TWERSKY, Isadore

Isadore Twersky, of Harvard and the Hasidim, Dies at 67

By ROBERT McG. THOMAS Jr.

Isadore Twersky, who bridged two worlds, making the study and practice of ancient Jewish traditions the common thread of a life as a Harvard scholar and Hasidic rabbi, died on Sunday at a hospital in Boston. He was 67 and had been the Nathan Littauer Professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy and the founding director of the New Harvard Center for Jewish Studies.

Friends said the cause of death was lymphoma.

In the classrooms and lecture halls of Harvard, Dr. Twersky was a professor personified, a bearded man whose dark suits, occasional tweeds and dignified manner bespoke his role as a renowned authority on the 12th-century Jewish philosopher Maimonides and other medieval thinkers.

At home in suburban Brookline and in his long black kapote at the Congregation Beth David (the beis mendrash, or study house, as he called it), he was every inch the dynastic Talner rebbe, the spiritual leader of a small Hasidic community his father had led a generation earlier, even as their Twersky ancestors had led congregations in Chernobyl, Ukraine, for centuries.

If simply being a Hasidic rabbi in 20th-century America weren't anomaly enough, Dr. Twersky made it a life's mission to transform the secular citadel of Harvard into a haven for observant Jews and a center of Jewish studies.

It wasn't easy. Although there had been formal Jewish studies at Harvard since 1925, when Dr. Twersky's mentor, Harry A. Wolfson, became the first Littauer Professor, Dr. Wolfson had been very much a one-man Jewish band on a campus where Friday night faculty meetings, Saturday classes and prevailing attitudes long made Harvard an unwelcoming place for practicing Orthodox Jews.

For Dr. Twersky, a 1952 Harvard College graduate who began teaching immediately after receiving his doctorate in 1956 and succeeded Dr. Wolfson in 1965, the conflicts were always resolved in favor of his religious obligations.

He has been widely credited with making Harvard a more comfortable — and comforting — place for observant Jews. But even though he held many prominent faculty positions (among them chairman of the department of Near Eastern languages and literatures, member of the faculty council and of the committee on educational policy and chairman of the standing faculty committee on medieval studies) Dr. Twersky brought about change not through petitions or demands, his colleagues say, but through the moral force of his personal example.

It was a moral force that surfaced early, shortly after he was born in Boston into a dynastic rabbinical family whose sons traditionally succeeded their fathers as leaders of the Talner congregation.



Harvard University, 1985

Isadore Twersky

According to family legend, Dr. Twersky, who had two older brothers, had such a magnetic personality as a child and such an aptitude for the religious life that his mother pointed to him one day and said, "This is the one who will become the rebbe."

Indeed, he did, but it is a further reflection of the anomalies of his life, that the man who became his greatest spiritual influence was not his father, but his father-in-law, Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, a celebrated American rabbi whose Lithuanian talmudist tradition had often clashed in Europe with the Twerskys' Talner brand of orthodoxy.

And for good measure, Dr. Twersky concentrated his scholarship on Maimonides, whose rationalist writings seem quite distinct from the mystic Hasidic traditions.

Dr. Twersky, whose books include "A Maimonides Reader" and "An Introduction to the Code of Maimonides," was in wide demand as a guest lecturer and visiting scholar in the United States and abroad, especially at Yeshiva University in the Bronx and the Hebrew University in Israel.

Partly because of his scholarship and partly because of his personal religious commitment, Dr. Twersky was named to a number of academic and quasi-academic positions and was showered with honors. For all that, he also managed to keep the family dynasty going: his two sons and his son-in-law are rabbis.

His survivors include his wife, Atarah; two sons, Mayer of the Bronx and Moshe of Jerusalem; a daughter, Tzipporah Rosenblatt of the Bronx, and several grandchildren.