

Hanoch Daniel Wagner\*

### TRACING PRE-1700 JEWISH ANCESTORS USING METRICAL AND RABBINICAL RECORDS

Life in a small Polish town of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not easy on Jewish families, for many reasons. One of these was that early deaths were commonplace, often followed by multiple marriages within the same families, for example among cousins. Some time ago I faced a genealogy dilemma that involved the convoluted records of my BAUM and KUMEC ancestors over the 1830–1860 time frames, in the town of Końskie. Complications arose due to the kind of problems recalled above – multiple marriages, mainly-, but also because of confusing spellings of first names, and an abrupt surname change. I was able to propose a reasonable solution<sup>1</sup> but one important issue – which is the starting point of the present paper – was left unanswered, as follows. I had collected early 1830s records for two separate KUMEC clusters in Końskie: the family of Rabbi Mendel KUMEC and his wife Dwojra, and the family of Uszer KUMEC and his wife Frajdla. KUMEC being a rare surname, I knew that these two families had to be related somehow but I couldn't figure it out. Rabbi Mendel's 1842 death record included the names of his parents, Mordka (Mortek/Markus) and Rajca/Rojza, but Uszer's 1848 death record, on the other hand, did not include his parents' data. Therefore, I figured that Mendel and Uszer could either be unrelated (the least likely option but a possibility nevertheless), or brothers (Mendel being the older brother), or first cousins. As will be seen here, all of these assumptions turned out to be wrong.

The initial motivation for the present article was, therefore, an in-depth analysis of two issues: (1) where did both KUMEC clusters (Mendel's and Uszer's) originate from, before settling in Końskie in the early 1820s? (2) How were Mendel and Uszer KUMEC related? The answers to these two questions unexpectedly generated a wealth of significant family history, including the discovery of a previously unknown rabbinical line by means of mutually substantiating metrical and rabbinical data.

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<sup>1</sup> H.D. Wagner, Brother? Cousin? or both? A family brainteaser, *Avotaynu* 20 (4) (Winter 2004).

## Research strategy

Our starting point is the 1832 marriage record between Mendel's daughter Ronia KUMEC and Mosze BAUM, a particularly fine document written in handsome calligraphic handwriting (Fig. 1). It states that Mosze BAUM, a resident of Wyszogród, is to wed Ronia KUMEC, whose father is the rabbi of Końskie (although he did not officiate as such at his daughter's wedding). A question that arose almost immediately was why of all places did Mosze BAUM (or his parents) of Wyszogród select a bride from distant Końskie (130 km away), and how did such 'bride selection process' (*shidech*, in Yiddish) work in those times? A possible scenario that solves the issue is to assume that both families initially resided together in Wyszogród and the marriage had been arranged early by the parents. This was only a guess because in reality there was no formal clue or evidence that any KUMEC individual had ever resided in Wyszogród, where the BAUM and KUMEC families supposedly could have known each other. In the mid 1990s, I already had had a look in Salt Lake City at the 1808–1826 Mormons microfilms for Wyszogród, searching for Mosze BAUM's birth record. I had found out that these early microfilmed records were of awfully poor quality, and the clerk's handwriting was systematically appalling, making the records almost unreadable. The fact that pre-1826 records contain no surnames before 1820–1821, and mix the data for all religions (unlike the post-1826 records for which separate books exist for each religion) didn't make the search any easier. It had taken a lot of hard work to find Mosze BAUM's 1816 birth record. Unfortunately, since those records are not accessible in Israel, I asked fellow Wyszogród researchers (Roni Leibowitz, Dolores Ring, Ada Holtzman, and above all, my recently discovered distant cousin Leah Jordan Bisel) for help with these pre-1826 microfilms.

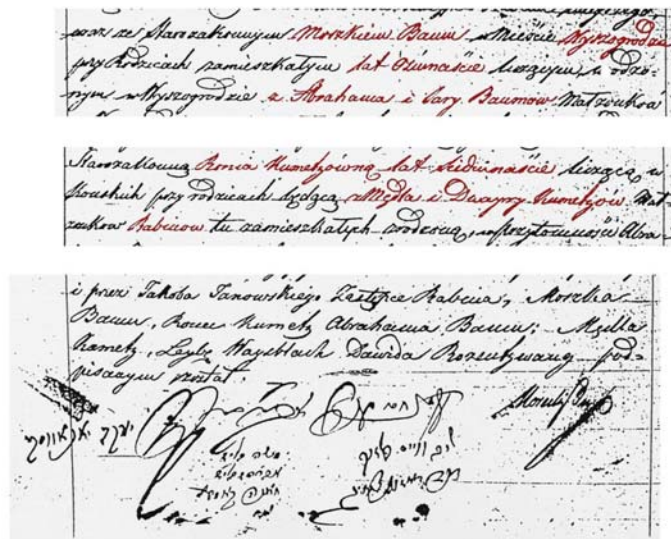


Fig. 1. Excerpts from the 1832 Końskie wedding record of Ronia KUMEC and Mosze BAUM. Mosze and his parents are residents of Wyszogród.

## Metrical data and Yizkor Books

As will be seen, Wyszogród was indeed the town of origin of Mendel KUMEC and his family. The findings in the pre-1826 metrical records of Wyszogród were the following:

- A barely readable 1815 birth record for Ronia, daughter of Mendel Mordka (thus, Mendel son of Mordka) and Dwojra Josek (Dwojra daughter of Josek), see Fig. 2.



Fig. 2. Excerpts from the 1815 Wyszogród birth record of Ronia, daughter of Mendel Mordka and Dwojra Josek. This Ronia most probably died as a baby.

- However, the next discovery was even more dramatic: the 1818 birth record of another Ronia, daughter of Mendel Mordka, 'podrabin' (under-Rabbi), and Dwojra Josek, as shown in Fig. 3! As if it was not hard enough to believe, this second birth record also included the name, Sara, of a twin sister. Which of those two Ronias had married Moszek BAUM? Even though a death record for the first Ronia could not be found, the Ronia born in 1818 is most likely the correct one: her parents would not have used the same name for two of their living children, unless the first one had died in the meantime (and using the same name again also was not uncommon). Later, both Ronia and Sara would marry in 1832, in Końskie, at age fourteen (!).

Did the second KUMEC cluster of Końskie that of Uszer and Frajdla, also originate in Wyszogród, which would indeed support the hypothesis of a close relation between Mendel and Uszer KUMEC?

- A birth record was found for Uszer, born in 1812, whose parents were Mendel Mordka and Dwojra Josek, see Fig. 4! Mendel and Uszer were thus father and son. Things were now falling into place, the age difference, the names of the children and grandchildren, even the double name (Mendel Uszer) of a future KUMEC descendant.

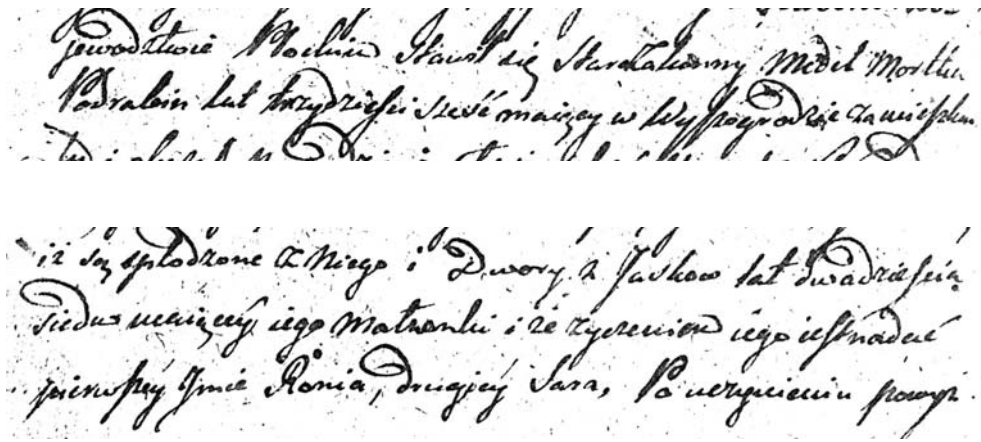


Fig. 3. Excerpts from the 1818 Wyszogród birth record of twins Ronia and Sara, daughters of Mendel Mordka and Dwojra Josek.

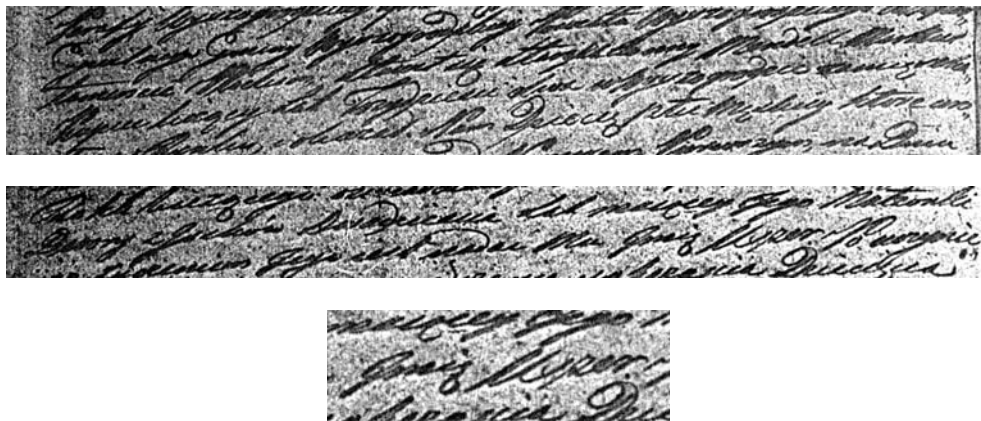


Fig. 4. Excerpts from the 1812 Wyszogród birth record of Uszer, son of Mendel Markus/Mortka and Dwojra Joskow.

At this point a decision was taken to explore the entire 1808–1825 metrical data set of Wyszogród in more depth, as well as to inspect the Yizkor Book of Wyszogród (available on-line<sup>2</sup>) with the hope that the surname KUMEC had perhaps persisted in the collective memory of the town.

Despite the poor quality of the metrical data films (most likely due to the bad state of the original books), their examination led to a number of findings:

- The 1815 wedding record of a sister of Mendel KUMEC, Ester Effrem, to a gentleman named Uszer Markus (as if this was not confusing enough!);

<sup>2</sup> *Sefer Wyszogród*, on-line at: <http://yizkor.nypl.org/index.php?id=2780>

- The 1813 death record of a Markus [son of] Effrem/Froim, age 60 (?), husband of Rojza [daughter of] Wolek Effrem, was found. One of the witnesses on the record is Mendel Markus himself, and this Markus (or Mortek) was definitely Mendel's father, whose name I knew from Mendel's 1842 death record (where Mendel's mother is indeed Dwojra). It is also possible that Mendel Markus had a brother Abram Mordka who seems to be included as a witness on Markus Effrem's death record (the text is hard to decipher).

However, a major new lead appeared in the Yizkor Book of Wyszogród, in very few words (pp. 19–20): a Rabbi Asher KUMEC had officiated first in Tykocin, then in Wyszogród. A look up at another on-line Yizkor Book, that of Tykocin<sup>3</sup>, revealed a long and detailed section about Rabbi Asher/Uszer/Oszer KUMEC. It said:

Asher KUMEC was born in Tykocin in the early 1700s, and served there in 1767 as a Rabbinical Judge (Av Beit Din). Earlier, he had been a pupil of Rabbi Shalom Rokach of Tykocin, and then replaced him upon Rokach's passing. However he only served for a year before moving in 1768 to the small community of Wyszogrod where he served as Rabbinical Judge. He gave his Approbation [Note: 'Haskama', an introduction by an eminent religious personality to a manuscript] to 'Hagorat Shmuel' [Shmuel's Belt], the book of Rabbi Shmuel Ben Azriel from Landsberg, a Rabbi in Plock. (...) Another book, 'Pnei Arieh' [Arieh's Face] written by Rabbi Arieh Lajb KATZ (KAC, or K"C), who was Asher KUMEC's son-in-law, has an Approbation by Asher KUMEC's own son, Froim KUMEC.

This finding extended the family tree back to the early 1700s. It was time to initiate research in a new direction, namely rabbinical genealogy.

## Rabbinical sources

The following information was discovered from copies of a number of books from the Jewish National and University Library on the Givat Ram campus of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and from the Library of the University of Bar-Ilan, with the precious guidance of Rabbi Dov Weber from Brooklyn, New York:

1. The 1770 book of Rabbi Shmuel Ben Azriel from Landsberg, *Hagorat Shmuel*,<sup>4</sup> a Rabbi in Plock, indeed contains Rabbi Asher KUMEC's Approbation ('Haskama'), from which we learn that, "out of modesty, Rabbi Asher almost never gave his Approbation to books" (Fig. 5).

2. The front page of the book *Pnei Arieh*<sup>5</sup> written by Rabbi Arieh Lajb KATZ (KAC, or K"C), published in 1787 in Nowy Dwór, refers to the author's father-in-law, Rabbi Asher KUMEC, and indeed includes an Approbation by Rabbi Efroim KUMEC, son of Asher KUMEC (Fig. 6).

3. The book *Divrei Gdolim*<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 7) had a biography (pages 6–10) of Rabbi Asher KUMEC with the following major information:

- *Natan, son of Asher KUMEC, died in 5581 (1820–1821).*

<sup>3</sup> *Sefer Tykocin*, on-line at: <http://yizkor.nypl.org/index.php?id=2746>

<sup>4</sup> Shmuel Ben Azriel, *Hagorat Shmuel* [Shmuel's Belt], Frankfurt-Oder 1770.

<sup>5</sup> Arieh Lajb KATZ, *Pnei Arieh* [Arieh's Face], Nowy Dwór 1787 [5547].

<sup>6</sup> Tsvi Yechezkiel Michelson, *Divrei Gdolim* [Words from the Great Ones], Pietrkow 1933 [5693]. Includes *Milei de-Avot* [Words of the Fathers] by Rabbi Asher KUMEC and Rabbi Moshe KAC (K"C), known as "The Great Ones from Tykocin."







Fig. 7. Front page of *Divrei Gdolim* (1933).

In all probability, Efroim KUMEC mentioned in *Pnei Arieih* and *Divrei Gdolim* was Mendel's grandfather Effrem/Froim recorded on the 1813 death record of Mendel's father, Markus. Some signs confirm this: later, one of Mendel's children, born in 1827, was also named Efroim Lajb. The *Pinkas Hakehilot Polin*<sup>7</sup> mentions: "Rabbi Efroim, son of Rabbi Asher KUMEC, who before coming to Września, served as Rabbinical Judge in a number of small communities in Poland."

<sup>7</sup> *Pinkas Hakehilot Polin* [Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities in Poland], vol. VI: Poznań, Jerusalem 1999.



As to Natan son of Asher KUMEC, mentioned in *Divrei Gdolim*, who died in 1821, a further search in the Wyszogród metrical data indeed provided the 1820–1821 death record of Nusen Uszerowicz, age 84, ‘podrabin’ (under-Rabbi), as well as the 1811 death record of Laja, 68, wife of Nusen Uszer, 70.

4. Since the KUMEC lineage seemed to comprise so many Rabbis, the classical volume *Otsar HaRabanim*<sup>8</sup> seemed like a natural source of information, and indeed provided the date of death of Rabbi Asher KUMEC, on 4 Kislev 5540 (13 November 1779).

5. The *Pinkas Kahal Tiktin*<sup>9</sup>, a miraculously preserved unique book which includes the minutes of all rabbinical meetings in that town between the years 1621 and 1806, revealed the following information:

1. Page 20 – Rabbi Asher ben Mordechai, Rabbinical Judge in Tykocin and Wyszogród
2. Page 28 – Item 56, Rosh Hodesh Nisan 5502 (5 April 1742), Rabbi Asher ben Mordechai is to become a ‘Magid (speaker)’ in the congregation.
3. Page 37 – Item 70, 27 Sivan 5516 (25 June 1756), mention of Rabbi Asher ben Mordechai.
4. Page 145 – mention of Mordechai KUMEC
5. Page 148 – Item 232, 26 Kislev 5466 (13 December 1705), “The widow of Mr Mordechai KUMEC [!]” is mentioned.
6. Page 151 – Item 240, 20 Tamuz 5466 (2 July 1706), mention of “Sara the widow of M”hram [Moreinu HaRav Mordechai?] KUMEC.”
7. Page 602 – Item 909, Pesach 5498 (1738), mention of Mr Asher ben Mordechai.
8. Page 606 – Item 918, Pesach 5499 (1739), mention of Mr Asher ben Mordechai.
9. Page 607 – Item 919, 6 Iyar 5499 (14 May 1739) or 6 Iyar 5502 (10 May 1742) (?), mention of Mr Asher ben Mordechai.

This provided the names of the parents of Rabbi Asher KUMEC: Rabbi Mordechai KUMEC and Sara, both born in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

6. In January 2008 I attended a scientific meeting in the USA. On my way back I contacted Rabbi Dov Weber and paid him a short visit in Brooklyn to thank him in person for his help and guidance with the rabbinical sources used in my research. While we were chatting about genealogy, our shared hobby, he showed me a copy of *Avnei Zikaron*<sup>10</sup>, a book he wrote in 1999 in collaboration with Neil Rosenstein. The book is based on the original manuscript bearing the same title by Samuel Zvi Weltsman of Kalisz (1863–1938), which can be found at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. Prior to World War I, Weltsman traveled through parts of Poland, Lithuania and Belarus and recorded the epitaphs of 921 prominent Jewish personalities buried in 51 communities. We both realized, all of a sudden, that the book he was handing to me could include an epitaph from Wyszogród. To our

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Natan Tsvi Friedman (Bnei Brak), *Otsar HaRabanim* [A Treasury of Rabbis], Tel Aviv 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Mordechai Nadav, *Pinkas Kahal Tiktin 381–566* [The Minutes Book of the Jewish Community Council of Tykocin (1621–1806)], Jerusalem 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Dov-Berish Weber and Neil Rosenstein, *Avnei Zikaron* [Stones of Remembrance], Elizabeth, New Jersey 1999. The book is based on the original manuscript bearing the same title by Samuel Zvi Weltsman of Kalisz (published at 1904).

amazement we discovered the text copied from the very tombstone of Rabbi Asher KUMEC (Fig. 8). This astonishing finding was particularly important in view of the fact that the two Jewish cemeteries in Wyszogród have not survived.

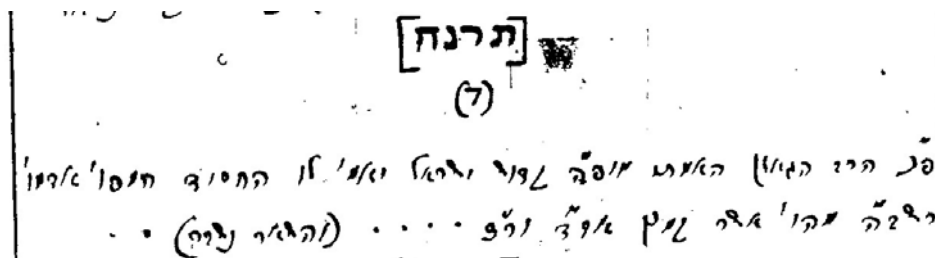
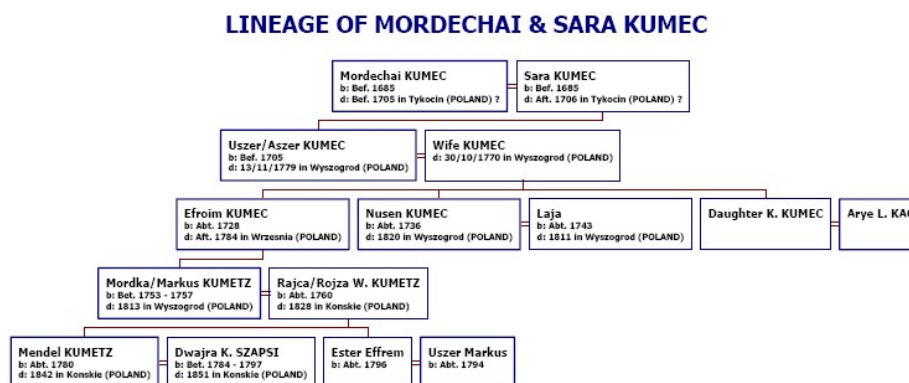


Fig. 8. Weltsman's handwritten epitaph of Rabbi Asher KUMEC, from the original *Avnei Zikaron* manuscript. Only the first part of the text survived because the tombstone was broken.

## Final comments and conclusions

The extensive search described above may be summarized in the KUMEC family tree presented in Fig. 9, which includes all descendants from Mordechai KUMEC down to Mendel KUMEC (Part I) and a direct descendant tree from Mendel KUMEC down to my own children (Part II). This includes a total of 12 generations, from about 1685 to the present (2008).



## Direct Descendants of Mendel and Dwojra KUMETZ

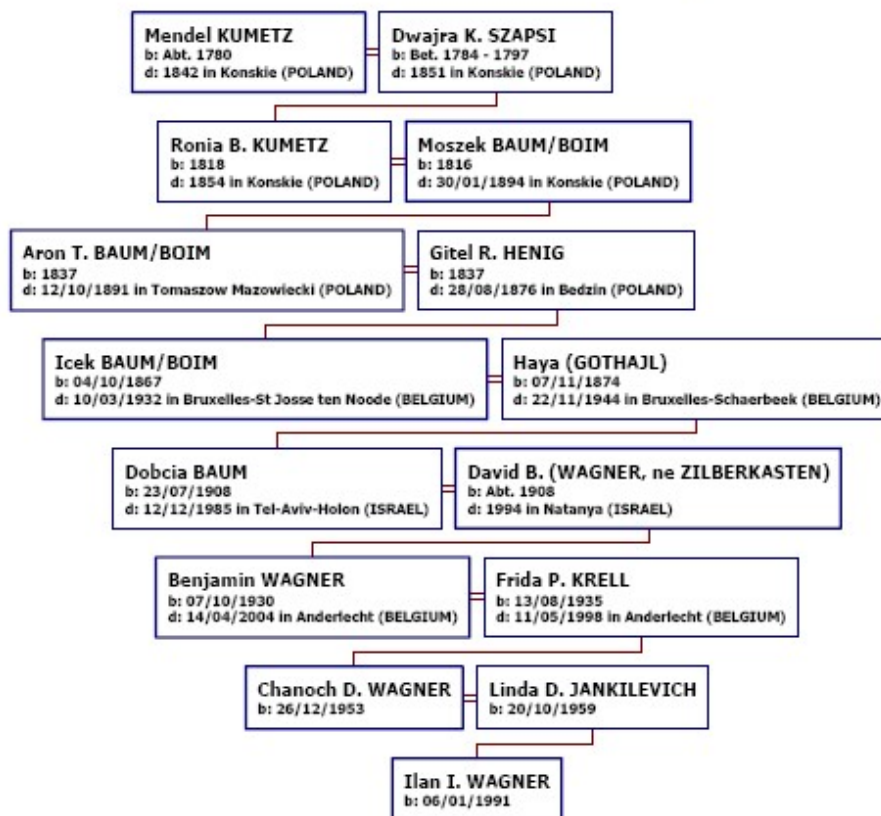


Fig. 9. 12 generations of the KUMEC rabbinical line, from 1685 (or slightly earlier) to 2007: (a) From Mordechai and Sara to Mendel and Dwojra; (b) From Moszek and Ronia to my younger son Ilan Itamar.

The following conclusions are worth mentioning:

1. The origin of the surname KUMEC is unknown. The designation KUMEC (possibly used as a nickname for my earliest ancestor Mordechai) appears as early as the year 1705 in the *Pinkas Kahal* of Tykocin. This pre-dates by more than 100 years the appearance of surnames in the metrical records as imposed by law, which for Jews emerged in the early 1820s. The surname KUMEC does not appear in the early metrical records of Wyszogród but was obviously kept as a traditional surname in the family because it reappears in Końskie in the 1824 birth record of Morteck, son of Mendel KUMEC.
2. Mordechai, the earliest ancestor, had a religious function ('Moreinu HaRav' above), and is therefore the first Rabbi of a – presumably minor – Rabbinical line, with continued through the generations down to the BAUM family (and

most certainly through the various other KUMEC lines of descendants as well), until my great-grandfather Icek-Meir BAUM who was a Rabbinical Judge in Brussels, Belgium, where he died in 1932.

3. Mendel Mortkowitz is quoted as a *podrabin* (under-Rabbi) on the 1815 birth record of his daughter, the first Ronia, as well as on the 1818 birth of the twins Ronia and Sara. Mendel then is quoted as Rabbi of Końskie on the 1821 birth record of his son Josek (not shown here). This clearly contradicts the text of the *Pinkas Hakehillot Polin* (published by Yad Vashem, Jerusalem) for Końskie which states: “*The first rabbi known by name who served in Konskie in the 1820s (his name is recorded in 1827) was R. Yekutiel, a disciple of the Seer of Lublin [Ya'akov Yitzhak of Lublin, d. 1815]. Following him were R. Mendel (about 1829) and R. Joshua of Kinsk [Konskie].*”
4. Later KUMEC lineages migrated away from Końskie to various towns and cities in Poland (Piotrków, Bełchatów, Chęciny, Będzin, Łódź, and more), then beyond Poland, all around the globe (Belgium, France, the USA, Uruguay, etc).

### **Acknowledgments**

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