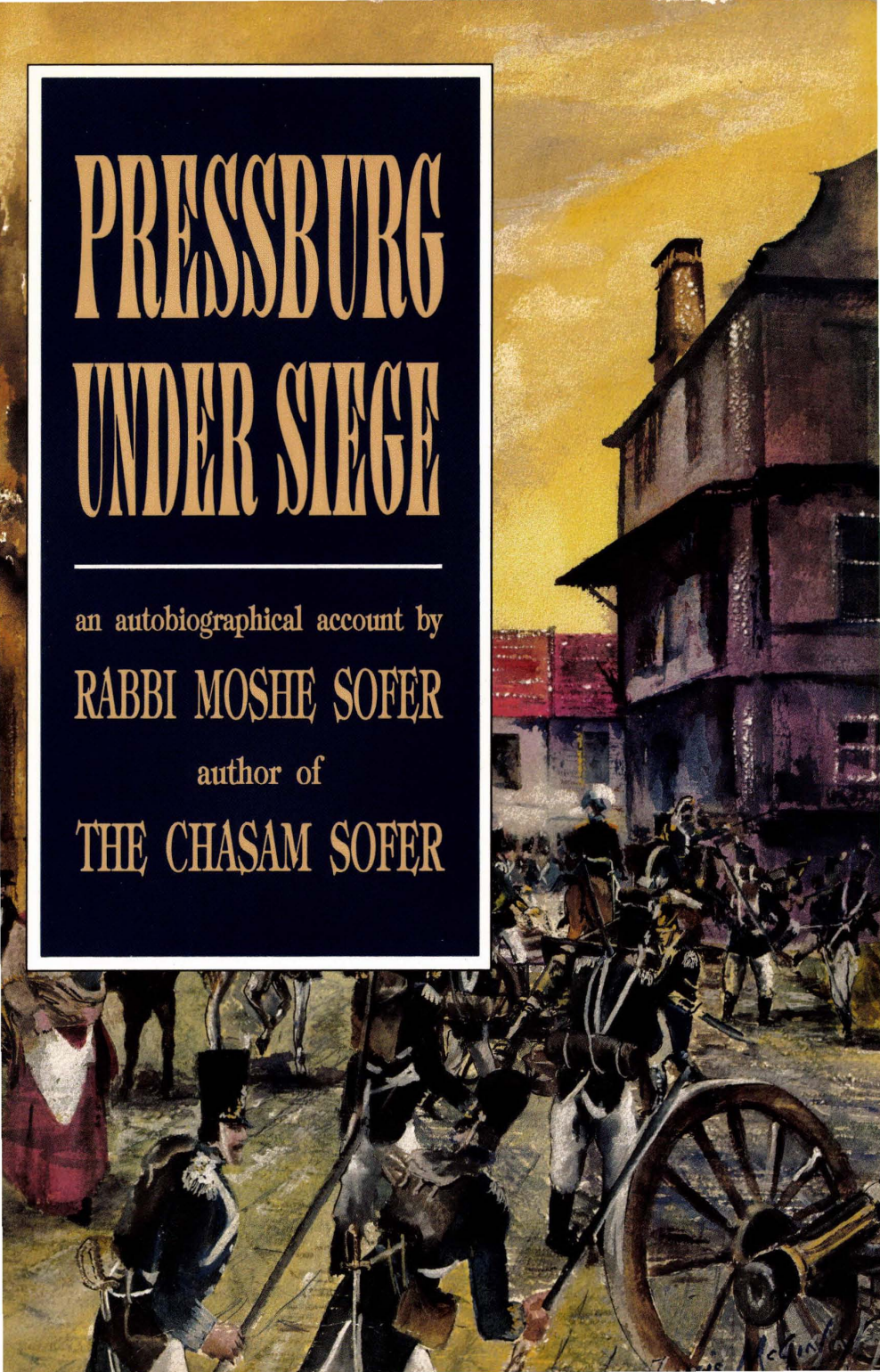
PRESSBURG UNDER SIEGE

an autobiographical account by

RABBI MOSHE SOFER

author of

THE CHASAM SOFER



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RABBI MOSHE SOFER

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introduction and translation by

RABBI AVRAHAM YAAKOV FINKEL

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PRESSBURG UNDER SEIGE

לז"נ
הרה"ח יצחק אריה
ב"ר אברהם אבא
מיללער ז"ל

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INTRODUCTION

One of the principal rabbinic figures of the early nineteenth century is the universally recognized Rabbi Moshe Sofer, the illustrious *gaon* and *rav* of Pressburg who inspired his generation and infused those who followed with an unwavering attachment to Hashem and His Torah.

A prolific writer of *seforim* on Halachah and Drush (homiletics), the Chasam Sofer (known by the title of his *Talmudic* works and *Halachic* responsa) also wrote *Sefer Zikaron* (Memories), presently translated into English under the title of *Pressburg Under Siege.* It records the Chasam Sofer's memoirs of the dramatic events surrounding the forty-two day siege of Pressburg by Napoleon's army. An intriguing account of ominous portents, heroism and suffering the Chasam Sofer emerges from its pages as the *manhig hador*, the devoted guide who confronts the onslaught of Napoleon's

swords and missiles with the spirit of Torah, who tenderly leads his flock through the days of bursting bombs and blazing fires, offering them solace, hope and reassurance, while gently admonishing them to improve their ways so as to merit Hashem's deliverance from distress.

In a broader sense, *Pressburg Under Siege* is symbolic of Torah-true Judaism under siege by the avalanche of assimilation that swept Western Europe in the wake of the spread of progressive French ideas under Napoleon, threatening to inundate Pressburg and the Orthodoxy of Central Europe. As the Chief Rabbi of Pressburg, the Chasam Sofer valiantly stemmed the deluge of the assimilationist movement and handed the Torah in its pristine form to future generations.

By his words and deeds, the Chasam Sofer made an indelible imprint on Jewish life, which endures to the present and is reflected in today's *yeshivos*, *shuls* and other institutions which have withstood the winds of change. Thanks to the Chasam Sofer and other like-minded *gedolim*, the Torah has survived the onslaught of the Modern Age and remains intact and unchanged.

The Early Years

Moshe Schreiber was born in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1763. His father Rabbi Shmuel, a great Torah scholar and *sofer*, was a scion of a long line of distinguished rabbis. His mother Reizel was the daughter of Rabbi Elchanan of Frankfurt, one of the prominent Kabbalists of his time.

Young Moshe was a child prodigy. At just seven years of age, he committed to memory several tractates of *Gemara*

(Talmud) and delivered a learned discourse which astounded an assembly of distinguished scholars. Although still very young, he was accepted as a student at the *yeshivah* of the *gaon* Rabbi Nassan Adler, an eminent Talmudic scholar and Kabbalist. He studied and debated on an equal footing with students much older than he was, earning Rabbi Nassan's sincere admiration.

The Chasam Sofer also studied under the Chief Rabbi of Frankfurt, the illustrious Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz, author of *Sefer Haflaah*, under whose tutelage he gained a clear understanding of the most intricate Talmudic themes.

Rabbi Nassan Adler's Kabbalistic practices and rituals, which were based on the teachings of the holy Arizal (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria) were misunderstood by the Frankfurt community. When he refused to abandon his hallowed way of life, a bitter controversy erupted. In 1776, on the advice of Rabbi Nassan Adler who wanted to shield his beloved student from the acrimonious conflict, young Moshe travelled to Mainz to study at the *yeshivah* of Rabbi Tevele Scheuer, where he gained recognition for his wide-ranging knowledge. Although only fourteen years old, he was given all the privileges of the older *bachurim*. Aside from his prowess in Torah, he also acquired a wide-ranging knowledge in the fields of mathematics, science, biology and astronomy, which is evident in many of his responsa.

In 1779, he returned to Frankfurt to continue his Torah studies under Rabbi Nassan Adler. However, in the wake of the recriminations regarding his Kabbalistic way of life, Rabbi Nassan was forced to leave Frankfurt in 1782 and become the rabbi of Boskowitz in Moravia (now Czechoslovakia). The Chasam Sofer followed his mentor there, and it

was in Boskowitz that Rabbi Nassan initiated him into the mysteries of the *Zohar* and the great Kabbalistic masters.

After his marriage, the Chasam Sofer settled in Prosnitz, and soon thereafter, he was chosen to be the rabbi of Dresnitz. His reputation as an eminent scholar and inspiring leader soon gained him the appointment to the rabbinate of Mattersdorf, a prominent community in Hungary.

Chief Rabbi of Pressburg

In 1804, he was elected Chief Rabbi of the imperial capital of Pressburg (today the city is named Bratislava; it is situated in Czechoslovakia, forty miles east of Vienna, Austria). It was a prestigious appointment, since Pressburg was one of the foremost communities in the Jewish world at that time.

One of the Chasam Sofer's major achievements was the establishment of a *yeshivah* which he headed. The most brilliant students from near and far flocked to study at the Pressburg Yeshivah, and before long the enrollment grew to five hundred students. Many of his students accepted leading rabbinic posts in Hungary and Poland, such as the Maharam Schick (Rabbi Moshe Schick) who became rabbi of Chust. It has been said that since the days of the *yeshivos* in Babylonia there had been no Torah academy to equal the Pressburg Yeshivah in the number of its students and the high level of scholarship. As *rosh yeshivah*, the Chasam Sofer stressed the importance of diligence, penetrating thought, *yiras shamayim* (piety) and humility. He was like a father to his *talmidim*, prodding and admonishing them with warmth and love.

After his wife died childless in 1812, the Chasam Sofer

married the widowed daughter of the towering Torah luminary Rabbi Akiva Eiger. And in 1815, the marriage was blessed with the birth of a son, Avraham Shmuel Binyamin.

Defender of the Torah

With the advent of the Age of Enlightenment and Emancipation, the ghetto walls of Germany crumbled, and the hallowed ancient Jewish traditions fell by the wayside. Intermarriage and conversion were rampant; assimilation was the passport to the modern world. The siren song of the French revolution, "*Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite*," was captivating the Jewish masses of Western Europe.

The Chasam Sofer spearheaded the struggle against the new movement. With vigor and eloquence, he spoke out against those who wanted "to come to terms with the spirit of the times." He galvanized his audiences with his battle cry, "*Chadash assur min Hatorah.* Any innovation, no matter how insignificant it may be, is strictly forbidden, simply because it is an innovation."

By inculcating an uncompromising attitude in his students, he raised a new generation of rabbis and communal leaders who vigilantly stood guard against even the slightest deviation from *Halachah* or *Minhag*. And when the reformers tried to establish a school in Pressburg in 1827, he thwarted their efforts. He used his influence with the Austrian Emperor to block any expansion of Reform into Hungary. He likened the Reformers to the Sadducees, Karaites and other deviant sects who were removed from the community of Yisrael and vanished from the scene.

His attitude made him the undisputed leader of the rabbis

of Europe. As a result of his dauntless fight, the rising tide of assimilation was checked at the gates of Hungary.

The Rise of Napoleon

Pressburg under Siege was written by the Chasam Sofer with the Hebrew title *Sefer Zikaron.* It is a record of his experiences before and during the siege and bombardment of Pressburg by Napoleon's army. A brief review of the history of that turbulent era may be helpful.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, from 1792 to 1795, France had been at war with much of Europe, and by 1796, Austria, under the rule of Emperor Francis I of the House of Habsburg (1768-1835), was the chief enemy. During this time, a great general emerged as the defender of Revolutionary France against its monarchist foes. His name was Napoleon, from the island of Corsica, and his brilliant military campaigns brought glory and victory to France and a place in the governing Directory for himself. Shortly thereafter, he crowned himself Emperor and set out to expand the borders of the French Empire.

In 1805, on his march to world domination, Napoleon led his troops into Germany, where he captured an Austrian army near Ulm. In December of that year, he demolished the Austrian army at Austerlitz, thereby gaining victory in his war against Austria. But in 1809, the Austrians rose up against him once again, while he was distracted by military campaigns in Spain, and war between France and Austria broke out anew. The main battle centered around Vienna, and it spilled over into Pressburg, located forty miles downriver

from the Austrian capital. This battle and the military activities surrounding it constitute the setting for the remarkable events as they are related by the Chasam Sofer in this book.

The Chasam Sofer's Writings

The Chasam Sofer left a rich legacy of precious *sefarim* (books) that can be found today on the shelves of every *yeshivah* library and in most home Torah libraries. Written in a lucid rabbinic Hebrew, his works attest to the vastness of his Talmudic knowledge, the incredible depth of his penetrating mind and his absolute intellectual honesty. Many of his insights on the *parshah* are true gems that are repeated by young and old from year to year with regularity.

Chasam Sofer, the title of his works, is the acronym of the initials of "*Chidushei Toras Moshe*, Novellae on the Torah by Moshe." Under this title, he authored *she'eilos uteshuvos* (responsa) on the four volumes of the *Shulchan Aruch*, comprising 1377 responsa (first published in Pressburg from 1841 to 1862), as well as *chidushim* on many tractates of the *Talmud*. In addition, he wrote *Toras Moshe*, a commentary on the Torah (first published in Pressburg, 1879), which has gained wide popularity and has been reprinted numerous times, as well as a commentary on the *Haggadah* (first published in Vienna, 1896). He also wrote *Shiras Moshe*, a collection of exquisite liturgical songs and poems based on Kabbalistic themes (first published in Pressburg, 1855).

Sefer Zikaron, from which this book is translated, also includes *Tzavaas Moshe*, the Chasam Sofer's ethical testament (first published in Vienna, 1863). A translation of this

tzavaah appears in the present volume. It is a fascinating document which encapsulates his life philosophy. *Sefer Zikaron* also includes a number of learned discourses which have been synopsized or omitted for this translation. [Translator's comments appear in brackets.]

The Chasam Sofer's *chidushim* on Talmud and *Halachah* are awe-inspiring masterpieces of analytical thought in the new light they shed on baffling questions. But the soul of this giant of the spirit is revealed in his *teshuvos*, in which we come face to face with the undaunted fighter for every *kutzo shel yud*, the minutiae of the law; the wise negotiator; the pious rabbi; the compassionate leader of his flock; the man who tempers justice with mercy, who is driven by a boundless love of Hashem, the Torah and the Jewish people. His deep humility is evident in the way he signed his name: Moshe Hakatan (the insignificant) from Frankfurt-am-Main.

In the present book, reading how the Chasam Sofer copes with an awesome series of calamities, we discover a facet of his personality not apparent in any of his other writings—the consummate Kabbalist. However, it is well-known that, as the pre-eminent disciple of Rabbi Nassan Adler, he would often delve into *nistar*, the concealed wisdom of the Torah, and indeed, the Chasam Sofer's son Rabbi Shimon Sofer related to Rabbi Avraham Abisch of Frankfurt that his father *davened* daily from a *Siddur Arizal*, a Kabbalistic *siddur*.

Postscript

On the 25th of *Tishrei*, 5600/1839, after faithfully serving the Pressburg community for thirty-three years, the fruitful

life of the Chasam Sofer ended at seventy-one years of age. He was buried in the Pressburg cemetery.

His oldest son, Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer (1815-1871), succeeded him as rabbi and *rosh yeshivah* of Pressburg, a post he held for thirty-two years. He is popularly known as the Ksav Sofer, the title of his work. Following in his father's footsteps, he vigorously resisted the growing assimilationist movement. His responsa were published under the title *Teshuvos Ksav Sofer* (Pressburg, 1879) and were widely acclaimed.

Another son of the Chasam Sofer, Rabbi Shimon Sofer (1821-1883), was chosen to be the rabbi of Mattersdorf in 1842, and in 1860, he was appointed to the rabbinate of Cracow. An outstanding scholar and charismatic leader, he was elected to serve as a delegate in the national parliament in Vienna.

Pressburg Jewry has been destroyed, its ashes scattered in the wind. But the spirit of the Chasam Sofer lives on. The dynasty he founded is growing by leaps and bounds. Thousands of his descendant in all parts of the world are carrying on his traditions as *roshei yeshivah*, Torah activists, Orthodox lay leaders and upright Torah-true parents of a younger generation.

And so, with the help of Hashem, the prayer of the Chasam Sofer at the conclusion of the ethical testament to his children has been fulfilled: "May the wellspring never run dry, and may the tree bearing the fruit of everlasting life never be be cut down."

Avraham Yaakov Finkel
Rosh Chodesh Tammuz, 5751/1991

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DREAMS AND PORTENTS

It happened in Pressburg in the year 1808 that the tranquility of my life as rabbi of the community was disrupted by a string of bizarre events, a series of phenomena so macabre that I was reminded of a certain Talmudic saying by Rava [the eminent sage of the *Gemara* who became the leading Talmudic authority in Babylonia in the 338 CE].

Rava said (*Chagigah* 5b) that although Hashem hides His face from us during our bitter *galus* (exile), nevertheless He shields us from our enemies. He does so by forewarning us through dreams and omens of impending doom in order that we mend our ways, give charity, and pray that He rescind the evil decree and thwart our enemies' malevolent designs against us.

And so, on *Rosh Hashanah* in the year 5569/1808 I received forebodings of imminent calamity through a number

of terrifying dreams. These dreams haunted me not only in the quiet of the night; they came to me even in broad daylight. Nightmarish visions they were. I would wake up with fear and trembling, appalled at the frightening scenes my mind's eye had witnessed. True, a Jew must not be superstitious, and I really should dismiss these nightmares as empty figments of the imagination. On the other hand, our Sages believe in the validity of *simanim*, (auspicious and evil omens). Of course, I knew full well that I was not worthy to receive prophetic messages. However, to be on the safe side, I considered these dreams as portents of approaching misfortune, and I did all a lowly person like me can do to ward off the looming menace.

Then it happened again. On the night of *Hoshana Rabbah,* after the customary recitation of *Tehillim*, I retired, hoping to get some sleep. But instead of peaceful slumber, I was shown a horrifying dream that caused me to break out in a cold sweat. On the following night, the night of *Shemini Atzeres*, the same thing happened; my sleep was disrupted by a frightening dream that shook me to the core. And as if these dreams were not enough, I received another ominous warning sign.

It occurred on the eve of *Simchas Torah.* The brightly gleaming oil lamps were illuminating the *bais midrash* with a festive glow. The floor was crowded with happy students, rejoicing with the Torah, singing and dancing with utter delight. As the festivities were reaching their climax, I left my private chamber and entered the *bais midrash* to *daven Maariv.* Suddenly, just as I stepped across the threshold, a burning oil lamp came crashing to the floor right in front of me, scattering broken glass in all directions. The lamp had been securely fastened to the large chandelier, and mysteriously, it had fallen off.

The joyous dancing came to an abrupt halt, and everyone stared at me in wide-eyed consternation. For a moment, I stood there frozen, startled, and taken aback. The haunting dreams of the past two nights were still fresh in my mind, and now this! Within seconds, I regained my composure, and flashing a broad smile, I pretended that nothing had happened and waved to the students to continue their dancing. My private fears and forebodings I kept to myself.

The dancing resumed with renewed vigor. Round and round the young scholars whirled, their bodies swaying to the exhilarating rhythm of songs proclaiming love for the Torah, attachment to Hashem and the joy of being a Jew.

The next thing that happened may seem trivial—under normal circumstances that is—but in light of the other sinister portents I had received it sent a chill up my spine.

At the height of the dancing, the leader motioned, "Time to take a breathe." As everyone relaxed, a dark-eyed young man of slight build stepped into the center of the circle. All eyes focused on Nachum Kohen, one of the outstanding students of the *yeshivah*, who offered to give a solo rendition of Psalm 111, "*Odeh Hashem bechol leivav;* I praise Hashem with all my heart." With rapt attention everyone listened to his lilting voice singing the enchanting melody. Verse followed verse as the audience hummed along the familiar words in harmony with Nachum.

All went well until the singer arrived at the verse starting with the letter *zayin*, "*Zeicher asah lenifleosav*; He has made a memorial for His wonderful works." Looking bewildered, Nachum suddenly hesitated, stumbling over his own words, and forgot the melody. In short, it was a great embarrassment.

When he concluded, I asked him to sing also Psalm 112,

"*Ashrei ish yarei Hashem*; fortunate is the man who fears Hashem," since David Hamelech composed both these psalms as a single unit and arranged them on the order of the *alef-bais*. Again, when Nachum reached the verse beginning with the letter *zayin*, "*Zarach bachoshech or layesharim;* to the upright He shines like a light in the darkness," he stumbled and became flustered and confused.

"This is no mere coincidence," I said to myself with a heavy heart. "This is the handwriting on the wall."

The night of *Simchas Torah* brought no respite from my bad dreams. Night after night they kept coming. I could not hide myself in my sleep; instead of peaceful slumber, I heard anguished cries and eerie shrieks, saw contorted faces and scenes of unspeakable horror. No doubt, they foreshadowed disaster.

Warnings from beyond the Grave

But there was more to come. No sooner had the *Yom Tov* passed than rumors began to spread that people living near the graveyard had seen and heard weird goings-on. At first, I dismissed the reports as old wives' tales, but I quickly changed my mind when a few days after *Yom Tov* I received a visit from two distinguished members of the community: Reb Feivel, the *shamash* of the *chevrah kadisha* (burial society), and Reb Yaakov Raab, a learned layman.

Reb Yaakov, facing me across the table, hesitated for a moment before blurting out, "Pressburger Rav, what I'm going to tell you will sound weird, but believe me, it's the truth."

Taking a deep breath, he continued, "During the night of *Shemini Atzeres,* just as I was preparing to retire, my house began to reverberate with an unearthly, ghastly sound. The noise, which seemed to come out of nowhere, grew louder and louder, reaching an ear-splitting crescendo. My entire family was petrified with fright. Never before in all my life have I heard anything as dreadful as this sound."

"If you ask me, rabbi," Reb Feivel interjected at this point, "the trouble was caused by the woman we buried on *Chol Hamoed Sukkos.* You see, her husband did not treat her with the proper respect, and since Reb Yaakov Raab is close to her family she is taking out her wrath on him."

Without waiting for my reaction to Reb Feivel's amazing theory, Reb Yaakov continued, "Tell me, rabbi, what can I do appease the woman's spirit?"

After giving the matter some thought I replied, "It would be a good idea for ten men to visit her grave and ask her forgiveness. I also suggest that arrangements be made for a *minyan* to study Torah on a daily basis in the room where she died." Speaking with greater emphasis I added, "*Rabbosai,* let me make one thing perfectly clear. The recent turmoil among the dead has nothing to do with things that happened in the past. Quite the contrary. The dead are sending us a warning concerning terrible things that lie in the imminent future. May Hashem have mercy on us."

Visibly shaken by my words, the men wanted to ask questions.

"Gentlemen," I said with finality, "that's all I can say. You must give me your word not to mention this conversation to anyone. In matters of this nature, the less said the better, for any talk may prove to be harmful."

There seemed to be no letup in the stream of bad omens. The commotion at the cemetery was followed by a tragic incident that happened while I was giving a lecture on *Halachah*. I was quoting sources in the *Gemara* and *Tosafos* when suddenly, one of the students, Nachum Kohen, the young man who sang the solo on *Simchas Torah*, suffered a severe nosebleed. Within minutes, the nosebleed turned into a veritable hemorrhage that continued for several days. Much as they tried, the doctors were unable to stanch the flow of blood. Sadly, a week later he passed away. It so happened that Rabbi David Deutsch of Serdehely was in Pressburg at that time, and we both delivered solemn *hespeidim* to honor his memory. He was an exceptionally diligent and bright young Torah scholar.

Just then the *yeshivah* students were preparing a *seudas siyum* (celebratory feast) in honor of concluding *Mesechte Gittin* and beginning *Mesechte Chullin*, two very difficult tractates of the *Talmud*. In deference to the mourning of their fellow student, whom they dearly loved and respected, the celebration was postponed. I requested that they observe a fast on the day before beginning the new tractate, in keeping with a ruling by *Sefer Chassidim* [by Rabbi Yehudah Hachassid, first printed in Bologna, 1538] who states that the day before one begins to study *Chullin* or *Yevamos* should be observed as a fast day. There are Kabbalistic reasons for this.

On the *Shabbos* of *Parshas Vayeitzei*, I arranged the *bar-mitzvah* banquet for my nephew Shmuel Katz, and I hoped that through this joyful occasion I would find relief from the dreams and tragedies that had been besetting me. But the bad omens pursued me relentlessly.

My relatives in Frankfurt also prepared a festive meal in

honor of the *bar-mitzvah*, but their happiness turned to gloom when on that *Shabbos* a fire broke out in the Jewish street called Neugasse. The fire consumed all the houses on one side of the street up to my mother's house—the *bar-mitzvah* boy's grandmother—and on the opposite side, all the houses up to the boy's parents' house burned down. Although their homes were not destroyed, their furnishings and other possessions were badly damaged by the fire.

Here in Pressburg, the *bar-mitzvah* celebration was also marred by trouble. It is a well-known fact that the essential part of a *bar-mitzvah* celebration is the *derashah* (speech) a boy delivers on this occasion, as set forth in the *Shach* [*Sifsei Kohen*, a commentary on the *Yoreh Deah* by Rabbi Shabbesai Hakohen, 1621-1663, first printed in Cracow, 1646] and the *Magen Avraham* [a commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch* by Rabbi Avraham Gumbiner, 1634-1682, first printed in Dyrenfurth in 1692].

Just as the *bar-mitzvah* boy ended his opening remarks, word came that one of the neighbors in the same house had died, so that the boy, who is a *kohen*, was forced to leave the premises (since his increased sanctity did not allow him to be under the same roof with a corpse).

Close to tears he left the festive meal; he had been looking forward to giving his *derashah* for which he had studied diligently. It is my fervent prayer that *Hashem Yisbarach* may grant him many other joyous occasions and that he will be spared from sorrow and anguish.

Death took no respite. A few weeks later, another young man died. His name was Gershon from Bokstan. In my *hesped* (eulogy), I mentioned the fact that he was beloved by Hashem and by his fellow Jews. That same winter, Reb Wolf Techin,

a prominent member of the community, passed away. He was a *tzaddik*, a righteous man in the true sense of the word, who devoted his time and efforts to the welfare of the Pressburg community. He lived to a ripe old age and his passing was mourned by the entire community. Eulogies were delivered by myself and his son-in-law Reb Zalman Loeb. May they pray before the Heavenly Throne for deliverance from pain and distress for our community and the entire Jewish people.

The Disastrous Deluge of the Danube

The warning signs persisted, coming with ever growing vehemence, reaching catastrophic proportions. The winter of that year brought to Pressburg a numbing cold wave the likes of which this city had never before experienced. For months on end, the mighty Danube River was covered over with a thick sheet of ice. People walked on the frozen river, and children skated on the ice, crossing from one bank to the other. It was an amazing sight. Then, without warning, on the morning of the twelfth of *Shevat* there was a dramatic change in the weather. The frigid cold gave way to balmy southern breezes which warmed the atmosphere. The rising temperatures brought about a sudden thaw which melted the ice. The gentle waves resumed their lazy, meandering flow. The lovely Danube River was its old self again.

But not for long. Within a few days, disaster came down upon us from the upstream regions of Linz and Vienna. Large ice floes and piles upon piles of huge chunks of ice broke loose and came streaming down the river. Slowly, inexorably, they came, crunching and grinding as they moved. At the southeast

corner of Pressburg, the Danube turns sharply to the south, and like a clogged drain, it was in this bend in the river that the ice became wedged, jammed solid into place. From upstream, the ice flowed toward Pressburg and, finding its progress blocked, built up into a gigantic dam of ice that effectively blocked the entire river.

Relentlessly, the ice kept moving; higher and higher grew the dam, and gradually, the river began to rise. People anxiously watched the water level climb, foot by foot. Feverishly, they built sandbag levees in an attempt to stem the merciless tide. It was no use. Before long, the river overflowed its banks, inundating fields and cascading into the city. Torrents of water surged through the streets, flooding homes and businesses in the heart of the city, as far away as the Park Allee. Rowboats crisscrossed the streets, in an attempt to bring people to safety. Still, many people and farm animals by the thousands drowned in the deluge.

The rising tide destroyed hundreds of homes and businesses. But the most severe damage was caused by segments of bridges that were torn from their moorings by the pressure of the ice, parts of wrecked ships, huge beams, logs and other debris that came drifting down the river. This flotsam and jetsam would crash into the wall of a home, a warehouse or a factory and completely pulverize it. Many flourishing businesses were demolished in this manner, including numerous Jewish stores. And for the final calamity, in the wake of the flood, the wall of the cemetery was overturned, monuments were ruined, and tombs that have been erected over the graves of many saintly rabbis lay in ruins covered by the floodwaters.

Now, in the middle of the Danube there is a tiny island named Beitsch (Petchen), on which there are just a few

houses. It belongs to one of the local noblemen who built a brick building there to serve as the home for a Jew from Serdehely. He hired this man to manufacture brandy for him. Near the house he had built a wooden stable where he housed twelve cows, and on top of the stable there was a large hayloft where he stored hay and feed.

It happened one day that the man, along with his wife and two boys were all working in the stable. Suddenly, he saw floodwater rushing toward him. Quick as a flash, he opened the barn door to allow the cattle to get out, while he wanted to save his family by taking them to the roof of his brick house. It was too late. He saw that he would never make it; the water had risen to his shoulders and was climbing fast. In a split second, he made his decision. Abandoning the cattle in their stalls, he dashed up the ladder to the hayloft, taking along his wife and sons. Trembling with fear they looked out the window, watching the water swallowing up treetops all around. Was it ever going to stop?

The tide crested when the water reached the level of the window in the hayloft. With terror and fascination they stared at the icebergs, beams and girders being pushed along by the swirling sea that surrounded them. All of a sudden, a massive chunk of ice slammed into their brick house, destroying it, while their wooden barn remained untouched. The cows below, caught in the surging tide, instinctively pushed against the floor of the hayloft where the Jewish family had found refuge, threatening to break it. For more than half an hour the family withstood the onslaught of the twelve terror-crazed cows, after which the animals drowned. Meanwhile, the family was in desperate straits, cut off from the world by a sea of seething water, and no one to save them.

The following day, the man climbed to the roof of the hayloft.

"Help! Help!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Save us! Save us!"

Over and over, he bellowed his call for help, cupping his hands around his mouth. At last, from the distance, people heard his despondent cry.

"That's the Jewish family on the island. They must be in trouble."

The officers of the Jewish community were alerted and took action at once. A boatman was hired for fifty thalers to rescue the Jewish family. They sent along Reb Feivel, the *shamash* of the *chevrah kadisha.* They used a fairly large boat, but when they returned on Tuesday evening they brought with them only the mother and her two sons, since the boat did not hold more passengers. They went again the following day, paying the boatman another thirty thalers, and this time the father was brought to safety.

On Wednesday, the 15th of *Shevat*, we heard that in the village of Uy a Jew had been marooned on a rooftop without a bite to eat for three days. The communal leaders sent a boat to pick him up. When he arrived, the poor man was half-starved and suffering from pneumonia and frostbite due to exposure to the extreme cold. He was given proper medical care until he recovered completely, thank Heaven. He thanked the men of the *chevrah kadisha* from the bottom of his heart for the kindness they had shown him and the other unfortunate victims of the flood.

The boat undertook many more rescue missions to save the non-Jews of this village who were stranded on rooftops. They arrived penniless, with only the shirts on their backs.

The Jews of Pressburg treated them with deep compassion, welcomed them into their homes, fed and clothed them.

The kindheartedness of the Jewish community did not go unnoticed. It created genuine goodwill and warm feelings of friendship and recognition on the part the gentile population and in government circles.

The Pressburg Jewish community also dispatched a boat-load of bread and an abundance of other provision to the Jews of Kittsee [one of the seven Jewish communities of the Burgenland region of eastern Austria, known as the *Sheva Kehillos*]. Thank Heaven, their community did not suffer quite as badly as some of the others did.

A Perilous Passage to Budapest

But the tale of woe does not end here. Shortly after the disastrous flood, a fair was being held in Budapest. A large number of local businessmen took a riverboat cruise down the Danube to Budapest to attend the fair. These were prominent and wealthy members of the community, and many took along their children on a sight-seeing trip to the big city.

Midway on the cruise, dark clouds began to gather, and amid thunder and lightning, a howling storm materialized. The captain made a heroic effort to maintain the heading but was unable to control the rudder. The large vessel, tossed by the churning waves, careened from side to side like a mad merry-go-round. Deckhands and passengers alike, yielding to despair, cried and prayed fervently. Huge waves whipped up by the violent squalls battered the helpless boat. It was only a question of time before the vessel would capsize, sending

everyone to a watery grave. The Jewish passengers, staring death in the eye, recited the *Viduy* confession, preparing themselves for the worst.

Then the miracle happened. As swiftly as it had blown up, the tempest subsided, the skies cleared, the waves calmed down, and the floundering ship was back on an even keel again. By the grace of Hashem, everyone was saved and made it home safely. I cannot elaborate on the incident, because I have the story only on hearsay.

But the string of bizarre and tragic incidents went on and on. It happened on the return trip from the Budapest fair. A prominent lady and her daughter-in-law Mrs. Yosef Bettelheim, stopping over in a small village, checked into the local inn along with many other Jews from Pressburg. In the evening, after they were settled in their room, the young Mrs. Bettelheim left to take care of some things. Her mother-in-law waited a long time, and when the younger woman did not return she became concerned. After waiting another hour, she alerted the Jewish guests who searched the inn without finding a trace of the missing woman. Thereupon, they obtained a search warrant from the police and combed the neighboring houses and courtyards, leaving no stone unturned. To their dismay, the effort ended in failure; it seemed as though the woman had vanished into thin air.

The following morning, on their journey home, riding through the countryside, they came upon a body lying in a field outside the village. It was Mrs. Bettelheim. She was fully clothed, wearing her jewelry. Her purse containing a substantial amount of money had not been touched. Obviously, robbery was not the motive. Who had committed the brutal murder? What was his motive? Who had carried the body to

this remote place? Was it another portent of tragic things to come? It was a mystery.

On the 14th of *Nissan*, word of the violent death of the respected and cherished lady reached Pressburg. The entire community was stunned and appalled. Was there no end to the catastrophes? May Hashem save us from all evil, as it is written, "Hashem will guard your going and your coming from now and forever." (*Tehillim* 121:8)

NAPOLEON'S ARMY IS COMING

The harsh winter of pain and suffering passed, the rains and the deluge were over and gone, and now the pounding of the horses' hoofs were heard in the land, as the mighty warriors of two powerful armies prepared to do battle. War had erupted between the forces of our sovereign, the Emperor of Austria, and the armies of Napoleon, the Emperor of France. The political wrangling and military maneuvering that brought on this conflict are well-known facts of world history and need not be reiterated [for background on the conflict, see Introduction].

From the first day of the war we recited psalms each day for the well-being of His Majesty the Emperor. Afterwards, we said the special prayer for the welfare of the ruler of the nation which opens with the words, "*Hanosein teshuah lamelachim* . . . He who grants salvation to kings . . ."

PRESSBURG UNDER SIEGE

Before long, news reached us that the French armies were moving forward in a victorious cavalcade. All Europe held its breath. It seemed as if a mighty machine had begun to move and there was no one to stop it. Napoleon's forces were preparing to lay siege to Vienna. We knew that a bloody battle was looming ahead. The war was approaching our doorstep, and we now included in our payers our brethren in Vienna who were in imminent peril.

On Wednesday, the thirty-second day of the *Omer*, the annual gathering of the *chevrah kadisha* took place. As every year, the gathering was convened at the Pressburg cemetery, where I made a fervent plea, asking the members to spare no effort and to strain every nerve to rebuild the wall around the cemetery which was destroyed in the flood. I urged them to do it a soon as possible, for no one could tell what the future held with the war raging at our gates. My appeal was only partially successful. A few outstanding members of the community donated close to two thousand thalers toward the project. They neglected, however, to hire the workmen to do the job of constructing the wall. Sad to say, to this very day it is still in disrepair.

On *Rosh Chodesh Sivan,* the mighty legions of Napoleon appeared on the west bank of the Danube, spread out like locusts on the fields. Only the waters of the Danube hampered their relentless advance and prevented them from overrunning the city.

Large megaphones were blaring the French demands to the people of Pressburg: "Citizens of Pressburg, you have twenty-four hours to provide us with ferryboats and rafts to enable our forces to cross the river. Otherwise, our heavy artillery guns will shell your city. We shall show no mercy."

The magistrates and the people of Pressburg, ignoring the demands, taunted the French army, "What kind of army is it that doesn't even have rafts? Let them swim across! Do they think we're crazy? We Pressburgers weren't born yesterday! Our answer is an unequivocal No!"

I did not share their rash attitude. The omens and dreams I had received over the past months had made me very apprehensive; were the dire forebodings about to come true? I felt that with their foolhardiness the people were courting disaster, and I told them so. However, my warnings fell on deaf ears. The Jewish community and the general populace were overconfident; they would not even consider the French demands.

"Pressburger Rav," they said. "You will see. The French won't lift a finger against us. We've got to be tough and resolute. They won't intimidate us with their bluster."

When I tried to point out the dangers of their reckless policy, they replied, "Rabbi, with all due respect, you're a timid soul. There's no reason to be afraid. We know how to handle the French."

They remained steadfast in their refusal . . . and nothing happened. On Friday, the fourth of *Sivan*, early in the morning, for no apparent reason, the French army withdrew. No one knew where they had gone or what had made them change their mind.

Pressburg was jubilant. The entire city made merry, and the Jewish community celebrated a joyous *Yom Tov* of *Shavuos*.

On *Shavuos*, we discovered the reason for the overnight withdrawal of the French forces. They had been redeployed elsewhere to fight one of the decisive battles of the war that was shaping up.

PRESSBURG UNDER SIEGE

Pidyon Nefesh Ceremony

Although it seemed that the threat had been lifted, premonitions of impending catastrophe were with me all the time. In an attempt at staving off the gathering storm that was sure to come, I called in my friend Reb Moshe Schreiber, the distinguished *gabbai* of our community. I asked him to make available to me from the general *tzedakah* (charity) fund the amount of 541 florins, since 541 is the numeric equivalent of Yisrael. Every member of the community contributed to this fund and thus had a share in it. I proposed to perform a *pidyon nefesh*, a "redemption ceremony," on behalf of the community, based on the text composed by the Ramban [Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1195-1270, famous Torah commentator and Kabbalist who live in Gerona, Spain].

After asking the *gabbai* to keep the planned ceremony strictly confidential, I gathered ten prominent men, most of whom were students of mine who could be relied upon not to divulge the secret rite.

What follows is the text of the prayer we recited at the "redemption ceremony" (donating in succession 10, 300, 200, 1 and 30 coins, consistent with the numeric value of the letters in the name Yisrael).

"For the sake of the unification of the Holy Blessed One and His Presence, in fear and love to unify the Name *Yud-Kei* with *Vav-Kei*, I am herewith donating these 10 coins on behalf of all Yisrael, and in particular on behalf of the Jewish community of Pressburg. To unify justice with justice for the redemption of the souls of your entire people the House of Yisrael. Let these 10 coins be the redemption of the letter *yud* of the name Yisrael.

"May it be Your will, Hashem our Lord and the Lord of our forefathers, that these ten coins be the redemption of the souls of Your entire nation of Yisrael, and in particular the community of Pressburg. May this act of charity bring peace, tranquility and security from now and forever.

"O Lord, pity and be compassionate to your people the House of Yisrael. Save them from the sword, captivity and pillaging armies, from any punishment that might occur, from walls that come crashing down, and from fiery conflagration."

The verse "Charity saves from death" (*Mishlei* 10:2) and several other appropriate verse were recited. This was repeated for the letters *shin, reish, alef and lamed*, after which the following prayer was said:

"O Lord, Who is the Healer of the broken-hearted and Who binds up their wounds, King, Helper, Savior and Shield, may You graciously protect the House of Yisrael wherever they may be. May Your Compassion subdue Your Attribute of Impartial Justice and keep Your anger from them and from us, the community of Pressburg. Save us from all evil, and from internal and external enemies. No weapon formed against you shall succeed, and every tongue that contends with you at law, you shall defeat; such is the lot of the servants of Hashem, such is their triumph through Me, says Hashem. (*Yeshayahu* 54:17) The name of Hashem is a tower of strength, to which the righteous man runs and is safe. (*Mishlei* 18:10)"

A few more verses were recited, as well as Psalm 128, "Fortunate are all who fear Hashem, who follow in His ways." [Full text of the ceremony appears in the original.]

PRESSBURG UNDER SIEGE

Bombs Fall on Pressburg

Soon after *Yom Tov*, the Austrian army made its appearance in Pressburg with the aim of defending the city from any future French attack. To this end, the Austrian forces crossed over to the west bank of the Danube, where they constructed an impenetrable defense line of huge fortifications. This line of fortresses and strongholds was designed to block any future attempt by the French to approach Pressburg.

Napoleon was not discouraged by a string of defensive positions. Within days, the French moved south from Vienna, massing their forces in the Kittsee area where they dug in opposite the Austrian army. The French also built a line of fortified bunkers facing the Emperor's barricades. The two armies were confronting each other across a narrow strip of no-man's land, their heavy cannons and artillery pieces menacingly pointing at each other, their troops with their bayonets mounted on their rifles, ready for hand-to-hand battle. But everything remained quiet at the front.

The deceptive calm ended on Thursday night, the 18th of *Sivan*, when pandemonium broke loose as night turned into day by the flashing light of exploding shells. The battle of the two giants had been joined. The deafening roar of rockets crisscrossing the air blended with the crackling of small arms fire and the blasts of field artillery. The neighing of thousands of frightened cavalry horses added to the ear-splitting racket that made the earth tremble. Huge, thick clouds of acrid smoke rose from the battlefield, slowly drifting across the river into the city. The people of Pressburg were terrified. Which way would the tide of battle turn? Who would be victorious? If the city would fall to the French, Napoleon's

troops would have their sweet revenge and take out their anger on the populace. Panic-stricken, they fled in droves, abandoning homes and possessions.

It soon became clear that the battle being fought was merely a local skirmish between the two warring armies. The French had no intention of attacking the city. After two or three hours, the intense artillery duel let up, a cease-fire went into effect, and serenity returned to the countryside. That night everyone in Pressburg slept peacefully. In the morning, a few isolated shots were fired, and Friday and *Shabbos* passed uneventfully.

On *Shabbos*, I delivered a *derashah* in which I spoke about the conflict raging all around us, citing various incidents in the life of David Hamelech and the lessons we can derive from them. The theme of my sermon was that our distressful times demand that we repent, return to Hashem, mend our ways, pray fervently and do good to our fellow man.

I concluded by expounding on the first nine verses of Psalm 21. I said: "In verse eight we read, 'For the king trusts in Hashem; through the faithfulness of the Most High he will not be shaken.'

"David Hamelech was a mighty monarch. He had amassed great wealth and possessed a powerful army; he built invincible fortresses. Yet he placed his trust in none of these. David had faith only in Hashem.

"But faith requires a solid foundation. Only a fool has faith without a firm basis. Placing one's trust in Hashem while violating His laws day after day is senseless. Does he expect Hashem to ignore his transgressions?

"David's entire life was dedicated to Hashem and His Torah. He was the epitome of *chessed elyon*, faithful service

of the Most High. This *chessed elyon*, was the foundation of David's trust in Hashem, and therefore, '*bal yimot*, he was not shaken.'

"The same certainly applies to us at the present time. It would be absurd for us to trust in Hashem to save us, without returning to Him and improving our deeds. We should be ashamed to pray, 'Please, Hashem, let no evil befall us' while our faith is based on a shaky foundation. And we certainly do have every reason to pray for deliverance, for troubled times are at hand.

"One of the things we must do is alleviate the pain and distress of many *talmidei chachamim* (Torah scholars) in our community who live in dire poverty and do not have the resources to furnish the basic needs for their families in these difficult times. It is the sacred duty of the community to come to their aid. In return, Hashem will bestow His rich blessings on you and on all of Yisrael." [Full text of this address appears in the original.]

After my sermon, the congregation *davened Minchah*. This happened on *Shabbos*, the 19th of *Sivan*. While the worshipers were engrossed in prayer a thunderous explosion rocked the foundations of the *shul*. Bombs were crashing into the city. Fires were burning out of control. People, gray with fear, were running in all directions, frantically seeking shelter from the rain of death coming down from the sky. Most people found refuge in the cellars of their homes; I also went down to have *shalosh seudos* (the third *Shabbos* meal) together with my students. We sang the traditional *zemiros* (songs), after which I offered some insights on the portion of the week, and for a brief spell, we were transported to a world of *kedushah* (holiness), oblivious to the destruction going on around us.

Meanwhile, the news spread that the bombs were the result of military activity across the river where the French troops were firing on a village that was under attack. The Austrian army, in an attempt to repel the enemy and relieve the village had sent reinforcements from Pressburg, who came rowing across the Danube in small boats and ferries. The French aimed their guns at these boats, trying to disperse or sink them, raining a hail of bullets and shells at the oncoming Austrians. Some stray shells overshot their marks and unintentionally landed on some Pressburg houses across the river. The shelling continued until nightfall when the hostilities ended. We *davened Maariv*. By now it was Sunday, the 21st of *Sivan*.

French Launch the Attack

I had a restless night, my misgivings and anxiety about the future did not allow me to sleep, and I woke up quite upset. The first thing I did was summon Reb Mendel Lemberger and ask him to call on the president of the community, who was bedridden, with the request to let him have two hundred thalers to perform a *pidyon nefesh* ceremony, after which the officers of the community were to distribute the money to the poor. Furthermore, they were to send ten Torah scholars to pray at the graves of *tzaddikim* (righteous people), imploring Hashem to have mercy on us.

No sooner had Reb Mendel left than, like a thunderclap, a bomb exploded, followed by a bombardment of hundreds of missiles and shells that blasted the air and rattled the windows. The booms of the barrage of bursting bombs were loud

enough to awake the dead. It was a ferocious bombing attack, aimed directly at the city. The Jewish neighborhood was struck by a rain of explosive pellets which killed several non-Jews who happened to be passing in the street. The cannonade caused extensive damage to houses owned both by Jews and non-Jews.

The city was in a panic. Cries of shock and dismay mingled with the moans and groans of the injured. Scenes of unspeakable horror abounded: a stunned man gazing with despair at the smoldering ruins of his home; a shrieking mother carrying her bleeding baby to the nearest hospital; the fire brigade rushing to the scene of a burning house, insistently clanging their bells; debris from collapsing walls plummeting into the streets. Walking the streets meant placing your life in jeopardy. Families huddled in their cellars, and little children, trembling like leaves, clung to their mothers' skirts, cringing each time the whine of a passing bomb reverberated overhead.

I was delivering my daily *Gemara shiur* (*Talmud* lecture) in the cellar. As we sat there in the dimly lit basement, the students were preoccupied and in low spirits. What was going to be the outcome of this? When was it going to end?

During the afternoon, the shelling seemed to intensify. The French were launching an all-out attack against the city. Without letup, volley after volley, the cannon balls kept coming. The rain of fire and steel fell indiscriminately, sowing death and destruction wherever it descended. But wonder of wonders, during the entire attack not one house in which a Jewish family lived was hit, not a trace of fire damage could be found in any Jewish home.

Around three in the afternoon, Reb Mendel returned from

his mission, carrying with him a bundle of money.

A large crowd of people assembled for the *pidyon nefesh*. I would have preferred to perform the ceremony in the large *shul* where there was more room, but I was afraid to walk outside because of the ever-present danger of incoming shells and cannon balls. I decided, therefore, to perform the *pidyon* in my house.

The participants were deeply moved by the solemn character of the observance and its far-reaching importance; there was not a dry eye in the crowd. I performed the *pidyon* as I described it above, but it was impossible to send a *minyan* to the cemetery on that day, since it was situated exactly in the line of fire, and anyone standing there would be an easy target. It was postponed for the following day.

After the *pidyon*, we *davened Minchah* with intense *kavanah*. In the meantime, the big guns fell silent, the fierce bombardment came to an end, and tranquility reigned once again in the streets of Pressburg.

What had been the purpose of this bombing attack? It did not make sense. One of the basic rules of military strategy is that when you are engaging the enemy in battle, then as long as you have not gained the upper hand you do not terrorize your enemy's city to force it to surrender, since the enemy will not allow the city to give up. What did Napoleon's generals hope to gain by their cannonade? And once they started it, why did they stop? The French seemed to act irrationally. At any rate, we were on pins and needles for fear that the shelling might start again. The slightest sound sent us scurrying to the cellar in mortal fear.

The following day, a horse-drawn carriage pulled up in front of my house. The president of the Jewish community of

nearby Jergen came to pay me a visit. After exchanging a few pleasantries, he told me the purpose of his visit.

"Pressburger Rav," he said respectfully, "this city is a very dangerous place for you to stay. Please, come along with me to Jergen where you can stay until things quiet down a little."

My family, gathering around me, urged me to accept the invitation and move to Jergen. I was inclined to follow suit. Indeed, I had a very powerful reason for wanting to move away. Very often in my nightmarish dreams of the recent past, I saw visions of myself fleeing Pressburg, becoming a wanderer and eating at someone else's table in a faraway small country town. I said to myself, by moving away now I would satisfy the conditions of the dream, and the dream would thus be nullified and wiped out. This is a marvelous remedy for averting the evil portents of bad dreams, which is recommended in the writings of the early Sages.

I myself wrote, in this regard, that such an intentional "dream fulfillment" was what Reuven had in mind when he suggested that Yosef be thrown into the pit. Yosef had dreamed that the brothers' sheaves would bow down to his sheaf. The brothers hated Yosef for this dream since it implied that he meant to rule over them. Reuven calculated that by throwing Yosef into the pit the brothers would all crouch and bow down to look into the pit to see how he was faring. In so doing, they would, in fact, be bowing down to Yosef, and thereby his dream would be fulfilled and canceled. He would never be their king and master, and the brothers' reason for hating him would thus be annulled.

However, a number of prominent members of the community prevailed upon me not to abandon the community. I

gave in to them because I could not reveal my innermost thoughts, and my purposes had to remain cloaked under a veil of secrecy.

EXILE IN JERGEN

After a quiet night, alarming stories began making the rounds. People were whispering that the French forces were seen reinforcing their ramparts and gun emplacements. This could mean only one thing. Napoleon was preparing to launch an all-out assault on Pressburg. Having softened up the local defenses with his brutal bombardment, he was now ready for a ground attack which would ravage and wipe out the entire city.

I issued instructions to all *shuls* in the community to recite the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer at the morning and evening services, emphasizing that it be said with deep concentration and fervor. Afterwards, several psalms were to be recited.

I *davened* in my private room together with my students. At the conclusion of the service, my entire family entered the room.

"Father, why do you insist on staying here?" they cried. "Don't you see? You are standing on a volcano. You are exposing yourself and our family to untold perils. Is a Jew permitted to place his life in jeopardy as you are doing?"

Tearfully they pleaded with me, until I could no longer endure it. Then, in what was clearly a sign from Heaven, their importunings were interrupted by a group of men who insisted on seeing me at once. It was the delegation of communal leaders who only yesterday insisted that I remain in Pressburg.

Obviously agitated, they addressed me with great urgency.

"Pressburger Rav," the spokesman said, "please forget what we said yesterday. You must leave the city at once lest you be harmed in the impending onslaught."

Hardly had he concluded his plea when a coach drew up in front of my house, ready to take me and my family to Jergen. A comfortable apartment had been prepared for us in a house owned by a local lady.

Most of the members of the community moved their families away from the city, to the safety of small neighboring villages. Although the battlefield remained quiet for the following ten days, no one felt secure. My thoughts were with the Pressburg community at all times, and I was deeply concerned about the various rumors—some true, others false—that were circulating. Our anxieties were exacerbated when the peasants of Jergen began to raise objections to the influx of the Pressburg refugees.

"Why don't you Pressburgers stay at home?" they said. "By coming here, you drive up rents and food prices."

The mayor and the village council supported the Jewish

refugees, placing the newcomers in a very precarious position. The new arrivals suffered a great deal of harassment and annoyance on the part of the inflamed local populace.

Each day of our exile in Jergen we recited *Avinu Malkeinu*, as well as the long *Vehu Rachum*, after which we said the following psalms: Psalm 2, 3, 10, 20, 22, 31, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 51, 90, 91, 102, 103, 116, 117, 120, 121, 130, 144, including the *Yehi Ratzon* after *Tehillim*; and in Psalm 119 [which comprises eight verses for each of the letters of the *alef-bais*, each group of eight verses beginning with the same letter], we recited the set of eight verses for the letters spelling Pressburg (*pei, reish, ayin, shin, bais, vav, reish, gimel*, the spelling that was used in writing a *get*).

After this we said the following prayer:

"O great, mighty and awesome Lord, hear our entreaties and our prayers and the prayers of all Yisrael and consider with compassion the people of the holy community of the city of Pressburg who are presently in great distress. They have no one to rely upon except You, our Father in Heaven. O King Who reigns over kings, save them in Your abundant mercy, and let not their enemies rule over them . . . Almighty Lord, be a stronghold for the people of the holy community of Pressburg. May the merit of charity and kind deeds and the merit of those who study the Torah stand them in good stead that they may not stumble and be afflicted in their souls and their possessions . . . Accept our prayer with compassion and with favor . . ."

Before leaving Pressburg, I had instructed two close confidants to take up a collection among the generous people of the community, the proceeds to be distributed among the poor and in particular among needy Torah scholars, this in

line with the theme of my sermon of the previous *Shabbos*. They collected approximately seven hundred thalers which were distributed to the needy.

Although most of my students remained in Pressburg, a number of them came along with me, so that throughout my stay in Jergen my *yeshivah* continued to function as usual. I continued to deliver my daily lectures in *Gemara* to an audience of at least ten students.

On Monday, I was called up to the Torah at which time I recited the *Birkas Hagomel*, the *berachah* you recite after surviving a dangerous situation, but instead of saying, "Who has bestowed every goodness on *me*," I said, "Who has bestowed every goodness on *us*." Rabbi Mordechai Task, the head of the *bais din* of Pressburg, also said the *berachah*, likewise using the plural form.

However, as time wore on and the military situation remained stationary and quiet, making life appear to be safe and secure, most of the people brought their families home again.

They rationalized, "By now, Napoleon has realized that he cannot not overwhelm Pressburg by bombing the city and that most of his cannon balls do not even reach the city. The range of the French guns is too short, and the ammunition drops harmlessly into the Danube."

The people imagined that the French had given up on conquering Pressburg. However, I was not swayed by such arguments.

"What they are saying is wishful thinking," I told my family. "As long as the French are dug in across the river we are not going home."

But I thought to myself that it would be a good idea for me

to go Pressburg on the forthcoming *Erev Rosh Chodesh Tammuz*—a day observed as a fast day by many people—to deliver a sermon to arouse the community to do *teshuvah* (to repent), and thereby bring honor to the Name of Hashem. I would not have to be afraid of getting in harm's way for it is written, "One who obeys the commandment will not suffer from the dangerous situation." (*Koheles* 8:5) After delivering the sermon I would return to Jergen.

I discussed my plan with a few close confidants, and on the afternoon of *Erev Rosh Chodesh*, two distinguished gentlemen, Reb Moshe Schacherles and his business partner Reb Gershon Pappenheim, came in their coach to take me to Pressburg.

Seated comfortably and engaging in pleasant conversation, we rode along the smoothly paved streets of Jergen. Suddenly, the carriage swerved, tilting sharply to the side and, within a split second, overturned, breaking up into pieces with a loud crash. People witnessing the accident rushed over to pull us out of the wreckage. *Baruch Hashem*, none of us was hurt, although I was quite unnerved by the experience. When I was back on my feet, the following verses came to mind: "The steps of a man are made firm by Hashem, when He delights in his ways. Though he stumbles he does not fall down, for Hashem gives him support." (*Tehillim* 37:23-24)

After giving the matter some thought I concluded that this accident was Hashem's way of telling me that He did not want me to go to Pressburg. I returned to our temporary home in Jergen, happy in the thought that with this mishap another of my frightening dreams had come to fruition, and thank Heaven we escaped unscathed.

On Tuesday night, the first day of *Rosh Chodesh Tammuz*

the bombardment of Pressburg resumed with full force. Day and night, heavy barrages of shells and cannonballs kept coming, lasting an hour and sometimes two hours. Many non-Jews perished in the bomb attack, but praise to *Hashem Yisbarach*, no damage whatsoever occurred in the Jewish quarter.

Saved from the Firing Squad

On Wednesday, the city of Pressburg received a distinguished visitor. The guest was one of the generals of the Austrian army under the command of Archduke Charles. The forces under his command were deployed on the west bank of the Danube covering an area ranging from a place near Vienna named Spitz all the way south to the Pressburg region. The general came specifically to see me, and sent a staff officer to the Jewish quarter to take me to him.

When word leaked out that the smartly dressed officer had come to take the Chief Rabbi of Pressburg to the general, the Jewish population was thrown into panic and consternation. What could be behind this strange request? Had someone leveled false charges against the rabbi? Had the rabbi been framed or denounced?

A delegation of communal leaders went to speak to the general.

"Your excellency," they explained. "We are very sorry, but the Chief Rabbi is not available at the present time. He is out of town, on an inspection tour of ritual baths. Could you possibly tell us the reason why you want to see him? Perhaps we can be of help."

The general, leaning back in his chair, stared at the ceiling.

"Briefly, this is the story," he replied. "We have caught two deserters, one a Jew, the other a gentile. As you know, desertion in time of war is punishable by death. The men have been found guilty, and both will be executed by firing squad this coming Saturday. The Jewish soldier requested that the Chief Rabbi of Pressburg come and pray with him, prepare him for death and attend his execution. That is the reason I sent for Rabbi Schreiber."

"Since the Rabbi is absent, could we send a substitute to perform the rites on his behalf?" the *gabbai* asked.

"Permission granted," the general replied curtly. With that he smiled and rose from his chair, signaling the end of the meeting.

After a brief discussion, Reb Zalman Bernau and Reb Mendel Lemberger volunteered to go to see the condemned Jew along with several members of the *chevrah kadisha*, carrying with them the death shrouds. Upon arriving there they recited with him the *Viduy* confession and explained to him the meaning and importance of *teshuvah*, repentance which brings about forgiveness of sin.

Having prepared him for death, they set about the task of saving the poor man's life. Following the chain of command, they spoke with deep emotion first to the man's corporal, then to his platoon sergeant, lieutenant, captain, and major, convincing all of them of the man's basic good character, asking that he be given another chance. They then approached his colonel and finally the commanding general himself, imploring him to have mercy on the poor man. The general listened attentively to their plea and seemed to be impressed by their arguments.

On *Shabbos*, the 3rd of *Tammuz*, the *Shabbos* of *Parshas Korach*, the two condemned men were led to the execution field, placed before the firing squad and blindfolded. The soldiers raised their rifles into firing position. Then the command rang out, "Ready!"

Before the fatal command "Fire!" could be called, the general stepped forward.

"Stop the execution!" he shouted. "You have been sentenced to die, but thanks to these fine Jewish men here who did their utmost to save your life, your sentence has been commuted. Both of you, the Jew and the gentile, your crime is forgiven. Go back to your units."

Praise to Hashem Who has been wondrously faithful to us; thanks to Him for saving this life through the merit of these upstanding men. Their merit was to stand us in good stead as will become evident later in our story.

Return to Pressburg

Now that most of the members of the community had returned to Pressburg, well-meaning voices were heard to grumble, "Why doesn't the rabbi come back to lead his flock? Hashem in His goodness has spared His people. Pressburg is safe. We want to have our rabbi in our midst, to guide us and protect us."

But there were others who were not so kindly disposed. They took the opportunity to vent their long suppressed animosity by launching a whispering campaign against me and inciting the community against me, the way Korach fomented his rebellion against Moshe Rabbeinu. When I was

told of the various murmurings, I thought the time had come for me to return to Pressburg, trusting that Hashem would lead me on the right path.

Thus, I set out for my home town on Tuesday, the 6th of *Tammuz*, but I did not return to my house since it had no cellar in which to hide in the event of an attack. Reb Mendel Lemberger, whose house had a two-story basement, prepared an apartment for me in his home. We shared this apartment with Reb Kaschman Offenbach, a *tzaddik* of a man. Of course, two families living in one apartment made for crowded living conditions, but we managed somehow. I was quite happy with the accommodations, because it was close to the large basement which was equipped with steel doors and iron bars in front of the windows to keep out marauding soldiers. Best of all, the great *bais midrash* was located in this house, giving me easy access to its library of thousands of *sefarim* (books). Moreover, it was close to my house so that my wife and children did not have far to go if they needed something.

The students of my *yeshivah* came every day to study under my guidance in the customary way. My lectures were not disrupted by the sounds of war, for there was a lull in the fighting, and the shooting and bombing died down completely. The Austrian troops, led by Archduke John, the brother of the Emperor, were quartered in military barracks in Pressburg. The Emperor himself as well as his brother and the entire general staff all resided in Pressburg. Being near the center of military power gave our people a false sense of security.

"If there would be even the slightest hint of a threat these important personages would not be staying here," they reasoned.

"It is clear that the Jewish community enjoys the special protection of the *Hashgachah*," others rationalized. "You've seen it; none of the bombs and the shells did any harm."

"Why doesn't the rabbi go back to his house on the Schlossberg?" they argued. "It is situated there on a fortified hill, far beyond the reach of the French guns. The wretched place where he's living now just is not respectable; it is unbecoming to a man of his stature."

I saw things differently. In spite of the apparent tranquility, I was deeply concerned; I had premonitions of menacing future events, and "the heart knows its own bitterness." (*Mishlei* 14:10)

An Important Derashah

On Thursday night, the 9th of *Tammuz, Parshas Chukas*, I delivered the following *derashah*, giving an overview on the current situation.

" 'Blessed is Hashem, for he has shown me His wondrous kindness in a beleaguered city.' (*Tehillim* 31:22) Let me publicly thank Hashem for the kindness He has shown us in the recent past. . . . Our city has been under siege, bombs and missiles have been launched against our streets and homes. And the astounded generals are asking: Strategically, there is neither rhyme nor reason to this attack. Has the enemy taken leave of his senses?

"Anyone with an ounce of common sense realizes that this is Hashem's doing. He brought this calamity upon the world for the sake of Yisrael. (*Yevamos* 63a) At the same time, we witnessed with our own eyes the lovingkindness of Hashem

Who performed great miracles for us. Not one Jew was hurt, and even material damage to Jewish homes was only minimal, amounting to only a few thousand thalers.

"Now, you may ask: Why did Hashem bring the peril upon us in the first place, if He intended to spare us? Let me make it perfectly clear. Hashem in His mercy is sending us a warning. Like a father speaking to his son, He is telling us, 'Look children, I kill and give life! I crush and I will heal! Return to me and pray, before the disaster strikes you. Heaven forbid, if you are obstinate and refuse to listen, be prepared for much worse troubles.'

"Therefore, if we do *teshuvah* and repent now, then the terror that came upon us will have been a greater favor to us than the rescue itself. For it was a warning signal admonishing us to prevent the coming of the day of wrath that lies ahead.

"While our escape from harm certainly was a miracle, the fact that Pressburg came under this horrifying siege was a much greater marvel and demonstration of Hashem's kindness . . . .

". . . Specifically, what should we do to mend our ways? It is a well-known fact that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* metes out punishment fairly, giving measure for measure. And when He punishes us with missiles, fiery arrows and other projectiles, then let us refrain particularly from committing such sins that are compared to arrows. If we do this, our *teshuvah* will surely serve to protect us from present-day arrows—shells, bombs and bullets.

"First and foremost, there is the sin of impure thoughts, which the Torah compares to an arrow. Let us avoid situations that arouse such thoughts. Let us refrain from having gatherings in mixed company, men and women, boys and girls

congregating in parks or other public places or in the privacy of the home. Every father should urge his daughters to dress modestly. Let them not be guilty of provoking lustful thoughts.

"Let us beware of *leshon hara*, talebearing, gossip and slander. Let us guard our tongue from speaking evil. Indeed, in *Tehillim* an evil tongue is compared to an arrow, "What can you profit, what can you gain, deceitful tongue? A warrior's sharp arrows, with hot coals of broom-wood." (*Tehillim* 120:4)

". . . I must reprimand those who shave using a straight razor or any kind of razor blade, whereby the blade is in direct contact with the skin. In so doing, each time they shave they transgress five negative commandments. To be sure, I can cite no verse from the Torah to prove that shaving with a straight razor is called an arrow. However, David Hamelech compares a razor to a tongue, "Your tongue devises mischief, like a sharpened razor that works treacherously." (*Tehillim* 52:4) Since we have established that the tongue is likened to an arrow, a razor is thus indirectly equated with an arrow . . .

"On the positive side, let us exert ourselves and study Torah. Woe to him who is capable of studying Torah and fails to study, or to him who is capable of supporting Torah scholars and fails to do so. Conversely, he who engrosses himself in the Torah will be protected from pain and distress. (*Berachos* 5)

". . . Let us rise to the challenge and repair the walls of the cemetery which were destroyed in the flood. We all know that the souls of the holy men in the graves voiced their outrage earlier this year. Let us delay no longer, let us repent and do good deeds. The souls of the saintly *tzaddikim* will stand by our side, and the merit of their Torah will protect us . . .

PRESSBURG UNDER SIEGE

"Recently it has come to my notice that many people in the community are saying, 'Sixty years ago, when the city of Prague was beleaguered by enemy forces, Rabbi Yechezkel [the rabbi of Prague, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau, 1713-1793, author of *Noda Biyehudah*, first published in Prague, in 1776] wanted to leave the city, but the leaders of the community prevented him from doing so. They wanted to have their leader among them and felt that a spiritual leader should not flee for his life and leave his community to fend for itself.

"Let me point out to you that there are different precedents. For example, when the city of Mainz came under siege a few years ago, the community sent Rabbi Chaim Hirsch to safety in Frankfurt. In a similar case, the community of Koblenz insisted that Rabbi Susskind Gunders find safe haven, also in Frankfurt. And when Frankfurt itself was besieged, my esteemed mentor, the great Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz [author of *Sefer Haflaah*] was sent away to safety in Hanau.

"The leaders of these communities gave as grounds for sending their rabbis away, 'Our Rabbi can pray for us wherever he is. What do we gain if he suffers along with us?'

"And let me point out, when a Torah sage goes into exile it is a good omen for winning a war. For the Torah states, 'When the Ark went forth, Moshe said, Arise, Hashem, and scatter your enemies!' (*Bamidbar* 10:35) The Ark symbolizes the Torah sage. Thus, when your sage is on the move, your enemies are scattered.

"So you see, there exists a difference on this subject between the custom of Prague and that of the other great communities I mentioned . . .

"There is also this to consider. In the *Gemara* in B*erachos*

we read the well-known dictum, "*ein chavush matir atzmo mibais haassurim*; a captive cannot free himself from prison." Bearing this in mind, it would be advisable for a community under siege to send away its rabbi, so that he should not be exposed to the peril along with the rest of the *kehillah*. When the rabbi is in a safe place, his prayers on behalf of the community are much more likely to be accepted than would be the case if he were inside the beleaguered city. When the rabbi's life is also threatened, his prayers are tinged by a selfish motive, since he would be praying also for his own deliverance... This whole discussion, however, applies only to outstanding rabbinical leaders who are on a very high spiritual level and is, therefore, not relevant to my case. I must follow the dictates of our Sages that anyone who bears even a small amount of guilt must avoid places of peril.

"May we merit to behold the rebuilding of Zion and Yerushalayim, speedily in our days. Amen."

My message made an impact on the congregation, moving the audience to tears. After I concluded, we *davened Maariv* in the large *shul* in a spirit of peace and harmony. And any ill-will and malice had completely evaporated. [The complete text of this address appears in the original.]

PRESSBURG ABLAZE

On Friday, the 9th of *Tammuz*, I officiated at a *get*, divorce, something I never do on a Friday afternoon. But this was an emergency. A Jewish soldier, who had received his marching orders only hours before, came to my office together with his wife. He wanted to give her a *get* [so that, in the event he would be missing in action, his wife would not become an *agunah*, a woman whose husband is absent, and who cannot remarry until her marital status is clarified]. After he gave the *get* to his wife, the couple became engaged again by writing a *tena'im* contract, and the projected wedding was set to take place within three years. Thus, they were now *chasan* and *kallah*, and after the soldier's return from the battlefield they would once again get married. These formalities took place in the *bais midrash* in Reb Mendel Lemberger's house, where I happened to live.

PRESSBURG UNDER SIEGE

At eleven p.m. on Monday night, the 13th of *Tammuz*, my worst fears were realized. All bedlam broke loose. Thunderous explosions and booming gunshot salvos reverberated through the city skies. A major bombing attack was underway. Deafening blasts rattled windows and shook solid structures, causing bricks and roof tiles to come crashing to the ground. Walls were collapsing, buildings were tottering like in an earthquake. Panic-stricken men and women, carrying their valuables in bundles on their back, ran around in a daze, seeking shelter in underground basements. My landlord Reb Mendel Lemberger's large basement became a refuge for all the neighbors.

All my ominous forebodings were coming true. Looking out the basement window, it seemed as though the entire Jewish quarter was ablaze in one huge conflagration; wherever I looked I could see towering tongues of fire reaching up into the sky. The roaring fire, the heat and the smoke combined with the shouting and the agonized wailing of the desperate victims to create a scene of unspeakable horror.

My wife and children were crying, "Father, let's get out of here! We'll be trapped in this basement. If we don't leave we'll all suffocate."

Other people in the basement took a different view.

"Pressburger Rav," they cautioned me. "We beg of you, don't go outside! *Chas veshalom* (Heaven forbid), you'll be hit by shell fragments or by falling rubble. Please, stay here where you're safe!"

The argument turned into a shouting match; people pulling me in opposite directions. It was sheer madness.

An old man, Reb Leib Kammern, entered the basement, crying bitterly. Between sobs, he explained to a doctor who

had found refuge with us that his son Wolf had been struck by a bullet.

"Please, doctor, save my son's life. Come quickly. He's bleeding to death!"

While he was pleading with the doctor, another man came in, looking for the doctor's wife, who was a midwife.

"Please ma'am, over in my building there's a woman in labor. She needs help, and she needs it *now*! Have a heart, for Heaven's sake, come and help her."

While the pleading and cajoling was going on, the bombs kept falling. Fires were burning out of control since the firefighters were afraid of being hit by bullets or shrapnel.

More and more people sought shelter in our basement, men, women, and children, out of their minds with fear, came to spend the night there. And the bombs kept falling, and the blaze kept spreading.

Miraculously, while the general population suffered numerous casualties, there was not one fatality among the Jewish community. Although thousands of Jewish homes were hit by incoming shells, the damage was negligible, and not one Jewish house was destroyed by fire . . .

At soon as the sun began to rise, I urged everyone to *daven Shacharis*.

"*Morai verabbosai*," I said. "Let's say our prayers while we can. Who knows what's in store for us?"

Everyone eagerly followed suit. I positioned myself near the steel door, and just as I was donning my *tallis*, the basement was shaken by a powerful blast. A cannonball had hit the steel door with full force. Thank Heaven, the door withstood the blast, shielding me from certain death.

While we were praying, the shelling abated and finally

ended altogether. When the men ventured outside they found unexploded 150-pound bombs lying around everywhere. The streets were strewn with shrapnel and bomb fragments, each big enough to kill a man or wreck an entire house. In the wake of this violent attack, there was hardly a house in all of Pressburg that had not been severely damaged or destroyed. I know of only four houses that were not hit: The *shul* and four adjacent houses, my own included. Except for these houses, there was not a building that remained intact; even the castle and the houses high up on the Schlossberg Hill received direct hits.

Clearly, the time had come for me and my family to go back to Jergen, where an apartment was made available to me. Most Jewish families also left the city, some finding refuge in the nearby town of Blumenthal, others in Ratzersdorf, Jergen and Basing, which was the residence of government officials, princes, dukes, the nobility, and the ruling aristocracy. The large influx of Pressburgers drove up prices to such an extent that the rent for a tumbledown shack reached five thalers per day. Unable to pay these exorbitant rents, a large number of poor families, including pregnant women, little babies, the aged, infirm and the sick, were forced to live outdoors.

The French Unleash Their Full Fury

On Tuesday, the 13th of *Tammuz*, the French military command sent a negotiator to the Austrian side, waving a white flag. His proposal: "Hold your fire while our forces are crossing the Danube. In return, we guarantee the safety of the city of Pressburg."

The Emperor and his brother Archduke John who happened to be in Pressburg rejected the deal out of hand and personally issued the command: "Under no circumstances will the French forces be permitted to cross the Danube. Any attempt by the enemy at traversing the river is to be interdicted at all costs. Deal a death blow to Napoleon! Make mincemeat of his army!"

Privately the Emperor said, "I'd rather see this city turned into a wasteland, or let it be flooded, than let the French set foot in it."

When I heard the Emperor's rigid response, I gave up all hope for a peaceful solution.

The French reply was not long in coming. On Tuesday night, the 14th of *Tammuz*, a second cannonade was launched, this one even more ferocious than the previous one. An uninterrupted drumfire of rockets, shells, rifle and cannon fire pelted Pressburg, wreaking havoc on the city. The famous Stadtswirthaus, the city tavern, was gutted by fire. Flames engulfed most of the Jewish homes in the Edelhof building complex, from where they spread up the Bergel and from there to the Nagelschmied section where they consumed many warehouses filled with commodities. Even barricades and steel doors offered no protection against the raging fires. Immense stocks of valuable goods went up in smoke. Libraries containing holy books worth tens of thousands of thalers were laid waste; apartment houses comprising up to forty apartments were set ablaze. It seemed as though the prophecy of Yirmiyahu was being fulfilled: "It will burn like fire, with none to quench it." (*Yirmiyahu* 21:12) For even when there was a letup in the bombing, there was no one there to douse the flames.

Even worse than the blazing fires was the damage caused by looters. Taking advantage of the turmoil and the absence of law enforcement, bands of marauders ransacked Jewish homes and businesses, carrying off anything of value, plundering and pillaging without restraint. It was nothing short of a miracle that the *bais midrash* in Reb Mendel Lemberger's house escaped the greedy hands of the looters. Neither did his *sefarim* valued at many thousands of thalers, suffer fire or smoke damage.

The calamity brought out the best in people. One incident of self-sacrifice that stands out in my mind occurred when Reb Gumpricht Schochet carried the old and sightless Rabbi Kaschman Offenbach on his shoulders, bringing him to safety. Reb Gumpricht, in total disregard of bomb blasts and burning debris, carried the aged *tzaddik* through the perilous streets to safe haven outside of the city. Dodging bullets and flames, his hat caught fire as bomb shells were exploding all around them. They truly were an "*ud mutzal mei'eish*, a firebrand rescued from the flames." (*Zechariah* 3:2) The next morning, Rabbi Kaschman was taken by coach to my apartment in Jergen. May Hashem reward Reb Gumpricht for his heroic deed.

The Tragic Death of Wolf Kammern

Wolf Kammern, the young man who was hit by a bullet the night before, was lying in agony in his apartment in the Schiegerhaus. When the fire storm threatened to sweep the house, he was carried on a stretcher to the hospital where his friends remained at his bedside. A bullet had shattered his

thighbone and shredded the surrounding muscle tissue. Each day the surgeons cut away additional portions of the festering flesh. It took eight people to restrain him and keep him from moving, and to stimulate him lest he fall into a coma and die.

Lying on his sickbed, suffering excruciating pain and feeling his end approaching, Wolf confessed his sins like a *tzaddik*, and the truth is that he had not sinned toward Hashem. However, he had transgressed toward his fellow man.

This is what happened. When he was employed as the business manager of the Schiegerhaus, the lady who owned the property had a bad influence on him and induced him to do reprehensible things. She was a foolish Jewish woman who had her mind set on sowing discord and causing friction in the community. Never in its history had the Pressburg *kehillah* known strife and bickering; our members have always been peace-loving and reasonable people who would go to any length to avoid quarreling.

Now this woman held complete sway over Wolf Kammern, so much so that he did her bidding unflinchingly. Two years earlier, she persuaded him to bring charges and testify against me in civil court on a matter that affected the entire community. The underlying reason for their hatred of me was that as manager of the lady's houses Wolf had raised the rents sky high, making it impossible for low-income families to find housing. The poor people raised a hue and cry at the injustice, and I spoke out publicly against unprincipled landlords who took advantage of the housing shortage by charging unconscionably high rents.

Wolf Kammern, writhing with harrowing pain and seeking to set things right with Hashem, accepted his fate and made a deathbed confession. He asked forgiveness from all

whom he had treated unjustly. Hashem accepted his prayer, and he died as a *baal teshuvah*, on Friday, the 23rd of *Tammuz*, after eleven days of anguished suffering. He was buried close to the eve of *Shabbos*. His funeral was done in great haste because of the intermittent shelling. However, while the funeral was in progress the guns were silent, until the very last shovel, after which the shelling resumed, and everyone had to run for his life.

There is a lesson to be learned from this. This young man who led an exemplary life, died at the young age of thirty as a result of just one transgression he committed. This should give pause to those who continuously heap sin upon sin, day after day. The Holy Blessed One is patient and long-suffering with those who sin against Him and His Torah. However, He swiftly exacts punishment on those who do wrong to their fellow man. "The living should take it to heart." (*Koheles* 7:2) "Let him turn back to Hashem and He will have compassion upon him, and to our Lord for He freely forgives." (*Yeshayahu* 55:7)

Trials and Tribulations

On Wednesday, the 14th of *Tammuz*, the day after the resumption of hostilities, the majestic Pressburg House of Parliament received a direct hit, so that the cardinal, the mayor, the princes and noblemen were left without a dignified place to hold their conferences. The situation went from bad to worse. The beautiful city of Pressburg was turning into a barren wasteland, a scene of total desolation. If the fire did not destroy a building it was sure to be hit by a bomb. To make

things worse, the city was buffeted by a fierce gale that whipped up the blaze and a torrential downpour that made life unbearable for the thousands of homeless people who were camping out in the open. Collapsing walls and roofs caving in added to the cataclysmic proportions of the destruction.

I witnessed the pathetic effects the bombing had on the Jewish community. Fastidious people of refined tastes, whose tables were graced with nothing but the most exquisite foods and wines, wore the same clothes for three weeks without changing. Some would take off their shirts, launder them in the river and wear them again. Not that they lacked the means; it was the result of the chaotic situation that followed in the wake of the attack. Their possessions were stored away in hiding places scattered all over town, and they were simply too preoccupied with just staying alive.

My family and I were in the same predicament. We, too, did not have clean clothes to wear on the first *Shabbos* in Jergen. Although I spent as much as one hundred and fifty thalers in an effort to secure clean clothes, I managed to obtain only underwear. It was Hashem's way of forcing us to share the adversity the Pressburg community was suffering and to identify with them on this first *Shabbos*.

On Thursday of our first week in Jergen, a coach arrived carrying a number of *Sifrei Torah* which had been rescued from the fires of Pressburg. They were to remain there until the storm would blow over. I regarded the transfer of these *Sifrei Torah* (Torah scrolls) as an amazing act of divine justice, of paying off an old score. My thoughts flashed back to events of a year ago. A devastating fire was ravaging the village of Jergen, destroying all the *Sifrei Torah* of the small *kehillah*. The Pressburg community responded to the emer-

gency by donating several hundred thalers, clothing and household goods. However, they were unwilling to lend them a *Sefer Torah* from which to read. I tried very hard to persuade the trustees to make a *Sefer Torah* available to the Jergen community, but for some reason they turned down my request. And now, in what seemed to be an unmistakable act of divine retribution, they were forced to entrust all their *Sifrei Torah* to the small community to which they had denied one *Sefer Torah* in its hour of need.

On Friday, I had the honor of being the *sandek* at the *bris* of the son of Reb Mendel Lemberger and his wife, the daughter of Reb Avraham Asch. The baby was born in Pressburg on Friday, the 9th of *Tammuz*. On the following Tuesday, the day the shelling began, she fled the city, carrying the newborn infant in her arms. The *bris* and a festive meal were taking place in Jergen, but unfortunately, the father of the baby was unable to attend the *bris*.

During this turbulent time, another baby was born to a woman evacuee en route to Blumenthal. Since there was no midwife present, the men in the convoy had to assist her in the delivery. "How great are Your deeds, Hashem, You made them all with wisdom." Thank Heaven, the men who had no experience or training in such matters, performed their task calmly and efficiently. Where most of them would normally faint at the sight of a drop of blood, they performed the delivery without batting an eye.

On that memorable first *Shabbos* in exile, all the newcomers pledged substantial amounts of money toward the restoration of the *shul* of Jergen; the minimum donation was eighteen thalers, while many people pledged much more than that. May Hashem reward their generosity.

Even in the relative safety of Jergen we lived in fear and anxiety as we heard the constant explosions in the distance. Our windows were rattling every time a shell struck a building in Pressburg. Newspaper reporters estimated that over four thousand projectiles had fallen on the city. We were deeply concerned about the fate of the Jews who remained in Pressburg, "What agonies were they enduring? How were they bearing up under the relentless bombardment?" The chilling thought robbed us of our serenity and peace of mind.

The Conclusion of the Battle

On Monday, the 26th of *Tammuz*, rumor had it that the city was about to surrender to the French, since most of the Emperor's forces stationed in Pressburg had suddenly withdrawn from the city and from the battlefield on the west bank of the Danube; only a few regiments remained in the city. On the basis of this rumor, most of the Jewish evacuees, as well as the non-Jews and the nobility who had taken refuge in Basing, returned to Pressburg. They reasoned that the French forces would occupy the towns where they had found refuge, blocking their access to Pressburg. They, therefore, rushed back to their homes in Pressburg before it would be too late.

I decided to stay put in Jergen. I said to my family, "As long as there remains a garrison of Austrian forces posted in Pressburg I don't believe any of these stories about an imminent Austrian withdrawal."

My assessment of the situation proved correct. It turned out that the Austrian troops under Archduke John had left the city to come to the aid of Archduke Charles whose army was

embroiled in a major battle at a place named Spitz. Archduke Charles lost the battle before John's forces arrived, so that a few days later Archduke John's army returned to Pressburg without having fired a shot. Thus, the military situation remained unchanged.

But the French forces deployed across the river from Pressburg were becoming impatient and issued the following ultimatum: "Unless permission is granted to the French army to cross the Danube unmolested by 6 p.m. this Thursday, Pressburg and its suburbs will be leveled completely. Every house will be razed to the ground. We will show no mercy."

Word of the ultimatum sent shock waves through the populace. All hopes for a respite from the blazing inferno had been cruelly dashed. People were frightened out of their wits. Those who had returned home fled again in great haste.

But Hashem's kindness had not ended. At 4 p.m., two hours before the expiration of the ultimatum, the commander of the Pressburg garrison, General Bianca, reported that the French Chief of Staff had sent a envoy on horseback bearing a message stating that the local rulers of the two warring sides had agreed on a cease-fire for a period of thirty days.

Under the terms of the cease-fire, the French troops would occupy Pressburg, the fortress of Brunn in Moravia, the city of Trieste in Italy, the fortress of Raab in Hungary and the state of Fiume. The cease-fire negotiations were carried on behind the back of the Austrian Emperor who was left completely in the dark. The French Commander-in-Chief confronted the Emperor with a *fait accompli*. The cease-fire went into effect, and there was nothing the Emperor could do about it. Jubilation filled the air. The days of misery and woe had finally come to an end.

PRESSBURG UNDER SIEGE

Reb Hirsch Schapiro, the president of the Pressburg Jewish community, rushed to be the first to bring me the good news. I was extremely happy and recited the appropriate *berachah*. Although I was delighted with the new development I realized that without the Emperor's express consent General Bianca had no authority to permit the French to cross the Danube. In light of the uncertain outcome of the events, I decided not to return to Pressburg but to remain in Jergen until the muddled situation would be clarified.

Confusion reigned supreme when on the night of *Rosh Chodesh Av* the Saxon forces who were allied with the French passed through the nearby town of Stampfen. Close on their heels and in hot pursuit came the Austro-Hungarian army. The Saxons thereupon informed the Austro-Hungarians that a cease-fire was in force and that peace was at hand. Soldiers of the two opposing armies embraced in friendship, toasts were exchanged, and yesterday's enemies drank to each other's health.

But the Austro-Hungarians had treachery in mind. After the Saxons had gone to sleep, the Austro-Hungarians launched a surprise attack engaging the sleepy Saxons in hand-to-hand combat, killing many with swords and bayonets.

"You are liars," they shouted. "There's no cease fire. We're still at war!"

After the initial shock had worn off, the Saxons regrouped and, infuriated at the contemptible Hungarian betrayal, fought back ferociously. Before long the Saxons gained the upper hand and dealt the Austro-Hungarians a devastating blow.

The Saxons now vented their anger on the city of Pressburg, claiming that the Pressburg municipal leaders had incited the Hungarians to attack them. In revenge, the commander of the

Saxon army sent his troops into the city on a looting and pillaging spree. The Saxon soldiers did not have to be told twice. They went on a rampage, plundering and ransacking Jewish and non-Jewish homes alike. People fled for their life in the middle of the night, abandoning homes and possessions.

On Friday, refugees from Stampfen arriving in Jergen brought reports about the military and political situation.

"You are next," they warned us. "All this talk about a cease-fire and a peace settlement is a hoax. You'll see, the Saxons won't spare Jergen!"

We were terrified and distressed at the prospect. Then, after the Friday night service, we received word from Pressburg that the main force of the Saxon army had entered the city, and to everyone's surprise, they had displayed a friendly and peace-loving attitude. It was too good to be true.

On *Shabbos*, while we were assembled in the *shul*, we heard cries outside, "The French are coming! The French are coming." Peasants abandoning their fields came running into town, shouting excitedly, as if they had actually seen the foreign troops.

"Don't you hear the drums in the distance? That's the French army!" one peasant would say.

"Yes, yes!" another would answer. "I can hear them. They're coming closer!"

The congregation, hearing the shouts outside, was panic-stricken. They ran out of the *shul*, planning to go into hiding in forests or caves. However, it was not long before the truth became known, when a letter arrived from Pressburg stating that throughout the night of *Shabbos* the Saxon troops had marched into Pressburg, well disciplined, with a congenial

demeanor, and that not one case of looting or abuse had been reported.

This report was bolstered by a letter a non-Jew had written to his Jewish neighbor, stating, "Come home without delay. You have nothing to worry about. Everything is peaceful and quiet in Pressburg. Nothing adverse is happening."

On the *Shabbos,* the third of *Av*, I was truly happy.

The Aftermath of the War

On Sunday, the 4th of *Av*, after an absence of forty-two days, we returned home safely. Back home, things had changed a great deal. The Saxon army now occupied the city of Pressburg and the surrounding area. This placed a heavy financial burden on the population, for the soldiers were billeted with the local families, six to ten men per family. The cost of providing food for these soldiers ran one thaler per man each day, in excess of the meat and the bread the city magistrate supplied to relieve the burden somewhat. The Jewish community was required to pay a tax of forty thousand thalers, in addition to the penalty the French Emperor Napoleon imposed on the city of Pressburg amounting to one million eight hundred thousand thalers. It had not yet been decided what portion of this amount would be charged to the Jewish community.

The city of Vienna was fined fifty million thalers. Since our ruler, the Archduke, lived in Vienna, an outrageous tax was imposed on him. Therefore, the Archduke asked the Pressburg Jewish community for a loan of fifty-seven thousand thalers.

The war plunged the Jewish community into abject poverty. For weeks there had been no business activity, while expenses continued to mount. Many people hired guards to watch their property during their absence, which meant an added expense of fifty thalers per day. Then there was the loss of houses through the fire, whereby each house represented a loss of twenty-three thousand thalers, and many people lost two or three houses. Many homes were damaged by the shelling, which cost from two or three thousand thalers to restore. And let us not forget the loss of the contents of the houses and *sefarim*. Worst of all was the inflation and the ensuing high cost of living.

As for the *yeshivah*, most of the students were dispersed in different localities, and only very few of them remained in the city of Pressburg. These had great difficulty finding room and board. Where in the past the *yeshivah* boasted an enrollment of close to three hundred students, it now numbered only a few.

A painful question surfaced as a result of the suspension of the classes. Teachers were asking whether in light of the forced interruption of classes they were entitled to their full salary.

I responded as follows, "Personally, I am paying all my employees in full, without withholding anything at all. As for your question, I am not sure what the *halachah* (ruling) is in this case. I suggest that you try to reach a compromise by paying half the teacher's salary, so that the teacher loses only half his salary. Clearly, the cause for the loss is a universal calamity that cannot be blamed on anyone. According to the *Sema* [*Sefer Meiras Einayim* by Rabbi Yehoshua Falk Katz, died in Lemberg, 1614, first published in Prague, 1606] the

teacher should bear the entire loss . . . The *Shach*, as well as Maharam Padua [Rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen, 1482-1565, first published in Venice, 1553], disagree . . . I find it difficult to place the entire burden on the employer. Since the calamity was a "divine act," both the employer and the employee were affected by it to the same degree. Why should one of them bear the entire brunt of the loss? . . . Therefore, I suggest they voluntarily reach a compromise to share the loss. I do not know what the *halachah* actually demands in this particular case. A greater sage than I will have to crystallize the true *halachah*."

Although the war brought commercial activity to a virtual standstill, the money-changing business made rapid strides. On the heels of the occupation, soldiers brought silver and gold coins which they wanted to change into the local currency. Often, they had copper coins which they wanted to exchange for paper money. Sizable profits could be made in these currency trades. Not only adults were engaged in this business, but even young boys could be seen carrying bags of coins and offering to exchange foreign money into local currency. This lucrative business aroused the ire of the non-Jews who were jealous of Jewish prosperity.

"The Jews are cornering the market," they grumbled. "They're hoarding all the money. They're controlling the economy and driving up prices."

"It's our money they are stockpiling," the rabble-rousers said as they incited the mob. "Let's break into their vaults and take back what's rightfully ours!"

The city administration quietly informed the Jewish communal leaders of the anti-Jewish sentiment being fomented among the masses. They asked that the money-changing

activities be curtailed so as to remove the source of the unrest and prevent an outbreak of violence.

Heeding the warning, the *gabbaim*, officers and trustees approached me, requesting that I admonish the community in this regard in my annual sermon given on the 7th of *Av*, which I did.

In my sermon, I said, "... Our Sages stated that *Mashiach* will come only after all the money is gone. At first glance, it might seem that this is something that can never happen. Furthermore, what connection is there between the disappearance of money and the coming of *Mashiach*?

"This *Gemara* may be explained metaphorically. The disappearance of money alludes to the time when the students of Torah will have vanished, when the Torah will be virtually forgotten. It is at a time of such extreme emergency that *Mashiach* will come.

"Regrettably, such times are upon us. Not only do our enemies denounce us and level false charges against us, but you make things worse by sending pure and innocent young children out into the streets, carrying bags of money to solicit business. Instead of studying Torah, the boys waste their time on such worthless activities.

"Our enemies are hatching evil plans against us. And if our children are not studying Torah, who will protect us from their nefarious schemes?

"Let me put it to you plain and simple. These money-changing activities must stop, here and now, once and for all. Anyone engaging in this business is considered a *rodef*, one who persecutes and victimizes the community, and shall be treated as such. He must bear the responsibility for his actions and he shall suffer the consequences!

"May we have the merit 'to behold the sweetness of Hashem and to contemplate in His sanctuary.'" (*Tehillim* 27:4) [The complete text of this address appears in the original.]

A remarkable incident occurred after the cease-fire went into effect. In the aftermath of the many fierce battles which had been fought, there were thousands of bodies lying scattered all over the fields, and an abundance of abandoned cannons, artillery shells, rifles, muskets and assorted armaments covered the countryside. The villagers would go out and collect huge quantities of these weapons and sell them to Jewish arms dealers.

One such dealer, Mordechai Oberbreit, recklessly endangered his own life and the safety of the entire community by his foolhardy actions. This is what happened.

Oberbreit bought a wagonload of such war materiel. He then drove the wagon filled with arms to Budapest, which was under Austro-Hungarian control. When the French military patrols stopped him, he made absolutely no secret of the fact that he was sending arms to the Emperor's army. He was immediately arrested and jailed for supplying weapons to the enemy, a capital offense. On *Yom Kippur*, ten other men from Stampfen who were involved in the arms deal were transferred to the Pressburg jail. They were all condemned to death, and the Jewish community was in grave danger. Using this incident as a pretext, agitators incited the common people to pillage and loot the Jewish quarter. But Hashem annulled their plans, and thank Heaven, nothing came of it. The prisoners were released, and the community was saved from harm.

The entire matter wound up in a *Din Torah*. The case and

the decision I rendered are recorded in *Teshuvos Chasam Sofer, Choshen Mishpat* 1.

[Translator's note: There is a remarkable story behind this incident. As a young man, when the Chasam Sofer was studying in Mainz, a French lieutenant named Pauli de Montfort was billeted in the house where young Moshe was boarding. The officer asked the young *yeshivah* student to give him lessons in German. In return, he would do his housekeeping chores. The lessons developed into a friendly relationship through which the Frenchman gained a sincere appreciation of and admiration for Judaism.

[When Mordechai Oberbreit was arrested, the Chasam Sofer, as Chief Rabbi, was held responsible for his misdeeds by the French military court. The Chasam Sofer was indicted, but to his great surprise, the presiding judge turned out to be his erstwhile friend Pauli de Montfort, who had risen through the ranks to become a leading commander in the French army. After a joyful reunion, de Montfort immediately dismissed all charges and assured the Chasam Sofer that no harm would befall the Jewish community.

[The Chasam Sofer was wont to cite this case in explaining the verse, "You will see My Back, but My Face will not be seen." (*Shemos* 33:23) We are often faced with situations that seem incomprehensible to us. Why is Hashem doing this? What are His reasons? "You will see My Back"—only long after an event has taken place do we grasp in retrospect the divine motive for it. "But My Face will not be seen"—at the time the event occurs, we cannot fathom the reasons for Hashem's actions.

[Indeed, the strange encounter of the French officer and

the young *yeshivah bachur* sparked the rescue of the Pressburg community forty years later. Hashem prepared the remedy before He sent the illness. From *Toledos Chasam Sofer*, Rabbi Avraham Feigelstock, footnote on page 21b.]

EPILOGUE

On Sunday, the 5th of *Marcheshvan*, a peace treaty was concluded between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the French Empire. In celebration of the joyous event, gun salutes resounded throughout length and breadth of the land. Four weeks later, the enemy forces withdrew, and the nation returned to a life of peace and tranquility. The work of reconstruction began. Cities were rebuilt and houses restored. Hashem blessed the land so that it prospered more than ever before.

On the 7th of *Teves*, during a sermon in the great *shul* of Pressburg, I announced that it would be proper and fitting to proclaim a day of thanksgiving to Hashem.

On Thursday of *Parshas Shemos*, which is observed by many as a fast day of *Shovevim Tat*, we recited the same psalms we said in the days of peril and distress. Afterwards,

everyone gave a contribution of a minimum of eighteen florins to two trustees toward a special fund. The trustees delivered the money to me, and in conjunction with the members of the *bais din*, and in the presence of a *minyan*, we performed a *pidyon nefesh*, a redemption ceremony, using two methods of calculating the numeric value of the letters of Divine Name. Subsequently, we recited Psalm 115 three times, *Yekum Purkan* and *Mi Shebeirach*. After that, the letters of the name Pressburg spelled out according to Psalm 119. Then we recited Psalm 128, after which we distributed the collected funds to the poor people of Pressburg.

Tam venishlam shevach Leborei Olam. Concluded with praise to the Creator of the Universe.

The Chasam Sofer's Ethical Testament

I am always mindful of Hashem's Presence. (*Tehillim* 16:8) Written in the year 5597/1837. For man does not know his hour, the hour to act for Hashem. Increase your Torah study, to raise again the House of our Lord and to repair its ruins.

My sons and daughters, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, grandchildren and great grandchildren lend me your ear and you shall live.

Let not your heart turn toward evil, do not join the company of evildoers who follow the modern ways and who depart from Hashem and His Torah. Do not dwell near them, and do not associate with them in any way shape or form.

Do not go near the books written by Moses

Mendelssohn, then your feet will never stumble. Study *Tanach* with the commentary of Rashi and engross yourselves in the Torah with the commentary of Ramban. Teach the Torah to your children, for it constitutes the underpinning of our faith and embraces the universal wisdom of the ages. And if Heaven forbid, you will be plagued by the banes of hunger, thirst and poverty, please stand this test and do not turn to false gods; do not omit Hashem from your thoughts. Let the girls study books written in German which are based solely on our tradition and the moral tales and insights of our Sages. I positively and unconditionally forbid you to attend theater performances. May you merit to behold the sweetness of Hashem and the joy of His children, speedily in our days, Amen.

If Hashem will show you His favor and make you successful, as I hope He will, then do not hold your heads high in arrogance and haughtiness toward a fellow Jew. Remember, we are the offspring of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, the students of Moshe Rabbeinu, the servants of David Hamelech. Our Father Avraham humbly said, "I am mere dust and ashes." (*Beraishis* 18:27) Moshe Rabbeinu asked, "What are we?" (*Shemos* 16:7-8) David Hamelech said, "But I am a worm, less than human." (*Tehillim* 22:7) And *Mashiach* will make his appearance as a poor man riding a donkey. This being so, how dare we show pride?

Be strong and resolute. Study Hashem's Torah diligently and with concentration. Disseminate the Torah among the masses. If your knowledge is limited, make an effort to teach others whatever you know, in purity and sincerity. Hashem knows you have no ulterior motive and that in all sincerity your only aim is to bring honor to His great Name, for "a hypocrite cannot come before Him." (*Iyov* 13:16)

Beware of adopting non-Jewish names, of speaking the language or dressing in the style of the non-Jew. This is indicated in the words, "*Vayavo Yaakov shaleim.* Yaakov arrived safely." [*Shaleim* is the acronym formed of the initials of *sheim*—name, *lashon*—language and *malbush*—clothing.]

Do not worry if you will not inherit great wealth, for the Father of orphans will have compassion for you and will not abandon you. Nothing is impossible for Hashem, no matter how big or small it is. Do not use the Torah as an instrument to gain honor or wealth; and most certainly, do not become itinerant preachers who demand payment for their sermons. Only if you are elected to serve in the rabbinate are you to accept a position.

Never say, "Times have changed." We have an old Father, praised is His Name, Who never has and never will change. May no evil ever befall you, and may you be blessed by Hashem, the ancient Refuge.

May it be Your will, O Giver of the Torah, praised is His Name, that the wellspring may never run dry

and that the tree bearing the fruit of everlasting life may never be cut down. Amen.

My dearly beloved friends of the magnificent community of Pressburg, may you be blessed from the wellspring of blessings.

You have allowed me to serve as your rabbi since *Tishrei* of the year 5567/1807, and with Hashem's help, I have taught thousands of outstanding students, so that the community has become an assemblage of Torah scholars. You have maintained a *yeshivah* with wisdom and discernment, and you have borne the burden of supporting the students. You have raised your children to become Torah-observant Jews, an endeavor in which you have succeeded admirably.

You are today one of the outstanding *kehillos* in the world. Never allow a person who deviates from *Halachah* to assume the leadership of your community. Please, I implore you, do not allow the rabbinate to remain vacant for more than two years. Appoint only a *talmid chacham* who has a reputation of being G-d-fearing and who is uncompromising in his adherence to the Torah and *Halachah*, a man who does not lend credence to heretical philosophies and who does not preach in the German language. Like a fleeting shadow, a man who is not G-d-fearing will not reign long in his rabbinical post. Select a man who delivers sermons like you heard from me, expositions of the teachings and sayings of *Chazal*, a man who gives no

special consideration to anyone and who cannot be bribed, either by honor, glory or flattery. He should be a humble man who will deliver public Torah lectures to the community.

The curriculum and the schedule of Torah classes should not be changed in any way. Anyone wanting to introduce changes shall be removed; anyone promoting the traditional system of teaching Torah shall be supported. The order of prayer and the layout of the *shul* shall be maintained in perpetuity without the slightest change or alteration. Let no one dare make any changes either in the arrangement of the interior of the *shul* or in the order of the prayers.

Our Father in Heaven, raise high the pride of Your people, and that of the people of Pressburg in particular. Grant them material wealth, glory and long life dedicated to the fear of Hashem and the study of Torah, until the coming of *Mashiach*. Amen.

The dawn of the nineteenth century found Europe in deep turmoil. Like a juggernaut, Napolean's legions were rolling across the continent in an irresistible advance, overwhelming the Austrian, Prussian and Russian armies. In 1806, his forces laid siege to the ancient city of Pressburg whose Jewish community was led by the illustrious Rabbi Moshe Sofer, universally acclaimed as the Chasam Sofer. Only the mighty Danube River impeded Napolean's onslaught. What followed was a terrifying siege lasting forty-two days during which the people of Pressburg experienced the unbridled fury of French firepower. The beleaguered city, pounded by an uninterrupted rain of bombs, rockets and missiles was turned into a scene of utter devastation, its populace decimated.

Miraculously, the Jewish population escaped virtually unscathed. In his *Sefer Zikaron*, presently translated under the title of *Pressburg Under Siege*, the Chasam Sofer offers a vivid description of the truly spectacular events surrounding this blockade.

The towering figure amidst this scene of horror and confusion is the Chasam Sofer, who earlier had bizarre premonitions of impending disaster. Frightening dreams had forewarned him of its coming. There had been other dreadful omens: a disastrous flood, a shipwreck on the Danube, a case of murder, ghastly sounds emanating from the graveyard and other appalling portents, all pointing to an imminent calamity. Seeing these phenomena as warning signs from Heaven, the Chasam Sofer admonishes his flock to do *teshuvah* and mend their ways. Highlights of a number of his sermons have also been translated and included in the text. He describes in detail a little-known ceremony of *pidyon nefesh* he performed, a ritual designed to ward off ruin and devastation. And he fervently prays for the *kehillah* of Pressburg.

Pressburg Under Siege inspires us and gives us an inkling of the wisdom and authority with which a surpassing *gadol* like the Chasam Sofer guided his community through a disastrous crisis.

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