

The Attack of the Poalei Tziyon

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לע"נ הו"ח א"א גו"נ ר' חיים
בן הו"ח ר' יעקב ע"ה זוגתו
מרת דינה בת ר' משה ע"ה
גרייזמאן

לע"נ הרה"ח הרה"ת משה אליהו בן
ר' אברהם יצחק ע"ה זוגתו מרת
חנה עטקא בת ר' נטע זאב ע"ה
גערליצקי
ת'נ'צ'ב'ה'

נדפס ע"י ולזכות
הרה"ת ר' חיים זוגתו מרת
ביילא מינדל בניהם ובנותיהם
מנחם מענדל, חי' מושקא, לוי יצחק,
חנה דינה, משה אליהו שיחיו
גרייזמאן

Winds of Heresy

In the early 1900s, there was a spiritual epidemic. *Yeshiva bochurim* throughout Eastern Europe were being attracted to new movements spreading through the Jewish community, whose books and newspapers were infiltrating the Yeshivos. Too many Torah students were being drawn away.

When the Rebbe Rashab established Tomchei Temimim, one thing was absolutely clear; *haskalah* would make no inroads in Lubavitch. Not one inch would be given to those ideologies; not one of their books would be allowed on the premises, and not a single *bochur* would be allowed to engage with them.

For ten years, Tomchei Temimim thrived. The Yeshiva numbered in the hundreds and Jews throughout Russia had heard about the phenomenon—a group of *bochurim* left untouched by the changing times. They didn't shave their beards, they learned only Torah subjects, and they were ready to go in fire and water to preserve authentic Yiddishkeit. Soon, the Yeshiva's alumni were dotting the landscape of Eastern Europe. To the *maskilim* of Russia, Tomchei Temimim was the worst sort of enemy. If they could only *chap* one of their *bochurim*...

Soon, they found their catch.

The Boy from Chernigov

Berel Dovzik was an only child. Seeking the best possible place for his education, his father brought him to Lubavitch when he reached his fourteenth birthday to enroll him in Tomchei Temimim. He was still practically a child, but as the months passed, he began making strides in his learning and maturing into a serious *bochur*.

But then there was a minor hiccup. Being an only child, he begged for permission to go home for Pesach—which was



A DIVISION OF POALEI TZIYON FROM THE YEAR 5666.

EXCERPTS FROM
AN ARTICLE IN A
NEWSPAPER OF THE
MASKILIM DESCRIBING
THE EPISODE.

דער ליובאוויטשער רבי האט געשריבן
דעם א ישיבה. א סך פונקטערדיג האט
דיא האויבע ישיבה שוין פערשפרייט צוויי
שען אידען. אין דער ישיבה ווערען דיא
יונגע בחורים/לער שוין אזוי יעוואיטיג
ערצויגען, אז דאס ליכט האט שוין סעהר
אויף זיי קיין שליסה ניט. דיא ישיבה האט
דיא איינציגע איינסטאבע אזוי אינווארצי
לען דיא פונקטערדיג אין דיא יונגע הערר
צער, אז דארטען זאל שוין קיין סאל קיין
ליכט מיט קענען ארוינדרוינגען. אין דיא
יונגע בחורים/לער, וואס הויכען פון אלע
קלען דוסלאנד, גערען ארויס פון דער
ישיבה שוין גרויסע איינסעוואחסענע יעד
דאזיגען אין זיי צוטרעגען דיא יעוואיטיג
שען תודות פון זייער רבי'ן אין אלע זיינע
דערער.

שפאלט אין א ציטער. אז דיא הונט, פערר
ציון" האבען זיך דערוואוסט פון אדעס,
זיינען זיי געקומען צום רבי'ן מיט דער
דעה צו בעפרייען דעם „געפאנגענעם“ מיט
ניטען, אָדער מיט געוואלט. צווישען דיא
פועליציון מיט דעם רבי'ס „סטראזשיי
קעס“ וואס האבען געהיט דעם „געפאנ
גענעם“ איז אויסגעבראכען א האכער
דעם רבי'ס סטראזשייקעס, דיא ישיבה
בחורים זיינען געווען בעוואפענט מיט
טפיטער האלז און אייזערנע שטעקעס
און דיא פועליציון — מיט ליידיגע הענד
דיא פועליציון האבען דעם קאפער ניט
געקענט אויסהאלטען און האבען געמיזט
אכטרעטען, נאָר דאָ האָט איינער אייבער
טאָטען פון אַ דעוואָלוצער... געשריט האָט
עס קיינעם ניט, נאָר דער איינשלידער
האָט האָט געבראכט צו פרויעריגע רעזול
טאָטען.

usually allowed only after spending a full year-and-a-half in the Yeshiva. Under pressure by the boy's parents and also by Radatz Chein, Rav of Chernigov, the *hanhala* relented.

After Pesach, Berel didn't show up. He sent a letter saying that, due to family circumstances, he wouldn't be able to return immediately. Instead, he showed up half a year later, for the winter *zman*.

The *hanhala* didn't know what to do. It was unheard of for a *bochur* to “play hooky” for an entire *zman*! In the end, they chose to allow him back, but put him under the strict supervision of several elder *bochurim*. He was on probation—if there was any trouble, he would immediately be expelled.

Late that winter, rumors began to spread. Berel Chernigover was hanging out with members of Poalei Tziyon, the secularist youth group in Lubavitch. After a few weeks, the news landed on the Frierdiker Rebbe's desk, and he opened an investigation. He reached out to the owner of Berel's lodging, and asked for a full report.

The owner of the lodge reported that Berel had been spending nights in the company of the Poalei Tziyon. At first, he had claimed it was to convince them of the error of their ways, but he had soon begun singing their praises. It turned out that during his hiatus from Yeshiva, he had become associated with Poalei Tziyon in his hometown of Chernigov. By now, he was no longer observing Torah and Mitzvos.

At this point, Berel realized he was in trouble. When a message came from the Frierdiker Rebbe asking him to come to his office, he refused, hunkering down instead in the home of a friend. An emergency message was sent to his father: come get your son quickly. Meanwhile, the *hanhala gashmis*

determined that he owed forty-seven rubles to the Yeshiva's *gemach*, so they confiscated his belongings.

The next day, a group of five Poalei Tziyon youth showed up at the Yeshiva administration and began yelling. Berel was a member of their club, they said, and therefore could not be expelled from the Yeshiva without their agreement. They demanded the immediate release of his belongings.

Hearing the commotion from his office, the Frierdiker Rebbe asked what was going on, and soon the whole crowd entered his office. They repeated their claims, but the Frierdiker Rebbe made it very clear that the Yeshiva wouldn't be asking their advice. The boys opened their coats to show that they were carrying revolvers, but the Frierdiker Rebbe didn't seem impressed. “*Ir hot mich nisht bashafen, un nit mir vet ir upshafen. Der Oibershter firt di velt. Arois! You didn't create me, and you won't uncreate me. Hashem runs the world. Out!*”

The Kidnapping

The story was far from over. According to the lodge-owner, Berel had been under severe pressure since realizing that the Yeshiva would probably expel him, because he was terrified of the prospect of facing his parents. He had even been threatening to commit suicide. The report on Berel's mental state was concerning, and regardless, he was the Yeshiva's responsibility until he was returned to the care of his father. The Yeshiva needed to get their hands on the *bochur*.

That Motzei Shabbos, the chance arrived. Berel was walking past the *chatzer* with a group of boys and girls of Poalei Tziyon when a group of *bochurim* raced out, nabbed him, and

quickly shlepped him into the office of the Frierdiker Rebbe.

In the office, the Frierdiker Rebbe told him that he would be under the Yeshiva's care until his father arrived. Meanwhile, he would be provided all his needs—while remaining in the office. Berel did not object.

Things took a dramatic turn that night. At eleven thirty that evening, a noisy crowd of Poalei Tziyon approached the *chatzer*. Five armed leaders came to the Frierdiker Rebbe's home, demanding the release of their friend. The Frierdiker Rebbe brushed them off; he told them that their friend hadn't been kidnapped; he had merely changed locations and was being well cared for. They had nothing to worry about.

Infuriated, two hundred Poalei Tziyon youth gathered outside and soon began to attack. Stones flying towards the Yeshiva broke all the windows, and several gunshots were heard. Reb Moshe Klatzkin, the Rav of Romanov who was visiting Lubavitch, had just bent down to pick something up when a bullet flew right over his head.

But the wild crowd soon met their match. The Yeshiva also had hundreds of *bochurim*. Seeing the tumult, they removed the iron bars from their beds in the *zal* and soon emerged into the *chatzer* bearing their makeshift—but dangerous—weapons. They charged at the Poalei Tziyon and chased them away from the Yeshiva premises. After a short scuffle, quiet was restored.



PHOTO OF THE FRIERDIKER REBBE TAKEN SEVERAL YEARS AFTER THE EVENTS.

Involving the Police

The Poalei Tziyon youngsters were terrified that the police would become involved. The Russian government did not see kindly to the new youth movements, and their involvement in a violent attack would not help their situation. They situated guards at key locations throughout the town to ensure that no one would be able to notify the police officer.

Despite their best efforts, a local guard managed to evade them and notified the police. Within a short time, several young men were arrested.¹ Soon, Berel's father arrived and took his son back to Chernigov.

The story was far from over. The Poalei Tziyon were a formidable group. Lubavitch didn't have a large police force; they would be able to make a lot of trouble for the Yeshiva, and they threatened quite clearly to do so. It was a miracle that nobody had gotten hurt so far, but there was no telling about the future. The situation was so stressful, especially for the families of *Beis Harav* living in the *chatzer*, that the Rebbe Rashab sent the Frierdiker Rebbe and his Rebbetzin out of the country for the time being. A special *pan* was sent to be read at the Ohel of the Rebbe Maharash and Tzemach Tzedek.

It was also a bit of a public relations disaster. The newspapers, mostly published by *maskilim*, were having a field day with the story. A poor *bochur*, who only wanted to be “enlightened” by the *haskalah*, had been kidnapped. The Yeshiva bochurim had “violently attacked” the “empty-handed” Poalei Tziyon who had come to rescue their friend. True, “one person shot a revolver, but nobody was hurt,” and yet the Lubavitchers had immediately involved the police, and now the poor youth of Poalei Tziyon were facing trial. Many supporters of the Yeshiva were hearing these accounts and asking what was going on. The Rebbe Rashab wanted to turn the page on the entire story.

The Poalei Tziyon came with demands to the Rebbe Rashab. They wanted him to fire the Frierdiker Rebbe from his post as *Menahel*, fire one of the Yeshiva administrators, expel five *bochurim* from the Yeshiva, and pay “restitution” of two thousand rubles. More importantly, they wanted to be allowed into the Yeshiva. Why was the *hanhala* so afraid of the *maskilim*, they argued? Why didn't they allow the *maskilim* into the Yeshiva, at least if only to discuss and debate the important issues of the day?

If the Rebbe Rashab wouldn't give in to their demands, they said, they would attack the Yeshiva again.

The heads of the regional Poalei Tziyon were in the nearby city of Vitebsk, where the Raza, the brother of the Rebbe Rashab lived. The Raza made it very clear to them that there would be no firing and no expulsion. Poalei Tziyon would have no say in how the Lubavitcher Yeshiva would run. At most, if they had a financial claim, they could bring it to a

neutral arbitration.

As news of the events spread, others began to pressure the Poalei Tziyon to back down. Many Vitebsk locals viewed themselves as Chabad Chassidim, and even if they were sympathetic to the new movements, the fight with Lubavitch was entirely unbecoming. The local villagers in Lubavitch also warned the Poalei Tziyon that “blood would be spilled” if they touched the Yeshiva—because it was the central pillar of the local economy.

The Poalei Tziyon weren’t willing to back down. They persisted in all their claims, and insisted that they choose two out of three members of the arbitration panel. To get their point across, they decided on another attack—this time against the Rebbe Rashab himself.

One summer day, as the Rebbe Rashab was staying in a quiet summer home near Liozna, a large crowd of Poalei Tziyon showed up at the door. They broke into the home, and began breaking everything in sight. The kitchen was totally destroyed. All that survived the attack was the clock on the wall. Everything else was in shambles. Rebbetzin Shterna Sara tried to leave the home with her terrified granddaughters, but their way was blocked. Again, the Poalei Tziyon blocked the roads so that nobody would be able to notify the police. “You didn’t listen to us,” they yelled. “Now we will show you!”

The End of the Story

The story up to this point is based on the letters of the Rebbe Rashab and the Raza, newspaper accounts, and a lengthy description in *Toldos Hatemimim* by Reb Moshe Rozenblum, written several years later. But how did the saga end?

In his letters, the Rebbe Rashab made it clear that Poalei Tziyon would never get a foothold in the Yeshiva. “Regarding their first demand [that the Frierdiker Rebbe step down], I will absolutely not fulfill it; they will have no say in the inner workings of the Yeshiva, and I will not allow the *bochurim* to be afraid of any figure outside the Yeshiva.” But what happened with the rest of the demands?

Forty years later, the Frierdiker Rebbe shared the following in a Sicha:

“In 5666, during the Haftorah on Rosh Hashanah, the Rebbe Rashab fell silent after reciting the words, *umorah lo yaaleh al rosho* (a razor shall not come upon his head). His lips were moving silently. In Adar that year, the incident with Poalei Tziyon and Tomchei Temimim took place. They didn’t want me as the *menahel* of the Yeshiva because [as I was the *menahel*], they didn’t have a foothold in the Yeshiva at all...

“My uncle the Raza was not a *pachdan* (coward)... but when he told my father, the Rebbe Rashab, what the Poalei Tziyon were planning, he said that we needed to take them seriously; they are big *shkotzim* and they could do a lot of



RECENTLY RECONSTRUCTED ZAL OF YESHIVAS TOMCHEI TMIMIM IN LUBAVITCH.

damage.

“My father answered: *Morah*, fear, is not possible. I already said on Rosh Hashanah that *umorah lo yaaleh al rosho*. But money? The *possuk* says *lo yecheratz kelev*. Well, when the dog does bark, you need to throw him a coin.” It seems that the Yeshiva paid off the hooligans, and the matter was considered settled.

What Happened to Berel

Ten years later, Reb Yisroel Jacobson was in Chernigov when the local police did a sweep of the market looking for draft evaders. Reb Yisroel didn’t have his paperwork in order, and he was soon arrested and put in a large holding cell.

As he sat there, a young Jewish man with a trimmed beard was brought into the cell. The Jew approached Reb Yisroel and said, “You look like a *talmid* of Lubavitch.” Reb Yisroel answered in the affirmative. As they conversed, the man revealed that he was married and leading a life of Torah and Mitzvos with his family.

“What’s your name,” Reb Yisroel asked.

“Dovber Dovzik,” the man replied. “In Lubavitch I was known as Berel Chernigover.” ¹

1. The entire preceding section of the story is based on the account of Reb Moshe Rozenblum (who worked in the Yeshiva administration at the time) in *Toldos Hatemimim*. Divrei Yimei Hatemimim pp. 159–172. The following section of the article is based on the collection of letters in *Divrei Yimei Hatemimim* pp. 284–296. The Frierdiker Rebbe’s sicha at the close of the article is published in *Sefer Hasichos* 5705 p. 12.