In today’s lecture I will discuss the history of Hassidism in the city of Rzeszów (rayshe in Yiddish) and elaborate a little on two figures from the Hassidic world who lived in a period of change for Jewish life. We will learn about their activity as Hasidic leaders and their responses to those changes, which perhaps share certain features in common. Through a description of these two personalities we will obtain a general overview of Jewish life in Rzeszów, spanning a period of some fifty years, from the eighties of the 19th century to the Holocaust years. These individuals represent different aspects of the city’s Jewish community, in an era of profound cultural and religious transformations, which entailed dramatic changes in the traditional structure of the congregation, alongside civil and political turnovers. The fact that most of the stories about these two men have been passed down as oral traditions, which I personally heard from involved parties or at second hand, vividly illustrates the collective Jewish memory of Rzeszów, a memory that survives and is preserved to this day, more than seventy years after the destruction of its local Jewish community.

The spread of Hassidism in Galicia began mainly in its third generation, through Rabbi Elimelech of Lzhensk and his students at the end of the eighteenth century. Although it was accompanied by more than a few objections and disputes, it did not take long for Hassidism to strike roots in all the towns of the region. This was the fate of Rzeszów as well; despite the fact that it was initially called a “city of mitnagdim [opponents of Hassidism],” for many years Hassidism held the upper hand. A large proportion of its residents were swept away by Hassidism, and some even began travelling to admorim [Hassidic rabbis] throughout Galicia and Poland. Meanwhile, a number of such rabbis settled in the city itself, where they were visited by numerous disciples on Sabbaths and festivals. Although the rabbinic leadership in Rzeszów was not under the control of the Hassidim, unlike many other cities in Galicia, nevertheless life
in the city was undoubtedly affected by the Hassidic approach, and the descriptions the two individuals of whom I will speak are clearly indicative of this fact.

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Amongst those who placed Rzeszów on the Hassidic map, and turned it into center of Hassidism, special mention must go to Rabbi Elazar Weissblum of Rzeszów, the son of the great-grandson of the famous Zaddik [Hassidic spiritual leader] Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, mentioned above. He lived there from 1880 until his death – here, in this place where we are standing, Boguchwala, in 1910. He is even called after the place: Rabbi Elazar Reisher. Rabbi Elazar was a throwback Hassidic figure, upon whom the waft of the earliest days of Hassidism still lingered.

Rabbi Elazar was born in 1839. Orphaned at a young age, he was raised in the house of his father’s close friend, the Zaddik Rabbi Chaim of Sanz, the author of the well-known responsum collection *Divrei Chaim*, and he continued to live in Sanz after his marriage until the passing of his great rabbi. Later he was appointed rabbi in Bukowska, a few years after which he settled in Rzeszów, and before long many of his father’s disciples began to flock to him there. His renown spread far and wide, and he gained a reputation as a “lover of Israel” and a “miracle worker,” especially as a healer, to such an extent that the righteous of the generation called him “the doctor from Rzeszów ("der raysher doctor").

Rabbi Yechezkel of Shinever said about Rabbi Elazar: “In heaven they distribute gifts and tasks for each Zaddik, through which the house of Israel will be saved, and each and every Zaddik is appointed over a particular occupation…Rabbi Elazar was given by Heaven a special ability to cure the sick, and this is his strength and greatness.”

His study house was always filled with heartbroken people, suffering from sicknesses of the body and soul, who came to seek salvation. Rabbi Elazar himself would prepare for them all types of ointments and pills. Dozens of stories are told of his skills as a healer and about the people who merited to be saved by him. The accounts of the masses who flocked to him and who were saved by him were so well-known that even contemporary doctors agreed – as publicized at the time in the Polish press – that in their own modern times there were clear miracles and that G-d hears the prayers of the righteous.
In sum, Rabbi Elazar can be defined as someone who returned to the original Hassidic path of the times of the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples. He was an authentic “miracle worker,” who cured the sick in body and mind. The fact that Rabbi Elazar was a kind of “folk healer,” in addition to a rabbinic and Torah figure, gave him access to broader groups in the diverse Jewish community, and even in the non-Jewish world beyond.

The second figure through whom we can analyze the character of Rzeszów in the first half of the twentieth century is Rabbi Chune Halberstam, known as the “rabbi from Kalshitz,” who also resided in Rzeszów, from 1922 until the years of the Holocaust.

During the period between the world wars, many of the sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, and even the sons of the great-grandsons of Rabbi Chaim of Sanz (1797–1876) served as rabbis and admorim throughout Galicia and beyond. One of the most famous of these was the man under discussion, Rabbi Chune Halberstam. Although he was not one of the older members of the generation – in fact he was one of the youngest – nevertheless, he attracted masses of disciples, including not only youngsters but also elderly folk, who had once been frequent visitors and who had sat in the shadow of his elders, Rabbi Yechezkel of Shineva and Rabbi Chaim of Sanz.

At that time foreign influences had already penetrated into Judaism, and changes could be seen on the Jewish street. In his characteristic manner, Rabbi Chune tried to stop the erosion of faith. He followed the path of his great predecessor, Rabbi Chaim of Sanz who was renowned for his greatness in the three pillars on which the world rests: Torah, Divine service, and acts of lovingkindness. Rabbi Chune was likewise outstanding in all three areas, as we will see below.

First, I will relate a little of his life story: Rabbi Chune was born on 29 June 1884, in the town of Frystak. His father, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, was the rabbi of the town, and a third-generation descendant of Rabbi Chaim of Sanz, both from his father’s side and his mother’s side: His father was Rabbi Aryeh Leib, head of the court in Dukla, son of Rabbi Dovid, head of the court in Chrzanow, who was a son of Rabbi Chaim of Sanz. Upon the outbreak of the First World War, Rabbi Chune fled from Poland, to return only eight years later, after the establishment of the new Polish state. When he returned to the land of his birth in 1922, Rabbi Chune settled in Rzeszów, a center of Torah and Hassidism for the surrounding area.
Rabbi Chune was an active public figure in several fields, and his various roles reflect Jewish life in Galicia between the world wars. An outstanding Torah scholar, he published in his lifetime two pamphlets that display his power of legal analysis even with regard to serious, complex matters. The first, *Kuntres Bein HaShemashot* (“Pamphlet on Twilight”), was written in support of the opinion of Rabbeinu Tam (an important medieval scholar) with regard to the definition of day and night, while the second, *Kuntres Torat Mikveh*, focused on the laws of ritual baths.

It can be surmised that Rabbi Chune chose to publish works on these particular topics for the aforementioned reason that he sought in his own style to reinforce the legal stringencies that were practiced of old. This is true with regard to the opinion of Rabbeinu Tam, as well as the laws of ritual baths, which follow the approach of his ancestor Rabbi Chaim of Sanz. The legal standards in these two fields were to a certain extent disintegrating, due to the dramatic transformations affecting Jewish society at the time. Rabbi Chune’s decision to deal with these specific issues reflect his efforts to try to hold back the corrosion of tradition which was occurring before his very eyes.

Rabbi Chune also invested his best efforts in the education of the younger generation in the path of traditional Judaism and Hassidism, as in days of yore. In 1928, he founded a yeshiva for youth called *Zera Kodesh*, in the city of Rzeszów. He took personal interest in the studies of each and every student, conversed with them regularly, and even sat down to learn with them himself.

Another area in which Rabbi Chune was active was acts of lovingkindness, and he was well-known for the goodness of his heart and his benevolence. He performed much charity and good deeds both personally and with his money, as he would distribute funds to every poor and the broken hearted individual, far beyond what he could afford. It is enough to glance at the lists in the archive of the ancient charity organization Kolel Chibas Jerusalem, which specify the donations of all city residents every few months: The total donations of Rabbi Chune stand out, as they were larger than all others, including community leaders. Rabbi Chune was also known for persistently hosting paupers, destitute individuals, and other young guests, who would satisfy their great hunger at his table. Not only with his money, but also with his body Rabbi Chune sought with all his strength to help anyone he could, without regard for his personal honor.
To summarize, by focusing on two Hassidic leaders, residents of the city of Rzeszów, we have discovered certain characteristics of life in the city over a period of roughly fifty years. These two individuals operated each in his own manner and in his particular field, in different areas of life. The Torah-scholarly sphere; the public-educational sphere, both through writing and educational activities; as well as the popular sphere, involving the broader layers of society - one served as a doctor and a miracle worker, while the other was a great figure of benevolence and charity.