

Rabbi Chaim Eleazar Spira



This is a photo of Rabbi Chaim Eleazar Spira, taken in Mukachevo in 1935. Mukachevo was a Jewish town. It was even called 'little Jerusalem' and it was a center of Hasidism. There was a yeshivah, a Jewish higher educational institution, in Mukachevo. The chief rabbi at the yeshivah was the popular Hasidic rabbi Chaim Spira [Shapira]. Our Hesed in Uzhgorod is named after him: Hesed Spira. Spira was a very authoritative Hasid known all over the world. I remember him very well since my father and I went to get shirayem - leftovers. A rabbi traditionally invites Hasidim to dinner on Saturday. The rabbi hands them leftovers of the dishes he had tried. Saraim was supposed to bring blessings to a person. Hasidim grabbed every piece from the rabbi's hands. Sometimes they even fought to get them. I remember when at the age of about five I crawled on all fours to the rabbi's table to get shirayem. My father didn't visit the rabbi every Saturday, but I tried to attend every Saturday. On Saturday morning my father went to the synagogue. When he came home we sat down for dinner and I rushed to the rabbi's house to get to the eshram on time. Once I got confused and instead of sitting at the table with the rabbi I sat at the table for the poor that couldn't afford a festive dinner on Sabbath. They had cholent, beans stewed with meat. I had a meal, but then one of the Hasidim asked my father rather maliciously whether he was poor to the

extent of sending his son to have dinner for the poor provided by the rabbi. My father asked me if this was true and then explained the difference between shirayem and dinner for the poor to me. There was some competition between two rabbis in Mukachevo. Besides rabbi Spira there was the Belzer rebbe, also a popular Hasidic rabbi. He built a synagogue in Mukachevo and the community members divided into the admirers and opponents between the two rabbis. The synagogues of Spira and Belze were close to each other. I cannot tell what it was like with adults, but we, boys, whose parents attended different synagogues, even threw stones at one another. There were conflicts between the rabbis' office and the Zionists, too. One of the reasons was the Jewish grammar school. The grammar school paid little attention to religious subjects. The rabbis were concerned about such abandonment. There were also differences in convictions. Hasidim didn't think it necessary to move to Palestine. They believed that the Messiah would come to lead all Jews to their ancestors' land of Palestine and that they had to wait for Him where they were, while the Zionists were helping people to move to Palestine. Rabbi Spira often made angry speeches against the Zionists and even cursed them. There is a well-known Jewish curse: 'to erase one's name so that nobody remembers it'. This curse is said at Purim when they mention Haman's name. Every time the name of Haman is mentioned, everyone boos, hisses, stamps their feet and twirls their graggers. Children start their rattles, adults hit the table with their fists and stamp their feet to blot out Haman's name from history. There's the expression 'blot out' the name or the memory of particular individuals. Rabbi Spira often used this expression when speaking about the Zionists. Sometimes it led to scandalous situations. Occasionally students of grammar school threw eggs at rabbi Spira during his speeches. Now I understand that it was wrong, but it wasn't considered to be so at that time: the rabbi spoke against the Zionists and they acted against the rabbi.