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A Torah Scroll for the Generations

Unlike most Jews living under the Communist Soviet regime, **Rabbi Pinchas Sudak** did not really lack for anything. He had an underground knitting factory and was a relatively wealthy man. He also managed to sustain a Jewish, Torah-observant life for himself and his family. When he escaped from Russia shortly after the Second World War, in the summer of 1946, at the age of thirty-eight, it was not because of any personal material or even spiritual need. On the contrary, he risked being shot at the border for trying to escape.

In the home of Rabbi Pinchas, commitment to *Yiddishkeit* [Torah Judaism] was a way of life. The oldest of the three children, Batsheva, as a young girl would ride alone on a donkey for several miles through the desert to bring home the necessary wheat to be later grinded and prepared under exacting supervision for the Passover matzah. (That was her task because, as a child, she was not as subject to questioning by the authorities.)

Nor was it an unusual sight in the Sudak home for music books to be swiftly spread over the piano as soon as a stranger entered their home, hiding the religious books nesting beneath. In this way, Batsheva was able to pursue her Jewish studies with her "piano teacher."

Rabbi Pinchas recognized that his children, raised to fight for the preservation of their faith, would gain inordinate strength and faith to persevere in following the path of their tradition — no matter what the circumstances.

"I am not leaving Russia for my own children," he said. "They will always know that they are Jews and will remain loyal to their faith. But what will become of my children's children-to-be? That I do not know. It is for them that I must leave the clutches of this regime."

Fortunate to have crossed the Russia-Poland border alive, the Sudak family found themselves in Cracow with a group of forty-six other Lubavitcher Chassidim escaping the Stalinist dictatorship, with their final destination unknown.¹

While still in Cracow, Rabbi Pinchas met a Polish Jew who was offering a Torah scroll for sale. This seemed to him extraordinary, like it was arranged specifically by G-d. Immediately he decided to purchase the Torah with money he had managed to smuggle out of Russia. "How can so large a group of Jews travel without a Sefer Torah in their midst," he said, "wherever this journey may lead us."

¹ Included in this group was the Lubavitcher Rebbe's mother, Rebbetzin Chana Schneerson.

So he bought the Torah, and quickly had a heavy wooden case fashioned to carry and protect it.

It was time for the group to move onwards on their dangerous trek, walking through Steczen, to cross the Czechoslovakian border on their way to Prague. They left late at night, allowed by their guide to carry only their most basic necessities; all other worldly possessions were abandoned. Rabbi Pinchas had diamonds sewn into the soles of his family's shoes.

In the blackness of the night, Zeidy Pinchas and his wife, Batya, and their three children, each tightly grasping the coarse rope designated to keep the the group together, trudged silently through a dense forest. Rabbi Pinchas clutched his beloved Sefer Torah as he marched behind Batya, who carried their youngest child, 3-year-old Bracha.

The way was difficult. As the hours passed, Rabbi Pinchas' wife grew more and more weary. Finally she motioned to her husband that she could no longer carry Bracha.

Rabbi Pinchas understood at once that if he would take the baby, he would have to leave the Torah behind. With tears in his eyes, he took his Sefer Torah out of its wooden case, and silently mouthed an apology.

"My priceless Torah, you know that it is for you that I have left Russia. I would not have left to an unknown future for myself. Nor would I have for my children. I am fleeing to ensure that my children's children will know you and live with you. Forgive me, dear Torah, for abandoning you now. It is either you or my child. I part with you now, so that my children and children's children should live a life where you are a real and meaningful part."

Weeping, Rabbi Pinchas embraced the precious scroll one last time. Then he gently laid it in its case under a tree and, after lifting his youngest child in his arms, journeyed forward.

Eventually, the Sudaks reached the free shores of Israel. His children --Batsheva,² Nachman³ and Bracha⁴ -- each grew up to become Rabbis or Rebbetzins serving their respective communities and promulgating faith in Torah.

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Sixty-five years later, in 2011, Rebbetzin Batsheva Schochet, was visiting in California where she was invited to the home of Mrs. Faigy Estulin, a family friend. Faigy was describing her own parents' exodus from Russia — several weeks after the Sudaks' escape — and attributed the longevity and robust health of her father, Rabbi Tzemach Gurevitch, to an incident that happened in their perilous journey.

² She married Rabbi Dovid Schochet, who became a highly respected rabbinical judge in Toronto and the president of its *Vaad HaRabbanim* (Rabbinical Council).

³ Rabbi Nachman Sudak was the Lubavitcher Rebbe's chief emissary to the UK and director of Chabad there for 55 years, from 1959 until his passing in 2014.

⁴ Her husband, Rabbi Moshe Bogomilsky, is an important rabbinical leader in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, Chabad community,

Rabbi Gurevitch and his wife, Chana Rivka, were escaping Russia on a dark night. Along the way, their five year old daughter wandered away from them and was momentarily lost. Frantically, the parents searched for her, crawling on their hands and knees through the forest.

Suddenly Rabbi Gurevitch felt a hard surface. Upon further investigation, he opened a wooden box to discover a *Sefer Torah*. Next to the case sat his young child, as if she was just waiting for her father.

Kissing both passionately, he took the Torah from its box, unraveled it and wrapped it around his body, tying it with his *gartel* (prayer sash). Eventually, that Torah scroll made its way to its current home, in a shul in New York City.

Mrs. Estulin ended by crediting her grandfather's long and healthy life to the merit of this significant act.

As she concluded her story, she was astonished to observe that Rebbetzin Schochet's face had gone completely ashen and tears were streaming from her eyes. When she was able to collect herself, she told her hostess the story of that Torah scroll and her father's self-sacrifice, and how happy she was to learn that the legacy of her father's precious *Sefer Torah* had come full circle.

She concluded her story by saying, "It was Divine Providence that brought me now to your home in Los Angeles. It was also Divine Providence that directed our conversation to our stories of rescue from Russia and childhood memories. It was Divine Providence that I learned from you that the Torah scroll found a home, and obviously, it was certainly worth it for my father to purchase it, even though he had to abandon it in the forest."

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Source: Compiled, adapted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from two slightly differing renditions of the story by **Rebbetzin Chana Weisberg** posted on //chabad.org, one for adults and one for children. She is the daughter of Batsheva Schochet and the granddaughter of Pinchas Sudak, both prominently featured in the above story. The 'adult' version was originally published in one of her six books, *Divine Whispers: Stories that Speak to the Heart and Soul* (Targum Press, 2005). The children's version was originally published in *The Moshiach Times*, a high quality children's magazine, published by *Tzivos Hashem*. I added footnotes 2-4 and some more factual detail from a 2018 article in *Beis Moshiach Magazine*.

[**Chana Weisberg** is the editor of //TheJewishWoman.org. She lectures internationally on issues relating to women, relationships, meaning, self-esteem and the Jewish soul.]

Connection: *SHAVUOT*: the celebration of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai 3333 (!) years ago (plus: in the second of the Ten Commandments appears the phrase, "to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generations").