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שוחאט

THE REBBE'S MELAMED

REB SHNEUR ZALMAN VILENKIN

This article is based on Derher's conversations with Rabbi Leibel Shapiro, and the Barash-Bistritzky Teshura 5780.

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The Boys of Podobranka

The town of Podobranka had a thriving Jewish life. It didn't have a huge population, but was known for its atmosphere of Torah and *yiras Shamayim*, with communities of Chabad Chassidim as well as *misnagdim*, each with a *rav* of their own.

During the Rebbe Maharash's *nesius*, the Chabad Chassidim appointed a special new *rav*: a grandson of the Tzemach Tzedek by his eldest son, Reb Boruch Sholom—Reb Levi Yitzchok Schneerson.

When Reb Levi Yitzchok's son Shneur Zalman reached marriageable age, a *shidduch* was arranged with the daughter of the local chassidishe *gvir*, Reb Shneur Zalman Chaikin. Father-in-law and son-in-law had the same name, so the *chosson* took on the first name of his recently deceased grandfather, Boruch (Sholom), and became known as Boruch Shneur.

After several years in Podobranka, Reb Levi Yitzchok assumed a new *rabbanus* position in a different city, but his son, Reb Boruch Shneur, remained behind. So, when tragedy struck and Reb Levi Yitzchok passed away at the young age of 44, Podobranka soon received a new Levi Yitzchok: the newborn son of Reb Boruch Shneur, born on 18 Nissan 5638 (1878), four months after his grandfather's passing.

Just six weeks later, another baby was born in Podobranka. The *chassidishe* shochet of the town was Reb Levi Yitzchok Vilenkin, a highly-regarded chossid from a family that dated back to the Chassidim of the Alter Rebbe. He had a son on 2 Sivan 5638, and named him Shneur Zalman.

The two children, Shneur Zalman ben Levi Yitzchok and Levi Yitzchok ben [Boruch] Shneur Zalman, grew up very close to one another. Naturally, they were good friends, learning together in the local Chabad shul. For a short period of time, their paths would separate—but they would soon be intertwined in ways the young Zalman Vilenkin could not have foreseen.

A Call From the Russian Military

Young Zalman Vilenkin was a sharp and gifted learner. Already as a child, he memorized entire sections of Mishnayos (something which would serve him well later in life). When he outgrew his *melamed*, he continued

learning on his own in the local Beis Midrash. Mainstream Yeshivos did not yet exist in the area at that time—the Rebbe Rashab would establish Tomchei Temimim several years later, when Reb Zalman was already 19 years old.

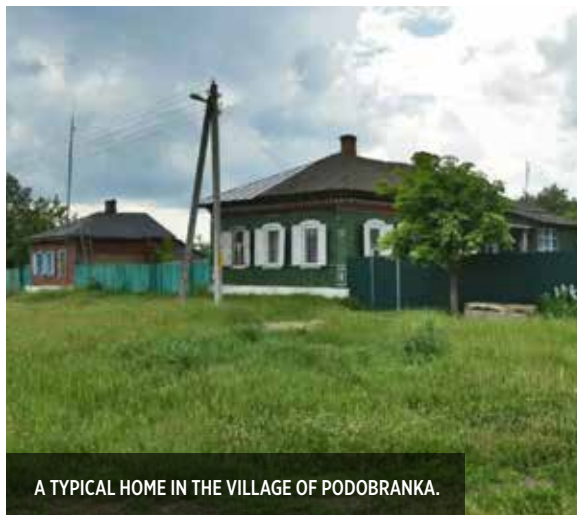
He wasn't only gifted in his learning; he was also very well-liked by his peers. His friends liked to spend time with him; he would never speak ill of anyone, and carefully avoided even a whiff of *lashon hora*.

When Zalman turned 18, a dreaded envelope arrived: a draft notice for the Russian army. Under the Czar, being a Jewish soldier wasn't just difficult—it was perilous. The gentile soldiers were antisemitic and made a sport of bullying the Jewish recruits in their free time. Even the officers were cruel and made life miserable for the Jews in their ranks.

The letter threw the Vilenkin family into chaos. They didn't have money to bribe their way out of it, and there didn't seem to be any other way to avoid this nightmare. But as Chassidim, they knew exactly where to turn. Zalman packed his bags and set off for Lubavitch.

At the appointed time, Zalman entered the Rebbe Rashab's room and handed him a *tzetel* explaining the situation. The Rebbe Rashab read the note and said, "Go home—you have nothing to worry about."

When Zalman shared the Rebbe Rashab's words back home with his parents, the sense of tension immediately lifted. He returned to the shul to resume his learning as though the draft notice had never arrived. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and then years. Eventually, it became clear—the army had simply forgotten about him.



A TYPICAL HOME IN THE VILLAGE OF PODOBRANKA.

The Planned Parnassa

When Reb Zalman reached marriageable age, he married Rivka, the daughter of the Reb Mottel Milavsky of Brayen, and settled near his in-laws. As time went on, he realized he needed a steady source of *parnassa*, and his father-in-law, who was a shochet, offered to teach him the trade. Before long, Reb Zalman had learned the craft of his father and father-in-law, becoming a skilled shochet himself.

Life was still very difficult. The economic situation in the small towns of Russia was increasingly dismal; thousands were leaving the *shtetlach* for jobs in the big cities, and *shochtim* like Reb Zalman were barely eking out a living. He needed to find a better arrangement.

Then, one day, an offer came that he couldn't refuse.

His old friend, Harav Levi Yitzchok had just been appointed the *rav* of Yekaterinoslav and had quickly gotten to work revitalizing the city's Jewish life. When he heard that his old friend Reb Zalman had become a shochet, he decided that he would be the perfect person to fill the position of shochet which had recently become vacant. Move to Yekaterinoslav, he sent the message to Brayen, and I'll make sure you have a good position here.

For Reb Zalman, it was the perfect opportunity. He didn't think twice; that same year, he and his family packed their bags and headed off to Yekaterinoslav.

The Missed Opportunity of a Lifetime

Bad news came to Reb Zalman when he arrived in Yekaterinoslav. The *shechita* position had already been filled; there was no need for his talents as a shochet after all. Given the state of communications in those days, Reb Zalman had missed the opportunity.

But Harav Levi Yitzchok had a different idea. He had just arrived from Nikolaev with three children in tow. His oldest son, the Rebbe, was just turning seven years old and was in need of a competent *melamed*. Would Reb Zalman open a *cheder* for them?

With few other options, Reb Zalman agreed to the proposal. Years later, he would say that it was the best missed opportunity of his life.

The Rebbe learned in Reb Zalman's home on 22 Kazansa Street for nine full *zmanim*, from age seven to eleven and a half, learning Chumash-Rashi, Nach, Mishnayos, and Gemara. As time progressed, more children joined the *cheder*—the Rebbe's brothers Reb Dovber and Reb Yisroel Aryeh Leib, and other children their age, such as Reb Nochum Goldshmidt and Reb Berel Rikman.

Reb Zalman's daughter, Mrs. Chana Shapiro, remembered the younger children of the *cheder* in her home. "It was a small, cramped apartment, and they would spend hours learning there. When they had recess, they would play in the apartment or sometimes go out to the street;



REB ZALMAN VILENKIN.



HOME OF REB ZALMAN IN YEKATERINOSLAV,
WHERE THE REBBE LEARNED AS A CHILD.

sometimes I remember my mother chasing them out, and they would laugh...”¹

But the Rebbe would sit separately. Reb Zalman would first learn with the Rebbe for a short period of time, and then, as he moved on to teach the younger class, the Rebbe would remain sitting in a corner, learning on his own.

Reb Zalman would later relate that the Rebbe was very reserved. He rarely engaged with the other children. He told his grandson, Rabbi Leibel Shapiro of Miami, that the Rebbe once asked such a sharp question that he was left in shock—he couldn’t believe that it came from so young a child.

He also shared a story about the Rebbe’s brother Reb Yisroel Aryeh Leib:

When he was too young to learn, Rebbetzin Chana would send him along with his two older brothers to Reb Zalman’s house so that he could play in an environment of Torah. One day, Reb Zalman asked the older boys a difficult question, and as they were trying to figure out the answer, Reb Yisroel Aryeh Leib—who had been lying on the couch, seemingly in his own world—piped up with a brilliant answer.

Harav Levi Yitzchok’s Insistence

Reb Zalman was outstanding in his *emeskeit*, his *chassidishkeit*, and his *midos*. One of his most striking traits was his refusal to speak negatively about a fellow Jew. If someone tried to share something critical about another person, Reb Zalman would immediately shut it down and find a way to see the good in them instead.

He was also an exceptional *melamed*. Along with his vast knowledge of Torah—both *nigleh* and *nistar*, he made the most complicated ideas clear and accessible, and his teaching left a lasting impression on his students.

Harav Levi Yitzchok, who had known Reb Zalman since they were young, had a deep appreciation for his teaching. He was so impressed that when a shochet position finally opened up, Reb Levi Yitzchok refused to let him go. A *melamed* of Reb Zalman’s caliber would be impossible to replace.

Rabbi Leibel Shapiro heard from his grandfather that he was a little taken aback at the time. “The Rebbe’s father refused to give him the

position—despite having moved to Yekaterinoslav specifically for that role... But later, he was very grateful that he had merited to teach the Rebbe.”

Ultimately, Reb Zalman stayed on as a *melamed* until the youngest brother, Reb Yisroel Aryeh Leib, was almost twelve, in 5678. Only then, after nearly a decade of teaching, did he finally return to *shechita*.

A Few Years of Peace

When the Rebbe and his brothers grew older, Reb Zalman Vilenkin returned to the role he had initially come for—the shochet of Yekaterinoslav. Being a shochet is not conducive to a luxurious lifestyle, but Reb Zalman was content; his poverty bothered him only when he didn’t have the funds to travel to see the Rebbe Rashab.

As long as he was left alone with his *seforim*, he was happy. He had a large collection of *seforim* in his home (his children recalled the Rebbe coming as a *bochur* to borrow and return *seforim*), a large collection in his *shechita* workplace, and there was a decent library in the “Butcher’s Shul,” the Chabad shul across the street from his home. At every free moment, he could be found among his *seforim*—and when there were no *seforim* available, he would close his eyes and review *Mishnayos baal peh*.

ARE YOU ONE OF THEM?

In Yekaterinoslav, Reb Zalman and his wife were blessed with four children: two daughters, Dina and Chana, and two sons, Yosef and Sholom Eliyahu.

Years later, when Dina, the eldest daughter, was in *yechidus* with the Rebbe, the Rebbe asked her, “I remember two children running around in the house—were you one of them?”

A similar thing happened when Chana came to New York. She visited Rebbetzin Chana, the Rebbe’s mother, and introduced herself as the daughter of Reb Zalman Vilenkin. The Rebbetzin, who remembered the family well, asked her, “Are you the older or the younger daughter?”

His *shiurim* in Ein Yaakov at the local shul drew a significant audience, and when other shuls would invite him to give a *shiur*, many of his regulars would join him, not wanting to miss the opportunity. He would also frequently repeat the many *maamarim* he had memorized, and whenever a new *maamar* or old *ksav* reached him, he would immediately use it and deliver a *shiur*.

Reb Zalman's home was a center for the Chabad Chassidim in the city. *Shadarim* (such as Reb Itche Masmid) or visitors always knew there was an open door in Reb Zalman's home. Life seemed fairly simple and peaceful, but dark clouds were gathering on the horizon.

The Days of Communism

As the revolution tightened its grip over Russia, *chinuch* became increasingly complex. The new regime wanted all children to attend the government-run schools, which would teach *kefira*, and enforce attendance on Shabbos. Reb Zalman wouldn't hear of it. He kept his children home and taught them himself. He and his wife did their best to shelter them from the neighborhood children as well, hoping to protect them from outside influences. His wife sewed them dolls for them to play with in their free time.

Yekaterinoslav—renamed Dnipropetrovsk—was still a relatively calm place for Yidden. The persecution wasn't yet as intense as in other parts of the country. So, in 5689, an underground branch of Tomchei Temimim was opened in the city.

Some forty *bochurim* arrived from the shuttered Yeshivos of Nevel and Charkov. Their *mashgiach* was Reb Mendel Futerfas, and they learned in the women's section of a local shul. Hosting *bochurim* or associating with the Yeshiva was a life-threatening endeavor, but Reb Zalman and other families ignored the dangers and welcomed the *bochurim*. Reb Meir Itkin and Reb Michoel Teitelbaum, for example, lodged in Reb Zalman's house during their studies in the Yeshiva.

But the Yeshiva didn't last long. After two years, the police closed in on the location and barged into the Shul, trying to "catch them in the act." The *bochurim* managed to escape through the windows, but their *seforim* and belongings were confiscated. The Yeshiva was closed down for good.

In the early 5690s, the Soviet government passed a new law targeting "unfit citizens": anyone not properly employed by the regime had no right to live in

government housing. As a *shochet*, Reb Zalman's work was deemed illegal, so one summer day, officials arrived and threw him and his family out of their apartment. Homeless, they spent several months living in the courtyard of the Butchers' Shul until they were able to rent a privately-owned home.

As the years passed, arrests became more and more



REB DOV ZEV KOZHVENIKOV.

MOVING THE RAV

One day, the Dnipropetrovsk city council decided to erect a park on the site of the Jewish cemetery. Led by Harav Levi Yitzchok, the community gathered to move the bodies of the *Rabbanim*—the chassidishe *rav* Reb Dov Zev Kozhvenikov, who had passed away some twenty years earlier, along with the former *rav* of the Litvishe community.

When they cleared the dirt around Reb Dov Zev, they were astounded to discover that his body was complete, like the day of his burial. The community elders remembered that it was exactly as they had buried him back then.

When they brought out his body, Reb Zalman Vilenken related to his grandsons, "*Dem Rebbe's Tatte hot a gos geton mit treren*—rivers of tears were streaming down the Rebbe's father's face..."

frequent. *Melamdin*, *Rabbanim*, *Shochtim*, and *Mohelim* were quickly disappearing, and Dnipropetrovsk was no exception. The fear in the Vilenkin home was palpable; Reb Zalman was a shochet, a prime candidate for arrest, but miraculously, it never came. Just like the Czar's army so many years earlier, the authorities seemed to have forgotten about him...

During those difficult years, another tragedy befell Reb Zalman: his wife Rivka fell ill and passed away. A few years later, he married Zelda Katzenelenbogen, his wife's long-time friend.

The Wedding

One day, Reb Zalman was conversing with Harav Levi Yitzchok's brother, Reb Shmuel Schneerson. Reb Shmuel pointed to his former *talmid*, the Rebbe, who was 15 years old at the time, and said, "You see him? He is a *baki* in the entire Shas—Gemara, Rashi, Tosfos—and the entire Likkutei Torah with all its references."

A true moment of *nachas* came when the news arrived that the Rebbe would become the son-in-law of the Frieddiker Rebbe. "On the occasion of the Rebbe's wedding," his son Reb Yosef recounted, "the *rav* and Rebbetzin held a celebration in their home, and the entire city came to participate. We too—my father and our entire family—were there, and it was very lively, with singing

and dancing the entire time. I remember that Harav Levi Yitzchok spoke words of Chassidus—and we later discovered that it mirrored the *maamar* the Frieddiker Rebbe delivered at the wedding in Warsaw."

Reb Zalman later related how he remembered Harav Levi Yitzchok composing a 101-word telegram² to his son, the *chosson*; by the time he concluded, the tablecloth was soaked in tears.

During the celebration, Reb Zalman was overcome with joy. At the height of the evening, he danced on the table with all his strength, saying, "*Ich hob zoche geven*—I had the merit..."—his own *talmid* had merited to become the Rebbe's son-in-law.

Escape

When the Nazis neared Dnipropetrovsk in 5701, Reb Zalman Vilenkin and his family escaped to the distant city of Makhachkala, the capital of the Dagestan region.

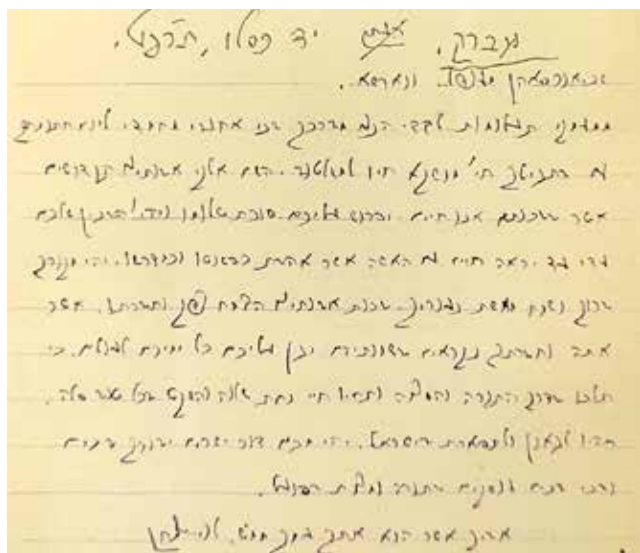
Among the thousands of refugees crowding the city was a group of Jews from a certain city who had evacuated together. They were uneducated and could barely speak Yiddish, but they asked Reb Zalman to deliver classes between Mincha and Maariv. He was happy to acquiesce, and began teaching Torah, reviewing *maamarim*—all in Russian—and serving as their shochet. He quickly became their full-time *mashpia*.

However, news soon arrived that a group of Chassidim had settled in Tashkent, and Reb Zalman decided to relocate. His entire new "congregation" accompanied him to the train station to see him off.

In Tashkent, Reb Zalman continued doing what he always did—serving as a shochet, davening and learning at length in his free time. People began coming to hear his *shiurim*, which, in the diverse Tashkent refugee community, now attracted Jews of all stripes.

Reb Meir Itkin related that many people would come to see his davening. "He would emphasize every word and daven carefully from the siddur, but the main thing was that it was without any outward show. There were other Chassidim who davened at length, but people came specifically to see his davening; everybody was awed by his *pnimiyus* and *emeskeit*."

His granddaughter Mrs. Eda Shpringer, who grew up during that period, reflected that she had never in her life heard her grandfather raise his voice. "He always spoke softly and nicely, and never said a bad word about a fellow Jew. He just sat and learnt—he was a very special Jew."



THE 101-WORD TELEGRAM SENT BY THE REBBE'S FATHER TO THE REBBE ON THE DAY OF THE WEDDING.

It's Not For Me

After years of deprivation in Tashkent, the war finally came to an end. A ray of light opened for Chabad Chassidim—the Russian government decided to allow Polish refugees to return to their country, and the Chassidim grabbed the opportunity. Passports were procured, names were changed, family groups were reinvented, and all the Russian chassidim suddenly became “Polish.”³

Reb Zalman and his daughters joined the mass exodus, and on Rosh Chodesh Elul 5706, they found themselves on one of the earliest *eshalons*, the trains leaving for Poland. After a short stop in Krakow, the *Breichah* organization helped transfer a large group of Lubavitcher families, the Vilenkins among them, through Czechoslovakia and Austria, until they reached the Displaced Person's camp of Poking, in the American zone of Germany.

The first act of the Chassidim was to establish a branch of Tomchei Temimim. Over the previous years, many of their own children had fallen behind in their learning, and *maggidei shiurim* were tapped to bring the *bochurim* up to their appropriate level. Reb Zalman was appointed to help guide the younger group of *zal*-age *bochurim*.

Reb Zalman was also responsible for restoring order to the *shechita* system.

When the Chassidim had arrived in Poking, they met Jews from other countries for the first time. The Russians had never seen Yidden dressed in that manner; dressed in their Shabbos finery, they seemed like angels. The Chassidim began eating from their *shechita* without compunction.

Reb Zalman wasn't pleased with this trusting attitude. He paid a visit to this specific group and asked to see their knives and their methods. He was not impressed with what he saw. Never one to speak badly about another Jew, he returned to the Chabad Chassidim and said, “The *shechita* that I saw doesn't appeal to me at all.” He refused to say anything more, but they quickly decided to arrange their own *shechita*.

Paris—Destination: America

All the Chassidim had one destination in mind—America. The Frierdiker Rebbe had moved to New York several years earlier, and the Chassidim all planned to follow. That's why they settled in Poking (and similar camps) which were located in the American zone following the



REB ZALMAN DURING HIS YEARS IN PARIS.

war.

The problem was that to immigrate to America from the American Zone in Germany, one needed to have an affidavit affirming that they were present in the area since 1945, while the Chassidim had all arrived in 1946. When the news arrived that no such affidavits were needed in Paris, the Frierdiker Rebbe established the *Lishkah*, headed by Reb Binyomin Gorodetzky, with the goal of moving the Chassidim to Paris and, over time, to America. In the span of a few short months, some five hundred Chassidim had moved to Paris.

Once again, the Chassidim immediately established a Tomchei Temimim, and once again, Reb Zalman became one of its important features.

While in Paris, tragedy struck, and Reb Zalman suffered a stroke which would leave one side of his body paralyzed for the rest of his life. For quite some time, he was hospitalized, and afterwards, was mostly confined to his home.

In 5713, the family finally received the long-awaited visas to immigrate to America. The Joint Distribution Committee informed them that they would receive apartments in Cleveland, but they would stay in New York for a short visit beforehand. Now they would have the opportunity to see the Rebbe.

This was a very special moment. After the Frierdiker

Rebbe's *histalkus*, Reb Zalman had enthusiastically signed the communal *ksav hiskashrus* to his own former Talmid and had sent *panim* of his own. When he had questions regarding medical treatment, he had written to the Rebbe for *brachos* and advice. Now, he would finally have the opportunity to have a *yechidus*.

The entire family—his wife, daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren—entered the Rebbe's room together, while the *bochurim* crowded around the doorway, hoping to catch a glimpse.

As he walked in, the Rebbe stood up, walked a few steps forward to greet him, and asked him to be seated. Reb Zalman declined. Despite his physical infirmity, it was unthinkable to him that he would sit in *yechidus*. Mrs. Eda Shpringer recalls the Rebbe noting to Reb Zalman that they had sat together “*oif ein bank*—on one bench” so many years earlier—but Reb Zalman insisted on remaining standing.

With his *melamed* standing, the Rebbe wouldn't sit down either, so the entire half-hour *yechidus* was held standing. During that *yechidus*, the Rebbe told him that he should take pride in his *talmidim*, who were now spread all over the world.

Rabbi Shapiro's Recollections

Rabbi Leibel Shapiro, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Gedolah in Miami, is Reb Zalman's grandson. He shared the following recollections:

“My earliest memory of my grandfather is from Paris,

where we lived until I was six years old. The Joint rented several locations around Paris to host the refugees of *anash*; we were set up in a hotel called *Modern*, where every family received one room. I remember jumping on my Zeide's bed and getting hurt...

“Later, we lived very close to each other in Cleveland, and soon after he moved to New York in 5719, I came to learn in New York as well. I arrived in Elul 5720, and I lived in his apartment until his passing, in Iyar 5723. My brother, Rabbi Sholom Ber Shapiro, and I slept in his kitchen. It seems strange to the modern ear, but we still had a very Russian mentality, and this was considered completely normal to us. It also gave us the opportunity to assist him and to learn from him.

“In his later years, his eyesight began to deteriorate, and he couldn't learn normally with *seforim*. Instead, he used to review *Mishnayos baal peh*—those Mishnayos he had committed to memory when he was a young child. Whenever I would enter his house, he would be reciting Mishnayos. He would often tell us to take a Mishnayos and correct him if he made a mistake; so we got to learn Mishnayos with him too.

“His davening was a special thing to see. He said every word with such beauty and such *geshmak*... He was a person who was *avoda* through and through. I never heard him say a bad word about anyone. I only remember him once gently hinting to a family member about the importance of speaking only positively.

“When we lived in Cleveland, he was already paralyzed, but people knew that there was a venerable Yid



RABBI SCHAPIRO (LEFT) AS A BOCHUR WITH HIS BROTHERS IN CLEVELAND, OHIO, LATE 5720S.



REB ZALMAN DURING HIS YEARS IN CLEVELAND.

SCHAPIRO FAMILY

living in the city. People would come to visit him, and he would give a regular *shiur* in Chassidus.

“Every Yud-Tes Kislev, *anash* would arrange a big Yud-Tes Kislev farbrengen. My father, Reb Lipa Shapiro, usually gave the keynote address, and my Zeide would review a *maamar*. When my Zeide moved to New York, the Rebbe mentioned to my father in *yechidus* that now he had more work—he would need to review the *maamar* as well...

“My grandfather had an amazing way with words. His stroke paralyzed him physically, but his speech wasn’t impaired—on the contrary, it was a pleasure to listen to him.

“When I was a young child, there was a Yud Shevat farbrengen at his house. He farbrenged about the concept of *ein od milvado*, and I remember understanding every word, despite my young age. At the end of the farbrengen, the *balebatim* were getting ready to head out into the snow when one person couldn’t find his rubbers (*galosh’n*). As he began looking all over, he said to his friend, ‘Where are my *galosh’n*?’ His friend, without missing a beat, replied, ‘What *galosh’n*, who *galosh’n*—*ein od milvado*!’

“In the late 5710s, my grandfather was thinking about moving to New York. He wanted to be closer to the Rebbe and live in the chassidishe environment of Crown Heights, and it was now feasible because one of his daughters had recently moved there from Cleveland. The only problem was that he received government support—they called it ‘relief’ at the time—from the state of Ohio, and certain details needed to be arranged before it would be possible for him to receive it in New York.

“I was in *yechidus* at the time with my father. The Rebbe told my father that there is a Yid named Friedman—a son of the Boyaner Rebbe—who works in the relief office of New York. We should reach out to him and tell him that the Rebbe asked for his assistance. Tell him, the Rebbe said, ‘*az ich gedenk noch di bleter gemara vos mir hoben gelerent tzuzamen*—that I still remember the pages of Gemara we learned together.’

“When my Zeide finally arrived in New York, he went into *yechidus* again, accompanied by one of his grandchildren. When my Zeide apologized to the Rebbe and said that he could not possibly stand, the Rebbe said that it wasn’t a problem at all. If I remember correctly, I heard afterward that the Rebbe replied something to the effect of, ‘*Mit fertzig yor tzurik hoben mir gezetzen ba ein gemara, velen mir oich itzt zitzen tzuzamen*—forty years ago we sat together over one Gemara; now we will sit

together again.’

“My Zeide wouldn’t often speak about the Rebbe as his *talmid*; he would more often speak about the Rebbe as Rebbe. He was a true *mekushar*; whenever a new *sicha* came out, he would immediately learn it; I often heard him speak about the Rebbe in wondrous terms. To him, the Rebbe wasn’t his student—it was his Rebbe, who he had the privilege of teaching so many years earlier.

“He would often ask me to bring to *Mazkirus* the letters and *panim* he wrote to the Rebbe. He never sealed the letters, so I noticed the concluding line—*משתחוה הנני מול*. That’s how he would always write to the Rebbe. He never felt special in any way.

“Because he couldn’t walk, he wasn’t able to attend the Shabbos and Yom Tov Farbrengens, and the weekday Farbrengens—which in those years were not frequent—were very long, and it was difficult for him to remain. At the time, the benches in 770 didn’t even have backs. So, he would come for part of the time. He would usually come at the beginning and stay as long as he could, and on occasion, he would come late and stay until the end.

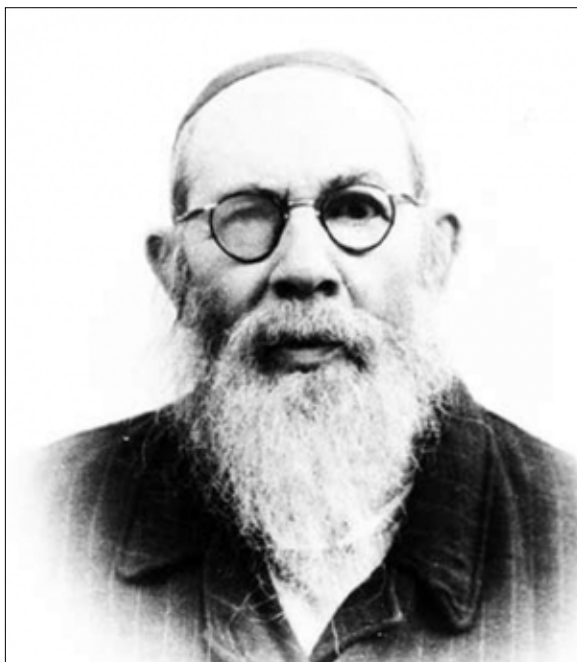
“When he left, he would first make his way over from his place behind the Rebbe to say *l’chaim*, and as he left the room—not a quick process—the Rebbe would always stand up halfway, as he would do when reciting kiddush. If he came late, and entered in the middle of a *sicha*, the Rebbe would raise himself up all the same.”

An Unprecedented Levaya

In Iyar of 5723, Reb Zalman suffered another stroke. The doctors wanted him to be hospitalized, and when the Rebbe heard about it, he said they should hire a full-time nurse, and he would cover the entire cost. Over the next few days, Reb Zalman’s health began to deteriorate, and on Thursday night, 23 Iyar, he passed away.

A large crowd attended the *levaya* the next day. In an unprecedented fashion, the Rebbe participated in carrying the *aron*, and then got into his car to travel to the cemetery, remaining there until the end of the *kevura*. (The Rebbe remained outside the cemetery gate and watched the entire proceedings; he explained to Reb Shmuel Levitin—who accompanied the Rebbe in the car—that if he entered the cemetery, he would need to visit the Ohel too, and he hadn’t made the proper *hachanos*.) The Rebbe paid for the entire expense of the *kevura*, and told the family to symbolically participate with one dollar.

At the farbrengen the next day, the Rebbe spoke about



REB ZALMAN IN HIS FINAL YEARS.



REB ZALMAN'S MATZEVA.

the unique merit of those who are buried after *chatzos* on Erev Shabbos—the Arizal writes that they are spared *chibut hakever*.

“When it came time to write the *matzeva*,” relates Rabbi Shapiro, “my aunt brought the draft to the Rebbe in *yechidus*. The Rebbe commented, ‘*Farvos shteit do nit az er hot oich gelernt mit Yiddishe kinder*—why doesn’t it say here that he also learned with Jewish children?’ The Rebbe continued: ‘*Ich bin an eidus*—I can testify to that.’ The Rebbe mentioned that there were other witnesses as well—such as Reb Nochum Goldshmidt.

“The Rebbe told my aunt that Reb Yisroel Jacobson was coming to *yechidus* that same evening. He was in charge of the *chevra kadisha*. ‘*Ich vel shoin mit em reidin vos tzu shreiben*—I will discuss with him what to write.’

“My aunt waited in *Gan Eden Hatachton*, and when Rabbi Jacobson emerged, he gave her the text that was ultimately put on the monument, which included the words, “ק אדמו”ר, זוכה אשר כ”ק אדמו”ר, he learned and taught Torah in public and with students, and had the merit that the Rebbe, R. M”M Shlit”a learned with him.”

The Rebbe participated in the cost of the *matzeva* as well; he said that the two daughters should each pay a third (the sons were still in Russia at the time), and he would pay the final third.

He Put Me On My Feet

Rabbi Shapiro relates:

“When my brother Reb Sholom Ber had a baby boy in 5738, the Rebbe asked Rabbi Mindel—his father-in-law—what name they had chosen at the bris. He responded that they had named him after his great-grandfather, Reb Zalman Vilenkin. The Rebbe said to him, ‘*Er iz geven mein melamed*—*er iz geven a gehobener Yid. Er hot mir aruf-geshtelt oif di fis*. He was my *melamed*. He was an exalted Jew. He stood me up on my feet. *Der rach hanimol zol gein in zeine veges*. The new baby should go in his ways.” ¹

1. Interview in JEM’s Early Years vol. 1.
2. Published in Likkutei Levi Yitzchok—Igros Kodesh, p. 207.
3. See “The Great Escape,” *Derher* Adar II 5782.



Much of the information in this article, and much more, can be found in the forthcoming book, *Legacy of Resilience: The Remarkable Journey of the Schapiro Family*, by Nuchie Schapiro.