

КГБ

КОНФЕДЕЦИАЛЬНО

ДЕЛО №

ТОМ №

THE MAN WHO MOCKED THE KGB

by Rabbi Moishe Levertov

THE MAN WHO MOCKED THE KGB



by
Rabbi Moshe Levertov

Edited and adapted by
Rabbi Daniel Goldberg

2002 • 5762

Digitized by Project Zikaron
Touro University-NY Libraries
www.zikaron.tourolib.org
2022

THE MAN WHO MOCKED THE KGB

Published and Copyrighted © by
Rabbi Moshe Levertov
688 Lefferts Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11203

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced
in any form or by any means, including photo-copying
and digital, magnetic, or optical storage,
without permission in writing
from the copyright holder or the publisher.

5762 • 2002

Digitized by Project Zikaron
Touro University-NY Libraries
www.zikaron.tourolib.org
2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword v
1. Historical Background 1
2. Family History 9
3. Moscow 19
4. War 57
5. Evacuation 63
6. Back in Moscow 85
7. Central Asia 95
8. Gruzia 123
9. Daring Escape 131
10. Father's Fate 147
Appendix I: The NKVD Files 159
Appendix II: The Interrogation 167

בס"ד

FOREWORD

The Bolshevik Revolution of October, 1917, brought radical change to the entire Russian Empire. A most significant change was the new regime's official policy of atheism and war on religion.

This affected Yiddishkeit (traditional Judaism) far more than other faiths. The "Yevsektzia" — "Yevreiskaya Sektzia," the Jewish section of the Communist Party — sought to erase every vestige of Judaism, goading the NKVD (Soviet secret police) to persecute observant Jews and religious institutions by every means possible — defamation, libel, economic pressure, confiscation of property, imprisonment, torture, exile, hard labor and coldblooded murder.

The Yevsektzia waged its war so systematically that it almost accomplished its sinister goal. The overwhelming majority of Russian Jews had been devoutly religious before World War I, but within a generation, most had been weaned away from Yiddishkeit.

Most, but not all. A handful of Jews stood in their way. Despite overwhelming odds, this handful staunchly maintained Yiddishkeit throughout the Soviet Union. Almost all were Lubavitcher Chassidim, devoted followers of Rabbi Sholom DovBer Schneersohn (the "Rebbe RaShaB," 1860-1920), and his son, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak (the "Rebbe RaYYaTz," 1880-1950). Most of these had studied in Lubavitch at the renowned Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim that the two Rebbes had founded in 1897, a yeshiva that imbued its students with ideals that permeated them entirely.

The Rebbe RaShaB once proclaimed that the yeshiva's students were the "soldiers going out to fight the war of the House of David" — the struggle to bring Moshiach whom we have long awaited throughout our exile. Only after the Rebbe

RaShaB's passing in 1920, however, did the real battle begin. Now his followers had to defend the very soul of Yiddishkeit against the onslaught of a mighty regime intent on uprooting it.



The Rebbe RaShaB,
Rabbi Sholom DovBer Schneersohn
(1860-1920), fifth leader of Chabad

Lubavitcher Chassidim suffered terribly for their convictions. Because they refused to work on *shabbos*, they were often reduced to poverty. They lived in constant fear of a midnight knock at the door. Many or most of them were eventually arrested.

The fearsome Soviet jails were brutal. Relentless nightlong interrogations, savage torture and inhuman beatings broke them physically and mentally. Some died under the pressure, others before a hail of bullets from a firing squad. Many were condemned to forced labor in frozen gulags, often expiring from their subhuman treatment. Others were exiled to primitive regions, far from minimal civilized conditions, their health so destroyed that often they did not last out their sentence. They were true martyrs for *Kiddush Hashem* — "sanctifying G-d's Name" in life and death.

The survivors of those awesome years are dwindling in number. A few have published memoirs. But each person's experiences were unique. And few of their memoirs have been published in English.

This volume is my humble contribution towards recording that frightful period for posterity. My memoirs revolve around the heroic life and activities of my father, Rabbi DovBer Levertov, of blessed memory — known among Lubavitcher Chassidim as Berel Kabilaker — and his family, as I recall the details from my childhood in the 1930's until I left the Soviet Union in 1946.

These memoirs are incomplete. During the worst years of the terror, I was still young. Many details must have escaped my memory or else I never knew them. Nevertheless, the account provides a glimpse into the terrors of life under Stalin's regime in the 1930's and 1940's. It also portrays some of the courageous Chassidim who courageously upheld Yiddishkeit and Chassidus in the face of such ferocious persecution.

Recently, copies of the NKVD files of Father's 1947 arrest and interrogation have come into my possession. Excerpts of these are translated here as an appendix to the memoirs.

May these memoirs serve as a modest memorial to my father, and to my mother, who stood heroically at his side through all those bitter years.

* * *

After his release from Soviet imprisonment in 1927, the Rebbe RaYYaTz is said to have declared: "For all the treasure in the world, I would not relive that suffering. Yet neither would I sell it for all the treasure in the world."

Similarly, although my years in the USSR were full of terror and persecution, in a sense they were the most satisfying years of my life — not to be exchanged for anything in the world. Every moment had a sense of living for a higher ideal, an inspiring feeling difficult to evoke under our present conditions of plenty.

My hope is that these memoirs immortalize the memory of those devoted Chassidim whose ultimate sacrifice preserved Yiddishkeit for generations to come. May my readers be inspired to emulate them, above all by delving into Chassidus and living

its teachings. For it was Chassidus that sustained Chassidim through the harshest years, motivating them to uphold Yiddishkeit at all costs, even to the point of utter self-sacrifice. If readers are inspired to greater dedication in that spirit, it will be my greatest reward.

Rabbi Moshe Levertov

11 Nissan, 5762
Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York

Chapter I:
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

UNDER THE CZARS

Before 1917, the Russian empire had been an absolute autocracy. The masses, crushed under the heel of the Czarist government and nobility, had no power and few rights.

The position of the Jews was even worse. Almost all were confined to the so-called "Pale of Jewish Settlement" that included Ukraine, White Russia, and Lithuania (Poland was governed as a separate entity). Even within this Pale, they were excluded from certain areas. They were also barred from many professions and trades, condemning most to lives of dire poverty.

Starting in 1879, the blatantly antisemitic Russian government, aided and abetted by the police and clergy, fomented waves of pogroms every few years against the defenseless Jews — the steady scapegoats whom the ignorant masses could blame for all their woes. Thousands of Jews lost their lives in these pogroms, with inestimable losses of property and their livelihood by pillaging lynch-mobs.

In 1891, Czar Alexander III's brother, Prince Sergei Alexandrovitch — both hated the Jews with a passion — was appointed governor-general of Moscow. Immediately he ordered almost ninety percent of the Jews living there expelled, an edict carried out with intense viciousness, besides other limitations of Jewish life in and around the city, including the closure of most of its *shuls*.

In 1913, the government even staged the notorious Beilis blood libel trial, openly supporting the clergy's preposterous claims that Jews use Christian blood for their matzos on Pesach. In essence, all of Russian Jewry was on trial, for the clergy tried

to discredit Judaism and its leaders in general. Although Beilis was eventually declared innocent, the trial came as a shock to all of civilized Europe and a further sign to Russia's Jews of their precarious position in the land.

The country was ripe for revolution. Small wonder that young Jews were among those in the forefront. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, some young Jews, especially those with secular education, became active in underground revolutionary movements. These were savagely crushed by the Czarist government, but all Jews were blamed for the excesses of the few. Among these popular movements was Socialism, the extreme branch of which became known, early in the 20th century, as Bolshevism.

The persecutions and the grinding poverty prompted masses of Jews to emigrate to the New World, Western Europe and other lands. They knew that religious standards in these new communities were minimal, but often they had no choice — they simply had no way of making a living.

WAR AND REVOLUTION

World War I started in 1914 on Tisha B'Av, 9 Av, anniversary of the destruction of both the first and second Temples in Jerusalem. The armies of Germany and its ally Austria made serious inroads into the Russian empire, occupying large swaths of territory in the regions inhabited by millions of Jews — Poland, Lithuania, White Russia and Ukraine. Their armies, which included many Jewish soldiers, generally treated Jews well. The fact that Yiddish, the language of most East European Jews, was close to German, made it easier for them to communicate.

This gave the antisemitic Russian government an excuse to blame its army's defeats on the Jews, accusing them of being a fifth column supporting the Germans. Russian forces expelled Jews from areas close to the front in Poland and Lithuania.

Besides the many Jews who fled the hostilities — as much from the Russian Cossack soldiers who delighted in attacking and pillaging Jews as from the invading enemy troops, hundreds of thousands of Jews were forced into the interior as impoverished refugees.

Russia's ignominious defeat and resulting economic breakdown brought increased poverty and hunger to its population. This was the last straw for the hated Czarist regime. In early 1917, supported by the Czar's own guards, strikes and riots overthrew his autocratic rule, leaving him powerless and forcing his abdication. That summer, Alexander Kerensky, a Socialist revolutionary, became Prime Minister of provisional government which hoped to introduce democracy to the land. But military defeats continued, thousands of soldiers deserted, and the peasants took advantage of the new government's weakness to seize land from the large landowners.

Russia was not yet ready for democracy. The power vacuum and general chaos created an opportunity for more extreme elements to seize power. In October, 1917, led by Leon Trotsky, under orders of the Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Lenin, accomplished an almost bloodless revolution in the capital of Petrograd (previously S. Petersburg, later Leningrad). Before long, the Czar and his family were executed, as were many members of the nobility. Posing as champions of the Russian working class so that the masses would rally to their side, the well-organized "Red Army" expanded Bolshevik control over more and more of the land.

CHAOS

The Czarist armies had been no match for the armies of Germany and Austria, and were now in utter disarray. To counter the Bolshevik threat, however, they tried to regroup. They were aided by military units from Britain, France, the United States and other Western lands mortally afraid that the

Communist message of government by the working masses might spread around the world and foment class struggles in their own lands.

The anti-Bolshevik forces — known as the "White" armies — were not united among themselves. Led by infamous commanders such as Generals Denikin, Koltchak, Wrangel and Petlura, these Cossack forces had little in common with each other than their fear of the Bolsheviks and a desire to reintroduce a conservative regime.

This Russian Civil War, as it is known, deepened the vacuum in authority as cities and provinces changed hands back and forth between the Bolsheviks and their foes. Lawlessness became the order of the day. The White forces often deteriorated into little more than marauding bands of brigands who roamed the land, pillaging and murdering unhindered.

Ransacking Jewish homes and businesses, these bands ruthlessly massacred tens of thousands of Jews just for being Jewish. The Red Army, on the other hand, included some Jews and did not kill Jews as such. But it added to the chaos by confiscating wealth and valuables in the name of the oppressed masses.

There was no authority to stop the atrocities, and no one cared about the Jews anyway. In this turmoil, which continued until the end of 1921, as many as thirteen million people died and much of the land was devastated. Perhaps half a million Jews fled for their lives to other regions of the land.

At first the Bolsheviks were too busy fighting to harass religion systematically. Although wartime conditions and the ensuing chaos had plunged the traditional Jewish school system and communal institutions into disarray, Jews were still able to teach their children the Torah and serve G-d in their shuls.

BOLSHEVIK RULE

As the new regime took full control of the land in 1922, it halted the unbridled killing and plundering. But now persecution of Yiddishkeit and observant Jews began in earnest.

Bolshevik agents came to every town and village to take over the local government. Factories and businesses were nationalized, and private business and trade eventually banned. Soon the new authorities controlled most sources of employment, granting jobs only to those who followed the party line, which meant declaring repudiation of all religion.

Many of the original Bolsheviks were Jews. After the revolution, many other secularly oriented Jews jumped aboard, using the Communist party as their stepladder to personal and economic advancement. The bitterly anti-religious Yevsektzia went much further than the official party line, seeking to crush the Jewish religion that its members had personally rejected. One effective weapon was granting jobs only to Jews ready to work on Shabbos.

Before the Revolution, most of Russia's Jews would never have desecrated the holy Shabbos. Now, however, many sincere Jews were unable to resist the pressure. Realizing that their families might otherwise starve, they felt they had no choice but to work. Early on Shabbos mornings, the shuls were full of Jews reciting their prayers — before rushing off, with a heavy heart, to their jobs.

Jewish religious schools for all ages were forcibly closed. Instead, the Yevsektzia established a network of secular Jewish schools teaching in Yiddish, the language of most Jews. These schools taught even young children to deny G-d and mock Jewish tradition and practice.

All Soviet schools taught that only Communism could save the world. As Stalin gradually consolidated his rule as supreme dictator of the Soviet Union — by the late 1920's — schools taught children that he was the "sun of the world, the savior of

mankind"! But the Yevsektzia schools went much further to instill hatred of religion, especially Yiddishkeit, in their young students' hearts.

Officially, parents were permitted to teach their children religion at home. But who could counteract the powerful propaganda absorbed at school? Schoolchildren were instructed to spy on their parents and report any "counter-revolutionary" — anti-government — talk or activities, which included anything to do with religion or traditional observance. Many were the tragedies in observant Jewish families whose children innocently reported their parents' religious observance, resulting in the parents' arrest and the children's transfer to government-run orphanages.

THE REBBE AND HIS SOLDIERS

The only serious opposition to this systematic obliteration of Yiddishkeit came from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, who succeeded his father in 1920.



The Rebbe RaYYaTz
Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn
(1880-1950), sixth leader of Chabad

As life settled down during the early 1920's, the Rebbe RaYYaTz initiated an underground struggle throughout that vast

land to reestablish and maintain all traditional religious institutions. He focused especially on opening clandestine "cheder" schools for children, yeshivos for teenage youth, mikvas (ritual immersion pools) in the many places where they no longer functioned, and Torah study groups in the shuls. He also worked to create an economic support framework to provide Jews with livelihood, which would also enable observant Jews to avoid working on shabbos.

Eventually the government realized it was the Rebbe who was behind this highly organized, nationwide network that was reestablishing Yiddishkeit right under its nose.

On 15 Sivan 5687 (June 15, 1927), the Rebbe was arrested. He was condemned to death. A storm of worldwide protests, however, even from non-Jewish governments such as Germany, France and the United States, helped get his sentence commuted to ten years hard labor in the frozen north, then to three years of exile. After almost three weeks of terrible suffering in jail (as he later described in his memoirs), he was sent into exile to Kostroma, in the Urals. Soon, however, under international pessure, he was reprieved — on his birthday, 12 Tammuz (July 12) — and permitted to return home to Leningrad.

In that awesome era, especially in view of the serious charges of "counter-revolution" against him, the Rebbe's release and reprieve were nothing short of miraculous. But his enemies remained ready to pounce on him at the slightest excuse. Realizing that they would never let him accomplish any more for his brethren from within the USSR, the Rebbe saw that he had no choice but to leave the country later that year.

Settling in nearby Riga, Latvia, he continued his work on behalf of the five million Soviet Jews, raising funds to help them and campaigning to alert world Jewry to their plight. In 1933 he left Riga to settle in Warsaw, Poland, then moved to its suburb of Otvotzk in 1936.

In order to succeed in his mighty campaign to strengthen Yiddishkeit, the Rebbe had organized an army of devoted

"soldiers." Essentially, these were any Jews ready to dedicate themselves to the dangerous work, which required immense self-sacrifice. Most of his soldiers were Lubavitcher Chassidim, above all graduates of the famed Yeshiva Tomchei Tmimim in Lubavitch, established in 1897, of which the Rebbe himself had been the dean.

One of the Rebbe's most devoted soldiers was my father, Rabbi DovBer Levertov. Everyone called him Berel Kabilaker — as was the custom then among Yiddish-speaking Jews to call people by the name of their birthplace or town of residence. Kabilak was the town where he served briefly as Rabbi and Shochet after his marriage.

A great Torah scholar and outstanding Chassid, Father tenaciously refused to compromise even one iota in his Torah observance, insisting on maintaining Yiddishkeit and Chassidus under the most difficult conditions. Eventually, like so many other Chassidim, he gave up his very life for the sake of his ideals.

Chapter II:
FAMILY HISTORY

FATHER'S FAMILY

My mother once told us that Father's father, Reb Shaul Levertov, was a descendant of the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), renowned author of the Tanya and Shulchan Aruch (Harav) and founder of the Chabad school of Chassidism. A close family member had in his possession a family tree detailing this descent. Unfortunately, after his passing, his wife sold it, not realizing its great value to the family.



Rabbi Shaul Levertov

Reb Shaul and his wife Yehudis were Chassidim of the Rebbe MaHaRaSh — Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch (1834-1882), the fourth leader of Chabad. Originally they lived not far from

Lubavitch, in Orsha, a town in the province of Vitebsk in north-eastern White Russia (modern Belarus). This region was classic Chabad "territory," where most Jews were Chabad Chassidim.

Later, Father's parents moved south to the Ukrainian city of Krementchug. There they lived in its suburb of Krukov, over the river from the city itself. Krementchug had a significant Chabad community, including many renowned Chassidic personalities who exemplified Torah scholarship and devout Chassidic worship of G-d. The city also had many "Polish" Chassidim — as other Chassidim were traditionally called among Chabad followers (although the region is far from today's Poland).

Reb Shaul himself was a devoted and thorough Talmud teacher, imbuing his many students over the years with a burning love of Torah study. One student later recorded in his memoirs that, when he was aged just eight and a half, Reb Shaul taught his class the tractate Chullin — one of the most complicated in the Talmud!

Father was born in 1885, and his parents named him DovBer after the Mitteler Rebbe (1773-1827), the Alter Rebbe's son and successor as leader of Chabad-Lubavitch. In keeping with their distinguished lineage, Reb Shaul raised his son in exemplary fashion, giving him a solid basis in Torah scholarship.

YESHIVA

Recognizing his son's fine capabilities, Reb Shaul decided to send DovBer away to a senior yeshiva where he could pursue advanced Torah studies. DovBer was just fifteen when his father sent him to the yeshiva of Lomza, a town in Lithuania with a high reputation for Torah scholarship.

Under the conditions of that time, sending a child hundreds of miles away from home could well mean that his parents would never set eyes on him again. Nevertheless, their son's Torah education was of such paramount importance that DovBer's parents were ready for this sacrifice.

Young DovBer's father was too poor to afford a train ticket. So he did what other poor boys did in those days — he hid under the train seat through the whole trip, terrified that at any moment the conductor might discover him and throw him off at the next stop!

He reached Lomza safely, however, and studied Torah there for the next two years, delving deeply into the Talmud and its commentaries.

LUBAVITCH

At that time, the now-renowned Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim in Lubavitch, the center of Chabad Chassidus. had only recently been founded by the Rebbe RaShaB. Even among Chabad Chassidim it was not yet well known. Soon, however, word spread of the new yeshiva's high standards of scholarship and unique atmosphere of devotion to serving G-d, and the warm camaraderie of its students.

DovBer heard about this new Yeshiva from his companions in Lomza. As a serious Torah student, especially one from such a staunch Chabad Chassidic background, he was greatly attracted. Lubavitch sounded like an ideal environment where he could advance in service of G-d through Torah study and devout prayer.

The new Yeshiva, however, was reputed to have rigorous admission standards, rejecting most applicants. DovBer decided to try his luck anyway. Without telling anyone, he packed his belongings and set out for Lubavitch.

DovBer presented himself to the faculty of Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim. The mashgiach — dean of Talmud studies — Rabbi Zev Wolf Levitin (father of the well-known Chassid, Rabbi Shmuel Levitin, 1883-1974), tested DovBer's expertise in Talmudic knowledge and immediately accepted him.

He studied in Lubavitch from 1901 until 1907. Among his fellow students in those early years of Tomchei Tmimim were

such famous names as Reb Shilem Kuratin, Reb Shimshon Vitebsker, Reb Yisroel Neveler and many others renowned for their dedication to Chassidus.

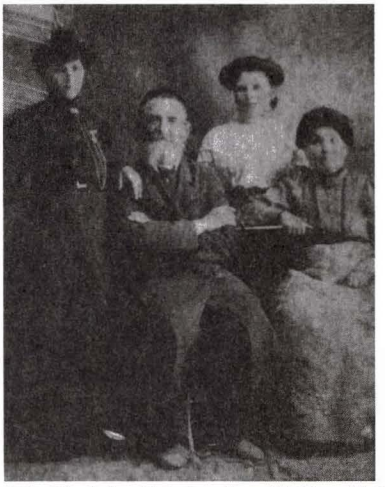
During his five years in Lubavitch, DovBer continued his intense study of Talmud and Halacha (Torah law) — the subjects of study at all Yeshivos. For the first time, he also started delving into Chabad Chassidus, studied in great depth for four hours of the yeshiva's daily twelve-hour study schedule. Chassidus was Tomchei T'mimim's greatest innovation. Before then, Chassidim generally studied this profound philosophy only after their marriage.

Eventually he was granted Rabbinic ordination (Semicha). He also received authorization to practice as a shochet (ritual slaughterer) and bodek (who inspects animals after slaughter) — both highly qualified skills.

In Lubavitch, DovBer was treated with special fondness by the Rebbe RaShaB and his son, the RaYYaTz, the yeshiva's dean. This close relationship was expressed years later when his first son — my brother Sholom — was born in 1927, and the Rebbe RaYYaTz agreed to serve as his sandek (who holds the baby during the circumcision ceremony). Unfortunately, the Rebbe was prevented from attending but sent his special blessing for the newborn to grow up as a Chassid who would be G-d-fearing and learned.

MARRIAGE

In 1907, Father married my mother, Yenta Rivka Sokolovsky, who was also from Krementchug. Her family were Rachmastrivker Chassidim (whose Rebbes are members of the Twersky family, descending from the renowned Tchernobyl dynasty).



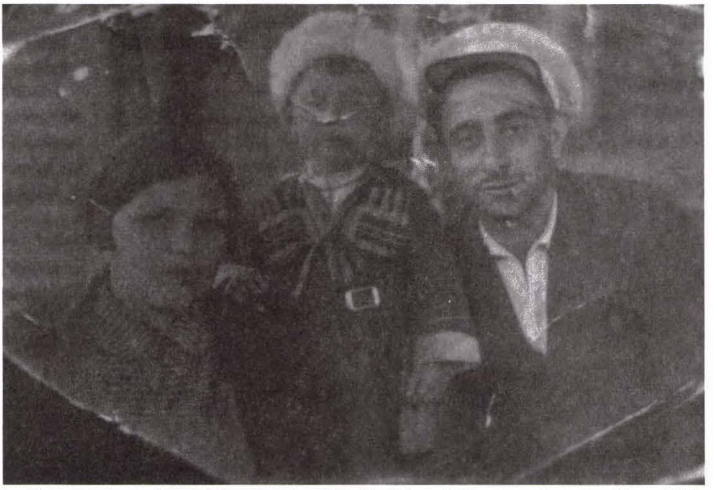
Reb Alter Bentzion Sokolovsky with his wife Elka and daughters, Yenta, Rivka Levertov (a year after her marriage) and Hinda Brocha (center)

Mother was an intelligent and well-educated woman who had studied for several years at a secular high-school ("gymnasium," as such schools were known) — for no Jewish girls schools existed then. Like many other Torah observant families, her parents employed special tutors to teach their daughters basic Jewish studies at home.



Rabbi DovBer Levertov and his wife Yenta Rivka at their wedding, 1907

After his marriage, Father became Rabbi and shochet of the town of Kabilak, near Poltava, Ukraine. He was there for no more than about a year, but he became known among other Lubavitchers as Berel Kabilaker — a name that stuck to our family to the extent that no one knew us by our real family name! Later, Father was employed in other towns, such as Kharol, near Orsha, White Russia.



Chava (nee Levertov), with her husband Leib (Liova) Pizov and their older child ה"יד



Basya Gurevitch (nee Levertov)
holding her younger brother, Moshe Levertov



Sheindel Yevsikov (nee Levertov), in recent years, after leaving USSR

According to the recently unearthed records of his NKVD interrogation, he told their agents that he had been drafted into the Russian army in 1916 during World War I, serving until the Czar was overthrown in 1917. During the War, the family settled in Krementchug until they moved to Moscow in 1922. By that time, my parents had three little girls: Chava was born in Kharol in 1913, Basya in Krementchug in 1914, and Sheindel in 1918.

In the chaotic years after the War, when marauding bands often attacked Jews, Father once had a miraculous escape. A drunk White Army officer attacked him with his sword. Just in time, a quick-thinking friend of his turned over the officer's sword so that it struck Father's shoulder on its blunt side instead of its blade. This saved Father's life, but the blow left a long scar on his body.

MOVING TO MOSCOW

As economic conditions deteriorated, living standards became intolerable. The family had little food and lacked vital necessities. My parents resolved to move to a larger city where there were more opportunities to make a living.

Before World War I, most Chassidim lived within the Pale of Jewish Settlement. Under the Czars, large cities such as Moscow

and Petersburg had been outside the Pale, and few Jews were allowed to live there. Chassidim actually preferred living in small towns which had fewer temptations and distractions from serving G-d.

During the war, the prohibition against Jews living outside the Pale was lifted. Many now moved to large cities, where there were more opportunities for making a living than in small towns.

Under the Communist regime, it was also easier for Torah observant Jews to keep a low profile in a large city, helping them to elude harassment and arrest. In small towns, anyone loyal to the Torah was a conspicuous target, especially Rabbis and other religious dignitaries, who were therefore among the first to move.



Sima Plotkin (nee Levertov), in recent years, after leaving USSR (center, together with Mrs. Brocha Levertov and her sister Mrs. Kuperman)



Shalom (r.) and Moshe (l.) Levertov in their youth

Father and Mother decided to move to Moscow. There Mother gave birth to her last four children: my sister Sima in 1924-1925, my brother Sholom (named after the Rebbe RaShaB) in 1927, and me, my parents' youngest, whom they named Moshe, in 1929. Another sister passed away at the age of three from measles.

Chapter III:
MOSCOW

STRUGGLE TO MAKE A LIVING

On arriving in Moscow, Father had to find work quickly if the family was not to starve. But a normal job, such as at a factory, meant desecrating the holy Shabbos. The new regime had banned all private trade. Even worse, it enacted a six-day week, with everyone working for five days and resting on the sixth, so that Shabbos could now fall on any day of the work week. Since all employment was sponsored by the government, anyone avoiding work on that day was asking for trouble.

Father, who would not think of desecrating the Shabbos, looked for work that would allow him to set his own hours. His novel solution was to learn photography, setting up a photo booth on the city streets where he offered his services to passersby.

Later, Father invested in knitting machines, two large ones for sweaters and three smaller ones for berets and stockings. Many Lubavitchers adopted this occupation, for it could be done at home, away from prying eyes. Above all, it enabled them to keep Shabbos.

Operating such machines at home was not considered a private business. Father had to register his affiliation with the government-owned factory that supplied the yarn and to which he later brought his completed merchandise, getting paid for his work. In practice, however, smaller factories operated almost as private businesses. Some were even run by Chassidim who thereby helped other Jews to avoid working on Shabbos.

These knitting machines became our family's source of livelihood. When my older brother Sholom turned bar-mitzva

and left home to study at yeshiva, I was enlisted in his place, at the age of eleven, to join my sister Sima at work on the machines.

Mother used to rise before dawn every morning to inspect every completed piece of clothing for holes, which she then darned in the knit. After he prayed, Father took them all once a week to the factory, which was very far from our home. Traveling by tramcar and changing from one to another on the way, he carried one heavy sack over his shoulder, with another hanging in front of him. His return trip home was just as arduous, carrying on his back two heavy sacks of yarn on spools for knitting the next batch.

Although Father worked so hard, I never heard him complain. The Jewish managers at the sweater factory had the greatest respect for him. He even convinced them once to contribute generously for the underground Chabad Yeshivos! At one point, they offered to take him in as a partner. But Father refused: "I'll sleep better without it," he told them. "Better to live poorly, but at peace, than to have ten thousand rubles and live in fear. I have enough other worries to be afraid of, without this extra concern." Indeed, years later in the 1950's, under Nikita Khrushchev's regime, the factory's Jewish managers were unfortunately executed for embezzling millions of rubles.

It is difficult to blame those who committed economic crimes during those difficult years. Aiming to impoverish all citizens and exert absolute control, the regime had confiscated most private property. It was impossible to survive on the low wages the government paid most workers, and they had little choice but to turn to illegal economic activity.

To earn extra income, factory owners used some of their government-supplied yarn, together with more bought on the black market, to knit sweaters for private customers. Workers at stores or factories felt justified in stealing merchandise, often bribing the manager or guard to look the other way. Bribery, of course, had always been integral to the Russian way of life since

the Czarist era; it was still indispensable as a tool of survival at all levels of Soviet society.

Mother was busy most of the day running from one store to the next, for products available at one store were not available at others and stores were often far from each other. Each store had an endless line of customers stretching out of the doorway, all anxiously hoping that some food would be left by the time they reached the counter.

At an outdoor public market called the "Rinok," only private produce could officially be sold. Peasants from the countryside — each of whom had received a tiny strip of farmland to cultivate, with a single cow and a few chickens — came there to sell milk, eggs, chickens, fruit and vegetables. But all sorts of other goods, usually obtained illegally, were also sold — at greatly inflated prices, of course.

OUR HOME

At first, our family lived in a spacious apartment in a large, dilapidated building. Father had the good fortune to be appointed supervisor of the building ("Upravdom"), an unpaid but responsible position, with whom all residents had to register. By law, anyone unemployed was forbidden to rent an apartment, and visitors were not allowed to stay overnight. But Father's position enabled him to provide temporary shelter for many Jews, especially Chassidim, until they could find other accommodation.

Our building was close to the famous Marina Roshtcha Shul, where Father prayed daily and was one of the Shul's leading members, serving as gabbay (overseer) of its Chabad Minyan. But in 1935 we were given notice that our building was to be demolished. We moved to a new home about 45 minutes walk from the Shul.

Before the Revolution, our new building had belonged to a wealthy member of the Russian nobility. His own quarters had

been on the second floor, while his servants occupied the rest of the building. As with other large homes, the Communist regime divided the building into multiple apartments — for a total of forty-two families, most with just one room each. The owner's original quarters now housed five families, including ours.

Our single-room apartment was 28 meters square. We divided it into separate sleeping quarters — for my parents, my sister, and us boys — besides a small living room where guests could stay, and a place for the knitting machines. In the basement was a communal kitchen where each family had its own table. The non-Jewish neighbors freely used each other's tables but knew that our table and kerosene stove were not to be touched or used — to avoid becoming non-kosher. We were on excellent terms with them, and they respected Father highly.

Residents on our floor were considered fortunate to have the luxury of an indoor toilet in the hallway. We shared it with five other families and often there was a line to use it. Our floor's only sink was in the toilet, and we had no choice but to use it for washing our hands before eating bread (Jewish law permits this only if there is no other choice).

ILLEGAL GUESTS

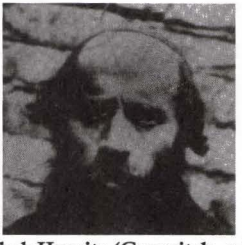
By Soviet law, the building's front door had to be locked at night. There were no bells, so late-night visitors had to knock hard to gain entry. Knocking at an apartment house at night usually meant asking for trouble, for the building supervisor might ask uncomfortable questions, demand a visitor's identity card, and report his suspicions to the police.

But we were very lucky, thank G-d. Although we lived on the second floor and often did not hear the knocking, our downstairs neighbors had such high regard for Father that they admitted our visitors even late at night, realizing that anyone knocking so late must be for us. Our visitors all knew they could knock without the neighbors making any trouble.

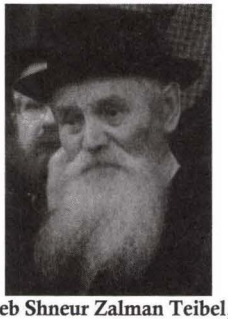
For the crime of harboring unregistered guests, Father could have been arrested. But he made sure to bribe the building supervisor regularly to turn a blind eye.

Our home was one of the few safe havens for Chassidim in Moscow. They had to take extra care not to arouse suspicion, for their beards and clothing made them so conspicuous. Some lived in Moscow's outer suburbs and had missed the last train home. Others had no valid identity cards or were on the run from the NKVD. Such guests often stayed with us a long time, especially those returning from imprisonment or exile for religious activities. These could not register for an apartment, because the government did not permit them to reside in a large city. They came to us, knowing they were always welcome in our home.

Almost every night we had guests. Somehow we found space for everyone. Chairs were turned into beds, some of us stretched out on the floor and soon everyone could fall sleep.



Rabbi Yitzchak Hurvitz (Gurevitch, c.1890-1941), renowned Chassid, known as Reb "Itche der Masmid" הי"ד



Reb Shneur Zalman Teibel, distinguished Chassid



Rabbi Elchonon Dov Marozov (1878-1938), personal assistant to the Rebbe RaShaB (1914-1915) and head secretary of the Rebbe RaYYaTz (1921-1927) הי"ד

Over the years, we hosted many well-known Chassidim. Before Rabbi Yitzchok Hurvitz — known as "Itche der Masmid" — left the Soviet Union, he often stayed at our home (as I heard from Mother; I was too young to remember). So did Rabbi Shmuel Notik, Reb Yitzchok Goldin, Reb Zalman Teibel, Rabbi Nissan Nemanov and many others. Rabbi Elchonon Dov Morozov, who had been the personal secretary of the Rebbe RaYYaTz, sometimes stayed with us before his 1938 arrest. He was outstandingly neat, using his own cup, which he would wash, dry, and set aside for later use.

Even without those who stayed with us, our home often bustled with people. Anyone who had to apply to the government for whatever reason knew that Father was literate in Russian — although he had never attended school — and could write up what was needed.

THE MARINA ROSHTCHA SHUL

Under the Czars, Jews had been forbidden to live in Moscow without a visa. In 1891, when 30,000 out of the city's previous Jewish population of 35,000 were expelled, most of its shuls — mainly small private minyanim — were closed.

That year, the great "Choir" shul on Archipova Square had just been completed at enormous cost but not yet opened. The Czar's brother ordered its great dome demolished, and it was not allowed to open for many years. When it was opened, however, in 1906, it immediately became the city's central shul, which it has remained to this day. In the main shul, prayers follow the Ashkenazic rite, while an adjoining hall has always had a minyan where prayers follow the Chabad rite. Later, after the Soviet regime closed the city's ladies mikvas (ritual immersion pools), a new one was built at the Choir shul — at the urging of the Chabad Chassidim — and has remained open to this day. Males were allowed to use it on the afternoons before, and on the mornings of, Shabbos and Yom Tov.



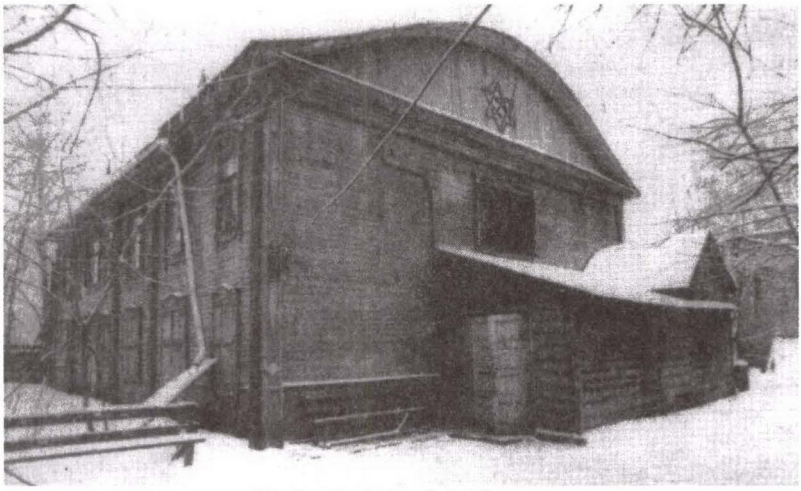
Choir Shul, Archipova Square, Moscow

Another shul, Poliakov's, was named for the wealthy industrialist who founded it (in recent years, during the 1990's, it has been returned to Jews for use as a shul). There were also the Arbat Shul and several smaller ones.

After the 1917 Revolution, Moscow's Jewish population increased from about 8000 before the Revolution to over 100,000, with a flow of Jews from the original Pale of Jewish Settlement — White Russia and Ukraine — most of whom were sympathetic to Yiddishkeit. Regardless of their needs, the Soviets brutally sequestered almost all of Moscow's shuls during the 1930's. Their sacred Sefer Torah scrolls were confiscated and given to shoemakers for use as leather, and their other Torah books distributed to grocery stores for wrapping food or to paper processing plants.

Amazingly, during this era of sequestration of shuls all over the Soviet Union, Jews in the Marina Roshtcha neighborhood of Moscow managed to build their own shul (Father was among the builders, I am told). Even more amazingly, this wood-frame building, completed during the 1920's, was not closed by the

regime and survived throughout the Soviet era. (In 1998, unfortunately, it was fire-bombed and destroyed by antisemites. By 2000, it was replaced by an imposing new seven-floor edifice, including a shul, elementary and high schools and a community center.)



Marina Roshtcha shul, Moscow

Father served as gabbay of the Chabad minyan (prayer group) at the Marina Roshtcha shul and active in all the shul's affairs. At the end of World War II, for example, he felt it important for the shul to have its own official Rabbi, suggesting Rabbi Nosson Nota Olevsky, an elderly Torah scholar — not a Chabad Chassid — who had been in exile in Siberia. His suggestion was accepted and Rabbi Olevsky remained in this position for many years until his passing.

On Shabbos, our shul had four separate prayer services. The earliest was conducted upstairs in the Ashkenazic rite and attended by non-Chassidim. When they finished, the "Polish" (non-Chabad) Chassidim started prayers. Later was the service in the main shul.

In an adjoining room was the Chabad service, starting around 10:30 a.m. Before Shabbos morning prayers, Father used to give a class in Chassidus, teaching the Alter Rebbe's profound

works on the weekly Torah portions — Torah Or and Likkutei Torah. As gabbay of the minyan, he used to organize the farbrengens (Chassidic gatherings), bringing the refreshments. He bought large bottles of spirit very cheaply from a neighbor who worked at a distillery.

As is customary among Chabad Chassidim, Father used to spend more time on his prayers on Shabbos, praying slowly and fervently in the classic Chabad style, completing them some time after the public service was over.

On Rosh Hashana, Father prayed in the main Marina Roshtcha Shul. There he was privileged to blow the shofar (ram's horn), and was seated at a special place of honor along the eastern wall.

COMMUNAL INVOLVEMENT

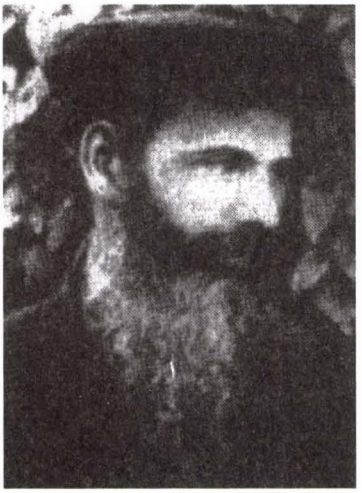
Father was highly intelligent and wise in the ways of the world. He was also kind and generous by nature, mild-mannered and always bursting with liveliness. These qualities endeared him to everyone, earning their great respect, and many Jews and non-Jews alike came to ask his sage advice.

But if ever Father was confronted by demands contrary to the Torah, his mild manner disappeared and he seemed to become a different person. Never can I recall Father yielding to pressure to agree to anything contrary to the Torah. He always remained firm and fearless, persevering in whatever had to be accomplished.

Besides running most activities at our shul, Father was deeply involved in all Jewish communal activities in Moscow and his opinion carried in the city's Jewish community, as illustrated by the following:

In 1938, Rabbi Shmarya Yehuda Leib Medalia, the official Chief Rabbi of Moscow and Rav of the Choir Shul, was arrested and later executed. For several years, no new Rabbi was appointed.

After the German invasion, however, in 1941, the Soviet Union had little choice but to cozy up to the other nations fighting against Germany, who were now sending the USSR much needed supplies. Soon representatives of the Allies, some of them Jewish, started to visit Moscow, and the government realized that the absence of a Rabbi in the capital city left a bad impression. They gave orders to their agents in the Jewish community to appoint a Rabbi in a hurry.

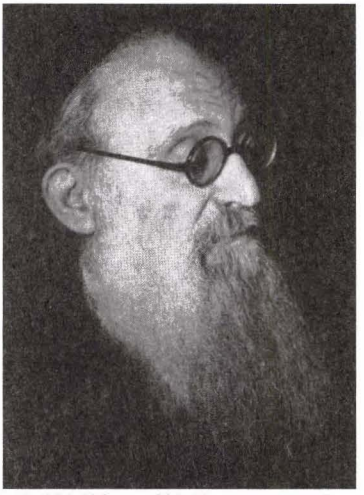


Rabbi Shmuel Leib Levin of Paritch (1890-c.1955)

About 1943, Rabbi Shmuel Leib Levin was appointed to the position. Known among Chabad Chassidim as Shmuel Leib Paritcher, for his birthplace of Paritch, White Russia, where he was born in 1890, he had studied at Yeshivas Tomchei T'mimim in Lubavitch and later served as mashgiach (dean of studies) in various branches of the yeshiva. Besides his great Torah erudition, he was renowned as an outstanding "oved," who prayed devoutly for many hours daily. (He is not to be confused with Rabbi Yehuda Leib Levin — 1894-1972 — a non-Chassidic Rabbi appointed to the position in 1957.)

Not long after Rabbi Shmuel Leib's appointment, however, the board of the official Moscow Jewish community decided to

replace him. Perhaps they felt he did not possess the required qualities of leadership, or were afraid that, as a Chassid, he would be too "extreme." Instead they decided to nominate a non-Chassid named Rabbi Shlomo Shleifer (1889-1957), who had ably served as the community's official secretary during the 1920's.



Rabbi Shlomo Shleifer (1889-1957), Chief Rabbi of Moscow

But Father was adamantly opposed. Firstly, Jewish law does not normally permit evicting a Rabbi from his position. Besides, Rabbi Shmuel Leib Levin, as a learned Chassid, would surely never agree to any compromise, whereas Father knew Rabbi Shleifer only as a Torah-learned layman, employed for many years as a bookkeeper, who seemed unlikely to have the extensive Torah expertise required by a Rabbi. He also had no idea of Rabbi Shleifer's inner convictions — for all he knew he might be an NKVD agent...

At a board meeting called in 1944 to discuss the issue, Father argued that it was unethical to replace Rabbi Levin. Most of the board disagreed. But Father's towering personality and the respect he enjoyed in the Jewish community bore such weight that his opinion could not be ignored. The board therefore

decided on a compromise — to employ both Rabbis together (an arrangement that did not last long, anyway).

Later, Father admitted to us that his suspicions had been unfounded. Rabbi Shleifer was indeed a giant in Torah knowledge, experienced in the entire spectrum of Halachic ruling, and deeply faithful to the Torah. In that frightening era, aware as Rabbi Shleifer was of the fate of so many other Rabbonim, it was an act of tremendous courage and true self-sacrifice for Yiddishkeit even just to accept such a position. Rabbi Shleifer served the Jewish community with outstanding devotion until his passing in 1957.

The president of the Choir shul and of the official Moscow Jewish community was a Mr. Shmuel Tchobrutski. An uncouth and ignorant former tailor from Odessa, he had managed to elbow his way into the communal leadership, grabbing all the shul's finances into his own hands. He appropriated to himself all foreign currency donations by Jewish visitors from other lands, besides other valuable gifts to the shul such as rare books and religious articles. Everyone was mortally afraid of him, for he was known to report to the authorities on everything happening at the shul.

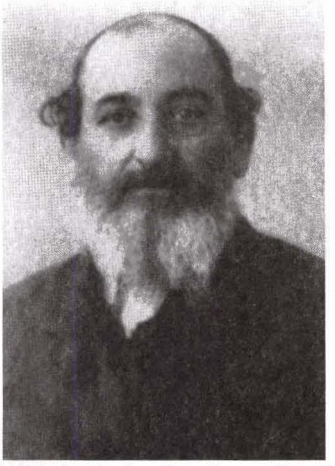
Yet Tchobrutsky's position made him the key to getting much accomplished. For the benefit of our shul, Father needed his help and made sure to keep on the best of terms with him. Sometimes this enabled Father to get favors from him. In 1941, for example, after Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union, it was almost impossible under the wartime conditions to obtain an esrog (the citron fruit, used on the Sukos holiday, which grows in warm climates like southern Italy). As president, Mr. Tchobrutski had somehow obtained a few, and Father used his good relationship to buy one for our shul — for the exorbitant sum of one thousand rubles!

THE SHUL'S ROLE IN OUR EDUCATION

After we moved to our new apartment, our walk to the Marina Roshtcha Shul took much longer. Nevertheless, regardless of the weather, Father always insisted on taking us there every Shabbos and holiday. He considered our regular attendance at the Shul integral to our upbringing, confident that its holy atmosphere would keep us faithful to G-d and His Torah.

On one bitterly cold Shabbos, when most congregants dared not venture out and the shul was half empty, Father took us anyway. We arrived frozen to the bone, and those who did show up berated Father for endangering his young sons' health. But we didn't mind; going to shul was what nourished us spiritually.

We grew up in the shul and felt at home there. The congregants treated us kindly, especially the "Polish" minyan, which sometimes honored us with the special aliya (call to the Torah) of maftir — even before our bar-mitzva. This is permitted by the Halacha but is unusual. By that time — the mid-1930's — children had become a rarity at shul. Shabbos was a school day and all children had to attend. Sometimes we tried to hold our own service with other boys, but there were seldom ten boys there over the age of bar-mitzva.



Rabbi Moshe Dovber Gansburg (1890-1960), distinguished Chassid

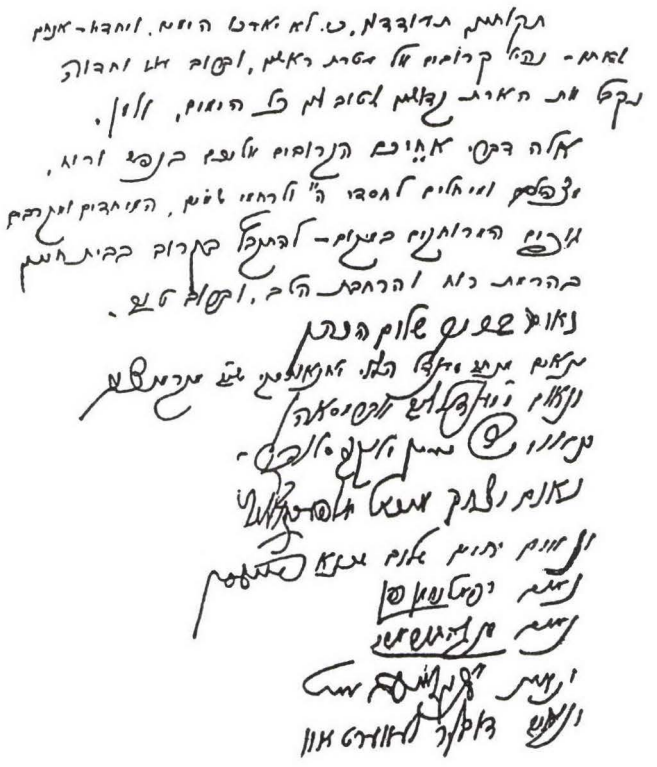
There were few other Torah observant children with whom to associate. One family with whom we were close was that of Reb Moshe Dovber Gansburg. He lived near the Choir Shul, but used to walk every Shabbos — over an hour each way — to Marina Roshtcha to pray together with his fellow Chassidim. His children, Leibel, Hirsch and Yitzchok, used to accompany him and were our friends. But in 1936 we lost them, when they received exit visas to leave the USSR, and emigrated to the Holy Land. Not far from us lived the Abelsky family, whose sons included Zalman (who later lived in Kiryat Gat, Israel, and is now Chief Rabbi of Moldava, a former Soviet republic) and his late brother Berel.

Occasionally, Chassidim from out of town spent a Shabbos or Yom Tov in Moscow, praying at our shul to be with other Chassidim. Sometimes they brought their children, in order for them to enjoy the company of other Chassidic children. It was a real treat for us, enabling us to renew old friendships and make new ones.

After Shabbos morning prayers, there were often Chassidic farbrengens. It was dangerous to hold one at shul, for informers were ever present, spying on every move. So most were held at private homes, usually at ours.

We drew intense encouragement from these informal gatherings where Chassidim discussed inspiring words of Torah and Chassidus, spoke about the Rebbe. They exhorted each other to greater care in Torah study and observance, and devotion to the Rebbe's concerns.

Although the Rebbe RaYYATz was physically distant, we knew that all his Chassidim were always on his mind. Father and others kept contact with him by mail, often in coded messages sent to other addresses from where they were forwarded to him. In 1927, a letter signed by about ten Chabad Chassidim of Moscow, including Father, was sent to congratulate the Jewish community of Riga, Latvia, for having the privilege to host the Rebbe after he left the Soviet Union.



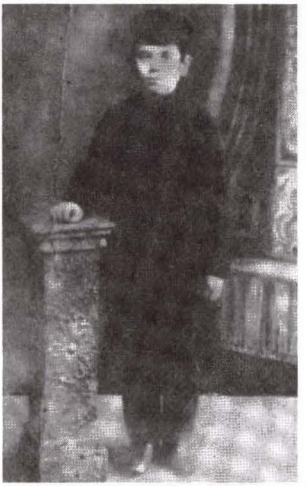
Letter to the Lubavitcher community of Riga, Latvia, from the Chassidim of Moscow, in connection with the arrival in Riga of the Rebbe RaYYaTz in 1927. The last signature is that of Rabbi DovBer Levertov.

At farbrengens, Chassidim often sang a song of yearning for the Rebbe: "Der Eibishter zol gebben gezunt un leben, vellen mir zich zehn mit unzer Rebben" (May G-d give us health and life that we may meet with our Rebbe!).

REB YONA POLTAVER

An extraordinary personality who left an indelible impression on us was Reb Yona Kagan (russified from Kahan, for he was a Kohen). Among Chabad Chassidim he was known as Yona Poltaver after the Ukrainian city of Poltava where he was born in 1898. Studying at Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim in Lubavitch and later at its offshoots in other cities, he developed

exemplary Chassid whose being was permeated with mesiras nefesh — utter self-sacrifice.



Rabbi Yona (Hakohein) Kagan of Poltava (1898-1949), in his youth, when he went to study in Lubavitch

By the end of summer, 1936, those who had directed the clandestine network of underground Yeshivos Tomchei T'mimim — notably Rabbi Nissan Nemanov (1904-1984, who later headed the Lubavitcher Yeshiva at Brunoy, near Paris, France) — had either been imprisoned, fled before the NKVD, or left the USSR. Reb Yona now accepted the dangerous responsibility of directing the yeshiva network and raising its funds — with the Rebbe's blessing.

By then, the yeshivos were constantly on the run. Despite all careful precautions taken by the faculty and students, it was rarely more than a few months or even weeks before the NKVD discovered them and closed them down, often arresting teachers and students. It was Reb Yona's responsibility to find new locations for the yeshivos to reopen, usually by asking local Chassidim to provide a clandestine haven at a shul where the yeshiva's presence was concealed even from the congregants.

For these yeshivos, Reb Yona raised funds only from Chabad Chassidim, lest information leak out to the authorities. Father

served as a member of his advisory committee, helping to raise funds in Moscow.

Reb Yona prayed regularly at the Marina Roshtcha Shul. Every Shabbos morning, when the Chabad minyan reached the point where the Torah is read, the service did not continue until he arrived so that he would be able to hear the Torah reading.

As a true Chassid, Reb Yona rose early, studying Chassidus and preparing for his Shabbos prayers — the spiritual climax of his week. Following Chassidic custom, he insisted on purifying himself spiritually before prayer, especially on Shabbos, by immersing himself in a mikva. The only mikva was at the Choir Shul, so every Shabbos he took a two-hour walk there from his home, in all kinds of weather, then an hour and a half back to our shul.

It was not only the length of his walk that reflected his intense devotion. It also demanded amazing courage. As a Torah observant Jew, Reb Yona did not carry anything outside on Shabbos, and walking so far without an identity card, especially through the center of Moscow, was hazardous. Anyone stopped by a policeman — a frequent occurrence — who could not produce his identity card, was immediately pulled in to the police station for questioning. For a Jew with a beard and Chassidic clothing, that meant dire peril.

Nevertheless, oblivious to all dangers, Reb Yona persisted in this custom every Shabbos and Yom Tov. Out of respect for his exalted level of self-sacrifice for living as a Chassid regardless of the dangers, our minyan awaited his arrival before starting the Torah reading.

Reb Yona's devout Shabbos prayers, in the classic Chabad style, took many hours until mid-afternoon. After his prayers, he never went home on Shabbos, but either stayed at shul or came to us for a farbrengen.

Sometimes he or other Chassidim would ask Sholom or me whether we had "mashke" (alcohol) at home. If our reply was

positive, they headed straight to our apartment — separately, so as not to attract attention — with Reb Yona in the lead.

No one bothered asking permission, for they knew they were always welcome. They knew where to find Mother's homebaked challa loaves (there were no Jewish bakeries, and we had no oven, so she used to bake them in a metal pan on the stove). The visitors found boiled eggs or other simple foods, enjoying a meager but satisfying meal, which served as the basis for an inspiring farbrengen.

When Reb Yona led the farbrengen, his words were always to the point, inspiring everyone present. Everyone appreciated his deep sincerity as one who practiced far more than he preached. His personal standards of Torah observance were impeccable, even higher than those of most other Chassidim. One minor example: Whenever he ate at our home, we made sure to bring him water to wash his hands before eating bread, for he would not do the ritual washing in our bathroom (which presents problems according to the Halacha).

One Simchas Torah remains engraved in my memory. Following Chabad custom, as stated in the Alter Rebbe's Siddur, we used to first dance and liven up the hakofos of our shul's other minyanim, then go to our apartment for kiddush and a farbrengen. Later we returned for late-night hakofos in the Chabad minyan.

At our farbrengen that year, Reb Yona had drunk plenty of l'chayims and was in high spirits as we walked back to shul for hakofos. Suddenly, in the middle of the street, he started singing and dancing joyously. He even picked on a passer-by — although he had no idea who he was, or even whether he was Jewish — and started dancing with him! Then he started doing somersaults. As a young boy, I was so excited by such a display of youthful exuberance by an older Chassid that I began to do the same. But the crowd that gathered to watch claimed that "the old man is performing much better than the boy!" On reaching the shul, Reb Yona continued his joyous dancing through the night.

Amazingly, this took place at the very height of the Stalinist terror! Torah observant Jews were being arrested and summarily executed for no other reason than their religious observance. Yet Reb Yona had no qualms about dancing in the street in honor of Simchas Torah, even during such a dangerous time...

In fact, the NKVD did not catch up with Reb Yona until 1948. Well aware that the secret police were searching for him, he managed to remain in hiding for a long time.

In 1946, when many hundreds of Lubavitchers stayed for months in Lemberg (Lvov), hoping to get a chance to leave the USSR illegally — as will be told in a later chapter — Reb Yona, with his proven organizational ability, was one of the main organizers of the escape operation. Even in Lemberg he established a temporary yeshiva for the youth to study Torah until they would be able to cross the border.

Reb Mendel Futerfas, the operation's other main organizer, once told him that, with the NKVD was hot on Reb Yona's trail, he had decided to reserve him a place on the next train so that he could escape their clutches as soon as possible. Reb Yona agreed. But when he was about to leave, he suddenly announced he had changed his mind and was staying behind: "The Rebbe appointed me in charge of Tomchei T'mimim," he explained. "My first responsibility must be to concern myself with every Tomim [student or graduate of the yeshiva] still left in the land. Only after the last one escapes can I leave!"

Reb Yona would not be swayed by any argument. He was overjoyed to hear that those Chassidim who left had reached Poland safely. But he would not think of leaving himself until he fulfilled the sacred mission entrusted to him of preserving Tomchei T'mimim, its students and graduates.

Many hundreds of Lubavitchers managed to escape to Poland before the NKVD clamped down. The remaining Chassidim, expecting to be arrested, started to escape to other Soviet cities.

One day, the family with whom Reb Yona stayed in Lemberg learned that the local NKVD chief had ordered a search there. Reb Yona was out, but as soon as he came in, he was warned to flee. But this great Chassid insisted on first saying his prayers. Others would have rushed their prayers, with a pounding heart, for every extra moment in the apartment was dangerous. But not Reb Yona. As usual, he prayed devoutly, saying each word with deep fervor, which took quite a while. Only then did he eat a fast breakfast and leave. The NKVD agent arrived, fortunately, only after he left. This incident has a sequel that will be left for a later chapter.

Reb Yona was now on the NKVD's "most wanted" list as one of the greatest "criminals." He escaped to Leningrad. At the apartment where he stayed, a prayer service was organized for Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year. A certain Jew known to be a government informer asked to join the prayers, but those present were naturally unwilling to admit him. Reb Yona, with his heart of gold, felt that even that Jew should be permitted to pray with other Jews on this solemn day, so they let him in. That was his undoing. The man promptly revealed Reb Yona's location to the NKVD, who soon arrested him.

Even in jail, Reb Yona was so scrupulous in his religious observance that he insisted on eating only home-baked bread. His wife sent bread she had baked to his jails, but it probably never reached him. Although he was not at all old, he passed away from malnutrition in his Leningrad jail on 22 Shvat, 1949.

Reb Yona and his wife were childless. Yet many Chassidim consider him their father in a spiritual sense. His untiring efforts gave hundreds of students a faithful Torah education in the underground Yeshivos, enabling them to survive as Jews through one of the harshest eras in our long history of persecution. His spiritual descendants are the thousands of families and pupils these students have since raised — a very large proportion of today's worldwide Chabad community, including many in the

forefront of the Rebbe's work to spread Yiddishkeit around the globe.

REB ZUSHE THE SHAMASH

Another memorable personality was Reb Zushe the Shamash, who served as the attendant at our Shul. He lived in an outer suburb of Moscow, and used to sleep over at the Shul on Shabbos — and often on other occasions — because his home was out of walking distance.



Reb Zusha Paz, "der Shamash"

Reb Zusha Paz, a "Polish" Chassid, was very refined and G-d-fearing. To avoid any possibility of wearing Shaatnez (mixture of wool and linen forbidden by the Torah for Jews to wear), he wore a handwoven Tallis for prayer. He was careful to eat only food prepared according to the highest standards of Kashrus. His wife baked their bread, and they had their own cow to supply them with milk. He often brought fresh milk for Chassidim who had to drink milk for health reasons but were careful to drink only Cholov Yisrael (milk that a Jew has observed the milking). For Shabbos he often brought cookies baked by his wife for the Chassidim to eat at farbrengens.

What made Reb Zusha so remarkable, however, was his mesiras nefesh — his readiness to make the ultimate self-sacrifice — to help other Jews, especially those in danger.

There were always Jews, especially Chassidim, on the run from the NKVD. They had nowhere to spend the night, for their homes were under surveillance and other Jews were afraid to invite them. They often had no choice but to stay in the shul.

Our shul's gentile superintendent, Semyon, was responsible to the NKVD. Every night, he forced everyone to leave before he locked up. After Semyon left, Reb Zusha used to reopen the shul to re-admit these illegals. They had to leave early next morning before Semyon arrived to open up. After morning prayers, Semyon locked up again. Soon after, Reb Zusha reopened the door every day and let the illegals back in!

This took incredible courage. Brazenly flouting the NKVD's orders in order to provide refuge to wanted "counter-revolutionaries" was a crime for which Reb Zusha, if caught, would likely have paid with his life.

Later, as the Germans approached Moscow in 1941, Reb Zusha left Moscow for Samarkand, Central Asia. When the situation there became more stable, he started his own cheder (Torah school) for young children, which we will later have occasion to describe.

EVERY IOTA OF YIDDISHKEIT

Father was a tower of strength to us, educating us by his courageous example. Permeated with faith, he encouraged us to follow his path and stand firm in the face of all difficulties.

In the great city of Moscow, Father was the only mohel (circumcisor). In every shul, anyone coming to inquire about a mohel was directed to Father. Only in one of Moscow's outer suburbs was there another mohel named Bronstein.

The Soviet regime considered circumcision a barbaric practice, dangerous for the child. If discovered, the mohel was

liable to immediate arrest and serious punishment. Nevertheless, Father felt a deep responsibility to bring every possible Jewish boy into the Covenant of Avraham. Ignoring the mortal danger, he performed thousands of circumcisions.

Allowing their son to be circumcised was risky for the parents, too. The Communist Party was the sole avenue to economic advancement, and whoever was able became a member. But circumcision of a son could mean immediate expulsion from the party, guaranteeing unemployment and potential starvation. So parents resorted to all sorts of ruses to arrange a bris. The mother might call the mohel while her husband was out of town, so he could claim to be unaware of what she did in his absence, allowing him to keep his job. Only the mohel had no excuse...

Occasionally, the infant's parents paid Father for his services. But often, when he saw a family's poverty, he accepted nothing and himself raised money to help the mother buy food and clothing for herself and her child.

Besides being a mohel, Father was also a shochet. Usually he slaughtered chickens only for our family. But he made an exception for certain Chassidim who insisted on eating meat only from his shechita, knowing they could rely on his scrupulous care in performing this highly skilled religious task.

In addition to his care in observing all Torah laws, Father was also careful to observe all Chassidic customs and traditional stringencies, regardless of the difficulty.

Notable was his insistence on eating only "shmura matza" on Pesach. This is matza baked of grain guarded from contact with moisture since it was harvested, and is preferable for use at the Seder. Most matza was baked from flour guarded only from when it was milled. But many Chassidim try to eat only shmura matza through all eight days of Pesach.

This was extremely difficult to arrange. First, a peasant or collective farm manager had to cooperate by allowing grain to be harvested under the required special Halachic conditions. The

grain had to be kept dry in a place clean of leaven — very difficult to do while living in close quarters with non-Jews and non-observant Jews. Then it had to be milled in a hand-mill specially cleaned for Pesach use. An oven had to be found that could be properly cleaned and kosherized, and where the baking process could proceed undisturbed by outsiders.

Yet, despite all these odds, the Chassidim managed year by year to bake shmura matza. The women rolled the dough while the men took care of the many other tasks. If any part of the process had been discovered by the police, consequences would have been severe.

Despite his constant struggle to make a living, Father spent many hours teaching us Torah, usually daily. If ever he was unable to teach us, it was Mother who urged us to continue studying on our own — for which I owe her an eternal debt of gratitude.

Mother's faith and fortitude helped sustain us during those difficult times. Among my most unforgettable early memories is how, in the winter twilight late on Shabbos afternoons, we youngsters would crawl into bed and listen to Mother reading aloud, half chanting, her Tz'ena Ur'ena — a renowned work written in Yiddish for women to read about the weekly Torah portion.

Even in the darkest times, when people barely had money to support themselves, Mother and another woman used to spend every Thursday traveling around Moscow by tram to raise money from other Jewish families for Jews in need.

OUR SCHOOLING

Father had incredible courage to keep us out of school. According to Soviet law, every child was required to attend public school. Parents who disobeyed faced severe penalties, including arrest, imprisonment, and placement of their children in government orphanages. Faced by such a threat, many fine

observant Jews felt they had no choice but to let their children attend school.

The government schools gave compulsory lessons on Marxist ideology. Teachers indoctrinated their young students with atheism, teaching them that Comrade Stalin was their father, and the Communist Party their mother...

Schoolchildren until the age of about 17 who dedicated themselves to the ideals of the Communist party became "Pioneers." They wore special red ties and on Communist holidays marched in parades like soldiers. Older teens became "Komsomol" — young Communists - who "volunteered" to work on the fields of collective farms during their school vacations.

The schools taught even youngsters to inform on their own parents. It was a child's duty towards the "Revolution" to report to his teacher if he saw his parents perform any religious ritual. This caused terrible tragedies in many religious homes, when children obeyed what they were taught at school, unintentionally becoming partners in harming their own parents. Often their parents were arrested, charged with trying to poison the minds of minors, or worse, of being "counter-revolutionaries."

By the time children entered their teens, many were filled with such Communist zeal that they despised and hounded their observant parents. One Chassid we knew was threatened by his own son that he would kill him if he were able!

Children from observant families who attended these schools faced tremendous trials, especially in keeping Shabbos. The fearful mother of one of my friends insisted he attend school on Shabbos. At first he left his briefcase on the outside steps of his building and ran off to join his father at Shul. But then he started going to school on Shabbos and eventually became completely irreligious.

Most of my other friends managed to escape attending school on Shabbos until the age of twelve, giving their teachers different excuses every week. Their parents bribed doctors to write sick

notes, feigned family accidents, and invented all sorts of ingenious excuses. But this became more difficult, especially when teachers realized that the parents were religious. After a while, to prevent suspicion, parents felt they had no choice but to send their child to school at least one Shabbos every few weeks. Once the children reached the age of twelve, it became so much more difficult that all my friends without exception eventually attended school every Shabbos.

Father, however, would have none of this. His decision was final: No son of his would attend a government school. He would not allow them to be exposed to atheism, nor permit any laxity in observing Shabbos. Some Chassidim sent their children to relatives in other cities to avoid the compulsory schooling. But Father, in his desire to supervise our education personally, kept us at home.

Besides teaching us himself, Father hired private tutors who taught us Torah at home several hours a day. Even our gentile neighbors knew we had private schooling. When their children played their games outside, they often announced to us that "the rebbe (Torah teacher) is coming."

The tutor, of course, had to be strictly Torah observant — already a rarity in those days. One of them, Reb Yuda, an elderly widower from Smargon, had previously taught our older sisters. Part of his payment, perhaps even more important to him than the monetary part, was the hot supper Mother gave him every evening. He also taught our friends, the children of Reb Moshe DovBer Gansburg, before they left for the Holy Land in 1936.

Our childhood was spent confined within our own private "cheder" (Torah school). Actually, I became envious hearing how my friends at public school enjoyed the Communist holidays when they received oranges and other fruits otherwise unobtainable!

Our days were filled with dread that we might get caught as truants from school. Our hearts froze in terror at every knock at

our door, especially in the early summer when officials used to visit every home to register children for school.

Once we had a real scare. We were in the middle of our Torah lesson, and Father happened then to be slaughtering a chicken. Suddenly, registration officials knocked at our door. We quickly hid our books and Sholom managed to escape, while Mother hurriedly put me to bed. Father had no choice but to complete his ritual slaughter of the chicken.

Fortunately, the officials were two simple women, who just wanted to do their job and had no intention of causing trouble. They duly registered me, and I was terrified that we would be punished if I did not attend school in the autumn. Another time, too, people came to register me. But, thank G-d, there were no consequences either time and no one came to drag me off to school.

The only entertainment Sholom and I had was a weekly trip to the movie theater ("kino" — cinema). In that pre-TV era, these were all over the city. They showed only Soviet propaganda movies — an easy way to brainwash young viewers. Knowing how confined we felt at home, Father permitted us this break, if only halfheartedly, realizing how much it meant for us.

When Sholom turned eleven, Reb Yona Kagan had a long talk with him to explain the spiritual dangers of viewing such films. Sholom agreed to stop. Without anyone to accompany me, I also stopped going and never went to watch a movie again.

All Soviet media were government controlled and censored. Never did they report accidents or murders, for these happen, of course, only in capitalist societies. In the Soviet paradise, everything was only good...

Once, though, we were surprised to read an astonishing item in the newspapers — about an American chess champion visiting the USSR for a tournament, who refused to play on Shabbos and ate only kosher! Government officials even visited our shul to find out where to obtain reliably kosher food for him.

The American champion was the well-known Samuel Reshevsky. We felt very proud that such a celebrity was a Torah observant Jew. But we were envious not to be able to observe the Torah with the same freedom.

Years later, after arriving in New York, I met Reshevsky. Although not a Chassid, he used to pray regularly at the central Lubavitcher Shul in 770 Eastern Parkway, Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and often asked the Rebbe's guidance on important issues in his career and personal life. He gave me a first-hand report of that historic visit to the USSR.

IN THE SHADOW OF DANGER

During the late 1930's, religious persecution escalated sharply. NKVD spies were everywhere, in all guises, ready to send a "counter-revolutionary" to exile or death for the least misdemeanor. Countless people, especially observant Jews, both Chassidim and non-Chassidim, just disappeared.

One Shabbos, for example, on arriving in shul, we noticed the absence of Reb Mendel Leib Abramson. A highly respected and learned Chabad Chassid who used to teach Torah classes at the shul, he had been a wealthy and charitable businessman before the Revolution but had lost his business and moved to Moscow. After his arrest by the NKVD, we never heard of him again.

Another special Chabad Chassid arrested by the NKVD in 1935, and who never returned, was Rabbi Yaakov Maskalik — known as Reb Yankel Zhurovitcher, by the name of the town where he had served as Rabbi. A graduate of Tomchei T'mimim in Lubavitch, he became a legend even among Chabad Chassidim, renowned for his boundless love for every Jew and his fearless devotion to Chassidus and Yiddishkeit. The Rebbe RaYYaTz once remarked: "If I would have a few such Yankels, I would be able to turn over the world."

During that terrible era, shuls and Torah schools were closed, mikvas were filled in, Rabbis, Torah teachers and observant Jews were dragged off in the dead of night — to imprisonment, exile or execution. We lived in constant terror, uncertain what the future might bring. The fear was so great that we were terrified to show any sign of religious observance except at shul.



Rabbi Yaakov Zecharya Maskalik,
Rabbi in Zhurovitz and Moscow

Yet nothing deterred Father from continuing his activities for Yiddishkeit, especially among Jews who could be trusted not to be informers. He seemed utterly oblivious to any consequences. We were terrified that he might be arrested and suffer the same terrible fate as so many others, for we had ample indication that the NKVD was aware of everything he did.

Once, for example, a certain Lubavitcher was summoned to appear at NKVD headquarters. "Tonight," he was told, "a meeting is to be held at Berel Kabilaker's home. You are to attend and report back to us tomorrow, repeating everything discussed there."

That night he came to us very agitated. "Tomorrow I have to report about this meeting," he revealed. "Please discuss only innocent subjects!" The Chassidim cooperated, avoiding any talk

of incriminating activities. Yet they were disturbed by the news: Who knew if they would be so lucky next time?

The next day, the Chassid dutifully reported back to the NKVD office that no one had discussed anything important at the meeting.

The officers stared at him coldly. "Fool," they blasted him, "do you think you can cheat us? We are fully aware that you warned them to speak only on innocent subjects!"

The Chassid was speechless. Somehow he managed to extricate himself and returned home safely. Later he repeated to Father what they had told him. We were stunned; were we so "dangerous" that they had to plant two (or more) spies among us?

Most parents avoided talking about the arrests, for schools taught students to spy on their parents and report any speech disloyal to the regime. But in our home we heard all about them. Some guests who slept at our home had returned, broken in body and spirit, from interrogations and torture at NKVD headquarters in the infamous Lubyanka jail for so-called "political prisoners." They gave bloodcurdling accounts of the inhuman suffering they had experienced or witnessed, the frightful tortures, merciless beatings and coldblooded executions.

Often their gruesome experiences had reduced our visitors to a mere shadow. But those who survived to tell the tale were the more fortunate ones. Many were never heard of again. Some were executed soon after their arrest. Others were banished into exile, often to prison camps in Siberia where, even under normal conditions, it was difficult to survive the long winters' subzero temperatures, and especially for many years in harsh labor camps.

We trembled as our guests recounted their unspeakable experiences. These savage realities became daily occurrences as more of those we knew were suddenly arrested and condemned to long jail sentences or worse. No one was safe.

Since the early 1920's, Torah observant Jews, especially Lubavitcher Chassidim, had suffered terribly at the hands of the NKVD. These persecutions intensified during the 1930's, especially during the period of the Great Purge of 1936-1939, when many millions of Soviet citizens were arrested and executed.

One winter night in 1938, the NKVD swooped down to arrest ten prominent Chassidim in Leningrad, dragging them off before the eyes of their families. Among them was the towering personality of Rabbi Elchonon Dov Morozov, and also his son Shmuel, who had recently married. Many decades later, it was discovered that these innocents had been brutally murdered soon after their arrest. Until then, their wives remained Agunos — Halachically forbidden to remarry because their husbands' fate was unknown.

That summer of 1938, about twenty Chassidim were arrested in Moscow. That same year, Rabbi Shmaryahu Yehuda Leib Medalia, a Chabad Chassid who had been appointed as Rabbi of Moscow in 1933, (previously he had been the Rabbi of Vitebsk, White Russia), was arrested together with his Rebbetzin, his three sons and his son-in-law. Later he and his son Rabbi Moshe, Rabbi of Rostov, were executed by firing squads for "anti-Soviet activities."

For the families of all these unfortunate victims, the pain was especially acute. Usually unaware of her husband's whereabouts, the victim's wife had to run from government office to office, begging for information. If she had young children, she had to take them with, unless she could find some kind neighbor to take care of them. The regime seemed to take a vicious delight in the suffering they caused the victim's family.

With the family breadwinner in jail, his wife somehow had to feed her young family. That is when Father appeared. He raised funds to support families of these unfortunates living in and around Moscow, enabling them to survive in a respectable manner.

War II, a few elderly Lubavitcher Chassidim held two regular clandestine minyanim, sometimes inviting a Shochet to come and provide kosher meat for Jews still observant. Shepetovka, a small Ukrainian town, had a Lubavitcher Shochet, as did Saratov. Many of these devoted heroes refused to emigrate later even when they had the chance, preferring to stay in order to keep Yiddishkeit aflame, like lighthouses illuminating the dark.

SHOLOM LEAVES FOR YESHIVA

In 1940, my brother Sholom turned thirteen. A few outstanding Chassidim came to participate in his bar-mitzva celebration, including Reb Yona Kagan and the renowned mashpia, Rabbi Nissan Nemanow. In our apartment, we had a lively farbrengen, and Sholom repeated aloud a maamar — a Chassidic discourse of one of the Rebbes — as is customary.



Rabbi Nissan Nemanov (1904-1984), Mashpia of Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim in USSR, Germany and France

At the farbrengen, Reb Yona and Reb Nissan decided to enroll Sholom in the underground Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim. He would travel to the yeshiva in Kursk accompanied by Moshe

At the farbrengen, Reb Yona and Reb Nissan decided to enroll Sholom in the underground Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim. He would travel to the yeshiva in Kursk accompanied by Moshe Morozov, a senior student in his early twenties who was already a faculty member and played a central role in the yeshiva administration. Moshe used to come to Moscow to receive funds for the yeshivos from Reb Yona. The NKVD, it was rumored, was on high alert to catch him.

At the last moment, for some reason, Moshe changed their travel itinerary, taking Sholom to Gruzia (Soviet Georgia) instead of to Kursk. It was just in time. The NKVD had discovered the yeshiva in Kursk, arresting its two oldest students, Yehoshua Katzenelenbogen (now known as Raskin and living in London, England) and Henoch Rapaport (who passed away in the Holy Land). Both were jailed for several years. On their original route, Moshe would have been arrested and Sholom probably sent to a government orphanage.

The yeshiva students of Kursk who had escaped arrest were now directed to relocate to the yeshiva's branch in Kutais, Gruzia.

The Jews of Gruzia are Oriental, following the customs and prayer-rite of the Sefardim. Compared to elsewhere in the USSR, Yiddishkeit was practiced there almost unhindered. Jews prayed in their shuls freely, kept Shabbos and kashrus, circumcised their children, and even had Torah schools.

They were not completely safe from persecution. Several of their great Rabbis — "Chachamim" — and community leaders were imprisoned. Nevertheless, in general, they were far better off than other Soviet Jews at that time (some say it was because Stalin, a native of Gruzia, did not want his compatriots treated harshly).

When Yeshivas Tomchei T'mimim moved there, the local Jews welcomed them with open arms. They despised informers, and that is probably why the yeshiva was able to operate there for several years. Reb Yona Kagan raised funds for its support, and

now and then a student traveled to Moscow to receive the money from him.

Sending a young boy like Sholom far away from home was a great sacrifice for my parents, especially for mother. But Torah education was of supreme importance and nothing else mattered.

Sholom's trip was a secret carefully guarded even from me. My parents told me he had gone to visit an aunt of ours who lived far away. In any case, I lost my only companion and playmate.

How envious I felt as mother packed big pots of butter and cocoa to send him! These delicacies rarely graced our table, except when I was sick, when mother bought such foods, together with assorted fruit preserves, to give me an appetite to eat.

Years later, Sholom told me that whenever any student received a package from home, he always shared it equally with all the other yeshiva students, for some of them had no parents, or else their parents could not afford to send them food. That's how the students of Tomchei T'mimim related to each other, like true brothers.

After Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June, 1941, our correspondence with Sholom soon ceased. Father and mother were very concerned, for Sholom, just fourteen years old, was now stranded far off with no way to send him food and other necessities. The news from the front was worrying: The Germans had advanced past Crimea, and were only a few hundred miles from Gruzia. Soon heavy fighting could be coming close to Kutais. It took a long time till the bloody battle at Stalingrad stopped the Germans, but at the time we had no way of knowing the outcome.

After months of anxious waiting for news, we heard that Sholom had left Gruzia, thank G-d, with a group of Chassidim fleeing to Samarkand in Central Asia. There he became one of the first students of a new underground Yeshiva.

CHABAD STUDENTS FROM POLAND

Within weeks after the German attack on Poland in September, 1939. they occupied most of the country. In accordance with their secret Ribbentrop-Molotov pact with Germany that summer, Soviet troops entered Poland and annexed a wide swath of territory.

Many students of the famous yeshivos of Poland, including dozens of students of the central Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim at Otvotzk, near Warsaw, managed to escape to Vilna, in Lithuania, which was still independent. From the courageous Japanese consul Sugihara, they were fortunate to receive visas that enabled them to traverse the Soviet Union by train till they reached China and Japan. They aimed to reach the United States, where the Rebbe RaYYaTz had already escaped in 1940 and was organizing efforts to rescue them. But only a few reached the United States and Canada before Japan entered the war at the end of 1941. Most had to stay in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, China, till after the war.

While passing through Moscow, these Lubavitcher students came to the Choir shul. There they readily recognized local Chabad Chassidim, and tried to contact them. Contact with foreign nationals, however, was immediately suspect in the USSR, and the Moscow Chassidim dared not have anything to do with them.

The students understood our apprehensions. But they had a surprise for us — booklets of the Rebbe's Maamarim and Sichos published in Latvia and Poland. These were new to us, for the Soviet government had never permitted such "counter-revolutionary contraband" to enter the land.

Realizing how much these booklets would mean to us, they found a way to get them into our hands. They came to use the shul's mikva before Shabbos and left the booklets behind in the ante-room.

To us, this gift of the Rebbe's Maamarim and Sichos was like dew in a parched desert. Father would not part with them at any cost, even when we were later evacuated deep into Russia. Most of the booklets that we received I managed to memorize by heart.

At home, Father had other works of Chabad Chassidus, published before the Revolution, such as Torah Or and Likkutei Torah. He also had manuscript copies of many Maamorim of the Rebbe MaHaRaSh and the Rebbe RaShaB, besides other Torah volumes such as an entire set of the Talmud, the four sections of the Shulchan Aruch, the Alter Rebbe's Shulchan Aruch, and others.

FATHER'S MIRACLE

On June 22, 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union. Soon the Soviet Union was fighting for its very survival. The vaunted Red Army suffered one defeat after another as the German forces advanced rapidly, taking city after city. Vast numbers of Soviet soldiers were lost on the battlefield or taken captive.

Yet even during such a national emergency, the NKVD found time to persecute the state's worst "enemies" — Chabad Chassidim!

About a month after the start of the war, Father received the dreaded summons to appear at NKVD headquarters for questioning. We had expected it all along, but it threw us into panic.

Father reported as ordered to the infamous Lubyanka building. The interrogator studied him carefully.

"We know everything about you," he told him. "You are the only circumcisor of children in Moscow." He started rummaging through Father's pockets. Triumphantly, he fished out of his top pocket a note with an address written on it. "Aha! Here's the address for a circumcision you have to perform!"

Father had carefully emptied his pockets of any incriminating material before reporting to the NKVD. But somehow he had missed that scrap of paper. Indeed it was the address for a circumcision he was due to perform.

"We also know that Mr. Lipschitz, the president of your shul, is only a front." the officer continued. "You are the real power who runs everything there."

"On July 7, you held a secret celebration at the shul with Yona Kagan." He watched gleefully as Father recoiled in shock. No one, but no one, had been present in the shul that Shabbos afternoon when the two had held a little private farbrengen. How had the NKVD found out about it?

But there was worse to come: "We know that you sent your son Sholom away to learn in a yeshiva, right?" This devastated Father, who had always prided himself on hiding our private schooling from the authorities. His only consolation was that the officer did not seem to know where Sholom's yeshiva was located.

The NKVD man went on to describe all of Father's activities. He seemed to know more about him than Father himself! After enumerating all his "misdeeds," the officer informed him:

"You are at liberty to continue your way of life — on one condition. From now on you must inform us of everything you can about Yona Kagan." He described what sort of information he needed, and gave a date and the train-station where they would meet. "Make sure you get me the information I need."

Father immediately resolved never to say anything that could harm Reb Yona, regardless of the consequences.

On the date appointed by the officer, he reported on time for his rendezvous at the train station. Miraculously, the officer did not show up. After waiting ten minutes, Father decided he had a more urgent concern — an appointment to circumcise a baby. Off he went to the address he had been given to perform the bris...

The merit of that bris must have protected him. The NKVD never bothered Father again until after the War.

Chapter IV:
WARTIME

WAR INTENSIFIES

Ideologically, Communism and Nazism-Fascism had been implacable foes. So the whole world was shocked when it was revealed that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany had come to a non-aggression agreement — the "Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact" — in the summer of 1939. Secretly, the two lands agreed to partition Poland between themselves, and the Soviets promised to remain neutral while Hitler expanded his Reich through Eastern Europe. This pact gave Hitler a carte blanche to attack other lands, assured that the Soviets would not interfere.

Between September 1, 1939, and mid-1941, Germany succeeded in conquering most of Europe. Of the lands not yet occupied, most had Fascist regimes close with Germany. A few neutral pockets were left, such as Switzerland, Sweden and Portugal. Only the British empire remained at war with Germany. But Britain's cities suffered merciless nightly bombing by Germany's Lufwaffe, while her shipping suffered heavy losses from German U-boat submarines.

Officially the United States remained neutral, although it provided Britain with enormous material help. Only after the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, by Japan, Germany's ally, did the United States join the war.

Half a year before that, however, on June 22, 1941, Germany suddenly abrogated its pact with the Soviet Union and invaded that land. Utterly unprepared for war, the Red Army collapsed before the highly organized German onslaught. Soon Soviet forces were in full retreat as the German armies plowed deep into the land. Huge numbers of Soviet soldiers, including many Jews,

were killed, wounded or taken captive by the Germans, who also captured vast stocks of munitions, food and supplies.

Wherever they came, the Germans left a trail of massacre and destruction, terrorizing and enslaving local populations for their war effort. But their prime goal was to annihilate the Jews. On entering towns and villages, special Germany army units called "Einsatzgruppen" rounded up all Jews, usually marching them out of town and forcing them to dig pits. All Jews, men, women and children were ruthlessly machine-gunned into the pits. Local non-Jews were overjoyed to be free of the Communist yoke, and even more to be rid of the Jews. Gladly they agreed to cover over the mass graves with earth — often burying alive the few Jews who somehow survived the shooting. Sometimes all the Jews were marched straight into the pits and buried alive.

Josef Stalin, the Soviet head of government and Communist Party leader, was also commander-in-chief of the Soviet military. At first, he gave orders to withhold from the public all news about the Soviet defeats. According to the Soviet media, their brave warriors were winning all battles. Deep within the land, few were aware how fast and how far the Germans had advanced.

Within just four months, the Germans were at the gates of Moscow. By then, the Soviet media were already describing the German atrocities in detail. For years, however, citizens had learned to be skeptical of government propaganda, and many ignored such reports, especially as some remembered how well the Germans had treated Jews in World War I.

But the German aerial bombing of the cities, especially Moscow, and the possibility that the government reports might indeed be true, convinced many Jews to flee. The government's official policy called for evacuation of all children and their mothers, the elderly, and all who were non-essential for the war effort. Soon Moscow looked like a ghost town.

Many Chassidim fled to Central Asia, especially Tashkent and Samarkand. But Father and Mother hesitated. Just before

the German invasion, my sister Chava with her husband Leib and their two children had left to spend a summer vacation at his parents' village in White Russia. When war broke out, Leib was drafted, and all contact with Chava was lost. At first my parents expected them back soon, and felt responsible for their apartment and belongings. But eventually they decided they had no choice but to flee.

AERIAL BOMBARDMENT

By autumn, 1941, the situation in Moscow was getting intolerable. The Luftwaffe bombed the city nightly, and we hardly slept in our apartment. The radio aired no programs at night, but we kept it on anyway, awaiting the piercing sound of the air-raid siren — usually in the middle of the night — and the announcement that enemy planes had penetrated the city's anti-aircraft defenses. Almost every night, one or two of the nimble German bombers managed to get through, and then they could not even be shot down, for a burning plane falling on the city could wreak enormous harm.

Lying in bed close to the radio, with my pulse racing, I was rarely able to fall asleep. As soon as the siren sounded, we dashed off to the nearest shelter, a cellar ten minutes away. As we ran, our hearts filled with terror as we heard the eerie whistle of falling bombs and the fearsome roar of explosions as they hit their targets. The bombs were not powerful but they caused great damage. All our windows were shattered from the bombings.

People often died needlessly. On our street was a munitions factory where the workers had strict orders not to leave even during an air-raid unless they actually saw a plane overhead. One night, their alarm sounded; a German plane was directly overhead! Hundreds of panic-stricken workers poured out of the doors to escape. But the guard refused to let them leave; he had received no order to open the gates! By the time they managed to push past him, it was too late. A bomb fell on the gate, killing

fifty of them. When we later emerged from our shelter, their bodies had already been removed, but we saw the huge crater left by the bomb.

Eventually, we had so many sleepless nights that we stopped running to the shelter, taking refuge instead on our building's ground floor. Often my sisters were too exhausted even to go downstairs, and stayed in bed, trying to continue sleeping. One night, hearing the drone of a plane right overhead, they ran down to join us on the ground floor. Just as my older sister came down the stairs, a bomb hit the house and knocked out the window panes inches away from her. Miraculously, she escaped unscathed.

On the night of Simchas Torah, we could hear the ominous sound of artillery fire in the distance. The Germans were battling on the outskirts of Moscow, just thirteen kilometers from the city! That was where the Soviet army eventually managed to beat back the enemy — months later — but we could not know it then.

ESCAPE FROM MOSCOW

My parents decided to leave Moscow right after Simchas Torah. For many days, they were busy packing our belongings and also Chava's. They probably took even more of her things than ours, to keep them safe. My sister Basya, whose husband, Reb Nochum Zalman Gurevitch, had been drafted into the army (but, thank G-d, not to the front) joined us with her two children, and my parents packed for her, too. All these belongings filled an entire freight car.

By the time we left, it was impossible to get train tickets to a specific destination. All we could do was ride a freight train going to some distant location determined by the government. We had no choice but to take the chance of ending up in some remote place where no other Jews lived.

The night following Simchas Torah, we took our belongings to the terminal where our train was to leave next day. Besides my parents and Basya with her two children, only my sister Sima and I were traveling; Sheindel was staying behind to work at her job.

By now, Moscow was a scene of total panic and was in the grip of an acute famine. The day after we left, the government announced that citizens were permitted to loot stores for any food they could find. Meanwhile, the government itself bid a hasty retreat, escaping Moscow by the last route still open, to the city of Gorki. Two days later Stalin returned to Moscow, ordered some high-ranking officers court-martialled, and tried to restore a semblance of order to the chaotic city.

Moscow was fortunate to have at least one escape route still open out of the city. Leningrad, on the other hand, the Soviet Union's other major city, is built on islands connected by bridges, which were all bombed by the Germans, so that no one could leave and no food or supplies could be brought in. An estimated two million people — including many Jews — died of starvation during that total blockade.

At the time, we did not realize our good fortune, that ours was the last train out of Moscow until the Germans were beaten back in February, 1942! But our trip was no joy ride. The first winter frosts had begun, and we debated whether the intense cold could be considered a life and death situation permitting us to kindle our freight car's coal stove on Shabbos to keep us warm.

Our train crawled along at an interminably slow pace, making occasional stops on the way. We had no choice but to drink dirty, polluted water from the locomotive's tank. Peasants crowded every station with bread for sale at exorbitant prices, for they knew we were starving and ready to fill our stomachs at any price. We bought their bread whenever it was available.

On a trip outside a city, Jews say a special prayer for a safe journey, called Tefillas Haderech. If we travel for more than one

day, we repeat the blessing every morning. On that trip, which lasted for twenty-two days, I learned it by heart.

Chapter V:
EVACUATION

NEW HOME

When our train finally reached its destination, we were happy to learn that the government had sent us far away from the war. We had been brought to Bashkiria, a territory in the Ural region of Russia inhabited mainly by a Tatar tribe called the Bashkirs. Like other Tatars, Bashkirs are Muslims.

At the station, a truck awaited us on which we loaded all our belongings. We climbed aboard for our 65-kilometer trip along a rough, unpaved road that made riding most uncomfortable.

When our truck rolled into the village of Ivanovka, all its inhabitants came pouring out of their homes to stare at the new arrivals. A truck coming to their village was a rare event!

On hearing that some of us were Jewish — "Yevrei" (Hebrews) — they actually came over to inspect our foreheads for horns! There was not yet any trace of anti-Semitism in this remote village, although it did not take long for some gentiles in our group to teach the locals how to hate Jews.

Ivanovka was one of the few villages in Bashkiria to be inhabited entirely by Russians. It was a typical Soviet village, boasting even a school, although most villagers had not graduated and were very simple and uneducated.

Originally, life had been good in Ivanovka, and the villagers had lived comfortably. The land was fertile, and their well-fed cattle grazed the pastures.

This had come to an abrupt halt during the middle or late 1930's, when the Soviet decree of "collectivization" forced peasant farmers to "donate" all their land and cattle to the government. The official aim was to establish Communist

ideology in practice, so that all farmers would coexist on equal terms on collective farms. But the true reason was to break the back of the well-to-do peasant class — known as "Kulaki," Russian for "fists" — to curb any possible threat to the regime.

The peasants resisted, for the decree meant total ruin for them, requiring them to forfeit everything they had. But the regime cracked down on them ruthlessly, arresting tens of thousands, who were often executed or sent to Siberia.

By the time we arrived, this system of collective farms — called "kolkhoz" in Russian — was already in place. The government owned all land, livestock and most produce, giving the farmers just a small percentage for their labors. Now, however, they had little incentive to work on the communal land, and their standard of living declined.

The kolkhoz allotted each family a small plot of land to cultivate on its own, together with a cow or two. The natives eagerly grasped this opportunity to work for themselves, investing their main efforts in growing their own food and raising their own livestock.

The months since the start of the war had already taken their toll on the village. First, all young men aged 18-25 were drafted into the military. Gradually, the maximum age went up until every able-bodied man up to age 55 was drafted. This left few people to tend the fields and care for the animals, so women and older children were now working on the fields.

LIFE IN THE VILLAGE

We managed to rent half a home from a peasant. It was difficult to heat and was literally freezing in the winter — often our water froze in the buckets. At night, we slept in our coats. Once I tried to be heroic and sleep without a coat; I woke up frozen to the bone!

In retrospect, Moscow now seemed so modern. Our village was 400 kilometers from the nearest city, and everything there

was incredibly primitive. Only the Communist Party's "tractor station" had electricity. It had a single tractor that, as far as I can recall, was never used. It also had a radio that could pick up news-broadcasts from afar, and two ancient telephones. The only other phone was at the post-office.

The tractor station was the headquarters of the commissar, the local Communist Party ideologist, responsible for party propaganda in our own and surrounding villages. He was surrounded there by his cronies. As an important official, he was exempt from the draft.

The village was so primitive that no one even had matches! To produce fire, we had to use two rocks and some cotton. We were fortunate to obtain kerosene for lighting a lamp — and also our Shabbos candles. For cooking we burned bundles of wood that we stacked in the oven. Our water came from a well; we had to draw it ourselves and carry it home in buckets that hung from each end of a special stick resting over our shoulders.

Ivanovka had no doctors, but only a male nurse. Father had a serious stomach ulcer, and had tried to ease his cramps during our trip by taking baking soda. This only made his ulcer worse. Even with the best intentions, all the nurse could do for him was to give painkillers, to which he soon became immune.

Ideally, Father should have been on a special diet. But we had no suitable food for him. We subsisted mainly on potatoes, which were partly rotten or frozen. Our flour, also spoiled and frozen, was polluted with field mouse droppings. All he could do to ease his constant pain was to apply heat with a hot-water bottle.

Yet, despite Father's suffering, it may have been a blessing in disguise. When the military started drafting even middle-aged men, his sickness saved his life. The draft board doctors found his stomach covered with burns from the hot water bottles, and granted him an absolute release, which was most unusual at the time.

Ivanovka was so remote that we were effectively cut off from civilization. We did not have even the radio receivers available in the cities, which picked up only the Soviet government broadcasts (it was a crime to own any other type of radio for fear that Soviet citizens might listen to Western "propaganda"). Only the tractor station had a radio, and often Sima and I walked over there at night to hear the latest news.

Of course, the government stations could not be trusted to give the full truth, and we had to read, or rather listen, "between the lines." When the radio broadcast that Soviet populations had "voluntarily" evacuated their cities, we realized that the Germans must be conquering one city after another. When the situation later turned around and the Red Army starting recapturing cities, the radio broadcast 21-gun salutes for the recapture of large cities and 12-gun salutes for smaller ones. But despite these limitations, the radio at least kept us up to date with some of the latest news.

Getting to the tractor station at night was a problem, for it was at the opposite end of the village from us, almost 25 minutes walk away. Since there was no electric lighting, everyone went to bed early. It was scary to walk out alone at night through the intensely cold, dry winter air. There was no sign of human life, nor any sound save the crunch of our boots on the snow. Sometimes the moonlight, reflected brightly from the snow-covered ground, illuminated our way.

There was a district newspaper, but all it contained was propaganda about how well our Kolkhoz was filling its quota of produce, and similar news.

WORKING ON THE LAND

Our first year in Ivanovka was especially difficult. The men had all been drafted, and the women and children saw no reason to work hard. With few workers in the fields, the produce rotted

away, and the fieldmice gorged themselves and multiplied alarmingly.

The next year was even worse. The locals knew from experience that after a year of plentiful grain, when the fieldmice multiplied, the next year's crop would grow poorly. Indeed, the second year's crop was so bad that our dough did not rise when we tried to bake bread. Only with great difficulty could we bake challa for Shabbos. We had no choice but to eat the low-quality bread we made, softening it by dunking it in skim milk.

Still, we were happy to enjoy even these meager rations. At least we had food to eat. Elsewhere, in cities such as Samarkand and Tashkent, people were dying of starvation.

To earn our share of bread, we had to work on the fields, helping to harvest and bundle the grain. I was only twelve years old, but all local children of my age already worked and none went to school. As a city boy, I could not hope to compete with them, for they had been brought up to do farmwork. But somehow I managed to earn 400 grams of flour a day.

One Friday, the female leader of our work-group assigned me work using a horse-drawn implement to arrange the harvested grain into rows, telling me how much of the field I had to complete. Misunderstanding her instructions, I completed only a smaller area. Assuming I had finished, I unharnessed the horse and let it go free to graze. The other workers told me off for shirking my duty, warning that I would be punished for letting the horse go free.

They did have a point. Every moment that the horses worked was precious, for all sturdy horses had been drafted for military use and only older, sickly horses were left for fieldwork. The postmaster was the only one who still had a strong horse or two to pick up the mail from the district center 35 kilometers away.

Shrugging off their warnings, I insisted that I had completed my quota and returned home to prepare for Shabbos. On Sunday, the group leader fined me for not completing my work, giving me only 300 grams of flour instead of my usual 400. After

that experience, I joined my sisters in their work of harvesting the grain, gathering it with a pitchfork.

The kolkhoz allotted our family a piece of land for use as a vegetable garden, and free time to cultivate it. We planted every vegetable growing in that region — tomatoes, cucumbers, pumpkins, carrots, cabbage, beets, onions and, separately, potatoes.

Before planting the vegetables, we had to first dig up the earth with a shovel to soften it. Each vegetable is planted in a different way; some are planted straight into the ground, while others grow from seeds. The hardest work was keeping the plot well-watered for months on end; we had to drag up heavy buckets of water from the creek at the bottom of the hill. We also had to weed the plot — pulling out unnecessary growth to prevent it from drawing nutrition from our vegetables. Later, each vegetable had to be picked at just the right time, not before ripening nor allowing it to get overripe.

The kolkhoz also allotted us a large field just outside the village for growing potatoes, which need much more space than other vegetables. One problem was our lack of a special implement for slicing the potatoes into pieces for planting, forcing us to cut them laboriously by hand with a knife. After they grew, we had to dig them up carefully to avoid severing their roots, which continue to produce new potatoes. Fortunately, potatoes do not need much water, and the rainfall was sufficient, saving us from bringing water all the way from the creek to irrigate such a large area.

During the summer, we prepared our heating fuel for the long winter — blocks of animal manure, called "kizakes," which were prepared in an arduous process. First we gathered straw for binding them. Then, with horses provided by the kolkhoz, we collected manure from stables and farmhouses in the region. One of us rode a horse down to the creek to bring up a barrel full of water for pouring over the manure. We rode the horses around in circles many times to tread and "knead" the pile of manure

into a dough-like texture. Then the whole family began molding the manure, shaping it on the ground into blocks. These were left out for a week to be baked by the sun, then turned over for another week till they were sub-baked on the other side, too, becoming as hard as bricks.

It took us a while to learn how to use them properly. Before our chimney could be closed to keep heat in the house, the kizakes had to be completely burned up. We sometimes forgot to check, and smoke from small, leftover pieces of kizakes caused dangerous carbon monoxide poisoning.

For cooking, we used firewood, felling trees in the nearby forest. We used a horse provided by the kolkhoz to drag the logs to a dry place for storage.

LOCAL HABITS

Despite their poor nourishment, the villagers of Ivanovka enjoyed excellent health — probably due to the fresh, clean air and their hard work.

But the region's climate is not always pleasant. Often it is wracked by fierce windstorms. In the winter these become blizzards, dumping heavy snow over everything to a depth of several feet, as a result of which no one can leave home for several days at a time.

The snow of these storms is so great that the roads become impassable. Travel is impossible during the storms, and even afterwards, enough snow is left that no vehicles other than horse-drawn sleds can be used all winter. Only the postmaster's horses were strong enough to brave the deep snows for the first journey after a snowstorm. When he traveled to pick up the mail from the post office at the district center, his sled flattened the snow on the roads, enabling other sleds too to start using them.

Our first storm caught us completely unprepared. All we had stored was potatoes and flour. Other necessities such as water, milk and kerosene were soon used up, but we could not get out

of the house for fresh supplies. We had to wait out the storm till the roads became passable again. That experience taught us to keep on hand emergency stocks of all basic supplies.

Refrigerators did not exist, even in the large cities. Instead, every house had a deep cellar where the temperature stayed cool but not freezing, saving vegetables from freezing if the house was left unheated. Thus, we always had potatoes and other staples in stock, regardless of the weather.

Later we learned from the locals the warning signs of an impending storm. It was vital to know these for sheer survival. Dangerous storms could strike suddenly, and no one wanted to be caught out in the fields when one came. If ever someone did get caught outside, he had no choice but to dig himself a nest in a bundle of straw or hay, hiding there for days till the storm passed, otherwise he would be frozen to death.

Summer came, bringing its own problems. There were no more blizzards, but occasional windstorms instead, with great billowing clouds of stinging dust that stopped all work on the fields. Over the years, the villagers had learned how to protect and care for their animals during these storms.

Father's poor health exempted him from work on the kolkhoz. Whenever anything important had to be done, my older sister was called upon. Due to my young age, I was not expected to join her, although I usually volunteered to help.

KEEPING THE TORAH IN EXILE

After the winter came Pesach. Our first concern was how to bake matzos. At the Seder, it is best to eat shmura matza, baked of flour guarded from contact with moisture since the wheat was harvested. But such flour was difficult to obtain even before the war, and usually only Father, as head of the family, would get to eat such matzos. The rest of the family ate matzos baked using flour guarded from moisture only since the wheat was milled.

In Ivanovka, Father enlisted my help to carefully clean a small primitive handmill. We used the flour ground in this mill to bake our matzos, and had some left over for other Jewish families to bake theirs. Before sunset the evening before we baked the matzos, we drew water from the well for kneading the flour (this is called "mayim shelanu" — water that has been kept overnight). After koshering our oven, we baked the matzos in our own home, obtaining new rolling pins for rolling the dough. Several Jewish women came to help with the rolling. Our unprofessional baking and poorly milled flour produced matzos that were thick and heavy.

Unfortunately, matzos were the only Pesach food we had at the Seder. No moror, bitter herbs, was available; none of the five vegetables that may be used grew in that region. Nor did grapes, so we could forget about the required four cups of wine. Even eggs were not available, because hens were not raised in the whole region — probably because the extreme cold would have killed them. During wartime, none of these foods could be brought in from elsewhere, either. During the winter months before Pesach, roads into the region were anyway impassable.

About a month before Pesach, while exploring a ruined hovel, I suddenly noticed some pigeons. I hurried to tell Father. He had brought his special slaughtering knife and sharpening stones with him to Ivanovka, but they had hardly been used, for lack of birds. Now he sharpened his knife, we caught the pigeons and he slaughtered them. Mother koshered and cooked them, and we decided to keep the meat for Pesach, storing it in a cool part of the cellar.

Now that we had meat, we gave up our original plan of drinking four cups of milk to serve as a reminder of the required four cups of wine at the Seder (according to the Halacha, of course, milk cannot actually be substituted for wine). As we sat down to our Seder and read the Haggada, we remembered our nation's original exile and liberation, and recalled our own exile

in that remote place and the present bitter exile of our entire people, praying to G-d to redeem us speedily.

After reading the Haggada, we fulfilled the Mitzva of eating matza with our home-baked matzos. Then Mother served the precious meat to the table. But all our efforts had been in vain. In the weeks since the birds had been slaughtered, the first rays of spring sun had taken the chill out of the air and our meat, to our dismay, had spoiled!

After the summer, the "Awesome Days" of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur came closer, when even Jews living far from a Jewish community try to pray with a congregation. Several Lubavitcher Chassidim were staying at farflung localities in our region. They included Reb Zalman Kalmanson and his family, and the well-known Rav and Chassid, Rabbi Avrohom Elya Plotkin (later my Rosh Yeshiva in Samarkand). On Rosh Hashana, they planned to gather for prayers with a minyan of ten or more Jews, and to blow the shofar — the main obligation of the day.

Father made arrangements to join them, even buying train tickets for himself and me. Unfortunately, he became too ill to travel and we had to cancel the trip.

A few weeks before Rosh Hashana, as I walked through the fields, I was amazed to notice a ram's head lying among the shrubs. Now we could have a shofar for Rosh Hashana! But it was still the middle of summer, so there seemed to be plenty of time. Besides, who needed a ram's head anyway? Even the wolves snatched only live sheep, devouring them at night when no one was around. So I left it where it was.

But I soon regretted it. By the next day, the ram's head had disappeared. We could not ask the villagers for another horn, for they had no dead animals during the summer, when food was abundant. Only in the winter, when food was scarce and it was often difficult to feed the animals, did they kill one or two of them at a time, cooking the meat with cabbage and making merry for a few days.

About a week before Rosh Hashana, the head suddenly reappeared. This time I grabbed it and brought it to Berel Gurevitch, who was then staying with us. "Now we can have a shofar for Rosh Hashana," I announced jubilantly.



Rabbi Yissochor DovBer Gurevitch (b.1917), later principal of Beis Rivkah Seminary, France

Berel — who now heads the large Beth Rivka girls school in Yerres, France — was a younger brother of my late brother-in-law, Reb Nochum Zalman, husband of my sister Basya. Even then, Berel was a special personality who exemplified Chassidic values, and whose self-sacrificing dedication to the Torah and Chassidus could serve as a shining example to all.

In his late teens, he had served as mashpia — teacher of Chassidus and spiritual guide — in an underground Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim at Berditchev, Ukraine. Early in 1938, he and the rosh yeshiva, together with the students, had been arrested. For a year or two he remained in prison, surviving brutal interrogations and beatings.

After his release, he had obtained a false identity card to evade rearrest. Looking younger than his real age, his identity card had a later birthdate than his real one, enabling him to escape the draft for several years. He came to take refuge with us, working with us on the kolkhoz until he was finally drafted.

Berel got to work on the ram's head right away. He took it to a field where the workers were all sitting around a fire boiling

water and baking potatoes. He found a large nail, heated it in their fire till it was red-hot, then used it to bore a hole through one of the horns. To all the spectators crowding around to watch, Berel explained that he was making a special kind of flute. He worked hard on his "flute" until satisfied with the result.

Thanks to Berel's explanation, we could carry the shofar openly, without arousing suspicion that it might have any religious significance. When asked about it later, Berel told them it had been a failure.

On Rosh Hashana, we gathered several Jews in our home to fulfill the mitzva, listening to Father blowing the shofar. Later, this shofar stayed with us for several years, accompanying us back to Moscow. Only when Father was arrested in 1947 did the NKVD confiscate it together with other articles from our home.

After Rosh Hashana, we began building a suka. During Sukos, we had to sit in the suka in sub-zero temperatures. We were grateful that Sukos is in the middle of the month, when the moon is full, for it was our only light at night.

During our years in Ivanovka, Father continued to spend much time teaching me Torah. When he was too sick to do it, I studied on my own, succeeding in covering much Chassidus and Gemara. For this I am deeply indebted to my mother, who always urged me to study even when Father was not well. Berel Gurevitch encouraged me to learn Tanya by heart, and I did manage to memorize most of it.

During the year after we arrived in Ivanovka, I turned thirteen. My birthday fell on a Shabbos, and we "celebrated" my bar-mitzva at Shalosh Seudos, the third Shabbos meal, drinking milk in honor of the occasion. I repeated a long maamar — discourse of Chabad Chassidic philosophy — that I had studied and memorized on my own. Only Father and Berel were there to listen, but that special Shabbos remains forever engraved in my memory.

Besides studying Torah myself, I also became a Torah tutor. My sister Basya's two children were several years younger than I,

and I taught them to read in the Siddur, and to study Chumash and other Jewish subjects.

OUR PRIVATE BUSINESS

In that primitive region, money was scarce and meant nothing to the local peasants. They had no need for it, for all their trade was conducted by barter.

The locals highly valued clothing. We had brought with us from Moscow our knitting machines and supplies of thread that Father had received from his factory. During our first year, we traded clothing, finished and unfinished, for whatever we needed, especially for staples such as potatoes and flour. After we grew our own food, we could afford to barter clothing for luxury foods such as butter and fine flour.

Soon we had a thriving barter business. Our neighbors had little to barter and often came to watch us trade our wares with others. This aroused the envy of our landlord, who was not well off. Often we noticed him spying on us through holes in the partition between our apartments.

One day, a friendly neighbor burst into our dwelling with alarming news. Among piles of papers at the village's municipal office, she had noticed a letter from our landlord accusing us of private trade — "speculation," as it was officially known — which was considered a serious crime. His letter was vague on specifics, for he was uncertain what we sold or how we produced our wares. But he demanded immediate action to halt our business.

We thanked our friend and immediately buried most of our merchandise in a deep hole we dug in our garden. We left out several items so that we could continue doing business.

Sure enough, our village's policeman, a Bashkir, came one day to investigate. Searching through all our belongings, he listed anything suspicious and took away two sackloads of knitted clothing.

Over the next few days, Mother knitted some nice sweaters on our machines and went to the Bashkir's home to present the "gift" to his wife. This had its desired effect, and a few days later we received a message that the case was officially dropped and we could come and pick up our sacks. Much of our merchandise was missing from the two retrieved sacks, of course, but for us it was a reasonable "business expense." Still, with no documentation to explain how we came to own the merchandise, we remained anxious.

After this incident, we moved out of our dwelling into a small hut. Our living conditions there were worse: The roof leaked, and the fierce snowstorms blanketed our new home so heavily that we were effectively sealed inside, forcing us to wait until friends cut through the packed snow and ice to let us out. But at least we were safe from prying eyes.

Incidentally, that landlord's life became filled with misery. The manager of a grain mill, he was caught stealing grain and sent to Siberia for three years. One of his sons was killed in the war, another was drafted, and his daughter fell off a stove and broke her back. His misfortunes, we felt, resulted from his envious attempt to get us into trouble.

CHAVA & HER CHILDREN

About a year after we reached Ivanovka, we received the shocking news about the fate of my oldest sister Chava and her children. Usually my sister Sima or I went to pick up our mail at the post office, but that day we were unable to go. Only Mother was there when the postcard was delivered directly to our home.

It was a Friday afternoon and Mother was just then placing the cholent into the oven for Shabbos. In shock, she dropped the cholent, which spilled all over the floor, and began sitting shiva.

Apparently, as the Germans had approached the village where Chava's in-laws lived, the Jews were in no hurry to flee. Some remembered how friendly the German soldiers had been in

World War I, so few believed the Soviet radio's reports of atrocities. Her in-laws also owned a cow — an important commodity they were unwilling to abandon. Since her husband Leib had been drafted into the army, Chava felt dependent on her in-laws and made the fatal decision not to leave until they would.

When the Germans entered the village, they immediately rounded up all Jews. Chava's older child, aged eight, appealed to their non-Jewish neighbors to save them. But the neighbors, despite their friendly relations with the Jews over many years, not only ignored them but even pointed out where the Jews were hiding. All seventy-five Jews there, including Chava and her two children, were forced into a cellar, where the Germans blew them all up. May G-d avenge their blood!

When her husband Leib, fighting at the front, later learned of their tragic fate, he burned with a desire for vengeance. Fighting the cursed Germans with all his might, he soon gained a reputation as a fearless warrior. Eventually, the Soviet army, reversed its previous full retreat and made a resolute stand at Stalingrad in 1942. After a long campaign, with huge losses of life on both sides, the Soviets triumphed over the Germans in a spectacular victory. Leib fought there like a lion, for which he was promoted to a high rank.

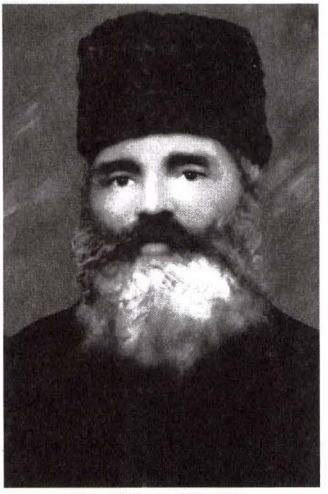
Determined to avenge the blood of his family and parents, he returned from the battlefront to his village. But he found it deserted! The treacherous villagers, hearing about his coming and his reputation as a fearless fighter, had all fled...

SIMA'S TRIP TO GORKI

During our stay in Ivanovka, my sister Sima studied at home by correspondence course for a diploma. On completing the course, she had to take examinations at the college in Gorki (now called Nizhni Novgorod), many hundreds of miles away. But getting there was not easy. First she had to get a permit to

documentation. Then she had to get to the train station — 65 kilometers away — with no bus, taxi or anyone with whom to hitch a ride. She had no choice but to walk all the way! Even after reaching the station, she could not get a ticket without first bribing the ticket agent.

In Gorki, Sima stayed with Reb Shlomo Raskin and his family, the only home where she knew it was certainly kosher. Few Jews lived in Gorki, and the Raskins were probably the only Chassidic family there. They helped her in everything she needed. Despite the alien environment, the Raskins had true self-sacrifice to observe Yiddishkeit under such difficult circumstances. All their children remained devoted Chassidim — a worthy testament to the family's devotion to the Torah.



Reb Shlomo Raskin,
who lived in Gorki, Russia

The Raskins were renowned for their outstanding hospitality. Any Jew passing through Gorki knew that the Raskins' warm home was always wide open for giving them a meal or a place to sleep.

In 1939, thousands of Polish Jews had fled into the USSR. Many were interned in Siberian labor camps. After Germany attacked the USSR in 1941, the Soviet government joined the

attacked the USSR in 1941, the Soviet government joined the Allies against Germany — which included the Polish government-in-exile in London. As a gesture of goodwill, the USSR released all interned Polish Jews, permitting them to settle wherever they pleased. Yet how could these impoverished refugees now start anew in life without money or even food to eat?

Many Chassidic families played an indispensable role in helping large numbers of such refugees and other Jews in need. They welcomed the unfortunates into their homes, often providing them with funds and other needs to make their life easier. The Raskins, in particular, distinguished themselves by generously hosting many such Jews in their home and finding other ways to help Jews staying elsewhere.

Sima had brought to Gorki some fine ladies shawls made of goat hair, a delicate material that makes a light, airy fabric considered a luxury item. She sold them there for a respectable sum, which she used to buy tea. Tea was the Bashkirs' national drink (as it was of other Muslim peoples in the USSR such as the Uzbeks, as I observed later in Samarkand). Often they came to Ivanovka from surrounding villages in search of it. After Sima returned, we traded the tea she brought for large stocks of butter.

FATHER IN HOSPITAL

Meanwhile, Father's health was deteriorating. His illness sapped his strength, endangering his very life. By Sukos, 1942, he was so weak that my sister and I decided on our own to bring him to the region's primitive hospital in the hope that the doctors might cure him or at least alleviate his suffering.

The hospital was 35 kilometers away, at the district center. We borrowed horses from the kolkhoz, harnessing them to a wagon. Father was too weak to resist as we carried him out and lay him down in the wagon for the ride there. He remained confined there until he recovered. Later he told us he had

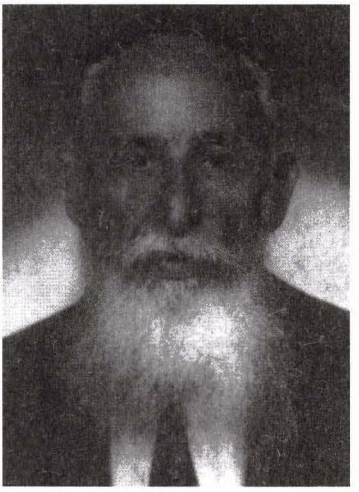
despaired of ever recovering, and his only thought on the way was to be privileged to come to "kever Yisrael," to be buried in accordance with the Torah.

That Sukos was very difficult for me. All alone I sat in the freezing suka, dreading what might happen if Father would not make it, G-d forbid. But, even without Father at my side, I knew that the Torah considered me an adult and I had to say Kiddush in the suka — on the challos Mother had baked — and eat bread, at least an olive's size, to fulfill my obligation to "dwell" in the suka surrounded with snow and ice, illuminated by light of the moon (Sukkos is in the middle of the Jewish month so the moon is in full circle). Eventually father came back from the "hospital" although still suffering from his ulcer, due to the lack of diet, even the bread wasn't baked through, but felt better.

RETURNING HOME

My sister Basya's husband, Reb Nochum Zalman Gurevitch, who had been drafted into the army, served as private attendant to a general. Later he often declared that it must have been the merit of his habit of reciting the holy words of Tehillim (Psalms) continuously all day that saved him from being sent to the front. Sometimes his non-Jewish comrades noticed his mumbling and used to remark: "Gurevitch is singing already!"

After we were in Ivanovka for a year and a half, Nochum Zalman was granted a furlough to visit his family. This reunion was cause for great celebration. A few weeks later, he had to return to his position, but soon afterwards he sent Basya the officially required formal invitation to return to live with him in Moscow. First, however, she had to obtain a visa to travel from one point of Soviet Union to the other, during the war, which could be granted only at the district center which was very far and no transportation was available at that time of the year.



Rabbi Nochum Zalman Gurevitch

Together with another woman, Basya walked all the 35 kilometers, day and night, making it there in just two days. At one point, through the darkness of the night, they were terrified when they caught a glimpse of the fiery eyes of wolves. Fortunately, Basya had a box of matches with her, and she struck them repeatedly until the wolves, scared of fire, slunk silently away.

Basya returned home safely with her visa and, a few weeks later, traveled back to Moscow with her two children. We, however, were still stuck in Ivanovka, awaiting an invitation from a relative in Moscow to allow us to move back.

Finally, in winter 1943, my other sister, Sheindel, who had remained in Moscow, sent us the awaited invitation. After obtaining the required permit to travel, we began packing all our belongings in preparation for the long trip. We had no tickets yet, but decided to go and wait at the train station till a train arrived. In those days, people often patiently awaited a train at the station for days on end. But they had to stay constantly alert to guard their baggage from being stolen.

Our biggest problem was how to get all our baggage over the 65 kilometers distance to the train station. In the middle of

winter, an opportunity arose when the kolkhoz organized a convoy of fifteen horse-drawn sleds to deliver their grain to the region's central silos. The drivers agreed to take us along. We packed our belongings onto a sled and set out on the snowy, poorly defined roads. The peasants walked with their horses to prevent hypothermia, but we sat on our sled, bundled up against the freezing weather. Father, too weak to walk, was also allowed to sit on the sled.

We traveled only by day. At night, the convoy stopped at a roadside inn that served hot water had our food and let us sleep on the floor. Our drivers warned us that the convoy would leave at daybreak.

That presented a problem. In such cold weather, it would be impossible while traveling on the sleds to bare our arms and heads in the open air to don tefilin. Father and I decided to get up before dawn to say our prayers before the convoy left. As soon as we noticed a glimmer of light through the windows, we arose and put on our tefilin. However, after finishing our prayers, we wondered why the room was no brighter than before. Suddenly we realized that the light from the windows was not from the dawn at all but from the full moon's silvery light reflecting from the white snow that blanketed everything!

We had no choice but to repeat our prayers after daybreak while traveling on our sled, although without our tefilin. When the convoy stopped later to rest the horses, we hurriedly put on our tefilin for a few moments to fulfill the mitzva for that day.

When we arrived at the train station, we parted warmly from the villagers, thanking them for their kindness and generosity to us during our stay in Ivanovka.

Somehow we managed to get tickets, but only till Samara, where we would have to change trains. At Samara, getting tickets for Moscow was even harder. Father's weak health left him helpless, and Mother was busy caring for him and guarding our belongings. I was too young to be of much help. It was left to

Sima to bargain and cajole till she was able to buy tickets at a decent price.

We still had an endless wait for our train. Finally it pulled into the station, and we boarded with all our belongings. During the long trip, we bought bread and dairy products at stops on the way until, exhausted, we reached Moscow.

Chapter VI:
BACK TO MOSCOW

STARTING ANEW

On returning to Moscow, we discovered that we were now homeless. Our apartment had been occupied by a Russian woman who refused to move out.

"My husband is an officer in the Soviet army," she yelled at us, "fighting at the front for our homeland! What makes you think I'll move out for you?" Nothing could budge her, and we soon realized it was pointless to argue.

Moscow had a severe housing shortage and we had nowhere to go. We had no choice but to move in temporarily with Chava's husband Leib, who had an apartment of his own. We had taken all their belongings with us to Ivanovka and had now brought them back to Moscow, never using them even after we learned of her fate. Her husband really appreciated all our sacrifice for his sake. On the other hand, he was not Torah observant, which led to conflicts, particularly about observing Shabbos. We would have to find a place of our own.

After his release from the army, Leib had resumed his job as manager of a large lumber factory. Now he found Father a job there as a watchman. The factory owned a small hut nearby, situated in the middle of a large housing complex, and Leib arranged for us to move in there.

Father was delighted with his new job, for it required little effort. His poor health ruled out any hard work anyway. While watching the factory, he had ample time to study Torah, and he used to ask me to bring him various Torah books from home to study. On many evenings I joined him so that he could teach me.

The job paid Father with ration coupons exchangeable for food in the stores. This was very beneficial for him, allowing him to start keeping a strict diet, which finally liberated him from the stomach-aches from which he had suffered for so long.

Best of all was our new home's closeness to our dear Marina Roshtcha shul. Because of the evacuation and draft, the shul was now holding prayer services only on Shabbos but not on weekdays. When we returned, we started daily prayer services again.

Since before the war, a man called Shmuel Katz had been staying permanently at the shul. He was known after his hometown as Shmuel Priluker. He was not a Chassid but was very devout.

The NKVD regularly summoned him in for questioning about the goings-on at our shul. But he was probably too G-d-fearing to pass on any incriminating information. When Reb Avrohom Maiyorer (Drizin) came to hide at our shul, he never reported it, nor did he ever cause the Chassidim any problems. He never informed on my evading of school and my studies at the shul, nor later when I left for yeshiva. When the NKVD officers found out I had left, they were furious: "Why didn't you tell us all this time that Berel Kabilaker's son was here?" they raged at him. Later, when I heard about it, I wondered how indeed they had not known of my presence. It was common knowledge that the shamash (attendant) at our shul then was a paid NKVD informer, and certainly not the only one.

Besides Shmuel, a Gerer Chassid from Poland named Alter also lived at the shul. Both were at about the same level of Torah knowledge as my own, and we established a joint session to study Gemara (Talmud) every evening after Maariv prayers, enjoying it immensely. Another study partner of mine for a while was Sholom Ber Drizin. For a short time, Reb Moshe Charitonov used to teach us Chassidus.

Reb Moshe Charitonov was an elderly Chassid. He and his brothers, Reb Aharon and Reb Sholom, from the city of

Nikolayev, were well-known composers of classic, soul-stirring Chassidic melodies (one of Reb Aharon's most famous ones was "The Beinuni," of which the Rebbe RaYYaTz was particularly fond).

Reb Moshe was the official baal korei — public reader of the Sefer Torah scroll — at our shul. Living far from our shul, he was finding the burden of walking so far every Shabbos and Yom Tov too much for him. When I expressed an interest in reading the Torah in his stead, he gladly agreed and, at the age of 14, I assumed this important responsibility.

ILLEGAL BUSINESS

Father's salary as watchman was so meager that it not cover even basic necessities. We had no choice but to seek illegal sources of income. Even then, our family barely had enough to buy food. We ate only black bread with a little margarine and saccharine, reserving white bread for Father's diet. Butter, sugar and other commodities were beyond our means. Wartime shortages meant that stores had even less products than before. The lines of customers stretched for many blocks, waiting often two hours or more just to get inside a store. Only on the black market was produce available but at exorbitant prices.

Sima and I got involved in various illegal "business" ventures:

Although all stores and suppliers belonged to the Soviet government, some store managers illegally bought merchandise — by bribery and similar means — from government suppliers with whom they were not authorized to deal. They then resold these goods, which were otherwise difficult to obtain, at a significant profit.

In the outer suburbs of Moscow lived a generous Jew named Vitkin, who was always ready to do favors for others. Before the Revolution, he had been outstandingly wealthy. Later he had become manager of a government-owned dry goods store. Mr.

Vitkin used his excellent contacts with government suppliers to obtain a variety of illegal goods, which he kept concealed at the back of his store.

Late at night, long after store hours, people who knew Mr. Vitkin used to knock at his store's back door to buy these illegal goods. He sold them at a fair price, enabling the buyers to resell the goods on the black market at a nice profit.

We used to buy goods from Vitkin, passing them on to an elderly man we knew, who resold them on the black market. Most dangerous was our ride home. Whenever a policeman boarded our tramcar or train, we froze in terror. I was short for my age, so I tried to bend over like a hunchback as I walked with sacks of clothing hanging behind me and in front, whistling to appear more natural. But my outward cheerfulness belied my inner fear. If police would search me, it would be all over; I had nor anywhere to hide, no cash for bribes, no excuses that made sense. If pressed to reveal the source of my merchandise or to whom I sold it, I would likely have broken down, spelling doom for my contacts.

We dealt in any goods available. Sometimes I was offered Czarist gold coins from before the Revolution, or even American dollars, for which people were ready to pay big money. Trade in currency was a crime so severe that it carried the death penalty.

After my brother-in-law, Reb Nochum Zalman, was discharged from the army, he started his own illegal business. Sometimes I got merchandise from him, keeping it at his home till I could dispose of it.

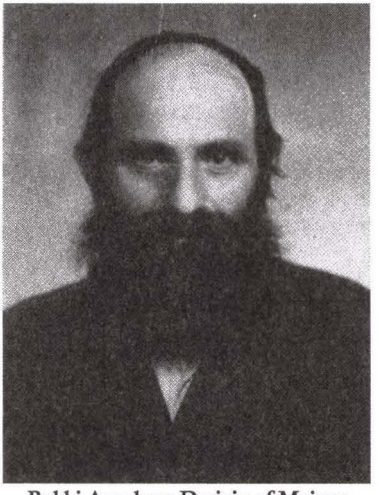
Another source of merchandise came from my older unmarried sister Sheindel, who worked at an office in a subterranean warehouse of army uniforms near the river in Moscow, right opposite the Kremlin. There, too, we could buy trimmed-off pieces of cloth. The managers opened the safes for us, cutting as much material as we could carry, which we resold on the black market. These wares were the most dangerous of all,

for trading in goods designated for the military carried the severest penalties.

In retrospect, I can hardly believe my own daring in those days. Although so young and short for my age, I dealt in illicit merchandise subject to heavy penalties, even greasing palms when necessary. I also arranged to obtain false documentation for myself. Pressing circumstances, it seems, force us to adapt ourselves accordingly...

FRIGHT

A friend of mine did similar business, but on a larger scale. Once he was caught by the police and, under pressure, broke down and told them the source of his wares.



Rabbi Avrohom Dreizin of Maiyor (1901-1998)

He used to buy them from Rabbi Avrohom Dreizin (1901-1998) — father of my friend Sholom Ber. Known as Avrohom Maiyorer, after his hometown, he was a respected Chabad Chassid, with a large family (later he settled in Israel, then in Crown Heights, where he passed away). After most Lubavitchers had fled for Central Asia, he continued living in his Moscow

suburb, not convinced that Jews had more to fear from the Germans than from the hated Soviets.

As soon as the police heard Reb Avrohom's name, their agents set out for his home to arrest him. He was out, so they waited there for his return. Hours later, Reb Avrohom walked in, dressed as usual in his old raincoat — which he wore as the only long garment available that was like traditional long Chassidic garb.

As he opened his door, he noticed the uninvited guests. Thinking fast, he stretched out his hand to beg: "Please spare some money for a poor man..."

The officers scolded him away, and Reb Avrohom fled for his life. By the time they realized their error, it was too late. They gave chase but their bird had flown!

Reb Avrohom had already caught the train back to Moscow. He went straight to the Marina Roshtcha Shul, where he hid in its attic. Only a few men who studied there at night knew he was there. As soon as an opportunity presented itself, he fled to Tashkent in Central Asia.

Reb Avrohom, an exceptionally wise man, was an exemplary Chassid, expert in Talmud, Halacha, Chassidus, and many Torah subjects rarely studied even by scholars. He was also a great oved, who spent many hours on prayer. Throughout his life, he used to rise daily at about 4:00 a.m. to study Chassidus for several hours, then meditate on it for hours, before praying slowly and devoutly for several hours more. While he stayed at our shul, I gained much from his Chassidic wisdom and vast knowledge.

Meanwhile, I turned fourteen. By then, the acute famine in Central Asia during the war's early years was over, and it was decided that I should join my brother Sholom at the yeshiva in Samarkand. A visa was required for travel there. To obtain it, I found a contact at the police station — a female officer whom I had to bribe abundantly for this purpose.

Several serious incidents occurred just then that prompted me to hurry my departure. Once I left my sister Basya's home with a load of stockings that I hoped to sell. Brashly, I exited the tramcar from the wrong side. A policeman standing right there caught me and hauled me off to the police station, where I was thrown into a cell with thieves and cutthroats. Trembling in fear, as I waited to be arraigned, I wondered what I would say if asked why I was out of school and the source of my illegal merchandise?

Just then the door swung open and a familiar face appeared — the female officer who was processing my travel permit!

"What are you doing here?" she asked in surprise. When I told her an officer had pulled me in for no reason, she released me.

Soon after, Nochum Zalman's illegal business was discovered and the police came hunting for him. Leaving their children with my parents, he and Basya fled to Tashkent. The NKVD took revenge for their escape by placing their youngest child, a three-year-old girl, under "house detention" in her parents' home, in her aunt's custody.

An NKVD agent came to our home to seek information. We had been tipped off about this likelihood and Mother had sent Basya's other children off to a neighbor. The agent sat across the table from Father. "Where are your grandchildren?" he demanded to know.

"I don't know."

"Liar!" the agent screamed. "We know you have information about them. Tell me immediately, where are they staying?"

Father insisted he had no idea what he was talking about. "They've left, but I don't know where."

Relentlessly, the agent continued his questioning, but Father revealed nothing. Suddenly, the agent tried a different tactic: "You're scared! I see your face is deathly pale."

Father picked up a mirror and stared at his reflection. "Nonsense!" he said firmly. "My complexion is absolutely normal." Actually, Father was indeed afraid that one of his grandchildren might suddenly return to our home, which would seal his fate. But eventually the agent realized he could prove nothing and left.

After these shocks, I hurriedly obtained my visa and started preparing for my trip to Samarkand.

BOOK HUNT

Hearing that Torah books were in short supply in Samarkand, I decided to take some with me from Moscow.

During the 1930's, in particular, the NKVD had forcibly closed many shuls all over the land. Before the war, I remember Father once coming home, his face gaunt with despair, to tell us that two of Moscow's remaining large shuls — Arbat and Poliakov — had been sequestered by the government and their Sifrei Torah given to gentile shoemakers for use as leather.

Sometimes, conscientious Jews were able to act quickly and spirit away as many Torah books as possible to some other shul. But often the police seized holy books and spitefully gave them away for use as scrap paper. For years afterwards, we used to find groceries wrapped in pages torn out of holy Torah books (in the Soviet Union, where bags were unavailable, even sugar was sold by weight and wrapped in newspaper or whatever else was at hand).

Over the years, Marina Roshtcha ladies gallery had become piled high with such books saved from other shuls. Others had been left by Jews afraid that their families might not treat the books respectfully after their passing. When Jews fled Moscow during the war, too, many left there books they could not take with them.

Hoping to find Torah books that might be useful in Samarkand, I got permission of the shul's gabbay — an elderly

man who was a worthy Jew — to take whatever books I could find. After spending many hours combing through the piles in the ladies' gallery, I selected some rare volumes and packed them with my other belongings, ready to leave.

Chapter VII:
CENTRAL ASIA

TASHKENT

The train ride to Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan, where I had to change trains to get to Samarkand, took about a week — including Shabbos. On such a long journey, observant Jews would normally get off the train before Shabbos, spending the holy day at the station, then await another train. But for a fourteen-year-old traveling alone, this would be too dangerous.

Because of a train's height above the ground, some Halachic opinions consider it as a separate "domain" on Shabbos, allowing continued travel as long as one does not get off on Shabbos. Although that opinion is not usually followed, my circumstances seemed extenuating enough for me to rely on it. Through the whole Shabbos, therefore, I did not step out of my train car.

Father asked a friend's daughter, an older girl making the same trip, to keep an eye on me and help me if necessary. She apparently did not relish the task of babysitting, and was more interested in enjoying her trip.

Our train reached Tashkent just before Rosh Hashana, 1943, and I stayed there till after the holiday.

Uzbekistan had a native community of Bukharan Jews — Oriental Jews with customs similar to the Sefardim. Most of them believed in G-d and were Torah observant to the extent of their knowledge, eating only kosher food, for example, and praying in their shuls. But until then they had had few Torah schools and they had no Torah schools, and were generally unlearned.

During the war, thousands of Jewish refugees from Poland and Lithuania, besides many Chabad Chassidim, settled in Central Asia, especially in the Uzbeki cities of Tashkent and Samarkand.

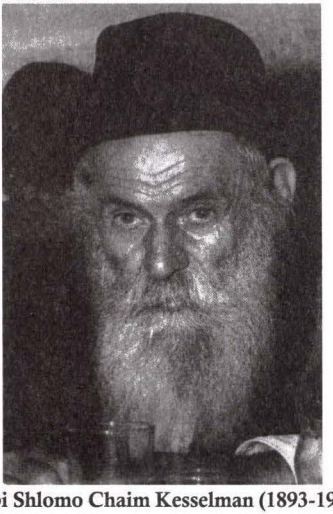
My first pleasant task was to visit our close family friend, Reb Yona Kagan, who had arrived long before. Father had let him know I was coming and he greeted me warmly.

"What did you do about Shabbos?" was his first question.

"I did what the Gemara says about Hillel," I replied. "'Desecrate one Shabbos for him so that he may keep many more.'" My reply seemed to satisfy him.

Next, I went out to see the city. A new world unfolded before my eyes. I was amazed to see obviously observant Jews walking in the streets without fear of arrest or antisemitic attacks. Back in Moscow, just days before, I often went home through side streets to avoid getting beaten up by antisemitic gangs.

Unlike Moscow, where Jews were afraid to come to shul, here the shuls were full of Chassidim praying and studying Torah. There were even boys of my age so advanced in Torah learning and service of G-d that they already possessed true Chassidic virtues.



Rabbi Shlomo Chaim Kesselman (1893-1971), Mashpia in Polotzk, Samarkand, and later in the Holy Land

Rosh Hashana, in particular, was an unforgettable experience. The shul where I prayed had many great Chassidic personalities, who spent most of the two holy days deep in prayer, pouring out their hearts to G-d. This left a profound impression on me.

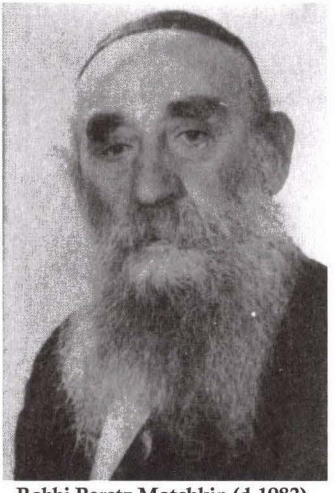
One of them was Rabbi Shlomo Chaim Kesselman (1893-1971). I had already been privileged to meet him, and knew his children, for our family had often spent a few weeks in the summer at a country cottage near their home. Reb Shlomo Chaim was a great oved, with a deep knowledge of Chassidus and the ability to make profound Chassidic texts easily understandable. The farbrengens he led were an unforgettable experience. The Rebbe RaYYaTz had appointed him mashpia, a role at which he distinguished himself for almost fifty years — first in Polotzk, Russia, later in other locations and eventually for over twenty years at Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim in Tel Aviv, Lud and Kfar Chabad, Israel, till his passing.



Rabbi Yisroel Levin of Nevel (d.1949), renowned Chassid

Another great personality was Reb Yisroel Levin, known after his birthplace as Yisroel Neveler. He was close friend of Father's, dating back to their years of study together in

Lubavitch. Reb Yisroel was a highly respected Chassid, a great Torah scholar and teacher, especially erudite in knowledge of Chassidus. He too was a great oved, who prayed for hours on end. He had great self-sacrifice for Chassidus and Yiddishkeit, for which he had been imprisoned for three years. Many thronged to hear his inspiring farbrengens. (He passed away in Paris in 1949.)



Rabbi Peretz Motchkin (d.1982), renowned Chassid and Mashpia, later in Montreal, Canada

Reb Peretz Motchkin was a Chassid of stature, who later served as mashpia of the Lubavitcher community of Montreal, Canada, for many years until his passing in 1982. Reb Yona was another of these special personalities, and there were other great Chassidim who prayed at various shuls in Tashkent.

That Rosh Hashana was truly uplifting for me. Till then, my life had been full of incessant anxiety and loneliness. Now I had come to a community full of Jewish light and warmth and a true Chassidic atmosphere.

THE WEDDING

The day after Rosh Hashana — the Fast of Gedalya — I bought a ticket to Samarkand. It could only be bought illegally,

for well over its actual value. My train ride that night was uneventful. No one awaited me at the station, for there had been no way to let my brother Sholom know of my arrival.

For the six-kilometer ride from the train station to the city, I hired a donkey-driven wagon. Soon we were alone on a road that led through empty desert. Imagine my shock when the gentile driver suddenly stopped and demanded full payment of the fare. I meekly complied and he took me further, but dropped me off at some distance from the yeshiva's address I had given him. At least he had done me no harm, thank G-d. I was forced to drag all my baggage quite a way to the yeshiva.

On the way, I was overwhelmed by a sight I had never before witnessed — a Jewish marriage ceremony! A groom and a bride were being led under the chupa canopy, surrounded by a large crowd of Chassidic Jews singing aloud a deeply moving melody. After the chupa, the festive meal and spirited dancing and singing continued for many hours into the night, the joyous voices reaching the far ends of Samarkand's Jewish quarter.



Rabbi Uziel Chazanov (1902-1999), distinguished Chassid



Reb Shneur Zalman Yissochor Getzel Rubashkin of Nevel, well-known Chassid

This fearless Jewish celebration was unlike anything I had ever seen, and it filled me with deep emotion. After all my years of dread, it was so heartwarming to see such a fearless and large

Chassidic celebration. The Chassidic families of Reb Getzel Rubashkin and Reb Uziel Chazanov (son-in-law of the well-known Chassid, Reb Meir Simcha Chein of Nevel) were uniting in marriage.

During my stay in Samarkand, many weddings took place. But we yeshiva students rarely attended, because Reb Nissan Nemanov, the yeshiva's dean and mashpia, felt it more important for us to spend the time on our studies.

YESHIVA

During my stay in the yeshiva, I had very little contact with my family. To correspond with each other a letter by mail was unthinkable, for, besides being dangerous for my parents, it could have placed the entire yeshiva in jeopardy. Only rarely could we find someone traveling to Moscow who could convey a message or letter to our parents.

I was assigned temporary lodgings at Kitapsky Tupik. It was a dead-end street, typical in Samarkand's old quarter, where all homes open to a courtyard, not to the main street. The sanitary conditions of the quarter were appalling. The floors of the homes were bare earth, from which all the yeshiva students got body lice. With no one to keep house for us and no showers or laundry facilities, the students all suffered but no one complained.

The apartment where I stayed served a dual purpose. It was a dormitory for out-of-town students and orphans, but also a study room for the yeshiva's older students through the day until late at night. Most of these older students were from families staying in Samarkand, but a few were from Tashkent. When I arrived, they were engrossed in study and prayer, and I was overwhelmed by their obvious fervor.

Soon I settled into a daily routine. My study day ended at about 8:00 p.m., when the local students went home, while out-of-town students returned to our dormitory. The table the older students had used for study became my bed at night! I would

place a straw mattress on the table and cover it with a sheet. My roommates were older students, and often I waited up for them to finish studying before I could get to sleep.

There were advantages in being the only young student staying in a room with senior students. Usually students of my age were not allowed to be present at farbrengens held for older students; we had our own farbrengens led by our teachers. But because I slept in the room where Reb Nissan used to lead farbrengens for his senior students, I had the privilege of being able to listen in.

One Thursday night I awoke late to find my "bed" in the middle of a farbrengen! As the coals crackled in the furnace, spreading warmth through the room, the students, their faces aglow with a warmth of their own, sat around Reb Nissan, drinking in his inspiring words. In between, they sang beautiful Chabad melodies.

Shaking off my slumber, I asked one student what was the occasion. He told me it was to celebrate the start of a new lesson, given every Thursday evening by Reb Nissan, of Kuntres Etz Hachayim. In this profound Chassidic text, the Rebbe RaShaB explains the vital importance of studying Chassidus — the foremost expression of P'nimiyus HaTorah (Jewish mysticism). It also details the unique nature of Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim and what the Rebbe RaShaB expects from its students.

REB NISSAN NEMANOV

Rabbi Nissan Nemanov (1904-1984) was the yeshiva's dean. He was a great oved, a devoted servant of G-d who toiled constantly to refine himself. His every deed and word were measured and permeated with the spirit of Chassidus. His daily prayers lasted many hours, preceded by hours of studying and meditating on Chassidus.

After studying briefly in several branches of Tomchei T'mimim, he served on the faculty of the underground yeshivos.

In 1930 he was arrested and exiled for three years. (After leaving the Soviet Union, he became the dean of Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim in Brunoy, near Paris, France, till his passing.)

After Reb Nissan's return from exile, aware that the NKVD still monitored him closely for any "counter-revolutionary" activities, he did not dare get involved in running the yeshivos again. He lived in a Moscow suburb, supporting his family, as did many other Chassidim, by machine-knitting clothing.

At the start of the war, as the Germans approached Moscow, most of the population was evacuated into the interior. Most Chassidim fled to Central Asia. But Reb Nissan remained unaffected by all the turmoil.

That winter was particularly cold even for Moscow. It was the abnormally low temperatures that apparently stopped the German advance, eventually helping to turn the tide against them. On one bitterly frigid day — even by Russian standards — Reb Avrohom Maiyorer, who lived not far from Reb Nissan, came to pay him a visit. On entering his home, he stopped short in shock. The home was as cold as outside!

Huddled in a corner sat Reb Nissan's children, hungry and moaning. There was not a scrap of food in the house. He himself, utterly oblivious to the intense cold and hunger, stood facing the wall, wrapped in his tallis and tefilin, deep in devout prayer.

Reb Avrohom ran out to buy wood for the furnace, and soon its warmth spread through the home. He bought a sack of potatoes and roasted them, leaving the family with enough food to last for several days. Through all this time, Reb Nissan stood totally engrossed in his prayers, unaware that Reb Avrohom had entered and left several times, bringing such good cheer to his home!

"That incident," Reb Avrohom later observed to me, "perfectly illustrates Reb Nissan's exalted spiritual level." His concentration on his devotions to G-d were so deep that he could banish all other thoughts, ignoring even cold and hunger.

A few years later, soon after the Lubavitcher Yeshiva was established in Brunoy, near Paris, France, Reb Shlomo Chaim Kesselman, a great Chassid and mashpiya in his own right, once spoke to me about the uniqueness of Reb Nissan, who had just arrived there from Germany: "If Reb Nissan Nissan had lived at the time of the Alter Rebbe, his constant self-refinement would have been highly regarded even then!"

Another incident I recall from my years of study in Brunoy was when I accompanied Reb Nissan one Friday on a trip to Paris to use the mikva before Shabbos (there was no mikva yet in Brunoy). He noticed me looking out of the window of our Metro traincar at each station to see if it was ours. "Why do you have to look out?" he rebuked me for unnecessarily looking beyond my immediate four cubits. "Why not just count the stations to know which is ours?"

Reb Nissan's overwhelming spiritual stature left a profound impression on our entire yeshiva. His lofty level, however, made him somewhat inaccessible for younger students like me. He taught the senior students Chassidus and spent time with them, but younger students were not allowed to attend the farbrengens he led for the senior students or for married Chassidim. Nevertheless, he was the spiritual head of the whole yeshiva and it was an ominous sign if any student, even a younger one, was called to speak to him!

When I first arrived, I received such a call. Reb Nissan had heard about the rare Torah books I had brought and how I had searched for them at the shul. He was shocked, afraid it could lead to the NKVD discovering our yeshiva.

"How could you do such a thing?" he berated me. "Your father is known as such a smart man — how could he be so irresponsible to tell the gabbay you need books for the yeshiva?" I made no reply, though I was convinced that the NKVD must know of the yeshiva's existence anyway, but chose to ignore it for their own reasons. The books were confiscated from me.

CHASSIDIC PERSONALITIES

The presence of many other special personalities created an atmosphere of Chassidic warmth and devout worship of G-d.

The yeshiva included students of all ages and levels, from basic Hebrew reading for young children to advanced Talmud, Halacha and Chassidic philosophy for senior students. Parents who had more money had the option of enrolling their children in small classes taught by a special teacher who gave them individual attention.

There was even a class for latecomers, students below the level of their age-group because they had had little opportunity to study. Some came from towns where there had been no one to teach them and they had been unable to leave home to study at a clandestine cheder (Torah school) elsewhere. Now they finally had a chance to study Torah at their own level.



Rabbi Abba Pliskin (1905-1999), distinguished Chassid

This special class was taught by Reb Abba Pliskin (1905-1999), a unique Chabad Chassid ideally suited for these students. Mild mannered and unassuming, but wise and learned, he was especially sensitive to these students' needs. They, in turn, held him in the highest esteem. Later, after escaping the USSR in 1946, Reb Abba — at the express request of the Rebbe RaYYaTz — was included in the original nucleus of Lubavitcher families that moved to Melbourne, Australia, laying the foundation of today's flourishing Chabad community on that continent. Later he moved to Crown Heights, New York, where he was

privileged to serve as the shamash of the Rebbe's shul for many years during the 1960's and 1970's.



Rabbi Yeshoshua (Shiya) Korf (b.1905), distinguished Chassid



Rabbi Moshe Rubinson (1914-1950), underground Rosh Yeshiva

Gemara (Talmud) is the main study subject at every yeshiva. The younger Gemara classes were taught by Rabbi Yehoshua — Shiya — Korf (born 1905, may he be well), who now lives in Crown Heights, and Rabbi Moshe Rubinson (1914-1950).

Reb Moshe Rubinson, known by the name of his birthplace as Moshe Korolevitcher, was adored by his students. Besides his scholarship, he was the epitome of kindness and concern, utterly devoted to his students' welfare as if he were their own father. They responded with love, often volunteering to help him with chores at his home, for his poor health prevented him from being of much help to his wife in coping with their young family.

In 1938, Reb Moshe had taught a small group of students at a clandestine Tomchei T'mimim Yeshiva in Berditchev, Ukraine, together with Reb Berel Gurevitch. On 24 Teves, when they led a farbrengen for the students, the NKVD broke in and hauled them off to jail.

Deciding to spare his young students from a continued stay in jail, Reb Moshe accepted full responsibility for the yeshiva. "I recruited students, " he told his interrogators, "ran the Yeshiva and raised funds to support it." His brave declaration also spared the true organizers of the underground Tomchei T'mimim Yeshiva system from blame. His young teenaged students were released and sent to a state-run orphanage, from where they later

escaped with the help of Reb Michoel Tietelbaum, who actually kidnapped them risking his own life.

In jail, Reb Moshe suffered from brutal beatings in many interrogations. His stay there seriously damaged his health and he never completely recovered. Nevertheless, on arriving in Samarkand, despite his poor health and the serious danger especially for one already jailed, this true Chassid went right back to teaching Torah. After leaving the USSR, he continued teaching till he passed away at a young age in Paris after World War II.

GREAT SCHOLARS

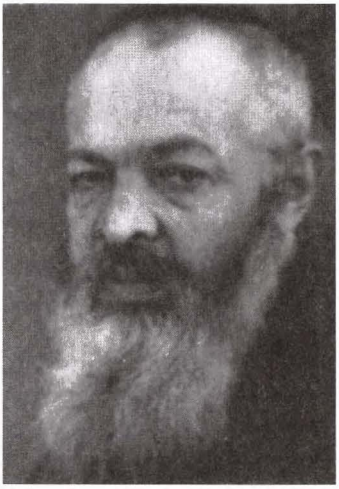
On arriving in Samarkand, I was tested orally in my knowledge of Gemara by one of the heads of the yeshiva, Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dvorkin (1900-1985). He was a quiet man but a great scholar, expert in all four sections of the Shulchan Aruch — the code of Jewish law. Later, after several years in Pittsburgh, he became the beloved Rabbi of the central Lubavitcher community in Crown Heights, New York, from 1960 until his passing in 1985.



Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dvorkin (1900-1985), Rabbi and Rosh Yeshiva in USSR, Rabbi of central Lubavitch community in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Apparently I did well on the test, and Rabbi Dvorkin enrolled me in a class of students of my age who used to study in a more advanced Gemara class, comprising mostly very bright students aged 15-16 years old, taught by Rabbi Avrohom Elya Plotkin (1889-1949).

A brilliant Torah scholar, Reb Avrohom Elya was considered a prodigy even among his fellow scholars at Lubavitch. The Rebbe RaShaB even selected him to serve for a while as the Rabbi of his household for ruling on practical Halachic questions. Later he served as Rabbi of various towns in Russia.



Rabbi Avrohom Eliyahu Plotkin (1889-1949), Rabbi and Rosh Yeshiva in USSR, author of "Birurei Halachos"

Although I had already studied much Gemara and knew it well, never before had I tasted such in-depth Talmud study. It was exhilarating to hear Rabbi Avrohom Elya's brilliant lectures explaining the Talmud's breadth and depth in all its detail, based on many authoritative commentaries and Halachic codes. We students all revered him and I became very attached to him, gaining vastly from his learned lectures and inspiring farbrengens.

Under the harsh conditions of the time, it seems incredible now how an entire yeshiva operated so freely with scores of students. The teachers had all fled from cities where intensifying persecution had conditioned them to constant fear. Some had already suffered in Soviet jails, while others had fled after NKVD agents came searching for them, and they naturally feared NKVD punishment for running our yeshiva.

Indeed, even in Samarkand's more relaxed conditions, we students were still very careful. We always carried our books under our jackets, for example, and took other precautions.

Understandably, Rabbi Plotkin was afraid to give his lecture at the shul where we studied all day. Instead, he gave it at his home. Then we returned to the shul to review his lecture and continue studying on our own. Even at his home, we took turns during the lecture to stand guard outside for the approach of anyone suspicious. The students inside were on constant alert: A pre-arranged signal from our guard sent us all racing to hide in the basement until it was safe to emerge.

Once, while hiding in the basement, we were terrified to discover a thick snake lurking there. Was it better to risk staying with a deadly viper, or should we emerge from our hiding place and risk arrest? Thankfully, a student who lived in Samarkand calmed our fears: "I'm familiar with this species of snake," he reassured us, "and it's totally harmless!"

After a while, Rabbi Plotkin became apprehensive even to give lectures at his home. The influx of new students, he felt, could arouse police suspicion. The parents of one of the students bravely volunteered to allow Rabbi Plotkin to give his lectures at their home, although, as before, with one of us always guarding outside the door.

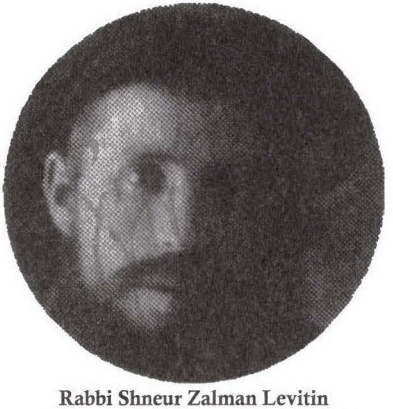
YESHIVA LIFE

Farbrengens for the younger students were held only on special occasions. They were led by our Talmud lecturer, Rabbi

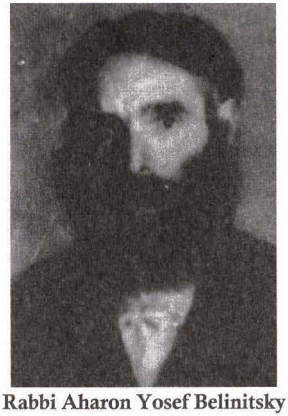
Avrohom Elya, or by Reb Shneur Zalman Levitin (1966-1977), our mashgiach — dean of students. Besides answering questions we had on our studies, Reb Zalman was responsible for ensuring that we punctually observed our study schedule. Although he was strict, Reb Zalman showed that he loved us dearly, and we really appreciated it.

For supper, each out of town student had "teg" — literally "days" — hosted by a different Jewish family every night of the week. Sometimes, after walking very far to reach that night's host, supper was not yet ready. But if it meant hurrying my meal or even missing it, we felt we had to leave on time to get back by the start of the next study period, so that Reb Zalman would not give us a hard time.

For breakfast and lunch, we received money to buy our own food: raisins, nuts and fruit, butter or smoked sheep fat. We were given bread, but it was usually black bread and never fully baked. By the time I arrived in Samarkand, thank G-d, there was always enough bread for everyone.



Rabbi Shneur Zalman Levitin (1906-1977), distinguished Chassid



Rabbi Aharon Yosef Belinitsky (1905-2002), distinguished Chassid

Reb Aron Yosef Belinitsky (1905-2002), another unique Chassidic personality (son of Rabbi Yisroel Noach, 1884-1983, one of the outstanding early students of Yeshiva Tomchei Tmimim in Lubavitch), was in charge of ensuring that the Yeshiva had all necessary supplies.

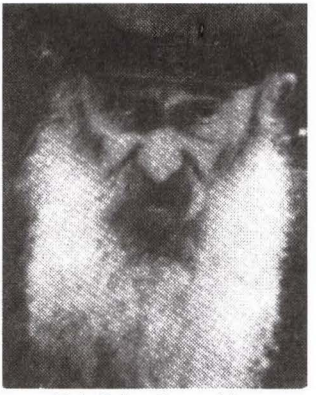
When refugees arrived in Samarkand in 1941, the war and the cold winter disrupted supply lines, causing a severe famine. Many, including thousands of Jews, died of disease and starvation. Reb Aron Yosef worked in the Chevra Kaddisha — Jewish burial society — the members of which volunteer to ensure that Jews who pass away receive a traditional Jewish burial. So many were then dying that often a body was brought to the cemetery late at night and laid inside an open grave that could not be filled in till the morning. Since the Torah prohibits leaving a body unwatched overnight, Reb Aron Yosef used to lie all night in the open grave, holding on to the corpse to scare off jackals scavenging for food!

Reb Aharon Yosef (who later served for many years on the faculty of Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim at Brunoy, near Paris, and passed away in Crown Heights) used to buy bread from Reb Osher Sossonkin, who managed a government-owned food store. During the war, the government distributed bread by a system of ration vouchers issued as payment to workers. It was illegal to trade in such vouchers, but Reb Osher managed to get many which he used to obtain bread for our students.

Reb Osher himself was a courageous young Chassid, a son of Rabbi Nochum Shmarya Sossonkin (1888-1975, a great scholar who had studied in Lubavitch and became known as Shmerel Batumer after he was sent by the Rebbe RaYYaTz to Batum, Daghestan, in the Caucasus to teach the local Jews. After leaving the USSR in 1946, he became Rabbi and mashpia of the Chabad community in Jerusalem until his passing). Later Reb Osher was arrested and spent eight years in prison camps, yet managed to avoid ever desecrating the Shabbos! In 1964, he was finally permitted to leave the Soviet Union, and was privileged later to serve as shamash in the Rebbe's Shul at 770 Eastern Parkway, Crown Heights, during the 1970's and 1980's until his passing.

Our water came from wells, and had to be boiled and strained from insects before drinking. On Shabbos, when

straining is prohibited, we used to follow the advice of the Shulchan Aruch and strain it with our teeth as we drank!



Reb Osher Sassonkin, distinguished Chassid



Rabbi Nochum Shmaryahu Sassonkin [1888-1975], Rabbi and Mashpia in Batum and Jerusalem

Friday was bathing day. The underground bathhouse in Samarkand's old Jewish quarter was steamy, decrepit and unsanitary. Everyone had to draw his own water in dirty old buckets from separate cisterns of cold and heated water. Sometimes we went to the more modern bathhouse of Samarkand's newer quarter, some distance away.



Rabbi Shlomo Matusof (b. 1917)

The yeshiva's treasurer was Shlomo Matusof (born 1917), a senior student familiar with bookkeeping. Reb Nissan entrusted

him with all the yeshiva's funds, which involved large sums of money. Shlomo had already been imprisoned for studying Torah in an underground branch of the yeshiva. He is respected for his learning to this day. During the early 1950's, the Rebbe sent him to Morocco, where he served with great dedication for over forty years, heading a yeshiva and directing a girls school in Casablanca. He now lives in Crown Heights, New York.

CHASSIDIC MELODIES

The most inspiring moments of our week were late on Shabbos afternoon. After the Mincha prayer, as dusk fell, all the students gathered in the study hall for a special hour devoted to singing profound Chabad melodies. Often students were so inspired that they sang with their eyes closed in ecstasy. After we sang a number of melodies for a long while, a student used to repeat a maamar of Chassidus he had memorized by heart (we took turns doing this — all of us were encouraged to memorize many maamarim).

Most of the students were from Chabad families. But many had lived in places of few Chassidim and had had little opportunity to learn most of the many hundreds of deeply moving Chabad melodies.



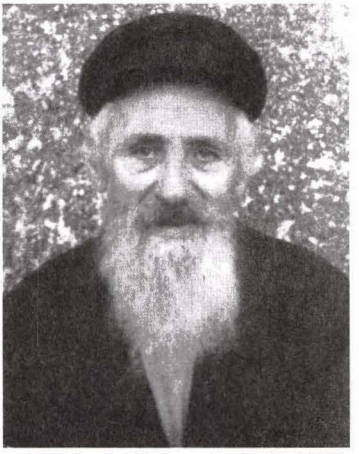
**Rabbi DovBer Levin,
Shochet in Belfast, Ireland, and
in Sunderland and London, England**



**Rabbi Leib Levin,
Sofer and Shochet
in North Africa and Paris**

In Samarkand, we were fortunate to have among us two brothers, Berel and Leibel "Feitel's" (after the name of their father, Reb Shraga Feitel, 1885-1942, a brother of Reb Yisroel Neveler) Levin. Both had beautiful voices and had learned a rich repertoire of Chabad melodies from their uncle, Reb Gershon Ber Levin, the Shochet of Nevel, a gifted singer and Chazan who was killed by the Nazis with the other Chassidim of Nevel. He had also taught them the traditional tunes used by Chazanim for leading prayer services throughout the year. It was a spiritual delight to listen to the two brothers' sweet voices ringing through the study hall in the late Shabbos twilight, as they led our singing and taught us many melodies new to us.

Unfortunately, both brothers (and a third brother, Binyomin) passed away in middle age. Many of my contemporaries did not reach their full life-span, perhaps due to the poor health conditions during their childhood.



Rabbi Mendel Dubravsky (1875-1958),
Rosh Yeshiva and Rabbi in various Russian cities

During my last few months in Samarkand, I was privileged to stay at the home of Rabbi Dvorkin's father-in-law, Rabbi Mendel Dubravsky (1875-1958), a brilliant and erudite scholar and Chassid of stature, of the generation before Tomchei T'mimim. In his youth he had studied together with the

great father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, under the renowned scholar Rabbi Yoel Chaikin, Rav of Podabranka. Reb Mendel was selected as lecturer on Talmud and its commentaries at Yeshiva Tomchei T'mimim in Lubavitch, and later served as Rabbi of various Russian towns. He passed away in Pittsburgh.

Reb Mendel was then a widower of seventy, living alone. His children felt he needed a yeshiva student to help him keep house. But he was far more active than they realized. Every night when I arrived, his home was immaculately clean, the stove full of coal and burning brightly, and the kettle boiling. He even used to insist on serving me a cup of hot tea! My only regret is not having recorded for posterity the many original Chassidic stories and sayings he told me.

Actually, I was busy then with another project — transcribing Chassidus. We had only a few mimeographed copies of the teachings of the Rebbe RaYYaTz and the previous Rebbeim, so students spent many hours copying maamarim and sichos by hand. Besides writing for themselves, some students wrote for others, too, selling the copies for a fee. When we later escaped from the USSR, these copies were left behind, for all manuscripts were suspect and could have caused grave trouble on our travels, especially at the border.

During my second year in Samarkand, my class advanced to a higher level. We did not yet join the senior students "in Zal" (i.e. those who studied Talmud on their own, because they had advanced beyond the level of needing regular lessons), although we ate our meals together with them. Instead we now became an intermediate class, studying at another shul. We no longer had daily lectures, but studied on our own, each student with his study partner, under a rosh yeshiva who lectured only occasionally but was available through the day to answer our questions. This was an enriching experience, as we learned to master on our own the Gemara's difficult language and complicated train of thought.

Our Rosh Yeshiva was Rabbi Shmuel Notik (1890-1949), a great scholar in Talmud, Halacha and Chassidus. Known by the name of his town as Shmuel Krislaver, he studied in Lubavitch and later served as Rabbi of the town of Kopust. In 1935, he was arrested and exiled, but on his return around 1939 served as head of Yeshiva Tomchei Tmimim in Kutais, Gruzia, until he moved to Samarkand near the end of the war. In 1947 he was arrested again and passed away in prison on 5 Shvat, 1949.

Our teacher for Chassidus was Reb Avrohom Shraga Feivish Zarchin, a fervent Chassid, who had studied in Lubavitch. Most of his family had been killed by the Germans, and he himself had been badly wounded. He spent his time in prayer and study of Chassidus. After many Chassidim escaped from the USSR after World War II, Reb Avrohom returned to his hometown of New Borisov in White Russia to serve as a shochet. Despite the danger, he taught others the craft of shechita (kosher slaughter), ensuring that the Jews of the Soviet Union would continue to have expert kosher slaughterers. He passed away there in 1981.

LIFE IN SAMARKAND

Besides the native Bukharan Jewish population, most Jews in Samarkand during the war were refugees. Many had fled from Poland and Lithuania after the German invasion in 1939. At first the Soviets interned them in labor camps in Siberia. After the German invasion, the USSR joined the Allies, which included the Polish "government-in-exile" in London. As a gesture of goodwill, the Soviets released their Polish internees. But the unfortunate refugees had no possessions and suffered pitifully as they tried to reconstruct their lives.

During the famine early in war, many of the refugees to Central Asia died of hunger or illness, especially typhus caused by the unsanitary conditions. Before my arrival, however, conditions had started to improve.

Some Jews managed to buy weaving machines to eke out a meager living. These weaving machines were often so primitive that they were similar to those mentioned in the Talmud. The suits and dresses made on them actually looked more like sacks, but nothing better was available.

Several Jews established factories, providing many fellow-Jews with employment. Thread for the machines had to be bought in Tashkent, then smuggled into Samarkand by truck. Large sums of money were needed for this and for other illicit businesses, and the money itself had to be obtained illegally — some specialized in smuggling many thousands of rubles into the city.

All this was conducted in the utmost secrecy for NKVD agents were everywhere, stopping people to check their documents in order to catch draft dodgers. By law, everyone had to carry his identity card at all times. To avoid the draft, some Lubavitchers had obtained forged or altered Polish passports. But those holding a Soviet identity card had to have a "white slip" to prove they were too old or sick to serve in the army.

Often the police became suspicious and dragged some hapless man off to the recruiting station, from where only a hefty bribe could get him released. Bribery also helped anyone caught doing business to avoid arrest or imprisonment.

Samarkand's old quarter was full of winding, narrow alleyways. Cars could barely squeeze through and usually avoided them for the wider roads outside. To transport merchandise in the quarter, the Uzbeks used donkey-drawn wagons.

Most of its houses were built of clay held together by a frame of wooden sticks. Often holes gaped through the walls, which had to be dampened regularly with water to smooth over the cracks and keep the clay together. In homes with a basement, the floor could cave in without warning. One Shabbos, after the Torah was read in our yeshiva minyan, someone was given the honor of raising up the Sefer Torah scroll for all to see. Suddenly

the floor collapsed beneath him and he fell into the basement, still holding half the Sefer Torah in his hands!

Although it was 1944, Samarkand's old city still had no electricity. For lighting and cooking, kerosene lamps and stoves were used, which were very dangerous. Indeed such a lamp once caused a terrible accident.

We had gone to hear a lecture by our rosh yeshiva, Rabbi Plotkin, at a student's home. It was somewhat dark, and our host went to light the lamp. The primitive matches used in Samarkand were tipped with a flammable paste that sometimes dripped downward after catching fire.

When our host struck the match, it dripped down onto the lamp's fuel container, full of kerosene mixed with gasoline. The lamp erupted into flame, shooting tongues of fire across the room. All hell broke loose as we desperately tried to put out the blaze. Helplessly, we ran downstairs and out into the yard.

One student, sitting next to the lamp, had become engulfed by the flames and was burning all over. Hearing our cries, a woman living next door ran in, grabbed a blanket and threw it over him, screaming to him to roll over on the floor. That saved his life.

It took a while to extinguish the flames. But that unfortunate student still lay unconscious. Serious burns covered his body, his arms and legs were so swollen that he could not move them, and his face was burned beyond recognition. The doctor who carefully tended him had only the most primitive resources at his disposal, and no hospitals were there to treat him. Listlessly the poor boy lay at home, recovering only after many months, although never completely.

Rabbi Plotkin had lost half his beard, and another student too was badly burned on his hand and neck, leaving scars, physical and emotional, for the rest of his life.

JEWISH LIFE IN SAMARKAND

Most of the Jewish quarter was occupied by Bukharan Jews. The other neighborhoods were populated by rough Uzbeki gentiles. We young boys were afraid of them, for their teenaged bullies hated us and often picked fights. Even the Bukharan Jewish boys were unfriendly and always ready for a fight. Often we walked in groups to avoid attacks.

Once two Uzbeki boys beat me up and threw me to the ground. When they suddenly stopped and ran off, I breathed a sigh of relief — until I put my hand in my pocket and realized they had robbed me of the 90 rubles I had been given to buy that day's meals!

Once, some Uzbeks living in a village just outside the city entered our neighborhood, grabbed a three-year-old Jewish child, Boruch Kievman (who now lives in Crown Heights), and ran back with him to their village. His uncle, Yosef Raitzes (also now in Crown Heights), then a teenaged yeshiva student, chased after them and retrieved the child, bringing him back home. Later he told us he had no idea how he mustered the courage to challenge all those ruffians on his own. The possibility of losing a Jewish child must have impelled him to act without thought of the consequences.

Unfortunately, most of the Bukharan Jews were hostile to us. Only a few families, mostly those who had had a prior relationship with Chabad — through Reb Simcha Gorodetsky, sent there by the Rebbe RaYYaTz during the 1920's — helped the refugees, especially during the famine. They were led by Chacham Refael Chudaitov and Chacham Chizkiya, who had studied in Lubavitcher Yeshivos and was a Chabad Chassid.

Especially deserving of recognition for his extraordinary kindness was Chacham Jury Niazov. He helped many refugees and opened his home to complete strangers, including an entire Chabad family. When the head of the family caught typhus, a dangerously contagious disease, Chacham Jury risked his life by

refusing to send them away. Unfortunately, he caught the disease himself and passed away with his guest.

Reb Simcha Gorodetzky, sent by the Rebbe RaYYaTz to strengthen Jewish life in Central Asia, had fulfilled his mission with great self-sacrifice, despite the danger. But the NKVD eventually arrested him and he was sent to Siberia for several years.

He had built on the pioneering work of representatives sent by the Rebbe RaShaB during the early years of the century. They included Rabbi Shlomo Yehuda Leib Eliezrov (c.1863-1952, a grandson of Rebbetzin Menucha Rochel, daughter of the Mitteler Rebbe of Chabad) who had served as Rabbi of Hebron in the Holy Land. On his travels to various lands between 1892 and 1920 to raise funds for the Jews of the Holy Land, he visited Central Asia several times, spending periods of several years in Samarkand as Rabbi of the Bukharan community, which held him in high regard. He taught Torah to youth and adults, and established communal institutions, such as shechita, on a high level. After World War I, he returned to the Holy Land, becoming a prominent Rabbi and leader of the Chabad community in Jerusalem.

Another representative of the Rebbe RaShaB in Central Asia, for a year or two before World War I, had been Rabbi Avrohom Chayim Noeh (passed away 1954) of Hebron and Jerusalem, later well known for his invaluable and pioneering Halachic works, "K'tzos Hashulchan," "Shiurei Torah" and others.

In Samarkand, for the first time in my life, I tasted meat (other than chicken). Although there was no butcher store, kosher meat was produced on a large scale. The main Lubavitcher shochet was Reb Uziel Chazanov (in whose courtyard I had been so impressed to witness his daughter's wedding), who supplied meat for all the Chassidim in the city. After the slaughter, he koshered the meat by salting it, and then it was distributed to the many Jews who kept kosher. If a policeman caught any part of this process, a bribe soon closed his

mouth — as it did for all other illegal activities. One mean-spirited Bukharan Jewish policeman named Mishka used to extort huge bribes, but the others did not expect as much.

Samarkand had no truly wealthy Jews. Anyone, especially Chabad Chassidim, who had money to spare — such as from private businesses — generously supported the shuls, cheder schools for children, and yeshivos for teenaged students.

The Bukharan Jews had many shuls in Samarkand, but the newcomers established their own. There were shuls designated for Lubavitchers, Polish Chassidim, and non-Chassidim from Lithuania, who also had a small yeshiva for older students. Its Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yitzchok Kopelman, a disciple of the renowned scholar Rabbi Shimon Shkop, later headed a yeshiva in New York.

One Chabad shul, rented from Bukharan Jews, was in a large, airy building on the "Chudzum," a main road. At all hours of the day, many minyanim prayed there, comprised mostly of workers and businessmen. This shul also had a cheder, run by Reb Zushe, the former shamash of the Marina Roshtcha Shul. His refined character was apparent in his refusal to accept payment for teaching the children, whom he obviously loved, and they adored him in return. Sometimes Jews came just to watch him teach. An older bachelor named Shmerel "der bahelfer" (teacher's assistant) used to help him. Although not the smartest, Shmerel was very devoted to his holy work.

It was truly amazing how, quarter of a century after the Revolution, this truly Jewish and Chassidic environment was able to flourish in Samarkand, with yeshivos, cheder schools, shuls full of minyanim, farbrengens, weddings and bar-mitzva celebrations.

In the midst of the intense sorrow wrought by the war, the Jews who found refuge there were happy just to be alive and well. For us especially, we were overjoyed to experience the renewal of Chassidic life and Torah study, and even

Samarkand's primitive conditions did not therefore bother us much.

Chapter VIII:
AFTER THE WAR

WHERE TO GO?

After the war ended in 1945, Soviet troops occupied most of Eastern Europe, where the lands now became Communist satellites of the USSR. In another goodwill gesture to its new satellite, Poland, the Soviet Union permitted all Polish refugees to return to their homeland. Most were Jews.

Here was a chance for Soviet citizens, too, to escape. If they could obtain Polish passports, they could escape from the Soviet "paradise" on the "echalons," as they were called, the trains conveying Polish citizens back to Poland. During the war, several Chabad Chassidim had obtained Polish passports — buying them from relatives of Polish refugees who had passed away, for example — in order to avoid the Soviet draft. Some now seized the opportunity and used their passports to leave the USSR.

Most Chassidim, however, were uncertain what to do. Their encoded telegram to the Rebbe RaYYaTz in New York, received a reply, also encoded, that seemed unclear. Some interpreted it to mean he agreed, while most felt it was not a clear approval (after leaving the USSR, we discovered that this was not, in fact, true).

In general, it was very difficult to communicate with the free world. The NKVD monitored all correspondence and people were afraid to accept even food packages from relatives — sent through the American "Joint" (Distribution Committee) — for fear that the NKVD would charge them with spying for a foreign land.

After most Polish refugees left, the NKVD started renewing its harassment of Yiddishkeit. Once Reb Nissan noticed he was

being observed from a neighbor's house. He hastily slipped out and escaped to Moscow, hiding at the home of Reb Zalmen Sudakevitch (now in Kfar Chabad) in a suburb of the city.

Rabbi Yisroel Noach Belinitsky and Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dvorkin now replaced Reb Nissan as heads of the yeshiva. But, with the NKVD at their heels, they soon realized that the yeshiva could not continue in Samarkand. They decided to try moving it gradually to Kutais, Gruzia (Georgia), where the local regime gave far more latitude to religious observance.



Reb Yechezkel Brod (b.1923), distinguished Chassid

Their choice fell on me to help arrange this, since my family did not live in Samarkand, so I would not endanger them if I were caught. Accompanying me was an older student, Chatzkel Brod, who had spent several years studying at Tomchei T'mimim in Kutais from 1938 till the end of the war.

A friend gave me the birth certificate of his deceased younger brother, which made me two years "younger." Remembering my new "name" was a challenge; I had to practice it constantly, rolling it off my tongue until it was familiar.

As a "young" boy traveling alone, I had to have a good excuse. I would claim to be seriously ill and that my doctor had ordered an immediate change of climate for my convalescence. Gruzia is much warmer and its mountain air more invigorating

than Samarkand, so my story was that my parents had sent me ahead and would soon follow.

Chatzkel's situation was far more complicated. His heavy beard and older appearance invited police questioning, and his identity documents were also questionable. Above all, he had no document of discharge from the army. We would have to rely on miracles.

We needed plenty of money with us to rent quarters for the new yeshiva, living expenses for us and for the students coming to join us later, besides any necessary bribes. It was dangerous to carry lots of cash, especially huge sums that even well-paid workers could never accumulate. If caught, we could have been charged with serious economic crimes. My false documentation was in order, making me less likely to be questioned, so I was entrusted with the $10,000, which I tied in a bundle at my waist.

OUR TRIP

We traveled by train to Krasnovodsk, where we had to stay for Shabbos. A former student of our yeshiva owned a small house there with an attic, and he was delighted to host us. Since the city had no minyan, we decided, after some deliberation, to stay home all day, both to avoid encountering police and to keep watch over our money and all-important identity documents. The uncomfortably hot day was spent up on the roof, on guard for unwanted guests.

After Shabbos we continued by ship across the Caspian Sea, the world's largest inland body of water. Throughout our journey, Chatzkel was in mortal fear of being stopped and questioned. Imagine our terror when we discovered that many of our fellow passengers on the ship were military officers! We spent the four-hour trip locked inside our private cabin, breathing a sigh of relief only after disembarking safely in Baku, Azerbaijan.

From there we took a train to Tbilisi, capital of Gruzia.

Chatzkel was familiar with the city, and led the way to the local shul of the Gruzian Jews, where we set down our suitcases. Chatzkel went out to buy something, but I waited at the shul, afraid of getting lost in this strange new city, especially as I had no idea how to proceed to Kutais on my own if necessary.

It took a long time for Chatzkel to return. I began to panic; maybe he had been caught by the police. If so, they must be looking for me too by now! Just then, worshipers started filling the shul for Mincha prayers. The curious crowd wanted to know what I was doing in their shul with all that luggage — mine and Chatzkel's! I explained that I was traveling to stay with an aunt of mine, and they seemed to believe me.

Finally, after two hours, Chatzkel reappeared, his face ashen white. As I had suspected, a policeman had tried to arrest him. Although Chatzkel's command of the native language made a good impression, it took a while to convince the officer to accept a generous bribe and let him go.

Once we took the train to Kutais, our final destination, we started to unwind a little. But our feeling of ease was premature. As we got off the train, I noticed from the corner of my eye a police officer watching us closely. Quickly I looked around for an escape route. But there was none. The station was on an open space with no streets or buildings close by.

Sure enough, the officer trailed us and motioned to me to follow him. My heart must have skipped a beat. "Continue walking," hissed Chatzkel. "Just pretend you didn't see him."

But it was no use. The officer caught up and told me to follow him with my packages to the train station's small police office.

"Sit down," he ordered. "Where is your identity card?"

After I handed them over, the interrogation began. He asked for the names of my parents, siblings, occupation, the purpose of my trip, and much more. Of course, I was well prepared for all his questions, but he refused to believe that I was coming here to

get a change of climate. Above all, I was terrified that he would search me. If he found the money, I was doomed.

After a long interrogation, he went out to make some phone calls. What if I were sent to jail? There was no way I would be able to stick to my story through torture and imprisonment.

Suddenly, the door opened and a soda vendor who sold his wares outside the police office appeared in the doorway.

"Get out of here, fast!" he told me. "Grab your belongings and leave." I had no idea what had happened but was happy to do as he said. Chatzkel awaited me at the door and we ran off.

As we ran, he cleared up the mystery for me. Outside the station, Chatzkel had been wracking his mind how to get us out of this dangerous situation. Noticing that the soda vendor was Jewish, he handed him sixty rubles and begged for his help. The vendor gave half to the officer to secure my release. As usual, money worked wonders.

KUTAIS

Like Samarkand, Kutais had an old quarter and a new city. Most of the Jews lived in the old quarter, which was primitive and dilapidated. Through the smelly alleyways ran open sewage (calling to mind the episode in Megillas Esther where Haman's daughter threw sewage down into the street without realizing it was over her father's head...).

We stayed with Rebbetzin Slavin and her son. Her husband, Rabbi Avrohom Levi Slavin, a graduate of Lubavitch, had been sent by the Rebbe RaShaB to Kutais in 1917. He had been highly respected by the Jews of Gruzia for his courageous and widespread communal activities on their behalf. Arrested in 1941, he passed away in Siberia a year or two later. His sacrifice was rewarded by G-d, for all his children remained Torah observant. His widow lived with her son, a very capable young man.

Chatzkel warned me to stay home and not show my face in shul. The local Jews knew him already and would not ask many questions. But their questions to me as a newcomer could get us both into trouble. As much as I wanted to pray in shul, I knew he was right and stayed home.

Two weeks later, two more students arrived from Samarkand. The older one was quite a scholar and acted as our Rosh Yeshiva. We set up class in an abandoned shul and Kutais had a yeshiva once more.



Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Perlow (1890-1978),
Rosh Yeshiva and Rabbi in USSR,
Italy and Melbourne, Australia,
author of "Get L'maaseh" and "Likkutei Sippurim"

Soon came 12 Tammuz, anniversary of the 1927 release of the Rebbe RaYYaTz from Soviet imprisonment. In honor of this important date, we arranged to hold a farbrengen at the home of Rabbi Mordechai Perlow, a senior Lubavitcher Rabbi sent by the Rebbe RaYYaTz in 1923. Also present was a Gruzian Rabbi, Chacham Yaakov, who had been in Kostrama when the Rebbe RaYYaTz was exiled there, and he told us what he remembered.

But our little yeshiva did not last long. Within three weeks, Rabbi Perlow's son came from Tashkent with exciting news: The Soviet Union had reached a further understanding with Poland,

permitting any remaining Polish citizens to return home. The handful of Lubavitcher Chassidim who had already used false passports to escape with the Polish repatriates, had encountered no problems. This seemed to be our last chance to escape the accursed Soviet soil forever, and many Chassidim decided to seize the opportunity.

Chapter IX:
A Daring Escape

Lemberg

Before World War II, Lemberg had been part of Poland. After Germany attacked Poland in 1939, the Soviet Union annexed the city in accordance with its partition pact with Germany. After the war, all Polish territories annexed by the USSR were incorporated into the Soviet republics of Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine.

Lemberg, or Lvov as it was called in Russian, had become part of Ukraine. It was the last Soviet city close to the border from where the trains ("echalons") carrying Polish refugees left for Poland. To facilitate the great escape, a committee of Chabad activists formed there, arranging for alteration and forgery of many hundreds of Polish passports, and raising funds for the huge bribes required. These activities could have cost the lives of everyone involved, and a fierce debate ensued over whether the Torah permits taking such a grave risk.

Rabbi Perlow and his son decided to travel with their family to Lemberg to join those planning to escape, as did my fellow students. With the yeshiva now disbanding, and since I had been away from home for several years, I decided to return to Moscow. When I arrived home a few days later, I discovered that Father had left to visit us in Tashkent — he was unaware that I had left for Kutais. He met Sholom there, and returned home with him.

Sholom and I were too afraid to pray in shul. But we really wanted to immerse ourselves in a mikva in honor of Shabbos. We decided it was worth paying a whole ruble each to use the fine swimming pool at the fancy Hotel National. The pool was

full of elite military officers, and the two poor boys taking a swim must have raised some eyebrows. But no one bothered us, thank G-d.

Father had heard of the escape plan, and decided that Sholom and I should risk the attempt. Before long, we packed our suitcases again for the twenty-four hour train ride to Lemberg. There we took a cab, giving the driver the address we had been given.

The door was opened by none other than Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dvorkin. He was shocked to see us:

"What are you doing here? Just yesterday, Reb Yisroel [Neveler] was arrested trying to cross the border. Too many people are already here illegally, and how long can it be before the police start to find them all? Any day now, arrests will start. You should have stayed in Moscow till the situation clears up!"

"We had no idea," we pleaded. "No one told us we shouldn't come. You can't send us back now!"

But Rabbi Dvorkin ignored our protests and insisted we leave town immediately. The sudden turn of events left us at a loss what to do next. Fortunately, we also had the phone number of one of the escape project's organizers and we phoned him.

"Don't be ridiculous," he told us. "After coming all this way, there's no reason to go back now." He gave us an address where we could find lodging. Like the many other tenants crowded into the apartment, we had to pay an exorbitant rent for our tiny room.

The apartment's former occupant, we discovered, had been a Polish Jew enamored with Communism, who had decided to join the Soviet "paradise." He had slipped over the border into the Soviet Union, and was then rewarded — typically — by being arrested and shipped off to Siberia!

Jews, especially Chabad Chassidim, were flocking to Lemberg from all over the Soviet Union. By the time we arrived, a number of Chassidim had successfully crossed into Poland, including Rabbi Nissan Nemanov. It seemed likely that, before

long, the Soviets would realize they had been duped and would crack down with a vengeance.

Reb Yisrael Neveler was soon released but warned that the NKVD was well aware of the whole operation! In a panic, the organizers decided to suspend it for the time being.

An underground group called B'richa — Hebrew for "escape" — organized by Zionists, ran a vast underground operation throughout Europe to smuggle Jews out of Soviet-occupied lands to safety. Its goal was to help concentration camp survivors reach Western Europe, from where they could be transported illegally to the Holy Land — the British government then held the mandate over Palestine and forbade entry to most Jews. With tremendous courage, the B'richa succeeded in smuggling many thousands of Jews over European borders until they reached the DP (displaced persons) camps under United Nations auspices in Austria, Germany and France.

In Lemberg, the B'richa was headed by a man named Varshavsky, who had contacts with the Zionist leaders in the Holy Land. Together with his colleagues, he had entered Russia illegally for the sole purpose of helping Jews escape — an incredible act of self-sacrifice. Eventually the Soviets caught the ringleader and executed him by firing squad.

Chabad Chassidim, however, who had learned by experience not to rely on anyone else, organized their own operation, cooperating with the B'richa only as much as necessary. Leading the Chabad operation was the famed Reb Mendel Futerfas and Reb Yona Kagan, and among those heavily involved were Reb Moshe Chaim Dubravsky and Leibel Motchkin. My brother-in-law, Nochum Zalman Gurevitch, was a member of the committee, and important meetings were held in his apartment. Mendel Garelik and his sister Tzipa were among those forging the passports needed for crossing the border — a closely guarded secret.



Reb Moshe Chayim Dubravski (d.1957)



Reb Yehuda Leib Motchkin (b.1924), activist in mass escape from USSR, 1946

Not everyone involved was a Lubavitcher. The Katzman brothers, for example, although paid handsomely for their efforts, performed an invaluable service, saving many families,

Lemberg was a much smaller city than Moscow and Leningrad, and several hundred new faces were immediately noticeable. Most Lubavitcher Chassidim streaming into the city were bearded, making them especially conspicuous. But it was impossible to stop them from coming. After all the persecution and suffering of over a quarter of a century, everyone was desperate to leave. Selling or even abandoning their apartments, furniture and jobs, they gathered a few essential belongings and set out for Lemberg.

More Chassidim were arriving daily, and the situation was becoming desperate, with a severe shortage of food and accommodation. Officially, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, it was illegal to stay in the city for more than twenty-four hours or to receive food coupons without being registered as a resident. To obtain registration papers, one needed a work permit. Worst of all would be if anyone were stopped by a policeman without appropriate documentation. Since the situation was so dangerous, everyone clamored to be on the first "echalon" that would become available.

To reach a definitive decision on the many life-and-death issues involved, a Rabbinical court was convened of twenty-three Chassidim (similar to the "minor" Sanhedrin at the time of the Holy Temple, which determined cases of life and death). Not all were ordained Rabbonim, but all were Torah scholars and respected Chassidim. The Rabbonim included Rabbi Nochum Shmaryahu Sossonkin, Rabbi Shneur Gorelik, Rabbi Shmuel Notik, and Rabbi Avraham Glazman. Among the respected Chassidim were Reb Mendel Futerfas, Reb Abba Levin, Reb Moshe Chaim Dubravsky, Reb Shlomo Chaim Kesselman and Reb Yona Kagan.



Rabbi Shneur Zalman Garelik (1880-1974), Rabbi in USSR and Kfar Chabad, Israel

The special court ruled that all were obligated to give up any money and jewelry they had to a communal fund that funded expenses for food, accommodation, tickets, passports and bribes. These were loans to be repaid in the future, after crossing the border to freedom. Everyone complied without hesitation, and these funds helped many families to survive.

Originally, my parents had decided against joining the possible escape. It was rumored that men might have to shave their beards to avoid attracting attention on the "echalon," and

Father refused to entertain such a possibility, even if it meant staying behind. "If there's no choice, then let the young men shave," he told me. "But the older Chassidim should never do it." Father was over sixty then, old by contemporary standards.

Also influencing my parents' decision to stay was my sister Sima's refusal to leave the country, for various reasons. After a while, however, Father changed his mind and decided to come to Lemberg on his own, without Mother, to explore the situation.

YOMTOV IN LEMBERG

Meanwhile, the holiday of Rosh Hashana arrived. We dared not risk going to shul, but made a minyan in a neighbor's apartment. But where would we get a Sefer Torah? There was one at the headquarters of the operation, at the other end of town, but how could we get it? It was decided that one of us would walk across town to the headquarters and, after their minyan finished using it, would carry it to our place. As the youngest of our group, with little growth on my face, I was selected for this dangerous task!

On Rosh Hashana morning, I set out for the headquarters, accompanied by a lookout. If I would be apprehended, he would run back to our minyan to tell everyone to disperse, so that if I was forced to reveal the minyan's location, no one would be caught.

After picking up the Sefer Torah and covering it well, I cradled it in my arms to conceal it and started the 90-minute walk back, humming as I went to make it seem natural. We walked separately — crossing through most of the city, including the smelly marketplace crowded with peasants who were selling food and clothing. I was convinced that I was being followed and that every corner concealed a policeman lurking to pounce on me. But we returned safely, thank G-d, and our minyan was able to hear the holiday's Torah reading.

On the day before Yom Kippur, even non-Chassidim normally immerse themselves in a mikva. But there was no talk of taking such a risk. The city's only mikva was at the shul, which was too dangerous even to approach. One fool did use the mikva while no one noticed, and got a harsh tongue-lashing when the other Chassidim found out. Miraculously, no harm came of it.

Sukos was approaching, and Chassidim started wondering where to build a suka that would remain inconspicuous. According to the Halacha, our dangerous situation certainly absolved us from any obligation to eat in a suka. Nevertheless, throughout the years of the Soviet regime, Chassidim had become accustomed to observing all mitzvos meticulously even under the most perilous conditions.

One day I noticed two Chassidic students carrying bundles of long grass in the street. It attracted no attention, for many of the city's residents had a horse or cow that needed to be fed. But, before Sukos, I realized it must be s'chach for roofing a suka.

"Where's the suka?" I asked in a whisper.

When they told me its location, I was amazed. They had built a suka on a roof next door to the NKVD headquarters! It was tiny, very narrow and barely higher than the minimum Halachic requirement of ten handbreadths (about 33"). Although we had to eat our meals there half-crouching, we were overjoyed at being able to fulfill this important mitzva. Ten families living nearby took turns to use it, eating their meals in shifts to give everyone a chance.

The climax of Yom Tov was on Shmini Atzeres, when the older Chassidim decided to hold a farbrengen — in the suka, of course. Despite its small size, nine Chassidim managed to squeeze inside. I crawled in last, and part of my body remained outside. We took care not to make any noise, and certainly not to sing.

As the Chassidim began their farbrengen, a heavy rain started to fall. Father was there, together with Rabbi Shmuel

Notik, Rabbi Shneur Gorelik, Reb Zalman Butman, and others. Soon the rain forced us indoors, but the farbrengen continued in the kitchen.



Rabbi Shneur Zalman Butman (1903-1983), distinguished Chassid

It was a farbrengen I will never forget. Most of the time, Reb Shmuel Notik was speaking, demanding tearfully that G-d grant our wish to be reunited with the Rebbe.

Father disagreed. "We must do whatever the Divine Providence demands of us," he argued. "If the Rebbe wants us to stay behind and continue working to strengthen Yiddishkeit here, then that must be our only goal!"

But Reb Shmuel would not concede. Soon both were in tears, and everyone wept with them, for no one knew how our escape plan would turn out. Tragically, both Father and Reb Shmuel were fated to stay behind and lose their lives in Soviet prison camps.

During Sukos, the Rivkin family, numbering forty souls, decided they could wait no longer. Disregarding the danger, they boarded an "echalon" to Poland, using false passports already in their possession, and made it safely over the border.

On Simchas Torah the Chassidim in Lemberg learned of this successful escape. So the border was still open! Their joy knew no bounds, and everyone danced ecstatically, for another family had made it to freedom. Father even turned cartwheels in the street!

But Father was soon brought back to his senses. Right after Yom Tov, Sima sent a message that strangers had asked about him at the Marina Roshtcha Shul. Father realized that the NKVD was looking for him, and if they traced him to Lemberg, it could jeopardize the whole escape operation. Rather than endanger other Jews, Father bid us farewell and returned to Moscow.

During our months of waiting in Lemberg, Reb Yona Kagan even opened a yeshiva for the unmarried young men to study! Rabbi Shmuel Notik was appointed to teach us, and he gave lectures in our room.

After a while, the Yeshiva had to move elsewhere because I fell sick and was diagnosed with typhus, a dangerously contagious disease. My quick-witted brother-in-law, Reb Nochum Zalmen Gurevitz, immediately bribed the doctor not to report this to the authorities, as he was legally required to do. To prevent the disease from spreading, the police used to force whoever caught it to go to hospital, and Nochum Zalmen realized that would make it impossible for me to join any escape transport (indeed, a friend of mine who caught typhus was discharged from hospital only after the transports left, missing his chance to escape).

It was my brother Sholom who devotedly nursed me back to health, for which I shall remain forever grateful. My sickness left me very weak, and he cooked expensive foods for my diet and patiently tended to all my needs, Later, Mother came from Moscow to help, and then Father, too. For almost a month I lay sick.

One day, as I lay in bed, we were suddenly notified that we were to join the next "echalon" crossing the border. Although I

was still so sick, the others at my apartment dressed me and took me to an apartment near the train station. It was my first time out of bed since catching typhus.

In the middle of the night, the organizers came to distribute forged Polish passports with false new names. Nochum Zalman and his family were also waiting to board this "echalon." As a fugitive hunted by the NKVD for his illegal business dealings in Moscow, he had disguised himself so well that I hardly recognized him!

Unfortunately, there were not enough passports for all of us. Nochum Zalman and his family were among those fortunate to escape with this transport, but neither Sholom nor I received a passport, and we had to return to our apartment. I went straight back to bed.



Reb DovBer Dubravski,
activist in mass escape from USSR, 1946

Ten days later, we again received word that we were to join the next train. Berel Dubravsky, one of those arranging transportation to the station, flagged down a passing truck and offered the driver a nice sum to take us there. This was a common practice then in the USSR (as it still is), for drivers received low wages and were always willing to transport paying passengers.

The driver agreed and Berel jumped inside, directing him to other locations where families and groups were waiting. "Absolutely no noise," Berel instructed them all. After everyone was aboard, Berel told the driver to proceed to the station. From afar, we could see our train standing on tracks usually reserved for freight trains. This was an added precaution to avoid suspicion.

As we approached the station, a soldier stopped our truck. He tapped on the window, requesting our identification documents and asking questions. Berel had warned everyone not to talk, but passengers at the back of the truck were talking. The officer stopped to listen.

"Aren't these supposed to be Polish citizens? Why are they talking in Russian? It makes no sense! What are your names?"

We all froze in terror. We had not yet received the forged Polish passports that would provide us with our new identities.

"Our papers are at the train station," Berel spoke up. "The head of our group has them."

But the officer refused to be sidetracked. "Your names!" he demanded. "I want to hear your names!"

The driver began turning his truck in the direction of the police station. We sat motionless, scarcely believing our bad luck. After all these months of waiting and planning, we had been about to leave this accursed land and now, at the last moment, our chance of freedom seemed about to evaporate.

Berel started to bargain. We sat quietly, praying in our hearts. The officer mentioned an exorbitant sum. Berel bargained him down to half that sum and immediately handed over the cash. We were now free to proceed. But our driver was drunk and started driving towards the police station.

"To the train!" we screamed desperately. "The policeman said take us to the train!"

The driver sped by the police station, then drove back to the train. As we boarded, I could feel my heart pounding furiously. This was the moment we had so long awaited!

The train was about to leave. But another problem arose. The family of Reb Dovid Leib Morozov was hysterical because their sixteen-year-old son Shneur Zalman was lost. Apparently, the truck bringing his group to the station had been stopped and taken to the police station. Later, they were permitted to leave. Meanwhile, however, Zalman, afraid that he would be kept in jail and lose the opportunity to leave the country, managed to escape. The police officer in charge became furious at his escape and ordered his men to pursue and catch him. But Zalman ran down side streets and managed to evade them. His family, however, did not know what had happened to him. The train was about to leave, and his father decided to stay behind to find him. He was just about to get off the train when Zalman suddenly showed up, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief... (The family later lived in Montreal, Canada; may Shneur Zalman ben Tzeita have a full and speedy recovery).

Just before the train pulled out, an officer boarded to harass us one more time: "How can you leave this paradise?" he ranted. "Our motherland is the best on earth. The Party is creating a new world."

We sat stone-faced through his tirade, not daring to meet his stare. Receiving no response, he got tired and left. Soon the train started pulling slowly out of the station. We watched silently as Lemberg swept by, hardly believing our good fortune.

For almost twenty-four hours we traveled. Ours was by far the largest illegal group to leave the USSR via Lemberg, and two train-cars had been designated for our group. There were a few Polish families in our car, which was not too full. But the second car was so packed that no one could sit down. Mothers with babies were forced to hold them through the whole trip. Tragically, one mother fell asleep while holding her baby, and the infant suffocated.

As the train approached the border, the organizers drilled us with our new identities — names, birthdates and siblings. Just before crossing into Poland, while still on the Russian side of the

border, we were all ordered to get off the train. We had to stand in the cold winter air, frozen to the bone, for almost two hours until we were allowed back.

A guard came aboard to question us. Standing in the middle of our car, he read our names from a list, asking us to identify ourselves. When a seven-year-old girl answered correctly as stated on his list, he looked up in surprise. "Very good!" he remarked sarcastically. "She has learned it well!"

We were shocked. Could he be aware that all our Polish passports were forged and that this transport of "repatriated Polish refugees" was a sham? But he finished reading the list without further comment, and we breathed a sigh of relief.

Now he asked if anyone had money with them. To cover any expenses I might encounter on our journey, Father had borrowed two gold coins from Reb Mordechai Dubin and these were sewn into my jacket. I took it off and buried it deep among my packages. The officer walked through the car, questioning everyone and checking through their packages.

(Reb Mordechai Dubin was an outstanding, scrupulously observant Chassid who was a celebrated statesman and member of the Latvian parliament. He played the major role in securing the release of the Rebbe RaYYaTz from jail in 1927 and arranging his subsequent departure from the USSR. When the Soviets occupied Latvia in 1940, they arrested him and sent him to jail. This saved his life, for when the Nazis entered Latvia in 1941, they murdered the Jews. Later in the war, he was released and settled in Moscow, where he renewed his activities to help Jews. Hundreds benefited from his courageous efforts. Later he was arrested again and exiled; he passed away in Tula during the mid-1950's, and his remains were eventually reinterred in the Chabad cemetery in Malachovka near Moscow.)

Soon my turn came. "Any money?" asked the officer.

"No," I lied. "Here are my packages. Check them if you want." He believed me and moved on, questioning every passenger.

"I have some Russian coins," someone spoke up. He was taken off the train by the officer and brought into the police office.

During those anxious moments, we felt that our very lives hung in the balance. This was our only possibility to reach freedom, to leave the Soviet hell once and for all. If that unfortunate man would buckle under questioning and give any hint about our illegal exodus, we could all lose our lives.

After what seemed an eternity, he returned safely, thank G-d. Slowly our train pulled out of the station, picking up speed. Soon, to our indescribable relief, we crossed into Poland. Bottles of vodka instantly appeared as everyone toasted each other "L'chaim" — "to life! — thanking G-d for our miraculous escape.

Unfortunately, the passengers of the other train-car could not share our joy. While thanking G-d for their escape from the Soviet Union, their joy was tempered by the tragedy of the infant's death. The unfortunate father had to get off at the first stop, Premishlan, to arrange for the child's burial.

After many more hours, our train arrived at the outskirts of our destination, Cracow, Poland, on Shabbos afternoon. Assuming we were now safe, and not wishing to desecrate the Shabbos needlessly, we resolved to spend the rest of the holy day outside the city.

But B'richa members arrived and urged us to continue our journey. This was a life-threatening situation, they told us, for a wave of virulent anti-Semitism was sweeping through Poland, and many Jews had been murdered, including scores in a recent pogrom in Kielce. If the bloodthirsty Poles would hear of our arrival in such an exposed area, they would soon come to attack us.

Our Rabbonim and respected Chassidim huddled together to consult on this, and decided that women, children, and invalids should continue on the train into the city while the men would stay behind until after Shabbos. We sat in the fields, nervously

watching out for any attackers. But Shabbos passed without incident, thank G-d, and soon we continued on our journey.

When we reached the city, we found representatives of B'richa and Vaad Hatzala awaiting us. They provided us with accommodation, food, clothing, and other necessities. They also warned us about the constant presence of NKVD agents, even here in Poland. Soviet troops occupied the land, and the streets were full of their police, who felt as much at home there as in the USSR.

Nevertheless, we were ecstatic. After a life of suffering, we were finally free!

Chapter X:
FATHER'S FATE

THE END OF THE ESCAPE OPERATION

Back in Lemberg, the organizers of the Chabad escape operation invested enormous effort in planning another getaway for the remaining Chassidim. Another train managed to depart safely, but it left the city so unexpectedly that almost half of those waiting to join were left behind. Some had already locked the outside doors of their apartment buildings for the night and could not be called out, while others did not get enough time to reach the station.

Another train was organized to leave for Poland, but this time through Romania. Many Chassidim were on board. But when they reached the border, calamity struck. Police boarded the train and arrested all illegal passengers, subjecting them to a thorough search and intense interrogation. They caught those responsible for forging Polish passports, discovering the names of everyone associated with the escape operation.



Rabbi Moshe Katznelenbogen, distinguished Chassid and educator, Moscow and London, England



Mrs. Soroh Katznelenbogen (nee Raskin), outstanding Chabad activist, known as "Mumeh Sorke"

The NKVD swept down in full fury, arresting all whose names were on the lists. A friend of mine, Moshe Katzenelenbogen (who now lives in London, England), barely sixteen years old, was among those arrested. His mother, Soroh (a remarkable woman known to everyone as "Di Moomeh Sorka" — "Aunt Soroh" — for she was an aunt of the various Raskin families), had been one of those most active in the operation. She had already been arrested and interrogated, but refused to divulge other names. In an attempt to threaten her, the police brought her son into her cell. Shocked to see that even her teenage son had been arrested, she later suffered a massive heart attack and passed away before his eyes.

MOTHER'S CLOSE ENCOUNTER

The NKVD agent who came to arrest Reb Yona in Lemberg (as related in a previous chapter) was unaware that his bird had flown. He decided to wait for him in the apartment where Reb Yona had stayed.

Meanwhile, Mother had just arrived in Lemberg from Moscow. She was on a dangerous mission of bringing gold coins to Reb Yona for the purpose of funding Tomchei T'mimim. It was, of course, illegal to possess such coins in the Soviet Union, and anyone found with them was liable to the severest punishment.

From the train station, Mother headed to the apartment where Reb Yona had been staying — without realizing she was going straight into the lion's mouth!

She rang the bell. The lady of the home came out. Any word she might say would bring the NKVD agent to the door and place Mother in danger of arrest. Instead she stayed silent, but gave Mother a push so firm that it inadvertently sent her flying down the stairs.

Mother took the hint. Realizing the danger, she immediately ran out into the street. She found a car waiting there with a driver

inside, and offered to pay him to take her to the train station — blissfully unaware that this was the very car which had brought the NKVD agent and now awaited his return with his prey!

The driver apparently had been waiting for a while, and nothing seemed to be happening. The station was probably not far off, and here was a chance to make a quick extra fare during his boringly long wait. Without considering whether the NKVD agent might be interested in arresting Mother, too, he took her to the station, where she managed to catch a train and escape!

Meanwhile, the NKVD agent must have heard the bell and realized someone had come. He went downstairs to take a look and was furious to discover that his driver had disappeared!

FATHER'S GOLDEN HEART

Now that the intense efforts needed to win the war were over, the Soviet authorities resumed their persecution of Yiddishkeit. A new wave of arrests followed, including Reb Mendel Futerfas, Reb Shmuel Notik, Reb Yona Kagan and many others. Many of them passed away from their inhuman treatment in jail and labor camps.



Rabbi Mordechai Kozliner, of blessed memory, mashpiya and director of Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim, Nachalas Har Chabad, Israel

Reb Chaim Zalmen Kozliner, a Chassid known by his initials under the codename "ChaZaK," had been one of those most active in running the underground Tomchei T'mimim yeshivos. He was arrested first, and then his wife, leaving their

two children, Mottel (Mordechai) — just 18 years old — and his younger sister on their own. In desperation, they traveled to Moscow to seek help.

Mottel walked into the Marina Roshtcha Shul. Father noticed him and hissed at him: "What are you doing here? Do you want to get arrested? Get out immediately!"

Shocked by this unexpectedly harsh welcome, Mottel and his sister fled. To whom could they now turn? Walking aimlessly through the streets of Moscow, they were at a loss where to go.

As they walked, brokenhearted, they were startled by a cough right behind them. Looking around, they noticed a figure hiding in the shadows. It was Father.

"Your lives were in danger," he whispered. "NKVD agents monitor the shul constantly, and anyone walking in comes under surveillance. Here, take this."

He thrust a small package into their hands and disappeared down an alleyway. Mottel and his sister opened it. To their amazement, it contained a large sum of money. Father's package enabled them to survive until they could settle down.

Such Chassidic nobility of character was intrinsic to Father's personality. He was always deeply concerned for other Jews' well-being, even in the face of personal danger.

When Reb Mordechai Kozliner emigrated to the Holy Land, he established a branch Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim in Nachalas Har Chabad, the Chabad suburb of Kiryat Malachi, Israel, founded by the Rebbe in 1969 for Soviet refugees. After arriving in the free world, he told me of his above encounter with Father.

"FATHER HAS BEEN TAKEN TO HOSPITAL..."

In September, 1947, Sholom and I received a shocking letter. "Don't write anymore," our sister Sima wrote. "Father is very sick, and has been taken to hospital." We understood. Father had been arrested by the NKVD...

Years later, we pieced together information about Father's fate from those with him at the time. One day, Father was walking with someone when they noticed they were being followed. "I don't care what they do to me now," Father told his companion resolutely. "I've already sent my sons out of this accursed land. I have nothing more to fear from the police."

Soon after, on August 13, 1947, Father was arrested. Also imprisoned at the same time were other Chassidim: Reb Berel Rikman (1898-1988), Reb Mordechai Gurarye, Reb Moshe Chayim Dubravsky, Reb Chayim Leizer Gurevitch, Reb Yona Kagan and many others. The NKVD accused them of being the members of an insidious group labeled "Chassidov," led by the Rebbe RaYYaTz from New York. It conspired, they claimed, to gather Jews and work on them in an "anti-Soviet, chauvinist, capitalist spirit," trying to smuggle them out of the country's borders to Poland, England, America and Palestine. They were further accused of organizing illegal shuls and schools called yeshivos in the cities of Moscow, Tashkent and Samarkand, and of giving an "anti-Soviet, religious chauvinist" education to Jewish and adults in illegal schools called "cheider," where the education was anti-Soviet and in some cases based on "capitalist ideology."

In prison, Father was interrogated mercilessly to extract information about others involved in the Chassidic "counter-revolutionary underground," and to get him to "confess" to serious crimes. From the official records of his interrogations (obtained from the KGB in recent years, and translated in the Appendix), it is clear that Father tried to mention as accomplices in his religious activities only Chassidim who had either left the USSR or had passed away.

The official indictment against all of them (except for Reb Yona who, accused of many other crimes, was indicted separately) was issued on February 6, 1948. Soon after, each had his sentence read to him separately: ten years exile in Siberian labor camp.

Mother was no longer a young woman, but she several times traveled the great distance, enduring the arduous journey to bring Father kosher food, especially as he needed special delicate foods for his poor health.

Reb Chayim Zalmen Kozliner, who later emigrated to the Holy Land, was imprisoned in the same labor camp as Father in Patma. He too heard Father resolutely telling his interrogators that he did not fear them, especially now that his sons had escaped abroad.



Rabbi Chayim Shneur Zalman Kozliner, distinguished Chassid

The prison rules required everyone to shave. Father was ordered to shave off his beard, but adamantly refused. Many tried to change his mind, for the prison rules were not to be trifled with, but Father would not be swayed.

As a Chassid, he felt strongly that a Jew must have a full beard, no matter what. Even during a typhus outbreak in World War I, when strict orders had been given for everyone to shave for hygienic reasons — the fatal disease is carried mainly by lice — Father would not hear of it. By keeping his beard, he could easily have caught it, but it did not concern him at all. Even when he lay deathly sick in hospital in Bashkiria, he clutched his

beard with both hands even while sleeping to thwart any attempts by hospital staff to shave his beard.

But in prison the officers would not tolerate Father's refusal to shave. One day they grabbed hold of him and held him down while they shaved his beard. Father was heartbroken. It was too much for his frail body to bear. Before long, in the arms of his friend, Reb Chayim Zalmen, he passed away from grief. The date was 7 Ellul, 5709 (1949).

Somehow, Reb Chaim Zalmen managed to relay the sad news to Mother. She was devastated. Three months later, a coded letter was received by one of the Chassidim who had recently settled in the Holy Land, mentioning that "Nochum Zalmen's father-in-law" had passed away. At the time, I was studying at Yeshiva Tomchei Tmimim in Brunoy, near Paris, and it was there that I received the news and observed the week of mourning, "sitting shiva."

MOTHER'S LATER YEARS

Mother was now a widow in her late sixties. She was too old to work and her government pension was all of nine rubles a month. We knew she would be unable to survive on this, but it took many months until we discovered her address so that we could send her regular food packages, including matzos for Pesach.

In 1953, the Soviet dictator Stalin, who had been responsible for the death of so many millions of Soviet citizens, died unlamented. Conditions started to relax, if only a little. Gradually, many who had been condemned to years in prison camps were released, including many Chassidim. To her surprise, Mother received a letter from the KGB (as the NKVD was now called) stating that Father had been "rehabilitated."

Late in the 1950's, the Soviet government started granting exit visas to a few citizens who applied to be reunited with their family members in other lands. These visas were still most

difficult to obtain, and the application itself often brought undesirable consequences, such as immediate dismissal from employment and harassment by the KGB. At Mother's advanced age, however, she did not have much to lose.



Mrs. Yenta Rivka Levertov (d.1970), the author's mother

In 1964, she applied for an exit visa. My sister Basya, Nochum Zalmen's wife, lived with her family in Melbourne, Australia, and sent her the necessary request forms to be reunited with her daughter. But her request was refused. Mother went from government office to office, begging and demanding to be allowed to leave.

"But your husband was a criminal," the officials told her. "What crime did he commit that he was jailed, and for which he had to die in prison?"

"You killed him!" mother screamed back. "First you murder him, then you send me a letter saying he's rehabilitated! And now you're asking why he was jailed and died?"

Finally, in 1965, Mother received permission to emigrate. She went to live with Basya in Australia. Several years later, she came to stay with us in Crown Heights, New York, for about a year. She passed away on 30 Adar I, 5730 (1970).



**Rabbi Nochum Zalman Gurevitch (1911-2000)
and Mrs. Basya Gurevitch (nee Levertov)**

THE MARINA ROSHTCHA SHUL TILL NOW

After the arrest of so many Chassidim, including Father, the Marina Roshtcha Shul almost came to a standstill. Even Jews still Torah observant at home were afraid to go to shul, for that made anyone immediately suspect.

As conditions relaxed a little after Stalin's death, some Chassidim released from jail settled in Moscow. They included my old friend Moshe Katzenelenbogen, Yisroel Pinsky (now in the Holy Land) and many others. As they started to rebuild their lives, materially and spiritually, their new life revolved around the Marina Roshtcha Shul. Originally, it had not been an exclusively Chabad shul, but by the middle of the 1960's it became so, as the old generation of observant Jews passed away, leaving no one to replace them, and virtually the only observant Jews left were Lubavitchers.

During those years, the Lubavitchers even managed to influence several non-religious Jews to become Baalei Teshuva — which would have been unthinkable during the Stalin era.

They even formed Torah classes for these mostly young Jews who were seeking to rediscover their Jewish roots and heritage.

Officially, the authorities no longer arrested Jews for observing religion. Nevertheless, they could not accept teaching religion to Jews who were not observant. They harassed the activists and tried to stop their activities, issuing decrees to prohibit public teaching of religion and religious gatherings — farbrengens — in shul. On several occasions, they threatened to close the shul.

At the time of the Six Day War, the danger enveloping Israel and the ensuing miraculous victory aroused the Jewish spark in thousands of Soviet Jews. In increasing numbers, they started applying to emigrate to Israel, and many began to study Hebrew and their Jewish heritage. That prompted the KGB to harass them even more. But the situation did begin to ease somewhat, and Jewish tourists from the free world were often able to smuggle in Torah books, religious articles and material help (such as medications), and to give active encouragement — all with our Rebbe's strong encouragement.

This situation continued throughout the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, and until the time of Michael Gorbachev. The shul itself, an old wooden structure, was badly in need of repair. Although the congregants had for long wanted to get it rebuilt, it was difficult to raise funds and obtain the required official permits.

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1992, a powerful bomb set by antisemites demolished the entire Marina Roshtcha building In 1998, miraculously with no harm to anyone. The Mayor of Moscow granted permission to erect a small temporary shul on a lot next to the site of the old building and a two-story building was erected for use as a shul — for which it is still used during the week. Several philanthropists now donated funds for a far more ambitious structure, and a leading Israeli architect volunteered to design it. An imposing seven-story center was erected, which is now used for many educational and social

activities for youth and adults, including Russia's first kosher restaurant since the 1920's.

It was my great privilege to be invited to the opening of the new center on 18 Elul, 2000. Present were many prominent Rabbis from Israel and other lands, and important dignitaries including the Prime Minister of Russia, Vladimir Putin. Although previously head of a department of the KGB's successor organization, Mr. Putin spoke of his high regard for religious Jews and praised the activities of the Chabad movement — headed in Russia by Rabbi Berel Lazar, who is now also Chief Rabbi of the Russian Federation.

What a change from the time when we prayed at the shul! Attending the celebration was a certain Chassid who had lost his father in the Soviet labor camps. Someone had asked: Since religion is now openly observed in Russia with the government's blessing and active assistance, what was gained by our parents having to give up their lives for Yiddishkeit? He answered that, as the Rebbe has often noted, our generation in comparison to previous ones is like a dwarf on the shoulders of a giant. Therefore it is our generation that is fortunate to reap the fruits of our parents' devoted sacrifices.

POSTSCRIPT

Recently, Reb Betzalel Shiff, executive director of Shamir (the organization of ex-Soviet scientists in Israel founded and headed by Professor Yirmyahu Branover), told me of an interesting encounter.

In recent years, he has managed to obtain copies of the NKVD files of the interrogation, trial and sentence of many Chabad Chassidim, including Father's. On successfully concluding his efforts, Reb Betzalel received a notice that the head of the KGB's successor organization in Moscow wished to meet him.

As a native of the Soviet Union, brought up with constant fear of the secret police, Reb Betzalel immediately felt nervous. But reason soon prevailed: Times have changed, he realized, and undesirable consequences were most unlikely.

Politely, the important officer asked him to be seated.

"Mr. Shiff," he asked, "why are you so interested in all these people? They can't all be your relatives..."

Under present law, a relative is entitled to receive copies of a criminal file. But Shiff had asked for so many such files that they could not all be related to him.

"They were friends of mine," Reb Betzalel replied a little lamely.

"You should be aware," declared the officer, "that most people jailed by the Stalinist regime were innocent and committed no crimes. But these people, for whom you have requested copies of their files, really did do much [against the government]."

He did not necessarily mean to justify their punishment. But he wanted to emphasize that, even by post-Soviet standards, their imprisonment had not been totally groundless...

Indeed, our courageous parents' tenacity did have far-reaching accomplishments — they succeeded in preserving the flame of Yiddishkeit throughout the Soviet Union during over seventy years of Communism.

May their memory be blessed.

Appendix I:

THE NKVD FILES

Excerpts translated from recently released NKVD files about DovBer Levertov

TOP SECRET

AGENCY INFORMATION

Facts provided by the informer of the "Marina Roshtcha" Synagogue

Name of officer: Fuchs
Date: 4/9/45

Our known informer..., from Samarkand, arrived a week ago with pertinent information. All Schneersohnists are mobilizing to leave Samarkand immediately. Nissan Nemanow has already left to Poland, taking with him his family and Berel Kabilaker's two sons.[1] D. reports that the Chassid David Braverman and his father-in-law, Yaakov Yosef Raskin, left from Bikovo,[2] Moscow, with their families.

Name of officer: Umansky
Date: 11/13/45

Schneersohnists Raskin and David Braverman have departed from Moscow, though they have spread rumors that they are traveling to Leningrad. According to Steingart,[3] Braverman lives with Konsun[4] in Ismailova.[5]

Name of officer: Fuchs
Date: 4/9/45

Saadya[6] told the informer that he wishes to stop his present role of teaching religious subjects to youth. Saadya begged his bosses, Levertov and Braverman, to relieve him on the pretext

that he devotes too much time traveling from Vishivekov to Kzoskove to teach, instead of actually teaching. Levertov mentioned that he is searching for a replacement and has already approached the informer's brother, who just returned from Siberia.[7] The brother refused, however, and Levertov is now conducting talks with another Schneersohnist,[8] Chaim Leizer, a Chassid who arrived from Tashkent. He lives on Kirova Street in Moscow.

Name of officer: Fuchs
Date: 11/30/45

A week before the Chassidic holiday in Kislev,[9] Levertov was already preparing great festivities, collecting money for vodka and food. He even approached Mr. Kushin, the Shul's administrator,[10] and our informer, asking them to contribute their share. Levertov organized the entire event. He led a ritual meal after the prayers for close to two hours with many Chassidim in attendance, including Rabbi Olevsky. The informer and his brother also attended.

No formal speeches were allowed, but Levertov said: "We must protect the holy soul of the Tzaddik." When someone suggested that Rabbi Olevsky say a few words, Levertov categorically forbade it. "Today is a Chassidic celebration," he objected, "our holiday. It is hardly the place for non-Chassidim to discuss their matters."

According to Dubruskin, the Chassidim prearranged not to convene all in one specific place. Ostensibly, they fear attacks by bandits. They planned to celebrate separately. Yet, on the night of the holiday, the Chassidim gathered in the home of Gildenblatt. Levertov was there with many others. The informer could not attend due to a doctor's appointment.

Levertov attends the Great Synagogue almost daily. At the Marina Roshtcha, he is close to Botvinikov,[11] who has just returned from Samarkand and is assuming a larger and more important role in their activities.

Name of officer: Arnumarsky
Date: 12/17/45

The informer spoke to Goldasky on the 5th of the month. This was in the Maladovka synagogue.[12] Goldasky had been present when the Schneersohnists gathered to celebrate Braverman's wedding in his apartment, and acted as the attendant. Kabilaker and Israel Nevler[13] dominated the event. Not only are they members of Chabad, they are considered "Shpitz Chabad," leaders and powerful personalities. In fact, Braverman does nothing without first consulting Levertov, the real leader.

Name of officer: Fuchs
Date: 11/4/46

Dubraskin told our informer that Avrohom Shmuel Lebenhartz arrived recently from Lvov. He is negotiating to sell his home; he wants to return to Lvov with his family.

Levertov is back to his old ways. He attends synagogue, performs circumcisions, and continues serving as a ritual slaughterer.[14]

Name of officer: Fuchs
Date: 11/13/46

There is talk of upcoming elections for the chairman of the Choral Synagogue. Various candidates were discussed, and various opinions presented. Rabbi Olevsky remarked, "Perhaps Rabbi Dubin[15] should be chairman of the community."

Levertov responded: "No! I know for a fact that Dubin will never be chairman. He is waiting for my answer tonight, because he knows that I will be present at this meeting."

Name of officer: Fuchs
Date: 11/27/46

A young Jewish man came to the Marina Roshtcha today. His name is Meir, another Schneersohnist. He is about thirty

years old, an arrival from Samarkand, and is the nephew of Raskin who escaped to Poland this past September. He found lodging with Shmuel Botvinikov, apparently because they met together in the synagogue.

Another Schneersohnist has also been making regular visits to the Marina Roshtcha. He came last fall from Samarkand, traveling through Moscow to Lvov. He asked around for Levertov's address and then went to his home. It seems he came directly from the train station, because the informer noticed he was still carrying his luggage.

Levertov later said he must travel to Kazan,[16] where many people need him to perform circumcisions. V. also approached the informer with the information that Levertov had taken money for a Molei[17] from Zusman, and was using it to fund Yeshiva students.[18]

Name of officer: Lisa
Date: 2/27/47

Levertov said the following about himself:

"My daughter Basya, together with her husband Nochum Zalmen Gurevitch and their children, left a long time ago to Lvov, from where they will try to travel abroad.[19] My sons were learning in the yeshiva of Samarkand but now they, too, are accompanying my daughter."

A few days after Levertov departed for Kazan,[20] a young man appeared in the Marina Roshtcha during the evening prayers. He looked very distraught and asked for Levertov. On hearing that Levertov went to Kazan for ten days, the young man became greatly distressed. "Where? Kazan?" he said bitterly, burying his face in his hands.

"How will I proceed now?"

He then asked for Levertov's address, and the informer gave him its approximate location. The informer also asked him from where he came. "From Samarkand...," he stammered nervously, "from Tashkent..."

ARREST WARRANT

I sanction the arrest.

Military Prosecutor, district of Moscow
Major-General of Justice Volkov
12th of August, 1947
21:20 hr.

I second it.

Approved by General Kraiunov
Head of Management of MGB, Moscow Region[21]
12th August, 1947

ORDER OF ARREST

City of Moscow, 12th August 1947

I, the senior operational representative of the Managing Division of MGB of Moscow Region, Lieutenant Shesarev, have finished reviewing material about the criminal activities of Levertov Berel (Berko) Sheilovich. Born in 1885 in Krementchug, a Jew, citizen of the USSR, non-partisan, watchman in a furniture factory. Lives at address: Novoslobodskaya Uliza, house #52.

Our findings:

Levertov B. Sh. is the head of the illegal anti-Soviet organization of Chassidim, leader of whom is the Tzaddik Schneersohn, who lives abroad.

Levertov B. Sh., a confidant of Schneersohn, together with Nemanow Nissan, Draizin Abraham, Futerfas Mendel and other appointees of the Tzaddik, heads the Chassidic underground and, after the war, headed the Chassidic organization of Moscow.

The aim of the anti-Soviet organization of Chassidim, according to directives received from Schneersohn, is to facilitate the massive exodus of Chassidim abroad. Practical means exist

to transport illegal immigrants over the border. This enabled many families to leave, mainly to Poland.

Levertov B. Sh. gave instructions to immigrants, accepted money and financed transits from other regions of the Soviet Union. Levertov kept in constant contact with the underground committee in Lvov. His son-in-law, Gurevich Sh., is a member of that group; his apartment serves as their headquarters.

In 1946, Levertov sent his older sons, daughter and son-in-law illegally to Poland, via the underground committee in Lvov. He is kept abreast of the latest developments through contacts arriving periodically from Lvov. He was thus informed of the smuggling of Chassidim over the border.

Levertov initiated illegal meetings for this organization in private apartments across Moscow and its suburbs (Tarasovka, Bikovo, Malachovka, etc.). These meetings promote religious, anti-Soviet customs and keep members abreast of latest developments in the activities of the underground committee.

In 1945-6, Chassidim established an underground yeshiva (seminary to teach young adults) in Tashkent. Levertov sent his sons there. Aided by Braverman D. Ch., his sons later collected non-official monetary donations from clerics (rabbis, slaughterers). The total sum was sent to Central Asia to support the yeshiva.

Levertov presently engages in the illegal collection of money, under the pretext of "helping the poor." Levertov and Braverman use this money for hiring illegal spiritual teachers to teach minors in Moscow and the region.

In 1946, Levertov traveled to Central Asia to establish contact with other Chassidim. He traveled to Kazan in 1947 for similar purposes.

Levertov is exposed as leader of the illegal anti-Soviet organization of Chassidim through testimony given by..., a participant of this organization currently under arrest.

Levertov's constant contact with the committee in Lvov has been exposed by the testimony of..., a member of this committee arrested in Lvov.

Based on the above-mentioned information:

It is decided:

Levertov, Berko Sheilovich, who resides on Novoslobodskaya #52 (dormitory of furniture factory), will be arrested and searched.

Signed .....

MINISTER OF NATIONAL SECURITY
SOVIET UNION
DIVISION OF M.G.B.,[22] MOSCOW

ORDER #340
8/13/47

To the Management Division of M.G.B., Moscow Region:

Comrade Kaunikov is to arrest and search Levertov, Berko Sheilovich.

Signed .....

SENTENCE

I, Detective Captain Dmitriev, have studied carefully all the material in case #359.

Considering that Levertov Berka Sheilovich has been exposed as an enemy of the Soviet government; a member of an illegal Jewish national organization of Chassidim, working under the direction of leader Schneersohn from America; a participant in illegal smuggling of Chassidim from the Soviet Union to Poland and Palestine; actively involved in anti-Soviet gatherings

during which anti-Soviet propaganda material was disseminated to crush the Soviet spirit; tried to cross the border into Poland.

It is thus decreed:

Based on codes 128 & 129 of UPK of RSFSR, Levertov Berka Sheilovich is accused of criminal code 17-58-1a & 58-111 and is sentenced to ten years in exile. The accused will be notified of the current decision.

Appendix II
THE INTERROGATION

NOTE

The following transcripts must represent but a small fraction of Reb Berel Levertov's long interrogation sessions. Such sessions would normally last four to five hours, and sometimes all night. The NKVD files record only the few paragraphs they consider relevant.

One of the main interrogators was Captain Dmitriev, a rogue who beat the prisoners constantly in an attempt to extract full confessions and to get others incriminated. Reb Berel Levertov was one of at least five Chassidim to feel the wrath of this vicious anti-Semite. Another Chassid, Reb Mottel Gurarya, appealed his sentence, submitting a letter in which he told how Dmitriev always employed brute force until prisoners buckled to his demands. Once, writes Gurarya, Dmitriev pushed a prisoner so hard against a door, that it splintered and broke, falling off its hinges!

Prisoners were routinely kept awake for many nights before an interrogation, so that it would be hard to think clearly, They would arrive for questioning hardly able to keep their eyes open, making it easy to be ensnared by the tedious questioning. Thus, although Father answered evasively during earlier interrogations, eventually he "confessed" in later sessions.

At the end of each session, the prisoner was forced to sign that everything had been transcribed truthfully and to his satisfaction. But that was an outright lie — the prisoner was not even allowed to read his file.

NKVD DOCUMENTS
TRANSCRIBED DURING THE INTERROGATION

8/13/47
Levertov, Berko Sheilovich

SESSION I

Q. State your occupation before the revolution.
A. I learned as a child in Cheder and later in Yeshiva. When I turned twenty-two, I began working as a salesman for someone by the name of Belostonsky. This arrangement lasted ten years. In 1916 I was drafted into the army, and I served until the Czar was overthrown.

Q. State your occupation under the Soviet government.
A. I came to Krementchug in 1917 and I was self-employed until 1922. Then I moved to Moscow, bought a knitting machine, and did light work at home for a local factory.

Q. What are your political views?
A. I am a religious person, observing all the religious laws. I have little interest in politics.

Q. To which religious sect do you belong?
A. There are no sects among religious Jews. All observe the laws according to our tradition.

Q. There is a sect among religious Jews called "Chassids." Why are you hiding this?
A. This sect does not exist now. The leader, Rabbi Schneersohn, lives in America. A leader for Chassidim does not exist here in the Soviet Union. Regardless, religious Jews still observe the ideals of Chassidus.

I hereby sign and confirm that my words were faithfully transcribed.

Signed .....

SESSION II

8/15/47, 20:00 hrs.

Q. Who is Schneersohn?
A. Schneersohn, Yosef Yitzchok, lived in the Soviet Union and taught the ideas of Chassidus to religious Jews. He enjoyed wide popularity. In 1927, Schneersohn left for Latvia, traveling on to Poland and to America.

Q. Name your acquaintances.
A. They are....[23] I don't recall any others. They all visit the Marina Roshtcha synagogue and I meet them there.

Q. What other synagogues do you attend?
A. Sometimes I also visit the Choral (Archipova) synagogue located on Spasoglenichesky Pereulok.

Q. You meet any Chassids there?
A. Sometimes I spoke to Mordechai Dubin. I don't know anyone else.

Q. What's your connection to Dubin? How often did you meet?
A. Dubin became acquainted with the Tzaddik Schneersohn when the latter was in Latvia. I only discussed religious issues with Dubin. Mutual convictions brought us together and we discussed religious matters two or three times a month.

Q. Where did you meet?
A. Only in the Choral synagogue, nowhere else.

I hereby sign that the above has been transcribed according to my words.

Signed.....

SESSION III

9/3/47 10:00hrs.

Q. What are your political views?

A. I was born and raised in a family where my father was a teacher. Father belonged to the Chassid sect and properly fulfilled all the directives of their leaders. I was raised in the spirit of his religious beliefs. In my youth, I studied in the so-called religious school, the Cheder, and from 15-20 I learned in the Yeshiva of Krementchug and Korsun. In Yeshiva, I studied the Talmud with its commentaries.

I moved in 1905 to the town of Lubavitch. I was accepted into their Yeshiva of Chasids, where I learned for a year. The leader was Schneersohn, Sholom Ber, father of Schneersohn, Yosef Yitzchak, who lives now in America.

Schneersohn Yosef Yitzchak represented the ideas of Lubavitch Chassids in the Soviet Union. He was a great leader and we followed his ways.

On the basis of religious conviction, I oversaw the teaching of Lubavitcher Chassids, even under the rule of the Soviet government.

Q. In other words, you belonged to religious sect of Chassids.

A. Yes, I belonged to sect of Chassids. I tried to fulfill all religious customs and teachings of Chassids.

Q. Tell us about Lubavitch Chassids.

A. About 200 years ago, in the town of Mezeritch, the local Rabbi, Rabbi Berel, established a special school for religious Jews. After his demise, his followers dispersed in many different localities. One of his famous followers, Rabbi Zalman Boruchovitch, moved to Liozna. His son, also named Berel, lived in Lubavitch. He attracted many followers with his brilliant knowledge of the Talmud and its commentaries.

In 1900, the father of Schneersohn, Yosef Yitzchak, opened a religious school for adult Chassids, a so-called Yeshiva. Emphasis was placed on the teachings of Lubavitch, which strengthen the Jewish religion. They have negative feelings about efforts to assimilate Jews into other cultures and consider themselves nationalists who live with an "old outlook," even in present times.

Leadership of Lubavitch is an inheritance. The current leader is Rabbi Schneersohn living in America.

Q. It seems you were also a follower of Schneersohn.
A. In respect to my association with the Lubavitch sect, yes.[24] I do not deny the teachings or instructions of Tzaddik Schneersohn.

I hereby sign that the above has been transcribed according to my words.

Signed.....

SESSION IV

9/16/47 19:00 hrs.

Q. When your sons came to Lvov, did they write to you?
A. Yes, I received one letter from them and my daughter.

Q. During the interrogation on the 15th, you concealed the fact that your sons traveled from Central Asia to Lvov. What purpose did this serve?
A. I misunderstood the question. I thought I was being asked where my sons went to live temporarily, information I really don't know.

Q. You understood the question very well, but you gave an evasive answer. You said they left Samarkand for an unknown destination. Give truthful reasons why you concealed information from us!

A. I answered what I did because I misunderstood the question.

Q. If so, explain why you are stubbornly concealing your own trip to Lvov.
A. I'm hiding it because many religious Jews left from Lvov to go abroad.

Q. How do you know this?
A. I heard from friends — I don't recall their names — that religious Jews left from Lvov. It was said that Braverman and Saadia left abroad.

Q. How long do you know Braverman for?
A. Mostly from after the evacuation of Moscow, that would be 1945-6.

Q. What was your relationship with him?
A. Braverman supervised teaching of Chassidus and religious customs. He often visited the synagogue and we became acquainted there. As a result, we had discussions on religion. Braverman respected me as an older Chassid, even inviting me to his wedding, which was performed in strict accordance to tradition.

Q. So, Braverman told you of his plans to exit the Soviet Union abroad?
A. Braverman did not tell me of any plans to leave the Soviet Union. I know he had lived in Tashkent during the war, after which many Jewish residents of Tashkent and Samarkand moved to Lvov. Once there, they traveled abroad illegally.

Q. How did these people get fictitious documents to leave the USSR for abroad?
A. When I was among the religious Jews of Lvov I heard them saying that two Polish Jews, Misha and Grisha, were

providing fictitious documents for those who wanted to leave. They got paid for this.

Q. Who told you that fictitious documents were available?
A. Now I remember, Gruzman told me.

Q. It looks like you also intended to leave the USSR! Otherwise, why should you be interested in obtaining fictitious documents?
A. I personally had no intention of leaving the USSR. I can't recall right now how information about fictitious documents came into my conversation with Gruzman.

Q. Who is Gruzman?
A. Mottel Gruzman, according to his religious convictions, belongs to the sect of Chasids, more specifically to Ukrainian Chassids. We became acquainted in 1930, when Mottel began attending the Marina Roshtcha. He lived in Moscow. He was in Samarkand during the war and moved later to Lvov. I think he left for abroad, but I can't tell you for sure.

I have read all the above several times and I affirm that everything has been recorded truthfully.

Signed.....

SESSION V

10/2/47 10:20 a.m.

Q. You admitted in previous interrogations that you are affiliated with the Lubavitchers. Name active people in this group.
A. Active people in Lubavitch sect are the following...[25]

Q. All these people are your acquaintances?
A. Yes, I met them often to discuss religious matters and the common religious outlook we shared.

Q. Where did this gathering of Chassidim take place?
A. At the synagogue or at a private home.

Q. Describe such a meeting.
A. In November 1945, we met together in the synagogue to commemorate the release of the Tzaddik Schneersohn's grandfather from prison. I don't remember everyone there, but some were...[26] I spoke, telling the people to honor the Tzaddik's ways. I said, "May the merit of this great man be a light in our lives." Afterwards, we drank some vodka and dispersed.

In December 1946, the members of Lubavitch held a gathering in the apartment of Shteingart, another member. This gathering was in honor of the Tzaddik Schneersohn's pardon from jail. I can't remember all those who came, aside from...[27]

Some meetings were held in Tarasovka, in the house of the Chassid, Rabbi Levin. In April, 1947, we had a meeting there as well. It was in honor of the circumcision of Levin's grandson. I attended with Botvinikov, Dubraskin, Shteingart and others. I circumcised the child, we all drank vodka, and then we left.

Q. Is it not probable to say that, at some time during these meetings, the possibility of leaving the USSR illegally was mentioned? Tell us about it.
A. I cannot recall precisely now. Let's assume they did mention this during their gatherings.

I hereby affirm that I read the above statement and that it has been transcribed according to my testimony.

Signed.....

The hearing recessed at 16:10, resumed after 21:00, finished at 23:50.

SESSION VI

10/2/47 14:00 hr

Q. When did your sons, daughter and son-in-law, exchange their motherland by illegally traveling abroad?
A. I met my sons, Sholom and Moshe, in Lvov during September, 1946. We talked a little about leaving the Soviet Union illegally but there was no concrete decision. They left the Soviet Union with my daughter and her husband after I left Lvov.

Q. What reason did your children have to illegally exchange their motherland for some other country?
A. On the basis of religious conviction, I raised my children in the religious path. While in Samarkand, Sholom and Moshe learned in the Yeshiva school run by the Chasids, and they were cut off from the influence of Soviet society. This brought them even closer to their religious outlook, and it was for this reason that they changed their motherland by leaving the Soviet Union illegally for abroad.

Q. When did your children part from you?
A. In the beginning of 1940, my oldest son, Sholom, suffered from a lung ailment and I sent him to stay with relatives in Odessa.[28] He was evacuated to Samarkand during the war and, in 1943, my second son went there as well.

Q. List your acquaintances in Samarkand.
A. ...[29]

Q. You had written contact with the people you just mentioned?
A. No. I met them later in Moscow.

Q. Didn't your sons meet Shmuel Botvinikov in Samarkand? What influence did he have?

A. My sons met him sometimes. He had no influence over them.

Q. So who got them into Yeshiva?
A. Many religious Jews lived in Samarkand and some of them ran the Yeshiva. My sons were Chassids and, as I understand, that's how they settled in to learn.

I have read the above transcript of my words.

Signed.....

Signed: Dmitriev

SESSION VII

8/24/47 12:20 p.m.

Q. Describe life with the organization of religious Chasids in Moscow. What were their aims?
A. Many members of Lubavitch lived in Moscow and belonged to the synagogue. Every so often, we held gatherings in private apartments to mark a religious holiday.

These people strictly observed their religious customs, but were not involved in organizing religious activities for others.

Q. Lies! This hearing has information that members of Lubavitch were very active in anti-Soviet activities. Why are you concealing it?
A. I don't know anything about it.

Q. How were the Chassidim of Moscow able to raise children and educate adults according to their religion?
A. The religious Jews teach their children separately. G. was invited to a few houses to teach children in the religious spirit, but there was no Cheder in Moscow.

Q. What was your role in educating the young religious children of Moscow?
A. I had no part in it.

I have read the above statement and it has been transcribed according to my testimony.

Signed.....

The hearing recessed at 16:20, continued at 20:20, finished at 24:20.

SESSION VIII

11/18/47 10:40hr

Q. What do you find yourself guilty of?
A. I find myself guilty of planning to exchange motherland Russia by traveling abroad illegally. To accomplish this, I traveled with my wife, Entariva Moiseeuna, to Lvov, in order to acquire false documents with which to cross the border between the Soviet Union and Poland.

I also knew of the treasonous plans of my sons, Sholom and Moshe. They accomplished their mission and crossed the border.

Q. You only admit guilt to this?
A. I also admit my guilt of being a member of the Lubavitch group, surrounded by people who shared identical thoughts. I heard the practical resolutions and actions of the members of this illegal organization of Chassids to send religious Jews abroad.

Q. To what country did these members of the illegal organization travel?

A. To countries that operate according to capitalistic ideas. Religious Jews feel that such countries are more acceptable for religious Jews than the present Soviet Union.

The above statement was transcribed according to my testimony.

Signed.....

Signed by Dmitriev and Major ..., Deputy Army Prosecutor

Ended: 12:40

NOTES:

The following notes are added by Rabbi Berel Levertov's son, Rabbi Moshe, and are **not** part of the NKVD files.

1. This was fictitious information; Reb Nissan had not left the USSR yet, neither had he taken my brother or I out of Samarkand.
2. A suburb of Moscow.
3. Apparently, this chassid turned informer on his fellow Chassidim. Father trusted him and mentions his name during his interrogation.
4. This chassid left the USSR in the late 1960's. The reader will note that this contradicts previous testimony to the effect that "Braverman...left Moscow with his family."
5. Suburb of Moscow.
6. Reb Saadya Liberow, a Chabad Chassid of strong convictions.
7. Many families were evacuated to Siberia during the war.
8. Chassidim associated with the Lubavitcher Rebbe [RaYYATz].
9. Yud Tes (19) Kislev.
10. Another informer.
11. Reb Shmuel Botvinikov was the oldest son-in-law of the famous Chassid, Reb Meir Simcha Chein of Nevel.
12. Miraculously, this synagogue remained untouched throughout the years. It is a Lubavitcher synagogue situated in a suburb of Moscow.
13. Reb Yisroel Konsin was called "Neveler," referring to his hometown Nevel.
14. Father did not slaughter animals on an official basis, except for our family and select Chassidim.
15. Rabbi Mordechai Dubin, a member of the Latvian Parliament, helped facilitate the Rebbe Rayatz's release from Russia. He was exiled to Siberia when Russia occupied Latvia in 1939, and released during World War Two. The Nazis murdered his family, yet Rabbi Dubin continued his work and helped hundreds of Jews. He was exiled again and died in Tula in the 1940's. His remains were later brought for reburial in the Maladovka cemetery.
16. A city several hundred kilometers from Moscow; the NKVD suspected this to be a ruse to cover other activities, but I knew that Father had indeed traveled to Kazan.
17. The prayer customarily recited on a Yahrzeit.
18. A Yeshiva.
19. They had left the USSR; Father was obviously unaware of their whereabouts.
20. Reb Yitzchok "Kazaner" lived in Kazan at that time. He was not a Chabad Chassid, but was very religious and served later as unofficial Rabbi for the Chassidim of Tashkent. After he left the USSR in 1970, he told me how he met Father on his visit to Kazan. When he mentioned he had noticed agents following Father and monitoring his activities, Father responded: "I'm no longer afraid of them, my sons have already escaped." Soon after, Father was arrested.
21. Territorial administrative district.
22. Local office of the NKVD.
23. 58-11 referred to "counter-revolutionary" crimes.
24. Names of people who attended the synagogue.
25. Although Father had earlier denied the existence of such a sect, the NKVD had clearly beaten and tortured him until he "confessed."

26. Here follows a list of Chassidim who lived in Moscow and were openly involved with Lubavitch. The NKVD knew of all these people, and Father deliberately chose those he knew would not be harmed by his admission. Rabbi Mordechai Dubin is mentioned, as are certain Chassidim who were already abroad, such as David Braverman.
27. Father listed a few names.
28. In fact, Sholom had been sent to learn in the Yeshiva of Kutais, Gruzia (Georgia).
29. Father listed Chassidim who had already left the country.

The Man Who Mocked The KGB

Russia's 1917 Revolution brought to power a new regime, avowed enemies of religion. The Communist Party's Jewish section, the "Yevsektzia," tried to eradicate Judaism by every means, even by torture, hard labor and execution. Within a generation, their aim was almost achieved: most Soviet Jews had been weaned away from their Jewish heritage.

Most, but not all. A handful of Jews stood in their path. Despite overwhelming odds, these devoted followers of the Lubavitcher Rebbe maintained Judaism throughout the Soviet Union. But they suffered for it, terribly. Refusing to work on the Sabbath, most lived in poverty and in constant fear of a midnight knock at the door. Many became true martyrs, sanctifying G-d's Name in life and death.

Survivors of those years are dwindling. In this fascinating account, revolving around the unique experiences of one family, we glimpse some of the terrors of life under Stalin in the 1930's and 1940's. And we get to know many courageous Jews who, in the face of ferocious persecution, kept the flame of Judaism burning.

This book celebrates the victory of Judaism. The Soviets were only the last in a long chain of persecutors throughout our history who have tried to destroy Jews and Judaism. Now the Soviet Union has joined those other persecutors on the dustheap of history, while Judaism is flourishing anew around the globe — even in the successor lands of the old Soviet Union!

20/20 Digital Design 718.493.7592