

The Rise of the Eltere Bochurim

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Days of Darkness

The meeting took place under a heavy veil of secrecy.

Early in the year 5697, under the cover of darkness in a quiet corner of Moscow, a small group gathered for a fateful meeting. The chossid Reb Yonah Poltaver, his brother-in-law Reb Mordechai Eliezer Laptovsky, and a select group of *'eltere bochurim'* in their late teens and early twenties gathered to deliberate on the future of Jewish education throughout the Soviet Union.

The previous two years had spelled doom for the vaunted Chassidic underground, the network of secret Yeshivos and Chadorim that dotted the landscape of Russia. One by one, the teachers and administrators of these courageous groups had been picked off by the NKVD, as the dreaded midnight knock on the door had come to haunt family after chassidische family.

Children watched in horror as their fathers were marched out of their homes surrounded by armed guards, never to be seen again. Mothers struggled to raise their young children on their own, all the while fighting valiantly to free their husbands. It was no longer safe for fathers of young families to be involved in the underground; after all, who would ensure that their own children would be raised as G-d-fearing Jews in their absence?

It was time for dramatic change.

The New Leadership

The administrator of the Tomchei Temimim network for much of the previous decade had been Reb Avraham (Dreizin) Mayorer, but in recent years, multiple police raids had forced him into hiding. Another important figure, Reb Shaul Brook, had just managed to escape the Soviet Union and immigrate to Eretz Yisroel. That left



REB YONAH POLTAVER
IN HIS YOUTH.

the leadership in the hands of the legendary Reb Yonah Hakohen (Kagan) Poltaver. In a secret letter from Poland, the Friediker Rebbe appointed him to lead the entire network.

Watching the situation become untenable, Reb Yonah called for this meeting.

It was a small group of *eltere bochurim*: Moshe Rubinson, Yosef Goldberg, Shimon Stillerman, Yisrael Levine, Michel Rappaport, Nochum Wolosow, and Shalom Vilenkin. They were themselves students in the underground, gathering in quiet corners of shuls and private residences to carry on learning *nigleh* and Chassidus, davening *b'avodah*, and farbrenging. But that was about to change.

Reb Yonah stood up and made an announcement.

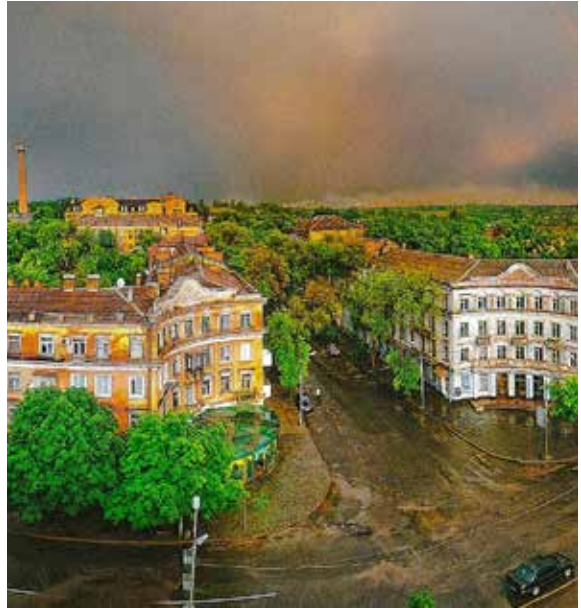
Dozens of *melamdin* have been arrested, he said, and many locations have been left without Torah teachers. Tomchei Temimim was in peril. From today onward, he said, the role of leadership is being placed on your shoulders. Your elders risked their lives to teach you Torah; now it is your turn to teach the next generation.

Reb Yonah held a similar meeting later that year, and Reb Mordechai Eliezer Laptovsky, held his own meeting with the *bochurim* of Zhitomir. One of the *bochurim*, Moshe Aharon Geisinsky, related his memories of that meeting:

“Reb Mordechai Eliezer called all the *bochurim* to his home and said to us: I see that Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim in Russia is shrinking to a frightening degree. Soon, it will simply disappear from the scene. Why are we sitting here and learning? We have no choice but to put our lives on the line and devote ourselves to bringing more students into Tomchei Temimim!”

At that meeting, Reb Mordechai Eliezer empowered the *bochurim* to establish new branches of Tomchei Temimim, telling them to travel across Russia and seek out boys who wished to join the yeshiva with their parents’ consent, to locate shuls that would agree to host the *bochurim*, and to find *roshei yeshiva* and *mashgichim* who could lead the *yeshivos* that would be established.

At the end of one of the meetings in Moscow (these became known as the “*Asifos of the Eltere Bochurim*”), Reb Yonah finished dramatically: “When we gather again—that is, if I will not be taken away to prison—we will continue the conversation.”



THE OLD SECTION OF KRIVOY ROG.

Rising to the Occasion

One of the *bochurim* at that first meeting, Michel Rappaport, reported the missions each one was given:

“It was decided that the *zal* would be in Zhitomir, the hometown of Reb Mordechai Eliezer. Reb Moshe Rubinson was sent to Berditchev to give *shiurim* for younger students, Reb Yisroel Levin was sent to Krivoy Rog to open a yeshiva there, Reb Yosef Goldberg was sent to Klinty, and I was sent to Kursk. Reb Nochum Wolosow remained in Moscow to manage operations from there, as deputy to Reb Yonah, and Reb Shalom Vilenkin traveled to Odessa.

“The funding came from Reb Yonah, delivered by courier, usually women, so as not to arouse suspicion. At times, we had to travel to Moscow ourselves to collect the funds and meet secretly there.”

Each *bochur* headed out into the unknown and got to work.

Krivoy Rog

Reb Yisroel Levine (father of Rabbi Berel Levine, chief librarian of the Rebbe’s library) was sent to Krivoy Rog.

“Reb Michael Teitelbaum brought me four boys,” he related. “Leibel Mochkin, Yoel Duchman, Mendel Raskin, and Yehoshua Katzenelenbogen (Raskin). He told me that they were wild kids, and it was too hard for him to deal with them; they were only twelve years old. He said he’d go to Zhitomir, where the *bochurim* were older, and I should stay with the younger group. Later, a few more

joined: Tzvi Breslover, Chatzkel Brod, Velvel Menshki (Auerbach), and Yisroel Modes.

“I began learning the sugya of *shnayim ochazin* with them. Reb Yonah Poltaver told me to keep an eye on the Breslover *bochurim* [apparently referring to Tzvi Breslover and Chatzkel Brod, who grew up in Breslover homes]—who wanted to travel to Uman, which would attract undue attention to the yeshiva, and also to watch over the *bochurim* from *anash*—they were still very young, and some wanted to daven at length, but they had no understanding of *nigleh* or Chassidus. They needed a firm hand.”

Kursk

The Kursk branch was opened by Reb Michel Rapoport and Reb Shimon Stillerman, and they were later replaced by Reb Henoah Rappaport, Reb Michel’s younger brother.

Reb Zalman Levin was one of the students in the Yeshiva at the time:

“During the day, we all learned together in one room. At night, we slept in an actual cellar—a pit beneath the ground—so that if anyone came searching for us, they wouldn’t find a thing. We wandered from shul to shul, sometimes learning in attics, sometimes in basements, or in homes we rented from non-Jews.

“I remember one summer, we were holed up in an attic crawl space made of metal. The heat was unbearable. We



REB ZALMAN
LEVIN IN HIS
YOUTH.

were all thirsty, but we couldn’t go out during the day to get water—we were too afraid of being discovered. Throughout the week, we lived on bread and watermelon or cantaloupe. That was it. On Shabbos, families from *anash* would host us for meals.

“We learned Likkutei Torah, Kuntres Umayan, Tanya, Gemara l’Iyun and Girsas, and at times we would go—one by one, so as not to attract attention—to Reb Dovid (Kievman) Horodoker to learn Likkutei Torah with him. What he taught us made a deep impression on our hearts and minds. That’s what carried me through the difficult years of the war and everything we endured.

“The farbrengens gave us strength during the hardest times. They revolved around one central theme: *mesirus nefesh*. Not to be fazed by anything. If we won’t have *mesirus nefesh* for Torah learning—we’d end up just like the gentile youth wandering the streets. The Rebbe made us the patriots of Lubavitch, we would tell ourselves. We should betray that?! *Chas v’shalom*. We’re the glowing embers of Yiddishkeit in Russia!”

Klinsky & Kuybyshev

Reb Yosef Goldberg was part of the founding group of Krivoy Rog, and afterwards left to Klinsky to open another branch. One day, the secret police burst into the shul to arrest him, but he wasn’t present at the time and miraculously managed to escape. Another time, police entered to catch him as he sat learning in a shul; he promptly jumped out the window and disappeared. He soon opened another branch of Tomchei Temimim in Kuybyshev.

“During that period,” he later confided to his son, Rabbi Yitzchak Goldberg, “I was certain that nothing would be left of me, *Rachmana litzlan*. It was just a matter of time before I’d be caught—and that would be the end. When I look at my family today, and my entire continued life, I see it as nothing but *chesed chinam*, pure, undeserved kindness from Hashem.”

On another occasion, he shared that despite serving as a rosh yeshiva in Tomchei Temimim in Brunoy, France, for thirty-seven years and teaching countless *talmidim*, it was those six years in the underground that he described as “the most precious years of my life.”

Berditchev

Reb Moshe Rubinson was sent to Berditchev.

He gave outstanding *shiurim* and was famous for the



A PHOTO RECENTLY DISCOVERED IN THE NKVD ARCHIVES SHOWING THE BOCHURIM IN BERDITCHEV RIGHT AFTER THEIR ARREST, 24 TEVES 5698.



REB MOSHE RUBINSON TEACHING A CHEDER CLASS.

LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASSIDET CHABAD

warm, fatherly care he gave each *talmid*. Soon a significant number of boys gathered around him—no less than twelve, which was quite remarkable given the circumstances.

On Chof-Daled Teves 5698, Reb Moshe farbrenged with the *talmidim* in the tailors' shul, one of 18 still operating in Berditchev, when suddenly there was a loud bang on the door and two NKVD agents stormed in with pistols drawn. Reb Moshe jumped into a side room, but the agents conducted a search and they were caught; the entire group was lined up and marched to the police station.

For a full month, these young barely-mesivta-age *bochurim* were harassed by interrogators for information about the secret Yeshiva network, while they denied everything and claimed to be a group of friends who were hanging out together.

Their imprisonment finally came to an end when Reb Moshe Rubinson took full responsibility for the Yeshiva and convinced the young boys to tell the whole story, so that they could finally be released. He spent several years in prison until he was miraculously set free. The young boys, however, were soon transferred to a government orphanage. After all, their parents were unfit to raise them as loyal Communists.

At first, no one even knew where the boys were. Reb Yonah's committee in Moscow sent Reb Michael Teitelbaum to investigate. He soon heard from a local Jew that he had noticed a strange sight: a group of young teenagers *under guard* at the government orphanage in Berditchev.

Reb Michael recruited Reb Henoah Rappaport, who was sixteen years old and had no beard, to secretly contact

the *bochurim* and help carry out the rescue. On Shabbos, when security was weaker, they snuck into the orphanage and smuggled the boys out, sending them that very day on a train to Kiev.

The Pivot to Asia

As each yeshiva was discovered and closed by the NKVD, *bochurim* began to hear about new opportunities in Russia's east, in regions like Kazakhstan and Georgia, where the persecutions were less severe and *yeshivos* were able to survive under the radar. Within a few years, Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, and everyone was forced to follow them east as well.

The *yeshivos* now reopened in Samarkand, Tashkent, and other cities. Due to the war, the NKVD lost some of its grip on the population, and many older Chassidim—refugees from the war—were able to safely join the administration of the *yeshivos* and take part in the Frierdiker Rebbe's holy work.

But for those few years before the war, the members of Tomchei Temimim were protected by a small group of *elters bochurim* who had risen to the occasion.

"All the harsh realities," related one of their young students, "seemed to fade the moment our rosh yeshiva—just a few years older than us—immersed us in a *maamar Chassidus*. His explanations somehow planted within us the *mesirus nefesh* we so desperately needed to hold on through the difficult moments." **1**

This article is based on Toldos Chabad b'Russia HaSovietis, Teshurah—Tiferes Banim Avosam, and Zichornosay by Reb Yisrael Yehudah Levine.