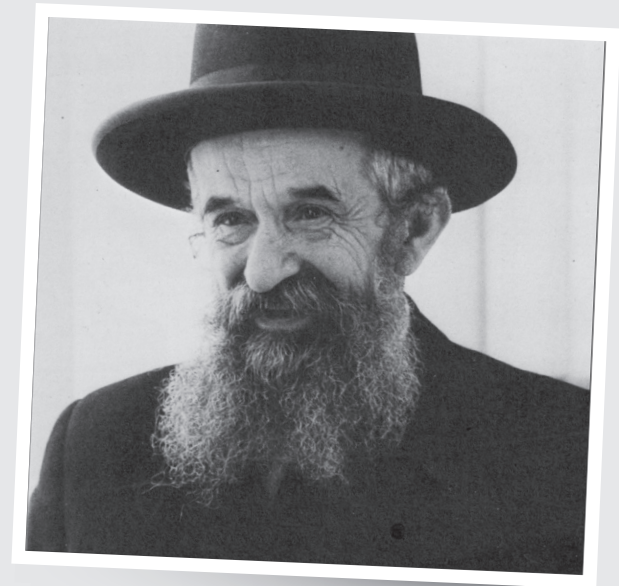


The Eyes That Saw The Rebbe

RABBI YOSSIE SHEMTOV



When my *shver*, Reb Tzvi Yosef (Hershel) Kotlarsky, was a *tomim* in the Lubavitcher Yeshivah in Otvotzk, Poland, the Second World War broke out. The Polish army ordered that the Yeshivah, under the *nesius* of the Frierdiker Rebbe, send a *bachur* to serve.

It was August of 1939. The first *bachur* sent was Reb Moshe Pinchos Katz. The second was my *shver*. The German Nazis were advancing with planes and tanks, while the Polish army relied largely on horse brigades in which my *shver* was enlisted.

In a letter he wrote from the battlefield to a friend, my *shver* described himself as “suffering from the horses.” He meant the physical strain of riding, something entirely unfamiliar for a yeshivah *bachur*, and also the difficulty of being among coarse fellow soldiers who were not known for their sympathy toward Yidden.

As the Nazis advanced, much of the Polish army scattered. My *shver* used the chaos to escape. When he met a fellow *chossid*, he was told that the Frierdiker Rebbe had instructed the *bachurim* of Otvotzk to find refuge in Vilna.

There, he and the other *bachurim* secured visas to Japan through the heroic efforts of the Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara. To reach Japan, they had to travel through Lithuania and then Russia, with a three-week stop in Moscow.

Before leaving Lithuania, they asked the Frierdiker Rebbe what they should bring to the *chassidim* in Russia. The answer was: “Bring *ma’amarim*.”

They did. But delivering them was fraught with danger. Russia was under harsh Communist rule, and any contact with local Yidden would put their lives at risk.

Especially in Marina Roscha, a well-known *chassidishe* shul, they were aware that

A true *chossid*, Reb Benzion (“Bentche”) Shemtov was sent to Siberia for following the Frierdiker Rebbe’s instructions to help Yidden who were suffering under Communism.

Photo courtesy of Rabbi Pinny Lew.

Back row (L-R): Mendel Shemtov; (his parents) Benzion Shemtov and Esther Golda Shemtov; (Esther Golda’s mother) Maryasha Badana Futerfas; Fradel Shemtov (Sudak) (daughter of Benzion and Esther Golda); Berel Shemtov (son of Benzion and Esther Golda). Front row (L-R): More children of Benzion and Esther Golda: Yisroel, Avremel, and Bassie (Azimov). Photo courtesy of Rabbi Pinny Lew.





Reb Mendel Shemtov at
kos shel brachah following
havdalah on 22 Nissan
5739 (April 19, 1979).
Photo JEM ID#126184.

government spies were watching closely. One Russian *chossid* understood that these *bachurim* had something for them. When the *bachurim* were in the *mikveh*, he said to them quietly, “Our coats are on the bench in the front of the shul.”

The *bachurim* placed their own coats nearby, each with a few *ma’amarim* inside. Carefully, quietly, they slipped the *ma’amarim* from their coats into the coats of the local *chassidim*, repeating the process until they were all transferred.

When my *shver* later told me this story, he mentioned something he could not understand. While they *davened* in the shul, the children stood and stared at them.

“*Di kinder hobn geshtanen un gekukt af unz,*” he said. The children would simply stand and look at them.

When my *shver* finished, I told him the other side of the story.

I had heard it years earlier from my father, Reb Mendel Shemtov, who was one of those children growing up in Marina Roscha under Communist rule.

My father recalled that his father, Reb Benzion (Bentche)

Shemtov, had instructed him and the other children to look closely at the *bachurim*.

“*Men zol shtayn un kukn af di eygn vos hobn gezen dem Rebben,*” he told them.

You should look into the eyes that merited to see the Rebbe.

They took this seriously. Every opportunity was used to catch another glimpse, to look into those eyes. Among those *bachurim* was my *shver*.

My father added that three weeks after the *bachurim* left, “we suddenly had *ma’amarim*.” It appears that the

chassidim waited until the *bachurim* were safely out of the country before bringing out and sharing what had been entrusted to them.

This idea was not new in our family. Reb Yankel Shlomo Goldberg, of blessed memory, once described a *farbrengen* in 5711 (1951) in Meah She’arim, Yerushalayim. An elderly *chossid* was present who had seen the Tzemach Tzedek. My grandfather, Reb Benzion, urged those present, “*Kuk oif di eygn vos hobn gezen dem Tzemach Tzedek.*” Look into the eyes that have seen the Tzemach Tzedek.

Reb Yankel Shlomo later adopted this language regarding those who had seen the Frierdiker Rebbe.

Today, we might tell the younger generation to look into the eyes of *chassidim* who merited to see the Rebbe. Yet when I observe the depth of *hiskashrus* among the younger generation, I sometimes feel that we should be the ones looking into their eyes.

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Reb Tzvi Yosef (Hershel)
Kotlarsky at kos shel
brachah following
havdalah on 23 Tishrei
5743 (Oct. 10, 1982).
Photo JEM ID#208785.