

— THE —

# Pious Ones

The World of Hasidim and  
Their Battles with America



Author of *The World in a City* and *Displaced Persons: Growing Up American After the Holocaust*

# JOSEPH BERGER

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THE  
Pious Ones

*The World of Hasidim and  
Their Battles with America*

JOSEPH BERGER

HARPER  PERENNIAL

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# DEDICATION

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To my parents, Marcus and Rachel Berger,  
who bequeathed to their children the flavor of the  
lost *shtetls* and ghettos of Europe

# EPIGRAPH

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There are two levels in the study of Torah, Torah of the mind and Torah of the heart. The mind cogitates, comprehends and understands; the heart feels.

I have come to reveal Torah as it extends to the heart as well.

If the Bible didn't show us the weaknesses, the vulnerabilities, the sins of our heroes, we might have deep questions about their true virtue.

—Baal Shem Tov

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## PROLOGUE: A PEOPLE APART

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We throw around the term “crisis of faith” so casually, applying it to artists, politicians and bankers not only tormented religious souls, that it has become a cliché of our times. Yet imagine what a crisis of faith must have been like for a man named Shulem Deen.

Deen had grown up a Hasid, a member of a rigorously Orthodox subculture of Judaism. Most strangers recognize Hasidim by the black suits, black hats and broad beards of the men and the wide and the enveloping outfits of the women but know little else about these people. What many outsiders do not appreciate is how all-encompassing a life Hasidism is, not just a faith for a Saturday or Sunday morning, but one that governs almost every waking hour and virtually every activity of daily life—what one reads and studies, who one marries, how many children one has, how one spends much of the day, even how one goes about having sex.

So when doubts about the literal truths of the Bible and other tenets he had been taught virtually round-the-clock since childhood led to his disenchantment with the restrictive Hasidic life, he had to wrestle with what leaving the fold would mean for his marriage, his intimacy with his children, his friendships, his work, his social life, what he ate, what schooling he would give himself and his family. Yet he could no longer be a Hasid, live what he felt was a consuming lie.

“It started becoming more and more ludicrous,” he told me. “I began to realize I didn’t want to live in a world I so fundamentally disagreed with. It was something I couldn’t do.”\*

Deen did leave and for the most part won the liberty to think and act for himself that he sought, but his doing so had many of the consequences he feared. His marriage has dissolved and four of his five children refuse to see him.

In studying the Hasidim, which I have often done in more than 40 years as a journalist, I could not help but be struck by the bittersweet, paradoxical outcome of Deen’s journey. Yet I also had to balance his tale against many other stories I’d learned, many of them far more ennobling of the Hasidic lifestyle than that of Deen’s. And the basic mysteries endured: How do people in an age that venerates personal freedom take on a life of so many commands and restrictions? What is it about the life that draws them and holds them in its grip as firmly as iron filings to a magnet? Why does it come into conflict so often with the wider society? Why do I hear so many intelligent people, especially Jews, revile Hasidim, accusing them of holding themselves above American laws while exploiting those same laws for their own sustenance?

I felt in undertaking a book on the Hasidim that many Americans are curious about this tribe of people that increasingly presses itself on society’s consciousness not just by its offbeat, colorful presence but by its rapidly growing numbers and influence. In a place like New York City, where Hasidim are a forceful, expanding minority, almost every week seems to bring another encounter with the ways of Hasidim—some profoundly troubling like Shulem Deen’s story, some enchanting and ennobling. The story of Leiby Kletzky, chilling as it was, gave people a deeper acquaintance and respect for Hasidim.

In the summer of 2011, Leiby Kletzky, an eight-year-old boy, asked his parents if he could walk home from day camp alone for the first time. They assented and he set out on his own through his Hasidic neighborhood of Borough Park in Brooklyn. But he soon got lost and stopped a stranger to ask for help. The stranger, Levi Aron, a bearded thirty-five-year-old hardware stock clerk with an odd, out-of-joint facial expression beneath a newsboy’s cap, lured the boy into his beat-up Honda, bizarre

drove him 50 miles north of the city to a cousin's teeming and tumultuous wedding in the Hasidic hamlet of New Square, then drove him back to his apartment in Brooklyn. The next day, he drugged and suffocated Leiby, killing him, then sliced up his body and stored his feet in his refrigerator while depositing the rest in a suitcase and throwing that into a Dumpster. The security camera film of little Leiby, a yarmulke crowning a face with too-large horn-rimmed glasses and long, dark sidelocks as he nervously waddled along on a sidewalk moments before he was abducted, haunted many who saw it, none more so than parents struggling with the amount of independence to give to their young children.

In the days after the crime, New Yorkers—and indeed much of the nation, since the murder of the missing boy was on all the networks—learned much about the Hasidic community. It was astonishingly zealous, cohesive and well organized, with hundreds of ruffled, bearded men streaming in from around the neighborhood and even from their summer bungalows in the Catskills to search single-mindedly for a boy they did not know. And when a funeral became sadly necessary after the boy's body was discovered, 10,000 people showed up at nightfall of the same day, spilling out of the synagogue to listen to an intense, heartbreaking eulogy, the men in a jostling, swaying swarm surrounding the coffin, the women clustered on the margins in long-sleeved dresses despite the near 90 degree heat. The Hasidic community, those unfamiliar with them were able to deduce, was impressively prolific, with families bulging with six and seven children and some with more than a dozen, in an era when most American couples married late into their 20s and had a child or two.

While most Americans had a monolithic view of the Hasidim as insular in their approach to outsiders, and spartan and anachronistic in their lifestyles, many viewers and readers who followed the Leiby Kletzky story closely were surprised at the variety within the Hasidic world. There were dozens of sects with different attitudes toward mainstream society, even distinctive styles of clothing. Some Hasidic men wore the equivalent of black sombreros and others homburgs; some women preferred wigs while others covered their hair with a kerchief. It turned out that neither Leiby nor his killer was Hasidic. Leiby's family was ultra-Orthodox but not Hasidic because it did not venerate a single grand rabbi the way most of the searchers did. Levi Aron did not even merit an "ultra." He came from a plain-vanilla Orthodox family though his father worked in the nationally famous camera and gadget emporium of B&H, which, to the surprise of those bearing views of Hasidim as antediluvian, was owned, managed and staffed largely by Hasidim.

And Americans learned that despite the close-knit nature of the community, which was genuine in Borough Park was increasingly reaching out to the mainstream, most relevantly for help with troubled individuals. True, it had historically sought to deal with problems within the community—through its rabbis and rabbinical courts—but that was slowly changing, too, most prominently as it, like the rest of society, coped with the problem of sexual abuse of minors (though it was never proven that Levi molested Leiby before he killed him). Dozens of cases of abusive teachers, camp counselors, merchants, even rabbis that had been secretly dealt with or hushed up within the community have been turned over to officials like the district attorney in Brooklyn.

Those who chose to delve deeper or simply to google words like "Hasidim" soon learned that the community was also dealing with renegades like Shulem Deen and dissenters in its midst, who blogged under noms-de-Web like FailedMessiah.com and Unpious. And in the year or two that followed, those googlers would also have learned that, perhaps in response to the wave of worrisome ferment, the community had long been unleashing "modesty squads" to make sure its young Hasidic men and women did not play DVDs or use the wrong smartphone or wear tank tops or display sex mannequins in their clothing shops.\* They would eventually learn that Hasidic groups, perhaps flustered



with the political power stemming from their growing numbers, were asking the city to post female lifeguards at a women-only swim session at a municipal pool in Brooklyn, were asking for an exception to a city ban on the use of well water in food production so they could bake matzo according to ancient tradition, were asking that men and women be allowed to sit apart—the men in front, the women in the back—on a public bus plying a route between two Hasidic neighborhoods. Many New Yorkers were outraged by what they felt were demands for special treatment and by the defiance of civic norms and, aware that I had covered such stories for many years, making the Hasidic world something of a beat, wrote to tell me so. Many of those who wrote were Jewish and embarrassed by the behavior of people of their own religious sentiments.

The community, in short, was both more complicated than the stereotypes and more enigmatic and protean. Still, admire Hasidim or detest them, it must be said that the existence of such a rich, colorful, abundant community in Borough Park and others in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Williamsburg and Crown Heights and still others in Los Angeles, Baltimore, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Montreal, Toronto and other pockets of North America and, of course, all over Israel, is testimony to the astonishing rebirth of a way of life whose origins stretch back to 18th century Eastern Europe. That was when the rabbis who forged Hasidic philosophy began spurning the austere intellectualism of that era's Judaism and instead emphasized fervor in prayer, an immersion in mysticism and exuberant observance through dancing and singing. A plainspoken peasant with a zeal for God could be as worthy a Jew as the most consumed Talmud scholar. The culture that has evolved since then seems archaic by 21st century standards, but it arguably represents perhaps America's fastest-growing ethnic tribe and one that has much to teach a society that it often tangles with.

Hasidim are reviving a vibrant culture that was nearly extinguished by the Holocaust. They are sustaining the flames of Jewish tradition, otherwise battered by assimilation and geographic dispersal, and the resulting lessons to be learned could have meaning for declining mainstream Protestant and other Christian groups. With their population in the United States doubling every twenty years and now put at more than 330,000 in New York City alone—30 percent of the city's 1.1 million Jews—the Hasidim and other ultra-Orthodox Jews will, according to some population studies, form a majority of America's six million Jews before this century is over.

That fact is breathtaking enough, but it also has profound political implications. Jews are a disproportionately influential ethnic group overrepresented in the halls of Congress, Wall Street, the Ivy League and popular culture. They have always been regarded as America's most liberal and progressive people. But if Hasidim become a more dominant share of the tribe, Jews as a whole may assume a more conservative profile, and politicians appealing to them and seeking their donations will tailor their message accordingly. In New York, Hasidim have been more prone to support Republican and Conservative Party candidates. The views of some Hasidic sects questioning Israel's legitimacy as a state—since they believe the Bible requires the advent of the Messiah before such a state may exist—may one day complicate American foreign policy.

It is also no small matter that Hasidim are preserving a language that is all but dead everywhere else. Yiddish, the homespun tongue of Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer, is approaching extinction among Jews of a cosmopolitan bent, barely kept alive by the dwindling ranks of Holocaust survivors, a smattering of their children and a few thousand or so young enthusiasts willing to study the language in college. But it is flourishing in America's 30 Hasidic communities, where it is the lingua franca, the language of schooling and the typeface of three weekly newspapers—each thick with ads for their abundant kosher restaurants and clothing, silver, wig and hat shops—and several news websites. (So dominant is Yiddish that many Hasidic youngsters born in this country end up

speaking an immigrant's broken, accented English, and otherwise intelligent Hasidim expressing embarrassment at how badly they write English.)

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Yet, to most Americans who encounter Hasidim—literally “the pious ones”—on city streets and increasingly in leafy suburban enclaves, they remain an enigma, a curiosity certainly but nevertheless a puzzle. They are seen by some—Jews and non-Jews—as beguiling and by others as irksome or even off-putting. Why, the curious ask, do they wear those formal black hats on hot summer days (not to mention the round fur *shtreimels* on Saturdays)? Why do their children dress as mini-me versions of their parents, with coiling sidelocks and threadbare tassels dangling out of their shirts? Why do the men scarcely look at passing women, and why do the women refuse to shake a man's hand or the men to shake a woman's hand? Indeed, why do the women spend their days pushing strollers with babies while hanging on to three or four toddlers at the same time? Why do they turn away from the nation's abundant colleges for repetitive immersion in yellowed, dog-eared volumes of the Talmud? Why, in short, do they maintain a lifestyle that is so out of step with the 21st century, or even the 20th and 19th?

The pages that follow will try to answer these questions by delving below the surface of an esoteric world that few from the outside have penetrated and introducing readers to some striking individuals who epitomize the Hasidic experience but also embody its contradictions. By depicting the fabric of daily Hasidic life, I hope to explore how their way of life has allowed Hasidic groups, after the ravages of Hitler, to reestablish themselves in burgeoning communities around the world. But I will also examine the conflicts between the Hasidim and the wider society—over housing, transportation, schooling and more—and the strains that Hasidim have experienced within their own circles over sexual abuse by teachers and rabbis, the role of women and defections.

Americans have much to learn from the Hasidim, eccentric as they are. They are a familiar and intriguing presence in the nation's large cities and their beliefs—on matters of abortion, gay marriage, birth control—somehow insinuate themselves into the national dialogue. As with the Amish, with whom they are sometimes confused, there is something charming about their steadfastness in conducting what seems like an outmoded way of life. But mostly those who delve deeper will realize that their communal bond offers a sharp challenge to the American pursuit of individualistic pleasure and attainment. In a culture that venerates personal fulfillment and reinvention, where everyone is encouraged to venture on a journey of egoistic discovery and transformation, Hasidim put the emphasis on the vibrancy of the group, of its unchangeable, ages-old traditions. For them, those values trump whatever a person can gain from freewheeling exploration of the liberties available in an open society. You may not agree or feel repelled, but that contrast is worth contemplating in a society where consumption has grown ever more conspicuous, where the rich grow ever more remote from the working and middle classes and where too many people spend their days in frivolous worship of *Real Housewives* and *American Idols*.

The Hasidim offer a model for how a faith that touches practically every aspect of human life, from work, schooling, eating and sex to clothing and social relations, can strengthen community in an age of anomie and alienation. For families whose kin are scattered far and wide, the Hasidim tell us how community can become the family or enhance it. And whatever others may think of it, Hasidic culture keeps youngsters within the fold, immune for the most part from the distractions of the outside world; studies show that there is actually a negligible proportion of defections. The Hasidic emphasis on the robustness of the tribe has allowed them to tenaciously abide in neighborhoods when most secular Jews have fled at the first sign of conflict with other ethnic groups. Like them or not, the Hasidim offer lessons in survival.

As monolithic as the Hasidic world appears on first impression, it is actually remarkably diverse. Each of America's 30 or so Hasidic communities reveres a different *rebbe*, a spiritual guru of some sort, believed to have remarkable, even miraculous insights into such intimate matters as the compatibility of husbands and wives, their fertility, the proper treatment of an illness. Each community, or dynasty, court, has subtly distinctive philosophies and traditions and displays singular nuances of worship, custom, even fashion; the width of a hat brim is a telltale clue to whether a Hasid belongs to the Bobov, Belz, Ger, Satmar or Vizhnitz sect. Sketching those differences offers a fascinating course in anthropology.

But underlying all the groups are some unifying principles, few more powerful than the need to wall the faithful in. In the playgrounds of the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, bright-eyed Hasidic boys with spiraling earlocks race their Easy Rider tricycles against other Hasidic boys. Hasidic girls in long pinafore dresses, jump to a rope swung by other Hasidic girls. Children of other ethnic groups also frolic in the playgrounds, but the Hasidic children seldom play with them. This is by design.

"If they start to play together when they are children, then later it is too late," Rabbi Joseph Weber, a yeshiva administrator, told me years ago. "The children should know that they have a different background, a different religion, a different tradition and they are supposed to be conducting a different way of life."\*

That stance—holding themselves apart from secular forces even as they live amid that world—often explains the tensions that have flared up between Hasidim and the surrounding communities with their more democratic values. Disputes have arisen over the separation of Hasidic boys and girls receiving remedial instruction in a public school or over a ban on assigning females to drive public transit-financed buses ferrying Hasidic boys to school from a village in upstate New York. In these conflicts, Hasidim have often been depicted as contemptuous of the world around them. Many Hasidim no doubt are contemptuous. But Hasidic leaders say that this view is a stereotype and that the truth about them is far more complicated. The barriers, symbolic and otherwise, are not hostile in intent, Hasidim say, though many outsiders are scarcely convinced. They are walls designed to keep people in, not keep outsiders out, to safeguard the community's identity and ensure that observance of the Torah's commandments is protected against erosion. Hasidim are almost universally discouraged from attending college, to avoid mingling of the sexes and exposure to ideas that could steer them away from what they see as true Judaism. Yet they are far from uneducated, sharpening their minds in the coiling ethical and legal arguments of the Torah commentaries and the Talmud. That women may not have the same access to the Talmud, they would argue, ensures an unswerving focus on their life's mission as keepers of the family hearth.

Most Americans may find demeaning the idea of having a ritual bath—the *mikveh*—where Orthodox women, Hasidic or modern, bathe after menstruation and Hasidic men before they study Torah or before the Sabbath and holidays. But a Hasidic woman like Yitta Schwartz told her daughter how much she looked forward to the ritual. She did not see bathing in the *mikveh* as washing away impurity and uncleanness, as those terms are understood, but as a mystical transformation that prepares the body for the holiness of sex, or, in the case of men, for study or the Sabbath.

Housing, too, has its own Hasidic twist. Houses have to be large, with room to hold all the children, and most Hasidim are willing to sacrifice backyard space to maximize their living space. Their kitchens, if they can afford to do so, should have two dishwashers and two sinks to ensure that dishes used for meat are kept separate from dishes used for milk products. There must also be room—a backyard or balcony—for the *succah*—the flimsy, shacklike structure that Orthodox Jews build for the autumnal, eight-day festival of Succoth, and in which they eat and sometimes sleep. As a result

the need for roomy housing has become the chief cause of conflict between the Hasidim and the secular towns and villages around them.

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To keep themselves apart, Hasidim have created their own fleets of buses, not just to ferry schoolchildren, but to whisk working adults from Brooklyn or a suburb like Monsey, New York, to, say, Manhattan's midtown Diamond District. Among other purposes, the buses make sure that Hasidic men minimize the physically close encounters they might have with the wider public, and they give busy Hasidim a chance to pray. But many of the buses are publicly financed or franchised. So if those buses arrange for separate seating areas to keep the sexes apart in casual social situations—Hasidic men want to avoid temptation and Hasidic men and women will not shake the hands of the opposite sex, as an artifact of menstruation laws—they pose challenges to the First Amendment's religious clause. Some buses even put up a *mechitza*, a curtain, to keep the sexes separate during prayer, yet they place a handful of non-Hasidic women, in a flinty stubbornness reminiscent of Rosa Parks, have refused to change seats.

Within the strict bounds of Hasidic doctrine, what Hasidim can do is often surprising. Unlike the pacifist Amish, Hasidim might serve in law enforcement, as Shlomo Koenig does, as a Rockland County, New York, sheriff's deputy, carrying a gun and badge while retaining his beard and corkscrew sidelocks. Another of the Hasidim you will meet in these pages, Mendel Werdyger, did not go to college nor the professional schools where he might have learned sound engineering. But on his own and with help from mentors whom he sought out, Jewish and gentile, he figured out how to splice and digitally clean the music on old 78 recordings of the greatest cantor of the 20th century, and convert them into CDs that have sold in the tens of thousands. Professional engineers apparently did not have the zeal for such painstaking work for so limited an audience.

Mendel Werdyger, Yitta Schwarz and Shlomo Koenig exemplify the engaging vitality of so many Hasidim that is evident to those who trouble to make their acquaintance. But the darker, flip side of Hasidic life is also part of the Hasidic picture, as are rebels like Shulem Deen, who see the world they grew up in as suffocating and too often unprincipled. The pages ahead will weave those strands together. Through stories like theirs, this mysterious, if controversial, community should come to life and be far better understood.

## A WOMAN OF VALOR, A HASIDIC LIFE

With her kerchiefed hair, long-sleeved frocks and Yiddish tongue, Yitta Schwartz was certainly not a polished chief executive or a stately member of a presidential cabinet. She never wrote a prize-winning book or set a record for speed or distance. Yet when she died on January 4, 2010, at the age of 93, many Americans were astonished by her life story, so many that a less than prominently placed article about her death that I wrote in the *New York Times* ended up at the top of that day's list of most emailed stories and stayed on the list for many more days.

She had certainly lived what almost anyone would consider an epic life—an upbringing in a Hungarian village, survival in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (though with the loss of two young children), transplantation to Belgium and then New York City, life in a burgeoning, sometimes blinkered Brooklyn community of like-minded souls and finally old age in a rural village in upstate New York. But what was most remarkable about her was that at her death she had left behind 2,000 living descendants, an entire tribe, including 15 surviving children, more than 20 grandchildren and hundreds of great- and great-great-grandchildren. They live in the same handful of communities, Hasidic neighborhoods like Brooklyn's Williamsburg and Borough Park and villages like Kiryas Joel in New York's Orange County, and include rabbis, teachers, merchants, truck drivers and plumbers. They ranged in age from a 75-year-old daughter named Shaindel to a great-great-granddaughter born a few weeks after Mrs. Schwartz's death and named Yitta in her honor.

"And she remembered everyone's name," her daughter, Nechuma Mayer, told me in what seemed at first like an antic Mel Brooks line. It was not intended to be. It was meant to distill something essentially Hasidic about her mother—her deliberate attentiveness to the people important to her. That attentiveness was, as she saw it, her payback to God for blessing her with such abundant progeny even after the losses she endured.

In assembling this tribe, Yitta was not trying to gain any special honor or distinction for herself. She was simply living life in the zealous Hasidic way, the way she had been raised, the way she tried to lead her days and nights, the way she taught her children and their offspring to lead their lives. For Yitta as for other Hasidim, the birth of a child is a tribute to God, not just because God commanded Adam in his first directive to be fruitful and multiply but because every child offers an opportunity to inform another soul of the sacred scripture that God passed on to Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. That transmission of Torah enlarges the circle of the innately faithful, producing more believers who can fulfill the commandment of passing on the Torah. And every mitzvah in that Torah, or added on by sages, must, in the Hasidic way of thinking, be executed with the same intensity and intention. That philosophy explains why the Hasidim spend their days the way they do, dress the way they do and live apart the way they do not only from gentiles but from other Jews.

The idea of having 2,000 living descendants may amaze a typical American, who if he or she lives long enough may leave behind a dozen or two dozen living descendants. But in the Hasidic world in which Yitta lived almost her entire life, such numbers are impressive but not surprising. Depending on the sect's claim, the average Hasidic couple has between six and nine children, so, in theory, the rank of descendants for any family can multiply exponentially into the thousands by the fifth generation.

Yet, if the news of Yitta's progeny did not surprise many Hasidim, it did bring a bit of mystical *schadenfreude*. Before World War II, Hasidim lived mostly in Poland, Hungary, Russia and Ukraine—the lands that were the major target of Hitler's master plan for eradicating the Jews; so Hasidim made up a significant share of the six million killed in the war. Most of the scores of sects were so shattered that they were never able to reconstitute. But more than three dozen did in the United States and Israel, and roughly a dozen of them have flourished in phenomenal fashion. One can jest that Yitta virtually reconstituted a whole group all by herself—though the members of the clan she led are virtually all allied with the Hungarian-rooted Satmar, now the prevailing sect in Williamsburg and the upstate New York village of Kiryas Joel.

As a result of bountiful procreation, Hasidim of various sects dominate three entire neighborhoods in Brooklyn that were fraying because of white and middle-class flight and the deepening poverty of the remaining inhabitants, and they are major ethnic blocs in cities like Los Angeles and Montreal. They can be seen scurrying—ambling or sauntering on a workday is not the Hasidic style—through the streets of Manhattan's diamond and jewelry district and its Garment Center, two of their largest work locales. Besides a flourishing insular economy, they run the country's largest independent camera store, B&H, with 1,500 employees and an international customer list that includes a fair chunk of the nation's professional photographers. They are so important a slice of the Jewish vote in New York, Baltimore, Los Angeles and a dozen more rural hamlets that Democratic and Republican politicians, to entice their support, pay them unusual obeisance—and engineer a goodly amount of kosher pork for their benefit, as well as sometimes turning a blind eye to violations of zoning, fire and educational laws. In these and other ways, the Hasidim unwittingly compel us to know who they are.

Yitta Schwartz was in many ways the model of a Hasidic woman and her life parallels the same 20th century arc as that of the Hasidic dynasties themselves. She had a boundless zest for life that was expressed, as her children and grandchildren remember it, by a devotion to Hasidic ritual, particularly as they revolved around family, as so many do. She faithfully attended the circumcisions, bar mitzvahs, engagements and weddings of each of her descendants. With 2,000 people in the family, such events occupied much of the year. Whatever the occasion, she would pack a small suitcase and ask a relative or neighbor for a ride from her apartment in Kiryas Joel in Orange County, New York, to Williamsburg—about 55 miles away—and sometimes farther afield.

“She would appear like the Prophet Elijah,” Nechuma Mayer said of her mother, a few weeks after the funeral. “Everybody was fighting over her!” Nechuma was Yitta's sixth-oldest living child, and she has 16 children of her own and more than 100 grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

I was drawn to finding out more about Yitta because she reminded me so vividly of the men and women my mother would talk about in her hometown of Otwock, Poland, a summer vacation spot about a half hour's train ride from Warsaw that was popular with Hasidic dynasties like Ger, Lubavitch and Modzitz. My mother worked as a teenage helper for the Gerer Rebbe's wife, and my grandfather taught the Modzitzer Rebbe's son the basics of Hebrew. My uncle Yasha, at eight years old, peeked into the Modzitzer Rebbe's window to hear him humming “bim, bum, bim, bum” to a melody he had composed. After all, the Modzitzer Rebbe was so charismatic that when he led High Holiday prayers Jews would line up for blocks to hear him. There was something about Yitta's concession to the whims of life as determined by what she inalterably believed was a higher power, her unbending loyalty to a tribe, to her steadfast faith in God in the face of the most tragic of losses and a universe gone haywire that reminded me of the clear-sighted common folk, people of simple pleasures, unquestioning beliefs and ironic reflections that my mother, perhaps romanticizing, would reminisce about when she talked to her children about the community she lost to World War II. He

father, a cantor and *melamed*, a poorly paid teacher of little boys, her stepmother, the neighbors, the townspeople and the Hasidim who flocked to hilly Otwock's crisp air hoping for cures of the tuberculosis or simply for a cool retreat would have found Yitta a congenial personality. I realized that Yitta's relatives spoke so worshipfully of her that they were giving me a very one-sided and possibly sanitized version of Yitta's life. After all, Hasidim believe in lionizing the dead and certainly not denigrating them. But I thought her story was worth telling nevertheless because it spanned much of the modern experience of today's Hasidim, from the rural communities of Eastern Europe, to the unimaginable destruction of World War II, to their astonishing regeneration in America and Israel.

Yitta was an oval-faced woman with gray eyes and a soft smile edged by the slightest hint of cunning. She was born in 1916 into a middle-class family of seven children—she was the oldest—the town of Kalev in northeastern Hungary, a two-hour train ride from Budapest. It is a market town that is esteemed beyond its borders as the hometown of the founder of Hungarian Hasidism, Rabbi Isaac Taub (1744–1828), a man known as the Kaliver Rebbe, who was famous for transposing commonplace Hungarian folk songs into Jewish liturgy. Every year, on the seventh day of the Jewish month of Adar, a week before Purim, rabbis from all over Europe would make a pilgrimage to the grave site. The small town, already teeming with students flocking to its famous yeshiva, would become a frenetic hive of excited black-garbed men. Some of them were Yitta's relatives.

Yitta was not without her own distinguished pedigree, an important attribute in the Hasidic realm where genetic links to learned rabbis are regarded as innate evidence of virtue (Yitta's daughter Nechuma, alerted me to her legacy). Yitta's great-grandfather had been the Stropkover Rov, Rabbi Chaim Yosef Gottlieb (1790–1867), head of the rabbinical court in a Slovakian town and a member of a distinguished line of rabbis famed for their piety, scholarship and charisma. Nechuma offered a sense of the mystical atmosphere in which her mother grew up by telling me a family legend of how Rabbi Gottlieb exorcised a dybbuk—the soul of a dead sinner that has migrated into a living person. It was known that Rabbi Gottlieb had a gift for such exorcisms and thus he was called on by a grand rabbi to perform the rite on a possessed young woman. He questioned the woman and her relatives and concluded that the dybbuk had been able to infiltrate the woman's soul because on the day before the Sabbath she had been reading romantic love stories instead of preparing herself for the week's most sacred day. He urged her to repent for that sin; miraculously, she was cured.

Yitta grew up in a world still untouched by 20th century conveniences. Even as a young girl, Yitta had to rise before dawn and draw water from a well and chop wood for a fire while her mother spent much of the day shopping in the market and cooking meals for her large family. That was the lot of most Hasidic women in Kalev. Although Yitta's own father, Nachum Schwartz, owned a "prospering grocery, the family barely scraped by, for example eating meat once a week—a chicken was slaughtered on Friday afternoon and roasted in time for the Sabbath eve meal. Nachum Schwartz distrusted wealth. "He used to say," Nechuma told me, "that 'I pray my children should not be wealthy because if you're wealthy you turn away from God.'"

In a society where Jews and Christians attended separate public schools, Yitta received a secular Hungarian education just through sixth grade. But her religious education never stopped. It was fostered by her parents in the privacy of their home—in admonitions about what to eat and not eat, what to do and not do on the Sabbath, what to wear and not wear to safeguard her modesty—and Yitta absorbed similar messages of observance from the communal ether. Yitta was a very responsible child. The story is told of how as a girl, she arrived late to school one day and her parents were summoned. They defended Yitta by explaining that just as she was arriving at school she had remembered that the chickens had not been fed that morning and so she rushed back home to do so.

“She was so selfless, even if she put herself in danger,” Nechuma Mayer told me, suggesting that Yitta might have been penalized for her lateness.

On Sabbath afternoons, her father would test his sons in the *Chumash*—the Five Books of the Bible—and the *Gemara*—the rabbinic commentary on Jewish law that forms the bulk of the Talmud—that they had learned the previous week. If the boys got the right answers there were candies and chocolates, but if they didn’t know their stuff, they got a smack. The Hasidic philosophy then—among mothers as well as fathers—was, as Nechuma put it: “If I do you good you will never remember, but if I give you a slap you will never forget.” Yitta would wait outside until she made sure her brothers were not smacked—as if her presence nearby could prevent such discipline. If they were smacked, she was heartsick.\*

Yitta was tall and attractive and her parents felt an extra smidgeon of concern that her appeal might not cause her to stray from the Hasidic path. This is clear from another family tale—a story that illustrates the lengths that Hasidim go to protect their children and their way of life. Some of the Kalever Yeshiva students boarded at her parents’ house and when Yitta was about 12 her heart went out to one boy who was suffering from tuberculosis. Her feelings were not romantic, the family emphasized, but simply the welling up of a good heart pained by suffering. She thought more food would comfort and help heal him so she put a glass of milk in front of his door. Still, her mother told her that what she did was not the right thing. It might spawn misconceptions by the boy or the neighbors and possibly lead Yitta astray.\*

When she turned 17, her parents arranged a *shiduch*—a match—with Joseph Schwartz, a young man from a Hasidic family in the city of Debrecen, about 150 miles east of Budapest and near the Romanian border. Schwartz, distantly related to Yitta, was a young merchant whose family belonged to the Kossony tribe of Hasidim. He was not a yeshiva scholar, but he was so fervent a Hasid that starting when he was nine years old, he, like other acolytes, walked 40 miles every year to spend the Jewish holidays with his rabbi, the Kossony Rebbe. Yitta moved to Joseph’s city of Debrecen, which had a community of 12,000 Jews. As with other fervently Hasidic women, the morning after the *chupah*, the name drawn from the Yiddish word for “canopy” that Hasidim give the wedding ceremony, she took a pair of scissors and cropped her hair down to her scalp. What remained, she covered with a kerchief.

Not long afterward, Joseph was drafted into the Hungarian army. He returned home as often as he could so that he could spend time with his bride, and sometimes Yitta would travel to the army camp where he was stationed. Most of the time, though, Yitta lived with her poor in-laws and found life in the bustling city congenial, preferring it to the quiet and isolation of a country village. To be sure, she was not a woman of cosmopolitan tastes; as Nechuma told me, she saw a sojourn in Debrecen as part of God’s plan for her—“this was destined for her so this was what she wanted.” In short order, the couple had six children—Shaindel, Chana, Dinah, Yitschok, Shimshon and Abraham—and raising those children occupied almost all of Yitta’s time and thoughts.

In March 1944, the Nazis marched into Hungary and seized the territory of its ally, declaring that the Horthy government had not done enough to confine and cull the country’s 400,000 Jews. (The Horthy government had already barred Jews from holding government jobs and applying for new trade or professional licenses, had severely limited their admission to university and had begun confiscating Jewish-owned land—but that was not enough.) Within weeks, SS commandos, led by Adolf Eichmann, began rounding up Jews, most of whom still believed this late in the war that after the mild experience with Germans in World War I they would be spared any cruel treatment.

Yitta’s in-laws were in the middle of a *Shabbos* meal when storm troopers banged on the door and



ordered them to put their belongings in a suitcase. Yitta, pregnant with a seventh child, and her husband and their children were taken as well. The family was dispatched by cattle cars to Auschwitz—briefly, it turned out—and eventually transferred from there to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. Whatever she witnessed—the inhumanly crowded trains, the brutal guards, the tearing away of children from their mothers—she comforted herself with her father’s words that “every stick has two ends—now we’re being hit but one day they will get it all back.”

At Bergen-Belsen, her one-year-old, Abraham, died of hunger and the newborn, who was never named, died at birth in ways Yitta never spoke about to Nechuma. Those children were two of the 200,000 Hungarian Jews slaughtered by the Nazis. Yitta never talked much to her children about the war years. But glimpses of what some regarded as her heroic stoicism leaked out from people who had been in the camp with her. At the *shiva* after Yitta’s death, Nechuma learned from a visitor—a woman whose mother had been in Bergen-Belsen, too—what kindness Yitta had quietly performed when an old woman died in the camp hospital with no relatives to bury her. Yitta, then 26 years old, took upon herself to prepare the body according to Jewish ritual, burrow out a grave and bury the woman inside the camp.

“For her it was a matter of necessity,” Nechuma said.

Yitta’s fierce visceral tenacity in clinging to her faith amid the camps’ horrors, in resourcefully finding ways to perform the mitzvahs in the face of anarchy and brutality, was true of many Hasidim, including a woman she would get to know in important ways many years later. The woman, Leah Mayer, lost a young daughter in the labor camp of Wiener Neustadt, an industrial town 40 minutes south of Vienna that was part of the notorious Mauthausen complex, where slave laborers quarried stone, manufactured munitions, excavated mines and assembled fighter planes. She buried the girl with her own hands, but she was, at 23, also eight months pregnant, and so she was brought to Wiener Neustadt’s hospital to have a baby who would likely be killed the moment it was delivered in order to have her continue working. At the hospital, she told a Dr. Tuchman, a Jewish doctor assigned by the Nazis to treat the working prisoners, that if the baby was a boy she wanted him circumcised.

“Are you out of your mind?” the doctor replied, with a sneering laugh. “Do you know where you are?”

But he eventually shrugged her off by promising that if Leah could get the commandant’s permission, he would agree to perform the circumcision. Leah wrote to a camp official saying she wanted the baby circumcised “for hygienic reasons.” Amazingly, the official permitted Tuchman to circumcise the baby. The reasons for the official’s decision will never be known, but perhaps he was aware the war was lost and was trying to rescue himself with a mercy or was simply tired of dealing with pesky, troublesome Jews. Leah did give birth to a boy and, with astonishing chutzpah, she did not let Dr. Tuchman himself circumcise the baby. She found a *moel* working in the camp, a Hungarian rabbi named Katz, and he did the *bris*. When the religious ritual was over, Leah pulled out a piece of bread she had squirreled away from her rations so she could have the *seudah*—the celebratory meal that tradition dictates accompanies a *bris*. She even produced some “wine” from a few grapes she had purloined.\*

And who was this baby that was circumcised in a concentration camp? The baby grew up to become the husband of Yitta’s Schwartz’s daughter Nechuma, who was her first baby after the war and the very person who was telling me the remarkable story. Whatever triumph there was for Yitta in that redemptive trick of providence was to be overwhelmed by the anguish of her wartime memories.

“She talked very little but sometimes I would get something out of her,” Nechuma told me from the comfort of her Borough Park home. “When she thinks of it, she told me, she realizes one of the

most painful things that Hitler did was he robbed away the humanity. People were treading over on another and hurting each other. They were so hungry they weren't human. This was what hurt her most. My mother always did whatever was within her power, but there are lots of things that were not within her power."

After the war ended, Yitta was slowly to learn that both her parents and three of her six siblings had died in Auschwitz and other camps. Only one sister, Dina, and two brothers, Motchek and Sru Mendel, survived. All of them chose not to return to Hungary. It was pointless to return to villages whose Jewish population had been all but extinguished and were already under Soviet domination. Yitta, her husband, their children and her husband's parents were transformed from inmates into refugees. They made their way to Antwerp, Belgium, where other surviving relatives had found a sanctuary. Yitta and Joseph's first shelter was in the wreckage of an apartment in a bomb-cratered building.

In Antwerp, Yitta was to give birth to six more children. Before the first baby was born, Yitta and Joseph were penniless and they had trouble finding a hospital that did not require cash up front. When a hospital was found, Yitta could not even afford a diaper to wrap the baby in. But, Nechuma told her she trusted in God.

"I didn't make plans as to what I'm going to feed this baby and with what I'm going to dress the baby, but God said I should have this baby," she told her daughter when she was grown. Yitta, whether intentionally or not, was articulating the Hasidic view of divine engagement in even the most ordinary events.

She gave the baby, born in January 1946, nine months after the German surrender, the name Nechuma because she was a "comfort" after all the misery and heartbreak of the war. She gave the next two babies—both boys—similar names alluding to comfort—Nachum and Nechemia.

Almost every day, her husband, Joseph, would head to the train station to scan the faces of arriving refugees, looking for other relatives. Often they would take in refugees who weren't related to them. Yitta had the willpower to put up those refugees in makeshift beds in the kitchen of her own ruin of an apartment. She was, her daughter said, driven by a conviction that she needed to live her life morally and kindly.

"She once said that when the *Moshiach* [the Messiah] comes I'll be ready for him," Nechuma recalled. "I won't have to change my dress and I won't have to change my attitudes, I'm ready to meet my ancestors."

Her husband too carried out the principles that had been imprinted since his infancy. Soon after their arrival, an American soldier came on a Saturday to their apartment to distribute funds earmarked for the refugees. He wanted to give the Schwartzes \$100, but Joseph refused to take the money, even after his oldest daughter pleaded with him.

"We don't have anything to eat," she told him.

"*Mir tor nisht nemen keyn gelt Shabbos*," he told her. "We're not allowed to handle money on the Sabbath."\*

And so it went. The war, with its massacre of so many innocents that had disillusioned tens of thousands of Jews, had not disabused Yitta and Joseph of their Hasidic beliefs. While some of the survivors forsook the practices they had grown up with before the war, Joseph and Yitta did not. Joseph, who soon found work as a diamond cutter, learning the craft from another Hasid, grew back the beard that the Nazis had cut off and did not trim it. They became close to other Hasidim who were gathering in Antwerp, including some from the Belz and Pupa clans. They sent their children to Orthodox Jewish schools. When she was six Nechuma started attending a Bais Yaacov school in

Antwerp. It was part of a network of ultra-Orthodox girls schools in Europe and the United States founded after World War I by Sarah Schenirer, a seamstress and daughter of Polish Hasidim who, dismayed by the Hasidic girls leaving the fold for secular enticements, thought girls should have formal religious education as well, if not in the same subjects taught to boys. The concept was controversial among Hasidim, who believed formal schooling was reserved for boys, but Schenirer's schools received the blessing of several notable rebbes and sages. Nechuma learned not only Torah and Hebrew but became fluent in French.

As the family settled in and began to achieve some economic security, Yitta, pragmatic as well as spiritual, was delighted with the fruits of modernism that Antwerp provided in ways she had never experienced in Hungary. Instead of drawing water from a well, she could simply turn a tap. There were sinks, toilets and bathtubs. They even had a primitive washing machine for the clothes. It still required a hand-operated agitator to twist the wet garments so that the water could be drained out. Nechuma remembers helping her mother twist that laundry.

“And my mother thought this was heaven,” Nechuma told me.

After nine years in Belgium, they took up a visa they had applied for years before and left for the United States. They wanted to escape Europe, where the Soviet Union was imposing its spartan and despotic communist vision on Poland, Hungary and much of the east and seemed to pose dangers for Western democracies like France and Italy as well. America was a logical refuge because Yitta had an uncle living in Brooklyn's Williamsburg who might help them get started. They arrived in April 1951. The *New York Times* the next day carried a short article about the arrival of 86 European refugees. It bore the subhead “Hungarian Family of 13 Among Newcomers from Europe,” and described how the Schwartzes—Yitta, 36, was identified as Julia—and their by-now eleven children—Shaindel, Chana, Dinah, Yitschok, Shimshon, Nechuma, Nachum, Nechemia, Hadassah, Mindel and Bella—arrived aboard a Pan American World Airways chartered flight from Brussels. The children, the article said, ranged in age from 18 years old to nine months. Another newspaper account was accompanied by a photograph of the Schwartzes, dressed in their European finery and smiling, standing on the plane's mobile staircase. Poignantly, the *Times* article quotes Chana, called Eva in the article, as saying that the family had endured several concentration camps, including Bergen-Belsen. The Schwartzes, the article said, would be resettled by United Service for New Americans, though Nechuma remembers that the family lived for a time in a partitioned shelter on Lafayette Street run by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, or HIAS. (Joseph Papp later turned the building into what is now the Public Theatre.) But even though two children had not survived the Holocaust, the rest of the family was safe. And they had transplanted their Hasidic way of life to America.

## YITTA'S GOLDEN LAND

The Kaliver and Kossony communities that Yitta and Joseph Schwartz had belonged to in Hungary were irretrievably decimated, so they looked around New York's Hasidic neighborhoods to see which transplanted sect was most congenial. They decided on another besieged Hungarian tribe, Satmar. Their rebbe, Joel Teitelbaum, had been one of a contingent of 1,685 Jews saved from a train headed for Bergen-Belsen by a deal worked out between a Hungarian Zionist refugee official and Adolph Eichmann—a deal for about \$1,000 a head paid in money, gold and diamonds. Teitelbaum spent the last year of the war in Switzerland, then after a short sojourn in Jerusalem, he made it to America in 1947 and began gathering his sect's remnants among the row houses and housing projects of Brooklyn's Williamsburg.

His was a particularly austere version of Hasidism, one whose most controversial tenet was its inalterable opposition to the creation of Israel as a state, which had occurred in 1948. Such an event, the Rebbe in his understanding of Torah felt, must await the arrival of the Messiah. Still, followers of several Hungarian dynasties who had lost their spiritual leaders affiliated with the Satmar. And Yitta and Joseph liked the neighborhood as well. Although more secularized Jews were in the majority—Williamsburg was Mel Brooks' old neighborhood—they found the sprinkling of studious, dark-suited, lush-bearded men, the modestly garbed women frenetic with the chores of home and family, the ragtag shops increasingly filled with silver plates, candelabras, and volumes of Talmud reminiscent of the streets of their Hungarian villages.

The first encounters with the more Americanized Jews were not always pleasant. The Schwartzes' first Brooklyn home was in an old brownstone on Penn Street, and Yitta would dispatch Nechuma—seven years old when she arrived in America—to the grocery at nearby Marcy Avenue to buy some food. Like most Hasidic girls, Nechuma usually wore a long-sleeved blouse and long skirt and stockings, and on summer days the women on the block, who were less than Orthodox, would say to her: "Little girl. Isn't it hot for you? Why don't you take off the blouse or roll up your sleeves." Nechuma would silently walk off, without answering. She was hot, of course, she acknowledged in our conversation years later, but, she insisted, she was delighted to be doing the bidding of God, as her tribe saw it, a God who insisted on modesty. She decided there was envy behind such dismissive remarks.

"I was so strong in my belief," Nechuma told me. "How come they don't know how much pride a Jewish girl has that for the sake of God she wouldn't move up her sleeve one inch. But I understand. Somehow this was the way they relieved their pain by ridiculing instead of saying I wish I could be like you."\*

Yitta proceeded to have five more children in America: Israel, Joel, Aron, Sarah and Chaim Shloime. Sarah came along after Yitta had already married off two daughters. Nechuma allows that perhaps her mother wanted to put as many children as she could on Earth because she came from a large family that had been truncated by the war. But her husband, Rabbi Menashe Mayer, now a snowy-bearded yeshiva scholar and administrator, objects gently that "it had nothing to do with that" that Yitta's thinking was another product of her ardently held beliefs.

“The Torah tells us, ‘You should not forget what you saw and heard at Mount Sinai and you should tell that to your grandchildren,’ and she wanted to do that,” he said, suggesting that it was her belief that the more grandchildren she had, the more the commandment would be fulfilled. This white-bearded scholar paused pensively for a moment and with characteristic Hasidic mysticism added: “I can picture her like she was standing at Mount Sinai and that’s the way she gave to the children and grandchildren.”

The family’s apartment at 167 Penn Street occupied the bottom two floors of a brownstone; today it might be given the fancy name duplex. The basement housed the kitchen and dining room. Squeezed into the first “parlor” floor were Yitta and Joseph’s bedroom and two children’s bedrooms, one for the boys and one for the girls. At one point in the late 1950s, there were ten children still living at home—three daughters and a son were married by then and the oldest son was away studying in the Yeshiva of Nitra in Westchester County’s Mount Kisco—so beds occupied the entire floor space of each of those rooms. The closet in the girls’ bedroom managed to hold a *Shabbos* dress and two week-day dresses for each daughter. With Yitta’s frugal practicality, there were no toys, and the austere outlook was absorbed by the children—at least when they were children.

“Today we raise the kids and don’t stop thinking what they’re missing,” Nechuma told me about the absence of toys. “But as a girl, I went to sleep thinking what can I do to help my mother and father. They worked so hard.”

Yitta decorated the space so tidily that Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum’s wife, the *rebbitzin*, asked her to host the first school party. The Satmar community was that small in the 1950s; the school’s families could fit in her apartment.

Once the family was settled, Joseph, Yitta’s husband, opened a furniture shop on Lee Avenue in Williamsburg’s commercial spine, right near their home, and Yitta tended to the needs of the family. She was not very educated and was never to learn English well. But tooling around her home with a kerchief over her close-cropped hair, she cooked the meals, cleaned the apartment and washed and mended the clothes, always, according to her daughter, without complaint. Typical of the demands of housework on a woman with so many children were the Sabbath challahs. She had to knead twelve pounds of dough for six loaves; if nothing else, the task gave her strong fingers. In later years, her task was eased by appliances from KitchenAid or Hobart. Indeed, Yitta, her daughter suggested, had a weakness for modern conveniences, boasting that her mother was among the first in Hasidic Williamsburg in the 1950s and 1960s “to buy silver foil and plastic bags.”

Yitta sometimes went into Manhattan to splurge for cream-white blouses—buying 20 for 99 cents each—at that often-lamented discount emporium on Union Square, S. Klein on the Square. Because she believed in living simply and economically, she might buy standard, inexpensive jumpers for her daughters but adorn them by sewing on her own mother-of-pearl buttons. Yitta used to say “the problem today is that people are not happy with their lot.” And she would remind them of her life in Hungary, where she chopped wood and drew water for the well and where meat and eggs were eaten once a week. “You don’t know what you have—water running in the sink, a fire in the house, meat whenever we want it,” she would tell them. But, according to her relatives, lectures like that were relatively few; she passed along this Mishnaic message of contentment with one’s lot through her everyday demeanor.

“My mother-in-law had a joy of life,” Menasha Mayer, Nechuma’s husband, told me. “She enjoyed living every minute and serving *HaShem* [one of God’s names], and everybody around her was affected by her natural happiness.”

Meanwhile, the children were also affected by their father’s burning fervor for matters Jewish, his

adding, in the Hasidic way, an extra morsel of zeal to the performance of every commandment. When he lit the Chanukah candles, he wore a *shtreimel*, the round fur hat usually reserved for Sabbath holidays or weddings. Not all Hasidim, not even all Satmar Hasidim, honored Chanukah with the wearing of a *shtreimel*, but to his children it was a sign of his spiritual zest. The depth of ardor he brought to the blessings he made upon entering the *succah* or simply the daily *bentshing*—the tuneless grace after meals—was no less than that for a prayer he might say when a daughter was married. His *kiddush*, the blessing over the wine to welcome the Sabbath, and his *havdalah*, the blessings over the twisted candle and fragrant spices to bid Sabbath farewell, were particularly vigorous and loud. Nechuma recalled. Schwartz, who was not a rabbi or yeshiva scholar, was equally scrupulous about not violating any of the prohibitions; he would not eat a tomato unless it was peeled; he wanted to avoid the risk, minimal as it was, of biting into a worm and thus breaching the law against eating a forbidden animal. In this way, he taught his children upright behavior, according to Torah, and humility before higher powers and principles.

“What a fiery Hasid he was,” Nechuma told me, using a descriptive that captured the quality that made him more than just a pious Jew.

How did the Schwartzes take care of so many children? Older daughters who were still living at home would help Yitta take care of the younger children, making sure they got off to school clean and well fed or stayed out of trouble when playing on the sidewalk. She sent the children to the Satmar day schools, which were relatively small then but today have 25,000 students, an enrollment larger than that of some cities and one that comprises 15 percent of the entire Jewish day school system in the United States. It was not easy paying tuition—which today is roughly \$3,000 per child—for so many children, but she and Joseph made sure there was enough money for education. Even if there hadn't been, the Satmar schools would have accepted the children. Hasidic schools, with heavy donations from more prosperous members of the community, make sure no one is ever turned away; the commandment of teaching the Torah to the young is ironclad and Jewish education is essential to the community's cohesiveness.

Once Rabbi Teitelbaum had set up the Satmar's United Talmudical Academy, the boys all studied there and eventually followed up high school with a *kollel*—an adult yeshiva where young men, usually married already, spend a year or two studying in large groups in the *beis medrash*, or study hall, poring over the large pages of Aramaic Gemara with a study partner in an ageless routine accented by singsong melodies and a raised thumb to clinch a point. Only after finishing *kollel* would a young man take on an occupation. The Schwartz sons all went to *kollel*, either Nitra or, once it was established, the Satmar Yeshiva in Williamsburg.

Rabbi Teitelbaum felt girls should be taught as well—but differently, befitting what he saw as their role as future mothers and homemakers. He liked the Beis Yacov model. He wanted girls to be instructed in the ancient Hebrew of the prayers and the Torah, though he forbade them exposure to the sinuous arguments of Talmud, reserved for men. Still, he insisted that they know how to read English well and be familiar with world and American history, geography and mathematics so they could navigate the demands of the wider society. It is clearly not an educational philosophy that more egalitarian Americans would approve of, but ironically, it meant that the community's women were often more prepared to talk with and understand the outside world than Hasidic men. Nechuma remembers making a scrapbook of American presidents, something it is doubtful her brothers were asked to do. Teitelbaum, however, asked that the girls' schools spurn science, feeling it might breed atheism.

“My mother felt extremely grateful to Rabbi Teitelbaum,” Nechuma told me. “He helped her raise

her children Hasidic. She did not know if she would have been able to raise them Hasidic in the United States of America without his work. There was nothing before he came. It's really priceless."

There were times when the burdens of so large a family required a little indulgence. Rabbi Herzl Frankel, head of English and secular studies at Williamsburg's large Satmar girls' school, recalled how one year Yitta came to him two weeks before Passover and haggled with him over letting her daughter stay home. She did not seem as intimidated arguing with him as some Hasidic women might have been.

"My name is Mrs. Schwartz," she said. "I respectfully request that you let my daughter take two weeks off to help me prepare for Passover."

"But she has important tests to take at this time of the year and she'll miss them," a skeptical Rabbi Frankel replied. "If I make an exception for you I'd have to let every child go home for Passover."

"Yes, but my situation is a little different," she said. "I have fifteen children."

The rabbi resorted to some other arguments, but when it fully dawned on him what it must be like to prepare Passover for a family of 15 children—cleaning a home so that it bears no trace of *chametz* (the grain products forbidden during Passover), airing out a library full of yellowed volumes of Talmud, preparing the dishes for two seders, not just for her family but for relatives and friends who might be invited—he succumbed. He has gone on to teach four generations of Yitta Schwartz's family.

Yitta supervised her children's spiritual education outside of school as well—often in ways that might repel more secular Americans. Nechuma, who loved to read as a child, tells the story of her delight in finding a nonreligious Yiddish book in a neighbor's garbage. It was on a topic she no longer remembers. But her mother told her, "My dear daughter, you cannot read this book. This is atheistic."

According to her daughter, no matter how many chores were demanded of her, Yitta was never too busy to tend to an unexpected need. Family legend tells of a Friday morning in fall or winter when the sun sets early and the time needed to prepare for the Sabbath is shorter than usual. One of Yitta's brothers knocked on her door to announce that his wife had just had a baby. Yitta dropped her Sabbath duties, scrambled two eggs, wrapped them in foil to keep them warm and snatched up a freshly baked roll. She dashed out of her apartment to catch a bus that would take her over the bridge to Beth Israel Hospital in Manhattan's upper East Village. Her sister-in-law, still feeble from a night of giving birth, was surprised with a warm, fresh breakfast. Yitta kissed her and congratulated her and sped off to catch another bus back to Williamsburg so she could finish her preparations for Sabbath.

Day after day, Yitta, like almost all other Hasidic women, clung to a rigorous conception of what modesty should mean. She wrapped her skull in a kerchief and spurned a wig, though most women in other Hasidic sects feel wigs fulfill the obligation of remaining modest before male strangers because they still hide their actual hair, yet are far more attractive. Yitta never felt that wigs were a transgression, but that wearing a kerchief was a higher form of observance. Her dresses were always high-necked and long-sleeved, of dark or plain colors. When she could afford it, her daughter confessed with a guilty giggle, she sometimes treated herself to a fashionable scarf by a designer like Hermès that could be used as a kerchief, but always in low-key colors.

"I look at the pictures from my mother and I can see she was dressed at the age of ninety just as she was at thirty-five," Nechuma told me. "She never changed her wardrobe because of this style or that style. She dressed like a dignified Hasidic woman."

And she made sure her daughters followed her vogue, discouraging them, for example, from wearing oranges or pinks. She was very particular as well as to where she bought her food; a label with

a kosher certification from the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America—satisfactory for most Orthodox Jews—was not sufficient for her. She insisted on the extra assurance of a certification by a Satmar or other respected Hasidic *mashgiach*—a rabbinical supervisor specializing in the attributes that make food kosher or not. She performed all the mitzvahs with that extra dollop of Hasidic fastidiousness. During the nine days leading up to Tisha B’Av, when observant Jews mourn the destruction of the two Jewish temples, she refused to do laundry or clean her house. The holiday occurs in the heat of summer, but Yitta refused to cool herself in a pool and kept her changes of wardrobe to a minimum.

For reasons of privacy and modesty her family would not say much about Yitta’s *mikveh* customs. But it can be safely assumed that like other Hasidic women, Yitta was scrupulous about observing the laws surrounding *niddah*—menstruation—and the *mikveh*. For twelve days after the start of menstruation—five days until blood stopped flowing and seven days for the purity interlude known as “the white days”—her husband had to avoid touching her and abstain from sexual relations. After sundown of the twelfth day, she would wash herself thoroughly, remove the minimal makeup and jewelry she wore and immerse her body from head to toe two or three times in the *mikveh*—a cubic tiled pool where some water must be gathered from rain or other natural sources. She would then say the blessing: “Blessed are you, HaShem, ruler of the universe, who has made us holy through His commandments, and has commanded us about immersion.” Afterward she would tell her husband that she was *tahorah*—ritually pure—and he was then allowed to have physical contact with her. More than that, he was required to resume sexual relations that night. Hasidim believe *mikveh* night is the most propitious time for conception. For Yitta, it obviously worked.

Just as for other Hasidim, Yitta’s week revolved around the Sabbath, its holiest day. The world, it seemed, was created for the exaltation of the Sabbath, the day God rested from creation, and the day that Jews were commanded to especially honor. Yitta would start preparing for *Shabbos* on Thursday when she’d buy carp for gefilte fish, grind it, shape it into oval balls then store it in the refrigerator so it would be cold for the Friday evening meal. On Friday, she rose early. With her older daughter bustling about to help, she packed her children off for a half day of school and started the lion’s share of the cooking and baking—challahs, chicken soup, a potato *kugel*, the sweetened carrots known as *tsimmes* and some of her dessert cakes: yeast rolls made with cocoa and sugar, apple pie, napoleon. All the while she and her daughters polished the stove and kitchen counters and mopped the floor. Just before the sun set she covered the dining table with a freshly ironed tablecloth, had the children change into their finest clothes and transfigured herself with a more elegant dress and low-heeled pumps.

“My mother believed the person was the house,” Nechuma told me. “So if a visitor came or if she had to leave on the spur of the moment she looked like a *mensch*.”

While this whirlwind was swirling, Joseph, on Friday around noon, would shutter his shop—Schwartz Furniture—and head to his home a few blocks away for a nap, a reward for his week’s hard work but also a way to arm himself for what was often a long night. He pared his fingernails and burned the clippings—Hasidim believe that evil can reside in our fingernails—and mulled over a page of Talmud, an almost daily exercise for many Hasidim but a particularly blessed session when done to honor the Sabbath. Then he joined other Hasidim at the men’s pool of the Satmar *mikveh*—now on East Williamsburg Street—to dip in waters Hasidim believe purify one for the obligations ahead—before they study or Sabbath. Afterward, he returned home to don his finest *kapote*—a shiny black silk frock coat—and his *shtreimel* and head off to synagogue for an hour of prayer. Upon his return, he and his family would savor Yitta’s Friday night meal, starting off with Joseph chanting a resonant *kiddush* and



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