside the famous Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin for its inauguration. Many Polish dignitaries were in attendance, as well.

At the same time, he ran a much smaller yeshiva for the elite students of the town. It was operated out of the shul and he fed the students himself in his home. Since he had no children of his own, he was able to devote himself to his students. "You are my children," he would tell them.

He called it Yeshiva L'metzuyanim, "Yeshiva for the Exceptional." It was based upon study of the Gemara, with the goal of developing great Talmudic scholars and Jewish leaders. As we will see ahead, his Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin expanded upon the program he established at Yeshiva L'metzuyanim.



Rav Meir Shapiro learning in his study filled with sefarim.