



THE RAV OF  
YEKATERINOSLAV

A FEARLESS LEADER  
of SOVIET JEWRY

*The untold story of*  
HORAV LEVI YITZCHAK'S TRIALS AND LEADERSHIP  
*as a community leader*

The stories in this article are based largely on the memoirs of Rebbetzin Chana, the Rebbe's mother, who recorded the occurrences of much of her distinguished husband's life in her personal diaries (published and copyright by Kehos). Additional details have been included from the set *Toldos Levi Yitzchok*.

לזכות החייל בצבאות ה'  
**לוי יצחק** ש'  
 לרגל ה'אפשערניש' בשעטו"מ  
 ביום כ' סיון ה'תשע"ו, שנת הקהל  
 נדפס ע"י הוריו  
 הרה"ת ר' **מרדכי** ומרת **חי' מושקא**  
 שיחיו  
**גראטבוים**  
 שלוחי כ"ק אדמו"ר,  
 סטאני ברוק, ניו יארק



THE SHUL WHERE HORAV LEVI YITZCHAK SERVED IN YEKATERINOSLAV.



*Presented in honor of the yom hahilula, Chof Menachem-Av*  
 'יום הסתלקות כ"ק הרה"ג והרה"ח המקובל וכו'  
 ר' לוי יצחק ז"ל שניאורסאהן

From 5669 (תרס"ט) through 5699 (תרצ"ט), Horav Levi Yitzchok Schneerson, the Rebbe's father, served as Chief Rabbi of Yekaterinoslav (Dnepropetrovsk), Ukraine.

For a period of thirty years, the sprawling metropolis merited to host one of the most fearless and unabashed leaders of Yiddishkeit. Through periods of suffering and persecution, as well as times of relative calm, Horav Levi Yitzchok stood head and shoulders above the surface, refusing to allow the Yidden to be swept along with the tide of *haskalah*, Zionism, and Communism.

In the Rebbe's words, he was the leader—after the departure of the Friediker Rebbe—of all the Yidden in Russia, caring for them and for all their needs.<sup>1</sup>

In the following pages, we catch a glimpse of the extensive work and endless *mesiras nefesh* of the Rebbe's father, and attempt to take a lesson—to the extent possible—to our daily lives.

## In the home of Horav Meir Shlomo

“It was the eighth year that we were living in the home of my parents, who supported us while my husband studied Torah full-time. The time had come to think about seeking a source of livelihood.”

This is how Rebbetzin Chana describes, in her memoirs, her family situation in the year 5666 (תרט"ו). Horav Levi Yitzchok was twenty-eight years old, and they were parents to two young sons, the Rebbe, and Reb Dovber. They were all living together in the small home of Rebbetzin Chana's father, Horav Meir Shlomo Yanovsky, who served as the rav of the Jewish community of Nikolaev.

“He was offered a rabbinic position in a certain city, but to be accepted there he needed a diploma equivalent to five years of college study.

“The examinations were to be held in Kiev. He traveled there and arranged for board and lodging. However, upon arriving at the examination commission, he saw that the curriculum required study of Old Church Slavonic and knowledge of the Christian scriptures. He didn't even register for the examinations, and left town that same night for home, arriving on the day of our sons' <sup>2</sup>bris.

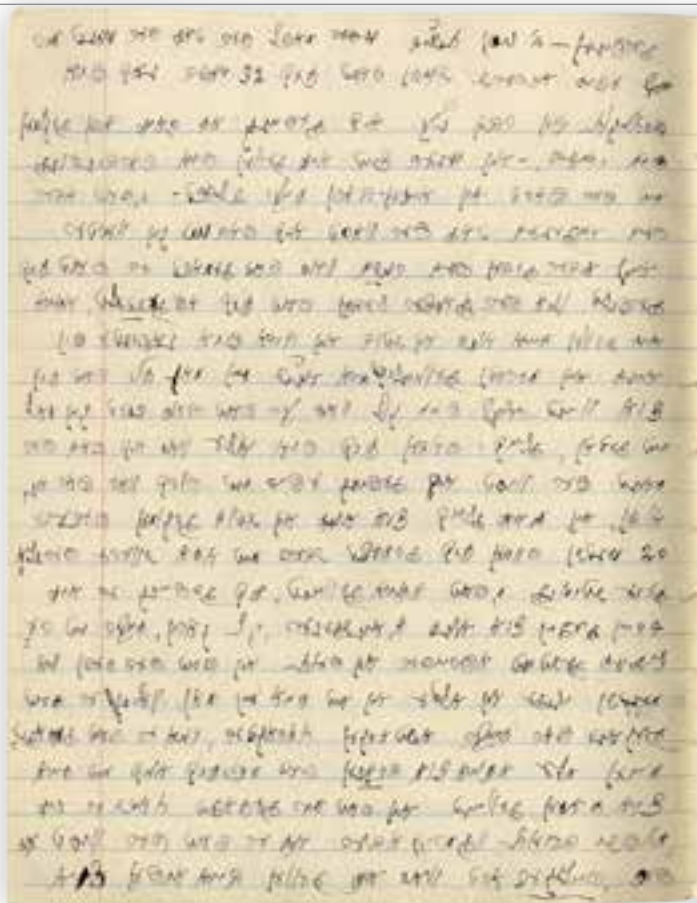
“Not long after, my husband was offered the position of rav of Yekaterinoslav, to succeed Reb Bere-Volf.”

## On the Dnieper River

Yekaterinoslav (later called Dnepropetrovsk), was a large city, with a colorful range of nationalities. Yidden began moving to the city in the mid 5500s (ה'ת"ק), and by the time of Horav Levi Yitzchok's appointment a bit over one hundred years later, they numbered over forty thousand souls—almost forty percent of the general population, making up the third largest ethnic group in the city, second only to Ukrainians and Russians.

Jewish life throughout the Russian Empire was not easy. The government placed many limits on its Jewish citizens, and for a period, they even sanctioned pogroms, with the peasants being given freedom to roam the streets and inflict damage on Jewish homes, businesses, and bodies, knowing that the local police would turn a blind eye to their actions.

Nevertheless, the Jews of Yekaterinoslav cultivated productive relations with their local government and citizens, and took an active role in the development of



VAAD HANOGCHOS BILAHAK

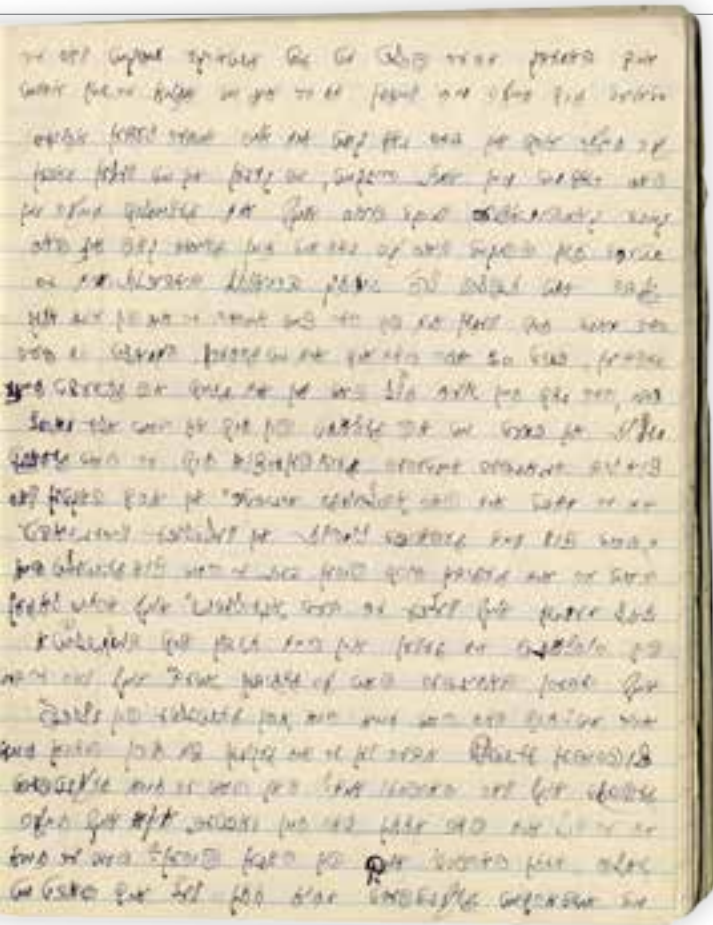
THE NOTEBOOK IN WHICH REBBETZIN CHANA RECORDED HER MEMOIRS.

the city. They controlled numerous large flour mills, factories, print houses, and various businesses.

The positive relations with the non-Jewish population had a dire effect on the Yidden's spiritual condition. Russian culture made deep inroads in the Jewish community, and Russian became the language spoken in many homes, a result of their children attending the non-Jewish public schools. The rich and the middle class assimilated almost entirely, and cases of conversion to Christianity (ל"ר) were not unheard of.

As the years passed, anti-semitism took a turn for the worse; the Jews were persecuted at every turn, and the authorities hampered the efforts of the Jewish youth to enroll in schools of higher learning. As a result, the phenomenon of conversion began to rise rapidly.

It was during this difficult period, when the persecution was worsening, and with the Yidden on an extreme spiritual low, that Horav Levi Yitzchok received the offer to become rav of Yekaterinoslav.



Those who supported his candidacy knew that he was the only person who will be able to deal with the issues that plagued the city. With his knowledge, Chassidus, strength of character and talents, they recognized that he would be the best choice to be the captain, and direct the Jewish ship that was being shaken to no end.

## The Rabbonim

During the years preceding the appointment of Horav Levi Yitzchok, a number of well-known and distinguished rabbonim served the community faithfully. The first rav of Yekaterinoslav was Reb Chone'le, who seems to have been a Chossid. As the community grew and spread throughout a larger area, two rabbonim were appointed; Rabbi Binyomin Zakheim was appointed rav of the center of the city, while Rabbi Dov Zev Kozvenikov, a revered Chossid of the Tzemach Tzedek, also called Reb Bere Volf, took responsibility for the Yidden living in the neighborhoods bordering the Dnieper river.

The city continued to grow, and in 5659 (תרנ"ט) a brand new Jewish neighborhood was established, with an urgent need for its own rav. Rabbi Levin, a young energetic man in his thirties, was brought in to take the job.

When he arrived in Yekaterinoslav, he found that many of the communal institutions had been neglected; the two rabbonim were elderly, and were having a hard time fulfilling their duties. Being the youngest among them, Rabbi Levin began working hard to serve the needs of the Yidden throughout the city; it was possible to see him running busily each day from one responsibility to another, while stopping off in the middle at the houses of the elder rabbonim to obtain their advice in complicated *dinei Torah*. Occasionally, Rabbi Levin was assisted by Rabbi Boruch Zaslevsky, one of the prominent *dayanim* in the city, who dealt with most of the *gittin*.

This situation continued for nine years, and then the city underwent a dramatic transformation.

In Teves of 5668 (תרס"ח), Reb Bere Volf fell ill, and passed away on 27 Teves, at sixty-eight years of age. In the month of Nissan of that year, Dayan Zaslevsky contracted an illness, and passed away two days before Pesach. On Lag Ba'omer, Rabbi Levin was testing children in the local Talmud Torah, when he caught a cold, fell ill, and passed away a week later at the young age of forty-two.

Within five months, the city lost three of its four most distinguished Rabbonim. Until their passing, peace had reigned in the city. Now that new rabbonim were to be appointed, major disagreements broke out; the city became divided into different camps: Chassidim, *misnagdim*, and *maskilim*.

## Controversy

The Chassidim had their eyes set on Horav Levi Yitzchok; the Rebbe Rashab himself instructed him to apply for the position, and actively worked to convince the leaders of the city to appoint him. (For a number of years before then, the Rebbe Rashab had begun to include Horav Levi Yitzchok in all of the conferences that he called to deal with public matters.) The *misnagdim*, *maskilim*, Zionists and high society on the other hand, fought to appoint an *olam'she* rav, Rabbi Pinchas Gelman.

The opposition to Horav Levi Yitzchok's appointment was not simply out of high regard for Rabbi Gelman;

many of the opponents simply could not bear the thought that a Chossid might once again be appointed to lead the city. The Zionists in particular were up in arms; the Rebbe Rashab had just published a letter denouncing Zionism and its goals, and they, joined together in a well organized and powerful organization, were not about to allow his close disciple to assume their city's most prestigious religious position.

Surprisingly, one influential individual, a prominent member of the Zionist party, worked hard to turn the tide in Horav Levi Yitzchok's favor.

Rebbetzin Chana relates:

"Sergei Pavlov Fallei was one of the city's most respected members of the Zionist movement. His father, however, had been a Chassidic Jew from Lithuania; a wealthy man, who had given his son a religious education.

"Following the meeting at which the Zionists resolved to oppose Schneerson's candidacy, Fallei told the Chassidim—who had proposed his candidacy—that he wished to meet the young rabbi.

"Following the meeting, Fallei called a group of acquaintances and urged them to form an 'army,' which he would lead, to fight for this candidate's appointment as rav. Having come to know him, he said, nothing should stop Schneerson's appointment, whatever the cost: 'Such a towering personality should not be allowed to go elsewhere.'

"At its own meeting, however, the Zionist party had decided to oppose my husband's candidacy. Accordingly, if Fallei remained a party member, he could not participate in advancing my husband's appointment. He therefore formally handed in his withdrawal from the party in order to remain free to work on the issue of the *rabbanus* as he saw fit.

"In any case, a dispute broke out in the city's Jewish community, with parties and families who previously had lived amicably becoming mortal enemies, divided by their opinions on the issue, for or against the candidate for rav.

"The Chassidic camp was led by Sergei Fallei. This reminds me of what Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev said of a Jew he saw reciting his daily prayers while greasing the wheels of his wagon. 'Even while greasing the wheels,' he commented, 'he is praying to Hashem!' Similarly, it sometimes happened that Fallei could be sitting on the boulevard on Shabbos afternoon, smoking a cigarette, while considering ways to get the Chassidic

rabbi appointed. He would say he viewed this not as an issue affecting only an individual, but it was in order to ensure that the philosophical outlook of Chassidism not be forgotten and, in general, to reinforce the traditional Jewish way of life."

Ultimately, the warring sides reached an agreement; Rabbi Gelman would succeed Reb Bere Volf in the neighborhoods adjacent to the river, and Horav Levi Yitzchok would move to the new neighborhood, in the place of Rabbi Levin.

This arrangement continued until the passing of Rabbi Zakheim, when Rabbi Gelman moved to take his place in the center of the city, and Horav Levi Yitzchok transferred to Rabbi Gelman's neighborhood. After the passing of Rabbi Gelman, Horav Levi Yitzchok was finally called to the center of the city. From then on, he was the only, uncontested rav of Yekaterinoslav, and the light of his wisdom and leadership shined far and wide.

*THE NEW YOUNG RABBI,  
TOOK OFF HIS NEW  
CLOAK AND SAID:  
"HERE YOU HAVE THIS  
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BEGIN BUILDING A MIKVEH."*

### Proposals in the council

Once appointed, Horav Levi Yitzchok began working tirelessly to strengthen the Yiddishkeit in the city. The prevailing attitude in the community council and in the influential class was one of apathy and indifference to all things Jewish, and Horav Levi Yitzchok had to work extra hard to bring about basic changes in Jewish life. We can get a glimpse into the effort he invested, and the influence which he had, from an observation made by one member of the community, a doctor, who mused to Rebbetzin Chana:

"Schneerson is a most interesting person, but he is exactly meticulous—he insists on fulfilling every single word stated in the Shulchan Aruch. When we read through the protocols of community meetings, three



REBBETZIN CHANA

quarters of them consist of Schneerson's proposals—which are of no concern to the rest of us at all. Yet he manages to get all these proposals incorporated into our community's social life.”

One of Horav Levi Yitzchok's first endeavors was regarding a basic element of Jewish living; the *mikveh* of Yekaterinoslav had grown old and unfit for use, and Horav Levi Yitzchok made it a priority to correct its sorry state. He gathered the community leaders, and told them about the severity of the issue, but they resisted; claiming that there isn't adequate funds in the community coffers.

The new young rabbi stood up to his full height, took off his new cloak which he had just begun wearing in honor of his distinguished appointment, and said:

“Here you have this garment, which costs a significant sum, and with its worth we can begin building a *mikveh*.”

The formerly apathetic community leaders were impressed with the severity of the issue, and immediately undertook to correct it.

Horav Levi Yitzchok's efforts to influence the Yidden of the city did not sit well with many of his opponents; some of them looked for every opportunity to challenge

him and hinder his activities. When he removed a *shochet* from his post after deeming his *shechitah* un-kosher, the elder rabbi of the city personally took offense, and staged a *din Torah* where testimony was presented contrary to the stance of Horav Levi Yitzchok. The testimony was presented by a passing traveler who took the stand, and claimed to have seen the *shechitah* in question, contending that it was done satisfactorily, contradicting the claim of the new rabbi.

Upon hearing the ‘traveler’ present his testimony, Horav Levi Yitzchok was shocked to realize that he was none other than one of the supervisors of the *shechitah* in the city, a close friend of the elder rabbi, who had simply dyed his jet black beard to red, and had adorned his face with thick spectacles. Once confronted, the supervisor readily admitted his guilt, bringing the case to an end. For Horav Levi Yitzchok however, the case was not over. So bothered he was from the ridiculous and incessant disturbances to his work, that he was bedridden for the following two weeks out of heartache.

## A Dance with a Shoemaker

The efforts to disrupt Horav Levi Yitzchok's Rabbanus knew no bounds. In a *Sicha* in 5745<sup>3</sup>, the Rebbe recounted another attempt, which took things to a new level:

“When my father became rav in Yekaterinoslav, in place of Reb Dov Zev, there were those that weren't happy that a *chassidisher* rav was once again appointed, especially being that he was a Lubavitcher rav, and they searched for ways to get rid of him.

“They didn't need to search for long, for being that he was a Lubavitcher, they already had a well-paved path: informing [to the government].

“Sure enough, one bright day the chief of police showed up in our home, saying that he needed to speak to the rav in a private room.

“It is easy to imagine the fear that this occurrence brought to everyone. In those days, during the rule of Nikolai, the appearance of the chief of police himself was no small matter.

“After he left, we asked my father to explain what had happened, and it turned out that this had been a case of *mesirah*. Someone had informed the government that my father is not befitting to lead the city since he was sighted drinking *mashke*, holding the arm of the shoemaker, and dancing with him...

“For such a distinguished city—the *mosrim* had explained to the chief —the largest and most prominent in the entire region, it is entirely improper for a ‘drunk’ who dances with a shoemaker (the most unbecoming profession in those days) to serve as chief rabbi. Surely, they continued, the chief of police will know how to deal with such a rabbi. The first thing is obviously to remove him from his post!

“This *mesirah* actually had a basis: That shoemaker was no ordinary shoemaker; he was a Chossid, who was very knowledgeable in Chassidus, and even more so in issues of *avodah*. For his occupation however, in order to support himself and his family, he was compelled to be a shoemaker.

“When Yud-Tes Kislev or Purim came around, a *chassidisher* farbrengen took place, where the shoemaker was obviously present.

“During the farbrengen, they understandably drank a bit of *mashke*, and as the farbrengen progressed, the

attendees broke out into a *chassidische* dance. So it came about that my father danced with the shoemaker after a bit of *mashke*, and that was the basis of the *mesirah* that he drinks *mashke* and dances with the shoemaker.”

## Only the Truth

Unfazed by the constant interferences with his work, Horav Levi Yitzchok stood strong for his principals, and refused to acknowledge the nay-sayers. Throughout all of his years as rav, the trademark of his leadership was the resolute insistence for the upkeep of every iota in *halacha*, and his fearless and unapologetic stance that he took in any area of Yiddishkeit, no matter the ramifications.

During his initial years in Yekaterinoslav, this was expressed mainly against the *maskilim*, who often scoffed at the ‘ancient ways’ and ‘primitive customs’ of the observant Jews. At a time when many felt that Yiddishkeit was on the defensive, and one needed to be sensitive to the turbulent times, Horav Levi Yitzchok spurned all apologetics.

A common attempt by observant Jews at the time was to explain the meaning of seemingly senseless mitzvos, attempting to portray them as logical ideas. Kashrus, for example, was explained to be a health regulation, designed to protect one from harmful foods and eating habits. Horav Levi Yitzchok would say no such thing. When a woman came to him with a *shailah* on a chicken, he intentionally proclaimed the fowl to be totally healthy, but nonetheless one hundred percent *treif*.

Reb Nochum Goldshmidt related that one Yom Tov, Horav Levi Yitzchok walked into the *maskilim*’s shul, ascended the *bimah*, and loudly denounced the existence of the shul. Such a public ‘desecration’ was wrought with danger, but that did not stop Horav Levi Yitzchok from going ahead with it. Concluding his statement, he got off the *bimah*, and immediately left the shul. As he was leaving, Reb Nochum said, the Gabbai spoke disrespectfully to Horav Levi Yitzchok, and a short time later he, as well as his wife, passed on to a different world...

When it came to education, Horav Levi Yitzchok once again rejected any attempt for change. The *maskilim* had come up with a new pedagogical formula, claiming that it was superior to the old ‘*kametz alef uh*’ curriculum. When talk of a new Talmud Torah arose, they were eager to implement their new system, but Horav Levi Yitzchok spent many hours trying to

## “GUARD MY SOUL”

Rebbetzin Chana relates the following incident, which took place during her years under Communist rule:

I recall an incident when I once left my house late at night and encountered an acquaintance who belonged to the most secular Jewish circles. He approached me, furtively glancing all around to make sure no one saw him speaking to me. When he was certain no one was looking, he asked whether I remembered the banquet at the home of “a certain communal activist.”

Present at that banquet was a certain Dr. Friedman, a university lecturer who belonged to non-Chassidic circles. He had received rabbinic ordination and considered himself a significant Torah scholar. At the dinner, he had asked the rav about the *possuk*, “שמרה נפשי כי חסיד אני” - “Guard my soul, for I am a Chossid.” It implies, he teased, that being a Chossid requires careful vigilance.

My husband, the rav, replied, “That’s because, for a *misnaged*, even careful vigilance wouldn’t help!”

Dr. Friedman, together with everyone present, applauded my husband’s witty response.

convince the community board to vote against the proposal.

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PROCLAIMED THE FOWL  
TO BE TOTALLY HEALTHY,  
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HUNDRED PERCENT TREIF.

### Growing Support

As the years passed, support for the new rav began to grow. Little by little, the influential Jews of the city were won over by Horav Levi Yitzchok's sincerity and steadfastness in Yiddishkeit. One would have thought that his many arguments and disagreements would have gained him staunch enemies, but the very opposite was true. Countless of those that had opposed his nomination now visited his office, often seeking his

guidance and counsel, and his sermons on Yomim Tovim began to draw larger and larger crowds.

Rebbetzin Chana relates how years later, people would comment to her that they remember the stories and messages that he had passed on in his speeches.

"They reminded me how he used to 'live' the story. For example, there is the story about the Baal Shem Tov's gentile servant, Alexi, who once saw a *shochet* prepare his slaughtering knife by rubbing his saliva over it to make it easier to sharpen. He commented, in Russian, 'Isrolik [the Baal Shem Tov] didn't do it that way. He would cry and use his tears to make it easier to sharpen.' When my husband would tell this story, his face would turn very red, large tears streaming down his face! Not everyone experiences a story so deeply or becomes so transported into the world of the story's character."

While many of them did not revert back to being observant Jews, these Yidden nonetheless supported Horav Levi Yitzchok in his work, and publicly acknowledged his leadership and wisdom. A request from the rabbi to many of them was like a



FARBRENGEN CHOF AV 5737.

YOSSI MELAMED via JEM 127734



commandment from G-d, and they would go to great lengths to fulfill it.

## The nucleus of Chassidim

Along with the support of the wider community, Horav Levi Yitzchok had a close circle of *mekuravim*, who were his steadfast admirers, and they attempted to be in his company at every opportunity. Consisting mainly of the Chabad Chassidim in Yekaterinoslav, they would gather in the rav's house on special days such as Yud-Tes Kislev, Purim, and even regular Shabbosim, to participate in his *farbrengens*.

It is from these gatherings that we hear about Horav Levi Yitzchok's lengthy discourses in Kabbalah; the Rebbe's father would speak Chassidus for many long hours, expounding on deep topics, often replete with *remazim* and *gematria's*. Nevertheless, he would accommodate all of his listeners; when talking to simple people, he would find ways to explain the lofty concepts in simple words<sup>4</sup>, and when speaking before the more learned Chassidim, the talk would take on a deeper form. From time to time, he would also deliver a *hadran* on a *masechta*. The *farbrengens* would then attract crowds from a larger circle; yeshiva students who were not necessarily attracted to Chassidus nevertheless refused to miss an opportunity to hear the *ge'onishe hadranim* of the rav.

A unique time in the presence of Horav Levi Yitzchok was Motzei Yom Kippur. Returning home from shul, he could not just settle down into his regular schedule. He would sit down, drink just a cup of tea, and lead a *farbrengen*—while still clothed in his *kittel* and *gartel*

RETURNING HOME FROM SHUL, HE COULD NOT JUST SETTLE DOWN INTO HIS REGULAR SCHEDULE; HE WOULD SIT DOWN, DRINK JUST A CUP OF TEA, AND LEAD A FARBRENGEN UNTIL TWO OR THREE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

which he had inherited from the Tzemach Tzedek—until two or three o'clock in the morning.

The *seder* night was also a significant time; although after a tiring day and a lengthy process of selling the *chametz*, Horav Levi Yitzchok led a Seder late into the night, leading deep discussions together with his sons and guests which had gathered around the table.

## Years of Persecution

As World War I passed, Russia underwent significant changes. The Czar, once an invincible autocrat, was unceremoniously deposed. A bloody civil war broke out; the Communists, known then as the Bolsheviks, fought bitterly for control of the vast empire, while being contested by the Democrats who fought to bring freedom and democracy to Russia.

After a few short years, the victory was in the hands of the Bolsheviks, who lost no time implementing their plans and promoting their way of life. Within a short time, all religions came under intense persecution. A special organization was created specifically to combat Yiddishkeit; run entirely by Yidden, they went about fulfilling their task ferociously, attempting to impede the progress of any religious institution or individual, all in the name of freedom and equality.

It was during these hard years that Horav Levi Yitzchok's strength of character came out in an entirely new light. Until then he may have had to deal with opposition and annoyances, but now, insisting on principles was a matter of life or death. No imagination was necessary to figure out what the government might do to someone who stood up to them. Many a rav was exiled to Siberia, and many others were killed outright; no one could know who was next on the black list in the offices of the NKVD.

During a time that many rabbonim went underground, Horav Levi Yitzchak remained at the forefront of the efforts to preserve and strengthen Yiddishkeit. Never for a moment did he try to appear as if he had rescinded his post and retired to a life of privacy.

There was a period that the government decided to 'help' all of the uncooperative rabbonim—such as Horav Levi Yitzchak—understand that they would be better off staying to themselves. Their method was simple. Rather than outlawing the *rabbanus* outright, they simply imposed an astronomical tax on anyone who insisted on retaining his post. Retiring, however, required a rav to



THE PIRUSHIM OF HORAV LEVI YITZCHOK ON THE FOLIOS OF A SEFER HAZOHAR.

publish an advertisement in the newspapers, where he would declare that he has understood that his previous ways had been wrong, and he had come to see the value in Communism and socialism.

Such advertisements soon became the norm. Horav Levi Yitzchak, however, did not plan for a second to play into the hands of the Communists. He would remain rav no matter what, and would unabashedly continue to promote Yiddishkeit throughout his city, and throughout the entire region. The tax was ultimately dealt with in a different way, and Horav Levi Yitzchok was not compelled to renounce his Yiddishkeit.

Horav Levi Yitzchok did not feel that this public support of Torah and mitzvos was unique to the status of a rav. When the Russian government did a census, asking citizens if they believe in Hashem, Horav Levi Yitzchok personally went from shul to shul and any gathering place in between, encouraging all to unabashedly declare their belief in the *Aibershter*,

declaring that it is forbidden for a Jew to disconnect himself from Hashem, even for a short moment. In her memoirs, Rebbetzin Chana wrote about the effect that the *drasha* had on one particular individual:

“His words had such a remarkable impact, that one individual with a position in a government office, whose wife had already written on the form that he was a non-believer, went to the statistics office and asked for the erroneous information to be corrected—that he was, in fact, a believer. Very pleased that he had mustered the courage to do this, the fellow came to thank the rav for having influenced him so”.

### The Conference

“No thank you,” Horav Levi Yitzchok told the officer, “I can travel on my own dime.” The officer stared at him, shell-shocked. Horav Levi Yitzchok was sitting in the offices of the NKVD, with a prominent officer across the desk.



M. BARON via JEM 147592

THE REBBE DAVENS AT THE AMUD FOR MINCHA, CHOF AV 5746.

An important conference was to take place in Kharkov, the officer explained to him, and Horav Levi Yitzchok's presence was imperative. The Pope had just denounced Soviet Russia for its persecution of religion, and had awakened a storm of protest from people the world over. The Soviet leadership did not appreciate the tarnished image that the denunciation had generated, and was attempting to mend it by publishing declarations of the rabbinical leaders stating that there is no religious persecution in Russia.

One such letter had already been published, as a result of a conference of rabbonim in Minsk. Seeing their success, they were now attempting a similar gathering in Kharkov, and hoped for the presence of the distinguished rabbis of Ukraine. This conference, they knew, would not be complete without Horav Levi Yitzchok. They were also aware, that the Rav of Yekaterinoslav was a hard nut to crack, and would need extra 'encouragement' for his presence to be secured.

Therefore, the NKVD officer made Horav Levi Yitzchok aware of the importance that the government placed on the meeting's success, and offered him a first-class ticket to Kharkov.

Horav Levi Yitzchok's response shocked the officer, but he swallowed the insult and was content with the fact that Horav Levi Yitzchok had agreed to travel there in the first place.

Arriving at the conference, the rabbonim noticed a stranger among them. The NKVD had placed an informer to report on all their conversations, and the rabbonim were obviously not comfortable speaking their minds.

One person stood out; Horav Levi Yitzchok took the podium, and stated, in no uncertain terms, that it was forbidden to sign the document, built entirely on lies and deceit.

Seeing the disaster that the conference would amount to, the minister of education invited Horav Levi Yitzchok for a conversation, where he reminded him of the importance and significance that the government saw in the success of the conference, and made him aware of the severity of his actions.

The private talk had no effect. Horav Levi Yitzchok refused to back down; he intensified his efforts to ruin the conference, and even sent a secret message

to the international press, making them aware of the government's actions.

The conference was a failure, and the Soviets were once again shamed in the international press when the stories broke.

## Midnight Ceremonies

Yiddishkeit came to a standstill. Rabbonim, *mohelim* and *shochetim* were a scarcity. Yidden throughout Russia, who held Jewish practice close to their hearts, moved their observance underground. Weddings, *brissin*, and other Jewish milestones were hard to organize, and while they were officially legal, one risked his job and reputation—in the least—if he dared go ahead with it.

Nevertheless, Rebbetzin Chana retells numerous stories of the weddings, *brissin* and other functions that Horav Levi Yitzchak organized, often at very great risk.

Dealing with a city which included many non-observant Jews necessitated that Horav Levi Yitzchak deal with them in a unique way, so as to encourage them to grow closer to Yiddishkeit, while at the same time remaining faithful to the boundaries of *halacha*. This was especially expressed during the *Yomim Noraim*, when hordes of Jews would pack into the often empty shuls, awakened by their *pintele Yid* which lay dormant a whole year round.

During the years of Communism, many Yidden expressed a wish to be able to daven with a proper *minyán* on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Being that those days usually fall out in middle of the week, their wish was hindered by their obligations to their employer—the government of the USSR. Requesting a day off would be tantamount to openly defying the government and its policies.

Sympathetic to their situation, Horav Levi Yitzchok organized early morning *minyanim*, after which the well-meaning Yidden would hurry off to their places of work, returning in the late afternoon to conclude the day with *ne'ilah*.

In the words of Rebbetzin Chana:

“For this service the shul was overcrowded, with many forced to stand outside. Everyone was exhausted from the fast and from having walked long distances. The physical strain was in addition to the spiritual agony from their awareness of the exalted day on which they had had to work, besides the heartbreakingly emotional prayers of the *chazzanim*—all this was indescribable.

“The congregants expressed heartfelt thanks to my husband for making it possible for them to participate in

## MITYA

Mitya Gurary was a young man who grew up in Yekaterinoslav, and became close to the rav and his family, gradually adopting all of their customs and becoming an observant Jew. His closeness to the rav of the city did not go unnoticed by the faculty of the university he attended, and they would often lay obstacles in his path, and persecute him on every step.

When he was sent by his school to volunteer on a *kolkhoz* [communal farm], he took advantage of the opportunity to visit the Yidden of the surrounding villages, bringing them tefillin and mezuzos, which Horav Levi Yitzchok had sent with him.

Well liked, and successful in his studies, Mitya—or Mordechai—rose in prominence, and was working towards his doctorate while clandestinely continuing his connection to Horav Levi Yitzchok and his dedication to Yiddishkeit.

One pleasant day, tragedy struck. Mordechai went to bathe in the river, and drowned. Knowing of his dedication to Horav Levi Yitzchok, Mitya's family asked him to lead the funeral, and promised to follow all of his directives.

Rebbetzin Chana relates:

“The shul's *gabbaim* brought a table out into the street and asked the rav to address the assembled. For more than an hour he described Mitya's religious lifestyle and how he had maintained his religious conduct, both during his studies and at home, with courage and fortitude. My husband addressed the young people, pointing out how one can be religious without it disturbing one's association with the secular world.

“The rav's words had a tremendous impact on his audience. Many were convinced he would be arrested following the delivery of such a speech. But this happened in 1935; he wasn't arrested until 1939”.

congregational prayers on the High Holidays, despite the early hour.

“Copious tears poured down my husband’s face as they spoke to him about this. Deriving intense satisfaction from their spiritual inspiration, he would comment with joy, ‘Oh, how special Jews are!’

“We were afraid to discuss such subjects very much. But my husband was pleased to have accomplished all this.”

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## Matzos: The last battle

Freedom of religion was one of the mottos of the USSR. As part of the PR campaign to prove this, they would allow the baking of matzos to take place. Being that all bakeries—as all businesses—were government run, they were the ones to actually facilitate the baking and the distribution. This was at the very same time that they were arresting rabbonim and Chassidim, and repressing religion in general.

Baking matzos was not enough. They understood that Yidden will only buy matzos with a *hechsher*; being that the Yekaterinoslav region was a outsourcer for wheat throughout the country, they wanted the local rabbi, Horav Levi Yitzchok, to certify that the matzos were baked kosher for Passover.

As per their custom, the authorities initially attempted to receive Horav Levi Yitzchok’s certification by means of intimidation. It was only when they saw that their effort bore no fruit, that they agreed to Horav Levi Yitzchok’s demand: He would be ready to certify the matzah, if the government would give him, and his *mashgichim*, full discretion in running the bakeries. If

the government would completely mix out, he would happily give the *hechsher*. If not, he would publicize that the matzos were total *chametz*, and forbidden for consumption on Pesach.

Surprisingly, they agreed, and on more than one occasion, kosher for Passover matzos were shipped throughout the entire region, giving the oppressed Yidden a chance to properly celebrate the festival of freedom.

In 5699, Horav Levi Yitzchok once again organized these shipments. Seeing opposition from the government, he decided to travel and obtain an appointment with Mikhail Kalinin, the President of the Soviet Union. As an outcome of their meeting, Mr. Kalinin gave an order that the baking of matzos continue undisturbed.

Superhuman effort was put into the baking. Obtaining the necessary permits, koshering the bakeries, and dealing with the government bureaucrats throughout the entire process was a backbreaking process which negatively affected Horav Levi Yitzchok’s health. But all that was insignificant in comparison to the spiritual pleasure that he felt. His face shined from pure happiness, knowing that he gave Yidden the ability to have a kosher and happy Pesach.

This happiness was too much for the government to bear. The final straw had been added to the camel’s back, and it was decided that the rav will not be allowed to reap the fruits of his labor.

On 8 Nissan 5699 (תרכ"ט), at three o’clock in the morning, knocks were heard on Horav Levi Yitzchok’s door. After a thorough search, the NKVD officers commanded Horav Levi Yitzchok to accompany them.

Thus began Horav Levi Yitzchok’s saga of trials and tribulations in Soviet prisons, and later in exile in Chi’ily, Kazakhstan, where he was joined by Rebbetzin Chana. After Pesach in 5704, he was granted permission to relocate to Alma Atah, where—for a few short months—he once again was able to lead a community, and teach Torah and Chassidus<sup>5</sup>. After Shavuos, he fell ill, and on Chof Av, Horav Levi Yitzchok was *nistalek*.

## Rebbetzin Chana’s return

Once, while she was living in Kazakhstan with her husband, Rebbetzin Chana returned home briefly to Yekaterinoslav. In her memoirs, she records what had happened in the absence of Horav Levi Yitzchok:

“Clandestinely, the community continued to pay my husband’s salary throughout this time, although it was illegal to do so openly. In the synagogue, they had fenced off his seat, allowing no one to come close.

“During the years before his arrest, there had been some differences of opinion between him and some congregants concerning the *nusach* of the prayers, the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah even during the silent *musaf* prayer, holding *hakafos* on the eve of both Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah, and the like. Now, however, there were no differing opinions, and everything was conducted as if my husband was still present. Even his greatest erstwhile opponents now proclaimed that the rav’s wishes, whatever they were, should be followed.

“Later, when I related all this to my husband, he was deeply gratified and pleased with this report.”

The effect of Horav Levi Yitzchok’s leadership is visible even today, many decades later. With the fall of the Iron Curtain, the sparks of Yiddishkeit remaining from his leadership burst forth. Yiddishkeit once again began to flourish, under the leadership of his son, the Rebbe *nesi doreinu*, whose shluchim, in Dnipropetrovsk, and throughout the entire former Soviet Union, continue to spread Yiddishkeit until this very day. ①



TZIYUN OF HORAV LEVI YITZCHOK.

1. Sefer Hasichos 5748 vol. 2 p. 588, Sefer Hasichos 5750 vol. 2 p. 620.
2. Reb Yisroel Aryeh Leib, Horav Levi Yitzchok and Rebbetzin Chana’s youngest child
3. Toras Menachem Hisvaaduyos 5745 vol. 3 p. 1482
4. See Sefer Hasichos 5751 vol. 1 p. 317 footnote 131.
5. See A Chassidisher Derher, Av 5775.
6. Sichos Kodesh 5732 vol. 1 p. 593.

## THE FIRST BORN SON

“I was born in a Communist country; my father served as the Chief Rabbi of Yekaterinoslav. The fact that I was the first born son to my father, and was fluent in Russian led to me being called from time to time to the ‘Yevsektzia,’ where they would interrogate, pressure, and yell at me.”<sup>6</sup>

Growing up in Yekaterinoslav, the Rebbe spent the vast majority of the time in seclusion, learning under the tutelage of his *melamed*, and later with his father. However, from time to time, as we see in the above *sicha*, the Rebbe would break from his usual schedule, and participate in his father’s work.

One area where he would participate was in his father’s correspondence. As a well known rav throughout the region, Horav Levi Yitzchok received letters with halachic inquiries from all over, and did not always have the time to answer them all. Instead, he would pass them over to the Rebbe, who would prepare answers which would be sent with his father’s approval.

Often, when Horav Levi Yitzchok would seek Rebbetzin Chana’s opinion, she would tell him to ask the Rebbe’s opinion. She once related, that “my husband didn’t just love him as a father to son; he respected him, and took his opinion into account already from childhood.”

The Rebbe also participated in communal activities. Each year when Yud-Tes Kislev came around, the Rebbe would collect money, and put together a children’s *farbrengen* in honor of the day.

During World War I, when refugees spilled into the city, and a typhus epidemic broke out, the Rebbe worked around the clock to help the unfortunate victims, to the point that he himself contracted the illness.