





MY GRANDPARENTS

# MULLE AND BELLA GUREVITCH

SARA GUREVITCH, AGE 13

---

*Dedicated to the good health and long life of Mrs. Bella Gurevitch (“Bubby Bella”), a woman who exemplifies mesiras nefesh for Yiddishkeit and for her fellow Jews.*

---

## ALL FOUR PARENTS MURDERED BY NAZIS

**My great-grandfather**, Refoel Dovber Gurevitch, was born in Slavnia, a small village in Belarus near Vitebsk and Lubavitch, to Reb Chaim and Devorah Malkah Gurevitch. He learned in an underground yeshiva in Moscow called Tiferes Bachurim, led by Reb Yankel Landau, a *chossid* of the Rebbe Rashab. Rabbi Landau later became Chief Rabbi of Bnei Brak.

Refoel Dovber’s wife, Sara Esther, was the daughter of Tzivia Rivka and Reb Avraham Chaim Edelchik. Reb Avraham Chaim was the Rav of Kochanov. The Rogatchover said of Rav Avraham Chaim, “He knows how to learn.” Refoel Dovber and Sara Esther had three sons: Avraham, Shmuel Gershon Nison, and Dovid.

Refoel Dovber and Sara Esther lost both sets of parents in the Holocaust:

On Chof Zayin Adar, 1943, Reb Chaim and Devorah

Malkah Gurevitch were murdered by the Nazis after being crammed into a shul which was then set on fire.

Tzivia Rivka and Reb Avraham Chaim Edelchik were forced to dig their own graves, then shot down by the Nazis in an act of mass murder.

Refoel Dovber and Sara Esther somehow survived the war, together with their three sons. One of the three sons was my Zaide Shmuel Gershon Nison, called Mulle for short. He married my Bubby Bella, may she live and be well.

## BUBBY BELLA’S CHILDHOOD

**Bella’s parents were** Avraham Shmuel Levenhartz and Etkha Chazernov (from Nevel). In the 1930s, after the Iron Curtain had already slammed shut, they miraculously managed to escape with their children to Palestine, where Bella was born. But Avraham Shmuel wasn’t happy with the level of *chassidishkeit* in Palestine. He made his decision: better no life at all than a life with no *chassidishkeit*! And so, in 1939, when Bubby Bella was only three years old, the Levenhartzes moved back to Russia on one of the last boats leaving the country. They didn’t ask questions. They didn’t doubt themselves. They did what they thought was necessary to lead a Jewish life. This move was risky and objectively backwards—they were choosing to leave a place of legal religious freedom to return to a place of persecution. However, Avraham Shmuel saw the younger generation in Israel, even the children of *chassidim*, leading “modern” lives, and he realized that too much freedom can be a spiritual trap. In fact, their plan succeeded: When the Levenhartzes left Russia in 1967 and moved back to Eretz Yisroel, it was with a full family of *chassidishe* children and grandchildren.

After returning to Russia in 1939, the family lived in Moscow for about a year and a half, until the Germans invaded Russia in 1941. The Levenhartzes then fled to Samarkand, in Asia, where many *chassidim* had escaped as it was far from the battlefield. There was major famine and many died of starvation, but at least they were safe from the Nazi murderers.

My Bubby Bella was the youngest child and only girl after five brothers—Zalman, Yoshe, Yonah, Meilech, Moshe. She had other siblings who passed away in childhood.

After World War II, there was an influx of Polish

immigrants moving into Russia. But these people, coming to this new country to seek refuge, instead found famine, cold, disease, and death. They were dropping like flies. This was not exactly ideal for the Russian government, at least from a propaganda standpoint. The swift demise of so many of the “welcome” immigrants damaged Russia’s fragile reputation as a communist paradise. So, for a while, Stalin turned a blind eye to all Polish refugees exiting the country. This opened a window of opportunity for many Russian Jews who wished to escape. By obtaining false Polish identification, they would be permitted to leave.

Reb Avraham Shmuel and his wife Etká (Bella’s parents) decided to take advantage of the situation and traveled from Samarkand to Lvov (Lemberg), which was near the Ukraine-Poland border. But they were too late. The border was closed.

The Levenhartzes were stuck. They couldn’t return home—their apartment had already been occupied. But they couldn’t continue on, either. What to do? Finally, they heard a rumor of a few *chassidim* who had moved to Chernovitz, located near Romania in the Carpathian Mountains. Hoping against hope, they made a last-ditch effort to scrape together enough money to buy tickets to Chernovitz.

Bella, then around ten years old, was the only child making the journey with her parents, Avraham Shmuel and Etká. Bella’s brothers were already teenagers, working in various locations throughout Russia in order to survive. While on the train, Avraham Shmuel voiced his fears to Etká. Yes, they had been fortunate to acquire tickets. They had even made it onto the train. With Hashem’s help, they would safely arrive in Chernovitz. But then what? They had no one to turn to, no family, no apartment or job awaiting them—nothing at all.

A woman approached them. She apologized for seeming too forward, but said she couldn’t help but overhear what they had been discussing. She then made a startling announcement. “I’m not religious like you obviously are, but I’m Jewish, too. My husband has still not come home from war. You are welcome to stay in my home until you find an apartment, at the very least until my husband’s return.”

The Levenhartzes were shocked and amazed at the generosity of this complete stranger. With no other option, they took her up on her offer.

Days, weeks, and months passed, and there was no sign of any available apartment. The long-awaited husband returned, and the Levenhartzes prepared to leave the woman’s home. But the couple flat-out refused to let

“My husband has still not come home from war. You are welcome to stay in my home until you find an apartment.”

the family go out onto the streets. They insisted on the Levenhartzes remaining with them in their tiny, cramped home. We do not know the name of this incredible couple, but my family’s survival is thanks to them.

Finally, an apartment became available and the Levenhartzes moved into it. Their new home quickly became known throughout the underground *chassidische* society as an open house, with *farbrengens* happening frequently with illustrious guests like Reb Mendel Futerfas.

Bella was sent to public school and was an excellent student, but she refused to go to school on Shabbos. She’d pretend to be sick, or *really* make herself sick—she even injured her own fingers. She did what she had to do to keep Shabbos holy. One Shabbos, her classmate informed her teacher that Bella wasn’t really sick, but was trying to avoid breaking Shabbos. Her teacher tried to teach Bella a lesson by walking to her house in order to catch her in the act, which could mean Bella’s family’s imprisonment. One of Bella’s *goyishe* friends escaped from the group, ran ahead, and warned Bella in time for Bella to overheat herself to fake a fever.



## ZAIDE SHMUEL GERSHON NISON'S CHILDHOOD

**Shmuel Gershon Nison** Gurevitch, or Mulle as he was fondly called, was a teenager by the end of World War II. For many years he learned in a hidden yeshiva in Samarkand, and then worked for the Underground, helping *chassidim* escape Communist Russia. Because he was only a teenager, he was the ideal messenger and he would smuggle packages all over the country. He would also help *chassidim* wanted by the NKVD to flee before they could be captured.

As mentioned above, many *chassidim* used forged Polish identities to flee the country. My grandfather would help them obtain forged documents. But time was running out fast. Finally he decided it was time for him to leave Russia before it was too late. On the last train leaving Russia before the borders were sealed, Mulle attempted to escape together with his brother Avraham and Reb Mendel Futerfas.

While sitting on the train with his companions, Mulle noticed two strong, burly men sitting a little way down. He overheard one say to the other in coarse Russian, "Ha. Those pathetic Jews think they'll be making it across the border." At the last stop before the border, police officials came on and arrested the trio. They even arrested Mulle's father, Refoel Dovber, for the crime of allowing his children to try to abscond. He was taken from his home in Lvov and imprisoned for eight years.

Avraham and Mulle sat in jail for two months and then were drafted into the army. Avraham was released from army service after a year and a half, but Mulle remained in the Russian army for five years. He was paid for his work after his mandatory three years of service were up and sent his salary to his mother and siblings back home, as his father was still in prison. He rose in the ranks, was appointed as an officer and eventually commanded a platoon of soldiers on the borders of Mongolia.

## THE SHIDDUCH

**After five years**, Mulle received permission to leave the army. Reb Mendel Futerfas advised him to go to Chernowitz, where Bella Levenhartz was living.

Reb Lazer Nannes was a *chossid* who survived 20 years in a Soviet labor camp, miraculously managing to keep Shabbos and Yom Tov throughout, without ever shaving off his beard and *payos*. In his book, *Subbota*,

he mentions a girl young enough to inconspicuously send him care packages in the mail, containing matzos and other necessary items. This girl was my Bubby, the young Bella Levenhartz.

On Shushan Purim of 1958, Reb Lazer conducted the *chuppah* ceremony at my grandparents' wedding, Mulle Gurevitch to Bella Levenhartz, and remained their friend throughout the years.

There wasn't much money to marry them off and get them set up, partially because of what happened to the money that had been saved up for that purpose:

During the communist era, the Russian government closed down *mikva'os* across the Soviet Union. Like many communities, the Jewish community of Chernovitz built a secret underground *mikvah*. At one point, there was a problem with the *mikvah* and it needed urgent repairs. Reb Avraham Shmuel Levenhartz was asked if he could contribute money to fix the *mikvah*. He wanted to help but the only money he had was a small bundle he was painstakingly saving so he could marry off Bella, his only daughter. He approached his daughter and asked her if he should use that money. Without hesitation she told him to give the money to fix the *mikvah*. It didn't matter if that meant there wouldn't be money to pay for her needs.

My Bubby Bella, may she live and be well, never told this story to her children or grandchildren. The story only became known through Reb Lazer Nannes and others who were there.

## EMIGRATION

**After my grandparents'** wedding, they lived in Lvov for a few years, where their sons Chaim and Meilech were born. They soon moved to Tashkent, where a daughter, Tzivia, was born. They lived an extremely simple life, barely making ends meet for themselves and their three children. All businesses were under the ownership and control of the government, but some high positions happened to be filled by Jews, and my grandfather found work with these Jewish-managed companies. At one point, he worked for a printing enterprise and another time he worked for a textile company. Because of the Jewish management, Mulle managed to earn a meager livelihood without being forced to work on Shabbos.

Reb Osher Sasonkin (called Osher "Batumer" since he was from the town of Batumeh) left the Soviet Union, and Bella and Mulle Gurevitch with their small children



Mulle and Bella at their wedding, Chernovitz, Shushan Purim, 1958.



Sara Esther in Kfar Chabad holding Yossel and Tzivia Gurevitch.



Refoel Douber and Sarah Esther Gurevitch in Kfar Chabad with their sons Avraham and Mulle and some of their grandchildren. Back row, l-r: Avraham, Chaim, Menachem, Mulle, and Bella. Front row, l-r: Yossel, Refoel Douber, Tzvik, Meilech, Sara Esther, Feiga, Tziva, and Malka, in Kfar Chabad.

Wedding invitation of Mulle and Bella Gurevitch.







Reb Mulle Gurevitch and the Rebbe.

moved into his house in Tashkent where she became the *mikvah* matron at a secret underground *mikvah* in that house, at great risk to her life.

In Tashkent, the Gurevitches waited for the Rebbe's permission to apply for visas to leave the country. The Rebbe was in America at this time, and simply writing to him was an extremely dangerous course of action. It could



Mulle and Bella at the wedding of their children (the author's parents) Yossel and Ety Gurevitch, on Lag B'Omer of 1991.



Sara Gurevitch, age ten, visiting her Bubby Bella in Kfar Chabad.

mean the end of your job or even the end of your life. As many *chassidim* in Russia would do, my grandparents would address their letters to the Rebbe as "*Dadushka*"—Zaide in Russian. They would send their letters to Bella's brother Zalman, who was already living in Israel. He would forward the letter to the Rebbe in Crown Heights.

My Bubby Bella was pregnant with their fourth child, my father, when they at last received the long-desired letter from the Rebbe, giving them his *brachos* to request visas from the government. In 1967, my grandparents received visas to leave Russia, and the Gurevitch family moved to Kfar Chabad.

## LIFE IN ISRAEL

**My father, Yossel**, was born shortly after his parents' arrival in Israel. Around that same time, the other Gurevitches and Levenhartzes also came to Israel. This included all of Bella and Mulle's parents and all of Bella's brothers (except for Zalman, who had already been living in Israel for years).

My grandfather Mulle Gurevitch was the secretary of the Talmud Torah in Kfar Chabad for many years, taking care of the technical aspects of the school. Despite not being one of the teachers in the school, he managed to influence and teach the students.

There was once a Russian *bachur* who came to Israel as a bar mitzvah boy and was very behind in his studies, as he'd never had the chance to learn properly. He didn't even know how to read. He entered yeshiva and sat in class with the five-year-olds. My Zaide would learn with him every day to help the *bachur* catch up to his class. By the end of the year, he was totally caught up. This boy grew up and told my father the whole story of my grandfather's great kindness to him.

My Zaide tutored many students independently, and every day my Zaide would give a *shiur* in shul between *Minchah* and *Maariv* on the *Shulchan Aruch*.

When Mulle's father, Refoel Dovber, passed away, a note was found amongst his possessions in which he bequeathed his sterling silver *kiddush* cup to my father. This *becher* was made in the 1700s, and Refoel Dovber had kept it with him and protected it throughout all the years in Russia.

On Yud Daled Iyar of 1997, Shmuel Gershon Nison (Mulle) Gurevitch passed away. He was *zocheh* to attend the weddings of all of his six children, and to hold in his arms several of his grandchildren. My Bubby Bella, *zol gezunt zein*, living in Kfar Chabad, is the matriarch of our large family, spread out everywhere from Eretz Yisroel to Crown Heights to Manhattan to California.

I'm proud to be my Bubby Bella's granddaughter. Bubby Bella used to work in a grocery store, and adults today tell me how she would give them free treats when they were children, when she saw them making

a *brachah* or doing a *mitzvah*. What they didn't know was that these treats were paid for out of her own paycheck.

Bubby Bella took exceptional care of both her parents and her parents-in-law in their old age. She also ran a money *gemach*, cashing checks for people and assisting those in need. She goes out of her way to help people any way she can, including *davening* for others. When I am in Israel, I love to spend time with her, *davening* and singing along to the songs she's always loved.

May we merit to see my Zaide, my great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, and beyond with the coming of Moshiach speedily in our day. ❧

DON'T  
LET YOUR  
TAXES BE  
A HASSLE,  
WE'LL DO  
THEM FOR YOU

SHLOMO BLASENSTEIN, CPA  
347.770.6013  
sblasenstein@aasfirm.com

Professional ✓  
Bookkeeping ✓  
Tax Preparation ✓  
Personal/Business ✓  
Confidential ✓

For all your  
WRITING NEEDS,  
visit

[www.shulaswritingservices.com](http://www.shulaswritingservices.com)

We offer pre-written and custom speeches  
for all occasions!

We also edit large projects and smaller writings including books, blogs, websites, presentations, newsletters, letters, articles, essays, speeches, ads and e-mails.

We will make sure your writing is free of grammar errors and typos.

We are also happy to help you with the content and progression.