Letters from Mir

A Torah World in the Shadow of the Shoah

The Correspondence of Ernest Gugenheim

Edited by Claude-Annie Gugenheim
Associate Editor Martine Bendavid



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DEDICATION

Our dear mother, Rabbanit Claude-Annie Gugenheim *aleha ha-shalom*, was, throughout her life, a true partner and companion to our father, Grand Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim, *zt"l.*

Thanks to her breadth of culture and extensive education, her literary talents and her exceptional willpower, she successfully dedicated her professional life to furthering Jewish education in France. During the course of her rich career, she was a teacher of Jewish studies in school and at home, principal of a Jewish school, and a renowned speaker. For over fifty years, she was the Editor of the well-known French Jewish education quarterly, *"Hamore"*, for which she was ultimately honored with the Jerusalem Prize conferred by Israel's President Chaim Herzog. She authored several books on Jewish education and translated many others into French with exceptional skill. She contributed a highly regarded translation of and commentary on *Pirkei Avot* for the comprehensive translation of the Mishna directed by our father.

Throughout his life, she worked closely with our father on the publication of his writings. After he passed away, she dedicated great efforts to the publication of our father's collected works, including numerous articles and conference papers, as well as the first collection ever of *She'elot u'Teshuvot* issued in the French language. She was married to our father for only 28 years, and yet she recently confessed to one of her children that he had remained with her every single day of her 37-year widowhood.

Her lifelong work was recognized, in 1992, with the Edmond Tenoudji Prize for futhering Jewish Education.

When our dear mother took the initiative of publishing the initial version of the *Lettres de Mir* in French, she had, from the very beginning, intended to publish the book eventually in

English as well. During the past few months, as she was battling her dreaded illness, she dedicated all of her sometimes waning strength towards that goal, with her accustomed attention to detail and desire for perfection. As she finally succeeded in completing this task just a month ago, the illness launched its final onslaught and took her from her loving family. She was blessed with passing peacefully into the *Olam ha-Emet*, surrounded by her children and grandchildren, on the afternoon of Erev Shabbat, June 20, 2014, in Jerusalem, where she now rests in peace. She had been very much looking forward, over the past year, to holding this English edition of the *Letters of Mir* in her hands. She was not to have been granted this last joy.

We dedicate the present English edition of *Letters from Mir* to her blessed memory.

The Children of
Grand Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim and
Rabbanit Claude-Annie Gugenheim

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FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

OU PRESS is proud to publish the English edition of Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim's *Letters from Mir*, an epistolary account of a young French rabbi's experience of the Mir Yeshiva and the world of Eastern European Jewry, on the cusp of this world's complete destruction. Originally published in French in 2006, this important book is now available to an English-speaking audience.

When our author arrived in January of 1938, the Mir Yeshiva, founded in 1815, had risen to become perhaps the preeminent institution of Talmudic learning, the Harvard of the yeshivos. Under the guidance of its Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Eliezer Yehuda Finkel, affectionately known as Reb Laizer Yudel, and its charismatic Mashgiach, Rav Yerucham Levovitz, Mir attracted the highest caliber of students from across Lithuania and beyond. As our author's account attests, students came to study in this small Belarusian town not only from Western Europe but also from as far as America.

Reb Laizer Yudel, son of the famed Alter of Slabodka, Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, was known for his love of *chiddushei torah*, new Torah insights, going so far as paying students for sharing their original interpretations of value. Reb Yerucham, who passed away shortly before Rabbi Gugenheim arrived at the Yeshiva, was one of the leading figures of the Mussar movement and ensured that the Yeshiva was a place of spiritual as well as intellectual growth. The Mir Yeshiva enriched the world of Torah in another way as well — Reb Laizer Yudel encouraged many of the best students in the Mir Yeshiva to continue their studies in Brisk under

Rav Yitzchak Ze'ev Soloveitchik, thus providing students for this great Talmudist and enabling the perpetuation of Brisk and its *derech halimmud*.

In October 1939, a year after Rabbi Gugenheim returned from Mir, the town fell under Soviet control, and aware that a religious institution would not be allowed to survive, the Yeshiva departed for Vilna. Students initially took up residence in the Rameillas Yeshiva, where due to lack of space, they actually slept in their suitcases. In early 1941, the Mir Yeshiva miraculously escaped Europe entirely, with almost the entire student body traveling across the Soviet Union to Japan and then to Shanghai, where they were forced to remain until the end of 1946. Mir was the only Eastern European yeshiva to survive the Holocaust almost intact, and today the Mir Yeshiva, with branches in both New York and Jerusalem, is again one of the world's greatest centers of Torah learning.

With charm and wit, this depiction of the pre-War Mir Yeshiva captures the simple living conditions in Eastern Europe as experienced by a Western Jew arriving in this *shtetl*, the sense of dignity with which the community lived even in poverty, the religious commitment and dedication of its inhabitants, the relations between the Jews and their Christian neighbors, and much more of great historical value to anyone who cares about what life was like in the Old Country on the eve of its destruction. But above all, Rabbi Gugenheim expresses the allure of the way of the yeshiva, of a world in which one can experience, in his words, "Judaism in all its simplicity and in all its plenitude, a Judaism stripped of all ceremony, of all pomp that does not become it, without exaggeration of any sort, in which the Torah is the absolute mistress, without any external influence intervening to alter it."

Even as he went on to become one of the most important religious leaders of the French Jewish community, widely credited with rebuilding Orthodox Judaism in France from the ashes

of World War II and from the inroads of emancipation, Rabbi Gugenheim's experience in Mir stayed with him. In describing his grandfather Rav Chaim Soloveitchik, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was fond of quoting Reb Yerucham's description, that Rav Chaim was able to grasp the soul of the Torah. This soul of the Torah is what so captivated the young Rabbi Gugenheim, and in his masterly account it will surely captivate his readers again.

Menachem Genack
General Editor
OU PRESS

PREFACE TO THE FRENCH EDITION

It is to our dear mother, Claude-Annie Gugenheim, that we owe the present publication of *Letters from Mir*.

It is she who unearthed them, sorted them, reread them, annotated and prepared them for publication; and it was she who looked for a publisher.

It is she, above all, who first recognized that the interest of these letters surpassed, and greatly so, the family circle and group of the close friends of my father *zt"l*,[1] for whom, as may be imagined, these youthful writings are endowed with an uncommon sentimental value.

Here, indeed, is a precise and meticulous testimony of Jewish life in Lithuania and Poland shortly before the Shoah that can add to the knowledge of even the best informed historians. Yet what constitutes the unique contribution of this epistolary relation is the description, from the interior, of the world of the pre-war Lithuanian *yeshiva* by a freshly ordained French rabbi.

The concept of *yeshiva* as a center for Talmudic study is as ancient as the Talmud. However, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (1749–1821), disciple of the Vilna Gaon, founded a yeshiva according to altogether original operational principles in Volozhin, which became the model for all modern-day *yeshivot* (yeshivas). Even today, the world over, many establishments claim to adhere to

1. The acronym of the Biblical expression *zecher tzadik livracha*, "the memory of the righteous is a blessing," or, more simply, "of blessed memory;" said of deceased rabbis.

this model and to this conception; they are called "Lithuanian *yeshivot*."

The pre-war Mir Yeshiva is without doubt at once the most famous and the most characteristic of the Lithuanian yeshivas of that period. For contemporary yeshiva students, as well as for their teachers, and still more perhaps for the general public, this previously unpublished testimony will provide a mine of information, often unexpected and even able at times to serve as a lesson and to suggest improvements in the current system.

It is by a providential set of circumstances, with which the reader will become acquainted, that our father had the good fortune of spending nearly nine months that made an indelible mark upon him in this yeshiva.

It transformed forever not only his relationship to the study of the Talmud, but also to prayer, to piety and to his Judaism in general.

The "non-initiate" reader will not fail to be struck as well by the throbbing emotion that often emanates from these lines, written nevertheless by a Cartesian mind.

> "As a postulate, you must believe everything I write to you, I will not exaggerate in any way and will tell you the pure truth... a frenzy that delights you and frightens you at the same time." (January 7, 1938)
>
> "The first time, at the *Shema Yisrael*, I thought the Yeshiva was going to collapse." (November 1, 1938)
>
> "Study, prayer, the joys of the yeshiva are unique experiences, lessons that undoubtedly it alone can teach." (June 7, 1938)
>
> "I think not even you can imagine what my residence here signifies. I have just experienced a *Shavuos*... I

would never have thought such a *hislahavus*[2] could exist." (June 8, 1938)

Indirectly, and without always being aware of it, my sisters, my brothers and myself have benefited from this distant influence, which explains in particular that for our father's four sons, it was completely natural in turn to experience the yeshiva, but this time in Israel.

What astonishment, what emotion we experienced, when we became acquainted with our father's letters from Mir, to observe that we had walked so exactly in his footsteps, discovering as he did such a particular, such an exceptional world, and comparing our universe so characterized by Western culture to that other universe in which it is practically absent.

More, what in the end is the most remarkable is that this mind, so steeped in French culture, endowed with a solid capacity for criticism and a delectable yet disquieting sense of humor, had come to the conclusion as to the incomparable worth of the training provided by a renowned yeshiva. To the point of making this judgment that I have never read elsewhere: "Nothing can set fire to the heart of a young Jew as the flame the study of the Torah ignites in him such as he encounters it in the yeshiva. It is not an overstatement to say that he who has never lived this experience and who has not made this sacrifice to the Torah is not qualified to speak of the authentic Judaism" (Ernest Gugenheim, *Judaism in Daily Life*, vol. II, p. 60).

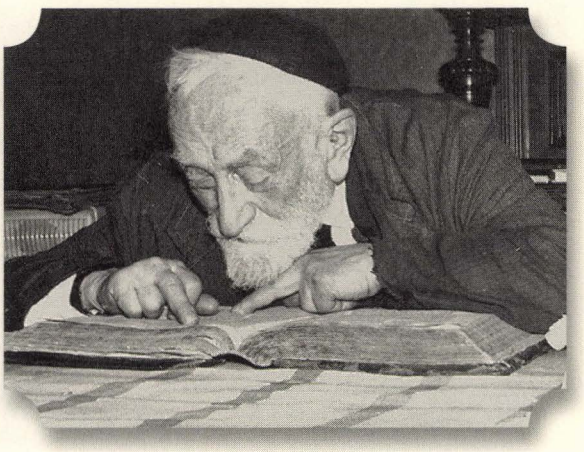
Michel Gugenheim
Chief Rabbi of Paris

2. Hebrew: passion, blaze.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

Who was the Author of *Letters from Mir*?

My father was born January 22, 1916, in a small Alsatian village, Westhoffen (Bas-Rhin) located in the East of France, where my grandfather, Max Gugenheim, was the rabbi. The family lineage provided an uninterrupted succession of Alsatian rabbis, dating all the way back to the first half of the 18th century when our ancestor Samuel Sanvil Weyl was the rabbi, in Ribeauvillé, of the entire Lower and Upper Alsace.



Grand Rabbi Max Gugenheim at 90 years of age. (Note the traditional method of using two fingers to keep track of the text of the Gemara and of its commentaries.)

The youngest in a family of four children, my father lost his mother to appendicitis when he was only four years old. My grandfather was deeply affected by the premature loss of his dear wife, Marta Meier, who was also his cousin. Nevertheless, he chose to remarry, and it was his second wife, Léonie Cahn, who raised his children.



Ernest Gugenheim as a child, with his stepmother and siblings and the family maid. Children from left to right: Alice (back row), Ernest, Blanche, and Jacques (back row)

In the meantime, the family had settled in Bouxwiller (Bas-Rhin), a larger community that boasted having once been the seat of a yeshiva, and to which he had been called to succeed the



Marta Meier, first wife of Grand Rabbi Max Gugenheim and natural mother of Ernest Gugenheim

Grand Rabbi Ernest Weil. It was there that my father was raised, there that his schooling took place up to the Baccalaureate. It was there that he was initiated into Jewish studies in the home of his father, as were all the young Jews of the surrounding areas. It was perhaps the exceptional quality of this transmission of learning from father to son, over so many generations, which left such a

deep impression on my father and such an everlasting attachment to his Jewish roots. It certainly led him to replicate this same model with his own children, and to make sure that he would personally pass on his love for *lehrnen* to each one of them.



Ernest Gugenheim teaching Gemara to his son Elie

Perhaps also this value was transmitted from father to son over many generations, and would partly explain the "dynasty," which he recalled often with some pride, from which he descended. But it is important to note that he learned from his father also a way of life, an open spirit, a sense of tolerance, a Judaism that combined

Jewish culture with general culture...and a sense of humor fundamentally Alsatian.

One day, finding himself with his sister Blanche in a boarding house of a Jewish family located in the Vosges Mountains, he met the then Chief Rabbi of France, Israël Lévi, who asked him what he wanted to do with his life. Without hesitation, he answered: "Rabbi!" Thus did his family learn of his vocation. He was only fifteen.

At seventeen, this young provincial boy moved to Paris to pursue his studies at the École Rabbinique (the outstanding Jewish Seminary for Rabbis of France). He joined his friend Elie, son of a close friend of his father's, Rabbi Joseph Bloch. The two young men established lasting ties of friendship during these years. He had been preoccupied and anxious about taking the rigorous exams of this prestigious institution. Although he was initially admitted with only a passing grade, he proved himself a brilliant student and, at twenty-one, he received his rabbinical diploma.

We find in the Prologue of *Letters from Mir*, the letter that the Grand Rabbi Maurice Liber, Director of the Rabbinical School, had written to his father. Finding in my father a man particularly endowed for higher learning, the Grand Rabbi Liber directed him to deepen and further his talmudic learnings. In this way, my father joined the famous Lithuanian Yeshiva of Mir from January to September 1938, from which originates this correspondence.

This brief sojourn at the Yeshiva had a profound and everlasting effect on my father. For one, it seems to me, he gained there a fervor of religious sentiment, which he maintained throughout his entire life. Most of all, his relationship to the Talmud was altered: the study of the Talmud always carried for him, thereafter, a flavor, passion and enthusiasm unlike any other, which he found most admirably expressed in the simple word "*lehrnen*." Much later, when I was celebrating my *Bar-Mitzva*, and he addressed the

congregation with the general sermon, the great moment of his *Drasha* came when he directed an appeal to me: "I ask three things of you: *lehrnen*, *lehrnen*, *lehrnen*!" Therefore, when I, followed by my three brothers — Jean- Jacques, Elie, and Daniel — received the Baccalaureate, we each came to the same obvious conclusion: the first thing to do, whatever career we might later choose, was to go to Israel to attend this special world of the yeshiva, and make it a part of us for our entire life. My two sisters, Martine and Anne, also chose to dedicate a year to perfecting their Jewish heritage, in a similar institution but adapted for women.



Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim in uniform (c. 1939–1940)

He was about to conclude his military service when the war erupted. He remained, therefore, enlisted in the French Army, and was named chaplain of the 43rd Army Corps.

On June 26, 1940, he was taken prisoner in Donon and sent into captivity in Germany, first in Eastern Prussia, and then in the Hamburg-Altona region. He remained there until the end of the war.

At his return to France, he learned that his only brother, Jacques, had died after being deported. In an address on November 18, 1945 at the solemn session to celebrate the start of the school year of the Rabbinical Seminary, he appraised those five years with the title: "Rabbi of the Stalag" (i.e., Rabbi in the Prisoner of War Camp). With a truly felt optimism, he described this time of challenges in a positive light:

> ...Never before had a rabbi associated so closely with the life of his faithful. He was just one of them, a prisoner like them, like them, a number. He shared their workload, their games, their punishments, their sufferings... It was his duty to show them, not with speeches but through conduct at every instant, what it was to be a man of the Torah... He could never fail, not for one instant... In this atmosphere, he was required to remain always equal to himself... At every occasion, he had to step into the breach. Tirelessly, he had to think about raising morale, picking up failing courage, calming anguish, sustaining those overwhelmed by sudden bad news throughout the nightmare of captivity. In spite of the hard work, the Shabbat was not forgotten, and it was not the least of the dear memories in the heart of the Rabbi to have seen the numbers grow, among his faithful, of those who would decide to honor the Shabbat by refraining from smoking.

It is equally interesting to note that during this time when he



Prisoner of War. Rabbi Gugenheim is on the right.

was a helper at a factory in Altona, his German overseer came to feel real affection for him. One day, he brought a piece of a *Sefer Torah*, probably rescued from a burning synagogue, containing the end of the Torah portion of *Vayeshev* and almost all of *Mikets*. My father carried the scroll back to France after the Liberation, and kept it until the end of his days — a message of hope in the depth of darkness.

In 1945, at the start of the school year, my father was named Professor of Talmud and Rabbinical Law at the *Séminaire Israélite de France* (also known as the École Rabbinique) and maintained this position until December 1976, when illness prevented him from fulfilling his duties. During this long period, he was also named, on two occasions, as the Interim Director of the school.

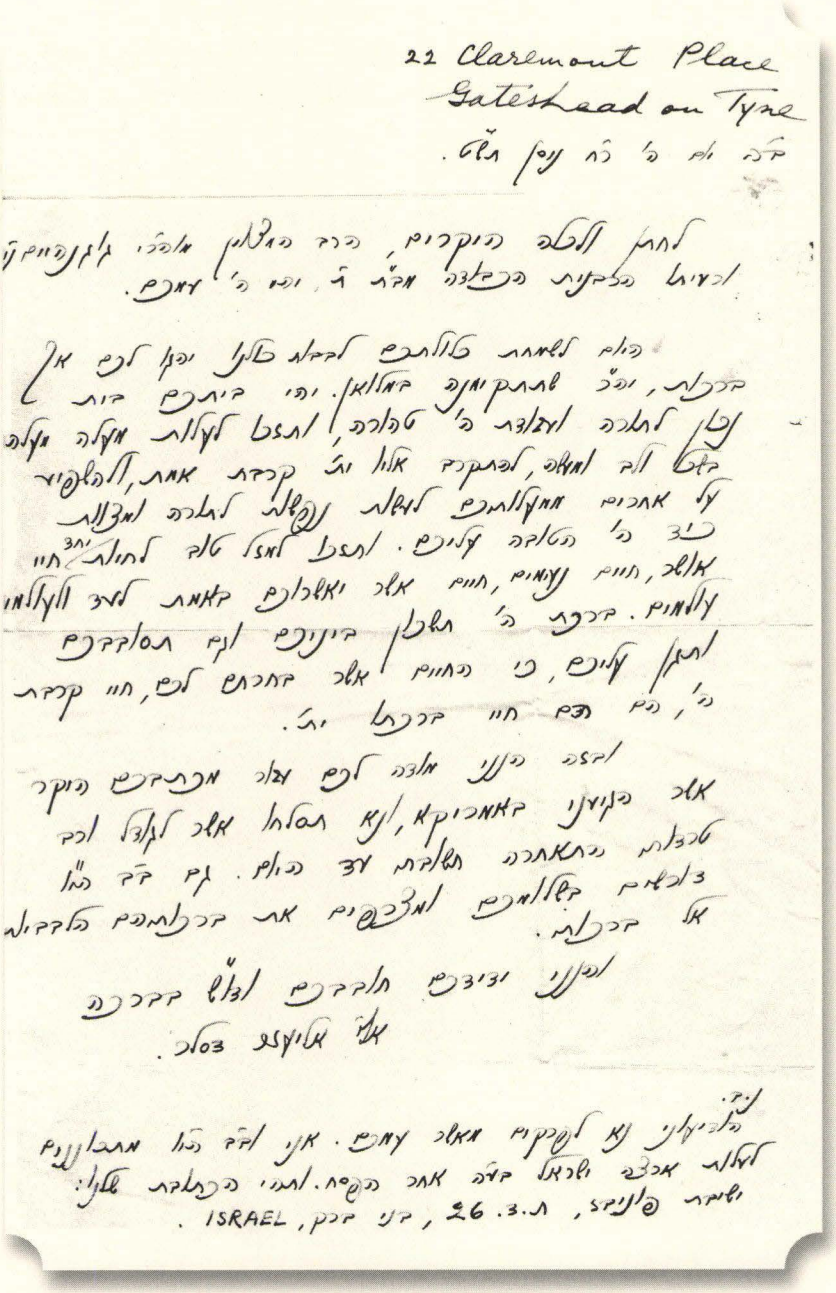
He met the woman who would become my mother in October 1947. She was attending the recently opened *École de Liturgie et Pédagogie* (The School of Liturgy and Pedagogy, which closed within two years!) and, as part of its curriculum, was taking his bi-weekly course on the Mishnah. This experience culminated a

year and half later with the romantic marriage of the professor and his student!

He married my mother, in 1949, in the Synagogue on Vauquelin Street.



Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim and his young bride Claude-Annie Dalsace, in the yard of the Rabbinical Seminary just after the wedding ceremony



Letter of congratulations from Rav Eliyahu Dessler to Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim and his wife on their marriage

I was born a year later and remain proud to this day of being the eldest in a family that would include three more sons and two daughters. My father extended his loving yet always discreet support to his sister and two nephews in 1954, upon the premature death of his brother-in-law, the philosopher Noah Gottlieb. He also kept close ties with his eldest sister, Alice, and her husband Achille Blum and their four children. Later, he had the great joy of seeing his two nephews, Daniel Gottlieb and Alexis Blum, follow in his footsteps and enter the Rabbinical Seminary as his own students.

He nurtured a limitless love and veneration for his father, who remained his strongest support, and ultimate recourse in the problems of life or questions of religious matters. This connection ensured that we always spent most of the summers and the Jewish holidays in the home of my grandparents, first in Bouxwiller, and then in Saverne, where my grandfather concluded his rabbinical career. My father could there refresh himself in the Judeo-Alsatian atmosphere that he so cherished. This idyllic period continued until the death of my grandfather, on June 30, 1968, on the day of his 91st birthday — less than nine years before the death of his own son. Though I found myself in Israel at the time, I could not fail to realize how difficult and painful those times proved for my father.

The internment was not solely a source of enrichment. I always knew that the war had left him with some scars and physical after-effects. But it was only a few days before his death that he confided in me that, as he returned to his duties as a professor at the Seminary, he realized that he had completely forgotten all his earlier studies! One can only imagine the willpower and work necessary to re-educate himself, and the arduous and deliberate process of reclaiming, all alone, those lost stores of knowledge, even simply for the preparation for his classes. Sometimes, in that initial period, he would sometimes "hit a snag" during a class.



Rabbi Gugenheim's class at the Rabbinicial Seminary. Rabbi Gugenheim is standing in the back row, third from the right. Grand Rabbi Liber is seated at the center.

He would then encourage his students to discuss and propose possible explanations, until the correct response would suddenly come forth! But fairly quickly, he reclaimed his ancient learnings, and went on to augment them considerably, becoming eventually one of the most preeminent Talmudic scholars of France.

Living at the Seminary itself, alongside the Director, he established warm and friendly relations with most of the students, which surpassed the simple rapport of teacher and student. This was the case not only with the first classes after the war, when it was not uncommon for the students to be close in age to their professor, but also throughout his thirty-one years at the school. As the years passed and the age difference made for some distance with his students, he made every effort to maintain this informal style of relationship in order to reduce the scholastic barrier. This attitude proved salutary. As his students became rabbis and consequently his colleagues, they remained in close contact with him,

never hesitating to consult him, ask for advice, and confide in him. As the Grand Rabbi Ephraïm Rozen wrote in his memoirs: "His responses would arrive very quickly, almost always by return carrier. He was always available." Later, many of his letters were compiled and published in the posthumous publication *Les Portes de la Loi* (*The Doors of the Law*), under the Section *"Cas d'espèce"* (cases), constituting thereby one of the first published collections in French of *she'eilot u-teshuvot* (responsa).

After 1952, the Seminary was under the leadership of the Grand Rabbi Henri Schilli, who was kindness personified, and my father continued in his role as an educator. Perfect harmony reigned, without ever the slightest cloud, between these two personalities who lived in the same house for more than twenty years, and their exceptional relationship remains, in my mind, the model example, a phenomenon without peer. It can only be explained by the extraordinary human qualities of these two great men.



Rabbi Gugenheim collecting Aravot for Hoshana Raba, in Alsace



Kashering for Pesach

My father made, without any doubt, a fundamental contribution towards the slow evolution of the Rabbinical School after the war. Among the Seminary's graduates, there had been in the past, on occasion, skeptical intellectuals with uncertain ideologies, lax interpretation of Jewish Law, and even sometimes an assimilationist bent. The newer rabbis showed quite a different style; fiercely pious, enthusiastic, scrupulous and rigorous in their obedience to the *halachah*, they pressed for strict religious practices and refused to serve in liberal communities. The arrival of North African Jews would eventually allow this definitive turn to consolidate.

The Seminary was not, however, my father's sole educational role. He also taught, for many years, at the *École Yabné*, a Jewish middle and high school.

It was also in 1952 that he was made Vice President of the Rabbinical Tribunal. He was charged specifically with those questions pertaining to Jewish identity, matrimonial difficulties, and

issues of litigation. Many of those who had recourse to his services were singularly impressed with the quality of his welcome, his availability, patience, courteous kindness and warm smile, his humanity. In legal cases, just as much as in marital troubles, he knew how to appease strife by intoning his voice just so. For us, the close members of his family, it was the reality with which we had daily experience.

Within the framework of his duties he was also in charge of the grave problems of *Agunah* and *Sarvanei Get*, that is, recalcitrant husbands who refuse to provide a *get* (religious divorce) for wives who have obtained a civil divorce. With the support of a group of legal experts from the community, he put in place a system that allows the wife to take her spouse to court and demand reparations for the injustice he has placed upon her by refusing her the chance to continue her life. This system which, over the years, has become widely accepted jurisprudence in France, is still in operation to this day, and constitutes one of the oldest and most effective rabbinical responses to a problem that is yet to be fully resolved in many other countries around the world.

In his last years, most of his time at the Rabbinical Tribunal was dedicated to the increasing demands of conversions to Judaism. Despite this intense activity, he remained surprisingly available, receiving guests without appointments, always ready for a speech here, or to provide an article there. He responded favorably to every query.

Never ceasing to improve himself, he remained abreast of current publications, noting the changes and the most detailed developments in rabbinical literature and jurisprudence. Spontaneously, questions and consultations converged upon him. His colleagues, confronting delicate religious situations, just as much as the general public, Jewish or non-Jewish, addressed their questions to him. He became therefore the foremost specialist in formulating an authorized view of traditional, Orthodox Judaism

in the French language, covering issues of ritual as well as the cosmic problems of existence. As an expert in medical ethics, he was invited on November 9, 1966 to testify before the Committee of the National Assembly, to present the Jewish point of view on the issue of birth control. The complete record of this public testimony appears in the "Neuwirth Report" no. 2203. Likewise, on January 25, 1974, he was heard by the Committee for Cultural, Family and Social Values of the National Assembly on the question of Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy, as part of the hearings for the drafting of the Veil Law (which decriminalized abortion).

This double capacity as a decision maker and as the voice of Jewish law to the French public is evidenced in the posthumous publication of his work, *Les Portes de la Loi*, included in a 1982 collection titled *Présences du Judaïsme* (*The Presence of Judaism* — not translated into English), published by Editions Albin Michel. A new edition in 2002 gave it the new title, *Le Judaïsme dans la vie quotidienne, tome II* (*Judaism in Everyday Life, Vol. 2* — not translated into English), to emphasize the fact that its content extended the work of an earlier publication bearing that same title, in 1961, and which has been the best seller of that entire collection (see further). It covers subjects as diverse and as relevant today as the anesthetization of animals before their being slaughtered, the *kashrut* of medicines, adoption, artificial insemination, autopsies, organ transplants, the death penalty, etc.

Guided by the sense of his exceptional talent for formulating Jewish values in a clear and simple language, and taking advantage of the genius of the French language and Cartesian spirit, he translated in 1957 the commentary by Rashi on Deuteronomy, all the while providing a new reading of the biblical text himself. In 1961, he published *Judaism in Everyday Life*, a magnificent synthesis, both descriptive and explanatory, of the *mitzvot* (commandments of Jewish law). He was deeply convinced that many Jews had become distanced from Judaism because of prejudices born

only from ignorance. In that same spirit, he assumed the direction of a translation of the Mishnah, of which he himself translated the first part, "*Berachot*." A contributor to the scholarly *Encyclopedia Universalis* and to the *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade* on the History of Religions, he contributed also to the 1974 French translation of Rashi's Pentateuch commentary, the great commentary of the Middle Ages. But, the greatest book that he ever composed, the most brilliant and most edifying, is without doubt that of his own life.

Awarded the medal of Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur



Chief Rabbi of France Jacob Kaplan presents the Legion d'Honneur award to Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim on behalf of the French President



Rabbi Gugenheim's acceptance speech for the Legion d'Honneur award

(1966), and named Grand Rabbi in 1973, he never sought any honors, but accepted them with simplicity and a sincere pleasure, while aware of their illusory — and sometimes belated — value.

He liked to work in solitude, in the calm and silence of the night; this was one of the secrets of his ready availability during the day.

With an insatiable curiosity of mind, he kept himself current on all aspects of the news, and was open to all forms of literature. He did not disdain relaxation, refreshed himself with good humor and, in the intimacy of his own home, he would delightedly abandon himself to exuberant laughter.

One of his singular traits, to my mind, was his consistent overestimation of all interlocutors — in spite of the evidence to the contrary accumulated over time.

Many among those who sought him were impressed by the tremendous force that emanated from his serene and smiling

countenance, and by the powerful tranquility derived from his wide knowledge, from the confidence of his learning.

For many, he also embodied a certain ideal of rabbi: the one who manages to gain the trust of all Jews and can establish communication with them, whatever their tendencies and their religious preferences.

But for us, his children, he remained above all the rabbi who would not allow his work to impede on his role as father.

During my entire elementary education, I studied every day with him during the lunch break. We "did" the Torah, then Joshua, then Judges, then the books of Samuel, and Kings.... At the synagogue, he always refused to sit in the place reserved for the rabbi, preferring to be seated on a simple bench, where he could be surrounded by his children.

At home, a spirit of complicity and collusion reigned; he volunteered aspects of his professional life. We had the experience of being a part of him. There was us — and then all the others.



With President of Israel Ephraim Katzir

His optimism overflowed without end, even during the last three months of his terrible illness. The night before his death, he still nourished grand plans. And yet, he knew....

When he left us, Tuesday March 22, 1977, in the morning, it was evident to all his family, though we had never spoken of it, that he would be buried in Westhoffen. It is as it should be that he rests a few meters from his father. On his epitaph reads a verse from Genesis (47:30): "And I will lie with my fathers...."

May I be allowed, in conclusion, to thank our dear mother, his faithful companion, for all that she has accomplished. Without her, this work would have never seen the light of day.

Michel Gugenheim
Chief Rabbi of Paris

INTRODUCTION TO THE FRENCH EDITION

Historical Context of the *Letters from Mir*

Today it seems a useful and reverent undertaking to preserve and publicize the vestiges that have survived the Shoah. This is why we have, so to speak, exhumed these letters dating from 1937–1938 (year 5698 of the Jewish calendar). They recount the life of a yeshiva student in an Eastern European *shtetl*, and record a very personal, subjective description with reactions quite typical of the mentality of a French Alsatian Jew, and proponent of a double culture, both Jewish and general.

How did these letters come down to us, how were they preserved by the recipients? It is very unlikely that they had been transported during the exodus throughout France between 1940 and 1945, and it is plausible that Rabbi Max Gugenheim entrusted them to the Municipal Museum of Bouxwiller at the same time as his own library. There is no longer anyone left to verify this hypothesis. I had seen the letters shortly after my marriage, during one of the many visits to my in-laws, but I was not especially interested!

After receiving their son's letters, Ernest Gugenheim's parents circulated them among their relatives, as the author implies in one letter or another, and collected them, due to the importance they attributed to this correspondence. When we sometimes notice the absence of one of these missives, it is probably due to the negligence of one of the readers in returning it! At a time when the telephone was not yet in everyday use (this device was absent from the family home in Bouxwiller), the diverse family members

used to write to each other twice a week when they were separated — a charming practice they maintained until the 1960s.

The correspondence of Chief Rabbi Maurice Liber, Director of the Rabbinical School, with Ernest Gugenheim and his parents, and with different community leaders, is mentioned in the archives of that institution.

In fact, Ernest Gugenheim originally intended to go to Palestine, then under British mandate, in October 1937, but this plan was thwarted when his applications for permission to travel to that country were never answered. (I have always suspected that this silence was linked in some way to political turmoil in that country.) Thus, he left for the Mir Yeshiva only in January 1938.

We have retained the original style of the author of these letters, a young, twenty-two year old rabbi whose native language was both French and Alsatian, with numerous colloquial expressions borrowed from Talmudic language and from Yiddish. Footnotes at the bottom of the page give translations when these expressions are first mentioned and they are partly listed in the glossary at the end of the volume. An index of the various people mentioned in the letters appears at the back of the volume.

The Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish words and phrases that appear throughout the letters were pronounced according to the Alsatians' Ashkenazic tradition, and we have retained this pronunciation.

❦ ❦ ❦

The reading of *Letters from Mir* raises questions of historical and geographical order. Our curiosity was provoked, for example, by certain information contained in the letters, such as the fact that in Mir, Russian was spoken, and that a tourist visa had to be obtained through the French Consul in Warsaw!

Mir was then in Belorussia, a "people's republic" created in March 1918 and divided in 1919 between Bolshevik Russia and Poland, which then had at its helm the Marshal Pildzuski. Poland received the western part of Belorussia with four million inhabitants. This situation was to last until 1939 when the Germano-Soviet Pact, concluded at that time, gave to Lithuania the Belorussian city of Vilna, which was to become its capital. In 1941, the Germans occupied the country, massacring a quarter of the population (two and a half million people). The Soviet Army was to retake possession of Belorussia during the course of the summer of 1944.

Jews had settled in Mir as early as the 17th century and had known a period of prosperity until the middle of the 19th century. The Mir Yeshiva was founded in 1815 by an eminent Talmudist and businessman, Rabbi Samuel Tiktinski. It continued to grow and attract renowned rabbinic figures. Toward the end of the 19th century, the Jewish community experienced important emigration to escape from pogroms and from poverty. In the 1920s, there were about 3,800 Jews in Mir (nearly half the total population), whose difficult economic situation made problematic the support of their educational institutions (Yiddish elementary schools and kindergartens, the Tarbut, Yavne and Beit Yaakov schools). During the First World War, the Yeshiva, under the direction of Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Finkel, had immigrated to Ukraine, from where it returned only in 1921 due to the political problems associated with the Soviet government. Until 1939, it was considered the largest yeshiva in the world. During the Second World War, the Russians, then the Germans, prompted the departure of the students and their teachers. Some of them went to Lithuania, which was still free, from where they reached Shanghai, thanks to the visas issued by the Consul of Japan, Chiune Sugihara.

After the war, one branch of the Mir Yeshiva relocated to Brooklyn, New York, while Rabbi Finkel created one in Jerusalem.



Castle Square, Bouxwiller

When the Germans seized Mir, they massacred a part of the Jewish community and locked up the survivors in an ancient fortress of the city, from which around two hundred youths managed to escape and join up with the Resistance. All the others, several thousand, were killed by the Germans.

Claude-Annie Gugenheim

PROLOGUE

Chief Rabbi Maurice Liber, Director of the Rabbinical School, to Rabbi Max Gugenheim, Bouxwiller (Bas-Rhin department)

October 5, 1937

My Dear Colleague,

You already know the results of the examinations your son took. I am happy to confirm to you that he passed them brilliantly, being classed first of seven candidates, among whom he is the youngest.

I attribute his success, for the most part, to his work and his progress, but also fundamentally to the example and influence of his family. If each Alsatian rabbi gave us a son such as yours, I would be reassured as to the future of Judaism in France.

I hope this success portends a happy career for your son as much as for the community capable of engaging him. It may be possible, furthermore, that he will have less success with certain communities that appreciate dazzle more than solidity. In my opinion, he would succeed more in higher education, and if I be allowed to shape projects for the future, I would like to reserve him for the School.

With this objective in mind, it would be advisable for him to improve himself in the Talmud, and the professors agree to recommend to him that he spend a year in a yeshiva.

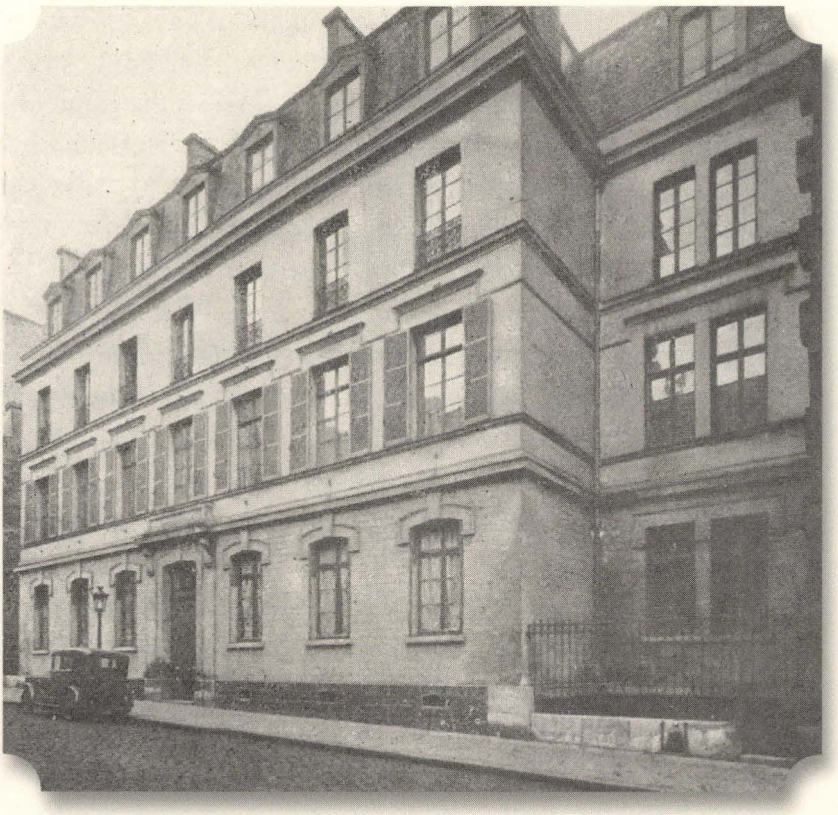
Personally, I would have liked your son to do his military service first, and, once released, to apply himself again to Talmud study, but he prefers to begin with the yeshiva, and it would seem

that you are of that opinion. I bow to your views, and I am going to ask the Commission to extend the scholarship he has received at the School.

I also hope he will also obtain an important academic award so that the sum of the two [ed.: the scholarship and the academic award] will allow him to go to Palestine.

While congratulating you, my Dear Colleague, for your son, and thanking you for having made such a gift to the School and to the rabbinate, I add my own personal and fraternal regards,

Maurice Liber

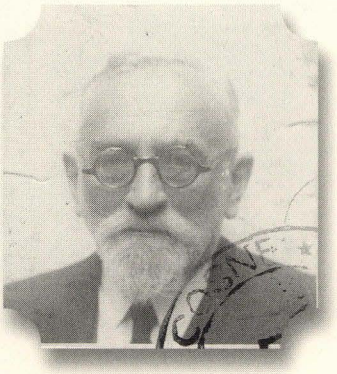


The Rabbinical Seminary

Response from Rabbi Max Gugenheim

Bouxwiller, October 13, 1937

Dear Chief Rabbi,



Rabbi Max Gugenheim

I beg your pardon for only being able today to thank you for your kind letter and for the compliments you paid me with respect to my son. I return them to whom they may concern, to you the Director of the Rabbinical School and to his professors, since while having always oriented my son's studies, he owes his success and evolution to your establishment. I am also indebted to Chief Rabbi Israël Lévi, who first was able to influence Ernest in the direction of the rabbinical career.[1]

I thank you as well, Monsieur Chief Rabbi, for having awarded the scholastic prize to my son and for giving him the possibility of continuing his studies in Palestine. In your letter to the president of the University, you warmly recommended him, and I am convinced that you will continue to advise and support him for his voyage and his future.

While waiting for the documents necessary for the trip, Ernest

1. The year of his baccalaureate, during a stay in Hohwald (Bas-Rhin department) in the boarding house kept by Mrs. Klein (the mother of the future Rabbi Samy Klein), Ernest Gugenheim met the Chief Rabbi of France, Israël Lévi, who questioned him about what he wanted to become; and the answer burst forth spontaneously, to the great surprise even of its author (according to his own testimony years latter): "A rabbi!"



Rabbi Max Gugenheim teaching a Talmud class in his home

uses a good deal of his time studying the Gemara and *leshon Ivrit*,[2] and I am happy to be able to work with him.

While asking you to remind Mrs. Liber of my fond memory, I extend to you, Dear Chief Rabbi, my cordial good wishes,

Max Gugenheim

2. Talmud and Hebrew.

Annexed Documents

Certificate

November 16, 1936

I, the undersigned Director of the Rabbinical School of France, certify that Mr. GUGENHEIM Ernest, born on January 22, 1916 in Westhoffen (Bas-Rhin department), student of the aforementioned School, who must take the second year courses of AMP [*Advanced Military Preparation*], cannot participate in the theoretical and practical work on the days of the Sabbath, which is to say during the day of Saturday and Friday afternoon.

Practicing Israelites are indeed not able to take part in any profane work on the days of religious holidays — and the only exemption possible applies exclusively to the obligations of military service strictly defined — when they are incompatible with religious law.

In witness whereof, I issue the present sworn statement to be presented to the Director of the AMP.

Chief Rabbi Maurice Liber

Chief Rabbi Liber to the President of the Central Consistory of France in the Bas-Rhin

October 5, 1937

Dear Mr. President,

I have the pleasure of informing you that Mr. Ernest Gugenheim, son of the rabbi of Bouxwiller and holder of a government grant,[1] has just successfully completed the final examinations of the Rabbinical School.

He was the first of seven candidates, and this success was all the more remarkable that he is the youngest among them.

This brilliant result bodes well for a successful rabbinical career, but Mr. Gugenheim cannot yet begin in the career: he must first do his military service, and we would also like him to improve in Talmud studies during a year at a yeshiva in Palestine.

In order to make this study period possible, I have the honor of proposing to you to maintain for one more year the scholarship for which Mr. Ernest Gugenheim is a beneficiary at the School.

Please accept, Mr. President, the assurance of my highest esteem,

Chief Rabbi Maurice Liber

1. The Bas-Rhin, as a department regulated by local religious law, the Concorda of 1801, was able to award scholarships within the framework of the *Direction des Cultes d'Alsace.*

Response from the President of the Central Consistory of France in the Bas-Rhin Department

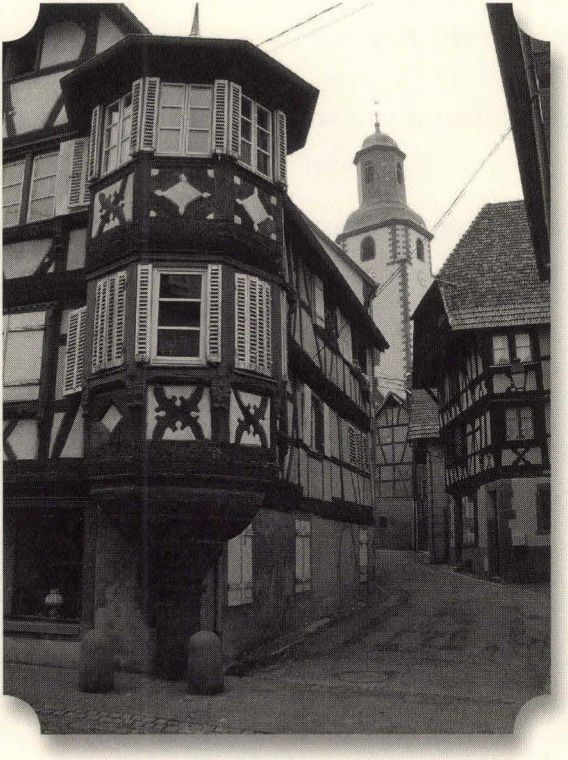
Strasbourg, October 8, 1937

Dear Chief Rabbi,

In reference to your esteemed letter of the 5th October concerning your proposal to maintain Mr. Ernest Gugenheim's state scholarship for one more year, I hasten to inform you that the Consistory formulates no objection.

Please accept, Dear Chief Rabbi, the assurance of my highest esteem,

The President



Street in Bouxwiller

Chief Rabbi Liber to the General Consul of Great Britain in Paris, 16 avenue Hoche

October 5, 1937

Dear Mr. Consul General,

I have the honor of presenting to you Mr. Gugenheim [Ernest], student at the Rabbinical School, born on January 22, 1916 in Westhoffen (Bas-Rhin department), who wishes to travel to Palestine to pursue his studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, as well as in a rabbinical institution.

Mr. Gugenheim has been awarded a scholarship by the Central Consistory of France, as well as a grant by the French State [*Direction des Cultes d'Alsace*]. He is therefore assured of having his expenses paid. His stay will not exceed a period of one year.

I would be obliged to you if you would stamp his passport with a visa.

Please accept, Mr. Consul General, the expression of my highest esteem,

Maurice Liber

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

Bouxwiller, October 8, 1937

Monsieur Chief Rabbi and Dear Master, *nero yair*,[1]

I have just received your letter, and I am sending by the same mail, or rather by airmail, my candidature and your letter to Mount Scopus. I regret having been the cause of extra work for you, and I profit from the present to thank you for the support you have so kindly offered so that I can travel to Palestine. I will try to prove my gratitude by justifying the confidence you have placed in me.

With my thanks and my wishes for a *gut Shabbos*,[2] please accept, Monsieur Director, the assurance of my greatest respect,

Ernest Gugenheim



Ernest Gugenheim 1937–38

1. Wish expressed in Hebrew: "May his light shine!" following a name.
2. Yiddish for "Good Sabbath!"

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

Bouxwiller, October 19, 1937

Monsieur Director and Dear Master,

In answer to the letter I sent to Mount Scopus, I just received today the response from the registrar of the University. Instead of the expected certificate, I was sent a form to complete. This form asks essentially for the information I have already furnished in my first letter, along the lines you suggested, and, in addition, for the various diplomas I have earned (Bac,[1] Rabbinical diploma). I already have one of these diplomas in my possession, but I will need the other, or at least a certificate.

Moreover, for the details I was referred to a brochure that I was sent in addition. I am sending you the enclosed pages concerning my case and that have been furnished in duplicate. There is no mention, however, of the *talmid ore'ach*[2] who seem to be free from these formalities. Since the brochure is the résumé of the one you kindly put at my disposal, I am sending it back to you, as well.

In his letter, the registrar does not allude especially to the financial guarantees mentioned in the brochure. I am somewhat apprehensive, though, that these formalities would postpone my departure for a very long time. In the meantime, I try to waste my time as little as possible.

With my thanks, please accept, Monsieur Director, the assurance of my faithful and greatest respect,

Ernest Gugenheim

1. "Bac" for baccalaureate.
2. Hebrew: guest student.

Response from Chief Rabbi Liber

October 25, 1937

My Dear Colleague,

Returning from a trip to the provinces, I find your letter of October 19th.

I had thought that Mr. Magnès,[1] whom I had approached directly, would exempt you from all these formalities, but I see that all he did was to transmit your dossier to the registrar of the University.

It would take longer to obtain the exemption from formalities than to carry them out.

Your Rabbinical diploma does not yet bear all the signatures; I have thus asked Mr. Marcel Sachs[2] to send you without delay a certificate to serve in its stead.

As for the financial commitment, do you want the School to assume it for you?

I remain, my Dear Colleague, yours faithfully,

Maurice Liber

1. The President of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
2. The Secretary General of the Central Consistory.

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

Bouxwiller, October 29, 1937

Monsieur Chief Rabbi and Dear Master, *nero yair*,

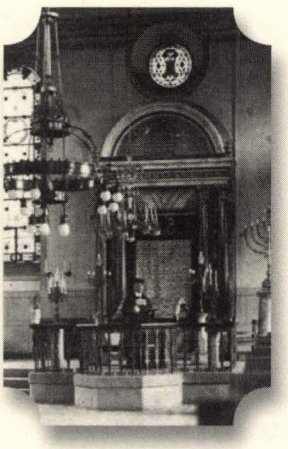
I am in receipt of your letter as well as the certificate Mr. Sachs sent me.

I have dispatched all the papers to Palestine, from where I am expecting, with understandable impatience, the response.

I am, moreover, very grateful for your proposition concerning the financial guarantees. It would, indeed, be very agreeable to me if the School would assume that commitment for me.

With my thanks and my wishes for a *gut Shabbos*, please accept, Monsieur Director, the assurance of my greatest respect,

Ernest Gugenheim



The Bouxwiller Shul

Response from Chief Rabbi Liber

November 1, 1937

My Dear Colleague,

In response to your letter of October 29th, I am sending you a commitment signed by me. I think that if I were to consult the Commission of the School, we would waste time and perhaps raise difficulties.

As soon as the Commission of the School convenes, it will take up the attribution of the Weisweiller prize.[1]

The Consistory of the Bas-Rhin department accepts to maintain your scholarship from the state.

Finally, I have reason to hope for a favorable response from Mr. James Armand de Rothschild.[2]

Have no illusions. The three sums united will not make you a Pactolus loaded with gold, but since you will not be staying for a whole year in Jerusalem, they should suffice to get you through.

I remain, my Dear Colleague, faithfully yours,

Maurice Liber

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1. The Rabbinical School, as heir or legatee of significant donations from the Community's wealthy philanthropists, each year distributed prizes to its best students, the Weisweiller Prize being the most important.
2. Son of the famous philanthropist Baron Edmond de Rothschild, he had left France for England and was president of the PICA (Palestinian Jewish Colonisation Association).

November 1, 1937

I, the undersigned Maurice Liber, Chief Rabbi, Director of the Rabbinical School of France, declare that I assume the following commitment *vis-à-vis* the Hebrew University Association:

Because of the authorization granted by the Government of Palestine to Mr. Gugenheim [Ernest] to enter Palestine and to reside there, I, the undersigned Maurice Liber, pledge to be responsible for his subsistence during the period of his stay in Palestine, which will not exceed one year.

If, at any given moment of the said period, Mr. Ernest Gugenheim should be deemed, in the opinion of the Government of Palestine, without resources or in its dependence, entirely or partially, on public charity or dependent on any other assistance, I declare by the present committed to paying the said Hebrew University Association a sum that will not exceed four pounds sterling per month, for the period beginning on the date he would become without resources or in total or partial dependence on charity, until the end of the period of one year after his arrival in Palestine or until the date of his departure from Palestine.

I moreover pledge, in the case where the Government of Palestine should decide to repatriate Mr. Ernest Gugenheim during the period of one year, to pay the said Hebrew University Association the sum that would be necessary for the expenses of his repatriation.

Maurice Liber

Ernest Gugenheim to the Chief Rabbi Liber

Bouxwiller, December 8, 1937

Monsieur Director and Dear Master, *nero yair*,

It is with an impatience increasing from day to day that I watch the weeks pass by. Indeed, since the last letter I sent to Jerusalem, and that was more than a month ago, no direct news has been reaching me from Palestine any more. I thus find myself in a state of uncertainty and forced semi-idleness that is all the more distressing that it threatens to persist.

Thus I have already asked myself, and I now ask you if it would not be better, so as to put an end to this situation, perhaps to abandon the project, however reluctantly, and to decide on something else.

I have been considering military service, but it is not possible to enlist in the middle of the year.

Perhaps, instead of leaving for Palestine, could I spend eight or nine months in a yeshiva in the East, where the question of money and the formalities pose much less difficulty. I even propose, if nothing changes in the meantime, to come see you in Paris early next week to discuss the matter.

Please accept, Monsieur Director, the assurance of my greatest respect,

Ernest Gugenheim



Jewish village in Poland

THE LETTERS FROM MIR

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, January 7, 1937 [*sic*, in fact 1938][1]

My Dear Ones,

According to yeshiva time,[2] it is now noon and I want to begin writing to you to be sure of being able to finish. But let's take things in order so I won't forget anything. As a postulate, you must believe everything I write to you; I will not exaggerate in any way and will tell you the pure truth.

Well, since yesterday I am "*in der Mir*." The Warsaw-Horodziej crossing took place like all trips; I was in the company of two guys from Mir, thus we were among Jews, and in the train I was at ease to put on the *tefillin*.[3] I hope you received my letter dated from Warsaw and given to the *poczta*[4] along the way. In the evening, after a five hour stopover waiting in Horodziej, where we had a glass of tea, we piled into a bus that took us to Mir in an hour.

1. Several letters are dated incorrectly in this way, since the year is 1938!
2. The yeshiva had its own time that differed from the legal time for reasons of ritual (see the following letter, dated January 11th).
3. This ritual of putting on the *tefillin* accompanies the morning prayer.
4. Polish: the postal system.

Since we were crammed together, we didn't feel the cold at all, and the jolts from the road also contributed.

On our arrival in Mir, five or six fellows from the yeshiva swooped down upon me, Aron Wolf among others, and another one, Wolbe, to whom Bensinger[5] had recommended me. A small twelve-year-old boy grabbed my bags, and I was dragged to lodgings of my *balebusta*.[6] At the suggestion of my classmates, I first gave my small porter boy 50 groszy (there are 100 groszy in a zloty), then 60. But here the small one insists: the trunks are heavy, etc. Finally, we asked what more he wanted, and with 10 groszy he was content. But this lasted for at least five minutes, if not more.

Then, Aron Wolf took me to his place. You should know that all the families, except for the richest, and these last are a minute minority, have a few *bachurim*[7] who eat with them. We are usually six or eight fellows seated around a table, and the *balebusta* serves what we ask for. At each meal, you have to write down what you eat: we ask how much the butter costs, the bread, rolls, etc., and then we pay at the end of the month, the whole adding up to about 50 zlotys. Already this morning, I ate at the house of my *balebusta* whose name is Batsheva, and she's the best in town.

So, to come back to last night, the five or six guys took me to the yeshiva after the meal. Now, make a small effort of imagination to conjure up for yourself what is to follow:

It is ten-thirty in the evening, and we approach the yeshiva. We first hear from outside a chanting sound, or rather it is louder than chanting, but really this is nothing as yet. We enter, and, lo,

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5. For the names of persons mentioned, see the Biographical Sketches at the end of the volume.
6. Yiddish: mistress of the house, hostess, corresponding in Hebrew to *baal habayit*, master of the house. The word designates both the landlady and the woman in whose house meals are taken.
7. Hebrew: young men. Singular: *bachur*.

an immense room, truly immense, and inside there are let us say fifty to a hundred fellows, *masmidim*,[8] who sing, who shout, who move and shake in a frenzy that delights and frightens you at the same time. In any case, it exceeds anything I had imagined. It should also be added that there was only a small portion of the students present because it was not the time of the *lehrnen*;[9] what will it be like when everyone is here? After that, we went home, the five guys with me.

I forgot to tell you that it became known in Berlin that someone was leaving for Mir. Immediately, students' parents brought all sorts of things that Mrs. Bensinger put into my trunks. I thus had to stage a distribution, and the joy of the recipients may easily be imagined.

I went to bed afterward, and I slept well in the flannel sheets; I was really comfortable and warm.

In general, it is not quite as cold as I had thought, and there is not much snow. This morning, I bought a pair of galoshes[10] for 3 zl. 60 gr., and now all parts of the body are warm. It is true that I put on my two sweaters. As for the ski hat, I can't wear it because the *bachurim* recognize each other precisely by wearing a hat.

This morning, I was introduced to the *Rosh Yeshiva*,[11] who was extremely kind and who knows "*Libern*," then to the *Mashgiach*,[12] who also had much pleasure with the *Franzeis*.[13] The boys are all very kind and helpful. I already know quite a few of them, and some Europeans and Americans who are as "civilized" as I am and have come to exile themselves in this "Asia," since Aunt Hortense[14]

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8. Hebrew: those who are assiduous.
9. Yiddish: studying.
10. The letter of Tuesday evening, February 1, 1938, p. 84 *infra*, may be compared.
11. Head of the Yeshiva.
12. Spiritual director, whose role is to teach the *Mussar,* Jewish ethics.
13. Yiddish: the French.
14. Hortense Lévy, Léonie Gugenheim's sister.

wasn't all wrong, especially when I think of the toilets. But this aside, all the other commodities are decent. There is enough water, and we make enormous usage of the *keli*.[15]

I eat in the company of a Swede, two Americans, a Pole and a German, and we understand one another. I know several Germans, two Swiss boys (an Erlanger from Lucerne, with whom I have many common acquaintances).

As for the shaver, all's well, but the electricity only works in the evening.

Since it's getting late, I will stop for the time being, and in my next letter, I'll tell you about the internal organization of the yeshiva and about the dapper town of Mir — because it is one.

Thus, with love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*, because I am writing on *erev Shabbos*,[16]

Ernest

My address is the same as Bensinger's:
Mir, Powiat Stolpce (pronounced Stolpze). SP. 17.
Western Europeans have this address in common.

15. Hebrew: receptacle used for ritual hand washing.
16. Sabbath Eve, Friday afternoon.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, January 11, 1937 [*sic*, in fact 1938]

My Dear Ones,

It was on Saturday evening that your letter reached me, which surprised everyone by its rapidity. SP 17 is the post office box for all Westerners, and a *bachur*, always the same one, goes regularly to get the mail that comes in at about five o'clock in the afternoon.

So I've been here for nearly a week, and already practically assimilated. Bensinger is still in Krakow; when he returns, I'll give him your letter. I already have a crowd of excellent friends. Instinctively, I turned to Westerners: Germans — many of whom are students from the Seminary of Berlin — Englishmen and Americans. I am, for example, on excellent terms with a Carlebach, nephew of the one in Hamburg. I have also become good friends with a very distinguished chap I had taken for an American; it later turned out that he is a Pole from Lodz. It should be understood that, a miniscule *psoles*[1] (2 out of 300) aside, an elite of Judaism is gathered in Mir. Not returning what is owed is considered a grave *gezel*[2] by everyone, which is why solidarity is so developed.

Since Saturday, I have begun intense learning. Here, moreover, is the practically uniform daily program:

At 8 o'clock, we *daven*[3] — only the yeshiva time is special, and three-quarters of an hour in advance of the normal hour. At about a quarter past 9, the prayer is finished. We go eat, and at 10 the

1. Hebrew: inferior element.
2. Hebrew: theft.
3. Yiddish: pray.

first *seder*[4] begins. Until 1 o'clock, we learn alone or with a friend. At 1, the *rebbe*[5] comes; it is with an extremely well-instructed *bachur*, 25–30 years-old, with whom we study until 3 o'clock. Then *Minchah*,[6] next lunch, and recreation until 5 o'clock. Here begins a second *seder*, with the *chavrusa* who is a man a little less learned than the *rebbe*, but still much superior to his students. We learn until 8–9 o'clock, we eat, then, at 9:30, there is *Musar*[7] and, at 10, *Maariv*.[8]

As for myself, I ran into two great fellows, Reb Yaakov Kamenitzer and Reb Shimon Bick (they are known by their place of origin) who made clear to me the first *mishnah* and *gemara* and *Tosafos* of *Kol ha-get*[9] that I just finished today, which is not bad at all.

The *Musar* lesson consists in reading the *Mesilas Yesharim*[10] all together, or in meditating, and that has a great deal of charm.

This apart, there are also the *Inyanim*[11] of the *Mashgiach*, which are philosophical or moral presentations that seem to be profound. I say "that seem" because I still have some difficulty in understanding the *lashon*.[12] But I'm making substantial progress.

After 10:30, we are free, and we can do what we want, for example, write.

As for the material conditions, I'm getting used to them, too. I

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4. Hebrew: regular study session. A typical yeshiva learning day consists of three *sedarim*.
5. Yiddish: rabbi, teacher.
6. Hebrew: afternoon prayer.
7. Hebrew: Jewish ethics class.
8. Hebrew: evening prayer.
9. Reference to the various elements of the third chapter in Tractate *Gittin*.
10. *The Path of the Just*, work of Jewish ethics written in 1740 by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, a translation of which, due in part to Aron Wolf, came out after the war under the title: *Le sentier de rectitude*, PUF 1956.
11. Hebrew: literally, "subjects" of study.
12. Hebrew: language (here, it has to do with Yiddish, language of study).

am on the best of terms with my *balebustes*,[13] and about food and sleep, truly only good can be said. The food especially is terrific: I had chicken twice this week; for the rest, cocoa, butter, cheese, cream, sardines, etc. Only the dessert is merely represented by apple sauce or prunes, but we are in winter. We drink tea as we drink water at home — that you knew already.

The Shabbos is characterized by clean clothes, the *hachana*,[14] a more profound learning. My roommate just explained to me all the substance that can be found in such a Shabbos. The *davening* is, moreover, *gevaltig*,[15] and for the first time at *Shema Yisrael*,[16] I thought that the yeshiva was going to collapse.

The cold is much less terrible than expected and makes me in no way suffer. Besides, I am very careful, and Blanche's scarf practically never leaves me.

I heard that Léo Cohn[17] has obtained the position in Strasbourg. Perhaps you could tell me something about that?

Since it's getting late, I'm going to quit and send you my wishes for a *gut Shabbos*, with love and kisses,

Ernest

Transmit many greetings to friends and acquaintances, Schönberg, M. Bloch,[18] etc.

13. Yiddish: plural of *balebusta*.
14. Hebrew: preparation.
15. Yiddish: violent, powerful.
16. Hebrew: "Hear, O Israel ..."
17. See the Biographical Sketches at the end of the volume.
18. *Ibid.*

Ernest Gugenheim to his sister Blanche and brother-in-law Noé

Mir, January 12, 1937 [*sic*, in fact 1938]

My Dear Noé and Blanche,[1]

Imagine a hall half the size of the Sainte-Geneviève Library during peak hours. A perpetual movement inhabits it nearly constantly; heads bend down and straighten back up in frenzy of more and more vehemence; lecterns, incredibly mobile, dance the saraband; tongues come and go: shouts, chants, humming. Impossible to resist for long this contagious enthusiasm that imperceptively rises in yourself. Such is the atmosphere I live in here, this is the room everyone flocks to, *this* is the Mir Yeshiva, which never empties.

Here, indeed, is the program for a day: it is the program for a week because the days are distinguished by a uniformity that nothing could be capable of altering. [...][2]

The *goyim*, as long as they have not been drinking, are



A view of Mir

1. His sister Blanche and her husband, Noé Gottlieb, who live in Paris.
2. We skip several lines that are a repetition of the preceding letter.

altogether decent; when they have *yom tov*,[3] it is preferable to avoid them because the vodka excites them dangerously.

Mir itself is a town of four to five thousand inhabitants, 60% of them Jews. Right now, it is covered with snow, and, moreover, since I always walk with my collar raised, I have not seen enough to describe it to you.

Because it's a quarter past midnight (by yeshiva time), I'm going to stop here for today.

Thus, love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest



The Old Town of Mir

3. Hebrew: religious celebration (ironic here).

Ernest Gugenheim to his sister Alice and brother-in-law Achille

Mir, January 13, 1937 [*sic*, in fact 1938]

My Dear Achille and Alice,[1]

It's now 11 o'clock at night, and for about five days I've been busy writing at this hour and later. This is because, during the day, it would be absolutely impossible to engage in such an activity. I leave you to judge for yourselves. [*Reproduction of the daily schedule described above in the letter dated January 11th.*] You can see as well from this timetable that it would be absolutely impossible to live without a watch.

[*Presentation of the diverse nationalities of the students and of the intensity of their studies, as described above.*]

There are obviously things that are less agreeable and which we are not used to. But so many foreigners have gotten used to them that there is no reason I shouldn't be able to. What's curious is that everyone has a handkerchief, but many people prefer not to use them. As for the toilets, happily there is a modern installation in the yeshiva, the only one, furthermore, in the whole town. Everywhere else, there is a great hole, surmounted by two planks that threaten to break, and, a little above and behind them, by a third plank. I don't know how it's used.

Much here can be explained by acute poverty. The installations are usually extremely primitive. Most houses are in wood; bedrooms are separated by a thin partition, and a large stove is capable of heating four rooms. 60% of inhabitants are *yiddele*,[2]

1. The eldest of his sisters, Alice, and her husband Achille Blum, who lived at the time in Bischheim, suburb of Strasbourg.
2. Yiddish: little Jews.

and it is not possible to buy anything without haggling. Here in Mir, happily they are honest, but in Warsaw, for example, a foreigner runs the greatest danger. You cannot leave your baggage even for a minute. Shortly before arriving in Warsaw, it even occurs that a controller walks through the train saying, "Watch your wallets!" Personally, I have remained unscathed.

My future correspondence may not be very regular and frequent: first, because of the work; second, because of the cost. 1 zloty = 5 francs 40, and 100 groszys = 1 zloty. Each letter costs 55 groszys. The envelope and the paper I send to you are sold by the post office. The red stamp represents the Chateau of Mir, for Mir belongs to a count who owns the chateau with a great territory, but who spends his life in Monte-Carlo.

Hoping to hear from you, love and kisses,

Ernest



Mir Castle

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Monday evening, January 17, 1938

My Dear Papa and Mama,

This evening, I have three of your epistles to answer. The first came on Thursday, the second on Friday, and finally today arrived your postcard sent on Friday. Based on your information, I notice that each time there was an irregularity of a day in the round trip. This was undoubtedly due to the snow that greatly delays the trains and the bus from Horodziej to Mir, the only official link to the outside world. It brings the mail every day at 5 o'clock.

No doubt you were expecting news before the arrival of the present letter. Since last Tuesday, though, I have been busy writing every evening from 10:30 on. I wrote to Paris [*ed.: to Noé and Blanche*], to Bischheim [*ed.: to Achille and Alice*], and to



"This was undoubtedly due to the snow..."

Wimpfheimer [*ed.: a fellow student from the Rabbinical School*]. For Liber, I want to wait a little more. Besides, it's only possible to write a letter or two each evening because, at 12:45 (*yeshivas zeiger*[1]), the electricity in Mir goes out until 3 o'clock the next day. It is moreover extremely curious, this electricity, and subject to numerous short circuits. To shave (we shave in general for *Shabbos*), I had to buy a plug to put into the lamp. But my *balebus*,[2] completely ecstatic about my machine, took pride taking care of everything. He even holds the mirror for me, if necessary.

In your letters, you frequently refer to my trip. But already in Warsaw, the incident at the border was completely forgotten, and aside from the mess of my suitcase — which I had the time to set right from noon to 8 o'clock in the evening — nothing happened.[3]

I am now beginning to see a little more clearly in everything: in the *gemara*,[4] in my finances, in people, in the city, etc. I thus have a *rebbe* for 35 zlotys, a remarkable fellow in all respects, then a *chavrusa*[5] for 18 zlotys. Food is only paid for at the end of the month, and I don't know yet how much that will be. What's certain is that it costs and is worth from 10 to 20 zlotys more than in the other *stanzies*,[6] let's say about 60 zl. But I wouldn't wish to change. Morning and evening, as I already wrote to you, we have cocoa, butter, fresh white cheese or another, similar to but better than Dutch cheese, sardines, eggs, cream, at our choosing. Everything has to be paid for, except the tea. At noon, usually there is poultry (chicken, duck, goose — whose feet are also

1. Yiddish: yeshiva time.
2. Yiddish: master of the house, host.
3. Allusion to the incident described in a letter that did not reach us (see the letter dated January 7th).
4. Aramaic: the Talmud.
5. Hebrew: a young assistant to the rebbe. See the letter dated January 11th.
6. Yiddish or Polish: boarding houses.

eaten) or veal, or ground meat, with soup and vegetables. For dessert, apple sauce or prune compote, if you want.

The houses are all very primitive, most of them in wood. Much is explained by poverty. But it's clean. I don't know if I told you that in the yeshiva there is a modern toilet, which would be clean if there weren't the only one sewer pipe in the city. In general, it is acceptable. A curious aspect in each house, and particularly in the yeshiva, is the numerous spittoons, of which great usage is made. There are also baths.

For the time being, it's surely not any colder than at home, the proof being that today it's been thawing a bit. Only you have to be careful because the temperature can change from 0°C to -20°C [32°F to -4°F] from one day to the next.

To send money, there are two ways: either by postal order or by letter closed with sealing wax, bearing the mention "declared value." This latter means is sometimes more advantageous since the postal service may offer a higher exchange rate than the bank. It's thus necessary to find out. But, if you send me money by 100 zlotys amounts, the difference is probably not very great. Besides, until the middle or end of February, I am provided for.

There is something else that I need: it seems that there has been a *demizie*[7] in France and that Sarraut is candidate for Prime [Minister]. At least, those are the rumors that come strike my ears now and then.

To alleviate this uncertainty, you would have to subscribe to the newspaper *L'Œuvre* for me. I think it can be done by quarter, for example. Besides, Bensinger and someone else from Berlin have entered into *shutfus*[8] with me and will pay me their share of the subscription. From here, it is not possible to subscribe since you can't send money out of the country.

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7. Yiddish: resignation.
8. Hebrew: partnership.

In *gemara*, I am now in the tractate *Gittin*, 28–29. It is fantastic how many *kushyos* and *teirutzim*[9] you can hear. Even the pages that seem particularly easy soon become extremely difficult. And still, I am now only doing a first reading that consists in knowing perfectly the *gemara* and *Tosafos*. Sometimes we take a *kuk*[10] at the *Rishonim*. At the second reading of the *perek*,[11] we'll do *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*.[12]

The *Rosh Yeshiva* only gives two or three *shiurim*[13] a week, which I do not attend, at least not yet. The *Mashgiach* in charge of our education gives moral presentations, *aggadic*,[14] that are often instructive, around which the students crowd closely so as not to lose a word. I already understand the *lashon* quite well, but the Yiddish here is completely different from the one we know in France; it is Lithuanian, which is very much like German.

Concerning the *Tosafos* in *Shabbos*, my *rebbe* explained to me that different readings could be found due to *machlokes*[15] between *masorah* and *kri*,[16] but none having effect on a *din*.[17]

As for Zionism, it should be known that our yeshiva is above these questions of politics and that only *Torah lishmah*[18] is done

9. Hebrew: questions and answers.
10. Yiddish: glance, quick look.
11. Hebrew: chapter.
12. Hebrew: literally "the first ones" and "the last ones" — denotes the commentators who were either before or after the publication of the *Shulchan Aruch*, Code of Jewish Law by Rabbi Joseph Caro (1567), respectively.
13. Hebrew: lessons.
14. From the Hebrew *aggadah*, material of a moral or philosophical nature (as opposed to *halachah*, material of a legal nature).
15. Hebrew: argument, difference.
16. The tradition records differences between the precise spelling of a word in the Bible and the way it is to be vocalized.
17. Hebrew: legal ruling.
18. Hebrew: study for its own sake, without any other ulterior or competing motives.

here. The best proof is that those who study *Yoreh Deah*[19] do not belong to the yeshiva because studying the *halachah*[20] is already no longer *lishmah*, but *kardom lachpor bah*.[21]

My friend Carlebach, although from Leipzig, is not the nephew of Ephraim.

Mir has always been called in this way since it's a Russian name. Russian is spoken more than Polish here.

Avadde,[22] we have an *eruv*[23] and *Shabbos goys*.[24]

After this long letter, somewhat extremely disjointed, I kiss you both,

Ernest

19. One of the four parts of the *Shulchan Aruch*.
20. Hebrew: the legal rulings and legislative part of the Talmud.
21. Hebrew, from the Chapters of the Fathers (*Pirkei Avot*): a pickaxe for digging — denoting using the Torah study for a purpose other than pure study, as an end in and of itself.
22. Yiddish: of course!
23. Hebrew: this word refers to a halachic device making it possible on the Shabbat to carry within the area circumscribed by the demarcation lines of the *eruv*.
24. Yiddish: non-Jews able to accomplish for a Jew, on the Shabbat, certain tasks that are forbidden for Jews (such as lighting a fire in winter to avoid suffering from the cold).

Chief Rabbi Maurice Liber to Rabbi Max Gugenheim

January 18, 1938

My Dear Colleague,

Please find enclosed a check for 86 francs, representing the School's and my contributions to the *Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums.*[1]

Further, I have just received the enclosed "cash voucher" for your son's scholarship. Since I do not yet have his address, you would be very kind to send it to him, asking him to return it to me after signing it (but without adding the date or the place).

I hope Ernest has arrived safely and that his first impressions are favorable.

Please rest assured, my Dear Colleague, of my faithful sentiment,

Maurice Liber

1. German: Society for the Advancement of Jewish Studies.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Friday, January 21, 1938

My Dear Ones,

I jumped for joy this morning when receiving, in addition to the nice letter from Alice, the *Canard* [*Enchaîné*].[1] It is a strong wind that connects us again to Western civilization a bit and reminds us that something else beyond the Mir Yeshiva still exists. Because we have a serious tendency to forget it.

We are already starting to do not only just *p'shat,*[2] but some deeper insights, as well.

According to my calculations, I will receive this evening or tomorrow a letter from home. The postcard for my birthday reached me on Wednesday. As Alice judiciously remarked, January 22nd this year fell on Saturday, *Parshas Yisro.*[3]

This morning, I went to the *beis mehrchatz,*[4] and in good French it was *nisht koshe,*[5] very pleasant and much better than I had expected. In accordance with the *Chofetz Chayim*[6] in the *Mishnah Berurah* (2:1), we were completely dressed like Adam, and I took note that only the first step was difficult. In my next letter, I will explain to you in greater length why that is so.

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1. French satirical weekly newspaper.
2. *P'shat*: Hebrew: straightforward meaning of the text.
3. Torah portion to be read on this Shabbat, and that is the same one he had read for his Bar Mitzvah nine years earlier. Moreover, in the year of his birth, January 22nd fell out on *Parshat Yitro*, as well.
4. Hebrew: public baths.
5. Yiddish: *nisht koshe*, not bad at all.
6. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, named after his famous book of *mussar*, whose title means "One Who Desires Life," from *Psalms* 34:13. He was the author of the halachic work *Mishnah Berurah*, to which Rabbi Gugenheim refers.

I learned that Chautemps[7] had formed the [French] cabinet, but many fanciful details always accompany these rumors so that it is impossible to make much sense of it all.

Example of a *kushya*:[8] in *Gittin* 29b, the story of Abba bar Manyumi[...][9] Simply to show how from an extremely easy text we create the greatest difficulties.

I took my canned food to my landlady, who will serve them to me when I want; from time to time I also take my *mezonos*[10] to her.

Did I tell you that we do not put on the *tallis*[11] and that, on the second day, my *tefillin* were declared *passul*?[12] Every morning, I recite the *berachah*[13] on other *tefillin*, and I have ordered from the *sofer*[14] a pair that was *kadin v'chadas*.[15] All the foreigners are in the same situation when they arrive.

Ernest

7. Camille Chautemps, President of the Council.
8. Aramaic: difficult logical or textual question in or on the Talmud.
9. We have had to omit this passage, only understandable for Talmudists.
10. Hebrew: cakes (in this case).
11. According to the Polish ritual in Central and Eastern Europe, only married men wear the *tallit*, the prayer shawl for the morning prayer.
12. Hebrew: improper, invalid.
13. Hebrew: blessing.
14. Hebrew: scribe.
15. Hebrew: ritually perfect.

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

Mir, January 22, 1938

Monsieur Director and Dear Master,

If I have waited until today to give you news about myself, it was only to be able to write to you appropriately. Indeed, the first fifteen day period spent here enables me to affirm that not only I do not regret for an instant having come, but that I am truly happy to have done so. Because, leaving aside even my studies, the *lehrnen* and the knowledge that I am on my way to acquiring, I have the considerable advantage of seeing at the Mir Yeshiva an extremely rare phenomenon, I mean: Judaism in all its simplicity and in all its plenitude, a Judaism stripped of all ceremony, of all pomp that does not become it, without exaggeration of any sort, in which the Torah is the absolute mistress, without any external influence intervening to alter it. It is this particular character, which I believe has struck me the most, and each coming day confirms my belief anew.

From morning to evening, we *lehrn*; 10 hours a day, with short interruptions during which we eat and go for walks. And we *lehrn* with an ardor and an indescribable enthusiasm in which humans and objects participate — because the *shtenders*[1] truly play an integral part in the *lehrnen* and dance the saraband while their owners shout, sing, thrash about, discuss with voice and gesture.

There are about 300 to 400 *bachurim*, 150 of whom are foreigners — Americans, Englishmen, Germans, Swedes, etc. — who perform this perpetual movement that is impossible to resist for long and that sweeps everything away in its frenzy. The *derech*

1. Yiddish: the lectern upon which the Talmudic tractate under study rests.

halimud[2] is quite profound, and no *kushya* is ever passed over in silence. This is the Lithuanian method, and the Yiddish is of the same country. In addition to the teaching, there is the instruction in which *mussar* plays a considerable role. The daily half hour that is devoted to it has an eminently beneficial influence.

Not everything is as perfect: I'm thinking here about the material conditions surrounding us. Mir is a town of four to five thousand inhabitants whose vast majority lives in a poverty that is nearly unbelievable; the whole town lives almost exclusively from the yeshiva. We stay in one *stanzie*, and we eat in another. Moreover, we eat very well, and at my landlady's, poultry appears on the menu practically every day. The *goyim* are Russians, and consequently without anti-Semitism.[3] Mir is only 20 kilometers from the border of the USSR.

However, all these minute details are fully compensated for by qualities such that we are quite content to sacrifice a little of the comfort we are used to.

Please transmit, Monsieur Director, my respects to Mrs. Liber, and accept the assurance of my highest consideration,

Ernest Gugenheim

2. Hebrew: methodology of Talmud study.
3. By comparison to the Poles who were rabidly anti-Semitic.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Cousin

Mir, January 24, 1937 [*sic*, in fact 1938]

My Dear Seppi,[1]

Needless to tell you that I like it here very much and that we learn a lot and well. When 300 guys work with an enthusiasm that makes them thrash about like devils, it is naturally impossible to resist this movement, and I was quickly swept up in the frenzy. I don't say that I've already forgotten what I learned in Paris, and I'm more or less certain not to change much in this respect, but I'm also certain that a year in the Mir Yeshiva leaves a lasting and beneficial impression.

That you have many friends here, you undoubtedly know, and you are even mentioned often. I also saw you in a photo representing the Hochwald camp.

What is there else to write from Mir but about the yeshiva and the *lehrnen*? Now, you are an initiate, so I can't go on about the *lehrnen*, or about the yeshiva.

I thus stop here, while sending you my best wishes for a *gut Shabbos*.

Faithfully yours,

Ernest

1. His first cousin, Joseph Walch, who lived in Switzerland.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Tuesday evening [January 25, 1938?]

My Dear Ones,

As might have been expected, I got your letter on Friday, and yesterday your postcard from Friday. I believe that I will soon have the complete collection of Parisian monuments. I have, moreover, been spoiled by my correspondence these last few days and already have a reputation for as much. Besides yours, I received missives from Alice, Blanche, and Wimpfheimer. I wrote on Saturday evening to the Director, and I praised the merits of Mir in splendid colors. I also wrote to the Consul in Warsaw and am waiting for his answer.

It seems that the Chautemps Cabinet got an extraordinary majority and that Madame Léon Blum died. That is the only French news I have heard. The daily backlog would have nothing to do with it, but in any case it is better that I don't get news since it would be too great a distraction.

In my studies, I finished *Kol ha-get* [ed.: third chapter of Tractate *Gittin*] yesterday and at the same time I was doing the *chazarah*,[1] I began *Hasholeach* [ed.: fourth chapter of Tractate *Gittin*]. *Ah, a geshmahkeh gemara!*[2] But there is no doubt that we know the text we learn here.

Bensinger is now studying *Yoreh Deah*, and I see him only at meals and at *davenen*, because he is not learning at the yeshiva; what's more, he works like a madman.

Since yesterday, Mir presents a new aspect to my eyes. There's been a partial thawing, and the streets are filthy with manure.

1. Hebrew: review.
2. Yiddish: Ah, a delicious *gemara*!



The Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Finkel

Happily the *galoshen*[3] can withstand anything! This does not mean that the cold may not return in a day or two.

We're on CET time [Central European Time] here, as in Germany, only the students at the yeshiva live three quarters of an hour in advance, as I already wrote.

Wimpfheimer wrote to me that he will very likely go to a yeshiva next year; I'm going to recommend Mir to him because the *mussar* that is done only here is given great importance. The *Mesilas Yesharim*[4] is not a subject of study, but all the 300 guys read it together and everybody on his own, and it is extremely curious and captivating.

Among the unusual *minhagim*[5] at the yeshiva, it should be pointed out that no one except the *Rosh Yeshiva* goes to kiss and follow the *Sefer Torah*. At the *aliyah*,[6] since we do not put on the *tallis*, we wear a coat as *kavod*.[7]

The food is always wonderful, but we'll see the tab next week!

For the remittances, the means does not matter to me. It's just necessary to let me know ahead of time. Besides, I'll write to you if I need any money: for the moment, I don't need anything.

At the baths, where I was on Friday, as you know, we are totally

3. Yiddish: rubber overshoes — see the letter dated February 1, 1938, "Tuesday evening," p. 84.
4. The *Path of the Just*, the classic work on piety by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, also known as the RaMCHaL.
5. Hebrew: customs, common practices.
6. Hebrew: ascent — in this case, when one is called up to make a blessing over the Torah at the time of the public Torah reading in the synagogue.
7. Hebrew: honor, to honor the *Sefer Torah*.

naked. For washing, there is a shower, and then there are buckets we fill with water at the desired temperature. You can also pour whole buckets over your body, which is very agreeable. There is also a *mikveh*[8] where you can go dunk yourself, if you want to. I didn't. Then, there is another room where you can take steam baths like those described in the Talmud. They are supposed to be extremely healthy.

The hot-water bottle is quite agreeable. I sleep admirably without waking from midnight to a quarter to 8 o'clock. Never do we go to bed before midnight. You can guess what time it is now,

Ernest

8. Hebrew: ritual bath.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Saturday evening [January 29, 1938]

My Dear Ones,

I hasten to follow your excellent advice to allocate correspondence to a few days in the week. Thursday evening, I already had your letter, which also may be read at different times. What's more, I do not complain about this.

This evening, at last, I got your newspapers, as well as the new *Canard* [*Enchaîné*] that Jacques[1] was right to send to me and whose reading is a more than agreeable recreation. But even the other newspapers lose their insignificance here. Nevertheless, after *L'Œuvre* comes, it won't be necessary to send others, this one sufficing amply for my needs.

The Shabbos went well, as always, and the *menuchah*[2] observed as Rashi's *p'shat* indicates about *"va'yeht shichmo lisbol*: this is *ohl Torah*."[3] As for other things, we ate an excellent *kugel* (though a little less good than yours) and tongue. We always get very good *challos*,[4] but not wine. Nevertheless, we'll probably be having some from now on: two new boarders have come to my

1. His brother. See infra the biographical notes.
2. Hebrew: rest.
3. In *Genesis* 49:15, it is written with respect to Yissachar: *Vayar menuchah ki tov, va'yeht shichmo lisbol*, "He sees that rest [*menuchah*] is good, he offers his shoulder for carrying." Rashi explains: *Va'yeht shichmo lisbol — ohl Torah*: "He offers his shoulder to bear the yoke of the Torah." For the author of the letter, this means: the *menuchah* was observed by submitting to the yoke of the Torah, which is his way of saying that the Shabbat rest was limited, in fact, to the study of the Torah!
4. Special bread for Shabbat and holidays, *challah* (plural, *challos*).

landlady's place, an American and a *Leipziger*, both immensely wealthy.

As anticipated, the weather has changed, and it's snowing today, with a very nasty wind. But we are so seldom outside! All the time, people are busy cleaning the sidewalk in front of their houses, and the next day the snow covers everything. Aron Wolf, who is elsewise very kind and making great progress, has to go to Warsaw tomorrow for the draft board. I gave him my cap for the journey from Mir to Horodziej. Provided you're well-wrapped up, these rides in a sleigh are rather agreeable. I say "rather" because the bumps in the road diminish the pleasure a bit.

In the morning, day breaks at 7 o'clock. I don't know exactly when night falls because we're always at the yeshiva then. But I think it's at about 6 o'clock.

❦ ❦ ❦

Monday evening

I have already just received your postcard from Friday, and can thus answer right away.

In the *beis ha'mehrchatz*, there is also a *mikveh* in which we plunge after washing well. In the words of my friend the Swede, you feel so "*frum*"[5] when you do the *tevillah*.[6]

As for my *tefillin*, the new ones will be a little bigger than the old ones; it will take about three weeks before they come, since the *batim*[7] are made in Telsc, roughly forty kilometers from Mir, which have the reputation of being the best in the world insofar as the *kashrus*[8] is concerned.

5. Yiddish: pious.
6. Hebrew: immersion in the ritual bath.
7. Hebrew: the leather case in which the parchments are stored.
8. Hebrew: in conformity with religious legal requirements.

I also got an answer for the French Consul in Warsaw, to whom I have to send, in addition to my passport and photos, my military passbook that I left at home. It will be thus necessary to have it sent to me, by registered mail naturally, but there is no absolute hurry: the Consul took a full eight days to answer me.

In connection with the *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin*, I discussed with my *rebbe* for more than an hour, without getting a satisfactory response. But the essential thing is that you can ask anything. They have an essential principle here that everything the *Chazal*[9] have said is *kodesh kodashim*,[10] and they ground this on the *Chazal* and on the *Rishonim*. A corollary of this principle is that, in comparison to us, the *Chazal* are *malachim*;[11] and, for this reason, there are many things we cannot comprehend. In spite of everything that might be said, this turn of mind, without going into details, is still more worthy than the disrespectful mentality in Paris. But I have been told one thing: that it's much easier to be a good Jew, in beliefs and practice, when living in Mir than when living in Paris. I have, moreover, no small amount of popularity as a *Franzeis*; Americans come try their hand at speaking French; *Peilnishe*[12] talk to me about Léon Blum as if he were king; Germans ask me first what is the tendency of the Rabbinical School and if there are any Orthodox Jews in Paris. I amply reassured them.

Another subject: this morning I caught in *flagrante delicto* a nasty little beast that did not escape. Unfortunately, there are others, and they will continue to flourish. They don't hurt me, but

9. Acronym for the Hebrew: *Chachameinu Zichronam Liv'racha*, the Sages. of the Talmud, literally "Our Sages, may their memory be blessed!"
10. Hebrew: of total holiness.
11. Hebrew: angels.
12. Yiddish: Poles.

it's bothersome. Is this one of the *kinim*?[13] Examining them, they are not ugly, but it's their effect. What will it be like this summer?

Whether there is a *shul* in Mir? In addition to the yeshiva, there are five more *batei midrashim*[14] for the 600 families in Mir. They are *kreimer*,[15] workmen, *soferim*,[16] etc.

Yesterday, the government took away tobacco concessions from the Jews, which will probably ruin some families. But the yeshiva students, who smoke a good deal, intend to boycott it. This aside, there is no anti-Semitism on the part of the population, since the Russian *goyim* are themselves *gedruckt*,[17] since they are a minority.

I'm now going to get into my bed, which has more of a straw mat than a mattress, but, on the mat, there are three more eiderdowns which are pleasant to sleep on. At least, I have never suffered from insomnia and, hardly in bed, I fall asleep until morning.

❦ ❦ ❦

Tuesday evening

In rereading your letter, I see there are a few more questions to answer.

Most bedrooms have two beds, and a few of them have four. Mine costs 7 zlotys, electricity included. There is at least an armoire, but no linen. Perhaps having my linen in a suitcase is what bothers me the most, but it's the same almost everywhere.

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13. Hebrew: the third of the ten plagues of Egypt, lice.
14. Hebrew: houses of learning, study halls.
15. Yiddish: grocers.
16. Hebrew: scribes.
17. Yiddish: oppressed.

Yesterday, I gave my belongings to be washed for the first time, it's a *goya* who does it, and she was particularly recommended to me.

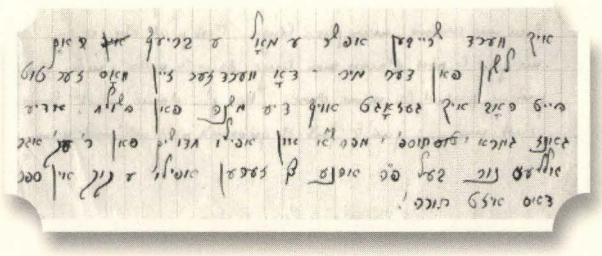
The *galoshen* are a kind of rubber overshoes you can put on and take off without using your hands. In the winter, they are indispensable because of the snow and then the mud. In addition, since yesterday the weather has been ideal, cold but clear and beautifully sunny.

It's the President's birthday, and the red and white flags have all come out, much more by fear of the police than by patriotism.

I'd also want to talk to you again about marriages, which make up a very interesting chapter. The *shadchan*[18] rules supreme here, and no marriage is done without his intervention.

[*Five lines in Yiddish follow here, apparently as an exercise rather than to hide a secret!*]

[Ernest]



18. Hebrew: matchmaker, who suggests unions to the families and introduces the parties.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Monday evening, February 7, 1937 [*sic*, in fact 1938]

My Dear Ones,

Your postcard just reached me, as well as a letter from [Robert] Dreyfus[1] and another from Seppi, but the latter was extremely short. I am able to observe that you give my letters a publicity for which they were not intended: if I'd known, I would have polished my style.

Through Aron Wolf I had already learned that Mr. [Marcus] Cohn had given a lecture in Strasbourg and that it was a great success.

Bensinger knew his parents' border pass had been withdrawn, but since they had received written word they were to going to attend the marriage of one of their Alsatian cousins, it seems their passport and border pass were restituted. There is, moreover, hope that they will be soon reintegrated. In Germany, on the other hand, all's not going according to order as it's supposed to in a dictatorship — although it is not known exactly what's happening. To date, *L'Œuvre* has yet to come; it might be able to inform me somewhat.

By my last letter, you must have understood that I have written to the French Consul for the obligatory registration, inscribed in the passport. My documents are traveling, probably, already.

As at home, the weather is pretty mild, and I have already had to take off a sweater. Since my arrival, it seems that the cold weather has ceased and that the winter is extremely mild.

1. For the names of people mentioned in these letters, please consult the Biographical Sketches.

This can also be seen in the prices; eggs only cost 8 groszy = 40 centimes.

❦ ❦ ❦

Tuesday evening

At this instant, we just performed *Kiddush Levanah*,[2] I suppose you have the same moon at home. This proves at the same time that we have a splendid starry sky today.

Since I came here, there are already three *bachurim* who have gotten married, and as many who have gotten engaged. The latter, before the engagement, leave Mir to go see the girl the *shadchan*[3] has found for them. It is practically a vital issue for them to find a pious and rich girl, usually the daughter of a *rav*, and finding these two qualities in Poland is rarer than you would imagine. When the two like each other reciprocally, a telegram arrives at the yeshiva to announce the good news. Naturally, the joy is general, and close friends of the fiancé are obliged by the *minhag* [custom] to offer *papyros* = cigarettes to the whole yeshiva. In Mir proper, there have not yet been either any marriages or engagements, but it seems the girls are ready to fall in love with any foreigner who becomes enamored with them. There are several of them who have become Americans this way.

What's happening with the foot-and-mouth disease?

That's all for today, *gut Shabbos*, love and kisses,

Ernest

2. Hebrew: sanctification of the new moon, at the beginning of the Jewish month.
3. Yiddish: matchmaker.

Response from Chief Rabbi Liber

Paris, January 31, 1938

My Dear Colleague,

I am very happy to receive news from you directly, happy especially to know that you are happy.

I was worried for you about the change of scenery, if not the homesickness. You're enjoying Mir, and that is the best guarantee you will benefit from your stay.

I'm not going to show your letter to all the French Israelites; they would believe all the Jews in Poland eat poultry at every meal! They undoubtedly don't know that poultry is inexpensive in that country.

Speaking of inexpensiveness, perhaps I am not being indiscreet in asking you how you make ends meet. This time, I can't consult the treasurer, but when transferring the receipt you sent to me, I remembered that your scholarship is only 2,000 francs. That would not suffice in Paris; it must not suffice in Mir. Tell me quite frankly what the situation is, and I will ask the Central Consistory to grant you the difference between the amount of your scholarship and the amount attributed to rabbis on leave.

Please rest assured, my Dear Colleague, of my faithful sentiment,

Maurice Liber

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

Mir, February 11, 1938

Monsieur Director and Dear Master,

Only today have I succeeded in acknowledging receipt of your letter and in thanking you for it.

I can only confirm my first impressions: every day I feel more at ease, and I don't think in the least about being homesick. Besides, I wouldn't have the spare time for that purpose.

You ask me how I made ends meet. My monthly expenditure necessarily amounts to 100 or 110 zlotys, which are expenses for studying, food and lodging. The study expenses, furthermore, constitute the largest part of these. The 2,000 franc scholarship and the Weisweiller Prize I had intended to use for my stay in Mir, together would have enabled me to stay here for eight or



A group of Mir Yeshiva students

nine months, until my departure for the Army. If the Consistory were to grant me its allowance this year before the expected time, even though I am not on active duty, it would obviously be an advantage of very great value.

Since I am on material questions, I would like to make clear, for the French Israelites you alluded to, that only the foreigners who eat at a *table d'hôte* in the families of Mir are so well served in their menus. The families themselves would never allow themselves such a luxury. In addition, there are in all perhaps four or five *stanzies* that one might describe as good, even for the boarders!

Please accept, Monsieur Director, the assurance of my greatest respect,

Ernest Gugenheim

Response from Chief Rabbi Liber

Paris, February 24, 1938

My Dear Colleague,

Thank you for the information you give me about your budget. It is difficult for me to ask the Central Consistory to allot you the same emolument as to the active rabbis, all the more so that I had your study scholarship renewal granted; one cannot be at the same time rabbi and student.

When we voted the budget, we did not appoint you among the active rabbis, but I will try at the next session to obtain the difference between the amount of your scholarship and the emolument of acting rabbis.

I received a letter from the rabbis who direct the Ostrog Yeshiva asking me to accept at the Seminary a *bachur* named Salomon Glouzermann, who is currently studying at the Mir Yeshiva. Even today, a student came to see me for the same candidate, and I understood that it is a matter of helping him [avoid] (— *the word, obtained from the carbon copy, is missing and must have been handwritten in Yiddish or Hebrew*) military service.

Would you be kind enough to bring him to understand that we cannot lend ourselves to that?

This young man does not know French, he probably does not have resources; I cannot see what he would do in Paris.

Please rest assured, my Dear Colleague, of my faithful sentiment,

Maurice Liber

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

Monsieur Director and Dear Master,

Mir, March 2, 1938

I have received your letter, and I thank you for it.

Concerning the *bachur* S. Glouzermann, I tried to make him understand the difficulties opposing his project. He told me that his cousin in France is rich and that he would thus not be dependent on anyone. The French, he would learn between now and October. It is evidently the fear of military service that inspires this plan, and a certificate of admission to the Seminary, and therefore the issuance of a visa for France, would get him out of this fix. It is, moreover, easy to understand very well that a Jew in Poland would feel an invincible repugnance faced with military service. For, first of all, one owes no gratitude to a truly cruel stepmother; and, furthermore, in addition to the physical suffering that a religious Jew necessarily brings upon himself, it is even harder yet to suffer the constant insults from anti-Semitic fellow recruits. In this respect, a Polish *goy* surpasses even a German.

There is also another eventual candidate for the Rabbinical Seminary who is at the yeshiva. He is an Alsatian from Strasbourg, Aron Wolf, who has his baccalaureate and who, in six months here, has made remarkable progress in the Talmud.

Please accept, Monsieur Director, the assurance of my greatest respect,

Ernest Gugenheim

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Sunday evening (February 13, 1938)

My Dear Ones,

Yesterday, I received for Shabbos your two letters, the one sent on Tuesday with my military passbook, and the other on Wednesday. In addition, since Friday *L'Œuvre* comes, bringing me interesting news with only two days delay. As you see, I had quite ample reading. Three days ago, three or four fellows pounced on *L'Œuvre*, and the news it brought made Bensinger and company, who bear a boundless hatred for their fatherland,[1] quiver with pleasure.

Your letters interested me very much; there have been new developments at home lately. Here, we could not go about like mother in an automobile — for, probably due to an anticyclone, it's started to snow again, and the temperature has fallen, while we had already imagined spring was near, just around the corner. Everything is white again, and the kids continue to skate and ski in the streets of the city, if I dare express myself in this way (for the three last words). Nevertheless, we stroll every day in the fresh air, half hour walks that show us the immediate surroundings of Mir.

This morning, I spoke with my *rebbe* about Martin's[2] ideas concerning the *shemitah.*[3] By a curious coincidence, we ourselves in our *lehrnen* came to *Gittin* 36 a-b, which is one of the great sources of *shemitah* and *pruzbul.*[4] He proved to me that Martin's

1. Germany.
2. A "Palestinian" Jew who, originating in Germany, had joined a *hachshara* (an apprenticeship of agricultural life) in Bouxwiller and had kept up correspondence with the rabbi in that locality, correspondence that was to resume after the war of 1939–1945.
3. Sabbatical year still practiced today in Eretz Israel.
4. Hebrew word of Greek origin, denoting a measure taken by Hillel in the 1st

criticism was absolutely unjustified and that the *rabbanim* of Eretz Israel could not bend the *din* at the discretion of the *dat chadasha*.[5] The question is to determine what the *halachah* is, and that is what we did by consulting the immense *shu"t*[6] of the very great *Gaon*, *Beis Halevi*, father of Reb Chaim of Brisk, who is the founder of the method currently used in the yeshivos. Nothing more beautiful exists than one of Reb Chaim's *shtikele*;[7] here you can feel what the *geonus*[8] is. We examined whether *shevi'is ba'z'man hazeh* is *mideoraisa* or *miderabbanan*,[9] but even if it is *miderabbanan*, there still exists for the Jew the absolute *issur*[10] to work during the year of the *Shemitah*. And it is not possible to affirm that it is a *safek*[11] on the subject of the year itself, for the *halachah* is determined according to the *cheshbon*[12] of Rambam. To criticize the *rabbanut*[13] on this subject is to criticize the Torah that determines this institution.

A discussion with my roommate obliges me to put off what follows until tomorrow.

❦ ❦ ❦

century before the Common Era to facilitate certain problems about loans relating to the sabbatical year.

5. Hebrew: new religion.
6. Acronym for the Hebrew *she'elot u-teshuvot*, responsa, rabbinical consultation. In this case, the reference is to *Shu"t Beis Halevi* 3:1.
7. Yiddish: lit., small piece — the reference is to a self-contained Talmudic analysis.
8. Hebrew: greatness, genius.
9. Hebrew: whether the laws of the sabbatical year in effect today are of Biblical or Rabbinic authority.
10. Hebrew: prohibition.
11. Hebrew: doubt.
12. Hebrew: calculation, account.
13. Hebrew: rabbinate.

Monday evening

Your postcard just came informing me, among other things, that 200 zlotys are on their way. Tomorrow or the day after, they will be here. It seems that the *bachur* who will be the first to announce the good news to me will expect the greatest *halva'a.*[14]

I also spoke with my *rebbe* about the organ. We read the Chasam Sofer's *shu"t* on the question, in which it is mentioned as an interesting argument, other than those already known, that it was due to *avoda zara,*[15] Jesus being considered as *shituf l'ha-Kadosh baruch Hu.*[16] We did not find an explicit prohibition against entering a church, but an interesting *sevara*[17] may be made, saying that we could rather enter one, for if we do, we know in advance that everything there is altogether foreign to us. But if we went into a *shul*[18] which has an organ, we might believe that it is part of the spirit or of the Jewish patrimony, and then go as far as believing that it is permitted... and we would thus become *kal.*[19]

To pray with *mechalelei Shabbos*[20] is permitted since the *korban* of a *choteh*[21] was accepted! For the *Chazal* and *Rishonim,* there is absolutely no difference, each and all parties are *kodesh kodashim.* But there are many of them that we do not understand.

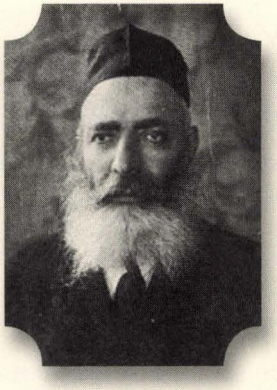
This morning, I dispatched my papers to the Consul.

This evening, I spoke at length with the *Mashgiach,*[22] but he saw I was not terribly convinced, and he counts on time for me to

14. Hebrew: loan.
15. Hebrew: idolatry.
16. Hebrew: another deity in partnership with the Almighty, which is ipso facto idolatrous.
17. Hebrew: reasoning.
18. Yiddish: synagogue.
19. Hebrew: lenient, too accommodating.
20. Hebrew: those who violate the Shabbat.
21. Hebrew: the sacrifice of a sinner.
22. Hebrew: spiritual director of the yeshiva.

change. It seems I came to Mir a little too late since the previous *Mashgiach*,[23] who was a unique personality, died two years ago. It is he who is responsible for the renown of Mir, and his name is famous in America. All those who knew him speak of him in a way I have never heard spoken of anyone.

Eggs are now at 6 groszy. To change a little from poultry, we now sometimes have tongue and veal and wonderful pickles.



Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz

23. This illustrious previous *Mashgiach* was Rav Yerucham Levovitz. The *Mashgiach* of the Mir Yeshiva in 1938 was Rav Lœwenstein.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Sunday, February 20, 1938

My Dear Ones,

I must first acknowledge receipt of the 200 zlotys that reached me on Tuesday last, when I had just sent my most recent letter. Right now, they are disseminated throughout the whole yeshiva, returning to me at the time of the *Rosh Chodesh*.[1] It's a much better investment than in my wallet.

Friday evening, your regular letter came, accompanied by one from Élie [Bloch]. With *L'Œuvre*, which comes every day, that was my mail for the week.

I again asked my *rebbe* the *kushyos* for this week. He still regrets not being able to read French *k'sav*,[2] and he tries to *chop*[3] the few words in your letter written in Hebrew.

Our milk is purely Jewish milk, but the butter comes from *goyim* and is subject to no *shemira*[4] of any sort.

There are also in Mir people in whose houses we could not eat for reasons of *kashrus*, but a *tzadkanis*[5] such as Batsheva, our hostess, cannot be found within a radius of several leagues. She knows *Yoreh Deah* better than the rabbis who eat at her table, and when she buys meat, it is pure beyond any *safek* or *sircha*[6] or other. In these conditions, she never does *k'chol*,[7] which presents

1. Hebrew: first day of the month in the Jewish calendar.
2. Hebrew: writing.
3. Yiddish: catch, grab.
4. Hebrew: supervision, control.
5. Hebrew: righteous woman.
6. Hebrew: adherence on the lung of the animal, posing a *kashrus* problem.
7. Hebrew: cow's udder.

too many difficulties. In any case, even without *k'chol*, I always feel physically and morally very good.

Far from getting tired or bored, I like the *lehrnen* more and more, for each day brings something new.

The *mussar* also interests me a lot, especially when seeing the extraordinary influence it has on the *bachurim*. While there may be a few perhaps, and I'm skeptical, who are worth less than the vast majority, most learn *lishmah* and even make extraordinary sacrifices for the Torah. Some of them live in unbelievable poverty, others also torture themselves even more to make sure they're not inducted into the military service. My *rebbe*, for example, in spite of all his efforts, was forced to do his. For weeks on end, he ate only bread and had to suffer from the anti-Semitism of the Polish soldiers. These *bachurim* consider that "*hamekabel alav ohl Torah*..."[8] and especially that they do not owe gratitude to such a homeland. Just now, a fellow who has only the skin on his bones came up to ask me if there was any way to go spend a year in the Strasbourg Yeshiva, he's so much afraid of being inducted. Although we have told him repeatedly that the Poles do not draft skeletons as soldiers, he is still afraid. He does not understand how a Frenchman can do his service quite naturally and doesn't even try to grease the palm of the doctor when he's before the Draft Board.

Today, Hitler spoke and was heard even here, for the modern inventions such as the radio are not, as might be imagined, things unknown in Mir.

❦ ❦ ❦

8. Quote from *Pirkei Avot* (3:5): "Whoever takes upon himself the yoke of Torah, from him will be taken away the yoke of government..."

Monday evening

This evening I got your postcard mailed on Friday and a letter from Wimpfheimer. For several days, I've wanted to write to Mr. Cohn, but I've not yet succeeded in carrying out this praiseworthy intention.

From Warsaw, I received my papers and registration. If ever something were to happen, the French government will take me under its protection.

On Monday a week from now, Élie [Bloch] will deliver 200 francs to Papa at the Rabbinical Assembly, to be sent to me. I had indeed written to him to *schnorr*[9] a little for a very urgent need. It is astonishing how much misery there is here to be relieved.

Since I'm very tired, I will continue tomorrow.

❦ ❦ ❦

Tuesday evening

I reread once more your postcard and letter to see if I had answered all your questions.

If Bensinger asked me to have 11 francs sent to Seppi, it is because Poland does not allow any money to leave the country, even less so than Germany. I think I even prefer a German *goy* to a Polish *goy*. Happily, Mir is in Russia![10]

Did I tell you a new foreigner arrived, a brother of the Swede, after having spent six weeks in Paris? I *lehrn* with him as a *chavrusa*, which constitutes an excellent exercise for me.

I think that's all.

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9. Yiddish: *schnorr*, to beg — here, to collect money for someone or an institution in difficulty.
10. See the Introduction.

With love, kisses and *gut Shabbos,*

Ernest

Polish stamps are "duties to be collected."

CONSULAT DE FRANCE
A VARSOVIE

AL. FRASCATI
TEL. 568-21, 22, 23, 24, 25

N° 262

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

VARSOVIE, LE 18 février 1938

Monsieur,

J'ai l'honneur de vous faire parvenir, sous ce pli, votre passeport, votre livret individuel, un certificat d'immatriculation établi par ce Consulat, valable 3 ans, ainsi que le récépissé de la déclaration de votre résidence à l'étranger./.

4 P.j.

Recevez, Monsieur, l'assurance de ma considération distinguée.

Le Consul de France:

Monsieur Ernest GUGENHEIM
MIR
powiat Stolpce
Skrzynka pocztowa 17

Letter from the French Consul

The Consul of France to Ernest Gugenheim

Consulat de France
de Varsovie

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

Al. Frascati
Tel. 568.21, 22, 23, 24, 25
N° 262

Varsovie, le 18 février 1938
Monsieur Ernest GUGENHEIM
MIR
powat Stolpce
Skrzynka pjocztowa 17

[*The text is translated from the French into English*]

Sir:

It is my honor to send to you, here enclosed, your passport, your personal passbook, a certificate of registration issued by the Consulate, valid for 3 years, as well as the receipt for the declaration of your residence abroad.

Please be assured, Sir, of my great consideration.

4 enclosures.

Consul of France

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Monday evening, February 28 [1938]

My Dear Ones,

As you supposed in your postcard I just received, the streets of Mir are, indeed, covered with mire and mud, and the pigs roll in it, vying with one another. I add that this is only the beginning and that the snow is only starting to melt. Next week, if the sun succeeds in completely defeating the cold, since for the moment it still freezes at night, it will be without doubt a complete stream.

This week's mail brought me, besides your letter that came on Friday, a letter from Bischheim and one from Liber.[1] The only interesting passage of the latter is the confirmation of what I already knew: he will ask the Consistory to attribute to me the difference between the scholarship and the emolument of an acting rabbi, but not that whole emolument, for "one cannot be at the same time rabbi and student."

To come to your letter written regarding Shabbos, I well understand that Schnurmann understands nothing in the *shiur* of the *Rosh Yeshiva*. Until now, I haven't been going to this course either, but like many others, I slip out beforehand. To be able to follow, you have to know by heart, at the least, the *gemara* and *Rishonim*. If he talked about the third *perek* of *Gittin*, I would be able to follow, but he is still discussing the first one. I will nevertheless go to be questioned by him. He asks at random for *dinim* or *she'elos* on the *gemara* and *Tosafos* for a whole *perek*, and naturally we don't have the text in front of us. The most important

1. See above the letter from Chief Rabbi Liber, dated February 24th.

thing is to be able to know clearly the *p'shat* in the *gemara* and *Tosafos*. This is moreover one of the principal occupations of the *Rosh Yeshiva*. In the morning, he learns; in the afternoon, he questions the students and, moreover, takes care of the financial management, which is not a small matter. When someone asks for a *semichah*,[2] he questions him on three to five consecutive days for three to four hours!

I didn't know there was a call-up in April. In any case, it is quite evident that I prefer to be in Mir than in the Army next April.

I suppose that Nathi [Horvilleur] heard news about me from Wimpfheimer; his class is now doing the commission sermons.[3] Samy Klein is not that far as yet, but only in fourth year.

❦ ❦ ❦

Tuesday evening

Minimal mail today, for even *L'Œuvre* let me down. Is it the fault of the Hachette Messagerie or of the Polish PTT, which inspires only a small amount of confidence?

Bensinger asked me if you have dispatched the 11 francs to Seppi. I need to be told at what rate the exchange was made to be able to calculate the sum in zlotys.

Parshas Shekalim[4] went by without splendor; we read the

2. Hebrew: rabbinical ordination.
3. That is the "sermon of departure" before the Administrative Commission of the School.
4. Hebrew: supplementary Torah reading for the Shabbat preceding the month of Adar.

parashah as in Alsace and did *piyyutim*,[5] those of *musaf*.[6] The reading was not interrupted by any *Mi Sheberach*.[7]

Until now, my clothes have suited their purpose very well; if they were not as fine, they would have also done nicely, but even at the yeshiva, I can't wear Papa's jacket; I only put it on at home.

For *Pesach*,[8] I'm very probably staying here, as will Bensinger and many others. It's fairly interesting because the students participate in making *matzos*.[9] Beginning on the 1st of *Nisan*, there is officially vacation, and we can do whatever we want to. In *Tamuz*, on the other hand, I will be going to a holiday resort in Otvotsk, to see the Chassidim with the *Lubavitcher Rebbe*, Kozhnitzer, and any other Chassidic "-itzer."

In my studies (I must speak about them since my life is study), I have come to the *Daf*[10] 40, after having sweated over the difficult *sugya*[11] of *Eved*. In 40a, we are asked two *kushyos* in the first ten lines about the *p'shat* of the *gemara*!

This evening, I ate Polish sardines that are quite comparable to our good French sardines.

Gut Shabbos, love and kisses,

Ernest

5. Hebrew: liturgical poems.
6. Hebrew: the additional prayer recited on Shabbat and festival days.
7. Hebrew: the blessing recited for one who has been called to the Torah.
8. Hebrew: Passover.
9. Hebrew: plural of *matzah*, unleavened bread.
10. Hebrew: folio of two pages, a and b.
11. Aramaic: passage, topic.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Sunday evening [March 13, 1938]

My Dear Ones,

Even at the yeshiva, the current events that hold the whole world in suspense have not gone unnoticed.[1] It is a veritable frenzy that seizes us from time to time when a *bachur* brings fresh sensational news he has just heard on the radio. Some of them think that it's the beginning of Gog and Magog and that the *yemos haMashiach*[2] are not far off. In any case, great things are in preparation, and we don't see yet what will come out of them.

Insofar as what concerns the yeshiva itself, Hitler also makes the German citizens here suffer. Thus, they have just received a letter from their consulate informing them that their passports are renewed but that they are considered *emigranten*, and that, if ever they set foot in Germany, they will be sent to concentration camps. Many of them who wanted to go home for *Pesach* will have to mourn for that. Moreover, since their parents' passports have been taken away, they cannot leave the country eventually to see their children. Finally, until now they have received money by a so-called transfer operation, from which the State took a third; now these transfers take so long that there is grave concern they will never arrive and that these, too, will be forbidden.

Another *bachur*, Carlebach, just obtained his *semichah* from the *Rosh Yeshiva*, and from three or four *gedolei Yisrael*:[3] the *Rav* from Slonim, the one from Brisk, and the one from Nowogrodeck.

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1. It is probably the question of the *Anschluss*, officially announced on March 13th, and followed by the entrance of the Nazi army into Austria on March 17th.
2. Hebrew: "the days of the Mashiach," the Messianic Era.
3. Hebrew: great Torah leaders.

There will also probably be the *Rav* from Mir, who is so great that R. Chaim Ozer Grodzinski[4] often asks him for his opinions on *she'elos*. Thus, this *bachur*, who could now go occupy a position in Germany, has just learned on his return to Mir that he is considered an *unerwünscht*[5] in his country. In such conditions, I think one might say, "*Vive la France!*"

❦ ❦ ❦

Monday evening

I see that normal, even rapid relations have been established in our correspondence, since this evening's postcard from you indicates you have already received the letter I sent on Friday. I got a long and interesting letter from Blanche, posted on Friday. I am often envied for the large number of letters I get!

Your relations with Mr. Bloch[6] are very similar to the variations in the weather that occur here. After sunny days, nights of snow and cold follow, annihilating the whole effect of the sun. For his method of *gemara* is exactly the contrary to the one in usage here and which consists in never allowing a difficult question to go unanswered.

Next week, I will probably be able to give you an interesting report on *Purim*[7] at the *yeshiva*.

From what I have been told, it's altogether *nisht koshe*.[8]

❦ ❦ ❦

4. The rabbi of Vilna, and most revered Torah scholar of his generation.
5. German: undesirable.
6. See Biographical Sketches.
7. Hebrew: Festival of Lots. The letter that was to describe the celebration of this festival at the yeshiva never came down to us.
8. Yiddish: not bad at all.

Tuesday evening [March 15]

Here we have come already to *Erev*[9] *Purim*. I can hardly fathom how short these last months have seemed, because your letters demonstrate that you are not bored either. Tomorrow [the day before *Purim*] will be a day of fasting. Here, they are rather *meikil*[10] with respect to this viewpoint, and many *bachurim*, too weak, do not fast completely. It is true that every day for them is a day of half-fasting, such that they are quite weakened.

There will also be *krepler*[11] for *Purim* here; it's thus a custom spread the world over.

The success of *L'Œuvre*, especially during these times of crisis, increases from day to day. The Poles also want us to *verdaitch*[12] the articles for them.

Gut Purim, *gut Shabbos*, love and kisses,

Ernest

Bischheim will get a direct letter very shortly with the same stamps; hopefully they will not be impatient!

9. Hebrew: the day before.
10. Hebrew: lenient.
11. Yiddish: cooked stuffed pockets of dough.
12. Yiddish: translate.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, March 28, Monday evening [1938]

My Dear Ones,

I have been incredibly spoiled since Friday, since, I received today a second letter in addition to your regular letter, accompanied by yet another from Blanche and another from Nathi [Horvilleur]. Besides, *Le Canard* was again a pleasant surprise; as it itself entitles one of its articles *We Ask for More.*

Also since last Friday, Polish Judaism is in great anxiety since the complete ban of *shechitah*[1] is being decided, which would constitute an absolute catastrophe for the Jews of Poland. It's for this reason that on Friday we did a *ta'anis sha'os*,[2] and since then, we have multiplied our *tefillos* and *tachanunim*.[3] I even heard they want to decree a fast throughout Poland, if not throughout the whole world, with *tekias shofar*.[4] I don't know if people abroad are aware of these measures. It is probably not known either that relatively serious anti-Semitic disturbances occurred in Warsaw this Shabbos. It seems that Polish censorship does not allow this news to filter through. But it doesn't go so far as to control personal correspondence.

There was also a great commotion recently at the yeshiva, because the radio announced that France had occupied Spanish Morocco and was intervening in Spain. This news turned out to be completely false.

❦ ❦ ❦

1. Hebrew: ritual slaughter.
2. Hebrew: several hours of fasting.
3. Hebrew: prayers and supplications.
4. Hebrew: blast of the ram's horn used on *Rosh Hashanah.*

Tuesday evening

Up until now, the weather has been quite cold, and the sun alternates with bursts of snow. Real springtime has not yet come, at least to Mir.

My *rebbe*, before leaving, warmly recommended that I write to him for *Yom Tov*.[5] I haven't yet found his substitute as likeable.

I'm short on news today. Next week, I'll write more since many of you will be reading my letters.

Love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

Here, the oranges from Palestine cost 1.80 zloty per kilo, which is 10 francs — which brings to mind your crate.[6]

5. Hebrew: Jewish holiday. The *rebbe* had probably left to spend the *Pesach* festival with his family, because at the yeshiva, many took a two-week vacation before the festival, starting from the 1st of *Nisan*.
6. The Gugenheim family must have received a crate of Jaffa oranges as a gift, perhaps from Robert Gottlieb (son of the officiating minister in Bouxwiller and Noé Gottlieb's brother), director of the PICA (Palestinian Jewish Colonisation Association).

Ernest Gugenheim to his sister Alice and brother-in-law Achille

Mir, March 30, 1938

My Dear Alice and Achille,

Your letter of February 22nd should certainly have merited a direct response for a very long time. However, my letters to Bouxwiller were always meant to be read directly by you, as well. But since I have learned that, due to unexpected and regrettable events, you have been retained in Bischheim, I delay no longer the present reply. I thus learned that Achille had an abscess that opened and that Alice had caught a chill. Even if I am some 2,000 kilometers away, please know that I sympathize with your fate. I hope that helps. Papa wrote to me in his last letter that Achille volunteered to undergo a blood transfusion on behalf of little Nelly,[1] and I certainly hope it was not in vain.

As for myself, I'm naturally always in good health. Perhaps you have read the description of *Purim* here, which was slightly more celebrated than in the occidental countries. Now, we are already thinking about *Pesach*, many fellows are leaving on vacation, and necessarily the work slackens a bit. In addition, we have already started to make *matzos*. This *matzah*-making is entirely by hand, and just this morning I took part in producing 25 kilos. And it's only the beginning. It's naturally quite interesting. If you wish for details, refer not to your usual newspaper, but to the letter I dispatched this morning to Bouxwiller.

You perhaps also know that Poland wants to ban *shechitah*. For anyone who does not live here, it is impossible to understand the

1. Daughter of Gaston (Achille's brother) and Marthe Blum; she did not recover.

magnitude of the misfortune that has befallen the Jews, as much from the material as from the religious standpoint. Regardless, in an effort to end this scheme, we have been multiplying prayers and fasting here. Thus, tomorrow we will fast all day long; we will sound the *shofar*, which is done only for very particular occasions. This fast will also be observed throughout all Poland. Given all of our efforts, the Poles only want to ban *shechitah* to annoy the Jews.

Until now, I haven't yet written any articles. Perhaps I will decide to do one during vacation when I have a little more leisure.[2]

After a period of ideal springtime, there is now a fresh outbreak of cold, snow and rain. I've never seen anything so inconsistent as the weather in Mir.

I hope you don't already have the enclosed stamps. I have already sent another series twice to Bouxwiller, one of which was implicitly meant for you.

As you very well guessed in your letter, social entertainment such as the cinema and the theater has completely disappeared for me. Besides, I do very well without them.

That's all, and it's late.

Love, kisses and *gut Shabbos,*

Ernest

2. We are not aware of such an article published in 1938; on the other hand, we have reproduced in an appendix the essential part of an article published in *Les Cahiers d'Étude juive*, 1946.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Sunday evening, April 10

My Dear Ones,

Without doubt, this letter will surprise you coming after the postcard dispatched yesterday. But here's the reason: a fellow from the yeshiva had received permission from the Polish government to send 2,000 zlotys to his family in Palestine. At the last moment, this permission was withdrawn, and so here now is his family, who had been waiting for this money with great impatience, without a cent. So, he went around asking about ten foreigners if they might be able to send from home part of this sum, which he will reimburse here. Through Bensinger's intercession, he asked me, too. It would be a matter of wiring, at the day's exchange rate, the value of 100, or rather 200, zlotys, to Yehoshua Roth, Tel Aviv, Dizengoff 264. All associated expenses will be completely reimbursed. I suppose you'll be able to do it and let me know how much it was exactly.

This evening at 10 o'clock, there was the marriage of an American from the yeshiva. It was in the open air, in front of the *shul*, under a beautiful starry sky. The Rav, the *Rosh Yeshiva* and the *Mashgiach* took care of the blessings; the *bachurim* sang and danced. The *chuppah*[1] was a *tallis* supported by four poles held by those present. On the whole, of extreme simplicity and without speeches; on the other hand, there probably will be some at the *seudah*.[2]

I will most likely write my next letter for *Pesach* and not for Shabbos, so as to be able to write again.

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1. Hebrew: wedding canopy.
2. Hebrew: festive banquet.

I have already heard that Léon Blum has resigned; France doesn't look good at the moment, especially from afar.

❦ ❦ ❦

Monday morning

Bensinger tells me this instant that it is necessary to try to settle the wire immediately because it's a question of *pikuach nefesh*.[3] I assume you will be able to do it upon receipt of this letter.

❦ ❦ ❦

Tuesday evening, (April 12)

It's half past 11 o'clock, I'm back from a *beis hamedrash* where there was a sort of protest meeting against the ban on *shechitah*. The different speakers, the older students from the yeshiva, some of whom are true orators, explained to the *baalei batim*[4] in Mir the catastrophe the new *gezerah*[5] represents from the material and especially from the religious standpoint, for it is a veritable *gezeras ha'sh'mad*.[6] Furthermore, a fast with *tekias shofar* has been announced for Thursday. Even today, we have just now said *selichos* with *viddui* and *shofar*, and this prayer has already made a tremendous impression. He who has not taken part in one cannot form an idea at all of what a *tefillah betzibur*[7] is.

Concerning your last letters, it won't be necessary to send me

3. Hebrew: life saving (the Jewish principal of saving a life).
4. Hebrew: "master of the house" (also used in opposition to *b'nei Torah*, those who devote their lives to study).
5. Hebrew: persecution.
6. Hebrew: decree of religious persecution.
7. Hebrew: communal prayer (as opposed to individual prayer).

Soil's brochure on Abarbanel since I was present when he gave that lecture. It is a work of research that is certainly in great part original because he had borrowed all the works by Abarbanel our library possesses.

I think I'm going to write soon to Nathi [Horvilleur]. My last "extraordinary" letters were addressed to Aunt Hortense and Mr. Cohn. During the vacation, I will probably write more.

I'd really like to know what is put into our *bibeles keis*[8] to make it "spicy," to give it its taste. Perhaps you could give me the recipe because the white cheese here has no *ta'am*.[9] Eggs now cost 3 groszy = 18 centimes; it's not surprising we eat two eggs every morning.

Tomorrow, we bake the *matzos*. I'll probably take part in this, only our *balebus* is so *medakdek*[10] that he does it at 7 o'clock in the morning to be the first to use the oven.

I'll send a new *shtickel Torah* shortly, but in French or in *Ivrit*.[11] I have, *b'ezras Hashem*,[12] finished the fourth *perek*, or at least I'll completely finish it this week. Knowing all this well is no small job.

❦ ❦ ❦

Wednesday morning

From 6 o'clock this morning until 9 o'clock, we baked our *matzos*. It's extremely interesting, but in my opinion very complicated compared to the Alsatian production method, since everything is done by hand. There are about ten women who, on a metal plate

8. Alsatian: soft white cheese.
9. Hebrew: taste.
10. Hebrew: exacting, scrupulous.
11. Hebrew: Hebrew language.
12. Hebrew: with God's help.

of impeccable cleanness, make the *matzos* with their rolling pins. They are immediately passed on to two men who, with a special instrument, pierce the holes and then put the *matzos* into the oven for a few instants. Between each batch, we clean and rub so that no remnants of dough remain stuck to the rolling pins or to the metal plate. Hands are also washed before each batch. The *matzos* are naturally not as regular as ours. But in a machine, I wonder how you can have the certitude that no speck of dough remains stuck inside. In any case, here the *kashrus* is guaranteed.

I have to finish because the mail leaves at 11 o'clock, and that's not far off.

I think you will soon have the entire collection of the stamps from here.

Ernest

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, April 13, 1937 [*sic*, in fact 1938]

My Dear Ones,

On Monday evening I received your letter sent on Friday; at your end, I hope you got my postcard and my letter. I think you have been able to take care of the money transfer to Palestine, and I am waiting for the bill, inclusive of all surcharges.

Since I am on matters of money, there are no objections to sending it by registered mail. Bensinger, for example, always gets his in this way. Moreover, we are not in Germany, and we have never heard of the Poles taking the liberty of opening the letters. They open packages and steal half, but the letters not at all. Yesterday, again, a parcel arrived emptied of half its contents.

I also looked at several *sefarim*; the *Mishnayos*[1] mentioned, with a beautiful binding, costs 17 zlotys here; it's even possible to get down to 15. As for the rest, there are many interesting books at reasonable prices. Some *gemaros* analogous to those by Pieterkov, but better printed, cost 1 zloty here.

The frequent changes of French ministries make a mediocre impression, especially from a distance. We were just talking about that this afternoon at the barber shop.

The example of Jacques in his success as an interpreter encourages me to accelerate my progress in Polish. Up until now, my knowledge of this language has been extremely precarious. That's easy to understand if you know that among Jews, you speak Jewish, and among *goyim*, Russian or a Russian dialect.

1. Collection of the Six Orders of the *Mishnah*.

Robert Dreyfus wrote to me that on the 10th of this month, he is getting engaged officially and for good, and that, moreover, he is a candidate in Haguenau. There are two other competitors.

If I remain in Mir for *Pesach*, it is not in the least for reasons of economy, but because I prefer to spend the holiday in an intimate and family circle rather than in a foreign city where I would be alone and lost. The Director had told me once to go and stay with Rabbi Schorr in Warsaw, but according to the *bachurim* at the yeshiva, he is nearly considered a *goy*.

The cleaning in Mir is also worthy of note, it's a complete *tummel*[2] all over the town. In the center, not a house has been spared. I'll be happy when it's over, even if I personally have not suffered particularly.

Bensinger told me that he wants to write to Papa for advice on what he must do to obtain perhaps a position in Alsace; in two or three months, he will have his *semichah*.

When you receive this letter, you will probably be five gathered around the *Seder*.[3] We are five boarders who have stayed on, plus Bensinger's sister. But the *Seder* will certainly take place in the whole family circle.

I cease writing, wishing you *gut Shabbos*, love and kisses, a *koshren Pesach*.[4]

❦ ❦ ❦

2. Yiddish: noisy disorder, chaos.
3. The ceremonial feast on the first two nights of Passover.
4. Yiddish: a Pesach in conformity with the (very meticulous) religious rules.

Thursday morning, April 14

I've just come back from Batsheva's house; it's a *tummel*, something that is *gefehrlich: glie, kashere, hassaka*,[5] etc. I didn't stay long. It is the only day she quarrels with her husband; but then, they make an uproar!

5. German, Yiddish and Hebrew: "terrible," and here he mentions various types of kashering methods, including boiling water, intense flames, etc., so that the untensils can be used during the holiday.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, April 17, 1938

My Dear Ones,

Talk about a correspondence! Yesterday, I get a two-page letter, and today a new one comes, as long as the first!

I informed Bensinger about the negative result for the money transfer to Palestine. After deliberation, he asked me to send first the 200 zlotys by postal money order. Then, he asked if Robert [Gottlieb][1] couldn't turn over to him, for example, 500 zlotys (or more), which he could pay to me or, still better, he could pay that sum to the branch of the PICA, or to some other organization of the sort here in Poland (since this sum is too large for me). He pays cash and has already given me 175 zlotys. Bensinger had used the expression *pikuach nefesh* because the family didn't even have the money to buy *matzos* and, in addition, had concluded a business deal for which he had to make a payment at a given date under penalty of seeing it fall through. These people are in reality quite wealthy, but their money is in Poland, and they can't get it out. He asked me to send this letter by air mail and not to worry about the cost. I wonder if any time is really saved.

Here, at last, is news about *Pesach*. The two *Sedarim* went extremely well; we finished each time after 1 o'clock, singing to avoid having to say anything. The *kushyos* and *teirutzim* followed one another at breakneck pace; our *balebus*, who is moreover a *talmid chacham*,[2] led the ball. Here are a few questions I draw from the lot: Why do we do as did Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah and mention *yetzias mitzrayim* at night, while the *Chachamim*,

1. See *supra* the letter dated Tuesday evening, March 29th.
2. Hebrew expression denoting a well-versed Torah scholar.

who are in the majority, are of a contrary opinion? Why is there first *hashata hacha, leshanah haba'ah b'ar'a de'Yisrael*,[3] and only afterwards, *bnei chorin*,[4] while it would be more natural to be first free before going to Palestine? Why diminish the *neis*[5] by contrasting it to Lavan *shebikesh lahorog es ha'kol*?[6] etc. The food was remarkable, too, and I told the *balebusta* that she knew how to make the *kneidler*[7] as well as we do the *knepfle*[8] at home. At the yeshiva, I once again observed how little attention is given to the *nigun*.[9] Everything was extremely simple, no *piyyut*; little is said, but what is said is well said. Only the *Kaddish* of *Tal*[10] was done as we do at home. The *birkas Kohanim*[11] without the la-la-la. It is not that the *nigun* is disdained, but it's not the *derech ha-avodah*[12] here. In addition, we sang and danced, and this morning there were about 100 *bachurim* who formed a long chain and danced together. *Mer haut visht gemacht*,[13] so it was lovely. The rest of the day was spent sleeping, taking walks or *lehrnen*, as usual.

According to *L'Œuvre*, since two or three days, the situation in France seems to have gotten better, and unless I'm mistaken, the franc has appreciated a bit?

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3. Passage from the beginning of the Haggadah: "This year, we are here; next year, in Eretz Israel!"
4. End of the passage in question: "This year, we are slaves; next year, free."
5. Hebrew: miracle.
6. Quote from the Haggadah: "who wanted to kill them all."
7. Yiddish: small balls made from *matzah* or potato flour, served with the broth.
8. Alsatian word denoting the small balls made from *matzah* flour, eggs and grease, served with the broth.
9. Hebrew: liturgical tunes.
10. Prayer that God may grant dew, in this beginning of springtime; recited on the first day of *Pesach*.
11. Hebrew: blessing recited by the Kohanim, which, in the Alsatian rite, is done with great solemnity.
12. Hebrew: the manner of service.
13. Yiddish: "we have made trouble," which is to say roughly "we made a lot of noise."

With regard to *matzos* machines, I never said the population here was against them; the proof is that, in addition to the manual production process, there are two machines in the Mir proper.

There are many fellows who did not put on the *tefillin* this morning, *Chol HaMoed.*[14]

Ernest

14. Hebrew: the "weekdays" between festivals; which is to say, the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th days of Pesach. Considered as semi-holidays, certain kinds of work are avoided, and many communities do not don the *tefillin*, as on holidays. (This is not the case for Alsatian Jews.)

Chief Rabbi Liber to Rabbi Max Gugenheim

April 4, 1938

My Dear Colleague,

The permanent Section of the Central Consistory having met last week, I submitted the request concerning your son.

It has accepted to grant him the same allocation it pays to acting rabbis, namely 500 francs per month (less 5% retained for retirement), from the 1st of April to the 1st of October, 1938.

Would you be kind enough to let me know if this sum should be sent to you or to your son?

Will he be coming to the house for Passover vacation?

Please rest assured, my Dear Colleague, of my faithful sentiment,

Maurice Liber

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

Mir, April 18, 1938

Monsieur Director and Dear Master,

By the present letter, I wish to express to you, somewhat belatedly it is true, my deepest gratitude. My father did let me know that, at your request, the Consistory had granted me the allocation it pays to acting rabbis, from the 1st of April to the 1st of October, 1938.

As you see, I am spending the vacation and the *Pesach* festival "in the Mir." During this period of *Bein ha'z'manim*,[1] the yeshiva is practically empty, and those who have stayed here of course work a little less than during the *z'man*[2] itself. There are nevertheless a great number of *bachurim* who study eight hours a day.

Among the finest studies that have been given for me to do here, the Torah of Reb Chaim Brisker must be mentioned especially. In the Introduction to his work, it is said of him: "*Kol mi shelo shama divrei Toraso v'lo ra'ah derekh limudo lo ra'ah Torah miyamav*."[3]

After my three-month stay, I already feel how much I regret having to leave the yeshiva so early, without being able perfect my studies. Happily, I am still far from the departure.

Please accept, Monsieur Director, the assurance of my greatest respect, as well as my belated wishes for a *kosheren Pesach*,[4]

Ernest Gugenheim

1. Hebrew: between the semesters.
2. Hebrew: semester.
3. Hebrew: "He who has not heard the words of his Torah, nor seen the style of his study, has never seen the Torah in his life."
4. Yiddish: a Pesach that conforms to the (very meticulous) religious rules.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, April 20, 1938

My Dear Ones,

With all my letters and supplementary postcards, I will be at a loss to fill the present ordinary and weekly letter. Nevertheless, I believe I didn't tell you in my report on the first days here, that, at the *Seder*, the son of the *balebus*, a thirteen year-old boy, at the moment of the *Ma nishtanah*, begins: "*Pape, eich vill dir frehgen feer kashess*"[1] and at the end: "*Nu, Pape, entfer meer e terets oif meine kashess.*"[2] In addition, before each part of the *Seder*, he had to indicate exactly what had to be done.

As you can imagine, the *yom tov* does not go by without greater expenditures, but it's not anything special because the first days cost, all included, about 8 zlotys, and I assure you that we eat and drink as we ought to.

I wrote to Rabbi Liber; it's not surprising that he hadn't written again — probably he was waiting for the end of the month to send a money order.

Élie [Bloch] wrote to me from Haguenau; I have the impression he has become completely gentrified, no longer interested in politics: he writes to me about his little Myriam who sleeps without crying from 8 in the evening to 8 in the morning. He writes besides that, in spite of E.'s maneuvers, Dreyfus is lucky to have been appointed in Haguenau.

We go now already to the *shul* at 7:30 in the morning because

1. Yiddish: Daddy, I want to ask you four questions.
2. Yiddish: Well, Daddy, please answer my questions.

8:30 is the limit for the *krias shema*;[3] we need 1 hour and a half for the *Chol HaMoed* services, even Schönberg[4] does them faster, and yet it doesn't seem too long.

It's still pretty chilly, even cold outside, and you can still see snow showers alternating with a pale sun. It's not the moment yet to put on the summer coat for good!

A suit was just sent to Aron Wolf; only instead of the clothes, he received a letter from Customs according to which he must present a certificate that he needs it due to his limited means. He goes to the town hall to pick up his certificate, and the Poles, those hoodlums, tell him that they do believe in his word but feel no obligation to issue such a certificate to him. Like it or not, the suit will probably go back to its country of origin.

That will be all for today.

Love and kisses, *gut Shabbos*, *gut yom tov*,

Ernest



A synagogue in Mir known as the "Kaldschul" (the cold synagogue)

3. The recitation of the *Shema* in the morning has to be done during the first quarter of the day.
4. The officiating cantor of the Bouxwiller synagogue.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Tuesday, May 4, 1938

My Dear Ones,

Today the summer *z'man* has begun; we are learning [Tractate] *Kiddushin*, but many students are still absent. Each day the motor car brings in ten or twenty fellows, the result being that, with all this commotion, we aren't yet working at full steam. Beginning on next Sunday, the true *hasmada*[1] will start. Nevertheless, you can already see a great difference compared to *Bein ha'z'manim*.

In the counting of the *Omer*[2] that they say here with great *kavanah*,[3] as with any *berachah* as well, they don't say "*yamim la'omer*," but, rather "*yamim ba'omer*."[4] This aside, the count is the same.

Today, Bensinger sent his sister back to Krakow.[5] He's all the same a great guy, and remarkable in every respect. He also told me recently how much his parents have already suffered and suffer every day. Their situation gets worse every day.

The weather is already very good now, to the point where you sometimes have to go out without a coat. But in the evening, the freshness and even the cold return with vigor. The sun has brought me a relatively new spectacle. Every day, and especially

1. Hebrew: constancy, perseverance.
2. Hebrew: name given to the 49-day period between *Pesach* and *Shavuos*. Each evening, the number of days already gone by is counted, and a blessing is recited beforehand.
3. Hebrew: concentration.
4. Hebrew: *Ha'yom yom eh'chad ba'omer* (or *la'omer*), "today is one day of the Omer." The formulation of the blessing recited in Mir was slightly different, with "*ba'omer*" ("in the Omer") in place of "*la'omer*" ("of the Omer").
5. She was studying in Krakow at the pedagogical seminary of Sarah Schnierer.

on Shabbos, the "Jewlettes" stroll along the "main street" — where I happen to live, in the middle of town — in the latest fashions (of Mir, to be sure), but in colors altogether exotic, yellow, green, red, and that can be seen from a distance. They are capable of strolling in this way 50 or 100 or 1000 times on a Shabbos afternoon, much worse than at the Brummel store[6] in Strasbourg. And what's interesting is to see the efforts they make to attract the attention of the yeshiva's *bachurim*. You can feel their desire to escape from here to go out into the vast world and the great cities, Paris, London or New York, little difference does it make. Unfortunately for them, the *bachurim* don't react in the slightest, and if ever one of them gets engaged, it's with the daughter of a Rav or with a graduate from a Beis-Yaakov school,[7] and not with one of these "*vildeh Tiere*,"[8] as Batsheva calls them when she makes a *drashah*[9] on the *middos* of a *tz'nu'idikeh*.[10] Needless to say that she herself always wears a *tichel*.[11]

That's all, love and kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

6. Department store in Strasbourg.
7. Name of the schools created by Sarah Schnierer.
8. Yiddish: little savages, wild animals.
9. Hebrew: sermon.
10. Hebrew and Yiddish: the virtues of a modest girl.
11. Yiddish: scarf (to cover her hair).

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, May 10, 1938

My Dear Ones,

The summer *z'man* is, in reality, very short because by mid-*Tamuz* most of the students leave on vacation, and the real *lehrnen* doesn't start again until *Rosh Chodesh Elul* and, from that moment onward until *Simchat Torah*, it is so to speak the apogee of the *lehrnen*. There are even many foreigners who come especially for *Elul* and the *Yamim Noraim*,[1] which are terrific. To me, it's only too bad that I can't learn *Yoreh Deah* to obtain *semichah*. Bensinger, with whom I always go for walks on Shabbos, which moreover enables me to see just how remarkable he truly is, repeats all the time that I should stay two years and shows me all the great advantages I would gain from that. He's probably right, but he doesn't conceive of all the obstacles and insurmountable impediments.

In regards to my last letter, truth requires that I correct a small inexactitude: in *Gittin*, I only began at the third *perek*, and not at the first. For *Kiddushin*, it's extremely interesting, especially since my *rebbe* explains it with an unmatched clarity. I now work every day from 6 o'clock to 7, before the *davenen*, then from 8 o'clock to 8:45, from 9:30 to 2:30, from 4 o'clock to about 9. If I count correctly, that makes 10 or 11 hours, which isn't bad.

For the Omer, here they only know the *talmidim*[2] of Rabbi Akiva. Here, everyone has a dirty beard, but in other yeshivot, like

1. The "Days of Awe," strictly speaking, the holidays *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*; and, by extension, the ten-day period that includes both.
2. Hebrew: disciples.

the one in Brisk, for example, the whole yeshiva, with the *Rosh Yeshiva* in the lead, shaves during this period.[3]

This will give you a short, general idea of the *lehrnen* here:

Concerning the third *Tosafos* of *Kiddushin*, *Tosafos* says that we deduce *shaveh kesef ke'kesef* for *Kiddushin* [effecting a marriage bond] from *eved ivri* [the acquisition of a Hebrew slave]. Yet further on, it says that (as far as the principle is concerned), it is not possible to derive *nezikin* from *eved Ivri*, because [for *eved Ivri*] a *kulah* is made due to the motive of *shelo yitma' bein ha'akum* (easing the redemption of the Hebrew slave so he does not become assimilated among the idolatrous). But then, from this motive, how is it possible to deduce *Kiddushin* from *eved Ivri*? (If one cannot derive *nezikin* from *eved Ivri* because he wants to show himself particularly indulgent for the latter, one should not deduce *Kiddushin* from *eved Ivri* either.) According to this *terets* (which is to say, after the explanation given farther along by *Tosafos*), it should therefore be possible to deduce *Kiddushin* from *nezikin*. There will be another difficulty, since after the first *terets* by *Tosafos*; we see that for *nezikin*, there is the motive of *meitav* (which is to say, the obligation of paying with the best property, requirement that exists neither for *eved Ivri*, nor for *Kiddushin*). And, as a result, how can *Kiddushin* be deduced from that? Answer: *lo kasha* ("this is not difficult"). What does the *din* of *meitav* signify? The Torah says that if the *nizak* (victim of the damage) wants *meitav*, he has the right, but if he wants *ziborit* (the least good land of the person responsible for the damage), who can prevent him if he himself desires it? For a woman, it is

3. During this period, 33 days of mourning are observed in remembrance of the death of 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva. One of the rites of mourning consists in neither shaving nor having one's hair cut. Since the plague ceased on the 18th of *Iyar*, there stops the mourning in Mir; while in the Alsatian rite, the mourning takes into account the victims of the Crusades, ending at the beginning of the month of *Sivan*.

the same: if she wants *shaveh kesef*, it is given to her, just as it is given to the *nizak* (who accepts the less good land), and *shaveh kesef ke'kesef*. If she does not want that, too bad for her, she will not get the *Kiddushin*![4]

I hope that you can understand this gibberish, which I am evidently writing by heart, without any *Gemara* at hand. And this is only a minute part of what can be said about this *Tosafos*.

And I cease writing, love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

4. The possibility of forming matrimonial bonds (*Kiddushin*) by giving money to a woman is deduced from a semantic analogy (*Kiddushin* 2a). When Abraham acquired the cave of Machpelah, he told Ephron (Gen. 24:13), "I gave the money for the field: take it..." With respect to marriage, it is written (Deut. 24:1) "When a man takes a wife..." The first *mishnah* of *Kiddushin* specifies that a woman can be "acquired" for a *perutah* or for the exchange value of a *perutah* (*shaveh kesef*). [Therefore, *shaveh kesef ke'kesef*, "the exchange value of the money is like money," or the payment in kind is like payment in money.]
In *Kiddushin* 16a, the *gemara* deduces from the expression "He shall return a sum equivalent to the price of his acquisition to redeem him" (Lev. 25:51), that a Hebrew slave (*eved Ivri*) may be bought back not only with money in cash but also with the money equivalent in kind.
In *Baba Kamma* 7a, with respect to damages (*nezikin*) caused to a bull or to an ass that has fallen into a well, the *gemara* deduces from the verse (Ex. 21:34): "The owner of the pit shall pay; he shall return money to the owner...", that the indemnity may be paid in kind.
The *Tosafot* explain as well that it is not possible to deduce *eved Ivri* from *nezikin* because the author of the damages must pay "with the best (*meitav*) of his fields" (see Ex. 22:4).

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Sunday evening, May 15, 1938

My Dear Ones,

I'm beginning already the present letter today since I've got something fairly interesting to communicate. This afternoon, the *Rosh Yeshiva* let me know that the *staroste*, i.e., the governor of the *powiat*, let us say a Prefect, was going to come to Mir and would naturally pay a visit to the yeshiva. I would be speaking, in the name of the yeshiva's foreign colony, to wish him welcome. A half an hour or an hour later, the *staroste* came and, after a Polish *bachur*, I pronounced a half-improvised short speech in French. There were at least a thousand people at the yeshiva; three or four of them, at the most, the *staroste* included, understood what I said. After the usual compliments, I expressed our gratitude with respect to hospitable Poland and, in my role as a Frenchman, I particularly exalted the Franco-Polish friendship, etc. At the end, the *staroste* rose and said, "Thank you very much, Sir!" while shaking my hand, which he had been very careful not to do with my predecessor. The *Rosh Yeshiva* called me later to his lodgings so that I could repeat my speech to him in Yiddish, and he was quite happy with it. In addition, I have repeated it again at least twenty times to the *bachurim*, and I gained today an incredible popularity. In his speech, the *staroste* quoted me several times, once even because I had especially mentioned Pildzuski;[1] as a protector of Jews, while, says he, all Poland protects them! In town, too, they are talking only about me today! They say the prime minister will be coming here; if he does, I'll take care to

1. See the Introduction.

prepare my speech ahead of time, for a speech in French cannot be avoided. It has remained the language of the Polish aristocracy. You see that even in "the Mir," I have not forgotten that I learned homiletics.

❦ ❦ ❦

Tuesday evening

I don't know if I wrote to you that my temporary *rebbe* for the *Pesach* holidays got engaged this week. Hence the great *simcha* at the yeshiva, and as a *talmid*, I had to contribute a bit by distributing cigarettes.

At the moment, it's as hot here as during the hottest days of August at home. That's what's called, so it seems, a continental climate. In any case, it's pretty difficult to work as I should. Happily, we go for a swim in the lake every day. A minor nuisance: you come out of the water a little dirtier than before. As for a bathing suit, one is not needed.

Your letters and postcard have reached me, interesting as usual. Robert Dreyfus also wrote to me that he had been appointed in Haguenau. In addition, I got a very kind letter from Uncle Camille and Aunt Ida,[2] only he didn't breathe a word about the *talmudim* I had asked him to send. You yourself must have gotten a letter last week from Bensinger. The subscription to *L'Œuvre* came to an end in the first days of May. I no longer need it; if, from time to time, even at long intervals, I get a newspaper, it will suffice amply.

I see that the rabbinate in Bouxwiller is expanding more and more. Will Papa have to go twice a week to Bischwiller? Wouldn't

2. Rabbi Camille Bloch from Dornach (Haut-Rhin department), Rabbi Max Gugenheim's colleague and brother-in-law.

Haguenau have been better for the one and for the other because of its location?

I just received my new *tefillin*, 100% kosher; I would much like to show them to you. They cost me 30 zlotys since I used the *parshiyos*[3] from my old *tefillin*, which were good even in the critical eyes of a *sofer* from Mir, who does not admit the slightest *safek*. Probably I will need a little money for *Rosh Chodesh*, but only at this date. Without this supplementary expense, I would have had enough to pay for the month. Nevertheless, the Daladier franc[4] doesn't afford much pleasure. If only the zloty were to tumble!

Be'ein acher akatser,[5] love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

3. Hebrew: these are the parchment scrolls on which are inscribed the four Biblical passages placed inside the *tefillin*.
4. The French franc was devalued under the Daladier government on May 4th for the third time since 1936, when the *Front populaire* came to power.
5. Hebrew: "having nothing else (to add), I abridge."

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Tuesday, May 24, 1938

My Dear Ones,

This week, I neither have to speak about the *staroste* nor about the *voivode*,[1] and thus the present letter will be more difficult to round out. The presence of these well-known figures has nevertheless completely changed Mir. They indeed found that there was not in all Poland (*guzmah b'alma*)[2] a town more poorly managed. Thus, the order was issued, under penalty of severe fines, to demolish all the old constructions and palisades that denature the panorama. Since everything has been made in wood that time has made worm-eaten, these orders were executed with rare promptitude, and on the next day, a new house in wood could replace the ruins of the former. Now is announced the arrival of a hygiene commission that is especially going to inspect the toilets. So, fines will rain down!

I have a new financial question to examine. The *Mashgiach* asked me to find out if he can send money through me to his wife in Palestine. However, he would like to know if he would gain anything by doing it in this way. Here he can buy the Palestinian pound for 26 zlotys. He imagines that if he makes an additional transaction through the franc, he will thus obtain the pound for less. In spite of what I told him, he asked me to find out; I therefore await confirmation. If 4 pounds cost him 105 zlotys, he's ready to go ahead with the transaction.

One can very well apply to "the Mir" the verse of Psalm 104:25

1. Slavic word: a local ruler or governor.
2. Aramaic: exaggeration.

"...*sham remes ve'ein mispar, chayos ketanos im gedolos.*"[3] Not a day goes by in which we are completely spared (by the fleas).

I had given slightly inexact details on the vacation. First, you should know that there are never real vacations here. The fact is that a great number of students leave Mir during the dog days of summer to rest in the countryside or in the spa towns. But the *z'man* goes up until *Tishrei*, after the holidays, and what must especially be seen, so it seems, is the *lehrnen* in *Elul* and the *tefillah*[4] during the *Yamim Noraim* [High Holy Days]. As for me, I don't at all know what will happen in *Tamuz*, and I still have lots of time to think about it.

To study *Yoreh Deah*, five or six months of thoroughly intensive studies are necessary, and the *Rosh Yeshiva* never gives a *semichah* before a year's stay here.

The Neitre Yeshiva has trumpeted much noise about itself, but it is not really to be recommended. There are three or four fellows here who have studied there and who figure among the worst here. They observe a curious super-Orthodox religion that manifests itself in odd *minhagim* that have little to do with the true *din*. Those who can't endure this method there easily become reactionary. Near here, in Kamenitz, there is a renowned yeshiva whose *Rosh Yeshiva* is one of the greatest authorities of our times.

I believe that the international <u>situation</u>[5] was strained these past days, but I think that it's calmer again. In Germany, on the contrary, the <u>situation</u> of the Jews is catastrophic: Bensinger told me, for example, about the terrible <u>situation</u> in which his nearly destitute parents find themselves.

I regret not having seen your beautiful blaze, but that occurs here, too.

---

3. "Look at the sea, so great, so wide! It teems with countless creeping creatures, living beings, both large and small."
4. Hebrew: prayer.
5. The underlining is the author's, showing he was conscious of the repetitions!

I ordered some asparagus from the *balebusta*, but she doesn't know how to cook it, and mayonnaise is for her a thing unknown. If I dared, I would make some one day, but I fear it (the mayonnaise) would spoil.

Do you know you could pay my correspondence by sending me international coupons for stamps? At the current rate of the franc, it would make a serious difference.

With this, love, kisses and *gut Shabbos,*

Ernest

Ernest Gugenheim to his sister Alice and brother-in-law Achille

Mir, May 25, 1938

My Dear Achille and Alice,

For several days already, I've been wanting to write to you, and at last I decided to do it this evening so that you will get another letter before the one you will read in Bouxwiller. About you, good news has reached me recently; it seems that both of you are doing good work. I suppose you learned also that I had the "awesome honor" of welcoming the *staroste* and that he left satisfied.

This sensational event aside, my life passes by evenly from 6 o'clock in the morning to 10 at night in the ways and byways of the Talmud and the rest in my bed. Obviously, I also eat in between times.

I haven't yet written an article; I started two of them, and with time and hope, they will be finished one day, even before my return. I don't know if they will accept to give them *for impression* [to the printer] or what impression they will make.[1]

In the last few days, I sense that politics were very interesting. I'm not sure, though, because I no longer receive *L'Œuvre*. If ever you have an interesting newspaper, I am a big fan.

I wear a quite gorgeous beard at this moment, six weeks old, and cleaned on *Lag Ba'Omer*.[2] It's not simply a piece around the chin, but a collar *à la* Hirschler[3] before he trimmed it. Moreover,

1. See the letter to the same recipients, dated March 30th: no article seems to have been published on the yeshiva during this period.
2. The 33rd day of the *Omer* that interrupts the mourning rites of the *Omer*, definitively or for 24 hours, according to the *minhag*.
3. See the Biographical Sketches.

soon I will make it disappear even though it is already popular at the yeshiva.

❦ ❦ ❦

Friday

At this instant, I receive the letter from Bouxwiller informing me, among other things, of the death of Edmond in Saint-Louis.[4] From his appearance, you would not have suspected such a weakness.

Alice, would you know of a good recipe against these little beasts that come bother me rather frequently?[5] I have been told of a means here, but it is really a bit too complicated. It consists of catching them first, then of tickling their tummies, which makes them laugh and then open their mouths. All that remains to be done is to introduce your finger, and there they are asphyxiated! There are perhaps other, more simple means, but are they as efficient?

I regret not sending you more beautiful stamps, but the series here quickly runs out of stock.

The Establishment Achille Lévy just sent, without being solicited, 500 francs to the yeshiva, which acknowledged this fine gesture by a letter of thanks. I'm aware of this because the *Rosh Yeshiva* asked me if I knew them.

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4. This is probably the nephew of Léonie Gugenheim, son-in-law of his sister and of his brother-in-law, Emile Jacob, who several years later was co-opted by Rabbi Camille Bloch in Aix-les-Bains and who contributed to the organization of an active religious life there. He was later arrested and deported with his wife in April 1944. Their daughter, Germaine, who remained a widow with two sons, one being Gérard (see the following letter), married again several years after the war.
5. Alice was a pharmacist.

Even by racking my brains, I wouldn't find anything more to say.

Therefore, love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, May 30, 1938

My Dear Ones,

I received with much grace these recent days your letters and postcard, newspaper and money. The money order arrived today, which is to say just at the right time. I was naturally also very satisfied with the 15 zlotys for my sick *chaver*.[1] I wouldn't have written to Blanche about this if he weren't one of the greatest *lamdanim*[2] here, who possibly can be saved even now and for whom as a consequence we can apply the *maamar Chazal*:[3] Saving a soul in Israel is like saving *ha'olam kulo*.[4] If Blanche sends about as much, it's already a very generous contribution from my part, even if in zlotys it doesn't have the same effect as in francs.

I showed Bensinger the news concerning him, rather negative news as expected. He still counts a very small amount on Liber, who is indeed able to do something, if he wants to.

I suppose the double officiation of services in Bischwiller is now organized normally. Or perhaps not; is it Haguenau that has been attributed at last to the domain of Bouxwiller?

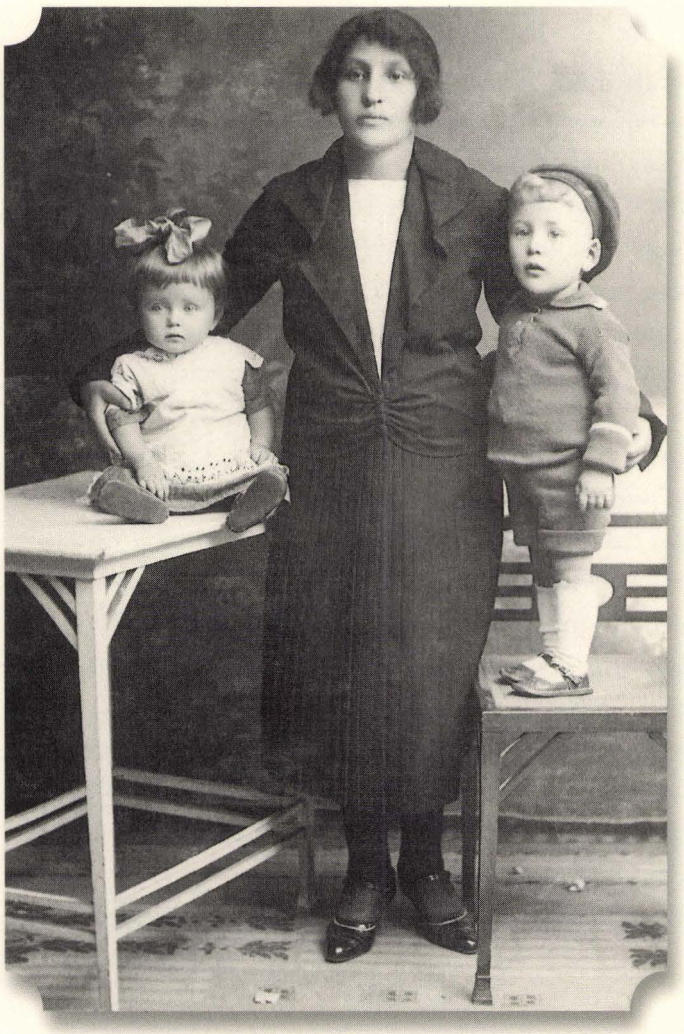
I would never have believed that Edmond was so sick and gravely ill. I wrote a letter right away to Saint-Louis, on Friday. With Gérard, you will have a little more life in the house; perhaps he will also be altogether tolerable.

I don't think I told you that Batsheva has a little Yerucham

1. Hebrew: friend, or study partner.
2. Hebrew: accomplished student in the Torah.
3. Hebrew: teaching of the Sages.
4. Hebrew: the whole world.

who is a year and a half old and who is beginning to speak, to *davenen*, to kiss the *mezuzah*,[5] etc.

I just realized that I have already been here for five months, and I find the time passes extremely fast. Next year, in the



Batsheva

5. Hebrew: parchment bearing two paragraphs from the Torah that is inserted into a case that is fixed to the doorframe of a house, and to rooms in a house.

[military] service, it probably won't be the same thing. All those who present themselves as conscripts here diet beforehand and look like skeletons when they appear before the Draft Board. That doesn't always prevent them from being inducted, unless they have bought the doctor. For that, too, we collect a lot of money here under the heading of *pidyon shevuyim*.[6]

Thus, there will be five of you again reading this letter. I repeat once more that I like to receive interesting newspapers from time to time. Bensinger, too, said he feels himself return to life when reading a French newspaper after several weeks of privation.

Up till now, my *kevius*[7] from 6 to 7 o'clock in the morning has been observed pretty regularly, but at present my pal is already seriously weakening, and I'm not doing much better. After the rest of *Shavuos*, we will begin again with renewed vigor.

I will perhaps find something more tomorrow. In the meantime, love, kisses, *gut Shabbos*, *gut Yomtov*,

Ernest

6. Hebrew: the redemption of captives.
7. Hebrew: routine study periods at set times.

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

Mir, June 7, 1938

Monsieur Director and Dear Master, *nero yair*,

On this day after *Shavuos*, it is agreeable for me to tell you once again the complete satisfaction I feel in living the life of the Mir Yeshiva. Study, prayer, the joys of the yeshiva are unique experiences, lessons probably that it alone is capable of teaching.

Yet here suddenly, as a holiday gift, yesterday I received from the Draft Bureau the announcement that my deferment expires on October 1, 1938; it asks me, in addition, if I prefer to be inducted with the next contingent or if I wish to renew my deferment for a year. When I left this winter for the yeshiva, it was for one year that I had left. Nevertheless today, at the moment of signing the act determining my departure, I was not able to do it without asking for your advice. It is only now that I am aware of all the influence the yeshiva can exert. I see what I have learned here, I see still better what remains for me to learn. If I have to leave in October, I would be as if uprooted from this captivating milieu, at the very moment when I begin to understand fully the meaning of the *lehrnen* and to savor all of its pleasure. Moreover, I would have to abandon adding to my diploma from the Paris Seminary, the *semichah* from Mir, which would have fittingly ended my studies at the yeshiva, and without which I would always have the sentiment that these studies have remained unfinished.

Staying one more year at the yeshiva therefore seems to me not only an inestimable extra, but truly a necessity. Yet, once more, the question of money looms as the principal obstacle to this project, which is why I wanted to ask if it were possible that the Consistory continue to grant me a scholarship for this year.

I know well it is a hard sacrifice that I am soliciting, but I dare hope as you yourself once affirmed, that this sacrifice would not be useless.

Please accept, Monsieur Director, the assurance of my greatest respect,

Ernest Gugenheim

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents and Brother

Mir, June 8, 1938

My Dear Papa, Mama and Jacques,

This is the first time I write my whole letter on Wednesday. The reason for this modification is extremely simple: it is because I was busy yesterday evening writing a letter to Liber. Indeed, at the receipt of the demand from the Draft Board, I thought what an incomparable advantage a second year in Mir would mean for me. I believe that not even you can imagine what my sojourn here signifies. I just lived through a *Shavuos*... I would never have expected that such a *hislahavus*[1] existed and, so I am told, it does not come near the exaltation on *Yamim Noraim* or *Simchas Torah*. In short, a second year would be an immense enrichment. Obviously the minor nuisances are irrelevant. If there were serious problems to face, that would be an additional reason to stay on and defeat them, to follow the *midrash* about *Zos haTorah, adam ki yamus be'ohel: ein haTorah miskayemes ela lemi shemeimis atsmo be'ohel Torah.*[2]

The principal obstacle would be the question of money. That's why I wrote a very fine letter to the Director asking if the Consistory would accept to pay for me next year again, which for a start would enable me to get by. If that were really to happen, and I suppose you have nothing against it, I would come home in the next month to rest until *Rosh Chodesh Elul*; otherwise, like it or not, I'll have to come home by *Rosh Hashanah*. In the latter case, I would probably stay here the whole summer, unless the

1. Hebrew: enthusiasm, exaltation — literally, a blaze.
2. Numbers 19:14: "This is the Torah: when a man dies in a tent..." Rashi: "The Torah is sustained only in he who studies to death in the tent of the Torah."

heat makes work impossible, and if so, I would travel around Poland for a couple of weeks, but the first alternative is more attractive to me.

The brilliance of the festival was increased still more by an abundant correspondence from Bouxwiller, Paris and Bischheim. Too bad that I wasn't in Paris to see the treasure of the rue Mouffetard![3]

All week long, Aron Wolf was sick, as was my *rebbe*. As a result, I was frequently occupied with *bikur cholim*.[4] It was naturally too bad for Aron not being able to attend the *smachos*.[5] I forgot to say we stayed up all night from the Shabbos to Sunday; at half past 3, we started *davenen*; after the *davenen*, there was even a *kiddush*[6] at the yeshiva, and at about 7 o'clock, we went to bed. At 3 o'clock in the afternoon, I woke up and went to eat.

As for the *Mashgiach*'s reckoning, it's not so complicated. From here, evidently he can't send anything, and as a result, he always does it via a foreign country. Through Holland, for example, the Palestinian pound costs him 26 zlotys. No matter, I told him that through France, he would lose a good deal in the trade, so the affair is settled.

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3. In the demolition of the building situated at 53 rue Mouffetard, in May 1938, was discovered a treasure hidden by Louis Nivelle, the king's privy officer, counselor and secretary, consisting of 3,351 gold coins, most bearing the image of Louis XV. The coins were wrapped in a paper by which Louis Nivelle declared he bequeathed them to his daughter, Anne-Louise-Claude. In 1952, these coins were turned over to her 84 descendants, with the exception of the share allotted to the City of Paris and to the workmen who made the discovery, after deduction of the sum required to cover the expenses of the genealogists. The treasure was worth more than 16,000,000 francs at that date. (From Jacques Hillairet, *Connaissance du vieux Paris*, Le Club Français du Livre, Paris 1956).
4. Hebrew: visiting the sick.
5. Hebrew: celebrations.
6. Hebrew: sanctification of the festival over a cup of wine, followed by a light meal.

The stamp affixed to this envelope was bought with the coupon; it's an altogether serious economy.

Bensinger has asked me again for an important and well-known address of Isaïe:[7] Edmond Bauer, 63 avenue des Vosges.

What we ate on *Shavuos* was mostly *milchig*.[8] I have given up on asparagus, but on the other hand, I introduced into the *stanzie* the good lettuce salad with oil and vinegar dressing, which represents a completely unknown dish for the Miriens.

Since I'm already encroaching on *seder*, I must leave off.

Love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

7. Perhaps Isaïe Schwartz, the Chief Rabbi of the Bas-Rhin department, then of France in 1939.
8. Yiddish: dairy products.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, June 15, 1938

My Dear Ones,

I'm not particularly inspired this evening since not much new has happened these days. Nevertheless, a new *gezerah*[1] has just fallen upon the Germans in our yeshiva. All those who wish to prolong their visa receive a refusal in response from the *staroste*, with the order to leave the Polish territory within a week, under penalty of expulsion. This measure probably concerns all the parts of Poland where Germans are in a great number. Naturally, practically all of them have no idea where to go. A representation will probably be made to the ministry, but the result is very uncertain. The yeshiva will also suffer a great deal since there are 40 Germans among its students.

I am waiting at the moment for Liber's answer which, I hope, will not take as long as in Bensinger's affair. I'm even a little surprised by his silence on that subject.

I remind you that on *Shavuos* the only *piyyut* which was said here was *Akdamus*. On *Rosh Hashanah*, nothing was added to the normal prayer, but the prayer lasted until 3 o'clock in the afternoon and the window panes trembled when we said *Amen*! Do you understand that?

When Aron Wolf saw the *Neue Nachrichten*[2] with sports news, he jumped upon it, exclaiming: "*Des esch awer gfitzt.*"[3] You have to know that in Strasbourg, he belonged to a soccer club.

I remember very well the farmer in Volksberg, who claimed

1. Hebrew: decree of persecution.
2. *Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, daily newspaper in its Alsatian version.
3. Alsatian: this is great!

that the air in his village must certainly equal the air in Paris, as well as the motto inscribed in Mr. Bachmann's guestbook.

Since *Shavuos*, I had stopped working between 6 and 7 o'clock before the *davenen*, but I started again today. My pal, on the other hand, has completely abandoned doing it because if he works so early, he remains tired all day long. In the beginning, until you get used to it, that's indeed the case.

In my next letter, I'll probably be able to send back the recruitment form to you and let you know if we'll have to wait for my return until *Elul*. Yet it's impossible to understand that you find the time so long. There are Americans here who haven't been home for five years, who left as fifteen-year-old kids over there, and who return worthy of being *rabbanim*.[4] And I, I've been here for barely five months.

❦ ❦ ❦

Wednesday

The *Mashgiach* just delivered his *Inyan*, which he presents each week to the European occidentals. He frequently says very interesting things, only for a Frenchman it's often very long. Still you always profit from it.

Love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

4. Hebrew: rabbis.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

B.E.H.[1]

Mir, Tuesday, June 21 [1938]

My Dear Ones,

As you guessed, I somewhat expected your last letter. Nevertheless, I persist in believing that the most important obstacle for a prolongation of my stay here remains the question of money. In fact, it would certainly not have occurred to me to want to stay on here if I hadn't the conviction that Liber will not let me down. If, for example, he were to give an affirmative response, would that not be a striking proof of what I am saying? If, on the other hand, his answer is negative, any deliberation on the subject would be superfluous or useless. But let us suppose he does stand by me; this year would certainly not damage my prospects for obtaining a post. Furthermore, it is absolutely certain that I would have no difficulty adapting myself to France, and my mentality would not suffer in any way. The best proof is Bensinger, who is nonetheless much more influenced than I can ever be, and yet no one in Alsace notices. Yes, if I were in Neitre or in another yeshiva of the sort, where you can see the profession of the *bachurim* inscribed on their faces, that could be, but Mir is a modern yeshiva where on the Shabbos we're better dressed than in Paris at the [Rabbinical] School; and any old fellow who graduates from here can, without looking unsightly, take his place anywhere. There remains, I repeat, the question of money.

If I get the Paris funds, I guarantee you that I'll know how to manage; but for that, we still have time to think about it. In

1. *Be-ezras Hashem*. Hebrew: with God's help.

any case, my opinion is that Liber ought to answer me soon, and Bensinger too. However, Wimpfheimer wrote to me that he was in Antwerp last week, and therefore busy. Thus, let's wait.

Aron Wolf wants, in fact, to stay on here for several more years. It's his uncle in Zurich who pays for the stay since his parents would be unable to. As for his future, he's not seriously concerned about it.

Last week's press also gave me great pleasure.

At the moment, we eat lots of strawberries, and vegetables are becoming more frequent. I suppose at home the strawberry season is already over. What's curious is that the Americans here can eat them only in a glass of cream and sugar. Besides, speaking of cream, they never eat it without buttered bread!

For the last few days, it's been cold outside, consequently excellent weather for working. In the evening, it's always cold to the extent that you can't go out without a coat. On this account, I'm well equipped.

I read from time to time some Yiddish, for example a novel by Scholem Asch, and it's already going quite fluently.

For this evening, I'm finished.

Gut Shabbos, love and kisses,

Ernest

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, [June] 28, [1938], Tuesday

My Dear Ones,

It was only this evening that I got the registered letter with its complete and interesting contents. It was accompanied by newspaper clippings, but I haven't yet seen where they're from. I was also well furnished this week in this domain, for in addition to yours, I received a few extreme-left newspapers from Élie [Bloch]. There are always many enthusiasts and readers for those.

A classmate asked me to have 20 zlotys 40 groszy (= 140 francs) sent to the following address: R. Margulies, 179 Bewick Road, Gateshead on Tyne, England. Since it's a small chore and he gave me the money right away, I didn't want to rebuff him.

Although, in general, we admit that *shetika kehoda'a damya*,[1] I think this time, with Liber, it's not the case. Since he is always very polite and rapid in his correspondence, his current silence remains incomprehensible to me. I think it is useless to wait any longer for a response that seemingly can only be negative, which is why I make the decision already today to shorten my stay here and to do my military service in October. In any case, I had to answer the Draft Board soon. It's evidently too bad for me, but you also don't have anything against my doing my service this year. I will also let Liber know my decision tomorrow. But, truly, I don't see any explanation for his current silence toward me, nor to Bensinger.

1. Hebrew: silence constitutes consent.

Tomorrow, I'm going to resume the *lehrnen* before the *davenen*; I had, in fact, suspended it for a while. I must at least take advantage of the remaining time I'll be spending here.

Robert [Dreyfus] wrote to me that he still has "100 days [of military service] left, with the 30 day leave, marches and maneuvers." He *lehrns* every day with Haguenaurer and goes home every week.

The Ansbacher Blanche was talking about is, as she thought, the brother of the one here who was the best student of the Berlin Seminary and who, instead of accepting a post of rabbi in Königsberg, preferred to come *lehrnen* here. Nearly all the foreigners in the yeshiva had to overcome very serious obstacles to be and to stay here, but they have overcome them.

The new stamps are quite beautiful, and it can be seen how much France tries to show that it is beautiful.

❦ ❦ ❦

Wednesday morning

The Americans were very satisfied to see in *Paris-Soir* the photo of their champion with the Nazi at his feet.[2] Even at the yeshiva, we rejoiced at the German defeat, be it in the ring!

Bensinger has already started selling the things he doesn't want to take back with him. In the coming month, he has to prolong his visa, and it's not sure that he'll be granted this prolongation (as a German), even though Jewish Senators have been stirred up on the subject. Otherwise, he would leave for France in two or three months. Perhaps you know that his parents have already asked

2. The event mentioned is the world boxing championship in which the American Joe Louis crushed the German Max Schmeling.

the Prefect in Strasbourg for permission to come live in France. Thanks to political protection, it seems that they will, at least, obtain this relatively easily.

Love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

Chief Rabbi Liber to Ernest Gugenheim

July 1, 1938

My Dear Colleague,

You must be surprised at not having received a response to your last letter. However, imagine we are busier in Paris than in Mir and that it is not only the Talmud that absorbs us.

In addition, to answer your question, I had to consult the Commission of the Rabbinical School and, in the first instance, its president. However, Chief Rabbi Julien Weill[1] was on convalescence leave and it was only yesterday that we were able to convene.

The Commission is of the opinion that we lack rabbis in France, good rabbis, Alsatian rabbis. You must therefore finish your military service to be able to enter the career... the rabbinical one.[2]

I add that the climate in Poland is, at the moment, less good for you than the one in France. I thus advise you, or rather I recommend to you, not to renew your deferment and to come back in time to be inducted in October.

Between now and then, I would advise you not to study at the yeshiva as much as you can — you do not need this advice — but to visit several cities that are important from the Jewish point of view, notably Vilna and Warsaw. By chatting with the rabbis, visiting the synagogues, you will learn many useful things.

Please tell Mr. Bensinger that I have received his letter, that

1. Chief Rabbi of Paris, then also interim Chief Rabbi of France and, in this capacity, member of the Commission of the Rabbinical School.
2. Probably an allusion to the words in French national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, in the stanza for youth: "We will enter the career..."

your father wrote to me for him, and that we are looking for a solution. I dare not add that he has played a bad card and lost; I will do the impossible, all the same, to get him out of trouble, but let him wait still a bit longer.

Please excuse me for not being able to answer your letters in which you give such interesting news about studying and the life in the yeshiba [*sic*]; I often think about it, but I unfortunately do not have the time to write.

Please rest assured, my Dear Colleague, of my warm and faithful sentiment,

Maurice Liber

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Tuesday, July 12, 1938

My Dear Ones,

Your letters did come, but both of them a day late; the last one could only be picked up this morning, and I wondered all night what the registered letter might have contained.

Papa, you really have very busy days. You will surely celebrate 14 July with greater joy than in a long time. For me, it will go by completely unnoticed this year.

The *Mashgiach* has asked me to have sent to Palestine, if it is possible, 100 zlotys. It would be doing him a great service. He wanted to send even double that, but I told him it was too difficult, if not impossible. The address is the following: Madame Yocheved Lœwenstein, Beth Lipkis, Petach Tikva. Palestine. In reality, he spelled it in Hebrew. I assume it's possible to send it.

Until now, I haven't yet answered the Director. It's important to show him that in Mir we work as much as in Paris. I also think it would be a good idea to travel through Poland. Foreigners can get a train pass for 60 zlotys that enables them to travel during fifteen days across the whole country. The price is rather attractive because, in fifteen days, you can see quite a few things. In addition, I wouldn't spend much more than if I were to stay a month in Mir, about 20 or 30 zlotys, perhaps. However, according to my calculation, my few francs must already have been spent at the present time! If ever I go on vacation, it will only be in the month of *Av*. We shall see.

I already wrote to you that almost all the Germans here are refused a Polish visa. Bensinger just learned today that his sister in Krakow did not obtain hers. He immediately wrote so that

administrative steps might be taken, probably in vain. He himself just sent his passport to the *staroste* to be prolonged for three months and is quite apprehensive as to the result. Perhaps only one month is left before obtaining his *semichah*, and he may be expelled in two weeks! Each sentence of the *Tochecha*[1] can be found in the tragedy of the German and Austrian Jews.

Blanche, Achille, Jacques, you and Élie [Bloch] have remarkably spoiled me this week by the "daily" reading materials sent, and no doubles! This is worth more than a subscription!

I am returning here the page from the *Tribune* containing my *Yichus*,[2] which I did not fail to show people here. They know very well the *Yad David* by David Sinzheim.[3]

I just went to walk around outside and to drink a glass of kvass. It's a liquid that replaces beer and lemonade here, and which isn't bad at all.

For this evening, love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

1. Curses predicted to fall upon the people of Israel if they do not observe the prescriptions of the Torah (*Lev.* 22, *Deut.* 21 and 22).
2. Hebrew: genealogy, high lineage.
3. Famous Alsatian rabbi who presided over the Grand Sanhedrin instituted by Napoleon and became president of the Central Consistory. He is also considered one of the great masters for his writings.

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

B.E.H.

Mir, July [?], 1938

Monsieur Director and Dear Master, *nero yair*,

By the present, I have the honor of acknowledging receipt of your last letter. In accordance with your advice, I have thus given up extending my deferment, and it is henceforth certain that I will be inducted with the next contingent in October. It only remains for me to benefit as much as possible from my short stay in Mir.

I also hope to be able to follow your second recommendation and get a close-up look at Polish Judaism and rabbinical authorities. Even though foreigners are offered touristic facilities, this project seems to me much more uncertain.

I passed on to Mr. Bensinger your response concerning him.

Please accept, Monsieur Director, the assurance of my greatest respect,

Ernest Gugenheim

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, July 19, 1938

My Dear Ones,

This week, I really have little to write to you. The 14th of July went by without any solemnity, not a tricolor flag made its appearance. This must be the first time I experienced such a thing.

Furthermore, it will probably not interest you much to learn that the Prince Mirsky (from Mir) just died. He has his chateau right here, and practically the whole surrounding country belonged to him. He was a close relative of the Tsar and a former ambassador to London. Of course, under Polish domination, he, too, suffered persecution. You certainly ignored that I lived in this noble neighborhood.

So at home, vacation has arrived, and I myself think you should benefit from it as everybody else does. I, at my end, am thinking quite seriously about mine, and very soon I'm going to decide on my travel plans. I don't know if I already wrote that I want to travel from the 10th of *Av* to the 1st of *Elul.*

Next week, Bensinger goes for his *semichah* and is going to relax a bit afterward. Except for the unexpected, he will stay here until *Simchas Torah* since, thanks to his dexterity, his visa was extended. Nevertheless, I now know what *Rishess*[1] is, and even its refinements.

The abundance of your correspondence, with that of Blanche, always holds great appeal for me. She, moreover, wrote to me directly this week.

The yeshiva is again relatively empty, and probably only four

1. Yiddish: anti-Semitism; from wickedness.

minyanim[2] in all will remain. Many among the *bachurim* offer themselves vacations costing at most 30 zlotys a month: a village, a *balebusta*, a barn to sleep in, a forest, and the Niemen, without forgetting the itching that costs nothing. Here, it's not nearly as serious as you are pleased to imagine. The heat, too, is easy to bear since the storms come frequently and refresh the atmosphere that is too hot.

❦ ❦ ❦

Wednesday morning

I have already *gedavent* [prayed] and listened to the weekly *Inyan* of Reb Chatzkel = Yechezkel.[3] He has already spoken very often against the *datsche* = vacations, wanting only the weak or sick *bachurim* really to go rest, but I observe he has not had much success in this respect and that there will be exactly the same number leaving. On the other hand, the yeshiva had gotten into the habit of rowing on the lake — but a single *Inyan* sufficed to bring an end to this custom from one day to the next — which constituted in a way a *chillul Hashem*,[4] because in doing it the *bachurim* put themselves in the same category as the town people. Yet, is it not correct that, since the Torah is different from everything that exists, a *ben Torah* is distinguished by his behavior from his entire entourage? In Yiddish, it's much better. I am sure that on my arrival in Mir, I would not have been able to understand that it was base to ride a bicycle or to go rowing. It is obvious that these restrictions are only valid here in this place, but you can

2. Hebrew: a *minyan* (literally: the count), quorum of ten men.
3. The *Mashgiach*, Rav Yechezkel Lœwenstein.
4. Hebrew: profanation of the Holy Name.

also see how much the *städtische*[5] feel respect or anger toward the *yeshiva-leit*.[6]

Such is the latest news.

Gut Shabbos, love and kisses,

Ernest

5. Yiddish: city dwellers.
6. Yiddish: people belonging to the yeshiva.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Tuesday evening [July 26, 1938]

My Dear Papa and Mama,

It is to you alone, subsequent to your letters, that I write the present. I spent an extremely eventful week. Since Masevaux's[1] visit to Bouxwiller, I, on the one hand, kept company with Mama, and, on the other, accompanied Papa and the King of England from the Quai d'Orsay to the Concorde and the Étoile squares, as well as on the Grands Boulevards. I truly had much to do! All the same, Papa, now you can say as did Goethe at Valmy, you "were there." I assume that since today you are again together in Bouxwiller, while Jacques must be traveling along the lovely roads of France.

Le Figaro and *L'Œuvre* have been met with great success, but the majority of the *bachurim* made the following remark with an infinite disdain: "*Di welt iz meshuge geworen.*"[2]

After your vacation, let us speak of mine. As said, I have the intention of leaving on the 11th or 12th of *Av* with a 60 zlotys train pass and of visiting principally (follow on the map) Vilna, Warsaw, Lodz, Danzig, Krakow, Lublin, Lemberg and the Chasidim's Galicia, with a few cities and the *yeshivos* that present themselves along the way. If I am able to realize this, it'll be unique. The only talking you hear is about vacation, *"datsche"*...

Bensinger just went to get his *semichah* at the Rav's place, and he got it with tremendous praise, for there are obviously *semichos* of very different merit. He will go after a few more with two or

1. Aunt Hortense, Léonie Gugenheim's sister, who lived with her family in this locality of the Haut-Rhin department.
2. Yiddish: "The world has gone crazy."

three other *rabbanim* in the area, and then he'll go off to rest. He looks completely exhausted, the poor fellow, so much has he worked.

I received from Achille a postcard of Niederbroon.

I am not surprised, Papa, that you spoke at length with the caretaker of the Rabbinical School, but you couldn't have opened your mouth much in his presence.

I have started a letter for Mr. Back,[3] but I also want to add a *shtikel Torah*: it will surely give him pleasure.

It is 1 o'clock *yeshivish*, thus lights go out.

❦ ❦ ❦

Wednesday morning

As expected, I came late to the shul this morning, but I heard an *Inyan* on the subject of: *Hasoneh hagadol hu yitsrecha hanimsar bekochos nafshecha.*[4]

Love, kisses and *gut Shabbos,*

Ernest

3. Talmud professor at the Rabbinical School.
4. Excerpt from the "*Chovot HaLevavot*" (*Duties of the Heart*), primary work of Bachya ibn Paquda, "Son of man! Know that your worst enemy in the world is your penchant..."

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Friday, July 29, 1938

My Dear Papa and Mama,

I just received your so interesting letter. In addition, I got a postcard from Wimpf, which completes the information on Paris, and another one from Jacques in the Puy-de-Dôme, signed by Adrien, Raymond, André[1] and R. Schwob. I don't want to comment on all this news right away to leave something for my next letter and today it's already late, but I wanted you to be aware of the fact that since I want to leave on vacation, I would need the 100 zlotys not at the end of the month of *Av* as usual, but for my departure, at the end of next week. When I think of the sum in francs, it makes me sweat, but when I think about the trip and all that I will see, I can't resist.

Bensinger having left, I am the *ben yachid*[2] in Batsheva's place or nearly so because there is another boarder leaving only on Monday.

The *Mashgiach* paid me, even without a receipt, but the money only slips through the fingers.[3]

To Mr. Back, I am sending a *wort*[4] today.

Gut Shabbos, love and kisses,

Ernest

1. Three youths from Bouxwiller, two brothers and their cousin, named Kaufmann.
2. Hebrew: only son.
3. This money being used rapidly as will be explained in the next letter.
4. Yiddish: a word (from the Torah).

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

B.E.H.

Mir, Tuesday, August [2], 1938

My Dear Papa and Mama,

The postcard you must have received from me indicated already that I had got your so agreeable letter on Friday.

The Draft Board story greatly interested me: it seems that, contrary to our anticipation, my AMP [Advanced Military Preparation] will not have been done in vain. And if my memory is correct, the transports section is an extremely agreeable part of the infantry. For the *kashrus*, on my return to France, I'll have to get in touch with Robert [Dreyfus] so he can give me information.

It is sticking a finger into one's eye up to the elbow to imagine that they like wearing a beard here. In normal times, every Shabbos we're as well shaved as any Parisian. And today, since the heat is nearly unbearable, making your cloths stick to the body, a two to three-week beard is a great torture. There're only six days left to suffer.[1]

We read the story of the false rabbi of Brooklyn, whose lies were revealed by the *Agudas HaRabonim*[2] of New York. In addition, we severely condemn the sale of opium or cocaine since it is a crime against human lives. While they approve here that you can deceive the *malchus*,[3] it is only in cases in which you profit from it yourself without harming anyone, for example: avoiding military service.

1. If there are only six days left, the date is the 5th of *Av*, Tuesday August 2, 1938.
2. Hebrew: association of rabbis.
3. Hebrew: state.

Thus, next week I'm going to embark on my trip across the country. You can send your next letter to Krakow, and the following one to Vilna, *poste restante*. Exceptionally, you are excused from sending me the usual Friday's *gut Shabbos* card. I will naturally keep you carefully abreast of the legs of my journey. I probably leave on Thursday.

I showed the *Mashgiach* the receipt from the bank, which greatly interested him, but as said earlier,[4] he had already given the money to me before. To be precise, this money was used to pay for the month of *Tamuz*, and if you send me the money for the trip now, of course none will be needed for the end of *Av*.

During these nine days,[5] the menu is scarcely varied. Today, however, with *vorspeise*,[6] then whiting (*lav davka*), then *latkes* = *grompere kischle*,[7] then potato soup and stewed cherries, which was altogether suitable. The whole for about 50 groszy. I am the sole boarder.

I think you should go together to Hohwald on Sunday. That way, Mama will also be able to say she was on vacation, unless you plan to go to Paris in September?

This is the last sheet of my pad, which proves that I have worked a lot... on paper. That's all. Love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

4. In the previous letter.
5. During the first days of *Av*, no meat is eaten to mark the mourning of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem.
6. Yiddish: hors-d'œuvre.
7. Alsatian: a sort of quiche with potatoes.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

B.E.H.

Mir, Friday evening, August 5 [1938]

My Dear Papa and Mama,

I was truly stupefied to see 150 zlotys come to me yesterday already, for actually, I was expecting 100 zlotys today. In any case, nothing more will stop me from going on my trip, which will begin on Wednesday next. I will naturally take all the necessary precautions *mishum ganavim*;[1] I have also been given some good addresses, and I won't be burdened with useless baggage.

I already have your letter, report on Hohwald, Jacques' military result and Blanche's letter, always interesting to read. While Jacques is on the French Riviera, I will be on the Polish Riviera at Zacopane, Krinyca, etc.

Concerning the *kashrus*, it's also rather difficult; in Vilna for example, there are *two* kosher restaurants in all. I would have never have imagined that.

Bensinger is already on vacation, taking a well-earned rest after three *semichos*. Perhaps I will see him on the way.

For the 9th of *Av*, your recommendations, Papa, are unnecessary, and I will undoubtedly learn the *agadeta*[2] of *Gittin* or analogous passages, but here I truly saw that the *lehrnen* becomes

1. Hebrew: due to thieves.
2. On the 9th of *Av*, because of mourning, one must not give oneself over to the joys of studying, but it is permitted to read the Talmudic stories concerning the destruction of the Temple.

a *simcha*.[3] In addition, we walk in the town all day wearing *galoshen* without shoes.[4]

It is late. *Gut Shabbos*, fast well.

Ernest



Water carriers in Baranowicze

3. Hebrew: joy.
4. This word was explained as being rubber overshoes in a letter written in the winter, "Tuesday evening (January 25th)." On the 9th of *Av*, as a sign of mourning, leather shoes are not worn.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, Tuesday, August 9, 1938

My Dear Papa and Mama,

This evening, at half past 7 o'clock *yeshivish*, I take the bus for Stolpce, and tomorrow I begin my trip in the direction of Lemberg. I've got everything necessary, *tseda laderech*[1] as well, as my postcard[2] has already informed you. I have to go to Stolpce to pick up my train pass, which can only be found in large cities or border towns. I also took my *Livret de Caisse d'Épargne* [savings booklet] to avoid carrying too much money with me because there is no lack of *ganavim*.[3] Nevertheless, I have high hopes and practically no baggage, so the trip cannot appear under better omen.

I don't understand that you can complain about the heat. Here the heat is, by intervals, extreme, more so than in Paris I think, but due to frequent storms, it always cools off. What the weather will be like in the Carpathians, that I ignore as yet.

Today I just finished the first *perek* in *Kiddushin*, and it's very good work. I've also equipped myself with a few "Torah morsels," because it could occur that one or another of the rabbis I will come across along my way may want to test my knowledge. It's thus still *tseda laderech*.

For the correspondence, send me the next letter to Vilna, *poste restante*. For the following one, I'll already be back in Mir again.

1. Hebrew: provisions for the journey.
2. The card that immediately precedes this letter.
3. Hebrew: thieves.

The 9th of *Av* went well, if that can be said. We spent the whole day in *galoshen.* We recited *Eichah*[4] and all the *Kinos.*[5] It's not the *Chazan*[6] alone who says the *Kinos*, but we all recited them together. On Saturday night, we didn't turn on the lights, but each one of us read by the light of a candle. I found the *din* that prescribes it this way. Then, we have *gelehrnt* a little; in other words, nothing extraordinary.

❦ ❦ ❦

Stolpce, 9 o'clock.

After a very busy day, I set off for Stolpce. A modern bus covered 20 kilometers relatively quickly, but what bumps! I have never been bounced around so much in a car, except perhaps this winter from Horodziej to Mir. But finally, I got there. When getting off the bus, I immediately saw a *bachur* from the yeshiva, and he showed me a very good hotel, inexpensive, where I am now writing and where I'm going to go to sleep immediately. Up to now, I am still in known territory and without *ganavim*; tomorrow the adventure truly begins. Nevertheless, a little example: I have to take a car to go to the train station. The guy asks for 2 zlotys, we had offered 50 groszy, and we settle at 80 groszy! But the way of haggling is admirable.

❦ ❦ ❦

4. Hebrew name for the biblical Book of Lamentations.
5. Hebrew: poems of lament dating from the Middle Ages.
6. Hebrew: cantor.

Wednesday morning

I am writing to you from Baranowicze where I arrived this morning. A very beautiful train station; by the way the one in Stolpce was as well, totally modern. Then, I look for my way, nothing but gardens with a few houses, until I decide to take resolutely a little wider street. After 10 or 20 meters, I at last find a *Yid*[7] whom I ask for a *beis midrash* — I had *gedavent* there — I continue on my way and discover a beautiful, big city with large avenues. The *Yid* told me he had a son in Paris in the rue des *Boukhardin*.[8] Lastly, I went to see a classmate who lives here, I ate well; and in two hours, I'm going to leave for Lemberg, the first leg of my journey.

I observed they have some *derech eretz*[9] for my passport. That's always a pleasure. Furthermore, everywhere in Poland, French is the second language.

I add here a photo that I had to stick on a *teudah*[10] from the yeshiva, thanks to which we get reductions.

What's quite interesting are the taxis, replaced by horse-drawn *droschken,*[11] and the drivers by *ba'alei agalos* (coachmen), the worst Jewish sort I have ever encountered until now; but as a novelty for me, it's curious to take them.

Love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

7. Yiddish: Jew.
8. Yiddish (?): rue des Rosiers.
9. Hebrew: politeness — here: respect.
10. Hebrew: certificate.
11. German: open carriages.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Lemberg, Wednesday evening [August 10, 1938]

My Dear Papa and Mama, and Jacques,

I'm already starting to write to you now, so I won't forget any of the interesting events of my days. I thus left Baranowicze at noon today in a good rapid train, but whose 3rd class wagons are not as soft as ours. I crossed through Polesia, then Volhynia, which, at intervals, are regions much lousier — louse-ier — than the so-called Champagne district.[1] But you also encounter magnificent forests that cannot be seen at home. I then entered Galicia, and there the spectacle changed to make room for a splendid panorama. But especially what changed were the types of Jews who are spitting images of those on the rue des Rosiers or on the rue du Marais Vert.[2] In like manner, I crossed through Dubno, Brody, etc., and I was headed — to be truthful, with a little apprehension — toward that Lemberg with its Galicians of whom I have been so strongly advised to be wary. Finally, I began to speak with a Jew who soon turned out to have already been in France, better still, in Alsace, and who mentioned to me Rabbi Brunschwig,[3] Chief Rabbi Ernest Weill,[4] etc.; in short, I saw that you could have confidence in him. He has a brother-in-law in Strasbourg named Tapper, 16 rue de Molsheim, and a cousin in Metz, the *katsev*[5] Reich! Afterwards, he escorted me to Lemberg and to

1. A region in France is called "Champagne pouilleuse," literally: lousy Champagne.
2. Streets epitomizing the Jewish quarters in Paris and Strasbourg respectively.
3. Rabbi of the synagogue in the rue Kageneck in Strasbourg; died in an extermination camp.
4. Chief Rabbi of the Haut-Rhin department, formerly rabbi of Bouxwiller.
5. Yiddish: butcher.

a kosher restaurant run by the son of the *dayan*,[6] and showed me around the city. I, who had expected to see a town filled with Jews, filthy beards, etc., rather discovered a big, beautiful city, neon lights and all. The streets are effectively filled with Jews, but bare-headed. In the entire main street, the finest stores belong to Jews. In the movie theaters, French films are shown, on a café is projected the sign "Café de la Paix." I have thus been lucky for once (fallen upon a good guide). I am sleeping in the hotel where I eat, have a nice room, and above all I am alone!

This was how Lemberg appeared to me at night. But the following day, I saw it as I had imagined. In the company of a Chassid whom I had met, I visited the Jewish quarter, for even though there is a *rov yidden*[7] in the city, there is still a quarter that is specifically Jewish. I saw various old *shuln*, the *kever*[8] of the Taz,[9] of the Sma[10] and others, on which people come to cry and pray. In short, in the company of the Chassid, I saw in this assimilated and reformed city its Jewish side. The morning, it was quite agreeable, but later on the Chassid multiplied his explanations at too great length, and I am like Papa, I prefer to see and discover alone.

At last, on his advice, I left yesterday evening, Thursday, for Inowicz, a thermal resort where I arrived this morning at about 6 o'clock. Except that, when I left the train station, starting to walk, I continued until the moment I saw written: Inowicz 9 kilometers! The train station is more than 10 km from the place. In the end, by foot, by horse-carriage hitch-hiking and car hitch-hiking, I arrived safely to port. You should know that I came here to see

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6. Hebrew: rabbinical judge.
7. Yiddish: a majority of Jews.
8. Hebrew: tomb.
9. Author of the "*Turei Zahav*" (*Rows of Gold*), commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*.
10. Author of the "*Sefer Meirat Einayim*."

the Boyaner Rov, one of the greatest leaders of the Chassidim (Runes[11] is one of his Chassidim). Furthermore, thanks to my Chassid from Lemberg, I know all the great Chassidic dynasties. The Boyaner, I saw him this morning, I spoke with him, and he didn't make a great impression on me. Only tomorrow I'm going to see him *fihren dem tish*,[12] and there, it could be something else.

Inowicz is a large resort town, good society types, very healthy spring water, but it smells of hydrogen sulfide under the influence of naphtha. I will moreover see bigger spas and greater Chassidim.

I will probably be going to eat at the *Rebbe*'s on Shabbos; I wonder what will transpire.

The language has completely changed, and the Jews, too. I am satisfied not to have been involved with one of these Galicians, and I always represent myself as a proletarian because, due to money, one has to be prudent.

And that's all.

Love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest



Synagogue in Lemberg (Lvov)

11. Rabbi of the Polish community in Strasbourg, deceased circa 1940, succeeded after the war by Rav Horowitz.
12. Yiddish: ritual and solemn dinner among the Chassidim, presided over by the *Rebbe* — see the description in the next letter.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

B.E.H.

Krynica, August 14, 1938

My Dear Ones,

Now I already don't regret having undertaken this trip, for I just witnessed something that is altogether strange. Friday, therefore, as announced I talked with the Boyaner *Rebbe*: he had a majestic air, nothing more. But in the evening, I *daven* in the middle of his Chassidim. He was invisible, in another room. All the Chassidim had a *streimel* on the head, a sort of silk skullcap like Papa's, but garnished with fur, in truth totally curious. We *daven*, and for *Kiddush* the *Rebbe* entered. He looked completely transfigured; he came forward, the head covered with a very tall *streimel*. We poured the wine into a wide glass, and then it started. Everyone gathered near to see the *Rebbe*, observe each of his gestures which, all of them, had a profound kabbalistic *kavana*, that no one understood; and the *Rebbe*, before beginning, meditated, I don't know if it was for inspiration or, on the contrary, to restrain himself for fear that his exaltation would be too great and break his *guf*.[1] In any case, after the *Kiddush*, he was completely in sweat. And he touches his *payos*,[2] seat of *kedusha*,[3] and his forehead, and the top of his *shtreimel*... I tell you that if I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't believe it. He said the *Kiddush* with a melody, an indescribable

1. Hebrew: body.
2. Hebrew: "corners" of the head hair that it is prohibited to shave, sidelocks or side curls, and that the Chassidim let grow. The custom in France is to call them *papillotes* ("curl-papers").
3. Hebrew: holiness.

music, said *gut Shabbos* to his Chassidim, and I assure you that I pushed stoutly to be on his path and catch his *gut Shabbos*.

Then, for the meal, I took part in their feast. The *Rebbe* ate alone, of course. Everybody was very nice to me, a Frenchman who was studying in Lita[4] and who had come to see the *Rebbe*. Youths even discussed my *payos*, but unfortunately for them, when you have spent eight months in a Lithuanian yeshiva, you already know the *lehrnen* much better than they do. I thus ate with them and as they did, the fish with their hands, and all drinking from the same glass, but that didn't bother me. And then suddenly, the plate the *Rebbe* had eaten on was brought in, and there were my Chassidim who leapt up, shoving each other, and each one grabbing a bit of the *Rebbe*'s leftovers. I was left speechless.

Since then, I've seen better yet: for example, at the *shalosh seudos*,[5] the *Rebbe* has *gefihrt dem tish*,[6] tasted, after who knows how many kabbalistic gestures, ever impressive even for a *misnaged*,[7] *un bit* [a tiny morsel], then pushed the dish away. Immediately, a frantic bustle, but what joy for he who had snatched a piece!

In the evening, at the hotel, a very characteristic incident: I arrived at my room, the bed was not made up, and the patron, a Chassid of course, does not know at all what could have happened with my belongings and my bed. In the end, everything was explained, but I think that such a thing could happen only in Galicia.

I spent the whole Shabbos among the Chassidim, in this Inowicz, and the *shalosh seudos* was the culmination. The *Rebbe* quoted parts of the Torah, some of which I was unfortunately unable to

4. Yiddish: Lithuania.
5. Hebrew: literally "three meals", also called *seudah shelishis*: it is the third of the required meals on Shabbos.
6. See note 12 in the previous letter.
7. Hebrew: literally "opponent" of the Chassidim.

comprehend, but I frequently heard the words *gematria,*[8] *rashei tevos,*[9] but I was not able to understand the *hemshech.*[10] Chassidic songs, kabbalistic *havdalah*[11] where there is sufficient matter, everything being quite ingenuous. However, I saw one thing: the Chassidim venerate and fear the *Rebbe* much more than *HaKadosh Baruch Hu.*[12] At least the prayer is done differently in Mir than here, and the simplicity of Mir makes, I believe, a much more lasting impression than what is done here. For us, it's totally foreign.

I'm thinking about seeing still other *Rebbes*; they're not all alike.

At the *seudos*, beer was distributed and also the *challah* on which the *Rebbe* had pronounced the *berachah*, and for each glass and each morsel of *challah*, the *Rebbe* indicated its recipient; he also sent a bottle to me, which is a very great honor.

I would have a lot more to describe, for example the clothes of the Jews who walk around here, many of whom having come uniquely to see the *Rebbe* on that *Shabbos Nachamu,*[13] and other curious details, but I will see more of them yet.

A little while ago, I said good bye to the *Rebbe*: he was again a man of the world; he gave me two or three *ra'yonos,*[14] not great, but in the end, he made a slight spiritual impression on me when shaking my hand — at least, I thought I felt it. Moreover, he knows Alsace well, which he has traveled through, and he asked me to transmit his best wishes to Runes.[15]

And now, departure for Krynica.

I arrived in Krynica this afternoon. According to first

8. Hebrew: a system assigning numerical values to words or phrases.
9. Hebrew: initials of words (basis of deductions).
10. Hebrew: continuity (of the ideas).
11. Hebrew: separation. Ceremony symbolically ending the Shabbat.
12. Hebrew: "the Holy One, blessed be He".
13. Hebrew: first word of the text from *Isaiah* that is read as *Haftarah* on the Shabbat following *Tisha B'Av.*
14. Hebrew: ideas.
15. See note 11 of the previous letter.

appearances, it's a large spa resort town. I found a boarding house at reasonable prices, and tomorrow I'm going to make the rounds of the *Rebbes*. The city is filled with Chassidim with very long *payos*, and on the balconies of sumptuous hotels you can see the Jews with their skullcaps. This city is called the Polish Vichy.

❦ ❦ ❦

Monday

Today, I took a walk around Krynica, and first of all I went to the Bobover *Rebbe*'s place. I was very well received, then taken to his house. I enter; he is there, with an eminently patriarchal look. I approach, and here he says to me: "*Bekol pinos she'ata pone, al tifne ela leyamin!*"[16] Without paying attention, I had wanted to walk around the table by the left! We spoke, and practically every one of his words was a profound thought or a lesson. In contrast with the previous one, he is a visible Rabbi who does not surround himself with mystery, but the number of his faithful is just as large. It's too bad I hadn't seen him on the Shabbos, since his Chassidim are more joyous than those of the Boyaner *Rebbe*!

Him aside, there are about fifty more rabbis of greater or lesser importance; I tried to see three or four of them, but the weather was not a help. Thus, I had to make do with seeing the city, which is marvelously situated. But since it rained all the time, *iz nisht do voo tzu gein*,[17] and in addition, I was furiously bitten last night, so I'm leaving this evening for Krakow.

❦ ❦ ❦

16. Hebrew: "Wherever you go, always direct yourself to the right", or "any turn that you make should only be to the right."
17. Yiddish: "There is nowhere to go."

Tuesday

I arrived this morning in Krakow, and a Pole took me to a *beis medrash*, where I *g'dahvent*. Afterwards, my first visit was for the central post office and the *poste restante*, where a disappointment was waiting for me: nothing! Then I walked around the Jewish quarter: there are more Jews and more beards than ever, and every other house shelters a *beis medrash*. I visited the oldest *shul* in Poland, as well as the one of the Rema,[18] the tombs of the Rema, of the Bach,[19] of the Tosafos Yom-Tov.[20] The cemetery contains some sixty celebrities. All this, I did unfortunately under the rain; the bad weather considerably darkened my humor, especially since I hadn't slept well the night before. Finally, after a little rest, I returned this afternoon to the post office and was given your letter from last Tuesday, forwarded here from Mir. That completely cheered me up, as well as the sun that at last makes its appearance. So, I'm now going to improve my knowledge of Krakow, which is remarkably beautiful city, and I will give you a report on it in my next letter.

Thus, love, kisses *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

18. Acronym for Rabbi Moshe Isserles (16th century), author of (among other works) the glosses on the *Shulchan Aruch*, codifying Ashkenazi custom.
19. Halachic decision maker, author of *Bayis Chadash*, whose initials form the acronym by which he is known.
20. Name of the commentary on the *Mishnah* by R. Yom-Tov Lipman Heller (1579–1654), student of the Maharal of Prague.



The Rema Shul in Krakow



The graves of the Rema and his family in Krakow



The Old Fortress Synagogue, Krakow

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

B.E.H.

Otwock, Friday, August 19, 1938

My Dear Ones,

I haven't written for a long time; at least I have that impression. On Tuesday, I spoke to you about Krakow, which has in fact turned out to be the most beautiful city in Poland. What especially gave me pleasure was to see that it is a very French city. On the main square, French is spoken in practically every store, and I went into several of them just to speak French. I asked, for example, for newspapers I was sure they didn't have!

I thus stayed two days in Krakow, and I even went on an excursion — the train ticket costs nothing — to the salt mines of Wieliczka. They have an international reputation, and consequently you must know that they are the oldest and most productive in Europe. It was pretty interesting: all the galleries are hollowed out in the salt, but you wouldn't believe it before touching the walls with your finger and then with the tongue. Unfortunately, there are many *tumos*[1] that former workmen have carved in the salt, and that bothered me considerably. I would have very much liked to see how the work is currently done, but that isn't shown to visitors.

From Krakow, I left for Lublin and the Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin.[2] I arrived yesterday morning, first went into a *shtiebel*[3] to *davenen* because at the yeshiva, I don't know why, they say *Krias*

1. Hebrew: in this context, the Hebrew word means crosses.
2. Hebrew: Yeshiva of the Lublin Sages.
3. Alsatian Yiddish: small synagogue.

Shema in the *z'man*, but the prayer is done much later. I knew the yeshiva from a mass of pictures I had seen of the building and its occupants. It's moreover a magnificent edifice, with a boarding school where you eat, sleep, *lehrn* and take walks, for there is a large garden to take a breath of fresh air. But, when I entered the study hall, I was quite astonished... I didn't know whether I wasn't in the presence of ancient Merovingians, like the ones you see in books of history, or of Asiatics come from the depths of Asia! — This comparison is really very badly chosen because it's pejorative, while there is nothing at all you could fault them for: I just want to try to give an approximate idea of them. — Since about a week, you know I only see *payos*, more *payos*, and still more *payos*, but like the ones they wear here, that's new. Young people from 20 to 22 years old, for no one is older there, have thick braided or open *payos* that come down below the shoulders. I made acquaintance with them. They were even very *mekarev*.[4] We talked about *Chassidus* and *misnagdus*, and *payos*, but I saw that in Mir they do the *lehrnen* better. If I'd come to such a yeshiva at the beginning of the year, I wouldn't have stayed a week. Just as their exterior is foreign to us, their *tocho*[5] is also quite distant, while for me Mir is not only much closer, even very close, but represents the truth. In a word, it had to be seen. I stayed the whole day, I ate with them and slept with them, and in addition I went to see the city. As much as Krakow is a beautiful city, ancient and modern, Lublin is miserable, old, with hardly a modern street, and is not worth much. There's just one *shul* of the Maharshal[6] and of the Maharam of Lublin,[7] as well as a very interesting old

4. Hebrew: welcoming, friendly.
5. Hebrew: interior.
6. Rabbi Shlomo Luria (1510–1574), contemporary of the Rema. Author of the "*Yam shel Shlomo*" (*The Sea of Solomon*), a Talmudic commentary.
7. Acronym for *M*oreinu *HaR*av *M*eir ben Gedaliah of Lublin (1558–1616),



Chachmei Lublin Yeshiva

cemetery with the tombs of the Maharam, and of Schakhne[8] and Pollak[9] the founders of *pilpul.*[10] However, the poverty is so visible, repugnant and saddening in this city that I didn't stay longer, and I left this morning for a short trip to Otwock. Short, because it was only 150 kilometers away, but on the trains here, three hours.

Otwock is the largest holiday resort or, better, a place of cure for those with pulmonary illnesses in particular. It is an admirable spot. Villas covering the surface of Warsaw are scattered over an immense forest, the likes of which are found only in Poland. I

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important decisor of Jewish law in Poland and author of "*Meir Einai Chachamim*," commentary on the Talmud.

8. Rav Shalom Schakhne, disciple of Rav Yaakov Pollak, later teacher and father-in-law of the Rema (see note 18 in the previous letter). Rav Schakhne established the yeshiva in Lublin in 1515. He died in Lublin in 1558.
9. Founder of the method of Talmudic study known as *Pilpul.* He died in Lublin in 1541.
10. Hebrew: technique of Talmudic dialectics. (The Hebrew term *pilpul*, meaning *pepper*, came to designate a method of a Talmudic study by intense and sharp textual analysis.)

went to a boarding house where there were *talmidim* from the Mir yeshiva, whom I did not myself know. However, all the old or new students of our yeshiva are quite intimately related. It is truly an ideal place to rest, and there are also two to three great Chassidic *Rebbes* I'm going to see. To catch sight of completely shaved and pious fellows again greatly impressed me because I hadn't seen any for ten days. Otwock is half an hour from Warsaw, and tomorrow night, *im yirtze Hashem*,[11] I'll be going to Warsaw and, to another destination, still somewhat undecided, Gdynia or Vilna, to visit Reb Chaim Ozer. I'm going to recover here a little, and especially from next Wednesday to Sunday. I'm not tired, but of course such traveling makes you lose weight.

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Gdynia, Sunday morning

I had a marvelous Shabbos in Otwock. In this ideal setting, I got a good rest and ate as I had not for some time; it's that these boarding houses serve food in surprising profusion. However, in addition to my *gashmiyus*,[12] I looked for a few *Rebbes* for the *ruchniyus*.[13] Unfortunately, the most interesting among them, the Lubavitcher *Rebbe*, representative of the *Chabad*,[14] cannot be seen on the Shabbos. I spoke with one of the Chassidim who knows Liber and the rue des Rosiers.[15] Another *Rebbe*, the Modzhitzer,

11. Hebrew: God willing.
12. Hebrew: the material being.
13. Hebrew: the spiritual being.
14. Acronym of the three Hebrew words *Chochmah*, *Binah*, *Da'as* (Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge), designating the *Lubavitch Chassidus*, thus named after the locality in Russia where the movement was first based.
15. Well-known street in the center of the largest Jewish quarter in Paris.

was not in Otwock on this Shabbos; he was nicknamed the *Rav hamenagen* because he sings so well that on the day he was to have an operation, he sang to put his pain to sleep, but the surgeons asked him to stop so they could operate.

Nevertheless, I saw the most curious of them all, the Kozhnitzer. He does the greatest extravagances with his Chassidim! What he does is completely unimaginable, and many people take him for a madman. And he is surrounded by a great number of *baalei teshuva*.[16] I heard him sing his Chassidic songs, full of tremendous life and gaiety! He has a brother in Paris, a rabbi in the rue Pavée.

Last night after Shabbos, I left Otwock and went to Gdynia where I arrived this morning at 7 o'clock. I looked for a *shul* in vain, finally a Jewish lady took me to her house for *davenen*, but I had to refuse eating there because of the *kashrus*.

Gdynia is a very beautiful town, new, with wide streets and tall buildings; I still have to see the sea and the port. I also wanted to go to Danzig, but these Jews made me so frightened of the Hitlerians who are there that I had to give up seeing the "free" city of Danzig. Here too there is some *rishess*, but to a lesser extent. I thus pronounced this morning the *berachah "she-asah hayam hagadol."*[17] I was truly impressed to see the sea, Baltic or otherwise, its violently agitated waves and the silhouette of a lighthouse blurred in the distance. Unfortunately, each time I arrive in a watering place, it rains! (pun intended) Thus, I spent the morning visiting Gdynia and its port and in the afternoon, I went as far as Hel, or rather the town that is before Hel. If you look at an atlas, you will see there's a narrow tongue of land that sticks out into the Baltic: it's this route that the train follows, running along the sea, and in this way you have for about fifty kilometers a magnificent

16. Hebrew: repentant Jews who have returned to the Judaism of *mitzvos*.
17. Hebrew: "He who made the great sea," expression of blessing recited when seeing the sea.

panorama of the immense sea spreading out below the gaze from the passing train. I have just returned, and I'm waiting for the rapid train to take me back to Warsaw tonight.

Along this whole coast, there are a great number of beaches where the Polish nobility meet. The rain bothered me a bit and prevented me from going on a boat excursion. Perhaps that's just as well, I avoided getting seasick.

To be continued and ended in the next issue.

Love and kisses,

Ernest

The report on the end of the trip unfortunately has not come down to us: one or two letters must be missing. By allusions to this journey made at a much later date, the author mentioned his visit to R. Chaim Ozer in Vilna during which was discussed a she'elah *(question) put to Rabbi Élie Munk of Adas Yereim (rue Cadet in Paris) concerning the prohibition of "transporting" objects on the Shabbos, due to the disappearance of the fortifications surrounding the capital.*

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

Mir, September 6, 1938

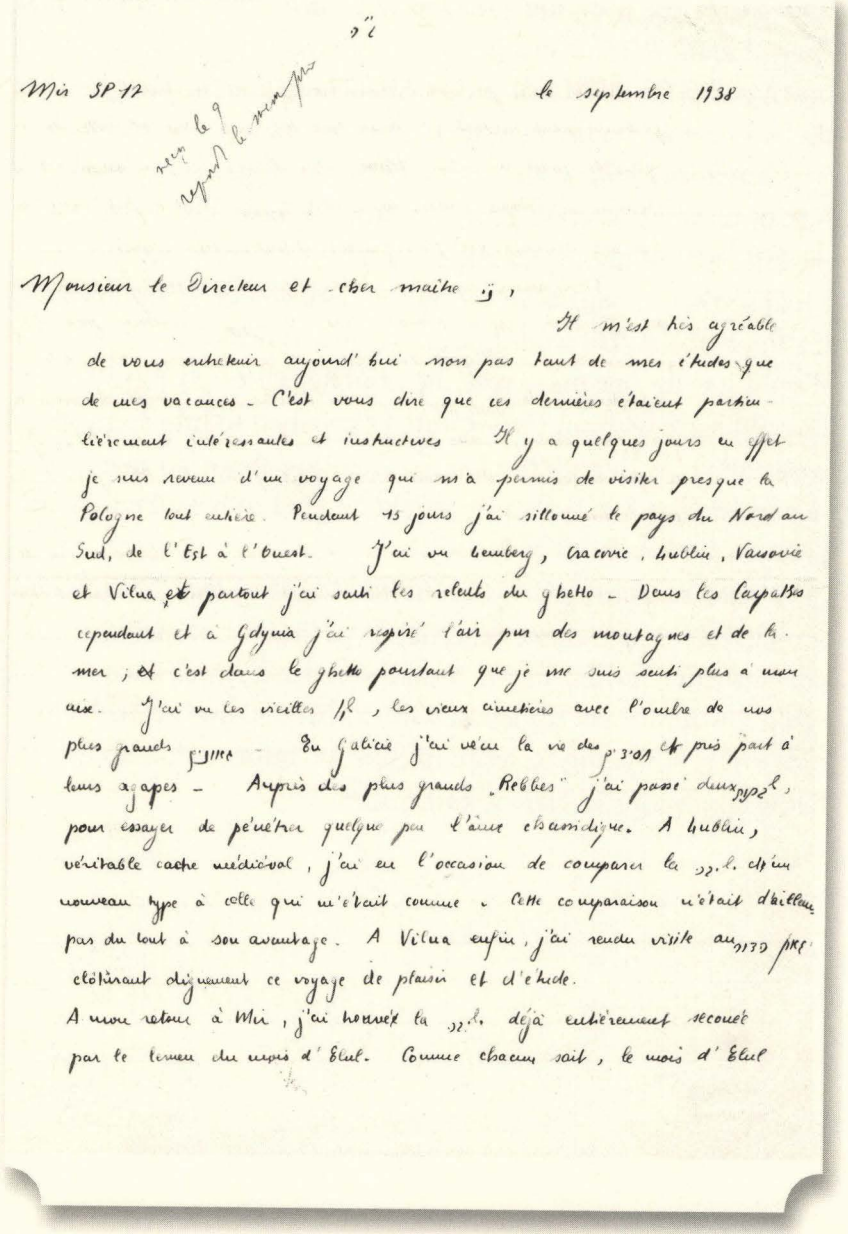
My Dear Ones,

Here we are in the second week of *Elul*[1] already. Now we can already count the weeks, and soon we will be counting the days before my departure. In a couple of days, I'm going to ask in Warsaw for my transit visa across Germany, because that can take longer here than in Paris. With these preparations, the time's going to seem even shorter.

Currently, it's a true pleasure to enter the yeshiva during the *tefillah* or the *lehrnen*. Especially for the *tefillah*: absolutely everyone comes since, before *mincha* as well as before *maariv*, every day there is a half hour of *mussar*. Here they understand differently than elsewhere what a preparation for *Yamin Noraim* is. Our *Mashgiach* also speaks more often than he usually does, and many of his *Inyanim* are worthy of being heard by occidental philosophers. I wrote a letter to the Director relating to him my impressions of Poland. I also let him know about the half-success of my AMP [*Advanced Military Preparation*].[2]

The *Mashgiach* mentioned nothing to me about the money transfer. Consequently, you'll only have to send me 100 zlotys for *Rosh Hashanah*, which will amply suffice for my final needs. I wanted to ask you, Mama, if you can think of anything among my affairs I ought to sell or leave here: linen, sheets, blanket? I hope neither to take with me nor to import home anything else!

1. Month preceding *Rosh Hashanah*.
2. See the following letter.



Mir SP 17 le septembre 1938

Monsieur le Directeur et cher maître ;,

Il m'est très agréable de vous entretenir aujourd'hui non pas tant de mes études que de mes vacances. C'est vous dire que ces dernières étaient particulièrement intéressantes et instructives. Il y a quelques jours en effet je suis revenu d'un voyage qui m'a permis de visiter presque la Pologne tout entière. Pendant 15 jours j'ai sillonné le pays du Nord au Sud, de l'Est à l'Ouest. J'ai vu Lemberg, Cracovie, Lublin, Varsovie et Vilna et partout j'ai senti les relents du ghetto. Dans les Carpathes cependant et à Gdynia j'ai respiré l'air pur des montagnes et de la mer ; et c'est dans le ghetto pourtant que je me suis senti plus à mon aise. J'ai vu les vieilles ;,l, les vieux cimetières avec l'ombre de nos plus grands ;,,l,l. En Galicie j'ai vécu la vie des ;,,o,l et pris part à leurs agapes. Auprès des plus grands „Rebbes" j'ai passé deux ;,,p,l, pour essayer de pénétrer quelque peu l'âme chassidique. A Lublin, véritable cadre médiéval, j'ai eu l'occasion de comparer la ;,,l. et l'im nouveau type à celle qui m'était connue. Cette comparaison n'était d'ailleurs pas du tout à son avantage. A Vilna enfin, j'ai rendu visite au ;,,l,o ;,l,l clôturant dignement ce voyage de plaisir et d'étude.

A mon retour à Mir, j'ai trouvé la ;,,l. déjà entièrement secouée par le tonnerre des mots d'Elul. Comme chacun sait, le mois d'Elul

Original of the letter printed on page 192

I got a postcard from Cabourg that came here after their return to Paris. They, too, had a wonderful holiday, but only *olam hazeh*,[3] and even in front of the mighty ocean, they didn't see as much *gadlus*[4] as I did in a simple Shabbos at the Boyaner *Rebbe*'s place. I haven't yet finished telling you about my impressions!

Our *Rosh Yeshiva* also came back from vacation, and each one of us went to greet him. On Sunday, he called for me and questioned me about my departure; he was even *makpid*[5] that I had settled the question of military deferment without asking for his opinion. He would have, he said, written to Liber that I should stay for one more year, etc., and he expressed surprise that I would leave without a *semichah*. I explained to him somewhat, especially now that it's too late do anything about, so that he did not insist. The fact is that he would be glad to have French students in greater number.

I read something in the *Moment*[6] saying that France had mobilized two age classes and had kept under uniform the class currently due for discharge. If that were true, which I would not wish, I would meet up again with Robert [Dreyfus] in Nancy. Moreover, I'm going to write to him for information about the living conditions in Nancy, *kashrus*, etc.

❦ ❦ ❦

3. Hebrew: in this world.
4. Hebrew: grandeur.
5. Hebrew: vexed.
6. A local newspaper.

Wednesday

I learn this instant that it's a fellow from the Radin yeshiva (of the Chafetz Chaim) who has been selected to replace Wassermann, but that he is still being refused a visa. It was the third brother of W. who told me so.[7]

That's all. Love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

7. Reference to Rav Chaikin, who would become the director of the yeshiva in Aix-les-Bains after the war. Rav Simcha Wasserman had been the director of a small yeshiva in Strasbourg-Neudorf (created by Chief Rabbi Ernest Weill) before leaving for the United States.

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

(Manual annotation by Chief Rabbi Liber:
received on the 9th, answered on the same day)

B.E.H.

Mir, September [?], 1938

Monsieur Director and Dear Master, *nero yair*,

It is very agreeable for me to discuss with you today, not so much my studies as my vacation. Which is to say that the latter was particularly interesting and instructive. Indeed, a few days ago I returned from a journey that enabled me to visit nearly all of Poland. During two weeks, I criss-crossed the country from North to South, from East to West. I saw Lemberg, Krakow, Lublin, Warsaw and Vilna, and everywhere I sensed the whiff of the ghetto. In the Carpathian Mountains, nevertheless, and in Gdynia I breathed the pure air of the mountains and of the sea. I saw the old *shuls*, the old cemeteries, with the shadows of the great *gaonim*. In Galicia, I lived the life of Chassidim and took part in their feasts. In the company of the greatest *Rebbes*, I spent two Shabbasos to try to penetrate somewhat the chassidic soul. In Lublin, an authentic medieval setting, I had the opportunity of comparing the yeshiva of a new type to the one known to me; this comparison, moreover, was not at all to its advantage. In Vilna, I went to visit the *Gaon hador*,[1] bringing to an end with dignity this journey of pleasure and study.

At my return to Mir, I found the yeshiva already entirely agitated by the *lehrnen* of the month of *Elul*. As everyone knows, the

1. Hebrew: the genius of our generation, Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski.

month of *Elul* is a special month in the yeshivos, and *lehrnen* and *mussar* are especially ardent. Thus everyone has hurried to return, full of new strength. My friend Bensinger too has come back from a tour of Poland, but endowed with altogether exceptional *semichos* that have been conferred upon him by our greatest Talmudic authorities. As for myself, I'm hence going to stay here until the day after *Rosh Hashanah*, from which I hope to be able to withdraw the *chizuk*[2] necessary for the coming days. The call-up for the contingent is set for October 18–19, thus just after *Simchas Torah*. I have the additional pleasure of informing you that, without knowing it, I obtained a half-success in the AMP [*Advanced Military Preparation*]. Indeed, I am among the number of candidates who took the AMP for the Infantry and the Transport!

While wishing you a happy completion of your holidays, please accept, Monsieur Director, the assurance of my greatest respect,

Ernest Gugenheim



Old Synagogue in Vilna

2. Hebrew: reinforcement (emotional or spiritual).

Rabbi Max Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Maurice Liber

Bouxwiller, *motzei Shabbos Parshas Ki Seitzei*[1]

Dear Chief Rabbi,

Ernest wrote to me today that he sent you a letter by the same mail. Perhaps it has already been delivered to you.

He was thinking of leaving Mir on the day of the Fast of Gedaliah[2] so as to still be present at the yeshiva for the *Rosh Hashanah* festival, which must be, even more than the courses, a "tremendous" event. I am transmitting your request to him immediately, but I wonder if he will be able to be back for *Rosh Hashanah*, given the vast distance for the correspondence and the journey, and the complicated preparation for the departure.

I think he will be able to be at your disposal for *Yom Kippur*, sufficiently charged with *mussar* for this service — if the political events permit him to make the trip.

Please accept, Dear Chief Rabbi, the expression of my faithful sentiment,

Max Gugenheim

1. Hebrew: at the close of Shabbos when we read this passage from *Deuteronomy*.
2. In Hebrew: *Tzom Gedaliah*. The day after *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jews fast in remembrance of the violent death of this Judean chief appointed by the victorious king Nebuchadnezzar.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

(Postcard dated 9/9/38 by the Polish postal service and 9/12/38, 7:45 by the one in Bouxwiller)

Mir, *Erev Shabbos*[1] [September 9, 1938]

My Dear Ones,

Change of program, or of destination rather, as the Director wrote at this time last year. The *Mashgiach* just asked me to send money again to *Eretz*, as much as I can. I told him I only need 100 more zlotys, and that's the sum to be sent to F. Edelmann, Petach-Tikva, T. D. 28.

He gave me a big *Toda raba le'avar u-le'asid.*[2] His wife and daughter arrived from there after a separation of two years. He hardly left the yeshiva for half an hour to say hello. You'll perhaps get an inkling of what a *tzaddik* he is.

That's not all. A classmate asked me if I could have 17 francs 20 sent to: État-civil, 4 rue Brûlée, Strasbourg, with the mention "for two birth certificates for Ernest Kaplovits. Remains to be paid." He's even already given me the 2 zlotys and some 50 groszy that it costs.

By an extraordinary misfortune, my *rebbe* just fell sick. Especially in *Elul* when all the 300 odd students work with all their *kochos*,[3] it's an unlucky setback. Tomorrow, we'll already be able to work again.

1. Hebrew: Friday.
2. Hebrew: thank you very much for the past and for the future.
3. Hebrew: forces.

Your letter is already here, but I was neither able to find it nor to read it, and since it's late, for the *shkiah*[4] is already at 6:30 *yeshivish*, I stop.

Love, kisses and *gut Shabbos*,

Ernest

4. Hebrew: sunset.

Ernest Gugenheim to his Parents

B.E.H.

Mir, Tuesday, September 13, 1938

All My Dear Ones,

I've received a very abundant correspondence since Saturday: three missives from Bouxwiller, a letter from Élie [Bloch] and one from Liber. The latter, at the reception of my letter in which I described my vacation and announced my forthcoming return for the *Tzom Gedaliah*, immediately sent me a letter that arrived yesterday on Monday. In this letter, he invited me with a particular insistence to come back for *Rosh Hashanah* to preach in Z...,[1] "so as to distance you as little as possible from your family." His letter, moreover, proves a great ignorance since he thinks the festivals at the yeshiva are without the least interest. While waiting for this evening's letter from you, I had already prepared one to explain to him by all sorts of reasons that I couldn't follow up on his invitation. But your response, Papa, gets me out of my perplexity in the most elegant fashion in the world, and I'm thus going to answer him directly again with the same logic, all while explaining what the *Yamim Noraim* at the yeshiva are. For *Yom Kippur*, I will be, if he wishes, at his disposition; it's not one more or one less sermon that intimidates me. It's not surprising that his letter took a little more time since he wrote it in Savoy, where he is on vacation.

You too must have received my postcard today or yesterday, with the money transfers to make.

Concerning my travel plans, I will leave as planned on *Tzom*

1. A small town in eastern France.

Gedaliah at about noon and will arrive on the following morning in Berlin at roughly 7 o'clock. I'll remain there until 11 o'clock in the evening and will thus be able to rest; and on the next day, Friday morning at about 7 o'clock, I'll arrive in Strasbourg. I could even be in Strasbourg already by Thursday night, but that's not necessary. You well can imagine that I don't wish to stay one more day in Hitleria in such times. The questions relating to my transit visa are of course done by mail. I've even found out from over there all the formalities to accomplish in case of need.

In truth, we ignore here nearly everything that's happening in politics these days, except for the Jewish events, which we learn about much more from correspondence than from reading newspapers. I hardly knew that the Congress of Nuremberg took place last week.[2]

On the contrary, we're already working now quite well at the yeshiva. Every day, people arrive: students, former students, recently married students, rabbis, foreigners, all come to celebrate the holidays here. At Batsheva's, from four boarders our number has climbed to nine. And Liber wants me to go spend *Rosh Hashanah* with the *baalei batim* of Z...!

Bensinger just received in the last few days astonishing news. All the [German] Jews in the Rhin region have been evacuated, either to the interior or abroad, for strategic reasons. His parents, after great difficulty, got into Switzerland, from where they will go to France. However, at the present time, so to speak he doesn't know anything, if they were able to take out any money, sell furniture... He himself owns books there worth several hundred zlotys. Nearly every German in the yeshiva suffers analogous afflictions.

I must address my congratulations to the new treasurer of

2. The Nazi Party Congress held annually in that city.

Bischheim[3] who, even though a *hergelofener*,[4] is rapidly collecting the honors in his new city. The means of informing me about it were eminently original.[5]

❦ ❦ ❦

Wednesday morning

I still want to write to Liber now and to finish my letter for M. [Marcus] Cohn, and the *seder* begins soon, therefore yet another reason to stop, especially since I have nothing else to write.

Gut Shabbos, love and kisses,

Ernest

3. Probably his brother-in-law, Achille Blum.
4. Alsatian: immigrant (freshly arrived in the Haut-Rhin department in 1936).
5. Perhaps by an invitation to the ceremony for the restoration of the synagogue, mentioning the names of the Committee members; Achille Blum had been elected Secretary of the Israelite Community.

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

B.E.H.

Mir, September 14, 1938

Monsieur Director and Dear Master, *nero yair*,

I just received your letter, as well as another one from my father, who from his end transmitted to me your invitation to return. He already told you himself that, given the great distance and preparation for the departure, it was materially impossible for me to be back in France for *Rosh Hashanah*. For *Yom Kippur*, however, I will be at your disposal entirely.

I by no means regret having to stay here for *Rosh Hashanah*. Indeed, according to your letter, you seem to think that the festivals at the yeshiva, nearly empty, are without any interest. Yet, the *Yamim Noraim* with *Simchas Torah* are precisely the culmination of the entire year. Not only are all the students present in full strength, but even former students, rabbis, newly married students, foreigners, all of them come from *Elul* to *Simchas Torah* to live these days in the bosom of the yeshiva. It has not been granted to me to be here for *Yom Kippur* and *Simchas Torah*, but I bless the providential chance that gives me this unique opportunity to still be here for this *Rosh Hashanah*.

Concerning Mr. Bensinger, if you allow me to give my opinion, I can assure you that his French would enable him to fulfill any function of professor or rabbi that you might offer him, to your complete satisfaction. He would certainly be capable of giving an excellent sermon to the critical ear of French Jews.

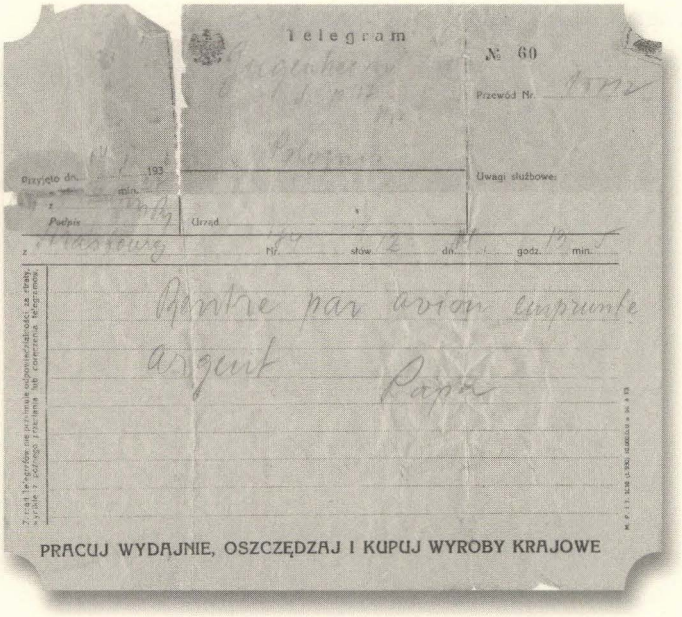
While regretting not to be able to follow up on your invitation, I permit myself to address to you, Monsieur Director, my

best wishes of *kesivah vechasimah tovah*,[1] and please accept the assurance of my greatest respect,

Ernest Gugenheim

That was the last letter from Mir.... On September 14th at 1:05 p.m., a telegram was sent from Strasbourg: "Come back by plane, borrow the money. Papa." We were expecting war to break out... but the Munich Agreement was concluded.

Rosh Hashanah *fell on September 26th: the author of the "Letters from Mir" was not able to fulfill his wish to spend this festival at the yeshiva, as confirmed by the letter below from Chief Rabbi Liber, addressed to Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim in Bouxwiller:*



1. Hebrew: expression of the wish for the New Year; literally "May you be written and sealed for a Good Year" (in the book of life).

Response from Chief Rabbi Liber

September 18, 1938

My Dear Colleague,

I am happy to know that you are back, even if the reason for your return is not the one I desired.

However that may be, I ask you to write without delay to Mr. N. K..., President of the Israelite Community of Z... — Grand-Rue.

I think you might take lodgings at the Israelite hospice of the community, unless you prefer staying in a hotel; as for the food, I can only tell you that I do not eat the *shechita* of Z...

Please share my best wishes of *kesivah vechasimah tovah* between your parents and yourself, and believe, my Dear Colleague, in my very faithful sentiment,

Maurice Liber

EPILOGUE TO THE FRENCH EDITION

Ernest Gugenheim to Chief Rabbi Liber

Bouxwiller, October 6, 1938

Monsieur Director and Dear Master, *nero yair*,

Upon my return from Z..., I hasten to report on the day I spent there. In fact, I assured the rabbinical service only during the day of *Yom Kippur*, the international situation having prevented me from doing so for *Rosh Hashanah*.

I prefer telling you straight away that even without having gone through a yeshiva, it is possible to be perfectly disgusted by such a spectacle. I am convinced that this *Yom Kippur* service, from the beginning to the end, was nothing more than a *chillul Hashem*. I do not even want to mention the accompaniment on the harmonium under the direction of a non-Jew. I particularly want to call to mind that one hour after the commencement of the service, we at last had a *minyan*, thanks to the boarders of the hospice; that the reading of the Law was only a grand and shameful comedy; that in the middle of *Al chet*,[1] members of the congregation were not embarrassed to spread open the *Est Républicain* widely and finally, that a member of the Commission[2]

1. Hebrew: "For the sin...," first words of the collective confession.
2. Administrative Commission of the Israelite Community.

asked a young man, supposedly the most *goy* in the whole assembly, to go turn on the light when it began to get dark; and so on and so forth....

One thing that consoles me nevertheless: it is not bad to know exactly to what extent French Judaism has fallen. I believe my plate is full. My disappointment is all the greater that last year I had taken away from Vichy the excellent souvenir of a service full of life, feeling and warmth.

Please accept, Monsieur Director, the assurance of my greatest respect,

Ernest Gugenheim



Ernest Gugenheim in uniform

Response from Chief Rabbi Liber

October 13, 1938

My Dear Colleague,

The transition from the School to life is always difficult; the passage from the yeshiva to Z... still more so.

I am thus only half surprised by your impressions, but I am half surprised nonetheless.

I would have thought that *Yom Kippur* would have made you less intransigent; the *mussar* learned in Mir therefore does not include indulgence?

Let us hope that the transition from the yeshiva to the barracks does not seem to you more painful still! When must you be inducted?

You write that you did not go to Z... for *Rosh Hashanah* because of the "international situation." Was it the Community that asked you not to come, or was it you who preferred not to leave Bouxwiller?

Recall my best thoughts to your father and please believe, my Dear Colleague, in my faithful sentiment,

Maurice Liber

In annex moreover, this postcard from Latvia, written obliquely, as required on Chol HaMoed:

Mordekhaï Bensinger to Ernest Gugenheim

Riga, *Chol HaMoed Sukkos*

Dear Ernest, *nero yair,*

You probably know that I had already left Mir on the day after *Rosh Hashanah*, having also received two telegrams, and in great haste I was only able to take with me your coat which (*agav urcha*[1]) gave me quite a bit of work since I didn't have room in my suitcase.

Concerning your debts, I took care of nearly all of them, I even collected a considerable amount from your fellows, I will send you the exact *cheshbon* after my arrival in France. Tomorrow, I am leaving Riga for Stockholm and Copenhagen! What a trip, you will say.

Chag sameach veKol Tuv,[2] *meachel lecha* Mordekhaï (Bensinger).

1. Aramaic: "by the way."
2. Hebrew: Wish for a good festival!

The world war was avoided for a year by the Munich Agreement.

Inducted as anticipated on the day after Simchas Torah, *Ernest Gugenheim was to spend nearly seven years in uniform, from conscription to the mobilization, then as war prisoner for five years in Germany, without the least Talmud treatise to study.... He had to take it up again practically from the beginning, when Chief Rabbi Liber, still Director of the Rabbinical Seminary, entrusted him with teaching Talmud and Rabbinical Law.*

However, the Mir Yeshiva had marked him forever with its stamp.

He chose in 1967 to send his eldest son to the Be'er Yaakov Yeshiva in Israel, where the Mashgiach *was Rav Wolbe, the first person to have welcomed him in Mir.*

And it was not without emotion that he met two years later in Jerusalem the "son of his landlady," Batsheva!

In 1951, during a Shabbos spent at Mea Shearim, he again found the atmosphere of the Polish Chassidic courts.

He continued to search for Gedolei hador *by meeting the Chazon Ish in Bnei Brak in 1951 and the Brisker Rov in Switzerland at Schuls Tarasp in 1955. He also knew Rav Dessler at Gateshead, having spent several weeks in the* kollel *of that English town in 1947 and 1948.*

In the correspondence published above, the intention of writing an article on the Yeshiva was mentioned. We found one, under the signature of Rabbi E. Gugenheim, in the Cahiers d'études juives, *September-October 1946. "This study had been suggested by an article appearing in* Messilot, *review published by the* Vaad Harabonim *in New York," as a note specifies. We reproduce below the passages that seem to us more particularly stemming from the experience in Mir.*

THE YESHIVA

Excerpted from an essay by Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim

"Make the Torah your constant occupation" (*Avot* 1:15)

When the tragedy that was to cost Israel so many tears and so much blood fell upon the Jews of Poland, all of Israel was gripped with the same anxiety: millions of Jews were destined to die. Perhaps some people, if that were possible, felt this suffering still more profoundly, more painfully: those who measured the whole breadth of the catastrophe, those who understood that again "the crown has fallen from our heads."[1] For, more than any other country, Poland had remained the homeland of the Torah, it was in its schools, in its yeshivos, with its grand masters, that thousands of Jews had come to drink the Torah from where it springs, at its least altered source.

Thus may we understand the interest such reassuring news can generate that in spite of all those specters of death and destruction, the Torah has found a new land of choice where already it shines with very vivid brilliance. A great number of yeshivos have been created these recent years in America, which hardly yield to their European models, and about ten thousand students attend them assiduously. [...]

What in truth is that attraction, what is that particular strength of Talmud study, which on the whole is the exclusive object of study in the yeshivos? All those who have engaged fairly seriously in such study agree that it has a taste, a special flavor. It is very evident that, when we speak of Talmud study, we have in mind not

1. *Lamentations* 5:6.

the study of conclusions, well-determined and important rules for conduct, but especially "the plunge into the powerful waters of that sea for the discovery of pearls," the attacks and the defenses, the questions and retorts, the discussions between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel, those between their disciples and between the disciples of their disciples; in a word, the whole scaffolding that the Talmud erects in the elaboration of the *halachah*, all the materials accumulated to bring a question to its definitive solution. When the Jew "uproots mountains and grinds them by reasoning," he well knows that this is not intellectual gymnastics, a pure game of dialectics. No! But, on the contrary, he feels himself truly associated with the Masters of the Talmud in the *creation* of the *halachah*. [...] He learns to consider the Masters of the Talmud as leaders and saints: their study is not science for science, but totally and exclusively the constant search for the will of G-d. He recognizes that all the words and all the discussions of the Sages are only the deepening of the comprehension of the written Law, in an attempt to express, as much as is possible, the divine will. That will cannot be disassociated, fragmented into multiple parts, but on the contrary, it encompasses, it *unites* the parts, the details of the Law. From all the commandments of the Torah together is completed the divine will; better still, all the letters of the Torah unite to reveal that will, which is why our Sages very correctly say that a Torah scroll in which one letter is missing is improper.

We thus understand as well that it is not possible to be content with a limited study, which would have as its object only the "current laws," those still in use in our time, but that this study must be extended to all the laws, current or past, since only by a complete study can one arrive at a complete knowledge. It is in this sense that is explained the verse of *Amos* 5:4, "Thus spoke the Eternal to the house of Israel: 'Seek Me and you shall live.'" "Seek Me in the whole Torah!" (*Makkos* 24a). It is for such a study that we say the blessing "Who has directed us to take care (constantly) of the

words of the Torah," for a study that requires of us constant work and effort, intimate and incessant commerce with our Sages; and immediately after which, we ask that "G-d render these words sweet and agreeable to us."

It is for these reasons that the generations preceding us preferred the Babylonian to the Jerusalem Talmud, because the latter did not procure for them the same pleasure, the same satisfaction as the ardent discussions of the "*Bavli*." And it is also for this reason that such an opposition was shown to the "*Mishneh Torah*" of Maimonides: it was feared this work would supplant the Talmud, which is to say that Israel would abandon the *living* atmosphere for abstraction, would thus abandon this study that is the secret itself of her resistance, of her life.

It is this taste, this flavor of the words of the Torah, this kind of spiritual voluptuousness of the Creator that we have sought and found in all times, in all these yeshivos which, like a golden chain, have succeeded one another since Yavne until our day. [...]

SUPPLEMENT TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

The Tradition of Mir

My father, Grand Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim, was profoundly influenced by the months he spent at the Mir Yeshiva. Those months reinforced characteristics cultivated alongside his own father and the instructors at the Rabbinical Seminary of Paris: love of study; erudition gained through an inexhaustible passion for greater learning; an unshakeable faith; an unconditional attachment to the values of the Torah, as well as every *halachah* and all customs; a devotion to others without reservation but proffered with patience and kindness; and, finally, a respect for the rabbinical luminaries of his time who embodied these ideals.

These manifest qualities were recognized by all, religious and lay. Such are these testimonies concerning the period of five years when he was a prisoner of war in Germany. In 1942, Mr. Marcel Bloch wrote to Rabbi Max Gugenheim:

> I take up this pen to speak of your son Ernest, with whom I shared some long months of captivity. I must here offer homage to your son who, throughout this period that I spent with him, proved himself to have an extraordinary character with an immense kindness in his soul, a difficult thing to accomplish in the situation where we found ourselves.

The following year, another companion during the internment attested that when a Seder was organized for all the Jewish



After the War, the first wedding which Rabbi Gugenheim performed was for one of his comrades in captivity.

prisoners in the stalag, "the [textual] explications were given by Gugenheim, who had no difficulty responding to questions." At the entrance to the Westhoffen cemetery where he rests, a similar message is engraved:

> In the cemetery of his birthplace rests Ernest Gugenheim, Grand Rabbi, our colleague and friend in captivity

(Germany 1940–1945), who was for all of us an example. By the force of his character and by his unshakeable faith, he was able to give us courage and the power of hope during these five long years.

These abiding qualities of my father and my grandfather were recognized even by non-Jews, as is apparent in this letter from the mayor of the village of Westhoffen, addressing the President of the Israelite Council of the Bas-Rhin, on July 18, 1977:



Dedication plaque presented by Grand Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim's comrades in captivity erected at the entrance to the cemetery where he is buried

> In your request of last June 15th, you requested the Municipality's attention towards giving the road leading to the Jewish cemetery the name of "Grand Rabbis Max and Ernest Gugenheim Street." This initiative was favorably received by the Council, which was not insensitive to acknowledging within the community the respect and memory of the formerly significant Jewish community, while venerating the honorable sons of the Gugenheim family.



Two adjacent Westhoffen streets named for three illustrious Jewish children from this peaceful village: One named for Grand Rabbis Max and Ernest Gugenheim; the other for Leon Blum, the Prime Minister of France shortly before World War II

But these traits had already been appreciated, in earlier years, by the high dignitaries of the Jewish community. A month after the armistice that brought the Second World War to an end, during

a session of the Administrative Commission of the Rabbinical School that was held on June 6, 1945, Grand Rabbi Liber confirmed the candidacy of Rabbi (Ernest) Gugenheim as Professor of the Talmud and proposed to confer upon him the position of Secretary of the Rabbinical Tribunal to complete his nomination.

In June 1950, when the Baron de Rothschild, President of the Central Council, raised the question of who would succeed Grand Rabbi Liber in directing the Seminary, Dr. Klein recommended Rabbi Gugenheim, "who had been deputized during the hiatus of the director's illness, who listened to the students, and who is a great Talmudic scholar." On this occasion, Grand Rabbi Liber listed the titles of Rabbi Gugenheim, whom he deemed appropriate to succeed him, as much for my father's knowledge as for the breadth of his ideas, his piety and his stature with the students.

Not mincing words, Rabbi Gugenheim wrote a letter addressed to the President of the Central Council:

> Evidently, time was needed before determining in good conscience the life of a school that is just awakening from a half-sleep. There are still certain "shadows" on the scene. The spirit of the school is not yet, to my mind, what it should be.... You do not ignore that in the minds of many, the school has a bad reputation and I must say that in the past this reputation was not entirely unjustified. There is nothing to this now and if the school is not what it might be, that is certainly because the students of this year are extremely disparate in their origins, studies, and the experiences that they were able to acquire. And, this can never change, as far as I am concerned, unless a group of young students, who are "orthodox" in the best sense of this word, have the courage to come to us. I am perhaps too exacting, but I do not think so. We cannot allow ourselves to be indulgent for future rabbis and it is

> certainly better for French Judaism not to have rabbis at all than to have bad rabbis who betray their role as religious leaders.... If I have brought forth certain shadows, there are nevertheless some rays of light as well. Overall, the students are enlivened by a truly serious spirit, and if they are not ideal graduates, they certainly suffice in qualifications for their graduation. Taken individually, there are even some students who are, or who promise to be, remarkable. They are, as a whole, inspired by a deep religious sentiment and appear to have a sharp understanding of the grave situation of French Judaism, and of the role they might yet play.

He described the reality without adornment and worked tirelessly to improve the situation. His competence in those matters was appreciated at the highest levels.

Thus, during a session on February 28, 1951, the Paris Council unanimously made Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim the Vice-President of the Paris Rabbinical Tribunal. Georges Wormser, the President of the Council, wrote him on this occasion: "I congratulate you on this nomination, certain that you will bring us the effective assistance of your devotion and your Talmudic knowledge."

Even today, more than thirty-six years after his departure, his children and grandchildren hear direct and secondary accounts of his significant role in the Jewish community. For example, when the Director of the *Yeshiva Ketana*, who was born in Israel, learned that one of his students was a member of the Gugenheim family, he contacted the parents and recounted that his father-in-law had often heard from the mouth of Rav Gershon Liebman, an eminent disciple of the Alter of Novardok, that Grand Rabbi Gugenheim had saved and rebuilt French Judaism after the war.

The respect due to the *Gedolim*

My father spoke with pride of those who had influenced him. "I have encountered three of the greatest Rabbinical lights of my generation: the great R. Chaim Ozer Grodzensky, in Vilna (in 1938), the Chazon Ish (Rabbi Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz) in Bnei Brak (in 1951), and in 1955 the Rav of Brisk in Schulz-Tarasp (in Switzerland, where he was staying for health reasons), the spiritual leader after the demise of the Chazon Ish."

At the Gateshead Kollel, where he spent several months in the summer, he met Rav Eliyahu Dessler, the celebrated author of the *Michtav me-Eliyahu* (adapted into English as *Strive for Truth*), who sent my parents a heartfelt letter of blessing upon their marriage.

During a trip to Israel in the summer of 1951, he went to Bnei Brak to meet Rav Dessler, who was the *mashgiach* of the Yeshiva in Ponevezh, and also to meet the Chazon Ish. The former was not there, but he met on this day the Chazon Ish. The journal of Jewish studies, *Hamoré*, for which his wife was the Editor in Chief, included an eloquent description of his visit (accompanied by his wife) with the Chazon Ish.

> His house at Bnei Brak, where he had established himself in 1935, had become the center not only for scholars and distinguished visitors, but also all those who sought advice and spiritual aid. I myself had the great joy of seeing him and receiving his benediction. Surrounded by gardens, his house was dressed in silence. In vain, we searched for someone who could introduce us to him.... Finally, a *bachur* of the Yeshiva said to us, "Knock on the door!" The wife of the Rabbi opened the door and, after permitting our audience with him, recommended that we not stay long so as not to tire him.

> In his office, where the shelves filled with books were the only decoration, he appeared to us, in truth, as old and weary. He responded curtly, but very clearly, to the questions that I asked. We did not dare to insist, out of feelings of respect and veneration, fearing to trouble this atmosphere of good health, of luminous serenity. This visit reminded me strangely of a visit I made a dozen years earlier to Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzensky, the Grand Rabbi of Vilna, undoubted leader of the earlier generation, who received me with the same affability. He already praised the Chazon Ish as a future master, to whom he ascribed many good qualities.

But my father completed this tale by recounting to us an unexpected occurrence during the course of their meeting. At a particular moment, the Chazon Ish asked him: "And you, when will you install yourself in Israel?" Caught off balance for an instant by this astonishing question from a rabbi known for his opposition to a secular State of Israel, and certainly not a fervent supporter of the Jewish Agency, my father responded that he considered his efforts in Paris as that of a sea captain on a boat threatening to sink, and he planned to stay at his post until his passengers and other members of the crew were safe. The Chazon Ish was not convinced by this response, it seemed, and suggested shortly thereafter that he wished to put an end to their conversation. Later, I understood that this reaction was in keeping with the profound convictions of the Chazon Ish.

Even if he did not see in the State of Israel "the beginning of deliverance" (*at'chalta de-geula*), he perceived the Shoah (the Holocaust) as an eradication of exile, a sign that there was no longer any future, in the long run, for the diaspora communities.

During the length of his rabbinical career, my father had the occasion to encounter many rabbinical figures known worldwide.

First, Rav Wolbe, who had welcomed him at Mir and who, after the war, became the celebrated *mashgiach* of the Yeshiva of Be'er Yaakov, where my eldest brother and I studied for several years.

He also took me to see R. Chaim Shmuelevitz, Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, as well as the great R. Yitzchak Nissim, the prior Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel. One day, when I was praying with him in a *shtiebel* in the Bayit Vegan section of Jerusalem, he recognized Rabbi Michel Feinstein, the son-in-law of the Rav of Brisk. Upon introducing himself to this illustrious rabbi, the man exclaimed with a great smile, "Ah yes, the French from Mir!"

In the same neighborhood, he had the opportunity to meet Rav Yechezkel Abramsky. On other occasions, he met many times with Rav Y.Y. Neuwirth, author of *Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata*. Dozens of years later, I came to ask him questions, and after identifying myself, he extensively praised my father, remembering his critical role on the Rabbinical Tribunal in Paris.

At other times, he was also in contact with Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, the past director of the Hildesheimer Seminary of Berlin, who lived next door to the Yeshiva of Montreux, in Switzerland, after the Holocaust, and who cites him in *Sridei Eish*, his compilation of responsa. Thanks to these encounters with the great masters, he could return anew to the atmosphere of the prestigious Yeshiva of Mir, by continuing to live and relive the exceptional moments that he had experienced there.

Jean-Jacques Gugenheim
Translator of the Talmud
and other works of Halachah
and Midrash into French

LEXICON OF HEBREW AND YIDDISH TERMS

A

Adar: twelfth month of the Hebrew/Jewish calendar.

Aggadah, Hebrew: Talmudic narrative of moral or philosophical inspiration, that which is not *halachah.* — In Aramaic: *aggadeta.*

Agudas harabbanim, Hebrew: association of rabbis.

Al chet, Hebrew: "for the sin..." — first words of the text of the confession.

Aliyah, Hebrew: "ascent" — to the *bimah,* podium of the synagogue to make the blessing on the Torah, or toward Eretz-Israel.

Av: fifth month of the Hebrew/Jewish calendar.

Avadde, Yiddish: of course!

Avodah zarah, Hebrew: foreign cult, idolatry.

B

B.E.H., Be-ezras Hashem, Hebrew: with God's help.

Baalei avera, Hebrew: sinners, transgressing a law of the Torah.

Baalei batim, Hebrew: "master of the house" (also used in opposition to *benei Tora*, those who devote their lives to study). Singular: *baal habayis.*

Baalei teshuvah, Hebrew: repentant sinners, those who have returned to the Judaism of *mitzvos.*

Bachurim, Hebrew: young men. Singular: *bachur.*

Balebus, Yiddish: master of the house, host.

Balebusta, Yiddish: "mistress of the house," hostess, corresponding to the Hebrew *baalas habayis.* The word designates both the landlady and woman in whose house meals are taken.

Batei midrashim, Hebrew: houses of study, learning. Singular: *beis medrash.*

Batim, Hebrew: houses, designates also cubic leather boxes where the *tefillin* parchments are stored.

Bein ha'z'manim, Hebrew: between study sessions, yeshiva holiday usually around *Sukkos* and *Pesach.*

Berachah, Hebrew: blessing.

Beis hamedrash, Hebrew: house of study.

Bikur cholim, Hebrew: visiting the sick.

Birkas Kohanim, Hebrew: priestly benediction, recited during certain public services by those descended from Aaron.

C

Chabad, Acronym from the three Hebrew words of *chochma* (wisdom), *binah* (understanding) and *da'as* (knowledge), denoting the Lubavitch *Chassidus.*

Chag sameach, Hebrew: joyous holidays.

Challah, Hebrew: name given to the bread for Shabbos and ceremonial occasions.

Chaver (Hebrew) or *Chavrusa* (Aramaic): study companion in the process of learning in pairs.

Chazan, Hebrew: Jewish cantor who leads the congregation is singing prayers.

Cheshbon, Hebrew: calculation, reckoning.

Chillul Hashem, Hebrew: profanation of the Holy Name.

Chol HaMoed, Hebrew: literally, the "weekday" of the festival,

semi-holidays in the middle of the holidays of *Pesach* and *Sukkos*.

Chuppah, Hebrew: wedding canopy.

D

Daf, Hebrew: folio of the Talmud consisting of both sides of the page.

Daven, Yiddish: pray.

Dayan, Hebrew: rabbinical judge.

Derech eretz, Hebrew: politeness; literally, "the way of the world," referring to deportment, manners and behavior.

Din, Hebrew: law.

Drasha, Hebrew: sermon.

E

Elul: sixth month of the Hebrew/Jewish calendar.

Erev, Hebrew: the day before.

Erev Shabbos, Hebrew: "the day before Shabbos," Friday.

Eruv, Hebrew: a device making it possible to move objects from the interior to the exterior of a house, and vice-versa, and to carry objects in public areas, on the Sabbath.

F

Frum, Yiddish: pious.

G

Gadol, Hebrew: great.

Gaon hador, Hebrew: the genius of our generation.

Gaon, Hebrew: denotes a Master of exceptional caliber.

Gemara, Aramaic: principal part of the Talmud, completing the Mishnah.

Goyim, Hebrew: literally people; plural of *goy*, denotes non-Jews.

Gezerah, Hebrew: decree [often of persecution].

Guf, Hebrew: body.

Gut Shabbos, Yiddish: "good Shabbos!"

H

Haftarah, Hebrew: passage of the Prophets read on Shabbos morning at the end of the weekly portion of Torah studied.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu, Hebrew: The Holy One, Blessed be He.

Hachana, Hebrew: preparation.

Halachah, Hebrew: "the way to go", — law and legislative part of the Talmud; the other part, Talmudic narrative of moral and philosophic inspiration is called the Aggadah — in Aramaic: *aggadeta*.

Hasmada, Hebrew: perseverance.

Havdalah, Hebrew: separation — ceremony marking the end of the Shabbos and Festivals.

Hislahavus, Hebrew: enthusiasm, exaltation — literally, a flame.

I

Im yirtze Hashem, Hebrew: if God is willing.

Inyan, plural *inyanim*, Hebrew: subject of study.

Issur, Hebrew: interdiction, proscription.

Ivris, Hebrew: Hebraic language, Hebrew.

Iyar: second month of the Hebrew/Jewish calendar.

K

Kashya, Aramaic: difficult question or textual difficulty in the Talmud.

Kushyos and *teshuvos*, Hebrew: questions and answers.

Kashrus, Hebrew: conformity to religious norms for dietary laws.

Kavanah, Hebrew: concentration, mental focus.

Kavod, Hebrew: honor, glory.

Kedusha, Hebrew: holiness.

Kesivah vechasimah tovah, Hebrew: expression of New Year's wishes, literally: "May You Be Written and Sealed for a Good Year."

Kever, Hebrew: tomb.

Kevius, Hebrew: routine study periods.

Kiddush, Hebrew: sanctification ceremony of Shabbos.

Kodesh kodashim, Hebrew: of total holiness, the Holy of Holies.

Kollel, Hebrew: institution of advanced Talmudic study intended for former yeshiva students after their marriage.

Krias Shema, Hebrew: ritual recitation of the Shema.

L

Lashon, Hebrew: tongue, language.

Lav davka, Talmudic expression: "not precisely."

Lehrnen, Yiddish: study or to study.

Lishmah, Hebrew: non-utilitarian study of the Torah, study for the sake of study.

M

Maariv, Hebrew: evening prayer.

Mashgiach, Hebrew: Spiritual director at the yeshiva, whose role is to teach *mussar,* Jewish ethics.

Matzos, Hebrew: unleavened bread, singular, *matzah.*

Menucha, Hebrew: rest, refrain.

Mesilas Yesharim, Hebrew: *The Path of the Just*, work of Jewish ethics written by Rabbi M. C. Luzzato.

Mezuzah, Hebrew: parchment consisting of two paragraphs from the Torah inserted into case that is affixed to the doorframe of a house or room.

Mikveh, Hebrew: ritual bath.

Mincha, Hebrew: afternoon prayer.

Minhagim, Hebrew: accepted customs, conduct. Singular: *minhag.*

Minyanim, Hebrew: a *minyan* (literally, the count, number), quorum of ten men, the minimum required to recite community prayers.

Mishnah, Hebrew: The written code of Oral Law which forms the basis for the Talmud.

Mussar, Hebrew: course in Jewish ethics.

N

Nero yair, Wish expressed in Hebrew: "may his light shine," which is added to the name mentioned.

Nigun, Hebrew: liturgical melody.

Nissan: the first month of the Hebrew/Jewish calendar, in the spring when Passover occurs.

O

Omer, Hebrew: name given to the period of 49 days between *Pesach* (Passover) and *Shavuos* (Pentecost).

P

Parashah, Hebrew: portion, section of the biblical text, *parashos* plural,

Passul, Hebrew: improper or invalid from the point of view of ritual.

Payos, Hebrew: "corners" of the head, sidelocks or side curls, hair that it is prohibited to shave, and that the Chassidim let grow long.

Perek, Hebrew: chapter of a tractate.

Pesach, Hebrew: Passover.

P'shat, Hebrew: surface, literal meaning of the text.

Pikuach nefesh, Hebrew: principle of life saving, the preservation of human life.

Piyyut, plural *Piyyutim*, Hebrew: liturgical poems.

Purim, Hebrew: Festival of Lots.

R

Rabbanim, Hebrew: rabbis.

Rebbe, Yiddish: rabbi; and also, in the yeshiva, "a young man from 25 to 30 years old, extremely scholarly, with whom one studies for a fee."

Rishess, Yiddish: anti-Semitism; from wickedness.

Rishonim and Acharonim, Hebrew: "the first ones" and "the last ones" — denotes the legal decision-makers who were either prior to or posterior to the publication of the *Shulchan Aruch*, Code of Jewish Law by Joseph Caro (1567).

Rosh Chodesh, Hebrew: literally, "head of the month," the first day of each month in the Jewish calendar.

Rosh Hashanah, Hebrew: Jewish New Year, literally, "head of the year."

Rosh Yeshiva, Director or dean of the yeshiva.

S

Safek, Hebrew: doubt.

Seder, Hebrew: literally, "order, ceremonial"; name of various times of study at the yeshiva, or the Passover ceremony, at home, during the first two evenings of the festival.

Sefer, Hebrew: book; plural *sefarim*.

Semichah, Hebrew: rabbinical ordination.

Seudah, Hebrew: meal.

Shadchan, Hebrew: Jewish marriage broker, who suggests unions to the families and introduces the parties.

Shalosh seudos, Yiddish: literally "three meals," also in Hebrew: *Seudah Shlishis*, the third of the Sabbath meals.

She'elos, Hebrew: questions.

She'elos u'teshuvos, responsa, answers to questions.

Shechita, Hebrew: ritual slaughter.

Shema Yisrael, Hebrew: "Hear, O Israel," beginning of the profession of faith.

Shevat: eleventh month of the Hebrew/Jewish calendar.

Sivan: third month of the Hebrew/Jewish calendar.

Shkiyas ha-chamah, Hebrew: sunset.

Shmita, Hebrew: sabbatical year.

Shofar, see infra *Tekias shofar*.

Shtetl, Yiddish: Jewish quarter in the small localities of Central Europe.

Shtikel (or *shtikele*) *Torah*, Yiddish: a small piece of Torah.

Shul, Yiddish: synagogue.

Shut (acronym pronounced "shoot"), Hebrew: *she'elos* for

questions, *u-* for and, *teshuvos* for answers. *She'elos u'teshuvos*, literally "questions and answers," known as responsa literature.

Simcha, Hebrew: joy, happiness; plural: semachos.

Simchas Torah, Hebrew: literally, "rejoicing with the Torah," celebration ending the holiday of *Sukkos* (festival of the Tabernacles or Booths).

Sofer, Hebrew: scribe; plural: *soferim*.

Stanzie: Yiddish: pension.

Sugya, Aramaic: subject.

T

Talmid, Hebrew: disciple; plural, *talmidim*.

Talmid chacham, plural *talmidei chachamim*, literally, "disciple of the wise," learned in the Torah, an eminent Talmudist.

Tamuz: fourth month of the Hebrew/Jewish calendar.

Tefillah, Hebrew: prayer.

Tefillin, Hebrew: phylacteries; worn for morning prayers.

Tekias shofar, sounding of the ram's horn, blown in the month of *Elul*, at the ceremonies of *Rosh Hashanah* and the end of *Yom Kippur*.

Teves: tenth month of the Hebrew/Jewish calendar.

Tishrei: the seventh month of the Hebrew/Jewish calendar, the month of the Jewish New Year, when the year changes.

Tseda laderech, Hebrew: provisions for a voyage.

Tummel, Yiddish: noisy disorder.

Y

Yichus, Hebrew: genealogy.

Yamim Noraim, Hebrew: "Days of Awe," *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur.*

Yid, Yiddish: Jew.

Yom tov or *Yomtov*, Hebrew: holidays or festivals.

Yoreh Deah, one of the four parts of the *Shulchan Aruch.*

Z

Z'man, Hebrew: time, period (of study or prayer).

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES FROM FRENCH EDITION

OF PERSONS CITED IN THIS CORRESPONDENCE

Mordekhai Max Bensinger: He appears frequently in this correspondence! What happened to him afterwards? We found a letter from him, dated May 19, 1953, with a letter head "Max Bensinger C.L.U., Planned Insurance Estates, New York Life Insurance Company," Cleveland, Ohio. It is written in English. Below is an extract:

> I do hope that you will forgive me for writing to you in English, but believe me, it is quite an effort to write French or German after having been away from Europe for so many years. [...]
>
> My brother in law has forwarded your letter of April 10 to me and I am very pleased to know that French Judaism has a man like you at its top. Frankly, I am quite a bit proud of the fact that I was instrumental in getting you into the yeshiva and that you have become a pillar of strength for orthodoxy. No doubt I would not have recognized the Rabbinical College of Paris after the job you have accomplished, and this again goes to show that nothing gets *ferfalen*, as the *Mashgiach zal* used to say. [...]

Élie Bloch: In the Memorial published in 1946 by the Central Consistory of the Israelites of France and Algeria, "in remembrance of our rabbis and officiating ministers victims of Nazi barbarity", it was Ernest Gugenheim who signed the text dedicated to

Rabbi Élie Bloch, who had been for a time his fellow student at the Rabbinical School. Rabbi for youth in Metz from 1934 until the war, he was deported with his wife and five year-old daughter...

> [...] All I have to do is to think of him to see him appear before my eyes such as we all always knew him: full of life, youth, fervor. I had no longer seen him at work during recent years. But what he did was only to remain himself, simply elevating his being to the scale of events. The reverberations of his action, penetrating frontiers and the screen of barbed wire, reached me as far as in the confinement of my Stalag. I knew of his incessant mediations undertaken with friendly and enemy authorities: these intercessions always daring, often efficient, in which he risked his life, his cherished wife's and his beloved child's; he never recoiled before any danger. I knew of the friendship the eminent representatives of the Catholic clergy lavished on him, as well as the attentive consideration he received from the simple men on the street: all admired his heroism, his self-sacrifice, his holiness. Living, he became a legend; dead, he remained living in the hearts of those who survived him.
>
> He had to act in this way: gifted with an acute sense of justice and liberty, he had always felt a solidarity with all disadvantaged people. [...] He greatly transcended social contingencies, exterior conventions: nothing could have stopped him in his need to say the truth — truths however disagreeable they may be. He was a true rabbi, keeping always before his eyes the luminous example of his father who had transmitted to him the love of integral Judaism. [...]

Mr. Bloch: Maurice Bloch was a professor of literature at the College of Bouxwiller and close friend of the Gugenheim family.

His father had been an elementary school teacher, and for two years the Director of the Israelite School of Sarre-Union that Max Gugenheim, son of the rabbi of that locality, had attended in his youth. Maurice Bloch was the uncle of Nathan Horvilleur. He died after being deported.

Achille Blum, descendent of the Orthodox Community in Mulhouse, married to Alice Gugenheim. He was a textiles sales representative, and she was a pharmacist.

Léo Cohn: grandson of the Chief Rabbi of Hamburg, Rav Carlebach, he arrived in France in 1934, fleeing Germany. After having been responsible for youth in Paris, he was hired by the community in Strasbourg as director of the *Mercaz Hanoar*, the "Youth Center." During the Occupation, he settled in Lautrec at the farm school headed by Robert Gamzon, and played an important role in the movement of the Israelite Scouts of France. He was arrested in Toulouse in May 1944 while preparing to escort a group of young Jews leaving for Palestine via Spain. He died after being deported.

Marcus Cohn was at the time Bible professor at the Rabbinical School. Descendant of the Orthodox community in Strasbourg, in 1950 he was to continue his teaching career in Jerusalem, after having created the first French Jewish high school in Boulogne/Seine a few years before the war, during which he was taken prisoner. He is the author of a Hebrew-French and French-Hebrew dictionary (Larousse publisher).

Robert Dreyfus, fellow student in the same promotion at the Rabbinical School, was to remain one of Ernest Gugenheim's best friends. After having suffered captivity in Germany as well, he occupied rabbinical posts in Metz and Brussels, and then "ascended" to Israel after having been Chief Rabbi of Belgium.

The two families Dreyfus and Gugenheim have kept up these bonds of friendship.

Noé Gottlieb, son of Abraham Gottlieb who officiated at the synagogue in Bouxwiller, was a professor of philosophy at the College of that locality when he married Blanche Gugenheim. In 1938, he worked at the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* in Paris and held this function until his premature death in 1954.

Robert Gottlieb, elder brother of Noé Gottlieb, was the director of the Palestinian Jewish Colonisation Association (PICA), organization created in 1924 by the Baron James Armand de Rothschild, dedicated to assisting the *Yishuv*, the establishment of Jews in Palestine.

Jacques Gugenheim, born in 1907, was the eldest of the family; he taught at the Israelite School in Ingwiller (Bas-Rhin department). Taken prisoner during World War II, he escaped, caught up with his parents in Vichy, but was arrested in June 1944 and deported to Auschwitz from Drancy on July 31 by convoy 77. He was part of the "march of death" and died of typhus in Dachau on 29 *Shevat*, 5705, the 12th of February, 1945.

René Hirschler, Chief Rabbi of Strasbourg, after the nomination of his predecessor Isaïe Schwartz to the functions of Chief Rabbi of France in 1938, was to fulfill with great devotion during the Occupation the functions of general chaplain of French internment camps. He was arrested, with his wife, in Marseilles in 1943, and both later died after being deported.

Nathan Horvilleur, fellow student at the Rabbinical School, did not become a rabbi and pursued a career in the French National Educational Institution.

Samy Klein was a student at the Rabbinical School from 1934 to 1939, including a year spent at the Telshe Yeshiva in Lithuania.

After the Armistice, he was appointed youth chaplain and general chaplain of the Israelite Scouts of France, and spread Jewish culture by correspondence. Acting assistant to the Chief Rabbi of France in January 1944, he was later shot by the Germans in July 1944.

Batsheva Lechinski succeeded in leaving Mir with her family and reaching Shanghai with the students of the yeshiva who were able to escape. After the war, she settled in New York where she died prematurely. The eldest of her sons, the one who asked the questions on Passover Seder, has been living for scores of years in Jerusalem, and that is how the Gugenheim family met him, with the title of "son of my landlady"!

Maurice Liber succeeded Chief Rabbi Jules Bauer at the head of the Rabbinical School, a function he continued to assume during the Occupation and until 1952. Historian of international renown, director of studies at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* of the Sorbonne, he was also known for his qualities as a polemicist.

Rav Yechezkel (Chatzkel) Lœwenstein, the *mashgiach* of the Mir Yeshiva in 1938, had succeeded an exceptional figure, Rav Yerucham Levovitz, grand master of *mussar*, who had occupied that function in Mir for 26 years. Rav Chatzkel, as he was called, had already spent several years at the Mir Yeshiva when he left it for the Lomza Yeshiva in Petach-Tikva, "Palestine." At the death of Rav Yerucham, he was called back to Mir, where he returned, leaving behind his wife and daughter Yocheved. During the war, he accompanied the Mir Yeshiva to Shanghai, and in 1947 he became the *mashgiach* of the Mirrer Yeshiva Central Institute of New York. In 1949, he left for Israel to take up the function of *mashgiach* at the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, which he left in 1954 for Bnei Brak and the Yeshiva in Ponovezh, where he remained until his death in 1974.

Moses Schorr was an "eminent scholar, professor and director of the Rabbinical Seminary of Poland, of liberal tendency" (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*).

Manfred Wimpfheimer left for the United States, where he continued to correspond regularly with his former fellow student and friend. He anglicized his name to Wimer and occupied a rabbinical post in Rome, NY. The two families Wimer and Gugenheim met on several occasions.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe was to reach Sweden, a neutral country, where after the war he welcomed survivors from the camps, in particular young girls, contributing to their return to life. Having become a specialist of *mussar*, he became the *mashgiach* at the Israeli Be'er Yaakov Yeshiva, where the two eldest Gugenheim sons studied for long years...and for a time, a Bensinger son. The work "*Mesilas Yesharim*" (*The Path of the Just*) was still an object of study there.

Aron Wolf, mobilized in 1939, entered in 1941 the Rabbinical School that had just reopened its doors in Chamalières (Puy-de-Dôme department), and afterward followed it to Lyon in 1943. He devoted a large part of his activities to Jewish youth and still found time to translate "*Mesilas Yesharim*" (a translation that was finished by one of his colleagues, Jean Poliatchek, and published under the title "*Le Sentier de Rectitude*" by the *Presses Universitaires de France*). Chaplain of a farm created in the Ain department by the *Entr'aide française israélite*, he was caught with his students by a detachment of the Gestapo guided by French Militia, and shot.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

In 2006 I took the initiative to publish the original texts of *Lettres de Mir* in French. I was assisted in this task by my daughter Martine Bendavid, who reviewed the text, and by my son-in-law, Marc-Henri Bollack, who oversaw the quality of the presentation and illustrations. As for this English translation, it has found the light of day thanks to the initiative of my son Elie Gugenheim and his wife, Ariela. They found a great editor in the person of Rabbi Menachem Genack, who attended to the publication of the English edition. Elie and Ariela also suggested going beyond the French edition, to include new photographs and complementary texts. Thus, my eldest son, the Grand Rabbi Michel Gugenheim, composed a biography culled from the French edition, and my son Jean-Jacques Gugenheim, with the assistance of my daughter Martine Bendavid, assembled biographical information from a wide range of sources, relating to their father's experience at the Yeshiva of Mir in 1938.

May they all be warmly thanked for all their diverse contributions!

Claude-Annie Gugenheim

CREDITS FOR PHOTOGRAPHS

Jacket: Courtesy of M. Lechinski

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Letters from Mir

The Correspondence of Ernest Gugenheim

Experience first-hand the daily life of a lost world.

Rabbi Ernest Gugenheim was a young French rabbi who traveled to Lithuania in 1938 to study in the premier Mir yeshiva. *Letters from Mir* is comprised of the letters Rabbi Gugenheim wrote home describing his experiences, opening a window on a world that was soon to be destroyed. Rabbi Gugenheim's sharp eye and charming descriptions make this an unforgettable memoir of a poignant moment in history.

Here is how Rabbi Gugenheim describes his initial encounter with the Mir Beit Midrash:

> *Now, make a small effort of imagination to conjure up for yourself what is to follow: It is ten-thirty in the evening, and we approach the yeshiva. We first hear from outside a chanting sound, or rather it is louder than chanting, but really this is nothing as yet. We enter, and, lo, an immense room, truly immense, and inside there are let us say fifty to a hundred fellows, masmidim, who sing, who shout, who move and shake in a frenzy that delights and frightens you at the same time. In any case, it exceeds anything I had imagined. It should also be added that there was only a small portion of the students present because it was not the time of the lehrnen; what will it be like when everyone is here?*

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