

A PHOTOGRAPH OF A FAMOUS RABBI FROM LUBAVITCH, BIRTHPLACE OF CHABAD, HAS BEEN FOUND¹

In 1883 the Fourth Lubavitch Rabbi Shmuel Shneerson, known in Hasidic history as Maharsh, died in the Jewish town of Lubavitchi, in the Mogilevskaya Province of the Russian Empire. Shmuel Shneerson was a great-grandson of the legendary tzadik Shneur Zalman Shneerson, the founder of the Lubavitch Hasids' ChaBaD religious movement. The name ChaBaD is an acronym, consisting of the first letters of the Hebrew words chachma, bina and dea, which mean wisdom, understanding and knowledge. Rabbi Maharsh was known in Russia for his active struggle against anti-Semitism; it was he, who, in 1869, founded a permanent Jewish rights committee in St. Petersburg, consisting of heads of Jewish communities. Scorched by the woeful history of the 20th century, what remains of this great tzadik's tombstone can be seen to this day in Lubavitchi, now a small ethnically Russian village in the Rudniansky District of the Smolensk Oblast² of Russia.

In 1882, not long before his death, Rabbi Shmuel Shneerson appointed his apprentice David Yakobson as Rabbi of Lubavitchi; this is the beginning of our small novella.



**Lubavitchi, November, 2011. Left: town marker; Right: headstones of
the Third and Fourth Lubavitch Rabbis Tzemach Tzedek and Maharsh.**

¹ Translated from Russian by Dan Veksler.

² Oblast – an administrative geographic delineation in Russia, similar to a county.

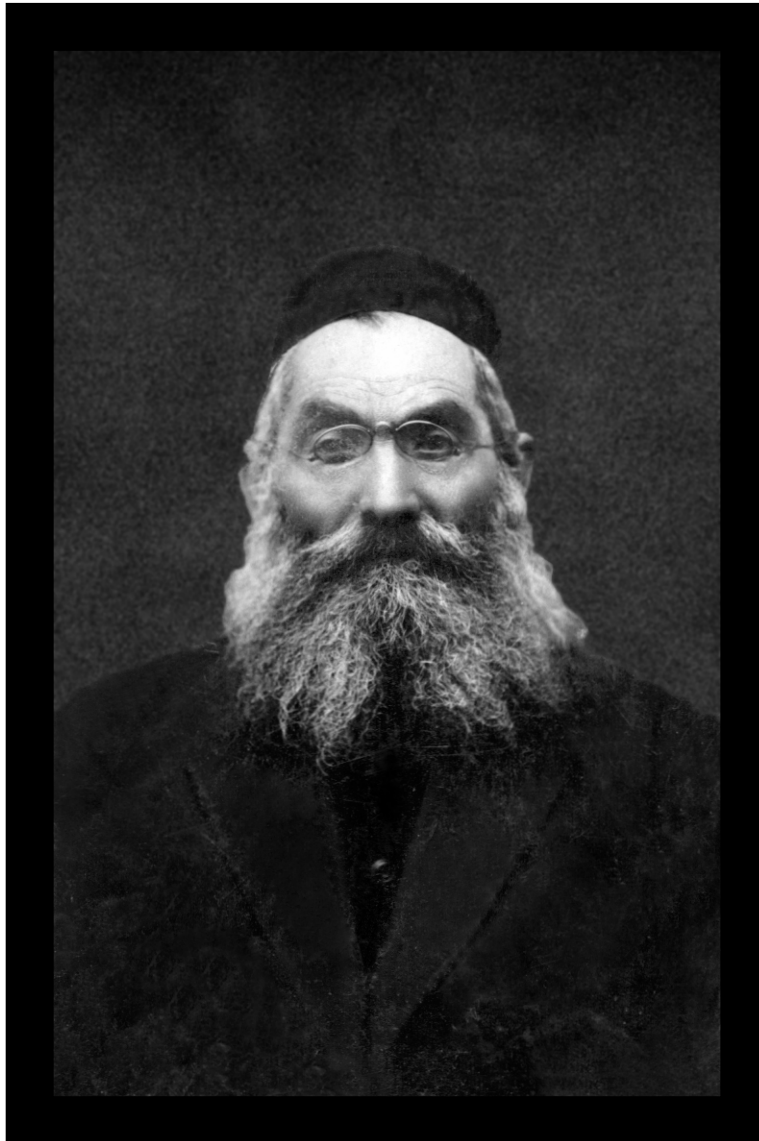
David Yakobson was born in 1852, in the family of Rabbi Bentsion Yakobson. In documents that have survived, David signed his name thus (translated from the Hebrew): “David, son of the blessed memory of Rabbi Bentsion Yakobson, Rabbi of Lubavitchi.” Family history has preserved the tradition of his marriage, at the age of fourteen, to the equally young Lea Zelikson, daughter of the then acting Rabbi of Lubavitchi, Avraam Zelikson. David and Lea’s marriage was a happy one; they had fourteen children! We know the names, and, partially, the stories, of eight of them: Zalman, Zelda, Lazar, Iosef, Risya, Riva, Tayba and Ida. The children of David and Lea produced numerous descendants, now living in Russia, Belarus, Israel, the United States and Germany – over sixty people in total. A detailed history of David Yakobson’s family tree must yet be written; it falls outside the limits of our brief tale.

The exact date of Rabbi Yakobson’s death is unknown. According to Hasidic sources, he was seen in Lubavitchi in 1922, already under Soviet rule. He is absent, however, from a 1930 family photograph, which suggests that the rabbi died between 1922 and 1930. More is known about the Soviet-era life of his wife Lea Yakobson. According to her great-granddaughter Zinaida Mayzelis, Lea died in Leningrad, not long before World War II. Having gone blind, she spent the last years of her life in her grandchildren’s home on Liteyniy Prospekt. Lea was a living legend in her family, and stories about her were passed down from generation, to generation.

Lubavitchi reached its highest peak in the days when David Yakobson was Rabbi of the town. It became the most prominent center of Hasidism, and was a relatively large settlement in the Orshansk district of the Mogilevskaya Province of the Russian Empire. The 1897 census shows a population of 2,711 people, including 1,660 Jews. Lubavitchi was the site of a regular market known throughout the province, and tanning, tailoring and linen dealing flourished there. This was the center of Jewish religious and professional education. There was a public mens’ academy in Lubavitchi, which included a professional trade-school. The famous Lubavitch yeshiva “Tomchei Tmimim” – the center of all Jewish learning in Belarus, whose graduates later headed many synagogues in Europe and the USA, – was flourishing in the town. Four generations of tzadiks from the Shneerson line had accumulated a unique library of antique books on history, philosophy and religion, in Lubavitchi. At the beginning of the 20th century this library contained 25,000 books and 50,000 rare documents! During the warm seasons, Hasid pilgrims would come here, by foot or by cart with their families, to pray in the local synagogue, see the tzadik’s library, and get their fill of saintliness and spiritual strength. Life in the town was filled with work, learning and prayer; there were religious books and secular texts in every home, and reading them was an indispensable part of daily life. High learning and intellectual activity were combined with the simplicity of village life. This small town, dwarfed by the vast expanses of our sinful planet, was an astonishing miracle – the miracle known as Lubavitchi!

David Yakobson was one of the last official rabbis in Lubavitchi. He continued to perform his duties even after 1915, when the Fifth Lubavitch Rabbi, Sholom Dov Ber Shneerson,

left Lubavitchi for Rostov-on-Don, taking with him the Court of the Lubavitch Rabbis, which never again returned to its homeland. In Soviet times, a collective farm was organized in Lubavitchi, and, crushed out by the ruling powers, the ethno-religious life of the Jews gradually ground to a halt. Still, by the time the tragedy of 1941 came about, there were more than five hundred Jews living in the town. Fortunately, Rabbi David Yakobson never lived to see this bloody turn in world history, and his children and grandchildren had long since left this once blessed place by then.



**“David Yakobson,
son of the blessed memory of Rabbi Bentsion Yakobson, Rabbi of Lubavitchi.”**

In July of 1941 the tiny village of Lubavitchi found itself right on the crux of the main strike by the monstrous steel armada of the German Wehrmacht – the most powerful division of the Army Group Center, under the command of General-Field Marshal Fedor von Bock – which was making its way toward Moscow. The steel vice of the tank armies of Fascist generals Hermann Hoth and Heinz Guderian were gripping Smolensk from the north and south. Lubavitchi, along with other Jewish towns and villages in eastern Belarus, fell right into this steel grip, and their fate was sealed. The fields of unharvested flax and the country roads along the shores of the Berezina, and the Western Dvina, groaned from the howling and the fire of the land-mutilating steel monsters. Hundreds of thousands of Red Army soldiers and officers were killed or taken prisoner in the terrible cauldron of Vitebsk³. On July 15th, Guderian's motorized division burst upon Smolensk. The town of Lubavitchi was now on Nazi-occupied territory, far behind the eastward-moving front. In the wake of the Wehrmacht military detachments, onto this defenseless land came divisions of professional Nazi killers – the SS Sonderkommand. With their arrival, having sensed the intoxicating scent of impunity, local rabble came out of the woodwork and set about looting and raping.

The Germans arrived in Lubavitchi on July 21st, 1941. They knew from the instructions they had received from the SS Einsatzgruppe B command, that the town of Lubavitchi, which had been entirely put at their disposal, was a sacred place for Jews and “a holy city of Jehovah and rabbis.” This doomed the local Jews who had not had a chance to evacuate, to a particularly cruel death. As a warm-up, the commandant of Lubavitchi immediately had a group of young Jews shot, and ordered a group of elderly ones to be beaten and gruesomely tortured to death.

The spine-chilling finale of the bloody drama in Lubavitchi took place on November 4th, 1941. On that day the commandant ordered the local polizei to round up all the Jews of Lubavitchi, including the children. They were led out in groups of a few people and dragged to the place of execution, which was in a small ravine on lands adjacent to the local slaughterhouse. The Jews were shot in the head, or beaten to death with crowbars and sticks. Small children were buried alive. 483 Jews were killed that day. Lubavitchi ceased to exist as a Jewish town.

There are no Jews in the village of Lubavitchi today. This small settlement, with its several hundred permanent residents, is not always found even on maps of the local area; it exists only due to tourists and religious pilgrims. A monument to the massacred Jews of Lubavitchi, donated by the Evangelical Christians of Russia and erected here in 2011, the restored house of Shneerson and the Court of the Lubavitchi Rabbis – now museums, and the remnants of the headstones of the great Lubavitchi tzadiks, are all that is left to remind us of the town's Jewish past and its great religious history.

³ The Battle of Vitebsk – July 10th-18th, 1941.



Lubavitchi, November, 2011.

Left: the restored house of the Lubavitchi Rabbi;

Right: the road leading to the monument to the village's massacred Jews.

Whatever the future holds for this small Smolensk Oblast village, its name – LUBAVITCHI – is immortal, for, along with waves of Jewish emigration out of Russia, the 20th century has given rise to an extraordinarily powerful worldwide missionary campaign of Lubavitch Hasids. This has led to the opening of large Chabad centers in Israel, the United States and many other countries. The righteous, incredibly dense cluster of faith that had, up to a certain time, lain hidden among the flax fields and birch groves of the small Belarussian town of Lubavitchi, has exploded, and, expanding rapidly, has studded the world map with constellations of Chabad. Today, hundreds of Lubavitch Hasid communities exist in dozens of countries throughout the world.

My own interest in the life-story and likeness of the famous Lubavitchi rabbi David Yakobson is easily explained: he is my paternal great-grandfather. In 1876 David had a daughter, Risya (Raisa) – my grandmother. In 1898 my grandfather Isaak Okunev, son of the Velizh shochet, came to Lubavitchi on his own horse and married Raisa Yakobson. In 1909 Isaak and Raisa had my father, Bentsion Okunev. That, in short, is my paternal genealogy, whose roots are in the famous town of Lubavitchi.



**A photograph of David Yakobson's family in 1930,
at the summer house in Chizhovka Village in the Vitebsk Oblast.
David's wife Lea Yakobson is fourth from the left, in the second row from the back.**

When, in 1999, already living in America, I set about writing my family history, I knew very little about my great-grandfather David Yakobson. There was no one from whom I could have learned anything about him. My grandmother Raisa died before I was born, and my grandfather Isaak died of starvation in the Siege of Leningrad, when I was only three years old. As for my father, he preferred not to talk about his ancestors. All of them, on both the Okunev and Yakobson sides, belonged to the most malignant category of persons, as far as Communist ideology was concerned: they were “acolytes of a religious cult.” In his documentation, my father had managed to transform his father, the Velizh shochet, from a “cult member” into a “cultural worker,” but this trick could not work with his grandfather, the Rabbi of Lubavitchi. Luckily, in Soviet questionnaires, the question of what one's family had been doing before 1917 extended no further than one's parents. However, many Soviet people preferred to remain silent about their grandparents, as not all of them had an “immaculate” proletarian background. I learned of my famous great-grandfather, not from my parents, but from my aunt, who had put together our family tree at my request, and, next to the square that contained the name “David Yakobson,” humbly added, “was a rabbi in Lubavitchi.” So, this utterly brief phrase comprised

the entirety of my knowledge about my great-grandfather at that time. All of my older relatives had by this time gone to meet their maker, therefore a burning and ever-increasing interest in my ancestors led me to look for any type of indirect way to retrieve some information about the past.



Surviving photos of David Yakobson's children: Zalman, Raisa, Riva, Zelda, Tayba

The first thing I remembered was that in Leningrad I had been well-acquainted with my cousin's husband, Aron Lazarevich⁴ Yakobson, who, according to all family assessments, was none other than the paternal grandson of David Yakobson. Aron, whom we all called Archie, never spoke of his grandfather. This is quite understandable, as Archie was a Soviet officer, a communist, and an Honors graduate from the Naval-Military Engineering Academy named after F.E. Dzerzhinskiy⁵; he developed Soviet submarines in top-secret paramilitary institutions, and, as they say, all he needed now was a rabbi grandfather!

Nevertheless, I understood that after Aron's death some documents, letters, maybe, if I was lucky, even a photograph of David Yakobson, may have survived with his relatives. So, I immediately tried to find them. This search lasted several years, and could in itself make a riveting detective story with much passion and many characters, but I will omit all details of it here, because the search eventually turned out completely fruitless. In a nutshell, it went like this: first, I found Aron Yakobson's second wife in Germany. She was an elderly and very sick woman, but spoke to me very genially. She mostly spoke about the last years of Aron's life, and kept promising to dig around in the photographs and letters he had left behind, but in the end didn't do anything, and my contact with her tapered off. Then, I found Aron Yakobson's son and grandson in Atlanta, Georgia (the story of this search is itself a semi-detective story). They reacted to my inquiries without enthusiasm, to put it mildly, and seemed to know nothing of their great ancestor, nor were they interested in knowing anything. Nonetheless, Aron's grandson, who had changed his last name from Yakobson to that of his mother, promised to find "an old suitcase in the attic, which possibly has something of interest in it." He promised to call me back, but either didn't find anything, or decided not to participate in this story any more – I don't know

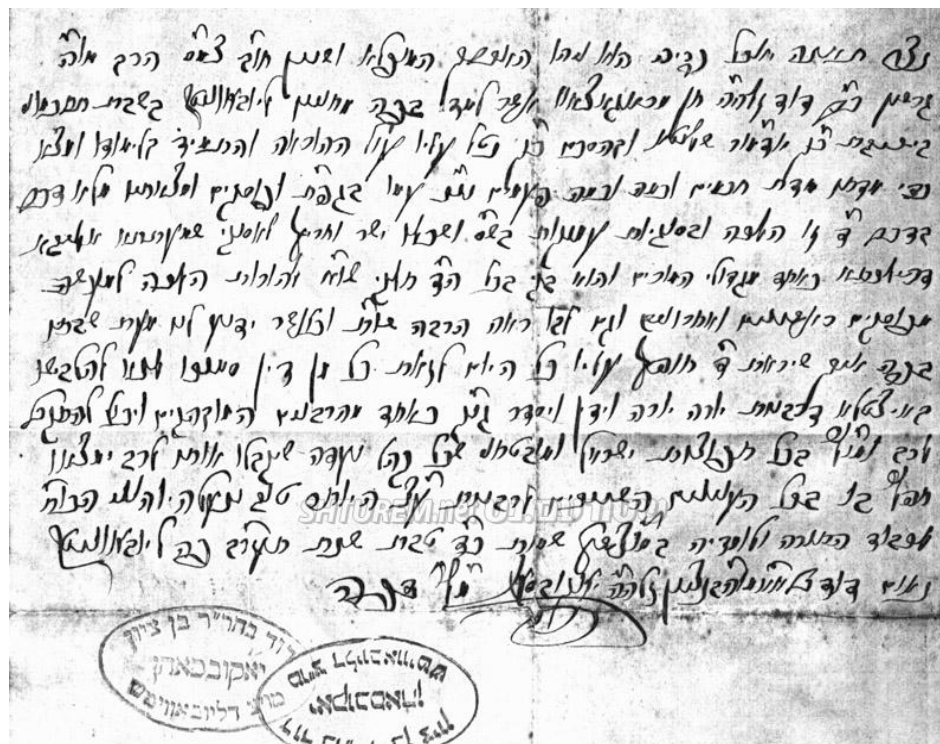
⁴ Lazarevich – a Russian patronymic, meaning "son of Lazar."

⁵ Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinskiy, a.k.a. "Iron Felix" – founder of the "Cheka," progenitor of the KGB.

what happened, but this channel of inquiry also dried up. I tried to find someone who had known Aron's father Lazar Yakobson. According to some stories he worked as a mathematics teacher in Baku, but none of my friends from Baku knew anything about him.

My second attempt to find out something about David Yakobson was more successful. Sometime in the middle 2000's, at a synagogue in Queens, New York, I made the acquaintance of a charismatic young rabbi named Eli Bloch, from the local Chabad community. I presented Eli with my then-freshly published book *The Axis of World History*. We met several times, and once I mentioned that I was looking for information about my relative David Yakobson, who had served as Rabbi in Lubavitchi. To my surprise, Eli Bloch knew this name. He claimed that there was information about David Yakobson in some Hasidic chronicles, and promised to find them for me.

Soon, Eli put me in touch with the Brooklyn Rabbi Aaron Leib Raskin, who sent me some brief notes about David Yakobson and the story of how he was appointed Rabbi of Lubavitchi. Aaron also sent me a copy of an authentic letter from David, with his personal seal on it, and an English translation of this letter. Aaron and I began corresponding; he demonstrated a vital interest in my research and, in one letter, asked me whether I had a photograph of David Yakobson. Alas, I did not have one.



Letter from David Yakobson, with his personal seal, written in 1911 in Lubavitchi, recommending someone named Hirschon Chein as Rabbi (courtesy of Aaron Raskin)

Years passed, and I managed to unearth the once-disappeared branches of our family tree. I also found the only portrait of the progenitor of the Okunev line, Velizh Shochet Movshe Okunev. However, I still hadn't found a picture of David Yakobson. It seemed that one would never be found.

In the end, an accident decided everything. Accidents, however – I believe this – are actually ordained by Providence. The Lord does not play dice with us; He deals the winning hand to him who works hard and keeps striving for his goal, despite all the obstacles and ill fortune.

My article, “A Miracle, Disguised as a Tragedy,” dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust in Lubavitchi, was published in December of 2012, in the 147th issue of the online journal, “Notes on Jewish History” (editor – Evgeniy Berkovich). In January of 2013, among many comments the article received, there was a short message from Zinaida Mayzelis, of St. Petersburg⁶: “Thank you very much for publishing this. If possible, I would like to get in touch with Yuri Okunev. We share a great-grandfather – David Yakobson – Rabbi of Lubavitchi.” (As Zinaida later told me, Nison Ruppo, a rabbi from Kostroma, had suggested she read the article.)

I learned of this unknown woman's request from Evgeniy Berkovich, and immediately, reverently, sensed the approach of good fortune. I had been convinced of the power of the printed word many times before – not for nothing is it said, “In the beginning, there was the word.” I soon found Zinaida's phone number and immediately called her. This was a hectic conversation between long-lost relatives, who, on top of everything, shared an interest in the history of their ancestry. All of my most magnificent hopes were immediately confirmed: one hour later, I was looking at a photo of David Yakobson that Zinaida had sent to my computer, which I had sought for over ten years. The photo was of very bad quality, but what difference did that make, compared to the fact that it had been found?!



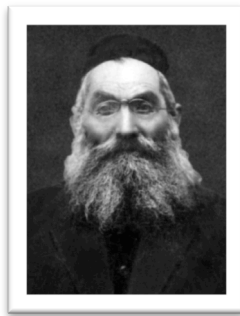
**Zinaida Mayzelis –
discoverer of the photograph of David Yakobson,
Rabbi of Lubavitchi.**

⁶ St. Petersburg – the original name of Leningrad, restored in 1992.

Curiously, that same day I received the same photo from Aaron Leib Raskin in Brooklyn, who had received it from Nison Ruppó of the Hasidic community in the Russian city of Kostroma, who had, in turn, received it from Zinaida Mayzelis.

Thus, happily, ends this story: we now have a photograph of the famous Lubavitch rabbi David Yakobson. I'm presenting it here in a restored format, thanks to the help of David's great-great-grandson Boris Yakobson, who lives in Jerusalem!

The male line of Rabbi David Yakobson's descendants



David Yakobson, rabbi (1852–192...),
Lubavitchi, Smolensk Oblast, Russia



Zalman Yakobson, merchant,
(1872, Lubavitchi – 1941, Leningrad)



Abram Yakobson, accountant, (1904-1989),
Vitebsk, Belarus



Yakov Yakobson, engineer, (b. 1935)
Vitebsk, Belarus



Boris Yakobson, engineer, (b. 1965, Vitebsk)
Jerusalem, Israel



Ariel Yakobson, (b. 1995)
Jerusalem, Israel



Gai-Benjamin Yakobson, (b. 2001),
Jerusalem, Israel

And that, in a nutshell, is the whole story. I now constantly communicate with my second cousin Zinaida Mayzelis, by telephone and Skype. She has an enormous family archive of the descendants of David Yakobson, which includes a large number of photographs, and is currently inventorying it at my request. With her help, I have gotten in touch with the rabbi's great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren, and great-great-great-grandchildren, in St. Petersburg, Vitebsk and Jerusalem. I hope that, with their help, Zinaida and I will publish an in-depth examination of David Yakobson's family tree.

The photograph of David Yakobson is now circulating throughout the Internet, and I have already received several copies of its original version, from various countries. This is not

surprising: an overall interest in the history of our ancestors is arising everywhere – especially among Jews, who have been removed for many generations from their great past. The interest in significant historical figures in one's family history is therefore growing at double speed. This interest is traditionally high among the particularly religious; when holy men are found in a family tree, it produces a devout delight in Hasidic communities throughout the world.

In my genealogical research, I am always fascinated by the question of whether someone among today's young generation knows the surname of the progenitor of their line. In other words, is there an uninterrupted chain of paternal descendants going all the way back to the beginning of the line, without name change? Unfortunately, I must report that in many cases I am aware of, the answer to this question is no. This was caused by historical circumstances in which many families were forced to live in the 20th century: men were killed in wars and purges, leaving no descendants. The family clan survived, therefore, mostly due to the surviving women, whose children's surnames, naturally, changed. Jews had additional circumstances that made the survival of the paternal family line difficult: anti-Semitism and compulsory assimilation persuaded many to change their ancient family names.

My research of the male lines of descent from Rabbi David Yakobson, which was based on the materials of Zinaida Mayzelis's family archive, has shown that, at the present time, only one line of male descendants exists, that has retained the name Yakobson. This line is: David – Zalman – Abram – Yakov – Boris – Ariel and Gai-Benjamin. This line seems highly symbolic to me, as it reflects the relentless historical movement of the main line of the Jewish people: the great-great-great-grandsons of Rabbi David Yakobson, who had served as the Rabbi of Lubavitchi, Birthplace of Chabad, now live in Jerusalem!

Could "David Yakobson, son of the blessed memory of Rabbi Bentsion Yakobson, Rabbi in Lubavitchi" have dreamed of anything better?

May he rest in peace!

Yuri Okunev
March, 2013