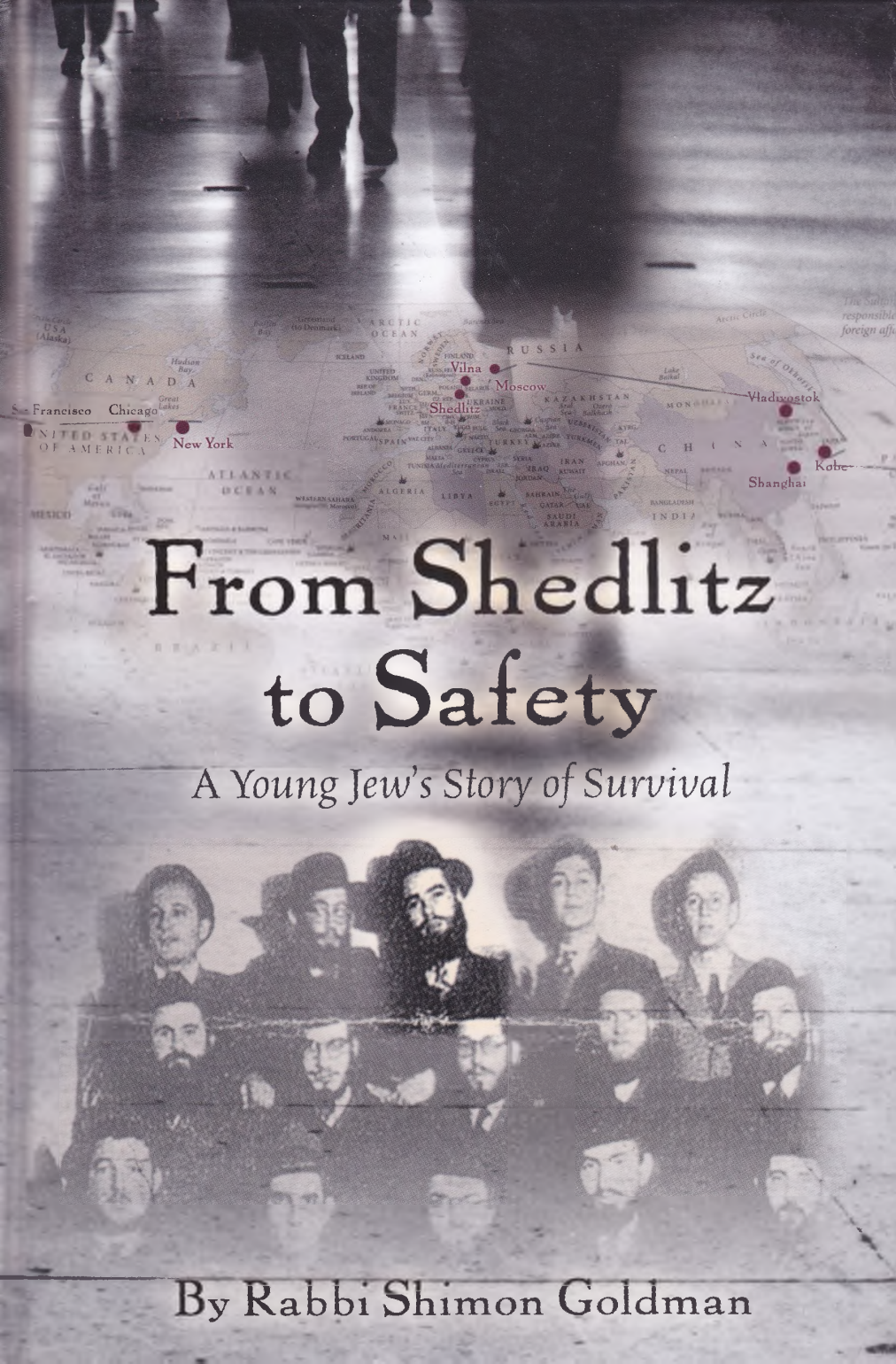
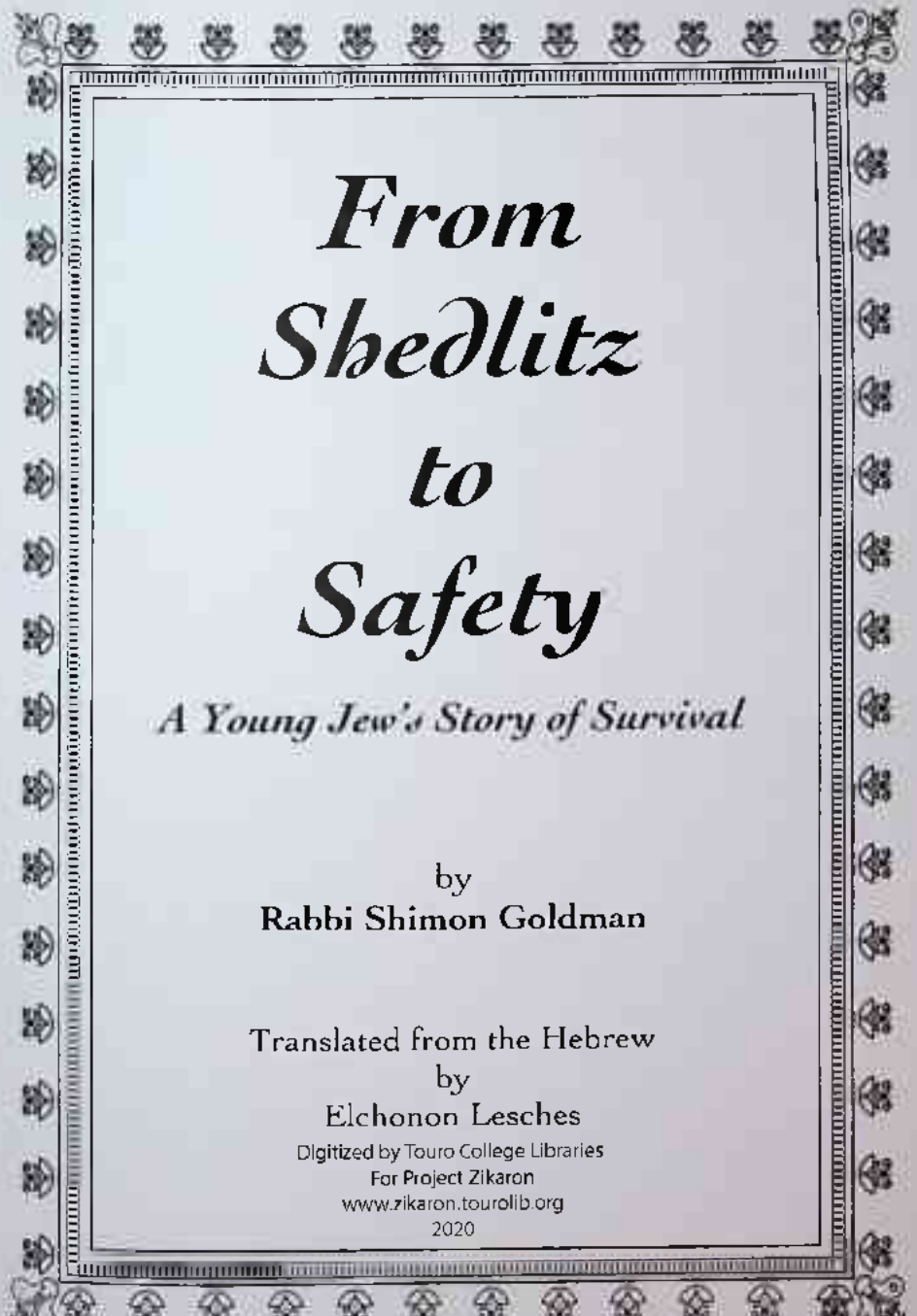




From Shedlitz to Safety

A Young Jew's Story of Survival

By Rabbi Shimon Goldman



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Translated from the Hebrew
by
Elchonon Lesches

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A Young Jew's Story of Survival

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Introduction

Writing my biography has not been an easy task. It has forced me to relive the trauma and horrors of war, the poverty at home, my constant wanderings, the destruction of my family and many friends. Yet, I feel compelled to put my memories to paper, and not for purposes of fame or financial profit. In essence, this book serves as a message to my children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and the entire younger generation, to teach them about their sacred ancestry and the conditions in which their parents were raised.

Living in comfortable, democratic America, my children and grandchildren have been fortunate to experience religious freedom. However, precisely this sheltered and untroubled existence poses the greatest threat of forgetting the hardships and travails that were part of daily life for European Jewry in pre-war days.

Having never lacked for food, my grandchildren might not realize that there was sometimes no food at home when *zayde* was a child. Having enjoyed a wholesome education, my children might not comprehend that their father could not afford to learn in a private *cheder*. Having continuous access to the latest technology and full wardrobes of clothing, my descendants might not understand that I did not even own one complete change of clothing.

Yet, despite the lack of physical comforts, our spiritual lives were very full indeed. Torah and good deeds filled our days. My father's life revolved around the *shabbat*; my mother's pious deeds illuminated our poverty-stricken home. Aside from wreaking horrific physical destruction, the Nazis obliterated a life of intense spiritual beauty that is impossible to replicate.

My descriptions in these memoirs will, I hope, share some of this spiritual beauty with others.



A learning stint in Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim, and other subsequent wanderings, brought me into the brilliantly illuminated world of Chabad Chassidim and their *Rebbeim* — Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok (“the Rebbe Rayatz”) and his son-in-law and successor, Rabbi Menachem Mendel (“the Rebbe”). This book can in no way do justice to the rich heritage of Chassidus Chabad, nor does it present a comprehensive overview or history of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. I can only relate how the *Rebbeim* and their devoted followers changed and elevated my life, and try to describe the incredible sincerity and fervor of the Chassidim I knew.

Naturally, Chabad Chassidism did not begin on the streets of New York. There is much more that can be told about the beautiful and inspirational lives of Chabad *Rebbeim* and their Chassidim, and transmitting this heritage is part of our responsibility toward the younger generation of today. As such, though this book is merely a tip of the iceberg, it is both an obligation and an honor for me to include mini-portraits of many Chassidim I was fortunate to meet during my first years in America — including the very first *Tmimim* who arrived on American soil. Similarly, I have included personal recollections of the Rebbe Rayatz’s life in America in the 1940’s and the tremendous inroads he made towards educating American youth in the path of Torah.



This book is a translation of my memoirs in Hebrew, which originally appeared in serialized form in the weekly *Kfar Chabad* magazine. I am indebted to the chief editor, Rabbi Aharon Dov

Halprin, for bringing my biography to his large readership. Special thanks to my son-in-law, Rabbi Moshe Klein and Rabbi Moshe Marenovsky for their work in bringing my original recordings from Yiddish to Hebrew. To Yosef Yitzchok Turner for designing the layout and typography, Yasher Koach. Many readers displayed tremendous interest in these articles and soon I was bombarded with requests to publish my memoirs in English. For this, I am deeply indebted to Rabbi Elchonon Lesches, who translated the material into English while retaining its original flavor and content. My son, Rabbi Yossy Goldman edited the English manuscript and was assisted by Ms. Raynor Friedman. To Renate Landman of Design R Studio, Johannesburg for her beautiful design of the book cover, thank you.

At this point, I express my thanks to *Haabem* for His abundant kindness to me during the war and its aftermath, and for granting me the merit of raising a large family dedicated to the principles of Torah and *mitzvos*. I am fortunate to share this responsibility with my *viabes chayil*, Esther, (daughter of the eminent Chassid Reb Yochanan Gordon). May *Haabem* bless us both with many more years of contentment, and may we all merit the ultimate Redemption speedily in our time.

Shimon Goldman

5 Teves, 5764

Brooklyn, New York

Foreword

ב"ה

A Tale of Two Bar Mitzvahs

My father, the author of this volume, never spoke much about his experiences during the war years. We know that many survivors had difficulty in reliving those darkest days. So while we knew that he was the only one left of his whole family, we never really heard much about his family or his childhood. We knew he was orphaned and left all alone in the world as the sole survivor of a large loving family who hailed from legendary Chassidic masters. But it was sort of pushed backward into the recesses of memory, somewhere between denial and distraction. Only as a student, when I began reading Holocaust literature did I myself begin to realize what he and all of us had lost. Only as I myself began raising a family did it begin dawning on me what an absolutely traumatic adolescence he must have experienced.

In 1990, when my parents were in Johannesburg on a family visit, I induced my father to allow me to interview him for a radio program. I was then hosting *The Jewish Sound*, South Africa's only weekly radio show. For the first time I heard stories of my martyred grandparents, uncles and aunts and my father's fascinating historical narrative of the long journey from Poland through Lithuania, Russia, Japan and Shanghai, China before his arrival in the United States after the war.

I am therefore eternally grateful for the fact that my children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces will not have to wait for special opportunities but will simply be able to pick up

"Zayde's Book" and read for themselves what transpired to their grandfather and to get an inkling of where they come from and how they got here.

It is my privilege to be able to write a few words of introduction as a Foreword to this important volume. In doing so, I decided to share with the reader the content of two speeches made at two Bar Mitzvah celebrations a generation apart. Both, I believe, are relevant, and entirely appropriate to set the tone for the pages that follow.

My Bar Mitzvah

It was 1963, in the reception hall of the then Young Israel of Eastern Parkway. The Guest Speaker was Rabbi Yosef Wineberg (of Tanya on the radio fame). He told the story of the great Maggid of Mezeritch; how as a young boy, his parents' home was engulfed in flames and his mother stood outside weeping as she saw her home go up in smoke. The little boy tried comforting his mother, "it's only material things, Momma." "No, my son, I'm not crying for the house or the furniture. I'm devastated because inside the house was my *Yichus Briv*, a document tracing my family tree all the way back to Dovid HaMelech (King David). And now it's gone and lost forever."

"Don't cry, Momma, said little Dov Ber. "I will begin a new family tree for you."

And so it was. Young Dov Ber grew into the great Maggid, successor to the Baal Shem Tov and teacher of the Alter Rebbe.

Said Rabbi Wineberg: Reb Shimon Goldman's family tree went up in the smokestacks of Treblinka and/or Majdanek. His whole mishpocha was wiped out. But today we witness the unfolding of a new yichus, a new chapter in the Goldman family tree. The Bar Mitzvah of his Bechor, his first born son.

And just as the Maggid's mother was comforted by her little boy's prophetic promise, we too are comforted. And let Reb Shimon himself be comforted as he sees his eldest son taking his place in the line of Jewish tradition and continuity.

My Son's Bar Mitzvah

It was 1987. My eldest son, Yochanon's Bar Mitzvah celebration. We came to Johannesburg, South Africa in 1976 as emissaries of the Rebbe. My initial shlichus was to establish the first Chabad House in Johannesburg. Having done that for ten years, my shlichus changed course and with the Rebbe's advice and my colleagues' encouragement, I accepted a call from the Sydenham Highlands North Shul to serve as their Senior Rabbi in 1986.

Yochanon's Bar Mitzvah was being celebrated in the Sydenham Shul just after Pesach. My parents were there, of course. My father was asked to say a few words at the Kiddush, (or, as it is known in South Africa, the Brocha). A respected lawyer would later tell me that it was the most powerful speech he'd ever heard in his whole life. My father told how he remembered walking with his father in his hometown of Shedlitz just as World War 2 was starting. Suddenly the Nazi Stuka divebombers came from nowhere and began strafing the streets. His father threw him face down into a cabbage patch and they said Shema Yisroel together, fully expecting these to be their last living moments. The planes were so low, he said, that you could hear the derisive laughter of the German pilots as they cut down every living thing in their sights.

And today, said my father, I stand before you, here in Johannesburg, South Africa, alive and well at the Bar Mitzvah of my eldest grandchild. Is this not a miracle? Is this not a gift from G-d? Who has outlived whom?

So the work you are about to read is the story of one Jew who outlived the Nazi murderers; of a young boy, scion of a distinguished Chassidic family tree, almost all of which was mercilessly uprooted. But because the Almighty granted him the precious gift of life, he was able to replant a new tree, with new branches and many fruits.

Unlike most memoirs of this genre, this book shares hardly any emotional grieving. My father was at least spared from seeing his family go to their deaths. Nonetheless, one cannot but be impressed by the courage of a young teenager becoming an independent adult overnight, and one cannot but be humbled by his commitment to go on living despite losing his entire family and having his life turned upside down in an instant.

Above all, it is the story of a faith never lost and an undying determination to perpetuate the Jewish Way of Life they were taught as children. Thus, it represents nothing less than the continuing miracle of Jewish survival and regeneration.

May it inspire us all to regenerate our own faith and families and to see that faith vindicated with the ultimate miracle of Moshiach's Redemption speedily in our days.

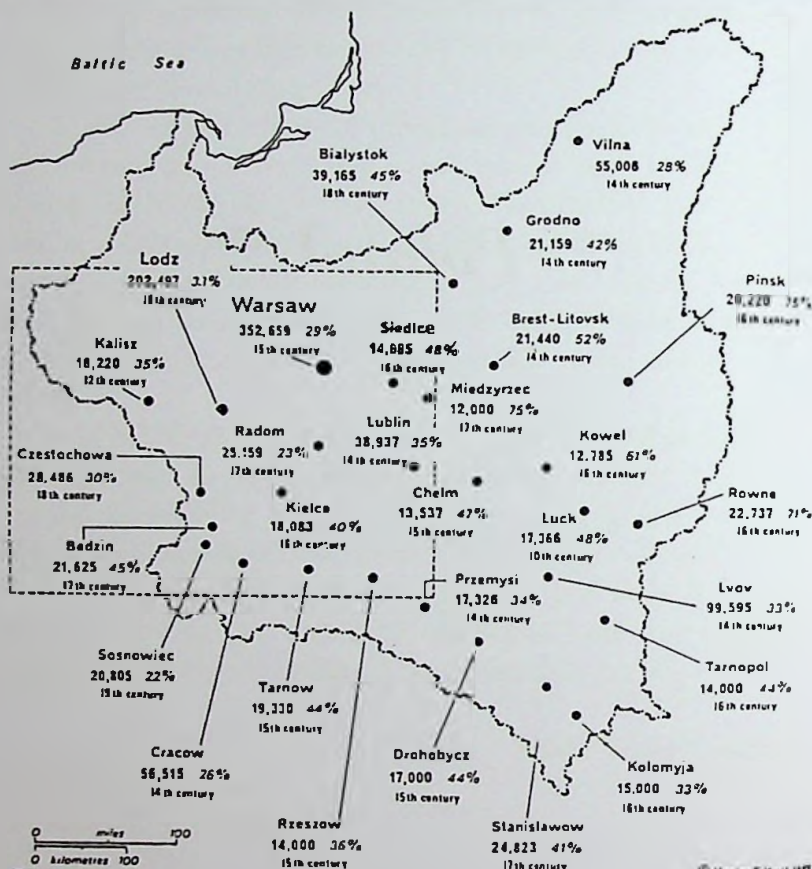
Rabbi Yossy Goldman

Rosh Chodesh Kislev, 5764

Johannesburg, South Africa

Poland

Poland's Largest Jewish Communities on the Eve of World War II



The Shtibl

Warm and inviting light filled the *shtibl*, sending a sliver of brilliance across the darkened neighborhood. Dozens of men crammed the wooden benches, swaying as they studied the holy books. I can still see my father, Shmuel Zanvil, sitting over a *sefer* in the *shtibl*, learning aloud with the many other laborers around his table.

Here, in the world of Torah, a workday laden with worry and anguish seemed to fall away. My father would momentarily forget all those hours of arduous work trying to support our family, often with little success. Ignoring the strong signals of hunger that come after a day of barely eating, my father continued learning in the *shtibl* until the wee hours of the morning. After all, there was barely enough bread at home to feed the children, never mind provide "supper" for himself. When he finished learning, my father would return home refreshed and recharged, ready to face another day and its invariable disappointments.

The *shtibl* was bright and comfortable, a welcome oasis in an unfriendly world. Every able person — married men, *bochurim*, laborers and peddlers — came to spend at least a few hours of learning in the *shtibl*. Some people studied until two in the morning, others stayed even later. Others came before dawn, to learn or recite Psalms while they waited for the prayers to commence.

The sounds of Torah and prayer filled the *shtibl* at any given hour of day or night. Hence, it was no surprise that my father enjoyed every moment he spent in the *shtibl*, sometimes even forgetting to come home and rest from the exertions of his day. His life revolved around Torah, and he tried to instill this trait in us as well. Like all children, I enjoyed playing tag, hide-and-

seek, and other games. "Shimon, come to the *shetibl*," my father often said. "You like playing with your friends, don't you? Play as much as you want in the *shetibl*, just don't leave. The holiness of Torah will undoubtedly affect you." My father often quoted the well-known saying of our Sages: "Whoever walks into a perfume store, even if he does not buy or sell anything, walks out with a pleasant smell. However, he who walks into a tannery, even if he does not trade or purchase anything, leaves the store with an offensive odor."

"This is why you should play in the *shetibl*," father would explain. "Even if you are not actually learning, the *shetibl*'s holy atmosphere will imbue you with the fragrance of Torah, fear of G-d, and Chassidus."

This was my father — a sincere and G-dfearing Jew who treasured every moment he spent learning Torah.

Earliest Recollections

I was born on the fifth of Teves, 5684 (January 1st, 1925) to Reb Shmuel Zanzil and his wife, Menucha Kreindel. Four children preceded me. Yakov and Yosef were my two older brothers; Chana and Leah were my older sisters. When I grew older, my mother revealed that she had lost two children during the First World War, when a deadly outbreak of typhus swept through our town. My mother bore two children after me — Hershel and Chaim.

My father came from distinguished lineage. His father was a direct grandson of the *Yid Hakodosh*, and his mother was a granddaughter of the first Rebbe of Ger, Reb Yitzchak Meir Alter (known as the *Chidushei haRim*). Our respected ancestry was similarly intertwined with that of other luminaries — the Rebbe of Kaliv, the Rebbe of Lelov, the Rebbe of Partzov, and many others. Naturally, as a direct descendant of the Gerrer

Rebbe, my father considered himself a Gerrer Chassid and normally prayed in the Gerrer *shtibl*

My father never discussed our unique lineage. People with respected ancestry never tire of impressing others about this fact, but my father was just the opposite. In fact, I discovered our family history purely by accident. When printing wedding invitations, many Polish Jews would list their saintly ancestors and, when my father married off the first of his children, he did likewise.

When the invitations arrived in our home, I was shocked to see such famous names as the Gerrer Rebbe and the *Yid Hakodosh* listed near my father's name. "What is this?" I approached my father. "Are we really descendants of such great *tzaddikim*?" My father then explained that, indeed, our family tree could be traced directly back to these saintly luminaries.

Poverty ruled our home. Exceedingly pious and G-d fearing, my father never complained about his difficult situation. He tried his hand at various jobs, somehow scraping together barely enough money to pay for bread and other staples. Before Pesach, my father and another Jew went to supervise the wheat harvest in the fields, to ensure that the wheat did not come in contact with any water. Later, they supervised the grinding in the mills. Once the flour was ready, father sold whatever he could to the Jewish people in our town, providing those interested in *shemura matza* with enough flour for their holiday needs. Each person then took the flour to the baker, who kneaded the dough and baked it into *shemura matza*. My father gained a meager profit from this "business."

Similarly, every year before Succos, my father tried selling *avogin*. This particular venture was not very lucrative, despite the reasonable prices my father quoted his customers. In those days, not every person allowed himself the luxury of

purchasing an *arrog*, and the buying market remained pitifully small. Father gained little from this "business."

Aside from these seasonal businesses, my father spent the year peddling linen. He often went to the city market, offering linen to customers interested in making a jacket or pair of pants. At times, he tried his hand at matchmaking. Together, these different jobs brought in barely enough money to feed the children and buy the most basic necessities.

My mother, Menucha Kreindel, was known for her refined manner and sterling character. Tall and beautiful, she brought charm and joy to every occasion. My mother always had a smile on her face and constantly showered us with attention and warmth. Similarly, she was always ready to help those in need. Our Sages say that "Jewish daughters are beautiful, but poverty makes them unbecoming." I can truly say that, despite the miserable conditions in our home, my mother remained beautiful and refined throughout.

We lived at 57 Pienkna Street, right across the city clock — a large watchtower that rose high above a wide government building. Only the rich owned pocket-watches; everyone else consulted the city clock for the time of day. Our "house" consisted of a solitary room, which served as our kitchen, dining room, play area, and bedroom. We learned to squeeze together and use this single room to its fullest potential. At times, my aunt — my father's sister — would come to visit us and, miraculously, we found room for her as well.

We had very little food. All my father's exertions at work hardly provided us with enough money to buy bread, so that when my mother did come home with a loaf of bread, she rationed off portions for every family member. First, she separated a small piece for my father. Otherwise, nothing would be left for him when he came home from the *shtibl*. We sat around the table, watching greedily as she cut off a small

slice and put it away for him. Then we each got a small piece, just enough to fend off some hunger.

When my father came home from the *shetibl*, he found a plate of kasha waiting for him. The "kasha" was often more water than grain, but at least it was food. This bowl of kasha was his entire meal. More often than not, my father did not even come home to eat supper, preferring instead to spend the night learning Torah in the *shetibl*.

"Shimon, Shimon," my father would say to me. "When Hashem helps a person earn a few coins, it's very easy to go out afterwards and buy a hat or a shirt. The purchase takes no time at all and the transaction demands very little effort. However, when it comes to learning Torah, there is no such thing as buying Torah in five minutes. Torah can only be acquired through sweat and effort." Father spoke to me about this often, encouraging me to use every spare moment in Torah study.

My mother's brother, uncle Yitzchak Meir, also lived in Shedlitz. Tall and handsome, Yitzchak Meir was a *shochet* who slaughtered fowl and cattle. Yitzchak Meir was widely popular in the community. People called him "the *Sfas Emes Yid*," because he had merited to travel and see Reb Aryeh Leib of Ger (known as the *Sfas Emes*). Every Tuesday, Yitzchak Meir worked in the slaughterhouse across the street from the *cheder* where I learned, and I visited him whenever I had the chance. This special uncle of mine was always ready with a tasty treat for me.

Shedlitz

I was born in Shedlitz (Siedlce), a sizeable town situated near Warsaw. In pre-war days, Shedlitz was home to a respectable Jewish population, and was considered an important Jewish city. An estimated 15,000 Jews lived in

Shedlitz, mostly religious Jews and Chassidim from various courts. Though many were Gerrer Chassidim, some followers of Radzin and Skernovitz also lived in Shedlitz. Even the irreligious Jews living in Shedlitz — a minority by far — were influenced by the traditions of the greater Jewish community.



The Landmark Clocktower of Shedlitz (Siedlce)

As in all large Jewish communities of Poland, Shedlitz was graced by a plethora of synagogues and smaller *shetiblach*, study halls and children's schools, charitable institutions and religious organizations. Prominent cantors appeared in the main synagogue, singing the Shabbos prayers for the enjoyment of hundreds of worshippers. A smaller *beis medrash* in the adjacent courtyard was used during the weekdays, where *minyanim* continued throughout the day. Assorted study groups also met in the smaller *shul*, providing Torah classes on every level. There were those who studied *Shas*, those who learned *Mishnayos*, and those who learned *Ein Yakov*.

Aside from the main *shul*, many smaller *shetiblach* could be found in every Jewish neighborhood. The followers of Gur had three *shetiblach* of their own; Chassidim of Radzin and Skernovitz each had a *shetibl*. People valued the time they spent learning Torah, and the sounds of study and prayer resonated through the *shetiblach* during all hours of the day. (Over Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, my father served as the *baal tefilah* in the Gerrer *shetibl*. His sincerity and feeling moved every soul, particularly when he cried out, "*Hamelech!*")

The children of Shedlitz benefited from an organized network of schools. Wealthier parents formed *chadorim*, smaller schools for young children, and paid talented teachers to instruct their children. The central Talmud Torah was run by the Jewish community and provided religious education for children of poorer families who could not afford to hire private tutors.



Town of Shedlitz (Siedlce)

As in all other Jewish cities, Shedlitz boasted many charitable organizations. Active free-loan societies helped struggling merchants and laymen secure interest free loans.

Guests arriving in Shedlitz could use the *bekdash shetibl*, a large *shul* that provided room and board for those with nowhere to stay. Other institutions included the *Bikur Cholim* — helping and supporting the sick; the *Hachnoses Kallah* — which assisted young brides; and the Burial Society.

The Jewish community also maintained a charitable institution equipped with expert doctors and all the medicines available in those days. "*Linat Hatzedek*" assisted the sick and elderly with medical equipment. Bloodletting cups (*bannkes*) were commonly used to treat a vast array of ailments, including pneumonia. After heating these special cups, the hospital staff applied the *bannkes* to the patient's bare back, ostensibly "sucking out" the infection. Though these medicinal practices and procedures pale in comparison to what we have today, the hospital gave the community access to medical equipment they could not afford at home, such as *bannkes*, thermometers, and other simple devices.

Shedlitz also cared for the downtrodden. The *Moshav Zekainim* was a modest old age home that paid special attention to a small number of seniors. These elderly residents had no family members to care for them, and would have surely died if not for this noble institution. Similarly, the Jewish community funded the Orphan's Home, a special dormitory for children who did not have parents or other relatives to provide for them. The poor received weekly food packages, and a special *Mosav Chittim* fund helped needy families with the additional expenses of preparing for Pesach.

The Jewish community alone financed all these institutions. A council of delegates headed the community and were responsible for the general administration and management of this impressive network. A yearly tax helped raise the tremendous amount of money needed to keep all these organizations running. Fully empowered by the Polish

government, this special team of elected delegates pored over a list of Jewish families living in Shedlitz, estimating how much tax each family could afford. The tax was levied on every Jewish family, arranged according to individual ability. Part of the tax revenue also came from the two slaughterhouses operating in Shedlitz — one for fowl, the second for cattle.

Naturally, Shedlitz had its own *rav*, who controlled the religious organizations and led the community. Shedlitz also had its very own Jewish cemetery, a convenience smaller towns did not have. Similarly, we had a city bathhouse and a *mikva*.

With time, various youth organizations began operating in Shedlitz, vying with each other to get the attention of idealistic Jewish teenagers. My father was generally wary of these institutions. Though some were guided by purely religious ideals, my father felt their activities were not conducted in the true spirit of Torah. Soon something occurred that demonstrated to me how deeply father felt about our education.



*Jewish children in pre-war Europe
(note the yellow stars on their chests)*

Among the different groups that organized activities for the children of Shedlitz was an organization called Mizrachi. One of the major events they sponsored was the annual *Lag B'Omer* outing, when Jewish boys and girls gathered outside the city to sing, dance, and watch a play. My older sister Chana was then studying in the Agudas Yisrael school. One day, she returned home determined to join the upcoming *Lag B'Omer* event.

Father was adamantly opposed to the idea. "No child of mine will attend such an excursion," he thundered. Chana begged and pleaded, but nothing could change my father's mind. Even when Chana started crying, my father refused to hear anything further about the idea. Other girls from deeply religious homes attended this *Lag B'Omer* outing, but father would not be swayed. I was too young to understand whether his opposition stemmed from ideological differences with the movement, or if he feared that such an event would undoubtedly compromise on the Torah's standards of modesty. Whatever the reason, he absolutely forbade Chana to attend the *Lag B'Omer* excursion.

And then the unthinkable happened. On *Lag B'Omer* morning, father stayed home instead of going to the *shTibl* to pray. This was an act of supreme self-sacrifice for my father, a person who never missed a *minyan*. His concern for our education prevailed over his desire to attend the *shTibl*, and he *davened* at home, thus ensuring that Chana did not sneak out and attend the outdoor trip.

Many years later, Chana again met with this steadfast adherence to Torah. As I mentioned before, the financial situation in our home was a sorry one. We barely had money for basic necessities. Realizing this, Chana decided to go out and work, hoping to bring some money into the house and improve our living conditions. She was a kind-hearted soul, and it really bothered her to see how terribly we suffered from poverty.

Here again, my father would not agree. In those days, it was considered immodest for a religious girl to work out of the home, and my father refused to even entertain the idea. True, our living conditions were hard and a few extra coins would have gone a long way but, as a true Gerrer Chassid, my father would not trade Torah values for physical comforts.

Aside from the religious organizations, many clubs and sporting societies also operated in Shedlitz. Jewish youth groups organized various matches and contests, often playing against gentile teams. This was not always a healthy arrangement: whenever the Jewish team won, the gentile players pounced on the Jewish athletes, thrashing and beating them for daring to win!

In all, Shedlitz was a pulsating Jewish community, a city alive with the sanctity of Torah and good deeds. During the war, Hitler's maniacal followers managed to massacre the larger Jewish community of Shedlitz, obliterating a city of intense spiritual beauty.

My Family

Yakov, my older brother, experienced much tragedy in his life. His wife, Bracha, was expecting a child and began labor on Shabbos when complications suddenly arose. People quickly ran to get the doctors of Shedlitz, hurrying them along to examine the patient. Meanwhile, a large crowd of people gathered outside Yakov's home, murmuring words of *tehillim* as they waited for the doctors.

After evaluating her condition, the doctors decided that it was imperative for Bracha to travel immediately to nearby Warsaw, where she could get the medicines needed to save her baby. The Halachic restrictions normally associated with Shabbos are negated by life-threatening situations like these,

and Yakov quickly summoned a wagon to take Bracha and himself to Warsaw. Tragically, disaster struck during the journey, and both Bracha and her unborn baby passed away.

Yakov later remarried and moved to Warsaw, where his wife ran a grocery store in the courtyard adjoining their home. The store brought in considerable profit, providing enough income so that Yakov and his family could live comfortably. They lived at 10 Pavva Street.

Chana, my older sister, supported herself by selling various kinds of perfumes, gloves, and assorted hairdressing items. Years later, when I became older and went to learn in various yeshivas in Warsaw, Chana often came by to visit me. My hectic learning schedule did not allow enough time to visit my relatives, so Chana made it her business to spend time with me. Needless to say, I appreciated these visits tremendously. (Though Chana became engaged during the war, I never learned if she actually married her intended husband. Evidently, the Nazis deported them both before their wedding.)



My sister Chana and her fiancé wearing the dreaded yellow armbands in the ghetto. This is the only photograph I possess of any member of my family.

Yosef, my other older brother, married Dina Scheinberg of Warsaw. His father-in-law owned a factory that manufactured hatboxes, shoeboxes, and other common cartons. My brother stayed in Warsaw, learned the trade from his father-in-law, and opened up a smaller factory. This new business brought in ample income, and Yosef began thinking how to help our parents with these new profits.

Yosef decided to mail five *zloty* home every week. Five *zloty* were a considerable amount of money in those days and it certainly alleviated the sorry situation back at home. My mother eagerly anticipated her weekly stipend; every Thursday, she waited impatiently for the mail to come. Caught up in the excitement, the children sat outside the house to watch for the mailman. When he finally did come, we children scampered off to hand my mother the money, and she quickly went to the stores to bargain with the merchants, trying to stretch the five *zloty* for all they were worth. She was thus able to buy everything we needed for the upcoming Shabbos and the following week.

Later, when I went to learn in Warsaw, these five *zloty* once caused me considerable heartache. Yosef had sent me alone to the post office, and I was trying to send the five *zloty* off to my parents. I had to fill out a lengthy form specifying the amount of money being sent, my address, the address of the recipient, and other petty details. As I stood there engrossed in the form, a lady came by and asked me a quick question. I responded, turned back to the form, and forgot about her. However, when I finished the form and went to stand in line, I could not find the five *zloty* anywhere.

I knew that Warsaw fairly teemed with roguish thieves and accomplished pickpockets, and I quickly realized that I had just fallen prey to one of these criminals. "Thieves are most expert in Warsaw," went a popular saying. "Hold your money tightly,

even if the thieves are far off in the distance." Now too, the seemingly innocent woman had stolen the five *zloty*s intended to help feed my poor family. I could hardly believe my misfortune. Worst of all, my family would have nothing to eat for Shabbos, and I still had to tell Yosef about the incident. I knew how hard Yosef worked for every *zloty*, and how much he sacrificed to provide our parents with this much-needed stipend.

Crestfallen and embarrassed, I went to Yosef's home and told him about the calamity. Yosef was beside himself with anguish. Although I was a young boy, he could hardly forgive me for not exerting more care. The entire incident took its toll on me, and it was a few days until I returned to my normal self.

The Rebbe of Shedlitz

Shedlitz was home to two distinguished Chassidic figures. The first was the Rebbe of Shedlitz — Reb Yehoshua Asher Roitblatt, a descendant of the *Yid Hakodosh*. Since our family shared his lineage, people viewed us as an extended part of the Rebbe's family. In fact, my paternal grandfather shared the same name as the Rebbe, both being named after a son of the *Yid Hakodosh*.



Reb Yehoshua Asher Roitblatt

The Jewish population of Shedlitz greatly revered the Rebbe. Local Gerrer Chassidim also showed the Rebbe tremendous respect, even the few Chassidim notorious for their sharp tongues. The Rebbe lived on the outskirts of Shedlitz, near the dirt roads that connected Shedlitz with Sokolov — a city some thirty kilometers away. I can still remember the small, modest hut the Rebbe called his home, and the perpetual swamp of bog and mud surrounding his house. The mud was thick and viscous, a slimy muck that clung to our clothing and boots.

I visited the Rebbe periodically and once brought him some of my father's *shemura* flour so the Rebbe could bake his own *matzos*. On another occasion, I was in the Rebbe's home to celebrate the *sheva brochos* of his eldest son Reb Eliezer (today of Borough Park, New York). Reb Eliezer had married the daughter of the Schinitzer *Rav* and later succeeded his father-in-law.

The Rebbe's neighborhood was decidedly non-Jewish. Despite this, the Rebbe maintained a study hall near his home, where many young men blossomed under his personal attention and guidance. The Rebbe's sons also learned there. (The Rebbe's youngest son — Reb Avraham — survived the war and lives in Kfar Chabad, Israel. Two of his daughters also survived the Nazi inferno. One of them, Devorah, married Dovber Kievman and also lives in Kfar Chabad.)

My father had tremendous respect for the Rebbe. Though he frequented one of the three Gerrer *shetiblach* in Shedlitz — a *shetibl* whose worshippers were known for their fiery zealotness and quick wit — he still showed great deference to the Rebbe. Every year, on the night of Rosh Hashana, my father joined many other Gerrer Chassidim and walked to the Rebbe's home on the outskirts of Shedlitz. They did this in order to receive the Rebbe's blessing for the upcoming year.

This was hardly a comfortable walk, particularly since roaming bands of Polish gentiles posed a considerable threat to the group. Despite the danger, the group had no misgivings about their yearly trek, and this arduous journey underscored their great adoration for the Shedlitzer Rebbe.

I met the Rebbe again many years later, during the Second World War. By then, the Germans had already conquered Poland and I joined the thousands of refugees fleeing towards Russia. At one point, my group had stopped to rest in the village of Semiatish, and it was there that I met the Rebbe again.

The Rebbe of Biala

The other Chassidic luminary residing in Shedlitz was Reb Yechiel Rabinowitz, the Rebbe of Biala. His house shared the same courtyard as the Gerrer *shtibl* on 51 Dlugah Street. A large and varied segment of Shedlitz Jewry adored the Rebbe — including simple merchants, businessmen, and unlearned common folk. The Biala Rebbe held every Jew dear, exhibiting such genuine concern and love toward everyone that the general population reciprocated with warm reverence of their own. The Chassidic community, however, did not hold the Biala Rebbe in such great esteem.

After the onset of war, I once witnessed an incredible act that showed some of the deep influence the Rebbe had on the simple Jews of Shedlitz. After the German invasion, hundreds of Nazis arrived in our hometown and in the surrounding villages. Late one night, during the week between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur of 1939, the Nazis rounded up thousands of Jews, and chased them into a large open space adjoining the prison house of Shedlitz. Though still a young

boy, I was caught up in the mad frenzy and ended up standing near my father in the crowded jail yard.

The Biala Rebbe was also among the gathered crowd. During the ensuing pandemonium, a group of Jewish women from Shedlitz decided to help their beloved Rebbe escape. With great courage and self-sacrifice, the women managed to distract the German soldiers sufficiently, enabling other women to pull the Rebbe out from the crowd. I could hardly believe my eyes, and felt overawed at the extent of their reverence for the Rebbe. The women carted the Rebbe off and hid him in a secluded location. Their act of heroism saved the Rebbe from suffering with the rest of the group in their forced march and other ordeals.

Meanwhile, groups of German soldiers surrounded the crowded courtyard. They seemed to be awaiting further instructions from their superiors, who also appeared at a loss of how to proceed. I stood in a corner, trembling in fright and wondering what the future would bring. Suddenly a German officer approached me. "You look like a young boy," he said. "You can leave and go home."

"I'm too scared," I replied shakily. "There are hundreds of soldiers between here and my home. When they see me walking alone, they'll think I escaped, and they'll punish me terribly." The officer seemed stunned by my answer. Turning to the soldiers guarding the main gate, he roared off a string of instructions in German, warning them not to impede my departure. I was thus able to leave the group and return home.

Back in the jail yard, the Germans ordered the Jews to start marching toward Sokolov. It was a heartrending sight: German beasts astride motorcycles rode alongside the marchers, screaming and cursing the weakened Jews as they tried desperately to keep up with the pace of the soldiers. When they arrived in Sokolov, the group was ordered to continue

marching until Wengoravo. In better times, this village was famous for local expertise in producing *battin*, the black leather boxes that house the parchment scrolls of the *tefillin*, but now the city looked ominous and desolate.

The Nazis had cordoned off a large field on the outskirts of the village, turning it into a huge jail for their captives. The Jews walked around dejectedly in their new ghetto, still unsure about their future, wondering among themselves what the Germans intended to do with them. Adding to their misery, the heavens suddenly opened and a drenching deluge began falling on the poor Jews. The prisoners had no means of protection against the rain. It seemed they would all become soaked to the bone, heightening their odds of becoming seriously ill.

Just then an amazing thing happened: the young teenagers amongst the prisoners — not necessarily religious Jews — threw themselves on top of the elderly people of the group, trying to shield them from the soaking rain. In addition, the Jewish women of Wengoravo used the cover of night to approach the fence and throw bundles of blankets, coats and pillows over to the hapless prisoners — a courageous act that could have brought instant death. These articles helped the Jews protect themselves until the storm passed. After Yom Kippur, the Jews were suddenly informed that they were free to return home. It was an absolute miracle, an unexpected kindness that I cannot explain even today.

I still remember our joy when, on the day before Succos, my father returned home from the prison camp. Although he just experienced a traumatic and frightening week, he had immediately began thinking about how to build a *succah* for the upcoming holiday. This was typical of my father. It was simply inconceivable for him to spend the festival without a kosher *succah*. After considerable thought, my father came up with a novel idea. Every house in our village had a small storage hut in

the back, normally for hoarding coal and other necessities. My father decided to remove the roof of our hut and use it as a *succah*.

That night my father spent hours working in the dark hut. He removed the roof, cleaned out the hut, and turned it into a *succah*. Apparently, my father had shared his idea with the Biala Rebbe, who lived near our home, and he came over on the first night of *Yom Tov*. My father and the Rebbe ate their meal in the *succah* while I stood watch outside, ready to warn them in case German soldiers approached.

The Biala Rebbe survived the horrors of the Holocaust, spending the rest of his lengthy years in Israel. During my trips to the Holy Land, I often visited the Rebbe in his home. Regrettably, though, I never met with his son Reb Hirshel, one of my best childhood friends in Shedlitz and my study partner as well. I did manage to meet Reb Dovid, the Rebbe's second son, when he was in America. After the passing of the Biala Rebbe, all his sons became Chassidic leaders of their own, thus perpetuating the legacy of their saintly father.

Yeshiva Studies

Due to the poverty prevalent at home, my father did not have enough money to pay for a private *cheder*, and I was sent to learn in the local Talmud Torah instead. Street-lamps did not exist in Shedlitz, and during the winter, when school ended after dark, it was pitch black on our way home. The richer children carried kerosene lanterns, encased by glass windows that kept the wind out. The lanterns cast a soft glow on our surroundings, and we walked with these children, carefully making our way across large drifts of snow left by the winter storms. A small mound stood near the Talmud Torah, providing us with ample skiing during our walk home in the

winter. After school, many children took along their crudely crafted toboggans and skis, shrieking with enjoyment as they slid across the hardened snow, and up and down our "mountain."

On freezing winter days, I had the responsibility of lighting the stove at home. I soon became an expert at this chore. In order to start a lasting fire, I first placed many smaller pieces of wood and thin twigs among the logs, so that the fire would catch and later spread to the larger logs and coals.

My parents soon began thinking of sending me away to yeshiva. Our one-room abode did not adequately house a large family and, as the eldest of the three children still living at home, I was old enough to start learning out of town. Moreover, this would free up some much-needed space. Soon we decided on Levertov, a small town situated near Shedlitz and Lublin. I had an aunt living in Levertov, and this was additional reason for my parents to choose this particular location. "Your aunt will take care of you," they comforted me. "Besides, Levertov is very close by; you can come home quickly and easily."

I packed my meager belongings and traveled to Levertov. True to my parents' prediction, my aunt — my mother's sister — welcomed me warmly into her home and cared for me throughout my stay. A warm and kind-hearted person, my aunt made me feel like part of her family, and did everything she could to ease my transition. During the time I spent in Levertov, I truly felt like a welcome guest in my aunt's home.

I learned in the only yeshiva in Levertov — the Nvardoker yeshiva. Though the *rav* of Levertov was a Chassid of Gur and the local *dayan* was an Amshinover Chassid, the only yeshiva operating in Levertov was that of Nvardok. The *rav*, who did not have any children, decided to have a *sefer torah* written in his name, in order to perpetuate his memory. I still remember

when the *sefer torah* was completed and joyously carried through the streets of Levertov, accompanied by musical instruments and the traditional *chuppah*. Saddened by the *rav's* childlessness, the Jewish community came out in force to rejoice with the *rav* and participate in the parade.

Before I left home, my father took an important step toward easing my stay in Levertov. He went to the *rav* of Shedlitz and asked him to write a letter addressed to the Rebbe of Levertov (whom people referred to as "the Partzover Rebbe"), requesting his help. The *rav* was more than willing to write such a letter: He described how I was a young boy from Shedlitz, all alone and far from home, and learning now in Levertov. The letter went on to ask the Rebbe for his assistance in ensuring that I remained happy in the yeshiva.

The letter made a favorable impression on the Rebbe and brought back warm memories of his youth. The Rebbe's father had lived in Shedlitz for a while and was even buried there. (In fact, we were distantly related, both being descendants of the *Yid Hakodosh*.) The Rebbe lived on the outskirts of Levertov, some distance from the yeshiva, but he invited me to come visit him every Shabbos. Hence, throughout my stay in Levertov, I walked to the Rebbe's home every single Shabbos.

As customary in all yeshivas, the out-of-town students ate at different homes, rotating according to the day of the week. This arrangement was called *even teg* (literally, "Days of Eating"). One of our favorite pastimes was to compare notes when we returned to yeshiva at night, comparing various menus and trying to ascertain who had enjoyed the tastiest meal. The *rosh yeshiva* and our teacher, Reb Elazar, both made a favorable impression on me, but I did not stay there too long.

(I did not see Reb Elazar again for a long time — not during the war, nor during the many years that followed. A few years ago, when I was attending a wedding in the Canarsie

section of Brooklyn, I suddenly noticed a familiar face. It was my old teacher from Levertov! Shaking with astonishment, I approached him and tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me," I said, "Aren't you Elazar Kametz?"

Now it was his turn to look astonished. "Who are you?" he demanded. "And how do you know my name?"

"But don't you remember me?" I replied. "I am Shimon Goldman from Shedlitz. You were my teacher when I learned at the Nvardoker yeshiva in Levertov."

Reb Elazar was delighted to meet me again. He told me that here, in America, he continued to work in areas associated with *Yiddishkeit*, and now worked for a Kashrus organization.

When the month of Tishrei approached, the yeshiva semester came to a close, and all the students returned to their respective homes for the *Yomim Tovim*. Hence, I traveled back to Shedlitz and celebrated the *Yomim Tovim* with my family. After the festivals, my parents began wondering where I should continue my studies.

At that time, my hometown played host to a conference of different Nvardoker yeshivas in the area. I do not know why Shedlitz was chosen as the site for this convention, but the conference interested me greatly. The Nvardoker yeshivas of Bialystok, Mezritch and Warsaw were all represented. I was particularly curious about the yeshiva of Nvardok. They acted somewhat peculiarly — certainly very different from what I had seen in other Chassidic circles — and I spent much of my free time in their company. A student of the Nvardok yeshiva attending the conference took a great interest in me, and spent many hours convincing me to continue my studies at the Nvardok yeshiva in Stashov.

Eager to recruit another student, this *bochur* went to my parents and spoke to them in great length about the great advantages of learning in Stashov. "I will take personal

responsibility for your son," he added. "You can send him without worry."

After thinking the matter over, my parents agreed and informed me of their decision. As I began preparing for the trip, my father instructed me to make a stopover on the way. "You have an uncle living near Stashov," said my father. "The way to Stashov passes through the city of Ostrovtze. Your uncle, Pinchas Brody, lives there, and I want you to stop there and meet him."

I had heard of my uncle before. A direct grandson of the *Chiddushei Harim*, he lived now in Ostrovtze and owned a textile business. People affectionately called him "Pinye'le." Indeed, when I later traveled to Stashov, I stopped off and visited my uncle.

Now I began wondering how I would make it to Stashov. My parents did not have money to pay for a wagon, and it was up to me to find an alternative. Soon I devised a plan: I offered my services to one of the many truck drivers who rode along that route, promising to guard his wares if I could hitchhike for free. The ruse worked. I traveled the long distance to Stashov in the back of a huge trailer filled with boxes of merchandise, bumping and lurching along the uneven roads for days on end. I was barely twelve.

Stashov

Stashov was a small hamlet on the border of Galicia, a far cry from the large city of Shedlitz. Stashov had their very own *rav*, a distinguished figure with a long white beard and patriarchal features. Originally from Galicia, the *rav* was called "the Riglitzer *Rav*." His daughter married a handsome young man from Galicia, who now became the first religious Jew in Stashov to speak a fluent Polish. The Jewish community was

thrilled with his command of the Polish language, because they now had someone who could represent them before the Polish authorities. Indeed, the *rav's* son-in-law served as the liaison between the community and the mayor, presenting the *kehillah's* claims and petitions to the proper channels.

As in Levertov, I continued the practice of *Essen Teg*, whereby I ate in different houses on different days. However, when it came to sleeping arrangements, things were decidedly different. My first place of lodging was — in the cemetery! Having filled all the burial lots in the ancient Jewish cemetery, the community now interred the dead in a newer cemetery, far away from the old one. Hence, the ancient cemetery remained silent and deserted, and the *tabara shtibl* — where the dead are washed ritually before burial — stood there unused. The yeshiva faculty was always on the lookout for available accommodations and, seeing the empty building, received permission to use it for the *bochurim*. A modest three-room structure, the *tabara shtibl* now became our new "dormitory."

Needless to say, this disconcerting arrangement did not please us at all. The cemetery gates locked shut at midnight, and woe to the *bochur* who did not make it back to the *tabara shtibl* on time! Latecomers faced the daunting task of scaling the cemetery wall, jumping over, and walking through the silent tombstones. Adding to our already jittery nerves, one of the students in the dormitory was an accomplished sleepwalker. After mumbling aloud in his sleep, the *bochur* would rise from bed like a ghostly apparition and begin walking around in the dark. Whenever he began this frightening walk, we ran screaming out of the *tabara shtibl*, scared out of our wits. Clad only in pajamas, we fled into the cemetery, hiding between the graves until the *bochur* made his way back to bed or woke up.

This particular *bochur* also talked in his sleep. This did not bother us hardly as much as his nightly jaunts, and we actually

began looking forward to conducting an experiment on our nightly speaker. "Sleep talkers can answer any question you want," one of the *bochurim* claimed. "Just stick his fingers into cold water, and he'll tell you anything you want to know." From time to time, we prepared a cup of cold water, eagerly waiting to verify this intriguing assertion. However, every time we placed the sleeping boy's hand into the cold water, his eyes flew open, and we dashed quickly back into bed before he could work out why his hands were dripping wet.

Aside from the *tabara shtibl*, students also slept in the study hall. A stone oven in back of the large hall gave off a pitiful amount of heat, and the *bochurim* slept on long tables near the stove, trying to warm themselves against the cold. Obviously, whoever came to the hall first had the best chance of sleeping right near the stove, and most students tried coming as early as they could. I also spent a few months sleeping in the study hall.

Then there was a third accommodation, which proved to be worse than all the others. An elderly widower living alone had asked the yeshiva to send some *bochurim* over to his house, to sleep there and keep him company at night. Whenever I went to his house, I knew I would hardly sleep that night. The widower had not cleaned his chimney in many years and thick, acrid smoke from the fireplace filled the house at night. I would lie awake in bed, coughing and gasping for air, while wondering how the elderly widower had managed to survive all these years of sleeping in such thick smoke.

My Bar Mitzvah

I was only twelve when I traveled to learn in Stashov. This was an act of tremendous sacrifice for my parents — to send their son away from home at such a tender age, yet their

commitment to Torah-true education overcame all other considerations.

I thus became Bar Mitzvah in Stashov, and I can still clearly remember the blue package that arrived just before my thirteenth birthday. A pair of *tefillin* lay inside, with a simply worded letter from my father. "I am sending you a pair of *tefillin*," the letter began. "Be sure to wear them every single day." He then wrote of other things and reminded me of the custom to receive an *aliyah* on my birthday or the closest possible time.

This, then, comprised the entire Bar Mitzvah "celebration" — a pair of *tefillin*, and an *aliyah*. No festivities, no piles of gifts, no fancy hat.

I learned in Stashov for a single learning semester and then I returned home. Upon my return, my parents decided I would resume my studies in the city of Warsaw.

My Relatives in Warsaw

Warsaw. The very name conjures images of a city bustling with a vibrant, diverse Jewish community. Writers more gifted than myself have written many books describing the unique Jewish atmosphere of Warsaw, so I will just give some general recollections of my own.

Warsaw, the capital of Poland, had a large Jewish population, most of whom were religious, sincere people. Many Chassidic courts had centers in Warsaw. Wherever you went, wherever you looked, one could find Jews dedicated to a life of Torah and purity — elderly grandfathers, little giggling children, fathers and sons.

Warsaw was blessed with a great many synagogues. There were the huge, awe-inspiring synagogues and study halls; the smaller and more intimate Chassidic *shtiblach*; the many smaller

synagogues and study rooms. The city seemed imbued with the spirit of Torah and Chassidus. A place of study or worship could be found on almost every street, behind practically every archway. Each synagogue and study hall had its own unique atmosphere, depending on its particular customs and type of congregation. All this and more gave Warsaw a special place in the annals of Jewish history, associating the city with greatness in Torah and Chassidus.

I was fortunate to have many relatives living in Warsaw who helped make my stay that much easier. My father's parents, Reb Yehoshua Asher and his wife Riva (Rivka), lived at 11 Schventyuska. Grandfather was very poor. His "house" consisted of one solitary room. He and his wife lived there, together with their daughter, her husband and child. They all crammed into one room!

Two of my married brothers also lived in Warsaw. Yakov had remarried and lived at 10 Pavva; Yosef lived on Milla Street. My sister Chana, still single, also lived in Warsaw.

Aside from immediate family, I had many uncles, aunts and cousins residing in Warsaw. Aunt Gisha, my mother's sister, has a special place in my heart. She was an extraordinary lady with a generous heart, renowned in the city for her hospitality. She opened her home for me throughout my stay in Warsaw, and whenever I walked in the door she did everything possible to make me feel comfortable. Her house — located in the non-Jewish district — became my "home away from home." I often played with her son, Leibel, who was the same age as myself.

Aunt Gisha's husband practiced *shechbita*. The art of *shechbita* seemed to run in my mother's family. I am named after my mother's father, Reb Shimon, who served as a *sbochet*. His sons and many sons-in-law continued the tradition, learning and practicing *shechbita* in their respective communities.

Reb Avraham, another uncle of mine, was a *shochet* in the village of Gur. Following a personal directive from the Rebbe of Gur, the *Imrei Emes*, my uncle left Poland and emigrated to Israel, where he continued the holy art of *shechita*. (He was also a *mohel*.) Reb Avraham passed away in Israel and is buried there.

Another uncle, Reb Henich, was the *shochet* of Slavatitch. My uncle Reb Yitzchak Meir served as the *shochet* of my hometown, Shedlitz. Yet another uncle was a *shochet* in Levertov. So too, Aunt Gisha's husband, Dovid, worked as a *shochet*, as did many others in the family.

The more I became acquainted with my mother's family, the more I noticed their extraordinary generosity and kindness. This does not in any way belittle my father's family for, due to prevailing circumstances, I was not as close to my father's side of the family. My mother, however, had a brother Yitzchak Meir living in my hometown; a sister in Levertov where I studied; and, of course, a sister in Warsaw.

Yudel Erman was another of Aunt Gisha's sons. A diligent scholar, Yudel dressed and conducted himself like a true Chassid. He wore a *kasket* — a short-brimmed cap — and kept a full beard with long *peym*. He could often be found praying or studying in the Gerrer *shtibl* of Waraw. When Yudel reached marriageable age, he became engaged to the daughter of a *shochet* living in Paris. After their marriage, the young couple moved to Paris, effectively severing my connection with them.

(I often wondered about this cousin of mine, daring to hope that maybe he, too, survived the Nazi onslaught that decimated so much of Europe. Years later, after the war, I tried desperately to locate Yudel. I spoke with many Chabad Chassidim who lived in Paris during the war, including the well-known Reb Zalman Schneersohn, but no one could help me. I even placed advertisements in prominent newspapers and

magazines, asking for information regarding the whereabouts of "Yudel Erman" — but all for naught. Naturally, I began to fear that Yudel had become yet another victim of the Holocaust.

Decades went by. Then, one day I received word that Yudel was alive and well in Israel. I obtained his phone number and dialed his house with a trembling heart: after so many years I would finally speak with a close cousin! Yudel answered the phone, and the conversation that followed was the most pleasant surprise of his life. During our conversation, I learned that Yudel and his son lived on a *kibbutz* in Israel. He also had two daughters — one in Safed, and the other in Paris. A further surprise awaited me: one of Yudel's sisters had survived the war and lived now in Australia. I called her, and we all agreed to meet each other in Israel.

Words simply cannot describe our meeting. Tears flowed like water as we reminisced about olden times and our experiences during the war. Our joy at meeting each other was severely tempered by the many losses our family sustained. In fact, it soon became clear that Yudel and his sister remained my only first cousins who survived the Holocaust!

The Piasechna Yeshiva

After I arrived in Warsaw, I stayed for a while with my brother Yakov, who lived a block away from the Piasechna Rebbe. I studied at the Rebbe's yeshiva, located on 26 Nowolipia Street, and I sometimes visited the Rebbe during my stay. The Rebbe had two singular practices: he was the only Rebbe to also conduct a *tish* during the week, and he was the only Chassidic leader who wrote medicinal prescriptions for his Chassidim. (His name is also mentioned by the Rebbe Rayatz, in his detailed description of the methodical Nazi bombing of Warsaw.)

In the courtyard of the yeshiva stood a *shitibl* frequented by Breslover Chassidim. Though a modest structure, the *shitibl* was permeated with Chassidic warmth and fervor. Every day, after the morning prayers, the Chassidim joined hands and danced around joyously. As a child, I loved to sneak inside the *shitibl* for a few minutes and watch this inspiring dance.

As time progressed, it became increasingly difficult to live in my original lodgings. My brother's home consisted of a solitary room, and I simply could not continue staying in such cramped quarters. Many other yeshiva students slept in various stores and businesses. This had a two-fold advantage: the students had a place to sleep, and the business owners paid the boys for guarding their stores at night. These few coins made all the difference for the poor students.

I soon joined this arrangement. Two businesses "employed" me to guard their stores, enabling me to earn some well-needed pocket money. At first, I slept in a store that sold fruit, vegetables and various kinds of confectionery. The store was located in the non-Jewish quarter of Warsaw. Every night, as I walked to the store, I knew I faced grave danger. Gangs of gentile thugs roamed the streets looking for some nighttime entertainment, and nothing pleased them more than beating up a hapless Jewish boy. I soon devised a plan. I replaced my black cap with a beret, walking nonchalantly past many dangerous gangs. My beard had not yet started growing, and the gentile boys never suspected I was Jewish. I thus reached my destination safely.

Once inside the store, I was confined to a little cell. Evidently, the storeowner feared that a hungry yeshiva *bochur* would undoubtedly help himself to the piles of produce and confectionery lying around the store. He therefore built a wire fence around my mattress, locking me in like an animal in a cage. I could not leave my cell until the storekeeper came every

morning to unlock the door and let me out. In retrospect, I cannot understand how I managed to live under such inhuman conditions. The fence was so constraining that I could not even put my feet over the side of the bed, never mind stand on the floor. However, that was life in those days, and I adjusted to it.

Later, I guarded another store that belonged to Reb Notah Scheinberg. His sister, Dinah, was my sister-in-law, having married my brother Yosef. Reb Notah sold an assortment of expensive teas, and I guarded the store at night. Reb Notah's father-in-law was a wealthy magnate who opened a tea wholesale business specifically for his son-in-law to manage. (After the war, Reb Notah moved to America and secured the rabbinate in a synagogue comprised of Jews from Warsaw. He passed away in America.)

Warsaw was home to many inspiring figures. Every day, as I walked to Yeshiva, I passed the house of Reb Menachem Zemba, a Torah prodigy who became known as the "Genius of Praga" — named for the suburb of Warsaw where he lived. All the greatest Talmudic scholars of Poland and Lithuania were well acquainted with the rare genius of Reb Menachem.

Aside from his prolific studies and lecturing, Reb Menachem was an untiring communal worker and a central figure in the Rabbinical Council. When the Second World War broke out, Reb Menachem stayed with his flock in Warsaw, and lectured constantly about the concept of martyrdom. Reb Menachem died on Passover of 1943, during the German attack on the Warsaw Ghetto, and his remains were later brought to Israel for reburial. May G-d avenge his blood!

I Join Tomchei Tnimum

After learning for a short while in the yeshiva of Piasechna, I decided to continue my studies in the Warsaw branch of the

already famous Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim. Rabbi Sholom DovBer Schneersohn, the fourth Rebbe in the Chabad dynasty, originally established the yeshiva in Lubavitch, but by now it had moved to Otwock. A branch had meanwhile opened in Warsaw to teach younger students. Upon completing their studies, these younger boys could then continue learning at the main yeshiva in Otwock.

Our study hall stood adjacent to the Chabad synagogue of Warsaw, situated at 32 Maranovska Street. The location was more than ideal for me: it was close to the homes of my brothers Yakov and Yosef, and my sister Chana also lived in the area. Chana visited me often, easing the hardships felt by a young boy living far away from home.

Tomchei Tmimim maintained high standards. They demanded much from their students, and it was quite difficult to be accepted into the yeshiva. Nonetheless, I met with the administrator, Reb Zalman Gurary, and requested to be admitted into Tomchei Tmimim. "Come back tomorrow," he replied briskly. "Be at my house at two in the afternoon." Anticipating a rigorous examination, I returned home and brushed up on my studies.



Reb Zalman Gurary

The next morning passed by slowly. Reb Zalman stayed at his mother's home, on Nalevki Street, and I made certain to arrive precisely at the stipulated time. When I entered, I was surprised to find a large table bedecked by a white tablecloth and covered with expensive, ornately carved vessels. I had never seen such a fancy table on an ordinary weekday and, as most young children would do, I could only gape in openmouthed astonishment. Soon Reb Zalman came into the room. He was accompanied by the *rosh yeshiva*, Rabbi Hershel Reisman, and the latter began questioning me, testing my knowledge and level of study. After the test, Rabbi Gurary accepted me into the yeshiva and my joy knew no bounds.

The Warsaw branch of Tomchei Tmimim was a small yeshiva, with only two classes. In other yeshivos, the younger class was merely an extension of elementary school, and the boys learned simpler texts, like *Chumash* with *Rashi*. Here in Tomchei Tmimim however, the younger class was already on an advanced level, and we studied the same texts as the older boys. We had two teachers: Rabbi Gurary — who also served as our administrator — and Rabbi Reisman, the *rosh yeshiva*.

Unfortunately, the yeshiva did not have a dormitory of its own. It did have a modest kitchen, where we received one solitary meal per day — sometimes lunch, sometimes supper. Though hardly luxurious, the yeshiva possessed unique warmth, where students studied and prayed with Chassidic fervor. In fact, Tomchei Tmimim was considered one the best yeshivos in Warsaw, famous for its demanding standards.

Ultimately, these standards conflicted with my previous habits. I still slept in one of the local stores — something that was totally against yeshiva protocol. Although every other yeshiva in Warsaw let their students guard local stores at night, the administration of Tomchei Tmimim were strongly opposed to this arrangement. Firstly, they argued, students faced

unnecessary risk in event of fire or armed robbery. Many students — myself included — were locked inside by the storeowner, and could not escape in case of fire. Secondly, these students could not leave at will and risked coming late to classes. This, too, was an example of the higher standards demanded by the yeshiva.

Though I knew it was against the rules, I found it difficult to part with my nighttime job and the meager income it provided. I continued sleeping in the stores, hoping that the yeshiva staff would not catch onto my secret. Inevitably, the staff did realize, and precisely due to the very reason they opposed these night jobs in the first place.

One day, I awoke early as usual, and waited impatiently for Reb Nota Schienberg to arrive and let me out of his store. The minutes ticked by, yet Reb Nota was nowhere to be seen. Finally, flushed and apologetic, Reb Nota came and opened the door for me. I ran out of the store and down the street, puffing and panting to reach the yeshiva doors before nine o'clock, when classes began. I ran into the yeshiva building a few minutes after nine, but it was enough to make Rabbi Gurary suspicious. He called me over, asked a few pointed questions, and soon revealed that I had been sleeping in one of the local stores. Rabbi Gurary punished me with only a small fine, but the secret was out. No longer could I continue guarding local businesses.

During my stay at Tomchei Tmimim, I became familiar with the Shmotkin brothers, who shared the same courtyard as the yeshiva. Reb Schneur Zalman Shmotkin was a Chassid of true stature. He was famous for his piety and scholarship; a Chassid who spent many hours immersed in prayer. To support his family, Reb Zalman sold *seforim*.

His brother Reb Shmuel also lived there, and I became a frequent guest at his house, often eating there on Friday nights.

Reb Shmuel was a short man with a flowing white beard. His house was situated far above street level, and I needed to climb a great many stairs just to reach the door.

I spent two years learning in Tomchei Tmimim of Warsaw. It was a satisfying period for me, a time when I could sit and learn unperturbed by worldly events. In 1938, after two years, I returned to Shedlitz to spend Pesach with my family. After the festival, father and I began wondering where I would continue my studies.

Kalushin

We soon heard about the Tomchei Tmimim division of Kalushin, a village situated near my hometown of Shedlitz. I had enjoyed my studies at the Tomchei Tmimim of Warsaw and I felt somewhat of an affinity with the yeshiva and Lubavitch. Like any other place, Kalushin had its advantages and disadvantages, but I showed considerable interest in continuing my studies there. Besides the obvious advantage of being closer to home, I also had an aunt and uncle living in Kalushin — my father's sister, Aunt Esther, and her husband, Yisrael Rapaport. And so it was settled. I departed Shedlitz and traveled to nearby Kalushin, to continue my studies at the Tomchei Tmimim yeshiva and fulfill the directive of our Sages, "Be exiled to a place of Torah (*Avot 4:14*)."

As in Warsaw, the yeshiva in Kalushin contained only two classes. To my great relief, I passed all the examinations and the faculty welcomed me warmly into the yeshiva. Reb Aryeh Leib Kramer, though still a young man, served as the yeshiva's administrator. (After the Second World War, the Rebbe Rayatz sent Rabbi Kramer and eight others to establish Torah centers in Montreal, Canada. Indeed, Rabbi Kramer was instrumental in founding the Tomchei Tmimim yeshiva of

Montreal, and continued to oversee the administration of the yeshiva — a position he held until his death.)

Our teacher was an exceptional young man. The son of the Kalushin *dayan*, he possessed sterling character traits and had wonderful talents. We learned the tractate of *Pe'achin* that year, and we particularly enjoyed the way he imparted the material we studied, structuring his lessons in such a way that we could all understand and participate. It was a delight to just talk with this special teacher.



Rabbi Leib Kramer

In Kalushin I once again encountered the practice of "*even teg*," whereby yeshiva students ate at various homes according to the day of the week. Having experienced this arrangement in Levertov and Stashov, I was already an old hand at managing this routine.

Though I learned in a Chabad yeshiva, family ties kept me associated with Gerrer Chassidim living in Kalushin. I became very close with Reb Naftali, nicknamed "Naftali Kalushiner" by Gerrer Chassidim. Reb Naftali was a tall fellow, a Chassid who always wore the customary dress of Gur — short dark pants with long black socks. Blessed with a prodigious memory, Reb

Naftali became a *chozer*, one of the select few who were able to accurately review the Torah thoughts expounded by the *Imrei Emes* at his weekly *tiub*. I became so close with Reb Naftali that he even invited me to sleep at his home!

Reb Nosson was another very close friend I had in Kalushin. A Gerron Chassid, Reb Nosson was ably supported by his father-in-law, enabling him to sit and study Torah. I never heard Reb Nosson utter an unnecessary word. A tremendously pious individual, Reb Nosson studied Torah an entire day and worshipped G-d to the best of his ability. My conversations with this uniquely spiritual Jew brought me great satisfaction.

I spent the year of 1939 in Kalushin, blissfully unaware that this would be my last peaceful year for a very long time. Though the rumblings of war were evident for some time already, Kalushin remained largely unaffected. All this changed on Friday, the first of September, 1939 — the date when war was officially declared.

Our yeshivah remained operational during the first week of war. We learned, we studied, and we tried to maintain our regular schedule. Outside however, things were decidedly different. Crowds of people filled the streets as groups formed on street corners and in alleys, worriedly discussing the outbreak of war and all the latest developments. The Germans marched confidently into Poland and were making great advances as they conquered city after city. Horrifying stories of their inhuman treatment of Jews also reached our ears. Hence, it was quite difficult to continue learning in yeshiva, but we decided to persevere in our studies.

We kept hearing alarming reports as the week progressed, describing the unimpeded progress of the German army as they continued conquering Poland. Realizing that an extended war was on the horizon, Rabbi Kramer met with the yeshiva staff to

discuss the grave situation. Most students were not local residents, and the yeshiva decided they could not assume responsibility for our welfare. Accordingly, they disbanded the yeshiva and instructed us to return to our respective homes. I packed all my belongings and left Kalushin with a heavy heart, setting out to rejoin my family in Shedlitz.

Home Again

Normally, the roads between Kalushin and Shedlitz provided a brief and comfortable ride for motorists traveling this short distance. Now however, the advent of war had disrupted any semblance of normal traffic, and I was forced to ride home by horse and wagon, bumping and rattling along the crowded roads. The hours passed as we rode along slowly, not reaching our destination until well after nightfall.

Total darkness blanketed Shedlitz. Hoping to protect the village from German attacks, the local authorities forbade the use of any lights, and I could hardly see anything around me. There was not a lit candle or kerosene lamp to be seen anywhere. Fortunately, I was well acquainted with my hometown and it was enough to guide me home. I encountered many people on the streets as I walked home — the local police were out in full force, as well as neighborhood patrols. These patrols included many Jewish men who joined the police in guarding local streets. They wore official emblems on their shirts, clearly identifying their association with the patrol.

To my surprise and confusion, my house was totally deserted. Panicking, I quickly went to one of our Jewish neighbors and asked about the whereabouts of my family. "There was a terrible period of bombing today," the neighbor explained. "We live here in the center of the city, and your parents were afraid that more attacks are on the way. The

Germans like to bomb the main sections of the city. Your family moved out and went to live with your uncle, Yitzchak Meir."

This move made a good deal of sense to me. Yitzchak Meir and his wife lived in a distant neighborhood, far away from the city center. Sensing that I planned to join my family, the caring neighbor quickly dissuaded me from making such a dangerous trip. "Don't you dare try to find them now in the middle of the night," he warned. "Stay here in the neighborhood and tomorrow morning you can go join them."

"But where should I sleep?" I protested. I was scared to stay alone in an empty house, and I had no other place to sleep. "Why don't you go to the nearby *shtibl* of Skernovitch?" suggested my neighbor. "Maybe you can find an empty corner to rest up until morning."

I took his advice and set out to locate the *shtibl*. This was hardly as easy as finding my house: I could not see anything in front of me and I was forced to rely on my sense of hearing. There I was, a young teenager inching along in complete darkness, trying desperately to retain my bearings and find the *shtibl*. Finally, I heard low sounds emanating from the direction of the *shtibl* and managed to make my way into the study hall. It was pitch black inside the *shtibl* but, from the amount of noise, I discerned that the study hall was packed to capacity. Somehow, I found a few inches of empty space at the end of a hard wooden bench, and I spent the rest of the night sitting in total darkness, waiting impatiently for the new day to dawn.

As the sun cast its first rays over a frightened country, I made my way out of the crowded *shtibl* and onto the quiet streets. Walking quickly away from our neighborhood, I walked through the city until I reached my uncle's home, where I met my family again. It was a bittersweet reunion: we were delighted to see each other again, but the circumstances of our meeting were far from joyous.

I had hardly begun talking with my parents and siblings when suddenly we heard the piercing sound of an air raid siren, indicating that German warplanes were fast approaching the city. The bombs would begin falling any minute now, and the siren allowed us a few minutes of early warning, enough to get away from conspicuous areas and try hiding for our lives. We ran out of the house, into the back garden, and threw ourselves head down between the wild weeds, growing vegetables and bushes, trying our best to hide from the planes.

Soon we heard the loud noises of German airplanes in the sky. The planes swooped low across the city, searching for prey. The planes flew so low, we could hear the German pilots shrieking with barbaric delight as they mowed down scores of innocent civilians. The stuttering machine gun fire and the loud roar of bombs mingled with the cries and screams of the wounded. I lay shaking in the garden, my face buried in the moist earth, and I truly believed that these were my last moments on earth. Father began saying the confessional prayer recited before death. We listened quietly, repeating the words after him. My father also used this opportunity to rebuke my younger brother Hirshel, a good kid who sometimes acted in a wild and unruly manner. "You are too mischievous," father said sternly. "Now is the time to resolve firmly not to be disobedient in the future."

Thank G-d, the German planes soon completed their mission and left the airspace above Shedlitz. None of us were harmed; no bombs had landed in our immediate vicinity. However, the attack changed my father's original understanding of the German objective. "There really is no difference where we live," he said to my uncle. "The Germans are out to destroy the entire city of Shedlitz." My uncle agreed that the whole area had become a danger zone, and we decided to flee.

Soon we heard rumors circulating around the city claiming that the Polish government had escaped via Shedlitz, and that the German attacks were aimed at killing these officials. I cannot say for certain whether or not this information was true, but the frightening experience certainly impelled us to leave Shedlitz.

It was fortunate we were staying with uncle Yitzchak Meir. As I mentioned earlier, he worked as a *schochet*, and many Jews from the surrounding hamlets often came to his house with a chicken or a calf for my uncle to *schecht*. As such, he became friendly with many people in the area and now he began thinking about all his acquaintances, trying to locate a safe location for us. "I know just the person!" he said happily. "He's a good friend of mine who lives in a distant village. I'm sure he'll let us stay in his house. Maybe we should go there until the danger passes."

And so, that Friday morning — merely a few minutes after being reunited with my family — I joined them and my uncle as we left Shedlitz together, hoping we could find a safe haven in a neighboring village.

It was a harrowing journey. We started off on foot, live fodder for the dangerous planes patrolling the skies. Planes appeared periodically, shooting and bombing all around us, and we often had no means of protection. Whenever we could, we stopped and ducked into the wild brambles growing on the sides of the road, praying that the pilots would not notice us. Finally, after many exhausting hours, we reached our destination — a tiny village mostly populated by non-Jews. Though I cannot recall the name of the village, I clearly remember the looks of hatred and contempt we received from the gentiles as we walked into their village.

My uncle's acquaintance appeared pleased to see us, but his modest hut could in no way accommodate our large family. Left

with no alternative, it was decided that my brothers and I would sleep in the stable. It was hardly a comfortable night: the stable was full of horses, animals and hay, and the stench was unbearable.

Shabbos passed amidst much discussion and argument. All the adults — my parents, my uncle and aunt, and our host — stood around in various corners of the house discussing our situation and hearing out all the alternatives. Some argued we should stay here in the village; others insisted we should return to Shedlitz; others thought we should travel further away. Someone even suggested that the women and children return to Shedlitz while the men escape. At the conclusion of Shabbos, we heard news that the Germans had already reached Shedlitz, and the entire city was under their control. Since our present accommodations were simply intolerable, the adults decided we would return to Shedlitz.

We arrived in Shedlitz on *erev* Rosh Hashana. German soldiers strutted around the city, fooling us with a show of friendliness and empathy. Soldiers stood in the streets distributing butter and fresh bread to Jewish children, smiling and chatting as if they were our best friends. Children stood in line to get these treats from the “courteous conquerors.” It would not take long before we would recognize them for the beasts they truly were.

A Fearful Festival

That night, the eve of Rosh Hashana, we *davened* at home. Most people felt apprehensive about leaving their homes at night, but the next day hundreds of people made their way toward their respective synagogues. Our *rav* at the time was Rabbi Eichenstein, popularly known as the “Chodarov Rav” for his rabbinical stint in the city of Chodarov. He sent

messengers to every synagogue in town, announcing that the prayers would not start until the authorities granted permission to bury the many Jews killed during the bombing. Their corpses still lay buried under fallen houses and buildings.

Thus started a most unusual Rosh Hashana. Instead of prayers and tears, the congregation put their *siddurim* away and began walking through the city, pulling Jewish bodies from buildings destroyed by the bombing. They combed the devastated neighborhoods, trying to locate the Jewish corpses. Others went to bring horses and wagons in order to bring the deceased for burial.

It took many hours, but finally the job was done, and it was time to begin the Rosh Hashana prayers. The entire Jewish community headed by Rabbi Eichenstein left the city streets and began walking back to the synagogue, when they suddenly experienced the true colors of our "courteous conquerors." The Germans rounded up the Jews and forced them all to march toward the main marketplace. Once they arrived, the Jews were forced to participate in all sorts of distasteful chores while they endured a barrage of humiliations and curses from the German soldiers.

The Germans then turned their attention to the rabbi. They undressed Rabbi Eichenstein in front of us and put his rabbinical garments on a clean-shaven teenager. Then they took the clothes of the teenager and forced the rabbi to wear them. "There you go rabbi!" they shouted maliciously. "What marvelous new clothes you have in honor of the new year!"

It was terribly degrading for the entire community to see our esteemed rabbi shamed in such a way, and this was only the beginning. Next, the Germans instructed the Jewish population to start sweeping and scrubbing the floor of the marketplace. After forcing everyone to participate in all sorts of degrading labor, the Germans began their next sport: shaving

off every Jewish beard. Even this humiliating torture was performed in the cruelest possible manner. The soldiers shaved these beards in all sorts of shameful ways, by shaving off only half the beard or great clumps of hair. (Nonetheless, not one Jew shaved his beard off upon returning home.)

I remember when my father came home, broken and shattered by the grueling tasks forced upon him. Rabbi Eichenstein became physically ill from the trying ordeal and was confined to bed. He lay in the community building — the “*Gmeina*” near the roads leading to Warsaw — weakened and dishonored by the menial tasks he performed and the public embarrassment he experienced.

I sometimes accompanied my father when he went to visit Rabbi Eichenstein. My father was very close with the rabbi and I often played with the Eichenstein children. During one of our visits, Rabbi Eichenstein made an observation that aptly described our frightful situation. “O enemy, your ruins are [gone] forever (Psalms 9:7),” he said. “Even when the foe is vanquished and the war is over, the destruction brought on the world — and particularly the Jews — will be everlasting.” The wise words of the *rav* stayed with me for a long time.

This encounter with the Germans brought many people to the realization that our “courteous conquerors” were hardly human beings at all, never mind courteous. Some of us had heard all sorts of nightmarish accounts from other places, and those who preferred to ignore these reports now experienced this inhuman treatment firsthand. Even those ignorant about the ongoing war suddenly became aware of our uncertain future. Although I was a young boy, I truly understood that we could not expect to survive under such cruel captors.

During one of my visits to Rabbi Eichenstein, I had a close encounter with the German beasts, one that almost ended in tragedy. As mentioned previously, the community building

stood near the road that led to Warsaw and, as I looked out the window one morning, I could see a group of S.S. officers standing around a store near the community building. In those days, every store had two doors — one opening to the street, and the other leading into to the back courtyard. On Sundays — when trade was officially prohibited — many storekeepers kept the front door locked and the back door open. This way, people could sneak into the store via the back courtyard and buy the things they needed.

This particular store sold kitchenware and other utensils. The German officers were keenly interested in getting their hands on the merchandise inside, but both doors were locked. As part of their efforts to gain entry into the store, the officers walked into the building and began searching the building. Soon they found myself, Rabbi Eichenstein, and an older girl from Beis Yakov. The Germans began asking us all sorts of questions about the store, trying to get information about how to get in. "I know who the owner is," I said. "If you want, I can go and ask him for the keys."

"We'll do it differently," they answered cruelly. "You stay here with us and just tell this girl where the owner lives. She will go get us the keys while you stay here as "ransom." If she comes back soon, you'll go free. If she doesn't, we'll take care of you."

I became very frightened by this ominous threat. I already knew that the Germans were capable of terrible atrocities and I hardly dared to imagine what they planned to do with me. I gave the girl detailed instructions where the storekeeper lived and she ran out, leaving us alone with the S.S. officers. The minutes passed with maddening slowness. I prayed to Hashem that the girl would find the right house and return with the keys. Indeed, she soon returned with the right keys and opened the store for the S.S. officers. They took whatever they wanted

and left peacefully, but the experience shook me to the core. I now knew for certain that I had to escape German rule, and the sooner the better. There simply was no other choice.

My Great Escape

After the Germans conquered Poland, they divided the country between themselves and Russia, using the 480-mile-long Bug River as a temporary divider. The land on one side of the river belonged to Germany, while the Russians controlled the other side. Many, many Jews tried to cross the river and enter Russian territory. Though Jews generally despised the Russians and their Communist rule, many correctly realized that living under German command was far worse.

One day, I heard that Rabbi Eichenstein had decided to try crossing the river along with the Tzukers, a prestigious Gerrer family living in Shedlitz. The *rav* even chose the exact date he would attempt to enter Russian soil. Benzion Tzucker — the father of the family accompanying the *rav* — had many children, all energetic and capable. I remember his three sons: Yehoshua, Leibel and Yudel. Yudel was the most talented of all the children. He was a Chassidic boy who was a keen Torah student, and he also had quite a grasp of worldly matters. Yudel even owned a small bank, and people gossiped that he owned half a million coins in foreign currency. Though they did not sport beards, the Tzucker children had Jewish features, and they wore the traditional hat. From the entire family, only Yudel had the courage to escape with the *rav*.

Upon hearing about this plan, I too decided to escape. I approached Rabbi Eichenstein and he gave his immediate approval, but my parents were not too thrilled when they heard my daring idea. "How can you do such a thing?" they asked in fright. "We can't let you go. You have no relatives in Russia; no

one will look out for you. You don't even have any money. How do you expect to live?"

Yet, despite their objections, I resolved to go. I was never a rebellious child and I did not enjoy contradicting my parents, but I felt a powerful inner force urging me to get out of German territory if I expected to survive. Thus, I formulated a plan.

On the day we planned to leave, I got up as usual and packed "all" my belongings for the trip. My entire fortune consisted of a second shirt, which I wore over the only other shirt I owned. After my father left the house, I accompanied my mother outside, ostensibly to stand with her in the long lines of people waiting for a loaf of bread. I could feel my heart pounding furiously as we joined the end of the line and waited there, with more people arriving with every passing minute. And then, the second my mother turned her head away, I let go of her hand and bolted. I ran and ran, out of the line, out of the neighborhood, out of Shedlitz.

As I approached the community building where the *rav* still lived, I could see the *rav* and Yudel Tzucker putting together some parcels containing the barest necessities. They finished their final preparations within an hour after I arrived, and we set out for the Bug River, hoping and praying we could make it safely across the river and into Russian territory.

Yudel Tzucker, the most resourceful person in our group, hired a wagon driver and a pair of swift horses. Rabbi Eichenstein, Yudel and myself boarded the wagon. Yudel offered the driver a generous fare, and we rode out of Shedlitz. The wagon could not hold us all — especially with all the packages — so we took turns walking alongside the wagon. We slowly made our way to the first stop of our lengthy journey — the village of Mord, some eighteen kilometers from Shedlitz.

As *rav* of such a prestigious city as Shedlitz, Rabbi Eichenstein quickly made his way to his counterpart — the rabbi

of Mord. The rabbi, a short man with a long black beard, was delighted to host such a respected figure, and he invited Rabbi Eichenstein to stay in his home. Naturally, as part of Rabbi Eichenstein's group, we were invited to stay there as well.

After ushering us into the dining room, the rabbi offered us steaming glasses of hot tea, and placed a plate of sugar on the table. I could hardly believe my eyes. Sugar! I had not seen sugar for months already, ever since the Germans began bombing Poland. Apparently, the small village of Mord had been spared these bombing raids, and remained unaffected by the rationing of food so prevalent elsewhere. I enjoyed the taste of sugar very much, relishing its sweetness once again.

After a while, we decided to continue our journey. We thanked the *rav* for his hospitality, boarded the wagon again and continued riding in the direction of the river. A boat waited there for us, ready to facilitate our escape. We climbed into the boat, took one last look at Poland, and crossed the river, thereby leaving German occupation and entering Russian controlled territory.

On My Own

Once we reached Russian territory, we climbed out of our boat and began walking toward the closest town. We arrived to find the village in a state of utter chaos. Russian soldiers marched the streets. Hundreds of Jews, refugees like ourselves, stood around in small groups, discussing the current situation and their available options. They analyzed the war effort continually, trying to evaluate where they could find a safe haven.

As in the village of Mord, Rabbi Eichenstein made his way to the local rabbi. Shedlitz — a large and important city — was a familiar name among the larger Jewish population, and everyone

recognized Rabbi Eichenstein. Although he had become a refugee, people still accorded him great honor. Similarly, when we came to the home of the local rabbi, he welcomed Rabbi Eichenstein with great respect, and invited us all into his home. After serving us a hearty meal, the rabbi made place to accommodate our large group and invited us to sleep there.

To our surprise, we soon learned that another distinguished figure was staying in the very same home. Reb Yehoshua Asher Roitblatt, the Rebbe of Shedlitz, had escaped along the same route we just used. He and his family lived now in the rabbi's home. The reunion between Rabbi Eichenstein and the Rebbe was a bittersweet one: though delighted to see each other healthy and alive, they expressed deep grief regarding the circumstances of their reunion.

We stayed in the village for a few days. It was relatively peaceful in the village; the Russians generally left us alone. Rabbi Eichenstein and his family planned to travel toward the city of Ludomir, where he hoped to find refuge in his sister's home. "You can come with us," he said to me. "We'll take care of you." I really had no other option. My family, still stranded behind in German territory, certainly could not help me now, and I had no relatives anywhere else in the area. As far as I was concerned, Rabbi Eichenstein could stay right here, or travel to Ludomir, or go to a different city — to me it was all the same. "Fine," I nodded gratefully, "I'll come with you."

We planned to reach Ludomir by train. First we boarded the train to Brisk, a larger city with a central train station that offered connecting service to many cities. From Brisk, we planned to transfer to a second train that stopped near Ludomir. Meanwhile, the train rattled along the tracks to Brisk, stopping at many smaller stations on the way — including an extended stopover in the village of Luninietz.

In Luninietz, Rabbi Eichenstein decided to disembark and rest in the station until our train resumed the journey. Some of the local Jews, recognizing the famous rabbi, insisted he come and spend some time in Luninietz and fairly dragged him off to meet the community. I stayed alone on the waiting train, overcome by longing for my family. Strong feelings of loneliness surfaced as I pondered my future. Where would I live? Who would care for me? Would I ever see my family again? How could I find a safe home in such an unfriendly world? There I sat, a young teenager all alone, brooding on the train and pondering my uncertain future.

After a while, I decided to disembark and see if there was a yeshiva in Luninietz. Maybe I could stay there with the other students and not feel so lonely. I left the station and approached the first Jew I saw. "Is there a yeshiva somewhere around here?" I asked "Of course!" he replied, pointing in the direction of the yeshiva.

Luninietz was a small town and I found the yeshiva easily. I felt pleasantly surprised to see so many *bochurim* from Poland learning in the yeshiva. Seeing that I was a refugee, the students befriended me and began spouting convincing arguments, demanding that I stay and learn in their yeshiva. "What's the point of traveling on to nowhere?" they asked. "You don't have any relatives in Ludomir anyway. Isn't it more logical to stay here with us?"

In truth, I had no idea if I could even locate Rabbi Eichenstein anymore, nor if the train was still waiting at the station. Neither did I particularly want to end up in Ludomir. Realizing that the *bochurim* truly cared about my welfare, I decided to accept their offer and stay in the yeshiva. Thankfully, the *bochurim* went out of their way to welcome me and accommodate my needs. I ate and slept together with the

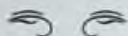
students and, on Shabbos, they arranged meals for me in the homes of local residents.

Life in Luninietz continued as usual, unchanged by war. The locals had never even seen a German soldier, much less experience a bombing raid. The war seemed a distant reality, like a bad dream that had yet to materialize. After a few days, we heard exciting news: the Russians had decided they would return Vilna (now Vilnius) to Lithuania. Years earlier, the Polish army had seized Vilna after World War I, sparking a state of war between Poland and Lithuania. Now that Russia had occupied large parts of Poland, the Soviets were offering the city back to Lithuania. Hence, on October 10, 1939, the Russians announced they would return Vilna to Lithuania, on condition that Soviet military bases could operate inside Lithuania. Though somewhat wary of granting the Russians a foothold in their country, the Lithuanian government was coerced into signing the agreement.

(It would later become evident that this transfer was merely a ruse, keeping the Lithuanians content until Russia attacked, retaking Vilna and conquering the entire country. At the end of World War II, Lithuania no longer existed as an independent entity. At the time however, the general population rejoiced at the move, thrilled to see the despised Soviets leave the city, and hoping for an easier, democratic rule under the Lithuanians.)

Upon hearing this latest development, we yeshiva students decided that Vilna would be far better than Luninietz. We began hearing reports of other yeshivos relocating to Vilna and this intensified our desire to leave. I was a young boy, still traumatized by the escape and separation from my family, and the *bochurim* kindly helped me along every part of the journey. We bought train tickets, boarded the train, and soon we were on our way to Vilna. Due to the political unrest, Vilna's borders remained wide open and we entered the city without difficulty.

The Russians still occupied the city, but the arrival of the Lithuanians was considered fairly imminent.



❧ *Lithuania* ❧

Vilna

After we arrived in Vilna, we immediately began searching for suitable accommodation. First we began inquiring about various yeshivos operating in the area, and people told us to try the yeshiva of Rabbi Meilis. The name was unfamiliar to us, and when we arrived at the building, we realized it had been named after a generous benefactor who donated the building to the yeshiva.

To our surprise, we found the building to be a large and elegant structure, inhabited by very few Lithuanian *bochurim*. The faculty welcomed us warmly, and invited us to stay with them. We spent a few days in the yeshiva building, eating and sleeping with the other students, but our contrasting backgrounds clashed strongly and we found ourselves ill at ease. Even our accents were different, and we could hardly understand each other. Though the Lithuanian students truly tried to be hospitable, we both realized that this arrangement could not last long.

Just as we began looking for alternative lodgings, we heard that the Tomchei Tmimim yeshiva of Lubavitch had a branch in Vilna. Like the Meilis yeshiva, Tomchei Tmimim in Vilna opened long before the start of war. Though most in our group were not followers of Chabad, all the students from Poland generally came from Chassidic homes, and most of us felt an affinity with this Chassidic yeshiva. Another three boys and myself decided to leave the Meilis yeshiva and join Tomchei Tmimim instead. Naturally, I felt a strong bond with Chabad, having learned in Tomchei Tmimim before.

Our move was an easy one. We had only our clothing — no heavy suitcases, packages, or other unwieldy belongings. We left the Meilis building and headed toward the *kloyz* of Apatov,

which housed the Tomchei Tmimim yeshiva. (Back in Poland, a study hall was called a *beis medrash*; here, in Lithuania, a study hall was a *kloyz*.) The building had been named for a certain Mr. Apatov, who donated most of the money for its construction.

Three Chassidim of great stature comprised the faculty. They were Reb Moshe Leib Rotshtein, Reb Shmuel Zalmanov, and Reb Yitzchak Dovber Ushpal. The latter lived near the yeshiva, and had been its administrator even before the war. Rabbis Zalmanov and Rotshtein were originally from Poland, and came to Vilna after fleeing from Otwock. All three waited now for entry visas into the United States.



The shul courtyard in Vilna

Slowly, steadily, the number of students grew, particularly when groups of refugees arrived from the Chabad yeshiva in Otwock. Naturally, once these students arrived in Vilna, they joined the Tomchei Tmimim yeshiva. Most of the students were considerably older than I was, but only slightly older than my three friends. Despite the obvious age difference, the Chabad *bochurim* made us feel like part of the student family, accepting us into their tightly knit group. Having experienced Chabad

warmth before, I felt particularly delighted to be accepted in Chabad circles again.

The *kloyz* of Apatov had many rooms. The main *shul*, a large, imposing room, was used only on Shabbos. We sat and learned in the smaller *shul*, a modest room that was used for prayer during the week. The ladies gallery was upstairs, and the basement contained the kitchen and our lunchroom. We ate all our meals there.

The yeshiva students lodged in various homes located in Shniapashuk, a suburb outside Vilna. A bridge spanned the large lake that separated our suburb from the city. Getting home from the city on frosty winter nights was hardly a comfortable experience. Snow and ice often turned the bridge into treacherous terrain, making our nightly walk that much harder as we navigated our way gingerly across the bridge.

I stayed in a building that belonged to the *kebilla* of Vilna — a hostel located on 29 Vilkomirka Street. Rabbi Yisrael Gustman also lived in the same building. A respected Torah scholar, Rabbi Yisrael had served as the *rosh yeshiva* in Vilna before war broke out. Now, with the tremendous influx of yeshiva students from Otwock and other cities, Reb Yisrael became the unofficial *rosh yeshiva* of all the refugee students, lecturing often for us.

Like most refugees, I arrived in Vilna with barely anything aside from the clothes I wore. Many of the students shared my predicament, and with winter fast approaching we became desperate for any extra clothing. We could barely find an additional shirt, never mind a warm coat. One day, as we sat studying, someone came into the *shul* and asked us to help complete a *minyan* for a mourner who lived nearby. I was among the small group of students who, for the next few days, went to the mourner's home to complete the *minyan*. When the week was over, the family showed their appreciation by

offering us the clothes of the deceased, a young boy who belonged to the Betar youth movement. I got a brown shirt, part of the Betar uniform worn in those days. We were thrilled to receive another article of clothing, enjoying the additional layer of warmth it provided.

As time progressed, we became accustomed to our nightly walks across the bridge, even in foul weather. Near the road we used, not far from the bridge, stood a synagogue that now housed the yeshiva of Bialystok. I visited the yeshiva often, to get some idea of their particular curriculum, their students and teachers. I had learned once in the Navordok yeshiva and I was curious about this Bialystoker yeshiva and their method of learning.

I was fortunate to meet with many inspirational people during my stay in Vilna. These were the spiritually attuned Chassidim of yesteryear — the kind we so rarely find today. Reb Nochum Lurie was one such example. A *Tomim* in the truest sense of the word, an aura of refinement and sincerity emanated from this special person and it was a pleasure just to sit in his company.

This special Chassid undertook the arduous task of providing bread for the yeshiva students. I sometimes accompanied him on his walks as he made his way from bakery to bakery, entreating the bakers to spare some bread for the students. He did this difficult task with selfless dedication and sincerity. (Reb Nochum's son survived the Holocaust and moved to Montreal, Canada).

I also knew Reb Anshel Arnovitch, a Chassid of stature whose name is mentioned in the introduction of the *Tanya*. The Rebbe Rashab nominated Reb Anshel as his personal representative, directing him to oversee the printing of the *Tanya* and *Likkutei Torah* in the famous Jewish printing press of

Vilna — the press belonging to the Romm brothers and their widowed mother.

Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky was the legendary rabbi and community leader of Vilna. A talented and systematic organizer, Reb Chaim Ozer applied his many skills toward aiding each and every Jew in Vilna. Reb Chaim was well advanced in years when we sought refuge in Vilna, but he remained a tower of strength and inspiration. Much has been written about this great man, but I just want to mention one of his aides, a Chassidic fellow by the name of Reb Mendel Levin. An industrious and pious communal figure, Reb Mendel brought great respect and distinction to Lubavitch through his worthy activities.



Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky

Streams of refugees continued pouring into Vilna, mainly Polish citizens who preferred the Soviets over the Germans. A great number of Jews arrived in these groups, including well-known rabbis, famous Chassidim and other prominent personalities. On many Friday nights, we saw some of these respected people enter our *kloyz* and sit down to learn *Likkutei Torah*.

One of the refugees who became a familiar face in our *kloyz* was Reb Leibel Mintzberg. Reb Leibel had been a distinguished communal figure back home in Poland. A Gerrer Chassid from Lodz, Reb Leibel had been a member of the Polish Parliament (the Sejm). A fiery orator, Reb Leibel had spoken forcefully for the benefit of his people on many occasions, including the time when the Sejm considered banning *sbechita*. Reb Leibel took the floor and gave an impassioned address defending the act of *sbechita* before the Polish Parliament, whose members included many virulent anti-Semites. Reb Leibel concluded his speech by roaring, "Hear O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One." His speech made a tremendous impact on the Polish dignitaries assembled in the room. Needless to say, the Jewish community spoke admiringly of his courage and tenacity for many days afterward.

But that was all in the past. Stripped of his parliamentary status, Reb Leibel was now just another refugee. He too, came to our *shul* on Friday nights and learned *Likkutei Torah* with Reb Mendel Levin and many others.

Reb Yakov Trukenheim was another familiar figure among the refugees. Before the war, Reb Yakov had been a member of the Senate — an assembled body of delegates that had greater power than the Polish Sejm. Reb Yakov had lost all his wealth and prestige, and sat now like so many others sitting and studying the holy words of *Likkutei Torah*.

During all this time, we anxiously awaited the actual occupation of Vilna by Lithuanian forces. The occupation was considered imminent, and we could hardly rest until we knew for certain that the Lithuanians — who were far better than the Russians — would gain control of the city. When that day finally did arrive, the joy on the streets was palpable. I cannot remember the exact date the occupation began, but I remember

it occurred on a Shabbos morning. We rushed out onto the streets, staring wide-eyed as the Lithuanian soldiers marched proudly through the city.

Overnight, the local economy improved dramatically. Until then, the prevalent lack of merchandise had forced many merchants to close their doors, and the stores that did remain open were full of empty shelves. Now however, after the Lithuanian takeover, all the stores re-opened for business and their shelves fairly groaned under the weight of assorted merchandise. Lithuania had once again become a democratic country. We yeshiva students joined the local residents in hoping that better times were finally upon us.

Despite the improved environment, none of us felt comfortable living in Vilna. We all had close family stranded in Poland — parents and siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins and friends. We did not feel as though Vilna had become our new home, a safe haven from the ongoing calamities. Instead, we viewed Vilna as a transit stop, another resting point on the long road to our destination — the United States of America, where the Rebbe Rayatz lived.

New Faces, New Figures

With the passage of time, more and more *Tminim* joined our yeshiva. A large number of people managed to enter Vilna while the border separating Russia and Lithuania remained open. Others joined special transports, guided by expert smugglers who knew vulnerable spots along the border. They bribed the border guards with exorbitant sums of money, ensuring the guards would look the other way while the transport crossed the border. These suspenseful trips normally occurred at night.

The yeshiva in Vilna sponsored many of the *bochurim* who wanted to join these transports. Yeshiva students had no money of their own, and could hardly afford to pay their share of the hefty bribes. However, the yeshiva paid the organizers of the transports only after the *bochurim* actually reached Vilna.

I remember the day when Reb Mendel Tenenbaum and Reb Shmuel Dovid Raichik arrived in Vilna. After joining one of these transports, the two *bochurim* spent the entire night crossing the border between Russia and Lithuania. At one point, Reb Shmuel Dovid fell behind the rest of the group. Imagine the fright of a young boy lost in complete darkness, left standing alone on dangerous territory!



Reb Shmuel Dovid Raichik



Reb Mendel Tenenbaum

Luckily for Reb Shmuel Dovid, his friend Reb Mendel was also part of the transport. "Mendel!, Mendel!," he called frantically, trying to locate the group. Reb Shmuel Dovid was from Malava, where locals could not enunciate the Hebrew letter *lamed* properly, and his pronunciation came out as "Mendew, Mendew." Amused by his unusual accent, members of the transport smiled at each other in the dark before quickly locating the lost boy. Thanks to his quick thinking, Reb Shmuel

Dovid was soon reunited with his group, joining them as they crossed the border and entered Vilna.

Reb Zev Greenglass, another new arrival, caused somewhat of a stir when he arrived in Vilna. His short jacket, reddish complexion and blonde hair seemed strange to us, but we quickly realized that Reb Zev was an exceptional *bochur*. Reb Zev possessed a wealth of knowledge far beyond his years, a truly extraordinary grasp of Chassidus. He was a real *chassidische bochur*, someone who spent hours immersed in prayer.



Reb Zev Greenglass

The yeshiva grew steadily as more and more refugees arrived. Each new face strengthened the core of students, until our classes resembled a normal yeshiva operating under peaceful conditions. We had regular classes at set times: Rabbi Gustman gave the *shiur* for the older boys, and a new *rosh yeshiva* was appointed to teach the younger class. The new teacher was Reb Zalman, a close friend of Rabbi Gustman and a former student of the Grodno yeshiva.

Our new teacher was also the son-in-law of the brother of the illustrious Lithuanian Torah scholar, Reb Boruch Ber of

Kaminitz. Reb Zalman taught superbly. His classes quickly became famous throughout Vilna, to the extent that other *roshai yeshiva* began sending their children to the Lubavitcher yeshiva just to hear Reb Zalman teach! These *roshai yeshiva* knew full well that Tomchei Tmimim operated and practiced like a true Chassidic yeshiva, yet they had no qualms about sending their own children to learn with us. These included such famous *roshai yeshiva* as Reb Reuven Grozovsdy of Kaminitz (Reb Boruch Ber's son-in-law), Reb Naftali of Radin, Rabbi Kalmanovitz of Mir, and many others.

In retrospect, I now realize that these special days in Tomchei Tmimim of Vilna forged my unshakable bond with Lubavitch. The warm Chassidic atmosphere, the advanced level of study, the fervent prayers — all these imbued us with a sense of spiritual bliss. During Succos, I joined my friends on the streets, stopping passersby and asking them to recite the blessing over the *lulav* and *arog*. In those days, these activities were not yet called "*mitzayim*," but we did it anyway.

Reb Elya Moshe Liss was the *machgiach* for the younger students. He ensured that we came on time to class and utilized our time properly. Reb Elya Moshe taught us *Tanya* and *Likkutei Torah* and, aside from these scheduled classes, he gave of his personal time to talk and *farbreng* with us. These informal get-togethers had a tremendous impact on us. Reb Elya Moshe spoke to us with sincerity and warmth, with words that truly emanated from the heart. His *farbrengens* captivated the students, pulling us steadily closer to the world of Lubavitch.

Another indelible impression that remains with me from those days is the special mode of prayer I witnessed among the older *bochurim*. Every Shabbos, after I finished *davening* and eating, I went with some of my friends to observe how the older *bochurim* prayed. As mentioned earlier, the upper floor of our building housed the ladies gallery. Older *bochurim* used this

quiet and unobtrusive location to meditate on Chassidus before starting their lengthy prayers. This was the Chabad way: to avoid fanfare, to serve G-d without showy demonstration. My friends and I spent hours watching from the sides of the *ezras nochim*. Totally oblivious to our presence, the *bochurim* sat lost in thought, *davening* slowly as they contemplated deeply into the Chassidic discourses they had studied. Their prayers were permeated with spiritual sweetness, with the special fervor that comes with the study of Chabad Chassidus.

Reb Mendel Tenenbaum and Reb Zev Greenglass were among these *bochurim*, as was Reb Yitzchak Hendel. Reb Zev stood with his elbows propped on a wooden lectern, gently swaying back and forth as he contemplated Chassidus and *davened*. Reb Zev's unusual powers of concentration were readily apparent; he seemed totally divorced from his surroundings. As he stood there lost in thought one Shabbos afternoon, Reb Zev lost his balance and fell backwards, causing the lectern to overturn and fall on top of him. Thankfully, Reb Zev suffered no physical harm, yet precisely this incident left an unforgettable mark on me, underscoring once more what it truly meant for a *chassidische bochur* to daven.

Another remarkable personality I met in Vilna was Reb Yakov Hoffman. Originally from Dokshitz — the same town as Reb Yochanan Gordon, my future father-in-law — this special Chassid could always be found learning Torah. Even as he walked the streets, his lips moved constantly as he reviewed the holy words of *Mishnayos* and *Tanya*. Reb Yakov was a sickly person, always suffering from one ailment or another. His wife and daughter were also unwell. Yet, physical suffering and pain could not diminish Reb Yakov's constant preoccupation with the study of Torah.

Reb Yakov began teaching *Tanya* for the people who frequented our *shul*. Reb Shmuel Zalmanov had started the

shiur, but when he left Vilna, it was Reb Yakov who continued the class. Scores of learned Jews who never opened a *Tanya* in their lives sat transfixed around Reb Yakov, thirstily absorbing his every word. Many Polish Jews erroneously thought that *Tanya* was a complex, mystical text, filled with abstruse ideas far beyond the reach of ordinary laymen. Reb Yakov dispelled this myth through his superb classes, enabling many people to understand and appreciate this holy book. People even said that Reb Yakov knew the entire *Tanya* by heart.

One day — I think it was *Yud-Tes Kislev* — a special guest arrived in Vilna to *farbreng* with us. This was Reb Yisrael Noach, the rabbi of a small Lithuanian village. Reb Yisrael Noach had learned in Lubavitch at the same time as another student with the same name. I imagine that, in order to differentiate between the two, Chassidim called him “the small Reb Yisrael Noach,” and the nickname stuck. When he arrived to take up the rabbinate in this small village, Reb Yisrael Noach began a weekly custom of reviewing *ma’amorim* (discourses in Chassidic philosophy) for his congregants. He often chose complex *ma’amorim* from the teachings of the Rebbe Rashab and, naturally, his audience barely understood a word. The village Jews were mostly unlearned, and though they listened respectfully as their rabbi preached, people could not help but wonder why Reb Yisrael Noach was wasting his time. “No one understands the *ma’amorim* you say,” someone finally asked Reb Yisrael Noach. “What’s the point of saying Chassidus for them?”

“They themselves might not understand,” Reb Yisrael Noach answered fiercely, “but their souls definitely understand.”

In Vilna too, Reb Yisrael Noach reviewed a *ma’amer* for us with such extraordinary energy and enthusiasm, it appeared as though he was actually a part of the *ma’amer*. As he spoke, he

mentioned the concept of G-d's light descending into this world, and he thrust his hand downward with his thumb extended, as if to illustrate the descent. He did it with such sincerity that, for a moment, we imagined we could actually see the light coming down. Reb Yisrael Noach epitomized the obsession of Chassidim with Chassidus.

Another unique individual who helped mold our spiritual lives was our *mashpia*, Reb Yehoshua Eizik Boruch. Reb Yehoshua Eizik was a *Tomim* in the truest sense of the word, a person who lived and breathed Chassidus. Nothing else mattered to him. The greatest proof of his stature is the fact that the Rebbe Rayatz sent him specifically to serve as *mashpia* of the *bochurim* learning in Vilna. Reb Yehoshua Eizik left his family behind and came alone to Vilna, to learn with us and help our spiritual growth.

When Reb Yehoshua Eizik *farbrenge*d with us, his inspirational words filled us all with ambition to reach greater spiritual heights. Though we were only young boys, he made us feel dissatisfied by our achievements. After listening to his *farbrengens*, we made firm resolutions to improve our studies, our prayer, and our general attitude.

At one particular *farbrengen*, Reb Yehoshua Eizik turned to Mendel Tenenbaum and said, "Mendel, Mendel, your forehead is not creased enough." Mendel Tenenbaum was considered a *maskil* — a *bochur* who spent much time contemplating the deep ideas found in Chabad Chassidus — yet Reb Yehoshua Eizik expected more. "Yes, you learn Chassidus in great depth," he seemed to be saying, "but there is always room for greater toil, for greater achievement."

One Shabbos afternoon, we came to the kitchen only to find the *cholent* burned beyond use, and none of the *bochurim* touched it. It was simply inedible. Reb Yehoshua Eizik spent many hours in prayer and he entered the kitchen well after we

finished eating. To his surprise, he saw all the *cholent* plates laying untouched on the table, and he asked us why no one had eaten. "But it's burnt beyond recognition!" one of the *bochurim* said. "We can't eat it!"

Reb Yehoshua Eizik could hardly believe his ears. "How can this be?" he said in amazement. "The Alter Rebbe writes that a person must not say, 'this I can do; this I can't do.' How can *bochurim* say about a piece of food: 'We can't eat it?'"

We, the spoiled boys of Poland, sat shamefacedly as Reb Yehoshua Eizik proceeded to make *kiddush* and eat the *cholent*. Our *masbpi'a* truly felt no other alternative: if the Alter Rebbe demanded that Chassidim should not be selective about food, then that is how Chassidim needed to act. Moreover, he expected every *Tomim* to feel the same, even if it entailed eating tasteless, burnt food.

In the winter of 1940, news reached us that the Rebbe Rayatz would soon leave Poland for Riga and, from there, to America. Upon hearing this, Reb Yehoshua Eizik immediately traveled to Riga, in order to see the Rebbe before his departure and secure his holy blessing. Reb Yehoshua Eizik did indeed merit to see the Rebbe, and the Rebbe blessed him, saying: "May HaShem help us to meet again with *Moshiach*."

These words filled Reb Yehoshua Eizik with dread. If the Rebbe blessed him to meet again with *Moshiach*, this meant Reb Yehoshua Eizik would not see the Rebbe before that time. Reb Yehoshua Eizik returned to Vilna in a despondent frame of mind, worrying about his apparently bleak future. Whenever he *farbrenge*d with us, Reb Yehoshua Eizik repeated: "We want to see our King!"

(Indeed, as a citizen of Lithuania, Reb Yehoshua Eizik was forced to remain in Vilna while we fled to Japan. After the Nazis overran the city, Reb Yehoshua Eizik and all of Vilna's Jews were herded into the Kovno ghetto, where they awaited

mass execution. Survivors later told me that, throughout this terrible period, Reb Yehoshua Eizik remained a bastion of faith and strength, offering encouragement to many Jews in the ghetto. On their final march to the firing squad, Reb Yehoshua Eizik addressed the other prisoners about the great mitzva of sanctifying G-d's Name. "We will go with self-sacrifice," he exhorted them, "just as Rabbi Akiva and many other saintly *tzaddikim*." Reb Yehoshua Eizik kept speaking words of encouragement until the very last moment — just before his voice was abruptly silenced by the Nazi guns. May G-d avenge his blood!)

Tragedy and Loss

Though life in Vilna seemed generally secure, we could not ignore the horrific calamities affecting Polish Jewry. At the time, we heard few details of the brutal Nazi war machine wreaking havoc across the country, but we understood that the once glorious Jewish community of Poland was facing systematic decimation. Our mood alternated between fear and despondence as we tried to digest the bits of news coming from Poland. It was a terribly difficult time.

We suffered spiritually as well. Some of the foremost Torah giants of the generation passed on from this world, leaving behind a tremendous spiritual void. Hardest hit were the Lithuanian yeshivos, which drew inspiration and support from these luminaries. Reb Boruch Ber Liebowitz, the *rosh yeshiva* of Kaminetz, and Reb Shimon Shkop — *rosh yeshiva* of Grodno — passed away in the same period of time. Thousands of students felt physically orphaned by the loss of these inspirational people. Reb Meir'l (Schedravitzki), the Rebbe of Bialystok, also passed away then. His comprehensive grasp of Torah was legendary; *minagdim* too accorded him great honor and respect.

Due to these tragedies, the community of Vilna decided to hold a special session in memory of these distinguished scholars, to eulogize the greatness of these Torah personalities and mourn their loss. The synagogue was crammed to capacity. The entire student body of every yeshiva in Vilna came to pay their respects for the departed *roshai yeshiva*. The general Jewish population and all the refugees also attended.

A panel of distinguished rabbis eulogized the *roshai yeshiva*. Among them was the *rav* of Krincka, who opened his address by quoting the verse, "Who will give water to my head; to my eyes, the source of tears." Continued the *rav*: "Who could possibly have enough tears in his head to mourn the tragedies befalling our people, to properly bemoan the terrible destruction of our nation and the loss of our leaders?" Reb Henich Eigish, one of Vilna's foremost scholars, also addressed the crowd.

Our sense of loss and insecurity was compounded when Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky, the legendary leader of Vilna, passed away shortly later. Still reeling from fresh losses, Lithuanian Jewry paused to grieve for this great *rav*, a community leader who felt personally for every Jew. I am hardly the person to describe his greatness in Torah or his tremendous acts of kindness, but it was common knowledge that Reb Chaim Ozer's home was the address to turn to for all problems. Capable of dealing with numerous issues simultaneously, Reb Chaim Ozer dealt with complex Talmudic questions, community issues, simple everyday problems, and any other predicament that crossed his door. In all, Reb Chaim Ozer was a central figure among the Torah giants of his generation.

In July of 1940, while Reb Chaim Ozer was in the countryside, he lay down to rest early one Friday morning, only to pass away quietly in his sleep. The tragic news quickly

reached the city, and the stunned community began debating when to perform the funeral. Some maintained it was more appropriate to hurry matters and bury the venerable *rav* before Shabbos. However, others pointed out that many *roshai yeshiva* were spending the summer in the countryside with their students, and it was only befitting that they, too, participate in the funeral. If the funeral were held on Sunday, busses could be arranged to transport the vacationing yeshivos back to Vilna. Moreover, Jews living in the surrounding villages would have enough time to come and pay their final respects to this outstanding leader.

A group of distinguished Lithuanian rabbis convened a special session to resolve this painful question and, after hurried deliberation, the funeral was postponed until Sunday. "True honor will now be accorded to this great leader," resolved the rabbis. "This postponement allows time for the funeral to be conducted in a proper manner, as befits such a distinguished Torah scholar."

Meanwhile, the *rav's* coffin was brought to Reb Chaim Ozer's home in Vilna. It is customary for people to stand watch over the *aron* and recite *tehillim* until the actual time of burial, and the community leaders began searching for the right people to perform this holy task. After consulting with various rabbis and *roshai yeshiva*, the students of Tomchei Tmimim Lubavitch were asked to undertake this responsibility.

We were chosen for two reasons. Firstly, Tomchei Tmimim was a well-established yeshiva, having opened in Vilna well before the onset of war and the ensuing flood of refugees. Secondly, many other yeshivos were away in the country, and could not possibly assist in this regard. *Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin* had also stayed behind in the city, but the rabbis decided to choose us instead. I suspect they felt more familiar with our

Hebrew pronunciation, which sounded very similar to their own Lithuanian enunciation.

We accepted this request with a great deal of pride and trepidation, realizing full well the awesome responsibility and honor of serving such a great *tzaddik*. We divided the yeshiva fairly, organizing the number of students into shifts, so that *tehillim* was recited continuously throughout Friday night, Shabbos day, and on Sunday — until the actual burial. I too, said *tehillim* in one of the shifts. When my turn came, I went to Reb Chaim Ozer's house and said *tehillim* near the *aron* (coffin).

Reb Chaim Ozer was laid to rest the following day, and the entire Jewish community came out to pay their final respects to a fallen leader. Tens of thousands of people followed the bier, weeping bitterly. It seemed as though Vilna had never mourned as deeply as it did Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky. All the *rashai yeshiva* and their respective students attended. The funeral started out from the *rav's* house, then stopped in the large courtyard that adjoined the *shul* of the Vilna Gaon, the *shetibl* of Kudainov, and other *shetiblach*. Thousands of grief-stricken mourners packed into the courtyard, weeping and crying as the eulogies began.

Many distinguished rabbis addressed the crowd, and I distinctly remember part of the eulogy delivered by the Maggid of Bialystock. A patriarchal figure, the Maggid was renowned for his piety and scholarship. Now, as he addressed the grieving crowd, the Maggid spoke about the laws of tithes, whereby the tenth sheep that exited the barn door was marked by a stick dipped in red paint and set aside as a sacrifice in the Holy Temple. "When the sheep is struck and sees the new red whip used by the farmer, she is filled with joy," said the Maggid. "The sheep rejoices with the red whip, not realizing that this has designated her as a sacrifice, sealing her destiny. A strike

with a red whip," continued the Maggid in his trademark sing-song voice, "is hardly reason to rejoice..."

The crowd recoiled in shock. The Russians had already begun their takeover of Vilna, and many Russian soldiers intermingled freely with the tremendous crowd at the funeral, gauging the sentiments expressed by the speakers. Aware of how deeply the Jewish community hated their anti-religious activities, the Soviets scrutinized every word they heard at the funeral. Yet here the Maggid spoke openly about the Russians — the "Reds" — and the danger they posed. The Russians could easily have executed the Maggid for his treasonous words, and the crowd viewed his speech as an act of supreme self-sacrifice.

After the funeral, the crowd dispersed back to their homes. Vilna's loss was keenly felt, and the community mourned the *rav* as best they could. We would later realize that Reb Chaim Ozer was in fact the last of the great rabbis of Vilna, for, toward the end of World War II, the Nazis massacred Vilna's Jewish residents, and the community known as "the Jerusalem of Lithuania" existed no longer.

Two Chassidic Giants

Three particular places in Vilna captured my attention. The first was the yeshiva of *Chachmei Lublin*, where many students shared a background similar to mine. Most of the *bochurim* came from Poland, many were Gerrer Chassidim, and this brought back warm memories of home. I visited the *bochurim* often, enjoying every moment I spent in their company.

The second place I enjoyed visiting was the home of the Amshinover Rebbe. How can I begin to describe this saintly individual? Renowned for his piety and sagacity, the Amshinover Rebbe was respected by Jews from all

backgrounds. The Amshinover Rebbe had tremendous regard for the Rebbe Rayatz, and the two Chassidic giants held each other in great esteem.

(This bond continued after the war as well. Every Purim, after his arrival in America, the Rebbe Rayatz would send a beautiful package of *Mishloach Manos* to the Amshinover Rebbe. The package invariably contained a bottle of Benedictine, together with an ornate cake. (It was common knowledge among Chabad Chassidim that both the Rebbe Rayatz and his father — the Rebbe Rashab — used Benedictine at family gatherings and *farbrengens*.)

One year, when the Rebbe's courier arrived at the home of the Amshinover Rebbe, he found the Purim meal already well underway. The Amshinover Rebbe sat at the head of the table, while dozens of Chassidim and distinguished rabbis crowded into the room, singing and listening to the Rebbe's talks. (In America, as in Otwock, many prominent rabbis considered themselves followers of the Amshinover Rebbe.) After the messenger placed the cake and liquor on the table, a certain rabbi noticed the unfamiliar bottle of liquor and, upon closer inspection, discerned the shape of a cross within the design on the label. He announced this fact to his colleagues, and the discussion around the table quickly turned to whether or not they could partake from the liquor in the Rebbe's *Mishloach Manos*.

Hearing this, the Amshinover turned to the rabbis assembled around the table, and the crowd fell silent. All knew the Rebbe as an exceedingly pious *tzaddik*, and a wise, insightful person besides. "Nu, Nu," said the Amshinover. "Open the bottle already and let's say *L'chaim*." Obviously, after hearing such a direct command, the rabbis lowered their eyes in embarrassment and dared not continue the discussion.



The Amshinover Rebbe

I heard this story from the *Shalach Monos* courier himself.

In 1950, when the Amshinover Rebbe heard about the *histalkus* of the Rebbe Rayatz, he immediately traveled to Crown Heights to participate in the funeral. He neared 770 Eastern Parkway — the home of the Rebbe Rayatz — but due to the unusually large crowd, could not even come close to the *aron*. "It would be better for you to go straight to the cemetery," his son suggested. "There's far too many people here. In the cemetery, you'll be able to approach and escort the *aron*."

The idea made good sense to the Amshinover Rebbe and his attendants. His son Reb Meir (a friend of mine) accompanied his father to the cemetery. When the bier arrived, Reb Meir turned to his father in distress. "They are carrying him, they are carrying him!" he said softly.

"They are carrying him, they are carrying him ..." groaned the Amshinover Rebbe, and fell to the floor in a dead faint.

I had this story from Reb Moshe Groner, an eye witness.

These and other incidents underscore the essential bond between this saintly individual and the Rebbe Rayatz. A pure and righteous soul, the Amshinover Rebbe could truly

appreciate the greatness of the Rebbe Rayatz, and held him in the highest esteem.)

Occasionally, I visited the Rebbe of Modzitz as well. The Rebbe "held court" during the *Shalosh Seudos* meal, and hundreds of Jews poured into the *shtibl* to hear his mesmerizing melodies. A gifted composer with an unusually sweet voice, the Modzitzer Rebbe created hundreds of melodies and songs, and had earned a legendary reputation for his brilliant compositions. "[The G-d] who takes pleasure in songs of praise," the Rebbe often quoted from the daily prayers. "G-d desires those who sing and create music."

As dusk fell over the city, and the Rebbe began *Shalosh Seudos*, the crowding in the *shtibl* grew. The Polish refugees found solace for their tortured souls at the Rebbe's table. Here they could momentarily forget about the war, their ongoing suffering, the endless anguish. Here they could remember the warm *shtetlach* of Poland, the many *Rebbeim*, the crowds of followers. Here, crammed around the table, they could close their eyes and envision the families and children they had been forced to leave behind. Here, borne aloft by the dazzling voice of the Modzitzer Rebbe, the refugees sensed a small measure of spiritual comfort, evoking memories of back home in Poland.

During my stay in Vilna, I heard an amusing anecdote about the Modzitzer Rebbe: When the Soviets returned Vilna to the Lithuanians, the Lithuanian army opened all the previously closed borders between Vilna and neighboring cities. The Modzitzer Rebbe, then residing in Vilna, decided to seize the opportunity and visit the Jewish community of Kovno.

Naturally, the Jews of Kovno accorded the Rebbe a grand welcome, in a manner befitting such a distinguished personage. The Rebbe conducted his famous *lilach*, replete with his customary words of Torah and beautiful singing, and large groups of Lithuanian Jews — most of whom had never seen a

Chassidic Rebbe before — came to stare wide-eyed as the Rebbe spoke and sang into the night. Having never witnessed such a scene before, the local Jews watched in astonishment at the Rebbe's customs at the *lich*, particularly his distribution of *shrayim*, the leftovers from his personal plate. "Isn't this incredible?" they whispered among themselves. "If the Modzitzer Rebbe is such a great singer, then the Rebbe of Gur — who is far more famous than the Modzitzer Rebbe — must be an even greater singer!"

This, then, was their perception of a Rebbe.

(I also visited Kovno once. I found some Chabad Chassidim living in the city. One of these was Reb Zussman — a red-bearded Chassid who had two sons. Before the war, he had traveled periodically to Otwock, to see the Rebbe Rayatz and hear his teachings.)

Though I enjoyed spending time with the Amshinover Rebbe, the Modzitzer Rebbe, and the students of *Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin*, I found myself becoming closer to the Chabad way of life. I did not consider myself a full-fledged Chabad Chassid just yet, but I truly appreciated the unique perspective of Chabad, its emphasis on prayer and sincerity, and the warm atmosphere of Tomchei Tmimim. With time, I began associating myself more and more with Chabad, as I slowly became part of this world.

Aside from supervising our spiritual advancement, the yeshiva cared for our physical needs whenever possible. Other people also tried to ease our living conditions. The Chabad Chassidim in Kovno once arranged for large boxes of clothing to be delivered to the yeshiva. The clothing was second-hand, but no one complained. We were thrilled to finally get some "new" clothing in place of our old and frayed garments, and we rummaged through all the boxes until we each found something appropriate.

Similarly, the Joint Distribution Committee of America included us in their international relief efforts. Many Jews throughout the world received direct assistance from the Joint, and the refugees living in Vilna also benefited from this noble organization. I still remember standing in line outside the local Joint distribution office, waiting with many others to receive new clothing. When my turn came, I was handed a warm coat, compliments of the Joint.

As the days passed, we tried to maintain a semblance of normal life. Vilna was peaceful compared to the rampant war and bloodshed in Poland, and we continued our daily routine of study and prayer in yeshiva. We did not know what tomorrow would bring or how we could outwit the advancing enemy, but we tried to focus on our daily schedule and live the present as best we could.

Our Bond With The Rebbe

During this difficult time, we continued receiving letters from the Rebbe Rayatz, infusing us with renewed enthusiasm and energy. The Rebbe had escaped to Riga, and urged us now to contact all our friends still stranded in Poland and encourage them to flee toward Vilna. This included the yeshiva students still learning in Tomchei Tmimim of Otwock and other cities in Poland.

In one of his letters to us, the Rebbe wrote the following: "Surely you have all written to your friends — students like yourselves — in whatever place they may be, encouraging them to make haste and join you. May no obstacle or impediment block their way.

Strengthen your trust in G-d. He will support you, bring success to your ways, and enable you to attain diligence in Torah and prayer. Send me a detailed list of the people you

contacted, and continue writing to them — encouraging them to come quickly and join you. Make haste, for time is exceedingly precious!" (This letter was later printed in *Igrot Kodesh* vol. 5, pp. 20-21.)

On the third day of Adar 1940, the Rebbe wrote again to one of the students, reiterating his heartfelt request that we communicate with our friends and convince them to join the yeshiva in Vilna. Among other things, the Rebbe wrote:

"May G-d help the students mentioned in your letter, assisting them to arrive soon at the yeshiva, and succeed in study and spiritual service. It is appropriate that every student correspond with a friend, to try influencing and persuading others to join the yeshiva at the earliest possible opportunity. Each should help his friend locate the students whose whereabouts are presently unknown, to track them down and correspond with them.

"Regarding particular students who, for whatever reason, are still hesitant and face difficulties in journeying to Vilna, it is fitting to talk with them and explain that learning in yeshiva is an essential need for their souls. These students should take pity on their souls, overcome all hurdles and obstacles, and join the yeshiva.

"This includes former students of elementary grades and younger classes. They, too, must be encouraged to join the yeshiva once more. This refers also to the younger students learning in Lodz and Chelm. Please keep me informed of all developments in this regard." (*Igrot Kodesh* vol. 5, p. 25.)

Needless to say, we complied immediately with the Rebbe's request. Though the ensuing war had made communication with Poland nearly impossible, we managed to use underground methods of communication, contacting yeshiva students still learning in Otwock and informing them of the Rebbe's desire that they relocate to Vilna.

Meanwhile, we continued learning in yeshiva, trying to remain focused on study and prayer. We utilized the free, democratic rule Vilna enjoyed at the time, using its benefits for our personal religious advancement. The study hall was packed with students who learned *Nigleh* and *Chassidus* diligently.

As I mentioned earlier, at first the Rebbe Rayatz was stranded in Warsaw, and witnessed the horrific Nazi bombing of that great city. His daring escape to Riga was a great miracle in itself. After arriving safely in Riga, the Rebbe wrote to us — his beloved students learning in Vilna — encouraging us to remain steadfast and resolute in all our ways.

In his very first letter to us, the Rebbe even found it necessary to mention our unique mode of clothing. In Poland, the customary mode of dress worn by Chassidic students meant wearing a long jacket (*kapota*) during the weekdays, and a silk *kapota* on Shabbos and Yom Tov. In Lithuania however, *bochurim* only wore short jackets. Our unusual clothing seemed outlandish to many people, and we sensed their looks of pity and amusement. Hence, among his many other instructions, the Rebbe also wrote: "Do not change your Shabbos or weekday garb."

And, in another letter addressed to us, the Rebbe Rayatz wrote the following:

"I was pleased to receive regards through Rabbi Shmuel Zalmanov and Rabbi Moshe Leib Rotstein regarding your temporary settling in Vilna and the ease of relocation you experienced. I therefore turn to each and every one of you who understand the yeshiva's current situation — a situation marked by transfer and change — to continue your individual advancement in the study of *Nigleh* and *Chassidus*, and to do all in your power to guard the unique character of the yeshiva. The yeshiva must continue in its original spirit, as guided and

supervised by the esteemed members of its faculty — the head of the *mesivta*, the *marbipia*, and the dean.

"I was also pleased to read the letter of the distinguished *bochur* Yosef Wineberg, informing me of various resolutions accepted upon yourselves during the Thursday night *farbrengen* of this past month. This includes your resolve to walk arm-in-arm along the path forged by my saintly father, founder of the holy yeshiva.

"I am strengthened by the hope that you will heed the request found in this letter and, strengthened by your strong love and bond, you will hearken to my words, to fulfill my resolute command with holy endearment and warmth. May G-d strengthen and assist you to become G-d fearing Chassidim and scholars, to lead comfortable, enriched lives within the gates of Torah and Divine service. I am interested in hearing from each of the students personally, and I remain your strong friend who seeks your benefit and success." (*Igrot Kodesh* vol. 5, p. 15.)



Reb Yosef Wineberg

Two weeks later the Rebbe Rayatz wrote us yet another letter, expressing his thanks for having fulfilled his instructions.

"I was gladdened to hear of your resolution to accomplish all that I wrote in my previous letter," he wrote. "It brings me very great joy to learn that this resolution is being brought into practical deed, and I pray that Hashem assist you all in both physical and spiritual matters." (*Igrot Kodesh* vol. 5, p. 20.)

These letters made our longing for the Rebbe that much stronger, particularly when we realized that Vilna was becoming a more dangerous place for Jews. Matters became increasingly difficult when the Russians overtook Vilna, placing the city under Communist rule again. As part of the Russian empire, residents of Vilna now faced severe Communist restrictions, including the near impossible idea of escape. Not only was it illegal for Russian citizens to leave the country, but even foreign nationals could not hope to escape Communist rule.

Help suddenly came from an unexpected quarter. Rabbi Laibl Kramer — our administrator — contacted one of the many embassies in Kovno which, until then, had been the capital city of Lithuania, and discovered a crucial piece of information. During his conversations with the authorities, Rabbi Kramer learned that we were eligible for special visas, which enabled the holder to use Russia as a transit stop on the way to another country.

Though salvation seemed so near, we still faced two significant hurdles. As refugees, we possessed neither passports nor any other form of documentation — papers we so desperately needed for the consulate to issue our visas. Secondly, we had nowhere to run. Our families were still trapped in Poland and, though we strongly desired to travel to the United States, we had no idea how to get there.

Precious as they were, the transit visas remained in force for a very limited time. Though we had stumbled upon a unique opportunity to escape from Russia, we still needed the proper

documentation. The days passed with maddening speed as we scrambled for solutions. The burning question remained: How could we obtain the necessary visas and reach the United States?

Realizing the difficulty of our ultimate objective, we temporarily abandoned the notion of entering the United States, focusing instead on first getting out of Russia. Thus began a furious chase against the clock, as we tried to secure visas from any country that offered to help us. Indeed, help soon came from an unexpected quarter — the Japanese embassy of Lithuania, also conveniently situated in Kovno. The Japanese consulate agreed to issue transit visas for all the yeshiva students, on condition that we choose a final destination point. Japan would merely be another stop on our itinerary; from there, we needed to travel onward.

Hearing this, we continued gathering information about possible destinations. Soon we heard that Vietnam — then a colony of Holland — was interested in allowing large groups of white men to settle in their country. All our problems suddenly vanished: Russia was willing to let us leave, Japan would provide the visas, and we would use Vietnam as our final destination point. Yet, a significant obstacle remained. As nationals of Poland, we needed to show our Polish passports, or the visas could not be issued.

Now that we had come so close to attaining our goal, we could not let this “detail” destroy our plans. We had never owned passports before the war, and we now turned to the Polish embassy situated in nearby Kovno. After arriving at the embassy, we met with the consular representative and petitioned his help. Thankfully, the officer was amenable to our request, provided we could produce our birth certificates and prove that we were, indeed, citizens of Poland.

Some of the students did, in fact, have this important document with them, and they were granted passports on the spot. However, some other *bochurim* — myself included — did not have the foresight to bring our birth certificates from home. Crushed with despair, I quickly wrote to my mother, asking her to contact City Registry and obtain a birth certificate for me. Though the war was well underway, I knew that the offices of the Ministry were still functioning. Anxious and worried, I returned to Vilna and prayed for a successful outcome.

I did not have to wait long. Immediately when she received my letter, my mother went straight to the government office responsible for issuing these certificates, and provided them with my date of birth. The clerks checked the date in the registry, found my name listed, and issued a birth certificate made out in my name. My mother quickly mailed the important document to Vilna and, when it arrived, I hurried off to the embassy in Kovno. The officer in charge examined the document carefully and, to my relief, issued a passport.

We Leave Vilna

A few weeks remained until our scheduled departure from Vilna. During this uneasy time, the refugees argued and debated amongst themselves, trying to determine whether it was better to stay on Russian soil or to try making it to Japan. Not surprisingly, many thought that these visas were another of the many infamous tricks used by the Russians to delude the general public. We had all heard hair-raising stories of the lengths the Russians went to cause others pain and grief, and their obsession to uncover the slightest disloyalty to the Communist cause.

Indeed, many Jews feared Communist retribution so much that they abandoned all plans to leave the country. Suspecting

the worst, the *rabbi yeshiva* of Bialystok, Kletsk, Baranovitch and others panicked, instructing their students to remain in Vilna and not provoke the Russians. Many others who could have used this method of escape also vacillated.

The Jews had good reason to fear. Months earlier, the accursed Russians had hung placards in Jewish neighborhoods, promising to reunite Jews with their families in Nazi Poland. Whoever was interested in these government-organized trips needed to merely register with the Russians. Hundreds of unsuspecting Jews lined up outside special offices set up by the Russians, registering their names and addresses in order to participate in these "humanitarian" trips.

These Jews were invariably Polish refugees whose families were stranded in Poland. By registering, the refugees naively believed the Russians would help them meet with their families again. Needless to say, these hapless Jews were never heard of again. In the dead of the night, the Russians descended on the Jewish neighborhoods, plucking the registered Jews from the addresses they had so carefully recorded. The Russians hoarded the "participants" onto waiting trucks and sent them all off to Siberia. After all, these Jews had the nerve to choose Poland over Russia — demonstrating their "treachery" to the Russian cause!

It thus came as no surprise that many Jews feared doing anything that could anger the Russians. Moreover, perhaps the Russians were waiting yet again to send those planning to leave to an entirely different destination — Siberia! Or perhaps they would simply block our exit and then avenge themselves with different methods. This fear prompted many Jews to remain in Vilna.

How did we — a small group of young students — know how to decide in this difficult situation? We had, in the past, received clear instructions from the Rebbe Rayatz to consult

with Reb Shimon Kalish — the Amshinover Rebbe — in cases of doubt. Here too, we approached the Amshinover Rebbe with our plan and the various objections others had raised, and asked his opinion. The Rebbe looked at us with bright, intelligent eyes before responding. "Take the visas," he said softly. "Take them and leave already."

Rabbi Kramer immediately went to the respective consulates to get all our necessary visas. However, in order to receive our exit visas, we had to appear in person at a certain office. The clerk in charge of distributing these visas was a Jew by the name of Schlosberg. Apparently, Schlosberg had been on good terms with the Communists before they annexed Vilna, and now they rewarded his faithfulness by appointing this Jew to a prestigious position — a responsibility that included the allotment of exit visas.

Aside from Tomchei Tmimim, the yeshiva of Mir also decided to grab this opportunity and leave Russia for good. Reb Eliezer Portnoy, a young communal activist, firmly maintained that it was absolutely crucial for the yeshiva to leave Communist controlled territory. (Rabbi Portnoy later made it to America, where he served as a *rav* in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York.) Rabbi Portnoy worked with heart and soul to get the Mir safely out of Vilna. He stayed up for days and nights on end, instructing the Mirrer *bochurim*, organizing passports, and getting all the necessary visas. Thanks to his efforts, the entire yeshiva escaped and eventually reached America.

We acted just in time. Barely a few months passed when, suddenly, the Polish, Japanese and Vietnamese embassies of Lithuania closed their doors. Their only remaining consulates were off in faraway Moscow, and many Jews now found themselves without the crucial documentation needed to save their lives. The desperate Jews thought of an ingenious plan. A

group of artists and calligraphers came together and began mass producing false visas, passports, and other documentation. They copied the intricate seals of various governments, the different stamps used by the embassies, and the flowery signatures of important officials. These forgeries saved many Jews.

Once, a father of ten children came to Schlosberg's office, ostensibly to demand his exit visa. Schlosberg was no fool. His trained eye quickly recognized that the passport produced by the applicant was forged, as were his other documents. Schlosberg looked up at the quivering applicant and a queer glint came to his eyes. "Your passport is forged," Schlosberg said, "but I'll grant you the visas anyway."

The hapless Jew nodded dumbly.

"When you leave this office," continued Schlosberg, "go back to those who gave you this passport and tell them to do a better job next time..."

The poor Jew grabbed the visas and fled for his life.

(Others were not as lucky. I remember the worried, drawn faces of Reb Leib Sheinin and his family when they arrived in Vilna. Having served as the *niv* of Dokshitz, Reb Leib now heard it was possible to escape via Vilna, and he began trying to gather the necessary visas. Reb Shmuel Levitin's son also came to Vilna for the same purpose. Tragically, these and many others arrived too late and lost their chance to escape for good. Stranded in Vilna, Reb Leib and his family were later murdered by the Nazis. May G-d avenge his blood.)

Debate and argument filled our few remaining weeks in Vilna. We discussed our situation constantly, analyzing whether our visas were indeed real or not. Meanwhile, as the departure date neared, another problem filled our minds. Where would we get the money needed to pay for the trip and other basic expenses?

Salvation came from faraway America. The Rebbe Rayatz and his son-in-law, the Rashag, who had arrived in the USA in March, 1940, began raising money for our cause, soliciting donations from the Joint Distribution Committee and other organizations. They sent the money to Vilna and, when the funds arrived, we bought tickets for the train that traveled from Vilna to the Far Eastern Russian city of Vladivostok. This huge city served as the eastern terminal of the Trans-Siberian railway, the proud port city off the Sea of Japan. From Vladivostok, we hoped to board another ship and sail to Japan.

Ironically, the Russians only accepted American dollars for these tickets. Since it was illegal to deal with, or even possess, foreign currency, the Russians set up a special booth in a certain hotel lobby, where they exchanged rubles for American dollars. We went there, changed our rubles, and purchased tickets.



The Rashag
Rabbi Shmaryahu Gurary

A few days before our departure, we received instructions from the United States to take along whatever religious items we could find — *tefillin*, *mezuzos*, large and small *talleisim*,

siddurim, *machzorim*, and copies of the Rebbe's most recent talks and Chassidic discourses. These religious articles were intended for Chassidim in Russia, who suffered greatly under Stalin's regime. Jews were subjected to continuous anti-religious harassment, and it was practically impossible to obtain religious articles there. Hopefully, our packages could alleviate some of the shortage.

Well aware of the lengthy trip before us, we made certain to stock up on large quantities of non-perishable items like sardines, *matza*, and other foods. As tourists, we expected to receive preferential treatment from Russian authorities but, having heard about the severe food shortages plaguing Russia, we prepared accordingly nonetheless.

Russia

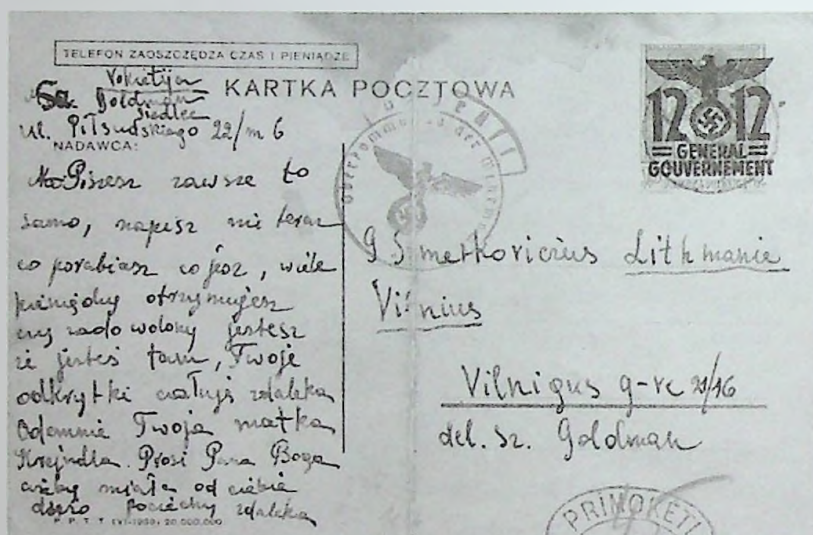
After many weeks of preparation, our scheduled date of departure finally arrived. We were traveling as Polish citizens — a paradoxical status, since Poland no longer existed as an independent country. Russia and Germany had long divided the country between themselves.

We left Vilna with mixed emotions. To be sure, we were traveling to a more secure location, but we felt pained at leaving behind our good friends and acquaintances — many of them Chabad Chassidim — who faced certain death in Vilna. Among those clamoring to leave Vilna were Reb Leib Sheinin, the wife and son of Rabbi Shmuel Levitin, the rabbi of Pastov, and many others who specifically traveled to Vilna to try escaping the country. As mentioned previously, these individuals came after all the embassies closed, too late to secure exit visas.

Anxious as we were about the fate of these people, it hurt us even more to sever the existing connection we still kept with our families stranded in Poland. Lithuania still maintained

steady postal service between Vilna and Poland, and I often wrote letters home to Shedlitz. (In fact, I still have some of the letters my parents wrote back to me in Vilna.) Our departure would effectively cut us off from family and home, yet we realized there was no other alternative.

Our group set out toward the train station, where we boarded a train headed for Minsk. After we arrived in Minsk, we spent some time sitting around in the train station, waiting to catch the next train traveling to Moscow. From Moscow, we planned to go to Vladivostok, from where we would board a ship headed for the Far East.



Postcard From Home To Vilna

In one, my mother asks me to send her food parcels. In another, she lamented the fact that I did not take my younger brothers with me. (Note the accursed swastika in the stamp.)

Though Stalin still held Russia in his tyrannical grip, we experienced virtually no harassment or inconvenience throughout our lengthy journey. Our special status as traveling

tourists protected us from the constant aggravation that was the standard fare of common passengers. In accordance with official protocol, visiting foreigners were generally not disturbed, and the authorities just smiled and waved us on, wishing us a pleasant journey.

As tourists, we were expected to register with the Intourist bureau of Moscow, a Soviet-operated agency that was an integral part of any visit to Russia. Ostensibly designed to help and guide visitors see the country, the agency was one giant facade — in reality, a Soviet method of keeping tight surveillance on tourists, controlling their itinerary and actions. To be fair, Intourist did offer certain conveniences, such as meeting tourists upon arrival and guiding them to and from various cities, but its true purpose was to prevent tourists from contacting ordinary Russian citizens.

Indeed, as our train pulled into Moscow, an Intourist representative was already waiting for us in the station. Our guide immediately whisked us off to a fancy hotel — the *New Moscow*. This was an unexpected treat for us: in those days, only foreign diplomats and affluent businessmen stayed in hotels. Apparently, due to the size of our group, Intourist deemed it necessary to place us in this important hotel.

The *New Moscow* was situated a short distance away from the Kremlin. We quickly realized that the hotel employees were all KGB agents, planted in the hotel for the sole purpose of spying on their guests, and we became extremely vigilant about every word we uttered. Nonetheless, we luxuriated in the pampering and careful attention of the hotel staff. We never expected that poor refugees like ourselves would one day receive such attentive service from the Soviet government! This paradoxical situation continued as we waited for the upcoming departure of our ship, so that we soon became accustomed to the caring service of the hotel.

Patrons of the *New Moscow* received the finest cuisine, enjoying three elaborate meals a day in the lavish dining hall. It was ironic to see the hotel guests stuffing themselves on all sorts of tasty dishes while the rest of the country literally starved. Russia was still deeply embroiled in the war and many of her citizens lay lifeless in the streets, yet an aura of opulence and luxury reigned in the hotel.

At meal time, the hotel staff accompanied us into the dining hall, showing us to tables decked in fine lace tablecloths and covered with expensive crystal and silver dishes. Our waiters hovered nearby, waiting for our orders. Naturally, the laws of *Kashruth* presented us with a real dilemma: what food could possibly be Kosher in this *treifa* establishment?

Finally we ordered fresh fruit, canned sardines, raw eggs, and boiling hot water. The liveried waiters raised their eyebrows quizzically and stared at each other in shock. What kind of guests were these — to choose fruit and eggs over the finest fish and fowl? Swallowing their disgruntlement, the waiters brought in our “meals” and watched in horror as we dunked the eggs into the boiling water, cooking them sufficiently for us to eat.

The Intourist agency planned our itinerary carefully, filling our days with guided tours around Moscow. They took us to the place where Lenin’s body is interred (or so they claimed anyway). The Intourist made a particular point of showing us a gigantic supermarket, trying to impress us and fellow tourists with the abundance of commodities available in Russia. Having already heard many painful stories about our Russian brethren, we knew better than to believe our glib-tongued guides.

We even experienced preferential treatment outside on the streets. Though we had brought along enough food to last through our journey, we did not have any fresh bread. Another *bochur* and I volunteered to stand in one of the infamous lines

that stretched out of every store and bakery, where people waited many hours for a single loaf of bread. As we stood there in line, a Soviet policeman walked by and happened to notice our unusual dress, distinguishing us as honored tourists. Red-faced with embarrassment and fury to see us standing in line like common citizens, the policeman ordered us to step aside and marched right into the bakery. "You see these honorable tourists?" he demanded rhetorically. "Give them bread, and give them as much as they need." We returned to the hotel with fresh bread and an amusing experience to relate.

Meanwhile, our hidden feelings of tension and unease grew day by day. We had really intended to meet with the Chabad Chassidim residing in Moscow, but the Intourist kept a strict eye on all our activities. Back in Vilna, we made arrangements to locate our fellow Chassidim in Russia and relay messages of comfort and enthusiasm from the Rebbe Rayatz and other Chassidim. Religious Jewry as a whole suffered terribly under Stalin, but the Lubavitchers were hardest hit. Merely ten years had passed since the infamous arrest of the Rebbe Rayatz and his subsequent release, and the KGB — still smarting from humiliation — was out to eradicate every last "Schneersonist." Hence, they pursued Chabad Chassidim with particular savagery and cruelty. Chabad Chassidim lived in fearful dread, wondering every day if they would live to see tomorrow, and we hoped our message would infuse them with new inspiration and hope. Besides, we also brought packages of religious items for the Chassidim.

We decided to exercise great care whilst meeting these Chassidim. Even in Vilna, people warned us to use extreme caution in Russia, and not arouse the suspicion of our Soviet hosts. "Remember to act carefully when talking to Russian Jews," we were told. "Many pairs of eyes are following every

move you make. Be particularly cautious when you give them religious articles."

After some debate, we decided to visit the famous Marina Rostcha *shul*, a Russian synagogue boasting daily *minyanim* and even a *mikva*. To our knowledge, this was the only public place where Chassidim gathered to pray. Hopefully, we could make contact and give them the religious articles we carried. As we entered, we saw the President of the *shul* sitting up front. Already forewarned about this notorious individual — a paid KGB agent who kept the Soviets informed about the *shul* — we took our seats and began *davening*. "Be careful to act innocently," Chassidim in Vilna had alerted us. "If the President realizes you are communicating with members of the *shul*, he'll cause trouble for everyone."

Indeed, though we saw many Chassidim in *shul*, we showed not the slightest flicker of recognition and dared not address anyone directly. We kept quiet even in the *mikva*. Local Jews did not have the same tourist protection we enjoyed; they would be summoned for intensive interrogation if they even attempted to talk to us. They would be forced to explain whom they spoke to, what they spoke about, and what they received in return. Hoping to remain inconspicuous, we stood in one place and began *davening*.

Soon we noticed a strange thing. As the prayers started, the Chassidim began walking back and forth in *shul*, passing close by to where we stood. Realizing that this was the safest mode of conversation, we relayed parts of our message every time someone passed us. We swayed back and forth as our lips moved, pretending to be *davening*, while we tried to communicate with our fellow Chassidim. We were thus able to relay the Rebbe's message.

Soon we decided to leave behind the religious items we had brought from Vilna. We knew that the President and other

KGB agents were waiting for us to make conversation with others, or hand our packages to the Chassidim. Hardly daring to make eye contact, we pretended to forget many religious items in *shul*, scattering them strategically around various tables and benches of the *shul*. We even left them our personal *tefillin*! "The Jews of Russia are in desperate need of Kosher *tefillin*," someone told us earlier. "You can't afford the privilege of having individual *tefillin* for yourselves."

We knew the Russian Jews would understand our intentions. Later, after the KGB agents left, the Chassidim would undoubtedly return to claim our "forgotten items." This constituted our entire encounter with the Chabad Chassidim of Russia. The *shul's* atmosphere of dread filled us with sadness and dejection. However, we rejoiced in the fact that our objective had been fulfilled.

As one of the younger *bochurim* in our group, I was the least informed about the ongoing efforts to meet with the Chassidim. I did hear that some older *bochurim* succeeded in meeting with the Chassidim, and had tried to organize a *farbrengen* in a clandestine location. All the preparations proceeded smoothly and the location seemed foolproof, but then, at the very last minute, the *farbrengen* was cancelled. Apparently, they had good reason to suspect that the Soviets had been tipped off about this planned "Schneersonist" meeting.

Though we stayed in Moscow for a relatively short period of time, the constant dread we witnessed left an indelible mark. We barely managed to exchange a few words with our fellow Chassidim, yet we clearly felt their tremendous fear and despair. Their eyes were full of sadness; their faces heavy with grief. We also discerned their overpowering desire to escape the Iron Curtain, especially now when they saw us succeed in leaving their country.

An elderly Jew I met — a short, emaciated fellow who spoke eagerly about *Moshiach* — personified this anticipation. He spoke about the Redemption with incredible feeling and longing. For these oppressed Jews, the coming of *Moshiach* remained the only glimmer of hope in their troubled lives. It was a confident expectation, coupled with their growing impatience to meet the Rebbe again.

During our stay, I once ventured out alone to mail a card to my parents, informing them of my arrival in Moscow and our upcoming trip. Since I was totally unfamiliar with the language, I waited outside and scanned the faces of passersby, hoping to find someone with Jewish features who could help me locate the closest post office. Soon I spotted a middle-aged man who looked Jewish. When I approached, it became evident that he was indeed Jewish, but with a very limited Yiddish vocabulary. In desperation, I tried speaking Polish, which has certain similarities to the Russian language, and managed to make myself understood. The man showed me in which direction to go, and I thanked him for his help.

As we parted ways, the Jew turned to me and stumbled through the few Yiddish words he knew. He said five words: "*Ich Yid, tatte Chevra Kadisha*" ("I am a Jew, and my father belongs to the Burial Society"). I will never forget this sentence. To me, it seemed to encapsulate the sorry state of Russian Jewry.

Completing Our Escape

On the scheduled date of departure, we took a train from Moscow to the eastern port city of Vladivostok. The piercing Russian winter was well underway, and all our layers of clothing could not fend off the biting winds that numbed our bones. The train stopped at many railway stations on the way,

waiting enough time for passengers to disembark and try purchasing some food. We quickly approached a vendor and asked, "Is there any salted fish in town?"

"No!" came the inevitable reply.

"What about hot water?"

"Yes!"

The same scenario played itself out at every station. The hunger in Russia was so strong that even salted fish had become a rarity. To our good fortune, every train station had a roaring stove with a large kettle of hot water — a crucial necessity for those traveling in the height of winter.

Two bearded Jews belonging to the *Bundist* movement were also on our train. Though they had managed to obtain some sort of legal documentation, their trip was fraught with danger. Had any passing police officer known their association with the *Bundists*, he would have arrested them on the spot and sent them to forced exile.

We pulled into one station just before midnight when a heartrending situation met our eyes. Small children materialized out of the darkness, stretching their emaciated hands out for some food. Torn by the gaunt faces of these children, we opened our food packages and gave them some of our supplies — a piece of bread, a can or sardines, or something else.

The Intourist guides and KGB guards were furious at the audacity of these children. How dare they show foreigners that hungry children existed in such a great country as Russia! In all the subsequent train stations, the guards refused to let us disembark, and chased the hungry children away from our train. This episode left a painful mark on our entire group.

At another station, we met a group of Jews ensconced in heavy fur coats. Russian guards patrolling the station ensured that we could not exchange a word with our brethren, but we

saw the looks of desperation and jealousy in their Jewish eyes as they watched us leave the Iron Curtain. We communicated with our eyes alone, absorbing the looks of pain and despair coming our way, and we left the station with a feeling of great sadness.

Finally we reached Vladivostok, the eastern terminal of the huge Siberian railway. From Vladivostok, we planned to board a ship and sail to Japan, but first the Russians had to prove their jurisdiction once again. Throughout our stay, the Russians had been genial — if not overprotective — hosts, yet now they took great pains to discomfort and humiliate us, all in the name of law and procedure. This was not just a cursory passport check: the Russians interrogated us mercilessly and combed carefully through our belongings, trying to find anything incriminating.

The entire ordeal was a frightening experience for us. Though our guides had always acted cordial and friendly, deep down we feared they would imprison us on the first possible opportunity. We had heard inhuman accounts of Russian brutality — particularly toward Jews — and we often wondered if the preferential treatment was really a giant facade. Now, as we sat facing our interrogators, all our earlier fears surfaced once again. Apparently, we remained prisoners as long as we stayed in Russia.

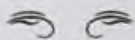
The interrogators finished their questioning and let us leave, but not before confiscating a *sefer torah* scroll they found among the belongings of Shmuel Avrohom Chanowitz. Relieved to be free again, we took our parcels and ran up the ramp to the waiting ship, but our joy was short-lived. International law designates certain areas of the sea as "territorial waters," and we watched worriedly as Russian boats accompanied the ship out to sea. According to law, the

Russians had full right to board the ship and carry out whatever procedures they thought necessary.

Finally, we saw the Russian boats stop and turn back, and we breathed a sigh of relief again. Mr. Chodorov, a Polish Jew on the ship, got up and began dancing joyously on the deck, celebrating his escape from Stalinist rule. Though we did not join in the dancing, we felt a similar sense of release and joy at having left the accursed Russians behind.

On the ship, I recalled an explanation I heard regarding the verse, "And Yakov left Be'er Sheva, and went toward Charan" (Gen. 28:10). This verse is somewhat redundant since, in the previous Torah portion, it already says that Yakov planned to travel toward Charan. However, these two verses symbolize two types of travel. In the first instance, the individual has a single interest — escape. He does not worry about the final destination, or the ensuing trip — he just wants to escape. In the second instance, there is a specific destination involved and the entire trip is aimed at reaching a certain place.

Our journey fit the first category. We had absolutely no interest in traveling to Japan; we wanted only to escape. In truth, Japan was just another stop — our final destination was to live near the Rebbe Rayatz again. Yet, the closer we came to Japan, the happier we felt. No longer would we endure anti-Semitic rule and propaganda, no longer would we suffer under oppressive regimes. We were on our way to a better life.



❧ *Japan* ❧

Adaptation and Change

The trip from Vladivostok to the port of Japan was a short one. Members of the local Jewish Federation were on hand as we disembarked the ship. They helped us immensely, doing everything to ease our acclimatization to the Japanese way of life. For convenience, we abbreviated the name of this agency and changed it to Polish, converting "Jewish Federation" to "*Yevkum*" (*Yev* — "Jew," *Kum* — "Committee"). Our address now became: the *Yevkum*, Kobe, Japan. I still have a letter from my father addressed to the *Yevkum* — his last letter before being murdered by the Nazis.

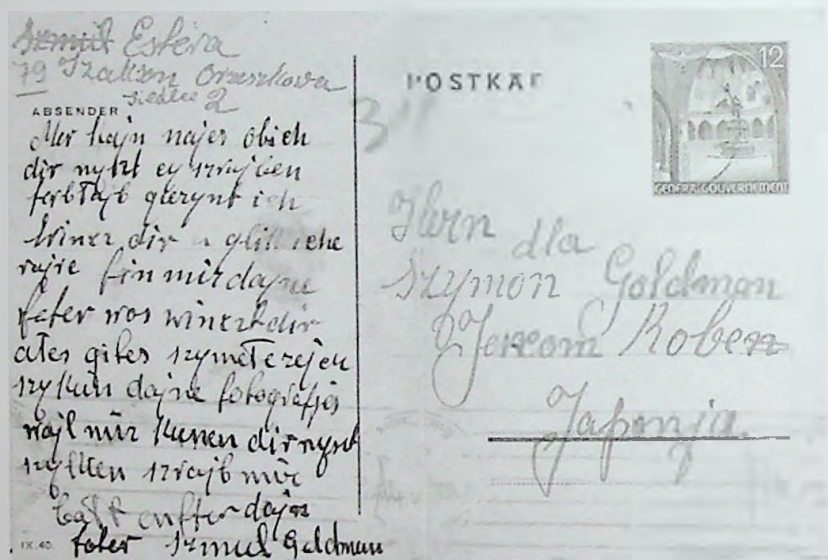
Special transit visas facilitated our entry into Japan, but these papers were valid for only three months and our future still seemed uncertain. Though we could hardly imagine what would happen after the visas expired, we pushed these unpleasant thoughts out of our minds as we tried to organize our daily routine. After all, we reasoned, three months is also time.

The initial days were very hard on us. This was our first time in a non-European country and we had a difficult time adjusting. Jews have always been different than the gentile nations and we felt this acutely in Japan.

The first novelty we encountered upon entering the city were — stores! The stores overflowed with an abundance of fresh fruit, vegetables and dried fruit, each arranged in methodical fashion. Other stores sold suits and leather clothing; some sold furniture and suitcases. As European *bochurim* from poverty-stricken homes, we could only stare in wonder at the seemingly endless supply of goods.

We began wandering around the stores, feasting our eyes on the plentiful shelves, when we suddenly saw an even greater

novelty — no one was watching the cash register! Storeowners mingled with the customers, totally unperturbed about the money lying around on the table. Upon inquiry, the storeowners told us about the strict punishment meted out to thieves — anyone caught stealing had their hand cut off! Apparently, this served as the best deterrent of all; people were simply afraid to steal. Moreover, the perpetrator had the word “thief” stamped into his identification papers, and his children were all branded as “the sons of a thief.” These penalties kept potential thieves out of work, to the extent that no one needed to guard the cash register or merchandise of any store!



Postcard From Home To Kobe

My parents had to write to me in Polish or German to make sure that the Germans would allow the mail to go through.

We traveled by train to Kobe — a city with a prestigious Jewish community, active lay leaders, communal rabbis and large synagogues. Due to the war, the main synagogue became

the center for incoming refugees, assisting and placing the many new faces arriving steadily in Japan. Most of the work was done in a cluster of offices adjoining the synagogue. After the work day, local Jews went straight to the synagogue to meet the newcomers and learn the latest news about the devastation spreading throughout Europe.

The *shul* area became something of a social scene for the unemployed refugees who sat around swapping war stories and experiences. Whoever wanted to hear the latest news of the ongoing war just needed to sit a while in the synagogue. People were always coming in with the news bulletins, rumors, and other developments.

The *Yevkum* organized sleeping quarters for us — a two-story building which we shared with the *bochurim* of Mir. Though we still felt like aliens in our new home, we were fortunate that, in ourselves, we comprised a group thirty strong — large enough to bond together and create our own familiar environment. We now began looking for places to eat. As true yeshiva *bochurim*, we also wanted a large room where we could continue learning and praying.

Sensitive to our needs, the *Yevkum* combed the area until they found a suitable location — a large home in decent condition. They gave us the entire first floor to use as a synagogue and study hall. The Amshinover Rebbe lived on the second floor. Seeing as we established our yeshiva in the same house, the Rebbe came down during the morning prayers to *daven* with us and hear *Borchu*, *Kedusha*, and *leining*.

I remember when, one morning, the Rebbe came downstairs late and asked the first *bochur* he met where the *minyan* was at. "The *chazan* just said 'the King who brings death,' the boy curtly replied. The Rebbe stamped his foot in consternation. "... And restores life," he said firmly, concluding the phrase.

Despite the strange surroundings, we kept up our daily yeshiva schedule. All the boys showed up to learn *Nigleh* and *Chavsidus*, and the yeshiva reverberated with the sounds of Torah. We all had our worries and problems — especially since our families were still stranded in Europe — but we understood our special responsibility, our unique duty to keep the yeshiva functioning in a way that would make the Rebbe proud.

When it came to our meals, however, we faced new problems. Every place has its peculiar conditions and habits, and Japan was certainly no exception. One of the first oddities we noticed was the lack of normal bread. Rice, a basic staple in Japan, was used in every dish, including bread. We simply could not find bread made from wheat flour or other standard grains. The rice bread was pearly white, light and almost hollow, and could only be obtained with special bread coupons. Meat was another problem. Organized *shechita* did not exist in Kobe, and it was extremely difficult to find kosher meat. As such, our diet consisted chiefly of fish, fruit and vegetables.

Here we were, thirty students in all, yet someone needed to arrange our meals. This was hardly an easy job: in the past, we had spent our time immersed in study and prayer, and we lacked the most basic culinary experience. We decided to share the responsibility evenly. Every day, two or three *bochurim* spent the day gathering food, cooking whatever they could, and serving the meals. They started off in the local markets, searching the stalls for kosher fish and edible produce. They then dragged the bundles of food back to the yeshiva, where they set about peeling and slicing, cutting and cooking. Needless to say, the cuisine was far from exceptional. After all, how could yeshiva *bochurim* be expected to cook gourmet meals?

The monitors were also responsible for cleanup. The room had to be swept and mopped from all the peels, spills and stains

that are an inevitable part of every yeshiva meal, and the monitors enjoyed this task least of all. (Cleanup was further complicated by the fact that most floors in Japan were made of straw mats, not from wood or stone.) Once, one of the boys started listing excuses why he could not participate in this detestable chore, until his partner purposely upset a pail of water all over the floor. "You see?" he then said, "we have to clean up now anyway..."

Our accommodations were arranged according to traditional Japanese custom. There were no beds. In fact, I cannot recall ever seeing a bed in Japan. Instead, we spread our sheets over the bare floor, and these became our new "mattresses." I then understood a central behavior in Japanese etiquette, whereby people remove their shoes before entering a home. Since most of the day is spent sitting or sleeping on the floor, it seemed unhygienic to tread all over the same floor with dirty shoes.

Our study hall however, did not look different than it did back at home. We sat on chairs, studying and swaying and studying in the usual position. Despite our new surroundings, we did our utmost to continue acting as Chassidim, learning and praying as though nothing had changed. We also went to *mikva* on a daily basis — hardly an easy feat in Japan, where only the very rich owned bathtubs and showers. All the locals used the closest bathhouse, a big building that contained a huge pool of water. People would come to the bathhouse, fill up pails of water from the pool, and rinse themselves off. Left with no alternative, we used these communal pools for our daily *mikvah* dip.

In Japan of those days, refrigeration simply did not exist. Local residents kept their perishable items out in the courtyards, where the temperature dropped during the night and kept the food somewhat fresh. We also used this primitive

mode of refrigeration, with tragi-comic results. One Friday afternoon, we placed a small quantity of fried fish in the courtyard, hoping to keep it fresh for the Shabbos meal. (As mentioned earlier, kosher meat was practically non-existent in Kobe, forcing us to use fish instead of meat for the Shabbos meals.) That night, as we slept, a light rain fell over Kobe. The rain soaked our store of fish, causing it to become flaccid and spoiled. Not realizing that it had rained, we ate the fish on Shabbos afternoon and quickly felt the consequences. That night, we were stricken with the most terrible stomach pains, as our bodies protested the digestion of rotten fish.

Whoever walked into our rooms the next day beheld an unusual sight: Older *bochurim* writhing in pain on the floor, moaning and holding their stomachs. We ourselves could not help but smile from time to time as we recalled the various calamities we had survived, and of the new "tragedy" that held us now so firmly in its grasp.

The Shabbos Debate

Undoubtedly, the most unusual religious dilemma we experienced in Japan was that of Shabbos. Keeping Shabbos was not difficult: we had our synagogue, our meals, and our special Shabbos schedule. Rather, the actual day of Shabbos became the subject of fierce debate between leading Torah scholars. Due to the international dateline and the resulting time difference between West and East, some rabbinical scholars doubted whether the seventh day of the Japanese workweek was in fact Shabbos.

The students learning in Kobe wrote letters to leading Torah personalities of the period, asking for their ruling on the matter. Soon we received answers from a wide array of scholars. The Chief Rabbinate ruled clearly that the seventh

day was Shabbos, despite the dateline. The Amshinover Rebbe agreed with this opinion. Yet, many Lithuanian Torah giants disagreed with this ruling, and the dispute was thus split along two distinct views. Some opinions maintained that the seventh day was Shabbos; other opinions countered that Sunday was truly Shabbos. Still others who kept Shabbos on the seventh day tried not to perform prohibited work on Sunday as well, just in case Sunday was truly Shabbos. Controversy swirled as each group quoted various Halachic rulings to uphold their particular view.

We followed the most stringent ruling. Hence, though we kept the seventh day as Shabbos, we refrained from work on Sunday as well. In some other yeshivos however, the faculty followed a different ruling, maintaining that Shabbos was, in fact, on Sunday. Such was the case in the Mirrer Yeshiva, where the students were instructed to keep Shabbos on Sunday. Many fine *bochurim* felt uncomfortable with this ruling and, every week, they slipped out of their yeshiva for a few hours and ran over to our *minyán*. This way they heard us read the Torah portion on our Shabbos, the seventh day of the week.

Restless Days

As the days progressed, we constantly thought about ways and means to leave Japan and somehow get to the United States. According to our visas, we were meant to travel to Vietnam after three months, but none of us even entertained such a notion. The Rebbe was in New York, and that was where we intended to go. Our objective remained focused: we needed to obtain entry visas into the United States.

Despite the ongoing war, the lines of communication remained open between Japan and the United States, and the American consulate in Japan received strict guidelines

governing the distribution of entry visas. We traveled to the embassy in Tokyo, where we filled out application papers for entry visas. I was very careful with my responses. People with relatives in Germany did not meet the criteria for these visas, because the American government suspected that such people could be German spies. Thus, I made certain to avoid any mention of my family still stranded in Germany.

Despite my cautious responses, I did not receive the desired visa. In fact, the consulate deemed that no one in the entire yeshiva was eligible for entry visas into the United States. This setback did not faze us in the least, and we remained determined to redouble our efforts until we could enter America and be reunited with the Rebbe Rayatz.

Meanwhile, the yeshiva continued functioning as usual. Yechezkel Deren, Yisrael Chanowitz and myself were among the youngest students in the yeshiva, and Reb Zev Greenglass — one of the older boys — taught us *Shoreish Mitzvos Hatefillah*, a famous Chassidic discourse of the Tzemach Tzedek.

Time passed quickly, and soon it became apparent that we needed to continue our escape. Under international rule, Shanghai remained open to thousands of refugees who had nowhere to flee, particularly since a visa was not needed to enter the country. Whoever had a valid ticket could enter or leave the country without hindrance.

Shanghai was home to a large and prestigious Jewish population. The rabbi of the Ashkenazi Jews was Rav Meir Ashkenazi, himself a graduate of Tomchei Tmimim. A fiery Chassid with a warm heart and strong bond to the Rebbe, Rav Ashkenazi was the epitome of a true *Tomim*. Hence, as students of the same yeshiva, we immediately felt an affinity for the place, and knew we could find support and help with the guidance of Rabbi Ashkenazi.



Rav Meir Ashkenazi

One Friday morning, we boarded an old ship that crept slowly from Kobe to Shanghai, China. It was a short trip and we arrived at our destination that very afternoon. As our ship neared the port, we all climbed on deck to see our new destination, and we were delighted to see Rabbi Ashkenazi standing there on the docks with his two daughters, waiting for us.

We arrived in Shanghai together with another great yeshiva — Yeshivas Mir. The yeshiva was headed by the *rosh yeshiva* Reb Chaim Shmuelevitz who, along with the eminent *mashgiach* Reb Yechezkel Levenstein, managed to bring the yeshiva out of the Nazi inferno practically intact. Though the Mirrer yeshiva arrived in Shanghai with many hundreds of students, while we only had a few dozen, the local Jewish population cared for us equally and did all they could to ease our relocation. Upon our arrival, they sent us all to learn in the Sefardi synagogue, a large *shul* that could comfortably house the tremendous influx of yeshiva students.

As time passed, we found a better location in the Jewish clubhouse of Shanghai. Our new home was situated in the “American quarter” of Shanghai, on a street known as Mulman

Road. A large section of the city remained under international rule and had been divided into many different quarters — a French Concession, a British Concession, and an American Concession. (The International Settlement was formed when a sizeable area of the British Concession merged with land under American authority.) The neighborhood itself was quite beautiful, and the actual clubhouse was located in a grand and impressive building. We now had a large open courtyard, our own bedrooms, a study hall, and a kitchen. The yeshiva of Lublin also stayed in the same building.



China



Lubavitch students in Shanghai. The author, still unbearded, is on the top left.

Jewish Life in China

China was completely different than Japan. Parts of Shanghai looked Westernized, replete with large homes and businesses. Thousands of people displaced by the war poured into China, including an estimated 20,000 Jews from Germany alone. Some of these refugees had the foresight to escape Germany immediately when Hitler rose to power. Besides the refugees, Shanghai was home to a prestigious community of Sefardi and Ashkenazi Jews. Most of the latter group was originally from Russia or Germany. The Sefardim had two beautiful synagogues, and the Ashkenazim — headed by Rabbi Ashkenazi — prayed in a new and large synagogue aptly dubbed “The Russian Synagogue.” In all, Shanghai back then housed a considerable Jewish population.

Our new surroundings gave us somewhat of a culture shock compared to our living conditions in Japan. We had just spent three months living in the totally different style of Eastern countries, suffering spiritually as well. The Jewish population was tiny in Japan, there was no kosher meat, and we had felt like true foreigners. Here in Shanghai however, we found a large and influential Jewish community, and even organized *kashrus*!

The *shochet* of Shanghai was Reb Chaim Plotkin. Short and wide-bearded, Reb Chaim supervised the *kashrus* of our meat, ensuring that everything ran according to *halacha*. Reb Chaim had the keys to the butcher store, so that the gentile owner and his workers could not start working until he opened the door. Reb Chaim guarded the entrance faithfully, ensuring that no one dare bring non-Kosher meat into the store.

We arrived in China sickly and weak. During our short stay in Japan, we had not eaten any meat and we lacked many

other nutrients. This poor diet affected our bodies so that we always felt drained of energy and large, painful sores soon appeared all over our tongues. Thankfully, there was a doctor we could turn to. Dr. Steinman, a Jew originally from Poland, examined our group of *bochurim* and looked carefully at our tongues. "Malnutrition!" he proclaimed. "Your bodies are missing many essential vitamins. I suggest that you all start eating yeast in an effort to boost the immune system." Yeast has never been the most palatable of foods, but we followed his advice anyway, and the lesions disappeared.

Though it was certainly easier to obtain kosher food in Shanghai, we now faced a different problem regarding our bread. Worms — hordes of them, carving comfortable homes in our bread — caused our newest difficulty. It was a miniscule problem compared to the general suffering caused by the ongoing war, but we dealt with this issue on a daily basis, which made it all the more frustrating. The Torah prohibits the consumption of even the tiniest creatures, and we faced a real dilemma every time we sat down to eat a meal. In the end, we were forced to crumble our bread into the tiniest pieces, to ensure we could remove every last worm. This ridiculous situation caused such heartache that a special *mashgiach* was hired to sift flour in local bakeries, checking and rechecking the flour to remove every last worm.

A host of kindhearted Jews did all they could to ease our stay in Shanghai. Rabbi Ashkenazi and his wife really did everything possible for us, and I remember how Rebbetzin Ashkenazi would stand for hours in the kitchen, baking food for our *farbrengens*. Sometimes she cooked a special kind of fish with brown skin, a species we had never seen or tasted before. Rebbetzin Ashkenazi had a primitive kitchen, with old cooking utensils and an ancient stove, but she baked away for us nonetheless.

Another fellow by the name of Brilovsky took it upon himself to help us find decent clothing. Brilovsky was far from wealthy, but nothing gave him more pleasure than helping yeshiva students find comfortable clothing and shoes.

Reb Boruch Stein was another helpful figure. Before any auspicious day — be it *Yud-Tei* Kislev, the twelfth of Tammuz, or any other Chassidic festival — Reb Boruch went to the community board and organized a special meal for us. Thanks to his efforts, we were able to celebrate these days in the proper spirit. True, Rabbi Ashkenazi had organized such *farbrengens* before, but now — after our arrival — Reb Boruch arranged these festive meals in a more elaborate manner.

On the morning of December 7, 1941, Japanese submarines and carrier-based planes attacked the American fleet stationed in the Hawaiian island of Pearl Harbor. The horrific aftermath — approximately 3000 military personnel killed or wounded, and many military craft destroyed — became known simply as “Pearl Harbor.” This incident marked Japan’s entry into the war, on the side of Germany, and the entrance of the United States on the Allied side.

The wrath of the United States turned against Japan, and the Chinese authorities quickly imposed strict regulations, prohibiting the show of light after dusk, to ensure that Shanghai remained enshrouded in darkness. Some of our *farbrengens* were conducted under such conditions, and we covered our windows with dark paper so that no light could escape.

We lived for a while longer in the clubhouse, and thereafter moved to a different location — the Hongkou District, a neighborhood northeast of Shanghai proper. Hongkou was easily accessible, near the converging point of the Huangpu River and the Suzhou Creek, and became known as the “door to the sea.” Our new district had a larger Chinese population

and smaller stores, quite unlike the Western improvisations we had seen in the American Commission. We had a large room for ourselves, which we used as a study hall and a lunchroom. After learning Chassidus and *davening*, the monitors cleared the tables and set up the food. After the meals, the monitors cleaned the eating area again and we resumed our studies on the same tables. Unlike our poorly prepared food in Japan, we now had our very own cook who prepared tasty meals for us.

Dr. Avraham Seligson, a pious Jew and expert doctor, lived in the same courtyard as the yeshiva. Though still a *bochur*, Dr. Seligson was a unique individual who had earned a respected reputation. Today it is very common to meet religious doctors, but in those days it was almost impossible to find experienced doctors who were G-dfearing Jews. Dr. Seligson was an anomaly, and people respected him for fastidiously observing *halacha* while continuing to practice medicine. His daily behavior was a tremendous sanctification of G-d's Name.



Dr. Avraham Seligson

Dr. Seligson's reputation grew when a large number of refugees became severely ill with dysentery. Preferring to use the services of a religious Jew, people flocked to the yeshiva's

courtyard to be examined by the doctor. Besides, it was common knowledge that his expertise far surpassed that of the other doctors. Dr. Seligson *davened* with us every day and, even as he prayed, scores of patients came into the *shul*, to wait patiently until he could see them. After the prayers, Dr. Seligson would attend to their needs and write out prescriptions.

During Tishrei, two of the students served as *chazonim* for the High Holy Days. These were Avraham Yitzchak Garfinkel and Yosef Borenstein, both talented singers with melodious voices. In fact, the pair served as our *chazonim* back home in Poland, then during our temporary stay in Vilna, now in Shanghai, and later also in New York. Both were originally from Poland, and they *davened* with the familiar tunes sung in synagogues around Poland.

Though our new neighborhood was strictly Chinese, many Jews still managed to find homes, set up businesses, and attend *shul*. Our yeshiva was located on Werd Street, near a large *shul* frequented by Ashkenazi Jews. We often visited the *shul* between study schedules, hoping we could meet with Mr. Brochshtat — an English-speaking Jew from Germany who understood the news broadcasts, and kept us abreast of all the latest developments.

Behind Ghetto Walls

We lived in Shanghai for five long years. During this time, the Canadian government issued a limited amount of entry visas, allowing some refugees into Canada. The Vaad Hatzalah — the Rescue Organization in America, distributed these visas among many yeshivos, allotting the visas according to the number and age of the students. Tomchei Tmimim of Shanghai received nine of these visas. As such, nine of the older boys left

Shanghai after a few months and traveled to Canada. They were thus spared the many ordeals and tribulations we were destined to face in Shanghai.

After the murderous attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese marched into Shanghai and took control of the city. Shanghai now lost its unique international status and, though it remained part of China, it became, in effect, a Japanese city. One of the first "innovations" of the Japanese was to turn our neighborhood into a ghetto, trapping many German Jews into clearly defined quarters. I still do not know the exact rationale behind this move, but it probably stemmed from the fact that Japan and Germany were close allies. Whatever the reason, our semi-comfortable lives changed yet again. The larger Sephardi community and the many Russian Jews living outside of the Hongkou quarter were still free to walk around as they pleased. Only the German Jews were targeted and confined to the ghetto, prisoners once again. Thankfully, our lives were not threatened.

Those living in the ghetto were restricted to certain boundaries; whoever dared leave without authorization faced heavy fines and stiff punishment. A Japanese officer was appointed to oversee the ghetto. Short and ill-tempered, this ugly man lashed out at us at every opportunity. He could not bear seeing a tall and handsome German Jew with blonde hair. Whenever such a person passed, the officer almost went out of his mind with hatred. Any time he wanted to punish a Jew, this short Japanese officer would climb up on a chair and slap us in the face.

Despite ghetto constraints, we lived almost normal lives. We had food, we had where to sleep, and we continued learning in our new quarters. Many Jews operated stores and businesses, including a plethora of Jewish tailors. Most importantly, our lives were in no danger. The Hongkou district

remained populated by many Jews, so that the usual crowd on the street looked similar to any other Jewish community.

Our yeshiva continued as usual. The few boys who ran the yeshiva were among those fortunate enough to receive Canadian visas, and the responsibility now fell on Reb Shmuel Dovid Raichik. He consulted regularly with Rabbi Ashkenazi and other leading rabbis, ensuring that the yeshiva would remain open and operational. This was not an easy feat. The yeshiva incurred many expenses, and new problems cropped up every day, but Rabbi Raichik persevered and succeeded.

(I need not describe the greatness of Rabbi Raichik. His name is a byword in many homes, due to his steadfast determination in spreading the wellsprings of Torah and Chassidus wherever possible. I will just relate a personal experience with this remarkable individual:

After his arrival in America, Rabbi Raichik became an emissary of the Rebbe — traveling to various American cities, where he taught Chassidus and raised money for the Rebbe's worthy causes. Rabbi Raichik once arrived in Buffalo and lodged in exactly the same home where I stayed at the time. Reb Dovid Eidelman, another Chassid, was there with me, and we were more than pleased to let Rabbi Raichik share the same room with us. That night, we went to sleep as usual, expecting our guest to follow suit.

Hours later, I suddenly awoke to a strange noise. I peered at the clock: it was three o'clock in the morning. Rabbi Raichik was pacing the room, his face fiery red, his eyes closed in concentration. I could hear him repeating, *Ribono Shel Olam, Ribono Shel Olam* — "Master of the World! Master of the World!" With a sense of awe, I suddenly realized that he was still saying the opening words of *Krias Shema Al Hamittab*, the bedtime Shema recited before retiring at night! We had always learned that this prayer was a most appropriate time for

personal introspection, but I never witnessed self-reflection to such a degree. Needless to say, I clamped my eyes firmly closed and continued listening, until I drifted back to sleep.)

Rabbi Ashkenazi became our *rosh yeshiva* and gave frequent lectures on *Bava Metzia*, the Talmudic tractate we learned at that time. Mrs. Ashkenazi visited us often in the ghetto to ensure we had enough food and decent clothing. Her warm concern for our wellbeing really touched us and we looked forward to each of her visits.

I must reiterate that we had a unified commitment to keep the yeshiva running as usual. The weekly *Shalosh Seudos* meal was just one example of our steadfast determination to maintain the unique atmosphere of Tomchei Tmimim. Though the war had greatly altered our lives, we continued the weekly tradition of gathering together on Shabbos afternoons to sing Chassidic melodies and review a Chassidic discourse.

I can honestly say that the *Shalosh Seudos* in Shanghai was identical to that of Otwock and Vilna. Every week, the entire student body assembled in the study hall, where we sang many of the heartfelt Chabad tunes we had heard before the war. Generally, we tried to sing different *niggunim* every week. Shlomo'le Hochler, a student with a gift for music, knew an impressive number of *niggunim* by heart and he helped us sing various *niggunim* every week.

Years earlier, Reb Yehudah Eber — the legendary *rosh yeshiva* of Tomchei Tmimim in Otwock and Warsaw — had arranged many varied Chabad compositions, allotting them names and specific numbers. Some tunes were grouped according to origin, while others were simply called "Number One, Number Two," etc. Shlomo'le Hochler had such a knack for remembering how each *niggun* started, that we could simply call out a number and he would immediately begin singing. In all, Shlomo'le knew 150 of these *niggunim*.



Reb Yehudah Eber

After the singing, we all listened in silence as someone publicly reviewed a Chassidic discourse. Singing *niggunim* and hearing Chassidus at the close of Shabbos generated a special atmosphere, a feeling unique to Tomchei Tmimim. In those precious moments, as the skies darkened and we heard the words of Chassidus, we forgot about the war and suffering, focusing instead on the spiritual energy prevalent in the room. It still felt like Tomchei Tmimim — even in Shanghai.

The students rotated every week, so that each *bochur* received a turn to say a *ma'amer*, but certain students showed specific talent in reviewing Chassidus. Rabbis Garfinkel, Shmuel Dovid Raichik, and Shmuel Moshe Lederhandler were among those who explained the *ma'amorim* with exceptional clarity and precision.

We were still in our teenage years, and the *Shalosh Seudos* atmosphere had a tremendous impact on us. We saw our friends reviewing Chassidus with awe and respect. As one voice, we sang the deeply beautiful *niggunim* of Chabad. This combined atmosphere of enthusiasm and sincerity created the highlight of our week.

Two students found their respective wives in Shanghai. Yosef Partovitz married a girl from the Thaler family, a Polish family who escaped to Germany and then Shanghai. Yosef was an exceptional young man who always had something brilliant and insightful to say. I became very close with Yosef and even stayed in his house. Pesach Rabinowitz also got married in Shanghai. Once again, Mrs. Ashkenazi became their surrogate mother, shopping for the newlyweds and arranging all their needs.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States began a series of military initiatives against Japan. American warplanes began roaming the skies, dropping powerful bombs on Japanese targets. Thankfully, the Americans were very careful to pinpoint only military targets and, generally, tried to avoid civilian areas. Though we saw American warplanes streaking across the sky, and we could hear the air raid sirens wailing in the distance, the bombs themselves never fell in our area.

It was ironic to see how circumstances had changed: In the past, we had tried to hide from German warplanes patrolling the skies, and now we had to conceal ourselves from their enemies — the American planes. The American bombers caused extensive damage and, despite their care, killed some civilians, including Jews. Though few and far between, we mourned the loss of every fatality, for “every soul is an entire world.” We now feared both the Americans and the Germans.

One day, one of the students suddenly died. Apparently, he had contracted a severe cold, which later worsened and developed serious complications. We never imagined that a simple cold could have such consequences, and this newest tragedy affected us greatly. Reb Shaul Margolis, an eloquent and famous speaker, came to eulogize the *bachur*. He touched on the verse describing how Cain killed his brother, his

punishment, and his subsequent complaint to G-d. Said Cain: "I am to become unsettled, to wander across the earth, so that whoever finds me will kill me (Gen. 4:14)." Reb Shaul applied the verse to our present conditions. "When one is at home, healthy and in the company of family, he is protected against small dangers. But now," said Reb Shaul bitterly, "now that we are 'unsettled and wandering across the earth,' then whoever so desires — even the slightest cold — can come and cause death."

Disgraced By Fellow Jews

Far off in the United States, a select group of Torah giants came together and formed the *Vaad Hatzala* ("The Committee for Saving Lives"). Their primary function involved raising tremendous sums of money from American Jewry, aimed at easing the plight of the many displaced yeshivos struggling for survival in Shanghai and other places. Officially, money was allotted according to the number of students in every yeshiva, allowing each and every *bochur* enough money for food and clothing. In short, these funds were a true lifesaver.

The United States and Japan were at war, and the money was channeled through Switzerland, a neutral country that maintained close ties with Japan. Reb Yisrael Zuber, a Chabad Chassid and graduate of Tomchei Tmimim, lived in Switzerland at the time, and he worked very hard to ensure that all the money would indeed reach Shanghai.

Sadly, certain factions of the *Vaad Hatzala* decided that Chabad *bochurim* would not get a single dollar of this charity. Whenever an envelope of money reached Shanghai, it was always accompanied by a letter specifying: "EXCEPT FOR CHABAD." Hence, while the students of Mir and other yeshivos received generous stipends to help them eat and buy

clothes, the students of Tomchei Tmimim had to fend for themselves.

The irony of the situation was not quite lost on the Mirror *rosh yeshiva*, Reb Chaim Shmuelevitz. These life-saving funds reached their destination due to a Chabad Chassid — Reb Yisrael Zuber — and were now being mailed to Rabbi Ashkenazi, another Chabad Chassid. Yet, Chabad *bochurim* could not get their rightful share of the money! Reb Chaim felt ill at ease about the entire matter and remarked wryly, “The Torah giants of our time could live in true harmony, were it not for the constant meddling and interference of their attendees.”

The monies were addressed to Rabbi Ashkenazi. He and Reb Chaim Shmulevitz distributed the money among all the students, but we received nothing. We heard that certain American *gedolim* were not on the friendliest of terms with Chabad, yet we still could not understand how this justified such a malicious separation between yeshivos.

Some postulated that members of the *Vaad Hatzala* were irate over a second fund established by the Rebbe Rayatz. Called the Fund for *Pidyon Shevuyim* (“Redeeming Captives”), the Rebbe raised money to support Jews suffering in Nazi Germany and Communist Russia. Needless to say, the legalities of such a fund were not straightforward, and this prevented the Rebbe from revealing the true nature of his fund. Neither could the Rebbe show other *gedolim* an accounting of the funds he distributed among German and Russian Jewry. Apparently, certain *gedolim* resented this secrecy and retaliated by excluding suffering Chabad students from the *Vaad Hatzala* fund.

This assumption was based on news we heard from America, to the effect that certain *gedolim* claimed the Rebbe’s fund hampered fundraising efforts for the *Vaad Hatzala*. Due to the intense secrecy so crucial to the Rebbe’s work, the Rebbe could not reveal that, indeed, his fund lent practically no

assistance to the many yeshivos stranded in Shanghai. His silence prompted these *gedolim* to bar us from benefiting from their charity.

Whatever the reason, this incident hurt us deeply. We had suffered at the hands of the Poles, the Germans, the Americans — and now we suffered at the hands of religious Jews like ourselves. Even today, many years later, it is still difficult to understand the rationale of the Rabbis who constituted the *Vaad Hatzala*.

The Rebbe appointed his son-in-law, Reb Shmaryahu Gurary (the “Rashag”), to try and ease our living conditions. Indeed, Reb Shmaryahu immediately began collecting money for us and managed to send us considerable sums of money. Due to his untiring efforts, we escaped hunger and death.

In retrospect, our entire stay in Shanghai seems surreal. Before the war, who could ever imagine that German and Polish Jewry would one day find refuge in Shanghai, China?

A World in Mourning

After some time, reports reached us describing the horrific decimation of European Jewry and their methodical execution by the Nazis and their crazed leader. We could hardly believe our ears when we heard about the extermination camps, the gas chambers, the mass graves, the inhuman tortures. We had heard various rumors before, but they all seemed so farfetched and illogical. At first, we were in a state of denial, convincing ourselves that such atrocities could simply never occur. After all, this was the twentieth century! The devastating news stunned us; we could hardly fathom how anyone could eradicate millions of innocent human beings so efficiently. As the days passed and more news filtered into Shanghai, the magnitude of our loss began to sink in.

Our world was plunged in mourning. We all had close family members still living in Poland and Germany — parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, cousins and other relatives. Bitterly, we suddenly realized that we would never again see our loved ones. Even now, I cannot find the words to adequately describe our grief. We were young teenagers torn away from our families, worrying incessantly about our uncertain future, and the tragic news left us absolutely shattered.

We were constantly tormented by doubt. Did any of our family members manage to escape the Nazi death machine, or were we all alone in this huge, unfriendly world? These maddening thoughts gave us no respite, as we agonized over the fate of our loved ones. May G-d grant that no Jew experience such mental torture ever again.

For days afterwards, we roamed the ghetto like living corpses. No one could eat; no one could sleep. One consuming thought filled our days and nights: did anyone in our families survive? At night we all lay awake on our beds, our minds racing in the dark. The room was totally quiet — an eerie silence full of screaming thoughts and searing questions. We were powerless, totally unable to help those who had stayed behind. Strong feelings of guilt surfaced, particularly when we contemplated our relative safe lives compared to those butchered back at home. Why were we chosen to survive, while so many perished innocently?

Sleep evaded the Shanghai ghetto for a long, long time.

A Memorable Gathering

During this difficult period, I merited to be with the Amshinover Rebbe. Most Jewish refugees had been transferred to the new ghetto but, apparently, someone

influenced the Japanese not to disturb the Rebbe. Hence, the Rebbe continued living in a more comfortable neighborhood, together with many Russian Jews.

Many stories are told about this special *tzaddik*. The Amshinover Rebbe worked incessantly to improve the lot of those trapped within ghetto boundaries. His superhuman efforts dwarfed the work of others around him. In one instance, the Rebbe personally intervened to assist some Lithuanian rabbis. The rabbis had no idea that the Rebbe was responsible for their deliverance, and the Rebbe wanted it that way. He did things without fanfare; he abhorred publicity. His mission was to help others in need, even when his efforts remained unrecognized.

When I visited the Rebbe, he was lying in bed, moaning and groaning in pain. The devastating news emanating from Europe had made the Rebbe physically ill. Still confined to his bed, the Rebbe quietly began laying the groundwork for a mass rally of Shanghai Jewry. The Rebbe wanted everyone to assemble in one of the synagogues, to mourn the unspeakable calamity that had struck European Jewry, and pray for Divine mercy. The entire Jewish population would be invited to the gathering — rabbis, merchants, judges and Jews of every persuasion.

In his legendary humility, the Rebbe preferred to hide his involvement in the matter. The public thought that a group of distinguished rabbis and laymen had organized the event, but I knew the truth. Almost alone, the Rebbe carefully nurtured the project through its many stages.

A printed notice was circulated around the Jewish areas of Shanghai, providing information about the upcoming gathering. The somber Yizkor service was scheduled to begin at 10 a.m., on February 28th 1946, in the New Synagogue on Rte Tenant de la Tour. All Jewish stores and offices were

requested to remain closed until one in the afternoon, to demonstrate their solidarity with the grief of the Jewish nation. A half-day fast was also declared. The notice was signed by Rabbi Ashkenazi, the Amshinover Rebbe, Rabbis Shmulevitz and Leventstein of Mir, and three Jewish organizations.

That day, every Jewish store, school and business closed their doors, as thousands of Jews from every corner streamed into the New Synagogue. Heavy grief and shock permeated the assembly. The pain was palpable, an overpowering grief that could not be assuaged. Distinguished rabbis and communal leaders representing the entire spectrum of Shanghai Jewry addressed the huge gathering, lamenting the unbelievable destruction of European Jewry.

A ripple of awe swept the huge gathering when the Amshinover Rebbe stepped up to the podium. His patriarchal appearance aroused feelings of veneration and emotion. All the assembled knew the Rebbe as a bastion of strength and encouragement, yet the Rebbe could barely compose himself to talk about the terrible Holocaust. He mouthed a few inaudible words and burst into tears; said another sentence and began crying again.

The gathering broke out in a fit of wailing and weeping. We saw a broken *tzaddik* standing before us, a righteous, spiritual soul drenched in blood and tears. The Rebbe's pure soul dissolved in pain over the hellish treatment suffered by our brethren at the hands of the Nazis and their cohorts. The crying rose to a crescendo, the very walls seemed to bend and shed a tear. Six million! Six million pure and innocent martyrs!

What more can I say. The Amshinover Rebbe aroused the congregated masses in a way that defies description. His presence up there on the podium evoked the strongest emotions, an outpouring of sorrow and bereavement. Reb Meir Podrabinik, a Jew from Bialystock, heightened the flood of

emotion when he chanted the *E-l Moleh Rachamin* in memory of those who perished in the Holocaust. Blessed with a sweet and powerful voice, Reb Meir's voice resonated throughout the *shul* as he put his heart and soul into this special recital, evoking a new rush of tears.

(Reb Meir, a refugee like so many of us, deserves special mention of his own. Reb Meir put Torah first and foremost, despite the difficult conditions he faced in Shanghai. He spent much time and effort teaching his children Torah, hoping and praying they would one day become Torah scholars. Indeed, his dream came to fruition.)

After the gathering, we continued collecting as much information as we could about the situation in Europe. Naturally, our interest in other worldly events grew as well, and we received constant updates regarding the ongoing war effort. Though we were living quite comfortably in Shanghai, physically far from the European massacre, our minds stayed focused on those suffering back home. Yes, we had clothing and food — and even a cook to prepare our meals — but we were far from complacent. The war occupied our minds constantly. We discussed all the latest news, argued and debated with one another, and waited impatiently for good tidings. Our studies in yeshiva continued regardless, but the general atmosphere on the street was one of tenseness and agitation.

The months passed quickly and, in 1945, we began hearing reports that Hitler's Third Reich was in its death throes, having suffered irreparable damage from the Allied forces. The Japanese, having taken the side of the Germans, began to fear Allied retribution. Most of all, the Japanese feared the military genius of General McArthur. Ironically, the general later wrote the truce of surrender, which the Japanese signed submissively at the end of war. Information and news trickled into the ghetto

day by day, until we heard an announcement signaling the surrender of Japan and Germany, effectively ending World War II.

When the news broke, a scene from the past flashed through my mind. I remembered Rabbi Eichenstein, weak and confined to bed, and his words resonated in my ears. "O enemy, your ruins are [gone] forever (Psalms 9:7)," he had said. "Even when the foe is vanquished and the war is over, the ruin they have brought on the world — and particularly the Jews — will be everlasting."

How terribly right he was.

Close Friends

Before concluding my recollections of Shanghai, I would like to mention some of the friends I had during this difficult period. One of my closest friends during our many travels and ordeals was Reb Nochum Prager. Originally from Brisk, Nochum went to learn in Tomchei Temimim of Otwock and, when the Germans approached, Nochum fled back to Brisk. The Germans had not yet captured Brisk, but Nochum decided to leave home anyway and join Tomchei Tmimim of Vilna — then still under Lithuanian rule.

I first met Nochum in Vilna. He traveled straight from home, and arrived in Vilna carrying a few suitcases of belongings. Having fled Poland with only the clothes on our backs, we stared at Nochum in disbelief, hardly believing that people still used luggage in these chaotic times. It gave us a thrill to see a Jew traveling like a normal person even in wartime, complete with suitcases and packages.

Though somewhat older than me, Nochum and I formed a close friendship — a bond that lasted throughout our wanderings in Lithuania, Japan, China, and, eventually, the

United States. After the war, Reb Nochum moved to the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York. He was an active communal leader and a successful businessman, a kind person who always lent others a helping hand.

Reb Yechezkel Deren — my learning partner in yeshiva — was another close friend. A prolific Torah scholar and G-dfearing Jew, Reb Yechezkel was known for his refined manner, Chassidic conduct, and pleasant demeanor. After we arrived in the United States, Reb Yechezkel married the daughter of Rabbi Sholom Posner — one of the very first Chabad emissaries — and moved to Pittsburgh. Reb Yechezkel was around the same age as me. His father, Reb Yisrael, was an Alexander Chassid who lived in the village of Vishokov.



Rabbi Sholom Posner

(This village is known among Chabad Chassidim because of a respected Chassid who lived there — Reb Chaim Meir Liss. Though I never met him personally, I heard many stories about this great Chassid, his warm heart and good deeds. Reb Chaim Meir began a Chassidus class in Vishokov, teaching local scholars the fundamentals of Chassidus, drawing them slowly closer to the Chassidic way of life. One of his closest

disciples was Reb Yisrael — the father of my friend, Yechezkel Deren.

One year, the rabbi of Vishokov gave the customary *Shabbos Hagadol* sermon, clearly outlining the laws of Pesach as they pertain to various kitchen utensils, and other laws. After the sermon, the congregation began discussing the rabbi's speech amongst themselves. "The rabbi spoke about comprehensible things," an unlearned villager was heard to say. "He spoke about plates, spoons and forks, pots and pans. Even I know what he's talking about. However, when Chaim Meir learns Chassidus with Reb Yisrael, this must be true Torah — because I don't understand a word he says..." (I heard this story from my father-in-law.))

I must also mention Reb Yosef Wineberg, another member of our group. An outstanding *Tomim*, Reb Yosef served as our spiritual ambassador of sorts, always busy with spiritual public service. As mentioned earlier, Rabbi Kramer arranged our physical affairs — our passports, our visas, and other necessities — but Reb Yosef busied himself with our spiritual needs. Whenever we needed to write a letter to the Rebbe, we naturally chose Reb Yosef to compose the letters on our behalf. Similarly, during our short stay in Russia, it was Reb Yosef who endangered himself by speaking with local Chabad Chassidim, conveying the Rebbe's message to them and offering words of inspiration. Reb Yosef lent his full assistance to these and other spiritual matters.

Reb Tzvi Kotlarsky, another friend of mine, was among the nine *bochurim* fortunate enough to receive Canadian visas after spending just a few weeks in Shanghai. Though safe and secure in Canada, Reb Tzvi's thoughts were always with us. Immediately after the war and the resumption of the postal service, Reb Tzvi began sending us letters, describing life in the West, and we deeply appreciated his letters.

Renewed Efforts

With the war behind us, we redoubled our efforts toward procuring entry visas for the United States. The postal route between Shanghai and America resumed normal service, and we sent off a flurry of letters to whomever we could, asking for assistance in receiving entry visas. Hopefully, we would soon be reunited with the Rebbe.

Rabbi Raichik, the principal organizer of our group, did not rest until we received the necessary documentation. In the United States, the Rashag (the eldest son-in-law of the Rebbe Rayatz) joined forces with the famed Rabbi Eliezer Silver from Cincinnati, and the pair worked incessantly on our behalf. They met with Senator Taft — a Senator with much clout in the United States Senate — and he proved helpful to our cause. Mr. Burns, the Secretary of State, also took a personal interest in our case and saw to it that entry visas were issued for our group.

Meanwhile, the Japanese began disappearing from the city. Shocked by the victory of the Allied Forces and afraid of possible retaliation, they slipped out of Shanghai and fled back to Japan. We rejoiced openly as American tanks rolled into the streets and the first American soldiers appeared. No longer would we suffer cruel treatment at the hands of the anti-Semitic Japanese. The ghetto boundaries were removed, enabling Jews to walk through the city once more.

We discovered many Jews among the American soldiers, mostly from the East Side or other areas of Manhattan. Quite a few soldiers spoke a fluent Yiddish, and we felt a sense of exhilaration just sitting in their company. Yisrael Sappir, a Jew living in Shanghai, even discovered a close family relative among the soldiers! Naturally, we spent every spare moment

with these friendly soldiers, trying to glean whatever information we could about Jewish life in the United States.

Soon we received a telegram, notifying us that the American Embassy of Shanghai already had our visas waiting in their offices. Needless to say, we were overjoyed! We went to the embassy and, indeed, received visas for the entire yeshiva. Contrary to standard procedure, the American government issued a "group visa," instead of separate documentation for each individual. This was due to the direct efforts of Senator Taft and Mr. Burns.

As time progressed, we received more and more letters from America. Tzvi Kotlarsky continued writing to us, describing all the latest developments among Chabad Chassidim and keeping us apprised of all the latest news concerning the Rebbe. We also got letters with detailed instructions about our upcoming journey to the United States.

One of the packages we received contained a recording of cantorial music. This was the first time we had seen such a thing. The tape was sent for Yisrael David Rosenberg, a *bochur* with a beautiful voice and an ear for music. Yisrael David was renting a room with two other *bochurim* — Moshe Feder and Yehoshua Bronstein — and they invited me to come over and hear the tape. I could see a look of pure bliss on Yisrael David's face as the rich voices on the tape filled the room. Jewish tapes are commonplace now, but this was a new experience for us, and we enjoyed every song on the tape.

In a sense, our current conditions resembled our previous escape from Vilna and arrival in Kobe, Japan. Here too, we experienced the entire gamut of emotions that come with total change. Once again we felt the dizzy rush of exhilaration that comes with freedom and the escape from tyranny and oppression. This time, however, our joy and excitement reached

fever pitch for, at long last, we would soon be reunited with the Rebbe and our many friends.

Obviously, many others shared the same feelings of hope and jubilation. Though we had all lost close family and friends in the concentration camps, gas chambers, and mass killings, we took solace in the fact that these atrocities had ended. The war was over; Germany and her allies had surrendered. The Jewish community of Shanghai rejoiced, relieved that the worst was behind them. Even the economy improved.

Despite our longing to leave Shanghai, we quickly learned that life had not yet resumed its normal course. The travel industry was in a shambles; ocean liners had not yet resumed operations. Our only choice was to board an army vessel headed for the United States. Military ships lacked the many amenities and comforts readily available on passenger ocean liners, but we could not bear to remain in Shanghai a moment longer. After hurried consultation, we decided to reserve places on the warship, eager to see the Rebbe once again. (Flying by airplane was simply not an option. Tickets were exorbitant, and we could not afford the airfare.)

In the days preceding our departure, we set out to arrange new sets of clothing. Back in Poland, our Chassidic dress included a long frock (*kapote*) that was worn even on weekdays. However, during our five-year stay in Shanghai, we found it physically impossible to obtain such *kapote*, particularly during the war. Only the older *bochurim* persevered, continuing to wear their Chassidic dress while the younger students slowly changed to short jackets. This bothered us greatly, particularly since the Rebbe Rayatz had specifically asked, "Do not change your Shabbos or weekday garb."

Now, with the conclusion of war and the improved economy, acquiring *kapote* suddenly became feasible again.

Obviously, we could not just order a *kapota* from a tailor. Rather, Mr. Chanin helped us obtain the necessary material for our *kapotas*. He brought us huge bolts of dark fabric, which we then gave to a local tailor along with detailed measurements on how to sew a *kapota*. We even instructed him to make the customary slit that is found in back of Chabad *kapotas*. The tailor was Mr. Shmueli, a Jewish master tailor who set up a tailoring business in Shanghai. He sewed our *kapotas* so expertly that people in America later stopped us to admire his fine tailoring!

Knowing how much this meant to the Rebbe Rayatz, we were overjoyed to receive our newly finished *kapotas*, and we packed them in together with our belongings. In a way, the new clothes were symbolic of this new period in our lives, a fresh start to life. After years of wandering and confusion, we were now entering a period of relative calm.



Lubavitch students in Shanghai towards the end of their sojourn. The author, now fully bearded, is in the center of the top row.

❧ *America* ❧



*The Rebbe Rayatz
Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn
The Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe*

Crossing the Ocean

We left Shanghai with nary a backward glance. Immediately upon boarding the ship, we felt overwhelming gratitude towards Hashem for His kindness to us. As though in a dream, we watched our ship steam out of the port — leaving behind the Chinese, the Japanese, and the local Jewish community. We could hardly believe we were on our way to America, to our friends, to the Rebbe. Soon we could once again begin a life of Torah study and prayer, unhampered by war or trouble. The unfathomable ways of Hashem raced through our minds — how Divine Providence ordained who should live and who should perish; who remained with family and who remained alone; who would survive in good health and who would suffer for long afterwards.

Our trip was uncomfortable and rough. The ship rocked and pitched in the turbulent waters, making us feel clammy and nauseous. Our cabins contained army bunk beds that offered us only thin, lumpy mattresses, but the constant queasiness kept many *bochurim* in these “beds” throughout the entire trip. Aside from our group, there were also many other refugees on the boat, including students of Mir and other yeshivos also on their way to America.

I previously mentioned Reb Yisrael David Rosenberg, a *bochur* with great musical talent. During our trip, Yisrael David experienced a long spell of seasickness, and spent many days in bed. A true musical artist, Yisrael David used the time to compose many new *niggunim*, one of which was later printed in *HaKriah v'HaKedusha*, a periodical published by the Rebbe.

The ship also carried many soldiers home from the battlefield, together with a large crew of sailors and maintenance workers. One of these, a black sailor, never tired

of greeting us on deck. Whenever he saw us, this crewmember would stop his chores and instantly bellow Moshe's demand to Pharaoh: "LET MY PEOPLE GO!" He wanted to impress us with his "knowledge" of the Bible, but we understood no English and could not appreciate his efforts.

On this trip, as in Shanghai, we were fortunate to have the Amshinover Rebbe accompany us. (I have mentioned this saintly *tzaddik* so many times throughout this account that it might appear I am an Amshinover Chassid! However, I simply cannot forget how, during all our troubles and travails, we merited to draw encouragement and strength from the Amshinover Rebbe. Moreover, we received an explicit directive from the Rebbe Rayatz to consult with the Amshinover in all circumstances — even in life-and-death matters. This direct instruction underscored the greatness of the Amshinover Rebbe.)

Aside from the uncomfortable conditions we had to contend with, our inner feelings were markedly different when compared to previous travels. On our earlier trips from Russia to Japan and, later, from Japan to China, we were fleeing Nazism or Communism. As such, these trips were fraught with unease and uncertainty. However, now as we crossed the ocean toward America, we felt serene and confident, realizing we were starting a new lease on life.

I cannot remember the exact duration of our journey, but one morning we awoke to loud shouts. We clambered up on deck and the sailors told us we would reach American shores within twenty-four hours. We hardly slept that night, waiting impatiently to finally reach our destination. Sure enough, the very next day, we watched in wonder as the port city of San Francisco came into view. The sailors pointed out the gigantic Golden Gate Bridge, enjoying our cries of amazement as we sailed near the large bridge. As the ship docked in the port, we

continued gaping in wonder at the modern structures of the city.

Barely had the crew lowered the disembarking ramp when hordes of journalists ran up on the ship, eager to interview us. News of our arrival had preceded us by a few days, and the American public was interested in hearing a report about the very first group of war survivors to arrive in America. The journalists clambered around, asking questions and snapping pictures, when they suddenly spied the Amshinover Rebbe. His patriarchal features and holy countenance made an incredible impression on the journalists and they turned their fullest attention to the Rebbe. Cameras flashed and whirled as they photographed the Rebbe, and his picture later ran in many prominent American newspapers, all describing the Rebbe as a holy, spiritual person.

The reporters finally left us alone and we were able to disembark. The Rebbe's eldest son-in-law — the Rashag — had sent two representatives from Tomchei Tmimim to greet us. Rabbis Yosef Wineberg and Moshe Yitzchak Hecht welcomed us at the immigration center and escorted us to the lodgings they had previously prepared. Our group consisted of twenty-nine *bochurim* and Reb Elya Moshe Liss, a widower.

A new world suddenly opened before us. We saw undamaged, comfortable houses, populated synagogues, children who looked healthy and happy, and prospering businesses. After years of wandering and deprivation, we were pleasantly surprised to see these normal aspects of life again.

Naturally, the American way of life differed greatly from our accustomed habits. Besides obvious differences, there was an emotional element also involved. There is a common saying, "Calamities are forgotten quickly; happy events are long remembered." In our case however, we could not shake off the fresh horrors of war. We could never forget that our families

were butchered, our communities destroyed, our friends killed. These depressing thoughts hampered our efforts to integrate with American society but, as time progressed, we slowly became accustomed to our new way of life.

A Warm Welcome

The organizers of our welcoming committee had arranged three separate events to welcome us in our new home. They divided our group into three, so that we could be represented at each of these welcoming affairs. Ten *bochurim* traveled to Seattle, Washington; another ten went to Los Angeles; and ten stayed in San Francisco.

I joined the Los Angeles group. We arrived to find an elaborate affair organized in our honor — the first yeshiva students to escape the European Holocaust and arrive in America. The dinner was held in a huge, elegant hall, and thousands of people participated in the event. It was a very moving and emotional evening. Rabbi Hecht, the organizer of the reception, addressed the crowd with heartfelt words, bringing many people to tears. He began by pronouncing the *Shebechyanu* blessing aloud and explained that when one meets another person after an extended period of time, and the meeting generates genuine feelings of elation, it becomes appropriate to thank Hashem by reciting *Shebechyanu*. "Indeed, there is no greater joy than our meeting tonight," proclaimed Rabbi Hecht. "After years of wandering and want, the *bochurim* have escaped to a new home. Meeting *temimim* from Poland is a great joy, one that definitely warrants a *Shebechyanu*."

A gifted speaker, Rabbi Hecht continued his address for some time, captivating the audience with his sincere words. When he finished, he invited us to address the audience, and Reb Elya Moshe Liss rose to thank the crowd and say a few

words. Though the evening was dedicated in our honor, it became a demonstration of a united Jewry, proving to the entire world that — despite the horrific Holocaust — the Jewish nation had endured and would remain vibrant. The huge audience shouted an unspoken message: the Jewish people would never be obliterated. Notwithstanding the recent unspeakable calamities, Jews were determined to live complete, wholesome lives, in both the physical and spiritual sense.

I felt a sense of tranquility that evening; my friends shared the same feeling. The balmy Los Angeles weather also contributed to our general feeling of contentedness. We enjoyed the warm days and comfortable nights, having never experienced such pleasant climatic conditions before in Poland.

After the dinner, Rabbi Hecht divided us into pairs, sending us to sleep in various homes around the neighborhood. I was paired with Hirshel Fuks, and we stayed at the beautiful home of a Jewish barber and his wife. They viewed us as G-dly angels — survivors of the Nazi inferno who arrived in America complete with Chassidic garb and full beards. In fact, the barber's wife even gave us a *pidyon nefesh*, asking that we pray on her behalf! She also gave us some money, and refused to accept our explanation that we were not really holy people. We later divided the money among our entire group.

We stayed in Los Angeles for a few days and then caught a train to Chicago. From there we planned to travel to New York, to see the Rebbe again. When we stopped in Chicago, we went to visit the *Bnei Reuven* synagogue. The rabbi was Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Hershberg, a prolific Torah scholar who later became the Chief Rabbi of Mexico. I knew Rabbi Hershberg from Vilna, when I spent hours visiting the students of the *Chachmei Lublin* yeshiva, where Rabbi Hershberg also studied. Even then he was considered a prodigy and, at the age of eighteen, had authored a work on the order of *Kodushim* that

earned him a wide reputation among the Torah scholars of Poland.

Needless to say, I was overjoyed to see a familiar face again. We greeted each other warmly and entered into conversation. Due to familiarity, I addressed the eminent rabbi by his personal name, but he quickly corrected my effrontery. "You can't just call me 'Avraham Moshe,'" he said. "Here I am the rabbi; you must address me as *Harav, Mara D'ava*." I happily complied.

After our visit to Chicago, we proceeded toward our final destination — the city of New York. Upon our arrival, we immediately took a car to Tomchei Tmimim, hearts beating with the anticipation of meeting our fellow students once again. It was only natural that Tomchei Tmimim would be our first stop. Many students there had shared hard times with us in Vilna and Shanghai, and we could barely wait to see them again.

The yeshiva building stood on the corner of Bedford and Dean. It was a grand building, with a large spire that rose above its four floors. Years earlier, far off in Shanghai, we had already heard about the new and beautiful building Tomchei Tmimim owned in New York. The building had served as headquarters for the Democratic Party, which later sold the building to Tomchei Tmimim. The yeshiva renovated the building, remodeled its rooms for yeshiva use, and opened their doors wide to serve American Jewry. Someone even sent us a newspaper article that described the opening of the new yeshiva building. The yeshiva hosted a series of gatherings for the occasion. Respected rabbinical figures came to address the crowd; famous *chazanim* and Jewish singers gave mini-concerts. Now, with our arrival in New York, we were finally able to see the grandeur of this graceful building.

We received a royal welcome, and I can truly say that seeing these friends again was one of the most moving moments of my life. The *bochurim* had already arranged rooms for us in the dormitory. Officially for out-of-town students, the dormitory now accommodated a new class of students — homeless refugees. We also ate our meals with the *bochurim*.

I slept in the same room as Leibel and Zalman Posner, two brothers who lived in Pittsburgh and learned in Tomchei Tmimim. My new friends went out of their way to welcome me and oblige my every need. They and all the other American *bochurim* truly made us feel part of the student family. It must have been difficult for them to help European foreigners adapt to American standards, but they did everything with a smile and a pleasant attitude. With their help, I slowly became accustomed to the American way of life and the learning schedule at Tomchei Tmimim.

The yeshiva was well organized. Older *bochurim* learned in the *zal*, a large hall on the first floor. Three classrooms adjoined the *zal*, where the students heard classes from leading Torah scholars. (To the best of my recollection, Rabbis Ushpal, Garfinkel and Kastel taught in these classrooms. In those days, Tomchei Tmimim did not have an "official" *rosh yeshiva* who lectured for the entire student body. Rabbi Mentlick, our *rosh yeshiva*, taught a single class. Years later, after 1947, Rabbi Mentlick began following the widespread custom among other *roshei yeshiva*, and he, too, began giving a weekly *shiur* for the entire yeshiva.)

A few more classrooms stood on the second floor, together with several administrative offices. The Rashag had his office there. Other offices belonged to Nissan Gordon, Reb Moshe Pinchas Katz, Shmuel Eizik Popack, and our old friends — Yosef Wineberg and Tzvi Kotlarsky. The yeshiva's accountant, Mr. Kriger, also had an office on the second floor. Some

dormitory rooms — including my bedroom — were also on the same floor. The third floor of the building served as a large playing area for the yeshiva's younger students.

The yeshiva's huge basement housed the kitchen and dining room. Every Shabbos, when the students ate together, it was heart-warming to see how the American *bochurim* all tried to squeeze together and sit close to us. Eager to hear about our past, the *bochurim* pressed us for details regarding our experiences. We told them stories about life back home in Poland; about the outbreak of war; about our escape to Vilna; and about our years in Japan and Shanghai. Besides for their interest in our past, the American *bochurim* yearned to hear the many Chabad melodies we knew. Most of these were still unfamiliar to them, and we spent hours teaching *niggunim* we had heard over the years.

The yeshiva's building on Bedford and Dean did not house the entire yeshiva. Many older students learned on the ground floor of the Rebbe's home at 770 Eastern Parkway (universally known as "770.") Every morning, one could see a large group of yeshiva *bochurim* walking from Bedford and Dean to Eastern Parkway. We joined this group of *bochurim*, returning to the yeshiva building only to eat and sleep.

Among the *bochurim* learning in 770 were local boys who did not need to sleep in the dormitory. These included the Simpson brothers, Yisrael Gordon, Sholom Chaskind, and many others. (Some students, like Eliyahu Chaim Carlebach, slept in the dormitory and learned in 770 anyway.) Nosson Gurary and Uri Ben-Shachar of *Eretz Yisrael* also learned in 770, along with many others.

Though all the students made a special effort to help us, two *bochurim* were particularly involved in our adjustment to Jewish life in New York. These two were Moshe Groner and Yechiel Ziskind. The pair took us to see Williamsburg and

Borough Park. These neighborhoods look totally different today, but, even at that time, many Jews were moving into these areas. The Rebbe of Klausenberg had just relocated to Williamsburg and Yechiel Ziskind took us one day to see the Klausenberger *beis medrash*.

We arrived just as the Rebbe began his morning prayers. The Rebbe prayed aloud, gesturing with fervor and enthusiasm, clapping his hands and waving his fists in the air. The scene was an eye-opener for me. I had never seen such open exuberance in the courts of Gur, and certainly not in Lubavitch. Rather, I was familiar with a quiet *davening*, one that focused on inner introspection and meditation.

(Seeing the Klausenberger Rebbe pray this way brought to mind a Chassidic anecdote I read once. An elderly Chassid once noticed a young man screaming and carrying on as he prayed. "Young man," said the Chassid, "have you tried speaking nicely?")

A *tzaddik* of stature such as the Klausenberger Rebbe certainly understood his actions, and his prayers were undoubtedly permeated with real devotion. However, we were unaccustomed to this mode of prayer.

One year, the Klausenberger Rebbe visited the Rebbe Rayatz in Crown Heights. As they parted ways, the Klausenberger expressed his hope for a brighter future. "The Jewish nation should be blessed with many salvations," he said with feeling.

Replied the Rebbe Rayatz: "We need but a single salvation — but a true, eternal one."

Reb Michael Dworkin

One day, as I sat studying in 770, a Biblical apparition walked into the study hall. He had a long beard, with a

knapsack on his back and light colored sandals on his feet. He looked as though he had just stepped out of the pages of *Chumash* — like one of the Jews leaving ancient Egypt. “Who is that?” I whispered to a friend sitting nearby.

“That’s Reb Michoel Dworkin,” he answered reverentially.

Michoel Dworkin! I immediately recognized his name from the printed talks of the Rebbe Rayatz. After spending some time incarcerated in Soviet prison, the Rebbe Rayatz was sentenced to years of exile in Kostrama. (This, too, was quickly reversed.) In his talks, the Rebbe describes how he sent Reb Michoel Dworkin ahead of him to Kostrama, charging him with the mission of preparing the village for the Rebbe’s spiritual needs. Later, when the Rebbe’s sentence was commuted, Reb Michoel danced joyously through the streets, loudly singing “*Nyet nyet nikavo*” (“There is none besides G-d”).

Now that I knew the identity of this distinguished figure, I paid careful attention to Reb Michoel, quickly realizing that this was a Chassid of extraordinary stature. Though Reb Michoel was neither a *rav* nor a *mashpia*, Chassidus permeated every fiber of his being and he personified the essence of a Chassid. I often spent time with him. When people inquired after his health, Reb Michoel invariably responded: “What can a mortal man feel anyway?”

Back in Russia, Reb Michoel ran a successful business. Now, after living in Israel for a few years, Reb Michoel decided to move to New York and live near the Rebbe. Reb Michoel did not have family ties to keep him in Israel so he packed his belongings and arrived, unannounced, in New York. He became a steady guest at the home of Reb Yochanan Gordon (my future father-in-law). Reb Yochanan’s wife went out of her way to accommodate this special guest, preparing for him the foods he regularly ate in Russia — black bread, *borsht*, and other dishes. Reb Michoel greatly appreciated her efforts.

Aside from the Gordons, Reb Berel Chaskind also hosted Reb Michoel in his home.



Reb Michoel Dworkin

Both these Chassidim — Yochanan Gordon and Berel Chaskind — lived on Eastern Parkway. Reb Berel lived in an apartment building directly across 770, while Reb Yochanan lived at 682 Eastern Parkway, a block away from 770. One Shabbos morning, Monia, the Rebbe Rayatz's nurse, arrived at 770 and went directly to the Rebbe's room. Monia helped the Rebbe with the medicines and injections he needed on a daily basis, and she made sure to be in the Rebbe's home early every morning.

That Shabbos, as she stood in the Rebbe's room, Monia happened to glance out the window and notice Reb Michoel cross Eastern Parkway, to the other side of the wide boulevard. "I see Reb Michoel is going to Berel Chaskind," she remarked to the Rebbe. "He's probably going for his morning coffee."

"Michoel is not going to Berel," said the Rebbe. "He's going to Yochanan."

The nurse looked at the Rebbe in shock. "But Yochanan lives on this side of the street!" she protested. "I just saw Reb

Michoel cross over to the other side; surely he is going to Berel Chaskind. In fact, I can see Reb Michoel walking on the other side of Eastern Parkway right now."

The Rebbe looked at the nurse with his keen, piercing eyes. "Michoel is going to Yochanan," he repeated.

Dumbfounded, Monia knew not to argue further. If the Rebbe said something, he obviously knew how events would unfold. She continued standing by the window, gazing outside, when she suddenly saw Reb Michoel exit the apartment building, walk back across Eastern Parkway, and change direction — toward the home of Reb Yochanan! The nurse could hardly believe her eyes. She decided to speak with Reb Michoel after her duties and ask for an explanation.

Later that day, Monia accosted Reb Michoel and demanded an account of his morning schedule. "What's there to understand?" shrugged Reb Michoel. "Originally I went to Berel Chaskind's house for some coffee. I banged on the door for a long time but, when no one answered, I decided to go to Yochanan instead..."

Monia pressed no further. Indeed, the Rebbe's words were not to be taken lightly.

Yeshiva Life

We enjoyed every moment of our new yeshiva. Rabbi Mentlick was our *rosh yeshiva*; Reb Yisrael Jacobsohn and Reb Shmuel Levitin were the *mashpiim*. (I am hardly the person to describe the greatness of Rabbi Mentlick. Among his students and admirers are many gifted people who can appropriately portray the legendary piety, scholarship, and humility of this illustrious Chassid.) Reb Shmuel Levitin gave a *Tanya shiur* for the entire student body, a deep, incisive class flavored with Chassidic stories and sayings.



Reb Shmuel Levitin

The *bochurim* revered Reb Shmuel, appreciating every minute they spent in his company. Reb Shmuel showered us with deep concern and affection, and we felt a close bond with this esteemed Chassid. Aside from his greatness in Chassidus and *avodah*, Reb Shmuel was known for his acute sagacity and perception. Whenever a personal problem arose, we knew Reb Shmuel could find the correct solution for our dilemmas.

Reb Shmuel maintained a close, fatherly connection with every student. It was only natural for us to consult him on every issue. When a *bochur* came of marriageable age, he would confer with Reb Shmuel to discuss various marriage proposals and other concerns. Our trust in him was twofold: he was wise and perceptive and, due to his many years as *mashpia*, had the necessary experience to address our concerns. We felt that the Rebbe Rayatz had appointed this venerated Chassid to help us resolve our problems, both physical and spiritual.

I particularly recall Reb Shmuel's intense celebration on Simchas Torah. In those days, the large *shul* of 770 had not yet been built, and hundreds of Chassidim crammed into the smaller *shul* to dance and rejoice with the Torah. Simchas Torah in 770 is always a unique experience, and Jews from all

areas of Brooklyn would walk in to watch the festivities. Apparently, Chabad Chassidim rejoice with special exuberance, one unduplicated in other congregations.

Every Simchas Torah, Reb Shmuel would drink a lot of *l'chaim* and *farbreng* with rare intensity. Our Sages say that, "when wine enters, secrets emerge," and this was certainly true regarding Reb Shmuel. Whatever he managed to hide behind a cloak of humility during the year suddenly came out in the open. His face burned like a fiery brand as he *farbrenged*, danced, and spoke with the *bochurim* — his children. At these *farbrengens*, we merited to see the epitome of a true Chassid, a real *mashpia*.

One year, after much *mashke*, Reb Shmuel turned his attention to one of the many guests who had walked in from nearby neighborhoods to witness the dancing and singing. The guest was clean-shaven and modernly dressed, but Reb Shmuel perceived the essence that lay beyond these external trappings. Reb Shmuel drew the man closer to him, extolling the virtues of the *nesbama* and explaining the innate qualities found within every Jew.

After this discussion, Reb Shmuel pulled the guest into the circle of dancing Chassidim, and danced with him for a long time afterward. Reb Shmuel's face was aflame; he seemed to radiate spiritual light. This scene made a unforgettable impression on us: Here was a revered Chassid and *mashpia*, among the elite of Chabad Chassidim, yet he felt privileged to talk and dance with a fellow Jew — just because the other was a Jew! In Reb Shmuel's eyes, outer appearances and superficial layers disintegrated before the pure brilliance of a holy *nesbama*.

Chassidim recognized Reb Shmuel as a unique individual and accorded him special respect and honor. His mere presence graced the yeshiva with an aura of holiness. We, the yeshiva

students, understood that Reb Shmuel served as the Rebbe's representative in the yeshiva, in order to keep the Rebbe abreast of all current developments. A kind and fatherly figure, Reb Shmuel showed keen interest in our progress and monitored our studies closely.

Reb Shmuel did not *farbreng* regularly. When he did, however, all the *bochurim* knew to expect a night of pure spiritual pleasure. Reb Shmuel related stories of Chassidim in bygone years, describing their sincere, holy lives, and the ideals they lived by. Reb Shmuel's *farbrengens* were permeated with Chassidic spirit, with the special refinement and earnestness that comes with Chassidus. Even his witticisms had special grace. Reb Shmuel's tone of voice took on deeper dimension when he spoke about the *Rebbeim* or when he reviewed a *ma'amer*. His face blazed with light. He made us feel lacking in our spiritual service, prompting us to accept new resolutions and improve our spiritual stature. "We must change ourselves!" he often repeated. Regardless of duration, we treasured every one of these *farbrengens*, dreading the moment when Reb Shmuel would finish and rise to leave.

Reb Yisrael Jacobsohn, our second *mashpia*, *farbrenged* with us often. A true Chassid, Reb Yisrael viewed the world from the Chassidic perspective, translating the mundane and physical into Chassidic goals and ideals. During his *farbrengens*, we felt elevated above the materialistic American culture that surrounded us. Reb Yisrael drew us into the warm, bright world of Chassidus.

Rabbi Jacobsohn used his talents in other circles as well. Determined to spread the pure wellsprings of Chassidus to the spiritually starved generation of American youth, he began a *Tanya* class with students of the Yeshivas *Chaim Berlin* and *Torah V'Daas*. Though certain faculty members showed open displeasure with this Chassidus class, Reb Yisrael persevered

with the teaching of *Tanya*. His lucid explanations and personification of Chassidic values attracted a large student following. Eventually, Reb Yisrael was instrumental in bringing dozens of the best *bochurim* closer to the teachings of Chabad Chassidus, transforming them into devoted Chassidim of the Rebbe Rayatz.



Rabbi Yisrael Jacobsohn

Rabbi Jacobsohn possessed organizational talent as well. He was a respected member of *Agudas Chassidei Chabad* of America, and did much to further the cause of Chabad. Together with two friends — Sam and Zalman Kramer — Rabbi Jacobsohn played an important role in rescuing the Rebbe Rayatz from the European inferno, facilitating his subsequent entry into the United States of America.

In all, Chassidic light and energy permeated the yeshiva. The *mashpūm* spoke to their students just like in Otwock, exhorting them to utilize their time and energy in pursuit of Torah and prayer. We were astonished to find that here, in modern America, *bochurim* spent hours *davening* — exactly as we had seen in Otwock. This emphasized the greatness of the Rebbe Rayatz — that even here, in twentieth-century America,

he had implanted genuine Chassidic behavior and ideals into American *bochurim*. Ably assisted by eminent *masbpiim*, the Rebbe had, in a matter of years, elevated the American-bred *bochur* to almost equal status of those educated in Europe.

The Rashag

Every week, after the Friday night meal, the Rashag — Reb Shmaryahu Gurary, the son-in-law of the Rebbe Rayatz — spent the night in our study hall, learning and looking through various books on Chassidus. The Rashag had been of indispensable help during our difficult years in Shanghai and Vilna, and now we had the opportunity to meet him personally. He sometimes spoke with the boys still sitting in the study hall, and it was a delight to engage in conversation with this great personage.

Extraordinarily proficient in all areas of Chabad Chassidus, the Rashag would review a Chassidic discourse every Shabbos. On Shabbos afternoon after *Mincha*, the Rashag headed a *Shalosh Seudos* meal in the smaller *shul*. The Rashag sat a table laden with *challas*, herring, and assorted drinks. Certain donors sponsored the *Shalosh Seudos*, while others purchased the actual food and brought it to the Rashag.

Prominent Chassidim participated in these weekly gatherings, as did many younger students who enjoyed hearing the Rashag review Chassidus in his lucid, explanatory fashion. Normally, Chassidim place careful emphasis on reviewing Chassidus in the precise format and order as originally expounded by the *Rebbeim*. Not so the Rashag. Having received explicit permission from the *Rebbeim* — some say the Rebbe Rashab, while others claim it was the Rebbe Rayatz — the Rashag deviated from this custom, explaining Chassidic thoughts in his own words and in different sequence.

Reb Avraham Blesofsky, a Stoliner Chassid who lived nearby, was a regular participant at the *Sbalosh Seudos*. Reb Nochum Wolosow also came every week. Having just emigrated from Russia, Reb Nochum was very much set in his Russian ways, and still preferred to call American dollars "rubles."

With the Rebbe Again

After our arrival in New York, the yeshiva hosted a special welcoming affair in our honor. The yeshiva's administrator — the Rashag — organized the details, and a respectable crowd crammed the huge hall of the yeshiva building on Bedford and Dean. Distinguished speakers addressed the gathering. Gershon Chanowitz, the representative of our group, recalled the time when Hashem paired Moshe with his brother Aharon, commanding them both to appear before Pharaoh. Originally, Moshe had feared that his older brother would harbor feelings of jealousy or resentment, but Hashem calmed him, saying: "Aharon will see you and feel genuine happiness in his heart (Ex. 4:14)."

"Imagine if Aharon heard this remark," exclaimed Gershon. "Had Aharon known that G-d truly desired his happiness, Aharon would have greeted Moshe with cymbals and trumpets, dancing and singing to fulfill G-d's wish. The same is true today. Meeting Holocaust survivors, *tmimim* who lived through the horrors of war, should arouse within us an increased measure of joy and an intense feeling of elation."

Touched by the immense outpouring of love and emotion, we left the dinner with mixed feelings. Though truly appreciative of all the welcoming crowds, we still longed to meet with the Rebbe Rayatz again, to see the holy face that sustained us throughout all these years. Meeting the Rebbe had

filled our minds even in Shanghai and Japan and now, living so close to the Rebbe, we readied ourselves with excited anticipation, waiting for our scheduled turn to have a private audience (*yechidus*) with the Rebbe.



The Previous Rebbe, The Rebbe Rayatz

At long last, we were informed to be ready for *yechidus* on a certain evening. The day passed in a blur; the hours flew by in frenzied preparation. We spent hours in deep introspection, preparing ourselves spiritually for our meeting with the Rebbe Rayatz. That evening, at the appointed time, we all gathered in 770. What followed was so intense, so moving, that it still remains difficult for me to describe it all on paper. I will, therefore, give only the barest details about our much-anticipated *yechidus*.

We all entered the Rebbe's room together, accompanied by our *mashpia*, Reb Shmuel Levitin. My emotions totally overwhelmed my faculties; I could not remember a single thing the Rebbe said to us. All I could do was look, and look again, at the saintly Rebbe, at the holy countenance that infused us with strength during all these difficult years.

The *yechidut* did not last long. As we left the Rebbe, I felt a strange sense of emptiness as all my earlier longing dissipated. Suddenly I identified with the Baal Shem Tov's explanation on the words, "I thirst to see You in the Sanctuary (Psalms 63:3)." It is easy to long for spirituality in a spiritual wasteland, commented the Baal Shem Tov. Hence, the Psalmist expresses his heartfelt desire to maintain this intense longing even whilst in the "Sanctuary" — when one is close to the spiritual source. I, too, hoped I could maintain my feelings for the Rebbe with the same level of intensity I felt in Shanghai and Japan.

That summer, the yeshiva administration decided to send us off to summer camp. Hoping the pleasant mountain air and beautiful scenery could assuage some of our painful memories, the administration reserved places for us in a camp run by *Torah V'Daas*. On our way to camp, a fellow introduced himself to us as Rabbi Linchner — the son-in-law of Reb Shraga Feivish Mendelovitz, the renowned founder and administrator of *Yeshivas Torah V'Daas*. Delighted to meet us personally, Rabbi Linchner treated us to lunch in the "American House," a kosher restaurant in the area. After the meal, Rabbi Linchner spent a few hours talking to us about our war experiences and the ongoing acclimatization to American life. We conversed for a while, thanked him for the meal, and continued on to camp.

As we entered the camp gates, we were shocked to see a football game in progress. Yeshiva *bochurim* ran around the field, their *tzitzis* flapping in the wind as they chased the ball. Suddenly I envisioned my father standing before me. I was a little boy again, playing ball in the dirt streets of Shedlitz, and father had found out about my games. "A ball?" he said scornfully. "A yeshiva student plays with a ball? It's not for you; leave the ball for the gentiles..."

Yet here, in a religious camp in America, mature yeshiva *bochurim* spent hours playing football and other sports!

Apparently, as I quickly learned, American students lived with a different set of standards.

Brownsville

The dormitory building on Bedford and Dean was a decent walk from 770, forcing us to walk back constantly for meals and, at night, when we went to sleep. Often we stayed up late, talking about our day and various events. By the time we finished talking many of us were hungry again, but the kitchen was already securely locked. Jerry Simon, a student from New Jersey, always came to our rescue. Somehow, Jerry found a way to get into the kitchen and bring out some food for his starving friends. Jerry showed special kindness to us — the so-called “hungry refugees” — and made sure to arrange food from the kitchen whenever we asked. (Indeed, he later became a caterer. Subsequently, he became my *mechutan*. My son Shmuel married his daughter Tziril.)

Yehoshua Bronstein, one of my friends from Shanghai, had a cousin Hirshel who lived on Crown Street, a few blocks away from 770. Forever on the lookout for his newly arrived cousin, Hirshel did all he could to help Yehoshua, inviting him often to his house and fairly demanding that other students also come along. These visits meant a great deal to us. Deprived of any semblance of family life during the war years, it was particularly comforting to walk into a home with two parents and healthy, happy children. Hirshel and his wife literally opened their house for us. We readily accepted all their invitations, enjoying every moment we spent in the company of a wholesome family. Besides, we craved the taste of homemade food again.

A few weeks after we arrived, Hirshel suggested that we rent a room in a private home. Having seen the dormitory

facilities for himself, Hirshel decided that his cousin deserved more comfortable surroundings. "The dormitory really isn't bad at all," Hirshel rushed on to explain. "I just feel that you and your friends might feel more at ease with rooms in a private home, instead of sharing a building with everyone else. Also, you boys are older than most other students. You need a bit more privacy. The Joint will help defray the cost of your rent."

Yehoshua discussed the idea with me and I found myself in total agreement with his cousin. We asked Hirshel to try and find us a suitable room. After a few days, Hirshel came back with information that a room was available in the home of Reb Shmarya Faktor. An acclaimed *sofer*, Reb Shmarya was renting out a spare room in his Brooklyn Avenue home, and we decided to accept the offer. We gathered our meager belongings, left the dormitory, and took up residence in Reb Shmarya's home. (Reb Shmarya merited to write *Mosbiach's Sefer Torah* — a project initiated by the Rebbe Rayatz in 1942 and completed by the Rebbe almost thirty years later.)

Many affluent professionals lived in Crown Heights during the 1950's. President Street, a wide boulevard with stately homes and carefully tended gardens, was dubbed "Millionaires Row." Prominent doctors and lawyers lived side by side, and the general atmosphere was one of cold materialism. Chassidim and their families could not afford the exorbitant rent in Crown Heights, so they lived in the nearby neighborhood of Brownsville.

Religious Jews of varied backgrounds came together to create a warm, vibrant community in Brownsville. There were different groups of refugees — Chassidim; Jews from Poland; Jews from former Galicia; and other refugees. Synagogues, *shtetl* and study halls dotted the neighborhood. (The Chabad community in Brooklyn at that time was sparse at best. In 1947, after many Chabad Chassidim managed to escape from Russia,

more Chassidim relocated to New York. Until then however, very few Chabad Chassidim actually lived in Brooklyn, and certainly no more than a few dozen families.)

A group of Jews from former Galicia formed a *shul* — “Rayim Ahuvim” — in the Prospect Park area. They prayed according to *Nuwach* Sefard, and their members built a men’s *mikva* which served the entire neighborhood. In those days, no other men’s *mikva* could be found in Crown Heights or its surrounding neighborhoods.

(Another *mikva* on Union St. served the needs of local Jewish women; men were allowed to use the *mikva* only during specific hours. The Ramash — Reb Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Rebbe’s second son-in-law and successor — had a personal key to the *mikva*, but the public had no access to the *mikva* after closing time. Hence, whoever came late to *mikva* was forced to walk or drive to the Prospect Park *mikva*. Thankfully, matters changed before long. A few years passed and Reb Zundel Klein moved to Crown Heights. The sexton of the large and prestigious Kerastirer *shul*, Reb Zundel built another men’s *mikva* in Crown Heights, right near his synagogue on Eastern Parkway.)

Meanwhile, Chassidim of Gur founded the Sfas Emes *shetibl*. Though the *shul* had an obvious association with the court of Gur, many followers of Chabad frequented the synagogue. These included such distinguished Chassidim as Rabbis Mentlick, Katz, Tenenbaum and others. Among them, I particularly recall Reb Henich Rosenfeld, a Polish Jew who was actually born in the city of Gur. Here, in America, Reb Henich worked as a *shochet*. (His sons — Yosef and Avrohom — went on to become respective administrators of the most important organs in the Chabad-Lubavitch educational empire — “Oholei Torah” and “Tomchei Tmimim.”)

During my conversations with Reb Henich, I happened to mention my father's name, and Reb Henich's face lit up in recognition. "Shmuel Zanvil was your father?" he said excitedly. "I knew him very well. We learned together as children and we both attended the same yeshiva in Gur!" It was a pleasant surprise to meet a Jew who knew my father and had actually learned with him!

Chabad Chassidim felt more at home in the Sfas Emes *shtibl* than in Rayim Ahuvim, despite the latter's close proximity to their homes. Evidently, the close similarities between Chassidic groups made the Gerrer *shtibl* a favorite choice for Chabad Chassidim as well. My friends and I also enjoyed *davening* there. A warm atmosphere of closeness and familiarity pervaded the *shtibl*.

With time, Brownsville became a Jewish oasis in the huge melting pot of New York City. Chassidim walked the streets proudly, transforming the neighborhood into a Chassidic *shtetl* of sorts. For our group of refugee students, Brownsville became a second home, a place where we felt comfortable, a place where we belonged. Walking the streets populated by Chassidic Jews reminded us somewhat of Poland in pre-war days. Various *Rebbeim* also lived in Brownsville with their followers.

In Brownsville, too, I met Jews who remained unchanged by the secular environment of America. They lived as Jews in Poland did, with warm, fervent faith and proud adherence to every aspect of *Yiddishkeit*. Many opened their door for us, inviting us in for meals whenever they could. Some Chassidim specifically told us to walk into their homes whenever we so desired — an invitation we greatly appreciated. Their wives exerted special effort to make us feel comfortable, showering us with motherly devotion we had not experienced in many years.

One of these open homes was 331 Hopkinson Avenue, the address of Reb Mordechai Groner. Permeated with Chassidic ideals and values, his home was a pleasant and familiar place for all visitors, us included. The kind members of his family did everything possible for us, making us feel comfortable and relaxed in their home.



Reb Mordechai Groner

We also often visited the Baumgarten home. Their children, Mendel and Berel Baumgarten, made us feel welcome whenever we decided to drop by. Their home was filled with Chassidic joy and contentedness.

Reb Pinye, another Jew I met in Brownsville, made a lasting impression on me. A long-bearded fellow, Reb Pinye was always in good cheer, greeting every person with a bright smile and a good word. Reb Pinye ran a milk factory which, in those days, served as one of the only sources of *Cholov Yisroel* milk. He sold milk, butter, cheese and other milk products, and those who placed careful emphasis on eating only *Cholov Yisroel* knew to shop at Reb Pinya's factory — the address for *Cholov Yisroel* products manufactured under the highest standards.

Mr. Nelson, a house painter, also lived in Brownsville. If I recall correctly, Mr. Nelson had also learned in Tomchei Tmimim in his youth. A warm-hearted and pleasant person, Mr. Nelson lived on Hopkinson Street, and was in great demand as a painter. Mr. Nelson was once hired to paint 346 Brooklyn Avenue — the building where the Ramash lived. One day, as Mr. Nelson left the building carrying two buckets of paint, the Ramash happened to walk out at the same time and tried helping Mr. Nelson carry his buckets. Obviously, the painter would not let go of the bucket, and refused to let the Ramash bother with the fresh paint. "Why do you care if I fulfill the *mitzva* of "you shall surely help him"?" asked the Ramash. Hearing this, Mr. Nelson conceded, and the Ramash carried a bucket of paint down the stairs for him.

Though the vast majority of Jews living in Brownsville were of Chassidic background, many other Jews lived there as well. *Yeshivas Chaim Berlin*, one of the first yeshivos in America, started in Brownsville. The yeshiva had an excellent reputation, and Jewish children from all over the city came to study at the yeshiva. Due to the lack of Chassidic yeshivos, many Chassidim sent their children there as well.

The Revolution

Meanwhile, the Rebbe Rayatz began laying the groundwork for Jewish Day Schools in America. Upon arriving on American soil, the Rebbe had proclaimed "America is not different!" and began working for the cause of Torah-true *Yiddishkeit* with such zeal and energy that it disconcerted many lay leaders and rabbis half his age. Various delegations met with the Rebbe Rayatz, trying to convince the Rebbe about the "futility" of his work and suggesting that the Rebbe conserve his waning health. Ignoring them all, the Rebbe

Rayatz proceeded with a systematic plan aimed at raising and educating American youth in the way of Torah and *mitzvos*.

First, the Rebbe's followers arranged *Mesibos Shabbos* gatherings, where Jewish children of all ages gathered every Shabbos to hear Jewish stories and songs. These informal weekly assemblies made an incredible impact on the otherwise apathetic Jewish-American youth, sparking an active interest in their heritage.

Building on the success of the *Mesibos Shabbos*, the Rebbe Rayatz instructed his followers to initiate a "Sunday School" program. In those days, before the advent of Jewish parochial schools, almost all Jewish children attended Public School, which did not schedule classes on Sunday. Energized and motivated by the Shabbos assemblies, droves of school children attended these Sunday schools. There they learned about the weekly Torah portion, heard stories of *tzaddikim*, and about practical Jewish laws and customs.

Having thus established a core group of students in many cities around the United States, the Rebbe Rayatz went on to start a veritable chain of Jewish Day Schools to better serve the needs of American Jewry. Stunned and awed, American Jewish leaders watched as, within a few years, the Rebbe opened schools in dozens of cities. Under the Rebbe's guidance, schools opened in Philadelphia, New Haven, Buffalo, Rochester, Worcester, Providence, Chicago, and many other cities.

Chassidim called these schools "Achei Tmimim," referring to them as "brothers" of Tomchei Tmimim. Reb Eliezer Weiler, a Chassid with a long beard, gave his soul to the project, devoting tremendous amounts of time and effort to make these schools succeed. Aside from boy's schools, additional schools were also opened for Jewish girls.

Tremendous manpower was needed to properly manage the expanding network of fledgling schools. The Rebbe thus turned to his Chassidim, sending many away from their comfortable New York homes in order to help direct these yeshivas in distant cities. As demand grew, the Rebbe asked older *bochurim* to join his army of teachers, administrators and principals. Many of my friends traveled to various cities and I was asked to join the staff of the new Day School in Buffalo.

Buffalo

In the 1940's, Torah-true Judaism was virtually non-existent in Buffalo. Though many synagogues boasted large congregations, most Jews did not practice all the *mitzvos*, and certainly not openly. Rare exceptions existed but, in the overall picture, the future of Buffalo Jewry looked bleak.

The situation of Jewish youth in Buffalo was a sorry one. Even those who came from so-called "religious" homes quickly abandoned their Jewish ways for the carefree pleasures of American life. I can think of only a handful of families — like the lawyer Shulgasser and his sons — who retained their *Yiddishkeit* and succeeded in raising religious children. Thankfully, our new Day School began turning the tide.

Before I arrived in Buffalo, Rabbi Tzvi Fogelman (today of Worcester, Massachusetts) ran the yeshiva. When I came, Rabbi Fogelman left to run the yeshiva in New Haven; Rabbi Moshe Yitzchak Hecht left to help the yeshiva in Worcester; and Rabbis Aron Popack and David Eidelman took control of the yeshiva in Buffalo.

I arrived at the yeshiva building on Butler Street, and Rabbi Popack immediately gave me a class of children to teach. I taught with heart and soul, returning home at night with my clothes drenched in sweat. "Don't exert yourself so much," my

new friends tried counseling me. "Take it easy with your classes."

I could not follow their advice. As a Chassid, I knew the Rebbe was counting on every one of us to make lasting inroads in Jewish education. I constantly repeated the maxim of our Sages, "Words that come from the heart, enter the heart." I knew I had to exert great toil and effort in order to truly instill in my students a lasting love of Torah and *mitzvos*.

Many Jewish residents of Buffalo watched the developments at our yeshiva with detached bemusement, still confident that one day the yeshiva would collapse and fold. "There's no future for the Torah way in Buffalo," people said to us time and time again. "It simply won't work."

They were wrong. The yeshiva grew steadily as the classes expanded, accomplishing significant religious change in the city. To our good fortune, certain local Jews had faith in our project and worked hard to provide us with stable financial support. They remembered the spiritual grace of pre-war Jewry, and the warm, sincere homes of their parents, and they desired no less for the Jewish children of Buffalo. Reb Leibish Silberstein, the honorary President of the school, worked hard to raise money for our activities. He was ably assisted by two *sbochtim* — Mr. Landau and Mr. Siggel — and a third individual who became the school secretary.

During my stay in Buffalo, I found time to visit the magnificent Niagara Falls, a natural wonder that can only arouse awe and admiration at the beauty of Hashem's Creation. At times, visitors to Buffalo would ask me to serve as their guide to the falls.

(Niagara Falls played an important role in the life of many refugees. These wondrous waterfalls lie on the border between Canada and the United States, and many refugees used this area as a point of entry into Canada. In those days, the

Canadian government imposed strict restrictions on refugees waiting to be admitted into the country. Many hapless Jews had visas waiting in the American consulate, yet were turned away at the Canadian border. In desperation, many Jews traveled to Buffalo and then to Niagara Falls, hoping to find a way into Canada to obtain their visas.

A certain individual, a wealthy Jew with a warm heart, found an ingenious way of assisting these unfortunate people. Using his private yacht, the wealthy magnate picked up groups of refugees at Niagara Falls, dressed them in lifejackets and swimming gear, and sailed them into Canadian waters. The businessman could trust no one else with this risky scheme; he alone ferried the refugees out of Buffalo and into Canada.

The magnate owned a private waterfront villa in Canada, where he brought his "guests" after the boat ride. Once there, the refugees changed back into regular clothing and left in small groups, trying to remain inconspicuous. Now that they were in Canada, the refugees made their way to the American embassy in Toronto, where they received the visas without question. Many refugees were thus able to settle permanently in the United States.)

Though many prominent rabbis graced the city of Buffalo, I will only mention Reb Dov Berish Tzukerman, a *gaon* and distinguished personality who possessed many outstanding characteristics. A Chassid of Belz, Rabbi Tzukerman was exceedingly pious and scholarly. He came originally from Galicia but, after the war, he left Europe and moved to Buffalo. The Rebbe held Rabbi Tzukerman in great regard and conversed with him in Torah matters.

Having grown up in Poland, I felt very comfortable at Rabbi Tzukerman's home and he always received me graciously. His home was graced with Chassidic warmth and vitality. His pious manner prompted me to improve my

personal spiritual growth and my study of Torah. Rabbi Tzukerman learned Torah day and night, constantly immersed in the holy books around him. He also proofread and reprinted *Chiddushei Ma'Harj Kurkos* — an ancient commentary on the *Rambam*. I became very close with this great *rav* and he later participated in my wedding.

Jews from surrounding areas often came to consult with Rabbi Tzukerman on matters of Jewish law. Even residents of Rochester would drive all the way to Buffalo to speak with Rabbi Tzukerman regarding divorce cases and other complex issues. He presided over *gittin* and other complicated Halachic matters. I could always tell whenever Rabbi Tzukerman was scheduled to perform a divorce. From early on in the morning, he exhibited palpable strain and anguish — tortured at the thought of separating a Jewish couple, and anxious about properly fulfilling the many intricate laws associated with *gittin*. (Rabbi Tzukerman's son-in-law, Rabbi Sholom Rivkin, served for many years as the senior *rav* of St. Louis.)

Rabbi Tzukerman gave his rabbinical supervision to "High Great," a slaughterhouse in Buffalo where they *shechted* cattle. He arrived every day by bus and spent hours validating the sharpness of the slaughter knives and supervising the work. After some time, the local *shochtim* began convincing me to learn *shechita*, and Rabbi Tzukerman also persuaded me in this direction. I spent many months learning the necessary laws and practicing, until I finally received rabbinical ordination to *shecht* both fowl and cattle. At that point, I began working alongside the *shochtim* in the slaughterhouse. Since I did not yet have a family to support, the wage I received from the company was more than enough to cover my needs. I spent many months in the pleasant company of other *shochtim* and, in all, my stay was an enjoyable one.

Many people visited the established Jewish community in Buffalo. One day, we received a telegram from the Rashag, informing us of his intention to visit Buffalo to raise funds for the worthy cause of Yeshivas Tomchei Tmimim. As chief administrator of the yeshiva, the Rashag often traveled around the country, soliciting donations to keep all branches of Tomchei Tmimim functioning in perfect order. In his telegram, the Rashag asked us to prepare a list of potential donors and to arrange appointments during the few days he would spend in Buffalo.

Indeed, after a few days, the Rashag arrived in town with Rabbi Predmetzki, the *rav* of a prestigious congregation in the Bronx. Rabbi Predmetzki was also the Vice-Chairman of the "Union of Orthodox Rabbis of America." Among his many other talents, the Lithuanian born rabbi was a fiery orator, famous for captivating large audiences with his spellbinding speeches. The Rashag, too, spoke skillfully, but Rabbi Predmetzki had special charm with potential donors, and the Rashag often recruited the *rav* to help the cause of Tomchei Tmimim.

Seeing these venerable rabbis alone aroused a sense of reverence. Whenever this distinguished pair entered the home of a donor, the host would listen respectfully as they outlined the unique character of Tomchei Tmimim, and often contributed far more than to an ordinary charity. Indeed, the Rashag's visit was incredibly successful. He and Rabbi Predmetzki spent the better part of the week visiting the donors on our list and they managed to raise significant funds for the yeshiva.

As the week drew to a close, Rabbi Predmetzki voiced his determination to return home for Shabbos. "Must you leave?" said the Rashag in anguish. "I had planned that you would

speak in various synagogues on Shabbos and continue fundraising with me on Sunday."

"I cannot stay for Shabbos," answered the rabbi. "I promised my wife to return home for Shabbos."

The Rashag could hardly believe his ears. Every dollar the collected was vital for the advancement of Tomchei Tmimim, yet the *rav* refused to stay in the city another day. He tried reasoning with Rabbi Predmetzki, but the *rav* would not reconsider. "I promised my wife already," he repeated. "I must be home for Shabbos."

Realizing he alone could not raise more money, the Rashag was left with no alternative but to join Rabbi Predmetzki and return to New York by train on Thursday night. Even in Buffalo, I tried very hard not to miss a Shabbos in 770, and I often took the Thursday night train back to New York, so that I ended up sitting in the same compartment as the Rashag and Rabbi Predmetzki. The eminent scholars were engaged in discussion, when the Rashag suddenly brought the issue up again. "Did we really have to leave?" he said. "Couldn't you stay over Shabbos?"

"But I promised my wife!" answered the *rav* in exasperation.

"What do you mean?" retorted the Rashag sarcastically. "Yes, your wife wants you to come home — so what of it?"

Hearing this, I could hardly contain myself. I gathered my courage, approached the Rashag, and asked his permission to say a few words. Recognizing me, the Rashag introduced me to the *rav*, and asked me to continue. "I once heard a *vort* from an elderly Chassid," I began. "In order to be a Chassid, a person must be ready and willing to rebuff three sorts of demands. (The Yiddish vernacular for this is "*a chosid darf hobin dray faygen*" — three figs i.e. three rebuffs.)

"The first mode of rejection should be toward himself. Whenever an individual feels an impulse to do something contrary to Torah, he must reject the impulse immediately and say to his evil inclination, 'A *fayg* to you!' Secondly, a Chassid must rebuff worldly inclinations. He should staunchly refuse to act in ways set by crass materialism, and, instead, give a *fayg* to this kind of mentality.

"The third *fayg*," I continued, "should be readied for one's wife. Whenever she presents a demand that is not in accordance with the advancement of Torah, the husband must be able to say, 'A *fayg* to you.'"

The Rashag brightened, nodding his head in appreciation. Later, whenever he saw me in Crown Heights, the Rashag would call out and say: "*Nu*, Goldman! What's doing with your *faygen*?"

Figures and Personalities

During my first years in America, I merited to meet a handful of Chassidim who had learned in Tomchei Tmimim when the yeshiva was still in the village of Lubavitch. These distinguished Chassidim radiated spiritual light; one could instantly detect their deep, essential association with Chabad.

Rabbi Avraham Elya Axelrod, the *rav* of Baltimore, was one such person. The purity of his face and brilliance of his eyes fairly shouted, "I am a *Tomim*!" It was immediately apparent that he stood on a higher spiritual plane, having internalized the teachings and deep philosophies of Chassidus Chabad. He looked inherently different than an ordinary rabbi. Looking at him, you could see a manifestation of Lubavitch and Chassidus. I am at a loss for accurate words to describe this individual and others like him, because it is nearly impossible to characterize such spirituality and refinement.

The first time my friend Reb Yosef Wineberg saw Rabbi Axelrod, he was surprised to see the eminent *rav* with a large *yarmulka* sticking out from under his hat. (Gerrer Chassidim place special emphasis on wearing large *yarmulkas*, but Chabad Chassidim never adopted this form of dress.) Having heard about the unique character of the *rav*, Reb Yosef decided to ask for an explanation. "Reb Avraham Elya! Why is your *yarmulka* sticking out from under your hat? This was never the way in Lubavitch!"

The *rav* studied my friend carefully and responded: "Before I came here, people kept telling me about the irreligious atmosphere prevalent in America, warning me that the very cobblestones were permeated with impurity. "A Treifene Medina" they called it. Hearing this, I became frightened and thought of canceling my upcoming trip to America. However, after extended thought, I stumbled upon a solution.

"Our Sages say that the evil inclination is an expert in his field. When he begins inciting people to sin, the *yetzer* starts with small things, minor customs susceptible to compromise. After he gets the person to yield and make concessions, the *yetzer* then moves on to greater things, until he leads the person to perform terrible misdeeds. The evil inclination will never say, 'Now Rabbi Axelrod, I want you to stop wearing *tefillin* and abandon Shabbos altogether.' Rather, he will first attack my Chassidic habits and customs, progressing onward as I concede.

"Knowing this, I hit upon an idea: I would antagonize the *yetzer* by wearing an oversized *yarmulka*, one that remained noticeable even from under my hat. The *yetzer* now has his hands full, trying to get me to trade in this *yarmulka* for something smaller. 'Your *yarmulka* is so outlandish,' he persists. 'American Jews don't walk around like that. A *rav* should look aristocratic and regal — not with a *yarmulka* peeking out under

his hat. You look terribly sloppy!' The *yetzer* pesters me continuously with these arguments — exactly as I had hoped all along. Obsessed with my *yarmulka*, the *yetzer* ignores all the more substantial issues, so I can learn and pray as I always did, without his annoying interference."

Needless to say, Reb Yosef Wineberg was very excited with this novel explanation, and later repeated this conversation often. This is the personification of a *Tomim* — someone who continually examines and redefines himself as he seeks methods of spiritual self-improvement. The *Tomim* tries to serve Hashem in all aspects of daily life, in order to become ever more pious and G-dfearing — in spite of a culture impervious to spirituality, or an environment where even the cobblestones are impure.

Rabbi Axelrod kept an open home in Baltimore. The poor and needy walked in the front door and literally helped themselves to whatever they could find in the kitchen fridge. To Rabbi Axelrod, no difference existed between host and guest. He took Baltimore's perception of *bachnosas orchim* to new heights.

Reb Eliyahu Nochum Sklar, another Chassid of stature, had also learned in the village of Lubavitch. In America, Rabbi Sklar supported himself by becoming a *shochet* and, later, a butcher, but he remained the same warm Chassid as always. Proficient in many Chassidic works, Rabbi Sklar loved nothing more than to spend time learning Chassidus. During work hours, he looked like an ordinary butcher as he sat on a stool in his small store, plucking feathers from dead chickens. However, after closing up for the day, Rabbi Sklar became a different person, immersing himself once again in the waters of Chassidus. Just by watching him pray and study, you could tell he had learned in Lubavitch.

In Rabbi Sklar, and others like him, I saw a basic truth. They viewed the material world as an outer shell, a burdensome layer that concealed the true inner worth of holiness and spirituality. Association with physical work was necessary just to support their families, but their main focus remained on the spiritual dimension — *davening*, learning, doing *mitzvos*. All their deeds were permeated by this special aura they had imbibed in Lubavitch of old.

I was often reminded of a Torah thought I heard from Rabbi Tzukerman of Buffalo. In *Pirkei Avot* — the *misbnayot* dealing with moral refinement and ethical conduct — our Sages often use the terminology, “He used to say,” followed by a specific remark. These terse words form the essential foundation for teaching others how to become better human beings. To preach and demand alone is insufficient; a living example is the best lesson of all. Thus, we interpret “He used to say,” in the following way: *He* — the complete being and essence of that particular Sage, *used to say* — i.e., his own behavior spoke volumes to others, demonstrating appropriate conduct and raising personal standards. In other words, seeing the refined conduct of great people makes the strongest impression of all.

I felt the same way whenever I saw these elite *Tminim*. Their entire being indicated an intense preoccupation with G-dliness, a soulful bond with the Rebbe, an obsession with refinement and good deeds. These were Jews of a lofty spiritual plane. The third Rebbe in the Chabad dynasty, the *Tzemach Tzedek*, once instructed one of his followers to make many more Chassidim. “But how does one make Chassidim?” asked the Chassid in surprise.

“First be a Chassid yourself,” retorted the Tzemach Tzedek. “When people see this, they too will become Chassidim.”

The same was true here. Just seeing these *Tmimin* brought an open appreciation of Chassidus and the Chassidic way of life.

Rabbi Eliyahu Simpson was another prime example of this conduct. Blessed with a prodigious memory, Rabbi Simpson had served as a *chozer* in his youth, faithfully reviewing every word the Rebbe Rashab uttered during his Chassidic discourses. Now, after the arrival of the Rebbe Rayatz in America, Rabbi Simpson became part of the Rebbe's secretariat. (Years later, Rabbi Simpson would continue to stand with total humility as the Ramash succeeded his predecessor and began expounding his own *ma'amorim*. Eyes closed, his face drawn in concentration, every fiber of his being tense and alert to absorb each word of the *ma'amer*, Rabbi Simpson epitomized the trait of humility.)

Among the many tasks carried out by the secretariat, Rabbi Simpson's responsibilities included the arrangement of *yechidus*. Whoever desired to meet with the Rebbe Rayatz first consulted with Rabbi Simpson. After arranging a specific time, Rabbi Simpson helped Chassidim compose a *pidyon nefesh* and, in many instances, actually entered with them into the Rebbe's room. Many Chassidim feared they would not clearly understand the Rebbe's soft, broken speech, and they relied on Rabbi Simpson to provide an accurate repetition of the Rebbe's holy words.

I, too, had opportunity to use Rabbi Simpson's help. When I reached marriageable age, many people came forward with various suggestions and I resolved to ask the Rebbe's advice. Rabbi Simpson entered with me, listened carefully to the Rebbe's response, and repeated the words for my benefit after we both left the Rebbe's room.

Rabbi Simpson brought great honor to Lubavitch. His saintly visage and Chassidic conduct only aroused admiration

and respect. Despite his meager livelihood, Rabbi Simpson merited to raise generations of proud Chassidim, and his name became synonymous with Chassidic ideals.

Rabbi Shlomo Aron Karzonovsky, another *Tomim* who learned in Lubavitch, became a tireless communal worker for the Rebbe Rayatz. Forever traveling the country to raise money for the Rebbe's causes, Rabbi Karzonovsky spread the teachings of Chassidus wherever he went and made a favorable impression on many people. (Rabbi Karzonovsky also played a vital role in rescuing the Rebbe Rayatz from Europe.)

Reb Berel Chaskind, another Chassid who had learned in Lubavitch, showed incredible attachment to the Rebbe Rayatz and the *shul* at 770 Eastern Parkway. Though he worked at several jobs, Reb Berel was far from a businessman at heart. A pleasant and soft-spoken person, Reb Berel merited to have the Rebbe nominate him as one of the *gabbeim* in 770.

In all, these Chassidim made up one large, warm family, where different personalities interacted and loved each other dearly. *Tminim* had always shared an extra measure of camaraderie, leading Chassidim to suggest that the friendship displayed by *Tminim* rivals the biological love between two brothers. I personally witnessed such mutual esteem and affection between two particular Chassidim, Reb Berel Chaskind and Reb Yochanan Gordon — my future father-in-law.

The Gordon Brothers

Originally from the village of Dokshitz, Reb Yochanan Gordon made it to America due to the untiring efforts of his three brothers — Shmuel, Avrohom, and Yosef Yitzchak — who were already living in the United States. The three brothers could not rest as long as their beloved brother was in

danger, and they took the necessary steps to bring Yochanan over to America.

Reb Shmuel Gordon, the second eldest brother, was a master *shochet*. When I learned the art of *shechita*, Reb Yochanan called me over and told me about his brother. "I think you should travel to where Shmuel lives," he suggested. "Go see how Shmuel performs *shechita*." I took his advice and went down to Shmuel's store, hardly believing my eyes as I entered. Reb Shmuel stood there *shechting* a number of chickens, yet his white coat retained its pure brilliance. Not the tiniest speck of blood could be found anywhere. Similarly, no matter how many times he *shechted*, his knife remained clean and smooth. Reb Yochanan was right: it was a trip well worth the effort.

Reb Avrohom, the oldest brother, also practiced *shechita*, and headed the *shechita* department in the slaughterhouse where my father-in-law worked. In compliance with a direct request from the Rebbe Rayatz, Reb Avrohom led *shechita* classes for yeshiva students, showing them how to properly sharpen the *shechita* knife, how to actually *shecht*, and all the relevant laws. Thanks to his efforts, many students later became true G-dfearing *shochtim*. Blessed with a melodious voice and gifted hands, Reb Avrohom often served as *chazan* and possessed beautiful penmanship.

Reb Yosef Yitzchak Gordon, the third brother, had a fiery, impassioned heart. His son Zorach traveled to Otwock in 1939, together with another nine *bochurim*, their hearts set on learning in Tomchei Tmimim. Zorach had extraordinary musical talent and a magnificent voice. (In the printed talks of the Rebbe Rayatz, the Rebbe instructs his Chassidim to sing during *farbrengens* and, at times, the initials "Z.G." appear. This was none other than Zorach Gordon, whom the Rebbe knew had unusual singing ability. Once, after Zorach Gordon sang a *niggun* in the presence of the Rebbe Rayatz, the Rebbe said the

following: "This *niggun* is sung after one is *already* a mentsch. It is time now to sing a *niggun* that will help one *become* a mentsch (i.e. experience self-refinement).

Apparently, Zorach had inherited an extra measure of his father's sweet voice. As administrator of the *Oneg Shabbos* synagogue of East Flatbush, Reb Yosef Yitzchak was known for his captivating *davening*. I heard from an eye-witness that, on Yom Kippur, Reb Yosef Yitzchak once had the merit to *daven* the *neilah* prayer for the Rebbe Rayatz. At the close of the service, the Rebbe turned to Reb Yosef Yitzchak and thanked him with a heartfelt "*Yasher Koach!*" This was most unusual for the Rebbe Rayatz, and only emphasized the unique quality and fervor in this Chassid's voice.

Reb Yochanan, the fourth brother, possessed an extraordinary degree of *biskaabrus* — the soulful bond a Chassid feels for his Rebbe. I later merited to join this distinguished family when I married Reb Yochanan's daughter, my dear wife Esther.

Reb Yochanan and his wife Zisha kept an open home. 682 Eastern Parkway, his address, became widely known among Chabad Chassidim — most of whom lived in the nearby neighborhood of Brownsville and regularly walked to Crown Heights on Shabbos mornings, to spend the holy day with the Rebbe Rayatz. Many Chassidim quickly adopted the weekly custom of stopping at Reb Yochanan's home for a steaming cup of coffee before the prayers. To her eternal credit, my mother-in-law prepared enough coffee and cake to satisfy the steady stream of guests that filled her home every Shabbos morning.

These morning visits were much more than just social calls. Chassidim sat around drinking coffee, relating various Chassidic sayings and stories, and discussing the Rebbe's talks. It was, in essence, a mini-*farbrengen*. I have already mentioned the close friendship between Reb Berel Chaskind and Reb

Yochanan Gordon, and I must add that Reb Pinye Althaus — a warm, energetic Chassid who lived in Israel — was a third member of this close-knit group. Whenever he arrived in New York, Reb Pinye made certain to visit Reb Yochanan, and the Chassidic trio sat around the table reliving various incidents from the past. Just listening to them was a rewarding experience. You saw three figures of a bygone era, each permeated with the special warmth of Chabad Chassidus. They discussed Lubavitch, the *Rebbeim*, and Chassidim of stature, speaking about each subject with enthusiasm and passion.

(Reb Pinye had an outstanding sense of humour and often joked around with others, particularly with Reb Berel Chaskind. When my mother-in-law prepared coffee for her Shabbos guests, she added milk to the coffee beforehand, letting all the flavors blend together on the stove. The milk formed a tasty crust on the coffee and, when my father-in-law brought the coffee to the table, Reb Pinye began his good-natured teasing with the other Chassidim, deciding who "deserved" the milky crust. (In Yiddish, this was called *fardinen zich af di playke*.)

I merited to see many Chassidim in my life, but Reb Yochanan's fiery *hiskashrus* exceeded anything I knew. I can never forget the tragic date of the tenth of Shevat 1950, the day the Rebbe Rayatz departed this physical world. It was a Shabbos morning, and I had just come in from Philadelphia with my wife, Esther, Reb Yochanan's daughter. Naturally, we stayed at the home of my parents-in-law.

That morning, as I sat by the window, I suddenly spied my eminent father-in-law race out of 770 and rush home. He bounded up the steps and crashed through the door, his face white like fresh plaster. I had no idea what happened, and I half rose from my place when my father-in-law spread his

hands out in desperation. "*Gevald*, woe is to us!" he roared mightily. "We have lost our father."

Believe me, dear reader, when I tell you that I have unfortunately seen many children lose their father. I have never, ever seen such overwhelming grief and anguish as I did in that moment — when this true Chassid lamented the *histalkus* of his revered and beloved Rebbe. His face was totally drained of color; his powerful body shook with emotion. I then saw the extent of true *hiskashrus*, when the soul of a Chassid is eternally bound with that of his Rebbe.

More Chassidic Personalities

Reb Moshe Leib Rottstein deserves special mention. Though we had been in Vilna together, Reb Moshe Leib succeeded in leaving for America quite quickly, and was spared all our travails in Japan and Shanghai. As part of the Rebbe's secretariat, Reb Moshe Leib merited to serve the Rebbe Rayatz in Otwock and, later, in America. After the *histalkus*, Reb Moshe Leib continued working for the Ramash.

Chassidim relate that, in many Chassidic courts, there is always a specific person who succeeds in amusing the *tzaddik* during times of hardship and stress. Whenever the *tzaddik* appeared bothered or aggravated, this particular Chassid could smooth over matters by relating a carefully worded witticism or anecdote. (For example, among the followers of Reb Boruch of Mezibush lived a famous wit, Hershel of Ostropol. If Reb Boruch became annoyed or upset, Hershel would inevitably bound into the room with a clever insight or humorous anecdote, forcing Reb Boruch to laugh. After seeing Reb Boruch in good spirits again, Hershel would quickly leave the room — until the next time.) When necessary, Reb Moshe Leib emulated this kind of behavior. In times of stress, Reb Moshe

Leib tried to bring the Rebbe some joy, to see the Rebbe smile again.

Among many other duties, Reb Moshe Leib was responsible for transcribing the Rebbe's letters. As the Rebbe dictated his replies, Reb Moshe Leib furiously recorded everything in shorthand, retiring afterwards to his room, where he sat for hours typing the answers on his ancient typewriter. Once, as he entered the room of the Rebbe to transcribe some replies, Reb Moshe Leib sensed that the Rebbe was sorely vexed about a particular matter. Seeing this, Reb Moshe Leib took a tiny pencil out of his pocket and began struggling to get a firm grasp on its thin tip. "Moshe Leib!" said the Rebbe in surprise. "Can't you find a bigger pencil?"

Reb Moshe Leib left the room and returned shortly with an enormous pencil — the meter-long kind normally sold as toys or souvenirs — tucked securely under his jacket. As the Rebbe began dictating, Reb Moshe Leib took the giant pencil out with a flourish. His efforts were well rewarded. The Rebbe gave an appreciative laugh and the tense atmosphere dissipated instantly.

Reb Shmuel Zalmanov, another Chassid who had shared some of our experiences in Vilna, possessed remarkable capabilities. An erudite scholar in all areas of *Nigleh* and *Chassidus*, Reb Shmuel was wise and insightful, and retained an uncanny familiarity with hundreds of Chabad melodies. Besides these inherent qualities, Reb Shmuel was fortunate to be raised in an affluent family. (I remember his father — Reb Shraga Feivel — from when I learned in Warsaw.) His wife's family, the Rapaports from Poland, were also quite successful.

Reb Shmuel merited to serve as the Rebbe's *chazan* during the High Holy Days. He had a pleasant voice, one that resonated with feeling and emotion. Reb Shmuel gave careful emphasis to every word of the *davening*, singing the liturgy in

exact accordance with the traditional Chabad *nusach*. Naturally, the Rebbe Rayatz was greatly pleased with his *Baal Tefillah*.

Back in Warsaw, Rabbi Zalmanov had been chief editor of *HaTomim*, a scholarly journal printed for Chabad Chassidim and the many students who learned in different branches of Tomchei Tmimim. (These journals were later bound in hardcover volumes and can be found in practically every Chabad home.) In America, as in Poland, Reb Shmuel remained the same pleasant and refined person, spreading the teachings of Chassidus wherever possible. Reb Shmuel worked hard for the betterment of Tomchei Tmimim and played an important role in the expansion of 770. In his later years, Reb Shmuel moved to Israel, spending the final period of his eventful life in the Holy Land.

I will quickly mention another few Chassidim that I remember from my early years in America:

Reb Mendel Cunin lived in Borough Park. A *shochet* and an exceedingly pious Jew, Reb Mendel gave charity with an open heart and hand. Already advanced in years, Reb Mendel received Social Security checks every month, but he did not wait for his stipend to arrive in order to give *tzedoko*. Rather, Reb Mendel donated to charity ahead of schedule, calculating his upcoming checks as though they had already arrived.

At that time, Chabad Chassidim in New York used "Ganneles Wine." Mr. Ganneles, the founder, had learned in Tomchei Tmimim, and Chassidim trusted his standards of *Kashrus*. More importantly, *Ganneles* wines were under the rabbinical supervision of trustworthy Chabad rabbis. Mr. Ganneles sometimes participated in the Rebbe's *farbrengens*, bursting into tears whenever he heard a particularly moving *niggun*. I was somewhat surprised the first time I noticed this, but then I realized that these *niggunim* aroused powerful

memories in the wine maker and probably reminded him of the many pleasant years he had spent in yeshiva.

I would be remiss if I did not make mention of Rabbi Sholom Posner of Pittsburgh, a Chassid of stature known for his sterling character and pleasant disposition. Reb Sholom raised all his children to become true Chassidim. Rabbi Schneiderman, another *Tomim* who learned in Lubavitch, lived in Pittsburgh and served as the administrator of the local Chabad school, together with Reb Yosef Menachem Mendel Tenenbaum.

Reb Zev ("Velvel") Kazinitz — another *Tomim* who learned in the village of Lubavitch — was another Chassid of stature. An adept *sbochet*, Reb Velvel lived on Watkins Street, where Chassidim often brought chickens for him to *sbecht*. (His son Moshe is a rabbi today in New Jersey; his son-in-law, Rabbi Yudel Krinsky, is well-known and occupies a very important position in Chabad leadership today.) A congenial and warm person, Reb Velvel viewed the world from the spiritual perspective, infusing his everyday affairs with intense spiritual energy.



Reb Zev ("Velvel") Kazinitz

I heard something interesting about Reb Velvel: whenever he heard a particular *niggun* sung at *farbrengens*, Reb Velvel promptly burst into bitter tears. When pressed for an explanation, Reb Velvel revealed that his learning partner in Lubavitch had sung this very *niggun* during his prayers and nightly introspection. His spiritual devotions impacted Reb Velvel to such an extent that even now — many years later — Reb Velvel could not help but cry whenever he heard the *niggun*.

Reb Nochum Nuvikov, another Chassid who learned in Lubavitch, moved to America after a short stay in Israel. (While in Israel, Reb Nochum changed his Russian surname to "Chodosh," its equivalent in Hebrew.) Reb Nochum opened a grocery store and continued living his Chassidic way of life as always. Many people unburdened their problems to Reb Nochum and he found a way to help everyone with his kind heart and caring attitude. I personally turned to him on occasion, especially during my first years in America. Reb Nochum was always there for me, always willing to lend assistance or give helpful advice. Reb Nochum had a wonderful voice, and he read from the Torah in 770.

I particularly recall his emotions on Shabbos, the tenth of Shevat, 1950, when we learned of the passing of the Rebbe Rayatz. Crushed and despondent, most Chassidim had resigned themselves to the tragedy and sat saying *tehillim* in *shul*, tears streaming down their cheeks. Only Reb Nochum did not concede defeat. His fierce *hiskashrus* could not come to terms with the impossible. Reb Nochum paced up and down the hallways of 770, wringing his hands in consternation. "It cannot be!" he proclaimed to whoever cared to listen. "They need a doctor! Why, oh why, won't they call a doctor?" No one had the strength to respond that many doctors had already been summoned. Thus, Reb Nochum continued walking the

hallways, repeating his demand for a doctor. It was futile to argue with him.

In summation, I simply cannot concur with those who claim that now, even today, we can encounter Chassidim of the same stature as those I mention here. In my view, it is fairly impossible to find such Jews today. *Tmimim* who learned in Lubavitch were on a lofty spiritual level, completely attuned to G-dliness. Little else mattered to them. This is an inherent quality, a level of attainment difficult to reproduce. It is simply a different way of life. The world has changed in many different ways, which makes it that much harder to reach the level of early *Tmimim*. True, Chassidim nowadays are sincere and wonderful Jews with outstanding qualities, but they cannot compare to the Chassidim of yesteryear.

My Engagement

After spending many months teaching in Buffalo, I began thinking about establishing a family. Most of the refugee students were older than the American *bochurim* learning in yeshiva, and many had already begun contemplating their future. I had an advantage: Having learned *shechita*, I could rely on this form of work as my future livelihood.

Since I had no living family, marriage brokers approached me directly with different proposals, but other Chassidim insisted that I lend my efforts to the growing network of Jewish Day Schools in other cities. Having followed their advice in Buffalo for some time already, I now turned my attention back to *shidduchim*.

Whenever a specific proposal came up, my first reaction was to think of my father. "What would he say about such a family?" I thought. If I could not decide alone, I consulted with Reb Shmuel Levitin, whose discerning perception guided many

bochurim in this most weighty decision. "It's not enough to just think about a *shidduch*," he often said. "You have to go and *do* a *shidduch*!"

Reb Shmuel listened with a careful ear to the pros and cons, only offering his suggestions after hearing all the details. "Money is definitely not a disadvantage," he told *bochurim*. Whenever someone experienced difficulty finding a *shidduch*, Reb Shmuel spoke soothingly to the distressed *bochur*, calming his fears and promising a rosy end. "There's no reason for depression!" he said emphatically. "Every person must complete a certain amount of stages until they merit to find their soul mate. Whenever a *shidduch* fails, you are, in effect, coming one step closer to meeting your destined partner."

In the end, however, it was the Rebbe Rayatz who personally intervened regarding my *shidduch*. Reb Yochanan Gordon — my future father-in-law — brought the Rebbe a chicken for *kapporas* every year, on the day before Yom Kippur. After the Rebbe finished the ceremony, Reb Yochanan would take the chicken, slaughter it outside, and then return to the Rebbe's room, enabling the Rebbe to perform the *mitzva* of covering the blood. During those few minutes, the Rebbe showed Reb Yochanan special affection, addressing him as a person speaks to his close friend.

Reb Yochanan had a daughter of marriageable age, and as he entered the Rebbe's room that year, the Rebbe Rayatz turned to him and said, "Why aren't you thinking about a *shidduch* for your daughter? In fact," added the Rebbe, "there are *bochurim* who arrived lately from Shanghai ..."

Without getting into additional details regarding the ensuing conversation, let me just say that the Rebbe paved the way for my *shidduch* with Reb Yochanan's daughter. I can confidently say that my father would have been extremely pleased with the *shidduch*.

When Reb Shmuel heard about my engagement, he told me what he told every *chassan*. "You are now in the best period of your life," he said. "Nothing is better than the time between a person's engagement and the wedding. Before the engagement, you were worried about finding a *shidduch*. After the wedding, you will worry about supporting a family and paying bills. Right now however, you have no worries to disturb your peace of mind. If so, this is the best time of your life..."

My Years With the Rebbe Rayatz

The Rebbe Rayatz lived on the second floor of 770 Eastern Parkway. On *Yomim Tovim* and Chassidic holidays, Chassidim assembled in the Rebbe's dining room, to hear the Rebbe talk and expound Chassidus. However, due to the Rebbe's weakened health, very few Chassidim merited to attend these gatherings. Chassidim of stature and respected rabbinical figures received personal invitations to attend these *farbrengens*; everyone else stood outside the locked doors, waiting for a glimpse of the Rebbe's face whenever the doors opened and closed.

Two doors led to the Rebbe's home. The main entrance, the door opening to the hallway of the Rebbe's home, was accessible via the staircase or the elevator. Most Chassidim and invited guests used this entrance. Then there was a second door that opened into the kitchen — an entrance reserved for family members. It was virtually impossible to gain unauthorized entry to these *farbrengens*, but, as *bockurim* often do, we tried every possible trick to get inside to see the Rebbe. These desperate attempts failed as a rule; on occasion, though, some people managed to sneak in.

One day, I arrived from Buffalo just in time to hear about a *farbrengen* scheduled for that day. "Maybe I should wait by the

elevator," I thought to myself. "When the Ramash goes in the elevator to go upstairs, I'll try to go in with him." (We all knew that the Ramash had a soft spot for those eager to participate in *farbrengens*, and often relaxed the rules to admit others into these gatherings.)

Indeed, when the Ramash entered the elevator, I slipped in behind him. The Ramash did not comment as the elevator rose to the second floor, and I silently congratulated myself for successfully executing my plan.

We came to the kitchen door and the Ramash slid his key into the lock. As the door opened, I saw the Rebbe's daughters — Chaya Mushka and Chana — standing in the kitchen. Both were responsible for guarding the back entrance, to ensure that uninvited Chassidim would not enter through the kitchen. I placed my foot squarely in the doorway, trying to block the closing door, when the Ramash turned to me and said, "Reb Shimon, you will not come in."

Realizing I had lost my opportunity, I left the kitchen and raced down the staircase, across the downstairs hall, and up the second staircase that led to the main door of the Rebbe's home. Dozens of Chassidim were crammed in the small space near the door, and I pushed my way into the crowd. Though we could not hear the Rebbe's voice through the door, we were able to hear when everyone sang *niggunim* between the Rebbe's talks.

We stood there silently, waiting and hoping to see the Rebbe's face. I could almost feel the overwhelming sense of longing in the room. Every Chassid desired to be admitted inside but, since this remained impossible, we continued standing quietly for hours until the *farbrengen* ended. As the doors finally opened and the Chassidim filed outside, our hours of waiting were rewarded with a quick glimpse of the Rebbe's saintly countenance. The Rebbe was then wheeled down the hallway of his home and back to his room, passing the main

entrance on the way. This was our opportunity to see the Rebbe up close and wish him a "*Gut Yom Tov*."

Despite the restrictions, I did sometimes manage to participate in *farbrengens* (though I cannot recall how exactly I got in). Once, as I stood inside, I noticed my father-in-law — Reb Yochanan Gordon — standing very near to the Rebbe with beads of sweat glistening on his face. I realized that people behind my father-in-law were pushing to get closer to the Rebbe, and my father-in-law was exerting every last ounce of strength to hold them back and not let anyone fall, G-d forbid, onto the Rebbe. Sensing this, the Rebbe Rayatz turned to him and said: "Yochanan, you are not crowding me." This, again, underscored the close *biskashruw* between my father-in-law and the Rebbe — the *biskashruw* of both a Chassid and a friend.

(On another occasion, the Rebbe made clear his feelings about Reb Yochanan. In 1941, when the Ramash succeeded in escaping from Europe, the Rebbe called in his private secretary, Reb Chaim Lieberman, and relayed the good tidings. "Tell my good friends that my daughter and son-in-law have escaped Europe," said the Rebbe. "Tell them they are on their way to America!")

"But who are the Rebbe's *good friends*?" asked his startled secretary.

"Berel [Chaskind] and Yochanan [Gordon]," replied the Rebbe.

The close bond between my father-in-law and the Rebbe Rayatz was also evident after the Rebbe's passing, when Chassidim drew lots to divide the different phases of *tabara*, the ritual purification and cleansing of the body. My father-in-law drew the inestimable privilege of washing the Rebbe's saintly head.

After these *farbrengens*, when Reb Shmuel Levitin came out of the Rebbe's home, he often turned to us and said: "I don't

know who is better — those who merited to be inside and see everything, or those forced to remain outside. The latter group are overcome by longing to see the Rebbe and, aroused by the *niggunim* sung inside, desire even more to enter and be part of the *farbrengen* ...”

This reminded me of the words of the Baal Shem Tov, an explanation I have already mentioned earlier. It is easy to long for spirituality in a spiritual wasteland, commented the Baal Shem Tov. The Psalmist therefore says “I thirst to see You in the Sanctuary (Psalms 63:3),” expressing his desire to maintain this intense longing even when he is in the “Sanctuary” — close to the spiritual source. In a sense, he was suggesting that the longing of those locked out of the *farbrengen* may well have outweighed the merit of the actual participants.

Pesach, the festival of freedom, had special significance for us. The Rebbe Rayatz conducted his *seder* in the dining room of his home, and it was fairly easy to gain entry and participate in this unique experience. Most *bochurim* fairly flew through their private *seder* at home, rushing back to 770 for a good vantage point to see how the Rebbe conducts his *seder*. During those few hours, we felt transported to a spiritually higher world, where every aspect of the *seder* shone with different light, one suffused with devotion and holiness.

One year, I entered just in time to see the Rebbe Rayatz eat his *matza*. The Rebbe held the *matza* with both hands, with such tenderness and affection that you could literally see his intense love for the *mitzva*. When it was time to eat *maror*, the bitter herbs, the Rebbe specifically took the head of horseradish — the sharpest, most biting part of the vegetable. The Rebbe’s pain and discomfort were clearly evident as he ate the hard, ungrated *maror*, gasping for air in an effort to lessen some of the *maror*’s bitterness.

(In later years, we merited to be present when the Ramash — later the Rebbe — ate the actual *seder* meal, I remembered a story I once heard about the saintly Ruzhiner *tzaddik*. Due to the malicious slander of an informant, the Ruzhiner was forced to flee Ruzhin for a short time and he escaped to Vienna. Some time later, when the Ruzhiner heard that the authorities in Ruzhin were replaced with friendlier officers, he decided to leave Vienna and return home.

Despite his intentions, his followers feared the possible consequences and suspected the authorities would imprison the *tzaddik* immediately upon his return. The Ruzhiner therefore turned to the *rav* of Lemburg — a *misnagid* who maintained excellent contact with the authorities in Ruzhin. A distinguished envoy of Chassidim traveled to Lemburg, asking the *rav* for a letter of recommendation to prove that the Ruzhiner was a saintly individual who deserved no harm.

The Chassidim met the *rav* closeted in his room with a group of elite scholars. They presented their request, but the *rav* looked at them in astonishment. "I don't even know your Rebbe!" he protested. "How can I testify about his piety if I have never met him? Please, tell me something about your Rebbe that proves his greatness."

"Simple," answered the Chassidim. "Our Rebbe never bends his head while eating. He brings the spoon to his mouth, without bending his head in the slightest towards his plate."

The assembled scholars burst into loud laughter and even the *rav* could not contain a smile. "This is his greatness?" he wondered. "There's nothing special about that. We can also do it!"

The *rav* called for a plate of soup and set it down on the table with a smile. Yet, despite his care, every time he lifted the spoon, his head bent slightly toward the food. After a few tries, the *rav* put his spoon down in frustration and asked the other

scholars to try. Notwithstanding their efforts, not one person could eat a spoonful of soup without bending their head at all.

"This is the greatness of our Rebbe," said the Chassidim. "Man is inherently attached to food; his nature demands it. It is physically impossible to remain perfectly still while eating, because the physical body is simply drawn toward the food. Our Rebbe, however, being a saintly individual, has successfully controlled his physical impulses, and can remain still while eating." The *rav* bowed his head in deference and respectfully wrote out the necessary testimonial letter.

Here too, as I watched our saintly Rebbe eat his soup, I saw his head remain perfectly still and upright. He moved the food toward his mouth, never his mouth toward the food.

After the meal, the Rebbe retired to his room. It is customary to leave doors unlocked and open on the first night of Pesach and I distinctly remember the Rebbe's door remaining open after the *sefer*. (One year, as I passed the door, I saw the Rebbe put on his eyeglasses and look in a *sefer*.)

Back to the *sefer* of the Rebbe Rayatz, I remember that despite the extremely late hour and our physical exhaustion, we all ran downstairs to participate in a "mini-*sefer*" of sorts, led by the Ramash, the Rebbe's second son-in-law.

Having all partaken of the *afikomen*, we could not eat anything or say *lechaim*. Instead, the Ramash sat at the head of an empty table and began discussing various parts of the *sefer* service, illuminating every aspect with the inner, esoteric light. A relatively large crowd stayed on into the wee hours of the morning to hear his explanations on the *Haggadah*. It was heartwarming to see dozens of Chassidim disregard the restraints of time and energy as they participated in yet a third *sefer*.

This was hardly the only opportunity to hear the Ramsash speak. In compliance with a specific directive of his father-in-

law, the Ramash *farbrenge*d on *Shabbos Mevorchim*, the Shabbos that precedes every new month. On other occasions — if a groom was called to the Torah, or a *kiddush* in honor of a newborn — Chassidim would ask the Ramash to *farbrenge* for them and he generally did so. The Ramash often explained the significance of the occasion, the Torah reading of that week, and the names of the celebrants — tying it all in with the deeper teachings of Chassidus.

The Succession

Chassidim sensed that the Ramash was far from an ordinary person. Though he carried himself humbly and shunned fanfare, we realized that the Ramash had attained lofty spiritual levels far removed from our own, and many eyes turned to him after the passing of the Rebbe Rayatz on the tenth of Shevat, 1950. When news of the *histalkus* spread, Chassidim felt a gaping vacuum and a crushing feeling of despair. It was as though the world had come to an end.

Thousands of people filled Eastern Parkway to participate in the funeral and pay their respects to the Rebbe Rayatz. After returning from the cemetery, Chassidim walked about in a state of shock, trying to imagine how life could go on. Thirteen days later my wife and I were blessed with a son. Many people — myself included — assumed I would name the baby after my late father, but, coming so close after the *histalkus*, I chose to name him “Yosef Yitzchak,” after the Rebbe Rayatz.

Our feelings of despair grew when the Ramash initially refused to accept the mantle of leadership. However, in the weeks and months that followed, we understood that the Ramash would eventually continue the golden chain of the Chabad dynasty. The Ramash himself privately showed certain characteristics exhibited by *Rebbeim*, and even began taking

pidyonos from certain Chassidim. These and other small indications encouraged our belief that, in the end, he would lead us as the seventh Rebbe.

I will just relate two incidents that illustrate the private and quiet acceptance of the leadership by the Ramash well before his public consent. In 1950, my mother-in-law suddenly became very ill with a life-threatening disease. Our family practitioner was Dr. Schwartz, a Jewish doctor who had been close with my parents-in-law when they lived in East New York. After most Jews left that area for other neighborhoods, Dr. Schwartz moved his practice to Crown Heights, renting a room in the dentist's office right next door to 770 (where the library stands today).

Dr. Schwartz immediately examined my mother-in-law and voiced his intention to admit her into hospital. My father-in-law was beside himself with worry: in the past, he never took such a crucial step without asking the Rebbe, but now — after the *bitalkus* — who could he turn to?

As he went out onto Eastern Parkway, my father-in-law decided to confer with the Ramash, who was working then in his office in 770. As he entered the room, the Ramash turned to him and asked regarding the welfare of my mother-in-law. "She is very sick," responded my father-in-law grimly, "and I have no one to ask advice from. When Dr. Schwartz demanded she be sent to hospital, I had no choice but to agree."

Responded the Ramash: "Even so, the Rebbe [Rayatz] finds ways to answer those who ask him, and sends the answer through an intermediary."

My father-in-law understood the hint. We began paying careful attention to the Ramash and the way he did things. Soon, a host of miraculous stories began circulating by word of mouth, attesting to the extraordinary perception of the Ramash and his G-dly vision. Nonetheless, the Ramash continued

conducting himself in a humble and unpretentious manner, publicly negating the possibility of his accepting the mantle of leadership.



*The Lubavitcher Rebbe,
Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson
speaking at a Farbrengen in the early 1950's.*

The second incident occurred with Reb Mordechai Groner. A short while after the *bistalkus* of the Rebbe Rayatz, Reb Mordechai became severely ill and his son — Reb Yehudah Leib Groner — approached the Ramash with a *pidyon nefesh*, asking him to pray for his father. “Why are you giving this to me?” asked the Ramash. “Go upstairs to the study room of the Rebbe Rayatz and relay the *pidyon nefesh* there.”

“But I don’t know how one relays a *pidyon* now,” protested Reb Yehudah Leib.

“If you don’t know how, then give it to me,” said the Rebbe. “I’ll transmit the message.” In fact, until the Ramash publicly accepted the mantle of leadership, he often served as a conduit for Chassidim who needed blessing and guidance for specific events.

Another incident stands out in my mind: My father-in-law was the *gabbai* of 770 and, among many other duties, he

organized the honors of those called up to the Torah. After the passing of the Rebbe Rayatz, two separate Torah readings occurred every Shabbos. The Rashag — the older son-in-law — received the prestigious honor of *maftir* in one *sefer torah*, while the Ramash was honored with *maftir* in a second scroll at a separate reading. On the Shabbos after the Ramash publicly accepted the mantle of leadership, my father-in-law made certain to conceal all the *sifrei torah* in *shul* besides one, ensuring that no one else could get *maftir*.



With the Rebbe at the Torah in 770

During the Torah reading, right before *maftir*, I noticed my father-in-law begin trembling in fright. He closed his eyes tightly in concentration, his face turned white, and his voice resonated throughout the *shul* as he proclaimed, "*Yaamod Adoneinu Moreinu v'Rabbeinu ... Arise our Master, Teacher and Leader, the son of Reb Levi Yitzchak, to maftir.*"

The Ramash left his place and made his way to the *sefer torah*. A ripple of awe ran through the synagogue as we all realized we were witnessing an historic occasion. We understood that the Ramash was our new leader now, and so it would remain forever more.

President Shazar and Lubavitch

Decades later, on one of my frequent trips to Israel, I heard a fascinating account about the association of former President Shazar with the *Rebbeim* of Chabad. I was staying at hotel "Hamerkaz" during my stay in Israel, and I spent my time visiting relatives and holy sites. One week, after the Friday night meal, I sat on the outside porch with Reb Nissan Gordon, my brother-in-law, and Reb Menachem Porush — a member of Knesset and one of the heads of the "Agudas Yisrael" movement. We struck up conversation with Reb Menachem, who kindly shared with us an interesting and vital moment in history.

Just before the establishment of the State of Israel, Shazar — then one of the chief officers in the Jewish Agency — traveled to collect money from Jewish philanthropists in the United States. During this time, Shazar was nominated to become Israel's Minister of Education, a prestigious position with many responsibilities. Many members in the Israeli government wanted to bring all the educational curricula in the country under the government's jurisdiction. No longer could yeshivos decide to learn *gemara* or *halacha* alone; each school was accountable to the government and had to follow its rules. Furthermore, the administration of these schools would be controlled by government employees, not rabbis or *roshai yeshiva*.

Naturally, this proposal caused a tremendous outcry among religious Jews worldwide. Reb Velvel of Brisk — a prodigious Torah scholar and respected personality — sent an urgent message to the Rebbe Rayatz, asking him to intercede with Shazar and have the proposal abolished. Though he himself was a *minagid*, Reb Velvel knew that only the Rebbe could influence the minister, because Shazar came from Chassidic stock and had actually been named “Schneur Zalman” after the Alter Rebbe.

Reb Velvel entrusted Reb Menachem Porush with the mission, instructing him to fly to New York and meet with the Rebbe Rayatz. Reb Menachem Porush went to 770 and relayed the message to the Rebbe who, in turn, gave Rabbi Porush specific instructions on what to tell the Minister of Education when they would meet. Indeed, at the first available opportunity, Rabbi Porush met with Shazar and relayed the Rebbe's words verbatim. Shaken and overawed, Shazar quickly stopped the proposal, and the suggested changes never took effect.

Shazar had already met the Rebbe Rayatz before — when the United Nations voted in favor of establishing a Jewish State. Shazar then visited the Rebbe and spent much time talking to him. In the ensuing years, Shazar assisted Chabad in many areas, particularly regarding the establishment of Kfar Chabad and its many institutions and schools.

After the *histalkus* of the Rebbe Rayatz, Shazar maintained a warm, personal relationship with the Ramash, the Rebbe Rayatz's son-in-law and successor. The Rebbe wrote him numerous personal letters. Even after becoming the President of Israel, Shazar had the greatest admiration and respect for the Rebbe. Nothing underscored this admiration more than Shazar's famous visit to the United States, when he came to visit the Rebbe in 770. Heads of the Israeli government,

political pundits and newspaper editors criticized Shazar for demeaning the stature of the Presidency by personally visiting the Rebbe. Instead, they claimed, the Rebbe should be coming to the President. Shazar brushed off the criticism. Unlike them, he had an inkling into the greatness of the Rebbe and understood full well that, as a Chassid, it was he who needed to go to the Rebbe and not vice versa.

Shazar came to the Rebbe on Purim. Hours earlier, security personnel closed off the streets and meticulously searched 770, making sure the area was safe for the President. Members of Israeli security were also on hand, and they closed 770 off to the wider public. Only those cleared for security could enter. My wife was then standing near the main entrance of 770. Having lived in Crown Heights almost her entire life, she knew which ladies were residents and wives of the Chassidim, and security personnel chose her to help them in securing 770. My wife stood at the doors with the guards, pointing out who they could admit into 770.



President Shazar visits the Rebbe, 1971

When Shazar and his entourage arrived, it was just before the reading of the *megillab*. The Rebbe went outside to greet his distinguished guest. As Shazar came out of his car, he embraced the Rebbe and the two walked arm-in-arm into 770. Cameras flashed as dozens of journalists strained to capture the scene on film, and the famous picture later ran in all major newspapers here and in Israel.

The Rebbe showed extraordinary affection toward Shazar. As I understood it, here was an individual who carried a prestigious position and wielded significant influence in Israel, and used his good offices to promote Torah, Chassidus, and those who followed its ways. After the *megillab* reading, Shazar spent some time alone with the Rebbe in his room, where they discussed many far-reaching issues. The Rebbe then escorted Shazar out of 770.

This visit made a great impression on Jews worldwide, and even liberal-minded Jews began looking at religion in a more positive light. After all, if the President of Israel could make an exception and personally visited a Chassidic Rebbe, surely religion must signify something of importance.

Shazar visited the Rebbe on other occasions as well and participated in *farbrengens*, where he sat very close to the Rebbe. Shazar stayed for hours, listening intently to every word the Rebbe uttered. Between the Rebbe's talks, as Chassidim sang *niggunim*, I could see tears falling from his eyes.

Who can estimate the beauty of a Jewish soul! Shazar, a *neshama* with roots in Lubavitch, had returned to his source. Now, as he sat by the *farbrengen*, he cried while Chassidim sang together as one voice. (In his memoirs, Shazar recounts how his father taught him a Chassidic *niggun*, and instructed him to sing it in times of distress. Said his father: "Whenever you are in a predicament and there seems no way out, just sing this *niggun* and you will be helped." No wonder that Shazar exhibited such

deep emotion when he heard us sing the moving melody of the Alter Rebbe known as the "Four Stanzas.")

During one of his meetings with the Rebbe, Shazar spoke about the immigrants who had recently arrived in Israel from behind the Iron Curtain. "They are empty Jews," said Shazar, referring to their absolute ignorance of even the basic fundamentals of Judaism. "Don't call them 'empty Jews,'" corrected the Rebbe. "Rather, they may be called 'simple Jews.'"

Celebrating A Milestone

In the early 1940's, the Rebbe Rayatz initiated the writing of a *Sefer Torab* in honor to greet *Moshiach*. Almost thirty years later, the Rebbe stunned Chassidim worldwide by announcing his intention to have the *Sefer Torab* completed by the tenth of Shevat 5730 (1970). Hearing this, Chassidim intuitively felt that the coming of *Moshiach* was definitely imminent, and many people made the effort to participate in this momentous occasion.

On Thursday the 8th of Shevat, many Chassidim arrived in New York by plane and bus. Some of the leading Chabad Chassidim in Israel came — Reb Shlomo Chaim Kesselman, the *masbpi* of Kfar Chabad; Reb Zushe Wilmovsky "the Partisan"; Reb Efraim Wolf, the dean of the Chabad yeshivos; Reb Chanoch Glitzenstein, the administrator of the *Toras Emet* yeshiva, and many others.

Rabbi Kesselman and Rabbi Wolf stayed in our house, as did the mayor of Lod. My son, Yosef Yitzchak ("Yossy"), who was studying in the yeshiva in Montreal, also came to New York from Montreal and brought many young *bochurim* along. From Montreal alone, no less than six buses were chartered especially for this occasion. Additional guests arrived by the

hour, gracing our home with an aura of Chassidic warmth and vitality. On Friday, at five in the morning, all the guests staying in my home sat down to compose a *pidyon nefesh*. After everyone signed, the guests drove off to the *ohel* of the Rebbe Rayatz in Queens, leaving themselves enough time to return for the actual completion of the *sefer torah*.

At the designated time, thousands of Chassidim crammed the huge interior of 770. Emotions ran high in the *shul*; one could feel a palpable sense of longing and excitement as everyone waited for the special moment. We felt that this event might very well mark the end of our long exile, ushering in the long-awaited Redemption.

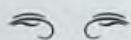
Reb Shmarya Faktor, the *sofer* who began the *sefer torah*, now had the honor of completing it. (I have already related how, as a *bochur*, I boarded in Reb Shmarya's home on Brooklyn Avenue.) During the entire time, the Rebbe's face seemed unusually serious. He watched every detail of the proceedings carefully, ensuring that every part of the completion was conducted accordingly. When the *sofer* finished, the scroll was lifted and rolled tight, garbed in a new mantle, and the Rebbe placed a magnificent crown on the *sefer torah*.

The tremendous crowd burst into joyous song and dance as the *sefer torah* was carried through the *shul* and into the Ark. We waited hopefully for a sign, perhaps the sound of the *shofar* that would herald *Moshiach*. Despite the close proximity to Shabbos, the Rebbe also addressed the crowd and explained the significance of the occasion. However, he stated emphatically that there would be 'no proclamations'.



The Rebbe places the crown on "Moshiach's Sefer Torah"

The *siyum* was undoubtedly one of the most famous milestones in Chabad history. Moshiach's *Sefer Torah* still stands in the Holy Ark of 770 today, where it waits together with all of us for the arrival of *Moshiach*. May it be speedily in our days. Amen.



Epilogue

From an eyewitness I learned that all of my family were taken to the concentration camp in August 1942. We estimated that the probable date of their murder was the 12th of Elul. This is the date I have kept *yabrtzeit* for my entire family.

Over the years, I managed to make contact with a few cousins who had survived. One day in the 1960's a second cousin, Chana Biegeleisen, contacted me. She had heard that a Goldman from Shedlitz was alive and living in Brooklyn. When she came there with her husband, Berel, she looked in the Brooklyn telephone directory. Naturally, there were many Goldmans. Then she spotted the name Shimon and remembered that there were Shimons in her family. (I was named for my maternal grandfather). Of all the Goldmans in the directory, she tried my number first. We have been in contact ever since and they have attended all our *simchas*. Later, Chana's sister, Fella and her husband Moshe Bienstock, came to the United States as well. These two were the only family with whom I have had regular contact.

Some years ago, I discovered there were a few first cousins who had survived, Kalman Apelblatt and Yidel Herman. Yidel also had a sister, Sima, in Melbourne, Australia. Kalman had apparently been a *schochet* in Sweden. Both he and Yidel were then living in Israel. I made a special trip to Israel and we enjoyed a bittersweet but memorable family reunion.



*At a reunion in Israel with long-lost cousins
Yidel Herman and Kalman Apelblatt*

In the pages that follow are photographs of my family at various occasions. They offer the most eloquent testimony to the miracle of Jewish survival and the indomitable Jewish spirit.

One young boy fled Poland, an 'ember plucked from the fire.' With the help of the Almighty, he succeeded in replanting his family tree. At the time of the publication of this volume, my wonderful four children, Yossy, Kraindy, Chana Leah and Shmuly have blessed us with 29 grandchildren and 11 great grandchildren, *bli ayin hora*.

May Hashem watch over them all and may He grant my wife and I the privilege of celebrating many more *simchas* together with them. Please G-d, may it be amidst good health, peace, prosperity and *nachas*. Amen.

There Must Be

a Reason

written by Shmuly Goldman
on the occasion of his father's
(the author) 70th birthday.

*Amid the destruction
an ember glows
facing the juggernaut
courage swells
there must be a reason*

*While the unimaginable occurs
there's divine inspiration
to salvage one twig
of a once mighty oak
there must be a reason*

*As the ashes cool
a journey commences
across the globe
to a new beginning
there must be a reason*

*Defiant of evil
in humankind's darkest hour
the twig takes root and begins to
flower
there must be a reason*

*Generations born faithful
replenishing the lost
bright shining faces
reflect the future
this must be the reason*

From The
Family Album



*Wedding of Shimon and Esther Goldman.
I am seated in the center. On my immediate right
(with hand over his face) is the Ramash, later to become the Rebbe*



*Going to the Chupah with my Unterfibrers
(l) Rav Meir Ashkenazi and (r) Reb Mordechai Groner*



*Reb Yochanan and Zisha Gordon
take their daughter Esther to the Chuppah*



*At our Wedding
28 Adar 5709/March 29, 1949 — Gold Manor, Brooklyn, New York*



*The main table at our Wedding
(l to r) the Kallab's brothers-Yisroel, Skolom and Nissan,
Reb Yochanan Gordon, Shimon and Esther, Mrs. Zisba Gordon,
Roslyn Gordon, Miriam Gordon*



At the Bar Mitzvah of my son Yossy, 1963



*My father-in-law, Reb Yochanan Gordon and our children
(l to r) Chana Leab, Yossy, Shmuly and Kraindy*



*At the Rebbe with my grandsons,
Yochanon and Michael Goldman, circa 1990*



With my grandson, Shmuly Goldman (named after my father of blessed memory), at his Bar Mitzvah in Johannesburg, 1994



Dancing with my grandson, Chaim Shaul Bruk at his Bar Mitzvah, 1994



At the Wedding of our grandson, Yochanan Bruk (eldest son of our daughter Chana Leah and her husband Levi Yitzchak) to Perri Rosler in Toronto, Canada, 1999



At the Bar Mitzvah of our grandson, Chaim Goldman, son of our son Shmuel and his wife Tzirl, 2000



At the wedding of our grandson Yochanan Klein (son of our daughter Kraindy and her husband Moshe) to Esti Malka, Brooklyn, 2002



At the wedding of our granddaughter Zeesy Goldman Johannesburg, South Africa, 5/6/2005



With my granddaughter Zeesy and her husband, Asher Deren, just after their Chupah, 2005



*Our great grandchildren gather in Brooklyn, 2005 בלעיה
(l to r) Mussi Klein, Mussi Grossbaum, Chana Grossbaum
Moussia Goldman, Rochele Klein, Mendel Goldman holding his
brother Yechiel Michel (Eli), Mendel Schapiro, Mushky Brook
holding her brother Sholom Dov Ber Brook, inset Muska Goldman*

Glossary

- aliyah*: ("lit. ascend") being called to the Torah
- aron*: (lit. "box") (a) ark that houses the Torah scrolls (b) coffin
- baal tefilah*: one who leads the congregation in prayer
- beit medrash*: study hall
- bochur(im)*: yeshiva student(s)
- Borchu*: "Let us Bless the L-rd," part of the daily prayer service
- borcht*: beet dish
- Chabad*: acronym of the Hebrew words for "wisdom, understanding and knowledge" — founded by Rabbi Schneur Zalman, this Chassidic group within the larger Chassidic movement is based on an intellectual approach to serving G-d
- challah*: braided bread, normally eaten on Shabbos and Festivals
- Chasid(im)*: followers of a Chassidic leader
- Chassidus*: (a) the Chassidic movement within Orthodox Judaism (b) the philosophy of the movement
- chazan(im)*: cantor(s)
- cheder*: children's school
- cholent*: hot potato and bean dish eaten on Shabbos
- Cholov Yisroel*: dairy products manufactured under the constant supervision of a Jew
- chosson*: groom
- Chumash*: the Bible, the Five Books of Moses
- chuppah*: wedding canopy
- daven(ed)*: pray(ed)
- dayan*: Jewish judge who issues Halachic rulings
- Ein Yakov*: collection of the homiletic sections found in the Talmud
- Eretz Yisrael*: Israel
- erev*: the day preceding
- esrog(im)*: citrus fruit(s) used on the festival of Succos
- ezras nashim*: ladies' gallery
- farbreng*: to speak at a farbrengen (see next entry)

farbrengen: informal Chassidic gathering

Gabbaim: the synagogue wardens

gedolim: towering Torah scholars

halacha: Jewish law as set forth by the Code of Jewish Law

Harav, Mara D'avra: "the Rabbi, the leader of this community"

Hashem: (lit. "The Name") alternative name for G-d

Histalkus: the passing of a *tzaddik*

kapparot: a pre-Yom Kippur procedure (normally done with a chicken) to arouse Divine mercy

Kashrus: Kosher; the Dietary Laws

Kedusha: holiness; sanctity

kehilla: Jewish congregation

Kodshim: Talmudic order dealing with various sacrificial laws

L'chaim: "To Life!"

leining: to read the Torah scroll with the proper cantillation notes

Likkutei Torah: collection of Chassidic teachings of Reb Schneur Zalman, the founder of the Chabad movement

Lubavitch: "city of love," small Russian village where many of the Chabad Rebbes lived and which has become synonymous with the movement

lulav: palm branch used on the festival of Succos

Ma'amorim: Chassidic discourse, first expounded by the Rebbe

machzorim: prayer books containing the holiday liturgy

mashgiach: (a) one who supervises the production of Kosher food (b) faculty member who monitors the advancement of yeshiva students

mashke: liquor

mashpia(im): Chassidic mentor(s) or counselor(s)

matza(s): unleavened bread eaten on Passover

mezuzot: parchment scrolls containing Biblical verses that are affixed to the door posts

mikva: pool of water used for ritual immersion

Mincha: the afternoon prayer

- minyan(im)*: quorum(s) of ten males over the age of thirteen, needed for communal prayer
- Mishbloach Monas*: gifts of food sent to another person on the festival of Purim
- Mishnayos*: terse statements of Jewish law, elaborated and elucidated by the Talmud
- minagdim*: antagonists and opponents of Chassidism
- mitzva*: commandment; good deed
- mitzayim*: campaign(s) to promote the performance of certain mitzvos among the unaffiliated
- mohel*: one who performs the rite of circumcision
- Moshiach*: (lit. "anointed") the Redeemer; the Messiah
- neilah*: the closing prayer of the Yom Kippur service
- Niggunim*: Chassidic melodies
- Nigleh*: the revealed "open" parts of Torah
- Nu*: Yiddish expression with a host of meanings, including "Well?" "So?" "And?"
- Nuwach*: particular rites of the prayer service
- Pesach*: Passover
- peyos*: longer locks of hair left near the ears, in accordance with the Biblical command
- Pidyon nefesh*: a note asking the Rebbe for his blessing and guidance
- Rama'sh*: Rabbi Menachem M Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe
- rav*: competent Jewish rabbi
- Reb*: "Mr."
- Rebbe Rayatz*: Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880-1950), sixth Rebbe in the Chabad dynasty
- Rebbe*: Chassidic leader
- Rosh Hashbana*: the Jewish New Year
- rosh yeshiva*: dean and head scholar or lecturer of a learning academy
- Sefer Torah*: Torah scroll
- seforim*: sacred books
- Shabbas Hagadol*: the Shabbos preceding the Passover festival

- Shalosh Seudos*: the third meal of Shabbos, eaten during late afternoon hours, toward dusk
- Shaw*: the Talmud, wide ranging compendium and main source of Jewish law
- Shechita*: ritual slaughter
- Shehechianu*: blessing recited on joyous occasions
- shemura*: wheat that has been guarded against moisture since harvest for the production of *matza* for Pesach
- sheva brochos*: the Seven Nuptial Blessings, during the week following the marriage
- shidduch(im)*: engagement(s); marriage proposal(s)
- shirayim*: leftover food that a Rebbe distributes to his followers as a sign of blessing
- shiur*: class or study group
- shochet*: ritual slaughterer
- shtetl*: small village or town
- shtibl(ach)*: smaller, informal synagogue/s
- shul*: synagogue
- siddurim*: prayer books
- sofer*: qualified scribe who writes Torah scrolls, *tefillin*, etc.
- succab*: temporary booths used on the festival of Succos
- Succav*: (lit. "booths") eight-day Jewish Festival, during which one lives in temporary outdoor dwelling
- talleisim*: prayer shawls
- Tanya*: classic Chassidic text written by the first Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman
- Tefillin*: phylacteries — small black leather boxes containing parchment scrolls written by a qualified scribe, worn by Jewish men during weekday morning prayer
- Tehillim*: the Book of Psalms
- Temunim*: students in the Chabad school of Tomchei Tmimim
- tiab*: (lit. "table") when a Rebbe presides over a gathering of Chassidim, normally on Shabbos or festive occasions
- Tishrei*: seventh month of the Jewish year
- Tomchei Tmunim*: the collective name of Chabad schools

Tomim: a student in the Chabad school of Tomchei Tmimim

Torah: G-d's Law, transmitted by Moses both as the Written and Oral Law

tzaddik(im): righteous person/s

tzedoko: charity

Tzemach Tzedek: Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, known by the title of his Halachic responsa, *Tzemach Tzedek*

Vilna Gaon: Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, towering Talmudic scholar and a main antagonist of Chassidism

yarmulka: skullcap

Yasher Koach: "Thank You!" "Well Done!"

yeshiva: Jewish academy of learning

yetzer: the evil inclination

Yid: a Jew

Yiddishkeit: Judaism

Yom Kippur: the solemn Day of Atonement

Yomim Tovim: Jewish Festivals

Yud Tes Kislev: the nineteenth day of Kislev marking the Alter Rebbe's release from Czarist prison

zal: (lit. "hall") study hall

In Memory

of my dearly beloved family,
murdered by the Nazis ימ"ש.

May their memories be blessed.

May they be good advocates on High
for their family for generations to come.



לע"נ

שמואל זאנוויל בן יהושע אשר

מנוחה קריינרל בת שמעון

יעקב בן שמואל זאנוויל

יוסף בן שמואל זאנוויל

חנה בת שמואל זאנוויל

לאה בת שמואל זאנוויל

צבי הירש בן שמואל זאנוויל

חיים בן שמואל זאנוויל

ה' ינקום דמם



Shimon Goldman was born in Shedlitz (Siedlce), Poland, in 1925. He is the only survivor of his entire family. This book is the story of his survival.

When the Nazis invaded Poland, he fled his home town and joined up with various Yeshivas. He and his friends traveled through Lithuania, Russia and Kobe, Japan, eventually finding a safe haven in Shanghai, China, where they spent the rest of the war years. With the end of World War 2, he finally made it to America, settling in Brooklyn, New York. In time, he married and raised a family, thereby replanting his family tree so cruelly cut down by the Nazis.

It is a tale of faith and fortitude under the most difficult circumstances.

