



PESACH FAMILY STORIES

In honor of Mendel's Bar Mitzvah



2 IYAR

APRIL 30, 2025



Zaidy Michel Vishedsky's Bar Mitzvah Story

When R'Michel was seven years old, he grew up in Chernovitz. Everyone had to go to the communist school. A week or two before September, the government officials visited the homes where children were turning 7, to make sure they were signed up.

In Gorky, his aunt Riva and uncle Sholem Ber Raskin and his grandmother Basya lived there. So when the officials arrived, Michel was sent to Gorky. So when the officials came to the house, they said he is visiting his grandmother. They figured 2 weeks later, he will return home.

During those 2 weeks, R'Moshe was arrested and his mother Bubby Chasha had twins. The aunt and uncle decided to keep him at their house and it will be easier for everyone back home.

Benzion the melamad, was 60 years old and he would come to Sholem Ber Raskin's home to learn with R'Michel and his cousins. He also had to go to the communist school.

His bar Mitzva was coming up. It fell out on a Monday, so his uncle wanted to take him to shul. It was dangerous to go to shul. There were no Shuls in the area, all shuls were closed by the government.

People daven in a basement at 12 pm. There were only 12-13 men were there. Everyone was over 70. There were also KGB spies there, so young people didn't attend.

Sholem Ber very much wanted him to have a bar mitzvah and have an Aliyah. That day, he was going to go to shul, they couldn't tell anyone that it was his bar mitzvah. He had to pretend that he didn't speak Yiddish or know how to read Hebrew.

At the shul, the gabbai was the biggest moser. So Sholem Ber asked him for an ayliah, to pretend that he needs an ayliah because he wasn't living with his parents. The gabbai said repeat after me, "Boruch." Then he stuttered "Boruch.." He had to repeat every word of the bracha verbatim preceding he never heard it before.

On Shabbos, by a kiddush in his house, Sholem Ber invited people and made a farbrengan. He said it was his birthday and everyone should wish him mazel tov. He couldn't say it was his bar mitzvah. He couldn't trust anyone. Tefillen, somehow Sholem Ber Raskin was able to get him a pair but he couldn't wear it in front of anyone.



Rabbi Berel Prus's Bar Mitzvah, Great Uncle

When Berel Prus turned 13, it was during WW 2 and he was in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. His father was in a Soviet Gulag and his mother passed away. He had no one to organize a bar mitzvah for him.

His father, R'Shmuel was in charge of the factory production at the camp. He was allowed to leave for short periods of time for business related matters only. Someone arranged on the day of the bar mitzvah to sneak him into R'Levenhartz's house for a few minutes so he could have a chance to celebrate with his son.

Rabbi Levinhartz made a small celebration with himself, his father and 2 friends his age. They brought him a special gift. It was a brand new pair of socks which was a luxury at that time. They couldn't get a new pair of tefillin. R'Levenhartz's father in-law just passed away, so they give him his pair.



Rabbi Zaidy Chaim Prus's Bar Mitzvah

When the Prus family was in Tashkent, the KGB was chasing them again. This was after R'Shmuel served 7 years in the Soviet Gulag. While R'Shmuel was in the meeting with a Russian executive about profit margins on clothing merchandise, his son Berel came to the door and motioned to him to leave the meeting. The KGB arrived at the factory on a different street to arrest him. R'Shmuel quickly disappeared from the meeting and started running for his life.

His friends quickly took R'Shmuel and dressed him up as a woman. They put him on a train to the other side of Russia, to Riga which is now Latvia. His friend, Yoske Motchkin accompanied him. When the police inspected each car, and came to their seats, Yoske told him that he is taking his crazy mother to a psychologist in Riga. The police accepted the story.

When R'Shmuel arrived in Riga, his original passports were damaged. He had to pay for new ones. In Russian a P was similar to a G. After giving a significant bribe, it was changed from Prus to Grus. This way, at least for the beginning, he was able to live in Riga under a false name in peace.

In Riga, R'Shmuel couldn't go to shul and had to keep a low profile. The shul was full of KGB agents and they would question a young person if he attended.

On his father's yartzheit, he had to go to shul for an ayiah. He couldn't bring anything with him. He needed to rely on the shul for a tallis and tefillin.

When he arrived at shul he told the shamesh that he doesn't normally pray but it's his father's yartzheit. The shamesh showed him where the tallisim and tefillin were stored.

He found kosher tefillin right away but every tallis he examined the strings wasn't kosher. When the shamesh saw him casting aside the possul tallisim, he quietly pulled out a new kosher tallis. Then he slipped under the Tallis, a new sidder. It was a תהלה ה.

It was a real treasure and a novelty. It was probably placed by someone sent by the Rebbe. It was too dangerous for an American to talk directly to the Russian Chassidim of Riga. The Shilach wouldn't know where to find the local real Lubavitchers because they were all hiding. He probably hoped that by leaving a real siddur with the shamesh, eventually it will end up with the right people.

This siddur was one of the first ones printed and none of Lubavitchers in Riga ever saw anything like it. When R'Shmuel finished davening, he returned the tallis and decided to take home the siddur.

When the shamesh saw the siddur wasn't returned, he began to protest. R'Shmuel quietly slipped 100 rubles to him. When he brought the siddur home, it was a big excitement. The entire Lubavitcher community examined it. It was decided that Rabbi Prus would use that sidder to learn aleph beis. In that sidder they wrote everyone's birthdays.

When they left Russia, they left this siddur with his married brother Berel. He didn't get permission to leave with them. It was hard to stay behind in difficult circumstances. Berel begged to keep this precious siddur with him. (When he left five years later, he left the siddur with another member of anash to keep and daven from until he would leave the iron curtain.)

Rabbi Prus celebrated his bar mitzvah on ג' אדר in Kfar Chabad. Rabbi Abba Levin taught him the מאמר, האמנם מכ"ק הרשב. They didn't know at that time that everyone says the same מאמר at a bar mitzvah.

At Rabbi Prus's bar mitzvah, members of the Shin Bet and Misrad Hachutz came to celebrate with them. R'Shmuel was working closely with them to get more of anash out of Russia. (Through these channels, they also helped the Vishedsky family escape.)

Rabbi Prus received one pair of תפילין. At that time, people would ask the Rebbe when to put on Rabbenu Tam and would begin at 18. At one point, the Rebbe said to stop asking him and to put it on when one turns 13.

After the bar mitzvah, they wrote a letter to his married brother Berel about the bar mitzvah and described everything he missed. They were surprised when they received his responding letter that they celebrated the wrong date. Berel checked the תהלת ה siddur and it was כג אדר. They remembered ג but forgot that it was really כג.





Mesiras Nefesh for Tefillin in a Soviet Gulag

R'Muleh Prus was in a Soviet labor camp. 18 kilometers from Tashkent. There were 3,000 prisoners and every day, 60 people would pass away from harsh conditions.

Every prisoner received 800 grams a day of bread. It was more of a clay consistency. It wasn't enough to feel full, just enough to survive. If someone didn't finish their work quota, the ration would drop to 400 grams of bread. There was no way to live on such a meager sum, the person ended up dying.

There was no way to escape the camp. They had soft ground surrounding the camp and one could see a footprint on it as soon as one stepped there. After that, there was an electric fence, with guards in the watchtowers and security dogs that were very unpleasant.

His son Zusha, would bring him food, oil and sugar to survive. R'Zalman Sudakevitch was also imprisoned in the camp. He managed to bribe the head of the camp to bring R'Shmuel his tephillin and a shofar. At that point, R'Shmuel

slept with all the prisoners and had to wake up very early to put on tefillin and daven.

It was hard to keep the tefillin. They had to stay hidden. Once in 2-3 months, the head of all the camps would do an inspection. The prisoners had to take all their belongings outside with them. They would inspect the barracks for weapons or forbidden items. When they did this, I would hide the tefillin under my clothes.

One time they decided to check each prisoner thoroughly before they went back inside. They checked every item and every article of clothing. He knew at this point they may find the tefillin. As they inspected his shirt, the tefillin were found.

“What’s this?” They asked.

“I am Jewish and I pray with this.” He responded.

The soldier took the tefillin. R’Shmuel was unable to use them and began to fast. He refused to eat until he got his tefillin back. Every time he received his food, he gave it to another Jewish prisoner.

On the fourth day of the hunger strike, the head of the prison camp came to speak to him. It was a miracle that he even came because they didn’t care about the prisoners and usually wouldn’t help them if they would die.

He returned his tefillin thanks to a bribe from Zalman Sudakevitch.



Mesiras Nefesh for Tefillin in a Soviet Hospital

In Russia, there was a mandatory draft at 18. So three years earlier, Bubby Chasha took them to psychologist. They went to appointments every few months and his mother said they talk to themselves, they act strange and need medication. The hope was, that with a three year history they wouldn't be drafted. They had to act crazy at every appointment.

The government was still suspicious. They had R'Michel come for an evaluation with 6 doctors. They tried to ask questions. He didn't answer some of the questions. He talked to himself.

They showed him a picture of 2 men cutting a large tree.

They asked, "What is this?"

"It's 2 men putting up a tree." He answered.

"Why do they have a saw?" They asked.

“To make the tree straight.” He replied.

They didn’t believe he was completely crazy so they hospitalized him. He was there for a week. There was no kosher food or tefillin.

Bubby Chasha explained that part of his mental issue is that he can’t eat unless he is alone with his mother in a locked room. She would walk miles to the hospital with tefillin and food.

Every time, she would come, she would close the door and hold it down. Michel would quickly put on tefillin and say Shema Yisrael by heart. People would try to come to the room to get him for “tests”. She would slam the door and say that he is eating now. Don’t disturb him. If he doesn’t eat he can die. Every so often people would come in and she would say no, you are not allowed to come in. He needs to eat.

On Shabbos, he turned to the wall to daven. The nurses wanted to give him a bath. He didn’t want to do that on Shabbos.

They said, “Hey, Misha.”

“Sh!” He answered.

“Hey, looks like you are talking to yourself.” They laughed.

He nodded and continued davening.

They said to each other, “Let’s come back later.”

When they returned, they said, "Who were you talking to you a few minutes ago?"

"G-d." He replied.

They asked, "Did he answer you?"

"Yes." He said.

"What did he tell you?" They asked incredulously.

"G-d, said not to take a bath today." Michel answered.

The authorities were not convinced that he was mentally instable but they couldn't prove that he was normal. After a week's stay in the hospital, he was discharged and dismissed from army service.



Mesiras Nefesh for a Beard

In the camp there was an evil Armenian guard. He didn't like the group of the frum Jews and one day gave an order that this group needs to shave their beards.

They started with the first person in the group, Israel Cok. He was very strong and fought with the soldiers. They struggled with him until they lay him flat on the floor and forcibly tried to shave his beard. He bit the finger of one of the soldiers until it fell off his hand. When the other soldiers saw this, they ran for their lives. The Armenian guard was furious. He said no matter what happens, he will force everyone to shave their beards.

They were called to the office of the camp. The commanding officer insisted that they shave their beards.

R'Shmuel said. "I already told you this won't end well, look what just happened. Someone will get injured, either us or the soldiers."

The official went to the Armenian guard and told him to leave the group alone.

One day they heard that they were sending a high-ranking officer from Moscow to review the work of the Armenian guard. This was their chance to stop the guard from harassing them.



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R'Moshe Vishedsky, Pesach in a Russian Gulag

R'Moshe Vishedsky was in a Siberian jail and Pesach was approaching. He knew it would be difficult not to eat Chometz on Pesach, so every day he saved a few sugar cubes. One day, a guard saw him putting away some cubes and said "I know what you are doing. You are saving sugar for Pesach. You can't do that here." He confiscated the sugar.

On Pesach, he had nothing to eat. The guards tried to force him to eat and he refused. He got very weak and he fainted.

They called a doctor. He tried to give him food and he refused. First, they thought he was on a hunger strike. So the doctor whispered in his ear, "המאבד עצמו לדעת אין לו חלק לעולם הבא" If one purposefully endangers himself, he has no portion in the world to come." The doctor was Jewish but not frum, it seemed like he had been at a yeshiva at one point.

R'Moshe responded, "I'm not suicidal. It's Pesach and I won't eat Chometz."

The doctor responded. "This is not one of the Mitzvas to go on מסירת נפש."

R'Moshe responded. "I am willing to go to גהנום, but I will not eat chometz on Pesach."

So the doctor asked him what can be done that he should eat food. R'Moshe requested that he buy apples and a new knife and tovel it in the river. Then, if he will peel the apples in front of him, he will eat it. So he asked R'Moshe, "Will you trust me that the knife is new and toveiled?" R'Moshe responded. כל ישראל בחזקת כשרות. "Every Jew is in trustworthy, unless proven otherwise."

The doctor followed the instructions. Although it wasn't filling food, R'Moshe began to recover. He was still weak but miraculously survived.

Once he was released from jail, and living at home, one day they heard a knock at the door. Reb Moshe's wife, Chasha, opened the door and a distinguished looking official asked if it was the Vishedsky residence. She responded that it was their home. He requested to see R'Moshe.

She ran to her husband and said that she thinks the KGB is after them again.

R'Moshe came to the door and the man asked, "Reb Moshe, do you recognize me?"

Reb Moshe said, "No."

The man responded, "I am the doctor that helped you on Pesach in jail. After that incident, it made such an impression on me that I couldn't eat chometz on Pesach again."



R'Shmuel Prus and R'Yoske Motchkin, Seder in a Russian Gulag

R'Shmuel Leib Prus was a prisoner in a Russian Siberian Labor Camp. He had to work long hours at the prison factory. There was a machine that operated by using one's hand and foot simultaneously. It was labor intensive and no one wanted to do it so they forced the prisoners to do it instead.

R'Muleh had to operate this machine and it was strenuous for him. The guards were constantly taking him in for interrogations and he felt sick and weak.

At 6 am each morning they had to go to work. Shabbos arrived and he and Yoske Motchkin did not go to the factory.

The guard asked them why they weren't coming and they replied that it was Shabbos. The commander in charge got angry and yelled, "Where do you think you are right now?"

The officers took off their shirts and threw them in into a dungeon. It was freezing and their bodies shook from the cold frigid air.

At 8 am, they brought them back their shirts. They could not put them back on because their bodies were frozen.

They were sent to the office of the director of the camp. The officer greeted them with anger. "Why didn't you go to work?" He yelled.

"It's Shabbos." R'Muleh replied.

"Do you know where you are right now?" He asked.

"Yes, we know where we are." They replied.

"What do you think? You are going to make your own schedule here? You need to work. If you don't, we will do something else with you." The officer answered.

R'Muleh said. "Do what you want you want to do but I never worked on Shabbos and I never will.

"I will beat you." The officer shot back.

"Ok, go ahead." Said R'Muleh

The officer threw them out of the room. Together, R'Yoske and R'Muleh walked a few steps towards the hall and the officer called them back in. He tried to

convince them. "Let's do this peacefully, just work a little bit and conform to the prison rules."

Reb Muleh answered him confidently. "I already told you, that you can do what you want to do but I'm not working on Shabbos."

The officer got angry again and threw them out of the office. Then he called them back and tried convincing them to work on Shabbos. This happened 5 times.

As they were leaving the office for the fifth time, he yelled. "Come back now."

"What do you plan on eating here?" He demanded.

"Bread." They replied.

"If you don't work, you will not get bread and you will die." He replied angrily. He continued to threaten them.

"Why do you care if there will be less counter revolutionary prisoners?" R'Muleh asked.

The officer suddenly changed topics. "Do you know Passover is coming soon?" He asked.

"We know." They replied.

"What do you plan on eating?" He inquired.

"If someone manages to send us matzah we will eat it." They said. (R'Peretz Motchkin was planning to smuggle in matzah.)

"If you don't get matzah, you will die!" The officer answered.

"Why do you care?" R'Muleh replied.

The officer changed his tune. "I will give you a document to receive dry goods for Passover."

"If you can give that to us, we will be thankful." Said R'Muleh in disbelief.

He gave them 2 documents. One for R'Muleh and one for R'Yoske so they could get dry goods and some vegetables from the prison for Pesach.

Right before they left the office, the officer turned to R'Muleh and said. "I have a request. If someone ends up successfully sending you matzah, can you give me a small piece?" They were shocked to learn that the officer was a yid.

B'h right before Pesach they got 4 kilograms of matzah and they gave the officer 2 matzahs.

A Polish yid, Milech Karp, was a יראי שמים and a מתמיד. He was with them in jail at that time. He never ate non kosher food and managed to keep Shabbos. He wanted to eat matzah and share the kosher for Pesach food with them. Although they didn't have much, they agreed that he could join them.

Another Yid saw this and also wanted matzah. They were reluctant to give him. If he was going to eat the regular food anyway, they couldn't spare an extra crumb. He got offended and said. "What? You think I will eat chometz this

week? I will die before eating chometz on Pesach.” When they heard this, they shared their matzah with him too.

They managed to get some raisins and added hot water to make wine for the 4 cups of wine. They had a few raw potatoes, 10 eggs and a few onions. They managed to share it amongst 4 men for eight days.

More Yidden heard about the matzah and wanted to have a piece. They divided one matzah and gave each person a small crumb. They were very, very hungry but managed to keep Pesach in jail that year.



R'Berel Prus, Great Uncle, Baking Matzah in Rezenke, Latvia

The Prus family secretly escaped Tashkent and ran to Riga. The KGB was after them. They arrived in Riga three weeks before Peaach. They brought Kosher wine from Tashkent but needed to get matzah.

R'Muleh sent his son Dovber to a small town, Rezekne, where they were going to bake Matzah there. The town Rabbi received special permission from the authorities to bake matza for his community. Latvia recently became part of the USSR, so the authorities were more liberal to the Jewish population and their customs. The permission to bake matzah was strictly given to the local residents only.

Berel had to catch a night train that went from Moscow to Riga. Rezenke was on the other side of Latvia. When he arrived, he found the place where they made matzah. It was not a shul or bakery but a private house. He figured that no one will notice that he isn't a local and will be able to bake a few dozen kilograms of matzah. It will be under the radar and no one will notice.

He wanted to bake matzah first to avoid the possibility of chametz on the tools or oven trays. The people at the house weren't familiar with the Lubavitch

customs for preparing matzah. He insisted that when preparing the matzah, one person pour the flour into the vat another person pour the water. This insures that the one pouring flour doesn't deal with the water and reduces the lumps that could accumulate on the person's hands or clothes, which can lead to chametz.

Dovber recounts the story in his own words:

The owner of the store said, "Please, if you pay me, I'm ready to put two people in charge."

My father gave me money and I was taught from early childhood, when it comes to Mitzvos, nothing should be spared. Of course, I paid although I saw it made a strong impression on the owner of the stove.

It was Sunday, someone already rented the oven for the evening, I stayed for another day. After each shift, the oven was cleaned and I wanted to bake a batch of matzah first after the oven was cleaned.

During the day, I bought a calf at the market. I brought it to a local shochet who slaughtered and butchered it. I had meat for Pesach. Evening arrived and it was my turn to bake matzah in the oven. It went quickly. The workers were experienced and the work went well.

I prepared everything in advance. The meat I put in a suitcase and I needed something for the matzah. I found cigarette crates that were large plywood boxes. I lined the boxes with paper and packed the matzah neatly inside.

I loaded the matzah and suitcase onto a sled pulled by a horse and went to the station. The Moscow-Riga train passed through Rezekne at midnight. I had a couple of hours until it arrived. I could've waited inside the heated train station but something was bothering me. The town was quiet at night and I was only

there. No one had noticed me but I didn't want to hang around the station even though I was in this town illegally for about a day and a half.

I decided not to wait in the small train station but would wait outside on the sled. It was bitter cold and snowing. Luckily, I was wearing a warm coat but I was still shivering. I waited on the sled until the train arrived. Even when I saw the train arriving, I waited even though it was at the platform. At the last minute, the owner of the sled dragged my suitcase and boxes onto the compartment and I jumped on to the train right before it started moving.

The houses of Rezekne flashed by the window, I settled into my seat. I thought to myself, perhaps I was too cautious waiting outside in the cold for so many hours but I was happy that everything worked out smoothly.

Thirty years later, I was living in Israel for a long time, on the 19th of Kislev, a Rabbi from Tel Aviv came to Kfar Chabad. He was a respected Rabbi, they wanted to seat him on the podium for honored guests. He refused and insisted on sitting at one of the regular tables.

My father and I happened to be seated next to him. It was a farbrengen, we drank a glass of lchaim together and began talking. He mentioned that he had been a Rabbi in Rezekne.

"Oh, how interesting!" I exclaimed. "I know this city. I baked matzah there once, thirty years ago."

The Rabbi jumped up. "So it was you?"

"After you left, KGB agents showed up at the shul. They began questioning me.

"There was a Lubavitcher guy hanging around here, where is he?"

I explained that yes, a guy showed up here. No one knew who he was or where he came from or why he was here. He was at the shul for a few minutes and left.

The KGB realized it was far from the truth. One of the officers murmured to himself. "We were watching him the whole time. How did he manage to slip away the last minute, when we were supposed to catch him red handed!"

"I kept repeating that I didn't know anything about him." The Rabbi said.

The KGB men didn't stop there. They kept calling me back for interrogations for several months asking about me.

"But how did they know I was a Lubavitcher?" I asked the Rabbi. "It wasn't written on my forehead."

"Well, that's very simple." Answered the Rabbi. "What young guy in those days could demand that one person pour water into a vat while another pours flour? Only a Lubavitcher would."

When my father and I heard this story, our hands shook so much, that the vodka spilled. If I would have been caught baking matzah for myself in another city and delivering kosher meat, I would have been put in jail.



Shmuel Berezin, Seder in the Barracks, Pesach 1951

A great uncle, Shmuel Berezin was arrested in 1950 in Soviet Russia. His crime was “failure to report.” He knew about the illegal crossing of the border of the Lubavitch families into Poland, organized by Mendel Futerfas. They used illegal documents and knowing about it and not reporting it was a violation of Soviet law.

Shmuel spent 10 months in a temporary detention center and didn’t say a word about any of the Chassidim. Not who organized the escape or who left illegally. They couldn’t prove that Shmuel knew the details of the episode but he was given 10 years in the camps.

Shmuel found Chabad Chassidim in the barracks. At night, they would gather there. They would talk about the Rebbe, and their families at home.

Before the first Pesach there, Shmuel wrote a letter to his family. "We have about a hundred Jews here. When one of the children comes to visit me in jail, have him bring more suitable products." He didn't specify which ones but he was hinting to Matza and Pesach food.

His son took 50 kilograms of food, mostly matzah. He also brought a few bottles of vodka to bribe the guards so they would allow all the food into the room.

Shmuel held a Seder in the camp. It was done secretly with a bribe. They cooked a few potatoes, had some matzah and Shmuel said the Haggadah by heart.

The people of that generation were not interested in money, nor honor or respect. They only wanted to observe the mitzvot and help others observe them. Even if it meant to risk their lives.

After he was released from prison, the family applied for an exit visa to Israel. They were repeatedly refused.

In 1969, they were granted permission and sold all their belongings and moved to Kfar Chabad.

In Tishrei, Shmuel was honored to meet the Rebbe in New York. When Shmuel entered the Rebbe's room for yechidus, the Rebbe asked him. "So you are Mulyeh?" At that point, Shmuel couldn't bear it and burst into tears. While in a Soviet prison despite all the torture and abuse, he never shed a tear. In the room of the holy Rebbe, tears flowed from his eyes in a stream from excitement and joy.

