

A Smile Well Earned

REMEMBERING THE VENERATED GABBAI REB SHAYA UNGAR, Z"L



BY RABBI MAYER SCHILLER



There are some

individuals who seem beyond the constraints of time. They have always been where they are and shall there forever remain. They seem to be where they should be, a perfect fit. Their fortitude seems indefatigable. One cannot imagine things without them.

Such a man was Reb Yeshaya Yoel Ungar, *gabbai* to two Skverer Rebbes, who loomed so large in the life of so many. But, alas, permanence in the human condition is, after all, illusory. On Rosh Chodesh Sivan, Reb Shaya was taken from us. Yet, in his nine decades upon this earth he left an imprint, on individuals and communities, that will reverberate through years and years to come.

As the Skverer Rebbe commented, when visiting the family during the *shivah*, "The *olam* did not absorb this easily. The entire *olam*. And I was also among that *olam*."

The Rebbe continued, "When I came back from the *levayah*, I said, 'The entire *shtetl* (New Square) should be grateful to him. He *mamash* had *mesiras nefesh* for the *shtetl* and as is understood for everything relating to Skver.'

Reb Shaya was a public figure, standing long hours at the Rebbes' *tishen*, writing *kvittlach* into the late hours of the night, accompanying the Rebbe on all his travels and performing these feats and many, many others for 64 years. In 1950 he became the *gabbai* of the previous Skverer Rebbe (Rav Yaakov Yosef Twersky [1900 - 1968]) and he remained at that position to serve the current Skverer Rebbe until a few months ago.

These prodigious feats of strength and perseverance were a wonder to one and all. It is impossible to understand the man's self-sacrificing devotion without realizing that his was a loyalty born of extraordinary passion. This was a profound man. The inner commitment that enabled his undeviating resolve was the secret of his essence, an essence that may serve as an example for all Jews.

Reb Shaya's roots reach back to the richest spiritual centers of Hungarian Jewry. His father, Rav Avrohom Tzvi Ungar, born in 1896, learned Torah from the masters of that era, the *Keren L'David*, (Rav Eliezer Dovid Greenwald) and Rav Shmuel Rosenberg of Unsdorf. After his marriage to the daughter of Rav Yeshaya Levinstein, the *Av Beis Din* of Beled, Rav Avrohom Tzvi learned there in the *yeshivah* of Rav Yoel Pelener. This immersion in Torah led to his being appointed *dayan* and eventually *av beis din* in Kopuvár. Reb Shaya himself was born in Beled, but his formative years were spent with his father in this small (1940 population 10,000; Jewish population 450) northwest Hungarian town.

The young Yeshaya Yoel spent time learning in Pupa (under the Vayaged Yaakov) and eventually Sopron, under that noted *gaon* of *nigleh* and *nistar*, Rav Shimon Yisroel Pozen. It was the Shoproner Rav whose influence would alter the trajectory of Reb Shaya's life and, through him, the lives of so many others.

In 1940, Rav Avrohom Tzvi fell ill and had to undergo the amputation of his foot. Reb Shaya became his primary caregiver. In fact, Rav Yitzchok Shlomo Ungar, *z"l*, (Reb Shaya's older brother and *rav* of the Chug Chasam Sofer in Bnei Brak) once surmised that it was in the *zechus* of his younger brother's *mesiras nefesh* in serving their father that he was "*zocheh* to become the *gabbai* to the Skverer Rebbes."

In fact, Reb Shaya's future accomplishments were first foretold by his father. Once during Purim festivities he offered that, "Yitzchak Shlomo will be a *rav*, Shmuel Efraim Zalman will be a *Dayan*, Michel will be a *melamed* and Yeshaya will fulfill 'Greater is the service of Sages than learning from them.' (*Berachos 7b*)."

The unspeakable tragedy that was the Second World War would envelop Shaya. Kopuvár's Jews were deported in the summer of 1944. Thereafter Shaya spent time in Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt. It is only now that his greatness during those days is slowly being revealed. Both in the concentration camps and later in the DP facilities his sacrifice for others



Reb Shaya Ungar, standing behind the Skverer Rebbe in the city of Skver, Ukraine

and loyalty to Torah simply boggle the mind. Once when an assistant for those suffering from the highly-contagious typhus epidemic was needed, he offered his services, falsely claiming that he had already survived the dreaded disease thus rendering him immune.

After the war he served the survivor community in Veitzen and Landesbourg as a *menaker* (a kosher butchery skill) and *sofer* (for which he received an official authorization from the Krasner Rav).

But all these holy talents, to which we might add that of being a skilled *baal tefillah* and *baal menagen* were all just a prelude and eventual helpmates to his life's destiny, which was soon to come.

Arriving in New York on the 15th of Shevat 5710 (February 2, 1950), Reb Shaya was reunited with his *rebbe*, the Shoproner Rav

who had settled in Williamsburg. It was after the Rav's *tish*, one fateful Friday night, that he told Shaya the following: "Shaya, I want to take you to a Rebbe. Come to my house on Sunday morning." At some point on that day, Rav Pozen told his *talmid*, "Shaya, if there is yet in this generation someone who knows how to 'read a *kvitel*' it is the Skverer Rebbe."

Reb Shaya himself told me that he made two trips from Williamsburg to the Skverer Rebbe in Boro Park with the Shoproner Rav via subway. At some point, his mentor told him, "Do nothing more than look at the Rebbe's face." One of these visits was on Shushan Purim. Memories remain hazy, but what remains is that after these two visits, Reb Shaya had found his *rebbe*.

From then on events proceeded quickly. Before Pesach of that year the Rebbe moved from Boro Park to Williamsburg. Reb Shaya set himself the task of cleaning up the new home throughout the night prior to the Rebbe's arrival. He was still washing and scrubbing when the Rebbe arrived and smiled affectionately at his efforts.

In Tammuz of that year the then *gabbai*, Reb Eli Ganz, suffered a heart attack. Reb Gedaliah Schwartz, supporter and staunch *askan* for the Rebbe in those years, brought a list of possible candidates for the position of *gabbai* to the Rebbe. His reply was clear, "Go ask Reb Shaya if he will be *gabbai*."

Surprised by the request, the future *gabbai* asked advice of the Shoproner Rav who responded, "Go quickly and grab the opportunity before someone else beats you to it."

And so on the third day of *Parshas Balak*, in the summer of 1950, began a 64-year uninterrupted devotion to two Skverer Rebbes, their *chasidim*, the village of New Square and thousands of Jews from all walks of life.

It would prove to be a wonderful match. Reb Shaya brought the simple piety of his father's home and of all those giants who nurtured his younger years, his cartload of talents and above all an unshakable faith in the Rebbe's person and guidance. The new appointee had just turned 24.

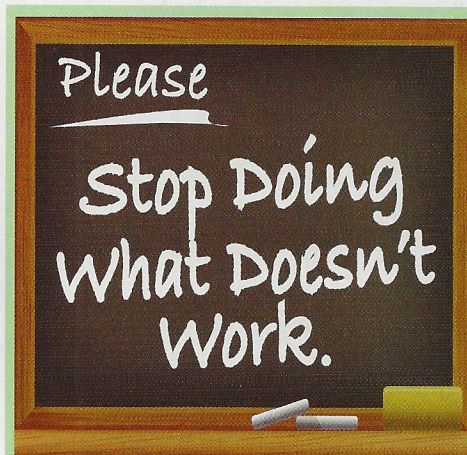
In the current Skverer Rebbe's words, "From the first minute, he was completely given over to Father, of blessed memory, with a loyalty that is not seen, *mamash* we don't see it... His loyalty was not to be found. This was in addition to his being a *Yid* from the earlier generations, his *davening* was with a *penimiyus* and his *hiddurim* in *mitzvos*, especially his care in matters of eating [was exceptional]."

Reb Shaya's devotion would soon be put to the test. The Rebbe was determined to leave the spiritually inhospitable environs of New York and establish a chasidic village in an isolated suburban area. This vision seemed wildly unrealistic to almost everyone. Here was a Rebbe who was in the process of establishing himself in Williamsburg and was simultaneously planning a retreat from the very sources of his personal stability.

Yet, the Rebbe was relentless. The city and its streets were, in his mind, antithetical to elementary *kedushah* and *taharah*. Further, the frequent intergroup squabbles of those days had to adversely affect the younger generation. Whatever the cost might be, he would have to leave the city with as many followers as were willing to go with him.

So many splendid Jews invested of themselves in this holy endeavor, but the focal man for their efforts was Reb Shaya. Fund-raising, borrowing money, balancing bank accounts, pounding the New York City pavement on a daily basis, Reb Shaya worked without respite to see the unlikely dream through to fruition. Begging, cajoling and pleading from bank officials and generous Jews alike, he managed to keep the project afloat for the seven years it took to complete.

Finally, on the 17th of Teves 5717 (December 25, 1956) four families left the city to settle in the new *shtetl*: a *shtetl* that at that time had neither roads nor lighting, permanent *shul* or grocery—a village that rain or snow turned into mud and was, in those pre-Palisades Parkway days, hours away from New York City. And, yes, Reb Shaya and his family were among those first four. And, yes, when on that first Shabbos the *mikvah*, such as it was, was completely frozen, it was Reb Shaya who, together with Reb Chaim Berger, *a"h*, broke the ice in order to ensure that the first *tefillos* in Skver should be led



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Reb Shaya Ungar, standing behind the Skverer Rebbe, greeting the Rebbe of Vizhnitz, zt"l

by those who had immersed in purity.

And let us not forget that his was not just the task of settling in primitive environs. The financial burdens of the entire enterprise were still enormous. Reb Shaya would trek daily to the city, often via the Red and Tan Bus Lines, which took an hour and a half each way to and from Manhattan. There he would wander about the boroughs, travelling by public transportation, striving to keep the just-born village alive.

Again, in the words of the Rebbe, "There were long, very long periods of time when he'd travel to the city on a daily basis. Not simply travel but there was the agony of going from one person to a second and on to a third. There were huge amounts he had to cover, and every morning fear overtook him when told how much he had to cover (in the bank) that day."

For this he asked nothing for himself. As Reb Shaya would tell it, "When I became *gabbai*, the Rebbe, z"l, promised to give me a salary. *Baruch Hashem* from that first day I never took a penny, never."

Actually he did ask for one thing. In a private conversation he said that he wanted it written on his gravestone: "He helped build Skver."

Truth be told, he helped build it in so many ways beyond the merely physical. His daily regimen was one of great piety. Arising early he went to the *mikvah* hours before the Rebbe was to *daven*. He learned, said *Tehillim* and at one point wrote a *sefer Torah*. Every aspect of his *Yiddishkeit* was a source of passion. His prayer was never rote, his embrace of *chashidische sefarim* never routine, his telling of *sipurei tzaddikim* always exact and inspiring. This was a man from whom all could have learned much, even had he

not have been a Rebbe's *gabbai*.

He shunned all manner of comfort, living all his days in Skver in a small modest home. He secretly maintained the extreme regimen of fasting that the Rebbe himself kept, never abandoning it until his mid-80s. He arose promptly each day regardless of when he went to sleep.

Moreover, he was that unique Hungarian Jew who came out of the Holocaust and, without flinching, rebuilt *heimishe Yiddishkeit* on these shores. It was men like him who built Skver and all the now flourishing chasidic communities.

They had an inner resolve that we can only marvel at. Somewhere in their upbringing, in their parents' homes, an internal fire smoldered that, rekindled by *tzaddikim* like the Skverer Rebbe, z"l, enabled them to create astonishing communities out of the ashes of the Holocaust.

Reb Shaya was a man of strength and passion. At times, particularly in his early years, that passion would flare up. He loved the Rebbe so deeply. He loved the Skverer *shtetl* with such an all-consuming love that he was deeply hurt when he thought it was challenged or threatened. These flare-ups were the exception, not the rule, and were quickly regretted by him. But it was the depth of his commitment that yielded these momentary lapses. And, who among us, especially in our younger years, does not bubble over a bit? But this cauldron of emotions was motivated by his desire that the holiness and love of the Rebbe, z"l, and his village should survive, endure and flourish.

Indeed, the same could be said of that generation as a whole, the builders of Skver and similar places. They had a firmness of person that taught a generation and, if today, a generation made of softer stuff finds them a bit forbidding, then the fault may well be found in our own looser personalities.

As Reb Shaya grew older, many would marvel at the physical demands he put on himself, standing for hours at *tishen* and *rebbishe simchos*. Yet, as he once put it, "In the weekdays I feel weak, on Shabbos at the *tish* I always feel well." For him it was a labor of love and hence never real labor.

Reb Shaya was man of insight, memory and intelligence. Maybe his greatest achievement was that of setting aside his own opinions on all matters, large and small, in order to obey the Rebbes of Skver. But this too was not a burden. The warmth of his inner *emunah* made utter obedience the only outcome.

Personally, my first meeting with Reb Shaya says so much about the man. It was the spring of 1964. Raised in a non-Orthodox environment, I decided with two of my friends to conduct an experiment of becoming observant Jews for a month. As part of this process we resolved to visit New Square to see what Orthodox Jews were like. One Sunday afternoon we walked down Washington Avenue arriving at the doors of the old *beis midrash*. Fearful of entering we stood frozen.

At that very moment a chasidic Jew approached. We were clad in the ski parkas common to that era, wearing plaid yarmulkes. He drew near with a large smile on his face, "*Shalom aleichem*, boys; what can I do for you?" And from that smile and the conversation that followed the course of my life was forever altered.

And it is that smile that endures. In the hearts of all who knew him, he sits forever in his small office in the Rebbe's house, pen and paper at the ready, bulging Rolodex not far away (It seems most appropriate that Reb Shaya never did transition to the technology age!) at the Rebbe's beck and call and to welcoming every visitor.

Reb Shaya once discussed with me the approval he received from the Rebbe to grant an interview about New Square in the early 1960s in the *New York Herald Tribune*. This was a sophisticated newspaper of that era and the Rebbe felt it would be worthwhile to explain Skver to the outside world while the battle over village incorporation was at its height.

The paper published the article, featuring a picture of Reb Shaya standing a bit removed from his house. The streets of New Square are covered with snow. He smiles, looking at his family from a distance and, perhaps, at the nascent village as a whole. It is a smile, not smug, but satisfied. It was as if he was taking solace in the beautiful reality that he did so much to create.

May he take that smile into eternity. It was richly deserved. ●



Reb Shaya Ungar's levayah in New Square

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