

# The Original Pinye

By: Rabbi Mendy Greenberg (Twinsburg, OH)

The Althaus family looms large in Lubavitch history. Reb Elya Chaim, Reb Binyamin, Reb Pinye—all exceptional characters and devoted Chassidim of the Rabbeim. The patriarch of the family, Reb Pinchas Todros became a chossid of the Tzemach Tzedek and founded the chassidishe community in Nikolayev, the Rebbe's hometown. The following account, written by his grandson, tells the story of Reb Pinye's life.

## The Origin Story

My grandfather, Reb Pinchas Todros, was originally from Lithuania. Because of fear of the *chapers*<sup>1</sup> his family moved to a small town in Courland. But even there, things were unsettled, and Reb Pinchas and his two older brothers eventually fled to Königsberg.

His family were staunch *misnagdim*—followers of the Vilna Gaon who firmly opposed Chassidus. The brothers were completely immersed in Torah study, barely ever leaving the *beis midrash*. Their meager meals were brought to them there, and they would nap briefly on the benches to regain strength before continuing their learning. They only went home for Shabbos. My Zaide, himself a notable *talmid chacham*, would speak with deep admiration about his older brothers, saying, “My brother Eli—he was truly great. I didn't even reach his ankles!”

What caused Zaide—still just a teenager of about 17—to suddenly leave his brothers and pursue a life

of Chassidus remains unknown. One day, he left his father's home and his brothers behind and set off—by foot, with a walking stick and a pack on his back—to Lubavitch, the heart of Chabad Chassidus. He traveled for many days, through forests and over rivers, until he arrived. The Rebbe at the time, the Tzemach Tzedek, warmly greeted the young Litvak and drew him close. Reb Pinchas settled in Lubavitch, married, and started a family.

But his time in Lubavitch didn't last long. A devastating cholera epidemic swept through the area, claiming many lives, including those of his wife and all his children.

Around that time, a second wave of Jewish pioneers began moving from White Russia to the southern Russian plains.<sup>2</sup> With ox-drawn wagons, they made the slow, difficult journey. Along the way, they buried their dead and gave birth to new life—until they finally arrived at their new settlements.

The Tzemach Tzedek instructed the young widow-



THE FAMED CHASSID, REB ELYE CHAIM ALTHAUS, SON OF REB PINYE.



THE ORIGINAL CHABAD SHUL IN NIKOLAYEV.

er to join this journey as his personal representative. No official letter of appointment was given, because a Rebbe's authority isn't like a government office. With no title or written mandate, purely with inner strength and spirit, my Zaide inspired and led the group, first on the journey, and then in building their new lives.

## A Nikolayev Farbrengen

Although his passport listed his official occupation as “farmer,” Reb Pinchas Todros actually lived in the city of Nikolayev. People from farming colonies near and far would turn to him—for advice, for help, or just to hear a warm word when their hearts were heavy, or when they needed a bit of joy and inspiration.<sup>3</sup>

Though he was poor and barely managed to support his family, he was rich in spirit. A deep, unshakable joy filled his heart, rooted in his firm *emuna*. It was part of his nature, part of his blood, and Chassidus only deepened and broadened its horizons. His sharp Litvisher mind worked hand in hand with that joyful spirit, and together, they made him someone to whom people naturally gravitated.

My mother once told this story: At the time, they lived in the military district of the city, in a courtyard belonging to an old Greek man. It was a freezing winter night. Everyone in the house was asleep, and even my father had closed his *sefer* and gone to bed. Suddenly, there was a knock on the window. My grandfather jumped up. “Who's there?” he called.

“*Chevre!*” came the answer—it was three *chassidische yungeleit*: one from this colony, one from another, and the third—a dear guest—was the young *shochet* from Otchakov. They had arrived late; where would they go if not the home of Pinchas Todros?

Zaide ran to the door, opened it wide, and welcomed them with a beaming smile, warm handshakes, and hearty pats on the back. The guests, wrapped in frost and steaming from the cold, slipped inside, a bit embarrassed, huddling near the stove to warm up.

“Riva!” he called to his wife. “Riva, wake up! We have guests, guests!” Without missing a beat, she got dressed, greeted them with a smile, and immediately went to the stove to prepare a big pot of *fish kartofels*—potatoes flavored as if they had been cooked with fish, spiced with onions and pepper—though no actual fish ever made it into the pot. It was the classic poor man's dish.

Meanwhile, Zaide put on his coat and headed out into the pitch-black night to hunt down a bottle of *mashke*. “*Yagaata umatzasa, taamin!*” says the Gemara. Sure enough, not long after, he came back glowing, pulling the long-awaited bottle from his coat.

By now, the children were awake. The unexpected excitement lit up the house. They quickly dressed, eager to see the guests and soak in the joyful atmosphere. Zaide sat down at the table with the guests and opened a *maamar chassidus*. Then they washed, said *hamotzi*, and warmed their hearts with one *l'chaim*, and another,

and another. As the joy built up, someone began to sing the Alter Rebbe's *niggun*, "*Tzama Lecha Nafshi*," and soon they were soaring from one *niggun* to the next. The hearts were lifted, the room was glowing.

Suddenly, one of the guests jumped up—he couldn't contain himself anymore—and burst into dance. His friend joined him, caught in the same fire, then the third, and Zaide among them. The children clapped along to the rhythm, dancing and singing. After a while, Zaide went outside, brought in some straw from the shed, and laid it out by the stove as beds for the guests. "My father's home was eternally joyful," my mother said.

## The Gabbai's Account

But it wasn't only from my mother that I heard about Zaide's special qualities. One Shabbos, during davening at the "Poilishe shul," a bunch of kids—myself included—were misbehaving. The gabbai, Reb Aharon Zayablin, came over and scolded us. All the other kids ran away. But me? Maybe I was too slow. Maybe I was just too proud. I didn't move.

The man came up to me and asked, "Why didn't you run away like the others?"

I stayed quiet and looked down at the floor.

He bent down, gently lifted my chin with his finger, and looked me in the eyes. "Whose child are you?"

I told him.

He asked again, "Is your mother's name Rasya? Was your grandfather Reb Pinchas Todros?"

I nodded.

"In that case," he said, "you're allowed to stay."

Then he pulled me aside and told me, "I was once a child too, and I used to play with the other boys. Do you know what our best moments were? When your grandfather would come to our shul on Shabbos. As soon as he arrived, all the children would flock to him. He was just like one of us—he would play with us, talk with us. The things we learned from him! We followed him like little chicks after their mother. We hung onto every word he said. We loved him with all our hearts."

What's amazing is that Zaide wasn't much of a talker. He actually stuttered a bit and had trouble speaking. But Reb Aharon Zayablin, who recalled him with such fondness, seemed to forget that. Clearly, there was something about my grandfather that completely overshadowed his speech—and made him a person everyone wanted to talk to.

As I mentioned earlier, Zaide was poor. No matter how many people admired him or how sharp and clever he was, he never managed to establish himself financially. In those days, the Jewish community of Nikolayev was small, and most of its members were well-off. A few respected householders got together and decided to



NIKOLAYEV APPROXIMATELY 150 YEARS AGO.

help Reb Pinchas get on his feet—they opened a tobacco shop for him. But Zaide wasn't successful in business, and eventually had to close the store.

For years afterward, he sold lottery tickets for a living. At the same time, he gave regular *shiurim* in Gemara and Halacha to older *bochurim* who had aged out of *cheder* but kept learning on their own.

I don't think Zaide lacked practical skills. It's just that the back-and-forth world of business—the bargaining, the marketplace—was completely foreign to his spirit. It clouded his joy. And joy, true inner joy, was the very essence of who he was.

## The “Rambam”

Zaide's joy was endless and infectious. Every day was a new adventure for him, full of wonder. He never got upset about being woken from sleep—instead, he would smile as if to say thank you for bringing him back to life.

That was how he was year-round—and all the more so on Shabbos and Yom Tov, especially on days of joy like Simchas Torah, Purim, and most of all, Yud-Tes Kislev—the day the Alter Rebbe was liberated.

Simply through his presence, Zaide brought people closer to Chassidus. One such person was a young man named Meir, a brush-maker, who had drifted away from Yiddishkeit and gotten caught up in a life of 'entertainment.' While everyone else avoided him, Zaide welcomed him in. Eventually, he did full *teshuva*, grew a beard and *payos*, and became a dedicated *lamdan*.

Back then, it was common among Chassidim to refer to each other by *roshei teivos*. Zaide was known as “RaPaT” (Reb Pinchas Todros). He jokingly gave this *baal teshuva* his own set of initials: “RaMBaM”—Reb Meir Bershteleh-Macher (Brush-maker). It may have been a joke, but the name stuck with him well into his old age.

I never met my Zaide—he passed away many years before I was born. But I did see the “Rambam,” the nickname Zaide gave that *baal teshuva*. He was blind in both eyes, an elderly man who never left the Chabad shul; that's where he learned and taught. One of his students, an orphan from childhood, eventually became one of the elder Chassidim in Kfar Chabad.

Zaide loved animals. Whenever he made a *bracha* on bread, he would tear off a piece, dip it in the soup, and lean down to feed it to the cat that waited patiently by his chair.

And he had compassion for every person. There was a woman who lived in their courtyard—a destitute widow. Her husband had died in a work accident, and she was left all alone with a baby in her arms. She was from the far north and known locally as “the Katsapkeh.” One bitterly cold winter morning, Zaide left the house to go to the *beis midrash*, but quickly turned back. “Riva,” he said to my grandmother, “invite the Katsapkeh and her baby to come stay here for a while—it must be freezing in her room.”

It's no wonder that Dr. Matos, Zaide's physician, burst into tears walking behind the funeral and cried out, “*Pana ziva, pana hadara*, the beauty and splendor of Nikolayev is gone!”

He was quite a character, this doctor. A captain in the navy, dressed in a sharp uniform with a sword at his side—but that was just the exterior. Inside, he was a warmhearted Lithuanian Jew, a sharp and brilliant *yeshiva bochur* at heart. Torah never left him. How he ended up in the naval academy in Petersburg, or in a permanent military post, I don't know. And there are other details I never uncovered—perhaps the most important of all: whether, at any point along his unusual path, he had formally abandoned his Yiddishkeit. He had a civilian medical practice in addition to his naval service, and when he met Zaide, he was drawn to him. He would visit from time to time, sit with him privately, and pour out his heart.

Zaide passed away on a Friday evening, right after *licht-bentchen*, with a volume of Gemara in his hands. During his final illness, he asked that a wooden plank be placed in his arms, so he could rest the Gemara on it and finish the *masechta*. Finishing a *masechta* is usually a joyous occasion—with friends gathered, cups raised, *niggunim* sung, and dancing—but he didn't merit that. He passed at age 54. **T**

*Account by Emanuel Harusi, formerly Novograbelsky. His memoirs of Nikolayev, published in the Barada Teshura of 3 Teves 5779, paint a fascinating picture of the city and its Chassidim.*

1. Those who would kidnap Jewish boys for the Czar's army.
2. This is a reference to the Kolonyes. See “Fields of Faith,” Derher Adar I 5784.
3. For more about the origins of the Nikolayev community, see “Cradle of Greatness,” Derher Nissan 5781.