

REB LEVIK'S MATZOS

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REB LEVIK, THE REBBE'S FATHER.
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The Rebbe's Bar Mitzvah

On Yud Alef Nissan, 5675 (1915), Reb Levi Yitzchok (known as Reb Levik) and Rebbetzin Chana Schneerson celebrated the bar mitzvah of their oldest son, the future Rebbe.

When he became bar mitzvah, the Rebbetzin said (apparently in the name of her husband) that he was already a gaon olam, a scholar of world stature.

Rebbetzin Chana describes the bar mitzvah:

After my son delivered his *drasha*, which made a strong impression on

all the listeners, he broke into tears. Many of the guests, seeing him cry, joined in and began to cry as well.

I found out that my husband had asked for a certain promise from our son. I did not know exactly what the request was, but I know that on Friday night, when my son finally agreed and gave his promise, there was great *simchah* in the house. The dancing lasted until late into the night.

After the bar mitzvah boy's *drasha*, a member of the community named

Sergei Pavlov Fallei approached me and wished me mazel tov. He added that he feels fortunate that he played a role in bringing such a Rav, and such a son, to his city.

Sergei, an engineer by profession, was one of the wealthiest and most influential Jews in Yekaterinoslav. His father was a religious Jew from Lithuania and as a boy he had received an [authentic Jewish] education. However, as he grew older he abandoned the Torah way of life and became an ardent Zionist. He was the leader of the Zionist movement in Ukraine.

When Reb Levi Yitzchok was proposed as the chief rabbi of Yekaterinoslav (now known as Dnepropetrovsk), the Rebbe Rashab's strong opposition to Zionism was already well-known. Naturally, the Zionists of the city tried to convince their leader to exercise his power and prevent the appointment of a prominent Chabad chossid to the position of chief rabbi of their city.

However, Sergei decided to check out the rabbi for himself before making a decision. He spent many hours secluded with Reb Levi Yitzchok, sitting together into the wee hours of the morning. The two discussed many issues and Sergei was deeply impressed by Reb Levi Yitzchok's broad knowledge in many fields. The next day, he announced his resignation as the head of the Zionist movement in the Ukraine, and gave his enthusiastic approval to the appointment of Reb Levi Yitzchok as chief rabbi.

Kosher Matzah with Soviet Certification

Rebbetzin Chana writes:

In 1939, government-certified matzah was baked for Passover. They were matzah in appearance only because they were not kosher at all.

This situation allowed my husband no

rest. He took it upon himself to make kosher matzah available to anyone who wanted to obtain them. He set himself to work—he koshered the two largest mills, acquired new sifters, and set up Passover supervision using many supervisors.

My husband sent a letter to the *Ispolkom* (the organ of local executive and regulatory power in the Soviet Union) detailing ten requirements to be implemented at the baking and selling of the matzah, along with the demand that everything he or the rabbis he had appointed would instruct must be followed. They replied that all his requirements

REBBETZIN CHANA,
THE REBBE'S
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“Failing to respond correctly is true heresy; no Jew may do so!”

would be met, and that regular flour from the market would not be used.

During that time, the population was fed using ration cards. Every citizen was given a mere 30 grams of bread per day, and new sacks of flour couldn't be obtained by even the highest institutions. But in Dnepropetrovsk, in order to provide the Jews with kosher matzah, the government provided thousands of brand new sacks and white flour, while everyone else was given only black bread.

The outcome was that people from all over Ukraine and White Russia—and from Moscow and Leningrad as well—traveled to Dnepropetrovsk to obtain matzah. All the synagogues were stocked with crates waiting to be filled with the matzah.

On Friday afternoons, all the bakeries would telephone to ask what time they must finish baking before Shabbos, and what time after Shabbos they could fire up the ovens again. They would also inquire on the procedure to be followed when drawing *mayim shelanu*.

All this took place, let us not forget,

during a time when a private individual who wished to follow a religious lifestyle, to keep Shabbos as much as possible, was forced to hide in total secrecy so that no neighbor or anyone else would notice.

Once, a supervisor reported that a dough made of approximately 144 pounds of flour had been left on the table for five extra minutes. My husband immediately instructed that it be sent to *chometz* bakeries, and they supplied new flour for those matzos.

All the sanitary supervisors repeatedly inquired how to do everything so that the matzos would be of the strictest kosher-for-Passover standards. Even under the old [Czarist] regime, when religious observance was strong, no other Jewish community managed to accomplish what my husband achieved under the communist regime!

My husband achieved this all by traveling several times to Kharkov, where he pressed to obtain the approval of the *Narkom*, Council of People's Commissars; the regional government authority of executive power, and then of Kalinin, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, in Moscow.

For the Jews who appreciated it, this was a true joy, and for my husband it was a true spiritual pleasure. It cost him much of his own health to ensure that other Jews would be able to keep and enjoy the festival. He himself, however, would experience no Pesach Yom Tov joy of his own. By then, he was already imprisoned. For the eight days of Passover, he managed with just water and the small package of matzah he had taken along with him. He even left a few pieces over for Pesach Sheni.

The Arrest

Eight days before Pesach in 1939, my husband was arrested by the N.K.V.D. Knowing full well that he would not be home for the holiday, he asked to be permitted to take along two kilograms

of matzah, which lay in a bundle. They allowed him this request.

I asked them how I would know where he was, so that I could bring him some money and food. They told me to come to police headquarters at two o'clock the next afternoon, where I would be told everything.

The next day I went there, but, alas, I learned nothing. I pleaded to be allowed to bring him something, but they responded that he was not there.

Seeing the gravity of the situation, I submitted a statement to the prosecutor declaring that my husband was ill. "If I will not be permitted to bring him food from home, he won't eat anything on Passover. I therefore request permission to bring him food from my home." On this request I received a formal response: "You will not be allowed to do this. However, in accordance with the law, all the food he needs is cooked for him in prison."

On the arrest warrant, I noticed the signature of the supervisor responsible for my husband. So twice every day—morning and evening—I telephoned him at the NKVD office. Every time, he reported to me that my husband was being cared for, and that he sits and reads from the *siddur* which he had brought with him.

This is how I continued for five long months. Every ten days, as his turn came, I would go to the prison to bring him food or a change of clothing, but they would always tell me that he was not there, although the prosecutor would tell me that he was.

Declaration of Faith in the Stronghold of Heresy

Before Pesach of that year, the government conducted a census of the entire population. One of the questions was, "Are you a believer in G-d?" and some believers were fearful to identify themselves as such. So my husband

ascended the *bimah* in the synagogue on Shabbos, when a large crowd was assembled, and declared: "Failing to respond correctly is true heresy; no Jew may do so!"

His words had such a remarkable impact that one individual with a position in a government office whose wife had already written on the form that he was a non-believer went to the statistics office and asked for the erroneous information to be corrected—that he was, in fact, a believer. Very pleased that he had mustered the courage to do this, the fellow came to thank the Rav for having influenced him so.

In the course of his interrogations—they were usually held around 3-4 a.m.—he was asked: "How were you able to carry out such a major (matzah baking) operation, and for religious purpose, no less, during a year when there was a shortage of flour and food in general?!"

My husband replied simply: "When I visited Kalinin, I bribed him, so he gave me a permit." The interrogator, may his name be erased, was speechless.

The second thing they asked concerned his public address about the census question on faith. It was clear that everything he had said in the synagogue had been relayed to them, word for word. They had evidently planted an agent to watch my husband's behavior, and to observe his influence over the people. We later learned that one of the congregants had been the informer.

My husband replied that the Soviet regime achieves all its objectives only through truth. So for a Jew to openly misrepresent his true belief, out of fear for losing his livelihood etc., would be untruthful. [Thus as a good Soviet citizen,] he had dutifully insisted that no one deceive the census-takers.

Oh, how wisely and cleverly he deflected their questioning! His responses put an end to both of these lines of inquiry... 🐣