

Source Sheet

THE CANTONISTS

Beginning with the reign of Czar Nicholas I in 1827, young Jews were forcefully conscripted into Russian military service. In this talk, Dovi Safier will explain how this edict brought upon the decimation of the Kahal structure and overall Jewish life in the Russian Pale.

Tisha Ba'av @ BMOL

7:00 PM (Mincha at 7:50)



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The Czars & The Jews

Written by Dovi Safier

	<p>Catherine the Great: (1762-1796) Jews came under Russian control for the first time following the partitions of Poland. While she was known to posterity as the mother of the Russian Enlightenment, she was not quite as liberal towards the country's Jews. She created the Pale of Settlement and excluded Jews from Russian society, politically and economically, essentially deeming the Jews a separate entity in Russia. Russian policy toward the Jews took an ominous direction with the issue of the <i>ukase</i> of 1794, which required them to pay double the taxes levied on Christians.</p>
	<p>Paul I: (1796-1801) His decrees during his short reign concerning the Jews testify that he acted tolerantly toward them. He opposed the expulsion of the Jews from Kamenetz-Podolski and Kiev. In addition, Paul I took a stand in the struggle between the <i>Chasidim</i> and <i>Misnagdim</i> by liberating Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi. He also rejected all blood libel accusations leveled against the Jews.</p>
	<p>Alexander I: (1801-1825) Was probably the best Czar for the Jews. Considered a liberal, he didn't have a reactionary policy against the Jews in any way. Him being the Czar is the real reason the Baal Hatanya supported Russia during the Napoleonic invasion - he was simply a Czar that was considered especially good for the Jews.</p>
	<p>Nicholas I: (1825-1855) Was considered the worst Czar for the Jews. The cantonist decrees were only during his reign. He restricted the Pale and economic opportunities for Jews as well. The clothing decrees were enacted during this time as well. Additionally the so called '<i>haskalah mitaam</i>', the government supported <i>haskalah</i> occurred during his reign, which attempted to force them to change their religious practices. The bloody Crimean War (1853-1856) was under his watch.</p>
	<p>Alexander II: (1855-1881) Also considered a reformer and more liberal. Freed the serfs. Was a bit better for the Jews under his reign as abolished some of his father Nicholas I's decrees such as the cantonists. He also abolished some of the special Jewish taxes, and began to allow certain Jews live outside the Pale. His assassination was blamed on the Jews.</p>
	<p>Alexander III: (1881-1894) Was terrible for the Jews. Very reactionary because of his father's assassination. The worst pogroms began when he became Czar, and it was seen as if he was doing nothing to stop them. The Great Emigration began as a result, resulting in hundreds of thousands of Jews leaving. He passed the May Laws, which made things extremely difficult for Jews in Russia. Jewish economy got worse under his rule. Volozhin was closed under his watch.</p>
	<p>Nicholas II: (1894-1917) The last of the Romanovs. Killed during the revolution. Considered not good for the Jews, and in many ways very bad for them. Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), Kishinev and later pogroms took place during his reign and again he reacted passively towards the bloodshed. Emigration continued at an increasing pace as it was seen to be impossible for Jews to continue under the Czars. He refused to reform any policy granting the Jews equal rights even though Russia was the last remaining country in the world where the Jews still didn't have rights. He didn't open the Pale either.</p>

A. S. Friedberg recounts an episode in which no one heard the cries of the kidnapped child nor those of his blind father:

An elderly blind man lived with his ten-year-old son. In his younger years, the old man had been the cantor and emissary of the town until he had contracted an eye disease and could no longer perform the functions of his job. He begged for bread to feed his family, his young son guiding him from town to town. As they walked through the forest one winter day, chappers abducted his son. Alone and lost in the forest, the blind cantor screamed for help until he lost his voice, but nobody heard the old man's cries. The next day, the cantor was found dead, frozen to death in the forest.³⁶

Yehudah Leib Levin describes the parting words of parents to their sons:

Captured children were squeezed tightly together in the wagon that uprooted them without warning from their world of the shtetl. A large, wide wagon pulled by two horses would rumble through the streets of a small village one day. The wagon drivers advanced from house to house, seizing boys out of each house until the wagon was filled. The boys were sitting or lying pressed against one another like fish in a barrel. Their parents, relatives and neighbors crowded around the wagon, crying bitterly. Parents thrust into the hands of their sons books of Psalms, sets of *tefillin* (phylacteries), whatever small religious article they had in their possession. "Stay a Jew!" they entreat their boys. "Whatever happens, stay a Jew!"³⁷

his riding crop. This happens two more times before you realize that the *va'ad* of the *kehile*, the local Jewish council of your *shtetl*, must have given you up to the *chappers* in place of the son of the wealthy merchant Chaim Itzkovitsch. You will not hear your real name again for many years. In the meantime, you will be Itzkovitsch. The loss of your name is another heavy stone to carry in your sack of miseries.

Your march progresses through the spring, which in that part of the world is not a time of flowers and birds but of melting, filthy snow and life-sucking mud. Boys who take sick, forced to keep marching until they drop, are left where they fall without even a few shovelful of dirt to cover their pathetic little bodies. As the soles of your feet begin to grow hard, so does your heart. If you happen to get your hands on an extra crust of bread, you hide it from the other boys or gobble it down. If you notice another boy exhibiting the white lips and blue rings around the eyes that are the telltale signs of fever, you try to sleep near him so you can get his socks if he dies during the night. You devote all your energy to survival, and your childhood becomes such a distant memory that you will later wonder if it mightn't, after all, have happened to someone else. The soldiers take away your shawl and phylacteries on the absurd grounds that they are slowing you down, leaving nothing of your Jewishness but the prayers you repeat endlessly as you slog along.

As April turns to May, your progress is interrupted by work in the villages you pass through. The soldiers hire you out to help hoe the fields or clear away debris where forest has been slashed and burned to create new farmland. You have never done physical labor of any kind, and your hands easily bleed, blister and swell. You wrap them in strips of cloth you tear from the bundle holding your possessions, but these soon become so soaked with blood and pus that they are of little use.

After weeks on the road (so many you have lost count), having alternated between stretches of field work and day-long marches, you arrive in Moscow, caked in mud and numb from fatigue. You see arching Cathedrals with glistening golden domes and the sturdy administrative buildings of Imperial Russia for the first time. But you aren't on a sightseeing excursion. The soldiers hurry through the town, stopping only long enough to stock up on vodka for the next leg of the journey and take turns visiting a brothel on the outskirts of the city.

Long March Begins

On the evening of the fifth day, you arrive in Nevel. There the *chappers* hand you over to the army, receiving six rubles for each of you. In the garrison, you are stripped naked and given a cursory medical examination by an army doctor. Then your head is shaved (How can you stand before the Lord without the *peyes* He has commanded you never to cut off?), and are given a uniform made for a grown man many times your size. You wonder if this is your final destination, but after only one night in musty barracks that smell of cold and damp, you are back on the road. This time, though, there is no wagon, and you are trudging along through the mud with about 50 other boys. You are accompanied by six armed soldiers. One is an officer with a limp, who doesn't seem to be too happy with his assignment. You are not allowed to talk with the other boys while you are walking, and the soldiers only speak to grunt out orders.

The boots you were given fit poorly, and yesterday's blisters are already open sores. The army coat tugs you earthward as its hem drags soddenly through the mud. You repeat over and over again the prayers you had memorized for your *beer mitzvah*, but they do little to lighten your spirits.

The soldier with the limp calls you Yankel Itzkovitsch. When you protest that Yankel Itzkovitsch is not your name, he calls you a liar and hits you with

There were men in Polotzk whose faces made you old in a minute. They had served Nicholas I, and came back unbaptized.

From The Promised Land by Mary Antin¹⁰⁷

On February 19, 1855, Tsar Nicholas died. The news and celebrations spread rapidly throughout the Pale of Settlement.

Upon the coronation of Alexander II in February 1856, the Jewish community sent a report to the new Tsar detailing the abuse that children had suffered as a result of the Cantonist Decree and requesting of him to take action to improve their situation.

Alexander dealt promptly with the matter. He issued orders that incrementally abolished the Cantonist Decree. On August 25, he ordered the ending of conscription of underage recruits and reduced the quota of Jewish recruits to an equal proportion to the rest of the population.¹⁰⁸ On December 25 of that year, Alexander issued another decree which, “restored to the families of soldiers the right to make arrangements for their sons at their own discretion.”¹⁰⁹

The worst aspects of the scourge of the Cantonist system were over. The Kahal was required to supply recruits, mainly adults, until 1874, when the decree was fully abolished and the length of a military term was limited to five years.

In Praise of the Cantonists

The Tzemach Tzedek compared the suffering of the Cantonists to the persecution of the Jews during the days of Hellenist Greek¹¹⁰ rule because it was of a spiritual nature.

“We cannot imagine the greatness of praying and chanting psalms by the Cantonists. It is worth more in heaven than the intention and fervor of the Arizal.¹¹¹ Their prayers are full of self-sacrifice and simple faith.”

“A learned man comes to the realization that he must keep the Torah,” explained the Rebbe. “However, the Cantonists knew this from pure and simple faith. When the Messiah comes, he will be inspired by these young Jews who sacrificed so much. There will be a separate place for these Jews. Even the most honest and sincere Jews will be jealous of them.”

Reb Chaim, a follower of the Tzemach Tzedek and a Talmudic scholar in his own right, once asked him, “Rebbe, how does one become a simple self-sacrificing Jew?”

The Rebbe replied, “It is more difficult to be a self-sacrificing Jew than to know the entire Talmud.”¹¹²

Yom Kippur

Once a group of illiterate Cantonists who had become regular soldiers were quartered in a Jewish city on Yom Kippur. They came to the synagogue to pray.

When the time for the *Neilah* (concluding) service arrived, one of the Cantonists was sent to the front of the Synagogue to lead the prayers. Since he had been drafted in early childhood and had nearly completed his twenty-five years of service, he was unmarried and had no family.

The Cantonist stood before the congregation and cried out, “Father in Heaven, for what shall I pray? I cannot pray for children because I never married and now have no hope of raising a family. I am too old to start anew. I cannot pray for life, for of what value is such a life? It would be preferable to die. I cannot pray for a livelihood because Nicholas provides for my daily bread. The only thing I can pray for is *Yisgadal V'yiskadash Shmei Rabbah* (May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified; the first line of the mourner’s prayer).”

The congregation heard this heartfelt prayer and burst into tears.¹¹³

understood that it was difficult to expect patriotism and heroism from the rank and file if they were constantly subjected to restrictions and oppression. In 1832 Emperor Nicholas I permitted Jews to become non-commissioned officers (NCOs), but 'only for excellence in battle against the enemy'. Four years later, [the government] permitted Jews to be decorated with military awards for combat exploits, and, one year later, Russian ministers proposed that the aged parents of Jewish sailors who were serving in Nikolaev and Sevastopol' be granted the right to live there. However, the sovereign amended the resolution 'to apply to widowed mothers only'.

The number of Jews recruited into service increased fivefold in 1841. Jewish soldiers were permitted to marry, but only under the condition that their children were numbered among the cantonists [the inhabitants of Jewish cantons]. Taking into account the impoverished living standard of the majority of the Jews, all of whom were eking out a miserable existence in conditions of difficult, tedious labor and day-to-day living, lower norms were established to determine their fitness for military service. Thus, a lower minimum chest capacity and height was applied to Jews than for recruits from other faiths. The family of any Jew who did not appear at the recruitment point on time was fined 300 rubles. Consequently, the percentage of Jews in the army was considerably higher than the percentage of Jews in the overall Russian population.

The higher recruitment norms for Jews resulted in the recruitment of even eight-year-olds among the cantonists. Those who did not have passports were handed over to the recruiters. Some draft-dodgers exploited this fact by kidnapping Jewish people and handing them over as soldiers in the place of children from well-to-do families, who paid for this method of substitution. A book entitled, *The Travels of Benjamin III*, which is a classic of Jewish literature written by Mendele Moicher Sforim, dealt with this problem.

Despite the fact that they were prohibited from living there, nevertheless, 500 Jewish soldiers died bravely during the defense of Sevastopol'. A monument to them was erected in the city. It is certainly possible that this record of heroism influenced the government, since in 1856 cantonists younger than 20 years were returned to their parents, and three years later Jewish soldiers were given the right to indefinite leave after 15 years of exemplary service. Later still, Jews who had completed their service in the army received the right to live anywhere in the country. In 1860 Jews were permitted to serve in guards units, and, in the following year, they were allowed to become NCOs with the same rights as Christians.

Archive materials contain many examples of Jewish bravery during the Russo-Turkish Campaign (1877-78). At that time, during the storming of an enemy redoubt near Gornyi Dubnik, surprise Turkish artillery fire produced confusion in a Russian detachment and prompted it to begin to withdraw.

Suddenly a loud exclamation, 'Shma Yisroel!' resounded. It turned out that a small group of Jews had advanced while uttering this victory cry, and behind them the entire assault column broke through the Turkish trench lines. In this manner, one of the Plevna Fortress's most important redoubts was captured. General M. G. Cherniaev related the following incident. When the commander of one of his redoubts was killed, he appointed the Jew D. A. Gol'dshtein to take his place. Subsequently, the garrison skillfully repelled the Turkish attack and Gol'dshtein received a medal for bravery. He was wounded and died in subsequent combat. In yet another engagement, on the advice of a Jew, the Russian soldiers put on Turkish fezes [caps] and, while collectively uttering the cry of 'Allah', they attacked and produced confusion among the enemy ranks. In another instance, a Jewish drummer-boy followed his commander into battle. Rushing into the attack, he carried the entire detachment with him.

General A. N. Kuropatkin, the Tsarist War Minister, later wrote that the Tartars and Jews had been able to and would continue to fight and die as heroically as any other Russian soldiers. The general knew well that one-fourth of the Russian Army's 10th and 30th Divisions, which had taken on new recruits in the Pale of Settlement, consisted of Jews. In fact, they made up more than half of some companies' composition.

The names of many Jews who perished in the war are etched on a monument to the Muscovite heroes of Plevna that stands behind the Polytechnic Museum in Moscow.

More than 30,000 Jews took part in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) and about 3,000 more served as military physicians. Jews constituted more than 10 per cent of the soldiers and officers of some of the companies. Even the journal of the Black Hundreds [an anti-Jewish movement], called *Novoe vremia* [New Time] acknowledged their heroism, writing:

What anecdotes do not tell of Jewish cowardice! Nevertheless, during the present war many Jews have shown themselves to be excellent, brave, and capable soldiers. Many of them have been awarded the St George Cross, and there are some who even have two or three, and these crosses are given not by the commanders, but are conferred by the company itself! And how the other soldiers love these Jews! Officers as well cannot praise them enough!¹⁵

Russia lost the Russo-Japanese War and 73,301 men were taken prisoner during its conduct. However, only 1,739 (2 per cent) of these prisoners were Jews. This percentage is five times less than the overall percentage of Jews in the Russian Imperial Army.

Children of widows, and those unfortunate orphans who had no protectors, were particularly vulnerable, as they had no means to redeem themselves. These poor mothers would hide their children in the attics and cellars, in the fields and in the forests, even in the oven and under the fireplace to save them. But the inhuman kidnappers would craftily investigate and search them out, forcibly dragging them out from their hiding places.

I still recall from my early youth a song children sang called *The Dirge of the Masses*, composed as a memorial to the sinful generation during those awful times, taught to them by their parents who had lived through it. As a reminder of those times, and in thanks to our Creator for saving us from the hands of those cruel men, I include it here. May it help us to appreciate civilized societies whose standards of behavior are based on justice and righteousness:

Tears flood streets bathed in children's blood.

Tiny chicks are torn from *cheder* and thrust in uniforms.

Zusha the tax collector has seven sons, not one in uniform.

But the widow Leah's only child is a scapegoat for the community's sins.

Alas, what bitterness. Will day never dawn?

It is told that the Gaon Rav Eliyahu Shick once convened a communal fast and prayer over this miscarriage of justice: the brutal murder of innocent children. There, he delivered a fiery *drashah* centered around the verse in *Yeshayahu* (42:24), "Who has made Yaacov to be trampled on and Israel into looters?"

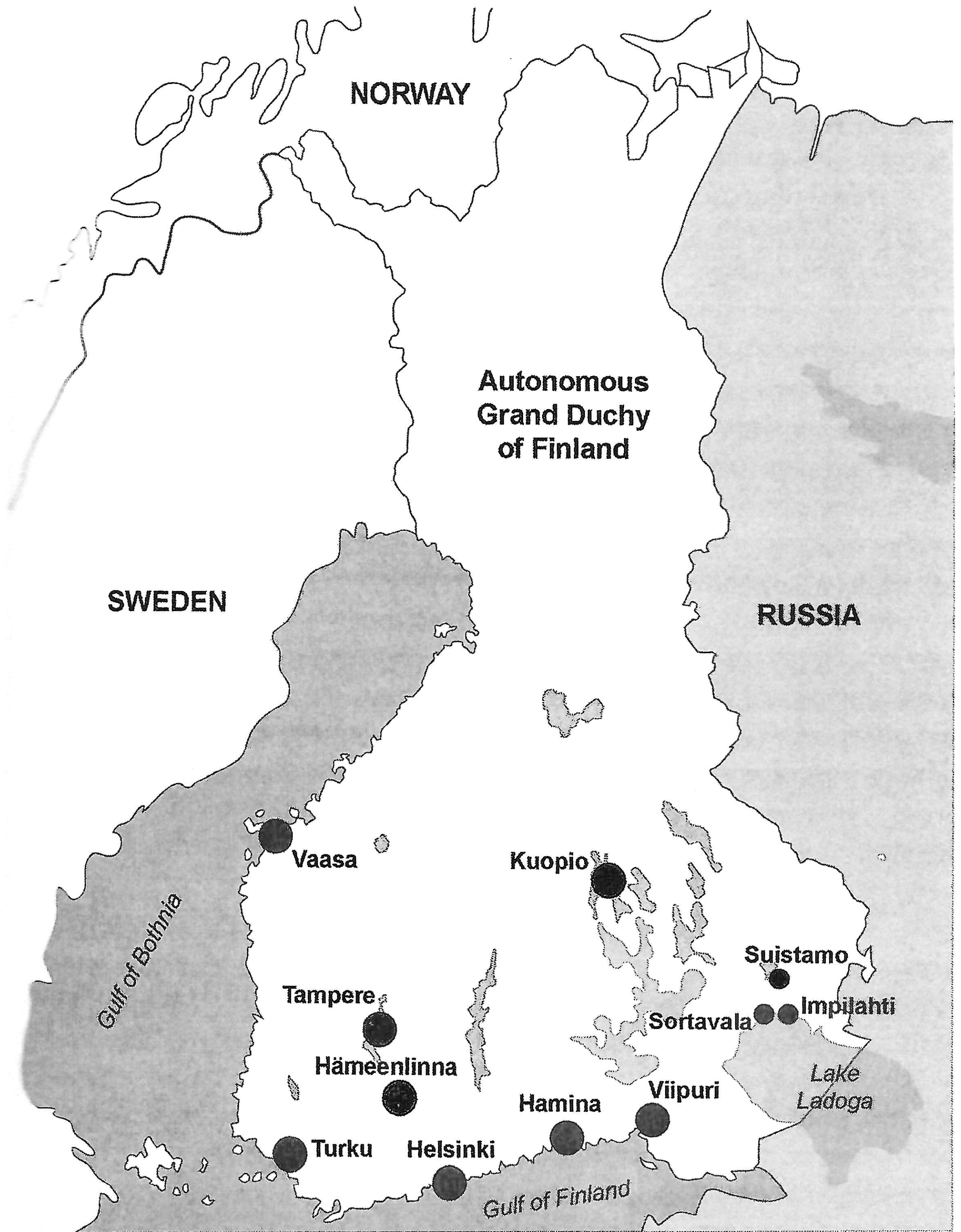


Figure 4.4. Russian Imperial Army garrison towns on Finnish soil (Marja Leskelä)

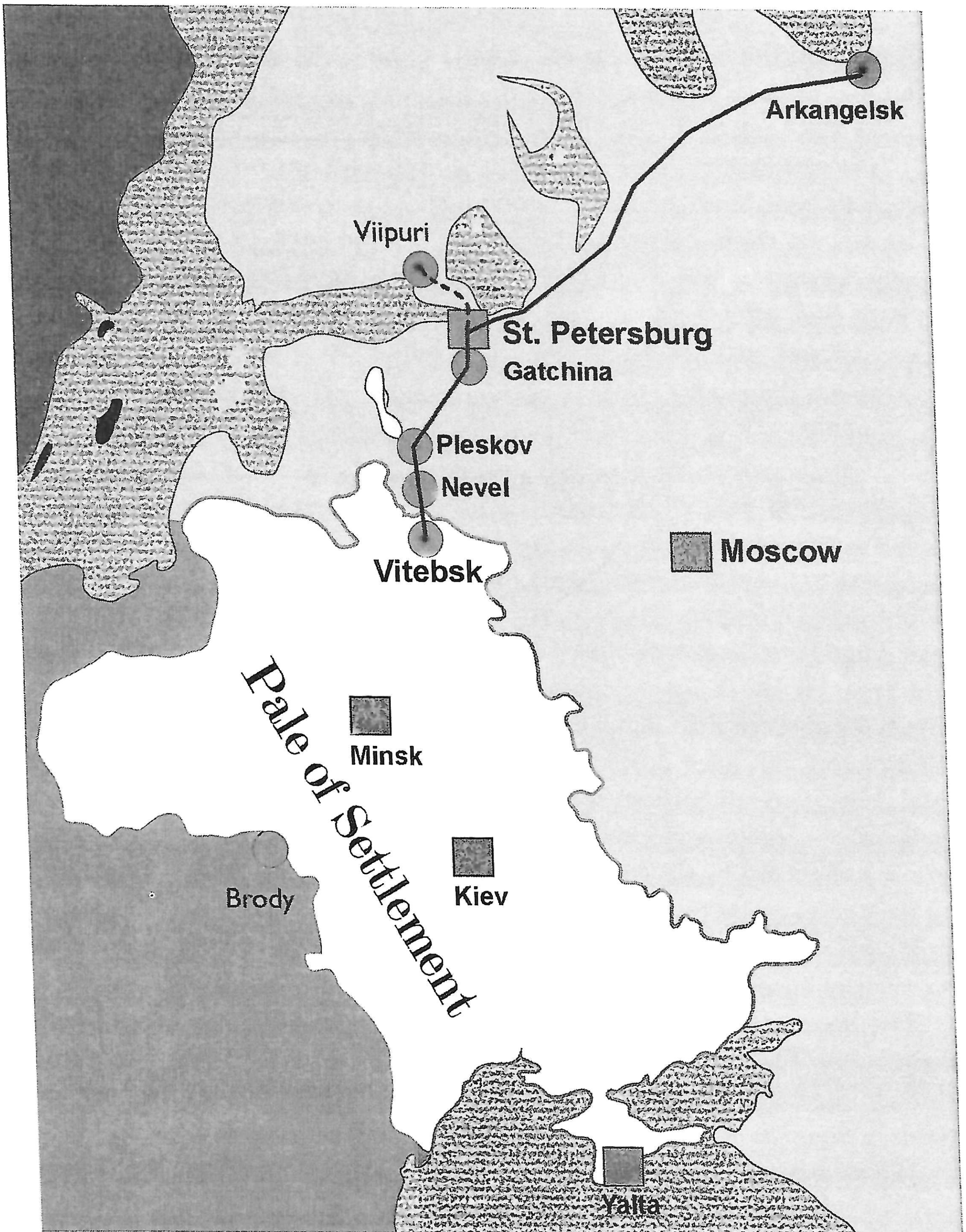


Figure 4.2. The Pale of Settlement, showing Peisach's journey to Arkangelsk and Viipuri (Marja Leskelä)

did not kill these Jewish soldiers and they survived the twenty-five years of their service with bodies intact, they could live wherever they wished in Russia. This privilege sometimes gave them considerable advantage so that they sometimes became wealthy later on. But for the vast majority, things did not work out this way.

So, now I was to live in a community of Nicholas-soldiers. After Vilna—Helzingfors!

It was very difficult for me to keep a ritually fit kitchen in such circumstances: the meat had to be brought from the city constantly, and I had to do the cooking myself because I did not want to rely on a Christian cook.¹¹ And only a religious woman and a good, true Jewish homemaker can understand how the difficulties increased before Pesach.¹²

But my burning desire to maintain tradition for my children and above all, love—warm, constant love for my husband—helped me over all these difficulties. Not for nothing do people say: “With a beloved husband, you can do anything.”¹³

We sought a Jewish tutor for the older children but could not find one and so it happened that my husband himself gave instruction to our elder son. But he was no teacher, had little patience, and often forgot himself. “You jackass, what will become of you?” he often shouted at him, at which point it often came to slaps. Such treatment could not have an encouraging and stimulating effect on the child, and the lessons became a torment. I often had to intervene and calm the furor. The lessons soon ceased, and we tried to engage a Jewish soldier, who lived in the fortress, as a teacher. But, alas, he refused our proposal.

This Jewish soldier, whom Captain Sommer described to us as a saint, was so unusual and interesting a phenomenon that I must say something about him. Religious, unassuming, reserved, and quiet, he led an almost ascetic life. His superiors as well as his comrades spoke of him as a godly man. Everyone treated him with singular respect. Despite the privileged treatment he received, he never slighted his duties, always appeared punctually on the exercise grounds, and was zealous in service. He spent his remaining time stooped over Talmud folios in his own little room that had been granted him.

His food consisted of black bread, *knas* (a sour cabbage, alcohol-free drink), potatoes, and herring. For religious reasons, he never ate from

the communal pot. On the Sabbath, he received a furlough to go to the city so that he might eat properly.¹⁴

His knowledge of Talmud was deep and substantial, and my husband sat with him fairly often in his tiny, unheated room, discussing it with him, about whom no one knew any details since he never wanted to reveal anything about his origins. My husband considered these hours on this lonely island his most interesting. He always returned from there in good humor and, full of admiration, told me of this solitary man, who was known in the regiment as Arkadius Petrov.

He did not agree to tutor my son. He refused our request, explaining that it would have robbed him of too much time.

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