

חג הגאולה יו"ד כסלו

The Arrest and Liberation *of the Mitteler Rebbe*

On Chol Hamoed Sukkos in the year 5587, a group of Chassidim were farbrenging in Vitebsk. Vitebsk was, and still is, the capital of the Russian region that includes Lubavitch.

Suddenly, Reb Simcha Zelig, one of the prominent Chassidim of Vitebsk, burst into the sukkah and brought shocking news: he had just been in the government offices and overheard a rumor that the Mitteler Rebbe was under investigation.

Nobody wanted to believe it. Besides, it couldn't be true. The Alter Rebbe had helped the Czar in his war with Napoleon by utilizing a network of Chassidim to spy on the French. In appreciation the Czar bestowed on his family the title "Honored Citizen," a title that was passed down from father to son.

Just 13 years earlier, the Mitteler Rebbe moved to Lubavitch from Kremenchug, where he had been since the *histalkus* of the Alter Rebbe. The government in S. Petersburg sent advance notice to all the cities

on the travel route that they should prepare a welcome delegation and help freshen his horses wherever he passed. How could it be that after all that the Mitteler Rebbe was now under investigation? And for what?

By Shemini Atzeres the rumors were confirmed. The secretary of the regional governor met with a delegation of Chassidim. He told them that by the following Thursday the Minister of Justice in S. Petersburg was expected to sign a warrant allowing the police to search and detain the Mitteler Rebbe.



לזכות
הת' מנחם מענדל שיחי'
מאן
לרגל הגיעו לעול מצוות
ט"ז כסלו ה'תשע"ט
נדפס ע"י הוריו
הרה"ת ר' שרגא פייוול
וזוגתו מרת דבורה לאה
ומשפחתם שיחיו
מאן



The minister went even further than just signing the search warrant. He ordered that the Mittlerer Rebbe be brought from Lubavitch to Vitebsk to be interrogated in person.

At this point nobody knew what the charges were or who had slandered the Rebbe. The Chassidim couldn't start preparing a defense without even knowing the charges. All they could do was to meet with the minister and demand that the Rebbe not be transported by the police like a common criminal. He should be allowed to travel by himself, in his

own wagon. Joining the Chassidim in their meeting with the minister were a handful of non-Jewish landowners, who greatly respected the Mittlerer Rebbe. The minister agreed, and also gave permission to travel slowly due to the Rebbe's health. The journey would take three days instead of the usual two.

Blackmail

By Sunday, a delegation of officers reached Lubavitch and began searching the Rebbe's house. The story was now becoming clearer.

As we know, the Alter Rebbe was *nistalek* while on the road from Liadi, escaping the advancing armies of Napoleon. All the possessions of the entire family had been left behind in Liadi where they were stolen and their houses burned to the ground.

The Mittlerer Rebbe was left with nothing and cash that they had used for the travelling costs. The Chassidim knew this. When the Mittlerer Rebbe accepted the request of the Chassidim in Lubavitch to settle there, he began making his way there and at every stop, local Chassidim

gave generously to *maamad*—the fund dedicated to the expenses of *beis harav*. Upon arriving in Lubavitch the Rebbe had a few thousand rubles, quite a large sum of money. He decided to divide the money between all the members of *beis harav*, who were all in dire poverty.

To divide the money, the Rebbe appointed Reb Pinchas Reizes, Reb Zalmen Reizes, and Reb Shlome Freides.

Years later, when Reb Pinchas Reizes passed away childless, his possessions were transferred to his nephew who lived in Shklov, and who was not the most pleasant person. This nephew was a known gangster and crook, and he got right to work trying to maximize his new inheritance.

He discovered among Reb Pinchas's papers a letter from the Mittlerer Rebbe, where he tasked Reb Pinchas with the job of dividing the money he had collected on the way to Lubavitch.

This nephew went to the Mittlerer Rebbe right away with the letter, and demanded a large amount of money. He said that if his demands weren't met he would use this letter to slander the Rebbe to the Russian government; in other words, blackmail.

Of course, the Mittlerer Rebbe completely refused his demands. He responded by saying that he had done nothing wrong, and what this nephew decided to do with the letter is his business, but this blackmail was not going to work.

Dejected, this individual tried thinking of another plan. There was nothing he could do on his own because he had no connections with the government. What he needed was a partner; someone with the right connections.

And he found it. The Mittlerer Rebbe's mother, the Alter Rebbe's Rebbetzin, Rebbetzin Sterna, was from a prominent, wealthy family in Vitebsk. The Segal family was famous

in Vitebsk for having "*Torah u'gedula b'makom echad.*"

They were *talmidei chachomim*, wealthy, and big *ba'alei tzedakah*, involved in every charitable endeavor in Vitebsk, but they were also bitter *misnagdim*. Besides for being *misnagdim*, they also had a personal grudge against the Alter Rebbe. For years they had tried marrying into the Alter Rebbe's family but were turned down. Even when they offered large sums of money for a dowry, their offers were politely declined.

As a result, they were always on the lookout for ways to harm the Alter Rebbe and his work, making them perfect partners for this individual from Shklov with the letter.

Most importantly, they had connections with Governor Chavansky, the governor of the Vitebsk region.

The Accusations

How could they use this seemingly innocent letter to slander the Mittlerer Rebbe?

They made one simple change. Where the Rebbe had written that he had in his possession three or four thousand rubles, "*gimmel o' daled alofim,*" they simply added a *kuf*. Now it read "*kuf-gimmel o' kuf-daled alafim,*" 103,000 or 104,000 rubles, which was an astronomical sum.

How could the Mittlerer Rebbe have collected such an astounding amount of money in the relatively short trip from Kremenchug to Lubavitch? There could only be one explanation—they told the minister: he is planning a revolution against the Czar. The trip was really an attempt to rile up the masses to overthrow the Czar.

In addition, they said the Mittlerer Rebbe was sending money to the Sultan of Turkey, at that time the arch nemesis of the Russian Empire. He was trying to bribe the Sultan to convince him to go to war against Russia.

Alternatively, perhaps the money was to finance the war or payment to the Sultan for the protection of Chassidim during the impending war. They weren't so clear on the details but one thing was obvious: sending money to the Sultan was a red flag.

As further proof for their ridiculous claims, they told the minister to measure the shul in Lubavitch. He would find that it was built in the exact same size as the *Beis Hamikdash*, which surely meant that the Mittlerer Rebbe was serious about his plans to overthrow the Czar.

Preparations

Word quickly spread that the Mittlerer Rebbe was going to be brought to Vitebsk for questioning. Even before the officers arrived in Lubavitch on Sunday, hundreds of Chassidim streamed in from the surrounding villages for Shabbos. The Mittlerer Rebbe did not change his behavior at all that Shabbos, and said Chassidus as he normally would.

Meanwhile, there was a great uproar in the whole region. Jews as well as non-Jews began making preparations to greet the Mittlerer Rebbe and accompany his carriage in and out of the cities he would be passing. It was clear to the police that this was no simple matter, that the Mittlerer Rebbe was famous and respected even by the non-Jews of White Russia.

When the police officers arrived in Lubavitch, they went straight to the home of the Mittlerer Rebbe. They stayed there for about an hour and spoke with great respect and deference. They politely asked the Mittlerer Rebbe to travel with them to Vitebsk to be questioned by the governor, and said that he can arrange his own transportation and travel at a slower pace due to his health.

The officers preferred to leave that day, Sunday, and travel until Liozna;



THE LIBELOUS LETTER SENT TO THE GOVERNMENT WITH THE ACCUSATIONS AGAINST THE MITTELER REBBE.

stay the night in Liozna and on Monday proceed to Vitebsk. But the Mitteler Rebbe's family asked that he travel that day only until Dobromisl, which was much closer; on Monday continue to Liozna, and on Tuesday to reach Vitebsk. The officers asked their superiors who agreed to the itinerary.

After the wagons had left Lubavitch, another four investigators arrived. These were Jews who worked for the government and spoke Yiddish. They mingled with the people in Lubavitch and tried to learn more information about the Mitteler Rebbe's behavior. They also interviewed the non-Jewish landlords and *peritzim* from the surrounding areas who all spoke highly about the Mitteler Rebbe.

Of course, the officers also searched the Mitteler Rebbe's home. They combed through every paper looking for evidence of treason, but the only suspicious thing they found were *cheshbonos* of tzedakah for Eretz Yisroel, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire under the Turkish Sultan. They confiscated these papers in order to translate them into Russian.

They also measured the shul in Lubavitch, and found that it did not resemble the *Beis Hamikdash* in any way.

The huge entourage all began moving at the same time. Many wagons, and hundreds of people on foot, all began the journey.

The Arrest

At 11:00 a.m., the Mitteler Rebbe left Lubavitch. The reaction in the Rebbe's *chatzer* was indescribable. People burst into tears, and there was screaming and emotional outbursts. This had been going on since Motzo'e'i Shabbos; only the Mitteler Rebbe himself was perfectly calm and relaxed. He accepted Chassidim for *yechidus*, wrote Chassidim, and early in the morning closeted himself with his son-in-law, the Tzemach Tzedek, for two hours.

When the Mitteler Rebbe sat down in the wagon, he had a kind of amused smile on his face. Then the wagon began moving, and it was quite a scene. The huge entourage all began moving at the same time. Many wagons and hundreds of people on foot, all began the journey to Dobromisl, arriving at three o'clock.

That morning, a group of Chassidim had approached the officers asking for permission to accompany the Mitteler Rebbe. The officers readily agreed; they enjoyed seeing the Jews

showing proper respect to their rabbi, and even the minister in Vitebsk had ordered them to speak to the Mitteler Rebbe with respect.

As the caravan passed Barzuvka, the first village on the road to Dobromisl, the entire village came out to greet them.

The "mayor" of the city, a gentile named Starasta, presented the Mitteler Rebbe with bread and salt as a sign of respect. The same happened at the next village, and again at the third one. About a mile outside Dobromisl, the Chassidim were greeted by all the non-Jewish inhabitants of the city led by the city elders. The officers accompanying the caravan were very impressed, seeing with their own eyes the great respect and admiration shown to the Mitteler Rebbe by everyone in the entire region.

Upon entering the city of Dobromisl, the Mitteler Rebbe's son announced that they would go straight to the main shul.

The Mitteler Rebbe went into the *cheder sheini* and told the Chassidim

to daven *Mincha*, after which he said a *maamar*. It was announced that the following morning after *Shacharis* they would continue to Liozna.

All the while, Chassidim sped between the cities on the route to give advance notice of the schedule. Reb Gavriel Yaakov, a Chossid from Vitebsk, made it to Liozna early Monday morning and found the entire city, along with hundreds of Chassidim from neighboring villages, waiting for the arrival of the Mittlerer Rebbe.

He told the assembled crowd everything that had happened until now, how the officers had showed great respect to the Rebbe and that they were allowing him to travel in his own wagon accompanied by all the Chassidim.

Upon hearing this, the Chassidim from Vitebsk, who were waiting in Liozna, immediately sent a messenger

back to Vitebsk. He was to tell the Chassidim there the news, and instruct them to ask the minister to allow the Rebbe to stay in a private house, to have *minyanim* and say Chassidus.

Setback

Suddenly, a new messenger arrived looking confused and worried. Everyone thought something terrible had happened. He said that the Rebbe was fine, but there was an update.

The *misnagdim*, seeing how the trip was turning into a “victory parade” for the Mittlerer Rebbe instead of the humiliating arrest they thought it would be, decided to take action. They went to the minister and accused the Chassidim of bribing the officers. The Mittlerer Rebbe, they told him, was being treated more like a king than a prisoner.

The minister became furious and immediately sent a rider on horseback

with a sealed message. The Rebbe was to stay the night with the officers and nobody was allowed to accompany him except his son and three people of his choice. They would continue the journey in a guarded wagon with the officers, not in his own wagon. Anyone attempting to accompany the Rebbe to Vitebsk would be harshly punished, without exception. In addition, the Rebbe would not be allowed to stay in a private house in Vitebsk. He would be put in prison in a general cell with other prisoners.

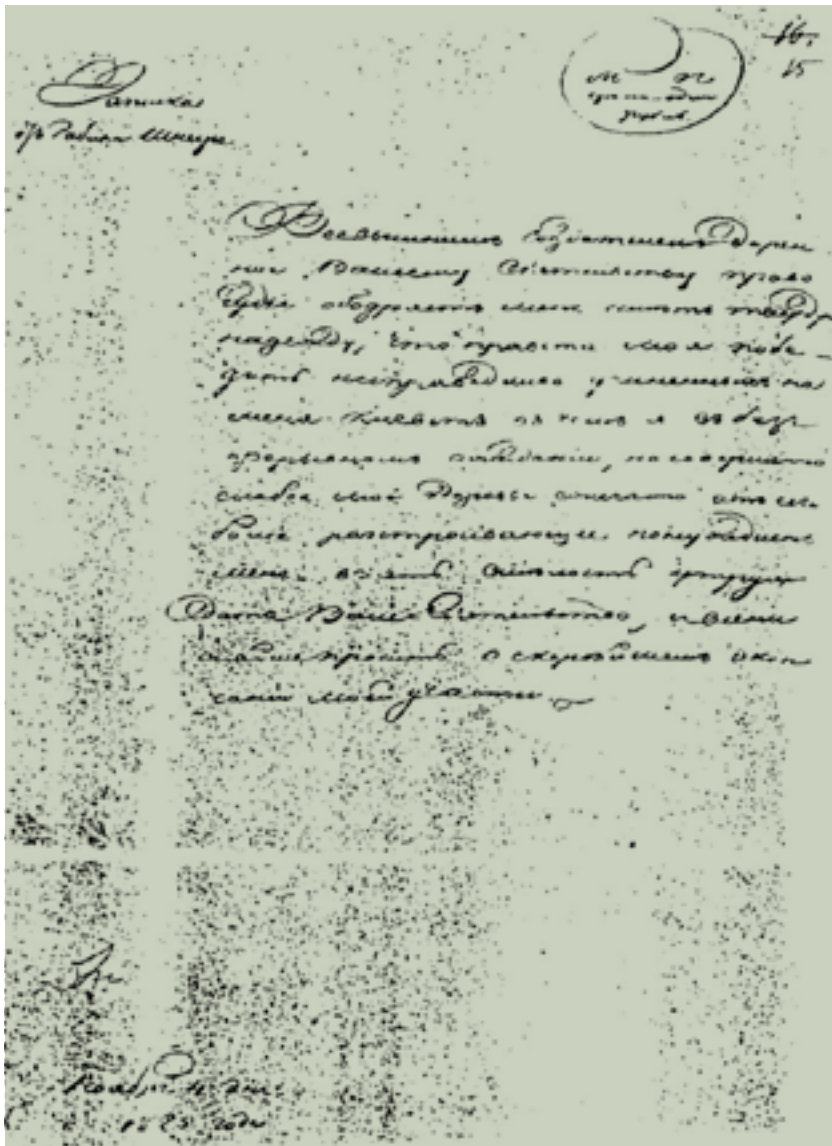
This terrible news threw the Chassidim into a panic. Nobody knew what to do or what was happening back in Dobromisl.

Night came and the Mittlerer Rebbe had still not arrived in Liozna, where he had been scheduled to arrive hours earlier.

At 4:00 a.m., the group from Vitebsk gave up on waiting, and hired



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LETTER FROM THE MITTELER REBBE TO THE MINISTER ASKING FOR HIS RELEASE.

a wagon to take them in middle of the night back to Vitebsk.

When they arrived they found thousands of people from Horodok, Nevel, Beshenkovitch, Polotzk and other cities, waiting in Vitebsk. The word had spread that the Mitteler Rebbe was going to arrive today, accompanied by a huge entourage. Everyone knew that he had said

Chassidus on the trip and was being treated with tremendous respect wherever he passed, and the excitement in Vitebsk grew with every passing moment.

Thousands of people lined the road from Liozna to Vitebsk; wherever one looked there were Chassidim milling around. All of them were eager to join the procession.

The group which had arrived early that morning from Liozna didn't have the heart to tell them that the "party" was over; there wasn't going to be any procession or entourage. When night fell and the Mitteler Rebbe with his entourage had not yet appeared, people started to get worried and frightened.

After it was already dark, more people arrived in Vitebsk. They knew what had happened and word spread that in Liozna the Mitteler Rebbe was placed in a private house under armed guard. Nobody was allowed in or out. That morning just two wagons, with heavy security, had come to Vitebsk and slipped into the city without notice.

At 9:00 p.m., the Chassidim learned from Dr. Heibenthal, who was friendly with the minister, that he had implored the minister to remove the Rebbe from the prison and give him his own room in the central police station.

The minister agreed and the Rebbe, along with his son and the three chosen Chassidim, were taken from the cell and given their own room. The doctor said that he had seen them there and had given the Rebbe medicine for the fever he had developed on the road.

That was all anyone knew.

Chassidus in Prison

For two long weeks there was no news. Nobody saw the Mitteler Rebbe and no information was forthcoming from the police.

Twice a day Chassidim were allowed to bring food to the station. They would go to the door of the station, whereupon one of the three incarcerated Chassidim would emerge, accompanied by an armed guard. He would take the food and give the person at the door the dishes from the last delivery. Neither of them were

He accuses me of being a liar and a traitor, yet he still addresses me as “Rebbe” because he knows the truth!

allowed to say a word or make any sound.

The Chassidim begged Dr. Heibenthal to do something but there was nothing he could do. The situation was too sensitive.

On Thursday, 16 Cheshvan, Dr. Heibenthal called a meeting of the most prominent Chassidim in town. He said that on Tuesday there had been a party at the home of the minister. Two of the princes who were invited, Lubamirsky and Tzekret, knew the doctor and also heard of the Mitteler Rebbe.

The doctor asked them to speak to the minister about the Rebbe to tell him how beloved he is by everyone, Jews and non-Jews, and that he is a holy and righteous person.

They did so, and on the day before, Wednesday, they went back to the minister to talk about the Rebbe. The minister listened and answered that from now on 20 people would be allowed to go in three times a day for *minyanim*, and twice a week the Rebbe would be allowed to say Chassidus for 50 people.

That morning the doctor was by the minister, who told him—not knowing that it was the doctor’s own initiative—that two princes had vouched for the Mitteler Rebbe and he was allowing the above mentioned things.

The next day, Friday, the office of the interior minister made an announcement that from now on, *minyanim* of 20 people would be allowed in three times a day, and 50 people twice a week to hear Chassidus.

Within an hour there was a raffle, and the 20 winners went into the Mitteler Rebbe’s room for *Shacharis*.

Another 20 went in for *Mincha*, and so on for *Maariv*, *Kabbalas Shabbos*, and *Shacharis*, and then 50 winners for the *maamar* after *Mincha* on Shabbos.

The Trial

The entire case hinged on the papers that had been confiscated from the Mitteler Rebbe’s house, and on the letter to Reb Pinchas Reizes.

The *misnagdim* told the minister that the Chassidim could not be trusted, and whoever was given the job of translating the papers into Russian was certain to be bribed to take out any incriminating lines. Therefore the translating should be done only by one of their own, a leading *misnaged* in Vitebsk.

Chassidim were worried that the translator would purposely add a few suspicious details to his translation, but *baruch Hashem* it was a faithful translation of the Hebrew.

The papers were *cheshbonos* of money sent to Eretz Yisroel to support the Chassidim there. Even though it was perfectly legal, there was concern that it would look suspicious, because Eretz Yisroel was, after all, part of the Ottoman Empire.

A bigger problem was the letter with the forged *kuf*. This was indeed suspicious, and it was the word of the Mitteler Rebbe vs. the *misnagdim*. There was no way to prove that it was forged. First the minister had a private interview with the Mitteler Rebbe, who explained that his father had many Chassidim in Eretz Yisroel, who were all extremely poor, and they survived from the money sent from Russia.

As for the forged letter, the Mitteler Rebbe conceded that he did in fact finish the trip to Lubavitch 12 years



THE TOWN OF LUBAVITCH, AS IT APPEARS TODAY.

ago with a large amount of money, but it was nowhere near 104,000 rubles. The 100 part of the number was fake.

The minister was greatly impressed by the Mitteler Rebbe, and was inclined to believe him. However, before he could make a decision, he ordered that the Mitteler Rebbe should face his accusers in person, and let them state their case.

The Mitteler Rebbe came to the meeting in a royal wagon fit for a king, dressed in all white with his special Shabbos clothes. He looked like a *malach*.

Chassidim were nervous the minister would be angry when he saw this display, but the opposite happened. Upon seeing the Rebbe, he



immediately offered him a chair to sit on and addressed him with respect.

Then the *misnaged* arrived and the Mittlerer Rebbe immediately went on the offensive, accusing him of fabricating a story because of a personal grudge.

During the course of the discussion, the accuser slipped and addressed the Mittlerer Rebbe with the word “Rebbe.”

The Mittlerer Rebbe turned to the minister and said, “You see, he accuses me of being a liar and a traitor, yet he still addresses me as ‘Rebbe’ because he knows the truth and the accusations are all lies.”

The accuser became confused and starting stumbling over his words,

unable to utter a complete sentence, until the minister said to him that he had heard enough.

The Mittlerer Rebbe left the meeting victorious, with great honor and prestige.

On Shabbos, 9 Kislev, while the Mittlerer Rebbe was in middle of saying the *maamar* “*Ata Echad*,” he suddenly stopped and said, “Make room, *der Tatte is duh*—the Alter Rebbe is here.”

The next day, 10 Kislev, he sent a letter with his daughters to the governor. When they arrived at his office they burst into tears, begging him to end this saga and allow their father to go home.

After reading the letter, he told the daughters to calm down as their

father was going to be released today. By the time they returned, the guards had already been told to leave and the imprisonment was over.

It is said that the messengers arrived at the house just as the Mittlerer Rebbe was saying the *possuk* “*Pada b’shalom nafshi*” in that day’s *shiur* Tehillim (*kapitel* 55, for the tenth day of the month).

The guards left and the house filled with Chassidim. The Mittlerer Rebbe sat down to say a *maamar* in public for the first time in months, and left Vitebsk that same day to go back to Lubavitch.¹ **T**

1. The stories here are adapted from Otzar Sipurei Chabad vol. 5, page 253 onward.