

IN THE FOOTSTEPS
OF CHASSIDIM

THE STARODUB AFFAIR

A SECRET TALE OF HEROISM

By: **Rabbi Mendy Greenberg**

In the preparation of this article, we were greatly assisted by Rabbi Shmuel Super.

Some one hundred and forty years ago, a tale of immense self-sacrifice and heroism played out in Russia. It rocked the entire Pale of Settlement. All the Jews of Russia were united in fear during the events, and collectively sighed of relief when it was over.

And then, the story disappeared.

Small snippets were told among Chassidim. There were stories of the saintly figure of Reb Zalman Neimark, the Starodub Rav, who languished in jail; there were accounts about the despised figure of Dov Lazarov, the evil informer; and there were whispers about the alleged involvement of the Rebbe Maharash himself. But the full account was never told.

In 1927, an account of the events by Professor Fisher Schneerson, a descendant of the Tzemach Tzedek, was published (posthumously) in a book titled *Kocha Shel Sanegoria*. His father had served as a Rav in Starodub, and he had also interviewed the last surviving people who had memories of the events. In his account, he describes the accusations leveled against the Chassidim, the efforts to release them, and the final ruling of the judges that resolved the affair—all in fascinating detail.

But this account is a work of historical fiction. Professor Schneerson loved to portray fictionalized historical accounts of the old Chabad world he had known in his childhood, and this work was no exception. While based on a true story, it

was greatly embellished, making it impossible to distinguish fact from fiction.

One source that contains reliable information is the account of Rabbi Avraham Yaakov Neimark. A grandson of one of the protagonists, Rabbi Neimark grew up hearing this story in his family. Later, as a Rav in Tel Aviv, Rabbi Neimark recorded the story in the introduction to his sefer, *Eishel Avraham*.

The following is his account in its entirety.

My grandfather, Harav Meshulam Zalman Neimark, was a descendant of the renowned Rav Meshulam Zalman Neimark, the Av Beis Din of *Kehilos Ah"u*—Altona-Hamburg-Wandsbek. My grandfather was a Rav in the towns of Horki, Starodub, Vitebsk, and Nevel, and it was in his home that my education began.

I remember him vividly since I was two years old. My grandfather was one of the eminent and distinguished Chabad *rabbanim* of his time. My first impression of him—which I will never forget—was upon visiting him when I was two years old at the prison in Starodub, where I was sent on a mission to bring him a gift—a snuffbox—from my maternal grandfather, Reb Akiva Posner (a descendant of Reb Baruch of Liozna, the Alter Rebbe's father).

This is, briefly, the story of his imprisonment.

לע"נ
ר' יהודה ע"ה בן ר' משה
יעקב ע"ה ביסטאן
נלב"ע ר"ח כסלו ה'תשנ"ט
ת"נצ"ב"ה

נדפס ע"י בנו
הרה"ת השליח ר' יוסף יצחק וזוגתו
מרת ביילא רחל ומשפחתם שיחיו
ביסטאן



1. BOOK ON THESE EVENTS BY FISHEL SCHNEERSON.
2. RABBI AVRAHAM YAAKOV NEIMARK.

My grandfather was incarcerated with his son, Reb Yechezkel Feivel Neimark, who later succeeded him as the *rav* in Nevel, and another eighty Jews. They were imprisoned for two years in a situation that once shook the Jewish world, but faded with the passing of the great thunderstorm that swept our world in the year 5641 [when terrible pogroms occurred in Russia].

The story began some years earlier when the Russian government introduced mandatory military service. This wasn't warmly welcomed within the Jewish community, for obvious reasons. People clearly remembered the nature of military service in Russia and what it entailed for a Jew, both physically and spiritually, and they were well aware of the limited civil rights afforded to Jews in Russia at that time. As expected, everyone sought ways to avoid this conscription. Given the level of "dedication" and "integrity" among Russian officials, and their corruption, this was not impossible. Such incidents occurred in the city of Starodub as well.

Starodub was home to a wealthy and brazen Jew who was close with the authorities. The Chassidim sensed that he was up to no good, and once, during a meeting at my grandfather's home, they insulted him. He was infuriated, and to get revenge, he informed on them to the government.

To spice up the story, he told the authorities that there was a group within the Jewish community called Chabad Chassidim, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Their headquarters were in Lubavitch, but they had representatives in every city in the country, and Rabbi Neimark was the most prominent among them. This group made it their goal to undermine the military

service laws, and Rabbi Neimark was the driving force behind this effort, with Starodub becoming a hub for all sorts of schemes to evade conscription.

This accusation was welcomed with open arms, and my grandfather was arrested as a first-class political and criminal offender. He was imprisoned under severe conditions, with no contact allowed with the outside world. After reviewing government records, they found that several hundred Jews had been released from military conscription after an examination in Starodub, and a secret order was issued to track them down and arrest them all. About eighty people were imprisoned, while the rest managed to escape and hide. The matter was assigned to a diligent investigator named Legentsov, who later became Minister of Justice.

Due to the harsh accusations, they refused to release him before the trial, and he remained imprisoned for two years until the trial finally arrived. However, as strict as they were initially, they later relaxed the conditions, as my grandfather made an indelible impression on the prison wardens. They quickly recognized him as a great and holy man, and they soon moved him and his son to a nice, clean room and allowed them to receive kosher food from home and whatever *seforim* they desired. Their prison cell became a Beis Midrash where they devoted themselves day and night to Torah and *avoda*. He even wrote *teshuvos* from his cell.

Essential messages were smuggled in small notes through a special double-layered coffee pot. I have in my possession a note from the Rebbe Maharash that reached him in prison, which said: "Regarding your situation, you have nothing to fear at all, as you heard directly from

my father, the Rebbe [the Tzemach Tzedek]. It would be appropriate to learn Mishnayos of Maseches Brachos and the Gemara of Maseches Brachos throughout the year, and Hashem will bless you with all the best, with whatever your heart desires.” I don’t know what these words refer to, but I know that my grandfather was very dear to the Tzemach Tzedek.

He became so respected in prison that when Sukkos came, they allowed him to build a sukka. His days in prison were spent learning and davening on a very high level, and throughout his life, he would speak longingly of those days.

I heard a remarkable story that took place during his imprisonment. There was a notorious thief and murderer incarcerated in one of the rooms, a man who had killed dozens of people. He was so beastly that when he had encountered a Jewish traveler on the road as he was being led in chains with a large armed guard, he had begged the soldiers to allow him to murder the Jew even while shackled; that’s how depraved he was. Yet, this murderer would be moved to tears when he heard the sounds of my grandfather’s davening and *dveikus*.

His *avoda* was truly extraordinary. I remember being ten years old when my grandfather would lead the first day of Selichos. All the *chazanim* and *baalei tefilla* would come to listen and absorb some of his heartfelt melodies; that’s how enchanting his *tefillos* were. He would lead Tefilas Tal, Geshem, Kol Nidrei and Ne’ila, and even though I heard those tunes nearly fifty years ago, I cannot think of them today without being stirred to the depths of my soul.

It was not only in those moments that he reached such high levels of *avoda*; even on ordinary weekdays, in the middle of davening, you would hear an outpouring of his *neshama*; his voice was so uplifting that they

touched the very depths of your soul, echoing the voices of the *malachim*.

Ultimately, he was acquitted in court and managed to secure the acquittal of all the other defendants as well. Of course, there were great lawyers involved, but the judges remarked that Rabbi Neimark’s broken Russian had a far greater impact on them than the long, eloquent, and polished speeches of the attorneys.

MYSTERIOUS RESOLUTION

Reb Avraham Weingarten transcribed the following story he heard from Reb Shmuel Levitin:

“Once, after Rosh Hashanah, a Chossid came to the Rebbe Maharash because he had a court case coming up. Several Chassidim had already been waiting for a *yechidus* since before Rosh Hashanah, and Reb Levik Meshares was very stubborn and did not easily allow anyone to enter out of turn.

The Chossid, who was from Starodub, was eager to enter because his court case was imminent. Reb Uri Leib, the *rav* of Pahar, was standing near the entrance; when he entered the Rebbe’s room, the Chossid held onto his coat, pushed past Reb Levik, and went in. Reb Levik saw this and caused an uproar, and the Rebbe Maharash saw what happened and sharply told the Chossid to leave immediately.

He began to cry bitterly and left the room totally broken-hearted—and soon won the court case.”



TOWN OF STARODUB AS IT APPEARED AROUND THE TIME THE AFFAIR TOOK PLACE.



It seems that this story—widely known at the time—was purposefully downplayed in the contemporary Jewish newspapers. The reason seems obvious. Spreading the news could have dire consequences on everyone involved in helping Jews evade the unfair draft.

Several letters written between Lubavitch and Starodub are published in *Toldos Chabad B’Russia HaTsaris*. The letters were written carefully with hints and allusions, but it is clear from them that the danger wasn’t just to the Chassidim of Starodub. During the interrogations, Chassidim were asked about their affiliations with the town of Lubavitch and the Rebbe Maharash. The Rebbe himself was in the crosshairs.

In the letters from Starodub written by Reb Heschel Noteh Gnessin, the Rosh Yeshiva of the local Chabad Yeshiva, he writes that the Chassidim hotly denied any connection to the Rebbe Maharash. Their frequent travels to Lubavitch, they told the interrogators, were simply to visit the Ohel of the Tzemach Tzedek who had passed away some fifteen years earlier. They refused to implicate the Rebbe.

In a letter to Rabbi Neimark from Tel Aviv, the Rebbe noted that he had personally heard about the case from the Frierdiker Rebbe, who had said that Reb Zalman had heroically refused to implicate the Rebbe Maharash.

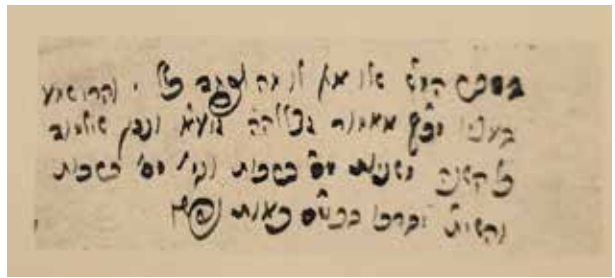
“When they wanted to make the libel about my grandfather [the Rebbe Maharash],” the Frierdiker Rebbe had related, “he took the entire thing on himself, saying, ‘Zeiner a sha’ah, an hour of his...’” To Reb Zalman, an hour for the Rebbe was so precious that he took the entire accusation on himself.¹

There was a high price to pay for Reb Zalman. In the absence of evidence against the Rebbe Maharash, Reb Zalman was the central figure caught in the conspiracy and was at risk of paying a much higher price. Nonetheless, he never said a word. He took responsibility for everything.

From a *sicha* of the Rebbe, it appears that the danger to the Rebbe Maharash was so great that it was as if the Rebbe Maharash himself sat in prison! The Rebbe noted that all the Rabbeim had been imprisoned; the Alter Rebbe, Mittler Rebbe and Frierdiker Rebbe were quite literally arrested; the Tzemach Tzedek and the Rebbe Rashab were placed under house arrest; and imprisonment was associated with the Rebbe Maharash as well, as the Rebbe said, “when he was replaced by someone else, one of the *rabbanim*, who sat in prison in his place...”²

Miraculously, the affair ended with the acquittal of all the Chassidim—but the *mesirus nefesh* of those difficult days was never forgotten. ①

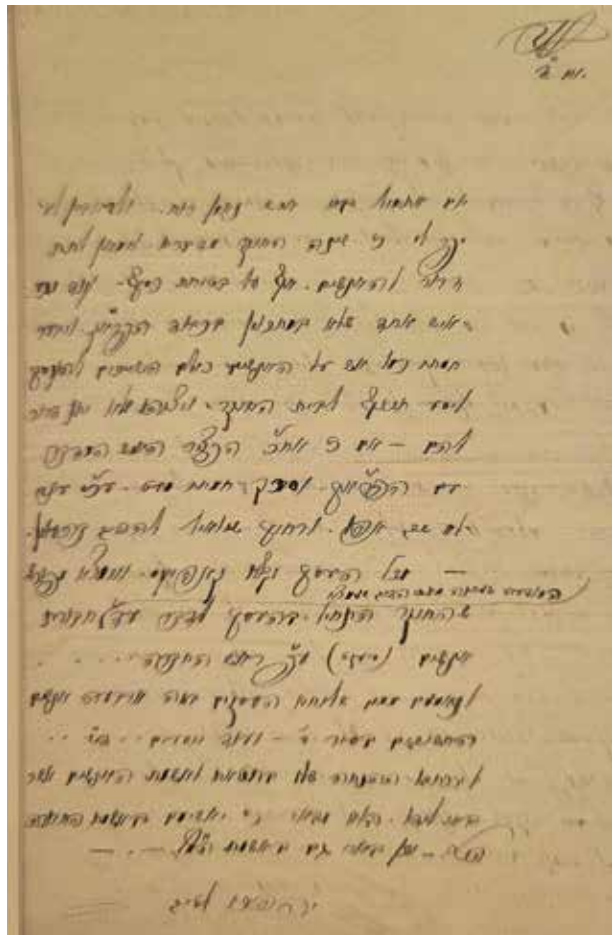
1. Igros Kodesh vol. 6 pg. 198, vol. 11 pg. 329.
2. Shabbos Parshas Shemos 5722, ois 11.



HANDWRITTEN NOTE FROM THE REBBE MAHARASH TO REB ZALMAN NEIMARK THAT WAS SMUGGLED INTO HIS PRISON CELL THROUGH A COFFEE MUG WITH A FALSE BOTTOM (PUBLISHED IN IGROS KODESH ADMUR MAHARASH, P. 23). THE NOTE READS:

בדבר המש[פט] שלו, אין לו מה לפחד כלל. והרי שמע בעצמו מ"ק אמור"ר זצל"ה זיע"א. ונכון שילמוד כל השנה משניות מס' ברכות, וגמ' מסכת ברכות, והשי"ת יברכו בכל טוב סלה כאות נפשו.

HE HAS NOTHING TO FEAR IN REGARDS TO HIS COURT CASE, FOR HE HEARD DIRECTLY FROM MY FATHER THE REBBE [THE TZEMACH TZEDEK]. IT IS APPROPRIATE THAT HE LEARN THIS YEAR MASECHES BRACHOS IN GEMARA AND MISHNAYOS, AND HASHEM WILL BLESS HIM WITH ALL GOOD, ALWAYS, AS HIS HEART DESIRES.



ONE OF THE LETTERS SENT BY REB HESCHEL NOTEH GNESSIN TO LUBAVITCH.