

The Pact That Brought Russia to its Knees

Deep in the Russian winter, a train is speeding through the countryside. It is dark outside, and the sound of train wheels rolling over tracks vibrates through the cars. The Frierdiker Rebbe sits in his cabin, lost in thought. His mind wanders to an episode that happened seven years earlier, when his father, the Rebbe Rashab, gave him a mysterious warning. "Dark clouds are looming over Russia; they will last for at least the next 22 years. Yosef Yitzchak, to promote the study of Torah and to spread Yiddishkeit will require actual mesiras nefesh!" Three weeks later, the Rebbe Rashab passed away.

What were these dark clouds? Who was threatening the survival of Yiddishkeit?

Dark clouds are upon us

Jewish life had been stormy for years. The Russian Revolution brought anti-semitic pogroms, and only after many years was Russia finally ruled by people who did not tolerate violence. Unfortunately, the communists, who now ruled Russia, were also anti-religious. They felt that anyone following communist beliefs had no need for religion. Because they kept the Jews safe, many Jews supported the communists and dropped Yiddishkeit. They even formed a group called the Yevseksiya, whose mission was to destroy all traces of Yiddishkeit. They worked together with the Soviet authorities to shut down many yeshivos, mikvaos, and signs of Jewish life. If the Yevseksiya found young men teaching Torah, they were immediately arrested and either killed or sent to Siberia.

It was under these conditions that the Frierdiker Rebbe found himself working tirelessly to reopen yeshivos, chadarim, and mikvaos throughout the Soviet Union. However, the Frierdiker Rebbe could not do this alone.

The secret meeting

The Frierdiker Rebbe often traveled to Moscow, where he headed a committee of rabbonim and activists who fought to keep Yiddishkeit alive in the Soviet Union. On one of these trips, in the early 1920s, the Frierdiker Rebbe planned to arrange a secret meeting with nine Chassidim who had learned in Tomchei Temimim.

Somehow, the authorities caught wind of these plans and forced the Chassidim to gather earlier than intended. At the meeting, the Frierdiker Rebbe said that he needed volunteers to strengthen Yiddishkeit in the Soviet Union. This included creating underground chadarim, building mikvaos, and inspiring people to remain true to Torah and mitzvos. He told them that many of their chadarim and mikvaos will be closed down, and they'll have to respond by building new ones. They will constantly be on the run, chased by the Yevseksiya; their lives will never be safe.

He then looked up to the Chassidim before him and asked, "Who can I count on to volunteer?"

We are not afraid!

Reb Bentzion Shemtov was the first to step forward, and the rest followed. They proceeded to split the Soviet Union into ten regions, and each committed to strengthen Yiddishkeit in one region. All ten of them, a complete minyan, made a pact and swore to remain true to their mission, until literally the very last drop of blood. Unfortunately, most of them indeed had to fulfill their promise, for they were murdered by the Soviets, ym"s, for the "crime" of spreading Torah.

After the meeting, a frightened Chassid exclaimed to the Frierdiker Rebbe, "Rebbe, I'm afraid!" The Frierdiker Rebbe responded, "If the heart [the Rebbe] is not scared, why should the rest of the body [the Chassidim] be afraid?"

Afraid or not, this meeting had the desired effect on the Chassidim. As a result of this meeting, hundreds of chadarim and shuls were established throughout the Soviet Union. How did they do it? What was life like for these Chassidim, who took on the mighty NKVD single handedly? Let's take a look at some of their stories.

Reb Bentzion Shemtov

Reb Benzion Shemtov was assigned the province of Volhynia, which includes parts of Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine. Bentzion immediately got to work. He traveled the region lecturing on the importance of Jewish youth. He implored his fellow Jews, both in person and in writing, to give their children a Jewish education. He personally founded tens of chadarim and helped refurbish many mikvaos in the area.

Benzion was so successful that he managed to establish four major yeshivos with a total of around 300 students. These yeshivos, headed by brilliant roshei yeshivos, operated secretly, right under the noses of the Yevseksiya and NKVD!

Benzion's work continued smoothly for two and a half years. The Jewish spirit in Volhynia was blossoming, and eventually the Yevseksiya began to take notice. They found some letters in which a mysterious figure wrote very disapprovingly of the communist schools. It did not take them long to track these letters back to Benzion, and they immediately began following him. Even though Benzion noticed that the authorities were hot on his tail, he could not bring himself to stop his holy work. Try to find a story about his arrest, or a story where he escaped arrest. Three months later, he was arrested.

Benzion was put through grueling interrogations where his captors demanded to know the locations of the chadarim and names of the teachers and students. Benzion did not budge, he stood firm and did not tell his interrogators anything! This strength of character made a tremendous impression on his captors, and they decided to release him for Pesach on the condition that he return immediately afterward.

When Benzion returned, he was surprised to find that the authorities were going to allow him to live freely in Charkov as long as he stayed in the city. Knowing that they wanted to follow him and find out who he was working with, Benzion made sure to be extra vigilant when meeting with other Chassidim.

However, that was not the end of his troubles. Further mesiras nefesh would be required of Benzion, for he was arrested at the same time as the Frierdiker Rebbe. The Yevseksiya once again put him through grueling interrogations, as they wanted information that would incriminate the Frierdiker Rebbe. Benzion understood their intentions and once again did not budge!

A month later, Benzion was arrested for a third time. This time, he was not given his tefillin. This pained him tremendously, and he decided to go on a hunger strike in protest. He was so stubborn that he managed to fast for seven days straight! When his jailers saw that he wasn't going to give in, they returned his tefillin to him. Benzion was overjoyed, but his joy was short-lived, for soon afterward he was sentenced to Siberia for three years. This was the price he was willing to pay to ensure that Jewish children would learn Torah.

The young warriors

Mesiras nefesh wasn't only required of the melamdin and organizers of the underground chadarim. The children and teenagers attending these yeshivos went through difficult experiences themselves. Chatzkel Brod was ten years old when his parents sent him 300 miles away from home to study at an underground cheder in Charkov. After a couple of months in Charkov and several years in Kiev, Chatzkel transferred to Tomchei Temimim.

Chatzkel joined the yeshiva in Krivoy-Rog. Not only did the bochurim have to hide from the Russian authorities, they also had to conceal themselves from the Jewish community. No one wanted to be associated with a yeshiva, for it could mean certain death if discovered. Every morning, the bochurim woke up very early and went to the local shul before anyone else. They had to hide in the women's section and be as quiet as possible to make sure that no one would notice them during davening. After everyone left, the shamash would lock the door from the outside, and the bochurim emerged from their hiding places to learn Torah.

It took only one month for the community to find out about the yeshiva, forcing them to move to Dnepropetrovsk. There too they had to hide in the women's section during davening, and on Shabbos, when the women would come to shul, they squeezed into a little side room, remaining completely silent throughout the entire Shabbos davening. It did not take long for the community to discover the yeshiva operating clandestinely in their shul, and the bochurim had to return to Krivoy-Rog.

So it went. A month here, a month there, the bochurim were constantly on the run. Often, there was not enough food, so they would go hungry. At one point, having nowhere else to sleep, Chatzkel slept in the large shul by himself. He had no pillow or blanket, only his coat. He would lay there all night trying to doze off.

After a tumultuous couple of months, Chatzkel ended up in the Tomchei Temimim of Berditchev. There were eight bochurim in that yeshiva, most of them from out of town. There too they arrived at the local shul by 5 am, where their teacher, Reb Moshe Rubinson, gave a daily shiur. Afterward, they would leave the shul in Paris to study on their own in random locations throughout the city.

On Chof Daled Teves, the bochurim gathered in the shul for a farbrengen. They locked the doors, boarded up the windows, and sat down to a meal of herring and potatoes. Quietly, they sang nigunim, said l'chaim, and listened to their teachers, Reb Moshe Rubinson and Reb Berel Gurevitch. Suddenly, they heard a loud pounding on the door. Immediately, as if it had been rehearsed, the table was cleared and everyone found hiding spots throughout the shul. The pounding grew louder, and eventually the door came crashing down, revealing multiple policemen with guns drawn. After a thorough search, everyone was found, and they were led to police headquarters. The next day, they were transferred to the dreaded jail cells of the NKVD.

In the den of the NKVD

Chatzkel was only 14 at the time, but he recalls his month-long stay in the NKVD jail cells with astonishing clarity. None of the boys wanted to admit that they had been learning Torah, for they knew that with such information the authorities could easily punish their teacher. Each student stood firm in the interrogation room, not budging from his story. "We are homeless orphans and were looking for a place to sleep. We saw the light on in the shul, so we came inside."

They were beaten, starved, and tortured in ways that no one should have to even imagine. Nevertheless, Chatzkel and his friends had mesiras nefesh to keep kosher, and they made sure to wash negel vasser every morning, even though it meant they wouldn't have drinking water that day. Eventually, they found out that their teacher had decided to take on all the blame. Reb Moshe did not want the NKVD to continue their investigation and arrest more people who had helped the yeshiva, so he confessed. The interrogators brought Reb Moshe to the bochurim's cell, and he told them that it was over. Only after their teacher encouraged them to confess did they admit to their "crimes." Not long afterward, the six younger students were transferred to a government-run orphanage.

This orphanage was made for children whose parents were arrested by the Soviet authorities. There were many such orphanages across the country with the goal of indoctrinating communist values. Needless to say, the principal quickly became frustrated with the new group of boys. They wouldn't eat the food, they would keep their hats on even though it was against the rules, and they clearly were not interested in anything their teachers had to say. It did not take long for the administration to decide that the bochurim had to be transferred.

They were transferred to a much stricter orphanage, which was run by the NKVD. Upon arrival, they were welcomed with a harsh lecture detailing the punishments that awaited them if they did not follow the rules. They had to eat what they were served, participate during class, listen to their superiors, etc. What the NKVD did not take into account was that these boys were well trained in the art of secrecy from their days in the underground yeshivos. They managed to keep Torah and mitzvos without sticking out. They found different excuses not to eat certain foods. At the dinner table, they slipped chunks of meat into their pockets and threw them out later.

One thing that the boys desperately wanted was a chance to put on tefillin. They approached the principal, told him that most of their personal belongings had been confiscated back in Berditchev, and asked if he would allow two of them to spend the day in town to restock. Permission was granted, and two boys traveled into town where they managed to obtain some kosher food and, more importantly, a small pair of tefillin. Then the boys asked for permission to go skating every day on the nearby frozen ponds. When that request was granted, the boys hid the tefillin under some snow deep in the forest, and went out to "skate" every day. Instead of skating, they would go to their secret forest hideout and put on tefillin. Their joy was indescribable when they finally managed to fulfill this special mitzvah for the first time in over a month!

Eventually, they managed to smuggle siddurim and a tehillim into the orphanage as well. One day, a teacher noticed that Heshyl Tzaitlyn was reading a Russian book very intently. Knowing that the bochurim did not enjoy secular studies, he stepped closer and noticed that Heshyl was hiding a tehillim underneath the Russian book. Furious, the teacher slapped Heshyl and tore the tehillim to pieces. From that point on, the administration kept a much closer eye on the boys. Soon afterward, Heshyl overheard the principal complaining that they were too hard to deal with, and that he wanted to transfer them to a much harsher institution. Luckily for the boys, help was on the way.

Reb Michael Taitelbaum had heard that these boys were locked up in an orphanage on the outskirts of Berditchev and wanted to help. He had two problems: firstly, he didn't have any money, and secondly, he was worried that the police would arrest him for having a beard. The first problem was solved by Reb Binyomin Gorodetzky, who sent him enough money to plan an

escape, and the second problem was solved by wrapping a handkerchief around his face, disguising his beard.

Not long after Reb Michoel arrived in Berdichev, he noticed two boys walking together in the street, and he recognized one of them as Fole Wilshanksy. Even with the handkerchief, the boys immediately recognized Reb Michoel and followed him to a nearby shul. There they discussed the conditions in the orphanage and began to formulate an escape plan. Reb Michoel suggested that they escape on Shabbos, for that was when security was lightest.

Reb Michoel went to the train station and bought six tickets: two to Kiev, two to Zlohbin, and two to Moscow. To avoid questions, he bribed six different people to wait in line and buy the tickets for him. Every minute in the train station felt like an eternity. Train stations across the Soviet Union were always buzzing with police officers and plainclothes secret agents looking out for anything unusual. If at any point a curious police officer decided to search him, he would have no way of explaining where he got such a large amount of money or why he needed the tickets. After an exhausting couple of hours, Reb Michoel returned home with the precious tickets in hand.

At the appointed time the next Shabbos, Reb Michoel waited outside the orphanage while the bochurim slipped out in pairs. Making sure to remain far apart from each other so as not to attract attention, they were led by Reb Michoel through fields and backroads until they reached the train station. Then the signal was given to meet at a prearranged location near the station where Reb Michoel gave out the train tickets and final instructions. There they said their final goodbyes and went their separate ways. Their nonchalant expressions belied their pounding hearts. Calmly, they each boarded their trains, and with prayers on their lips they all safely reached their destinations.

Even though none of these bochurim were older than 15, they did not flinch even under the harshest conditions. They never ate treif, and they remained true to Torah and mitzvos as best they could. From where did they get this conviction? Who taught them to remain so strong? How did their yeshivos thrive under such intense persecution? The answer to these questions lies in the pact that the Frierdiker Rebbe made that fateful night to remain committed to the perseverance of Yiddishkeit “until the last drop of blood.” Thanks to the mesiras nefesh of the Frierdiker Rebbe and his Chassidim, a generation of Jews was raised with the spirit of Yiddishkeit even under the shadow of the Iron Curtain.

Reb Simcha Gorodetzky

Reb Simchah Gorodetzky was another trusted shliach of the Frierdiker Rebbe. Reb Simchah traveled all over the Soviet Union building mikvaos, establishing chadarim, and fundraising for their upkeep. Additionally, Reb Simchah would report back to the Frierdiker Rebbe about which communities needed a shochet, a melamed, a rav, etc. Through his efforts, many communities in some of the most far-flung regions of the Soviet Union were able to retain some form of a Jewish community.

Reb Simchah spent five months traveling around Crimea. There he visited many towns and villages building chadarim, mikvaos, etc., always staying one step ahead of the NKVD. Once, a police officer stopped him and demanded to see his papers. Knowing that he did not have the proper documents, Reb Simchah feared the worst. Indeed, the officer had heard that Reb Simchah was engaging in “counter-revolutionary activities,” and was planning his arrest. What

the officer didn't realize was that Reb Simchah had developed a very special relationship with the local Jews. As soon as they heard that Reb Simchah was being led down the street by a police officer they grabbed whatever weapons they could find and attacked the officer allowing Reb Simchah to escape! That was one of Reb Simchah's many close brushes with the NKVD

Another region where Reb Simchah spent a long period of time was Buchara. His first stop was Samarkand where in a matter of three months he managed to gather eight hundred children and enroll them in cheder. He had forty-five teachers on his payroll for which he constantly fundraised. After a year in Samarkand, a Jew from Tashkent came to Reb Simchah imploring him to do similar work in his city. That night they left for Tashkent. Miraculously, this decision saved his life. The authorities had been searching for Reb Simchah for months and were planning to arrest him that very night! They barged into his house only to find that no one was home. Reb Simchah was on the train to Tashkent.

Reb Simchah was so successful in planting seeds of Yidishkeit throughout the Soviet Union that he became a high-profile wanted criminal in the eyes of the Russian authorities. Photos of Reb Simchah were circulated to every single NKVD branch across the country forcing Reb Simchah to flee. Thanks to his tireless efforts the sound of children studying torah could be heard in many villages across the country even after he escaped.