



# Legendary Patriot From a Forgotten Shtetl The Izik Leibovich Melamed Story

*by Jacob Lesov*



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Izik Leibovich Melamed (1893–1976) dedicated his long life to his country—Russia, and later the Soviet Union—and to his countrymen, disregarding nationalities. One of the greatest generation, he became my father-in-law and passed away four years after his daughter Basya's marriage.

His life was extraordinary. Izik's *kheder* years started when he was five; he began working as an apprentice when he was ten. In his twenties, Izik was among the conscripts of 1913. He fought as a private in World War I and in 1916 was captured by Germans and stationed in POW camp in German-occupied northern France. He was inspired by a speech of Soviet revolutionary leader Lev Trotsky in Ukraine in 1918. He witnessed the civil war in Russia in the 1920s, which took millions of lives, putting other millions in danger of dying from hunger. He saw in person Golda Meir in Palestine.

Izik volunteered for the Soviet Army in World War II and was wounded by a Nazi bomb in 1943. After the war, during which all of his family perished, he found the spirit to live on. He built a new family when he was past the age of 50 and felt a strong sense of responsibility for his new stepchildren. He became a devoted father for the first time at age of 56. He threw his Communist Party ticket in the faces of Party officials and nevertheless escaped Stalin's purges. He was never a complainer; he was a man who gave decades of enthusiastic labor to his new hometown of Rezekne in Latvia, badly stricken by war. He enjoyed being with people, loved companionship, and spoke with pride of his work for the Jewish elderly. At the end of his life he became a local legend, obtaining official permission to build a Holocaust memorial at the Jewish cemetery in Rezekne.



### 1. Vorotinchina-Orsha, Belarus

Izik Melamed was born in 1893 in the village of Vorotinchina, in Mogilev Gubernia, where forests and thousands of swamps, rivers, and lakes make Belarus a fresh-water colossus. Most of the Jews in the *shtetl* were poor, and Izik's family with eight sons was no different. The houses looked like small, wooden, century-old shacks with straw roofs and *mezuzahs* on doors. Between the houses and the muddy streets were small vegetable gardens. The goats provided milk for families and were kept inside homes.

The shtetl dwellers cooked, baked, and were content. The Jews were accustomed to poverty and through the ages they had learned how to subsist on the barest of essentials. None envied their neighbors. People were involved in each other's lives: they lent and borrowed things, helped in time of need. No one was alone. The shtetl was a close-knit community providing strength and endurance for its inhabitants.

This region of Belarus was blessed with large number of unique teachers (*melameds*) and famous rabbis. Early Judaic teaching was conducted in a private community-run elementary school, a *kheder*, such as the one shown below, which literally means “room” and generally consisted of the living room of the teacher’s house, in which his wife with her children pursued their domestic duties even as the lessons went on the whole day. No matter how poor, families were willing to sacrifice a great deal to have their boys tutored, starting at a tender age.



From Sunday through Thursday Jews were busy earning their living, but on Friday things changed. For the Jews the Sabbath was a time to forget their daily problems and hardships and to reflect on the richness of their heritage. It was a time to give praise and thanks to G-d for seeing them through another week. Early in the morning, the women started chopping fish to prepare the Sabbath meal. Toward afternoon a bath attendant rushed through the streets calling the men to come to public bath so that they could approach the Sabbath in cleanliness. The bathing alternated between men’s and women’s use for the next couple of hours. With the conclusion of the Sabbath meal of *challah*, fish, soup, fowl, and wine, the master of the house usually gave a test to his sons on what they had learned at the *kheder* during the week.

Because the Jews generally kept to themselves and spoke Yiddish, they were considered as foreigners by Russian officials. Nevertheless, Tsar Alexander II, who reigned until 1881, eased many restrictions on Jews. In 1879 he granted full freedom of movement to all Jews who held diplomas of higher education. The next year he allowed the first Jewish student into a Russian university. Jewish communities responded to the new liberalism at to a welcome breeze.

After Alexander II’s assassination by group of nihilists in St. Petersburg in March 1881, his son Alexander III succeeded to the throne. Believing that Jews were responsible for his father’s death, he was determined to show them that they had no more home in Russia. Those were grim years for Russian Jews. In 1882 Alexander III introduced temporary regulations called May Laws that stayed in effect for more than thirty years. The intent of these laws was to restrict Jews from getting an education and entering professions. Alexander III authorized bands of marauders called “The Black Hundreds” to sweep through Jewish settlements slaughtering, looting, and burning. Waves of pogroms washed over the Pale of Settlement.

Izik began to attend kheder when he was five years old, as was the custom. There he spent his childhood, from seven in the morning till eight at night, studying the Torah and reading the Hebrew prayer book. Bible translation, Hebrew cursive writing, and communication in Yiddish also were part of the curriculum.

The years following kheder were a tough time for all Jewish students as there were many limitations to continuing education at public high schools, or *gymnasiums*. So, when Izik was ten years old, his father went to the city of Orsha thirty miles north and arranged for Izik's apprenticeship at a workshop owned by skillful Jewish craftsman. A private agreement between the parent and shop owner committed a child to the owner's authority for a period lasting from three to five years. Before Izik left the shtetl, his mother became nearsighted, almost blind, and the family lost one of Izik's younger brothers, who drowned in a river.

Izik's shop owner in Orsha specialized in coloring clothing and fabric for the garment industry. For Izik, it was the first step into the hardships of the adult world, working every day except Shabbat and every night except Friday, living in the lowest strata of society. Izik entered his teenage years in turbulent times, as Russia headed toward the revolution of 1905, which resulted in significant reforms. Struggling to regain control of the nation, Tsar Nicholas II issued the October Manifesto, a document which granted basic civil liberties to all people, including Jews, and gave citizens a voice in the government through the election of the Duma.

At that time, as the city of Orsha on the picturesque Dnieper River became more prosperous, central streets were being paved with cobblestones, street lamps had been installed, and brick and stone buildings were erected. After long years of apprenticeship Izik became a qualified tradesman skillfully applying the textile painting techniques he had learned. He began working independently, receiving clients and contracts.

It was also a time when Zionism and Socialism found sympathy and support among Russian Jews. The Jewish party called Poalei Zion (Laborers of Zion) had a basic goal to establish a Jewish national state and to move Jews from all over the world to *Eretz Yisrael*. In contrast to the Poalei Zion, the Bund—the All-Russian Jewish Workers Union—rejected Zionist ideology. Bund leaders supported the learning of Yiddish, because they saw the future of Jews as being in Russia. Both the Poalei Zion and Bund published newspapers and created cultural networks by organizing clubs, libraries, and circles. At the age of 18, Izik joined the Poalei Zion Party and became a Zionist. The group would gather together in the evenings, drink fragrant tea, and meditate on fulfilling their dream of immigrating to Palestine.

Izik's cousin Fenya Dubrovenskaya also lived in Orsha. They started to see each other and began dating; within a short period of time, the relationship developed into a passionate courtship.

## 2. Tsarist Army: World War I

Izik and Fenya's happiness, however, did not last long. Upon reaching the age of twenty-one a young man in Russia was subject to be drafted into the Tsarist army. Per Russian army regulations in 1913, the service period for infantry was three years. As Izik approached enlistment age, he was drafted and assigned to the infantry regiment where conscripts learned the basic skills of soldiering: trench warfare and the use of barbed wire barriers and machine guns. An army field ration for soldiers was three pounds of black bread a day, a few ounces of grits or buckwheat gruel and half a pound of "wormy" beef. Conscripts were paid the equivalent of forty-five cents every two months.

On August 2, 1914, Russia declared war on Austria and Germany and the Russian army entered Germany to defend Russia's fellow orthodox Slavs, the Serbs. Russian troops were armed mostly with Berdan single-shot rifles with semi-permanently attached bayonets. The soldiers' gear included two leather ammunition pouches holding thirty rounds of each. World War I was the first war in which the soldiers of the chief nations involved were outfitted with steel combat helmets; the Russian soldiers, however, wore cloth caps with visors, no protection against bullets or flying shrapnel.

The war for Russians began with their invasion of East Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia. The first incursion quickly turned to a Russian defeat in the Battle of Tannenberg. Luckily, Izik's detachment was sent to Galicia and in September their army won the battle. By the end of 1914 the Russians controlled almost all of Galicia. The Russian and Austro-Hungarian armies continued to clash throughout the winter. In March 1915, the Russians made an advance, crossing the Carpathian Mountains and defeating the Austrians. A month later the German and Austrian offensive forced a Russian evacuation back eastward. The German offensive soon turned into a general advance and then into a strategic retreat of the Russian army. By mid-1915, the Russians had been expelled from Russian Poland and pushed hundreds of kilometers east, away from the borders of the Central Powers. The German heavy artillery commenced to pound the Russian defensive positions. Occasionally, the artillery barrage from the enemy lines included smoke shells to screen the attacking troops and chlorine gas-filled shells. Izik was shocked as shells came from everywhere and a mass of mangled steel flew through the air. Again, he escaped injury. Others were not so lucky: hundreds of men lay dead on the ground with their arms or legs ripped off. Their bodies often could not be retrieved and buried, especially those who had died near enemy lines. Rotting flesh sent up a stench which was a torment to soldiers in the trenches.

Fighting side by side with his gentile comrades and submissively suffering for his country, Izik won the respect of his comrades, who began to call him Arkady. In the trenches and on the firing line Izik offered ample proof of his valor and endurance. Of course, as a Jew he heard a lot of anti-Semitic remarks from his fellows and even was punched by Jew haters, but his hard life had made him fearless; having a hot temper, Izik taught a bigot a lesson when he went too far.

Trying to forget about the tormenting lice and literally sinking into the stinking mud, Izik took part in the best planned and most successful Russian attack of the war, "General Brusilov's Offensive" (June–September 1916), the only battle named after an individual field commander. The last large attacks Izik fought in this war were in the battlefield near the town of Lutsk in Svinyukhi village during late fall 1916, when his unit was cut off, encircled and captured by Germans.

Russian prisoners in captivity spent nightmarish days in crowded cells, jam-packed on wooden shelves, covered in scabies before being shaved and fumigated for disinfection. The poor hygiene explains why diseases such as typhus and cholera appeared soon and spread like wildfire. A barracks housed an average of 250 prisoners and the foul air circulated very little. Sometimes the Germans came along and prisoners were given half an hour of fresh air. Rations consisted of a mug of soup but what was in it, no one could tell. Camps had only a single faucet in the yard for thousands of people. Latrines were a simple board with a hole in the middle above a pit, which the prisoners were tasked with emptying. The pit often overflowed during powerful rains, making the air noxious. Men died every day from wounds, dysentery, and starvation. Cemeteries for deceased prisoners were opened near the camps.

Izik's knowledge of Yiddish, his mother tongue (*mameloshn*), gave him the skills to translate questions and orders and be helpful to the Germans. After a while Izik was transferred to a POW camp in northern France where he remained for the duration of the war. Again, luckily, he survived

captivity through to the end of spring 1918 when the camp guards began drifting away. There was no organized German effort to send prisoners home—the POWs were largely left to their own devices.

Izik, then recovering from typhus, realized that he has a long way to go. He began slowly heading toward Russia, walking and from time to time catching a lift. The best one could hope for was to find someone to share the path and to meet good people who were ready to help. It was not easy. While traveling along the railway tracks for roughly half the distance across Europe and then along well-traveled paths toward the towns, Izik became seriously ill. He began feeling an abnormal accumulation of fluid in his belly (ascites). He suffered cramps, stomach pain, and swelling almost all the way back home, but still he was confident of making a recovery. By the time he crossed the Ukrainian border Izik was exhausted. Here he learned about Tzar Nicolas II's abdication in March 1917, the outbreak of Bolshevik Revolution in November of that year, and Russia's withdrawal from the world war in March 1918. Now he realized that things were far from quiet and that Russia was descending into civil war. With Red and White armies all around, the former prisoners often found themselves in the middle of danger.

Trying to manage the stomach pain, Izik was convinced that he knew the way home and hoped to reach Vorotinscina by autumn. Again, he moved slowly on foot trails, taking the easiest routes available. He thought to complete the journey to Belarus by train in boxcars and partially succeeded. Stopping at a big station, Izik saw many people gathered around a heavy armored train with two engines. The orator attracted his attention with his emotional speech. The next thing Izik knew he was listening to the energetic revolutionary Lev Trotsky, the Bolshevik Government War Commissar. In his speech, Trotsky explained the need for Russia to withdraw from the war. He described the negotiations that led to the treaty and told the crowd of the Bolsheviks' intentions to carry out radical land reform when they came to power. The great estates of the rich would be taken away, divided, and the land would be given “to those who work the land.” The Bolsheviks promised national self-determination for all the people in the Russian Empire. They raised visions of a free, proletarian Belarus, Ukraine joining with the working masses of free Baltic republics in an offensive against the “old, rotting world.” They would soon be joined by the workers of France and Germany, then by the “enslaved millions” of China and India. Before too long there would be a “world commune” based on absolute justice. Trotsky encouraged villagers, troops, and his illiterate audience, who were cut off from the vital news, telling them: “These spring months [in 1918] become the decisive months in the history of Europe. At the same time this spring will decide definitely the fate of the bourgeois and rich peasant, anti-Soviet Russia.”\*

Not only Izik but most of the listeners embraced the Bolshevik cause. After two years of fighting in a war and another year and a half living in captivity in a distant land, it was a great relief for Izik to learn that all restrictions on Jews were abolished and that Jews could hold any available public office. Jews enjoyed new-found freedoms and for the moment anti-Semitism was forced underground.

From this point on, Izik believed he had found his permanent home. He believed in the Bolsheviks' promises and thought that socialism was the correct response to anti-Semitism. Izik expected to remain with these people for the rest of his life and to give them his full support. He could not understand then that the Soviets' overall attitude was utopian, based on unrealistic promises, and that Red propaganda was a major factor in the rapid Bolshevization in Russia.

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\* “Inspiring the Red Army, April 1919, Leon Trotsky”: [http://www.speeches-usa.com/Transcripts/125\\_trotsky.html](http://www.speeches-usa.com/Transcripts/125_trotsky.html) (accessed February 17, 2013).

Besides, Izik was becoming more and more impatient to see his family and his fiancée—the people he cared about most deeply.

### 3. Interwar Years and World War II

Back in Vorotinshcina, Izik was believed to have been killed. During his days in the army and then in captivity Izik was not able to write home. The use of Hebrew characters was prohibited by military authorities; all letters were censored and those written in Hebrew were confiscated. Izik was illiterate in Russian, so his family knew nothing about his whereabouts during all those years.

Tragically, after seeing Izik return alive, his mother suffered a heart attack and died. After Izik buried his mother he went to Orsha where more sad news awaited him. He hardly expected to learn that his fiancée Fenya was preparing to marry another man. During Izik's long absence, rumors circulated that he was dead. Now, suddenly, Fenya awakened and realized that Izik was alive and that it was her dream to marry him. She turned away from the huppah and devoted herself to Izik and to his complete recovery. The Jewish families in Russia still had the long practice of marrying within the extended family, but parents warned mature children to exclude close relatives such as first cousins. Nevertheless, Izik married Fenya and they lived happily together for twenty years, having no children. Izik's old father Leiba, the widower, became very feeble and Izik took him to Orsha, providing good care for him until his death.

Again, it was time of turmoil and suffering in Russia. Granted independence in 1918, Poland occupied part of the country during 1919–1920. The Treaty of Riga, signed in March 1921, confirmed Polish possession of large areas in Belarus and Ukraine and brought an end to the Russian Civil War. Then, in 1921–1922, the Russian famine began and millions died. With so many men killed or wounded during these numerous conflicts, the Russian economy stagnated.

Despite the powerful influences of atheism and socialism in Russia at that time, Izik could not erase the strong impressions of his years in kheder and the values he carried from childhood. Thus, once again, Izik became involved in the Zionist movement that flourished in 1920s. Zionist youth groups were formed throughout the country. Hebrew book clubs were founded. The news of the Balfour Declaration of 1917 reached Russia and the talk was that the British government favored the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. Zionist rallies were held in many cities. During preparation for the opening of Jerusalem University, Orsha's Zionist group was invited to attend. They traveled went to Eretz Israel in 1925, among them Izik Melamed—tall, well dressed, good looking, yet not over-confident; a Jewish man who walked with dignity and with his head high—a *mensch*.

In Palestine the group visited many *kibbutzim*, their schools and libraries. In Jerusalem the Zionists from Orsha met with a sad-eyed, delicate young lady, who was representing the Jewish Labor Organization, Histadrut. The lady's name was Golda Meyerson and she said that she had been born in Russia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. She spoke about the basic aims of Histadrut, saying that thousands of men and women in Jewish Palestine now were without work. She showed personal interest in town of Pinsk, where her grandparents lived and which as a young girl she visited quite often. The group informed Golda Meyerson that in 1919, during the Polish–Soviet war, Polish soldiers killed as many as thirty-five Jews in Pinsk, suspecting them of collaborating with Bolsheviks. In a couple of decades the whole world would know this lady as Golda Meir—the Israeli Prime Minister in 1970s.

Returning to Orsha, Izik was hired as a manager of the state-owned shop for fabric painting and dry cleaning. In the 1930s, the town was becoming a major textile center with the largest linen

mill in the region. Many factories in Orsha produced knitted goods and clothing. Flax was a common fiber for clothing and household textiles. Izik operated the dry cleaning shop for many years and business was brisk. The manufacturing workers' greasy robes and overalls were cleaned by the dozens in Izik's shop every day. Among his customers were machine shops, locomotive depot, construction companies. On a particular day of the week a truck came to the plant to collect soiled garments from the workers and distribute clean ones. The head of the Orsha's locomotive depot, Konstantin Zaslonov, demanded strict quality control. He and Izik became close friends and remained so until World War II.

In 1930s, Izik enjoyed a period when Yiddish flowered in Belarus. Along with Russian, Belarusian, and Polish, Yiddish was among the four official languages of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. There were Yiddish drama theaters, schools, courses in Yiddish language and literature at the University in Minsk, daily Yiddish papers. But this would not last long. Yet Izik's life taught him to be very cautious and avoid comments or discussions of political or national subjects at home or with friends. He knew about the arrests in the country and, to protect himself, and his family he was careful not to identify too overtly with the Jewish nationalists.

When Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Izik was 48. He asked his wife Fenya to stay with her relatives and go eastward with them as soon and as fast as they could. Although Izik could have avoided service in the war entirely, he joined the Soviet Army as a volunteer and was assigned to noncombat duties in rear area auxiliary units, such as supply, kitchen, and laundry.

During 1941 and 1942 Izik saw things going from bad to worse. He witnessed hundreds of Russian soldiers dying. His army participated in the battles of Rzhev (1942–1943)—a series of offensives aimed to eliminate the threat to Moscow. It was an epic disaster for hundreds of thousands of young Soviet men. Because of the huge losses, these battles were named the “Rzhev meat grinder.” Generals Zhukov and Konev were the front commanders and cared little about the loss of lives, considering it inevitable.

Izik treated the soldiers well. Troops in his army were sure that “Arkady's Bath” would be hot enough and “Arkady's Soup” would be salty enough to make soldiers feel appreciated and respected. Izik's rear area outdoor station behind the front line also housed wounded soldiers waiting for transportation. A few injured troops lay on simple stretches; others were lying or sitting on the ground. Izik took care of all wounded soldiers and especially those who were wounded seriously. He delivered water, helped the injured get into a position to relax, and gave them words of encouragement. Once, a badly wounded young soldier called out to Izik and eagerly begged for water. Izik knew that drinking water with a stomach wound would kill the soldier and treated him by wiping his face with a wet cloth. The young soldier, without uttering a word, handed Izik his soup spoon and closed his eyes. Izik said, “You will need this spoon yourself very soon.” As Izik knelt down to give his face another wipe he suddenly felt a quiver and then discovered that the young man had died.



The engraved soup spoon pictured here meant a good deal to Izik as a life symbol, showing how life should be valued and loved. Izik kept it all his life. The back of the handle had been engraved with the soldier's full first and last names, Simen Korshunov. The bowl contains an engraved Russian Orthodox cross with the skewed lowest bar, a symbol of Christianity in Russia. After the war Izik made repeated attempts to find soldier's family but was unsuccessful in locating any relatives.

At the end of 1943 Izik himself was wounded in the left leg. A piece of shrapnel tore through his thigh, coming to rest near a bone, requiring immediate surgery. Izik was sent to the hospital in the city of Ostashkov. The shrapnel was removed through a four-inch incision and Izik felt lucky again, having avoided the amputation of his leg.

In the hospital Izik learned about the Nazis' atrocities against Jews in Belarus and Ukraine. He never heard anything from his wife Fenya during all these years and with deep sorrow thought that he would never see her again. Later, Izik found out that no one in his family in Orsha survived the Holocaust. He also learned that during the first years of war his close friend Konstantin Zaslonov became a legend of the partisan movement in Belarus. He organized an underground group which blew up nearly a hundred German locomotives and carried out a number of acts of sabotage and diversions, using mines camouflaged by coal. Zaslonov was killed in a battle in November 1942 and was posthumously awarded the Star of Hero of the Soviet Union.

After recovering, Izik was appointed to stay at the hospital and perform maintenance duty. A couple of months later in 1944, the hospital was moved closer to the front line, to the town of Rezekne, Latvia, which had just been liberated from the Nazis.

#### **4. Post-War Period, Rezekne, Latvia**

Working at a hospital in the city of Rezekne during the last months of the war, Izik met a Jewish widow, Tanya Kunst, with two school-age children. Kuntz had returned from evacuation in the upper Volga basin and worked in the kitchen in the same military hospital where Izik worked. In the dish room she washed large pots and pans with food sticking to the metal bottoms. She scraped out whatever porridge, stew, or mash potatoes she could and took it home to feed to her children. Towards Tanya, Izik felt, if not love, then a strong sense of responsibility. Her husband had died in the evacuation and her oldest son, Zyama, had been killed in the Holocaust. So, Izik decided to make Rezekne his new home and marry Tanya.

When the war ended in 1945, Izik acquired a city permit to build and organize a fabric coloring shop. He turned his craft into a full-time business and began to work as a textile colorist, striving to ensure that each color or color combination turned out as expected for the particular fabric. It was a hard physical job. Izik pulled heavy, awkward rolls of fabric from the shelves, unrolled them, then submerged the entire length of cloth in the dye and let it soak. Then the textile needed to be boiled, scrubbed, rinsed, wrung out, and hung to dry. Tanya helped Izik in many ways, but mostly as a presser. Flattening wrinkles and seams on heavy fabrics in an airless room was not an easy job either. The old coal-heated irons weighed ten pounds and were soon replaced by stove-heated irons. The rotation of cooled and heated irons continued all day long.

There was one important and specific ongoing disagreement between Izik and Tanya. Izik wanted a child of his own. He wanted it all his life. Tanya felt it would be shameful to be pregnant, as the mother of two growing teens, and she opposed it. Besides, she was 44 years old. Izik insisted and even threatened that he would leave her if she wouldn't keep the baby. So, Izik was 56 when he became a father for the very first time. Izik loved his only child, his daughter Basya, with all his heart. Despite the hardship, Izik was very happy in those years.

Now, after the war, Izik had snow-white hair and his large dark eyes held traces of sadness. Often Izik started his conversation claiming that his life was ordinary. He was modest, kind, and outgoing, but he became a completely different person when someone offended him with an anti-Semitic remark. No one would be able to stop Izik from punching out an abuser. In the 1950s, Izik lived through vicious and brutal anti-Semitic campaigns such as the "Rootless Cosmopolitans" and

“Doctor’s Plot.” Jewish intellectuals were accused of lacking patriotism and Jewish doctors were accused in plotting against Stalin’s life. Party meetings were called throughout the country. Every Party member was obliged to join in the condemnation of Jewish intellectuals. Izik was called to the Party Committee office and was asked to publicly criticize certain Jews whom Izik knew as very good people. From his childhood Izik recalled the words from Torah: LO-TA ANEN VERE CHA ED

SHAQER! **לֹא־תִשָּׁעַן בְּרֵעֶךָ עַד שֶׁקֶר:** : Thou dost not answer against thy neighbor a false testimony! He refused to obey the Party Committee. Despite his fear of losing his job, Izik threw away his Communist Party ticket and said that having gone through two Great Wars, spilling his blood for the country, he had nothing to be afraid of. Usually, expulsion from Party membership inevitably led to loss of a management job, but Izik continued to run his shop until retirement and kept his belief in socialism, although never again joined the Communist Party.

All his life Izik secretly considered himself a Zionist. He was glad to witness the Soviet Union’s early support of the State of Israel. However, relations between Israel and the Soviets worsened in the 1950s, with Israel eventually turning into a pro-Western ally of the United States. It caused a great shift and soon the Soviet government began to regard Zionism as an enemy and increased its support for Egypt and Syria. At the end of the 1960s, the Soviets began to back the Palestine Liberation Organization against Israel. Izik understood that the propaganda put out about Israel was not true and became “The Listener”—a category of people who spent evening hours with shortwave radio listening to the Kol Israel station, which was the only way to find out what Israel was doing. Despite the jamming of the Israeli station, Izik’s patience was rewarded and he continued to be well informed about life in Israel. Izik saw that Israelis were not defenseless little Jews who allowed themselves to be massacred. They were alive, strong, and proud. And their pride extended not only to themselves but to all Jews in the Soviet Union.

As Izik still had the skills to recite prayers and to sing passages from the liturgy, he often stood in for the first *hazan* in synagogue and led the community in worship. His hearty and pleasing voice appealed and impressed the worshippers and inspired prayers.

After retirement, now having spare time, Izik had become active in the community. He developed what must have been a natural talent for social work. People he met in the neighborhood, in parks, in the synagogue and town hall confided their personal problems in him. He felt that people trusted him and soon he was elected to the City Retiree Committee. Izik was proud that people were letting him represent them to the City Authority. The most important theme in those days was to erect a monument in the city of Rezekne to honor the victims of Holocaust. Jewish people talked to Izik about their families lost in the Holocaust. In 1941, all Jews were brutally massacred on Market Place in downtown Rezekne and in Anchupane Forest. People recalled the Nazis’ collaborator’s name as Krasovskys, who was a former post-office manager in the village of Vilyaky and took the most active role in murdering Jewish people. After Rezekne was liberated from the Nazis, Krasovskys escaped to the United States but was caught and prosecuted.

Izik began to considering the memorial project as the highest goal in his life. The city officials were still asking questions: why should this monument be dedicated to Jewish people only? People of many other nationalities, also civilians, had been killed by the Nazis. City authorities still regarded the memorial for Holocaust victims as not critical, not vital.

In the mid 1960s, Izik suffered a sudden and massive heart attack. He was over 70 then. Doctors told his wife and daughter that he might just have days to live. But Izik’s words were different: “I recovered from typhoid fever at the age of 24 and will recover now.” During his recovery Izik pursued his idea about the Holocaust memorial despite doctors’ warnings to reduce stress.

He was determined to get a city permit for the monument and, despite all obstacles, he continued to voice the people's intention to have a place to honor and remember those who had been killed. Izik was determined to convince the authorities that Jews were murdered merely for their ethnicity. "All of them—children, women, the elderly; peaceful and unarmed people," as Izik constantly told his family. "Other civilians were killed for other reasons, maybe because they did something against Germans or were helping partisans or as hostages. But Jews were killed merely because they were Jews. They were victims of the worst of all crimes—genocide."

Finally, Jews of the city of Rezekne were allowed to erect a Holocaust memorial at the Jewish cemetery. Izik, despite his humble origins, had become a heroic and legendary figure. People in Rezekne would say: "Either you like Izik or you haven't tried to talk to him yet."

Izik died at the age of 83, having lived ten years longer than doctors predicted—long enough to tell his grandkids Pavlik and Anya stories about his now-extinct shtetl with its soft and jovial Yiddishkeit.



Left: Izik Melamed in park in Rezekne, Latvia, 1975; right: Jewish people gathered on the day of Kever Avos next to the Holocaust memorial in the village of Vilyaki, similar to the monument built in Rezekne under Izik's leadership.

Conclusion: Much of what I discovered about Izik Leibovich Melamed life I learned through conversations with my wife Basya and other relatives. Unfortunately, I did not take advantage of his stories when we spent summer vacations in Rezekne and he was willing to talk. Busy with family and work, I did not take the time to learn more. Now I feel shame and real sorrow, when I think of all the details that have been forever lost.



Izik Melamed and the author are in ovals, right and left, respectively.

**About the author:** Jacob Lesov was born and raised in Moscow, Russia, the youngest in a Jewish family of three children. He graduated from the Automobile and Highway Engineering College in Moscow and worked as an engineer for 20 years before immigrating to the United States with his family in 1990. He now resides with his wife, Basya, in Columbia, South Carolina, and is employed in the engineering department of a large metal manufacturer.

Mr. Lesov devotes most of his spare time to writing about the history of his extended family, including articles published in the *Columbia Jewish News* that deal with civilian life during the world wars, post-war hardships and losses, Stalin's anti-Semitism, the Soviet government anti-Jewish policies, and the family's experience of immigration. He enjoys performing Jewish music and plays solo mandolin and accompanies Beth Shalom Synagogue's choir in its musical Shabbat program.

Jacob and Basya's three grown-up children live with their families in Georgia, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Jacob and Basya's youngest son Alexander during his bar mitzvah ceremony was given the Hebrew name Izik in honor of his zaide Izik Melamed, whom Alexander has never seen.



Rabbi Hesh Epstein preparing Alex-Izik for his Torah reading.

On the cover: a Hebrew "aleph-bet" pictorial flyer used as a mnemonic device for Jewish children in Russia learning Yiddish; and photograph of Izik Leibovich Melamed with Russian and Latvian children (circa 1965), standing in front of trees Izik had planted in front of his apartment building. All photographs courtesy of the author.