

## **OLEVSK OHEL**

***“The righteous are greater in death than during their lifetime.”***

*This story is a joint statement from all family members of Rabbis Ishua and Levi Itzhak Gottlieb. Family last name Gottlieb also known as Goutloib, Gotloib, Gotlib, Gotteib, Готтлоїб, Готлиб  
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***Rabbis Ishua and Levi Itzhak Gottlieb from Ludmir Family Ohel, in Olevsk, Ukraine.***

***A Ohel is the small house built over the graves of righteous Hassidic Rabbis.***

*Photo by Natalya Mazurskaya, great-granddaughter of Rabbi Levi Itzhak*

For the past 130 years, despite violence, upheaval, wars, and changes in societies, ideologies, and rulers, the Gottlieb family Ohel has stood untouched on a small hill in an old Jewish cemetery in Olevsk, Ukraine. According to family history, Ohel is the last resting place of the renowned Tsadikks Rabbis from Ludmir (present day Volodymyr-Volynsky) [1, 14]. It was originally built in 1889 for Rabbi Ishua Gottlieb [1, 2, 4, 9], the grandson of Rabbi Moshe from Ludmir, and great-grandson of Rabbi Shlomo from Karlin. In 1929, Rabbi Ishua Gottlieb's son, Rabbi Levi Itzhak Gottlieb [1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9], was buried there next to his father.

All of us, Rabbis Ishua and Levi Itzhak Gottlieb's grandchildren and great-grandchildren, were raised with amazing stories that we heard over and over again, every single year during our visits to Olevsk. We were told about a higher power that preserved our grandparents' Ohel and their graves, during the terrible disasters that destroyed many other sacred Jewish sites in Ukraine.

Rabbis Ishua [2, 4, 9] and Levi Itzhak Gottlieb's [3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9] story dates back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and embodies the development of the Hasidic movement of the era. At that time, many Jewish people in Ukraine moved from villages to small but growing industrial towns. One of them was Olevsk, located in the heart of Ukrainian Polissia, on the rocky banks of the honey river Ubort. It had several sawmills, tar distilleries, a stone pit, and two mills. Most Jewish families lived on the left bank of the river. They heard about Tsaddik from Ludmir, Rabbi Ishua Gottlieb, and invited him frequently for holiday services. The Rabbi led holiday prayers and other special events and, with his participation, a new synagogue in Olevsk was built. He brought the first Torah for the new synagogue, along with religious texts, and many books to teach children. Under his spiritual guidance, the first organized Jewish community of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the city of Olevsk was formed.

While visiting in 1888, in front of the entire Jewish community, the Rabbi blessed the Jewish cemetery built around a small hill. One year later, during the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, the Rabbi became sick and died in Olevsk on the first of Tishrey in 1889. Per his expressed wish, he was buried in the same spot where he had once blessed the cemetery. In memory of the great Rabbi, Jews from Olevsk built the Ohel, which became a sacred place where, for years, they'd pray, reflect on life, and ask for advice and blessings.

After the Rabbi died, his son, Rabbi Levy Itzhak, was invited by the Jewish community of Olevsk to continue the work of his beloved Tsaddik father. Rabbi Levy Itzhak was born January 1863 in Ludmir, and lived there with his family prior to his father's death.



**Rabbi Levi Itzhak Gottlieb**

*Gottlieb Family Archive*

In 1892, Rabbi Levi Itzhak moved to Olevsk with his wife Rebbitsa Peisya Leya (Gaft) [5, 11] and daughter Revecca (Riklya) [6], who was born in Ludmir in April 1887. Three younger children were born in Olevsk: son Solomon, in 1895; son Misha (Zeidel or Mevsha) [5, 8, 10], born in 1900; and daughter Manya (Minyza), born in 1905. Rebbitsa Peisya Leya was from Austria-Hungary, and was descended from generations of Rabbis Gaft. According to the stories, Peisya's father Rabbi Michel Gaft and his family were good friends with Rabbi Ishua Gottlieb. Their families often vacationed together and, when Levi was eight years old and Peisya was just four, their parents arranged their "shidduch" or marriage.

Rabbi Levi Itzhak continued to rise as a spiritual leader in the Jewish community. He was known especially for his help to the poor. Under his supervision, a new synagogue was built; everyone, regardless of their wealth, was invited to gather and worship there. That shul became known as the shul of Rabbi Levi Itzhak, the place where he prayed and led holidays. His grandchildren shared memories of the Rabbi receiving a special parcel every year from his family in Palestine, with an Etrog and Lulav, before the holiday of Sukkot. Rabbi Levi Itzhak, like his father, was especially devoted to children's education and even brought small Torahs for them. He taught youth personally in Jewish law, rites, ceremonies and prepared them for bar mitzvah. In his shul, he established a choir for young boys who performed during holidays.



**19<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Levi Itzhak Gottlieb's Chanukah Shemira Coin Menorah**

*Photo by Mila Zatulovsky, great-granddaughter of Rabbi Levi Itzhak*

By the First World War, tragic events descended upon Olevsk. Pogroms and the persecution of Jewish families were escalating. The Rabbi continued to give his time, heart, and soul to his community, making himself available not only for prayer, but also providing financial help to many families in desperate need. At that time, relations with countries like Austria-Hungary and Palestine were forbidden. Communication with Peisya Leya's family

became sporadic as the climate grew increasingly dangerous. To protect their family and loved ones from communist persecution, our grandparents were forced to burn names, addresses, letters, and even photographs. Our connection with the Gaft family was lost forever.

As Rabbi Levy Itzhak's health was failing, Jews began joining together for prayers in his home in a large room they called "zala." The Rabbi died on the second of Cheshvan in 1929. At that time, the old Jewish cemetery had been closed for many years. Nevertheless, the family and community decided that the beloved Rabbi Levy Itzhak should be laid to rest in the Ohel, next to his Tsaddik father. The entire Jewish population of Olevsk, including the Rabbi's wife Rebbitsa Peisya Leya, his sons Solomon and Misha, his daughters Revecca and Manya, and his grandchildren Mikhail and Genya, were all present to pay respect as his body was carried by hand down the central street of Olevsk.

As the city continued to grow, the Ohel became situated in the middle of new construction. The sacred cemetery blessed by Rabbi Ishua Gottlieb had been desecrated by politics, vandalism, and wars. There were attempts by different people to take over the Ohel, and some even tried to move in.

During the Holocaust tragedy, a blacksmith from a nearby village, took advantage of the unguarded building and opened his workshop in the Ohel. He was found dead a short time later, and many locals believed he'd been punished for the violation of the sacred site. German soldiers ordered another blacksmith to work in the Ohel, but he also died suddenly. After that, even Nazis were afraid to destroy the Ohel and stayed away from our Tsaddiks' graves. The blacksmiths' wooden work bench and tools remained in the Ohel for years as a stark memory and a reminder of what happened.

In 1980, Levi Itzhak's granddaughter, heard another story from locals living near the Ohel, about a woman whose husband had kicked her out of their home as a result of her heavy drinking habits. She had nowhere to go and moved into the Ohel. Soon after, she was spotted in the middle of the night screaming, "Bearded Jews are coming!" She had a dream where she saw two religious Jews with long beards who came to tell her she must stop drinking and return home to her husband and children. She quit drinking, returned to her family, and resumed a normal life. Stories like these were well known and perpetuated the belief in the sacred power of the Ohel.

Since Rabbi Ishua Gottlieb died in 1889, for almost 130 years, the Ohel was under the constant care of our family. But until 1996, Ohel stood without any identifying information about Rabbis buried there. This was due to the fact that displaying any religious affiliations in the former Soviet Union was very dangerous. Practicing religion became forbidden, synagogues were closed, and people faced the tragedy of the Great Terror and brutal massacres. Until the 1930s, Rabbi Levi Itzhak, his wife and children watched over the Ohel. After he died, the family moved from Olevsk. Since that time, Rabbi Levi Itzhak children and then grandchildren regularly visited and financed the maintenance of Ohel, carefully selected local Jewish people to take care of Ohel and entrusted them to hold the keys. Their loving care of our Tsaddik grandparents' gravesite has been invaluable.

The Second World War brought new tragedies and tremendous losses to the Jewish Community of Olevsk, and to our family. On November 15, 1941, 900 Jewish residents, including women, children, the elderly, and several family members who still lived in Olevsk, were taken to the nearby village of Varvarovka, brutally murdered by Nazis, and buried in a mass pit. A Holocaust memorial was built in Varvarovka to preserve their memory [22]. The oldest son of Levi Itzhak, Solomon, and his beautiful wife, Gitl, were killed around 1941, probably in Kovel, where they lived before the war. The youngest son of Levi Itzhak, Misha (Zeidel or Mevsha) was wounded and died in 1942. Rabbi Levi Itzhak's wife, Peisya Leya, also died in 1942 in Uzbekistan [11], where our family went to escape from the Nazis.

After the war, very few Jewish families remained in Olevsk. New generations raised with an atheistic ideology weren't interested in the religious past or history of our family. Displaying Rabbis' names continued to be dangerous, as vandalism and destruction of Jewish graves remained common.

In December of 1991, the Soviet Union fell apart. The doors of Ukraine were open to foreign visitors, and interest in the Ohel grew. Many Jewish religious groups started to visit known Tsaddik's graves. Roman Shapiro became the new caregiver of the old cemetery until his death in 1998. He knew that the Rabbis buried in Ohel were Tsaddiks from Ludmir. But none of us were living in Olevsk to share our detailed family history with the younger generations

and foreign visitors. We recently heard a new theory, which was introduced by Hassidic scholars in the 1990s, that Rabbi Moshe Gottlieb from Ludmir, who died in 1829, and was grandfather of Rabbi Ishua Gottlieb, could have been buried in the Olevsk Ohel. We had never heard about this from our elders and no other burials found around Ohel are from that time. Rabbi Ishua Gottlieb died in 1889. Many gravestones surrounding the Ohel are from the same age and it makes the family story more likely. In Hassidic literature, there are different opinions about where Rabbi Moshe could have died. We hope that with time and with more archive records available for public access in Europe, it will be possible to shed more light on location of Rabbi's Moshe burial.



**Gravestones near the Olevsk Ohel**  
*Courtesy of Leonid Kogan*

**Gravestone next to the Olevsk Ohel  
 end of 19<sup>th</sup>, beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century**  
*Courtesy of the Center for Jewish art*

At the same time, in the 1990s, the preservation of Jewish Religious sites had gradually begun in Ukraine. In 1994, Governments of the United States (United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad) [15] and Ukraine (The Jewish Preservation Committee of Ukraine) entered into an agreement to record and preserve all Jewish burial grounds and other important sites in Ukraine. A representative from the committee, ethnographer Leonid Kogan, visited Olevsk in June of 1996. He surveyed, photographed and recorded Jewish graves at the old and new Jewish cemeteries. He also interviewed Roman Shapiro. In 2015, we were able to find and connect with Leonid Kogan, who now lives in Germany. He shared with us how difficult it has been to collect information when so many archives were destroyed. In many cases, like during his visit to Olevsk, his only option for research and information was to rely on recollections of local, elderly Jewish residents. However, very few were available. The Jewish population of Olevsk decreased from almost 3000 before World War II to under 200 in the 1990s [21], and less than 20 in the present time. Sadly, the memories of many were less than clear and were unreliable as a result of age, strenuous living conditions in Ukraine, and the time that had passed since there was a significant Jewish presence in these towns [15].

The family did not know anything about the new theories and surveying of the cemetery. After the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the fall of Socialism, many of us were fleeing Ukraine and Russia. In 1996, we felt that it was finally time and finally safe to place the names of both Rabbis on the Ohel to preserve it for future generations. Our family installed the memorial plaque in September 1996, just 3 month after Leonid Kogan conducted the survey of the cemetery.



**Olevsk Ohel**, *Courtesy of the Center for Jewish art*

In 2003, Rabbi Levi Itzhak's oldest grandchildren who knew him personally, wrote an article titled, "Memory of the Heart" [1]. It was based on their personal memories and everything they knew from previous generations. The

article was published in 2003, in New York, in the Jewish World Magazine, and became the first major step in preserving our family history. The article has been displayed in the Ohel since that time. Rabbi Levi Itzhak's granddaughter narrated the family story to her grandchildren before she died in 2007. Her recorded audio diary became part of our heritage.



**Article "Memory of the heart" written by Mikhael and Genya, grandchildren of Rabbi Levi Itzhak Gottlieb published in Evreiskii Mir (Jewish World) weekly newspaper, Brooklyn, NY No 597, 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2003**

In 2005, the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad published a report [15], based on the 1990s survey, about Jewish cemeteries, synagogues, and mass grave sites in Ukraine. Because of this tremendous project, the Olevsk Old Jewish Cemetery was registered as an Historical Jewish Heritage Site in Ukraine on the International Jewish Cemetery Project [18], and more recently, at The Center for Jewish Arts in Israel [12].

Only 10 years later, in December of 2015, we first learned about the International Jewish Cemetery project [18] and realized that no one knew our Tzaddik grandparents' history. In 2016, we hired a researcher in Ukraine with the hope of confirming the family story with archive records. With guidance from Miriam Weiner [16, 17, 18], renowned genealogist of Jewish history in Europe, and her foundation "Routes to Roots," we were able to recover family records in Rabbinical metrical books and census records in the archives of Zhitomir and Lutsk. We found priceless documents that completely supported our family history and provided the unique opportunity to trace it back 10 generations to Rabbi Shlomo Gottlieb from Karlin and his son Rabbi Moshe from Ludmir. We have documents that show that Rabbi Shlomo from Ludmir [2, 13, 14, 22], son of Rabbi Moshe, was married to Chaya Sara Twersky [2, 13, 22], the daughter of Grand Rabbi Aaron Twersky of Chernobyl [20]. Rabbi Ishua Gottlieb was their son and our great-great-grandfather, the first Tsaddik for whom the Ohel in Olevsk was built in 1889.

At the present time, more and more people from across the globe journey to visit and pray at our grandparents' graves, and many religious groups visit during holidays. We feel that the history that was preserved within our family has become not only vital for us, but has grown into a responsibility and duty to share the story as it was passed down from our elders. Traditionally in Hasidism, Ohel is the resting place of a righteous person and "the righteous are greater in death than during their lifetime". Olevsk Ohel is one of the few Jewish sites in the world that survived virtually untouched, and we attribute it to the power of the Tsaddiks who are buried there. As new generations come to Ohel for blessings, spiritual guidance, and inspiration, as they light candles and leave hundreds of notes at graves, we hope they'll appreciate knowing Rabbis Ishua and Levi Itzhak Gottliebs' names and amazing stories. Blessed be their righteous memory!



**Rabbis Ishua and Levi Itzhak Gottlieb from Ludmir Family Ohel, in Olevsk, Ukraine.**  
*Photo by Natalya Mazurskaya, great-granddaughter of Rabbi Levi Itzhak*

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