

Rabbi Arye-Leyb ben Meyshe ber Shifman from Pukhovichi

by Leonid Smilovitsky, Ph.D.

Diaspora Research Center, Lester and Sally Entin Faculty of the Humanities, Tel Aviv University

Beginnings

Arye-Leyb was born in Turov on the eve of *Simkhat Tora*, 1891, the son of *shohet* Meyshe ber Shifman and Gitl-Tsivye (*shohet* is Hebrew for kosher butcher or ritual slaughterer). The Shifmans subsequently had six more children, but Arye-Leyb, their first-born, had special gifts. When Arye-Leyb turned seven, Rabbi Iser-Zalman Meltzer became his guardian.¹ At thirteen, he was admitted to the renowned Radun *yeshiva*, led by Rabbi Khafets Khaim.² Young Shifman maintained a connection with the *yeshiva* for eighteen years.

When Arye-Leyb was thirty, Iser-Zalman Meltzer introduced him to Rokhl Lider, daughter of Kopyl Rabbi Israel Yankiv Lider. Rokhl and Arye-Leyb were wed in 1922. The same year that the groom earned his *smikha* (rabbi's diploma) and the right to head the *shtetl* community of Grozovo.³ Sadly, both Meyshe and Gitl Shifman died shortly after the 1920 pogrom in Turov, so they witnessed neither the wedding of their son nor his ordination as rabbi.

The independent life

Arye-Leyb was known to be thoughtful, responsive, and to have wisdom in Jewish learning. He subscribed to the

moral and ethical laws of Khafets Khaim. In 1922, while serving as spiritual head of Grosovo, Shifman was invited to lead the Jewish communities of Maryina Gorka and Pukhovichi. Maryina Gorka was an urban community in the center of the Pukhovichi region, 63 kilometers from Minsk. Its population was 6,000, a fifth of whom were Jewish. It had a railroad station, a post office, and an agricultural technical school.

Pukhovichi, was only seven kilometers from Maryina Gorka, and smaller. Nevertheless, it had a rich history dating from the 16th century. In 1923, 1,214 Jews lived in Pukhovichi; this represented more than half the total population of the town.⁴ For each church in Pukhovichi there were three synagogues. Jews traded in fifty shops and the town held fairs four times a year. Relations with the Belorussians were good.

The Shifman couple stayed in Pukhovichi, first with Khaim der Karliner (a native of Karlin, a village near Pinsk) and then with Dovid der Kramer (German for grocer). Jews of the community commonly used nicknames. The *shtetl's* water carrier was Nokhim der Klug (German for clever). The local fool was Meir der Meshugener (Yiddish for crazy).

Once the Shifmans had a place of their own, they hosted the family of Rabbi Lider of Minsk each summer. Before Rabbi Aaron Kotler moved to America, he dropped in on the Shifmans to say good-bye. Tsilya, Arye-Leyb's daughter, remembered her father saying that he wouldn't go to America; he wanted to go to Palestine.

Tsilya (Gitl-Tsivya) was born in 1924 and her brother Meyshe Ber was born in 1927. In 1924 a fire largely destroyed *shtetl* Pukhovichi, but Rabbi Arye-Leyb contacted the *American Society of Pukhovichi Descendants* to raise money to rebuild. Contributions from the United States went to Arye-Leyb, who oversaw the construction of houses, two synagogues, a kosher slaughterhouse and a *mikvah*. The Jewish cemetery was also renovated at the same time.

If someone needed a night's lodging after evening prayer, Rabbi Shifman offered his home. The townspeople were also generous. On *Shavuot*, housewives treated their guests to pancakes. On *Shabbat*, each family had a *challah* and piece of meat, which it was customary to share. Even in the terrible year of 1933, townspeople shared bran and sauerkraut.

At this time the Rural Council of the Soviets governed Pukhovichi. They forced believers to send their children to state schools and shut down the Jewish *cheders*. They threatened to arrest Shifman if his daughter did not attend the state school on Saturdays. Tsilya was forced to walk to school on Saturdays but often came up with excuses not to attend. The school's director scheduled antireligious evening programs for the parents. Tsilya was asked to recite

Fig. 1 - Rabbi Shifman with wife and daughter





Fig. 2 - Rabbi Lider and family, Kopyl 1920

the atheistic verses of Kharik, Kulbak, and other proletarian Jewish poets.⁵ Arye-Leyb rejected collaboration with the Soviet Council and thus he was the object of much harassment. He was arrested twice for concealing unearned income and for leading a parasitic lifestyle. In 1933, the chairman of the Council led him to jail and required gold for his release. The Council demanded that Shifman publicly surrender his position as rabbi through a confession in a Soviet newspaper. A revenue inspector regularly visited the Shifman home, demanding proof of family income. The family subsisted on only fifteen rubles a month, which they received from two sisters of Arye-Leyb who lived in Minsk. In 1936, government authorities ordered the Shifman family to leave Pukhovichi within twenty-four hours. All suspicious and disloyal persons living within 101 kilometers of the Soviet-Polish border were removed. Shifman was thus separated from his community and his belongings. Upon his arrest, his books, nine folders of manuscripts and other documents were confiscated. The books were burned; the documents and manuscripts disappeared.⁶

Shifman was permitted to stop in Osipovichi, where he found rooms and settled his family.⁷ Then he traveled to Smolensk seeking employment. He became employed as the bookkeeper at the Smolensk synagogue, but he also fulfilled the responsibilities of rabbi. In the summer of 1937, he found a home on Nizhneprofinternovskaya Street, house number fourteen, apartment one, and brought his family from Osipovichi.

The last arrest

On 17 October, 1937 the NKVD (*Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*, or People's Commissariat of the Internal Affairs, i.e. the Soviet security service) summoned Shifman for questioning. The interrogation dragged on; the authorities offered him two choices: either Shifman become a secret informant or he would be arrested for political crimes. He was given a day to confer with his wife and to decide what he would do. He refused this offer, stating that his faith would not allow him to compromise. On 19 October, the police searched the Shifman home; they even went so far as to shake out each Hebrew book. When they left, they took two full bags away with them. They took his manuscripts, letters from relatives and from rabbis Kotler, Meltzer and Khafets Khaim.

Although 7 November was declared a day of general amnesty in celebration of the October Revolution, amnesty was not extended to political prisoners. A young non Jewish man visited Arye-Leyb's wife, Rokhl. He said he had shared a cell with Arye-Leyb. Although the prisoners were forced to remain standing, the rabbi retained his dignity, comforted the weak, and encouraged those whose spirits had fallen. From his rations, he ate only the bread; he gave the soup and tobacco to other prisoners. Out of respect, the others made room for Shifman so that he could lie down for two hours each day.

On 27 November, Rokhl and the children went to Smolensk prison with a parcel for Arye-Leyb. The prison

chief approached them and asked if they were there to see Shifman. When they said yes, he questioned, “[the one] with [the] beard?” When they nodded, he coldly announced, “Sentenced to ten years without the right of correspondence. He has been sent to a camp.” That night, Rokhl secretly took the children, then ages thirteen and ten, to relatives in Gomel. It was common practice that upon executing the sentence of a husband the authorities would then arrest the prisoner’s wife and send their children to a special orphanage.⁸

Investigation and law court

Arye-Leyb ben Meyshe ber Shifman was charged with engaging in counter-revolutionary activity, slandering the Soviet regime, contacting foreigners, sympathizing with Trotsky and Tukhachevsky, and agitating parishioners against local authorities. The trial lasted from 20 October to 12 November 1937.

In letters which he sent to relatives in Lithuania and the United States, Shifman complained about his economic woes. He asked for and received assistance from *Torgsin*.⁹ These letters were used against him. One charge stated that Shifman tried to convert the Jewish community *Misnagdim* in Smolensk into a counter-revolutionary organization. He was charged with helping Smolensk believers to observe Jewish traditions. A petition that he had organized to gather signatures to rebuild a kosher slaughterhouse and *mikvah* was used as evidence of a counter-revolutionary plot. He was also charged with tax evasion.

Some of the witnesses against him were the parishioners of Smolensk synagogue and members of *dvadtsatka* or the Soviet Board.¹⁰ The *Troika* (a special non justice organization consisting of three persons) of Administration of the NKVD of Smolensk province, found Shifman guilty. He was sentenced to death by a firing squad and was killed on 19 November; his burial place is unknown. He was forty-six years old at the time of his death. In such cases as these, prisoners were shot in the basement of the NKVD prison on Dzerzhinsky Street in Smolensk. At night, the bodies would be taken either to *Kozy Gory* (Russian for Goat Mountain) or to the cemetery on the southern outskirts of the city.

The war

Rokhl and the children settled in Gomel. Rokhl worked as a cashier in a food market. Tsilya and Meyshe attended school. Tsilya was admitted to the Leningrad State University and completed her first year of studies before the war was declared with Germany. At that point, Tsilya returned home to Gomel. Whenever the city was bombed, the family hid in an air raid shelter. Tsilya would take with her the only family photo, taken in 1925 in Pukhovichakh. In August 1941, the Shifmans were among the last families to be evacuated from Gomel. Although Meyshe was ill with a high fever, his mother and sister carried him. The family made it first to Kharkov and then to Central Asia. The Nazis invaded Gomel on 21 August.

Tsilya was able to finish her studies, and graduated from the Pedagogical Institute in Leninabad, earning a diploma as

teacher of mathematics.¹¹ Meyshe studied at the Leningrad Electro-Technical Institute, which was temporarily housed in Leninabad. Once the German blockade of Leningrad was removed, the institute and Meyshe returned to that city, and in November 1945, Tsilya and Rokhl joined him there.

The Shifman relatives in Minsk and Vilnius were not so lucky. Minsk fell to the Nazis on 28 June 1941. Common citizens were not allowed to evacuate the city, although government leaders were free to leave. If the ordinary people left, they were considered deserters and were subject to martial law. One hundred thousand Jews were left stranded in the Minsk ghetto; among them were Arye-Leyb’s sisters Freydl, Khanke, Riva, and their families. Riva’s husband, Shmuel Khurgin, had a brother Moisey, a doctor, who survived the liquidation of the ghetto because he was at work. He escaped to Novosibirsk. Riva died of starvation in the ghetto after a hunger strike. Shmuel’s daughter Emaliya escaped to the partisans hiding out in the forests. Emaliya found Khankhe and her infant daughter dead on the road near the forest. Freydl, who had a limp, was killed by the Nazis in front of her house. Arye-Leyb’s brother, Lyeshua, with his wife and two children, Braynele and Meyshele, died in the Vilnius ghetto. Rabbi Shifman lost twelve relatives in the occupied territories of Belorussia and Lithuania. His other sisters and brother and their families died at the hands of the Nazis in Poland.

After the war

In 1947, Tsilya married David Dynkin, a medical officer who had spent four years on the front attending the wounded soldiers. Later he became a civil doctor and a religious man in Leningrad. For twenty-five years, he was the attending doctor of the Leningrad rabbis Lubanov and Epstein.^{12,13} He also ministered to many congregants. Tsilya and David had two sons, Shimen-Zalman and Leybe, who had secretly been circumcised. In order to accomplish this in 1949, Tsilya and David invited the *mohel* to their little room, locked the door, closed the curtains, and blasted the radio to mute the sounds of their prayers and the baby’s cries. In 1957, a *bris* was performed on the second son, in their apartment, using the same subterfuge.

Rehabilitation

Tsilya retained the surname Shifman through 1977, in the hope that someone might locate her and give her more information about her father. In 1979, she submitted a form to authorities requesting her father’s rehabilitation. In March, the Smolensk Provincial Law Court vacated the guilty decision of the NKVD of 1937.¹⁴ Arye-Leyb ben Meyshe ber Shifman was posthumously rehabilitated. The family received a death certificate on 28 December 1979 stating that Arye-Leyb had died in his place of confinement with no cause of death stated.¹⁵ In 1994, the family was able to read the hand copied text of the criminal case of Arye-Leyb in the Smolensk Archive of the Federal Security Service. Shifman never admitted guilt of the charges, despite the fact that he underwent severe torture.¹⁶

In America

Shimen and Leyb each graduated from the Leningrad Polytechnic Institute, one with a degree in astrophysics and the other with a degree in biophysics. The Shifman-Dynkins family lived in Leningrad until 1983, when after three years of living as refugees, they received permission to emigrate to America. Rokhl, and Tsilya, David, and their children settled in New York, free to openly practice Judaism. David and his younger son Leyb remained orthodox Jews, while their older son Shimen-Zalman married an American woman and became a conservative Jew. Both Leyb and Shimen found work in America as mathematical analysts.

In 1990, the Shifmans erected a monument on Rabbi Arye-Leyb's symbolic grave in a New York cemetery. The stone states: "Arye-Leyb Ben Movshe Shifman, 1890-1937." From the 1994 Smolensk document, the family learned that Arye's correct year of birth was 1891. Rokhl, Rabbi Shifman's widow, died in 1995, at age 92. In Israel, at the *Institute to the Memory of the Victims of Nazism and Heroes of Resistance* (Yad Vashem), Tsilya and David filled in the names of their twelve relatives who perished in the Holocaust. In Jerusalem, hangs a plaque memorializing Arye-Leyb ben Meyshe ber Shifman, in the Khafets Khaim *yeshiva*.

Notes

1. Meltser, Iser-Zalman (1870-1953), rabbi, founded a *yeshiva* in Slutsk (1894), rabbi of Slutsk (from 1904), moved to Palestine (1924), headed the *yeshiva* "Ets Khaim" in Jerusalem, founded the system of the orthodox religious education, headed a union of *yeshivas* in Palestine, chairman of "Council of Torah scholars" Agudat Israel, author of commentaries to the works of Maimonides.
2. Khafets Khaim - Israel Meir ha-Kohen [Kagan, actual surname: Pupko] (1938 -1933), one of the leading *Halakhah* authorities of modern times and one of the most respected leaders of Orthodox Jewry, head of the *yeshiva* in Vasilishki (1868), founded *yeshiva* in Radun, author of the famous work *Khafets Khaim* (Life lover, 1973).
3. Grozovo, former *shtetl* in the Slutsk district of Minsk province, now a village in Kopyl district, Minsk region, had 928 inhabitants in 1897, including 765 Jews. In 1923, 686 Jews resided in the village.
4. L.G. Zinger, *Evreiskoe naselenie SSSR: Dvizhenie za vremia s 1897 po 1923 gody i raspredelenie po respublikam i poseleniam* (Moscow: Izd. TsK ORT,1927), p. 34.
5. Tsilya Dynkin to Leonid Smilovitsky, 26 February 1999.
6. Tsilya Dynkin to Leonid Smilovitsky, 20 May 2000.
7. Osipovichi, former *shtetl* in Mink district, Minsk province, now town and governmental center of district in the Minsk region, in 1923 there lived 2,856 Jews.
8. "Remembering Rabbi Arieh Leib Ben Meishe Ber Shifman." *The Jewish Press*, 5 Oct. 1990.
9. *Torgsin* (trade with foreigners), the system of stores in the 1930s, traded the goods that were in deficiency elsewhere

else in the exchange for the foreign currency, gold and silver coins from the Tsar mints, and the articles made from the precious metals.

10. *Iniziativnaya dvadzadka* (initiative twenty), minimum number of believers that was necessary under the Law of 1929 for the registration of a religious union and for turning over to it the prayer house. Members of the "twenty" were personally responsible for all that happened in the synagogue.



Fig. 3 - Shifman monument in New York

11. Leninabad (1938-1991), city in Tajikistan on the Syr-Dar'ya river (before 1936, Khojent; after 1991, Khujand).
12. Lubanov, Abram Ruvimovich (1888-1973), Rabbi, public figure, in 1930s lived in the building of the Leningrad Choral Synagogue (1943-1973), arrested 1951, from the mid-1960s after the amputation of his leg lead the community without leaving his house.
13. Epshtein (Pinski), Moyshe-Mordkhe Girshevich (1875-1977), rabbi, graduated from *yeshiva Tomkhey Tmimim* in Lyubavichi, rabbi in Mogilev province (1900-1920s), rabbi of Leningrad (from the early 1930s), arrested (1937, 1950), unofficial leader of the Leningrad Chasid community (1954-1976), emigrated to Israel in 1976.
14. A.E. Starostenkof to Tsilya Dynkin, 22 January 1979. A. E. Starostenkov was the senior deputy for the public prosecutor, Smolensk Province, and was responsible for the supervision of the investigation in the Organs of the State Security Service in Smolensk.
15. N.S. Shchadenkov to Tsilya Dynkin, 23 March 1979. N.S. Shchadenkov was chairman of the Smolensk Province law court.
16. Author's Archive. The copy of death certificate for Leyba Movshev Shifman, issued on 28 December 1979 by the Smolensk Civil Registry Office (ZAGS).