

Ani Mamin

The Rebbe of Modzitz, **Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar**, had Chassidim throughout the major towns and cities of Poland. One of these was **Reb Azriel David Fastag**, who was noted for his exceptional voice throughout Warsaw. Many came to the shul where Reb Azriel David and his brothers, who were also blessed with lovely voices, would pray on the High Holy Days. Reb Azriel David would lead the prayers, while his brothers accompanied him as a choir. His crisp, clear and moving voice had a profound effect on all who heard him.

Reb Azriel David lived simply, earning his livelihood from a small clothing store, but his happiness and fulfillment came from another source -- the world of Chassidic music. His moving tunes made their way to Otvoczka (a suburb of Warsaw), where his Rebbe, Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar appreciated them immensely. The day a new *niggun* (melody) by Reb Azriel David arrived was a festive day for the Rebbe.

Dark clouds began to cover the skies of Europe -- the clouds of Nazism. In spite of the terrible decrees, the yellow patch and the ghettos, most Jews could not fathom what was about to befall them. Only a few managed to escape the clutches of the Nazi occupation to safe havens. One of them was the Modzitzer Rebbe, Rebbe Shaul Yedidya Elazar, whose Chassidim made a tremendous effort to save him. As the Nazis entered Poland, the Chassidim smuggled him out of Poland to Vilna, in Lithuania, and from there he made his way across Russia to Shanghai, China, eventually arriving in America in 1940.

Meanwhile in Poland tens of thousands of Jews were being shipped off daily to their death in cattle cars that were part of the railway system. Roused from their warm beds in Warsaw in the middle of the night, husbands were separated from their wives, children wrested from the arms of their parents. The elderly were often shot on the spot, in front of their loved ones. Then the Jews were gathered and sent off in those trains to a place where their existence would no longer trouble the Nazis -- to Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek.

Inside the crowded cars, over the clatter of the cattle cars' wheels, rose the sounds of people gasping, sighing, weeping and dying. One could hear the stifled cries of children crushed together. But in one such car, headed toward the infamous death camp Treblinka, the sound of singing could be heard.

It seems that an elderly Jew, wrapped up in his ragged clothing, his face white as snow, had made his way over to his neighbor on the death train, begging him to remind him the tune of *Ma'areh Kohen* sung by Modzitzer Rebbe during the Yom Kippur service.

"Now? Now, what you want to hear is *niggunim*?" answered the other, with a hard look at the Chassid, thinking that maybe all the suffering had caused him to lose his mind.

But this Modzitzer Chassid, Reb Azriel David Fastag, was no longer paying attention to his friend, or to anyone else on the train. In his mind, he was at the prayer stand next to his Rebbe on Yom Kippur, and it is he who was leading the prayer before the Rebbe and all the Chassidim.

Suddenly, there appeared before his eyes the words of the twelfth of the Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith: *Ani ma'amin b'emuna sheleima, b'viat hamoshiach; v'af al pi she'yismamaya, im kol zeh, achakeh lo b'chol yom she'yavo* -- "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Moshiach; and even though he may tarry, nevertheless, I wait each day for his coming." Closing his eyes, he meditated on these words and thought, "Just now, when everything seems lost, is a Jew's faith put to the test."

It was not long before he began to hum a quiet tune to these words. There, amidst the death and despair on the train to Treblinka, the Chassid was transformed into a pillar of song, bringing forth out of his bloodied lungs the song of the eternity of the Jewish People. He was unaware of the silence in the cattle car, and of the hundreds of ears listening attentively in amazement. He also didn't hear the voices as they gradually joined his song, at first quietly, but soon growing louder and louder.

The song spread from car to car. Every mouth that could still draw a breath joined in Reb Azriel David's *Ani Ma'amin*.

As if waking from a dream, Reb Azriel David opened his eyes to the sight of the singing train. His eyes were red from crying, his cheeks wet with tears. In a choked voice, he cried out: "I will give half of my portion in *Olam Habbah* (the World to Come) to whoever can take my song to the Modzitzer Rebbe!"

A hushed silence descended upon the train. Two young men appeared, promising to bring the song to the Rebbe at any cost. One of them climbed upon the other, and finding a small crack of the train's roof broke out a hole from which to escape. Poking his head out under the

open sky, he said, "I see the blue heavens above us, the stars are twinkling and the moon, with a fatherly face, is looking at me."

"And what do you hear?" asked his companion.

"I hear," the young man answered, "the angels on high singing *Ani Ma'amin*, and it's ascending to the seven firmaments of heaven!"

Bidding farewell to their brothers and sisters on the train, the two proceeded to jump off, one after the other. One was killed instantly from the fall. The other survived, taking the memory of the song with him. He eventually found his way to Land of Israel (perhaps to the Modzitzer Rebbe's son, the author of *Imrei Aish*, who was in Tel-Aviv), and the notes were sent by mail to Rebbe Shaul Yedidya Elazar in New York.

Upon receiving the notes and having the Reb Azriel Dovid's *Ani Ma'amin* sung before him, the Modzitzer Rebbe said: "When they sang *Ani Ma'amin* on the death train, the pillars of the world were shaking. The Almighty said, 'Whenever the Jews will sing *Ani Ma'amin*, I will remember the six million victims and have mercy on the rest of My People.'"

It is told that on the first Yom Kippur that the Modzitzer Rebbe sang the *Ani Ma'amin*, there were thousands of Jews in the shul. The entire congregation burst into tears, which fell like water into the pool of tears and blood of the Jewish people. The tune soon spread throughout world Jewry.

"With this *niggun*," said Rebbe Shaul Yedidya Elazar, "the Jewish people went to the gas chambers. And with this *niggun*, the Jews will march to greet Moshiach."

To hear Reb Azriel David Fastag's *Ani Maamin*, [click here](#)

Biographical note:

Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazer Taub (1886-1947), the second Modzitzer Rebbe, succeeded his father, Rabbi Israel, in 1920. At the outbreak of World War II he escaped Poland and made his way eventually to New York in 1940. He traveled extensively in the USA, bringing Torah and *niggunim* to many communities. He may have been the most prolific Chassidic composer of all time, with the total output numbering close to 1000 compositions. Some of them may be heard on the Modzitz website (www.Modzitz.org). He was also known for his extraordinary love for the Holy Land. On his fourth and last trip there in 1947 he

intended to remain and settle, but he passed away that same year. He was the last person buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem until after the Six Day War.

By [Yitzchak Dorfman](#)