

From the Pages of Tradition

ESTHER HILDESHEIMER CALVARY: THE HILDESHEIMERS IN EISENSTADT

R. Azriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899), like his contemporary R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), was one of the great champions of Orthodoxy in its confrontation with modernity.¹ The indefatigable Hildesheimer served as rabbi of a separatist Orthodox congregation, principal of its congregational school, and rector of the Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin. Rabbi, rosh yeshiva, and poseq, he published over 150 books and articles during his lifetime. Several important works by Hildesheimer published posthumously include: She'elot u-Teshuvot Rabbi Azriel, 2 vols. (Tel-Aviv, 1969 and 1976), and Hiddushei Rabbi Azriel, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1984 and 1992.)²

In 1846, Hildesheimer married Henriette Hirsch, the daughter of a wealthy Halberstadt industrialist. In 1851, the young couple moved to the Austro-Hungarian community of Eisenstadt, where Hildesheimer was appointed Chief Rabbi. There he founded the first Orthodox Yeshiva (i.e., a secondary and post-secondary Jewish Talmudical academy) to include secular study in its curriculum.³ The Hildesheimers spent 18 eventful years in Eisenstadt, and it was there that their 10 children—six sons and four daughters—were raised.

It is rare indeed that a daughter of a gadol be-Yisrael writes about her father. It is even rarer when such a daughter writes about her mother and thus provides us with a glimpse of the wife of a gadol be-Yisrael. Esther Hildesheimer Calvary did just that in a passage that, due to the talented efforts of Gertrude Hirschler, appears here in English translation for the first time.⁴

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THE HILDESHEIMERS IN EISENSTADT

On the whole, my childhood memories center primarily around my mother, and important personality in her own right, who gave us her devoted guidance. Father, a prominent, much sought-after public figure, was with us only for meals. He spent the rest of his time in his study or in the classroom where he delivered his *shiurim*. These two rooms adjoined one another. The former was taken up by books and Father's desk; the latter, which was quite spacious, contained only one long wooden table and several wooden benches. When we were very young, Father rarely spent time with us. Mother used to say, "As long as the children are under two or three years old you could bring other people's children in their place and my husband would never notice the difference."

On late Sabbath afternoons between the *minhah* and *ma'ariv* services all the young people would gather at our home and there would be plenty of singing because Father was very fond of music. He particularly liked liturgical chants and when, from time to time, a *hazzan* from out of town visited Eisenstadt, Father might

actually give him some of his precious time, though this meant depriving himself of sleep at night in order to make up for the lost hours of reading and study. I remember very clearly that while we lived in Eisenstadt, Father never shortened his *shiurim* no matter what befell. If some extraordinary event forced my father to interrupt one of his *shiurim*, he always made up punctiliously for the time lost, even if it was no more than five or ten minutes.

On *Yom Tov*, between *minhah* and *ma'ariv* when no *zemirot* were sung, he would seat himself in the large armchair in the bedroom, we children around him. I still remember sitting at his feet on his footstool, with my brothers Levi and Aaron standing beside him and with Mother and the younger children on the the sofa. Then Father would sing to us German *Lieder*. The high point always came when he sang his favorite, Heine's *Die zwei Grenadiere*.⁵ But on the whole, I remember Father primarily as that distinguished figure who played an epoch-making role in the lives of those around him. He was quick in his movements and actions and expected his children to be equally swift in doing what was required of them.

The front windows of the *shiur* room looked down upon the the main road, and when the Talmudic debates between Father and his students grew particularly loud and heated, people would stop in the street below, thinking that there was a brawl of some sort going on inside. One most disturbing element were the [Christian] pilgrims who would converge upon Eisenstadt each year during the period between the sowing of the spring corn and the reaping of the early harvest and would pass beneath our windows with their monotonous chants, banners and clerics. Eisenstadt happened to be one of the best known places of pilgrimage because it was the site of Mount Calvary and its famous church.

Father got along very well with his colleagues in the Seven Communities⁶ despite the fact that they had initially greeted his arrival in Eisenstadt with considerable suspicion because he possessed a secular education. Among the most frequent visitors at our home were the rabbis of Mattersdorf⁷ and Zehlem.⁸ The official name of Zehlem was Deutsch-Kreuz, but observant Jews felt squeamish about pronouncing the word *Kreuz*, meaning "cross" or "crucifix," hence they called the town *Zehlem* (from the Hebrew term for "image").

We were particularly impressed with the visit of one hasidic rebbe from somewhere near Ligs or Zans, who had been taking the cure at the spa of Baden at Vienna and had made the trip from there to Eisenstadt especially to call on Father. As the rebbe's carriage drew up in front of our house, the rebbe's factotum was the first to appear. He ordered all the females to leave the rooms through which the rebbe would have to pass. So we girls and the maidservants had to leave. Afterwards we went into the kitchen, where we found the factotum busy at the *milchig* range preparing his master's coffee. First he poured the water through a cloth, just as we did during Passover. Next, he poured the same water through a cloth bag into the pot he had brought with him. Only after all these elaborate preparations did he proceed with the actual boiling of the coffee, without, of course, using any utensils at all from our kitchen. Father was a very strong opponent of hasidism but he maintained that the rabbi of Mattersdorf was even more averse to the hasidic movement than he. Many of the stories Father loved to tell about the hasidim came from his anti-hasidic colleagues. Whenever such a hasidic rebbe turned up at Baden at Vienna, the result was a true *hillul ha-Shem*. For no one who has not been there himself can imagine the incredibly clamorous, noisy prayer service that somehow

never got started before eleven in the morning. Eventually, complaints from the other spa guests forced the management to move these loud, unpleasant guests (who, however, were a lucrative source of revenue for the baths) into lodgings outside the resort area.

The entrance to our apartment was, of course, on the Judengasse which was part of the ghetto. On Friday nights the ghetto would be locked with chains and an iron grille to prevent carriages from passing through the ghetto streets during the Sabbath

Life in the city's one street where Jews resided had, of course, a flavor all its own. Each weekday morning the men were summoned to the daily morning services at the synagogue by a *shulklopper*. If all was well, this individual gave each door three knocks with a big wooden hammer. If a member of the *kehillah* had died during the night, there were only two knocks. Whenever that happened, even the laggards would leap from their beds, eager to find out which of the patients in our community had succumbed to his illness. On the Sabbath, the faithful were awakened by a call instead of a knock. Instead of the *shulklopper* hammering on each door in the morning, the senior beadle would call out, "*In der shul!* [To the shul!]." In the afternoon, he merely called, "*In shul!* [To shul—omitting the definite article] to distinguish the briefer Sabbath afternoon service from the longer morning devotions.

In front of almost every house there was a stone bench where the women would sit in the afternoons with their needlework, for people in the Judengasse did not go for walks during the daytime on weekdays. In the evening, after dark, people strolled up and down the Judengasse until suppertime. At noon on the Sabbath it was customary to parade up and down the street until the maidservants appeared, bringing home their employers' *shalet*⁹ pots from the "Jew baker," to whom that Sabbath delicacy, securely wrapped and packed, had been sent the day before, to simmer in an oven constructed especially for keeping *shalet* warm overnight. Of course each family rushed home as soon as it saw its *shalet* coming.

Contrary to the fashion of the time in Germany, where no young girl ever ventured out of doors without a cloak or shawl, it was customary in the Judengasse for girls to go "uncovered," that is, without a wrap to cover their dresses. From 1866, the year that troops from Saxony, Austria's ally in the Austro-Prussian war, were stationed in Eisenstadt, until the signing of the Austro-Prussian peace treaty, Saxon officers often came close to the ghetto railing to see the Jewish girls, some of whom were quite good-looking, promenaded up and down the street, showing off their pretty figures. It was said that even Bismarck, when he was in Nikolsburg,¹⁰ never missed an opportunity to enjoy this lovely sight in the Judengasse of that city.

Before writing about Rosh HaShanah, I must say a few words about our *hazzan*, Reb Azriel Pollak. He has a wonderful voice and was a most pious, honest man. I remember that each year, on Rosh HaShanah, Father, of blessed memory, would make a point of telling us how much he admired Reb Azriel's clear and intelligent rendition of the Hebrew chants. Very ambitious in his profession, Reb Azriel was constantly on the lookout for new melodies with which to please his congregation. During the summer he could walk for miles behind an Italian barrel-organ grinder who was playing the latest hit tunes—probably from *Il Trovatore* or from other operas by Meyerbeer or Verdi. Returning from his walk, Reb Azriel would announce,

"I've got a new tune." He told the truth, for he had thoroughly recast the barrel-organ's melody into an opus bearing his own stamp. During the year 1866 foreign troops passing through Eisenstadt introduced a snappy new march which the local band took to playing quite often. Reb Azriel Pollak always turned up at these band concerts, and on Rosh HaShanah that year, he used the march tune for the passage *eilu ve-eilu*,¹¹ a text to which it was most appropriate.

On the first day of Rosh HaShanah we had our morning coffee before daybreak, and then we all set out together for shul. Father admonished us to be very quiet, not to talk in the synagogue and especially not to interrupt the solemnity of the service by talking at any time between the first blasts of the shofar and the reading of the passage beginning with *ha-yom*.¹² I still follow this admonition faithfully to this day, just as Father's other wishes, too, have been my command all through my life.

Next to Mother's seat in the synagogue there was a vacant space. This was intended to be left empty as a passageway of sorts; yet, on *Yom Tov*, one of us girls always managed to sit next to Mother. My younger sister Leah, at the age of seven, was of course already able to read the prayers fluently, so she was placed next to Mother. As a result, it came about that from the time I was eight years old, I already had a seat of my own in the synagogue. I was very proud that I always knew the place in the prayer book and could show it to the other women.

I was especially moved each year by the recitation of *unetanne toqef*, a most solemn prayer, particularly when, just before the *hazzan* began his repetition of the prayer, my father cried out the closing words of the text, "*U-teshuvah, u-tefillah u-zedaqah* [but repentance, prayer and charity can avert the evil decree]" with so much strength, conviction and feeling. These are memories that accompany one throughout life, from childhood until old age. Altogether, the atmosphere in shul was beautiful and inspiring, and this early festival mood remained through all the days of awe that followed. One felt truly free and uplifted.

Until Yom Kippur, of course, the mood was very solemn. Father fasted a great deal during that period. After the last meal on Yom Kippur eve, when he had already put on his *qittel* and was ready to leave for shul, Father blessed us children. That was the only time during the year that he did this, unlike the parents of our friends, who blessed their children every Friday. As for Mother, she never blessed us, not even before *Kol Nidre*.

I always loved Yom Kippur. Before that solemn day Father himself studied with us the principal prayers of the service and their meaning. When I was first given a *mahzor* with a German translation and I read the German versions of the most important passages, I was struck by one sentence in a particularly lengthy passage of the Yom Kippur morning service. "The King of Kings," I read. "The God of gods." I asked Father how such a thing could have been written. After all, there were no other gods; was it not obvious that there could be only one God? Of course, Father had an explanation at hand, but perhaps I was not bright enough to understand it correctly. Be that as it may, I can no longer remember his explanation and the passage has puzzled me to this day.

Already as a child I was teased, and to this day many people do not understand, why I regard Yom Kippur as the most beautiful holiday of the year. Imagine my great joy, then, when years later, reading through correspondence between my late parents, I came upon a letter dated 1846, in which my father wrote to my

mother that his mood on that particular day was almost as festive as on the most beautiful, exalted day we have in our calendar, namely, Yom Kippur. When I read these words, I felt vindicated in my own feelings; it was clear to me that I had acquired them by heredity.

Father always led the congregation in the *ne'ilah* service, but by that time the people were already in a hurry to get home. So before taking his place at the reader's stand, my father would place his watch conspicuously in front of him where he could see it and say, "I just want to tell all those assembled that I have placed my watch here before me so that I will finish the prayer at the exact moment of nightfall. But if you will insist on rushing through *avinu malkenu* [the concluding portion of the *ne'ilah* service], you will simply have to wait that much longer before you can go home."

Many of the women left the synagogue as soon as the shofar had been sounded, which marked the end of the Fast. We, however, remained until after the evening service. Every woman took home with her the candle that she had kindled in the synagogue the day before and that had been burning for the past twenty-four hours. This candle was then used at home for the recitation of the *Havdalah*. It was considered a cause for special rejoicing if the moon was clearly visible in the evening sky, so that the men could bless the New Moon before reciting the *Havdalah* at home. Immediately after breaking our fast we began work on the Sukkah and started to make the rings of dried palm leaves that would hold the *lulav* together, because that was what Father always expected us to do.

The day before my brother Levi's bar mitzvah was marked by a momentous event in our community. Reb Loew Wolff, the wealthiest and most respected lay member of the community, had opposed the election of my father to the rabbinate of Eisenstadt. He had wanted the position to go to the senior *dayyan*, Rob Wolf Austerlitz. When he found himself outvoted by the opposing party, he declared that he would never set foot in the home of the new rabbi. He kept that vow for twelve years. But two days prior to my brother's bar mitzvah he requested the *bet din* to annul his vow. Father, for his part, of course, always went to Wolff whenever he wanted or needed anything from him without expecting Wolff to honor him with a return visit. Our families, the Hildesheimers and the Hirsches, had no use for implacability. Mother often told us that whenever her father learned that she had had a quarrel with one of her brothers, he would slap the face of each party, explaining, "Whenever two people quarrel, both are in the wrong." That was also the attitude in our own parental home; our father, too, had no patience for people who bore grudges. Our neighbor and close friend, Mrs. Spitzer, frequently quarreled with her sisters and brothers; she was a *née* Wolff. If she then told the other Wolffs, by way of an implied reproach, that she, Mrs. Spitzer, had been spending the better part of each day with our mother and had never quarreled with her, her brother, Ignatz Wolff, would answer, "That is because the *Frau Doktor* simply refuses to get into a quarrel with you."

We loved our walks with Mother. She was familiar with botany and could tell us the name of every flower we passed. In the old days, when chemistry had not yet progressed to its present state, many ailments were treated with home remedies, and it was Mother who taught us how to distinguish between harmless and poisonous herbs. The most dreaded plants were spurge and winter cherries. When we discussed camomiles, she told us of a physician who had already been old when she herself

was still young, and who never tired of extolling the healing properties of camomiles. “Whenever you pass a camomile flower,” the old doctor would say, “uncover your head before it. It has tremendous healing powers.”

Mother knew something about everything. When she walked with us through the fields, she taught us to distinguish between rye, wheat, oats and barley and to identify fruit trees according to their species and stages of development. She could become quite annoyed with us if we could not distinguish between the various types of field produce. She was able to help us also in our academic school work, whether it was French, English or mythology. But what amazed us most was the breadth of her knowledge of arithmetic and even more of geography, which had always been her favorite subject. We could come to her for help also if we had a difficult piece of needlework to do.

NOTES

1. In general, see David Ellenson, *Rabbi Esriel Hilderheimer and the Creation of a Modern Jewish Orthodoxy*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1990. Earlier biographies (not mentioned by Ellenson) include G. Karpele, *Dr. Israel Hildesheimer: Eine biographische Skizze*, Frankfurt am Main, 1870; and Yaakov Mark, *Gedolim fun unzer Zeit* (Yiddish), New York, 1927, pp. 174-190 [Hebrew edition: Jerusalem, 1958, pp. 154-167].
2. See Esriel Hildesheimer, *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer: Bibliographie seiner Schriften*, Jerusalem, 1987. The German version is drawn from A. Hildesheimer “Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer: A Bibliography” (Hebrew) *Alei Sefer* 14 (1987) 143-162.
3. See M. Eliav, “Torah and Derekh Erez in Hungary” (Hebrew), *Sinai* 51 (1962) 127-142.
4. For the German original, see Esther Calvary, “Kinderheitserinnerungen,” *Bulletin des Leo Baeck Institute* 8 (1959) 187-193.
5. This lyric poem reflects the esteem in which Jews in many countries held Napoleon for having brought emancipation to the Jews of France and to the lands he conquered. Heine was born in Dusseldorf, which had been part of the short-lived Napoleonic empire. In *Die zwei Grenadiere*, two French grenadiers, just released from Russian captivity, mourn Napoleon’s downfall, and hope to be able to fight again under his command.
6. The “Seven Communities” in Burgenland were Eisenstadt (Kismarton), Mattersdorf (Nagymarton), Kobersdorf, Lackenbach, Deutsch-Kreuz, Frauenkirchen, and Kittsee.
7. The reference is to R. Shimon Sofer (d. 1883), a son of the Hatam Sofer, who served as rabbi of Mattersdorf from 1848 to 1861.
8. The reference is to R. Menahem Prosnitz (d. 1891), who served as rabbi of Zehlem from 1840 until his death.
9. See the entry “Cholent” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 5:490.
10. Presently called Mikulov, Nikolsburg was the Jewish capital of Moravia and the seat of a renowned Jewish community.
11. The reference is to the liturgical poem beginning *Kol shin’annei shahaq*. See D. Goldschmidt, ed., *Mahzor le Yamim haNora’im: Rosh ha-Shanah*. Jerusalem, 1970, pp. 109-111.
12. The German original reads: *harom*. The reference is probably to the *ha-yom harat ‘olam* recited after the last series of *shofar* blowing.