

SELFLESSNESS

(Mesirus Nefesh)

Translated by Helena Belova

“And women, What reward do they deserve?”

After I had left the boundaries of the Soviet Union, I was often invited to speak, as I had seen and experienced much.

I was fortunate enough to have seen aged men who had visited the Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek, who died in 1866. They, in their turn, had met men who had seen the Mittler Rebbe, who died in 1827.

Today, looking at the future generation that is sure to meet Mashiach, I recall the path I traversed and the things I heard. Various episodes, tragic and joyful, arise in my memory.

Usually people recount the heroic lives of famous Rabbis and Chassidim, as well as stories of common people who dedicated their lives to the Torah and their beliefs. However, the stories of the women who sacrificed themselves for the sake of raising and supporting Jewish Chassidic families should not be ignored. Compared to the men, they would look so bright against their background, even common women and girls such as *Mumeh Sarah Raskin-Katzenbogen*.

To be connected with Chabad was considered a crime. The very act of marrying a Chabad youth was in itself a selfless action. These women even composed a song about themselves. Its melody served them as a hymn, “*Budem, deti, goduvaty iv Tomchei T’mimim odovaty*” (“Children, we’ll wait a bit and give you to Tomchei T’mimim.”)

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The winter day was frosty. The gloomy sun, reddish and cold, was slowly setting behind the horizon, its last rays heralding that G-d had transformed day into night. One could hear a bell ringing in the distance.

At that twilight hour, a handful of shivering Jews was waiting for the coffin of Nina Semyonovna Rybakova (Nechama Brocha) at the Petrovskoye cemetery in a Moscow suburb. It was being brought from a hospital about 200 kilometers away. One of the Jews who knew her well had made desperate attempts to have her body released from the hospital without an autopsy, so that they could bury her according to Jewish law.

The severe frost and the strong howling wind resembled the “whip” of her hard fate that would not relent even during the last minutes of her stay on earth. It was inexorably lashing and chasing her, just as it had tormented her all during her short and grievous life. Why is the lorry delayed? Is there really one more bitter drop left in the cup that she had not drained during her lifetime?

At last the lorry arrived. We took the coffin out in tense silence, hastily lowered it into the frozen ground and covered it with earth. One of the men recited the mourner’s

prayer, *Kaddish*, at the fresh grave and put up a wooden board with the inscription on it: "Here lies Nechama Brocha, the daughter of Shimon Rybakov." Then everybody hurried home.

She had no relatives, no private property and no wealth left on earth, only her good name that was known to few people.

For the final time she was left alone, lying all by herself among the silent graves. She took all her secrets with her.

Would people know who she was, where she came from and how tragic her life had been? Would anybody remember her and come to visit her grave?

* * *

That was in the winter of 1949.

I first met Nechama Brocha, of blessed memory, several winters before, when I was hiding from the sharp eyes of my persecutors. "Oh, my fate, my fate! Where have you led me?"

Moscow was so huge, with its multimillion population, millions of new-comers and people in transit! Electric trains and subways were packed with people whose sole goal was to assimilate and survive in that troubled post-war time. Even that human tumult was not enough to conceal me and people like me who sought to hide from the hidden, yet penetrating eyes of the militia that suspects all and everybody.

The whole world is actually too small!

A strong desire to resist and survive makes the human brain resort to all kinds of tricks in order to mislead the persecutors.

Is it possible to find a single person who could describe precisely the sufferings of a chased man? In the morning he prays to G-d, "Who will grant me an evening?" In the evening, "Who will grant me a morning?"

I am moving through a crowd of people as dense as an ant-hill. The search for shelter for the coming day is straining my mind. I cannot remain during the day in the same place where I hide at night, and I cannot remain for the night in the same place where I hide during the daytime for fear of being recognized.

I wander without purpose along the busy and crowded streets of Moscow.

That was how I felt as a hunted man in post-war Moscow of 1946.

My troubled soul was pained and uneasy; times were hard and the future looked dim.

Sometimes there is a particle of something good even in evil things. Those are long lines at the half-empty grocery stores – but I can hide there and give a short rest to my swollen legs while people wait for hours. Perhaps half-rotten vegetables, bones or something else would be brought for sale. Then people can bring home some food, so that their relatives might partially satisfy their hunger.

I was sick of wandering the streets of the city, with no documents or money, my head filled with anxiety and my stomach empty. I raised my eyes to heaven and whispered my prayer to G-d, "Oh, Lord, have mercy on me! I am fed up with suffering and humiliation. Pay heed to my prayer and don't reject it. Show me a place where I can at least have some rest."

Like an angel, one of my friends appeared in front of me – Ben Tzion Gorelik.

(He lives in Kfar Chabad now.) He was happy to see me. When he heard about my desperate situation, he sheltered me in his communal apartment in Tarasovka, a small town 43 kilometers north of Moscow. He and his family occupied one room in it.

He shared a piece of bread with me, though there was not enough bread for the hosts themselves. May G-d remember him for his kind deeds towards me!

However, my happiness did not last long. The suspicious neighbors started to become curious about me. Nevertheless, the kind-hearted Ben-Tzion did not let me worry. He asked me to wait a little and went away for some time. He returned home in good spirits and led me across the street, straight to the house of his Uncle Reuven and Aunt Basya Bolshin.

Their little house stood a bit back from the road. Even now I can distinctly see their two room house with a kitchen, a large Russian stove, and a big kitchen table. We used to sit at that table and spend long evenings listening to Aunt Basya's stories about the good old times and dreaming of a happy future.

When I first entered the house, Aunt Basya, with affected sternness, asked me, "What's your name?" She did not need any further information, as they were used to guests like me. She ordered me to take off my coat right away, wash my hands and take a place at the table.

The dizzying smell of potatoes wafted from the stove. Soon the hot potatoes had pleasantly warmed my insides, and I grew languid. The habitual nervous strain disappeared. Having satisfied my hunger, I felt as comfortable as if I were at my grandmother's.

Until my very last days I will remember the images of Uncle Reuven and Aunt Basya, who saved dozens of people and given them shelter. I will always remember their small house in Tarasovka.

We used to convene for prayers in one of the houses in Tarasovka that served as a synagogue. At that time Reb Shmuel Leib Levin, one of the most famous Rabbis of Moscow, was still alive. About thirty people frequented the house. Among them, one man attracted my attention, not only because of his outward appearance, but also by his ardent and selfless way of praying, turning to the wall while reciting the prayers.

That man did not speak to other people. He seemed to be a rather silent man, and his eyes were filled with a deep sorrow that did not correspond to his athletic stature.

I became interested in that man, but no one was in the habit of inquiring about anything there, so I had to wait for the moment when Aunt Basya would tell about him during one of our evening tea parties. I did not have long to wait.

One evening Aunt Basya, as usual, kneaded dough for the fancy pastries that she sold to hungry Muscovites in the market. Although her illegal "enterprise" put her in danger, Basya had no other choice. It was her only way of earning money for herself and for other women whose husbands had been imprisoned or had perished at the front-lines. Thank G-d, the buns were delicious and fragrant and they were sold in no time.

Aunt Basya wiped her hands on her apron, sat down at the table and poured everybody a cup of tea from the shining copper samovar. Then she sipped some hot tea and commenced her stories.

One story followed the other. At last came time for the story about that strange man who had attracted my attention in the synagogue from our very first meeting.

"During the war," Aunt Basya started her story, "a large family lived in our

house. The husband was persecuted. He was a well-known Chassid, Reb Abraham Dreizin, known as Avrom Majorer. Whenever somebody knocked at the door, he immediately went down to the cellar. The trap door was covered with a rug, and a table was placed on it.

“One day a military patrol came in search of deserters. One of the soldiers involuntarily knocked the table and felt that there was a cellar door beneath it. When he opened the cover, he encountered a man with a shock of disheveled hair, a black beard and frightened eyes. The soldier was shocked and surprised, but I was not, so I pushed the soldier aside and cried out, ‘Be careful! He’s crazy! He’s dangerous!’ The soldier was frightened and quickly left the house, without turning back. For some time everybody sighed with relief, although the danger was not over. He decided that he should not stay in the house any more. He had to go out, pass the numerous patrols that filled all the side streets and manage to avoid being arrested.

“We were lucky to find a Jewish militiaman who, for a good remuneration, gave his consent to pretend Abraham Dreizin was a prisoner, and to accompany him to Tashkent. The journey was long. It took more than ten days to get to their destination. Besides, they had to stay for Sabbath at one of the small intermediary railway stations.

“All during their journey Abraham Dreizin talked with his escort and learned many interesting things. It turned out that both of them were from the same village. They attended the same *cheder* (elementary school) in Lubavitch. His escort’s father was a pious Jew who read psalms every evening and fasted each Monday and Thursday. He was a peddler who used to walk from one village to another; he often spoke to non-Jews, but that did not prevent him from keeping the Jewish *mitzvot* (commandments.) His son, however, abandoned his origins. He married a Russian woman who gave birth to two sons. He just “flowed with the stream.” Later he volunteered to work in the militia.

“Reb Abraham, with all his eloquence, told him about the power of the Jewish religion, about its being the “chosen” among others, and about the sufferings of the Jewish people. By the time they reached Tashkent, Reb Avraham had affected the man’s way of thinking. He decided to return to his wellsprings, to Judaism.

“When he returned home, the militiaman applied to Reb Shmuel Leib Levin for support and advice. The Rabbi advised him to leave the militia. He helped him to convert his wife and his sons to Judaism.”

That escort was the very same man I had noticed in the prayer house in Tarasovka. He was a G-d fearing Jew. His house became a real, warm Chassidic home.

It seems to me that it would be impossible to retell all Aunt Basya’s stories. Every story is a particle of the sufferings and heroism of our martyred people.

Late one evening, as usual, we were sitting drinking our traditional tea. It was severely cold outside. The wind was howling in the chimney, but it was warm and cozy in the little house, so that we even forgot about our difficult situation.

The creaking of footsteps broke our peace. Somebody knocked at the window shutters and I had to leave my place at the table and hide. Who might that late night guest be?

Aunt Basya hastily threw a *fufaika* (padded jacket) over her shoulders and ran outside. We heard her joyful cries and calmed down. She returned home accompanied by

a woman of medium height, dressed in an old *fufaika* and in a big kerchief that was covered with tiny icicles. She wore big felt boots.

“Oh, it’s so nice you have come,” sang out Aunt Basya, “Look here, that’s our Notah. Come in; warm yourself with hot tea. We’ll find some snacks. You must be starving.”

The guest took off her kerchief and her padded jacket. The woman must have been close to fifty. Her face, though covered with numerous early wrinkles despite her relative youth, still preserved her former beauty. Her name was Nechama Brocha.

Aunt Basya exchanged whispered secrets with that woman all throughout her one-week stay in the house.

My usual place was on the *polaty* (planking between the Russian stove and the ceiling that serves as sleeping place). When I woke up early in the morning, before dawn, I already heard Aunt Basya whispering. She was standing near the stove, praying in Yiddish. She begged the Almighty to protect her, the people in her household and those poor, miserable women. She mentioned all of them by name, together with the members of their families, with their requests and needs.

Having finished her prayer, she dropped some coins into a jug for *tzedakah* (charity). Then she went on whispering something and sighed. Only then did she start baking pastry. As it baked it filled the house with a delicious aroma. She performed her work swiftly and efficiently. Our guest was standing at the far window. She used to get up early and pray silently, unburdening her heart to the Guardian of widows. Then she sighed heavily and wiped her tears.

In the evening, as usual, the samovar sang its melody. Each of us sat down in his own place at the table listening to the thin singing of the samovar. The guest became accustomed to me and was not afraid of me any more. One evening Nechama Brocha started telling us her life story. Gradually raising her pleasant voice, she skillfully described her native country, the beauty of nature, her mansion, and the people who surrounded her. “I was my parents’ only daughter. They were rather well-to-do people. Our estate was kept in good order. There were fields, horses, cows and poultry there. A dozen Jewish families lived in the village.

“Our mansion was rather large. A room in the garret was specially kept for honored guests like Reb Yechiel Galperin and others. There were several buildings on the estate. One small house was used as a guest house; the other served as a prayer house. The people who were supported by my father prayed and studied Torah there day and night.

“A big pond separated the orchard from the birch grove. Ducks and geese swam there. On the other side the surface of the pond was covered with green duckweed and reeds. Wild birds migrating from warm regions far away built their nests there. In the evenings the peace of the vicinity was broken by the croaking of frogs. A large pine forest surrounded the village. Jewish timber manufacturers worked there. They built log cabins, a synagogue and a *mikveh* (ritual bath) in the depths of the forest. Among those people were some Chassidim. Sometimes they visited us, especially on Chassidic holidays.

“Our house was always open to everybody, not only to our usual guests. Scholars, ordinary people, and quite simple people used to come to us. Sometimes hidden *tzaddikim* also came, odd people,” said Nechama Brocha, “and I still remember well the

image of one Jew. He was about forty years old, tall, thin, dressed in neat clothes he grew out of long before. His hands and fingers were long and clumsy. His long neck was always wrapped in a muffler that supported his small reddish beard. He used to hold a violin in his hands, never parting from it. It seemed to be his only friend. The man was silent; he never spoke to anybody. He often fasted or ate only brown bread with cold water from the well. He slept on a bench in the synagogue and put a log under his head for a pillow. He would read *t'hillim* (psalms) for hours, but no one ever heard his voice. After long prayers, as if having awoken, he used to seize his violin and go to the pond with it. He touched it with a fiddlestick – and the violin started to tell its story with its own thin voice. It spoke directly to the heart.

“I can recollect everything vividly, as if it were now: the violin speaking, pleading, crying, getting angry, sobbing, as if it is saying farewell to the most precious and dear thing in life. The fiddler himself is standing with his eyes closed. He is shaking like a reed in the wind. Time and again he shakes his head; it seems he is either trying to forget everything or to remember something. Those who listen to him are standing enchanted. They are unable to move from their places. Everything is silent – the trees, the birds; even the frogs in the pond stop croaking.

“Once it happened that he played until he fainted. After that he disappeared, and we did not see him again for more than a year. When he came back, everybody was glad to see him despite the fact that nobody knew who he was or where he came from. They say he came from a rich and honorable family. When he was in school, he joined the “leftists,” abandoned his parental home and caused much worry and trouble to his parents. When he received news of his father’s death, he did *teshuvah* (repented) and started roaming from place to place to atone for his guilt.

“Among the guests who often visited us were those who stayed for one or two days to rest from their tiresome routes begging from door to door. My father gave them a generous donation, and my mother would add something more to it. My parents taught me to give some coins to each of them, so that my hand would get used to giving *tzedakah*. There were also some honored guests who stayed longer – a week or more. They prayed with zeal for hours. After that my father gave them some drink so that they could say “*L’Chayim*” and a piece of *lekach* (honey cake). Among them were some people who would read the midnight prayers, crying and mourning the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

“From my early childhood I enjoyed listening to our guests’ prayers and watching their behavior. Mother taught me how to serve the guests.

“An especially warm atmosphere reigned at our place when the envoy from Lubavitch, the Chassidic Rabbi, Reb Yechiel Galperin arrived once a year. All the other people came to us then too. On that occasion we would open the largest room which was usually kept closed. Some Chassidim came from neighboring towns and settlements too. The festive meal would last until morning. The older Chassidim spoke, told stories, tales and parables; the whole house would fill with holiness.

“Reb Yechiel was notable among the others, especially for his pleasant voice. He sang heartfelt tunes in his high pitched voice that resembled a violin. Everybody tried to sing with ardor. Everybody would fly high, to the highest worlds, especially when someone shared a teaching from Chassidism.

“My father’s face would beam with delight and happiness. He would serve the

guests with agility. Everybody joined in the common dance, with hands interlaced, with one heart and one soul, just as it had been while receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai.

“Among the guests were some people who were noted for their talent of narrating their stories so vividly that I could easily imagine the places and people they described. Afterwards I used to dream of all the things I had heard.

“Being the only daughter in the family,” went on Nechama Brocha, “I felt ardent love for my parents. They dedicated themselves to raising me. When I grew up, the winds of the Revolution stirred up by the First World War started to blow. That was the beginning of our suffering, pogroms and persecution. We were forced to leave our estate and move to a town. We rented two rooms, sharing the kitchen with our hosts who also suffered much from those changes. The hostess and my mother often sat crying and grieving over the loss of their happiness and their wealth.

“The situation depressed me. I felt anxious. I missed our countryside house so much. I often wandered about the fields and the forest behind the railway tracks, as they resembled the place we used to live.

“My father began collecting debts which were owed him from the ‘better times.’ His health was getting worse. He cared about one thing only – marrying me to a proper bridegroom. He wanted to find the best, the perfect *shidduch* (match). Many young men wooed me but my father rejected all their proposals.

“One day my father came back from the *shul* (synagogue) accompanied by a strange guest. He was a little stout. His clothes had once been elegant. He spoke a lot, and quickly, gesticulating with his hands all the time. My father asked us to serve them some refreshments. He listened to the guest’s words for some time, and then he slipped a banknote into his hand. That man was a matchmaker.”

Our guest Nechama Brocha paused in her story to drink some hot tea from the samovar. Among the people present at the table that evening was Mary (Miriam), the wife of the late Rabbi Shmuel Leib Levin. She was a daughter of the well-known Chassid Reb Meir Simcha Heim from Nevel. Mary took the opportunity to share her story. “As the conversation has turned to matchmaking, let me tell you about the *shidduch* of my sister Rochel Leah.

“Once, in Lubavitch, my father met a well-known Chassid, Abeh Noach from Sosnovtsy. During one of their talks Abeh Noach addressed my father, ‘I say, Meir Simcha. You have a good daughter, and I have a good son. Let’s make a match!’

“My father thought awhile, then said, ‘Why not?’

“Some time passed. My sister was standing near our shop. She saw a *droshky* (Russian horse cab) approaching from a distance. A respectable Jew was sitting in it. She understood: that was ‘him.’ She entered her father’s room; he was having a rest. My sister whispered in his ear, ‘He has come.’

“Meir Simcha washed his hands and smoothed the *pe’os* behind his ears. My sister saw how agitated he was. She covered the table with a white cloth and put some refreshments on it. She went to her room to change into another dress. She kept bustling near the table, listening to their conversation as she knew it concerned her.

“After exchanging common courtesies, Abeh Noach asked my father, ‘Well, what do you think, Meir Simcha? What are you going to give me for the dowry?’

“ ‘What do you expect of me?’

“ ‘We need a flat, clothing, household utensils and furniture.’

“ ‘How much will these things cost?’

“ ‘The bedroom furnishings will cost so much, the sitting room furnishing will cost so much, the study, so much. The total will be one thousand rubles.’ (This was at a time when a cow cost ten rubles!) My father thought a little and said to Abeh Noach, ‘No, I won’t make a match with you!’

Abeh Noach thought my father did not want to spend so much money for the wedding, so he said, ‘Reb Meir Simcha, I will cover all the wedding expenses; it seems to be a good match.’

“ ‘No,’ answered my father, ‘I am not rejecting the *shidduch* because of money problems. You see, people used to convene at my place; they would drink some vodka and start dancing. Sometimes a floor board would break. So the following day I would invite a carpenter and for fifty kopecks he would repair it. One of young men has a habit of dancing on the table. Sometimes he breaks the table while dancing. Then I invite the carpenter and he fixes the table for one ruble. You say the house should be so beautiful, with a painted floor and polished furniture. A common Jew will not step over the threshold of such a home. That is not for me. I won’t make such a match.’ ”

Now Nechama Brocha finished her tea and continued her story. “The events proceeded quickly. My late father set off for another town to make the acquaintance of ‘him’ and his father who was the town Rabbi. His mother was not alive any more. Two days later my father returned home in an elated mood. When we sat down at the table, he started to tell us with enthusiasm about ‘him,’ his father and all their honorable family, Chassidim since the times of the Alter Rebbe’s son. They were great Rabbis and scholars of the Talmud, though they earned their living by fishing. That’s why they were called *Rybaky* – fishermen. Their family name Rybakovy originated from them.

“I got excited. I wanted to go out but I was afraid to miss any small detail of the story about ‘him.’ My father asked my decision, and I gave my consent.

“In several weeks my father went out to greet the guests dressed in his festive Sabbath clothes. Extremely excited, I was standing at the window awaiting their arrival. The *droshky* stopped in front of our house. I had no time to discern their faces before they had entered the house. My mother was so busy serving the refreshments and my father was so engaged with receiving the guests that everybody completely forgot about me.

“When I was called in, I entered the room trembling all over with excitement. I glanced at the face of my father-in-law and felt as if lightning had flashed. I got so frightened that I wanted to cry out: my father-in-law’s face, like an angel’s, was radiating light; holiness itself was imprinted on it. That was the face of a tzaddik, a Torah scholar.

“Everybody felt at ease at the table, and gradually I calmed down too. I was sitting with my eyes cast down. Time and again I looked stealthily sideways at ‘him,’ at my bridegroom. As soon as our glances met, I understood that he was mine.

“The next day we celebrated our engagement. Some guests were invited. My father-in-law spoke about the role of the Chassidic Jewish home, especially in our troubled times. He explained the concept “my wife is my home” as meaning that the main purpose of a marriage is to raise a new generation that would follow in their parents’ footsteps.

“The wedding was set for the beginning of the month of Elul. My parents and I began preparations for the wedding. I received several letters from my bridegroom. His letters showed that he was a sensible man.

“Everything was ready for the wedding. The guests began to arrive; relatives and Rabbis from neighboring towns came. I was very glad that the neighbors from our village as well as some people who used to visit our country house came too. I was extremely happy when I saw among them that very tall man with the muffler around his neck and the violin in his hands. I did not know his name then, and I still don’t know it now.

“The man put his violin under his chin and touched it with the bow. A lovely merry melody was heard. He played it especially for me. For the first time I heard his husky voice saying, ‘*Mazal Tov! Mazal Tov!*’

“The wedding was magnificent, merry and enjoyable. We celebrated the whole week. *Sheva Brachot* (seven blessings recited during the wedding and the following week) were celebrated in our house and at our friends’ place. Young people used that opportunity to associate with one another and strengthen their spirit in observing the Torah and *mitzvot* (commandments).

“The Rabbis were talking. The loud-voiced men were singing. Men, old and young, were dancing with joined hands.

“I was eager to start a new life, as our living conditions depressed me very much. It was 1926, the hard times after the NEP (New Economic Policy). Under the NEP people revived a bit, when they had an opportunity to earn more money. Now they had to pay for it.

“Two weeks after the wedding we began to make preparations for the journey “home,” to my new house. Men got busy with packing our belongings. My mother added some of her personal things which she did not need any more. One of our friends, a neighbor, offered us a horse and a cart for the delivery of our new possessions.

“On the day of our departure our friends and neighbors came to see us off and wish us good luck. The way was tiresome. It took long hours of driving in the cart, but I was happy to be in the country again. Surrounded by rural landscape; I could again admire the beauty of nature. The fields had been mown. The farmers were busy carting the sheaves. Loud voices could be heard from afar singing joyful folk songs. We passed through a pine forest that was intermingled with some birch trees and low bushes with red and black berries. ‘How great are Your works, Oh Creator!’

“We were met by the elders of the town, my father-in-law and young men, friends of my husband. We were greeted with the traditional bread and salt and a song.

“The house turned out to be spacious: three rooms and a large kitchen with a big Russian stove in it. The bookcases in the big room were filled with books. My father-in-law used to spend most of his time there reading and writing. I soon became accustomed to my new position and set about running the house.

“When I first came out into the main street, women and children poured out to have a look at the daughter-in-law of their beloved Rabbi. The town was similar to other small towns of Byelorussia: the main street was about 1.5 kilometers long; side streets branched off from it. Common and simple Jews inhabited the *shtetl* (little town). There were two synagogues. Some people came long before dawn to read psalms and pray. In the evenings they congregated to hear the lessons from *Ein Yaakov*, while others used to sit there until midnight studying the Talmud and Chassidism. The majority of them strictly observed the Covenants of the Torah and tried to avoid any slander or malicious gossip. The Rabbi and the town elders were esteemed people; townsfolk revered them.

“After I came to town, the situation started to change due to the influence of

World War I and the Revolution. The dregs of society raised their heads and started to infringe on people of means, although their freedom of action was still limited to some degree. At that time three men stood at the head of the *Yevseksiya* (the Jewish section of the Communist Party). Mordukhovich came from Minsk. He had been a left-wing Zionist. Roshin, his comrade, was short of stature, with thick glasses that perched on his humped nose. He spoke with a burr and leapt like a crow when walking. He resembled a bird of prey. Long before, Roshin had studied at a yeshiva in Slutsk, but later he went astray. When Soviet power was established, he was appointed director of a middle school and a local correspondent of the newspaper *Bezbozhnik* (Apostate). People knew these two men, Mordukhovich and Roshin, and were on their guard against them.

“There was also the third ‘type,’ a man named Gershunov who had emigrated from the Ukraine. He was a Jew approximately 35 years old, of medium height, with black hair, a thin beard and piercing narrow eyes. He usually held his head tipped a little to one side and he wore his hat on the slant. He resembled a righteous man but turned out to be a werewolf. He had a habit of speaking to another person in a low voice, whispering in his ear. He was a sly man. In a short period of time Gershunov managed to assemble all the scum of society around him. To some extent he resembled a plague rat that was spreading rumors.

“His wife was a tall woman of solid build, prompt and adroit. She usually walked with a resolute stride and spoke in a loud and clamorous voice. Her character was as strong as that of her husband; she did not yield to him in that respect.

“When the Gershunovs arrived in town, they disturbed its peaceful life. Squabbles and confrontations arose between people. Gershunov was a skillful instigator. He provoked other people and they implemented his ideas.

“When I first met the Gershunovs at the big *Kiddush* that was arranged in honor of our arrival, instinctively I felt that they were villains and traitors. When his wife, nicknamed ‘Zeret,’ embraced and kissed me, shivers went all over my body. In a short time Gershunov’s wife became a frequent guest at our house. She meddled in all our family affairs, and that disturbed my husband very much. On the very first day he asked me to drive her away, but I refrained from doing so until I saw that her presence dispirited my father-in-law who was an open-minded and delicate man by nature. Then I asked her not to visit us so often. She was hurt. From that moment the spouses started to persecute us. They plagued my father-in-law. They spread all kinds of calumnies. They said that he was a bad spiritual leader, and that he was involved in financial machinations. All that affected my father-in-law’s health.

“One day my husband, my Bereleh, ascended the *bimah* (pulpit) and started to reproach the Gershunovs in public for their lies and fabrications. The Gershunovs were enraged. They declared an open war. From that time on, when the people convened in the synagogue early in the morning for reciting psalms, they became involved in gossip instead. Those who came to the evening studies were forced to listen to backbiting directed against the Rabbi. Then everybody added something else of their own...

“Some time passed. One day a malicious article appeared in *Bezbozhnik*. It contained a sinister caricature of the Rabbi and accused him of being dishonest. The entire town started to seethe with excitement. I felt that misfortune was approaching.

“One evening when my father-in-law came home from the synagogue, he did not even have time to wash his hands before a messenger came from Mordukhovich, head of

the *Yevseksiya*. He was a Jewish shoemaker who stammered. He could hardly pronounce enough distinct words to convey the message that the Rabbi was urgently summoned to the *Gorispolcom* (the Town Executive Committee).

“My father-in-law went with him and never returned home. On that very day he was sentenced to three years of exile for his counter-revolutionary activities.

“The Gershunovs were triumphant.

“Gershunov was elected a *Gabbai* (synagogue trustee) and he represented the Jewish community to the town authorities. From that very day young people started leaving the town. The *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) fled. The town elders were powerless. They were so frightened that they did not dare utter a single word. Other people simply ignored us.

“I knew that my Berleh was the next on the list, but he would not listen to my warnings. He assured me over and over again that the law allowed studying the Torah. He quoted the Rebbe’s words who encouraged the study of the Torah and the observance of *mitzvot*.

“At that time I received a message that my father was ill. At once I went to see him. He lay in critical condition, with his eyes closed. He repeatedly asked whether I had arrived or not. When I approached him, he took my hand and kept caressing it with his cool palm. Time and again he opened his lackluster eyes and looked at me as if he wanted to say something. I bent over him and he said in a feeble voice, ‘My dearly loved daughter, remember everything that you have seen in your parents’ home. Behave yourself just like your mother does. Do forgive me. Peace to all of you.’ His head fell to the side – that was the end.

“I had no time to recover from that blow, as two months later my mother passed away too. I returned home in a completely broken state. New misfortunes began to pursue us.

“No news came from my father-in-law. After persistent investigation we found out that he had been transferred to a labor camp near Rybinsk.

“Our house became deserted. There were no friends any more; we were isolated. Meanwhile Gershunov built his career. He elected himself Chairman of the Board of the community. The Jews were frightened to come to the synagogue. Nevertheless, Gershunov was not satisfied with the suffering he had caused us. He looked at our house with envy and he decided to take possession of it. Gershunov started to cast a net around my husband Bereleh who was not cautious enough.

“Meanwhile Bereleh performed the duties of a *shochet* and a *melamed* (teacher), he kept the *mikveh* running, etc. Mordukhovich warned my husband to abide by the law as the old times had passed when counter-revolutionaries had been in power. Now the working people were governing the country, and they didn’t want any of the old beliefs to be preserved. Gershunov waved his hand in triumph. ‘Just wait! We will drive you out of town!’

“One night when my Bereleh was putting his father’s papers in order, we heard a sudden terrible knock at the door. I had no time to come to the door before militiamen rushed in. They searched the house thoroughly and took my Bereleh away with them. All the manuscripts and family valuables were taken too. They took him from me by force. I have never seen him since that night. I have no idea where his bones are, and whether he rests in peace. News of my father-in-law ceased to come too; he disappeared. I remained

quite alone. I was tired of life; besides, I was pregnant by that time.

“I gave birth prematurely, after seven months, to a child who would never know his father. The midwife was one of our neighbors. I shed many tears until someone helped to arrange a *Brit Milah* (circumcision) for my son. Everybody was afraid to have any connection with me. They avoided me as if I were leprous.

“Only two people dared to come to me, Efraim Shlomo, a faithful friend of my father-in-law, and his wife Ethel. Efraim Shlomo was a blue-eyed old man, very clever and kind-hearted. When I was ill, he came to heat the stove and look after my child. He could sit quietly for hours; only his lips were whispering something all the time.

The *Mohel* (circumcisor) was brought from a neighboring town. We could hardly gather a *minyán* (a quorum of ten men) for the *Brit Milah*. I called my son Bereleh in honor of my husband whose fate was unknown to me. My child was a small dark-eyed boy.”

The storyteller paused and hung her head down. Complete silence reigned in the house. We also lowered our heads, feeling heartache. After a long, tense silence Nechama Brocha came to herself and shook her head as if trying to get rid of unpleasant reminiscences. Then she went on, “I started to think about the meaning of life, ‘It is time to act for *HaShem*; they have made void Your Torah.’ (Psalm 119:126)

“They truly had violated the Torah, and the time for action had really come! My father-in-law had been taken away from his holy post; my husband, who had carried on the holy fight, was also no longer here. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, who sacrificed his life for strengthening Judaism, was languishing in prison. At least I had to do something! I started to bring in a *shochet* from another town, so that he could slaughter a calf or hens at night so the Jews would not have to eat *treif*. I taught some children to read the *Siddur* (prayers), *Chumash* (Pentateuch) and the rest of the Torah. Gradually my prestige grew in the eyes of other people who knew me. Danger hung over my head, but I did not pay attention to the warnings of the head of the *Yevsektion*, Mordukhovich, who told me not to be involved in ‘unlawful’ activities.

“Meantime my little Bereleh grew up. I had to devote more time to his upbringing and teaching. I tried to educate him in the spirit of purity and sanctity. Reb Efraim Shlomo helped me to teach him. My son turned out to be a very gifted boy. He quickly mastered the assigned lessons and memorized them brilliantly. At the age of six and a half he started to study the Talmud. Reb Efraim Shlomo devoted all his time to my son. When my Bereleh was nine he already knew about two hundred pages from the Talmud by heart. I felt happy to have borne him. I prayed to the Almighty to make my son a G-d-fearing scholar and a Chassid.

“My troubles began in earnest when Bereleh reached school age and it was time to register him in public school. An elderly woman doctor who seemed to be a religious woman provided me with a certificate stating that my son could not attend school because of illness. In truth, my son’s health was weak. The wrath of the *Yevsecs* and the school director was limitless. How is it possible that they cannot cope with such a weak woman? They transferred the doctor to another town. I had no more legal papers. Reb Efraim Shlomo got weaker. Now the evil-doers had the opportunity to wage an attack. They started to pester me. They either toadied to me or came with threats or various new proposals: ‘We understand you. You don’t want your son to break the Sabbath. We will allow him not to write on Saturdays. As an exception, we will even let him sit in class

with his head covered with a *kipah*, if only he attends school.’

“My heart was torn to pieces. I felt that something dreadful would happen. I was crying all night. I was praying and asking G-d to help me, but my sins stood like an iron curtain blocking my prayers from being heard.

“I was invited to the *Gorispolcom*. Mordukhovich warned me that if my son did not attend school, I would be deprived of the right of motherhood. My son would be sent to an orphanage. There he would be brought up as a law-abiding citizen. He would atone for the sins of his counter-revolutionary parents.

“When I returned home, I burst into tears. My Bereleh came up to me and embraced me, ‘Mammaleh! What’s wrong?’ I told him the truth and asked him, ‘Is it, maybe, really worth attending school until the danger is past?’

“My little son, my wonderful son, drew himself up, just like a grown-up, a real man, and said, ‘No, Mummy, no! What is life worth if it is not a Jewish life? My place is not among those who don’t even resemble people, is it? Must I waste the hours intended for Torah study? I have to sanctify G-d’s name, just like it was done by my forefathers who gave up their lives for the sake of the Almighty. No, Mummy, no! I cannot and will not be torn away from my Creator. Let Him do whatever He likes.’

“My little boy – he was right, but my mothering heart was breaking to pieces. Disaster was approaching. It was already standing on the threshold. I was searching for any possible way of avoiding it, but I could not find the way out. The fixed hour drew near, the hour when my son, my fruit, would be taken from me. The fatal day came. From afar I saw the evil-doers and the militiamen heading for our house. They were led by Mordukhovich and Roshin. I dashed around the room, from one corner to the other. I did not know what I could do. Suddenly an idea flashed through my mind. I had read about it in a story about the Kantonists.

“I seized my Bereleh, laid him on the floor, covered him with a white sheet and put some candles around. I begged Bereleh, ‘My dear son, try not to breathe until these villains go away.’ I sat beside him, crying and sobbing. I disheveled my hair and started to wail.

“When the villains opened the door and saw that scene, they became frightened and shrank back. I started to cry louder. I had plenty of reason for crying: my husband was not with me, my father-in-law was taken away, and now they wanted to take away my fruit, my sole son, the light of my eyes.

“I went crazy.

“When they moved away from the house, I told my Bereleh, ‘Get up my son, my darling.’ But Bereleh would not answer. He did not move from his place. I was terror-stricken. I quickly tore off the sheet. Bereleh was lying motionless. His face was as pale as chalk; his eyes were closed. I cried out in hysterics, ‘Don’t you hear me? Awake, my son! Get up, my son, my life!’ But Bereleh did not hear my groaning any more; out of fear he had given back his clean and holy soul to the Almighty.

“I got up and said, ‘Oh G-d, the Creator of the world! You gave him to me and You have taken him away, and I am compelled to live on. Blessed be Thy name, the true judge.

“May His great name be exalted and sanctified, *Yitgadal v’yitkadash shmei rabbah.*”

Everyone present sat in silence. They were unable to utter a single word, and even

sighing was beyond their power. Aunt Basya was the first to break into tears; the others followed her.

“Look from heaven and behold how we have become an object of scorn and derision among the nations. We are considered as sheep led to the slaughter...” (Psalm 44:23)

We have not forgotten Your name, and You do remember us and take revenge for the innocent blood that was shed.

Nathan Barkan was born during the Pesach holiday of 1923 into a family whose genealogy can be traced from the beginning of the 14th century.

Most of his ancestors were Rabbis. According to historical chronicles, his forefathers on the paternal side come from Polotsk. His mother's great grandparents come from Latvia (and can be traced back to the 17th century).

Nathan Barkan graduated the Lubavitch yeshiva in the settlement of Gostini and in Riga. He has been participating in social service activities since the age of 14.

In 1954 he started spreading Chabad teachings in the underground.

In 1969 he made *Aliyah* to Israel. For twenty years he has worked at a state office. At the same time he founded a *Heder* (school) in Lod and brought up children in the spirit of Chabad.

He had the honor of visiting the Lubavitcher Rebbe twenty-seven times. He has fulfilled some errands for the Rebbe. According to the Rebbe's advice, he resumed his journeys to the Soviet Union in 1988.

In 1989 he received the blessing of the Lubavitcher Rebbe to assume the post of Chief Rabbi of Latvia. He was nominated for that post by the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Mordechai Eliyahu, and the Chief Rabbinate of Chabad of Israel.

He is married and he has children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Three of his grandsons work as Rabbis in Russian cities.