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Translated from Hebrew by Ira Moskowitz

## **Book Kaddish**

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Historians estimate that about 100 million Jewish books were destroyed in the Holocaust. Several dozen of them were copies of a book written by my father's father.

My grandfather was the principal of a small Jewish school in Bialystok, that combined religious and secular studies, and where Hebrew was also taught. Over a period of about 30 years, he occasionally took pen in hand and wrote articles for publications affiliated with Agudath Yisrael. In 1938, he collected 14 of the articles into a thin book, with sections entitled "Articles and Thoughts," "Stories and Drawings," and "Lines and Sketches." He called the book "Writings."

This is how he described his articles: "In most of them, the actions of human beings are reflected – their customs and thoughts in those days, the days of turmoil and confusion, a muddle of ideas and thoughts, days of the reign of hunger and the rule of death, whose impact is still clearly felt today, resulting in broken spirits, desperation and indifference to everything around."

In one of the articles, he inveighs against the Zionists who say: "Here we have a spiritual center that will protect us from destruction." In another article, he gently addresses those who see "one of their brothers being led to burial with red flags surrounding his coffin" and he tells them: "A curse will not emerge from your mouths. Mourn for yourselves as mourners do because you did not appropriately educate the generation."

Some of the articles are drawings of people from the town: "the Shabbat crier" whose "mere appearance in the street of the Jews ... was sufficient to create the necessary impression to make them set aside their business affairs." The synagogue attendant, a simple and devoted person "who listens to the echoes of the sad chants of yeshiva students who stand in the synagogue at night," makes an effort to learn himself, but does not understand a thing and bursts into heart-rending tears.

The publisher of the book was the author himself. It is easy for me to imagine my grandfather proofreading the printed text, making sure to add a list of corrections to the book, holding copies he received from the bookbinder, bringing them to his friends, carrying them to the post office, sending a few copies to his two sons in Jerusalem, addressing by hand the envelopes in which copies of the book would be mailed to several Jewish libraries in Poland.

Several months ago, I happened to visit a Jewish library in New York that was located in a building adjacent to where I was staying. The library still has an old-fashioned card catalogue. I leafed through the cards around my family name until I came across a book by Y. M. Rubinstein. I asked the librarian to bring me the book and he soon placed a green envelope in front of me. I pulled my grandfather's book out of the envelope.

I was puzzled. After all, it was inconceivable that he would send a copy of his book to far-off America. And why would a library in great New York purchase such a modest booklet? Two stamps in the book indicated the path the book had traveled. A stamp in Polish from the library of the Great Synagogue in Warsaw indicates that the library received the book in 1939. The second stamp: Offenbach. Offenbach was a sort of "concentration camp" for Jewish books. The Nazis sent the books they stole from Jewish libraries to Offenbach. The books went through a selection process at Offenbach and those that remained were supposed to serve as items to be used by researchers studying the culture of the lost Jewish people. After the war, the Americans returned some of the books to their places of origin, while other books were given to Jewish organizations defined as "heirs" of the treasure of Jewish books. This is how the book made its way from my grandfather's hands in Białystok to my hands in a New York library.

I gently put the tattered book back into the green envelope. I felt as if I were wrapping the book in its burial shrouds. It is doubtful that anyone would ever exhume it from its resting place. I handed the envelope to the librarian, a bearded and gruff Jew, who appeared to me at that moment as a gravedigger. I suddenly wanted to recite *kaddish*. But I was not sure whether this was permitted. So I left the place and this essay is my *book kaddish*.