

GROWING UP AMONGST THE CHASSIDIM

THE MEMOIRS AND MESIRAS NEFESH OF REB CHAIM BER WILSCHANSKI

A MEMENTO FROM THE WEDDING OF SHOLOM AND ESTHER REICHER | 13 SIVAN 5784

GROWING UP AMONGST THE CHASSIDIM

THE MEMOIRS AND MESIRAS NEFESH OF
REB CHAIM BER WILSCHANSKI



A MEMENTO FROM THE WEDDING OF SHOLOM AND ESTHER REICHER

13 SIVAN 5784

Growing Up Amongst the Chassidim
The Memoirs and Mesiras Nefesh of Reb Chaim Ber Wilschanski

Copyright © 2024

Project Manager and Design: Yossi Reicher

Research and Compilation: Chezki Lever

Writing and Editing: Tzali Reicher

For any comments, corrections, or feedback
email **chamberbio@gmail.com**

Printed in the United States of America

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	1
Family	3
Rabbi Refoel and Raizel Wilschanski - (Paternal Grandparents)	3
Rabbi Schneur Zalman and Raizel Levin - (Maternal Grandparents)	4
Rabbi Betzalel and Chaya Wilschanski - (Parents)	6
Early Years	10
Dnepropetrovsk and Reb Levik	10
Rostov and Reb Itche Der Masmid	11
Voronezh, Anash, and the Bochurim	13
Arrests and Escapes	20
Kursk: Yeshiva and The Arrest	20
Kutaisi, Samarkand and Tashkent: Amongst the Chassidim	28
The Great Escape	32
Inside the Lubavitch Underground and the Escape from the Soviet Union	32
The Next Steps	41
In the DP Camps	41
Coming to Australia	45
The Rest of His Life	48
Appendix I: Bracha from Zeidy Wilschanski a”h	50

ב"ה

PREFACE

Reb Chaim Ber Wilschanski was an ordinary man, who did extraordinary things and spent time around extraordinary people.

The maternal great-uncle of the Chosson, Reb Chaim Ber passed away this year on 30 Tishrei - Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan, 5784.

He lived an incredible life, yet much of it was shrouded in relative anonymity and obscurity. Few are aware of how he helped save the lives of hundreds of chassidim, or of the remarkable *mesiras nefesh* he displayed during his childhood imprisonment and interrogations at the hands of the NKVD. After spending his early years behind the Iron Curtain, where Reb Chaim Ber faced immense danger and was constantly on the run from Communist authorities, he spent the majority of his life in a quiet suburb in Melbourne, Australia, far removed from the chaotic times that shaped him. Despite his close relationships with legendary Lubavitch figures such as Reb Levik, Reb Itche der Masmid, Reb Mendel Futerfas, and countless others, Reb Chaim Ber lived apart from the Chabad community for much of his last 50 years. He was deeply connected to the Friediker Rebbe—whom he only ever referred to as “the Rebbe” or “the Rebbe Rayatz”—but he could never bring himself to embrace the next stage of Chabad Chassidus: the generation of our Rebbe, *Dor HaShvi'i*.

He was a man of contradictions and complexities, bravery and *bitachon*. By sharing Reb Chaim Ber’s life, we are introduced to the Chosson’s family and their history, as well learning of the incredible *mesiras nefesh* everyday chassidim of yesteryear courageously displayed.



We are extremely indebted to **HaTomim Dovid Eli Edelman, HaTomim Chezki Lever, Rabbis Mendy Wilschanski, Aron Roth and Avrohom Moshe Hanouka**, who had the foresight to sit down with Reb Chaim Ber and interview him, leaving us with his priceless recorded testimony and insight into what Chabad Chassidus looked like during the dark days of the Soviet Union. We also must thank **Jewish Educational Media (JEM)** for sharing their complete interview with Reb Chaim Ber, which was crucial in helping understand his life and times. An interview Reb Chaim Ber's great-niece **Chaya Benchemon** recorded with **Rabbi Shmuel Gurewicz** about Reb Chaim Ber was also a helpful resource for this project. We'd also like to thank the other sources and family members that helped inform and develop this enormous undertaking, and got it to the finish line. This *teshura* is a faithful record of Reb Chaim Ber's experiences and stories as he told them, and we have done our best to ensure it is consistent across his multiple testimonies and corroborated by all available sources.

We dedicate this *teshura* to the memory of Reb Chaim Dovber ben Reb Betzalel a'h, and hope it brings *nachas* and comfort to his wife, daughters, and grandchildren.

With this being published in honor of Sholom and Esther Reicher's wedding, we wish them a *binyan adei ad* and many happy, healthy years together. They should build a beautiful family, having *chassidische nachas* themselves while being a source of *nachas* for all who know them, firmly grounded in the ways of Torah and Chassidus as illuminated and explained by our Rebbeim.

May it be His will that we are immediately reunited with all our family members that have passed on into the next World, and celebrate only simchos together as we march into the joyous days of Moshiach with the Rebbe leading the way.

The Editors

Yud Gimmel Sivan, 5784

FAMILY

Rabbi Refoel and Raizel Wilschanski - (Paternal Grandparents)

Rabbi Refoel Wilschanski, Reb Chaim Ber's paternal grandfather, was a Kopuster chossid, an offshoot of Chabad Chassidus that emerged after the Tzemach Tzedek passed away and had four *Rebbeim*.

Married to Raizel, like many other chassidish families, a number of their children unfortunately became caught up in the wave of the Communist revolution. One of his daughters was a censor for the Communist newspapers, and personally saw Joseph Stalin *ym"sh* ten times over the course of her career, while another son rose to a high position of the NKVD. A son-in-law purposefully antagonistic to his father-in-law's way of life, tearing up Reb Refoel's handwritten books of Chassidus and defiling them, but enough were left that Reb Refoel was able to bequeath over forty handwritten booklets of Chassidus to his son, Reb Betzalel Wilschanski.



Figure 1: Reb Refoel's family in Kherson. circa 1910



Rabbi Schneur Zalman and Raizel Levin - (Maternal Grandparents)

Rabbi Schneur Zalman Levin, Reb Chaim Ber's maternal grandfather, was a highly respected chossid in the town of Romanovka, near Kherson. Reb Chaim Ber spent his early years in his grandfather's presence, and remembered him as a serious man, an *oived*, and a devoted chossid.

Reb Schneur Zalman was a proud 18th generation descendant of Rabbi Moshe Cordevoro—the “Ramak”, the famous *mekubal* quoted in Tanya who was also a contemporary of the Arizal—and was born to a Lubavitch family in Kherson in around 5619, to very frum and pious parents¹.

One time, when the Tzemach Tzedek passed through their town, Reb Schneur Zalman's mother rushed up to his carriage and thrust her child forward, begging the Rebbe for a *bracha* for her young son. The Tzemach Tzedek blessed him, and Reb Schneur Zalman maintained a lifelong attachment to the Tzemach Tzedek and his Torah.

In those days, the main way that *maamorim* were disseminated and shared was through the handwritten transcripts. The bochorim used to give each other their handwritten transcripts as gifts and for *mishloach manos*, and Reb Schneur Zalman would participate in this practice.

Reb Chaim Ber spoke of how Reb Schneur Zalman didn't care for any music that wasn't a chassidishe *niggun*, and how he had special tunes that he would use when serving as *chazan* during the *Yomim Noroim*, that Reb Chaim Ber could still sing over decades on. A serious chossid and a *gehoibener yid*, he rarely allowed a picture of himself to be taken despite the repeated requests of his children, a practice that was emulated with limited success by his son-in-law, Rabbi Betzalel Wilschanski.

One day, while Reb Schneur Zalman was engrossed in a *sefer*, his son arranged for a photographer to stand outside the window². He then told his father to look up



Figure 2: Reb Schneur Zalman Levin, shochet of Romanovka

¹ His father's name was Shimon, and his mother's was Aidel.

² The son was a chazzan, and wanted a picture of his father to show people who asked who he was. When his son told him why he wanted the photo to be taken, Reb Schneur Zalman responded that if the son would become something of himself, he wouldn't need a photo of his father to carry around.

at the camera, which the unsuspecting Reb Schneur Zalman did, not knowing what a camera looked like. At that moment, one of the rare photos we have of Reb Schneur Zalman was snapped. On the bottom, his son wrote in Russian: “I am leaving this as a remembrance for my children and grandchildren”.

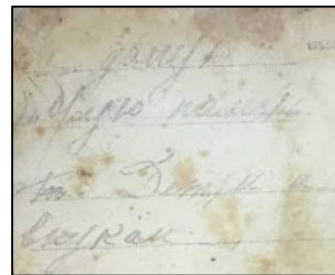


Figure 3: The inscription on the reverse of the portrait

Reb Schneur Zalman used to say – in Russian – “A word is not a bird. It does not fly away, it is here to stay”, and never hit his children, saying “*A patch fargeit, a vort bashteit*- A slap goes away, a lesson stays”.

Over the course of his life, despite his material success as a landowner as a result of the Mittlerer Rebbe’s deal with the Czar to buy the area of Romanovka in the Kherson region, for chassidim to settle decades prior³, Reb Schneur Zalman experienced much pain and heartbreak. During the Russian civil war that raged between 1917 and 1922, he lost five of his children in a single night when their town was attacked. Afterwards, Reb Schneur Zalman stood on the veranda and cried for hours, mournfully singing a *niggun* to himself⁴, with not a complaint crossing his lips. This is how he was *mekabel yissurim be’ahava*.



Figure 4: Raizel Levin

His wife, Raizel, was born to the Nodel family in Kherson. Together, they had many children, amongst them Chaya Wilschanski, wife of Reb Betzalel Wilschanski and mother of Reb Chaim Ber (and the Chosson’s grandfather, Reb Refoel Wilschanski). Reb Schneur Zalman passed away when young Chaim Ber was around four years old, while Raizel passed away several years later.



³ See *Igros Adham*”tz.

⁴ Reb Chaim Ber said the *niggun* was *Ashreinu*, *Niggun* #103 in *Sefer HaNiggunim*, which he sang slowly without the words.

Rabbi Betzalel and Chaya Wilschanski - (Parents)

Rabbi Betzalel Wilschanski was born in a small farming settlement of “Nahar Tov” in the Kherson area to Rabbi Refoel and Raizel Wilschanski on 21 Shevat, 5658.

Whilst Reb Refoel was a Chossid of the Kopust branch of Chassidus Chabad, Raizel came from a Lubavitch family, and so when their son Betzalel was just 13 years old, she loaded him onto a train and sent him to Lubavitch to learn in the Rebbe Rashab’s Tomchei Temimim yeshiva. When Reb Refoel came home and asked his son was and heard his wife had sent him to Lubavitch, he was initially upset, although he eventually came to terms with it.



Figure 5: Reb Betzalel and Chaya Wilschanski

While Reb Betzalel was growing up in Kherson, his future wife was living close by. Chaya, the daughter of Rabbi Schneur Zalman and Raizel Levin, was the most *chassidische* and *frumme* of her parents' many children.

Growing up in the Romanovka region, her home was a common stop-over for many prominent chassidim traveling through the area, and young Chaya was deeply impacted by the atmosphere she grew up in and by the chassidim to whom she served food and tea.

Chaya inherited her father’s beautiful voice, and one Friday she was staying by her older brother in Odessa, who took her to visit a musical professor in the city. Upon hearing the young girl sing, the expert exclaimed his astonishment and promised to make her famous. Reb Schneur Zalman discovered the meeting that

was underway without his knowledge and traveled from Kherson to Odessa, his ever present *tallis* and *tefillin* tucked under his arm. Chaya was shocked to see him there and walked out with him, and later that evening they spoke about the events of the day. Reb Schneur Zalman

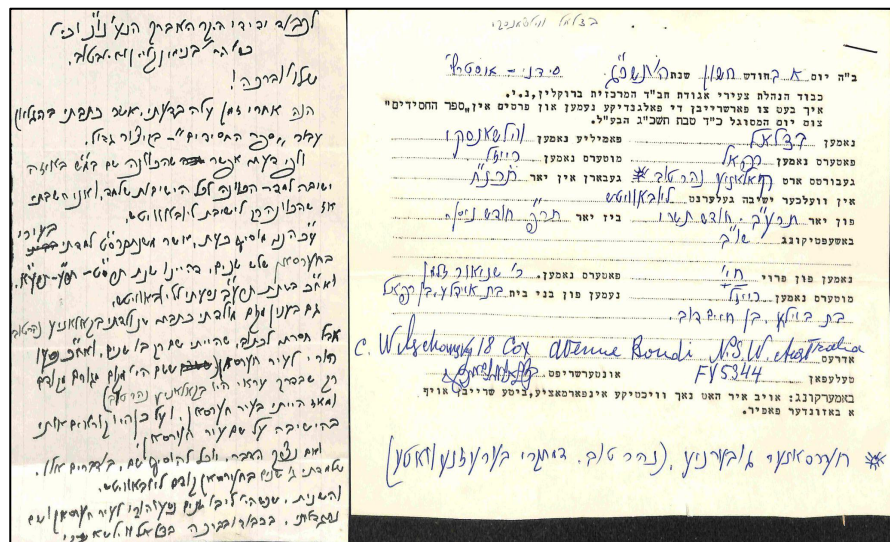


Figure 6: Reb Betzalel's submission to "Sefer HaChassidim". Sydney, 2 Cheshwan 5723

acknowledged her talent and ability, but reminded Chaya that it was all worthless if it was not in service of something holy. He encouraged her to proudly assume the role of a *chassidish* mother and woman. When she protested, he said: “I came to take my daughter home, if she doesn't come I'll take my *tallis* and *tefillin* and go back myself”. Chaya left with him, and never considered professional singing again. Later on, she taught *nusach* and various tunes to her *baal tefillah* husband Reb Betzalel.

Once he entered Lubavitch, it became Reb Betzalel's whole world. He was known as *Tzalkah Khersoner* during his time in yeshiva, and merited to develop a personal relationship with the Rebbe Rashab.

After he had reached the end of his yeshiva years and married Chaya, Reb Betzalel went into *yechidus* and told the Rebbe⁵ that he wanted to attend a special *kollel* for aspiring Rabbonim, with the ultimate goal of becoming a communal rov.

The Rebbe responded: “Why do you want to become a rov? I want to keep you as a shochet for a big city.” As it turned out, Reb Betzalel did eventually become a qualified rov years later, but never held a formal communal position⁶.

Reb Betzalel received a number of *horaos* from the Rebbe Rashab. Rabbi Yosef Goldberg⁷, who later became the legendary Rosh Yeshiva of the Lubavitch yeshiva in Brunoy, France, was known *Yoske Tiraspoler* for the town from which he came, and wrote that Reb Betzalel had been told by the Rebbe Rashab to accept upon himself a new *hiddur* every year. Consequently, this led to Reb Betzalel assuming many *hiddurim* over his lifetime, especially with regards to Pesach.

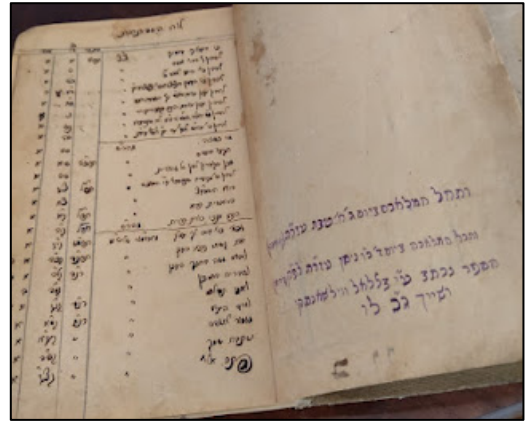


Figure 7: A "bichel" of Chassidus written by Reb Betzalel Wilschanski

⁵ From the recorded interviews, it is unclear if this happened with the Rebbe Rashab or the Rebbe Rayatz.

⁶ At this point of his recorded interviews, Reb Chaim Ber began discussing Rabbi Mordechai Perlow, Reb Betzalel's friend in yeshiva and future *mechutan* (Reb Betzalel's daughter married Reb Mordechai's son). Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Hakohen Perlow (Kherson, 5750 - Melbourne, 5738) learned in Lubavitch from 5664-5673, and became a rov in Berislav (near Kherson) in 5675. He was arrested in 5693 and sentenced to five years of harsh labor. He continued serving as rov in many *kehillos* worldwide until his passing on Yom Kippur 5738. Reb Chaim Ber spoke about Reb Mordechai's diligence, and how the non-Jewish janitor said Reb Mordechai must never need the washroom because he never stepped away from his learning. He also said the Rebbe Rashab repeatedly insisted Reb Mordechai get *smicha* and train to be a rov despite another *hanhala* member's objections, saying Reb Mordechai would become a community rov for 62 years, which he was. Reb Chaim Ber brought him up to contrast how the Rebbe Rashab encouraged Reb Mordechai to become a rov, but didn't encourage Reb Betzalel to do the same.

⁷ Rabbi Yosef Goldberg (Tiraspol 5674 - Paris 5745), learned in various branches of Tomchei Temimim from 5687-5696, and then served as a *maggid shiur* and *mashgiach* from 5707 in Brunoy.

Due to suffering from a hernia that wasn't dealt with for years behind the Iron Curtain⁸, Reb Betzalel was exempted from military service. Interestingly, for a mohel and a shochet Reb Betzalel couldn't stand the sight of blood, and Reb Chaim Ber remembered his mother always being the parent that took out splinters and cleaned up cuts and bruises.

With even more *Hashgacha Pratis*, despite being under constant surveillance and having his life routinely threatened, he was never arrested by the NKVD despite his incredible *mesiras nefesh* and blatantly illegal efforts to keep Yiddishkeit alive during a dark time for Russian Jewry. A famed mohel, people knew Reb Betzalel couldn't say no to ensuring every Jewish soul was welcomed into the *bris* between Hashem and the Jewish people, and would ask him to conduct underground *brissin*.

Once in a secret minyan, someone approached Reb Betzalel and asked him to immediately come to his house for a *bris*⁹. Despite the immense risk, Reb Betzalel went along, his dread growing when he saw two policemen loitering in the courtyard. Too late to walk away, he followed the Jew into the house where he thought an ambush had been laid, and his anxiety wasn't quelled when he saw a young Russian man in the doorway.

The Russian approached Reb Betzalel and told him: "I'm the father of the child. I already have one son who has a *bris*, and I want my second to have a *bris* now. I don't want one to be called a *yid* and the other called a *goy*. And besides, my father told me that if I don't give my son a *bris*, he won't speak to me and won't know me going forward."

Relieved, Reb Betzalel performed the *bris*. Afterwards, the man opened a can of sardines and offered some to the anxious mohel, saying, "This has *snapir vekaskeses*



Figure 8: Rabbi Chaim Mordechai HaKohen Perlow speaking at a Yud Tes Kislev farbrengen. Melbourne, 5720. (see footnote #6)

⁸ It was only treated once he arrived in France after World War II

⁹ Chassidic singer Avraham Fried immortalized a dramatic version of this story in his song "A Bris in Moscow", which appeared on the Yiddish Gems 2 album composed by Yom Tov Ehrlich. It could be referring to an entirely different episode Reb Betzalel experienced, but it is similar enough to this story Reb Chaim Ber told about his father. The way the song tells it, Reb Betzalel was snatched by soldiers in the middle of the night and brought to a secret location. There, the religious father of a Communist official begged forgiveness from Reb Betzalel and asked him to perform the *bris* of his new grandson, which Reb Betzalel happily did.

[Heb. for fins and scales); you're allowed to eat it." Hearing the familiar words made Reb Betzalel reexamine the father of child, and he suddenly saw a resemblance to a friend of his from Lubavitch.

"Are you related to so-and-so?" Reb Betzalel asked him. "Or perhaps are you his son?"

The man answered "*Fregt nit kein kashes, vet men aich nit darf'n zog'n kein lig'n*- Don't ask me any questions, and I won't have to tell you any lies", but afterwards he would supply Reb Betzalel with occasional information and various items to make his life easier.

Reb Betzalel and Chaya had four children: Aidel Perlow (passed in 5778, aged 95), Reb Refoel Wilschanski (grandfather of the Chosson, passed in 5776, aged 91), Baila Stillerman (passed in 5784 several months after Reb Chaim Ber, aged 97) and Reb Chaim Ber (passed in 5784, aged 95).



Figure 9: Reb Betzalel in 770 in his later years.



EARLY YEARS

Dnepropetrovsk and Reb Levik

Reb Chaim Ber was born on Gimmel Tammuz 5688¹⁰ in the city of Dnepropetrovsk, the youngest child of his parents.

Reb Betzalel was serving as the town shochet during the time our Rebbe's father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Schneerson¹¹, was the rov¹².

Reb Levik was present at Chaim Ber's *bris*, which was attended by his grandfather and other local chassidim. During his *bris*, there were fears that he had not survived because he was so passive throughout it so they put something something under his nose "to see if I was breathing, which I was – and I'm still around today!"¹³

The baby was named Dovber after a paternal ancestor, who bore the name of the Mezritcher Maggid. The name Chaim was added when he was still a baby because

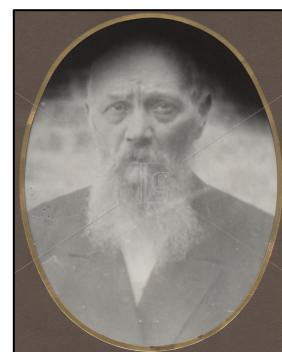


Figure 10: The Rebbe's copy of the picture of his father taken in prison, 5699.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Reb Chaim Ber was born on the first anniversary of the *Yom HaGeulah* of his Rebbe, the Rebbe Rayatz, who was spared from execution on Gimmel Tammuz, 5787.

¹¹ HoRav Levi Yitzchok Schneerson (Podabronka 5638 - Alma-Ata 5704) was a direct paternal descendant of the Tzemach Tzedek and son-in-law of the rov of Nikolayiv, Reb Meir Shlomo Yanovsky. In 5668, the Rebbe Rashab sent him to become the rov of Yekatarinoslav (later Dnepropetrovsk), where he served with tremendous *mesiras nefesh* in spite of the Communist regime. In 5699, Reb Levik was exiled to the remote province of Kzyl-orda in Kazakhstan for 5 years, before moving to Alma-Ata in 5704, where he succumbed to the tremendous burden the imprisonment had taken on him and passed away on Chof Av.

¹² Reb Chaim Ber related that Reb Betzalel remembered seeing our Rebbe as a young man during that time.

¹³ In 5783, when this interview was recorded.

he was very ill. Reb Chaim Ber would say the left side of his body belonged entirely to the Rebbe Rayatz after he was left paralyzed after contracting polio at the age of three years old. With no treatments available, all his parents could do was rub salt on his body to keep the blood circulating, and sent a telegram to the Rebbe Rayatz asking for a *bracha*. In the message they got back, the Rebbe said not to worry because the child would be healthy and the parents would derive much nachas from him. And so it was.



Rostov and Reb Itche Der Masmid

In around 5690, when Chaim Ber was two years old, the Wilschanski family relocated from Dnepropetrovsk to Rostov, where the Rebbe Rashab had moved following the German advancement a number of years earlier, because Reb Betzalel was being hounded by NKVD.

Serving as the local shochet and as an unofficial rov, Reb Betzalel was given an apartment in a local shul to house his young family. Reb Betzalel enjoyed taking his older children around Rostov and showing them the various sites where the Rebbe Rashab had lived, davened and *farbrenge*d.



Figure 11: The Wilschanski Family, L-R: Refoel, Chaya, Chaim Ber, Baila, Aidel, Raizel. Note Betzalel's absence.

Reb Itche der Masmid¹⁴ used to come to Rostov to be close to the Ohel of the Rebbe Rashab. During that time, Reb Betzalel was often on the run because he was known to the authorities as a rabbi and the local shochet, so the young Wilschanski children became close to the legendary chossid that spent a lot of time in the shul in which they had an apartment.

Reb Chaim Ber remembered Reb Itche sitting on the veranda of the shul learning and how he would fast all day, only eating a little bit of *kichel* at night.

Taking extreme care of what he ate and from where it came, Reb Itche only trusted one local lady's cooking, and every day he would buy three *kichelach* from her.

¹⁴ Reb Yitzchok HaLevi Hurwitz *hy'd* (5640 - Riga 5702) was a legendary chossid commonly known as *der masmid*. He served as a *shadar* of the Rebbe Rayatz for many years.

He would divide the first one into four pieces and give a piece to each Wilschanski child, the second he would divide in half and tell them to give it to their mother, and the last one is all he had to eat until the next day.

Reb Itche was well known for his holiness and piety, and Reb Chaim Ber said that when he lived in Riga they wanted to make him into a Rebbe but he categorically refused, saying “*Ich bin nisht kein Rebbe*”.

Reb Itche was once saying a *maamer* explaining the concept of “*Ki Yaakov Chevel Nachaloso*”. As seen in Chassidus¹⁵, a *neshamah* is like a rope made up of 613 strands connected Above, and every time one does an



Figure 12: Reb Itche Der Masmid

aveirah they are cutting a strand, until it is possible to sever the entire rope. There was a not particularly observant Jew amongst those gathered who understood enough Yiddish to understand what was being said, and immediately began loudly remonstrating and protesting. He screamed about how Reb Itche was saying he wasn't a Jew because he was a sinner, while the crowd had to hush and subdue him. While all this chaos went on around him, Reb Itche just sat there serenely and continued delivering the *mammer*, completely oblivious to the disturbance. After he was finished, some of the assembled asked Reb Betzalel to mention this indignant fellow's argument to Reb Itche, because they were very close friends. Reb Betzalel approached the venerable chossid and said “*Reb Itche, der Yid vil epes fregen*”. When told of how the Jew had protested when he thought he was being characterized as non-Jewish for sinning, Reb Itche replied, “*Es hot em ongerirt? Zeir gut!- It affected him? Very good!*”

He was a heavy smoker, and one time he sent Chaim Ber's brother Foleh (Reb Refoel Wilschanski) and sister Aidel (Perlow) to buy him cigarettes. When they returned, Reb Itche saw that Foleh's knee was bandaged up and asked what had happened. They told him Foleh had been hit by a vehicle on the road and his leg was injured. Reb Itche asked him to unwrap the bandage and show him the affected area, and when he saw the relatively serious wound, he simply told Foleh to wash it out with cold water. Of course, the leg healed completely and didn't even require stitches.

When Chaim Ber was three and fighting his polio illness, he managed to wander out into the courtyard where he fell and lay weakly on the ground, unable to get up. Reb Itche happened to be crossing the yard on his way to the *mikvah* when he saw the sick young boy. Reb Chaim Ber continues the story: “He picked me up and

¹⁵ See *Igeres HaTeshuvah Perek Hei* and *Likkutei Torah Parshas Nitzavim*.

started to say – rather shout – “*yevarechecha...*”. I had heard *Birkas Kohanim* in shul before but this was nothing like that. He was gazing at the Heavens and in his unique voice that we used to imitate, was shouting “*yevarechecha!*” When I got home and told my mother that “Zaidy Itche” had picked me up and gave me a *bracha*, she started to cry from emotion – it was a very touching moment.”

Reb Itche was murdered in Riga by the Nazis *yemach shemom* in 1941, after they locked him in a Shul and burnt it to the ground while he was *davening* on the 10th of Kislev 5702, may G-d avenge his blood¹⁶. The Rebbe Rayatz was deeply shocked and affected by his passing.

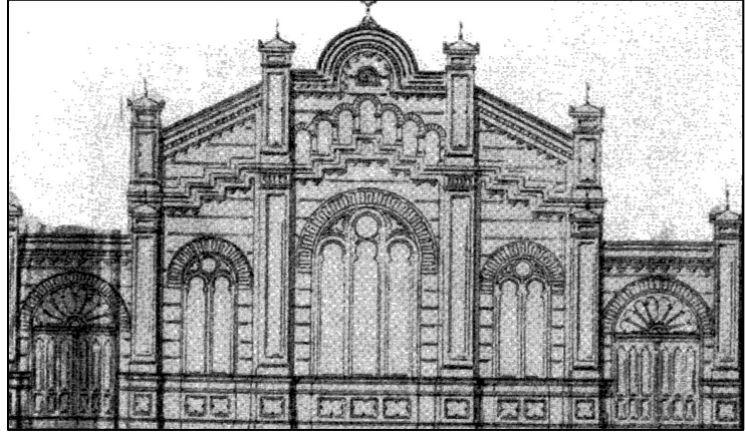


Figure 13: The Chabad shul in Riga in which Reb Itche and other chassidim were burned alive



Voronezh, Anash, and the Bochurim

The Wilschanski family relocated to the city of Voronezh in 5694, and times were tough for them. Reb Betzalel couldn't work because of the Soviet crackdown on all religious services, while the NKVD was still hot on his tail. He made a minimal amount from performing *brissin* and from his *safrus* and *shechitah* work, but it was Chaya that supported the family with her knitting and seamstress jobs.

With Foleh now aged 12 and away in the Zhitomir yeshiva while his sisters were busy all day waiting for hours in bread lines for a morsel of food, the other house jobs and market trips fell on Chaim Ber. Already displaying an ability to mingle in and demonstrating his extreme resourcefulness- defining skills that would later help him in later work in the Lubavitch underground- the young man developed a friendship with the local small-time gangsters that ran the town's operations. In exchange for doing small but daring favors for them, the crooks would help Chaim Ber skip lines and obtain food and other items that were extremely difficult to get hold of during that immensely challenging era. He would come home loaded up with treats such as sugar and kasha, while his sisters would often return empty handed, the shelves having been emptied long before their turn to be served.

¹⁶ Despite this being the story that is widely told of how Reb Itche passed away and how the Rebbe Rayatz heard the news, he was actually killed by the firing squad whilst wearing his *Talis* and *tefillin*.

Reb Nissan Nemanov¹⁷ and Reb Yeinah Poltaver¹⁸, the famed *mashpiim*, had decided that the older students of Tomchei Tmimim had to learn how a *Chassidish yungerman* should behave from living examples, and so they sent a number of bochurim to learn from Reb Betzalel and *farbreng* with him¹⁹. Amongst the students that came would later become renowned chassidim themselves. Reb Michael Teitelbaum²⁰, future founder of the Oholei Torah yeshiva, was one of them, along with the Reb Sholom Morozov²¹ and Reb Moshe Morozov²², brothers and sons of Rebbe Rayatz's legendary secretary Reb Chonye Morozov, who was killed *al kiddush Hashem*. Reb Chaim Ber remembered Reb Sholom's legendary memory and studiousness, and said that once he looked at something, he would never forget it.

Another bochur that spent time in Voronezh was Reb Sholom Vilenkin²³, the son of Reb Zalman Vilenkin- our Rebbe's *melamed*. Reb Sholom also taught the young Chaim Ber during this time, and Reb Chaim Ber enjoyed saying: "The Rebbe had the father, and I had the son."

Berel Dovid-Gorodoker's²⁴ was one of the bochurim that was sent to Voronezh. Humorously, he stuck out in Reb Chaim Ber's memory for being slightly gullible and easily



Figure 14: Reb Michael Teitelbaum as a young man



Figure 15: Reb Sholom Vilenkin in his later years

¹⁷ Reb Nissan Nemanov (Zlobin 5664 - Paris 5744). Learned in various branches of Tomchei Temimim from 5677 - 5688, and from then on taught Chassidus in Brunoy from 5708.

¹⁸ Reb Yonah HaKohen Kagan h'yd (Poltava 5658 - Leningrad 5709). Learned in Lubavitch and various other branches of Tomchei Temimim. In 5696, he was appointed head of the underground yeshiva network. In 5707, Reb Yeinah was highly instrumental in the escape from Russia, and tragically missed his spot on the last train because he was going around waking people up. Arrested in 5708, he languished in the cellars of the NKVD until he passed away whilst being imprisoned the next year. May G-d avenge his blood.

¹⁹ See Toldos Chabad BeRussia Hasovietis -Voronezh.

²⁰ Reb Michael Teitelbaum (Veliki-Luki 5672 - Crown Heights 5765). Learned in Tomchei Temimim from 5687 - 5699, and ran several of the branches from 5696. Founded the Oholei Torah school in Crown Heights in 5716.

²¹ Reb Sholom Morozov (Rostov 5683 - Crown Heights 5766). Learned in Tomchei Temimim from 5698 until 5715, and was a mashpia in 770 from 5715.

²² Reb Yosef Moshe Morozov (Yekaterinoslav 5680 - Crown Heights 5771). Learned in Tomchei Temimim from 5696 - 5709.

²³ Reb Sholom Eliyohu Vilenkin (Yekaterinoslav 5677 - Kiryas Malachi 5755) was first a student and then a mashpia in the underground branches of Tomchei Tmimim in Russia. In 5731 he left Russia and became a mashpia in Kiryas Malachi.

²⁴ Reb Sholom Dovber Kievman (Vietka 5680 - Kfar Chabad 5767) was the son of Reb Dovid Horodoker (whom the Rebbe Rayatz called "a Beinoni") and learned in Tomchei Temimim from 5695 - 5700.

persuadable, and his fellow students used to lightly tease him. One Friday he was walking in the street when he saw a light on in a basement. Berel innocently wandered in, and stumbled into two NKVD policemen. They arrested him and held him until Tuesday before they let him leave, and he fasted the last two days of his detention because he hadn't yet heard *Havdalah*. Berel also had an interesting way of preparing for davening, which Reb Nissan Nemanov discovered several years later when he went to the mikvah in the Poking DP camp and found Berel lying still under the water. It turns out Berel was meditating about the different names for Hashem, and had mastered the ability to stay underwater for long periods of time. Reb Nissan gave him a stern rebuke after that episode.

The bochurim learned in the Voronezh shul that had been built by the Cantonists. They had a specific knock that only they knew to let each other in, and when they heard a knock that they didn't recognize, they all scattered to different areas of the shul to hide from the policemen that occasionally passed by to make sure no undercover learning was happening there. Some hid in the *ezras nashim*, while others hid in the massive *aron kodesh* that was home to over 90 *Sifrei Torah* after the Cantonists asked for Torahs to be sent to them and donations poured in from across Russia.

They had to feed themselves, and lived on the most meager morsels. The bochurim ate whatever was the fastest and easiest to make, which usually left them with flavorless slop. They'd often take beans and boil it in water, and 'flavor' it with some salt, while other times they had onions, oil, herring and halva. Chaim Ber once showed them how his mother fried onions and cooked it with the beans, and introduced them to the world of proper food for the first time.

At one point during these years, Chaim Ber's mother Chaya became very ill and the doctors said she would not survive. She was distraught at the thought of leaving four orphans alone, and Reb Michoel Teitelbaum (then still a bochur and was close with the family) assured her that if she cooked for the bochurim of Tomchei Temimim, she would have *arichas yomim*. Chaya started cooking for them and survived her illness, and fed them the fanciest dishes that she could make in the circumstances. A favorite of theirs was her mustard and fish, and when Chaya had to go away for a short while after Foleh was arrested aged 12 in Berditchev, they

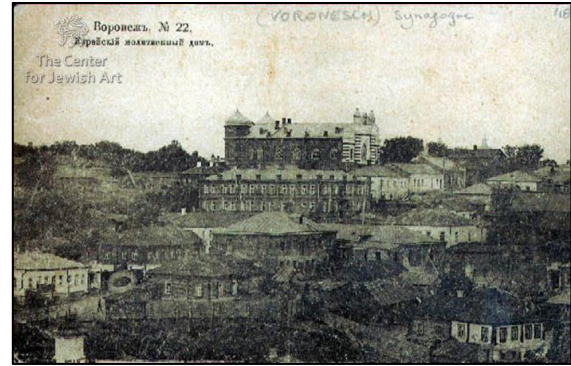


Figure 16: Shul in Voronezh, postcard from 1917

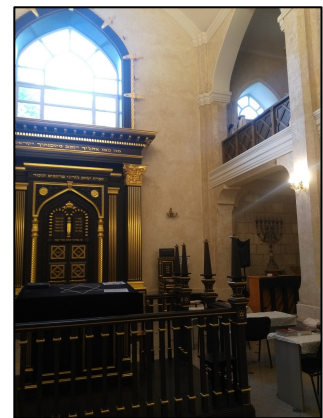


Figure 17: The massive aron kodesh

attempted to make it on their own. They bought mustard seeds and cooked them, then mixed it with water and salt and spread it happily on their bread, not knowing the actual recipe for making mustard. Suddenly they began coughing and choking their concoction up, and Reb Chaim Ber still chuckled at the hysterical scenes decades on.

Reb Michoel also played a pivotal role in helping the Wilschanskis during Foleh's arrest with his fellow students and subsequent imprisonment in a government orphanage. Reb Michoel helped the younger bochurim out and eventually lead their escape from the orphanage²⁵.



Figure 18: NKVD photo of the Berdichev yeshiva after their arrest. 24 Teves 5698. Foleh is second from the right in the lower row.

There were a total of four chassidim with their families in Voronezh: Reb Betzalel Wilschanski, Rabbi Binyomin Gorodetzky²⁶, Reb Efraim Fishel Demichovsky²⁷, and Reb Yosef Gorfinkel²⁸. These chassidim would often arrange to learn and *farbreng*, usually on Fridays, and had codes to know if one of them was knocking. To get into the Wilschanski's home, there was a metal ladder that rested against the wall and if they heard someone knocking on the ladder, they knew to open the door. At other houses, they would knock several times, pause, and knock again.

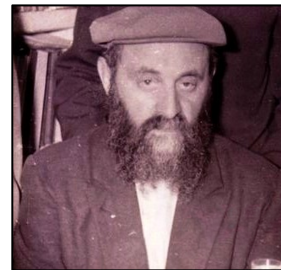


Figure 19: Reb Efraim Fishel Demichovsky

The Demichovsky's had a son named Leibel who was good friends with Chaim Ber. One Friday, while their fathers were learning in the Demichovsky's home, the boys were playing outside and throwing

²⁵ Also arrested with Reb Refoel Wilschanski was Reb Herschel Ceitlin, Reb Chatzkel Brod, Reb Velvel Averbach, Reb Rafael Brook, while Reb Moshe Rubinson (who Chaim Ber later helped escape from the Soviet Union) was their teacher and took much of the blame and punishment. Their entire story, along with how they smuggled *tefillin* in and eventually got out with the help of Reb Michoel Teitelbaum, is written in Brod's book *Chassidic Light in the Soviet Darkness*.

²⁶ Rabbi Binyomin Eliyohu Gorodetzky (Babroysk 5668 - 5755). Personal emissary of the Rebbe to Eretz Yisroel, Africa and Europe. Married the daughter of Reb Shmuel Levitin in 5686 and founded Tomchei Temimim in Kursk in 5691.

²⁷ Reb Efraim Fishel Demichovsky (Shtzedrin 5662 - Minsk 5725). When his mother passed away on the day of his Bris, he was adopted by her brother – the famed Rogatchover Gaon – who sent him to learn in Tomchei Temimim in Lubavitch. He served as the shochet in Minsk for many years.

²⁸ Reb Yosef Shmuel Gorfinkel (Pahar 5640's - 5703). Among the earliest students in Tomchei Temimim of Lubavitch, married in 5666 to the daughter of the famed chossid Reb Osher Nikolayever. He was eventually arrested by the NKVD and sent to exile where he perished. May G-d avenge his blood.

snowballs at strangers, before running away. Unfortunately, one of the couples they hit immediately called for the police, and in quick time the street was flooded with NKVD officers. Leibel couldn't afford to get caught because of all the adults illegally learning in his home, so Chaim Ber let himself get arrested and was dragged home by the police-appointed supervisor of their area. Arriving at the Wilschanski's house, where a frightened Chaya was relieved the police were only there because of her son's childish antics, she assured them he would be promptly beaten and disciplined. Chaim Ber developed a reputation for his stunts, and even the police would scold him in the streets saying "*Chaim Ber, Gei Lermen*" because everyone always heard his father saying that.

Reb Yosef Gorfinkel used to come to their house on Motzei Shabbos to hear Reb Betzalel- a renowned story teller- tell a story of the Baal Shem Tov. But before Reb Betzalel could begin, Reb Yosef would quickly say this story: One Motzei Shabbos the Baal Shem Tov once instructed his students to each give a *pyatik* to *tzedakah*. They were all still wearing their Shabbos clothes that they never kept money in, but when they put their hands in their pockets, lo and behold, they each pulled out a *pyatik* for *tzedakah*.

He concluded the story with "*hob a gutte voch*" and would make his way back home. Reb Yosef was old, starved and terribly sick, and Reb Chaim Ber remembered him having painful coughing fits that would last up to half an hour at a time. Despite all that, he had *mesiras nefesh* to be together with his fellow chassidim, and their *achdus*, friendship and *ahavas re'im* was beautiful to behold.

Rabbi Binyomin Gorodetzky was then serving as the rov in the nearby town of Kursk, long before he settled in France and established the "European and North African Bureau of Chabad-Lubavitch²⁹" at the request of the Rebbe Rayatz. In that capacity, he would employ Reb Chaim Ber's brother Reb Refoel for decades, but at this time Reb Binyomin was being investigated by the NKVD for his activities in Kursk and needed a place to lay low. He fled to Voronezh empty handed and was assisted by the Wilschanski family until he was able to move on.



Figure 20: Reb Binyomin Gorodetzky

Reb Binyomin had a three year old daughter, and Reb Chaim Ber recalled how when it was time to *daven*, Reb Binyomin would take a chair, turn it upside-down, and put her inside. When she would start crying he would pick her up tapping her on the back and sing to the tune of "*Nye Zhuritzi chloftzi*" in his broken Russian: "*Papa lyube denki, Mama lyube denki, Fraidl lyube denki, vse lyube denki*".

²⁹ Known in Hebrew as "The Lishka".

She would stop crying and he would transition the *niggun* back into where he was holding in *davening*. For a short while, he had nowhere to live and stayed with his family in the home of a non-Jewish gravedigger, and Reb Binyomin used to say by *farbrengans*: “Hashem already has somewhere for me to stay, I just need to find the key.”

Arriving late at Chaim Ber’s Bar Mitzvah, Reb Binyomin realized he had missed the Bar Mitzvah boy’s drasha, and asked him to repeat it. Chaim Ber had expounded on the possuk טוב ילד מסכן וחכם ממלך זקן וכסיל, and shared how the Rebbe Rashab taught that the *yetzer tov* only comes in at the Bar Mitzvah, which is why he’s called “yeled”, as opposed to the *yetzer harah*, which is present as soon as one is born and is thus called “zokein” (“*An alter ferd*”). Reb Binyomin listened intently- the *vort Chassidus* was the only part of the Bar Mitzvah celebrations he was interested in.

While Chaim Ber’s spiritual education was taken care of as a result of being surrounded by great examples, his legally mandated secular education was a major concern. The government had eyes and ears everywhere, and not sending your children to school was illegal.

Foleh got away with getting private lessons before he was sent to yeshiva in Zhitomir, Berdichev and other places, while Aidel was homeschooled and had to send in her work. The younger girl, Baila, was forced to go to school but Chaya bribed her teachers to let her skip on Shabbos and Yom Tov.

Reb Betzalel worked hard to protect his children from undue influences. In school and exposed to secular ideas, his daughters wanted to become more informed about what they were learning and asked their father’s permission to read non-Jewish books. After several sleepless nights contemplating how he should handle this request, Reb Betzalel reluctantly agreed with the condition that he could review and have a say in their reading choices.

Aidel and Baila would go to the library and return with a stack of books. Reb Betzalel would carefully peruse the titles, examine each book, and then divide them into two piles—a larger pile they could read and a smaller one they could not. Sometimes he would allow the top four books but not the last two; other times, he would say they could read all but the top and bottom ones. His children respected his decisions and refrained from reading the books he deemed inappropriate.

A fellow chossid asked Reb Betzalel how he became such an expert in literature, particularly in the works of Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky, to determine which books were suitable for his daughters. He admitted that he hadn’t read any of the books and wasn’t familiar with their content. When asked about his seemingly arbitrary selection process, Reb Betzalel explained that his main goal was to instill in his children the understanding that books need to be reviewed, that there is parental

and divine oversight, and that certain books and ideas should be avoided, especially in youth, to prevent negative influences on their hearts and minds.

A restless and energetic child, Chaim Ber was able to avoid going to school by getting himself thrown out on the first day. He threw his shoe out of the window he was seated next to, and when the outraged teacher told him to get it, he ‘forgot’ to come back. He skated by copying his sister’s schoolwork, and passed without having to sit in class. Additionally, Chaim Ber picked up the fiddle and developed his musical abilities. The government valued extracurricular cultural education as long as it was undertaken seriously, and so he practiced 6-7 hours every day. The musical education provided a good cover later on when Chaim Ber left town to attend yeshiva in Kursk at the age of nine, and the local education officials thought he was in the nearby musical academy working on his craft during that time. The Rebbe Rashab wanted bochurim to only learn Torah, and Chaim Ber was able to do that with help from Above. Despite his lack of formal schooling, Chaim Ber made it through life with his street smarts and determination, and even spoke seven languages.

When Chaim Ber approached his teenage years, it was time for him to go to yeshiva and he was sent to the branch of Tomchei Temimim in Kursk.



ARRESTS AND ESCAPES

Kursk: Yeshiva and The Arrest

The yeshiva for younger bochurim in Kursk was small. It was based in the house of a chossid named Reb Mendel Sheinman, who had become a *ba'al teshuvah* after being taken under the wing of Reb Chonye Morozov³⁰ and Reb Yankel Moskalik³¹ when they were together in a labor camp. Foleh was in the older group, while the entire student body of the younger yeshiva consisted of Chaim Ber, Mendel's son and a third child. Mendel would teach them, and his wife would cook. Once, already unimpressed, Chaim Ber saw how she tasted the soup and put the spoon back in the pot and decided he had seen enough. He convinced them to send him home, and was close to his parents until he was sent back to Kursk for the next school year in 5699.

³⁰ Reb Elchonon Dovber Morozov h'yd (Cherkas region 5637 - Leningrad 5698). Amongst the first students of Tomchei Temimim. *Chavrusa* of the Rebbe Rayatz, and later his personal secretary. Exiled in 5687, arrested again in 5698, and executed by firing squad. May G-d avenge his blood.

³¹ Reb Yaakov Zecharyah Moskalik h'yd. About him, the Rebbe Rayatz said, "If I had 10 Yankels I could conquer the entire Russia". Arrested and executed by the NKVD. may G-d avenge his blood.

By then, Chaim Ber was spending time with the slightly older students, amongst them Heishke Raskin³², Heshel Ceitlin³³ and Henoah Rappaport³⁴. One night, during the warmer months of 5700, there was a wedding that the other students participated in but Rapoport was the *memunah* and told Chaim Ber that he was young and needed to stay to sleep.

Chaim Ber was sleeping, alone in the house with one other student, when he felt a kick in the ribs. A tall Russian soldier loomed over him, and asked what his name was. Chaim Ber responded by identifying himself as Boris Wilschanski. The officials searched the house until 3:00 am, searching through every nick and cranny with police dogs, taking anything that piqued their interest. Returning from the wedding, the older students saw what was happening as they approached and quickly fled to a neighboring village, where they were soon caught and sent back to Kursk.

Chaim Ber was arrested with the one other bochur that had skipped the wedding and driven to the local prison of the NKVD. There were already some other arrested bochurim there, and they were all kept together in one room for three days with someone to listen in to all their conversations, in the hopes they would reveal some information as they spoke amongst themselves. Chaim Ber sang *niggunim* in his room, to keep all the bochurim's spirits up.

They called the assigned supervising agent *nasetke* (a mother hen who constantly sits on its eggs). He would engage in conversation with the bochurim and encourage them to talk, but Chaim Ber, the youngest person there, already knew better and vowed to not reveal anything to the NKVD.

He was called in for official interrogations, and faced three men sitting behind a desk. One would ask the questions while the other two would listen, occasionally chiming in with questions of their own.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m on a holiday,” came the simple denial.

“Who pays for you?”

“Nobody.”

“Idiot! Do you eat? Somebody has to pay for your food!”

The interrogators asked point blank if he knew Mendel, his host that was operating the local yeshiva. With a flash of inspiration, Chaim Ber told them Mendel was his uncle.

³² Reb Yehoshua Raskin-Katzenelenbogen (Gzhatsk 5683 - London 5780). Learned in Tomchei Temimim 5697 - 5709. His memoirs of this event can be found in *Toldos Chabad Berusia Hasovietis* p. 308ff.

³³ Reb Yehoshua Heschel Ceitlin (Homel 5682 - Montreal 5748). Learned in Tomchei Temimim from 5696 - 5708. Arrested while learning in Berditchev with Reb Refoel Wilschanski.

³⁴ This story can also be found in the memoirs of Henoah Rapoport, printed in “In the Shadow of the Kremlin”. Memoirs of Reb Yehoshua Raskin Printed in *Kfar Chabad* magazine issues 230-232.

Over the next four days, he was interrogated multiple times, usually in the wee hours of the night. They employed different psychological methods to trick him into breaking, but didn't beat Chaim Ber because he was so young. Throughout the entire time, he didn't give up any names and kept on maintaining Mendel was his uncle.

Eventually Chaim Ber and Mendel were seated together for an interrogation called "*otshnoya stavka*"- a face to face meeting where they would be asked to verify each other's claims. With two soldiers armed with rifles flanking each inmate, the interrogation commenced.

Mendel went first. They asked him "Do you know this child?" "Yes," he responded. "What's his name?" "Boris." "Is he related to you?" "No".

Then they turned to Chaim Ber. "Who is this man?" "My uncle," came the defiant reply. They asked Mendel again, "Is this your nephew?" He said no. They asked Chaim Ber, "Is this your uncle?" He repeated his claim that Mendel was.

When the NKVD frustratedly exclaimed that Mendel had denied any familial connection, Chaim Ber kept saying that they were related, refusing to yield or show any weakness. Mendel told Chaim Ber that he had already talked and admitted there was a yeshiva in his house, encouraging him to give interrogators the information they wanted to know because he had already accepted blame and Chaim Ber should spare himself further pain. Chaim Ber said he didn't know what Mendel was talking about, and Mendel didn't protest further.

A psychologist was called, and attempted to show Chaim Ber they knew he was lying about Mendel's relationship with him. When the old man asked Chaim Ber how he supposedly knew Mendel was his uncle, the inventive child spun a tale about how he was once on a holiday with his mother and was traveling by train. They had stopped at a certain station when a man came aboard and warmly greeted his mother. Chaim Ber told the interrogators that he had been told the man was his uncle, and that the man was Mendel. The interrogators threw a glance at each other, started laughing, and let him return to his cell. From then on, they stopped the regular interrogations.

Procedure dictated that prisoners had to sign the end of every paragraph of their transcribed interrogations to affirm its veracity, and one Shabbos they ordered Chaim Ber to sign his most recent documents. He refused and resisted, until they took his hand and forcibly signed the paper in all the necessary places.

Chaim Ber was held in prison for five weeks until the court case, and was kept alone in a disgusting single cell (called *odinokhes*) on the fifth floor. Each cell had a hard bed with a straw pillow, jug of water and a small bucket to use as a bathroom. On the wall was a long list of rules, and one of them that Reb Chaim Ber remembered was that during the day lying on the bed was forbidden; a prisoner

could only sit on it. Always outspoken, Chaim Ber challenged the guards on how they could hold a 10 year old who did nothing in prison, and told them to ask Stalin if they were allowed to hold a child in solitary confinement. The officials would smile at his bravado, and kept on doing their jobs.

He sat and did nothing all day, and whatever *davening* he knew by heart he said. Chaim Ber desperately wanted his *Siddur Tehillas Havayah*³⁵ that he had received from Reb Moshe Chaim Dubrawsky³⁶. They responded by giving him a Catholic bible and when Chaim Ber told him it was a different book for a different G-d, the warden responded “If there is a G-d, there is only one G-d!” Chaim Ber was proud he had gotten the Communist official to declare *achdus Hashem*, a minor victory considering he didn’t get the siddur back.

At his ‘trial’, Chaim Ber was sentenced to two and a half years of “re-education” in a special home for ‘delinquent’ children.

The facility was large, with separate buildings for the boys and the girls, and was surrounded with high fences topped with electrical and barbed wire to ensure that nobody would run away. He remembered there being about 60 boys and 60 girls at this re-education camp.

Upon arriving, officials confiscated Chaim Ber’s *yarmulke* and *tallis-koton*, and shaved his head. Mendel’s daughter was then a 19 year old medical student, and sent a note to the camp saying Chaim Ber was a frail child due to his childhood paralysis and polio, and asked them to give him an easier time wherever they could. A woman who spent time on the campus- Reb Chaim Ber didn’t know if she worked there or was the wife of a staff member- took a liking to him, and she looked out for him. She also used to give him treats when she could, including priceless treasures like chocolate.

There was nothing else for Chaim Ber to eat- he obviously wasn’t going to eat any *treif* food- so the resourceful young child marched into the kitchen and told them he knew how to cook. He was given the job of starting the fire to heat the two enormous pots to feed everyone, and had access to the kitchen to prepare food that he was able to eat. Chaim Ber was also careful to swap shifts a non-Jewish prisoner to avoid working on Shabbos.

With food taken care of, Chaim Ber wanted his *yarmulke* and *talis-koton*. When he was told no, Chaim Ber insisted on calling his NKVD interrogator, who he had somehow bonded with during his initial arrest and subsequent interrogations. The interrogator's name was Pietkovitch, and Chaim Ber complained to him that the

³⁵ The “Rostov Siddur” was printed in 5678 & 5686 in Leningrad, and is very different from our *Tehillas Hashem siddurim* of today.

³⁶ A chossid who appears frequently throughout Reb Chaim Ber’s early and teenage years.

wardens had taken his possessions. Having taken a liking to the feisty child, Pietkevitch reamed the warden out and insisted Chaim Ber's possessions be returned. He eventually got his belongings back, but now the warden had it out for Chaim Ber. It was time for him to escape.

Early one morning, he went as usual to the corner of the camp where the enormous supply of firewood for the year was stored, and collected a number of long logs. Chaim Ber dragged them to the electric fence, leaned the logs over it, and climbed up and over them into freedom.

Now that he had escaped, he hitched a ride 25 kilometers back into the city with traveling farmers, but Chaim Ber had nowhere to go. He had no resources, no money, and no options. Additionally, during wartime cities were effectively locked down, and all travel from to and from different areas was banned.

With no other choice, Chaim Ber called the only contact he had: Pietkovitch, the NKVD agent. He told the stunned Communist official that he had escaped, and needed permits to travel back to Kursk. Amazingly, Pietkovitch gave Chaim Ber two permits- for himself and Mendel's daughter- to return back to their homes.

It was a terrifying time for the chassidim of Kursk. Approximately 75 of them were arrested, and many couldn't stay at home³⁷. They were constantly on the run, staying in one place until the locals began to notice them, and they would be forced to flee quickly to their next haven. Another way chassidim and bochurim used to gather and hide was by staying in people's empty vacation homes, until someone would see them and they would run again.

Reb Betzalel Wilschanski was one of the chassidim who didn't spend much time with his family during these months, but when Chaim Ber returned home following his heroic time in prison, his father kissed him- the first kiss from his father that he could remember. Reb Betzalel had a particularly reserved way of showing his love, and told the story of how the Rebbe Rashab once wanted to give the Rebbe Rayatz a kiss when he was a child. Instead, he took the moment of love and channeled it into writing a *mammer* for him, saying "*Dos iz er chassidisher kush-* This is a chassidisher kiss". Reb Betzalel broke his longtime custom and kissed his son because he was so impressed with how Chaim Ber didn't break or give up the names of any chassidim despite the immense pressure and interrogations he had been subjected to, a challenge many people far older and wiser than him hadn't been able to endure.

Reb Chaim Ber was always proud that he had stayed strong during this time. At the time, the Rebbe Rayatz was already in the United States, and remarked³⁸ at a

³⁷ It was during this crackdown that Rabbi Binyomin Gorodetzky fled to Voronezh.

³⁸ See Sefer HaSichos 5701 p. 135.

farbrengen: “There are young children in Russia - just 10-12 years old, who are sitting in prison and being interrogated several times a night, and nevertheless they keep their mouths closed”. Chaim Ber would relate that the Rebbe Raytz was referring to him.

The things he witnessed during his time in captivity stayed with Reb Chaim Ber throughout his life. Another bochur that was arrested and kept with him was 17 years old, and given the full interrogation treatment. Instead of the patience they had for Chaim Ber due to his age, the interrogators subjected this young man to extreme torture and humiliation to break him. He was stripped to his underwear and kept in a pit of dangerously dirty water surrounded by moldy walls for a day or two. The exceptionally bacterial environment, along with the psychological torment, caused the bochur to literally lose his mind, and he was eventually released after being rendered mentally incapacitated. He spent the rest of his days crazily roaming around as the war raged on around him, until he was killed while wandering the streets during the Nazi bombings of the city.

While back in Voronezh, Chaim Ber joined a short government course on how to recognize German spies and picked up valuable spy and stealth skills that would help him get his father out of a number of scraps, and aid dozens of Chassidim immensely in the coming years.

Alma-Ata: Escape from Eastern Russia, and Reunited with Reb Levik

Chaim Ber and several members of his family escaped Eastern Russia on the last available train out of the region in around 5703, as the Nazis dramatically ramped up their bombing campaign.

The train was 90 carriages long and intended for transport government officials and files, but a number of Lubavitch families – Reb Chaim Ber remembered the Slavin and Schiff families being amongst them – were able to bribe their way on board. Each carriage was filled with 80 people, with only 20 at a time able to lie down on a flat shelf that ran along either side of the carriage.

The journey took 12 weeks, and took that long because of the constant German bombardment. Tracks that were hit had to be fixed, and the carriages that suffered damage were disconnected. The conductors would then connect the remainder and continue its risky escape. When people died along the way, they would simply throw the bodies off the train.

There was no water or warmth for Chaim Ber and his companions, and the bitter cold and frost came straight through the hole-filled walls of the carriage. Whenever the train would stop, he would jump off and steal water from the tanks on the farms that dotted the countryside, in order to have the minimal amount of water needed to stay alive. To warm up, they were occasionally able to get hot water from the

steam engine at the front of the train, and firewood from the train track to fuel the single iron oven in the center of each carriage.

The train finally came to its final stop in a tiny farming town just outside of Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan. The Wilschanskis were put up in an old barn, and lived in terrible conditions with a small fireplace that didn't do much to warm up their quarters. Reb Moshe Chaim Dubrawsky and Reb Hirschel Raskin were the only other chassidim there with them, and they *farbrenge*d together to keep up their spirits. On Yud Tes Kislev, they made sure to say L'chaim in honor of the special day, and said it on a ladleful of mashke because they didn't even have a cup to use. There was no wine with which to make kiddush, instead a Jewish girl who worked for a local pharmacist used to bring medical grade 96% alcohol for them to use.

After months of living like this, Pesach was fast approaching and they didn't know how they would find matzah for yom tov. Chaya, Chaim Ber's mother, had with her a package of silk that she had bought with her eldest daughter's dowry, and happily exchanged the valuable material for two kilograms of wheat. They crushed the wheat into flour with a hand-turned millstone, and constructed an oven suitable for baking matzah after Chaim Ber climbed the rooftops of local houses, 'borrowed' the shingles off a number of them, and constructed it together to create a clay oven that was able to reach the temperatures necessary to bake matzah. Due to his inventiveness, they were able to have matzah for Pesach, and used beetroot juice for the *Daled Kosos*.

Eventually the Wischanskis moved to Alma-Ata, 15 kilometers from where Reb Levik was living after Reb Hirshel Raskin helped him move from the tiny town he had been exiled to for five years. Because Reb Levik had no way of supporting himself after he was branded a counter revolutionary and many of rights were taken away, the main way Reb Levik and Rebbetzin Chana got by was on the small amount Reb Hirshel was able to collect from chassidim.

Friendly with the legendary rov and *mekubal* from their early years in Dnepetrovsk, the Wilschanski family decided to go to his house on Shabbos, when they knew Reb Levik would be *farbrenging*.

It was a long walk and the children were hungry, not eating much during those days due to the war raging around them. They passed fruit trees and fallen produce alongside the road, but Reb Betzalel didn't let them eat it, saying it is forbidden to

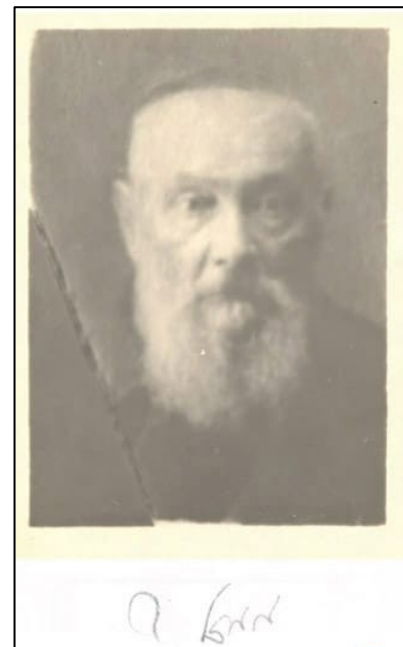


Figure 21: Reb Levik in exile. The Rebbe wrote on the back: אבא [My father, location unknown]

eat fruits that have fallen off a tree on Shabbos. By *Hashgacha Pratis*, a carriage loaded with preserved produce rumbled past them and some of its content fell out as it continued up the bumpy path, and the Wilschanskis happily stopped to make a *bracha* and eat before they recommenced their walk.

When they got to Reb Levik's house, he was deep in the middle of *farbrenging*. Someone gave Chaim Ber a cup of mashke and when Reb Levik finished speaking and began saying L'Chaim to the assembled, young Chaim Ber stood up and declared that they should all be quickly reunited with the Rebbe. Reb Levik asked who the child was and when they told him, he responded "Oh, *Tzalkeh's ah kind!*"

Reb Levik was looking after the two children of a relative that had been killed in the war and wanted Chaim Ber to befriend and be *mekarev* them, and so he paid unique attention to him. Reb Levik asked Chaim Ber if he thought about the *pirush hamilos* when he *davened*, to which Chaim Ber replied that he did at some parts, and didn't at others. Reb Levik responded by saying a *yid* needs to understand what he is saying when he davens.

Reb Chaim Ber couldn't remember any of Reb Levik's *Torahs*, because his style was too deep and Kabbalistic for the young man to comprehend, but Reb Chaim Ber did remember him as being an extremely calculated and measured person.

When Reb Levik asked Chaim Ber what he did one day, and the response was that he had spent hours in a bread line, Reb Levik said: "Yes, Hashem created the body that it needs to eat, but one needs to remember that the *neshama* also needs sustenance."

Another time, as they were walking together, Reb Levik asked Chaim Ber what he was learning. There was only one Gemara in Alma-Ata and it was a Baba Kamah owned by the Raskin family, and so Chaim Ber responded he was learning Baba Kamah.

Reb Levik, who liked to test Chaim Ber, didn't ask him any questions on the Gemara, instead asking him to explain the *Pousk* in *Az Yoshir* "אמר אויב ארדוף אשיג אחלק", which is seemingly out of order, because first one kills the enemy and only then divides the spoils. Chaim Ber didn't know where he had learnt this answer, but responded that Pharaoh was so sure that he would defeat the Jewish people that he said "אחלק שלל" before "תורישמו". Reb Chaim Ber remembered Reb Levik being satisfied with that explanation.

The Wilschanskis lived in the home of an old non-Jewish woman, who died after catching a cold. Reb Betzalel didn't want to stay in the same home as a dead non-Jewish woman, so the rest of the family moved to the next room while Chaim Ber stayed and slept there.



Kutaisi, Samarkand and Tashkent: Amongst the Chassidim

Always moving, the Wilschanski family now relocated to Kutaisi, Georgia, where Foleh already was, because they had no way of making money in Alma-Ata.

On the way, they traveled through Tashkent and Samarkand. They met Reb Nissan Nemanov, who made a living by knitting socks with Yosef Nemoytin. Reb Yeinah Poltver and Reb Avrohom Mayorer were also there; before most of the Chassidim had moved to the area.

Reb Yeinah asked Reb Betzalel, “Tzalkah, where are you going?” When he replied to Kutaisi, Reb Yeinah gave him a wad of cash—about 3,000 rubles—to bring to the yeshiva in Kutaisi, despite it being illegal to transport money in such a manner.

They continued their conversation, while Chaim Ber took a Tehillim, left the room, and began reciting it. He was saying the *Pasuk*, “וראה אם דרך עצב בי ונחני בדרך עולם,” when Reb Mendel Futerfas³⁹ walked by.

He asked Chaim Ber to explain the *Pasuk*. The simple translation is that Dovid Hamelech asks Hashem, “See if I am on a wrong path, and if so, guide me to the eternal way.” But Chaim Ber interpreted it to Reb Mendel differently. “See if I am on the wrong path, and if so, it’s better that I should go ‘B’derech Olam’—in the way of the world, implying that he should take my life.” Reb Mendel was surprised and asked why he translated it so darkly.

Chaim Ber explained that there is a story in the Midrash where Hashem asked the *malachim* what to do with a person who sins. They answered, “He should die.” But Hashem said, “No, he should do Teshuvah.” Chaim Ber told Reb Mendel he agreed with the opinion of the angels.

Reb Shmuel Notik⁴⁰ (also known as Reb Shmuel Krislaver) was also an *elter chossid* in Kutaisi at the time, and he was Chaim Ber’s *melamed*, mashpia, and beloved mentor. Chaim Ber grew greatly attached to him, and loved him dearly. He used to say: כולם קדושים, כולם גיבורים, כולם ברורים, כולם אהובים, כולם אהובים: *Darf men zich opshtelen un fregen; vu bin ich*”.

³⁹ Reb Menachem Mendel Futerfas (Pleshnitz 5668 - London 5755). Learned in Tomchei Temimim from 5685 - 5689, and ran many branches of the yeshiva from 5690. He was instrumental in the great escape of chassidim from Russia until his arrest in 5707. He was finally released from Russia in 5724, and was sent by the Rebbe to be the mashpia in Kfar Chabad in 5732.

⁴⁰ Reb Shmuel Notik (Kislava 5650 - Lvov 5709). A tremendous Lamdan. After learning in Tomchei Temimim in Lubavitch, he was sent by the Rebbe Rashab to become Rov in Kopust, where he fearlessly led his Kehilla in spite of the Communist oppression. Arrested and sent to a *gulag* for 5 years, he served as a mashpia and rosh yeshiva in various branches of Tomchei temimim after his return in 5700. In 5707, he was arrested again while trying to escape Russia (together with Reb Mendel Futerfas) and he and his wife were both sent to harsh labour camps where he perished on the 5th of Shevat, 5709. May G-d avenge his blood.

Another *vort* Reb Chaim Ber remembered Reb Shmuel Krislaver saying by a *Farbrenge*: אני אמרתי בשלוי בל אמוט לעולם. Dovid Hamelech said this when he was king (“*B’Shalvi*”), and he was *devening* that “*Bal emot le’olam - az ‘eilom’ zol em nisht opkeren fun der richtigen veg*”.

About 50-60 bochurim were then learning in Kutaisi. They learned in the lobby of an abandoned mikvah attached to the shul, and weren't afraid of being seen because they were the only ones who would use the broken-down mikvah. The conditions there were terrible, and often they only got something to eat at 3:00 pm.

There was a local rabbi named Tapchan; a very tall, handsome man with a big beard who the Russians had once considered making the chief rabbi. One day, Chaim Ber was learning Bava Kama with his chavrusa Azriel Chaikin, when Tapchan approached them and started testing them in their learning. Reb Moshe Morozov was supervising the bochurim, and called over another one named Sholom who was known for his smarts, who quickly dispatched all of Tapchan’s questions, which was intended to prove Lubavitch bochurim couldn’t learn. Tapchan was impressed and said this bochur would have been an *iluy* if he learnt in a different yeshiva, but Sholom replied, “Everything I know is from Tomchei Temimim.”

Noting the disturbance, Reb Shmuel Krislaver came to their table and began berating the rabbi for testing the bochurim on questions in Gemara instead of asking how they were doing physically or offering them food. “But if you’re asking them questions in Gemara, let **me** ask some questions,” Reb Shmuel said, and stumped Tapchan. Soon after, Reb Shmuel received a letter from the rabbi with pages and pages of pilpul trying to answer the question. It was addressed with all sorts of titles: “Harav Hagaon Hagadol, etc.” Reb Shmuel looked through it and dismissed his attempted answer, saying there was a much better explanation. Three weeks later, he got another letter. The bochurim overheard him say, “*Oh! Der Mamzer* got it!” Reb Shmuel told the bochurim later, “This was the classic question we used to ask the *misnagdim* whenever they started up with us.”

Reb Chaim Ber fondly recalled his time in Kutaisi, and the chassidim there with him.

“These were *yidden*; *Ovdim*. They poured their blood, sweat and tears into their *davenen*. Those were different times.”

But as good as Kutaisi was for them spiritually, they suffered physically. With no food available, they heard that Samarkand was a wonderful place that many chassidim had fled to and had plenty of food with a growing yeshiva. And so they moved again, this time to Samarkand.

When they got there, Reb Chaim Ber remembered walking with his father on the street when they saw a *yid* approaching them in ripped and tattered clothes. Reb Betzalel excitedly fell into the stranger’s embrace, recognizing him as a childhood

friend who had just been released after 15 years of languishing in Communist prisons. Reb Betzalel described him as “one of the *ovdim* of Lubavitch”, and despite it having been 40 years since they had seen each other, Reb Chaim Ber was deeply impacted by the love that was evident between the *temimim*⁴¹.

Life was much easier in Samarkand. They weren’t bothered as much by the NKVD and had some means of livelihood there. On an average weekday, one could walk into the shul and find 6-10 chassidim davening *b’arichus*. There was one elderly chossid—whose name Reb Chaim Ber couldn’t remember—who was old and sick. He had spent years in Soviet prisons and gulags and was wounded by shrapnel, requiring a knee operation. The medical care in Russia wasn’t great back then, so he constantly had pus oozing from the wound. He would stick a bandage inside and change it every four hours, yet despite this, he would stand and daven for hours, and his *tefilos* could break hearts.

Chaim Ber applied to join the burgeoning branch of Tomchei Temim there, but Reb Nissan Nemavov didn’t accept him despite Foleh getting in. He was deeply offended, and a number of the *eltore chassidim* tried comforting him. Reb Berkeh Chein encouraged him to go to the neighboring city of Tashkent, which had also drawn a number of chassidim, and off Chaim Ber went.

He had nowhere to stay, so Chaim Ber set himself up in the home of an old widow where chassidim would gather and learn. Reb Mendel Futerfas, Reb Mendel Morozov and Reb Yeinah Poltaver were some of the names he became close to, and Reb Chaim Ber remembered them repeatedly hushing each other to ensure he was able to sleep.

⁴¹ At this point of his recorded interviews, Reb Chaim Ber spoke about the impact of going to Tomchei Temimim: The Rebbe Rashab once said, “One who eats from the kasha of Tomchei Temimim will not die without doing teshuvah.”

He said Reb Betzalel was once at an airport when a Jewish man approached him and asked, “Are you a Lubavitcher?” When he replied that he was, the man began to say all sorts of terrible things about the Rebbe Rashab. Reb Betzalel asked him, “What do you have against the Rebbe?” The man replied, “I studied at Tomchei Temimim for only a brief time, but even then, the Rebbe managed to take away my enjoyment of Olam Hazeh (this world), and for that, I can’t forgive him!”

There’s a tale that Chassidim sometimes tell at farbrengens: Once, there was a peasant from a small farm town who had an old, sick mother. As he grew up, he left the small town to join the army, eventually rising in rank to become a famous general. One day, he decided to visit his old mother. When the news spread that the general was coming to visit, the whole town prepared themselves. He arrived and went with his entourage to visit his mother in her old, dilapidated shack. As he walked in, his mother asked, “Who are you?” He said, “I am your son Fidot.” She still didn’t recognize him, so he gave all sorts of proofs that it was him. Finally, she said, “Yes, yes, it’s Fidot, but not the same Fidot that I knew.”

Chaim Ber remained in Tashkent for about two years, and had regular meals at the homes of famous chassidim including Reb Yonah Poltaver, Reb Shlomo Chaim Kesselman, Reb Yisroel Neveler (Levin), Reb Bentzion Shemtov, Reb Avrohom Mayorer (Drizin), and others.

He once didn't have anywhere to sleep, and Reb Avrohom invited him to sleep over in his house. He had a large and boisterous family in a small home, and when Chaim Ber arrived at some point in the evening, one of the daughters told him they didn't go to sleep that early. Chaim Ber left and rode a tram around the city, returning a while later. The daughter informed him that now it was past their bedtime, but handed him a pillow and blanket to sleep with and told him to make himself comfortable on the tabletop.

Chaim Ber greatly enjoyed his time with the Drizins, although he hardly slept from all the noise the children generated. He would wake up early so the table would be available for the family to eat breakfast, and Reb Avrohom sat three of his children in front of Chaim Ber and instructed them to watch how he ate, saying: "Watch and see how a tzaddik eats". After that glowing praise, Chaim Ber was too embarrassed to eat. Reb Avrohom's wife used to prepare him lunch, give him 10 rubles for spending money, and insisted Chaim Ber bring her his dirty laundry so she could wash it. Chaim Ber was deeply grateful for her attention and care, and said a *Kapital Tehilim* for her on Shabbos for the rest of his life.

Reb Chaim Ber remembered Reb Yeinah Poltaver's *farbrengans* and how it was either about *avodoh* or *hiskashrus*. He described the scene: the chassidim would gather quietly together with the lights off, the space illuminated only by a small candle. They were constantly on the lookout and jumped at any sudden sound, afraid that *they* were at the door. Reb Chaim Ber vividly felt the fear from years before, and said it was a completely different and unrelatable world.



THE GREAT ESCAPE

Inside the Lubavitch Underground and the Escape from the Soviet Union

With World War II now over, in a pact between Joseph Stalin and the newly re-established Polish government, the authorities announced a repatriation program through which any Polish citizen that had fled into Russia during the war could return. All the refugees had to do was prove Polish citizenship.

For the chassidim that had been persecuted and hunted by the Soviet authorities for decades, this was their first and best opportunity to escape. Chabad families massed in Lvov (then Lemberg), the closest border town, and waited for an opportunity to cross the border into freedom. but when the idea first came up for the group of chassidim to escape Russia for good, there were a number of them in opposing camps.

Reb Nissan Nemanov was of the opinion that it was too risky because the NKVD were already monitoring their activities, while Reb Leibel Mochkin believed they should go for it. Reb Leibel was already making money smuggling people across the border, but several of the chassidim worried about Reb Leibel leading the operation due to his relatively young age.



Figure 22: Reb Nissan Nemanov

Eventually, everyone agreed to go, but during the time it had taken the community to reach a consensus, the repatriation program had ended and the border had hardened, and they needed an enormous amount of money to bribe officials on both sides to open it back up. The local *anash* convened a Beis Din of 23 *chassidische rabbonim*⁴², who *paskened* that everyone must give all their money to the group arranging the escape, allowing only one thousand rubles for each family to live on. Chaim Ber- who was trusted by the leaders and appreciated for his daring and resourcefulness- was given the job of going from house to house to collect the money, and later delivering communal funds to each needy family so they could have something to eat while the months ticked by before they were able to escape.

There was a wealthy Jew who was desperate to leave Russia and wanted to smuggle his vast fortune with him. One of the organizers approached him and guaranteed that if this gentleman funded the entire escape, the Rebbe Rayatz would pay him back in full once they arrived in the United States⁴³. Amazingly, the man agreed and the Chabad community prepared to escape.



Figure 23: Reb Leibke Mochkin

With the funds secured, all of the group's plans could begin being executed in earnest. The leaders of the Lubavitch group bought and collected Polish passports from Jewish and non-Jewish people who were killed in the war or in concentration camps, and forged them for the *Anash* members desperate to escape. With their freshly doctored documents and with the help of bribed officials, over 1,000 chassidim were able to cross the border into Poland, and from there into the liberated free world. The whole escape would end up costing over \$3 million.

Reb Leibel Mochkin was the ringleader of the operation, with the connections and the know-how. Reb Mendel Futerfas had the people skills and organized the travel groups and schedules, while Reb Mendel Garelik was in charge of forging the documents. A number of other chassidim, including Reb Nochum Zalman Gurewicz, who later joined the Wilschanski family in France and Australia, were also on the planning committee. The

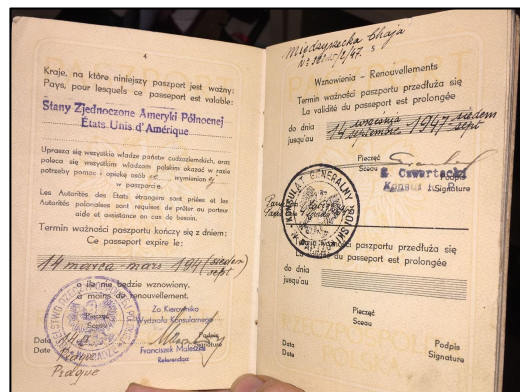


Figure 24: One of the many forged passports

⁴² Chaim Ber was the one who gathered them all in one place.

⁴³ Reb Chaim Ber didn't know what happened to this man or his money afterwards.

group had contacts with some of the heads of the local branch of the NKVD, who accepted heavy bribes to inform the group when a train was coming, who was being searched, and what to look out for.

Chaim Ber was their man on the ground, the only one who was able to move around freely due to the high profile the other leaders had. They were all constantly surveilled, and Reb Leibel never slept in the same house two nights in a row. Chaim Ber was sent on missions to pass along sensitive information and documents, and eventually caught the attention of the Communist officials after they began wondering who was running the network of chassidim when all communication was monitored and the leaders were being watched. Nevertheless, he continued his work for the underground movement, changing his clothes up to three times a day to avoid becoming familiar to the officials he passed frequently. Although he was permitted to, he never took any money for himself aside for cigarettes, vodka and the occasional new pair of socks⁴⁴.

Rabbi Shmuel Gurewicz, Reb Nochum Zalman's son who met Chaim Ber during this time and maintained a lifelong connection with him after both settled in Australia, remembered how "gutsy", courageous and resourceful Chaim Ber was as just a teenage boy during the tense months of the escape.

There was much risk and danger to the operation, the paranoia and fear all the chassidim lived with was unbearable.

The police would stop everyone on the streets, asking for their papers. It happened that Reb Bentche Shemtov was walking down the street together with another chossid, but only Reb Bentche had documents. They saw a few policemen some distance away, and the chossid without papers became very scared. "Don't worry," said Reb Bentche, "just keep walking normally." With that, he started running. The police gave chase until they finally caught up with him. "Show us your papers!" He took out his papers, and everything was in order. "Why were you running away from us then?" they

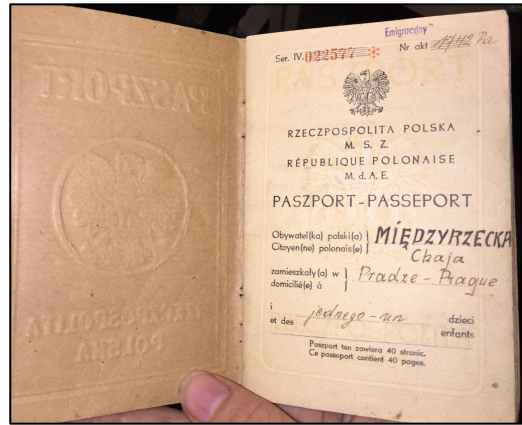


Figure 25: Another page of a forged passport



Figure 26: NKVD mugshot of Reb Nochum Zalman Gurewicz. Leningrad, 5689.

⁴⁴ At some point during his time in Lvov, Reb Chaim Ber shared the sad story of a Jewish girl who had a non-Jewish friend. Refusing his constant proposals to marry her, she eventually jumped out of a fifth story window to avoid being forced into it.

asked. “I needed the bathroom,” Reb Bentche replied. “But you saw us chasing you; why didn’t you stop?” “I thought you also needed the bathroom!”

Foleh was once in shul davening Mincha when a policeman came in, looking for someone. Foleh was in the middle of Shemoneh Esrei, and Chaim Ber screamed at him to run away. Foleh didn’t listen and finished Shemoneh Esrei, and by then the officer found him, arrested him, and started taking him to the NKVD. Foleh had 20 rubles in his pocket. He pulled it out and said, “This is all I have. Take it and let me go.” The officer took the money and set him free.

Tzipa Kozliner was Mendel Garelik’s sister, and as a woman was less conspicuous. She used to be sent from one location to another to transfer documents. She was once sent to get a load of 70 passports stamped by the paid off Russian officials⁴⁵, but when she got to their offices and said the prearranged code, he denied knowing what she was doing there and sent her away empty handed but knowing the deal was off.

Chaim Ber, who supervised the missions, was standing on a hill watching Tzipa from a distance, and noticed two men following her. He quickly intercepted her on a bridge and warned her she was being followed and not to return to their secret headquarters. Chaim Ber, employing the stealthy tactic of bending down to adjust his pant leg to look behind him naturally, then noticed one of the men had broken away to follow him, and ran into a nearby market to get away. When the entire marketplace began repeating the NKVD man’s urgent cries to grab him, Chaim Ber joined in the commotion and upturned carts to sow further chaos. He darted into a dark movie theater where he lost the agent and escaped through a narrow back alley.

When he returned to the offices and told the leaders what had happened, Reb Moshe Chaim Dubrawsky, who Chaim Ber knew well from their time together in Kutaisi, was very upset at him and angrily asked why he ran away instead of trying to help Tzipa. Hurt, Chaim Ber began berating the elderly chossid, exclaiming that he was the one that repeatedly risked his life on behalf of the group, while others just sat around and ate. All the while, Reb Leibel Mochkin patted Chaim Ber’s arm and tried to calm him down, saying Reb Moshe Chaim was *eltere yid*. Tzipa was eventually sentenced to 8 years of hard labor in the *Gulags* for her role in the escapes⁴⁶, and the NKVD now had the false



Figure 27: Reb Moshe Chaim Dubrawsky (right) in a Soviet Gulag.

⁴⁵ They paid the official about 300 ruble for each stamped passport.

⁴⁶ She was miraculously released after only one year, but remained stuck in Russia for many years.

passports of 70 people ready to escape. Chaim Ber had to go around warning them to hide until the coast was clear for them to be taken to the train.

Chaim Ber looked up to Reb Leibel, and extolled his *mesiras nefesh* and “amazing *ma’alos*, truly amazing *ma’alos*”. Reb Leibel tried convincing Chaim Ber to go along with the next group to escape when the police were closing in on him, but Chaim Ber said he wouldn’t go unless Reb Leibel went to. Reb Leibel had papers made for himself that he could use at any time but didn’t, so Chaim Ber said if he wasn’t going to use them, could Foleh have Reb Leibel’s papers. Without thinking twice, he put his hand in his pocket and handed the precious documents over in an amazing display of self-sacrifice.

Chaim Ber himself had many brushes with danger, and had a seemingly impossible-to-satiate appetite for risk.

He would hijack military and NKVD cars that belonged to top officials⁴⁷, because they had a government flag in the front and wouldn’t be stopped. He would wait for the official to go into a meeting for a few hours, approach the chauffeur, who often agreed to drive him around on a mission in exchange for a bottle of vodka. Other times, Chaim Ber would entice the driver by holding a packet of the expensive cigarettes and then walk over to ask for a light. When he ‘noticed’ the chauffeur eyeing the packet, he would offer one and start a conversation, and he would secure all sorts of cars and trucks for his operations.

He was never told no, and he said it was because there was a force higher than himself asking. Reb Chaim Ber always said that all his heroic and miraculous work wasn’t his own doing and never took credit for it. Rather, his body was just *keli* and he was just a conduit for all of the *Aibishter’s* miracles and the Rebbe Rayatz’s *brachos* to go through.



Figure 28: The Rebbe farbrenging in Paris, Lag B'omer 5707. Reb Refoel Wilschanski is directly behind the Rebbe, and Reb Nochum Zalman Gurewicz and his son Mulik, are fifth from the left.

⁴⁷ Reb Chaim Ber related that Reb Chaim Serebryanski tried hijacking a government car once. He went over to the car but forgot to wait for the passenger to get out. When he looked inside, he stared straight into the eyes of a surprised general of the NKVD, and Reb Chaim ran away as fast as he could.

In one daring story of Chaim Ber's exploits shared by Rabbi Shmuel Gurewicz⁴⁸, after a meeting of the leaders of the escape in the Gurewicz family home one Friday afternoon, his mother Basya noticed two suspicious men standing across the street and discreetly taking photos of their home. With her husband Reb Nochum Zalman forced to flee, Basya sent word to Chaim Ber of what she had seen. The next morning, which was a Shabbos, Chaim Ber pulled up in a car with a non-Jewish driver at 7:00 am and spirited the Gurewicz family out of their home before the NKVD could arrest them for hosting known dissidents. They drove to a different part of town, where Chaim Ber ordered the driver to let them go six blocks away from their destination to ensure he wouldn't know anything if he was arrested, and led the Gurewiczs to an apartment owned by a Jew across the street from the local offices of the NKVD. Chaim Ber set them up there because he was sure the government wouldn't look for wanted people right under their noses, and the Gurewicz family credited Chaim Ber for saving their lives that day. That night, their house was raided by the police.

Chaim Ber didn't break Shabbos just because he could, and tried to avoid it however much he could.

In the early days of the escape, still an idealistic young man fresh out of yeshiva, Reb Shmerel (Batumer) Sasonkin asked Chaim Ber to drive a car and run a car rescue transport on Shabbos. Reb Shmerel, who was the group's rov, said there was no *inyan* of Shabbos in cases of *pikuach nefesh*, and begged Chaim Ber to go. Chaim Ber refused, saying he didn't travel on Shabbos, and couldn't be convinced until Reb Mendel Futerfas said he would join him in the car. Happy to accept that Shabbos could be broken if a chossid like Reb Mendel said so, Chaim Ber accepted the mission. Ultimately, Reb Mendel didn't join him on that drive, but the pair grew very close.

Chaim Ber viewed Reb Mendel as a father figure, and had an unbelievable feeling of attachment towards him⁴⁹.

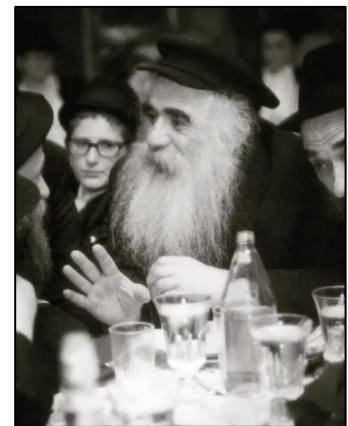


Figure 29: Reb Mendel Futerfas

⁴⁸ When Reb Chaim Ber told this story to the editors, he didn't mention it was Shabbos, and didn't say he left them in an apartment close to the NKVD office.

⁴⁹ When Reb Mendel visited Australia for the first time in Adar 5727, Reb Chaim Ber went along with several of Reb Mendel's family members to pick him up from the airport. Reb Mendel didn't recognize Reb Chaim Ber, who didn't have a beard then, until he said his name. Once he realized who it was, Reb Mendel pulled him in for a warm hug and said "*Chaim Ber, dir hob ich gevolt zehm andersh*" and didn't comment about it again, until his next trip. The next time, Reb Mendel said now that Reb Chaim Ber was self employed, he should keep his beard and asked him to promise he would do so. Reb Chaim Ber said he couldn't make that promise, but when Reb Mendel left he stopped shaving it, because Reb Mendel spoke with such truth and feeling one couldn't ignore his wishes.

Years later, when they parted ways after one of Reb Mendel's visits to Australia, Chaim Ber had a terrible premonition as they hugged farewell and cried bitterly. Reb Mendel tried to comfort him, but couldn't calm the younger man down. When Reb Mendel returned to London, his daughter was tragically killed in a car accident.

The chossid Reb Moshe (Karalevitzer) Rubinson had been Chaim Ber's melamed in Nigleh, and Reb Chaim Ber remembered him as a "very very *ibergegebn yungerman*" who dedicated his life to the bochurim in Tomchei Temimim⁵⁰. Reb Moshe was a deserter from the army after ignoring his conscription, and made his way to Lvov by train without tickets after bribing the conductor with a couple of rubles.

Before reaching Lvov, the train stopped at the top of a hill, with a flight of about 20 stairs leading to a barracks where soldiers would check everyone's papers to make sure they had the special permit required to live in the well guarded border town of Lvov.

Because Reb Moshe had no papers due to being a deserter, he would have been arrested there. Chaim Ber heard Reb Moshe was arriving and would be in danger when he got to the station. He quickly gathered a few random papers, and ran to the soldiers' office.

In Russia, the border officials had green passes, the railway had pink passes, and the NKVD had blue and red passes. Chaim Ber approached the guards—two soldiers with automatic rifles—and said, "I have important documents I need to give to the officials." They let him in, and he went over to Reb Moshe, telling him, "Come with me." Chaim Ber then told his wife, "When they ask for papers, tell them your husband has them all and that he went to find somewhere for you to stay and will be back momentarily. Closing time is at 5:00. Make a fuss, insist you can't leave with the small children in the snow, and they'll throw you out. The more you insist, the quicker they'll throw you out. I'll be waiting nearby to pick you up." And that's exactly what happened.

Later, Chaim Ber came back with Reb Moshe and told the officials, "This is the man you're looking for." They said, "We don't need him," and issued him a permit.

Reb Chaim Ber said these miracles happened tens of times.

Some chassidim found it quite hard to navigate the whole duplicitous business. The elderly Reb Yisroel Noach Blizinsky was totally removed from his surroundings, and when he got to the border he had forgotten the assumed identity that he had been assigned. They called his "name" multiple times but he didn't respond, and the border official started to get angry. The two policemen on either side of the officer

⁵⁰ A number of years earlier, Reb Moshe had been arrested with Chaim Ber's brother Reb Refoel Wilschanski in Berditchev.

were about to step forward to arrest him when one of the other chassidim said “This man is crazy, he has no idea what’s going on”, to which the officer nodded his head in understanding and miraculously waved him through.

Another time, Chaim Ber was driving a truck packed with over 40 chassidim to the train station, which was heavily guarded with unavoidable fences and soldiers.

Chaim Ber drove straight up to the gate and said, “I came to deliver furniture belonging to Polish citizens,” and pointed to an old bedraggled carpet hanging on the back of the truck. The guards, fed up with dealing with the Polish repatriation program, said, “Enough with the Polish! Just go through and don’t bother us anymore.” Chaim Ber even audaciously offered to show them papers, but they waved him away and opened the gates for him- and his precious cargo.

Many times, guards came close to the trucks with dogs to inspect it, but they never picked up the scent of anything suspicious. Reb Chaim Ber quoted Reb Yisroel Neveler, who said that just like when the *Yidden* left Egypt and the dogs didn’t bark but watched quietly, so too it was by the escape of the chassidim from the Soviet Union. Miraculously, the overwhelming majority quietly escaped, with tremendous *siyata dishmaya* ensuring the NKVD dogs didn’t blow the cover of the operation.

Whenever Chaim Ber brought a group of Chassidim to the station, he always cautioned them not to say a word. They were pretending to be Polish, and any Russian word spoken would have given them away. One time, as he pulled up and they started loading onto the train—which were cattle cars, so passengers had to walk up a board to get in—a woman turned around and announced in Russian, “*Dyeti! Za mnoy!*” (Children, follow me). Chaim Ber always carried a small gun (that he thankfully never had to use), and he shoved it into her ribs and threatened, “Do you want me to shoot you right here? You’re endangering the lives of the entire transport.” Everyone spoke to Chaim Ber fondly after they had all escaped; she was the only one who held a grudge⁵¹.

Even when Chaim Ber escaped with his brother Foleh and the rest of the family, the miracles kept on coming. Rabbi Shmuel Gurewicz remembers his papers assigning him to Reb Betzalel’s family with a sister, whose hair was cut to make her look like a boy⁵², and they looked at the Wilschanski siblings like their own brothers and sisters. They were put together in a packed carriage that was so full a Jewish baby passed away to the immense pushing and lack of space.

⁵¹ Reb Chaim told the interviewer about an engaged woman he dropped off at the train station. Later, at a farbrengen, her Chosson said, “I’m going to get married, have children, and they won’t even know what a *chassidische Yid* who davens *b’avodah* looks like.” Reb Chaim Ber said he turned out to be right. “As it says in the Gemara, *Nevuah* nowadays is given to *Naronim* (fools),” he said.

⁵² The rest of the Gurewicz family was on the train, but on a different carriage.

Foleh caused a minor stir when he said he wouldn't be traveling with them if Reb Mendel Futerfas wasn't going to join them (which he didn't), which led to his mother Chaya saying she wouldn't leave without him, and the rest of the women saying they wouldn't leave without her. Foleh finally agreed to board when he saw how worked up everyone was getting.

The train took them to Romania, and disguised in a winter hat that obscured most of his face, Chaim Ber joined a *farbrengen* led by Reb Yisroel Neveler. They didn't have tickets or money when they needed to change trains in Czechoslovakia on their way to Vienna, yet with a baseless confidence Chaim Ber marched up to the cashier and asked for three tickets, enough for those that needed. Inexplicably, the cashier handed them over, further proof that they were being watched and guided from Above the entire time⁵³.

Far away in the United States, the Rebbe Rayatz had been saying *Az Yoshir* over and over again as his chassidim made their escape, and said Boruch Hashem they had made it to a safer country when they had successfully crossed the border.



⁵³ When the train arrived in Vilna, they announced that anyone who helped clean the garbage would receive an extra package of food. Chaim Ber volunteered, but he never imagined how disgusting and dirty the task would be, and had to replace all his clothes. Afterward, all the children avoided him like the plague.

THE NEXT STEPS

In the DP Camps

A number of the chassidim who had escaped made their way to Poking, a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Germany, where war refugees waited for papers to relocate to a different part of the world.

Even then, the refugees couldn't tell anyone about how they had escaped: one girl told her Polish friend about the operation and he informed her to the authorities. She was deported back to Russia, and never heard from again.

While Chaim Ber was in Poking, Reb Yisroel Neveler educated the young bochurim and was the *maggid shiur* for *Gemarah*. Once in class, a bochur named Avremel Neimark was playing with a gold watch that he had received from his father, and it was causing a mini disturbance. From Reb Chaim Ber's recorded interviews, it is unclear why Reb Yisroel thought Chaim Ber was to blame, but he grabbed Chaim Ber from where he was sitting across from him and bit his arm. Blood poured from the wound, and Chaim Ber was deeply upset at the incident of which he thought he was an innocent victim. Soon afterward, Reb Yisroel became sick with



Figure 30: A group of chassidim shortly after escaping Russia. Betzalel is seated wearing a casket (second from the right) his son Foleh (with a beard) is standing behind him.

gangrene and passed away. Chaim Ber felt guilty for a long time, upset by the thought that he might have put an *ayin harah* on Reb Yisroel after he bit the body that had saved the lives of dozens of Yidden.

Reb Leibel Mochkin wrote a letter to the Rebbe's secretariat in New York, asking them to send Chaim Ber \$20,000 as payment for all his work during the escape⁵⁴, and to help him find a shidduch and set up his life. Reb Leibel couldn't have known that *Beis Rabbeinu* was in dire financial straits at the time, and he never got a response to his request for the enormous sum of money. When Reb Leibel asked Chaim Ber if he was upset that the Rebbe didn't answer him, Chaim Ber responded that he actually had received an answer: "If the Rebbe didn't answer - that means no. The Rebbe is saying that whatever I need, the *Aibershter* will supply me with"⁵⁵.

While in Poking, Chaim Ber began working on his *davening*, seeking to reach the spiritual heights of the chassidic giants he had always been surrounded by. One day, he felt someone watching him as he *davened*, and turned to see Reb Nissan Nemanov quietly standing in the corner. When Reb Nissan later asked him what he thought about while davening, Chaim Ber explained his process: By every *Pasuk*, he would translate it in his head, and if the *Pasuk* was explained in Chassidus, he would think about the *mammer* that discussed it. Then he would sing a *niggun*, and continue to the next line.

Reb Chaim Ber had three letters from the Rebbe Rayatz, the only correspondence between the Rebbe and



Figure 31: Chaim Ber with his nephew Zalman Perlow shortly after their escape from Russia



Figure 32: *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* printed in Germany and owned by "Yeshivas Tomchei Teminim Lubawitch - Poking" (see footnote #55)

⁵⁴ Interestingly, Reb Chaim Ber never wrote to the Rebbe Rayatz about his involvement in the escape operation, feeling that it was inappropriate to write about such matters to the Rebbe.

⁵⁵ A cute story from this time when Reb Chaim Ber was strapped for cash: While Reb Chaim Ber was in Germany, he borrowed \$1,000 to buy silver at a cheaper price in France and sell it back in Germany. At that time, Reb Michael Teitelbaum was printing the *Kitzur Shulchon Aruch*. Somehow, they found out that Reb Chaim Ber had some money, and they asked him to lend it to them. He agreed but wasn't paid back. Reb Michael assured him, "Don't worry, you'll get the money when you get to France. We've already started selling the *Kitzur Shulchon Aruch* there."

When Reb Chaim Ber arrived in France, he went to the office and said, "Reb Michael said that I will be paid back here." They responded, "Of course, we'll give you 500 *Shulchon Aruchs*." He replied, "I don't need *Shulchon Aruchs*, I need money!"

chossid who was *mekushar* to him *lev v'nefesh* that survives after a non-Jewish cleaner threw out the rest of his letters when he moved houses, along with those addressed to his father and other family members.

Reb Chaim Ber referred to the letters as his *yechidusin* with the Rebbe Rayatz, and could recite them verbatim.

The first letter was written when he was in Peking. Typically, when sending a letter to the Rebbe, a mashpia would review it first, and Reb Nissan insisted on going over Chaim Ber's. He initially resisted, which he could do because of his stature as leader in the escape, but eventually acquiesced. Reb Nissan pointed out a few mistakes and said Chaim Ber was writing too casually, as if to his grandmother instead of his Rebbe. He encouraged Chaim Ber to add a question Reb Nissan pulled from *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, and told Chaim Ber to ask the Rebbe for a *bracha*. Chaim Ber wrote 'שהשי"ת יעזורני שיהי' דעת ומבין בהוי' ית', which surprised Reb Nissan, but he let it through. The Rebbe Rayatz responded, and at the end of his response referenced Chaim Ber's childhood polio illness that wasn't mentioned in the initial letter, instructing Chaim Ber to watch his health.

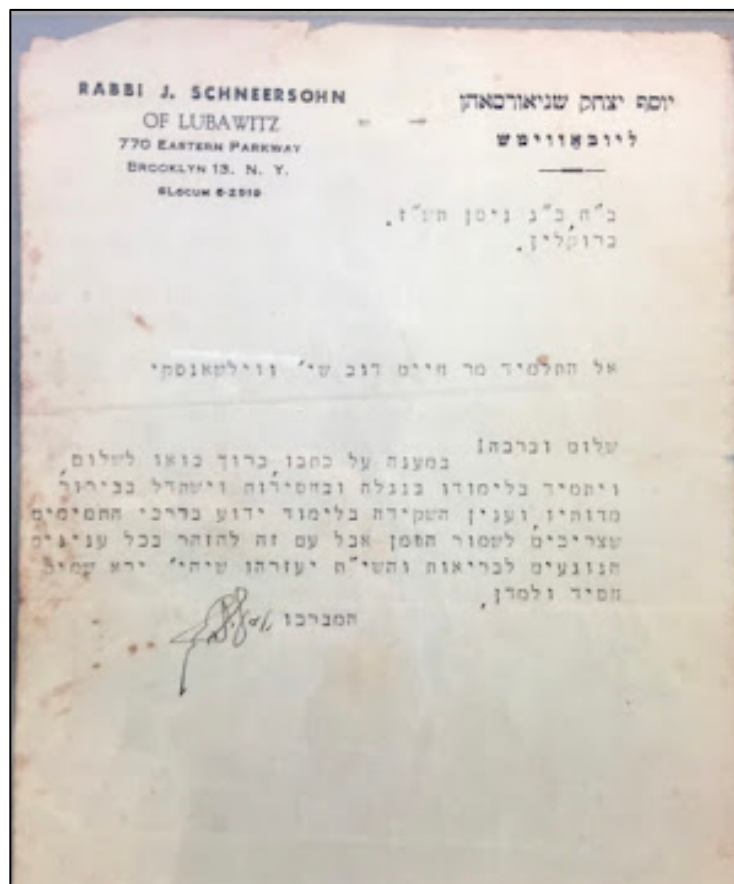


Figure 33: The first letter - 23 Nissan 5707



Figure 35: The second letter - 18 Sivan 5709

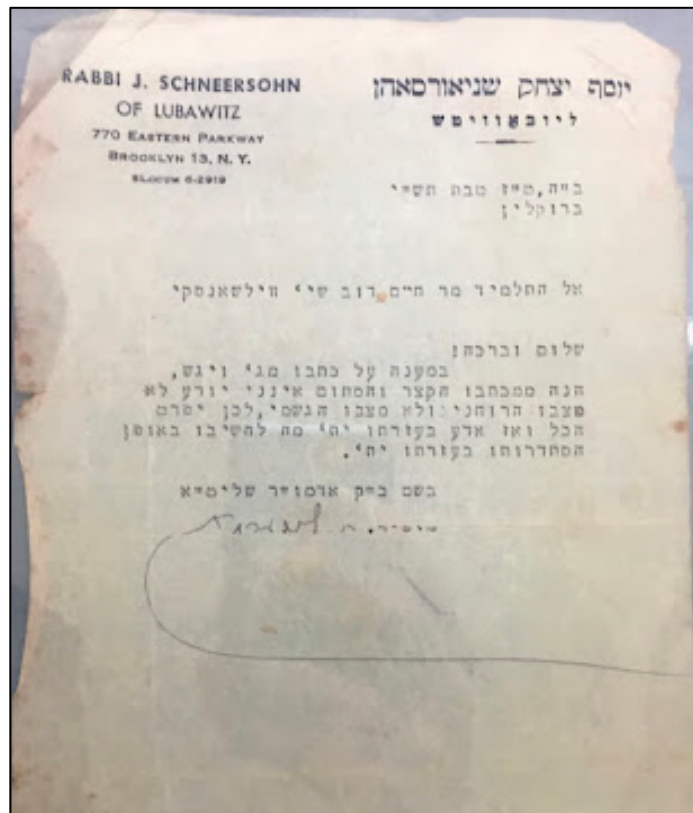


Figure 34: The third letter - 16 Teves 5710



Coming to Australia

In 5696, Reb Moshe Zalman Feiglin⁵⁶ needed to bring someone to Australia to be a rabbi and a *shochet*. After the first person that agreed pulled out after going insane following the news that his family had been killed in Poland during the Holocaust, a butcher in Australia named Meir Polonsky who knew Reb Betzalel Wilchanski from Cherson recommended him to Reb Moshe Zalman, saying: “Here you have someone who is a chazan, a Rabbi, a shochet, a ba’al korei, a sofer, a mohel—anything you want, he can do for you!”

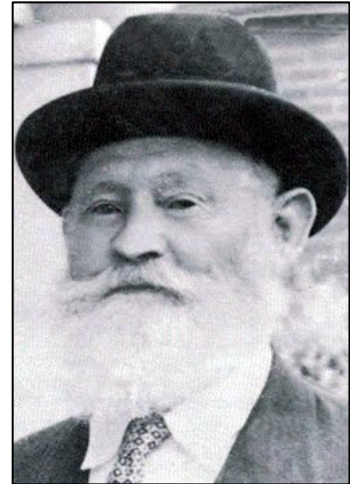


Figure 36: Reb Moshe Zalman Feiglin

Reb Moshe Zalman immediately invited Reb Betzalel to come, but Reb Betzalel waited until the Rebbe Rayatz had given his approval before he agreed⁵⁷.

It was very difficult to leave Russia at that time. The authorities wanted a guarantee that the Wilschanskis expenses would be covered for the first five years, so 230 pounds were sent to Russia- a fortune back then when the average wage was 5 shillings a week- and Reb Betzalel procured all the necessary documents at a significant cost.

When he went to get his documents, he waited in the office while everyone else was called in except him. He started to get scared, thinking maybe they were going to arrest him. Finally, he was called in. “Mr. Vilschansky,” said the man behind the desk after a prolonged silence, “I need to ask you a question, which I’m not allowed to ask. Do you work for the NKVD?” My father answered, “Me?! No way!” The man responded, “Thank G-d there are still such people around!”

The NKVD heard of his travel plans and summoned him for an interrogation, asking how he had secured exit documents. Reb Betzalel responded by saying he had found the complete set of documents in the street, and somehow they just happened to have all his information on it. The incredulous officers repeatedly poked holes in his ridiculous story, but eventually let him go after they were unable to build a case to prosecute him.

⁵⁶ Reb Moshe Zalman Feiglin (1875-1957) was a devoted Lubavitcher Chassid and a pioneering leader of Chabad Chassidus in Australia. He arrived in Australia in 1912 and played a crucial role in establishing many Jewish educational institutions and Chabad communities across the country. Known for his unwavering philanthropy and dedication, he earned the title “Avrohom Avinu of Australia” from the Rebbe. He built a large chassidic family and is the great-great-grandfather of the Chosson.

⁵⁷ By Hashgacha Pratis, decades later, Reb Moshe Zalman’s great-grandson would marry Reb Betzalel’s granddaughter, and they are our Chosson’s parents: Reb Chaim and Devorie Reicher.

Eventually, after spending time in France, the Wilschanski family moved- Chaim Ber⁵⁸ with them- after receiving the Rebbe Rayatz's *bracha*, while another six families joined them to found the now thriving community: the Kluwgants, the Althaus⁵⁹, the Serebryanskis, the Gurewicz and the Pliskins.

On the journey to Australia, they had to spend Shabbos on the ship. Reb Betzalel wrote a letter to the Rebbe Rayatz about this and their concerns about getting supplies for Pesach, and the Rebbe Rayatz instructed the Rebbe to send two containers of wine, each about 1½ liters, along with Shmurah Matzah. They received the provisions when they docked in Panama, where the group stayed for two weeks while the cargo ship unloaded and reloaded. Chaim Ber wanted to change plans and fly to New York to see the Rebbe Rayatz, so he called the secretariat in 770 who asked the Rebbe if Chaim Ber could come. However, the Rebbe Rayatz said he should go straight to Australia instead of visiting and Chaim Ber continued on with his family⁶⁰. Due to this directive, Reb Chaim Ber never left Australia for the rest of his life.

All the families all moved to Shepparton, a city close to Melbourne, Victoria, where Reb Moshe Zalman had established his thriving orchards and business empire. They lived on Reb Moshe Zalman's dime, and paid him back by planting the early seeds of what has grown to be an incredible Jewish community, to which all credit goes to him. Reb Moshe Zalman and Reb Betzalel had a regular *chavrusa*, and Reb Chaim Ber remembered Reb Moshe Zalman as a *chassidische yid* with many virtues. "He was truly a *Pnimitusdike yid*. *Pnimitus* is a totally different coin," Reb Chaim Ber said about Reb Moshe Zalman. "It's entirely in its own league."

In his early days in Australia, Chaim Ber stuck to the intense seder of Tomchei Tmimim: 8 hours of *Nigleh* every day, and 4 hours and 20 minutes of Chassidus. He kept it up for four months until he felt he couldn't maintain it, and wrote to the Rebbe Rayatz asking for advice on what to do. In the response, the second of the three letters Reb Chaim Ber had possession of till his final days, the Rebbe Rayatz

⁵⁸Reb Refoel Wilschanski stayed in France, where he got married and had three children. After remarrying following the passing of his first wife, he moved to Crown Heights where he and his wife Chava *shetichye* gave birth to their daughter Devorie Reicher *shetichye*, the Chosson's mother.

⁵⁹ As Reb Chaim Ber tells it, when the Rebbe Rayatz's letter advising Reb Betzalel to accept Reb Moshe Zalman's job offer arrived in France, Reb Shmuel Betzalel Althaus opened it and saw the Rebbe's instructions, and was eager to join. He quickly wrote to the Rebbe Rayatz expressing his desire to go as well. The Rebbe Rayatz responded that he should reach out to Reb Moshe Zalman and that his brother-in-law, Reb Isser Kluwgant, should stay with him.

⁶⁰ Rabbi Shmuel Gurewicz said that when he went to be *menachem ovel* Reb Chaim Ber in 5776 after the passing of Reb Refoel Wilschanski, they spoke about this journey. Crying, Reb Chaim Ber spoke of how this denial deeply bothered him. Note that Reb Chaim Ber never physically met the Rebbe Rayatz, despite their close connection.

told him to go to two chassidim for advice, and Chaim Ber asked Reb Moshe Zalman Feiglin and Rabbi Osher Abramson of Sydney what they thought he should do.

Reb Moshe Zalman told Chaim Ber he would give him a job in his orchards and help set him up for life and find him a shidduch. Rabbi Abramson advised Chaim Ber to move to Sydney to help him start a yeshiva, but Chaim Ber didn't find either option appealing and wrote to the Rebbe Rayatz once again.

The Rebbe Rayatz never answered the letter, but in the next answer Reb Betzalel received from New York, the Rebbe told him to make sure his son Chaim Ber would always find himself in good surroundings.

Chaim Ber chose to settle in Melbourne, well before most of the Chabad community moved there from Shepparton. He established a *chavrusa* with a fellow European emigre which they maintained until the fellow began delivering a shiur and they had to stop learning together. From time to time, Reb Betzalel would travel from Shepparton to Melbourne to check up on Chaim Ber, as the Rebbe Rayatz had instructed.

The last letter Chaim Ber received from the Rebbe Rayatz came in Shvat 5710, days before the Rebbe Rayatz's *Histalkus*. It came after he thought that if the Rebbe could respond to a 'letter' his mentor Reb Mendel Futerfas in his head and send an answer, the Rebbe could receive a message from him as well. When Chaim Ber wrote his letter, he thought over his main question over and over again without actually putting it in writing, however the Rebbe Rayatz instructed him to rewrite the letter with more detail. Reb Chaim commented that apparently a greater level of Hiskashrus was necessary to merit an answer in such a manner.



THE REST OF HIS LIFE

Reb Chaim Ber began building his family in Melbourne. He got married and had three daughters, and spent many years working in the Kosher food industry. Reb Chaim Ber had different stints as a *menaker*, a butcher and a restauranter, amongst several other business ventures. He often said that his only wish was that one person would be inspired to do *teshuva* as a result of eating kosher food in his restaurant.

His family lived close by: His parents Reb Betzalel and Chaya moved to Melbourne, followed by a period in Sydney, and finally settled in Melbourne for good. Reb Chaim Ber's sisters Aidel Perlow (married to Rabbi Dovid Perlow, son of Rabbi Mordechai Perlow) and Baila Stillerman (married to Reb Shimon Stillerman) lived near him, while his older brother Reb Refoel Wilschanski lived for two decades in France, before spending his last 40 years in the United States.

After the Rebbe Rayatz's passing, Reb Chaim Ber couldn't bring himself to replace him and accept another Rebbe upon himself.

To those who asked, he spoke of the extreme *hiskashrus* that he was taught by Reb Shmuel Krislaver, and explained: "Since I was a child, everything in our lives revolved around the Rebbe Rayatz. We would go to sleep looking at his picture, we would wake up looking at his picture, when we would walk past his picture we would say *Der Rebbe kuk'd oif dir.*"

Connecting to another Rebbe in place of the Rebbe to whom he had been so devoted was completely alien to Reb Chaim Ber, although he held a deep respect for our Rebbe. He donated *maamed* and occasionally wrote to the Rebbe. When he *farbrenge*d, Reb Chaim Ber would encourage attendees increase their *hiskashrus* to the

Rebbe, saying the only thing that mattered was that they be connected to their Rebbe.

While he navigated his feelings about the events of Yud Shvat 5710 and 5711, Reb Chaim Ber still *davened* in the local *Anash* minyan until his father's passing on 2 Sivan, 5741. Not long afterwards, he chose to begin attending a shul more aligned with the Mizrachi movement and moved out of the predominantly Lubavitch area to one half an hour away.



Figure 37: Reb Chaim Ber in his later years (photo courtesy of JEM)

Despite his personal relationship with the Lubavitch *mosdos* in Melbourne lessening over the years, Reb Chaim Ber remained a chossid and always maintained his chassidische sensitivities. He davened Nusach Ari, and spent hours every day *davening b'avodah*. Reb Chaim Ber celebrated *chassidische yomim tovim*, particularly those related to the Rebbe Rayatz such as Yud Beis and Yud Gimmel Tammuz, and occasionally accepted invitations to *farbreng* about his incredible youth and relationship with Rebbe Rayatz on those special days, which he did in front of captivated audiences.

Reb Chaim Ber fought a number of illnesses and health challenges during his later decades, and spent his last two years in and out of hospitals and aged care facilities.

On Simchas Torah 5784, Rabbi Yoseph Nerenberg was leading the celebrations for the elderly Jews at the Gary Smorgon House, and later he wrote, “We did *Seder Niggunim* with him in his room. Even though he was very weak and on oxygen, he sang with us and clutched one of our hands. He especially enjoyed singing a *niggun* from the Frierdiker Rebbe, whom he referred to as the Rebbe Rayatz. When we were done he kept asking us in Yiddish to bring him over to the front door, and when I asked him why, he said because he needs to go and greet Moshiach. Personally, it was one of the most inspiring and moving *Seder Niggunim* that I have ever been a part of”.

Reb Chaim Ber Wilschanski passed away a week later on Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan (30 Tishrei), 5784, at the age of 95.

After concluding an interview in 5783, Reb Chaim Ber said that at least one vort should stay with someone and affect a maaseh be'poel. Our hope is that by reading the story of Reb Chaim Ber, readers come to appreciate and be inspired by his unbelievable mesiras nefesh, and absorb the lessons he took from the leading chassidim of his day.

תהא נפשו צרורה בצרור החיים



APPENDIX I:

Bracha from Zeidy Wilschanski a”h

On the occasion of Sholom and Esther’s wedding, we are excited to share the brochos the Chosson’s grandfather, Reb Refoel Wilschanski a”h, sent to a newly married grandchild a number of years before he passed away:

בעזה"ת

בסימן טוב ומזל טוב ובשעה טובה ומוצלחת

לנכדינו היקרים הנאהבים והנעימים שיחיו.

ביום שמחתכם ומועד כלולתכם ברכת מזל טוב לבבית. בורא עולם בקנין ישלים זה הבנין ויאמר לדבק טוב להפיק רצון מהוי' הטוב שיעלה זיווגכם ליפה ויהי' קשר של קיימא ובנין עדי עד לאורך ימים ושנות חיים טובים ומאושרים ותזכו לבנות במרומי ההצלחה בית נאמן בישראל בנוי לתלפיות על יסודי התורה ועמודי המצוות בהידור, ולהעמיד דור ישרים יבורך לתפארת אבות והדר זקנים. ויהי ביתכם פתוח לרווחה לקבלת ברכות שמים מעל מטל השמים ומשמני הארץ ורוב נחת ועונג, מידו המלאה הקדושה והרחבה, שפע ברכה והצלחה בבני חיי ומזוני רויחי. ששון ושמחה ימצא בו תמיד תודה וקול זמרה על כל הטוב אשר יעשה הוי' בתוספתו המרובה בגשמיות וברוחניות גם יחד וברוכים ומאושרים תהיו כל ימי חייכם ככל משאלות לבבכם לטובה ולברכה עד בלי די בכל הפרטים דבני חיי ומזוני רויחי.

מזל טוב מזל טוב להורים, ולכל הקרובים. ישבעו ויתענגו מטוב ה' בכל מילי דמיטב בגשמיות וברוחניות בבריות גופא מעליא ורוב נחת ועונג מכל ילידיהם מתוך הרחבה ומנוחת הנפש והגוף ושובע שמחות תמיד. ואנחנו נברך על הטובה ונישא לבבינו אל כפיים אל ק-ל בשמים אשר הגדיל לעשות עמנו ויט עלינו חסד, ובטובו הגדול החיינו וקיימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה. ועתה השם אלקינו אשר עד הנה עזרנו רחמיך, עינינו לך תלויות ואת פניך הוי' נבקש: תבא לפניך תפלתנו והי' נא קרוב לשועתנו, חננו ועננו, אל תעזבנו ואל תטשנו ותאריך ימינו ושנותינו בטוב ובנעימים בבריות טובה במילואה, במנוחת הנפש והגוף ובשמחה וטוב לבב, ותזכנו לראות בשמחות כל יוצאי חלצינו דורי דורות זרע ברך השם, חסידים ואנשי מעשה יראי הוי' וחושבי שמו, עטרת תפארת שיבה.

וכולנו יחד נזכה לראות בבנין הבית הגדול והקדוש, הבית הנאמן לישראל, בנין אריאל, בית המקדש השלישי והנצחי בגאולתנו האמיתית והשלימה על ידי משיח צדקנו בעגלא דידן במהרה בימינו ממש נאו.

מאחלים מעומקא דליבא

זידי ובאבי רפאל וחווה ווילשאנסקי



לע"נ
הרה"ת הרה"ח ר' רפאל
בהרה"ח בצלאל ע"ה
ווילשאנסקי

נפטר ביום ג' שבט ה'תשע"ו
ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.



לע"נ
הרה"ח הרה"ג ר' משה צבי
בהרה"ח דוב ע"ה
רייכער

נפטר ביום ג' מר-חשון ה'תשע"ה
ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.



לע"נ
הרה"ת הרה"ח ר' שניאור זלמן
בהרה"ח רפאל ע"ה
ווילשאנסקי

נפטר ביום י"ז אדר ב' ה'תשפ"ד
ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

לזכות
החתן הרה"ת שלום דובער שי'
והכלה המהוללה מרת אסתר מלכה תחי'
רייכער

לרגל נישואיהם בשעה טובה ומוצלחת
י"ג סיון ה'תשפ"ד



שיזכו לבנות בית נאמן בישראל בנין עדי עד
על יסודי התורה והמצוה כפי שהם מוארים
במאור שבתורה זו היא תורת החסידות

