

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF CHASSIDIM

לעילוי נשמת
ר' בנציון בן ר' דוד ע"ה
נלב"ע ו' אלול ה'תשע"ט
תנ"צ'ב"ה

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מרת חנה ומשפחתם שיחיו
נובאק

In The Footsteps of a Family

By: Rabbi Mendy Greenberg (Twinsburg, OH)

Several years ago, I received an email through a genealogical website. The sender was a man named Victor, a non-Jew from a remote city in Russia. To my surprise, he identified himself as my relative. He said that my great-great-grandfather, Reb Michoel Katzenelenbogen—a chossid from the times of the Rebbe Rashab and Friediker Rebbe—was a relative of his great-great-grandfather, who was called Reb Chaim Katzenelenbogen, also a chossid from the times of the Rebbe Rashab and Friediker Rebbe!

Victor was doing genealogy research into his ancestry and discovered many legal records that identified his ancestors as having lived in the town of Lubavitch and its environs. They were clearly Lubavitcher Chassidim, so he was searching for someone who could do Hebrew-language research to uncover the story of his family from within Chabad writings.

My interest was piqued.

I knew about my zeide Reb Michoel Katzenelenbogen *hy*"d. He had been a *tomim* in Lubavitch, and was killed in Stalin's purges of the year 5698 for the crime of teaching Torah to young children. (His wife was more famous than he; she was the legendary Mumme Sarah who passed away in jail for her role in the 'Great Escape' of Chassidim from Russia after World War II.) However, I didn't know much about Reb Michoel's Katzenelenbogen family ancestry, so I began searching through the Chabad library of Otzar HaChochma.

I discovered a fascinating tale—the story of a family of Chassidim—its growth, its decline, and its ultimate survival.

Rabbi Mendy Greenberg (Twinsburg, OH)



REB CHAIM KATZENELBOGEN.



REB MICHOEL KATZENELBOGEN WITH HIS WIFE AND CHILDREN. THIS PICTURE WAS SENT TO THE FRIEDIKER REBBE IN 5696.

There Once Was a Family

In the days of the Mitteler Rebbe, a man settled in the town of Lubavitch. His name was Reb Yehoshua Katzenelenbogen. Not much is known about this Reb Yehoshua; he isn't a grandson of the famous Katzenelenbogen family of Poland, but he settled in the town of Lubavitch and raised his family there and his children grew up as Lubavitcher Chassidim.

His sons Avremke, Dovid, and Yossel, likewise raised families of Lubavitcher Chassidim, and the Katzenelenbogens soon branched out throughout Lubavitch and surrounding towns like Liadi, Babinovitch, and Vitebsk—all strongholds of Chabad Chassidim. They became an entire tribe.

Most of them were ordinary Chassidim; they aren't remembered in the annals of Chabad history as famous Chassidim. However, members of the Katzenelenbogen family make appearances in numerous stories recorded by Chassidim throughout the generations, and even in the stories of the Frieddiker Rebbe.

One notable member was Reb Nachman Katzenelenbogen “ben Dovid Yehoshua’s.” Here is the story recorded about him:

“The Tzemach Tzedek thought highly of Reb Nachman, and asked him to make the long journey to become

the head of the Mashgichim in Peterburg, and be responsible for all the *shechita* that took place there.

“Reb Nachman apologized and said to the Tzemach Tzedek that he didn't want to move so far from the Rebbe and from his family, but the Tzemach Tzedek responded, ‘It's known that a shochet needs to have strong *yiras shomayim*, and that is certainly the case for the supervisor of the *shochetim* themselves. Who should I send if not you?’

“When the Rebbe Maharash heard his father's words about Reb Nachman, he hired him—upon his return from Peterburg some years later—to learn Gemara, Rashi, and Tosafos with his three sons (including the Rebbe Rashab) when they were *avreichim*.”

Another notable mention is in the Frieddiker Rebbe's Reshimos:

In 5663, the *maskilim* attempted to establish a school system in the town of Lubavitch, a move that the Rebbe Rashab vehemently opposed. The Frieddiker Rebbe records a meeting between the Rebbe Rashab and the regional inspector general of the Education Department, who wanted to understand the reason for the Rebbe Rashab's opposition. He writes that the *meilitz*, the translator—the Rebbe Rashab did not converse in Russian—was Reb Chaim Katzenelenbogen (the same Reb Chaim mentioned in the introduction to this article).

The Strong Character

The most consistent appearance by a Katzenelenbogen is another grandson of Reb Yehoshua, named Bere Avremke's. He was one of the well-known *balebatim* in the town of Lubavitch, and he was a bit of a character, as expressed in the following story the Frierdiker Rebbe told at a farbrengen:

"When Isser the *chazan* sang *kor'im*," the Frierdiker Rebbe related, "there wasn't a single person in shul who wasn't moved to tears."

Isser the *chazan* was a legendary *chazan* in Lubavitch who received many of his tunes from the Rabbeim themselves. Of all of his *tefillos*, his *Avodah* on Yom Kippur was most memorable, and the pinnacle was *V'hakohanim*. The Rebbe Maharash himself would exit his private room and sit down near the *chazan*, sometimes singing along and other times leading the tune with his hand motions.

"In Lubavitch," the Frierdiker Rebbe continued to relate, "there was a man named Bere Avremke's. He was a strong man, a *takif*. He once declared, 'Enough—I won't cry during Isser's *korim*.' He usually davened in a different *minyán* in town. But one year, he came to the Rebbe's *beis midrash* to hear Isser's *Avodah* on Yom Kippur, and stood near the washing basin."

Bere Katzenelenbogen's confidence didn't last very long. As he stood there listening to the *Avodah*, he found it difficult to contain himself.

"When Isser the *chazan* began to sing '*V'hakohanim*' with immense fervor," the Frierdiker Rebbe continued, "Bere Avremke's began to tremble and weep—so intensely that he had to hold on to the wash basin to keep from collapsing."

Bere Avremke's 'collapse' wasn't just from the power of Isser's voice, the Frierdiker Rebbe explained. It was from the *kavanos* of his grandfather, the Rebbe Maharash.

In later years, Bere Avremke's was already an elder. In the memoirs of Reb Sender Yudasin, he relates that on Chof-Daled Teves 5666, Bere Avremke's was honored to conduct the annual *Siyum Hashas* in the presence of the Rebbe Rashab. Again, the story has a humorous twist.

"When he finished reciting the final segment of the Gemara," Reb Sender relates, "Reb Bere Avremke's began to stroke his lips and beard and was about to share a *chiddush* of his own to connect with the *Hadran*. Sensing this, the Rebbe Rashab remarked, 'Up until now, we were obligated to listen—but from here on, we are not obligated.'"

Seeing that the Rebbe Rashab was not interested in a *drasha*, Reb Dovber said, "*oib azoi—Hadran alach...*" and finished the *nusach* of the *siyum*.

One final story took place several years later and was recorded in the memoirs of Reb Yisrael Jacobson:

In 5669, the news arrived in Lubavitch that the Rebbe Rashab's brother, the Raza, had suddenly passed away. The decision was made to withhold the news from his elderly mother, the Rebbetzin Rivkah, in order to protect her health.

Rebbetzin Rivkah was accustomed to receiving twice-weekly letters from the Raza, and when a week passed with no word from him, she began to worry. When nobody would tell her what was going on, she decided to visit him on her own. It was a Friday morning; the wagon, the horses, and the wagon driver were ready to go, but nobody had the heart to tell her the news.

Finally, says Reb Yisrael Jacobson, "one of the *choshuve* senior *baalei-batim* of Lubavitch named Bere Avremke's approached the Rebbetzin and told her, '*Nito noch vos tzu foren*, there is nothing to go for.' The wagon driver returned the horses to the stable."

Where Did They All Go?

Today, there is still a large Katzenelenbogen family in Lubavitch. Of the generation of Chassidim that left Russia, there was Reb Shimon Katzenelenbogen of Nachlas Har Chabad, Reb Zalman (Kazen) of Cleveland, Reb Yehoshua (Raskin) and Reb Moshe Katzenelenbogen of London, and Tzivya Goldberg (wife of Reb Yosef Goldberg, the Rosh Yeshiva in Brunoy). These were all scions of the above-mentioned family (despite the different last names).

But there is one strange aspect to this story.

All of the above were siblings. They were all children of Reb Michael Katzenelenbogen, a *tomim* from Lubavitch mentioned in the introduction to this article. But based on all these stories, they should have all had cousins, second cousins, third cousins and even fourth cousins, all Lubavitcher Chassidim! Where did everyone go?

A short search through a genealogical website reveals the sad reality:

After three, four, and even five generations of their existence as a large chassidische family came the winds of change.

Russia began to industrialize, and people began moving to the big cities for *parnassa*, leaving behind the close-knit Yiddische atmosphere of the *shtetlach*. New move-

ments began to spread; Socialism, Zionism, and *haskalah* of various sorts, all with the common denominator of abandoning Torah and Mitzvos. Then, with the Bolshevik revolution, Yiddishkeit was outlawed, and it became almost impossible to give children a Jewish education.

One by one, members of the family fell away. Pictures of chassidische yidden with long beards give way to their clean-shaven sons, many even named Menachem Mendel (born in the years after the *histalkus* of the Tzemach Tzedek). *Their* children already have Russian names.

In the course of a few short decades, an entire family disappeared. Every single grandchild who lived in Russia lost touch with Yiddishkeit.

With one exception. Reb Michoel.

“Echod Me’ir, Shnayim Mimishpachah”

When the Rebbe Rashab established Tomchei Temimim, it was with the express purpose of saving the youth. The Rebbe Rashab would personally raise a generation of Chassidim who would be soldiers, who would have a fiery devotion to Yiddishkeit, and would go through fire and water to preserve it.

The hundreds of *bochurim* that streamed through its doors were often *echad me’ir, shnayim mimishpacha*—the single members of their families who ultimately proved to have remained committed to Yiddishkeit.

Reb Michoel was one such example. He came from a long line of Lubavitcher Chassidim; his own father Reb Yehoshua, was the *baal korei* and *makri* of *tekios* by the Rabbeim in Lubavitch (!); but of his entire family, only his descendants remained connected.

He had been taken under the Rebbe Rashab’s wing.

A Second Generation

The fact that his children remained connected to Yiddishkeit could not be taken for granted either.

On Motzei Simchas Torah 5698, Reb Michoel was arrested by the Soviets and was never seen again. His family later discovered that he had been sentenced to death and killed on 15 Kislev that year, for “being an active participant in a counter-revolutionary group, educating youth in an illegal *kheder* in counter-revolutionary spirit, and teaching hatred towards the Soviet system.”

This could have again spelled the end for his family,

but Reb Michoel had already ensured that his children would remain connected to the Frierdiker Rebbe.

In those dangerous days, children would rarely join their fathers on visits to the Frierdiker Rebbe. Most children growing up in Russia never saw the Frierdiker Rebbe, not even once. That was true for Reb Michoel’s children as well. It was simply too dangerous.

Then, on Chol Hamoed Sukkos 5688, notice came to their home that the Frierdiker Rebbe would be leaving Russia. Simchas Torah would be the last opportunity to see the Rebbe, perhaps forever.

Disregarding the danger, Chassidim and their children began streaming to Leningrad. Reb Michoel grabbed his two older sons, Shimon and Zalman, and ran to catch the train to Leningrad. Reb Zalman would often tell about that special visit—watching the Frierdiker Rebbe’s Haftorah, meeting so many other Jewish children for the first time, and the pinnacle: the exalted few minutes when they entered the Frierdiker Rebbe’s holy chamber for *yechidus*, for the first time (and as it turned out, the last time) in his life.

When they were old enough, their father sent them away to join the underground network of *chadarim* and *yeshivos* that dotted the landscape of the Soviet Union. Their father’s disappearance didn’t weaken their resolve in the slightest. With the guidance of the Frierdiker Rebbe through secret letters and codes, the brothers all learned Torah, married, established chassidische homes, and ultimately emigrated from Russia.

They had been taken under the Frierdiker Rebbe’s wing.

The story continued into the third generation. Hundreds, if not thousands, of the descendants of this family merit to serve as the Rebbe’s Shluchim across the globe. This, too, could not be taken for granted; when Reb Zalman, for example, arrived in America with his family, he told the Rebbe that he planned to sell watches for a living. But the Rebbe took him and his family under his wing, and guided them to a place and position where they would spend the rest of their lives being *mekarev* hundreds of Jews to Yiddishkeit.

These Are The Lachmah Anya

This story brings to mind a unique *sicha* the Rebbe once said at a Yud-Beis Tammuz farbrengen.



THE FOUR SONS OF REB MICHOEL. FROM RIGHT TO LEFT: REB ZALMAN, SHIMON, YEHOShUA AND MOSHE KATZENELBOGEN.

The Rebbe noted that when we mark a special event or memory, we often place an item on the table—a physical item associated with the day, like Matzah on Pesach—to help us connect to the events of the past. What do we put on the table on Yud-Beis Tammuz? And why indeed do we so publicly mark an occasion which seemingly is only about an individual—the Frierdiker Rebbe’s personal liberation?

But the liberation of the Frierdiker Rebbe is not just a personal moment. The ‘item on the table’ that reminds us of the relevance of the day is right here, the Rebbe said. Around and around—albeit not on the table itself—“are the *lebedike yidden* who learn Torah *now* and do Mitzvos *now* and lead Jewish homes,” because of the *mesiras nefesh* of the Frierdiker Rebbe. Because they were carried on the

wings of the Rabbeim.

The Rebbe called them the “*lachmah anya di achalu avhasana b'ara d'mitzrayim*”—the current-day descendants of those who owe their connection to Yiddishkeit to the Rabbeim are the physical manifestation of the story.

There is also modern-day relevance to the story.

The sight of that *lachmah anya*, the Rebbe said, serves as an inspiration for our own connection to Yiddishkeit.

In the Rebbe’s words:

When we experience our own obstacles in *avodas Hashem*, we are reminded that just as the *Aibershter* stood by our ancestors, “*kaasher haya im avoseinu*,” so too, Hashem will be with us—“*al ya'azveinu v'al yit'sheinu*”—when we do our part to follow באורחותיו אשר הורנו, in the paths our Rabbeim showed us. **T**

1. MiGeza Lubavitch, p. 18. Recorded by his grandson Reb Menachem Nochum Chanun (a chossid who immigrated to Eretz Yisroel as a child and passed away in 5736), grandfather of the Lubavitch Hertzfel family in Eretz Yisroel.

2. Sefer Hatoldos Admur HaRayatz p. 196.

3. Sefer Hasichos 5704 pp. 26–27.

4. Halekach V'Halibuv p. 212.

5. Zikaron Livnei Yisrael p. 19. He also appears elsewhere in the Frierdiker Rebbe’s *reshimos* and *sichos*. See Shemuos V'Sipurim vol. 3 p. 103, Lubavitch—Ha'Ayarah shel Chabad p. 21, Sefer Hasichos

5708 p. 172, Sefer Hasichos 5688–91 p. 274.

6. Reb Moshe Sarah’s (Gruzman Teshurah Elul 5775) p. 8.

7. As heard from Reb Zalman by his great-grandchild, the author of this article. See also Reb Zalman’s interview with JEM’s My Encounter with the Rebbe.

8. See e.g. Igros Kodesh Admur HaRayatz vol. 11, p. 273.

9. Queen of Cleveland p. 235.

10. 13 Tammuz 5736; Sichos Kodesh 5736 vol. 2, p. 406.