



# FEARLESS FAITH

A Memento from the Wedding of

Yaakov שיחי' & Doba Raiza' תחי'  
Sudakevich

Chof Alef Sivan, 5785



ב"ה

## GREETINGS

The chosson and kallah, Yaakov and Doba Raiza, are honored to share a remarkable heritage through three sets of mutual grandparents:

Reb Yehoshua Lein and his first wife Masha (mother of Aaron Leib) and second wife Risha (mother of Rivka).

Reb Shraga Feitel and Chaya Leah (Semensky) Levin.

Reb Shloime and Basya Chaya (Vygon) Raskin.

This teshura focuses on the shared zeides, delving into their remarkable lives through interviews and research.

Due to our tight schedule, the section on Reb Yehoshua Lein was not added. We know he was a truly special chossid, Rav and mekushar to the Rebbeim. Tracing his ancestry to his distinguished great-grandfather, Reb Peretz Chein, he is a direct descendant, son to son, from Dovid Hamelech. Through the impetus of his father, Reb Chaim Dovid Lein, the Frierdiker Rebbe established the practice of reciting Tehillim on Shabbos Mevarchim.

While researching the Raskin family in the Frierdiker Rebbe's writings, we found mentions of Basya Chaya's father and grandfather. This discovery led us to explore the history of the Vygon family as well. And while Basya Chaya's brother, Reb Shamai, is well-known from the Frierdiker Rebbe's writings, her brother Reb Yosef was relatively unknown. We were fortunate to discover the diary of Reb Yosef's son, Michel Vygon, which provided valuable insights specifically about

Reb Yosef and enabled us to present this biography of the Vygon family.

For the Levin family, we were privileged to receive the testimony of Mrs. Sima (Levin) Sudakevich, which offers a first-hand account of a world many of us have only encountered in books.

We invite you on a journey to a time when emes prevailed, a time when the deepest desire was to connect with the Rebbe. We invite you to glimpse the dedication of our ancestors, for whom the struggle to keep Shabbos triumphed over the struggle for a piece of bread, and whose chassidishe spirit could not be broken by the persecutions of the day.


Let us all take their legacy to heart, learning from their fearless faith and working to instill it in the next generation. Together, may we be zoche to the geulah ha'amitis ve'hashleima.

Thank you for celebrating our simcha with us.

**Mendi and Chana Sudakevitch**  
**Shloime and Chaya Raskin**


*Chof Alef Sivan, 5785*

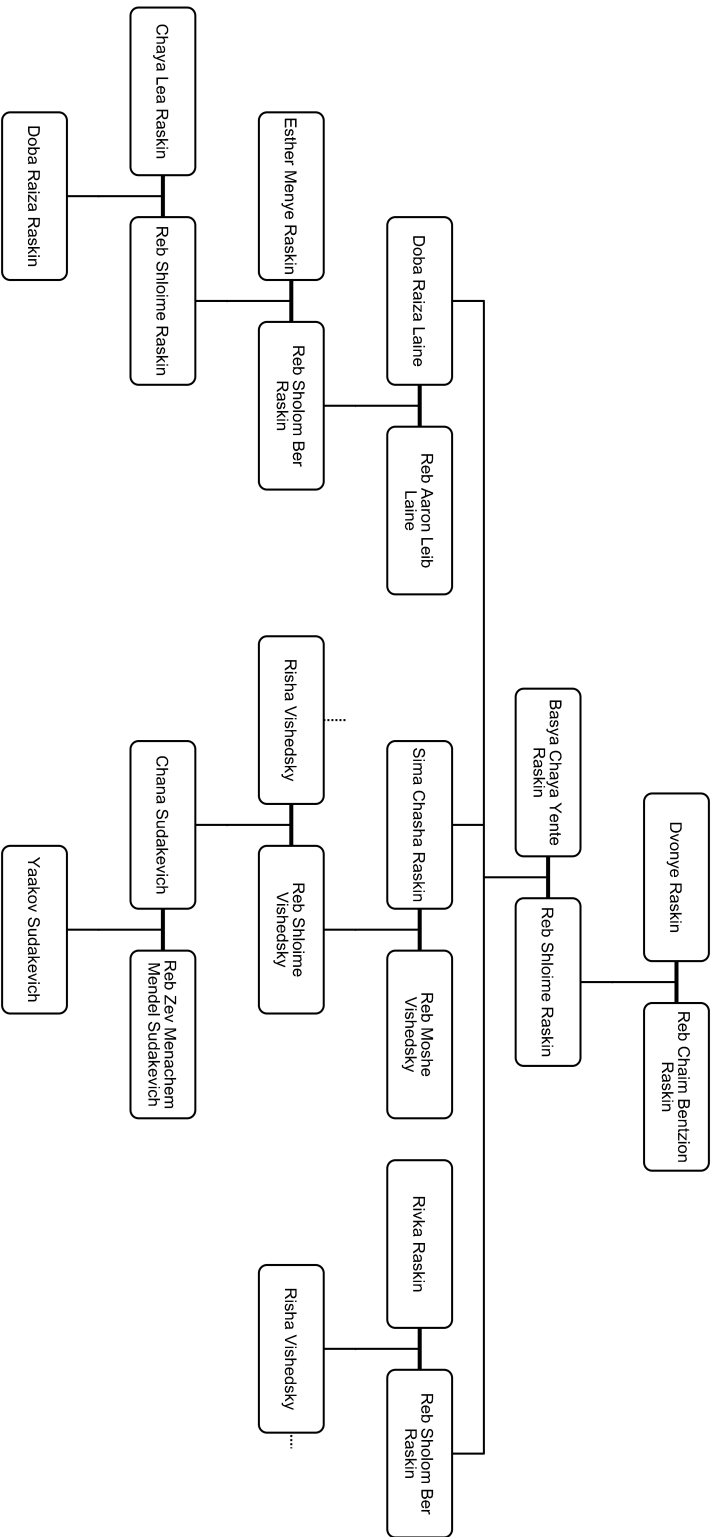




# The Raskin Dynasty

Reb Shloime and Basya Chaya Raskin





# THE RASKIN DYNASTY

## Deep Roots

To know a man is to know his roots, his community, his home.

The Frieridiker Rebbe mentioned how the Raskin family in one of two *mishpachos* who are rooted, "*eingevartzelt*," in Lubavitch from *chassidim* of the Alter Rebbe<sup>1</sup>. This highlights the deep, multigenerational connection the Raskin family has to Chabad, dating back to its earliest days.

## Shloime's Parents: Chaim Bentzion and Dvonye Raskin

If one were to journey to a small rustic town, situated in Russia's vast Smolensk region, the town of Gzhatsk would appear, home to a small, insular community. It was precisely in this town, far from the larger Jewish community of Rudniya and its outside influences, that R' Chaim Bentzion Raskin chose to relocate his family<sup>2</sup>. This move, coming after years in his vibrant community of Rudniya, was a testament to the self-sacrifice and whole commitment R' Chaim Bentzion invested in building a strong Torah abode. Together with his wife, Dvonye Raskin, R' Chaim Bentzion crafted a legacy that was hewn of polished values and ingrained with upstanding morals. They carefully cultivated a rock-solid home where *Yiddishkeit*, connection to Hashem, and *Chassidus* were as essential as the air they breathed.

Chaim Bentzion was a man of principles, holding his family to the highest standards of Torah and *Halacha*, never once allowing

persecution or pain to serve as a deterrent. He also was a deeply respected figure in the Lubavitch community, holding a special status as a *Ben Bayis* in the Rebbe Rashab's house. This meant he could visit the Rebbe Rashab without needing a formal appointment.

The character of this extraordinary man and his wife, the devoted and nurturing Dvonye, is beautifully captured in the words of their granddaughter, Mrs. Sima Itkin (née Raskin)<sup>3</sup>, who lived with them in their later years in Leningrad:

"Bubbe Dvonye was a very good-hearted person. When anyone came to visit, she always had a big *Chainik* of hot water and potatoes on the stove. When anyone came, she would ask, '*Du vilst essen? Na dir. Vilst essen? Na dir.*' ('Do you want to eat? Here you go. Want to eat? Here



R' Chaim Bentzion Raskin



Dvonye Raskin  
(Mondshine Family Archives)





R' Yitzchok Raskin

you go.') When *bochurim* didn't have where to live, she housed them. She was such a good lady."

About her grandfather, she recalled, "Zaideh Chaim Bentzion was very *frum*, no compromises. He said, '*Voss m'tor nit, tor m'nit. Voss m'ken, darf men eich nit.*' ('What we aren't allowed to do, we don't do. What we can do, we don't need to.') But thanks to him, we remained *frum* children."

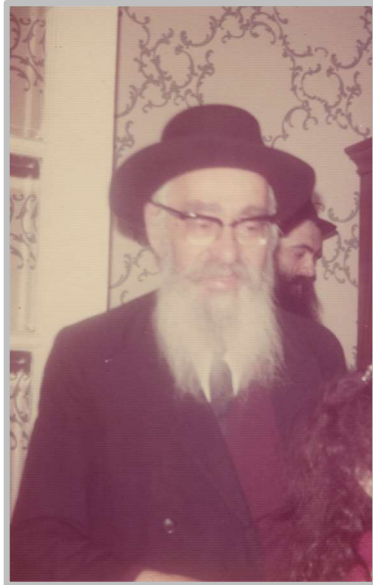
Sima recalls an experience both traumatic and yet formative, when her father, Yitzchok, was arrested by the KGB for the mere crime of being a proud Jew. He was taken, leaving behind four young girls. It was only due to their grandfather Chaim Bentzion's efforts and influence that they were kept on the path of observance. "My grandfather would say, '*Zalst gedenken az du bist a Raskin'yak.*' ('Remember that you are a Raskin.') And you should know that Raskins don't compromise," she remembered. "He used to say, 'Your father was arrested because of *frumkeit*. You have to be *frum*.'"

The Raskin home was known for its open hospitality. This characteristic was later reflected in their children – Yehuda Leib<sup>4</sup>, Shloime, Sara (later known as Mume Sara), Yitzchok, and Yaakov Yosef – who were known for their exceptional selflessness and generosity.





The Matzeiva of R' Chaim Bentzion,  
Discovered and Refurbished by His Great  
Grandson, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Mondshine



R' Yaakov Yosef Raskin

The Frierdiker Rebbe once said, "There lives a Jew near Moscow. Every day he rises at four o'clock to study Torah, and before learning he recites *Tebillim* and sheds tears like water. And what is he crying about? He asks for mercy from Hashem so that his children and grandchildren should walk in the right path<sup>5</sup>." Though the Frierdiker Rebbe did not mention R' Chaim Bentzion by name, all who were present clearly understood to whom he was referring.

The strength and vitality that carried him through the trials and tribulations of his life never retired or weakened. Even after suffering a debilitating stroke that left him completely unable to move, with just the use of one hand, R' Chaim Bentzion's passion for *Yiddishkeit* never dimmed. "The last *Simchas Torah* before he passed away, he was singing with us and dancing with us," his granddaughter recalled. "He just wanted us to keep *Yiddishkeit*. 'Er iz geven a zaier heise Id.' He was a very passionate Jew. He was very *Chassidish*; he had a lot of feeling."

# R' SHLOIME RASKIN

## Shloime's Early Life

It was in this sheltered stronghold that Shloime Raskin was born. On the 13th of Adar, 5647 (1887), Shloime Raskin was born as the second child to Chaim Bentzion and Dvonye Raskin. Growing up in the Raskin household meant being steeped in the values of authentic *Yiddishkeit* and *Chassidic* tradition from an early age.

The principles his father, R' Chaim Bentzion, lived by – unwavering commitment to Jewish observance, deep connection to the Rebbe, and maintaining faith even in challenging times – formed the foundation of Shloime's character and worldview.

Though limited information exists about Shloime's early years, it is known that he followed a path different from many of his contemporaries. Unlike those who attended formal *yeshivos*, Shloime stayed home and learned Torah under his father's guidance. He was described<sup>6</sup> as an "*ehrllicher bachur*," a G-d fearing man.

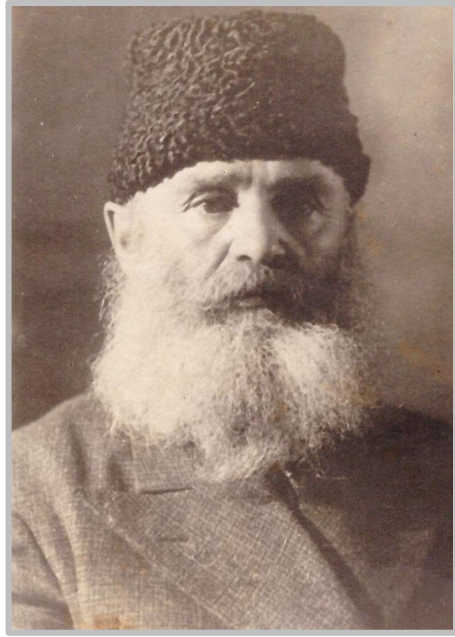
## A Good Idea

R' Chaim Bentzion believed that a young man or woman should marry by age eighteen. When Shloime reached this age, marriage proposals began to arrive from all directions. Rather than analyzing each prospect himself, R' Chaim Bentzion completely trusted his Rebbe's wisdom. Whenever a potential match would be suggested, Chaim Bentzion simply wrote it down and presented the names to the Rebbe Rashab for guidance.

On one particular Thursday, R' Chaim Bentzion traveled to Lubavitch with a list of eight prospects. During his private audience with the Rebbe, he presented the list. The Rebbe put on his gold-rimmed glasses and, with just a single glance that lasted only a second, surveyed the entire list from the bottom upward, and then set it aside.

"There is nothing suitable here," the Rebbe explained. "Among them is one who won't be careful with wearing her wig properly, and another who won't know how to educate her children," and so on.

R' Chaim Bentzion accepted this judgment completely. He remained in Lubavitch for *Shabbos* and prepared to begin searching for the right match once more. After *Shabbos* ended<sup>7</sup>, however, prospects began to change when a fellow



R' Shloime Raskin  
(Mondshine Family Archives)



Basya Chaya Yenta as a Newlywed

*Chassid* approached him with a new suggestion: Basya Chaya Yenta, the daughter of R' Michel Shtzerbiner from the Vygon family.

Immediately, R' Chaim Bentzion returned to the Rebbe to ask about this new prospect. The Rebbe's response was enthusiastic: "Ah, Michel Shtzerbiner! Michel Shtzerbiner is a God-fearing man, and his wife is a granddaughter of R' Yehoshua Elye, a respected *Chassid* of the Mittler Rebbe and Tzemach Tzedek. It's a good idea! It's a good idea!"

For R' Chaim Bentzion, no further discussion was needed. He was quite familiar with Michel Shtzerbiner, as the Raskin family and the Vygons had been connected through marriage in the past<sup>8</sup>. He returned home with the happy news: "Our Shloime'le deserves a *mazel tov*. The Rebbe has approved a match for him with Basya Chaya Vygon!" He was confident his son would agree since the families were connected and the Rebbe had approved.

Yet, to everyone's bewilderment, something quite unexpected occurred: Shloime refused the match. His objections were threefold: First, at only eighteen, he felt too young to marry. Second, he had not yet appeared for his military service. And third – perhaps most surprisingly – he was reluctant to marry a village girl when there had been prospects from bigger cities like Smolensk and Vitebsk.

"Why should I consider a match with a girl from a farm?" he protested. "The girl lives in a '*kbutor*,' a tiny settlement of just a few humble huts far from any village."

His father let the matter rest, and two months went by with no resolution reached. R' Chaim Bentzion decided it was time to return to Lubavitch. During his private audience, he painfully shared his son's refusal with the Rebbe. The Rebbe was puzzled. "I don't understand. Michel Shtzerbiner is a God-fearing man, and she (his



Shtzerbina on a Map From 1790

wife) is a descendant of R' Yehoshua Elye. It's a good idea! It's a good idea! Why wouldn't he want it?"

Armed with the strength of the Rebbe Rashab's approval, R' Chaim Bentzion returned home to pose the match again. To his dismay, however, Shloime still refused. An entire year passed with the young man holding firm in his refusal. Finally, R' Chaim Bentzion returned once more to the Rebbe and, in desperation, asked: "Is this truly his intended match?"

The Rebbe answered decisively, "Yes, yes!" R' Chaim Bentzion was shaken by the Rebbe's clear statement. Still, his son remained unmoved by this news. Shortly before *Yud Tes Kislev*, R' Chaim Bentzion visited the Rebbe again to report that his son still refused the match. This time, the Rebbe's instruction was simple: "Bring him here."

In time with the celebration of *Yud Tes Kislev*, R' Chaim Bentzion traveled to Lubavitch with his son Shloime. After the Rebbe's



*farbrengen* ended, father and son entered the Rebbe's *Yechidus* room together.

The Rebbe turned first to Shloime and asked directly, "Young man, what do you need? What do you want?"

Gathering his courage, Shloime poured out his concerns: he was too young; he had not yet appeared for military service; and his hesitation to marry a village girl when there were other matches from bigger cities.

Despite his exalted position, the Rebbe spoke to the reluctant young man with fatherly warmth, addressing each concern in terms he could understand.

"You say you're too young? With Hashem's help, you'll get older. You say you haven't yet had your military evaluation? I promise you'll be exempted from service. And you say she's from a village? Let me ask you: if this same girl were from Vitebsk or Smolensk, would that be good? I tell you, they would surely have more faults than her. Michel Shtzerbinner is a God-fearing man, and she is a descendant of R' Yehoshua Eliahu – this is a good idea! It's a good idea! Why don't you want it?"

Hearing the Rebbe address each of his concerns individually, with care, concern, and a direct manner, gave Shloime the push he needed. With the Rebbe's staunch backing and assurance, Shloime finally agreed to the match.

## Fifty Years of Influence

The long-awaited match had been made, and wedding preparations were in full swing. As family and friends began to arrive in the small, quaint settlement of Shcherbina for Shloime and Basya Chaya's

wedding, R' Chaim Bentzion and his family had a stop to make. The wedding was set in the winter, and the family made their way through the cold to Lubavitch to receive the Rebbe's *Brachos* for the wedding and marriage. R' Chaim Bentzion and his son Shloime arrived at the Rebbe's house and were told that the Rebbe was in the middle of a meal. The Rebbetzin opened the door and informed the Rebbe,

"Bentche<sup>9</sup> has come with his son." From behind the door, they heard the Rebbe reciting *Birkas Hamazon* in his sweet voice, every word penetrating their hearts.

A few minutes passed, and the Rebbe motioned for them to enter and asked what they had come for. R' Chaim Bentzion explained that they were traveling to Shloime's wedding and had come to request a blessing before the *Chuppah*.

The Rebbe responded: "A blessing?" Instantly, the tone in the room shifted as the Rebbe rose to his holy feet and began to adjust his *sirtuk* and fasten the buttons. His face changed, becoming radiant like flames. R' Chaim Bentzion, who was accustomed to standing before the Rebbe frequently but had never seen this, grew frightened and overcome with trembling. He felt that at any moment he might collapse from the overwhelming emotion and awe. His son Shloime



Rebbetzin Shterna Sara



R' Moshe Vishedsky

was shaking even more than his father, standing with his knees knocking together.

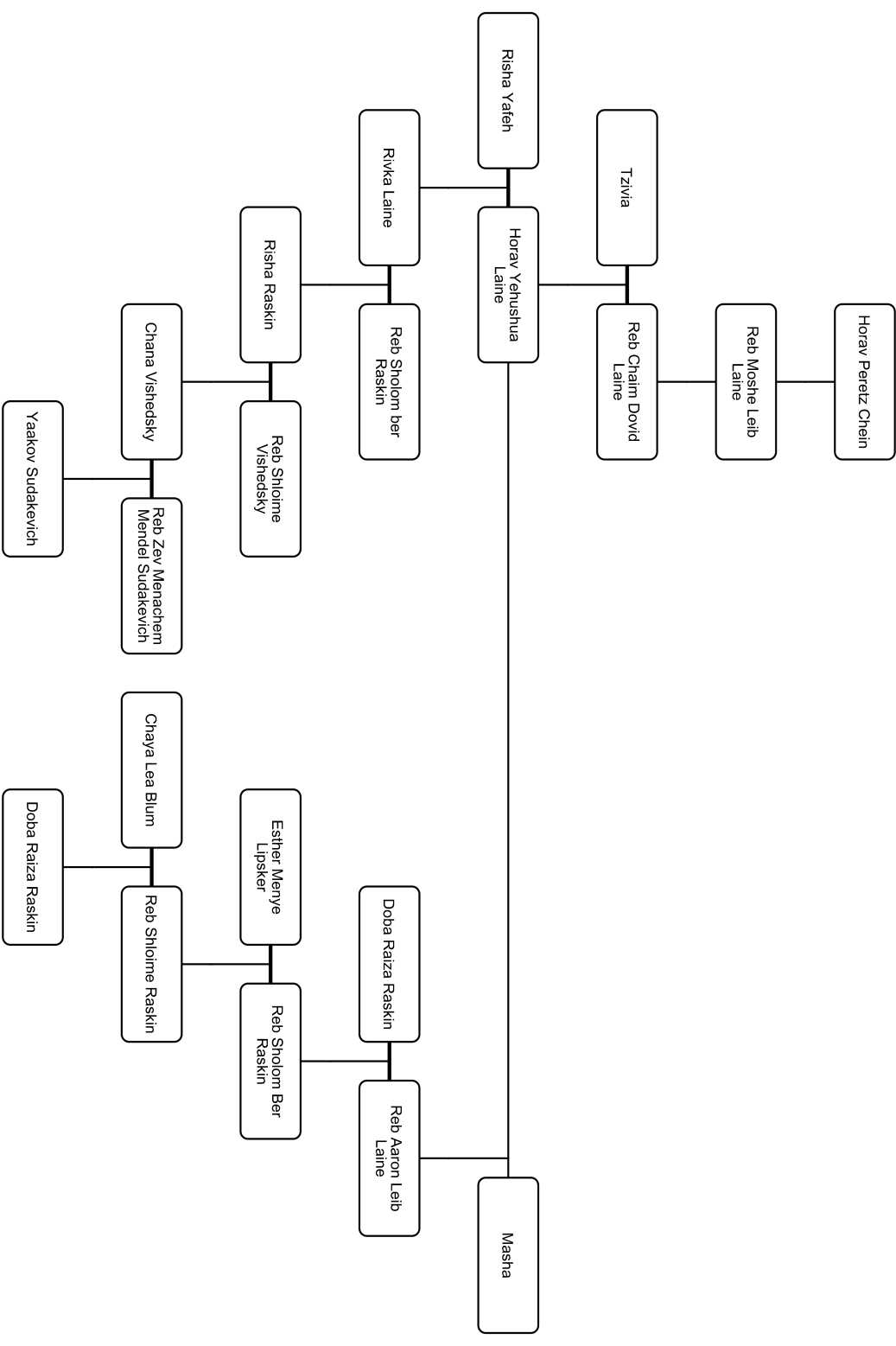
The Rebbe finished arranging his kappote and began to speak: "*Es vert gebracht in a sefer, in a sefer vert gebracht*" ("It is brought in a book, in a book it is brought") – repeating the phrase both forward and backward – "that when standing under the *chuppah*, one should think about continuing the acceptance of

the yoke of Heaven upon oneself, upon one's bride, and upon the children that Hashem will give, and this helps for fifty years<sup>10</sup>."

The Rebbe repeated these words a second time from the beginning: "*Es vert gebracht in a sefer...*" And then a third time. They felt that if the Rebbe were to speak to them once more, their souls might depart from their bodies. Yet, this was the last time, and the Rebbe blessed them and concluded.

With this holy blessing from the Rebbe Rashab guiding their marriage, Shloime and Basya Chaya began their life together.

R' Chaim Bentzion recounted this story countless times to his grandson, R' Moshe Vishedsky (who would later marry Shloime's daughter Sima Chasha). Each time he told the story, he was filled with the same emotion and wonder, tears flowing as if he were experiencing the holy moment for the very first time<sup>11</sup>.



# EARLY YEARS OF MARRIAGE

## Founding a Family

Following his marriage, R' Shloime initially lived in either Rudnia or with his wife's family in Shtzerbina, a town in the Rudnia District. It was there, in 1908, that his eldest daughter Doba Raiza was born.

R' Shloime and his wife eventually relocated to Kovna, Lithuania (now Kaunas). Kovna was a major Jewish center within the Russian Empire where Jews were allowed to live. Despite limitations imposed on Jewish inhabitants, Kovna flourished as a Jewish center, and several of R' Shloime's and Basya Chaya's children were born there<sup>12</sup>.

Their two youngest children, Luba and Sholom Ber, were born later, after the family had left Kovna.

Their children were<sup>13</sup>:

**Yehuda Leib (Leibe)**, later married **Sara Basya Budnov** (his second cousin, granddaughter of R' Mendel Raskin from Kovna).

**Doba Raiza**, later married **R' Aaron Leib Laine**.

**Shaul**, later married **Freida Moskalik**.

**Sima Chasha**, later married **R' Moshe Vishedsky**.

**Tziviah**, later married **R' Betzalel Rubashkin** (after his death she married **R' Zushe Margolin**).

**Luba Michla**, later married **R' Meir Zarchi**.

**Sholom Ber**, later married **Rivka Laine** (R' Aaron Leib's sister).



P. C. 1. I. R. O. Paris 80.495/5

x) left for *bourbon*

RASKINA x) Doba 30.7.08 Pol. Juudin Lg. Wegscheid

x) Michel (Sohn) 5.11.29

x) Berl " 3.6.34

x) Dawid " 12.5.40

x) Beno " 15.10.41

בית יום כ"ח חודש 1600 שנת 5701

כבוד תהלתו צעירי אגודת חבד בארץ חיים  
הראשון דוד הרב קטן 16. ת.ה. 4446

אבקס יום אף עזק החרשים ידולון ב, שפיר חרשים

שמי 1400 שמי

כ"ב יום חודש כסלו שנת ה'תשנ"א

כבוד התולה בעירי אגודת חב"ד בארץ ח"י  
ה"אביב רח' הרב קק ט"ז 4446

אבקש לעיין את השמות והמסות דלחול ב' בשבט, החסידים ליום המסוגל כ"ד שבט תשנ"א

שם פרטי: 1460  
שם משפחה: ק"מ  
שם האב: א"ה  
שם האם: ד"ה  
טקסט הלידה: ק"מ 10.6.5

באיות ושיבות לחד  
שנת: \_\_\_\_\_  
התקופות: \_\_\_\_\_  
שם אבית: 1460, 1461, 1462, 1463, 1464, 1465, 1466, 1467, 1468, 1469, 1470, 1471, 1472, 1473, 1474, 1475, 1476, 1477, 1478, 1479, 1480, 1481, 1482, 1483, 1484, 1485, 1486, 1487, 1488, 1489, 1490, 1491, 1492, 1493, 1494, 1495, 1496, 1497, 1498, 1499, 1500, 1501, 1502, 1503, 1504, 1505, 1506, 1507, 1508, 1509, 1510, 1511, 1512, 1513, 1514, 1515, 1516, 1517, 1518, 1519, 1520, 1521, 1522, 1523, 1524, 1525, 1526, 1527, 1528, 1529, 1530, 1531, 1532, 1533, 1534, 1535, 1536, 1537, 1538, 1539, 1540, 1541, 1542, 1543, 1544, 1545, 1546, 1547, 1548, 1549, 1550, 1551, 1552, 1553, 1554, 1555, 1556, 1557, 1558, 1559, 1560, 1561, 1562, 1563, 1564, 1565, 1566, 1567, 1568, 1569, 1570, 1571, 1572, 1573, 1574, 1575, 1576, 1577, 1578, 1579, 1580, 1581, 1582, 1583, 1584, 1585, 1586, 1587, 1588, 1589, 1590, 1591, 1592, 1593, 1594, 1595, 1596, 1597, 1598, 1599, 1600, 1601, 1602, 1603, 1604, 1605, 1606, 1607, 1608, 1609, 1610, 1611, 1612, 1613, 1614, 1615, 1616, 1617, 1618, 1619, 1620, 1621, 1622, 1623, 1624, 1625, 1626, 1627, 1628, 1629, 1630, 1631, 1632, 1633, 1634, 1635, 1636, 1637, 1638, 1639, 1640, 1641, 1642, 1643, 1644, 1645, 1646, 1647, 1648, 1649, 1650, 1651, 1652, 1653, 1654, 1655, 1656, 1657, 1658, 1659, 1660, 1661, 1662, 1663, 1664, 1665, 1666, 1667, 1668, 1669, 1670, 1671, 1672, 1673, 1674, 1675, 1676, 1677, 1678, 1679, 1680, 1681, 1682, 1683, 1684, 1685, 1686, 1687, 1688, 1689, 1690, 1691, 1692, 1693, 1694, 1695, 1696, 1697, 1698, 1699, 1700, 1701, 1702, 1703, 1704, 1705, 1706, 1707, 1708, 1709, 1710, 1711, 1712, 1713, 1714, 1715, 1716, 1717, 1718, 1719, 1720, 1721, 1722, 1723, 1724, 1725, 1726, 1727, 1728, 1729, 1730, 1731, 1732, 1733, 1734, 1735, 1736, 1737, 1738, 1739, 1740, 1741, 1742, 1743, 1744, 1745, 1746, 1747, 1748, 1749, 1750, 1751, 1752, 1753, 1754, 1755, 1756, 1757, 1758, 1759, 1760, 1761, 1762, 1763, 1764, 1765, 1766, 1767, 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, 1773, 1774, 1775, 1776, 1777, 1778, 1779, 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783, 1784, 1785, 1786, 1787, 1788, 1789, 1790, 1791, 1792, 1793, 1794, 1795, 1796, 1797, 1798, 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803, 1804, 1805, 1806, 1807, 1808, 1809, 1810, 1811, 1812, 1813, 1814, 1815, 1816, 1817, 1818, 1819, 1820, 1821, 1822, 1823, 1824, 1825, 1826, 1827, 1828, 1829, 1830, 1831, 1832, 1833, 1834, 1835, 1836, 1837, 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842, 1843, 1844, 1845, 1846, 1847, 1848, 1849, 1850, 1851, 1852, 1853, 1854, 1855, 1856, 1857, 1858, 1859, 1860, 1861, 1862, 1863, 1864, 1865, 1866, 1867, 1868, 1869, 1870, 1871, 1872, 1873, 1874, 1875, 1876, 1877, 1878, 1879, 1880, 1881, 1882, 1883, 1884, 1885, 1886, 1887, 1888, 1889, 1890, 1891, 1892, 1893, 1894, 1895, 1896, 1897, 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904, 1905, 1906, 1907, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1914, 1915, 1916, 1917, 1918, 1919, 1920, 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026, 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, 2031, 2032, 2033, 2034, 2035, 2036, 2037, 2038, 2039, 2040, 2041, 2042, 2043, 2044, 2045, 2046, 2047, 2048, 2049, 2050, 2051, 2052, 2053, 2054, 2055, 2056, 2057, 2058, 2059, 2060, 2061, 2062, 2063, 2064, 2065, 2066, 2067, 2068, 2069, 2070, 2071, 2072, 2073, 2074, 2075, 2076, 2077, 2078, 2079, 2080, 2081, 2082, 2083, 2084, 2085, 2086, 2087, 2088, 2089, 2090, 2091, 2092, 2093, 2094, 2095, 2096, 2097, 2098, 2099, 2100, 2101, 2102, 2103, 2104, 2105

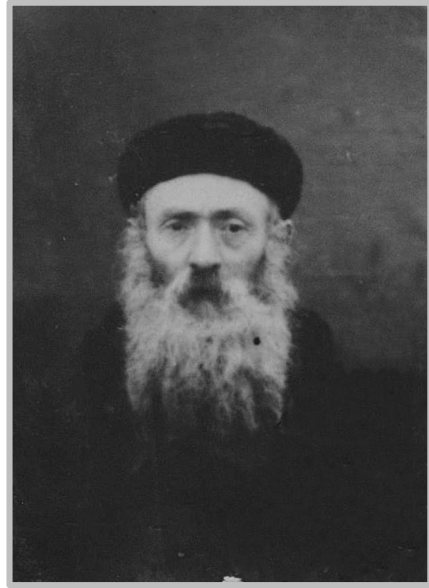
Shaul Raskin's  
Sefer  
Hachassidim  
Entree  
(Library of Agudas  
Chassidei Chabad)

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Sima Chasha's Birth Entree in the 1913 Community Book, in Hebrew and Russian

## Life in Kovna

Until World War I began, R' Shloime lived in Kovna and worked in a flour shop managed by his uncle, R' Mendel Raskin. During this period, he obtained his first passport in 1911, which required annual renewal under the Russian Empire's bureaucratic system. According to a 1913 legal document, he was seeking to extend his visa so he could legally remain in the city for another year.



R' Mendel Raskin, Brother of  
R' Chaim Bentzion

When World War I broke out in 1914, everything changed. The Russian military command, suspicious of Jewish populations near the German and Austro-Hungarian borders, began mass expulsions. They worried that because Jews spoke Yiddish, a Germanic language, they might act as spies for the enemy. The Russians expelled all Jews from Kovna and other cities near Russia's western border, forcing hundreds of thousands into the Russian interior.

# LIFE IN GORKI - 1918-1944

## World War One

At the onset of the war, R' Shloime and his family moved to Lubavitch, where the Rebbe Rashab was then situated<sup>14</sup>. His family subsequently moved to Kanavino, a district of Nizhny-Novgorod, which was called Gorki at that time<sup>15</sup>.

R' Shloime's uncle, Moshe Raskin, lived in Gorki. His wife passed away at a young age, leaving him with young orphaned children. Shloime's daughter, Luba, said she remembered R' Moshe Raskin as ill and paralyzed, yet also as a great *masmid* who would sit with a tall *yarmulke* on his head and learn Torah all day. He later became the father-in-law of R' Nissen Nemanov.

## Soviet Gorki

At the end of World War One, the Communist revolution took place. Openly practicing *Yiddishkeit* became dangerous. Gorki was designated a "closed city," where Communist control was especially strict because of its defense industries. Among its one million residents were nearly twenty thousand Jews, yet they faced harsh religious persecution. As a grandson of R' Shloime stated, "The *shuls* were locked up in the 1930s. Sadly, the second generation of Jews became assimilated into the population<sup>16</sup>."

By World War II, under intense pressure, only two Jewish families in all of Gorki still lived a *frum* lifestyle. The Raskin family was one of them<sup>17</sup>.

## Secret Jewish Life

There were no official *shuls* in Gorki. Instead, *tefillas* were held in the home of a Jew named Kogen, a *kohen*. Kogen's son worked for the NKVD but respected his father and allowed the *minyan* to take place. They *davened* there on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*. His grandson Berel Raskin recalled *Rosh Hashanah* in that house:



Basya Chaya Raskin

"Before *tekios*, reading *Lam'natzeiach*, *Zaideh* – the *Ba'al Toke'a* – would cry uncontrollable tears." Throughout *Sukkos*, adults and children would discreetly walk – separately, and under cover of the night – to the Kogen's courtyard *Sukkah*, sometimes at 1:30 AM, in order to avoid suspicion<sup>18</sup>.

On *Yud Tes Kislev* and *Yud Beis Tammuz*, people close to Lubavitch would come to the Raskin home to *farbreng*. On *Yud Tes Kislev*, Basya Chaya would prepare the traditional "*kasha varnishkes*," buckwheat *kasha* and chopped eggs.

## Supporting Imprisoned Chassidim

During the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, numerous *chassidim* were arrested and sentenced to hard labor in Siberian labor camps. It was very risky to associate with any sentenced criminal, *chassidim*



Mume Sara Katzenellenbogen  
(Mondshine Family Archives)

included. Despite the risks of aiding "enemies of the state," R' Shloime would constantly send food packages to these prisoners.

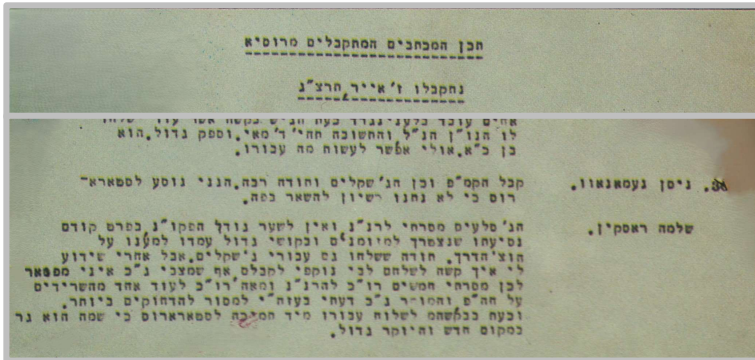
His seventeen-year-old nephew, R' Yehoshua Raskin (Katzenellenbogen), was arrested for hiding *yeshiva* funds in his suitcase. He bravely claimed the money was his, despite threats from the interrogator. After nine months in prison, he was sentenced to ten years in a detention camp. Because of

his young age, the sentence was shortened to five years. Alone in a Russian labor camp, who could he reach out to?

From his place of imprisonment, he wrote to "Shlomo Raskin, Main Post Office, Gorki" – not knowing the exact address. The letter miraculously reached R' Shloime, who forwarded it to Yehoshua's mother, his sister Mume Sara Katzenellenbogen<sup>19</sup>, in Samarkand. She was then able to send her son valuable packages of tobacco, which he traded for food<sup>20</sup>.

Many *chassidim* credited Shloime Raskin's packages for their survival in harsh labor camps. For example, R' Avraham Elye Plotkin<sup>21</sup> attributed his survival to the food parcels he received from R' Shloime. R' Nissen Nemanov<sup>22</sup> also relied on packages sent by R' Shloime both during his imprisonment and after his release. R' Shloime regularly





The content of the letters from R' Nissen and R' Shloime to the Friediker Rebbe (Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad)

sent food and money to prominent *chassidim* before each *Yom Tov*. Shloime's daughter, Luba, recalled that her father never celebrated a *Pesach* without sending R' Nissen a package. Numerous other *chassidim*, including R' Shmaryahu Sasonkin and R' Nachum Labkovsky, also benefited from his support.

His grandson, Michel Raskin<sup>23</sup>, would often wire money to *chassidim* throughout Russia on R' Shloime's behalf. On one occasion, a clerk at the money transfer office recognized Michel and exclaimed, "Make way for this guy if you want your money!" – aware that he was sending funds rather than coming to withdraw money. Upon hearing this, R' Shloime decided Michel could no longer go, deeming it too risky due to the increased likelihood of their activities being discovered<sup>24</sup>.



Michel and Berel Raskin

## School Struggles

R' Shloime's grandchildren were forced to attend Soviet schools, where they had to attend classes on *Shabbos*. As his grandson Berel recalls, "My grandfather deeply took it to heart and would cry, so I would try and leave for school when he wasn't looking. I would try to jump out the window to leave the house... One time I couldn't bypass him and he saw me leaving, and I saw him crying from the pain of me going to school."



Berel Raskin (Son of Doba Raiza)

The sight of his grandfather's tears had a profound impact on young Berel. The pain he was causing his beloved Zaidch moved him deeply, and he resolved that when *Yom Kippur* came, he would not go to school, no matter the consequences. When he returned to school after *Yom Kippur*, his teacher – a fellow Jew but staunch communist – confronted him: "Why didn't you come to school?"

Berel did not answer. She continued, "I know why you didn't come! Because yesterday was a Jewish holiday."

She then made an example of him, gathering the entire school – about 400 children, most of them not Jewish – for an assembly. She brought Berel to the front and announced, "Look at this comrade who refused to come to school because of a Jewish holiday." She went on to

denounce parents who, in her words, "served their children poison to drink against communism."

After this humiliation, Berel felt terrible but also more determined. When *Sukkos* approached, he wanted to skip school again, but he could not bear the thought of another public shaming. So he devised a plan. "I went to the hospital and told them I had bad stomach pains and couldn't walk. The doctor gave me a note saying I needed two weeks of rest." Two weeks later, he returned to school with the doctor's note in hand. His teacher was furious, but she couldn't challenge an official medical excuse – not in Communist Russia. "She couldn't say the doctor was lying, but she was fuming mad. And that's how I was able to celebrate *Sukkos*<sup>25</sup>."

## MEMORABLE MOMENTS

### Connection to the Frierdiker Rebbe

In 1927, the Frierdiker Rebbe was expelled from Russia after his arrest for maintaining *Yiddishkeit*. Masses of *chassidim* came to Leningrad to bid him farewell. R' Bentzion Raskin sent telegrams to all his children, commanding them with "*gzeiras ha'av*," a father's decree, to travel immediately to Leningrad, despite the danger involved. His son R' Shloime was among them and stayed with the Rebbe for Tishrei.

Years later, R' Shloime's grandson, R' Shloime Vishedsky, recounted what he heard from his mother, Sima Chasha (Raskin) Vishedsky. "Upon his return from Leningrad, my grandfather was very cold and weak. When we asked him to tell us what



The Frierdiker Rebbe in 1927



R' Chaim Bentzion in 1930  
(Mondshine Family Archives)

happened with the Rebbe, he simply said, "I have nothing to tell. There was terrible pushing and shoving, I barely heard anything, and what I did hear I didn't really understand."

But suddenly, R' Shloime took a *Chumash*, climbed onto the table, began to dance and exclaimed, "This, yes, this I saw. This is how the Rebbe danced on *Simchas Torah*." While still dancing, he added, "Yes, I remember one more thing. The Rebbe cried out and said: For the education of

children, one must go to the point of self-sacrifice!" These words stayed with his children and affected the education of the next generation<sup>26</sup>.

R' Shloime's time with the Friediker Rebbe impacted him deeply and was carried throughout his life. The Friediker Rebbe told Shloime to learn *Tanya* by heart. All the way into his final years, he persistently reviewed chapter after chapter by heart with *Kabolas Ol*.

The Friediker Rebbe once said about Shloime, "Although he never learned in Lubavitch, he associated with *T'mimim* and he illuminated all of Kanavine<sup>27</sup>."



R' Shloime Vishedsky



R' Moshe and Sima Chasha Vishedsky

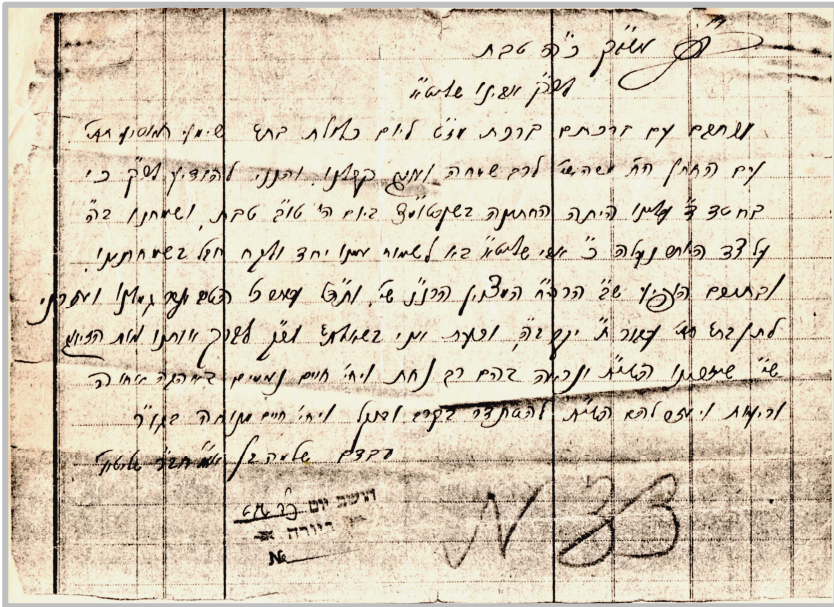
## The Vishedsky Wedding

In 1934, R' Shloime's daughter, Sima Chasha, married R' Moshe Vishedsky. The match was arranged by her grandfather, R' Chaim Bentzion Raskin<sup>28</sup>, and received the Frierdiker Rebbe's *brocha*. The wedding took place on the 17th of Teves in Gorki, where the *kallah* lived.

R' Shloime wrote to the Frierdiker Rebbe after the wedding, "With Hashem's kindness upon us, the wedding was at a good and successful hour, on Thursday, the 17th of Teves, and we rejoiced – thank Hashem – in the most elevated way. My honored father came to rejoice with us and took part in our celebration." He also noted the presence of his relative, the distinguished *Chassid* R' Nissan Nemanov.

The Rebbe instructed R' Moshe Vishedsky to move to Gorki to spread *Chassidus* among the local residents. In a letter to the Frierdiker





R' Shloime's Letter to The Friediker Rebbe

Rebbe, R' Moshe mentioned his plan “to enter the knitwear business, to sell bought merchandise in the market, and also a little of my own handiwork.”

Following the Rebbe's instructions, R' Moshe conducted underground *Chassidus* classes in the Raskin home. R' Moshe's influence led many to embrace *Chassidus*<sup>29</sup>.

# WORLD WAR TWO

## A Haven for Refugees

In September 1939, World War II began. Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the west, while Soviet Russia invaded from the east, splitting the country between the two powers. Many Polish Jews who were fleeing the Nazis suddenly found themselves in Soviet-occupied territory.

The Soviets offered these refugees a choice: accept Soviet citizenship, or request to return to their homes in what was now German-occupied Poland. Relying on the guidance of their Torah leaders – and unaware of the full horror of Nazi intentions – many chose to return home rather than become Soviet citizens.

But the Soviets viewed those who refused citizenship as "deserters" and enemies of the state. Instead of allowing them to leave, they arrested these Jews and deported many to labor camps in Siberia or remote forest settlements. Others, like some who came to Gorki, struggled to survive as stateless refugees with no legal protection.

During this period, the Raskin home became a crucial refuge – a haven of warmth and safety amidst chaos – both for family members fleeing the siege and displaced Polish Jews. R' Shloime's four-room house, considered spacious by the standards of the time, was filled to capacity. Living with him were his three sons – Yehuda Leib, Shaul, and Sholom Ber – as well as his two married daughters, Tzivia Rubashkin with her three children, and Doba Raiza Laine with her four. Both daughters had fled to Gorki when the war began. Their

husbands, Aaron Leib Laine and Betzalel Rubashkin, remained in besieged Leningrad serving in the national guard. Tragically, both men were killed in the same German air raid on the 10th of Shvat 1942. Also staying in the house were Aaron Leib Laine's siblings; his brother Sholom Ber Laine, and his sister Rivka Laine (later Rivka Raskin)<sup>30</sup>.

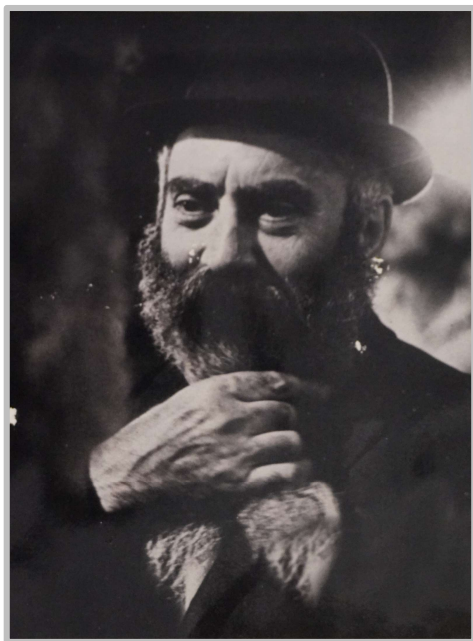


R' Sholom Ber and Rivka Raskin

Despite the crowded conditions, R' Shloime continued to host many Jewish refugees from Poland, welcoming those fleeing Nazi and



R' Shloime Raskin with his Son-in-law R' Aaron Leib Laine



R' Sholom Ber Raskin (Son of R' Shloime)

Soviet persecution. His grandson Berel Raskin recalled, "Michel and I slept on the floor covered with coats." Another grandson remembered people sleeping everywhere – under the table, on the table, in every corner of the house.

### Feeding the Hungry

During the war, R' Shloime worked tirelessly to secure food for his family and many others. He managed to stockpile a large supply of potatoes. His wife, Basya Chaya, would cook these potatoes and distribute meals to the many Jews in need. The family managed to gather enough potatoes to last the entire winter. The walls of the house were lined with sacks of potatoes, and whenever one began to rot, they would quickly use it before it spoiled the rest<sup>31</sup>.

Daily government rations were meager – just two kilograms of bread per family. To obtain additional food, especially potatoes, family members made trading trips to nearby villages by train, where they would barter for food. These demanding journeys were taken on by young Michel Raskin, about twelve years old and the eldest son of Doba Raiza, together with Rivka Laine (sister to Aaron Leib and Sholom Ber Laine), and their uncle Sholom Ber. Young Michel recalled an instance where he was refused a cabbage because even simple cabbage had become a rare luxury. The trips were strenuous,

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and he remembered sometimes having to carry fifty pounds of potatoes back to Gorki.

There was always food in the Raskin home, and every member of the extended family played a part in making that possible. Thanks to their efforts, many Jews received nourishing meals regularly and were saved from starvation.

## REFUGEE ACCOUNTS

### The Sadover Rav

The Sadover Rav<sup>32</sup>, R' Yerachmiel Yisroel Sekula, who later became renowned for his *matzah* bakery in New York, recounted this remarkable story.



The Sadover Rav

At the onset of the war, he and his wife were fleeing, lost and disoriented in unfamiliar territory. Without a calendar, he could not be sure if *Rosh Hashbanah* was that week or the next. After stepping off a train in an unknown town, he found himself walking along the edge of a river, calling out to Hashem for guidance since he knew no one and had nowhere to go.

As he walked, he suddenly noticed what looked like children's *tzitzis* hanging from sticks near the water. Surely, he thought, it was a hallucination – his mind was playing tricks on him from exhaustion and strain. But as he drew closer, he realized they were actually *tzitzis*. Closer still, he saw something that took his breath away: Jewish bearded men with small children standing in the freezing





Train Station in Gorky



Berel Raskin and His Mother Doba Raiza



Sholom Ber Vishedzky in the DP Camp  
(Mondshine Family Archives)

water! It was the beginning of the Russian winter, bitterly cold, and there was already a thin layer of ice forming in parts of the river.

Astonished, he asked, "What are you doing? What is going on here?"

They explained, "Today is *Erev Rosh Hashanah*. There is no *mikvah* for us in the city, so we are *toiveling* here."

Indeed, this was the Raskin family, headed by R' Shloime. Among them was young Berel Raskin, R' Shloime's grandson, who was around seven years old, with Sholom Ber Vishedzky, who was even younger. The Rav asked, "But why bring children to such a cold and dangerous river<sup>33</sup>?"

R' Shloime responded simply, "We need to educate them from a very young age."

The Rav accepted their invitation to go home with them, and R' Shloime took care of him for the rest of his stay<sup>34</sup>.

## R' Shloime Aaron Rozen

One winter day, young Berel Raskin arrived home to a distressing scene. A Jewish man stood at his door, appearing utterly destitute. The man's clothing was tattered, and crude footwear made from tire



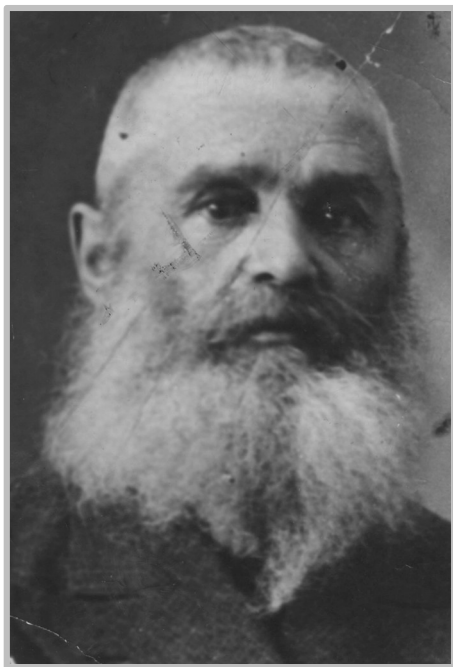
From Right to Left: R' Berel Raskin, R' Shloime Aaron Rozen,  
R' Shloime Vishedky

rubber encased his feet<sup>35</sup>. He was visibly unkempt, likely having gone without bathing for months. Berel's mother, Doba Raiza, requested his help to bring the new visitor inside<sup>36</sup>.

The man was R' Shloime Aaron Rozen, a devoted Bobover *Chassid* who was now a refugee. He had been forced to work for the government, but a severe foot disease, gangrene, had freed him from labor. His feet were terribly swollen. Despite his condition, he was clearly a strong Galician Jew who spoke Yiddish with the distinctive accent of his region.

The family fed him, gave him a place to stay, and slowly nursed him back to health. R' Shloime's daughters, Doba Raiza and Tzivia, poured oil on his feet to reduce the swelling and bring back the blood circulation.

One night, the new arrival asked young Berel Raskin to bring him "a *kots*." Berel thought the refugee had gone crazy and was requesting



R' Shloime Raskin

a cat in his Galician accent. But R' Shloime Aaron cleverly realized the linguistic confusion. He smiled and explained he did not need a cat that runs on four legs, but a '*kots*,' a blanket, to cover himself at night. The Polish pronunciation had confused the young boy.

R' Shloime Aaron Rozen stayed with the Raskins for four years throughout the war. During his stay, the family asked him to teach Torah to the young

grandchildren. R' Shloime Aaron would later remark with a smile that he was lucky – he got to sleep under the table, the one place where no one could accidentally step on him<sup>37</sup>.

He shared that before coming to Russia, he had been told that if one wanted to remain an *ehrllicher Yid*, one should be around Lubavitchers. In his words, this proved profoundly true<sup>38</sup>. The *frumkeit*, *yiras Shamayim*, and kindness shown to him by the Raskin family left a permanent impression. Here was a family who, even among the harsh realities of Soviet Russia during wartime – when most were focused solely on their own survival – thought of others first. In fact, R' Shloime Aaron was so moved by his experience that he said *Kaddish* on the *yahrzeit* of R' Shloime and his wife Basya Chaya, every year for the rest of his life<sup>39</sup>.

R' Shloime Aaron's first wife was killed during the Holocaust, but he later remarried and settled in London, England, where he became a respected *baal tefillah*. Those who knew him described him as "an authentic old-style *Chassidishe Yid*" who knew *Zohar* and *Midrash* by heart, had a beautiful voice as a *chazzan*, and even knew *badchanus*. Despite his hardships – including childlessness – he remained cheerful, with a great sense of humor and good spirit<sup>40</sup>.

Every year he would travel to New York for Tishrei, stopping in Crown Heights to visit R' Shloime's children and grandchildren in warm gatherings, where he would share stories and express continuing gratitude. His respect for Lubavitch, born from his experience with the Raskins, was unwavering. He would not allow anyone to speak critically about the movement that had saved him, both physically and spiritually<sup>41</sup>.

## Helping the Refugees in Vetluga

As shared above, many Polish Jews fled the German invasion of Poland only to find themselves under Soviet control. Those who asked to return to Nazi-occupied Poland were labelled "deserters" and sent to exile in remote settlements or forests in Russia<sup>42</sup>.

Among these was Rabbi Meir Rottenstreich, then a young boy, and his family. Meir's family and other refugees were sent to a remote forest camp 700 kilometers from Moscow. The conditions in the forest were horrific. For many months, roughly 1,500 Jews lived in roofless, temporary barracks. Their *tefillin* and *taleisim* were damaged by the cold rain and snow. These survivors thought they were the last Jews in the world, and dropped almost all Jewish practices they kept until now. They subsisted on minimal food supplies, just enough to avoid starvation. Meir Rottenstreich described the conditions. "We



The Shofar That Drew Yidden Near

lived in the forest in miserable huts, without food, without water, without facilities, and without basic furniture. And especially in spiritual matters, the place was a wasteland – no *Shul*, no *Sefer Torah* or other holy articles, nothing! We thought it was all over."

After the forest, they were relocated to Vetluga, a district near Gorki. They had slightly better conditions there, but still no *shul*, *Sefer Torah*, *shofar*, or anything needed for Jewish life or practice. Understanding their spiritual desperation, R' Shloime took action.

In Elul, he sent Sholom Ber Laine on a dangerous but important mission to bring hope to these suffering refugees. R' Shloime sent him off with a small *Sefer Torah* and a *shofar*.

When Sholom Ber arrived, wearing a cap and scarf to hide his beard from authorities, the refugees were astonished. Many scrambled to their barracks to find a headcovering. Seeing them begin to retreat to their barracks in discomfort, he took out the small black shofar and blew, as is the minhag to blow the shofar in Elul. At its call, people slowly emerged with makeshift coverings for their heads. Meir



Rottenstreich recalled, "One day in late Elul, a young man arrived with a small *Sefer Torah* and a *shofar*. There we were, residents in a G-dforsaken place, Jews from *frum* and *Chassidic* homes in Poland, who were forced to leave everything behind. We were astonished. Here in remote Russia, there is a G-d!"

This was exactly what R' Shloime had hoped to accomplish – to restore their faith in Hashem and give them some spiritual sustenance.



R' Sholom Ber Laine

Sholom Ber had planned to leave right after *Yom Kippur*, but the refugees begged him to stay for *Sukkos* and *Simchas Torah*. Understanding their deep need, he made the journey back to Gorki to consult with R' Shloime, who immediately provided him with a *lulav* and *esrog* to bring back to Vetluga. Every day of *Sukkos*, people in Vetluga lined up to recite the *bracha* over these precious items that R' Shloime had procured for them.

Meir Rottenstreich testified, "Those *Yamim Noraim* – 'Days of Awe,' both literally and figuratively – and especially the days of *Shemini Atzeres* and *Simchas Torah*... the way Sholom Ber danced and made the entire 'world' dance with him – I will never forget it for the rest of my life."



Frida Rokeach Who Stayed at  
the Raskins'

R' Shloime continued to support these refugees, sending additional *tefillin*, *taleisim*, and *siddurim* through Sholom Ber. He also helped them find employment and even hosted some in his own home. For example, the Rokeach family – a widow with several children<sup>43</sup> – were welcomed into the Raskin household. Her son was given small items like cubes of sugar and thread to sell on the black market.

Meir Rottenstreich's own family survived economically in Vetluga thanks to the help of the Raskin family. R' Shloime leveraged his standing with the Soviet government to quietly obtain goods, which he then gave to Meir – a thirteen-year-old boy – to sell in the local market. Meir's vivid description of standing in the stall while his mother stood just behind him, ready to take the money before it could be stolen, paints a poignant picture of their constant vigilance and resourcefulness.

For many refugees, including Meir Rottenstreich, this was their first encounter with Chabad *chassidim*, but it would not be their last – thanks to R' Shloime's unwavering determination to rekindle Jewish life in the most forsaken places<sup>44</sup>.



A Bombed Factory in Gorky

## Surviving the Bombing

Gorki was heavily bombed because of its defense factories. During a particularly severe air raid, while most family members went to the basement, R' Shloime stayed upstairs with Shloime Aaron Rozen, and with his grandsons, Berel and Michel Raskin. As bombs fell closer, R' Shloime prepared to say *Vidui*. R' Shloime Aaron Rozen declared, in his distinctive Galician accent, "I promise you, bombs cannot fall on this house. Bombs do not fall on *Avrohom Avinu's* house."

The miracle became apparent the next morning. The Raskin home stood just a few meters from the river, and they discovered that bombs had fallen directly into the water, killing hundreds of fish that now floated on the surface. The bombs had landed so close to their home, mere meters away, yet the building remained completely untouched. Berel testified, "It was an unbelievable miracle from Hashem"<sup>45</sup>.

# LEGACY

## His Final Day

A few days before *Shavuot*, on the 2nd of Sivan, 1944, R' Shloime felt unwell. No one was home except for his nine-year-old grandson, Berel. The young boy was in his grandfather's room. The window was open, and R' Shloime's *Tanya* was sitting on the windowsill, its pages turning in the breeze, as his *nesbama* passed on<sup>46</sup>. This was a fitting final image for a man who had devoted himself to learning *Tanya* by heart, even in the darkest of times, as per the directives of his beloved Rebbe.

## Basya Chaya's Continuation

After her husband passed away, Basya Chaya continued their tradition of welcoming guests and helping refugees for the remainder of the war. Despite her loss, she remained strong and dedicated to her family. She arranged the marriage of her youngest son to Rivka Lein, who came to live in her house. In 1949, the family wrote to the Frieddiker Rebbe<sup>47</sup> requesting a *bracha* for her complete recovery from illness. The Frieddiker Rebbe *benched* her. Basya Chaya lived several more years and passed away in 1952, eight years after her beloved husband.

## Legacy

Hundreds of Jews helped by R' Shloime and Basya Chaya went on to rebuild their lives after the war. Their grandson, Shloime Zarchi,



Matzeiva of R' Shloime





The Friediker Rebbe Blessing Basya Chaya

met countless Jews in America who said they were helped by "Zaideh Shloime" in Gorki, whether with food or a place to sleep.

The kindness, hospitality, and self-sacrifice that characterized R' Shloime and Basya Chaya Raskin's lives left an indelible mark on all who knew him. In a city where Jewish life was nearly extinguished, he kept the flame of *Yiddishkeit* burning – not just for his own family, but for innumerable others who found in his home a reminder of what it meant to be a Jew.






Matzeiva of Basya Chaya





# The Vygon Family

Basya Chaya (Vygon) Raskin's Lineage







# THE TALE OF THE VYGON FAMILY

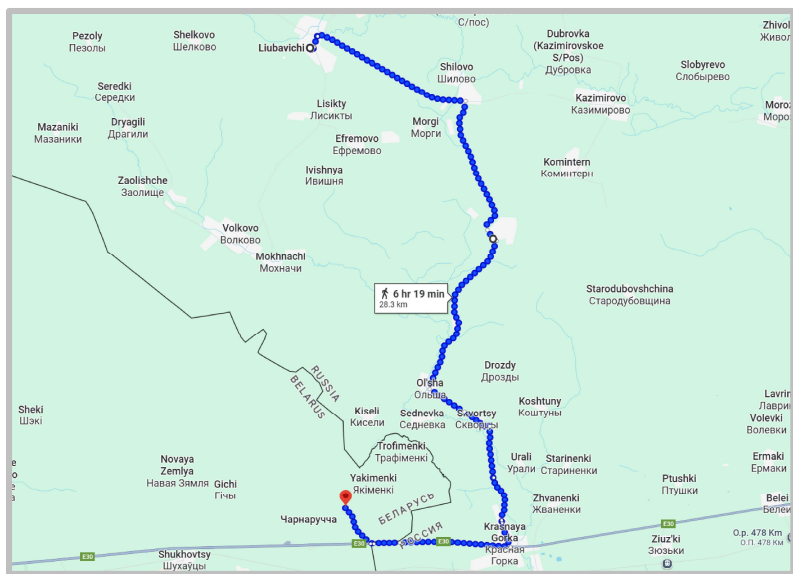
## Basya Chaya Yenta Vygon

If you were to turn back the clock 140 years, you would meet young **Basya Chaya Yenta Vygon**, called Basya Chaya, a refined young girl who would one day marry **Shloime Raskin** and become the beloved matriarch of both the Raskin and Sudakevitch families. Bubbe Basya, as she was known, was described with one word by her children and grandchildren: a *tzidkonis*. This simple word, meaning a righteous woman, captured her essence.

Bubbe Basya Chaya was known as a *kluge*, a wise lady who helped many in need. When she recited her *brachos*, she would say them loudly and slowly, each word filled with meaning and devotion. In her busy and often chaotic household, she remained the calm center, a peaceful oasis amidst life's storms.

From where did she get her rock-solid *emunah*, her passion, and fortitude?

Growing up, she saw living examples of true *chassidim* in her parents and grandparents – ordinary people who lived extraordinary lives. With strong, deep roots, her identity grew unshakeable and firmly grounded.



Approximate Location of Shtzerbina

## R' Michel Shtzerbiner

**R' Michel Shtzerbiner**, Basya Chaya's father, was a model of true *Chassidische ehrenskeit*. R' Yisroel Jacobson, who stayed over at R' Michel's house for a night, described him as an introverted and reserved person, a village dweller who lived in the settlement of Shtzerbina<sup>48</sup>.

As someone who lived in Shtzerbina, just thirty kilometers from Lubavitch – a two-hour horse and wagon drive away – R' Michel had the distinct privilege of supplying milk and cheese for the Rebbe Rashab's table<sup>49</sup>. His granddaughter, Doba Raiza (Basya Chaya's daughter), vividly recalled the occasion when she went along to bring dairy products to the Rebbe's home in Lubavitch. Although she was a young girl of six or seven, she recalled him being tall and treasured that unique moment of seeing the Rebbe her entire life.

During a late *Simchas Torah farbrengen*, the Frierdiker Rebbe himself once spoke about the profound, pure sincerity of R' Michel<sup>50</sup>.





The Rebbe Rashab

"Michel Shtzerbiner once stood near my father (the Rebbe Rashab) during *Selichos*, and tears streamed down his face. My father envied him. My father, a man of handsome appearance<sup>51</sup>, was so struck by this that his cheeks seemed to sink in from envy. He said that he envied Michel for the way that he lives in his village, gets up at two in the morning, and says *Tebillim*<sup>52</sup>."



The Friediker Rebbe

On another occasion, the Friediker Rebbe offered this description of R' Michel: "R' Michel himself was an *ish poshute*, a simple *Yid*, and an *oisgegossener* – completely genuine. When he listened to *Chassidic* teachings, it was like he was sleeping in *Gan Eden*<sup>53</sup>." Even if the deep, intricate ideas of *Chassidus* were not fully clear to R' Michel, just hearing the precious words of the Rebbe was a wondrous pleasure for him, as blissful as dreaming in *Gan Eden*.

# HER GRANDFATHER

## R' Zalman Shtzerbiner

Basya Chaya's mother, **Luba Michla**, was the daughter<sup>54</sup> of the famous *Chassid* **R' Zalman Shtzerbiner**.

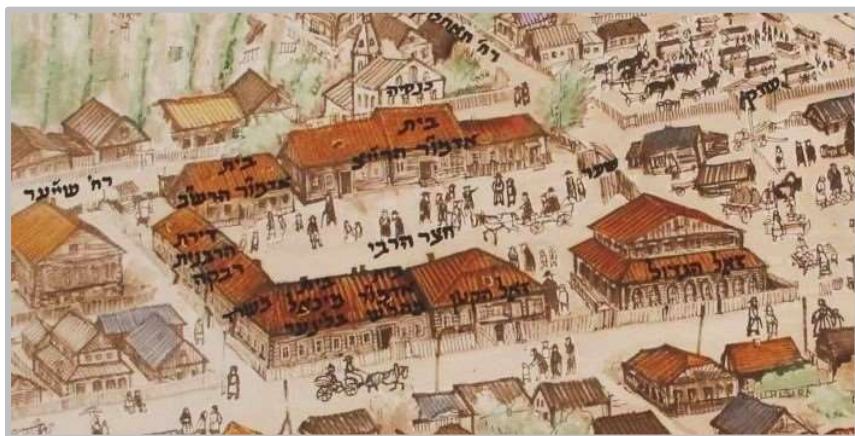
Who was R' Zalman Shtzerbiner?

Despite being a tremendously learned individual, R' Zalman was known simply as "Zalman Shtzerbiner" without any prestigious titles. This was characteristic of *chassidim*: not to focus on receiving honor or respect, but to remain modest and unassuming. Yet, this humble man was extraordinary in his knowledge and character. His vast studies included fluency in *Talmud Bavli*, expertise in *Talmud Yerushalmi*, a profound understanding of *Shulchan Aruch*, and deep familiarity with the *Zohar* and the writings of the *Arizal*. Furthermore, he had studied all printed *Chassidic* texts and was renowned for his generosity and extensive *tzedakah*<sup>55</sup>.

The Rebbe Rashab, the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, once made a remarkable statement about him. "I believe that Zalman experienced revelations of *Eliyahu Hanavi* and was himself unaware of their nature<sup>56</sup>." This implies that R' Zalman attained such spiritual heights that he merited divine appearances.

## Influence on the Frierdiker Rebbe's Childhood

In his memoirs, the Frierdiker Rebbe recalled many stories that he heard from R' Zalman during his youth. R' Zalman was the *Chassid* of three Rebbeim: at first of the Tzemach Tzedek, then the Rebbe



## The Rebbe Rashab's Court in Lubavitch

Maharash, and finally, of the Rebbe Rashab. When the Frierdiker Rebbe first met him, R' Zalman was approximately seventy years of age and visiting the Rebbe Rashab in Lubavitch.

The Frieddiker Rebbe wrote that the nobility of R' Zalman's appearance was difficult to capture properly in words. His features reflected a great intellect, a good heart, and an upright soul. He remained one of the most distinguished figures in the Frieddiker Rebbe's childhood recollections.

R' Zalman's narratives were characterized by exceptional precision. When recounting an event, he would describe not only what occurred but also the specific place, time, and surrounding circumstances with great detail. This vivid detail allowed his listeners to feel present, as if standing among those *chassidim* and witnessing the previous Rebbeim themselves<sup>57</sup>.

Following are several stories that the Frierdiker Rebbe documented after hearing them from R' Zalman.

## A Lesson on Erev Yom Kippur

One year, either in 1887 or 1888, on *Erev Yom Kippur*, R' Zalman approached the Rebbe Rashab immediately following *Shachris*. He offered the Rebbe a cheerful "Good *Yom Tov*!"

The Rebbe Rashab was intensely serious at that moment, deeply concentrating on a *sefer*. He responded to R' Zalman: "Indeed, it is *Yom Tov*, and *Yom Tov* is an 'appointed time for joy.' However, it is also *Erev Yom Kippur*. Now, a person must cultivate a spirit of profound *teshuvah*, which involves sincere regret for past transgressions and a commitment to future improvement."

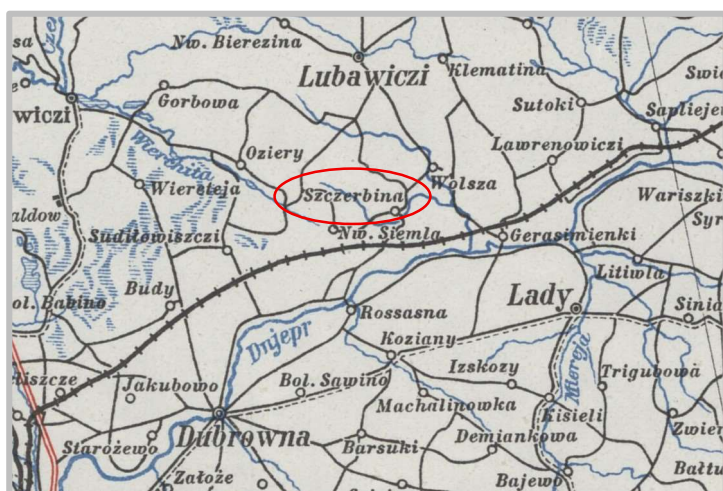
R' Zalman explained his merry mood. "Rebbe, we are soldiers. Hashem designated *Erev Yom Kippur* until midday as *Yom Tov* and commanded us to be joyful. After midday, we are required to *daven Mincha*, recite '*Al Chet*', and engage in *teshuvah*." With this, R' Zalman described how his joyful disposition, appropriate for the morning, would shift sharply at midday, comparing it to a soldier following orders. Then, with a concluding smile, R' Zalman requested, "Rebbe, give me *lekach*."

The Rebbe Rashab was very pleased with R' Zalman's insightful response. He presented him with a piece of *lekach*, saying: "I give you *lekach*, and may Hashem bestow upon you a sweet year."

This teaching from R' Zalman, regarding the twofold dimension of *Erev Yom Kippur*, proved so significant that it was repeated in the Rebbe's household for many years<sup>58</sup>.

## The Joyful Wheat Harvest

In one *sicha*, the Frierdiker Rebbe offered an unusually long and detailed description of the process of obtaining the flour for *Shmurah*



Shtzerbina On a Polish Map From 1915

*Matzah*, highlighting R' Zalman's dedication and delight in the *mitzvah*. Clearly, this event was a powerful and formative experience in the Frieddiker Rebbe's childhood, as evidenced by the fact that this *sicha* was handwritten and went through no less than five revisions!

R' Zalman held a unique honor: the wheat from his Shtzerbina fields was used for the Rebbe's *shmurah matzah*. The process of harvesting this wheat was vividly described by the Frieddiker Rebbe in his memoirs when he was just a young boy.

Sourcing this special wheat began as early as midsummer. Perfect conditions were essential for the harvest: a clear, bright day with the sun directly overhead and no rain for the three preceding days. Harvesting was strictly limited to the hours between twelve noon and approximately 2:00 or 2:30 PM.

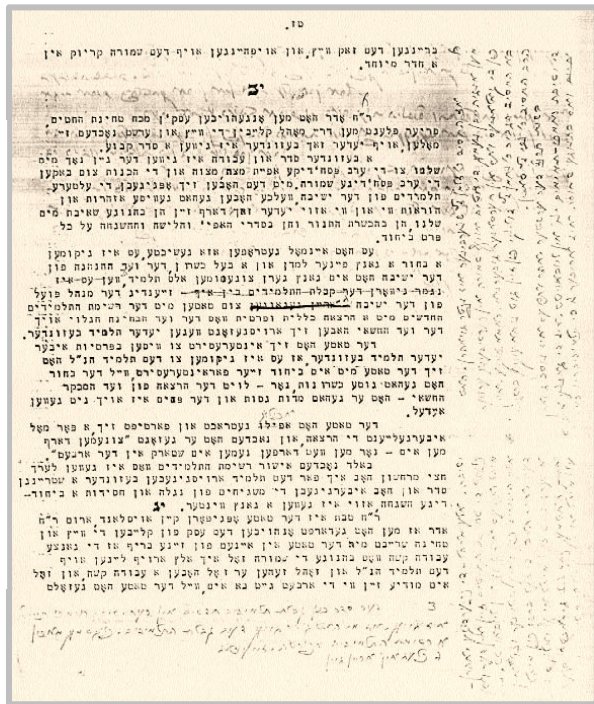
As harvest time neared, R' Zalman would travel the 30 km to Lubavitch with several wagons to coordinate the arrangements. He would bring back *yungeleit* and guests who wanted to join the *Shmurah Matzah* harvest, along with provisions to last throughout



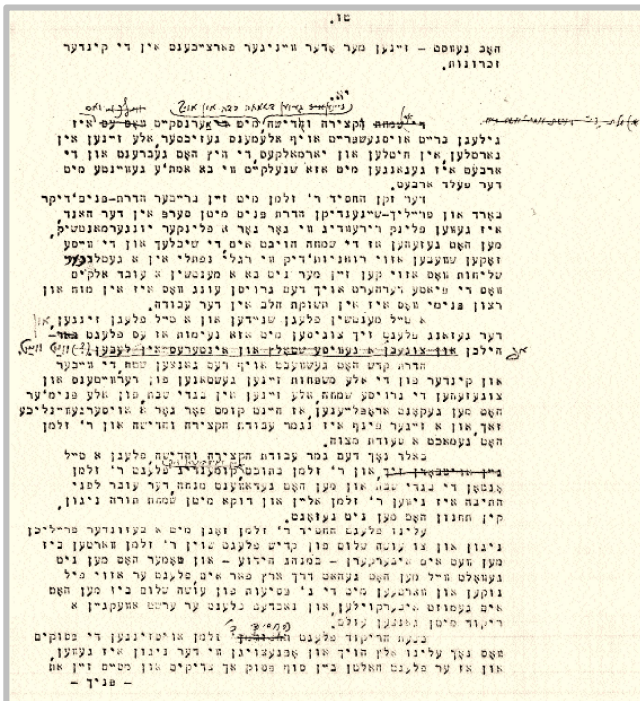




Right: The Fourth Version of The Sicha, Typed with Corrections and Additions in Hanwriting of The Friediker Rebbe



Below: Fifth Version of The Sicha, Typed with Correction in Hanwriting of The Rebbe



אין ליובאוויטש האבן די ימים טובים ומועד' השנה פארנומען  
זייער א וויכטיקן פלאץ. אלע פון קליין ביז גרויס איז מיין צו זאגן  
הן בני חורב בעלי יריעה והשנה און הן פשוט אידן - זיינען געווען  
פארנומען מיט אלע זייערע כחות און חושם מוחות און הערצער מויל און  
אויפן הענט און מים, פריער מיט די הכנות צום יום טוב און דערנאך  
מיטן יום טוב גוט.

די קליינע שטעטלעך די אזוי גערופענע פראווינצן שיינען זיך  
שטארק אונטער פון דער גרויסער שטאט. די פראווינצן צייכענען זיך אויס  
מיט איהר מנהג ערענסטיקייט און מער אמת, כפרס אסאליקע יארן ווען דער  
אלגעמיינער מצב איז געווען גאנץ אנדערש אין דעם זימן פון אמת און  
ערנסטיקייט. אפילו מ'א יאר 50'40 צוריק האט נאך די קליין שטעטלעך  
גאר אנדערש אנטוועקען. אויף יעדער קליינשטעטלעך אידשען פרצוף  
האט זיך דייטליך אנגעזעהען אונזער דרייטויזענע יארקע יחוסדיקע  
אפשטאמונג בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב.

הם אין דער קליין שטעטל איז דער ואל חתורע לרשות געווען  
כמה מרובה. מען האט געלעבט אין פחד וסורא פאר א קול עלה נדה. ווען  
מען האט געזעהען וועמען עס איז פון די פקיד' הממשלה זיין אין גאס  
האט זיך די הארץ געשריטלט. פון דער צווייטער זייט אבער איז געווען  
זייער געשמאק און מאראליש שיינן דער זיכערער רוהיקער לעבן, וועלכער  
איז געווען א געוויסע מרוכס פון דער מדה החתמות.

אין יעדער קליין שטעטל זיינען געווען די העכסטע געשעצטע  
מוסדות הצדקה ווי: תלמוד-תורה בקור חולים לחם אבינוים מלביש טרומים

1

דער אמירת החלים פון דעם שבת איז אויך געווען אנדערש פון  
דעם החלים פון א גאנץ יאר. הגם דאס זיינען די זעלבע אידן פראטע  
מענשען וועלכע קומען זיך צונויף יעדען טאג כחשבת זאגן חללים און  
שבת פלעגן קומען אויך די וועלכע פלעגן אנאנצע וואך "לרבל עסקיהם"  
זיין אין די עטערע און ישובים.

יעדער דער דאזיקער שבת איז נאך ניי אויך אנדערש פון אלע שבתים.  
אדער איינער איז פארנומען מיט זיך, אין דעם קול אמירת החללים הערם זיך  
א קול פנים פון א חסידשען מקיף.

קומענדיג פון מכות איז מען געגאנגען חורן דעם מאמר וואס האט  
פארנומען א שיינע 500 פאר שעה. געוויינליך פלעגט מען אריינגיין  
אויף חורב און נאכדעם ווייטער חורן דעם מאמר און דאווענען און א זייער  
דריי פלעגט מען עסען 5 סעודות שבת קדש.

די סעודות ש"ק פון שבת מליחות על שלחנו של הור כ"ח אאמור" הרח"ק  
צוקליטש' נב"ם וי"ע איז אויך געווען אנדערש פון סעודות ש"ק בכל השנה  
זי איז געווען א סך קיצורליכער ככלל האנן אין ליובאוויטש די סעודות  
גיס פארנומען קיין סך זמן, גאר פארקיס פלעגט זיך מאכען אז מען פלעגט  
פארבריינגען דערציילען א מעשה אדער איבערדערציילען א ווארט.  
די סעודות שבת אין ליובאוויטש האבן געהאט א סדר מסודר, ובכלל  
האט ליובאוויטש געהאט א סדר אין אלע זאכן מיט א קביעות מוגבל אין די  
הנכלות פון זמן ומקום. אבער למעשה מליחות איז געווען בקיצור, ווייל אין  
אלץ האט זיך געשפילט דער ריח פון ימים נוראים.

1

די עבודה פון הכנות לש"ק וי"ט בכלל ובחבונות להח"פ כפרס האט  
נא דעם סאטען פארנומען זייער א חשוב' ארץ ער האט מערערע מאל' געזעט  
שבת העוסקים כחכונת ש"ק וי"ט, ובפרס כענינים הנוגעים לחם הפסח.  
די הכנות צום פסח האבן ש זיך אין ליובאוויטש אנגעהויבן שוין  
פון מיטן זומער. עס איז געווען א בעשטימטער ארץ א ווארס 30 פון  
ליובאוויטש אין ווען קיין פראווינצן, א פריזשער הויף מיטן נאמען  
"שערבינא" וואס פון דארטען פלעגט'נמען ווייז איהר סמורת.  
אין שערבינא האט געוואונט איד ר' ולמן האט ער געהי'טען.  
א איד א חסיד ולמן א בעל מדינה הן אין מוהין און הן אין מדינת סובוט  
גאר אזוי ווי חסידים זיינען דאך גיס מדיק אין חזקת הכבוד אין גיס  
קוקענדיג אויף דעם וואס ר' ולמן שערבינער איז געווען א בקי איש בכלי  
מים א יריעה אין ירושלים ו' שורים בקי כזהר וכבתי הארזי' און אין  
די עדרוקעס ספרי הסטטוטס החסידות און דערצו א בעל צדקא מפורסם, האט מ  
מען אים דאך גערופען גאר ולמן שערבינער.

ווען איך האב אים געקענט איז ער שוין געווען א איד א בן שבעים  
דער חזאר און חרות פנים איז געווען אומבשעייכל'ך. אויף דעם פנים איז  
געלעגען סימנים פון גרויסע מוהין און ליכטיגע גופאקייט און גלאטקייט  
ער איז נא מיר איינער פון די חשובים נרשמים אין מיין ספר הזכרונות  
פון די קינדער יארען.

ולמן שערבינער, אחוץ וואס ער איז געווען דער ריכטיגער סימון  
פון די אסאליקע חכמי הישוביקעס פון די חכמי האמת ובעלי מדות טובות,  
איז ער געווען איינער פון די חשובע יונגע לייס ביין עלטער זיידן און  
איינער פון די גרויסע מקושרים צום זיידן.

גענוליכער מעשיות האבן אידן פון אים געהערט. דאס אין די מעשיות  
שטייגלט זיך אפ דער לעבן פון פילע מינ חסידים מיט דרכי החסידות פון  
דעם דור הברכי' והחמישי פון חסידות הבר'.

ווען ר' ולמן האט דערציילט א מעשה איז ליכד וואס ער האט מדיק  
געווען אין דעם עצם הספר. אן הוספות און אן ביאורים, נאר די מעשה

their stay in Shtzerbina. Since it was impossible to predict precisely when conditions would be optimal, they would come to Shtzerbina in advance, occasionally waiting an entire week for a clear day with optimal conditions.

This undertaking brought R' Zalman immense joy for three reasons. Firstly, he had the distinct honor of harvesting wheat for the Rebbe's *shmurah matzah*. Secondly, he cherished the privilege of hosting guests for several days, a skill at which he excelled. Lastly, and most importantly, he experienced the very special honor of the Rebbe himself attending the harvest – an event that provided R' Zalman with profound energy for years.

From the day R' Zalman began preparations until the arrival of a clear day suitable for harvesting the wheat, all conversation revolved around the weather. They would scrutinize the sky, assess the dryness of the wind, and check for any moisture. Daily predictions were made about tomorrow's weather. Each day, they anxiously awaited a special messenger from Shtzerbina who would confirm that the harvest was ready to proceed.

When the anticipated day finally dawned, the scene was truly remarkable. The Rebbe Rashab and his son traveled to Shtzerbina and met with the Chassidim there. All participants wore *gartlach*, *yarmulkes*, and hats, despite the intense heat. The work progressed with astonishing speed and efficiency, as if they were seasoned agriculturalists.

The venerable R' Zalman, with his broad, majestic beard and bright, happy face, expertly used his harvesting tool, moving with the swiftness of a much younger man. It was evident that the joy of performing the *mitzvah* imbued him with exceptional strength. Clad in sandals and white socks, his feet appeared to move very lightly, like

one rushing to fulfill a directive of the Creator. He possessed the vibrant energy of a true servant of Hashem who is filled with profound joy and a strong desire for this holy work.

While some people harvested, others sang. Sweet *niggunim* rolled far across the wide field. An aura of sanctity enveloped the entire area. The women and children from the local families of Shtzerbina dressed in their *Shabbos* finest and watched from a distance, the extraordinary significance of the event evident on every face.

## Post-harvest Celebration

Following the harvesting and threshing, R' Zalman and several others immersed in the *mikvah*. Upon his return, R' Zalman donned *Shabbos* clothes and *davened Mincha*. R' Zalman himself led the *minyan*, singing the joyous tunes of *Simchas Torah*. *Tachnun* was omitted.

By "*Aleinu*", R' Zalman used an especially joyous melody. Upon reaching the words "*Oseh Shalom*" in the final *Kaddish*, he waited to be playfully lifted and flipped upside down, a well-known and *lebedike* custom. If individuals hesitated out of respect, he would gently urge them with a "*Nu...*" until they complied. Then, R' Zalman would begin dancing with the entire crowd.

During the dancing, R' Zalman loudly sang *pesukim* from *davening* to a dance rhythm. When he completed "*Ach tzadikim... es panecha*", he would leap and roll back and forth three times.

Afterwards, everyone gathered around a lavish table of dairy delicacies in the fruit orchard. The Rebbe Rashab taught *Chassidus* and led a *farbrengen* with all present for several hours. This was followed by the *Ma'ariv* service. The Rebbe would then retire to a





The Tzemach Tzedek

pecially prepared room, while the rest of the community continued their *farbrengen* throughout the night. The following morning, they would pray collectively, and by ten o'clock AM, they departed for Lubavitch.

That evening, R' Zalman and his friends brought the sack of wheat to Lubavitch and ceremoniously hung it on a "*shmurah* peg" in a specially designated room.

This tradition lasted for many years, until R' Zalman passed away, after which the *shmurah matzah* wheat was obtained from different sources<sup>59</sup>.

## Reliving the Tzemach Tzedek

One cold *Chanukah* night in 1889, when the Frierdiker Rebbe was nine years old, an incident happened that he would always remember. Several prominent *chassidim*, including his teacher R' Shmuel Betzalel, R' Hendel Kugel, R' Aaron and R' Yekusiel from Dokshitz, and R' Zalman Shterbiner, assembled together for a *Chanukah* gathering.

As the night went on, the men began sharing memories of when they would visit the Tzemach Tzedek, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe.

### ניגון קטפ

אשרי איש שלא ישכחך (מתפלת מוסף ר"ה)  
 כפי שמקובל אצל החסידים, ניגון דבקות הזה  
 הי' נשמע מפי כ"ק אדמו"ר מוהר"ש (נ"ע בעת  
 תפלתו בלחש במוסף ר"ה. וקרוב הדבר אשר ניגון  
 זה מקורו מכ"ק אדמו"ר הצמח צדק (נ"ע, כי באחת  
 השיחות מכ"ק אדמו"ר מהור"י צ" (נ"ע מספר אדות  
 הניגון הידוע מאדמו"ר הצ"צ) שבו התפלל מוסף  
 דר"ה, והתנועה הידועה המעוררת הכוונה שבה הי'  
 אומר התיבות אשרי איש שלא ישכחך וכו'.  
 נרשם מפי החסיד ר' פנחס אלטהויז.

Nigun Entree of "Ashrei Ish" in Sefer Hanigunim

Suddenly, R' Zalman stood up and began singing a special tune that the Tzemach Tzedek used during *Mussaf* on *Rosh Hashanah*.

Instantly, everyone rose and joined the song. When they reached specific moments in the melody where the Tzemach Tzedek sang the words "*Ashrei ish shelo yishkochecha uven adam yisametz bach*"<sup>60</sup>, the men present were overcome by intense spiritual excitement and devotion. Their faces glowed as tears streamed down their cheeks.

The Friediker Rebbe was filled with awe as he observed the scene. Having heard many descriptions of the Tzemach Tzedek's prayer hall and his customary place of prayer, he was deeply moved by the fervent singing and the men's expressive faces. He vividly imagined his great-grandfather, the Tzemach Tzedek, wearing a white *kittel* and draped in his *tallis*, reciting those very words, and he could almost hear the Rebbe's holy voice. Having heard many stories about how the *neshamos* of *tzaddikim* can appear to their children and students, the young child felt certain that the Tzemach Tzedek was really there with them at that moment. This experience filled him with a unique blend of happiness and awe, a truly special sensation.



Years later, thinking back on that powerful childhood memory, the Frieddiker Rebbe wrote, "I gained a deep respect for those *chassidim*. I saw for myself their great spiritual strength, their ability to go beyond everyday life and reach such a high spiritual level, connecting with the distant past with all their energy. Oh! A *Chassidic* gathering like that fills a person with so much life and encouragement! It removes the difficulties of physical life and puts a bit of true life into daily living, making the hours of worldly life completely changed – purer and more refined."

## A Secret Field Trip

In 1894, the Rebbe Rashab took a unique *Lag B'Omer* trip with his son R' Yosef Yitzchok. This expedition continued a tradition that was passed down by the Rebbeim, beginning with the Alter Rebbe, and continued by the Mittlerer Rebbe, Tzemach Tzedek, and Rebbe Maharash, to go out into the fields on *Lag B'Omer*.

Around ten in the morning, the Rebbe Rashab *davened* and delivered a *Maamer*. Afterwards, at about eleven-thirty, they secretly left Lubavitch to visit R' Zalman Shtzerbiner, 30 km away. This visit led to profound spiritual revelations<sup>61</sup>.

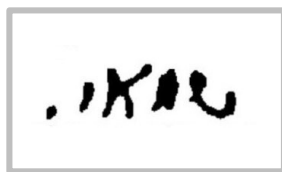
## R' SHAMAI SHTZERBINER

### A Testament to Their Home

The beautiful *chinuch* that Basya Chaya and her siblings received was reflected in the lives they lived, each carrying forward the flame of *Yiddishkeit* in times of great persecution. Her parents, Yechiel Michel and Luba Michla, succeeded in transmitting a warm *Chassidishe chinuch* to their children, including Basya Chaya Yenta, Shamai, Yosef, and Zalman Ber. Their staunch dedication to *Yiddishkeit* and *biskashrus* to the Rebbe profoundly shaped their identities, with the life stories of each sibling serving as a testament to these everlasting values.

### R' Shamai Vygon

Basya Chaya's brother, Shamai Vygon, was known affectionately as Shamai Shtzerbiner or Shamai Zhrebanker, after the town associated with his family. As a student in Tomchei Temimim, he earned a reputation as an exceptional *tomim* and *oved*. His life would become a testament to unwavering commitment to *Yiddishkeit*, even when facing terrible hardships.



R' Shamai's Signature

### A Miracle?

Basya Chaya<sup>62</sup> developed a growth on her tongue, and the doctors said it was a dangerous disease that required surgery. Her



R' Yehuda Chitrik

brother, Shamai ran to the Rebbe Rashab and asked what to do. The Rebbe told him that his sister should go to a dentist. Apparently, she had a decayed tooth that caused the growth. Indeed, she went to the doctor, found and extracted a rotten tooth, and the growth healed.

Amazed *chassidim* remarked to the Rebbe, "You perform miracles!"

The Rebbe answered, "Shamai came and cried that his sister needed to be saved from this trouble. Nu, what was I to do?"

## Studying in Shtzerdin

During World War I, Shamai studied at the Tomchei Temimim branch in Shtzedrin. While geographically located near Lubavitch, this was of no benefit to Shamai, since the Rebbe Rashab had left Lubavitch for Rostov, in 1915, due to the war. Many respected *chassidim* and teachers had left with him, leading to a lack of staff, organization, and inspiration. Despite the difficulties, Shamai's commitment to learning never wavered.

R' Yehuda Chitrik, one of Shamai's close friends, shared stories that revealed Shamai's spiritual life of that time<sup>63</sup>.

"Shamai was a *pnimi*, authentic, and naturally *Yarei Shamayim*, G-d-fearing." R' Yehuda recalled, "He told me that he had studied the foundational *maamar* titled '*Tanu Rabbanan Ner Chanukah 5643*' many times, and he had reviewed and contemplated it before *davening* more than one hundred times."

Shamai's dedication to deep *hisbonenus*, contemplation, revealed his earnest desire for a personal emotional connection with Hashem.

## Rising to the Hiddur

During *Pesach* preparations in *Yeshiva*, a discussion arose whether to bake *matzos* with the specific stringencies, *biddurim*, used by the Rebbe Rashab. Shamai questioned his peers, "Are we worthy of such *biddurim*?"

In those days, a *Chassid* scrupulously observed *halacha*, but adopted *biddurim* only with deep inner readiness, to avoid spiritual arrogance. Their discussion led them to conclude, "To truly grasp *Chassidic* teachings, *Divrei Elokim Chayim*, we must be as meticulous as possible in our observance." This humble outlook powerfully illustrates Shamai's character and his drive for spiritual growth.

## Becoming a Shochet

In the autumn of 1922 (5682), Shamai sought the Frierdiker Rebbe's guidance on learning *shechitah*.

The Rebbe's positive reply was accompanied by specific instruction: "In response to your letter, I agree that you should travel to Poltava to study, but you should learn the laws of *shechitah* and its details thoroughly, in a way that I will soon be able to send you to some

place to engage in such work and to influence young people in both revealed Torah and *Chassidic* teachings."

Shamai became a devoted *shochet*, faithfully fulfilling this holy role.

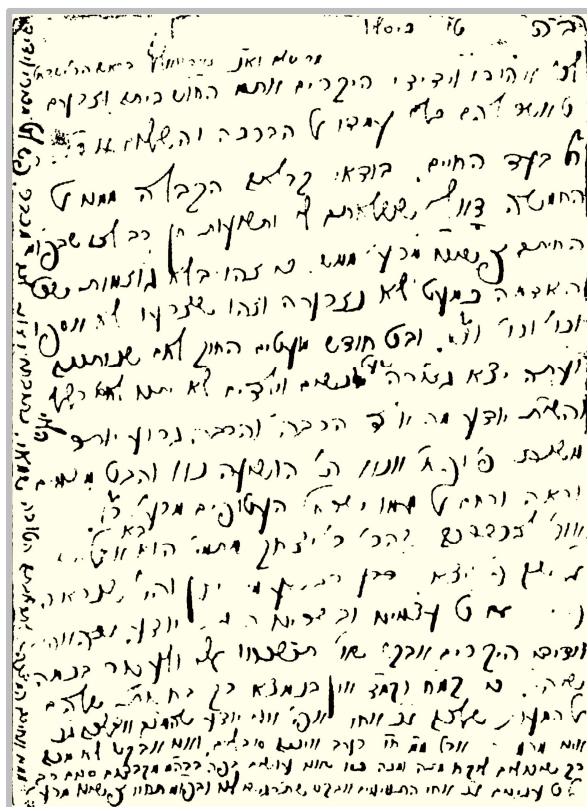
The profound nature of Shamai's personal *avodah* during this period is evidenced by an account from his *shechitah* student, R' Zev Kazinitz<sup>64</sup>. Whenever R' Zev heard the distinct tune Shamai used for *Shema*, R' Zev would invariably be overcome with emotion. Shamai was known to spend much time reciting *Krias Shema Shel Hamitah*, even until dawn, while weeping profusely, and his heartfelt delivery was said to "break listeners' hearts."

## Spiritual Leadership

In the winter of 1928, *Erev Rosh Chodesh Shevat*, 5688, after leaving Soviet Russia due to religious persecution, the Friediker Rebbe sent Shamai a letter emphasizing the critical role of a *shochet* in the community<sup>65</sup>. The Rebbe began with blessings for Shamai's daughter's recovery before outlining the *shochet's* broader duties. "You already know, as you have heard many times, that the *shochet* is one of the central pillars in every city and community among the Jewish people. It is his duty to think deeply and to act to improve the condition of the city and community in which he finds himself, in all spiritual matters, such as the *mikvah*, establishing public Torah study, supervision of kosher meat, etc."

He continued with a strong admonition: "Anyone who restrains himself from this regardless of the reason, whether because he thinks little of himself, or because his nature is not suited for such matters, commits a very great sin."

This letter powerfully reveals the Friediker Rebbe's deep trust in



A Letter from Shamai to Friends in America

Shamai to take on significant community responsibilities and spiritual leadership.

## Faith Under Fire

As life for Jews in Soviet Russia grew increasingly difficult, Shamai took on a dangerous but vital role – preserving Jewish religious articles. From his home in Rostov, he facilitated the transfer of *Sifrei Torah* and *seforim* from closed *shuls* in Russia to the United States. There, these holy items could be sold, and the funds were saved for future



needs. This dangerous work continued until early 1935, when a new decree forbade the export of books from Russia.

During this challenging period, Shamai tried to emigrate to *Eretz Yisroel*. Though he secured his own visa, he could not obtain passports for his family, forcing him to remain in Russia.

The situation for religious Jews in Soviet Russia grew increasingly dangerous. Even after the Frierdiker Rebbe's departure from Russia in 1928, *chassidim* bravely persisted in spreading Torah and *Yiddishkeit*. Upholding their sacred mission, they secretly taught Torah to both children and adults. Trained *chassidim* continued to perform *bris milah* and *shechitah*, and communal leaders maintained the underground Tomchei Temimim *yeshivos* and operational *mikvahs*.

## The Arrest

The Yevsektzia, the Communist Party's Jewish section, became enraged by these defiant activities. They resolved to dismantle the remaining *Chassidic* community. Starting in 1935 (5695) and lasting until World War II, a five-year period of arrests and searches swept across Russia, sparing no Chabad *Chassidic* community.

Shamai was arrested<sup>66</sup> in Rostov<sup>67</sup> on the eve of *Yom Kippur* 1935 (5696). His brother-in-law R' Pesach Freidkin wrote, "Shamai son of Luba Michla HaLevi<sup>68</sup> from Rostov became ill on the eve of *Yom Kippur* with the illness of arrest. I do not know the reason."

Shamai's brother-in-law, R' Chaim Padnas, chronicled the unfolding tragedy in letters to R' Yisroel Jacobson. On November 10, 1935, he reported, "Our friend Shamai has become ill, and several of our *chassidim* with him. Only Hashem knows what will be the end..." A subsequent letter grimly updated, "Our friend R' Shamai is ill, and



R' Yisroel Jacobson

several of our *chassidim* from our city, Heaven help us. They have been imprisoned for more than a month... And their families are literally starving, Heaven help us."

R' Chaim Padnas later confirmed their fate. "My brother-in-law, R' Shamai, is sitting imprisoned in jail, Heaven help us, and several more of our *chassidim*. The trial has taken place, and they sentenced them to three years of hard labor in the distant provinces of 'Siberia.' May Hashem help them and save them from all trouble." After *Pesach*, he added, "The verdict of my brother-in-law R' Shamai and other people... sentenced to three years of hard labor in distant places, and he is now on the way (to Siberia)."

Among the arrested was also the city's esteemed Rav, R' Moshe Medalia. Exiled to Siberia for ten years, his fate was tragically sealed; he was later discovered to have been executed<sup>69</sup>.

## Strength in Siberia

Siberia truly tested Shamai, but his faith never broke. After three and a half grueling years, he returned and wrote to his friend R' Yisroel Jacobson in America during *Chanukah* 1939. Due to Communist censorship, he could not overtly write about the terrible imprisonment he had just endured, but had to employ euphemisms to describe his experience:

"*Baruch Hashem* that I recovered from my illness, Heaven help us, as I was, Heaven help us, ill for nearly four years, and *Baruch Hashem* that I came out of the 'hospital' alive."

Later, on *Motzei Shabbos Kodesh Metzora*, he shared an astonishing detail: he had meticulously kept kosher throughout his entire imprisonment, against all odds.

"When I was ill, Heaven help us, I ate nothing except a few nuts, *Baruch Hashem*. And during the entire 'illness' of three and a half years, I ate only bread and water, and Heaven forbid, nothing of theirs, because the condition of my stomach prevented me from eating [their non-kosher food], and *Baruch Hashem*, everything passed peacefully."

This unparalleled dedication to *kashrus* in a Siberian labor camp, where starvation was common and refusing food could mean death, highlighted Shamai's absolute devotion to Hashem and His *mitzvos*. It was *mesiras nefesh* in its purest form.

## A Tragic End

After his release from Siberia, Shamai continued to face immense hardship. His health was severely compromised by imprisonment, and he wrote to friends in America, pleading for food packages. In one letter, he gratefully noted receiving "a package with two suits and two pairs of shoes." Despite all his trials, his faith remained unshakeable.

Tragically, during the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Shamaï, his wife Sofia, and their two daughters were killed by the Nazis. *Hashem Yikom Damam* – may Hashem avenge their blood<sup>70</sup>.

## R' YOSEF VYGON

R' Yosef Vygon, Basya Chaya's other brother, was described simply by R' Yisroel Jacobson, a peer from Tomchei Temimim, as "a *tomim* with outstanding *middos*<sup>71</sup>." Though not as well-known as his brother Shamai, this humble description truly reflected his wonderful inner qualities.

Through the help of R' Yosef's great-grandchild, a memoir written by R' Yosef's son Michel was discovered. Throughout this personal account, Michel describes his "courageous, special father," a proud Lubavitcher *Chassid* who kept his *Yiddishkeit* alive during the darkest times.

Michel himself had grown up during the most challenging years of Soviet rule, when religious practice was severely suppressed. Like many of his generation who were educated in the Soviet system, Michel's own religious observance differed from his father's strict adherence to *halacha*. Despite this, Michel remained a proud Jew and did what he could to help R' Yosef observe *mitzvos*, even when it put him at personal risk with the authorities.

What follows is mostly based on this autobiography.

### Listening to the Rebbe

In 1922, R' Yosef married Beila Shevelev<sup>72</sup>. Shortly after their wedding, the young couple made a decision that would shape their entire future. Following the instructions of the Rebbe Rashab<sup>73</sup>, they moved to a *kolkhoz*, a collective farm, in Crimea – no small sacrifice



R' Yosef Vygon



R' Yosef's Son, Michel

during those uncertain times in the Soviet Union. Although there were a few *Yidden* in the beginning, the numbers dwindled, and in his later years, R' Yosef was not even able to gather a *minyan*. He would travel to Simferopol, the closest city with a Jewish community, to purchase things he needed, and to *daven* with a *minyan* for the *Yamim Noraim*.

R' Yosef's commitment to his Rebbe was powerfully demonstrated when his friend, R' Yochanan Gordon, offered to help him get a visa to the United States. This was a chance to escape the growing hardships of Soviet life. R' Yosef refused this opportunity, explaining that the Rebbe Rashab had instructed him to travel to the colonies and told him that being there would be a *segulah* for *yiras Shamayim*. His devotion to the Rebbe was so strong that he chose the difficult path, to stay in Russia, as long as he would have *yiras Shamayim*<sup>74</sup>.



## Life on the Soviet Kolkhoz

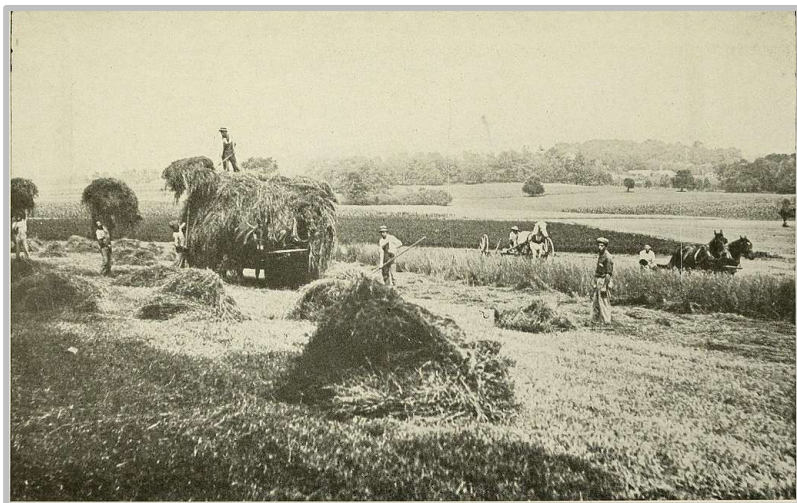
The Vygon family settled in Mayfeld, a Jewish farming village in Crimea, during the 1920s. They were a middle-class family, and R' Yosef uniquely combined his commitment to *Yiddishkeit* with practical farming skills. He had spent a year learning advanced agricultural techniques as a farmhand for German colonists – a noteworthy endeavor for a former *yeshiva bochur* from Lubavitch, as it allowed him to gain vital knowledge from non-Jewish farmers.

Their farm, though modest, sustained them. They owned a pair of oxen that R' Yosef playfully named Chamberlain and MacDonald, after British politicians he read about in the Soviet newspaper "Izvestia." They also had Magda, a large, calm cow with a perpetual sadness in her eyes, a gift from the German farmers. This cow's milk became their savior during hungry times. The family also kept sheep, a horse, and a spirited young colt named Krasavchik, "Handsome," which R' Yosef's son Michel later had to surrender to the Red Army cavalry.

Life changed dramatically in the early 1930s with Soviet "collectivization." Individual farmers like R' Yosef were forced to give up their land and animals to join large government-controlled farms. For religious Jews, this created special hardships. The officially atheist government closed synagogues, mocked religious holidays, and made practicing *Yiddishkeit* extremely difficult. Those maintaining their religious observance faced serious dangers.

## The Battle for Shabbos

For R' Yosef, observing *Shabbos* became his greatest challenge. How could he keep the holy day of rest when working on Saturday was mandatory? The penalties were severe. Missing work on *Shabbos*



meant losing pay for five workdays the first time, ten days' pay the second time, and fifteen the third. During winter, he sometimes found ways around this requirement, but the summer harvest season posed a much greater challenge.

People would whisper to him, "R' Yosef, at least climb up on the haystack so they see you're there! It's harvest time, and you're praying..." The pressure was immense, but his commitment to *Shabbos* observance remained unshaken.

Some neighbors reminded R' Yosef about Stalin's new Soviet constitution that supposedly guaranteed "freedom of conscience," the right to one's own beliefs. Acting on advice from Zalman Khasdan, a *frum* school teacher, R' Yosef made a brave decision. He traveled to Simferopol, the main city in Crimea, and asked the chairman of the Crimean Central Executive Committee for permission to observe *Shabbos*. The family saw him off with excitement and fear.

To everyone's surprise, R' Yosef returned a day later with remarkable news. Meeting the chairman, an older Tatar man, had been



R' Yosef Vygon's Home

surprisingly easy. R' Yosef, true to his *Yiddishkeit*, kept his cap on his head as he explained his situation.

The result exceeded all expectations. He received a certificate stating, "Comrade Vygon I.M., collective farmer of the Molotov Agricultural Artel, based on the USSR Constitution, has the civil right to freedom of religious belief and the holy Sabbath." This document became a treasure in their house, a shield protecting R' Yosef's right to keep *Shabbos* even in the atheist Soviet Union.

## A Sukkah Under Soviet Skies

The family's *mesiras nefesh* extended beyond *Shabbos*. Michel recalled how Zhigarev, the local policeman – not very educated but usually kind – approached R' Yosef when he noticed that he had gathered wood and branches to build a *Sukkah*. Young Michel was helping his father put the little structure together.

The policeman offered some practical advice: "You, Michalych, go

ahead and build your little hut. Pray all you want. I know they filled your head with that religious stuff since you were a kid. Just to be safe though, hang up a picture of one of the leaders."

Beila suggested a brilliant solution: they would display a picture of Karl Marx, who "after all, was Jewish, and had a huge beard!" It was a creative way to appear compliant while maintaining their religious observance.

That year, theirs was the only *Sukkah* in the entire colony. When evening fell, people from throughout the village quietly made their way to the Vygon home. They tiptoed in, placed their small pots of food on the table, whispered *davening*, and began their simple *Yom Tov seudah*.

Beila felt nervous about these uninvited guests. If authorities discovered such a gathering, they might accuse R' Yosef of organizing a secret religious group, a serious crime that not even his *Shabbos* certificate could protect him from. Yet, they opened their *Sukkah* to fellow Jews, sharing the *mitzvah* despite the risks.

## His Son's Assistance

In 1942, R' Yosef and his wife fled to Dagestan to escape the war. While there, Beila contracted malaria and passed away. After his wife's death, he returned home to Mayfeld and lived alone for his remaining years in their old house. This house had been built in 1926 with help from the Agro-Joint (an American Jewish organization). There, the apricot trees he had planted years earlier stood tall, still producing sweet fruit. His garden also flourished with tomatoes, zucchinis, cucumbers, and cabbages, all protected by neat rows of sunflowers and corn.



R' Yosef's Passport to Evacuate to Dagestan

Due to the trying circumstances of the times, R' Yosef's children did not maintain his observant lifestyle. His son Michel would visit when possible, especially during *Yomim Tovim*. Sometimes he brought fresh fish, which they would prepare using Beila's old recipes. Other times, he would seek out a kosher chicken, no small feat in the Soviet Union. Although R' Yosef ate *milchigs* exclusively during the year, he would try to get chicken from Simferopol before *Pesach*.

Their old neighbor, R' Chaim Rappaport, a Lubavitcher who had been trained as a *shochet* in his youth but was forbidden to practice during the *kolkhoz* years, now lived in Simferopol. He or his wife would help Michel buy a live chicken at the market. Michel would then pay the *shochet* for *shechitah*, a price equal to the market price of the chicken itself.





R' Yosef and What May Be R' Chaim Rappaport

The *shochet* would provide a note stating, "*R' Yosef, di feigele iz kosher, est af gezunt*" (R' Yosef, the bird is kosher – eat it in good health). Once, rushing to catch a bus, Michel forgot this important note. Though he assured his father the chicken was definitely kosher, R' Yosef refused to compromise on this principle. Rather than eat a chicken whose kosher status was not properly verified, he gave the expensive chicken to the neighbor's children.

## Pesach Under Watchful Eyes

For *Pesach*, R' Yosef sometimes received packages of *matzah* from as far away as Sweden. These *matzos* actually originated in Israel but were shipped through Sweden to reach religious Jews in the Soviet Union, which had poor relations with Israel. Later, when *matzah* baking was permitted in Simferopol, R' Yosef would order three kilograms.

While Michel was standing in line to collect the *matzah* order, he was acutely aware of being watched. His "assigned KGB handler," a



gray-templed major, was physically present, monitoring the situation. This agent kept track of any religious activities Michel engaged in. This agent knew that Michel had recited *Kaddish* for an old woman (who had no one to say it for her) and received a Yiddish newspaper called "*Der Veg*" ("The Way") from Israel.

As Michel waited in the *matzah* line, a loud voice called out from the service window: "Comrade Vygon! Will four kilograms be enough for your father and you? We have a chance to add to your order." Michel immediately thought about what his KGB handler would make of this. The agent later remarked that "a teacher of literature and history didn't necessarily need to be standing in line for *matzah*" – a subtle reminder that they were always watching.

## Legacy

In his final years, R' Yosef gifted rare *seforim* and *kisvei yad* to the Rebbe through R' Hilel Zaltzman.

As Hillel Zaltzman related in his book, *Samarkand*: "When I arrived at his house, in the initial excitement, he told me about the *shlichus* he received from the Rebbe Rashab, while complaining that the Rebbe sent him to this settlement where there were a few *Yidden*, but in recent years he doesn't have a *minyan*.

He complained to me that there's no Jewish *beis olam* there and he fears he won't merit to come even to *kevuras Yisroel*...

"His general appearance was like a farmer working the land. He told me that several times after he planted potatoes or tomatoes or other vegetables, the *sonoi Yisroel* came and destroyed his field. But generally, he has food from what he plants."

R' Yosef passed away in 1976, marking a long, heroic life keeping yiddishkeit, despite all obstacles.

His only child, Michel, lovingly cared for his father in his later years. Afterwards, Michel, along with his wife, their only child Rina<sup>75</sup>, and grandchildren, moved to *Eretz Yisroel*.

## **R' Zalman Ber Vygon**


There was also a third brother, R' Zalman Ber Vygon, known as Beshe. A *shochet*, he spent his final years in Leningrad and tragically died during its siege. Not much is known about his life, besides that some of his Raskin nieces would stay with him when they were in Leningrad.

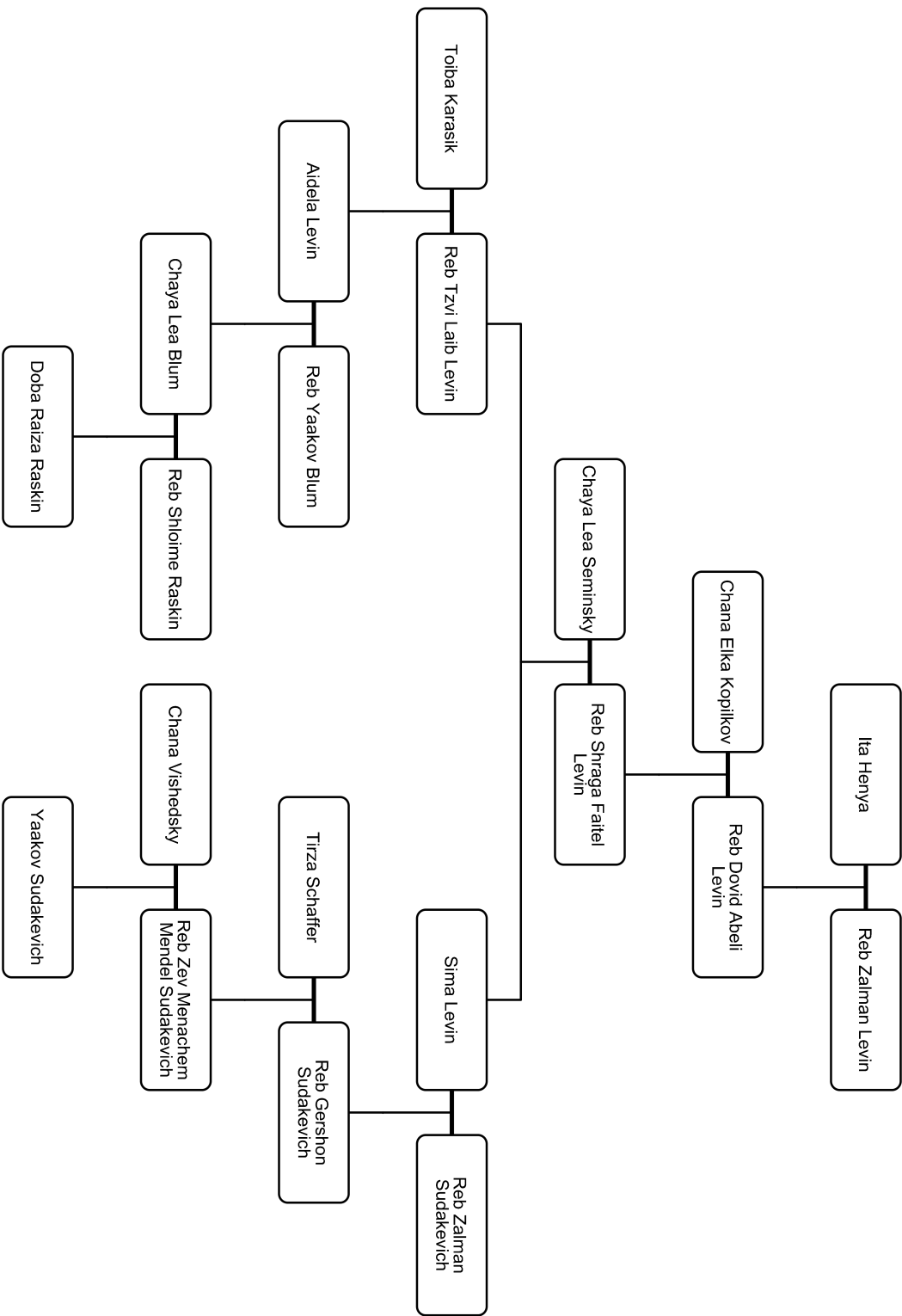
The lives and stories of these great individuals formed the backdrop and foundation that shaped Basya Chaya's life and upbringing. Among a family of giants, Basya Chaya stood tall and proud, guiding her family in the ways of her illustrious ancestors. The stories of their lives, highlighted by *mesiras nefesh* and utmost dedication, are a rich legacy and source of enduring inspiration and guidance for generations to come.



# The Levin Legacy

Reb Shraga Faitel and Chaya Leah  
(Seminsky) Levin





## THE EPITOME OF NEVEL

Ah! Nevel. One small, underdeveloped town, known as royalty in Lubavitch lore, often proclaimed with deep fervor and rich nostalgia. Nevel was a town in the Vitebsk region in which the Jewish population was exclusively Lubavitch. It was considered a badge of pride to be identified as a "Neveler."

### A Thoroughly Lubavitch Town

Though Nevel was a city of mud and squalor - not at all modern, with outhouses and water pumps everywhere - in the eyes of a Neveler, there was nothing better. There were two main streets in Nevel, one called "America," and the other called "Amur." There was a joke that in Nevel, you didn't have to dream about America - you could just walk there<sup>76</sup>! Houses on the American street were made of brick, which was quite a luxury compared to the wooden houses they were used to.

A humorous incident<sup>77</sup> shows how thoroughly Lubavitch the town was. The Lubavitch minhag is to wrap the retzuos of the tefillin around the arm clockwise, away from oneself. During World War I, there were Litvisher refugees who fled to Nevel and wrapped their tefillin straps counterclockwise. This was so unusual in Nevel that all the children gathered around these men to see their strange way of wrapping tefillin!

### The Distinctive Character of a Neveler

The famous writer and chassid, R' Heishke Dubravsky, a Nevel native, described the personality of a "Neveler" in detail.

Modern technology and transportation threw entire cities and countries into one big melting pot where everything mixed together and lost its unique character. Before this, Jewish communities and towns maintained their distinct characteristics... unique ways of speaking, different customs, and so on for generations and if this was true for every Jewish city and town, then Nevel - kal v'chomer!

You could identify a "Neveler Yid" first and foremost by how he spoke. Many words in Yiddish were pronounced slightly differently than in other places. This phenomenon usually characterizes entire countries or regions, but here, one single town developed its own "dialect" or "accent." An example of this is in their pronunciation of the letter lamed, which for most Nevelers sounds like a w - "wamed."

But a Yid from Nevel could be recognized not just by his speech. The "*middas* Nevel" spread through his *neschama's* qualities, temperament and special character affected his entire Jewish spiritual life.

The Yidden of Nevel belonged to the "joyful stream" of chassidim, "*der freilicher chassidonye*." A Yid from Nevel was always b'simcha, loved a chassidishe farbrengen (and especially its central point of "saying l'chaim" or in Nevel language, "*areingiessen a koise*," pouring a shot). The Yidden of Nevel had a kind of chassidishe purity and simplicity, alongside *yiras shamayim* and inward seriousness.

## Praise from the Rebbeim

Nevel uniquely merited clear praise said in a play on words from the Mittlerer Rebbe, "*Hal'luhu b'nevel*" - Praise Him in Nevel!<sup>78</sup>

There's another saying of meaning, depth, and appreciation about the chassidim of Nevel, from another Chabad Rebbe, the Rebbe



Rashab. "A butcher from Nevel is more precious than a *maskil*<sup>79</sup> from Kremenchug"<sup>80</sup>.

In Kremenchug lived some of the greatest chassidic maskilim, the most famous of them were three chassidim who were all named Ber, known as the "*Kremenchuger Berelach*."<sup>81</sup> Yet how can a simple "Neveler butcher," whose understanding of chassidus is very far from a great maskil, is nevertheless more precious than a *maskil* from Kremenchug? The butcher from Nevel possesses the essential qualities of *mesirus nefesh* and *bittul*, which surpass the importance of intellectual achievement.

This was highlighted when a chassid from Lubavitch visited these towns. In Kremenchug, the locals would ask him, "What was the maamar that was said last Shabbos?"

But, when a chassid from Lubavitch came to Nevel, they would first ask, "How is the Rebbe himself? How is his health?"

## The Levin Family

The town of Nevel and the Levin family are synonymous. This deep connection is exemplified by the famed chassid R' Yisroel Levin, who was so identified with the town that his surname effectively became 'Neveler,' known widely as R' Yisroel Neveler.

R' Yisroel along with his brothers R' Gershon Ber and R' Shraga Feitel (our main protagonist) came from a long line of distinguished Nevelers, all of whom are ancestors to many respected Chabad families today.

## LEVIN FAMILY HISTORY

### Ita Henya Levin/Kohnson, R' Faitel's Grandmother

**Mrs. Ita Henya** lived in the chassidic town of Nevel. Around 1860, she married **R' Zalman HaLevi Levin** and gave birth to **R' Dovid Abele HaLevi Levin**. After being widowed at a young age, she married **R' Shraga Faitel Kohnson**<sup>82</sup>. Together they had several children, from whom many Chabad families descend today. When R' Shraga Faitel Kohnson also passed away, Mrs. Ita Henya was left alone to raise five orphaned children.

### R' Binyomin Kopelkov, R' Faitel's Grandfather

Ita Henya's son, **R' Dovid Abele Levin**, was a distinguished melamed in Nevel and devoted chassid of the Rebbe Maharash. He married **Chana Elka**, daughter of **Binyomin Kopelkov**, a blacksmith from Nevel.

R' Binyomin was no ordinary blacksmith<sup>83</sup>. While he worked daily at his smithy with hammer and anvil, face blackened with soot like other smiths, he raised an entire generation of chassidim. His descendants became renowned Torah scholars who settled in Eretz Yisroel and else where, and even his apprentices became G-d-fearing Jews.

During the Cantonist decrees, when Russians kidnapped Jewish children for military service, R' Binyomin's great strength made him feared by the gentiles. The famous chassid and *baal menagen* R' Zalman Levin describes his great-grandfather, "He could lift two men

LW

(1) REGISTRATION No. 505872

**A.E.F. D.P. REGISTRATION RECORD**

Original ☐ Duplicate ☒

M. ☐ Single ☐ Married ☒  
 F. ☒ Widowed ☐ Divorced ☐

(2) Family Name CHEIN (3) Sex IDA (4) Marital Status WIDOWED (5) Claimed Nationality RUSSIAN JEW

(6) Birthdate 10.1.1902 (7) Religion (Optional) JEWISH (8) Number of Accompanying Family Members: 5

(9) Number of Dependents: DAVID LEWIN (10) Full Name of Father CHANA KOPELYKOW

(11) Full Maiden Name of Mother RAABA J. Schneiderman (12) DESIRED DESTINATION 330 EASTERN

(13) LAST PERMANENT RESIDENCE OR RESIDENCE JANUARY 1, 1938. BROOKLYN NEW YORK MOSEWA Mad. SS. N.

(14) Usual Trade, Occupation or Profession Minotagadepatman (15) Performed in What Kind of Establishment Yes (16) Other Trades or Occupations None

(17) Languages Spoken in Order of Fluency YEWISH RUSSIAN e. (18) Do You Claim to be a Prisoner of War Yes (19) Amount and Kind of Currency in your Possession None

(20) Signature of Registrant: (signed) (21) Signature of Registrar: FP Date: M. XII. 46 Assembly SCHWAB Center No. HALL

(22) Destination or Reception Center:

Name or Number										City or Village										Province										Country									
CHEIN IDA										- MANN										(24) REMARKS																			
Minkowicz Izya										- Schwiegermann										CHEIN LEIB - NEFFE																			
- RYWA										- Tochter																													
- MEIER										- ENKE																													

DP-3  
15-50781-1

DP Registration Document of R' Dovid Abele's Daughter, Ita Chein

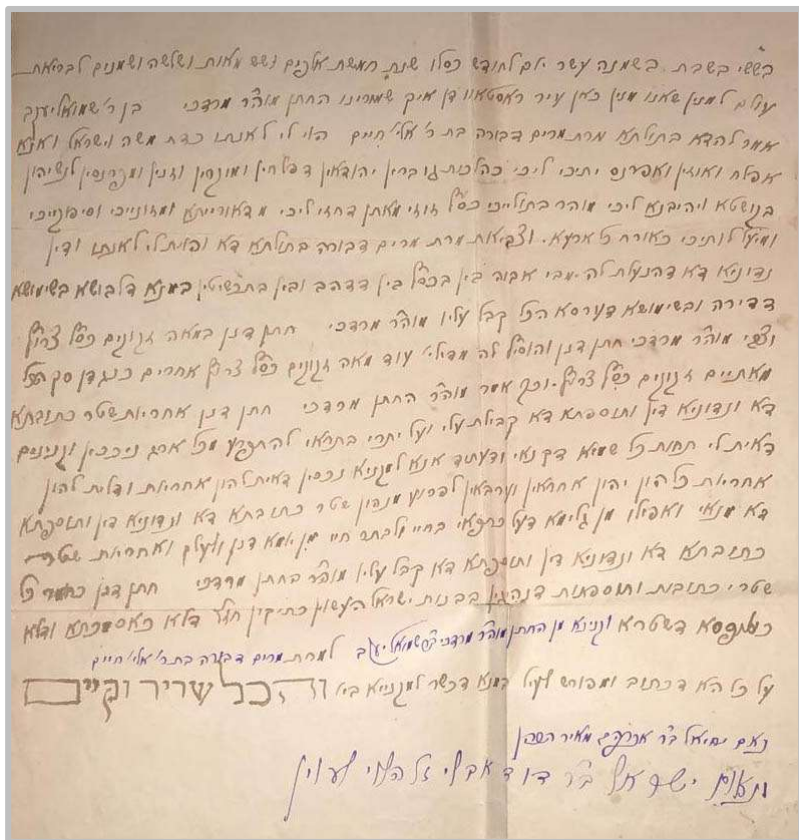
and knock their heads together..."

Once, on Friday night, gentiles kidnapped several Jewish children. Despite it being Shabbos, R' Binyomin immediately pursued them with a wagon. At the hideout, when a guard tried to stop him, he killed the man with one punch. He tore the locked door from its frame, rescued the frightened children, and brought them home safely.

Afterward, he traveled to the Tzemach Tzedek to ask for spiritual rectification for desecrating Shabbos. The Rebbe laughed: "If you're asking for a *tikkun*, then you're already fixed." He performed many such nighttime rescues, secretly infiltrating Cantonist camps to return children to their families<sup>84</sup>.

## R' Dovid Abele and Chana Elka Levin, R' Faitel's Parents

R' Dovid Abele, a chassid of the Rebbe Maharash, was a very pious, sincere, and intelligent man. He was a devoted, skilled melamed who



R' Yisroel Nevler's Signature on The Kesubah of R' Elye Chaim Althoiz's Daughter's Wedding (Note the Spelling of R' Yisroel's Father's Name)

imbued his students with true Yiras Shomayim. He created educational techniques that brought out the best in each child, no matter their ability or character. His reputation as a melamed of distinction spread widely.

R' Dovid Abele and his wife Chana Elka had five children. Their three sons, **R' Shraga Faitel (our main protagonist), R' Yisroel (Neveler), and R' Gershon Ber**, became renowned chassidim who stood out even in the notably chassidic town of Nevel. Their two daughters were **Baila and Ita Henya**.

The townspeople of Nevel called Chana Elka "the *tzadeikes*" and "*di gebentshte boich*", "the blessed womb" because she gave birth to three exceptional chassidim. The Rebbe Rashab reportedly characterized each brother by a distinct trait – Yisroel as a chassid, Gershon Ber as *yiras shamayim*, and Faitel as a *lamdan*.

R' Zalman Levin, R' Shraga Faitel's nephew, shared a memory of his grandmother Chana Elka. "She taught me the Chabad niggun '*Kol Atzmosai Tomarna*.' During the harsh Communist era, when my father (R' Gershon Ber) had to hide from the KGB for running an underground cheder, grandmother would care for us children. She would sing '*Kol Atzmosai*' with tears, and we children sang along, understanding that the niggun referred to us. We Jews were the 'poor and needy' while the Communists were 'stronger than he' and 'the robber.' We davened to Hashem for salvation. We especially sang this niggun on Chanukah, connecting with the difficult period of the Chashmonaim."

Shraga Faitel was born in the early 1880s and named after his grandmother's second husband. R' Faitel's daughter Sima stated, "Our family has deep chassidic roots, with ancestors among the chassidim of the Alter Rebbe and later Rebbeim."

## R' FAITEL LEVIN

### His Personality

As a young bachur, Faitel was greatly influenced by the famous chassid, R' Gershon Ber of Pahar. R' Faitel's yeshiva colleague, R' Folle Kahn, described him as "proficient in Shas and Poskim by heart, as well as in chassidic texts. Despite this knowledge, he was a quiet one who preferred living only from his own labor. He had a good temperament, was broad-hearted, and davened at length with exceptional pleasantness<sup>85</sup>."

Though quiet and reserved, R' Faitel was far from silent – he actively served as a *baal menagen*, *baal tefila*, and *melamed*. His calm temperament stood in sharp contrast to his vibrant brother R' Yisroel. As R' Pinye Korf described R' Yisroel, "Of all the elder chassidim I knew, R' Yisroel Nevler davened with more enthusiasm than anyone else. He was a *lebediker Yid* in general – a man full of life."<sup>86</sup> R' Faitel's davening was a more inward, still experience.

R' Mendel Futerfas once remarked to R' Faitel's grandson that when he wants to reflect on what a chassid is, he thinks about R' Faitel.

In addition to his exceptional Lomdus and Avoda, R' Faitel was highly respected for his wisdom. It was said that his keen insight never faltered, and further, to quote the mishna "Who is wise? He who sees what is yet to come."

Despite his quiet nature, R' Faitel was recognized as a community leader. Menachem Urieli, a Nevel resident, listed him among the





R' Yisroel (Nevler) Levin



R' Shruga Faitel Levin  
(The Original Photo)

handful of main active chassidim during the late 1920s and early 1930s<sup>87</sup>.

## Marriage

**R' Shruga Faitel** married **Chaya Leah Seminsky**, a modest, noble, and kindhearted woman.

Their daughter Sima Sudakevich recalls the mutual respect between her parents. "Father honored and valued Mother in an extraordinary way. There was Shabbosim when we had almost no meat. Mother would naturally serve the meager portion of meat to Father. But when she would get up from her place for a moment, Father would quickly transfer the meat to her plate. She for her part would return it to his plate."

Together they had five children, **Avraham Yaakov (Yanche)**, **Binyomin**, **Dovber (Berel)**, **Sima**, and **Tzvi Leib (Leibe)**.



Chaya Leah's Mother, Doba Seminsky, With Some of Her Children

## A CHASSIDIC HOME IN NEVEL

### Pictures in the Wall

Sima describes the deeply chassidic atmosphere of her childhood home. “The education we absorbed at home was chassidic of the highest order. Material matters didn’t interest us at all. Father instilled in us, mainly through personal example, Torah learning, doing *chesed*, and *mesirus nefesh* for every detail of Yiddishkeit.” To maintain separation from the surrounding culture, her father insisted they speak only Yiddish at home, never Russian.



Sima Sudakevich

Life in Nevel unfolded under constant threat from Soviet authorities and their collaborators in the Yevsektzia<sup>88</sup>. One particular incident left an indelible mark on young Sima’s memory.

Their house was built with exposed wooden beams, and one day the curious child discovered two small, folded papers hidden between them. When she opened them, she found pictures of two distinguished-looking Jews. Excited by her discovery, she ran to her grandmother.

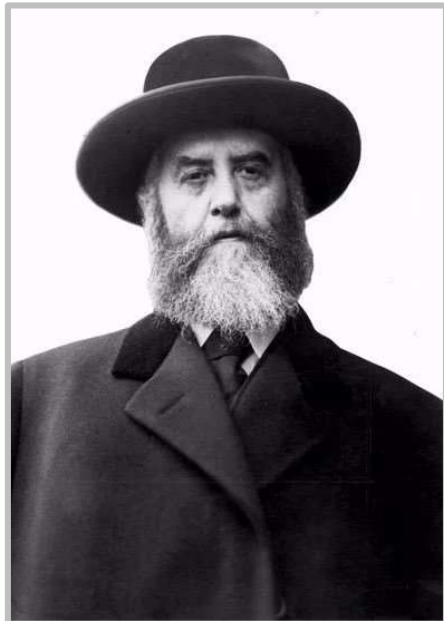
"Bubby, look at the pictures I found inside the wall!" Sima announced. "Who are these beautiful people?"

Her grandmother's reaction was immediate and terrifying. As Sima recalls: "I'll never forget how Bubby turned pale and literally began to tremble. She snatched the two pictures from my hands and said to me in tremendous panic, 'It's nothing, Sima... You didn't see anything... You didn't find anything here... This doesn't belong to us at all!'"

The mystery remained unsolved for years. Only much later, when Sima had left Russia and she saw pictures of the Rebbe Rashab and the Friediker Rebbe, did Sima finally understand who those "beautiful people" had been – and why their mere possession had struck such terror into her grandmother's heart.



The Rebbe Rashab



The Friediker Rebbe

## Work During the Communist Regime

Sima recalled her father's principled approach to earning a living. "Father always was careful not to benefit from others, but only from the work of his hands." While living in Nevel, R' Shraga Faitel established a factory for manufacturing paint brushes. The factory prospered and its sales flourished.

But the Communist regime soon intervened. "The Communists took the factory from his hands, just as they nationalized all private businesses, and appointed Father as the accountant. After a short time they fired him from this job too, and at the same time revoked his voting rights and the right to receive food rations. In Russia of those days an unemployed person, a 'parasite', was considered the lowest on the social class ladder and according to law could be persecuted and harassed in every possible way<sup>89</sup>."

With no choice, he had to find new sources of livelihood. Yet despite these hardships, his priorities remained clear. "His work was only to the extent necessary for earning a living. Most hours of the day he dedicated to learning Torah, *nigleh*, and chassidus. He knew Shas and Shulchan Aruch by heart, as well as many seforim of chassidus."

## Torah Diligence

When R' Faitel's father, R' Dovid Abele, passed away, his mother and much younger sister Ita Henya moved into his house. In addition to his children, R' Faitel now cared for his sister with love and devotion.

His sister described him as someone who learned Gemara day and night without pause.

"I lived as a child with my mother in his house," Ita Henya recalled. "I slept with my mother in one room. One night I heard Faitel talking to someone. I wondered who he could be speaking with so late at night. He was conversing in Yiddish, having what sounded like a complete discussion. I crept out of bed to investigate, and I discovered there was no one there. He was sitting by himself with a large Gemara, learning as if he were talking to a study partner."

His brilliance became legendary among those who knew him, in line with how the Rebbe Rashab described him, as "*a lamdan*".

Sima remembered her father's diligence. "Father would dedicate every possible moment to Torah learning with persistence. I remember how often, when for some reason I would wake up in the middle of the night, I would see him sitting bent over his seforim. In Nevel, Father taught children in the local cheder and also served as a '*maishiv*'<sup>90</sup> in the yeshiva that operated in the city. Every Friday night the chassid R' Zelig Zubrovsky would come from his home at the other end of the city to our house and he and Father would learn chassidus together until the early morning hours."

## A Telling Sigh

R' Dovid Chein shares a remarkable story about his uncle, R' Faitel.

"When I was around eleven years old, living in Nevel, I remember Shabbos mornings when Uncle Faitel's sons and several other young students would learn Likkutei Torah together. They had just one volume of Likkutei Torah, and everyone sat around it.

"R' Shraga Faitel would listen to their learning while pacing back and forth in the house. I recall he suffered from stomach pain, so he walked while holding his stomach.





From Right to Left: Yanche Levin, ?, Binyomin Levin

“When the boys made an error in their reading, my uncle never directly told them they were wrong. He would simply sigh, and they immediately knew they had misread something. The same happened when they mispronounced the *roshei teivos*, which Likkutei Torah is filled with. He would just sigh, and they knew to correct themselves.

“We were amazed at how he knew the entire Likkutei Torah by heart!”

## True Chinuch

Despite R' Faitel's enormous learning and knowledge, he was by nature quiet and introverted, speaking very little. Sima, his daughter, doesn't remember talking much with him as a child. He appeared to her as an elevated figure, raised above ordinary people.

Sima related, “Yet he was blessed with a developed sense of chinuch, of proper education and guidance. His methods were unique. He never raised his voice at his children, and certainly never raised a hand against us. When he wanted to rebuke us, he would sit

with us and give *mussar* and *tochecha* – ethical instruction and reproof – all in a quiet and peaceful tone. His calm tone didn't dull the sharpness of his words."

She remembers how once he chastised one of the children with his quiet words. Afterward, that child came to him crying bitterly and said, "It would have been better if you had given me a beating..." His words of *mussar* and *tochecha* penetrated all of them to the depths of their souls.

There was an incident when her brother Leibe, about ten years old at the time, left the house and returned more than an hour later. "Where were you?" their father asked him. Leibe answered innocently that he had walked down the street, saw a soccer game, and stopped to watch.

Their father raised his eyebrows in amazement. "How is a Jewish child able to stand a whole hour and watch a soccer game? If you had watched five or ten minutes, fine. But a whole hour?!" He didn't let up, repeating again and again his wonder: "How can a Jew watch?!" until Leibe burst into tears of regret that came from the depths of his heart.

"When one of us would cry from his *mussar*," Leibe recalled, "he would cry with us too"<sup>91</sup>.

## The Rebbe Has Spoken

One day<sup>92</sup> R' Faitel was learning with R' Chaim Berhzin, the local shochet, in the shul of Nevel, when the shochet's out-of-town son suddenly arrived. "I'm just passing through," Chaim's son Shmuel, a wealthy young butcher from a nearby town, explained. "The Rebbe Rashab is his vacation place and I am on my way to visit him."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed R' Chaim. "I wish I could also go!"

His son did not miss a beat. "I will buy you a ticket."

R' Faitel seized the opportunity to express his overwhelming desire to see the Rebbe, and to his pleasant surprise, the young man bought him a ticket as well. The group set out on their journey.

The Rebbe Rashab was staying at a resort not far from a lake. The trio reached the closest port on Friday morning. They now had a few-mile walk to the village where the Rebbe was staying.

Before they began their trek, they decided to immerse in the lake. R' Faitel and the shochet immediately emerged from the water, but Shmuel continued to swim around for quite a while. When he finished swimming, he rejoined the others to walk to the Rebbe's home.

Suddenly, as they passed through a small town, Shmuel dropped to the ground and lay there motionless. All his father's efforts to arouse him were to no avail; the young man was unconscious. R' Faitel helped the distraught father carry his son to the nearest Jewish home. As the son lay immobile in bed, their hosts ran out to fetch the closest doctor.

When the doctor finally arrived, he examined the patient. "I can't understand what happened," the father explained. "We were just swimming in the river and my son was healthy. When we continued walking, he collapsed to the ground, and he's been lying like that ever since."

The doctor looked at them in astonishment. "The local river?" he repeated. "You swam in that water?"

"We didn't stay too long," the shochet said. "My son was there longer than us. He probably swam for a few minutes."

"A few minutes!" the doctor shook his head in dismay. "I'm sorry, but there is little I can do. That water is contaminated and prolonged contact has always proved fatal. Your son is in a coma, far beyond human help!"

The doctor packed his bag, and ignoring their protests, headed out the door. The shochet turned to R' Faitel in desperation. "Only the Rebbe can help us," he said. "We must go straight to him!"

They left him bedridden in the house and continued walking to the resort, arriving at the Rebbe Rashab's residence on Friday night at midnight. When they arrived, the shochet immediately asked the Rebbe Rashab's *gabbai* to grant him a *yechidus*, but he was refused.

"The Rebbe is not seeing anyone now," explained the *gabbai*. "However, if you really must speak with the Rebbe, wait outside his room, because the Rebbe always goes from one room to the next between three and four in the morning. Then you will be able to ask him whatever you want."

The shochet and R' Faitel waited outside the Rebbe's room for hours. Suddenly, at 3:30 a.m., the door opened, and the Rebbe Rashab came out.

"What do you want?" the Rebbe asked.

R' Shmuel burst into tears and quickly related what had occurred. When he finished, the Rebbe made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "He will be here for havdala," he said. With that, the Rebbe went to a different room.

The pair looked at one another in amazement! R' Shmuel's son was stretched out in bed, practically lifeless, and yet the Rebbe expected him to walk five miles to the resort in time for havdala! However, being true Chasidim, they did not question the Rebbe's words. In fact, the

shochet was so overjoyed by the Rebbe's words that he decided to stay there until after Shabbos, for if the Rebbe promised his son would recuperate, then returning to the village would be a waste of time.

A little while later, back in the village, the young man suddenly awoke to find strangers looking at him. "What am I doing here?" he said. "Where is my father?" The son tried to get up, but fell back, exhausted by the effort.

"Watch yourself!" said the woman of the house. "You are very ill and the doctor said you will die soon! Don't move or you might make it worse!"

The family tried all they could to get him to stay in bed, but he resisted. "What do you mean?" he said indignantly. "I came here to see the Rebbe, not to stay in bed!"

Gradually, he mustered enough strength to sit up. Then he stood up and walked around. After eating something, he left the house, against the strong exhortations of his hosts to remain and gather his strength. When he arrived at the house of the Rebbe Rashab, he opened the door to find the Rebbe standing at the table with the cup of wine in his hand, just ready to begin havdala. He had arrived in time.

Decades later, R' Faitel's son R' Berel related this story to his children. "This story," he observed, "illustrates the incredible faith of the Chasidim. This man had left his son on a deathbed with the doctor saying there was no hope for him, yet when the Rebbe said he would be fine, the Chasid did not return to check to see if the son had returned to health. The Rebbe had spoken; his word was enough!"<sup>93</sup>

# BAAL MENAGEN: A MASTER OF PRAYER AND SONG

## As a Baal Tefillah

R' Faitel served as the *Baal Tefillah* in his shul. Although known for his quiet, introspective *avodah* through *tefillah*, he also possessed exceptional musical talent, was a master of *nusach*, and had the spiritual gifts to lead the community in prayer. Described as "a *chazzan* and *baal tefillah* filled with tremendous passion"<sup>94</sup>, "his *tefillos* were so impactful that listeners often remarked they had never heard such davening before"<sup>95</sup>.

His sons often accompanied him as a backup chorus. In the Chabad minhag, the chazzan does not repeat words during davening, so his sons would be the ones to repeat certain words among other things.

## Elul and Tishrei

R' Faitel's son Berel remembered the awe and seriousness that accompanied their musical and vocal preparations during the month of Elul. They felt true fear of the approaching *Yom HaDin*. When Berel helped dress his father in his kittel before 'Hineni', his father's entire body would tremble<sup>96</sup>.

R' Faitel had a deep emotional connection to the *tefillos*. As his grandson related, "When I asked my father about how his father





R' Berel Levin

would sing '*Hineni*', my father answered, 'I can tell you the beginning. But afterward, there was such weeping that I cannot describe it'<sup>97</sup>."

## Musical Excellence

R' Faitel served as *baal tefillah* in a shul with more prominent chassidim. When that shul closed, they merged with another shul that had a more ordinary, workman crowd.

As the Yomim Noraim approached, the distinguished chassidim from the original shul wanted R' Feital to lead the tefillos. The regular shul members objected. They wanted someone who was musically talented and thought that R' Faitel, being a chassid focused on personal spiritual service, wouldn't be suitable.

But the prominent chassidim insisted strongly, so the shul let him daven. When R' Faitel finished, the ordinary *baalei batim* were completely overwhelmed and impressed, even from a purely musical standpoint.

He managed to combine the highest level of spiritual service with exceptional musical excellence.



The brothers, R' Berel and R' Leibke Levin, recording chazanus  
at R' Leibke's home in Paris

## Passing on Niggunim

On the topic of music and the Levin family, the Levin family profoundly influenced the Chabad *niggunim* we know today<sup>98</sup>.

During World War II, many chassidic families fled to Samarkand and Tashkent to escape the battlefield. As they settled, they worked to restart the Tomchei Temimim yeshiva that had been interrupted by the war. R' Faitel had passed away, but his two sons, R' Berel and R' Leibe Levin, both studied at the newly organized yeshiva<sup>99</sup>.

The Levin brothers possessed a distinct knowledge of generations of Chabad *niggunim*, learned from their father, R' Faitel, and their uncle, R' Gershon Ber. Most of the students at the yeshiva had never learned these melodies, yet more so because of the war and the difficult conditions they had lived through.

The two brothers then taught these tunes to their fellow students at the yeshiva. As R' Moshe Levertov recalls in his memoirs, "These

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two brothers taught and trained the students in Chabad niggunim, and it was a wonderful sight every Friday night and Shabbos afternoon to hear and sing Chabad melodies before the *maamar*."

The legacy of niggunim continued through the Levin family. They became renowned as talented *baalei tefillah* and *baalei menagnim*, carrying on the distinctive chassidic warmth that had been established by R' Faitel Levin and his brother.

# THE STRUGGLE FOR EDUCATION

## Mandatory 'Shkole'

Despite grave personal danger, R' Shraga Faitel refused to compromise on his children's Jewish education and send them to the Russian public schools, 'shkola'.

This was the 1920s, when persecution of religion and Jews was at its peak. The stakes were enormous, as Sima shares, "In those days a compulsory education law was enacted. This law established that every father had the obligation to send his children to government schools. Anyone who violated the law faced long years of imprisonment under terrible conditions and no less serious than that, having his children taken from his custody because he couldn't raise them 'properly.'"

All the *chadorim* were closed but R' Faitel didn't give up. He gathered together a few students and taught them himself, in secret, at great personal risk.

## The Painful Compromise

Eventually, the pressure became unbearable.

"There were those who outsmarted the authorities and sent only one of their children to school, while the others remained at home. At a certain stage, the pressure on my parents increased until they could no longer withstand it and Mother pleaded with Father to allow one of the children to go to the 'shkola'. At some point, Father also



R' Binyomin Levin

understood that there was no choice. The lot fell on my brother Binyomin."

Binyomin's experience in public school was heartbreaking. "Binyomin went to school with his head held high, proud of his Yiddishkeit, with his yarmulke, peyos, and tzitzis out. The students would harass him daily. One day the teacher stood Binyomin by the blackboard and ordered all the

children in the class to come up and pull his tzitzis and peyos. This was already beyond his strength. That day Binyomin came home and declared, 'Let them hang me, let them burn me, I'm not going to school anymore!'"

With Binyomin out of the running for public school, the burden fell to young Sima. "Binyomin was then about thirteen and I was still a young child of about seven. Since someone from the family had to go to the 'shkola', it was decided that from now on it would be me. There was logic in this, since they couldn't pull my *tzitzis* or *peyos*... I was sent to a government school located far from our home, where they didn't know I had four brothers."

On her first day of school, another Jewish girl, the daughter of the chassid Red Leibel Karasik, tried to enroll as well. The teacher saw the newcomer and reacted strongly. "Karasik? *Subbotnitsa*, one who keeps Shabbos?" she asked. "I had enough with his previous daughter. No, I'm not willing to accept her in my class!"

Sima survived her public school ordeal through her mother's intervention. "From time to time Mother came to school and bribed the teacher with money and nice gifts. In return, the teacher turned a blind eye to my absence from class on Shabbos." Still, "when I would arrive at school in the mornings a chorus of boys and girls would stand and shout at me, '*Subbotnitsa! Subbotnitsa!*'"



Sima Sudakevich

## Maintaining Jewish Identity

Throughout this ordeal, R' Faitel worked to preserve his children's Jewish identity. "He tried to minimize the damage and ensure that I wouldn't feel equal among equals at school, but rather feel different from all the students. For example, he didn't agree that I or my brother Binyomin go to school with a schoolbag 'like everyone else,' and so I would come to class with my textbooks tied with string. 'We don't belong to them! We're not their friends! We mustn't have anything that will put us in the same line with them!' he would constantly drill into my ears."

When Sima was required to wear the Pioneer uniform with its red tie and Communist pin, her father's pain was evident. "When I came home and Father saw my new appearance, he found it hard to bear. He said to me quietly and with tears in his eyes, 'I'm not willing to see this within the walls of our home. If you must appear this way at school, put on the tie and pin only after leaving the house. And when you return from school, before you enter the house, remove them from yourself, so that none of us will be forced to see this.'"



## Why Was He Born?

The extreme commitment to *mesirus nefesh* was colorfully expressed in an incident with Leibe, the youngest son. Leibe recalls<sup>100</sup>, "From the age of seven, a child was required to attend the Communist schools. This would usually mean you would eat non-kosher food, desecrate Shabbos, and abandon Jewish practice entirely... Our parents educated us from a very young age about the life of *mesiras nefesh*."

When Leibe's turn came, his father's resolve remained unshaken. "I recall one night hearing my parents discussing what they should do about my situation. "He is turning seven, and we need to figure out how to handle this so he won't be discovered," they said. In the middle of their conversation, I heard my father declare, "I will not send my son to their school! Is this why he came into this world, just to enjoy *gashmius* and to learn among non-Jews?!" Though I was very young, those words struck me like an arrow."

When the antisemitic school principal demanded that R' Shraga Faitel come to discuss Leibe's enrollment, "My father, with tremendous *mesiras nefesh*, sent back a bold reply. 'Since I am older than you, out of respect, you should come to me...'"

# YEGORYEVSK

## The Move

Around 1937, R' Faitel's family moved from Nevel to Yegoryevsk, an industrial army town located about a hundred kilometers from Moscow. Many Chabad chassidim<sup>101</sup> moved to Yegoryevsk because it was easier to make a living that didn't involve *chilul Shabbos*.

Very quickly, a home-based industry of knitting and weaving developed. Raw materials were purchased in the market and then families manufactured berets, hairpins, shoelaces and other items in their homes.

Leibe pointed out that in Yegoryevsk, Jews were a smaller group and consequently attracted less attention, which was advantageous.



An Old Believer

Another reason is, the town's unique local character provided a form of visual camouflage. Yegoryevsk was a historical center for the "Old Believers" (*Starovery*), traditionalist Orthodox Christians whose men wore long untrimmed beards. In a Soviet city, a beard would instantly identify a man as a religious "element," but in Yegoryevsk, it was a familiar sight. This allowed the bearded chassidim to blend in with the local population, attracting significantly less attention than they otherwise would have.

## The Hidden Children

In Yegoryevsk, as in every Russian town, every building had a “book” of all the residents, and all dwellers needed to have their names in this government registry. Until the age of nine, Leibe was not written down as a resident of the building – his father had deliberately kept him unregistered, knowing the dangers that official documentation could bring. Leibe would then need to attend a Communist school.

“I would learn with my father and each time we heard a knock at the door, I would hide in the fireplace,” Leibe recalls. “Late at night, when all neighbors were sleeping, my father would take me to get some fresh air.”

The boys’ existence was a carefully guarded secret, their lives confined to the shadows of their home except for those precious midnight walks when the streets were empty. But secrets, no matter how carefully kept, have a way of surfacing.

“Once a neighbor passed by and asked my father if this boy was a guest or a son. Father was terrified that the secret was revealed.” The casual question carried enormous weight – discovery could mean deportation or worse for the entire family. Fortunately, the neighbor proved to be trustworthy. “This neighbor highly respected my father and showed him that he secretly was a religious goy, so he had nothing to worry about.”

## Avoiding School

The reprieve was temporary. Eventually, word of Leibe’s existence reached the local school dean, who sent a message that the boy needed to come to school. His mother, thinking quickly, dressed him to look

mentally ill. When Leibe appeared before the principal, he complained of feeling unwell and was sent to see a doctor.

What followed was an elaborate deception orchestrated by his father. After the doctor's initial examination, Leibe's father invited the physician to their home. "He came and my father got him drunk on vodka," Leibe remembers. "But he understood there was something my father wanted from him, and he wasn't brought just to drink, so he asked what do you want."



R' Leibke Levin

"My father said he wanted a note that says Leibe is sick. The doctor wrote a note that I am severely ill, and each day I need to rest multiple times a day. So, it is impossible for me to sit in class." The fraudulent medical certificate came at a steep price – his father paid the doctor a substantial bribe before sending him away.

With this document in hand, Leibe was officially excused from school, allowing his secret education to continue. "This way I did not need to go to school. I would learn with my father secretly. I would learn when he would come home from work. My father was a genius and would teach me everything by heart, not needing to look in a sefer."

During this period, Leibe celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. It was held in a cramped, dimly lit house, windows tightly shut. Gathering for such

an event was fraught with anxiety, and the attendance barely reached a minyan of men<sup>102</sup>.

## Sima's School Struggles

Four months after her family left Nevel, Sima remained behind with relatives to finish the school year. At the beginning of 5698 (1938), she joined her family and began studying at a large school in Yegoryevsk where about a thousand students were enrolled.

As the only Jewish girl, Sima felt isolated but excelled academically. "Despite the feeling of loneliness I felt, as a Jewish girl in a sea of gentile students, I excelled in my studies and was even appointed after a period as editor of the school newspaper," Sima recalls. She carefully avoided attending school on Shabbos. Once, when a very important test was scheduled for that day, she arrived with a bandaged hand, claiming she couldn't write.

Her academic success brought recognition – and unexpected complications. The school announced that because of her excellence, she had won a special prize: a trip to the Kremlin in Moscow as the school's representative at a ceremony for the new civil year.

"I came home and told my father about this excitedly," she remembers. "My father's face became serious at once and he said to me in a piercing tone, "Do you know how much Jewish blood was spilled by these cursed wicked ones?!"

That year, 1938, was particularly dangerous. Stalin's purges were at their height, and masses of people suspected as enemies of the regime were arrested or murdered. Among them was Sima's uncle R' Yisroel Nevler, who was arrested for a full year. "When he returned he was a broken vessel and it was frightening to see him."

Her father quickly devised a solution. He went to a doctor and requested certification of illness. When he returned, he had an official document certifying that Sima had contracted pneumonia, obviously too serious a condition for her to make the trip to the Kremlin.

The following summer brought a similar situation. Again, Sima received an excellence prize – this time a trip

to Artek, the premier Young Pioneer camp of the Soviet Union, a summer camp for outstanding students in Crimea. Her father refused to even consider it.



Sima Sudakevich

"In the camp they'll feed you *treif* and brainwash you with words of heresy!" he declared. Once again, he approached the doctor for medical certification. This time, the doctor certified that Sima had been struck with dysentery, and her trip to Artek was cancelled as well.

## Showdown with the Principal

Sima continued her studies while her father reluctantly held back his objections. But when she reached the age of 14, when it was essentially mandatory to enroll in the Komsomol, the communist youth organization, he drew the line.

"This is mamash *avodah zarah*!" he declared.





R' Shraga Faitel Levin  
(Restored Image)



Chaya Leah Levin

Sima went to the school principal with a prepared excuse, telling him that her mother was sick and she was forced to stop her studies. The principal, who was clearly antisemitic, looked at her with hostile eyes and demanded, "Let your father come here."

While her father went to meet with the principal, Sima remained home with her mother. "Together we said Tehillim and cried bitter tears," she recalls. "It was winter and evening was quick to fall."

After several tense hours, her father returned home, his face pale as chalk. The family was frightened – he could barely speak. "The only words he said were, '*Zol er gayn in der erd arayn!*' (May he be buried deep in the ground!)." After that, he washed his hands and stood to daven maariv with tremendous weeping.

When he finally calmed down and finished davening, he related what had happened. The principal had lashed out at him with chilling threats. "I know that you have four sons at home who don't study in

school. You yourself walk around with a beard, and your family keeps Shabbos. In addition, you also maintain contact with all the other religious families. We know all your tricks and soon we'll put an end to this whole thing!"

The family's carefully guarded secrets had been exposed. From that moment, constant fear reigned in their house. They didn't know what would happen or how they would cope with the trouble standing at their doorstep.

But then, in that exact week, war broke out on the Russian-Finnish border. Several days later, the principal was drafted and taken to the front, from which he never returned.

"This was an open miracle!" Sima reflects.

With the principal out of the picture, Sima kept away from school entirely and instead attended training courses in the evening hours.

# WORLD WAR TWO

## Tashkent

When World War II broke out, the Germans began approaching Moscow in a rapid conquest campaign. When the danger became real, the authorities called on residents to flee to the depths of Russia. The government initiated an organized transfer of citizens to the east of the country.

The Levin family too intended to escape, but suddenly their mother, Chaya Leah, fell seriously ill. The family faced an agonizing decision – flee immediately or risk being trapped by the advancing German army.

"After a brief consultation, it was decided that I and the two older boys, Yantzeh and Binyomin, would set out immediately with Mother, while Father and the two younger brothers, Berel and Leibe, would remain in Moscow a while longer to pack belongings and try to sell the house," Sima recalled. "Yantzeh was still a bachur, while Binyomin was already married to his wife Freida (née Rivkin)."

As soon as possible, they boarded a freight train heading to Tashkent<sup>103</sup> in Central Asia. The journey was grueling week long, with their mother's health deteriorating by the day.

"We arrived in Tashkent on Rosh Chodesh Elul 5701 (1941). I was then a girl of about fifteen. When we arrived, Mother was in very serious condition. She was taken from the train straight to the hospital."

The family was now scattered across thousands of miles, with their father still in Moscow and their mother fighting for her life in a hospital in an unfamiliar city.

"Our situation then was utterly grim," Sima remembered. "Father was still in Moscow, Mother was hospitalized, and we were wandering the city streets among hundreds of thousands of other refugees who had fled to Tashkent from Russia and Poland. During the cold nights, we slept in the train station."



Chaya Leah Levin

The conditions in Tashkent were beyond harsh. Work opportunities were scarce compared to the enormous number of refugees flooding the city. Severe hunger prevailed, and people were dying from starvation and disease. The lack of living quarters and basic sanitary conditions led to epidemics that spread rapidly through the refugee population.

## Losing Mother

Two weeks after their arrival, on the 16th of Elul, R' Faitel and the two younger brothers finally reached Tashkent. "We went to the train station to meet them, and from there we walked together to the hospital to inquire about Mother's condition. When we got there, we

received the news with sorrow and shock that Mother had passed away just hours before."

The timing was cruel; their father had arrived just hours too late to see his wife one last time. R' Faitel's turned ashen as he absorbed the devastating news. He murmured quietly to himself, "This won't take long," speaking about his own life.

"When I heard this, I began screaming with emotion and pain, 'Father! With whom will you leave us here?!' and we all burst into bitter weeping," Sima recalled. The fifteen-year-old girl's cry captured the family's terror – they were strangers in a hostile city, having lost the loving woman who held them together. "Later, I remember myself running bewildered from the hospital that sat on a high hill, screaming into the void, wailing bitterly for my mother who had been snatched from me so suddenly."

The funeral arrangements were handled by others, Sima doesn't even remember who organized it. Having no known address in the city, the bereaved family returned to the train station, and there, among the crowds of refugees, they sat shiva for their mother.

## **Finding a Place to Live**

As Shabbos approached, the family didn't have anywhere to be. Then, unexpectedly, help arrived. One of the Sirota family members, a chassidic family living in Tashkent, discovered them. The Sirota's opened their home, their pockets, and their hearts to the grieving refugees. They brought R' Faitel along with their older and younger brothers into their house. Sima, her brother Binyomin, and his pregnant wife went to search for their own accommodations.

What happened next left an indelible impression on Sima's

memory. As they wandered the streets, "From one of the house windows, a voice suddenly called out, "The girl can stay with us!" We raised our eyes and saw Mrs. Zelda (Zina) Gourary, wife of the chassid R' Mordechai Gourary."

Since she had been invited, Sima parted from her brother and his wife, who continued searching for their own place. Sima entered the Gourary home, a one room abode where the two parents and their baby son lived, a child born to them thirteen years after their marriage.

"I mention this because at that moment I could have served as a living example of the third plague in Egypt," Sima reflected, referring to her lice-infested condition after weeks of living as a refugee. "Yet they still brought me into their home and weren't afraid for the welfare of their only baby."

The family's kindness was extraordinary. They gave up their floor space so that Sima could sleep next to the table, her makeshift bed padded with a blanket. But their generosity went beyond mere shelter.

"Shabbos passed and I remained in their home for some time longer. On Sunday morning I woke up and saw my dress hanging to dry in the center of the room. Mrs. Gourary had washed and cleaned it of the little parasites."

Shortly later, the family managed to secure a tiny apartment where they could all live together. Throughout that entire month of Elul, a minyan was held in their cramped and poor dwelling to say Kaddish for their mother.

## **Saved from the Kolkhoz**

With the influx of refugees and the lack of accommodations, the authorities tried to disperse many refugees among the kolkhozes,





R' Zalman Sudakevich

agricultural settlements controlled by Uzbek citizens<sup>104</sup>. Refugees worked from morning to evening growing rice in flooded fields and doing other backbreaking labor. It was terrible, but there was no other choice. Staying on the streets wasn't an option.

To get a referral to this "paradise" called a kolkhoz, families had to stand in long, endless lines. One night, while the Levin family stood in the

endless queue waiting for morning when distribution of the coveted kolkhoz referrals would resume, a young and energetic Jew with a spark in his eyes saw them.

"Listen to me, don't take a referral to a kolkhoz," he said to them without knowing them, sizing them up by their appearance alone. "Say that you want to go to Karasu." His name was Zalman, and his kindness extended beyond advice. He even brought them a kvort to wash negel vaser in the morning<sup>105</sup>.

Despite that dark night, standing in the long line when they didn't know their right from their left, something about the way Zalman spoke to them made them trust him. They followed his advice, reached Karasu, and rented a small cabin. Who could have imagined then that this energetic stranger, whose good advice gave them a home and hope, would become Sima's husband not long after?

## The Black Market

Now came the time to find a source of livelihood. This wasn't simple in those chaotic days, but the terrible hunger left them no choice. Together with her brother Leibe, Sima began selling bread. Sima and Leibe waited for a wagon driver who brought bread to stores and hospitals, and when they met him, he agreed to cooperate with them. Each day he would stop on a side street and sell them a certain amount of rolls. They would hurry to hide the rolls in a wooden box they carried, then go to the market and sell them. This type of illegal commerce was nicknamed "the black market." The family survived on the profits from these sales.

This arrangement didn't last long. One day Sima was caught in the act by police. Leibe's feet were faster and he managed to escape, but she was arrested. She had managed to hide the rolls in the box, but the police didn't hesitate – they broke it open, revealing its contents. They led her to the detention center where she was accused of stealing bread and black market trading.

"I was in detention all that day and was only released late at night," Sima recalls. "When I returned home, I saw Father sitting by the table with a lit candle, saying Tehillim with great concentration. The house was dark and a cloud of sadness hung in its space. Mother's passing floated in the air."

When her father saw her entering the house, he was relieved and burst into tears of emotion. "Now sit and say Tehillim," he told her.

Sima joined him and began reciting Tehillim with great emotion. "All the sadness and pain that had accumulated within me during those weeks burst out through the words. I knew how to read Hebrew, but over the years I had forgotten the meaning of the words."

When her father heard her saying Tehillim, he turned to her, completely moved, and said, "You don't understand what you're saying, but do you have any idea *how* you're saying it?!"

"From then until today, whenever I remember this story, I say Tehillim with a special feeling," Sima reflects.



Avraham Yaakov Levin

## R' Faitel's Passing

To his children's great heartbreak, R' Faitel's dark prophecy came true. He suffered from kidney disease that kept worsening, and on the 26th of Nissan 5702 (1942), about half a year after his wife's passing, he too was taken from his family. "Oy... what a father he was!" Sima laments.

The family's trials were not yet over. The firstborn, Avraham Yaakov, called Yancheh, also passed away a few months after his father, succumbing to the brutal conditions in Tashkent. Within less than a year, the family had lost three of its members to exile and hardship.

But the surviving children would honor their parents' memory by rebuilding what had been destroyed. Eventually leaving the harsh landscape of Russia behind, they established beautiful chassidishe homes, carrying forward the traditions and values their father had so carefully instilled in them.

**Binyomin** married **Freida Rivkin**, **Dovber** married **Rochel Shagalov**, **Sima** married the very same **Zalman Sudakevich** who met

them that dark night in the refugee line, and **Tzvi Leib** married **Taybe Karasik**.

All his children became actively engaged in spreading chassidus and the Rebbe's directives, exerting profound influence on countless people.

Through their children and grandchildren, R' Faitel and Chaya Leah's legacy continues, their devotion to Torah and mitzvos living on in future generations.

## ENDNOTES

1. R' Shloime Zarchi.
2. R' Chaim Bentzion's maternal grandfather, R' Shimon Krimer, lived. R' Chaim Bentzion studied there as a bachur.
3. Mrs. Shaina Stolik's (née Itkin) Itkin Family Thesis.
4. He lived in Warsaw, Poland and was killed by Nazis with his entire family, HY"D.
5. From his son R' Yaakov Yosef Raskin's diary.
6. R' Moshe Vishedsky.
7. Or before Maariv.
8. According to R' Mosheh Vischdsky – though he wasn't entirely certain – R' Bentche Raskin's maternal uncle, who resided in Horky, may have married someone from the Vygon family. R' Yehoshua Mondshine writes that R' Chaim Bentzion's sister, Sara, married one of R' Michel Vygon's sons.
9. A nickname for Chaim Bentzion.
10. The Original Yiddish:  
עס ווערט געבראכט אין א ספר, אין א ספר ווערט געבראכט (כך חזר הרבי על הדברים פעמיים, ישר והפוך), אז ווען מ'שטייט אונטער דער חופה דארף מען טראכטן ממשיך זיין קבלת עול מלכות שמים אויף זיך, און אויף איר, און אויף די קינדערלאך וואס דער אויבערשטער וועט געבן און דאס העלפט אויף פופציק יאר.
11. More information about R' Chaim Bentzion can be found in the Mondshine family Teshura, 15 Av 5759, compiled by R' Yehoshua Mondshine.
12. Legal records confirm that Shaul and Sima Chasha were born in Kovna.
13. Doba Raiza and Aaron Leib, Sholom Ber and Rivka, and Sima Chasha and Moshe are all direct great-grandparents of the chosson and kallah.
14. According to the memoirs of R' Shloime's brother, R' Yaakov Yosef. Possibly he meant the vicinity of Lubavitch, either Rudniya or Shtzerbin.

15. Nizhny-Novgorod was called Gorki from 1932-1990.

16. Shloime Raskin (son of Sholom Ber).

17. Ibid.

18. Testimony from Berel Raskin: On Sukkos, we would go at around 1:30 am to Kogen's home, because he had a sukkah. Zaideh would walk with Moshe Vishedsky, and we would walk a little behind them so it would not look like we were walking together. Us children would enter the sukkah just to make the bracha "leisheiv basuka", but the adults would stay in the sukkah to eat and farbreng a little bit.

19. His sister Mummeh Sara Katzenellenbogen was also a great business person like him, and always had money at her disposal.

20. *Yabadus Hadmama*.

21. As heard from his son R' Shmuel, and from R' Shloime Zarchi.

22. See also bottom of cover of *Toldot Chabad b'Russiya ha'Sovietit*.

23. Incidents which include his grandchildren Michel and Berel Raskin happened during WWII.

24. As heard from his son R' Arik Raskin.

25. At one point, R' Moshe Vishedsky convinced his sister-in-law Doba Raiza to send her son Berel to an underground yeshiva. Berel traveled with Sholom Ber Vishedzky, Moshe's son, to Tashkent and then Samarkand, where he learned under R' Berke Chein and R' Chaim Meir Gorelik.

26. R' Shloime Vishedsky would tell this story to say how these words about *mesiras nefesh* for education affected his daughter Chasha.

Years later, when Chasha lived in Chernowitz, her nine-year-old son Shloime walked with his mother on Shabbos morning toward the school for a national exam that required desecrating Shabbos. Along the way, they encountered his father Moshe and the mashpia R' Mendel Futerfas. R' Moshe looked at his wife and son and said, "Do as you understand."

Suddenly, the mother hurled her son into a muddy path puddle formed from melted snow. Shloime fell and became completely soaked. When the school saw the state young Shloime was in, they sent the wet child home.

Back home, R' Mendel Futerfas asked Chasha, "Where did you find the courage to push your son?"

Chasha answered, "I remembered my father R' Shloime Raskin when he returned from the Friediker Rebbe in Leningrad. He climbed onto the table, danced and cried out, "For the education of children, one must go to the point of self-sacrifice!" When we approached the school today, I pushed my son into the mud. Isn't that what he said, 'to the point of self-sacrifice'?"

27. As related by R' Shloime Zarchi, who heard it from chassidim.

28. He also arranged the match between Doba Raiza and Aaron Leib Lein a few years earlier.

29. See the Hebrew book *Reb Moshe Vitebsker* for a rich biography of the Vishedsky family.

30. Miraculously, thanks to their staying there, they survived the war, while the rest of their family was killed by the Nazis. While living at Shloime Raskin's home, Sholom Ber worked sewing gloves and scarves for the Red Army. As he worked, he would recite Tanya, Mishnayos, and ma'amorim from memory.

31. This detail I heard from R' Arik Raskin (son of Michel).

32. Sadov was a town in Poland. He was also known as the *Sadovner Rav*.

33. This river was next door, a few meters away from the Raskin house.

34. As retold by R' Berel Raskin, who heard it from the Sadover Rav, and from R' Shloime Zarchi, who heard it directly from R' Michel Vishedsky right after the Sadover Rav had shared the story with him.

35. Bentzi Raskin recalls him saying that he kept those rubber shoes and would wear them on Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av.

36. As told by Berel himself and Mrs. Henya Laine

37. This account is mainly based on how R' Berel Raskin shared it.

38. Horav Note Landa, a *Baal Mechaber* Seforim titled *Ner Yehoshua*.



39. R' Bentzy Raskin.

40. As heard from Horav Note Landa and R' Moshe Wasserstrum, the Gabbai of the Bobov Shul in London.

41. R' Moshe Wasserstrum.

42. As mentioned earlier, those who had chosen to remain under Soviet rule were later caught in the Nazi invasion and mostly perished, making being transferred to Russian labor camps or settlements a "miracle" in disguise.

43. The daughter Frida would later marry R' Sholom Ber Laine.

44. This account was shared by the Laine family, specifically R' Leizer. This is also based on an oral interview with Mair Rottenstreich and some documents.

45. As heard from R' Berel raskin.

46. Ibid.

47. Through Sholom Ber Lein, who previously lived in their house as well. Graciously given by R' Laizer Laine.

48. Zichron L'Veis Yisrael p. 61, and 87, note 156.

49. As heard from several family members.

50. He prefaced by saying, "I would want to be an *ish pashut* (a simple man), but only an *ish pashut* as our holy Rebbes understood the concept of an *ish pashut*. Michel Shtzerbiner once..."

51. *A sheiner* in original. R' Shloime Zarchi relates that when an elder chossid would describe the Rebbe Rashab it was always "tall and handsome" *A boicher un a sheiner*.

52. Sefer Hasichos 5691, p. 166.

53. Sefer Hasichos 5689, p. 29.

54. This is based on Sefer Hasichos 5689, p. 25. R' Yisroel Jacobson writes Zalman was Michel's father (Zichron L'Veis Yisrael p. 61, and 87, note 156).

55. Sicha of Pesach 5694 (Likkutei Dibburim vol. 1, p. 229 (new print)).

56. Reshimas Hayoman, p. 260.

57. Sicha of Pesach 5694 (Likkutei Dibburim vol. 1, p. 230 (new print)).

58. Sefer Hasichos 5689, p. 26. Summer 5700, p. 10.
  59. Sicha of Pesach 5694 (Likkutei Dibburim vol. 1, p. 238 (new print).
  60. R' Shmuel Zalmanov writes that this is most probably the famous tenua attributed to the Rebbe Maharash (Sefer Hanigunim vol. 2, nigun 179).
  61. Sefer Hasichos 5704, p. 119.
  62. As far as we know, she was the only girl in the family.
  63. Reshimos Devorim, p. 303, see also p. 369.
  64. Zichron L'Veis Yisrael p. 87, note 156. R' Shloime Zarchi.
  65. Igros Kodesh vol. 14, p. 88.
  66. See also Aleh Toldos Peretz, p. 144.
  67. In Beis Moshiach #199, p. 55, there is a list compiled by R' Yehudah Eber in 1930 and submitted to the Friediker Rebbe. The list documents chassidim living in Russia at that time. Regarding Shamai Vygon, it notes that he served as a shochet in Rostov but was experiencing severe financial hardship. The original Hebrew text states: **ר' שמאי ווגאן הוא שו"ב בראסטוב, אך סובל דחקות גדולה ביותר**.
  68. This is one of the only mentions we have that says Vygons' are leviim.
  69. Toldos Chabad B'Rusya HaSovyetis, p. 214-15.
  70. For more on Shamai, see Toldos Chabad B'Rusya HaSovyetis, Reshimos Devarim and Beis Moshiach #1184.
  71. Zichron L'Veis Yisrael p. 87, note 156.
  72. Legal documents. Her parents were Moshe and Henya from Vitebsk. Interestingly, R' Bentzion Raskin's wife Dvonya was a Shevelov, just from Rudnia.
  73. R' Shlome Zarchi and R' Hilel Zaltzman.
  74. R' Shlome Zarchi. R' Hilel Zaltzman relates what he heard R' Yosef:
- When I arrived at his house, in the initial excitement, he told me about the shlichus he received from the Rebbe Rashab, while complaining that the Rebbe sent him to this settlement where there were a few Yidden, but in recent years he doesn't have a minyan.
- He related that before the Friediker Rebbe left Russia, he traveled to him and told him about his life in the settlement. He claimed that since there are almost no

Yidden in the place, he has nothing to do there. But the Friediker Rebbe told him: Since the father [Rebbe Rashab] sent you there, I cannot permit you to leave the place. After all, you make a parnossa from working the land, and every time you ask for the Ribbono Shel Olam's bracha - you live from Hashem's bracha, and in this you must be b'simcha.

75. Possibly named after the original Yechiel Michel Vygon's mother.

76. As told by R' Meir Itkin, A"H (Taken from Mrs. Shaina Stolik's (née Itkin) Itkin Family Thesis).

77. Ibid.

78. A play on the pasuk of Hallel, "Praise Him with the harp (*nevel*)". Likkutei Dibburim Vol. 1, p. 20 (2021).

79. The term "maskil" in Chabad terminology means a chassid distinguished mainly by his intellectual depth of understanding of chassidus Chabad writings.

80. Likkutei Dibburim Vol. 1, p. 20 (2021).

81. In English, "the Bears of Kremenchug".

82. R' Faitel Levin was named after his father's stepfather.

83. R' Mendel Laine, a brother of the famous Neveler shochet, R' Chaim Dovid Laine, writes about his childhood town Nevel. In his description, this is how he mentions R' Binyomin.

84. His grandson R' Zalman Levin, in *Kol Atzmosai*.

85. *Lubavitch Ve'chayoleha*.

86. R' Pinye relates that when Lubavitchers fled Russia and stopped in Krakow, they were taken care of by the Agudah. The Agudah even prepared special meatless Shabbos meals since there was no Lubavitcher shechita available. While R' Yisroel Neveler usually *davened* in a shul, in Krakow he chose to *daven* privately, saying "Why should they see me acting *mesbuge*?" His davening was genuinely robust and loud, so he davened in his room instead.

87. Alongside R' Meir Simcha Chein and R' Zalman Mosheh Hayitzchoki.

88. The Jewish section of the KGB.

89. See also *Beis Moshiach* #199 p. 52.

90. One who answers questions
91. Heard from his son R' Faitel.
92. R' Yosef Levin relates this story in the name of his father R' Berel Levin, the son of R' Faitel Levin
93. Based on Rabbi Elchanan Lesches' account of what he heard from R' Yosef Levin (son of R' Berel).
94. R' Zalman Levin in *Kol Atzmosai*.
95. R' Faitel, son of R' Leibe.
96. R' Faitel, son of R' Berel.
97. Ibid.
98. As related by R' Moshe Levertov in his memoirs.
99. One in the advanced "zal" and the other in the younger classes
100. The accounts related by R' Leibe in the following pages were preserved through stories he shared orally with his great-nieces for a school project.
101. Among others, the families of Feldman, Aharonov, Futerfas, Kamenetsky, Laine, Rivkin, and Faitel's brother R' Yisroel Levin.
102. His son R' Faitel recalls hearing that Leibe's father was not present at the Bar Mitzvah; instead, his uncle R' Yisroel Nevler led the farbrengen. During the Bar Mitzvah, they could hear the Nazis raining down bombs from warplanes.
103. Many chassidim fled the battles and reached Uzbekistan, where the Rebbeim's shluchim had worked before the war. Most settled in Samarkand, while fewer went to Tashkent. Despite their efforts, the Bukharian community in Tashkent couldn't handle the refugee influx, particularly given the rampant hunger and disease, so many continued to Samarkand.

The Chabad refugees' situation was dire. Hundreds of thousands of refugees, Jews and non-Jews, arrived with nothing; no food, money, or possessions beyond what they carried. Many wandered the streets without knowing where they'd sleep.

Within the first months, two chassidic centers formed: the larger one in "Stari-Gord" (old Tashkent) and a second in "Karasu," a neighborhood at the city's edge. In following years, most chassidim from Karasu moved to Stari-Gord.

104. Similar to a kibbutz.

105. This detail is based on a handwritten cryptic comment of Sima. Reb Faitel Levin (son of R' Berel) seems to remember hearing from R' Zalman that R' Faitel, who was on the line with Sima, brought with him a kvort for negel vaser. R' Zalman took the kvort to use in the morning, showing them that he is one of them and can be trusted.

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