

THE WITTY ESCAPE

י"ב-י"ג תמוז

The year 5687 marks a stormy period in the fight between communism and Yiddishkeit in the USSR. The men of the Yevisekziya (Jewish division of the NKVD) were trying desperately to snuff out the flame of Yiddishkeit. One of the ways they used to catch their fish was through 'Mesirah'; planting undercover agents everywhere, bringing terror into the hearts of the people.

In the city of Cuta'isi, Georgia, there lived a young man who was from the best students in the recently established Tomchei T'mimim. He worked as a chazzan in a Sfardic Shul and was known as a "Chacham." After the government closed the Yeshiva, he would teach children in secret, keenly aware that such behavior would be putting his life in danger.

It wasn't long though, until he received the dreaded order to appear at the offices of the NKVD. He was interrogated cruelly but after much useless questioning the interrogator asked him bluntly: Who pays you for teaching the children?

Without becoming flustered, he responded: "What children? What pay? Who's interested in having their children taught?"

"If so," retorted the interrogator, "why do you visit specific houses daily – if not to teach children?"

"People call me to remove an 'Ayin horah'."

The interrogator burst into laughter. "Are you at least successful in this work?"

"You can't know," replied the Chossid. "Each case is unique. They pay me, and they ask me to come again. Why should I care if they think it works?"

Having prepared himself for this, he continued playing dumb as well as being very cautious. The interrogators wouldn't relent, and continued barraging him with questions trying to pry out a confession. However, the Chossid soon proved too much for

them and they commanded him to leave while they discuss his case.

Continuing to play dumb, he headed straight for the exit of the building. The armed guard stepped in and stopped him, asking him where he was going.

"I was told to go," the Chossid said simply.

The guard, certain that no one could leave an interrogation without permission, let him go.

Aware that going home was dangerous, as surely a search party would soon be sent for him, he went to a friend's home for a few days, and then traveled to Rostov.

Arriving in Rostov, he found his fellow Chassidim in despair.

"The Rebbe has been arrested and sentenced to three years exile in Kostroma," he was told.

Without hesitation, he set out immediately for Kostroma. When he arrived where the Friediker Rebbe was staying, he requested permission to see the Rebbe. The Chassidim were reluctant to allow him in – as this could endanger the Rebbe – but at last he was granted a Yechidus.

In Yechidus, the Rebbe gave him peculiar instructions: Travel to Moscow and meet with several Chassidim who have genuine permits allowing them to purchase merchandise. Try to obtain for yourself such documents bearing your name, and once you have them, return to Cuta'isi and present yourself to the NKVD, and you should tell them that because during the interrogation they were not happy with your method of income, you therefore chose to go into business, and that's why you left so suddenly – to buy the merchandise already.

The Rebbe then gave him a note that contained specific instructions for the elder Chossid Reb Boruch Shalom who would make the necessary connections with the

businessmen. He then warned him to ensure the note be destroyed immediately after reading it.

After shabbos he traveled to Moscow. The train station was packed with people, many of them secret agents of the NKVD and much caution was needed to not raise suspicion. He took the first trolley in the direction of the city taking a seat next to a bearded elderly Jew. After eyeing each other for some time, the elder broke the ice.

"From where does a Jew come?" He questioned.

"Kostroma", the Chossid replied.

The joy on the elders face was clear. Realizing that this was his chance, the Chossid probed, "Perhaps you know Reb Boruch Shalom?"

"Boruch Shalom – that's me", the elder responded.

Arriving in Reb Boruch Shalom's home, the two hugged and kissed as is customary by Chassidim. He inquired about the Rebbe, and the reason for his visit. He conveyed regards from the Rebbe, and gave him the note, which, after reading and rereading, they burned it.

The Chossid was overjoyed at finding Reb Boruch Shalom in such a large city. His joy turned to amazement when hearing from Reb Boruch Shalom that he usually never travels in the morning before shacharis, but that particular day he awoke with an urge to go to the train station.

"How wondrous are the ways of Hashgach," cried Reb Boruch Shalom. "When traveling with the Rebbe's koichos, wonders are no wonders."

On the following day there was a farbrenge with the ziknei hachasidim, and the Chossid conveyed regards from the Rebbe. Their happiness was tremendous, as much effort was being put into securing the release

of the Rebbe – which was expected within the next few days. And after that, Chassidim hoped, he would be granted permission to leave the USSR.

After meeting with the right people and getting the necessary papers, he returned to Cuta'isi, following the exact directives of the Rebbe. When he arrived, although a wanted man, he informed his family that he had no intention of fleeing or going into hiding – and to compound their fears, he told them his plans to walk directly into their offices voluntarily. In vain his family pleaded with him to come to his senses but he remained adamant at following the Rebbe's advice and soon left toward the offices of the notorious NKVD.

The same guard was on duty from when he had left and he recognized him immediately. Seeing his chance to make up for his embarrassing saga, the guard led him directly to the interrogator's office, announcing, "You were upset that I let this guy leave, well here he is, he returned on his own."

Almost instantly, he was bombarded with questions: Why did you run and disappear?

"I didn't run away," he answered calmly. "You told me to go – so I left. Who can escape you anyway."

"And where have you been until now?" the interrogators queried.

The Chossid then proceeded to them exactly what the Rebbe had told him to say, and concluded by presenting the paperwork to validate his tale.

After thoroughly inspecting the papers and finding them to be in order the interrogator told him:

"It's a fine choice you made to not be a chacham, and rather take the road of business, but take my advice; drop the business and become a worker!"

The Chossid nodded his agreement and promised to consider his advice.

"It is your good fortune," continued the

interrogator, "that you turned yourself in. Were we to find you, you would have been sentenced to ten years exile in Siberia. Now go home, but heed my word and become a worker."

Each year on Yud Beis – Yud Gimmel Tammuz, he would celebrate his freedom, on the same days as the Rebbe's, thanks to following the Rebbe's advice.

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