



Reb Mottel Livshitz

the FIRE and FAITH

A modern-day Maccabee's story
of old-time mesirus nefesh

By Mendy Hecht

I first heard the name Reb Mottel Livshitz earlier this year, while working for *Hamodia* on a feature article on the underground yeshivah movement during the volatile adolescence of the Soviet Union. As with most articles, research consisted of several phone calls, each a river breaking off into several tributaries.

While investigating the Novarodok Yeshivah's involvement, I had made calls to a well-known Staten Island *askan*, which led to his venerable Baltimore-area father, which led in turn to a Brooklyn Rosh Yeshivah. One of the school secretaries at this yeshivah turned out to be Reb Mottel Livshitz's middle-aged married daughter. "Why don't you speak to my father?" she suggested, telling me a little about him when I explained the reason for my call. Reb Mottel Livshitz, an elder Lubavitcher Chassid, who was one of the numerous Lubavitcher chassidim working in secret to spread Yiddishkeit in the then Soviet Union, under the leadership and guidance of the Lubavitcher Rebbes zy"ta. It seems he had not only been a *talmid* in the Torah-*chinuch* underground, but had only left Russia — astoundingly — in 1993 and had remained *frum* throughout. I was intrigued and filed it away for future reference.

Fast-forward three months. *Hamodia* was now preparing its Chanukah issue, and a suggestion was made to pursue the lead on Rabbi Livshitz. A few weeks and several phone calls later, I found myself approaching the nondescript apartment building at 658 Montgomery Street in Crown Heights, just off the commercial thoroughfare of Kingston Avenue.

I ring the bell for apartment 1K. The front door buzzes, and Reb Mottel Livshitz stands in his doorway, his short, stout silhouette framed by light. I extend my hand, greet him with "Shalom ale-

ichem" and thank him for agreeing to meet with me.

He regards the handshake curiously. "Nu! Iz vos?" he replies with a half smile; I get the sense he feels I'm flattering him. Clearly, this is a man without Western conventions — what you see is what you get.

We enter Reb Mottel's cozy, cluttered apartment. On the dining-room table, toward which he gestures for me to take a seat, is a *Shulchan Aruch Harav*, opened to *Hilchos Shabbos*, which he obviously

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was studying before my arrival. I feel a pang of guilt: when was the last time I had a *Shulchan Aruch* open on my dining-room table?

The interview hasn't even started, and I've learned something already.

Boruch Mordechai Livshitz was born in Kiev, Ukraine, on 30 Menachem Av 5676/August 29, 1916, and spent his early childhood there as well. At the age of 6, he was sent to *cheder*. "It was in a *shtiebel*," he recalls, "where there sat an *alte Yid*, an *eingeboigener*, with several children like me around him. *Er lernt!*

That was the *cheder*."

In those days, a short two years after the Bolshevik Revolution, organized Torah study was already outlawed to the extent that *chadarim* like the one he described could not publicize their existence. Today, we laugh at the foolish notion of children's Torah study constituting a threat to society and government, but the Communists were dead serious, and the threat of their police state loomed. It is this otherwise-laughable belief that Reb Mottel ruefully satirizes when he says, "Ohhh ... *ehr lernt kinder*, he teaches Jewish children? A *moiredikeh zach*. *Men darf machen a mishpat* — he must be brought to justice." He then goes on to describe how his then-90-year-old teacher was vilified in public for "poisoning the minds of children." Nevertheless, he recounts, if one *cheder* was closed, another one would be opened.

Though Reb Mottel is, *baruch Hashem*, healthy and lucid, his hearing is somewhat impaired, and communication with him is sometimes halting. His grandson, Rabbi Levi Haskelevitch — who has compiled his *zeide's* Yiddish-language memoirs, *Zichronos fun Gulag* — helps out, at one point repeating his grandfather's answer about his most frightening childhood experience. "When you're a kid learning in the attic of the Kiev shul," Rabbi Haskelevitch conveys to me, "which has a metal roof so it's very hot, and you're 10 years old, and the police come in and tell you to march to the police station with *Gemaras* in hand, you're frightened."

But young Mottel survived childhood with his *Yiddishkeit* intact and, as a toughened young man, sought to further his higher education. I ask how he became a *mohel* and *shochet*. He lights up youthfully and animatedly. "Ooooh ... *dos iz a lange maiseh* — that's some story!" Then he says that he spent seven years in Siberia. I don't follow.

"Chabad! Schneersohn! Lubavitch!" he calls out inexplicably, as if to say, "You want to know how I ended up in Siberia? Because I was a *mohel* and *shochet*, inspired by Chabad."

As a *bachur*, Reb Mottel heard that a yeshivah had opened in Moscow where *shochtim*, *chazzanim*, and *mohalim* were to be trained. Yeshivas Kol Yaakov, under the official auspices of the government, astonishingly, was showcased by the KGB for propaganda purposes to portray Communism's official policy of "religious freedom." What students were to do — or, better put, *not* to do — with their training was another story, which is why "people thought [the yeshivah] was a joke," explains Rabbi Haskelevitch. "Also, I don't think *shechitah* was ever officially outlawed. It didn't bother them as much as *milah*. I guess they knew there was no *issur kares* involved in *shechitah*."

Reb Mottel nevertheless made his decision and went to Moscow. At the time, *bris milah* had already been banned, with *malshinim*, informers, adding to the dangers of performing a circumcision. Still, *mohalim* were in demand, and they had to travel to various cities such as Kharkov and Leningrad to carry out this special *mitzvah* under the new circumstances.

Reb Mottel describes the trepidation with which he approached his first *bris*, explaining how certain procedures had to be performed using the fingernails as implements were not available. "I don't know how I did it," he says with a smile. "I didn't do it. Eliyahu Hanavi did it! All I know is, it was done and the baby was fine."

It was one of the *malshinim* — a fellow *bachur* at the Moscow yeshivah, no less — who turned Reb Mottel in to the authorities. Twenty-one Adar was a Motzaei Shabbos, and young Mottel came home from shul to find the "mech-ablim," the NKVD, waiting to nab him.

“Contraband” such as *Gemaras* and other *sefarim* abounded in his residence, but they were looking for specific “incriminating evidence,” writings from the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Reb Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, *zt”l* (1880-1950), of which the informer had told them.

The next day, Reb Mottel was taken to the local NKVD office. “You understand you’ve been arrested?” the officer asked him rhetorically. “I know,” the young man responded. “But I’d like to know why.” “I’ll give you one reason,” the officer retorted. “Last week, you were in shul learning with so-and-so ...”

The interrogator proceeded to grill Livshitz on what he had learned. Apparently, he was Jewish and was able to appreciate Reb Mottel’s explanation of “*shor shenogach es haparah*,” letting on that this “friend” was his source of information. The NKVD man then ridiculed the *sugya* — “Don’t tell me stories! Tell me what Schneersohn says!” — and gave Reb Mottel a bit of “friendly advice”: “Look, you’re young, you’ve got your whole life ahead of you, and the state doesn’t want you wasting your mind on such nonsense. Give it up, don’t do back to yeshivah, and you’ll be safe.”

Reb Mottel’s reply was swift and incongruously polite: “Look, I understand what you’re saying, but I’m sorry. I can’t give up my *Yiddishkeit*.” He knew what that meant, but he said it anyway. It wasn’t long before he was on a train for the gulag.

The next seven years may have spared him the horrors of the Holocaust, but the stark horror of unimaginable cold and death by freezing burned itself into Reb Mottel Livshitz’s mind forever. He remembers prisoner after prisoner, many of them *frum* Yidden like himself, dying

of cold and starvation, their bodies discarded, unburied, upon the fields of unyielding tundra, where they were devoured by bears.

How did he keep his *emunah* alive? He answers in a nanosecond: “Chabad! The Rebbe! Either you were a chassid or a Communist ... Chabad *git a koach* ...” Indeed, he tells me that the Chassidic *niggunim* of his youth, particularly “*Ashreinu Mah Tov Chelkeinu*,” which he would sing quietly to himself in the bitter cold of Siberia, kept him going.

“*Nu?*” continues Reb Mottel, relating his return to civilization in 1946 from seven years of torturous existence as casually as we would describe an errand. His newfound freedom sent him to Lemberg, the western Ukrainian city now known as Lviv, or Lvov, which was then a hub of World War II refugees, survivors, and displaced persons. Here he married in 1947; he then moved on to the city of Frunze in Kyrgyzstan, another refugee center, at the behest of Rabbi Levin, Kol Yaakov’s Rosh Yeshivah and then Chief Rabbi of Moscow, where he served shortly as an underground *shochet* and *mohel*.

Due to his growing stature in the underground Jewish community and his ongoing work in *shechitah* and *milah* — a reputation which had reached as far as Moscow — the police called him in on some trumped-up charge and threatened him with 10 years in prison. An incomprehensible bribe of 10,000 rubles, collected with the help of the Jewish community (“You could buy a house with that money then,” says his grandson), was paid to the local decision-maker, and Reb Mottel was able to flee to Kharkov. “It was a *nes* that they accepted the money,” he says.

By 1961, after similar stints and stunts in Kharkov and Sverdlovsk, Reb Mottel and his young family had settled in Moscow. He was extremely grateful that his wife was as able to take their three children through the Iron Curtain, first to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, then to Israel, and finally to America. He did not leave with them, as it was simply too difficult to arrange. But despite it all, he kept on performing *milah* and *shechitah*.

As the years progressed, Reb Mottel became an old hand at evading the Rus-

are no obstacles; there is only *ratzon Haborei*. As his grandson succinctly puts it, “I think that what he wasn’t *nispa’el* from there is what we should be *nispa’el* from here.”

One such typical episode of *mesirus nefesh* on Reb Mottel’s part was witnessed by former refusenik Yuli Edelstein, today a respected member of the Israeli Knesset. As a young Russian Jew, Edelstein was one of a handful of guests surreptitiously summoned to a Moscow address where a clandestine *bris* was scheduled to take place. But when Reb Mottel approached the building from the street, he was alarmed to see KGB men milling about near the entrance — and he knew what that meant.

He disappeared hastily. The KGB personnel raided the apartment and caught all the guests engaged in an “illegal assembly for religious purposes,” and after several terror-filled moments of document-checking, departed, having been unable to prove any “illicit” activity.

Fifteen minutes after the KGB and most of the guests had left, a white-faced Reb Mottel silently showed up, performed the *bris* with no fanfare, and vanished just as quickly as he had appeared. Yuli Edelstein later commented that it was this episode that taught him what it meant to sacrifice for the cause of being Jewish.

The year 1972 saw Richard Nixon visit the Soviet Union, the first such formal state visit by a sitting American president. Pretty much everyone on the American side saw through the Russians’ transparent charade, in which Nixon was shuttled about to see the glorious freedom of Communism; but to Reb Mottel Livshitz, the fact that the simple Jewish coatroom clerk at Moscow’s Choral Synagogue was dressed in a regal cloak and declared a rabbi during Nixon’s visit was especially laughable.

In Brooklyn in 1973, one of Reb Mottel’s daughters became engaged to a fine young Russian immigrant named Berel Haskelevitch. The son-in-law-to-be wrote a letter to the Lubavitcher Rebbe,

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ian internal security services. His reputation had grown to the extent that the Jewish underground knew exactly whom to call upon to perform a *bris*, and thus Reb Mottel found himself traveling repeatedly all over the Soviet Union and as far as Bukhara and Kazakhstan to carry out *brissos*. By 1967, he had also become the unofficial *shochet* of Moscow.

I ask him whether he was afraid of being caught. Wasn’t it *pikuach nefesh*? “But a Jewish baby has to have a *bris*; otherwise he remains a *goy!*” he responds spontaneously. For this dedicated person, *mesirus nefesh* was and is as natural as breathing. There



(Above) The picture of happiness: Reb Mottel may never have imagined he’d live to see children and grandchildren such as Rabbi Levi Haskelevitch (L) and Levi Livshitz (R, here at his own wedding), *oskim baTorah u’mitzvos*.

(R) On 2 Nissan, Lag BaOmer of 5741, Rabbi Ephraim Potash of London paid a secret visit to Reb Mottel and his young underground *chevrah* in a Moscow apartment, where the brotherly bonds of a spirited *farbrengen* inspired a spontaneous outburst of dancing and singing. The teenager in the fur hat is Rabbi Moshe Tamarin.



time in Chaim Berlin and Ner Yisrael, he married Emma, a Gateshead Seminary girl from Brooklyn whose parents were from Moscow, and joined a *kollel* in Brooklyn.

I did not think I had much chance to convince Dovid and his wife to move to Leipzig when I prepared to call him last spring. Much had changed since I had met him in the cafe eight years earlier, not only in his life but in the life of his community. I had received permission from Dovid's *rebbe*, Harav Moshe Eisemann, *shlita*, from Ner Yisrael in Baltimore, to call and make my proposal. Nevertheless, it was a long shot. Stranger things have happened, I thought, and if this is what the *Ribbono shel Olam* wants, then it will work, and if not, then something else will. I picked up the telephone.

IV

A few months earlier, in mid-December 2005, Leipzig had witnessed a fairly remarkable scene. It was a snowy, cold Sunday afternoon, the kind of day when, if you need to go out at all, you put your head down and your collar up and scurry around quickly, trying to avoid blasts of

icy wind. Yet several hundred people were on the street, dancing and singing with abandon. This was a scene from an earlier, prewar Leipzig. *Chashuve Rabbanim*, *yeshivah bachurim*, and *Torahdig baalei batim* were accompanying a newly written *sefer Torah* to its home in a neighborhood *beis medrash*.

These same streets had once resonated with Torah. The city, with its legendary fairs and reputation as the fur-trading capital of Europe, had drawn Jews from across Eastern Europe. As they arrived, they established their shuls and *batei medrash* — the Tiktiner shul, the Krakauer shul, the Kolomaer shul, the Yassyer shul, the Brody shul, and others. At least twenty shuls and *batei medrash* dotted the map of an area west of the central train station, called the Waldstrassen-viertel.

Great Torah personalities, too, had made Leipzig their home — Rabbi Simon Hurwitz, who produced an edited version of *Machzor Vitri*, Rabbi Dovid Feldman, author of the *Metzudas Dovid* on the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, the Boyaner-Leipziger Rebbe, great-uncle of the present Boyaner Rebbe, *shlita*, and Rabbi

Ephraim Carlebach, scion of the legendary German Rabbinic family, among them.

Most of these names are not known to the 1,200 Jews who have moved from the former Soviet Union to Leipzig over the past fifteen years. One name, however, is known; and it is this link from the past to the future which brought about dancing on the streets on a cold winter day one year ago.

Rabbi Moshe Rogosnitzky, *zt"l*, was the Rav of the Ohel Yaakov Shul on Pfaffenfurterstrasse and the *Av Beis Din* of Leipzig. He had fled Leipzig for Great Britain in the 1930s as the Germans' murderous intentions became increasingly apparent. Today, his descendants live in London. The *Av Beis Din's* great-grandson, Shuey Rogosnitzky, and a group of his friends are today actively involved in supporting Jewish life in Leipzig. Many of the key developments of the past year, including the opening of the Torah Center, the *hachnasas sefer Torah*, and most recently a project to build a *mikveh* in Leipzig, have come about through the voluntary engagement of the descendants of Jews who were once forced to flee.

As we danced down the street on that wintry day a year ago, Shuey's son carried the *sefer Torah* under the *chuppah*. Would his great-great-grandfather, who had carried suitcases in the other direction on these same streets seventy years ago, have been able to fathom the scene?

V

It was some time between the *hachnasas sefer Torah* in December and the arrival of Rabbi Dovid Chandarov six months later that I got stuck at the Holocaust Monument on Gotthardstrasse in Leipzig.

What was I doing here? This city, with its *batei medrash* and *Rabbanim*, had been lost. Leipzig was over — shuls burned, stores looted, Jews deported, shot, gassed. All that was left were empty chairs.

Yet only a ten-minute walk away, at the ToraZentrum, young Jews were starting to learn, *daven*, keep Shabbos. The chairs were starting to fill up again.

It is hard to take it all in. **M**

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zy" *a*, asking for his father-in-law's permission to depart what Ronald Reagan later termed the "Evil Empire" to attend a child's wedding. The Rebbe responded with an inspiring letter, exhorting his disciple about his monumental *achrayus* and telling him not to leave an entire city without even one *shochet* or *mohel*. At that time, Reb Mottel had not seen his own children for seven years but, ever the soldier, he stayed on.

In 1987, Reb Mottel himself wrote to the Rebbe. The winds of change, which by now have left an unrecognizable Russia in their wake, were then just beginning to blow. A young Russian-born *baal teshuvah* named Moshe Tamarin (who today serves as Rav of the Siberian Jewish community of Kostroma) had been trained in *shechitah* and *milah* by the master of *mesirus nefesh* himself. Thus it was that the unsung, soft-spoken hero received permission to travel to the court of his Rebbe — a Rebbe he had not seen once since the onset of his assuming leadership in 1951 — for the month of Tishrei 5748, on condition that he would return to Russia after the *Yamim Tovim*.

"It was spectacular!" recalls Rabbi Haskelevitch. "It was the major highlight of his life." The grandson recalls getting to know the beloved *zeide* about whom he had only heard stories and with whom his entire contact until then had consisted of the exchange of a few let-

ters.

"We never spoke by phone," he says, although the senior Haskelevitches did; the grandchildren would record messages on tapes and deliver them through the international underground. "I think that the fact that his grandchildren didn't speak by phone was due either to fi-

nances or to the concern that the kids would say things that might get him in trouble," says Rabbi Haskelevitch. "My letters to him were censored by my parents. I could not write the word 'Rebbe' in them ..."

To honor such a distinguished guest, who had upheld the Torah during the most trying circumstances, Reb Mottel was given the rare honor of holding a *sefer Torah* at his Rebbe's Shemini Atzeres night *hakafos*. In the crowded *beis medrash*, Reb Mottel was physically lifted from his place and carried overhead by *bachurim* to the center of the room, where a small scroll was handed to him and where he stood with fellow *sefer*-holding honorees to carry out the sacred dancing.

Reb Mottel returned for a second Tishrei in 5750, and after his second wife (with whom he had no children) passed away on 20 Shevat 5753, he received permission from the Rebbe to relocate to Crown Heights permanently.

"He was literally astounded," recalls Rabbi Haskelevitch of his grandfather's first month in America. "To see little Jewish boys walking in the street with *tzitzis* hanging out to their sides? He *mamash* couldn't believe what he was seeing."

What does Rabbi Boruch Mordechai Livshitz have to say about the affluence and opportunity of America?



These grim, grainy 1939 photographs of a young, recently arrested Mordechai Livshitz expose the true face of the Soviet repression machine. The photos were retrieved in recent months from old KGB records by his grandson, Rabbi Levi Haskelevitch, and are reproduced here for the first time.

"*Vayishman Yeshurun*," he quotes from the *passuk*. "[In Russia] there were physical tests for the Jews. There I did a *bris* once every two or three weeks, and here you can have a few *brissos* in one day. Here, [the problem is] assimilation. The *Misyavnim* were something else."

What was it like to keep Chanukah in the gulag? He responds sharply: "What Chanukah? What Pesach? What Yom Kippur? You didn't know what day anything was!"

But in a turnaround perhaps more apropos of Purim's theme of "*V'nahapoch hu*," Reb Mottel found himself in 1991 lighting a giant menorah on the street in front of the Moscow Kremlin, the official residence of Russia's head of state. After endlessly long years, the Chanukah light of Torah and *Yiddishkeit* had ultimately defeated the darkness of Communism.

I ask him one last question about the future of Russian Jewry. He shakes his head in genuine amazement at the complete change that occurred in his own lifetime. "It's a different world altogether! You can teach children [Torah], you

can put them on a bus [in Moscow] and bring them to *cheder*..." He still can't get over it.

As I leave, he asks me which paper I'm writing for. "*Hamodia*?" he responds with a mix of incredulity and delight, informing me, to my complete surprise, that the Agudah had somehow tracked him down in Moscow in the '80s and had started sending him the *Hamodia* Hebrew-language edition on a weekly basis. The paper was "*mezonos*" to him: "*Es iz geven bei mir a mechayeh nefesh!*" The mail censors did not block its arrival, probably because it made no explicit statements against the regime, and it helped him enormously as he struggled along during those dark years.

Thus ends a profoundly inspiring interlude with a holy Jew who is a master of *mesirus nefesh* — a chassid born before a failed revolution that died before him, a man who was the real-life inspiration for Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser's *Comrade*, a superb novel of historical fiction, and a humble Jew who performed hundreds of secret circumcisions in close to fifty years of defiance. **M**

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