

“Who, her? She’s nothing special.”

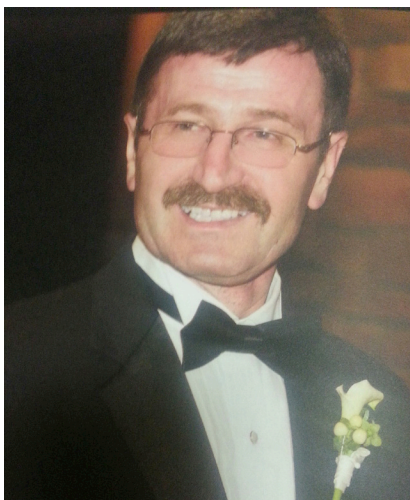
“Oh, him? Nothing to write home about.”

“What, them? But they’re not even frum!”

Two stories that may shed some light on how frum or important “non-frum” and “unimportant” people really are. First, the true (but never before told) story of Lemel Groiser...

“**H**e was my grandfather, and he lived in Belza, Moldova. This was the early part of the 1900s and the neighboring Soviet Union was fighting with Romania over who owned Moldova. At the time of this story, Moldova was part of the Soviet Union, under an oppressively anti-Semitic communism*. My grandfather Lemel ben Zalman, known as Lemel Groiser because he was big and strong, was not religious at all, but he knew he was a Jew. In Moldova when I was born, in 1957, being circumcised made you vulnerable to harassment and ridicule, or worse. You were marked as a Jew. Yet my grandfather Lemel Groiser told my parents, “It should be done,” and it was. He had an instinct about it. He also protected other Jews although he didn’t know there was a mitzvah of ahavas Yisroel. He didn’t know about most mitzvos. It was more of an instinct than a decision.”

-Aron Pripilitsky, a Jew I was honored to meet while spending Shabbos with Shluchim Rabbi Zalman and Mrs. Hindel Levitin at the Chabad House in Palm Beach, Florida.



Aron Pripilitsky in Palm Beach, FL, 2013.

Lemel Groiser led a construction crew for the communists in the late 1920s. He had to select workers to work under him. Many Jews came to him begging to be chosen, hoping he would protect them. He agreed and took them at great risk to himself because they were tailors and accountants, not builders. This would certainly make things difficult for Lemel who had to get things built. (They were building fake airplanes, to get the Germans to bomb them and waste their valuable ammunition and manpower.)

At one point his superiors became fed up with how little his team was producing. They gave him an ultimatum. The “planes” had to be completed... by tomorrow. That day Lemel chose the men who really knew construction, and told them they had to work all night until the job was completed. Naturally he chose none of the Jews, who wouldn’t be able to do the work.

The other workers were incensed when they realized that the Jews were in their beds while they, the non-Jews, kept working through the

night. They complained to the communist boss and Lemel was thrown into communist prison for five years.

A few months after his release, his Jewish workers came to him with another request: They wished to bake matzah for Pesach. Again at great risk to himself, Lemel helped them to do it. When the communist boss saw what was going on, he became very angry. He cursed Lemel, saying, “*Zhidan, chyla Palestina!*” (Romanian for “Jew, go to Palestine!”) and said that one of them had to go to prison for this sin; after all, Comrade Lenin denied that there was such a thing as G-d given laws at all. Baking matzah because G-d had commanded it was unacceptable.

The Jews who had baked matzah turned to Lemel.

“You’ve been in Soviet prison before, and survived it. If we go, we won’t survive it!”

And so Lemel Groiser, a man described by his grandson as “not religious at all,” voluntarily went back to Soviet prison for another five years.

He immigrated to the U.S. in 1992 and passed away in 1995, at the age of 85, an unsung hero.



Riva (Rivka), wife of Lemel, died in 1968 and was buried in Moldova. Paula (Pesha), Aron Pripilitsky's mother, is seen standing next to her mother's grave, along with her husband, David (Aron's father), and her father, Lemel Groiser. Lemel is the taller man.

**“We deny that there is a moral law which comes to men from outside of history, outside of society. It is a fraud. We devise our own moral rules according to the needs of the class struggle.” - Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), speaking to the Young Communist League, Moscow, 1920. Lenin denied that there was such a thing as G-d given laws at all; even the murder of innocents was acceptable if it would further the goals of the communist party. Eventually he was murdered by those who agreed with him on this point.*

Second, the story of Shimele der shtiller (“the quiet one”), who lived in the Jewish section of Prague in the year 1286...

Shimele was a very shy and quiet child. The other children made fun of him because he could never answer a question in class. It was generally accepted that Shimele would never amount to much, except by his grandmother, Tzipperel. She believed in him, defended him, and always said, “Leave my Shimele alone, and remember – still waters run deep! One day you’ll see...”

Shimele der shtiller grew up, got married and had children, but had a hard time supporting them, so his grandmother took a job cleaning the shul to help out. She became known as Tzipperel Shammeste.

One day it was announced in the city square, on Siroka Street, that King Wenceslas II and his wife Judith were about to visit the Jewish section of Prague.

As the king rode on his horse through the Jewish section, with Rabbi Yonasan, the Chief Rabbi, at his

side, the entire Jewish community lined the streets. The Jews were polished to a shine, as were the streets and storefronts. Cheers and applause followed their Majesties as they visited the sights in the Jewish quarter.

Suddenly, the enthusiastic applause and jubilant cries turned into horrified screams. A brick had been hurled down from a tall building. It landed right in front of the king’s horse. The king and his entourage sped off in a terrible rage.

The tall building was searched but nobody was found inside. Within a day a harsh and angry message arrived, addressed to Chief Rabbi Yonasan from King Wenceslas II: The Jews of Prague had eight days to turn over the would-be assassin, or the entire Jewish section would be plundered in a deadly pogrom, and on the ninth day any surviving Jews would be driven away.

Rabbi Yonasan tried negotiating with the king, swearing that no Jew had thrown the brick, and promising

the king that he too wanted to bring to justice whoever had done it. The king would not be appeased.

Rabbi Yonason tried his best to request an audience with Zawish Rosenberg, the king's chancellor, but Rosenberg refused to see them.

Rabbi Yonason had the gates of the city locked even in the daytime, afraid of the fury of the mob that was zealously gathering axes, clubs, and knives, delighted at an excuse to harm the Jews.

Seven days passed all too quickly, and finally it was the eighth day. The war cries of the mobs outside the city gates were frighteningly loud.

The sobs of the Jews in the shul were just as loud. The entire community, every man, woman and child,

Upon hearing this news, Tzipperel Shammeste cried out, "Look who is giving up his life to save us all!" And then she died, of joy or shock or a combination of the two.

The king decreed that the punishment would fit the crime, and the culprit would be thrown down from the very building where he had thrown the brick.

And so Shimele was brought to the city square in chains, accompanied by Rabbi Yonason. He was allowed to say good-bye to his sobbing wife and children, and then the king's guards stood on the ground holding their spears pointing upward as Shimele der shtiller was taken to the roof of the building and pushed off, to his cries of "Shema Yisroel..."



Siroka Street in Prague, Czechoslovakia, today.

was in the shul. One person was missing – Shimele. The community would not have noticed, but his loyal grandmother Tzipperel Shammeste was heard murmuring, "My poor quiet Shimele, what has happened to you?"

And then Rabbi Yonason went up to the bimah and commanded silence.

"The community has been saved from catastrophe," he declared, "but at what a price. One of us has, with few words, as always, sacrificed himself for the sake of Israel. Last night Shimele der shtiller went to the castle and presented himself as the man who threw the brick. We all know that he is innocent. His memory shall stay sacred. His sacrifice shall be accepted soon, as King Wenceslas II has decreed that Shimele is to die."

For three days, the Jews of Prague mourned the quiet man who had willingly gone to his death to save them.

Two years later, Zawish Rosenberg was found guilty of high treason and sentenced to death by hanging. Minutes before his execution he had Rabbi Yonason summoned from the Jewish quarter, and he confessed that he had paid a servant to throw the brick, knowing it would be ascribed to the Jews. Zawish begged Rabbi Yonason to see to it that Shimele's family was taken care of.

The story of Shimele der shtiller is told in greater detail in "The Prague Golem: Jewish Stories of the Ghetto," a collection of stories taken from various publications of the mid-1800s and early 1900s. ■