

IN THE FOOTSTEPS
OF CHASSIDIM

MOVING THE OHEL

THE STORY OF THE REBBE
RASHAB'S RESTING PLACE

לזכות החיילים בצבאות ה'
מנחם מענדל בן חי' מושקא שי'
לרגל יום הולדתו ז' מר-חשון
אסתר הנג' רחל בת חי' מושקא תחי'
לרגל יום הולדתה י"א מר-חשון

שמעון בן חי' מושקא שי'
שיינא בת חי' מושקא תחי'
אליהו שמואל בן חי' מושקא שיחי'
יה"ר שיגדלו חי' לים בצבא כ"ק אדמו"ר
מתוך שמחה, בריאות והרחבה

The News

It was the winter of 5699, the worst days of Soviet Russia. Stalin's purge was at its height; nightly arrests were made, and millions of people were sent to the Gulag. Countless Chassidim had already disappeared. People were terrified; informers were everywhere, and the slightest slip of tongue could be a death sentence.

One day, shocking news reached the Chassidim in Rostov: the authorities had decided to erect a new complex of buildings and they had found the "perfect" location: the old Jewish cemetery. The gravestones would be removed, and buildings would be erected in their place.

The plan sent a shiver down every chossid's spine. The old cemetery contained the Ohel, the holy ground under which the Rebbe Rashab was interred. The Rebbe's resting place was going to be plowed over.

What to do?

There was no point in approaching the authorities. The Rebbe Rashab was the father of the Frierdiker Rebbe, considered a "mortal threat" to the Soviet cause. There would be no sympathy from the government; the mere thought of bringing up the issue was terrifying.

There was only one solution: to move the Ohel to the "new cemetery," at a different location, which wasn't under

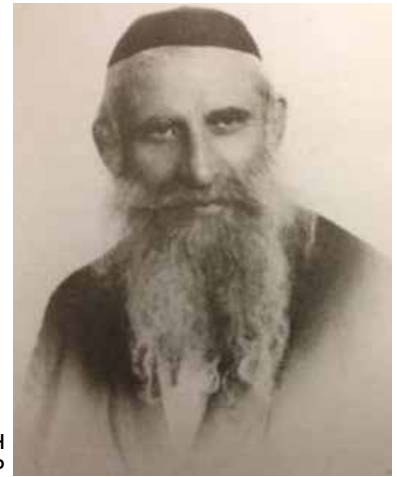
threat—and to do so under a thick veil of secrecy.

The Chassidim were concerned about the potential reaction from the government, but they were even more concerned about the prospect of digging up the Ohel and moving the Rebbe's holy *guf*. Disturbing those who have passed on to eternal rest is something that Halacha does not take lightly, and now they were forced to do so to the Rebbe himself!

There were countless questions. How should they open the *kever*? How should they transport—and re-interr—the Rebbe's holy remains? A secret letter was dispatched to the Frierdiker Rebbe, who was living across the border in Otwock, Poland.

The reply soon arrived to the Chassidim in Charkov, who quickly passed it on to Rostov. The Frierdiker Rebbe approved of the move. For the specifics, the Frierdiker Rebbe instructed them to consult with his *mehutan*, Harav Levi Yitzchok Schneerson, the Rebbe's father, who was still serving as the Rav of Yekaterinoslav; he would be arrested only a few months later.

A Chossid named Reb Moshe Volf Labok—who had served as the Rebbe Rashab's personal shochet—was dispatched to Yekaterinoslav to consult with Harav Levi Yitzchok. He soon returned with instructions and the Chassidim got to work.



REB YONAH
EIDELKOP

The Day Arrived

A minyan of Chassidim gathered secretly. Reb Tzemach Kutman, Reb Mendel Kantor, Reb Moshe Volf, Reb Nachman Lokshin, Reb Avraham Katzenelson, Reb Yonah Eidlkop, and four others. They fasted the entire day, and—with no available *mikvah*—poured *tisha kabin* of water on themselves. A large, sturdy stretcher was procured from the son of a local Jew, and late that night they set out for the cemetery.

It was an especially dark night, and the rain came down in unusually heavy torrents. The ground was covered in snow and ice.

The Chassidim approached the *tziyun* and asked *mechila*, then started digging around the *kever*. After several minutes, they were awestruck; the Rebbe's holy *guf* was complete and unchanged; there was only a small crack that seemed to appear near his heel, which was also slightly askew; Reb Tzemach gently straightened it out. Even the tallis was intact.

Together with three *tefachim* of dirt, they carefully brought up the Rebbe Rashab's *guf* and laid it on the stretcher, which was then covered with a cloth.

At first, the Chassidim planned to carry the stretcher on their shoulders to the new cemetery, but they quickly realized that it was impossible. With three *tefachim* of dirt, the *aron* was incredibly heavy; moreover, the weather was terrible

and the Chassidim were weak from fasting. They needed to find a car.

Reb Yonah Eidelkop decided to go to the government. The official responsible for a fleet of cars was Jewish, the son of an acquaintance, who had become an avowed communist. Of course, it was impossible for Reb Yonah to reveal the true reason for his request; he simply asked for a vehicle to transport a newly deceased person to the cemetery.

At first, the communist official categorically refused. But Reb Yonah persisted; he begged, cajoled, cried, and finally declared that he would not leave the house until the man agreed. Ultimately, he agreed to send a van and a driver.

Reb Yonah quickly directed the driver to the old cemetery where everyone was waiting. They set up a divider between the driver and the rest of the vehicle, and loaded the *aron*, with the Chassidim sitting around it.

The vehicle couldn't fit through the gate of the new cemetery, so the *aron* was placed on their shoulders and carried a considerable distance to the new *kever* that had been dug in advance. The torrential rain did not abate, and they were forced to take several breaks just to catch their breath.

When they finally arrived, they placed the *aron* in the new site, following all of the instructions of Harav Levi Yitzchok carefully. Later, they returned to remove the bodies of Reb Shmuel Gurary and eight other Chassidim, who were each

laid to rest in the same order as they were near the previous Ohel. An intact silk handkerchief was found inside Reb Shmuel's grave; the Chassidim realized that it was the handkerchief the Rebbe Rashab held during *maamarim*, which he had given to Reb Shmuel as a gift.¹ Soon, an Ohel was erected over the site, sponsored by the more well-to-do Lubavitcher Chassidim in Leningrad.²

All seemed to end well, until the truth was discovered by the Communist official and his wife. They were furious; if the scheme was discovered, the man was sure to lose his job or worse. To placate them, Reb Yonah paid their home another visit. He explained the incredible merit they had in protecting the Rebbe Rashab's Ohel, and promised that no harm would befall them.³

The Source

This entire account was related by Reb Yonah Eidelkop, the only participant who managed to leave the Soviet Union. After emigrating, he described the events in a letter to the Frierdiker Rebbe which was published at the end of *Ashkavta D'Rebbi*. The names were only printed as initials; several of the participants remain anonymous.⁴

Reb Yonah would later relate that even the Rebbe Rashab's tallis remained complete, covering his holy face and beard. Whenever he would recount the story, he would be overcome with emotion.⁵

However, it seemed that there was another story—of which Reb Yonah himself was unaware.

Rabbi Elyashiv Kaploun served as the Rebbe's shlichus to Rostov for many years. Over the course of his *shlichus*, he published a book called "*BeSoch Hagolah*," chronicling the history of Rostov's Jewish community. In the process of compiling material, he interviewed many of the city's elders.⁶

One interviewee was Reb Eliyahu Friedman, whose childhood years had been spent in Rostov. He was the son of a Tomim from Lubavitch, Reb Mordechai Aharon Friedman.

"One day, some time before my father's imprisonment," he related to Rabbi Kaploun, "my father, along with a few other Chassidim, was involved in transferring the holy body of the Rebbe Rashab to a new burial site nearby.

"I remember that when he came home that evening, my mother offered him some food, but he was too overwhelmed to eat. He told my mother the details of the transfer; he said that the Rebbe Rashab looked as if he was alive, '*a lebediger!*' Even the tallis hadn't moved; it was as if the *kevura* had taken

place that day!

"It was a laborious task to move the many stones from the old site to the new location, which was in the same cemetery, about a hundred meters from the original site. At the new site, there was no longer a stone structure and a *matzeiva*; there was just plain earth."

To Rabbi Kaploun, this was a dramatic discovery. Reb Elyeh Freidman was clearly not speaking of the same event described by Reb Yonah Eidelkop. Reb Elyah's account was about a move within the same cemetery, while Reb Yonah's described a move to a different one. Reb Elyah's father Reb Mordechai Aharon was arrested and sent to Siberia in 5695, five years before the events described by Reb Yonah Eidelkop, and his initials are not included in the letter. Reb Elyeh insisted on his version of the story, and claimed never to have heard the other one.

The History

According to Rabbi Kaploun, there is good reason to believe that Reb Elyah's account is correct, and that prior to the move to the new cemetery, the Ohel was moved within the old cemetery.

In the Frierdiker Rebbe's Igros, there are two letters from 5693-5694 which speak about renovations at the Ohel.⁷ The details of the renovations are unclear, but they might be connected to an earlier incident.

In the early years after the Rebbe Rashab's passing, the home adjacent to the Ohel was occupied by the *shamash* of the cemetery, but he and his family behaved in a manner inappropriate for the holy site. One day, the Frierdiker Rebbe called Reb Shmuel Gurary and said "My father complains that he cannot bear the behavior of the neighbors." Reb Shmuel spoke with the *shamash* and asked him to move to a different location, but he refused.

He soon fell ill. During the Frierdiker Rebbe's next visit to the Ohel, the *shamash* came out to speak to him, and the Frierdiker Rebbe promised him that if moved homes, he would enjoy a complete recovery. However, he remained adamant in his refusal, and soon passed away.

About a year later, a Lithuanian Rav moved in with his family. Their behavior was again unbecoming; his family would also laugh at the Chassidim coming to the Ohel and belittle them. Again, the Frierdiker Rebbe sent warning messages and offered to cover the cost of the move. "Do everything you can to convince them," the Frierdiker Rebbe told

the messenger; “*a rachmonus oif a Yid!*”

The new resident said that he was a *misnaged*, and not afraid of Rebbes. Within a short time, he unfortunately passed away as well.⁸ (Later, the Frierdiker Rebbe allowed a chossid to take up residence in the same location, instructing him to keep certain windows closed and not use the two rooms closest to the *tziyun*⁹).

This story was recorded in full detail by Reb Folleh Kahn in *Shmuos V’Sipurim*. A short version is also extant in the Rebbe’s Reshimos, in a collection of letters he copied directly from the Frierdiker Rebbe’s Igros. The Rebbe repeated the story in his painful *sicha* on Tu Bishvat 5737, after the Frierdiker Rebbe’s Ohel was desecrated by vandals.¹⁰

Another incident took place shortly after leaving Russia. In an extremely sharp letter, the Frierdiker Rebbe writes a rebuke to the Jewish community of Rostov “for raising their hands to take revenge on the Chassidim, for coming close to the Ohel of the Rebbe.”¹¹ The letter doesn’t spell out what happened, but it seems to refer to other people being buried very close to the Ohel, in a manner which was unacceptable.

“It’s not clear, ultimately, why the Ohel was moved,” says Rabbi Kaploun. “Perhaps there were other incidents as well; Rostov didn’t have a large Jewish population, and the Chassidim may have feared that the Ohel would be desecrated.”

A final clue, Rabbi Kaploun says, was discovered in the *tzava’ah* of Reb Alter Simchovitch, who passed away in תרצ”ו. In keeping with the chassidisher minhag, he asks that his family inform the Rebbe Rashab of his passing; he asks them to do so at the Ohel, “both at the old address and the new.”¹² **1**

1. Kovetz Atarah L’Yoshnah pg. 56.

2. Estalek Yekarah pg. 208.

3. Oseh Yiddishkeit pg. 13.

4. The author of Ashkavtei D’Rebbi dates the events to Adar 5700, but that seems to be incorrect because Harav Levi Yitzchok was arrested a year earlier, in Nissan 5699.

5. Kfar Chabad Magazine issue 1074.

6. BiToch Hagolah pg. 272.

7. Igros Kodesh Admur Harayatz vol. 11 pg. 213, 229.

8. Igros Kodesh Admur Harayatz vol. 14 pg. 444. Shemuos V’Sipurim vol. 3 pg. 201.

9. Igros Kodesh Admur Harayatz vol. 14 pg. 291

10. Sichos Kodesh 5737 vol. 1 pg. 466.

11. Igros Kodesh Admur Harayatz volume 14 pg. 293

12. Tichayenu issue 10 pg. 91.



1. AFTER THE CHASSIDIM SECRETLY MOVED THE KEVER OF THE REBBE RASHAB IN 5700, THEY DID NOT PLACE A TZIYUN OVER THE SITE. THE ONLY MARKING WAS THAT REBBE RASHAB’S HEAD LAY RIGHT BEFORE A DISTINCT TREE.

IN THIS PHOTO, REB DOVID NACHSHON STANDS BY THE BURIAL SITE AS HE PREPARES TO PLACE A MATZEVA (WITH THE REBBE’S APPROVAL) ALMOST 50 YEARS AFTER THE KEVER WAS MOVED TO THIS LOCATION.

2. IN 5732, THE REBBE SENT MONEY TO THE HEADS OF THE ROSTOV JEWISH COMMUNITY IN ORDER TO BUILD WALLS AROUND THE TZIYUN. THIS PHOTO OF THE SURROUNDING WALLS WAS TAKEN IN THE MID 5740S.

3. THESE PHOTOS WERE TAKEN AFTER THE MATZEVA WAS PLACED AND A SMALL SHUL WAS BUILT ADJACENT TO THE OHEL. MOST RECENTLY, THE OHEL WAS RENOVATED COMPLETELY.