

The Third Passenger in the Belzer Rebbe's Car



The Belzer Rav (C) in Marienbad

This week marks 80 years since the sainted Belzer Rebbe, Rav Aharon, *zt"l*, and his brother, the Bilgorayer Rav, Rav Mordechai, *zt"l*, arrived in Eretz Yisrael following a harrowing, years-long escape.

The definitive account of what happened, *Rescuing the Rebbe of Belz*, authored by Yosef Israel and published by ArtScroll, states that three people were in the rescue car that left the Bochnia Ghetto near Krakow in May 1943: Rav Aharon of Belz, his brother Rav Mordechai of Bilgo-

rai—the father of the present Belzer Rebbe—and Reb Duvid Shapira, who served as *gabbai*.

Who is Reb Duvid Shapira? Why did the Rebbe motion to his young *shammes* to enter the vehicle and thus be rescued? The story is tinged with tragedy and has a surprising conclusion. And it is being told here for the first time.

The Belzer Rebbe famously said that “Every survivor was accompanied by *malachim* on every side.” Reb Duvid Shapira certainly was, in the form of the two holy brothers.

Targeted by the Nazis as the famous

Wunder Rabbiner, the Belzer Rav was forced to flee from place to place using an assumed name. Eventually, in late 1942, he reached the Bochnia Ghetto. *Rabbanim* and *chasidim* who were concerned for the Rebbe's safety raised a large sum of money to get a high-ranking Hungarian officer to sneak the Rebbe out of the ghetto and drive him to Budapest, which was not yet under Nazi occupation. The car (recently revealed to have been driven by Laszlo Gerecz, who moved to Venezuela after the war) had room in the backseat for three.

Originally, the third person was supposed to have been Rav Yeshaya Tchechoiv-

er, the youngest son of the Divrei Chaim of Sanz. Rav Yeshaya was a cousin of the Rebbe—his *rebbezin* was a granddaughter of Rav Yehoshua Rokeach, the second Belzer Rebbe. The Tchechoiver Rebbe, however, demurred. Although he was ailing and approaching his ninth decade, he did not want to save himself and leave his son, Rav Yaakov Tzvi, the *rav* of Sucha, and grandchildren.

The Belzer Rebbe turned to Duvid Shapira, a 25-year-old member of the Rebbe's inner circle, and waved him into the car. "Duvid," the Rebbe stated, "you are coming along." Shapira said goodbye to his young wife and daughter, and never saw his family again.

The three survivors, dressed as captured Russian generals, were taken on a roundabout route, until they reached Budapest, 250 miles away.

When the car finally arrived in Budapest, it was expected that Rav Yeshaya Tchechoiver was one of the passengers. As the son of the Sanzer Rav, he was beloved and well-known in Hungary. When Duvid Shapira emerged from the vehicle instead, it was devastating for the chasidim who were waiting for Rav Yeshaya Tchechoiver. A rumor began that Shapira had inserted himself into the car and the Belzer Rebbe did not want to send a *Yid* to death by ordering him out of the vehicle. "Once he's sitting already," they claimed the Rebbe said, "he shouldn't get up."

Although the Belzer Rebbe later stated explicitly that he was the one who ordered Shapira in, this rumor haunted him until the day he passed away.

While the Rebbe continued on to Eretz Yisrael, Shapira stayed behind in Budapest until the war ended. He then moved to the United States, but the accusations against

Shapira continued. He tried settling in Boro Park, but the rumors hounded him there, so he moved to Queens.

Reb Duvid remarried but never had children again. Shortly after his move to Queens, he discovered that he had a cousin living in Manhattan, Mrs. Gittel Alster. She had been married to Reb Yosef Shmuel, and the couple had their first child in 1946 after ten long years of marriage. In a tragic circumstance, several months after the child was born, Reb Yosef Shmuel returned to his native Antwerp to see what remained of his family and business, and on his return trip, the plane he was in crashed during the landing descent in Gander, Newfoundland. It hit a mountaintop deep inside a forest, killing 26 of the 44 people on board in the first major fatal crash of a commercial airliner in history.

Gittel, now a young widow, took to the business world to support herself. She became very successful. She sent her son, Yisrael Shimon, to a modern *cheder* in Manhattan, with plans to send him to a prestigious university after he graduated.



Clockwise from top: The Belzer Rav on the train leaving Hungary; the Belzer Rav in Marienbad; the Belzer Rav in later years in Eretz Yisrael



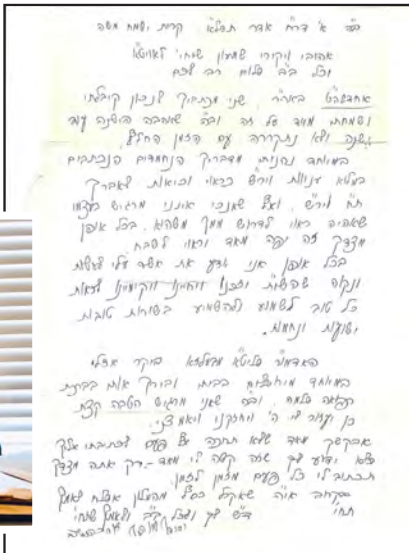
When Duvid Shapira heard about this, he began acting as a surrogate father to the young boy. Shimon would travel weekly to Shapira's home in Queens for Shabbos, where he was regaled with chasidic tales and *divrei Torah*. "Reb Duvid slowly implanted in him an appreciation for Torah," Rav Mordechai Alster, a son of Rav Shimon, tells me. "He taught him the old Galicianer *minhagim*, and he gave him over his entire *mesorah*. This ultimately was the springboard for my father to commit himself totally to Torah."

Shapira was rewarded when at the age of 14, Shimon informed his mother that he wanted to go to learn in Eretz Yisrael—something very uncommon at the time.

This decision was very hard on his mother, who would be separated from her only son for years on end, and who also had to give up on her dream of having her son get



Left: Reb Duvid Shapira (L).
Below: Rav Shimon Alster, zt"l.
Right: A letter from Reb Duvid to Rav Shimon.



a college degree. Shapira, along with Rav Yehuda Leib Kagan, her late husband's *chavrusa*, persuaded her to agree.

The young Rav Shimon became a prized *talmid* of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach in Yeshiva Kol Torah. When he returned to the US, he became a *talmid muvhak* of Rav Binyamin Paler. A year after his *chasunah*, at the age of 25, he was given a position in the newly opened Yeshiva of Long Beach, which was started a year earlier by Rav Yitzchok Feigelstock. In over a half century of *harbatsas haTorah*, Rav Shimon Alster moved thousands of *talmidim*.

Rav Alster, who was *niftar* three months ago, became *rav* of Khal Torah Utefillah in Flatbush in 1995, and opened his own *yeshiva* in Cliffwood, New Jersey, in 2004.

But it all started with those *Shabbosos* with Duvid Shapira at his Kew Gardens home in Queens. Rabbi Paysach Krohn told the Alster family that he remembers the young Shimon Alster coming to *daven* at Rav Yaakov Teitelbaum's *shul* for Shabbos and other occasions.

"Nobody knows what the *hashgachah* is, and nobody knows what the Belzer Rebbe had in mind," Rav Mordechai Alster says, "but what resulted from that decision of the Belzer Rebbe is Rav Shimon Alster embarking on his path to becoming the *adam gadol* that he became."

Duvid Shapira never forgot those rumors that tormented him. In time, his cause was taken up by others who investigated and exonerated him. One such

supporter was Rav Yitzchok Lebovits, the Woodridger Rav, who wrote a sharp letter decades ago against those who attacked Shapira.

"The Belzer Rebbe—when you say his name you must say the *heilige* Belzer Rebbe"—himself told Rav Zishe, the Cheronoblyer Rebbe, who was a son-in-law of Rav Yeshaya Tchechoiver, that 'Rav Shayala didn't want to sit down in the car,'" Rav Lebovits tells me. "Duvid Shapira was certainly not to blame for anything."

When Duvid Shapira was *niftar* on 23 Av—two days after the Belzer Rebbe's *yahrtzeit*—he left all his possessions to Rav Shimon Alster...on the condition that he give *tikkun* on his *yahrtzeit* "as is the *minhag* of *chasidim*." Rav Alster, a prominent *Litvishe rosh yeshivah*, was not used to this *chasidishe minhag*, so every year on the *yahrtzeit* he would take cake and schnapps over to a *chasidishe shtiebel*.

About 15 years ago, he brought the *tikkun* to the *beis midrash* of the Woodridger Rav. Rav Lebovits noticed him and walked over, greeting him and asking him whose *yahrtzeit* it was. "Oh, a cousin," Rav Alster replied. But the Rav pressed him to reveal the name of the cousin. "You don't know

him," Rav Alster replied. "A Duvid Shapira."

"I don't know Duvid Shapira?" the Rav replied in disbelief. "I have been fighting to clear his name! This is my *sugya*." The two then spent time comparing notes. Rav Alster marveled for years at the *hashgachah pratit* that he happened to bring *tikkun* to the place where the man who championed his cousin was *rav*.

"Reb Shimon had a *heilige neshamah*," Rav Lebovits told me. "He used to come to our *beis midrash* often after that *tikkun*."

Rav Mordechai Alster says that it was a shame his father did not have the chance to read this article.

"Duvid Shapira told my father a hundred times that Rav Yeshaya didn't want to come, and that the Belzer Rebbe told him to get into the car. And it's a shame. I really wanted an article to be written on this while my father was alive so that he could be the one to clear his cousin's name.

"Why was Duvid Shapira in the car? As far as we are concerned, it was in order that my father should be able to teach thousands of *talmidim*. Because without Duvid Shapira, this would never have happened." ●