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HASIDIM

"SAVING THY PEOPLE"

The resistance of Hasidic Jews to Soviet oppression during the Stalin era

English translation by Malcolm Gilbert

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.	3.
Translator's note.	4.
Foreword: A book of sorrows.	5.
Introduction.	7.

PART I. JEWISH RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE 1920s AND 1930s.

Chapter 1. Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak: The call to arms.	10.
Chapter 2. Yosef-Itzhak and the Leningrad Jewry.	16.
Chapter 3. Leningrad's ordeal intensifies.	24.
Chapter 4. Trials of the Moscow <i>Hasidim</i> .	34.
Chapter 5. The internal diaspora and the Shneersohn network.	47.

PART II. JEWISH RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE LATER STALIN YEARS.

Chapter 6. Central Asia: The <i>Habad</i> in wartime.	63.
Chapter 7. The Lvov exodus.	69.
Chapter 8. The Dobruskin case.	78.
Chapter 9. The last days of Stalin.	86.
Notes	93.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Some words relating to the Jewish faith have accepted English renderings and need no special note e.g. *rabbi*, *synagogue*, *Hasid* (plural: *Hasidim*), *Hasidic* etc. Otherwise the conventional italics are used for Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew terms. Where Soviet police files use Russianised forms, these are retained; 'Hasids' better conveys their tone, while Hebrew *yeshivah* and *yeshivot* appear as *yeshibot* (sing.) and *yeshiboty* (pl.), all plural endings being in y as in Russian. As the author indicates, she has chosen to cite personal names in the forms employed in the police files, although variants may exist in other sources. In this translation such names are transliterated into English with a few simplifications. For example the soft sign, conventionally represented by an apostrophe, is here omitted, the name-ending "skii" becomes "sky" and the Cyrillic 'X' is rendered as 'H'. In the Hasidic context, with its strong Byelorussian and Ukrainian associations, 'H' is phonetically more appropriate than the conventional transliteration 'Kh' and is, moreover, accepted in standard English renderings of many Hebrew words. Because this sound in Russian roughly equates to that in the Scottish 'loch', there is a case for 'Ch', and some texts on Jewish themes would use it, as in 'Chaim'. But here that alternative has to be rejected, because many names in the text require the 'Ch' to transliterate the Russian equivalent of the English sound in 'Church'. Adhering to police-file versions means accepting 'G' for the more authentic 'H' in names like 'Altgaus'. All such decisions are subjective and purists may well object. Strict transliteration is however applied in the case of authors and titles cited in the chapter footnotes and the list of sources.

The book contains extracts from secret police reports and case-files. It was almost always the interrogator who wrote down – and chose the phraseology of – witness statements and 'confessions'. Hence there is no avoiding their formulaic and repetitive prose in which, particularly in the 1930s, innumerable counter-revolutionary Jewish-clerical anti-Soviet organizations engaged in illegal struggle against *Sovietskaya vlast'* (Soviet power, rule), only to be justly exposed and liquidated. It is however a style which conveys the character of the regime and the times. Some English words have 'Soviet' meanings; 'agitation' is political persuasion, 'exile' is internal banishment to some inhospitable part of the USSR. There are oddities, like the unabashed official use of "the repressed" (*repressirovanniye*) to describe the victims. The security police themselves, officially changing their title over time (OGPU, NKVD, MVD, MGB, KGB. etc.), are most often referred to by the author by the popular generic terms, 'the organs', the 'GPU' or 'Chekists' – this last the title proudly assumed by its operatives as recalling the original Che-Ka, the Extraordinary Commission founded by Lenin and 'Iron Felix' Dzerzhinsky.

From 1917 to the 1960s the USSR saw constant re-arrangement of administrative areas. For example, at province level, *oblasts* became *krais* and then *oblasts* again, gained and lost territory, amalgamated and subdivided. The translation clarifies the geographical context where necessary. To simplify things, 'province' is used for *guberniya*, *oblast'* and *krai* and 'district' for intra-provincial subdivisions (*rayon* etc.). It bears repeating that such decisions are a matter of personal judgement.

FOREWORD: A BOOK OF SORROWS

Rabbi Itzhak Kogan, envoy of the Lubavich Rebbe, and vice-president of Agudas Hasidei Habad.

"I wanted to live in Russia because Jews there are devoted to the spirit of the Torah and observe it in poverty, oppression and suffering. May God grant the speedy fulfilment of the words of our elders: 'Whoever observes the Torah in poverty will in the end gain the opportunity to observe it in conditions of material and spiritual abundance'."

These are the words of the Sixth Lubavich Rebbe, Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn, written in May 1928, a year after his death sentence (for "counter-revolutionary activity") had been reduced to one of exile from the Soviet Union. Today his words have the force of prophecy. Russia was the homeland of the Lubavich movement. The position of Lubavich Rebbe carries with it the hereditary dignity of honorary Russian citizenship, conferred for service in the war against Napoleon in 1812. Indeed, not a few Hasidic Jews were decorated in the 'Great Patriotic War' of 1941-45. But the author would also award the title 'hero' to those who suffered for their beliefs under the militantly anti-religious totalitarian Soviet regime. This book, *Hasidim: 'Saving Thy people'*, amply justifies that verdict.

This book records the names of people whom I hold dear, people from whom I received the burning lamp of faith. It presents documentary evidence of the strength of spirit, the self-sacrifice and heroism of people widely differing in status and circumstance, rabbis and simple believers, who, in conditions where freedom was crushed, followed their steadfast Lubavich Rebbe to the very end.

The evidence has been assembled, piece by piece, under the auspices of the Research and Information Centre of the society *Memorial*, drawing on files on 'criminal' cases and other documents in the archives of the Interior Ministry (MVD) and the FSB (formerly NKVD, KGB etc.), covering, respectively, the civil and the secret police, archives opened up during Gorbachev's period of office and the policy of 'glasnost'. Many of the facts concerning religious persecution might be difficult to believe, but they have a unique claim to credibility because the documents were produced by the perpetrators themselves, those who worked to annihilate our movement.

The Almighty sometimes aids the virtuous in unexpected ways. We never anticipated that we would receive information so vital to us from a social research organization far removed from our movement and, indeed, from within the former punitive agencies. But Menachem Mendel Shneersohn, Seventh Lubavich Rebbe and leader of the *Habad* movement, said to me in 1986, when he was proposing to return to Russia: "The government there wants to change." It is from him that I received the injunction to write a substantial account of the Hasidic movement in the Soviet Union, but it would of course be written 'from the other shore', based on the harsh experiences of myself and my friends and the recollections of older survivors. Admittedly, compared with the sufferings of that older generation, our ordeal was relatively mild; we were rarely imprisoned, but were periodically summoned for interview by the KGB, fired from our jobs and denied permission to emigrate to Israel. It was not easy, but at least we were not, at every step, confronted with the prospect of sacrificing our lives for our faith, as did our predecessors who died by firing-squad or rotted for decades in the labour camps. An example was my maternal grandfather, Yosif Tamarin, a Leningrad Hasid known for his good deeds. Every year he was the one who brought from Moscow the *etrog* (citron), the fruit required for the festival of *Sukkot*. He was a genius at obtaining such things. Sometimes the supply of this essential fruit was so restricted that even the Moscow synagogues ran short and every Hasidic community in the city rushed around to ensure that its own congregation was blessed. But Rabbi Yosif performed miracles of diplomacy and never failed to provide the precious item to order. Sometimes he did not himself manage to get home for that holiday and instead celebrated it in Moscow at the home of an acquaintance. But the festive booth (*sukkah*) which he used to erect for the ceremonial meal, was enjoyed by more than his own household.

Late in the 1930s he escaped by a miracle the tenacious grasp of the Leningrad NKVD. But in the 1940s he was acutely aware both of the old things and the new situation. After the war my grandfather mastered the art of *matzah*, unleavened wheat bread, and supplied it to all the members of his

community on feast-days. Someone informed the GPU, which eagerly manufactured a group case as part of the campaign against "cosmopolitans" (i.e. Jews). Tamarin, as "the leading conspirator", was interrogated for many hours and tortured to name his associates. Then, so my parents told me, my vigorous 54 year-old grandfather began to pray that the Almighty would gather him unto Himself. And a miracle occurred. Stepping out into the street after the latest session of interrogation and torment, he fell dead. His heart could endure no more. But he could now be properly buried in the cemetery like a free man.

In following his teaching, my parents also made sacrifices to bring up my brother and me as believing Jews. They gave up prestigious positions to become petty clerks so that they could observe Saturday as the Sabbath and maintain other Jewish customs. Their modest earnings were devoted to the strengthening of the religious community. I remember from my childhood my father's morning prayers; even in the darkest mornings he did not light a candle, lest it attract the attention of the neighbours, but he said: "With prayer, I have light even in the darkness." Considering the dangers to which believers were exposed, his behaviour was sensible, but I did not realize that at the time.

It is a common observation that life turns in a circle. At 26 years of age, heading the construction bureau of a large engineering plant, I placed spiritual development above my career. I applied for an exit visa to Israel for my family and myself, and for years I suffered as a so-called 'refusenik', systematically denied permission to leave, black-listed by the authorities and persecuted for my persistence. I survived by repairing refrigerators and other domestic appliances, and at my community's request I mastered the technique of *shehitah* or ritual slaughter of animals. For some years I had only verbal confirmation of my licence to slaughter. Rabbi Abram Medalie, who remembered my grandfather and understood my position, vouched for me every time, but he was not permitted to issue the necessary official document to a 'refusenik'. His father, Moscow Chief Rabbi Shmaryagu Yegudu-Lebu, had been executed for his beliefs in 1938 and he had himself been despatched, at the age of 17, to receive his 'second education' in various jails and camps. At that time he showed great promise as a mathematician, and with his flexible and crystal-clear mind he might have become a second Kantor. But his talent withered in the camps.

Another remarkable man was a Leningrad rabbi, Rafail Nemoitin, long my guide and teacher about life. His father, also a rabbi, had been shot in 1938 and as a young man his own talent and character were tempered like steel through years of exile as an unyielding warrior for his faith, a philosopher and wise elder. I learned literally everything from this man, a Hasid to the marrow of his bones. As a duty and sacred obligation, I pay tribute to him in greater detail in my own book. For, despite all my resounding official titles, I am merely a link in three generations of Hasidim who upheld their religion in times of unimaginable hardship.

I wish to end this foreword by expressing my heartfelt gratitude to the dedicated people who have provided, for our movement and for history, a list of martyrs, innocent souls whose tragic fate has thus been in large measure rescued from oblivion. Today, in conditions which are still by no means ideal, we are continuing their work. This tragic theme is far from exhausted. We await with impatience the response of readers to this book of remembrance. I am sure that they will open many more hitherto unknown pages in the history of self-affirmation and sacrifice that marked the Hasidic movement in the Soviet Union.

Readers who wish to can contact me. Rabbi Itzhak Kogan, envoy of the Lubavich Rebbe, at MOSCOW 103104, Bolshaya Bronnaya ulitsa, 6.

INTRODUCTION

The Hasidic movement brought into rabbinical Judaism a current of profound religious fervour. The term Hasidism (from Hebrew: 'the devout') pertains to a popular religious and mystical movement founded by Ba'al Shem Tov in the 18th century in Podolia and Volhynia and subsequently appearing in many different countries. Hasidism, valuing purity of heart above intellectual study, preached the equality of all before God and the supreme duty of devotion to prayer and God's commandments. It spread widely in the western borderlands of the Russian empire, particularly Byelorussia, from the early 1800s, and within a century there were Hasidic communities in the provinces of Mogilev, Vilna, Vitebsk, Minsk, Kovno and Courland. A tendency emerging within Hasidism adopted the term *Habad* (an amalgam of the words *Hokhmah*, *Binah*, *Daat*; wisdom, understanding, knowledge), and this would become a significant element in Russia. Hasidism spoke in a language of parables understood by humble folk and responded to the dreams of ordinary Jews about a heartening and consoling faith. There was a natural appeal in the notion that the Almighty valued emotion more than reason and rejoicing more than melancholy. Most of all, Hasidim emphasised that only the soul moved by deep feeling can come to know God.

In the course of a confrontation with the priesthood of official Judaism, Hasidim formed separate, often isolated communities with their own synagogues and, in view of the fundamental importance of religious education, their own *hederim* (lower schools) and *yeshivot* (higher Talmudic academies). In the late 18th century the settlement of Lyubavichi became the residence of the spiritual leader of the *Habad*, the position of Lubavich (in Russia it remains Lyubavich) *Rebbe* generally passing in dynastic fashion from father to son (though other 'just and righteous men', rabbis and teachers with prestige within their communities, might also be called 'Rebbe').

Our knowledge of the history of the Russian Hasidic movement owes much to Khovkin (*Nyepokorivshisya*, pp. 1-95). In Tsarist Russia, the two orientations within Russian religious Jewry were officially recognised in 1804 and the struggle against Hasidism ended. However, in the second half of the 19th century there was a significant assimilationist movement for Jewish collaboration with the Russian school system and in 1863 a 'Society for the Propagation of Knowledge among the Jews of Russia' was formed in St. Petersburg by Jewish teachers who saw it as their mission to familiarise Jews with the Russian language and culture. The Russification campaign was encouraged by the Tsarist government but strenuously opposed by Hasidic leaders. The head of the Lubavich Hasidim at that time was Rebbe Shalom-Dov-Ber Shneersohn, who, together with devoted followers, strove energetically to combat police surveillance, restrictions on movement within the Jewish Pale of Settlement and above all the activities of the so-called 'Society for the advancement of the Russian Language' which was pressing for radical changes in the Jewish educational system.

In the 1880s Hasidism faced a new opponent in Zionism, the movement for the return of Jews to their Biblical homeland. Several Russian cities saw the formation of *Hib bat Zion* circles dedicated to this aim and preparing the ground for the first organized emigration to Palestine. The influence of political Zionism gained ground rapidly among the Jewish population in general, giving rise to a whole series of organizations. For example, *Poale Zion* ('Workers' Zion') combined Zionist and socialist aims and became one of the sources from which sprang the later left-wing Jewish parties, while *Tzeirei Zion* (Zionist Youth) developed as a socialist but non-Marxist movement. The Zionist political programme centred on the establishment of a Jewish state, and whether this accorded with God's law was not a primary concern. Rebbe Shalom-Dov-Ber rejected such ideas, regarding it as unacceptable that Zionists should consider themselves free of Divine injunction; to him "they substituted their nationalism for the Torah, which they regarded merely as a good idea." (Khovkin, p. 91). For the education of true followers of Hasidism, Shalom-Dov-Ber created in 1897 in Lyubavichi a religious academy, *Tomehei Temimim* ('support of the pure in heart'), in which students, besides the usual academic subjects, devoted most attention to Hasidic philosophy and interpretation of the Torah. A year later the Rebbe's son, Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn, became head of the academy, and a *Tomehei Temimim* affiliate with 27 students was opened in the village of Zembin near Minsk.

World War I marked the beginning of an apparently endless succession of calamities for the Jewish population of the empire. Following Russian defeats, Jews were commonly accused of anti-Russian sentiments, espionage and aid to the enemy. Violent eviction from their homes and serious pogroms became everyday events. A series of orders by Grand Duke Nikolai, in supreme command of the army, required all Jews residing in the frontier zone or the area of military operations to leave their homes within 24 hours. Hundreds of thousands of such refugees, forced to abandon property and livelihood, migrated to the interior provinces. Many died on the road. To the deprivation suffered by these broken, hungry people were added physical and spiritual humiliation as helpless victims of systematic lawlessness. Particularly severe was the ordeal of the Hasidim forced from the western borderlands to seek refuge in Jewish settlements in central Russia.

In the fall of 1915 the front line came close to Lyubavichi. Rebbe Shalom-Dov-Ber, with his relatives and disciples, was expelled from "the *Habad* capital from which his forefathers and he had directed the movement for 102 years." (Khovkin, p. 93). They settled in Rostov-on-Don, which became for some years the centre of Russian Hasidism. With the help of former students of the academy (*yeshivah*) of *Tomehei Temimim*, the Rebbe issued a call to the faithful now scattered all over central Russia; every spiritual leader, every *melamed* (religious school teacher) and *maggid* (professional popular preacher), indeed, every truly pious person, should assist in establishing a network of underground schools, *hederim* and *yeshivot*, to educate both refugees and indigenous Jews in the various localities. The new Lyubavichi would now be in the heart of Russia.

With the triumph of the February Revolution of 1917, Jews enjoyed a partial respite. The Provisional Government abolished the Pale of Settlement and all restrictive laws against the Jews. Jewish organizations and political parties emerged from underground and held open conferences. Many such groups now amalgamated, while new formations – women's, youth, student – now appeared. Orthodox religious parties could now campaign freely against secularisation in Jewish life and education; one such creation in Petrograd was *Netzah Israel* ('Eternal Israel') which was also sympathetic to Zionism.

During the October Revolution and the Civil War that followed, the Jewish population was once more subjected to excesses, humiliated, robbed, murdered in pogroms, victimised impartially by Reds, Whites, German and Polish occupiers, Petliura's Ukrainian nationalists and the inchoate marauding peasant bands (the 'Greens') among whom Makhnovs anarchists were the most notorious. Then, with the consolidation of the Bolshevik regime, came the arrests of what the Soviets called 'servants of the cult' and Jewish community activists, with attacks on the communities' physical infrastructure – desecration of synagogues, closure of centres for Torah studies and the destruction of *mikvaot*, the *mikveh* (gathering of the waters'), the baths for ritual ablution, was as necessary to the community as the synagogue.

When the Red Army occupied Rostov-on-Don in 1920, the new city authorities imposed a curfew and meetings and assemblies were prohibited. Every day saw searches and arrests and some people simply disappeared. Rebbe Shalom-Dov-Ber lived with his family in a house in the centre of town. One day, as an organized 'demonstration of the workers' passed his window, he noticed a slogan promising "the inevitable destruction" of the class enemy and "happiness and eternal bliss for the working masses." He turned away from the window, saying: "No, I cannot bear to live in the same world as these." (Khovkin, p. 94). His words were prophetic. "Within two weeks, on 2nd Nisan [in March] at 3.30 in the morning, the soul of the father, the soul of the Rebbe, departed this world." (Khovkin, p. 95). For his son, Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn, now in his forties, his father's injunction: "Go forth and spread the Word" would become the overriding purpose of his life. His is a constant presence throughout this book, which broadly covers the Stalin years. Part I takes the story to the outbreak of World War II, while Part II considers the period from 1941 to the dictator's death in 1953.

"If someone proposes that I buy for a billion [release from] a single second of my future suffering, I will not buy it. I/they offer me a billion for a single second of my past suffering, I will not sell it."

Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn.

PART I

JEWISH RELIGIOUS LIFE

IN THE 1920s AND 1930s.

CHAPTER I

REBBE YOSEF-ITZHAK : THE CALL TO ARMS

"I will strive with all my strength to ensure that the students of the yeshivah which shall be called Tomehei Temimim – the support of the pure in heart – serve the Almighty in truth and with a whole heart, and that when they become adult they shall become human beings. Each of them must know where lies his duty and calling in life. Then shall there be light in those of our homes, wherever they may be, which are visited by Temimim – simple souls, whole and free."

These words of Shalom-Dov-Ber defined the most important practical issue in what would be his son's work. For two years following his father's death, Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn lived in seclusion and indeed was seriously ill for almost a year. Then came a time of reflection and decision concerning the continuation of his father's mission. As a priority it was important not only to support the functioning of the by now numerous branches of *Tomehei Temimim*, but also to extend their influence on the life of the Jewish communities caught inside the new Bolshevik state. To this end it was necessary to revive the lower schools, the *hederim*, as quickly as possible, especially in those places where large groups of Jews were settled. New schools had to be established where none hitherto existed. Then could follow the organization of lessons in *Hasidut* (Hasidic doctrine) in settlements where they had been curtailed or had ceased altogether. Most importantly, former *Tomehei Temimim yeshivot* would need to be revived and new branches set up in many cities and provinces. Yosef-Itzhak owed it to his father to shoulder this immense responsibility. Hence, when older Hasidim came to urge upon him the role of Rebbe, he recited for them, as custom dictated, his first *maamar*, a rabbi's authoritative discourse on the nature of God, the order of the universe and the soul of Jewry. Thus "he became the new head of the Hasidic movement." (Khovkin, p.102).

As in Lyubavichi days, the Rebbe had at his disposal an office permanently staffed by trusted and experienced disciples. Some were responsible for correspondence with distant community leaders while others, at a word from the Rebbe, might at any moment be sent on secret missions to remote parts. Yosef-Itzhak began by gathering information, sending letters to hundreds of Jewish communities, requesting answers to the most important questions. Were their *hederim* still functioning? Did they have a *mikveh* pool? Was kosher food available and did they bake *matzah*, the unleavened bread? Much of this was written in code – a *yeshivah* was a 'depot', a *heder* a 'grocery store'. Replies arrived, addressed at first to the Rebbe, but later, for security, to arranged accommodation addresses. Yosef-Itzhak began to despatch secret envoys to communities which needed help in opening a covert *heder* or constructing a *mikveh*, and money was sent to pay a rabbi, a teacher of the Torah or a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer). The Rebbe's associates solicited contributions from the prosperous, sought out learned men willing to risk teaching in a *heder* or *yeshivah*, and in general worked to stimulate and embolden Hasidic communities.

All this has to be seen in the context of early Soviet religious policy, which, officially at least, did not prohibit religion nor persecute believers; some families could hire teachers to instruct their children in the Torah and 18-year old youths could legally enrol in a *yeshivah*. But, as always under the Bolsheviks, the written laws were subject to spontaneous revolutionary modification on the ground. Verbal instructions from those in power and contrived 'local initiatives' encouraged the appropriation of temples for secular use as clinics or storehouses, the arrest of priests and laity as 'counter-revolutionaries', execution with neither trial nor investigation, and the incitement of the young to mock their parents when the latter clung to their faith. Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak was convinced that only a highly-organized underground with tight security and reliable personnel could preserve Hasidic traditional life under Soviet rule.. Therefore in 1922 he convened a secret meeting of his most loyal and trusted associates, *Tomehei Temimim* graduates, and "together they swore to instruct Jews in the Torah, disdaining all danger, to their last breath." (Khovkin, p. 102).

The scale of operations of this illicit organization required that the Rebbe mobilise the energies of large numbers of reliable and respected people. Later in 1922 he left for Moscow to discuss with Jewish leaders in the capital his proposal to convene a conference of rabbis and to create from

among their number a Rabbinical Council for all the Jewish communities. (Khovkin, p. 106). After a week of complex negotiations, a general invitation was issued to rabbis and Torah scholars in all the larger communities. Assembling in Moscow, they spent several days discussing the Rebbe's plan to revive Jewish traditional religious life. Yosef-Itzhak insisted that a precondition of his project was the assurance that the work of *hederim* and *yeshivot* would be completely independent of local contributions from the wealthy; under Soviet conditions, the financing of any activity directed toward Jewish religious revival had to be organized centrally. At the end of the conference, his proposals were adopted. The spiritual leaders called their association the 'Council of Rabbis of Jewish communities of the Soviet Union' and elected an executive central committee (*Merkez*) of which, during its first year, Yosef-Itzhak was elected chairman. This elevation ensured that he would sooner or later become a prime candidate for arrest and despatch to an 'isolator' prison, the camps or exile in Siberia or the far North; it was of course always possible that he would be executed.

However the challenge was mounting for the general body of Hasidim. Many Jews of secular bent had actively participated in or warmly supported the Bolshevik revolution and many were now enthusiastically working to implement its policies. In 1918 a Jewish Department had been established within the newly formed Soviet government, and in 1919 the Communist Party organization took things further by setting up Jewish Sections (*Yevseksii*) attached to Party committees at the various levels, such sections being responsible for local "direction" of Jewish national life. They naturally developed as weapons in the Bolshevik war on traditional Jewish culture and religion, assisting in the destruction of Jewish political parties and organizations. The study of Hebrew ("a counter-revolutionary language") was banned and all traditional Jewish institutions and practices came under attack. The *Yevseksii* were largely staffed by radical Jews opposed to any religious revival and of course bitterly hostile to the Hasidic movement and its leadership. They launched their onslaught by staging public debates in which 'servants of the cult' and religious activists were invited to participate, but in conditions where a single incautious word or phrase could be construed as "counter-revolutionary agitation" and punished by arrest. Meanwhile, the opponents of religion could indulge in the grossest tirades, inciting the audience to insult and mock believers.

That spiritual leaders nevertheless often won public support is suggested by the frequency with which members of the *Yevseksii*, smarting from defeat in argument, were impelled by "sincere urgings" of conscience to send denunciations to the GPU, after which the authorities would take "appropriate measures". These so-called debates often functioned as popular 'courts', delivering verdicts. We can cite examples from the Russian Jewish Encyclopaedia. At Vitebsk, on January 12th-19th 1921, a public debate on *hederim* culminated in a 'judgement' which closed the legal ones while an illicit Jewish school was shut down at the same time. In Gomel in early 1921 a *heder* debate was followed by a show trial of ten *shohetim*, in which they were sentenced to several years imprisonment. A year later, also in Gomel, at a debate on the Jewish festival of 'The Day of Judgement', a speech by Rabbi R.-M. Barishansky led to his arrest and conviction. In Bobruisk in 1922 a debate on *hederim* coincided with the arrest and incarceration of all the teachers. On March 14th 1923, in Gorky (Mogilev province), another teacher (*melamed*), Boris Goldin, was brought to trial "in connection with his teaching of religious subjects to a number of children of two years and older." (Khovkin, p. 186). He was sentenced to a month's hard labour and legal costs. In Velizh, Vitebsk province, in the early 1920s, denunciations by the *Yevseksii* led to the arrest and conviction of Rabbi Eliezer Pupko for secretly building a *mikveh* and for advising people not to buy meat from non-kosher butchers. Another public trial in Bobruisk in 1923 condemned a number of *heder* teachers and servers in the synagogue.

These open debates and show trials enjoyed full official backing. For example, on August 2nd 1922, a meeting of the *Yevseksiya* attached to the provincial education department in Konotop issued the following order. (Khovkin, p. 117-118).

- " – All instruction in *hederim* is to cease immediately, even if parents have paid the requisite fees.
- The GPU is to undertake the most vigorous measures in pursuance of this order.
- Persons resisting this order, for example, those who contribute money to *hederim* and other religious schools, or offer them premises, are to be apprehended immediately and brought to trial."

As a result of this order and the flow of denunciations from the *Yevseksiya*, students at secret *yeshivot* were seized and beaten up. A letter to Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak recounted details of *Yevseksiya* attacks on fellow Jews.

"Lazar Levin and his people looked for him [28 year-old student Mikhail] at the *yeshivah*, but failing to find him, they went on to his home. Lazar demanded that Mikhail go with them but he refused. Then they beat him brutally, breaking the stick on his back, and dragged him off to prison. After this, Mikhail was taken to hospital where he died. Ten *yeshivah* students were apprehended and taken to jail by the police. There other students were already held in the cell. A little later, when the young men started to pray, the guards. Red Army soldiers, attacked them, knocked them to the ground and began to beat them. Only intervention by other prisoners saved them... One lad, Shiomo Gekhter, was delivered to the prison, beaten up and then stood against the wall and threatened with execution As a consequence he suffered nervous collapse." (Khovkin, p. 118).

The Rebbe had long ago observed that in those towns where the administration was in the hands of non-Jews there was less pressure, but wherever Jewish Bolsheviks dominated, the religious communities were particularly victimised. More than once he expressed his revulsion at the conduct of communist Jews who, to curry favour with their superiors, "spare no effort, seize synagogues, close *mikvaot* and spy on those who teach their children the Torah" (Khovkin, p. 120). Yosef-Itzhak's opinion of the Jewish Sections was an open secret and it was no surprise that he and his assistants were under constant scrutiny by their more zealous members, who informed the security organs about every visitor he received.

The Rebbe's fame was spreading and his personal influence as a prime inspiration of Hasid resistance would continue to be recognised by the authorities for many years, even after his arrest in 1927 and his subsequent exile to Latvia, described later. There is eloquent testimony from his enemies. In a letter of 1929 the head of the Moscow *Yevseksiya*, Litvakov, would complain to Albert Fuchs, leader of the city's Jewish community, about Yosef-Itzhak, who, even from abroad, "is organizing all the servants of the cult, whether rabbi, *shobet* [slaughterer] or *melamed*, in every corner of the land, and is in every possible way aiding and supporting them and the religious institutions – *mikvaot*, synagogues, *hederim* and *yeshivot* – and their teachers and students. . . . Wherever we look, not only in Byelorussia, Ukraine and central Russia, but in the remotest parts of the country, in Georgia and Central Asia, even there we find Shneersohn's emissaries strengthening religious institutions."¹

Litvakov concluded with threats. "We have decided to extirpate him at the roots and we have already accumulated sufficient evidence to do this." To tackle this problem once and for all, and specifically to combat more effectively the Rebbe's envoys in the field, Litvakov turned to the GPU with the proposition that members of the Jewish Sections should be given credentials and authority to act as secret police auxiliaries, the more efficiently to "close down religion" (Khovkin, p. 197) by utilising "the sword and shield" (referring to the GPU insignia, the proud badge of the Chekist). The authorities officially turned down the request, but a meeting of high officials of the secret police, after lengthy argument about "the religious question", decided that the issue of support for the *Yevseksii* be left "for consideration by local GPU sections, depending on the circumstances." (Khovkin, p. 200). In the event the Moscow *Yevseksiya* received no such powers, while the Leningrad GPU created "within its own apparatus a special department for the struggle against the Jewish religion." (Khovkin, p. 200).

In many cities, collaboration between *Yevseksii* and local security organs was close, and the activity of Jewish informers and Chekist agents brought swift and profitable results. Their reports facilitated the accumulation of compromising material on rabbis, *melamedim*, ritual circumcisers and slaughterers, sparking arrest and exile of offenders and closure of educational establishments and *mikvaot*.

The blight affected province after province For example, by the mid 1920s over 50 synagogues and 100 *hederim* had been closed in Berdichev, 60 *hederim* in Bobruisk and 15 synagogues (out of 17) in Vinnitsa.. In Vitebsk 63 Hasidic synagogues and all the *hederim* were shut, as were all synagogues in Gomel. Dnepropetrovsk lost 30 synagogues and all *hederim*, while Zhitomir, the centre of Hasidism in Volhynia, saw 27 closures of synagogues, *yeshivot* and *hederim*. In general the militantly anti-religious activities of members of Jewish Sections were so effective that Stalin himself is

supposed to have said: "If all our anti-religious organizations were as active as the *Yevseksii* in the anti-religious struggle, we would long ago have finished with religion."

In 1921 Lenin's introduction of NEP, the 'New Economic Policy' which relaxed prohibitions on small private enterprise, brought temporary relief, particularly for young Jews for whom official employment was problematic. Traditional Jewish occupations – mainly small trading and crafts – were once more feasible. But then NEP was gradually abandoned and private enterprise was again victimised. It was not merely a question of economic survival; such occupations allowed Jews to sustain a proper religious life, to avoid work on the Sabbath, to observe religious holidays and to provide religious instruction for their children in the home. The regime's renewed hostility towards small business was most destructive for Hasidic households in the smaller towns of the Ukraine and Byelorussia, where such activities were basic, where everyone knew everybody else and it was difficult to observe the norms of religious life in privacy and without attracting notice. There developed a substantial migration of Hasidim to larger cities where there was a guarantee of initial material aid from established Jewish communities and of subsequent help in finding accommodation and work (significantly easier in the suburbs). Moreover it was relatively easy for Hasidim to 'lose themselves' in the much more numerous urban Jewish population.

However, whatever the pressures, petty enterprise remained a potential lifeline. In the later 1920s assistance from foreign charitable organizations facilitated the establishment of a network of small craft cooperatives (mostly of the *artel* type) and craft training centres for Jewish youth. Charities also sponsored free communal dining centres for students and the poor. Material support for Hasidim working in cooperatives or at home could incur criminal prosecution. For example, GPU files in the case of 'Dobruskin M.Ya. and others' would depict such aid as aimed at "drawing the poorest among the population into economic dependency by lending out funds, knitting machines etc."

We should note, in passing, that the Dobruskin case-file, replete with data on these early years, was actually put together in 1947-48, much later than the period under discussion. This illustrates aspects of the Soviet security system which govern the sources utilised in this research. As the Stalinist system developed, individual offences were increasingly woven together as manifestations of an "organization" at work. No connection was too remote to be considered suspicious by security agencies in which becoming paranoid was a good career move. With a varying mix of faith and cynicism, it was professionally necessary to be convinced of the irredeemable anti-Soviet criminality and conspiratorial ingenuity of whole groups of the population. It is perhaps ironic that in the case of the Hasidic resistance, this was close to the truth. At all events, people were arraigned in droves.

And when such a 'group case' was launched, GPU archives would be ransacked to demonstrate the long subversive antecedents and group associations of the persons now investigated. Unpunished misdemeanours and even completed cases from the distant past would be exhumed for inclusion in a new group case-file, assembling the records held on people who had variously served or were still serving past sentences, were on the run or had left the country. Thus, because, in 1947, a large number of veteran Hasidic campaigners were arrested in the Dobruskin case, the case-file became a portfolio covering several decades. References to it will recur throughout this study, because it consolidated 'evidence' from the entire history of what the GPU represented as a continuous and integrated 'Shneersohnite' conspiracy.²

The file reaches back into the 1920s, when GPU attempts to introduce its spies into Hasidic communities encountered difficulties in penetrating the strict security surrounding the work of clandestine religious schools. The Dobruskin case-file shows how reports from such covert police informers were digested into "Memoranda" and "Explanatory Notes" for the edification of higher GPU and Party officials. For example, one such memorandum from a later date looked back on the general situation.

"One of the principles of Lubavich Hasidism – the education of the young in a religious-nationalist spirit with rejection of Soviet reality in the post-Revolutionary period – has manifested itself in the organization, in a number of towns and cities (Nevel, Lyubavichi etc.) of illegal religious schools of lower (*heder*) and higher (*yeshibof*) type. Based on these schools and prayer-houses, Hasidic communities have become more organized and unified. In the late 1920s and the 1930s, in illegal schools of lower (*heder*) and higher (*yeshibot*) type, partly under the direct influence of Shneersohn and

partly under the supervision of his assistants, Hasidism tried and tested the cadres who would become the nucleus of the resurgent sect and revived with known success its old reactionary forms (illegal houses of prayer, *hedery* and *yeshiboty*).

One report in the file observed that Hasidism was the product of "a socially alien milieu", the families of craft workshop proprietors or petty merchants, who, under NEP, had found it possible to expand private production or trade, and that following the abolition of NEP and the withering away of individual business they organized collective enterprises cemented by the bonds of religion. The same informer opined that such cooperatives were essentially "a form of disguise", since Hasidim were formally registered as working in the cooperative while in reality they had personal knitting machines or looms and were working individually at home. The report drew the security organs' attention to the fact that these collective businesses "received raw materials through the official plan for state enterprises, while the finished product was disposed of primarily on the black market", reaping huge profits hidden from the tax authorities. But of chief interest to the Chekists was the opportunity individual work at home afforded the Hasidim "to observe their religious obligations, that is to refrain from working on Saturdays and feast days and to educate their children, not in Soviet schools, but in illegal *hedery* and *yeshiboty* or by inviting teachers for individual tuition of children at home."

The secret police began systematically to plant their people inside Jewish cooperatives to identify among the 'workers' any former rabbis, *melamedim*, *shohetim* or *mohalim* (circumcisers). GPU operatives became active members and even leaders of religious communities. A note in the Dobruskin case-file justified this policy on the grounds that "within Jewish circles, Hasidism has become one of the militant, fanatical and reactionary ideologies. It everywhere sets up unlawful *hedery* and *yeshiboty*, relentlessly opposes every innovation adopted by the Jewish working masses, even resorting to threats etc."

From the mid-1920s regional divisions of the GPU were required to submit to the Moscow centre annual "Estimates of expenditure incurred in dealing with religious and sectarian groupings", in which a separate section covered operations to hunt down Jewish religious leaders and activists. An idea of the scale and cost of these operations can be gleaned from an explanatory note attached to estimates for the first half of 1928, submitted on April 23rd 1928 to the Organizational Bureau (Orgburo) of the Ukrainian Communist Party Central Committee (TsDAO, Ukraine, Archive 1, Schedule 16, Case 34). It observed cautiously that "work concerning the Jewish priesthood is in its first year and is only at the stage of determining the composition of the leadership and gathering intelligence. For the successful conduct of work in 'servicing' the Jewish communities we require two paid informers in each *okrug* [district]. The actual team of agents currently at work in each district certainly-exceeds the specified number of two, but we are assuming that district offices are willing to pay for the extremely valuable information which facilitates the conduct of an effective religious policy."

The Ukrainian GPU further proposed that to pursue the Jewish spiritual leadership they recruit secret collaborators in 38 districts and, assuming a payment of 10-20 roubles a month, this would mean an outlay of 4560 roubles for the first half of 1928. In this connection the explanatory note pointed out that the above-mentioned level of payment to informers "is not always attractive, especially for initial recruitment", and that therefore in practice they were obliged to pay out "on a variable tariff, depending on the quality of the particular agent." In fact, "especially valuable informants sometimes demand payments of up to 60 roubles or even more." By including such 'explanations' in their official estimates, local GPU offices sought to prove that the expenditure proposed was the minimum needed for efficient surveillance.

Besides direct payments to field operatives, it was accepted that "the obvious necessity to summon agents to the centre and also to meet with them in specified suitable locations in appropriate conditions" demanded additional outlay amounting to 600 roubles. The estimates also listed further expenditure of 300 roubles for briefing agents. Finally, "the informer network must periodically receive instructions through special visits by our colleagues", although this applied chiefly "to the most important and valuable informants"; such travel, naturally, would not be at the agents' own expense. If one takes into account that according to these estimates the total required for GPU surveillance of all religious groups, and not merely Jews, was 58,480 roubles for one half-

year in the Ukraine alone, one can imagine the scale of government expenditure on such work for the whole USSR year on year. In fact, however, GPU agents and voluntary informers worked to such good effect that in subsequent years the funds earmarked for "clandestine surveillance of religious groups" would be continually increased.

The results were dramatic – widespread closure of synagogues, *mikvaot*, *hederim* and *yeshivot*, whether open or secret, and the mass arrest of rabbis, religious workers and lay activists. But, as educational institutions were shut down, others were opened clandestinely. Particularly impressive was the sheer geographical range of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak's influence and inspiration, a topic explored in Chapter 5. Underground branches of *Tomehei Temimim* flourished in Berdichev, Nevel, Leningrad, Vitebsk, Kiev, Poltava, Polotsk, Kherson and even Bukhara, and many *mikvaot* and *minyanim* (the ten-man quorum for public prayer) continued to function despite the GPU campaign. In many ways life in the religious schools continued as before, although pupils took turns to watch at the windows, ready to disperse at the first sign of danger. The son of *melamed* Isroel-Yeuda Levin, after two years in a Kiev *yeshivah*, left in 1927 to continue his studies at a *yeshivah* in Vitebsk and was struck by the number of young men at the railroad station with *payes* (side-curls), incipient beards, caps and prayer-shawl fringes (*tzitzit*) showing. And this was no dream; the academic year was beginning and these young people were about to enrol at the *Tomehei Temimim yeshivah*. This miraculous sight at Vitebsk station remained with the young man for the rest of his life. "I felt as if I were in *Eretz-Israel* [the land of Israel]." (Khovkin, p. 189).

Rabbis and *melamedim* were increasingly hunted down, but those arrested were replaced by new men. We know the names of many who suffered during those early years of Bolshevik oppression, some of whose stories will figure in this narrative. There were rabbis who directed *hederim*: Sholom Fridman (Berdichev), Shmuel Kotkin (Donetsk), Morduhai Rabinsohn (Bobruisk), Luchinsky (Boguslav, Kiev province), David Liberman (Borzon, Chernigov province), David Kievman (Vetka, Gomel province), the brothers V.M. and I.M. Boruhor (Zhitomir) and M.M. Gilevich (Zembin, Minsk province). Far to the south, in Derbent on the Caspian, a *heder* for mountain Jews was led, from 1921, by N.Sh. Sosonkin, who, with Boruh Levkirk, also directed a *yeshivah* in Batumi. Other rabbis running *yeshivot* in the *Tomehei Temimim* network were A.Z. Pinsker and Avrom Dreizin (Vitebsk), Moishe Pritsker and Eliezer Pinsky (Berdichev), Isroel-Yeuda Levin (Yegoryevsk, Moscow province), Moishe Axelrod and I. Benyaminsohn (Khiobin, Gomel province) and N. Labkovsky (Dnepropetrovsk). We know also of *melamedim*, for example, Nison Nemanov (Nevel) and Yakov Landa (Leningrad), the latter subsequently replaced by Rabbi Simon Lazarev.

In the Crimea there were functioning Jewish agricultural settlements. Several *hederim* were successfully opened there, *shohetim* were invited in and one *mikveh* was constructed. There was a struggle "for every sermon preached, for every extra day that Jewish religious life could be lived." (Khovkin, p. 120). With the onset of mass arrests of rabbis and teachers, some of them, fearing for their families, refused to work in unlicensed schools. This prompted the direct intervention of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak. He called together alumni of the Lyubavichi *Tomehei Temimim* and told them of the critical situation in local *hederim* deprived of spiritual leadership. Following lengthy discussion some 70 of them agreed to go to the danger zones and occupy the places which others had declined. The Rebbe later paid tribute to these selfless and loyal pastors. "The self-sacrificing nature of Russian Jews during those years was astounding... They never thought of themselves; they were ready for anything. They feared arrest less than they feared interruption of their work. The only reward they requested was that they be granted the possibility of feeding, at the most modest level, their wives and families." (Khovkin, p. 117).

CHAPTER 2.

YOSEF-ITZHAK AND THE LENINGRAD JEWRY.

This chapter draws heavily on Beizer's valuable study (*Yevrei Leningrada*) of the situation of Leningrad Jews during the early Soviet years. An influx of religious Jews into Leningrad in the early 1920s necessitated the establishment of new synagogues and prayer-houses; during religious festivals the Horalny and other existing synagogues were simply overwhelmed. For example, the Hasidic synagogue, *Beis-Yakov*, opened on the corner of Troitskaya Street, would function until 1929. Among other newcomers were the *Shavrei Zion* ('Gates of Zion') synagogue on Znamenskaya (later moved to Artilleriiskaya Street), the 'Hasidic merchants' prayer-house' headed by Yeguda-Leib Meizel in an annex of the Horalny synagogue, and the *Tiferes Israel* ('Glory to Israel') synagogue which survived from April 1922 to June 1924 in an apartment on Vosnesensky Prospect and later in Nikolsky Pereulok.

In the early 1920s the Soviet authorities were preoccupied more with the struggle against the recalcitrant 'Tikhonovite' Russian Orthodox Church than with that against Jewish religious organizations; the latter task was for a time left largely to militant Bolsheviks in the Party Jewish Sections. The fact that many high officials of the GPU itself were Jews may have made that organization reluctant to act in this area, but a more likely reason was the sensitivity of the Soviets, bearing in mind Russia's record of pogroms, to possible accusations of anti-Semitism. The general easing of policy associated with NEP brought the first signs of relaxation in official attitudes towards religion. A religious community could now be registered as an *obshchestvo* ('society', 'association') with rather more rights than had been accorded in 1918 to the so-called 'twenties', the limited groups of lay parishioners licensed to represent believer communities and acquire premises.

In Leningrad, a group of social and religious activists took advantage of the new regulations to form such a 'religious association', assuming the more extensive rights and powers that title implied, and under this umbrella they were able to unite the fragmented 'twenties' of almost all the city's synagogues. (Beizer, pp. 199-200). On October 24th 1924, a meeting of the founders of this wider Leningrad Jewish Religious Association (LERO) formulated a draft constitution. On January 26th 1925 the association was registered with the authorities. However the regulations were not over-generous; like all such 'societies' LERO had no juridical rights as an entity and could not own property. It was dominated by the Horalny and Cemetery synagogues but the smaller synagogues were represented on the governing committee. The Hasidim, as a minority in the wider Jewish movement, were allocated a half-ruined two-storey house and expended much labour and money to restore it and establish the synagogue *Tzemah-Tzedek*. According to Beizer (p. 197), 17 synagogues and prayer-houses were functioning in Leningrad by 1930, and even correspondents of the Communist Party newspaper *Leningradskaya Pravda* acknowledged in their articles that synagogues were attended, not only by petty capitalists, the suspect 'Nepmen' but by handicraft workers, "gathering here, coming from Nevel and Vitebsk in search of an illusory happiness, and sometimes they even include the backward wives of workers" – that is, of real proletarians. (Beizer p. 204).

A significant development was the appearance in Leningrad of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn, whose influence would later be described by a *Leningradskaya Pravda* correspondent as a major factor in the growing interest in religion, "not only among Jewish bourgeois elements but in more or less broad circles of the Jewish working class." The GPU itself regarded the Rebbe as "one of the pillars of the orthodox (Hasidic) movement." (Beizer, p. 205).

Yosef-Itzhak arrived in Leningrad in 1924. In that year, at about 6 p.m. on March 11th, Chekist operatives had entered his apartment in Rostov-on-Don. Their search was long and thorough, and the Rebbe was marked down for arrest and trial. But he had friends with influential contacts in official circles, and after a good deal of argument behind the scenes the local authorities agreed unofficially to drop the case, provided he left the city for good. In June he quitted Rostov, quietly and without attracting attention, together with his family and close associates. He made for Leningrad, henceforth to be the centre from which his covert missionary work would be pursued

with even greater energy and over an ever wider area. From there hundreds of his emissaries would travel all over Russia with assignments and instructions.

The Rebbe's arrival prompted many Hasidic families to move to Leningrad. Some managed to find accommodation in the city itself while others settled in the suburbs, above all in the Novaya Deryevnya district north of the Bolshaya Nevka river branch. This left them fairly close to their spiritual pastor, while at the same time it offered a peaceful location, sufficiently safe to allow the growth of a compact Jewish community and a continuation of traditional religious life. Novaya Deryevnya gradually became a distinctive centre of Hasidism. Khovkin, (pp. 154-155) quotes the recollections of Rabbi Rafail Nemoitin.

"When Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak moved to Leningrad, I was only a boy of 15. My grandfather belonged to the Hasidic congregation of Rebbe Shmuel [Shneerson – Yosef-Itzhak's grandfather], my father to that of Rebbe Shalom-Dov-Ber and I joined the congregation of his son. I first saw Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak during the Civil War [c. 1918-21]. As I remember, he visited Petrograd [Leningrad] several times in connection with his work. My father, Rabbi Shmoel, kept a Jewish canteen and a kosher butcher's shop, so all roads led to him. How do I remember the future Rebbe? Young, red-headed, handsome, clever, rather jovial. Very clearly spoken. And kind..."

The Rebbe's apartment saw a constant stream of visitors. Lubavich Hasidim came from many parts of the USSR. The large parlour, converted into a synagogue, was always full during regular prayer meetings. Yosef-Itzhak's congregation became known even in the West and several foreign charitable organizations contacted him, as president of the Council of Rabbis of Jewish communities of the Soviet Union, to offer financial assistance. From 1925 the funds arriving annually from various countries were distributed all over the USSR, in accordance with the Council's wishes, for the maintenance of *mikvaot*, the organization of *hederim* and *yeshivot*, salaries for their teachers and payment of *shohetim*, rabbis and expounders of the Torah in homes and synagogues. Some money was diverted to help colonists building new Jewish agricultural settlements. The scale of the activities undertaken by Yosef-Itzhak and his disciples can be gauged from a letter he wrote to a contact abroad, explaining – without mentioning people or places – how the money solicited by his Council would be spent.

" 25 rabbis will receive. 10– dollars every three months,
50 rabbis will receive 8 dollars every three months,
50 rabbis will receive 5 dollars every three months.
200 *melamedim* will receive 10 dollars per month.
100 *melamedim* will receive 20 dollars per month.
15 *melamedim* will receive 40 dollars per month.
Persons giving lessons on the Torah in the synagogues will receive:
50 persons – 10 dollars each.
50 persons – 15 dollars each.
15 persons – 4 dollars 30 cents each.
5 persons – 5 dollars 50 cents each." (Khovkin, p. 115).

The Rebbe's letter then drew attention to the sorry state of *mikvaot* in many small towns and villages and the constant need for repair and maintenance. Some places could get by with a one-off subsidy while others would require monthly inputs. Hence he proposed the following single payments:

" 50 *mikvaot* will receive 50 dollars each.
100 *mikvaot* will receive an average of 25 dollars (I remind you that we are talking only of one-off grants).

Monthly subsidies will be as follows:

100 *mikvaot* will receive 19 dollars each." (Khovkin, p. 115).

Over the next few years many places saw their *mikvaot* restored, the opening of previously suppressed and wholly new *hederim* and support for clandestine units, both old and new, of the *yeshivah* network of *Tomehei Temimim*. Yosef-Itzhak, aided by his followers and substantial help from Western charities, was able to fulfil the injunction of Shalom-Dov-Ber, his father. "Go forth and spread the Word."

In 1925, following instructions from the Rebbe, a former student of *Tomehei Temimim*, Shmuel-Isroel Levin (nicknamed Neveler) arrived in the town of Nevel in Leningrad province. Within a year he had organized an illicit synagogue and brought young people together in a group called *Tiferes* (or *Tiferet*) *Bahurim* ('Glory of Youth'), the members of which began to study in the *Tomehei Temimim* branch he set up under the name 'Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn *yeshivah*'. Its chief aim was to prepare rabbis and *shobetim* for Hasidic communities. Soon young men from many different towns and villages came to enrol and as many as 65 were studying there at any one time. Money for the upkeep of buildings and for student stipends came from Poland. The school directors set themselves the task of "sustaining at whatever cost the light of the Jewish soul, so that none shall extinguish it." (Khovkin p. 110). As Yankel Gurevich, a student at the Novel *yeshivah*, would admit when interrogated in the Levitin case: "I first entered the *yeshivot* in Nevel, where 40 or 46 people were enrolled."

As in the Dobruskin example, the GPU would exhume these events of the 1920s as material in a much later case, mounted in Moscow province in 1938 against 'Aronshtam L-I.Sh. and others'; this later file would also revisit allegations against the Nevel academy, in language beefed up to suit the more savage atmosphere of the late 1930s. One of the accused, a former student at Nevel, would then, under duress, recall that young men "in the *yeshivot* were indoctrinated with counter-revolutionary views, [that] teachers at the *yeshivot* constantly expressed opinions hostile to the existing order and slandered the Party and the Soviet authorities", and that students were obliged "to conduct counter-revolutionary agitation-among the population." He stated that in his time some 15-20 persons graduated from the *yeshivah* and that all then "left to work in various cities." He would also name names, including those mentioned below.

The GPU were aware of the activities of *Tiferes Bahurim* by early 1928 and had identified Yuda Eber and Hacha Feigin as directors; the latter, however, managed to hide in time. A *melamed*, Samuil-Shmuel Levitin was apprehended and exiled to Siberia, and the illicit synagogue, within which the *yeshivah* functioned, was shut down. Shortly afterwards Shmuel-Isroel Levin, head of the *yeshivah*, fled Nevel in time and moved to Toropin, while students also went into hiding. Yankel Gurevich, Zaiman Gurarii, Samuil Arvand, Girsh Ardov and Abram Obolsky went to Leningrad to continue their studies in other underground *yeshivot*. The last three, together with Falvist Berezin, who entered a Kharkov *yeshivah*, were all natives of Nevel. Another group of fugitives, including Izrail-Yosif Aronshtam, Neiah and Yakov Gansburg, Lazar Gertsovich and Haim Levin, went to Moscow, where local contacts arranged for them to hide out in private apartments and ultimately to obtain work in a craft cooperative ('MebeFshchik') in Yegoryevsk, some 90 km. from Moscow. There they melted into a sizeable Hasidic community and continued studying in an illegal *yeshivah* run by the rabbi Nahum-Gilel Pinsky. They would be joined in 1935 by Shmuel-Isroel Levin, who, after some wandering, also found shelter in Yegorevsk. This nest of ex-Nevel activists would give rise to the Aronshtam case of 1938 (see Ch. 4).

Almost all those involved in these developments acknowledged, in greater or lesser degree, the authority of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak. His increasing prestige had long since alarmed not only the GPU but also important figures in the Leningrad Jewish religious association, LERO, because it brought into question their leadership in the organization of religious life in the city. (Beizer, pp. 204-212). In 1925 the LERO executive issued a call for an all-Russian Jewish religious congress to discuss the problems of maintaining traditional practices -construction of *mikvaot*, sale of kosher meat, instruction of children in the Torah etc. LERO leaders were willing to take upon themselves the organization of the congress, involving visits to larger Jewish communities and correspondence with the others, as well as seeking the necessary official permission; the prestige of their venerable honorary chairman, Rabbi David-Tevel Katzenelenbogen, would, it was hoped, sway the authorities. In all this they calculated that were the gathering a success, foreign charities would channel funds in their direction.

In August 1925, L. Gurevich, chairman of the LERO executive, approached Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak to request his support for the idea of convening such a congress in Leningrad. The Rebbe could help by recommending the project to Hasidic communities in other cities. However, relations between LERO and the Hasidim were problematic: The LERO leadership included many who had been instrumental in the Communist rise to power, in the subsequent social and political

transformation and even in the campaign against religion. Criticising support offered to LERO by Rabbi Katzenelenbogen, Hasidim charitably attributed it to "his childishly trusting nature and the feebleness of old age, which allowed the cunning and unscrupulous leadership to use Katzenelenbogen for its disreputable intrigues." (Beizer, p. 207). During talks with Gurevich, the Rebbe began to suspect that the congress organizers were simply a front for the Leningrad city *Yevseksiya* and its associates in the security organs. Those suspicions were in large part justified, in that rabbis in many other places were being summoned to GPU headquarters and strongly urged to participate in the proposed congress. Many of them later recalled that before leaving the GPU they were threatened with execution unless they signed a pledge never to divulge the substance of the interview. It is fair to note that, suspicions aside, the Rebbe had good cause to oppose the congress, since any strengthening of LERO influence weakened that of the Council of Rabbis of Jewish Communities, of which he was president.

In mid-November, ten members of the governing council of LERO, mostly Hasidim, demonstratively resigned and a delegation was despatched to Rabbi Katzenelenbogen to "open his eyes", a task in which it totally failed. And on November 22nd, members of prayer-house congregations in all city districts were invited to a Hasid-inspired meeting at the Horalny synagogue at which they were informed that the Godless leadership of the LERO was secretly preparing a congress the purpose of which was to draw Jews away from the Torah.

Divisions within Leningrad Jewry became increasingly marked. On June 16th 1926 Hasidim gathered to found a new association, based on their synagogue, *Tzemah-Tzedek*, under the direction of Rabbi Simon (Shimon) Lazarev, a close associate of Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn. Many of those present immediately decided to join the new body. It would take the society over a year to obtain official registration, granted on September 27th 1927. Meanwhile Hasid differences with LERO continued. 1926 saw the election of two Hasidic rabbis, Shmuel Mekler and Shmaryagu Gurarii, to its governing body, but the tension was obvious and LERO's attempts to press on with the congress project aroused the vigorous opposition of the Hasid leadership. In December, Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak circulated to all major Jewish communities an open letter containing a warning.

"The call for a general congress now signals danger; it is an unclean thing and therefore I am speaking out against it finally and irrevocably. I foresee that a congress will lead to evil consequences. May the Almighty preserve us from them." (Khovkin, p. 218).

The letter had an effect, as did widespread rumours that the GPU was promoting the congress as a means of keeping the Rebbe under observation. Communities in Moscow, Minsk, Kremenchug and Dnepropetrovsk declared themselves against the project. Nevertheless preparations continued and Rabbi Katzenelenbogen met with Yosef-Itzhak in another attempt, inevitably abortive, to enlist his support for the venture.

In October a Rabbinical Council for Volhynia was scheduled in Korosten, with full permission of the authorities (Beizer, p. 205), and its organizers, on the initiative of the rabbis Shmuel Kipnis (Ovrach) and Yakov Levitsky (Malevsk) contacted the Rebbe with an invitation to attend. (Beizer, p. 208). He replied that although it was not a time for conferences and there were suspicions that 'red' rabbis might be among those present, such a meeting might perhaps do no harm and could even bring certain benefits. He provided the organizers with funds and sent Shmuel Mekler to attend as his representative.

The council assembled early in 1927 with 50 rabbis from Volhynia and 23 from communities outside the province, mostly from Leningrad and the Ukraine (Kiev, Odessa, Poltava, Nikolaevsk and Kremenchug). It lasted about a week and proceeded in an atmosphere of high spiritual fervour. Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak, despite his absence, was elected honorary chairman and his letter of welcome was read out on the first day. In it he reminded participants of demands which the 1917 Moscow Congress of rabbis had failed to press upon the new Soviet government, notably "to grant Jews complete independence in everything that concerns observance of the commands of the Torah" and "to permit Jewish children attending Soviet schools to absent themselves on the Sabbath and on feast-days."

Some of those present put forward a proposal to unite the Jewish religious communities over the whole of Russia, and an executive committee was selected to oversee the implementation of conference decisions. However, for the watching Soviet authorities, the Rebbe's election as chairman

and the public reading of his letter may well have exhausted their patience. The executive committee was soon ruled unlawful and one of the organizers arrested. He was not held for long but on his release he warned the Rebbe that there were plans to arrest four of the most active rabbis, among them Yosef-Itzhak's principal secretary, and to exile them by simple administrative order with neither investigation nor trial.

Meanwhile the LERO leadership was pushing ahead with plans for their congress. In spring 1927, the Rebbe, convinced that the Communist *Yevseksii* would use such a gathering to bring about a schism in the rabbinate, again turned to the faithful to warn them against attending. The proposed agenda included discussion of particularly thorny problems, for example, the provision of religious education, maintaining Sabbath observance and combating the bans on charitable activities and publication of religious literature.

179 delegates, drawn from 110 legal Jewish associations, were scheduled to attend the forthcoming congress. (Beizer, p. 211). One of the proposals for debate – for the creation, at a level higher than the *yeshivah*, of a religious-philosophical seminary for the training of rabbis – aroused Yosef-Itzhak's fierce opposition. He considered that implicit in the plan was a condition imposed by the authorities, in that it would require the exposure of all the underground *yeshivot* from which seminary candidates would be drawn. He also felt that the fact that an executive committee to be elected by the congress would be allocated some of the funds flowing from Western charities (a LERO objective) would adversely affect the covert activities dedicated to the renaissance of Jewish religious traditions.

However, by that spring of 1927 the net was about to close on Yosef-Itzhak. He was too great a nuisance. At the beginning of the year he had made a working visit to Moscow and at a 'safe' apartment met with members of his Council of Rabbis of Jewish communities of the Soviet Union. In discussing projected activities for the current year, there was disagreement over whether the Council should subsidise Jewish craftsmen working at home. The Rebbe argued that this was precisely the help that should be expanded, because it allowed a religious Jew to work and yet to keep the Sabbath. He won his point with a unanimous Council vote. He then met with a representative of an American charity and reached agreement to obtain extra funding for the Council budget. They would now receive \$40,000 for the second half of 1927 to finance the purchase of equipment for domestic craft workers and to help in feeding thousands of needy families in central Russia and the Ukraine.

The Chekists were informed of the Rebbe's presence in Moscow and of his secret meetings with the Hasidim. In February the chairman of the Moscow Jewish association, Albert Fuchs, a lawyer, was summoned by the GPU. In the course of a long 'conversation' it became clear to him that investigators had already collected numerous statements from 'witnesses' concerning the Rebbe's activities and that the position was 'becoming serious. Returning from the interview, Fuchs found members of the governing body of Moscow's Horalny synagogue anxious about his long sojourn at GPU headquarters. However he did not disclose the primary focus of the interrogation, confining himself to vague generalities. But to one of them, a Hasid close to the Rebbe, he revealed the details. The guardians of order had asked him whether it was true that in Moscow Yosef-Itzhak had collected "a large sum of money for Jewish religious educational establishments" and "had received a significant proportion of that money from abroad" something which enabled the Rebbe to exercise "authority over hundreds of thousands of religious Jews, whether they were Hasids or not." (letter in *Alef* No. 484, p.28). Fuchs then requested that the Rebbe be warned to leave Moscow that same night. But the latter dared not return immediately to Leningrad, because of news from his family about the detention of his secretary, Elhonen-Ber Morozov, of whom more later. Yosef-Itzhak therefore remained in the capital, resolved to celebrate the festival of *Purim* in the Hasidic synagogue, an occasion which Albert Fuchs (himself to be arrested in 1935) later remembered (letter, *Alef*, pp. 28-29).

"On Thursday morning, passing the Lubavich synagogue, I saw that it was lit by many candles and crowded with people packed tightly together. Many, unable to find room inside, stood outside in the street. When I asked what was going on, they told me that today was *Purim Hatan*, 'Little Purim', and the Rabbi [here not 'Rebbe'] was preaching. Hearing this I thought: 'What courage and strength has the grandson inherited from the grandfather [Shmuel Shneerson, Lubavich Rebbe from 1866]

who, regardless of personal danger, stood against evil-doers and defended the Jewish people.' I entered the synagogue to hear the Rabbi and saw him standing in the middle of the hall, speaking, in loud and measured tones, of the miracle of *Purim*. He spoke of the steadfastness of the people of Israel and their capacity to withstand their enemies. The Rabbi reminded us of the 22,000 young Jewish men, pupils of Mordecai, who, when the decree was issued [in Persia] forbidding the study of the Torah, said to their teacher: 'We are with you in life and unto death.' And these children and youths overcame the great minister Haman. This struggle is never-ending, this eternal conflict continues in every generation and every part of the world. And only study of the Torah from earliest childhood can make firm the foundations of Jewish resistance to the enemy.'

I will never forget the content of that address nor the enthusiasm it aroused in all who were present... My friend, who was with me in the synagogue and who knew the Hasidim better than I, remarked to me, on the way home, that the Rabbi's sermon, so appropriate in the situation now confronting religious Jews in Russia, would undoubtedly be carefully transcribed and circulated among the followers of the Lubavich Rabbi."

Meanwhile events in Leningrad were unfolding in line with the several warnings the Rebbe had by now received. On February 9th 1927 the apartment of his secretary, Elhonen-Ber Morozov, was searched, and the correspondence seized confirmed reports already supplied by GPU informants about the financing of the *Habad's* underground activities through contributions collected all over Russia and donations arriving from abroad. That same day, the secretary's daughters, Rahil and Sarra Morozova (he had eight children), were apprehended for "involvement in a secret Zionist-socialist youth organization called *Dror* ['Freedom']", dedicated to promoting devotion to Jewish national culture and values. Four others were taken into custody later.¹ According to the file on the case of 'Morozova and others', Rahil, questioned on February 12th, admitted having joined in 1926 an organization, *He-Halutz*, which prepared young Jews for emigration and a life of pioneer labour in Palestine. Others now detained made similar admissions and some confessed to having entered *Dror*. All the accused were sentenced on May 27th 1927 to 3 years' exile in Kazakhstan, though one, Sicilia Skipnaya, went to Siberia.

Evidence incriminating Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak himself would be incorporated in a separate case-file on 'Shneersohn I.-I. and others', following his later arrest. However the principal items emerged on February 21st when his former colleague, Sabshel-Yakov Sorin, was questioned. Sorin stated that "Shneersohn receives money every month from all parts of the USSR and from abroad", that many *yeshivot* were sustained by these means, and that "Shneersohn engaged in unlawful correspondence with [persons] abroad", receiving such letters "via the addresses of Morozov Honon, Liberman H.R., and other persons", using for this purpose the diplomatic bags of the Polish, Latvian and Estonian embassies.

The arrest of Yosef-Itzhak's secretary, Morozov, of which the Rebbe was informed in Moscow, took place on February 23rd directly following Sorin's interview. Elhonen-Ber was initially accused of "attempting to smuggle the Rebbe's books abroad." Consigned to prison, he was placed in a cell with common criminals who mocked him and prevented him from praying. Rahil and Sarra, learning of this, declared a hunger-strike, and on the fifth day of their protest their father was moved to a cell with Zionist political prisoners. In April he was formally indicted as having "assisted a group of people to cross the frontier illegally." In May 1927 he received a sentence of 3 years' exile and was deported to Krasnoyarsk. As we shall see, he would later return, to be caught up once more in the tribulations of the Hasidim.

Morozov's indictment was framed under Article 58, section 10, of the Russian Republic (RSFSR) Criminal Code (Article 54 in the Ukraine). This article would achieve notoriety, and substantial over-use, as the catch-all for every even vaguely political offence. Virtually all political prisoners would be '58s'. Section 10 criminalised any behaviour which might be construed as anti-Soviet agitation. Section 11 had a beautiful simplicity; it arraigned one for associating with any other person – and thus forming an 'organization' – in any activity covered by another section of Article 58. Elhonen-Ber Morozov was lucky to avoid a '58-11'.

But his case was only a prelude to the attack on the Rebbe himself. On the night of June 14-15th 1927, agents arrived to search his apartment and present the warrant for his arrest. Parting from his family, he managed to tell them to spread the word, through friends and contacts, to all the

underground schools, to remind them that nothing should deflect them from their task; it was vital to continue instructing the young as if nothing untoward had occurred. While the search was proceeding, Yosef-Itzhak's daughter Haya-Masya saw through the window her fiancé, Menahem-Mend Shneersohn, approaching the house. The window was open and she cried out that they "had guests". He immediately understood and went to pass news of the arrest to the Rebbe's assistant, Haim Liberman, and to remove from his own home some of the Rebbe's manuscripts which he had been transcribing; these he distributed among various conspiratorial apartments unknown to the GPU, simultaneously alerting everyone to the dangers of the situation.

For his part, Haim Liberman, as a priority, burned the lists of envoys of the *Habad* and removed from his apartment Yosef-Itzhak's correspondence and other documents. When the Chekists burst in on the following day they found only ashes, but Liberman was taken to a cell inside the GPU internal prison on Shpalerny Street. At his first interview he was formally accused of directing an illicit network of *ofbederim* and *yeshivot* in which he himself taught. He denied everything, 'declined to cooperate with the 'organs' and declared that if he knew anything about the organization of such schools, he would, as a religious believer, refuse to divulge it. The official indictment against Liberman claimed that he "had engaged in counter-revolutionary sabotage", a charge under Article 58-14, and also that he "instructed children and -adolescents in religious doctrines." He refused to sign the indictment as procedure required and was sentenced in June to 3 years' exile in the provincial city of Tambov. Luckier than many, he would serve his term and emigrate to become Yosef-Itzhak's representative in Warsaw, moving in 1940 to New York to serve the Rebbe there.

Meanwhile Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak was also incarcerated in Shpalerny Street while his interrogation proceeded. During his first days there he was shocked by the brutality of the guards, the abuse, the taunts of 'Yid-snout' and the beatings-up. (Beizer, p. 214). Khovkin (pp. 231-72) provides a fuller account of his sufferings. His request that he be allowed at morning prayers to strap to his left arm the *tefillin*, traditional leather prayer-boxes containing Torah verses (seized during the search of his apartment), provoked a flat refusal and a vicious blow to the head, which knocked him down the iron staircase and caused serious injury. However, despite this, he quickly familiarised himself with official prison regulations and, in telegrams to the prosecutor's office, the prison commandant and the investigator supervising his case, he demanded the return of the confiscated *tefillin*. Obtaining no satisfaction, he went on hunger-strike. Two days into his protest he was again summoned for interrogation but he refused to answer any questions until he had a guarantee that the things he needed would be returned. In any case he rejected prison food and would accept only that which was sent in from home.

He was first interrogated on June 16th, the day after his arrest. He was accused of "counter-revolutionary activity", namely support for reactionary forces inside the USSR, organization of a nation-wide *heder-yeshivah* network and receipt of funds from foreign organizations and charities for the support of religion. There followed further sessions, at one of which the Rebbe was threatened with summary execution. But he remained calm, responding always by demanding the proper procedures enshrined in Soviet law, a ploy perhaps then not as patently futile as it would become in the late 1930s. The 'Shneersohn and others' case-file records that he refuted all accusations, stating: "I engage only in Hasidic studies and have no other activities. I enjoy authority in Hasidic circles only because of my knowledge of the doctrines known as *Hasides*. The letters I receive or despatch are sent only by the official postal service." He denied that his correspondence went through diplomatic channels and that he received money for religious purposes. As for the organization of *yeshivot*, he commented that he had no direct responsibility but "would sympathise with such institutions."

Yosef-Itzhak's community rallied to his support. The day after his detention they sent Rabbi Shmaryagu Gurarii to Moscow where he helped organize a committee to work for the Rebbe's release. Three lines of action were decided upon. Firstly, they turned for support to European public bodies, ambassadors and ministers of Western governments. Secondly, they launched a massive series of initiatives within Russia. Telegrams went to the Soviet government, notably to Kalinin, Rykov and Menzhinsky, and personal interviews were solicited with several prominent Bolsheviks; petitions signed by thousands were sent to various authorities, and Hasidic communities demonstratively staged prayers and fasting. Thirdly, the committee approached Yekaterina Pavlovna

Peshkova, first wife of Maxim Gorky, who was busy establishing an organization, 'aid to political prisoners', which would evolve into the 'Political Red Cross', an astonishing beacon of human rights in the darkest Stalinist years.² This remarkable woman committed her energies to the campaign to save the Rebbe.

On June 21st Yosef-Itzhak was formally charged. In the words of the Shneersohn case file: "Being the leader of a Jewish nationalist group of Hasids, he unlawfully organized Jewish schools, *bedery* and *yeshivoty*, where he taught religious knowledge to children." And "funds flowed to Shneersohn every month from every corner of the USSR and from abroad." He refused to sign the indictment and was duly condemned. We know from memoirs that his stature as an ideological menace was evidenced by the fact that, unlike the minor players exiled, he was judged worthy of the death sentence, which, routine in the Stalinist 1930s, was not yet so in 1927.

The telegrams, petitions and Western interest organized by the committee may have had an impact, but at this point Peshkova's resolute intervention was undoubtedly crucial. The death sentence is not even mentioned in the official case-file, because her endeavours procured first a change to a sentence of 10 years in the Arctic camps of Solovki, and then, by a direct appeal to the new GPU chief, Menzhinsky, a reduction to the common lot of 3 years' exile in the far from remote city of Kostroma. She was still not satisfied, and further efforts led to a case review on July 11th, as a result of which the Rebbe was released without even restrictions on place of residence. He returned to Leningrad, but justly fearing some vindictive act of revenge on the part of the frustrated local security organs, he moved to Moscow and settled in the nearby village of Malakhovka.

However the Rebbe now felt it advisable to apply for permission to leave the USSR. He was invited to take up work as a rabbi in Frankfurt-am-Main and also in Riga. The Foreign Ministers of Germany and Latvia made repeated representations on his behalf and Peshkova weighed in once more, but the Soviet authorities were adamant. It was only Soviet interest in a trade agreement with Latvia that brought about a change of heart. An influential figure in Latvia was Mordehai Dubin, a rabbi -and Hasid, a personal friend of the country's President and a member of Parliament since 1919, representing the Jewish party, *Agiidas Israel*. He was always eager to help his co-religionists within the Soviet Union, and at this juncture he offered his assistance in the matter of the trade agreement, on condition that Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak was permitted to emigrate. On September 27th the Soviet Foreign Ministry granted exit visas for the Rebbe, his family and six of his closest associates (Khovkin, p, 288) and they left Russia on October 20th 1927.

Yosef-Itzhak would live in Latvia for several years before moving to Poland in 1934 and ultimately, in 1940, to the USA, narrowly escaping the terrible fate that overwhelmed East European Jewry under Nazi occupation. In America he led Hasidic activities, especially in education, founded one of the world's largest publishers of Jewish and particularly Hasidic religious literature and himself wrote many books on doctrine. New York was to become the new capital of the Hasidic *Habad*. But for years, albeit from abroad, Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn continued to provide that inspired leadership to Hasidim in Russia which so enraged the Bolshevik authorities.

Hasidim would long remember his leave-taking at the last *Purim* festival in "Moscow, when the Rebbe, "tormented by an unbearable heat as if his soul was burning his body through" (Khovkin, p. 213), tore his shirt, sobbed and cried aloud, warning of the dreadful dangers which lay ahead for them.

"Jews! Remember these words!

We are going to cast ourselves into the fire of selfsacrifice. Every one of us must remember and understand. They are taking our children from us. They want to render us childless and barren. Rabbis, *shohetim*, *melamedim*, heads of households, lawyers, doctors, men and women. Together we must all be ready for anything, even to burn – may God spare us – for the Torah and the commandments. And then we shall be worthy of a future in which we shall have children and grandchildren." (Khovkin, p. 221).

CHAPTER 3.

LENINGRAD'S ORDEAL INTENSIFIES

For Leningrad Hasidim the Rebbe's departure did not herald easier times. In 1928 the authorities in Leningrad Oblast' held a conference on the problems of national minorities. One resolution condemned "Jewish clericalism" as "a focus around which are grouped all kinds of anti-Soviet elements: Zionists, Bundists [the Jewish socialist movement], nepmen [speculators], members of the free professions etc." (Beizer, p. 218). This was part of an accelerating assault on religion in general, reaching a crescendo in the comprehensive anti-religious legislation of 1929. The "Law on Religious Associations" (April 8th 1929) was followed in May by an amendment to the Soviet Constitution, which reduced still more the already minimal scope for religious activity. A further law "On the Rights and Obligations of Religious Associations" was passed on October 3rd 1929.

The Leningrad Hasidic community, its leadership already depleted, suffered with the rest. On August 28th 1929 the GPU seized Honon Epshtein, who, while collector of donations at the Leningrad synagogue, was secretly fulfilling rabbinical functions. The case-file on 'Epshtein Kh.M.' shows that he denied being involved in "anti-Soviet nationalist agitation", but informers had supplied enough evidence about his real activities to place him in serious peril. The indictment drawn up in September alleged that "being a clandestine rabbi, under the guise of collecting donations, he moved in Jewish religious circles and there engaged in anti-Soviet agitation and, as a rabbi, judged community disputes", that is, he fulfilled a rabbi's traditional role as arbiter where domestic matters were at issue. In addition it was noted that letters to his brother in America contained "slanders alleging that in the USSR the Jewish religion is persecuted." His protest, that he had merely told his brother of synagogue closures, was ignored. However, on October 30th he was released pending a future trial date, which never in fact materialised. His case would be officially dropped on July 27th 1931 and he would enjoy a few years of liberty before they came for him again.

The authorities chose the eve of the Jewish new year in 1929 to launch a nationwide campaign termed "the fall anti-religious offensive", in the course of which almost all remaining synagogues were suppressed. In Leningrad the smaller ones were the first to go, and on January 17th 1930 the main Horalny synagogue was closed. Its Moscow equivalent followed on February 1st. At about that time the local GPU reported to Moscow on the productivity of its personnel infiltrated into synagogues and the Jewish religious community. As a result of "detailed analysis of the material provided", they concluded that "the most active members of the association *Tzemah-Tzedek* have built a fairly solid nest in the heart of Leningrad." According to informers' reports, "the leaders of the community have met with considerable success in organizing *hedery* and *yeshivoty*, attended by young people from various cities of the USSR." (Lazarev and others' case-file).

There was an occasional glimmer of hope in what was a somewhat confusing year. In early 1930 the drive to collectivise agriculture was proceeding furiously and the excesses and disasters it entailed persuaded Stalin to curb, if only for the moment, the misplaced zeal of his minions. His rebuke in the celebrated *Pravda* article, "Dizziness from success" (March 2nd 1930) applied almost equally to extremist measures against religion. In a tactical retreat, the *Yevseksii* were abolished and many decisions on church closures were revoked. On April 10th and May 15th respectively the main Moscow and Leningrad synagogues were reprieved.

Relief however was short-lived and selective and the threat to the Hasidic community did not go away. In mid-1930 eleven Leningrad Hasidim linked to *Tzemah-Tzedek* were apprehended, among them rabbis Simon Lazarev and Nison Nemanov, *melamedim* Leiba Kreinin and Simon-Berk Livshits, and the chairmen of the 'rventy', the governing council of the synagogue, Berko Yasnogorodsky. Six *yeshivah* students were also taken.¹

Two covert *hederim* had been functioning in Leningrad since the late 1920s under the direction of Rabbi Nemanov and *melamed* Kreinin, while an illegal *yeshivah* enrolled at least 20 students a year, provided them with a canteen and organized, under Rabbi Lazarev, a mutual aid society. One of the students subsequently remembered:

"Study at the *yeshivah* demanded application and enthusiasm. Students rose very early; work began at 5 a.m. and finished at 8 p.m. During the day, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., there was a lecture or a *shiur* (lesson) while the rest of the time had to be devoted to independent study with periods set aside for meals and for prayers. Independent study usually meant working in pairs, analysing texts, correlating and comparing them." (Kaplan, pp. 17-18).

All the people mentioned above were arrested together to constitute a 'group case', always dangerous in that it implied an "organization" rather than individual transgression. The Lazarev case-file claims that "the directing nucleus of the Hasidic community" was a trio comprising rabbis Lazarev and Nemanov and 'twenty' chairman Yasnogorodsky, who were "well-known not only in Leningrad but throughout the USSR." The GPU uncovered their links with Hasidic communities in Moscow, Rostov-on-Don, Mogilev, Kremenchug and elsewhere and with foreign organizations from which "they, as local leaders, received instructions."

The students came from different places. Some we have noted in Ch. 2 as coming from Nevel after the closure of its *yeshivah*;² others were from Bobruisk (Abram Pochin), Dnepropetrovsk (Osher Sosonko), Melitopol (Abram Malchik), Klimovets (Gillerman) and Kherson province (Gil Azimov). There were also Leningrad natives like Lazarev's son Gersh-Leizer. Almost all categorically denied having attended the *yeshivah*. Gurarii told his interlocutors: "I began studies at the Nevel *yeshibot* and continued there until it was liquidated. At the time it was liquidated I heard that my father was under arrest and then I went to Leningrad in order to support my family, since my father was exiled to Kem. I did not enter a *yeshibot* in Leningrad." Others denied frequenting the synagogue for instruction. "The accused Sosonko, Malchik, Pochin and Lazarev [the son] claim that they went to the *Tzemah-Tzedek* synagogue only for prayers; because they are pious people, and have not studied, nor are they now studying in the *yeshibot*."

There were more interrogation sessions and face-to-face confrontations with witnesses. One of these, Rahil Yoffe, testified that 'students of the *yeshibot* attached to the *Tzemah-Tzedek* synagogue did in fact eat at my place, coming to dinner between 12 and 1 o'clock and to supper between 7 and 9 in the evening. All the *yeshibotniki* visited the apartment, where, after dinner or supper, they studied the Talmud.' The young men's prevarications were futile and they were compelled to acknowledge their guilt. One such confrontation forced Yankel Gurevich into an admission.

"The *yeshibot* was first located at Nevsky Prospect 128, then moved to Ligovka [Ligovsky Prospect] 55, where 8-10 persons studied. After the closure of the synagogue on Ligovsky, the *yeshibot* was affiliated to the *Tzemah-Tzedek* synagogue and by that time it had grown to 18-20 students. Lessons in the *yeshibot* were conducted not in large groups but with two or three [students] at a time, since experience at the Nevel *yeshibot* suggested the need for caution, so as not to attract attention."

The woman whose apartment was used also claimed that "there were many occasions when the *yeshibotniki* studied not only the Talmud but also politics. They analysed the newspapers in detail. The *yeshibotniki* used to say that the time was coming when we would have to submit to the authorities, because we were faced with circumstances in which, in one way or another, we would be forced to work on our sacred Saturdays."

In examining testimony in case-files, one should be sceptical about the wording; in the Lazarev, as in other cases, it was more often than not written by the interrogator. However, much of Yoffe's evidence has the ring of truth. She was "not able to say exactly what they discussed, because when they all began to speak there was such a noise, and then some of the *yeshibotniki* stood up and cried 'Gentlemen, we must be more careful; remember we are here illegally'." Equally convincing was her observation that in their everyday life they were just ordinary people who "got together to sing songs, or rather melodies, both happy and sad, played draughts and chess", and that her apartment was for them "a real home."

It is surprising that the *yeshibot* canteen was established in this particular apartment, since Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak had lived there for a while, in itself sufficient to focus the attention of the Chekists. Moreover, as the witness stated, "all the rabbis and other religious Jews arriving from other areas lodged with me and I provided them with kosher food." The students paid 3-5 roubles a day for their meals and the hostess also received money sent by parents for their offspring.

Rabbi Simon Lazarev, born 1885, now GPU nominee as a leader in the "organization", had arrived in Leningrad in 1923 or 1924, and from 1928 served officially as bursar and unofficially as rabbi at the *Tzemah-Tzedek* synagogue. As noted earlier, he had certainly headed the association when it was founded, but involvement in the *yeshivah* was a different matter. When questioned, he confessed that he knew of the activities of the group of young men. "I was unhappy about them and did not want to get involved, but could not just throw them out. Nor did I think it my duty to do so, being neither a director nor a participant in the matter." He refused to give the names of the students attached to the synagogue. "I know several of them only by sight, but I do not know their last names because I did not want to have any contact with them. I am accustomed to work only in accordance with the regulations, within the framework of Soviet law."

Lazarev conceded that every morning in the synagogue he saw Rabbi Nison Nemanov sitting apart at a table with students, but "whether or not he was teaching them, I could not see." At the next interview, in answer to questions about Nemanov, he claimed that when he heard of the work with *yeshivah* students, he "lost patience and on one occasion spoke to him very sharply, asking why he was coming to our synagogue and when he would cease his activities. But Nison did not even want to look at me and continued to occupy himself with the students." The case-file notes Lazarev's later excuse, that as a rabbi he could not insist that the lessons be abandoned, "because I would have been criticised and would have lost all authority."

The *melamed* Simon-Berk Livshits, who sold literature in the synagogue, testified that "one Nemanov, Nison, was the teacher in *theyeshibot* and was busy with the students morning and evening. The *heder* teacher is a certain Kreinin, whom I know well and who told me himself that he teaches children at his home, including the children of Rabbi Lazarev."

Nison Nemanov, 34 years old, had moved to Leningrad in 1929 to escape the wave of arrests that accompanied the closure of the Nevel *yeshivah*. Ostensibly a craft home-worker, he enjoyed among Hasidim a reputation as an accomplished Talmudist. Now in custody, he began by denying any involvement with education in Leningrad, but, confronted by witnesses, he had to confess to having "fixed himself up at the *Tzemah-Tzedek* synagogue" with his students (but had "only seven persons"), and that the fees for teaching were donated by members of the congregation. However he strongly denied any part in circulating around the country appeals for help for the *yeshivah*, couched, according to the GPU, "in clearly anti-Soviet language." Despite his protests, this charge was included in the indictment.

Berko Yasnogorodsky, who had certainly been aware of student activity at the synagogue, vigorously maintained his innocence. "I know nothing of the existence of any *yeshibot* attached to *Tzemah-Tzedek*. I know, and indeed observed, that young men were coming to the synagogue and were studying the Talmud. Whether or not they had a teacher, I do not know. I rarely saw Nison and do not know what he was doing."

When the investigation was concluded, Simon Lazarev's official indictment claimed that he was "in reality head of the religious association *Tzemah-Tzedek*, organizing unlawful *yeshiboty* and *hedery*, for which he received money from foreign capitalists, and indoctrinating the mass of believers with an anti-Soviet outlook." Kreinin, the *melamed* who had covertly established a *heder* in his apartment, and Nison Nemanov, head of the *yeshivah*, had, in the words of the indictment, "besides religious education, indoctrinated their students with anti-Soviet views." Nemanov was additionally charged with issuing, "through the students, anti-Soviet appeals for donations to the *yeshibot*" All the *yeshivah* students were formally arraigned as "active *yeshibotniki*, carrying out anti-Soviet agitation." Gurarii, Gurevich and Sosonko were also accused of joining in "the circulation of anti-Soviet appeals for financial aid for the *yeshiboty*."

The indictments invoked Article 58, sections 10 and 11, of the Russian Criminal Code, emphasising collective involvement in an 'organization'. As members of the Hasidic *Tzemah-Tzedek* and of a secret *yeshivah*, "in their deepest convictions they were inciters to chauvinism" and "besides direct manifestations of bigotry, they engaged, both as leaders and as *yeshibotniki*, in clearly anti-Soviet agitation, going so far as to issue calls [to action]." The Lazarev case-file noted their behaviour under questioning. "Under the influence of fanaticism and their training in discipline and conspiratorial *tzadikism*, they all displayed exceptional facility in simulating stupidity and an inability to understand the questions." As an epithet. *tzaddik*, denoting to Hasidim a leader of intense purity

of spirit in mystic union with God, could hardly carry the connotation of low cunning and deceit which the GPU intended. But Chekists, at least at provincial level, frequently did not fully understand the movements they hounded or the terms they bandied about, nor did they greatly care.

Simon Lazarev and Nison Nemanov, "as especially dangerous", received sentences of 10 years' and Leiba Kreinin and Berko Yasnogorodsky 3 years' ITL (corrective labour camp). The students Gurarii, Malchik, Sosonko and Lazarev *fil's* got 3 years' internal exile, while the smaller fry, Gurevich, Livshits and Pochin were expelled from Leningrad and banned from residing in six specified major cities (the so-called 'minus 6' noted in their passports).

Simon Lazarev died in the camps in 1933. Nemanov and the student Osher Sosonko were both to serve their terms and then, like many other Hasidim, would work underground in Central Asia during the war and in Lvov in 1946 (see Chs. 6 and 7). We have no information on any of the others.

In Chapter 2 we remarked that Elhonen-Ber Morozov, the Rebbe's secretary, exiled to Kazakhstan prior to the latter's emigration, would figure again in this history. Freed on amnesty late in 1929, he had no illusions about his security. He lived briefly with his family in Nevel and then in Polotsk and finally, in 1931, using false papers under the name of Leiba Berkovich Pevzner, he found shelter in a friendly Leningrad apartment. However his real identity became known to the GPU and he would find himself caught up in the waves of arrests, mounting towards the 'terror year' of 1937, in which group after group of Leningrad Hasidim would be 'liquidated'.

Sarra Raskina, daughter of a Leningrad *mohel*, Itzka Raskin, recollected:

"My father was official circumciser, the *mohel*, a man strong in the faith. During the 1930s he continued to perform the *berit milah* ritual, and also maintained the last legally functioning *mikveh* in the city, located on the *Griboyedov canal near our home*. One day [in 1931], my father announced that a certain Rebbe Honi would be coming to stay with us. He offered no explanation, nor did he tell us that Rabbi Elhanan Morozov had recently returned from exile and was living illegally [that is, without registering residence]. A few days later, Rebbe Honi appeared at our home. He was a short man with piercing eyes. Later on, his family arrived in Leningrad. They lived separately, but his sons Mulya, Pinya, Mendel, Meishke and Sholem, came to us on Saturdays.

On weekdays Rebbe Elhanan had to pretend to be a craftsman working at home and had in his room a device for winding thread. That was during the day, but in the late evening and at night Hasidim came to the apartment to see my father and Rebbe Elhanan, to discuss what to do and how to conduct themselves so as to fulfil the injunctions of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak, then living abroad in Riga." (Kaplan, pp. 204-205).

Elhonen-Ber Morozov's own daughter, Rahil, also remembered that time.

"The large Raskin apartment was always full of people; someone would be sleeping on the dining-room floor, *yeshivotniki* living secretly in Leningrad without permits would appear and disappear, as if the old [Tsarist] days had returned and the forgotten 'licence to reside' system again hung over the heads of the Jews. A tiny room was set aside for my father; it seemed to me about four square metres, not more. My aunt slept on the bed and my father curled up on a small divan. He suffered from sores on his feet, but it seemed that neither physical pain nor age affected what was most striking in his appearance. He was stronger than before, more severe and more reserved. His life was entirely dedicated to what he considered his duty." (Kaplan, p. 82).

We can turn again to the memories of Sarra, Itzka Raskin's daughter, recorded at length by Kaplan (pp. 206-207).

"After Rebbe Elhanan came to live among us, our apartment was transformed into a veritable headquarters. He was one of those through whom the rabbi Yosef-Itzhak maintained contact with Hasidim inside the Union, and, as the rabbi's former secretary, he collected information coming in concerning what was happening to Hasidim in various parts of the Union.

The best feature of the apartment was the large parlour where the nucleus of the congregation, the *minyán* [the quorum of men for public prayer], gathered on Saturdays. This was very important. Previously my father had gone on foot to a rabbi's house where he used to pray. But at this particular time he found it a long way to walk, so the *minyán* arranged to meet at our place. Sometimes messengers came to us from the rabbi [in Riga], bringing money. As a rule these were

not Hasidim but Jews travelling on some merchant business but very eager to offer help and support to the successors of Rabbi Shneersohn.

Life in our home was dominated by intense activity every day, and there were in addition the festivals, including the most important and joyful days of 12th *Tammuz* [in June], when we celebrated Rabbi Yosef-Itzhak's release from prison, and 19th *Kislev* (in December), anniversary of the release of Rabbi [Rebbe] Shneur Zaiman. About 50 people assembled for the festivals. They sent us, the children, to bed, but I remember that once I was woken in the small hours by quiet singing and went to the door through which the voices were audible. I peeped in and saw some 40-45 Hasidim. They were standing with their hands on each other's shoulders and singing in four-part harmony, so simply and so much from the heart that I would never again forget that scene.

We children led a strange double life. In 1934 when Kirov was assassinated [Leningrad boss and Stalin's close colleague, shot December 1st], I was 9 years old. Like many of my friends from Hasidic families, I deliberately enrolled in a school a long way from my home so that it would be harder for the authorities to figure out the reason if I happened to miss school on a Saturday. It was impossible to do this every week, but on those Saturdays when we could not avoid going, it was mandated [by our religion] that we go on foot and refrain from writing anything while in class. Some parents, concerned for their children, bandaged their right hands to give them a concrete excuse for abstaining from schoolwork, but others considered such an evasion unworthy. I recall that Avrum-Shaye Shapiro, an extreme Hasid, whom the members of the *Habad* remember to this day, said to me: 'If they told me to send children to school on Saturday with a bandaged hand. I would prefer to cut their hands off.'

Around the mid-30s, a spy was planted among those attending the Hasidic synagogue. This was a dark-haired clean-shaven man of about 32, with the code-name 'Znayushchy' (Knower). It was he who in 1935 informed the GPU about the arrival of one of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak's most committed partisans, Mordehai Dubin, the Latvian rabbi who had negotiated the Rebbe's release in 1927. He also reported on visits by Dubin to the Raskin apartment for meetings with Elhonen-Ber Morozov. Later, on March 19th 1936, 'Znayushchy' sent in a report about an encounter at the synagogue with Samuil (otherwise Shmuel) Nemoitin, whom he described as "an active anti-Soviet Hasid and Zionist." In the course of their conversation, Nemoitin supposedly declared: "The Jews find themselves in a strange land. The country of the Jews is Palestine, and this land where the Communists rule must be alien to all Jews."

Such information would accumulate in the GPU file for the subsequent case of 'Nemoitin S.Ye. and others'. In reading this report, Znayushchy's Chekist controller underlined Nemoitin's alleged opinion that "if everyone hated the communists and Soviet rule as I do, it would long since have vanished from the earth."

On April 8th 1936, 'Znayushchy' reported that Samuil Nemoitin, in the presence of a Hasid, Yakov-Yosef Raskin (not the *mohel* Itzka) and two others unknown to him, "literally uttered the following words: 'However, they ought to remove Stalin in the same way that they removed the boss of Leningrad [the assassinated Kirov]' at which Raskin, with an evil laugh, remarked: 'I completely agree'."

The Nemoitin case-file reveals that this report was considered too serious to ignore, and on April 24th one of the witnesses to this conversation was called to the GPU for interview. The man confirmed that Nemoitin "had expressed, in the conclusion [to the conversation], his opinion of the wise government of Stalin in terms which constituted counter-revolutionary abuse, bitter and filled with curses." It is interesting that after this interview, which yielded evidence of a significant political offence, Samuil Nemoitin was not taken into custody. The Chekists, as usual, were playing a longer game, with a 'group conspiracy' as the hoped-for payoff. Nemoitin was placed under permanent surveillance in order to identify his acquaintances in Leningrad and other places. Only after a year and a half, during the night of August 7-8th 1937, was he apprehended. Searchers at his home discovered his passport, three photographs, books in Hebrew and 23 letters, plus "a parcel containing ancient Jewish scriptures."

He was interrogated the next day. In answer to a question about persons with whom he "maintained contact", he named five, four of whom had emigrated to Palestine between 1934 and 1937. The fifth, Yakov-Yosef Raskin, named in Znayushchy's report, was still around. Nemoitin

then stated that he too wanted to leave the USSR with his family, although "purely on grounds of religious belief," in the hope that in Palestine he "could occupy himself teaching children the ancient Jewish language."

Questioned again on August 13th, he refused to admit acquaintance with several well-known Hasidic rabbis named by the interrogator, including Shneur-Zalman Gorelik, Shmuel-Leib Levin and David Fridman. He admitted only to knowing the night watchman at the Hasidic synagogue, Elias-Haim Obolsky, and the rabbi Moishe-Aizik Sivashinsky, who was married to his sister. He did not deny continuous contact with Hankel Feigin and Haim Liberman, the Rebbe's representatives now based in Warsaw, and with rabbis in Latvia, England, America and Palestine. But he rejected suggestions that he had engaged in "counter-revolutionary conversations" or had said anything against Stalin. On August 23rd he was confronted with a witness whose evidence he flatly contradicted, but he was nevertheless forced to confess to having engaged in "counter-revolutionary agitation for the emigration of Jews to Palestine." He "did not remember" with whom he had talked of this.

He was shown the official indictment on August 25th 1937. It claimed that "as an active Zionist he conducts counter-revolutionary agitation for the emigration of Jews from the USSR to Palestine, allowed a counter-revolutionary attack concerning Comrade Stalin, manifests terrorist attitudes towards the leaders of the Party and has foreign contacts." In late August 1937, Samuil Nemoitin was tried by a three-man special tribunal ('Troika') of the type routinely used in 1937-38 to mete out summary and caricature justice. The Leningrad NKVD 'Troika', invoking Article 58-10 of the RSFSR Criminal Code, sentenced him to death. The fact that Section 11 was not mobilised indicates that the Chekists failed to tie Nemoitin into any substantial conspiracy.

There is inconsistency in the Nemoitin file. The first transcript (written in ink) from the 'trial' record, with a prosecutor's objection, is dated August 26th, but a second (printed) transcript, with the death sentence, is dated August 28th. In any case Nemoitin was shot on the 29th on waste ground in the north of the city.

As was normal during the Stalinist Terror, the families of 'enemies of the people' suffered the righteous anger of the Workers' State. In November the GPU detained Nemoitin's wife Ida and his son Rafail as "socially dangerous elements", and with neither interrogation nor trial deported them both to exile in Yaroslavl. Rafail was later sent further away to Kazakhstan and would be freed only in November 1953, after Stalin's death. He then returned to Leningrad from Kustanay province to spend several years moving from one refuge to another, with no home of his own, until he managed to procure official rehabilitation for his executed father and ultimately for himself.

1937-38 were the climactic years of the Terror. The cycle of arrests, farcical trials and draconian sentences accelerated with apparently endless energy. In August-September 1937, two aged servitors of Leningrad's Preobrazhensky cemetery, the rabbis Moisei Polyak and Leizer-Itzek Gutner, were arrested, sentenced on October 15th and executed on the 21st. Meanwhile a much more complex and far-reaching investigation was germinating; the file on the so-called Sosonko case would provide voluminous material and a classic illustration of the anatomy of a GPU 'group' case.

In September 1937 the Chekists seized two students of a clandestine *yeshivah* called *Tiferes Bahurim* ("Glory of youth"); the title was that of the Hasidic youth group originally organized by Shmuel-Isroel Levin and linked to the former Nevel academy (see Ch. 2). This heralded the case of "Sosonko M.Sh. and others", the file on which is the source for this account. Apparently on the basis of informers' reports, the two young men, Abram-Shaya Sverdlov and Nohim Trebnik, were initially cast as "leaders of the counter-revolutionary clerical-nationalist youth organization *Tiferes Bahurim*" Their capitulation would give the GPU a satisfactory launch.

Interrogators extracted from them detailed admissions that the said youth group had been organized on the orders of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak as far back as 1925, for the primary purpose of studying the Talmud. This was of course true. We noted in Chapter 2 that the GPU had the organization in its sights by 1928; some members had been convicted but others had successfully escaped, allowing for the continuation of its work in a number of locations, as we shall see later. A Leningrad group had been assisted by Rabbi Mendel Gluskin who died late in 1936, a man "who saw the young people as carrying on the cause in the future." The group had been headed by Yakov Landa until his departure for Palestine in 1929, after which instruction was continued on a regular

basis by Elhonen-Ber Morozov. This connection with the Rebbe's secretary may help to explain the GPU's revived interest in an "organization" they had at least partly 'liquidated' in 1928. Kaplan (p. 207) again quotes Sarra Raskina.

"Rabbi Yosef-Itzhak attached particular importance to the creation of *yeshivot* in Russia, and Rebbe Elhanan Morozov saw as his task the maintenance of those existing and the founding of new ones. 'While there are *yeshivot*,' he used to say, 'our flag will not be lowered, even in the hardest times'."

Tiferes Bahurim had not merely survived; it had a whole cohort of young recruits and numbered, at different times, some 20 persons³ A man named in the Sosonko case-file as Faibysh Estrin (Beizer has him as Feibish), as chairman at one time of the 'twenty' governing body of the *Tzemah-Tzedek* synagogue, cooperated in the work of the *yeshivah*, and from revenue obtained by baking and selling *matzah* he set aside a portion to pay teachers. The Morozov connection was emphasised, one of those in custody testifying that from conversations with Elhonen-Ber he learned that "in Berdichev there was a clandestine *yeshivah* with 8 students and that Morozov constantly solicited donations in support of its activities."

Sverdlov and Trebnik acknowledged their guilt and signed the indictments placed before them. On November 15th 1937 they were condemned to 10 years in the camps, but their willing cooperation with the 'organs' evidently told in their favour; their cases were reviewed and they would be set free on March 15th 1940. Their evidence doubtless helped to keep the investigation going, and further arrests could be anticipated.

Rabbis Honon Epshtein and Yankel-Shmul Golubchik were detained on December 30th in a case concerning "a counter-revolutionary nationalist group of Jewish clericals." The initial accusation was one of speaking out before the congregation in the synagogue, "praising in every way life in foreign countries and uttering vicious slanders against the Soviet Union, calling it the 'land of exile' of the Jews." But the Chekists soon ceased to bother with substantiating these charges against Epshtein and simply dug out old ones from the case mounted against him in 1929 and dropped in 1931. The accusations we noted earlier were now recycled. "As a rabbi with a hostile attitude to the VKP(B) [the Communist Party] and the Soviet government, he systematically conducted counter-revolutionary nationalist and emigrationist propaganda and agitation."

Golubchik aroused greater GPU interest because he was a former 'S.R'. During and after October 1917 the peasant-oriented Social-Revolutionary Party had been the chief rival of the Bolsheviks for left-wing political allegiances and the detestation was mutual. What is more, Golubchik had then moved to the Zionist wing of the Jewish socialist Bund, an equally 'anti-Soviet' choice. He left the Bund in the 1920s when he abandoned politics for a career as a Hebrew specialist in Leningrad University library. But his background, associations in the university and close contact with Hasidim at the synagogue gave the GPU grounds to consider him an intermediary between a "nationalist group of Jewish intelligentsia" and the leadership of an "organization of clericals." Both he and Epshtein could be tied into 'Sosonko and others'.

In late January 1938, Faibysh Estrin, head of the Horalny synagogue, and Berko (Dober) Kuznetsov, manager of the *mikveh*, were summoned to the NKVD. Here they were required – and refused – to hand over the keys of the ritual baths, and were threatened:

"You'll pay dearly for your stubbornness." (Beizer, p. 228). Subsequently, during the night of February 2nd-3rd, they were arrested along with eight others, including the *mohel* Itzka Raskin and Rabbi Elhonen-Ber Morozov, now renewing his acquaintance with the Soviet judicial system.⁴ One suspect, Nahum Sosonkin, managed to leave the city in time. He later recalled that the obvious threat of arrest decided him to flee to Moscow, and he suggested to Morozov and Raskin that they follow his example. Morozov replied that he "was already in exile and had no strength left for wandering." (Beizer, p. 231). Raskin refused to leave his family and small children. And so they waited for the GPU.

Courtesy of Kaplan (pp. 208-209.), we have a vivid account of these events by Sarra Raskina.

"As early as 1934, when the first arrests began in Leningrad, informed people warned my father that our house was being watched. He was urged to leave the city but he refused -what would become of the *mikveh* and the rest of our people? He and Rebbe Honi [Morozov] were prepared to face arrest at any moment. I remember my father's remarking to someone:

'In olden days, when they took a city by assault, the first ranks of the attackers would be killed, the corpses would fill the ditch and the next wave would advance over the bodies of the dead. Only thanks to the dead could the besiegers reach the fortress walls. God grant that there will be those who will march on over our bodies.'

They came for them in the night. The most terrible thing was the businesslike ordinariness of it all. It was February 1938 and arrests were occurring everywhere, and now everything happened just as we had been told, or rather whispered, by those who had already gone through it. A loud knock on the door and five people entered. The obligatory 'witnesses' – the janitor and two neighbours – sat silently in a corner while the search proceeded. It went on till morning. I remember the white face of Rebbe Elhanan. I remember how he looked at us as my father said goodbye to us children. My elder sister was already engaged to be married and my father said: 'Don't put the wedding off for me. They led them away, together with five people who were staying overnight in our apartment.

My mother was ill. She was only 46 years old but she looked like an old woman. After my father's arrest we felt as if we had been infected with plague; neighbours recoiled from us and people were afraid to approach us in the street."

According to the 'Sosonko and others' case-file, Elhonen-Ber Morozov was told at his first interview on February 3rd that his interlocutor "had precise information about the nature of his correspondence with all the Hasidic activists abroad." Morozov did not deny that he "had actually received from Shneersohn letters, advice and prayers which he had circulated among believing Jews." His position was further undermined by evidence from others interrogated, to the effect that he, formerly the Rebbe's personal secretary, was considered by local Hasidim "to be the representative here of the *tzaddik* Shneersohn", and that he had cultivated contacts among the Rebbe's adherents in other cities. He himself was compelled to concede that in his correspondence with Yosef-Itzhak he "informed him about the condition of the Hasidic movement in the USSR, described in detail how religion was being harassed and particularly stressed the fact that it now existed illegally and that life for religious Jews in the USSR had become impossible."

Morozov, questioned again on March 7th, openly acknowledged that the thing he found most difficult to accept was that "the Soviet government has deprived us of the opportunity to educate our children in a spirit of devotion to our Jewish religious laws, so that we cannot teach our children the Torah and the Talmud." In the name of all Hasidim, he repeatedly described the Soviet regime as "a prison" and as "a place of exile where they persecute such pious Jews as I am."

Faibysh Estrin, as chairman of the synagogue 'twenty', was in trouble as a result of testimony by a fellow prisoner that he had personally offered the youth group *Tiferes Bahurim* a place in the synagogue for study of the Torah. As mentioned above, he had also "arranged illegal collections of money, part of which he distributed as aid to the legal and illegal Jewish priesthood." Faced with witnesses, Estrin had to admit to amassing up to 100,000 roubles during the year, through the additional collection he had organized for *matzah* production.

Another detainee, Pinhus Altgaus, son of Rabbi Eliahu-Haim Altgaus and prominent in the 'twenty', was also interviewed on February 3rd 1938 and declared that he wished to emigrate to Palestine because conditions in the USSR did not offer "any possibility of holding to one's religious convictions, and as a religious person, I suffer various pressures and have no chance of obtaining employment, because everywhere they force you to work on Saturdays." On February 21st he signed a confession stating that he had corresponded "on religious issues" with Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak and also with the latter's secretary in Poland. In these letters, Altgaus had written: "Here we are starving and are persecuted for our religious beliefs."

Other suspects – Berko Kuznetsov, Lev Yosfin, Shevel Fridman and Itzka Raskin -also confessed to corresponding with the Rebbe after his expulsion from Russia. Raskin had informed Yosef-Itzhak that "religious Jews are hounded, synagogues are shut down by the authorities, they have closed the last *mikveh* left to us and pious Jews will have nowhere to cleanse their sins." He had also written about the harsh material circumstances afflicting Hasidic families, observing that "most Jews do not even have the means to buy *matzah*."

Many prisoners testified that Hasidim "gathered frequently at Raskin's place on Saturdays to pray, besides which Raskin habitually offered shelter at his home to poor Jews who needed a refuge." But the gravest danger for the *mohel* concerned his contact in the spring of 1936 with an

Englishman, Kastenbaum, who had visited the Horalny synagogue and donated a small sum of money to help impoverished Hasidim; the Chekists had learned of this through their informer network. On a second visit, in 1937, this Englishman had told Raskin that there was a charity in London which could send aid to the faithful in the form of manufactured goods practically unobtainable in Russia since the abolition of the special *Torgin* stores for foreigners and the elite.. Kastenbaum promised to send the parcels directly to the addresses of those in need. Raskin asked Faibysh Estrin and Shaya Gold to compile a list of rabbis, *shohetim*, *yeshivah* students and Hasidic activists, such information to be forwarded to London.

Raskin was subsequently forced to reveal that in 1936 the rabbi Mordehai Dubin had often stayed at his apartment. As a member of the Latvian Parliament the latter was able to obtain a number of visas for persons wishing to leave for Palestine and had asked Raskin to recommend people of proven reliability. Raskin now refused to list those persons, claiming that "he could not remember their names." However, the Terror years favoured increasingly brutal methods, and pressed by his interrogator he confessed that his apartment was a meeting place where Hasidim discussed "religious questions" and various ways to procure visas and get out of Russia.

"I considered that for us Jews the only salvation lay in closer unity. Discussing the issue of closure *ofhedery* and *yeshivot*, we felt that by this means the Soviet government was engaged in the liquidation of Jewish nationality and therefore we resisted this in every possible way, teaching our children illegally."

One prisoner stated that the accused Saul Katzenelenbogen, son of LERO president Rabbi David-Tevel, was "an active clerical" who, in speeches at gatherings of believers, "called for the creation of an illegal council of the Jewish community, with the task, among others, of raising funds for the maintenance of religious schools for children and adolescents." Another witness noted that Katzenelenbogen collected contributions from the faithful for transmission to Voronezh province to support *bederim* and *yeshivot*.

The cast of players in the 'Sosonko and others' case now expanded still further to include, among others, the man whose name would head the case-file. We should note that this distinction was often quite arbitrary and carried no connotation of leadership or ultimate responsibility for the particular 'conspiracy' the GPU were fabricating. Moisei and Haim Sosonko were among eight younger Hasidim taken into custody on February 26-28th as "participants in the counter-revolutionary nationalist organization of Jewish religious youth called *Tiferes Bahurim*" Others were Gersh Zobin, Moisei Lein, Israil-Yankel Lokshin, Meer Tsinman, Shaya Esin and Elhonen-Ber Morozov's son Samuil.

Samuil's sister Rahil Morozova, recalling that their father had been detained under the name (Pevzner) in his forged passport, described the sufferings now endured by father and son.

"Although they (my father and my brother) had been arrested under different names, the interrogators were aware of their relationship. They beat Mulya [Samuil] savagely in front of his father to make him acknowledge aloud his father's real name. My father pleaded with Mulya to give them what they wanted. 'Tell them that I am your father' he begged his son, but the latter remained silent." (Kaplan pp. 218-219).

It is clear from the case-file that the crime of these youths was simply that they used to visit the synagogue in the evening to study the Torah and the Talmud. These sessions were portrayed as "illegal meetings of an organization where they discussed the politics of the VKP(B) [Communist Party] and the Soviet government in a counter-revolutionary nationalist spirit." Most were also accused of "Palestinophile propaganda" because they did not conceal their desire to emigrate.

The unlawful methods used to extract confessions would be later described in letters which the condemned *yeshivah* students wrote from labour camps demanding review of their sentences. Such boldness became possible in 1939, when Lev Yosfin wrote in May to the provincial prosecutor stating that when he was first interrogated, he was told that "whether you're alive or dead, we'll get what we want from you." Later "the harshest measures" were adopted and he "spent four weeks in the Gaaz hospital attached to the prison." Moisei Lein wrote in the same vein. "Every time I was summoned, by measures applied to me (physical beating), the interrogator caused me to lose consciousness, and at the final interview I signed the record they put before me, though what was written there I do not know to this day."

In the Chekist version, the organizers and ideological inspiration of the Leningrad *Tiferes Bahurim* – the older men, Elhonen-Ber Morozov, Pinhus Altgaus, Itzka Raskin, Shaya Gold and Berko Kuznetsov – had set themselves the task of organizing Jewish youth around the synagogue "in order to cultivate in them religious nationalist feelings and a hostile attitude to the policies of the VKP(B) [the Party] and the Soviet government."

On March 14th 1938 all those arraigned in "Sosonko and others" were shown the official indictment, alleging that "all active members of the Hasid sect, being inclined towards counter-revolution, came together in a counter-revolutionary nationalist group" which mounted a propaganda campaign to prove that official Soviet policy on the nationalities question "was directed towards the liquidation of the Jewish nation, explaining in this way the ban on Jewish national schools, the *hedery* and *yeshiboty*."

Sentence was pronounced on March 20th. The charges came under Article 58-10 and 58-11, this being a group *czisepar excellence*, and the timing – early 1938 – was of the worst. The entire senior cohort was condemned to death: the elder Morozov, Epshtein, Golubchik, Raskin, Estrin, Katzenelenbogen, Kuznetsov, Altgaus, Shaya Gold and Meier Fridman. All ten were shot on April 9th on the usual execution ground, the waste plot on the north side of Leningrad. With them died young Samuil Morozov; as his sister recounted, he had been badly beaten in a vain attempt to extract testimony against his father. It was perhaps his recalcitrance that cost him his life.

There remained the students of the secret *yeshivah*: Zobin, Yosfin, Lein, Lokshin, Tsinman, Shevel Fridman, Shaya Esin and the two Sosonkos. All the young men got 10 years and were despatched to the camps, mostly to Ukhtizhlag in the Kotlas area. Several died there, Haim Sosonko on July 6th 1942, Moisei Sosonko and Israil Yankel Lokshin on March 17th 1943. Esin died on the Arctic railroad project on August 6th 1944. It is a grim reflection on camp conditions that Shaya Esin was 32 and the Sosonko brothers 27 and 31 at the time of their deaths. Gersh Zobin, Moisei Lein, Shevel Fridman and Meer Tsinman survived their terms and would resume covert Hasidic activity, incurring the wrath of the GPU in 1949-50 (see Ch. 9). Lev Yosfin avoided perilous entanglements after his release and lived quietly near Sestroretsk.

Two other Hasidim, Eliyahu Belkind and Ishiyahu Krasnoluker, also arrested in February 1938, saw their cases separated from the *Tiferes Bahurim* affair but suffered the same fate. In March, Melkind was sentenced to death and Krasnoluker to 10 years in the camps.

CHAPTER 4.

TRIALS OF THE MOSCOW HASIDIM.

From the early 1920s Hasidism began to take root in Moscow and the surrounding small towns and villages. Hasidim arrived from all parts of the country. The first-comers tended to be individuals sought by the 'organs' and seeking a place to hide, but later whole groups migrated. The huge city offered at least the possibility of living inconspicuously, and, as pressure on Hasidic centres mounted, the flow increased significantly. Many of the newcomers appeared in Moscow's Horalny synagogue, where they tried to seek out acquaintances or learn the addresses of Jews with whom their friends had found refuge. But even if a Hasid knew nobody in Moscow he could always obtain help at the synagogue, in the form of a roof over his head and assistance in finding somewhere to settle for a while and look for long-term employment.

In the country areas around the capital they normally rented or bought houses from the locals and sought work in those cooperative enterprises that would accept employees working at home. This was to keep the Sabbath free for devotion. After resolving the problems of a place to live and a job, a Hasid would arrange for his family to join him.

GPU operations had closed many of the *yeshivot* of the *Tomehei Temimim* chain originally inspired and led by the Rebbe Shneersohn (see Introduction). Among those arriving in Moscow were many of their students and alumni, eager to continue their schooling, as well as teachers and rabbis from the Ukraine and South Russia, willing to teach in new schools covertly established in city apartments or private houses in outlying settlements.

The situation is well illustrated in an extract from recollections by Israel Pinsky. (Vagner, pp. 183-186).

"My father, Shneer Pinsky, was a student of *Tomehei Temimim*, as were his brothers. When the Lyubavichi branch of the *yeshivah* was closed in 1918, my father returned to Ozarichi and set up a *heder* there, instructing youths in the Talmud. In 1923 he moved to Moscow at the invitation of a prosperous Hasid, R[abbi] Nehemi Ginsburg. My father taught children the Torah and also gave lessons in other families, notably those of Beri Ginsburg, Mendel Stesin and Israel Shneerov; he also supervised systematic study of the Torah in Moscow synagogues. In particular he taught at the Zarad'ya synagogue (later demolished).

After his marriage with Sara, the young Pinsky family led a normal Jewish life, although by that time 'normal' life had become something extremely difficult, indeed abnormal. [There were problems with] observing the Sabbath, educating children in the Jewish tradition and adhering to *Kashrut* [dietary laws] in multi-family communal apartments.

My parents lived in the Taganka district, thirty minutes walk from the central synagogue on Arkhipova Street. There was no limit to their hospitality and our nine square metre room was always crowded with people of different ages and different opinions. Hasidim came from nearby, others arrived from my father's home district [and] there were Jews, known and unknown, who were brought to us as guests. Every one of them found warmth and comfort in our home; there was a glass of tea and a piece of stuffed fish, which our guest had probably last tasted a long time ago in his native region. Many stayed overnight, on the floor, on the table or on chairs pushed together. We always had bedclothes and pillows for all. On festival days up to twenty-five people piled into our tiny room and on *Pesah* [Passover] there would be even more, with not enough room at the table for everyone. We, the children, sometimes had to spend the night in the corridor or with neighbours, sometime accompanied by one or more of the guests.

Among the visitors, as I have earlier remarked, were different kinds of people. Heated arguments often broke out over religion, the destiny of the Jewish people, new social problems or the Revolution itself. Many felt that this last had brought genuine liberty to the Jews. The children, holding their breath, listened to the adults' conversation. I remember how my father tried to convey to his partners in discussion his belief in the Almighty, to convince them that only faith and strict fulfillment of the commandments could bring real freedom. At the same time, as a sincere Hasid, he

extended his trust to any Jew, in the hope that one would at some time complete *teshuvah* ('the return') and embrace again the faith of his forefathers."

Not far outside Moscow, the village of Malakhovka became a focus of GPU concern in the summer of 1927, when Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn took up residence in the Hasidic community during the short interval between his abbreviated period of exile in Kostroma and his departure from the USSR (see Ch.2). After he left Russia the security organs continued their surveillance of the local synagogue with the aid of several spies. These efforts yielded information compromising local rabbis, *beeler* teachers and Hasid activists. However, the years passed, the community was determined and resilient, and by summer 1935 informers were reporting that Malakhovka boasted ten illicit *hederim* functioning in private apartments, as well as several *yeshivot*. Identified as organizers were the rabbis Yakov (his passport said Yankel) Moskalik and Avrom Dreizin, while the *melamedim* were Aba Levin, Meier Avtson, Isaak Goldin and a father and son, Lazar and Mendel Gorelik.

A report then submitted by the head of Moscow provincial NKVD to his superiors in the Soviet government cited "information reaching him" that "a group of Jews with counter-revolutionary attitudes, Dreizin, A.B., Moskalik, Ya.V., Avtson, M.G. and others in the village of Malakhovka in Ukhtomsk district are carrying out active work involving the organization of covert *bedery* and *yeshivot*." This required, in his opinion, "liquidation of the members of the organization." The central authorities apparently gave the necessary permission, and both the request and the reply were duly placed in the file now opened on 'Avtson, M. and others'. On September 15th 1935, nine persons were apprehended, either in the village or in Moscow itself, including, besides the rabbis and *melamedim* mentioned above, Shiioma Matusov, Girsh Vozlinsky and Berk Reznikovsky; however, the last two, men in their sixties, were not found to be connected with the supposed group and were released.

The suspects were taken into the city for further investigation and lodged in the Butyrka prison. Here the main evidence, apart from operatives' reports and information from two informers acting as 'witnesses', came from two *yeshivah* students. It was they who revealed the names of their lecturers and the apartments where teaching had taken place, and who supported the primary allegations against the chief suspects. The GPU decided not to stage confrontations with the accused, fearing that, faced with their own teachers, the youths might withdraw their statements.

After all the prisoners had been shown the evidence against them, the interrogators attempted to assess the scale of the problem. How many *hederim* and *yeshivot* had been created in Moscow city and the surrounding areas and how many pupils and teachers were involved? But all the accused returned the same answer. They had taken part in no such activities; they knew nothing and they knew nobody. Meier Avtson and Shiiom Matusov, identified by witnesses as roving envoys following instructions from the rabbis Moskalik and Dreizin, were grilled about which towns they had visited to establish schools and pass on money to pay rabbis, teachers and slaughterers. The two men were very young – Avtson was 26 and Matusov only 19 – but they stood firm and gave nothing away.

The Avtson case-file indicates that indictments were finalized on October 20th 1935, alleging that all the accused, "as Jewish zealots with counter-revolutionary tendencies", having come together "in a tightly-knit counter-revolutionary grouping, made active efforts to unite Jewish youths and children and to foster in them a spirit of counter-revolutionary nationalism." There followed a list of the ten members of the "organization" together with the names and addresses of those householders in Malakhovka whose homes had harboured illicit *hederim*, in each of which "five to eight Jewish children and young people had been systematically gathered together." Also named were those whose apartments had been used by clandestine *yeshivot*, where "Jewish youths aged 16 and over were taught", and which were managed "directly by Dreizin and Moskalik."

The Chekists particularly emphasised that the influence of the accused rabbis and *melamedim* on Jewish youth and children was so profound that some of the latter "categorically refused to enrol in Soviet schools, claiming that instruction there was Godless and imposed attendance on Saturdays, an impossible condition for believers." A standard charge of anti-Soviet agitation was appended, because the defendants had preached in the synagogue that "the Soviet government is persecuting all

religions and especially the Jewish religion and its adherents", and that therefore Jews must unite and emigrate to Palestine.

Yakov Moskalik was in his fifties and a well-known Hasid, celebrated in Moscow for his 'boundless love for all Jews and his readiness to help them at all times.' (Beizer, p. 183). The GPU singled him out with a further accusation of "criminal connection with persons living abroad, from where he was receiving hard currency." It was this money, according to the indictment, which enabled him to organize secret educational establishments and to pay those employed in them.

The detainees stuck resolutely to their plea of innocence but the GPU insisted that they had been "comprehensively unmasked by the evidence of witnesses." They were charged under Article 58, sections 10 and 11, and sentenced on November 3rd 1935. Seven got 3 years' exile in Kazakhstan, while the two students who had provided corroborating testimony were released. Later in the month, the condemned were shipped off to Alma Ata for dispersal to designated locations. We have no information on the subsequent fate of five of them. Yakov Moskalik committed an offence during his time in exile and was shot for it in 1937. The younger Gorelik, aged 26 at the time of his conviction, was released in 1939 and would subsequently be involved in the events in Central Asia and Lvov recounted in Chapters 6 and 7.

A notable omission from the list of victims was the community leader, Avrom Dreizin, who went into hiding before the GPU swooped. The *Russian Jewish Encyclopaedia* (Vol. 4, p. 260) records that he remained on the run for years and, like Gorelik, would be involved in events described in later chapters.

In all, considering the gravity of the accusations, for a whole group arraigned under 58-10/11, the sentences were lenient, reminiscent of the mid-1920s. But Malakhovka would not entirely escape the officially sanctioned savagery which would prevail within a year or so and which overtook Leningrad Hasidim in the *Tiferes Bahurim* affair. The case-file on 'Alterman N.Z.-Sh. and others' introduces a complex episode which ended tragically for some but, unexpectedly, not for others.

On December 24th 1937, Nueh Alterman was arrested. The prosecutor issued the warrant only on the following day, and in subsequent documents his arrest is post-dated to December 27th. He was in fact interrogated overnight on 24th-25th and confronted with a preliminary charge of "anti-Soviet activity," which he rejected. The record of this first interview reveals that GPU interest in this apparently ordinary pensioner (he was 69) was connected with earlier activities of his which had been the subject of an unsuccessful prosecution some years previously. In 1932, at Tomilino, on the railroad a few kilometres from Malakhovka, the chairman of a Jewish religious association. Lev Kagan, working with three assistants, Aron Velikovsky, Yuda Kliet and Aron Levlyanta, had collected from members of his community the sum of 10,000 roubles for the erection of a prayer-house. With this money a covert synagogue was built on land attached to the dacha (country cottage) belonging to Nueh Alterman, with the permission of the owner and his family. To conceal from the authorities both the real purpose of the building and the fact that it had been financed by contributions from a religious group, Kagan and Alterman concluded an unofficial but formal agreement; they would publicly represent the premises as having been built by Alterman and merely rented by Kagan, on behalf of the Jewish community, for a four year term at 2000 roubles a year. Officially the building would be used as a craft workshop.

In early 1935, following the assassination of Kirov, there were wholesale arrests of 'Trotskyites', arraigned in batches in 'group' cases, while the introduction of a new passport regime resulted in the expulsion from Moscow and Leningrad of large numbers of undesirables – former gentry and landowners, merchants, priests and lay activists of all religious persuasions; These developments alarmed Nueh Alterman's family, particularly since the clandestine synagogue was being attended by ever more people, which, in turn, attracted the attention of the local NKVD 'organs'. Therefore, in 1936, when the term on their agreement expired, Alterman, urged on by his son, warned Kagan that services in the building on his land must cease.

An argument ensued between the two parties. Kagan's view was clear; the building could not simply revert to Alterman to do with it as he wished. Either the synagogue would continue to function or Alterman should return the money the community had invested in construction. However, Alterman could not afford to return the money. In any case his son was convinced that

they had fulfilled their side of the agreement and owed Kagan nothing, and that to agree to any continuation of the synagogue's work would, in the present climate, be far too dangerous.

With both sides adamant, discussions got nowhere. So Lev Kagan, acting for his association, brought civil suit against Alterman, demanding return of the money and submitting documentary evidence that the construction on Alterman's property had been financed from community funds. Neither of the parties to the dispute really realized the danger that bringing the affair before the courts invited and the dire consequences likely to follow.

Those consequences became clear to Nueh Alterman in late 1937 when the GPU homed in on the affair. At his second interrogation session on December 25th, he faced a grave allegation from a witness, a personal acquaintance, who claimed that, in conversation, Alterman had remarked: "The Bolsheviks are strangling religion. Jews cannot walk together with Bolsheviks whose policies insult them. We must leave Russia and establish our own state." Alterman could not deny any of this. On the following day he did deny having any part in the management of the religious association, but stated that what the case-file called a "Jewcultsociety" (*yudkul 'tobshchina*) "had been organized in 1932 by Kagan, Lev Abramovich, residing in Tomilino station on the Lenin railroad." He also testified that later on a three-man executive had been elected, comprising "Kagan L.A., Kenin, Haim Morduhovich, residing at Malakhovka station on the Lenin railroad, and Mozover, Leiba Gershovich, residing on the Kraskovo Shosse."

Alterman conceded that he had made available the plot of land for the construction of the synagogue and had entered into a fictitious agreement with the association's leaders. On the basis of this confession, the Chekists inserted a further accusation that Alterman was "at the same time an active organizer of the unlawful religious association", in that the agreement "broke Soviet law."

In the heat of the 1937-38 terror campaign the local GPU was always under pressure to mount a group case unmasking a "counter-revolutionary organization of Jewish clericals." The unfortunate Kagan, identified by Alterman as a prime mover, would now find his name heading a new file on the case of 'Kagan A.A. and others'.

On December 30th 1937 more "conspirators" were marked for ultimate inclusion in the Kagan file. Motya-Nason Kok, aged 50, and Yankel Shats, aged 27, of Chertanovo village, Mozaisk district, and Lev Krivoi, aged 57, from Ochakovo in Kuntsevo district were detained as "active participants in a counter-revolutionary organization." It is hard to see what could unite these men, living in villages in different parts of a large province, and when first questioned they strenuously rejected any suggestion of counter-revolutionary activity. But the case-file shows that evidence was forthcoming from informers, certifying that in 1932 these men "on Jewish feast-days organized in their homes secret prayer meetings for Jews", something that Kok and Krivoi admitted. Shats, for his part, was unable to refute allegations that he "played an active role in illegal prayer meetings at Kok's home and engaged in anti-Soviet agitation among his acquaintances."

Subsequently, other prisoners, subjected to the tortures which were increasingly applied during this period, "remembered", backing it up with signed confessions, that Kok, "together with others attending those gatherings, held anti-Soviet conversations", that Krivoi "once, in conversation, spoke favourably of the enemy of the people, Tukhachevsky [Soviet Army Commander, arrested in May 1937 and executed], and allowed himself to insult the leaders of the Soviet government", while Shats, "by virtue of his hostile attitude to Soviet rule, intended to escape to Palestine."

The fate of all three is recorded in the case-file. The milder sentences possible in the 1920s or even in 1935 were by now almost unthinkable. On February 21st 1938, Kok and Krivoi were sentenced to death "for organizing illegal meetings of Jewish clericals and systematic religious agitation/" and were shot on March 20th at the Butovo military firing range near Moscow. Shats, condemned on March 8th for "counter-revolutionary activity", was executed on April 5th.

Meanwhile, in early January 1938, the Alterman case had been uncoupled from the putative Kagan conspiracy "in view of the fact that a connection between Alterman and the others accused in the case has not been established" – a curious conclusion in view of the indictment quoted below. In any case his fate would be no less harsh. The now separate 'Alterman and others'³ file records that, confronted with testimony and with the witnesses who had given it (under interrogation, naturally), Alterman was compelled to sign an indictment claiming that he "being hostile to Soviet rule, attended illegal prayer meetings during which, together with Kagan, Mozover and others, he engaged

in conversations of anti-Soviet nationalist character." On February 21st he signed a further indictment certifying that "in unlawful gatherings of Jewish clericals [he], together with other members of the counter-revolutionary group, called on those present to join in active struggle for the creation of a Jewish bourgeois state." He was sentenced and shot, presumably in the same process as Yankel Shats and on the same days, March 8th and April 5th respectively.

Meanwhile, Lev Kagan himself, with his alleged associate, Leiba Mozover, had been arrested. According to the Kagan case-file this occurred on January 20th. That same day Kagan's apartment was searched, revealing "many religious books in different languages" and "a printed scroll in a silk cover." Kagan was initially accused of having "gathered young Jews at his home and subjected them to propaganda based on a Zionist-nationalist interpretation of Jewish teaching." However after several interrogation sessions the charge would be modified.

When first questioned, Kagan confirmed that he was one of the leaders of a religious association engaged in "practising Jewish religious customs, that is, the believers assemble in the prayer-house, where they conduct prayers." But later he insisted that he was primarily occupied with administrative duties, corresponding with official institutions on issues arising in applying for permits for the holding of community meetings and ceremonies.

On February 18th various witnesses were interviewed. One testified that, in September 1937, Kagan, after the arrest of his son Adam, had said: "To hell with the Bolsheviks! Always talking of the workers, they've been shouting themselves hoarse – 'We're living well!' Someone is, but not us. Even if we don't perish from starvation, they won't let us die in peace." Kagan was unable to rebut this evidence, which allowed the GPU to add a charge of "counter-revolutionary slanderous fabrications about the VKP(B) [the Party] and the Soviet government." Lev Kagan and Leiba Mozover were then transferred to the Butyrka prison where each suffered more interrogation sessions, resulting in revised indictments which both men duly signed.

However, the denouement was surprising. On July 23rd 1938 the case against Lev Kagan and Leiba Mozover was dropped and they were set free on August 13th. It was an early, and fortunate, local manifestation of a shake-up in official security policy at the highest level. The year 1938 had seen growing disagreement within the regime over the benefits and disadvantages of unbridled violence and the colossal and increasingly arbitrary power of the 'organs'. Nikolai Yezhov, head of the NKVD, was seen by popular opinion as the architect and symbol of the Terror, although the guiding hand was of course Stalin's. The dictator, moved by the same instinct as in 1930 ("Dizziness from success"), now decided on tactical withdrawal. In July 1938 he appointed Lavrenty Beria as Yezhov's deputy as a deliberate counter-weight to the latter, and from that point on the balance of authority within the 'organs' swung steadily in favour of Beria and a change of policy. Yezhov's removal from office would be officially announced on December 8th (he was secretly executed), and in 1939 Beria, as his replacement, would launch a purge of GPU cadres at all levels, with new interrogators appointed and new instructions issued, all with the aim of repudiating the Terror and restoring as much of a semblance of proper legal procedures as the totalitarian system could comfortably digest.

Although the decisions in the Kagan case were probably influenced by these dramatic developments, they were unfortunately untypical of what was still going on for most of 1938. One swallow did not make a summer, but the accused were early beneficiaries of the perceptible undermining of Yezhov's position from July onward and the consequent inconsistency and confusion which infected GPU operations as the crisis approached. While some cases continued to their grim conclusion, others were dropped and prisoners suddenly released. Moreover, after Yezhov's fall, when policy demanded that his minions be discredited, Kagan case interrogators Bobrov and Shupeiko would be arrested (June 4th 1939) "for fabricating cases" and sentenced to 10 years in the camps.

There is a curious footnote to the affair. Many years later, Khrushchev's turn from Stalinism would bring official rehabilitation for many innocent victims of the *Yezhovshchina*. When Nueh Alterman was posthumously rehabilitated, on October 4th 1955, a note was entered in his case-file to the effect that "concerning those who, on Alterman's evidence, were investigated as participants in illegal prayer meetings, Kagan L.A., Mozover L.G., Kenin H.M., Polovitsky I. and others, there is no information on their arrest and sentencing in 1937-38."

It was true that in the late 30s, much depended on the precise dates on which a case reached this or that stage. At about the time the Alterman-Kagan prosecution was beginning, other Jewish cases were coming to a head, and thus too early for those caught up in them to benefit from the rethinking of policy. For example, the file on the Moscow case of 'Maizel L.D. and others' indicates that it began as early as 1936. It apparently arose from the protest of a citizen K who, on November 23rd of that year, wrote to the police at Moscow's 26th precinct, reporting certain occurrences and expressing the view that the report "should be passed to the NKVD, because the incident was of a counter-revolutionary nature."

The letter was long and colourful. Citizen K noted that he had gone to the police before and had talked to an inspector who advised him to write down the details of the 'incident' because the police were already in possession of a report on the same topic from Emmanuil Sheptovitsky, chairman of the Jewish association involved. Citizen K had obliged.

His opening sentence testified to his burning civic commitment. "Comrade Chief! The patriotism of the workers of the USSR is so fervent that every single one of our proletarians is ready to give his life for our glorious Motherland, for liberty and a good life." He proceeded to emphasise that in Tsarist Russia his children had had no future, while under Soviet rule they were working and studying; his youngest daughter was completing her third year at medical school. "It would never have been possible in Tsarist Russia that a cobbler's daughter could become a doctor. . . . Therefore, when I hear anything said against Soviet rule, no matter by whom, I feel bitter enmity toward such a person and am ready to tear him apart."

He then went on to the requested detailed description of the incident which occurred on November 17th 1936 in the administrative office of a Moscow synagogue in Spaso-Glinishevsky Pereulok, at a meeting of the governing committee of the Jewish association. As one who performed the ceremonial function of "accompanying the deceased to the Vostrakovsky cemetery", he was almost always present in that part of the synagogue where relatives of the dead made their payments for the burial service and where he "offered his services as ceremonial escort." In the corridor where the bereaved relatives assembled, K unexpectedly heard, through a half-open door, an exchange between two elders of the community, Leiba Maizel, committee member, and Emmanuil Sheptovitsky, chairman, on the subject of the events in Spain, where the Soviets were supporting the Republic against the reviled Francoist uprising. The conversation, complete with ironical sneers at the Bolshevik slogan about 'life getting more joyful', was reproduced *verbatim*.

– "Emmanuil Yakovievich, what do you think? A good marriage, eh! Madrid is already prepared [for her fascist bridegroom]. It looks as if, for the Spanish communists, life has got better, life has got happier! I think that in time this marriage will be repeated; the fascists will get to us as well. Good for them!

– I've been saying that this infection wouldn't last long.

– God grant, Emmanuil Yakovievich, that it just happens as soon as possible."

Citizen K swore that when he heard these words "his blood boiled with rage." He ran into the room and shouted: "You'll never live to see it, you damned enemies, you bourgeois!" A furious exchange ensued and Sheptovitsky, crying: "get out of the office", tried to push K out through the door. The latter, for his part, seized an inkstand from the table and threw it. A fist-fight erupted, the janitor and boiler-man were called and with difficulty dragged K from the room, during which operation Sheptovitsky twice hit K in the face. Realizing that the police would soon get to know about the disturbance, Sheptovitsky went immediately to report K. for 'hooliganism'. In his letter, K referred to this allegation, commenting that the chairman "certainly would not have mentioned" the reason for the quarrel, "fearing for his hide and to avoid being punished for his counter-revolution."

On examination, the uncouth signature of the informant K suggests that the letter was not written by him at all, but by someone in the police, perhaps imposing coherence and putting a gloss on a verbal account. And initially it was not taken up, Sheptovitsky may have been able to persuade people that K was psychologically unreliable. The report did ultimately land on a desk at the GPU, but it aroused no immediate reaction there either; at least, nobody was detained. But it is likely that the persons named in it were placed under observation, since some months later, on August 16th 1937, warrants were issued for their arrest. Maizel and Sheptovitsky were taken into custody on August 22nd and transferred to the capitals Taganka prison for further investigation.

The 'Maizel and others' file contains accounts of the interrogation of six witnesses, worshippers at the synagogue, who were questioned primarily about the pre-revolution background of the accused. However it records only two interviews with Maizel, in which he flatly rejected all accusations, and not one mention of interrogation of Sheptovitsky.

The witnesses testified that Sheptovitsky had been part-owner of a tobacco factory in Grodno, while Maizel had owned a tannery in Smorgon in Vilna province and had later gone into trading. Every witness subsequently added incriminating details concerning the defendants' opinion of Soviet rule and Bolsheviks. One apparently also supplied evidence against Maizel's son-in-law, Rafail Belsky, who was duly apprehended on August 30th. Belsky, a Lithuanian citizen, was initially accused of espionage, but no evidence was forthcoming so the charge was altered to one of "participation in counter-revolutionary activity." The only real reason for his arrest was his marriage to Leiba Maizel's daughter, but his case was nevertheless taken up for investigation. His fate would be decided on May 16th 1938, with a 10-year sentence to be served in Kolyma, the most remote and inhospitable, camp complex in Siberia.

Meanwhile, Maizel and Sheptovitsky were presented, on December 10th 1937, with an indictment stating that they "had a hostile attitude to Soviet rule and the VKP(B) [the Party] and had, until their arrest, carried on counter-revolutionary agitation." They denied everything. Maizel's sentence of 10 years in the camps was handed down on December 16th and he was shipped off next day to Bamlag to work on the Baikal-Amur rail project. We know nothing more about him, but at 72 years of age he was unlikely to survive the hardships of camp life. The file does not record the fate of Emmanuil Sheptovitsky.

In the dreadful annals of 1937-38 the number of cases deserving of study is virtually inexhaustible. Almost exactly contemporary with the Maizel case was that of Moshko-Haim Gutenberg, cantor at Moscow's Horalny synagogue. He would be remembered by his grandson.¹

"My maternal grandfather, Moishe Gutenberg, was a quiet man, smiling and refined in manner. And also small in stature. It seems that in all his life he never raised his voice to anyone, never got in anybody's way. In addition he had what was, even in those days, a good-sized family – seven children. And all this family had to be fed. How on earth such a man could make difficulties for the Soviet authorities is to this day a mystery to me.

However, formally at least, he was a member of an alien class, a 'servant of the cult'. True, he was no rabbi or priest, but only a singer in the synagogue, a cantor. But there were few cantors like him. People who still remembered him from Kiev, even twenty years after his death, would say to me: 'Your late grandfather Gutenberg – that was a voice! Silk and velvet.'

Yes, silk and velvet... But even in that capacity he was considered dangerous. People now middle-aged certainly do not remember that in the pre-war years, there was this evil term, 'a disenfranchised person'. This meant someone deprived of voting and all such civil rights. To this outcast group belonged, for example, 'nepmen' (now we would call them businessmen), victims of 'dekulakisation' [the purge of better-off or suspect peasants], former gentry and priests. And, as members of the family of a 'disenfranchised person', Moishe Gutenberg's children had no right to education."

The cantor was arrested at his home in Ostankino, in Moscow's northern suburbs, during the night of November 19th-20th 1937. The case-file 'Gutenberg M.-N. A.-G.' contains only two protocols, each of less than a page, recording his interrogations. In 1937, as the Maizel case suggested, interrogations were becoming ever more perfunctory. In the first interview, after the usual recording of personal details, the interrogator asked the cantor only two questions.

- "What are the names of the people who visit you and whom you visit?
- Except in the synagogue, I meet nobody and have not met anybody.
- What is the name of your rabbi?
- Our rabbi, Medalye, is responsible for four synagogues. He rarely visits our synagogue."

At the second session, after identifying his profession, he faced only one question.

– "The investigators know that you, being dissatisfied with Soviet rule, engaged in counter-revolutionary agitation. Do you confess your guilt?

– No. I do not admit any guilt, because I have not engaged in any anti-Soviet agitation and have not talked on that subject to anybody."

However, witnesses were produced, in the shape of a married couple. B., to offer convenient testimony. They affirmed that "Gutenberg gathers around himself inhabitants of Ostankino village, among whom he conducts counter-revolutionary agitation, saying: 'I hate the Soviet government because it exploits and ruins the people. Let war come as soon as possible and put an end to it!'"

We may speculate about the motivation of those witnesses in testifying, or simply signing affidavits composed by their interlocutors, either of which actions, in those times, meant sending people to their deaths. It might have been fear for themselves and their families, or simple weakness of character or surrender to physical ill-treatment. It might have been misguided patriotism. It was in any case these statements which fuelled an indictment which included a claim that "Gutenberg, questioned in his capacity as defendant, did not confess his guilt but was sufficiently exposed by the evidence of two witnesses."

On December 5th, for "propagating counter-revolutionary propaganda of terrorist character", Gutenberg was sentenced to death. In the fevered atmosphere of 1937, terrorism was a popular addition to the range of accusations and the 'supreme penalty' was virtually routine. Moshko-Haim Gutenberg, aged 55, was executed on December 10 on the Butovo range.

Gutenberg's brother David contributed to the manuscript collection, quoted earlier, devoted to the cantor's memory. He recalled how the family's tragedy commenced.

"It was November 19th 1937. An ordinary day for the inhabitants of peaceful Ostankino. At No. 19, 6th Novoostankino Passage, a large family had gathered for supper. It had been a fine day; the Ostankino mud had frozen by evening, a clear moon shone over Ostankino and all the children had come to the table on time and an old acquaintance had called to see his dear friend Moishele.

Everyone was in a positive and happy mood. Supper began with the raising of glasses. Moishele proposed a toast, speaking, as always, clearly, calmly and to the point. I do not know what strength the man commanded, but he knew how to attract and hold his listeners' attention, knew how to bring a smile to the faces of the children and tears to the eyes of the adults. 'It is better that people are joining our family rather than leaving it, he said, 'and let happiness not pass by our house.'

Everybody smiled and clinked their glasses. And then there was a peremptory knock on the door. The youngest daughter, suspecting nothing, went to open it. On the threshold stood two men with coarse and cruel faces. 'Is your father home?' 'Papa, it's for you' said the girl, in an almost inaudible voice, looking uncertainly at her father. And, catching her troubled glance, Moishele immediately understood.

He sat impassively watching those who now lorded it in his home. His face lost its normal healthy colour and became as white as a sheet of paper. 'I'm afraid that this is it.' – he pronounced the words firmly, turning to his son. 'I ask you, children, [to ensure that] everything remains in order at home. As always.'

The outer door slammed shut behind him. He had gone. And with him went everything that was most dear in our home."

The Gutenberg case was one of many in the capital. However, similar Hasidic communities existed in rural settlements all over Moscow province and, as in Malakhovka, many Jews saw such villages as potential refuges where religious life might continue in hoped-for obscurity. But there was in reality no safety anywhere.

Since 1936 the village of Yamskaya Sloboda had harboured a clandestine synagogue attended by Jews from a wide area. In 1937 a spy, planted or locally recruited by the GPU, informed his masters of its existence and the head of the local NKVD in Mozhaisk asked the chairman of the village Soviet, the local council, for information on a number of people whom informers had denounced as Zionists. "Active participants, according to evidence in the hands of the competent organs, are: Brutman, Zeiman Leibovich; Hurgin, Zeiman Abramovich; Pevzner, Zeiman Yevelevich. Please submit all the material you have." This request was in the file now opened on the case of 'Brutman Z.L. and others'.

In October 1937, the Soviet (council) chairman duly forwarded several reports containing "incriminating evidence" on all the people named. According to these documents, the former rabbi and *shohet* Brutman had bought a house in the village and moved in with his family and that of a rabbi, Aron Tseitlin. Soon a synagogue was secretly created in the house, attracting initially locals, but later on Hasidim from Mozhaisk and Moscow. The chairman went on to claim that "Jews

arriving in the village of Yamskaya Sloboda from Moscow and other places and lacking residence permits, are being registered by Brutman as living in his house. Enquiries have revealed that the Jews so registered at Brutman's place do not really live there but reside illegally in Moscow at unknown addresses. In recent days, ten Jews appear to be registered at the Brutman home."²

The council chairman particularly complained about the rabbis Zeiman Brutman and Zeiman Hurgin. As prime movers in the establishment of the unlawful synagogue, "they had, in 1937, demonstratively quitted the *artel* [work cooperative] 'Mozhaisk Metallist' and urged other Jews to follow their example in order to bring about the collapse of the *artel*." Finally, besides these reports, the chairman sent the GPU a list of Jews belonging to 57 families in Yamskaya Sloboda who, with their kinfolk, regularly attended the synagogue.³

Brutman and Hurgin, with six others, were arrested in the village on October 9th as "active organizers of an illegal synagogue and participants in secret meetings." Those six others included Zeiman Pevzner, who had featured in the original GPU request to the council chairman, and Aron Tseitlin, listed as one of the dubious residents at Brutman's.⁴

However, the first interrogation revealed that the synagogue, while holding no official permit, nevertheless had a legal claim to exist. Brutman made the point, explaining that "the Mozhaisk prosecutor told our representative, Kevesh, Haim, that up to twenty persons may pray together without written permission. Therefore we held prayers."

This was intolerable. The interrogator demanded that he name the rabbi of what was beyond dispute an unlawful synagogue. Brutman replied that he did not know of a single rabbi; they just got together to pray. The Chekist was now outraged at such effrontery. "We know that you are both rabbi and *reznik* [ritual slaughterer]." But the accused continued to deny the obvious, asserting: "I am neither rabbi nor *reznik*."

The Brutman case-file records an exchange with his interlocutor concerning his daughter's failure to attend school on Saturdays.

– "I don't stop her. She herself decided not to go to school on Saturday. We don't have rules covering small children.

– Explain. What rules?

– Jewish religious rules.

– That means that you do not recognise Soviet laws on compulsory school attendance, and are guided only by Jewish laws.

– I do recognise [Soviet laws] and I do send my children to school. My daughter wants to observe the Jewish holiday on Saturdays."

During night-time sessions, Brutman uncompromisingly rejected the notion that he "had created a nationalist Zionist organization" to "agitate" for Jewish emigration to Palestine. He explained that "during prayers, every Jew reads that God sent us the prophet Moses and would gather us all, all Jews from all parts of the world, in Palestine and would rule over us in Palestine." He acknowledged that he had himself applied for an exit visa with his family but had been refused.

A search at the home of another suspect rabbi, Zeiman Pevzner, yielded a leaflet, the contents of which were exhaustively explored by *his* interrogator. Pevzner stated that it had been circulated to Jewish communities as an appeal to all Jews to "cleave to Rabbi Yosif, a righteous man sent by God... and through him they would be more closely in touch with God and He would help them to raise the spirit of religion in Russia."

Several witnesses described Pevzner's anti-Soviet outbursts at a meeting of the Jewish association in December 1936. "In the Soviet Union it is hard for Jews to live. Religion is persecuted; they prevent us praying to God and make it impossible for priests to live." Then, said one witness, the rabbi continued his discourse in Yiddish. "God grant that we escape from the calamity which Soviet rule has brought and that He help us to leave for Palestine as soon as possible."

A worker at Mozhaisk post office signed a deposition concerning money transfers from abroad to members of the community. "In June 1937 alone, they received messages and money, Tseitlin from London, Pevzner from America, Rosenbeim from America." Witnesses also complained that no Russians were admitted to the cooperative *artel* 'Mozhaisky Metallist', formed by community members. Moreover, when, in January 1937, the district Communist Party office, the *raikom*, had

sent a Young Communist Leaguer, "Kuznetsova, to serve as cultural organizer" in the Jewish association (this really was a deliberate provocation), the Jews had rejected her, claiming that they needed "a cultural organizer who was Jewish, who could properly understand the conditions and requirements of their way of life." Other testimony apparently contradicted this picture of the *artel* as a tight Jewish enclave, repeating the council chairman's allegation that as a result of disruption caused by Hasidim deliberately leaving the enterprise, the remaining members ceased production in April 1937 and the *artel* disintegrated. However, all testimony, however inconsistent, was acceptable if it was damaging.

Final indictments in 'Brutman and others' were presented to all the accused on October 15th 1937. The rabbis Zeiman Brutman and Aron Tseitlin were charged with "organizing a Zionist counter-revolutionary group to persuade Jews to emigrate to Palestine and to defy Soviet laws", as a result of which, said the GPU, nine members of the community had applied for exit visas. Particularly emphasised was the claim that "members of the group engaged in indoctrination and recruitment to this cause among young people, forbidding children to attend school on Saturdays. They created their own nationalist school, which Tseitlin himself directed. He worked with children in his own home and regarded this as a sacred duty and obligation." It was also asserted that under the cloak of prayers in the illicit synagogue, secret meetings were arranged between local Jews and others coming Moscow, from Birobidzhan (the much hyped 'Jewish autonomous region' in the Far East) and even from Palestine.

None confessed their guilt. The only point Brutman was forced to concede was that he did organize in his home "a synagogue, without permission from the Soviet authorities, in which religious Jews, up to twenty in number, used to gather for services." Some identified as members of the group – Haim Kevesh, Leiba Revzin, Sh. Sosonkin and A. Samuilovich -managed to go into hiding. Several men and women from the *artel*, summoned as witnesses, refused to give the required evidence, something which, in 1937, signified great courage; they knew that the GPU would neither forgive nor forget.⁵

Those in custody, middle-aged family men (except the 23 year-old Rosenbeim), were condemned on December 20th 1937, under the usual Article, 58-10 and 11 of the RSFSR Criminal Code. All got 8 years, to be served initially in the Baikal-Amur rail construction camps (Bamlag), though some were subsequently moved. The later fate of Hurgin, Tseitlin, Shneer and Rosenbeim is not known. Brutman died in camp in 1942. Chereshnya, Abramov and Pevzner survived their terms. Abramov moved to Malakhovka, still a nest of Hasidism after World War II, while Pevzner lived in exile in Tashkent, where he died in 1971.

Over twenty years later, in the rehabilitation hearings of the Khrushchev era, it would emerge that none of the defendants had been permitted to see the evidence against them, the indictments had never been confirmed and the witnesses – those available being re-examined – stated that their affidavits were false and had been written by interrogators. All of which was standard practice in 1937-38, later to be officially denounced as part of the excesses of the "Yezhov regime" and supposedly remedied by the purge of the 'organs' in 1939. But all that came too late for Yamskaya Sloboda as it did for Ostankino, for Maizel and for Gutenberg.

It did not however come too late for Yegoryevsk. This town, some 50 miles south-east of the capital, had, since the late 1920s, acquired a large Lubavich community. As noted in Chapter 2, several fugitives from the original GPU operations against the Nevel *yeshivah* and the youth organization *Tiferes Baburim* had ended up here, including Izrail-Yosif Aronshtam, Neiah and Yakov Ganzburg, Lazar Gertsovich and Haim Levin. They were among the many Hasidim employed in a furniture *artel*, 'MebeFshchik', organized by Nahum-Gilel Pinsky. In 1935, Shmuel-Isroel Levin, founder of *Tiferes Baburim* and a prime figure in the Nevel events, also settled in Yegoryevsk, supposedly employed as a domestic craft worker.

Shmuel-Isroel organized a secret *yeshivah* in his apartment with himself as *melamed*, while the illegal *minyán*, the synagogue quorum, met at the home of Isaak Rivkin. This determined Hasid activity was the origin of the case of 'Aronshtam I.-I.Sh. and others'. The case-file notes that on April 24th 1936 the head of the district NKVD received a denunciation from a local home-owner, which stated that early in 1936 he had rented two rooms to a Jew called Mendel Maizus, newly arrived in the area, and that the family of a certain Haim Levin had later moved into one of them.

The loyal informer took six pages to recount in detail what occurred in the apartment following these arrivals. "Strangers often come, stay for several days, and then leave." And "when I insisted on application for residence permits for these people, Maizus and Levin, Haim, avoided doing so on various pretexts." Moreover "illegal meetings continually took place in the house."

The owner of the premises was deeply disturbed by the incessant stream of visitors and the well-attended secret meetings. He felt that his home was becoming "an apartment of sinister elements," and he therefore asked the responsible 'organs' to "begin an investigation into the case of the above-mentioned Maizus, living in an apartment" in his house.

This missive resulted in the launching of a 'group' investigation of members of the 'MebeFshchik' *artel*. The case-file contains character-sketches of Nahum-Gilel Pinsky and Yevael Kagan, provided, at the CPU's request, by the chairman of the cooperative. For example: "With a hostile attitude to Soviet rule, he damaged work discipline in the *artel* [and] conducted religious propaganda among Jewish members of the *artel*." The chairman commented that the suspects' campaign "for the suspension of work on Saturdays" had enjoyed some success and accounted for the enterprise's failure to fulfil its production plan.

Aronshtam, Pinsky, Kagan and Shmuel-Isroel Levin were detained on August 27th 1938. In all 22 persons were named as involved in "a counter-revolutionary organization of Jewish clerical Hasids", including most of the *yeshivah* directors, teachers and students, some of the Novel refugees and even the long-departed emigres Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn and the rabbi Yakov Klemes.⁶ Some Hasidim arrested later in the Aronshtam investigation were subsequently separated from the others in preparation for a different case.'

Izrail-Yosif Aronshtam himself was interrogated on August 31st 1938, In common with all his fellows, he began by firmly rejecting all accusations, while his interrogator adopted the usual ploy: "We know everything. Just confess!" Their dialogue gives an idea of what GPU men understood by detective work.

- "You have been arrested as an active participant in an illegal counter-revolutionary organization. We insist that you provide information on this point.
- I have not taken part in any illegal counter-revolutionary organization.
- You are lying. The case team possesses evidence exposing you as a participant in the said organization. We demand that you tell the truth.
- I say once more that I have not engaged in counter-revolutionary activity.
- You continue to lie. The investigators again demand that you testify truthfully about your participation in an illegal organization, or we will ourselves expose you.
- I again declare that I have not taken part in any illegal organization and I am not aware of the existence of such [an organization]."

The interrogator changed the line of attack.

- "When did you arrive in Moscow?
- I arrived in Moscow from Nevel in 1935.
- What reasons caused you to leave Nevel?
- I left Nevel because there was no work there, and also because my family were living in Moscow.
- You are lying. The investigators know that you left Nevel to escape arrest for your counter-revolutionary activity.
- Yes. I will admit that I left Nevel for fear of arrest for visiting the synagogue which I attended as a believing Jew, and also because of the fierce criticism of Soviet rule voiced by some in the Jewish population of Nevel."

At some point during these sessions, the prisoner seems to have broken. He suddenly embarked on an elaborate account of his "counter-revolutionary activity", naming names and endorsing the gravest accusations against himself and others. The reason would be clear before the case ended. Physical and mental torture had become ever more common as the tempo of repression mounted, but it remained unofficial ('excessive zeal'). According to Robert Conquest, the night of August 17th-18th 1938 was the moment when Yezhov's 'organs', over the USSR as a whole, were given official sanction, and indeed encouraged, to inflict brutal beatings to extract confessions. The detainees in the Aronshtam case were savagely assaulted and continually threatened with the arrest of their families.

Subjected to questioning on September 30th, Nahum-Gilel Pinsky testified that in 1932 Rabbi Yakov Klemes had met him several times at the synagogue at Malakhovka, a location rich in subversive Hasidic enterprise, and held discussions with him on political themes, expressing "counter-revolutionary opinions", as, for example, that "the system existing in the USSR does not serve the national and religious interests of the Jewish people. The Soviet government oppresses religion." GPU logic dictated that as a natural outcome of such meetings Pinsky must have been "recruited by the Moscow rabbi Klemes, who was soon to leave for Palestine, into an illegal Jewish organization of clerical Hasids."

In 1935 Pinsky had become acquainted with the Hasid Mendel Maizus, at that time chairman of 'MebeFshchik' in Yegoryevsk, where several Hasidim were already working: Zelik Aronov, Aron Belenitsky, Leizer Gertsovich, Mihail Golshmidt and Mendel Futerfas. Pinsky, having joined the cooperative, allegedly "recruited into the organization" former *yeshivah* students, Nevah and Yakov Gansburg, Boris Gorohover, Hatskel Mebel, Zaiman Pruss and Abram Rishin.

Interrogated further, Pinsky signed a deposition confessing that "in a whole series of towns in the Soviet Union, in Moscow, in the Ukraine, in Byelorussia, on orders from the *tzaddik* Shneersohn, Yosef-Itzhak, expelled from the USSR in 1926 [*sic*] for counter-revolutionary activity, counter-revolutionary organizations of clerical Hasids were created, with their controlling centre in Moscow." He confirmed 'evidence', also concocted by his interrogator, proving that the organization's aim was "the overthrow of Soviet rule, the establishment of a bourgeois democratic republic and the restoration of capitalism, [with] the bringing together of Jews in an independent Jewish national state."

Shmuel-Isroel Levin's first interview began on the customary note. His interlocutor put his accusations and questions and stolidly recorded the prisoner's denials. But Levin did not know that the GPU had already obtained exhaustive testimony from another of the accused concerning the past and current activities of the *artel* membership. He even tried to deny his well-attested acquaintanceship with Pinsky, maintaining that he had seen him for the first time only in prison. Later he would be coerced into confessing that he had seen Pinsky once in the *artel* just after starting to work there, but he continued to insist that "he had never met him again anywhere." The interrogator, outraged (genuinely or spuriously) by this behaviour, shouted: "You are lying. You know Pinsky very well. For a long time Pinsky used to eat at your place. You are giving false evidence because you were linked to Pinsky in counter-revolutionary work. It's obvious now that you cannot be believed. Tell the truth!"

The interrogator now brought weightier arguments to bear, in the form of vicious beatings and threats against loved ones. Unsurprisingly, Levin started to 'cooperate', giving the Chekists the fullest information and answering all their questions. More importantly, he began to confirm and sign the most grotesque allegations against himself and his associates and even against the absent Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn.

The Aronshtam case-file reveals that, as was characteristic of GPU investigations, Levin's entire history, some of it familiar to us, was now re-cycled, via stereotyped testimony from another detainee, to buttress the edifice now being constricted.

"In 1925, on Shneersohn's instructions, Levin organized an illegal *yeshibot* in Nevel, where he also engaged in counter-revolutionary activity among young people studying. In 1931, Levin, living in the town of Toropin, made contact, for the purpose of counter-revolutionary activity, with a former industrialist in the lumber business, Faishtein, and, acting on Shneersohn's orders, organized in the town an illegal prayer-house, where, among clericals, he engaged in vigorous counter-revolutionary activity. In 1933, Levin, summoned to the OGPU organs, concealed his counter-revolutionary activity, and after that, fearing arrest, he moved to the town of Klimovichi, where he continued to engage in counter-revolutionary activity until 1934. During this period he organized in Klimovichi an illegal prayer-house."

Levin's later affidavits, delivered in collaboration with the GPU, unmasked "branches of the organization" in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and elsewhere. Speaking of its aims, he repeated the usual selection, listed in what appears to be a pre-written standardised formulation to be inserted in the interrogation records of all the accused and, of course, signed by them. Every defendant also had to

sign a document "exposing the counter-revolutionary activity" of a fellow defendant with whom he was personally acquainted.

In February 1939, the accused were shown, and required to sign, supposed records of their interrogation, paraphrased or even entirely composed by interrogators. Three signed, but – a sign of change – Levin, on February 19th, added a rider to his record. "I have been shown the present legal document. I have studied the evidence adduced. As regards the charges against me under Article 58-10 and 58-11 of the RSFSR Criminal Code, I do not admit any guilt. I retract all my previous testimony."

The group indictment, approved on May 26th, was typical in its tedious hyperbole. "The organization in Yegoryevsk was formed by Mendel Maizus, currently in hiding, and Nahum-Gilel Pinsky merely extended and reinforced the counter-revolutionary organization of clerical Hasids." Those arraigned were "active participants in the said counter-revolutionary organization, more than once took part in its counter-revolutionary meetings and engaged in counter-revolutionary slanderous agitation of a defeatist nature, casting gross aspersions on the leadership of the VKP(B) [the Party] and the Soviet government."

But from February to September 1939 the accused remained incarcerated in the Butyrka prison, and no sentence was pronounced. History, and Lavrenty Beria, were moving in their favour and the behaviour of their captors allowed hope and courage to revive. At last, on September 5th, every one of them sent an identical submission to the prosecutor's office. "I hereby retract all admissions I made concerning counter-revolutionary activity, because the confessions were forced and given under physical coercion on the part of the interrogator. I also retract all statements made during personal confrontations." The various witnesses who had provided information, now re-examined, refused to confirm their evidence about the prisoners' "counter-revolutionary activity", declaring that their own testimony at the preliminary investigation had been given "under pressure from interrogators."

They were right in their judgement of the altered climate. On September 21st the investigation into the "counter-revolutionary organization of clerical Hasids" was terminated "in the absence of evidence of any crime." The prisoners were freed. Probably contributing to this happy outcome was the fact that their case had dragged on for so long. Arrested in mid-1938 they had been the victims of the Yezhov cohort of interrogators who, by mid-1939 were to be removed and discredited like those in the Kagan case reviewed above.

While the detainees in 'Aronshtam and others' were undergoing their ordeal, the Yegoryevsk *yeshivah* continued to function, under the supervision of Rabbi Moishe-Zalman Kamenetsky. When the case was dropped, Shmuel-Isroel Levin took it over again. Having escaped the GPU yet again and being still comparatively young (53), he ran the academy until his war-time evacuation, when he would figure in the events in Tashkent.

Israel Pinsky remembered:

"In the '30s my brother and I had to attend school. During the first year my brother did not go to school on Saturdays or feast-days and my mother had to shoulder the heavy responsibility of avoiding trouble, finding all sorts of excuses, true or false, to prove that he could not help missing lessons on those days.

I started school in 1939. I had to go on Saturdays, but I did absent myself on festival days. In class I took off my *tyubeteika* [skull cap], which I wore at all other times. At school I never emphasised the fact that I was a believer, but I never pretended to be an unbeliever. Perhaps because my behaviour was natural, I never had any conflict with my class-mates nor with the kids in our apartment block. In the evenings a teacher came to our place and with him I studied the Torah."

CHAPTER 5.

THE INTERNAL DIASPORA AND THE SHNEERSOHN NETWORK.

In the fall of 1926, Comrade Litvakov, head of the Jewish Section (*Yevseksiya*) of the Moscow Communist Party organization, undertook a tour of inspection in the Caucasus to assess the achievements of his assistant Shevelev, despatched some time before on a mission to raise the flag of Godlessness and eradicate religious practices among local Jews. As 'the man from Moscow', Litvakov was everywhere received with due deference and not a little apprehension.

In Georgia, at a meeting arranged by the provincial authorities in Kutaisi, Litvakov spoke inspiringly of the battle against religious superstition and the path to "the glorious future", *svetloye budushcheye* being a favourite Bolshevik slogan. Despite (or because of) their imperfect grasp of the Russian language, those present listened attentively. Khovkin (p. 203) gives a full and nicely ironic account of the response delivered by one of the Jewish notables.

"Will you please convey our warmest greetings to our Jewish centre, with special thanks to those comrades who brought us the order to resurrect the ruined *mikveh*, just two weeks after Comrade Shevelev had it demolished. They offered us 200 *chervontsy* to pay for workers and materials, but we did not take it. The main thing was to get permission; we will find the money ourselves. Tell Moscow from us that the *mikveh* has been functioning now for ten months and our women especially are very grateful to you. And here is a collective petition requesting the revival of the synagogue, which Comrade Shevelev turned into a club [cultural centre]. Your representatives explained that by law we needed 50 signatures to such a letter, but we've got 120."

Khovkin continues (p. 203). "Litvakov listened in silence, clenched his fists and even allowed himself to be conducted in state to view the new *mikveh* and admire its water supply. He realized that the Kutaisi Jews, with no great understanding of politics, thought that the Party *Yevseksiya* was some sort of organization for the propagation of Judaism. Who was it who had visited them and brought to nothing all the endeavours of Comrade Shevelev? Obscurantists from Shneersohn's organization – there could be no doubt about it! The dumbfounded Litvakov encountered the same situation in other Georgian towns; the [cultural] clubs just opened were now closed, the closed synagogues re-opened. Now here, now there, had appeared young rabbis with Ashkenazy names. Who had sent them to Georgia? Who was paying them?"

It was this kind of experience which later prompted Litvakov to write to Albert Fuchs, head of the Moscow Jewish association, the indignant letter quoted in Chapter 1. Those in authority found both impressive and alarming the degree to which Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn, through correspondence and above all through dedicated emissaries, planted the influence and sustained the institutions of Hasidism in the most remote areas of the USSR. A letter of the time (Alef, 484, p. 29) pays due tribute, remarking that the visitors to Kutaisi spoke fluent Georgian, and in persuading local Jews to revive synagogues and establish schools, they showed intelligence and ingenuity. "Professing respect for the government for its recognition of the right to freedom of belief, the young rabbis quoted the laws "which permitted citizens to maintain their own religious institutions." Their words and their whole demeanour made a deep impression on their audiences, and after their speeches in Georgian towns and villages "a religious revival began; *mikvaot* were cleaned and repaired, new religious books and Torah scrolls were purchased and *bederim* were opened, with teachers from Minsk, Vitebsk and Mogilev."

Things were no more satisfactory for the regime in Central Asia, where Rabbi Yosef-Itzhak had sent one of his most dependable disciples to spread the word in Samarkand, then a city of over 100,000 inhabitants. Simha Gorodetsky, a 22 year-old graduate of *Tomehei Temimim*, recently married, moved there with his wife, with instructions from Shneersohn to rent a house, find a job and settle as an ordinary citizen for a long stay. He would be expected to serve Jewish communities over the Samarkand-Bukhara region as a whole, but his immediate task was to establish a network of covert *bederim* in Samarkand itself. To this end he had to find premises, hire teachers and obtain the funds to pay them regularly. A primary concern was to arrange things so that the system could function

independently, resistant to disruption by GPU harassment and the possible arrest and exile of personnel.

The first stage of the mission was successfully accomplished, and Gorodetsky recorded significant achievements, organizing regular classes in *hederim* for several hundred pupils, hiring twenty-five *melamedim* and creating centralized financial control over payments for the services required. He found a family apartment to rent and fixed himself up with legal employment. To all appearances he had no connection at all with underground religious activities.

However, early in 1926, the local GPU summoned for interview, not only Gorodetsky, but also the *melamedim* who received monthly stipends. The day before his scheduled appearance, Gorodetsky went around all his proteges with instructions that when interrogated they should answer that the money for their work came from the parents of their small groups of pupils; they should, above all, insist that he, Gorodetsky, was in no way connected with any of them.

Twenty-three *melamedim* promised to answer as he requested, but two replied that they had never in their lives told a lie and would be obliged to tell the truth on this occasion also. Gorodetsky tried to persuade them that truth should be sacrificed for the greater good of the Torah and the Jewish people, but his plea was in vain.

When next day he obeyed the summons, he met his interrogator with resolute and self-assured denials. Nobody had sent him to Samarkand, he had not organized *hederim* and had no links with any teachers. The *melamedim* were then summoned one by one, but, initially at least, they stuck to the line he had suggested. However, when it was the turn of those who could not tell a lie, something remarkable and unexpected occurred; The interrogators, instead of putting the fateful question, simply threw them out of the office. The Rebbe's envoy, in this extraordinary way, escaped unscathed.

The reprieve was not permanent. In the spring of 1927, two policemen appeared in Gorodetsky's apartment. To his alarm, they carried, not the normal warrant, but a GPU file with a cover bearing the inscription "Case of Simha Gorodetsky: Organizer of Theological School." The word for "theological" in Russian is *bogoslovsky*. The quick-witted Hasid, sensing at a glance that the two policemen, as natives of the region, did not understand Russian too well, put on a show of irritation, pointed to the file and shouted: "Look, what's this? It says 'Bogoslovsky'. My name's not Bogoslovsky. Citizen officers, this is a mistake!" The police, confused, protested a little, but he was right about their linguistic skill. They agreed that they would have to go back for clarification and told him to wait for their return. As soon as they had gone, Gorodetsky warned his wife and then left the apartment. That same night he went to the smaller city of Bukhara, where he stayed for two months, hiding out in a wine-cellar. It was there that he learned of the arrest in Leningrad of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak, of his brief exile in Kostroma and his move to Malakhovka, just outside Moscow.

After weighing up the situation, Gorodetsky set off for Moscow. Three days later he met with the Rebbe and asked him for instructions. Yosef-Itzhak told him to wait for a while in Moscow. The Rebbe then left for Latvia, from where, a month or so later, a letter arrived, ordering Gorodetsky to return to Samarkand but to find a dwelling for himself and his family in a different quarter of the city. Gorodetsky obeyed.

He was soon once more immersed in his covert operation to establish Hasidic schools, and was ultimately able to send pupils from two illicit *hederim* to pursue their studies in the *yeshivah* of *Tomehei Temimim* in Nevel. As remarked in Chapter 2, 1927 was the last year in which the Nevel academy managed to function effectively. The GPU was on its track, and the arrival of students from Central Asia was quickly detected. The trail would inevitably lead back to Gorodetsky. He was detained in Samarkand and threatened with exile to a more remote region, but thanks to the goodwill of a particular Chekist, a Jew, he was released on condition that he left the city. However, conscious of the mission entrusted him by the Rebbe, he simply moved to yet another part of Samarkand and continued his work through the late 1920s and the increasingly perilous 1930s. With his help the underground life of Hasidic communities and their children's schooling continued through the war years. In the immediate post-war period, he would, as so many did, cross into Poland from Lvov. He died in 1984.

The obvious success of the Shneersohn network was emphasised by the scale and precision of the campaign to secure Yosef-Itzhak's release after his arrest in 1927. Far from being confined to

Leningrad and Moscow, energetic support came from Hasidic communities all over Russia. The regime's response was a massive programme to infiltrate GPU spies and loyal informers into Jewish religious associations throughout the USSR. The Chekists' increasingly determined pursuit of the Rebbe's adherents resulted in the wholesale arrest of rabbis, *melamedim*, *shobetim* and other key figures in their localities.

For example, in Bobruisk in early 1930 there was a public trial of Girsh Pinsky, a Hasid who combined the functions of *shobet* and *mohel* in the nearby settlement of Ozarichi. He had eight sons, of whom seven were *yeshivah* students. The charge was "circumcision of a child who thereafter died from inflammation of the lung." The child's parents, at the instigation of the local *Yevsekisiya*, demanded a criminal prosecution. An intriguing detail was that the Chekist in charge of the case, as well as the judge and the prosecutor, had all been circumcised by Pinsky. It did him no good; he was sentenced to 3 years. His grandson remembered.

"The sequel was as follows. In 1936, the parents of the dead child came to my grandfather and begged his forgiveness. From the time they had slandered him, no child born to them had survived. Of course my grandfather forgave them." (Beizer, p. 181). It was however in 1936, that year of forgiveness, that Girsh Pinsky was again apprehended, and "as a 'socially dangerous element', was expelled from Ozarichi, the home, incidentally, of four generations of his forebears."

In December 1930, fifteen rabbis and other persons working in one of the Vitebsk *yeshivot* were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment and the school itself was dissolved. The mid-1930s saw the detention and exile to Siberia of the rabbis Sholem Perlov (Bragin, Gomel province), Israel Babulikashvili (Tbilisi), Menahem-Mendl Gilievich (Zembin, Minsk province) and many others. But in their place, *Tomehei Temimim* schools acquired new directors. Some have been listed in Chapter 1, but there were many more, as, for example, Meir Itzhak and Ilyagu Dadashev in Derbent, or Aba Pliskin and Mordhe-Tsvi Haritonov at the end of the 1920s in Dnepropetrovsk. Particular effort went into developing and sustaining *yeshivot* in Batumi in the Caucasus, in major Ukrainian bases like Kiev and Donetsk, and in the Central Asian foci at Samarkand and Tashkent. These centres catered for students from the region and from provinces further afield. In primary education, *hederim* were sustained and new ones sprang up. In Byelorussia, a new *heder* opened in 1927 in Doroganovo. The Ukrainian cities were healthy; a Zhitomir *heder* graduated 100 pupils. In short, the now widely dispersed Hasidic movement, still drawing on Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak's spiritual and practical leadership, showed a remarkable capacity for organization and survival, especially in its determination to educate a younger generation to succeed the old.

In 1932, the Soviet regime proclaimed an anti-religious 'Five-year Plan', to parallel the economic one. The target, to be achieved by 1937, was the eradication "of even the concept of God." This demanded intensified GPU action against 'servants of the cult' and believers of every persuasion. By 1937 Hasidic communities the length and breadth of the USSR were experiencing the brutal repression which earlier chapters have described as afflicting Leningrad and Moscow. By then, anyone who could be suspected of having served as a rabbi, *melamed*, *shobet* or *mohel*, faced not merely arrest but summary execution or deportation to the camps, where conditions promised an early death. And of those who survived, only a handful would be free to return to their home districts.

We can mention only a few, but typical, victims. Rabbi Yosef Beil was shot on August 17th 1937 in Belbaltlag, the camp complex constructing the Baltic-White Sea canal. Rabbi David Baasov from Tbilisi was sentenced to death in 1938 but his sentence was commuted to exile in Siberia. Sent to the camps in 1937 were the rabbis Ber Vihnin (Bobruisk) and Betsadel Vilshansky (Voronezh), the *melamedim* Benjamin Izraelit (Dzerzhinsk, Minsk province) and Zaiman Liberman (Ilinka, Voronezh province), and a group of *melamedim* from Zhitomir. Some time in the late 1930s rabbis Shmuel Kotkin (Donetsk), Avrom-Levik Slavin (Kutaisi) and Avrom-Boruh Pevzner (Kharkov), went to the camps. As the 'Five-year Plan' progressed, the GPU approach moved towards prosecuting offenders in whole batches, stitching them together in "organizations" under titles which were simply permutations of standard terms of abuse. Whether one belonged to "a counter-revolutionary Jewish clerical-nationalist organization" or "an anti-Soviet grouping of clericals" or "an illegal organization of Jewish religious Hasids", was of no great moment; the outcome was the same.

As in Moscow and Leningrad, one can bring the reality of persecution home by examining specific cases and drawing on the memories of participants. The cases can also illustrate once again

the changing nature and tempo of Soviet repressive policies. Hasidim in the provinces, like their brethren in what were still called the 'two capitals', were the target of GPU operations from the first years of the Soviet state. A crude overview would point to gradually increasing severity of treatment and sentencing through the 1920s as the regime became both more alarmed at the intransigence of religion and more expert in dealing with it. This phase climaxed with the harsh anti-religious laws of 1929. Stalin's tactical retreat (the March 1930 *Pravda* article "Dizziness from success") produced a lull that was brief, relative and locally patchy. But the GPU campaign then resumed from the level reached in 1929, so that, reviewing the cases of, say, 1930-34, the 1920s appear in retrospect years of relatively mild sentences and at least vestigial respect for due legal process. From the assassination of Kirov, in December 1934, dated an acceleration towards all-out terror. 1937 was the most notorious year, of an unmitigated savagery which was continued into the following year, so that 1937-38 earned the epithet, the *Yezhovshchina*. Then in late 1938, after Beria's appointment as NKVD deputy head, the cracks appeared, uncertainty spread, and with Yezhov's disappearance in December, the way was open for the revisionist course supervised by Beria. This historical schema was not rigid and was subject to local variation as provincial GPU chiefs and their Party superiors struggled to read the mind of the Kremlin in deciding priorities. But the chronology was broadly valid. The Ukraine, rich in Hasidic activity, can serve as an illustration, beginning with the city of Kiev.

On May 2nd 1922, Kiev's Morio synagogue, at 2 Mezhygorsky Street, hosted a congress of the *Tseirei Zion* ('Zionist Youth') Party, a moderate socialist workers' movement, originating in 1903 as part of a wider formation and becoming a separate party in 1917. Each delegate had received a personal invitation, sent out from the organizing centre in Petrograd (Leningrad). The congress discussed three issues: the creation of a committee to organize assistance to hungry Jewish families, the establishment in Palestine of a democratic republic permitting the full development of Jewish national interests, and the expansion of cultural and educational work with Jewish youth.

The congress failed to reach any decisions because, on May 4th, 41 delegates were arrested. Among them were members of the governing body of the synagogue, Haim Borodyansky, Elyash Grinberg, Moisei Gendelberg and Aron Halfin, accused of "counter-revolution, manifested by cooperation with this unlawful congress through the provision of premises." (Borodyansky and others' case-file). However, this was the early 1920s. Members of the synagogue committee, when questioned, openly avowed that they were orthodox Zionists but presented evidence that the congress had been held in the synagogue without their explicit permission. The Kiev Revolutionary Tribunal charged the four men with "collaborating with and concealing an illegal congress", but on August 28th a court acquitted and freed them.

Others fared less well. Among those attending the congress was 18 year-old Mordechai Shenkar, who had joined the party only in January. On August 26th 1922 he was sentenced to one year of compulsory community work, but was then freed on account of his youth. He returned to his native Berdichev for a while, but went back to Kiev in January 1923 and joined the youth movement *He-Halutz*. This was a significant organization, whose Leningrad branch would later recruit Rahil Morozova and her friends (see Ch.2). Shenkar soon became a member of its district executive. That summer he tried to establish a *He-Halutz* cell among his Berdichev circle, but found little support. He returned to Kiev in September, enrolled in a cooperative technical school and made a little money giving private lessons.

By this time he was under observation. An informer denounced him to the GPU and the report was forwarded to the school authorities. "Information in our possession indicates that a leader of the Berdichev Zionists, Shenkar, Motya, is in hiding in one of the *dachas*." He was detained on January 25th 1924. He refused to name the leaders or members of *He-Halutz* in Kiev or those he had approached in Berdichev and elsewhere. His health deteriorated badly in prison, and on February 22nd he was released after signing a guarantee that he would not leave the area. After a goodly delay, on November 19th 1925, his case was dropped, "insufficient evidence having been collected."

Through the 1920s Hasidic activity in Kiev continued, with secret *mikvaot* and *hederim* and meetings of covert *minyanim*. Rebbe Shneerson's *Tomehei Temimim* organization established its covert presence in the form of a *yeshivah* attached to a synagogue, and Boruh-Motl Livshits, alumnus of a Lubavich *yeshivah*, organized a branch of the youth movement, *Tiferes Baburim*, founded by Shmuel-Isroel Levin. Recruits studied Hasidic doctrine under the supervision of Rabbi Meer-Volf Rapoport

and a *shohet-mohel*, Bentsion Gaisinsky. An illicit *yeshivah* took shape in Livshits' apartment, where lectures were delivered by Rabbi Beinus-Shaya Lipman. On feast-days they would there arrange a joint *minyan* – a quorum for public worship – of *yeshivah* students and *Tiferes Baburim* members, at which Rabbi David Kaplan preached. Kiev Hasidim celebrated most of their festivals in the home of Rabbi Rapoport and they also assembled there for other notable local occasions, like the 'Torah day of joy' (*Simhat Torah*), the 'Birth of the *tzaddik*' and the 'Tzaddik memorial banquet'. On such days, the officiating rabbis led religious symposia, recalling the lore and way of life of the righteous *tzaddikim* and the miracles they had wrought. With Rapoport's help, money was collected for the families of those who had been imprisoned and also for the payment of rabbis and teachers.

One of the most enterprising of Kiev Hasidim was Moishe Kolikov, who served a year in prison in 1927 and, after his release, began, at the age of 49, to devote his energies to raising funds from sources far outside Kiev. He made contact with Hasidic associations in Warsaw, Lodz and even London, and he lobbied various foreign charitable organizations. Early in the 1930s he reached agreement with a London charitable committee concerning itself with relief for starving Jews in Russia. Through Kolikov's efforts a Kiev affiliate of this committee was created to channel such relief to Jewish groups in the Ukraine. This Kiev branch was chaired by Rabbi Vaishelboim.

In 1934-35, Kolikov visited Uman and Vinnitsa, where synagogues and clandestine *yeshivot* were functioning, and also Dnepropetrovsk, where an offshoot of *Tomehci Temimim* had been set up before 1930 by N. Labkovsky, Aba Pliskin, Mordhe-Tvi Haritonov and Mendei Futerfas. This last is just one of many whose movements would trace the geography of the centres of Hasidic life and resistance. Futerfas would move in 1935 to Yegoryevsk, to be peripherally involved in the Aronshtam case (see Ch. 4), and then surface in wartime Samarkand and post-war Lvov.

Wherever Kolikov went, he summoned rabbis, *melamedim* and *shohetim* to secret meetings where he informed them of the existence of the new committee and its links with the parent body in London, and promised them that aid would be forthcoming. "At his request, Usher Lerner, cantor at a Vinnitsa synagogue, Leiba-Itzhak Bender, *shohet* in Uman; and Levi-Itzhak Shneersohn, rabbi in Dnepropetrovsk, agreed to compile lists of the rabbis, teachers, *shohetim* etc., who were in need of help. The information was sent to Kiev for inclusion in a general register, on the basis of which the funds coming from abroad would be distributed. Communities received money for the support of their religious infrastructure and personnel and there was also relief in kind; each association was allocated "half a *pood* [8 kg.] of flour and two pounds of sugar" per 25 members. In addition, every member was given 4-5 dollars a year. Kievan adherents of *Tiferes Baburim* helped in the task of conveying the goods and the money to the towns and addresses indicated by Kolikov.

In November 1935, *shohet* Leiba-Itzhak Bender was apprehended in Uman. He appears to have provided the first firm evidence to support a GPU case against Kiev rabbis and *melamedim* involved in relief operations. He related how, in 1934, a Hasid, Nusim Kotik, had arrived in Uman from Teplitsa and resurrected the clandestine *beder*, inviting as teacher the 53 year-old rabbi, David Kaplan, whom we have noted also as preaching in Livshits' apartment-synagogue in Kiev. Bender also confirmed reports reaching the GPU about Moishe Kolikov's visits to Uman, the regular financial assistance received from the Kiev committee and the letters of thanks sent to London and Poland.

David Kaplan left Uman after a year and returned to Kiev, but his apartment was now under surveillance. In any case, he and his family were already suspect in official eyes. In 1925, his two eldest sons, having completed their studies at a Lyubavichi *yeshivah*, had secretly crossed the frontier and were now rabbis in Poland and London respectively. His youngest son, David, had also tried to escape abroad via Georgia in 1931, but had been captured and imprisoned for a year.

Investigation of the Kiev relief committee and the build-up of the list of suspects seems to have proceeded at a very leisurely pace, relatively unaffected by the punitive frenzy of 1937-38. The explanation may lie in the fact that this was the Ukraine, where the GPU had its hands overfull with a comprehensive onslaught on nationalist as well as the usual political deviations. The mayhem at all levels, especially within the official apparatus, affected even the 'organs' themselves. The death toll in the Ukraine during the Terror was second to none; one may therefore suggest that at such a time the Kiev Hasidim were seen as a peripheral nuisance. In view of the historical sequence, the delay could prove providential.

The pursuit was, however, by no means abandoned. In 1937, the rabbi Meer-Volf Rapoport, having received from Palestine an entry visa for his whole family, applied for permission to emigrate but was refused. The following year his brother-in-law Itzhak Makovetsky, was arrested and apparently supplied useful testimony.

Not until early 1939 was the GPU ready to descend on the organizing nucleus in Kiev. On March 10th, on a charge of "belonging to an anti-Soviet grouping of Hasids and [engaging in] anti-Soviet agitation", seven people were arrested. The case-file on 'Kolikov M.Ya. and others', lists the detainees as Hasid activists Moishe Kolikov, David Gaisinsky and Boruh" Moll Livshits, rabbis David Kaplan and Meer-Volf Rapoport. *melamed* Bemus-Shaya, Lipman and *shohet-mohel* Bentsion Gaisinsky. With the exception of the 22 year-olds, Livshits and David Gaisinsky, all were middle-aged experienced campaigners.

A cipher telegram went to Moscow, stating that "in Kiev an anti-Soviet grouping of Jews-clericals has been exposed and liquidated." In the same month came the arrests of the cantor Usher Lerner in Vinnitsa, Avrom-Boruh Pevzner in Kharkov and Meidib Shapiro in Uman; all were absorbed into the Kiev investigation. The Dnepropetrovsk rabbi, Levi-Itzhak Shneersohn, was also detained, but was soon disassociated from 'Kolikov and others' 10 figure in a case examined below.

In the course of interrogation, the *melamed* Lipman was pressed to name "the most outstanding religious leaders in Kiev." As "prominent rabbis, enjoying great authority among Jews", he named, among others, Biyashev Romanovsky and Tversky, who were in fact already in prison. Questioned as to whether he knew of underground *yeshivot* in other cities, Lipman denied any such knowledge, observing that, of the *yeshivot* he knew about, the one in Minsk had been closed in 1932 and those in Voronezh and Kursk in 1937.

On July 31st 1939 all the prisoners were shown official indictments accusing them of "membership of an anti-Soviet grouping of clericals, which, being associated with Jewish bourgeois nationalist organizations in Poland, Palestine, London and America and acting on the instructions of these [organizations], engaged in counter-revolutionary activity among the Jewish population." The rabbis and the *melamed* faced an additional charge, that "among the young [they] conducted agitation for refusal to serve in the Red Army, indoctrinating young people, in illegal *yeshiboty*, with anti-Soviet religious nationalist attitudes." All maintained their innocence.

For Moishe Kolikov, the most onerous clause in the indictment concerned his "connection with bourgeois nationalist organizations", which he was alleged to have informed about "imaginary starvation and deprivation of working-class Jews in the USSR", and to which he sent "lists of starving Jews for receipt of assistance."

Sentences were due under Article 54, sections 10 and 11, the Ukrainian code's equivalent of the Russian Article 58. But it was already October 1939. Yezhov had long gone and the purged GPU, albeit with unpredictable local aberrations, was in general parading its good behaviour. On October 17th, Beinus-Shaya Lipman and the two youngsters, David Gaisinsky and Buruh-Motl Livshits, were sentenced to camp terms of 3 years, while the rest got exile in Kazakhstan, Kaplan for 5 years and the others – Kolikov, Rapoport, Pevzner and Bentsion Gaisinsky – for 3 years only. One cannot help remarking the bitter irony involved in greeting with relief sentences that, qualifying as 'lenient', tore men from their families to labour in camps or rot in exile for three or five years, simply for professing their faith and sustaining its institutions. Of the ultimate fate of the victims, we know only that Pevzner died within a year, while Livshits survived his camp term in the Kolyma and settled thereafter, as a tied worker, in Magadan.

Among the cities caught up in the case was Dnepropetrovsk. With over half a million inhabitants, it was big enough to boast a large Jewish population and a range of Hasidic activities independent of those in Kiev. In 1921, when the position of chief rabbi in the city was taken over by Levi-Itzhak Shrieersolm; there were over twenty synagogues and fifty *hederim*. However, over the next few years, many synagogues were closed, *hederim* suppressed and rabbis and *melamedim* stripped of civil rights.

In 1925, Levi-Itzhak received an invitation from Palestine to serve as a rabbi in Jerusalem, but he declined the offer. At the end of 1926, he visited Leningrad at the request of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak. The Rebbe told him of the LERO plan (see Ch.2) to convene a congress of Jewish religious personnel to discuss the problem confronting their communities. We remember that, faced with this

prospect, Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak proposed to call together "certain authoritative rabbis for preliminary discussion on the advisability (or in his view, the inadvisability) of holding such a congress. (Kotlyarsky, p. 32)

The Dnepropetrovsk rabbi also took part in the Volhynia rabbinical conference in Korosten in early 1927, of which the Rebbe was elected president. As Chapter 2 made clear, Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak was by then under determined surveillance and his detention and exile soon followed. Meanwhile, Levi-Itzhak's contacts with the Rebbe sufficed to provoke the GPU into action. He was arrested in Dnepropetrovsk in 1928 and summarily exiled to Alma Ata for 3 years.

Having served his term, Rabbi Levi-Itzhak returned to Dnepropetrovsk to resume his religious duties. The famine that was to devastate the Ukraine in 1932-33 was just beginning, and he made desperate attempts to contact foreign relief organizations. Later he would tell his interrogator that he "knew of a number of committees which were organizing aid from abroad to succour the starving", but he had failed to get in touch with them. Only in 1933, as a result of a visit to Dnepropetrovsk by Moishe Kolikov, did he learn of the London committee. He went to Kiev to meet Vaishelboim, chairman of its Kiev offshoot, and, on his return home, called together representatives of the various synagogue congregations in the city, and with their help compiled that list of names and addresses of the needy which we have already noted as being requested by the centre in Kiev. (Kotlyarsky, p. 33). The outcome was that the community in Dnepropetrovsk received coupons which could be exchanged for food products in the special *Torgsin* stores, a privilege otherwise restricted to foreigners and the local official elite.

Obviously, the 'organs', probing the activities of Moishe Kolikov and the Kiev committee, remarked the increasing involvement of the rabbi in Dnepropetrovsk. However, in 1936, Levi-Itzhak abandoned both these activities and his rabbinical functions and retired to dwell in tranquillity at the expense of one of his sons.

He was not, however, forgotten. He remained a figure in the long drawn-out process through which the GPU would ultimately bring Kolikov and his associates to book. On March 28th 1939, two weeks after the Kiev group was seized, this man, living in obscurity, was suddenly arrested. He was taken to Kiev on March 30th to be tied into the case of 'Kolikov and others'. Apart from involvement in "the anti-Soviet grouping of Jewish clericals of Kiev", he was personally accused of "organizing a clerical group in Dnepropetrovsk." At some point, however, possibly to focus on the latter charge, Shneersohn's case was, as mentioned earlier, detached from the Kolikov group investigation (case 58707) and treated as a separate affair (Case 147006).

On March 31st, Rabbi Shneersohn was questioned about his sons. His eldest, Mendel, had helped to warn people in Leningrad when Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak was arrested, and had subsequently married the Rebbe's daughter. Levi-Itzhak told the interrogator that Mendel had emigrated from the USSR with the Rebbe in 1927, had studied in Germany and later in Paris, and was now an engineer. His youngest son, Izrail-Leiba, had left Dnepropetrovsk in 1926 to study in Leningrad and now lived in Berlin. In subsequent sessions the Chekists pursued questions relating to the rabbi's attendance at the Volhynia conference twelve years previously. This must have been ground well trodden in other GPU enquiries, but they demanded to know who else was there, who talked to whom and who established contacts with whom. He gave them the names of men now dead or safely abroad; otherwise he said he could not remember, or had only confused recollections.

He was pressed to enlarge on his involvement with the Kiev group. "When had he made contact with Vaishelboim? Had they corresponded? Whom did he know on the committee besides the chairman? Who drew up the list? Who received aid? Who baked *matzah*?" (Kotlyarsky, p. 33). He was subjected to many hours of night-time interrogation, but they did not get the evidence they wanted. When it came to naming the leaders of Zionist groups in Dnepropetrovsk, he adopted the same tactic as before, naming only the dead, like the rabbis Pinhas Gelman, Izrail Motskin and Mendl Yofe, or men long since inactive or living abroad. Those apart, he "could not remember" any other members of the organization which he had allegedly joined, nor could he remember its aims or its achievements.

During one session, Levi-Itzhak admitted that at the time of the USSR population census in 1937, many religious Jews had turned to him for advice on whether to enter themselves as 'believers' or 'unbelievers'. He had spoken in the synagogue on this point, arguing that "the Soviet government

does not want any deception, and one should write 'believer'. He who does not believe, let him write 'unbeliever'." (Kotlyarsky, pp. 33-34). The number of people of all religious faiths recording themselves as believers was one of the reasons for the government's subsequent denunciation and suppression of the census results as engineered by a Trotskyite conspiracy.

Fourteen interrogators had bullied him in turn, and in vain. On August 4th the intransigent rabbi was taken from Kiev to Dnepropetrovsk for direct confrontation with other detainees and several witnesses. Here too, GPU efforts proved abortive, and at the end of August the indictment was drawn up. "Shneersohn, maintaining contacts with Jewish clerical circles abroad, fostered in Dnepropetrovsk a Jewish clerical underground. He ordered the creation of an illegal network for distributing money, through which aid was provided to 'poverty-stricken' Jews. In the synagogue and in illegal meetings in his apartment, under the pretence of conducting religious services, he engaged in anti-Soviet propaganda. On his instructions, help was extended to the families of the repressed [those in camps or exile]."

The charges were grave, but as in the related Kolikov case, the times favoured what would pass for relative leniency. On November 23rd 1939, Shneersohn was sentenced, "as a socially dangerous element", to 5 years' exile, the term to date from the issue of the arrest warrant on March 8th. In December he departed for the village of Chiili in Kyzyl-Orda province in Kazakhstan. For a 68 year-old man almost any term meant intolerable hardship, released in 1944, Levi-Itzhak would return to Dnepropetrovsk and die within a year.

That one should not over-rely on the broad historical pattern, is underlined by cases in Odessa. The city, one of the Ukraine's Jewish strongholds, endured the familiar GPU onslaught in the terror years of 1937-38. At that time, the 'organs' introduced most group cases with a standard formula. "The NKVD office of District X has received information that." Then would follow a list of culprits and their supposed offences. This would have originated in a field agent's report or a primitive denunciation from some envious citizen. The period was characterised I by an orgy of informing, as, urged on by the regime, fantastic suspicions were given credence and personal scores, often of the most trivial kind, were settled. The Hasidim of Odessa were not necessarily a priority target, but they had their place in the hierarchy of the people".

The denunciation that inaugurated the case of 'Shpigel L.S. and others' stated that in the village of Yanovka in Odessa province, a rabbi, Abram Shahman (in other sources, Shihman) and the elder of the religious association, Leiba Shpigel, on the occasion of the closure of the synagogue in 1934, "had actively carried on anti-Soviet agitation among the Jewish population against the action of the authorities." After the synagogue had been suppressed they created "in Shihvar's apartment an underground synagogue, and for its maintenance periodically organized collections among the villagers."

On September 25th 1937, Abram Shahman was apprehended in Yanovka on suspicion of "secret counter-revolutionary activity." He was 44 years old. His father David had been Yanovka rabbi before him and, following the closure of the synagogue, the son covertly assumed the duties of both rabbi and *shohet* to ensure the continuation of religious life in the community.

Shpigel, as head of the religious association, was detained on November 3rd. Witnesses gave evidence exposing his culpability as organizer of the secret synagogue. He was also responsible for arranging the collection of contributions and for engaging in "anti-Soviet agitation among the Jewish population, directed at strengthening the Jewish religion."

On November 29th 1937, Shpigel and Shahman were formally indicted. "Remaining irreconcilable religious fanatics, they did not cease their anti-Soviet activities, in pursuit of which they organized, in Shihvar's private apartment, an underground synagogue where religious services were performed." Shahman confessed his guilt on these counts, but categorically rejected a further charge of "anti-Soviet agitation and propagation of defeatist rumours." Leiba Shpigel simply denied all the accusations.

Shpigel was sentenced on January 23rd 1938 under Article 54-10 of the Ukrainian code. However, the denouement was surprising. The *Yezhovshchina* was at its height, but Shpigel's punishment was a mere '5 plus 3' that is, 5 years' camp plus 3 years' exile, while Shahman was actually acquitted on the "agitation" charge, sentenced to one years' hard labour for the illegal synagogue, and immediately freed on account of time served in prison.

Events would put this anomaly into perspective. Within a month, Odessa-Hasidim were embroiled in another case. Arrested on February 28th 1938 were two elderly men (in their sixties), Abram Duditsky, chairman of a Hasidic association, and Haim-Shmuel Fishman, rabbi of the *Keiles Yakov* synagogue. The case-file, 'Duditsky A.N. and others', notes that...at his first interview, the chairman confessed to previous close contacts with Yirtman, former rabbi of the Hasidic synagogue, and with Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn prior to the latter's exile. After the *Habad* synagogue had been closed in 1929, Duditsky had established one illicitly at 22 Tiraspol Street. Some 15-20 Hasidim gathered there for prayers on Saturdays and festivals,¹ and thanks to his foreign connections Duditsky used to receive substantial funds for its upkeep. In 1932 he made a special trip to Moscow to meet with prominent Hasidic activists and to set up a permanent link. In the case-file, he is portrayed by his interrogator as "an advocate of [the cause of] Jewish religious Hasids, heading an illegal, underground union of such [persons]."

Haim-Shmuel Fishman was allocated his own case-file, with documents alleging, *inter alia*, that, "with the priesthood as a nucleus, he gathered together elements with counter-revolutionary tendencies, comprising former traders, property-owners and others, and employed them for counter-revolutionary agitation [and] slander, directed at the Soviet authorities concerning the harassment of religion."

On March 1st, the day after the arrest of Duditsky and Fishman, the GPU, still rather short of hard evidence, moved to detain three other members of the Hasidic community: Shmuel Dembin, a *maggid* (preacher), Abram Fridman, rabbi of the synagogues *Shraitnikis* and *Moibre Peres*, and Yakov Kuklin, who had been chairman of the *Habad* synagogue management committee since 1926 and had spent two years in prison in 1935-37. The Odessa GPU, for whatever reason, chose, as with Duditsky and Fishman, to document the cases individually, although the intention was clearly to demonstrate the existence of a group conspiracy. As a consequence, our sources are the separate files on 'Dembin, Sh.A.', on 'Fridman, A.Z.' and on 'Kuklin, Ya.A.'.

Lubavich rabbi Shmuel Dembin, born 1876, had arrived in Odessa from Warsaw in 1915, and quickly built up a reputation through his sermons in the *Moibre Peres* synagogue. The advent of the Bolsheviks brought the usual problems; the synagogue was shut and he continued his preaching in secret. The congregation at the *Habad* synagogue also demanded his assistance; when their place of worship was closed, they invited him to serve in a Hasidic synagogue secretly established in a private apartment. In the early 1930s he applied for an exit visa for Palestine, but to no avail. Now in custody, Dembin was immediately accused of being a representative of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn. Also, "being an illegal servant of a religious cult, a *maggid*, he headed in Odessa an illegal union of Jewish religious Hasids."

Abram Fridman, son of Rabbi Shmuel Fridman, had, following a traditional religious upbringing, become official rabbi at *Moibre Peres* in 1923 at the very young age of 19. The Chekists had no doubt that, in the synagogue, he preached "in a counter-revolutionary nationalist spirit." They soon extracted from him the necessary confession that he had always maintained "a position of active struggle against Soviet rule", and had gathered the faithful in the synagogue for "systematic counter-revolutionary agitation for the organization of emigration of all Jews to Palestine, and the creation there of an independent Jewish state of fascist orientation." He also incriminated the cantor Toihva Goihman, who was arrested on March 8th 1938 and accused, among other things, of links with "an illegal organization of Hasids."

Cases were separately filed, but all those apprehended were judged together. They were formally indicted in mid-March. "From the earliest days of Soviet rule, in line with the whole reactionary position of the priesthood, they were all imbued with hostility to Soviet rule and entered upon the path of struggle against it." Fridman and Kuklin were lumped with Goihman for the charge of "close contact" with an illegal association of Jewish religious Hasids and agitation among Jewish youth in a counter-revolutionary religious spirit."

In the rehabilitation hearings of the Khrushchev 'thaw' the then prosecutor's office would conclude that all the convictions were based purely on "individual confessions of guilt", obtained by threats and beatings. As for testimony delivered by witnesses in face-to-face encounters, it was all invented by the interrogators. That this group case was wholly characteristic of the period in which it occurred is underlined by the outcome. With blithe disregard for the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian

S.S.R. and its Criminal Code, Fishman, Dembin, Fridman, Kuklin, Goihman and Duditsky were all condemned to death under Article 58-10/11 of the Russian Republic code. The first five were executed on April 3rd and Duditsky on April 7th 1938.

The story had not finished. The one prominent Odessa Hasid still at liberty was Yakov-Zelman Rymar, chairman of the *Moibre Peres* synagogue. He was apprehended on April 16th in a mopping-up operation and confronted with incriminating statements allegedly obtained from his already dead co-religionists. The GPU emphasised that during the investigation described above, Rymar had continued alone "active attempts to reopen closed synagogues." An Odessa NKVD Troika handled the 'trial' expeditiously (by then they could get through several cases every minute); he was condemned on April 24th and shot on May 9th.

The smaller Ukrainian cities mirrored the experience of Kiev and Odessa. Berdichev, some 100 miles south-west of Kiev, was one-tenth the size, but the proportion of Jews among its inhabitants was very high. In 1910 there had been 67 synagogues, over 100 *bederim*, two Jewish cemeteries and a number of Zionist societies, as well as the underground printing-press of the Jewish socialist party, the Bund. As Hasidism spread in Russia, Berdichev acquired an important Lubavich community.

The town and its suburbs emerged from the October Revolution and the Civil War with a Jewish population of about 30,000. But in 1923 the principal synagogue, the Horalny, was converted into a club for the militant 'League of the Godless' and almost all the others suffered closure as a result of a campaign by the Jewish Section of the Berdichev Communist Party committee.

Until the mid-1930s, civic institutions and offices in Berdichev continued to work in Yiddish where required, and instruction in Jewish schools was in that language. Clandestine Zionist organizations flourished, as did a covert *yeshivah*, affiliated to *Tomehei Temimim* and supervised by Rabbi Eliezer Pinsky, a highly esteemed authority on the Torah and Hasidic doctrine. In reality, he was the principal organizer of the entire network of Jewish educational institutions in the Ukraine and himself ran *yeshivot* in Zhitomir as well as Berdichev.

By 1938 his Berdichev *yeshivah* had twelve students drawn from the surrounding villages, six aged 13-14 and six aged 15-16, most of the latter already in their second year of study. Tseitlin records the memories of one of the students.

"They studied all day, but then dispersed to whatever places they could find for the night. Two slept on a bench on the boulevard, one used to creep into a railroad passenger car and spend the night in a compartment, while another, disregarding the danger, stayed on in the gallery where they studied. The most street-wise would find some attic with a stove and pass the night in relative comfort. There was a man who took in several of them, although he fully realized how dangerous it was to shelter these strange lads."

On January 24th 1938, two rabbis, 54-year-old Ber Gurvich and his young colleague Moishe Rubinsohn, aged only 24, decided to bring both groups of students, the younger and the older, together for a *farbrengen*; the word denoted a ceremonial gathering, usually to commemorate some noteworthy event, at which Hasidic texts were recited and Hasidic songs sung. After the *day's work in the yeshivah*, candles were lit in the synagogue and the boys crowded around the table, which was covered with a white cloth. The teacher spoke briefly and, very quietly, those present joined in the traditional "Lehaim" ('to life!'), and the beautiful Hasidic melodies. Everything else was forgotten – the cold outside, the dangers, the official harassment. But, suddenly and unexpectedly, there came a knocking at the door and a loud voice in Russian. "Open up!" Nobody said a word. They understood perfectly that their time had come.

"They moved quickly, as if they had spent their whole lives preparing for this moment. In an instant everything disappeared from the table and the boys dispersed in all directions. One hid in the ark containing the Torah, another vanished under the pulpit, a third climbed into a bookcase, two hid in the toilet and the rest slipped away into the adjacent living quarters." (Tseitlin).

The doors flew open and the Chekists burst into the room. They had precise information, presumably from an informer, about the number of students and teachers, and a thorough search discovered all the fugitives. When the numbers tallied, the search was ended and everyone was hauled off to prison. There they were separated, the younger boys placed with Moishe Rubinsohn and the older with Ber Gurvich.

The boys were questioned to ascertain who they were and where they were from; then they were asked to name their teachers. They all gave the same answer. "I am an orphan. I'm looking for work in town and I decided to shelter for the night in the synagogue. I do not know any of the kids nor the adults." However, they were badly shaken when the Chekists arranged for them to confront Rubinsohn. In their presence he confirmed that he was indeed the *melamed* and that they were his pupils.

"The lads were horrified. They could not believe their ears. What had happened? Their teacher, who had constantly urged them to resist, to rise above any violence or torture and never to give anything away, not even to open their mouths, – to their consternation, this man had surrendered." (Tseitlin).

The students nevertheless stood firm and denied even knowing the rabbi or ever having studied in the *yeshivah*. The interrogators failed to break them. When the Chekists left the cell, there was total silence; the boys dared not look at their teacher. They waited to hear what he would say. And then Rubinsohn reassured them. He said that nobody had tortured him and that he had confessed everything of his own free will, because he feared that if he refused to testify, the Chekists would turn to beating his students.

"They would certainly have succeeded in probing this business more thoroughly. They would have discovered others connected with the *yeshivah* and this could have had serious consequences for *Tomehei Temnum* and for all the Hasidim in Berdichev. Therefore I decided to take everything on myself. I met you in the street, took you to the synagogue and instructed you in the Torah all this time, providing for your education and looking after your other needs. They have to conclude that I atone am responsible for everything." (Tseitlin).

Finally, he exhorted the boys to stick to their story. By insisting that they were orphans, they would avoid incriminating their parents. When interrogators next entered the cell, all the students supported the rabbi's version. A few days later they were taken to a closed *internat*, a boarding school near Berdichev; run by the NKVD for children with bad backgrounds; many children of 'enemies of the people' were held in such places for 're-education'; For the boys, the pain of separation from their parents was the hardest to bear. Especially acute was the realization that, lacking news of them, their parents must be tormented with uncertainty. To meet with fathers or mothers, even outside the *internat* walls, was impossible due to the vigilance of their guardians.

The situation changed dramatically with the arrival in Berdichev of two young rabbis, Mihoel Teitelbaum and Mihel Rapoport, who had come with a plan to arrange an escape. As a beginning, the rabbis established a system of regular communication with the boys during walks which the latter took under guard, outside the *internat* perimeter, as part of their routine. Then the rabbis passed them two leather boxes (*tefillin*) to bind to the arm, so that they could pray in the proper form. Lads began to lag behind deliberately on the walk, ignoring the warden's shouts and threats to cancel the privilege and confine them to school.

One day, one of the students accidentally overheard a conversation between the deputy principal and men from the local GPU, in which the former complained of the exceptional obstinacy and disobedience of the group and suggested their transfer to another *internat*. Next day, on the customary walk, the first pair of boys slipped away and headed for the railroad station. When they had safely disappeared, the second pair made off, to be followed by the third pair. The fugitives assembled at a pre-arranged rendezvous, where the rabbis gave them tickets for the Kiev train. They split up, and in ones and twos found seats in different sections of the train.

On arrival in Kiev they dispersed to addresses they had been given. Rabbi Teitelbaum himself arrived in Kiev the next day and arranged their onward journeys to Gomel, Kursk and other towns, where *Tomehei Temimim* operated underground *yeshivot*. After graduating, these students themselves were to become rabbis, *melamedim*, *shobetim* or *mohalim*, a new generation to serve the underground Hasidic movement.

If the Ukraine suffered many casualties in the struggle of provincial Hasidim for religious survival, it was not alone. As seen earlier, Central Asia was becoming embroiled in that struggle and would be even more so during the war years (see Ch. 6). But almost every region yielded cases worthy of compassionate study. The lands along the Volga saw many such, as is illustrated by the case of Rabbi Bogatin in Saratov.

In 1907, Yosif Bogatin, then 27 years old, took up the twin duties of spiritual pastor and administrative rabbi in his home town, Lepel in Byelorussia. However, around 1920, the Jews of Saratov invited him to move there to serve them. The Revolution and the Civil War had devastated this city on the middle Volga. Formerly a prosperous trading centre, it was now inhabited by the destitute and the wandering homeless. People lived in constant fear for themselves and there loved ones. Saratov was multi-ethnic and multi-faith, but religious buildings had been impartially desecrated, many being converted into warehouses or barracks: The main synagogue had been colonised by some public institution or other, and there were in the city no premises which could be legally used as a house of prayer. From the moment of his arrival, Rabbi Bogatin was faced with the Herculean task of salvaging Jewish religious life from the wreckage.

He managed to find a small prayer-house in one of the suburbs, where the community could once more begin to light the candles on the Sabbath. His grandson, B. Benkovich, would later comment: "This house gradually became a meeting-place, not only on the Sabbath, out also on Jewish religious holidays, with extremely interesting gatherings and discussions between the rabbi and his flock."

The small community created what was at first a very modest social fund to provide relief for Jewish families, the needy, the sick and those which had been left without the support of a breadwinner. Bogatin dreamed of resurrecting the synagogue, and, after expending much time and effort, he obtained the necessary official permission. Even so, for all his pains, he was only able to get hold of a half-ruined building. His grandson recalled the undertaking.

"Among the prayer-house congregation they seek out construction workers, bricklayers, painters, plasterers etc. The plans for the future synagogue are drawn up, and, with enormous difficulty, the necessary 'deficit' [hard to get] materials are assembled. The enthusiasts know no rest, day or night, and the practically derelict building slowly but surely begins to take on a civilised aspect."

The work went on for several years, and alongside the volunteers there was always the rabbi, tackling the most menial and dirty jobs. "Someone remarks that he is unrecognisable as a rabbi, but he explains that there is no such thing as dirty or unpleasant work when one is building a temple where the Sabbath candles will soon be light and prayers to God will resound." (Benkovich).

At last came the evening when the synagogue opened its doors to those who flocked to celebrate the Sabbath. They entered and, as Benkovich remarks, felt immediately "the warmth that comforted the heart, the light of the Sabbath candles which the Jewish women had lit." From that time, Yosif Bogatin would weld together the Jews of Saratov and accustom them to, observance of the religious rituals. He accomplished this through frequent meetings and purposeful discussions with members of his congregation, his unfailing attention to their individual needs and his ready assistance in any difficult situation. He also found time for scientific research, and some of his work found its way to England and America for publication.

On November 29th 1937, Chekists appeared at his home with an arrest warrant. The search was brief – in that year things were hurried along – and they took him away, "having thrown the rabbi's books and manuscripts into sacks which they brought with them" The 'investigation' was as cursory as the search. Five days later, on a charge of "engaging in anti-Soviet agitation", a three-man summary tribunal, a 'Troika' of Saratov provincial NKVD, sentenced Yosif Bogatin to death and he was executed on December 5th.

The rabbi's sons, Girshi and Nohum, who worked in Russia for an American charity, were also arrested and sent off to the camps. They were young, but when they were released after World War II, their health had "gravely deteriorated." For Rabbi Bogatin's wife the strain of all this was too great; her health collapsed and she became practically bedridden. Yet, as Bogatin's grandson wrote, the family were consoled by "the response in the warmth OF human souls which had earlier been healed and comforted by Rabbi Yosif People helped [us] in whatever way they could, ignoring the danger which threatened all those who had the courage to cohort with members of the family of a person stripped of all rights, the family of an enemy of the people."

Of course, even in those dreadful years leading up to World War II., not all Hasidim were caught up in the vicious machinery of arrest, interrogation; perfunctory trial; and draconian punishment. Many, never arrested or tortured, simply endured the endless petty harassment and

bureaucratic provocation which became the normal environment of their everyday existence. These stories are recorded, not in GPU case-files, but in the memories of those who lived them. One such was Moshe Niselevich, growing up in Kremenchug, a town on the Dnieper some 150 miles downstream of Kiev.

"Until I was 11 years old, I managed to persuade my father not to send me to school. I and my sisters remained at home, and our neighbours, though aware of this, said nothing; after all, we were not hurting anyone. But once, playing in the courtyard with other kids, I accidentally hit a neighbour's son on the head with a stone. They immediately called the police and our failure to attend school was discovered. It was terrible. My father was threatened with prison and deprivation of parental rights. We were forced to go to school, and to a Jewish rather than an ordinary school. This was far worse, because the Jewish schools were weapons in the hands of the *Yevsek* people [the Party Jewish section] in their battle against Jewish religion and its traditions.

In school I went straight into the third-year class, because I could already read and write well. All the lessons were conducted in Yiddish, and all textbooks were also in that language. I loved some subjects, especially geography. To this day I remember the absorbing interest with which I studied maps. But despite all that, I found school very difficult to bear. There were many problems. For example, it was forbidden to wear headgear in class. Having consulted the rabbi, my father decided to let me walk to school without wearing my cap, although I put it on when going out into the street at break. In general, the school tried to root out 'Jewishness' by every means possible. Yiddish words derived from Hebrew were deliberately distorted in our textbooks to fit the new rules of 'Soviet-Jewish' orthography.

But the greatest problem arose in trying to observe the Sabbath. Having stalled my school career, I made a firm resolution; I would not attend school on Saturdays I remember, as if it were happening now, the first time I arrived in school after missing a Saturday. The teacher, Shura Grigorievna, asks me: 'Niselevich, why weren't you in school?' The children laugh at me and I turn red and mutter something about a headache. But Shuni Grigorievna says to me, above the-mirth in the classroom; 'A headache! You observed *Shabes* [a Yiddish rendering for the Sabbath]. There was no headache'."

Such scenes occurred repeatedly, and on one occasion, the teacher, losing patience, sent Niselevich to the school principal. This man, reminding Moshe that as a religious believer he should never lie, tried for a long time to extract an admission that the boy's father had forbidden him to come on Saturdays.

"I answered that, on the contrary, papa insisted that I go to school, but that I myself did not want to attend, because my late grandfather taught [me] that on Saturdays we should write nothing and study nothing except the Torah. How could the principal know that I could not even remember my grandfather, because he had died long before. The principal tried long and hard to get me to throw the blame onto my father, but I insisted: my grandfather taught me this. During the conversation, the man bombarded me with quotation from holy books, enjoining one to tell the truth. And I listened, and I thought: 'God grant that one day I should know so much'." (Vagner, pp. 170-71).

After a few more weeks of deliberate absence on Saturdays, the teacher again sent Niselevich to the principal. This time the latter put him in a car and took him to a big building, probably the *Yevseksiya*. Here, in one of the rooms, three young Jews were waiting for him.

"Straightaway they started to cite passages from the Torah and the Talmud, proving how wrong it was for a person to lie, and therefore I should be open and admit that my father had forbidden me to attend school on Saturdays. I stuck to my story; my father really forces me to go to school, but I simply cannot, and will not commit sacrilege. The conversation lasted several hours, always in the same vein, until finally they resorted to threats. They tried to frighten me with talk of every kind of disaster for our family. But, curiously, after this interview, they simply abandoned their efforts, both with my sister and myself. I was never again summoned for a talk on the subject of my Saturday absences, and they even stopped commenting on it." (Vagner, pp. 171-72).

The same sort of everyday, mundane but constant tension was recorded by Itzhak Zilbar in the city of Kazan on the Volga, where Hasidim co-existed with, among others, a large population of Muslim Tatars, itself in conflict with Soviet policy.

"There were no synagogues in Kazan at that time. The Jews rented, from a Russian, part of a house on the edge of town in the Kaban Lake district, and while I was at university I tried to go there every day. I was very worried that on the way I might run into students I knew, and they would guess where. I was going. But God was good to me, and in all my years as a student there was never any problem connected with my religious allegiance. I made it a rule to study the Torah for two hours a day, and if for any reason that was not possible, I marked it down as a debt to be repaid in future sessions, although not, of course, on Saturdays, because the Sabbath was in any case fully given to study.

In December 1940 I graduated from the university with distinction and was sent to work in a school in the village of Stolbishi. There I lodged in a room with three of my pupils and this caused no end of difficulties. At first I tried to put on my *tefillin* [prayer-box] in the loft in the early morning, when the others were asleep. But this in itself could have attracted attention, so I took to going outside the village or locking myself in the school laboratory. There were also problems with food, because the lads who shared my room would sometimes try to treat me to a meal. I remember that one of them shot a duck, made soup from it and pressed me almost by force to try it. I managed to delay until he had gone out, and then I fed the soup to the cat and her kittens; who, unlike me, greatly appreciated it.

It was very hard for me during *Pesach* I hoped to go off to Kazan for a few days, and I actually arranged a medical appointment for the first day of the festival. But the authorities would not release me. It was just as well that-mama had supplied me with *matzah* in advance." (Vagner, pp. 66-67).

More poignant than *most* is the story of Riga, for twenty years capital of independent Latvia and, despite some local anti-Semitic feeling, a refuge for many Hasidim, including Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn. But in June 1940 the Soviet government presented an ultimatum to all three Baltic states, rigged elections followed in July and the new assemblies petitioned for incorporation in the USSR. They were ceremonially 'admitted' in August. A Hasid, Nahum Barkan, witnessed these events and their impact.

"Our turn came in 1940. The Russians entered Latvia. Gradually the Talmud and the Torah were outlawed, Jewish schools were suppressed, synagogues closed one by one. Prayer at home was not prohibited, but conditions were created in which many Jews abandoned religion, some out of fear, some out of simple lack of will to persevere. The *yeshivah* had been in existence for about six months. I studied there and I had absolutely no wish to abandon my education. The difficulties that arose during those months were innumerable. One had to have a new [internal] passport, and to get that, one had to show a certificate from one's place of work. I studied during the day, and at night I loaded trucks, but even so, they would not issue a certificate. 'You're religious' they said; 'you don't work on Saturdays, and you don't intend to anyway. So what kind of certificate could we give you?' So I remained without a passport.

My brother, Shaya-Hanoh, was a rabbi in a small town, Gostin. He organized a *Habad yeshivah* there, in which taught such rabbis as Iyehetzkel Gimmelshtein, Iyehetzkel Feigin and Gilel Gurevich. I began to study in Gostin, but Soviet authority imposed its will even there. They started to harass Jews, closed the *yeshivah* and forced us to quit the place. I now understood that I had to get out of the country. The Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, possessed a Japanese consulate, with a consul who was doing everything in his power to help Jews escape from Russia. Students from the *yeshivah* began to slip away to Vilnius.

Finally, I and a friend decided to go to Vilnius too. It meant getting across the Latvia-Lithuania border. Such a border still existed [despite the Soviet occupation of both states] and was guarded on both sides; It was winter, it was freezing, and we had to cross a river on the ice. In a village on the river-bank lived a rabbi, an incredibly kind man. When we called on him, told him who we were and asked for help, he was terrified, but he nevertheless agreed.

At our first attempt to cross the frontier, we were picked up by the guards. To this day I cannot remember the long explanation we gave them. They let us go but they kept us under observation, and we, in our inexperience, blundered and gave ourselves away. They arrested us – my first arrest, but not my last. We were interrogated by two of them, a Russian and a Latvian, both pretty high-ranking. The Russian kept asking whether we were Bundists [the outlawed Jewish socialist

movement], and his Latvian colleague, more knowledgeable in these matters, did not explain to him that rabbis are never Bundists. For which I am grateful to him.

They held us for three days, then let us go. We were saved by Rabbi Mordehai Dubin, who exhausted his last shreds of influence trying to help Jews. When I returned to Riga, I called to thank him. Within a week he was arrested." (Vagner, pp. 18-20).

In the tragedy of Latvia, Mordehai Dubin has an honoured place. In 1927, an influential political figure, he had secured the emigration of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak. Now he was a victim. The GPU indictment was couched in familiar terms, charging him with "leadership of the reactionary clerical Jewish party, *Agudas Israel*", allegedly cooperating with former president Ulmanis to carry out a fascist coup d'etat. Sentenced in 1940, Dubin was exiled to Kuibyshev province on the Volga. After his release in 1945, he settled in Moscow, where underground activities (see Chs. 7 and 8), would lead again to his arrest. But his exile proved the lesser of two evils. On June 22nd 1941 Nazi Germany invaded, and Latvia, in common with all the areas newly annexed to the USSR, was swiftly occupied. Some Jews fled eastward, but those who remained were engulfed in the horrors of the Holocaust.

PART II

JEWISH RELIGIOUS LIFE

IN THE LATER STALIN YEARS

CHAPTER 6.

CENTRAL ASIA: THE *HABAD* IN WARTIME.

World War II inaugurated a new stage in the Hasid battle for survival. In 1939-40 thousands of Jews fled Poland as war overwhelmed the country, and became caught up in the mass movement by which the Soviet regime deported to the eastern USSR entire sections of the population, Polish or Jewish, of the sector of Poland occupied by the Red Army under the Nazi-Soviet pact. These Jews, at least, were more fortunate than those later trapped in German-occupied Russia or in the ghastly 'General Government' of occupied Poland. Soldiers of the defeated Polish army were also deported east to prison camps, although thousands of their officers were murdered on Stalin's orders.

The Nazi attack on Russia in June 1941 changed the situation. The Soviets reached an agreement with the exiled Polish government in London. Surviving prisoners of war were amnestied, and, together with other Polish nationals, were relocated in regions of exile in Siberia and Central Asia. This latter region also received a large share of a new migration in 1941-42, when huge numbers of people, including many Jews, fled the threatened western regions of the USSR for cities like Samarkand and Tashkent.

Included in these movements of population were Hasidim, many from Moscow or Leningrad, travelling with specific destinations in mind. These migrants not only knew of the existence of local Hasidic communities in Central Asia, but in many cases, and in large part due to the Shneersohn network, already had long-established and close connections with those communities. Once settled in the region, they consolidated their position and sent off letters urging their acquaintances in other areas to come and join them. In Tashkent, arriving Hasidic evacuees were met at the railroad station and allocated accommodation with local people. A major role in organizing all this belonged to a Hasid activist, Motya Sirota, who offered shelter at his house to several Hasidic families and willingly shared with them his scanty food supply.

Natan Barkan, with his father and two sisters, was evacuated from Latvia to Ivanovo province, north-east of Moscow, where he worked, as he had in Riga, loading trucks, at first in a lumber camp and then on a collective farm. There he learned that a group of Hasidim were planning to go to Central Asia, and he and his family decided to join them. They travelled as a group, accompanied by some Poles recently released from captivity under the amnesty. Barkan recorded his impressions of their arrival at their goal, the city of Tashkent

We made it, finally, after the long journey. We got off the train and Tashkent was all rain and slush and nothing to eat. A vast open square in front of the station was like an anthill, swarming with people who, having somehow or other found a space, settled with their meagre possessions directly on the ground, in the pouring rain.

And then I looked around, and here came two lads. One had not yet begun to grow his beard and the other's cheeks were covered with a light down. They were obviously looking for someone I stopped them and started to question them. They turned out to be Lubavich Hasidim. Peretz Mochkin's sons. They were not at the station by chance; there was a rumour abroad that Hasidic families were encamped on the square and they had come to seek out their own.

Their own! What could we be to one another in that terrible time, when people lost even the semblance of humanity? We were not relatives, nor were we from the same area, nor had we been students together. We had never before set eyes on one another. But we were united by the strongest of bonds; we were Hasidim of the *Habad*. The youths took us to their friends, who immediately offered us a piece of radish each; they themselves had nothing more. But in war-time Tashkent, in winter, this was a real treat. And the lads who had brought us went straight back to the station." (Beizer, pp. 20-22).

In June 1942, in Tashkent, there occurred a meeting of an organizing committee, representing Hasidic associations and other Jewish religious groups. Many of its members were veterans of pre-war Hasidic resistance. The prime movers, Nison Nemanov and Shmuel-Isroel Levin, together with Avrom Dreizin (Mayer), had featured in events in Leningrad and Moscow, described earlier. Betsadel Vilshansky had served a camp term for his activities in Voronezh. Benyamin Gorodetsky,

as an agent distributing funds for the Shneersohn network in Moscow, had been exiled in 1930, but absconded.

The meeting discussed provision of the essential requirements for Jewish religious life: the organization of work cooperatives where Jews could earn a living while still respecting religious traditions, the creation of *mikvaot*, *hederim* and *yeshivot* and the payment of teachers. The priority, energetically pursued by Nison Nemanov, was the creation of a knitwear *artel* in which Jews were enrolled as craftsmen working at home, the key condition for Sabbath observance and regular synagogue attendance. Evacuees from Moscow and the western provinces took the lead in establishing, in the old town, a clandestine synagogue which could accommodate 20-25 people at worship. The question of constructing a *mikveh* was discussed at a meeting of the Tashkent Jewish community as a whole, after which all the believers set themselves to raise the necessary funds.

They also arranged the ritual slaughter of animals for the whole community, the slaughterers' assistants delivering kosher meat to the homes of the faithful. This was a very risky operation; to be caught delivering the meat inevitably invited punishment as a 'speculator'. The *shobetim* worked impartially to supply both Hasidim and other Jewish religious groups. Families received meat only on condition that they sent their children to study at the *yeshivah* or accepted that a *melamed* should visit the home.

The result was a gradual consolidation of Hasidic life in Tashkent. Covert *minyanim* and *hederim* were functioning, with children studying in the synagogue under the eye of Rabbi Itzhak Zilber, who during those years provided spiritual inspiration for all Tashkent. In the *heder*, where children aged 9-15 were taught, the *melamed* was Shmuel-Isroel Levin applying experience and dedication that dated back to Nevel and Yegoryevsk. The GPU would later allege that he "educated children in a religious-nationalist, spirit and in a, spirit of hatred towards the existing Soviet system."

Children who went to the *heder* did not attend state schools, and after completing their studies, they moved on to the *secret yeshivah* where Nison Nornanov lectured. To maintain these establishments and pay their teachers, the community organized periodic collections among its members.

A distinguishing feature of Hasidic society in Central Asia was the meticulous attention paid by both adults and children to matters of security and secrecy. Even so, despite all their precautions, the GPU (now officially the MGB) picked up the scent. A report went to Moscow.

"Operational material received from a wholly reliable source bears witness to that activity which the Hasids have developed here, owing to the complete absence of local vigilance with regard to them. This same material has also exposed the close links which have been established between the Hasids of Central Asia and Jews now living here through evacuation – Polish citizens, clericals and non-religious persons. The shared work in the *artel*, shared living conditions and shared speculative activity of these circles, have to a certain extent brough Hasids and Polish Jews closer together." In all this the GPU saw the hand of the Rebbe; Moscow was told that "Nemanov, Nison, has organized in Tashkent an illegal Jewish anti-Soviet nationalist organization of Hasids, with the title '*Tomehei Temimim* of the *tzaddik* Shneersohn'."

These documents would find their way into the file on the 1948 Dobruskin case, in which so many Hasidic crimes were revisited. The Dobruskin file also contains detailed personal descriptions of Hasid activists who have been prominent in this narrative, police profiles intended to guide the hunt for men, including Nemanov, Levin, Dreizin and Vilshansky, 'wanted' in Central Asia.

To an even greater degree than Tashkent, Samarkand attracted Hasidim from the western USSR. The foundations of a substantial – *Habad* presence had been laid by Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak's disciple, Simha Gorodetsky, during his difficult mission in the 1920s (see Ch. 5). In the summer of 1941, a small group of Lubavich Hasidim arrived to assess the situation, and they were soon followed by tens of thousands of Russian and Polish Jews, among whom were numerous supporters of the Rebbe. Soon several large Hasidic congregations developed in the city. Living conditions for the native population during the first year of the war were desperate, but they were even worse for the immigrants. Vagner (p. 22) quotes the recollections of Natan Barkan.

"The first year was especially hard People died of hunger and disease. Epidemics broke out. God grant that the young never see such horrible scenes People collapsed on the street. There was a special cart, which went around collecting the corpses for burial in common graves. And among the

Samarkand community appeared volunteers who took upon themselves the task of identifying, among all the dead, those who were Jewish, so that the bodies could be committed to the earth in accordance with Jewish ritual "

In Barkan's own record of his memories (Barkan, p. 76), we read: "Rabbi Mendel Leich and his son Dovid, prosperous folk, opened their home to the needy and began to feed all who were unable to earn their bread. Rich Jews from Bukhara also helped – Refael Hudaityatov, Avram Boruhov, Avram-Haim Haikov and others."

Barkan (in Vagner, p. 23) noted his own arrival in Tashkent mirrored in the charity of the Bukharans. "Rebbe Refae Hudaityatov used to send his children to the railroad station to seek out Jews among the refugees in order to offer them shelter. His enormous courtyard resembled an evacuation point."

Betsadel Shif recalled that his father, Yosef Shif, "brought back from the front both a medal and his Party card, and, as a wounded *frontovik* and a communist, he was immediately appointed to an important post. Now he had more opportunities to help Jews, with money, contacts and advice, especially the families of Jewish refugees from Poland. For many of them, finding themselves in a strange land, without the language, money or connections, Yosef Shif became a guardian angel. An extraordinary fact is that he organized a *minyan* for services in his own office. When such prayers were held, he refused to receive anyone; he was officially in a 'meeting about production'." (Vagner, p. 262).

To meet official regulations, the Hasidic community quickly set up various legal production enterprises – textile workshops, silk-screen printing – to give the new arrivals the means to earn a wage and support their families. Such work, bringing together people already well acquainted, promoted solidarity and mutual support in matters like the observation of the Sabbath and Jewish holidays.

Since the 1920s a key role in organizing the religious life of the Jewish associations had been played by representatives of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn, although he himself had moved to New York in 1940. Clandestine Torah study groups and *hederim* continued to function in Samarkand, and soon new religious schools opened, staffed not only by European Ashkenazy, but also by Bukharan and Georgian *melamedim*. The city also contained a large number of covert synagogue congregations. Rabbi Mendel Leich and his colleagues set up a secret *yeshivah*, and in 1944, in collaboration with Nison Nemanov from Tashkent, another was opened, with about 80 students. Lessons took place, not in a central location, but in private homes, with students migrating from one apartment to another, in order to minimise suspicion.

"These underground educational establishments of the Hasidic association were located in the private homes of local Jews. For example, Moshe Niselevich [refugee from Kremenchug], Haim Notik and other activists harboured *hederim* in their apartments. To avoid detection, the location of classes was changed frequently. Sometimes even the parents did not know in whose house their children were studying. Only a narrow circle of activists had a clear idea of the number of classes the *yeshivah* ran, or which lecturers took which groups. The *yeshivah* had no student accommodation; the same conspiratorial rules dictated that the boys would lodge with families of the Samarkand *Habad*. Most of the lads passed whole months without venturing outside the courtyard of the building where they lived and studied." (Vekselman, p. 25).

To ensure the efficient functioning of *hederim* and *yeshivot*, community leaders created a centralized financial system, with every member of the association paying contributions. According to Natan Barkan (Vagner, p. 17 "any family, even those who were in dire need, tried to give something, whatever they could, to sustain the underground *yeshivah* and the *heder*." This central fund was managed by Benjamin Gorodetsky, who released money for various community undertakings, "such expenditure amounting to several hundred thousand roubles a month." (Vagner, p 174).

Tight control by a small group of lenders was, under Soviet conditions, both advisable and effective. The results were impressive. Dov Vilenkin estimated that "in underground *hederim* and *yeshivot* more than 200 young people were studying. Moreover, they organized a canteen attached to the *yeshivah*, to provide food prepared in accordance with religious laws." (Vagner, p. 38).

These vigorous initiatives were bound to come to the notice of the 'organs', and Samarkand MGB went into action. A number of secret agents and informers were infiltrated into the Hasidic

community and these soon sent back information on the unlawful activities of both local Jews and evacuees. Their reports are in the Dobruskin case-file. An informer code-named 'Umansky' submitted a report on June 20th 1944.

"Residing for the time being in Samarkand, after evacuation from Moscow and the surrounding areas, are the Shneersohnites Goldman, Itzhok, and Dreizin, Avrom (Mayer). Also present is Yankel Palant, who went into hiding before the war, to avoid arrest."

On July 28th 1944, 'Umansky' reported again. "In Samarkand and the surrounding districts, there are illegal *yeshivot* and *bedery*."

Another informer, 'Lisa', wrote at length. "While staying in Samarkand, this source has acquired detailed knowledge concerning a *yeshivot* and a *heder* organized by Shneersohnites. The organization of the said schools has been undertaken by clericals, for the most part Hasids, evacuated from various cities of the country. Special premises have been rented for the *heder*, and students are provided with food, footwear and clothing. Every day, *yeshivot* students are allocated, in organized rotation, to specific Jewish families for meals. For the maintenance of religious schools, a monthly contribution is required from each family. Religious schools also receive considerable financial assistance from abroad, mainly from Palestine."

While these developments were taking place in Tashkent and Samarkand, a remarkable opportunity to arrange the escape from the USSR of at least some Hasidim had appeared. As earlier noted, the German attack on Russia had, albeit temporarily, reconciled the USSR with the exiled Polish government in London. The GPU massacre of over 10,000 Polish officers at Katyn was for the moment a secret; meanwhile the Soviets amnestied Polish prisoners-of-war and permitted their recruitment into an army, commanded by General Wladislaw Anders, which, by 1942, numbered over 70,000. But the anti-Soviet sentiments of this force made it more of a danger than a help, and the progressive breakdown of Russian relations with the London Poles made Anders' position untenable. Churchill proposed that these troops be allowed to join the war in the West. In July 1942, Stalin agreed, and preparations began for the whole Polish army to leave the USSR by crossing into Iran.

It was following this decision, that Avrom Dreizin (Mayer) "having established contact with the Poles reached an agreement with them by which Polish citizens' documents might be obtained from families where such persons had died." (Vagner, p. 174). Young Hasidim, having bought these papers, could substitute their own photographs and then be officially conscripted into the Polish army and cross the frontier with Anders' units.

The 'organs' became aware of this through their informers, and Samarkand GPU duly reported that "through the Poles, Polish passports have been supplied to religious-persons wishing to leave the country. Many Jews, attempting to evade military service in the Red Army, have been buying Polish passports. In particular such a passport has been purchased by Medalie, son of a Moscow rabbi."

It was already too late to remedy the situation. One could merely complain that "with the first detachments of Anders' Polish troops, crossing into Iran, have gone a large number of Jewish clericals who bought themselves Polish passports." (Vagner, p. 174).

Despite Dreizin's efforts, the number of Central Asian Jews who could realistically be smuggled out in this way was bound to be limited. Hasidic communities in Samarkand and Tashkent had little option but to continue the battle to sustain their traditions in a hostile Soviet environment. But the hope of escape would remain and there would be other chances.

By late 1944, the international situation had altered dramatically. In August the Red Army reached the old demarcation line which had divided Poland between Nazis and Soviets in 1939, and by December the Soviet-controlled Lublin committee had declared itself the provisional government of Poland. Poland would inevitably become a Soviet satellite, and on that basis, friendly relations with the USSR could be restored. By a last agreement with the hopelessly outflanked London Polish government, Stalin sanctioned the repatriation (to a Poland he would control) of "persons of Polish or Jewish nationality who were resident in Poland before 1939," the repatriation to be carried out by the Soviet government at its own expense, in specially arranged transports. Official figures put the number of Polish citizens then on Soviet soil at about 250,000.

Victory over Germany was sealed in May 1945, and by October preparations began for the return of Polish nationals to a homeland whose borders had radically changed. As, already described, many Poles and Jews of Polish origin had been stranded in Central Asia during the war. Now those towns where they were concentrated established registration points and anyone born in pre-war Poland was allowed to register for repatriation.

At first, no documentary proof was demanded. A simple declaration, backed by two witnesses, was sufficient. Polish citizens who had married while in the USSR had the right to take with them wives or husbands and the latter's parents, brothers and sisters, as well as any children, even if born before the the marriage was formalised.

Gershuni (p. 159) comments bitterly. "Such sudden generosity on the part of Stalin seemed very strange. Informed people explained that many of those who had been interned had died, victims of starvation, cold and forced labour. The same fate had overtaken some of those who had been amnestied and then exiled to the heat of Uzbekistan, where they perished from hunger and disease in the first years of the war. The cemeteries of Samarkand, Tashkent and other places bear silent witness to these events."

The registration of would-be repatriates continued all through the winter of 1945-46, and it was a long time before the departure of the first official transports carrying authenticated Polish nationals. But for Soviet, as against legally Polish Jews, this was a possible opening. There were, as Gershuni observes, several possible methods by which non-Poles could attach themselves to this exodus.

They could contract genuine marriages to people already satisfactorily registered. This could provide a legal exit for an entire family, but it was by its nature not something that everybody could arrange.

Alternatively, they could arrange fictitious marriages. This required reaching agreement, probably on a commercial basis, with persons willing to cooperate. It was not easy and it was also dangerous. Yet there were many such bargains, and there were even cases where a Polish couple went through a fake divorce to enable each to contract an equally false marriage with a Soviet citizen.

Finally, one could purchase Polish papers. There were Poles who had died, probably of hunger or sickness, in the very early days of the war, when, in conditions of administrative chaos and demoralisation, municipal officials had been overwhelmed by problems of immigration or food and fuel supplies, and routine tasks like registration of births and deaths had often gone by the board. In many cases, the dead were still officially alive, and documents like passports remained in the family's possession and might be for sale at the going price. It was also possible to buy documents from some of the approved repatriates who preferred not to wait, possibly interminably, for their allotted places in the free transport to be officially arranged, but decided instead to make their own way to frontier cities like Lvov or Vilnius, where local columns were being organized. Title to the allotted places on official convoys could therefore be sold, although there could presumably be other difficult formalities before the frontier.

For a while it was possible to get hold of a Polish passport without undue difficulty. The main thing was to ensure that the family, in number, ages and genders, matched the details on the passport. 'Specialists', forging the handwriting, could add to the document the names of extra 'relatives', provided only that these were younger than the genuine passport-holder, since names were listed in order, one below the other.

There was one problem which was far harder to surmount – a complete ignorance of the Polish language. Pretending to be deaf mutes was hardly feasible as a mass solution, although individuals could get away with it if they travelled in the midst of a large Polish contingent willing to shield them. Discovery was a great fear; to be caught attempting to escape meant being handed over to the Chekists. Hasidim had to choose. They could take the risk, join, by whatever dubious means, this probably short-lived official emigration, and from Poland perhaps reach a land where they could freely practice their faith. Or they could avoid the danger and reconcile themselves to living under the conditions imposed by a repressive Soviet regime.

"After the festival of *Pesah*, in April 1946, a secret meeting of leaders of the *Habad* from all over Russia was convened at Samarkand. Among those present were the prominent rabbis Shmuel Notik,

Sh. Sosonkin, Abragam-Asher Plotkin and that great authority on the Torah, head of the *Habad yeshivah*, Nison Nemanov." (Gershuni, p. 160). After long and heated argument, those attending decided to adhere to the tried and trusted principle that in unpredictable situations it was wisest to abstain from precipitate action. They would not seek to join the migration. Many of the religious leaders hoped that the post-war period would see a relaxation of religious persecution. Their decision was communicated to the Hasidim of Samarkand and Tashkent and also to centres elsewhere.

The conference decisions and the actions of the leadership were dutifully monitored by GPU agents and their, voluntary informers. The Dobruskin case file has a report from the faithful 'Lisa'. "In Samarkand, there was a company of Shneersohnites, among whom this informant recognised Avrom Mayer [Dreizin], Yankel Dain, Shteingard, Boris Nedalie and others. This tightly-knit band gave the Jews various pieces of advice, and met together to discuss many questions connected with emigration from the USSR."

The decision of this gathering was not palatable to all community leaders, and some pastors acted on the basis that no formal prohibition had been issued. Many shared the view expressed by Rabbi Plotkin. "Nothing can remove the right of a Jew to save, in spiritual integrity, himself and his children." (Gershuni, p. 161). Consequently, some rabbis were willing to give their approval to pretended divorces among Polish couples and then to unite in spurious marriage Polish man with Jewish woman and Polish woman with Jewish man, thus giving two families a chance to leave, together with their Soviet children and relatives (true or counterfeit).

Even more extreme, having obtained the consent of the parents, a rabbi would confer his blessing on the children's emigration as members of a 'Polish' family. In this way, children from Soviet Jewish families, when safely abroad, could openly profess the faith of their forefathers, so that "henceforth nobody could extinguish in them the light of the Jewish soul." (Khovkin, p. 212).

This flight of Jews to freedom had only just begun, when, at the Samarkand market, the GPU unexpectedly encountered and detained Rabbi Itzhak Kopelman. He was forced into a car and taken off for interrogation, only to be released the same day and ordered to leave Samarkand. But before he quitted the city, he contrived, through a reliable contact, to get a warning to Nison Nemanov, advising him to leave immediately. Nemanov quickly removed to Tashkent, where, as we know, he had earlier been active and it was easy for him to arrange a hiding-place.

Any illusions about relaxation in the regime's war against the *Habad* were rapidly dissipated. Religious Jews were threatened with a fresh wave of arrests. Some belatedly attempted to get hold of Polish passports, but it was already far more difficult, official registration of Polish nationals having ended months before. But Hasidim then received information that in Lvov, near the Polish frontier, it was appreciably easier to procure the necessary papers. Many of those determined to emigrate were inspired to leave Central Asia and move, in the first instance, to Moscow, where they could get more precise information about these new possibilities.

CHAPTER 7

THE LVOV EXODUS.

Thousands of people of Polish origin, including many Jews, moving east as refugees in 1939 or released later from Soviet camps, spent the war years in exile communities in Central Asia or Siberia. But as the war moved to a close and the repatriation terms were agreed, there was a spontaneous mass movement westward towards the Polish border. The city of Lvov, formerly in Poland but now annexed to the Ukrainian Republic of the USSR, became a magnet as a departure point for the now legalised emigration. For Soviet citizens desiring to emigrate illegally, the repatriation program offered interesting possibilities; after all, the new Polish frontier was a mere 60 km. away.

With the Nazi annihilation of its Jewish inhabitants, Lvov's native population, mostly Polish, had been greatly reduced. But it was now swelled by thousands of new arrivals. The government set up joint Soviet-Polish committees to manage the legal emigration. Anyone who could present a Polish passport was registered and entered on official lists for evacuation. People on the list had then to present themselves at an embarkation point, normally the railroad station, at the appointed time, and, after a further check on their papers, board the transport provided.

The Dobruskin case-file includes a coded telegram which Nison Nemanov received in July 1946 from Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak. "Grandfather very much wants to see his children. Go and visit Aunt Polya. Everything there is fine." 'Aunt Polya' was Poland. The Rebbe's adherents inside the USSR understood the message as an instruction to prepare plans for a large-scale escape, using the repatriation project as a cover. For Hasidim who managed to reach Poland, the Rebbe's people would arrange transport to Lodz, where I. K. Goldin headed a committee, which arranged their journeys to destinations further afield. For many, the next stop would be another organizing, centre in Prague, where Rabbi Yakobsohn could procure visas for the USA or Palestine.

During 1946, the MGB 'organs' became fully aware of plans by leaders of the *Habad* to get their people out of Russia. One of their Tashkent agents reported. "Nison Nemanov has proposed to Hasid spiritual leaders that they find ways to organize the escape of Hasids, posing as Polish citizens, at first to Poland, and from there to America or Palestine." (Dobruskin case-file).

Tashkent Hasidim maintained permanent contact with their Moscow brethren through Jews who passed through the capital on their way to Lvov. A witness interrogated in Moscow testified that "they were ordered by Nison Nemanov to stop over for a while in Moscow and get in touch with Braverman, in charge of transit procedures at the Moscow staging post." It was David Braverman who arranged temporary shelter in the capital, with a bed for the night, saw that they were fed, gave them the latest news from Lvov and obtained rail tickets for the journey to the border city.

The activist Hasidim setting up in Lvov hoped that the sheer scale of the legal exodus of Polish nationals would make it easier to smuggle religious Jews into the system and across the frontier. Staying on in Lvov for a lengthy period, in order to organize this, could be risky in the absence of residence permits. But the local police were, initially at least, overwhelmed by the flood of newcomers and had almost ceased to carry out routine checks on documents. Nevertheless the danger was always there.

The first Hasidic migrants, having left their jobs and sold their possessions, began to appear in Lvov in summer 1946. Among them were some fairly prosperous people, but many were poor and had been given money for their tickets out of general funds created by their communities. By the fall the number of Hasidic families waiting in Lvov ran into the hundreds, and they were experiencing difficulties, first and foremost in finding accommodation. Without the proper papers they could not register with the police, as was required for legal renting of a room. They had to find people willing to risk renting space to 'illegals' without residence permits. There were some such, but they charged extortionate rents, up to 30-50 roubles for a single night. Similarly, it was impossible to obtain legal employment without presenting documents certifying residence.

In such circumstances, the majority of new arrivals were forced to pay exorbitant sums for accommodation, and then to remain locked indoors all day, afraid to venture into the street. They

might be stopped by the first policeman who noticed them; he would demand documents, and then would follow the awkward questions at the police station. Where were their residence permits? Who had provided them with a room? Why had they not been working for such a long period? In short, what were they doing in Lvov?

Besides this, a Hasid, even if he had the proper papers, might not escape detection. Nearly all had beards, a distinction which invited police attention. Or, by visiting a synagogue, where he would be a new face, he would alert the informers who invariably frequented such places. Jews staying illegally in Lvov therefore preferred to pray in the privacy of an apartment, even on the Sabbath. By the fall of 1946, underground synagogues were functioning, in the sense that groups sufficient for public prayer (*minyanim*) could be assembled at certain private dwellings. But such daring folk were running enormous risks.

For many arrivals the situation became desperate as their money ran out. They could no longer pay for food and shelter, nor could they afford to buy the documents and rail tickets that might secure their passage. However, they could turn for help to the rabbis Betsadel Vilshamky and Zalman Serebryansky. These two had come from Samarkand in the summer. On their initiative, a secret meeting of the more active Hasidim was arranged, at which the decision was taken to form a committee to organize the whole process of illicit emigration. The immediate aim was to procure Polish papers; beyond that, the committee would undertake all measures necessary to facilitate the movement of Jews across the border.

Detailed profiles of committee members are in the Dobruskin case-file, including, apart from Vilsnansky and Serebryansky, Moishe-Haim Dubrovsky, Yeino Kogan, Leiba Mochkin and Shmaryagu Sosonkin. Nearly all the members had been active in Central Asia and in pre-war resistance in various places. They now swore an oath not to leave Russia "until the last member of the *Habad*, in need of their assistance, had left the country." (Gershuni, p. 180) Vilshamky and Serebryansky resolved to establish a central fund, money from which would be used to purchase rail tickets and documentary evidence of Polish citizenship, and also to relieve the plight of destitute Hasidim.

Rich Hasidim lent their support to the Lvov committee by promptly donating substantial sums to help the poor. One of them, Kameshsky, was particularly generous. Witnesses interviewed by the GPU would assert that the fund often had 30,000 or 40,000 roubles at its disposal. The Hasidic community accepted a proposal that "persons leaving the country, if they possess valuables, will hand these over to a member of the committee." This rapidly eased most of the financial difficulties. Testimony in the Dobruskin file also claims that a general meeting resolved to place a solemn curse on "anyone who, on going abroad, takes with him any kind of valuables." The committee guaranteed to those going abroad that on their reception in Poland a careful account would be drawn up, so that they would be reimbursed the amount, in cash or valuables, that had been left behind for the general fund.

The committee then turned its attention to the business of establishing links with the official Soviet-Polish committees which were supervising the repatriation program. As usual, "relations with government officials were facilitated by means of a tried and trusted device: bribery." (Gershuni, p. 166). One of the members subsequently contrived to reach an 'arrangement' with conductors on the trains going through to Poland, and, through them, with the frontier guards. Meanwhile, similar useful business deals were concluded on the other side of the border. (Gershuni, p. 166).

Specific responsibilities were allocated to each of the committee's members. Rabbi Leiba Mochkin was entrusted with the task of obtaining Polish passports. He was acquainted with two Polish Jews, known as Misha and Grisha, who had contacts in the Soviet bureaucracy and could, for a consideration, get hold of falsified papers for 'Polish citizens'. The 'consideration' was not negligible; each set of papers cost 10,000 roubles, which rather puts the fund's resources in perspective.

One very useful person, whom everyone knew only by a first name, Svetlana-Polya, arranged the committee's links with officials of the Soviet-Polish repatriation committee. These would supply forms for official evacuation lists, on which Hasidim could be entered, with their names, personal and family details corresponding to those on the false passports which they had bought or which had been purchased for them.

Finance was mainly the province of Rabbi Serebryansky, who controlled the central Rind, collected contributions and disbursed money for purposes approved by the committee Rabbi Kogan then monitored that expenditure, ensuring that the money was efficiently directed to its proper purposes. Unexpected crises were handled by Rabbi Dubrovsky; in any emergency, he would get in touch with the relevant people, if possible negotiate a solution. and report back to the committee.

One of the most dedicated of Rabbi Kogan's assistants was Mendel Futerfas, whose pre-war activities had embroiled him with the 'organs' in both Dnepropetrovsk and Yegoryevsk, and who, in Samarkand, had achieved the remarkable feat of altering his passport age from 33 to 51 to avoid conscription into the Red Army. Another was Boris Rubinsohn, who had come from Samarkand at the invitation of his relative, Mendel. Rubinsohn was responsible for drawing from the general fund the cash to be passed to Leiba Mochkin for the latter to buy spurious Polish documents. From late 1946, Rubinsohn had the duty of producing estimates of revenues and expenditures for the committee's approval.

Outside the inner circle, the committee recruited a whole army of carefully selected and reliable supporters. For work with Hasidic families and for urgent tasks they chose people whose appearance would not excite suspicion – men without beards, women or adolescents.

"Almost every day, some new *Habad* family would arrive in Lvov, not knowing where to stay. And every extra minute spent at the railroad station by people of distinctive appearance meant increasing danger. So the committee designated a reliable person to meet every train coming in from the east. Greeting each family in turn, he would give them an address and quickly put them in a taxi." (Gershuni, p. 165).

As the project got off the ground, Leiba Mochkin was despatched on a mission to Tashkent, Samarkand and Moscow, to promise people there that, if they wished to leave the USSR, they too would receive help. Subsequently, through local contacts or through relatives, Hasidim in other communities received the same encouragement.

For the Lvov committee, secrecy was vital. The apartments used for its work were known to only a few; most Hasidim were in the dark. At first they met in the apartment of Rabbi Mordechai Shenkar, an activist who had begun his career in the Hasidic youth movement in Berdichev and Kiev (see Ch. 5), and, as a reward for his work in Lvov, would end it in the Vorkuta camps. The committee later moved to the home of Nohim Gurevich, whose father-in-law, Beri Levertov, was one of Rebbe Itzhak-Yosefs most energetic supporters in Moscow.

The committee managed to stay in existence for little more than six months. But even in that short time, its members and their many helpers were able to save hundreds of Hasidic families and launch their passage to lands less hostile to their religious traditions. In November 1946, Leiba Mochkin and Moishe-Haim Dubrovsky found out when the first official transports were to leave for Poland, and began to allocate places which they might have available for illegal Hasidic emigrants. The priority was always the young; *Yeshivah* students and families with children had first call. As in Tashkent, there were religious parents who desired above all to give their offspring a chance to live a normal life guided by the Torah; with their consent, their children departed, ostensibly as members of other families.

New 'families' were created by combining people to fit the mix of gender and age on the documents that had been purchased. Complete strangers were brought together previously unacquainted families were constrained to exchange their children, and brothers and sisters masqueraded as husbands and wives. After receiving their papers, the 'families' were given the precise time of departure of the train, so that they would not arrive early and awaken suspicion by loitering in the station or by making enquiries.

Among those who crossed into Poland in 1946 were many redoubtable campaigners whose achievements this book celebrates, like Nison Nemanov, Avrom Dreizin (Mayer), Shmuel-Isroel Levin and Benyamin Gorodetsky, all finally escaping the oppression against which they had fought all their lives. The 'organs' would have to content themselves with trying and sentencing them *in absentia*.

Moscow provided a sizeable proportion of the would-be emigration. The Latvian rabbi, Mordechai Dubin, active in the Moscow community since his release from exile in 1945, came to Lvov to meet the chairman of the city's Jewish association, and persuaded the latter to agree that

Hasidim arriving from Moscow could approach him for assistance. Returning to the capital, Dubin let it be known that, in his opinion, the chairman of the Lvov Jewry was "one of us, and a trustworthy man." Later, Dubin, wishing to prevent the "trustworthy man" being duped by GPU agents, warned him that genuine messengers, coming to see him at the synagogue, would identify themselves with the formula: "I have arrived from Dubin, travelling in car No. 6, seat No. 8." (Dobruskin case-file).

In November, Lvov heard rumours that Jews without beards could obtain legal permission to leave, obviating the need to get hold of false papers. However, the chairman of the Jewish association expressed the opinion that it was better not to take the risk. Members of the committee, who also had doubts about it, had a meeting with him and decided to heed his advice. But then the committee received reassuring news.

"However, a small group of people, feeling themselves in desperate straits, decided to try for happiness, come what may. One has to say that some interpreted the position of the chairman of the association as an attempt to influence the mood of Hasidim in a direction desired by the authorities. One way or another, thirty-seven people got onto the train for Poland. Before the journey, the Jews recited psalms and prayed to the Almighty for relief. 'O Lord, hear our cry!' After a short time there came the news that we had awaited with hope in our hearts. The whole group had safely crossed the border. When we learned of this, our hearts overflowed with joy." (Gershuni. p. 181).

It would appear that the GPU already had access to a list of projected 'repatriates' which the committee had prepared, and knew that none of its leaders were leaving with that particular group. The Chekists therefore decided to lull the organizers' suspicions and inspire false confidence, by allowing the group to pass freely into Poland. The fact is that the 'organs' had for some time been fed information by well-placed informants. On October 2nd 1946, the head of counter-espionage in the Northern Army Group submitted to higher command his "Summary of operations (No. 29408/2)."

"From information in my possession, it is known that the chairman of the Lvov religious Jewish association is connected with the Zionist underground, and that he receives from leaders of Zionist organizations in Poland money and instructions for the transit of Soviet Jewish citizens from the USSR to Poland." This report, together with a whole series of related documents quoted below, would find a place in the Dobruskin file S (see Cb. 1. footnote 2).

In early October, a Polish citizen, N. M. Klionene, was apprehended in Lithuania. She was on her way to Lvov on a mission from the director of a foreign charity; She was taken from Vilnius to Moscow, and under interrogation on October 16th, confirmed that she was "a messenger for a foreign Zionist centre." In Lvov she was supposed to contact one of the officials of the state evacuation commission, using the passwords: "I come from Meyerovich and Aizikovich." Klionene was rapidly brought before a military tribunal, which, on January 11th 1947, found her guilty of espionage and sent her to labour camp. But her evidence was taken up.

Headquarters sent a cipher telegram to local GPU sections, ordering them to "arrest and work on" certain-named persons and informing them of Klionene's testimony concerning the functionary working in the evacuation commission. However a GPU officer, M, in the Lvov area, then revealed that both the said functionary and X, chairman of the Lvov Jewish association, had been recruited by him in 1946 and, in his words, had more than once "supplied several pieces of useful information, and [that] during the time when X had been a contact of his, 'the latter had never incurred any suspicion of double-dealing or disinformation."

Another local Chekist, K, also handling the informer network, confirmed that the Jewish chairman, X, had been on his payroll for three months as a "secret collaborator with the organs" and that he had given X the job of "providing information on all persons from Moscow who might approach him [X] for assistance in arranging to leave the country."

K also stated that the chairman of the Jewish association had told the GPU of the arrival in Lvov, on November 6th 1946, of a large group of Jews seeking help in their preparations to cross into Poland. "A representative of this group (a woman) even gave [X] an advance payment of 50,000 or 100,000 roubles in cash." X gave the money to K. It was duly "deposited as income for the State, and the female liaison was arrested."

The woman concerned was V. A. Gorelik-Kozliner, who was acting as liaison between the Lvov underground committee and groups wishing to escape. This particular 'large group of Jews' numbered more than 500 Hasidim who decided to risk posing as repatriates by obtaining forged official evacuation forms. There were also rumours that bureaucrats in the evacuation commission were displaying an unusual willingness to renew documents that had expired. Despite the suspicions which this aroused, the group resolved to go ahead and the Lvov committee decided to initiate an approach to an official with whom, supposedly, the chairman of the Jewish association had arranged things. This happened while the committee was still rejoicing over the unexpected success of the group of thirty-seven, which had suggested real cause for optimism. But catering for 500 fugitives required rather more than optimism. Gershuni (pp. 182-83) quotes Shmaryagu Sosonkin's account of the tragic outcome of these endeavours.

"The committee entrusted to One particular woman, whom we will call 'Ts', the mission of passing the money to a certain person who was managing this affair for us. [Gorelik-Kozliner, handing on money to X]. They gave her (Ts) a list of 300 people who possessed papers which had now expired or been cancelled, and enclosed with it documents for the rest. On the appointed day, Ts, with 68 sets of documents (each of which was in the name of the head of the household and had the names of other family members appended), went off to get the required visas attached. She was accompanied by Rabbi Betsadel [Vilshansky], who had arrived in Lvov from Kherson.

She went in, while Rabbi Betsadel waited for her outside. Soon he noticed a car parked nearby and realized that he was being watched. The officials did not take the papers from Ts (so that she would still have them on her when arrested), but quickly showed her out. She left, thoroughly bewildered, and told Rabbi Betsadel that they had better fix up another meeting with L.M., a person through whom all contacts with officialdom were arranged. Rabbi Betsadel whispered that they were under surveillance. They immediately parted, and Rabbi Betsadel observed that the car drove up to Ts, two young men pushed her inside, and they drove off, he did not know to where."

Shortly after the arrest of Gorelik-Kozliner, her brother and 16 year-old son were also detained. Her husband was due for arrest, but went into hiding. However, on the following evening the three prisoners were released. They told committee members that the Chekists were fully informed, not only about the illegal border crossings that had already taken place, but also about those which were being planned, in that regard, the only thing the GPU found surprising was that there were so many Hasidim still waiting in Lvov in hope of escape. The Chekists had thought that all who had the slightest chance of leaving had already done so, and would have had difficulty in crediting the new information, had they not now in their possession the list of 300 people taken from Ts, and the plausibly official documents that the group had hoped to use.

Time passed, and no Hasidim on that list were arrested. But the loss of the first sets of documents was a real obstacle. They decided that it would be reckless to consider crossing with old Polish papers which had expired or been annulled, and that every effort must be made to obtain new ones. But with the GPU apparently well-informed (although X was not suspected), that too was fraught with danger. According to Shmaryagu Sosonkin, the men, as heads of the household, "turned to the women. 'Were they willing to run such a risk?' The response of their wives and mothers was emphatic. 'We will kill ourselves if you do not decide [to go]'." (Gershuni, p. 184).

Getting the money to buy new Polish passports was problematical. However, the Lvov committee's central fund came to the rescue, pledging the resources of the Jewish community, in the form of gold, valuables and dollars left behind by Hasidim who had passed into Poland. "Everyone without exception agreed with the committee's decision and gave up the last of the money." (Gershuni, p. 185).

Documents were provided and a first group, comprising 44 Hasidim, duly departed. There was a very real danger that they might be recognised by GPU operatives as they boarded the special train. They now held passports in names that were different from those on the list that had been seized, but Chekists on watch at the station might remember their faces from photographs on their earlier documents, confiscated at the same time and doubtless scrutinised at GPU headquarters. But all went well and the party arrived in Poland safely.

This small triumph emboldened the members of the committee and they decided to risk a second venture. And again the train reached Poland without incident. Two more groups were

successfully despatched. The last party actually travelled on papers which had already been used once, because a handsomely rewarded train conductor agreed to bring back, on the return journey from Poland, the passports of Hasidim who had crossed on his train. There was a potential problem in that these papers had been inspected and stamped at the frontier on the outward trip. But the committee knew specialist chemists who could remove the marks.

Sosonkin Liter described the chronic anxiety and sudden alarms on board the train as it neared the border. Some of the groups included boys dressed in female clothes, because the documents obtained by the family specified girls. "And here stands one of these 'girls'-reading *Shmoneezre*, and the passengers' nerves are strained to breaking-point. God forbid that some frontier guard might enter the compartment! Or, in another scene, a mother is holding her little boy, and the child suddenly cries out: 'Mama!' – but on the passport she is entered as 'grandmother'. Or they start to suspect that a particular passenger is working for the Chekists, and fear, even panic, prevails. 'Maybe there's an informer from that organization in every group!'" (Gershuni, p. 186).

When questioned by the CPU, the organizers themselves estimated that the clandestine committee succeeded in getting out of Russia "not less than 500 adults and children, the majority of whom were Hasidim." In the last days of 1946, with the final series of repatriation trains, a few members of the committee made their way to Poland. We now know that in total about 1000 Hasidim were rescued in this way, but, as will become apparent, the human cost would be very high.

From January 1947 the committee was headed by Yeino Kogan, with Mendel Futerfas as his deputy in charge of finance. But the official repatriation program was practically finished. From now on, any Polish citizens who had failed to leave earlier, but now wished to do so, had to follow the regular procedure, presenting their passports to the authorities, obtaining exit visas and then buying tickets on the ordinary rail service. However, even though the Soviet-Polish joint committees had now been disbanded, one could get hold of blank evacuation lists already endorsed with the required signatures and official stamps, and these could still be used. But such forms cost money, up to 55,000 roubles. Some people were willing to pay these sums, and by mid-January, the committee had sent off another 40 Hasidic families.

However, the next attempt to organize an illicit border crossing, although carefully planned, ended in disaster. In early January, Boris Rubinsohn instructed an assistant, Nehim Lis, to purchase, for the sum of 76,000 roubles, evacuation lists to accommodate 25 people. With the repatriation system ending, it was time for the committee's remaining organizers to consider their own future, and several took places on the first evacuation list. These included Mendel Futerfas, whose family had reached Poland in November, Rabbi Shmuel Notik with his wife, Mira, and daughter, Sarra, and Berk Gurevich's teenage sons, Abram and Samuil, who were to travel with the Rabbi's family. Later in the month, Rubinsohn bought tickets for all for the journey from Lvov to Przemyśl, just inside Poland. If this first party crossed successfully, a second group of Hasidim, with false papers already prepared, were to travel the same route in early February.

But on January 24th, at the frontier station of Medyka, the first fugitives were taken off the train and placed under arrest. The local GPU sent a coded telegram. "The counter-intelligence organs of the MGB of the Pre-Carpathian Military District have detained a group of people of Jewish nationality, attempting, by means of counterfeit documents, to leave the country." (Dobruskin file S). They were taken to Lvov and questioned between February 5th and 15th.

With key figures like Futerfas in the hands of the 'organs', the committee was increasingly vulnerable. The Moscow connection too was unravelling. The GPU knew of the missions of Mordehai Dubin and Mordehai Gurarii from several sources, one of whom, code-named 'Oko' (see Ch. 8), ensnared another visitor from the capital, Beri Rikman, resulting in his arrest at the railroad station on February 4th 1947. Mendel Gorelik was also apprehended that day, and the rest of the month saw the arrest of more committee members and of people close to them. As those in custody were compelled to reveal more and more about the group, the circle of arrests would progressively widen. The committee would not give up without a struggle, but the end was in sight. "The arrests began, followed by exile, and the camps. The very best became victims. And even the place where they are buried is not known to us, and nobody has read *Kaddish* over them."

One casualty of the new round of interrogations, was the career of X, the association chairman, as a valued GPU 'source'. The Chekists themselves had harboured doubts about X's ambiguous

loyalties and he had been put under observation, with other agents ordered to seek out any evidence that might expose him. Much appeared satisfactory, and files would record that X continued to collaborate actively with the 'organs', and "having received instructions to cultivate the Zionist, Dubin, and other persons from Moscow", he kept the GPU continually informed "about Dubin and people arriving [with assignments] from him", for example, Mendel Gorelik and Mordehai Gurarii. But, unfortunately for X, a member of the committee, interrogated on March 4th 1947, testified that "a leader of the underground committee, Mochkin, had direct connections with the chairman of the Jewish association in the city of Lvov, to whom he gave passports which had been [unlawfully] obtained or forged, destined for persons being sent abroad. "

Other prisoners also confirmed at interview that "the said X, through representatives of the commission for the evacuation of Polish citizens to Poland, would, on the basis of false passports, enter names on evacuation lists and on vouchers for places on the special trains, [doing this] for Hasids emigrating abroad." This was sufficiently incriminating to bring about X's arrest on March 25th 1947 on suspicion of concealing "his anti-Soviet activity and criminal links with members of an anti-Soviet Zionist organization [operating] both abroad and inside the USSR." (Dobruskin file S).

Adding to his problems was a report from a Moscow informer, stating that at a meeting with Mordehai Dubin in Lvov, "citizen X warned him of preparations for his arrest and advised him to leave Moscow immediately", which Dubin promptly did. When this report was shown to X, he was forced to confess to double-dealing. While he "collaborated with the organs of State Security, informing them of several facts concerning the criminal activity of persons known to him", he simultaneously "actively cooperated with Soviet citizens of Jewish nationality, in procuring for them forged documents for leaving the country, receiving from these latter substantial bribes."

It seems likely that X, having signed up to cooperation with the 'organs', worked fairly conscientiously in their interests. He certainly pleaded this in his petition for rehabilitation during the Khrushchev era, when he declared that "as a covert collaborator with the MGB organs, I informed the organs of all facts and all persons which I knew of and whom I encountered." But his position as Jewish association chairman, his important connections among officials in municipal departments and institutions and in the state evacuation commission, all gave him opportunities to make a great deal of money from bribes. Therefore he did offer real assistance to the Hasidim, supplying them with needed documents and entering many on evacuation lists, and in choosing to do this he risked his liberty and perhaps his life. He would be sentenced, on January 24th 1948, to 5 years in labour camp, under Article 54, Sections 4, 10 and 11, of the Ukrainian Criminal Code.

Meanwhile interrogations were yielding other useful information, as a result of which twelve more Hasidim were detained in mid-February.¹ These included committee members and their volunteer helpers, all in varying degrees implicated in the traffic of people across the border. There were also Moscow Hasidim, like Semen Katsenelenbogen, who had come to Lvov to emigrate, and had been helped to buy the necessary documents and evacuation forms. But most valuable to the GPU were the key insiders. They had not yet moved against Yeino Kogan, but they held Rabbi Shmuel Notik, financial director Futerfas and his close associates, Boris Rubinsohn and Nehim Lis, the former Berdichev *melamed* and Siberian exile Berk Gurevich, and David Katsman, this last having contributed 67,000 rouble to the fund to buy passports for his family and for other Hasidim.

Mendel Futerfas would later protest to the prosecutor's office about the methods employed in the initial interviews. "I signed the interrogation record of February 17th as a result of physical coercion on the part of the counter-intelligence operatives, Schwartz and Velichko, who beat me frequently and mercilessly and forced me to sign a confession concocted by them in my name." The same point was made by Semen Katsenelenbogen at the end of the investigation. "The record with the confessions and slanders of others accused was composed by the interrogators, Schwartz and Velichko, who forced me to sign it. I tried to refuse, for which they beat me severely and put me in a punishment cell. How my signature appeared on the interrogation record of February 26th, I do not know."

The Chekists were no more restrained in their treatment of other prisoners. While mass arrests never again reached the scale of 1937-38, it was with Stalin's personal sanction that the post-war GPU resorted again to the most brutal methods. For this reason, all the detainees confessed to the crimes of which they were accused, and testified in detail against one another. Futerfas was portrayed as "the head of the underground committee for the illegal passage of Hasids abroad."

Ten defendants, including Futerfas, Rubinsohn, Lis, Gurevich, Katsenelenbogen, Notik and David Katsman,² all "active participants in an anti-Soviet organization of Hasids", were presented with indictments which branded them as "intending to betray the Motherland." They were officially tied into the Dobruskin case (see Ch. 8) which centred on the Moscow end of the line. But their interrogation was completed before that of the Moscow detainees and they were dealt with before the latter were indicted. On August 23rd 1947, they were all sentenced to 10 years in labour camp. The 60 year-old Rabbi Notik would live for barely a year, but others would survive. We know of four released in 1956. Futerfas emigrated in 1964 to Britain and then, in 1972, to Israel, where he was a principal organizer of *yeshivot*. He died in 1995 at the age of 88. Both Rubinsohn and Katsenelenbogen settled in the Ukraine, while Gurevich became head of a Jewish school in Paris. The fate of the others is unknown.

Three other detainees, sometime Malakhovka *melamed* Mendel Gorelik (formally included in 'Dobruskin and others') and Mira and Sarra Notik, were also indicted for "intending to betray the Motherland." Gorelik and Mira Notik got 7 years and Sarra Notik 4 years in the camps. Motel Karp, Natan Lempel and Haim Ferber were finally accused of "complicity with persons attempting to betray the Motherland," and sent to labour camp for 5 years; David Meller got 8 years on the same charge. We know nothing of the subsequent history of any of these victims.

The severe GPU clampdown caused many Hasidim to abandon Lvov and return to their homes in Moscow, Leningrad and other cities. But proximity to Poland was a powerful incentive to stay on. Some managed to obtain residence permits and find employment, while others continued to live there illegally. Even those who left the city kept in touch with co-religionists still in Lvov, sent them money and received in return discreetly coded messages providing up-dates on the situation there.

Astonishingly, the clandestine committee was still in existence. Yeino Kogan headed it for a time, and new members replaced those in prison or in hiding. The balance of its work now shifted. Its function mainly "consisted in extending aid to those who had sunk into poverty. They sent parcels to those in jail and helped the needy – those without residence papers and who, hiding from the authorities, sat behind closed doors and never showed themselves in the street for weeks at a time." (Gershuni, pp. 188-89).

The committee sent out couriers to assess the chances of escaping from Russia via other cities in the newly annexed border regions. Promising candidates were Baranovichi in Byelorussia, Vilnius in Lithuania and Chernovtsy in the Bukovina province of western Ukraine. Mendel Futerfas had earlier sent people to Baranovichi to verify reports that train conductors there had several times helped people to cross the border. The Lvov committee now despatched Zelik Persitz and two younger people, named only as Boris and Sonya, to make contact with these same conductors. The GPU learned of their visit from committee members already in custody and filed personal descriptions of Zelik and Boris (Dobruskin file S). The Baranovichi mission was a failure and the envoys returned empty-handed.

Zeiman Butman was sent to Vilnius. A rabbi of his acquaintance told him that the situation there had changed appreciably. A while back it had not been particularly difficult to cross the USSR-Polish border from Lithuania, but recently a number of fugitives had been caught and imprisoned; it was therefore not now so easy to find conductors willing to take the risk.

On the whole, the committee's efforts to find alternative routes were unsuccessful. Lvov remained, as before, the place from which one had the best chance of slipping across the frontier. The problem was that stopping in Lvov for any period was becoming daily more dangerous. However, Rabbi Kogan persisted in his endeavours, revived and reinforced the ties that bound the Hasidic community and organized help for all who needed it. Constant danger lay in possible revelations by committee members already arrested and currently interrogated. In February, as a consequence of just such testimony, Kogan was called for interview. He resolutely denied any connection with the committee and was released, subject to his promise not to leave the city.

Kogan's release was patently a manoeuvre, postponing his arrest in order to uncover his links with other Hasidim. He himself must have realized that he was now constantly watched and would not be free for long. Prudence demanded that he leave town without delay. Through clandestine channels and disguised as a peasant he evaded official vigilance and made his way to Moscow. However, not only he, but all the Hasidim compromised by evidence extracted from committee

members in custody, were now posted as 'wanted' by the police, with particulars of their appearance and distinguishing marks circulated to all regional GPU offices.

Those still at liberty in Lvov, like Shmaryagu Sosonkin and Mordehai Shenkar, nevertheless kept the committee alive. Especially distinguished "by her outstanding social and political skill [and] her extraordinary kindness [was a] woman named Katsenelenbogen, whom everyone called 'Aunt Sara'." (Gershuni, p.189) Her dedication to the cause and the energy and selfless service her assistants rendered to the *Habad*, enabled the committee to prolong its activity into the summer of 1947.

But the situation in Lvov was ever more threatening. Prisoners inside and informers outside were supplying information which would allow the GPU to track down those still active on the committee's business. In September, several families, with Sosonkin, 'Aunt Sara' and a group of students from the Lvov *yeshivah*, left the city and headed south to Chernovtsy.

Chernovtsy, formerly Romanian Cernauti (and before that, Austrian Chernowitz), was now the capital of Soviet Bukovina and only about 50 km. from the new Romanian frontier. It had already received a number of relatively rich Jewish immigrants, who had set up craft workshops with some success. With help from a police agent and travelling without baggage, several of these people subsequently slipped over the border. But small craft enterprises controlled by Jews made it possible for later Jewish arrivals to get work which permitted them to survive economically while observing the Sabbath and the festivals. Meanwhile the proximity of the frontier kept alive the hope of one day quitting the USSR. Dov Vilenkin later recalled that his family had arrived in Lvov early in 1947 "on the very day when the last train carrying Hasidic families departed [for Poland]. People with forged Polish passports were beginning to be arrested. My parents, to avoid arrest, fled to Chernovtsy. They wanted to cross into Romania, but nothing came of it."

The activists from the Lvov committee stayed in Chernovtsy, in relative tranquillity, for more than a year. The adults found work and gradually recovered from the stress which life in Lvov had imposed. The young people took up their studies again in a local *yeshivah*. Then, in 1948, two Hasidim came secretly from Romania. They persuaded three of the *yeshivah* students to escape by returning with them to Romania, and a prominent member of the Lvov committee decided to join the party, together with his 10 year-old grandson. They all departed, promising, if all went well, to let their friends in Chernovtsy know.

However, at the frontier they were apprehended by Romanian border guards and handed over to the authorities. They proffered large bribes, but to no avail. They were interviewed in Russian by a Jew who was a Soviet citizen, and then they were all sent back to Chernovtsy. Incarcerated by the 'organs', they found themselves charged with "betrayal of the Motherland" and, after a closed trial, condemned to 15 years in labour camp. As soon as this became known to Hasidim in Chernovtsy, most of those who had anything to do with the committee rapidly decamped, among them Sosonkin and 'Aunt Sara'.

All the committee members still at large, whether in flight from Lvov or Chernovtsy, were now the subject of a nation-wide hunt which mobilised Chekist agents and informers everywhere. Sosonkin sought refuge in Kutaisi, which (perhaps as a result of the Rebbe's missionary network) has been mentioned more than once in these pages as a centre of Hasidic activity in Georgia. However, he was arrested there in 1949 and sent to the camps, whence he emerged in 1956. He would finally leave Russia in 1964, join Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak and die in 1988. 'Aunt Sara' was captured in 1950, also in Kutaisi, she died in camp. Zaiman and Mendel Shuiman were apprehended in Lvov in 1949, accused of "attempting to leave the country illegally" and given 10-year terms. And on February 2nd 1951, also in Lvov, the GPU arrested David and Abrahama-Aragon Hen and Mordehai Shenkar.

Shenkar was particularly vulnerable, since it was in his apartment that the Lvov committee had assembled four years previously, and the GPU, thanks to evidence from an earlier detainee, was well aware of the fact. Initially they accused him of organizing assistance for Jews intending to cross the frontier unlawfully, but later they attached him to a group case against "an anti-Soviet bourgeois-nationalist underground organization of Hasids." Like the others implicated in this alleged "organization", Shenkar was condemned to 10 years and shipped off to the Vorkuta camp complex in the Arctic, where the camp administration vainly tried to recruit him as an informer. He was, like so many of his fellow victims, released in a Khrushchev amnesty in 1956.

CHAPTER 8.

THE DOBRUSKIN CASE.

In 1944-45 many Moscow Hasidim returned home from their wartime sojourn in Central Asia, the Volga lands or Siberia. Among them was David Braverman, who resolved to call together all the friends and acquaintances with whom he had worked in Central Asia and elsewhere. These included many long involved in the Hasidic resistance. Avrom Dreizin (Mayer), Mordehai Dubin, Beri Levertov, Leiba Kreinin, Mordehai Gurarii. Beri Rikman and Yakov Raskin have all figured in earlier chapters, but there were other proven activists Shmuel Bortnovsky, Shmuel Botvinnik, Moisei Dobruskin, Zusya Yevzlin and Lizik Groinem. The group accepted Braverman's suggestion that they establish a fund for mutual aid and to pay rabbis and *melamedim* who would secretly visit homes to teach the children. Also in Moscow was Shneur Pinsky, a *Tomehei Temimim* graduate who had become involved in Hasidic education there as early as 1923. His son, Israel Pinsky, remembered the effort to revitalize the religious community in the capital.

"The pre-war circle of acquaintances was gradually reconstituted. It was, admittedly, a narrower circle than before. Many of my father's friends had gone off to Tashkent and Samarkand, several had managed to leave the USSR and some had perished in the camps or died a natural death. But, in any event, the Hasidic hall at the central synagogue on Saturdays and holidays was full to overflowing.

After the war, in spite of the fact that arrests were taking place all around, my father continued to lecture to adults and children on the Torah and Hasidic doctrine, frequently without payment or for a token salary. He never got home before midnight after his daily and evening labours and was on his feet again at 5 a.m. Among his new pupils were people no longer young, some in their fifties or sixties. On Saturdays they used to come to study at our home. I remember the magnificent *Kiddush* [prayer of sanctification over the wine], which took place following the reading of the book *Tanya*", Shneur Zaiman's exposition of *Habad* teaching. (Vagner, p. 188).

Avrom Genin, who returned having lost both legs at the front, visited the synagogue in Marima Roshcha and was at first received rather circumspectly. The times were difficult and all unfamiliar faces were greeted with suspicion, since "cut of three new [arrivals], two would turn out to be informers." (Gorin). Genin later recalled how important it was for him then to become part of a religious community.

"The Mariina Roshcha synagogue was not merely a refuge for me [but] a little island where I had no need to hide, where it was possible to talk with my own people in my own language and where they would understand all my problems and share all my sorrows and joys, Jews were drawn there, and I, a very lonely man at that time, was ready to give my all for those people; they became like my own flesh and blood. Only God knows what I did not do for that synagogue. It had to be cleaned – I washed it down. It had to be painted – I painted it. I did building work, I transported folk to and from the synagogue, I procured various things." (Gorin).

However, the whole Hasidic enterprise was threatened by massive infiltration by GPU undercover agents and their voluntary collaborators. As the file shows, the build-up to the Dobruskin case would be an object lesson in the effective deployment of informers. By summer 1945 they were taking a keen interest in the Hasidic activists who had returned to the city. 'Sources', as they were termed in GPU files, reported not only on significant individual encounters and group meetings but also on the most trivial everyday conversations. Their GPU controllers incorporated the most important of these innumerable titbits of information in special 'Memoranda', digesting "material supplied by agents", and these in turn would contribute to the files of evidence being accumulated concerning the nefarious activities of prominent Hasidim.

The numbers and identities of those serving in this army of spies changed frequently, but some at least were for a long period close to the Hasidic leadership. One, code-named 'Fuchs', was a near acquaintance of Moisei Dobruskin and had the duty of 'nursing' him. Several of the infiltrators had worked within the community during its Central Asian evacuation and had accompanied the Hasidim on their return. For example, 'Umansky' continued in Moscow the role he had played in Samarkand; he was friendly with the activist Golodovsky and often attempted to lure him into

significant disclosures. 'Lisa', a veteran informer from the pre-war era, also moving from Samarkand to nurse her clientele, reported on meetings and conversations of Hasidim with the *melamed* Beri Levertov. It is possible that one of her sources belonged to his immediate circle. Meanwhile, 'Leshch' (Bream) wrote only about Levertov and had obviously been assigned the task of shadowing him personally. Duplicating surveillance of important targets guarded against double-dealing of the kind in which the informer X would be detected in Lvov.

The agent 'Kiselev' was employed in the synagogue and his reports therefore provided valuable information about new people appearing there. Agents 'Bukhgalter' (Accountant) and Varshavsky (Warsaw man) both described conversations in the synagogue, but mentioned no names. 'Oko' (Eye), a Lvov Hasid in GPU employ, has already been noted as monitoring the events described in Chapter 7. The Chekists were acutely aware of the importance of links between Moscow and Lvov at this time, and reports from 'Oko' informed them about Hasidim arriving from Moscow, Leningrad, Tashkent and Samarkand in the hope of joining the exodus.

All these 'sources' contributed to a bulky 'Memorandum' in the Dobruskin case-file. Extracts from their reports provide information on the clandestine activities of Moscow Hasidim and also shed light on the close contacts between them and their brethren in other cities, especially in Central Asia and the Ukraine. Jews were of course aware of the danger. 'Lisa' reported on March 4th 1945 that "Hasid-clericals, returned to Moscow, are trying to keep themselves apart, since, as Yakobi and Bach explained, the Hasids do not wish to attend the synagogue, because, in visiting the synagogue, they risk coming under observation by the NKVD."

In the summer and fall of 1945, 'Fuchs' supplied a constant stream of information gleaned from various conversations with Moisei Dobruskin. His report of June 20 1945 stated: "On June 17th of this year, in [Shmuel] Bortnovsky's apartment, there was a meeting of former members of the Shneersohnite organization *Temimim*. At this meeting there occurred the reading of Shneersohnite literature. Dobruskin described how Levertov, Beri, and Braverman, David, both former Shneersohnites, collect money from those attending the Mariina Roshcha synagogue, for transmission to Samarkand. In Samarkand there is a Shneersohnite *yeshibot* (a theological academy) with 300 students. This source has discovered that next week the former members of the Shneersohnite organization are to hold a meeting to celebrate the anniversary of Shneersohn's escape from captivity."

This last point was confirmed when 'Fuchs' wrote a week later. "On June 26th this source talked with Dobruskin, who said that on 24.VI.45, in the village of Bakovo, there had been a meeting of Shneersohnites, dedicated to the anniversary of Shneersohn's escape from prison. At the meeting was *Khozyain* [the Boss] was a code-name for Levertov]; Braverman, David; Avtson, Meier; Bortnovsky and Dobruskin himself, in all 10 persons. One of the leaders of the said group, Braverman, David, has, in the past, been closely associated with Shneersohn, and, during his time in Rostov-on-Don, studied in a *yeshibot* headed by Shneersohn."

On July 17th 'Fuchs' reported. "Levertov openly solicited donations for a person repressed by the NKVD, Shmul Abramovich. It is [Levertov] who organizes the despatch of parcels to the latter. This source is aware that in Kraskovo there exists an illegal *heder* (a religious school for children). The teacher in this *heder* is a Shneersohnite called Sadye."

When the community first heard rumours about Moscow Hasidim crossing into Poland, 'Fuchs' learned of them from talk in the synagogue and informed his masters on September 14th 1945. "Nison Nemanov has left with his family for Poland and apparently Levertov's sons have gone with him. Dobruskin told this source that Braverman, David, and his father-in-law, Raskin, have left not long ago for Poland. This source is aware that Shneersohnites have recently begun to congregate in Moscow. A few days ago, a prominent Shneersohnite, the wealthy [Israel] Konson, aged 40, former adjutant of Zaiman Shneersohn, arrived from Tashkent."

Hasidic inter-city connections were obviously thriving. On December 20th, 'Fuchs' reported that "Konson confronted Levertov's son-in-law [Nohim Gurevich], reproaching him for not sending his 10 year-old son to study in Samarkand, and Levertov's son-in-law agreed to send the boy there." And some months later, on March 18th 1946: "This source has learned from Dobruskin that one of the leading Shneersohnites, Yevzlin, Zusya Abramovich, has arrived from Central Asia. [He] studied

in his time at a Lubavich *yeshivot* [and is] a fervent devotee of the Hasidic *Habad*. Yevzlin told Dobruskin that he would not stay in Moscow but would be going on to Poland."

In July 1946, the word spread that Isroel Konson, visiting from Tashkent, had been arrested. In this connection, agent 'Varshavsky' noted the firm belief among Hasidim attending the synagogue that Konson had been detained "specifically because at Easter he entertained Dubin as a guest." 'Varshavsky' also confirmed reports that Mordehai Dubin "enjoys great authority in the religious world and is popular not only in the USSR but also abroad."

On July 24th 1946, 'Kiselev' informed the GPU about a trip to Central Asia by Beri Levertov, referring to him under his code-name, 'the Boss'. "It has become known to this source that the target, *Khozyain*, spent three weeks in Tashkent and Samarkand. In Samarkand is the *yeshivot* where his two sons are studying. From different sources it is known that while Polish Jews were in Central Asia the *yeshivot* was maintained largely with their help, but since the Polish Jews have left, the *yeshivot* has been in difficulties. They have started to squeeze the *yeshivotniki* [students] and, most importantly, there are serious financial problems."

A follow-up claimed that "according to the latest information from Finger, David, *Khozyain* did not find his children in Samarkand, because all the students of the *yeshivot*, as well as the directors, had made off in the direction of the Iranian frontier." The Chekists were sufficiently interested for Moscow to instruct Tashkent and Samarkand to keep a close watch on any meetings the object of their attention might have. As a sequel to this visit, the Central Asian GPU significantly increased the level of activity in its informer network.

Yeino Kogan appeared in Moscow in September 1946 as an envoy from Nison Nemanov. In a gathering at the synagogue, he communicated the resolve of the Tashkent and Samarkand Hasidim to try, by any means possible, to escape abroad; he himself then departed for Lvov, where he joined the clandestine committee. In their turn, Moscow Jews began, at the synagogue or in secret meetings in apartments, to discuss possible ways of leaving the USSR. There was much talk about Lvov, for this was late 1946, when, as Chapter 7 has shown, hopeful developments there were arousing the interest of Hasidim everywhere.

On October 8th, 'Kiselev' dutifully reported on these discussions and on rumours he had heard. "In the synagogue there are conversations to the effect that in Lvov, a point of departure for Poland, there is an organization which, for a consideration, arranges the transfer of Jews across the frontier." And 'Fuchs', on November 4th, also reported on preparations for illegal emigration. "Leibengarts, Abram-Shmuel, recently arrived from Lvov (he is staying in Perovoye Polye), intends to sell his home and return to Lvov, taking his family."

Down in the south, Lvov informer 'Oko' added a contribution on November 20th 1946, with news about migrants from Moscow and Leningrad. "I wish to inform you of the arrival in Lvov, from Moscow, of citizen Gurarye [Mordehai Gurarii], a very distinguished person (the son of well-known manufacturers), about 50 years of age. He approached me on behalf of Dubin and asked me to investigate the chances of crossing illegally into Poland, because he wished to emigrate with his family." 'Oko' added that this Gurarye claimed to be "a close and trusted associate of Mordehai Dubin" and that he and Dubin "used to discuss together all serious questions." 'Oko' assured the GPU that he had not told the man from Moscow anything about possible ways of escaping abroad; instead, he had merely promised to discuss the matter with the relevant people and send Gurarii their response via Mordehai Dubin. 'Oko' anticipated a meeting with Dubin fairly soon, because "Dubin told Gurarye to tell me that I must definitely come to Moscow because he [Dubin] had important matters to discuss with me personally, and was impatiently awaiting me."

The GPU officer to whom 'Oko' reported found this information significant enough to pass it on to his superiors. "Dubin intends to confer with the source on the following matter, namely that there is a need, supposedly, to create in Moscow a group or organization with representatives of Jewry from inside and outside the USSR, and he, Dubin, will head this mission or organization, and for this reason, Dubin even refuses to take on the leadership of the Jewish association in Moscow."

When, in the first months of 1947, the GPU started to arrest members of the underground Lvov committee, the news quickly reached Moscow, where Hasidim came to the grim but inescapable conclusion that emigration via Lvov was no longer a realistic proposition. On February 28th 1947, 'Fuchs' described the atmosphere prevailing in Moscow.

"A few days ago, in the Mariina Roshcha synagogue, there appeared a young Hasid Shneersohnite, who had travelled in the fall [1946] from Samarkand to Lvov via Moscow, where he had called on Levertov in the synagogue here. Now he was returning from Lvov, obtained Levertov's address [from someone] at the synagogue, and went to see him. Apparently he had come directly from the station, because he had his baggage with him. Later on, in the synagogue, Levertov explained that he, Levertov, would have to go to Kazan, where, it seems, many people required the services of a *mohel*."

Berl Levertov, *Khozyain* to the GPU, had strong links with Kazan Hasidim. He regularly collected money to send them to finance teachers' salaries and student stipends in the Kazan *yeshivah*. When he next wrote, on March 13th, 'Fuchs' reported that two days after Levertov's departure for Kazan, a young Jew, unknown to the spy, arrived in the synagogue during evening prayers, in a very agitated state, and demanded to see Levertov immediately. When they told him Levertov was away, the young man clutched at his head in despair and cried out: "What? In Kazan? What can I do?" At that point 'Fuchs' gave him Levertov's address and asked where he had come from. The young Jew hesitated, said "Samarkand", then changed his mind and said "Tashkent". But when the informer repeated the question, the young man lowered his voice and said "I haven't come from Samarkand. I've come from Lvov." "How are things in Lvov?" asked 'Fuchs', to which the man replied: "It's finished there. It's no place for us." The informer's report concluded: "Then he jumped onto streetcar No. 41 as it passed, and vanished."

As the GPU demolished the Lvov operation, the Hasidic community in Moscow began to look for other exit routes. As we know, the surviving members of the Lvov committee had reached the same conclusion and were themselves seeking alternatives. Rumours circulating about successful escape bids were eagerly discussed in the synagogue. 'Fuchs' reported on August 5th 1947 concerning one such story. "The Shneersohnite Osher, son of the rabbi 'Batumer' [Batumi-born Rabbi Olevsky], is going, not to Samarkand as earlier reported, but through Kiev to Chernovtsy."

It is, with hindsight/obvious that a community so saturated with informers had little hope of concealing anything or avoiding punishment when the 'organs' finally decided to strike. The flood of information kept the Chekists fully abreast of developments throughout 1945-46, but they were in no hurry. They established the identities of new people at the synagogue and those coming illegally to live without residence permits, accumulated 'operational material' on the leaders and activist Hasidim and traced their links with other centres.

But Moscow GPU could not wait indefinitely. The interconnections between Hasidic groups meant that the arrests of January-February 1947 in Lvov, marking an all-out onslaught on the emigration network, necessarily precipitated similar remedial action at the Moscow end of the clandestine chain. To some extent, the Lvov events were a catalyst. Chapter 7 noted that on February 4th 1947 Berl Rikman, aged 49, prominent in Hasidic circles in Moscow, was arrested at Lvov station while boarding the train for Vilnius. The charge was "attempting to flee abroad." In a coded telegram in the Dobruskin case-file, MGB Counter-intelligence for the Pre-Carpathian Military District informed higher authority that "in the course of elucidating the motives for and circumstances of Rikman's perpetration of this crime; he identified himself as a resident of Moscow and explained his attempt to cross the state frontier by his discontent with life in the Soviet Union."

Rikman had arrived in Lvov on February 2nd, ostensibly on a business trip but in reality to talk with the underground committee. He had previously met with Mendel Futerfas (in GPU custody since late January), Mendel Gorelik and Yeino Kogan, and he was also to see Boris Rubinsohn and Moishe-Haim Dubrovsky. But his immediate contact on arrival was one of the local Hasidim recommended by Mordehai Dubin. Unfortunately, this confidant was the long-standing police spy, 'Oko'. As a result the GPU was able to monitor all Rikman's movements and arrest him as he prepared to leave the city.

Rikman was interrogated in Lvov for two months, as the GPU probed the committee's Moscow links. He came up against the same interrogators as his Lvov brethren, and in his petition to the military prosecutor's office on April 7th 1955, requesting rehabilitation, he would voice the same protests. "The interrogator. Major Schwartz, tried to get me to incriminate myself and to slander other accused persons, by means of systematic and savage beatings and by keeping me for almost a month in a semi-subterranean asphalted cell, unheated and with broken windows (this was in

February). For the whole month, apart from 300-400 grammes of bread and a pinch of sugar per day, I received nothing, not even a cup of hot water." (Dobruskin case-file).

When Lvov had finished with Rikman, Moscow claimed him. By order from the capital on April 18th 1947, Rikman, "together with the initial material from the investigation of his case", was transferred to Moscow for further examination. He was lodged in the Butyrka prison, where, in his first interrogation, he rejected the evidence which other imprisoned Hasidim had provided as well as that which the GPU claimed to have itself collected. As in all such cases, the Chekists had drawn on informers' reports to compile a comprehensive dossier on his activities over many years. Graduating from *Tomehei Temimim* in the early 1920s, he had taught in a Dnepropetrovsk *beeler*, and in 1931 moved to a *yeshivah* in the notable Hasidic community of Malakhovka. He spent the war as a *melamed* in Tashkent, and from late 1944 he instructed pupils at homes in Moscow and the nearby village of Kraskovo. However, Rikman denied this entire history of underground activity, stating only that "I call myself a Hasid, because my father, my grandfather and my great-grandfather worshipped in the Hasidic manner." (Dobruskin case-file).

With the Chekist licence to torture renewed by Stalin, prisoners were abused and physically ill-treated in Moscow as in Lvov, and in the end Rikman signed all the dubious records of his interrogation, confirming that he "had joined an illegal organization of Hasids in 1942 on the basis of anti-Soviet bourgeois nationalist convictions, and took an active part in its operations."

On August 8th 1947 Moisei Dobruskin, Beri Levertov and Mordehai Gurarii were detained by the GPU and in October it was the turn of Lazar-Haim Gurevich (Israel Pinsky calls him Haim-Eliezer). A note attached to their section of the case-file emphasised that all those arrested "had been under observation by the organs since 1945", and that their part in illicit activities like organizing *yeshivot*, collecting funds to pay rabbis and *melamedim* and aiding relatives and acquaintances to emigrate illegally – all this had long been known to the GPU "from operational material."

The evidence amassed in this investigation implicated 32 Hasidim, in large part a roll of honour of veterans in the long struggle to preserve and pass on the faith to succeeding generations. A fair number had permanently escaped the GPU's clutches by leaving the USSR, mostly from Lvov in 1946. Safely abroad were Nison Nemanov, Avrom Dreizin (Mayer), Shmuel-Isroel Levin, Benyamin Gorodetsky and David Braverman. A goodly number of the accused were on the run, probably inside the USSR, and were being hunted by the police; one of these was Rabbi Mordehai Dubin.¹ On the grounds, not without foundation, that all "Shneersohnite" activity was part of a single conspiracy, a contingent of Hasidim arrested in connection with the Lvov committee, including Mendel Futerfas and Mendel Gorelik, was added to the Dobruskin party, but, as recounted in Chapter 7, interrogation had been completed and they were sentenced on August 22nd. Yeino Kogan was arrested later; having avoided capture in Lvov and lived illegally in Moscow since March 1947, he now fled to Leningrad, but was apprehended there on December 3rd 1947. Another fugitive, Shmuel Bortnovsky, was also caught in December in Riga. Betsadel Vilshansky, Zaiman Serebryansky, Nohim Gurevich, Yankel Raskin, Zusya Yevzlin, Perets Mochkin and Isroel Konson were also among those accused.

From Moscow or from Lvov, whether in custody or not, all those listed had their often multi-layered criminal records, with all the supporting 'evidence', incorporated in the Dobruskin case-file. One can see how this file itself became an archive recording a large part of the history of the *Habad* in the USSR.

As far as the Moscow end was concerned, 62 year-old Beri Levertov, product of a Lyubavichi *yeshivah*, *melamed* prominent Moscow activist since 1922, was singled out for a leading role. He was accused of having for several years "directed the Hasidic underground and [of having] after the war headed the Moscow association of Hasids." In his personal dossier there was a note to the effect that "in the whole period of existence of Soviet rule, he has never worked in any state institution or enterprise."

In the rich harvest of offences suggested by informers' reports concerning *Khozyain*, the interrogators highlighted his speeches at Hasidic gatherings celebrating important dates. In November 1945, at a meeting in the Mariina Roshcha synagogue to commemorate the release from prison of Menahem-Mendel Shneersohn, Third Lubavich Rebbe, Levertov said:

"Let the services of this great man be an example to us in life." On December 2nd 1946, on the anniversary of the release from captivity of Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn, the *melamed* delivered a forceful address at a Hasidic gathering in Malakhovka and on December 12th he spoke with equal effect in Tarasovka.

On Levertov's position in the Moscow Hasidic community, the undercover agent 'Leshch' reported that "Beri Kobilyaker [a pseudonym] was the principal figure in [Yosef-Itzhak] Shneersohn's company and played a major role in the Jewish religious movement. And now Beri heads the Hasids who live in and around Mariina Roshcha district. Among Hasids he enjoys, at the present time, great authority."

All the other detainees confirmed that Levertov did indeed direct "the Moscow organization of Hasids", that he was the founder of the mutual aid fund into which "every member paid a specific sum, [and that] from this fund came the money for the illegal education of Hasids' children in a religious spirit."

But the 'organs' had plenty of others to work on. Rabbi Mordehai Gurarii, who enjoyed the complete confidence of Mordehai Dubin and the Hasidic community in general, had returned from his mission to Lvov with no suspicions about 'Oko', his contact in that city. Back in Moscow, he was equally unaware that one of his acquaintances was the undercover agent 'Umansky', assigned to keep him under constant observation. On April 17th 1947, 'Umansky' had reported that "Gurarii appears in the synagogue with Levertov and they both talk for a long time with Dubin. When anyone enters the room, they fall silent."

Now a prisoner, Mordehai Gurarii was questioned by a certain Dmitriev, who beat him cruelly. Gurarii turned to the prison governor with a request that a prosecutor be present to witness his treatment, but at the next session he again found himself alone with Dmitriev, who, "holding my petition in one hand, knocked out six of my teeth and brutally assaulted me." After this, Gurarii understood that "there was no defence, and not having the strength to withstand further tortures, I said that I was ready to sign anything, no matter what, providing the interrogations were quickly brought to an end."

It is therefore not surprising that detainees signed interrogation records containing confessions which were patently fabricated. "Everyone signed without reading." The charges against Gurarii were the standard ones (anti-Soviet organization etc.), plus that, based on information from 'Oko' of fulfilling "the role of emissary of the Moscow organization of Hasids in maintaining links with the Lvov underground committee."

Lazar-Haim Gurevich, *Tomehei Temimim* graduate, had lived in Moscow since 1922, worked as a *melamed* a covert *beder* and also visited Hasidic households to instruct children in the Torah. Arrested on October 31st 1947, he was charged with membership "of an illegal anti-Soviet organization of Hasids" and with educating the children of Hasidim "in a religious nationalist spirit." At first he held firm and flatly rejected all allegations. When asked why, "knowing of the treacherous intention of Sadye to escape abroad", he had not informed the authorities, he proudly replied: "Believers cannot betray their own."

However, that same interrogator Dmitriev, with a mixture of menaces and violence, soon forced the prisoner to sign "anything and everything, without reading." Gurevich would later write to the prosecutor's office, complaining that "during questioning, the interrogator frequently intimidated me by threatening that if I did not provide evidence incriminating myself, he would arrest members of my family, and once he said that my son was already in custody and was in the next cell to mine."

Moisei Dobruskin was apparently viewed less harshly. He had, albeit unwittingly, provided 'Fuchs' with all the latest intelligence concerning the Hasidic community, and the 'organs' seem to have considered that this warranted a little indulgence. They concluded that Dobruskin had not been much of a religious zealot, had never been in Lvov and had never planned to emigrate. They therefore charged him only with failure to inform the authorities of what he knew; the irony, in view of the flow of information to 'Fuchs', was blatant. Incidentally, this is a classic illustration of the fact that the name at the head of the case-file in no way indicated a leading role. As in examples cited earlier, it often seems to have been an almost random choice, frequently falling on a minor figure.

Threats and assaults apparently did not produce sufficient 'evidence' to satisfy the Chekists. So prisoners who had signed up to serve as informers were placed in cells with the 'detained Hasidim. Anonymity was preserved, their reports being filed under the numbers 2 to 13. The people they watched were named in these reports, although one or two had code-names; Levertov, as before, was referred to as *Khozyain*. We can cite examples. Informer No. 10 talked to Lazar-Haim Gurevich in their cell on November 12th 1947. "Further conversation with Gurevich revealed that one of the principal organizers of the illegal transport of Jews abroad was Levertov, commanding great authority among Jews and collecting large sums for this purpose."

On January 20th 1948, No. 4 reported that he had asked Gurevich: "Where did the money come from for emigration?" Gurevich replied: "The funds to finance illegal emigration consisted of voluntary donations and also came from the large sums rich Jews were charged for arranging their flight abroad. With these donations and these charges the passage of poor Jews abroad was financed." It is doubtful whether Gurevich, or any other prisoner, really expressed himself in language so closely attuned to GPU requirements, but discreet editing was part of every informer's professional duty.

On February 6th 1948, those of the accused who were now held – for many had evaded capture and the Lvov group had been disposed of – faced formal indictment as members of "an anti-Soviet bourgeois-nationalist organization." In detail, the accusations were, firstly, of "uniting Jews and working on them with the intention of inculcating anti-Soviet religious-nationalist tendencies", and, secondly, of "preparing and putting into practice a mass illegal movement of Jews animated by anti-Soviet bourgeois-nationalist feelings, from the USSR to [countries] abroad – Poland, England, America [and] Palestine." Synagogues, functioning outside the law, were "the base for religious-nationalist indoctrination of Jews", while "for education, in an anti-Soviet religious-nationalist spirit, of Jewish children and young people", the basic instruments were the *hederim* and *yeshivot* functioning at that time in Moscow, Tashkent and Samarkand. The indictment particularly noted that during World War II "the organization also carried out propaganda and practical work to promote evasion and rejection, by Jews, of participation in military activities."

Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak Shneersohn was named as overall leader of the "organization" According to the GPU, he sent his instructions covertly "through coded correspondence and general directives." In summer 1946, allegedly on his orders, special "underground committees" had been established and began to function in frontier cities, and the most wellknown and effective of these had been "the Lvov underground committee."

The defendants tried to argue that there was absolutely no need to conduct "agitation" among Hasidim to induce them to emigrate. "Many religious Jews have always dreamed of leaving the Soviet Union for abroad." They explained that the primary reason lay in the desire of Hasidic Jews to educate their children in religious schools, something which, in the USSR, could be done neither openly nor at public expense. All such arguments were futile and, indeed, offensive.

On April 8th 1948, the prisoners were all sentenced to 10 years in labour camps, except for Moisei Dobruskin, who, as a candidate for leniency, got 7 years; despatched to Karlag at Karaganda, he would return to Moscow after his sentence. The 'tenners' were distributed among various camps. Beri Levertov went to Temlag and died after a year. Lazar-Haim Gurevich was sent to Intlag and later to an invalid camp in the Komi republic Berl Rikman, suffering bouts of sickness, moved between Karlag and the Far East (the Kolyma), and Mordehai Gurarii between Norilsk, Khabarovsk and Dubrovlag (Mordvin ASSR) Both of these ultimately got back to Moscow.

Veino Kogan, besides being a member of "the illegal anti-Soviet Jewish bourgeois-nationalist organization of Hasids", was naturally arraigned as "head of an underground committee in Lvov, connected to Moscow Hasids." The Chekists, probably resenting his success in living with a false passport and temporarily evading their grasp, treated him with appalling brutality, and he rapidly confessed to every conceivable crime. He "engaged in propaganda in favour of the flight abroad of Jews with nationalist inclinations, took an active part in the practical preparation and realization of their illegal passage abroad, personally directed the collection of moneys, obtained forged documents and by their means transported abroad Jews living in the USSR." Finally, he himself planned to flee the country.

In March 1948, "in connection with the exposure, during the investigative process, of a further series of offences committed by him", Kogan's case was set aside for separate consideration. On April 17th he was sentenced, under Article 58-10 and 11, to 25 years and transported to Karlag, where he died in February 1949 at the age of 50.

Mordehai Dubin was captured in mid-1948 as he left a Moscow synagogue. Earlier chapters have made clear how many scores the GPU had to settle with him, and he had been constantly watched since his arrival in Moscow in 1945. Most of the congregation of the synagogue 'turned to him in all questions of religion and daily life.' Israel Pinsky later recollected that it was at that time impossible to imagine the synagogue without "the sincere Hasid", Rabbi Dubin.

"Rabbi Mordehai was an amazingly intelligent and modest man. He used to pray very quietly and for a long time. On Saturdays he usually arrived at the synagogue at 8 and left at about 3 or 4 o'clock. He always sat at the back of the hall and tried to attract as little attention as possible. But, nevertheless, everyone considered it an honour just to go up and exchange greetings. From a distance it looked like a ceremonial procession. A large number of Jews from the big choral hall, including rabbis, synagogue elders and similarly respected persons would in turn approach Rabbi Mordehai and say 'Gut Shabes!' [Yiddish: Good Sabbath].

Rabbi Dubin was one of the organizers and directors of the illegal emigration of Hasidic families to Poland after the war. He also inaugurated the tradition of holding a general and joyful celebration in the synagogue on the occasion of the *Simhat Torah* [Day of Joy, the last day of *Sukkot*]. Dubin would stand in the middle of the merrymaking, dispensing vodka and Jewish honey-cakes. He would dance and sing. He loved to dance with the children and could entertain them for hours. During those times he would change before our eyes, becoming ten or twenty years younger." (Vagner, pp. 188-89).

Informers had long since supplied quite enough for the Chekists to proceed against Dubin, but they had postponed his arrest in order to track his many contacts, especially with visiting representatives of foreign charities, and his brief period in hiding made little difference to their plans. Initially he faced the normal charge of "participation in an anti-Soviet Jewish nationalist organization." The GPU was most interested in his foreign charitable connections and his correspondence with Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak and the latter's representatives in Poland, France and England. The most weighty allegation was that "Dubin participated in the organization of the illegal passage abroad of Jewish bourgeoisie and spread slanderous fabrications about the Soviet government, and also maintained criminal links with Jews with hostile attitudes, inciting them to flee abroad."

Dubin denied everything, and on October 16th 1948 was condemned to 10 years' imprisonment. He served his sentence in Moscow's Butyrka jail, where he was taken ill in 1951. Subjected to psychiatric assessment within the penal system, he was judged mentally ill and on January 12th 1952 was taken to Tula psychiatric prison hospital for "compulsory medical treatment in conjunction with isolation." But in 1956 a nurse from that hospital called on Jewish acquaintances and told them: "One of yours has just died at our place. He was a strange man. He lived on honey and nuts." (Khovkin, p. 289).

The condemned Hasidim did not escape surveillance even in the camps and jails to which they were sent. In the spring of 1954, the commandant of Dubrovlag in the Mordvin ASSR more than once informed Moscow about repeated and fruitless attempts by the camp security officer to recruit Mordehai Gurarii as an internal informer. Later, the commandant reported that "serving his punishment in the camp, Gurarii engages in anti-Soviet agitation among the convicts [and] praises the bourgeois order in Israel." Moreover, on March 21st 1954, "Gurarii said to our undercover agent 'Berezin': 'If I only stay alive and healthy and I get out of here, then, no matter what it costs me, I will get to Israel'."

That last report could have spelled more danger for Gurarii, because, in numerous complaints and petitions sent from camp to the prosecutor's office, the Supreme Court and various members of the Soviet government, he had always sworn that he never had any intention of leaving the USSR. But there were great changes in the air, for Stalin was dead and the era of rehabilitation was beginning.

CHAPTER 9

THE LAST DAYS OF STALIN.

On April 4th and 5th 1952, at Elektrostal near Moscow, the Hasidim Yakov Fridman, Motya Aerilevich, Yosif Gizunterman and Samuil Peretsman were arrested. The case-file (Fridman H.-Sh. and others') records that all were active in a group which arranged "illegal Jewish religious gatherings – *minyany*." Yakov Fridman was cantor in the local Jewish association. It was true that in his home, as in others, a quorum for synagogue services, the *minyan*, would assemble during Jewish festivals, and religious ceremonies would take place. But the four were also accused of being "members of a so-called arbitration tribunal", which the Chekists saw as grounds for a further, judicially more concrete charge of "contravening Soviet laws."

The offences dated back some five years. As in nearby Moscow, Hasidim had returned to Elektrostal from the regions where they had spent the war years, and had began to rebuild community life. In summer 1947, in order to comprehend and resolve differences within the renascent religious community, Yakov Fridman had proposed the establishment of a tribunal to hear and reconcile opposing claims. The occasion was a quarrel which had broken out between two Jews on August 15th 1947 over some domestic matter and which had ended in fisticuffs, one of the parties suffering severe blows to the head. On August 19th, the victim submitted a formal complaint to the local court, with a demand that criminal charges be brought. His attacker, having received the summons, turned to Fridman, as a man much respected by the Jewish population, with a request that a way be found to resolve the matter peacefully.

It was then that the cantor hit upon the idea of drawing upon the Jewish tradition of arbitration. The case-file represents him as feeling that "it was very damaging when a dispute between Jews gets as far as a court case." Jews have "an ancient tradition of solving such problems through their own comrades' courts." To use the term 'comrades' court' (*tovarishchesky sud*) shrewdly suggested its legitimacy through kinship with the similarly-named low-level popular tribunals instituted by the Soviets. In any case Fridman was convinced that it was not in the interests of the Jewish community that Soviet courts should convict Jews and sentence them to confinement in the camps.

Motya Aerilevich accepted the task of arranging for the election of members of the proposed tribunal. As a result, Yakov Fridman became chairman and the newly constituted body arranged sessions at his apartment. The other members were Aerilevich, Gizunterman and Peretsman. At their first meeting to consider the dispute, the offending party admitted culpability and begged forgiveness for his hot temper and for the blows he had struck. The tribunal decided to fine him 1700 roubles. The fine was paid in and the tribunal deliberated on the distribution of the money. Obviously most should go to the victim. But 200 roubles were to be sent to Ovruch (Zhitomir province) to help the impoverished family of Fridman's sister, 150 roubles were donated to an equally needy old lady, a neighbour of Fridman's, and a small sum was set aside for the supper of reconciliation which, in the Jewish tradition, should crown the tribunal's final session.

At its second session, the tribunal heard a plea from the defendant, requesting that 500 roubles of the fine be diverted to help his brother's wife; the brother was in prison and a letter from him described his desperate situation. The tribunal granted the request.

All judgements were properly recorded, with two copies signed by the tribunal members and handed to the disputants. Then followed the ceremonial supper. On August 28th 1947, the plaintiff withdrew his application to the Soviet court and the case was dropped "in view of the agreement between the two sides."

And then, five years later, the whole business was suddenly disinterred and everyone who had had a part in the tribunal was arrested. The 'crime' was hardly high up in the hierarchy of Hasidic resistance activities. It is difficult not to see yet again the impact of major historical developments on the detailed treatment of political offenders, and, in this case, specifically of Jews. Launched in 1946, Andrei Zhdanov's campaign for a truly 'Soviet' literature had included violent attacks on all Western influence, and over the following years the tone grew increasingly ugly, with much abuse of "rootless cosmopolitans", which meant Jews. Then, in February 1949, Jews in Palestine won a decisive victory

over ill-coordinated Arab armies, and the emergence of the state of Israel radically raised both the morale of Jews in Russia and the resentment and suspicion with which they were traditionally regarded by many. There were now even stronger grounds for seeing every Jew as a potential traitor.

In December 1949, Stalin's 70th birthday was celebrated. The dictator was old, his suspicions and prejudices were increasingly on view, and one of them was certainly anti-Semitism. His personal endorsement brought a new intensity to official vilification, culminating in 1952 with the execution of several outstanding Jewish writers and the grotesque allegations of the 'doctors' plot'. Things were moving towards a repetition of the Terror of 1937-38.

Like their colleagues everywhere, Moscow Chekists were eager to distinguish themselves by anti-Semitic zeal and a total lack of scruple in their methods. Participation five years earlier in a traditional Jewish arbitration procedure was now depicted as a criminal attempt to "by-pass Soviet laws and replace it by Jewish traditions," an act which clearly branded the accused as "inveterate nationalists."

Yosif Gizunterman was a tribunal member and a permanent presence in the *minyan* which assembled at Fridman's place. In a search at his home, Chekists seized a Torah, prayer-shawls and religious books in Hebrew. Cizunterman argued that tribunal membership was in no way criminal, maintaining that in Jewish settlements "conflicts between Jews were sorted out by a rabbi, who sat alone to consider the matter and announced his decision to the contending parties. But in this particular case, in the absence of a rabbi, the domestic dispute had been settled in a more democratic way, that is, by a comrades' court." (Fridman case-file).

In personal confrontations with other witnesses, the accused men did not deny their part in a clandestine *minyan*, but insisted that in those gatherings they had never discussed political topics nor had they studied Zionist literature. They had merely read from the Torah. Their story was confirmed by witnesses – their wives and daughters, others attending the *minyan* in Fridman's apartment, and the two parties to the original quarrel. But these were now detained as well.

On April 29th 1952, three of the people now in custody had their cases held over for separate examination: the two original disputants, Froim Vygodner (plaintiff) and Haim Zhovner (defendant), and Vasya Adamson, Fridman's daughter, who had transcribed the tribunal record. The four principal accused were officially indicted on April 30th. The prosecution proposed five-year camp sentences with confiscation of property seized during searches at the Gizunterman and Fridman homes.

But on May 6th 1952, before sentences were pronounced, the governor of the Butyrka received orders to transport the prisoners immediately to a 'special camp', a category established in 1949 for 'political'. Then someone changed his mind and they all remained in the Butyrka while the investigation was renewed and extended. In fact they would be held there for more than a year, the likely intention being that (with grave implications for them) their cases could be integrated into a more spectacular group case against "Jewish nationalists."

The delay allowed history to take a hand. In January 1953, *Pravda* signalled further anti-Semitic frenzy by listing nine doctors (seven Jewish) who, supposedly, had killed or plotted to kill Soviet leaders. But on March 2nd 1953 Stalin was taken ill and his death on March 5th was announced the following day. In the triumvirate that emerged (with Khrushchev and Malenkov), Lavrenty Beria took charge of all internal security organs and immediately announced that the 'doctors' plot' had been fabricated, and on March 27th an amnesty was declared, though its scope was unclear. An unbridled GPU was a threat to the elite and on April 4th Beria issued orders to curb its excesses, to ban physical brutality in interrogations and "to liquidate in the Butyrka and Lefortovo prisons the chambers organized by the former MGB USSR for subjecting those arrested to physical pressure, and to destroy all instruments by which torture was carried out." Beria, as in 1938-39, was bringing a degree of moderation to an oppressive and harsh regime, but his motives were apparently tactical and a more genuine commitment to relaxation would await further events.

For the prisoners in the Butyrka the signs were confusing. On April 18th 1953 they were presented with a new indictment for "anti-Soviet activity directed at disruption of the Soviet legal system," a charge which would normally mean at least a 5-year camp term. But on April 23rd the investigation was again prolonged and a further extension was ordered on May 15th. Then, on July 10th *Pravda* announced that Beria had been dismissed and expelled from the Party, and the retreat

from extreme repression became increasingly convincing. On July 16th the Fridman case was at last scheduled for final resolution and was concluded within a fortnight, with a shift from a political to an ordinary criminal charge of 'illegal assumption of judicial powers', under Article 203 of the Russian Criminal Code. This made the defendants' position distinctly more favourable, since, in the camps, common criminals were treated as "socially friendly elements", essentially redeemable. But they never went there. They came under the provisions of the amnesty of March 27th to mark the demise of the Leader and they were all set free on July 30th 1953.

All over the USSR, GPU policy and attitudes moved to reflect these changes in the Kremlin, although, as always, local variations preclude precise correlation of dates and outcomes. But to the Hasidic communities the basic task remained that of ensuring the survival of their faith in circumstances which would never be easy, given the fundamental assumptions of the Soviet system. In conversation with the author, Rabbi Itzhak Kogan, representative of the Lubavich Rebbe, recalled the trials of his family in Leningrad.

"When I was five my mama hired a teacher to come to our home. Mama, a lawyer by training, worked as a salesgirl in the fruit section of the Yeliseyev store [Leningrad's premier grocery] simply in order to be able to observe the Sabbath and feast-days.

In 1948 one of my teachers was arrested. During interrogation, the Chekists told him that he was accused of being a Hasid and the son of a Hasid. This was the only charge against him and it brought him a sentence of 10 years' imprisonment. One might find this absurd, but the man later wrote that if he had to stand before the Throne and give true answer, he would say: 'Look at the case-file', for there it is written that he was a Hasid and the son of a Hasid.

My grandfather, Yosif Tamarin, was tortured in 1950. When they buried him, my father swore an oath over his grave, before Rabbi Mordhe Epshtein, that our family would be faithful to the Jewish way of life.

In Leningrad there were secret synagogues and underground *minyanim*, and my father, a *cohen* [priest called first to read from the Torah], went round to several such gatherings delivering blessings. When they prayed, they used to close the doors and nobody was allowed in or out. The window was covered so that nobody could see in, and a woman would be set to watch through the window to make sure that no suspicious person was nearby. Sometimes 40 or 50 people would be present, sometimes as few as 20. When I grew up, I became a *cohen* in some of the *minyanim*, while my father took others. And then my brother grew up and became [a *cohen*] for yet more."

Following the break-up of the Moscow Hasidic association in the Dobruskin case, the GPU increased surveillance and informer penetration in the Leningrad community. As in Moscow, they did not hasten to make arrests, but concentrated on amassing evidence and uncovering the contacts between Hasidim still at liberty and those imprisoned in labour camps or languishing in the exile imposed when camp terms had expired. Letters from exiled Hasidim who had managed to establish regular correspondence with their friends at home yielded much valuable information, since such letters were normally fairly open and unguarded.

On April 25th 1949, the prosecutor's office in the Uzbek republic was given sanction to detain a Hasidic exile, Meer Tsinman had been sentenced to 10 years in the camps in 1938 for his role in *Tiferes Baburim*, the "Jewish clerical-nationalist youth organization." Released in 1947 from Ukhtizhernlag in the European North, he had lived semi-legally in Tashkent, working as a craftsman in an *artel*. From there he established a correspondence with other former students of the Leningrad *yeshivah* with whom he had been arrested and convicted and who, like him, were now free but mostly living illegally or semi-legally: Gersh Zobin, Moisei Lein, Izrail-Yanket Lokshin, Shevel Fridman and others.

The arrival of letters addressed to Tsinman from many different cities was inevitably noted by agents working in the post office. The GPU was informed that the released convict and now exiled "member of an anti-Soviet nationalist organization, Tsinman, is making contact with persons hostile to the Soviet government." The report would be placed in the case-file on 'Sosonko M.Sh. and others', containing the documentary record of the original *Tiferes Baburim* investigation in Leningrad (see Ch. 3), and those formerly implicated in it were now to receive renewed attention.

Moisei Lein had served his 10 years in Ukhtizhernlag and Ukhtpechlag, and, like Tsinman, had moved to exile in Uzbekistan. On April 27th 1949, he was arrested for "continuing anti-Soviet

activity." After questioning, he was indicted on the same charge as ten years earlier, "membership of a clerical nationalist organization" and sentenced to permanent exile in the wilds of the vast Krasnoyarsk province, in mid-Siberia.

Also on April 27th, Meer Tsinman, forewarned about the imminent detention of his acquaintance and with his own arrest warrant already issued, contrived secretly to leave Tashkent. On January 4th 1950 he was, like many others, declared the object of a nationwide man-hunt. He had made his way to Kutaisi in Georgia, which, as already noted, was something of a base for Hasidim in that region, and where Gersh Zobin had taken up residence after his 10 years in Ustvymlag. Zobin had moved there with his family in February 1948 and succeeded in finding employment as a joiner in the 'Arbedzhi' *artel*. When Tsinman arrived, Zobin helped him to get work as a home-based knitting-machine operative in another *artel*, the 'Saretsao Natsarmi'.

But, as other fugitive Hasidim had found, Kutaisi was not safe. On May 19th 1950 higher authority instructed the local GPU to locate Gersh Zobin and "subject him to arrest" as "returned from exile, a former member of the Jewish clerical-nationalist youth organization, *Tiferes Baburim*" The charge sheet simply listed the offences of 1938 for which he had already served 10 years in the Arctic. The Soviets were never prejudiced against double jeopardy. Rather they gave it a new dimension, trying people a second (or third) time for offences for which they had already served sentences. Indeed, people could incur a second sentence without the formality of a trial; the camps were full of such unfortunates.

In this case however, the 'organs' did later make a technical change in the charges. The Georgian Ministry of State Security endorsed the arrest instruction on May 31st 1950 and Zobin was apprehended on June 29th, but although the formal indictment, on July 14th, repeated all the 1938 accusations, the word "youth" was omitted. *Tiferes Baburim* became simply a nationalist organization. The change might have been ominous, but perhaps it made no difference; like Moisei Lein, Gersh Zobin would now pay a second time for offences he had already expiated. On September 9th, under Article 58-10 and 11, he was despatched to exile in perpetuity in Krasnoyarsk province. He would be freed on September 13th 1954 after Stalin's death.

Meer Tsinman lacked a Kutaisi residence permit but managed to hide for almost two years. He was arrested on January 4th 1951. It is likely that the GPU tracked him down through one of their undercover men in Leningrad, because Tsinman journeyed there several times in secret to visit friends. Now the Georgian authorities transferred him to Tashkent, whence he had fled in the spring of 1949. He was questioned there and finally indicted on August 4th 1951, The accusation was that "he periodically and secretly visited Leningrad where, residing on an illegal basis, he met with members of an anti-Soviet nationalist organization of Lubavich Hasids, Golenbeich and Kuznetsov, offering them assistance."

Tsinman vigorously rejected allegations of "practical anti-Soviet nationalist activity", acknowledging only his clandestine trips to Leningrad and meetings there with friends. He remained long in confinement, such delay sometimes allowing charges against Jews to be imaginatively revised upward to satisfy the prejudices then raging. However, on January 7th 1952, over a year after his arrest, he received exactly the same sentence as Lein and Zobin. He would be freed from exile in 1954, two weeks before Zobin.

Meanwhile, in November 1951, 37 Hasidim were detained in Leningrad as "participants in a counter-revolutionary Jewish nationalist organization." Almost all had arrived from Lvov and they included natives of Leningrad who had gone south in 1946, hoping to leave with the Polish repatriation. All 37 were accused of "attempting to cross the frontier illegally with the intention of reaching Israel." Gershuni (p. 195) has an account of this affair.

"Interrogation continued until September 1952. Then there was a trial. Almost all were condemned to 10 years in the camps. Among those sentenced was the wife of one of the defendants, come to Leningrad with a parcel for her husband. For this they arrested her and gave her 10 years as well. Two of those convicted were Rabbi Haim-Meir Mints and Aragon Kuznetsov."

The business of the parcel is illuminating. Family members always tried to take advantage of the wholly legal, though hardly generous, privilege of bringing parcels, especially of essential clothing, to their imprisoned relatives before the latter were shipped off to the camps. Sometimes prisoners

actually received them. If that was truly the woman's 'offence', the incident is a commentary on the sheer lawlessness which prevailed in Stalin's last years, particularly with regard to Jews.

The last case to be examined takes us back to Odessa. The personal history of Rabbi Yosef Diment can stand as a final representative of those hundreds of lives, of rabbis who were not necessarily involved in grand group cases, but instead, as individuals, fought the good fight in their own way in their own communities and faced the consequences alone.

The rabbi Yosif Diment began his long life of service in a village synagogue in Troitskoye, near Odessa, in 1896, at the age of 22. In 1918, during the Civil War, he was forced to remove to another village, Yanovka, where he worked for nine years (and where his successors would fall victim to the Terror; see 'Shpigel and others', Ch: 5). The authorities closed the synagogue in 1927 and Diment moved on to Kotovka, where a synagogue would remain open for several more years until it too was suppressed in 1931. The rabbi then went to live in Odessa city, working first as an accountant and then as a home-based bookbinder. But he continued secretly to conduct prayers in private homes.

When the Romanian army, as an ally of the Nazis, advanced on Odessa, evacuation took Diment east to Andizhan province in Central Asia. When Odessa was liberated in September 1944, he returned to the city and became chairman of the Jewish religious association, in which capacity he could openly conduct worship in the synagogue.

After the war ended in 1945 the GPU began quite openly to collect "compromising material" about him. Informers' reports accumulated in what would become the case-file on 'Diment I.-Sh.'. In 1947, one undercover 'source' reported that while maintenance work was going on at the Jewish cemetery, Rabbi Yosif, in front of the workmen, had declared that "during the Patriotic War, alongside the Germans, both Russians and Ukrainians murdered Jews." This would earn a place in the case-file as evidence of "the rabbi's slander against the Soviet people."

Other reports from this agent were also noted. "On the first feast-day celebrated on the premises of the synagogue on Peresyp, Father [sic] Yosif, during prayers, said: 'The official organs persecute Jews!'" Diment would later try and explain these words as a reaction to the removal of the synagogue in which he served from Pushkin Street to the remote fringes of the city. The explanation cut no ice with the 'organs'.

In areas under occupation by the Nazis and their allies, the traditional anti-Semitism of the Ukrainian population had been deliberately encouraged; there was justice in the rabbi's charge against "the Soviet people". These regions therefore responded with particular enthusiasm to the anti-Jewish slanders which permeated the USSR in response to the creation of Israel and in deference to Stalin's personal inclination. Almost any comment by a rabbi during his sermons could be portrayed in an informer's report as "rabid propaganda for the anti-Soviet ideas of Jewish bourgeois nationalists." (Diment case-file). Phrases traditionally included in prayers now became subversive. "Thou hast chosen us of all peoples, Thou hast loved us, Thou hast raised us above all the nations", was torn from context and represented as an expression of the rabbi's personal opinion that "Jews are cleverer than anyone else; other nations should learn from the Jews, and there will come a time when the Jews will rise above the other peoples."

In late 1951, as informers plied their trade around him, Yosif Diment was summoned to an interview with an official of the Odessa provincial Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, which, among other duties, monitored information coming in from 'sources' concerning that particular area. Diment tried to convince this bureaucrat that he recited prayers only in the form prescribed in the texts approved by officialdom. Despite his protestations, he was dismissed with an ultimatum that the synagogue should hear no more "Zionist preaching" of the type implicit in the phrase: "Next year we shall be in Jerusalem."

A year later, in the fall of 1952, secret agents observed the festival of the Day of Judgement, introducing the ten days leading to *Yom Kippur*, and the GPU filed another denunciation. In the synagogue, Rabbi Yosif, together with others "had distorted the text in the prayer-book, and, by his words, stirred up national dissension for counter-revolutionary purposes." Summoned again to the Council for Cults to explain this latest infraction, he insisted that he had— never uttered the seditious words and had never conducted "anti-Soviet nationalist agitation among the congregation." (Diment case-file).

On March 6th 1953 Diment was arrested Stalin's death was announced on that day, but nobody could anticipate the consequences. For Odessa Chekists it was business as usual, and the aged rabbi – he was 78 – was accused of "counter-revolutionary activity." Several witnesses were found to testify that he repeatedly advocated Jewish nationalism, "playing on the religious and nationalist prejudices of the masses." One witness also alleged that during sermons the rabbi had more than once declared that "the Jews are surrounded by enemies, the Jews are for ever persecuted. Therefore Jews must unite. Never report anything to the authorities and never reveal any secrets."

Only one of the witnesses, a certain Tzizin, called at the defendant's request, had the temerity to assert, firstly, that Rabbi Yosif always said that "we were persecuted before, but thanks to the Soviet government, we have been saved", and, secondly, that he had never uttered the slogan: "Next year we shall be in Jerusalem." But his contribution fell on deaf ears, the GPU dismissing it with the comment that he and Diment "were bound in a strong mutual relationship" and that "the testimony of this witness is contradicted by other witnesses."

The final indictment claimed that Yosif Diment, in his capacity as rabbi of the synagogue, "systematically engaged in propaganda for the anti-Soviet ideas of Jewish bourgeois nationalists, preached the national exclusiveness of the Jewish people, fostered nationalist sentiments among those who attended the synagogue and, on the feast of the Day of Judgement, took part in the proclamation of the Zionist slogan: 'Next year we shall be in Jerusalem'."

Diment was sentenced on May 22nd 1953 to 10 years in labour camp, under Article 54-10 of the Ukrainian code, with an additional 5 years' deprivation of civil rights. This was in spite of a judge's comment that "the court also takes cognizance of the age and ill-health of the accused, which requires the application of a less severe measure of punishment."

But Kremlin changes were now spreading their effects through the system, altering perceptions among both oppressors and oppressed. The lawyer F.B. Reizina submitted an appeal to the Supreme Court on Diment's behalf. As a result the original charge was modified and the term of imprisonment reduced to two years. And finally, like the defendants in the Fridman case considered above, the aged rabbi Yosif Diment was released on July 14th under the terms of the post-Stalin amnesty.

These were the months in which Beria's trial and execution (made public in December) and the ostentatious taming of the GPU seemed to herald a long-term relaxation. But everything was relative. While the grotesque official anti-Semitism of Stalin's last years did not survive him, and the arbitrary power of the 'organs' was to some extent restricted, there was no basic change in the nature of the Soviet regime. The following years would see the official rehabilitation of many of the Hasidim encountered in these pages, but it would be a process primarily designed to discredit the dead Stalin and Khrushchev's opponents rather than a manifestation of liberal convictions. Indeed, the persecution specifically of religious belief and practice, would, if anything, be intensified under Khrushchev. But that is beyond the scope of this book.

NOTES

Chapter 1. Rebbe Yosef-Itzhak: The call to arms.

1. Published by the journal Atomim (Warsaw) in 1937. See Alef, Moscow 1993.(5753), No.484, p.28.

2. There are in the Russia State Archives two files on the 1948 Dobruskin investigation. All references are to the main file, P-31401, except for some in Chapter 7, which relate to the supplementary file, P-211616, referred to as 'Dobruskin file S'.

Chapter 2. Yosef-Itzhak and the Leningrad Jewry.

1. Mariama Idelsohn, Benedikt Ioffe, Gelya Paisen and Sicilia Skupnaya.

2. Peshkova's tireless and courageous efforts allowed the 'Political Red Cross' to function through the earlier Stalinist repressions until its suppression in 1937. It occupied an office adjoining the KGB reception rooms at Kuznetsky Most 24, in Moscow. A fine description of it occurs in Razgon, Lev, (1989) Nepriidumannoye. Moscow, Kniga.

Chapter 3. Leningrad's ordeal intensifies.

1. Zainian Gurarii, Yankel Gurevich, Gersh-Leizer Lazarev, Gersh Malchik, Abram Pochin, Osher Sosonko.

2. Ex-Ncvelers now arrested included Samuil Arvand, Girsh Ardov, Zaiman Gurarii, Yankel Gurevich and Abram Obolsky.

3 Apart from Nohim Trebnik and Abram-Shaya Sverdlov and the young men mentioned later as detainees, the Sosonko case-file names Mendel Morozov (Elhonen-Ber's son) and Lipa Shapiro.

4. Pinhus Altgaus, Shaya Gold, Lev Yosfin, Saul Katzenelenbogen, Meer and Shevel Fridman.

Chapter 4. Trials of the Moscow Hasidim.

1. Vospominaniya o cantore. p. 1.

2. Those registered were: Zeiman Brutman himsel., Anton Gishevsky, Volka Grozberg, Yakov Notik Leiba Revzin, Yosif-Abram Fridman, Elka Hein, Aron and Leiba Tseitlin.

3. Including *arlet* workers: Haim Kevesh, Vladimir Visnevich, Yakov Notik, Mihed Noskm and Isaak. Ruderman.

4. The remaining four were Haim Abramov, Meer Shneer, David Rosenbeim and Zeiman Chereshnya – this last having already served a 5-year camp term.

5. They were N.I.Wolfenzohn, A.LZhuchkova, A.P.Krupenya, C.LNeustoyev and M.A.Rogozhina.

6. Among those apprehended were Mendel Maizus, Nevah and Yakov Gansburg, Abram Gorelik, Leizer Gertsovich, Boris Gorohover, Hatskel Mebel, Zaiman Pruss, Abram Rishin, Zaiman Ryvkin and Zaiman Feldman.

7. They were Mendel Futerfas, Zeiik Aronov, Aron Belenitsky, Shiema and Shmeri Feldman, Mihail Golshmidt, Moisei Kamenetsky and Morduh Ryvkin.

Chapter 5. The internal diaspora and the Shneersohn network.

1. Among them were Gersh Perdicevsky, Gersh Bukshtein, Moishe Goldberg, Tovlev Gutevich, Haim Koihman, Haim Sandier, Perod Shargorodsky and Mordhe Fishman.

Chapter 7. The Lvov exodus.

1. They were Boris Rubinsohn, Berk Gurevich, Nehim Lis, Samuil Bezchinsky, Motel Karp, Semen Katsenelenbogen, David and Shmuel Katsman. David Meller, Haim Ferber, Pinhas Heinshtein and Natan Lempel.

2. The others were Samuil Bezchinsky, Shmuel Katsman and Pinhas Hein

Chapter 8. The Dobruskin case.

1. Others in hiding included Oreler and Poleter Yankel, Sadye, Shmuel Botvinnik, Lizik Groinem, Avrom Kogan, David Kok, Zaiman Sudakevich, Motel Cherkasov, Boruh Shelensky and Bentsion Shemtov.

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