

Biography of Rebbetsin Kazen of Cleveland's Zemach Zedek Shul (1922-2018)

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Shula Kazen served as rebbetsin of Zemach Zedek shul in Cleveland for about 50 years. This is her biography.

Shula was born in Gomel Belarus, in 1922, just a few years after the Soviet government came to power. Gomel had 45,000 residents, half of whom were Jewish.

Shula was the oldest of 6 siblings. Her father, Elchanan Shagalov, was a Chabad rabbi, a teacher, a mohel and a shochet.

In 1931, when Shula was 9 years old, the Soviet government increased its oppression of all religions, including Judaism. The government took possession of all homes & businesses. Those who protested the government take-over were sent to slave labor camps or executed. The government allowed citizens to continue living in their homes and working at their jobs only on condition that they support communism and abandon religious practice. The gov't decreed that anyone who practices Judaism will lose their home and their job, and be out on the street with no income, and be labeled a counter-revolutionary and enemy of the people. Shula's parents refused to forsake Jewish practice, so they were evicted from their home in the middle of winter & barred from regular employment.

Shula's family took up residence in the women's section, on a balcony, of a wooden shul building. They ended up living there for the next 8 years. The shul building had NO running water, NO indoor toilet, NO heat, & its walls had cracks that let in the wind. The family obtained water from a city well located a few blocks away. They used the shul's outhouse. They acquired a wood-burning stove for heat. No one would rent living quarters to them, because anyone who rented to a counter-revolutionary would be arrested.

Since Shula's parents were barred from regular jobs, they eked out a meager living by working, under-the-table, at menial jobs that barely provided enough food to eat.

The government further declared that anyone who HELPS OTHERS practice Judaism (e.g., by teaching Judaism or circumcising children) will be will be imprisoned or executed. Nevertheless, Shula's father continued to circumcise babies and teach religion, but only in secret.

The city of Gomel had several clandestine cheders (Hebrew classes). Each cheder was held in a secret crawl space, in the form of an earthen pit, that was dug under the floor boards of a house. The cheder was illuminated only by candles. It was amazing how many Jewish parents risked their freedom & their lives by letting their babies be circumcised and letting their children learn Judaism.

The government required children to attend public school from 1st through 8th grade, including on Shabbos. The public schools indoctrinated students to believe that religion is evil, and that their true mother and father is the Communist party, and to turn in to the authorities any family member who practices religion.

So Shula's parents did not send their children to public school, but instead home-schooled them in both secular subjects and religion. Shula and her siblings pulled different ruses to make it appear, to neighbors, as though they WERE attending school.

In 1938, when Shula was 16 years old, after Shula's family had lived in the shul balcony for 7 years, Shula's father was arrested, and later executed for teaching Judaism and performing circumcisions. That very same day, 4 other Jews were arrested and later executed.

A year later, the local school board finally discovered that Shula and her siblings had never attended school all those years. Shula's mother feared that the government will soon be coming for her and her children, so Shula's family fled to Uzbekistan where they took on a new identity. The family lived in Uzbekistan throughout WWII

During WWII, the family children fled to Samarkand. They arrived there erev Yom Kippur. Although they were ordered by the authorities immediately registering themselves at the central police station, they instead walked away from the crowd and found a shack in the outskirts of the city and slept in that shack. The next day, they took a big risk by not showing up at the police station (as they were ordered to do) but instead found a shul and spent Yom Kippur praying there. When the shul service ended at the end of Yom Kippur, Shula's mother explained to a female congregant about her having defied the police by not registering at the police station as ordered. The congregant replied "Don't worry. My son is chief of police and will take care you tomorrow."

When Shula was 18 years old, her mother was visiting a clandestine yeshivah. There, Shula's mother met an 18 year old boy named Zalman Katzenelenbogen. His father, too, was executed by the government for teaching Judaism. Shula's mother arranged for this young man to marry Shula.

During WWII, many Polish citizens fleeing the Nazis ended up in different Russian republics. When WWII ended, those Poles wanted to return to Poland. The USSR normally forbade anyone from emigrating out of the USSR. But in 1947, the USSR enacted a temporary loophole. The USSR decreed that, for a limited time only, anyone in a USSR republic that has a Polish passport, proving their Polish citizenship, may return to Poland. During those months, many trains were leaving Russia, filled with Poles returning to Poland. There were organizations, including Lubavitch and the Hagana, that were using this emigration loophole to enable even NON-Poles to leave Russia. They did this, at first, by finding valid Polish passports that had belonged to Poles that had died in Russia, and giving those valid passports to Jews trying to flee Russia. When Lubavitch & Hagana ran out of such valid Polish passports, they started producing forged Polish passports and passing them out to Jews. In this way, many Jews were able to escape the USSR, including 1000 Lubavitch families. One such family was Shula's family (the husband & mom & siblings).

Shula and her husband were smuggled out of the USSR in 1947, and spent some years in France and Germany. In 1953, HIAS brought Shula & her husband to NY and assigned Cleveland to be their final settlement destination. While waiting for the resettlement arrangements to be completed, Shula fell in love with the Lubavitcher community in NY. Shula scheduled an interview with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. She told the Rebbe that she wanted to become a Lubavitcher and live in the Lubavitcher community in NY and not proceed to Cleveland. But the Rebbe told her that she SHOULD go to Cleveland. He said that Cleveland is not a bad place, and that Shula's husband can be a rabbi there, and make a living, and help others keep the faith.

So, although the rest of Shula's family (including her mother) settled in NY, Shula and her husband settled Cleveland. Shula's husband shortened his last name from Katzenelenbogen to Kazen.

The Kazens (i.e., Shula & her husband) first lived in Cleveland's Kinsman neighborhood in 1953. Shula's husband served in several temporary rabbinic jobs, and as a High Holiday chazan, and as a Hebrew teacher and a shochet. He disliked asking for money, and people rarely paid him. Eventually, he got a job as a shochet at Coventry Poultry, and Shula worked there plucking chickens.

At that time, the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland had only 45 students. And the classes were mixed, with both boys and girls learning together. Shula told its principal, Rabbi Dessler, that she would enroll her 6 children in the Hebrew Academy only if the classes will be split between boys and girls, and Rabbi Dessler agreed to that.

In 1958, brothers Jake & Louis Madorsky bought a storefront building on Lee Rd near Cain Park. The Madorskys relocated, into that storefront building, their family's shul. This shul was a non-Chabad Nusach-Ari shul. It was found by, and subsidized by, the Madorsky family and, until then, had been located in Cleveland's Glenville area. The Madorskys hired Shula's husband, Rabbi Kazen, to be their shul's rabbi.



Zemach Zedek Shul on Lee Rd



Zemach Zedek Shul on Green Rd

The Kazens moved from the Kinsman neighborhood, and bought and moved into a 2-family house on Glenmont Rd in Cleveland's Coventry neighborhood. This neighborhood is near Case Western Reserve campus and was full of students and hippies and recent Russian-speaking immigrants.

The Kazens officiated at Zemach Zedek Shul for over 50 years. Throughout that period, they worked extremely hard in Jewish-outreach for neighborhood people (students, hippies & immigrants). Shula drove recent-immigrants to different appointments, and found them jobs and shiduchim. She arranged for a large number of immigrant children to enroll in Cleveland's Hebrew Academy day school. Each morning and each evening, Rabbi Kazen personally drove immigrants to and from shul services that he led, even while keeping his day-job as a shochet in Coventry Poultry.

Zemach Zedek provided a full sit-down meal after services each Shabbos for the congregation. The meal was personally cooked on Friday by Shula herself, along with help from others.

The Kazens let immigrants and students and hippies shack out in her apartment. In the 1970s, to alleviate the crowding at the Kazens' home, the Kazens, with Podiatrist Bert Brown, bought a house on Green Rd (across from Notre Dame College). It served as both a new Zemach Zedek shul (secondary to the primary Zemach Zedek shul remaining on Lee Rd) and a dorm (called "House of Refuge") for Jewish hippies and students to live in while immersed in a Jewish lifestyle. Rabbi Kazen served as rabbi of both Zemach Zedek shuls, which entailed him walking to both of shuls, alternatingly, on Sabbaths. This was even though his home on Glenmont Rd was 1.4 miles from the Lee Rd shul and 3 miles from the Green Rd shul.

In the 1980s, the Kazens bought a building from CWRU. This building had previously housed CWRU's podiatry school, and appeared to be about 100 years old. The Kazens turned it into a Chabad house. They, with Peretz Burnbaum, opened a kosher pizza shop in that building.

The Kazens hosted a Russian-language Sunday-morning Judaism lecture each week at their Lee Rd shul. After each lecture, the Kazens gave a kosher chicken to each attendee.

In the 1990s, the Kazens opened a kosher food bank (called "Kosher Food Pantry") in their Lee Rd shul. Years afterward, the food bank was moved to their Green Rd shul. About 2000, the food bank appended 2 office trailers to the Green Rd shul to accommodate the food bank's expansion.

When Shula was 84 years old in 2006, her mother died in NY at age 106.

Rabbi Kazen died in 2011.

Rebbetsin Shula Kazen moved to NY, and died there in 2018 at the age of 96.