

INYAN

HAMODIA WEEKLY MAGAZINE

COUNTING^{UP}

COUNTING

DOWN

13| View

"Not a proper phrase for a *talmid* to use when speaking to his *Rebbi*..."

16| What's Your Heirloom Worth?

"Wonderful! It looks like it was done on linen with watercolor paint."

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The Shochet

An Ordinary Jew, An Extraordinary Life

by ABRAHAM CORBETT



STORY OF TRIAL AND TRIUMPH

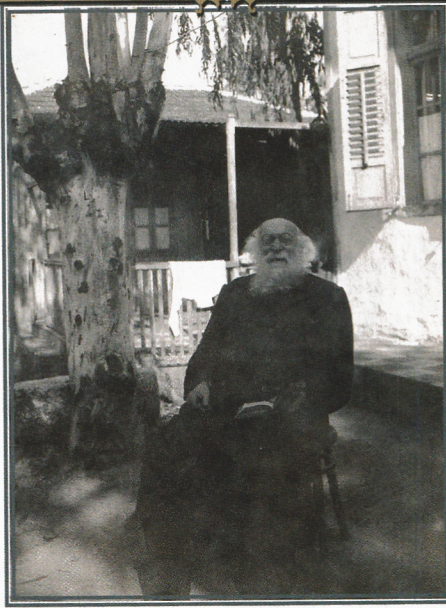
Autobiography, the written telling of one's own life story, is a rare literary genre among *frum* Jews. Even the few autobiographical works we have from recent centuries were authored almost exclusively by great *talmidei chachamim* such as Rav Yom Tov Lipman Heller, author of the *Tosfos Yom Tov*, and Rav Yaakov Emden (with the memoir of the 18th-century German businesswoman Gluckel of Hameln a famous exception to the rule).

This makes *The Shochet: A Memoir of Jewish Life in Ukraine and Crimea*, a Yiddish autobiographical work newly published in English by Touro University Press, doubly exceptional. Its author, a Chassidic Jew named Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn, also known as Pinya-Ber, was not a Rav of renown but a learned, G-d-fearing Jew who worked as a *shochet* and lived an ordinary life in the Ukraine and Crimea of the late 1800s. His life story recounts everyday events in the life of a so-called simple Jew — and that is precisely what makes it both a fascinating read and an invaluable historical document.

Goldenshteyn began writing his life story around the turn of the century and completed most of the 510-page manuscript by 1913. He printed it privately 15 years later in Petach Tikva, in what was then British Mandatory Palestine, making it one of the first published Yiddish-language autobiographies. He wrote in a rich, colloquial Yiddish, which gave the book a unique charm, while his down-to-earth, highly detailed manner of storytelling injected it with a powerful sense of authenticity. The result is a portrait of life as it truly was in small-town Eastern Europe of the 19th century.

A PORTRAIT OF UNUSUAL ACCURACY

In a glowing 1930 review in *Der Tog*, the prominent Yiddish literary critic Shmuel Niger described the book as depicting “the typical life of yesteryear at greater length and more thoroughly than those who initially took it upon themselves... to be the historians of those eras and environs.” How did Goldenshteyn succeed where so many others writing about their lives during the same era failed? Mr. Niger explained that when those who left traditional Judaism for the secular world wrote their life stories — which Michoel Rotenfeld, associate director of libraries at Touro University, terms “maskilic autobiographies” — they did so with a historical consciousness. Unwittingly or not, they were attempting to leave their works as “gifts to posterity,” preserving the memory of a way of life they were certain would soon



Pinya-Ber in the late 1920s in Petach Tikva.

disappear.

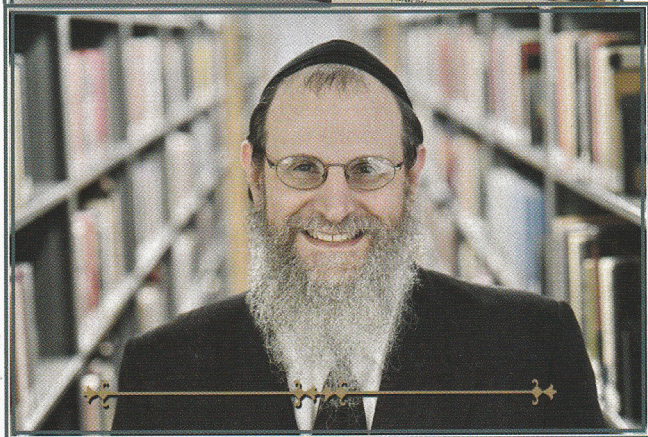
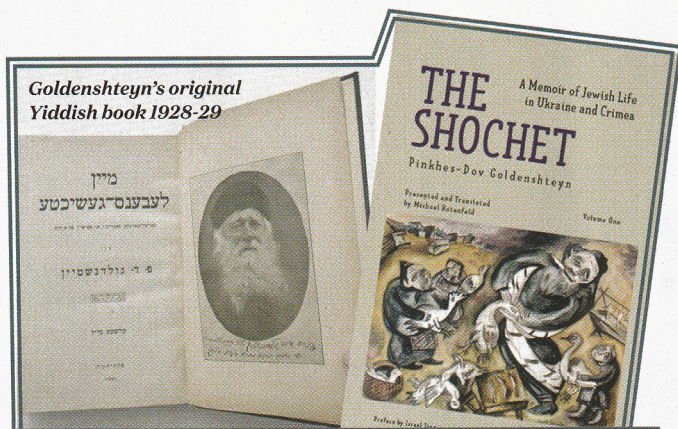
In their zeal to leave behind a lasting historical record, these newly secular autobiographers often focused largely on societal trends or contemporary controversies but neglected to share their own subjective experiences and inner lives with the reader. Oftentimes too, they wrote about the traditional communities of their youth only many decades after leaving it and usually in a language different from the one in which they had experienced the events they wrote about.

By contrast, Mr. Niger observed, Pinya-Ber's life “is that of an average poor and pious Jew in southern Russia... It is a complete portrayal of a single individual's life, practically without any pretext of introducing us to the spheres of a certain lifestyle, environment or era... He does not attend to history. He is not a historian. And that which he wrote is an autobiography — nothing more. But an autobiography it is, and as stated, an authentic, 100% one at that. The one who reads it feels and knows that he is being pulled into a very narrow stream, into the lifestream of one person from one family... and the reader recognizes that life was actually lived that way by many, if not by everyone, in those times and surroundings.”

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ANOMALY

Now, Mr. Rotenfeld has rendered this classic first-person account into a riveting English-language narrative that grabs the reader from Page 1 and doesn't let go until it ends. The first volume of *The Shochet*, covering Pinya-Ber's life in Ukraine from birth through marriage and his beginnings as a *shochet*, was released in September 2023; a second volume, completing his life story and set in Crimea and Eretz Yisrael, is slated to be released this coming fall.

Rotenfeld prefaces the book with an enlightening 75-page introduction, which explores the book's central themes and illuminates its uniqueness within the Jewish autobiographical genre. As he expertly demonstrates, *The Shochet* is the polar opposite of an entire genre of Yiddish autobiographies penned in the late 19th century, which are largely either paternalistic critiques of the traditional way of life their authors rejected or sentimental recollections of a vanished old-time culture. In their descriptions of small-town Eastern European life, they alternate between overly negative portraits of a backward, stifling existence and overly romanticized ones, which airbrush out the grim realities of extreme poverty and oppression.



Translator, Touro librarian Michael Rotenfeld

With an implicit agenda to justify their authors' own abandonment of Jewish tradition and influence readers to follow them, many of these books follow a certain predictable storyline: an oppressive upbringing leading to surreptitious exposure to secular literature and culture, followed by an eventual break with one's family and community and, ultimately, with *Yiddishkeit* entirely.

The author of *The Shochet*, too, had a motive for telling his life story, which was the diametric opposite of all these other autobiographical works: Sadly, by the time he put pen to paper, in the first decade of the 20th century, most of Pinya-Ber's children had begun to stray from *Yiddishkeit*. He hoped to draw them closer again by sharing the story of how he had witnessed Divine Providence at every step of his turbulent life.

When he moved from Ukraine to Crimea in 1879, Pinya-Ber was taken aback to find it populated by unlearned Jews bereft of spiritual leaders to guide them. The steep religious decline that most of Eastern Europe experienced between the world wars had already begun among Crimean Jewry decades earlier, and his children's religious observance suffered as a result. He and his wife had 13 children; only seven of them survived into adulthood, and of these, only two remained *shomrei Shabbos*.

Although he doesn't openly speak of this painful reality in the book, he alludes to it, writing of his hope that his words would "affect my children and grandchildren by

strengthening their trust in G-d so that they will go on along the right path and believe in G-d and Divine Providence, as their aged father has in his life." And although most books were then being written in Hebrew, he notes in a preface to the book that he chose the Yiddish vernacular because he wanted his family "to be able to understand what their father endured during his lifetime and how G-d always helped him and never abandoned him."

A TALE OF TRAVAIL... AND THE FORTITUDE TO PREVAIL

And endure hardships he surely did. Indeed, he adds in his preface that he wanted "those who plagued and tormented me... to read this in order to learn the moral lesson that there is a G-d in the world who protects the harassed and oppressed and repays everyone according to his deeds," adding sharply, "may they repent." Much of the book reads like an unrelieved litany of troubles that befall a helpless orphan who is nearly alone in the world. The few interspersed periods of calm and happiness he experiences seem like rays of blessed sunshine unexpectedly breaking through a gloomy, cloud-filled sky.

The broad outline of the author's life is rather straightforward: Born in 1848 in the Ukrainian town of Tiraspol, he was the youngest of eight children in a family of Bersheder Chassidim. By age 7 he had been orphaned of both father and mother, who died at ages 40 and 38, respectively. With the family left in abject poverty, little Pinya-Ber was shuffled between relatives, suffering a variety of torments at their hands. He became engaged at age 16 and married three years later, spending the intervening years learning in yeshivah and working as a *melamed*. Along the way, he embraced Chabad *Chassidus* and became certified as a *shochet*. In 1879, he moved from Ukraine to the Crimean town of Bakhchisaray, where he worked as a *shochet* and *chazzan* and eventually began to put his life story into words. In 1913, he moved to Petach Tikva, where he died in 1930 at the age of 82.

The true pathos of Pinya-Ber's story is in his rich rendering of his experiences down to their minutest details: the day-in-day-out struggle to survive amid grinding poverty, his encounters with coldhearted relatives and duplicitous strangers and his efforts to evade a czarist regime that delighted in tormenting its Jewish subjects. On and on goes this tale of woe as the author's poignant prose pulls the reader along on a journey filled with privation and heartbreak.

After their parents' passing, the Goldenshteyn orphans were buffeted by one misfortune after another, with three of the siblings dying in their 20s and others enduring divorce and unhappy marriages to ne'er-do-well spouses. With virtually nothing to eat in the home, little Pinya-Ber was sent





you admit me to the yeshivah... Don't you see how lost I am and how poor and alone I am? Don't you see that I'm orphaned?!"

He also writes movingly of the dedication of even common folk to supporting Torah, describing the practice known as "eating *kest*," whereby yeshivah students ate their daily meals in the homes of local residents. "If you would have seen with what type of honor the poor man took a yeshivah student, you would say, 'And who is like Your people, like the people of Israel?' for such poor people, who barely made it through the week on dry bread, managed to save food from their own portion to feed a young student for a day, making sure that on that day a piece of meat was cooked for lunch... Everything was done with such honor and joy..."

Despite all that he endured — and at times, his tribulations were almost physically painful to read about — Pinya-Ber strived to overcome life's difficulties through joy, buoyed by his unshakable

belief that all that happens is ordained from Above by a loving Father.

Cynthia Unterberg, a Manhattan-based great-granddaughter of the author, who was instrumental in having her ancestor's book translated into English, became involved with the project begun nearly 20 years ago when she traveled to Eastern Europe. Seeking to retrace the steps Pinya-Ber took on his tumultuous journeys throughout Ukraine and the Crimea, she visited many of the towns mentioned in the book, accompanied by a Russian-speaking guide.

She never met her great-grandfather but says that her own father often spoke of Pinya-Ber, describing him as "always singing, a joy to be around. He was a very spiritual man and quite distinguished-looking."

If there is one overarching message the author seeks to impart, it is this: "There is a G-d in the world... He unceasingly safeguards all who seek His protection, and those who trust Him are never disgraced. You yourself will be convinced of all this upon reading how this orphan endured misery and suffering and was often in danger and mortal fear, yet G-d constantly guarded and protected him from every evildoing and evildoer in the world."

From where did Pinya-Ber draw the strength to achieve this triumph of the spirit? Perhaps the answer lies in the author's description of his saintly mother, Ester-Khayeh, taken tragically from him at age 38. She worked hard as a storekeeper to supplement the meager income of her husband, Reb Itsye, "acclaimed as the greatest, kindest and most devout *melamed*" with whom "it was considered a privilege to have one's son study."

Pinya-Ber writes that her "entire motive in life lay in her sons growing up to be Rabbis and spiritual leaders of their generation and in her daughters marrying scholars of the same caliber... Not only did she not feel her poverty-stricken condition, but she was also practically unaware of it. She was always in good humor and happy, was never worried and did not permit any worry to reach her dear and devoted husband nor her dear children. She strove with all her strength to embed good character traits in the young hearts of her children and primarily strove to implant faith in them."

This fascinating book is a shining testament to her success. ■

off to live with a series of relatives and others, where he was often treated miserably.

As a young *cheder* boy, Pinya-Ber was subjected to the ridicule of classmates and the undeserved punishments inflicted by cruel *melamdim*. Of his first *melamed* he writes: "When a child could not, or did not, understand his lessons well, he would bear the brunt of each and every one of Reb Shmiel's slaps, pulls of the ear and hard pinches on the cheek, so much so that the boy's soul wanted to leave him then and there." When his siblings sent him to live with a wealthy but childless couple, he attended another *cheder* where his foster parents instructed the teacher "to beat me for everything and anything; I was beaten for the slightest of gestures. By nature, I was happy; if I chuckled or simply had a happy expression on my face, I would earn a blow of the strap across my face or neck."

And yet, despite these horrific early experiences, Pinya-Ber writes again and again of his delight in the study of Torah. In one moving episode, the young orphan hears of a yeshivah for poor children in Odessa and asks some fellow Jews to raise the money for him to travel there, for "if not, I would go on foot to Odessa because I heard one can study well there and I knew that I would devour all that they would teach me." Upon arriving in Odessa, he is sent to the home of the yeshivah's *gabbai*. "He asked me, 'Do you know how to study Torah a little bit?' I answered him, 'If I knew how, I wouldn't have had to come here.' My answer pleased them all." When the *gabbai* hesitates to accept him, Pinya-Ber bursts out sobbing, "I am an upright boy and want to study. I won't leave here, even if it means my death, until