

# The Life of a Chossid

## Reb Shilem Kuratin

Born: Circa 5645

Passed away: Elul 5679

Chossid of: The Rebbe Rashab

### Tomim, Chozer, Mashpia

Reb Shilem Kuratin was born in the year 5645, in the city of Disna, White Russia.

His full name was Meshulam Yedidya Gotlieb. However, he was called to the Torah only as Meshulam Yedidya, "Gotlieb" being a nickname of sorts. But it was the name "Shilem" that he would be known by for the entirety of his short life of 35 years and beyond. Famous as a *mashpia*, mentor and great *maskil*, he was a Lubavitcher Chossid for only 19 of those years.

His revered role and prominent position that he carried until his passing, belie the challenges and struggles of his upbringing; it was far from your textbook description of a *bochur* in Tomchei Temimim.

At the time of his birth, his parents were quite advanced in age; his older siblings already having grown up. This enabled his father to dedicate time to his upbringing and firm *Yiddishe* education. So devoted was he that, despite their poverty, he took every measure to pay for his son's *melamed*, ultimately selling the family cow to secure the necessary funds. Sadly, his father passed away before his *bar mitzvah*. Through the interference of many circumstances, he almost became a prodigy for the Enlightenment movement; however, in 5661, at the age of 16, he finally joined Tomchei Temimim.

Upon ascending the ranks in the refinement of character and study of Chassidus, he progressively became more and more liked by his peers and others around him. Eventually he was appointed as the *mashpia* and *mashgiach* for the *sedorim* of Chassidus in the yeshiva. Even with this honorable title and responsibility, he continued to conduct himself in a humble and unassuming manner. His sincere and deep care for every Yid was apparent in every encounter he had, even when disciplining the *bochurim*.

### The Making of A Mashpia

Shilem's father passed away at a very young age, and under the care of his older brother who was an adherent of the "*Haskala*," young Shilem was enrolled in a Gymnasium. Eventually though, he was sent to Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim.

With joy and optimism he arrived in Lubavitch but his clothing stuck out like a sore thumb: He was still dressed in the uniform of the secular school he left.

Concerned he may negatively influence his peers, the *mashpia*, Reb Shmuel Gronem met with the boy and made it clear that he was not interested in having a Gymnasium student in the yeshiva.

Now, while Shilem sat crying outside the *mashpia's* office, someone felt sorry for him and told the Rebbe Rashab what had happened. When the Rebbe Rashab heard the full story, he decided to allow Shilem to enroll at the yeshiva. Suitable clothing was provided for him, as well as somewhere to stay. The young orphan had finally found a home, in more senses than one. Until this point, he had not realized how much his soul had thirsted for the study of Chassidus. He dedicated himself entirely to his studies, integrating everything he learned into his daily conduct. At first he found Chassidus difficult to grasp, but he persevered eventually overcoming his difficulties. Before long, he became known as one of the most diligent students in the yeshiva.

### Focused!

Reb Shilem was known for his powerful levels of concentration. He could sit for hours on end without being distracted by anything going on around him.

One winter evening in the year 5668, the small oven heating the *zal* in Lubavitch sent off sparks in all directions starting a terrible fire. Screaming, running and chaos ensued as *bochurim* began pouring bucket after bucket of water to try and battle the flames. The tumultuous noise reached the ears of the Rebbe Rashab and the Frierdiker Rebbe who came to see what the commotion was all about. After the flames died down and they were able to re-enter the *zal*, they saw the most incredible scene. Standing in a corner, completely oblivious to everything that had been

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לכ"ק אדמו"ר  
ולזכות תלמידי התמימים  
בכל אתר ואתר  
המסורים לעניני כ"ק אדמו"ר  
באופן ד"יתיר מבחיהי" ממש  
נדפס ע"י  
הרוצה בעילום שמו

going on, was Reb Shilem. When the fire broke out he was in middle of *Shema* of *Maariv* and his concentration didn't break for even a moment. The Rebbe Rashab turned to his son and exclaimed, "It was for such individuals that Tomchei Temimim was formed!"

This was not a one-off display of his concentration and devotion; there are many similar stories that express the same idea.

Shilem used his unusual powers of concentration and memory for a very important function. He became one of the "*chozrim*" who transcribed the *maamorim* and *sichos* of the Rebbe Rashab, a great privilege in Lubavitch. There were 13 *chozrim* who were divided into three groups. So well did he perform his task as *chozer* that in time he became the leading transcriber.

Not only was Tomchei Temimim created for Reb Shilem but so was a dreaded Russian army conscription center.

In 5667,<sup>1</sup> like many young men his age, he was called for military service. That year, during Simchas Torah, the Rebbe Rashab spoke about the function of a Jew in elevating the sparks of *kedusha* buried in profane places. The Rebbe commented on this statement of the Rebbe Rashab: "This refers to being released from military service."

Call-up took place at the beginning of the winter and those who were due to be conscripted would go to the Rebbe [Rashab] on Simchas Torah to receive his blessing. When Shilem was called up, the Rebbe [Rashab] said: "You will eventually be released, but [in order to liberate] the spark that needs to be elevated by you, you will have to pass through the *oblast*." (Each Russian province, or "*oblast*," had its own conscription office.) He added that the local office, where Shilem was the only Jew to present himself, existed just so that Shilem could pass through it."

## Teshuva Without a Gun

During the unstable period between the deposing of the Czar and the Communist seizure of power, murderous gangs of criminals organized wholesale pogroms against the Jews.

The war forced the yeshiva to leave Lubavitch and along with it went Reb Shilem. After settling in Kremenchug with his family and a number of other Jews, they were once abducted by one such gang. They were taken to the outskirts of the city where these murderers were about to execute them when suddenly a miracle took place. Before

the criminals managed to fire their guns, they were forced to run away and Reb Shilem and the others were saved. Afterwards, someone who had heard about this miraculous escape from death said to Reb Shilem: "I would love to attain the level of *teshuva* that you must have achieved when those guns were pointed at you!"

Reb Shilem dismissed the man's words with a wave of his hand and remarked, "When you are standing with your family opposite the muzzle of a rifle, it is very difficult to do *teshuva*. The highest levels of *teshuva* can only be achieved when one has a *tallis* over his head."

## Roundabout

The tremendous care Reb Shilem had for the physical needs of each and every *bochur* was legendary.

It happened one evening that a certain *bochur* received a *knas* and was not allowed to eat the yeshiva's food that night. This was not an uncommon punishment at the time and most of the *bochurim* in this situation would have to figure out a solution to their hunger on their own. This particular *bochur*, Reb Shilem knew, would not be able to do so and would therefore be left hungry.

When he came home he asked his wife to prepare supper for this *bochur* but cautioned her that it should be "unofficial."

While the yeshiva was in Kremenchug, Reb Shilem and his family moved into the yeshivah building. (It was dangerous to walk outside in the streets, even during the daytime, due to the constant fighting and rioting.)

On Shabbos Parshas Shoftim 5679, Reb Shilem read the *haftorah* in the yeshiva's *minyan* and then continued davening *barichus* long into the day. When he finally finished davening Reb Shilem joined the Shabbos afternoon seder Chassidus as usual. His Shabbos meal was only eaten after *Mincha*.

Unbeknownst to any of the *talmidim*, Reb Shilem was actually suffering from a terrible illness. That night Reb Shilem passed away at the age of 34, leaving behind his wife and children, and many "orphaned" *talmidim*.<sup>2</sup> **T**

1. Sefer Hasichos Toras Sholom p. 70 fn. 1.

2. For further reading see Derher Weekly Newsletter, Volume 1, Issues 7-10