

## HAGIOGRAPHY WITH FOOTNOTES: EDIFYING TALES AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY IN HASIDISM

ADA RAPOPORT-ALBERT

The role of the heroic personality in history entered the historical discourse of the nineteenth century and became the subject of popular debate in connection with the publication in 1840 of Thomas Carlyle's famous book on this topic.<sup>1</sup> Dismissing the debate as a futile expenditure of scholarly energy, Ahad ha-Am,<sup>2</sup> in the introduction to his quasi-biographical essay on Moses, first published in *Ha-Shiloah* in 1904, wrote:

Surely it is obvious that the real great men of history, the men, that is, who have become forces in the life of humanity, are not actual, concrete persons who existed in a certain age. There is not a single great man in history of whom popular fancy has not drawn a picture entirely different from the actual man; and it is this imaginary conception, created by the masses to suit their needs and inclinations, that is the real great man . . . this, and not the concrete original. . . . And so it is when learned scholars burrow in the dust of ancient books and manuscripts, in order to raise the great men of history from the grave in their true shapes; believing the while that they are sacrificing their eyesight for the sake of "historical truth. . . ." These scholars will not appreciate the simple fact that not every archeological truth is also a historical truth.<sup>3</sup>

The distinction between "archeological" truth, namely, documentary or material evidence, and the "historical" truth of the heroic personality which is formed in the popular imagination and becomes an active force in history, served Ahad ha-Am well in his attempt to capture the impact of the mythical personality of Moses for whose concrete life, "archeologically" speaking, there was virtually no retrievable evidence at all.

It is remarkable, however, that Ahad ha-Am's framework of interpretation, designed to cope with the state of the evidence on Moses—a figure located more than three millennia ago—should have been found suitable, albeit as a self-conscious literary bow in the direction of Ahad ha-Am, for the reconstruction of the life of the founder of modern Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov, who, after all, lived only two and a half centuries ago, in an age with which we are all, rela-

1. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London, 1840).

2. *Nom de plume* of the Hebrew Zionist essayist, Asher Hirach Ginsberg (1856–1927).

3. Ahad Ha-Am, *Selected Essays*, transl. Leon Simon (Philadelphia, 1912), 306–307. For the background to Ahad Ha-Am's ideas on this see E. Simon and J. E. Heller, *Ahad Ha-Am, Ha-Ish u-Pho'olo* (Jerusalem, 1955), part 2, chapter 2, esp. 145–156.

tively speaking, at home, and about which we are, on the whole, extremely well informed.

Echoing Ahad ha-Am's methodological remarks, with which, like all Zionist intellectuals of his generation, he was bound to have been familiar,<sup>4</sup> Ignacy Schiper, a social and economic historian of Polish Jewry who died in a concentration camp in 1943, wrote an essay in Yiddish entitled "R. Israel Baal Shem Tov and his Image in Early Hasidic Literature." The essay appeared in Warsaw in 1939 and was eventually translated into Hebrew and published posthumously in 1960.<sup>5</sup> In it Schiper distinguished sharply between the "archeological" truth about the alleged founder of Hasidism and the network of fanciful fabrications and confusions which have created the legend of his "historical" truth. Unlike Ahad ha-Am, however, as a professional historian he was more concerned to identify the true core of "archeological" data than to trace the "historical" impact of the myth. He argued that all the literary sources which had traditionally served the historians of Hasidism as the basis for their reconstructions of the Baal Shem Tov's life and works were virtually worthless in that they were written long after his death, by men who were either unacquainted with him personally or else motivated by a desire to obscure the true origins of Hasidism. The real "archeological" founder of the Hasidic movement was not Israel Baal Shem Tov at all but a fellow Baal Shem, a certain Yoel of Nemirov — a contemporary rabbi and Kabbalist who, like his colleague Israel Baal Shem Tov of Miedzyboz, possessed the secret knowledge of divine names and could manipulate them to perform supernatural feats, as the title Baal Shem Tov implies.<sup>6</sup> According to Schiper, this "archeological" fact, which was still known in the second generation of Hasidism at the "court" of Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezchirech, was effectively obliterated by the machinations of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, a personal disciple of Israel Baal Shem Tov and a rival of Dov Baer. It was he who began the process which eventually ousted R. Yoel Baal Shem and promoted Israel Baal Shem Tov in the collective memory of the movement to the "historical" position of founder and first leader of Hasidism.

This extraordinary piece of detection contains not a grain of truth, "archeological" or "historical." It is as confused and as fanciful as many of the Hasidic tales whose authenticity the author was out to deny so categorically, and it was never taken seriously, as far as I know, by any subsequent student of the history of Hasidism.<sup>7</sup> But the sensibility which had inspired it — a sense of the historically problematic nature of the Hasidic sources for the lives of Israel Baal Shem Tov and all his associates — was shared by all but the most naive or apologetic historians of the movement. It led such scholars as Aaron Zeev Aescoly — an

4. Schiper must have known Ahad Ha-Am's essay on Moses, but the application of the categories of "archeological" and "historical" truth to the study of the Baal Shem Tov may have been suggested to him by Simon Dubnow's remarks in his *Toledot ha-Hasidut* [1931] (Tel Aviv, 1960), 42, n. 2.

5. *Ha-Do'ar*, Year 35 (1960), no. 27, pp. 525-532; no. 28, pp. 551-553.

6. See G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1974), 310-311.

7. See Scholem, "Demuto ha-Historit shel R. Israel Baal Shem Tov," *Devarim be-Go* (Tel Aviv, 1975), 287.

historian, among other things, of Jewish sectarianism, messianic movements, and Hasidism—to conclude in his doctoral dissertation, published in Paris in 1928, that “the Besht<sup>8</sup> had played no part whatsoever” in the formation of the Hasidic movement,<sup>9</sup> that he was “a legendary figure in the history of Hasidism whose historical value rested on the sole fact that his legend had been set up at the head of the Hasidic tradition,<sup>10</sup> that only “after his death, when the Hasidic movement proper was begun by his disciples and followers, did the mysterious Besht become the central figure and later on the alleged creator of the movement,”<sup>11</sup> and that “the followers of Hasidism had created their own master.”<sup>12</sup> Even Simon Dubnow, who laid the foundation of the scholarly investigation of Hasidic history,<sup>13</sup> introduced his chapter on Israel Besht with the following pessimistic remarks:

The historical figure of the creator of Hasidism appears to us out of a mist, the mist of fanciful tales with which folk tradition had adorned the head of its beloved hero. A thick screen, woven in the imagination of both contemporaries and subsequent generations, conceals from our eyes the true image of the Besht, so that at times it appears as if this man had never existed but was a mere fable, a name made up for the factor initiating a religious movement which was to shake the Jewish world.<sup>14</sup>

Dubnow nevertheless proceeded to dismiss the notion that the Baal Shem Tov never existed as absurd, rightly pointing out that a) he was mentioned not only by venerating Hasidic disciples and colleagues, long after his death, but also by a number of contemporary outsiders or even opponents of Hasidism who could not be associated with the construction of the Hasidic legend of the Besht, and that b) even his legendary biography, the *Shivkhey ha-Besht (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov)*,<sup>15</sup> admittedly published as late as 1814, well over fifty years after his death, nevertheless, if read critically, could yield a considerable amount of verifiable historical evidence.<sup>16</sup>

The problem of the sources is, however, serious, both for the life of Israel Baal Shem Tov and for the precise nature of his teaching. For his life—the problem of identifying his authentic teaching lies outside the scope of the present discussion—we do not possess any of the raw materials which biographers (at least biographers of mid-eighteenth-century CE Europeans, if not of thirteenth-

8. This is the acronym of the Hebrew *Baal Shem Tov* and one of the most common designations of Israel Baal Shem Tov in the Hasidic sources.

9. A. Z. Aescoly-Weintraub, *Introduction à l'étude des hérésies religieuses parmi les juifs: La Kabale – Le Hassidisme* (Paris, 1928), 33–34.

10. *Ibid.*, 40.

11. *Ibid.*, 52.

12. *Ibid.*, 51.

13. His *History of Hasidism* was first published in Russian during the 1880s and 1890s. See below, note 65.

14. Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 41.

15. All references are to the English version: D. Ben-Amos and J. R. Mintz, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (Bloomington and London, 1972).

16. Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 41–52, 59–75; cf. G. Scholem, “Shetey ha-Eduyot ha-Rishonot al Havurot Hasidim va-ha-Besht,” in *Studies in Hasidism* (Hebrew), ed. A. Rubinstein (Jerusalem, 1977), 198–210; Scholem, “Demuto ha-Historit,” 287–324.

century BCE Egyptians) might expect to find easily and abundantly; there is no autobiography or a “confessions” by the Besht, no diary, no memoirs, no “journal,” nor a substantial body of letters to be scrutinized for psychological insight or even for sheer, elementary facts such as his dates of birth and marriages, his educational career, his places of residence and employment, and other landmarks in his physical or spiritual life.<sup>17</sup> This dearth of autobiographical materials is intriguing and should, perhaps, be seen in the context of the overall poverty of Jewish historiographical output until as late as the nineteenth century,<sup>18</sup> as well as, and more particularly, of that “personal reticence” which has been identified as characteristic of most Jewish mystics, in contrast to the often autobiographically prolific mystical exponents of other religious traditions.<sup>19</sup> The Baal Shem Tov and his colleagues would have had no literary models for such an enterprise, no access to any Eastern European Jewish literary tradition of spiritual autobiography or “confessions.”

The sources to which one has to turn for information about his life, and the lives of most other Hasidic masters, are not autobiographical or, strictly speaking, biographical, but can be classified as belonging to the hagiographical genre—edifying tales about the extraordinary lives of holy men or saints. Many of these are truly fanciful, echoing literary motifs which are the common stock of folktales the world over: magical transformations of inanimate objects and animals, encounters with witches, demons, werewolves, and other mythical creatures; miraculous healings and resuscitations by the saint; the ability to travel through time or to ordain the future; and so on.<sup>20</sup> While all this fills the pages of *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, and all the subsequent Hasidic hagiographical collections which were modelled on it, with reading material which is as entertaining as it is morally and spiritually edifying, it reduces the historical credibility of the tales to a matter of religious belief and piety.

Moreover, the hagiographical tales are not only fantastical in parts and so historically or “archeologically” implausible, they also conform to a typology of saintly lives which had been established in the literature long before the publication of the first Hasidic hagiographical work in 1814, or even before the very emergence on the historical arena of Israel Baal Shem Tov himself in the 1740s.<sup>21</sup> The *Shivkhey ha-Besht* takes its generic inspiration, right down to its title, from the “praises” or tales of the lives of eminent scholars and saintly personalities of the medieval

17. Only a handful of letters by the Besht have survived which can be presumed to be authentic, and even they are not unproblematic. For an English rendition of the most famous (and controversial) of them, see L. Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies* (New York, 1976), 148–155.

18. See Y. H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London, 1982).

19. See G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1961), 14–17. There were, of course, exceptions. One of the most remarkable in the Hasidic context (and the Hasidic Masters did not write autobiographically, at least not until the twentieth century; it was the Jewish Enlightenment that brought the autobiographical genre to Eastern Europe) is Nathan Sternharz (1780–1845), R. Nahman of Braslav’s disciple and quasi-successor. His autobiography was published in two parts, in 1876 and 1904 respectively. It is yet to be placed in its proper literary context.

20. See Ben-Amos and Mintz, *In Praise*, Index of Motifs, 290–305.

21. See *Ibid.*, Introduction, xxv.

and early modern period. Such tales were being compiled as cohesive literary works from the end of the sixteenth century. The most immediate typological model for the life of Israel Baal Shem Tov was the Kabbalist Isaac Luria, the *Hola Ari* whose "praises" constitute the first such comprehensive cycle of hagiographical tales. These began to circulate as a literary unit in the first decade of the seventeenth century and became known as *In Praise of the Ari*.<sup>22</sup> Some of the biographical details related by *Shivkhey ha-Besht* to Israel Baal Shem are too close to the details of Isaac Luria's life as related in *Shivkhey ha-Ari* to be considered as mere coincidences. For example, both are said to have spent several years in seclusion prior to the public disclosure of their true spiritual stature; both are said to have been conceived "in purity" – without sexual desire on the part of their parents; both are credited with the superhuman knowledge of the languages of "animals, birds and palm trees." Although the esoteric concept of mastering the speech of animals and palm or other trees (as well as plants, mountains and valleys, angels and demons) is of Talmudic origin,<sup>23</sup> the mention specifically of palm trees, which seems natural enough against the setting of the Ari's life in Palestine and Egypt, is almost as unnatural in the case of the Baal Shem Tov as the very power of speaking the language of trees, since it has to be set against the background of his experiences in the Carpathian mountains and the forests of Podolia. It was clearly grafted onto his life story from the earlier Lurianic context, as a ready-made measure of extraordinary spiritual powers.<sup>24</sup>

It is not impossible, however, that the parallels between the "praises" of the Ari and the "praises" of the Besht are not a purely literary phenomenon. The Besht himself may have wished to conform to the existing typology of mystical saintly lives and might have modelled himself on his illustrious predecessor, re-enacting certain scenes from the life of the Ari as recorded in the *In Praise of the Ari*.<sup>25</sup> We know with greater certainty, for example, that a later Hasidic master, R. Nahman of Braslav, had interpreted certain incidents in his own life as a repetition of events in the life of the Ari with whom he identified in some respects as an earlier manifestation of the same mystical-messianic soul with which he himself, and other distinguished figures of the historic past, had been endowed.<sup>26</sup>

To complicate matters further, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* appeared in several editions, both Hebrew and Yiddish, close to the time of the first publication of the Hebrew version in 1814.<sup>27</sup> The editions vary from one another to some

22. See J. Dan, *The Hasidic Story: Its History and Development* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1975), 29–35; *The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1974), 238–251; "Le-Toledoteyha shel Sifrut ha-Shevakhim," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 1 (1982), 82–100; G. Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale: Its History and Topics* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1981), 25–27.

23. See *Babylonian Talmud*, "Sukkah," 28a; cf. *Zohar*, part 3, 228a.

24. For other examples of this see Dan, *The Hasidic Story*, 68–74; Nigal, 26–27.

25. See Dan, *The Hasidic Story*, 71.

26. See A. Rapoport-Albert, "Katnut, Peshitut ve-Eyni Yode'a Shel R. Nahman mi-Braslav," *Studies in Jewish Intellectual and Religious History Presented to Alexander Altmann* (University, Ala., 1979), Hebrew section, p. 11.

27. See A. Yaari, "Shetey Mahadurot Yesod shel Shivkhey ha-Besht," *Kiryat Sefer* 39 (1964), 249–272, 394–407, 552–562.

extent, and the question whether the Yiddish version represents an independent recension of the material or is a free translation of the Hebrew text remains controversial.<sup>28</sup> The task of preparing a critical edition of the text – a prerequisite for any systematic attempt to extract historical information from the tales – is daunting and has not yet been undertaken.

As fanciful and typologically prescribed as they are, and however problematic from the textual point of view, the tales nevertheless have been sensed by most scholars as containing many echoes of the historical reality of their heroes. Since for the most part they form the richest, if not the only, repository of biographical source material, historians of Hasidism, however skeptical, could not but grapple with the problem of sorting out fact from fiction without any clear methodological guidelines<sup>29</sup> beyond the obvious search for corroboration from extraneous sources.

Such corroboration has been found for the references in the tales to the ritual blood accusation in Pavlitch (Pawolocz) in 1753,<sup>30</sup> or to the value of various units of currency during the first half of the eighteenth century, which is mentioned incidentally in the *Shivkhey ha-Besht* and agrees with what is known from other sources about the rates of exchange current in Poland at the time.<sup>31</sup> The same is true of the tale which describes the involvement of the Baal Shem Tov with the brothers Shmuel and Gedaliah, the chief tax-farmers of Prince Radziwill. It can be corroborated by several non-Hasidic sources and reflects quite accurately the historical background of the peasant rebellion against the Prince and his Jews during the 1740s, a rebellion which became known by the name of its leader as the Woszczylo revolt.<sup>32</sup> The historical details supplied by the tales in connection with the immigration to the Holy Land of R. Eleazar of Amsterdam in 1740 have likewise been verified by comparison with other sources, and the tale can, on the whole, be taken as a record of authentic events.<sup>33</sup> The same applies to a number of other tales concerning personalities and events in the Holy Land, which could have been based on communications from the Hasidic emigrants to the Holy Land during the eighteenth century, and have been shown to be valuable and reliable complements to other sources.<sup>34</sup> Most dramatically, the very fact of the Baal Shem Tov's existence at the time and place at which Hasidic tradition had always located him has been established recently by an independent source, firmly and unequivocally enough as to demolish once and for all

28. See J. Mondschein, *Shivhei ha-Baal Shem Tov* (Jerusalem, 1982), 22–47.

29. See, for example, B. Dinur, *Be-Mifneh ha-Dorot* (Jerusalem, 1955), 89–92; cf. Scholem, "Demuto ha-Historit," 287–291.

30. See *In Praise*, 161–163; cf. Dubnow, *Toledot*, 64.

31. See M. Rosman, "Miedzyboz and Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (Besht)," (Hebrew) *Zion* 52 (1987), 178.

32. See *In Praise*, 211–217; cf. I. Halpern, *Eastern European Jewry* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1968), 277–288; Dan, *The Hasidic Story*, 113–118.

33. See I. Bartal, "Aliyat R. Eleazar me-Amsterdam le-Eretz Israel bi-Shenat Tav Kof Alef (1740)," in *Studies on the History of Dutch Jewry*, ed. J. Michman (1984), IV, 7–25.

34. See J. Barnai, "Some Clarifications on the Land of Israel's Stories of 'In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov,'" *Revue des études juives* 146 (1987), 367–380.

the case, however contestable, for his purely “historical” but not “archeological” reality.<sup>35</sup> A young Israeli scholar, Moshe Rosman, has examined the archive of the Polish Czartoryski family, who owned the town of Miedzyboz where, according to *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, the Baal Shem Tov was resident during a substantial part of his career as a public figure, from 1740 until his death in 1760. The archive, now kept in Krakow, covers the middle decades of the eighteenth century. It contains material concerning the large Jewish population of the town. This includes lists of rate-payers which were updated almost annually and arranged according to the order of the houses in each street. One house, close to the town’s synagogue, is listed as owned by the Jewish community council and therefore exempt from rates. Nevertheless, the Czartoryski officials occasionally noted the identity of its occupants in much the same way as they did regularly for all the other rate-paying residences in the town. From 1740 until 1760 – precisely the period of the Baal Shem Tov’s residence in Miedzyboz according to Hasidic “legend,” the occupant of this house is identified in the Polish documents variously as *kabalista* – a kabbalist, *Balsem* or *Balsam* and finally *Balszam Doktor*, all of which can refer to no one other than Israel Baal Shem Tov who was indeed a kabbalist and a healer: “doctor.” In 1763, three years after his death, the house was listed as occupied by a certain Herszko, who must be identified with Zvi Hirsch, the Baal Shem Tov’s son according to Hasidic tradition. Other names can likewise be identified with members of his family and other close associates, precisely as depicted in the *Shivkhey ha-Besht*.<sup>36</sup>

While Rosman’s discoveries have removed such doubts as might have been entertained by ardent skeptics such as Aescoly and Schiper about the factual basis of the Hasidic legend of the Besht, they suggest the need for a drastic revision of all received notions of his role and status, and highlight at least one of the biases which characterize the modern, secular, scholarly historiography of Hasidism, biases which make this historiography as problematic in its way as the hagiographical Hasidic sources are in theirs.<sup>37</sup>

Clearly, the Hasidic narrators of the tales do not share historians’ concern with

35. Scholem (“Demuto ha-Historit” and “Shetey ha-Eduyot”) had attempted to assemble all the contemporary extra-Hasidic references to the Besht, but some of these were interpreted by others as unrelated to the founder of Hasidism. See H. Lieberman, “Keyzad Hokrim Hasidut be-Israel,” *Ohel RaHeL* (New York, 1980), I, 24–49.

36. See Rosman, 177–189.

37. *Ibid.*, 187–189. Rosman’s findings confirm, for example, the impression that the Baal Shem Tov was not a demotic, anti-establishment figure, the popular leader of a movement for the masses, as he has so often been portrayed in both the scholarly and the popular historiography of Hasidism. As Rosman has shown, he was, rather, a functionary of the community and a member of its elite group. A number of studies in recent years have pointed independently at the same conclusion. See, for example, E. Etkes, “Hasidism as a Movement: The First Stage,” in *Hasidism: Continuity or Innovation*, ed. B. Safran (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1988), 1–26; M. Piekarz, *The Beginning of Hasidism* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1978), 136–137; A. Rapoport-Albert, “God and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship,” *History of Religion* 18 (1979), 313–315. For an analysis of this bias in the modern historiography of Hasidism, focusing on the work of Simon Dubnow, see R. M. Seltzer, “The Secular Appropriation of Hasidism by an East European Jewish Intellectual: Dubnow, Renan, and Besht,” *Polin* 1 (1986), 151–162.

“archeological” data. To the extent that they refer to specific historical facts—events, dates, names, locations and the distances between them, currency units, and so on—they do so incidentally and casually. Their conscious purpose is to record the spiritual achievements of the saints, and to inspire the readers with a sense of awe and piety. Notably, the author or final editor of *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, clearly an heir to a tradition which ascribes little value to the writing of history as such,<sup>38</sup> prefaced the volume with an apology in which he disavowed any historiographic intent:

Let me explain . . . so that the reader will not question my decision or wonder what brought me to write meaningless narratives. . . . The reader should realize that I wrote all this not as histories nor as stories. In each tale he should perceive His awesome deeds. He should infer the moral of each tale, so that he will be able to attach his heart to the fear of God, the beliefs of the sages and the power of the holy Torah.<sup>39</sup>

But it is precisely the historically casual nature of the tales, the fact that their conscious “agenda” is pietistic, not historiographical, that lends credibility to such concrete items of historical information as they still contain. The weight of their self-proclaimed commitment to the value of edification rests elsewhere, and this renders the historical pegs to which the tales are casually tied an indifferent component of the work, one in which little effort of value-charged, tendentious interpretation or embellishment has been invested.

The tales of *Shivkhey ha-Besht* may seem fanciful to the modern, scientifically critical reader; their credibility may depend on the belief in supernatural forces; the printed texts in which they have come down to us may have been corrupted in the course of transmission; and some of the tales may have been disconnected in time from the factual ground in which they were once rooted; but they do not set out to falsify the facts or to make them up. Often enough, as we have seen, the historical framework to which they point incidentally seems authentic and is compatible with extra-Hasidic evidence.

In addition to the hagiographical tradition, which can yield much authentic historical and biographical information, however inadvertently, the historiography of Hasidism has had to contend with a body of fabrications and falsifications of evidence which is quite distinct from the tales in both provenance and intent, although it bears a certain relationship to them.

The earliest instance of the manufacture of evidence which can be demonstrated to be false is the report by a certain Podolian Jew, Abraham of Sharigrod, which was recorded in good faith by the famous Talmudic scholar, kabbalist, and anti-Sabbatean polemicist, Jacob Emden, who published it in Altona in 1769. According to this report, Israel Baal Shem Tov was one of the main delegates, alongside some of the most eminent rabbinic authorities in Poland at the time, who represented the Jewish-rabbinic side in the disputation with the Frankist heretics which took place in Lemberg in 1759.<sup>40</sup> The report was taken at face

38. See Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 33.

39. *In Praise*, 3–5.

40. See Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 67–68. Abraham of Sharigrod’s report was reprinted, to-

value and accepted as historical fact by the early historians of Hasidism<sup>41</sup> as well as by subsequent manufacturers of false documentary evidence on the career of Israel Besht.<sup>42</sup> But all other reports of the disputation, both Jewish and Polish, including eyewitness accounts whose authenticity is beyond doubt, fail to mention the Baal Shem Tov while providing a full list of the leading Jewish participants.<sup>43</sup> It is clear that the Baal Shem Tov did not take part in the official disputation with the Frankists, and hardly surprising that he was not counted at that time among the first rank of Talmudic scholars and rabbinic authorities who were elected to represent rabbinic Judaism on behalf of Polish Jewry. The fact is that while the hagiographical tradition of Hasidism celebrates the Baal Shem Tov as a national hero who was able time and again to astonish all those who came in contact with him by his unrivalled mastery of every aspect of Jewish scholarship and by his divine inspiration, he was hardly ever mentioned by any of his well-known contemporaries outside the Hasidic camp, either favorably or even in opposition to his personality or teaching. It is true that there exists a handful of reports about the activities of the Besht or someone very much like him by contemporary observers from his immediate region,<sup>44</sup> but the Lithuanian rabbinic authorities which came to be identified as the Opponents of Hasidism (*Mitnaggedim*) did not launch their campaign against the movement until 1772, twelve years after his death, and they never focused it on his personality at all. This, indeed, was one of the puzzling facts which had led such scholars as Aescoly and Schiper to the speculation that the "archeological" Baal Shem Tov, if he ever existed, could not have been the true founder of Hasidism.

The interpolation of the Baal Shem Tov's name in the list of eminent delegates to the Lemberg disputation could have been made only by someone who, like Abraham of Sharigrod, had come from the Baal Shem Tov's immediate region where alone he appears to have been known during his lifetime or shortly afterwards. It suggests a naive belief in his universal reputation or the conscious desire to promote this reputation beyond the region of its provenance in Podolia. Notably, this falsification of evidence, whatever its motives, occurred less than ten years after the death of the Baal Shem Tov, long before the Hasidic legend of his life had become available in print and begun to circulate widely. It appears to be quite independent of *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, which never associates the Baal Shem Tov directly with the disputation in Lemberg. Moreover, the falsification supplies indirect confirmation of the essential historical credibility of *Shivkhey ha-Besht*: although the book portrays the Baal Shem Tov as deeply concerned with the Sabbatean-Frankist heresy, and although it contains several tales which could provide a natural narrative framework for the interpolation of such false

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gether with an analysis of the affair, in M. Balaban, *Le-Toledot ha-Tenuah ha-Frankit* Part 2 (Tel Aviv, 1935), 295-320.

41. See Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 68, n. 2.

42. See below, p. 134.

43. See Balaban, 306-311; A. Y. Braver, *Studies in Galician Jewry* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1956), 225-266.

44. Cf. note 35 above.

evidence,<sup>45</sup> the *Shivkhey ha-Besht* refrains from doing so while preserving the evidently authentic information that the Besht was not acquainted personally with at least one of his alleged (and truly celebrated) fellow disputants.<sup>46</sup>

While the promotion of the Baal Shem Tov to the rank of public disputant at Lemberg may have been inspired by the apologetic need to magnify his stature and to legitimate it by conventional criteria, in response to the first signs of local opposition to his activities or the activities of his associates and disciples in the 1760s, it seems more likely to have been the more casual product of local rumor and exaggeration which were inspired by his charismatic personality. Abraham of Sharigrod does no more than incorporate the name of "R. Israel Miedzyboz Baal Shem" in the list of delegates which appears in the middle of his rather confused and unreliable "eyewitness" account. He does not make the Besht a central figure in the disputation, and may have simply believed the rumor of his presence at Lemberg to be truthful or plausible.

The psychology of the fabrication of this early, and isolated, item of false evidence is quite different from the one which underlies the later production of forged Hasidic documents to which we shall soon turn our attention. Like the *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, Abraham of Sharigrod's report may reflect the desire to exaggerate the scholarly reputation of the Besht<sup>47</sup> against the background of his admittedly humble, if inspired, origins which may have attracted some criticism and scorn, but it is innocent, like the *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, of any modern historiographical sense of the inadmissibility of hagiographical "praises," hearsay, and oral transmission in general if they cannot be supported by more rigorous documentation. The editor of *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, like R. Jacob Emden who recorded Abraham of Sharigrod's account, is confident of the credibility of the information he publishes since he believes and can clearly show it to derive ultimately, albeit indirectly, from firsthand, eyewitness reports. In the case of *Shivkhey ha-Besht* this takes the form of carefully noted, uninterrupted chains of informants with which most of the tales are introduced.<sup>48</sup> This device had served as a stamp of the authenticity and validity of tradition, however ancient, and above all of the continuity of divine revelation in the literature of Judaism since the classical rabbinic sources.<sup>49</sup> R. Jacob Emden assures the reader of the reliability of his account

45. See *In Praise*, 54–58, 59, 86–87, 192, 155.

46. See Scholem, "Demuto ha-Historit," 304–307.

47. *Shivkhey ha-Besht* contains a tale, for example, which refers to an examination in Jewish ritual law to which the Baal Shem Tov was subjected by the most eminent rabbis of Poland, members of its Council of Four Lands. See *In Praise*, 222–223. The Besht manages to impress them by his knowledge of the law, although he appears to derive it from inspired insight rather than from erudition. Interestingly, the tale is echoed in an anti-Hasidic source which was published sixteen years before the first edition of the *Shivkhey ha-Besht*. See Dubnow, 65, n. 1. See also *In Praise*, 39.

48. See for example the opening lines of Tales 5, 17, 18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, and so on throughout the book.

49. See for example *Mishnah*, "Ethics of the Fathers," chapter 1. For a discussion of the "chain of tradition" as a genre, see G. Cohen, *The Book of Tradition by Abraham Ibn Daud* (London, 1967), introduction, l–lvii. Cf. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 31–32.

by stressing that his informant had witnessed the events described and that he himself had recorded them accurately. In his preface to Abraham of Sharigrod's report he presents these credentials as follows: "I consider it desirable to publish here . . . the account of the event as it occurred, as it was told to me recently by a person who was there, at the time and place at which the wondrous event occurred . . .";<sup>50</sup> and he expands on the same point at the conclusion of the report: "Thus far the account of the above mentioned visitor who spoke without ulterior motives (*ha-mesi'ah lefi tumo*). He related it to me in Yiddish, and I wrote it down in Hebrew word for word (to the extent that a foreign tongue may be translated into Hebrew literally), without addition or omission."<sup>51</sup> In both cases, the credibility of the evidence is established beyond doubt (however unjustifiably, as it happens, at least in R. Jacob Emden's case) by intrinsic criteria which had long governed the process of authentication in the Jewish literary tradition.

By contrast, the relatively recent production of "early" Hasidic documentation, and the bulk of the modern internal-Hasidic historiography which derives from this production its stamp of authenticity and rigor, reflect a keen awareness of extrinsic historiographical sensibilities and a novel, extraneously inspired sense of the inadequacy of hagiographical traditions as historical source material.

The most extensive enterprise of manufacturing what is now sensed to be the awkwardly missing "hard core" evidence about the founders of Hasidism is the vast collections of letters and other materials allegedly written by the Baal Shem Tov himself and by members of his family and other associates and disciples, purporting to date from the 1730s to the beginning of the nineteenth century. These "documents" were discovered in mysterious circumstances after the first World War in the Ukrainian town of Kherson, and have since become notorious as the Kherson *Genizah* (a repository of disused books and manuscripts). Although they were celebrated at first as the most important discovery of the new century by historians and followers of Hasidism alike, and were quickly being published by both, the letters soon aroused the suspicion of scholars who eventually, on the basis of internal contradictions, discrepancies with extraneously verifiable facts, anachronisms, and other technical pitfalls into which forgers are always liable to stumble, proved enough of the letters to be recent fabrications to discredit the entire collection.<sup>52</sup> A number of Hasidic leaders were quick to dissociate themselves from the discredited *Genizah*<sup>53</sup> while others continued to endorse it as authentic; in scholarly circles the condemnation of the letters as forgeries has become virtually universal.<sup>54</sup>

Neither the identity of the forgers nor their motivation are entirely clear. They

50. Balaban, *Le Toledot ha-Tenuah*, 297.

51. *Ibid.*, 304.

52. For a summary of the affair, see I. Raphael, "Genizat Kherson," *Sinai* 81 (1977), 129-150, although the author himself would prefer to leave open the question of the authenticity of the documents. See pp. 149-150.

53. See *Ibid.*, 158, n. 61.

54. The list of scholars who concluded that the documents were forged includes Balaban, Dubnow, D. Z. Hillmann, and Scholem. See *ibid.*, 140-144.

were certainly at home with the Hasidic world and its literature in the Eastern Europe of the turn of the last century,<sup>55</sup> and the documents are likely to have been produced not long before their discovery.<sup>56</sup> The motivation might well have been sheer greed: by the beginning of the twentieth century, in what was now perceived internally no less than outside the Hasidic movement as the dearth of reliable documentary evidence about its early history, such a treasure trove of ancient "archival" material was bound to fetch a high price on the market.<sup>57</sup> At the same time the forgers might have been motivated by the desire to reinforce with unchallengeable documentation "sanctified" Hasidic traditions<sup>58</sup> which had, by then, been questioned or even dismissed by modern skeptics as superstitious nonsense. The two motivations need not preclude each other. In one way or another the Kherson *Genizah*, and particularly its endorsement and exploitation by the Hasidic leaders who persisted in treating it as authentic,<sup>59</sup> are a response to the breakdown of wholesome faith and the encroachment of secularization which expressed itself increasingly in the course of the nineteenth century not only in the emergence of secular political ideologies but also in the growth of modern, critical Jewish historiography, first in Western, and eventually in Eastern Europe.

This historiography developed as both a reaction against and a direct by-product of the Jewish Enlightenment of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — a movement which, in its Eastern European expression, was militantly opposed to Hasidism as an obscurantist, regressive element in the Jewish society the Enlighteners were attempting to reform.<sup>60</sup> The modern Jewish historians of the nineteenth century had inherited the rationalistic world-view of their enlightened intellectual forebears and were embarrassed by all manifestations of irrational, emotional religiosity in Judaism, a tradition which they were at pains to portray as essentially rational and perfectly compatible with, if not central to, the civilized, liberal culture of nineteenth-century European society into which they were seeking full admission.<sup>61</sup>

55. See for example Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 431.

56. See below, p. 134.

57. As indeed it did. There are references to "high prices" in the letter of the Admor Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, the leader of the Hasidic school of HaBaD, whose father had received a large collection of Kherson letters purchased for him by one of his wealthy followers. The letter was published in Warsaw, in the HaBaD periodical *Ha-Tamim* 1 (1935), reprinted in two volumes (Kfar HaBaD, 1975), I, p. 11.

58. The view that the hagiographical traditions of the *Shivkhey ha-Besht* and later collections of tales were regarded as sacred by the followers of Hasidism, a view which has been taken for granted by most scholars, even though they were aware of a certain ambivalence with regard to the publication of these traditions, was recently challenged by J. Mondschein who argued that the attitude to the tales within Hasidism was much more casual. See Mondschein, 52-57. From the point of view of the modern forgers, however, the tales represented the history of Hasidism (sacred or not), and it was this that they were proposing to reinforce with documentation.

59. On this, see below, pp. 137ff.

60. The most comprehensive work, now available in English, on the relationship between Hasidism and the Eastern European Jewish Enlightenment is R. Mahler, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, New York, and Jerusalem, 1985).

61. See G. Scholem, "The Science of Judaism: Then and Now," *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*

By the end of the nineteenth century, near the likely time of the production of the Kherson forgeries, the Hasidic movement and its hagiographical tradition had been exposed to a number of historiographical treatments which ranged from the devastatingly hostile to the cautiously skeptical but which were all united in paying critical attention to the hagiographical tales – inevitably the main source for any historical characterization of the movement.<sup>62</sup> To convey the flavor of this type of historiographical abuse, it would be sufficient to quote from the chapter entitled “The New Chassidism,” first published in German in 1870, in the monumental *History of the Jews* by Heinrich Graetz, the most important German-Jewish historian of the nineteenth century:

It seems remarkable that, at the same time as Mendelssohn<sup>63</sup> declared rational thought to be the essence of Judaism, and in fact founded a widely-extended order of enlightened men, another banner was unfurled, the adherents of which announced the grossest superstition to be the fundamental principle of Judaism, and formed a special order of wonder-seeking confederates. . . . The new sect, a daughter of darkness, was born in gloom, and even today proceeds stealthily on its mysterious ways. . . . As ugly as the very name, Besht, was the form of the founder and the order that he called into existence. The Graces did not sit by his cradle, but the Spirit of Belief and Wonder-working, and his brain was so filled with fantastic images that he could not distinguish them from real, tangible beings. . . . Israel Miedziboz also boasted that he could see into the future, as secrets were unveiled to him. Was this a deliberate boast, or self-deception, or merely an over-estimation of morbid phenomena of the soul? There are persons, times and places, in which no line of demarcation can be drawn between trickery and self-delusion.<sup>64</sup>

Other historians, notably Simon Dubnow, were less passionately condemnatory but more explicitly critical of the hagiographical sources which had to be stripped of their mythical elements and checked, as much as possible, against alternative sources before any historical use could be made of them.<sup>65</sup>

If Hasidic hagiography was being subjected to critical scrutiny and found to fall short of historical credibility on the grounds that it lacked documentary proof and was altogether fanciful and too farfetched, then the Kherson *Genizah* was to supply the missing documents so valued by historians and modern readers of historical works, and thus silence the skeptics in their own terms. The eagerness with which it was received at first, not only by professional historians (whose appetite for archival material could be taken for granted since it was built into the historiographical tradition in which they were rooted) but also by the followers of Hasidism and their leaders, to whose hagiographical, essentially oral tradition it was alien, would suggest that the *Genizah* was recognized as a valu-

(London, 1971), 304–313; “Mitokh Hirhurim al Khokhmat Israel,” *Devarim be-Go*, 385–403; M. Wiener, *Jüdische Religion in Zeitalter der Emancipation* (Hebrew translation) (Jerusalem, 1974), chap. 3, 204–283; Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, chap. 4, 81–103.

62. For a list of the historical studies of Hasidism which would have been available before World War I, see Dubnow, Appendix A, 397–406.

63. Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), the leader of the German Jewish Enlightenment.

64. H. Graetz, *History of the Jews* (London, 1901), V, 397–399.

65. Dubnow’s history of Hasidism (*Toledot ha-Hasidut*) was first published in installments in Russian, in the Russian-Jewish periodical *Voskhod*, between 1880 and 1893. The relevant section appeared in 1888. See Seltzer, “The Secular Appropriation,” 160, n. 22.

able weapon not only in the defense against the modern, secular world which lay outside and around Hasidism, but also if not primarily against the infiltration of its values into the heart of the Hasidic world. This world began to encounter modernization, secularization, and assimilation through its clashes with the Enlighteners of the early decades of the nineteenth century. By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, after the pogroms in Russia during the 1880s and the early 1900s, the First World War, and the Russian Revolution, all of which had resulted in the dislocation of vast numbers of Jews from the traditionalist environment in which they had been reared, the fear of secularization, and the sense of demoralization within their own depleting ranks was becoming a constant preoccupation for the leaders of orthodox Jewry, Hasidic or not.<sup>66</sup> The value of archival documentation thus belonged to the secular world which was now encroaching forcefully on a disoriented, modern Hasidic consciousness, hardly impervious to the challenge of the historiographical critique of its traditions.

The forgeries of the Kherson *Genizah* thus appear in the first instance to offer concrete documentary verification of the hagiographical tales whose traditional method of authentication had lost its validity through the assimilation, however unconscious, of modern historiographical criteria, and whose miraculous elements were becoming less credible to the growing number of Jews, including Hasidic Jews, who were exposed to a modern scientific education. Kherson letters which spring from the tales of *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, while purporting to corroborate them, include, for example, the letter from the Baal Shem Tov to his brother-in-law R. Gershon of Kutu, which both reflects and “confirms” a tale depicting him as adopting the false identity of an uneducated Jew (prior to his self-disclosure as a spiritual giant) and arousing the anger and frustration of R. Gershon with his apparent coarseness. The Baal Shem Tov’s letter is not in Hebrew but in crude Yiddish, as befits the guise of an uneducated Jew, and it consists of his clumsy apology for irritating R. Gershon by his ignorance.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the Baal Shem Tov’s letters which urge R. Dov Baer of Mezhirech, depicted in one of the tales as initially doubtful of the healing powers of the Besht, to come to Miedzyboz and see for himself are dependent on, while appearing to provide an independent corroboration of, the tale.<sup>68</sup> Similar examples abound.

The Kherson letters likewise supply rigorous documentary evidence purporting to corroborate traditions which do not stem from the hagiographical literature of Hasidism but have grown out of the misunderstanding or earlier falsification of evidence. The most transparent of these is the “document” which appears to corroborate Abraham of Sharigrod’s presentation of the Baal Shem Tov as one

66. For a survey of the scholarly literature which concerns these events and processes, see G. Bacon’s bibliographical essay, “East European Jewry from the First Partition to the Present,” in G. D. Hundert and G. C. Bacon, *The Jews in Poland and Russia: Bibliographical Essays* (Bloomington, 1984), 158–170.

67. Cf. *In Praise*, 19–22 with the letter as published in *Ha-Tamim* 3 (1936), vol. 1, p. 248. Cf. Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 430.

68. Cf. *In Praise*, 81–82 with the letters in *Ha-Tamim* 2 (1935), vol. 1, pp. 120–121.

of the official delegates to the Lemberg disputation with the Frankists in 1759.<sup>69</sup> The Kherson document makes the Baal Shem Tov a proud signatory, alongside one of the authentic delegates and several prominent Hasidic figures who had nothing to do with it as far as we know, on a proclamation celebrating their collective victory over the Frankist disputants.<sup>70</sup> This apparent corroboration of what had been established as a false report, and its ill-informed embellishment, so that a victory is announced when in reality the outcome was defeat,<sup>71</sup> was in fact one of the first Kherson documents which aroused the suspicion of scholars and led to their exposure as forgeries.<sup>72</sup> M. Balaban, the historian who was chiefly responsible for the clarification of this issue, was able to demonstrate further that the forger of the proclamation from Lemberg did not derive his information directly from Abraham of Sharigrod's report as published by Emden in 1769 but rather at second or third hand, from an inaccurate version of the account which appeared in a scholarly history of Hasidism published in 1914.<sup>73</sup> This suggested to Balaban that the document, and possibly the rest of the Kherson material, was manufactured in or shortly after 1914<sup>74</sup> — a suggestion which is compatible with the circumstances of the Kherson discovery.

The Kherson documents are at their most creative when they fill in some of the intriguing gaps left by the hagiographical tales which, while expanding, extravagantly at times, on the miraculous feats performed by their heroes, are not concerned to cover their life stories systematically, and are often laconic or simply silent precisely on those issues which interest modern historians most.

One of these issues, for example, is the relationship between Israel Baal Shem Tov and the mysterious R. Adam, described in the Yiddish (though not in the Hebrew) version of *Shivkhey ha-Besht* as a fellow-Baal Shem,<sup>75</sup> who had discovered in a cave a collection of ancient mystical esoteric writings which he was commanded by revelation from Heaven to pass on to the Besht. The writings are presented as extremely important, initiating the Baal Shem Tov in the years prior to his "disclosure" to spiritual insights which were to qualify him for his public role.<sup>76</sup> The tale clearly attempts to place the Baal Shem Tov within an esoteric tradition, conferring on his teaching the legitimacy of continuity and antiquity. However, nothing is known of an historical Adam Baal Shem, and the information about him supplied by the *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, which introduces him without naming his place of origin or any other geographical landmarks, is too fantastical to suggest any possible identification. This has led the late Gershom Scholem to the speculation that the esoteric writings in question were a kabbalistic work

69. See above, pp. 126–129.

70. See *Ha-Tamim* 6 (1937), vol. 2, letter 175, pp. 558–559; cf. *ibid.* 5 (1936), vol. 2, letter 115, p. 445. See Balaban, *Le-Toledot*, 318.

71. See Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 428.

72. See Balaban, *Le-Toledot*, 314–320.

73. This was David Kahana's *Even Ofel* (in his *Toledot ha-Mekubalim, ha-Shabtaim ve-ha-Hasidim*). See Balaban, *Le-Toledot*, 319–320.

74. *Ibid.*, 320.

75. See C. Shmeruk, *Yiddish Literature in Poland* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1981), 126.

76. See *In Praise*, 13–18.

by the heretical Sabbatean prophet Heschel Zoref, and that the hagiographical tale had substituted for his name the pseudonymous Adam Baal Shem, in order to disguise the embarrassing Sabbatean connection.<sup>77</sup> This speculation became wholly unconvincing with the discovery that an Adam Baal Shem did exist in Prague in the late sixteenth century, if not as a concrete historical figure, at least as the hero of a seventeenth-century Yiddish hagiographical work which would have been accessible to the author of the Hasidic tale and which must have inspired it.<sup>78</sup> The forgers of the Kherson letters could not, of course, have been aware of these scholarly considerations, but they were equally eager to explain the relationship between Israel and Adam Baal Shem. To account for their failure to meet each other, and for the complicated procedure by which the writings were passed on to the Besht by R. Adam's son after his father's death,<sup>79</sup> they produced a number of letters addressed by Adam Baal Shem (whom they relocated, unaware of the Prague connection of the original figure, in the Galician town of Ropczyce, within the orbit of nineteenth-century Hasidism) to his younger colleague-to-be Israel Besht during 1731–1732, in which R. Adam complains repeatedly that he cannot find R. Israel, and urges him to reveal himself to him so that he would be able to deliver the secret writings to his hands.<sup>80</sup> The stipulation implied in these letters, that Israel Besht and his whereabouts should not be known to R. Adam, is in harmony with the hagiographical tale which suggests that the secret writings were revealed to the Baal Shem Tov during his years of "concealment," before he became a public figure whose identity and location could be established easily enough. Adam Baal Shem eventually leaves the writings, and his still undelivered letters to the Besht, in the hands of his son whom he instructs on his deathbed to find Israel Besht and convey the material to him. Curiously, and uncharacteristically, the forged documents depart at this point from the framework of the account in *Shivkhey ha-Besht* and offer quite a different version of events. According to all the editions, both Hebrew and Yiddish, of the *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, R. Adam's son managed to locate Israel Besht in the town of Okopy, where he was employed at the time as an attendant in the local *beit midrash* (study house). He gave him the secret writings on condition that the Baal Shem Tov would study them with him, and eventually died as a result of this exposure to mystical experiences for which he was not spiritually fit.<sup>81</sup> The Kherson documents, on the other hand, present the Baal Shem Tov as reporting in a letter to his brother-in-law that he had found the secret writings with the help of a gentile Wallachian shepherd where R. Adam's son had left them for him, "under a stone in the mountains"<sup>82</sup> — a version which, to the best of my knowledge, is not attested anywhere in the hagiographical sources.

77. G. Scholem, "Ha-Navi ha-Shabta'i R. Heschel Zoref — R. Adam Baal Shem," *Zion* 6 (1941), 89–93.

78. See Shmeruk, *Yiddish Literature*, 119–139; Mondschein, *Shivhei*, 58–65.

79. *In Praise*, 15–18.

80. See *Ha-Tamim* 1 (1935), vol. 1, pp. 13–19.

81. See *In Praise*, 18.

82. *Ha-Tamim* 1 (1935), vol. 1, pp. 19–20.

Although the authors of the Kherson letters often expand on the hagiographical tales and occasionally clash with them unwittingly on technical points, they are not in the habit of contradicting their narrative substance as blatantly as in this case. One can only assume that they were working from memory, without reference to the text of *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, and had confused the reference to Adam Baal Shem's initial discovery of the writings in a cave<sup>83</sup> with a later reference to Israel Baal Shem Tov's ultimate concealment of the writings "under a stone in the mountains,"<sup>84</sup> entirely overlooking the account of his encounter with Adam Baal Shem's son, thus producing a new hybrid version of the story.<sup>85</sup>

Another example of the creative originality of the forgeries is the correspondence of the Baal Shem Tov during his period of concealment with a number of "secret Zaddikim" (righteous men). The concept of supremely righteous individuals (often numbered thirty-six) who inhabit the world in the guise of simple men, without anyone recognizing their true stature and supernatural powers, is rooted in ancient rabbinic sources and makes its first full-fledged appearance in Hasidic literature with a single reference in the Yiddish version of *Shivkhey ha-Besht*. But both the term and the theme became a commonplace in the hagiographical literature of Hasidism only from the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>86</sup> The Kherson letters make Israel Baal Shem Tov, in the years prior to his "revelation," a member of a confederacy of "secret Zaddikim" who are known to each other but not to anyone else and who are engaged in good works on behalf of the nation, out of the public eye.<sup>87</sup> The entire picture is anachronistic both terminologically and historically. The term "secret Zaddik" did not gain

83. *In Praise*, 13.

84. *Ibid.*, 31–32.

85. Curiously, the official biography of the Baal Shem Tov which has emanated from the Hasidic school of HaBaD (A. G. Glitzenstein, *Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov* [Hebrew] [Kfar HaBaD, 1975], 27), while it quotes extensively from the Kherson letter in which the Besht reports to his brother-in-law the contents of R. Adam Baal Shem's letter, ends the quotation abruptly, omitting precisely that section of the Besht's letter which describes the circumstances of his discovery of the manuscripts with the help of a Wallachian shepherd. The quotation is resumed immediately after the conclusion of the Besht's account of the discovery, with him confiding to his brother-in-law his reluctance to "reveal himself" (although the letter is reproduced in full at the end of the book, where the entire collection of Kherson letters by the Besht is published as an appendix. See *ibid.*, 174–185). The discreet omission of the middle of the letter suggests a possible reluctance to draw attention to the discrepancy with the *Shivkhey ha-Besht* version. It is also curious that both the reference to Adam Baal Shem's discovery of the secret writings in a cave, and the reference to the Baal Shem Tov's "sealing" of them "in a stone in a mountain," as well as the whole encounter between Adam Baal Shem's son and the Besht – precisely the elements of the story which are discrepant with the Kherson letter – are missing from the manuscript version of *Shivkhey ha-Besht* which was published by Mondshein and which similarly stems from the HaBaD school who consider the Kherson letters authentic. See Mondshein, *Shivhei*, 144 (p. 30 of the manuscript), 145, 147. Although the manuscript contains only some 54% of the material contained in the printed versions (see *ibid.*, 7), and these passages are by no means the only ones missing, the omission on p. 144 which consists of a single sentence in an otherwise identical text somewhat strengthens the impression that it may have arisen from the odd discrepancy with the Kherson version of the story.

86. See Nigal, 252–253.

87. See *Ha-Tamim* 1 (1935), vol. 1, pp. 20–24; 2 (1935), vol. 1, p. 122; 3 (1936), vol. 1, pp. 339, 342–343, 345.

currency in Hasidism until after the term “Zaddik” had become the regular designation of the Hasidic leader in the speculative literature of the movement, long after the 1730s or even the death of the Besht, towards the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>88</sup> Historically, the Baal Shem Tov’s affiliation with a group of pneumatics during his early period of concealment is an anticipation of the pattern of his association with fellow Hasidic masters after his dramatic “revelation” according to *Shivkhey ha-Besht*. The earlier hagiographical notion of his self-imposed anonymity has been ousted by the new literary context: a righteous man in obscurity must be one of the “secret Zaddikim.” Similarly, the earlier hagiographical notion of his solitary spiritual training for the eventual assumption of public leadership has been ousted by the later historical context: a “secret Zaddik” must be a member of a fraternity of leaders.

Another “gap” in the tales of *Shivkhey ha-Besht* which the Kherson letters endeavor to fill is the bewildering silence of the book on the apparent failure of both the Baal Shem Tov’s son and the son of Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezhirech, to succeed their fathers dynastically in their respective capacities of first and second central leaders of early Hasidism. While altogether failing to address this issue directly, the *Shivkhey ha-Besht* confirms indirectly that its authors were not aware of any institutionalized procedure or even an informal designation of a successor, hereditary or not, by which the transfer of authority might have been governed at that time, nor of any crisis in the leadership which might have occurred as a result.<sup>89</sup> Both sons, R. Zvi and R. Abraham “the angel,” are conventionally portrayed in the historiography of Hasidism as unfit for leadership on the grounds of lack of personal talents or inclinations.<sup>90</sup> However, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere,<sup>91</sup> the very expectation of dynastic succession in a putative Hasidic institution of central leadership at this stage is anachronistic: it projects the nineteenth-century organizational structure of each particular Hasidic “court” and its hereditary leader onto the entire Hasidic movement at its inception. Neither the Baal Shem Tov nor the Maggid of Mezhirech could have functioned as unique central leaders organizationally (although the

88. See G. Scholem, *Elements of the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1976), 241–242.

89. See *In Praise*, 185: “I heard this from the Rabbi, the Hasid, Rabbi Jehiel Mikhel of the holy community of Zolochov. When he visited here . . . he said that he was ordered from heaven to accept the Besht as his rabbi and to go and learn from him. They showed him the “streams of wisdom” which led to the Besht. When the Besht passed away he was ordered to accept the Great Maggid, Rabbi Dov, as his rabbi. They showed him that the same “streams of wisdom” that formerly ran to the Besht now led to the rabbi, the Maggid, God bless his memory.” R. Jehiel Mikhel, in the *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, would not have needed to resort to the vision of “streams of wisdom” which flew first to the Besht, then to the Maggid, had they possessed any knowledge of the appointment of the one by the other. The tale points to the notion that the Maggid derived his charismatic authority directly from Heaven, as did the Besht.

90. See, for example, Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 69, 80, 213; S. A. Horodecky, *Ha-Hasidut ve-ha-Hasidim* (Tel Aviv, 1927), I, 80; D. Kahana, *Toledot ha-Mekubalim, ha-Shabtaim ve-ha-Hasidim* (Tel Aviv, 1926), II, 82.

91. A. Rapoport-Albert, “The Hasidic Movement after 1772: Structural Continuity or Change?” (Hebrew) *Zion* (forthcoming).

impact of their personalities and teachings was clearly felt, on the personal and spiritual levels, by both contemporary and subsequent Hasidic leaders who may have served a period of discipleship at their “courts” but who still saw themselves collectively as their faithful disciples even as each one of them was heading an independent circle of his own followers during the lifetimes of the two great masters). The Kherson letters share with the bulk of the historiography of Hasidism, critical-scholarly and internal-apologetic alike, the anachronistic perception of this and other aspects of the organizational history of the movement. But while the historians have speculated casually, the Kherson letters again supply “hard-core” documentation which explains the apparent irregularities of the first two successions in the leadership, and establishes nevertheless some reassuring sense of dynastic continuity by the implicit designation of a chosen disciple as an heir on the part of both the Baal Shem Tov and Dov Baer of Mezhirech. In a number of Kherson letters the Baal Shem Tov addresses the Maggid of Mezhirech, or else refers to him in letters addressed to others, in the most intimate and yet respectful terms, appointing him to deputize for him during long periods of absence and putting him in charge of all the affairs of the movement.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Dov Baer of Mezhirech singles out R. Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745–1812, the founder of the HaBaD school of Hasidism<sup>93</sup>) as his most distinguished disciple, and reports in a letter to his son “the Angel” that the Baal Shem Tov had appeared to him in a dream and identified R. Shneur Zalman as a young man possessed of extraordinary spiritual powers.<sup>94</sup> Although in this case the Kherson letters cannot quite point to R. Shneur Zalman as the direct successor of the Maggid of Mezhirech,<sup>95</sup> they nevertheless supply “documentation” which lends support to, and clearly reflects, the dynastic consciousness of the HaBaD school, which sees itself as the most authentic heir of the original Hasidism of the founders.<sup>96</sup>

The affinity between the Kherson letters and the historical self-perception of the HaBaD school was observed by some of the scholars who had examined the Kherson *Genizah* only to dismiss it as a recent fabrication.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, like the letters just cited, the Kherson material often appears to reflect a peculiarly HaBaD perspective on the early history of Hasidism, and to serve HaBaD interests by reinforcing this perspective with corroborative archival documentation.<sup>98</sup> While

92. See *Ha-Tamim* 1, no. 3 (1936), 121, 122, 124; 4 (1936), 349; 2, no. 6 (1937), 558.

93. For a brief overview of this school, see “Habad,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), VII, 1013–1014.

94. See *Ha-Tamim* 2, no. 7 (1937), 659, letter no. 229.

95. See more on this below, pp. 142–144.

96. See below, p. 145 and n. 120.

97. See Scholem, “Demuto ha-Historit,” 290; Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 432.

98. It has been suggested recently that the bulk of the extant historiographical materials concerning the formative stages in the development of Hasidism—the hagiographical *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, the pastoral letters of the two leaders of Belorussian Hasidism, R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and R. Abraham of Kalisk, who had emigrated to the Holy Land in 1777, and of R. Shneur Zalman of Liady who succeeded them, as well as the polemical responses of Hasidism to the Opponents—has been preserved and published by the HaBaD school which had displayed from the start a keen

the identity of the authors of the letters is not known, and they cannot be shown to have come from the HaBaD ranks, the affinity between the *Genizah* and the school of HaBaD was highlighted by the fact that shortly after its discovery, in 1918, a large collection of the letters was bought by a wealthy HaBaD follower who gave it as a present to the then leader of HaBaD, the Admor Shalom Dovber. According to his son and heir, the Admor Joseph Isaac Schneersohn (1880–1950), R. Shalom Dovber scrutinized the Kherson letters at length, and, shortly before his death in 1920, declared that “all the writings and letters are only copies of the original autographs but their contents are authentic. Even if they should be found to contradict some points of fact, this is insignificant in relation to their remarkable contents, and must be the result of errors by the copyists.”<sup>99</sup>

This defensive endorsement of the Kherson material anticipates the main arguments against the authenticity of the documents, including the laboratory tests carried out on the paper in the mid 1920s which proved conclusively that it could not have been produced before 1846.<sup>100</sup> The results of the tests were sent to the new Admor, R. Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, and he responded in December 1929 by advancing the explanation that the extant letters were only copies of the originals, endorsing their ultimate authenticity.<sup>101</sup> Since then, the HaBaD leadership, right down to the present Admor,<sup>102</sup> has remained committed to this stance against the growing conviction by most scholars that the documents were mere forgeries. Between 1935 and 1938 the Admor Joseph Isaac Schneersohn initiated the publication in Warsaw of the most extensive collection of Kherson letters in the HaBaD periodical *Ha-Tamim*. He prefaced it with a statement relating the circumstances of the discovery of the *Genizah*, describing its contents and

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historiographical interest, deployed in the promotion of HaBaD's centrality to the history of Hasidism as a whole (see Z. Gries, “Hasidism: The Present State of Research and Some Desirable Priorities,” *Numen* 34 [1987], 101–103). Although this can be said of the internal historiography of HaBaD in the twentieth century (on which see below), it is difficult to discern a particular HaBaD bias in the *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, for example, even though the printer of the first edition was a follower of the leader of the HaBaD school, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady. By contrast with the Kherson letters, and the modern historiography of HaBaD, which place R. Shneur Zalman and his family at the very center of the Hasidic movement from the start, the *Shivkhey ha-Besht* does not mention them at all. Nor does the correspondence between the Hasidic leaders of Belorussia and their followers during the final decades of the eighteenth century present itself as any more than a regional, Belorussian Hasidic affair. The same applies to the polemical sources which stem from HaBaD quite plausibly, since this was the Hasidic circle which was closest to the Lithuanian centers of Opposition. While Dr. Gries regards the internal historiography of HaBaD in the twentieth century as a direct continuation and natural conclusion of the early HaBaD interest in the publication of historical materials, I regard it as a break from the old tradition and a wholly original development, inspired by the peculiar historical circumstances of HaBaD in the early decades of the present century, and associated primarily with the personality of its leader from 1920 to 1950, the Admor Joseph Isaac Schneersohn. See below, pp. 139ff.

99. *Ha-Tamim*, 11–13. The letter was republished, together with additional material including the renewed endorsement of the *Genizah* by the present leader of HaBaD, in *Igrot Kodesh Admor ha-Zaken, Admor ha-Emtza'i Admor ha-Tzemach Tzedek* (Brooklyn, 1980), 469–487.

100. See Raphael, “Genizat,” 143.

101. This letter, first published in the periodical *Moznayyim*, was printed again in *Igrot Kodesh*, 472–473.

102. See *ibid.*, 473–475; cf. Raphael, “Genizat,” 144–149.

endorsing it again in both his father's name and his own.<sup>103</sup> His name has become firmly associated with the Kherson documents.

To those who are convinced that all these documents are worthless forgeries, even to skeptics who prefer to suspend judgment and pass over the entire episode in silence, the persistent endorsement of the *Genizah* by the Admor Joseph Isaac — indisputably a leader of remarkable abilities and insight, and a man of the world<sup>104</sup> — may seem foolhardy or naive. After all, he could easily have chosen a more cautious course of action, by keeping the controversial documents in his private archives<sup>105</sup> while refraining from publication, so as not to draw attention to material which could, as in some quarters it did, damage the reputation of HaBaD by casting aspersions on its integrity. His decision to endorse and publish this material was clearly made quite freely rather than being dictated by an inherited commitment to the letters; although his father did receive and pronounce them to be authentic in substance, it was not he but the Admor Joseph Isaac himself who gave publicity to this verdict. It could, had he so wished, have been suppressed and quickly forgotten. The Admor Joseph Isaac elected to risk discredit by association with the Kherson *Genizah* because he clearly recognized its immense value to his novel historiographical enterprise.

He was extremely prolific in a variety of genres and had initiated an extensive publication program of both his own writings and the writings of his HaBaD predecessors.<sup>106</sup> This program was much enhanced by the official HaBaD publishing house which he founded shortly after his escape from wartime Poland to the U.S., in 1942. His literary prolificity<sup>107</sup> and his publishing interests reflected not only his personal inclination and talents, but also his understanding of the traditional HaBaD commitment to the wide dissemination of its teaching (including its most esoteric kabbalistic aspects) by means of communicating it at various levels of meaning, designed to reach various classes of followers.<sup>108</sup> But the Admor Joseph Isaac was wholly original in his particular interest in history, especially the history of Hasidism, and many of his publications were in the histori-

103. See above, note 99.

104. See his biography, based on his own writings, by A. C. Glitzenstein, *Sefer ha-Toledot*, 4 vols. (Kfar HaBaD, 1972–1976).

105. From the description of the contents of the letters received by his father, as it appeared in the Admor Joseph Isaac's letter in *Ha-Tamim*, as well as from an explicit statement to that effect by the present Admor (see *Igrot Kodesh*, 474), it appears that a considerable proportion of the letters remains unpublished in the HaBaD archive, particularly letters which contain esoteric teachings rather than the more prosaic subject matter of the published letters.

106. For a detailed list of his publications, now somewhat out of date, see Glitzenstein, *Sefer ha-Toledot*, IV, 317–347; for a more recent list see *Hayom Yom . . . From Day to Day* (Brooklyn, 1988), A18–19; see also Rabbi Tuvia Blau, "Kitvey Admor Morenu ha-Rav Yoseph Yitskhak," in *Al ha-Sifrut ha-HaBaDit* (n.p., Kehot Publication Society, 1969), 57–61.

107. It must be noted that, as has always been the case in Hasidism, the Admor's discourses and talks were delivered orally, written down by disciples, and usually edited by him prior to publication. See, for example, Glitzenstein, *Sefer ha-Toledot*, 317, on the collection of "talks" *Likkutey Dibburim*.

108. This is the subject of a forthcoming book by Dr. N. Loewenthal entitled *Communicating the Infinite*. For the time being, see his preliminary remarks in "The Apotheosis of Action in Early HaBaD," *Daat* 18 (1987), vi–viii. Cf. E. Etkes, "Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady as a Hasidic Leader," *Zion Jubilee Volume* 50 (1935–1985), 338–347.

ographical genre,<sup>109</sup> a genre in which none of his HaBaD or general Hasidic predecessors had ever expressed himself.

His keen historical curiosity first displayed itself in early childhood in the desire to hear historical tales from his grandmother,<sup>110</sup> and soon developed into a compulsive interest in the personal reminiscences and oral traditions of his father and other senior figures at the Lubavitch "court," whom he would interrogate about the early history of Hasidism.<sup>111</sup> He began to record these traditions in diary and other notes and eventually published selections from them in a number of explicitly historiographical works, as well as introducing this material in the form of historical excursions of varying lengths into his speculative teachings and vast correspondence.<sup>112</sup> In addition to his own historiographical activities, he ascribed great value to the personal histories and reminiscences of the ordinary adherents of Hasidism, and he urged his followers to record what they knew about the Hasidic past.<sup>113</sup>

This rich historiographical output, which has been published in many editions and which underlies all the subsequent historiographical publications of HaBaD, has, on the whole, been ignored by the scholarly historians of Hasidism, who have associated the Admor Joseph Isaac with the Kherson forgeries and have mistrusted either his judgment or his integrity or both. By contrast, the two major histories of the HaBaD school which were written in the beginning of the present century, prior to the discovery of the Kherson documents, by men who were closely associated with the HaBaD community through family connections as well as by consciousness, are generally taken to be reliable and have served as the basis for all modern, scholarly reconstructions of the early history of HaBaD.<sup>114</sup>

109. These include a diary, a long historical essay entitled "Avot ha-Hasidut," first published in *Ha-Tamim* in installments, an historical account of the encounter between the third leader of HaBaD, the Admor Menahem Mendel, and the Russian Jewish Enlightenment, a book of memoirs and a large number of letters which contain historical or autobiographical accounts. All this is unprecedented in the literary history of Hasidism. Cf. above, p. 122 and note 19.

110. See Glitzenstein, *Sefer ha-Toledot*, I, 49ff.

111. See *Ha-Tamim* I, no. 2 (1935), "Avot ha-Hasidut," chapters 4-5, pp. 139-140.

112. For his own account of how he began to keep a diary in early childhood, chiefly in order not to forget the "stories" about early Hasidic and HaBaD figures, see Glitzenstein, *Sefer ha-Toledot*, I, 117-119. For a large collection of "diary entries," see *ibid.*, II, 143-279.

113. See, for example, his letters in *Igrot Kodesh . . . Morenu ha-Rav Rabbi Yoseph Yitskhak* (Brooklyn, 1983), V, 98, 108-109, 125-126; (Brooklyn, 1985), XI, 186-189. Cf. below, p. 153.

114. These are H. M. Heilman, *Beyt Rabbi* (Bordichev, [1902]), and M. Teitelbaum, *Ha-Rav mi-Liady u-Mifletet HaBaD*, 2 vols. (Warsaw, 1914). Both authors were intimately related to the leading family of HaBaD. Both regarded themselves as professional historians, however sympathetic to HaBaD, and both were critical of the hagiographical tales, particularly those which concerned HaBaD history, clearly differentiating their own approach from the cavalier approach of the hagiographers. Heilman stresses in his introduction (3-6) that he intends to refrain as much as possible from using material derived from "rumor" rather than from written documentation, and that whenever an oral tradition would be cited, he would identify it as such, and register its degree of credibility. This represents a clear break from the essentially oral hagiographical tradition, and the genuine assimilation of modern, secular historiographical criteria for which Heilman would have had numerous models in the modern Jewish historiography of his time. Nevertheless, he still displays an ulterior commitment to the apologetic suppression of evidence on such sensitive issues, from the Hasidic point of view, as internal

In recent years, a few attempts have been made to draw the attention of scholars to the historiographical literature of HaBaD and to examine it with an open mind: after all, given the paucity of historical records about the Hasidic movement in its formative years, such historiography as has emerged from within the movement should be welcome by historians and trusted, at least in the first instance, to be reliable and well-informed through its greater access to sources, both written and oral, which may not be available to outsiders, or greater insight through intellectual and spiritual affinity if not actual proximity of time and place to the events and personalities of the Hasidic past.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, it could be argued methodologically that the burden of proving the historical value of information drawn from sources which yield it reluctantly, indirectly or incidentally (such as the hagiographical tales of Hasidism) must lie on the historian who proposes to use them for his or her own reconstructions and analysis. On the other hand, sources which are explicitly and self-consciously historiographical (such as the memoirs, diaries, and historical accounts written or generated by the Admor Joseph Isaac) can be presumed to be reliable, and the burden of proving them otherwise must lie on anyone attempting a conflicting historical reconstruction.

This recent challenge to the historians of Hasidism to address themselves seriously to the internal historiography of HaBaD has been accompanied by the attempt to dissociate it entirely from the admittedly forged documents of Kherson.<sup>116</sup> This is a problematic proposition. The Admor Joseph Isaac himself fully acknowledges his debt to the Kherson *Genizah*, not only implicitly, by proclaiming its authenticity, but by drawing from it explicitly, with full acknowledgments, in his own historical works. He writes, for example:

And even before our master the Besht, may he rest in peace, had revealed himself, while he was still in concealment, he and his colleagues, the secret Zaddikim (some of whose names we find in the letters of the recently discovered *Genizah*, such as R. Mordechai, R. Kehat and others) were well organized.<sup>117</sup>

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Hasidic controversies, or the clash between Hasidism and its rabbinic Opponents (6-15), or the embarrassing apostasy of R. Shneur Zalman of Liady's third son, Moshe (113). Teitelbaum is even more self-consciously professional as a modern historian. He is critical of Heilman for not checking his sources thoroughly enough and allowing hagiographical traditions to slip in (I, 250), and presents his own work systematically, setting it out not only in chronological but also in thematic order, devoting volume I to a biography of R. Shneur Zalman of Liady and volume II to an analysis of his teaching. He states in the introduction to volume I (xii): "As for my own relation to the Rabbi [Shneur Zalman] and his views, I have been very careful to stay as objective as possible. All the facts and events presented to the reader are recorded and described as they were, free from any tendentious bias. My greatest wish has been to remain true to the spirit of history, which tolerates no blandishment, hypocrisy or partiality. . . ."

115. See Rachel Elijor, "The Minsk Debate" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1982), 181-183; R. Foxbruner, *Habad: The Ethical Thought of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 59-64.

116. See Elijor, "The Minsk Debate," 182-183, explicitly; Foxbruner, who is much more dogmatic and utterly uncritical of this historiographical tradition, dissociates it from the Kherson letters implicitly, by refraining from mentioning their existence.

117. "Avot ha-Hasidut" in *Ha-Tamim* 1, no. 2 (1935), chap. 1, p. 138. For other examples of direct quotations from or explicit references to the Kherson *Genizah*, see, for example, *ibid.*, 139 (with

As we have already seen,<sup>118</sup> the very notion that the Baal Shem Tov was a member of an organized network of “secret Zaddikim” does not occur in the hagiographical or any other Hasidic sources, but makes its first appearance in the Kherson material. The Admor is clearly drawing from it not only the additional detail of their names, fortuitously “preserved” in the letters of the *Genizah*, but also the very concept of their existence. The only alternative explanation for this affinity between his own account and the Kherson letters on this point is that both were drawing on authentic oral traditions; but this explanation is hardly compatible with the view that the Kherson letters are recent fabrications while the Admor is making use of his unique access to old, authentic family traditions which would not have been available to anyone not intimately connected to the HaBaD “court.”

Even when he does not cite the Kherson documents explicitly, the Admor can be shown to be drawing his information from no other source but them. He reports, for example, a conversation between the Maggid of Mezhirech and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady in which the Maggid commands his young disciple “to do his utmost to ensure that his son, R. Abraham [the Angel] should accept the leadership [after his own death], and if he refuses they should appoint R. Menahem Mendel the Litvak instead.”<sup>119</sup> There is no mention of such a conversation or its contents in the writings of R. Shneur Zalman himself or in the later HaBaD literature except, once again, for the Kherson letters, which include what must be the Admor’s direct source. This is a letter from R. Shneur Zalman to Abraham the Angel, the Maggid’s son, purporting to date from 1773 – shortly after the death of the Maggid, in which R. Shneur Zalman reports:

He [the Maggid] said to me in the following holy words, on the 18th of [the month] of Kislev, just before he died [and here the Maggid’s words are reported as spoken in Yiddish, not Hebrew in which written communications would normally be put unless they are addressed to women or uneducated men, no doubt in order to enhance the authentic flavor of the message]: Do whatever you can, so that my Avrehminyū, long may he live, would take my place. But in the event that he refuses, God forbid, let it be Mendele the Litvak.<sup>120</sup>

The alleged conversation is implausible, to say the least, when examined against the background of the organizational reality of Hasidism at this stage. As was suggested above,<sup>121</sup> the Maggid of Mezhirech was not succeeded by a direct heir since his “office” had not yet generated the expectation of dynastic succession,

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regard to the “victory” over the Frankists at Lemberg); *ibid.* 1, no. 1, p. 12 (with regard to the election to the leadership of R. Abraham “the Angel,” the Maggid of Mezhirech’s son).

118. Above, pp. 135–136.

119. “Avot ha-Hasidut” in *Ha-Tamim* 1, no. 2 (1935), chap. 8, p. 142. Menahem Mendel is referred to here, and in the Kherson letter which underlies this passage, as “the Lithuanian” (Litvak). This takes account of the Maggid of Mezhirech’s Volhynian perspective when referring to a Belorussian.

120. *Ha-Tamim* 2, no. 7 (1937), p. 665, letter no. 249. See also the Admor’s reference to the document in which a group of the Maggid’s disciples swore allegiance to R. Abraham “the Angel” after his father’s death, in “Avot ha-Hasidut,” *Ha-Tamim* 1, no. 2, chap. 8, p. 142. Such a document, of which nothing is known elsewhere, appears in the Kherson collection, *Ha-Tamim* 2, no. 7 (1937), p. 664, letter no. 247.

121. Above, pp. 136–137.

an institution which did not emerge in Hasidism until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and became established in the majority of the particular Hasidic “courts” only a few decades later. The principal of succession suggested by this letter and by the Admor Joseph Isaac’s account is, therefore, entirely anachronistic. Nor, strictly speaking, did the *maggid* ever function as a central leader of a highly organized movement (although he was clearly regarded as the teacher and mentor of many other leaders of Hasidism). The implication of the Kherson letter, and the Admor’s reconstruction which must be based on it, is that Abraham the Angel, and if not him, R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, was to succeed the *Maggid* of Mezhirech to the leadership of the whole of the Hasidic movement. This is not only implausible on the grounds of the pluralistic structure which underlay the organization of Hasidism from its start, but it reflects clearly the implicit HaBaD “appropriation” of the founders of Hasidism. The portrayal of R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk as the *Maggid*’s own choice of an alternative candidate for succession is the next best thing, from the HaBaD perspective, to naming R. Shneur Zalman himself – a step which no HaBaD historian could take, since R. Menahem Mendel’s seniority and his involvement in the eventual authorization of R. Shneur Zalman to lead the Hasidic community of Belorussia are well attested in the earliest Hasidic and HaBaD sources and could not be ignored.<sup>122</sup>

R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk was one of a small group of the *Maggid*’s disciples who imported Hasidism to their region of provenance in Belorussia. He became the head of a Hasidic circle, first in Minsk and eventually in Gorodok, in the province of Vitebsk.<sup>123</sup> He was the most senior figure in Belorussian Hasidism, the branch from which the HaBaD school descends. To promote R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk to the position of the *Maggid*’s dynastic heir is to promote Belorussian Hasidism, and ultimately HaBaD Hasidism, to the position of the most authentic expression of Beshtian-*Maggidic* Hasidism, a posture which we have already encountered in the letters of Kherson.<sup>124</sup> Each one of the *Maggid*’s disciples who became leaders of their own Hasidic communities could have made a comparable claim of “direct” inheritance, a claim which would be as morale-boosting internally but just as unfounded by external criteria as the implicit HaBaD claim. Indeed, some such claims can be found in the hagiographical literatures of other Hasidic circles,<sup>125</sup> although none have been as authoritative or

122. For a careful reconstruction of R. Shneur Zalman of Liady’s gradual ascent to leadership see E. Etkes, “Aliyyato shel Rabbi Shneur Zalman mi-Lyady le-Emdat Manhigut,” *Tarbiz* 54 (1985), 429–439. Nevertheless, late HaBaD historiography tends to obscure the intermediaries between the leadership of the *Maggid* of Mezhirech and R. Shneur Zalman’s “succession.” R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk is reported, for example, to have known all along that he was unsuitable for leadership (implicitly making way for the proper “succession” by R. Shneur Zalman). See Raphael Nahman Ha-Cohen, *Shmu’ot ve-Sippurim me-Rabboteynu ha-Kedoshim* [1964] (Kfar HaBaD, 1976), I, 245–246; *Ibid.* (Kfar HaBaD, 1974), II, 81–82, @105.

123. See Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 132; Heilman, *Beit Rabbi*, 11–12.

124. Cf. above, p. 137.

125. See, for example, the hagiographical anthology *Ohel Elimelekh* (Jerusalem, 1968), 49–50, @124, for a tradition whereby R. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk was elected to succeed the *Maggid* of Mezhirech; cf. A. Z. Aescoly, “Ha-Hasidut be-Polin,” in *Beit Israel Be-Polin* (Jerusalem, 1953), II,

as persistent as HaBaD's which has been advanced through the exceptional historiographical endeavors of the Admor Joseph Isaac.

In order to translate into more concrete, institutional, dynastic terms HaBaD's sense of itself as the direct heir and most authentic expression of original Hasidism, the Admor can be shown to have exploited not only the Kherson letters but also late HaBaD hagiographical sources whose reliability has been questioned even within the HaBaD school.<sup>126</sup> This applies, for example, to the frequent statements throughout his writings that the founder of HaBaD, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, was in the habit of referring to the Baal Shem Tov—the founder of Hasidism—as “granddad” (*zeide* in Yiddish):

The Old Admor, R. Shneur Zalman, used to call the Besht granddad. This was because he was his disciple's disciple. . . . R. Shneur Zalman saw himself as the “grandson” of the Besht, and he used to say: “R. Baruch [of Miedzyboz] is a physical grandson of the Besht, while I am a spiritual grandson.”<sup>127</sup>

This formula, and the title “granddad,” do not occur anywhere in the published writings of R. Shneur Zalman or any of the early sources of Hasidism. They appear to have been based on an hagiographical tale of the second half of the nineteenth century, written by a man who had been born into the HaBaD community but who stepped out of the traditionalist fold and eventually emigrated to the U.S.<sup>128</sup> The tale is an embellishment of an authentic source—a letter by R. Shneur Zalman of Liady in which he reports his quarrel with R. Baruch of Miedzyboz, the Baal Shem Tov's grandson.<sup>129</sup> While the original letter clearly provides the formal context of the embellishment, in that R. Shneur Zalman pointedly refers to the Baal Shem Tov as “your grandfather,” it says nothing of any claims by either party to the title of “physical” or “spiritual” grandson. The tale, on the other hand, elaborates on the original exchange as follows:

Then R. Baruch said: How dare you quarrel with me. Am I not the grandson of the Besht? The Rabbi [Shneur Zalman] replied: You are his grandson in the physical sense while I am his grandson spiritually. . . . For the Great Maggid was a distinguished disciple of the Besht, blessed be he, and I was a distinguished disciple of the Maggid.<sup>130</sup>

This hagiographical elaboration, which seems to be the fruit of the creative imagination of its author, distorts the original tenor of the dispute. It reflects and

128 for a similar tradition in the Ger (Gora Kalwaria) Hasidic dynasty whereby R. Jacob Isaac, the “Seer” of Lublin was the Maggid of Mezhiroch's successor.

126. See Heilman, *Beyt Rabbi*, 3–6.

127. R. Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, *Sefer ha-Zikhronot* (Memoirs) (Brooklyn/Kfar HaBaD, 1985), I, chap. 9, p. 37. This is common throughout his works. Cf. *Likkutey Dibburim* (Collected Talks) (Brooklyn, 1984), II, parts 3–4, p. 695, where in a talk dating from 1938, he reports in the name of R. Shneur Zalman of Liady that he used to call the Maggid of Mezhiroch “father,” and the Baal Shem Tov “grandfather,” making the “dynastic” link even more explicit.

128. This was Michael Levi Rodkinson (Frumkin) (1845–1904). On him and his books see Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 28–30; “Perek be-Toledot ha-Sippur ha-Hasidi,” *Sefer Sippurey Kedoshim* (Jerusalem, 1977), 87–109; cf. Dan, *The Hasidic Story*, 195ff.

129. D. Z. Hillmann, *Iggerot Baal ha-Tania u-Bheney Doro* (Jerusalem, 1953), 192, letter 113; cf. *Igrot Kodesh Admor ha-Zaken*, 142, letter 9.

130. M. L. Rodkinson, *Shivkhey ha-Rav* [Lemberg, 1864] (Jerusalem, n.d.), 33.

at the same time nourishes the late HaBaD tendency to present R. Shneur Zalman as an “heir,” a tendency which the Admor Joseph Isaac shares and wishes to promote in making use of the tale. It is hardly likely that R. Shneur Zalman in his day would have thought of himself in these categories.<sup>131</sup>

The historical reconstructions of early Hasidism by the Admor Joseph Isaac are distinguished by a number of other traits which reveal his overriding interest in promoting contemporary HaBaD values, in response to contemporary events and trends, specifically through historiography. He exploited the medium for the promotion of these values at the cost, which if he ever perceived it as such he was certainly willing to pay, of ordering the past in certain categories and patterns which could be totally alien to it in reality. These categories and patterns were formed out of the harrowing experiences of his own period of office, from 1920 until his death in 1950.

The Admor Joseph Isaac succeeded to office during the early post-revolutionary years of Soviet rule in Russia, when the Jewish “sections” of the propaganda department of the Russian Communist Party were engaged in the systematic eradication of all national and religious institutions of Jewish life: community councils, synagogues, religious academies and schools, ritual baths, ritual slaughter houses and butchers, Hebrew libraries and books were being liquidated with the help of the internal security forces. Following the elimination of the traditionally bourgeois basis of Jewish economic activities, many were forced to seek new sources of livelihood in agriculture and the crafts, colonizing new territories in which there was no tradition of Jewish life nor any access to its resources.<sup>132</sup> The Admor launched a courageous campaign for the preservation and dissemination of Jewish religious practice in perilous conditions. He conducted it as an underground operation, sending out secret emissaries—rabbis, teachers, ritual slaughterers, and other specialists in Jewish lore—as well as material resources to Jewish settlements which had been cut off and were becoming estranged from their tradition, not only by government oppression but also by the already established presence of secularist elements within the Jewish community itself. After a period of arrest in 1927 he moved to Latvia where he established a new center of HaBaD. Seven years later he settled in Poland, creating a network of HaBaD religious

131. For a detailed discussion of this see Rapoport-Albert, “The Hasidic Movement,” section 5 and the discussion around notes 109–127. Another example of the Admor Joseph Isaac’s probable integration of a late hagiographical tradition into his own historical memoirs is the account of R. Shneur Zalman’s apparently random, but evidently significant selection to attend to the ritual purification of the dead Maggid’s head (while other disciples had to be content with lesser parts of his body). This is mentioned by the Admor in his historical essay, “Avot ha-Hasidut,” *Ha-Tamim* 1, no. 2 (1935), chap. 9, p. 143, and vol. 2, no. 8 (1938), p. 792, but the story appears in full in Jacob Kaidaner, *Sippurim Nora'im* (Lemberg, 1875), 61 (my pagination; the book has none).

132. For the situation in Russia at the time, and its implications for the Jews, see S. M. Schwarz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1952), 90–194; J. Lestschinsky, *Ha-Yehudim be-Rusyah ha-Sovyetit* (Tel Aviv, 1953); M. Altshuler, *Between Nationalism and Communism: The Evseksia in the Soviet Union 1918–1930* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1980); A. A. Gershuni, *Yahadut be-Rusyah ha-Sovyetit* (Jerusalem, 1961); J. Rothenberg, *The Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1971).

academies, recruiting new followers and setting up various organizations dedicated to the material support and religious welfare of Soviet Jews. During World War II he fled to the U.S., forced, once again, to leave behind the bulk of his traditional following. From his new headquarters in Brooklyn he effected a remarkable rehabilitation of the HaBaD movement, setting up a large network of schools, academies, publications, and various other organizations and institutions, actively engaged in Hasidic-traditionalist propaganda.<sup>133</sup> He left to his son-in-law, the present leader of HaBaD, a movement which, unlike many of the Hasidic schools of Eastern and Central Europe, had not only survived the war but had become freshly invigorated, making an effective adaptation to the conditions of the new continent in the postwar period.

These experiences and achievements had clearly shaped the historical outlook of the Admor. It was by the criteria of activism, propaganda, powerful centralistic organization, and heroic self-sacrifice that he assessed the Hasidic leaders of the past. He identified these qualities in the personalities and styles of leadership of the three Hasidic masters from whom he and HaBaD trace their direct descent, the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid of Mezhibezh, and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady. He writes of the Baal Shem Tov's period of concealment, which he portrays along the lines suggested by the Kherson letters,<sup>134</sup> while at the same time echoing his own experience of underground organization in Soviet Russia:

Since its earliest beginnings, organization and propaganda had always occupied a place of prime importance in the Hasidic camp. Even before our master the Besht, may he rest in peace, had revealed himself, while he was still in concealment, he and his colleagues, the secret Zaddikim . . . were well organized and had set up centers at various locations. Each one would work at his own center, and from time to time they would report in detail to the center where our master the Besht, may he rest in peace, was located.<sup>135</sup>

The same features characterize the Baal Shem Tov's leadership in its "revealed" state which, again, corresponds well to the Admor's own style of operation once he had left the Soviet Union, when he was able to set up a network of open centers while maintaining links with his underground operators inside Russia:

When our master the Besht was revealed, he set up open centers, and in each center he established one of his close disciples, or he would set up a center where a close disciple was resident. In the year 1760 we find our master the Besht surrounded by powerful disciples, all expert at the battle for *Torah* [Jewish lore]. And in addition to his disciples and colleagues the secret Zaddikim, he now had openly revealed disciples, eminent men, highly organized and energetic, each at his own post, at the place designated for him by the Besht. This organization, and our master the Besht's inspired strategy of [realizing the ideal of the] love of Israel, together with the propaganda activities of his holy disciples, carried out with the utmost dedication to the point of willingness to die as martyrs, had the result that within fifteen years, the teaching of the Besht had spread not only

133. The Admor's career as HaBaD's leader during his thirty years of office is assessed in detail in his official biography: Glitzenstein, *Sefer Ha-Toledot*, vols. 3 and 4. His heroic role in the campaign for the preservation of Jewish life in Soviet Russia is acknowledged outside HaBaD's own historiography as well as within. See, for example, Gershuni, 156–207; Rothenberg, 161, 178.

134. See above, pp. 135–136.

135. *Ha-Tamim* 1, no. 2, "Avot ha-Hasidut," chap. 1, p. 138.

throughout Poland but also in Lithuania. . . . This high standard of order and discipline had yielded good results; the inspired success in spreading our master the Besht's teaching . . . was evident throughout.<sup>136</sup>

The leadership of the Maggid of Mezhiroch is characterized by the intensification of the same activities: "During the leadership of the holy rabbi, the Maggid, the propaganda activities were doubled and organization was improved."<sup>137</sup> A temporary setback had occurred during the brief period in office of R. Zvi, the Baal Shem Tov's son (of whose leadership nothing is known in the early Hasidic sources, but whose failure to succeed the Admor feels compelled to explain, since he perceives the leadership as dynastic from the start):<sup>138</sup>

After the death of our master the Besht, his son, the righteous rabbi, R. Zvi, was elected supreme leader. However, at the end of his first year of office, the holy company realized that their teacher's son was a weak man while the situation required valiant strength and a man spirited enough to lead.<sup>139</sup>

But this difficulty was soon overcome by R. Zvi's abdication following a communication from his deceased father, who instructed him to pass the mantle of leadership on to the Maggid of Mezhiroch.<sup>140</sup>

In the "third generation" of the leadership of Hasidism, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady is engaged in similar activities, described in identical terms:

The situation at that time required a supreme leader who would be spirited enough to speak unequivocally to the Opponents. . . . In its general assembly, the holy company elected our Old Rabbi [R. Shneur Zalman of Liady] to act as chief organizer. . . . They gave him power and authority over the organization of all the centers and all propaganda activities throughout the land, [and they authorized him] to visit from time to time all the places where the disciples of our master the Maggid, may he rest in peace, were resident. For approximately three years, from 1773 to 1776, our Old Rabbi was engaged in various journeys to various places, to supervise the condition of the disciples of the Maggid and to inspect their activities at the centers, in order to ensure that they accorded with the decision of the central committee. Some of these journeys were made in the open while others were secret, when he made secret visits to Shklov, Minsk, and Vilna.<sup>141</sup>

These reconstructions are anachronistic and historically implausible in a number of details.<sup>142</sup> But quite apart from this, what is most striking about them is the

136. *Ibid.*, chap. 3, p. 139.

137. *Ibid.*, chap. 7, p. 141.

138. See above, pp. 136-137.

139. *Ha-Tamim* 1, no. 2, "Avot ha-Hasidut," chap. 6, p. 140.

140. *Ibid.*, 140-141. The same story appears earlier in the collection of "talks" by the Admor's father and predecessor, R. Shalom Dovber. See *Torat Shalom* (Brooklyn, 1957), 83, @19. The story echoes the *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* tale which spoke of heavenly "streams of wisdom" flowing first to the Besht and then to the Maggid of Mezhiroch (see above, note 89), but it tames the notion of fresh charismatic authority by introducing the deceased Baal Shem Tov as its regulator who irons out the difficulty of an unsuitable heir in order to secure the proper functioning of the dynasty.

141. *Ha-Tamim* 1, no. 2, "Avot ha-Hasidut," chap. 10, p. 144. The secret journeys were to the Lithuanian strongholds of Opposition to Hasidism where, according to this account, it was impossible to spread Hasidism openly.

142. For example, there is no trace of evidence for the emergence of "secret" Hasidism in Podolia, let alone in Lithuania, as early as the 1720s; the earliest indications of Beshtian Hasidism are from

similarity of the terms in which the Admor describes these three distinct generations of leadership, stretching over a period of some fifty years during which the Hasidic movement was entirely transformed organizationally and in other respects as well. His account blurs all distinctions and focuses on the similarities — precisely the opposite of the analytical procedure of the historian. In fact, his perception of the institution of Hasidic leadership as it emerges from this account can be classified as typological rather than historical, and it is not unlike the perception of the career of the saintly hero in the hagiographical tale.<sup>143</sup>

The Admor's typological perception of personalities, institutions, processes, and events is evident throughout his historiographical work. He writes, for example, of the activities of the Baal Shem Tov and the "secret Zaddikim" in the 1720s:

At that time, around the year 1720, our master the Besht, together with his colleagues the secret Zaddikim, embarked on a propaganda campaign among the Jews in the provinces of Podolia and neighboring regions, [encouraging them] to move out of the cities and other densely populated areas into the villages and countryside settlements, and to work there in agriculture or the crafts, while the women should accustom themselves to weaving, keeping domestic animals or fowls, growing vegetables, etc.<sup>144</sup>

Elsewhere he adds: "The secret Zaddikim were not satisfied with merely directing the unemployed to take up productive trades; they made a living example of it themselves. This is why many of them became farmers."<sup>145</sup> Now the issue of the "productivization" of Jewish economic life through the move into farming or the crafts and away from the traditional occupation of leasing or managing the estates of the nobility made its first appearance on the horizon of Russian Jewry in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, as one of the many reforms which were attempted (without much success) by Alexander I.<sup>146</sup> The leader of the HaBaD community at that time, R. Dov Baer of Lubavitch (R. Shneur Zalman's son and heir) responded positively to the Czarist government's initia-

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the second half of the century (although it is, of course, as impossible to disprove conclusively the presence of a secret organization as it is to prove it). Similarly, there is no sign of opposition to Hasidism in this period, and even for the 1750s and 1760s the evidence is uncertain; the anti-Hasidic agitation in Lithuania and Galicia did not begin until the 1770s. Nor is there any evidence for the brief period in "office" of R. Zvi, the Baal Shem Tov's son, who is presumed to have succeeded his father on the basis of the anachronistic projection of hereditary leadership onto this early period. The leadership of R. Shneur Zalman of Liady did not begin in the early 1770s, immediately after the death of the Maggid, nor in the late 1770s, after the emigration to the Holy Land of the two senior figures in Belorussian Hasidism (R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and R. Abraham of Kalisk), but only in the 1880s, after the death of R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, when R. Shneur Zalman was gradually emerging as the more powerful of the three figures partially, and with some reluctance, authorized by the leaders in the Holy Land to look after their followers in their absence. See Etkes (above, note 122).

143. Subsequent HaBaD leaders are described similarly as "systematic," excellent organizers, distinguished by a sense of "order," and so on. See, for example, *The "Tzemach Tzedek" and the Haskala Movement* (Brooklyn, 1969), 8.

144. *Ha-Tamim* 1, no. 2, "Avot ha-Hasidut," chap. 2, p. 138.

145. *Sefer Ha-Zikhronot* (Brooklyn, 1985), I, 38.

146. For a detailed discussion of this see J. D. Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews: The Origin of the "Jewish Question" in Russia, 1772-1825* (Dekalb, Ill., 1986), 150ff.

tive and actively encouraged his followers to become farmers and artisans, promoting the dignity of these productive occupations against the indignity of poverty and unemployment.<sup>147</sup> By the middle of the century, under Nicholas I, R. Menahem Mendel, the third dynastic leader of HaBaD, was fully committed to the policy of agricultural colonization, acquiring land and setting up Jewish farming communities in the region of Minsk.<sup>148</sup> The issue was topical again in the early years of the Admor Joseph Isaac's own leadership, when the Soviet government was attempting to achieve the "productivization" which the Czarist regime had failed to implement effectively, by setting up new Jewish agricultural colonies and collectives in a number of regions throughout the Soviet Union.<sup>149</sup> The Admor Joseph Isaac was deeply involved in the endeavor to extend pastoral care to these settlements.<sup>150</sup>

This evidently authentic concern in the HaBaD leadership over several generations for the amelioration of the material conditions of its following through the shift towards "productive" occupations on the land becomes an essential ingredient in the Admor Joseph Isaac's typology of the ideal Hasidic leader. It is perfectly natural for him, therefore, to identify this ingredient in the leadership of the Besht and his fellow "secret Zaddikim" during the 1720s. The fact that this anticipates the earliest, and wholly unsuccessful, attempt at the agricultural settlement of the Jews in Austrian Galicia by some sixty years,<sup>151</sup> and in the Baal Shem Tov's more immediate environment by another twenty at least, is hardly material. It was not the particular circumstances which could give rise to such

147. See Heilman, *Beyt Rabbi*, 93–94, note 1.

148. See *The "Tzemach Tzedek"*, 9. For the general background, see M. Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia 1825–1855* (Philadelphia, 1983), 155ff. The adoption of the cause of the productivization of Jewish economic life in Russia by the HaBaD leadership in the nineteenth century was the appropriation of an extraneous value which was being advocated not only by the Russian authorities but also by the Jewish Enlighteners with whom HaBaD was engaged in a series of bitter clashes (see *The "Tzemach Tzedek,"* and Stanislawski, 150–152). It was presented by the Admor Joseph Isaac as the duty of the Hasidic leader to concern himself not only with the spiritual but first of all with the material well-being of his followers: "His holy eminence, our Old Rabbi [R. Shneur Zalman] told his grandson, my great grandfather, the author of the *Tzemach Tzedek* [R. Menahem Mendel was thus named after the title of his major work] that his grandfather, our Master the Besht [for the Besht as 'grandfather' of R. Shneur Zalman see above, pp. 144–145] had said that the beginning of his work with his colleagues the secret Zaddikim was to restore to health—[in Yiddish] *gezunt makhen*—the body of Israel and only later to restore to health their spirit and soul. That is why, so long as our Master the Besht was in concealment, he dedicated his work to helping Israel in matters concerning their livelihood, and most of his work was with simple folk who are the body of Israel. Only later, when he was revealed, did he concern himself with students and scholars who are the soul and spirit of Israel" (*Ha-Tamim*, "Avot ha-Hasidut," chap. 2, p. 138). This represents a departure in HaBaD from R. Shneur Zalman's conception of his leadership as confined to spiritual affairs only, and his refusal to attend to the more prosaic questions of livelihood and material affairs which were becoming the major concern of other Hasidic leaders at the time. See below, note 184.

149. See on this Schwarz, 160–185; Ch. Szmeruk (Shmeruk), *The Jewish Community and Jewish Agricultural Settlement in Soviet Belorussia (1918–1932)* (Hebrew, with English summary), unpublished doctoral dissertation, Hebrew University, 1961.

150. See *Sefer ha-Toledot*, III (which deals with the years 1921–1928); IV, Appendix, 397–413.

151. See Braver, 45, 165, 169ff.; Mahler, 59–60; 195–197.

an ideology of “productivization” in Hasidism that interested the Admor; he was interested in the value of a caring leadership, a value free from any ties to specific time and place, and one which he was concerned to promote.

The same typological perception underlies the Admor’s location of each one of the early leaders of Hasidism and HaBaD in a situation which is marked by deep crisis and confrontation, requiring time and again a leader “spirited” enough to cope and to inspire his disciples by his own example, with dedication “to the point of willingness to die as martyrs” – a fixed pattern which fits well and most probably arises from the trials of his own critical period of office. Thus he places the emergence of the Baal Shem Tov and his “secret Zaddikim” in the context of the aftermath of the Cossack uprising in Poland in 1648–1649, an event which resulted in the massacre of thousands of Jews and the devastation of a large number of Jewish communities in the Ukraine.<sup>152</sup>

The main objective of our master the Besht and his colleagues the secret Zaddikim was to encourage the people of Israel and to strengthen their spirit after 1648–49, the years of the terrible persecution of the Jews, when thousands of lives were lost and all material assets plundered. The Jews began to concentrate in the towns and larger communities, afraid to live in the villages. Most of them were unemployed. They became impoverished, and with poverty came despair at their bitter exile.<sup>153</sup>

152. For the Cossack uprising and its consequences for the Jews see S. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* (Philadelphia, 1946), I, 144–153; B. D. Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland* (Philadelphia, 1973), 181–205. Interestingly, the Admor Joseph Isaac appears, once again, to have assimilated a modern, secular historiographic perception of the background to the rise of Hasidism, stemming from the wholly negative evaluation of the movement by the Enlighteners, which left its imprint on the scholarly historiography of Hasidism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is the view of Hasidism as a movement which was born into a situation of economic deprivation, moral degeneration, intellectual and spiritual decline and the collapse of traditional communal and religious institutions (see, for example, Graetz, *History of the Jews*, 406, 408, 410–411). The implication was that only in such conditions of poverty, ignorance, and degradation could an obscurantist movement such as Hasidism take root and flourish. The most persuasive and enduring portrayal of Hasidism as the product of such conditions, precipitated by the Cossack uprising and the ensuing massacres of 1648, was made by Simon Dubnow who, in the introduction to his *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, linked the rise of Hasidism to the social, economic, and religious bankruptcy of Polish Jewry in the first half of the eighteenth century, following the crisis of 1648 from which it never fully recovered (see Dubnow, *Toledot ha-Hasidut*, 8–36). In recent years, this view of the background to the rise of Hasidism, which has dominated the historiography for many decades, has been undergoing a major revision. Younger historians, born or educated after the last war, who had not shared directly in the predicaments of Eastern European Jewry in the twentieth century, were able to look at the evidence afresh, and to dissociate the experience of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Polish Jewry from its ultimate fate. Their findings have suggested a quicker and fuller recovery, both economically and culturally, from the catastrophe of 1648. By the first half of the eighteenth century, Polish Jewry was enjoying relative prosperity, security, power, and intellectual prestige. See on this Foxbruner, 7–12; G. Hundert, “Some Basic Characteristics of the Jewish Experience in Poland,” *Polin* 1 (1986), 28–34; M. Rosman, “Jewish Perceptions of Insecurity and Powerlessness in 16th–18th Century Poland,” *Ibid.*, 19–27; Rosman, “The Image of Poland as a Center of Torah Learning after the 1648 Persecutions,” (Hebrew), *Zion*, 435–448, and the additional bibliographical references he cites there, 448, n. 58. The Admor Joseph Isaac could not, of course, have been aware of this evaluation of the conditions from which Hasidism grew. He had internalized the Dubnowian evaluation, implicitly negative about the origins of Hasidism as it was, and placed the notion of a prolonged crisis (from 1648 to the 1720s) within his typological framework of crisis and opposition as the “natural setting” for the activities of the Baal Shem Tov and all subsequent Hasidic leaders.

153. *Ha-Tamim* 1, no. 2, “Avot ha-Hasidut,” chap. 1, p. 138.

The element of confrontation which belongs in the same fixed patterning of events is identified in this case as follows:

The opposition came from two directions: from those who were called the Opponents [*mitnaggedim*], who had begun to agitate against the new path already during the lifetime of the Besht, and from the Frankists (the followers of the false messiah Frank) with whom the Besht and his disciples had conducted disputations from which they finally emerged victorious.<sup>154</sup>

With regard to the Frankists' opposition to Hasidism (of which nothing is known historically, as is the case with the hostilities of the as yet nonexistent rabbinic Opponents), the Admor explains elsewhere:

Our master the Besht conducted a number of disputations with the Frankists until he won victory, as is explained at length in the letters of the [Kherson] *Genizah*. This victory gave rise to a repressed hatred of our master the Besht and his holy disciples on the part of the Frankists.<sup>155</sup>

The succession to the leadership of the Maggid of Mezhiroch in the early 1760s is marked by an intensification of the same anti-Hasidic agitation on the part of the Lithuanian Opponents of the movement (which in reality was to begin only a decade later) and by further, and more damaging, hostilities on the part of the Frankists.<sup>156</sup> Subsequent leaders in the HaBaD line are similarly shown to be operating in the context of crisis and opposition. The Frankists eventually disappear from the arena but are replaced by the Enlighteners against whom the third leader of HaBaD, R. Menahem Mendel, conducts a heroic campaign and emerges victorious.<sup>157</sup>

This typology of the ideal leader who emerges at a time of crisis and spearheads a victorious campaign against militant opposition of one type or another is truly rooted in the historical experience of HaBaD Hasidism: its founder, R. Shneur Zalman, *was* at the center of the confrontation with the rabbinic Opponents of Hasidism in the final decade of the eighteenth century; they *did* bring false charges against him as a result of which he was arrested by the Russian authorities only to emerge vindicated and "victorious" (although his victory over the Opponents at a public disputation in Minsk, which is not attested anywhere outside the historiographical works of the Admor Joseph Isaac,<sup>158</sup> is more likely to be the product of the typological patterning of his career, modelled, perhaps, on the Baal Shem Tov's alleged victory over the Frankists at the disputation in Lemberg, than to have taken place in reality); his son, the second leader of HaBaD, was similarly the victim of false accusations by the Opponents and, like his father, was imprisoned and released; the third Admor, R. Menahem Mendel, was indeed a militant campaigner against the Enlighteners who denounced and persecuted him; and the reality of the career of the Admor Joseph Isaac himself,

154. *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*, I, 40.

155. *Ha-Tamim* I, no. 2, "Avot ha-Hasidut," chap. 3, p. 139.

156. *Idem* and chap. 7, pp. 141-142.

157. See *The "Tzemach Tzedek."*

158. See Elior, "The Minsk Debate." 179-235.

as we have seen, fits this heroic pattern extremely well. The point is that the typology which has emerged from this collective experience of crisis and confrontation in HaBaD has become the principle by which the peculiarities of each experience and its context are organized in the historical narratives of the Admor. This is particularly evident in his accounts of the more distant, pre-HaBaD Hasidic past, the time of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezhirech who in reality could not, of course, have shared in the collective experience of HaBaD. It is here that the Admor's reconstructions are most at odds with all the facts which can be gleaned from other sources.

Notably, in his book of memoirs which contains, despite its title, long cycles of plainly hagiographical tales about personalities and events of centuries before his time, the Admor alludes to the constructive propagandist value of this typological perception of history. He presents R. Baruch, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady's father, as a young man brought up to identify with the rabbinic Opponents of the Besht. R. Baruch is first swayed from this stance to a sympathetic curiosity about Hasidism when he learns of the comparable rabbinic opposition to the pious sixteenth-century kabbalist, R. Elijah the Baal Shem of Worms. He is told that "just as there is no difference between R. Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement, and the Baal Shem of Worms, so there is no difference . . . between the earlier opponents and the Opponents of this generation."<sup>159</sup> R. Baruch becomes a convert to Hasidism once he realizes that the Baal Shem Tov and his "holy company" of "secret Zaddikim" are not a recent aberration but an ancient phenomenon in kabbalistic Judaism which is characterized as having always attracted suspicion and contempt in rabbinic quarters where it was viewed as forbidden magic or mere superstition.<sup>160</sup>

The typology of opposition here, as in the accounts of the subsequent careers of the Maggid of Mezhirech, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady and all the HaBaD leaders right down to the Admor's own age, validates the present by reference to the past while at the same time vitalizing the past by injecting it with topical meanings, enlisting it in the service of the crucial cause of the present — "to bring the Jews closer to the Creator and to instill in them a love for *Torah* and a desire to observe its precepts."<sup>161</sup>

159. *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*, 295.

160. This explanation of the opposition to Hasidism as rooted in an age-old conflict between kabbalists and scholarly rabbinic circles is both inaccurate and anachronistic. While it is true that in the course of the nineteenth century, the study of the Kabbalah disappeared from the Lithuanian curriculum (see, for example, I. Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Beginning of the "Musar" Movement* [Hebrew] [Jerusalem, 1982], 102–104, 132–133; Jacob Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah* [Hebrew] [Jerusalem, 1984], 101), at the time of the Baal Shem Tov the discipline constituted an integral part of the scholarly-spiritual training of the elite. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, the most venerated rabbinic authority of the eighteenth century in Poland, and the man who initiated the rabbinic opposition to Hasidism in the 1770s and 1780s, was himself a kabbalist. The Admor Joseph Isaac's interpretation of the conflict represents, once again, his assimilation of the modern, secular historiographical view of Hasidism. It is there, not in the proclamations of the Opponents, that the Baal Shem Tov and his followers are condemned as kabbalists — primitive purveyors of magic and superstition (see, for example, Graetz, 397–400). The Admor internalizes this perception and uses it in order to legitimate kabbalistic Hasidism by the traditional criterion of antiquity.

161. *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*, I, 283.

This use of the past is no different from the one intended by the final redactor of the hagiographical *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, who directed his reader “to infer the moral of each tale, so that he will be able to attach his heart to the fear of God, the belief of the sages and the power of the holy *Torah*.”<sup>162</sup> What is different is that while, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, the author of *Shivkhey ha-Besht* still needed to apologize for writing apparently “meaningless narratives” or “histories,” and to derive the legitimacy of this medium from the value of edification which it promoted, by the first half of the twentieth century the Admor Joseph Isaac could take for granted the full legitimacy of the historiographical medium; it was the eroded value of the fear of God, the beliefs of the sages, and the power of the holy Torah that needed to be expressed in this medium in order to be validated and promoted effectively.

The status and function of history had been transformed in the course of the nineteenth century, as a new consciousness of the Jewish past was emerging in response to the breakdown of traditional belief and practice:

The modern effort to reconstruct the Jewish past begins at a time that witnesses a sharp break in the continuity of Jewish living and hence also an ever-growing decay of Jewish group memory. In this sense, if for no other, history becomes what it had never been before—the faith of fallen Jews. For the first time history, not a sacred text, becomes the arbiter of Judaism. Virtually all nineteenth-century Jewish ideologies, from Reform to Zionism, would feel a need to appeal to history for validation. Predictably, “history” yielded the most varied conclusions to the appellants.<sup>163</sup>

Modern Orthodoxy—a nineteenth-century ideology of which Hasidism has been a militant exponent—was one of the appellants, and the Admor Joseph Isaac was addressing “fallen Jews,” or Jews who were at risk of “falling,” or whose children seemed likely to “fall,” first in interwar Europe and eventually, and even more so, in the U.S.

In a letter written in 1932, he urged his followers to talk to their children about their Hasidic past as a means of reinforcing their religious identity:

It is the duty and obligation of each one of our people . . . to tell his children, and members of his household, what he had seen and heard at the homes of his Hasidic father and grandfather. By means of such stories he would establish the value of God-fearing on a sound basis.<sup>164</sup>

Dozens of similar letters to both individuals and groups of followers encourage them not only to remember and talk of the past, but to write it down in the form of memoirs, histories, and stories, and to collect more information about it from the elderly who can remember further back.<sup>165</sup> A number of letters point out the good effect of Hasidic gatherings dedicated to the recollection of “days of old,” as a result of which individuals or groups of lapsed Hasidic followers—

162. Cf. above, p. 126.

163. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 86.

164. *Igrot Kodesh* . . . *Yoseph Yitskhak*, XI, letter no. 3886, p. 187.

165. See for example, *ibid.*, IV, letter no. 938, p. 124; no. 975, pp. 217–219; no. 1023, p. 344; no. 1050, pp. 393–394; V, no. 1157, pp. 31–32; no. 1210, pp. 97–99; no. 1220, pp. 114–115; no. 1250, pp. 152–153; no. 1378, p. 276; no. 1424, p. 334; no. 1450, p. 372; no. 1463, p. 393; no. 1539, p. 480.

people who had long abandoned the traditional Jewish way of life — were stirred and brought back to the fold.<sup>166</sup>

This exploitation of the past acquires a new dimension of nostalgia for the vanished “old world” after the move to the U.S. during the war. In his first year in New York, urging a follower to record his memoirs, the Admor writes movingly of the effect on him of his own historiographical activities:

I know for myself that when I read or write my memoirs, at that time it is as if I am back in my old situation, and a special, pleasant sensation overwhelms me. This must be the same for each one of our people when he remembers the old days, while he was still living in an environment glowing with spiritual illumination.<sup>167</sup>

Nostalgia for the “old world” is not only aroused by historiographical activity; it soon begins to nourish the work itself. In his book of memoirs, written after his arrival in the U.S., the Admor devotes several chapters to the Belorussian town of Lubavitch which had served for over a century as the headquarters of the HaBaD movement and with which its name has remained associated intimately even after the evacuation of the town by the ruling HaBaD family during World War I. The Admor speaks of Lubavitch longingly, in the most affectionate terms, and he transforms the emotionally charged name, alluding to its literal meaning in Russian, into a “symbol of the love of Israel, the love of humanity and above all, of course, the love of God, the Creator of all.”<sup>168</sup> Taking every liberty with chronology, geography, and the bound of historical plausibility, he presents the town as the most important center of Hasidic agitation during the “concealed” stage of the Baal Shem Tov’s activities as a “secret Zaddik,” thus turning the nineteenth-century “capital” of HaBaD into the very birthplace of Hasidism in the beginning of the eighteenth century — a theme which was not present in his earlier, prewar accounts of the same period of the “secret Zaddikism of the Besht.”<sup>169</sup>

Altogether, the Admor Joseph Isaac’s *Memoirs*, first published in Yiddish during the war years in New York, and subsequently translated into several languages, are more boldly and imaginatively hagiographical than autobiographical in the conventional sense. His memory is not confined to the experiences of his own past. It embodies a new collective memory of HaBaD, forging its postwar historical consciousness for the consolidation of a wider and newly based following, alien to the concrete reality of Hasidism in the “old world.”

The book contains long cycles of quasi-historical, essentially hagiographical tales,<sup>170</sup> many of them apparently new, about the prehistory of HaBaD Hasidism. The Admor assumes as a matter of course the full legitimacy of the genre, al-

166. See, for example, *ibid.*, V, letter no. 1218, pp. 106–110; no. 1226, pp. 123–126.

167. *Ibid.*, no. 1220, p. 115.

168. *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*, 1, 3.

169. *Ibid.*, 1–36; cf. *Ha-Tamim* 1, no. 2, “Avot ha-Hasidut,” chaps. 1–2, pp. 137–138.

170. Population statistics and precise geographical information appear side by side with accounts of the miraculous feats of the “secret Zaddikim.” See, for example, *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*, 1, 4 and 7.

though his title, which sounds distinctly modern-historical rather than being drawn from the traditional stock of hagiographical book titles (Praises, Deeds, Wonders, Glory, Tales of the Zaddikim, and so on) may suggest that a subtle, and not unconscious, blurring of generic categories has taken place. Indeed, the Admor does not distinguish clearly between “memoirs,” “stories,” and “histories,” terms which are often used interchangeably in his other writings.<sup>171</sup> He appears to be drawing on the now firmly established legitimacy of the historiographical medium in order to establish the hitherto questionable legitimacy of the hagiographical tale in HaBaD.

The tales had not only attracted the skeptical scrutiny of modern historians; their status within Hasidism had been uncertain from the start.<sup>172</sup> Significantly, it was not with this genre, which was to become its popular hallmark, but rather with its speculative teachings that Hasidism had first launched itself in print in the 1780s and 1790s. It was this literature, not the hagiographical tales, that formed an important element of the campaign for the wider dissemination of Hasidism during the crucial stage of its expansion in the final decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>173</sup> Although the oral transmission of the tales must have begun early and was never interrupted, the publication of this material was treated with ambivalence, as both the author's and the printer's introductions to the *Shivkhey ha-Besht* would confirm.<sup>174</sup>

Moreover, the embarrassment which was clearly felt in some Hasidic quarters with regard to the more extravagant elements of the “praises” was compounded by an embarrassment not only with the tales themselves but also with the wondrous deeds which had inspired them. While no one doubted the ability of a saint to perform miracles, a number of Hasidic leaders had expressed their distaste for the display of what they considered to be vulgar skills, and they defined their own roles in terms which precluded the expectation of such performances on the part of their followers.<sup>175</sup> This distaste for miracle-working Zaddikim may have preconditioned a certain distaste for the tales of miracle-working Zaddikim.

In addition, the Hasidic camp must have been aware — although the extent of this awareness is difficult to gauge — that their tales “in praise of” the Baal Shem Tov and his associates were being ridiculed by the Enlighteners. The *Shivkhey*

171. See, for example, *Igrot Kodesh . . . Yoseph Yitskhak*, V, letter no. 1157, p. 32; no. 1220, p. 115; no. 1250, pp. 151-152.

172. For a discussion of this, see K. Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yiddish—Perakim le-Toledoteyhah* (Tel Aviv, 1978), 203ff.; Mondschein, *Shivhei*, 52-57; Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 24, 70-71; Elior, “The Minsk Debate,” 181; M. Piekarz, *Studies in Braslav Hasidism* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1972), 128-131.

173. See Dubnow, 138ff.

174. See above, p. 126, n. 39, and cf. *In Praise*, 1.

175. See R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk in *Peri ha-Arets* (Zhitomir, 1867) (facs. ed. Jerusalem, 1970), 60 (also published in Y. Barnai, *Hasidic Letters from Eretz-Israel* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1980), letter no. 35, p. 154). For R. Nahman of Braslav see J. G. Weiss, *Studies in Braslav Hassidism* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1974), 146-148; A. Green, *Tormented Master* (University, Ala., 1979), 43. For R. Shneur Zalman of Liady see Hillmann, *Iggerot*, letter no. 39, pp. 60-63 (also published in *Igrot Kodesh Admor ha-Zaken*, letter 24, 53-58); cf. Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 71.

*ha-Besht* supplied them with powerful ammunition and exposed a particularly irrational, and so vulnerable, face of Hasidism.<sup>176</sup>

It is, perhaps, for all these reasons that, after the publication of the *Shivkhey ha-Besht*, the production of Hasidic hagiography was arrested for a period of some fifty years, and it was only from the middle 1860s on that publications in this genre began to proliferate, achieving great popularity if never quite the full legitimacy which they had lacked from the start.<sup>177</sup> Very probably, the hagiographical works which began to appear in the second half of the nineteenth century were a Hasidic response to the encroachment of Enlightenment. In the opinion of some of their authors, they provided edifying, pious "histories" for the masses as an antidote to the secular literature which was becoming increasingly available to them,<sup>178</sup>—a motive which had not been present in the consciousness of either the author or the printer of the *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* in 1814.

Curiously, although some of the pioneers of this second phase of Hasidic hagiography were associated with the HaBaD movement and dedicated their works to the glorification of its leaders,<sup>179</sup> and although the founder of HaBaD, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, was involved in some way, however indirectly, with the publication of the first Hasidic hagiographical work, the *Shivkhey ha-Besht*,<sup>180</sup> the HaBaD school did not contribute directly to the hagiographical literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries while being extremely prolific in the speculative and halakhic genres.<sup>181</sup> Moreover, at least one Hasidic tradition which stems from outside HaBaD registers a certain measure of disapproval of the *Shivkhey ha-Besht* in HaBaD circles.<sup>182</sup> The first two modern historians of HaBaD in the beginning of the present century, who clearly wrote as "insiders" from the HaBaD perspective (however professionally and rigorously they were committed to their craft as historians), were blatantly critical of the hagiographical tradition and saw their own work as the answer to countless exaggerations and

176. For the attacks on Hasidism by the Enlighteners see S. Werses, "Ha-Hasidut be-Eyney Sifrut ha-Haskalah," *Molad* 144–145 (1960), 379–391; Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yiddish*, 234–260; cf. Dan, *The Hasidic Story*, 195; Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 69–70.

177. See Dan, *The Hasidic Story*, 189–195; Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yiddish*, 210–211; cf. Mondschein, *Shivhei*, 55–56. For an example of present-day ambivalence about the publication of Hasidic stories, see J. R. Minz, *Legends of the Hasidim* (Chicago and London, 1968), 5–6.

178. See Nigal, *The Hasidic Tale*, 69–70; Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yiddish*, 210.

179. It seems as though the very first hagiographical collection after *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* was a Yiddish volume dedicated to R. Shneur Zalman of Liady but written by a man who was not personally associated with the HaBaD school. This was the *Ma'ashe Nora'ah ve-Nifla'ah . . . me-Rabbi Zalmina . . .* (Chernovtsy, 1863) (see Shmeruk, 212). This was followed by *Shivkhey ha-Rav* (Lemberg, 1864), by Michael Levi Rodkinson-Frumkin (see above, note 128) who returned to the same subject in a second work dedicated to the HaBaD leadership, *Toledot Amudey HaBaD* (Koenigsberg, 1876). The other HaBaD hagiographer was Jacob Kaidaner with his *Sippurim Nora'im* (Lemberg, 1875) (see above, note 131). On him see Nigal, 38; Heilman, *Beyt Rabbi*, 213.

180. See Mondschein, *Shivhei*, 18–21; cf. Etkes, "Rabbi Shneur Zalman," 327–329.

181. J. Mondschein has assembled some references to or short tales about the early leaders of Hasidism which are embedded in the speculative teachings of HaBaD. See J. Mondschein, *Migdal Oz* (Kfar HaBaD, 1980), 366–376. For comparable tales about the Baal Shem Tov see his appendix in *Shivhei*, 243–260. It is clear that tales were being told but not published in HaBaD.

182. See Mondschein, 53.

false reports which it had propagated.<sup>183</sup> In addition, R. Shneur Zalman of Liady was one of the Hasidic leaders who did not approve of the miracle-working aspect of Zaddikism, insisting that his followers should address to him requests which concerned only their spiritual welfare, while disclaiming the power to intervene on their behalves supernaturally in material affairs.<sup>184</sup> If this posture had served as an inhibiting factor on the evolution of miraculous tales around his personality such as were emerging around the personalities of many other Hasidic leaders in the nineteenth century,<sup>185</sup> it could go some way towards explaining the hagiographical reticence of HaBaD.

The Admor Joseph Isaac was, of course, fully conscious of this distinctive feature of his own Hasidic tradition. He was proudly aware that the HaBaD school had laid an emphasis on the dissemination of speculative teachings, providing each one of its followers with the challenge of actively expressing his Hasidic affiliation by means of studying this literature in order to refine his intellectual and spiritual grasp. He contrasted this orientation with that of most other Hasidic schools, referring to them collectively as “Polish,” “Galician,” or “Volhynian” Hasidism (as distinct from Russian or Belorussian HaBaD), where the followers had traditionally expressed their Hasidic affiliation passively, by basking in the reflective glory of each one of their leaders, relying on him to “lift” them through his own spiritual endeavors on their behalf. This perception of the contrast between HaBaD and the rest of the Hasidic world recurs time and again throughout the Admor’s writings, and must have come into sharp focus during his period of exile in Poland in the 1930s, when, for the first time in its history, HaBaD was exposed to the close and crowded proximity of Polish Hasidism in its native environment, and was defining its distinctive identity by constant reference to the difference between its own and the “Polish” style.<sup>186</sup> The Admor formulated this difference as follows:

One of the fundamental principles of the Hasidic teaching of HaBaD is that each one of its adherents must be diligently engaged in the work of Hasidism, not as in the system of Volhynia, where the main point is the affiliation to the leader, and the leader lifts those who are affiliated to him.<sup>187</sup>

183. See above, note 114.

184. See above, note 175.

185. This might have checked the development of an hagiographical tradition in HaBaD, but it clearly did not stop it, as the works of Rodkinson and Kaidaner illustrate. However, their works were never embraced by the HaBaD leadership as “official” hagiography, and Rodkinson’s desertion of the traditionalist camp had discredited his work.

186. The view of a “Polish” Hasidic leader as “carrying the flock” rather than letting the flock “carry” themselves is ascribed to R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, who directed the comment at R. Shlomo of Karlin. See Heilmen, *Beyt Rabbi*, 128, n. 2. The Admor Joseph Isaac’s father, in a letter dating from 1914, had already contrasted “the path of the Polish followers of Hasidism who live by the glorification of their leaders” with the HaBaD path. See Mondschein, *Migdal Oz*, 381. Cf. the Admor Shalom Dovber’s *Torat Shalom*, 23–24. In the writings of the Admor Joseph Isaac this becomes a recurrent topic. This is the subject of a paper entitled “‘Polish Hasidism’ in the HaBaD Perspective: The Admor Joseph Isaac Schneersohn in Poland, 1933–1939,” which I intend to publish elsewhere.

187. *Igrot Kodesh . . . Yoseph Yitskhak*, IV, letter no. 1054, p. 398.

In a long letter from Riga, written to his son-in-law (the present Admor) in 1932, he analyzed the “Polish” and the HaBaD approaches respectively, classifying the former as revolving primarily around the personality of the leader whose miraculous feats are bound to generate a hagiographical literature, while defining HaBaD as distributing the burden of spiritual work among all the followers, consequently generating only a speculative literature while suppressing the impulse, natural in the young, to glorify in wondrous tales about the lives of their leaders:

It is evident that the methods and teachings of the leaders of Volhynian, Polish, and Galician Hasidism are closer to the method and teaching of our Master the Besht than is the teaching of HaBaD, especially as far as miracles are concerned . . . for our Master the Besht used to perform many miracles . . . and this is the method also of the leaders of Volhynia, Poland, and Galicia. . . . The attention of the followers of Hasidism concentrates on the paths paved by their leaders, our leaders and the leaders of Volhynia, Poland and Galicia respectively. . . . The foundation of the HaBaD teaching is the study of Hasidism profoundly, rationally and with insight, in order to pray with contemplation and to perceive speculatively. . . . Five generations of HaBaD followers . . . have concentrated on this path. . . . The students and the young crave to hear the occasional miraculous tale, but the older followers rebuke them, since in the eyes of the eminent HaBaD followers, miracles degrade Hasidism. . . . The Hasidic followers of Volhynia, Poland, and Galicia [on the other hand] have concentrated their attention on the lives of their leaders, their tales and their deeds. . . . For this reason, while the Hasidic followers of Volhynia, Poland, and Galicia write down tales and [narratives of] events, providing us with whole books of Hasidic teachings—transcripts of the words of our Masters, long expositions and profound rational explanations.<sup>188</sup>

While he acknowledged fully that the HaBaD tradition had tended to frown on both wonders and their tales, the Admor is far from condemning them outright himself. Remarkably for the spokesman of an Hasidic school which insists on its intimate and exclusive affinity with the Hasidism of the Besht and the Maggid of Mezhirech,<sup>189</sup> he admits that in respect of the attitude to miracles, “Polish” Hasidism is closer to the original “path” of the founders. Moreover, he identifies the desire to hear miraculous tales within the ranks of HaBaD, albeit in young students, not in the old and eminent. One cannot help feeling that his sympathies on this are with the young, and that he disapproves of the doctrinaire attitude of the old. Indeed, near the conclusion of the letter he confesses:

I cannot deny that I often regret it that the Hasidic followers of HaBaD in every generation did not write down the tales and accounts of events which comprised numerous miracles and supernatural feats, even though I still prefer their books and the writings which expound the teachings they had heard, each in his own time, to the wondrous tales they might have told us.<sup>190</sup>

The letter makes it quite clear that despite the disapproval of the older HaBaD followers, tales about the leaders of HaBaD continued to be “whispered” even if they were not written down.<sup>191</sup>

Even at the time when he was writing this letter, and increasingly in the course

188. *Ibid.*, II, letter no. 552, 362–370.

189. Cf. above, pp. 144–145.

190. *Igrot Kodesh* . . . *Yoseph Yitskhak*, II, letter no. 552, p. 377.

191. *Ibid.*, 376.

of his term of office, particularly during the postwar period in the U.S., the Admor Joseph Isaac was committed to the rehabilitation of the tales in the HaBaD school. By blurring the distinction between stories and histories, he was able to inaugurate a new era of hagiographical production in HaBaD, wholly “modern” in its historical orientation, reinforced by the rigor of the Kherson “documentation,” but at the same time drawing on the rich resource of the orally transmitted tales which clearly nourished his own historical writings.

One of his early informants was his grandmother: tales about the lives of the Zaddikim were clearly being transmitted by the women in HaBaD,<sup>192</sup> a fact which would hardly have enhanced their ambiguous status but one which the Admor highlights uninhibitedly. He admits proudly to having listened eagerly to “old wives’ tales,” not only out of his interest in the rehabilitation of the tales but as a part of his equally novel campaign for the rehabilitation of the status of women in HaBaD: appealing to them directly as the guardians of tradition in the home, injecting them with a sense of their own value, and mobilizing their energies for traditionalist propaganda and activism in all spheres of life which are traditionally considered appropriate or specific to women.<sup>193</sup>

The Admor invested the tales with a higher degree of legitimacy by reporting, for example, that his father always concluded the delivery of a formal discourse with a tale or a brief casual talk when addressing an audience of “simple” people – uninitiated into the teachings of HaBaD. This technique proved effective, since “the teaching in general, and the casual talks and tales in particular, had acted upon the audience so that some of them became involved in the Hasidic style of worship, taking long over prayer and adopting the manners of the followers of [HaBaD] Hasidism.”<sup>194</sup> As a method of recruitment or restoration into the HaBaD fold, the tales acquired the same status as the historical works into which they were woven and from which they were hardly distinguishable. The Admor’s followers, and the present generation of HaBaD, have been committing them to writing and to print, taking both their inspiration and license from him.<sup>195</sup>

The historiographical enterprise of the Admor Joseph Isaac, typological, anachronistic, uncritical of its sources as it is, was not the naive work of a dilettante historian. As a religious leader of ingenuity and vision, he borrowed the potent historiographical idiom in order to validate and harness to action a hagiographical tradition whose power of edification he was compelled to draw in conditions of unprecedented crisis and change. He may not have uncovered the “archeological” truth, but that he created a new “historical” truth of HaBaD is certain.

### *University College London*

192. See *Sefer ha-Toledot*, II, 17–18; 136–139.

193. See on this A. Rapoport-Albert, “On Women in Hasidism: S. A. Horodecky and the Maid of Ludmir Tradition,” in A. Rapoport-Albert and S. J. Zipperstein, *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky* (London, 1988), 508–509; 524–525.

194. *Igrot Kodesh . . . Yoseph Yitskhak*, IV, letter no. 906, p. 71.

195. See, for example, the introductions to all three volumes of Ha-Cohen, *Shmu’ot ve-Sippurim*, which feature “talks” or letters by the Admor Joseph Isaac in which he explains the importance of stories and histories in kabbalistic terms and stresses their power of edification.