

PERSONAL DIMENSIONS



# Towering Above His Past



BY YITZCHOK S. DREZDNER

*Matys Weiser's unusual height parallels his towering spiritual stature. His last name refers to wisdom — and indeed, he has been wise enough to seek out the ultimate truth of Torah.*

*In an absorbing interview, this distinguished ger tzedek from Poland, who now lives with his family in Monsey, recounts how he overcame obstacle after obstacle on his journey to Judaism.*

Olava, Poland, the town where Matys Weiser was born and where he lived for thirteen years.

**Where were you born?**

I was born in Poland in 1966, twenty-one years after World War II. It was a very interesting time in Poland, and in Eastern Europe.

**At what age did you convert to Judaism?**

The actual conversion took place sixteen years ago. But my spiritual journey started when I was fifteen or sixteen years old, perhaps when I was even younger. It wasn't until 1981 or so — in the middle of the Solidarity revolution in Poland, which attempted to overthrow communism, that I began to seriously question my life.

At that time I began, like many teenagers, to look for meaning, for a goal in life, for answers to questions that had troubled me for years. So while my

country sought a better destiny, I decided to live my life as a person who serves the Creator. With Hashem's help, today I can say I reached the goal I set for myself back then.

In the fifteen years between 1981 to 1996, when I drastically changed my life, I slowly traveled the road to Sinai. I wasn't a Jew, but I was surely going in that direction. The problem was that I lived in Poland, lacked a Jewish community that could serve as a role model, and had to deal with widespread negative assumptions about Jewish people — strong anti-Semitism, to put it more accurately. All of this made my journey so much more difficult.

In my book,<sup>1</sup> I describe my journey to

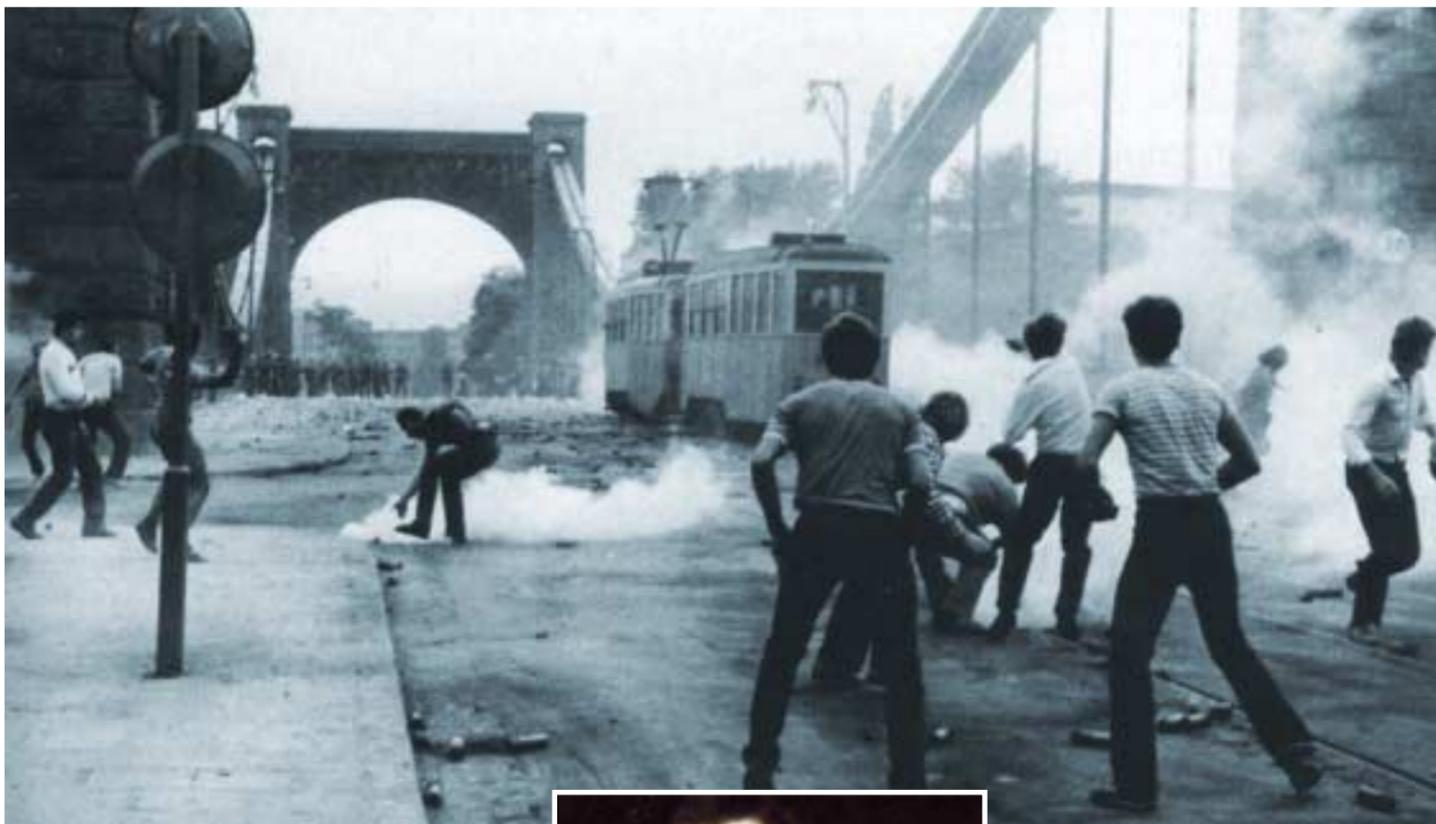
1. *Another Convert* by Matys Weiser, self-published, 2010.

*Yiddishkeit*. In addition to my spiritual quest, my story is also interesting because Poland at that time was undergoing huge changes as well, including the transition from communism to a free-market society. I included as many details as possible in my book so that in addition to learning about my personal rebirth, readers will also come away with a deeper understanding of what people in Eastern Europe went through, what they endured during those years.

I realize that there are not too many Jews emigrating to the Western world from Poland, but there are thousands of Jews who have come here from Russia, and although my book doesn't describe the political and social situation in Russia, nevertheless, it provides perspective on what Eastern Europeans



*Havdalah in a Wroclaw youth club. First from right is Matys; his son Mechel is holding the havdalah candle.*



experienced. For the American reader, I think it's very enlightening to learn about those issues.

**So you were born in 1966, had a normal upbringing, and went to public school. What prompted you to question your life?**

I guess I was born with a questioning nature. I started reading the Bible and quickly understood that this was the book that would answer most of my questions. I was convinced that different so-called "holy" books of other religions contained nothing, on any level, that could be compared to the Bible.

But I soon found out that even the Christian religion, the church that I was attending, didn't live up to those Bible teachings, so when I was seventeen I decided to leave my church. I couldn't make this move legal because at that time in Poland the law stated that one had to be at least eighteen years old to officially change one's religion. So I waited until my eighteenth birthday and then left the Catholic Church.

**What was your parents' reaction?**

They reacted rather drastically, in

essence they expelled me from our home. They told me that if I walked out that door, I could never come back. So I never went back — meaning I never went back to live in their house. I restored peaceful relations with my parents very quickly, but that initial rift left lasting consequences.

I don't have a good feeling about that, especially now, after being a parent myself for a large part of my life. By now, I can put myself in my parents' shoes. At that time, I wasn't looking for trouble, besides for my involvement in the street riots that finally led to the fall of Polish communism. Back then I was simply and truly looking for spiritual

(Above) Matys helped to build a barricade against the communist police in Poland.

(Left) Matys at age twenty-one.

advancement, for spiritual growth. Nevertheless, I imagine that my parents felt very uncomfortable about my decision to leave the church. Their reaction was to send me away from home. So I went.

However extreme it sounds, at that time for me, it was either-or: either I served my Creator, or I compromised merely to retain my social and family situation. I could not make that compromise. For me, it was impossible.

**What were the questions for which you sought answers?**

Why are we here? Why do we exist? Who am I, and what is the reason I was put on Earth at this particular time?

To me these were very basic questions, questions that plague most thinking young people. But all too soon, most people get to a stage in life when they stop asking those questions; they come to accept whatever is.

Some are very happy with whatever they are taught by the priest or pastor or mullah, whatever religious leader they follow. Others give up without finding a

satisfactory answer. But some people explore this question on a deeper level, and I guess it's there that you'll find the *geirim*, the converts.

**Where did you first obtain a copy of a Bible?**

It's interesting that even though Poland is a Catholic country, you couldn't simply go into a store and buy a Bible. It was simply impossible. The reason for that was twofold. First of all, for many years the Catholic Church didn't allow people to read the Bible because it was extremely obvious that the Bible teachings — and I'm even talking about what they call the New Testament — are so different from the official practices of the Catholic Church. Another reason was that Poland was ruled by communists and Communism did not advocate spreading the Bible.

But there was one store in Poland, located in Warsaw, where you could

actually buy the Bible. Some churches also made it available, but in a nation of thirty-eight million people, there was only one store that sold them!

So for my first Bible, I went to Warsaw. How this happened was an amazing example of *hashgachah pratis* that I describe in my book. Anyway, I got a copy of the Bible and started to read it. That was a very big step in my journey.

That's also when I began to ask questions about my church — why we had statues and paintings when the Bible clearly prohibits making any representations of G-d. And why we celebrated Sunday as a day of rest when the Bible says to celebrate it on Saturday. And why everything in the Bible is about the Jews!

That was a very, very big question. I was Polish, and there are seventy nations, or whatever the number is, on the planet Earth, but the holiest book

talks constantly about the Jews. Who are they? Are they still around?

I'd heard the word "Jew," but it was a word with a rather pejorative meaning, a slightly dirty word rather than the name of the people of the Bible. When I saw the Bible filled with stories about the Jews, it was a huge discovery.

**You were sixteen then and still going to church. Did you ask your priest any of these questions?**

Sure! The church offered lessons twice a week. I started to attend the ones offered in my parish, then I went to classes in my friend's parish, taught by a different priest, because I saw him as more intelligent and more forthcoming. But no one could answer my questions, even the very simple ones.

As I continued to read the Bible, my questions became much more sophisticated, and although I always



In the Wroclaw Synagogue several years before coming to America. Matys is sitting, second from left.



This was the day I first learned Rashi with Rabbi Hershel Lieber (second left), a Boro Parker who has spent decades helping returning Jews.

addressed the priests respectfully, I soon realized that they weren't capable of answering my questions. They were either unprepared or unwilling.

During the next few years, although I had already left the Catholic Church, I kept in contact with those priests. But answers were never forthcoming.

#### **How did your school friends respond? Did they make fun of you?**

They couldn't make much fun of me because I was a full head taller than they were! Although sometimes I suspected something going on behind my back, their reaction was mostly one of respect. And most of them wondered what was going on in my life because at that time I was known for my extreme political views.

Then, for a while, I joined the hippie movement — with long hair and everything that comes with it.

Afterward, however, they saw me slowly turning into sort of a holy man. They found this very interesting especially since I immediately started to preach; whatever I learned, I needed to share with others.

So my friends didn't make fun of me, rather they sort of respected me because they had no arguments that could sway me. If a person doesn't have a weapon to bring to a fight, he has to give up. Respect comes automatically when they realize that you're stronger in your convictions than they are in theirs.

#### **When did it occur to you that you might become a *ger tzedek*?**

It took a couple of years. First I discovered that Jews used to live in my country. I hadn't known that.

I don't remember the sixties, but between 1973 when Rabbi Vava Moreino, *z"l*, emigrated from Poland and 1983 when Rabbi Pinchas

Menachem (Mendel) Joskowicz, *z"l*, arrived, for one full decade there was no rabbi in Poland, at least not that I knew of. The Jewish community was basically dying; there was no normal Jewish community as we know it. The joke among the few remaining Jews in Poland was that before the last one would leave he'd have to remember to shut the lights, and that would be the end of a thousand years of Jewish existence in Poland.

Among the non-Jewish population, there was a common, unspoken agreement not to talk about Jews. When they were angry and wanted to hurl an insult at person, they would call him "Jew" or "Ukrainian" or whatever.

In school, we didn't learn about the Jews. Throughout most of Polish history, Jews were 10 percent of the population, but nothing about them was mentioned in our textbooks. At that time, we were living in a society that was completely

controlled by the government. And just as we didn't learn about Jews, we didn't learn about political events in pre-World War II Poland, about Marshal Jozef Pilsudski or General Wladyslaw Sikorski, who were Polish heroes but anti-Communist.

Despite this, while at home we might hear about Pilsudski and Sikorski, we didn't hear about Jews because the topic of the Jews was much more taboo — not imposed by the government but by grassroots society, which refused to discuss Jews. Sure, they remembered them, but I guess there was a shared feeling of guilt, which was not admitted but nevertheless existed.

By my mid-teens I knew that the people of the Bible had been living in my country; and then, when I was eighteen, Claude Lanzmann, a French filmmaker, released his documentary *Shoah*. The government didn't allow the media to broadcast it, but it was showed in special clubs for journalists, and I got to see all nine hours of it. For three days, I went to watch it with [the girl who would become] my wife.

At the age of eighteen, to see that this horrible thing had happened in our land and to realize that nobody spoke about it, that our generation didn't *know* about it — we were shocked, listening to people on screen talk about the death camps, the concentration camps....

We had heard about concentration camps, about Auschwitz and Majdanek, but all we knew about them was that they had been run by the Germans who

had invaded our country and killed a lot of Polish people. Nobody spoke about the fact that out of the six million Polish citizens who had been murdered, half of them — three million — were Jewish! This had never been spoken about at all.

When we watched that documentary, we were the only two teenagers in the room, and it was a shocking experience to feel that we were the only teenagers in the entire city who now knew the truth.

### **When your parents told you to leave the house, where did you go?**

When I left, I was eighteen. I wanted to find a religious group that personified the true teachings of the New Testament that I had been raised on. I looked into this for about a year and a half until I found such a group, which I joined. First, someone allowed me to sleep at his place for a couple of weeks, then I lived for two

years with an older member of this religious organization while I worked to support myself. I couldn't continue my education, obviously, being on my own; I was learning a lot from life instead of from books.

In 1985, I became a member of that group's council. Technically, I was a clergyman, and since every clergy member in Poland has to be registered with the government, I must have been the youngest one listed in the entire country.

I remained with them as a teacher and preacher for the next four years. Then the church designated a group of us to do extensive research so we could write a history of the Law. We were aware that the Law, written in the Torah, was a direct message of the Creator given to humanity, and our goal was to write a book about it to make it more accessible to the lay public.



Matys during his first days in America.



At the Chechinover *hachnasas sefer Torah* about thirteen years ago, Matys danced with the Torah.

But while we were working on this project, I realized that the Law was given to a specific nation, and that this nation and the Torah are indivisible. You cannot take the Jewish people out of Torah, and you can't take Torah out of the Jewish people. They share one identity.

When I understood that, I was twenty-four, and I was by then the father of a son. I asked that my name be erased from the church council, although I still continued to teach certain things. But within the next couple of months, perhaps a year, through networking with other young people my wife and I started to attend a synagogue.

I had first attended a synagogue when I was nineteen, but at that time, in that particular synagogue, I only met old people. The youngest one was sixty-five. He is still alive; I saw his picture this Chanukah in an e-mail I got from Poland. At that time, he was the youngest Jew in that shul, now he is the oldest. Very few are left ... it is very sad.

That was on Purim of 1985. It was an interesting experience for me and for my future wife, so we returned there for Pesach as well, and I attended synagogue from time to time even though I belonged to a

Christian group. It took me a few years to understand that living as a Christian could not bring me to the levels of spirituality and service of the Creator that Torah could give me, if I started to actually practice it, instead of constantly studying it. When I finally realized this truth, my life changed.

#### **In what language did you first read the Bible?**

In Polish!

I know there is a presumption that Polish people are only carpenters and cleaning ladies. But believe me, there are forty million Poles, a whole society of people with different levels of intelligence and education.

Poland has a rich literature, and my areas of interest were history, philosophy and religion, which the Communists didn't look upon with favor. We were extremely interested in books about pre-World War II. You couldn't buy them, but they existed in university libraries and we made Xerox copies of them.

I spent my days, weeks, months in the university library, absorbing books on religion and history.

#### **When and where did you convert? And did your wife and children convert with you?**

I finally converted when I, and then my family, came to America sixteen years ago. Although I had contacted an Orthodox rabbi about conversion several years before that, for me converting in Poland was impossible due to family considerations.

At that time I believed that as a person who was born into a gentile family, I should not sacrifice my marriage and family to take this step. I believe that in marriage and dealing with family, we battle our *yetzer hara* more than in any other environment. I had learned that every non-Jew who abides by the seven requirements given by G-d to Bnei Noach, which include those that pertain to the relationship between men and women, will be rewarded with a place in the World to Come.

So I waited about six years, until my wife's desire to serve Hashem as a Jewish wife and mother matured, and we converted together with our children through a *beis din* in Boro Park soon

after my family joined me, after I emigrated from Poland to the United States.

**Can you describe how you felt when you finally completed the process of *geirus*?**

I know people are expecting me to say that taking that final step was absolutely amazing, because that's how most people assume they would feel. This was something I had been waiting for, aiming for, during the fourteen to fifteen years of my life when I was heading in that direction.

So sure, there was the realization when I joined the Jewish people that this was a major step. But for me my conversion was a technicality. By then I had done so much studying, thinking, changing, that I knew who I was. I knew

I belonged here and that I was part of the Jewish nation. Going to the *mikveh* in the *beis din* was a technical detail for me.

The more amazing feeling for me was when I came to America in 1995, when I saw Boro Park for the first time, saw living Jews, whose pictures I had only seen in the books I had been studying for so long. What a thrill it was for me to know that those "ancient" Jews were still walking the streets wearing yarmulkes, and that nobody was afraid of what a gentile might do to him! This was a more spiritually uplifting moment than anything else, and so it was for my wife, who joined me five months later.

She arrived in America the day before Purim, on Taanis Esther. She walked through Boro Park, and she saw Purim come alive before her eyes. In Poland,

nobody admitted that he was Jewish; nobody admitted that he had Jewish friends. There being Jewish was like having a disease. No healthy person would announce his Jewishness. Coming from that reality to Purim in Boro Park — that was like, wow! Could it get any better

**When you came from Poland, where did you settle, and what did you do for a living?**

First I lived in Boro Park for five months, on the corner of Ditmas and Coney Island avenues.

I fit somewhat the profile of what people assume Poles are, people who know the construction business. Indeed, I did know a bit about it since I had lived in Poland at a time of major transition, when people were acquiring various

Matys's book, *Another Convert*, on the shelf in Eichler's.



skills so they could survive. And even while I was a preacher I worked as the church demanded that its preachers be self-supporting. At that time Poland's economy was changing from total government control to a free economy. So I got some experience on minor construction jobs, and then as a manager for that company. Before I left Poland I owned my own construction company.

So when I came to New York, I fit that profile, although it was never my choice. I had always wanted to be a tour guide, something I could not do in Poland but have merited to do these past two years. So at first I supported myself as a general contractor, which I did successfully until two years ago. I erected some solid buildings here in Boro Park — homes, shuls, *mikva'os*.

#### **Who gave you the name Matys Weiser?**

The name Matys was suggested by the Chechinover Rav, Harav Chaim Yaakov Rubin, who helped me establish myself here. Weiser means "wise"; he suggested this name as well.

#### **How is your relationship with your family in Poland today? Do you ever go back?**

I call my parents and my siblings from time to time, and every few months we "visit," using more advanced technology. But I never returned there.

My wife's family has come here to visit. My in-laws have expressed an interest in Judaism.

When they were here, they went through a certain spiritual evolution and did some research, similar to what I had experienced decades ago. But they can't move to New York, and without our help it is simply too late for them to take such a major step since they are now elderly. But of their own will, they came to understand that believing in the Torah and keeping *mitzvos* elevates a person to a high level of spirituality and engenders a strong connection with *Hashem Yisbarach*.

*"I call myself a chassid of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch; I really love every touch of his pen, the intellectual appeal of his writings. Baruch Hashem, I have the freedom to take the best from any group of Jews and use it for my own spiritual growth."*

#### **You give the impression of a *chashuve chassidische* Yid. How did you decide what community you wanted to join once you became a *ger tzedek*?**

When I came to Brooklyn, I was too new and uneducated to make this decision. However, I was under the impression that chassidim are the most serious people when it comes to *avodas Hashem*, to service of G-d, to *Yiddishkeit*.

Why? Simply by how they look outwardly it seemed to me as if they were declaring, "We are servants of G-d" more than anybody else. With their *peyos* out and their distinctive clothing, it was like broadcast advertising. That was my first impression.

Then came the years of learning and experiencing different communities. I traveled all over the United States. For the last few years I've been guiding people through national parks in my favored profession as a tour guide. Here in the tristate area, I have friends in all Torah communities. My older son learned in *chassidische* yeshivos, but he also learned in the Mir for a few years. My younger son used to learn in Satmar, but now he is in Lakewood. Our daughter was enrolled in *chassidische* schools in Boro Park and Monsey.

I pretty much have an understanding of the differences among the Litvish way of serving Hashem, the *chassidische* way, and the Yekkish way. But I prefer a *chassidische* lifestyle. I see more seriousness in it than anyplace else. For learning, I send my sons to Litvish yeshivos; I understand they can learn more intensely there than in *chassidische* yeshivos.

I call myself a chassid of Harav Samson Raphael Hirsch; I really love every touch of his pen, the intellectual appeal of his writings. *Baruch Hashem*, I have the freedom to take the best from any group of Jews and use it for my own spiritual growth. I am very grateful to Hashem that He gave me this opportunity, which I probably would not have if I were not a *ger*. ■