

# *Tales of My Zaydee*

(Tribute of a Grandson)

by Yitzchak Solomon

(Zaydee is Rabbi Hershel Cohen of West Orange, New Jersey. Born in Grozov, White Russia, he studied in the *yeshivot* of Slutzk and Stuchin, Lithuania, before arriving in the United States in 1923. Formerly the spiritual leader of Congregation Ahawas Achim B'nai Jacob, one of the most prominent synagogues in Newark, New Jersey, he served there for thirty years until 1966. At present, he is Rabbi Emeritus of the merged Congregation Ahawas Achim B'nai Jacob and David in West Orange.)

Quotations from the Bible and Talmudic maxims saturate his conversation. A visit to my *Zaydee*, who has spent fifty-five years as a pulpit rabbi, is a very rewarding experience. On my most recent visit, I asked him why he never shared with others the story of his life in Europe and in the *yeshivot* where he spent so many of his early years in study. "I shall try," he said, "to dig out some episodes from my youthful years."

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Until the age of twelve, I studied at my father's "small *yeshiva*" where about fifteen boys studied Talmud, Bible and Hebrew grammar. My father was one of those Talmudic scholars who did not want to be a practicing rabbi. Like others with his learning and stature, he opened a *yeshiva* as a source of income. Mother opened a bakery, and the combined income was sufficient to sustain a family of eight children.

Each student paid a fee of fifteen rubles for six months of study. The fee for Hebrew school as well as for a private tutor was always for the period of six months. This was known as a *zman*. The curriculum consisted of Talmud, Bible, Prophets, history and Hebrew grammar. Father was concerned that his students should be familiar with the Hebrew language.

At the age of twelve, I left home and traveled to Slutzk, a city about twenty miles from my home. The *yeshiva* of Slutzk was famous because of its dean, the Gaon Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer. Boys of my age had to study for at least one year in the *mechina* class to prepare themselves for the *yeshiva*. The tests in the *mechina* were very difficult, but they were worth all the effort because it was an accomplishment to be accepted in the *Yeshiva Eitz Chayim* of Slutzk. For me, a boy from a small town, it was an exciting experience to be among the 300 young men who came to the *yeshiva* from the various cities of Russia and Poland.

Since there were no dormitories, no cafeteria and, most of all, no money, I was advised by the boys to see Dodil, a man who always had time for the boys. Dodil was in charge of finding a room for you to sleep in and *teg* (days) for meals. The best way to describe Dodil is to say that he was always running. Dodil gave me the names and addresses

of five families, each of which was to provide me with two meals a day. Friday I had no *tog*, but a wealthy man gave every *yeshiva* boy five *kopekas*, which I used to buy some cookies.

I waited for *Shabbos* when I could eat with a distant cousin, rather than strangers. As for my sleeping arrangements, an aunt offered me space in the foyer of her home, where I slept on boards. With a place to sleep and five “days” arranged, I finally had peace of mind and could begin my life at the *yeshiva*.

The day at the *yeshiva* began very early with *davening*, followed by breakfast at the home of my “day” hostess. After breakfast it was back to learning until lunch, which I ate in the *yeshiva*. It consisted of some of my mother’s cookies, a piece of cheese, an apple or a pear, and a glass of milk. Then it was back again to learning until the evening services. After *maariv* I went back to my “day” family for dinner.

Monday was a good *tog* because then ten of us would eat two delicious meals at the home of a wealthy Jew who then gave each boy two *kopekas* for candy. Some of the boys then went back to the *yeshiva* to learn until nine or ten o’clock, while others went to bed to be ready to get up early the next morning.

Learning in the *yeshiva* was serious business. We were not permitted to read any secular literature or even newspapers.

During my time, the *yeshiva*, which was earlier housed in a synagogue, moved into its own new building at the edge of town in an open field. The *mashgiach* was Rav Sheftel Kramer, the brother-in-law of Rav Meltzer and the father-in-law of Rav Ruderman, dean of the *Ner Israel Yeshiva* in Baltimore. An apartment for Rav Sheftel (his last name was not used) was built high above the *Beis Midrash* near the ceiling. It contained a small window through which the *mashgiach* could keep a constant, watchful eye on the boys. If you were caught “*schmoozing*” too often, you were put on the blacklist.

Rav Sheftel was not a friendly person, to say the least. Young as we were, we understood that his stern demeanor was probably due to the fact that he was blessed with five daughters. Each time he really let out his anger on us, we knew that his wife had given birth to another girl!

Horav Meltzer was not only the illustrious *rosh yeshiva* of Eitz Chayim in Slutzk but also the spiritual leader of the city, a community of some 12,000 people, more or less. His home was divided into two parts. One section was the residence for the Rav, and the other was for the *Beth Din* where the *dayanim* held court to decide on religious questions. When a problem involved money or family feuds, Rav Isser Zalman was invited in for consultation. The *Beth Din* room was always filled with people: *shochtim*, butchers, housewives with questionable chickens, traveling preachers and beggars. With all his responsibilities, the Rav had little time to involve himself with the activities of the *yeshiva*. The only time we students saw him was on Thursdays when he delivered his weekly *shiur*.

The burden of responsibility for the 300 students fell on shoulders of the *rebbetzin*, who was superior in her own right. She was one of four daughters of Mr. Frank, a wealthy merchant in Kovno, Lithuania. He provided the best teachers for his daughters, an uncommon occurrence in those days, and they were given an extensive education in both religious and secular subjects.

A wealthy man, he was able to pick and choose husbands for his daughters, and this he did, selecting four great Talmudic giants as sons-in-law. They were: Rav Moshe Mordecai Epstein, *rosh yeshiva* of Slobodka and later of Hebron, Israel; Rav Isser Zalman of Slutzk;

Rav Sheftel Kramer, *mashgiach* in Slutzk and later *rosh yeshiva* in New Haven, Connecticut; and Rav Baruch Horowitz, a prominent Rav in Alexot, Lithuania.

Rebbetzin Meltzer was a very gifted woman who was well versed in *Tanach* and *Midrashim*, which she quoted often to support her views. A strong disciplinarian, she was well suited for her job as secretary of the treasury of this great academy of learning.

The summer came, but there was no vacation for the boys. Learning continued twelve months a year. For a boy like me from a small town, the summer months in Slutzk were far from pleasant. There were no trees for shade and no fragrance of flowers in the air, things I remembered from home and yearned for during the long, hot days. The heat was made more unbearable because we had to wear the clothes we wore in the winter; no one had special summer clothing. It reminded me of the words of our Sages: “Go as a voluntary exile to a place of *Torah*” (Avoth 4:18).

Everyone wore the customary black hat, There was one boy, however, who took the liberty of putting on a straw hat. I shall always remember how we all looked at him as if he were an apostate, God forbid. This “modern” young man, Rav Yitzchok Shisgal, later became a *rav* on the lower East Side of New York. As the hot summer days wore on, I longed more and more for home to see my parents and taste Mother’s cooking and the fresh fruits that grew in abundance near our house. The “three weeks” and *Tisha B’av*, a time of sadness and mourning at the *yeshiva*, had come and gone, so I decided to go home for *Shabbat Nachamu* to refresh myself. The only problem was transportation expenses, which amounted to thirty-five *kopekas*, I went to the *rebbetzin* and told her of my desire to visit my home and asked her for the money. She looked me over and said: “A young, healthy boy like you can walk to Grozov,” I walked away from her with a bitter taste in my mouth, which I remember to this day.

We all had to yield to the whims of the *rebbetzin*, since she had dominion over the treasury. This control led to a great embarrassment for her. One day we were all informed that no one would get his monthly allowance because there was a shortage of money. Everyone was very secretive about the reason for the shortage, but finally the mystery was solved. Somehow, the money was mysteriously lost by the *rebbetzin* and no one wanted to talk about the circumstances of the loss.

The word *ilui* is a very popular term at all *yeshivot*. It is synonymous with an individual who has a photographic memory. There are many great *rabbonim*, but there are very few *iluyim*.

While most *rabbonim* achieve their knowledge due to the long hours of study, the *iluyim* are given the *Torah* on a silver platter. The gates of *Torah* are wide open to them. We had many outstanding *talmidim* in Slutzk. Among them were Dovid of Bookie, Rav Kaganoff, who was a *rosh yeshiva*, in Chicago, and Moshe Aaron of Timkowitz, Rav Polayef, a *rosh yeshiva* at R.I.E.T.S. Brilliant as they were, however, they were not considered *iluyim*, Imagine our excitement then, when a young man in his early twenties walked into the *yeshiva* one day accompanied by Kaganoff and Polayef, who introduced him as the *ilui* of Sislowitz. We were told that this slim, young man would treat us to a *d’var Torah*, The *d’var Torah* lasted two and a half hours, and it consisted of an analytical *shiur* dealing with *halachah* on the highest level in form and content. He spoke rapidly and appeared very relaxed, This timid *bochur* became quite well known. His name was Hagaon Aaron Kotler of Lakewood.

It was not long afterward that Hagaon Kotler became *choson* of Horav Meltzer's daughter, and I witnessed one of the most impressive weddings that any *rav* or *yeshiva* boy was ever privileged to see. It was talked about for weeks afterward. Horav Henkin, the *gaon* and *posek*, once remarked that the *drasha* that Horav Kotler delivered at the *Tnoyim*, even he or Rav Isser Zalman could match; but the *drasha* that Rav Aaron gave at the wedding dinner, neither he nor Rav Aaron's father-in-law could duplicate.

After four years at the *yeshiva* of Slutzk I decided to go to another *yeshiva* to learn. The one I chose was farther from home, a *yeshiva* in Stuchin near Vilna. A day after *Pesach* I prepared myself for the long journey. It was the first time in my life that I traveled on a train. I felt very much at home in this town with its quiet streets and friendly people. I felt the atmosphere would be very conducive for study.

There were no *teg* (days) in Stuchin. A committee from the town welcomed every new student and gave him an address where he would be lodged and an address where he would eat on *Shabbos*. I noticed that the committee was looking me over.

Rav Leib Chasman, *rav* of Stuchin and founder of the *yeshiva*, was a disciple of the famous Rav Israel Salanter, the founder of the *Mussar* movement, so lectures on *mussar* were an important part of the curriculum in Stuchin. Every *Shabbos* between *mincha* and *maariv*, Rav Leib would set aside time for a short lecture on *mussar*, which left a deep impression on me to this day.

Hagaon Rav Alter Shmulewitz, Dean of the *yeshiva*, was a dynamic person with an angelic face, He was, however, somewhat disorganized. One day he walked into *shul* with only one shoe on. One of the boys quickly ran to his home to bring him his other shoe. The typical absentminded professor! While Rav Leib was very reserved and spoke slowly like a British diplomat, Rav Alter was very *heimish* and friendly with the boys. His *shiurim* were deep like those of Rav Kotler, and very logical. Here my learning flourished. Unlike Slutzk, where the *yeshiva* boy was not treated with great respect, the people in Stuchin held the student in high esteem. The pure *Torah* air of Vilna reached out and permeated the town near it, and we felt a warmth in Stuchin from people the likes of which I have never met elsewhere in my lifetime.

Looking back at the years I spent in those two *yeshivot*, I am happy that my formative years were molded by such great *gaonim* as Rav Meltzer, Rav Shmulewitz and Rav Leib Chasman, whose *mussar* sermonettes were my guidelines for a moral and ethical life.

I give thanks to *Hashem* for the privilege of faithfully serving Him and my fellow Jews for over fifty years. I have been most fortunate to see my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren walking in the path of *Torah* and *mitzvot*. May the words of the Prophet be truly realized in my family: "My spirit which shall be upon you and my words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your children, nor from the mouth of your children's children, says the Lord, henceforth and forever" (Isaiah 59:21).

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