



"TRUMPETER AND
CANTONIST OF THE
LIFE GUARDS CAVALRY
REGIMENT (1845 - 1848)."



WE WANT TO SEE *The Rebbe!*

*The Tzemach Tzedek
and the Cantonists*

לזכות
הרה"ת ר' מרדכי שיחי' ומשפחתו שיחיו
וולבובסקי
לרגל יום הולדתו טו"ב חשון
לבשורות טובות ורוב נחת חסידותי
מכל יו"ח שליט"א



JEWISH SOLDIERS IN THE CZAR'S ARMY GATHER TO EAT KOSHER FOOD.

"I knew about this seven years before it happened. When I was at the Ohel of my father [the Alter Rebbe], I saw that there was a terrible Heavenly prosecution against the Jew-hating young men¹, and my spirit was broken within me. I knew that at some point this decree would come to fruition. Then at my daughter's wedding, when so many people gathered around, young and old, in order to hear words of Chassidus, I was so elated, I thought the decree had passed. But then as morning drew near, when I started falling asleep my father came to me and asked, 'Why are you so happy, rejoicing with these young men gathered here? Don't you know about the prosecution that is currently going on and getting progressively worse?' Immediately, my spirit was broken. I knew it had to do with taking Jewish children away to the battlefield..."²

The Mittler Rebbe gave this frightening description in a *maamar* dedicated to the terrible decree of the "Cantonists," said shortly before his *histalkus*.

It was a decree issued by Czar Nicholas I, primarily targeting Jewish communities, with forced conscription

of young Jewish children into the Russian army for 25 years, beginning at the age of 12. It was a deliberate attempt to tear Jewish children away from Yiddishkeit and forcibly assimilate them into the Russian religion and culture.

Implementation began in the year 5587*, one year before the Mittler Rebbe's *histalkus*.

According to the law, every community had to supply four recruits per thousand members. The dreadful task of selecting the recruits was left to the heads of the *kehilla*, and every community struggled to deal with this terrible reality. Many communities refused to send their children, and armed soldiers would arrive in the towns to search and capture the children instead. Eyewitnesses recounted the heartrending scenes of screaming mothers running after their small sons as they were snatched away.

Many children tried to hide in caves and forests while the soldiers searched their communities. This brought about the sad phenomenon of Jewish kidnappers, "*chappers*," who found the children in their hiding

places and delivered them to the authorities.

The children were taken to "Canton" schools, where they were "deprogrammed" from their Jewish upbringing.

The terrible decree was finally abolished by Czar Alexander II, in the year 5616*, after he witnessed the unbreakable spirit of the Jewish children, seeing how even a very young boy preferred to take his own life rather than convert.

In this article we will focus on some of the activities of our Rabbeim, especially the Tzemach Tzedek, attempting to help these Jewish children in their difficult plight, and pulling strings to have the decree averted.



"This is your sign," the Alter Rebbe writes in a letter. "The time will come when the apple of your eye will be taken from you, and they will begin taking soldiers from our Jewish brethren..." This was an instance of open *ruach hakodesh*. The Alter Rebbe was presumably alluding to the *histalkus* of the Mittler Rebbe, which took place just half a year after

THE MITTELER REBBE'S
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PHOTO OF CANTONIST SOLDIERS.

the decree of the Cantonists was implemented.³

In the wake of the decree, the Mittlerer Rebbe traveled from his home in Lubavitch to daven at the Ohel of his father in Haditch. On the way back, the Mittlerer Rebbe took ill and had to stop in Nezhin, where he was eventually *nistalek* and buried. It was there that he delivered the *maamar*, "להבין ענין לקיחת אנשי חיל מישראל ביד" —To understand why the Jewish soldiers are being taken by the non-Jews..." The Mittlerer Rebbe explains that Hashem craves the Yidden's *mesiras nefesh* awakened within their hearts during difficult times of *gezeiros*. The pain that the Yidden feel from not being able to keep the mitzvos is enough of a *zechus* to keep the whole world in existence, and it will eventually lead to the decree being annulled.⁴

The Village Rebbe From Lubavitch

The Tzemach Tzedek assumed the *nesius* of Chabad at the height of this decree, and much of his time was dedicated to easing the resulting plight of the Jewish people. In addition to his efforts on this front, the Jewish community was also plagued by severe attacks from the Haskalah movement, and the Tzemach Tzedek exerted much effort fighting against this too.⁵ (At times these two issues actually crossed paths.)

Some of the Tzemach Tzedek's work in the wake of the Cantonist decree included:

1) Sending messengers to all the affected communities to meet with the heads of the communities and see how they could reduce the number of children actually being sent, and

to make sure that the kidnappers received the appropriate punishment.

2) Arranging groups of people who would save the children already taken for conscription, by bribing the kidnappers with exorbitant sums, who would in turn report to the authorities that the children died.

3) Sending groups of Chassidim to the army bases where Jewish children were held to offer encouragement and assistance.

These activities had to be carried out in utmost secrecy. Unfortunately, members of the Jewish community who had joined the newly founded Haskalah movement began informing on the Tzemach Tzedek and his Chassidim to the Czar's government, saying that the Rebbe and his associates were disrupting law and order with their activities.



TWO YOUNG JEWISH SOLDIERS IN THE CZAR'S ARMY.



A PAMPHLET BEARING THE TITLE "דער שנע 'ישראל'" RECORDING THE TZEMACH TZEDEK'S TALK TO THE CANTONIST SOLDIERS, WHO WERE TORN FROM THE ENVIRONMENT OF YIDDISHKEIT IN THEIR YOUTH.

The government officials were outraged that a rabbi in a small village called Lubavitch wielded so much power over their schemes, and they immediately set out to remove this disruption. The Tzemach Tzedek was placed under strict surveillance and much of his everyday activities were reported in detail to the authorities. Of course, the harassment by the government officials and the members of the Haskalah did not succeed in stopping the Tzemach Tzedek; on the contrary, his efforts were redoubled in helping his fellow Yidden.

At that time, the Tzemach Tzedek had opened a yeshiva in Lubavitch, and one day two *chappers* showed up there, discovering that 30 runaway Cantonists were hiding there! The Czar's police officers were immediately notified, but even after careful examination, they were unable to find any discrepancies in the identification papers of the yeshiva boys, and they all left in shame.

A New Approach

Eventually, the government officials and members of the Haskalah realized

that there was no way to deter the Tzemach Tzedek and his Chassidim from their activities to save *klal Yisroel*. Their hopes to forcibly assimilate the Jewish community into their culture were quickly fading. So they decided to take a new approach; a more "inclusive" one.

They called for a grand conference of all rabbis, representing the full spectrum of the Jewish community in the Russian Empire: Chassidim, *misnagdim*, and even the less Orthodox. The official charter of the conference was to hear from the members of the Jewish community themselves about the issues of the day. But the real reason was that the Haskalah people hoped to be able to persuade, or coerce, the rabbis to accept their plan for the future of Russian Jewry and to stop all their activities to the contrary.

The Tzemach Tzedek was invited as the representative of the Chassidishe community, Reb Yitzchok ("Itchele") Volozhiner (son of the famous Reb Chaim Volozhiner) was invited as the representative of the *misnagdishe* community, the philanthropist Reb

Yisroel Halperin as the representative of the business community, and Mr. Bezalel Stern as the representative of the Haskalah community.

By bringing the Tzemach Tzedek to Petersburg, the Russian government was hoping that they would be able to force him to stay there and not return to his home in Lubavitch, thereby lessening his influence significantly. For this reason they tried to give the Tzemach Tzedek as comfortable a stay as possible, offering him a good place to lodge, allowing for Chassidim to join him for *minyanim*, and so on. They hoped that this non-aggressive approach would let them finally have their way.

But the Tzemach Tzedek stood strong and would not budge one iota when it came to matters of Yiddishkeit. The Tzemach Tzedek's firm resolve and his refusal to relent to any demands caused him to be arrested some 22 times! He told the authorities that "even the harshest punishments will not scare me..."

It was during this time that the Tzemach Tzedek was able to meet with a group of Cantonists for the first time.



THE KONSTANTINOVSKY
ARTILLERY SCHOOL IN S.
PETERSBURG, WHERE MANY
YOUNG CANTONISTS WERE
TAKEN FOR YEARS OF BRUTAL
TRAINING.

Kronstadt

This following story was witnessed by Reb Yitzchok Rubashov, a youngerman from Nevel who assisted the Tzemach Tzedek on his travels. He lived to his nineties, when he met the Frieddiker Rebbe and related what he had seen as a young man. He added that after the Tzemach Tzedek returned to Lubavitch, he thanked Reb Yitzchok for all the help, and blessed him with two brachos: “זאלסט האבן אריכות ימים, און דיר זאל קיין” — You should have many long years, and you should never be missing anything.”

Reb Yitzchok concluded his story to the Frieddiker Rebbe: “Indeed, these two brachos were fulfilled. I’m already 89 years old, and I am not missing anything...”⁶

On an army base in the city of Kronstadt, right near Petersburg, there was a group of hundreds of Jewish soldiers who had heard that the Tzemach Tzedek was nearby. They petitioned their superiors to allow them to meet with the great Rebbe who was stationed nearby, and the government agreed. Perhaps they hoped that by granting this to the

Tzemach Tzedek, he would be quicker to give in to their demands on other things.

Some 300 Jewish soldiers gathered to meet the Tzemach Tzedek as he visited them at their army base.

Seeing the holy Rebbe, they said with tears in their eyes, “Rebbe, we worked so hard to polish and shine the buttons of our uniforms in honor of this visit. Now it’s your turn to polish and shine our dilapidated *neshamos*.”

The Tzemach Tzedek responded with a *maamar* on the *possuk* “מחיתי כעב פשעייך—I wiped away your sins like a cloud...” speaking in Yiddish using a simple vocabulary that the uneducated Cantonists would understand. After the *maamar*, the Tzemach Tzedek added words of encouragement to the soldiers, calling on them to strengthen their connection to Yiddishkeit even if it takes *mesiras nefesh*. Then he said: “You polished your buttons with sand and water; your *neshamos* should also be polished with sand and water. Sand is the words of Tehillim that you say, and water is the tears that you say them with...”

One of the soldiers called out: “Rebbe! When we go out to conquer a city, we can’t do it with tears. We sing a victory march!”

The Tzemach Tzedek agreed with the soldier and explained that indeed, *avodas Hashem* should be done with joy.

[Interestingly, the Rebbe notes that those words of the unassuming soldier caused all the Rabbeim to choose this path of *simcha* in *avodas Hashem*.⁷]

In the Plaza

The Tzemach Tzedek’s visit made a big impression on the soldiers and lifted their spirits significantly. Many of them began coming closer to Yiddishkeit and demanded that their superiors allow them to join the Tzemach Tzedek in Petersburg.

After much pressure mounted from hundreds of soldiers at different bases, the officers of the army had to allow for another opportunity for the Cantonists to see the Tzemach Tzedek.

A few weeks later, permission was granted and all the Jewish soldiers who wanted to, were able to come and see the Tzemach Tzedek in Petersburg. More than 600 soldiers gathered in the



ILLUSTRATION OF THE CANTONIST MILITARY, PUBLISHED IN 1913.

plaza of the Peter and Paul Fortress in Petersburg, and the Tzemach Tzedek delivered the *maamar* “*Shema Yisroel*” for them, again in Yiddish using a simple vocabulary.

After the *maamar*, about 15 soldiers came over to the Tzemach Tzedek and said, “Rebbe! We are tormented and oppressed Jews. We don’t know how to learn, we don’t know anything. All we have is our *emunah*. We know the words of the davening, bentching, and a few chapters of Tehillim; but we don’t understand their meaning.”

The Tzemach Tzedek responded: “A Yid who believes in Hashem—the creator and sustainer of the world and all its inhabitants, who watches over them with *hashgacha pratis*—that He gave them the holy Torah and mitzvos, who knows the words of davening and some chapters of Tehillim and recites them, and says Shema and Tehillim;

this Yid is a very healthy Yid, both in body and soul. May Hashem indeed bring you all home safely.”⁸

Coming back to his room after meeting with the soldiers, the Tzemach Tzedek spoke with great emotion to the other rabbonim about how precious these *Yiddishe neshamos* are. “When Moshiach comes,” he said, “there will be a special section just for these simple Jews of *mesiras nefesh*, and all the great minds of the Jewish people will be immensely jealous of them. No one can be considered greater than the Rambam, who reached an understanding of *Elokus* based on his own brilliant intellect. Yet, he too will be humbled before these soldiers, for they can feel and sense *Elokus* in a way that no one else can.”

Seeing the great respect and admiration that the soldiers had

towards the Tzemach Tzedek and the profound spiritual impact he had on them, the Russian authorities decided it was best to send the Tzemach Tzedek back home to Lubavitch.

The Tzemach Tzedek’s words had a lasting effect on the soldiers. The story is told that one day the Czar himself came to check up on the soldiers at their base, and he was quite impressed with their performance. When he asked the soldiers for their names and they responded with Jewish names, he was immediately disheartened. Czar Nicholas told them that they must convert to Christianity right away and he will promote them to the highest ranks of his army.

One of the soldiers responded: “Five years ago, we were visited by the great Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek. He told us that even if the Czar himself will tell us to convert, we should be



YOUNG JEWISH CANTONIST SOLDIERS-IN-TRAINING, (SOURCE UNKNOWN).

ready to give up our lives and not comply.” With that, all the soldiers jumped into the river and drowned themselves.

I Am a Jew!

In a fascinating discovery, old government files from the time of the Cantonists were recently made available and we indeed read of a major awakening of Yiddishkeit among the soldiers.

One of the reports states: “According to a report submitted to his great majesty Alexander II, 92 Jewish Cantonists who arrived at the naval base in Kronstadt have proclaimed that their previous conversion to Christianity was forced upon them, and they now want to return to their Jewish roots. Now another 11 soldiers joined them, making the total 103.”

In the documented testimony of one of these Cantonists, we read excruciating details of the suffering and *mesiras nefesh* that the Cantonists were put through:

“They forced me to convert. I was in terrible stress. I tried committing suicide but my friends wouldn’t allow me to. I remain a Jew and I

don’t want to be Christian under any circumstances. I had with me a siddur, tefillin, and tzitzis which I took from my home, and now they were confiscated. I hid the holy articles in the last stop on our way to Arkhangelsk, where my friend and I dug a hole in the forest, and on our way back to active duty, we retrieved them.”

In My Domain

Despite the harassment and persecution by the government, the Tzemach Tzedek’s efforts on behalf of the Cantonists (and the potential Cantonists) did not wane. One of his Chassidim, Reb Chaim Yehoshua, succeeded in saving a few children from the hands of the “chappers,” and the Tzemach Tzedek instructed him to

Today’s Cantonists

The Rebbe once related this story of the Tzemach Tzedek and the Cantonists at a farbrengen, adding a fascinating *hora’a*:

The most unique part of the story is that although the Russian government tried so hard to eradicate any sense of Yiddishkeit from the hearts of these children, nevertheless, they begged and demanded that they be allowed to meet with the Tzemach Tzedek!

The lesson is clear: There are people today who are just like the Cantonists of old. True, we live in a free society and we are not exposed to the same *nisyonos* as the Cantonists. But there are Jews who are in spiritual captivity. They know very little about Yiddishkeit, not even the Aleph-Beis.

Nevertheless, deep in their hearts these Yidden really thirst for Yiddishkeit. In fact they demand it! It is only up to us to reveal this to them, and to provide them with the knowledge to allow these deep hidden sparks to shine in everyday life.

(13 Nissan 5745, sicha 2)



CERTIFICATE OF RELEASE FOR A CANTONIST SOLDIER AFTER 25 YEARS OF MILITARY SERVICE.

THE "SOLDATSKAYA" (SOLDIERS) SHUL IN RIGA, LATVIA. UPON RELEASE FROM SERVICE, THE CANTONIST SOLDIERS FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO INTEGRATE INTO THE EXISTING JEWISH POPULATION AND BUILT THEIR OWN SHUL. IT WAS DESTROYED BY THE NAZIS IN 1941.

make it his life's mission to save Jewish children. He sent him around to various towns and villages to ransom back children who were already kidnapped, and to help them hide and escape. Eventually, Reb Chaim

Yehoshua was arrested and almost sentenced to capital punishment.

The Tzemach Tzedek did everything in his power to secure Reb Chaim Yehoshua's release, employing government connections wherever he

could. Indeed, with the help of some of the distinguished Chassidim, they were able to secure his release and Reb Chaim Yehoshua returned to Lubavitch for a *yechidus*. The Tzemach Tzedek told him, "For this *mesiras*

A Change of Heart

Once, a young boy was kidnapped by the "chappers," and his parents could not afford to bribe their son's way back.

The child had a wealthy uncle who made frequent trips to Moscow, and he started making inquiries until he learned that the child was at a training camp in Moscow. The uncle traveled to Moscow and offered a hefty bribe, and he was allowed to go in and visit his nephew at the camp. The child was placed in the tailors' ward, learning to sew uniforms, happy and content. It seemed that he was assimilating into the Russian culture, and the uncle was very distraught.

The uncle went to the Tzemach Tzedek and poured out his heart in pain. The Tzemach Tzedek replied, "Try to bring him to Lubavitch, even if for a very short visit."

After much effort, the uncle succeeded in bringing the child to Lubavitch, even though he had no interest in Yiddishkeit anymore and was happy to stay in the army.

They came to Lubavitch for Shabbos. The *zal* was packed to capacity, and when the Tzemach Tzedek came in to recite a *maamar*, a pathway opened up, with the uncle and nephew standing in the front row. When the Tzemach Tzedek saw them, he gave the boy a penetrating stare, and he began to tremble. Suddenly, the boy began feeling a sharp pain in his stomach to the point that it was unbearable. On Sunday, he was eagerly awaiting to be able to leave and he was furious at his uncle for bringing him to such a place. But soon, the pair entered into *yechidus* and the Tzemach Tzedek turned to the boy: "Do you want to stay here?" he asked. In an instant, the boy had a change of heart and he answered that he indeed wishes to stay.

The Tzemach Tzedek gave the child instructions as to how to conduct himself from then on, and the child eventually grew up and married, building a nice Jewish family.

(*Shmuos V'Sippurim* vol. 1, p. 55)



CZAR NICHOLAS I MADE MANY HARSH DECREES AGAINST THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN RUSSIA, INCLUDING THE CANTONIST DECREE.



CZAR ALEXANDER II, WHO ABOLISHED THE CANTONIST DECREE.

nefesh on behalf of Jewish children, you will merit to be together with me in my domain in the world to come.”

Your Neshamah Is Here For This

In the year 5616*, the decree was finally overturned. The soldiers who had finished their terms were allowed to live anywhere in the Russian Empire (as opposed to most Jewish people who were restricted to the Pale of Settlement). Thus formed communities of these ex-Cantonists who strongly identified as Yidden but knew very little about Yiddishkeit. The Tzemach Tzedek and later the Rebbe Maharash worked hard to help these Yidden, sending Chassidim to their communities to guide and teach them about Yiddishkeit.

The Frierdiker Rebbe relates in a letter that his grandfather, the Rebbe Maharash, had a Chossid, a silversmith and watchmaker by trade, who moved from the Chassidishe city of Polotzk to Vladimir, deep in Russia, in order to make a living. The Rebbe Maharash asked him if he had a set time to teach Torah in his community. He responded that he learns Torah

on his own and he also spends time preparing *krias haTorah* because no one else in the city knows how to do it. In the whole community, there are only two other people who even know how to daven at the *amud*. The Chossid continued that the people of Vladimir are simple folk, most of them from the Cantonists, who act like their Russian neighbors and don't know how to daven—they just answer *amen* and barely recite the *bracha* on the Torah.

The Rebbe Maharash explained to the Chossid that the real reason he had to move to this city was not just for *parnasah*.

“You are making a mistake,” the Rebbe Maharash said. “Not for material *parnasah* did Hashem bring you to Vladimir. One who believes in Hashem and His Torah and in *hashgacha pratis*, knows that just for material *parnasah*, Hashem would not make a Jew and his entire family move away from a Yiddishe city to a barren desert, to live with simple and ignorant people...”

“...The problem is, you think that your job is cleaning gold and fixing watches. Your real job is Torah and

avodas Hashem. Hashem made you move from Polotzk to Vladimir so that you can be with these Cantonists, Nicholas's soldiers, and teach them about Yiddishkeit.

“The Baal Shem Tov taught that a *neshamah* comes down to this world for 70-80 years, just to do a favor for another Yid, materially, and especially spiritually. To say that Hashem *must* give you *parnasah* in only one city stems from a lack of faith. Hashem can provide for you anywhere, whether in Polotzk or in Vladimir...”¹

1. I.e. against the Jews, *b'lashon sagi nahor*.
2. The Mittlerer Rebbe in the *maamar*, “*Lehavin inyan lekichas anshei chayil...*” Maamarei Admur Ha'emtzai—Kuntreisim.
3. Igros Kodesh Admur Hazaken (5772), p. 397.
4. Maamarei Admur Ha'emtzoi—Kuntreisim, p. 263.
5. See Admur HaTzemach Tzedek U'tnuas HaHaskalah, from the Frierdiker Rebbe.
6. Igros Kodesh Admur HaRayatz, vol. 2, p. 106.
7. Simchas Torah Night 5727.
8. Igros Kodesh Admur HaRayatz, vol. 4, p. 147.
9. Igros Kodesh Admur HaRayatz vol. 7, p. 20. Some of the material in this article is culled from *Ba'keseh Lyom Chageinu*, Vaad Chayolei Beis Dovid, 5777.