



Antwerp

The Antwerp Jewish community has always been known as a strange phenomenon. Proportionally it is the most Ultra Orthodox Jewish city in the Diaspora. It consists of a concentrated Ghetto in the centre of Antwerp of about one square mile. It is predominantly Hassidic and the different sects fight and squabble amongst themselves but unite only protect their world from scrutiny and encroachment from the outside . Antwerp Jewry, founded primarily on the once mighty Diamond business combines elements of excessive piety with excessive corruption. This story I am about to tell illustrates both.

In 1988 I married into the Kaszirer family which had moved to Antwerp from Romania in the early fifties. The Patriarch Itzu Kaszirer, a mercurial, brilliant dealer, together with his wife Suri, built up one of the most successful diamond companies in Antwerp in a very short time. In its day, the Kaszirer empire spanned the globe. It had offices and factories in Antwerp, New York, Israel, Moscow, the Philippines and South Africa. It held global real estate interests.

Itzu has always been a devoted follower of the Viznitz Hassidic dynasty. In addition to funding the massive main sanctuary of Viznitz in Benei Brak, Israel, singlehandedly, he established and paid for synagogues for Viznitz around the world. In Antwerp he bought the land and built a large synagogue in Jacob Jacobstraat which he personally funded and maintained for over thirty years. Itzu was always incredibly charitable. He rarely turned people away and gave out interest free loans to anyone coming from the old country whether they were from Viznits or not. His synagogue offered free breakfasts, free kiddushes and free loans. It housed a Cheder and a Mikva and although it as officially a Viznitz centre it welcomed all and sundry, waifs and strays. All those who prayed there, were in some degree personally indebted to Itzu.

Like any synagogue, its members (though no one was ever asked to pay for membership) argued and petty jealousies were rife. Still it was a congenial place to pray and study. In the few years that I lived in Antwerp it was 'my' synagogue. For all its idiosyncrasies I loved it.

During the 1990s the business began to fall apart. Itzu's son Mendy had a mind and values of his own that conflicted with his father. They undermined each

other. The premature death of Suri removed the last constraints. The principals made disastrous miscalculations . Itzu had a serious stroke and by 1997 the business had collapsed and was in the hands of receivers. Itzu was no longer the wealthy patron.

The Antwerp synagogue was held in the name of a non profit association to which various members of the Kaszirer family were appointed. The actual day to day running of the congregation was left up to those who prayed there. For a while the family maintained the synagogue. Some moved away but others including Itzu himself when he could, his son-in-law, grandchildren and even great grandchildren continued to pray there. Slowly the remaining regulars of the synagogue took its affairs into their own hands. Over time a new rabbi was employed and different individuals got involved. Although Itzu was no longer the same man and suffered increasing ill health, whenever he could he was wheeled in and he donated money when he could. A few years ago was persuaded to fund a renovation of the Mikvah for which he gathered funds to the sum of \$110,000.

Quite by accident it was discovered a few years ago by one of Itzu's sons in law, Dr Henri Rosenberg that the new committee had illegally removed all the Kaszirer family members from the association and replaced them with their own, most of whom have no connection with or loyalty to Viznitz. The problem with this move is that it would enable the new 'owners' to sell the synagogue and its contents and pocket the proceeds. Whereas the original Kaszirer constitution required that in the event of the synagogue closing the proceeds of any sale should be sent to a similar charity as decided by his heirs.

The family asked the committee of the synagogue to rectify the situation and to account for the money Itzu had donated for the Mikvah which had patently not been used for that end. They refused. In addition they began to exclude Itzu from his own synagogue and physically threaten his grandsons. The family tried to get the Dayanim and the Beth Din to take action. For various reasons they chose not to and instead, without hearing another point of view took the side of the committee against the Kaszirer family and accused the son in law and grandchildren of being in the wrong. This left the family no other option other than to go to court.

The matter has been dragging on as is the way of things in Belgian courts. In theory of course, religious Jews should only deal with religious courts. But where religious courts have shown a predisposition and a bias there can be no justice and alternatives are legitimate. The battle between the two sides continues. The current worshippers have been using the money Itzu gave for the

Mikvah to run the synagogue. Now it has run out they are unable and unwilling to pay the costs of the synagogue and are trying to put it into liquidation from which they hope to buy it at a knock down price. The family is fighting this. Last week the Av Beth Din Dayan Sternbuch and the rabbi of the Shomrei HaDass in Antwerp Rav Lieberman who have long ignored the true facts of the case, published an announcement in Hebrew and Flemish attacking Itzus son in Law Dr Rosenberg in the most abusive manner (see attached public statement). And see Dr Rosenberg's defence.

This is a typical case of disgraceful behavior, and corruption where an old man's generosity is repaid with hostility and an attempt at misappropriation and theft. To make matters worse it is once again an example of ostensibly religious men and rabbis no less, ignoring honesty and equity for personal gain. Sadly this sort of thing happens in Antwerp often enough. What is particularly offensive here is the refusal of the senior rabbis of the town to hear another point of view and to pre judge the issue. Money as always certainly plays a part . As the saying goes ' There is no honest Judge there can be no honest Law.' No wonder religion gets a bad name.

And here we are in the days leading up to the 9th of Av and we wonder how it is that Jews can be so crooked with each other. Wasn't this what contributed to our own self destruction? If you cannot treat your own honestly how can you possibly treat others any better!

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<http://jeremyrosen.blogspot.com/>

Background of the dispute (Hebrew): <http://www.wiznitz.org/OpenBriefBb.pdf>

Rabbinic announcement (Dutch): <http://www.wiznitz.org/Machue%20001L.jpg>

Rabbinic announcement (Hebrew): <http://www.wiznitz.org/Machue%20002L.jpg>

Open Letter to the Chief Rabbi's (English): <http://www.wiznitz.org/Puntjes%20op%20de34E.pdf>

Letter by the President to Rabbi D.M. Lieberman (English): <http://www.wiznitz.org/PresidentDavid%2520open%2520letter%2520to%2520li%2520bermann%2520%283%29%2520pdf.pdf>