

The Rebbe Was Framed

Newly available documents from former Soviet archives offer fresh insights into the imprisonment of the first Lubavitcher rebbe, and the Jewish opponents who got him arrested

DAVID ASSAF

The Lubavitcher hasidic movement's 90-year-old rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is still suffering the effects of a stroke suffered some nine months ago, with no successor on the horizon; 200 years ago, Chabad (as the international movement is known) also had rebbe troubles — the first Lubavitcher rebbe, Schneur Zalman of Lyady, endured two periods of imprisonment and interrogation by the czarist authorities, on suspicion of subversion.

The first incarceration came in 1798, the second in 1800, after the rebbe's anti-hasidic opponents falsely accused him of organizing young Jews to come to the assistance of the French Revolution — hoping that the czar would see him and his followers as a threat to the imperial regime. At the time, the rebbe was living and teaching in Lyozna, in Byelorussia (Lyady is where he ended his career; Lubavitch where his son and successor Dov Baer settled), but his followers were widely dispersed throughout the region, including Russia and Lithuania.

New light has been shed on Schneur Zalman's two arrests and subsequent release without charge (each time after less than three months) by documents long hidden in archives in St. Petersburg, where he was imprisoned. Since the collapse of Communist rule the documents were made available to Jerusalem scholar Yehoshua Mondshine — though he does not reveal how, if others were hoping to follow up on his work. Mondshine is a Lubavitcher hasid who has devoted his ta-

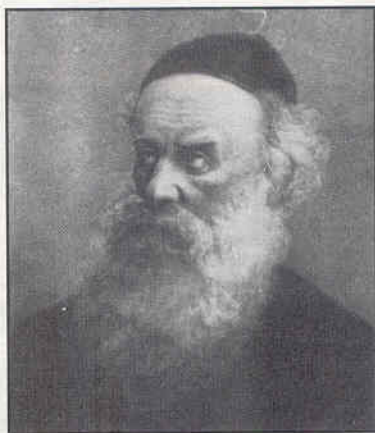
lents and energies to preserving and nurturing Chabad's heritage — and its image.

Chabad is by far the largest hasidic group in the world, and although these days it may be best known by its aggressive campaign to encourage people to "prepare for the coming of the messiah" — who members strongly suggest is the rebbe himself — it has from the start also been known for its strong intellectual bent and erudition. The name Chabad, in fact, is a Hebrew acronym for the words meaning wisdom, understanding and knowledge.

Mondshine himself makes his living as a bibliographer in the manuscript department of the National and University Library. He labors on the margins of the professional academy, but he knows well how to use the tools of that world. He has 15 years of research and publications — books, articles, collections of docu-

ments — behind him, on Chabad and hasidism in general. His writing is characterized by comprehensive and impressive knowledge, originality, provocativeness — and a willingness to enter into polemic battle against what he sees as distortion of Chabad's image by outsiders. The way he straddles the thin line between academic objectivity and Chabad partisanship necessitates a special alertness on the part of the reader.

A rich file of interesting and revealing documents in Russian and Hebrew, with Mondshine's commentary, appears in the two hardcover volumes that constitute issue No. 4 of *Kerem Chabad*, a Hebrew-language journal that is edited and written almost exclusively by Mondshine and



Schneur Zalman: The first Lubavitcher rebbe was the victim of a power struggle

published irregularly by the Lubavitch "Oholei Shem" institute, of Kfar Chabad. Many of the documents are connected to Schneur Zalman's two stays in jail. They include the Russian authorities' paperwork on all stages of the interrogation of the rebbe, along with 22 of his followers, and their release; details on the offenses of which he was suspected; and his defense.

Until now, the existence of only a small proportion of the documents was known, and researchers frequently erred in details. Mondshine clarifies the nature of the accusations (for example, what was until now only suspected becomes clear — that one informer used the name of a non-existent person), and presents the rebbe's answers to the questions of his interrogators. The latter offer ample evidence of the rebbe's charismatic yet modest personality.

Of course, Schneur Zalman's responses must be seen firstly as apologetics: the answers of an accused, imprisoned man interested in gaining his freedom. Nevertheless, many autobiographical details and important data on the origins and development of hasidism emerge.

The czarist regime wasn't concerned with religious differences between the hasidim and their opponents, the *mitnagdim*. But they feared that the hasidim identified with revolutionary interests, and were similar in organization to secret societies like the Freemasons. However, the intensive investigation revealed that, even if the charges had been true, the threat was minimal; in fact, the authorities concluded that the number of hasidim was so small that, as the official checking the charges reported to the czar, "by expelling 30 Jews from Russia, it would be possible to solve the whole problem." Presumably the official was thinking of 30 Chabad leaders in Vilna, who presumably would have represented a much larger group of followers.

The interrogators' questions centered on the principal charge of disloyalty: Had hasidism in fact changed ancient Jewish ritual, and if so, in what way and why? (The czarist regime always felt threatened by new sects.) How were the finances of the rebbe's court administered? What was done with the money given the rebbe by his followers? What was the nature of the rebbe's connections with the hasidic community in the Land of Israel?

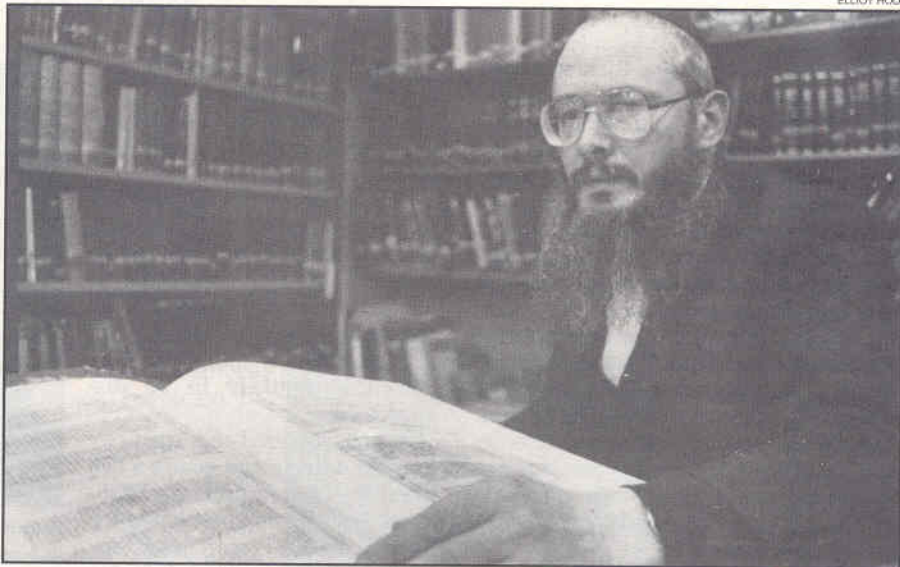
Regarding the question of ritual, the rebbe responded that his followers had not created a new sect, but that they did put a new emphasis on *tefila bekvannah*, that is prayer with intent and devotion, rather than by rote. Money was being sent to followers in Israel, but for their personal welfare (the authorities feared that funds were intended for Napoleon, then battling in Egypt). Both times he was arrested, the rebbe was fully vindicated;

the date of his first release — the 19th of Kislev — is still an occasion of annual celebration among Lubavitchers.

Mondshine's documents also disclose some surprising episodes in the history of the *mitnagdim*, who were based principally in what is today Vilnius, Lithuania, among the followers of the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon (1720-1797). The author describes the struggle against hasidism as one of interested parties, interested more in maintaining their autonomous status rather than defending their values or manner of prayer, and who drafted to their struggle, by way of

against the hasidim, and whose name appears on the manifestoes (long available to historians) announcing the ban on them, is portrayed by Mondshine as an innocent or oblivious figure, cut off from his surroundings. Hasidim have always had difficulty accepting the fact that a Torah scholar of such great stature could have been such an implacable enemy. Indeed, Mondshine writes that he is anxious to "purify the Vilna Gaon of his disgraceful reputation of being a persecutor of hasidim," and to represent him as a passive figure who was dragged into a dispute almost involuntarily, although in

ELLIOT HOOL



Mondshine: Using the tools of the scholar to defend the image of Chabad from detractors

false claims, the authoritative figure of the Vilna Gaon.

Jewish Vilna at the end of the 18th century, as portrayed by Mondshine, was in no way the holy metropolis that we have come to view with sugar-sweet nostalgia as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." He sees it as a community run by corrupt leaders who would fight their opponents with every means at their disposal, ready to lie, to forge evidence and hire witnesses who would perjure themselves.

For example, each month a new *rodef ne'elam* (hidden persecutor) would be chosen, his identity a closely held secret. He would be empowered to coordinate and carry out campaigns of punishment against recalcitrant community members, able to go so far as to empower people to offer false testimony against the offender in the religious court. "We're not dealing with a God-fearing community here," writes Mondshine, "but rather with politicians, a party like all ruling parties, and a leadership like all secular leaderships — even if these same people were supposed to be 'religious.'"

The Vilna Gaon, who led the campaign

his innermost self he knew that it was based on interests of status, blind hatred and deceit. (In fact, the Gaon died the year before the rebbe's first imprisonment.)

But although he doesn't say it, the Elijah ben Solomon he portrays, with the help of the documents, is also weak of character, naive and isolated. It is an original interpretation, but one too colored by the author's need to dull the Vilna Gaon's hostility. The truth is that opposition to hasidism was not limited to Vilna, but rather existed throughout the region, wherever the Vilna Gaon himself had influence.

There is little doubt that the libraries and archives of the former Soviet Union that were off-limits to researchers for so long contain additional hidden documents that can change what we know of hasidism's history. The documents now published by Mondshine are evidence of the vast research potential in these old-new treasures, locked away for 75 years. □ David Assaf is a historian at the Open University of Israel; his principal field of research is the history of hasidism.