

## The Undercover Mission

**The Alter Rebbe was outstanding, both as a leader and as an organizer. Every word he spoke and every decision he made was the result of careful consideration and planning. With his vast knowledge and forceful determination he never once retreated from anything he had decided upon – neither in spiritual matters nor in worldly matters – regarding his public service.**

**Reflective of a true leader, the Alter Rebbe's public service was conducted in absolute discretion; only those who truly needed to know were kept informed. And even then, they were instructed by the Alter Rebbe to maintain the secrecy.**

In the year 5532, Empress Catherine II assumed control over White Russia and granted civil rights to the Jews of the annexed territories. The Alter Rebbe saw this as a good opportunity to send several Jewish families to these territories.

Choosing twelve men<sup>1</sup> from the chassidic community, most of which were energetic young scholars, the Alter Rebbe helped them and their families settle in their new surroundings. Their special mission was that, in the course of their business affairs, they were to become acquainted with the counts, princes, dukes, and heads of the government ministries. This effort would form the cornerstone of his public affairs program.

A plan was deliberated for the twelve emissaries in the capital city, and one of them, Reb Avraham Yaakov ("the Smith"), was elected to lead the effort. Using their acquaintance with the nobility and the government officials, the group aided the neighboring Jewish communities for many years. When the chassid Reb Avraham Yaakov passed away, the Alter Rebbe chose his son, Reb Shmuel Moshe, who was smart, capable, and energetic, to be his father's

successor.

The following year Poland was conquered and soon became a breeding ground of Jew-hatred. French professors began spreading false accusations against prominent Jewish figures and greatly influenced the Polish nobility.

When the secret Public Affairs Committee of the chassidim learned of the growing animosity, Reb Shmuel Moshe, the group leader, instructed each member of the group to approach the officials with whom they held sway, and speak well of the Jews. He further instructed them to influence the Interior Ministry's local office to suppress letters from officials of the provincial governments – speaking ill of the Jews – from reaching the Interior Minister.

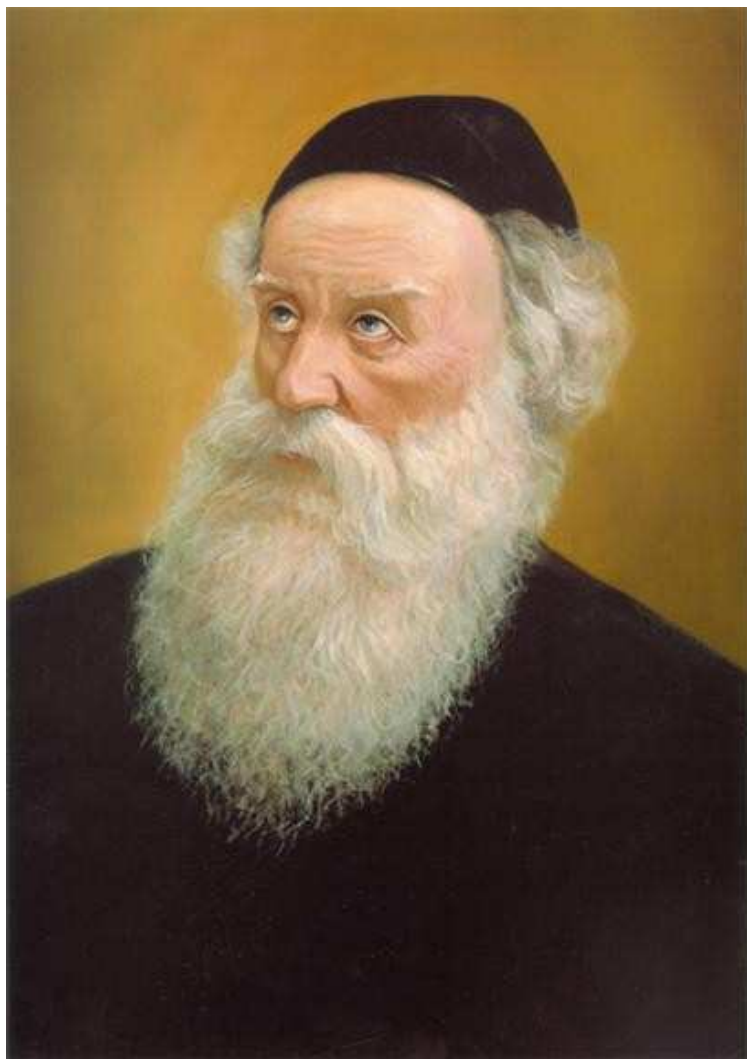
Reb Shmuel Moshe, himself, was well acquainted with Count Lubamirski who held influence at the court of Empress Catherine II. However, his efforts were in vain as Count Lubamirski couldn't be swayed. Another member of the committee, the chassid Reb Zundel Yitzchak of Shklov, knew Lord Potimkin who held also held great influence over the Empress, and managed to persuade him to intercede for the Jews.

Lord Potimkin succeeded in persuading the Empress to send agents to investigate the reports against the Jews, and she ordered the Minister of the Interior to send a reliable official. The official was to travel throughout Lithuania, Little Poland, and Ukraine to observe the commercial affairs and lifestyles of the Jews, and their relations with their non-Jewish citizens. Every meeting and encounter was to be written down in a notebook and the mission was to be completed within two years.

The Minister of the Interior referred the Empress' command to his assistant Niksin. However, Niksin was a well-known anti-Semite and he chose the famed author Derzhavin<sup>2</sup> for the job – a man whose Jew hatred was equal to his.

In his youth, Derzhavin had been an apprentice to an estate owner near Disna. At the time, Reb Dov Moshe was renting the estate, and the young Derzhavin would often visit him. Reb Dov Moshe, impressed by the young apprentice, would regularly praise Derzhavin's achievements to the estate owner. Many years later – after Reb Dov Moshe had moved to Petersburg and Derzhavin had become a distinguished figure in the literary world – the two happened to meet and immediately recognized each other. Derzhavin was reminded of his youth, and asked to visit Reb Dov Moshe at his home.

Reb Dov Moshe spoke to Derzhavin several times about his attitude toward the Jews, and reproached him for his hatred. And yet, despite his many proofs to the virtues of the Jewish people, Derzhavin only replied, "If all your fellow Jews were like you, I would love them; at least, I would not hate



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them so much.”

Now, when word spread that the author Derzhavin had been appointed by the Interior Minister to undertake the investigation, Reb Dov Moshe visited Derzhavin, urging him to be fair in his report – as would be expected from such a scholarly writer.

However, Reb Dov Moshe found Derzhavin in very cheerful spirits.

“I will fulfill this mission with a joyful heart,” he said. “And as for you, my longtime friend, and your fellow Jews – prepare yourselves to go into exile.<sup>3</sup> In two years’ time, when I return from my journey, my first recommendation will be to expel the Jews from the capital city.”

Reb Dov Moshe took leave of Derzhavin with a growing sense of gloom. Reporting

the conversation to the other members, the committee seemed resigned to their fate – only Reb Shmuel Moshe remained unconcerned.

The meeting tarried on late and concluded with several instructions:

The happenings at the Empress’ court and the visit to Derzhavin were to remain secret, and if the royal decree did happen to become public knowledge, the committee would try to wave it off with little concern.

Additionally, it was decided to send an emissary to the Alter Rebbe, to inform him of the situation. Since Reb Dov Moshe knew Derzhavin well, and had personally heard his evil plans, they decided to send Reb Dov Moshe of Disna to the Alter Rebbe.

The Alter Rebbe’s replied to the commit-

tee with specific instructions:

An agent with the details of Derzhavin’s planned itinerary should be sent to him immediately, and that the council members should continue their diplomatic efforts.

In his reply, the Alter Rebbe also reassured the council members regarding Derzhavin’s threat of expulsion, quoting the verses, “Let not the [warrior] who girds on [his sword before battle] boast like one who removes it [from his belt after victory in battle],”<sup>4</sup> and “Deliverance is the L-rd’s,”<sup>5</sup> and concluded with a brocha.

When Reb Dov Moshe returned to Petersburg he procured a copy of Derzhavin’s planned itinerary, along with a list of names of the people he would be visiting. An estimate of Derzhavin’s travel time was also obtained, and the information was relayed to the Alter Rebbe.

The Alter Rebbe chose two businessmen, instructing them to arrange their schedule similar to Derzhavin’s itinerary. One of them was the chassid Reb Shmaryahu Zalman of Polotzk<sup>6</sup>, a dealer in silk and velvet cloth, and an expert tailor of women’s clothing. The second was the chassid Reb Nasan of Shklov<sup>7</sup>, a dealer in jewels and precious stones.

Through the guise of business pursuits, they were to try to gain admittance to the homes of the officials and the estate owners whom Derzhavin planned to visit. Every encounter was to be recorded in writing and no expense was to be spared in obtaining information.

Reb Shmaryahu Zalman and Reb Nasan fulfilled their mission with genuine mesirus nefesh, and, with cunning and guile, they managed to obtain copies to some of Derzhavin’s notes, and a list of bribes that had taken place. Names and dates were all recorded in detail.

During this time, Empress Catherine died, leaving her son Paul to inherit the throne. He was an honorable and peace-loving person, and he surrounded himself with advisors who pursued justice. His chief advisors were Counts Dalgarkov and Lubamirski, men of stature that had been spurned by Empress Catherine for degenerate ministers.

Czar Paul also replaced the government ministers with finer people, striving to improve the conditions of the population – including the Jews. When he ascended the throne, he granted the rights of citizenship



to the Jews of Courlan. It was as though the Jewish people were given a breath of fresh air.

Remembering the Alter Rebbe's words, quoting the verses, "Let not the one who girds on [his sword] boast like one who removes it," and "Deliverance is the L-rd's," it was clear to the Public Affairs Committee that the new atmosphere within government circles was what the Alter Rebbe had hinted to.

Meanwhile, the Alter Rebbe summoned the chassidim Reb Moshe Vilenker<sup>8</sup> and Reb Moshe Meisels<sup>9</sup>, supplying them the information that Reb Shmaryahu Zalman and Reb Nasan had obtained. He instructed them to arrange the material in proper order, and then take it to Petersburg to meet with the committee and determine the next step. Enlisting in the help of counts and noblemen who were in a position to exert their influence in favor of the Jewish people was key.

The chassidim Reb Moshe Meisels and Reb Moshe Vilenker executed their instructions. When they arrived in Petersburg, they found that the writer Derzhavin was already there. Through his acquaintances, Reb Dov Moshe of Disna learned that Derzhavin was in the process of submitting his final report.

The wicked Derzhavin took no notice of the new atmosphere at the Imperial Court. He submitted the report based on his investigations in the cities where the Jews lived, severely maligning the Jews. In a personal letter to Czar Paul, he stated that he had accomplished his mission honestly, as assigned to him by the empress.

During the three months of Shvat, Adar I, and Adar II, the chassidim Reb Moshe Meisels and Reb Moshe Vilenker succeeded in their mission - with the help of Counts Lubamirski and Dalgarkov. The Czar punished Derzhavin and ordered the reports to be burned, allaying the fears of Jews throughout the country.

The chassid Reb Moshe Meisels had an impressive mind and fervent heart, and was a determined character. Even in his early youth his astute mind was well recognized. At about thirty years old,<sup>10</sup> the geonim Reb Yissachar (brother of the Gaon Rav Eliyahu) and Reb Avraham sent him and a few of his outstanding fellow students to Berlin.<sup>11</sup>

In Berlin, Reb Moshe Meisels studied German, French, and Italian,<sup>12</sup> and spent his time reading various books.<sup>13</sup> Hand-

some, witty, and jovial, Reb Moshe always made a good impression, and he soon found favor with several wealthy residents of Berlin. His new friends owned libraries and they would lend him books for long periods, and he would return them by mail and receive new reading material.

Upon returning from Berlin, he described in detail of the political maneuvers he and Reb Moshe Vilenker had just achieved. Of course, he also mentioned the participation of the Public Service Committee of the Petersburg chassidim, headed by Reb Shmuel Moshe, following the Alter Rebbe's orders.

The members of the Vilna chassidic congregation recommended a communal feast of celebration be held, complete with the recitation of Hallel and prayers of thanksgiving, and with Tachanun to be omitted. Furthermore, a description of the entire event - in all its details, and including the names of the participants - should be written down in the official archives of the congregation, to be remembered forever.

However, the party of the misnagdim opposed this idea, and the chassidim were aware that the leaders of the misnagdim were plotting against them.

However, the Chassidim set a date for feasting and rejoicing, disregarding that it was already several days into the month of Nissan. Pesach was only a few days away and most of them were busy with preparations. They sent notices to all chassidim of the district, and a few young chassidic volunteers set out to inform the neighboring districts of Minsk and Polotzk.<sup>16</sup>

At the designated time, many chassidim arrived in Vilna. Reb Meir Raphael, president of the congregation, opened his home for the celebration, and build a large building in his courtyard for the event.

During the feast, Reb Moshe stood up and once more recounted the story in true detail, emphasizing the contributions of the Public Service Committee that had operated under the Alter Rebbe's instructions. The audience paid close attention to the recital, and afterwards, they passed a unanimous resolution that the story be written in a scroll, and sent to all chassidic communities.

Hundreds of copies of the story were made and wherever it was heard, Jews rejoiced, praising the chassidim and the Alter Rebbe. Thousands of people joined the Chassidic movement and the chassidic communities grew larger.

About two years after his return from Berlin, and fifty years of age, Reb Moshe was appointed secretary and trustee of the congregation, and, with his energy and enthusiasm, breathed new life into the congregation. The Gaon Rav Eliyahu attested that since the day the congregation was first established,<sup>14</sup> there had been no person like him.<sup>15</sup>

*Adapted from "Branches of the Chassidic Menorah" Vol. 2 p. 38*

1. We know the names of only nine of them: from Minsk, Reb Avraham Yaakov and Reb Gedaliah Zev; from Borisov, Reb Avraham Zev and Reb Baruch Yosef; from Shklov, Reb Zundel Kohen and Reb Chayim Moshe; Reb Dov Ber Moshe of Disna, Reb Eliyahu Shmuel of Radczov, and Reb Mordechai of Vitebsk.

2. The Russian poet, Gavril R. Derzhavin (1743-1816).

3. Lit., "Prepare utensils of exile for yourselves"; Yechezkel 12:3.

4. I Melachim 20:11.

5. Tehillim 3:9.

6. The grandfather of the chassid Reb Shlomo Zalman of Yanovitch.

7. The father of the chassid Reb Shlomo Monnessohn.

8. See *Links in the Chassidic Legacy*, Sichos In English, Brooklyn, 1997, p. 125ff.

9. See Vol. 1 of *Branches in the Chassidic Menorah*, Supplement E: "The Alter Rebbe's Later Years."

10. He was born in the year 5505.

11. These scholars were sent to investigate Moses Mendelssohn and his German translation of the Chumash. For the rest of his days, Reb Moshe would quote the blessing they had received from The Gaon Rav Eliyahu before departing for Berlin. He had said, "My sons, I am well aware that the road you are about to travel is a perilous one. It is forty years since I last traveled in Germany. In those days there were still great Torah scholars to be found there; even so, the atmosphere there favored the attractions of the pleasures of the material world. And this is especially true today! May G-d bless you and watch over you."

12. He had a native talent for learning foreign languages.

13. He used to say that while he lived in Berlin, the twenty-four hours of the day were not sufficient for him.

14. He was referring to the time of Rav Yehudah the notary and magistrate, who would set the calendar for hearing lawsuits and other disputes.

15. The Gaon Rav Eliyahu was unaware that Reb Moshe was already a Chabad Chassid. [He came to be one] when the famous gaon Reb Yosef Kalbo visited Vilna in 5531. Reb Yosef was already a fervent chassid, and was one of those who urged The Gaon Rav Eliyahu to grant an audience to the holy Reb Menachem Mendel of Horodok and the Alter Rebbe. Several of the outstanding scholars, including Reb Moshe, were drawn to Reb Yosef. When the Alter Rebbe visited Vilna in 5532 (this was before the cheirem was proclaimed), Reb Moshe became his adherent, and began to study Chassidus diligently.

16. To avoid the expense of sending a special messenger, they would hire a horse, and one of the younger chassidim would volunteer to ride it.