

From the Pages of Tradition

FAIGEL DEM ROV'S

By JOSEPH FOXMAN

Joseph Foxman's eyewitness account of Faigel dem Rov's (Yiddish for: Faigel, the Rabbi's daughter) is a moving testimonial to a Holocaust victim who sanctified God's Name in life and death. Originally published in Yiddish, it is presented here – as best we can tell, for the first time – in English translation.¹

A Holocaust survivor, Joseph Foxman (1905-1977) was born in Baranovich (today in Belarus) and died in New York. A writer of note, he published widely in the European Yiddish press prior to World War II, and contributed significantly to the Jewish community memorial volumes (*yizkor-bicher*) published after the Holocaust. With the outbreak of World War II, he escaped to Vilna and ultimately was imprisoned in the Vilna Ghetto. An ardent Zionist Revisionist, he was a founding member of the United Partisan Organization (FPO), the Jewish resistance movement in the Vilna Ghetto. Escaping from the Ghetto, he made his way to Poland in 1945, then to New York in 1949.² Abraham

¹ At least three different early accounts of Faigel dem Rov's have appeared in print. See J. Foxman, "פייגעל פון ווילנער געטא" דער אמעריקאנער in Friday, August 9, 1957, 12. Cf. M. Unger, "פערעלע פערלאוו" באראנאוויטש-קוידענאווער, in J. Foxman, ed., באראנאוויטש (New York: Baranowicher Farband of America, 1964), 22-25. See also M. Unger, "דער קרייז פון פייגעלע דעם רבס", in his דער גייסטיקער ווידערשטאנד פון יידן אין געטאס און לאגערן (Tel-Aviv: Hamenora Publishing House, 1970), 89-91. This last account claims that it is drawn from Joseph Foxman's essay in דער אמעריקאנער, August 9, 1945. This is surely a mistaken reference to the 1957 version listed above. We have translated the 1957 version, correcting only obvious errors. For the later accounts (often abridged), see, e.g., M. Dworzecki, "ההיים" בקדושה ובגבורה (Tel Aviv: Eibeshutz, 1978), 277-278; and Y. Granatstein, הגבורה האחרת (Jerusalem: Makhon Zekher Naftali, 1988), 102-104.

² See the entries on Joseph Foxman in ליטעראטור פון דער נייער יידישער ליטעראטור, vol. 7 (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1968), column 329, and in יידיש- לעקסיקאן פון יידיש- (New York: Rayan Ilman-Kagan, 1986), column 439.

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Foxman, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, is Joseph's son.³

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I had the tragic privilege and the great misfortune of participating in the fate of Vilna Jewry during the insufferable and dreadful years of the Hitler regime.

Whenever I relive my memories of the past, I stand in awe when confronted by the holy name "Faigel dem Rov's."

Faigel dem Rov's was a young woman, perhaps twenty-one years old at the time, the daughter of Rabbi Beigel of Trokhinbrod in Volhynia.⁴ In September 1941, following the Nazi provocations in Vilna, she was imprisoned – together with all of Vilna Jewry – within the walls of the narrow ghetto. Faigel dem Rov's, together with a group of other young women – all of them Beth Jacob students and teachers from a variety of towns and villages – were housed in Hekdesh Gass 9.⁵ This was the home of the hasidic ritual slaughterer, R. Aharon Yedidovitch, may God avenge the shedding of his blood.

From the very first day of her entry into the ghetto, Faigel dem Rov's took upon herself the task of organizing into a separate group all the religious girls in the ghetto. The first girls to join the group were: Raizel Orleanski from Brisk, Shoshana Starovinetz from Mir, Leah Reiss and her sister from Lutsk, Braindel from Pinsk, Rischel from Derevna, Bracha and her sister from Bialystok, Malkele from Polanka, Berkovitch from Lutsk, and Roth from Frankfurt am Main. The group was later joined by Rebbetzin Shub⁶ and her daughter from Vilna, Rebbetzin

³ See Abraham Foxman's foreword to Joseph Foxman, *In the Shadow of Death* (New York-Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2011), 9-13. This recently published memoir contains important new material about Faigel dem Rov's on pp. 45-46 and 102-104.

⁴ Faigel was the daughter of R. Barukh Ze'ev and Ruhamah Beigel. R. Barukh Ze'ev served as rabbi of Trokhinbrod from 1910 until 1942, when he was killed, together with seven of his children, by the Nazis. Trokhinbrod, also called Zofyuvka, was a small town populated almost entirely by Jews (approximately 1500 Jews lived there at the outbreak of World War II), some 50 kilometers northwest of Rovno in Ukraine. See Y. Vainer, et al, eds., ספר קורות טרוכנברוד ולוויזשט, האגידן ושורשיה: (Givatayim: Agudath Bet Tal, 1988).

⁵ Foxman here gives the Yiddish name of the street. Under Polish rule it was called Szpitalna (see below); today it is called Ligonines.

⁶ Rebbetzin Shub, daughter of the rabbi of Minsk, R. Eliezer Rabinowitz, was married to R. Yosef Shub, close associate and confidant of R. Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski. R. Shub served as the first head of the Va'ad Ha-Yeshivos. See

Berek⁷ and her daughter, and Rebbetzins Berkovitch, Kopelovitch, Epstein, Perlow,⁸ Deretzin, and Rebbetzin Levitan from Rokishkis, and many others.

A majority of the group used to gather together every day at Shpitalna 9,⁹ where they engaged in communal prayer and the recitation of Psalms. The services and the recitation of Psalms were led by Faigel dem Rov's. Every Shabbat, the group used to study the weekly Torah portion together with Rashi's commentary and other commentaries as well, *Pirkei Avot* (in Yiddish), laws from the *Shulhan Arukh*, and various excerpts from *Musar* literature were also studied.

Faigel dem Rov's popularity, and that of her circle, grew from day to day, so that the number of listeners to her Torah and Musar lectures increased considerably. Rabbi Yedidovitch's apartment was too small and could no longer house such a large group of women. And so the "Women's House of Study" moved into the home of Rebbetzin Reiss of Lutsk on Yatkever Gass.¹⁰ It was not long before the "Women's House of Study" outgrew this venue as well. Then – thanks to the intervention of Rabbis Landau and Jacobson – the public kitchen on Deutsche Gass 31¹¹ was placed at the disposal of Faigel dem Rov's.

The prayer services, the study sessions, the Torah and Musar lectures, and the recitation of Psalms were for women only. We are aware of several instances when Faigel dem Rov's invited men to teach and deliver sermons. One such invited guest was R. Yaakov Zeldin, one of the great Musar exponents in pre-war Poland.¹²

I. Lewin, ed., אלה אזכרה, vol. 1 (New York: Research Institute for Religious Jewry, 1956), 247-254.

⁷ Rebbetzin Sheyna Berek was married to R. Aharon Berek, a close associate of R. Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski who succeeded R. Yosef Shub as head of the Va'ad Ha-Yeshivos. See I. Lewin, *op. cit.*, vol. 3 (New York, 1959), 73-77.

⁸ Rebbetzin Perele Perlow, wife of R. Shalom Alter Perlow, the Koidanover Rebbe in Baranovitch, fled together with her husband from Baranovitch to Vilna. See I. Lewin, *op. cit.*, vol. 5 (New York, 1963), 187-191; cf. M. Unger, אדמו"רים שנספו בשואה (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 2007), 265-267.

⁹ Same as Hekdesh Gass, above.

¹⁰ The equivalent of "Butcher Shops Street" in Yiddish. Under Polish rule the street was called Jatkowa; today it is called Antokolskio.

¹¹ The equivalent of "German Street" in Yiddish. Under Polish rule the street was called Niemiecka; today it is called Vokieciu.

¹² A distinguished graduate of the Musar Yeshiva "Bet Yosef" in Bialystok, he served as Dean of the "Bet Yosef" Yeshiva of Lutsk in Volhynia. In late 1939 he escaped, together with the Yeshiva, to Vilna. See Y. Granatstein, מקדשי השם (Bnei Brak: Ganzakh Kiddush Ha-Shem, 2006), vol. 2, 339-340. For his photograph, and for additional information about him, see K. Farber, אוילקניקי ראדין וילנא (Jerusalem: Bnei Ha-Mehabber, 2007), 23 and 194-196.

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A lecture on the topic “Shabbat, the Cornerstone and Foundation of Yiddishkeit” was delivered to the women’s group by the young religious poet Chaim Semiatitzki,¹³ may God avenge the shedding of his blood. A short Musar homily was presented by Yosel Bialystoker. Shalom Shub lectured on “Kiddush Ha-Shem.” The male presenters were always introduced by Faigel dem Rov’s.

At the gatherings held in the public kitchen on Deutsche Gass 31, the walls would be decorated with slogans and large posters prepared by a scribe. Some of them read as follows:

1. Redemption for any particular generation comes about only by means of the merit of its righteous women.¹⁴
2. Israel was redeemed [from Egypt] through the merit of its righteous women.¹⁵
3. Jerusalem was destroyed only because of the profanation of the Sabbath.¹⁶
4. Be holy!¹⁷
5. Watch over the Sabbath, and the Sabbath will watch over you.¹⁸

I had in my possession two handwritten Torah discourses by Faigel dem Rov’s, appended to which was a note of approval with the signature of R. Yaakov Lutsker (Zeldin), may God avenge the shedding of his blood. One manuscript, on Parshat Hayvei Sarah, was entitled “And Abraham Came to Eulogize Sarah and Bewail Her.” The other manuscript, on Parshat Va-Yishlah, was entitled “And Jacob Erected a Monument Over Her Grave.” Both manuscripts are presently in the Historical Institute in Warsaw. A manuscript on Parshat Va-Yera, entitled “Whatever

¹³ On Semiatitzki, see לעקסיקאן פון דער נייער יידישער ליטעראטור, vol. 6 (New York, 1965), columns 494-5.

¹⁴ שני לוחות ילקוט שמעוני to Ruth 4:11 (§606, end). Cf. R. Isaiah Ha-Levi Horowitz, שני לוחות הברית, ed. M. Katz (Haifa: Yad Ramah, 2010), vol. 2, 350 and 361, and ed. Y. Vidovski (Jerusalem: Makhon Even Yisrael, 2010), vol. 3, 423-4 and 442.

¹⁵ B. Sotah 11b.

¹⁶ B. Shabbat 119b.

¹⁷ Lev. 19:2.

¹⁸ Popular adage in modern Jewish literature, based perhaps on the formulation of R. David b. Samuel Halevi (d. 1667), who wrote regarding the Jews: ישמרו אותם השבת, אם ישמרו את השבת, שמהר השבת אותם. See his טורי זהב to *Shulhan Arukh: Orah Hayyim* 267:3. For a variation of this theme, see the famous formulation (שמרה השבת אותם) על פרשת דרכים (יותר משישראל שמרו את) by Ahad Ha-Am in his (Berlin: H. Itzkowski, 1905), 79. For a comprehensive discussion of this adage and its possible sources, see R. Shmuel Ashkenazi, אלפא ביתא תניתא דשמואל זעירא (Jerusalem: n.p., 2011), vol. 1, pp. 377-380.

Sarah Tells You, Do as She Says,” I gave as a gift to the rabbi of Vilna¹⁹ after the liberation of Vilna from Nazi persecution.

Many of the young women, Faigel’s devout followers, always carried with them their small prayer books. All the small prayer books had the following inscribed on their inside covers: “Heaven, and the heavenly Expanse, and the Earth and all its creatures were created only to serve the needs of human beings.”²⁰ Further on, the inscription reads: “To You, O Lord my soul turns for protection.”²¹ The inscription concludes with the blessing: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us to sanctify publicly His Name and the name of Israel.”²²

When despair and demoralization prevailed inside the walls of the ghetto, Faigel dem Rov’s taught the young and forlorn Jewish daughters how to preserve the ancient and holy Jewish values of honesty, integrity, modesty, purity, and morality.

Most of the young women in Faigel’s circle did not work for the German labor brigades, so as not to violate the Sabbath laws. They worked inside the ghetto and came under the protection of the so-called “Schutz-Scheinen” (certificates of protection). Not even one of them had a “yellow” protection card, which “guaranteed” the life of its possessor. Many of them were registered as fictitious wives of husbands who possessed the “yellow” protection cards. But they [the young women] lived separately from them, despite the ghetto regulation that married couples had to reside together in the same apartment.

On a bright and beautiful summer day, in September of 1943, Faigel dem Rov’s and her followers – heroes of holiness and of passive resistance –

¹⁹ Almost certainly the reference is to R. Yisrael Ze’ev Gustman (1907-1991), who survived the Nazi occupation of Lithuania and served as the official rabbi of Vilna after it was liberated by the Russians. Cf. K. Farber, *op. cit.*, 410. On R. Gustman, see R. A. Katzman, “The Gaon Rabbi Yisrael Ze’ev Gustman,” (Yiddish) in *דאס אידישע ווארט*, Tammuz-Av, 1991, 43-44.

²⁰ The language is drawn from Neh. 9:6 and various rabbinic passages. The theme is central to the teaching of Maimonides. See especially his *הקדמה לפירוש המשנה*, in Y. Kafih, ed., *משנה עם פירוש רבינו משה בן מימון* (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1963), vol. 1, 21-24.

²¹ Psalm 25:1.

²² For the blessing of *Kiddush ha-Shem*, see R. M. Fogelman, “הברכה במצוות קידוש השם” *Torah shebe’al Peh* 14 (1972), 97-100; Prof. S. Abramson, “נוסח ברכה על קידוש השם” *Torah shebe’al Peh* 14 (1972), 156-164; and R. M. A. Bleich, “אם יש ברכה” *Or Ha-Mizrah* 130-131 (1988), 302-314. The precise text of the blessing, as recorded by Foxman, is unparalleled in the halakhic sources.

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were driven by the bayonets of Nazi criminals, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians to the racial selection place in Vilna. Part of the group was ordered to the left. Faigel dem Rov's and the larger portion of the group of her closest friends were ordered to the right, which meant they were designated for life. In closed wagons, they were sent on their way to Riga.²³

In July of 1944, when the Soviet army reached Latvia, the vast majority of Jews who had been incarcerated in the 20 Latvian concentration camps were transferred by the Nazis to the infamous concentration camp in Stutthof, near Danzig.²⁴

Faigel dem Rov's of Trokhnibrod, together with many of her devoted friends, were among those who were transferred to Stutthof. Only two of the women survived, Rebbetzin Berkovitch²⁵ and her daughter,²⁶ who are now in Israel. All the others died from starvation and other diseases. Faigel dem Rov's died from typhus just prior to the liberation of Stutthof.²⁷

May these lines serve as a tombstone for the unknown grave of a holy Jewish daughter, who taught others how to live and die by sanctifying God's Name, and who herself died sanctifying God's Name. May her memory forever remain holy.

²³ For a detailed account of the transfer of the last inhabitants of the Vilna Ghetto to Latvia, and of the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto, see M. Dworzecki, ווייסע געכט און אויסע געכט און (Tel-Aviv: I.L. Peretz Publishing House, 1970), 65-107.

²⁴ On the evacuation of the Latvian concentration camps and the transfer of Jews to the Stutthof concentration camp, see M. Dworzecki, *op. cit.*, 389-393.

²⁵ "Rebbetzin Berkovitch" undoubtedly refers to Masha Liebe, wife of R. Yosef Berkovitz, who founded, and served as Rosh Yeshiva of, Yeshivat Maharsha in Ostrog, Ukraine. In 1939 R. and Rebbetzin Berkovitz fled, together with 57 students of the Yeshiva, to Vilna. Rebbetzin Berkovitz together with her daughter Miriam survived the Vilna Ghetto and made their way to Israel, a fact attested to in R. Hayyim Yaakov Goldvicht's introduction to the reissue of R. Yosef Berkovitz, חלקת יוסף (Bnei Brak: n.p., 1959). Alas, R. Yosef Berkovitz died a martyr's death in 1941 in Ponary, where most of the other inhabitants of the Vilna Ghetto met their tragic end.

²⁶ Miriam would later marry R. Hayyim Yaakov Goldvicht (1924-1995), famed Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh.

²⁷ Stutthof, among the last of the concentration camps to be liberated, was liberated by the Soviet army on May 9, 1945.