

The Hasid Who Discovered Oil in the Carpathian Mountains

Leon Thorne

The passing crowd looked on with amazement at the strange goings-on. No one could understand why Melech the innkeeper and his wife Tzirl were standing in the middle of their garden on a hot summer day furiously digging holes in the ground. Everyone knew that the day before Melech had returned from the Rebbe of Zydachov where he and his sons had spent the holiday of Shevuos. Might there be a connection between that visit to the Rebbe and this feverish activity? Theirs was no ordinary digging. The couple worked with great haste and enthusiasm as if they had buried some treasure in the ground and now wanted to recover it as quickly as possible.

Some curious folks asked him: “Melech, why are you digging up your garden? Have you lost something?” But Melech didn’t answer them. He only murmured under his breath: “One digs because one must dig.” In truth, his vague answer was not entirely wrong. He himself was not sure why he was digging or what he was looking for. But he was certain of one thing. The great Rebbe of Zydachov had hinted that he should dig, and that was enough for him.

The reputation of the Rebbe, a pious man and miracle worker, was well known in Schodnica, the village in the Carpathian Mountains where Melech and his family earning a living as innkeepers and farmers. Melech and Tzirl had long heard of the Rebbe and his ability to inspire downtrodden Jews. Melech had often thought about paying the Rebbe a visit, to pour out his bitter heart to the great man and beg him to intervene with the Almighty to help Melech secure an easier and less dangerous livelihood.

The source of Melech’s livelihood was an inn that he rented from the landowner of the village. Day and night, Melech had to tend to drunken peasants, and listen to their quarrels and coarse discussions. Often, fights would break out with broken bottles and glasses. Behind the counter at

which Melech poured the drinks, he had a small table on which rested an open Talmud which he studied in every spare moment.

Tzirl and Melech were blessed with six daughters and five sons. All eleven resembled their father: strongly built, tall and healthy. From the big city Melech had hired a *melamed* [teacher], set aside two rooms for him, and paid him well to teach his sons the Bible, Talmud and the commentaries, and Yiddishkeit. The melamed also taught Melech’s daughters Hebrew and the prayers. When the inebriated peasants annoyed Melech beyond his endurance, he would open the door leading to the study rooms and listen with rapt attention to the voices of the children studying Torah. As soon as he heard the sing-song of the studies, he seemed to change. A warmth enveloped him and for a few minutes his troubles seemed to evaporate. “Thank the Almighty,” he whispered to himself, “they will be scholars and righteous Jews and walk in the ways of their forefathers.” That knowledge gave him strength to accept his bitter life.

Tzirl was short, thin and extremely energetic. From early dawn till late at night, she managed the entire household. The stable, the cowshed, the horses, the chicken coop, and the workers in the field and in the house were under her control. Even the inn, which Melech supervised, did not escape her attention. When quarrels erupted among the peasants, she was the first to insert herself between the fighting parties, even when they were armed with knives. Often, she had to throw them out of the inn.

Many stories were told about these fights and about Tzirl’s efforts at peacemaking. Once, it was told, a fierce fight broke out between two men over a woman. Each claimed that she was his and was ready to settle the issue with a long knife. Tzirl the peacemaker separated the two rivals and decreed a compromise — the woman should live with each of her admirers for three months. The arrangement pleased the scoundrels; they shook hands and the inn became calm for awhile. When people criticized Tzirl for suggesting this strange immoral arrangement, she answered, “Don’t worry, just watch what happens.” As usual, Tzirl was right. After six months, each of the men unceremoniously evicted the woman and forbade her to return. The unhappy woman came crying to Tzirl and begged her to arrange a match with two more honorable and less violent men.

Tzirl had married at 15; she was two years younger than her husband. One year after the marriage she bore her first son, Berele. During this year, they lived with Tzirl’s parents, and Melech studied Talmud and helped out on their

farm. When he became a father, he began to worry about his family's future. After all, how long could he take advantage of his father-in-law's generosity?

Tzirl's father bought the young couple a farm in Schodnica, and he also rented an inn for them from the village's landlord. When the time came to sign the contract, Melech needed to provide his family name. He suddenly realized that he didn't know his family name, nor even whether he had one.

So Melech and his young bride decided to visit Melech's mother, Silke (his father was no longer living). Perhaps she, or his brother who lived in a neighboring village, would know something about their family name. Silke didn't know the name either, but she remembered that the family name was written on a small slip of paper which she had placed in the attic with the Passover dishes. A few decades earlier, she told them, the village judge had notified everyone that a clerk was coming from the big city with an order from the Emperor that everyone must appear before him and receive a family name. (This must have taken place between 1780 and 1790 during the reign of Emperor Joseph II, when all inhabitants of the Austrian Empire were given family names for the first time.)

Nobody took the order as seriously as Melech's father, Shlomo Leib. He was terrified when he heard the news. Did it mean that his Jewish name would be taken from him and replaced with a gentile one. Why was the Emperor doing this? He couldn't calm himself.

On a Saturday when the Jews from the neighboring villages collected at a central village to pray, they decided that, no matter what name they were given by the Emperor's clerk, they would continue to call each other by their Jewish names. There was no question but that they would use their Jewish names when called to the Torah.

When his day came, Shlomo Leib put on his best Sabbath clothes and, with great trepidation, went to the village clerk. To his family's surprise he returned after a short while, satisfied and happy. In Polish, the clerk had asked him one question: had he prepared a family name? Shlomo Leib had not expected such a question! But not waiting for an answer, the clerk, noticing Shlomo Leib's red cheeks, wrote something on a piece of paper which he handed to him. Because of Shlomo Leib's red cheeks, the clerk had given him the name "Backenroth."

Melech searched for the slip of paper among the Passover dishes, and when he found it brought it to the lawyer who wrote the contract, and he

and Tzirl settled into the inn in Schodnica for the next twenty years.

Unlike her husband, Tzirl never made with peace with her fate as an innkeeper's wife in a small village among gentiles. When the children began to grow up, new worries beset her. "Where are we going to find husbands for our daughters and brides for our sons?" she asked. There were only two other Jewish families in Schodnica. In order to pray in a minyan at least once a week on the Sabbath, Jews from several villages had to gather together. When heavy snows fell in the winter, or when the rivers overflowed in the spring, they couldn't pray in a minyan even once a week.

Tzirl refused to wait for a miracle from heaven, so she devised a plan. The Jews who used to travel through Schodnica told innumerable tales about the Rebbe of Zydachov, about his love for his people, his miracles and kindness. "You can be helped just by touching the doorknob of his room," they said. So Tzirl said to Melech, "You must go to the Rebbe of Zydachov. He is the only one who will be able to advise us."

Melech decided to visit the Rebbe on the holiday of Shevuos which celebrates the receipt of the Torah. He and his five sons traveled an entire day and night to get to Zydachov, a small town between Stryj and Chodorov. They arrived on the eve of the holiday and at once headed for the great synagogue in order to pray with a minyan and to find a suitable place to stay for the next two days. Once they found an inn, they hurried to the ritual bath and from there to the Rebbe's house to shake hands with the holy man and receive his blessing. About two hours before the evening services, the doors of the Rebbe's room opened and the Rebbe appeared. One after another, hundreds of his hasidim who had waited for the great moment all day approached to shake the Rebbe's hand.

When Melech touched the Rebbe's hand, he felt immediately that he had a real friend. He pronounced his name clearly to the Rebbe: "Melech the son of Shlomo Leib from Schodnica." He introduced his five sons and added, "Blessed be the Almighty, they each study Torah." The Rebbe shook their hands, asking each son what he was studying and patted each on the cheek.*

*The author's mother — named Tzirl after her great grandmother — remembered hearing her grandfather Shmuel Leib (one of Melech's five sons) describe that first visit with the Zydachover Rebbe and adding, "Although nearly sixty years have passed, I can still feel the Rebbe's bright eyes and his warm pat on my cheek."

At the first evening meal at the Rebbe's table, Melech was in for a great surprise. There was a custom in Zydachov that after the Rebbe ate a small morsel of food from his plate, he would call the names of the renowned scholars and men of importance and hand them a portion of food. Considering himself unworthy to sit near the Rebbe, Melech seated himself at the foot of table. Suddenly he heard his name called loud and clear by the Rebbe's assistants: "Melech from Schodnica, where are you?" When he responded, the head of a fish was handed down to him by the hasidim all the way from the head of the table where the Rebbe presided. This portion of fish was seen as a sign of future greatness.

For Melech the two days of Shevuos seemed a dream. The heartfelt communal prayers, the meals at the Rebbe's table, his teachings and sermons — all of it ended too quickly. Before going home Melech and his sons had a brief audience with the Rebbe. The Rebbe carefully read the *kvitel* [note] Melech presented to him and questioned Melech in great detail about all that was troubling him. Afterwards, the Rebbe questioned the boys in detail about their studies. The Rebbe blessed Melech, his sons, and his entire family, and then, remaining seated, the Rebbe silently covered his eyes with his left hand. Seeing that the Rebbe had nothing more to say, Melech and his sons quietly left the room.

When they arrived home the following day, Tzirl and his daughters were waiting for them with anticipation and apprehension. Tzirl was not at all interested in the spiritually intense hasidic holiday Melech and the boys had experienced. She even waved aside the story of the fish head. She was interested in only one thing: "What did the Rebbe say we should do after giving up the inn?" she asked.

"About this he said nothing," Melech replied.

"Did he give you a sign? Perhaps a hint?" Tzirl insisted.

Suddenly Melech and the boys remembered that when the Rebbe covered his eyes with his left hand on the night of their departure, he had also lowered his right hand toward the floor. Twice the Rebbe had raised and lowered his hand with a digging motion. When Tzirl heard that, she became quiet for a moment and then clapped her hands and exclaimed: "That's it. The Rebbe was hinting that somewhere in our field lies a buried treasure!"

Many legends were told about buried treasures in the Carpathian Mountains. Stories were whispered that in one or another village farmers

found barrels of golden coins and precious stones while ploughing their fields. Some of the hidden treasures had been buried by soldiers in the innumerable battles fought in the Carpathian Mountains. Evidently the soldiers buried the loot in fear that the officers or the government would confiscate it, and punish them as well. Stories were told about a notorious highway robber, Dobosh, who used to attack passing merchants, rob them of their possessions and bury the treasures in the ground.

The following morning Melech and Tzirl began to dig in front of their house. After two days of digging, a brown liquid began seeping into the hole. Soon, they were unable to stand on dry ground, so they began a second hole. But the same thing happened. They filled a small pot with the strange liquid and brought it into the house where they noticed that it had peculiar qualities. It was very flammable, had the consistency of a fat, and had an unusual odor.

They didn't know what to do with the liquid. They couldn't light the house with it because the vessel caught fire. True, it saved some wood since it burned easily in the stove. But where was the treasure that the Rebbe had hinted at?

The next day Melech and his son Itzig harnessed their horses and went to see the Rebbe in Zydachov. The Rebbe looked carefully at the black liquid and told Melech to go immediately to Lemberg to see the Austrian Governor. The trip took some time (it would be several decades before the railroads were built), but Itzig arrived safely in Lemberg and handed over the bottle containing the liquid to the Governor's assistant. The following day the Governor himself received him, asked him his name, the name of his father, and about the village of Schodnica where the liquid was discovered, and dispatched him with a letter of recommendation and a clerk to Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was received there by one of the ministerial assistants and told to return the next day. The following day Itzig was received by the Secretary of Industry who notified him that the black liquid in his field was oil.

A multitude of engineers, industrialists, merchants, and speculators descended on Schodnica. Many of them came from Rumania's Ploesti oil field where oil had been discovered a few years earlier. The merchants scurried through the fields with Ukrainian interpreters buying up the drilling rights to future oil discoveries from the peasants. The sellers were only too eager to sell

the rights to the oil below since they were not selling what mattered to them, the field above. The peasants could still till their fields, cut the wheat, and remain bosses as before. They sold only what was in the depths. They didn't know what they were selling nor why they were being paid. In but a short time, nearly all the farmers had sold perpetual drilling rights to their land.

But they didn't buy from Tzirl. As soon as she saw the clean shaven, smooth talking, cologne-smelling Austrian speculators, she immediately labeled them "Viennese crooks," and determined not to sell them even a blade of grass. As it happened, Melech and Tzirl owned the best field. Its superficial wells suggested that there were large deep deposits of oil under enormous pressure that had forced the oil up through all the layers of rock, almost to the surface.

The oil companies finally came to an agreement with Melech and Tzirl. The companies would receive half of the oil revenues and in return would pay all expenses. Soon they hit an enormous gusher, with oil and gas so thick that for several days the well couldn't be controlled at all. The oil flowed like a river. A total darkness descended on Schodnica, and no match could be struck, even by the women wanting to light Sabbath candles.

In the Austrian Parliament, the Secretary of Industry announced that oil had been discovered within the boundaries of the Austrian monarchy: "The place where large deposits of oil were found is the village of Schodnica, district of Lemberg, Province of Galicia, and the discoverer of the oil is Melech Backenroth."

And Tzirl?

She lived to see them become oil magnates. But she didn't live to see the Great Synagogue built by Melech. Nor did she live to see the important scholars and wealthy men from Poland, Galicia, and Hungary who wanted desperately to marry her children. She didn't live to see the brilliant scholars and beautiful, virtuous women that Melech selected as mates for their children. Soon after the oil discovery she took ill and became thinner and weaker with each passing day. Still, she went about her daily work and kept an eye on the farm and the oil fields, until one day she fell in front of her house. She was carried into the house, and a medic, following the custom of those days, put cups and leeches on her body, but to no avail. She died on the following day. Her final words were: "Children, take good care of your father." She was 36 years old.

Melech was like someone cut down. He did not wish to re-marry, although he was only 38 when Tzirl died. Once, when the Rebbe of

Zydachov, on one of Melech's now frequent visits, hinted to him about re-marrying, Melech bent down and whispered something into the Rebbe's ear. The Rebbe never again mentioned the subject and no one ever learned what he told the Rebbe.

Melech was destined to have one other great joy in life. The oil discovery attracted many Jews: workers, storekeepers, and industrialists, so that the village of Schodnica became a large community. The community chose as its first rabbi Melech's eldest son, Berele. Melech's joy at having a son as Rabbi was unbounded. Little did he know, however, that the first eulogy his son, the Schodnicer Rebbe, would deliver would be for his father. A short time after Berele became rabbi, the worshipers in the synagogue noticed that Melech, sitting in his tallit and tefillin, had fainted. They couldn't revive him, so they carried him home where the doctor determined that half of his body was paralyzed. He died the same day, eight years after Tzirl.

When the mourning period ended and the children began to divide their father's clothing among the poor, they found in one of his pockets a small accounting book in which Melech kept a record of his finances. On one of the pages he had written:

My precious children, my grandchildren, and all the offspring who come from their loins. Hold dear our luminous treasure, our sacred Torah; always love your Jewish people and what the Jewish people represent; never be overproud and arrogant; help the Jewish people with your money; and have the faith of the righteous.

Rabbi Leon Thorne, z"l, was born in Schodnica, near Drohobycz, in Poland where his family owned and operated oil wells for more than 100 years. He was ordained a rabbi at the age of 19, continued his religious studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, and earned a Ph.D. at Wuerzburg in philosophy and history. He served as a spiritual leader in Pomerania in Poland, as a chaplain in the Polish Free Army after 1944, and as rabbi of the liberated Jews in Frankfort-on-Main in Germany from 1946 to 1948. Rabbi Thorne emigrated to the U.S. in 1948, and continued his rabbinic and literary activities until his death in 1978.

This story was translated from the Yiddish by members of his family.