Mordechai Staiman



Secrets of the Rebbe

That Led to the Fall of the Soviet Union

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by Mordechai Staiman

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2025

Mendelsohn Press
Brooklyn, NY

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ISBN 0-8266-0029-8

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Published and distributed.
by
Mendelsohn Press
565 Crown St. Apt. 4H Brooklyn, NY 11213
Tel.: 718-467-1957
email: mp770@aol.com

For additional copies or information please contact the publisher

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Secrets of the Rebbe That Led to the Fall Of the Soviet Union

Consider the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the crumbling of Communism. Yes, after years of oppression and corruption, it may have seemed inevitable that the Soviet Union would fall, and yet who could have predicted that it would happen so suddenly and so peacefully? The world is consistently evolving toward unity, toward recognizing the divine rights of all mankind.

Rabbi Simon Jacobson
Toward a Meaningful Life:
The Wisdom of the Rebbe
Menachem Mendel Schneerson

The 19th-century chassidic leader Rabbi Chaim Halberstam, the Sanzer Rebbe, basing his comment on ancient texts, told one of his followers, "Before the messianic era, Russia will crumble into many pieces and then the Messiah will come!"

Dedicated
to my one and only
Rebbe
Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson

and to

My mom Leah bas Morris, o.b.m.
my dad Saul ben Herschel, o.b.m.
my wife Ada
my daughter Lisa, my son Ari
my sister Heather
Michael, Sachiko, Tom
my granddaughter Sarah Chana bas Arielle
John Tusa, Mrs. Rose Tusa, o.b.m.
and Sophie Weisbard, o.b.m.,
who was born in Yekatrinislav
where the Rebbe was raised,

and in memory of

Shaindel bas Avrahom Yitzchak, Yblcta,
and Leah, Tblcta, Silverstein

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Preface

by Professor Herman Branover

The book about the deeds of the Lubavitcher Rebbe on behalf of Russian Jews is not just important and timely; it presents to the astonished reader one of the most important and miraculous items of the infinite list of supernatural accomplishments of the Rebbe.

During all the 70 years of the Communist regime in Russia, the Rebbe's concern about Russian Jews was unbounded, and the effort to improve their condition was unending. Among the topics of the Rebbe's discourses at chassidic gatherings, Russian Jewry was one of the most frequent, with the emotion of the Rebbe's speech at its highest. His words have been mixed with physically tangible love, tears and profound suffering but also with iron strong confidence in the ultimate liberation.

The Rebbe's perfect knowledge of the Russian language, of the Russian habits as well as of the even most minute details of the structure of the Communist regime and psychology of the leaders gave him the ability to advise every Jew there, those who got into most difficult situations and even many of those hundreds of thousands who had been jailed or sent to labor camps in Siberia. But rational thinking, knowledge and wisdom alone would by far not be enough to explain the Rebbe's unparalleled success in leading Russian Jews. The spiritual supernatural powers of the great *tzaddik* certainly played a crucial role in preservation of Russian Jews, in survival of millions despite all the threats of spiritual, cultural and physical assimilations.

Of course the Rebbe acted through thousands and thousands of his *chassidim* born and living in Russia, most of whom never saw the Rebbe, but were, and still are, indisputably dedicated to him. As a matter of fact these *chassidim* represented the only large group of Torah-observant Russian Jews who, despite deadly threats to them, never gave in and continued their eternal mission in educating the young generation, in spreading Torah knowledge and life-style.

Many of them have been saved directly by the Rebbe himself. I personally was fortunate to join the Lubavitcher movement in Communist Russia in 1964. Eight years later I was permitted to leave Russia for Israel. The permission was granted just three weeks after I received by phone a very special blessing from the Rebbe personally. The permission could not be explained in any natural way since the authorities repeatedly told me that because of my access to military secrets during my work in the Institute of Physics of Latvian Academy of Sciences I would not be given permission to leave for another 10 to 15 years.

In the spring of 1985, during my stay in New York, I got a call from one of the Rebbe's secretaries. He told me that the Rebbe wanted to see me. I was privileged to listen to the Rebbes prophetic forecast about the collapse of the Soviet Union and

world communism during the next few years. The Rebbe wanted me to communicate this fabulous news to Jews in Russia and to encourage them, to tell them that in a few years those who desired to leave would soon be able to do so and the others would be permitted to lead a Jewish life in Russia.

All this reminded me of the well-known historical fact that the founder of Lubavitch Chassidism—the Alter Rebbe, Shneur Zalman of Liadi—waged a spiritual, mystical strugle against Napoleon (who would bring about mass-assimilation of Jews once he conquered Russia). The Alter Rebbe won.

In the same way our Rebbe won the struggle with the Communist regime.

Mordechai Staiman paints a colorful picture of an unprecedented battle for light, wisdom, morality, love inside the kingdom of darkness and hatred.

The reader will thrill reading about the deeds of the Rebbe and thousands of his *chassidim*. One of the most remarkable stories is about the model *chassid*—Reb Mendel Futerfas. After he arranged the escape of about three thousand Russian Jews soon after the end of World War II, Reb Mendel was caught and sentenced to death. Sitting in a solitary jail and awaiting his execution, he communicated with the Rebbe through thoughts, and received answers in the same way. Ultimately, his death sentence was commuted to 25 years in a labor camp. In Siberia, at minus-50 degrees cold, he put on *tefillin* every day while friendly Gentile inmates surrounded him and hid him with their bodies from the eyes of the KGB guards. Reb Mendel never put any unkosher food in his mouth. Gentiles had a tremendous respect for him and told him many times that they envied him. "We've lost here in camp all the pleasures of bodily life for which we lived. You, Mendel, pray, observe your commandments. Speak to your Rebbe! The KGB does not have power over you!"

One, who sits in a deep dark well, sees stars even during the day. The Rebbe says that Russian Jews, because of their genuine longing, have the greatest power and ability to accelerate the revelation of the King Moshiach!

This book of Mordechai Staiman will hopefully bring this message to numerous readers.

Professor Herman Branover
Tevet 20, 5761 / February 15, 2001
Beer-Sheva, Israel

Professor Herman Branover was the first Soviet Jewish scientist to emigrate legally from the former Soviet Union, and was the first Russian told by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 1985 to prepare his fellow Soviet Jews for the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Introduction

I shall tell you a great secret, my friend. Don't wait for a former Communist official to reveal why the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The truth and prophecy have long been known since 1965, and carried out successfully in the spiritual war waged by Soviet Lubavitcher *chassidim* directed by the Lubavitcher Rebbe Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and before him, the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn.

As you read this book of secrets, open your eyes and keep your faith intact as you see how a handful of Soviet Jews, motivated to keep their Jewish faith no matter what, made a big difference; how each of these Soviet Jews stood up like David with a slingshot against the mighty Russian Giant, which considered G-d's creation and the first truth absurd. Open your eyes, and learn the secrets of the Rebbe—enduring capsules all—that are found inside these pages, secrets that make up some of the most important truths that freedom-loving men and women have to know—finally. Truly a revolution was brewing beneath the streets of the Soviet Empire. For these Soviet Jews, religious freedom was a breakfast food. [1] In a sense, the practice and theory of the Soviet Communists could be summed up this way: Once, when Russian dictator Josef Stalin was cautioned by his underlings that the Pope didn't approve of his actions, he scoffed and said, "And how many divisions does the Pope have?" Funny, Stalin—nor for that matter, Malenkov, Khrushchev, Kosygin or Brezhnev—each who also disdained all things Lubavitch, never questioned the Rebbe's Lubavitch underground fighting force. Funny how Communists, almost till their very end, insisted, "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."[2] Funny, too, how Jewish holiness and ingenuity diminished Russian arrogance every time.

As the first chapter of this book is called, "Long Night's Journey Into Day," let me be the watchman to tell you of the night, what its signs of promises will be. Let me begin with what Australian chassidic writer Yosef Loebenstein noted:[3] One man defied the Evil Empire. "One man was absolutely determined that Jewish life would continue in Russia, that the Torah would not be forgotten. The Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, sixth leader of Chabad, resisted the furious onslaught and kept alight the flame of Judaism in Russia. At a time when other Jewish leaders and Torah greats, considering the situation hopeless, had left the country, the Previous Rebbe increased his efforts in the dissemination of Torah and *mitzvos*. A place needed a rabbi or *shochet*? The Rebbe sent one. Students wanted to learn Torah? The Rebbe founded underground *yeshivahs* and *cheders*. A *mikveh* was necessary? The Rebbe had it

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1. A paraphrase of e. e. cummings, from his poem, "freedom is a breakfast food" (1940).

2. Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. Ib. II, p. 224 (1965).

3. *Days of Destiny: The Jewish Year Under a Chassidic Microscope*, adapted and translated from the works of the Lubavitcher Rebbe Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson (Brooklyn, NY: Sichos In English, 1998).

built. No facet of Jewish life escaped his notice and attention. His efforts brought down upon him the wrath of the *Yevsektzia* and the authorities.... The storm broke. On the fifteenth of *Sivan*, 5687, the Rebbe was arrested and incarcerated in the infamous Spalerno prison in Leningrad. His captors subjected the Rebbe to beatings and interrogations and kept him locked up in squalid filth, trying to break the one person who thwarted their designs.... His *chassidim*, those staunch disciples who resolutely carried out his directives, they too suffered. Many were imprisoned, many sent to Siberia. And many would not be heard of again. Their *mesirus nefesh*, self-sacrifice, came from the Rebbe. He imbued them with the incredible strength needed to continue the task of keeping Russian Jewry alive. His flame was their flame, his burning urgency their command."

When the Previous Rebbe was finally freed from Soviet prison and was departing for exile in Kostrama on the Third of *Tammuz*, "a crowd of Jews gathered at the train station to farewell him. In his parting blessings, the Rebbe said: 'It was not by our will that we were exiled from *Eretz Yisrael*, and it is not with our strength that we will return there. Our Father, our King, blessed be He, sent us into exile, and He will redeem us, gather our dispersed from the four comers of the earth, and lead us upright to our holy land through our righteous Moshiach, speedily in our days.

"'But all the peoples of the earth should know that only our bodies were delivered into exile and servitude, not our souls. We must openly declare that concerning our religion, Torah, *mitzvos*, and Jewish customs, no one can tell us what to do, and no coercion is allowed.

"'We must declare with all the firmness of our Jewish stubbornness, with the Jewish self-sacrifice of thousands of years —"Do not touch My anointed ones and do not do evil to My prophets."[4]

When the present Lubavitcher Rebbe, known to millions as the Rebbe, took over the Lubavitch reins in 1951, he soon argued, in many personal letters, that the best proof as to the unique ability of *Chabad Chassidus* to bring about love and fear of G-d is the indisputable fact that, under the oppressive regime of Soviet Russia, it is only the *Chabad chassidim* who did not discard their Judaism.

Below is an excerpt from one such letter from the Rebbe, dated *Mar Cheshvan* 24, 5720 (1960), written in English:

"...Let me give you an illustration, which I trust you will not take amiss, especially as you can verify it through other sources. I do not have to tell you under what terrible conditions the Jews lived in Soviet Russia under the Communist regime, and how it affected Jewish religious life, especially of the younger generation who had no opportunity to anchor themselves firmly, or at all, in *Yiddishkeit*. When the Iron Curtain temporarily lifted after the war and many Jews managed to get out of Soviet Russia, it became clear that of the various classes and types of Russian Jews only those who had learned in *Chabad yeshivoth* and were brought up in chassidic homes and in the chassidic way of life were able to survive those terrible trials and difficulties and remain faithful

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4. Ibid., pp. 202-205.

and practicing Jews, not only themselves, but also their sons and daughters with them. This should convince even the most skeptical as to the power and efficacy of *Chassidus* as a living force and practical means of the preservation of *Yiddishkeit* even under the utmost difficulties...."

Yes, the greatness of the Lubavitcher Rebbe does lie in his miracles and prophecies. But this book was written to dramatize the many instances of concern he demonstrated for the spiritual and physical welfare of every impoverished and otherwise unknown Jewish individual in every faraway place, including the former Soviet Union. Kabbalist Rabbi Laibl Wolf once wrote: "The traditional approach to the study of history assumes that historical process is the product of events impinging upon an era, or of charismatic leaders leaving their mark on society. My spiritual mentor, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, offered a deeper spiritual insight. He noted that it is also affected by the vertical dimension—that of spirituality. In other words, spiritual dynamics affect history."5

This is the message of this book. And so now, turn these pages of Jewish history, and find out for yourself the Rebbe's enduring influence on Russian Jews in Soviet Russia right up to its final days in 1991—and beyond....

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5. *Practical Kabbalah: A Guide to Jewish Wisdom for Everyday Life* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), p. 32.

A Secret of the Rebbe

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, at first glance, it seemed that it would be a local war. Soon, however, the world gasped, realizing it was headed toward becoming an international war between the super powers: Russia and China against the U.S. and its allies. The world was in a panic, especially the nations of Europe, whose lives were broken from World War II. Chabad *chassidim* were also not in good shape, broken. The European rehabilitation process was not going quickly. Then, too, that year, the Previous Rebbe passed away, and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson was still reluctant at first to assume the Lubavitch leadership. Yet, there was a *chassid* who lived in a refugee camp near Paris by the name of Saadia Lieberoff. On the day after the U.N. forces united against the Communists in Korea, he, among others, sent the Rebbe a letter in the name of the community of *chassidim*, asking what should they do. In response, the Rebbe wrote back: "I received your letter.... I don't see any foundation to be so excited about it." In other words, the war would not break out there in Europe.

This was one of the first of many prophecies foretold by the Rebbe—all of which have come true.

Acknowledgments

When something unusually good happens, as the publishing of this book, I usually round up the usual suspects, those good people who give unstintingly of themselves and help me create in between the pages of my books what I could never do myself. This time around, first off, let me post on the wall the picture of the most important person, whose input into this book made the difference between a hope and a reality. And that person hands down is Rabbi Reb Moishe Levertov, my very favorite *sofer*. Not only did he fully open his dusty files from Lishkas Ezras Achim, but he and his wife Bracha Levertov (some know her best as the matron of the Crown Heights *Mikveh* for women; others, as that indefatigable woman with an amazing canning machine who single-handedly canned hundreds of food cans, which the Levertovs sent over in Ezras Achim care packages for religious Jews in Soviet Russia) made themselves totally available (Totally? Well, almost totally!) to my hundreds of questions. Reb Moishe—may he continue to be a *sofer* for at least 121 more years!—supplied me with the names, addresses and phone numbers of the men and women you'll read about in this book. Many times he was my wake-up call: "Mordechai," he'd phone me, "Lazar will be in town tonight. He's staying at so-and-so." Or, "Mordechai, Kuravsky's here from Moscow. Interview him." Or, "Mordechai, get hold of Rudy Appel in Long Island." Or, "Mordechai, get up, get up, make sure you contact Rabbi Moshe Chaim Levin..." Yes, Reb Moishe's requests seemed endless, but all were essential. And for all the direction he gave me, and the endless hours he spent correcting and adding info to my book, I gratefully thank him. Especially, I wish to acknowledge Reb Moishe for his sensitive understanding and discriminating taste he brought to the shaping of this book. He guided me unerringly along the many paths of the book. There was no way this book could have much validity and truth without him. And, after reading this book, you suddenly feel the irrepressible urge to personally thank the Levertovs for helping to make known to the world—finally—the major role the Rebbe and his emissaries played in establishing the spiritual revolution that led to the physical downfall of the former Soviet Union, go ahead, and thank the Levertovs; they live on Lefferts Avenue in Crown Heights (and take an admiring gander at Bracha's canning machine and that steady hand of Reb Moishe, my favorite *sofer*).

On that same wall of recognition have to be two more wonderful suspects: Rabbi Reuven Blau, who suggested that I write this book, and his wife Devorah Leah, who suggested I contact her uncle Reb Moishe Levertov. Like the Levertovs, the Blaus encouraged me countless times to carry on whenever I felt like giving up on this monumental task. That you're reading this shows that their gentle arm-twisting worked.

Other generous *Yidden* who gave me the support to carry on my work in this book include the late and beloved Sandra Botnick (story suggestions); her husband Daniel Botnick (story leads); Rabbi Yosef Shagalov (story leads and translations); Professor Herman (Yirmiyahu) Branover (for inspiring this book); Peter Kalms (for his generosity in allowing me to use freely material from his book, *Guidance from the Rebbe*,

and his thoughtful editing); Rudy Appel, Sharyn Schneider and Carol Abramson (their wonderful stories about their Soviet Union travels and photos taken in Russia); Rabbi Shalom Yaakov Chazan (his advice and permission to reprint a very important secret of the Rebbe); Rabbi Yosef Keller (background research and translations); Moshe Chaim Levin (his Russian experiences and photos); Boruch Merkur (his superb editorial work); Dr. Victor Borden and Dr. Alan L. Graber (photos); *Beis Moshiach* Magazine (serializing my book); Rabbi Mendel Morosow (translator); Levi and Raizel Reiter (story suggestions at *Shabbos* lunches); Jim Blier (editorial work); Dr. Burton Milenbach (who helped me keep my head on my shoulders); Dr. Alan Newmark and Dr. Michael Thompson (those famous foot doctors who saved the rest of me many times); three great transcribers—Esther Soskowin, Tzivia Yaffe and Alessa Wircberg; Bracha Levertov (translation); Gabriel Rubaszkin (for his use of a very rare historical book); Aaron Mendelsohn (my publisher who knew a good book when he read my manuscript); and special thanks go to Chaya, Mendy and Yosef Yitzchak Ramniceanu for their patience, smiles and funny faces as their *tateh*, Daniel Ramniceanu, translated Hebrew material for me.

Deepest thanks go to the Rebbe for molding me into the kind of *chassid* that my Creator wanted me to be, even if I couldn't see that too clearly for most of my life. To do that, the Rebbe brought me to my wife, Ada, and it has been Ada, my Doctor Mom and *tzaddekes*, who did the daily work of helping me to reshape my thinking from a secular Jew to an Orthodox Jew and Lubavitcher *chassid*—never an easy thing to do with me! Truly I tell the world, this book would have never been finished—or started—without her presence in my life. May G-d bless my beloved Ada!

1

Long Night's Journey into Day

You're about to hear the darkest story I've ever told, and I pray to G-d I live long enough this night to tell you how it ends. I know when it began. I know what occurred up to...but the night is very long...anything can happen.

And I wish I could let Reb Menachem Mendel Futerfas himself tell his extraordinary story, but in truth this is not entirely his story, and if he were allowed, this tight-lipped Jew—"He who saves a Jew's life will always be a hero" is recorded in the annals of heaven about him—Futerfas would never speak out that way about himself. It might have appeared he had too much *tsuris* (trouble) to be happy. Yet this larger-than-life man could always see the hope beyond the river of despair. Whatever more can be said of this extraordinary soldier of G-d is that, to his last day on earth, he continued to reclaim the joy of life unfettered.

Now, since 1995, Reb Menachem Mendel Futerfas is no longer with us. So the story of "Secrets of the Rebbe" can never be completely revealed in the context and style I would have preferred to inform you of. What we're left with is a kind of pastiche of underground activities instituted by Lishkas Ezras Achim, the Lubavitcher organization based in Crown Heights and dedicated to helping their Jewish brethren in the Soviet Union. It's very important that you should know that Ezras Achim means "brothers' help." Because underwriting this story is our brothers' keeper. That is the first of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's secrets.

The second secret of the Rebbe is Rabbi (Reb) Menachem Mendel Ben Menachem Mendel Futerfas. Who was this bearded, grizzled, pain in the neck to the Soviets? Not only was this renowned elder *chassid*'s entire life the embodiment of true self-sacrifice, he was also one of the most imprisoned Jews (in Soviet prisons and gulags), enduring years of hard labor in Siberia. Why so much jail-time? Because he was totally dedicated to the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, and to the current Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. In truth, Reb Mendel had received no specific directive from the Previous Rebbe to remain in the Soviet Union; indeed, he could have escaped with his family and friends, yet willingly chose to stay behind for the sake of doing the Rebbe's work, He often quoted a saying of our Sages to explain his behavior: "Who is a '*kosher*' woman? One who fulfills the wishes of her husband. Similarly, a *chassid*...does not wait until the Rebbe gives him specific

instructions; he does what he feels the Rebbe wants him to do, even without an explicit command."

As for that love for Chabad-Lubavitch, Reb Mendel singularly translated it into a hushed movement of countless Jews he helped escape to freedom; the tempered bustle of underground schools he organized where Jewish children studied their heritage, customs, and religion; and the years of prison life and Siberian labor camps he suffered for keeping Judaism alive in Russia during Josef Stalin's tyrannical rule. He lived 88 years and left a legacy as *mashpia* (one who teaches others *Chassidus* and offers guidance) in Kfar Chabad, Israel, which continues to be inherited by every Jew as part of the Lubavitch living history.

For all his efforts, the Rebbe had blessed Reb Mendel and never forgot him. Once, five years before he was scheduled to finish his jail term again, Reb Mendel sighed deeply, as he sat alone in a cold, dirty Gulag barrack. He felt the overpowering need to speak with his Rebbe, or at least write him a letter. As both things were an impossibility, he proceeded to write a letter in his head to his Rebbe. First, of course, in his mind he pictured himself immersing in the purifying waters of a *mikveh* (a ritual bath), then, he recited several Psalms, including the Rebbe's current birthday Psalm, next learned a chassidic *maamar* (a formal chassidic discourse first delivered by a rebbe) by heart, plucked from the many *maamarim* he stored in his head, and finally prepared his thoughts for the heady *yechidus* (a private meeting) with the Rebbe.

"Dear beloved Rebbe," he etched every vowel, every syllable, every loop in the handwriting in his head, "sitting alone in this Gulag concentration camp—what else can one expect of Russian hospitality for Jews!—I am writing the day before my birthday, and ask for your blessing. It's the water that quenches my thirst to go on with your work..." And for the next few hours Reb Mendel shared his deepest thoughts with the Rebbe many thousands of miles away. Finishing it, he then sent it off through his head.

In 1964, just about the time the Palestine Liberation Organization was opening its doors in another part of the world, the Russians were trying to push Reb Mendel out the side door, willing to do anything to get rid of him and his religious activities on behalf of the Lubavitch Movement. That side door consisted of a phone call from a secret office in the Kremlin, dealing with control of refuseniks and any other undesirable Jews; the secret call went out to Harold Wilson, then Prime Minister of Great Britain. We don't know what the Russians promised the British if they took Reb Mendel off their hands—"After all, he has family in your city of London. He can live quietly with them. Agreed?"—we do know that he first reunited with his wife and children in London. After they embraced, his wife handed Reb Mendel a letter from the Rebbe. "It arrived about five years ago, but, you know, there was no way I could get it to you." Smiling warmly, Reb Mendel took the letter from his wife, looked at the date on the envelope, then opened it and read the following, before tears streamed down his face.

Dear Reb Mendel,

Greeting and blessing.

I received your letter while you are in prison, ready to celebrate your birthday on the morrow. I am writing you this letter to give you my blessing. And it's important for me to tell you....

How is all this to be explained to a person who never met the Rebbe, to a puzzled person standing outside a window, where he watches people dance at a chassidic wedding yet hears no music? No little birdie can whisper the voice from the deep calling unto the deep; evoke the invisible thing; unravel the mystery of the Rebbe—whose *neshama kelalis* (a general Jewish soul) is connected to the *neshama* (a Jewish soul) of every living Jew—who, thank G-d, can feel all the pain of every Jew. "The whole problem," Reb Futerfas once said at a *farbrengen* (a chassidic get-together), "is that we look at the Rebbe and think he's a man of flesh and blood, someone like us. Certainly, he is amazingly wise, an awesome genius, a great *tzaddik* (a righteous person), a *yerai shamayim*, one who serves *Hashem* (G-d) with all his might, a wonder worker, one who devotes himself to all Jewry and to every single Jew, etc.—but, after all is said and done, there are times that the Rebbe seems human, like us—limited by the constraints of nature and the world. Yes, the Rebbe's body is composed of flesh and blood, but as far as he's concerned, he is not compelled or limited by anything—not by physical limitations nor by spiritual limitations, He 'is what he is.' Even as he is enclothed in a physical body, he remains limited by nothing whatsoever and he has the ability to do everything and be everything in an unlimited manner. When you look at the Rebbe with this in mind, it is obvious that he is with each one of us at every moment, and our personal conduct in thought, speech and action has to reflect this knowledge. In this way, we are connected to the Rebbe not only on certain occasions and in certain places, but 365 days a year, 30 days a month, 24 hours a day, 60 minutes per hour, 60 seconds per minute."

So the Rebbe felt the pain of Reb Mendel, so the Rebbe blessed this prisoner some 5,000 miles away.

Now Reb Mendel was fully ready to see the Rebbe. Immediately he bade his family in London good-bye and went straight to report to the Rebbe in Crown Heights, in Brooklyn.

As one *chassid* noted at the time, "Reb Mendel Futerfas arrived in New York on the night of *Yud-Tes Kislev* (the 19th day of the month of *Kislev*, the day the Alter Rebbe was freed from Russian jail), 1964. I went along with many of the *anash* [a cordial term for an assembly of Lubavitchers] and the *temimim* [students of a Lubavitcher yeshiva] to the airport, where we gave him a warm welcome. We sang and danced with real chassidic joy, seeing our brother who had been released from the 'vale of tears' and was now about to meet the Rebbe, *shlita* [acronym for the Hebrew words meaning, 'May he live a long and good life']."

"We returned to 770 in time for the evening prayer service. The Rebbe, who was wearing a silken *Shabbat* [Sabbath] *sirtuk* [a frock coat used specially on the Sabbath], gazed upon him for a long time, and after praying he left while encouraging singing the *niggun* (a melody, usually, wordless, especially one figuring in Divine service) of '*Pada b'Sholom*.'

"On Thursday, *Kislev* 26, Reb Mendel went in for his first *yechidus*. I heard that the reason he didn't go in sooner had to do with the fact that his sister who had lived in London had passed away not too long before, and that her *sheloshim* [observance of a 30-day period after a person passes away] ended on *Kislev* 26."

At a *yechidus* with the Rebbe:

"Rebbe, here I am, and I thank *Hashem* for your letter to me when I was imprisoned and for my now being reunited with you again. But you know I'd rather still be in Russia doing your work."

"How well I know that," smiled the Rebbe.

"I had no choice but to stay in Russia until they quickly dispossessed me. I hardly knew what happened to me until it happened. The same fate, you know, happened to Reb Berl Gurevitz."

"Yes, Reb Mendel," the Rebbe nodded. "One day they took Reb Berl from his imprisoned gulag in Siberia, blindfolded him and shipped him out at night. He never saw daylight until he found himself in Poland. It was obvious at that time when the Russians were expelling non-Jewish dissidents from their prisons that Reb Berl, like you, thank the *Aibeshter* [G-d], fell through the Soviet cracks, or, as I suspect, the authorities there deliberately wanted to get you both out of their hair."

"My Rebbe, *shlita*, I have a question."

"Yes?"

"Do you want me to return, perhaps smuggle myself back into the Soviet Union?"

"Why do you wish to do that?" the Rebbe asked.

"For the same reason I never wanted to leave in the first place. I left a lot of Jews back there—including widows and orphans—and they're having a very hard time. Maybe the Soviets will let them go, but they have no financial means of leaving the U.S.S.R. These Russian Jews have little money. Many have children to feed, to educate, to pay for their teachers and *kashering* [making something *kosher*]. I cannot leave them in the grips of the Russian bears."

"All the more reason, Reb Mendel, you can help them more from here now."

"How so, Rebbe?"

* * *

"'How so?' I asked the Rebbe," Futerfas told Reb Moshe Morosow, one of his Russian cronies from the old days.

"And so?" asked Morosow.

Arching his bushy, black eyebrows, Futerfas said with a passionate tongue, "Moshe, that's not the kind of question I expected from you."

Morosow, at age 35, looked at his friend, Reb Mendel, who had just celebrated his 57th birthday at the time. He knew Reb Mendel liked to tease him, but where did tease end and reality begin? Reb Mendel had his ways about him—that was for certain. What now did he expect of Reb Moshe Morosow, who hadn't seen his friend for almost 20 years? Now, Reb Moshe was involved in the diamond-cutting business in Manhattan, and directly from a *yechidus* with the Rebbe came Reb Mendel to seek him out. *Shalom Aleichem*—what's up?—was the natural question. And surely something had to be up. There was no doubt, in Reb Moshe's mind, that his question to Reb Mendel should be formulated in this way: "So, how can I help?" Yet Morosow had to be asked, coaxed, maybe even prodded to ask; his mind moved slowly compared to Reb Mendel. "But how can I ask, Reb Mendel, how can I know what's on your mind?" Reb Moshe asked himself—slowly.

"Do you want to know why I'm here, and what the Rebbe wants of me—of you?"

"Of course," said an eager Reb Moshe.

"Let me tell you a story, but first, Reb Moshe, as you know, *chayus* is impossible without the Rebbe," Reb Mendel said. "The Rebbe is the only one who is truly alive and therefore only he can give true life to others. As the *Gemara* says—*'Rebbi lo shana, chiya minayin*?'—this is interpreted: If you haven't been to the Rebbe for a year, where can your *chayus* come from?"

Before Reb Moshe could speak, Futerfas added: "That is why I must now be here with the Rebbe. As for you, my comrade..." And here, Futerfas, seated with his friend at a *farbrengen*, filled both their glasses with a fresh round of vodka—their second *lechaim* (a toast)—and, despite Reb Moshe's initially meek protest, each *chassid* drank heartily.

Now began Reb Mendel: "When I was sent (due to my 'great sins' against the government) to the Siberian camps, I was put into a large bunkhouse. It contained prisoners of all types and backgrounds, from all over the Soviet Union. Our common denominator was our imprisonment for 'crimes against the state' and our status as 'enemies of the people.' As a result, a strange sort of brotherhood developed between us (as much as could possibly exist between such disparate people).

"After a few days, we prisoners became accustomed to our new lives: to the backbreaking work, to the frigid cold, to the degradation on the part of the *natchalnik* [captain, in Russian] and his cronies, to the meager portion of bread, to hard labor, to lack of sleep, and to everything that the place could offer. Generally, people silently made peace with their lot. They tried to wile away the difficult winter nights by relating stories of their past and of this and that, while peals of laughter and joy could be heard.

"Amidst the tumult, it was unusual to hear the sudden cry of utter sorrow of someone who could not make peace with his lot. 'What happened? Why do you cry?' asked the others. 'We all suffer together, yet we continue to live and even joke and laugh. Why do you cry?'

"'How can I not cry,' said the prisoner in abject misery, 'when I recall my past, and contrast that with my present situation? I was a renowned doctor. All the respected people of the city flocked to my door. I was accepted in the highest echelons of society, and everybody wished they could be my friend. Any request of mine was fulfilled the moment I expressed it. I lacked neither money nor honor. Now, naked of everything, working at demeaning backbreaking labor, abused by the *natchalnik*, my life is worth nothing. Is this life? Can one rejoice under these circumstances?'

"'Do you think you are the only one?' said another prisoner. 'What should I say? I was a successful lawyer. Everybody wanted to be my friend. I always sat among the honored citizens. All pleasures were mine. And now, I have fallen into this cursed place.'

"'And what should I say?' asked a third. 'I was a senior member of the Party. Everybody trembled before me. One word from me was enough to make them all run to do my bidding, and to satisfy my desires. From whence did I come, and where am I now?'

"Once they started, all the prisoners one by one told their story about how unfortunate they were compared to where they had come from. All became unhappy

and despondent. That is, all except for me, Moshe. I didn't take part in the public 'mourning.' And I made it as plain as day that I would not be a participant in their tales of woe. Of course, this came as a surprise to all the people sitting there.

"Indeed, one of them asked me, 'What about you, comrade? Did you have an important position? Doesn't our pitiful plight bring you to tears?'

"And do you know what I told them, Moshe, these prisoners who expected me to cry? Instead I smiled and said, 'I used to be a *chassid* (at least I tried to be...) and that is something that no one can take away from me.'"

"And so, Reb Moshe, before you tell me how hard your life has been in America, or how good it is, let me remind you that you used to be a *chassid* (at least you tried to be)."

These words were not lost on Reb Moshe. Still, he protested, "But I still am."

"Ah! Then you agree to work with me. Good, have another *lechaim*."

Reb Moshe put both his hands over his glass. "Enough! Reb Mendel, are you trying to get me drunk?"

"If that's what it takes."

"Hear me, Reb Mendel, I'll do whatever the Rebbe tells me, or tells you to tell me to do."

"Good, Reb Moshe, I know how hard you toiled, keeping the Lubavitcher yeshiva intact in Kutaisi, despite the strong-armed tactics of the Communists and the *Yevsektzia*. But let's have another *lechaim*, my old friend, so you won't change your mind or tighten up your loose tongue."

"Mendel, I tell you this: I'll never go back to Russia! If I do, I may never get out this time. I'm certain things haven't changed much since I left in 1947."

"Reb Moshe, that calls for another *lechaim* and a song," said Reb Mendel, as he suddenly broke out into a *niggun* the Rebbe had introduced to his *chassidim* in past years. At first savoring the voice of his Rebbe in his head, Reb Moshe then joined in the song—"Save your nation, and bless your inheritance; tend them and lift them forever." For a long time both men sang the song that connected them, that inspired them to help their fellow Russian Jews.

By now, Reb Mendel and Reb Moshe had met in a series of private meetings. And always Reb Mendel pressed for his agenda, and Reb Moshe, always with a different excuse, resisted. Things suddenly changed one evening when, once more, the two cronies were of two different minds, yet clear, precise, unequivocal, filled with truth, goodness, righteousness, and G-d. Reb Mendel slapped the bench he was sitting on.

"Reb Moshe..."

"Yes?"

"I Jewish, you Jewish! I *tefillin*, you *tefillin*!"

"Aachavee!"

"Moshe, do you recall Reb Michoel Neveller [a *chassid* of the Rebbe Rashab[1]]?"

"Yes?"

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1. Rabbi Sholom Dovber Schneersohn of Lubavitch. Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe. 1860-1920.

"If you recall Reb Michoel was very concerned and devoted about the needs of the *talmidim* [students] in Tomchei Tmimim, even (or perhaps especially) when the *talmidim* themselves didn't feel a lack or didn't care. There's a story about a shoemaker who arrived in Lubavitch when Reb Michoel was in the middle of praying at length and was up to the blessings of *Shema* [the reading of *Kriat Shema*, the daily declaration of faith in G-d]. He called out to the shoemaker, 'spoke' to him by motioning with his body and hands (since he wasn't allowed to talk at that point), and took him and pointed out the torn shoes of Dovid Horodoker who was a *talmid* in the yeshiva at the time. He stressed how urgent it was to fit his shoes immediately. When they later asked Reb Michoel how he could stop in the middle of praying and the *Shema* to involve himself in such mundane matters, he said: 'And what do you think *Hashem echad* means? *Echad* means to worry that somebody's shoes shouldn't be torn! That's *echad*! Reb Moshe, I Jewish, you Jewish!"

"I Jewish, you Jewish!" Moshe Morosow repeated as if there were nothing else to be said. And he knew he too had come to hear these words. When Reb Mendel uttered those words with such pleading sincerity, no one Jewish, no one connected to G-d through *tefillin*, could ever find it in his heart to refuse this moving request.

"I'm not certain what you expect of me, but I'm with you."

Reb Mendel finally heard what he had come to hear, and Reb Moshe to say what he had come to say. The two men embraced each other.

Then Reb Mendel sat back to choose his words well. "The Rebbe told me I was needed here," he swayed back and forth as if he were *shuckling* [moving in place] in prayer. "'For raising funds for the Russian Jews you've left behind,' the Rebbe told me. 'By raising the consciousness of Jews in America to help their brethren not only to survive, but to prevail over the Russian government. For the day is coming, Reb Mendel,' the Rebbe told me, 'when I shall, G-d willing, have good news for all Jews in the "Valley of Tears." This,'" Reb Mendel put his hand on his friend's shoulder, and said, "'your coming out of your prison, to me here,' said the Rebbe to me, 'is the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. It will come about because we're making Russia a holy place for the *Aibeshter* to dwell in.'"

"How can I help?" said Reb Moshe to Reb Mendel Futerfas.

These were the same words Reb Mendel used to the Rebbe. And the Rebbe had reminded his beloved *chassid* that what he was about to tell him was to be kept a secret, for a long time never to let anyone know the Rebbe's involvement in it, except, perhaps, for Reb Mendel's closest confidants. And as the Rebbe spoke his mind, Reb Mendel's body was covered with goose bumps. He was privy to the Rebbe's mind and thoughts, at a time, when he probably didn't even divulge his thoughts to his secretariat. Here was the Rebbe openly conferring to Reb Mendel, at a time when everything the Rebbe did in connection with Russian Jewry was done in absolute secrecy. Every letter, every verbal instruction given during *yechidus* was confidential and private. As the Rebbe expected no less of him, Reb Mendel knew that the Rebbe was extremely circumspect when it came to Chabad activities behind the Iron Curtain. One time, the Rebbe was critical that a copy of a report from Russia had been left out on a desk and not put away.

And as Reb Mendel now spoke to Reb Moshe, both men felt the same rush of

excitement as if the Rebbe were standing next to them, which, in truth, was exactly the way it was supposed to be. "Moshe, you're here, thank G-d. You have what you need, but we left a lot of people back there and they're having a very hard time. Maybe the Communists will let them go. But they have no financial means to leave the U.S.S.R. And what money they have to live on is pitiful. I also reminded the Rebbe of the terrible earthquake the Jews in Samarkand have endured. 'And all the more reason you must initiate an underground rail in the Soviet Union for packages to Russian Jews,' the Rebbe told me. 'Packages?' I said to myself. 'Packages— they were just what my fellow Jews needed, but how? It was terribly dangerous for any Russian Jew to receive such a package. It was like receiving a death warrant,' and yet the Rebbe knew that would change. Now, it's no danger to send and receive packages. They can receive them and you'll see such an endeavor will bear fruit. So, I tell you, Reb Moshe, we must get on with the Rebbe's work. I shall be your chief fund-raiser, and all decisions will and must come through me. It doesn't matter where I'll be—in London, here in Crown Heights, in *Eretz Yisrael*—don't make a move without my approving it."

"How will the Rebbe know what we're doing?"

"I'm surprised—again—that you would bother asking that. Besides, that's my concern. Not for anybody else, including you for now, to know. Rest assured, the Rebbe will know, G-d willing. He'll know because he has his eye on us, connected as he is at all times to our Jewish souls."

All this was another of the Rebbe's secrets.

Out of this soon came an organization of package senders. Of course, there is much more to this story. Some of it can be told now. Some later. Some, not till the Messiah comes and reveals everything we've long wondered about.

What we do know, for now, is that as soon as the Rebbe directed Reb Mendel to that end, hardly was the Rebbe's name mentioned again in connection to this super-secret project. And as soon as Reb Mendel Futerfas personally persuaded Reb Leibel Motchkin, another Russian crony from the old days, to join Reb Moshe Morosow, who then in turn involved Rabbis Gedalia Korf and Moishe Levertov, the four set the organization on full course, calling it "Lishkas [Office] Ezras Achim"; the name "Ezras Achim" was chosen by the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe after he left Russia for good in 1928, to help the Russian Jews remaining there. The new Ezras Achim took its lead from his efforts. In the early days, probably every able-bodied Lubavitcher resident of Crown Heights had a hand or two in carrying out the myriad of tasks, such as collecting or buying low-cost bedspreads or cloth to make clothes out of to send to the Russian brethren. The organization's technical operations were monumental in scope: how and where to get money; how to set up contacts; how to pay for shipping; whom to ship to; and the list went on and on.

Despite the sense of seemingly 1,000 Crown Heights Jewish "ants" at work to get Ezras Achim off the ground, at first there was no centralized leadership, which meant that everyone almost did whatever they pleased. Finally, for a short time, Reb Mendel Futerfas took charge of the operation again. This time, he did not propose—he demanded, rightfully that everybody pull in the same direction. By all accounts, Reb Mendel was a very wise man, had a good sense of humor, was very unselfish and

outspoken, and he knew how to be happy, joking a lot; yet when he spoke seriously" — "Don't just follow orders...do all that you can!"—you had to be all ears. Reb Mendel was convinced—and he convinced anybody whom he addressed—he was doing the best thing for Ezras Achim when he placed all responsibilities into the hands of his original four handpicked cronies—Morosow, Levertov, Korf and Motchkin—and this resulted in a smoothly carried-out operation over the years. Over the years, others joined the Ezras Achim staff and Executive Committee, including Rabbi Shlomo Zuntz, Rabbi Hersh Spalter, of blessed memory (o.b.m.), Israel Duchman, o.b.m., and Rabbi Yehoshua Pinson. Eventually, Rabbi Simcha Gorodetsky, who was also an Ashkanazi, entered the picture. A *shaliach* (an emissary) of three Lubavitcher Rebbes, his credentials were perfect for the task. He himself had been under arrest for many years, and he became one of the principal actors in discerning and sorting the different addresses and in obtaining detailed information about the situations with Russian families.

* * *

We must now ask ourselves: why did the Lubavitcher Rebbe insist that all his efforts be kept in the background, that neither the Russian Jews nor the Communists should know who was behind the steady stream of food, clothing, and Jewish prayer objects that came from the West? Yet everything was in agreement with the Rebbe's wishes, including, if necessary, letting organizations like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint) take full credit. Well the current Lubavitcher Rebbe knew what a thorn his predecessor [Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the Rebbe Rayatz] had been in the sides of the Russians. The Rebbe Rayatz had spearheaded the underground Jewish resistance to the Communist government and the *Yevsektzia*—and paid for it by brutal incarceration and a capital sentence from which he was miraculously liberated in 1927. By resisting the Stalinist regime and creating the organizations—his unyielding efforts began with *Talmud Torahs* (a school for young students, preparatory for a yeshiva), *mikvehs*, and synagogues throughout Russia—and the atmosphere that survived those dark days, the two successive Rebbes inspired and enabled the current rebirth of Judaism. With the clarity of vision that comes with hindsight, we can now see how the 12th of *Tammuz* was the first substantial blow delivered against the "Evil Empire" that eventually led to its downfall.

Released from the Spalerka Prison in Leningrad, the Rebbe Rayatz, in prophetic words written long before the collapse of the U.S.S.R., said, "...G-d did not liberate me alone on the twelfth day of *Tammuz*, but everyone to whom our holy Torah is dear, including those merely bearing the name of Jew."

Fearlessly, he called on his *chassidim* to defy the mighty Soviet regime, even at the cost of literal self-sacrifice, in order to secure the survival of meaningful Jewish life. As they saw it, the Soviets considered it a bigger crime if they caught anyone involved with Lubavitch. Up to then, the Rebbe Rayatz had been behind all Lubavitch activities in Russia. When he finally left Russia for good in 1928, the Soviets hardly had time to take a collective breath, what with the likes of Lubavitcher followers as Rabbi BenZion Shemtov, who always managed to elude Stalin, and Reb Mendel Futerfas, who always stood his ground, never backed down from wrestling with the Russian Bear, if he had

to, and continued to spread *Chassidus* every moment of his life, at the risk of his life.

As we know now, Reb Mendel Futerfas was imprisoned for eight years in Soviet prisons. During his time in prison, he spent most of his free time in prayer and study. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, he chose not to remain totally aloof from the gentiles who shared his lot, and he spent a few hours a day in conversation with them. Included in this group were many different types of people: political idealists who had fallen out of favor with the Stalinist regime, businessmen who had run undercover private enterprises, and ordinary people jailed of "crimes," which neither they (nor for that matter, many of those who arrested them) understood the criminal nature of.

Among the latter category was a circus performer whose claim to fame was his feats as a tightrope walker. He and Reb Mendel had a standing argument. For this was before safety nets had become standard circus practice, and Reb Mendel could not understand why a person would risk his life walking on a rope extended high above the ground.

"There must be," maintained Reb Mendel, "some hidden cables holding you in case you slip."

For his part, the tightrope walker maintained that there was no need for cables. It was not all that dangerous. One began practicing on low ropes and once a person gained experience, the chance of falling was minimal.

The argument continued for years until, after Stalin died in 1953, the prison authorities relaxed their rules slightly. Several months prior to May Day, they told the prisoners that they would be allowed to prepare a makeshift circus in celebration of the day. Our circus performer suddenly came alive, becoming the center of attention in the prison. He organized various performances, with, needless to say, the highlight of the show to be his tightrope walk.

He made sure that Reb Mendel was in the audience. After the performances were completed, the drums began to beat, and the performer climbed the pole and approached the line. His first steps were somewhat timid; after all it had been several years since he had walked the ropes, but within a few seconds, he felt at home.

It all came back to him. He began to twirl a hoop with his hands and wave to his friends. As he reached the end of the rope, he hesitated for a moment, made a fast turn, and then proceeded to the other side. On his way back, he exuded confidence; he caught hats thrown to him by his fellow inmates and performed several other stunts. After he reached the end of the rope, he climbed down the pole and ran to Reb Mendel.

"You see, no ropes holding me up," he gleamed in satisfaction.

"Yes. You're right, no ropes," agreed Reb Mendel.

"You're a smart man," the performer continued. "Tell me. What is the secret? Is it in the hands or feet?"

Reb Mendel paused to think. The performer had moved his hands freely, nor did it appear that his footwork was the determining factor.

After reviewing the scene in his mind several times, Reb Mendel said, "It's the eyes. At all times, your eyes were riveted on the opposite pole."

The performer nodded in agreement, "When you see your destination in front of you, you know where to put your feet."

"And what is the most difficult part of the process?" he asked Reb Mendel.

Reb Mendel thought again and replied, "The turn."

"That's right," agreed the performer. "For then, you lose sight of the first pole and the other one has yet to come into focus."

With such talk, Reb Mendel rallied the Rebbe Rayatz's followers who remained in Russia after 1947. "We must have the tightrope walker's sense of direction and purpose. We must be Jews who, knowing where we are going, know where to put our feet. We must, embedded with an inner sense of purpose, have a needle constantly pointing us 'true-north.' In our world of Lubavitch we don't look for explanations and logic only—even if accurate and true. Neither, in Lubavitch, do we look for somebody who is capable of exciting the emotions and getting people excited. In Lubavitch one seeks the truth. Absolute truth. When you arrive at the truth, you know and recognize that there is no room for discussion. As Rabbi Yaakov Mordechai of Poltav would say (quoted many times by the Rebbe): *'Azoi, azoi iz der inyan'*-'This is the way it is.' And that's why the Torah is our blueprintt—the 'true-north'—for our walk through life, our destination and preparation for the advent of the Messiah. And we must never turn—lest we all fall off the tightrope."

From such talk, it seemed to the Communists—and it was true! it was true!—that there was absolutely no room for them in the hearts and souls of Lubavitchers. All the more reason for the Communists to hate anything that smacked of Lubavitch. The Rebbe, having grown up in Mother Russia, knew—only too painfully—how dearly the Communists would make the Russian Jews pay for any involvement with Lubavitch, no matter how small the matter.

So, nobody must know openly the Rebbe's blessing on every package received in Russia. Making this very clear, Reb Mendel told his gang of four that everything had to be done in a very quiet way: "Even we ourselves are not allowed to publicize in public the mention of the Rebbe, nor must we ever put it in writing, and nobody here"—and Reb Mendel stared long at each man—"none of us is to phone Lubavitch headquarters—or, even if you happen to be with one of the Rebbe's secretaries, don't breathe a word about what you're doing. And never ask any of them to ask the Rebbe to bless you or Ezras Achim. Let the other Jewish organizations think of us as odd senders of packages. We know what we're up to."

As for how this dedicated group of brothers' helpers got word to and from the Rebbe, the tight-lipped Reb Mendel Futerfas has promised to reveal that secret in due time. But not now.

So we come back to Ezras Achim proper, which was set up then in the basement of the home of Rabbi Moishe Levertov and his wife Bracha, at 688 Lefferts Avenue, in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York. On Sundays, the (former) part-time jewelry stone-setter and part-time teacher Reb Moishe Levertov, who, like Reb Mendel, was physically short, must have had a very long and strong set of legs, for he and many others like him never tired of seeking out Jewish people everywhere to collect money.

"At that time, people were very responsive," remembers Levertov. "A word from Reb Mendel Futerfas himself, the legendary Russian Jewish fighter—'I Jewish, you

Jewish! I *tefillin*, you *tefillin*!'—and any Jew who loved other Jews gave money freely. Later on when we had contact directly with Russia via phone, we got a second phone, although we never let anyone know of its existence. From the basement we ran wires upstairs to our bedroom. In the middle of the night we often got life-and-death calls from Russia."

How did Ezras Achim distribute their packages? Officially, such packages had to be sent from one person abroad to another person in the Soviet Union, a relative to another relative, or a friend to another friend. Problem: how was one relative, having little or no contact with his blood relationship in Russia, to know what to send? If he picked a suit, it might be of one size or be the wrong material, which might make wearing it or selling it very difficult. Ezras Achim soon realized that a garment that could be easily sold would be of greater profit to the Russian Jews.

Eventually, Ezras Achim began to choose names at random from telephone books—Levi to Levy, Cohn to Cohen, Kuperman to Cooperman, names that were similar to the names of Soviet Jews. On this side of the Atlantic, the American families never really knew such packages were being sent on their behalf to the Soviet Union. All the notice they got, in the mail, was a thank-you card from the receiver in Russia, which left them scratching their heads. Of course, when Ezras Achim contacted these Americans, to inform them they were actually sending the packages to Russian Jews, most of the American Jews took it in stride; indeed, for many, no matter how they initially felt having their names and addresses used, Jewish pride kicked in, and inspired them to contribute more than their names to the great cause. But the real object of using "relative" names, as far as Ezras Achim was concerned, was to ascertain if the packages were being properly received and not confiscated along the way by corrupt Communists. Mostly, they had to find ways to protect these packages from non-Jewish Russians working in their post offices, who could easily keep them for themselves. In America, of course, there are procedures for a person to sign for such packages, to ensure if the package was received by the intended person. The response card was sent back to America to the person. But that was too iffy in the Soviet postal system. To counter that, Ezras Achim used a shipper, to which all response cards went. The organization dedicated to improving the lot of Russian Jews also improved its lot by choosing people who lived close by to Ezras Achim. In this way, they had a strong hold on senders and receivers of the packages.

The dam of addresses broke in 1967. Many Jews—some active refuseniks who knew the situation they were leaving—were released from Russia, and they brought out names and addresses of others left behind. These stuck-at-home names and addresses were delivered into the hands of Ezras Achim officials, and the newly released Russian Jews in turn became active emissaries by helping Ezras Achim to deliver further goods to their left-behind friends in Russia. Many of them joined Rabbis Gedalia Korf and Moishe Levertov and their wives to shop for potential merchandise to be sent to Russia. One of them was Rabbi David Okunuv (may G-d avenge his blood!), a true chassidic person. Ezras Achim hired him, and he worked for them in their office, where he controlled the list of names and addresses in Russia.

"The addresses in Russia where we sent packages," said Rabbi Levertov, "we compiled without any difficulty. The real problem was to know exactly which families

were most in need. On the first day we established a rule, that a family had to be observant, as we knew that for such a family it was much more difficult to survive, for a few reasons. One, they couldn't work on *Shabbat*. Two, they had to keep *kashrus*. Three, they had many children. Of course, it wasn't always possible to keep to these rules 100 percent, since those who gave the addresses were generally either relatives or friends who had been able to leave Russia in the meanwhile or who would worry for their relatives. But in most cases we were able to know what was what."

The money, funneled to Ezras Achim, was to help Russian Jews not only in Russia, but also to help them resettle in America and Israel.

As time went on, Ezras Achim received more and more addresses. From even far-flung places in the Soviet empire, Ezras Achim gathered intelligence about remaining families. Essentially the packages were divided into two categories: packages that made it possible to continue *kosher* life in Russia—namely, food, *tefillin*, *mezuzahs* (a tiny parchment scroll affixed to a doorpost), prayer books, clothing, etc.; and packages that were destined to help those who were interested in leaving Russia. Example: Someone has obtained an exit permit; he must also receive a visa and plane tickets. This was sent to the person as soon as possible: as soon as someone registered a request for an exit permit, he would be dismissed from his job, without ever finding out whether he would receive the permit. Many times *chassidim* would think more than twice to submit a request for an exit permit.

Countering Soviet spies bent on infiltrating and upsetting the package-delivery system was difficult, if at all avoidable. Many parents at such addressees had high posts in the Party and were afraid for their own skins if the authorities found out. So Ezras Achim had to stop sending any person who requested that it cease and desist.

In the repressive Russian days and nights, Ezras Achim proved that magicians can do more by means of faith than physicians by the truth. These were simple men, these were Lubavitcher men and women who believed they would always find ways to smuggle Jewish needs into Russia. Perhaps the outside world might have called the staff of Ezras Achim magicians—and, in a sense, rightly so—but going for them was the Rebbe's blessing on all their packages. As it is written, "If ye will not have faith, surely ye shall not be established" (Isaiah 7:9). Ezras Achim was firmly established.

A good case of Lubavitcher ingenuity involved the dye for making *kosher tefillin* straps black. Simple, and it worked every time: someone buys a bottle of shoe polish, spills the contents of the bottle out and replaces it with the black dye.

Smuggling in *tzitzis (tallis katan)*, perhaps, was a bit easier. The Lubavitcher rabbis and their wives simply folded the *tallis katan* and had it declared as a tablecloth, at customs in the U.S.S.R.

Indirectly, through Reb Mendel Futerfas, the Rebbe gave Ezras Achim detailed instructions, but nothing beyond that would Reb Mendel reveal, including how Ezras Achim sent queries to him in London, how he then personally contacted the Rebbe (often secretly flying in to have a *yechidus* with the Rebbe), and how he relayed that message from London back to Crown Heights to Ezras Achim. No one from Ezras Achim was allowed simply to pick up the phone and phone the Rebbe's office, or take a short stroll over to "770," the main Lubavitcher synagogue and worldwide

headquarters of the Lubavitch Movement. That was not the way to go. In fact, Rabbi Levertov pointed out, "We once had a *melava malka* here in Crown Heights, and we invited someone from Russia to speak. The Rebbe was against it. Said the Rebbe: If they knew that a Russian was speaking in front of Lubavitchers, the Russians would be angry.

* * *

All this, thank G-d, changed in 1991 when the Soviet Union crumbled like the perennial cookie. By then that dark tunnel was well lit by candles, many of which were bought with and by Lubavitchers' blood, sweat and guts. Of course, many other Jewish-American organizations, backed by G-d, helped bring down that Russian House of Cards. And in now telling this story, perhaps known in snips and snatches outside the rooms of Lubavitch, perhaps by Jewish men and women sworn to secrecy and as tight-lipped as Reb Mendel Futerfas was, we are bound to cross paths with other such organizations which were divinely dedicated to helping Russian Jews.

But Lubavitchers, thanks to their two Rebbes (since 1927), began the long trek out of repressive Russia to freedom.

Don't look here for a comprehensive account of all things that led up or led to the fall of the Soviet Union. In G-d's time, that too will be written. In the meantime, let's begin with what we know or think we know—from the files of Ezras Achim, based on secrets of the Rebbe—and leave the rest for Jewish historians to make sense of.

A Secret of the Rebbe

As the Previous Rebbe was being arrested in his home by the *Yevsektzia*, upstairs "[o]ne of the daughters of the Rebbe [Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka], while in a room by herself with a window open to the courtyard, managed to [send a spiritual] message to Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson [the Rebbe's future son-in-law and successor] through the open window, saying, 'Schneerson: guests have come to visit us!...'" (from *The memoirs of Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Althaus* (Appendix 7, *The Heroic Struggle: The Arrest and Liberation of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Shneersohn of Lubavitch in Soviet Russia, trans. by Rabbi Dr. Alter B. Metzger* [Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 1999], pp. 44-45). The future Rebbe understood and ran to notify others (including the Rebbe's secretary, Mr. Chaim Lieberman)...of what was taking place and of the necessary precautions. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson... appointed people to stand at various intersections to determine where the Rebbe would be taken. (Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, quoted in *Kfar Chabad* Magazine, *Shevat* 5748, no. 322, p. 37); also quoted in *The Heroic Struggle*, p. 45.

2

The Troika

In less than 90 days before three key Ezras Achim secret emissaries visited refuseniks in Russia in 1978, Soviet Jewish dissident leader Anatoly Scharansky was convicted of espionage and received a 13-year sentence, three in prison and ten in a forced labor camp. In despair, Avital Scharansky, Anatoly's wife, met with then-American Vice President Walter Mondale and U.S. Congressional leaders. She told them, "In your hands is the fate of the Jewish movement in the Soviet Union." Nobody asked Reb Mendel Futerfas, then the spiritual guide of Kfar Chabad, Israel, who symbolized— following the lead of the Rebbe—the very essence of people helping people, what he thought of Mondale's chances of freeing Russian Jews. He didn't have to. The answer was clear.

The buzz on the Pan-Am flight to Moscow focused on those very words. Could Mondale be the messenger to carry the message? Amongst themselves—Carole Abramson and Rudy Appel, two members of the Committee for Soviet Jewry of North Shore Synagogue, Syosset, New York, and Sharyn Schneider, a member of Temple Israel of Great Neck, New York—they too wanted to believe that Walter Mondale as well as President Jimmy Carter would make the difference for Russian Jews. But in 1978 the Soviet Communists were still in the catbird seat, and even if the medium is the message, Lubavitchers worth their salt in Russia and without well knew that Walter Mondale, as a messenger, was a medium in the sense of mediocre. In two years he was gone as a major player from the American scene, and the new U.S. president, Ronald Reagan, was already calling, or thinking of calling, the Soviet Union the "Evil Empire," but it remained, as always, for Jews to help their fellow Jews in Russia.

So where was G-d and where was the Rebbe? Nowhere to be seen or heard in Russia? If you think like that, think again. As the Rebbe himself pointed out in his own words, many times, the events that we commemorate on Purim are their own kind of chess game. Not once is G-d's name mentioned in the entire Book of Esther, yet the Jews won. Somehow, some way, after learning about the "chess game" that takes place in those days, one has to conclude that G-d's hand is controlling the game, then, now and always.

So, too, the not-so-visible hand of the Rebbe was felt every time an Ezras Achim "tourist" shook a Russian Jew's hand. And so, too, secretly encouraged behind the

scenes by the Rebbe, more and more such tourists were travelling to Russia to bring much-needed Jewish supplies and hope. A slow process, on the surface, of course. Slow, as in Odessa, where Jews used to sing a Bob Dylan song (naturally, the words were changed to fit their own life situations): "Where have all the Jews with full beards gon

"In Odessa, we have a small *minyan*, which is basically 12 to 13 old men," s beardless, old Jew, who, all the time he was being interviewed secretly by an American tourist, kept a watchful eye on the door to his apartment, as if he expected at a moment for an intruder to break in and arrest him on the spot; yet the beardless J allowed himself to talk to the first American he had met since he got out of prison a a long period of "rehabilitation."

"Nowadays, there's one Jew left in Odessa with a full beard," he told the well-dressed, middle-aged emissary, whose complexion evidenced he was Sephardic. "*Da*, there used to be 20 to 30 observant young people in Odessa," he added, wringing his hands. "But they have left since, mostly to Israel."

(According to Rabbi Moishe Levertov, the situation in Odessa up to then was "in a way, unique. Gone now is the Kaufman family. I tell you, nothing stopped Mrs. Kaufman from doing what she wanted. When it came time for her to visit the *mikveh*, she hopped a train and traveled 24 hours to Moscow. Then there was the family of David Schechter, who now lives in Israel, where this Lubavitcher *chassid* edits the Russian magazine, *Alef*, published by Chamah. Odessa had its big share of activists, including the Nepomnishzees and their son-in-law Yankel Levin. At one point they Soviet authorities arrested Mr. Nepomnishzee and Mr. Levin and sent them off to Siberia for a few years. During that time, Yankel married Nepomnishzee's daughter.

("Let me not forget that other active young man from Odessa. I never got his whole name, but everybody called him 'Mesh,' so I did too. Not religious, but oh so conscientious, he was also arrested and beaten severely, then thrown face down on a stone floor in prison. Poor man. Although he was released quickly, he incurred liver damage, but thanks to a Chinese doctor who eventually healed him with herbs. Later, Mesh emigrated to the U.S.

("And then there was Mrs. Ela Gisser, who resides now in Israel; her son Shaye later returned to Odessa and is the Lubavitcher *shaliach* there, sponsored by Ezras Achim. As a religious Jew, Mrs. Gisser herself then was just a beginner. Like other *baalei teshuva* in the U.S.S.R., she shared with her other Jewish friends whatever *Chassidus* she had learned. But this small, hardly noticeable lady was a hero on the go. From city to city she traveled in the U.S.S.R., carrying heavy Hebrew books to whomever needed them. At any time she could have been arrested, but, I tell you, she had a mind of her own. 'Plus,' Mrs. Gisser liked to add, 'I'm under the complete protection of the Rebbe—and that means I'm safe and I'll be safe, no matter what!'")

"Now, there is only one observant family left," said the old Odessa Jew.

"Yours?" the emissary asked the old man.

"*Nyet*," said the old man, "but we try to be. It's hard, so very hard. Would you like to trade places with me, Mister?"

The American smiled awkwardly. No sense answering the old man. He had been sent (sponsored, if you like) through one of the Rebbe's organizations, Ezras Achim; he could leave whenever he wished. But the Russian Jew facing him had nowhere to

go—for the past 10 years, he and his family had even been denied emigration to Israel.

"Do you have some chocolate for me?"

"Is that all you want?" asked the emissary, incredulously?

"It's all I expect."

Chocolate? What kind of person would ask for that when he could have so many Jewish things? Yet the old Russian was highly intelligent, yet pragmatic. The American gave him a strange look.

"Let me tell you a story," he told the American.

The story: After the smoke and thunder of the battle had died down at Austerlitz, Napoleon wished to reward a number of men of various nationalities who had fought like heroes that day.

"Name your wish and I will grant it to you, my gallant heroes," cried the emperor.

"Restore Poland!" cried a Pole.

"It shall be done!" answered the emperor.

"I'm a farmer—give me land!" cried a poor Slovak.

"Land it will be, my lad."

"I want a brewery!" said a German.

"Give him a brewery!" ordered Napoleon.

Next it was the turn of a Jewish soldier.

"Well, my lad, what shall it be?" asked the emperor, encouraging him with a smile.

"If you please, Sire, I would like to have a nice schmaltz herring," murmured the Jew, bashfully.

"*Ma foi*!" exclaimed the emperor, shrugging his shoulders. "Give this man a herring!"

When Napoleon had left, the other heroes gathered around the Jew.

"What a fool you are!" they chided him. "Imagine, a man can choose whatever he wants and all he asks for is a herring! Is that the way to treat an emperor?"

"We'll see who's the fool!" retorted the Jew (who probably was devoted to the Alter Rebbe's [Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, 1745-1812] teachings, and therefore onto Napoleon's deceptive actions toward Jews). "You've asked for the independence of Poland, for a farm, for a brewery—things you'll never get from the emperor. But you see, I'm a realist. If I ask for a herring—maybe I'll get it."

The joke aside, the old Russian Jew got far more than chocolate that day. Based on his family's needs, he was able to select from blue jeans, tape recorders, blank tapes, extra batteries, Casio Mini-card calculators, digital watches, wool sweaters, hard rock records, modern art books, Russian-English Dictionaries, hi-potency vitamins, thermal underwear, antacid tablets, Marlboro cigarettes, "safari" suits, fake fur coats, ladies high-heeled leather shoes, vitamins that look like candy, 3-d postcards, 6-inch audio cable, 3.5 mm. mini-plug each end, synthetic blouses, and, of course, white chocolate. As for any Jewish books gotten safely through customs the old man hoped to receive from his visitor, "as long as they're in Hebrew or Russian I can share them with my friends," he said eagerly. "And please," the old man tugged at the visitor's sleeve, "tell the Jews in the free world that they must never forget that they are their brothers' keeper."

"Of course," said the visitor.

"And please," again the old Russian pulled at the visitor's sleeve for effect, "you

must remind non-Jews that every man is created in the image of God and is entitled to a life of freedom, dignity, and security."

It was obvious this representative of all oppressed Russian Jews wanted more than chocolate in his life.

In truth, the express purpose of the Long Island trio's trip was to visit refusenik families, in particular, the Lev Elbert[1] family of Kiev, who had been the "adoptee" of North Shore (Long Island) Synagogue for the last two years. To accomplish this undercover work, three Long Islanders joined forces: Carole Abramson, a 35-year-old career and personnel counselor who was married to a prominent Long Island doctor; Rudy Appel, a 54-year-old exporter of refrigeration and air-conditioning systems, involved with Ezras Achim and Soviet Jewry since 1971, who was now making his first of five trips to the Soviet Union; and Sharyn Schneider, also, 35, who was the wife of an international lawyer and had known Carole Abramson since their high school days. They would travel there in a group of 20 mostly retired persons from different parts of the United States. Completely unrelated to the purpose of these three, the trip of the other 17 tourists to the Soviet Union would focus on visiting the U.S.S.R. countries, their museums and other attractions.p

Their trip was sponsored by the Long Island Committee for Soviet Jewry and its dedicated president, Mrs. Lynn Singer (who was also president of the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry in the United States). Ezras Achim in Crown Heights briefed them and supplied the religious and other valuable items to the "unlikely spy" trio (but let us now call them as they liked to call themselves: "the troika"[2]).

Wisely, Ezras Achim marked the suitcases with the word *treif* in Russian, and filled them with so-called *treif* stuff), which Ezras Achim intended to give to refusenik families. Such families, or individuals, of course, were truly in great need of economic assistance. Many of them, in the refusal state for a number of years, had no jobs or very menial ones.

"Sometimes," said Mrs. Abramson, "we had difficulties deciding where to leave what or who needed certain items more than others. Occasionally, we misjudged, although the refuseniks told us several times that they share with one another—especially with Hebrew books or the 12 tapes of Hebrew and Jewish content. Now the refuseniks who acted as Hebrew teachers had some good tools to work with!"

Their travels would take them to four cities: Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkov, and Kiev.

After their passport and visa inspection in Moscow, Rudy Appel looked for a customs inspector (as Ezras Achim had briefed him to do), who would go easy on

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1. Kiev activist Lev Elbert stood trial on May 25, 1983 under Article 100-92 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code, "evasion of army service by a reservist." The judge, in his sentencing, was vituperative and vicious in his antisemitic judgment of Elbert. Lev had been targeted for harassment by the KGB in an effort to crack the activist community in Kiev and to abort all Jewish culture. In April of 1983, Elbert had been called up for reserve duty although normal army procedure called on officers only, and Elbert was a private. For fear of being refused an exit visa on the pretext of "secrecy" following reserve duty, Elbert requested that he be given written assurance that his position in reserves be considered non-classified. Authorities refused to comply and Elbert therefore did not report to the army. Elbert received a one-year sentence. Currently he and his family live happy and successfully in Israel.

opening suitcases of arriving passengers. Appel selected a fat man with a serious look on his face, and indeed his inspection of the suitcases was cursory (their hand luggage and Appel's second suitcase were not even opened at all).

What especially caught the eye of the customs inspectors were written documents or books, which incoming tourists were obliged to place on top of their suitcases for inspection. These, the customs officials pored over carefully. Understandably, two of the troika were apprehensive about this, since they had written many letters or talked via the telephone to refuseniks in the Soviet Union over the years. Who knew if their names might, at that very moment, be posted on a nearby customs inspection bulletin board at the Moscow airport! This, fortunately, wasn't the case then—blame it, if you will, on not-up-to-snuff Russian computers.

Typically, when the group arrived at an "Intourist" hotel, their passports were taken away, and later returned each time they moved to a different city. As instructed, they made photostats of their passports, which they always carried with them.

Then the tours began. Please keep in mind this is not after the fall of Communist Russia, but 1978. Perhaps our Jewish tourists, especially our troika of Rudy, Carole and Sharyn, who were, in a sense, visionaries, could visualize, or want to visualize, an ex-communistic world where there were more Jewish organizations in Russia than there were Jews; where Jews were enjoying undeniably the greatest level of freedom they ever experienced in that part of the world; where non-Jews, one a Russian, one with an Armenian accent, at an exhibit of Jewish artists in Moscow's Central Artists' House, are overheard trying to best one another by citing cultural contributions Jews have made to the world; where there are empty pedestals where statues of Communist leaders once stood; or where, on the Moscow metro, people openly read Jewish books, often prompting a "*Chag Sameach*" or "*Shalom Aleichem*" from fellow travelers; or when the first Chanukah celebration was held in the Kremlin in 1991, or, as Lubavitcher Cantor Berel Zaltzman, a major performer there, likes to refer as "The night when one Jew sang for his supper in the Kremlin as 10,000 other Jews watched"; all this possibly flitted through some of the tourists' minds, especially our heroic troika, who felt in a way they were activists bent on helping to activate a whole new brave world for Jews; still, those who had such farfetched thoughts then kept it to themselves and paid attention to what they really saw and heard.

But there were realities, or perceived realities. The American troika was completely convinced that their hotel rooms were "bugged." "Can you blame us?" said Carole. "In our rooms we could plainly see wires running across the ceiling and little apparatuses that looked like shuttlecocks of a badminton game; these were probably the 'bugs.' And that's just part of it. One day, I wanted to water a drooping plant in my room. 'Don't do that,' shouted a chambermaid as she burst into my room. 'Why?' I asked her. 'Because,' she said, 'it only causes the microphones to rust.' Of course," added Carole, "we made no telephone calls from our room to any of the refuseniks. Whenever we had to speak of important things, we wrote each other notes. These notes and any other sensitive material were either torn into tiny bits and flushed down the toilet or burned and then flushed down the toilet.

"And you have no idea how many telephone calls we received, often in the middle of the night, with no one at the other end. Obviously, someone was checking to see if

we were in our rooms. The KGB operatives didn't always sit at the other end of the 'bug' and listen to our conversations, but you can bet these conversations or any other noises emanating from our rooms probably were taped and played later on."

Sharyn and her two companions relied heavily on phones a few blocks from a hotel they were currently staying at. "Public telephones in the Soviet Union work," she beamed—either to emphasize the miracle of any apparatus working in the U.S.S.R. or to pinch herself with the thought that maybe the Russians were telling the truth when they claimed they invented the telephone before Alexander Graham Bell. And said Rudy, with a twinkle in his eye, "If you don't have a two kopek piece, a U.S. dime works well."

The Ezras Achim troika, supplied with names and addresses beforehand, visited about 32 refusenik families, consisting of 55 persons, many of whom could converse in at least limited English; at other times the refuseniks spoke Yiddish, making for round-robin conversations of Yiddish, Russian and English. Eager to have news from the outside world, they told their visitors about their twilight lives as refuseniks, of the harassment by the KGB; about the widespread antisemitism that now pervades most phases of life in the Soviet Union, encouraged from "above" and spelled out in the newspapers and on television.

When the conversation turned to sensitive subjects, out came the "magic slate." In case you don't know, a magic slate is a toy slate on which one writes and, after having written, one lifts up the cellophane sheet and the writing disappears. (Later, Ezras Achim supplied magic slates to all their *shluchim* [emissaries of the Rebbe] as well as small address-telephone computers, password-protected, in which addition-al names and addresses could be added.) Every refusenik family seemed to have one or more magic slates, unexplainably imported from the United States with pictures of Mickey Mouse and Walt Disney characters on them. Some of the refuseniks became so adept at these magic slates that when Rudy, Carole or Sharyn was writing, seated at table across from the Russians, the Russians were able to read the messages upside down. Why the hush-hush in private apartments? Because, insisted most refuseniks, their apartments were also bugged by the KGB.

Part of the troika's job was to network: collecting names of relatives or friends of refuseniks in the United States and Israel, to whom they could later convey regards, messages or pictures.

Always the troika brought up the big question: How valuable—good-bad, productive-counterproductive—was it for the Jews in the West to make as much "noise" as possible about the plight of Soviet Jewry? Noise or quiet diplomacy? Of course, the inevitable answer came from their lips: "Noise and quiet diplomacy." Some of them felt that other Jews would have been put on trial together with Anatoly Scharansky, if there hadn't been such an outcry from the West.

The troika also informed the refuseniks that the Rebbe was very much against holding such public demonstrations in the West. Why especially against the former Soviet Union? Because the Rebbe maintained such demonstrations were hurting Jews in Russia. As the troika pointed out to the refuseniks, maybe "noise" was a good way of venting anger in the form of a demonstration, but in the long run it was counter-productive. And who better to appreciate that personally than refuseniks

themselves who could plainly see their friends whisked away to prisons late at night in the U.S.S.R. after every such demonstration outside the U.S.S.R.!

Those refuseniks who aligned themselves with the Rebbe began to back off from outright demonstrations. Instead, they requested that their names be mentioned as frequently as possible in the free world press and in the halls of Congress. They urged influential and ordinary people to start letter campaigns on their behalf. The refuseniks also requested that if any economic deals were being struck with the Soviets, either by privately owned companies or on a governmental level, part of the price for such deals should be the release of one, two, or three specific refusenik families.

Before the troika flew to the Soviet Union, Ezras Achim had fully briefed them: They knew how to make a telephone call, been briefed on what a taxi without passengers looked like; supplied with maps of all Soviet cities; told to carry flashlights because the apartment houses, or at least the approaches to them, were notably dark and unlit; and so on.

"But," said Rudy Appel, "we weren't prepared for one thing: how difficult it was to leave these people at the end of the evening after one or two hours in their presence. To think that we, with our American passports, could return to our hotel and a few days later leave the country for the safety of the West, but these Russian Jews had to remain there, living an unknown future. A tough thought. So, this leave-taking at the end of the evening was really the most difficult part of our entire trip."

Generally the troika found the taxi drivers, after being handed a small piece of paper with an address written in Russian on it, very helpful. "Hats off to those cabbies!" said Sharyn Schneider. "They made sure we arrived at the right apartment house. And after we left a refusenik's apartment the refusenik family always went outside with us to make sure that we were able to get a taxi back to the Intourist hotel."

Did the KGB follow them? Yes, but the Long Islanders had no idea how often. Rudy Appel said he was definitely trailed once in Leningrad and twice in Kiev. "In Leningrad a lady dogged my footsteps," he said, "but it was rather easy to lose her." That time, Rudy went by himself without Carole and Sharyn, and as soon as he left the lobby of the Intourist hotel the doorman—and Rudy caught him doing it—signaled one of the KGB goons who had been waiting in the lobby for just that purpose, and he followed Rudy everywhere he went.

But if you know Rudy Appel, he kept his cool. He boarded a trolley car, then entered a department store, where he had fun riding up and down escalators and elevators, then hustling through street underpasses. That first afternoon it took him about an hour and a half to lose his "tail," and then only after stepping into apartment houses, going through the back doors, through backyards and into other apartment houses, etc. He still could make the appointment with a refusenik at 6:00 p.m., but had to forego an appointment at 4:00 p.m.

The next day the same thing happened, but this time he found it was impossible to lose his "tail." In fact, that day there were probably two goons who followed him—one the very same man from the previous day.

But let us end this Leningrad narrative on an upbeat note.

There's a story about a man who was very religious and always did G-d's will.

One day someone knocked at his door and said, "Leave your house immediately,

the river is overflowing and will flood this area." But the man said, "I will not go, G-d will save me." So the waters rose and became a flood and surrounded the man's house. The water rose higher and higher. He climbed out of his window up to the roof when a boat came by and offered him a ride. He said, "No, G-d will save me." The water rose higher still. A helicopter came by and offered him a rope, but the man said, "No, G-d will save me." And the waters rose higher and the man drowned.

When he arrived in Heaven, he said to G-d, "I was a religious man all my life, I always prayed, I always did good deeds and I believed that you would save me." And G-d replied, "But I sent you a messenger, sent you a boat, I sent you a helicopter."

* * *

In the U.S.S.R., the troika saw its own G-d-sent sign.

On the very first night in Leningrad, the trio were out on their first of many secret missions, having taken a taxi and the Metro, to the street of the refusenik whom they intended to visit. Said Carole Abramson, "We don't mind saying that we were somewhat apprehensive that night. Before we made this journey, the State Department was already warning Americans not to go to Leningrad, because they would face arbitrary arrest, beatings or humiliating searches."

All this, of course, paled in the face of the Rebbe's blessing, transmitted to them before the trip through Ezras Achim. So they were well armed, walked that Leningrad street that night, looking for a refusenik's apartment house. Suddenly, it started to rain heavily. The troika took cover under the archway of a building, to avoid the rain, and did not feel too comfortable just standing there with their bags. Yet where else could they be in the heavy downpour! Then, Carole nudged Sharyn, who in turn said to Rudy, "Look—up there!" All three looked up into the sky and saw a beautiful rainbow, vivid and bright, the best rainbow that they'd ever seen. Rudy knew what he had to do—reciting the blessing over rainbows—and he explained to his partners that this was "our sign," the Sign of the Covenant, "and nothing bad could happen to us now."

For several minutes, the rainbow lasted, and then disappeared. A few minutes later, the rain stopped; another few minutes and the troika was inside the apartment of Lev Shapiro.

("We have mentioned this incident to a number of people from Leningrad," said Rudy Appel. "Many said that they had indeed seen rainbows in the Soviet Union, but hardly ever in the City of Leningrad.")[2]

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In Kharkov and Kiev, where the refuseniks seemed more cowed than in other cities, it was obvious to the troika they themselves too had to be more alert for KGB operatives. "In fact," noted Carole Abramson, "the KGB had menaced these Soviet Jews to the point that they didn't know much about one another, even being afraid to meet with other neighborhood refuseniks. And we were cautioned not to give them

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2. The troika thanks Ezras Achim for supplying vital information for their trip, and dedicate their trip to the valiant refuseniks they met in the Soviet Union. These families included: (Moscow) Drugova-Begun, Feldmann, Gildengorn-Lainer, Fishman, Blitshstein, Elison-Gorelik, Tufeld, Lerner, Vigdoroff, Elistratov, Yoffe, Gutsk, and Ulanovsky; (Leningrad) Taratuta, Genusov, Karolin, Gitlin, Ruckcan, Grinberg, Shostokovski, and Bronstein; (Kharkov) Modilevsky, Amusin, Paritski, Gorshunski and Silnitski; and (Kiev) Elbert, Kislik, Fridman, Pergamenik and Hertzberg.

away by speaking English at any time, including in taking taxis to their apartments."

Added Rudy Appel: "We found it very poignant when we were with Lev Elbert and his 7-year-old son Karmi in a trolley car in Kiev. When Carole and Sharyn spoke English to each other, young Karmi turned around and put his finger to his lips and said to them in Hebrew: '*Sheket.*' He didn't know the English word for being quiet and, of course, he knew they didn't understand Russian. One learns young when one is the son of a refusenik in the Soviet Union."

A special experience: One Sunday afternoon, the troika joined many refuseniks in front of the Moscow Choral Synagogue on Arkhipovna Street. There they met Alexander Lerner, a 7-year refusenik and famous scientist who had received Senator Ted Kennedy in his apartment about a week before and Leonid Scharansky, brother of the imprisoned Anatoly Scharansky. On Arkhipovna Street, where much of the drama of Soviet Jewry's freedom struggle was played out from the 1950s to the 1980s, information is exchanged, visitors are greeted, small talk is held and about 20 percent of the participants, so the troika found out, are KGB agents. In fact, one such KGBer introduced himself to the on-the-alert troika as "Boris."

What struck the troika over and over was that after 60 years of Communism, of systematic ridiculing, stamping out, closing down of Jewish religious institutions, despite the unavailability of Hebrew teachers and despite the impossibility of sending their children to a religious school, that such a large number of Jews continued to declare that they are Jewish, that they remembered their Jewish heritage, that they didn't want to assimilate in Russia, that they wanted to emigrate and to live as Jews in Israel or in the West.

"We felt," said Carole Abramson, that this was a miracle of the same grandeur as was the Six-Day War." But Rudy, more than the two women, knew the truth, for he had been involved with Ezras Achim since 1971 (and still personally thanks the organization for helping him to deepen his *Yiddishkeit*). He had heard how Reb Mendel Futerfas got things started in 1964. He had heard all about this larger-than-life figure even reducing himself to a "simple Jew" if he had to, to help other fellow Jews.

Rudy had heard the story told of Reb Mendel travelling on a train in Europe at the time that the Rebbe announced the campaign of Mivtzah *tefillin*, in 1967 (followed by the other nine Mitzvah Campaigns of *mezuzah*, *Shabbat* candles, Jewish Books, *kashrus*, Family Purity, Jewish Education, Loving One's Fellow Jew, Torah Study and Charity). Reb Mendel wanted to help people put on *tefillin*, but he wasn't that familiar with the English language, though a little thing like that would never stop him. *Tefillin* in hand, he approached people, and simply said, "*tefillin, tefillin.*" To his way of thinking, this was something people just couldn't refuse. They just "had to" put on *tefillin*.

Often, as Rudy Appel got closer to his own source of his Judaism, he wondered what set *Klal Yisrael* apart from all the other nations. And what was the Rebbe's real contribution to the mix? As quoted by Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Ginsberg of Kfar Chabad, Israel, according to the Rebbe Rayatz, "Love is the breath of life in the service that is *Chassidus*. It is the thread that binds *chassidim* with one another, and the thread that binds the Rebbe with his *chassidim* and the *chassidim* with the Rebbe. Love works in a direct way (initiated affection) and also in a reflective way (responding to the other's affection). It knows no barriers and transcends the limits of time and place" (*Hayom*

Yom, Shevat 26). To which it should be added that there are two characteristic expressions in *Chassidus*: (a) A Jew recognizes G-dliness and senses the supra-natural. He needs no proofs for these; and (b) a Jew neither wants nor is able to be sundered from G-dliness. The truth is that these two expressions are one and the same: A Jew recognizes G-dliness and senses the higher-than-natural, and that is why he neither wants nor can he be torn away from G-dliness. To which Rabbi Ginsberg also added, "The Jewish people's unity stems from the essence of their very existence since they were always really 'one man.' This unity is not always expressed in an open way, but when they came to Sinai this essential unity of 'one man' was revealed for the purpose of receiving the Torah 'with one heart.'"

In the Russian Jews he met, Rudy constantly saw the "one man with one heart."

In trying to follow in the footsteps of Reb Mendel and the devoted men of Ezras Achim, especially Rabbi Moishe Levertov, over time Rudy shared his deep love of *Chassidus* and the Rebbe, and how he himself seemed to feel and see the "invisible hand" of the Rebbe everywhere his troika helped their fellow Jews in the former Soviet union.

On the day of departure to the U.S., the troika felt relieved to see that their suitcases were not opened. However, as the outgoing passengers for Pan American Flight 67 lined up, they had to go through a routine check of hand luggage and metal detection. Apparently the Russians decided to throw a scare into them: suddenly the metal detector rang—and even a second time—after all three of the troika had emptied their pockets. Soon, the three noticed that everyone else for that flight had boarded the flight and only they were left.

The KGB agents, who were in attendance, took the troika's hand luggage and put it through a radiation oven (destroying all their exposed film; fortunately many of the important photos were already stashed in their suitcases).

Individually the troika was taken to a small curtained-off cubicle. Everything that they had in their pockets was carefully examined and their bodies frisked. The KGB, fortunately, did not find anything. They also went through the hand luggage with a fine-toothed comb. Only later did Sharyn Schneider notice that the paperback book, between which pages she had noted many Israeli and American addresses that the troika had received from the refuseniks, were confiscated during that search. Fortunately, no Russian addresses had been noted there.

Time was running out; the Pan-Am plane was ready to take off. Would they make it? Would the KGB, who were taking their sweet time about everything, let them go on time?

With about three minutes to spare, the Russian agents let the troika dash off to their plane. Once they got inside the cabin, the plane's door quickly shut. Then, to the applause of a great many of its passengers, Pan-Am Flight 67 lifted off, bound for home.

The Rebbe's continuing secret blessing had its own flight.

As for the rest of this story culminating with the fall of the Soviet Empire, you should know that the next chapter is entitled, "Outside the Prison of Ignorance." Skip this if you wish, and go directly to jail!

A Secret of the Rebbe

In 1970, thousands of visitors came from many different countries to participate in the celebration of two decades of the Rebbe's leadership. On the day that many of them were scheduled to return home, the Rebbe held a special gathering. As it progressed, he sensed their tension about getting to the airport on time, and he began to tell a story about himself and his father-in-law, the Previous Rebbe. "He was living in Leningrad at the time, and had planned a trip to Moscow," the Rebbe recalled. "His train was set to leave in a half hour. This was during the period when the Communists had declared open war on religion, particularly against my father-in-law's efforts to promote Judaism. He was followed wherever he went, and word had arrived that the government was ready to stop him at any cost. When I entered his room, I was surprised to see that although his train was scheduled to leave shortly, he was perfectly composed, working at his desk, totally unconcerned with the impending danger. I asked him: 'How can you have such self-control at a time like this?' He told me that his father had once spoken of something called 'success with time.' 'What does that mean?' I asked. He explained: 'You cannot add more hours to the day, so when you are involved in an activity, you must be totally immersed in it, as if nothing before it or after it exists at all.'" The Rebbe smiled after telling the story. "I realize it is difficult to expect that people who have a flight in a short while, and who still need to pack and say their goodbyes, will be able to totally focus on the present moment, to be oblivious to the fact that there exist airplane tickets, an airplane, a Kennedy Airport! So I will attempt to keep this gathering as brief as possible, and G-d should help that we all have 'success with time' in the future."

3

Outside the Prison of Ignorance

In Russia, there was a time when the final collapse of the Russian Czarist government began with the pogrom of Kishinef. And in Russia, there was also a time when the collapse of the Soviet Union began with the prediction by the Lubavitcher Rebbe. In a private audience, the Rebbe met with Rabbi Israel Miller of Yeshiva University, in 1965, and predicted the downfall of communism.[1]

The Rebbe easily saw through the manipulations and bluff of the Soviet Union, and thus he acted upon this, albeit secretly through organizations like Ezras Achim. After all, not everything could or had to be revealed all at once to special emissaries of the Rebbe like Rabbi Israel Miller and Rabbi Herbert Bomzer, or even to his closest Lubavitcher emissaries. Yet the Rebbe knew.

Already by 1965 the Rebbe had received reports about what Betram D. Wolf first promulgated in 1972,[2] the so-called formulated "law of diminishing dictators" to explain changes in the top Soviet leadership. From secret, smuggled reports, the Rebbe heard in depth how Soviet dictators were doing, from Lenin ("a commanding personality in all respects") to Stalin ("intellectually limited but all powerful") to Nikita Khrushchev ("much less power despite high visibility") and finally, to Kosygin and Brezhnev

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1. In the words of Rabbi Israel Miller:

"When I came back from the Soviet Union in 1965, I felt I ought to speak with the Rebbe because I had met some fur merchants at the Moscow Airport—Jews who were also entering Russia as I was. At that time the emigration out of the Soviet Union was counted in tens. So, say, for example, 200 Jews a year emigrated out of Russia, then, we felt that we were saving 200 souls.

"These fur merchants told us to be very careful, that we were always being watched. They also told us that they were smuggling in Jewish items sent by the Rebbe. Indeed, we found, in time, that Chassidus was the only real Judaism with ahavas Yisrael that was still alive at that time in Russia.

"So I phoned the Rebbe's secretary and made an appointment. It was Elul, the month before Rosh Hashana, and I was told the Rebbe saw no one during that period. Yet the Rebbe agreed to see me; indeed, he spent two hours with me. Not at midnight, but at nine in the evening. And as we spoke, there was a rapping on his door I'll never forget. His followers wanted him to come pray at the evening service, but he said, 'They will wait.' The Rebbe told me that it was more important for him to hear directly from me what was happening to the Jews in Soviet Russia.

"In Leningrad (now Petersburg), I mentioned to the Rebbe, I had seen a room full of sifrei Torah scrolls. So now I said to the Rebbe, 'I think we need to redeem them. In the fledgling state of Israel there's a great need for Torah scrolls.'

"Prophetically, the Rebbe said to me: 'Those Torah scrolls have to remain there. There is going to be a Jewish community that is going to come back to life again, and they are going to need those Torah scrolls.'

"That was in 1965, and I never spoke about this until very recently (1993) because the breakup of the Soviet empire has happened before my very eyes and the Jewish community in that former Communist state has very much come alive."

2. Donald W. Treadgold, *Twentieth Century Russia* (Chicago, 1972), p. 484.

("there"). Israel had its Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir. The U.S. had its Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon. Way beneath the surface of newspaper and friendly governmental sources were detailed, firsthand reports given verbally to the Rebbe by the Lubavitcher *chassid*, Reb Simcha Gorodetsky, o.b.m. Others, who left Russia for good in the late 1960s, included Rabbis Michoel Vishedsky, Yitzchok Mishulovin, brothers Hillel and Berel Zaltzman, Reb David Okunov, o.b.m., Reb Zalmen Ozimov, o.b.m., Moshe Chaim Levin, and others, all of whom provided Ezras Achim with the names and addresses of needy Jews left in the Soviet Union.

All told, it was just a matter of time before the Communists would lose their iron grip and paranoid will to control Jews, and then the religious doors of Jewish worship would swing wide open. But when? No one really knew for sure.

Leonid Brezhnev himself was an enigma. On the one hand, he acted as if he would have been happier being the Dictator or President of the entire Western World, where he could indulge all his eclectic tastes for the good life; on the other hand, he gave the impression he would not be kind or sympathetic to Russian Jews, and he surely wasn't. But Reb Mendel Futerfas and the other free-at-last Russian Lubavitchers told the Rebbe that Brezhnev was not as treacherous as Joe Stalin was. Already Leonid Brezhnev was a diminishing dictator—his "slip" was showing. Under Brezhnev's leadership, there were faint signs of slight improvement in the attitude to Soviet Jewry. The campaign against "economic crimes" and the synagogues ceased; baking of matzos was to a certain extent renewed; Jews were mentioned as victims of the Nazi Holocaust on Soviet soil; and even a public denunciation of antisemitism as one of the evils of society was once made in a speech by Prime Minister Kosygin.

With Judaism in Soviet Russia having no organizational structure, above ground, and with contact not permitted between the various Jewish communities, the plight of Soviet Jewry seemed on hold, more likely to get worse than better. Above ground, throughout the Soviet Union Jews were forbidden to issue even a single religious publication. No edition of the Bible in Hebrew had been published since 1917, and Jewish religious calendars were nonexistent. The last edition of the Jewish prayer book appeared in 1958, with only 3,000 copies. Production of prayer shawls, phylacteries and other religious items was in fact, if not in principle, forbidden for Jews. Jews were also prohibited from having contacts with organizations abroad.

Truly, Ezras Achim had its work cut out. Was sending packages from the U.S. to Russia enough? Everybody knew it would never fully work in the long run. There had to be other avenues to comfort, and give new hope to, the souls of Russian Jews. That time finally came at the beginning of the 1980s, through, of all things, tourism.

Immediately, Ezras Achim supplied secret guidelines to a new breed of heroic "tourists" (read: in the super-secret service of the Lubavitcher Rebbe), and the armies of the Rebbe confidently went forth to rescue Russian Jewry. So it began with the Rebbe's fresh new recruits, undercover, of course.

(Yet, it must also be said, at this time, the political climate had sufficiently changed in the U.S.S.R., so that Lubavitchers were able to return there. One such Lubavitcher *chassid* was Rabbi Moshe Chaim Levin, who was sent at the time by Ezras Achim as a permanent *shaliach* (emissary), along with his wife Doba, to Moscow, to organize and

conduct seminars in Jewish schools there. He was in charge of the first Chanukah satellite transmission from Russia. In conjunction with the Tzivos Hashem organization, he also set up the Tzivos Hashem Exhibit, complete with exhibit materials and a stage, in Moscow.

(Moreover, until the summer of 1990, for 51 years, there hadn't been a rabbi in Dnepropotrovsk [formerly Yeketrinaslov], U.S.S.R. In that particular summer, Lubavitcher Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetski and his wife left the comforts of American life and moved to Russia to fill the void. Ezras Achim offered the Kaminetskis a choice of Russian cities in which they hoped to help revitalize Jewish life. The Kaminetskis chose Dnepropotrovsk, the city in which Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Schneerson [father of the Rebbe] had been chief rabbi. Participation at their first two classes topped 200 people and 90 children attended their summer camp.)

* * *

Reb Mendel Futerfas once related at a *farbrengen*: "My father, *z'l*, died before I was born and I am named for him (Menachem Mendel ben Menachem Mendel). I grew up in my grandparents' home. They were well regarded among the *chassidim*.... Being a 'rich orphan,' I was able to wear shoes while my classmates in *cheder* went barefoot. Their parents didn't allow themselves such 'luxuries.' A few months went by and as is the way with all material things, my shoes were worn out and unwearable. New shoes had to be bought.

"I approached my grandfather and asked him in surprise: 'I don't understand it. Those shoes were strong and durable just a few months ago, but that didn't prevent them from wearing out. But my friends who had no shoes and went about barefoot, their feet are not worn out! How is that possible?'

"Grandfather looked at me and said, 'Mendele, what are you talking about? That's a living thing and a living thing doesn't get worn out!'"

We speak now about two more of G-d's "living things"— Professor Yitzchak and Laya Block, assuredly a man and woman who were not born heroes, but earned the right to be called heroes, and whose emissary deeds are detailed in the files of Ezras Achim.

On Monday, December 13, 1982, the Blocks left for Moscow at 6:30 p.m. via Air France, and arrived in Paris around 8:00 a.m. In the Charles de Gaulle Airport outside Paris, Professor Block put on five *tallisim kattan* (*tzitzis*) over his own *tzitzis*. The next morning, the couple flew to Moscow, arriving around 4:00 p.m. in the afternoon on Tuesday, December 14, 28 *Kislev*.

At the airport outside of Moscow, the Russian customs officials treated the Blocks politely and cordially, but searched them thoroughly. Every item in their suitcases was examined carefully, including pockets in suits, vests, and sweaters.

Then, they were escorted to a private room and given a personal search. Right off, one official noticed the obvious, Professor Block's six *tallisim kattan*, and asked him why he was wearing so many.

"I heard it was very cold in Moscow in the winter and I wanted to keep warm," he said drily.

This argument didn't impress the Russian official, who politely said, "Take them off, and leave one on—yours."

From this exchange, for some reason Professor Block became so convinced that had he packed two or three in his suitcase, "they might have also let them through."

Having been warned by the previous *shluchim*, the Blocks made certain not to take too many *seforim* with them. Still, the customs officials appropriated any *sefer* that was in Hebrew and appeared new. However, most *seforim* that were Professor Block's, which he brought with him and had the appearance of wear and tear, purposely stained with coffee or tea, were allowed through, with the exception of prayer books. All prayer books that the Blocks brought in, whether old or new, were confiscated. They left the Blocks one prayer book, plus an old *Chumash* or *Sefer Minhagim*, three Chanukah letters from which Professor Block had cut off the letter heading; a number of small *Tanyas*, *Hayom Yom*s, pocket-sized books for the afternoon and evening prayers, and an interlinear translation of *Chumash* with Rashi-*Bereishis*. ("I think this was allowed through because they did not know it was a Hebrew book," smiled the professor. "On the cover one English word appears with one Hebrew word, which is not very noticeable.")

Prior to leaving New York, Professor Block was appointed a *shaliach* by Ezras Achim to bring a divorce paper (a *gett*[3]) for a married woman in Moscow. Much to the Blocks' surprise, the customs inspector let the Blocks pass through with the divorce paper and a valuable *sefer* that was used in the *beis din*, established shortly thereafter in Moscow.

(Later, Yehuda HaGodol,[4] acting as a *shaliach*, helped the Blocks locate the woman, who gratefully accepted her divorce paper.)

Professor Block also brought with him a number of books and manuscripts on Aristotle, thinking he might have time to visit some of the academics and professors in Moscow and Leningrad. He had actually written letters to a number of them some weeks before, but had received no reply.

The Russian customs people examined all this very carefully, but let them through. However, they took away pens with "We want Moshiach [the Messiah] now," Tzivos Hashem key chains, and some necklaces with a picture of a small girl *benching licht* (lighting candles). They did not confiscate any food products the Blocks brought in, but this may have been because all the wine they had packed spilled out in the suitcase in transit and everything was soaked with wine. This may have been a blessing in disguise.

Professor Block brought in four pairs of *tefillin*: two Rashi and two Rabeinu Tam. The customs official, who was searching the Blocks' suitcases, called over a higher official to ask about the *tefillin* and he said they were O.K. The impression the professor got was that they expected rabbis and their wives to bring in each two pair of *tefillin*. "However," Professor Block later wrote to Ezras Achim, "I would advise in the future to bring in three Rabeinu Tam and one Rashi. It seems that there is a greater need for Rabeinu Tam *tefillin*. We had many requests for Rabeinu Tam *tefillin*, which we, alas,

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3. Why is the biblical "bill of divorcement" ("*sefer k'ritut*" called a "*gett*"? Because the letters of the word "*gett*," *gimmel* and *tet*, are never found next to each other in any word of the entire Torah—the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets, or the Writings!

4. Yehuda HaGodol Bartnovsky.

were not able to satisfy. Of the two Rabeinu Tam *tefillin* we gave one pair to Reb Kalmen Melech Tamarin[5]'s son who had just become *bar-mitzvah* and the other to Yitzchak Kogan[6] in Leningrad, who himself did not have a pair."

"Grisha Rosenstein[7] asked me for a pair for a friend of his as well as at least two or three other people. 'Gladly,' I told Grisha, a man who had once been a famous Russian scientist, now a refusenik[8] for many years. Everyone who knew Grisha admired him terribly. Grisha had joined the *Baal Teshuva* Movement in his country and became very active as a member of the committee of Lubavitchers known as *'Askonim'* activists."

(One secret report written by Edward Kissin of Birmingham, England to Reb Moishe Levertov of Ezras Achim, dated January 22, 1984, emphasized the enormous amount of work Grisha Rosenstein and his family did for the Jewish community in Moscow. "But he is very tired and does not feel well (something is wrong with his eyesight). They have been refuseniks for over 10 years. His eldest son Misha is in a very peculiar situation: he works in Moscow, but does not officially live there. His youngest son Ephraim will face the same problem of being called up to the army in two years. One of Grisha's neighbors is a KGB man. Grisha told me a typical story about his life. A wall in his flat was damp for some time. When he asked the KGB neighbor in his building who was responsible for taking care of such repairs, he was told that nothing would be done and that in general Grisha should be grateful to him because he had been ordered by very important officials to cut off all supplies—electricity, water, sewerage—from Grisha's flat."

5.Reb Kalmen Melech Tamarin was a very hearty, warm, active man, who, not in the least afraid of the KGB, organized and set up Jewish classes until he died at a young age. But he left two sons, Nochum and Moshe, decidedly chassidic.

6.Yitzchak Kogan (nicknamed the "Tzaddik of Leningrad") and his wife Dr. Sofia Kogan set up a "hotel" for Shabbat, where Jews from all over could sleep and partake of the Shabbat festivities. The Kogans, after Yitzchak himself learned shechitah (ritual slaughtering for kosher meat), provided kosher meat for Jews in Leningrad. Truly he was a thorn in the eyes of the KGB, who relentlessly harassed him. He and Grisha Rosenstein helped countless refuseniks who were jailed or in gulags. Inspiring them with faith and courage, Kogan and Rosenstein provided religious items, and put themselves in great danger of being incarcerated themselves. Currently, Yitzchak Kogan lives in Moscow as serves as rabbi of the newly opened Polakovs Synagogue and works as a shochet.

7.Now, since 1988, living with his family in Israel.

8.A sharp change in Soviet emigration policy in the period 1979-1981 led to the formation of a large group of "refuseniks," i.e., people who were refused permission to emigrate. Reasons given for refusal were often far-fetched pretexts of local OVIR (visa) offices caught between a flood of requests for exit visas and a sharply reduced quota of permits allowed by Moscow. No judicial procedure existed for appealing OVIR decisions. In the early 1980s, the number of refuseniks in the whole country numbered tens of thousands. Besides many had their emigration documents rejected even for consideration by OVIR while others who had an invitation from Israel did not submit their applications due to their conviction that such an attempt would be useless. A whole generation of Soviet Jews grew up "in refusal," including thousands of highly qualified professionals whose careers were irretrievably harmed when they were banned from working in their fields after applying to emigrate. By 1987 refuseniks had become a dominant factor in Soviet Jewish life, a major force for unity among international Jewish organizations, and an important element in Soviet-Western relations.—Encyclopaedia Judaica CD Rom.

Perhaps what it meant to be a refusenik comes from a Russian Jew, who said, "I thought of myself as a Russian, not as a Jew. Than after the war I found that it did not make any difference what I thought about myself—I was a Jew on the books. I was a Jew to the director of the institute where I worked. Very well, I became a Jew to myself."—Quoted in an article by Harrison Salisbury in The New York Times after a 1955 visit to Russia.

Another definition: "The Berditchev rav was asked to explain the difference between an optimistic refusenik and a pessimistic refusenik. 'An optimistic refusenik expects that he will be sent to Siberia.' explained the rabbi. 'A pessimistic refusenik also expects to be sent to Siberia—but only on foot.'"—David A. Harris and Izrail Rabinovich, *The Jokes of Oppression: the Humor of Soviet Jews* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), p. 98.

(The report goes on to say, "Some attempts have been made to negotiate permission unofficially for Grisha and his family to leave Russia. One of these attempts was undertaken by Rabbi Hool and Rabbi Abraham Sassoon They tried to persuade Mr. Zalman Margolis to help Grisha as he has business links with Russia. As far as I know, none of Mr. Margolis's attempts was successful. I wonder if there are any other possibilities for organizing unofficial negotiations to get permission for Grisha to leave; this can be done through influential people in trade or business (but not in politics) or through other unofficial channels. Grisha knows of examples of people who have been released after unofficial negotiations behind the scenes of this type. Grisha also asked whether there are any books that deal with medicine from a religious, mystical point of view. He is particularly interested in possible correspondences between different *mitzvahs* and illnesses, and in religious ways of treating different illnesses. If you know of any books of this kind (not on the wider question of medical ethics) would it be possible to obtain them and organize their delivery to Grisha?")

"'Gladly,' Dr. Block again told Grisha. 'For everything you've done.' Including: Initiated many Russian Jewish projects, such as a study of Jewish life in the U.S.S.R., for which purpose he dispatched Shimon Yantowsky to record and report on the number and conditions of synagogues or private *minyans* in the cities and to find out how many Jews were in remote areas."

(Yantowsky eventually printed a book on this subject. As for Grisha, who had raised his son in Moscow under harsh conditions and was periodically threatened by the KGB for his active religious life, he and his family are now living in Israel, and very proud that the son grew up to be a *talmid chacham*.)

Before the Blocks left customs, the official, who was examining their baggage, as well as one of the higher officials left the customs area and walked out into the main area of the airport. The Blocks could see where they were headed, and wondered if this meant more trouble for them.

As it turned out, the officials were playing a cat-and-mouse game—or so the officials thought—as they went directly to the Intourist (the official Soviet agency that handles travel arrangements for foreign visitors) desk to speak with the people there. However, the Blocks kept their cool, certain the officials were merely warning the Intourist officials to keep a strong eye on them. But that was it.

Once ensconced at their hotel about eight in the evening, the Blocks *benched* Chanukah light.

The next morning, about 8:30, the Blocks went to the large Choral Synagogue on Arkhipovna Street. The first *minyan* there began around 8:00 a.m. with continuous *minyans* up to about 11:00; at least four or five *minyans* prayed there every morning. The *minyan* of Reb Getche Wilensky, o.b.m., was the last one and usually began around 9:30 a.m.

Professor Block especially liked the way Reb Getche prayed: he led it word by word." Indeed, one American rabbi, who was there at the same time, approached Reb Getche after praying and told him it was worth while to travel all the way to Russia if for no other reason than to hear his praying. This must also be said about Reb Getche: He was an old *chassid* with a handsome white beard from a previous generation, and he

was truly a beacon of light for the burgeoning *Baal Teshuva* Movement in Russia. Tirelessly, Reb Getche constantly encouraged them, teaching them, *farbrenging* with them, and even arranging for their circumcisions. Totally attached and devoted to the Rebbe, Reb Getche also headed the *beth din* to perform conversions. Everyone agreed that he was probably responsible for most of the people who returned to their Jewish roots in Moscow. He brought many of the present-day leaders of the *Baal Teshuva* Movement to Torah and *mitzvahs*. In a letter from a then young man to his family, he wrote, "When you met him [Reb Getche] you understood why he had such a tremendous impact on Russia. He was a true *chassid* without any strings attached. When you met him you could not help but be impressed by his simplicity, goodness, honesty and complete dedication to the Rebbe, *shlita*."

At the Choral Synagogue, Professor Block met a few *baalei habatim* (supporters of good causes). One asked him for *mezuzahs*. "Generally," Professor Block later jotted down in his notes, "one has to be very careful with whom one speaks in *shul*. I was told later that the person who asked me for *mezuzahs* usually would turn around and sell them for an exorbitantly high price. So, I was advised only to talk to people I know, but of course to be friendly to everyone."

After praying, Reb Getche took the Blocks home to his apartment. Of course, they left the synagogue separately so as not to give the impression they were leaving together (it was, in those days, considered a serious offense by the government for Soviet citizens to be friendly with or show hospitality to foreigners or tourists). The *shuls* in Moscow and Leningrad had individuals who were officially paid by the government to report everything they saw taking place in the synagogue. Later, the trio met at the end of Arkhipovna Street and took a taxi to Reb Getche's apartment.

The Blocks gave Reb Getche the *tefillin* straps, olive oil, ink and parchments they had brought with them as well as *shmura matzah* and a salami. While they were still there, he called Grischa (or rather a neighbor of Grisha Rosenstein, as Grisha himself had no telephone) and he came over later, as did Yehuda HaGodol.

Professor Block asked Grisha Rosenstein if he could hold a *farbrengen* the next evening, and Grisha said he would try to arrange this as well as set up speaking engagements for the professor before various seminars and Jewish study groups in Moscow. He kept his word.

While the Blocks were in the apartment with Reb Getche, Yehuda Hakoton, as he was called, remained in the other room. He didn't want to meet the Blocks—lest he endanger them in any way—for he was at the time in hiding. Shortly after the Blocks arrived at the apartment, Yehuda Hakoton left the apartment, and the Blocks never saw him again during the course of their stay in Moscow.

By then it was time to *bench* Chanukah light. Reb Getche had his menorah nailed to the doorpost, and after he lit candles they sang, "*Hanaros Halolu*," which they knew only partially. This surprised Professor Block, that they seemed unaware of the *niggun*—or at least were not too familiar with it. Still, the Russian Jews soon caught the spirit and joined in. Afterwards, everyone danced a *rikud* in Reb Getche's apartment. After the festivities, Grisha guided the Blocks back to the hotel via the subway.

The next morning, Professor Block went to *shul* while his wife visited some of the

young Jewish women, whom she had on her private list. After praying he went with Yehuda HaGodol to the Dutch Embassy, which acts on behalf of Israel in Russia, to pick up some visas that had arrived for Yehuda HaGodol from Israel.

After that, Professor Block returned to the hotel to prepare for a wedding he and his wife had been invited to attend on the outskirts of Moscow. The bride was the sister of Micha Greenberg, a *baal teshuva*. They rode to the wedding in a taxi with Reb Mordechai Livshitz, the *shochet* and *mohel* (one who performs ritual circumcisions), Reb Getche, Yehuda HaGodol and Uri Kamishev.[9] Reb Mordechai was *mesader Kiddushin* (the rabbi who performs the ceremony). At the wedding all the men *farbrenged* and gladdened the hearts of the groom and bride.

After the wedding everybody trained back to Moscow; by that time it was seven in the evening. From the Metro they went straight to the apartment of Bartsch Ginis. As they arrived, the Blocks saw Ira Ginis and his wife blessing the Chanukah lights in the window. It was the seventh night of Chanukah. Again the professor and his wife stared intently at each other, very moved that Ginis's wife wasn't afraid to light the candles so openly.

During the *farbrengen*, Grischa arranged for Block to speak to three groups over the weekend: one, on Motzoei *Shabbat* to a Hebrew Teachers Seminar, two, on Sunday afternoon to a group of refuseniks and three, on Sunday evening to a study group of new *baalei teshuva* in the apartment of a very active refusenik, Pinchus Polonsky.

On the following *Shabbat*, after the evening prayer and *havdalah*, the Blocks went with Yehuda HaGodol via taxi to an apartment in the suburbs of Moscow, to meet with a group called the Hebrew Teachers Union, which had been secretly organizing Hebrew classes for years. The leader of this group was a young man by the name of Lev Gorodetsky. The Blocks learned that he was a *ger*: his mother was not Jewish, and so he himself converted. He spoke Hebrew fluently as did all those present. In his precise, nearly perfect English his vocabulary reflected the passion for vivid conceptualization found in most Russian intellectuals. And whether he spoke in Hebrew or English, Gorodetsky always emphasized how important even one Jewish teacher can be in the Soviet Union. "Our Hebrew network is not just classes. A simple Hebrew teacher for the beginners is a key position. He's sort of a Jewish guru. He is the only window to the Jewish world for these people. Our people should be supported in every possible way."

Since Professor Block was to talk on Greek philosophy and he found it difficult to express himself in Hebrew, he spoke mostly in English, using Hebrew terms, occasionally pointing out how some of these terms come from the Greek. "The general

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9. Uri Kamishev was a highly educated Russian Jew who majored in computer science. After becoming a baal teshuva, he threw himself into studying Torah and became a talmid chacham, giving lectures on Torah and Chassidus. The Rebbe would not permit Kamishev, while he remained in the U.S.S.R., to quit his job until the Lubavitcher yeshiva was founded in the Marina Roscha Shul, where he served as its rosh yeshiva. Currently he and his family live in Israel.

10. The local Moscow elevated and subway system consists of four interconnective train lines, which is probably the only decent structure in the entire U.S.S.R. Every station is a work of art and clean, and the trains go everywhere and come literally every two minutes.

theme of my lecture was the unity of form and matter in Aristotle and how this is connected with the unity of *Hashem* and the world as explained in Rambam and *Chassidus*. I also offered some words of encouragement and spoke a bit about Chanukah. I gave everyone Chanukah *gelt* [money] at the seminar. There were about 15 persons present there," said Professor Block.

After praying on Sunday morning, the Blocks met Shimon Katz in the subway. He was the leader of a group of refuseniks in Moscow, and they accompanied him to his apartment where they met a number of former professors, mathematicians and academics who had lost their jobs because they had applied to leave Russia. Mrs. Block spoke with the women and then later her husband spoke to the group. The topic was science and Torah with the main emphasis on discussion of evolutionary theory. Professor Block especially encouraged them in their situations to accept more of Torah and *mitzvahs*.

December 20 was the Blocks' last day in Moscow. With the aid of Reb Getche, they established a *beis din* with the Odessa Rav and Professor Block transferred his *shlichos* to Yehuda HaGodol. The Odessa Rav asked for 50 rubles for the transaction, and Reb Getche paid him. The Blocks said their farewells to Kalmen Melech Tamarin, Uri Kamishev, Grisha Rosenstein, Yehuda HaGodol, Moshe Garbas, Uri Kosin, and Reb Getche.

Before Grisha Rosenstein bade good-bye to Professor Block, he reminded the American professor about the suggestion he had made to him earlier, which was that the professor should try to arrange for Radio Canada and the Voice of America to beam their programs into Russia, programs with substantial Jewish content to help Jews in Russia acquire a greater knowledge of their history, *mitzvahs* and customs that many of them were so desperately trying to acquire against mounting difficulties that were continually increasing. When he reached the States, Professor Block began to make inquiries along these lines.

Reb Getche accompanied the Blocks, in the taxi, back to Block's hotel, and, much to the professor's surprise, got out with him in front of the hotel. "I don't know why he did such a dangerous thing," said Professor Block, in wonder. "I thought he would have continued on in the taxi to wherever he was going. No, we said a few parting words and then he walked away."

Later, as Yitzchak and Laya Block noted in a secret report to Ezras Achim, "Saying good-bye to these newfound friends with whom we felt a closeness as if we had known them all our lives was by far the most difficult part of this journey."

As their plane took off to Kharkov, the Ukraine, somewhere in the wispy clouds, there remained only the dim memory of Reb Mendel Futerfas in someone's recall—my brothers' keeper—at such a not-long-forgotten *farbrengen*, when Reb Mendel's grandfather looked at him and said, 'Mendele, what are you talking about? That's a living thing and a living thing doesn't get worn out!'"

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As soon as the Blocks arrived in Kharkov they were greeted by an Intourist guide and whisked off to the Intourist Hotel on Lenin Avenue. After they settled in their room for an hour, they left the hotel and walked a few blocks to a public telephone.

The Blocks had two names: one, an older *chassid*, Yisroel Yitzchok Yaffe, whose telephone number Grisha Rosenstein gave them. Grisha had said that Reb Yisroel Yitzchok had a small *minyan* in his home, but that he—Professor Block—should be extremely careful in Kharkov as the authorities were more forceful in preventing meetings with foreign visitors. "You mustn't do anything to endanger the *minyan*," Grisha cautioned the Blocks.

When the Blocks called Reb Yisroel Yitzchok, his wife answered the phone, and after some consultation with her husband, she said he was not home and in any event could not talk with us. The Blocks understood that they were afraid to do so.

They then dialed Uri Feinstain, a young man who was a friend of M. Goldin, who also was from Kharkov, and befriended one another when first they became involved in *Yiddishkeit*.

The Blocks agreed to meet Feinstain the next morning at 9:00 a.m. at a subway station at the end of the metro line. He said he would be sitting reading a newspaper in the station.

The next day, at the station, they recognized Uri immediately. He was a young man of 22, very slim with a full beard, a black fedora hat with an upturned brim (such a hat is unusual in Russia—in fact it was the only time Professor Block had seen anyone wearing such a hat). *Tzitzis* protruded a bit from under Uri's jacket. The young man amazed the Blocks, and, the more they spoke to him, the more amazed the Blocks became. Professor Block handed Uri a picture of the Rebbe, which he handled as if it were a diamond. The professor also gave Uri some Chanukah *gelt*. "From the Rebbe?" asked Uri. "Absolutely!" the professor said.

"Because of the late Russian winter light in the morning," Uri confided to the Blocks, "I don't work because I have no time to pray."

"Where do you get your livelihood?" asked Mrs. Block.

"Wherever," the young Russian shrugged.

Changing the topic to describe a different woe, he added: "My wife travels once a month to the *mikveh* in Moscow, over 700 kilometers away. The journey takes 24 hours."

The trio agreed to meet later, at 9:00 p.m., with a few of Uri's friends with whom he learned. Sensing then it wasn't a good time to give Uri two Chanukah letters, some salami and other *kosher* food products, Professor Block wisely held back. It was just as well. As they exited the subway, a militia man approached Uri and motioned him aside. Standing there, the Blocks waited for Uri to return, but the militia man and Uri disappeared in the crowd.

Distressed, the Blocks were relieved when they phoned Uri's home that evening and heard him say hello.

"Uri, is everything okay?" they asked him.

"No, everything's not okay, and I got to go." Quickly, Uri hung up on the Blocks.

That was their last contact with Uri Feinstain.

The day before they left Kharkov, the Blocks decided to take a tour of Kharkov. Their guide was a young lady, highly articulate and intelligent, who had met them at the airport when they first arrived. As we toured the city she pointed out a large statue

of the "founder and hero of the Ukraine," Bogdan Chmelnitsky. In glowing terms, the guide spoke about this seventeenth century Hitler whose Cossacks murdered 600,000 Jews almost in a wink of an eye. Of course the female guide never mentioned that, but the Blocks knew, and after that it wasn't easy for them to stomach any of her talk. As they turned to go, Professor Block spit at the base of the statue while the guide was not looking.

As they continued the tour she pointed out a number of historic churches. Mrs. Block naively asked if there were any synagogues, whereupon the guide mentioned that there were no official ones. "But there are a number of small houses where Jews meet to pray unofficially," she added. So, Grisha Rosenstein was right about the authorities knowing about the private *minyans*. The professor then asked her how many Jews there were in the city and she said about 60,000. "I heard that it is closer to 100,000," the professor said, "yet to me it seems strange that there isn't one synagogue for so many Jews." The guide made no reply, and the Blocks dropped the subject.

When the Blocks returned to the hotel, they were summoned by the hotel's Deputy Minister, who wanted to see them. The Blocks had no doubt what he wanted. A very personable middle-age man, the Deputy Minister spoke with the Blocks through an interpreter. He tried to make us feel at home by asking them how they were enjoying their visit. "Very much," replied the professor, "and we find the Russian people, particularly those we met in Kharkov, very friendly." The Deputy Minister said something about how tourism leads to a better understanding between the Russians and the Americans, and Professor Block agreed. "But," he added, "in order to facilitate even better understanding the U.S.S.R. should allow more Russians to tour in America, particularly those who have relatives there."

In response, the Deputy Minister mentioned that President Reagan had shut down Aeroflot flights to New York, and that Reagan was the cause of all this recent antagonism between the two countries.

All pleasantries aside, they finally got down to business. Said the Deputy Minister, through his interpreter, "I received a call from the militia that you have associated with 'antisocial' elements in the city. It's my duty to warn you against any such future meetings either here or in Leningrad where you're traveling to tomorrow." He added a few words of his own by saying, "You know what I mean, yes?..."

Professor Block responded by saying that he really did not understand what he meant, and "I myself was shocked that as I was walking with this young man the day before in a subway station he was suddenly arrested and taken away." Professor Block also informed the Deputy Minister that he phoned the young man later in the evening (since they knew that anyway) and was relieved to find him home. "Things like this don't happen in America or Canada," Professor Block said calmly, "and it's hard to adjust to the fact that one could, for no apparent reason, just be whisked away like that."

The Deputy Minister replied that, though he did not know the young individual personally, he had been informed by the militia that he was antisocial.

Professor Block said that he had been a professor in a university for more than 20 years and had in this time taught thousands of young men. "I consider myself a good

judge of character," said the professor, "and this young man seemed to me a very fine and intelligent person. I was bringing him greetings from his cousin in America who had given me his name and telephone. Hardly had I a chance to have a few words with him when he was abruptly arrested. I find this reprehensible."

No words came out of the Deputy Minister, but he shrugged with a touch of feeling.

That little "touch" encouraged Professor Block to ask the Deputy Minister: "Is it possible that he's considered antisocial because he is a religious Jew like myself?"

"No, no!" insisted the Deputy Minister. "This is not the case." All the while, he eyed something under his desk, which Professor Block assumed was a tape-recorder recording their conversation. "Oh, no," he protested again. "There is absolute religious freedom in Russia."

"If this is so, why was it that all the religious Jews I have met so far live in fear?"

Suddenly the Deputy Minister's pleasant smile disappeared. "I advise you not to get involved in philosophy."

"Philosophy?" the professor said. "I'm speaking about religion—the Jewish religion, to be exact."

On that note the meeting ended, and they parted with a cordial handshake.

The next day, cloudy weather prevented the Blocks' airplane from flying to Leningrad. Instead, they took the overnight train that was scheduled to arrive in Leningrad at 11:00 a.m. Friday morning. They boarded the train at 2:00 p.m. Thursday afternoon and as first class arrangements were not available, they shared a compartment with two Russians. One was a very nice person who spoke a little English and the other was someone who looked like an elderly drifter sleeping on the cot with a couple of empty vodka bottles testifying to the cause of his deep slumber.

When the English-speaking Russian went out for a smoke, Professor Block quickly completed the afternoon prayer in the compartment. After he finished, his wife confided to him privately that she spotted their so-called slumbering companion open his eyes and look at him curiously while he had been praying. Professor Block told his wife, "Not to worry." But was that enough for both to be worry-free? Was the slumberer a KGB plant? The Blocks suspected that he was, as well as the other newly acquired "friends" who crowded into the compartment.

To relax, the American couple took out a chess set that Professor Block had bought in Kharkov for a present for his father-in-law, and he started teaching his wife how to play chess.

Suddenly the entire compartment was crowded with kibitzers, advising the professor's wife how to move since she obviously was a beginner. As each visitor filed into the compartment to watch the game, even the slumbering man was now up, also taking part in advising the wife how to move. More and more Russians—it reminded Professor Block of a Marx Brothers' movie where countless people piled into a small guest room on a sailing liner—now did the same and quickly the compartment filled up. Still, more came in, and everyone was having a good time. There was a retired coal miner from the Ukraine, 54 years old, who took out his own private vodka and insisted everyone all drink a toast with him. "Today's my birthday!" There was no getting round this, and all finally drank a toast to "*druzhba*." In addition to the coal miner, there was

an Armenian girl from Rostov, a young man who was a wrestler from Kafkas, another young man from Tashkent and a few others whose names escaped the Blocks. The coal miner insisted that Block's wife drink a toast with the Armenian girl from Rostov. After a few more drinks and some more kibitzing, everybody was the best of friends. Professor Block suddenly gave the slumbering companion a pack of American cigarettes (a bribe? But *Nyet*!)—suddenly the two became lifelong bosom friends. The chess games between husband and wife ended after three matches; then, high on vodka, the professor took on virtually the entire compartment. "I don't think any of those games lasted more than seven or eight moves before I was check-mated," Professor Block recalled. "I finally gave up, and then everyone started to sing songs. I responded with *'Nyet, Nyet, nekevah'* and *'Nizruyitcha kloptzi,'* and everyone started rolling in the aisle with laughter." That evening, the professor wondered to himself, what his *kavanah* (directed intention of holy purpose) was in that friendly meeting with Russians.

The next morning the professor arose early, around 7:30 a.m., while it was still pitch black. At about 8:00 a.m., he could see the sun rising in the East and he immediately put on his *tallis* and *tefillin*, found an isolated place in between the railroad cars, and quietly prayed. Done at 9:30 a.m., he returned to his compartment.

At about 10 a.m. the gang from the previous night began to crowd into his small compartment again, with greetings of "*Dobra outra*!" ("Good morning!").

"Are we getting close to Leningrad?" Mrs. Block asked everyone. Peering out the window, the coal miner shook his head, and then squeezed through everybody to leave the compartment. In a few minutes he returned, saying "*Schlect*." What the German word *Schlect* meant was that the train, for no explainable reason, had taken a 500-kilometer detour around Moscow and was due into Leningrad at 8:00 p.m. that evening, nine hours late!

Always in good spirits, the coal miner urged the Blocks not to worry. "We have vodka and bread, so we won't starve," he said, half in Russian, half in German.

Professor Block excused himself from his wife and the others, and went looking through the cars for someone who spoke English. When he finally found someone, he had that person accompany him to speak with one of the train conductors. Through his interpreter, he asked the conductor if the train stopped at a city before Leningrad.

"*Da*, the train will stop for just a few minutes at Kalinin [an old city at the mouth of the Volga River that was originally called 'Tver']."

Professor Block asked if he could detrain there. His interpreter gave him a quizzical look. Not even bothering to ask the conductor, he told the professor, "It is impossible: you are a tourist in this country."

With that, the professor returned to his compartment and told his wife, "Somehow we have to get off the train at Kalinin. We're scheduled to arrive there around 1:00 p.m." Professor Block looked at his watch. "It's now about 11:30 in the morning," he told his wife. Yet another consideration: how could they manage all that with four heavy suitcases? Still another: Would anyone attempt to stop them from getting off the train?

The Blocks decided to tell their new "friends" of their plight and see if they would help them. Truly, it was impossible for the Blocks to pull it off by themselves. To the

Blocks' surprise, the Russians gathered in that little compartment, perhaps having partied by themselves in their own compartments, seemed very eager to help the Blocks and, even more surprisingly, didn't question whether the Blocks were doing anything illegally.

About 12:45 p.m., the train started to slow down and, then to everyone's amazement, the lady ticket-taker came in and said that this was Kalinin, "where you wish to get off." She returned the tickets to the Blocks. When the train came to a full stop, all the newfound Russian friends carried the Blocks' four suitcases as the Blocks, empty-handed, disembarked. On the small platform, the Blocks bade farewell to their "old friends." Some of them gave Professor Block their addresses to send pictures he and wife had taken of them.

As the train pulled out, the Blocks stood on the platform, wondering what to do next. To this day, they still don't know how the car-lady knew they wanted to get off at Kalinin or why she allowed them to do so: it was strictly illegal for tourists to do that, and she could have wound up being jailed as an accessory to the fact. The only explanation, the Blocks later conjured up, was that there must have been someone from the Soviet authorities watching them on the train, who obviously overheard Professor Block's conversation with the train conductor and the interpreter—maybe it was the interpreter himself! —and intentionally decided to let the Blocks off the train. Suddenly they remembered a warning from the secret guidelines that Ezras Achim had provided them with: namely, if the Soviet government wants to exact from the government of your country something it did, it arrests you with an imaginary accusation or blows up a little misdemeanor to a major crime. Was this the scenario now?

Whatever the case, on that cold, deserted platform, the Blocks, whose visas did not include Kalinin, felt foolish and vulnerable. Standing not far away was a militiaman who had already spotted them. Yet he walked the other way. Why? Because when he saw the kind of good-bye the Blocks got from their Russian friends, he dropped all suspicions he might have had.

Fortunately, in the small city there was an Intourist hotel, which services a ski resort in the area. At the time, however, there was no snow on the ground, it being one of the warmest winters in Russia over the past 100 years. As that side of the world turns, the Blocks were the only guests in the hotel and, of course, had to explain what they were doing in Kalinin.

The hotel owners provided them with a cozy, little room, with a touch of heat as long as they stayed under a heavy blanket.

At the hotel there happened to be a bank teller who was standing at the front desk when the Blocks mentioned they needed to exchange some money. "I'm responsible for exchanging money at my bank," she said, and volunteered to get them to her bank, even providing a bank car with a driver to return them later to their hotel, which was about five miles away. With alacrity, she got them to the bank, exchanged money for the professor and his wife even though the bank was officially closed.

The Blocks arrived back at the hotel at 3:30 p.m., just in time for *licht benching* (candle lighting), and spent a quiet *Shabbat* in the hotel. However, it wasn't entirely uneventful on *Shabbat* morning. Suddenly there was a knock on their door, and the

hotel owner said the Deputy Minister of Immigration wanted to see them in the office downstairs.

When they entered the office, they were confronted by a blank-faced man in a dark suit who politely received them. He wanted to know why they had got off the train in Kalinin.

Professor Block explained why to him, and he asked the professor, "Which religion tells you that you cannot ride on Saturday?"

The Blocks explained that they were Jewish, which they took for granted he knew. However, he admitted that he was totally unaware of this. Then he nodded his head in understanding. "Please sign these papers testifying to the reason you got off the train illegally."

The Blocks explained to the official that they couldn't write or sign anything until after dark, about 5:00 p.m. He agreed this was O.K. and then told them that if they ever wanted to return to Russia they should obey the laws. Replied the Blocks: they didn't really want to get off at Kalinin, but were forced to do so by circumstances beyond their control. He accepted this, and no doubt that was probably why the Blocks were not taken to task more vigorously.

That night, after *Shabbat*, the Blocks signed the documents of the Deputy Minister of Immigration, and took the early evening train to Leningrad, where the oldest complete Hebrew Bible in the world is located (in storage at the Saltykov-Schedrin State Public Library), and where Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad Chassidism, was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in 1799 and 1800. Their train arriving around 12:30 a.m., the Blocks were met at the station by a tour guide and were taken to the Astoria Hotel, quickly falling fast asleep in their room.

Later in the morning, the Blocks prayed at the Choral Synagogue—so named because many young boys sang there. There, they met Yaakov Sadya Butman and Avram Abba Esdrin, who were then the *gabbaim* of the *shul*; Mordechai (Mottel) Romanov, a relative of the Simpsons of Brooklyn, New York; a young *baal teshuva* named Eliezer Ksido, whose wife was in the hospital expecting a baby; Reb Refoel, a *chassid* whom the Blocks later consulted when they wanted to find the exact apartment the Rebbe Rayatz (Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, 1880-1950) occupied at the time of his arrest and imprisonment in 1927; an old *chassid*, Yitzchok Videren, who said he was a *chaver* of the Rashag (Rabbi Shmaryahu Gurary, o.b.m., the late brother-in-law of the Lubavitcher Rebbe) and who was *mashgiach* of the *matzah* bakery there; and finally Yitzchak Kogan, who was the center of gravity around whom the young Chabad *baalei teshuva* turned in Leningrad. There, the Blocks also met Dovid and Yitzchok Rivkin, [the late] brothers of Mrs. Doba Brikman of Crown Heights.

At each house they visited in Leningrad, the Blocks handed out lots of *kosher* food products, along with a pound of *shmura matzah*. To the Fradkins, where a *farbrengen* had been arranged, they presented Daniel ben Faige and Sarah bas Bersheva with an interlinear English translation of *Chumash* and Rashi-*Sefer Bereishis*. Overjoyed, Mr. Fradkin told them it was just what they needed in Leningrad for their Torah studies. At the *farbrengen*, toasting with the Rebbe's *mashke* (whiskey), Professor Block celebrated the Russian Jews for standing at the front lines and in the battlefield of

Torah and *mitzvahs*. "They are the ones whose sacrifices will bring the Messiah and the Messiah will come first to them," said Professor Block.

Great events not only take place in the streets, but also under the streets, or rather, in the underground places where Jews prayed in Russia. So, as non-Jewish Leningrad went about its daily business, Jewish Leningrad met in *shuls* to be blessed by the Rebbe, whose blessings Professor Block brought them along with foodstuffs.

When they all convened in the synagogue, at a *farbrengen*, Reb Abba produced some cake and fruit and Yitzchak Block pulled out the Rebbe's *mashke*. For about a half hour, they *farbrenged*.

Professor Block gave over a few words about the *parsha* that week, which was about Yaakov, who lived the best years of his life in *Mitzrayim* (ancient Egypt) and had self-sacrifice for Torah and established yeshivas and schools for learning Torah even in Egypt. The professor also mentioned that it was peculiar that Yaakov didn't recognize his own grandchildren—"Who are these?"—even though he had been living in *Mitzrayim* for 17 years. "Rashi mentions that Yaakov's doubts are connected with the descendants of Menashe and Ephraim, who were at that time young men of about 25 or 26 and were just starting to raise their own families. However when Yosef showed that he had a Jewish wife and no doubt kept *taharas hamishpacha* (family purity), then Yaakov was assured that even though their children were born and raised in Egypt they were worthy of Yaakov's special blessings. So likewise," added Professor Block, "the young *baalei teshuva* in Russia today who are getting married and raising families according to the laws of Moshe and Yisroel, even though they were born and raised in a land of bitter exile similar to that of Egypt, they will surely merit the blessings of the Rebbe, which will bring the end of the Exile."

One of the young men, Zalman Zev, asked the professor if *ahavas Yisrael* applied even to informers. The question embarrassed Professor Block, in front of the rabbi of the synagogue; still, the professor replied yes, it did, "and perhaps even more so. Indeed one should regard such Jews with *rachmonos* though this may be difficult."

Later, Zalman Zev approached Professor Block and said he had some important things he wanted to discuss with the professor. Mottel Romanov suggested they come with him to his apartment. At the apartment, Zalman Zev asked questions primarily connected with his study of a *maamar*, which he learned constantly. For three hours, the two men discussed these matters. For his part, Professor Block was very impressed with the depth of Zalman's understanding of the Rebbe's *maamarim* and his total involvement in and devotion to the study *Chassidus*. He confided to Professor Block that he thought about the Rebbe and his teachings all the time. "Yet," he lamented, "I've no one in Leningrad with whom I can discuss these matters, and so I often go to Moscow to talk with Uri Kamishev."

As if he didn't have enough *tsuris* in his life, Zalman Lev also discussed his problems with the Soviet army. "The authorities told me to give up my Torah studies or I'd be conscripted into the army." This, he found impossible to do, and asked Professor Block to get a blessing from the Rebbe about the matter. Professor Block promised he would pursue that with the Rebbe, and mentioned it in his report to Ezras Achim. This pleased Zalman Lev.

After leaving Zalman Lev, the Blocks returned to their hotel.

That evening Yitzchak Kogan was preparing a *farbrengen* in his home. Around 8:30 p.m., Yitzchak and Laya Block arrived at Kogan's home. There, they met Yitzchok's wife and older daughter. At the *farbrengen* were Mottel Romanov, Zalman Zev, Yeshayahu Gisar from Odessa, Yitzchak Kogan, of course, and a frail, anxious young man who never revealed his identity to the Blocks. Professor Block brought out the Rebbe's *mashke*, which he had carried from Crown Heights, and the *farbrengen* was very joyful. The professor later left the bottle of the Rebbe's *mashke* with Yitzchak Kogan.

Late in the night, Kogan suggested they all go out on the street to see if there was a new moon. It had been cloudy the whole time the Blocks were in Russia, and Yitzchak Block didn't remember seeing the sun or the moon once. So off the group went, in good spirits, to the street, around 1:00 or 1:30 in the early morning. As was expected, the streets were deserted and the sky was cloudy. No way could they even see a sliver of the moon. As they stood together in the street, Yitzchak Kogan recalled the story of the Baal Shem Tov, who, one *Motzoei* Yom Kippur, wanted to make a blessing to the new moon although the sky was cloudy. He told his *chassidim* to dance until the moon appeared. So, right in the middle of that street, Yitzchak Block and the refuseniks followed suit, dancing and singing, and guess what? After a few minutes, a break appeared in the clouds and the moon appeared long enough for the happy group to make the blessing on the new moon Then, again, they danced some more in the street. Finally, the "party" was over, everybody wished one another and the Rebbe a "*guten chodesh* [good month]," and they wistfully went off to their homes.

On December 28, a Tuesday, the Blocks went to the Leningrad *shul* for the last time and, after praying, said good-bye to everyone. The professor gave Yitzchak Kogan the Rabeinu Tam *tefillin* given him by Ezras Achim for such a purpose and time: Kogan didn't have one of his own. Before he left Moscow, the professor had given his Rashi *tefillin* to Reb Getche. He also gave his personal *tallis* to Zalman Zev, who needed one, and another *tallis* to Yehuda HaGodol in Moscow.

What would Professor Block do the next morning, so he could pray according to ancient laws of his religion? "Good question," he said. The Blocks were scheduled to depart promptly from Leningrad in the early morning and to arrive in Amsterdam around 12 noon the same day. There, Professor Block felt certain he could borrow *tallis* and *tefillin* to pray.

Their final evening in the Leningrad Hotel, the Blocks spent most of the time going over their notes and, after putting them into code, destroyed them, for they fully expected a thorough search at the airport before leaving.

And it was so.

On the same plane the Blocks again ran into the two *shluchim* from Manchester, whom they had met at Fradkin's apartment two days earlier and now were traveling back to England.

With borrowed *tallis* and *tefillin*, Yitzchak Block now began his morning prayer.

Rabbi Mendel Futerfas once told the following story:

"Many years ago, in the time of the Rebbe Rashab, a number of wealthy Jewish businessmen happened to meet in a certain place. Although all of the merchants were *chassidim*, each one was from a different 'court.' Every *chassid* was full of praise for his

own particular Rebbe, wishing to impress upon his fellows the obvious spiritual superiority he possessed. To pass the time, the businessmen decided that each person would be allowed a turn to relate a story demonstrating the wonders and miracles his own Rebbe had wrought.

"And so it was. One by one the *chassidim* told their tales, each portraying his Rebbe as a holy man who existed above the confines of natural law and whose every utterance was transformed into immediate reality.

"One of the businessmen present at this gathering was Reb Shmuel Gurary, the famous *chassid* of the Rebbe Rashab. When it was his turn to speak, Reb Shmuel stood up and related the following:

"'Some time ago, a particular business opportunity was brought to my attention. This venture, in the forestry industry, was somewhat risky as it required a very large investment of capital, yet a great deal of money could be made if everything went smoothly. If, however, any problems arose, there was a very real chance that the entire investment would be lost. I did not know what to do. On the one hand, the proposition offered me a chance to profit handsomely, but on the other, the risks were quite real. I asked the Rebbe his advice, and he told me to go ahead with the investment. I did, and a few days later, all my money was gone.'

"The group of merchants waited in suspense for the rest of the story, the part that would contain the 'wonder' that turned Reb Shmuel's fortune around. But much to their surprise, Reb Shmuel returned to his seat and sat down.

"'Where is the wonder?' they all cried. 'What kind of story did you tell us? Where is your Rebbe's greatness? On the contrary, what you have demonstrated is that your Rebbe's advice and counsel led to less than desirable results!'

"'You don't understand,' Reb Shmuel replied. 'The true wonder is that I have remained a *chassid* of the Rebbe, and that I believe in him as much as I did before I lost my money!'

"'Furthermore,' Reb Shmuel continued, 'If you think that this wonder is my doing, you are mistaken. My belief in the Rebbe—the pure and simple faith in a *tzaddik*—was planted within me by the Rebbe himself, and remains strong even when the positive outcome I had hoped for does not materialize.

"'I am sure,' Reb Shmuel explained, 'that the investment was for my good—the Rebbe specifically told me to make it! The Rebbe would certainly never advise me to do something if it is not beneficial. It's possible that the Rebbe saw a terrible decree up in heaven that threatened me or my family and averted it in this way, or perhaps there is another explanation. In any event, the entire story from start to finish is nothing but a wonder of the Rebbe. As *chassidim* used to say in the times of the Alter Rebbe, "Is there any greater miracle than the transformation of a lump of flesh into a human being?"'"[11]

All the time he was praying on the airplane, Professor Block especially felt that lump of flesh in himself, transformed by the Rebbe, as a living thing that never wears out. And that too is one of the Rebbe's secrets.

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11. To this day, you will find Reb Shmuel buried four cubic feet from the ohel of the Rebbe Rashab, the Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, just as the Rebbe himself told Reb Shmuel: "Wherever I shall be, you will be."

A Secret of the Rebbe

Moscow-born Rabbi Ezra Chovkin relates: "It was *erev Simchas Torah* in the early 1980s, when we suddenly received an order from the Rebbe not to celebrate *Simchas Torah* in the Marina Roscha Shul [in Moscow]. We were quite surprised. Of course we listened, and not one of us approached the *shul* despite our disappointment. The next day we discovered that KGB agents had entered the *shul* and arrested everyone there."

4

The Invalid Passport

Rabbi Asher and Sema Zeilingold were well out of Russia and filing their report to Ezras Achim, by the time Soviet refusenik Josif Begun was sentenced in October 1983 to seven years' imprisonment and another five years of internal exile for anti-Soviet propaganda. His crime: teaching Hebrew. Still, on the 11th of the month of *Tammuz*, 1983, halfway through their two-week visit to the U.S.S.R., in part sponsored by Ezras Achim, the Zeilingolds might have felt like some of the 12 spies whom Moses sent to gather intelligence about the land of Canaan. Ten of the 12 spies returned with disparaging reports; that although the land was fertile, its inhabitants were too strong and their cities too well guarded to be defeated by the Israelites. This report broke the morale of the Jewish Nation.

Did the Soviet Empire discourage these modern-day spies called Asher and Sema Zeilingold from St. Paul, Minnesota? Not at all. True, the rabbi and his real estate agent-wife arrived in the U.S.S.R. on Wednesday, *Tammuz Daled* (5th of the month of *Tammuz*), and quickly grasped that the Jews there were under more pressure than ever before. refusenik Grisha Rosenstein expressed concern that this was the first time that a kgb man (Brezhnev's successor, Yuri Andropov, Secretary General, 1982-84) was the Soviet leader, and he expressed his fear to the Zeilingolds what this might mean for the refusenik movement. Reb Getche (o.b.m.) always had *farbrengens* in his apartment and he couldn't have them any more, and it appeared that he wouldn't be able—for the first time—to have a *minyan* for the upcoming High Holy Days—yet undaunted, he phoned Rabbi Leibel Groner, the Rebbe's secretary, in New York, to ask whether he should journey to Malachovka for the high holidays. In Leningrad, Zalmen Zev was stopped by the militia and his *tefillin* and prayer book were taken away. He was also afraid that any day he might be conscripted into the Soviet army. Grisha Wasserman, a leading religious teacher, who learned and taught extensively the Talmud in Leningrad, came under Soviet attack for publicly slandering the Soviet Union. (Ezras Achim sent him all kinds of spiritual and material help. He's now in Israel, a leading figure in the Shvus Ami Organization, and publishes many articles on religious subjects.)

Was this the 12 spies revisited? Hardly.

If anything, the Zeilingolds were like the two spies—Joshua and Caleb—no defeatists them. Most of their lives they'd been pressing for the Rebbe's implementations to aid Russian Jewry, wherever and whenever he and the Previous Rebbe directed. Totally responsive to the Rebbe, the Zeilingolds are still proud of being part of the direct beneficiary line stemming from the Rebbe Rayatz's emigration to America in 1940.

As long as they live, they'll never forget how one night, in 1927, KGB agents led the Rebbe Rayatz away to the most feared jail in the city from which hardly anyone returned. They subjected him to the greatest disgrace and torture, but he continued to defy them.

The Zeilingolds also had heard how the Rebbe Rayatz had once responded (in between Russian "jails" in 1927): "This, all nations on earth should know: Only our bodies were put in exile and subservience to kingdoms, but our souls were not driven into exile nor subservience to kingdoms. We have to say explicitly, open for all, that with regard to that which related to our religion, Torah, *mitzvahs* and Jewish customs, no one has the right to tell us Jews any opinions, and no force of compulsion may be used for this." Ten days later the Rebbe Rayatz was freed for good. And ever since that time in 1927, the underground network the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe had set in motion, spanning thousands of miles—*shuls*, *cheders*, *mikvehs*, yeshivas—all for the sake of spreading *Yiddishkeit*—still exists, though now in 1983 it more or less operated more openly.

Before they left to Leningrad, the Zeilingolds stopped off to see the Rebbe in a *yechidus*; the Rebbe gave Rabbi Asher a bottle of *mashke* and said, "Bring this bottle to Russia, share it with your fellow Jews, but make certain you don't bring it back home." The Rebbe, who usually handed out crisp, new dollar bills to his visitors, this time handed the 42-year-old Asher four old bills—one 10, one 5, one 2, and one 1—of course, equalling *chai*, and counseled them to change them into rubles. Nothing more had to be said. The Zeilingolds flew off to Russia with an upbeat and positive attitude.

By then, the rule of the Russian dictators was on the wane. Who knows: maybe Andropov didn't have the stomach for his new job. Nor probably the short-lived other dictator, Konstantin Chernenko (Secretary General, 1984-85). Jews there began to feel less challenged—oppressed yes, but, thank G-d, during those days the Russians were having their hands full and their feet were deep in the mud of Afghanistan.

Slowly the Lubavitcher underground network was working its way to the surface—slowly. What became more evident for Russian Jews who, sight unseen, performed *mitzvahs* in the U.S.S.R. was that there were no rewards or punishments. There were only consequences. As one Jewish wit said about the insecurities of Jewish life in Russia, "It's one foot on a bar of soap and the other in the gutter." But the refuseniks were holding their own (even if it didn't seem that way at times) between the soap and the gutter.

Of course, other international Jewish organizations were doing their best to help Soviet Jews, but the Lubavitcher organization, which was there first with the Rebbe Rayatz, was countering, and ridiculing, in its way, the Russian Bear; even, it must be said, by then, Jews, especially, refuseniks, were taking KGB threats with a grain of salt. Always a humorous people, the Jews learned to use humor and wit to make their points against the KGB, and it worked—somewhat.

Maybe you heard this one: Zev telephoned the KGB: "Hello. Is this the KGB headquarters? I was just wondering whether by chance a parrot has come into your office?"—"No," came the reply.—"Well, if it should come I just want to let you know in advance that I don't share his political views," Zev explained.

Or maybe this one: An announcement came over the loudspeaker at Moscow airport: "Attention, attention. those passengers with exit visas for Israel and tickets for Vienna are kindly requested to proceed to the Moscow-Gulag flight leaving from Gate 3 at 21:30 (9:30 p.m.). Thank you."

The main thing, though, was that KGB threats stopped intimidating and affecting the quality of learning Torah and *Hafotzas HaTorah* (spreading Torah).

The Zeilingolds had their work cut out for them. "It was very obvious that there was no central force for *anash* there," said Rabbi Asher. "Besides Reb Getche, who had the respect and devotion of everyone, there was really no one person to be the guide and give direction in all matters of personal *avodah*, learning, and *Hafotzas HaTorah*."

Asher found everybody running off in different directions, one in *Haskalah*, one involved in learning about good deeds, and another in *Hiskashrus* (bonding between the Rebbe and the *chassid*). Of course, it was good that each one stressed a certain area of Torah and *Chassidus*, but the problem arose when each one felt that his way was the proper way to the exclusion of the others. One person told Asher that he considered another—who happened to be very involved in *Hafotzo*—as no more than sympathetic to *chassidim*. Especially, Asher experienced this when *chassidim* of one city spoke about the *chassidim* of another city.

Later, when Asher and Sema sent their report to Ezras Achim, they wrote: "We recommend that we should try to have one person to be the *mashpia* (or whatever other title) for all the U.S.S.R., and this person would be the *shaliach* to the *anash* there.

"Rabbi Berel Levy comes right away to mind. He is most familiar with all aspects of the situation there, and he knows each of the *anash*. (Before we left, we had long discussions with Rabbi and Mrs. Levy. I was very impressed by the very strong and personal relationship that they have developed with the families there.)

"There is the obvious problem of the same person getting a visa, and not being able to go too often, but at least for a period of time it could be one individual, and then another. Has anyone ever thought of putting someone in business to be able to go there once every two months or so for a few days or a week?

"We also recommend that we send back the *shluchim* who have already been there. We personally feel that if we—Sema and I— return we shall be at least as twice as effective. There are certain things we now know about the Russian system and are 'comfortable' with. Most of all, there are certain *anash* with whom we've developed personal relationships. We understand their needs and wants and would be able to prepare ourselves much more adequately if we return. We're sure that our time there—as well as others—would be spent much more effectively.

"There is a tremendous strength amongst *anash* in anything that has to do with the Rebbe, *shlita*, and/or anything connected to or with the ways and *minhagim* (customs) of *Chassidus*. In fact, we brought with us pictures that our daughter Miryam Rochel took of the *Lag B'Omer* parade in Crown Heights. We recommend *shluchim* bring in pictures of specific places or events to give *anash* a better understanding of what is happening outside Russia, because they very much want to be part of everything Lubavitch stands for. Examples: a *Siyyum Sefer Torah*, the new Crown Heights *mikveh*, the inside of 770, and also pictures of family *simchas* (especially the *simchas* with which

they may not be familiar, e.g., *upsherenesh* [special haircuts when Jewish boys reach the age of three], *Kabbolas Ponim* [the reception before a wedding where everyone greets the bride and groom], etc.) and inside of Torah institutions, etc.

"No pictures that Sema and I brought in were confiscated. The customs officials went through all my pictures of the Rebbe, *shlita*, and did not ask us anything. (Of course, the first rule in relation to customs inspections is that there are no rules.)

"Reb Kalmen Melech Tamarin [o.b.m.], who was a very warm chassidic person, and whose son Nochum later returned with his family to the Ukraine as a Lubavitcher *shaliach*, invited us to stay in his apartment for *Shabbat* and told us very specifically that he wants us to do everything 'just as the Rebbe, *shlita*, does it' and to teach him all the chassidic customs. We gave him his *tallis/tefillin* bags (a present from Rabbi Mendel Lipskar of South Africa, who was very successful in his work for Ezras Achim). Before touching them, Kalmen ran to wash his hands. The level of his and his wife's hospitality to guests is absolutely incredible and difficult to describe. It is their real joy to have guests and *farbrengens* in their home. Both his two sons (Moshe and Nochum) are very good boys who evidently spend their time in learning (the older son, Moshe, is learning *Chitas*), praying and doing good deeds to the best of their ability. They begged me to teach them different *niggunim*.

"That *Shabbat* there wasn't a *minyan* in his apartment. Besides myself, there were Reb Kalmen Melech Tamarin and his two sons, Moshe and Nochum, Reb Getche, Reb Shia, Yehuda Hakoton and Moshe from Samarkand. Truly it was one of the most beautiful *Shabbats* of my life. The apartment is very small but there was room for everyone to sleep and eat. Before *Kabbolas Shabbat*, I imparted what the Rebbe, *shlita*, had given over last year in his *maamar*. I sang the *'Lecha Dodi'* to the tune of the Alter Rebbe's *'Keli Ate.'* I taught them the tunes to *'Al Tiro,' 'Ach Tzaddkim,' 'Ki Elokim,'* etc. We also sang *'Shalom Aleichem.'*

"Up to then, I had never fully grasped the meaning of the words, *'Borchuni Leshalom.'* That night I did, I really did.

"Later that night, we held a *farbrengen*, and Reb Kalmen Melech Tamarin, who loves 'Shamil's *Niggun*,' asked me twice to sing it for him. I readily obliged."

On Friday, *Tammuz* 6, the Zeilingolds again went off to the Choral Synagogue, where they already had made a few friends. Asher gave Grisha Rosenstein some food, including cans of meat (Ezras Achim had a canning machine used by Rabbi Moishe Levertov's wife, Bracha, who canned meat and fish for all the "messengers" to bring to distribute throughout the U.S.S.R.). Grisha purposely left his *tefillin* satchel open near where he prayed. Unobtrusively, Asher took his bag outside to where Sema was with their bags, slipped a pair of Rabeinu Tam *tefillin* and food items into his bag, and then surreptitiously replaced it nearby where he was sitting.

Later Asher and Sema returned to their hotel to prepare for *Shabbat*. Asher bought a bottle of *mashke* in the hotel bar, which he intended to take back to the Rebbe. However, he used this *mashke*, as well as the *mashke* the Rebbe gave him, at every *farbrengen*. (The new *mashke* that Asher brought the Rebbe was eventually used by the Rebbe on *Chof Menachem Av*, and the Rebbe distributed the *mashke* amongst all the *shluchim* who had come for that *Shabbat*.)

In Moscow, the Zeilingolds made certain to spend part of every day with Reb Getche. Here truly was a remarkable man—always so happy, so positive, so open, exuding warmth and inspiration. Asher could clearly see Reb Getche had the devotion, love and respect, not only of all *anash*, but also of many others. Reb Getche told the Zeilingolds how much he appreciated the *shluchim* who came, and that it was certainly a source of *chayus* for him.

Whatever Reb Getche received from the Zeilingolds and other Ezras Achim emissaries, he fairly distributed the funds and food items and *tashmishei kedushah* (religious items such as *tefillin*). Ezras Achim had appointed Reb Getche treasurer. Many times he was told to distribute money to certain groups, especially to leaders of groups, who at the time were numerous, some of them not being too religious, yet all needed help learning about and preparing to emigrate to Israel. So, now, Reb Getche gave Asher money to take to someone in a different city, because he had heard that he was in much need.

As for Rabbi Zeilingold's relationship with Yehuda Hakoton, a somewhat controversial figure in Moscow, this is what Rabbi Asher Zeilingold had to say after he met him a few times in Moscow: "I spent a lot of time with him and he was not in hiding (as he had been when other *shluchim* visited). He enjoyed everything I told him and the *farbrengens*. He appreciated everything he could hear about the Rebbe, *shlita*, *farbrengens*, 770, *minhagim*, etc. I was told he read everything he could get his hands on, especially talks. (When I was showing a group some *Lag B'Omer* pictures I told them that the Rebbe, *shlita*, spoke in Yiddish, then someone translated; he asked me, "Does 'J.J.' [J.J. Hecht] translate?") I left him the *sefer Yagdil Torah*, which he appreciated. I recommend *shluchim* taking a few editions of *Kfar Chabad* magazine for Yehuda and those in a similar situation (they only had two copies there, which had been read from cover to cover. When writing about the Lag B'Omer Parade the *Kfar Chabad* magazine described Eastern Parkway as "the widest street in America." Yehuda asked me, "Is it really?"). He asked me that if he ever came to New York, would he have to go to President Street to see the Rebbe. If he came to 770 could he just walk in? Would they let him in? In a taxi on the last day, I told him that on Thursday morning (the day after I arrived back in New York) I'd say the prayers at Krias HaTorah in 770.

After a few days in Moscow, they journeyed on an overnight train ride to Riga. Unfortunately, they could not reach their main contact, Yitzchok Mordechai Pevzner, o.b.m., and found the *shul* locked. When the Zeilingolds finally met him, they gave him food, presents and *tashmishei kedushah*. Reb Mordechai was very proud of his *yichus* (lineage) as a student of Tomchei Tmimim Yeshiva, and he became very emotional a few times during his conversation with Asher and Sema. The hot Russian climate was not good for Reb Mordechai; not a well man, he often had to be hospitalized.

Later, in the *shul*, Asher and Sema took pictures of the Soviet Jews there, who were happy to have their pictures taken. One Soviet Jew asked Asher if he was a Lubavitcher and if he had ever been in *yechidus*. Asher couldn't resist: "How come you know the word *yechidus*?" he asked the Jew. The Jew grinned, saying, "Eh, eh, that's my secret. But I already knew you were a Lubavitcher, so I'll tell you. I'm 60, but I don't look my age, eh? So, how do I know what *yechidus* is? I had one."

"You did?" asked Asher. "How—when?"

The affable Jew, who was a few inches shorter than Asher, stuck his face right close up to Asher's, and said he had been in *yechidus* with "the Rebbe Reb Yosef Yitzchak" before the war. Asher asked the Rigan Jew if he recalled anything the Rebbe Rayatz had said to him. Yes, he said. He had asked the Previous Rebbe if he should go to live with his uncle in South Africa or his uncle in America. In response, the Rebbe had advised him to live with the one who was more observant. As things turned out he had remained in Riga, except during the World War, when he had fled for that time.

At Reb Mordechai's home, the Zeilingolds were happy to see that his daughter and son-in-law (son of Rivkin in Leningrad) and child had come to stay with them. Asher told them that it was *erev Yud-Beis Tammuz Achar Chatzos* (after midday), and he brought out vodka and *mashke*. As they *farbrenged*, Asher told them all about *Yud-Beis Tammuz* and the Redemption and why it has special meaning for them (living in Riga and Leningrad). Sema told the young couple of the great responsibility and merit they had that *Hashem* had given them a child and they should do everything possible to bring him up—and more to come in the way of Torah. "Yes, always Torah," added Asher. "Always that. Or, as another Asher, the French sage of Lunei, Asher ben Saul (late 12th-early 13th century), once said, 'The sun gives light by day, the Torah by day and night.'"

That same evening, the Zeilingolds flew to Leningrad, where they were taken to the New Hotel Pribaltiijskaya. Considered one of the most beautiful and modern hotels in Europe, it was, unfortunately for their purposes, the worst possible place to stay. The Zeilingolds were very far from everyone and anyone, as it was situated on its own huge tract of land. It was also very difficult to hail a taxi. And, as the hotel officials forbade anyone using the stairs, there was no way to reach a lower floor and leave the hotel on *Shabbat*.

At the synagogue the next day, they quietly sought out Yitzchak Kogan, but could not locate him. One of the Rivkin brothers motioned Asher to come to him (his son had called from Riga that the Zeilingolds were coming to Leningrad). Before the Rivkin brother prayed, making certain to keep his eyes on the words of his prayer book, he quietly asked Asher how things were going in Riga. Through a little smile and nod, he reassured Rivkin.

When, shortly later, Yitzchak Kogan entered the *shul*, Rivkin pointed him out to Zeilingold. After praying, Asher introduced himself to Kogan. Once they left the *shul*, the Zeilingolds drove by car to the Kogan home. Along the way, they stopped at the building where the Previous Rebbe had lived.

In the Kogan home, Asher and Sema met Mrs. Sofia Kogan and gave her and her husband their share of foods and *tashmishe kedushah*. To the children, they gave Tzivos Hashem items and presents.

(Walking into their home on any *Shabbat*, one might have thought he was in a religious neighborhood in Brooklyn; there were always 15 to 20 guests around the table laden with homemade delicacies. But the apartment Sofia and Yitzchak Kogan dwelled in was in Leningrad, Russia. Their simple, straightforward attitude attracted many fellow refuseniks and young people to their home. The guests came to learn, or talk, or just be in the warm, totally Jewish atmosphere.

(The Kogans' life wasn't always dedicated to encouraging and helping others in their search for Judaism. Yitzchak had held a prestigious job as an engineer until he was dismissed because of his application for a visa to Israel. Sofia, a prominent dentist heading a department at a large hospital, was also dismissed.

(Though Yitzchak's upbringing had been fairly observant, Sofia came from a nonobservant family. Most of her extensive knowledge was acquired through reading. Her daughter, however, had an opportunity unique to Russia, learning with an elderly religious Jew. "At first he didn't want to teach her. He was afraid that teaching Torah to such a young person would get him in trouble, and," Sofia said with a smile, "he was not used to teaching girls." After a few months, the elderly man came to the Kogans and thanked them for the opportunity to teach their bright daughter. It had given him so much pleasure, he told them.

(As the Kogans' commitment to Judaism grew they looked for ways to help the budding Orthodox community in Leningrad. Yitzchak, seeing the need for a *shochet*, learned the intricate laws and detailed skills necessary for that profession.

(Often, the Kogans introduced single men and women who later married. But their involvement didn't stop at mere introductions. The weddings were usually held at the Kogan home, with their three daughters helping prepare a feast for 80-100 people. "Everything was homemade. You can't find *kosher* products in supermarkets or even specialty stores in Russia," said Sofia, eyes twinkling as she remembers the crowd in her tiny apartment.

(The Kogans were concerned for every Jew, whether from Russia or the West. People coming to them from the U.S. were inspired by their devotion to their fellow Jews and Judaism. A favorite custom of Yitzchak's was to take out his *Kiddush* cup before saying good-bye to a visitor. He would hold it, saying, "When you're making *Kiddush* at home on Friday night, think about us. I'll think of you and in this way we'll be united."

(The Kogans' first wish, upon leaving Russia in 1987, was to see the Lubavitcher Rebbe. For so long, without ever having seen or spoken to him, the Rebbe had been their main source of inspiration. Amidst a hectic schedule of interviews and speaking engagements, they said the highlight of their New York visit was a private two-hour audience with the Rebbe.

(Now settled in Israel [although as of 1999, the Kogans reside in Moscow], Sofia said, "Jerusalem is home. I felt I belonged there as soon as I arrived."

(The Kogans continue their life's work in Israel.)[1]

After that, a *bochur* named Yeshaya, who had come from Mezebuz, received permission to leave the U.S.S.R., and was preparing to emigrate to Israel, took the Zeilingolds (and by now if you are wondering where were their Russian tails, so too such thoughts rented space in the heads of both Zeilingolds) by taxi to the apartment of Zalmen Zev.

Asher and Sema spent a lot of time with Zalmen and his wife (they were married

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1. *L'Chaim* Publication, no. 5 (Brooklyn, NY: Lubavitch Youth Organization, April 15, 1988), p. 2.

the past summer and she was expecting a baby around Yom Kippur time, 1983). Almost before the apartment door was shut securely, Zalmen plied Asher and Sema with question after question he had been saving up for the next *shaliach*—questions in *Halachah* (Jewish Law) and on the *Gemara*. One by one, the Zeilingolds patiently went through all his questions. As for *Chassidus* and *Kabbalah*, which Zev was deeply into, Asher stressed his using a *seder* and method to his learning. In every way Asher promised to help, even making tapes for him to learn with. In the very small apartment, Zalmen and his wife lived with their in-laws. He told the Zeilingolds that his in-laws were also getting closer to Torah observance and doing *mitzvahs*.

Their visit to Grisha Wasserman (who didn't at the time really consider himself to be a Lubavitcher, but undeniably felt very close to Lubavitch and in fact translated for everyone what Asher spoke about in his holy house) had to be curtailed because they were running out of time. No, the KGB was not running after them—although they were hotly persecuted in 1981, especially when four men—one uniformed militiaman and three Civil Guards—broke up a refusenik meeting in Grisha's tiny apartment on the top floor and falsely charged and imprisoned Evgeni Lein, as outside the building, on Culture Avenue, agitators chanted, "Beat it Jews, beat it!" Now, in 1983, the more immediate danger at that late hour was: in Leningrad, all the bridges would open up at about 2 a.m. to allow boats to pass through. As it was still quite light at midnight (sunset was at 11:30 p.m.) Asher, who has a marvelous sense of humor, remarked, "This shows that in Leningrad we Jews have the strength to change the dark of night into light—even at a time of day when the rest of the world is in darkness. It is the same now as when our forefathers, who had light in Egypt even before the Redemption; now we get additional strength from the Rebbe, the *Baal Hageulah*, for he shows through his actions how to transform the night into light."

With nearly everything said at the *Yud-Beis Tammuz farbrengen* in the Wassermans' apartment, the Zeilingolds departed. Just as they came to one of the bridges, it was opening up, and the taxi-driver calmly told them they'd have to wait an hour. Certain that the taxi-driver had deliberately taken a very long way around, they got out of the cab and told him to be on his way. If perchance some KGB goon happened to be watching them now, all he'd see was the two tourists, along with clusters of other people standing around, seeming to be enjoying themselves as part of a very beautiful and peaceful scene. Ah, Leningrad: at 2 a.m. it's light enough to read a book or wave to people on the slow-moving boats on the river. Finally, after the bridge closed at 3:15 a.m., the Zeilingolds hailed another taxi to their hotel.

Once again in Moscow, they met Uri Kamishev[2] (who had been away the past week) and later, privately, Ari gave Uri an answer from the Rebbe, concerning a personal problem. First, Asher read the answer to Uri, then Uri himself read it over. Then he stood up and kissed the paper with the Rebbe's answer.

2.Uri Kamishev was a highly educated Russian Jew who majored in computer science. After becoming a baal teshuva, he threw himself into studying Torah and became a talmid chacham, giving lectures on Torah and Chassidus. The Rebbe would not permit Kamishev, while he remained in the U.S.S.R., to quit his job until the Lubavitcher yeshiva was founded in the Marina Roscha Shul, where he served as its rosh yeshiva. Currently he and his family live in Israel.

On the following Tuesday, *Shiva Asar BeTammuz*, a large *minyan* showed up at the Choral Synagogue, obviously because of the fast. A young lady arrived at the synagogue to be converted. The *Chevra* (the society involved with conversions there) obviously had known her for some time. Asher said that he would take responsibility for the conversion of the woman only if Reb Getche would ask him to do so. Reb Getche did just that, but it turned out that the *mikveh* water was too cold and the conversion had to be postponed. Asher and Sema spent some time with the young woman (the prospective convert) and explained to her the meaning of becoming Jewish with a full commitment to Torah and *mitzvahs*.

After the praying, the Zeilingolds went to Grisha Rosenstein's home. There, Grisha gave them a box with 2,000 names for the *Sefer Torah*, which he asked Asher to bring back to Crown Heights. Afraid that the box of names would be confiscated at customs, Asher photographed all the names. Unfortunately, the photos didn't come out.

Grisha also made it very clear that he felt very strongly that Western efforts were too small. Said Grisha, "There must be a much greater and intensified effort; we must look for and find new and innovative ways to bring in *tashmishe kedushah*, etc. (tourist groups, group operators, businessmen, etc.)." He spoke over and over about getting Jewish programs of substance on the radio (Radio Free Europe) in order to reach the masses of Jews all over the U.S.S.R.

Footnote: On their way back to the U.S., the Zeilingolds changed planes in Zurich, Switzerland. As there was some time between planes, they decided to leave the airport terminal for a look-see. Asher went over to Passport Control, and handed the woman his passport. After taking one look at it, she handed it back to Asher and said, "This passport is not valid. It is not signed."

As Asher Zeilingold looked at his own passport, he laughed—a big laugh that shook his personal rafter.

The laughter made little impression on the female official, yet maybe, she wondered, the man in front of her was laughing at her. So drily she asked him why he was in stitches.

"Do you realize," Asher said in between smaller laughs, "I've just been in and out of Russia with a passport that would never be accepted even by the most neutral country!"

"So?" the Swiss airport official said. "I don't get it."

"Good," Asher said back, "and neither did Leonid Brezhnev get it when he said that Soviet achievements leave class enemies breathless. I'm proof he was wrong. For, young lady, here I stand almost breathless over an invalid passport."

Unamused, the female airport worker turned away and busied herself with some paperwork.

As for Rabbi Asher and Sema Zeilingold, they continued to laugh all the way home—except when they remembered what every Russian Jew had said to them:

"Do not forget us."

A Secret of the Rebbe

In the words of Professor Herman Branover:

"When the Rebbe summoned me in April 1985 and told me I should call whomever I can reach by phone in Moscow and Leningrad to tell them that before too long the Soviet Union will collapse, I never dreamed in my wildest dreams that he'd say that to me. I was flabbergasted. At that time the Soviet Union seemed invincible.

"Yet the Rebbe unraveled the precise details of the unbelievable changes that were to take place in Russia. With Mikhail Gorbachev's ascent to power, a new era of openness and freedom would begin, the Rebbe prophesied. And waves of Russian Jews would emigrate to Israel.

"If I had heard these words from anyone but the Rebbe, I would have dismissed them as fantasy. As such, I was neither surprised nor offended when the various people in Russia whom I contacted were skeptical. 'Are you sure this is exactly what the Rebbe said?' they asked. And, may I add, these were people who were directing all the Lubavitch underground activities in Russia.

"It was simply that the Rebbe's prediction seemed so far-fetched. In the spring of 1985, newspapers like *The New York Times* and the *New York Post* predicted that the new leader in the Kremlin was going to be harder than the previous one. To this day, I have these papers in my home. And who felt this Communist hard-line more powerfully than the people living in the then Soviet Union!

"When I related the response from Russia to the Rebbe, he requested that I contact them once again, assuring them that these changes would indeed take place. The realization of the Rebbe's words is now history. In 1992, when Mikhail Gorbachev visited Israel, we were introduced and I told him what the Rebbe had said seven years earlier. Gorbachev was stunned. 'When I assumed power in 1985,' he told me, 'I myself did not have the slightest idea which direction this would take. I had no concrete plan. I would like to meet this man who knew so much about the direction I and my country would follow.'"

5

The Street Smart Fellas

Great events often take place in the streets. Yet, sometimes on a tightrope. Such a great moment came when a man once came to a town and told the people that for a 100 guilders, he would walk across the river on a tightrope. The townsfolk collected 100 guilders and told him that if he'd accomplish the walk, they would pay him the sum. Among the many people watching the scene was Rabbi Chaim of Krasna, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov.[1] Rabbi Chaim watched very intensively as the person walked across the tightrope.

When asked why he was so intensively watching the man walking on the rope, Rabbi Chaim told the persons that watching the man taught him a great lesson in the service of God.

"Here I saw a man putting his life at risk in order to earn a 100 guilders. Yet, as I was watching him walking the rope, I realized that his entire concentration was on the task before him. Not for one second did he think about the reward. For had he thought about the 100 guilders even for one second, he would have lost concentration and would have fallen into the river.

"From this I learned that although God promises us rewards for the *mitzvahs*, yet when we perform the *mitzvah*, our entire concentration should be to accomplish the *mitzvah* to the best of our ability and not to think about the reward."

So it is, in this story, with the two fellows (in today's jargon, "two fellas") with Jewish street smarts, Lubavitcher Rabbi Shmuel Heber and his Cincinnati connection, his brother-in-law Rabbi Sholom Ber Kalmanson. So keep your eye on their tightrope walk through Russia and by all means watch their lips. Yes, their lips, and read their words in the streets of Moscow or Leningrad (now S. Petersburg) or Rostov—if you can. In reality, it won't be that difficult for you, because this writer has, with a few touches of his computer keyboard, put these savvy fellas into a new focus: always facing you as they and their newfound refusenik friends stroll along streets. Clearly they managed to frustrate the KGB, which couldn't bug the whole outside world, just to pick up their street talk.

Once in the U.S.S.R., the street smart fellas quickly put to good use their so-called Magic Slates (a child's writing slate on which one writes and, after having written, one

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1. 1698-1760. Founder of Chassidism.

lifts up the cellophane sheet and the writing disappears). Ezras Achim had provided the fellas with such "ammunition" to communicate with refuseniks in their "bugged" apartments, and they passed them on to the refusenik families they came into contact with. They also quickly learned that it wasn't the best of ideas to speak openly on Saturday afternoon meetings on Arkhipovna Street, outside the Moscow Choral Synagogue, where one couldn't tell refuseniks from Soviet snitchers, or mad dogs out in the noonday sun from Muscovites taking a "Sunday" stroll.

And Kalmanson and Heber quickly learned, secondhand, how Soviet officials continually frustrated, threatened and often imprisoned refuseniks—indeed any Russian Jew—for daring to speak with foreign correspondents and tourists.

It was 1984—time to set your clock to the dying Secretary General Konstantin Chernenko and, waiting in the wings, Mikhail Gorbachev, the would-be Russian diminishing dictator. By now every Russian Jew had heard more than he or she ever wanted to hear from Chernenko. So, now who was this much-talked-about Russian leader Gorbachev? What possible thing could he say or do to help the Jews? Fine that he would say in October 1985, "If there is any country in which Jews enjoy the political and other rights that they do in our country, I would like to hear about it.... The Jewish population, which makes up 0.69 percent of the country's total population, is represented in its political and cultural life on the order of at least 10 to 20 percent." But would all his "nice" words be worth the price of a single slice of *kosher* black bread? In the beginning the Jews would see this same Mikhail Gorbachev, rumored or not, order an end to the censorship of mail, yet he also warned that letters containing anti-Soviet comments would not be delivered. This would be the era of Mikhail Gorbachev, when it was said openly by refuseniks without too much fear of being put in one of those psycho wards, "What is the difference between capitalism and Communism? Answer: Capitalism's the exploitation of man by man. Communism's the reverse."

All this notwithstanding, refuseniks continued to do everything they could to get out of their country—as soon as the OVIR (Visa Application and Registration) would let them. Meantime, they didn't let up on their Hebrew lessons, countless petitions, and *samizdats* (underground newsletters). The Soviet political machine could say what it wanted, but refuseniks shared the conviction disseminated through contacts by Ezras Achim agents and the Rebbe's own words, that the Messiah would come in their lifetime; then it would be on to Israel. The times were really a-changing.

(As one of the refusenik leaders, Rabbi Eliyahu Essas, noted: "The Six-Day War had marked a watershed in the history of Soviet Jewry. Despite the constant barrage of anti-Israel propaganda disseminated by the government, the Jews of the Soviet Union were electrified by word of Israel's extraordinary victory. Not long afterward a few foolhardy souls approached the OVIR...office in Moscow with an outlandish request: They wanted to leave the 'Workers' Paradise,' permanently. They wanted to go to their homeland—Israel. The outrageous request was, naturally, turned down, and a new word entered the vocabulary of dictatorships: refusenik."[2])

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2. Miriam Stark Zakon, *Silent Revolution: A Torah Network in the Soviet Union* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1992), p. 15.

A-changing they may be, times in the Soviet Union were still fraught with danger. At the time there was actually an advisory not to travel to Russia because it was the peak of the cold war, when U.S. marines were pushed around by the KGB agents in Moscow. It was understandably a time when ordinary people would not have made a trip to Russia. Yet Lubavitchers, now permitted to visit the U.S.S.R., knew they had to focus on their secret mission for the Rebbe, no matter the reward, whether they were armed with American citizenship papers: anything was possible to Jews, Russian or otherwise.

The KGB was not above arresting somebody sub rosa and making them disappear for good. To paraphrase Jim Carey the movie actor (in the film, *The Truman Show*), the two Lubavitchers, Kalmanson and Heber, might wind up saying, "Good-bye good morning, and if I don't see you the rest of the day, Good-bye good afternoon. Good-bye good evening. Good-bye good night. And good-bye good-bye."

Undeterred, Ezras Achim, whose Crown Heights' long arm extended all the way across the Atlantic Ocean (it should be pointed out that at no time in the 1980s did most if not all the directors of Ezras Achim visit Moscow on any business, nor did they have any desire to return there, considering how oppressed their lives were before they emigrated to America in 1946-1947—and they easily could have been arrested, as we'll shortly see).

So, in a way, it was fortunate that Ezras Achim engaged two these two thirtyish men—Rabbis Sholom Ber Kalmanson and Shmuel Heber—who had never lived in or feared the Soviet Union. Ezras Achim wanted to develop deeper roots and better contacts in Russia. In doing so, the new agents were told to explore a lesser-known route, through Finland, into Russia, to bring in much-needed Jewish goods such as *tallisim*, *tefillin*, *mezuzahs*, *mohel* knives, *shechita* knives, in especially this time, *esrogim*, as their trip was in the summertime; and to develop an easier route for future emissary of the Rebbe to pass through to the U.S.S.R., where they would live, teach and rotate their interchangeable stays in Russia—all underground, of course, until the right moment when they'd be in place and ready to surface aboveground, and that day was soon to come, word spread.

Until then, all Ezras Achim emissaries had flown into Moscow or Leningrad and were thoroughly and properly searched by customs agents, who were well-trained to check out tourists and spies, and/or both. Now the pair would fly to Helsinki, ferry to Tallinn, Estonia (then part of the Soviet Union) on Tallinn Bay of the Gulf of Finland, and be searched by custom agents who often couldn't tell a religious Jew from a religious Protestant, as we'll learn why shortly from the lips of Shmuel Heber.

Reb Moishe Levertov and Rabbi Gedalia Korf approached Shmuel Heber, a Crown Heights resident in the jewelry and diamond business, and asked if he would undertake a two- or three-week "secret" stint to Russia on behalf of Ezras Achim. Shmuel looked eager, but... "Only if I can go with my brother-in-law, Sholom Ber," he said.

Levertov and Korf readily agreed.

"But aren't you going to ask why I want Sholom Ber to go with me?"

Levertov and Korf asked why.

"Because if those Reds give me a knock on the head, Sholom Ber is a good head-holder and will comfort me. In short, Rabbis, we're the ideal combination for such a job. Between us, we've got an answer to any question those Russkies might ask. The Baal Shem Tov said we should harness all that's in this mundane world and use it to help Jews become holier. So it's a deal. I myself will phone Sholom Ber, and we'll write the Rebbe for a blessing, come to Ezras Achim headquarters for your training, and then we'll be off to Finland."

Levertov and Korf knew they had the right men with the right attitude for a dangerous, ground-breaking job.[3]

Why were Sholom Ber Kalmanson and Shmuel Heber so willing to risk their necks? As Shmuel noted, "We were probably picked because of our ability to give *shiurim* [Torah learning classes] in Moscow, Leningrad and other cities. There are many things that are beyond our capacity to explain and understand. But that is no reason to deter us from the main point: we have a Rebbe!"

"Yes," Sholom Ber added, "this job called for two guys, both strong in character, and pretty much with both feet down on the ground. We'd quickly have to size up every situation, knowing who were the foes and who were the friends. In any big city like Moscow or Leningrad, there was always politics. This one said yes and this one no. Even among our own friends. But we never knew who the friends on the outside were. It was very dangerous to fall into the trap of someone you can't trust. So this was part of our mission."

Despite the fact that Sholom Ber Kalmanson had Russian-born relatives, and was himself born in Europe, the importance and desperate need to utilize astute people on this vital mission overshadowed any dangers involved.

And what were some of these dangers? Until then, the Soviet Union did not recognize dual citizenship. This meant that if the Soviet government, from its point of view, had a basis to consider a tourist a Soviet citizen, then, falling into the territory of the Soviet Union, the tourist could wind up in the position of a person whom the Soviets considered its own citizen, rejecting any other citizenship. The consequences could be devastating. At the time there were numerous examples of this.

According to Soviet law, then, departure from the Soviet State was settled by The Edict of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet U.S.S.R. If a person, at any time, were a Soviet citizen and did not have documentary confirmation that the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet released him from Soviet citizenship—he would be well advised not to show up at a Russian entry. What if a person's parents were or were once citizens of the U.S.S.R.? The Soviet government would consider that person a citizen irrespective of where he was born. The very same thing could happen, if one of the person's parents at the time of his birth was a citizen of the U.S.S.R. and at that moment even if only one of the person's parents was on the territory of the U.S.S.R. Also a tourist had to be careful in the case where he was born in territory that was currently under the control of the U.S.S.R. Special caution should also be used if a person, during World War II, was on occupied Soviet territory or on territory that today was under the control of the Soviet Union—independent of how a person might consider his own activities at the time. What could they possibly charge a tourist with? For one thing, as Ezras Achim

always pointed out to its flock of "tourists" and emissaries, if the Soviet government really wanted to be nasty, such a tourist could be accused of military crimes or collaboration with the occupiers. And worse, if a tourist arrived in the Soviet Union and was accused of once being on Soviet territory, there was very little a tourist's own government could do. Many times, in training and briefing men and women tourists ready to spy for the Rebbe to help their Russian Jewish brothers and sisters, Reb Moishe Levertov would emphasize this:

"Your government might turn out to be powerless in the attempt to help you if the Soviet Union considers you a Soviet citizen. In particular, this concerned former Soviet citizens constantly living abroad, but not having another citizenship."

Knowing this, Shmuel Heber still accepted the new Ezras Achim assignment. And when Shmuel phoned his brother-in-law to inform him they both together had to do a job for G-d in Russia, Sholom Ber shot back, "Of course, of course, it's just like that famous *chassid* Reb Itche the Masmid used to say, that 'the bottom line in the existence of the world is G-dliness. When you look at the world what do you see? G-dliness.' Shmuel, Reb Itche is right. We can't fail. We're in G-d's country. Russia's no different."

In New York, Ezras Achim put the fellas in touch with Betzalel Schif, who worked at the time for Ezras Achim in Helsinki, but is currently the director of Shamir Association, founded by former Russian refusenik and world-famous scientist of magnetohydrodynamics, Professor Herman Branover, who is also the treasurer of the newly formed party of Russian people in the U.S.S.R. In turn, Schif gave the fellas the name of a 22-year-old man named Ben Rubinstein, who at the time lived in Torku, Finland, and a young woman's name of Sara Sabav, 27 years old, who resided in Helsinki.

With everything in place, there was no stopping these Lubavitcher fellas. On their journey via FinAir Flight 106, they took along, in addition to the two suitcases they were allowed to carry, two boxes full of *esrogim* (citrons, one of the four species used during the Festival of *Succos*), prayer belts, *mezuzahs* (tiny parchment scrolls affixed to a doorpost), prayer books, *machzorim* (special prayer books for the High Holy Days), *sheitels* (wigs for married women), and other religious articles.

On the plane, the two fellas, dressed in traditional Lubavitcher garb, mingled with a group of Jewish pathologists, who were heading to medical seminars and other events in Russia. But what a night they spent on the plane, recalling the 1953 witch hunts of Jewish doctors in Soviet Russia, and, on a happier note, discussing some deep meanings of their ancient religion—"a very satisfying chassidic moment in my life," is the way Shmuel Heber put it.

The two fellas also learned that Finland is well known for its deeply religious feelings about Jews. Indeed," said Shmuel Heber, "the Fundamentalist Christians there hold that the Jewish souls from the Bible can be found in the very Jews of today's world, and who can deny that; it's the truth; we Jews all know we're from those very 600,000-plus souls[4] who gathered at Mount Sinai. The Rebbe himself said many times that we are reincarnations of the generation of the desert, and we have much in common with them. As for these Fundamentalists, about a thousand believers in strength, still continue to observe *kashrus* and *Shabbat* out of their great love for

Judaism and Israel. Over the years they've put their own lives in harm's way, to help Jews. As a friend of mine once told me, it's not unusual to see, in Finland, the Finnish flag—white with a blue Nordic cross—juxtaposed with the exactly color-matched Israeli flag."

Notwithstanding all the Finnish support for Israel and Jews, Heber and Kalmanson were asked to develop Jewish contacts, whom they could thoroughly trust: basically dyed-in-the-wool religious Russian Jews, hopefully a whole underground line of refuseniks who could be taught chassidic Judaism and pass it on, as teachers, to other Russian Jews.

So, arriving in the Finnish world where the sun sometimes barely sets and sometimes barely rises, Kalmanson and Heber reached their chosen hotel, the Presidente, and settled in the sizable building on the seventh floor. Then, first things first, they began the morning prayer, after which they phoned Ben Rubinstein in Torku to meet in their hotel room. Promptly, at the designated time of 6 p.m., Ben Rubinstein and Sara Sabav showed up.

Heber explained to the young students what a big merit it was for them to continue to help their Jewish brothers and sisters behind the Iron Curtain, and, in turn, Ben, who was a very sincere young man who definitely had a big heart and expressed how open and willing to do anything and everything to help the Jews in Russia.

Then, Kalmanson emphasized the great necessity to work out a way that Finland would enable Ezras Achim to send a flowing traffic of different religious articles through that country to future *shluchim* in Russia.

The two Lubavitchers gave the Finnish students a case of *esrogim* and the sum of $250 to help defray the cost of their own trip to Russia before *Succos*. Then, the four warmly parted company for the time being. In their adieu, there was an inevitable yet silent, unexpressed feeling that each might never see the others again. Facing them was the Soviet Union. So who knew!

The next day the fellas taxied over to the ferry port, which, although, was located in Finland, was considered by everyone as Russian territory, peopled by basically under-trained Russian custom agents. But now we come to the place (author's message: "Whenever two Jews meet, there are always at least three opinions"), where the two observations of the fellas diverge.

If you buy Shmuel Heber's story, the customs people who checked them out at the ferry port had no idea what a Jewish person looked like. "Nor," said Shmuel Heber, "did they know what a Jewish book looked like; at least in those days it was Greek to them. So, we turned our books upside down, and they let them pass." But what if they saw your *tzitzis* dangling out of your pants? Shmuel was asked. A broad grin flashed over his face, and he bragged, "I suspect they would have thought, Poor man, he wears such old, bare garments! What kind of wife would let her husband look like this! But, since we didn't want our wives reproached even from afar, we kept our *tzitzis* inside our pants.

4.The 600,000-odd male souls, together with their wives and children, amounted to three million people. (See Talmud, Makkos 23b.)

"I don't know about my brother-in-law Sholom Ber, but in the beginning I didn't quite catch on that these relaxed custom agents didn't know who we really were. Maybe because the town of Tallinn is a very relaxed place; maybe because the Russians there seemed to really like Finnish visitors. I don't know. So many *goyishe* touring parties passed through that port, always in a jovial mood."

So who did the customs people think you were? Shmuel was asked.

"Ah, interesting you should ask that," Heber said. "Because the Russian customs people were certain we were Protestants and took a deep interest in us. They wanted to know when our new Protestant church in Tallinn would be completed. Would we have Sunday picnics or just holiday cookouts? "And how is the reverend and his new bride?" asked the custom agent. Taking in the stream of friendly questions, Shmuel saw there was no sense in contradicting the agent; anyone in that area might have mistaken him and Sholom Ber for Protestants, because the Protestant men in that area dressed somberly and often wore beards. So Heber went with the flow, and was whisked quickly through customs, few questions asked. If you buy Sholom Ber's story, the Russian customs people on Finland's side did ask ingenuously if the pair were priests and, after a wink, as if to say, G-d be with you! they perfunctorily stamped their visas.

"Technically, once we began to cross the gulf, we were on Russian soil," said Sholom Ber. "The boat itself was vintage Russian, and it looked like something out of some old Tolstoy war novel. Private seating was nowhere to be seen; maybe there was one short bench in the whole hall where everybody, because of the generally inclement weather outside, herded together inside: an ideal caboodle for snooping on other people's conversations, eh!" Sholom Ber blurted out. "We got a real feel for life in Russia before we even managed to get on its soil."

As it turned out, the fellas left the "comforts" of the hall and went outside to the deck of the ferry; there they found some chairs. Immediately, in the four-hour ferry trip to Tallinn, they set to doing their homework, which consisted of how to prepare for the customs agents on that side.

"So why are we carrying *milah* [circumcision] knives?" Shmuel put to Sholom Ber.

As if the answer was perfectly clear, Sholom Ber said, "Because we're always eating hard cheese and we need a sharp knife to cut it."

Then it was Sholom Ber's turn: "Shmuel, why do we need several pairs of *tefillin*?"

"Easy to say," said Shmuel. "Because we change them, and all our undergarments, every day."

Back to Shmuel: "All right, fella, why are you bringing in seven cameras?"

Without hesitation, Shmuel said (and, dear reader, feel free to add as much emotion as you yourself feel is necessary to get Shmuel's point over), "Because we intend to photograph schools of baby fish off the waters of Odessa. Unfortunately none of these cameras we bought are waterproof. Yet we must use them to get those baby fish pictures or we'll—G-d forbid—have to scrap our long-researched project."

Now, Shmuel and Sholom Ber each put the other to the biggest test.

"What if the Russkies ask why we're carrying a dozen prayer books?" asked Shmuel.—"Why a dozen, why not 13?" asked Sholom Ber.

"Why not?" asked Shmuel?—"Why not what?" asked Sholom Ber.

"Why a dozen?" asked Shmuel. — "Hokay, let's say those customs guys ask us why we're carrying 12 prayer books," said Sholom Ber.

"And?..." said Shmuel. — "What do you think we're going to say?" asked Sholom Ber.

"What any American studying for a law test would say," said Shmuel. — "But I'm a *shaliach* in Cincinnati and you're a jeweler in Manhattan," said Sholom Ber.

"Hokay," said Shmuel, "but for the next two weeks I'm studying to be a lawyer." — "But," wondered Sholom Ber, "what's a guy studying law doing with 12 of the same books?"

"Sholom Ber, you never studied law or you'd know how hard lawyers study for the bar." — " So?..." said Sholom Ber.

"So" said Shmuel back, "every day for the next two weeks, I carry one book under my arm and study hard from it along my travels." — "So?..."

"So, I write voluminous crib notes to myself on the margins of the book's pages. Naturally, I rip these pages out and stuff them in my pockets." — "So?"

"So, naturally the next day I need a fresh book to review with and make more notes." — "Aha!" said Sholom Ber, "but what am I doing all this time?"

"You," Shmuel pointed his finger at Sholom Ber and said, "are doing exactly what I'm doing with another book. Because you too are preparing for the law bar."

"Aha!" said both the fellas at the same time. "Aha!"

On the spot, as both Heber and Kalmanson quickly picked up, any reasonable story would satisfy these customs inspectors, who only wanted to hear make-sense answers to their questions.

"So we kept coming up with cockamamie reasons for every little item in our possession, and it worked," said Shmuel.

"Why?" said Sholom Ber. "Because the bottom line is that we saw the hand of the Rebbe very strongly in our venture."

Indeed, all the work that these two men did for the future successes of Ezras Achim, per force, depended on the Rebbe's blessing, and these two fellas were amazed daily to see "miracles" occur in their dealings in Russia. Each day the Rebbe's blessing manifested itself.

But come now, let us not jump to the conclusion that the Rebbe had to perform these miracles for anybody, in this case, for Shmuel and Sholom Ber; he didn't. "*Goyim, chassidim* used to say, need wonders and miracles in order to believe. *Chassidim,* however, do not have faith in their Rebbe because of his miracles, but because he is the Rebbe. If, for his own reasons, the Rebbe needs to perform miracles he will do so, but *chassidim* do not require them in order to remain *chassidim*."[5]

So, daily, these two chassidic fellas went about their work for the Rebbe and Ezras Achim, and, in wonderment and amazement, kept wagging their heads. And who could blame them. Indeed, Sholom Ber Kalmanson recorded those daily sightings in his extensive report.

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5. Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Ginsberg, "A Tower of Strength," *Beis Moshiach* Magazine, no. 15.

Of course, Shmuel and Sholom Ber realized they had to do their part, too. Key to their success was their mind-over-matter attitude, intellect over emotion, as the *Tanya*, the Bible of *Chassidus*, teaches and trains every *chassid*. (In effect, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe, author of the *Tanya*, might have said, "If you want to act like a beast, go right ahead. But you're capable of much more. You have the ability to rise above yourself. As an animal, the earth is your limit. As a G-dly person, the sky is the limit. You have the ability to rise infinitely and better the world and yourself.? This kind of statement would have been enough to acclaim the Alter Rebbe as a G-d-given genius for humanity.)

Translated, that meant these two well-trained *Tanya*-ists were never to show any signs of nervousness. And to meet each question, clearly a distinctly Jewish tactic, with another question. Anyone who has ever asked, "How are you?" and is asked in turn, "Why do you ask?" will think twice about asking questions, notwithstanding an untrained custom guard who unfortunately happens to run into the likes of the two Lubavitcher fellas named Kalmanson and Heber, both, in their own ways, masters at double-speak and double-think. Perhaps, even, the Russian customs officials were only too happy to get rid of these holy men who looked like Protestants—"Photographing schools of baby fish?" "Hard cheese?" "Stringy underwear?" "These Westerners are weird!" "What will they think up next?"—why, they might even put a hex on the customs agents if they gave them a hard time!

So, no wonder, then, Shmuel Heber claims he and his brother-in-law sailed through customs in Helsinki.

But was that also true when they stepped on the Russian soil of Tallinn?

* * *

"Hold fast, Tallinn, hold fast to Estonian dreams!"

And when the street smart fellas arrived at this major commercial and fishing port and industrial center,[6] they too held fast to their own Lubavitcher dreams, totally confounding the Russian customs agents who were hoping to get a quick read on the duo's body language. But whatever the officials were expecting from them, their body language spoke a foreign tongue.

A lot was riding on how cool Rabbis Kalmanson and Heber could be. All those future *shluchim* who would come to Russia after these two so-called "guinea pigs" would need to know exactly how to deal emotionally with "dime-store" psychologists, also known in Russia as customs officials, and get away with it. Here is where street smarts came in handy. And that's why Shmuel Heber was so convinced he and his brother-in-law got through customs in a breeze.

But both Lubavitchers also carried out the Rebbe's directives.

They claimed and recorded all the American money that they brought in. Said Shmuel, "The Rebbe told us to do everything in a legal way. So, if we had to exchange American money for Russian money, we should change it only in banks, in short, a legal fashion."

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6. In Tallinn, shipbuilding and machine building head a range of engineering industries, and many consumer goods are produced. The cultural center of Estonia, Tallinn has an academy of sciences; polytechnic, fine-arts, and teacher-training institutes; a music conservatory; and several theaters and museums. Population (1991 est.): 481,500.

But did the Russians from Tallinn really think the two Lubavitchers were Protestants? Notwithstanding that the gulf port city had a sizeable number of resident Jews, mainly Sephardic, the Jews there were typical of Jews around the world—stiff-necked and G-d-fearing—yet they had their own ways separate from Ashkenazic. Shmuel and Sholom Ber, coming from a Lubavitcher world apart, bore outwardly little physical relationship to the Tallinnese Jews.

"But O those Tallinnese Jews!" said Sholom Ber. "Truly, they're like our brethren in Tashkent: rougher and tougher when the going gets rough and tough. All over Russia, the Russkies were closing down *shuls* and everything, yet when we came to Tallinn we saw a tremendously beautiful building standing in the sun, with all signs that it was an active religious center of Judaism. Later, we learned that when the Reds arrived with their bulldozers, intent on wasting the beautiful synagogue, the Jews of Tallinn lay down on the ground, and shouted, 'Bulldoze us first!' The Russian bulldoze team backed off."

Remember the camera tall tales the fellas spun off at customs way back when? Well, the fellas put them, no, not the tall tales, the cameras, to good use. "I mean, talk about *chutzpa*!" said Sholom Ber. "We got pictures to prove ours."

"It was fine to be a tourist in that strange land and carry around a camera," said Shmuel, "but you'd better not point it in the wrong direction, warned the Russkies." Then with an impish grin, he added. "But we did. And it wasn't an instant impulse; we'd been preparing to take pictures all the way to the Soviet Union, going over and over in our minds our destinations and how we would take photos surreptitiously or in the open. The Rebbe wanted these pictures and this was our job to deliver them to him."

Of course it was scary doing such things in the U.S.S.R., but both fella, far removed in time and space from those clicking days, brazenly now could afford to boast of their actions.

Among the hundreds of photos they shot—many illegal—their "Russian memory" scrapbooks today include pictures of the KGB headquarters in Leningrad, where the Previous Rebbe was confined in the Spalerka[7] Prison for 18 days in 1927.

How did the fellas manage to escape with those pictures? "Easy," said Sholom Ber. "What we did was walk into a hallway across the street from the KGB prison, giving the impression that we were entering a building. Immediately, in an instant, we turned around and shot the prison's outside, using a wide angle lens. We followed such tactics everywhere, doing everything in a blink of an eye, and half the pictures we took were a no-no. Yet on the way out of the U.S.S.R., nobody questioned us. Didn't the customs guards care? I guess, the Russkies made doubly certain to scare the daylights out of most tourists—'Don't take pictures of illegal places or else!'—that they were confident of their threats' effects. Shmuel and I got away with the real goods, and we saw the

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7. "Spalerno! The very word casts dread and horror upon whoever hears it. It takes its name from the street over which it looms, and is popularly known as Spalerka. It is a nightmare to all men, irrespective of religion, nationality or party. Even children know that being taken there is no laughing matter that will pass in a day or two.... 'Over there people talk; over there mouths open; they talk and tell, and keep on telling.' Cross-examination is lightweight; it is conducted at other addresses. Spalerka is for the heavy treatment. And Spalerka is the address which I am waiting to be taken to in the military vehicle which is duet at any moment."—Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn of Lubavitch, *A Prince of Prison: The Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe's Account of His Incarceration in Stalinist Russia in 1927*, translated by Uri Kaploun (Brooklyn, NY: Sichos in English, 1997), pp. 17-18.

Rebbe's hand in all our actions."

Outside, in the Intourist office, the fellas got shortchanged, and they had to bite their collective lip. Following the Rebbe's directive, they changed some American money for Russian money. In return the Russian bank gave them 86 kopeks for each dollar—a Russian proposition that was as outrageous as some of American duo's best tall tales, but there was nothing they could do about it except accept the money. Shmuel shrugged and said, "After all, we needed pocket money."

From then it seemed as if even the air the fellas breathed was controlled. The taxi whisked them to their hotel, the Viru. Their passports were taken away and they were given copies of their papers. Then they were put up on the tenth floor—"Or maybe it was the twelfth floor," wondered Shmuel—from which they saw, from afar, a spectacular view of the countryside. But it wasn't all that bad, when the two legally were let out of their room and managed to find an isolated phone booth in a street far enough from their hotel. They managed a call in code to the red hotline phone located in Reb Moishe Levertov's home on Lefferts Avenue, back in Crown Heights. And the way Shmuel said hello to Reb Moishe Reb Moishe knew that things were going well so far in Tallinn. And the way Sholom Ber told Reb Moishe how scenic Tallinn was, Reb Moishe knew that the two men had succeeded in bringing in all the cameras, which were to be given eventually to refuseniks, who in turn would sell them and use the money to live on. And the way Reb Moishe spoke very fast told Sholom Ber and Shmuel that Reb Moishe was "gushing" with excitement at their initial successes.

The next afternoon, at 1:30, they flew the two hours from Tallinn to Moscow, and there were moments during that trip, they reined in their wise guy routines and suited their solemnity to the situation. "Anyway," there was nothing to laugh at or about," said Shmuel. "So we kept our mouths shut and our eyes wide open. We remembered the folly of the 12 spies. Jews may be foolish once; we're never that twice. Steadfastly we kept in our minds that our *shlichus* (mission) was solely a fact-finding mission, and not to add our own opinions, thereby discouraging our people from carrying out G-d's requests, through the Rebbe, in this broken- heart-and-soul land ruled by Communists. Besides, when it came to doing the Rebbe's work in Russia, we had to be like soldiers who knew their orders and carried them out thoroughly, with self-sacrifice. As the Baal Shem Tov once said, 'There is no room for G-d in a person who is full of himself.'" And so Sholom Ber Kalmanson and Shmuel Heber proceeded in this vein. To the refusenik fighting Russian windmills in vain, to the Russian Jew who longed to be with the Rebbe. To the Jew who already knew that when he leaves synagogue, he shouldn't take long steps. To the young Russian boy whom the fellas gave his first *yarmulke* and then watched him fall into his mother's lap, joyfully weeping without stop. To refusenik Ida Nudel,[8] who had been convicted on charges of "malicious hooliganism" and was sentenced to internal exile in Siberia for hanging a sign on her balcony, saying, "KGB,

8.Actress Jane Fonda, who helped bring Nudel's case to world attention, was on hand to welcome her to Israel in 1987. Fonda recalled that she was first made aware of the case in 1979 by I-WIN (Israeli Women for Ida Nudel). Noting that Nudel fought for all Soviet Jews, Fonda said that "Ida was literally the little guardian of the prisoners of conscience" who kept in close touch with all of the Jews imprisoned for wanting to leave their country and live in Israel. "She's little and she's beautiful, but she's also a strategist, one of the leading strategists of the Soviet Jewry movement...I want to thank her for teaching me one very important thing: never lose hope, never lose hope."

give me my visa!" To all the Russian Jewish women who had once devoted themselves to the Russian Revolution with radical fervor, and now were more depressed than their Russian menfolk as they heard the lies and saw the oppression of Soviet Communism. And to the group of refuseniks over the age of 60, what could the fellas say to these men, some of whom had been "in refusal" since 1972? A lot.

And they did, bringing the Rebbe's blessing to each refusenik who yearned to hear anything about the holy man whom people in the privacy of their homes (using Magic Slates to speak to one another, of course) or outside on the street where great events were slowly taking shape, were already considering him the Messiah, the real Messiah, or, as they whispered the words in Hebrew, "*Moshiach Vadai*," he who would deliver all Jews somehow some way to the Final Redemption, as sacred Jewish literature promises.

At the secret *shiurim* held in refuseniks' apartments, Shmuel Heber or Sholom Ber Kalmanson would always quote words from *Pirkei Avos* (*Ethics of the Fathers*): "Each and every day a Heavenly voice goes forth from Mount Sinai," and, "you, my fellow Jews, are lately heeding its call more and more, to 'Return, return, O Jerusalem!' As the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism, himself once put it: Whenever a Jew feels an inner awakening to strengthen his observance of Torah and *mitzvahs*, it is because his soul is responding to the call that it heard emanating from G-d at Sinai." And later in their *shiurim*, the Lubavitcher fellas would remind the refuseniks of their great *mitzvah*: "Return is the ultimate act of self expression. Nobody returns because he is commanded to do so. The ability to return comes from you alone. And this is the evidence that you were never truly torn away: The outer garments of the soul may have been severed, but the core remained at every moment in intimate union with its Source. And from there came the message to return."[9]

And these refuseniks wanted to believe that; they knew they had to believe that! There had to be hope beyond despair. Hadn't the Rebbe, in so many personal letters, argued that the best proof as to the unique ability of Chabad *Chassidus* to bring about love and fear of G-d is the indisputable fact that, under the oppressive regime of Soviet Russia, it is only the Chabad *chassidim* who did not discard their Judaism. This the Lubavitcher fellas kept reminding the refuseniks of. Using the Rebbe's own words, from one such letter from the Rebbe, dated *Mar Cheshvan* 24, 5720 (1960), they shared in *shiurim* wherever they went in the U.S.S.R.: "The Rebbe said, 'Let me give you an illustration, which I trust you will not take amiss, especially as you can verify it through other sources. I do not have to tell you under what terrible conditions the Jews lived in Soviet Russia under the Communist regime, and how it affected Jewish religious life, especially of the younger generation who had no opportunity to anchor themselves firmly, or at all, in *Yiddishkeit*. When the Iron Curtain temporarily lifted after the war and many Jews managed to get out of Soviet Russia, it became clear that of the various classes and types of Russian Jews only those who had learned in Chabad yeshivoth and were brought up in chassidic homes and in the chassidic way of life were able to survive

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9.From Rabbi Tzvi Freeman's book, *Bringing Heaven Down to Earth*. Rabbi Freeman based his book on the teachings of the

those terrible trials and difficulties and remain faithful and practicing Jews, not only themselves, but also their sons and daughters with them. This should convince even the most skeptical as to the power and efficacy of *Chassidus* as a living force and practical means of the preservation of *Yiddishkeit* even under the utmost difficulties ....'"

In *shiur* after *shiur*, Kalmanson and Heber spelled out these words and so much more. So, it wasn't that surprising when, long after the street smart fellas returned to the States, this very inspired group of over-66-year-old, but definitely not-over-the- hill, refuseniks, despite all the threats and intimidations, in an open letter issued, in February 1988, said, "We have appealed to all the Soviet authorities many times, but always in vain... Our appeals have always been met with indifference. Thus, we were driven to demonstrate against violations of our civil rights. Our peaceful demonstrations were dispersed; refuseniks were placed under house arrest; people were pulled out of cars; we were kept in police stations for hours... The years are passing. Our strength is ebbing. We do not have many years left...." Yet, among the many signatories, were well-known refuseniks Ella Varshavskaya, Mot Ganapel, Esphir Grinshtein, Boris Livshitz, and Riva Grusman. The release of some of the longest-waiting refuseniks and Prisoners of Zion was greeted with joy in Israel and especially in the offices of Ezras Achim and Reb Moishe's red hotline phone in his Crown Heights home, where phones were ringing off the hooks. The climax came with the emigration of the "angel of the refuseniks," Ida Nudel, in mid-October 1987.

But all this was a flickering daydream way back in 1984, when the fellas first paved the way for a whole underground army of *shluchim* from America, who were inspired by the Rebbe and trained by his rabbis to bring hope and comfort to Jews in Russia.

So, keeping everything under their hats, the two fellas arrived with their baggage in Moscow, were set up by Intourist in a hotel facing the Kremlin, and prepared to meet with refuseniks and other Jewish contacts, as best and quietly as they could. Quickly the pair picked up the little things about being a Russian in Russia; for instance, the duo noticed many men carried shoulder bags and wore distinctly Russian caps on their heads in the streets They effected that on their persons, too.

"In our case," said Shmuel, "we carried food and religious articles in our shoulder bags because we were going to distribute them."

One of the first things the fellas did in Moscow was to get in touch with a Russian Jew named Yehuda Bartinovsky. "In Russia," said Sholom Ber, "he was known as Yehuda HaGodol ('Big Yehuda'). At the time, Yehuda HaGodol was quite ill, having suffered a second attack of cerebral thrombosis. Although he attended the local *shul* every so often, we were told, he had very little physical energy, and he was forced to stop working and became an old-age pensioner. Yet, despite his pension being a pittance, he tried to help other unfortunates around him. And that's why he needed some sort of financial help from Ezras Achim. Apart from this, he also asked if he could be sent a brown suit made of wool without *shaatnez*; English size 46; his height is 180 cm.; and a timer for *Shabbat* (the plug-in type)."

(Yehuda HaGodol, o.b.m., passed away in the early 1990s. He himself had studied in underground yeshivas before World War Two and remained the old guard of Lubavitchers, who chose to stay in Russia after the outflux of Jews in 1946-1947 and

dedicated himself to helping the remaining fellow Jews.)

Unable to reach Yehuda HaGodol by phone, they finally contacted another refusenik, Reb Getche Wilensky, o.b.m., who then lived on Pruzanskaya Street. Reb Getche eagerly said they should come to his apartment, on Pruzanskaya Street. "But be sure to ask the taxi driver to stop at the nearby train station, where I shall be waiting for you." As for why the fellas were not directed to his flat, Reb Getche explained that he didn't want any Russkie to know where he lived.

For a long while, they sought in vain to find a taxi, despite, they were told, many taxis riding through the streets during daytime hours.

Then, they decided to take the Metro, which, before they had arrived in Moscow, they had boned up on. Reb Getche told the fellas that he lived four stations away from the hotel where they were staying, and that he'd be waiting by the train station for them. Even if they had no idea what Reb Getche looked like, the fellas felt certain they'd find him. "We chose the Red Line. Oh," asked Shmuel, "you never heard of the Red Line? Well, in Russia, there are four Metro lines. Good that we took the Red Line, which was, for us, the correct one."

When the pair reached the Pruzanskaya station, Reb Getche was nowhere in sight. Right away they phoned his apartment, and his wife informed them he was already on his way, having left a few minutes before their phone call. So they milled around Pruzanskaya Street.

Suddenly they realized two men had been following them. KGB operatives? "Who else!" said Shmuel.

The two then did the natural thing: divert attention away from Reb Getche. This time they quickly hailed a cab and had it race towards the American Embassy, to notify their government that they were in Moscow. The only problem was that once the taxi driver realized that their destination was the U.S. Embassy, he ground to a halt a few blocks from the embassy. Whatever the frightened Russian had in mind, his gestures and words meant, "No can do." So they walked or, rather, ran the rest of the way to the embassy.

Later, when they had time to assess the situation, the street smart fellas quickly realized that riding on trains distracted them from their notice of being trailed. But the taxis that pulled up to hotels weren't driven by real taxi drivers. These were KGB agents. They stood in front of the hotels with their engines running, pretending to be reading a newspaper, but they were peeking through the paper, watching the comings and goings of tourists and any Russian foolish enough to enter the hotel.

The Soviets had another tricky way to keep tabs on their foreign visitors. Every tourist, leaving the hotel, has to turn in his key to a clerk on the same floor, who sits at a little desk near the elevator. When the tourist returns, he picks up the key from the clerk. This way they always keep a tab on you: when you're in, when you're out.

But the street smart fellas also picked up the Soviet vibes—"Warning, warning, you're being followed. Put Plan A into operation!"—they had a succession of escape hatches to dodge these feeble Soviet public detectives.

"The day we decided to use the train over to Reb Getche," said Sholom Ber, "we would stand on the station and enter a train going the opposite way. Once a wrong train stopped, we strolled into the train. Whoever was following us presumably would do the same thing. The Metro has a speaker system that has an announcement equivalent to saying, 'Move away from the doors; the doors are closing now.' When that announcement went on, we'd quickly backtrack out the subway door, and, as our followers with a dumb look on their faces inside the moving train, went by, we'd smile and wave, 'Bye-bye, have a nice trip.' Then we took a train that went the other way. That is how we got rid of our tails."

"This," said Shmuel, "was an acid test for us. For the two weeks that me and Sholom were in Russia, in every hotel we never spoke. Never. We had those little boards that you write on: Magic Slates. That was the only way we were able to communicate. In every hotel we stayed at, the Russkies didn't even hide the microphones. In the hotel rooms, the mike plants quite obviously stuck out in quite blatant places. Of course, mikes or not, the fellas prayed and learned together the *shiur haRambam* (A Rambam study class], *Chumash*, *Gemara* or whatever was appropriate. The recording of today's activities and the days to come would patiently wait till later when Sholom Ber used his retentive mind to recall practically everything that occurred. For three weeks the silence worked, and the fellas passed their self-imposed test with flying colors.

Finally, that day, after the fellas completely lost their tails, they managed to meet up with Reb Getche. "At the time," said Shmuel, "Reb Getche was in good health and in good spirits, although he had been forced to stop his *minyan* after a very unpleasant talk with Comrade Maksimov, one of the high-ranking officials in the Soviet Committee for Religious Affairs."

"But," added Sholom Ber, "Reb Getche confided to us, what Comrade Maksimov didn't know didn't hurt us. Actually, there were two *minyans* in Moscow on *Shabbat*, which kept changing places. One of them consisted entirely of young Jews. Reb Getche said he himself was very impressed by their level of knowledge and by their determination. This was the first time that a Muscovite *minyan* was run by the younger generation, which showed, as far as Reb Getche was concerned, that this generation had become capable of taking over. Reb Getche also told us that the *Sefer Torah* at this *minyan* was covered with a cloth sewn and embroidered in Moscow by some refusenik women quite recently. They wished to continue their work, but needed special material for the covers (velvet) and special golden or silver threads for embroidery." All this Sholom Ber scrupulously marked down in his detailed report. (Later, the desired material was sent to these refuseniks, according to Reb Moishe Levertov. As far as Reb Moishe and the Ezras Achim high command were concerned, "their wishes were commands to us. We knew only to well how much all these small things meant to them.")

At Reb Getche's apartment the fellas set up their "research."

Who were the refusenik leaders? The religious groups were basically divided into Chabad, Agudas Israel, and religious Zionists. In Moscow religious activity originally centered around Vladimir Shakhnovskii, Mikhail Nudler, and Eliyahu Essas (Agudas

Israel); Grisha Rosenstein and Zev Kuravsky (Chabad); and Vladislav Dasheskii, Pinchus Polonsky, Mikhail Karaevano, and Kholmianskii (the religious Zionists). Leningrad with the religious leaders Yitzchak (Izzy) Kogan (Chabad) and Grisha Wasserman (Agudas Israel) lacked the religious Zionist orientation.

Although the refusenik movement in the 1980s included in its ranks only several thousand people, in the atmosphere of fear that dominated the Soviet Union at that time, it was virtually the only mass opposition aboveground movement in the country. It was not exclusively Zionist. Participation in illegal Jewish activity during their years of refusal, however, increased activists' national consciousness and instilled in many the desire to go straight to Israel as soon as they were free to leave. Many activists after their emigration joined Jewish organizations in Israel and the West (especially in the U.S.), and continued to study and teach Jewish history, Hebrew, and the Jewish religion.

But the Lubavitch Movement, for many reasons, kept a low profile underground. For years, beginning with the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the Lubavitchers raised a red flag in the eyes of the Reds, and seeing the red flag, the bull, or in the Russian case, the bear went crazy. It tried to snuff out Lubavitchers, with little or no success. Ezras Achim and soon the Chamah Organization (which you'll hear more about in Chapter 9 of this book) were filling spiritual spaces that aboveground Jewish organizations and refuseniks dared not go. If Alexander Kerensky (Provisional Government Head, July-October, 1917), Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (Soviet Premier, 1917-22), Josef Stalin (Secretary General, 1922-1953), Nikita Khrushchev (Secretary General, 1953-64), Leonid Brezhnev (Secretary General, 1964-82), Yuri Andropov (Secretary General, 1982-84), and Konstantin Chernenko (Secretary General, 1984-85) couldn't do it, what with all their forces marshaled in their favor to practically run the world, it was becoming apparent there had to be a sub rosa, or underground, reason for the failure of these diminishing dictators to destroy the Jewish spirit in their country.

Let me suggest that this underground reason was the Rebbe's blessing and all his spiritual minions of Ezras Achim. But above all, the Rebbe's blessing.

And it was this blessing of the Rebbe that the fellas saw manifested everywhere they went in the U.S.S.R.

The fellas felt certain they'd find trustworthy Jews to receive the money (in the form of 35mm and video cameras, which in turn were sold for high profit) sent by Ezras Achim. This money was earmarked to be distributed to Jews becoming Sabbath observers. By not working on the Sabbath in the Soviet Union, these Jews were summarily fired and hence, were hard pressed to support themselves financially. It came down to this: Who were the people to work with and who were those to steer clear of? And this was where the Rebbe's blessing especially paid off.

Once the two completed their work with Reb Getche, they phoned refusenik Zev Kuravsky, who was only too happy to receive them in his apartment. He asked them to meet him outside a certain Metro station. Before they departed, Reb Getche gave them some insight into the persona of Zev Kuravsky: "He's a loner, you know. His application to Israel was turned down because his parents and brother have refused to

agree to his leaving the U.S.S.R. Despite his being a refusenik, his job is secure as a computer programmer. Which is strange, that he's a refusenik with steady work, yet when you know him better, it's not so strange, you know. His wife works too; she claims she's invaluable to her office, so that they don't give her much trouble. He spends much time learning, with his kids, too. *Bava Metzia*, second *perek; Ketubot* 2b, and so on. They're all musically inclined."

Kuravsky told the fellas that they shouldn't, under any circumstances, approach him in the street. He said, physically he was of average size and weight, in order for the fellas to recognize him, in some way, and he'd wink to them from a distance. The fellas were then to follow him. That is what they did. The three, Sholom Ber and Shmuel together and a distance ahead, Zev Kuravsky, separately entered the underground train that runs under Red Square to Gorky street—the so-called Green Line. They rode seven train stations, and after they exited their station they still had to walk 10 more minutes to get to Kuravsky's apartment. When they did have to speak, they spoke in Hebrew, the common language to them all.

When the fellas met the 30-year-old Zev Kuravsky he was already a bearded rabbi. But once he was an ordinary Russian worker in Moscow, who dreamed of the good life in Israel, but settled for Russian nights in the underground. Through Lubavitchers trained by Ezras Achim, he learned to help other refuseniks, and then, still not known to him, his wonderful life really began.

Oh, this Zev Kuravsky had dreams, as big as Jimmy Stewart in the film "It's A Wonderful Life!"

To begin with, Zev's dreams had nothing to do with being Jewish. In fact, Kuravsky was born in Siberia to atheistic parents. When the fellas asked if Judaism was at all a part of his life, Kuravsky smiled a sad smile and shook his head. Indeed, it wasn't until he was a university student that he found out that there are Jewish holidays. "My strongest childhood remembrances on this subject were that I was extremely embarrassed that I was Jewish. I did everything to hide it. Yet, one day, another Jew whispered to me that my freedom wouldn't be complete until I was free of the fear of being Jew. *Oy*, that Jew's words: I couldn't get his words out of my head after that."

It wasn't until Kuravsky began studying in University—four years in Siberia and then on to a physics degree in the Moscow University—that he started interacting with Jews. While living in Moscow, two of his mother's aunts "got a hold of me and told me that I must marry a Jewish girl. They introduced me to my wife."

After their marriage, Zev Kuravsky's many newfound Jewish relatives encouraged him to spend more time around Jews. "They began to influence me to think that a Jew needs to be a Jew and not to be embarrassed about his Jewish nationality. But their Jewishness had nothing to do with religion; it didn't even have anything to do with Israel. They didn't consider themselves Zionists. They were not concerned at all with Israel. The only difference between my wife's relatives and me in the area of Israel," explained Kuravsky, "was that I didn't even know that the State of Israel existed!"

One time, when the Kuravskys were visiting a family, Zev found a Hebrew language newspaper. He was surprised to find out that his hosts not only read, but

understood what was written in the paper. And so began his total preoccupation with the Hebrew language. Studying Hebrew consumed him day and night. Nothing else was important to him anymore. Within a year, he was fluent in Hebrew and began teaching Hebrew to others. In 1976, one of his friends with whom he learned Hebrew invited him to attend a class taught by Chabad *chassidim*.

"Truthfully, I wasn't as interested in learning about Judaism as I was in the language. For me, I looked at the class as one more opportunity for using the Hebrew language. We learned *Gemara* from a Steinsaltz *Gemara* [a translation into Hebrew from the Aramaic by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz] and we learned *Tanya* [the basic work of Chabad *Chassidus*]."

Little by little, the Kuravskys became more and more involved in Judaism and the Chabad community with whom they had become friendly. In the summer of 1980, the Kuravskys spent time on the Baltic Sea with a few Chabad families. Kuravsky marks that as the year when he and his wife Irina really became serious about Judaism.

But when the awakening-to-his-full-role-in-Judaism hit him and Kuravsky applied for an exit visa to Israel, his wonderful life outwardly ended. Zev Kuravsky was refused an exit visa because—as if the Soviet authorities really needed a bona fide excuse for anything they did—his parents refused to leave Mother Russia; and, according to Soviet law in those days, if the whole family didn't elect to emigrate, no one family member could. So, as the saying goes, if you're handed a lemon, you make lemonade. In the case of the Kuravskys, as his electrical engineering wife Irina worked at home and raised their two sons, Dovid and Reuven, Zev devoted his life in Russia to making a wonderful, spiritual life for other Russian Jews.

One look around Zev's apartment was enough to impress the fellas. An air of normalcy pervades the religious flavor of Kuravsky's home, similar to that found in Lubavitcher families throughout the free world. The fellas saw the entire *shas* (sixth tractate of the *Mishnah*), the Rambam,[10] the Tur[11]'s *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law), the Alter Rebbe[12]'s *Shulchan Aruch* and other chassidic works. It is easy to forget that Jewish study activities and the very possession of Jewish materials were illegal only a short time ago and subjected their owners to persecution and harsh imprisonment. Now, to brazenly have such books out on shelves meant to the fellas that this Russian Jew had a strong connection to the Rebbe, and that was a big advance in their research.

Now that the Soviet authorities had cracked down on Reb Getche and his open-door *farbrengens* (chassidic get-togethers), Zev Kuravsky took over some of the leadership from him. All *farbrengens* took place in his apartment, and refuseniks became household fixtures there. In their main work for Ezras Achim—giving *shiurim*

10.Maimonides, acronym for Moses ben Maimon. Spanish physician, theologian, jurist, codifier of the Jewish law. A sage whose commentaries on the Torah and the Talmud are Torah classics. 1135-1204.

11.Rabbi Yaakov Baal Haturim. Torah commentator and Halachist. 1275-1343.

12.Shneur Zalman of Liadi, 1745-1812, founder of Chabad Chassidism. First Lubavitcher Rebbe.

separately for men (Shmuel) and for women (Sholom Ber)—they had to lecture, carry on discussions, arrange, deal with people and details, fact-find, interview, check things out, scout neighborhoods and cities, and scrutinizing—Shmuel Heber always took the high road as rabbi clergyman while Sholom Ber, the nuts-and-bolts rabbi.

At one evening learning class in Zev Kuravsky's apartment was a young female refusenik, probably not a day over 17. In trying at the same time to be polite and probing, she waited for the right moment, when Sholom Ber, sipping a hot cup of tea, was relatively alone in the room. Then she made her move toward him.

"Rabbi Kalmanson."

"Yes?" he responded in Hebrew.

"Forgive my question, but I'm just learning what it means to be a good Jew."

"Good for you," Sholom Ber said cheerfully. "I myself am still learning that."

Managing a smile, the young woman then took a deep breath and said, "This is my first talk, and I learned a lot."

"Ah," Sholom Ber said, then took another sip from his coffee cup.

"But I am puzzled, Rabbi. Tonight, you and Rabbi Heber have divided the men and women in classes, to teach them separately. From what I understand, my mother, who is over there"—she pointed to her left—"tells me this is done wherever religious Jews meet. Fine, Rabbi, but I was born a Russian Jew, and I'll defend my right to be just that. Russian and Jewish. Yet one of my Russian heroines, human-rights activist Yelena G. Bonner, once said, 'Our country is on such a low socioeconomic level that at the moment we cannot afford to divide ourselves into 'us women' and 'us men.' We share a common struggle for democracy, a struggle to feed the country.' I feel very strongly that Jewish men and women should stick together at all times."

"Did you come just with your mother?" asked Sholom Ber.

"Yes. My father's serving time in jail for, of course, trumped-up charges. And I'm here, trying to be a good Jew in his name. Yet I have a lot of fear."

"Fear or confusion?"

"Perhaps both," she said. "I come to this *shiur*, see men and women separate to pray, and I'm reminded of Yelena Bonner's words—not to separate. To join forces at all times. Maybe this seems fine with you, Rabbi. But I don't know what to make of your meeting that divides men and women."

By that time, Sholom Ber had finished his coffee, and placed the empty cup on a table. Then, he gave the teenager his full attention.

"Marina [made-up name], what Yelena Bonner called for, men and women joined in common determination, would be wonderful in Russia as elsewhere."

"So you agree, then?" asked Marina.

"Yes," said Sholom Ber. "Provided that every man and woman had assigned roles and studied them well. Then, they could mesh together for a common cause. But, sadly, as we both know, this is not happening in Russia today. Jews in Russia not only don't know their roles, but the Soviet Union denies them insignificant ones once they avow their Jewishness in the open. So, as much as Mrs. Bonner's a great activist, she remains an idealist whose time has not come in the U.S.S.R."

Marina's whole face lit up, and then abruptly she looked as if she fell into a pit of despair. "But, Rabbi," she finally said, "is there an answer for us refuseniks?"

"There is, Marina. Through the teachings of Torah each Jew is given his or her assigned role and told how to carry it out for ultimate success. All Jews are like one body. No two hearts are needed. Nor three-and-one-half eyes. Nor 35 livers. Nor 18 stomachs. Nor seven legs. Nor 349 pinkies. Nor a 100 wisdom teeth. Well, maybe a lot of funny bones. Yet, amazingly, through the Torah every Jew finds his or her glorious place in the body."

"Marina was smiling big-time," said Sholom Ber, and he could see that with every word from his mouth, Marina seemed as if she were suddenly catching a glimpse of her own role in the Jewish body.

So then he added: "Let me tell you a story—a Rebbe story. Once, a Russian rabbi, he was called, Rabbi Zev Gold, once went to New York to pay a bereavement (*shiva*) call after the passing of a very prominent rabbi. At the *shiva* were leading figures from all walks of American Jewish life. Suddenly the door opened and in walked a young man Rabbi Gold did not recognize. Everyone stood up when he entered. Rabbi Gold asked someone who the man was. "The Lubavitcher Rebbe," Rabbi Gold was told. The rabbi had, of course, heard of the Rebbe before, but he had never had the honor of meeting him personally. Rabbi Gold went over to the Rebbe and spoke with him for a few minutes. 'I'm afraid I'm going to become your *chassid*,' Rabbi Gold told the Rebbe after their conversation. 'Why must you be afraid?' the Rebbe replied. 'You can do the same thing out of love.'[13]

"So, Marina, to fully answer your question, Jewish men and women separate at religious events out of love. Why? Because we all want to singly and exclusively serve G-d with joy, absent everything else."

Another question came up another time. There was this 80-year-old man named Zev Steinberg, Kuravsky told the fellas. "He's sick and blind and cannot go to *shul* on the high holidays. He said he heard that there was a *heter* (a special law) from Rabbi Moshe Feinstein[14]—a loophole, by which a person like Zev Steinberg may travel by Metro to *shul*. Reb Zev asked me if this was really true."

Shrugging ever so slightly, Kuravsky said, "I myself never heard of it. How about you?"

"Beats me." said Sholom Ber.

"Zev," said Shmuel, "if Sholom never heard it, it doesn't exist. And that's that."

In parting, the fellas toasted *l'chaims* with Zev Kuravsky and doled out rubles for each member of Zev's family. Surprised, the Kuravskys asked, "Why the rubles?"

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13. Rabbi Rafael Nachman Kahn, *Extraordinary Chassidic Tales*, vol. 2, translated by Basha Majerczyk (Brooklyn, NY: Otsar Sifrei Lubavitch, 1997), p. 73.

14. American Orthodox Rabbi Moshe Feinstein. Talmudist and Halachist. 1895-1986.

"*Tzedaka*.[15] The Rebbe sent you *tzedaka*, which you are in turn to give to others," advised Shmuel.

Mrs. Kuravsky thanked the Rebbe, and graciously received the other religious items Ezras Achim sent her family: *kosher* canned food, a *challah* cover, *The Memoirs of the Frierdiker Rebbe*, *The Lubavitcher Thought For the Week in English*, a *MeAm Loez*[16] (Torah Anthology), and chocolate candy for the two boys. Kuravsky asked the fellas if Ezras Achim could forward him an English *Tanya*, a Lubavitcher *Haggadah* (the book that tells the story of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt), a *Sefer Minhagim* (book of Lubavitcher customs), as well as a *Likutei Sichos* (authored by the Rebbe), *Likutei Diburim* (penned by the Previous Rebbe), and *Torah Ohr* (a book of chassidic *maamarim* written by the Alter Rebbe).

Before the fellas left Zev Kuravsky's apartment, which was after midnight, he phoned Grisha Rosenstein for them. At the time, Grisha was in charge of all Chabad activities in Russia. Yet, he did not have a personal phone, so a neighbor had to bring him to his phone. The three on one end of the phone had already made up their minds to travel together to Grisha's; now the party at the other end agreed to meet them at 11 in the morning at his apartment. That a refusenik openly would be travelling with two foreigners, even though the three men were similarly dressed might prove fatal for all three, but they were more concerned not to endanger Grisha and to give the KGB reason to arrest all four of them on the spot. But they had to take the risk. So much depended on it. "Besides," as Sholom Ber loved to say all along the trip, "Look, we have the Rebbe's blessing." And who could doubt that, especially since the fellas were never in any hot water.

So the three men met at Grisha's apartment. There was even a strong rumor that Rabbi Eliyahu Essas, one of the most famous refuseniks in Russia, would be there. It was probably more than acceptable with certain refuseniks, who loved the Rebbe and appreciated Ezras Achim's efforts in helping all religious Jews, that Rabbi Essas, who disdained being associated in any way with Lubavitcher outreaches in Moscow, never showed up.

Nobody could explain to the fellas Rabbi Essas's sometimes anti-Lubavitch rhetoric over the years. In a sense, it was a case of biting the hand that feeds you. These

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15."The idea of giving a little charity every day has many benefits. First, you get rid of some of that change jingling around in your pocket or purse. Giving charity, after all, doesn't have to mean sitting down and writing out a check. It can be as simple as putting a few pennies or nickels into a charity box that you hopefully have in your house and office.

"Another advantage of giving a few coins daily is that it makes us more sensitive to the plight of others; more thankful for everything we do have. In the split second that it takes to drop a few cents in the slot, we remember that there are others less fortunate than we. And, if we don't remember others because giving tzedaka has become a habit, it's all right; tzedaka is not the type of habit you need to "kick."

"Additionally, when we give charity every day, we are showing, on an ongoing basis, our compassion and kindness toward others. This helps ensure that 'The One Above Who presides over that big charity box in the sky' will be compassionate and kind to us. And it helps guarantee that we won't be in need of charity ourselves."—From *L'Chaim* Magazine, issue no. 69, July 14, 1989/11 Tammuz 5749.

16.Rabbi Yaakov Culi (1689-1732), translated by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan.

words are not too much. For, when American tourists Steven Levenson, o.b.m., and his wife Dena contacted Essas in Moscow, he readily agreed to set up a schedule of *shiurim* for them, and later knowingly accepted many needed items sent by Ezras Achim to him.

After his trip in December 1983, Edward Kissin, a British "tourist" for Ezras Achim, wrote, "No 'tourist' should have to raise his own money and run around shopping for gifts.... Luckily, we were placed in contact with the Ezras Achim organization of Lubavitch in Brooklyn and they provided us with the following items: 2 pairs of *tefillin*; 2 *tallisim*; 2 Nikon cameras with accessories; 12 cans of meat; 18 packages of Cholov Yisroel cheeses; 2 large boxes of *shmura matzah*; and ointment medicine for refusenik Eliezer Ksido's baby, and offered an array of electronic appliances as well. And they delivered the items to our house one day after our speaking to them!"

So, at 7:30 that evening the fellas showed up at Grisha Rosenstein's apartment with their shoulder bags filled with "goodies and religious stuff," and prepared to learn there, and back again to Kuravksy the next evening to *farbreng* there.

Finally, at the *farbrengen*, the fellas realized they were not back in Crown Heights or Cincinnati, but were in the Soviet capital of Moscow. Suddenly they got frightened. Suddenly, in the midst of an exciting *farbrengen* with a whole group of 30 refuseniks, the two were *farbrenging* with a whole group of refuseniks. "I might add," said Sholom Ber, "Zev's apartment building was sort of in an outskirt area—the least dangerous place for any Russkie spy to suspect that there was a group meeting in Zev's house."

So, by now already well past midnight, everybody was deep into the *farbrengen*, when suddenly there was a loud, menacing knock on the front door.

Everyone in that room paled and wanted to run to cover. "Shhhh," quietly said Zev. The group was not expecting anyone else. They knew those they invited, and they were all in that room. So, it had to be the KGB—who else! Immediately, Zev motioned with his finger to his lips for everybody to remain silent, and he got up; everyone else kept their seats, hoping against hope. Zev then left the room and closed the door to the room everybody sat in. Then, calmly as he could, he went to the front door and opened it.

Facing him—clearly not the KGB—was Reb Kalmen Melech Tamarin, o.b.m., and his two teen-age sons, Moshe and Nochum. Immediately, Zev ushered them into the apartment, and he apologized profusely for not getting hold of them. "I really tried."

"Yes, I believe that. Fortunately," said Reb Kalmen Melech, "one friend told another and that friend spotted us in the street, and then told us. The rest, as the Americans like to say, is history. We're here, safe and sound."

"I'm so pleased. Thank G-d, for your coming."

When the three men entered the room, everybody breathed the air again of the *farbrengen*.

One night, Nochum and Moshe Tamarin asked a question that astounded both Shmuel and Sholom Ber. Of course, both fellas were well versed in answering one question by asking another. But this time the question begged for a straight answer—even if the Tamarin's question seemed like a curve ball. "What do you think was bothering them?" said Sholom Ber. "What was bothering them was they wanted to

know the schedule of the *bocburim* of Yeshiva Tomchei Tmimim in America."

"Why did they want to know that? I asked them," said Shmuel. "Because, explained the Tamarin brothers, they too desired to follow exactly in the footsteps of their American brethren. Sholom Ber and I broke it down for them: *Chassidus* at 7:30 to 8:30 in the morning. praying 9 to 10. Then breakfast. More learning from 11 a.m. till 2 p.m. Then lunch. At 3:30, the afternoon prayer. At 4 o'clock, more learning until 6:45. After that followed dinner. And between 8 and 9:30 in the evening. more *Chassidus*. finally, the evening prayer, depending on the time of sundown."

"Imagine that!" said Sholom Ber. "In Russia there are bigger problems than to know exactly what hours yeshiva students learn in '770.' But this is how really wholesome and sincere these Tamarin boys were—are. They simply had to know how to please the Rebbe, to become Russian chassidic connections.

"And the irony of all this was, there was no such yeshiva for such boys to follow in the *bocburim*'s footsteps of Yeshiva Tomchei Tmimim in America.

(In October 1988, the Lubavitcher Yeshiva Tomchei Tmimim opened in Moscow, Headed by refusenik Uri Kamishev as its principal, it started off with 10 students, two of whom were American, and was located in the Marina Roscha Shul.)

Yeshiva or not, nothing stopped these refuseniks from carrying out their Jewish rounds. The fellas met a recent Russian *baal teshuva* who, tears in his eyes, told of how he and his wife would send off their five-year-old son to a secret underground *cheder* many miles from their home. On Friday, they'd bring him home for *Shabbat*, only to have a heart-rending parting with the boy again on Saturday evening or early Sunday morning. This is true self-sacrifice," said Sholom Ber, who didn't try to hide the tear in his own eyes.

Shmuel pointed out another thing. "We have heard the Rebbe say so many times, in his own words, [based on Maimonides in the *Chumash*] that the food we eat is transformed into our flesh and blood, and affects our physical health. When a Jewish person eats food that is not fit for his consumption, his spirit becomes coarse and crass like the animal from which the food originates. But when he eats food that is fit and *kosher* according to the Torah, his spirit will be responsive and perceptive.

"And let me tell you still another thing. In America we eat Tam Tam crackers without thinking twice, right? Over the years, the *kashrus* on Tam Tams has improved much, but in those days Tam Tams were called Pas Palter. In Russia, many refuseniks refused to eat Pas Palter, even if it meant suffering and getting very sick. Confronted by this terrible situation, we had to phone Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dworkin from Russia, a well-known Rav, to alert these refuseniks that they were allowed to eat the so-called Pas Palter, according to Jewish law. Torah says a person cannot commit suicide, and that's what the Rav told the refuseniks. They're allowed to. And they still refused to do it—these refusing refuseniks, eh?

"Finally, with Ezras Achim continuing to smuggle in *kosher* yeast, these women decided to bake their own *challahs* in secrecy every Friday. More easily said than done. If the Russian authorities ever found out, these refuseniks' gooses would have been cooked." Suddenly Shmuel threw his hands up in the air as if to emphasize his point. "Phenomenal! Their self-sacrifice! Sholom and I, you know, supposedly came to impart

things to them, but I think we took more from them than we gave."

As the Jewish American writer Ludwig Lewisohn once noted, "In the first millennium of the Christian era, amid darkness, confusion, the conflict of creeds, and the downfall of classical civilization, the Jews learned the lesson of being a nation by force of the spirit alone."—And that very spirit was and is alive and well in the Soviet Union, and it has carried these refuseniks and *baalei teshuva* all the way to 1991, when the Soviet empire collapsed fully, and beyond to this very day.

The next day, in hooking up again with Grisha Rosenstein and Reb Getche, the fellas and Zev Kuravsky had to use their full bag of tricks to trip up any KGBers who might be tailing them. Once they were in Grisha's apartment, it was understood, they wouldn't be able to talk in depth because of the "bugs." So they conversed in the street, and, as this writer mentioned earlier in the story, you the reader could hear every word coming out of their mouths: in detail, the Ezras Achim plans to open the new venues from Finland into Russia, what supplies and religious items they needed and would receive through students of Helsinki. Leningrad and Yitzchak Kogan were also brought up, and their key roles in maintaining the material and spiritual needs of refuseniks in both Moscow and Leningrad. The problem of "Comrade No-Name" was brought up, with a fine-tooth comb.

After Grisha told the fellas (Zev Kuravsky already knew the details) that Reb Getche and Comrade No-Name had had a difference of opinion over a divorce case, it was perfectly clear why suddenly the Soviet authorities learned about the refusenik meetings at Reb Getche's, and banned them. After Reb Getche's opinion based on *Halachah* was proved correct, Comrade No-Name flew off the handle and disappeared for a week. The betting was that, typically of sore losers, he went off to the KGB and turned in Reb Getche and his activities. Grisha felt (as you read his lips) there was much to be feared about Comrade No-Name. "It's over a year that I suspect him, and nothing about that has changed my mind." Why? "Because his father is close to the government and drives a foreign-make car, which, in Russia, even important ministers barely have such cars. Indeed, [Comrade No-Name] was never afraid to arrive at the airport to greet visitors from overseas—something everyone in Russia is afraid to do, especially Jews. I can go on and on with the *chutzpa* of [Comrade No-Name]. He's never even afraid to come to hotels where tourists stay—a definite no-no for Jews.

"And despite that [Comrade No-Name] is pretty well versed in Judaism and knows how to learn quite a bit, he always stays away from giving *shiurim* himself or organizing *shiurim* for the *shluchim* who arrive here. Which is another reason to believe that he's a government agent."

"And further," Grisha added, "from all the cameras and electronic devices that were given to [Comrade No-Name] for sale and to use the money to help, both Reb Getche and I have no idea what he did with the money. He obviously isn't passing on the money to whomever he was told to. We see [Comrade No-Name]'s very close relationship with Rabbi Adolf Shayaevhitz, the president and rabbi of the Choral Synagogue who was allegedly also a government agent himself. "Such suspect friendships in the Soviet Union," Grisha said, "was an indication to beware, go slow, watch out! Why do I say this about the *shul*'s president? Because many Jews would

bring *kosher* meat to sell for the *shul*" (which is the way they did things in those days) "whereupon the rabbi would demand that there should be *kosher* and non*kosher* meat sold at the same time. He himself takes from the *treif*. That shows you what a big rabbi this guy is."

One day all the discussions about Comrade No-Name (if by now, you've guessed who Comrade No-Name is, please keep it to yourself; besides, it's not nice to speak bad about a fellow Jew) came to a halt: he vanished totally, and nobody heard from him again.

Unfortunately the Soviets had their own bag of tricks. While the fellas were still travelling in the Soviet Union, they inquired about the refusenik Yuli (Yoel) Edelstein.[17] Reb Getche and Grisha said he was sitting in jail and they had spoken to his mother and sent requests to the Rebbe to bless him. Long had Ezras Achim—and, unfortunately, the KGB, too—been tracking Edelstein in his outreach work. Today he is a member of Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, but then he was trying to stay one step ahead of the KGB.

A young man, married with two children, he opened his door one day and was whisked off to KGB headquarters. There, they searched him fully and took away all his possessions he had in his pockets. Then began their interrogation. "We know you used to drive on *Shabbat*. What happened that you decided not to do it any more? Why did you become a *baal teshuva*? We also know you recently had yourself circumcised. We know exactly who did that to you, and we're going to round up those thugs, those lowlifes, and send all of you away a long time for breaking Soviet law. You'll regret the day you declared yourself a Jew!"

After the interrogation, upon returning all his personal items, the KGBers claimed they found drugs in his matchbook. So, having found the perfect excuse to lock him up, they did so. That was typical of their dirty tricks: planting evidence. And when his wife came to KGB headquarters to plead his case—"I assure you, Comrade Sirs, everybody who knows Yuli Edelstein knows him to be a very decent fellow. I ask you, why would he need drugs?"—they answered her, "Since he became a *baal teshuva* he definitely needs it to make *havdalah* on *Shabbat* night. Don't try to talk your way out of this: all you religious Jewish people have to inhale drugs."

So much else was happening, Reb Getche and Grisha informed the fellas: it seemed as if the Soviet authorities were primed to turn back the clock to the 1930s.

If you'll recall, Josef Stalin's "purges" of the late 1930s, which were directed against the members of the old Communist guard, many members of the *Yevsektzia* were liquidated and the main Jewish newspaper and the Ozet Society (the organization for settling Jewish workers on the land) were closed down. Apart from this, however, these "purges" did not bear an anti-Jewish character and were a part of the general policy of the party. At the end of the 1930s Jews still played an important role in administration, science, and Soviet art. However, no Jewish national or communal organization existed whatsoever. Assimilation took giant strides. Mixed marriages became commonplace. Yiddish-Communist culture was gradually disappearing, but

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17. Born in 1958 in the Soviet Union, he emigrated to Israel in 1987. Currently a member of Knesset, the Israeli Parliament.

there was still a class of Jewish activists, authors, and teachers who held their ground in this atmosphere of extinction and proclaimed, in accordance with the optimistic official line in the Soviet Union, the great "success" achieved by Marxist-Leninist policy in the solution of the Jewish problem and the "renovated Jewish people" (*dos banayte folk*), which had emerged in the Soviet Union. Many of these same writers were executed or exiled in 1945 to Siberia.

All this came to an abrupt halt when the infamous Jewish Doctors' Plot was hatched in 1953—and Stalin dropped dead in the nick of time.

Now, in 1984, the KGB and other Soviet departments were cracking down hard on Jews in Odessa, Kiev, Berditchev, and Dnepropetrovsk. Rampaging vandals had messed up 500 Jewish graves. *Sefer Torahs* were stolen outright from the *shuls* or left very badly damaged, beyond use. In Kharkov there used to be three *minyans*; now there were left only two. In Dnepropetrovsk (formerly Yeketrinaslav), the Soviets had just closed down the *shul*. "It seems the 1930s all over again," said Reb Getche.

Grisha told the fellas about the KGB special division designed to break the back of the *Baal Teshuva* Movement in Russia. Heading this division was a man named Mr. Padaradchik, who had been the head of the KGB in the Ukraine, and in every sense of the word, hated Jews. "There's only one way that can stay this cruel man's hand," said Grisha, "and that is for you both to ask the Rebbe for a blessing on our movement." The way the refusenik leader put it was that this particular Mr. Padaradchik should die an unnatural disastrous death.

The fellas passed it on, that is, the request for a blessing from the Rebbe.

Despite all the Russian odds against them, the refuseniks carried on their struggles to be Jews first, determined to grow in *Yiddishkeit*. Zev Kuravsky continued giving *shiurim* to the men, and other refuseniks, Uri Kamishev and Pinchus Polonsky, picked up the slack; the young and old refuseniks learned; the network of *shiurim* spread. Soon, there were classes in many apartments in Moscow, Kiev and Leningrad, and many other places too numerous to mention here. All Ezras Achim paths in Russia led to Torah. "Strength through *shiurim*" was the cry around which Russian Jews could rally for G-d, Jews and their ancient heritage, and the movement was not only growing but burgeoning at times. The time for this idea had fully come, and "it's not a bad idea," Sholom Ber said, "to remind ourselves now what the Messiah once told the Baal Shem Tov. He asked him: 'When will the Messiah come?' and the Messiah replied: 'You will know of it when your teaching becomes famous and revealed to the world, and when that which I have taught you and you have comprehended will spread abroad so that others, too, will be capable of performing unifications and having soul ascents as you do. Then will all the *kelippot* [shells or evil covers of man's spiritual core that form a barrier between man and G-d] be consumed and it will be a time of grace and salvation.' This," said Sholom Ber, "continues to sustain Jews everywhere."

Grisha Rosenstein also pointed out that they recently printed underground 65 copies of the *Tanya* in Russian; 30 of them he sent, knowing it would give the Rebbe *nachas* and joy, to the refuseniks in Leningrad, in the Rebbe's name.

Then, too, said Grisha, the underground press printed 40 copies of Adin Steinsaltz's book, *The Thirteen Petaled Rose*; 10 copies of *Ani Maamin*; and 40 copies of

The Tent With the Cloud on It, another Steinsaltz book.

Grisha also suggested to the fellas that Ezras Achim contact Professor Herman Branover in Israel to translate *The Thirteen Petaled Rose* into Russian, especially the introduction, which, Grisha maintained, was truly inspirational and fitting for the outreach work of Chabad in Russia.

In passing, we must credit these two Lubavitchers for also having the foresight of transferring the complete Code of Jewish Law by Maimonides onto microfilm, which they smuggled into Russia. As it's written (Ecclesiastes), "Of making many books, there is no end." "You can be certain," said Shmuel, "these refuseniks got the most book value out of that microfilm!"

Other news: Reb Mordechai Livshitz, the only *mohel* in Moscow, continued circumcising children and grown-ups. While a doctor did the actual cuttings, Reb Getche was always present on such occasions to ensure that everything was done according to *Halachah*. Reb Avraham Genin arranged such matters.

Sooner or later it had to happen: Sholom Ber Kalmanson finally met his counterpart in Moscow. "Despite all the hardships," said Shmuel, "many things became possible thanks to this guy called Yaakov Wilgi. He was a *baal teshuva* who worked in a printing shop and had lots of connection with printers. It's not like today when a photocopy machine story, alongside a pizza joint, is practically on every block, and all you have to do is, first say the appropriate blessings, then chow down a *kosher* slice or two of pizza and a Diet Coke as a machine whizzes out 500 copies for you. To disseminate and promulgate information then, a lot of manpower was needed. And such operations were fraught with danger.

"And yet this enterprising refusenik came up with one bright idea after another. One big idea of his was to utilize Radio Free America from England or from Israel. Here was a man like me who could talk meaningfully off the top of his head—maybe that's where he stored all his ideas—and make all the sense in the world. But it was apparent to me that he always had given his thoughts much airing in his head before he blurted them out in bullet-like fashion. And his ideas were very good," Sholom Ber boasted.

"Wilgi was convinced that spreading *Yiddishkeit* into Russia via the radio would work without any major problems. By the way, not long after Wilgi came up with that idea, a former emigree to Crown Heights, Dov Ber (Berl) Haskelevich, started broadcasting to the Soviet Union. Rabbi Berl Haskelevich was asked by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty to be the producer and commentator for a weekly rabbi's talk; he agreed but had some concerns. Most of his listeners would not be Jewish. And he had to discuss things that were relevant to everyone without compromising his Torah principles.

"Unbelievably—but Wilgi kept saying, 'See, see, I told you so!'—Haskelevich, at his radio program's heyday, reached 50 to 60 million listeners across the former Soviet Union and in other parts of Eastern Europe as well." (See Chapter 7, "How the Soviet Union Found Out There Is a G-d.") "Another important peg was put in place," added Sholom Ber.

From their can't-read-my-lips discussions with Grisha on the street, the fellas later

suggested to Ezras Achim that *bochurim* should be sent to the U.S.S.R. in pairs, to remain in Russia and to learn for a month; then to send another set of *bochurim* three weeks later, The idea here was that each set of *bochurim* would overlap their predecessor's, so that some Lubavitchers would always be in the U.S.S.R., ready to do the necessary underground work of teaching and learning. "And," said Shmuel, "this set the stage for Ezras Achim taking up the idea of establishing Soviet yeshivas there."

Grisha also acknowledged the $40,000 he received from Reb Getche, which Ezras Achim sent. Of the money, Grisha gave one thousand American dollars' worth of Russian rubles to Aryeh Spivac. Who is Aryeh Spivac? Not much physically, but O what a giant-sized 17-year-old lad in Moscow who was totally dedicated and became responsible for outreach work to all Jews in the Soviet Union!

Another amount of rubles Grisha sent to Grisha Wasserman, who was in Leningrad. Not only was he involved in translating the biography of the Alter Rebbe (finished in 1985), but he also conducted many *shiurim* on the Talmud. which brought in hundreds of new refusenik recruits and a new wave of *baalei teshuva*.

It was also decided that future *shluchim* would visit different cities other than Leningrad and Moscow. "But," cautioned Grisha, "go slow toward the city of Berditchev. Why? Because we have to see which way the new Gorbachev wind will blow."

"Very true," said Shmuel, tongue in cheek, "but I also suspect," and Shmuel's grin was getting bigger and bigger as he spoke, "Grisha had a 15-year-old son named Ephraim, who'd been living in Berditchev during the past *Shavuos*. He's back now. But if *shluchim* arrived in Berditchev, the boy might not get a job there again. Doing what? The young Ephraim had so much on the ball that the whole Jewish congregation were so impressed with him that they made him the *shul*'s Torah reader, *shofar* blower (taught by my brother-in-law) and sort of the mini-rabbi."

As a representative of future Russian Orthodox Jewry, which was definitely on the rise again, this too must be said about young Ephraim Rosenstein. At 15, sporting the beginnings of a beard, he spent much of his time learning with Uri Kamishev, who was knowledgeable in Talmud, among other Jewish literature. Having no intention of desecrating *Shabbat*, Ephraim refused to attend public school, and his *tateh* Grisha backed him completely. Ephraim knew he was living in the Evil Empire, yet he strolled the streets of Moscow and Berditchev with his *tzitzis* out of his pants. He never made a blessing without two covers on his head—his *yarmulke* and a hat. Scathing newspaper articles were written about this young boy, and still he wouldn't allow anything to interfere with his Jewish studies.

Grisha also told the fellas of the letter the Rebbe sent to his son. "Not on official stationery, of course; just a plane white paper; probably the standard letter the Rebbe sent to all *bar mitzvah* boys, signed at the bottom, 'Menachem,' in case the letter fell into Soviet hands." The fellas readily agreed that the young Ephraim had certainly merited that letter, if only because he had memorized the regular *maamar* all the boys in "770" recite for their *bar mitzvahs*.

Once everyone was in Grisha's apartment, out came the Magic Slates. On it Grisha wrote: "Please come back tomorrow to learn with my son Ephraim. And on Sunday, to

give a lecture to refusenik women, most of whose husbands are still prisoners." Grisha also wrote that he wanted to call meeting to say Psalms for their husbands, and he was hoping that the fellas might infuse the women with hope and inspiration.

On that day that was just the beginning of the refuseniks' plans. Men and women refuseniks intended to hold a press conference and demonstrate to call attention to the general public what was happening lately with Jewish prisoners in the U.S.S.R. Already prepared was a written protest with a long signature list of Jews living outside the U.S.S.R. The cry went up and out from the apartments of all refuseniks in Moscow:

"Six hundred souls cry from within us!"

Grisha had a hard time with this protest, as well intentioned as it was. At the time he didn't know exactly how the Rebbe felt about it. His question: Should Chabad people be involved in only spiritual matters and not in politics? Should he be involved in signing this or not? Of course the fellas put Grisha straight. "The Rebbe does not want it," said Shmuel. He told Grisha of the series of events that led Hans J. Morgenthau, o.b.m., then an important person in the U.S. State Department, to a *yechidus* with the Rebbe, in February 1971. At that time some people tried to hijack a plane from Russia, and, as a result, a big demonstration in Brussels was planned, with tens of thousands of people going to rail against the Russian government. There, Hans Morgenthau would make the keynote speech. However, before traveling to Brussels, he went to see the Rebbe in a private *yechidus*. Out of that, Morgenthau toned down his Brussels speech and was royally booed. "Now," Sholom Ber added, "it is known that the Rebbe has always been very much against having public demonstrations. Why especially against the former Soviet Union? Because the Rebbe maintained such demonstrations were hurting Jews in Russia." "In other words," said Shmuel, "maybe it was a good way of venting our anger in the form of a demonstration, but in the long run it was hurting Jews in Russia, where they were whisked away to prisons late at night after every such demonstration." The Rebbe told Grisha not to sign the protest, and Grisha abided by that decision.

It had to seem like a lifetime of anxiety and stress—those five days in Moscow and Leningrad—yet the enterprising fellas laid the Lubavitcher groundwork for years to come. It wasn't an easy task, what with each day their having to come up with new ways, some successful, some not so, to keep from being distinctly noticed, spied upon by the KGB, and, worse, arrested and thrown in jail, with the key dropped gently into the Black Sea. That was always a very strong possibility.

Then, in their travels, came Tbilisi, in the Republic of Georgia. Parking their bags in a room at the Ivory Hotel in the center of a modern building, the fellas quickly strolled outside and tried to make contact with Jews. Of course, in those days, Georgia, with its very independent Mountain Jews, was not like Russia or other parts of the Soviet Empire. Jews openly worshipped above ground. And by all accounts, Soviet rule over Georgia was far from successful in its efforts to destroy Jewish religious tradition. Even in the 1960s and in the 1970s most Georgian Jews observed religious traditions: visiting synagogues, observing *kashrus*, and conducting their family life according to religious law. Many of their children studied in illegal *chederim*. The authorities were aware of these afternoon schools, but chose not to notice them.

And after the Six-Day War, Georgia became the leading region in the Soviet Union for Jewish demonstrations and petitions, demanding the right to leave for Israel. The letter of August 6, 1969, by 18 heads of Georgian families to the United Nations, containing an appeal to influence the Soviet government to allow them to leave for Israel, was the first document of the *aliyah* movement in the Soviet Union to receive wide publicity in the West. The mass *aliyah* of Georgian Jewry began in 1971; by 1981, about 30,000 of them had immigrated to Israel.

So why did the fellas go there? "To find out for Ezras Achim what the remaining Mountain Jews needed to sustain a full spiritual life," said Sholom Ber. "There's a tradition among the Jews in Georgia (the *'Gruziner'*) that they are descended from the Ten Tribes exiled by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser, which they support by their claim that there are hardly any *kohanim* (priestly families) among them. So they had problems peculiar to themselves, and we stood ready to help"[18]

While playing tourists, the fellas met two groups of people who came to help Russian Jewry. "We met a Reform Jewish woman there who said she met a beautiful family in Moscow," said Sholom Ber. "When she mentioned the father of the family, Victor Lazar, I became wary, but said nothing. Who was Victor Lazar? He was the president and treasurer of the Marina Roscha Shul in Moscow. This Victor Lazar explained to her how he's a pillar of the *shul* and how he does not allow the government to take down the *shul*'s Star of David. As things progressed, Lazar asked the woman, when she returned to the States to ask her rabbi, who was obviously not an Orthodox rabbi, to obtain a visa for Victor Lazar to emigrate from Russia. Now this same woman was importuning us to intercede on Lazar's behalf. As it turned out, the man who sweet-talked his way into her heart was a KGB agent," Sholom Ber pointed out.

The Georgian Jews were receptive to the innovations proposed by the fellas, but, in the end, they preferred to receive channeled goods through Grisha Rosenstein in Moscow and Izzy Kogan in Leningrad.

With the Tbilisi business finally settled,[19] on *Elul 22*, the fellas journeyed to Leningrad. There, they met Rabbi Mendel Simpson's uncle, Mordechai Romanov, who took the fellas on a tour to where the Alter Rebbe was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress.

From their hotel room 216 in the Hotel Europeista, a five-floor hotel on Blutkayis street, they shortly phoned Yitzchak Kogan, who was unquestionably the lifeline of Jewish blood and activity in Leningrad. If ever there was a Russian Jewish general who deserved a chest of medals, that man had to be Yitzchak Kogan. He was very active in getting the children of Chernobyl out of that atomic radiation-tainted area. At that time, he had a big apartment —five rooms—that he used as a *shul*. As a *shochet*, he traveled from city to city to *schecht*.

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18. But the Tbilisi business was not over; indeed it was just beginning. In 1989, a yeshiva opened in Tbilisi. The Georgian Lubavitcher yeshiva was the third yeshiva to be established in the Soviet Union over the past year. It was named Yeshiva Tiferes Bachurim, for a Lubavitcher yeshiva established in Russia upon the request of the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe after World War I.

19. Excerpted from *Wellsprings* Magazine, a Lubavitcher publication.

To reach Yitzchak Kogan that day, the fellas, armed with handbags full of food and religious articles, hailed a cab and arrived at his apartment on Getchakayitz Street. The fellas will never forget their first meeting with this very proud Jew with a long beard on the bottom part of his face and on top of his head a "shnapper"—a Crown Heights hat, as worn by the Rebbe himself. In Leningrad, everybody wore caps, but not Izzy Kogan, who was totally devoted to the Rebbe, top to bottom.

The Kogans' life, found out the fellas, wasn't always dedicated to encouraging and helping others in their search for Judaism. Yitzchak had held a prestigious job as an engineer until he was dismissed because of his application for a visa to Israel. Sofia, a prominent dentist heading a department at a large hospital, was also dismissed.

Though Yitzchak's upbringing had been fairly observant, Sofia came from a non-observant family. However, most of her extensive knowledge was acquired through reading. Her daughter Chaya, then 15 (the Kogans also had two other daughters: Simona, 6, and Esther, 3), had an opportunity unique to Russia, learning with an elderly religious Jew. "At first he didn't want to teach her. He was afraid that teaching Torah to such a young person would get him in trouble, and," Sofia said with a smile, "he was not used to teaching girls." After a few months, the elderly man came to the Kogans and thanked them for the opportunity to teach their bright daughter. It had given him so much pleasure, he told them.

As the Kogans' commitment to Judaism grew they looked for ways to help the budding Orthodox community in Leningrad. Yitzchak, seeing the need for a *shochet*, learned the intricate laws and detailed skills necessary for that profession.[20]

He gave thanks to the Rebbe's blessing that he was able to move from a little basement into this huge apartment.

His was the official Chabad House in Leningrad, in every sense of the word. Any problem—prisoners, gatherings, *shiurim*, *minyans* —he was called upon to handle and resolve. He even had an *aron kodesh* (the place where the Torah scrolls are generally held in a synagogue) with a *Sefer Torah* in his apartment, a very unusual sight to see anywhere in Russia.

Unflappable, Yitzchak Kogan held weekly *farbrengens* in his house. He fed people like it was going out of style. The Kogan home was always full of young people interested in finding out more about their Jewish heritage. Often, they introduced single men and women who later married. But their involvement didn't stop at mere introductions. The weddings were usually held at the Kogan home, with their three daughters helping prepare a feast for 80-100 people. "Everything was homemade. You can't find *kosher* products in supermarkets or even specialty stores in Russia," said Sofia Kogan, her eyes twinkling as she remembered the crowds in her tiny apartment.

Between the two, the Kogans spoke your language: he, good Yiddish and Hebrew; she, English, Hebrew and a little Yiddish.

As for the plan of the Helsinki route in the Soviet Union, Kogan was thoroughly

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20. Ibid.

enthusiastic about that. The three men also discussed the problems of the *mikveh* in Leningrad; at that point it was open twice a week: on Sundays and Wednesdays, from 5 to 7 p.m., for women only. Correction: for elderly women. The governmental authorities cited hygienic reasons to bar young women. As any Jew knows, elderly women don't need a *mikveh*. Young women do. But the Leningrad city government banned these young women. Kogan couldn't care less what Leningrad authorities dictated: he told young women to use the *mikveh*. Of course, no matter who used the *mikveh*, Kogan had to deal with getting hot water piped into the *mikveh* in the winter.

One Friday morning, the Rebbe's blessing saved the day. A number of men, including the fellas and Grisha Wasserman, the 33-year-old refusenik who had a strong Jewish mind of his own, were learning together in Wasserman's apartment. Suddenly, there was a rap on the door. Grisha Wasserman had no doubt who it was: the KGB. He told everyone to quietly hide in the closets or bathrooms or wherever. Then he went to the door and opened it ajar, but not even enough to let the person on the other side get his toe in the door.

"Ha!" said Shmuel. "The *chutzpa*! It turned out that the guy at the door claimed he was a repair man, that there were some problems with the heating. Grisha basically kept the door shut and told him he had no problems in this apartment, and didn't need any repairs. There was no doubt in Grisha's mind this was a KGB operative who had seen us enter the building and was trying to determine the extent of the meeting. But the KGB agent didn't force the issue. Grisha said later, if the agent felt he had the goods on you, he would have forced the issue and arrested everyone. Clearly I saw the hand of the Rebbe in protecting us."

Before the fellas left Leningrad (within a year or two, Yitzchak Kogan and Grisha Wasserman separately had more than 100 refuseniks in their Leningrad networks of *shiurim*), on Sunday, *Elul* 26, they marked down in their notes what Wasserman told them: "There is a great need for vitamins for children, solid as well as liquid vitamins for very young children, and vitamins and iron pills for pregnant and nursing mothers."

But let's go for a side trip now following the car driven by Izzy Kogan and the fellas. Of course, you'd like to know where we're going. Anyway, it's no big secret now, but back in 1984 it was surely one. In the middle of the night, in a car that smelled like a butcher shop (because Kogan used his car to transport *kosher* meat), the three men drove to the town of Lubavitch, as in its literal meaning, "Town of Love." What did they hope to see? "Nothing, there was nothing there," said Sholom Ber. "At that time there was nothing but farm area, except for the mass grave outside Lubavitch where many Jews who were murdered lie dead. Dead, did I say? They will come alive again when the Messiah comes. It was a nostalgic kind of thing more than anything else. There were no Jews living there. I tell you, going back then to our Lubavitch birthplace was quite emotional.

"Divine visions of all the Lubavitcher *Rebbeim* danced in front of our eyes. Even in Lubavitch my mind's eye took me back to Leningrad, when we stood on the turf where the Alter Rebbe was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress on an island, and we saw the Nieva river there, and across the other side, the Tainy Soviet (Secret Chamber of Council) building, and we visualized the Alter Rebbe being transported from the

prison to the Tainy Soviet building, for interrogation. And in the middle of the transporting, it was one of those nights in Leningrad, which, if you're familiar with that part of the world, I need not tell you, Leningrad is mostly cloudy because it is over a lot of water. On that night, amazingly, the Alter Rebbe beheld a clear night. It was the right time of the month for him to recite the Benediction of the New Moon (*Kiddush Levanah*). He asked the captain of the little ferry to please stop, because, according to *Halachah*, one has to stand in one place when saying such prayers. The captain refused. Why should he listen to a prisoner? Thereupon, the Rebbe said that, should he wish, he could stop the ferry by himself. When the ferry caption still refused, the ferry stopped on its own, and the Rebbe recited verses from Psalm 148, which precedes the Benediction, but not further. Then the ferry again continued on its short journey—the captain in awe with what he had just witnessed. Shortly the Alter Rebbe again asked the captain to stop the ferry. This time, perhaps realizing the extraordinary power of the holy man he had aboard his boat, the captain asked for—actually he demanded—a reward to stop the boat. As the story is handed down from the Previous Rebbe to us, the Alter Rebbe gave the captain a blessing written on a piece of paper in his own handwriting. The captain then stopped the ferry, and the Alter Rebbe recited the *Kiddush Levanah*. For many years, the Previous Rebbe wondered why the Alter Rebbe simply didn't stop the boat on his own. He had that power. Instead, the Alter Rebbe asked the captain... One day a Divine realization came to the Previous Rebbe: The event indicated a very basic concept of worship. It had to be that way and only that way, for one is to fulfill the commandments as they are vested within the laws and modes of nature, and not by supernatural means.

"In Lubavitch, I could see the Mitteler Rebbe [Rabbi Dov Ber Schneersohn of Lubavitch, the Second Lubavitcher Rebbe, {1774-1827], smiling at a young *chassid* he was facing for the first time. He told him to study two holy books, the *Tanya*, written by his father the Alter Rebbe, and the *Imrai Binah*, which he himself had written. After the *chassid* had studied these two books within a year's time, he returned to the Mitteler Rebbe to get answers to the questions he had about the *Imrai Binah*.' Sholom Ber well recalled the words the Mitteler Rebbe then said to the young *chassid*: 'I did not write the *Imrai Binah* in the same way my father wrote his *Tanya*. My father labored over every *vov*, which I did not do in the *Imrai Binah*.' He then advised the *chassid* "to go back and learn it again, a third time, a fourth time, and a fifth time. 'Then you will understand.'"

And to these three visitors to the hallowed town of Lubavitch, the whiffs of the Garden of Eden filled the night air. It is always that same sweet air from the Garden wherever *tzaddikim* lived or are interred. As they drove by the wooden bridge over the Berezina River, one of the fellas told Izzy Kogan of another time, another place, about another chassidic rebbe (the Sanzer Rebbe, Chaim of Sanz, 1793-1876). "I once heard this from someone, who heard it from someone else, or had read that Aaron of Zhitomir [died 1816], a disciple of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev [a leading chassidic rebbe, 1740-1810], had given it over to others," said the fella—which is often how authentic chassidic stories begin.

"As I heard it, On his travels, Reb Chaim of Sanz once passed through a remote

little village called Makali. He suddenly asked the wagon-driver to halt; then the Sanzer Rebbe climbed down, entered the inn that stood nearby, and asked if there were any old men or women on the premises. The innkeeper's mother was 90 years old, and when she was brought to see the distinguished guest, he asked her: 'Do you recall any *tzaddik* ever having stayed in this inn?'

"The old woman recounted that once Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev had passed through their village on his way to Hungary, and had spent two weeks in this very inn.

"Reb Chaim turned to his *chassidim* and said, 'As we passed by, I felt the aroma of a *tzaddik*, yet how could it have reached here? Yet after what I heard this moment from this old woman, there is no longer anything surprising about it."

Yes, for the fellas the town of Lubavitch held fond memories and Divine thoughts, but, speaking personally, Leningrad held an even more special sentiment. There his father, Yisroel Shimon Kalmanson, got married. "If you see a photo of the Rebbe's *kaporos*," said Sholom Ber, "you'll also spot my father in the picture. He is the Rebbe's *shochet*. And I'm proud to say, on *Pesach*, the Rebbe drank only my father's wine."

Another memory flits by the *shaliach* from Cincinnati. "My father didn't know I was going to Russia, so when I arrived in New York, he asked me what I was doing there (he lives in Crown Heights) and when I told him he was flabbergasted and nervous. 'Please,' he begged me, 'don't tell anybody your name is Kalmanson.' Ah, my beloved father! To him the KGB was still waiting for him. Today 50 years later out of living Russia, my father still wakes up from nightmares about the KGB. After he got over the initial shock of my going to Russia, he gave me a full description of where he lived and the yeshiva over there, and exactly where he got married. I found everything in Leningrad, including the room he lived in."

There was so much more to Heber and Kalmanson's trip, and if you're in Cincinnati and can read Hebrew, drop in to Sholom Ber's Chabad House, and after you pray and have a good meal, ask him to browse through his manuscript. Be sure to sit down in an easy chair and recall your own freedom as a human being. Then, thank G-d you're sitting in that easy chair, as the manuscript undoubtedly will carry you right into the oppressive days of Soviet Russia, when there was no freedom for Jews—except for the Lubavitcher Jews and Orthodox *baalei teshuva* men and women who spent their time underground and put their trust and faith in the Rebbe, that he'd deliver them from bondage. Are these words too much? Not as far as the fellas are concerned.

In another time, Isaac Leibush Peretz, the Polish-Yiddish writer (1852-1915), penned these words:

"Life means: having divine imagination and in a certain measure divine will to carry what is imagined into effect, to change the environment to accord with the imagination, creating new forms—a partner in the work of Creation!

"I live—therefore, I have a divine spark in me; all who live have it—and I feel that all lives!"

In still another time, this is how the fellas came to Russia and helped steer the silent Lubavitcher revolution towards new forms, toward changing the repressive Soviet environment to accord with Jewish imagination, to be emissaries of the Rebbe as they went about their work there, knowing full well that the Rebbe's blessing on them was

in full effect. Oh, you don't want to believe that? Nor that the Rebbe's blessing eventually helped topple the Evil Empire? Then you don't really grasp the true meaning of street smarts.

Based on the evidence and experience of the fellas, inside Russia, the Rebbe's blessing worked from the beginning to the end of the spy trip, both on arrival and departure, and awe-inspiring points in between. Although the fellas officially recorded at customs that they were bringing in cameras, tape recorders and books, on arrival, they came up empty, on departure—obviously because they gave them to refuseniks. Yet customs officials, knowing this or not caring, passed the empty-handed, but never empty-headed fellas through to their plane to America, without even as much as a haughty look. "I mean, Shmuel and I prepared reasons galore for those Russkies, but, the bottom line is, nobody asked anything. We left and we got out very simple and very easy. We definitely marveled at the fact that we saw so openly the Rebbe's blessing."

It was this kind of "street smarts" that every Lubavitcher emissary sent to Russia, after the initial entry of Rabbi Shmuel Heber and Rabbi Sholom Ber Kalmanson, learned to use to help their fellow Russian brethren.

And to think it all began with that famous meeting between the Rebbe and Reb Mendel Futerfas!

A Secret of the Rebbe

In 1962, with the Cuban Missile Crisis upon us, nuclear war was looming over the whole world. U.S. President John Kennedy warned the U.S.S.R. to remove the missiles from Cuba, but Khrushchev said he wouldn't back down. Those who remember those days recall the kind of fear that gripped everybody. Rabbis and other great leaders in Israel, in the holy land and throughout the world, announced an international fast day and other such announcements. The U.S. army was put on high alert for the first time in many years. A fleet of the Russian navy steamed towards Cuba. Suddenly, when least expected, Khrushchev sent a letter to Bertrand Russell, an English philosopher, in which he stated that the U.S.S.R. was not going to follow through in this madness and they would not let themselves be sucked into war.

The entire world breathed a sigh of relief. Lubavitchers, those who had followed the responses of the Rebbe, were not surprised. The letter announcement hit the world press sometime near the end of a *Simchas Torah farbrengen* by the Rebbe. Earlier, in the middle of the *farbrengen*, the Rebbe and his followers were singing a happy *niggun*. Suddenly the Rebbe called for silence. Then he said that whoever served in the Israeli army should come up and stand next to him.

The congregation stood with open mouths. No one could understood the sudden request. Still, all those who were on reserve in the Israeli army stood next to the Rebbe, and at the request of the Rebbe, they said, "*lechaim*" (a toast) over little cups of wine. Then they joined in an exciting chassidic dance full of *dveikus* (an ecstatic state of cleaving to G-d). For a half hour, they danced as the Rebbe waved them on. When the Rebbe again spoke, he said it is the will of G-d that "our obligation should go through, you know just the terrible things that should have happened, we should be *yotze*" (become acquitted from an obligation). In this case, the feelings of fear itself would suffice as a *yotze* instead of war. The Rebbe announced that success was at hand and nothing terrible would actually happen. Later, when the crisis ended, Jews everywhere understood that the Rebbe again foresaw the future and helped accomplish a miracle

6

The White Knight of White Nights

O those white nights of yore, when it "was ordained by Providence that Jews should not live in Leningrad, since in the summer months there is no night (the 'White Nights')[1] and consequently it is not possible to define the times for morning and evening prayer."[2]

Yet, only a number of years ago, there was a brave young Russian Jew (let's call him rightly a "white knight of the white nights") who lived in modern-day Leningrad (now S. Petersburg) and helped define the times and character for morning, afternoon and evening prayer for all Jews in that Russian city. Unlike the refuseniks of the 1960-1980s who chose to emigrate to the U.S. and Israel, during that time this Russian Jew heroically remained in his hometown of Leningrad to help his fellow Jews survive. Undaunted by the KGB and local police, he did his holy work in the dark and "white" of night, he did it under the very eyes of Big Brother, and, sometimes, boldly he did it in the city parks, making speeches against tyranny, studying *Chassidus* with a learning partner, or passing on much-needed living supplies from agents of Ezras Achim to refuseniks and their families. Of course, he did it with other fellow Lubavitchers, all white knights, each of them filled with dedication, self-sacrifice, and *ahavas Yisrael*, all men and women volunteered in the secret service of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Often he held *Shabbatons* in his apartment.

This is the story of what this very active white knight did from 1956 through 1991, and by extension we get more than a glimpse of why and how each man and woman chose to work in the super-secret underground service of the Rebbe inside Leningrad. In 1965 (and then again in 1985) the Rebbe had predicted the fall of the Soviet Union, and well prepared was his army of emissaries to start the spiritual Jewish revolution in the U.S.S.R. that would precede the physical revolution there.

In his talks of *Acharon Shel Pesach 5747*, the Rebbe drew another line in the sand: "It is therefore proper for Jews," he said, "to participate in building dwellings in Jerusalem for the Jews from Russia who will soon be coming out. Those that have already been appointed to head this project should do so with great haste and energy, and this should be the main point in their lives from now on."

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1. Sunset begins about midnight or later, which means, daily, there are almost 24 hours of daylight in the summer months.

2. From the article, "St. Petersburg," *Yevreiskaya Entsiklopedia*, Quoting the Rabbi of Keonigberg, Lev Epstein, from his book, Hapardess, 1750.

Physically, Alexander joined his family in 1956, the newest member of a well-educated but not at all religious family, definitely members of the Jewish intelligentsia. Both his father, Michael, o.b.m., and mother, Dasha, o.b.m., taught German—he as deputy dean of the University of Leningrad, she as a professor at the military academy. He also has a ten-year-older brother named Grigory, who still lives in Russia.

Don't blame it on those seemingly endless, restless summery "white nights" of Leningrad, yet it took Alexander eight years, of a new kind of blinding light, to find out he was a Jew—and that was by chance, or better yet, by Divine Providence, for in G-d's world nothing is left to chance.

During his school days, Alexander was subjected, like all Soviet pupils, to the belief in the mummified remains of a past leader. As reported by one American visitor to the Soviet Union in those days, "In place of America's Pledge of Allegiance, Soviet school children begin each day, saying, 'Lenin was, Lenin is, Lenin will be. Down with American imperialism and Zionist racism!"[3]

Specifically in his second grade, Alexander was given a library card for his parents to fill out. In it was a question that his parents were required to answer. "Nationality?" he repeated to himself as he walked home. "I thought we were Russian. So why ask that to a Russian family with a Russian boy in a Russian school? Boy, what silly questions some people ask!" And he put his library card back into his school bag and ran quickly home.

What Alexander didn't realize then was that Jews in Russia were not considered a religion. They were considered an ethnic group. And so, on the way back to the school, curiously he took out the library card and read what his parents had written. Nationality?..."*Yevrei*"—"Jew" in Russian.[4] So he was a Jew. But what's a Jew? he wondered. Later, looking into the Great Soviet Encyclopedia (the *Bolshaya Sovietskaya Entsiklopedia*) his parents had in their home, Alexander learned that Jews are a nation and there is a State of Israel. More, there's a religion called Judaism. Obviously, the Russian encyclopedia omitted the cry of the Russian Jew[5] stung by antisemitism, the

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3. Dr. Eugene Wolchok, *Jacksonville Jewish News*, August/September 1988, p. 22.

4. A common Jewish joke made the rounds in the Soviet Union of the 1980s. It was said then that, in the U.S.S.R., everyone aged 16 and older must have an internal passport. In the year 2000, the Kremlin predicts, a new Soviet passport will be issued to reflect the fact that the ultimate goal of Communism has been achieved. All the 100-plus nationalities of the U.S.S.R. will have been joyously blended into one group—the Soviet people. Thus, the authorities will finally be able to eliminate all references to nationality. The new passport will look like this:

Surname_____ First Name:_____

Father's Name:_____ Date of Birth:_____

Nationality during period of socialist transition: Jewish or non-Jewish (circle one)

5. Russian Jewish poet, Simeon Yakovlevitch Nadson, a sad-fated poet who died at the early age of 20. He lived on ulitsa Petra Lavrona, not far from the first apartment of Alexander Lakshin, on Kirochnoya Saltykova-Shedrina, as well as near the large, four-story building on the corner of Mokhovaya ulitsa and ulitsa Pestelya, with gryphons supporting the second-floor balconies. It was there, from 1924-1927, that the Rebbe Rayatz lived. Together with his closest associates (those whom *chassidim* call "the Rebbe's Court"), they had moved from Rostov-on-Don, where they had been stranded by World War I. For a short time, therefore, Leningrad became something that it had never been before and never became again, the center of Chabad *Chassidism*.

Jewish lad hurting badly, who admits, "I grew up alien to thee, O people outcast,/'Twas not to thee I sang in times of inspiration,/Thy sorrowful oppression; the world of all thy past,/Are alien to me, as is thy education./ And if, as of old, thou wert happy and strong,/And if by the whole world not rejected—/Burning and fired by other dreams along/'Twould not be to greet thee that I'd be infected./But nowadays, 'neath the burden of thy grief/Thou lower'st thy brow, cringing, hoping to outlast,/When the word 'Jew' resounds like the call of 'Stop, Thief!'/In the mouths of the mob to reject the outcast,/When like a pack of hounds, thy foes show their hate,/And tear thee apart and roundly they curse thee,/ Oh then—desperate people, outcast by Fate—/In the ranks of thy fighters, please modestly accept me."[6]

But what did that all mean to a young Russian boy? Was he not both Jewish and Russian? What did he care what they called him? As long as he and his family lived well as Jews and Russians in Leningrad! Why, even his non-Jewish schoolmates in the special school he went to openly criticized others students for making antisemitic remarks. Alexander was protected from his Jewish soul, and it seemed more important to assimilate, to be part of the Soviet Union flag. So far, unlike older Soviet Jews, his vision of life was not clouded by tears.

Unperturbed, he went on to school, with his library card in hand, ready for another school day.

The Six-Day War in 1967 changed a lot for Alexander. At that time, Soviet radio interrupted its broadcast to declare the cessation of diplomatic ties with Israel, repeating this news every other minute for an hour. The next day in all the newspapers (by then Alexander was in the third grade and could read newspapers—well, maybe not the fine print), there were articles lambasting Israel and how it was attacking its peaceful Arab neighbors.

One thing the youngster Alexander remembers very clearly. "I cut out of the newspapers the facts that pertained to military strength of Israel and combined Arab forces and I knew that my deeply felt sympathy toward Israel in that case had to be kept a secret. Into an envelope I put these clippings and hid it in my toy box. Two years later, when I was aged 12, I discovered it there. Many years later, I read an article in a Jewish paper. And O what a world of difference between the Russian and Israeli versions," Alexander shouted as he stood up, walked over to a desk, pulled out a colorful three-ring binder, and said, "Let me read a not-so-recent clipping about the Six-Day War—from the Israeli point of view. Every time I read it, it warms the cockles of my heart, brings tears to my eyes, and reminds me of the Jewish boy I once was, whose body was never in Jerusalem, but whose heart and soul were. So," said Alexander, and then paused to get his bearings on the newspaper article he was about to read. "Mordechai," Alexander said to me, "it's an article by Yossi Rosen, called 'Live from the Western Wall.' Nowadays a television producer, Yossi Rosen recalls broadcasting the liberation of the Temple Mount and Western Wall.

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6. A poem by S. Y. Nadson.

He cites the third of three eyewitness accounts provided to *'Bamahane - IDF* Magazine' by men who took part in the key moments of the Six-Day War, which helped change the course of Jewish, Middle East and world history.

"At the beginning of June 1967, as Israeli forces prepared to confront the Egyptian army, most Army Radio reporters were situated in the south of the country. Those in the regular army and in the reserves were with their units in the field, and each day phoned in reports. I had started working at Army Radio two months earlier. As the newest rookie, I was assigned the 'dirty work' of taking dictation from these reporters. So when the Jordanians began shelling Jerusalem, there was nobody available to report on what was happening in the capital. In spite of my inexperience in the field, I asked to leave for Jerusalem. I envisioned a city under siege, as it had been during the War of Independence, with nobody there to report on what was happening. To my great disappointment, my request was denied, due to a shortage of available vehicles and tape recorders. It was only toward evening that help arrived from an unexpected source. A 23 year old from Holon, by the name of Yossi Velni, presented himself to General Moshe Dayan, and announced that because he had not been drafted, he was requesting to volunteer for Army Radio. He had a Grundig tape recorder and a powerful Triumph motorcycle, and so my problem was solved.

"On the morning of Tuesday, June 6, we raced over the empty roads leading to Jerusalem. Around Ramle, we had to evade a military roadblock, which tried to prevent us from continuing due to Jordanian shelling along the way. We arrived in Jerusalem, and found that the streets were almost empty. In the background, sounds of explosions could be heard. Most of the city's residents were in bomb shelters. In order to be brought up to date, and then to join one of the units fighting in the field, we headed to the Jerusalem regimental headquarters.

"This was on a rooftop several stories high—the Histadrut building on Straus Street. The sight that greeted us could have been taken from a movie. Jerusalem was spread out below us, and beyond it Mount Scopus and the Mount of Olives. Israeli Air Force planes dove relentlessly toward Jordanian posts, and at concentrations of tanks in the area of what is now Ma'aleh Adumim. A bit to our north, we could see the shelling around King Hussein's unfinished palace, next to the police academy. In the south we could watch the battle of Armon Hanatziv.

"Our tape recorder was running nonstop. I described the planes' dives as though it were an Independence Day parade. We located an unmanned switchboard a few floors below us, which we used to pass on the recorded material to the studio in Jaffa. We spent the night on the roof, from which a giant searchlight illuminated the combat area across from us.

"Throughout the morning of Wednesday, June 7, Velni and I were glued to walkie-talkies from which emanated various battle commands. Suddenly we recognized the familiar voice of the commander of the paratroops brigade, Colonel Mordechai 'Motta' Gur, giving orders to the battalion commanders to occupy the Old City:

"'Attention, all battalion commanders! We are sitting on the mountain range that looks down on the Old City, and are about to enter it. The Old City of Jerusalem, which all generations have been dreaming about and striving toward. We will be the first to enter it!'

"'Eitan's tanks are progressing from the left and will enter the Lions Gate. Move! Move to the gate! The final rendezvous will be on the open square above.'

"It was clear that Gur was referring to the open square of the Temple Mount. With us on the roof was General Shlomo Goren, at that time the chief rabbi of the Israeli army. He informed Gur over the walkie-talkie that he was on his way to meet him, so as to be among the first to enter the Old City. Accompanied by his loyal assistant, Rabbi Menahem Hacohen, Goren ran down the dozens of steps. Deciding in a split second, I ran down after him, followed by Velni. It was only in the car that Goren realized he was not alone.

"During a fast drive in the direction of the Mandelbaum Gate, which had served up until then as a crossing point between Jewish and Arab Jerusalem, I told him that we were Army Radio staff members, and that it was our intention to join up with Gur. Upon our entry into Jordanian territory, we were stopped by the paratroopers, who were on their way toward the Old City. We were forbidden to continue by car, since the entire area was under sniper and shell fire. So we left the vehicle and continued quickly on foot. As far as I remember, we were the only ones in the whole area running without helmets or weapons. Goren was armed only with a *shofar* and a Bible, and we carried only a tape recorder and a knapsack filled with batteries and rolls of recording tape.

"We ran, while trying to stay as close as we could to the Old City wall to our right, but exposed to the sniper fire coming from the Mount of Olives on our left. Our mad rush was made even more difficult by the short cord, approximately two meters long, connecting my microphone to the recorder carried by Velni. Not knowing better, I continued to describe into the microphone what was happening in an out-of-breath rush of broken sentences. Today I know that it was precisely my lack of professional experience that contributed more than anything else, to the authentic documentation of the breakthrough into the Old City. As we ran, we passed two lines of paratroopers who were progressing carefully toward the Lions Gate. Goren was determined to get to the head of the line as quickly as possible. At the top of the street leading to the Lions Gate, we passed a still-smoking Jordanian bus. We stopped only at the gate itself, which was blocked by an Israeli Sherman tank which had gotten stuck in the entrance. We climbed over the tank and entered the Old City.

"Now the excitement reached its peak. Goren did not stop blowing the *shofar* and reciting prayers. His enthusiasm infected the soldiers, and from every direction came cries of amen! The paratroopers burst out in song, and I forgot my role as 'objective reporter' and joined them in singing 'Jerusalem of Gold.' We reached the Temple Mount. Deputy Chief of General Staff, General Haim Bar-Lev and head of the Central Command, General Uzi Narkiss, were also on hand. Dozens of soldiers flowed onto the square, and the senior commanders gave short, emotional speeches.

"Narkiss recalled the unsuccessful attempt he led during the War of Independence to liberate the Old City. With great emotion, he finished with the words: 'Never has there been such a thing, for those standing here right now. I am speechless. We all kneel before history.'"

Whether Alexander Lakshin heard this as part of a radio rebroadcast or in a newspaper, he's not quite sure, but not unlike General Narkiss, he too felt speechless,

and his Jewish soul burned on fire—as it is said, "If fire grabbed the wet, what chance have the dry?"[7] The boy's curious mind absorbed precious few Jewish rituals, practiced in his family. Some time in the spring, his parents brought home several boxes of *matzah* that were shipped to their relatives in Velikie Luki (a small town 400 miles south of Leningrad). One night, his mother placed the *matzah* on the table and said, "Tonight is *Pesach*." Sweet-tasting new fruits (maybe not apples with honey, but all kinds of fruits) were served on the Jewish New Year, which curiously, for Alexander, fell in September. And Alexander wanted to know why his mother lit a *yahrtzeit* lamp— "Not a candle, mind you, but a lamp in memory of my grandparents," said Alexander. "I don't remember them. They passed away before I was born." Later these impressions undoubtedly contributed to the process of this young boy who belonged to the second generation of Jews robbed of their heritage by the country they lived in. His Jewish market list continued to go on and on, and still, now (1999) as a Lubavitcher *chassid* living in Crown Heights U.S.A., he remains very inquisitive and reverential of the world of *Yiddishkeit*, and often quotes his Jewish students in Touro College in New York City one of his favorite talmudic lines, "Never depend on a miracle."[8]

One thing, back then as a young boy, really put Alexander to the test. At the time, his uncle, Yosif Kogan, o.b.m., from Velikie Luki (a small town in the northwest of Russia) was staying at the Lakshins' home. Guests were not a rare phenomenon in the two-room space of a shared apartment, which the Lakshins occupied. His parents had numerous relatives from both sides, and cousins, uncles and aunts were always welcome. Besides, Alexander's father, Michael, was an extremely friendly and open person, and quite often he invited many persons of different backgrounds he had met through his job and business trips to visit him.

But Uncle Yosif—his mother's cousin—stood out in many different ways. First of all, Mother Lakshin, an excellent cook and a perfect match to her husband in the *mitzvah* of hospitality, always had doubts how to feed Uncle Yosif. Then, Uncle Yosif ate with a cap on his bald head.

Father Lakshin often asked Uncle Yosif some very strange questions, such as, "Yosif, what month is it now?" And equally strange to Alexander's ears was Uncle Yosif's responses to his father's questions. Yet he was determined to understand these father-uncle exchanges. They seemed meaningful and special, in words he was not yet familiar with. However, often instantly, the conversation changed into Yiddish, which, not uncommon in many other Jewish families in Russia, became the spoken language to discuss issues that were not intended for children to hear.

Another thing Alexander noticed about Uncle Yosif: whenever he was their guest, he disappeared all day every Saturday. But on that morning when Alexander opened the door to the large anteroom of their apartment (which was really big and served as a library and study, too), he saw Uncle Yosif silently standing there, wrapped in a *tallis* and *tefillin* on his left arm and his head. Suddenly Alexander felt embarrassed, almost fearful, and he abruptly shut the door. Never, after that incident, did he ask Uncle Yosif or his father what the white garb or black boxes were for.

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7. *Sefer Eliyahu Rabbah*, ch. 14, ed. Friedmann, p. 65.

8. Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 32a.

Maybe, admitted Alexander, if he himself had been born in another time and had been more exposed to his very religious uncle, he would have felt very different about such important Jewish symbols as *tefillin* and a *tallis*. When later he somewhere read the words of Lithuanian-born Zionist leader David Wolffson—"We have a flag and it is blue and white: the *tallis* with which we wrap ourselves when we pray—that is our symbol"—he beamed with pride and thought warmly of his uncle then standing in the doorway. Now, he'd never slam the door shut, but gratefully hold it open and welcome in his Uncle Yosif—and Judaism. From that day he had a new sense about his Jewishness. The *tefillin*, however, did not come on the day he became a *bar mitzvah* boy. Many years were still to pass before Alexander would lovingly hold his own set of *tefillin*.

Before that, a terrific earache assaulted him, and his mother rushed him off to a doctor—Jewish, of course. When the doctor asked Alexander his D.O.B., he said November 19 (that very day). Mamma Lakshin said, "He is 13 years old today." "Oh," glowed the doctor, "congratulations," and with a special voice, she seemed to blow the number up to heaven as he said "13!" Something happened—who could explain it!—Alexander's earache disappeared and he never had another one again. Speaking of small miracles!

Later that night at the Lakshins' home, during dinner, Father Lakshin tried to explain to his son the meaning of this day. He said that in ancient times, among certain nations, 13 was the age of adulthood.

To which his mother responded, "Why a certain nation! The Jews!"

This was the extent of Alexander Lakshin's *bar mitzvah*.

But he never forgot the "Jews!" And using his time wisely, this budding white knight began to read any book about Judaism he could get his hands on, and—taking a cue from the Baal Shem Tov, who said, "He conceals Himself in His manifestations, and reveals Himself in His concealments," Lakshin even pored over books published by Communist party propaganda that denounced Zionism and Judaism as reactionary ideologies, and he found, "strangely enough, many of those books were written by Jews with clearly Jewish names, containing facts among the almost profane language commenting on those facts. From these books, in the very depths of G-d's concealments," said Lakshin, "I learned about Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, about prayer and the synagogue in Leningrad. I was already 19 when I first decided to go to the Choral Synagogue. But when should I go?" Lakshin pondered for a time.

That he figured out soon, through his short wave radio, specifically, the Voice of America radio network, which had at the time broadcast a program that was called, "A Review of Jewish Communal and Religious Life in the States"—a short program that condensed information about major events in the Jewish calendar. So, one *Simchas Torah*, Lakshin headed to the Choral Synagogue. At the time he was a student of the University of Leningrad, Department of Chemistry, and why he chose that night was because he knew young people in huge numbers went to the synagogue.

But don't think doing that was not fraught with danger. It was. Only a year ago, then, five young Jews, practically graduating seniors from a prestigious technological institute, were expelled for the "terrible crime of going to the synagogue on *Simchas*

Torah." There were KGB informers all around. Pictures were taken. Not only that, the five were also members of Komsomol, the Young Communist League, which was practically mandatory if one wanted to get anywhere in Soviet society. Its membership numbered 100 percent among people aged 14 to 28. Once the five students were expelled from Komsomol they could no longer remain college students. The same axe fell on other Jewish students in the Leningrad Conservatory (the Academy of Music).

Determined to go to the synagogue nonetheless, the youngest pride and hope of the Lakshin family didn't even tell his parents where he was going. "I just told them that I was going for a walk; then, I took a bus headed in the direction of the synagogue. Not exactly certain where the Choral Synagogue was, I was still familiar with its surrounding neighborhood. When I arrived in that area, I walked about the side streets. Suddenly I saw it: the magnificent-looking Choral Synagogue. I knew I was in the right place because a huge crowd was standing outside the building. Everybody was dressed in Parkas and other water-resistant clothing: it was rainy time in good old Leningrad."

It was also not summertime—hence, now in October, by 7 p.m. it was already dark, and in a crowd from their early teens to their early thirties, Lakshin felt safe, anonymous. A few fellows hanging out in the groups were speaking Hebrew. Lakshin saw how difficult it would be to quickly move in or out of the groups, as they stood wall to wall outside the synagogue—like the 60 guards of King Solomon—as it's written, "Behold it is the *mita* [litter, a kind of vehicle carried by people or animals, consisting of a bed or couch, often covered and contained, suspended between shafts] of Solomon; 60 mighty men are around it, of the mighty men of Israel: all girt with swords and expert in war; every man has his sword at his thigh because of the fear in the night" (Song of Songs, 3:8). Suddenly Alexander Lakshin felt safe. Suddenly he could be a Jew. Suddenly he was also one of the 60 guards protecting the "litter" of the Choral Synagogue. Exuberantly, unchallenged, like a newly freed Jewish spirit, he went, from circle to circle, joining in the songs with his limited Yiddish. At once he felt protected and protective—of the Torah, of every Jew on that street, and he felt that peculiar joy a Jew only feels when he's dancing so close to his Torah. "*Simchas Torah* means 'the Torah's joy,' and it is not enough for a Jew to find joy in the Torah, but the Torah should also find joy in him."[9] So close was Alexander Lakshin to the Torah at one point, that he had to be the Torah itself, and at that very point the Torah surely found joy in him!

Finally, at 10 p.m., the crowd dispersed. And later that same year, after his father passed away, Lakshin felt himself suddenly and finally transformed as the Defender of the Faith, or as he thought of himself in Leningrad, idealistically, as the white knight of the white nights. Not quite in the mold and ephemeral ideals of Don Quixote de la Mancha, but more like one of those ever-watchful 60 guards around the litter of King Solomon. Lakshin could tell you, if he were asked, who the first Russian Jew to be ennobled was: "Baron Horace Guenzburg in 1871, while his father, Joseph Yozel Guenzburg was likewise created a baron three years later," said Lakshin, with a bit of Jewish pride.

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9. Russian Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik of Brisk. 1820-1892..

With students being expelled from universities left and right for just being seen near the synagogue, Lakshin kept going to synagogue, first on holidays, then, on weekdays, whereupon he was greeted with mixed feelings by a group of old Jewish men, who concluded at first he was a KGB operative, but then had to admit they needed this Jew for a *minyan* and welcomed him into the fold—somewhat.

"In 1976, it was very unusual for a young man to attend the synagogue especially on weekdays," said Alexander. "One old man, I don't remember his name, was very friendly to me. I told him my father recently passed away. He said, 'Are you saying *Kaddish*?' I said I didn't know what to do. He said, 'I'll give it to you in Russian.' He handed me a paper the size of a business card, with a Russian transliteration of *Kaddish*. He didn't bother to explain to me when or how to say it. He just said I had to say it every day. That I dutifully did. Mostly on my way from and to the State University. I didn't know if *Kaddish* required a *minyan*. I knew nothing. I just hoped that this was the least thing I could do for my father, who was the first man in my life from whom I learned many things I must do for myself. As for my mother, who helped teach me who I am, I thought it best to protect her from knowing about my secret activities."

One night, on Purim in 1978, Alexander arrived late at the synagogue. The worshippers were already headed out of the synagogue and going home. Suddenly, Lakshin spotted a familiar face in a mixed group of male and female students. Seeing Lakshin, that person asked him to join the group. Lakshin heartily agreed. In a moment made ready for the Messiah, when night will become day (Isaiah 30:36) and the primordial light will be restored,[10] Alexander Lakshin had no idea where he was going, but the journey was on!...[11]

The group went to a tram stop and there the students put together whatever money they had, one or two rubles, which was what students normally had at that time. One of them was promptly dispatched to the nearest store to buy wine and candy. Then they boarded a tram and traveled fairly far. If the impressionable Alexander Lakshin had been blindfolded and taken to that location, it would have seemed just as if both his eyes were uncovered and he could see the whole World-to-Come: There, in a packed two-bedroom apartment filled with Jews, he heard words of Torah he had never dreamed of. Said a fellow speaker: "The world is based on three things: on Torah, worship, and loving-kindness" (*Mishnah, Avos* 1:2). Lakshin saw young Jews openly celebrate Purim. One young woman (now married, with two children who attend a yeshiva in Brooklyn) delivered a speech explaining what Purim was. "She sounded like the most knowledgeable person I ever met," said Lakshin. She reminded everyone there that "should all the festivals be abolished, Purim will remain."[12] "That's why,"

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10. *Exodus Rabbah* 18:11.

11. Compare this with another singular and historic (and obviously more important) moment in Jewish history: One Friday afternoon, in the midst of singing with his disciples, the Arizal suddenly said, "My comrades, would you like to come with me now to Jerusalem? and have Shabbat there?" Jerusalem was a long way off. Still, some responded affirmatively at once; others hesitated. "We're ready, Master," they answered, "but let us first tell our wives that we won't be here for Shabbat." Suddenly the Holy Ari looked crest-fallen. He shook and cried out, "Heaven help us! Had you all answered yes yes yes! without any second thoughts, the Jewish people would have been redeemed. But as soon as you hesitated, the moment passed and now the Messiah will not come."—*Shivchei Ari* - "Praises of Arizal," pp. 9b-10a.

12. See *Sefer Hasidim*, 13C, # 1055, p. 267.

chirped up a male student, "on Purim we should drink till we cannot tell the difference between 'Cursed be Haman' and 'Blessed be Mordechai.'"[13]

For Lakshin, that night was full of surprises. Someone else quoted Elie Wiesel: "The Jew cannot be a Jew [in the U.S.S.R.], but neither can he be a non-Jew."[14] "Look, hear what I learned today," shouted someone excitedly from one part of the packed room, "I learned why the Bible begins with the letter *beth*." "Tell us," demanded another. "Because," said the excited one, "just as *beth* is closed on all sides but one, so you may not investigate what is above or below or behind Creation, but only what has been since Creation."[15] An admirer of Lubavitch present there told the audience how the Lubavitcher Rebbe had introduced a special *niggun*, to inspire all Jews to help Russian Jews in the Soviet Union. Another shouted out, "Please teach us the *niggun*." "Gladly," said the man who had his ear close to Lubavitcher matters and who had a fine tenor voice. "The words—'Save your nation, and bless your inheritance; tend them and lift them forever'—come from Psalm 28:9," and then he broke out into song, shortly followed by another 60 soaring voices, all singing as one. Joined together in that one place, if only for that one night, they might have sent every Russian Communist to his own "10 circles of hell."[16] As wrote Chaim Potok, "The Russians never quite knew what to do with their Jews. Autocratic tzars saw the Jews as a problem that could only be solved by assimilation or banishment. But Jews who assimilated were accused of trying to take over the power in the fatherland and Jews who emigrated were regretted as a serious economic loss or labeled as treacherous revolutionaries."[17] While Chaim Potok was safely writing his words thousands of miles away, a voice in the rear of the Leningrad apartment, of the man whose body was sitting on the inside of a window sill, boldly kept shouting out his words: "Mordechai, Mordechai, deliver us on this Purim!" "Amen!" said everyone else. Then the "spotlight" fell on two young men who claimed they were from England, although their English was so tinged with a strong Hebrew accent that Lakshin concluded they had to be from Israel. "I remember," said Lakshin, "these two men staging a contest among us, to see how many Hebrew or Yiddish songs we knew. When nobody else broke out into song, they introduced their own, and that went on like that."

Purim 1978 was the beginning of a magical sleigh ride for Alexander Lakshin. Soon he joined Jewish seminars in Leningrad, which discussed Jewish subjects and Israel in general. Soon he made new Jewish friends. Soon, he met regularly with other Russian Jews to play soccer. Out of all places they picked, the field they chose was in the courtyard of Lavra, which was the largest Russian Orthodox Church in Leningrad and also had a theological seminary. "They had that good field that was not used," beamed Lakshin. "So we played there for a while. All Jews. Boys and men playing

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13. Talmud, *Megillah* 7b.

14. *The Jews of Silence* (1966).

15. Jerusalem Talmud, *Hagigah* 2:1.

16. David Zilberman, Soviet emigre, describing the difficulties and experience encountered by Soviet Jews wishing to emigrate from the Soviet Union, quoted in the *Jerusalem Post*, December 1, 1971.

17. *Wanderings* (1978).

soccer. Talk about taking a non-Jewish area and making it holy for Jews—we did it with that Russian Orthodox field!"[18]

At the end of that year, Alex Kott, one of the first *baalei teshuva* in Leningrad, approached Alexander with an offer to join a discussion group in a private apartment. Both Kott and Lakshin had the same first name and were practically the same age: 22. "Well, maybe Kott was 23," said Alexander, but we had a lot in common, except that he had his own room—an unusual situation for such a young man—in a shared apartment: his parents lived out of town."

The *shiur* was set for *Shabbat*, on Friday night. Ten persons showed up. The only young woman there lit *Shabbat* candles for everyone. Recalling that, Alexander broke out into a kind of awkward laugh and shrugged his shoulders. "It was well after sunset, but we didn't know any better. Looking back I can say we knew nothing or next to nothing. None of us knew Hebrew. We had a Russian translation of *Chumash*. All we did was read and discussed parts. Everyone could state his opinion freely. Nobody was drunk, but we might as well have been: we were on such a spiritual high that hardly anybody in that room could tell the difference between 'Cursed be Haman' and 'Blessed be Mordechai.' Still we were becoming more Jewish every other inch.

"Surprisingly later," Alexander grinned, "I discovered many of the things that we suggested as explanations, some of them word for word, coincided with the writings of Rashi or the Rambam, which we came to learn much later. There I saw a clear *Ruach Hakodesh*—a Divine spirit— that dwelled with us. And as we progressed in our Jewish studies, we changed. One of the first changes we effected was transferring the *shiur* from Friday night to Saturday night; some people wanted to take notes and we already knew we couldn't write on *Shabbat*. Eventually the non-*kosher* dishes and knives disappeared from the table. We learned how to say '*Shema Yisroel.*'"

For a time Lakshin's group sought no outside speakers as they didn't want any ties with the established Jewish underground. But then they decided to invite a speaker. His name was Grisha Wasserman. Thirty-something, he had a beard and wore a *yarmulke* over a balding head; his speech was laced with humor. Yet he spoke about serious things. "He electrified me, set my Jewish soul on fire. I've never forgotten that man."

In the spring of 1979, when Alexander graduated from the university, he ceased going to the seminar for personal reasons. Yet, later, he was reminded about the seminar in a blunt way. In October of that year, he got an offer from the university to work there. He had no trouble in this regard as he had remained as a Jew, in the closet, never applying to leave the Soviet Union. One day, as he was working on research in organic chemistry, he received a phone call from the secretary of his departmental director, who told him that Yuri (the director's first name) wanted to see him on such a day at such a time.

At the appointed time, Lakshin showed up at the office. Right away, the secretary

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18. Although playing on this field obviously would not be acceptable behavior for Orthodox Jews (as the field was part of an extant church), it is understandable that this group of soccer-playing Russian Jews, with their so-far limited knowledge of Yiddishkeit, chose to play on this field as a band of Jews growing —very very slowly! —in *Yiddishkeit* together.

announced that the director was not there. "My gut feeling told me," said Alexander, "it was not he who wanted to speak to me," said Alexander. "Something else was up."

A few minutes later, a stranger entered the outer office and walked directly into the director's office, followed by the secretary. A moment later, the secretary came out of the inner office and paged Lakshin. "Sasha [Russian nickname for Alexander], this gentleman wants to speak with you."

The secretary, with an uncomfortable look on her face, ushered Alexander into the director's office. Seated at the director's desk, as if he had always been the boss himself, was the stranger. Up and down, Lakshin eyed him—as the stranger at the desk in turn took the measure of Lakshin.

Right away the stranger—by now Lakshin realized he came face to face with a dreaded KGB operative—produced a little red document from his pocket. The letters of KGB flew into Alexander's eyes, and the document was flashed in such a way that Lakshin couldn't read the man's name. Finally, he did reveal his name, and said he wanted to speak with Alexander. About what? About a friend of Alexander, "who is of interest to my organization," he said. Who? Alex Kott—in whose apartment those gatherings were held. And what did he want of Lakshin? The KGB man said he was in need of objective, unbiased information about Kott, and, naturally, he said in his soft-spoken voice, "We don't want to get it from outsiders, who are prejudiced and biased against Jews. I'd like to know your opinion about Jewish culture and the position of Jews in the Soviet Union." Of course, that was just the beginning. He had a long dirty list of questions to ask Alexander. His goal, it quickly became apparent after two or three meetings, was to get information about other people. "I mean, you couldn't tell a KGB man to mind his own business. You couldn't say, 'I don't want to talk to you.'" Lakshin was beside himself with such anxious thoughts.

Notwithstanding the threats or consequences, that night Lakshin went to a street pay phone and asked someone, a young lady passing by, to dial a number for him. "Please ask for Mrs. Kott," he said. Giving Lakshin a funny look—"Maybe, G-d forbid, she thought I was having an affair with a married woman"—she dialed the number. When Mrs. Kott answered the phone, she handed him the phone and abruptly walked on.

Mrs. Kott was the very young woman who had lit candles every *Shabbat* at the *shiur* in Alex Kott's apartment. Now the two were happily married, and Lakshin's phone call was designed to help them keep their marriage that way.

When Lakshin had Mrs. Kott's ear, he said, "I hope you recognize my voice." Yes, she said. "Well, Mrs. Kott, I've something very important to tell you." Shortly thereafter the two friends met on a agreed-upon street. He told her that the KGB is after them. Mrs. Kott said she and her husband already knew that. Lakshin promised her he'd keep them further informed of anything he himself picked up.

After successive meetings, the KGB man became less soft-spoken and more demanding. "He said to me—one time we agreed to meet on the street: 'We understand that you are a young man at the beginning of your career and you probably want to complete your Ph.D. thesis. We understand that your salary is low and you probably want to succeed in spite of any obstacles..."

Like the good soldier-white knight Lakshin was, and would become, when

confronted with the enemy, he offered his name, rank and serial number, with a few private opinions he held, but no discussing other people, he clearly, if not bluntly, told the KGB man, who was growing increasingly frustrated with his answers by then. At one point, the KGB, perhaps knowing it was senseless to pursue the matter with Alexander, yet encouraged enough by all the other Jewish informers they already had on their payroll, finally put it straight to Lakshin: the KGB wanted to hire him as an informer. For all the good that would have done the KGB, they might have offered to hire him as a rock star. With his heart and soul deep in Jewish causes, Lakshin already knew what he wanted to be, and no promises or threats from the KGB would ever change that.

In the spring of 1980, Lakshin got another phone call from the director's office, asking him to report to the so-called "First Department." First Department was a code word for the KGB office that existed in every university, big plant, factory, etc.

"I have to work with my students. I'm conducting a seminar," gently protested Lakshin.

Never mind, he was told. Somebody else would take care of his duties for that time. So, unable to get out of it, he went to the First Department in the main building. "At any time it was a scary venture," he said, gritting his teeth. The First Department had double doors, completely covered with soundproof material. After he went through the first door, it locked behind him, and only then did the second door open. Through a tiny window a person asked him for his ID. After a vacant look from the person, he was let in. Inside, he was confronted by three persons: his "case worker" (the man who had met with Lakshin many times), the First Department Chief of the University, and his case worker's boss. The University KGB man introduced Lakshin to the other two and left. The case worker's boss did the talking to Lakshin while the First Department Chief sat in the corner on one side of Lakshin, and took mental notes, with a grimacing sometimes menacing look on his face. (Lakshin suspected they had a hidden tape recorder somewhere in the room). The tone of the boss was harsh. It was obvious the niceties were over, and they intended to get right down to the business of spying for them. "Lakshin, you are offering us information that is of no interest to us. At the same time you are associating with people—those so-called refuseniks—who apply for emigration visas to go to the enemy state of Israel. At this point we want to know if you are a Soviet Citizen in your heart?"

"Yes," Lakshin said half-heartedly.

"Okay," said the boss. "We shall see how you act."

They let Lakshin go. Two weeks later, a white car abruptly stopped at a street curb, where Lakshin was waiting to cross the street. In a wink of an eye, his case worker popped out of the car and confronted the white knight. "Alexander, get inside." His gesture was such that indicated that if Lakshin chose to ignore him, he would be pushed into the car. As he got in, Lakshin checked his watch and looked at the street names of the intersection, wondering if it would be the last time he saw daylight for a long time. Once in the car, he found himself flanked by two very large men, in the back of the car. Up front was the case worker's boss, and the case worker himself, who, once he got in the car, drove off.

They came to a stop behind the Artillery Museum, which was designed in the form of military fort: a red brick wall with no windows except for holes for the guns.

The boss then turned to Lakshin and apologized for the necessity of talking to him in a car, "but you seem to be avoiding us. Let's put things straight. We are military people. The government pays us huge salaries. We're not allowed to waste our time and we are wasting our time with you for a half a year already. At this point you must tell us, will you cooperate and work for us?"

Lakshin knew this "Only in Russia" moment had come in his life as a Jew in Leningrad. He was prepared. There was no exit from that. "Each of us who would join any kind of Jewish activity was prepared for that sooner or later. Still, I paused for a second. Not that I ever believed I could do that. I couldn't go to a person's house as a welcomed guest and spy on him. That was not right. I couldn't. But I couldn't figure out how to say no and get away with it. My biggest concern was my mother. I could take lumps, but what might they do to her if I said no? I was scared to death for her. She belonged to the previous generation, of Stalin's days, when the KGB terrified, menaced, threatened, incarcerated, tortured, and murdered."

But Lakshin had also prepared for this day in a different way. "One thing I learned quickly and well: If you're scared of something, don't let them know it. As for losing my job, I was prepared for that too. As much as I loved chemistry, it was only a job that was at stake. They could not erase the contents of my mind—or at least were not at that time prepared to do so. Quickly in my head I figured out that, with my low salary as an engineer, I could probably make out anywhere else."

With the two big men squeezing him like a Big Mac sandwich in the back seat, Lakshin finally gave them his answer.

"No."

One of the big guys stepped out of the car and held the car door open. The boss said in a gruff voice, "Get out of here quick."

With his 6'1" frame sucked in, Lakshin asked, *chutzpadic*, "I know that you are a powerful organization. I informed you about my interest in Jewish culture that brought me to these meetings, and I still believe it isn't a crime in our country to learn about one's culture. If you feel it is a crime, I am at your mercy and you can do whatever to me. Yet, could you just tell me what is going to happen now?"

Genuinely the boss was shocked by Lakshin's *chutzpa*. "Listen." he said, "we are not an educational institute. Our job is to protect the state and punish its enemies. As for you, you have a party organization at work, a trade union organization at work; it's their job to provide you with political education. Get out!"

Surprisingly, nothing happened to Alexander Lakshin. Yet, in 1980, approximately two months after he bluntly refused to be an informer, the Kott family was notified they had seven days to leave the country. That was before the 1980 Moscow Olympics. The Russian government wanted to get rid of many refuseniks who were potential troublemakers. They expected a huge flow of tourists. So the Kotts were one of those who were kicked out at that time. Subsequently, for two years, Lakshin had almost no contact with Jewish life in the city except for occasionally going to the synagogue.

In other ways, life went into the slow lane for Lakshin. For 10 more years he worked at the university. "I think, with one notable exception," he said, " I probably

was the only person at work who never got a single raise or promotion. I worked as good as anyone else. I published articles. I thoroughly and accurately researched my Ph.D. thesis, but I never got ahead. Still, I accepted that as the least possible evil."

In 1982, Alexander Lakshin attended a non-Jewish friend's wedding at a non-*kosher* restaurant. By then, Alexander had attempted to eat food as close as possible to what he considered *kosher* food. At that time, for a person who was not connected to a *shochet*, it meant to give up meat entirely. For three years, Alexander was a vegetarian. As many Russians were into all kind of diets, Alexander's special food plan drew no suspicion. However, as soon as he sat down at a table, he spotted, seated at a nearby table, a person with a black kippa on his head. On his plate was a cut cucumber. Beside that stood a glass of vodka. As Lakshin saw him, he was mumbling something. The prayers for cucumbers and vodka? wondered Lakshin. But then maybe not. Leonid couldn't have changed that much.

Lakshin was thinking of the very young man he had known, through mutual friends, since their school days. His name was Leonid, but his Hebrew name was Elimelech Rochlin. At the wedding they exchanged phone numbers and met a couple of times.

During one of their walks, Lakshin asked him, now a fully observant Jew, a natural enough question: "How did you come to all this?" Taking something out of his pocket, he gave Lakshin a *yarmulke*—his first ever. (The thrilled Lakshin kept that *yarmulke* in his pocket for the times every day when he said the *Shema*.) Instead of answering Lakshin directly, Elimelech said, "Come Friday night to my apartment. Come cling to good neighbors."[19]

"I remember that Friday night very well. It was November 4, 1982. His apartment was in one of the new neighborhoods near a huge recreation park in Leningrad, about four miles from the center of the city."

There, Lakshin found a group of young Jews his age, who were not dreaming of living Jewish life—they were living it! Candles were lit by Elimelech's wife. *Kiddush* was said. Jewish songs, *zemiros*, were sung at the *Shabbat* table. Everybody discussed the weekly *parsha*. The words—"The lamp is lit, and sorrows flit"[20] ..."Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy"[21]..."In love and favor Thou hast given us Thy Holy Sabbath as an inheritance, a memorial of the Creation...in remembrance of the departure from Egypt"[22]..."More than Israel kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel"[23]—and the joys—"The tumult of my heart is stilled/For thou art come, *Shabbat* my love!"[24] "Who worships on *Shabbat* eve is as God's partner in Creation"[25]—this was the *Shabbat* that enveloped and caressed him as he had never been touched before in his

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19. A paraphrase of *Mishnah*, Avos 2.9.

20. Quoted by I. Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (Macmillan/Jewish Publication Society of America, 1896).

21. Bible, Exodus 20:8; compare with Deuteronomy 5:12.

22. Part of the Kiddush.

23. Abaye, Talmud, *Sabbath* 119b.

24. Judah Halevi, tr. Solis-Cohen.

25. Talmud, *Sabbath* 119b.

whole life. "What also moved me that night were the people all seated at table who were my age. Until then I had images of *Shabbat* of my uncle Yosif and his elderly friends, all well in their eighties. *Shabbat*, I had thought, was a nice time although practiced by a few old people. How wrong I was! Friday night was my *Shabbat*, too."

That night—who knew!—he walked, skipped, leaped, ran, all without ever touching the sidewalks of Leningrad. "Every Friday afternoon I tried to finish early because *Shabbat* in Leningrad starts early in winter, around 4 or 5 o'clock. I left my briefcase and everything else in my university office and walked home. Fortunately for me, my mother was working a different shift, Friday nights, at that time. She had retired, but, to supplement her income and to keep her busy after my father's passing away, she took a low-paying job that allowed her to keep her pension. So I didn't have to explain why I came home late every Friday night."

At the *shiurim*, Lakshin met rabbis from abroad. Never did he ask their names because the less he knew, he was convinced, the safer he felt. "I remember their giving a *shiur* in Hebrew. I didn't speak Hebrew at that time. So, I asked them, 'Will you please continue in English.' Both were surprised at my fluent English. They then encouraged me to translate their talk into Russian for the other *shiur* participants."

But then, after the *shiur*, came the afternoon prayer, and Lakshin felt at a loss. Everyone else stood facing the wall to pray but Lakshin didn't join them. "Why don't you pray?" the rabbi asked Lakshin. He did not know how, answered Lakshin. "Ah!" said the rabbi. "G-d understands every language; for Him it doesn't matter. Speak in English." Now it was Lakshin's turn to say ah! He picked up the bi-lingual prayer book, *Tehillas Hashem*, and began. Even in English, what with all those strange-sounding words tripping off his tongue, it took him about 20 minutes to complete, but complete it he did, with the bursting pride of a young Jewish boy saying his first prayer under the approving sky of heaven. "I remember feeling that I was really communicating. I was really talking to *Hashem*. So I became part of that group." All of them, except for me, had established themselves as refuseniks by the early '80s. Everyone knew how hard it was to leave Russia. The war was going on in Afghanistan, and the Russian government temporarily severed many of its ties with the West, and vice versa. Refuseniks were no longer a trade commodity, as a political ploy for the West to gain their freedom. Finally, Elimelech Rochlin got permission to leave. For personal reasons, he divorced his wife, and left Russia. His wife remarried and her new husband, Mordechai Yudborovski, eventually became my teacher; it was he who introduced me to Yitzchak Kogan."

If that name rings a bell, you should also know that Yitzchak Kogan was one of the most famous white knights in Leningrad. The Kogans were well known in Jewish circles outside that city. Kogan's wife Sofia's English was excellent and Yitzchak had been steadfastly teaching himself English. Sosya (Sofia's Hebrew name) spoke Hebrew, but was very shy. The Kogans kept an open house for both refuseniks and foreign visitors. The only request Sosya had was that if people phoned to come, they shouldn't set a specific time to meet because they ran the risk of being intercepted (it had happened) by the KGB. Having a car allowed the Kogans to travel, and by then Izzy's beard was very long. Sosya Kogan was a fountain of information—herself

maintaining an excellent grapevine and, according to other refuseniks, through the excellent connections the Kogans had established within the Jewish community, especially their ties to the underground religious educational world of Lubavitch.

Now things were getting very interesting. Lakshin learned quickly, if the Lubavitcher Rebbe has a fire for every pot, he, Alexander Lakshin, through the help of Yitzchak Kogan, was about to become a new pot boiler.

Once before, Kogan and Lakshin had met—during Yom Kippur of 1983. Now, in 1985, they met again, this time both more advanced in their *Yiddishkeit*. That winter of 1984-1985 had been a terrible time in Lakshin's life. In November 1984 his older cousin passed away unexpectedly. That was a terrible loss for the close-knit family. Two weeks later, his nephew Boris from Kishenev, Moldova, a young man, started bleeding internally, spent 40 long days in a coma, and died in January. When Lakshin returned home after the funeral, he was told his mother was at another uncle's home. Rushing there, he found out that this uncle had a brain stroke and was taken to the hospital. His only daughter, Lakshin's married cousin (by that time she had been living in the States for five years), kept phoning the Lakshins every day to find out what was going on with her dad. She wanted to return to the Soviet Union to visit her father, but the Russian Embassy kept turning down her request. It was very sad, and nobody could or would help. "Within 10 days my uncle, may he rest in peace, passed away. Sitting next to him in the hospital, I literally saw his last breath."

But those dreadful and trying 10 days were also a boon to Lakshin's Jewish education and faith. By then he knew that there was a Lubavitcher Rebbe and Yitzchak Kogan's Lubavitcher connection to the Rebbe. So, desperate to help save his uncle's life, Lakshin went to Kogan's apartment, to seek the Rebbe's blessing. There he met two visiting *shluchim* (our famous street smart fellas, Rabbis Shmuel Heber and Sholom Ber Kalmanson, mentioned in an earlier chapter), whom he told about his uncle's plight, and asked them to contact the Rebbe. They said they'd try, but it would not be easy to phone New York from Russia at that time. "You know," Heber reminded Lakshin, "you just can't dial a number and make an automatic connection. You have to place an order and wait, sometimes for days."

"I know," shrugged Lakshin, beside himself with grief.

The *shluchim* told Lakshin they'd do their best. "In the meantime," said Kalmanson, "may I tell you that the moment a *chassid* thinks about asking something of the Rebbe, his thought has already traveled to the Rebbe." Then, Heber wanted to know if there was a *mezuzah* on the uncle's apartment door. No, replied Lakshin. Heber gave Lakshin two *mezuzahs*, saying, "Take one to his bedside and," instructing Lakshin, "say certain Psalms there. The other one, affix to his apartment door. Don't hesitate a moment to do this."

Off Lakshin went to his uncle's apartment and affixed the *mezuzah*. His aunt, who watched Lakshin nail the *mezuzah* to the doorpost, was not at all surprised. She knew what it was, and readily agreed to putting it up. Two days later, her husband, Lakshin's uncle, passed away. In his grief Lakshin confided in Izzy Kogan. "Why did he die? The Rebbe must have received my plea before that. Why?"

The two *chassidim* hugged. There was no further need to explain why his uncle

died. Truth is, because he lived. And now Lakshin determined more than ever to live, as a Jew helping other Jews in Leningrad—or what's a white knight of the white nights for!

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Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky all spent time in Siberian exile. The lesson they learned was not that sentencing their political enemies and Jews to Arctic prison camps called gulags was wrong, but that they should make sure that their enemies never returned from Siberia alive.

Many Jews found ways to avoid that fate, but they often suffered worse fates living as hated people,[26] in big Soviet cities where they could openly be singled out and discriminated against,[27] and sometimes tortured in places like the so-called Bolshoi Dom ("the Big House," a nickname for the KGB headquarters in Leningrad) and another centrally located functioning jail called Kresty ("Crosses," due to the shape of the iron gates installed in its windows).

One Jew who always managed to live the kind of decent life that Jews in the U.S.S.R. could hope for was Alexander's beloved mother, Dasha. She had always been a source of great strength for both her sons. "From our mother we learned who we are," Grigory often reminded his younger brother, Alexander. But now something physically was very wrong with her. She began to complain of nagging headaches. Very concerned about her frail condition, the Lakshin brothers sent her to an affordable spa for rest. But three days later Lakshin came home from work and found two emergency telegrams.

"Come immediately! Your mother is not feeling well," they read. By the time they reached the airport the next day, the brothers received word of her passing. "We flew to pick her up and return her to Leningrad for burial," said Lakshin. "There, at the funeral I said *Kaddish* at her grave, clear and loud, without any embarrassment or hesitation. Then, for a year, I went to synagogue. I didn't care who was watching me. I

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26. "What I saw around me [was] that the common folks do hate Jews, period. You go to the store and stand in line; someone cuts in the line and you speak up...the response is, 'And what do you want, you kike, you Jew.... Go to your Israel.' And that's constantly in the streets."—Leonard Slepak, refusenik who was released by the Soviet authorities years before his parents, Vladimir and Masha Slepak, A Refusenik Diary, documentary, 1988. Also quoted in Two Jews, Three Opinions, eds. Sandee Brawarsky and Deborah Mark (New York: Berkley Publishing, 1998), p. 484. Also, said Rachel Rapaport, "We didn't come here [Israel]...for the luxuries...If we could survive the war [World War II] in the Soviet Union, we could survive any hardship. What we couldn't take was the constant pain you feel inside when you are insulted as a Jew."—A retired surgeon from Leningrad and recent emigree to Israel, quoted in *U.S. News and World Report*, May 7, 1990.

27. In the Russian Empire during the 19th and 20th centuries, mass beatings and murders of Jews were so successful that a word, pogrom, was coined to describe such incidents. And these pogroms were viewed by their antisemitic perpetrators as being of such significance that they were equated with the saving of Russia... The Russian expression is, "Byay Zhidov Spassai Rossiyu" ("Beat the Zihds and save Russia"). This phrase is so well known among the Russians that Yevgeny Yevtushenko quoted it in his most famous poem, "Babi Yar," written in protest against contemporary Soviet antisemitism.... "Soviet antisemitism is a reaction against every component of Judaism."—Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *Why The Jews?* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1983), pp. 18, 38, 200.

More ongoing antisemitism from Russia (December 25, 1998, *The Jewish Press*, p. 58): "A Russian prosecutor said he is investigat-ing whether a recent comment made by a Communist lawmaker that Jews in President Boris Yeltsin's inner circle are responsible for the 'genocide' of ethnic Russians is a prosecutable offense. The controversy over Viktor Hyunkhin's comment comes weeks after another Communist lawmaker, General Albert Makashov, also made several public antisemitic remarks. The Russian Parliament has rejected the motions to censure the lawmakers for their remarks.

knew I had to do it, and I did it. My connection with Izzy [Kogan] grew stronger. He invited me for *Shabbat*. I just couldn't stay alone in my 'large' apartment that I inherited from my parents. My brother Grigory lived separately, elsewhere. So on *Shabbat* I went to Izzy's apartment. By that time, my *mashpia* Mordechai Yudborovski had emigrated to Israel."

Lakshin once confided to his mother how much he loved her and needed her. "What will happen to me when you pass away?" he plaintively asked her.

"Alexander, even more so shall I be with you, in your heart and soul."

"And in my mind, too, Mother."

"Yes, there too, and you'll always remember the things I've said to you."

From then on, that became a great comfort in Lakshin's life. From then on, Lakshin devoted himself to his Creator and his religion, always trying to honor his parents in everything he did. He kept the Sabbath and strengthened his *kashrus*.

"In *kashrus*," said Lakshin, "it was easier as long as you didn't crave for much meat and was satisfied with one chicken a month, cutting it into four pieces to have one piece every *Shabbat*. Vegetables were available.

"*Shabbat* in Russia was a separate issue. In summer it was not a problem, but in winter when *Shabbat* started at 4 o'clock and your workday ended at 5 or 5:30 p.m., you just couldn't tell your boss, as you can do in America, 'I am a religious Jew. I must leave.' The minute you said that, you might as well say, 'You can't fire me—I quit,' because you'd no longer have a job. In honoring the *Shabbat* during that hour at work, then, I tried to prepare myself and just sit there, leafing through my records or magazines, which were part of my work; or on Friday afternoons I'd take off to the library to search through scientific literature. From there I strolled over to Izzy Kogan's apartment or wherever I was invited."

By 1987, Lakshin's own apartment was a well-known and well-attended gathering place for Russian Jews, refuseniks and others, those white knights of the white nights, not unlike Alexander Lakshin, who daily were suiting the Rebbe's words to action. Most of these men and women—Alex and Lena Kott, Elimelech and Golda Rochlin, Mordechai and Zhenya Yudborovski, Grisha Wasserman, Yitzchak and Sofia Kogan, Dovid Kogan, Dovid and Polina Eldin, Lev and Marina Furman, Lyuba Furman, Ilya Dvorkin, Michoel Tzivin, Shima Krochmalnik, Eliahu and Leah Perelman, Yaakov and Esther Krugliakov, Avigdor and Rivka Parnas, Grisha and Sarah Klimovitsky, Moshe-Reuven and Chana Stul (now Azman), Zeev and Lena Braudo, Tamara Krasilnikova, Masha Dobrusina, Marina and Yuri Fridman, Zion and Marina Abramov, Arye-Leib Vakhnovetsky, Eliezer and Rivka Ksido, Elazar Nezdatny, Eliahu Fuzeev, Alex and Marina Sheinin, Yehoshua Sheinin, Alexander and Rachel Fragin, Lena Dynina, Michael and *Tanya* Makushkin (now Eizeri), Nechama Lein, Zeev Flasburg, Zalman Ruppo, Michael and Olga Dolzhansky, Menachem Vinokurov, Dovid-Yisroel Dashevsky—now live in Israel, some in America, some still in Russia, or came back there after the fall of Communism as *shluchim*, rabbis, teachers and principals of the Jewish schools. Most of them are married, have children, some even grandchildren. Some are Lubavicher *chassidim*, while some belong to other trends in Judaism. But all of them—and many more not mentioned here—will never be forgotten and each, by right, should have a book written about them for their bravery

and unstinting dedication to the spiritual revolution that they were involved in prior to that fateful day in December 1991 when the Soviet house of cards finally fell.

With all due respect to former great refuseniks like Anatoly Scharansky, who wrote in 1988, from Israel, that "[m]y former existence is now nothing but a history, removed from me and somehow living its own life. And now I have the luxury of doing something I couldn't allow myself for years: forgetting. Forgetting, finally, the exact wording of the punishments, the conversations with my interrogators, the names of my guards. Forgetting the cold of the punishment cells and the weakness of my starving body.[28]

And with all due respect to former refusenik Ida Nudel, who said, "A few hours ago I was almost a slave in Moscow. Now I'm a free woman in my own country. It is the moment of my life."[29]

And with all due respect to former refusenik Rafael Zaitel, who, having immigrated to Israel from Russia, still genuinely couldn't understand the depth and significance of *ahavas Yisrael*, when he said: "Tell me, why are people who are not my relatives so concerned about me?"[30]

And with all due respect to all the refuseniks who said at one or another time, in Israel: "In Russia they called us *zhid (kike)*. Here they call us Russians."

With all due respect to all those who stayed and those who emigrated, leave it to the Jews of Russia to sum up their positions in an oft-repeated wry joke making the rounds then: "You know, of course, that there are two groups of Jews in the Soviet Union: first, there are the brave—those who leave the country, and then, there are the very brave—those who don't!"

Very brave or not, our white knight of the white nights stayed and fought the "battles" of Soviet Jews in Leningrad. "Sometimes the enemy wasn't the KGB; sometimes it was eating *treif* food," said Lakshin, who armed himself well against that enemy by learning to cook *kosher* food. And, honoring and blessing his parents, he made good use of his large apartment by holding his own *Shabbat seudas* (feasts). Still unmarried, his hospitality to guests became legendary. People flocked to him. "Some just stayed because I had a three bedroom apartment. It was just a 50-minute walk from *shul*. By Leningrad standards, that was like next door. Often, Jews would willingly walk for two hours, three hours, especially on Yom Kippur."

On *Shabbat*, Lakshin always had a large crowd sleeping overnight in his apartment. Often he held *Shabbatons* for the close-knit *baalei teshuva* community of Leningrad. "We welcomed any Orthodox Jew who could come and teach us something." Later, Lakshin learned about all the different Jewish trends, splits and movements and organizations competing in America, "but fortunately for us at that time," Lakshin said, "this competition didn't exist in Leningrad." And he and the other white knights tried to keep it this way, many of them learning from rabbis belonging to many different schools within Orthodox Judaism, especially visiting Lubavitcher rabbis from the States.

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28. *Fear No Evil* (1988).

29. Commenting on her arrival in Israel from the U.S.S.R. on October 15, 1987, quoted in Lilith, Winter 1987-1988, and *Two Jews, Three opinions*, p. 483.

30. Quoted in "Immigrants at Midnight," *Hadassah*, April 1990.

By 1987 most of the long-term refuseniks already had left the country, and there was a shortage of teachers. That was probably the turning point in Lakshin's life, particularly after one *Shabbat seuda*, when a visiting rabbi from Cincinnati, namely Zelig Sharfstein, asked Alexander Lakshin why he didn't become a teacher.

"I know very little," protested Lakshin.

Said Rabbi Sharfstein, "That is exactly what you should teach. The Rebbe says if we know only *aleph* [the letter *a*], we should teach *aleph*. If we only know *beth*, then we should teach *beth* [the letter *b*]."

That made perfect sense to Lakshin.

In the fall of 1987 he began: On Sundays, his day off, he gathered a group of four to teach Torah. By the spring of '88, he had 30 persons attending his *shiur*. Some participants became more observant; some just learned something, but the interest was there. "Not only *Chumash*, but Jewish holidays, customs and other areas of interest," said our white knight.

A year later Lakshin was asked by a group of his students who were planning to make *aliyah* to Israel, to teach them Hebrew and so Lakshin added Hebrew to his curriculum.

One day, in 1988, Lakshin got a phone call from a young American lady named Leah Lerner, who said she was in Leningrad. She told Lakshin that she needed a place to eat on *Shabbat* night, and it turned out that Lakshin's apartment was very close to the hotel where she was staying, although she never said exactly where she was staying. Lakshin offered to pick her up wherever she was: "It's not safe for you to walk around in Leningrad at night."

Ms. Lerner told Lakshin she was staying at the American Consul General's Residence. Immediately, Lakshin realized she was not the typical tourist. "No regular tourist stays at the American Consulate. But I didn't ask any question. That day we met at a certain place; I lived two blocks from the American Consulate." Lakshin escorted her all the way to the synagogue." There was no doubt in Lakshin's mind that she was an Orthodox Jew.

At the end of the service, a huge stretch limo drove up to the synagogue and the American Consul General himself stepped out and entered the synagogue. Greeting everybody there, he told them that if they had any problems we should call him any time and he'd do anything he could to help the Jewish community.

Only the next day did Ms. Lerner confide to Lakshin that she worked for the State Department as a special assistant to Richard Shifter. "He's a well-known American politician, still in the State Department," said Lakshin. At that time, Shifter was the commissioner in charge of human rights in Europe. Leah Lerner was his special envoy who went out on missions as a trouble-shooter to determine what was needed to be done.

Lakshin confided to Ms. Lerner that he had a "small" problem.

Earlier that year, in 1988, one of the Communist newspapers ran a big article about young religious Jews in Leningrad—of course, blaming them for falling into medieval obscurantism (a $64 word meaning a deliberate obscurity or evasion of clarity), reactionary ideology, and other things. The newspaper named two Jews—Alex Sheinin

and Alexander Lakshin—and blamed them personally for dragging unsuspected young students into that "Jewish swamp."

"Good for Alex Sheinin," Lakshin laughed awkwardly. "He emigrated a year and a half before that and he was safely ensconced in Israel. He had a laughing fit when he got a copy of this article. He sent a very warm letter to us in Leningrad, saying from where he sat he could see the beautiful Judean hills outside his apartment and 'let them write whatever stupid things they want.'"

For Lakshin the article left him with an ugly taste. The material for that article was collected in 1987. "I don't know why they procrastinated almost a year and a half before they blasted Sheinin and me. All I can say is, in 1982, a name mentioned in such an article would result in a jail term. In 1987 it probably meant a loss of a job. In 1988 it just meant putting me on edge. By that time I realized there were higher values in life than having a high-paying job or career."

Still, Lakshin considered it prudent to speak with Ms. Lerner about his concerns. He told her that, in the spirit of *glasnost* (the declared public policy within the U.S.S.R. of openly and frankly discussing economic and political realities, initiated under Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985), he had tried to take the author of that publication to court for defamation. Nothing definite materialized out of the lawsuit.

Hearing all this, Ms. Lerner gave Lakshin a name, a man in the U.S. Consulate who might help Lakshin in case the Soviets tried to put the screws on him for daring to file his lawsuit. With that she left Leningrad for the States. Through Leah Lerner (Shostar)'s help, new channels were temporarily found for Ezras Achim to ship in religious books and articles, the routes of which still cannot be divulged even now.

(Another route to smuggle in religious books to Russia came through Rabbi Yossi Friedman, who set up Kehot Publication Society exhibits at book fairs in Moscow over the years. With the help of Grisha Rosenstein, they secretly arranged to send some of the books, after the fair, to Marina Roscha Shul and other books to the U.S. Embassy, where under cover, they were handed out, piecemeal, little by little, to visiting American tourists, who then passed them on to the Marina Roscha Shul. A scary footnote to all this: At one such fair, Reb Getche was arrested for "stealing" a Lubavitcher prayer book, but was released unharmed soon after.)

One day, in 1989, Lakshin came home from Moscow. He'd attended the opening ceremonies of the Adin Steinsaltz Hebrew College—the first Hebrew college legally to open its doors in the daylight in the U.S.S.R.—where he had been invited as a guest. That incident seemed to create the biggest opening so far in the U.S.S.R. Lishkas Ezras Achim was there, backed by the Rebbe, to further the educational hopes of all Russian Jews—"Thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children" (Deuteronomy 6:7).

(In that very same year, Lishkas Ezras Achim announced that a Jewish day school opened in the fall for the first time in Soviet Russia. The day school had 25 students enrolled for Jewish and secular studies. It was then being housed temporarily at the Moscow Choral Synagogue on Arkhipovna Street and was officially recognized by the Russian government. "The day school is only one of the many programs that Chabad has organized in the Soviet Union for Russian Jews who are beginning to rediscover their heritage," read a news report.

(There was more: By November 1989, A yeshiva opened in Tbilisi, Georgia, U.S.S.R., reported Ezras Achim. The Georgian yeshiva was the third yeshiva to be established in the Soviet Union that year. It was named Yeshiva Tiferes Bachurim, in honor of the yeshiva established in Russia upon the request of the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe after World War I, and run by Rabbi Chaim Shtock, who now lives quietly in Crown Heights.

(Another report surfaced that a trailer of food was sent to Moscow that year. The trailer contained 15 tons of *kosher* food and other hard-to-get food and health items. This was the second food shipment organized by Ezras Achim.

("One hundred and seventy-five years later," the report went on to say, "Lubavitch is once again at the forefront of reconstructing Jewish communities in White Russia. For the past eight years, pairs of Lubavitcher *shluchim* [emissaries], under the auspices of Lishkas Ezras Achim, have been traveling to the Soviet Union. There, they have been instrumental in rebuilding traditional Jewish life in Russia. In the past few years, these *shluchim* have not only been visiting 'big' cities like Moscow and Leningrad, but also smaller cities like Minsk, Bobruysk and Vitebsk in White Russia.

("It is indeed heartwarming when our *shluchim* come back, telling unbelievable, hopeful stories about the Jews in the Soviet Union. One cannot help but be amazed at the beauty of the Jew. After hundreds of years of persecution the Jewish fire is still burning strong.

("Hearing of their dedication and commitment one cannot help but exclaim: 'The Jews are indeed a special people.'")

That day, in Lakshin's mailbox, there was a letter from the United States. Leah Lerner's mother sent him an invitation to the wedding of her daughter that would take place in New York City in three weeks' time. So, with nothing to lose, Lakshin went to the local OVIR visa office, to file an application to visit the States based on the invitation. Of course, the Soviet officials gave him a hard time. "Come back tomorrow." "Its not an official invitation." What's official? "Official is certified by some American official. This is just a post card. Anyone could have mailed it." What about if the American Consulate certifies it? Begrudgingly the official accepted that possibility. So Lakshin showed up at the consulate office and explained his situation. Said the American official, "Ah Laurie [that was her English name], she's getting married! Give her my best regards!" Lakshin said he'd gladly do that if he could get there. "That's why I've come to see you. Laurie said you'd help me."

The American wasted no more time. He went to his Russian typewriter and typed a letter that said: "Ms. Laurie Lerner works for the State Department and this is to certify that her mother invites Alexander Lakshin to the wedding party of her daughter, which will take place in New York City on [such-and-such date]." Then he handed it to Lakshin, who eyed it carefully. He saw the stamp of the American Eagle on top. The American's name and signature and the American Consul General's seal were at the bottom. At last, an official document!

With that Lakshin returned to the Soviet Visa office, and the official's eyes there almost popped out of their sockets. The female went behind a small room divider and placed a phone call. Lakshin could hear her talking very fast and hard. "Yes, yes, he

brought a regular post card here, but somehow penetrated the red tape of the American Consulate."That was her exact term: penetrated... "penetrated the American Consulate and brought back a letter. Yes, with a stamp and a seal, everything. What? Should I accept his application?"

The Soviet official—it probably broke her heart—accepted Lakshin's application, but the next day when Lakshin returned for his okay, he was told, "We are no longer in charge. Go to the central OVIR (Visa Application and Registration) office. OVIR set up an appointment with our white knight, designed in every way to frustrate him, two weeks before the wedding. At first the OVIR official said, No, no, no. Then she looked through her files and said Lakshin would have to see the head officer, a KGB general. She went to his office, but he was not there, nor did anybody know when he might return. "You can sit there for him, but you have to leave by closing time if he doesn't show up," the woman told him. Lakshin nodded and, when the woman turned her back to him, he prayed, cupping his hands to his face.

Lakshin waited for 35 minutes. Suddenly the head of OVIR's central office came out of her office. Her voice was as sweet as honey as she told Lakshin that "we will accept it, but we probably won't be able to process it in time. Please, don't press us."

Lakshin went home, and tried to forget the whole matter. Sometime in April, well past the wedding date, Lakshin received a phone call from the OVIR office, that he could come to the office and pay for his visa. So, Lakshin paid, and, of all things, another wedding came along. His good friend, Rabbi Berel Lazar, now chief *Chief Rabbi of Russia*, was getting married.

"Berel and I were very close friends, because every time he came to Leningrad, he took the trouble to learn with me personally, a little out of schedule with the rest of my group, because I worked and was finishing my Ph.D. at that time and couldn't come to regular classes. Berel came to my house as early as 7 a.m. for a page of *Gemara* or part of a talk. We became good friends. So, I got this invitation for his wedding in June. Since I already had a visa, I decided to purchase a ticket. Fat chance, a ticket! I stopped at the Aeroflot office every day, dutifully, on my way to work and on my way from work. All for nothing. Finally, an official asked me, "Will you take business class?" Sure, I said. At that time (maybe it still is) Russia was a strange place. Business class was only 400 rubles more than economy class: equal to an extra $15. It was my first and only business class trip since that time."

The flight was on Friday, an early flight. So Thursday night Lakshin trained to Moscow. Arriving at the airport, he found out the flight was delayed.

Finally the airport announcedthat the flight was on again. Because there was a big time difference between Moscow and New York, everything indicated that the plane would arrive on time for *Shabbat*. On board the plane he found a *minyan* of *frum* Jews. They prayed the afternoon service together and, of course, as soon as two Jews get together, there's always bound to be an extra opinion or two—in this case, whether the plane would arrive before the Sabbath. Nothing was for sure on a Soviet airplane, including death and taxes. The other opinions differed. One insisted they'd land on time, but there was no guarantee they'd be able to make it from the airport. Lakshin was even not certain where to go once he arrived at JFK. He had telephoned a *shaliach* friend of his by the name of Michael Koritz, who was at the time in Israel, and asked

him to arrange something with the Rebbe for him in Brooklyn. But he had not heard another word. So, the first surprise and the first proof on American soil of how much Chabad cares for each person came as soon as he stepped off the plane.

The plane landed maybe 35 minutes before sunset. The *frum* Jews who were on board were the first to rush out of the plane, and Lakshin, who is a good runner, led the race through the airport's corridors, and he ran like crazy. There, at the end of the corridor before customs, before immigration, before everything, Lakshin spotted a young man dressed in white shirt, black pants, and black hat.

Lakshin looked at him—he at Lakshin. "Alexander Lakshin?" the black-hatter asked him.

"Yes?"

He said, "Go!" Through Rabbi Edgar Gluck of the New York State Police, Reb Moishe Levertov, who, frantically trying to have Lakshin whisked through customs, managed to accomplish that daunting task, despite it being a weekend when all official offices were closed. Lakshin and the black-hatter jogged together to the immigration point with its huge line. Then came the second surprise. The young men told the immigration officer, "Officer, this is the gentleman I told you about." The immigration officer waved me to approach him, past the entire line. He asked for Lakshin's passport; barely opening it, he stamped it; then handed it back to him with the words, "Welcome to America."

And they continued jogging along. Next stop: luggage counter. The person in charge of luggage was an Italian. Lakshin's host alerted him that, because of the pending Jewish Sabbath, Lakshin wouldn't be able to pick up his luggage. "So, please take care of it." The uniformed Italian nodded and said, "O.K., *Shalom*."

And Lakshin and his host ran out to the parking lot and there they jumped into a car with another young man dressed the same way at the wheel, and they started to race down Belt Parkway. The car sped and stopped in front of a house on Empire Boulevard in Crown Heights. The young man told Lakshin to go up the stairs of the house, and then the car sped off.

Quickly Lakshin walked up the stairs and he heard a lady's voice speaking to him in Russian, welcoming him. She was Zelda Nemes. He was already a good friend of her son, Yossi Nemes, one of his many *Shabbat* guests he had entertained at his apartment in Leningrad.

For the first time in Lakshin's life, he experienced firsthand a chassidic *Shabbat*, with everything very important on time, including the lighting of the Sabbath candles—18 minutes before sunset.

Suddenly, Lakshin realized he goofed and had no access to his luggage, which he left earlier at the airport. All he had with him was his traveling clothes: jeans, a shirt, and a green baseball cap. But that wasn't good for *Shabbat* wear. In Leningrad it was okay in case of emergency, but not here in Crown Heights.

At once Yitzchok Nemes hunted for something Lakshin could wear. He came up with a white shirt for Lakshin. Also a jacket, although a little short. The pants he was offered were much too short. He stayed with his jeans. "Ah!" said Yitzchok Nemes, "now you are looking like an American *baal teshuva*. Fine."

With Reb Yitzchok at his side, he repaired to "770." "That was the first time I saw the Rebbe," exclaimed the white knight. "Immediately I said the blessing *shechiyanu*. I was totally taken aback: I had seen huge gatherings in the courtyard of the Leningrad Choral Synagogue, but never so many people praying together."

At "770," Reb Yitzchok Nemes introduced Lakshin to Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Isaac Hodakov, o.b.m., the Rebbe's personal secretary. Rabbi Hodakov spoke to the newly arrived Russian, in Russian, telling him he himself was from Riga.

"I didn't know who he was," Lakshin said. "Later I found out how great this man is. Then we went to Rabbi and Mrs. Nemes's home and ate their delicious *Shabbat* meal there. Later that night was one of Berel Lazar's *sheva* blessings celebrations. Although the wedding was held in Pittsburgh, everybody came from around the world for the sheva blessings parties in Crown Heights."

On that *Shabbat*, Rabbi Dov Ber Haskelevich, the so-called "Radio Rabbi of Russia," who, by then was living in Crown Heights, approached Lakshin to introduce himself. He said he knew about Lakshin because, like so many others, he had read that article in the Communist newspaper; he said he was a Russian talk show host for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. He had covered that article in one of his broadcasts, which was the first that Lakshin knew about that. Haskelevich gave Lakshin his address.

On Sunday, Lakshin had a dilemma. "On the one hand, I had to go to the airport and pick up my luggage; on the other hand, I couldn't miss the opportunity to see the Rebbe. Also I was embarrassed at my jeans and green baseball cap."

First things first, Lakshin decided. Rabbi Haskelevich said he would introduce Lakshin to the Rebbe. So be it! And when Lakshin met the Rebbe Rabbi Berel told the Rebbe where Lakshin came from and what he was doing there.

"I remember I wanted to say something to the Rebbe or ask him something," said Lakshin, "but my tongue froze. It's interesting that the Rebbe spoke to me in Yiddish, and the phrase he used—I don't remember it word for word unfortunately—but I remember it was carefully attuned to my vocabulary. As little as I understood during the talk the day before I met him, as much as I understood right then and there, I grasped intuitively a 100 percent what he said. He wished my entire family well, which surprised me at that time as my family was me and my brother Grigory.

Then the Rebbe handed Lakshin another dollar for Leningrad, saying it was specifically for the Jews in that city of "white nights."

Lakshin returned shortly to Russia, and, in the winter of 1991, he went again to visit the Rebbe in "770." Already, at that time, he was one of the foremost leaders of the Jewish movement in Leningrad. Dividing his time between work at the university and completing his Ph.D., which he finished in 1990, he then left the University of Leningrad, and took another job with his friend, who had a private travel agency. Lakshin's objective? To develop Jewish programs, and he became the manager in charge of such a program. It gave him an opportunity to travel all over Russia, the Ukraine, Byelorussia, and Lithuania. He visited the resting places of *tzaddikim*,

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31. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, 3rd Lubavitcher Rebbe, 1789-1866.
32. Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn, 4th Lubavitcher Rebbe, 1834-1882.

including the *ohel*s of the Tzemach Tzedek[31] and the Rebbe Maharash.[32]

By April 1992, our white knight of white nights left Leningrad, indeed, all of the Soviet Union, for good. The day of his departure was *Yud-Alef Nissan*. His destination was Pittsburgh. Landing in JFK, he suddenly remembered that *Yud-Alef Nissan* is the Rebbe's birthday. The Rebbe was then 90 years old. So, now being in New York, Lakshin decided to visit "770."

At "770," he ran into an old Lubavitcher friend, Alex Poltorak from Monsey, who happened to spend a *Shabbat* in Moscow at Zev Kuravsky's apartment together with Lakshin two years before that. On that particular *Shabbat*, which was *Chai Elul*, by the way, Berel Lazar, who had recently arrived in Russia, and hardly spoke a word of Russian, asked Lakshin to address a crowd on the steps of the Moscow Choral Synagogue. Outside the synagogue, Berel said, "Sender [Alexander's Hebrew name], speak to them [the huge crowd]. Tell them something chassidic in Russian."

Sender spoke about *Chai Elul*, about the Alter Rebbe, about the Baal Shem Tov.

And everybody cheered the white knight on.

Alex Poltorak was also there when Lakshin spoke outside the Choral Synagogue. And now he wasted no time in "770," on *Yud-Tes Kislev*, to offer Lakshin a teaching job at Touro College.

"What?" asked Lakshin.

"Yes, I am in charge of the Russian program at Touro college. I need someone to teach Jewish studies."

"I got you there. I am a chemist by my diploma. I have none of your qualifications."

"Are you kidding? After you wowed them outside the Choral Synagogue in Moscow. You I know. You're the man for this job."

After a short visit to Pittsburgh, Alexander Lakshin has remained in Crown Heights, doing his work as a white knight there, including his other New York job, at which he analyzes Russian Jewish information, and provides recommendations to the Jewish Community Relations Council in New York. The young Russian woman, Esther, who was always his *bashert*, soon arrived from Leningrad, went to Machon Chana in Crown Heights to study, and later the two married. Now, the Lakshins live in Crown Heights with their two children—Yisroel Dovid and Boidana Dasha.

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So, for now, we leave this white knight, Alexander Lakshin, knowing full well the army of the Rebbe has been spreading, and will continue to spread, *Yiddishkeit*, much in Leningrad by other heroic white knights of the white nights.

Come heed the words, in the poem called "Rabbi Ben Ezra," these stirring words: "Grow old along with me!/The best is yet to be,/The last of life, for which the first was made/Our times are in His hands."

Come hear about the overnight camps in Russia: Jewish boys and girls and young adults in the U.S.S.R. attending overnight camps and retreats in the summer of 1990; a camp for boys and another for girls located outside of Moscow; in Kiev, two Torah study retreats for high school and university students organized; in Dnepropetrovsk, another camp for young boys—all these summer programs organized by representatives of Lishkas Ezras Achim. In addition to local staff, 50 counselors were

brought in from the United States and Israel. Nearly 1,000 children and young adults attending the camps.

Come hear what happened around Passover of 1991, when Lishkas Ezras Achim announced that its representatives in the Soviet Union were expecting more than 20,000 people to attend *seders* they were sponsoring in 28 cities, including Moscow, Leningrad, Tbilisi, and Dnepropetrovsk. Supplies for the festive meal were sent from Europe, Israel and the U.S. In addition to the dozens of permanent emissaries Ezras Achim currently had then in the Soviet Union, 50 more Lubavitcher volunteers were sent from Israel and the United States to conduct the *seders*.

And, finally, come hear about, in the year of 1992, barely months after the official fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, how Rabbi Menachem. M. Pevzner of New York assumed the post of Chief Rabbi of Leningrad. His arrival enhanced the then-60-year presence of Lubavitch in that city. Rabbi Pevzner's grandfather served as dean at some of the underground yeshivas that Lubavitch ran under the Communist regime in the 1930s and 1940s.

It is written, "There are many lights in light" (Talmud, *Berachot*). So we must conclude, then, that very brave are the white knights of the white nights, who continue to light the way in Leningrad. As one *chassid* recently noted, "When G-d surveys the Jewish light of Leningrad, before and after the fall of the U.S.S.R., our Creator has to conclude that this too is good...on the way to the Final Redemption." Curiously a new, other kind of "light" did fall over Leningrad. In 1991, it was renamed S. Petersburg.

A Secret of the Rebbe

In 1976, Belgian diamond dealers approached Yissacher Dov Weiss, a wealthy Lubavitcher Los Angeles businessman. "There is an opportunity to make millions by investing in Liberian diamonds," they told him. Reb Yissacher Dov weighed the matter carefully and then consulted the Rebbe, who advised against the investment. "The political situation there is shaky," the Rebbe explained.

"But Liberia is known as the Switzerland of Africa!" the businessman retorted. The Rebbe only repeated his view that the situation was unstable.

Several months later, a revolution erupted that wrecked havoc throughout the land.

7

How the Soviet Union Found Out There Is a G-d

By the end of 1991, the Soviet Empire totally collapsed. Startling were the events of that year, beginning with the Communist Party being banned after an abortive coup of Communist hard-liners in August, trying to oust Mikhail Gorbachev from power. After three days the coup failed and Gorbachev was returned briefly to power. In September 1991, civil war broke out in the Georgia republic. From "770," on the first day of Chanukah, the Lubavitcher Rebbe lit a menorah, and menorahs around the world seen on satellite TV hookup—including a menorah in the Kremlin palace—instantaneously followed suit. On the seventh day of Chanukah, the Supreme Soviet voted itself out of existence, to the bewilderment of friends and foes alike. Nine days later, on December 17, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin met in Moscow to discuss an orderly transition of power. They agreed the Soviet Union would cease to exist by 1992. On December 21, 1991, 11 former Soviet republics met in the Kazakh city of Alma-Ata and signed an agreement to create a commonwealth. Two dazzling days after that, on December 23, Gorbachev and Yeltsin met again in the Kremlin to discuss the final transfer of power. And finally, on December 25, 1991, Gorbachev, having become a leader without a country, officially resigned as president of the U.S.S.R. As an official sign, on December 31, 1991, the Soviet flag atop the Kremlin was officially replaced by the red, white, and blue flag of prerevolutionary Russia. The implosion of the Soviet Empire, without the benefit of the usual military catastrophe that heralds the demise of most empires, marked the failure of a great utopian dream that had dominated the twentieth century.

This world historical event, which has been compared to the fall of the Roman Empire in its historical significance, will, no doubt, be studied and restudied for decades to come. But, in truth, it was also a time when the Bolsheviks, the Communists, and all the avowed atheists suddenly discovered the best-kept secret in the U.S.S.R.: there is a G-d!

We can well imagine the famous TV news broadcaster Edward R. Murrow with his ubiquitous cigarette in his mouth, if he were around on that day, opening his news program in his own dramatic fashion, "This—is Moscow..."

But since Murrow[1] had already passed from the scene long before that, the

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1. American broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow, European bureau chief for CBS during World War II, died on April 27, 1965, in Pawling, New York. From 1947 to 1960 he produced numerous radio and television programs, including an expose of Senator Joe McCarthy.

Russian Jews, from many sources, also learned indirectly of their new fate—dare we say freedom for all time!—from another in the great line of broadcasters, the Russian-born, Crown Heights U.S.A.-implanted Jew that the Soviet government came to love to hate, Rabbi Dov Ber Haskelevich. On that fateful date, in his own quiet way, Rabbi Dov Ber, seated in his broadcast booth, at his book-cluttered desk, with an overhead boom microphone, sent out a prerecorded religious message to his fellow Jews in the Soviet Empire, part of which surely contained, if only between the lines, a message he himself first heard from the Rebbe that year: "The Rebbe said the Redemption is at hand and Moshiach is on his way!"

Before we go on, we must bring up an inevitable question. "Why mention Edward R. Murrow in this Jewish story?"

Because, maybe you don't know this yet, it was Edward R. Murrow in his broadcasts who brought down the paper tiger called U.S. Senator Joe McCarthy (of Wisconsin). It was Joe McCarthy who had destroyed so many American lives with his false slander and Communist baiting—"You are a card-carrying member of the Communist Party!"—accusations of so many Americans. What the rest of America couldn't do, Murrow did.

So, now we're going to find out how a rabbi—*l'havdil*, the Jewish equivalent of Edward R. Murrow—on his radio program dared to face down the Soviet monolith and helped bring it to its natural craven position: where old war elephants are buried. We're going to see one more secret the Rebbe had up his holy sleeve to deal with the antisemitism and oppression of Jews in the U.S.S.R.—namely, the "Radio Rabbi of Russia," who openly says, "My congregation is in Russia."

After hearing some of the most spiritual and heroic radio broadcasts Rabbi Haskelevich ever broadcast via Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) to the Russian Jews and non-Jews, years later one continues to wonder: Did the underground Lubavitcher outreach religious and educational thrusts in the former U.S.S.R., via shortwave broadcasts from the United States, help cause such an above-ground upheaval that it shook the very rafters of the Kremlin? Certainly Rabbi Haskelevich's radio broadcasts played their important part in carrying out the Rebbe's directives to help unite the Russian Jews to throw off their chains and shackles, ever reminding them, in the words of Rabbi Nechunya in *Pirkei Avos*, "Whoever takes upon himself the yoke of Torah—the yoke of government and the yoke of worldly cares are removed from him."

In late 1991 the number of Jews in the part of the U.S.S.R. known as the Ukraine was estimated at 325,000. The birth rate for Ukrainian Jews in 1988-89 was 6.6 per 1,000 and the mortality rate was 23.4 per 1,000. Ukrainian Jewry was characterized by a high median age (approximately 50), a high proportion of mixed marriages, and a low fertility rate.[2]

Born in 1947, young Berl (as Dov Ber was known at birth) grew up the son of a respected Torah scholar under the Soviet regime, in the city of Chernovstsi (which eventually became part of modern-day Ukraine). He had a solid mix of Russian

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2. "Ukraine," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-Rom version.

schooling and, privately, a good Jewish education. "One of my Hebrew teachers was a Lubavitcher *chassid*. His name: Reb Moshe Veshedsky, the father of Rabbi Sholom Ber Veshedsky. When I grew up enough to grasp the deeper meanings of the love-of-my-life religion, I used to travel to his home, and there we delved deep into *Chassidus*."

At an early age, young Berl began to resolve intellectual conflicts resulting from the discrepancy between his Jewish upbringing and the propaganda he learned in the Soviet school system. Always a lover of truth, he'll never forget an incident that shaped his life.

Shortly after his *bar mitzvah*, Berl was in his public school chemistry class, taught by an observant Jew, whom Berl knew and prayed with in a hush-hush Rosh Hashana *minyan* prayer group. The teacher was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party, and he always hid his Jewish life. Once, the young, impressionable Berl heard this chemistry teacher spout off in class the Party line on atheism. The chemistry teacher went over to the class blackboard, wrote something down, and then whirled around to face his class. "The Bible," he said, "tells us that G-d created the world through His hand or His word. But science has proved that to be untrue. Students, I tell you, we cannot abandon science, the breast of our nostrils. Science or religion—which will survive? Science, of course. Why of course? Because, students, science may well be converging ultimately on a major truth, which religion will never know. Yes, science, science, science!" Then the chemistry teacher went on with his class.

What unnerved Berl for days after that? Not faith in Judaism or Jews, but faith in the kind of Jew who would not sacrifice his life for his faith. Berl's learning had taught him a lot by then. *Chassidim* to a T whom he knew would do—or did—self-sacrifice. He remembered his Isaiah: "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" (1:11). His Proverbs: "A faithful man will be abundant in blessings" (28, 20). His Talmud: "The exile will be gathered in only at the price of faith" (*Sota*). From Moshe Ben Ezra: "Who believes in a thing that contradicts logic abuses the finest gift G-d gave him." From the Baal Shem Tov: "When G-d wants to punish a man, He deprives him of faith" (*Keter Shem Tov*, 1864, p. 93). "To what purpose...man will be...at the price of faith...that contradicts logic...He deprives him of the finest gift G-d gave him"—this is how the young Berl saw his Jewish chemistry. Granted he was judging another Jew, but what could this growing-up-quick-Orthodox Jew do? He had his own Judaic principles to deal with in Soviet Russia. The chemistry teacher's words had created a bad impression on the boy turned 13. The next day, as he prayed, he struggled to fully say "*Boruch Sheamar Vehaya H'Oloam*"—"Blessed is He who spoke, and the world came into being."

Not that he focused on his teacher's bad mouthing of religion; he didn't. Rather, Berl's own inner struggle began; he questioned his own faith, his religious teachings. "My search for understanding Godliness began. A dangerous struggle, he readily admitted, "but one I had to go through." He searched public libraries; he looked deeply; he thoroughly read between the lines of Jewish books: each time seeking the face and hand of G-d.

At the age of 14, he knew he had to become a Lubavitcher *chassid*. Maybe he

wasn't a Franz Rosenzweig, who could put down his feelings about Chassidism so eloquently on paper—"On Saturday, I happened into a Hasidic *shtiebel* (*shul*).... The songs were the main attraction. I have never heard anything like it. They do not need an organ—such rapturous enthusiasm, young and old together."[3] Maybe he hadn't the powerful thoughts of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who said, "A true *chassid* is he who devotes himself in love entirely to the service of the Higher Power, who...does not withdraw from the world, but lives in it, with it, and for it."[4] And maybe Berl was not yet in touch with the words of Reb Pinchas of Koretz (Ukrainian chassidic rebbe, 1726-1791), who often asked his *chassidim*: "How is it possible to know G-d in all ways? It is because when G-d gave the Torah, the whole world was filled with the Torah. Thus there is nothing that did not contain Torah.... Since the beginnings of Chassidism this doctrine has always been regarded as one of its basic principles."[5]

But a *chassid* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, young Berl was determined to be. And so, later, in 1968, as a 20 year old, Berl traveled to Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where he now resides with his Russian-born wife Chaya Sara and their nine children.

"I originally came to see if everything I had heard about the Lubavitcher Rebbe was true. I came for a short visit and I never went back," he said.

Once in Kfar Chabad, Berl, encouraged by a friend, wrote the Rebbe, and lo behold he received a very warm letter in Yiddish from the Rebbe. He congratulated Haskelevich on his birthday—the date mark on the letter, which arrived "special delivery"!—and blessed his efforts for studying *Chassidus* in Kfar Chabad.

For the next 20 years, he prepared himself for his life's work, leaving quickly from Crown Heights to learn *Chassidus*. Berl's father was a rabbi, but not a Lubavitcher, and he did not originally approve of his son's attraction to Chassidism. The 20 year old felt otherwise. He had his doubts and his questions, yet every one of them was dispelled or answered, as the case may be, as if the Alter Rebbe personally took him in a room alone and entertained each one of young Berl's questions or doubts, but did not directly respond to it. Then, it was as if the Alter Rebbe sang one of his famous wordless *niggun*im, and Berl Haskelevich knew Chabad *Chassidus*, with all its profoundest answers, was for him.

And all that time he never forgot his fellow Soviet Jews, and, in turn, as he began later communicating with them via his radio program, he found out just how much these left-behind Jews never forgot him. That came about in 1985, when Rabbi Dov Ber was invited by RFE/RL to participate in a program that was called "Judaism."

But what really happened in the U.S.S.R. before 1985 to set up the need for Rabbi Dov Ber's proposed Russian-language radio program? This is part of what we know: When Leonid Brezhnev died in 1982 the plight of the U.S.S.R. had reached crisis proportions. Brezhnev had not been in effective control of the country during his last

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3. German philosopher and theologian (1886-1929), from his *Letters and Diaries* (1978), ed. by Rachel Rosenzweig and Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann.

4. From his *Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel* (1899), trans. by Bernard Drachman.

5. Quoted in Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (1933).

6. There is agreement that Andropov was probably not Russian, and some say he was a Jew.

few years owing to senility, and Aleksei Kosygin had died in 1980. The Soviet Politburo was dominated by old men, and they were overwhelmingly Russian. Non-Russian representation at the top of the party and the government had declined over time. The Soviet crisis, thus, was largely a Russian crisis. Yuri Andropov[6] and then Konstantin Chernenko led the country from 1982 until 1985, but their administrations failed to address critical problems. When Gorbachev took over as general secretary of the party in March 1985 he was not fully aware of the depth of the crisis and launched *perestroika*, a program of economic and political restructuring. He believed that, although it was necessary to accelerate economic growth, the system itself was basically sound. The Gorbachev team was even more heavily Russian than that of his predecessors.

Gorbachev perceived that the defense burden, perhaps equivalent to 25 percent of the gross national product, was crippling the country. This had led to cuts in expenditures in education, social services, and medical care. The corruption of the administrative apparatus fueled the popular belief that officials were enjoying illegal privileges and not responding to the needs of the citizens. The legitimacy of the party—that is, the willingness of the population to accept its right to rule—was very low. The party did not study in depth the malaise of society. This was particularly true of ethnic problems, especially within Russia. However, the party did have some knowledge of the looming threat of Islam. (In 1989, Muslims made up more than a sixth of the U.S.S.R.'s population. It was feared that with the decline of Communist ideology Islam would reassert itself.) Economic decline increased tension and led many minority Soviet citizens to blame their misery on the Russians, who held most of the leadership roles.

Gorbachev had also instituted a policy of *glasnost*, which some Russian officials and others opposed on the grounds that it was punishing to the Russians, who could now be openly blamed for all the ills of Soviet society. *Glasnost* also allowed the media more freedom of expression, and editorials complaining of depressed conditions and the government's inability to correct them began to appear. Reactionary elements, including antisemitic groups, also began to emerge, especially in Leningrad (S. Petersburg).

Gorbachev concentrated his energies on increasing his authority (that is to say, his ability to make decisions). He did not, however, develop the power to implement these decisions. He became a constitutional dictator—but only on paper. His policies were simply not put into practice. When he took office his main opponent, Yegor Ligachev, was made head of the party's Central Committee Secretariat, one of the two main centers of power (with the Politburo) in the Soviet Union. This prevented Gorbachev from using the party apparatus to implement his views on *perestroika*.

Gorbachev never made clear his vision of what *perestroika* meant. His goal was quite plain: to bring the Soviet Union up to economic par with such capitalist countries as Japan, Germany, and the United States. Desperately he wanted to keep the Soviet Union together.[7]

But was *glasnost* also good for the Jews? Probably as much good for the Jews as

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7. According to Encyclopeadia Britannica, 1998 CD Rom Edition.

when Benny rushed to his grandpa and said, "Gramps, I've just come from Yankee Stadium where I saw Babe Ruth hit his 60th home run." To which Grandpa asked Benny, "Tell me, Benny, what this Babe Ruth did, is it good for the Jews?"

Over those 17 years (1968-1985) of his life in the United States and Israel, assessing Soviet activities pro and con against Jews, Rabbi Dov Ber Haskelevich had prepared himself, and caught the eyes of many in Russian-American literary circles. By then he was already known as a man who wrote on Russian-Jewish topics. His published works included *The Disputation of Nachmanides*, the famous Jewish vs. Catholic disputation that took place in 1263; *Introduction to Talmud Study, in Russian*; *Megillat Esther*, a new Russian translation; The *Complete Story of the Exodus*, in Russian; Commentary on the Torah (1979); and the Passover *Haggadah*, newly translated in Russian. If I listed the complete works in Russian accomplished by Rabbi Dov Ber, you might think he never slept. Who knows but that may be true—perhaps a bit like the tireless efforts of the Patriarch Yaakov.

As if he didn't have enough on his hands after publishing his work, *The Book of Books in Classical Interpretation* (a new Russian translation of the Torah with a selection of classic Jewish commentaries from the *Midrash, Exegesis, Kabbalah*, Jewish philosophy, *sedrahs*, *Bereishis*, *Noach*, and the weekly *Haftorah*), in the same year, Haskelevich's book was "reviewed"—and that was a mild word—in a Soviet atheistic magazine, *Science and Religion*, by Dr. Kryvelev, a well-known Soviet scholar who worked for the Institute of Atheistic Propaganda. Without prefacing remarks, Dr. Kryvelev's "review" got straight to its point. The Ph.D. accused Rabbi Haskelevich of using— "inventing"—new talmudic commentaries to refute the higher biblical criticism. Haskelevich—recalling the criticism—laughs a knowing Russian smile. "Oh, I'm not mocking the ignorant words of Dr. Kryvelev—for he wouldn't know one *perush* from another *perush*. *Perushim* means commentaries. I just gave over the whole *perush* from the *Midrash*, from *Chassidus*, from Rashi, from whatever commentaries and put them in my book. (Actually, I especially wouldn't, and didn't, even consider inventing *perushim*.) But this doctor who reviewed my book didn't understand where my *perush*im were coming from. So he assumed wrong. And you ask me why I'm smiling? Because, as some writer once said, 'There are two sides to every issue. One side is right and the other side is wrong, but the middle is evil.' And especially evil is the man who jumps into the middle of Jewish things without knowing his right side from his left side. That's why I'm smiling—for years. And having assumed wrong, in the article, the good doctor undeservedly praised my so-called new *perushim*, and then proceeded to ask questions he thought cannot be answered. In the end he accused me of Zionist propaganda because I mentioned a Rashi that *Eretz Yisrael* belongs to the Jews. The kind of 'truth' Dr. Kryvelev knew was meant for him. 'As Truth said to G-d: "Don't create it [man]; it is full of lies!" So G-d cast Truth to the earth so that it might sprout forth, in a deeper and truer form, from the soil of falsehood.'[8] And this was the truth of, and legacy to, Dr. Kryvelev. But let me not give too much importance to ignorance," said Haskelevich. "Let us go on..."

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8. *Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis* 8:5.

Let us go back to those days when Radio Liberty started a highly successful and provocative program called "Judaism." Let us recall how those magnificent nine Russian premieres—Lenin, Stalin, Malenkov, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Kosygin, Andropov, Chernenko, and Gorbachev—one after another, in trying to build or preserve the Soviet system, contributed to its ultimate destruction—when they shot themselves in their own feet, teaching "the young the idea how to shoot."[9] Let us finally get a glimpse of G-d in the Soviet Union—not for Russian Lubavitchers, who lived and walked along God's—albeit underground—path, and had long insisted that "G-d's creation was purely an act of grace"[10] but for those Soviet Jews who had not yet opened their eyes to the miracles happening before or around them—who sorely needed G-d's grace in the Evil Empire. Now suddenly these Soviet Jews and non-Jews could hear this new Radio Rabbi in the secret recesses of their apartments, and he was telling them there is a G-d, there is a G-d, there is a G-d! And sweet to their ears was that truth. He was saying, in essence, Evidence of G-d I see in the existence of the U.S.S.R. Yes, the Radio Rabbi was also speaking of the G-d of Israel at the same time that he was speaking of the G-d of Russia—the same G-d who would deliver His people from that nation, too. He was telling his fellow Jews, Hang On, fellow Jew, keep the Jewish faith. "God is the reconciliation of the many in the One."[11] In effect, he was telling his radio listeners, huddled close to their receivers, away from other snooping ears, that coal is nothing but concentrated sunlight.... The story of the Russian Jew is the story of coal. Under a surface marred by oppression and persecution he has accumulated immense stores of energy, in which we may find an unlimited supply of light and heat for our minds and hearts. All we need is to discover the process, long known in the case of coal, of transforming latent strength into living power."[12] Yes, Haskelevich was always emphasizing, from every talk and *parsha* commentary of the Rebbe, Yes, there is a G-d. And despite Haskelevich's initial thoughts—that Radio Liberty was much too political for his Lubavitcher views, and that the program had been jammed all over Russia with the highest degree of jamming. Yet Rabbi Dov Ber got the go-ahead sign from the Rebbe, and then he took his radio seat and delivered his powerful message to Jews and non-Jews of the U.S.S.R., whoever had the opportunity to hear him. Let's not make it seem that simple—after all, Gorbachev did institute the openness of *perestroika* at that time (A coincidence? Hardly!), yet, truth to tell, it almost seemed as if Haskelevich's message was so powerful that it even unjammed the radio waves of the Soviet Union.

We must also recall that, until this time, Lubavitcher activities in the Soviet Union were generally conducted underground, at the risk of life and limb. Now this transplanted Russian-born rabbi in Crown Heights, who well knew how much the word Lubavitch made the Soviets see red, had the opportunity to bring Lubavitcher

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9. James Thomson, *The Seasons: Spring* (1726), p. 49.

10. Saadia, Emunot VeDeot, 3, *Exordium*, p. 933.

11. Hans Kohn, *Die Politische Idee des Judentums*, 1924.

12. J. Friedlander, *Jews of Russia and Poland*, 1915, p. 209.

teachings and the Rebbe, in effect, out in the open. Was this a good idea, after all those terrible years, when it could easily mean the death or disappearance of a man or woman in Russia for reading Lubavitcher material or having a picture of the Rebbe on his apartment wall?

For other reasons the Rebbe was not predisposed toward broadcasting radio programs, at the time, to Soviet Jews. Not because of the international politics involved, but because, the Rebbe explained, he felt he did not have the right man for that particular job.[13] Despite this, Rabbi Haskelevich wrote to the Rebbe, to explain that he had been offered this radio broadcast post and that if he did not accept it, the post might be taken by a (perish the thought!) Reform minister. Radio Liberty said it needed a rabbi, but not necessarily an Orthodox rabbi. So far the radio company had interviewed several persons who claimed that they were rabbis, Haskelevich informed the Rebbe. What should he do? And should he reveal to Radio Liberty who he really was, a *shaliach* of the Rebbe?

That evening the Rebbe held a *farbrengen*. The Rebbe, as if answering Rabbi Haskelevich's question, introduced ancient words transferred into a new *niggun*, "so that they should be "heard in that place" [a euphemism for the U.S.S.R.]. Easily the words of "*Nyet, Nyet Nikavo*," the Russian *niggun*, became the perfect rallying call:

"There is no one besides Him" (Deuteronomy 4:39).

Hearing the words like an anvil chorus that evening, Dov Ber, acting like a true *chassid*, took the Rebbe's message, "*Nyet, Nyet*, Nikavo," as he should, personally, and he wrote again to the Rebbe that he accepted the radio post, and now with the Rebbe's "blessing," he began his "Judaism" broadcasts. After that, the Soviet Union was never the same again.

Of the 30 minutes of the "Judaism" program, Haskelevich's part consisted of 10 minutes of *Chassidus*. "We had other participants speaking about morality, the philosophy of Judaism. They weren't Orthodox, and it showed: their material came out of encyclopedias. But the program's flourishing finish fell to me. The most elevated part. My subject was chosen by me—with the blessings of the people in charge, the *goyim* of Radio Liberty, Russian Orthodox people working for the U.S. government, getting very high salaries—because they couldn't interfere with things they knew nothing about. If they did know enough, surely these modern-day builders of the Tower of Babel would have been very explicit with what I spoke about. But that was not the case. The man in charge, a Russian religious man, who reviewed my programs, treated my addresses as holy things. Happy as he could be, the man told everyone, 'I never knew that our faith has borrowed so much from Judaism.' With all due respect, I saw the Rebbe's blessing at work even in *goyim*. As I once heard, when the message is sent out, its receivers are all ears."

What about feedback? Back in 1985, how could anyone know who was hearing these broadcasts from the U.S.S.R., a closed world? Yet Radio Liberty continued to conduct research on how many people were actually listening to the program.

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13. Concerned Lubavitchers had proposed several though unacceptable proposals for such a project, but each time the Rebbe had rejected it.

Guesstimates centered on 10 to 20 percent of the population who regularly listened to the radio program; in certain Soviet areas, 50 percent of the population. Quoting statistics garnered from *U.S. News & World Report*, Haskelevich said that Radio Liberty had then 20 million listeners in the Soviet Union and 24 million in Eastern Europe. "Ironically," quipped Rabbi Haskelevich, "there are no 20 to 24 million Jews in the Soviet Union. So I had to conclude most of my listeners were non-Jews."

"Sympathizers—many of them?" Haskelevich wondered aloud. Perhaps, but they were listening—and per force had to help the spiritual revolution fully under way in the Soviet Empire. Haskelevich's message to his fellow Jews? You have special obligations daily toward the doable of the 613 *mitzvahs* G-d gave you. Haskelevich's message to his fellow non-Jews? Stress the Seven Noahide laws—the basis of all religious belief systems and which serve as the unifying force for all peoples—in your life and your family members' lives.

"I began," he said, "by concentrating on episodes from the Bible and explaining them in light of chassidic philosophy and also in terms of the Seven Noahide Laws. And since the Lubavitcher Rebbe had begun speaking about the Seven Noahide Laws as universal laws for all non-Jews, I saw this as a unique opportunity to fulfill the Rebbe's directive by educating my largely non-Jewish audience to follow the Seven Noahide Laws. For all this, I received a very positive reaction from Jews and non-Jews."

One other successful part of the mix: Haskelevich spoke Russian to his listeners—in direct contrast to the Orthodox rabbis in the Russian *shtetls*, who spoke Yiddish to those who came before them as they expounded on sacred Jewish works and on ways to serve *Hashem*.

Oh the spiritual fun Haskelevich had with this program! He prepared his program, entitled the weekly portion of the Torah, in such a manner that even a non-Jew listening to it could derive something. The "fun" began when Rabbi Dov Ber was informed that the Russian Orthodox priest, with whom he had no contact on the station's grounds, was following in Rabbi Dov Ber's footsteps: he was preparing a program on the Bible, similar to the Jewish schedule.

And there were more kudos for Rabbi Haskelevich. From Munich, Germany, where Radio Liberty beamed its programs to the Soviet Union, and from where its top management was, came personally one of them, Count Petrovsky, to the Manhattan studio to express his gratitude to the Radio Rabbi of Russia. Said the count: "In the name of the entire management of Radio Liberty, I would like to express our thanks to you and to all who make this program happen. Your Jewish program is the most interesting and inspiring program that Radio Liberty produces and it's good not only for Jews. It's good for everybody and it's better than the Russian Orthodox program."

Then, after the high praise from Russian Orthodox radio station rulers, a fight—more than boasting rights—broke out among them. Each station boss wanted to be considered the chief boss of the Judaism program. This fight threatened the very existence of the Jewish program. At one time, an American Jewish woman, who was at the time in charge of quality control of all Radio Liberty programs in Munich, journeyed specifically to Manhattan on a mission.

"Since the Judaism program is really so good, why not try to improve it?" She had

a specific point to make. In her purse, she carried a letter from the president of the radio station, which said that the station is non-sectarian. "Why," she had asked, "is the Rambam (Maimonides) constantly spoken of?" The program producers explained to the woman that UNESCO had pronounced that 1985 (that year) was to be called the Year of Maimonides.

But this still was unacceptable to the woman. "Maimonides was Orthodox," she countered. Do you mean to say there are no Reform or Conservative rabbis who are greater than the Rambam? And why is the Lubavitcher Rebbe quoted so often? This is not a Hasidic station!"

She went on. "Here, I've contacted the Synagogue Council, and I'm told this organization represents all three branches of Judaism in America."

When she was finished fuming, Rabbi Haskelevich pointed out that the Synagogue Council couldn't possibly represent the Orthodox, as the greatest contemporary authority on Jewish law Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986) ruled that an Orthodox rabbi cannot be a member of the Synagogue Council, since Conservative and Reform ministers are members of that same Council. "For that major reason, the Synagogue Council cannot represent the Orthodox," concluded Rabbi Haskelevich.

From this, the frustrated, reigning bosses almost eliminated the program, but in the end they realized they had a successful vehicle, the best on the RFE/RL dial. It had a widespread audience, not exactly knowable in those days, who would somehow find a way to make their displeasure, if not their despair, known. This eventually came through many, many mailbags filled with letters.

In a far-ranging interview with Julius Liebb, in *The Jewish Press* (December 21, 1990), Rabbi Haskelevich said his message, "conveyed through concepts from the *Tanach* and Jewish philosophers, has the potential to reduce antisemitism, which has, in fact, become one of the rabbi's major goals. He feels that by raising the level of understanding among the general populace of the Jewish roots of Christianity and Islam, he would be helping to build a more positive attitude toward Jews.

"Haskelevich believes the manifestations of antisemitism in the Soviet Union are a result of the deprivations suffered by the people who are looking for someone to blame. The Jews, as usual, are a convenient scapegoat. They are resented because they can leave the country, a privilege not accorded to the non-Jewish population.

"Rabbi Haskelevich is not so naive as to believe he can end antisemitism in Russia, but, he says, 'I can stop those who are not influenced by hatred.' Eventually, he says, once the hunger problem is alleviated, no doubt with U.S. assistance, and there is no revolutionary return to Communism, Russia will be anxious, to retain good relations with the West, a condition that will not be achieved if antisemitism persists.

"He acknowledges that the willingness of so many Jews to immigrate to Israel, despite the economic hardships and Arab threat, reflects the serious danger that Soviet Jews find themselves in. But he hopes his approach will help to create 'an aura of understanding' that will contribute to an amelioration of the difficult status of the Jews."

Yet the program had a broadcast booth full of detractors, criticizing its content for its non-*kosher* aspects. Knowing his was one man's answer to Soviet antisemitism,

Haskelevich still went right to the crux of the matter. He argued that the entire program should be *kosher*. How? he was asked. Argued he: The Reform and Conservative ideas should not be allowed on the program. Why? Because (as of 1987) Russia is an atheistic country, and using a specific Reform rabbi from Florida, who openly said that he didn't believe in G-d, was sending the wrong kind of message to people who desperately needed to hear that G-d was alive and would shortly redeem them. As for the Conservative synagogue in Manhattan involved in the radio program's content, it was openly pushing homosexuality.

Knowing that most of his radio listeners were Gentile and the same held true for his RFE/RL bosses, all Russian Orthodox believers, all keen on his Bible remarks, Haskelevich asked his radio bosses if they could—or would—consider combining a Russian Orthodox program with one on Judaism. Of course, they responded no, never! Yet, with their saying that, the realization dawned on them, "And why not? Our Greek Orthodox religion and Orthodox Judaism glorifies and praises G-d. But how can we rationally combine, on one program, Orthodox Judaism with Reform Judaism, which denies that the Torah was given to the Jewish nation by G-d? Do we have to export atheistic ideas to an already atheistic Soviet Union?"

"No, no!" concluded the Russian station administrators. "No more Reform ideas in the program!" Rabbi Haskelevich was a Jew whom they could trust, and with all that in place, Orthodox Judaism on "Judaism" beamed bigger and brighter than ever.

To Rabbi Haskelevich, however, the controversy surrounding his work was merely amusing. He mostly concerned himself with reaching the average Russian citizens and educating them to understand spiritual concepts that they were denied access to for so long. That is why he expanded his work to include an umbrella organization called H.O.A.S.C.A.N.I.M. (Hebrew Orthodox Association for Societal and Cultural Advancement through National and International Media). As such, H.O.A.S.C.A.N.I.M., which is the Hebrew word for activists, supports Radio Liberty and publishes books and magazines in Russia as well as conducts lectures to the many groups which formed to learn more about the Seven Noahide Laws. Its objectives remain, to spread the teachings of Torah among Jews, to educate Gentiles on the Seven Noahide Laws, and to dispel antisemitic myths.

"And the Rebbe was very happy with what I was doing," said Rabbi Haskelevich. "He read my radio scripts, and I received many blessings from him."

A Jewish writer once noted, "The greatness of the moment at Sinai is that G-d made His love for us manifest through Torah, that we might return that love by doing His will."[14] From the overseas mail Rabbi Haskelevich received from the U.S.S.R., he became thoroughly convinced that Jews from the farthest regions in the Soviet Union were responding to this very love of G-d.

But not just Soviet Jews got into writing the Radio Rabbi. "Many *goyim* in the Soviet Union, through their letters, praised the Jewish religion very highly," noted

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14. Ronald Brauner, President of the Foundation for Jewish Studies and professor of Jewish studies, "Making Love at Sinai," quoted in *Being Jewish in a Gentile World* (1995).

Haskelevich. "One of them from Moscow, a young boy, wrote four letters. He wasn't sure any of his letters would get through. So, four copies of the same letter. In his letter, he expressed the hope of becoming a *ger*. After listening to my programs, his goyishe life seemed meaningless to him. He had a girlfriend whom he tried to explain the richness of Judaism to, as he heard it from my radio programs. So moved was he to enter a yeshiva in Moscow, he lied to the yeshiva officials, claiming his mother was Jewish. But then, he became totally afraid to go back and tell the yeshiva the truth. He wanted me to become his *mashpia* and help him to become a convert to Judaism."

In January 1986, said the Radio Rabbi, "Russian friends phoned me and asked, 'Do you really believe that such a country could have any real changes?' I answered that I sincerely believed it. I had a sense from the Rebbe's advice to Jews in Russia at the time—telling them to cooperate with the government—that the Rebbe was anticipating a change. My hunch was correct."

By 1991, the Russian Revolution had run its course. With the unprecedented and miraculous downfall of the most repressive regime known to world history came the opening up of the floodgates of religious freedom. Unfortunately, however, this also brought on a resurgence in antisemitism. Pamphlets were printed in Russia, again accusing Jews of baking *matzahs* with Christian blood. Russian Jews became so intimidated that some were afraid to let their children out of the house during the Passover season.

An aboveground footnote: Mikhail Gorbachev himself admitted that, after having escaped a coup d'etat against his life, he owed his survival to the fact that he was listening to a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty program. "Once Gorbachev himself revealed this," said the Radio Rabbi of Russia, "my program rose greatly in popularity [even though it probably wasn't his program from which Gorbachev heard the news of his fate]."

So, did the underground Jewish religion in the former U.S.S.R. and the Haskelevich's radio broadcast beamed there help to foment such an above-ground upheaval that shook the very rafters of the Kremlin? At another time, we learn from our Talmud (maybe it had in mind Edom [Rome], the Evil Empire of its days), "The government does nothing for nothing."[15]

So here's something for the nothingness of the U.S.S.R., a typical Russian story (out of millions) that set the Soviet Empire on fire. Now, you're about to find out about Leonid Fundo, a former Seventh Day Adventist pastor, and his wife Marina, who long searched for religion in an atheistic country, under the brutal control of the KGB, which was founded by Leonid's grandfather, and who finally found their way back to their original religion— yes! —Judaism.

For the first 17 years of his life, Leonid Fundo learned that everything in the world began in 1917, the year of the Russian Revolution. And when he met his wife Marina she told him that was the one thing she had trouble with, too. What did the Russian Revolution have to do with G-d, or G-d with the beginnings of the Soviet Empire?

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15. Ben Kappara, *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 11:1.1.

Both Fundos had been put on the Soviet merry-go-round, and at times, they wanted to shout, "Stop the world, I want to get off!"

What makes the Fundos' story, in its way, an innermost part of the Rebbe's secrets (and forgive my stretching a point here) is that Leonid Fundo was born a few steps away from the famed Choral Synagogue, in an apartment long ago ceded to his grandfather, one of the founders of the KGB. Leonid might have gone on living his life under Communist Party rule and accepting that "all life began in 1917," but "once exposed to the Bible, I couldn't get it out of my head. Brushed off by above-ground religions, I took to exploring the so-called unofficial catacombs—underground religion, and I settled on the persecuted branch of the Seventh Day Adventists Church."

Eventually, before the fall of the U.S.S.R., he emigrated to the United States, still as a Seventh Day Adventist pastor, and formed the Messianic Synagogue, on Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. Still, continuing as a pastor with his 50 constituents, he labored to grasp the deeper meanings of the Bible. Finally, in 1989, he attended the Moscow Book Fair, and there he found a book penned by Rabbi Dov Ber Haskelevich. Once he opened it, he couldn't put the book down. That book opened the way for him to find his own answers. Then, too, his constituents plied him with question after question. Fundo began to wonder: If we're observing the Jewish Sabbath, wearing *talliśim*, and lighting Sabbath candles, what does that make us? Jews? Seventh Day Adventists? Jewish Christians? Who? What? Where are we? Fundo had too many answers to his own questions.

As Divine Providence would have it, one day on a short trip via ship to Canada, Leonid Fundo encountered a Russian crony aboard the ship. The friend was a professional photographer who had been making it his business to photograph the Rebbe. And without any intention to convert his friend to his newfound ideas, Fundo introduced himself as a Messianic Jew and asked his friend, "What do you think about the Messiah?" Or maybe the word still uncomfortably tripped off Fundo's tongue, and he might have used the word *Meśśiah*. In response, his Russian crony said, "Ha. No problem. I'm a Messianic Jew and I know who is the Messiah. But I'm not sure it's best for you to talk to me. It's better for you to talk to Rabbi Haskelevich."

And to that, Fundo yelped, Oh! Haskelevich? Don't I know this name already from some years ago in Russia?"

A year passed before Leonid Fundo phoned Haskelevich, and, as soon as they talked, the pastor from Russia felt he could trust the rabbi from Russia. That night, he came to Haskelevich's home on Montgomery Street in Crown Heights; there, they spent eight hours at night sitting and talking, mainly about answers to satisfy his congregation. That night, how quickly 2 a.m. came around! That very morning, Fundo was scheduled to leave to Russia. Almost nonstop, the two discussed, discussed, discussed, and finally, Fundo scampered home to prepare for his Russian trip. Later, when Fundo returned to America, he revisited his new friend and mentor, and they talked again more and more.

One *Śhabbat*, two months after those discussions, he brought his entire congregation to Haskelevich. On *Śhabbat*, they arrived in their cars at the rabbi's house. As much as Haskelevich was delighted to see them, there was no doubt he quickly

grasped that this was the start of an unusual Sabbath in Crown Heights. "I made *Kiddush* for the group, but I never got to eat," he laughed awkwardly, almost painfully, but made a sweeping gesture with his arms, as if to say, "Hey, but it turned out all right anyway."

But that was the end of Pastor Leonid Fundo. He informed his headquarters about his decision to leave the church and Christianity. Soon two church leaders visited him at his apartment.

"Why did you do that?" they asked him.

He told them that he didn't believe any longer in neither the Trinity nor any other Christian dogma. They asked him to rethink his new position, and they never again called him.

So, although as Pastor Leonid Fundo and his wife Marina had kept the *Shabbat* heretofore, now, when they met Rabbi Haskelevich and experienced the real meaning of *Shabbat*, as Jews celebrated it, Leonid's Jewish spark ignited into a big flame and ultimately he returned as a *baal teshuva*, with his wife and two children not very far behind. As Leonid Fundo put it, "While I was going through various religions, it was like putting on the left glove on the right hand. It makes you a little warm, but it doesn't fit. Finally, in coming home to the Jewish faith, it fit like the right-hand glove on the right hand."

This first meeting in Crown Heights eventually grew into an ongoing Russian Jewish outreach: several weekly seminars around Brooklyn, run by Rabbi Haskelevich.

Amazingly, with all the indoctrination and atheism in the U.S.S.R., a Jew never forgets everything about his Jewishness, no matter how threatened he is with hammers and sickles. In the privacy of his mind, he can even joke about it. He hears his Russian teacher say, "See, see, there is no G-d. You cannot see him." And the Jew inside the Jew yells back, "Well, does anybody see the teacher's brains?" And why not call into question the brains of a teacher who cannot see or fathom a Creator Who made his brains, and the rest of him, too? A Jew knows there's an emptiness in anyone who questions G-d.

A Jew also knows there's never been a Russian revolution where Jewish blood wasn't spilled.[16] Leave it to the Lubavitcher Rebbe to help forge a bloodless, spiritual revolution even in the Evil Empire. It was—until now that we are learning the truth about the underground and above-ground Lubavitcher activities that led to the Soviet downfall—almost a thankless task, but somebody had to do it. With all the non-Jewish books beginning to proliferate on the subject, another somebody Jewish had to tell how the Soviet Union really found out there is a G-d. Hats off to the Rebbe and to Rabbi Dov Ber Haskelevich!

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16. Alexander Shmuckler, member of the Soviet Jewish Vaad Organization, speaking at the August 24 funeral of Ilya Krichevski, a Jew killed resisting the August 1991 coup, quoted in the Jerusalem Report, September 5, 1991, 3-1/2 months before the Soviet Union crumbled in the dust.

Another Secret of the Rebbe

After the establishment of the state of Israel, the future president of Israel, Zalman Shazar (1889-1974), wanted to return to the U.S.S.R. to visit his brother, two sisters and other family members whom he hadn't seen in many years. At that time, the Israeli government decided to appoint him as an Ambassador in Moscow. All that was needed was just the agreement of the Russian government.

Before the response even arrived from Moscow, a special messenger arrived from the Rebbe, who told Shazar, not to go to Moscow; "Don't receive the appointment. No good is going to come out of it; not for you, and not for the Jews who live there." After two days, the Russian government notified the Israel government they opposed the appointment of Shazar.

By 1963, Shazar had traveled to the Soviet Union, after which he visited the U.S. and went to see the Rebbe. They spent more than five hours together. Shazar brought with him a report he made about the situation of the Soviet Jews. All of a sudden the Rebbe turned to him and said, "Zalman, if they suggest to you soon to become the president of the state of Israel, please do not accept it." Surprised, Shazar said, "The current president, Yitzchak Ben-Zvi, is still very much alive and nobody is suggesting that I should replace him." Said the Rebbe, "Nevertheless, if they suggest it to you, I don't want you to accept." Heeding the Rebbe's advice, Shazar rejected the Israeli offer when it came up. And then took off shortly for another flight to the U.S.S.R., for more fact-finding, which of course, he couldn't have taken had he been president of the state of Israel as the relations between Russia and Israel then were not exactly bright.

When he returned from the Soviet Union and again visited the Rebbe at "770," this time, the Rebbe told Shazar that "very soon they are going to suggest to you the office of president of the state of Israel. This time I advise you to accept." And Shazar did accept.

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Fun and Games in Kiev

In the summer of 1985, a young, female Columbia University student named Rena N. (the name has been changed at the request of our heroine) and 44 other Russian-studies teachers and students traveled to the Soviet Union, to the land of Shalom Aleichim,[1] Mendel Beilis,[2] Babi Yar,[3] and Golda Meir (also born in Kiev). Call the capital of the Ukraine what you will—Kiev, Kieff, Kyyiv, Kiyev, Kiov—to many Jews living there, Kiev, with its deeply painful memories of blood libel accusations, overt antisemitism, the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648, dictatorships out of control, the cyclical patterns of persecution, expulsion and return, beginning in 1495, the more than 200,000 murdered Jews and non-Jews buried ignobly at Babi Yar in 1941, and countless personal attacks by non-Jews[4]—Kiev remains an eternal calling card to bitter-sweet Jewish memory.

So, let's be fair to Kiev, as often in the past it was fair to Jews. In their almost here-today, gone-tomorrow lives in Kiev, Jews, at first transient merchants, settled in Kiev as a community by the tenth century, when visitors from the Jewish kingdom of Khazaria tried to persuade Kiev's Prince Vladimir to convert to Judaism. With the annexation of Kiev to the principality of Lithuania in 1320, the Jews were granted certain rights ensuring the safety of their lives and property. Several of them gained leasing rights to collect taxes, and they amassed fortunes. As the Jewish community

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1.Foremost Russian-Yiddish humorist (1859-1916), who spent much time in Kiev; in his writings Kiev is always referred to as Yahupets.

2.Victim of a blood libel in tsarist Russia. Incarcerated, he was subject to a long period of torture and cross-examination in the vain hope of extorting a confession. After a trial that attracted international attention, he was acquitted of all wrongdoing.

3.A large ravine on the northern edge of Kiev, the capital city of Ukraine, the site of a mass grave of more than 100,000 victims, mostly Jews, who were killed by German Nazi SS squads between 1941 and 1943. The site became a symbol of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust. In 1966, a small obelisk was constructed there, and in 1976 a 50-foot memorial statue was unveiled. Neither the statue nor the obelisk, however, made any reference to the Jewish dead. Especially after the Six-Day War in 1967, Jewish national feeling reemerged publicly in Kiev. The anniversary of Babi Yar became a rallying day for Jews, most of them young, who came not only to recite Kaddish but also to express their Jewish identification. Wreaths bearing inscriptions in Yiddish and Hebrew were laid and there were occasional attempts to make speeches, but on every such occasion the police intervened to remove the wreaths and silence the speakers. After one such gathering a young Jewish engineer, Boris Kochubiyevski, was arrested in 1968 on the charge of "spreading slander against the Soviet regime," after he and his wife Larissa had applied for an exit permit to Israel. In May 1969 he was sentenced to three years imprisonment with hard labor. At his trial Kochubiyevski made a passionate speech, declaring his Jewish credo.

4.To this day, one of the most popular, insensitive, and underground anti-Jewish jokes goes this way: Two Kievans, Alexei and Mikola, were walking along the street when they saw a Jewish-looking fellow approaching. "Let's give that Jew a thrashing," Alexei said to Mikola. "But," protested Mikola, "he looks very strong. He might hit us back." Said Alexei, "He wouldn't do that." "And why not?" asked Mikola. Replied Alexei, "What could he possibly have against us?"

increased in numbers so did the number of scholars, although the statement found in several sources, "from Kiev emanate Torah and light," is an exaggeration.[5]

No Jewish community would form in Kiev again until the second partition of Poland, in 1793; that added thousands of Jews to the Russian realm. By 1815 the city had 1,500 Jews and two synagogues. After expulsion again, finally in 1861 two sections of the city—Podil and Lyebed—were assigned for Jews who could get permits. With the exception of the years under German occupation, Podil has been a center of Jewish life ever since.

The last restrictions on Jewish residence in Kiev were lifted during World War I and after the Russian Revolution, and then more Jews poured into the city. By 1960, the Jewish population reached 200,000.

One of the two synagogues in Kiev, with room for about 1,000 persons, is situated downtown in the Podil quarter, on 29 Shchekavitskaya Street. Its rabbi is Yaakov Bleich, chief rabbi of the Union of Jewish Religious Organizations of Ukraine. On holidays, particularly on Yom Kippur, also the memorial day of the Babi Yar massacre, several thousands attend the service there, overflowing into the courtyard and the street.

Attached to the synagogue are also a *mikveh*, a place for the ritual slaughtering of poultry, and a *matzah* bakery. Before that, from 1960 until 1966, the baking of *matzahs* had been prohibited and several Jews were punished for baking them "illegally" in their homes.

In 1959, the Kiev municipality opened a new Jewish cemetery and decided to close the old one at Lukyanovka, near Babi Yar, which had been desecrated and partly destroyed during the Nazi occupation. Local and foreign Jews were allowed to transfer the remains of their relatives to the new cemetery if they defrayed the expenses involved. American chassidic rabbis arranged for the transfer of the remains of the chassidic rabbis of the Twersky family, and the president of Israel, Izhak Ben Zvi, received permission from the Soviet head of state to transfer to Israel the remains and the tombstone of his friend Ber Borochov (1963).

Generally, Kievan *misnagdim* and *chassidim* have gotten along fine (a big achievement, especially in the early days when, elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the two groups generally distrusted each other). Indeed, Kiev was the home of many chassidic dynasties: Stolin-Karlin, Twersky, Chernobyl-Square, Rizhin-Boyan, *et al.* All this, of course, was before the Communists took over. However, even in later years one finds chassidic families who clung to the religious way of life and even risked being arrested by the KGB for their religious practices.

We also find—thank G-d for the Divinely inspired practice called *ahavas Yisrael!*—many Jewish philanthropists among the wealthy population of Kiev. After the fall of Communism and the Ukraine became independent, Chabad/Lubavitch finally succeeded in obtaining the remains of the Great Central Synagogue, the blue-and-

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5.*Encyclopaedia Judaica* CD Room, Item: Kiev.

white building dating from 1897, erected with the funds of Joseph Brodsky and his family, who also built Kiev's first Jewish hospital. The Great Central Synagogue/Brodsky Synagogue, located at 13 Shota Rustavely, once housed a workers' club and, since 1955, a municipal puppet theater, but now also houses the Chabad House of Kiev run by Lubavitcher Rabbi Berl Karasik. Both Chabad House and, *l'havdil,* the puppet theater have separate entrances to the building. In its earlier setting, at the Podil Synagogue, Chabad had set up a yeshiva for teenagers. After that, Stolin-Karliner opened up a children's school, which is still in operation.

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As of 1991, Podil was still the center of Jewish life in Kiev, though about 110,000 Jews can now be found all over the city. Jews are disproportionately represented among the city's doctors, engineers, and musicians, among teachers (especially languages and mathematics), and in the film industry.

Nowadays, the Lubavitch Movement is continuing to be strongly felt through the tremendous outreach work of Rabbi Berl Karasik and his Chabad House of Kiev—thanks in a good part by Kiev multimillionaire businessman, Avraham Rabinovich, who is financing the reconstruction of the Brodsky shul/Chabad House of Kiev.

But, in passing, let us salute the other Lubavitcher rabbis of the Ukraine, who are all doing great work in G-d's world. They include: Rabbi Yitzchok M. Lipszyc, Chabad Lubavitch of the Crimea; Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetski, Chabad of Dnepropetrovsk; Rabbi Pinchus Vishedsky, Chabad House of Donezk; Rabbi Moshe Moskovitz, Chabad House of Kharkov; Rabbi Sholom Gottlieb, Chabad of Central Synagogue of Nikolayev; Rabbi Avrohom Wolf, Chabad of Odessa; Rabbi Nachum Erentrei, Chabad of Zaporozhia; and Rabbis Shmuel Plotkin and Shlomo Wilhelm, Chabad Lubavitch of Zhitomir.

Still, it must be added, no Jew who visits Kiev even nowadays can effectively disregard the spirits of dead Jews calling to him or her from their graves and beyond. "It happens to many Jews when they first set foot on the streets of Kiev...[t]here is a sense that you have been here before."[6] Kiev, a symbol of Jewish suffering, is filled with such Jewish souls that won't go away.

Yet, Rena, who looked like a sunflower (or as the Ukrainians endearingly call it, "little sunshine")[7] eternally growing in the gloom of winter, seemed right at home as she

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6."The Kiev of the [1980s] looks much as grandparents described the Kiev of the first decade of the century. Close to 90 percent of Warsaw was destroyed in World War II, but less than 20 percent of Kiev. If other European cities offer a view, Kiev offers a strong sense of deja vu."—Alan M. Tigay, *The Jewish Traveler* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994), p. 252.

7.In winter, dried sunflowers were boiled into a tea to help ease colds, and sunflower oil was used in salves for burns and skin rashes. A quarter-cup of sunflower oil is still used today as a tonic to cleanse the liver of impurities.

eagerly arrived in the sunshine of Kiev on Wednesday, August 7. Eagerly arrived? Do these words give a proper fix on her attitude? Was she a wide-eyed American graduate student bent on picking up the "street smarts" for her Russian studies, or totally dedicated to help save a fellow Jew in Kiev? Not too much of her background is known, but, as you'll see, her intention was to "go to Leningrad State University, be with my group (of 45 American students) and improve my language skills." Did she accomplish these tasks? Who knows! But what we do know is, what she was confronted with in Kiev hurt her and other Jews so much that her report, after she returned home to America, was kept well hidden. Although Rena doesn't write of the U.S.S.R. of 1999, her story must be read and definitely not forgotten, if only because, as former U.S. Secretary of State, Dean Acheson (1893-1971), once wrote, "Memory is not something that's fortuitous for Jews. Judaism is founded on the idea of remembering, and remembering, and remembering that you should not forget. That's what makes us Jewish...." Now that all persons mentioned in the story are safely out of harm's way, let us all be grateful to her story finally being released.

In the evening of the day Rena arrived in Kiev, she left her group ensconced in their hotel rooms and stealthily made her way through Kiev to visit a young refusenik named Misha [Michael] Elbert, who wasn't home at the moment when she arrived unannounced.

On the morning of August 8, her touring group of Russian-studies students and professors paid a visit to Babi Yar. To be seen there at the time was a stone Jewish menorah, sitting on a stepped pedestal, sculpted by Yuri Pakevich, and a plaque in Yiddish, but no permanent Jewish memorial. And as many people who've heard of Babi Yar know, it took a world-famous non-Jew writing a poem to electrify and shame the Ukrainians and the world, to acknowledge and to establish, or plan to establish, some kind of fitting memorial to Jewish victims buried at Babi Yar. That Russian poet was Yevgeni Yevtushenko. His poem: "Babi Yar"[8]—both poem and poet were among the first chinks in the great monolith of Soviet information control. (When, finally,

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8. **Babi Yar** A poem by Yevgeni Yevtushenko Translated by Benjamin Okopnik, October 1996

No monument stands over Babi Yar.
A sleep cliff only, like the rudest headstone. I am afraid.
Today, I am as old as the entire Jewish race itself
I see myself an ancient Israelite.
I wander o'er the roads of ancient Egypt.
It seems to me that Dreyfus° is myself
The Philistines betrayed me—and now judge.
I'm in a cage. Surrounded and trapped,
I'm persecuted, spat on, slandered, and
The dainty dollies in their Brussels frill
Squeal, as they stab umbrellas at my face.
I see myself a boy on Belostock°°
Blood spills, and runs upon the floors,
The chiefs of bar and pub rage unimpeded
And reek of vodka and of onion, half and half.
I'm thrown back by a boot, I have no strength left,
In vain I beg the rabble of pogrom,
To jeers of "Kill the Jews, and save our Russia!"
My mother's being beaten by a clerk.
O, Russia of my heart, I know that you
Are international, by inner nature.
But often those whose hands are steeped in filth
Abused your purest name, in name of hatred.
I know the kindness of my native land.
How vile, that without the slightest quiver
The antisemites have proclaimed themselves
The "Union of the Russian People!"
It seems to me that I am Anne Frank,
Transparent, as the thinnest branch in April,
And I'm in love, and have no need of phrases,
But only that we gaze into each other's eyes.
How little one can see, or even sense!
Leaves are forbidden, so is sky,
But much is still allowed - very gently
In darkened rooms each other to embrace.
-"They come!" -No, fear not - those are sounds
of spring itself. She's Coming soon. Quickly, your lips!"
-"They break, the door!" -"No, river ice is breaking..."
Wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar,
The trees look sternly, as if passing judgment.

Jewish leaders from Kiev dedicated an explicitly Jewish monument at the site on September 28, 19911—the fiftieth anniversary of the first killings—they were joined not only by Jews from Israel and the United States, but also by representatives of the Ukrainian and Soviet governments. Given that the Soviet Union itself would pass into history two months later, sanctioning the memorial it had so long prevented was one of its last official acts.)

But let's not get carried away with summer griefs and disappointments. Rena couldn't allow herself to get too carried away with despair. She had her own private mission in Kiev, and the need to keep herself calm and collected. To this end, after the group's visit, she again separated from them, and bearing in mind that Misha Elbert's apartment was a stone's throw away from Babi Yar, she walked to his apartment. Again, he wasn't home.

Strange? she shook her head. *Has something happened to Misha? Perish the thought! Why not think something's good happening to Misha at this very moment!*

That night she dreamed of finally telling Mendel Beilis she always wanted to meet him and to thank him for being so courageous. In the dream, Beilis took it all in without even a smile on his face. After a long pause, he said, "My name is Menachem Mendel Beilis, and I am a victim of a blood libel charge in Russia in 1911. They want to blame me for killing a little boy and..." From the dream Rena quickly awoke, and softly wept, "Where will it all end?" Then she got up and phoned Misha. Again, he didn't answer the phone, and this made her very uneasy.

At 5:30 p.m., she tried another tack, phoning Misha's brother

—Lev Elbert..[9] A mutual friend in Leningrad gave Rena Lev's number. Somebody answered, but it was neither Misha nor Lev. The gruff voice on the other end of the phone asked whom she wanted and why she was calling. Intimidated by the man's tone, she blurted out that she was looking for Misha. "Is this L.?" asked Rena.

"There is no L. here."

"Well, so much for that!" she said to herself.

Yet she couldn't give up. She then placed another call to Misha. This time he was home. Rena mentioned she was a friend of Grisha Wasserman from Leningrad, and she'd like to visit Misha.

Here, silently, all screams, and, hat in hand,
I feel my hair changing shade to gray.
And I myself, like one long soundless scream
Above the thousands of thousands interred,
I'm every old man executed here,
As I am every child murdered here.
No fiber of my body will forget this.

May "Internationale"[xxx] thunder and ring
When, for all time, is buried and forgotten
The last of antisemites on this earth.
There is no Jewish blood that's blood of mine,
But, hated with a passion that's corrosive
Am I by antisemites like a Jew.
And that is why I can call myself a Russian!

x.Alfred Dreyfus was a French officer, unfairly dismissed from service in 1894 due to trumped-up charges prompted by antisemitism. xx.Belostok was the site of the first and most violent pogroms, the Russian version of *Kristallnacht*.

xxx.The "Internationale" is the Soviet national anthem.

9.The older brother of Misha Elbert, Lev Elbert, the "Prisoner of Zion," was put on trial in Kiev on May 25, 1983, charged with "refusing to report when summoned to military service." Convicted, he was sentenced to one year in a labor camp. As the above story unfolds, both Lev and Inna Elbert are reunited as husband and wife, free and living in Kiev. Of the two brothers, the younger Misha generally remained in the shadow of his big brother. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why Rena N. decided to visit the shy Misha.

"Hokay," said Misha.

Slowly turning her head from left to right, to see if she was being watched or overheard, Rena asked to visit Misha on the morrow. *"Shabbat?"*

"It would be better for you to come now," he said.

"I'll be there within the hour," she said. On the way, more thoughts of Mendel Beilis came to mind. She thought of Bernard Malamud, the Jewish author. She thought of his novel, *The Fixer. Was every word he wrote about Beilis true?* she wondered. She also thought of the mass grave of Jews at Babi Yar. *They didn't have a chance! At least Beilis had a fighting chance!* She thought of the blood libel charge against Beilis. *On March 20, 1911, the mutilated body of Andrei Yushchinsky, a 12-year-old Christian boy, was discovered in a cave on the outskirts of Kiev. The monarchist rightist press immediately launched a vicious anti-Jewish campaign, accusing the Jews of using human blood for ritual purposes. At the funeral of Yushchinsky, leaflets circulating the blood libel were distributed by members of the reactionary "Black Hundred" ("Union of Russian People") organization. Beilis was arrested for the crime. Why? Why? Why?* Rena shook her head. *How could they think any G-d-fearing Jew would ever mix Christian blood—any blood!—in Passover matzahs! Nothing changes in Kiev!* And then another voice in her head said, *"Maybe it does."*

At 6:30 p.m., Rena arrived at Misha's. At that moment, he was taking out his garbage. The two met at the front door of the apartment house. He spotted the American student and told her to wait for him by his apartment's front door. Rena did as he said. The two of them were about to enter his apartment when a tall, plainclothes KGB agent appeared in the hallway. He flashed his card (let's call him No-Name) at Misha and, pointing at Rena, asked, "Who is she?"

Rena said in Russian, "I'm Misha's friend."

No-name scowled. "This looks like a crime scene, and I've caught you with the goods. What do you have in your bag, narcotics?"

Rena opened her bag and said, "No, just bread and vegetables. Sorry."

Suddenly Rena recalled: *Two medical professors were bribed, as they later admitted, to testify that the child had apparently been drained of his blood while still alive...* No-Name asked who Rena was. In Russian she gave her name and said she was an American.

"What hotel are you staying at?" asked No-Name—as if he didn't know that already, Rena figured.

She mentioned the name of her hotel.

No-Name asked for her passport and visa.

She didn't have them on her, she said.

"In that case, you must go with me to your hotel to verify that you are who you say you are."

Before No-Name could take any action, Misha ushered Rena into his apartment, and shut the door.

The KGB man was furious. "Come out of there!" he demanded.

Behind the closed apartment door, Rena's body and mind freely shook. *In July 1911, a lamplighter testified that on March 12, the day Yushchinsky disappeared, he had seen him playing with two other boys on the premises of the brick kiln owned by a Jew, Zaitsev. He also alleged that a Jew had suddenly appeared and kidnapped Yushchinsky, pulling him toward the brick kiln. On the*

strength of this testimony, Mendel Beilis, the superintendent of the brick kiln, was arrested on July 21, 1911, and sent to prison, where he remained for over two years. A report was submitted to Czar Nicholas II that Beilis was regarded by the judiciary as the murderer of Yushchinsky.

"Nyet," shouted Rena—at Czar Nicholas for his Jew-hatred, and at No-name, who meant her no good..

You can't treat me like Beilis! she silently shot back at the KGB man on the other side of the door. *I know how the police handled poor Beilis. You knew the real murderers—a gang of thieves associated with a woman, Vera Cheberiak, notorious for criminal dealings—yet you gathered evidence to convict a hapless Jew. And you can bring on any "scientific" foundation for a blood libel you want. I know all about Father Justin Pranaitis, that Catholic priest with a criminal record, who stated at the Beilis trial that the murder of Yushchinsky had all the characteristics of ritual murder enjoined by the Jewish religion. I tell you, Mr. Goon,* she silently said vehemently to No-Name on the other end of the door, who, in effect, could not hear any of her words, let alone her heavy heart beating, *I tell you, Mr. KGB goon, I'm an American citizen; you're not going to get me on trumped-up charges!*

All this time the KGB operative himself was yelling through the door, demanding that Rena respect Soviet authority. Finally, however, he slammed the door with his fist, and said, "Obviously you respect nothing!" Then he left the hallway. Shaken, Misha and Rena were relived he had left.

"Do you think he'll return?" she asked Misha, after they finally backed away from the door.

"Uh. Apparently he went looking for instructions what to do next. And yes, once they get a hold on you, they always come back to tighten their grip."

Against her better judgment, she used the phone in Misha's apartment to call her old hotel. She had to act fast. *Shabbat* was fast approaching, and she was already in the Intourist hotel, the Dnyper, and she would no longer be able to meet up with her group who were in the old student hotel, the Mir. Since Misha advised her to call in as many Americans as possible this was her last chance.

After many unsuccessful attempts she finally got someone in her room. Rena asked her fellow student to get hold of Jan and Sasha. (Jan was a professor of politics at the University of Massachusetts and Sasha was her Soviet husband, a Hebrew teacher in Leningrad, whom she had married only two and a half months ago.)

"Give Sasha and Jan my address and telephone number, and hurry please, get here soon and bring as many people as possible." In her current situation, Jan and Sasha were the only ones Rena felt could help her, since both, although not religious, were actively involved in Jewish affairs. Rena also told the student in the hotel to alert Marina. Marina was one of the group's two official translators. Of course, no one in the group really needed her for translating anything; they themselves all fluently spoke the Russian language. But since she was their official guide and translator, the group looked upon Marina as their pet Soviet informer...

But Marina was a decent person, everyone had to admit that, and a number of times she looked the other way when somebody from the group broke a small infraction. More than the others, Rena appreciated Marina, even if she secretly thought Marina pretended all along to be her friend.

After she hung up the phone, Rena looked at Misha, and flipped out her hands as if to say, "Let's hope for the best"; *the worst: a liberal journalist named Brazul-Brushkovsky discovered Vera Cheberiak had cooperated with the government in planting the dead boy's clothing in Beilis's home.*

As they moved toward a few chairs to sit on, Misha said to her, "We must talk before they return. This is serious that they are on to us."

"How serious?" Rena said uncertainly.

Back to Beilis again: While antisemitism certainly played a major role in the Beilis case...the struggle was as much for the soul of an entire nation as for the exoneration of the single Jew at the center.[10]

"How serious?" Rena said uncertainly.

"I'm not sure how serious right now," said Misha, "but let's keep our story straight. Remember, you're here to give me regards from my fiance, who lives in France."

He then told Rena her name and their history. "Three years ago we legally registered our desire to marry. Evelyn has not yet received a visa to return here to marry me. You got the facts straight?" he said to Rena.

"Uh-huh. Evelyn. Three years. Wedding bells eventually."

Shortly the KGB man returned with a militiaman (let's call him No-Name-2), banging hard on the door. As he went slowly to open the front door, Misha motioned Rena to the kitchen area. "Stay there until I call for you."

As soon as No-Name reentered the apartment, he and No-Name-2 began to shout, "All right, where's the girl?"

Misha turned toward the kitchen. "Rena," he said, "come out here, please."

As soon as Rena showed her sunflower face, the two accusers pounced on her with words. "Who are you? What are you doing here? Why did you and your friend shut the door in my face? What were you trying to hide?" Why this...did you do that...are you a spy...?

Rena said to Misha, in English, that she didn't understand Russian. "Please explain to me what they said."

No-Name was scowling at her while No-Name-2 stared at her as if looks could kill...*the journalist also learned that Vera Cheberiak had killed her own son rather than run the risk of his disclosing the true facts of the original murder*[11]...Realizing that No-Name already knew she could speak Russian, she tried to quickly cover her tracks, explaining, this time in Russian, that she spoke a little Russian. "Sir, I do respect your authority, and since this is an official visit—as I can see by your bringing a militiaman along with you, I wished to speak in a language, English, that I understood best."

But the way the two antagonists turned away and abruptly exited the apartment, leaving the door wide open, neither she nor Misha knew what to think.

A few moments later, No-Name and No-Name-2 reappeared, this time followed by two "witnesses" who lived in the building. Misha seemed to know both of them, as he acknowledged them with as brief smile. One was a middle-aged Jewish man who,

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10.Naomi Pasachoff and Robert J. Littman, *Jewish History in 100 Nutshells* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), p. 244.

11.Howard M. Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 295.

Misha later confided to Rena, had often visited his apartment, obviously a KGB plant for the authorities. The other was an old man who could barely see or hear. Immediately, No-Name placed a sheet of paper on the living room table, and, in front of Misha and Rena, and these two witnesses signed it. *In July 1911, a lamplighter named Schakhovsky testified that on March 12, the day Yushchinsky disappeared, he had seen him playing with two other boys on the premises of the brick kiln owned by a Jew, Zaitsev. He also alleged that a Jew had suddenly appeared and kidnapped Yushchinsky, pulling him toward the brick kiln. That Jew was Mendel Beilis. Why Beilis? Why not Beilis? Again, why not Beilis! That was the iron-clad logic of the prosecuting team of Chaplinsky and his assistant, A. J. Vipper.* Rena also remembered what the Lubavitcher Rebbe has said many times over the years about the incident. *In those days of Czar Nicholas II, a policeman saw a Yid running away from him. When he caught up to the Yid, he demanded to know why he ran as soon he saw him. Quite intimidated, the Yid replied that he made a very big mistake of mailing a letter on which he placed a stamp of the czar upside down. "That's treason!" shouted the policeman and he dragged the Jew off to jail. And so, why not Beilis! Jews were always placing the czar's stamp upside down on letters.*

In another time, the same Yid might be surrounded by a group of Nazis, who demanded of him, "Tell us, Jew, who caused the war?" No fool the Jew, he said, "The Jews," then added, "and the bicycle riders." The Nazis were puzzled. "Why the bicycle riders?" they asked him. To which the Yid answered, "Why the Jews?"

...now Beilis was accused of being a Jew, who deliberately places Russian stamps upside down on letters...

And now Rena was being accused...of improper behavior...of intentionally refusing to speak in Russian. And when asked if she had any photograph of her in her purse, she replied yes, a Xerox copy of her passport, visa and student card, which only made matters worse for her. Now she was hit with another charge: intentionally hiding important papers from them. And they wrote down with profuse notes how Rena happened to be in Misha's apartment that day.

Rena knew she was in trouble. What kind of trouble she wasn't certain of. She racked her brain, trying to recall something in the Soviet law regulations she had been briefed about. Suddenly something about Soviet regulations she had memorized, perhaps not precisely chapter and verse in Russian, but...

As it read out in her mind, it said, "Even with your complete willingness to tolerate all the restrictions that subject foreigners in the U.S.S.R., you can turn out to be in a situation where against your will and against your wishes you will happen to enter into a legal discussion with Soviet officials. For example, you made a mistake concerning the filling out of the customs declarations, and Soviet officials interpret this mistake as being intentional. Or, you had a little talk with a person whom the Soviet authorities want to subject to prosecution and for this demand from you to give compromising evidence about this person. In all of these cases, the knowledge of your rights will turn out to be of invaluable service to you, exactly like your willingness to insist that you are a free person and that your rights must be preserved."

So Rena stood accused of doing certain things intentionally. Whatever they asked her, they deliberately distorted her claims, writing down all kinds of misinformation. And Misha did not get off scot-free: he was told he would be charged 100 rubles for her

misbehavior. For all the good it did her, Rena protested that she was an American citizen and that she had rights. During the hour of interrogation, the phone rang two times. Each time Rena spoke to Jan, Sasha and Marina, telling them that she was being blamed for looking like a criminal and for carrying narcotics. She pleaded with her friends to help her. *Accordingly, the chief district attorney of Kiev disregarded the police information and instead looked for a Jew on whom to shift the crime, through whom the entire Jewish people could be publicly indicted. Beilis was promptly arrested and thrown in jail.*

No-Name knew he had the upper hand, and demanded that Rena go with them.

"I won't go anywhere till my friends come," said Rena.

No-Name spat out the Russian equivalent of "Oh yeah!"

Rena stood her ground, ready to physically resist arrest. "I tell you, sir," she nervously barked at her accusers, "there are 44 Americans in this city who know exactly where I am and what you're doing to me."

No-Name said he was unimpressed. He told Rena that if she didn't go with him right then, he had the right to arrest her for three days. "You'll be put in jail with thieves, murderers and prostitutes," snapped No-Name-2. *Rena suddenly remembered that Beilis was promptly arrested and thrown in jail—through whom the entire Jewish people could be publicly indicted....*

This was a very close call for Rena. If it were not *erev Shabbat* Rena might have called their bluff. But she didn't want to take even the slightest chance of spending *Shabbat* in such a *ruchniasdik* place like jail. Nonetheless, she asked permission to speak to Misha privately. No-Name reluctantly allowed it.

She asked Misha what to do.

He suggested that she should go with them.

Before leaving, Rena handed Misha all the rubles she had on her. Although it amounted to about 60 rubles, Rena confided to Misha her intention to help defray the 100 rubles Misha was fined. (It turned out that the 100-ruble fine was only a ruse, an empty threat.)

So Rena left the apartment with her accusers. As they reached the street level, No-Name asked if she left anything in the apartment. No, she said. "Are you sure?" he asked. Yes, Rena answered.

The trial of Beilis took place in Kiev from September 25 through October 28, 1913.

Why did this thought suddenly come to Rena's mind? Were they also going to put her on trial? she wondered. What would she be accused of? Looking like a criminal? What does a criminal look like?

A block away from Misha's building, the two no-names told her that they were going with her to the Hotel Dnepr; they intended to check her documents. They also said that she would have to pay for the taxi ride. Another trap? Rena said she had no money on her to pay for the cab. The way they were staring her down, she felt she was tightening a noose around her own neck. But then what could she say! Said No-Name: "If you had no rubles on you, then how did you get to Misha Elbert's apartment?"

Rena also recalled that the chief prosecutor A. I. Vipper made anti-Jewish statements in his closing address and defended the Cheberiak gang against the charge of Yushchinsky's murder. As for Beilis...

As for Rena, she claimed that she had used up all her rubles coming to Misha's. But No-Name-2 said that he saw rubles in Rena's pocket at Misha's.

"Well," Rena said, "I cannot see what's in your pocket; how can you see what is in mine?"

That seemed to take the pressure off Rena. At this point the militiaman No-Name-2 left the two others. Rena and No-Name found a taxi who was willing to take No-Name and his "prisoner" to the hotel without charge (once No-Name flashed his official badge).

...as for Beilis, he was represented by the most able counsels of the Moscow, S. Petersburg, and Kiev law bars: Vassily Maklakov, Oscar O. Gruzenberg, N. P. Karabchevsky, A. S. Zarudy, and D. N. Grigorovitch-Barsky. As for the lamplighter...

Along the way to the hotel, No-Name did his best to provoke Rena. First he railed against and insulted the United States (little did he know that a goodly amount of Americans were also down on what America stood for). Then when Rena didn't respond, he began to tell the taxi driver how Rena had misbehaved.

Another aspect of the Beilis trial struck her: As for the lamplighter, he also alleged that a Jew had suddenly appeared and kidnapped Yushchinsky, pulling him toward the brick kiln. On the strength of this testimony, Mendel Beilis, the superintendent of the brick kiln, was arrested on July 21, 1911, and sent to prison, where he remained for over two years.

"I tell you, Comrade Taxi Driver, this woman will get her comeuppance for showing such disrespect to Soviet authority."

Not once did the taxi driver turn around, but, like an exclamation point, he nodded at each word No-Name uttered.

Little did Rena know what was in store for her at the hotel. Past the hotel's service bureau, into the furthest office she was quickly ushered to meet three gaunt, mealy-faced men, all specters of death, who grilled her nonstop that Friday night for four-and-a-half hours, from 7:30 p.m. until midnight. Rena's heart beat so wildly that she felt at any moment she'd breathe her last— "stung by the laughing bee on a stalk of death."[12]

Working her over were three Soviet goons—one very cruell-looking, one very sweet-looking, and a third who said nothing at all, until he was ready to explode, probably the chief "laughing bee."

When she returned to the States, she was told she should have phoned the American Embassy and demanded that a representative from the United States embassy be at hand. That, she knew, was Soviet Law. Instead, every 20 minutes, she blurted out to her interrogators in the hot, stuffy room, "I already told you that I won't say anything until Marina [her "translator"] gets here."

Who in this grilling room had the upper hand now? There was no consulate or embassy in Kiev at the time. Marina was an official Soviet worker. How she could help Rena was anybody's wild guess. Ditto her American group leaders, who would be of little help. "One was too inept, afraid of her own shadow," said Rena, "and the other

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12.Naomi Pasachoff and Robert J. Littman, *Jewish History in 100 Nutshells* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995) pp. 245-246.

had married a Russian woman and would not risk getting himself or her into any trouble or a sticky situation as hers." The group did have another translator. But as far as Rena was concerned, "She couldn't be relied on, especially in this situation."

Marina seemed the only saving grace for Rena. Perhaps she herself was not permitted to watch a full interrogation—and if this were so—then, faced with the situation, she'd have to get new instructions from her Moscow headquarters. Here's hoping Marina's presence would prove to be a useful delay tactic. .

In assembling a legal staff for the Beilis prosecution, only lawyers willing to put career goals above a commitment to justice were willing to become involved. Nor could any Russian church official or scholar of any repute be found to testify on behalf of the blood accusation. The government had to content itself with a Catholic priest from remote Tashkent, who some years before had written a pamphlet to prove that Judaism sanctioned ritual murder. Fearful that a randomly selected jury would reject the blood libel and acquit Beilis, the government handpicked a group of mostly illiterate peasants who, it was hoped, would be convinced by their prejudices to endorse the blood accusation.

Yes, said Rena to herself, Marina will help her! Yes, said the KGB henchmen to themselves, Marina will help them!

In trying to make Rena talk, the KGB operatives tried everything, except physical torture, but she steadfastly kept saying the *Shema.*

But she had more a pressing problem common to you, me, and every other observant Jew: At 8:30, after being there an hour, she started worrying what she should do with the *muktzeh* in her purse.

Suddenly a desperate plan came to her. Surely they'd let her go to the bathroom, so she would ask them. From there, with her purse in hand, she'd maneuver to reach the elevator, and bring the *muktzeh* to her room. Then she'd return to the little room, with no one knowing what she had done.

As it turned out, the KGB men who until then said nothing allowed her to go to the bathroom, and she thought she was in the clear. However, when he saw her headed toward the elevator, he dispatched a KGB agent to head her off and block her from going to her room. Both the KGB agent (No-Name) and Rena reached the elevator at the same time and entered, the two stepped in to the elevator.

"It's obvious that you're trying to hide something in your purse. You probably have narcotics in there."

Again No-Name was accusing, and again Rena opened her purse and emptied its contents on the floor of the elevator floor.

"See, there is nothing suspicious there," she said.

"That's what you say!" snapped No-Name.

Rena screamed at her enemy, "You're a very cruel man."

Almost trying to muffle her physically, No-Name gritted his teeth and ordered her to be quiet. "Don't make a scandal or we'll throw the book at you," he sassed.

Suddenly, No-Name's tone softened. "Quietly follow me, please, back to the [secret] office," he said.

Rena felt relieved. So he was not going to assault her. Or keep her bag and its contents. So now she explained why she had to drop off her purse in her room, and requested, if he wished, that he escort her there, to see that she wasn't pulling a fast one.

"Nyet," he said, "Don"t try to trick me. You could tell your friends I did something to you along the way."

"Frankly, who'd believe them or me? But you—a Soviet official," she said almost sarcastically, "they'll believe you though you lie.""

Now Rena knew she knew she had put her foot in her mouth. No-Name marched her off, *muktzeh* purse in hand, without another word back to the secret office.

Fearful that a randomly selected jury would reject the blood libel and acquit Beilis, the government handpicked a group of mostly illiterate peasants who, it was hoped, would be convinced by their prejudices to endorse the blood accusation.

In the secret office, her three accusers were waiting for Rena. "Did you think we'd not know you were up to some trick." Mr. Cruel One said.

Said Mr. Sweet-Looking, "We knew, and the moment we saw you head to the elevator we sent our man to prevent you from going into the elevator. And if you had tried to leave the hotel, we also had a man at every exit."

Chief Laughing Bee said nothing, but Rena felt more threatened by this man's silence.

Finally, at 9:00 p.m., as if signalling the advent of *Shabbat*, the light in the room began to dim. And Rena remembered. *When G-d created the two great lights* (Genesis 1:6), *the moon asked, "Can two kings wear one crown?" Said G-d, "Go, then, and make yourself the lesser to rule the night."* Driven by that, Rena also remembered to rekindle an old flame. After asking permission of her interrogators, Rena went over to the light switch and turned on the four or five bulbs in the office. As if she were involved in candle-lighting, and in a sense that was exactly what she was doing, as she felt "candles" on her face, and circled the "flame" and covered her eyes, she then made the blessing, *"lehadlik ner shel Shabbat."* Then she sat down. Immediately, Rena's mood changed. She stopped doing, reacting, and concentrated on just being. The Sabbath that comforts Jews, that Sabbath that makes others say (to Jews), "I don't envy you your religion, but I envy you your Sabbath." On her hard seat in that hot little room she had personally made holy, she remembered that, *following the reading of the indictment in court on the second day of the Beilis trial in September 1913, a greater shock awaited the regime. A devastating assessment of the indictment was published in an editorial—but not, as might have been expected, in a liberal newspaper. Rather, the editorial was signed by a well-known antisemite, editor of the Kiev semiofficial monarchist and reactionary newspaper. He wrote that one did not need legal training to see that there was no case against Beilis, and that the government's mock trial could only bring shame on Russia before the world.*

Rena looked around at her detractors, who were chomping at the bit to make her talk, and she smiled at their ineptness. This was the *Shabbat*, and there was little else they could do until Marina arrived. Then she closed her eyes and sang a new *niggun* for *"Lecha Dodi"* she'd learned in Yerevan. Then she reopened her eyes, smiling, singing *"Lecha Dodi"* again, and swinging her leg back and forth to the rhythm of the *niggun*. For all their shouts and accusations, the three men did know how to handle her.

At 9:30 p.m., Rena heard Jan's high-pitched voice. It turned out that Misha had come to the hotel and joined Jan and her husband Sasha to rescue Rena. Loud and clear, Jan, or her echo, rang out: "My friend is here. She is an American citizen and so

am I. I know she's here and I demand to see her."

The man (probably at the front desk) said, just as loudly, "She isn't here."

In the little room, Rena went into action. She stood up from the couch, pretended to yawn and stretched her hands to her sides and—bolted out the room, making a beeline to where Jan's voice was coming from. After Rena came the Russian Keystone Cops, who couldn't, among them, manage to get a hand on her..

"Jan!" Rena shouted.

Now seeing her friend coming right toward her, she cried out frantically, "Rena."

Before anyone could get in their way, the two American students embraced, locking hands.

No-Name immediately hustled Sasha out of the hotel. In front of a half-dozen shocked hotel guests, who were told by the hotel detective to turn the other way, one of the KGB goons tried to separate Jan and Rena; in the end, he, a man at least six feet tall, literally dragged the two of them—Rena, measuring 4 feet 10 inches, and Jan, 5 feet—the 200 meters to the little back room. Being dragged along the shiny hotel floor, Rena said nothing. But Jan screamed, as if for all the Free World to hear, "You Fascists! You Nazis! I'm a pregnant woman and you're hurting me and my baby. If anything happens to this baby you're going to be in a lot of trouble. I am a professor of politics and have written many articles, and I'll blast you in print about this. So you better stop."

Along the way, Rena didn't exactly take it lying down. She stomped on the man's right foot. But Jan cautioned her to stop, that it could lead to real trouble as it was illegal to kick a KGB operative. Still, when Rena reached the little room, she maneuvered to put her foot horizontally across the doorway, thus blocking her and Jan from being dragged into the room. Every time the goon succeeded in putting down one of Rena's feet, her other foot sprang into position.

When he finally gave up, Rena gave in, now that she'd won this teeny battle, and got up off the floor and calmly walked into the little room. As American Jews, Rena and Jan knew they were not alone. Certainly they could deal with the two other KGB operatives, who had now returned to the small room, to join their comrade.

Jews from around the world also organized a Beilis Defense Committee. Nor was it Jews alone, in Kiev or elsewhere, who organized on Beilis's behalf. In Russia, professionals, workers, and peasants throughout the country protested the government's contempt for justice. Trolley-car workers in Kiev collected money for Beilis's wife and five children.

Never a quitter, despite her husband Sasha now possibly in the clutches of the KGB, Jan demanded to call the American Embassy in Moscow. When she tried to pick up the phone, they refused to let her use the phone in the office. If she wanted to, they said, she could go outside and make any calls she so pleased. Said Jan: She wasn't going to leave Rena alone. So they could forget about her making her phone call elsewhere. Interspersed among her demands, she gave them her individual two cents, what she thought of them; Rena gave them the silent treatment. But she managed to tell Jan everything that happened at Misha's, after that, and until the moment she came. And she said it both in English and Russian, to let the KGB men know that they wouldn't get away with their actions. Rena and Jan would tell their story to the Free

World; indeed by next Sunday, as Jan was leaving the very next morning for New York City, and then Washington, D.C.

Notable figures in the arts, sciences, and politics, not only in Russia but also in Germany, England, France, and the United States, signed manifestoes condemning the Beilis case. In fact, more international outrage was expressed against the czarist regime's falsified case than against Nazi antisemitism in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Jan then told Rena that the KGB had taken Marina away three hours past, as soon as they heard that Rena had requested her.

"They're intentionally preventing her from coming?" asked Rena.

"Uh-huh," said Jan. "But then I really don't know what she could do. She's one of them, right?"

Where was Sasha? Rena asked.

Jan said she wasn't sure. Nor did she know now the whereabouts of Misha. "They pushed both men out of the hotel."

At 10:00 p.m., Marina walked in the door. Within 10 minutes Rena and Jan decided that it would be better if Jan left. So she did. And with her went the freedom to protest Rena's situation to the West...*The foreign press recognized that the Beilis case was more than an antisemitic incident, it was proof of a desperate regime's utter lack of principle and its willingness to sell its soul to forestall revolution*...The new American-Russian battle went on in the room. Now that Marina was in the room, thee was no way that Rena could misinterpret their questions or accusations.

Mr. Sweet-Looking asked Rena if it were okay for everybody to speak Russian. Rena agreed on the condition that if she didn't understand a word, Marina would explain it to her...*The Beilis trial itself was a travesty of justice. When faced with trained lawyers of the highest caliber, many of the witnesses for the prosecution recanted their original testimony. The state prosecutor claimed that all such retractions were due to Jewish bribes or threats*...At this point Rena explained to Marina that she deliberately had summoned her because "these men are accusing me of things I'm not guilty of, namely, of looking like a criminal and carrying narcotics."

What were the three KGB men doing while Rena and Marina were conferring with each other? Was it wishful thinking on their part that Marina would help trip up Rena by getting her to say the wrong thing? Not typical bystanders, they allowed this cross-conversation to go on.

As the Beilis trial progressed, it became clear that less and less of the testimony had to do with Beilis at all. Not only did the newspapers begin to question, "Where is Beilis?" but when a member of the defense team, probably B. Karabchevsky or A. S. Zarudny, raised the same question, the judge called a ten-minute recess as nearly everyone in the packed courtroom—the state prosecutor included— began laughing...Rena told Marina that the KGB men wouldn't let her defend herself in any way, but told—no, accused!—her what she had done and why she went to Misha in the first place. "But why have you asked for me?" said Marina. "Because," confided Rena, "I was hoping that if you came, there was a chance they'd discover that this is all a mistake"..... *When no witness could be found to say anything negative about Beilis, the prosecutor claimed that the better a Jew's reputation, the more likely he would commit ritual murder*..."I-I-I don't know what I can do here," said Marina, filled with hopeless hope.

Then the men took turns questioning Rena.

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "Why did you visit Misha?"

"I came to give regards from his fiancee, Evelyn T., who lives in France."

Mr. Cruel-Looking: "Now tell us the real reason you went to Misha's and not this fabrication."

This my answer. If you don't like it that is a sham because I have no other answer to give you."

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "Did you know that Misha is involved with anti-Soviet activities?"

"No, I did not, and I don't believe he does this."

Chief Laughing Bee: "Did you know that he was a refusenik before you visited him?"

Rena had to think fast: *It's very unlikely that his fiancee wouldn't tell me this piece of information beforehand; therefore, I better say yes.* "Yes, I did," she told the men.

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "Aha! And did you know that Misha's brother Lev is in prison?"

Misha later told Rena that this was a lie. His brother Lev had been in prison for trumped-up charges, but was no longer there.

"No," said Rena. "I did not know that his brother *was* in jail."

Mr. Cruel-Looking: "Is!"

"Was!"

Chief Laughing Bee: "Are you an agent of the CIA?"

"No, I am not."

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "Are you an agent of the Zionists?"

"I couldn't possibly be."

Chief Laughing Bee: "Why not?

"Well, because I am a Jew, religious and I do my best keep the commandments of the Torah." Rena then turned to Marina and asked her, "Marina, have you once seen me eating in a restaurant during the last eight weeks?"

"No," admitted Marina, but first looking at the disapproving eyes of the men.

"That," said Rena, "is because I keep *kosher*. This is a special type of food that Jews are permitted to eat."

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "Is that all?"

Rena again turned Marina. "Is it or is it not true that every time the group left for a new city on Friday night I did not go along?

Said Marina, "It is true."

"That," Rena directed her remarks to the men, "is because I keep the Jewish Sabbath—and we religious Jews don't travel on that day. So," she gestured expansively, "you see here before you proof that I am religious. Not only that, but that I tried to put my bag upstairs in my room was because there were items in my purse called *muktzeh*, which means we aren't allowed to carry them on *Shabbat*—things such as cameras, pen, money, etc. At 9:00 p.m., when I got up to turn on the light, it was because *Shabbat* was arriving and we usually light Sabbath candles. But I had none. Again, sirs, I have proved that I am religious. Zionism is against religion. So I could not

possibly be a Zionist, and therefore could certainly not be a Zionist agent."

This seemed to convince them as they dropped the entire subject thereafter.

Mr. Cruel-Looking took up the questioning again. "How did you know Misha's address?"

"I had it written in my address book." *Uh-oh!* Again, immediately Rena knew she had just put her foot in her mouth. *What would Mendel Beilis have said? What would his dream team of lawyers have offered?*

Rena should have said she knew Misha's address by heart. Until this moment, the KGB deputies had not rifled through her purse, including her address book. Now Chief Laughing Bee looked at each page of the address book. When he found something irregular there, he looked up and slyly asked, "Who are these four people written in your book?"

"Who are these four people written in your book?"

"Those are addresses of Jews who live in Leningrad."

Chief Laughing Bee: "I know that already. By why do you have these addresses?"

"A woman asked me to visit them."

Mr. Cruel-Looking: "For what purpose?"

"To ask them how they are, how they're feeling."

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "Where did you meet this woman?"

"She came to my university, Columbia University, looking for a student who was going to Russia so that she could find out how her friends are doing in Russia."

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "What is her name?"

"She didn't give me her name," shrugged Rena. "You know how it is" (she forced a smile). "There is a Russian saying, *'Nye znayish, nye skazhish'* ('What you don't know, you can't say')."

Mr. Cruel-Looking: "Were you aware that these people are all refuseniks?"

"Yes, I did. That woman told me."

Again, Mr. Cruel-Looking: "Did you visit these people?"

"No, I did not."

Chief Laughing Bee: "Why not?"

"Because all I wanted to do was go to Leningrad State University, be with my group (of 45 American students) and improve my language skills. I am a Russian studies major at Columbia University and this is why I came. If I were to get involved with such people then I would not be able to participate in this student group. I didn't want any trouble, so I didn't visit them."

Chief Laughing Bee: "We believe you've been visiting refuseniks. Is this so?"

Rena knew she had to lie, and with a straight-forward look she said so: no!...*The prosecution's attempt to prove the blood libel also ran into trouble. Only one "expert" could be found to interpret the wounds on the body as being likely proof of ritual murder; it later came out that the "expert" had accepted a bribe of 4,000 rubles...* "We can prove otherwise," said Mr. Cruel-Looking. "All we need to do is call the police in Leningrad and they will tell us if you indeed visited them."

"Go ahead, call them."

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "Have you come to marry somebody in the Soviet Union?"

"No, I have not and I never would do such a thing?"

Again Mr. Sweet-Looking: "Why not?"

"I'll tell you, but you will laugh."

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "We promise not to laugh."

"Well, let me see how to explain this to you." She set her mind to thinking. Finally, she said to them: "There is something in the Jewish Sabbath laws called *Psik Reisha*. This means that if something is inevitable, even if you don't derive any pleasure from the result, you cannot do it if the result is something that is forbidden. The Talmud gives an example of a man who has a son. He wants to give his son a toy on the *Shabbat*, that is what Jews call their Sabbath. He wants to give his son the head of chicken. Yet it is forbidden to slaughter animals on the *Shabbat*. This means, in order to give his son the toy—that is, the head of the chicken—he must kill the chicken. Even though his intention is not to kill the chicken, but to give his son the head as a toy, he is forbidden to do so since it is inevitable that the chicken will die, which the father isn't allowed to be the cause of. The concept is called *Psik Reisha*, which literally translates to 'cutting off the head' and comes from this story."

Of course the men laughed, and Rena countered with "I told you so."

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "What does this have to do with your not marrying a Jew to get him out?"

"Very simple, I could only marry for love. But if I married somebody here who would like perhaps to live somewhere else, then it would be a *mitzvah*—a kind act—to marry him. It is inevitable that I will be doing him a favor whether I mean to or not. This would prevent me from figuring out if I really love him and am therefore marrying him, or if I am marrying him in part to do him this favor. Therefore, I can never marry a Soviet Jew."

Rena was satisfied when she saw the looks on the men's faces. This, of course, was nonsense; she herself knew that, but they swallowed it!...*The testimony of the priest from Tashkent in the Beilis trial was also undermined when the defense counsellors exposed his pretensions to scholarly knowledge of the Talmud and other Jewish texts by revealing his ignorance of some basic terms.*

Again they tried a different question.

Chief Laughing Bee: "Do you belong to any Jewish organization in the United States?"

"No I don't; after all I knew that if I did that I could not come to the Soviet Union."

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "Are you willing to put all you've said on paper?"

"No, I am not. It is *Shabbat*, remember? I cannot write on *Shabbat*."

Mr. Sweet-Looking: "Can Marina write for you?"

"Let me ask Marina something." At which point Rena whispered into Marina's ear, "Is your mother Jewish?" It was rumored in the student group that one of Marina's parents was Jewish. If it were her mother, she was a Jew!...

"No, I'm not Jewish," said Marina, saying it loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

"Okay" Rena now said, turning to her accusers, "I'll permit her to write for me."

Chief Laughing Bee dictated Rena's *obyasnenie*—explanation—and she began to

write the following: :

"I, Rena such and such of the United States of America, went to Misha E.'s house to give him regards from his fiancee Evelyn T. of France. When I got to the door a man told me that I looked like a criminal and said to me, 'What are you carrying in the bag, narcotics?'"

At this point the man Rena was referring to, namely, No-Name, who a few moments earlier had entered the room, said: "You can't write that; it's not important."

"Sir," Rena gave No-Name a hard look, "this is my *obyasnenie*. You asked me to write this. I did not volunteer. If it is my *obyasnenie* then I would like to write it the way it happened. If you think there is a discrepancy between what I am writing and between what really happened I agree to change it to the way you say it happened. May I go on?"*...In addition, the defense called not only on the chief rabbi of Moscow, Rabbi Jacob Mazeh, but also on four Christian scholars who testified that Jewish ethical principles contradicted the concept of blood libel. Mendel Beilis first became aware of how deeply the Jewish community was involved in helping him. Prominent Jewish personalities as diverse as Lord Rothschild from London, the Chazon Ish, the Lubliner Rav, the Chortkover Rebbe and Rabbi Meir Shapiro*[13] *played very important roles. But a special word must be said about the then Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Rebbe Rashab, Rabbi Sholom Dovber Schneersohn of Lubavitch (1860-1920). Before and during the trial, the Rebbe Rashab personally directed that Beilis should be advised always, no matter what the trial outcome, to keep the words of the Shema—"Hear, O Israel, G-d is our Lord, G-d is One"—in his heart and on his lips. The chief defense counsel, Oscar Gruzenberg, also turned to the Rebbe Rashab for help in preparing his arguments. The Rebbe sent a letter of strong encouragement to Gruzenberg, and the lawyer kept this letter in a golden box, evidence of how precious this was to him. The Rebbe Rashab also sent Gruzenberg a certificate he had received from Czar Nicholas I, designating the Lubavitcher Rebbe as an "honored citizen for all generations." In addition, the Rebbe Rashab assigned his brilliant talmid, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, to assist in the preparation of the defense, especially in the area of Kabbalah. In all of his numerous letters and directives, the Rebbe Rashab attempted to disprove all these allegations conclusively, to eliminate the very idea of the possibility of a blood libel from the nonon-Jewish world*...Rena asked, "May I go on? No one objected. So Rena continued to write:

"The man then asked me if I had my passport on me. I replied in the negative, but told him that according to Soviet law my passport had to be in the hotel as I arrived here today and they were registering me with the police (as they do all foreigners who come to any Soviet city). How can you demand that and then demand that I give it to you? I posed to the KGB man [No-Name]. I then walked into Misha's apartment and called my translator Marina to come and help me."

At this point the four men were getting awfully tired of Rena's explanation...*In the end, on October 28, 1913, the jury found Beilis not guilty, although its findings on the blood libel question were unclear. Perhaps their statement that the murder victim had "lost five glasses of blood" could be interpreted as implying that the lost blood was intended for drinking. In any case, both sides*

13.At the time he was the Rabbi of Galina.

claimed victory...and the KGB men asked Rena to hurry up, and said:

"Now, tell us about your 'confession' concerning the woman who gave you those addresses."

"I am afraid I cannot do that," said Rena. "I'm here because you thought that I had some illegal business with Misha. I am therefore here because of Misha. If you wish, I shall write an explanation why I went to Misha and what happened when I tried to give him regards. I will not, however, write about something that does not pertain to me or to Misha."

Mr. Cruel-Looking: "But it pertains to the Soviet Union!"

"Well, then the Soviet Union will have to deal with it, not I"...*As if in response to news of a great military victory, a wave of joy spread throughout Russia in response to what was seen as a defeat for the administration. Strangers kissed each other on the street. Telephone operators in the major cities announced "acquitted" before asking callers for the numbers they sought* ..."Okay," said Chief Laughing Bee, "we would like to know if you have any complaints about the Soviet police."

Surely the antisemitic prosecutors must have tried to pin Beilis with curve balls. What did his dream team—W. A. Maklakow, Oscar O. Gruzenberg, B. Karabchevsky, A. S. Zarundy, Arnold D. Margolin, and D. G. Grigorovitchh-Barsky—urge him to say, if anything? What could Rena say in defense of herself at this mock trial? She had no lawyer to help her. "Complaints against the police?..." she mused aloud, knowing thousands of Soviet Jews depended on her saying the right thing. She wanted bring up Louis Brandeis, who said, "To secure respect for law, we make the law respectable."[14] She wanted to ridicule what the Russians themselves had ridiculed most—their constitution—through their own actions. She wanted to say a lot of things, but she had to watch what she said. Never would she do or say anything to harm any Jew in the Soviet Union.....*the chief district attorney of Kiev disregarded the police information and instead looked for a Jew on whom to shift the crime, through whom the entire Jewish people could be publicly indicted*...Rena had to watch what she was about to say. Truth is, she had been learning Torah with many Jews in many cities. But Rena did not want these KGB operatives to find out who these other Jews were. It was absolutely essential for her accusers not to get any idea whatsoever that she was about to learn Torah with anyone, especially Misha.

Yet, if they found out that Rena was going to learn with Misha—which she was—then that would open up a whole pandora's box for the KGBers to poke around in.

Then, too, she had to make a major decision. She had to choose whether or not to call the embassy in Moscow on *Shabbat*. This had to be a very difficult decision for any Observant Jew. Rena knew what she had to do: she decided to keep the *Shabbat* and, in that *zechus* (merit), to use her wits to get out of this dangerous situation...*The Beilis trial testimony of the priest from Tashkent was also undermined when the defense exposed his pretensions to scholarly knowledge of the Talmud and other Jewish texts by revealing his ignorance of some basic terms*...This might have been a mistake—Rena was very worried about this,

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14.American Supreme Court Jurist, 1856-1941, from a speech made on October 15, 1936.

but sooner or later she had to let G-d do His mysterious work—as it is written, "A Jew should always carry with him two purses, so that he may reach into the one or the other according to his needs: one with 'I am but dust and ashes,' and another with 'For my sake was the world created.'"[15] Which of the two purses he opened was G-d's mysterious work. And such was Rena's choice.

What did she have to say about this was the decision she made at that time. What to do about the complaints against the police? She finally dictated to Marina: "I have no complaints against the Soviet police on the condition that not one Jew in the Soviet Union be harmed because of me."

"Now sign it," said Chief Laughing Bee.

"Sir, I can't. I already told you we don't write. If I could sign it I could write it."

"But," said Mr. Sweet-Looking, "if you don't sign it, it is not worth anything."

Rena had another idea. She had Marina further write:

"Tomorrow night, Saturday, August 10, at 10:40 p.m., after the Jewish Sabbath is over, I agree to sign this document."

Whether she will or won't is another story. Rena's thoughts amused her very much.

Marina then signed the document with her signature and the official inquiry was done.

Then No-Name came right up to Rena, eyeball to eyeball. "Just know, though, that you will not meet with Misha tomorrow, so don't even try it."

"Of course, I won't," Rena promised.

Then No-Name backed away...But Rena knew that as long as she remained in Kiev, they'd be after her...Suddenly Rena remembered another thing: *The following day the reactionary press let leak that on the question of Beilis's guilt, the jury had been split 6 to 6, technically an acquittal, but hardly a trouncing of antisemitism...the foreign press in general felt that the regime's bluff had been decisively called, and Beilis' acquittal was the most devastating blow to the czar since the Russo-Japanese war.*..Midnight fell. They told Rena to go to her room. Don't meet with Misha—or else, they warned. For the time being, she was free. Marina would carry her purse to her room..

When the two women reached the main lobby, Marina walked towards the elevator and Rena strolled towards the main staircase.

"Where are you going now?" everyone asked Rena.

"I'm walking up the stairs, because it's forbidden to ride an elevator on *Shabbat*. So *gut Shabbat* to everyone and to everyone, a *gut Shabbat*." Then Rena began to ascend the staircase.

The KGB men made a mad dash into the elevator and, by the time Rena reached her floor, they all were waiting for her, trying to see if her physical presence revealed she had stopped off along the way and was now hiding something or other. Was the group waiting to waylay Mendel Beilis or her? wondered Rena? It didn't matter either way: Beilis was out of harm's way, and she had no fear of them, especially on the Sabbath.

15.Judah HaNasi, *Shabbat* 113b.

Marina and one of the men, Mr. Sweet-Looking, escorted Rena to her room. He asked her to check her bag, to make sure there was nothing missing or nothing added. Playing his sweet-looking game, Rena said that if he was willing for her to check it, she didn't need to do so. "Secondly," she added, "I can't deal with my luggage until the Sabbath is over."

In his unctuous manner, he then informed Rena that they still might kick her out of the country tomorrow morning—meaning *Shabbat* morning. Rena said to Mr. Unctuousness: "Do me one favor. If you decide to kick me out, please do it Sunday morning and please not to Paris, but to London." (Her plane ticket to Israel originated from London, but, of course, she didn't tell him this.) The KGB man said he'd see what he could do for her.

After they left, the phone rang inside Rena's room. Jan had mentioned that she would call the embassy in Moscow and Rena was hoping it wasn't her, because she didn't want to desecrate the *Shabbat*. After the phone rang about ten times, the "key lady" (in the U.S.S.R., every hotel floor has a lady that keeps your key when you're out so that you don't lose it) knocked on the door and told her that a person named Sasha was trying to reach her through her telephone; he asked if Rena could come to the phone in the hall to speak to him. Rena went with the key lady, but told her to speak for her because she would rather not speak into the telephone directly, especially to a fellow Jew. Sasha told the key lady he wanted to meet Rena the next day.

"I'll walk to your hotel," Rena said through the key lady to Sasha.

"But that is so far," he said.

"I'm used to walking. See you tomorrow."

Returning to her room, she prayed, made *Kiddush*, ate, sang *zemiros*, *benched*, said the *"Shema,"* and went to sleep. In the morning, she awoke, prayed, made *Kiddush*, sang *zemiros*, *benched* and left the hotel at 11 o'clock in the morning. It took one and a half hours to get to Sasha's hotel (Rena's old hotel where the group had been staying). But no Sasha. Rena waited outside. Still, no Sasha. She went into the lobby. He wasn't there either. Rena then went to the staircase leading to the rooms, but the hotel detective wouldn't let her pass without a pass—which, she didn't have nor could she have carried on *Shabbat*.

Finally, she went to the front desk and asked if Sasha was still in the hotel. The portly desk matron said, with a scowl on her face, that the American group had checked out. Not to be discouraged, Rena sat down in the hotel lobby, and when the coast was clear and the detective had turned his back Rena sneaked upstairs to the sixth floor where Sasha's room was.

Luckily, the door was open. On a table in the room, Rena saw a hotel directory opened, with Jan's writing on it. Obviously, from this, Rena concluded, this had been Jan's room, although she was no longer occupying it.

On a wall, Rena also spotted the tacked-on itinerary for the group; it read that their plane left 11:40 a.m. By then It was already 1:20 p.m., and Rena concluded that Sasha had enough time to return from the airport and that something must have gone wrong. Rena's conclusion turned out to be correct. Later she spoke to Misha, but we'll get to that shortly.

Once outside again, Rena noted that from Sasha's hotel there was one main road leading to both Misha's house and her hotel, and that only later did it fork into two completely different directions. Should she return to her hotel or try to visit Misha, despite her being warned not to? What made up my mind was that when she was in Leningrad a Jew named Elimelech told her that once a *shaliach* journeyed to Leningrad; there, the KGB warned him not to visit any Jews or to teach Torah as he had planned. Elimelech himself advised the *shaliach* to give *shiurim* to the Jews in that city. The most the KGB would do to him was kick him out of the country. And, by then, as the Soviet Union was apparently beginning to fall apart at the seams, they'd probably do nothing to the Soviet Jews whom he taught. That *shaliach* gave three wonderful *shiurim*. Elimelech asked Rena to tell this heroic story wherever she went. So, she put to herself, how could she tell over this story and not make it part of her own courageous life? She went to Misha's place.

It was a long walk: three and a half hours. At 5:00 p.m., Rena arrived at her destination. Misha wasn't there. After waiting on the outside steps for 40 minutes, she decided to leave... *later in life, Mendel Beilis moved to the United States where he wrote his memoirs, Die Geshichte fun Meine Leiden ("The Story of My Suffering")...Rena* then went to Babi Yar to pray the afternoon service and then walked back to her hotel, arriving at 8:00 p.m.

The key lady told her the Service Bureau (read: KGB) had requested that she come to that office when she returned. Before that, nonetheless she went to her room, had *seudah shlishis*, slept for half an hour, and then walked downstairs to the service bureau.

Chief Laughing Bee was alone in the office. Rena was expecting another hard time, but he got right to his point. "We have decided to forget that all that has happened. Now, all that we're asking of you is that you behave like a normal tourist."

Rena readily agreed.

"Good. You can pick up your passport and visa and find out when your taxi will be taking you to the airport tomorrow. (Rena was scheduled to fly to Moscow for three days.)

After *havdalah*, she left under cover of the night, and took a trolley to Misha's house. Together the two friends strolled along the streets of Kiev, almost walking the whole way back to her hotel and speaking, without fear of being overheard, for three hours.

Misha said that what happened to her was a victory for the Jews of the U.S.S.R...*Did Beilis's lawyer O. O. Gruzenberg or Arnold Margolin claim the same thing? Yes, yes. yes!*...and that it was no minor feat. Then Misha related to Rena what went on outside while she was in the little room. The tall KGB man, No-Name, emerged from the hotel to find Sasha and Misha there, which to him meant they were causing a scandal. No-Name demanded to know why Misha had not stayed home, why he was now making problems by speaking up.

Misha asked No-Name, "What would you do in my place? How would you feel if someone barged into and dragged a guest of yours out of your own home? Well, I tell you, you will never drag a guest out of my house without my complaining about it."

At which point No-Name didn't say another word and returned to the little room.

After Rena inquired, Misha then explained the whereabouts of Sasha and himself earlier in the day. The KGB kicked Sasha out of Kiev, but did nothing else to him. As for himself, Misha had come home late from *shul*, ate, and then went off to visit some friends, just about the same time that Rena arrived at his home. Rena felt very relieved to hear this.

Misha urged Rena, when she reached Moscow, to file a full report to the American Embassy, about exactly what happened to her in Kiev. Then, she should take the report and submit it to the Soviet procurator in Moscow. "Let them think twice before yanking people out of Jews' homes for nothing."

Rena parted with Misha somewhere about 2:30 a.m., walked to her hotel, and, at 6:00 a.m., was taken to the airport and flew off to Moscow. Arriving in Moscow on Sunday, Rena plunked down, on Monday, a lengthy report she had written about her ordeal in Kiev, on the desk of the Second Secretary to the United States Embassy. She did not repeat the entire interrogation to the secretary (especially the parts pertaining to religion). She repeated that which seemed essential, that which she wished to complain about. Rena basically said that the Kievan KGB had done this without any provocation on her side, that she was innocent and so was Misha...*When Beilis continued to protest his innocence, "cell-mates" were produced by the prosecution to testify that Beilis had admitted his guilt to them*...Rena also asked approval of the American Embassy before going to the procurator of Moscow. The secretary said he would do what he could. Immediately he left his office. When he returned from his superior, he told Rena that this kind of incident happens too often and, "Frankly, Ms. I., it's too insignificant for our embassy to get involved," said the secretary. If Rena had been formally arrested or if they had violated international or Soviet law, then her embassy would consider doing something. "But it sounds like that was not the case," the secretary said. In short, Rena was told that the American Embassy would not involve itself at all. What else could Rena do but politely thank him, and she left! At the point, Rena decided that it was pointless to file a complaint to the procurator of Moscow without the support of the American Embassy.

Later, Jan found out from the U.S. State Department in Washington, D.C. that there was a group of three men in Kiev who enjoyed harassing tourists by interrogating them for several hours in the back room of the Dnepr Hotel. It also appeared, Jan later told Rena, that these three trouble-makers didn't always have Moscow's authority to carry on so.

When finally the American consulate was set up in Kiev, it helped put an end to such "fun and games."...*As it's written, "The miscalculations of the regime in the Beilis case symbolized the general failure of the czar to understand the mood of the country at large. While the end of the czarist regime would surely have come whether or not the Beilis trial had occurred, the case certainly played a role in hastening the inevitable. As the correspondent for The Times of London at the trial stated, 'This is not the Beilis case. It is possibly a final fight for existence on the part of the innermost powers of reaction against all modern forces in Russia.'"*[16] *And much later, "at the end of the affair, with Beilis acquitted, the Lubavitcher Rebbe [the Rebbe Rashab] wrote a letter expressing*

16. Naomi Pasachoff and Robert J. Littman, *Jewish History in 100 Nutshells*, p. 247.

his deep fears and sense of foreboding regarding the safety of the Jewish people. He dealt with the issue of the hatred that had been unleashed and the constant incitement of the populace against the Jews. The Beilis affair was over, but the Jewish people were not safe. The era of pogroms and massacres, organized openly or secretly by the government, was not over."[17] ...Then again maybe something was over. Since the Beilis trial, rarely has a Kievan Jew been accused of pasting a stamp upside down[18] on a letter and been severely punished for it. That too is called progress on the way to the Redemption.

17.Mendel Beilis, *Scapegoat on Trial: The Story of Mendel Beilis*, edited by Shari Schwartz (New York: CIS, 1992), p. 257.

18. Alan M. Tigay, in his book, *The Jewish Traveler*, mentions another outrageous symbol long gone from the Kievan scene against Jews. "The story used to be told that Party Secretary Brezhnev told a crowd, 'By the year 2000 every Russian will have his own airplane.' A heckler by the name of Goldberg interrupted, asking, 'What do we need airplanes for?' Brezhnev, visibly irritated, replied, 'Idiot! Suppose you are in Moscow and you hear that in Kiev they have potatoes.' Nowadays, the Brezhnevs are gone; Moscow seems to have more fuel for cars and airplanes, but Kiev seems to have more bread and potatoes; and the Goldbergs can ask any questions they like"—p. 255.

A Secret of the Rebbe

Rabbi Dovid Zovi from France relates: A Jew who worked for the phone company in Paris came into the Chabad house to put on *tefillin*. After he finished praying, he said: "You think you know the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Come, I'll tell you a story about your Rebbe from 30 years ago. I lived in Casablanca, Morocco and one day I met one of the Rebbe's emissaries, who told me that you can write to the Rebbe and ask for a blessing. The emissary promised to personally deliver my letter to the Rebbe.

"I got in touch with my nephew who hadn't had children in many years and I told him about my encounter with the emissary. He wrote a letter to the Rebbe in which he asked for a blessing for children. He had written the letter on a page of the book he kept in his store for his accounts. After finishing his letter, he tore out the page and put it an envelope which he addressed. Then he gave it to me and I gave it to the emissary.

"Some time later when he was leafing through his book, my nephew was stunned to discover the letter he had written to the Rebbe. Somehow by mistake, he had torn out a different page and had put it in the envelope.

"Less than a week passed and a letter arrived from the Lubavitcher Rebbe. It began with the words, 'I received your letter dated...which contained a request for children for...."

The man concluded the story by saying that the baby born after receiving the Rebbe's blessing was named Menachem.

9

Feeding Among the Lilies

I hear it now: the aging movie actor Walter Houston singing those immortal lyrics: "For it's a long long way from May to December. But the days grow short when you reach November." Some say those words are also the perfect swan song for the Soviet Union's demise in December (1991), as surely time was fast running out—just as the Rebbe had predicted—and a silent, spiritual revolution was taking place right under the very noses of the Soviet authorities. Part of the build-up of this "revolution" was the important role Chamah was playing in the hearts, minds and souls of Soviet Jews.

As it is, Chamah is an abbreviation for *Chavurat Mazakai Horabim*, "the Society Spreading Good Deeds Among the Masses," and through the guidance of its three directors, Hillel Zaltzman, Moshiach Chudaitov, and Binyomin Malachovsky, all Orthodox Jews from the former Soviet Union, this once tiny, little-known relief agency feeding hungry Soviet Jews in the former U.S.S.R. has blossomed into one of the leading conduits of U.S. governmental surplus food aid to all C.I.S. nations. Since 1992, nowadays Chamah works closely with the Russian Federation government in distributing the food to 56 cities, including some in the remotest depths of Siberia.

Right from the outset more than 40 years ago, Chamah, or whatever it was called in 1955, set out to prove that not all bad beginnings wind up with bad endings. For the record, Reb Moshiach was born into a large family of seven sisters and four brothers, whose parents, Rafael, o.b.m., and Rochel, o.b.m., since 1924, fought for Chabad concerns in Samarkand, with close ties to the Rebbe Rashab's emissary, Reb Simcha Gorodetsky. From his youth, Reb Rafael Chudaitov was a merchant, who played a key role in organizing a badly needed Jewish cooperative involving 3,000 Jews, Jews whose family might starve if they didn't have this means to work. It was a tough time for Jews in Samarkand, but when wasn't it!

Jews are mentioned in Samarkand from hearsay for the first time by Benjamin of Tudela (12th century) as a large community. It was apparently destroyed when the town was captured by Bab Mehmet Khan in 1598. The Jews later suffered from Muslim oppression. In 1843, at the request of the Jews, a special area was allocated to them for the construction of a Jewish quarter: they were led by a nasi named Kulantur, approved by the emir of Bukhara. The situation of the Jews improved after the Russian conquest (1868), and in 1887 there were 3,792 Jews in Samarkand, the overwhelming majority of them of the Bukharan community.

Settlement of Ashkenazi Jews from Russia began with the construction of the

railroad to Samarkand in 1888; they played an important role in the commercial development of the city. In 1897 there were 4,307 Jews (about 8 pecent of the total population). Their number subsequently increased with Jewish immigration from the emirate of Bukhara and Russia. The Russian authorities were opposed to this immigration, and, in contrast to the local Jews, the "foreign" Jews (from Bukhara) and the Jews of European Russia were subjected to persecutions. In 1907 the Jewish population numbered 5,266.

With the outbreak of the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Jewish movement in Samarkand gained in strength and served as a factor unifying the various communities there. A communal center and Hebrew secondary school were established. Under the Soviet regime a Jewish-Bukharan branch of the Communist Party was formed in Samarkand. Nevertheless, the *Yevsektzia* took steps to oppose the national and religious traditions of the Jews in Samarkand. By 1933, 15 of the synagogues in the Jewish quarter had been closed down. In 1935 "Sovietization" of the Jewish Museum (founded in 1922) expurgated its national-religious character and the evidence of the close ties existing between the Jews of Samarkand and Israel. The Jews of the Bukharan community numbered 7,740 in 1926, and 9,832 in 1935 (8 percent of the total population); 8,898 lived in the Jewish quarter, whose name was changed in 1926 to "Eastern Quarter," while 95 percent of the inhabitants were Jews. The Jewish school, whose language of instruction was Tajiki (or Judeo-Tajiki; the language spoken by the Bukharan Jews), was attended by over 1,400 children. During World War II many Jewish refugees from the western part of the Soviet Union arrived in Samarkand.

In the late 1960s the Jewish population was estimated at 15,000 (mainly Bukharan Jews), most of whom resided in the former Jewish quarter. There remained one synagogue in the old part of the city where the Jewish quarter is located; it included a separate section for the Ashkenazi Jews. Samarkand retained a Jewish cemetery. In 1951, Rabbi Hakham Ezekiel was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment for "religious activity," but was released in 1957, having served six years. In March 1964 the community was compelled by the authorities to protest against the sending of *matzos* from Israel and the baking of *matzos* was carried on at home.

In this part of the world the Jewish spark called Moshiach Chudaitov first saw the light, and he carried on in his father's footsteps. No, he was not put in jail, as his father was. The Soviet government falsely accused Rafael Chudaitov of having close ties to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint) and, in effect, practicing sedition. Everyone knew he had been incarcerated for not playing ball—the Soviets had a small cash-flow of gold and demanded Reb Rafael impress upon his hundreds of wealthy Jewish friends to hand over a huge chunk of their gold for "favors"; Reb Rafael refused to do that. "They don't have that kind of money," he countered. The Soviet authorities didn't believe him, so they accused him of working undercover with the Joint. "Who knows from that," said Reb Moshiach, but my uncle Bentzion had a bigwig friend in the Samarkand KGB. Immediately my uncle sent a note—a secret letter—to my father, to deliver the same to his KGB friend. It didn't take long for the KGB man to act: One word from him—"This man is totally innocent of all

charges!" said the KGB chief—and they "let one of our people go—my father," said Reb Moshiach.

With his family being in a good position to provide an underground *malamed*, Reb Moshiach got his Jewish education that way. At 17, his father brought him into his business of doing community work. "We lived in the city closer to the agriculture college. On Karl Marx Street. As chief of the cooperative my farther managed to have an estate of a few houses from my grandfather. Farther outside the city, my father took me to the Jewish ghetto and we visited a couple of houses. It was the holidays, and we brought fruit for the elderly people. From a bazaar we also bought potatoes, rice, and other vegetables in large quantities via a wagon and horse. We placed all the goods in the Jewish ghetto, in the hands of a special *chassid* named Rabbi Avraham Chaim Ladaev, a Bukharan Jew. He was a person who was actually arrested in 1951. First they gave him the death penalty, then changed it to 25 years in prison, and then released him after a couple of years. Rabbi Ladeav spoke no Yiddish, only Persian, so he and my father conversed in Hebrew." Reb Moshiach also tells many stories of his father coming to the aid of Bukharan Jews arriving in Samarkand and helping them settle into the Jewish ghetto.

"Matter of fact, many years later, I met some of my father's visitors here in New York, in Williamsburg [Brooklyn] and Riverdale [Bronx], who were in our house. Once I went to a store and the fellow asked me if I was from Russia. 'Yes,' I said. From Samarkand? he asked. I nodded yes. He said he too was in Samarkand and knew Reb Rafael. 'That is my father.' And the store owner would describe my house on Karl Marx Street. There was no denying I had met him in my younger life," said Reb Moshiach.

Early impressions, no doubt, are hard to erase from the mind, but Reb Moshiach hopes he never forgets that blind old woman he and his father met in the ghetto. She was seated on the floor, with a large leaky hole in the ceiling of her small room. Yet it's one thing to see the sky and sun from that position and another to have the sun at your doorstep. "She was alone, blind, freezing and in danger of starving to death, when my father and I found her."

"There you see, son," Reb Rafael told Reb Moshiach, "is what we're up against. Twenty thousand of our people in this ghetto are starving, and we must help every one of them."

And that impression—"the day is long, the wind is cold"—the same ghetto still exists—continues to stick in Reb Moshiach's mind. Even today, in every Russian Jew he sees the haggard face of that blind old woman seated helpless on the floor of her house, and he feels compelled to help and help and help.

"I tell you," said Reb Moshiach, "one day, all the world will drink from the waters of the Garden of Eden, when even Russian Jews will say, 'How sweet the lily grows. Let's go down and feed among the lilies.'"

From an early middle-teen age, Reb Moshiach became like his father, helping Jews in any way he could, and he got a lot of help from his friends, specifically, a young street-smart Jewish fellow named Hillel Zaltzman, the brother of another famous Lubavitcher *shaliach* and *chassid*, Cantor Berel Zaltzman. For Reb Moshiach, Samarkand is a major crossroads for Jews. There, in 1961-1962, he not only met Reb

Hillel, who was from Charkow, but his other close friend from Chamah, Binyomin Malachovsky, from Leningrad. Each had in mind the same message from his father: Without involvement with Jewish people in exile and helping each other, we can be lost forever in other nations.

But before that happened, at the appropriate time, Reb Rafael confided to his son that there was a group of young men who were keeping the Jewish way of life and learning underground. He wanted Reb Moshiach to be among them. Reb Moshiach the student of life, seeing his fellow Jews as acts of G-d defined, readily agreed.

Being thrust with fellow Jews nearly the same age as Reb Moshiach didn't guarantee too much. Each brought his baggage of fear with him. Each student kept one eye on his books and the other on the other boys watching him as he watched them. Big Brother was everywhere. Trusting others would take time. Everyone was advised not to divulge their secrets to others. As one teacher put it, "If you keep a secret, it's your prisoner; if you let it out, you are a Soviet prisoner."

"I'll tell you a very interesting anecdote," Reb Moshiach said. "One *Shabbat* I was preparing to attend an underground synagogue *minyan* in Samarkand. Where was I going? my father asked me. Sorry, I can't tell you, I told my father. Hearing that brought a big grin to my father's face." Reb Moshiach the young *chassid* was learning his lessons well.

Finally, in their early twenties, Rebs Moshiach, Hillel and Binyomin met each other through Rabbi Moshe Nishilevich and his underground organization of a few dedicated Jewish people. At the time, this robust, 55-year-old rabbi was organizing underground schools, helping bake *matzah*, conducting *bar mitzvahs*, officiating at weddings, building *mikvehs*, in short, doing everything to help keep alive Jewish tradition—that, and the rabbi himself was learning in yeshivas in Georgia. In Samarkand, Rabbi Nishilevich organized and taught each of three or four boys in different houses. Often one group didn't know the existence of the other groups. Such was the Jewish underground, with teenaged boys from Moscow or Tbilisi or Tashkent learning in Samarkand and vice versa, while their parents never knew exactly where their children were learning. Often, their Jewish teachers were imported from outside the boys' circles. Writing home, the boys addressed their envelopes to a Moscow address; there, other underground Lubavitcher Jews changed the envelopes and addresses and then sent them on to the parents. Obvious was the need to protect the students' location at all cost.

One day, in the mid-1960s in Samarkand, Binyomin Malachovsky awoke in the early hours of the morning, his head bathed in sweat. Immediately he sat up on his bed, as if he had something urgent to do. What is bothering me? he wondered. He patted his wet brow with the back of his hand, and then stood up immediately to prepare for the day. There was something he had to do, but what? Why the words, "We can be lost forever in other nations," should come into his head just as he opened his front door and was about to leave his room, he had no idea what involvement with Jewish people awaited him that day. But he didn't have long to wait.

That morning a Jewish woman named Rosa alerted Reb Binyomin about an elderly, sick woman, who lived with her college-age son named Joel.

"How can I help?" asked Reb Binyomin.

"Comrade Binyomin, I managed to talk with this elderly woman—her name is Ana—and she told me that she's very sick. Going to have an operation. And...and...the way I understand it, Ana's dearest wish is to see her son Joel return to Judaism. She fears he will be lost forever."

"Is that what this woman Ana said?"

"Yes."

"We must not let that happen," said Reb Binyomin, "I shall help them. Where do they live?"

Once Rosa gave him the address, Reb Binyomin wasted no more time. He had to be totally involved with Jewish people in exile and helping them. This visit was just another involvement. And after he heard Ana's story, he knew why he awoke bathed in sweat that morning. There was no hesitation—he would meet with young Joel—he would personally take charge of this Jew, and especially there was no hesitation when the two men met. No, as Reb Binyomin initially feared, Joel was not a member of the Komsomol, the Young Communists League. And yes, Joel agreed to apply his formidable scholarly talents to learning *Yiddishkeit*. "I feel like I've just arrived in a candy store," said an excited Joel, "with *kosher* candy at my fingertip. Where—when—do I start?"

"First things first," said a beaming Reb Binyomin, and promptly taught Joel the *alef-bais*. From there the climbing up of Jacob's ladder picked up speed. Amazingly, despite Joel's working to make a living in the daytime and attending night college, he also learned in the underground yeshiva in Samarkand. Soon he met a young, Byelorussian woman his age, in Samarkand, and they planned to marry. Of course it was explained to the woman the need to go to a *mikveh*. She agreed. To take her there, they traveled for about two hours in a car, circling this way, chugging that way, slowly, quickly, meandering north and suddenly reversing themselves, southward, taking a different route. Why the secrecy? As Reb Binyomin said, "Because the young woman was a foreigner—they hardly knew her at the time—and they couldn't take a chance of divulging the whereabouts of the secret *mikveh*. So, blindfolded they led her in to the *mikveh*, where Jewish ladies took the young woman to the traditional bath."

Before Reb Binyomin left Samarkand in 1971, Joel and his wife were practicing Observant Jews. And Ana (whose Jewish name was Chana), who had an operation yet passed away not long after her son's wedding, continued to live on in the name of her first grandchild, Chana.

In 1995, Reb Binyomin, now living in Crown Heights, received a letter from his old friend Joel and his wife, both living in Israel. "A blessing, a blessing!" wrote Joel. "We married our daughter Chana to a nice religious Israeli. As for our son, who's 17, another blessing! another blessing! He's studying in a yeshiva here."

When Reb Binyomin put the letter down, he wiped his misty eyes, and said softly, "Ana-Chana, I never told you this. But surely you must have guessed. I asked the Lubavitcher Rebbe for a blessing for you. And the Rebbe blessed Joel and his wife, to go from strength to strength. And, see, see, how the Rebbe's blessing has extended to your grandchildren!" And though Reb Binyomin didn't know why his brow was

perspiring at that moment, he wiped it with the back of his hand, and said, "Thank G-d!"

Saying it all, he had nothing more to say.

In 1971, Nishilevich, Chudaitov, Zaltzman and Malachovsky emigrated to Israel, and that's where Chamah really got off the ground internationally, thanks to the inspiration, urging and direction of Nishilevich. He rallied them, counseled them, arming them with action words and fresh ideas. "You must continue working for the Russian Jews," said Rabbi Moshe. "The Rebbe once said, 'One day soon, Russian Jews will again add their strength to *Klal Yisrael*.' Reb Moshiach," Rabbi Moshe said to Chudaitov, "you must make that day come real soon. Give them classes. Show them what *ahavas Yisroel* is all about. Fill them with the same love you have for the Torah. Tell them about the giant shoulders of the sages we Jews are sitting on. Tell them how we crossed the Red Sea. Fill them with pride about their own Red Sea crossing out of the Evil Empire. Tell them they can have their circumcisions. Describe the wonders of the lights of *Shabbat*. Tell them they can marry under the *chupah* [wedding canopy]. Tell them about Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and Sarah, Rivkah, Leah and Rochel. Tell them about the Lubavitcher Rebbe and the challenge of *uforatza* [a Hebrew word meaning 'spread out'] the Rebbe has given to his *chassidim*. Tell them about the World-to-Come that's already in place. Tell them everything their Jewish minds want to know. Remind them, in the U.S.S.R. we were called *zhid [kike]*. Here in Israel they call us Russians. So let's show them. let's stage a peace-loving Russian Revolution right here in Israel, and, Reb Moshiach, may that day start today."

To bring about that day, Reb Moshiach and his wife Basya excitedly traveled to Crown Heights to visit the Rebbe and ask for his advice. Blessings galore the Rebbe gave the Chudaitovs, resulting in a job offer from Lishkas Ezras Achim (a New York-based organization that helps Jews in Russia materially and spiritually), to Reb Moshiach, a natural enough proposal since Chudaitov could use his extensive contacts in the U.S.S.R. Jewish underground to raise money to send packages to Russia. The Rebbe counseled Reb Moshiach to accept the job, and Reb Moshiach immediately pitched in.

About a year later, Rabbi Moshe Nishilevich sent Hillel Zaltzman to Moshiach Chudaitov in Crown Heights, urging him to found a charter organization called "Chamah." After again consulting with the Rebbe, Reb Moshiach readily accepted.

"We set up shop to organize the Russian Jews arriving in Israel, to work with them, to help send their children to Jewish schools. To do as much as possible for Jews who wanted to live in Israel. Over the years we managed to keep more than 20,000 kids out of Israeli secular schools, instead, enrolling them in existing religious schools and yeshivas."

With the exception of using their connections inside the Soviet Union to help Ezras Achim distribute the care packages, the bulk of Chamah's efforts initially were in helping Soviet Jewry settle in Israel, and it would take more than this story, indeed, more than this whole book, to detail what Chamah did in Israel and the U.S. But never did they neglect their Soviet brethren.

This much of Chamah's current activities in the former Soviet Union should be known. As an ongoing organization in full bloom, since 1992 Chamah has successfully been operating a soup kitchen, social and medical programs in Moscow. This soup

kitchen was founded by the late Alexander Shvetz and Joseph Ganger. Today it is still being supported by the Shvetz and Ganger families. Dr. Greta Elinson, Director of Chamah in Moscow, says the demand for the sit-down meals and home delivery program has soared in the last three months as the recent financial crisis in Russia has left thousands of our fellow Jews going to bed hungry.

"Many of our beneficiaries are people who were once at the top of their professional careers, such as doctors, authors, engineers, scientists, high intellectuals who today live on their meager pensions, These are people whose dignity would not allow them to beg, but at Chamah's soup kitchen in Moscow they are treated with the respect and honor they deserve."

Feeding the hungry is only part of what Chamah does in Moscow. The agency provides free medical care to hard-pressed seniors and runs a nursery school, kindergarten and primary school. In 1997, Chamah opened a new community center and synagogue in the city's Otradnoye area—the first newly built synagogue in Russia since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Russia is a country where strange things happen, so we come upon this bizarre tidbit: the synagogue was funded primarily by the government of Saudi Arabia, which had to agree to Russian government terms that it pay for the construction of a synagogue and a church before it would be allowed to build a mosque in the Russian capital. Even stating "*l'havdil*" in this situation is unnecessary, as a ravine separates the territory between the synagogue and the two other places of worship. The facility has classrooms, space for a library, a dining room, and an adjacent kitchen, with a yard of about 150,000 feet (14,000 square meters).

For Chamah, it all began to happen in its first office, in the basement of Chudaitov's house on Lefferts Avenue; then in another basement on Montgomery Street. Finally their efforts grew from the basement up and they opened in the fresh air feeling in a fifth floor office at 615 Eastern Parkway. A couple of years later they moved their offices to Kingston Avenue, above Mermelstein's Restaurant—ah, those delicious Jewish smells!—and probably held a lot of business lunches there. Thanks to Jack Wilder, one of the biggest real estate people in New York, the dynamic Chamah trio set up permanent shop at 78 Pearl Street in lower Manhattan, and since 1988 that's where they've been.

This is what reporter Walter Ruby had to say about this wondrous agency: "What is astonishing to a first-time visitor to Chamah's cramped but bustling walk-up world headquarters on Pearl Street in lower Manhattan is how such a modest organization maintains a worldwide network, Chamah's annual budget is only about $2.5 million, its headquarters staffed by just seven. But what the Chamah headquarters may lack in architectural splendor or organizational grandeur, it more than makes up for in the atmosphere of informality, infectious warmth and *Yiddishkeit* that envelops a visitor who ascends the narrow staircase. A hubbub of unrestrained rapid-fire conversation in Russian, Hebrew, English and Yiddish can be heard in all corners of the ramshackle office."[1]

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1. "Sometimes, It's Just Not Enough to Feed a Soul," *Long Island Jewish World*, December 18, 1998, vol. 27, no. 47, pp. 6-7.

Finally, in 1989, Chamah returned to its haunting grounds, Russia. Why do we use the word "haunting"? Because, as it's said, "[m]ost Russians love the heart of Russia, because, like first love, it will not forget you."[2] Since they left, Russia had haunted all three Chamah directors. Now it was their turn to haunt Russia, to make it a G-dly place, to give every Soviet Jew the chance to go down and "feed among the lilies." Or, as Binyomin Malachovsky put it, in other words, "The central mission of Chamah is very much like that of Lubavitch, namely, 'to reach out to each and every Jew with love, whether he or she is observant, and to support Israel.'"

So, with the full blessing of the Rebbe, the Chamah men haunted Russia in 1989. They helped organize a Jewish Book Fair. Their theme, or message, if you will, to the Jews remaining in the Soviet Union, "Remember *Jews*, we have preserved the Book and the Book has preserved us." The Fair was held in Moscow—an astounding thing two years before the U.S.S.R. fell in 1991! But the Rebbe and his emissaries knew they were up to it. So what was a lot of foolishness and loud words from the Soviets! Gorbachev was clearly in power. *perestroika* was in its proper place. The KGB operatives were beginning to mind their Ps and Qs—well, almost. And having maintained contact with Jewish religious activists inside the Soviet Union for many years, it now, as Hillel Zaltzman said, "was an incredibly exciting and gratifying experience for us to go back in to the Soviet Union after so many years and to be confronted head-on by the enormous interest of Russian Jews in connecting with their heritage. We realized we were now in a position to have open programs in the Soviet Union."

Chamah named David Karpov, a *baal teshuva*, to head Chamah's office in Moscow.

In that historical year of 1989, the following also happened or was about to happen:

* In January, the first officially sanctioned Jewish cultural center opened in Moscow. It was named after Solomon Mikhoels, Yiddish actor, cultural leader, and chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, who was killed in 1948 during a Stalinist purge.
* On January 17, the Vienna concluding document of the Helsinki Agreement stated that there was to be a free flow of information into the Soviet Union and free.
* In February, a yeshiva for the training of rabbis, scholars, and teachers opened in Moscow. Founded by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, the first aboveground yeshiva in the Soviet Union, although it didn't produce the results it hoped for, was a joint project of the New York-based Aleph Society and the Soviet Academy of Sciences. It began with 80 students, and three rabbis from Israel and two American rabbis as faculty members.
* The Rebbe's vision of the changes to take place behind the Iron Curtain began to receive even greater publicity in the years to come. At a *farbrengen* on the *Iyar* 29, 5749 (June 3, 1989), the Rebbe noted that the Hebrew letters that give the numerical equivalent of the coming *nun-yud-yud-shin-tes* formed an acronym for the Hebrew words, *mem-yud-samach-yud-nun tes-nun-shin alef-chet-tes* —"This will be a year of

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2. The words of poet Feodor Tiutchev.

miracles." These miracles, the Rebbe explained, would change the face of the world, projecting us into a new era. As the Rebbe continued to express this theme in the coming months, people in all walks of life began to look forward to see what the new year held in store. And they were not disappointed. Soon it became clear that the Rebbe's statements were no mere play on words. In 1989, the Cold War melted, fears of imminent nuclear war went on the back burners in people's minds, cataclysmic upheavals overwhelmed one despotic regime after another, the Soviet bloc began to collapse, the Warsaw Pact dissolved, both sides of the Iron Curtain stopped spending inordinate time and money preparing for an anticipated global confrontation—a World War III—that never occurred, and the potential for world peace blossomed.

* In August, YIVO entered into an agreement with the government of Lithuania, allowing it to photocopy 40,000 pages of documents, newspapers, and books left by YIVO in Vilna during World War II.

* On August 1, on the BBC the Soviet government announced that any book in any quantity (including bulk) may be brought into the Soviet Union, excluding anti-Soviet and pornographic material.

* In the fall, Ezras Achim set up a Jewish day school for the first time in Soviet Russia. Twenty-five students enrolled in the day school for Jewish and secular studies. It was housed temporarily at the Moscow Choral Synagogue on Arkhipovna Street and received official recognition by the Soviet government.

* In November, a yeshiva opened in Tbilisi. The Georgian Lubavitcher yeshiva was the third yeshiva to be established in the Soviet Union over the past year. It was named Yeshiva Tiferes Bachurim, after a Lubavitcher yeshiva established in Russia upon the request of the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe after World War I.

* In November, more than 11,000 Jews left the Soviet Union, the first time the figure exceeded 10,000 a month. Over 71,000 Jews left during 1989.

* In November, the Berlin Wall, symbol of the Cold War, was torn down.

* In December, Chamah held a conference in Moscow under the title, "Reawakening." Religious activists attended from over 100 communities all over the country. The conference and other aspects of Chamah's work in Russia were supported not only by wealthy philanthropists in the U.S., but now into the picture stepped fledgling members of Russia's own Jewish nouveau riche, such as Yevgeny Satanovsky, a former underground activist who had formed a consortium of companies mainly to provide money to the Jewish revival. "My father, Reb Rafael, of blessed memory, would have been so proud of Yevgeny Satanovsky," said Reb Moshiach.

More floodgates were opening—proof that the Book continues to preserve the Jews!

In December, At the Malta Summit, Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. President George Bush declared the Cold War over.

Whether you consider the Jewish books "forbidden propaganda" that Chamah's representatives Moshiach Chudaitov and Hillel Zaltzman brought to and distributed at the Moscow fair, it was all done under the very nose of the KGB. That year, Chamah Publications, Inc., publishers of Judaica in Russian, was invited to attend the Exhibition of the Economy of the Achievement of the Soviet Republic.

The two Chamah rabbis manned the Chamah booth in Moscow. After, exhaustive preparations, the rabbis arrived at the VDNH—the most famous tourist attraction in Moscow. There, the rabbis found their two shipments intact, but, to their chagrin, it appeared that their audio cassettes had been confiscated.

The day before the grand opening there was tremendous commotion in the huge building with Soviet militia, official organizers, and publishers like themselves hurrying to and fro. Several times they were approached by officials who interrogated them. "Why are they going as an independent organization? What kind of materials are you presenting? Are you Orthodox Jews? Are you connected to Lubavitch?"

Finally, Zaltzman plucked up the *chutzpa* to question them in return. "Why all the questions?"

Quite cordially, the KGB agents answered that they were sure that this religious booth in the *glasnost* era would attract such a huge crowd that they were concerned how the two rabbis would be able to control it. They therefore assigned a KGB agent named Pasha to assist them.

Definitely not a tight-lipped KGB "big brother," Pasha turned out to be quite cooperative and sensitive to their needs. Zaltzman asked him what could be done about the missing cassettes that did not arrive and Pasha promised to investigate the matter. The next day he arrived with the missing cassettes and when the tape recorder they had brought from New York failed to work, he brought his own from home.

The opening day brought an unprecedented crowd, with the majority of the Jewish visitors thronging to the small Chamah booth. The other publishers, which had far larger booths, were nowhere as busy. These Jews knew where to come for the real thing. By the end of the day, the rabbis were exhausted, but elated with the genuine outpouring of emotion.

On the second day, so encouraged by the raw emotions of the Soviet Jews he had come in contact with at the fair, Reb Hillel turned to Reb Moshiach and said, "Today, let's bring *tefillin* with us for our visitors at the fair."

Reb Moshiach had a funny look on his face. "Do we dare?" he said excitedly. "Do you think the KGB and militia will come down on our heels?" And before Reb Hillel could say, "The Rebbe's blessing all the way," Reb Moshiach said, "But you know," he said, nodding and grinning, "I like it, I like the idea very much."

"Look, Moshiach, haven't we prepared the way? Haven't we put up religious symbols to provoke visitors?" What Zaltzman was referring to was the attractive manner they had draped a large *tallis* and *tzitzis* over a large, rented refrigerator in their booth. On that first day hundreds of Jews stopped by to discuss the significance of the so-called "decorations." When the two rabbis explained their real uses in *Yiddishkeit*, many of the Soviet Jews walked away, determined to obtain such precious garments for themselves. Reb Hillel didn't have to remind Reb Moshiach of all that. "Yes," said Reb Moshiach, "yes, let's go with *tefillin*."

That second day was a very long day, and weren't Zaltzman and Chudaitov overjoyed! To their booth came an endless line of Jewish men who, once they learned what the purpose of *tefillin* was for, lined up eagerly to put *tefillin* on for the first time. To everyone's amazement the KGB operatives and militia kept their distance from the

Chamah booth, but not Pasha, the ever-friendly and talkative KGB agent. He listened attentively to all the questions and answers at the booth, and, finally, he had to say something. He took Reb Hillel aside. "Listen, Rabbi Zaltzman, I heard everything you said to your fellow Jews."

"Yes?..."

"Well, Rabbi, you left something out."

"Which is what?" Reb Hillel asked Pasha.

"You should have told those Jews that the word *tefillin* does not come from the root *tefilla*?"

For a second Reb Hillel mulled it over; then he grinned and said, "You're right, Pasha." (And he couldn't help wonder if this non-Jewish man called Pasha was secretly studying Hebrew somewhere.)

By the end of the second day the two rabbis were so worn out they decided to leave an hour early. Pasha promised to guard the booth. As they walked away they glanced back for a moment and saw a crowd around their booth. To their astonishment, they saw Pasha distributing the *alef-beis* card souvenirs. Running back, they asked Pasha what he was doing. A little embarrassed, Pasha explained sincerely that "the people are passing by, I just have to give them something to take away!"

The rabbis were taken aback by the irony of the present situation: a KGB agent was literally helping to spread Judaism.

By the third day the pair of Lubavitchers had received many calls from the states, all claiming they had seen them on American TV. "Yes," said Zaltzman, "CBS TV crewmen were here at the fair, and they filmed us." "But," added Reb Moshiach, "they also filmed the others, too." "Yes," added Reb Hillel, "it's no big thing."

"No big thing!" shouted one rabbi from New York. "Do you realize, Hillel, they showed 2-1/2 minutes of air-time on the whole fair, and your booth got 1-1/2 minutes of that time."

Finally, Reb Moshiach and Reb Hillel admitted that was a big thing.

A few days into the fair, on *erev Shabbat*, Zaltzman and Chudaitov set up a little table in front of their booth. Over the table, they draped a *Shabbat* tablecloth. On top of the tablecloth, they placed two large *challahs*, covered by a traditional *Shabbat challah* cover. Next to it, they placed, in candle holders, three candles—one short and two long. Also prominently displayed on the table was a hand-written sign that read in Russian: "On *Shabbat* we do not work."

On that memorable *Shabbat* the two Lubavitchers entered the Choral Synagogue on Arkhipovna Street and introduced themselves as representatives of the American Jewish publishers. They were permitted to address the worshippers. Rabbi Zaltzman spoke about that week's Torah reading, which commands us to set aside the best of one's products for holy purposes. Zaltzman explained that the Rebbe expounds on the importance of giving the best Torah education to one's children. The two rabbis stressed that it is now the responsibility of the Russian Jews, who are finally able to live in such a free time, to do so. Many people wept openly when they heard this.

For many Soviet Jewish visitors to the Chamah booth, the personal message from the Rebbe to them was most important. Prior to their leaving Crown Heights, Zaltzman

and Chudaitov were given a bottle of *mashke* and the Rebbe's blessing for them and all the Soviet Jews they would meet at the fair. Every day at the fair, the rabbis set up hundreds of little cups filled with the Rebbe's *mashke* and proclaimed to every Jew there to come and drink the Rebbe's *mashke* and be blessed for a happy and healthy New Year. "*Lechaim*! *lechaim*!" shouted Zaltzman and Chudaitov. And throughout the fair, there seemed to be a responsive echo of "*lechaim*! *lechaim*!"—as if the whole world were Jewish in those moments! And maybe it was. Clearly that the name of the Lubavitcher Rebbe could be pronounced openly in Russia at that time was a miracle in itself. "Yes! *lechaim*! *lechaim*!" The Rebbe's words went, from heart to heart, to each Soviet Jew, and each was deeply moved. This was a new beginning, this open book fair, and everyone there knew that more would come.

Even Pasha, seemingly very moved in his own way by his assignment at the Chamah booth, again took Reb Hillel and Reb Moshiach aside and said to them, "You know, I must tell you something else."

"Which is?" asked Zaltzman.

Thus said Pasha: "A sixteenth-century rabbi by the name of Joseph del Medigo once said, 'Books are subject to the same process as souls; they migrate from one body to another. Not by chance are "son" and "book" designated in Latin by the same term, *liber*. And so it is in the case of scholarly books that are translated from one language into another, in a different style, in other words, and in changed order. The language becomes different, but the content is the same.' Then he added something of his own: 'Long live your books!'"

Hearing this, the rabbis could only thank Pasha, and say no more. (Now, both rabbis were absolutely certain this KGB agent was secretly studying Hebrew, and probably a lot more!)

Ah, after all those telltale events in 1989, could the fall of the U.S.S.R. be far behind? "We *chassidim* really knew!" said Reb Moshiach. "For quite some time we had known that. We knew because the Rebbe knew, and clearly he had told us to get ready. Inevitably we were—and are—heading to that precious place, the Redemption, to feed among the lilies."

Another Secret of the Rebbe

In 1965 and again in 1966 the Rebbe already predicted the fall of Communism. Then in 1987 when the Iron Curtain was still impenetrable, the Rebbe made a startling request. He asked his followers, including Ariel Sharon, to build homes and prepare jobs in Israel for the masses of Jews who would be leaving Russia. Two years later in 1989, miraculously the doors of Russia sprung open. Millions of Jews streamed into Israel. The housing that was prepared according to the Rebbe's directive overflowed with the new arrivals.

10

The Doctors' Plot And Payback Time

This is what Josef Stalin probably didn't know: By 11 p.m., on March 1, 1953, Stalin never regained consciousness. At that moment, without permission, his closest guards and his housekeeper, Matryona Petrovna, entered Stalin's rooms and found him sprawled on the floor, unconscious and wheezing.[1] According to Russian historian Dmitri Volkogonov, Lavrenti Beria (1899-1953), then head of the Soviet secret police—and whose own "head" would shortly be chopped off—eventually arrived that day and whispered to Stalin's staff, "Can't you see, Comrade Stalin is sleeping soundly! All of you get out of here and don't wake him up!"[2]

Stalin, himself born in the land of Georgia 74 years thence, truly believed he would live out the natural 100-years-plus life of an average Georgian.

Nevertheless, on March 6, 1953, Stalin's autopsy took place, lasting seven hours. It was carried out by nine specialists, all of them with Russian names, as no one was yet aware that the antisemitic "Doctors' Plot" had perished with Stalin.[3]

What really happened between March 1 and March 6, 1953? We have numerous Russian versions about the last days of Stalin, all designed to protect each Soviet official with a good alibi, emphasizing that he or she had nothing to do with Stalin's death.

So here's another explanation, definitely Jewish, definitely another secret of the Rebbe. Do you recall the infamous "1953 Doctors' Plot"? Rabbi Shalom Yaakov Chazan remembers it only too well, and this is what he has to say about it. But wait, not right away. This special secret is so important that we want to share it with you along the way, in its proper place, out of earshot of any leftover Russian spies. So pay close attention, this is a hush-hush story; we'll try and speak in a low voice, which you'll hopefully pick up by reading between the lines. Believe me, the secret is worth it.

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1. Dimitri Volkogonov, *Autopsy for an Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built the Soviet Regime*, ed. and trans. by Harold Shurman (New York: The Free Press, 1998), p. 173.

2. Ibid., 179.

3. On April 3, 1953, Pravda announced that the doctors were not guilty and had been freed, and those responsible for using "impermissible means of investigation" had been arrested. On July 20, diplomatic relations between Israel and the Soviet Union were restored. Weeks later, Beria was tried, convicted of treason, and shot to death by a firing squad. And finally, in his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress (1956) Nikita Khrushchev blamed the Doctors' Plot on Stalin, but carefully ignored its antisemitic aspects.

Let's now get to the main story and find out what Stalin definitely didn't know.

Thirty-four years after 1953, there was an altogether different kind of doctors' plot, dubbed "The Doctors' Mission for Soviet Jewry"; some call it payback time to Josef Stalin for messing with Jews. Now, after many years, we get a fuller picture how these American doctors traveling undercover throughout the U.S.S.R., between November 6-15, 1987, added measurably to the spiritual revolution in the waning years of the Soviet Empire.

In this adventure, the dream and desire for it began in two human heads—those of Dr. Victor Borden and his wife Frani, both from Englewood, New Jersey, who had made their first trip to the then U.S.S.R. in July 1985. There, they met with refusenik families to express their solidarity, to emphasize to them that American Jews cared very much about them and their ugly situations in a land whose government hated them, but refused to let them go. That freedom for Soviet Jewry was a cause the Bordens could work for and brought them in contact with other doctors who had similar dreams and were ready to join forces. But when they met, each doctor had his own medical prescription. As the poet Alexander Pope once put it, "Who shall decide when doctors disagree?"[4] This was the dilemma of basically the seven Jewish doctors involved: Dr. Richard Andron, internist/rheumatologist; Dr. Kenneth Garay, an otolaryngologist/ head-neck surgeon; Dr. Mark Helbraun, a colorectal surgeon; Dr. Raphael Levine, an orthopedic surgeon; Dr. Richard Rosenbluth, a hematologist-oncologist; Dr. Victor Borden, an obstetrician/ gynecologist; and the only doctor not from New Jersey, Dr. Alan Graber, an internist/endocrinologist from Nashville, Tennessee.

We're not talking about a Hollywood film called *The Magnificent Seven*, where seven ambidextrous, fabulous-looking cowboys, armed with all sorts of weapons, save a Mexican town from marauding Mexican bandits. We're dealing here with seven conservative American doctors—armed only with medicines, stethoscopes and TLC (tender, loving care)—who were ready to save Jews in the U.S.S.R., Jews who might be right then, hanging on, in the eternal life-and-death struggle of bodies with pain... These were the kind of things that propelled these seven magnificent men on. And well they knew what their greatest frustration facing them would be: knowing what the Soviet Jewish patients they'd tend needed, knowing that, in the West, medical treatment could commence immediately, and knowing that because of the many Soviet Jews suffering being put on the back burners of Soviet priorities, the seven American doctors would be unable to deliver total medical care or what they considered as total care.

Frustrated or not, they forged themselves into a unified Jewish front. Privately there was some doubt that these three Observant Jews and four Reform Jews, each practicing Judaism in his own way, could work well together, as if their very lives depended on it—and it did, it did! After all, these seven Jewish men, to paraphrase the saying, "two Jews, three opinions," had at least eight opinions. Yet, as one Chabad

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4. *Moral Essays*, III. To Lord Bathurst (1732), l. i.

rabbi counseled them, "Maimonides reminds us that intelligent people ought to examine all different opinions."[5] That was further put to the test as soon as one of the Observant physicians asked the other six to take a suitcase packed by the Lubavitch for the Orthodox community in Russia, specifically Reb Moishe Levertov of Lishkas Ezras Achim.

This at first didn't go down too well with Borden. "Personally," he said, "I was put off by, what I thought I perceived as, the inflexibility of the Lubavitcher sect. I respected their fervor, but objected to their rigidity and unyielding philosophy. However, I felt guilty in turning down the request to carry another suitcase. I felt it would jeopardize our main purpose, that of providing medical support to the Soviet Jews. All of us were carrying drugs and medications supplied by American pharmaceutical firms, and medical equipment as well as other items needed by the refusenik community." This, Borden felt, was the primary reason for their trip. He was also very apprehensive that a large quantity of Judaica found on the doctors by the Soviet customs inspection would compromise their main mission. That initial decision by Borden not to carry suitcases supplied by Lishkas Ezras Achim further polarized the seven doctors. Until one of them posed, "Do you know why the *Mishnah* records the unaccepted and differing opinions of both Shammai[6] and Hillel the Elder?[7] Ill tell you: to teach future generations not to persist in an opinion."[8] After some more talks, everyone finally agreed on sharing in moderation some of the Lubavitcher-provided materials. Dr. Raphael Levine, himself one of the Orthodox Jews on the trip, carried "several suitcases and duffel bags filled with oodles of menorahs, *tefillin*, prayer books, and most of the *seforim* that we had were Hebrew on one side and Russian on the other side."

(But, of course, that the Rebbe had by then blessed their trip guaranteed that the seven doctors would come to realize the vital importance of bringing body-medicine bundles and soul-medicine packages, too.)

Approximately one week before departure, all the doctors, with the exception of Alan Graber from Nashville, held their final meeting at Raphael Levine's home. For the session, Borden did a lot of preparation, compiling and copying all the profiles provided him by the National Conference on Soviet Jewry and the International Physicians Committee for the Protection of Prisoners (I.P.C.P.P.), an organization supported by the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry in Chicago), and many phone numbers and addresses of underground Lubavitcher contacts in Moscow and Leningrad from Reb Moishe Levertov of Lishkas Ezras Achim.

Based on their medical specialty, the seven divided these profiles, which represented actual medical cases according to the perceived medical need, among themselves.

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5. Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, Yad: *Sanhedrin* 10.6.

6. Sage, first century BCE, founder of the Shammai School, who held many opposing theories to Hillel the Elder.

7. Sage, 1st century CE, founder of the Hillel School, who held many opposing theories to Shammai.

8. *Mishnah, Eduyot* 1,4; Samuel, Talmud, *Erubin* 13b.

At this meeting, too, they went over the general rules they had decided to follow among themselves. For example, when visiting refuseniks, they'd always travel at least in pairs, never singly. Also, to always act as a group when confronted by the Russian authorities.

By the end of this meeting, everybody sensed that they were finally coming together as a cohesive group. There was a common purpose driving them, spurring them on.

During the last few days before departure, the seven doctors committed to memory, as best as they could, every refusenik profile for which they were responsible. Borden, for one, utilized different methods to code phone numbers of refuseniks he wanted or was obligated to meet. One such method used was a check-book register in which he wrote in amounts of deposits or check numbers that corresponded to fragments of phone numbers of refuseniks, along with shorthand codes used to identity whose numbers these were.

As an example, Igor and Inna Uspensky, world-renowned entomologists: Borden encoded their phone number under a check headed "tick spray." Another example: the phone number of Avram and Svetlana Kagan (whose children now reside in Toronto, Canada): Their phone number was encoded under the heading "Canadian shop."

Other doctors came up with other inventive methods. One involved an appointment book with made-up meetings of times in the past that corresponded to phone numbers. Another: wallet-sized photos of their children, on whose backs were encoded the phone numbers of refuseniks as if they were dates at which time the pictures had been taken. Still another involved address books. "We used a code in putting down names," said Rosenbluth. "If, for example, we intended to see Sasha [now Alexander] Lakshin in Leningrad, I would put down 'noodle pudding.' But each of us had to remember what these code words stood for. I had one of these little watches, a watch you could put numbers in. Obviously by using the real peoples' name would jeopardize them. It was irrelevant whether the customs people knew what we were up to. We kept to our story and they could find no reason not to let us in."

As for the many vials of medicines Borden brought along, he typed out prescription instructions that reminded him whom they were intended for (all in code, of course) as well as Rx numbers that corresponded to phone numbers. He felt sure that at least one of these systems wouldn't be discovered by customs inspectors, and, in this way, he'd be able to smuggle into the Soviet Union phone numbers that he needed. Other colleagues bought Casio watches with mini-computers that had 4K of memory; they utilized this to encode numbers and names of refuseniks.

Others, like Levine, had all different kinds of drugs in bags that had been emptied of Good-N-Plentys and M&M's and Hershey bars. "I had suitcases filled with bags that had candy names on them, but inside were medical pills," said Levine. "We stapled and sealed them together so it looked like a whole bag of M&M's that hadn't been opened. This system worked extremely well.

And so did their friends. Frani Borden shopping and bought, among other items, *kosher* food, manicure set, batteries, baby oil and Desitin cream and Hebrew books, especially for children. Victor Borden had already prepared and set aside several *New*

York Times' Science Sections, medical journals, and purchased a stethoscope and a manual breast pump, both of which were required by various refusenik families. All seven spent a great deal of time collating and preparing medications they would bring along, such as prenatal vitamins, antibiotics, anti-inflammatory agents, anti-hypertensives and various psychotropic drugs. Each day, new profiles or requests for specific medication would arrive from Linda Opper, the I.P.C.P.P. executive director in Chicago. Joe Carver, an internist from Philadelphia, called and asked Borden if he would take in a pacemaker for a specific refusenik. Borden turned him over to Graber, who complied with the request. Graber himself asked Borden to bring along a glucometer. A psychiatrist from New York sent the group some additional psychotropic medications for a specific individual in Moscow. Finally, or hopefully finally, Gail Stieglitz, a friend of the Bordens, who had just returned from the Soviet Union, phoned Victor to implore him to take several items to the Lvovsky family In Moscow. At first, Borden refused, fearing he had no room in which he could pack more articles. But then, he felt the same about the Lubavitcher packages yet had changed his mind. So...the morning of his departure, he phoned her and told her that if she could be at the airport, he'd add it to the *kosher* food he was carrying, which included *kosher* salami, *kosher* bouillon cubes, *kosher* cheese, as well as the individual cans of tuna, peanut-butter and cans of tomato juice he had for his own personal consumption. After many such transactions, there was no doubt that the seven would get along very well with the help of their friends.

Along the way to the Pan Am terminal at J.F.K. Airport, on the departure day Victor Borden's airport limousine stopped to pick up Mark Helbraun. At Helbraun's house, Borden watched as Helbraun said farewell to his wife, Barbara, and then hug his 3-year-old daughter, Dina. Helbraun is one of the most altruistic and charitable individuals Borden has ever met. The Helbrauns live very modestly, not much interested in accumulating material goods. "I know of their generosity to many causes, most of which are done with no fanfare at all," said Borden. "Mark has been involved with 'Operation Moses,' the exodus of Jews from Ethiopia to Israel. He was selected by me to be head of the Israel-bond campaign during the first year of my presidency at Temple Beth El. I had the opportunity to be with Mark on another type of mission, that of a men's mission to Israel from the United Jewish Community of Bergen County, and had come to know him well. In addition to his limitless charity, Mark harbors no prejudice for any human beings and castigates any others who take advantage in any way of any other individual."

At the airport the two first met Alan Graber. Until then, neither had seen Graber, except through a photo he had sent them.

Graber, an endocrinologist, enjoys photography and jogging (he has run several marathons). He's a pensive, self-controlled individual who, as a Southerner, moves and talks slowly with no wasted motions or thoughts. Borden already had decided that, as he was the only one who had corresponded and talked with Alan, the two would be roommates during the first few days in Leningrad. "I wanted to make sure he felt comfortable with the others and that he would become an integral part of our group."

The next one to appear in the terminal was Ken Garay, the otolaryngologist. Of all

the eventual participants, Garay was the most unsure of his commitment and, probably, the most apprehensive and most nervous of the Russian authorities.

Richard Rosenbluth, a hematologist-oncologist, Richard Andron, an internist-rheumatologist, and Raphael Levine, an orthopedist, arrived together.

Of the group, Raphael Levine was one of the most compulsive, "even more than I am," said Borden. "I say this meaning no disrespect because his compulsiveness translated into commitment. Of all of us, he was the most worried that we were not going to do enough. He wanted to make sure that every possible moment would be dedicated to our mission."

Certainly, as the most Observant, Dr. Levine worried the most about logistics during *Shabbat*. He was very upset, for example, that their Moscow hotel, the Cosmos, was located too far from the main Moscow synagogue. Fortunately, they learned that there was another synagogue within walking distance of the Cosmos. This synagogue, more intimate than the Central Synagogue, served to introduce those who went there to the religious community of Moscow. Raphael was extremely zealous in his desires and to that end, he served to motivate the group.

Of all of them, said Borden, "Richard Rosenbluth has the most biting, sarcastic wit. His humor kept everyone laughing throughout the trip and occasionally served to buoy them during the saddest moments. Rosenbluth had utilized the few months prior to the trip to learn Russian and, thus, served as the group's linguist. He expressed the desire to meet with non-English speaking refuseniks, because he sensed they did not have the same opportunities to meet with Western Jews."

The first leg of their flight was from New York to Frankfurt, Germany. Andron, Levine and Rosenbluth found a small chapel at the airport terminal to pray. When they were all together again, they found a restaurant for a *kosher* snack. During the meal, they noticed a great deal of commotion. Many security guards with walkie-talkies and a few soldiers with automatic weapons were running around and positioning themselves in various locations. A section of the airport was cordoned off. While they were continuing their leisurely meal, they heard an explosion not far away from them. Later, they were told a bomb had gone off. The waiters quickly escorted the group out of the restaurant, making sure, however, they paid for their meals at the exit. Borden was impressed with this example of German efficiency.

To the very end of their time at the Frankfurt Airport the seven studied their refusenik profiles and encoded last-minute numbers and names into their Casio watches. As they headed to the gate of their Aeroflot flight, they tore up all of their profiles and scattered them in various trash cans in the terminal.

Once the seven Americans were at the gate, their demeanor changed. Acting as if they were already on Russian territory, they chattered inconsequential matters and viewed other tourists seated in the waiting area as KGB agents. The flight on Aeroflot was half filled, and many of the passengers were young and physically well-built men who, the doctors agreed, were travelling as an athletic team. Although they never found out for sure, the doctors suspected they were a soccer team travelling back to the Soviet Union from outside matches.

After a flight lasting just over three hours, they landed in Leningrad at around 10

o'clock in the evening, not seeing many lights from the city below as they descended to earth.

Within approximately 20 minutes, all of them were set to face their first major and probably most difficult hurdle, that of customs inspection. For five of them, however, customs was almost a breeze, but Graber and Levine were detained for closer scrutiny.

Graber, by nodding imperceptibly, tried to reassure the other five that all was all right. However, he was not making any further progress toward completion of his inspection.

As for Levine, he had no idea what troubles were to fly in his face. "In Frankfurt, as Victor [Borden] might have mentioned to you, we had to study all the information that we had and then throw it away. Unfortunately one of the sheets of paper I had I couldn't throw away out of sight of the Soviet authorities; it was a complicated glitch of a paper. Trouble was it involved our stay in Moscow, the second leg of our journey. The group planned to stay at the Cosmos Hotel there." As an Orthodox, Levine insisted on being near a *shul*, to pray on *Shabbat*. The nearest Orthodox *shul* was the Lubavitcher Marina Roscha Shul, about two or three miles away. Worse, the road was long and winding, and Levine was certain he'd get lost without a map. "Besides, who knew if any other Jew would be going in my direction. I might be the only one."

So Levine prepared well. Before the trip he visited a friend, a physician named Dr. Milgrom from Randolph, New Jersey, who previously had been to Russia and knew how to get from the Cosmos Hotel to the *shul*. At Dr. Milgrom's home, Levine was shown a sheet of paper, listing a large group of refuseniks that Dr. Milgrom at the time of his visit had visited or had planned to visit. At the bottom of that sheet of paper were directions on how to walk from the Cosmos Hotel to the Marina Roscha Shul. As there was no *eruv* in Moscow, Levine knew he had to dispose of the paper before *Shabbat*. Until then, he studied the directions as often as he could. "But *oy vey*," Levine shook his head, "when we got to Frankfurt I studied all the other stuff about the refuseniks, but I forgot about that yellow paper I had memorized already."

The only memorable events during the Aeroflot flight to Leningrad were the rowdy, boisterous behavior of the Soviet athletes. Many were drunk, having brought on the plane bottles of vodka and beer. They sang Russian tunes loudly and mostly out of tune. "Actually," added Graber, "those who slept snored more harmoniously than those who sang."

Aboard that flight, Levine stuck his hand in his pocket and realized he still had the yellow paper, which he'd planned to discard in Frankfurt. "So right away I tore it up into about 20 different pieces," and he stuffed the pieces back in his pocket. When he reached Leningrad, he'd throw them in a garbage disposal or flush them down the toilet.

At Leningrad's airport, Levine's luggage was opened as several inspectors slowly checked every item of clothing and goods within. This seemed to last well over half an hour. The lone KGB guard at the airport suddenly approached him, and told Levine again to open his bags. The KGBer's eyes popped open when he saw what was in the luggage. Said the KGB guard, "What is all this [referring to the Judaica items]?"

Said Levine, using his best physician's bedside manner, "I'm a Jew and I need all

this for religious purposes."

"Oh, and you need more than one of these things." And pointing to the two pairs of *tefillin* and three menorahs, he asked why Levine had several of these items.

"In case I lose one, I want to make sure I have another one."

The KGB guard stared intensively at Levine as he shouted out. Was Levine about to lose more than his shirt? Suddenly, about 10 more KGB guards came out from the broom closet, it seemed, or its equivalent, and surrounded the hapless Levine. Only the first KGB man, Numero One, spoke English; the others didn't. Each of the other guards opened Levine's "candy," and showed the pill contents in the wrappers to Numero One, who barked at Levine, "This is not candy. This is pills. What is this?"

"Antibiotics," Levine said, with his heart beating wildly.

They opened some more "candies."

"What's this?"

Levine already knew what he would say: "For diabetics."

"And these?" Numero One's voice registered harshly.

Levine said they were for him.

All 11 KGBers stared down Levine, ready to pounce on him if he gave them the wrong answer.

"So," said Numero One, "you have antibiotics? You have diabetes pills? What are these?"

Levine answered, "For blood pressure."

"How sick are you? You have blood pressure problem? You look healthy to me."

"Thank G-d I'm healthy," said Levine, "but whenever I travel anywhere, it's important that I bring things just in case I get sick. I have this craziness about myself. I always have to bring things."

The KGB men then huddled out of earshot of Dr. Levine. When they returned, with some pointing their guns or rifles at Levine, Numero One said, "We don't believe you. You're going to visit people and you're going to bring these to people."

"These are all for me," insisted Levine.

"Hah!" snapped Numero One. "We have a Russian saying: There's a fool in every family or school. But not one here at Leningrad's airport. We were told in advance you'd insist these pills were for you, so we're onto you. Now tell us the truth."

Levine stuck to his story. He knew they couldn't prove anything if he didn't admit to anything. So, "This is all for me."

Another fast meeting of KGBers, and they stormed back at Levine. "We don't believe this is for you. You have drugs of all different types, you have Jewish things of all different types and duplicates. We know you're going to visit private people. Who are you going to visit?"

Levine insisted he wasn't going to visit anybody. "I'm a tourist. This is all for me."

Finally, as his friends watched through a glass separation, the muscled KGBers muscled muscle-less Raphael Levine into a little room for further interrogation. Its size was a bit more than two broom closets together, with one table and a chair inside. They forced Levine to stand up against one wall, despite his pleas to sit down. From his trousers, they removed his wallet and found inside it photos of Dr. Levine's daughter,

who had previously been in Russia the year before; there, she had met some refuseniks. After that, his daughter went off to study in Israel and had sent her dad photos of her and her refusenik friends in Jerusalem. Naturally, like a good dad, he stuck them in his wallet, ready and willing to pull them out at any time to show off his daughter. As Levine's luck would have it, Numero Uno recognized these refusenik, and said, "Vladimir Lipshitz. He was a refusenik. He left last year. Why do you have his picture?"

Levine said, "I don't know who that is. It's my daughter next to him."

Said Numero Uno, "Well, it's Lipshitz. Why do you have this picture?"

"I told you, it's a photo of my daughter."

"Who's your daughter?"

Levine pointed to his daughter in the snapshot. "This is she. She's a student from America, and this past year she's been learning in Israel. She sent me a picture of herself. A natural enough thing between a child and her parents."

"Well, why does she have a picture with Lipshitz?"

Levine told him he didn't know. "In her letter to my wife and me, she never mentioned the person standing next to her. All I know is that it's a picture of my daughter."

Digging deeper in his wallet, the KGB men found another one.

The same accusations. "This is so-and-so. Well?..."

And so it went on and on, and Levine kept to his "ignorance." He could see his interrogators were getting very frustrated. At that point the nervous Levine put his hands in his pockets. Like vultures, they descended on him. Pulling his hands out of his pockets, they then searched him. One found the torn-up yellow papers. Quick as a flash, on the table they had it all assembled like a jigsaw puzzle. On the page, of course, was the list of names of remaining refuseniks in Moscow and Leningrad with their addresses and telephone numbers. Below this list were the directions to the *shul*.

But the KGBers had eyes only for the list. "Ah! You're going to visit this one...you're going to visit this one...you're going to visit this one."

Levine said, "I'm not going to visit any of them."

"Then why do you have this paper in your pocket? Who gave you this paper?"

Levine tried to explain. "An American friend of mine in New Jersey gave me this paper. I needed to know how to get to the synagogue because I'm staying at a hotel in Moscow, the Cosmos, and I want to walk to the synagogue."

"Hah! A likely story. Why don't you take a taxicab?"

"It's important for my religion and I already told you that. So on that day, I have to walk, and my friend gave me instructions how to do that."

"Why do you have this paper with the names?"

"The only thing I can read on that paper are the directions. What was on the rest of the paper was a mystery to me—then and now."

Finally the jig was up. Not for Dr. Raphael Levine. But for Numero One and his KGB cronies. Finally, to Dr. Levine, "You will leave. Pick up your belongings and leave."

They made Levine gather his "stuff"—the drugs, the *seforim*, menorahs, his

personal garments, even the candy wrappers.

All that time, Graber was allowed to close his suitcase, but was told to remain there alongside the customs aisle. About 20 minutes later, Levine returned to the main customs area, looking extremely glum. Along with him came an inspector who appeared to be agitated. He was accompanied by a representative of Intourist (the official Soviet agency that handles travel arrangements for foreign visitors to the then Soviet Union), who acted as his interpreter. Through him, the inspector informed the Americans that they had discovered "narcotics" on Levine, and now they wanted to reinspect everyone's belongings again.

Why suddenly did Josef Stalin pop into Victor Borden's head? Why did Alan Graber, seeing the visibly shaken Raphael Levine, suddenly think of those doctors accused and jailed in 1953? Then, the whole world shivered at two words: Doctors' Plot. "On January 13, 1953 (*Tevet* 26, 5713) the official Soviet information service [the newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*] made the following broadcast: 'The authorities have just discovered a terrorist cell of doctors who were intending to assassinate our leaders by carrying out harmful medical procedures upon them.... Most of these physician-murderers are part of the international-Jewish bourgeois organization known as 'the Joint'; some of them are also in the pay of the British secret service. They were responsible for the deaths of Andrey A. Zhdanov [Central Committee secretary, who had died in 1948], [and Alexander S. Shcherbakov (died in 1945), who had been head of the Main Political Administration of the Soviet army]. Attempts have also been made on the lives of other senior officers. Our investigation into this matter will be concluded in the near future.'"[9]

Graber and Levine seemed caught in the Soviet trap. Probably it struck more than one doctor in the group that he was next, and then another doctor, and another, and another. The announcement went on to list the names of nine top Russian physicians [Professor M. S. Vovsi, a Jewish therapeutist; Professor V. N. Vinogradov, a therapeutist; Professor M. B. Kogan, a Jewish therapeutist; Professor B. B. Kogan, a Jewish therapeutist; Professor P. I. Yegorov, a therapeutist; Professor A. I. Feldman, a Jewish otolaryngologist; Professor Y. G. Etinger, a Jewish therapeutist; Professor A. M. Grinstein, a Jewish neuropathologist; and Professor G. I. Mairov, a therapeutist]. Six of them were Jews. This was the beginning of the scandalous blood-libel which came to be known as 'the Doctors' Plot.'"[10]

Was this hold-up at customs the Doctors' Plot all over again? Would the seven be accused of trumped-up charges, worse than possessing narcotics, which was not true to begin with, as far as the seven were concerned?

Victor Borden, the leader of the group, stepped forward and confronted the inspector. "It's ridiculous to think any of us have any narcotics. We're all physicians traveling together as friends and tourists, and we're carrying with us medicines we

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9. Rabbi Shalom Yaakov Chazan, "Word Power and the Death of Stalin," *Kfar Chabad* Magazine, March 12, 1998, no. 800, pp. 12-13.

10. Ibid.

either need or might require in different situations."

Once he heard what Borden had to say, he said angrily, and the translator suited his action to the words, "A crime is when you get caught. Smuggling narcotics into Russia is a crime. We have a saying here: When you return from a foreign land you can lie without end."

"Sir, you have another saying here: The fish doesn't care for jokes when the hook is in its mouth."

Almost red-faced, the chief inspector turned to Richard Rosenbluth and asked him, "If you're coming to the Soviet Union for 10 days, what do you need all these bottles for?"

Without a trace of a smile or humor, the quick-witted Rosenbluth said, "When a person packs for a big trip, he'd like to carry the kitchen sink if he could. Better to err on the safe side. We're not going to take three pills of this and nine pills of this. What you do is take all your medicine. So although I'll need ten of these pills, and maybe I need three pills taken five times a day or five pills taken seven times a day, I took the whole bottle. These pills won't be given to anybody except us. None of them are narcotics, and feel free to check out all the pills."Then the chief inspector turned back to Borden. From him to translator to Borden: "Meantime, we insist on reinspecting the luggage of all seven of you."

Leaving the other six Americans for his crew of inspectors, the chief inspector took personal charge of examining Borden's luggage. He was especially interested in the many vials of medication Borden had, asking what each one was for.

"They're all for my personal use," said Borden.

Who knew if the chief inspector bought that! But he had Borden put the vials of medicine aside, in a separate place. Then, he checked each book and set aside all the Hebrew ones. Angrily he held up a children's book, yelling at Borden, "Who are they for?" Suddenly Borden recalled: while packing his suitcase, he'd neglected to remove from that book a self-adhering small note, which had written on it, "for Shelly Mendelleev." Holding up the book, the chief inspector read aloud, "for Shelly Mendelleev."

"Who is Shelly Mendelleev?" he demanded to know.

"It's a gift for me from a friend in the United States whose name was Shelly Mendelleev."

"In Russian?" he shot back.

"Uh-huh," said Borden.

"Aha!" Now the chief inspector thought he had him. "And of course you read Russian!"

"I took the book along with me because I enjoy my friend's illustrations. That's all."

Again the chief inspector did not accept Borden's explanation and set aside this book, far away from the other belongings. Then he had Borden fill out a new customs declaration form, forcing him to list his Minolta camera and its lens, together with its serial numbers; the Kodak disc camera Borden was carrying for Lev Sheiba; and his tape recorder. Borden managed to convince him that the two Swatch watches and the Timex he had on him were worth very little, and he acquiesced to Borden's not noting

them down on his customs form. Similarly, he was able to hide his calculator from the chief inspector, and that as well did not go on the customs form.

Finally, the chief inspector said that everything but the medicines and the Hebrew books were approved. This approval extended to Borden's journals, the *Times*' "Science Sections," *Newsweek* magazines, and the various novels by Israeli authors. He told Borden he'd return shortly and reexamine the medications and the books, but all else he could repack.

After stuffing everything back into his suitcase and carry-on bag, Borden waited with his luggage and the two separate piles of drugs and books placed neatly alongside his suitcase. Surreptitiously he threw the sticker with Shelly Mendelleev's name on the floor, hoping it would be lost in the hectic activity of the airport. Twenty minutes later, he was alone; by now all of his colleagues, including Graber and Levine, had completed their inspections and left the room.

Finally, his patience worn thin, he beckoned another inspector and asked about his status. "Hokay," said the inspector." Translated: Everything was approved and Borden could now repack and leave.

Immediately, Borden bent down to pick up the crumbled blue sticker with Shelly Mendelleev's name on it. The customs inspector saw what Borden had done, and asked him for the piece of paper. Borden said it was just trash and he'd throw it out when he saw a trash can. Again the inspector asked for the note. After more persistence, Borden, concerned that it might cause Shelly Mendelleev a tremendous amount of difficulty, reluctantly gave it to the inspector—who promptly threw it away in a trash receptacle. Then he turned to Borden and said how much he appreciated his not littering the floor.

Better than the outcome of The Magnificent Seven film could ever be, all efforts of the seven doctors, all their preparations had culminated in a successful entrance into Russia. Every capsule, every tablet, every item of Judaica, every item of medical equipment, including one of the most advanced pacemakers in the world, were now inside the U.S.S.R.

In a 20-minute ride from the Leningrad airport, the seven Americans reached the 1,700-room Moskva Hotel around 1 a.m., and spent the next four days there. It had been predetermined that Garay and Helbraun would room together, Andron, Levine and Rosenbluth would share a room, and Graber and Borden would be roommates. The room shared by the three was no larger than any of the others and it was necessary for a small cot to be brought in by the hotel staff. Before he went to bed, Rosenbluth, phoning his wife in New Jersey, used a different kind of code to say what he wanted. "The code was, if we had difficulty getting into the country, I'd tell her what a terrible headache I had on arriving. I told her I had a bit of a headache, but fortunately it was all gone now," smiled Rosenbluth.

The next morning the seven of them hit the streets in search of public telephones. The Soviet Jewish contacts knew the Americans were coming, and set up little clinics in individual apartments; they knew which specialists would be at which house; they knew one clinic would be set up for cancer patients; another would be set up for gynecologic problems, and so on. During their stay in Leningrad, followed by three days in Moscow, the seven "tourists" visited with and evaluated more than 150 men,

women, and children with medical problems of varying severity. The patients they diagnosed, evaluated, and, when possible, treated suffered from a wide variety of disorders, ranging from psychiatric disturbances in children through congenital, metabolic, cardiac, and neoplastic (cancer) diseases.

During their stay in each city, they saw their patients in various "clinics," set up extemporaneously in several refuseniks' apartments. To these "clinics," came waiting lines of individuals eager for a dose of Western medicine.

In Leningrad, their workday began at eight in the morning, and ended in the early hours in the evening, seeing patients. Each doctor gave advice as much as he could; without too much medication, he dispensed whatever medicines he had. The doctors left the balance of the medicines with their major contacts. They also gave the refuseniks items that they could sell on the black market, to help sustain them and their families.

But didn't the Soviet authorities know what you were doing? the seven men were asked. Speaking for all seven, Kenneth Garey said, "We were limited to what we could do. True, none of us was very savvy about the spy business. So I personally concluded, either the Russkies didn't pay much attention to us or they didn't care. The risk that we were taking is, if they really wanted to, they could easily say we were practicing medicine without a Russian license. But, then," he added, first, however, crossing two fingers of his hands, as if to say, luck had a lot to do with it, "the year was 1987, not 1953."...In 1953, the Doctors' Plot proclamation "was published in the press and broadcast on the radio. Commentators gave lengthy 'official explanations,' which were in reality nothing more than vicious and provocative attacks against the Jews. The harshest and most inflammatory propaganda was against the newly established State of Israel. The population of the U.S.S.R. was warned against 'enemies of the people,' and was told to be careful of 'terrorists masquerading as doctors.' So-called 'information sessions' were held in all public institutions, including schools, colleges, factories, army camps and hospitals. These sessions were conducted by Communist Party functionaries and members of the secret police, who issued dire threats against 'the doctor-murderers.'"[11]

In Leningrad, Andron and Rosenbluth saw Soviet hospital-based medicine at what was termed a "middle-level" institution. They had been invited by the Jewish father of a cancer patient, although neither the father nor the son had expressed interest in emigrating at that time. A leading non-Jewish surgeon, whom the two doctors found "knowledgeable, bright, and a study in frustration over his inability to surmount bureaucratic obstacles to the delivery of proper medical care," escorted them on a tour of the ward, including the Intensive Care Unit.

"The only difference between the ward and the ICU was that there were fewer patients in the ICU and much more light," said Andron, who characterized the hospital as reminiscent of a New York City municipal institution of a century ago. "It was dark, dreary, and depressing."

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11. Ibid.

"The only people who smile in that country are the refuseniks," said Garay, a child of survivors, who could not help wondering if the course of Jewish history 50 years ago would have been different if "American Jews had done in Europe what we were doing in the Soviet Union."

On the second day in Leningrad, Graber, Levine and Borden arranged to meet with Roald Zelichonok, who was incarcerated in 1985 for teaching Hebrew, shortly before the Bordens tried to meet with him; instead they met with his wife Galia about a week after his confinement. Two years had taken a harsh toll on her. By 1987, she was 90 percent blind, having uveitis and cataracts. The day the Bordens visited her in 1985 she had just been fired from her job, which involved twirling together pieces of wire for telephones. She did this by touch only. Although not working she could not be considered a parasite as officially she had been declared an invalid and was on a state pension. In addition to her visual deficits she was obese and suffered from hypertension and ulcer disease, tooth ailments as such widely prevalent in the refusenik community.

"We met Roald, known familiarly as Alek, at the Metro station," said Borden. "He'd told me he would be holding a bag with a camel's picture on it. It was easy to identify a very distinguished man carrying a plastic bag with a Camel cigarette advertisement on it. We greeted each other, without any physical contact, and he led us to their apartment, which consisted of a living room and a small bedroom. Their kitchen and bathroom were communal, being sharers with relatives not in refusal."

Almost as afterthought, Borden added, "I got the feeling there is much friction with them."

Alek warned the three physicians that his apartment was bugged, at one point looking up at a spot on the ceiling of the room and yelling, "What more can you do to me?" The five persons at length discussed his incarceration for two years in the Gulag where he underwent deprivation, torture, and beatings. He also talked eloquently about Pamyat, its dangers to the Jewish community, its irrational antisemitism (as if any antisemitism could be rational). Finally, he spoke at length about the medical condition of Jews in refusal, stressing the great deal of anxiety, sleep disturbances, and degree of tensions they all experienced.

Graber examined both Galia and Roald. He felt Galia could be treated in the West with advanced techniques that could bring about an improvement in her sight. Roald suffered from labile hypertension, and for this, they gave him a specific anti-hypertensive drug.

That night, upon returning to their hotel room, Borden received a call from an Intourist representative who claimed the group owed Intourist more money. Why? "The bus driver had to wait over two hours for your group at the airport," the female voice said, "so we must charge you for this extra time."

"You can forget that," said Borden. "There's no way we'll pay any extra charge. Instead, bill the Leningrad customs inspectors as it was their fault we were delayed."

The female voice asked if customs found and confiscated anything. No, said Borden. Thanks, she said, and hung up.

Despite all their successes of the day, that night none of the seven had a restful sleep, tossing and turning all night as thought after thought, or vision after vision,

haunted their minds.

Overnight it had snowed, and there was a two- to three-inch layer of snow on the ground the next morning. After breakfast Andron, Garay and Borden met Anatole Koddner, a 40-year-old physician in refusal for several years. The Russian authorities had convinced him and his wife to divorce, suggesting they both could then be allowed to leave the country. It was a bald lie. His wife was given permission to leave and now lives in the U.S. At that point the ex-couple had been separated for three months. He was denied his exit visa, but just recently had been told he should reapply. His hopes were high that he would be granted an exit visa. In the meantime, in Leningrad, he was destitute, not earning enough to live on, and was just barely able to exist. A quiet and reserved man not given to discussing his many difficulties, he didn't try to ingratiate himself with the physicians in order to receive extra gifts. He worked unofficially, caring for refusenik families for which he wasn't compensated.

Later, the three physicians squeezed into the back seat of Koddner's small, ancient automobile and were driven to Lev Furman's apartment in downtown Leningrad. There, the trio of doctors bade farewell to Koddner as he drove back to his home.

While all the other refusenik visits had been to the newer outlying districts of Leningrad, the Furmans lived in the center of town. Their apartment building exuded an elegance of a time long gone by. One wonders what historic events occurred there or nearby.

However, time had not been kind to this building. Once one enters through the large oversized door in the front a dark, dingy hallway and landing confronted him. A stench of urine and rotten garbage quickly became apparent. The floor tile was cracked, chipped and gouged. It was obvious there was no general maintenance. As Levine walked up the wide stairwell he tried to imagine what type of people lived in each apartment.

The Furmans, Lev and Marina, lived on the third floor. Expecting the doctors' visit, Lev quickly opened the door once they knocked. A slightly built man, bearded, and one of the few refuseniks who looked younger than his stated age of 40, Lev Furman wore an old, faded flannel shirt and frayed pants, and his head was covered by a large Oriental-style kippah.

He tried to make the visitors as comfortable as possible in the living room, which also served as a bedroom for his father. The apartment consisted of this fairly large room, a kitchen and another bedroom used by Lev and his wife and their 8-month-old daughter. The ceilings was at least 12-feet high; the paint and wallpaper were peeling off the walls. Somehow, Borden later assessed, "I felt that the neglect of the physical space was far outweighed by the great spirit of the apartment's occupants, I was not mistaken."

In refusal for 13 years, Lev Furman was a Hebrew teacher and an activist involved in frequent demonstrations in Leningrad. He had been detained or called in for questioning by the KGB over 40 times. Prior to his request for emigration he worked as a mechanical technician in a secret lab, but quit upon applying. For the past 13 years this extremely intelligent and capable man had worked as a coal stoker in a boiler room. His refusal by Soviet authorities was based on state secrecy.

Lev's father, also in refusal for a lengthy time, was a naval hero from World War II, known in the U.S.S.R. as the great Patriotic War. Hanging on a door was a jacket with a row of medals. These were awarded to Lev's father by the Stalin regime.

Twenty-eight years old, Marina was already a refusenik, from Kiev, prior to her marriage to Lev in 1985. A small woman with shoulder-length brown hair and light skin, she is soft-spoken and quiet, but when she spoke she did so with a powerful passion, exuding an inner strength, an aura of determination that made the American physicians certain that she would endure whatever obstacles the Soviets erected.

The KGB had threatened Marina that when she went into the hospital to give birth nobody would be surprised if either she or her baby died. The reason for their threat was a letter the then 27-year-old, 7-month pregnant Marina wrote and had smuggled out to the West. The letter described Soviet antisemitism and life in the Soviet Union for a Jew and for a refusenik—a Jew who had been denied a visa to emigrate to Israel. Marina wrote the letter about her own life, growing up in Kiev, in order to exemplify—not the stories of the famous refuseniks about whom much was known in the West—but about typical refuseniks in Soviet cities smaller than Moscow and Leningrad where life for Jews could be far more difficult. The letter found its way into Great Britain, was broadcast over the English BBC and was picked up in some places in the Soviet Union. A number of Marina's friends heard the broadcast and told her about it—as did the KGB.[12]

"Do you know how I know the letter was good? Because the KGB was so upset by it," Marina said. The KGB told Marina the reason they were threatening her so severely was they were afraid she would become an example to other refusenik women as was former prisoner of conscience and current refusenik Ida Nudel. Nudel was convicted on charges of "malicious hooliganism" and was sentenced to internal exile in Siberia for hanging a sign on her balcony saying "KGB, give me my visa." The KGB warned Marina that her fate—if she and her husband did not stop their "Jewish activity"—will be far worse than Nudel's has been. They told her that Jews in the West do not care about Soviet Jewry and only use the issue to promote their own business. They told her that if she or her baby died the world would not know and would not care.[13]

Marina described in great detail her difficult pregnancy and labor. She had some cardiac problems during her prenatal course. From what Marina described, Borden, an obstetrician/gynecologist, couldn't be certain whether this was due to an arrhythmia related to mitral valve prolapse or another cause. In any event, the Furmans bribed, with 150 rubles, one of the better obstetricians in Leningrad to ensure his presence at her delivery. She claimed that the KGB pressured him not to attend to her, and during labor he wasn't available.

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12. The preceding statements were also quoted from Shira Leibowitz, "A Great Miracle Will Happen Here," *Nshei Chabad* Magazine, February 1999.

13. Ibid., includes the preceding paragraph of this story.

She was very fortunate that another physician took pity on her situation and provided excellent care. She said, during labor, it was only due to his care that she survived. Since then, she claimed, that particular physician had been demoted and reassigned to an outlying hospital.

From Marina Furman and other once-pregnant Jewish women, the three physicians were able to piece together the ways and means of Soviet hospital and medical care. Routine care provided during a woman's labor appeared to be only slightly more than benign neglect. Once a woman was admitted to the hospital prior to or during labor she was separated from her family for her entire stay. Hospital officials claimed visitors on OB floors would increase the risk of infections. The normal length of hospitalization was seven to 10 days for a routine birth. It was also reported to Borden by several women whom he examined that the obstetricians did not gown or glove or even wash their hands between examinations or deliveries. "If this is true," Borden said, "it harkens back to an era before Semmelweis [Ignac Fulop Semmelweis, 1818-1865], who discovered over 100 years ago that postpartum fever was due to obstetricians spreading infection from patient to patient." Borden found it hard to believe that this scenario could exist in 1987 in any industrial, technologically advanced country, let alone in a superpower.

The Furmans' daughter, named *aliyah*, was one of the most beautiful babies Levine had ever seen. "She resembled a porcelain doll. She has been playing in a playpen in the room while all of us have been talking. She was a happy, contented child, smiling all the time. As a matter of fact, a Soviet physician told Marina that there certainly exists a psychiatric problem with *aliyah* because she smiles all the time and normal Soviet children don't. At the age of eight months the oppressive Soviet system was already attempting to subdue the natural human spirit. They won't succeed with *aliyah* Furman. She undoubtedly has inherited the spirit her parents exhibit." Added Borden, "A*liyah* is the future. May G-d allow her to live in freedom in a strong and healthy Israel." The Furmans planned on living in Israel (which is exactly where they live as of 1999) whenever visas were finally granted.

Dr. Andron examined Marina while Garay and Borden continued their conversation with Lev. He stressed his concerns, some of which the doctors had heard from others, that of the resurgence of antisemitism. He also feared that if he and other activists were allowed out of the U.S.S.R., there would be no one to replace them as leaders and teachers of the Jewish community. He was constantly trying to identify and train others to take his place when the time came. Lev showed the Americans photographs of recent demonstrations in Leningrad. He pointed out different people, some of whom Borden recognized.

Furman also described a demonstration the past summer. The KGB arrested and later fined men 50 rubles for participating, while women were made to pay 30 rubles. The Leningrad newspapers wrote that agents of Zionism had come to Leningrad and paid refuseniks to demonstrate, referring to them as slaves of Zionism. The Furmans told us they would demonstrate monthly until they were granted exit visas. He had no fear of the authorities. He was committed to a course of action which he felt was necessary. This was bravery. This was heroism. No more needs to be said; that year was

1987, not 1953"...In 1953, the Stalinist paranoia about killer Jewish doctors was "taken very seriously by the citizens of the Soviet Union. The campaign of incitement only grew with each passing day. Although many of the announcements did not actually contain the word 'Jew,' terms such as 'homeless cosmopolitans,' 'nationalists,' 'bourgeoisie,' and 'Zionist agents' were frequently employed. Most of the Russian population knew exactly to whom these appellations referred. These events took place at the height of Stalin's relentless campaign against the Jews. The few individuals who understood the true nature of this paranoid autocrat well knew that the doctors themselves were innocent of the crimes of which they had been accused. The senior members of the medical profession who knew the accused men personally were also aware that they had not committed any such offense.

Unfortunately, not many Soviet citizens did know the truth. Most of the public were influenced by the massive propaganda campaign, and believed it. People began to be afraid to be examined by Jewish doctors, even in the distant Republic of Uzbekistan. As a result, many Jews were dismissed from their positions, not only within the medical profession, but also from scientific institutions and universities. Jews everywhere became more and more fearful. Every day the public waited for the grand 'show trial' that would surely take place. The Jews were terrified that the inevitable 'guilty verdict' would unleash a wave of pogroms that had not been seen since the czarist era"[14]...

In a way nothing had changed between 1953 and 1987. Marina Furman told her American visitors us that the main industry of the U.S.S.R. was production of propaganda. "There is a Russian joke that there are two television stations. The first shows only propaganda; when one turns to the second a KGB agent appears on the screen, ordering you to turn back to the first station."

Using a Magic Slate board, Garay asked Lev Furman if he thought Gorbachev, two years then in power, would be good eventually for the Jews, "*perestroika* and *glasnost* and all that?"

"Gorbachev," Lev wrote on his Magic Slate, "he once said, I'm not sure to whom, 'I can't go on living like this any more.' Well, we refuseniks have for years been saying just that, that it was impossible to live a decent, any semblance of a human life, under the Communist regime. Maybe by saying that, Gorbachev was at heart a refusenik, too. But sympathetic to Jews, the jury's still out. Still, this much can be said: He didn't instigate the people's protest that had long awaited public expression. but I feel certain he'll go down in history for having made it possible."

Then Lev turned to his wife, and the three Americans could see she, too, had something to say. "Gorbachev," she wrote on her Magic Slate, "everything nowadays in the U.S.S.R., begins with him. But his task is hopeless. Why? Because aboveground there is spiritual uncertainty. It has no constructive ideas for relieving its chronic economic crises. Our lives are covered with dirty snow. The only spiritual revolution taking place in our country is underground"—and here she whispered the word

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14. Rabbi Shalom Yaakov Chazan, p. 13.

Lubavitch—"and if the underground leaders and their Jewish education fully surface one day, who knows what may happen. One day we'll all wake up here and see the ground covered with white snow. Jewish snow. Of course, the Russians, as with everything else, will claim they invented the Jewish snow. But who cares what Mr. Gorby and his cohorts say. As we say here, 'What makes us happy, makes us rich.' The Jewish snow is our soul food. And our talmudic Sages laid it on thick. Because they knew that G-d always supplies the cure before the disease. The disease, in this case, is the more or less wicked ways of a Soviet nation on the way down, and the cure, the Jewish nation on the way up."

Victor Borden was dumbstruck. "Where did you learn this?"

(On her magic slate, Marina wrote): "From people like Alexander Lakshin, who started a *shiur* on Sundays here in Leningrad—and from those Jewish books you and others bring us. May G-d bless you for every Jewish book you smuggle in to us!"

Borden was impressed. Suddenly he saw the Rebbe's blessing in action. Suddenly he grasped the vital importance of bringing body-medicine bundles and soul-medicine packages, too. Gratefully, he then thanked the Furmans, saying (via a Magic Slate), "Guess I better read some of that Lubavitcher literature, too."

Seventy years before 1987, "Lenin saw that power was lying there to be picked up on the streets of the capital in October 1917. The seizure of power was possible because of a rare constellation of circumstances perceived by Lenin. It is what he did with that power that would prove monumentally tragic for Russia."[15] Are these words too much? Not when you consider that in October of 1987, "more than two years into the new course, Gorbachev was still wedded to the ideas of Lenin and Leninism.... "You know, I'd like very much to draw a parallel between history and the present. We didn't mean to do this just artificially, but in reality to build a bridge to Lenin, to connect Lenin's ideas, Lenin's approach to the problems of those years and the issues of our own day...

"After all, the dialectics applied by Lenin in solving problems is the key to solving present-day problem."[16] Sounded good then, but, four years later, Gorbachev & Co. was out of business.

Now in 1987, as the clock kept ticking toward the final stage of the spiritual revolution the Rebbe had set in motion, Dr. Andron pronounced Marina Furman physically fit although he said, if he were able to, he'd order an echocardiogram and other tests to rule out mitral valve prolapse. Her diet and nutrition could be better, he told her, knowing for now this was impossible to achieve.[17]

Just prior to their departing from the Furmans, Lev asked them to photograph a list of Jews who needed invitations from families in Israel. Borden agreed. He told the Furmans that he'd personally send the negatives to several organizations in the U.S., which would arrange for the obligatory invitations to arrive.

The next day, on another visit, Levine learned more about Alex Zelichonok, who was once a celebrated computer engineer. A number of years before that, he learned

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15. Dmitri Volkogonov, *Autopsy for an Empire*, pp. 442-443.

16. Ibid., pp. 442 and 443.

17. The Furmans now live in Israel.

and taught Hebrew in the city of white nights. Once he started teaching, the Soviet authorities entered his house, confiscated his books and arrested him. Promptly he was jailed. In that jail at the same time was none other than Vladimir Lipshitz who, besides being in that same photo with Levine's daughter in Israel, was also a very famous Hebrew teacher.

After leaving prison, the two Soviet Jews were deemed undesirable and had to be separated. They secretly shipped Zelichonok to a prison cell in Eastern Russia and Lipshitz to a prison cell in southern Russia. From those points, Zelichonok was put on a train going from eastern Russia to western Russia; Lipshitz was put on a train going from southern Russia to northern Russia. By Divine Providence the two men on two different trains stopped at a junction at the exact same minute. Filled with tears of joy, the two friends hugged and kissed each other in disbelief. "I tell you," said Raphael Levine, repeating Zelichonok's own words, "It was *Hashem's* doing!"

Now meeting Zelichonok in his new home in Leningrad, Levine saw a man at peace with himself and his world. "Highly intelligent. Speaking beautiful English. Not depressed. Although concerned about his future, he claimed to be unconcerned about the KGB. He spoke about his prison conditions, his beatings, the hospital fare food and the fortuitous meeting with Lipshitz. Obviously believing in G-d's doing, he always said, 'Whatever is going to be...' What struck me was that here was a Russian fellow who didn't know anything about *Yiddishkeit*. Yet he had so much *emunah*."

The Zelichonoks had taken in a family of Jews for room and board: Joseph Abramson, his wife and their 4-year-old child named Misha. Misha had cerebral palsy. The Abramsons asked Dr. Levine to determine whether there were any orthopedic procedures that could be done as his muscles were very stiff, or if they could get an operation for Misha.

Dr. Levine examined Misha, and then said to his parents, "You know he has a type of cerebral palsy called 'athetoid.' Their muscles are very tight, but you can't really correct them with any surgery. What the athetoids have going for them more than any other type of cerebral palsy is intellectual potential. They can't speak because they have no control over the muscles around their mouth. But they understand and they can learn, and you can give them devices with which they can get their thoughts out. Whether it's an electric typewriter or other mechanical mean, they can 'speak.' That's what you must help them do."

"Dr. Levine," said Father Abramson, "would you please leave? You're wasting our time."

"Why do you say that?"

"You've no idea what we're up against here," said Abramson. "When we brought Misha to the Soviet doctors, they said he has cerebral palsy and mental retardation; They said we must not give him any information. When we discuss anything that needs thought, we have to make certain that he cannot hear us. We have to send him out of the room or his brain will become more damaged. And you're telling us that he has potential to learn, more so than many children?"

"That's true, and what you were told is false."

They said, "All of our lives we've been pushing him out of the door when we

discuss anything that's going on in the world and now you're telling us that he can learn? Please leave, you're wasting our time, we have to make up for lost time. We have to teach Misha, and now we're wasting time."

About a month after Dr. Levine got back to he States, he got a letter. "Dear Dr. Levine, permit me please to congratulate you and your family with Chanukah holidays." Dr. Levine smiled kindly. "I know the letter was written in broken English. But his heart was in the right place. He wrote, 'Please also wish you healthy and happy new [Jewish] year. You encouraged family very much. Hope see you anywhere. Is Misha [by now] famous all over your country? Next year in Jerusalem. Sincerely yours, Joseph Abramson, December 1987.' Dr. Levine called up his most endearing bedside manner smile and said, 'Isn't that something!'"

After four days, in Leningrad, of examining Jewish patients with all kind of maladies, the seven physicians had to conclude that the refusenik community suffered from an inordinate degree of stress, depression, and anxiety caused by living in a state of refusal—which, no doubt, exacerbated any preexisting medical conditions.

But the seven Americans had their own misgivings. They worried about meeting with non-refuseniks. Potentially they could be informers or, worse, KGB agents. Graber, however, felt strongly they needed to make contact with these Jews. Certainly most Jews in the U.S.S.R. were not refuseniks; many were in the process of just deciding to take that fateful step of exit application, yet others would never do so. In any case, many Soviet Jews wanted to meet with Western Jews. To some the American Jews were as alien as inhabitants of another planet. There was no satisfactory resolution of this conundrum. To meet unknown Jews was to take risks, so the Doctors' Mission for Soviet Jewry went on—to Moscow, and there further steps were put in place, in 1987 and 1953.

Interrogator: You, [Dr. Yakov] Rapoport, have been arrested as a Jewish bourgeois nationalist, an enemy of the people. Tell me about your crimes.

Rapoport: I have committed no crimes.

Interrogator: This is a hypocritical lie.

Rapoport: There is no hypocrisy here.

Interrogator: Stop quibbling and tell me about your vile deeds.

Rapoport: I have never committed any vile deeds.

Interrogator: You will not evade responsibility for your crimes. Rapoport: I have committed no crimes.[18]

Once in prison, following the daytime, "lying down was forbidden, and so it went, countless days without sleep. Sometimes I fell asleep during the day standing up, but my legs buckled under me and I snapped awake. If I closed my eyes when sitting down, a shout quickly followed: 'Get up, open your eyes!' There was one particularly vicious watchdog, a man with rotten teeth and a malicious glint in his eyes. Once, weak beyond measure, I dozed off while sitting on my bed and did not notice him enter the cell. He awakened me with a shout: 'What's the matter... Want to be sent downstairs [a hint at the punishment cell]?'"[19]

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18. Yakov Rapoport, *The Doctors' Plot of 1953* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 94.

19. Ibid., p. 109.

No wicked dreams abused their curtained sleep, Raphael Levine and Victor Borden awoke early, excited about their impending arrival in Moscow, and after their morning prayer and a glasses of tea by the train attendant, the doctors sat on the train to Moscow and watched as the countryside rolled by. Borden told his friends he could easily imagine the shtetl where his ancestors lived as he visualized the woods and farms they were passing. In the early morning hours, peasants hurried along dirt paths on the way to their morning chores. Slowly, as the train chugged on, the density of homes increased, electric lines multiplied, and more and more people scurried about.

Exactly on time, the Americans arrived at the main railroad station in Moscow. Their porters were waiting for them, and this time they were transported in three limos to the Cosmos Hotel—on time. The hotel, an immense building of over 3,000 rooms, several restaurants, a bowling alley, four bars, an indoor pool and sauna, is one of the busiest in the world. Located across the street was a Metro station on the orange line called Vonkh. Also just behind the station was a large park with an immense monument dedicated to the Cosmonauts. It consisted of a large parabola stretched skyward and sitting on top was a large missile pointing towards the heavens (cosmos, in Russian)... The Soviet people jokingly referred to this monument as "an impotent dream—always erect but never taking off."

As soon as the group settled in the hotel, Borden left his room and crossed the highway in front of the hotel to the bank of phones by the Metro station. He phoned Igor Uspensky, his main Lubavitcher contact in Moscow, and arranged for all of the physicians to meet with him later that morning. There was some pressure on all of them as they had to set up their schedules before sundown. *Shabbat* began then, and those among the Americans who were observant were anxious to conclude all arrangements as early as possible.

Distinguished entomologists, Igor and Inna Uspensky had worked at the Institute of Medical Parasitology and Tropical Medicine in Moscow. When they applied for exit visas in 1979, not only did the Soviet authorities refuse to give them permission to emigrate to Israel, but they also isolated them from their scientific contacts. The authorities even threatened their colleagues who continued to keep in touch with them. The Uspenskys were not fired immediately, rather their supervisors chose to make their working conditions more and more difficult. They were denied permission to publish scientific articles or to participate in meetings.

In December of 1981, Igor was demoted after rejecting a proposal to retract his application. Inna was dismissed from work at this time while Igor, for a time, toiled as an elevator operator, but by 1987, he was earning a living translating medical journals.

Igor's mother, Irina, was a renowned biologist who had published about 70 papers in different scientific journals and text books. Before she retired in 1976, she was a senior scientific consultant. She too applied for permission to emigrate together with her son's family in 1979.

Igor and Inna's younger son, Slava, had become an Observant Jew. He applied separately from his parents in early 1987 and on June 1 was given his own badge of courage, his own turn-down. The authorities told him to wait five years before reapplying again. Not so typical was the explanation given him: refused on grounds of

"grandmother's secrets." His grandmother Irina's field of study was plant disease. Slava continued to pursue his studies, hoping that somehow he and his family would eventually receive permission to emigrate to Israel. He and his friends were ardently religious.

Inna belonged to a Jewish women's group, and participated in March of 1987 in a three-day hunger strike. This began on the March 8 International Women's Day.

Now, Igor and Inna served as coordinators of the medical care of the Moscow refusenik community. Igor Uspensky was considered the "physician" of the refuseniks.

The Americans met Igor on the platform of the Metro stop nearest his apartment. Looking several years older than Borden remembered him 2-1/2 years ago, Igor told Borden about his added stress of losing his menial job, and of Slava's potential draft into the Army. The Uspenskys had managed to prevent that catastrophe by means they never revealed to Borden or the other American doctors.

Igor also told his friends of Slava's refusal to take a scheduled exam on Saturday because of *Shabbat*, and how he was able to convince Slava to walk to the examination center and participate in the exam.

When asked by Dr. Ken Garay about the apparent changes in the Soviet System, Dr. Uspensky replied, "It is very difficult to ask a person who is in a jail cell if there are positive changes or not. Maybe there are, but he is still in the jail cell... If I received my permission to leave and was in Israel right now, maybe I would applaud; otherwise, I cannot."

Accompanying Igor was Mark Rechtman, a mustachioed, sturdily-built, 41-year-old physician who, prior to his application for an emigration visa, was one of the leading Soviet researchers on epilepsy. Now he worked in sports medicine, and had begun to involve himself in the medical care of the refusenik community.

The physicians spent the early part of the afternoon at Igor's apartment, reviewing their schedule. Igor had produced two large sheets of paper, one in English and one in Russian, each with seven columns neatly drawn. The headings on top of each column were the different medical specialities the seven Americans represented. In each column were the times and addresses at which clinical sessions were arranged. Igor had established an organized system of clinics for all of the American physicians. Each of the Americans were assigned several sessions to be held in individual apartments. The logistics of the Moscow organizational chart were staggering. Each of the seven physicians required a capable English-speaking translator, an apartment to hold each session, and, by the looks of it, the table of organization involved more than 100 people.

That night at Alex Ioffee's *Shabbat* table, Alex shared his depression over his situation. "It's been over 12 years since I and my family have applied. I'm separated from his son, daughter-in-law and granddaughter for over a year. Many of my friends have left and still I'm subjugated and denied."

Part of their conversation that evening was very sensitive. It dealt with the planned secrecy seminar later that month. Organized by Pavel Abramovich, it involved the subject of refusal on grounds of state secrecy. While everyone discussed the subject Alex removed the phone from its attachment to the wall. He knew his phone was monitored. Borden left the Ioffes very depressed. "They are my family. I love them as

I suffer for them. They are imprisoned in an evil system," said Borden. But Alex left his American friend with this: "There are three groups of people that smile in the U.S.S.R. The first are children because they have no conception of what awaits them in their future. The second group are lovers because when in love nothing else matters. The last group is refuseniks, because they are the only ones that have some slight hope of improving their situation." So, concluded Borden, his friends were not as hopeless after all, and filled with a higher hope.

On *Shabbat* afternoon, the American physicians reported to their assigned apartments to treat the sick Jews. Andron and Borden repaired to Elena Dubinskaya's apartment, a 41-year-old woman prominently involved in the Refusenik Women's Group. She had been in refusal for 11 years. Prior to her application she worked as a lecturer in Soviet Political and Economic History. Now she worked as a typist.

The basis of Elena's refusal had been that her oldest brother had a classified job. He was 19 years older than she and she had very little contact with him. In any event he died over five years ago. Now the authorities claimed her refusal is due to her second husband, Eric Khasin, who had a Ph.D. in Metallurgy.

At length, the two doctors and Elena discussed the current political topic in Moscow—the effect on Gorbachev's power as a result of Boris Yeltsin's discharge from his governmental position. This, she felt, weakened Gorbachev's position. Elena fondly recalled Bob Torricelli, then Borden's New Jersey Congressman and friend who visited the Soviet Union about two years ago. Torricelli impressed Elena very much. Elena also told Borden and Andron of her daughter Inna's medical problems. Inna was then 19 years old and was hospitalized for over a year with active tuberculosis involving both lungs. Initially she was treated with Rifampin, but developed hepatitis as a result. Now she is taking INH, Streptomycin and Ethambutol. Andron and Borden agreed that her therapy was being handled appropriately.

Elena described the conditions of Inna's hospitalization in the special tuberculosis sanitorium. There were 13 beds in the ward, all filled with teenage girls mostly from the provinces. They were uncultured peasant girls, with very antisemitic feelings. Each patient's history includes nationality, so Inna's nationality—Jewish—was known to everyone. This added a great deal of stress to Inna, and Elena felt it worsened her medical condition.

A few moments later Inna appeared from the other room. She was very thin and fragile. After Andron examined her, he said he was satisfied with her condition. "She'll get better every day—I can see that," he said.

The apartment consisted of three rooms: a small kitchen; Inna's bedroom, which also served as a small den; and Elena's bedroom, which doubled as a living room. Patients scheduled to arrive at different times would wait either in the kitchen or den. Borden or Andron would first interview a patient in the living room. Elena served as the interpreter, as her English was excellent. Once the history taking was complete, Borden and Andron would examine the patient. Elena provided them with gloves for the exams. The gloves were made for cleaning and washing, not for medical exams. They were clean, certainly not sterile, but stained from previous use. After completing the exam, the patient would redress and then the physicians would offer their

conclusions and advice to her.

The patients were those whom Igor knew required GYN consultations or friends of Elena who knew of Borden's presence in her apartment. They were all extremely easy to examine, exhibiting none of the usual embarrassment Borden's own patients at home had during this exam. They were all very appreciative of his efforts and, as such, constantly expressed their gratitude.

We in the U.S. are told frequently of the numerous lines Russian citizens must stand on for food, clothes and various other products. There was an actual line that formed in Elena's apartment as women patiently waited their turn. At no point, in spite of a long wait, did anyone exhibit any impatience or restlessness.

Now there was a Muscovite Jew named Victor Flaxman, who unfortunately had gangrene of his legs and needed an amputation. But he had recently had a heart attack. The Soviet doctors had told him, "There's no way that we're going to give you anesthesia to do the leg amputation." But he could have had it under spinal anesthesia. However, neither hospitals in Moscow nor Leningrad had it available; neither did they have anesthesiologists to do spinal anesthesia. So it looked very grim for Flaxman. The American doctors did everything they could to have him sent to the U.S.A., but he passed away shortly thereafter.

Still there were other lives in Moscow they could save. Secretly the American doctors dropped off their medicines to their Lubavitcher contact, Igor Uspensky. Then, on a bitter-cold November day one reads about in Russia, Levine and Andron left the Cosmos Hotel and visited to the Marina Roscha Shul. Arriving there, the duo was struck by the *shul*'s smallness (which has since been rebuilt after a damaging fire). Inside were a few Jews. Dr. Levine, the only Levi there, got an *aliyah*. What also struck Levine and Andron was that, here was a *shul* in the midst of Gorbachev's antisemitic era and before *Mussaf*, the congregants stood up and blessed Gorbachev. One Soviet congregant explained to Levine, "We have to do that just in case there are any spies in the *shul*, and there always are."

Levine laughed. "Mikhail Gorbachev is the enemy in the Jewish news coming out of Russia, and I said to myself, 'How bizarre it is! We're sitting here in *shul* praying to *Hashem*, hoping that this man is overthrown, and they're making a blessing to preserve him only because there might be someone in the crowd who is going to pass that word on!'"

In the late Muscovite afternoon Andron and Borden went to the home of Oscar and Shelli Mendeleev. Oscar was 59 and Shelli, his wife, was then 53. They had twin sons, Gregory and Valery, both 17 years of age. Oscar, a geophysicist and electronics engineer, invented a device to determine soil conductivity by means of microwaves. His degree in geophysics was from the Moscow Institute of Geology. After graduating, he worked, prospecting for radioactive materials. Later he searched for freshwater as a means of assessing sites for future construction of plants and pipelines. All of his research and inventions had been published openly in the West. Therefore, detaining Oscar and his family for reasons of state security was absurd.

In 1972, when the Mendeleev family applied to emigrate to Israel, Oscar was dismissed from all his posts. In 1976, he was involved in underground statistical work

by keeping Jewish statistics. He was caught by the KGB and warned that any future activities would result in imprisonment.

He had been fired several times from the menial jobs he'd had since 1972. At one point he was accused of parasitism. He found a job as a tutor, but in reality this was only a pretense as others were listed as his students. By the time Borden met him again, Oscar Mendeleev was earning some money by tutoring English and some by working as a computer programmer in the paper industry. His parents applied together with Oscar in 1972. At the age of 80, his father began learning Hebrew so he would be ready when an exit visa was approved. Unfortunately, his father died in 1979 at the age of 82. Oscar's mother died 25 days later.

Shelli was a pediatrician and worked in a clinic. She suffered from asthma. She was a very personable, hospitable woman who served Borden and Andron a wonderful dinner. The dinner plates were placed on a magnificent lace tablecloth with the Star of David embroidered on it. She had prepared a delicious eggplant salad, and a concoction of carrots, cheese and nuts that the physicians had several helpings of. Naturally they toasted their friendship with the vodka Borden had brought as a present for their hosts.

Since Gorbachev had been in power, he carried out a major campaign against alcoholism. As part of his efforts it was almost impossible for ordinary Russian citizens to obtain vodka. As American tourists in the Soviet Union, the seven doctors were able to purchase as many bottles of vodka as they wanted, in the Berioska shop (store outlets that sell expensive, high-quality, foreign-made goods, which can only be purchased by foreigners, showing their passports, and paying in American dollars) located in every tourist hotel.

"I made sure to bring along several bottles with me whenever I visit a refusenik family," said Borden. "It will also serve as a valued bribe if so desired."

The Mendeleevs' twin sons both suffered from epilepsy. Valery developed petit mal epilepsy at the age of 12 and developed general seizures at age 13. Since then, he suffered intermittently from them. Gregory developed his first seizure at the age of seven. Both were currently taking medications to prevent seizures.

Immediately after dinner, Dr. Andron examined Shelli. He felt her asthma was under fair control. We were sure that the stress of their lives worsened both Shelli's asthmatic condition and the twins' epilepsy.

Before leaving Borden and Andron presented the Mendeleevs with some gifts and Hebrew books. They asked the two visitors to send them more Hebrew books as both were in the process of learning Hebrew. In turn, they gave each of us tea strainers. We parted, wishing them the best possible wish—freedom.

After *Shabbat*, Rich Andron made arrangements to examine Marina Friedlander at the Lvovskys' apartment. This was a hastily arranged meeting. Mark and Ada Lvovsky didn't personally know the Friedlanders, but had agreed to allow their apartment to be used for this purpose. This was symptomatic of how refuseniks helped one another. Ada served as Andron's interpreter. After a thorough examination for a very complicated case, the Friedlanders were satisfied with Andron's counsel.

Of all the places in the world, a basement, Dr. Raphael Levine met Professor

Edward Nodgorney. Once the head of the main physics institute in Moscow, he was a brilliant physicist who'd written hundreds of scientific articles. Often the professor had traveled as a representative of the Russian government, discussing physics.

Once, however, he applied to leave the U.S.S.R. as a Jew, he was stripped of his position as head of the physics institute in Moscow, and relegated to a technician job in a basement. "Can you imagine the shame?" Levine wondered aloud. "Doing menial technical work. Shlepping packages. Making up packages. It was all compassion." The American doctors spent some time with him in his apartment in Moscow. "We met his son, Boris," said Levine, "and we called him Baruch.

"I must also tell you," added Dr. Levine, "that Lubavitcher organization, Lishkas Ezras Achim, really has its eyes and ears pointed in the right direction. Their insistence on our bringing in Russian-Hebrew books definitely made a big difference in the lives of Soviet Jews. Yes, we had trouble at the Leningrad airport with *seforim*. And even if they put me in jail, I'd go to their prison, insisting that the *seforim* were mine. After all, as someone once said, 'A book may be as great a thing as a battle won.' And we Jews, People of the Book, are in it together, fighting the battles of G-d."

So, in the battle of wits at the Leningrad airport, recalled Levine, KGB Numero Uno stuck a calendar written in Hebrew and Russia in the face of Levine.

"He said to me, 'Is this yours?' I said, 'Uh-huh.' 'Okay,' said Numero Uno, 'then read this.'"

Levine could see Numero Uno had opened to a Russian word, meaning the Jewish month of *Teves*.

Undismayed, Levine said, "This says *Teiveis*." For a special effect, he broke his teeth with the Russian sounds. "I couldn't really read it. But I had to show them that I was a nerd trying to learn Russia."

But these Jewish books got through safely, just as the Rebbe had blessed them to do that. The new revolution was beginning to breeze slowly through the Soviet Union, and there was nothing the Soviet authorities could do against the words and actions of G-d. Many refuseniks they met were thrilled, Levine and Rosenbluth agreed. "They were becoming religious and their teachers were either leaving or on their way out of the U.S.S.R. It didn't take long for the Soviets to realize it was in their best interests to kick out all Jewish teachers from their country. They figured if they could get rid of the Hebrew teachers, then the feeling about Judaism would die on the vine.

That's where Hebrew books came in. With *seforim*, all they needed was some guidance. The American doctors brought some Jewish items so they could learn on their own. "It was very, very important to them," said Levine, the biggest keeper of the flame, among the team of American doctors. "It gave them a lot of *chizuk* because they now felt they had fellow Jews looking to help them further their *Yiddishkeit*."

One of the young Russian Jews, named Julia Wax, approached the seven doctors. At the time, Julia was a medical student in Moscow. She had heard about their trip, and since she could speak English, this *baal teshuva* expressed her deepest desires to learn alongside them. This meant, if they agreed, she would work on their staff in Moscow while they made their rounds there, and she in turn could learn as much about *Yiddishkeit* and medical practices as possible. Dr. Levine, for one, was delighted with the

prospect of taking on this medical student aide, who fully intended to stay in Moscow no matter what and help her fellow Jews.

Sunday was the team's last full day in Russia. By then, for better or worse, the seven physicians had grown lax in their personal securities. Names of people were now sprinkled in their dialogue as opposed to the codes they had used earlier in their mission. They now traveled singly to their appointments, something they vowed they'd never do. In their hotel rooms, they no longer used the magic slates to communicate. None of them phoned the American Embassy upon their arrival in Moscow, whereas in Leningrad it was the first task we all performed.

Were they headed for trouble? Would they be charged with treason—or worse? In 1953, the accusations against the nine doctors unleashed panic among the Jews of the Soviet Union and were met by reactions of disbelief and foreboding in Western Europe, the U.S.A., and Israel. On January 19, the Israel foreign minister, Moshe Sharett, bitterly condemned the Soviet action. A bomb exploded in the courtyard of the Soviet embassy in Tel Aviv on February 9, wounding four of the staff. Despite prompt apologies from the Israel government, the U.S.S.R. immediately broke off diplomatic relations. The Soviet press then stepped up its attacks on Israel, the "Joint" [the American Joint Committee], Wall Street, Zionism, and imperialism. "The pack of mad dogs from Tel Aviv," wrote Yuri Zhukov in *Pravda*, February 14, 1953, "is loathsome and vile in its thirst for blood." An article published in *Trud* on February 13 noted that the "Joint" had organized major anti-governmental conspiracies not only in the U.S.S.R., but in Hungary and Czechoslovakia as well as direct reference being made to the Slansky Trial of November 1952.

After Stalin's death, many believed that the Doctors' Plot was all part of Stalin's own final solution to "the Jewish problem" within his empire. According to Stalin's plan the doctors would be found guilty, which would result in a strong wave of antisemitism. At the last minute the authorities would take measures supposedly to protect the Jews. These measures included rounding them all up and exiling them to distant Siberia and Kazakhstan. In recent years researchers discovered that transport links had already been set up for this purpose. The deportation and forced migration of ethnic minorities had already taken place during the Stalinist era. For example, during the years 1943 and 1944 the Tatars were forcibly removed from the land their ancestors had lived on for centuries. Everybody agreed or nodded in private that the Doctors' Plot was apparently part of Stalin's plan for a new purge of the top Soviet leadership. It was probably directed against Lavrenti Beria, the minister of the interior (MVD), who had been responsible for security matters when Shcherbakov and Zhdanov had died. The Pravda editorial of January 13 specifically criticized "the agencies of state security" that had failed to "discover the doctors' wrecking, terrorist organization in time." (Moreover, the Plot was clearly modeled on the 1938 case of G. G. Yagoda, an earlier chief of the Secret Police who had been found guilty of recruiting medical specialists to murder such prominent citizens as Maxim Gorki.) Stalin's death enabled Beria to regain control of the Secret Police (MGB) and merge it with his ministry, the MVD. The release of the doctors and the arrest of their interrogators evidently formed part of Beria's desperate, but ultimately futile, effort to consolidate his power. Seen in broader perspective, the Plot proved to be the last of those macabre "conspiracies" that were manufactured during Stalin's reign but did not reappear in such a form in the subsequent Soviet regimes, though many of the anti-Jewish manifestations that had

accompanied the Doctor's Plot were to reemerge later.

In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress (1956) Nikita Khrushchev blamed the Doctors' Plot on Stalin, but carefully ignored its antisemitic aspects and even took the opportunity to exonerate S. D. Ignatev, who had headed the MGB during the Plot, in early 1953. In fact, Ignatev was reelected to the Party's Central Committee in 1956.

In the fall of 1987, was the Soviet secret police again setting up another trap, now for these seven American physicians? The evidence was there, waiting to be collected. The only thing necessary was for Gorbachev to give the nod to his current stooge version of Lavrenti Beria...but would he? How could he with *glasnost* and *perestroika*, like two Barbie dolls that hadn't been fully painted yet, in his unsure hands?

So the final act unfolded. Each doctor went off to his assigned "office." Borden traveled by Metro to one of the farthest neighborhoods from central Moscow. There he met Nadezhola Supin. She and her husband, Gregory Supin, had been in refusal for nine years.

Nadezhola, 54 years old, was an electrical engineer. Her husband was a chemist. Upon their application both lost their jobs. The Soviet authorities claimed both had state secrets which is the reason for their refusals. Both the Supins refuted this claim.

The Supins' apartment was small and consisted of the usual three rooms, a tiny kitchen, a small den which doubled as a bedroom, and a slightly larger living room that also served as the master bedroom. Most of the families the doctors visited had an oriental rug that, instead of placed on the floor, hung on a wall for decoration.

When entering a Russian apartment the custom is for everyone to remove their shoes or boots and put on comfortable slippers. Extra slippers are always available in a small hallway or foyer by the entrance to the apartment. Shoes are for outside use; only slippers for home use.

Aliona Noveck served as Borden's interpreter. During his examinations he noticed that "when I said something good the woman I was examining would turn her head over the left shoulder and make a sound as if she was spitting. The 'ptt, ptt' sound over her left shoulder is a superstitious gesture similar to knocking wood. It is meant to keep evil away."

As a group, the seven American physicians collectively examined 102 patients in Moscow alone (more than 175 in both cities). They found medical care in the Soviet Union varied from appropriate to decidedly substandard. "There are a number of individuals who would definitely benefit from procedures, technology, and know-how currently unavailable to them in the Soviet Union," said Levine. "In some instances, the need for medical intervention is urgent. "But," shrugged Levine, "what else can we do under these circumstances. Yet just wait till we get back to the States; we'll blow the horn, or *shofar*, for these needing Jews, loud and clear!"

Now that even our seven new hero-doctors are out of harm's way, let us move ahead to 1998 when, in a magazine article, Rabbi Yaakov Chazan revealed a secret relevant to the Doctors' Plot and Josef Stalin.

"Imagine the situation many thousands, of miles away in Brooklyn, New York, on *Teves* 21, 5713 (January 8, 1953), five days before the announcement heralding the beginning of the 'Doctors' Plot.' The Rebbe Rayatz had passed away about three years

before, and exactly a year later his son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, had become Rebbe. In the Rebbe Rayatz's later years a special pamphlet would be published in honor of each festival or special day in the Chabad calendar (such as *Yud-Tes Kislev*) with a chassidic discourse in honor of the occasion. In due course, his successor continued this custom.

"Yet on *Teves* 21, 5713 (1953), the Rebbe surprised his *chassidim* by publishing a special pamphlet containing a *maamar*. They were very puzzled because, as far as they knew, there was no particular significance attached to *Teves* 21. In the introduction to the pamphlet the Rebbe wrote: '...Here is the *maamar* that begins with the words, "The Holy One does not confront His creatures with unreasonable demands," which was first delivered in 1925. It is very well known by *chassidim*. and the Chabad community. As is also known, my mentor and father-in-law the Rebbe [Rayatz] was especially fond of it and it was delivered, albeit with some changes, several times...'

"Usually, whenever the Rebbe had a particular *maamar* published, he would speak about it at the next *farbrengen*, drawing lessons from it or mentioning its relevance to that particular date. At the *farbrengen*, however, the Rebbe did not mention this *maamar* at all. It almost seemed as if it had been published for no particular reason.

"The key to the whole mystery lay within the *maamar* itself. The following few lines appear to sum up the situation in Soviet Russia at that time: '...The Torah was given to Israel alone...because of their characteristic self-effacement and self-sacrifice.... From time to time it becomes more difficult to study Torah and observe the commandments because of worthless scoffers who deride those who fear G-d and study Torah. This stems from the insolence that will appear as the footsteps of the Messiah come closer. When our lot becomes very bitter in exile, we certainly have the strength to overcome [our troubles] because nothing evil emanates from Above.'

"A few weeks later, it was Purim. In Crown Heights, a *farbrengen* took place that evening. A large crowd, still in a festive mood after their Purim celebrations, had come to join the Rebbe. Among the many who had gathered in '770' were dozens of Jews who had left Russia only a few years before. Some of them had physically experienced the horrors of Russian labor camps and internal exile in Siberia. They knew all too well how much their brethren were suffering behind the Iron Curtain. Even on this happy day, they could not stop thinking about their friends and family whom they had left behind.

"At the beginning of the *farbrengen* the Rebbe delivered the *maamar* that begins with the words, 'And he brought up Hadassah—this is Esther'...Before delivering a *maamar* the Rebbe would always look very earnest: he was readying himself to transmit a pure distillation of *divrei Elokim Chaim*—the words of the Living G-d.' However this time the Rebbe wore an even more grave expression than usual as he prepared to deliver the *maamar*.

"A few hours went by during which the Rebbe, as might be expected, delivered a few talks related to Purim, sang chassidic melodies with the assembled *chassidim*, and said '*lechaim*!' As dawn vas about to break, his luminous features gradually disclosed a state of *dveikus*—the silent rapture in which, at a moment of inspiration, a *tzaddik* cleaves to his Maker. The Rebbe was clearly about to impart another *maamar*. This was

unprecedented: the Rebbe never delivered more than one *maamar* during a single *farbrengen*.

"The Rebbe began by telling the following story: 'Soon after Czar Nicholas II was toppled from his throne, elections took place in Russia, and the Rebbe [Rashab] instructed his *chassidim* to participate. One of these *chassidim* was so uninvolved in the workings of the mundane world that he knew nothing of the recent cataclysm of the toppling of the czar. However, as a devoted *chassid* he hastened to fulfill his Rebbe's instructions.

"'So he prepared himself—as for any pious obligation—by immersing himself in the local *mikveh* and taking along his prayer belt, and went off to the polls. When he arrived, he had no idea whom to vote for or even how to vote, so some other *chassidim* soon told him what to do. He solemnly tied his prayer belt around his waist, and whatever they did, he did. When the voting was over, everyone started to shout, "Hurrah!" Not knowing what else to do, the *chassid* joined in, at the top of his voice: "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" [In English and Russian, the word *hurrah* is a cheer; in Hebrew, the two words *hu-ra* means "he is bad."]'

"As the Rebbe called out 'Hurrah!' [without imparting what definition he had in mind, that is, 'Hurrah!' or '*Hu-ra*!'], his face radiated with fiery intensity. The assembled *chassidim* were exhilarated, and, of course, surprised. This apparently simple story was obviously loaded with deep significance. Swept along with the Rebbe's enthusiasm, they all called out in unison, 'Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!'

"Then the Rebbe delivered the *maamar* that begins with the words, 'Therefore this festival is called Purim from the word *pur* [Persian for "lots"]....' This learned discourse was eventually printed in a pamphlet issued for Purim in 1991, which also described this most unusual *farbrengen*.

"In the introduction we read, '...The second *maamar* that was delivered during that Purim *farbrengen* was linked with the fall of the leader of that state that persecuted the Jews. This was understood at the time from the story which the Rebbe told just before he recited the *maamar*, about a directive given by the Rebbe Rashab after the fall of the czar....'

"On March 4, 1953 (*Adar* 17, 5713) a dramatic announcement was heard over Radio Moscow. A little more than two days previously, Josef Stalin became dangerously ill and was now in a coma. This happened at exactly the same time that the Purim *farbrengen* took place in New York. The true situation was only revealed the following morning. In fact, the ruthless dictator of the Soviet Union was dead. Russian Jewry were now able to breathe a sigh of relief. The atmosphere in the Soviet Union became considerably lighter after the tyrant's death and many political prisoners were released. The 'Doctors' Plot' and the deportation plan both died, together with their wicked initiator. In New York, on the day that Stalin's death was announced, a *maamar* was published in a special pamphlet, despite the fact that *Adar* 18 is also not a day of any particular significance. In the introduction the Rebbe simply wrote that its publication was in response to 'a suggestion and a request.' Yet no one ever knew who had made the suggestion or the request.

"From a superficial glance, the *maamar* itself was a surprising choice, since it

relates to *Parshas Va'eschanan* [a Torah portion]. It was originally delivered in 1924, and is based on the verse, 'And you who cleave to the L-rd your G-d are all alive today.' Its theme is the uniqueness of the Jewish people. Significantly, though, it also includes a rare allusion to the distinctive power that the Torah infuses in the righteous.

"In this unique sequence, the first *maamar* anticipated a dire hour by carrying a reassurance that 'The Holy One does not confront His creatures with unreasonable demands'; the Jewish people are always armed with the capacity for self-sacrifice; there is no room for despair.

"The second *maamar* prompted cosmic repercussions that we cannot begin to fathom. The fact is, however, that Stalin died at the very time that this *maamar* was delivered, immediately after that outcry of 'Hurrah!'

"The third *maamar* brings the Jewish people a message of hope: tyrants come and go, but 'you who cleave to the L-rd your G-d are all alive today.'

"Forty-[six] years later, this story serves as an amazing reminder of the power of a *tzaddik*'s words."[20]

The Doctors' Plot failed, yet this led to the final fall of Stalin. The Doctors' Mission for Soviet Jewry succeeded, and we owe so much to the seven doctors and all the Jewish organizations that helped contribute immeasurably to the spiritual revolution taking place in the U.S.S.R. as 1987 marched inevitably into 1991.

Finally, let us note that one of the major threads that tied these two incidents together is the Rebbe's blessing, for both the 1953 and 1987 sets of physicians.

After all, as far as many Jews and non-Jews are concerned, the Rebbe's blessing is forever.

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20. Rabbi Shalom Yaakov Chazan, pp. 14-16.

A Secret of the Rebbe

In one of the least-known episodes of Lubavitch history, recounted by Yosef Yitzchak Kaminetzky, in a book called *The Rebbe and the Mossad*, during the years 1953-1955, following the Doctors' Plot, the Israeli Underground Mossad in Soviet Russia worked to keep alive the Jewish essence and resistance, helping those Jews left in Russia with *seforim* and other Jewish items. One of the projects of the Mossad underground was to serve as the connection between the Rebbe and his *chassidim* in Russia. They'd pass on letters and answers, on private and general issues, to the *chassidim*. This was also in addition to the many holy items the Rebbe sent through the Mossad agents to Russia. The members of the Mossad underground continually gave an account of their underground activities to the Rebbe, what was happening to Jews in general and to his *chassidim*, in particular. The end of these Mossad functions ended in the summer of 1955, when the head of the underground Mossad was caught redhanded in the home of a Soviet Jew in Moscow, whom he brought Jewish literature. Immediately the Soviet government expelled all the members of this underground Mossad unit. They all had diplomatic status.

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The Worm that Ate Through Stone and an Iron Curtain

If architecture can be considered frozen music, what more can be said of that most magnificent and holy First Temple King Solomon built that has not already been said? Only the small worm called "Shamir,"[1] which literally ate its way through stone and helped shape the Jerusalem Holy Temple, knows for certain its frozen music, including the liturgical music once sung by the Levites.[2] And like a true Jew, the worm has always let its actions speak for themselves. Nowadays, probably that same worm or a distant cousin of it—assuredly with the same name of Shamir—began slowly eating its way through the Iron Curtain of the former Soviet Union since the fall of 1971, and it's still going strong heading into the year 2000. Of course, this time, former Russian Megnetohydrdynamics Professor Herman Branover and English businessman and activist Peter Kalms—bolstered by many years of detailed guidance from the Rebbebbe[3]—put the Shamir worm up to it, creating a new kind of fantastic worm called the Shamir Association—all toward the accomplishment of a gigantic task, namely, to repair all the incredible harm that was done by the communist regime to Russian Jewry, especially to Jewish education and culture.

Always the common denominator of progress are people. So too such people were found in the underground Lubavitch movement in the Soviet Union as well as placed strategically outside the Soviet Union by the Rebbe to help Soviet Jewry inside cope. For this particular tale, we'll come to know two special heroes of our time. One wears a beret, one doesn't. But oh those wonderful thoughts in their heads!

The bereted hero is the modest but world-famous former Russian Professor of Magnetohydrodynamics Herman Branover, who might have become a lost name, once he decided to become a fully Observant Jew, against all odds, in Riga, Latvia at the time. Until then, he had been schooled in the Soviet system to prove that religion was

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1. "The most important of King Solomon's acts was his building of the Temple, in which he was assisted by angels and demons. Indeed, the edifice was throughout miraculously constructed, the large, heavy stones rising and settling in their proper places by themselves (*Exodus Rabbah* 52:4). Solomon split the stone by means of the Shamir, a worm whose mere touch cleft rocks. He was informed of the worm's location by the chief of the demons, Ashmedai, who was captured by Benaiah, Solomon's chief minister" (*Git.* 68a).—*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-Rom 1998..

2. Members of the Tribe of Levi supplemented the priestly activities of Aaron and the *kohanim* (priests), serving primarily as singers, musicians, gatekeepers, treasurers, and assistants to the priests.

3. Peter Kalms detailed and published his personal recollections of more than 30 years of close contact with the Rebbe, between the years 1961 and 1993, in a book called *Guidance from the Rebbe*.

nonsense. "All my life, natural science has been my craft," said Branover, "and I was educated from childhood on to think rationally. But belief springs spontaneously in the human spirit. There occurs a moment in everyone's life when the presence of the Creator is felt."

As he was rising to the peak of a successful academic career, he felt compelled to involve himself in something authentically Jewish. His voracious appetite for philosophy and his speculations about science led to points of dissatisfaction. He even explored nature. Then he began to look to Jewish sources.

Soon he became involved with clandestine groups of Lubavitchers in Russia. Branover started to learn Chabad chassidic philosophy (*Chassidus*). Initially, it wasn't easy to study. But, with encouragement, perseverance and some kindly help, he began relating *Chassidus* to his feelings about being a Jew. The meditations on nature, the philosophical speculations of the great minds, the striving for academic perfection did not answer his needs. In *Chassidus* he found answers.

In his autobiography, *Return*,[4] Branover writes about Notke, a Lubavitcher whom he met in 1964. "He symbolized the quintessence of Judaism, Torah, a Jewish way of life.... It amazed me that this man, without having completed high school, was able to talk for hours about philosophical difficulties in explaining the creation of matter *ex nihilo*, about time as one of the dimensions of the physical world, and about the necessity for the soul to master and control the body.

"Once I asked him how he had arrived at all this, and he burst out laughing in reply. 'I don't make this up by myself. It's all written.'

"'Where?'

"'Here, in this book that I study.' He showed me a pocket-sized book. 'This is the *Tanya*, the major book of the first Chabad Rebbe.'

"'And you studied it?'

"'No. I am studying it.'

"'For how long?'

"'For a few decades.'"[5]

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4. Herman Branover, *Return* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996). Professor Branover is the Lady Davis Professor and head of the Center for Megnethydrodynamic Studies of Ben-Gurion University in Israel. Dr. Branover has served as a professor at Tel-Aviv University as well at New York University and Argonne National Laboratory in Chicago. He is a member of the Russian and Latvian academies of science. In Israel he founded the organization Shamir, and has published more than 350 Jewish books translated into the Russian language. He established the magazine *B'Or Ha'Torah*, on Judaism and the modern world, and has published 18 books and 250 scientific articles on physics and energy engineering as well as numerous books and articles on Torah and science.

"Herman Branover's intensely personal memoir, *Return*, is an impressive Jewish document. It records the physical and spiritual battles of a leading Soviet Jewish scientist to free himself from the bondage of communist rule, and from the atheism that is the official view in Marxist lands, and the prevalent view in much of free Western society. He won both struggles. With appalling difficulty, Professor Branover made his way to Israel. As one of the world's authorities in the recondite field of magnetohydrodynamics, he now serves on the faculty of the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beersheva. His pioneer work in the energy field has brought him contracts with the United States government as well. Parallel to this distinguished life in science, Herman Branover has penetrated deeply into Jewish religious thought and tradition, especially in the field of Chabad Chassidism. He works ceaselessly, in Israel and the United States, as he did in the Soviet Union, to restore to the Jews of our time the love for our heritage that is his own source of strength. As a small part of this unending selfless effort, he arranged for the translation into Russian of my simple work on Judaism, *This Is My G-d*. I admire the man and his deeds. I hope that Return will inspire many readers to share the powerful Jewish vision of this bold scientist and man of G-d."

——HERMAN WOUKUK

5. Ibid., pp. 52-53.

Right away, Herman Branover, the man who was born to learn and discover, began his own studies of the *Tanya*.

It was his fate to be a Jew in the clutches of an intransigent Communist government, which wouldn't let him emigrate anywhere. At the time he worked for the Academy of Sciences in Riga, where he dealt with, among other things, sensitive subjects of research, some of them with military applications. All his work ended as soon as he applied for a visa to visit Israel in 1970. The Academy of Sciences dismissed him, and his wife Fanya, a medical doctor, also lost her job.

The trouble, said the Russian government, was that Professor Branover knew too many Russian secrets. Faced with deprivation of any kind of employment in Russia, a hungry family, and almost total ostracization from his gentile neighbors, not even his already growing international reputation could help him then. He had to find a way out of Russia before he and his family starved to death.

They tried many schemes to escape Russia, including setting up bogus marriages for each of them. "The idea," Professor Branover said, "was for me to marry a Polish woman, my wife to wed a Polish man. But," here he shrugged, and you knew you weren't going to hear something good, "the plot failed. The KGB saw right through it, and they kept on giving us a very hard time." Through it all the Branovers were sustained by care packages from their friends in Israel and the USA. So when they received the parcels, which inevitably contained mainly clothing, they had to take it and go into the market and sell it for food and other essentials. Here, Branover shook his head. "I was not really good at that—just a very bad clothing salesman. But," he sighed, "I had to do it just to live." For the next two years, Branover and the Russian government played cat and mouse with each other. When he protested and demanded his freedom, the Russian government promptly jailed him a number of times. "Just a preventive and an annoying arrest," Branover said. "No trial, no long-term jail sentence. Just harassment. They accused me of all kinds of crimes and then after a week or two they let me go, and then promptly arrested me again. You have to remember that was how it was then in the fifties and sixties and seventies," explained Branover. "There was no relatively lenient Boris Yeltsin on the scene; instead we had the likes of the foreboding Leonid Brezhnev and his Communist government that still made every Russian quake in his boots whenever the late Josef Stalin's name was mentioned."

Typical of the annoying threats against Branover was when President Richard Milhous Nixon, in 1972, visited the Soviet Union. A few days before Nixon arrived, the Communists rounded up and arrested Branover for the umpteenth time, this time accusing him—of course, falsely—of running over a girl with his car. What a free press would have done with this blatant lie is obvious! The record would have shown that Herman Branover had a very old Moskovitch car, which barely moved, and at that time it was in a garage for many weeks, "because," said Branover, "it couldn't go." Still, for their own sense of safekeeping, the Communists jailed him until Nixon left the Soviet Union.

By year-end 1972, Branover succeeded in getting out of the Soviet Union and into Israel. He went on to lecture to audiences in the Western world only to be assailed by incredulous questioners: "But do you really put on *tefillin* every day and pray? Does your wife prepare *kosher* food and light *Shabbat* candles? All this while you're living in the modern world?"

At first, such questions infuriated Branover. But when he found that people were genuinely interested in how he became observant, he wrote his life story (*Return*), which preceded him to Israel by 10 years.

In 1971, the Iron Curtain was lifted for a short while and hundreds of families poured out of the Soviet Union in a wave of *aliyah* that took place over a few months. Among these *olim,* there was a group of about 30 families who were *Chassidei Chabad*. And during *Tishrei* they were invited to come for the month of the festivals to the Rebbe. Their tickets were financed by the secretariat of the Rebbe. And at the end of that month of spiritual elevation, after *Shabbos Bereishis*, all the members of this group came to a special *yechidus* in the Rebbe's office.

The *yechidus* lasted about a half hour, and in it the Rebbe explained that they had a special and holy obligation, to be active among the Russian immigrants who live in *Eretz Yisrael*. "You who have this *mesirus nefesh*, who've made this life commitment to spreading Judaism in Russia, it is your obligation to organize yourselves and to continue in these actions amongst the new immigrants to *Eretz Yisrael*, as well as amongst those who were left there in Russia, as much as possible." In this *yechidus* the Rebbe named this organization, *Agudas Akedemayim, Yotzay Bris Moe'etzes*, Association of Academicians, Emigrants from the Soviet Union. And the provisional director of this organization would be Rabbi Chaim Pruss, and the General Secretary would be Betzalel Schiff.

Enter our second hero: Peter Kalms, also known as Pinchas Meir Kalms. Both he and his wife were born in 1929, he in London, she in Vienna. They married in 1955 and had their first of four daughters in 1956. Kalms' connection to the former Soviet Union included his father's family originating from Riga (Kalmovitz-Regomolsky) and his mother's family from Gomel (Zisslin), with strong connections to Chabad. Esti Kalms' father, David Weinstock, and her mother, Chaya Yehudis (Beer), were both descendants of chassidic families, tracing back to the Baal Shem Tov.

Kalms' first contact with Lubavitch was in 1961, when an announcement of the birth of his third daughter Penina in *The Jewish Chronicle* led to a visit to his office from Rabbi Faivish Vogel, a *shaliach* of the Rebbe in London. Gradually, as they became friends, Vogel brought him into the family of Chabad *chassidim*.

The central role of the Rebbe in the life of his *chassidim* very soon became apparent to Kalms. "I listened, with growing respect, to the stories of the Rebbe's admirable qualities, but did not, at first, feel that he might have any particular relevance for my life. The relationship between a Rebbe and his *chassidim* was not part of Anglo-Jewish education and at that time I had not heard any mention from my parents or grandparents of such a tradition in our family. When Rabbi Vogel suggested I should accompany him to meet the Rebbe in New York, I responded that whilst it could be interesting to meet such a charismatic personality, I had no 'pressing' problems, no reason and no justification to 'impose' myself on him, and take up his valuable time. Fortunately Rabbi Vogel insisted, that even as a favor to him I should go, and so began a challenging, inspiring and totally unexpected relationship, quite unlike anything I had experienced, in which the social convention of 'not imposing' just had no place.

"It was my good fortune to have met the Rebbe in the nineteen sixties when he was under less pressure and able to give more time to individual relationships. Occasionally, he even directed the *yechidus* into a kind of relaxed conversation as between trusted

colleagues with common interests. At every stage, even in the later years when thousands competed for his attention, he never showed the slightest hint of impatience. Indeed, his whole attitude was always total identification with the interest of the visitor with time of no significance.

"*Yechidus* would begin about 8 p.m. three times a week and often continue throughout the night. The atmosphere at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn was a combination of apprehension and excitement, which increased in intensity the nearer one came to the Rebbe's room on the ground floor. A list was compiled by Rabbi Chodakov, *a"h*, assisted by Rabbi Leibel Groner or Rabbi Binyomin Klein in a certain order, but since it was never possible to be sure how long—seconds, minutes or hours—the visitors would stay, they were divided into two groups: The more immediate in the corridor outside the Rebbe's room and the rest in the main hallway or other study rooms, where the *bochurim* were learning at all times, day or night. Usually the first to enter were engaged couples or young *chassidim* on their way to *shlichus*. They'd emerge quickly, backing out respectfully and looking dazed. Then, local families would go in for a birthday or special occasion, followed by visitors, mainly from abroad, who would be brought two or three at a time to wait outside the Rebbe's room prior to *yechidus*. There were men and women of every type and from every country, poor and prosperous, soldiers, politicians, intellectuals, businessmen and workmen, all waiting in silent tension for their call. Sometimes, when visitors would emerge from particularly long sessions, still somewhat shaken by the experience, friends and acquaintances would surround them, asking in urgent whispers for some explanation for the unusual length of time spent with the Rebbe.

"For my *yechidus*, I always took with me a small notepad and, accepting the Rebbe's invitation to sit, would scribble key words and phrases during the conversation. The door was always left slightly open and, as the minutes passed, a buzzer would sound on the Rebbe's desk. From time to time, Rabbi Groner would put his head round the door, silently reminding the visitor of the lateness of the hour and indicating that he should have some consideration for the Rebbe's well-being, but the Rebbe, and usually the visitor, would appear not to notice.

"On leaving the Rebbe's room, I would go immediately to a quiet corner of the building and for several hours (once all night) and still on a 'high' would write down my recollection of the complete dialogue, using the Rebbe's own words. This was the procedure during the years from 1965 to 1981 when I was privileged to spend many hours during nine separate *yechiduses*. A wide range of topics were discussed in the early years: Lubavitch London affairs, Israel, Soviet Jewry, family matters, my business affairs and, later on, mainly the progress on the Solmecs project, which seemed to myself and my family to be a kind of *shlichus*. Several times, the Rebbe gave messages for me to Rabbi Vogel, Professor Branover or Rabbi Shia Joseovits during their own *yechidos*."[6]

Early in 1972, Peter Kalms had written to the Rebbe, proposing to establish a center for helping Russian immigrants in the Holy Land. The idea had occurred to him

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6. *Guidance from the Rebbe*, pp. 5-7

after a meeting with a group of young Russian immigrants in *Yerushalayim*. In detail, they described their difficulties in getting acclimated. Their stories pained Kalms. He felt he had to do something to help. So, at the next *yechidus* later in the year he presented the Rebbe with a number of concrete ideas to help and resolve these problems. The Rebbe agreed in principle, but insisted that the director of such a center had to be under the supervision of Chabad, and its director had to have a good grasp of *Chassidus*, "to be someone whom you can really trust, and fully expect that in 10 years from now he'd be growing in his *Yiddishkeit* and leading the organization in the right direction."

Kalms expressed his opinion that the director of such an organization also had to be someone who could meet Russian intellectuals as an equal.

"Yes, there are several such persons like this from the universities of Russia," said the Rebbe. "Maybe they didn't graduate from the yeshiva, but they have the necessary knowledge and skills of this kind."

"Can you suggest someone for the project?" Kalms asked the Rebbe.

For a moment the Rebbe went into deep thought. Then he said, "I cannot tell you right now if it will be this person or another person, but I will let you know."

A year after it came out that the person that the Rebbe was considering was none other than Professor Herman Branover.

When Professor Branover arrived for the first time in Israel, he was greeted with a special reception at the airport in Lud, and Betzalel Schiff, one of his greeters, informed Branover that he had been made the director of the Agudah of the Association for the Russian Jews. Later on, when the Russian scientist met the director of Tzach in Israel, Rabbi Yisrael Leibov, *a"h*, it was officially confirmed: Professor Yirmiyahu Branover had received the post. Shortly, more things gelled. Rabbi Leibov arranged him to meet with Peter Kalms.

Once they met in late November of 1972, at a JIA leadership mission in Israel, these two men knew they had a common bond: they would gladly labor at the eternal task of saving their fellow Jews. Early in 1973, the association Shamir (*Shomrei Mitzvos Yotzei Russia*) was formed by the Rebbe, with Herman Branover as chairman.

Kalms was so keen on Professor Branover's credentials that he told the Rebbe in a *yechidus* about his new friend. "Shamir can work with Professor Branover. He has many qualities, but is always aware of the dangers outside. Perhaps it is his academic upbringing, perhaps it was the way of life he was used to in Russia, with danger always present and the necessity of secrecy. Shamir needs someone to attract the membership on an everyday basis."

Kalms acquired for Shamir a "key money" long lease on the premises at 6, David Yelin Street in Jerusalem. At the same time, the Shamir Publishing House came into existence. The staff of the central office and publishing house amounted to about a dozen people (some of them on a part-time basis). However, Shamir's ability to achieve its goals was enhanced by a number of free-lancers and by its hundreds of volunteers.

At that time, Shamir was the only organization through which former immigrants from the Soviet Union worked for new immigrants. In a short time Shamir became well recognized and respected by several ministries of the Israeli government (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Absorption, Ministry of Religion,

etc.), as well as by the Jewish Agency and some international and American Jewish organizations—SDC, Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, World Jewish Congress. Several years later, the Organization of American Friends of Shamir was established in New York. A number of well-known Jewish public personalities as well as several serious businessmen had been impressed by the activities of Shamir and agreed to join the Board of the American Friends of Shamir. Among these public personalities were Malcolm Hoenlien (then Executive Director of the Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry), Rabbi Israel Miller (then President of Jewish Organizations in America, now one of the leaders of Yeshiva University and chairman of several Jewish organizations), Dr. Alvin Shiff (then Director of the Board of Jewish Education of New York), the famous lawyer Julius Berman (then President of the Orthodox Union), and a number of others.

In a follow-up letter to Peter Kalms about Shamir, the Rebbe stressed the "urgency of the project under discussion, for it concerns new *olim* from a certain country who arrive in the Holy Land with a great deal of enthusiasm and receptiveness, but unless they can be contacted soon after arrival and given the opportunity and facility to translate their inspiration into concrete and tangible experience in daily life, they are in danger of being swept away by undesirable forces, with the result that these enthusiasms might quickly evaporate and give way to disenchantment, which would then make it much more difficult to set them on the right track. And although these 'derailed' *olim* must also not be given up on, and as our Sages of the *Mishnah* declare, 'To save even one Jewish soul is to save a whole world,' nevertheless, it requires far less effort to do the job at the right time and thus being able to use the excess effort in saving so many more souls. I need not elaborate to you on the importance of conservation and the most efficient utilization of resources."[7]

Soon both Kalms and Branover were conferring regularly with the Rebbe about Shamir operations. On Sunday night, *Tammuz* 20, 5735, Peter Kalms and his daughter Tanya met with the Rebbe in his sixth *yechidus*. The first part of this *yechidus* dealt with private matters, but the second part dealt with dangerous matters.

Said the Rebbe: "If five people know something, it must be assumed it is also known in the Kremlin, and if there is any doubt in the eyes of the Kremlin they will assume the person is an enemy. If Mr. Kalms or Professor Branover were approached, not as a military spy but just active on social aspects, then every undertaking by Kalms or Branover is suspect. It is well known that exit visas were given to spies amongst those who came to Israel from Vienna. It may be that amongst those whom the visitor will meet will be a potential spy. The danger is not to the visitor to the Soviet Union, but to those he may be sent to meet."[8]

The Rebbe also pointed out that the names and full details will be known to the Soviets, and they will treat all the movements of these Soviet Jews as if they were spies. "And this is not right to put Lubavitch in such a great danger."

Obviously, to Kalms' way of thinking, in this way the Shamir Association would be able to get information on what was happening behind the Iron Curtain. So he

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7. *Guidance from the Rebbe*, p. 40.

8. *Guidance from the Rebbe*, p. 59.

asked the Rebbe, "Does this mean that we shouldn't ourselves recruit visitors, even for our own purposes?"

Kalms' reasoning: the worst thing that would happen would be that they would chase these people out of Russia.

The Rebbe advised that it would be better not to meet with them before.

"But how can Professor Branover impart the necessary detailed briefing?" Kalms asked the Rebbe.

"You must find an intermediary who will instruct," said the Rebbe. "You can give him all the details. It is not necessary to divulge that the instructions come from Mr. Kalms or Professor Branover."

A few months before that, both Peter Kalms and Herman Branover had suggested that Israeli yeshiva boys be sent to Russia under the guise of tourists. Over there they would hold *shiurim* for different groups of Jews who work in Russia. Already they had conferred with members of the Foreign Ministry of Israel, which had been very excited about the idea, and they also agreed to finance the project.

But the Rebbe did not agree.

"Rebbe, Professor Branover has secured exceptionally good relationships with Israeli authorities; it doesn't seem possible to continue our work without such cooperation."

The Rebbe agreed: "You should make the best relationship with all the authorities."

In a *yechidus* with Professor Branover, the Rebbe approved the Kalms' trip to investigate, from inside the Soviet Union, the Soviet Jewish activists, their operations, deeds and accomplishments. Then the Rebbe added: "Mr. Kalms should go with a single condition, that he will not ask in advance to meet with these activists."

And so, on the Thursday, *Yud-Gimmel Tishrei*, 5736, we find Peter Kalms sitting with his daughter Tanya in an airplane from London to Moscow, beginning their trip on October 7 and ending October 21, 1976. He was loaded with suitcases of holy objects and books, and Shamir's publications. Each book or holy object was hidden inside different garments, so that when Soviet customs inspectors searched, they'd find nothing overtly wrong. In the end, though, even these customs searchers didn't rifle through the suitcases. Peter Kalms and Tanya were very surprised that after two or three questions, they just let them through customs without further fuss. Yet there were more surprises, not always very surprising...

As it's been said, "Too often travel, instead of broadening the mind, merely lengthens the conversation,"[9] and after a certain trip to Moscow, Leningrad and Riga, Peter Kalms and his daughter Tanya had much to talk about—too much, and not too pleasant. Yet before we get to that spin, let's keep the focus on the goals of Peter Kalms in the Soviet Union. Did he accomplish what he set out to do? As arranged with Branover, Kalms distributed books about Judaism that were specially prepared in the Russian language, met with the main activist groups and established relationships for future plans and actions in the future. He took in more than 50 books, most of them for the very first time, and received many requests for new written material.

A side bar: In Moscow, Rabbi Eliyahu Essas, one of the most famous

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9. Elizabeth Drew, English-born American author.

activists/dissidents to come out of Russia, contacted Peter Kalms, requesting an urgent meeting. Kalms agreed. The next day the two met and walked deeply into the forest area outside Moscow known as *beryoshka*. When they were completely alone among the trees, Essas told Kalms that he was meeting very shortly with a group of Georgians, that they secretly intended overnight to rebuild the tomb of the Baal Shem Tov, and requested, of Kalms, to get the Rebbe's blessing for this project. Kalms promised to do this speedily. Once out of the U.S.S.R., Kalms phoned Rabbi Binyomin Klein, at "770," and told him of the Beshtian project. Shortly, Klein got back to Kalms, saying that the Rebbe nixed the idea. Why? Klein related to Kalms: The Rebbe opposed it because such a project would draw the attention of the Soviets to the *matzeva* and that it "would become a weapon in their hands against all Soviet Jews." Either the angry Soviets would destroy the monument or forbid access to it, the Rebbe also pointed out. Quickly, Kalms wrote Essas about the wishes of the Rebbe (the code name for the Rebbe was "Uncle"). "The matter you mentioned amongst the *beryoshka* I have discussed as agreed with your relative [meaning 'Uncle']. He's very anxious for you not to proceed." Essas responded to Kalms: "Message received. Already stopped the *metzeva* plan. Please send explanation." That explanation finally came to Rabbi Eliyahu Essas after he emigrated out of the Evil Empire, and he and Kalms met in Israel.

In accomplishing all this, Peter Kalms did his job well, perhaps too well this time.

During his time in Moscow particularly during any visit to the main synagogue in Arkhipova street the same blond, obviously non-Jewish, police agent watched his every movement. Kalms and his daughter named him "Gladys." They told the activists they met, who included Sharansky and Prestin, that a police agent was tailing them. but none of the activists seemed overly concerned about that.

At the very end of his visit—the day was Wednesday, *Cheshvan* 3, 5736—Peter Kalms and his daughter were arrested by Soviet agents at the Moscow airport. After a short interrogation they let his understandably frightened daughter go, but they kept him for further interrogation. When they told him he would be searched Kalms agreed, but asked for a representative of the British Embassy to be present as he felt he had not broken any laws. He was shown pictures of men with packets of drugs strapped inside their trousers—clearly inferring that he would "find himself" in a similar situation. After some hours of hard-cop, soft-cop interrogation everyone sprang to attention as a high-ranking KGB Officer entered the room and the search began. The Soviets were particularly interested in a list containing the results of a survey of more than 60 individuals on a number of key questions about the attitudes of Jews to Israel and their commitment to Judaism, which had been prepared by Professor Branover. Fortunately, the survey didn't yield namess—only the answers.

Kalms was finally given permission to fly to London through Helsinki, Finland. In the Soviet newspapers there was a report: "This spy arrived in the Soviet Union and he was sent by the well-known Zionist Yirmiyahu Branover, who stands at the head of this anti-Soviet organization." The Russian press also reported that Kalms would never be allowed to return.

On November 14, 1976, Peter Kalms sent a full report to the Rebbe, which covered personal profiles on a number of individuals, their activities and current outlook, the future strategy of the *Tarbut* group led by Professor Fain and Zev Prestin,[10]

the requests for material aid, and the full details of Kalms' interrogation by the KGB. The results of the survey (with other matters) were confiscated by the KGB. Fortunately, Tanya Kalms had kept a diary of the visit, and this was eventually published by Shamir.

The Rebbe thanked Peter Kalms and blessed him. "May G-d grant an improvement—a very substantial one, and soon, on all matters about which you wrote—and that the unpleasant experience and anxiety which you had on departure [from Russia] should spare you any anxiety in the future in all your affairs." [10]

At his next *yechidus*, a month and a half later, the Rebbe expressed himself to Kalms, saying, "I don't know if you are aware of the miracle, because this miracle is much greater than you and I can imagine."

He set out to transmit and to receive news from the Jewish underground agents as arranged with Branover, to distribute books about Judaism that were specially prepared in the Russian language, to meet with the main activist groups and establish relationships for future plans and actions in the future. He took in more than 50 books, some for the very first time, and received many requests for new written material. To a fault, Peter Kalms did his job well, perhaps too well this time.

Herman Branover couldn't agree more with the Rebbe. "From the point of view of what was done, it was really very successful. As I understood, what happened when Mr. Kalms left Russia and particularly when those he had met were visited by the KGB, this was a not-good consequence from our side, but the miracle was—and we can't understand, except that it's a revealed miracle, that none of them had any harm done to them. The Rebbe saw this mission as a whole in a very positive way. When Mr. Kalms went to *yechidus* after he came back from Russia, the Rebbe told him that the *hashgocha protis* was accompanying him all along. When he came to Russia *Hakadosh Boruch Hu* helped him that he should have *hatzlacha* to bring all the material into Russia, which was really something very important for the Russian Jews. When he left Russia there was some problem, but in reality it was nothing at all, and since we saw already that it happened that a 'tourist' was arrested when he just arrived there and he was sent back right away. During the *yechidus* the Rebbe promised him that the consequences will be good, and all that would come out from his mission would be realized in the coming months. And really we witnessed extraordinary consequences from that visit.

"The main thing," the Rebbe told Kalms in the *yechidus*, "is Russian Jewry. To begin with a general point.[11] It is better to err towards overcaution, and after using your notes you can destroy them. I have often done this and it is worthwhile, even if it is difficult sometimes to recall events.

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10. A survey devised by Professor Branover was conducted with the help of more than 60 activists, asking for the following information:

Conclusions	
1. How long do you wait for permission to leave the Soviet Union?	Approximately 12 weeks
2. What percentage would go if the gates were open?	25-40%
3. What percentage intermarriage?	30-40%
4. Attitude to Jewish religion?	Mainly positive

11 ."For the very first time ever," Kalms later jotted down, "the Rebbe himself produced a slip of paper seemingly listing the points to be discussed."

"There are millions of Jews in Russia. By natural growth even after many have left, there will still be three million. What those who come out must realize is that we have to look after the others 'inside' who are depending 99% on Shamir and abroad. How to help to leave now must take second place. Your publicity and writing should be directed to those who speak Russian, not only Soviet Jews. It should not make the customs man hostile, before he has seen what is inside. Afterwards we can be explicit. In your 'Russian Language Library,' the heading should be: Russian speaking Jews are in need of *Yiddishkeit*.[12] It should also appear to be directed to Russian-speaking Jews living in other countries, so that when it is received in the Soviet Union they will not have a pretext to find it anti-Soviet, as it is directed also to Jews in other countries. It is not necessary to say Jews *in Soviet Russia*. You can say South Africa or Australia or the Israeli desert. Brooklyn is also a kind of desert!

"If possible, books should not be printed in Israel or if they must be, then a second edition should be made in a country with diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. All materials, all appeals, can be directed to a Jew who speaks Russian, directed also to Brooklyn, or the Netherlands, not to the moon or Mars or Israel or the Soviet Union. Maybe if there is some special reason why Russia must be mentioned, e.g., candle-lighting times, then show not only times in five Russian cities, but also in other places.

"The same approach for the work of Shamir in general. A good idea is to divide Shamir in two: 1) For all countries except the Soviet Union. The Soviets can only tolerate that which can be discussed in the presence of Soviet officials, e.g., *Chumash*, candle-lighting, etc., can be open. There should be nothing against *Yevsektzia* Jews either. And 2) Form a new organization for certain other activities."

"What would the new organization do?" asked Kalms.

Said the Rebbe: "It should produce tourist material for the Soviet Union where the official name and officials are not the same as Shamir, which must remain extremely *kosher*. The senior Soviet officials will know, but not the small functionaries."

Kalms then asked the Rebbe, "Has Shamir not already been classified as anti-Soviet?"

"It's not certain if Soviet officials know or not," said the Rebbe, "but from now on you'll be good boys. It is important that a small official in Leningrad or Moscow is not against the publications of Shamir. Most important is to bring the basis of *Yiddishkeit*. I don't believe that the seminars can do this, or modern Hebrew lessons, etc. We should not make a red rag for the bull. The ordinary rank-and-file Jews cannot be persuaded to attend the seminars."

"What should be taught?" Kalms wanted to know.

The Rebbe: "A 30 year old should teach simple *Chumash* to 12 Jews who don't know the difference between *Shabbos* and Friday."

The Rebbe explained that Jewish society in the Soviet Union is different from that in the West. "The only way to prevent assimilation is to work through very small groups. When you approach a boy in the Soviet Union and tell him he is different by philosophy, he will not absorb it. But if you tell him the philosophy is in the Torah, he

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12. A new brochure— "Russian Language Library"—was printed by the Shamir Association.

will. The day after dancing on *Simchas Torah* you can speak to him and say, 'I will give you logical continuity of your dancing. You will come to my home with 10, 15 other boys and you will learn a few words of Torah.' The function of these boys is to teach others, the three million, not the 10,000 elite. The 2,990,000 must be taken into account. for to prepare a cadre you must begin at the bottom, not at the top. Their interest must be awakened."

"Ah yes," said Kalms. "Not philosophy but *tachlis*, the practical side of life."

"Jewish people," said the Rebbe, "must survive even Bolshevism. It is not enough to dance one day a year at *Simchas Torah,* but a person must do something every day. *Modeh Ani,* not higher philosophy! I am not a Zionist, but even *Am Yisrael Chai*...but they must be taught that *Yiddishkeit* is not against the State, but against atheism, and they won't be afraid. Leaders themselves must try to educate the teachers for 'the elementary school of *Yiddishkeit*' Now! Each must find 10 others to organize in his private room (often a *chassid* occupied one room of a large apartment), not at a high level, but basic *Yiddishkeit*."

"How will I persuade them?" Kalms posed to the Rebbe.

"If you will ask, 'What will preserve you from assimilation?' Don't talk about *Eretz Yisrael* only as an ideal. The first stage is preparing the soil for *mitzvos*. Do you know the history of the name '*Tarbut*'?"[13]

"Yes, it is not good."

Explained the Rebbe: "It was the name for the culture movement from Czarist times and it was eventually prosecuted by the authorities. A red *tallis* in front of a bull. If they have the possibility to change it, they should. It is not their purpose to criticize the Kremlin, but to preserve *Yiddishkeit*!

"Indeed, *Tarbut* is not even a Russian word. The Soviet official will look every time and see the continuation of Zionist work in 1919, which they consider even more dangerous for Russian (non-Jewish) intellectuals."

Kalms said he'd try to persuade them to change the name *Tarbut*.

The Rebbe continued: "Jews inside the Soviet Union cannot see the whole picture and must go through the narrow channel which exists. But we cannot wait! We must deliver them a vital injection now from England and the U.S.A."

Then the Rebbe added, "If each one of the present Jewish leadership in Russia will take on himself 10 people, and start to teach only things neutral from Communism, without provocation, then I would be in favor!"

"Will they be satisfied with such simple work?" the Britisher wanted to know.

"You cannot begin with philosophies," said the Rebbe. "If you have a better plan, I'll be interested! When a farmer sows a harvest, he spreads a great multitude of kernels, knowing only a percentage will sprout. At first glance, it seems a great waste. Then he thinks he will sow only 10%. What will happen? Only 1% will take root. The same thing is said in the *Midrash*. That one rabbi comes to *pasken* a *shaaloh* [pass judgment], but before that there must be 10 in *mesivta* [higher learning Jewish academy] and a 100 in yeshiva, and a 1,000 in *cheder*. We must create an ambience also

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13.Tarbut was the name chosen by the group of activists for Jewish "culture" in Moscow.

for young people; they must have the feeling they are not alone.... If these dedicated groups are to reach their goal, they must begin from elementary facts."

* * *

Hearing this, Branover was at once both surprised by and in awe of the Rebbe's total understanding of the details of the true situation inside Russia and the needs of the Russian academium.

"In the period I was held hostage in the U.S.S.R. I made a petition for exit for leaving Russia, but the answer I received was that I had to go through a cooling-off period for a few years. Why? Because it was Russian policy that they wouldn't accept emigration requests of prominent academic personalities, and, in particular, those who had worked in the fields, either directly or indirectly, involving national secrets. In those days the monolith called the U.S.S.R. was a different kind of frozen music. So when I asked, how many years would I have to wait, they told me, maybe 10, maybe 20, maybe 25. In that situation, even in my wildest dreams, I would not dream that I could leave Russia within the year. And as I understood it, if I had known about the words of the Rebbe, I would have been able to get through these difficult periods much more easily than I did. In that final year, the Soviet persecutions of me reached new proportions. They accused me, they threatened long-term prison for me, and there was always the subtle threat I might just disappear for good one night. Finally, they tried to throw the book at me by accusing me of running over a little girl with my car, which is punishable by several months of imprisonment. To my luck, in that time, there was a directive stating that the police had to make known to the newspapers every single accident when people were hurt. Keeping my wits about me, I proved to them that the day when they accused me of running over this girl, there was absolutely no police notice of this accident in the newspapers."

By then, Branover had had enough. He had to contact the Rebbe and tell him about his precarious situation and ask him for a blessing. But how? Every outreach was fraught with danger. Mail the Rebbe a letter. Very likely it would be discarded by Soviet censors. Phone him? The secret police made that impossible when they disconnected his home phone—permanently. Suddenly, Branover hit upon a brazen scheme—if it worked at all. Why not! Out he went to the post office, made a phone call from the public telephone there, asking the phone company operator to be connected to the number of the *Mazkirus*, the Secretariat of the Rebbe. Within 10 minutes, he received a phone line. "Ten minutes," Branover repeated with inner wonderment. "My friends told me, at best, I'd be waiting for that call a few days at the post office. Thank G-d, they were wrong." Not only was this very fast in those days, but it was also a major miracle that he got through at all. At any moment he expected the law to clamp him in irons and drag him off to a jail where the sun never shines.

On the end of the phone was one of the Rebbe's secretaries, Rabbi Binyomin Klein. He told Professor Branover that the Rebbe never speaks on the phone. "So," suggested Rabbi Klein, "talk to me and I will pass on your request."

Branover was very disappointed. "For I was absolutely sure that such a situation was very special, that when a *chassid* was making a phone call from the Soviet Union, for sure he would be able to have special attention. But Rabbi Klein said again, no, it wasn't possible to speak directly to the Rebbe over the phone.

"So I decided to insist, and after a few minutes, I was put on the phone line with

Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Isaac Hodakov. At first, he told me that it was absolutely impossible to talk to the Rebbe. But after I insisted and insisted, and insisted, I heard, all of a sudden, on the line, a third voice, and I felt that this must be the voice of the Rebbe. 'Tell him,' said the Rebbe in Yiddish, 'he already has all the *brochos*, and soon he will leave Russia.' Suddenly the telephone line was cut. But I knew I wasn't dreaming. The Rebbe had spoken and blessed me."

After three weeks Professor Herman Branover received his exit visa to emigrate to *Eretz Yisrael*.For a long time thereafter, Branover remained in sweet shock. Even after many years, that moment still comes back to him in a rush. "What happened between my first and second visits to the Russian authorities?" he still asks himself. As he speaks, one can see the incident genuinely bewilders him. Yet, he's also convinced that the Communists themselves didn't know what happened or why they were doing this.

How to explain it, then?...

Yes, Yes, Yes!

"The Rebbe, the Rebbe," the words came flying out of Branover's mouth. "Somehow the Rebbe's blessings finally broke through," Branover said. Finally, Mother Russia was willing to forget him, if not forgive him. He was the first professor/scientist ever released from the Soviet Union.

During the previous year, a dramatic change had occurred in the Soviet policy toward Jewish emigration. There was a steady flow of departures and 12,897 Jews left the U.S.S.R., with 12,839 emigrating to Israel. Shamir the worm was already at work.

It was some months later in 1973 that Professor Branover was able to have his first meeting with the Rebbe and for the *yechidus*, as usual late at night, Branover brought his wife Fanya and eight-year-old boy Daniel. The Rebbe talked to little Daniel at length about his Torah education, and then had the boy sent off to sleep because of the late hour.

"But," smiled Branover, "a year later all three of us were again with the Rebbe in *yechidus*, and my boy, now nine, plied the Rebbe with questions concerning the special dates in the Jewish calendar when the coming of Moshiach [the Messiah] is more probable."

Why did Daniel want to know that? asked the Rebbe.

Because, said Daniel, talking like a chip off the old block of his *tateh*, he heard that people were continuing to calculate *keitzim* (particularly auspicious times for the Messiah to bring the Exile to an end).

Smiling at the brightness of the boy, the Rebbe told Daniel that, yes, there are certain years and certain periods of time when because of some hidden reasons in the Torah the coming of Moshiach is more probable than other times. But it doesn't really mean that Moshiach cannot come at any other moment, said the Rebbe, "for much depends on us." First pointing at the father and son, the Rebbe said, "If you and your father *and I*"—this time the Rebbe pointed at himself—"will strengthen our Torah activities and our *mitzvahs* and our desire for Moshiach, Moshiach can come at any moment. It just depends on us."

Father and son were amazed. With their own ears, they had just heard a dramatic statement straight from the holiest man on earth. That the Branovers had a vital role to play in bringing Moshiach still affects and pleases them deeply, and in his work, Professor Branover takes the Rebbe's words to his heart and soul.

Also, at his first *yechidus* with the Rebbe, another very important matter came up. "At the Rebbe's advice, the name of the organization was changed. This was after I had already acquiesced to be the director of the organization. To the *yechidus*, I brought with me a few propositions for new names for the organization, and the Rebbe chose the one: 'Shamir'—it was the initials for *Shomrei Mitzvos Yotzei Russia*. The Rebbe said that the organization has to be such as the Shamir as *Shlomo Hamelech* [King Solomon] used in building the *Beis Hamikdash*. The Shamir was a little worm, but this small worm was able to cut through giant rock that stood in front of him. And this, said the Rebbe, was the way of our organization; although it's small, it had to be strong and whose mere touch cleft rocks. Facing that kind of G-d-given worm, what chance did the U.S.S.R. monolith have to remain one big block? None!"

At first the major thrust of the Shamir Association was with Russian immigrants. It had to deal with disillusioned men and women, who had decided to come to Israel based on ideological motivations about truth and self-sacrifice, to seek a better way to live their lives. Of course, their Jewish souls were on fire, but when the Israeli society and the government of Israel couldn't understand that, they viewed these immigrants as takers of benefits and things. So the way the Israelis treated these newly arrived "Israelis" upset them. And in a few months this became very challenging, since their material and emotional aspirations—forget for the moment that their Jewish souls burned brighter than ever now that they were ensconced in *Eretz Yisrael*—couldn't be fulfilled. Very soon these immigrants felt desperate.

Quickly Shamir sized up the situation. To respond to this problem there was only one solution: to organize a spiritual center for Russian-speaking immigrants in which they could obtain the basic knowledge of *Yiddishkeit* in a short time. For this goal, the Shamir Center in *Yerushalayim* established itself.

In one of his letters, the Rebbe inquired about the opening of the Shamir Center, and underlined that it was very urgent to open this project as "it is important for the new immigrants from that country, those who come to the Holy Land have a burning desire, and they are very open to hear and to receive. But if a connection is not made with them immediately when they come in order to give them the possibility and the means to translate their thirst into real action in their daily life, then there would be a danger that the not-good influences would push them and their thirst would soon be diminished and instead, they would be disappointed, and afterwards it would be much more difficult to bring them on the right path."

Shortly after the building was acquired and work began with a staff of six, besides these actions in the building, Shamir published a paper in Russian called *Vazruzhdina*, which was distributed in the immigrant centers in Israel and outside.

"In reality," said Branover, "almost all these years, in almost everything that we did, there was not one action that we did that was without the Rebbe's direction, either directly, or indirectly. The Rebbe asked to be informed about every detail, and from our side, we didn't do anything without the Rebbe's knowledge and approval. A lot of times when I was in *yechidus* by the Rebbe— and these *yechiduses* were very long—and in most of them the only subject that we talked about was how can we help Russian Jewry. The opinion of the Rebbe was that Shamir has to be a strong, organizational body that represents the immigrants from Russia, and that this organization should help them to find good material conditions. According to the Rebbe's opinion, most important to

these immigrants were material, economic problems. All the rest was only symptomatic.

"The main cause why the Russian immigrants wouldn't acclimate themselves to the religious atmosphere was that their main preoccupation, in the first days, involved confronting the problems of *parnassa*, a livelihood. And they were trying to find a job and lodgings. Since lodgings and jobs could be received more easily when one associated himself with a certain political party, this definitely influenced these immigrants to join political parties that would help them. And, of course, in doing so, their world outlook was aligned more closely with the non-religious parties.

"The answer to this problem, in the Rebbe's opinion, was to transform the organization Shamir to a place where the immigrants could receive help also for problems about jobs and lodgings. Until the time would come that the organization would be very strong, and they could help to find good situations for the immigrants that the organization would represent. The Rebbe told us not to get involved in politics, and of course, not to transform ourselves into a political channel for any of the parties. For this, the Rebbe asked that we should begin to act discreetly, not to go out publicly, hoping that with time we would accumulate enough strength we'd be able to find good situations for the immigrants without them having to pay a political price, whatever it might be."

In 1977, the Rebbe changed the priority to focus on those Jews still inside the U.S.S.R. He instructed Professor Branover to make every effort to combat the spiritual destruction taking place there. The Rebbe said that "those former Russian Jews who successfully left the Soviet Union are obligated to understand that we have to consider those Jews who stayed there inside. Ninety-nine percent of them are dependent upon Shamir and upon the friends outside that land."

Shamir started to publish a series of books in the Russian language, called *Sifriyas Kodesh*, the *Holy Hebrew Collection*. That series contained information on several subjects, including information about how to perform certain particular *mitzvahs*.

Through this series, the Rebbe suggested that Shamir aim at anyone who was Russian-speaking, and not to design it only for Jews in Soviet Russia. Why? "Because if we directed it straight to the Jews of Russia," explained Professor Branover, "this could bring special problems. The Rebbe went into great detail, and he explained that when the customs official would inspect the packages, it is possible that he'd destroy them immediately if he saw that material was expressly made for Russian Jews. But on the other hand, if this material addressed all Russian-speakers, then the authorities at the Soviet borders wouldn't have the excuse to say that this was anti-Soviet material, as it was made also for Jews in other lands."

Still, Soviet law forbids any religious action of any kind. How would the Soviets allow Shamir to act as a religious organization? Professor Branover consulted with the Rebbe about that, too.

"The Rebbe turned us to sections and sub-sections in the Russian Constitution in which we could learn that everything is not so black and white. There are numerous actions in that field that are very gray, that the Soviet law would eventually make possible.

For instance? Soviet law forbids giving lessons in religions. But this interdiction is not absolute. It is for the young until a certain age range. And also what is forbidden is only for a large public group. For a group of four people, it's permissible to gather

for a lesson. Of course, if we had to ask the governmental offices for permission for that, they would refuse it to us. But, on the other hand, when such a lesson takes place, and when on the table we have copies of the law that allows these specific actions, then when a policeman would come to arrest this group, he would not be able to because the law would be right in front of him.

"So it was that way regarding the *mikveh*. Soviet law forbids having a *mikveh* for a group of people. But a *mikveh* for a family is allowed. And similarly with *shechitah* (ritual slaughter). *Shechitah* for a family in need is allowed. The only thing that is necessary is to prepare a good cover story, and to prove that these actions are only made for a family's needs. And of course, you also have to have copies of these sections of the laws on hand.

"As for printing, Soviet law forbids printing without authorization. But there is no interdiction regarding copying. The only thing that's necessary is to prove, from a legal point of view, that the manner that you are reproducing is not considered printing. Then you have to be ready with answers on the table for any policeman who shows up at your door.

"The Rebbe made clear that if something is absolutely forbidden in Moscow or in Polish cities, at least in smaller cities, there's no doubt that the policeman will hesitate to make an arrest and probably isn't so particular about the law."

Professor Branover told the Rebbe he was astonished by his knowledge of Soviet law. Then the Rebbe told him that when the Rebbe Rayatz was in Leningrad, he copied all the details of the law that referred to groups of learning. All those details that were important for his basic actions to make *chederim*, Jewish schools. And he sent copies of all these subsections concerning what is permissible to the Russian government. The Rebbe said that, of course, these *chederim* had more than four children in them; indeed, many had 30 children in them. Still, the Rebbe said, until an inspector came along, the children would continue learning.

So the worm Shamir, guided by the Rebbe, the King Solomon of our days, began to make further inroads into the Soviet Iron Curtain, bringing knowledge of the basics of Judaism to Russian Jews.

"In the U.S.S.R., we didn't organize seminars or classes in modern Hebrew, and such things," said Branover. "Admittedly, it would be very difficult to convince a Soviet Jew who has an important post to put himself in danger by participating in a seminar on Judaism. What we stressed is basic knowledge on practical *mitzvahs*—not Jewish philosophy. Our goal was to reach out and bring the light of Judaism to the millions of simple Jews. The vision of the Rebbe was that if we would pay attention only to the groups of intellectuals, we wouldn't be able to bring leadership that can be pulled that way—for the reason that leaders have to have a whole community in which there are simple people also. And if simple people wouldn't be interested in Judaism, then all that you've invested would go to waste. Therefore, the Rebbe said, in order to plant a leadership seed, you have to start from down to up."

How did Branover manage to keep sending Shamir envoys to the Soviet Union without making them stick out in Soviet crowds? "First off," said Branover, we never sent men directly from Shamir. We took a back seat, yet we always steered the car. We sent envoys whom we never even talked to directly. And they didn't know that they were being sent by Shamir. We had a man who was our liaison. He'd meet the people

whom we knew who would be ready to take some risk for that very important goal. And he was the one who gave them the material—holy books, etc.—to take with them. Not a lot. Every time we'd send five or 10 books, and that's how we would limit the danger.

"The campaign of action of our organization reached its zenith during the 1980s. Then we also started to send *shluchim* from the organization to Soviet Russia. During these years, tens of books on Judaism were translated into the Russian language through Shamir which were distributed throughout the whole world, including behind the Iron Curtain," said Branover.

After the fundamental changes in the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism started in 1989, Shamir expanded substantially its activities and changed its order of priorities. Two major changes took place: (a) the development of educational activities and book printing inside the former Soviet Union; and (b) placing major emphasis on helping immigrants from Russia in Israel in spheres of their profession. The first Jewish religious school established in the former Soviet Union after the collapse of communism was the Shamir School in S. Petersburg, which was started in the very beginning of 1989.

Well before the advent of the year 5750 (September 1989 through September 1990), the Rebbe announced that the Hebrew letters whose numerical equivalent equals 5750 are an acronym for "This will be a year of miracles."

Indeed, the Rebbe spoke many times throughout the year about the miraculous nature of 5750, including the collapse of the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe and the freedom granted to Russian Jews to emigrate to Israel.

Our Sages relate that miracles can occur to a person without his even realizing that they have taken place. Though some might have the audacity to conclude that the breakdown of communism and subsequent emigration of Russian Jews were not miraculous in nature, they could hardly say the same for the events of the following year.

Another miracle: in 1990, books in the Russian language on Israel, Jewish history and Jewish tradition began arriving in the U.S.S.R., from Alma Ata to Zhitomer in the Ukraine. One thousand books were mailed daily from the Shamir head-office in Jerusalem. In the first stage of this unprecedented campaign, 30,000 families each received 10 volumes, totaling 300,000 books to be sent to the U.S.S.R.

Today, Shamir has published more than 350 books in Russian translation. The books include fundamental books of Judaism (*Chumash* with classical commentaries, *Siddur*, *Machzor*, *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, *Pirkei Avot*, selected chapters from the Rambam, etc.), books on Chassidism, including the *Tanya* with commentaries, textbooks of Jewish tradition, and books for youth and children.

Altogether, Shamir has printed and disseminated more than 12,000,000 copies of different books. More than 10,000 unsolicited letters related to those books came to Shamir from Russia and other countries. People are constantly praising Shamir's books and asking for more and more. There is strong evidence that Shamir's books and activities were instrumental in motivating tens of thousands of Russian Jews to emigrate to Israel.

Still another miracle (but why am I saying "another miracle" when every line in this book is about miracles—miracles also known as the Rebbe's secrets!): In 1991,

Shamir was approached by representatives of the Russian government and the Academy of Natural Sciences, who requested that Shamir create an eight-volume *Encyclopedia of Russian Jewry,* covering a thousand years of Jewish presence in Russia and the world civilization. Three volumes of this encyclopedia have been already published in Moscow in the Russian language. The first volume is already translated into English and published in the United States. A team of about 250 experts—historians, philosopher, writers and scientists—are working in Moscow on the remaining volumes. .

In Israel, Shamir has a team of 60 lecturers—volunteers who give dozens of lectures and classes on Jewish themes every week in various parts of Israel. Articles on Jewish tradition, education, holidays, etc., are written by members of Shamir and published weekly in a number of Israeli newspapers in the Russian language. Shamir also has weekly programs on the Israeli Russian language radio station.

The history of the world may be none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom, but in the case of Russian Jewry, it was speeded up by a worm of thought, naturally the worm being called Shamir, and the detailed guidance from the Rebbe! Thank G-d for that, too!

Another Secret of the Rebbe

In a newspaper article in *The Jewish Chronicle*, the journalist Ben Azai had written, "The Lubavitcher Rebbe has his reasons for keeping his base in Brooklyn rather than Jerusalem, but it never occurred to me that he would discourage others from emigrating. A friend of mine, the financial director of a large, successful company and who is all but a *gartel*-wearing disciples of the Rebbe, made himself and his family ready to fulfill a lifetime ambition to move to Israel. Then out of '770' came the order: 'We need you in England,' and in England he remained."

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Transforming the U.S.S.R. — One Jew at a Time

In all of recorded Jewish history, only a very select few women, I have heard of, put on *tefillin* every day, and two of them are King Saul's daughter, Michal, and Rabbi Meir's wife, Bruriah. Of course, there must have been at least a handful of other such women. But, in 1987, one American woman made Russian history, for the record, claiming to put on not one, but two pairs of *tefillin* every day. No Jew anywhere to be found today believes Mrs. Leona Bomzer really did that, nor did she. Yet now we know that she and her husband, Rabbi Herbert Bomzer, made such an important contribution to the welfare of Soviet Jews that she deliberately told a fib (in order to smuggle in *tefillin* for Soviet Jews), which the Soviet customs men at the Leningrad airport bought hook, line, and sinker, and we thank G-d for that too! As for the truth of their historic journey, we get to that now; the fib will out along the way.

Nineteen Eighty-Seven was yet another not a good year for Soviet Jews. Under the policy of *glasnost* declared by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, some—but not many—of the longest-standing and best-known refuseniks were allowed to emigrate to Israel between 1987 and 1988. Many credited U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz with doing a great deal to obtain the release of leading refuseniks, who had attended the Passover *seder* Shultz hosted in Moscow in April 1987, which seemed obviously timed to coincide with the upcoming Ronald Reagan-Mikhail Gorbachev summit.

Just about the same time as the Bomzers were flying in to the U.S.S.R. on a secret mission encouraged by the Rebbe, a 31-year-old former Soviet musicologist by the name of Lev Sud, with his feet safely planted on Israeli soil, told a group of international reporters that there was a definite change in the atmosphere between 1986 and 1987 in Moscow.

"In 1986, I understood that the secret police could stop me and put me away for three years. That year, they would stop me at the post office after a phone conversation to the United States and say, 'You said things against the state.' In 1987, I was also afraid when they stopped me, because I had finally gotten my permit to go to Israel and thought they might stop me. But I knew I wouldn't be sent to prison camp. And I felt deep down that they wouldn't rescind my permit, which had been granted just before Secretary of State Shultz's visit."

Lev Sud believed that the religious revival came about because of the "drought," the long period between 1980 and 1987 when only a handful of Jews were allowed to emigrate while many others became *baalei teshuvah* in the Jewish underground. "There was 'no exit' and so, people had more time to think, to learn more about Hebrew and

Jewish culture. We needed the belief in the religion as our chances for leaving became increasingly more slim." By then, there was a wide variety of "streams" within the Jewish religious revival, and conflict between them existed. Many newly observant Soviet Jews were leaning towards the Chabad-Lubavitch direction. And it probably goes without saying that they, like their fellow refuseniks, wanted to emigrate to Israel, but, very likely, at the private urgings of the Rebbe to bloom where they were planted, these heroic *Yidden* felt that they could do more, in the U.S.S.R., to help one fellow Soviet Jew at a time to return to Torah observance.

Sharing the thoughts of thousands of other Soviet Jews he had left behind in Mother Russia, the old refusenik-new Israeli Lev Sud continued to be skeptical of Gorbachev's liberalization policies, saying he felt that the release of a few thousand Jews was also little more than window-dressing: "They open and close the emigration faucet before and after meetings with U.S. leaders." He gave as an example the American senator who was told that refusenik Boris Chernobylsky would finally be getting an exit permit. "When this senator no longer figured in the presidential race, the Soviet leaders saw no reason to reward him with Chernobylsky. So his case was dropped, and Chernobylsky was left stranded as usual."

One of the most terrorizing moments of 1987 came when the virulently antisemitic group, the Pamyat ("Memory"), marched on the Moscow city council, engaging in the most vulgar attacks on Jews, threatening pogroms, anti-Jewish demonstrations, disruptions of synagogue services, and other forms of hooliganism.

Into this pot boiler called Russia, in June of 1987, stepped the Bomzers,[1] in particular, Young Israel Rabbi Herbert W. Bomzer, who was hand-picked for a special task, in the eyes of the three decision-making groups, the Rabbinical Council of America, the Council of Soviet Jewry, and the Lubavitcher organization of Lishkas Ezras Achim.

The 60-year-old Bomzer's special credentials: "Number one," Rabbi Bomzer pointed out, "I was at that time already a Lubavitcher *chassid*, certainly a *chassid* of the Rebbe, in the sense that when a *chassid* carries out his Rebbe's directives, he unites with the Rebbe's actions. Number two, I was, and still am, a professor at Yeshiva University. Three, I speak English, Hebrew and Yiddish, and Hebrew and English were very important for the tasks ahead. Number four, it was already known that I had expertise in two particular areas. In my work here in New York City, I arranged for a divorce, a *gett*,[2] between a Jewish husband and wife. And perhaps the most important was my reputation, which the Rebbe wholeheartedly approved of, dealing with conversions of non-Jews and secular Jews into Torah-observant Jews." Bomzer heads a *Beis Din* in Brooklyn that arranges such conversions.

One day, attending a meeting of the Conference of Soviet Jewry, at the invitation of his good friend and the organization's chairman, Rabbi David Hill, Rabbi Bomzer

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1. Much of the following story has been recounted in Rabbi Herbert W. Bomzer's book, *The Chosen Road* (New York: Sheingold Publishers, 1996), and reprinted here with permission from Rabbi Bomzer.

2. Why is the biblical "bill of divorcement" ("sefer k'ritut" called a "get"? Because the letters of the word "get," gimmel and tet, are never found next to each other in any word of the entire Torah—the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets, or the Writings!

was asked to visit the U.S.S.R. to help his fellow Jews. Rabbi Bomzer wanted to hear more. Rabbi Hill, owner of the 999 Meat Factory, in Queens, and, at the time, president of the National Council of Young Israel, explained: "Herbert, I missed the Holocaust, and all these years I felt I owed a debt to the Jewish people. I began paying off that debt when I read that Jews in the Soviet Union were being prohibited from making *matzahs* for the Passover holiday."

Hill told Bomzer he had met with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, "because nobody was more knowledgeable" about the plight of Russian Jews. "I have contacts," he told the Rebbe. "Diplomats who go in and out of Russia. They can bring in religious articles, books. They happen to be black." The Rebbe delivered his blessing. "As long as there's no publicity," the Rebbe warned. "If there is, the Russians will stop it." That was Hill's most important lesson, he confided to Bomzer.

Hill also informed Bomzer that there "have been regular visitations to the Soviet Union by American rabbis who went for short periods of time and were able to meet the Russian refuseniks. Most of them were underground groups, because, when they were caught, they were punished, sometimes imprisoned.

"We need you and your wife to undertake a trip there to meet the wonderful, brave, courageous Jews who are suffering so much," Rabbi Hill urged. "It's a big, big place, this Soviet Union, where a mountain and a mountain cannot meet, but, Herbert, it's also a place where Jewish men must come together. And, as you're a university professor, you won't be coming in as an ordinary rabbi."

Professor Bomzer liked that thought. "I see. I'd go there, ostensibly, to give lectures, to gather educational material for lectures I'll give in my university on various subjects, including the history of Russia, the Jewish population of Russia, etc."

"Yes, that's the ticket," Rabbi Hill said.

(And though Rabbi Hill supplied many salamis and other cold cuts, Ezras Achim actually supplied the plane tickets to the Soviet Union, paid lodging expenses, and supplied all kinds of religious objects such as clothing, matzahs, *tzitzis*, *tefillin*, and Hebrew books. Ezras Achim also urged Bomzer to get in touch with Reb Getche Wilensky, a Muscovite Lubavitcher *chassid* who had performed, until then, many *brisim* (circumcisions) and officiated at many Jewish conversions according to Jewish Law, throughout Russia. Rabbi Bomzer readily agreed to do that.)

Every so-called "tourist" to the U.S.S.R. has his own "war" story to tell about their customs inspection at a Soviet airport, and the Bomzers were no exception.

First their very forgiving and understandable subterfuge, the fib: Professor Bomzer carried four valises containing, among other things, all kinds of documentation and papers, mostly yeshiva test booklets, obviously to indicate Rabbi Bomzer was a professor and, since it was at term's end, he was carrying along test papers and booklets to mark. "My scholarly beard and head—a perfect cover," crowed Rabbi Dr. Bomzer.

The Bomzers filled one valise with clothing; a second, with *kosher* canned food (specially canned by Mrs. Bracha Levertov and her famous canning machine, which is still in her basement, waiting for the next operation) for the two weeks they planned to spend among the Soviet Jews; and a third valise was filled with religious items, such as a ball of yarn that was really *tzitzis*. "All told, we carried four pair of *tefillin* with us," said the rabbi. "One was mine and the other three we put in the other valises, just in case any Soviet Jew needed a pair of *tefillin;* we'd make it available."

Suddenly Rabbi Bomzer's face went glum. "Now, if you're asking me about the mood that I was in when we arrived there, my wife and I were detained in the Leningrad airport for six hours. We were body searched. Every article in our possession was gone through by customs agents. As if they already didn't know, having asked many other Jewish 'tourists' the same questions time and again, they wanted to know in every case, why this and why that. I could see that by the looks on their faces, they were probably thinking, 'Yeah, yeah, so what else is new!' So my wife who has a delicious sense of humor responded, for the record, after I told them I put on two different sets of *tefillin* each day, 'one in the morning and one in the afternoon,' she said, 'The other two pairs are for me; my husband's *tefillin* are masculine; mine definitely are feminine. And, I assure you, I dutifully do everything my husband does.' So," Rabbi Bomzer sighed gently, "who can tell if the Soviet customs agents had heard that explanation before, but clearly their raised eyebrows said something else, as they finally let us pass into the summer air of Leningrad to our hotel. So much for fibs!" And so much for the trooper Mrs. Leona Bomzer, who initially felt threatened about visiting that terrible place that the Soviet Union was then, who held her breath at the Leningrad airport, and who prayed the Soviet officials would give them back their visas and force them to return to the United States right then and there. Yes, every Soviet Union American tourist has his or her story to tell, and the Bomzers' scary experience is 12 years old now—enough time for both Bomzers to find some humor in it—and they have, if only a bit.

One more downer: Rabbi Bomzer had brought along tape recordings of *davening* and different Hebrew songs, which, he'd been informed by another American rabbi (who had been to Russia the month before), Soviet *baalei teshuva* yearned to listen to. So Bomzer brought them, only to have them confiscated at the Leningrad airport.[3] When they reached their hotel room, he phoned the American embassy to lodge an official complaint. After he told the embassy official his story, he asked Bomzer where he was phoning from.

"From the hotel," responded Bomzer.

"Whew!" said the embassy representative, "don't complain. You might have been calling us from jail."

For the next two weeks, Rabbi Dr. Herbert Bomzer lectured extensively to groups of *baalei teshuva* in Leningrad and Moscow, and brought them much needed encouragement and hope. In Leningrad, on the 13th day of *Sivan* 5747 (1987), he met with the leaders of *Chozre Beteshuva* ("Returnees to Judaism"), among them A. Ben Z. and B. Ben Y. To Bomzer, each such Soviet Jew was, as he called them, *mevakshay Hashem* ("seekers of the eternal"), because they had never willingly left the Almighty. They had been notified that Rabbi Bomzer was in their country, and they brought before him two women, C. and D., and a minor, C.'s daughter Elena, for *giyur* (conversion) purposes.

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3. The audio tapes were eventually returned to the Bomzers at the Moscow airport en route to their departing the Soviet Union.

As his wife sat beside him, Rabbi Bomzer faced the five persons (the other two were, respectively, C.'s and D.'s husbands), and as the rabbi asked them, first, general questions about their intentions to convert from gentiles to Jews dedicated to Torah Judaism, he was struck by five ordinary persons. No, their overriding desire was not to get out of the living hell called the Soviet Union, although that played a big role in their psyches. Nor to make their previous, secular marriages a bit more *kosher*. Nor to convert from gentiles to Judaism. These were truly dyed-in-the-wool refusenik Jews, whose fathers but not mothers were Jewish. They were individuals of great intelligence and sensitivity. Extremely articulate about their Judaism, with vast reserves of inner strength and unyielding allegiance to their Russian-Jewish heritage, the force of their personalities overwhelmed the Bomzers; hence, the Bomzers knew they were on the right track with these Jews. "These people were struggling to be Jewish," said Rabbi Bomzer. "I live in Brooklyn USA where we take religion for granted. I tried very hard to appreciate their lot in the U.S.S.R."

For the record, one Soviet Russian lady, C., was married to a Jewish man. Her identity card, Bomzer saw, indicated that she was Jewish, a refusenik who had been waiting 10 years for a visa to leave Russia. At the time, they did not have high hopes that major changes would occur in Russia as quickly as they actually did a few years later. C. and the other adult woman, D., who was also married to a Jew, had indeed suffered because of their identification. They were very anxious to be recognized and accepted as Jews by their friends. They pined for true conversion in accordance with *halachah*. Still wondered Rabbi Bomzer: Were C. and D. going through all this just to be more acceptable as immigrant Orthodox Jews in America or Israel? And what were the intentions of this shy nine-year-old girl, Elena, who desired a deepening sense—but how deep could her sense of Judaism be at nine years old?—of being a Jew? Yet C. knew about converts who came before her: "Hadn't Abraham and Sarah proselytized souls to faith in monotheism! And hadn't Yitzchak and Yaakov done the same? Oh, Rabbi Bomzer, I can roll off the tip of my tongue some well-known *gerim*: Unkelos, translator of the Torah into Aramaic."

"Good," said Rabbi Bomzer.

Added C.: "And Shemaya and Avtalyon, the teachers of Hillel the elder."

"Very good," said Mrs. Bomzer.

"And," as C. almost clapped her hands, she blurted out the names of Rabbi Akiva (although only his father Reb Yosef was) and Rabbi Meir (who was a descendant of the Roman Emperor Nero). Then D. said, "I have something I learned, too."

"Yes?" asked the rabbi.

"The Jewish law that governs conversion is derived from the Book of Ruth. She was a convert who was the great-grandmother of King David, and as all Jews should know, one of the tenets of our system of faith is the belief in the coming of Messiah..."

"Moshiach," interjected Rabbi Bomzer.

"Yes," said D., "Moshiach, who will be of the lineage of King David and therefore a descendant of a convert."

Rabbi Bomzer was very impressed. Then he turned to Elena and asked her if she would like to add a few words.

Like an overeager schoolgirl, the nine year old began to wave her raised hand without saying anything. Finally, after C. encouraged her to speak, Elena said, "My

daddy told me that the entire Jewish people was converted at Mount Sinai. And my daddy also told me the souls of gentiles, who wanted the Torah and who would eventually convert, stood there, too."

A big, pleased smile broke over the faces of the Bomzers.

Then, Rabbi Bomzer got more serious. "All this is true," he said, "but there has also been an instance where Abraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov were punished for not accepting Timma, who came to be converted." (*Tos.* ibid. 109b and T.B. *Sanhedrin* 99b.) "That's why I guard well my applications of *gerim*. And ladies, you should know that it is necessary to reject candidates for conversions before accepting you. But don't be discouraged. I didn't travel this far, nor have you risked virtually your lives, to be rejected here today. So much is riding on your conversions, for you and the entire Jewish people. So I shall ask you, as part of the application: What has motivated you to convert? Do you know that Jews today are oppressed, despised, and rejected and that persecution is our lot—yours and mine? Since the Holocaust, we Jews have buried many of our children and grandchildren. We are killed for observance of *mitzvos* such as circumcision and for immersion in a *mikveh*, as evidenced here by you Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917. We are not treated publicly as other nations, as witnessed by the history of *Eretz Yisrael* in the United Nations since 1948. So, do you still want in?"

All three said, in their own fashion, "More than ever!" "Let us then go on," said Rabbi Bomzer.

For the next seven hours, Rabbi Bomzer put these three *gerim*-to-be females through Jewish tests: about their knowledge of *halachah: mitzvos kalos vahamurot* (stringent and moderate laws, scriptural and rabbinical). As the Bomzers could see, the three females were extremely knowledgeable concerning the Jewish calendar, the observances of *Shabbat* and all the holidays, including *Pesach*, Yom Kippur and the minor rabbinic holidays such as Chanukah and Purim, the fast days, *kashrus, Taharas HaMishpachah, and berachot*. The two women and the nine-year-old girl, all excellent candidates for conversion to Orthodox Judaism, were able to read Hebrew and knew by heart the *siddur* prayers.

Exhausting hours of questioning, evaluating their commitment to observe a religious Jewish life, registered strongly in Rabbi Bomzer's mind. Again and again he repeated to them his opinion that there is no such thing as a convert to Judaism without commitment. They accepted this and convinced him that they were very serious.

C. brought her daughter Elena up. "Rabbi, are there special considerations for conversion of minors?"

"Yes, but we're in good shape that way since both the Talmud and *Shulchan Aruch* sanction conversion of minor children," Rabbi Bomzer pointed out. "The *Beit Din* has the total authority to convert minors who are brought by their parents, whether birth parents or adoptive parents. But the *Beit Din* must make sure...

"But the *Beit Din* must make sure that the parents, you, C. and your Orthodox Jewish husband, and D., and your Orthodox husband, in this case, are committed to *Yiddishkeit* and belong to the Jewish community, which," said Rabbi Bomzer as his eyes slowly took in the sight of these women, "I can see readily in both your cases. As the Psalms say, 'In Thy light do we see light.' Ladies and my young lady, there is that very light in all three of you. How much more so from now on that your homes and lives must always reflect positive Jewish values; you must be members or profess you will

be members of an Orthodox congregation; your home must be *kosher*; you must be *shomer Shabbat* and, of course, have *mezuzot* on your doors—no matter what. You must also commit yourselves to raise Elena and indeed all your children in a Jewish atmosphere and to provide an intensive Jewish education for them."

"That is a big thing," said C.'s husband. "But C. and I are prepared to do it, Rabbi."

Rabbi Bomzer laughed softly. "My friends, there is more; there is always more. Whatever land you'll be in, you are instructed, on the day of *bas mitzvah* (or *bar mitzvah*, as the case may be when you have male children), to ask your daughter Elena whether she chooses to be Jewish. Elena could then retroactively nullify the conversion by objecting to being Jewish. You the parents are responsible for her decision. How? Why? Develop your child as an Observant Jew and she'll truly be a religious Jew. Otherwise, you're setting up the decision for her to choose to be non-religious."

Nothing Rabbi Bomzer said that night deterred these three *Pintele Yiddin* from taking the "chosen road," and so it went. But what struck Rabbi Bomzer most about the whole Leningrad experience was the extraordinary situation—that such a thing like this could be taking place under the very Soviet noses of antireligious people intent on stamping out such religious practices..

"I'd been warned not to go directly from the hotel to their home. To reach the apartment where we met required a roundabout trip by train, bus, and cab. Everything had to be done in a clandestine manner, and taking the women to the *mikveh* for conversion as planned clearly was illegal."

By the time Rabbi Bomzer was ready to leave for the *mikveh* with the two women, Elena the young girl, the two husbands, and several members of the *Beit Din* to the *mikveh*, it was after 10:00 p.m. Such a "conversion" immersion, according to the *Beit Din*, had to be performed in the daytime, but 10 o'clock at night in Leningrad is unlike most other cities in the world. On such summer days sunset is very late, this night in particular at 11:30 p.m., but the city of "white nights" boasts sunsets on other days up to one or two in the morning. Unlike Moscow, which is an extraordinarily depressing, dirty, decrepit capital of ten million people, Leningrad is distinctively flavored European. "It enjoys the more artistic architecture of pre-revolutionary czarist tastes. Still, its roads, trolley tracks, and infrastructure are crumbling. Maintenance of any sort seems to be nonexistent. Only two aspects of the Soviet Union society operate efficiently: the black market economy and the subways, which are gleaming, artistic and efficiently functional."[4]

When the group arrived at the Baron Hirsch Synagogue, the main sanctuary was closed, as expected. Everything had been arranged, according to the *Beit Din* and *halachah*. The *mikveh*, which was downstairs, had been opened by the *shochet* of Leningrad, who also was a member of the *Beit Din*. As a proverb says, "Where people pass, tell no secrets" (*Genesis Rabbah* 74.2). All the more so in the then Soviet prison city called Leningrad. As a precaution, the *Beit Din* arranged to have the *shammus* (sexton)

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4. As reprinted in the *Jacksonville News*,, August/September 1988, p. 22.

of the *shul* out of the way. "We are deliberately disinvolving him with the ritual that is about to take place," a *Beit Din* member told Rabbi Bomzer. "It might be very dangerous for him. Even though he is Jewish, he is also an employee of the government," Rabbi Bomzer was told. That "day," Mrs. Bomzer officiated as the *mikveh* lady. In a small outer room of the *mikveh*, in accordance with *halachah*, C. and D. and Elena, like three butterflies ready to float away from their cocoons, were questioned concerning their acceptance of the entire yoke of scriptural and rabbinic *mitzvos*. Then, at the right moment, each female went down into the *mikveh*, in the most *tzniuss* (modest) manner possible. The three *dayanim* (judges) witnessed the actual *tevilah* (holy purification) of the two women. Then Elena was immersed *al daat Beit Din* (by the authority of *Beit Din*) in accordance with the *halachah*.

After the three *gerim* dressed again, everyone met in the auxiliary *beth midrash* (small sanctuary), and Rabbi Bomzer broke open a new bottle of vodka for the special occasion. "Given to us from the Lubavitcher Rebbe," he said.

"*Lechaim! Lechaim! Lechaim*!" said the joyous husbands. To one of the *dayan*, the occasion must have felt like a chassidic wedding, as he broke out into singing the *"Alter Rebbe's Niggun."* At one point, the two husbands linked arms and danced in a circle. Not to be outdone were C. and D. who now danced in their own circle. Skipping to and fro, the new nine-year-old Jewish *ger*, Elena, with tears of joy streaming down her face, cried out, "Thank you, Mommy and *Tateh*, thank you for bringing our family together again, in such a G-dly way. This is the happiest day of my life!"

When the dancing stopped, C.'s husband leaned over to Rabbi Bomzer and said, "Rabbi, inside this room is heaven. Coming from the streets of Leningrad and entering this synagogue is going from hell to heaven; and then, after a few tempting hours of heaven here, we are forced to return to hell. That is why we must inevitably leave this *shul*, this city, this evil state, and like Abraham, journey to the Holy Land."

"Which Holy Land do you have in mind?" asked Rabbi Bomzer, certain they would say "Israel."

"Rabbi," D.'s husband said, "Israeli visitors who come here advise us to go to Israel. And you Americans come and tell us to live the good life in America. Other Soviet Jews say we should stay here to improve Jewish life in the U.S.S.R. What, I ask you, Rabbi, are we supposed to do?"

What was Rabbi Bomzer supposed to say to that? Well he knew that, under no other circumstances, would he ever personally force individuals into such a state of confusion. Let he be the last person to send such conflicting messages! So he said, "There is a talmudic dictum saying that he who dwells in the Holy Land is like a man who has a G-d, but he who lives in other lands, has none."

"Yes," said C. "But isn't G-d everywhere?"

Agreed Rabbi Bomzer. "Especially here right now. I can almost see the Divine light of His *Shechinah*, His Divine Presence, right in this room with us. But there is a reason for such an old saying. To help Jews settle best. The point is, every Jew must seek his Holy Land, even though the road may appear long and difficult. He needs a homeland for his soul." Then Rabbi Bomzer explained to the new converts why the feeling for such a Jewish homeland opposes a spirit of somber asceticism. As a people of G-d, we Jews have duties to be performed in this world—613 *mitzvos*. Pure, pious and charitable, we must live in human society. This, and this alone, gives us the right to

eternal life. A society built on the foundation of Judaism is professed also in our Jewish prayers, food and drink of the soul: "A person who prays for himself is like one who retires alone into his house, refusing to assist his fellow citizens in the repair of the walls."[5]

"Do you want to hear a story?" asked one of the judges. Since everyone was in a listening mode, yes readily was the answer.

"Not far from this area, south of you, somewhere deep under the water, was a nation of converted Jews, like you, but not like you. In your conversion you went deeper into your *Yiddishkeit*. But can you imagine a whole nation of non-Jews converting to the Book of the People all because their king decided it was the best idea going on in the world? Indeed," said the *Beit Din* judge, "that the king of the Khazars in the eighth century of the Common Era, 740 to be exact, had recognized the tenets of Judaism to be the best of all (in a choice among Mohammedanism, Christianity and Judaism), proves the truth of the view that the Jewish religion transcends national as well as international boundaries. The great Jewish poet, Yehuda Halevi,[6] describes how one night an angel came to the king in a dream. Acknowledging how hard the king had tried to lead a truly religious life in the tradition of his people, nevertheless, announced the angel to the king, 'Thy way of thinking is indeed pleasing to the Creator, but not thy way of doing.'

"Until now, my new converts," said the judge, "this has been your way, too. G-d has loved your thinking in the right direction, now, oh! His love radiates all over for what you've done tonight. As for the Khazarian king, from his dream he then began to explore thoroughly the beliefs of the great religions, in order for him to reach the right decision. Keep in mind, he had the whole Khazar nation on his shoulders, so he conferred with a philosopher, a Christian priest, a Moslem religious, and a rabbi. Now this king was a shrewd and wise man. Hearing finally from the very lips of the Christian priest and Moslem leader that their religions is based on the tenets of Judaism, he decided nothing but the source was good enough for him and his nation. He chose Judaism. Not so much because the rabbi had a better argument why his religion was richer than the others. What the rabbi told the king was simply the historical experiences of his people: G-d led the *Yisraelites* out of Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, gave them the land of Canaan and the teachings of the Torah. This is both the Jewish religion and the history of the Jewish people. What the rabbi said was, 'Our creed is based on our Divine experiences.' In his quest for G-d, the king took his Vizier into his confidence and made him his companion. The doctrines of the rabbi touched the king deeply, and he wanted to know more about Judaism. One night the king and his vizier set out—on such a night as we started out this evening—and they discovered a cave where a group of Jews were celebrating the *Shabbat* in their traditional manner. The two nocturnal

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5. Rudolf Kayser, *The Life and Time of Jehudah Halevi*, translated from the German by Frank Gaynor (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), p. 139.

6. As well as a rabbi and philosopher, who lived in Spain from 1080-1145 C.E. The story of the conversion of the Khazar king to Judaism formed the basis for Yehuda Halevi's famous philosophical dialogue, *Kuzari*.

wanderers revealed their identities and let themselves be initiated into the community of Israel. They loved their new religion, and felt happy in it. The king returned home, fully convinced that he had understood right the message of the angel and followed the will of God. He induced his entire people to embrace Judaism, and imported books and teachers from other countries to spread the doctrines of *Yisrael* in his kingdom. The rabbi became the king's teacher, and their studies at last brought peace and happiness to the heart of the monarch."

"What happened to these Jews?" Elena asked the judge.

"What happened? They disappeared, overrun by Russian hordes at the time. But they did exist. The Khazarian Jews scattered all over Europe, including Hungary, and one of them at least found his way to Spain, very near to Yehuda Halevi. The artifacts of the Khazar empire, however, are scant. A number of sites in Russia have been excavated, and though details of the archaeological activity in Russia are difficult to obtain (the Russians hold a monopoly on digs in ancient Khazaria), it appears that there have not been any sensational discoveries to date. No royal burial sites have been unearthed—hardly surprising since the remnants of the empire were buried under a stream—and no inscriptions, public or private, have been found; nor any traces of the fortress constructed by the Greeks for the Khazars have been found.

"So why am I telling you all this?" asked the judge. "This story has a moral to tell us. That it's not enough to leave *Mitzrayim*; we must also enter the Promised Land. And what is the promised land that we enter every day? The life of a Torah-observance. As Nathan Nemirov,[7] one of our Russian chassidic authors, once said, 'Every living soul is a letter of the Torah, wherefore all souls taken together make up the Torah.' So it is with you five, I say, all adding your letters to the Torah. May G-d bless each and every one of you. And so may you help other Jews like yourself see that Divine light."

"Amen," said Rabbi Bomzer, and the amen was also voiced by everyone in the room, and surely that too found its way up to heaven, as part of their prayer.

"Rabbi," Elena suddenly said.

"Yes, Elena?" smiled Rabbi Bomzer.

"When I grow up, maybe I'll look for the Khazars," said Elena.

"That would be good for Jewish history."

"Mine too. I'm a Russian."

"Yes, truly a Russian Jew," C. said as she embraced her child.

"Our talmudic sage Simeon ben Lakish calls our *gerim* 'new-born infants,'" said Rabbi Bomzer. "You should all look at yourselves as such. As newborn Jewish infants. Yet always bear in mind the dying words of Joseph Suss Oppenheimer, the so-called 'Court Jew,' right before his execution as a Jew. He said, 'I am a Jew and will remain a Jew. I would not become a Christian even if I could become an emperor. Changing one's religion is a matter for consideration by a free man; it is an evil thing for a prisoner.'"[8]

Some time during this historic "day," the certificates of conversion were written out

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7. Napthtali Herz, died 1845.

8. S. Stern, *The Court Jew* (1950), p. 262.

on plain paper as Rabbi Bomzer had no stationery with him. Making them official were the signatures of the three *dayanim*, Rabbi Bomzer, and two of the leaders of the *baal teshuva* movement in Leningrad.

But this story does not end here. "It is my understanding that both families received exit visas soon afterwards and are now residing in *Yerushalayim*, thank G-d," said Rabbi Bomzer. Yet even with this this story does not end. It is its beginning, it is its middle, but never its end. The march toward Redemption perforce begins with one step. This conversion of the first Soviet Jews by Rabbi Bomzer was another step. There were and will be many more conversions to Torah-observance, one Jew at a time. As the Baal Shem Tov, founder of *Chassidus*, once said, "Every Jew is an 'organ of the *Shechinah*.' As long as the organ is joined to the body, however tenuously, there is hope."[9]

Pray G-d, we all act on that hope and make this a better world for Him!

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9. Quoted in *Shibne Habesht* (1903), p. 27..

Another Secret of the Rebbe

During the Gulf War the Rebbe predicted that Israel would be the safest place to be, that there would be no need for gas masks, and that by Purim the war would be over. That is exactly what occurred.

13

The Shrimp that Learned to Whistle

Sunday, December 8, 1991, was a peculiar day. Leaders of Russia, Byelorussia and Ukraine met in the Byelorussian city of Brest to officially declare the end of the Soviet Union.

Not peculiar at all was the day before. On Saturday, December 7, 1991, the morning religious services went on as usual at "770," attended by thousands of Lubavitcher worshippers, and at the afternoon *farbrengen* the Rebbe discussed at length the Torah portion of *Miketz*—"In the end"—with not a single word spoken about the impending doom of the U.S.S.R. Not that there was a need to—its end was inevitable, the Rebbe had prophesied—for this was a Sabbath, G-d's day. On this day, all talk of the higher aims of holiness came from the holy mouth of the Rebbe. The next day, and ensuing days, there would be enough words to go around to make all the living Soviet dictators eat their words.[1]

Don't expect a daily blow-by-blow description here of what went on above ground in the Soviet Union. Silent, spiritual revolutions underground don't work like that. If you need to feel the actual Soviet physical blows and body bag counts, consult your *New York Times'* back issues. What is going to take place here, beginning in August 1991, as eight tired old Communist men pushed buttons, signed writs, and moved troops, to scare the Soviet populace as in the bad old days, *anything* to try to oust President Mikhail S. Gorbachev, as part of their August 19-21, 1991 coup attempt; as other Soviet Jews marched in unifying grief behind the casket of a fallen Jewish comrade draped in national colors, while tens of thousands of other individuals rallied around the Parliament building in Moscow and began erecting barricades; as you see the statue of Felix Dzherzhinsky, the architect of the political police system—truly one of the purest embodiments of the evil of communism—dangle from a crane; as at the height of the revolt against Yeltsin and Gorbachev reached its peak, some of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's emissaries, terrified of the situation in Moscow, "wired" the Rebbe if they should return immediately to the U.S., and the Rebbe wired back, *No*, they won't

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1. Including Nikita Khrushchev, who died on September 11, 1971. In a speech he made in Moscow on September 17, 1955, he said, "If anyone believes that our smiles involve abandonment of the teaching of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, he deceives himself. Those who wait for that must wait until a shrimp learns to whistle." In response, author Mark Hitchcock noted, "On Thursday, December 21, 1991 [when 11 former Soviet Republics met in the Kazakh city of Alma-Ata and signed an agreement to create a commonwealth], the shrimp learned to whistle."—*After the Empire* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994).

succeed in their mission and that they should stick it out in Moscow; as the recently elected Russian President Boris N. Yeltsin outlawed the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) on Russian soil; as Gorbachev resigned as CPSU general secretary and dissolved the CPSU; as police arrived, after the coup attempt, to arrest Boris K. Pugo, the interior minister under Gorbachev and one of the principal coup-attempt conspirators, at Pugo's home, but he refused to surrender and shot himself to death; as Soviet citizens stood ready to give up civil war, famine, war, mass murder and repression for standing on endless lines, outside empty shops; as they viewed the Western nations that formed the European Union, once mesmerized by Kremlin leaders, cutting off $1 billion in food and technical assistance, holding back in extending a few more billions in credit, as they feared that the coup might mean a return of the Cold War; and don't expect to hear about the fear of rampant chaos among the pews of the Marina Roscha Shul; it never happened in there—indeed, inside the Lubavitcher *shul* it's really those moments at the height of prayer when the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid of Mezeritch, the Alter Rebbe, the Mitteler Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek, the Rebbe Maharash, the Rebbe Rashab, the Rebbe Rayatz and the current Lubavitcher Rebbe, all the patriarchs of Chabad *Chassidus*, all who probably never physically stepped foot in this *shul* in their lifetimes, but were there now, in living spirit, as part of the *Aitz Chaim*, the eternal Tree of Life, all joined arm-in-arm in prayer with the *shul*'s current worshippers, which included Rabbi Berel Lazar, Zev Kurasvsky, Alex Lukatsky, Yaacov Vilge, Boruch Filtzer, Yeshaya and Boruch Kleinberg, and Uri Kamishev, the *rosh yeshiva* of the *shul*, who in turn are enveloped in the kabbalistic portrayal of Adam Kadmon (primordial man) and his mysteries of lights that flow from his ears, mouth, nose, and eyes. This is what concerned Jews who left the Russian Jewish torture chamber above ground, at the doorsteps of the *shuls*, scuffing their shoes well-off on the mat, and who entered each day to pray. As for those Lubavitcher Jews, in the streets, on their way to pray, no doubt they've noticed the spiritual revolution's flag flying in the open breeze; but then each man waves to a different flag, certainly the Lubavitchers who kept their flag of victory inside their hearts and souls; perhaps it was some of these very Jews who stood openly in the besotted Moscow streets outside the Marina Roscha Shul or the Choral Synagogue, in the evening, intoning the prayers for a new moon. Already there were signs that underground was meeting above ground; more and more, Elie Wiesel's two-and-a-half-million Jews of silence were fast becoming Martin Gilbert's Jews of hope.

During that amazing transformation, a different kind of "student exchange"—a curriculum packed with electives—took place. Invited by Lubavitcher Jewish residents in Moscow, a young "student" rabbi journeyed from "770" to Moscow; there he was sent to learn and teach, but his real purpose, as Ezras Achim defined it for him, was to be the chief rabbi in the Marina Roscha Shul, to become the *mashpia* (someone who teaches *Chassidus* and guides others) to Tomchei Temimim Yeshiva, started there a few years back, and, since Moscow was the hubbub of activity, above ground and below ground, he was to contact *shluchim* in outlying areas and funnel help to them in every way. After the Rebbe gave Lazar his blessing, the rabbi and his wife Chani packed and they were off, on their third and "final" trip to Russia.

Lazar recalls well the first time he entered the Marina Roscha Shul. "It was a place where you felt like you came home to someone.

As soon as we walked in, everyone came over to us, hugged us, kissed us, asked us all about this *maamar* [a formal chassidic discourse first delivered by a rebbe] and that *maamar*. It really felt like a place that was under the Rebbe's direction. In general, it was like one big happy family. Not in Russia. If so, in a safe embassy. Everyone lined up to join *shiurim*, men and boys in their groups, woman and girls in theirs. Learning was on high and low levels, depending on the needs of each group of participants. From morning till night. Teach and teach and teach. Learn and learn and learn. Often going to people's apartments to *farbreng*."

All this came about because Grisha Rosenstein, the Lubavitcher's major connection in Moscow, emigrated to Israel. One thing Rosenstein did before he left Russia: He contacted the Rebbe about whether he should leave one person or a committee (a *vaad*) behind him in Moscow to oversee what he had accomplished and wanted to continue being carried out in Moscow. The Rebbe advised a committee. Immediately Rosenstein held an election among the 40 Lubavitcher families in Moscow; the result: three men—Uri Kamishev, Zev Kuravsky and Alexander Shentzes—were picked to work hand in hand with Reb Getche. This committee didn't last long, as there was a lot of resentment toward and opposition against Rosenstein having acclaimed himself as the Chabad leader. After he left Russia, his influence faded.

(Some notes on Reb Getche Wilensky: He was the oldest *chassid* and the lifeline behind the Iron Curtain. On Rosh Hashana 1988 he turned 84. It may be true as Josephus said, in quoting Herod, that excessive confidence throws men off their guard, whereas fear teaches precaution, yet that rule of thumb never seemed to apply to Reb Getche. As far as Lishkas Ezras Achim was concerned, there was no Russian Jew more trustworthy than Reb Getche, and that trust and love of him permeated most Jews who knew him. Some Jews used him as their personal bank; if they had money to hide (for instance, if someone wanted his funds available to him once he emigrated, he'd give it to Reb Getche, who, in turn, asked Ezras Achim to lay out the money in the U.S. or Israel), he'd hide it for them; as expected, he never mixed up anyone's money. By acclaim, Reb Getche was considered the father of the *baalei teshuva* (returnees to Judaism) movement. And wherever a *farbrengen* was held in Russia, it was a sure bet he'd be there with all the other *anash*. No dimestore psychologist he, yet Jews turned to him to consult about their emotional problems. And, in the absence of an ordained rabbi, Reb Getche was regarded as the *rav* for the Russian community. Frail and worn-out, he always found time to travel across town to deal with an halachic problem.

(Since he oversaw and paid, through funds supplied to him by Ezras Achim, for the upkeep of the *mikveh* at the Choral Synagogue, he was in an excellent position to assess the goings-on at that *shul*, which was run by a committee of Jews who answered to the local Soviet authorities. In his pay was Frieda Koronova, the woman who operated the *mikveh*, who always seemed to be on good terms with the committee and, therefore, was able to secretly warn Reb Getche and the Lubavitcher Jews of the synagogue of any trouble brewing. She was worth her weight in gold. As Rabbi Eliyahu Essas once said, this woman deserves to be known as the grandmother of the Soviet *baalei teshuva* movement. "The men and women who were returning to Jewish observance in Moscow, Riga, and Leningrad knew little about the elderly widow who served in the Moscow *mikveh*. She wore a kerchief, she lived alone in a small Moscow apartment—and she was there when they needed her. As the network of Observant

Jewish families grew, so did the number of women determined to fill the precepts of family purity. The network spread the word: Contact Frieda Koronova. And so they did, in ever-increasing numbers."[2]

(Every day Reb Getche had to wear many hats. At any time of the day he might be called upon, either in his capacity as the chairman of the committee to perform circumcisions throughout Russia, or to perform marriages and conversions [*gerim*], according to Jewish law.

(He was also responsible for distributing secret charity funds especially from Ezras Achim to destitute Soviet refusenik Jews; and this was one of the areas he took a great deal of heat from the Soviet government, which demanded that he cease his "subversive" activities. He didn't. And often the KGB threw up their hands in frustration. He was too old and frail to put in jail and throw away the key, and there was a question—seriously pondered—whether such extreme measures would stop him from carrying on his work from prison. That this beloved man might die on them frightened his accusers.

(Reb Getche and his wife Soshe had five children: Miriam, Rochel, Esther, Dov Ber, and Yaakov. The death of his favorite son a few years back (around 1981) continued to haunt Reb Getche. In 1984, Reb Getche privately confided to two *shluchim* (Rabbis Kalmanson and Heber) that he had no *nachas* from his sons. "As a matter of fact," said Kalmanson, "Reb Getche asked us to write to the Rebbe for a blessing. It's interesting the way Reb Getche put his request. He asked the Rebbe for a blessing, citing the verse in the Bible that deals with curses, 'And thou shalt eat the fruit of thine own body, the flesh of thy sons and of thy daughters whom the Lord thy G-d hath given thee' (Deut. 28:53)." Surprised by Reb Getche's request, Rabbi Kalmanson asked him to explain what he had in mind. Reb Getche said that he wanted a blessing to be able to eat meat in the house of his sons—in other words, to be able to trust them in *kashrus*.

(Reb Getche would have been a great scholar if he had lived.)

Unfortunately, Reb Getche passed away three months before Rabbi Berel Lazar arrived on the scene in early September 1989 (although he had met Reb Getche on his three previous visits to the Soviet Union).

All this had been known to Berel Lazar, who yearned to pick up the slack in Moscow, and everyone from Ezras Achim and the Lubavitchers in Moscow who knew this charismatic, soft-spoken, scholarly-looking *chassid* by the name of Berel Lazar, were rooting for him to succeed. Lazar was not an unknown quantity; working extensively for Ezras Achim, Lazar already had a few years' experience in the Soviet Union under his belt by then. By the summer of 1989, Ezras Achim's board of directors back in Crown Heights selected five Lubavitcher families to work and live in the Soviet Union. Why Lazar was chosen, out of the five men, to go to Moscow was basically a decision made solely by Ezras Achim's then chief director Rabbi Moshe Slonim, o.b.m., who, based on the young rabbi's early successful experience in Russia, decided to go with him over any other *shluchim*, even to giving Lazar more managerial power than the other members of Ezras Achim would have preferred for him at that early point in time.

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2. Miriam Stark Zakon, *Silent Revolution: A Torah Network in the Soviet Union* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1992), p. 106.

As it turned out, Slonim's views on Lazar paid off in the end. Also that which must be taken into account, of all the current *shluchim* in the Soviet Union, Berel Lazar had a unique technique—learned well from the Rebbe, the master of all Lubavitcher teachers—of encouraging everyone he came into contact with of dreaming he could be a leader, too. "Our plans were to train leaders so they would eventually continue teaching to the next generation of *baalei teshuva*," said Lazar. Eventually scores of such "leaders" were trained and spread their learning all over Moscow and Leningrad, for starts.[3] "Actually," said Lazar, "these people became teachers, or a *rosh yeshiva* of a Jewish school or a rabbi in the community." And this is what the Rebbe had been telling all his *chassidim* to do, and Berel Lazar carried this message wherever he went, to every Jewish man and woman and child he met along the Soviet paths, and that's one of the reasons why this unusual *shaliach* still remains today "our main man in Moscow."

After him came Rabbi Moshe Chaim Levin and his wife Doba, who came to help Zev Kuravsky, who founded the Achei Tmimim school of 100 boys in Moscow, in 1989. To meet this very soft-spoken man and to minimize his physical and mental capacities to rise like a giant in defense of Jewish matters, is to do yourself a wrong. It says nothing about him and everything about you. Kuravsky let his actions speak for him (see Chapter 5). With the Rebbe's blessing in his pocket, he worked very closely with Rabbis Levin and Lazar right from the start. Kuravsky knew it was against the law to open such a school, yet he pursued one of his big dreams. In the beginning when they opened it, it really was not allowed. Another educator might been easily scared off, or disappeared in the process of trying, but not Zev Kuravsky. With a "slap in the face" of Soviet educators, Kuravsky "raided" their public schools—and brazenly got away with it!—took Jewish kids out of these schools, including his own, and signed them up at Achei Tmimim. He asked the Rebbe for permission but he never bothered to file his request with the KGB. Result: Somebody brought Kuravsky a message from Gorbachev, stating that he wouldn't allow such a school, but had no intention of causing him any trouble if he kept it open. This, in the view of Kuravsky, Levin and Lazar, was, kind of, a Soviet green light. Within a year, 100 Jewish boys were in attendance.e.

Ever mindful of his role in the Rebbe's spiritual revolution, Kuravsky described the network of Lubavitch activities, which included a summer camp on the outskirts of Moscow, Hebrew schools and Sunday schools for younger children to study Hebrew and Judaism, a *mohel* (a circumciser) and a *shochet* (ritual slaughterer).

In addition to Moscow's official Choral Synagogue, the Marina Roscha Shul had been reopened as an independent Lubavitcher yeshiva, the only independent synagogue in the Soviet Union, immune from government pressures; there, a group of 15 to 25 yeshiva students conducted daily studies under the guidance of Lubavitcher emissary/teachers from abroad.

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3. According to Lev Gorodetsky, the head of the Hebrew Teachers Union, in the Soviet Union, since 1989 "Moscow has about 50 Hebrew teachers with 700-800 students. Leningrad about half. In the 35 other cities of the Soviet Union where Hebrew is being taught, there are 140-150 teachers and several thousand students."—quoted in a column titled, "Destiny," *The Jacksonville [Florida] Jewish News*, September 1989, p. 15..

Built in 1926 the *shul* was the first synagogue during the era of communism. It became a symbol of resistance to the reign of terror against *Yiddishkeit*. It was through this Chabad center that the Rebbe coordinated his underground activities to ensure Jewish survival throughout the Soviet Union. The Lubavitcher synagogue was the site of the first Jewish school, yeshiva and *mikveh*.

And that *mikveh* is worth writing home about. Alex Lukatsky, a onetime Soviet engineer, who was refused an exit visa by the Soviet government—"You know too many secrets!" he was told—to make a living, drove a truck. Living close to the Marina Roscha Shul, this *shul* worshipper saw the need for a *mikveh* there, and built it with his own hands. After he completed it, it was in use for one day before the KGB broke into the premises that night and boarded over the entire floor. No notice had been given to the *shul*, and when an explanation was requested, the *shul* was told that it didn't have permission to build a *mikveh*. For one year, the *mikveh* remained closed.

Eventually the Muscovite Lubavitchers asked the Rebbe what they should do. The Rebbe blessed the *mikveh* and all their efforts. Never was the following official in any way, yet it was said that the Rebbe said he and his American friends would put some pressure on would-be visitors to the U.S.S.R. and on the American government. He pointed out that Gorbachev was claiming he was giving freedom of religion, so he should be asked, "How can you close a *mikveh*?" As for the American tourists, he advised each and every one to make sure that, once in Moscow, she or he insist on using the *mikveh* at the Marina Roscha Shul; and, if he or she were told that such a *mikveh* didn't exist, the visitor should complain and make a big stink about it.

Enough visitors and U.S. congressmen complained, so that by March 1987, when American businessman Edgar M. Bronfman and Morris Abrams, then president of the American Conference on Soviet Jewry, arrived in Moscow, Gorbachev, out of shame or compassion or a mix of both, met with the two Americans, whom Gorbachev well knew shared the same deep commitment he saw in Rabbi Israel Singer, the head of the World Jewish Congress, in changing life for the Jews in the Soviet Union.

As the Rebbe's blessing unfolded, after the two men flew back to the States, almost the following day, the Soviet government advised the Marina Roscha Shul leaders that they could reopen the *mikveh*, that "the incident was a mistake by overzealous KGB operatives."

"If that is so," said the bold (or foolhardy?) *shul*'s reply, "Let your own KGB men repair it."

And you know what? The KGB actually dug out the whole *mikveh* again. First they removed the layer of parquet floor. Then, they removed the cement they filled the *mikveh* with. Before they left, the new "mikveh" looked very good (if that was possible, considering these KGBers, although versed in cement-mixing, had to be considered "cement-heads" compared to Alexander Lukatsky, acknowledged by his peers as an experienced engineer bordering on perfection in his works).

Then, on the early morning of December 30, 1993, Marina Roscha Shul was destroyed by flames. Only one wall, where the holy ark stood, remained untouched—a symbol to all Soviet Jews that the holy work initiated by the Rebbe must continue with ever-increasing faith and fervor. As Rabbi Lazar puts it, "The Rebbe's love for Russian Jewry is manifest in his concern for both their spiritual and physical needs. To this end, a new Jewish Community Center is being built to attend the needs of Russia's

largest Jewish community. Located at 2 Vysheslavtzev Per. 5A, Marina Roscha Shul today serves as the headquarters for Chabad Lubavitch in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

In the short years before the Soviet Union's demise, it was an exciting time; each Lubavitcher player, with one foot underground and the other foot operating aboveground, was a key to the spiritual revolution. So the Rebbe chose them well. If there were a difference of opinion, for instance, as between Rabbi Moshe Slonim and Reb Moishe Levertov, you can be certain the Rebbe was consulted, and the best decision was always made, the best person was chosen for each task, by the Rebbe. As it's written, "As the generation, so the leader" (Jerusalem Talmud. *Sanhedrin* 2.6).

The Achei Tmimim school for boys was typical of the spiritual revolution's finest moments. When it daringly opened in the women's gallery of the Choral Synagogue, it had no official status, hence the Lubavitcher community in Moscow tried to keep it underground—as underground as a sprouting bulb mostly atop the earth. They knew it was risky to operate such an underground Lubavitch school aboveground, but they did it anyway. (Eventually, in 1994, way after the former Soviet Union was a black eye on the mend in the world's face, the new Russian government leased a building to the Lubavitcher school, and day after day, hot or cold, excluding all Jewish holidays and the Sabbath, Jewish students and Jewish teachers have ever since been learning together.)

Somewhere along the way in this book, maybe once or twice, maybe more often, a reader will scratch his/her head and say, "I still don't get the connection between the secrets of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and the collapse of the Soviet Union. After all, the Chabad movement trained no soldiers to defeat the Communists on the battlefield." If that is how you're thinking, keep on believing that the Soviet Union collapsed for this reason or that reason. But the real power, off the battlefield, lies in the power of a prophet and his prophecy. Let us go on with the power of the Rebbe as prophet. His prophecy will sooner or later out along the way.

Gorbachev kept on promising the world, nevertheless disillusioning his citizens.

"With *perestroika*, why is there no pro-Israel journalism?" Jewish dissidents and refuseniks wanted to know.

"Where is the fairness?"

"Several years ago there were rumors picked up by BBC, VOA and VOI, concerning the Soviet promise that 15,000 Jews would be released. Where are they? The world must be reminded and demand an answer."

"Gorbachev said there would be no refusals for more than 10 years and they announced the possibility of flights from Moscow to Tel Aviv for those people interested. What happened? Soviet officials must be reminded of these broken promises at every meeting."

"People forget—they hear news but do not bother to check so they think things are better."

Even foreign Jewish newspapers had no idea where anything in the Soviet Union was heading. They responded to every Soviet scratch mark. Writing in the July 21, 1989 issue of *The Jewish Week*, writers Pamela B. Cohen and Micah Naftalin wrote, "The issue now is whether the United States should accept Soviet 'assurances' of reform or continue to demand performance. Those willing to settle for promises assert

that appropriate reform is all but accomplished. To the contrary, more than two million Jews remain in an exceedingly unstable U.S.S.R., facing rising anti-Semitism and an uncertain future. At present, with no institutionalized right to emigrate, the privilege for anybody to leave is decided by the caprice of the state and its bureaucracy. More than 2,000 refuseniks, many of them waiting more than a decade, still suffer from the arbitrary emigration system. Hundreds of new refusals have been issued in the past year under the same arbitrary barriers—state secrets and lack of family permissionss—that Jackson-Vanik was enacted to eliminate 15 years ago. The Soviets have been promising imminent reform, in the name of rule of law, for the past 18 months. What then, is the harm of awaiting that event? Even to those who advocate an early waiver, there is no harm unless the laws are not in compliance with international standards; they will not be implemented faithfully; or they are not imminent. If any of these scenarios comes to pass, it is all the more important that a waiver be withheld...."[4]

As the hammer-and-sickle equivalent of a Times Square bell marked the end of 1989, hardly any Soviet man or woman knew it, but it was the beginning of the end of the Soviet empire. In October, the East German and Hungarian handwritings were on the wall, both caught up in the move away from the Soviet external empire. Gorbachev's spokesman, Gennady Gerasimov, told Western reporters on October 25 that Gorbachev had adopted the "Sinatra Doctrine" (in reference to singer Frank Sinatra's theme song, "My Way"). He said that the Warsaw Pact regimes were "doing it their way" and that "the Brezhnev Doctrine is dead."[5] In November, the Berlin Wall, symbol of the Cold War, fell. And in December of that year, at the Malta Summit, Mikhail Gorbachev and then U.S. President George Bush declared the Cold War over.

Enough air and nerve seeped up from underground. Separate summer camps of boys and girls took place in 1990. Seminars were beginning to be held out in the open, and, wonder of wonders, its participants kept both their eyes and ears pointed toward the speakers, forgetting that there might be—or might not be—it didn't seem to matter very much any longer—that there might be KGB operatives in the audience, maybe sitting right alongside them. Whatever political rivals Mikhail S. Gorbachev and Boris N. Yeltsin had to say to one another or against one another, that wasn't their grist.

Rabbi Lazar tells a story he was told, of change of sorts, if not from the top of the Soviet heap, at least not from its bottom. Sometime in early 1991, the local electric company decided to shut off the electricity in the Marina Roscha Shul. The check might have been in the mail, but that wasn't good enough. The bill had to be paid now! "But it's during a Jewish holy day," protested the Jews. That wasn't their concern, said the electric company men. The Jews were stuck: they couldn't make phone calls on the holiday. Not only would their *mikveh* waters suffer, but the *shul*'s worshippers couldn't *daven* in the dark.

So, some of the Jews decided to carry a few bottles of vodka (Jewish law allowed carrying on that day anything to be used that day). They walked to the central electrical station to try to convince them that they'd pay the electric company after the holiday. Meanwhile, turn on the lights, please, the Jews beseeched the authorities, and handed

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4. Newspaper story, "Soviet Performance Doesn't Justify Move."

5. William E. Watson, *The Collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 13.

over the bottles of vodka as a "a present." When they mentioned to the department head the name of the *shul*, his eyes lit up. "Marina Roscha, did you say?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," said one of the Jews. "You've heard of it? We need the lights on there. It's a public place now."

"You're telling me Marina Roscha?" said the department head. "The KGB sent me there as an electrician to put in hearing devices for them," and he started describing the whole synagogue, what it looked like, where he put this listening device and that microphone. The Jews reassured him his microphones were still in place and were working fine. The department head seemed pleased to hear that. End of story: Still, the Jews had to wait till the next day before the *shul* lights were turned on, and not before the entire bill was paid in cash.

Coordinating all activities of the Rebbe's emissaries in Soviet cities, Rabbi Berel Lazar staged a big conference in a major hotel in 1991. In attendance were the Rebbe's *shluchim*, activists, myriads of *baalei teshuva* and refuseniks. "We explored how the rest of Europe could help Russia expand into a truly open and accepting society for Judaism, and ways to spread *Yiddishkeit*, to help bring Moshiach (the Messiah). Because there were really miracles happening then. So many secular Jews coming close to *Yiddishkeit* and the Soviet government was going out of its way to help us, giving us buildings for schools, reopening *shul*s that were closed for a long time. Every day you felt that there were more opportunities, things taking place, unheard of in earlier days. In truth, by then the Soviet government was beginning to fall through the cracks. President Gorbachev was trying to keep a stiff upper lip, but his cracked lips were all too noticeable. So too by then the KGB was not cracked up to be what it was in the past. *Shluchim* flowed in and out of the city, in and out of the hotel. Communism was becoming a revolving door. Nobody was arrested or harassed. It was as if the KGB couldn't care less or was involved in other life-and-death matters—their own.

While Soviet citizens were battling each other and their Communist government in the streets, amid well-placed mounds of candle wax and wreaths, after a three-day spurt by an old guard that proved toothless to overthrow the Gorbachev government, while in the end Yeltsin, astride a neutralized tank, and Gorbachev, desperately trying to reshape or revive a system that seemed like an inert body, both couldn't even agree (as *New York Times* correspondent Francis X. Climes noted) "...when the graveyard marker should be judged as firmly affixed above the corpse of the Soviet Union"), while the general condemnation-or praise—of Gorbachev was that he remained unable to change the living standards of the Soviet people, but he had changed—and continued changing—the people (or as as *New York Times* correspondent Serge Schmemann said, Gorbachev "didn't know how to make sausage, but he did know how to give freedom"[6]; all this and all the big events and gestures—nothing small ever happened in the U.S.S.R.—from Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, who were known for their grand schemes, and Feodor Dostoevskiki[7] and Leo Tolstoy,[8] for immense themes in grandest of grand novels. Words and gestures swirled around them, but you wouldn't

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6. "The Soviet State, Born of a Dream, Dies," December 26, 1991.

7. Whom Vladimir Lenin thought was "the foulest of writers."—Lenin, Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii, vol. 48, p. 295.

8. Whom Lenin found "useful only because Lenin could describe him as a 'fiery protester' and denouncer of the tsarist order."—Dmitri Volkogonov, *Autopsy for an Empire*, trans. by Harold Shukman (New York: The free Press, 1998), p. 15.

have sensed that by the actions of Rabbi Berel Lazar and his small family as they readied themselves for the High Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, solemn but never unhappy days; yet for the very first time, in the open, the *shofar* was blown—"As we blow, first we stand, then we sit, to confuse Satan" (Talmud: *Rosh Hashana* 16a)—wherever Jews lived and worked. That spiritual powerhouse named Berel Lazar introduced many American Chabad customs of doing things in Russia. "At first the Soviet Jews were shocked, but when they joined in and saw nobody was going to throw them in jail, their Jewish sparks kicked in, and the wanted to know more about these quaint American Chabad customs, which, by the way, had originally sprung up in their neck of the woods in the middle of the eighteenth century." For now, the few rabbis like Berel Lazar and Moshe Chaim Levin had to suffice, but there was no dearth of wishful thinking for more Lubavitcher *shluchim* to arrive in Russia to help lead the way. Steadfastly, Lazar reminded the Soviet Jews that the Rebbe prophesied the collapse of the Soviet Union just as he had correctly prophesied many other world-shattering events. "What the Rebbe wants from many of you is to become leaders right here and to lead other Jews into the light of freedom," pointed out Lazar, and he would then excite his fellow Jews further with the words the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe once told his *chassidim*, to encourage them to actively demonstrate self-sacrifice in the face of Communist oppression, in the nineteen twenties and thirties: "Jews, you must grab *mesirus nefesh* [self-sacrifice] now. Grab it! Because the time for *mesirus nefesh* is about to end. The day is coming very soon when there will be complete religious freedom; you will look for *mesirus nefesh*, but will not find any."

Yet there was a great deal more to the rabbi's work—much more. Remembers Lazar: "There was a point when everyone disagreed with the Rebbe. Every Jewish organization in America and in the Soviet Union claimed that Soviet Jews had to leave, and they tried their best to convince refuseniks to emigrate. Eventually, everyone understood the Rebbe was right: if all these Jews left the Soviet Union, they would have taken all their learning and teaching with them to Israel and points West. The reason *Yiddishkeit* was kept alive was only because some of these refuseniks and *baalei teshuva* decided to remain in the U.S.S.R."

So, faced with a massive *aliyah* of his fellow Jews to Israel, Lazar had to speed up the training of new teachers who promised, sort of, to remain in the Soviet Union to teach others Judaism. No easy task, now that the long-oppressed Soviet Jews smelled the blood of the dying bear.

Still, Lazar and his team of Lubavitcher *bocburim* (older, former yeshiva students) threw themselves fully into the task of preparing the Soviet Jews intending to emigrate to Israel, to explain what the Land of Israel is, what *Yiddishkeit* is. "We did this through teaching Hebrew, meaningful to their new lives," Lazar said. Hundreds of Jews came to the Marina Roscha Shul every day to learn Hebrew and *Yiddishkeit*, to prepare themselves for Israel. "Their attending our *farbrengens* helped a great deal," said Lazar. To which he added, "About that, the Rebbe himself once said, 'All that is necessary is for a person to perform one small act and G-d will help him and lift him above all things. This is enhanced by the influence of a chasidic *farbrengen* which can achieve more than the influence of the angel Michael.'

"So, over the next two years, we held a lot of them, and weddings, and performed circumcisions to get them ready for their journey, and thank G-d we accomplished a

new kingdom almost ready and able for the Redemption, if not the collapse of the Union—not yet, anyhow."

Then, too, Rabbi Lazar had to bid farewell to many of his fellow Jews at the train stations and the airport: "Well," said a happy Lazar, still with a touch of regret in his voice, "it felt as if I were waving to an endless conveyor belt of Jews on their way out, new Jews always replacing them on the moving belt, and all I could do was give them as much as I could in the short time they were still there in front of me, and wish them *'Sholom Aleichem,'* as I intoned the prayer of travel for them, and waved a last goodbye for the moment."

Then came the Festival of *Succos* and *Simchas Bais Hashoeva*, and the Chabadniks in the Soviet Union really staged a party on other streets. Their first *Succos* aboveground, in the open, they were determined to spread their good cheer everywhere. We sent out a *Sukkah*-mobile [a thatched hut Jews live in and/or eat in on the holiday of *Succos*; a *sukkah*-mobile is one on wheels) to spread the word through the streets of Moscow. To this end, "we also advertised very strongly about *Simchas Bais Hashoeva*. The ad explained: "The joy of *Simchas Bais Hashoeva* was the most overwhelming experience of happiness in the days of the Holy Temple in *Yerushalayim* * Since 1981, the Lubavitcher Rebbe reintroduced the custom of all-night dancing and singing by thousands of Jews to the accompaniment of large bands in the streets of Crown Heights, home of the Rebbe and Lubavitch, and it has become part of the Lubavitch tradition * The Rebbe *shlita*'s call to carry the joy of *Simchas Bais Hashoeva* out into the public domain is an effort to convert the mundane 'street' into the domain of the Holy One Blessed Be He, so that even the gentile nations of the world will recognize and know that G-d is Master of the World.—See you on *Simchas Bais Hashoeva*, beginning sundown, on September 14, outside the Choral Synagogue, on Arkhipovna Street."

The Lubavitchers not only advertised in the local Jewish newspaper, but they took out a respectable-sized ad in a local Muscovite paper, and that really got everyone talking. Jews were shocked and scared. "What was going on!" "Hold on a minute!" "This is September 1991—not the End of Days in the World-to-Come!" "Shouldn't we wait till the Redemption arrives before we dance?"

Rabbi Lazar smiled and readjusted his eyeglasses on his face. They were always getting too loose; he must find somebody to tighten them better.

"Shouldn't we wait till things get better before we get carried away?" "Maybe we should hold up...?"

Endless questions.

Rabbi Lazar noticed that his eyeglasses tended to get looser when he felt anxious, and he certainly was getting anxious hearing all those questions. So, if only to forget his eyeglasses, he told them a story.

"A Jew once came to Rabbi Chanoch Gad of Piltz and asked him why *chassidim* are always dancing so much. 'How can they dance while we are still in *golus*? Why don't they wait until *Moshiach* actually gets here to celebrate?' he inquired.

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9. Quoted in Shibhe HaBesht (1903), p. 27.

"In response, Rabbi Chanoch Gad replied with a question of his own. 'Why do *kohanim* [modern-day Temple priests-to-be] need to learn the laws of the service in the *Beis Hamikdosh* [the Holy Temple)?' he asked.

"'So that when Moshiach arrives, they'll know exactly what to do,' the Jew said.

"'The same is true for *chassidim*,' the sage replied. 'They dance now so they'll also know what to do when the time comes.'"

Then Rabbi Lazar ended thus: "During these last few minutes of *golus*, dancing not only serves to bring the *Geulah* closer, but prepares us for the era of Redemption we are about to enter."

The Soviet press came to the dancing, too, took pictures and printed big articles about it. Jews initially scared, said to themselves, "If it's written in the paper, it's probably all right. So, on the remaining nights, all those Jews threw off their shackles of questions and danced "till the cows came home in the morning." The street was totally closed—anyhow, nobody could walk along it! At one point, everyone started singing *"Am Yisroel Chai!"* - "The Nation of Israel lives!" and everybody just started jumping and screaming and dancing. If there were tears, they were tears of sublime joy.

And as *Simchas Bais Hashoeva* rolled into the holy days of *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchas Torah*, Rabbis Lazar and Levin, and Kuravsky kept their fellow Soviet Jews abreast of the holiday's meanings. In a series of quick, intensive seminars, practically every Soviet Jew who yearned to know about these holidays knew that *Simchas Torah* is the culmination of a month filled with uplifting experiences. Said Kuravsky, "We've stood in awe before the King of the universe; we have been forgiven and cleansed by His mercy; and we have experienced the joy of uniting with G-dliness through His beautiful commandments." Added Levin, "Now, we rejoice with His Torah." And Kamishev imparted: "Now we take the sacred scrolls in our arms and dance together, scholar and novice alike. During the dancing, the Torah remains in its cover, for this, I tell you, is not a time for study. The joy of *Simchas Torah* is far greater than any delight we may derive from intellectual understanding." And finally added Lazar, "Our Jewish soul—we are all one—is at its sublimest."

And on that *Simchas Torah* on that September cool night on Arkhipovna Street—who cared how many spies were alongside them!—these newly proud Jews, as it's written, "[d]ancing together, truly rejoicing with the Torah, imbued with the conviction of its absolute relevance, its utter indispensability to life. To them, life without Torah is unthinkable. Only a life of Torah has purpose and meaning. Thus, when they look at the *Sefer Torah*, rolled up and covered, they realize, each within the bounds of his own intellect, that in this scroll and what it represents, is their *raison d'etre*, their tree of life. The less learned are moved by the flood of joy emanating from the more intellectual, who are in turn moved by the simple exuberance emanating from the faith of the less learned; resulting in a unified display of joy in the Torah."[9]

And one of the rabbis somewhere along the way told the Jews, yearning for stories, this: "*Simchas Torah* in the 'Soldier's Synagogue' in a little town somewhere in Russia was a wonderful sight. There was true rejoicing with the Torah in that

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9. *Challenge: An Encounter with Lubavitch-Chabad* (London: Lubavitch Foundation of Great Britain, 1974), p. 297.

synagogue.

The most impressive part was when, at the height of the rejoicing, one of the old soldiers told his story:

"'I was a little boy of eight when the terrible order came to my father, Rabbi Shlomo, to hand over 20 boys from our town for the czar's army. All the leading members of our community gathered in my house. My father demanded that all children be treated alike, and that the recruiting be done by casting lots.

"'The meeting continued all night and I fell asleep.

"'When I awoke in the morning I found my mother sitting on my bed, her eyes red from crying. I knew then I was to be one of those boys who would be sent away. "Don't cry," I said, "I will come back."

"'I know that. What I am worried about, Dovid,' my mother said, 'is whether you will come back a Jew.'"

"'Mother,' I said resolutely, 'I will always be a Jew.'

"A few days later we were led away in two wagons, roped together. The whole town came to see us off. My mother managed to throw me a package. 'Don't forget your *bar mitzvah*' were her parting words. It was *tefillin* and a little prayer book.

"In the next three years my 'training' consisted of little more than a systematic preparation for conversion.

"During those three years I came to be regarded as the chief of our group. Being the son of a rabbi and knowing a great deal more than the others, they all looked up to me. I knew that if I would show the slightest weakness, it would break the spirit of the boys.

"One day, after a terrible beating, I was brought before the sergeant and a priest. I was told of a brilliant career in the military academy, the honor and power of a governor; but if I refused, I would die miserably, never seeing my mother again.

"I said I would give them an answer in three days. They took this to mean a victory for them. The next three days were the worst I had ever had. The last night before I had to give my answer I had a strange dream. I was back in my little town, swimming in the stream. Suddenly, I felt a terrible cramp and began drowning. I grabbed for a straw I saw floating nearby. The straw turned into a golden chain, one end of which was firmly fastened to a tree.

"The chain had many links growing bigger the farther they were from me. The furthest chains had the names of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob on them, followed by names familiar from the Bible. The link in my hand had my own name on it and was securely held by my father's link.

"For a moment I felt happy, but then I saw that my link was slowly breaking apart. I awoke with a start and lay crying the rest of the night.

"In the morning, the big mess hall was filled to capacity. At the dais sat many military men of high rank. In the hall sat many young Jewish 'recruits' from my own group, as well as from other nearby units. An elaborate affair was planned for my conversion.

"I was led up to the dais and asked to declare my willingness to convert. But I did not answer immediately. Instead, I turned around and gazed at my fellow Jewish recruits. Then I walked to the wall and took down a small hatchet that hung there. Returning to the table, I placed three fingers on it, carefully avoiding the middle one

around which I hoped to wind the straps of *tefillin* one day, and before anyone realized what I was about to do, I lifted the hatchet and brought it down with all my strength upon my fingers.

'There is your answer for the three days!' I exclaimed, waving my hand in their faces."

"Here the old soldier stopped. He told us no more, but we knew that it was this very aged soldier who brought about the repeal of the czar's cruel decree. When Czar Nicholas heard, he knew that so long as boys like Dovid were among his subjects, all his decrees were doomed to failure.

"We looked admiringly upon the aged soldier who immediately jumped up and went dancing and singing, 'The Torah is our only choice, on *Simchas Torah*, rejoice, rejoice.'"[10]

There was nothing more to say. Lenin could bequeath to Stalin the heritage of "continuing the process of assimilating the Jews and destroying the religious institutions that had served as their rock and refuge through centuries of persecution under the tsars."[11]

Stalin could, in framing Jewish doctors in the infamous 1953 Doctors' Plot, try to exile the entire Russian Jewish community to Siberia. Khrushchev, another ruthless and ambitious Communist, could bang his shoe on the U.N. table and desire to visit Disneyland in California all he wanted. Brezhnev, with "no political will, no broad economic views, and no clear idea of real possibilities,"[12] could focus as much energy as he wanted in conferring on himself ever more decorations, including Marshal, Hero and Laureate.[13] As for Andropov, the 15-year KGB chief, who secretly wrote poetry and loved jazz, could, for all his intellectual depth, he "could propose nothing to save either society or the Party,"[14] and left this message in a sketch of a poem found among his papers:

We are fleeting in this world, beneath the moon.
Life is an instant. Non-being is forever.
Earth spins in the universe,
Men live and vanish...[15]

As for Chernenko, we are reminded of Marlon Brando's famous line, "I coulda been a contender." So could have Chernenko been one—as a businessman with a middle-sized computerized company. By the time Gorbachev, and later, Yeltsin, stepped up on the main Soviet dais, most Soviet citizens had ceased listening to their tired old ideas. (So a tired old joke goes: Question: What is the acronym for Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* [the declared public policy within the U.S.S.R. of openly and frankly discussing economic and political realities], *perestroika* [reconstruction, in Russian] and *uskoreniye* [speeding up, in Russian]? Answer: GPU

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10. *L'Chaim* Publication, no. 29, September 30, 1988.
11. Lester Samuel Eckman, *Soviet Policy Towards Jews & Israel* (New York: Shengold, 1974), p. 36.
12. Dmitri Volkogonov, *Autopsy for an Empire*, p. 278.
13. Ibid., pp. 302-303.
14. Ibid., p. 343.
15. Ibid., p. 384.

[the political or secret police that was established by Lenin in 1922 and abolished by Stalin in 1934, only to be replaced by the NKVD and later the KGB].[16] Yes, there was nothing more to say.

But the Jews were going to have their say. Those ones dancing in the open streets on the eight days of *Succos*. Those who took their Jewish studies seriously. Those who were now listening to the "Radio Rabbi of Russia" on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). Those who loved to *daven* in the only independent *shul* in Russia—we're speaking, of course, of Marina Roscha—and, close to Rosh Hoshana, who held a *kiddush* after service and then exited the *shul* to look for Jewish passersby and gladly blow the *shofar* for them. Those who received letters from the Rebbe and turned them over to Rabbi Lazar so he could print them in the local newspapers, "sort of Rosh Hashana greetings from the Lubavitcher Rebbe," explained Rabbi Lazar. "The days of Stalin, Khrushchev and other Soviet tyrants, of not openly mentioning the Rebbe, were over. And especially when his Rosh Hashana letters were printed in the newspaper, even those run by the government, those were the real beginning of heady days for us."

And words have to be said about those outside rabbis like the former Chief Sephardi Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, Chief Rabbi of Israel Yisrael Meir Lau, Rabbi Hillel Pevzner from France, Rabbi Ezriel Chaikin from Brussels, Rabbi David Hollander from Brooklyn, New York, Rabbi Zalmen Posner from Nashville, Rabbi Zelig Sharfstein from Cincinnati, Rabbi Moshe Landa from Bnei Brak, Israel, Rabbi Sholom Rifkin from St. Louis, Rabbi Shmuel Lew from London, Rabbi Herschel Fogelman from Massachusetts, Rabbi Alter B. Z. Metzger from Crown Heights, and Edgar M. Bronfman of The Seagram Co.—they and so many more came to say and bring Jewish things of hope to the Soviet Jews in Moscow.

In a sense these Jews from the West brought old Judaism to new Judaism in the Soviet Union. It's not an exaggeration to say, everyday life for Soviet Jews might have taken some bad turns in the road, if not for the actions of these outside Jewish men and women. Freely, they gave some Soviet religious Jews licenses to work in the Soviet system, where every one still had to have a job, be self-sufficient, or risk going to jail for the crime of being dependent on the State—the Soviets branded them "guilty of parasitism." What kind of licenses? So there a Jew could now be a *shochet* (ritual slaughter) or a *mohel* (circumciser), once forbidden practices and now accepted as work by governmental officials; the only thing required by the Soviets was documented proof that such-and-such person was employed.

Rabbi Lazar also did more of his share in this regard. As he oversaw all religious Lubavitcher institutions, he provided many men and women with religious work throughout Russia. One person guarded a *shul*, another acted as an alternative *gabbai* (a *shul*'s treasurer), and so on. In stretching such limits, Lazar always was able to put one more person to work in a *shul*. As an aside, his doing so always provided *minyans* (a quorum of 10 Jewish men required for Divine service) at any time in the *shul*. Another aside: Says Lazar, "Even when they chose me to be the chief rabbi of Marina Roscha, everything had to be recorded and documented with a meeting, with votes.

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16. David A. Harris and Izrail Rabinovich, *The Jokes of Oppression: The Humor of Soviet Jews* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1988), p. 215.

Although it was still the old Soviet system, enough things were changing openly in the streets.

And there was the time when Rabbis Berel Lazar and Moshe Chaim Levin conferred with Boris Yeltsin about the Rebbe and Soviet Jewry. And here it's worth putting other matters on hold to give you some details on how the Yeltsin-Lazar-Levin meeting came about. According to Lazar, the meeting happened quite simply. "I had arrived here a couple of months earlier in Moscow, and one day Professor Veronica Irina (who later was involved in trying to help retrieve Lubavitcher *seforim* that were being held illegally by the Soviet government[17]) told me that she could arrange a meeting with Yeltsin, then head of the Russian Federation, whose office was in the Parliament Building, the so-called Russian White House. Levin and I readily agreed. So, on the appointed day, before we entered the White House, Professor Irini suddenly

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17. In the November 1, 1991 issue of *L'Chaim Magazine (no. 187), this article appeared:*

A LETTER FROM MOSCOW

by Rabbi S. B. Cunin

Rabbi Cunin is the director of Chabad of the West Coast. He is presently in Moscow on a special mission from the Lubavitcher Rebbe. This letter appeared in the People Helping People magazine produced for the *L'Chaim—To Life Chabad* Telethon in Los Angeles.

"Except for a few days spent on Capitol Hill and in Los Angeles, I have now been in Russia for the better part of eight months. They have been months of trial by fire for myself and my colleagues—Rabbi Y. Aranow, executive director of Chabad Youth Organization in Israel, Rabbi I. Kogan, the famed Russian emigre and activist, and Rabbi Sholom Ber Levinson, chief librarian of the Central Lubavitch Collection in New York.

"We are here, at the request of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *shlita*, to retrieve 12,000 sacred and historic volumes of books which belong to Chabad Lubavitch, but have been held captive by the Russian government since 1917.

"What is at stake is much more than the outcome of a pile of books. The wisdom, understanding and knowledge held within the pages of this collection—known as the Schneerson-Agudas Chassidei Chabad Books—is the only surviving portion of original written chassidic philosophy, collected over a 200-year period since the time of the first Chabad Rebbe, that remains separated from the 150,000 volume Chabad Library in Brooklyn. In essence, it is the missing spiritual link to an approach to life that has brought solace and succor to literally millions of people throughout the world.

"To the Russian government, the books have no value. They are meaningless. In 70 years only 87 of them have been catalogued. The rest remain in their original crates, accessible to no one. To us, they are priceless. Once returned to the Chabad Library, where they will be available to the Rebbe and leading scholars from all over the world, these treasures will be the source for innumerable volumes of chassidic insight, inspiration and guidance.

"Just as each and every one of you has been touched by the work of Chabad, every single member of Chabad Lubavitch looks to the works of the Rebbe and his forbears and draws strength from the study of *Chassidus*. This is the driving force behind everything we do; it is what guides our efforts in reaching out to the less fortunate. That is because at the heart of chassidic teachings is the philosophy of people helping people, and, at the core of that philosophy is the intellectual, spiritual and emotional union with G-d.

"These captive texts are an integral part of that union and belong, by virtue of law and in the heart of people everywhere, to our movement.

"Yet they remain imprisoned in the Lenin Library. How did they get there?

"In 1916, with the German army marching toward the village of Lubavitch, the fifth Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Ber Schneersohn, o.b.m., sent part of his library to a storehouse in Moscow for safekeeping.

"The chaos that followed the 1917 Revolution prevented him from retrieving the books. After his passing in 1920, his son, Rabbi Y. Y. Schneersohn, o.b.m.—the sixth Rebbe—began the long struggle to get them back. From early on a pattern of hope followed by crushing disappointment was established. In 1922, the authorities gave written permission to release the books, only to have the document be 'misplaced.' The books were then sent to the Lenin Library where they have remained, untouched, ever since.

"My three colleagues and I have vowed not to leave Moscow as long as one page of these spiritual treasures remains. The four of us are responsible for humanitarian and educational institutions affecting the lives of untold thousands of people. This is a responsibility we wrestle with daily, keeping the single telephone line available to us working around the clock to fulfill our commitments to our respective communities.

"The incredible support we have received from political leaders and captains of industry around the world speaks volumes about the impact Chabad has had.

confided to us that the meeting with Yeltsin was not a done deal—yet. Why not? I asked. All she said was, 'We may yet meet with him. He knows you're coming. So let's hope for the best.' Both Moshe Chaim and I nodded in agreement, focusing on the Rebbe's words, 'Think good and it will be good.' That carried the day for us. While we waited near his office, we *davened Mincha*; and just as we finished our prayers, a Yeltsin aide appeared and ushered us into Yeltsin's office. Looking healthy, the dignified Russian president greeted us, as a king might greet one of his favorite subjects. With his advisors, he and we sat at his meeting table. I explained that Levin and I by and large represented the Orthodox Jewish community and that we were hoping his Russian government would continue to help us open more Jewish schools and to return our closed-down synagogues. Yeltsin said he'd do everything he could to return all Jewish buildings to the community. 'Gone forever are the Lenin-Stalin days of eradicating Judaism and their culture in this nation,' said Yeltsin. In front of the two rabbis and the one female professor, Yeltsin also vowed to support the Jewish people and support freedom of all religions. 'We've had it on the Soviet books,' he said; 'now we're going to enforce it.'"

("By the time the Soviets totally closed down shop in December 1991, about nine towns had rabbis. Yet everywhere Jews lived in the Soviet Union, they began to clamor for rabbis to be with them. The had so much catching up to. So much to learn about their ancient heritage; some of them for the first just found out they were Jews and that Judaism existed; that's how much the Soviets had successfully kept the successive generations of Jews over the past 70 years in the dark! Nowadays [1999] we have 100 *shluchim*/rabbis throughout the Commonwealth of Independent States [C.I.S., the former Soviet Union], and getting more every moment.")

"During the conversation, when I first mentioned that I had been sent to Moscow by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Yeltsin's eyes lit up like two Chanukah candles at the mention of the Rebbe.

"'Your Rebbe—he's the Rebbe of all Russian Jews, as I'm told,' said Yeltsin. And then the Russian leader went on to say how much he had heard and read so much about the heroism and the history of Lubavitch in Russia. 'Yes, Rabbi, I know so much about your great movement and what it has meant for Jews in the Soviet Union.' "*Would Yeltsin ask him to ask the Rebbe for a blessing?* Lazar wondered. It wouldn't be the first time the Rebbe blessed a foreign leader, in order to make things better for that country's Jews. "So why not!" Lazar said to himself. "In this new world order of Russia,

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"We have received every encouragement from the religious, legal, academic, cultural and political establishments of the U.S.S.R., including that of President and Mrs. Gorbachev.

"There have been times when it seemed the end was in sight. I have seen the books, held them in my hands as tears streamed down my cheeks—tears bearing the agony of three generations of Rebbes and the hope of millions of people around the world.

"I cannot express the profound disappointment, the unbelievable pain each time that hope was thwarted by bureaucratic entanglement. I am not at liberty to go into details now. I can only assure you that those bureaucrats who shortly after our arrival said, 'Don't worry, the Russian winter will take care of these guys,' sorely underestimated the resolve of people who believe in G-d and live by the philosophy of people helping people."

Ed. Note: It is now in the year 1999, and still very few Lubavitcher *sefarim* have been given back to them. Still, the Rebbe's emissaries are in there fighting for them.

anything was possible."

Anything was possible, did I say? Oh you know enough of the Soviet political climate, by your newspapers of that time what was happening and what was not happening there. Gorbachev in, Yeltsin out. Yeltsin in, Gorbachev out. Gorbachev in, the Soviet Union out. Gorbachev resigning from a Communist government that had ceased to exist almost a week before he signed his own walking papers.

Who knows if 1991 was a good year for sales of Russian vodka, but Jews everywhere seemed to expect a lot to happen, and the Rebbe himself had proclaimed the year to be the "Year of Wonders." And wondrous for the Jews it was. Topping off the Jewish calendar, in the month of *Kislev* (most of its days falling out in the month of December). "It's amazing how things work out," said Rabbi Lazar. "Even I looked a bit askance when Moshe Chaim Levin suggested a Chanukah concert in Moscow, hooked up by satellite around the world, with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, at the appropriate time, sending his wishes and *sicha* out to everyone. The idea excited me."

Lazar asked Levin if he had a place in mind to stage such a concert.

"Right in the Kremlin."

"Okay..." Lazar said low-key, keeping his wild excitement in check—*The Kremlin? Wow!*—and he didn't miss a beat in asking Levin who would be singing there.

"Oh, a few American singers I'm sure you heard of."

"Who, who?" impatiently said Lazar.

"Avrumel Fried."

"Avrumel Fried?"

"Uh-huh, and Mordechai ben David."

"Mordechai ben David?"

"Uh-huh, and Berel Zaltzman."

"Cantor Berel Zaltzman?"

"Uh-huh, and Shmuel Levy."

Now, Lazar lost most of his cool. He nodded, and nodded and nodded. Then he said, "It's perfect!"

"And it will be held in the Palace of Congresses in the Kremlin."

"Of course," said Lazar. "Where else!"—as if it were the most natural place for Jews to meet in the world, and to sing Jewish songs and hear Jewish-pride speeches.

Yet, Berel Lazar, with a big heart and a big imagination, could almost visualize it now:

"Ladies and gentlemen, be seated.

"In memory of the biggest stars this side of the Iron Curtain, Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko, Gorbachev, we..." reads the concert's M.C., holding a program close to his eyes: "now bring you directly from the convention hall in the Kremlin...Cantor Berel Zaltzman.

"A Jew? Wait a minute!"

Before the announcer can say another word, Cantor Berel Zaltzman on stage opens his mouth to sing. "We are the Chabadniks..." The announcer wants to say something else—a protest?—but he's shushed down by the audience who, hearing a composition of music they've heard all their lives, are also stunned in their own way. This music: an orthodox communistic military march. These words:

We are the Chabadniks emerging from the pain of the earth.

We bring you the Tablets of Moses.

At this point, we also bring you a truth about this story: the M.C. of the concert never spoke such lines; all the rest, however, is true: the words of hope, the sparks of redemption, the cantor and his song, and Jews openly weeping in the audience.

What is our secret?

How come we endure and endure and leave the graves of our enemies behind us?

The cantor's voice rises. With outstretched arms, he asks his people:

Where does our power come from?

Our power is the Torah. Our power is G-d.

Somehow, in spite of the overwhelming applause that drowns out a word or two of his song, the cantor manages to make his point clearly:

We are the Chabadniks.

G-d has seen to that.

The Soviet Union is relegated to a grave of the past.

The cantor sings on. To his right is a large menorah, with the first night's candle lit. If this were some underground *shul* in Moscow how easily the Jewish audience—all 10,000 of them—could easily have accepted the situation, keeping one eye on the cantor and one eye out for the secret police. Nothing so radical as they behold in front of them could really be taking place, in the Kremlin of all places. Yet, as it is written in Ladino (the language of the Sephardic Jews from Spain), whatever has not happened in 1,000 years may happen the next moment. Still, some Jews in the Kremlin audience pinch themselves. Any moment they expect the secret police to overwhelm them all and by tomorrow morning be on their way to Siberia. But as the minutes go by, Cantor Zaltzman takes on a new reality and the audience, gaining strength and hope, cheer him on. He's singing their song. He's singing of their Torah.

We are the Chabadniks...

The year is 5752, December 1991, Chanukah. In the wings await other Jews—Mordechai ben David, Avraham Fried, Shmuel Eli and the spirit of Soviet Jewish composer Dimitri Pokras who composed the song the cantor now sings.

When the project was brought up to other Lubavitchers around the world, almost everyone thought it was a crazy idea. Yet...the Russian *shluchim* wrote to the Rebbe, and promptly got an answer from him enough to turn on their faucets. Then they wrote to Mikhail Gorbachev, and probably because he had a soft spot for his Jewish friends in the world, or he was one of those happy men who gained wisdom in the nick of time, he gave the necessary permission, "about 10 days before the concert took place," said Levin.

What with Berel Lazar who coordinated the entire event and Moshe Chaim Levin and so many others who would make this historic concert the big success it would become, who needed 10 days to sell concert tickets! Immediately they plunked down the $800 to rent the Kremlin. Then spread the word. Within one full day the tickets were sold out—over 6,000 tickets! Of course the local, antisemitic Pamyat group protested. It threatened on radio to block Jews from entering the Kremlin, but, said Lazar, it would have taken more than the Pamyat to block his fellow Jews. The local police showed up, and so did not 6,000 but 12,000 Jews. The few hundred Pamyat got scared at the sight of 12,000 Jews, and ran away.

In the meantime, December 1991 was also a very good year for Chanukah

menorahs. You can imagine the wagging tongues, and hoots and angry looks of Jew haters as they passed the Russian White House and saw a large menorah at the top of the steps leading to the Parliament Building. "We can only assume," said Rabbi Lazar, "that Yeltsin, from his office window, looked out and saw it too, and smiled, especially when he spotted a banner nearby with the Rebbe's likeness on it. Putting up the menorah was legal—Moscow city officials gave us the green light. For Jews it was a great moment to be in Moscow."

Pamyat, eat your hearts out!

Truly the highlight of the concert came when the Rebbe appeared on the screen of the satellite hook-up and spoke. Everyone in the whole world heard him. So did everyone in the Kremlin, certainly all the Jews in the audience, and probably the Communists listening in on their aging, secret hearing devices. But what the Communists didn't hear that night although Jews everywhere knew much about was, eight days before the concert in the Kremlin, the Rebbe delivered a talk about a famous incident that happened in "770." It dealt with the French national anthem, the "Marseillaise."

This is the story of the "French *Farbrengen Sicha*"[18]: In 1974, a large group of Jews from France came to Crown Heights to acquaint themselves with the Lubavitcher movement. At the *hakofos* (the seven processions made with the Torah scrolls, around the synagogue, on *Simchas Torah* and accompanied by singing and dancing) they were unable to join in with the singing, being unfamiliar with the *niggunim melodies*. Suddenly the Rebbe, *shlita*, began to sing a tune they knew well, that of the French National Anthem ("La Marseillaise"), accompanying it with the words of a prayer, *"Ho'aderes V'hoemunia."* The singing began softly, as almost all the *chassidim* there in "770" were unacquainted with the song. But the momentum built up and before long, French guests and bearded *chassidim* were singing the rousing march in unison. As the Rebbe kept them going moving his arms, over and over, the newcomers and *chassidim* picked up in fervor, and soon the anthem was transformed into an outpouring of emotions. Suddenly the newcomers felt that all these bearded people were not strangers at all, but brothers, with one soul, one purpose, and one G-d binding them all together. Feelings of love and yearning towards G-d were welling up and gripping them with their intensity. The singing stopped, but its echoes continued to resound in the hearts of these newcomers to Judaism. The indelible stamp the experience left on them gave them the strength to endure all the travails of *baalei teshuva* beginning a completely new lifestyle.

That night at the concert, when the Rebbe's "French *Farbrengen*" talk was briefly mentioned, the Jews in the Kremlin wept openly with those French Jews, all brothers, united with one soul, one purpose, and one G-d binding them together. Ten days after the concert, the world shook again: the Soviet Union collapsed. But the followers of the Rebbe had long saw right away the connection between the Rebbe's freeing the "Marseillaise." France was never again the same after the Rebbe adopted this anthem as a *niggun*. All the more reason for Cantor Zaltzman to belt out "We are the

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18. Although, as always, the language spoken by the Rebbe, Melech Hamoshiach, was Yiddish, the invigorating chassidic gathering of *Shabbos Parshas Vayeishev* (*Shabbos Mevarchim Teves*) will long be remembered by all those present as "the French *farbrengen*."

Chabadniks," and Avraham Fried and Mordechai ben David raising the Kremlin audience to new heights of spirituality with rousing songs for the Jewish heart and soul. And like France, after that concert and the Rebbe's prophetic *sicha*, the Soviet Union was never the same. The Wizard of Soviet Oz was found out, in the end, for what it was: a blowhard out of wind.

Wednesday, December 25, 1991, was a peculiar day.

The 74-year Soviet experiment was over. On that day the U.S.S.R. officially turned into C.I.S. and Mikhail Gorbachev resigned from a nation called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that had ceased to exist four days before that. On that day Gorbachev, after his announcement, led only himself out the Kremlin door, taking with him the last vestiges of the "Great October Revolution of 1917." At 7:32 p.m. of that day, shortly after Gorbachev concluded his televised address, a Soviet captain, his many medals weighing heavily on his uniform, lowered the hammer-and-sickle red flag, hanging limply on the flag pole in the windless air over the Kremlin, and raised in its stead the white-blue-red Russian flag, and left it also hanging limply on the flag pole in the windless air over the Kremlin. Below, some surprised foreigners cheered as the chimes tolled from the Spassky Gate. "What will be?" moaned an angry lone war veteran.

For Jews, sunset begins a new day, and the eve of December 25, 1991, was also a peculiar time for Russian Jews in the Marina Roscha Shul. Their minds were on all sort of things, but not on their religious books, for, on that eve called, in Yiddish, *"Nittel Nacht"* - "Nothing Night," no serious Jew studies or learns anything Jewish.

That evening when Berel Lazar entered the *shul*, he spotted three young men playing a serious game of checkers, two playing, the third kibitzing. Looking around the *shul*, Lazar saw seven old *chassidim*, sitting together, shaking their heads; one of them, suddenly wincing, had asked another to pinch him in disbelief; the second obliged, obviously pinching him too hard; and a muttering match ensued. The group was in the process of tearing sheets of very rough toilet paper in preparation for the following year's days of the Sabbath, when tearing wasn't allowed according to Jewish law. Two *chassidim* started a duet of old Russian songs; three others, off key, joined them. Long-time artist and *baal teshuva* Reb Izrail Reznikov, pencil in hand, drew sketches of his memories of those August coup days. He kept wishing he had a camera during those days. "But who can forget," he groused, as if he really wanted to forget but couldn't. Yet his sketches depicted a vivid memory. In the old days he would never have gotten away with his kind of artwork. Reb Izrail was old enough to remember the days when the Soviet Union, in promising a people's culture, engendered an anti-culture in which mediocrity was glorified and talent was ruthlessly persecuted. The KGB created an entire department to control all aspects of art, trying first to harness rising talents to serve the state, and if that failed, to muzzle or exile them. Repressed or exiled artists included Mandelstam, Malevich, Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn, Rostropovich, Brodsky, and so many more. Now Reb Izrail Reznikov from Moscow (unlike another fellow artist, Izrail Radunsky from Byelorussia, who left the Soviet Union in April 1990 with his family to pursue his art in Chicago) made up his mind as an artist to search for Russian-Jewish landscapes, and what better landscapes than those made up of his fellow countrymen!

The Parliament building. Riot troops. Tanks. The Alpha[19] Team. The Iron Curtain rust. Propaganda screaming. Fifty thousand Muscovites locked arm in arm around the parliament "White House." Openly defying the old-guard Communists. Russian Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi carrying a gun. A large, old tri-colored Russian flag appeared. The looks on their Russian faces—if they were doomed once again to be subjugated by another oppressive Communist junta, they would not go meekly—said it all. Yeltsin on the parliament balcony, spurring them on to help free Gorbachev. It was all there, in the head, the penciling and the landscape of Reb Izrail Reznikov. But the artist kept muttering. Now he wondered why he kept drawing the face of Reb Mendel Futerfas so many times as the faces of strangers. Why? he asked himself. Because, he remembered, in 1964, Futerfas asked him not to forget him. "Forget you!" he said to Futerfas. "I'll never forget you." And Reb Izrail never forgot his old friend, who then lived in Israel, doing the Rebbe's work as a *mashpia* (mentor). And into the night, Reb Izrail fleshed out his "Russian Jewish landscape," and one day he'd send it to his old friend in Israel.

Without asking for too many details a lad of 14 asked his friend of 16, "Tell me, Alex, was this *glasnost* and *perestroika* in any way good for us Jews?" The 16 year old said, "I don't know about that, but I was almost foolish enough, when I was your age, to respond to a notice in the *Moscow Evening News*."

"Oh," said his surprised friend.

"Yeah, it advertised a contest for the best political joke. First prize was 10 years in prison; second prize, five years; third prize, three years; and there were six honorable mentions of one year each."

"That's crazy," said the 14 year old. "I hope you didn't do it."

"*Nyet*," said Alex, "but I would've won, I'm sure."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the best political joke was *perestroika* and *glasnost*."

And so Nothing Night went on with such nothings.

On the morn after Nothing Night, everything at the Marina Roscha Shul was back to normal. All prayed and thanked G-d. Gorbachev left center stage and there was no more Soviet Union. After the *kiddush*, some of the old men from the night before, who had finished cutting toilet paper and stacked it in large boxes for the coming *Shabbats*, couldn't resist hugging Uri Kamishev and Berel Lazar, confiding their deepest beliefs to Kamishev and Lazar that all that had happened "definitely was the hand of G-d and the work of the Rebbe." There was no other way to explain the collapse of the greatest empire since ancient Rome fell in 489 of the Common Era. What began with a small group of men in the *shul* suddenly blossomed into large. Every other minute a few more men trickled in from the outside. "It was as if we had been jailed all their lives (which was true for the most part), and the prison gates were opened, and out came the prisoners rubbing our eyes from the blinding sunlight. More and more Jews came into the *shul* to spend their first day of freedom," said Berel Lazar, recalling one December

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19. One of the major factors behind Yeltsin's power was the Alpha Team, an elite Soviet counter-terrorism unit that was part of the KGB, but became a separate entity in 1991, following the collapse of the U.S.S.R. The Alpha Team was responsible for the attacks on civilians in the Vilnius Massacre (January 1991) in Lithuania. Its leaders, however, were sympathetic to Boris Yeltsin during the August 1991 coup attempt, and refused to obey KGB orders to storm the Russian Republic's White House—center of Yeltsin's resistance to the coup.

25 he'll never forget.

For them freedom meant recalling the past and their old and new friends. They remembered all those Jewish dissidents, *baalei teshuva* and refuseniks who gave up their lives, with "*Shema*" on their tongues as they died before Soviet firing squads or starved to death or those swollen from hunger lay in their beds; the Muscovite families of Drugova-Begun, Feldmann, Elison-Gorelik, Polansky, Gildengorn-Lainer, Fishman, Blitshstein, Tufeld, Katzov, Lerner, Vigdoroff, Elistratov, Yoffe, Gutsk, Ulanovsky; the Leningrad families of Taratuta, Genusov, Karolin, Gitlin, Radomyslsky, Mariasin, Wasserman, Grinberg, Shostokovski and Bronstein; the families from Kiev—Elbert, Kislik, Fridman, Pergamenik, Hertzberg, Kotlyar, Veprinsky, Feller, Litovsky, Klinsky, and Godovski; the families from Kharkov: Modilevsky, Amusin, Paritski, Gorshunski and Silnitski; and Yaakov Gutman and Yitzchok Bachman from Minsk. Someone mentioned Yitzchok Mordechai Pevzner from Riga, and a young *bochur*, who had heard that name before, asked how he was. The someone shrugged his shoulders, as if he himself were afraid to find out the truth about Pevner, but finally did offer, "All I know is he was very proud of his Jewish *yichus* [a pedigree of noble birth]; I heard he was not a well man; the last I heard about him is he went into a hospital."

Later, in the fine tradition of Lubavitch everywhere, many Jews exited the Marina Roscha Shul and fanned out all over the city to visit synagogues, apartments and hidden praying areas, to *daven* with other Jews and bring them a little *Chassidus*. A group went to the Choral Synagogue. Outside on Arkhipovna Street, Jews as always milled about, this time hugging and crying in each other's arms in disbelief. Now they could say and feel what they wanted. No KGB agents were among them; they were out of business. There had always been sub rosa talk about certain Jews who reported everything to the KGB in return for a few extra comforts of life. But today, there were no recriminations, no hard feelings among the Jews. What they did in the past—like yesterday—was forgivable. As the Rebbe himself said, "*Teshuva* is usually rendered 'repentance'...signifies return. A Jew is essentially good, and his innermost desire is to do what is right. It is only due to various circumstances, wholly or partly beyond his control, that he has erred. This is the Jewish concept of *teshuva*—a return to his roots and origins, to his innermost self, revealing his innate personality, which will now become the master of his life." Three cheers went up for the Rebbe. Gone forever were the fears of even whispering the Rebbe's name in public. Now his holy name could be shouted to the rafters and to the sky above. One day someone will write a book and tell the world about the extraordinary efforts the Lubavitcher Rebbe and his army of *chassidim* made on behalf of freeing Jews from the Soviet Union of Prisons. "One day," a *chassid* told a young man who, for unexplained reasons, was wearing a yellow Jewish star sewn on his right sleeve, right above his elbow, "soon the world will know what the Rebbe has been emphasizing for 50 years, namely, all these remarkable events are merely a prelude to the final Redemption, culminating in unity among people, domestic harmony, and cessation of hostilities between the races, neighbors and nations." And for some reason the young man rubbed his yellow Jewish star and said, "I don't doubt that at all."

After an hour at the Choral Synagogue, the group of Lubavitchers wished the others well, and headed back to the Marina Roscha Shul. By late afternoon, all the *shul*'s worshippers arrived back, and they commenced *Mincha*, the afternoon prayer.

Refreshments were then served, and someone brought up Reb Mendel Futerfas's name. "I know he would have gladly preferred to be here celebrating with us," Lazar said. "But as it's written, 'No happening is merely circumstantial.' Reb Mendel Futerfas is in Kfar Chabad, Israel, where he's needed. Reb Mendel kind of once related a story about that.

"There was once an old, learned man who took care of the *shul* and Jewish life in his local town. He organized the *davening*, gave *shiurim* and looked for new congregants, and was also involved in public matters (such as *mikveh, kashrus, Shabbos*, etc.) to the best of his ability.

"Then came the days of the Communist Revolution, when the *Haskalah* and Communist groups were at their height, and youth from his town left Torah and *mitzvos* for the allure of foreign pastures. When the old man saw that his days were numbered he groaned and said, '*Nu*, the fact that I have to leave this world that doesn't upset me too much; after all that's the way things work. But what does upset me is seeing what is going on around me. *Oif vemen lozen mir de velt*? (Who are we leaving the world to?) What will happen to Judaism in the town when I'm gone?'"

Then Rabbi Berel pointed out that when Reb Mendel recalled this old man he began singing the tune of "*Chayalei Adoneinu*" while saying, "Thank G-d, we don't have to worry or deal with the problem of '*oif vemen lozen mir di velt*'"—"for, aside from the fact that we are in the final generation of exile and the first generation of the Redemption, we aren't 'leaving' this world," said Lazar. "The Rebbe is establishing a generation of dedicated and loyal soldiers, who even if they're relatively 'puny' compared to earlier generations, they go loyally on the Rebbe's mission to transform the world. They do this, not with their own abilities, but with the strength of the Rebbe, so we have nothing to worry about '*oif vemen lozen mir di velt*'; somebody is taking care of that."

And then Rabbi Berel pointed his finger upward, and every Jew in the *shul* knew who "was taking care of that."

As I said, you heard the darkest story I've ever told, and I pray to G-d I lived long enough through this night to tell you how it ends. I know when it began. I know what occurred up to...but the night was very long...anything could have happened. And it has ended. And somewhere Reb Mendel, the eternal soldier of the Rebbe, is standing in front of some *Yid* he never saw before and saying, "*I Jewish, you Jewish! I tefillin, you tefillin*!" From time to time he tells the man, "I love you!" and smiles calmly no matter how nasty the response. Then it happens, as it always happens when the love expressed by Reb Mendel melts the icy walls of resistance the Jew has built around himself. Then, he just "has to" put on *tefillin*. And everyone in that *shul* could visualize Reb Mendel and his newfound *Yid* of a friend, wearing a *yarmulke* and wrapped in *tefillin* while saying "*Shema*" (the opening words, which are part of the confession of Jewish faith, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is one!").

And finally you hear again the name of Reb Getche, the old man of the underground movement. Once, before he died in 1989, he sang a mystical song called "Troika," which he said he'd composed just for the moment the Soviet Union collapsed in his arms, so certain from the Rebbe's words that it would happen, and it did.

As it is written, "We think that anything we can do won't change matters much, but in reality the exact opposite is so."

So it should also be noted in passing, "It is Accident that has become decisive for

the structure of Jewish history. And Accident...in the language of religion is called [Divine] Providence."[20] Which is why the shrimp finally learned to whistle.[1]

The End

P.S.: As this book is about to go to print, the Lubavitch movement in the former Soviet Union has come full circle, and operates aboveground with the complete blessing from Russia's leader, Vladmir Putin. As the *Algemeiner Journal* reported in its December 3, 1999 edition, "A convention of abut 250 representatives from 80 secular and religious Jewish organizations from cities across Russia met in Moscow this week to establish a national union called the Federation of Jewish Communities. Its aim is to revive Jewish communities Jewish communities by opening and helping schools, clubs and youth groups, and community centers reclaim synagogues taken over by the then-Soviet Russia, and to counter antisemitism.

"Russian President Boris Yeltsin, in a letter of support to the gathering, said the new organization will 'enable mutual enrichment' of Russian and Jewish cultures.

"'We're the first real society uniting all Jewish groups,' said the Federation's spokesman, Boruch Gorin. The convention took place at a time of perceived growing antisemitism. Some members of the Russian Parliament made antisemitic remarks that were not repudiated by the body. There are neo-Nazi groups which, though small and marginal, have gained followers in recent years.

"A related Jewish organizational development in the former Soviet Union is the growth of Hesed welfare centers with 685 volunteers serving 175,000 elderly Jews at 88 locations. The centers, which are administered by the American Jewish Joint Committee, provide Jewish elderly Jews not only with food and health care, but also connections to their Jewish roots through klezmer concerts, the publication of newspapers, and the celebration of Jewish holidays.

"The Hesed volunteers deliver meals on wheels to home-bound individuals, as well as dinners at community dining rooms; do household repairs, and provide consultations on medical and other matters. A great part of the funds for the Hesed project, especially in the Ukraine and Belarus, are provided by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany."

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20. Aaron S. Steinberg, Dubnow Festschrift, 1930, p. 34.

Another Secret of the Rebbe

Why the Rebbe never went to Israel: When Rabbi Nachman Bernhardt of South Africa was planning to move to *Eretz Yisrael*, he asked the Rebbe's advice. The Rebbe advised him not to go, continuing, "Don't you think that I too would like to be there, in a place of holiness? But we have responsibilities."

And when an Israeli army officer pressed the point, saying: "In the Israeli army, we train our officers to say '*Achorei*' - 'After me.' Why shouldn't the Rebbe come to Israel and tell his *chassidim* to follow?"

The Rebbe replied: "That approach is proper when going out to battle. In such an instance, a commander must march at the head of his troops.

"But there are exceptions to this principle. Take a sinking ship, for example. It is not right for the captain to be the first to head for the lifeboats, telling the crew to follow him. Instead, he must direct others to the lifeboats first. Only when he is sure there is no one else on board can he leave the ship."

Similarly, to countless others involved in outreach work in the Diaspora, the Rebbe gave a clear message: "A general does not abandon his troops."

Appendix A

The Rebbe's Secret One-Man Army

Part 1: Preparations

Joyful has always been the anniversary when G-d gave the Torah to 600,000 Jews at the foot of Mt. Sinai some 3,000 years ago, and, in its proper context, the night of *Shavuos*[1] 1964 was joyously discoursed about by the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson at a chassidic get-together with his followers in "770."[2] But then a strange thing happened. The Rebbe began to weep openly. Know that when the Rebbe weeps, he weeps like the Jewish matriarch Rachel weeping for her children.

"We are sitting here," the Rebbe cried aloud, "and not one person has lifted up his cup and made a *lechaim* [toast] for the redemption of our brethren in that country [the Jews in Russia]."

Although this was not the first time the Rebbe had poured out his heart on such matters, his call to action was unmistakable. It was shades of the Previous Rebbe's call of then some 23 years past, "Immediately to *teshuva* [repentance]! Immediately to Redemption!" (1941). It was the call of "Let My people go so that they may serve me!" (Exodus 5:1). It was the cry of "Redeem us speedily, for the sake of Thy name!" (one of the 18 Benedictions).

Suddenly 5,000 hands were raised, 5,000 voices were prepared to cry out "*lechaim,*" 5,000 brave hearts were ready to dare. Yet the moment came and went. Even as everyone in that cavernous *shul* on Eastern Parkway awaited G-d once more giving Jews the Torah, there was no denying the sad truth: the Soviet Empire seemed to be in full control of its Jews.

No one in that room really knew how to comfort the Rebbe—or whether he was consolable at that very moment.

Yet his *chassidim* stood ready. At the *kos shel brocha* (a cup of blessing, from which the Rebbe pours his wine for everyone who passes in front of him) one such man, with a long, flowing beard, stepped forward. His name was Rabbi Yitzchok Churgin, o.b.m., but was affectionately known as Reb Itche.

As Rabbi Hirschel Shifrin remembers him, Reb Itche seemed perennially old, yet a man, as far as anyone could recall, who always appeared wise and generous to others. An Israeli emigre, Reb Itche had already been in Crown Heights for 20 years by 1964.

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1. Literally, "weeks." Festival commemorating the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai; in Israel, falling on the sixth day of the month of *Sivan*; outside Israel, on *Sivan* 6-7.

2. 770 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY—the address of the Lubavitch World Headquarters; the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe's (Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn) residence from 1940 until his passing in 1950, and the current home of the Central Yeshiva Tomchei Tmimim.

Through Lubavitcher schools, he had learned everything he knew about *Chassidus* (the eighteenth century movement of spiritual reawakening within Judaism founded by the Baal Shem Tov), and, in the early nineteen forties, he himself, subsidized by the Feiglin family to educate their children in a proper Torah-true and chassidishe way, successfully taught *Chassidus* to others in Australia. Finally ensconced in Crown Heights, he accordingly sat in places of honor at the Rebbe's table on holy days and festivals, and often formed part of the Rebbe's *minyan* in an upstairs *shul* in 770.

All his life the *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) and *mohel* (one who performs ritual circumcisions), Reb Itche, had remained unmarried and totally dedicated, first to the Previous Rebbe and, since 1950, to the Rebbe. Indeed, he had willed his lifesavings—$150,000—for the Rebbe's institutions. In 1975, Reb Itche finally died, after a long illness in a hospital where Rabbi Hirshel Shifrin comforted him till the end. Upon hearing of his death, the Rebbe himself came into the *beis hamidrash* (a synagogue and place of study) of 770 and told the *bochurim* (unmarried men from a yeshiva), "All of you are to stop your learning. Go immediately to the cemetery and make sure you are at the burial, because this is called a once-in-a-lifetime occasion, a *mes-mitzvah*. Reb Itche has no relatives and you, as the *bochurim* of the yeshiva, should all go."

Return now, however, to that sobering moment in 1964, when Reb Itche rightfully stepped forward as a Russian Jew himself to tell the Rebbe, within earshot of a 25-year-old *bochur* named Binyomin Katz, "Rebbe, I said *'Lechaim'* for the Russian Jews."

The Rebbe nodded twice. Then: "True, Reb Itche, but you said it *kol d'momoh daka* [in a low voice], in a very sweet, beautiful voice, yet I want someone to break through to the heavens above in a very loud cry and to burst open the Iron Curtain down here. A *kol gadol!* it should be."

As it is also said, "In prayer, there is a time to be brief, and a time to be profuse."[3] All the Rebbe's men grasped the immediacy of the Rebbe's words. They knew they must do something for the Jews in Russia: to focus on different ways to save them! But what?

The *what*—which seemed unrelated to Russian Jews—came *Motzoie Shavuos* (the night following *Shavuos*), when a group of rabbis, including the outspoken (then from the Bronx) Orthodox Rabbi David Hollander, met in a *kinus Torah* in 770. For those who love spy-thrilling stories, there are many involving Rabbi Hollander in the service of the Rebbe, but we'll leave that for another time.

For now, at the *kinos Torah*, Rabbi Hollander spoke about his recent trip to Scandinavia, apprising the others in the room of the outstanding *kiruv* work Rav Ezriel Chaikin was involved in Denmark, indeed all of Scandinavia. A lot had happened, since 1684, when Danish Jew, Meyer Goldshmidt, chanted his first *Kiddush* at a time when there were only nineteen Jews in Copenhagen. A lot more happened since the first day of Rosh Hashana in 1943 when the Germans, who had occupied Denmark since 1940, planned a series of roundups of the Jews of Copenhagen, who would be conveniently assembled in synagogues or in their homes. But these raids were thwarted by the quick action of Danish Christians. At risk of their own lives, they hid their fellow Jewish citizens in attics, basements, church belfries, and funeral parlors until safe transportation to neutral Sweden could be arranged. That occurred during the 10 days

3. Eliezer bar Hyrcanus, *Meklita* to *Exodus* 14:15.

between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.[4]

"Now, Rav Chaikin," Rabbi Hollander pointed out, "needs an assistant, perhaps a *bochur*, who can help service the 21,500 Jews in Scandinavian countries these days. But," said Rabbi Hollander, who had a slight cough and wheezed into the warm air of the room, "I tell you, it won't be easy."

"And why is that?" Rabbi Hollander was asked.

Pray, let recent Lubavitch history in Denmark respond.

In the service of the Rebbe, a young *shliach* named Rabbi Ezriel Chaiken, stationed in Morocco in the 1950s, one day was visited by Rav Binyomin Gorodetsky, the Rebbe's right-hand man in Europe and North Africa. When Rav Gorodetsky visited any *shliach* under his direction, you knew he would convey a message from the Rebbe himself. This time was no different. Shortly after the meeting, Rabbi Chaikin and his wife took up a new assignment and moved to Copenhagen to establish a Lubavitcher yeshiva in Denmark.

In placing Rabbi Chaikin there, Rav Gorodetsky knew he would have the right man in the right place. Not the kind of man overtly to make waves, Rabbi Chaikin nevertheless knew well enough that adversity is the first path to truth. In stepping into the Orthodox yeshiva of Machzike Hadas Shul, more than the job of *rosh yeshiva* was at stake and *davening* with the Lubavitcher *siddur* based on *Nusach Ari,* with a congregation made up mainly of Danish students.

Shortly on the job he succeeded beyond Rav Gorodetsky's dreams. Some time after that, however, a new issue arose: the *shul* need a *rav*. After a long search of candidates, Rabbi Chaikin was selected, although, according to the *shul*'s selection process, he was not a 100 percent qualified. Yet, for reasons probably known only to him, an elderly German Jew congregant almost from the start took a strong liking to Rabbi Chaikin, and from there on in, he touted Rabbi Chaikin as the best rabbinical candidate that Machzike Hadas could ever have. He told the protesters he would not brook any complaints. That he was deaf helped him in all his efforts to overcome any adverse remarks such as "Don't take a *chassid* because *chassidim* are like wild men—like wild Indians!"

"Yes, I think well of Rabbi Chaikin," insisted the deaf Jew.

"I said *wild*!" said the protester.

"I heard you, I heard you," said the deaf man. "You don't have to shout. I'm wild about Chaikin, too."

And so it went until, in the end, everyone finally capitulated. Rabbi Chaikin was chosen as the *rav*. Quickly, in fact, everyone in the *shul* also became "wild" about the rabbi of Lubavitch.

"Look, look. Our rabbi doesn't even *shuckle* back and forth as other *chassidim* do when *davening!*" said one congregant.

"Ah, how could we have ever said he was wild?" said another.

"Yes, I'm wild about Chaikin, too," said the deaf man.

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4. "A large stone from Eilat, whose Hebrew inscription identifies it as a gift of friends of Denmark in Israel, rests in Israels Plads (Israel Square) near the city flower market in Copenhagen. Similarly, a stone from Denmark can be found in Kikar Dania (Denmark Square) in Jerusalem's Beit Hakarem neighborhood. These monuments are symbols of the reciprocal friendship that has existed between Danes and Jews for most of their shared history, particularly in the twentieth century"—*The Jewish Traveller*, ed. Alan M. Tigay (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994), p. 147.

Clearly, Rav Chaikin was no wild-eyed *chassid*. He knew his Danish worshippers. For these German-descended elders of the *shul*, everything had to be exact. A 15-minute speech on *Shabbos* had to be 15 minutes—not 14, not 16. And into that speech had to be contained sections of the Babylonian Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud, a *midrash*, a chapter of *Tehillim*, a portion of *Shulchan Aruch*—and it all had to make sense together with the *Shabbos parsha*. Rav Chaikin never failed to please. He was a first-class and meticulous orator. Every Saturday night he held a question-and-answer period for the scholars of the community, after which, late that night, Rav Chaikin entered his private quarters and typed up these beautiful *droshas* (speeches) for posterity.

In turn, replacing Rav Chaikin as *rosh yeshiva* in Copenhagen was Lubavitcher Rabbi Avrohom Osdoba. He too succeeded beyond anyone's dreams. As a teacher, his patience with the Danish students was legendary. Often, these bright students would challenge Rabbi Osdoba with the following question:

"Rashi and Tosafos explained the *Gemara* this way. But I think I have a better explanation. How come Orthodox Judaism won't accept mine?"

By the time Rabbi Osdoba patiently explained why Rashi's and Tosafos's explanations were correct, the Danish student felt thoroughly satisfied, and Rabbi Osdoba's stature in such students' eyes grew larger and larger.

Now, Rav Chaikin needed an assistant, Rabbi Hollander told the other rabbis in 770. "But choose him wisely," he cautioned. "He must be up to the task."

Everyone in that room grasped the importance of Rabbi Hollander's words. Copenhagen remained an umbrella organization for all Lubavitcher activities in Scandinavia. At that, Rav Ezriel Chaikin worked very hard, yet he stretched himself too much trying to hide his Lubavitcher outreach activities from his staid congregation. Understandably, they wanted him all for themselves. What Rav Chaikin needed then, counseled Rabbi Hollander, was a savvy *bochur* who could maintain a low profile yet get all the *uforatza* work done.

Right away, three 770 *bochurim* stepped forward to volunteer for the job. The three candidates included Rabbi Elimelech Swibel of Morristown, New Jersey, Rabbi Shimon Lazeroff of Houston, Texas, and Rabbi Binyomin Katz of Montreal Canada. Who first gained the Rebbe's ear? Binyomin Katz. Why? Because in those days it was the Lubavitcher custom for the Rebbe to see a person who had a birthday, in *yechidus*. That month, Binyomin Katz turned 25, and he became the first *chassid* of the three *bochurim* to gain a birthday *yechidus* with the Rebbe.

Enter the Russian connection. Said Binyomin Katz: "A few minutes before I went into the Rebbe's room, one of my classmates, BenZion Schaffran (of blessed memory), came over to me and pulled out a map, insisting that I look. All right, I looked as he pointed in turn to each Scandinavian country. 'So,' I asked him, 'why're you showing me this?' 'Don't you see how close Copenhagen and Leningrad are?' he shot back. 'On a five-hour train trip from Helsinki, Finland, you can be in Leningrad. I know a friend who did it. Don't you see, Binyomin—this is a golden opportunity to help the Russian Jews.' Schaffran was right. I agreed to take it up with the Rebbe, I told him. 'Great!' he said as I stepped into the Rebbe's office."

After he came face to face with the Rebbe, Binyomin inquired about being sent on a prolonged *shlichus* for Merkos[5] that coming summer in Denmark to work under Rav Ezriel Chaikin.

"I have this idea, Rebbe," he said excitedly. "My friend BenZion Schaffran told me that Helsinki's very close via train to Russia. I could enter Russia and tell people that the Rebbe is thinking about them, and announce that soon all Russian Jews will leave Russia and then Moshiach will come. Perhaps I'll even get a chance to bring back some of your father's books to you."

"All by yourself?" smiled the Rebbe.

Katz shrugged. "No, but I'll try with G-d's help to be successful. I'm ready to carry out your instructions and decisions."

For a moment the Rebbe thought, then said, "First go to Scandinavia. From there, write me every week what you accomplish, what you see. May G-d be with you, and you should be successful. When you finish in Scandinavia, then we'll think about what you should do in Russia. I'll send you further instructions. Nevertheless, being that you are right now here in America, I would like you, when you leave this *yechidus*, go to my secretary, Rabbi Hodakov, and talk to him about your new *shlichus*. He will supply you with photos, detailed instructions, etc."

* * *

In Denmark, the worldly education of Binyomin Katz began in earnest. Throughout Scandinavia, he was sent out for two weeks at a time by Rav Chaikin. Rav Chaikin supplied Binyomin with money, clothing, food, advice and all other important information.

In every city he visited, he had to know by heart every Jewish leader's name and personality; no, more than that. Rav Chaikin also told his new aide about every individual that he'd meet. "Precisely how the person thinks. How he generally reacts and how I should react to him. Not to use the word *thank you* to this man. Not to use the word *fire,* when expressing a celebration, to Mr. Shtiller. Watch my tongue. Observe others. *Shabbos* in *shul*, in Finland, I was warned against looking up at the gallery whenever Mr. Friedman and son pass by. To say 'Sholom' every time I see Mr. Cohen. Everything, Rav Chaikin taught me, down to the finest detail was true. He told me everything about every place as a father takes his son into a garden and says, 'These are the apple trees. They have to be tendered and worked with this way. Much irrigation with these. Sunlight with these.'"

During that summer of training, Binyomin Katz felt, as he had never felt before, that he was actually growing from a quiet yeshiva boy to an outgoing man that *shlichus* demands.

"Yet to turn myself around 180 degrees?" Binyomin Katz shook his head in wonder. "Never in a million years, did I think I would—or could—be somebody who might do all these things. In fact, in 770, when I went to the Rebbe to ask that I be chosen, some of the *mashpeim* and rabbis later told me that it wasn't right that I should offer myself, because the two other *bochurim* were more capable, more outgoing and more sensitive to the feelings of other beings. Emotionally, I was not right for the job, they said. Yet the more these rabbis got on my case to step aside, the more they told me I was the wrong person, the more I determined to change my nature. After all, the Rebbe picked me. So, I'd do everything to be outgoing. I proceeded to interview many Jews about Jewish life. I had to learn to make Jews—no, everyone—feel at home around me."

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5. Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, the Lubavitcher Educational Outreach Organization.

Binyomin Katz also learned to work with language. Faithfully, he wrote the Rebbe.

"...Rav Chaikin gives me detailed instructions...at times they seem funny, at times solemn, but he knows all the ins and outs of Scandinavia and he's always correct in his instructions, and thank Hashem I see success...."

* * *

"This week I visited four cities: Malmo, Gothenburg, Halsingborg and Karlstad. I had to meet with 20 families; as two were away on vacation, I met only 18. Thank G-d, Rav Chaikin had already established contact with these families, and they were very receptive to me. I brought them *mezuzahs* from Rav Chaikin, and *tefillin* because one of the boys in the family was becoming *bar-mitzvahed*. I also delivered *kosher* meat from Denmark to them, because all the meat in Scandinavia is first electrocuted, then slaughtered. *Shechitah* is illegal, especially in Sweden, a relic of a time when Jews had little influence over legislation that affected them. (Ironically, Swedish Laplanders, whose slaughtering methods are similar to *shechitah*, are exempt from the ban.) So, these 18 families survived Hitler's war, and they depended upon Rav Chaikin for spiritual help and *kosher* meat from Denmark."

* * *

"Rebbe, today I met the young people who were saved by the Swedes after the war. Four hundred Jewish girls, aged 15-to 24, weighing anything from 55-65 pounds, were sent from German DP (Displaced Persons) camps to Scandinavia. Most of them, left to Israel after they regained their health. However, some of them married *goyim* over here and kept on living in Scandinavia. All remaining DP Jewish female immigrants Rav Chaikin managed to meet, and he told them, 'All your children are Jewish. You will have to do something for your children in memory of your parents.' The children, now, after the war, in 1964, were aged 18 through 20. My job, Rebbe, was to meet with them, talk to them about Torah, and to arrange to send them to a kibbutz in *Eretz Yisrael* for Jewish Scandinavian children. I had to convince these young persons that somebody in New York—you, beloved Rebbe of Lubavitch—was thinking about their future and that they should go to Israel where they would be able to meet and marry other Jewish people. I told them that they are Jewish because their mothers are Jewish. . . .

"Thanks to Rav Chaikin, I was well prepared for my encounters with such Jewish students in Scandinavia. Rav Chaikin published one of your detailed scientific letters, in Danish, proving that the world was not five billion years old, but only 5,724 years old, which was the center of our discussion. Even before I began my class, I had to have my full thinking cap on: one of these bright, young students showered me with this question about the Bible. 'If Cain killed Abel, how did the world exist afterward?' My answer: 'According to Rashi,

there were actually five children—three girls and two boys, who, of course, were Abel and Cain. And their vehement argument centered on which of them would take the third sister as his wife."[6]

"This too, Rebbe, I observed: Typical was a taxi driver who looked like he was 65 or 70 years old, an old Swedish *goy*, often drunk, with a young Hungarian Jewish woman as his wife, less than half his age.

"Why did she marry him? unobtrusively I asked her. The same answer came from so many such women that it made sense: Typically, when the young Jewish girl from a DP camp was deathly sick, the *goy* was the male nurse who fed her and brought her back from 65 pounds to 100 pounds. After that, she took stock of herself: her whole world was burnt out and her parents died before her eyes. She had nothing left in this world and here this man was being so nice to her. He was a pleasant *goy* and doesn't show any antisemitic traits. So she married him.

"Oh Rebbe, now look at this couple: He looks as if he fell off a bottle of beer. She looks like she just came from Moshe Rabbeinu's tent and got lost."

* * *

Still another letter to the Rebbe:

"Rav Chaikin sent me to this particular city for this past *Shabbos*. There, I met an English-speaking businessman named Mr. Gutterman, who is the key man for all my activities involving Jewish students in Scandinavia. He supplied me with further information that complemented Rav Chaikin's instructions about these Jewish students from mixed marriages of Jewish women and *gentile* fathers. Once I met Mr. Gutterman, he assembled these children for a few hours so that I could address them all together. Being that they were college students, they understood and spoke English (their second language), which is my first and only language.

"'These are the things you are to say to them,' Rav Chaikin instructed me. 'Remind them, lovingly but firmly, that they are Jewish because of their mothers being Jewish. Speak to them about the *parsha* of the week. About the Rebbe and his activities—what he plans to do for *Am Yisrael* and them. And be sure to tell them about *kosher* food. Above all, Binyomin,' counseled Rav Chaikin, 'keep their interest and don't talk too fast.' And, Rebbe, thank G-d, that's what I did. I kept them looking forward to my next visit."

In the meantime, Binyomin Katz was learning every bit of geography in north

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6. Two years later a customs officer, who inspected Katz's luggage at J.F.K. Airport in New York, took him aside and whispered, "Rabbi, I respect you and don't want to examine your luggage. But this is my job. But what I really want to do is to ask you a Bible question that has been bothering me for many years." His question: "If Cain killed Abel, how did the world exist afterward?" Twice this question had been asked of Binyomin Katz—once at the beginning of his *shlichus* and again at the end of his mission. Hearing this, the astounded Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Isaac Hodakov, the Rebbe's secretary, felt that these questions had a positive significance on the whole *shlichus:* Just as Katz had approached the first question properly, so too all the other subsequent and in-between questions of the *shlichus* were handled well, said Rabbi Hodakov.

Scandinavia, surrounding the Soviet Union. By flying a few times a month, he also learned the air routes from and to Copenhagen. Or often he sailed by boat from Copenhagen to the seaport city of Malmo. "From Malmo I would take trains and visit every Jewish town and carry out Rav Chaikin's instructions."

Suddenly, after summer's end, the Orthodox Jewish community of Stockholm needed a rabbi for the High Holy Days, for their two congregations. So they contacted Rav Chaikin.

In turn, Rav Chaikin approached his assistant and said, "Please do me a favor. You did a wonderful job. I want you to stay here the month of *Tishrei*."

Binyomin protested: "I want to return to the Rebbe. I want to be with everybody else in Crown Heights on Rosh Hashana."

Rav Chaikin insisted: "Stay. A rabbi is needed and we can't leave the Jewish community of Stockholm without a leader. Binyomin, I'll appoint you as a *chazzan*. You'll sing and talk and give them hope."

"But, Rav Chaikin, I don't know what to say. I'm not a *baal darhsin* [a man who expounds Torah]. Here, I've done *shlichus* as an individual, one to one. Now you're asking me to speak to an entire Jewish community—500-800 people. I don't have it in me to do that. I rather go home."

Rav Chaikin pleaded his case one more time: "You won't lose: it's a tremendous experience. I'll tell you what to say. I'll tell you what to do. Please consider this."

Still, Binyomin Katz hesitated.

Finally, the clincher: "Besides, Binyomin," Rav Chaikin grinned from ear to ear, "I have your ticket home and I cannot find it. So, you're not going anywhere. Besides, my father, Rav Chaim Meir Chaikin, your *rosh yeshiva* in Montreal, speaks highly of you and really believes you can do it."

What could he do? At that, Binyomin Katz good-naturedly conceded.

That Rosh Hashana, Binyomin "brought" the Rebbe and 770 with him as he visited two Jewish communities in Stockholm, Sweden. For anyone who has traveled there, one is struck by the quaint smallness of the little *shul* called Jeshurun Synagogue in Stockholm on Nybrogatan Street. Yet truly, in this case, looks are deceiving. For its 30 to 40[7] congregants, the *shul* looms larger than life. To them it will always be "the Miracle *shul*."

What's the miracle? In 1939, a man named Hans Lehmann brought it to its current place intact. In fleeing the Nazis and surviving *Kristallnacht*, the night in November 1938 when Nazi gangs attacked synagogues all over Germany, At that time, Heinreich Barth Strasse Synagogue was overlooked. So, the chief rabbi of Hamburg, Rabbi Joseph Carlebach, later martyred by the Nazis, asked his good friend Hans Lehmann in Stockholm to disassemble and transport that synagogue to Sweden to avoid its ultimate destruction. Hans Lehmann did exactly that, including all the furnishings of the *shul*: the ark, lamps, benches, scrolls and books—brought over to Sweden by ship. In Stockholm, Hans Lehmann found a secure place to house the *shul*, reassembled it, and it has been in daily use morning and day since 1940.

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7. The Number 40 has held a mystification for Jews since time began. But in English, 40 has its own distinction, as apparently the only number that has its letters in alphabetical order

Many of the very old and very religious worshippers were still occupying its pews when Binyomin Katz arrived, and, like eager-beaver young students, they plied him with many questions about the Rebbe and *Chassidus*. Nothing Jewish was lost on these longtime Swedish Jews.

As for the larger Orthodox synagogue, Adas Jisroel, located in the southern part of the city, Binyomin was struck very much by its size and the number of its congregants. After all, with hundreds and hundreds of worshippers making their peace with G-d, How could Binyomin Katz—or anyone else—appreciate all that what was going on during the synagogue services? To borrow the words of Russian revolutionary and Yiddish author, Vladimir Medem (1879-1923), upon visiting the Minsk synagogue for the first time (1899), he said: "Here, it was as though I had fallen among torrential waves. Hundreds and hundreds of worshippers—each one taking his own case to G-d, each one in a loud voice with passionate eagerness. Hundreds of voices ascended to the heavens. each for himself, without concord, without harmony, yet all joining together in one tremendous, clamorous sound. No matter how strange to the Western ear, it made a deep impression and has a great beauty derived from the passion of the mass feeling."[8]

After a day at these two synagogues, Binyomin Katz was very happy Rav Chaikin had misplaced his plane ticket to the States. There was much to do in Scandinavia, and he now wanted to do it.

Then came the sadness and more darkness. On the day when two worlds met with a kiss, the world going out, the future world coming in,[9] Rebbetzin Chana, the Rebbe's mother, passed away on *Tishrei* 6, 5725/1964.

At the time, Binyomin Katz immediately returned to Copenhagen, informing Rav Chaikin that he must leave his service. This time the rabbi readily agreed. Of course, Binyomin, on his own, could not make a decision about going to Russia. He had promised the Rebbe to await his instructions. So, when he sent a telegram of *nichum aveilim* (condolences) to the Rebbe, Binyomin added a request for some direction: "Should I go to Russia as we spoke about in *yechidus*? Or should I go visit my father in Bnai Brak in Israel? Or should I return to New York?"

As I said, the night of *golus* is very long; anything can happen. In such darkness, once, talmudic sages Rabbis Chiyya the Elder and Simeon ben Chalafta were walking in the valley of Arbel (in the Galilee). Suddenly the slight mist disappeared, the leaves of the trees let go of their burden, and the wind blew the dark away. The two rabbis beheld the morning burst as banners and streams of colors of welcomed them. Rabbi Chiyya turned to Rabbi Simeon and said: "Thus will be the Redemption of Israel: at first, just a little; then, as it will progress, it will grow greater and greater."

In the meantime, Nikita Khrushchev, in October of that year, was ousted from his position as premier of the Soviet Union and was replaced by Leonid Brezhnev; and the servant Binyomin Katz waited during the nights, without lifting his voice, neither breaking a bruised reed nor quenching the dimly burning wick.[10] Sometime before dawn one day, he received further instructions from the Rebbe.

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8. *Fun Mein Leben*, 1923, quoted by *Commentary*, Nov. 1950, p 481.

9. Jose ben Abin, Jerusalem Talmud: *Yebamot* 15:2.

10. A paraphrase of Isaiah 42:2f.

Part 2: Mystic Wine

In the World-to-Come, a man will bring a single grape by wagon or ship, put it in a corner of his house, and use its contents as if it were a large cask; and he will use its stalk to kindle fire under a stewpot. There will not be a grape, mind you, that will contain less than 30 kegs of wine.[11]

But that was when.

For now all we have is the mystic wine of night, for now all we have are those sleepless hours when we daydream of things to come, when abruptly the telephone rang in Binyomin Katz's room, at once awakening him. At the other end of the telephone was Rav Chaikin.

"Binyomin, you better return at once. The Rebbe sent you a telegram," Rav Chaikin, wasting no time, said.

The next day, Binyomin flew from Stockholm to Copenhagen. When he finally held the Rebbe's telegram in his hands, if he were not a *chassid*, he'd probably not know what to make of it. The words were in code, interspersed between many abbreviations, the meaning of which, to Binyomin Katz, somehow made sense. In effect, Binyomin was "to go forward and backward with *hatzlacha*." Which, to both Rav Chaikin's and Binyomin's ears, meant Binyomin Katz was to travel undercover in Russia. But how? What kind of disguise would Binyomin Katz have to effect? A tourist? A student? A cantor? An only son of a rich family, who won the *Afikoman* and received a world tour as his Passover gift? If caught, would the Soviets sentence him to death as a spy? Whom could he trust? Who would see right through his disguise? Would Rav Chaikin emphasize it strong enough, that where Binyomin Katz was headed, nobody was to be trusted with the details of his mission? "My friend, there are no friends where you're going," Binyomin must have heard over and over, until his covert operation was, like a hand of cards, kept close to his vest at all times, even before he left the safe haven in Copenhagen. Russian-born Rav Chaikin taught and American-born Binyomin Katz learned, until both teacher and student were of one mind.

Baby Russian steps first. Binyomin Katz had to learn to speak Russian phrases. With pen and pad in hand, Binyomin Katz followed Rav Chaikin and his wife through their house, into the kitchen—bread box, icebox, borscht, milk, can-opener, soup pot, stove, hard-boiled eggs, samovar, toaster, "rare, medium, and well-done," and all *kosher* foods; into the dining room—host, hostess, candlestick holder, table, chairs, how to sit at table, how to ask for a glass of tea, and how to say thank you; into the bedroom—bed, pillows, "very warm blankets," sheets; the halls—coat rack, closet, mirror, snowshoes; into the library—books, bookshelves, telephone; into the bathroom...; into the elevator...; and into the synagogue.... In two days, Binyomin Katz learned scores of important Russian words, all of which he was instructed to put into memory.

Baby fat steps second. As Binyomin learned the Russian ropes, he deliberately put on 90 pounds, puffing up from 150 to a robust 240. Why? To come off as a prosperous

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11. Talmud, *Ketubot* 111b.

American, a non-threatening, lethargic, stout tourist who always dressed immaculately, from haute hat to shiny shoes. Of course, Binyomin Katz the tourist was always to be seen carrying a camera, eager to shoot only Communist-designated sites. "Never make a false move that the ever-watchful Big Brother eyes don't approve of," Rav Chaikin reminded him. Binyomin also added his extra poundage for another reason, obvious to any Observant Jew who might have to skip several meals at a time until he found *kosher* food. This was going to be Binyomin Katz's Soviet Union plight—many hymns and few noodles!—one he was well equipped to handle, as he rarely thought about eating.

Would Binyomin Katz's youthful beard be a dead giveaway? Absolutely not. Indeed, a bearded Binyomin Katz would easily blend into Russian street crowds, many of such men wearing beards, if only to keep warm in the dead of winter. More importantly, the beard on the Rebbe's emissary would gladden the hearts of old Russian Jews looking for a sign that there were still some things in the West that remained from the old European type of Judaism that they knew or heard about. Just recently, Rav Chaikin told Binyomin Katz, ten beardless rabbis from America had visited Russia and met with Russian Jews in their synagogues—even speaking about the Rebbe's activities. The Russian Jews came away in sadness: the Judaism they once knew had gone down the tubes in America. A bearded Binyomin Katz was sent to these same men and women to change that image forever and bring hope to his fellow *Yidden*, wherever he went.

In Moscow, the *shul* was going to be the connection. Daily, Binyomin Katz spent six to ten hours, waiting patiently, while *davening*, to absorb information from local Jews or transmitting vital news to them, on the Q.T. Of course, Big Brother—low-level governmental officials—had eyes and ears everywhere. So, the trick was to get the Communists to believe Binyomin Katz was a happy-go-lucky tourist albeit a very religious one at that. True, he lingered in n *shul* for long hours, under very watchful eyes, yet he kept doing it, and it worked, thanks in good part, to the *shochet* and *baal koreh* (Torah reader) of Choral Synagogue, Reb Yankel Elishevitz, who showed him the ins and outs of dealing with people, including KGB spies, in the synagogue.

Whichever group of Jews Binyomin Katz met in Moscow, they urged him to tell other foreign Jews in the West to stop public demonstrations. Binyomin Katz reminded his audience, "This isn't the way of the Rebbe." When the oppressed Russian Jews heard this they breathed long sighs of relief. "Yes," Binyomin Katz assured them, "the Rebbe well knows enough how much public demonstrations in New York and London are hurting you here. The Rebbe, who himself was born in Nikolayev, understands the Russian mentality. He's very well aware that for every Jewish demonstration in front of the UN, no matter how effective, the outside world would know nothing about the 50 to 100 Russian Jews the Communists pick up and ship off to Siberia that very following night. Oh, my fellow *Yidden*, the Rebbe understands this only too painfully. His own father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, was arrested and jailed by the NKVD in 1939 as a 'counter-revolutionary' for his efforts to strengthen Judaism. And sadly, after ten months in jail, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was sentenced to exile in the city of Tzeili in Kazakhstan. There, he died five years later."

A long time ago, American Jurist Wendell Phillips Stafford after a visit to Moscow, addressed the situation between Russian Jews and non-Jews, in a speech, on January

21, 1906. He said:

> A Russian to hate a Jew! Out of the wall of his vast cathedrals he carves the figures of his 12 holy apostles—and every one a Jew. He enters and prostates himself before the picture of a Hebrew child in the arms of a Hebrew mother. He mutters a creed that declares a Jew to be the Son of G-d, the Savior of the world—then he goes out and kills the first Jew he meets because he is a Jew. It is irony to move the laughter of devils and the tears of the just.

Of course, much of that 1906 climate in Russia existed in 1964, and Binyomin Katz's undercover visit to Russia does not address these issues; yet it remained an irony to move the laughter of devils and the tears of the just. As for the tears of the just, for the most part, or as best as they could, the isolated Russian Jews and Binyomin Katz, the American Jew, wholeheartedly bonded with one another. Based on what Binyomin had told them, they liked the Rebbe's ways: he'd never allow any outsiders to be a part of any demonstration whatsoever, they were convinced.

"*Nu*, why did the Rebbe send you here this time?" they asked Binyomin Katz, ready to help him in any way.

"To put your names to memory," said Binyomin.

"And then?" they asked.

"Then, as soon as I can, I'll prepare visas for you to Israel."

The Russian Jews didn't have to ask Binyomin Katz that question again. Even to those who barely believed in G-d, who might have believed that liberty was a new religion, the religion of their age, deep down they remained Jews in search of Him, their Creator.

"I must tell you this," said Binyomin.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Go on."

"The Rebbe said you Russian Jews will leave Russia, and then Moshiach will come."

Leave? Moshiach coming? That was almost too much even for these Jews to hear. The Communists had an air-tight grip on their lives. It was very clear that they'd never be able to leave Russia. Yet despite all the oppression, these Jews could see the pronounced ways of the Rebbe. His emissaries brought them precious gifts of *tefillin*, *tallisim*, menorahs, *esrogim*, and *siddurim*. And with such Jewish tools they could again learn the truth about themselves, that even a Jew "devoid of Torah is as packed with merits [precepts] as a pomegranate is with seeds,"[12] and they began to have the hope of a waking dream. "The Russian Jews will leave Russia, and then Moshiach will come," the Rebbe told them: this would be their new underground path, their underground dream.

However, waking dreams, for Binyomin Katz, could prove fatal, a long-term jail sentence, rotting in a Soviet prison or locked up in an "insane asylum." In those days, a Moscow hotel room cost close to $180 a night, and that was the high-price-tag room

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12. Simeon ben Lakish, Talmud, *Berachot* 57a.

Binyomin Katz was put in. Financing his trip was not his concern. His concern was not to dream in the wrong places. He simply couldn't get it out of his mind: Did the Communists have a way of knowing what he dreamed?

"At night never would I sleep with a sheet on the bed," Binyomin said. "Instead, during the early part of the night, I'd take the sheet off and put it on the chair. Then I sat on my bed and set to memory every single name that came to me that day. Each name represented another family, another visa, another passport, and that was what I did. Later, after a hot shower to make me sleepy, I slept on the mattress and the quilt. Why? Routinely, the Communist authorities sent in a cleaning lady—a spy—who'd report what she saw in your room. If you had a completely wrinkled sheet, that meant to the authorities you were a nervous person with possible matters to hide, which trouble your sleep or keep you awake all night.

"Then, the Russians would watch your behavior during the day. To test your reaction, they'd do certain things. They had certain rules of what they called norm and not norm. For instance, in the hotel hallways, they'd place a contingent of soldiers with drawn rifles. Every passerby, of course, would react to that. If you overreacted or hastened past the soldiers, to the Communists, that meant you had something to hide. If you walked past the soldiers and shook a little bit, that was perfectly normal. Abnormal was, if you passed the soldiers and showed no reaction.

When asked how he dealt with this test of wills, Binyomin said, "Simple. I was apprised about such tactics, and so I never reacted in a wild way. Instead, I'd look at the soldiers' faces and imagine pages of Talmud or *Tanya* on them. One by one, as I passed them by, I just read these pages. Their faces were plastered with holy pages. Was I acting normal? Abnormal? Who knows! It worked for me."

In the synagogues, it also wasn't easy. For one thing he got flak even from each congregation of Jews. They were afraid to have him around. To them he might stick out like a sore thumb, although, to the friends of the police, he looked like any other Jew praying, wrapped totally in an old *tallis*, which must be quickly added here, was convincing, as many Jews in Moscow owned such old, threadbare *tallesim*. To the Communists, Binyomin Katz obviously was devoted to his G-d.

Whenever he entered a synagogue, designated persons always rushed over to the wealthy-looking Binyomin Katz, carried his coat, and escorted him to a position where he might *daven*. As he passed by, every eye watched his every move. Binyomin had to bide his time, until he separated believer from informer, governmental spies from Russian Jews who were under pressure from the government to spy; and find those younger Russian Lubavitcher Jews who were afraid to show their faces in synagogue, but who cherished the thought of conferring with an emissary of the Rebbe.

After spending six to ten hours a day in each *shul*, Binyomin sized up the situation. To his advantage, electricity was expensive, so they kept the *shuls* mostly in shadows. It was easy, with a *tallis* draped over you, to get lost or forgotten in synagogues like the Moscow Choral Synagogue, outside of which, on its narrow street, much of the drama of Soviet Jewry's freedom struggle was played out from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Just as in "770," the Choral Synagogue, located on Arkhipovna Street, has many *minyans*. Jews, and people who love to spy on Jews, came from all parts of Russia to this central synagogue. From Red Square, it is a five to eight minute walk. Visitors enter the synagogue through the columns of its neoclassic facade. Inside the eclectic

main sanctuary is a high-arched ceiling and a series of chandeliered arches over the women's gallery. Above the marble *bimah* are floral wall decorations of grape vines and three small, modern stained-glass windows. In front of the synagogue on Arkhipovna Street, there is always a crowd and it's easy to lose oneself.

Thanks to Rav Chaikin, Binyomin Katz fell right in step with the other congregants, who left and were replaced by a new set of worshippers after every half-hour service. During the wintertime, the praying took place in the right-hand corner of the Choral Synagogue, in the room called the Chabadzka Shtiebel. Binyomin Katz stayed right through it all, from 6 a.m. till noon, and from 1:30 p.m. till the last *Maariv minyan*.

"It was very interesting," said Binyomin, as he reminisced about that time in his life, "how I met these Russian Jews. All were over 60 and retired. Like hawks, these old persons took in all my movements as I *davened*. They took mental notes on the exact way I put on *tefillin* and *tallis*, and told me they appreciated that when I addressed the Holy One, my words were few.[12] They also told me—when it was safe for them to speak—how my *davening* was enunciated distinctly, but without raising my voice; that too was something they wanted to do. And, as I would lead them in prayer, they would hear the *nusach* that I *davened*; they would see that I was fluent in it. I could *daven* without a *siddur*"—as it's written, he pronounced his prayers clearly and precisely, so that each word illumined the skies[14]—"and that would open up many eyes and doors by itself. My Lubavitcher *davening* background rang a bell for these worshippers—like a person blowing a *shofar*, saying, 'I am here, a young, American *chazzan* from, Brooklyn.' This inspired them to get a message to me without being spotted by the other congregants, who in turn, at the same time, were also trying to contact me without being spotted. All of them wanted one thing: a visa."

As Rav Chaikin had earlier won over the German Jews in Copenhagen, so now Binyomin Katz was following in Rav Chaikin's footsteps with these Russian Jews.

One day, a sinister-looking old man approached the pew where Binyomin Katz was sitting. With a jerk of a finger, he unmistakably motioned for the tourist to follow him. This, Binyomin Katz did, in silence, his heart beating fast as the two walked in tandem through the darkened corridors of the synagogue until they reached a locked door. Once the man opened the door with a key, he gestured to Binyomin Katz to enter the room. Once in the room, whose only window allowed daylight to dimly filter in, the two were alone together. Binyomin Katz quickly sized the man up. There was a menacing look on the man's face; physically he looked strong as an ox; and his breath reeked of vodka. Binyomin had no idea what to expect from him.

After a few moments, the old man shouted at Binyomin, "Do you know who I am?"

"I've seen you a few times," admitted Binyomin, holding his own. "But no, I don't know who you are."

"I am Ephraim Kaploun, *the* president of this synagogue."

"*Sholom Aleichem*."

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13. A paraphrase of Rabbi Meir's words, Talmud, *Berachot* 61a.

14. Zevi HaCohen, quoting Yekutiel Arich, *Mebaser Tov*, 1900, p. 2.

Without saying a word, suddenly Kaploun brandished his fist in Binyomin's face.

When Binyomin didn't panic—perhaps because he saw a Torah page written on his adversary's face—Kaploun then pounded a table. "I'll get right to the point."

"Yes?"

"Make sure that you leave the synagogue right now!"

"Why?" Binyomin asked.

"There's no good reason that you should be here."

"I am a tourist," said Binyomin Katz.

"Tourist, my eye! I know who you are!"

"Who?" Binyomin calmly said, knowing full well Kaploun was bluffing.

"Never mind that. You've no right to live in my *shul*. Coming early every morning and leaving late in the evening."

"My dear, Mr. Kaploun," Binyomin now tried to sweet-talk him, "it so happens I heard very beautiful things about the *shul* and I see beautiful things, and I like to be next to beautiful people and beautiful *shul*s. I've never seen a *shul* like this before."

Kaploun suddenly pushed Binyomin Katz around like a rag doll. "If I catch you here tomorrow, I'll break your head," he said.

When Binyomin managed to catch his breath, he kibitzed: "The last fellow who tried to break my head, I broke his first. And he'll never forget that shattering experience."

Binyomin's smile fell on blind ears. Still, he knew that nothing would happen to him in Moscow: as an American, he was protected by the United States Government. "Nobody would dare lay hands on me. And I wouldn't take such stuff lying down. And, thanks to Rav Chaikin, I also was hip to Russian tactics: whatever they do to you, do right back to them. You don't show any fear to a dog, and I wouldn't show any fear to Russian bullies there. That is exactly what I did."

Throughout Binyomin Katz's stay, Kaploun's bully overtures continued. Shoving Binyomin. Banging on his desk. Threatening him. Telling Binyomin he already reported him to the Communist authorities.

Yet Binyomin Katz's connection to the Rebbe seemed to protect him wherever he went. Perhaps, even if the Communists really knew who he was and what his mission was, he came off to them as a friendly, harmless tourist, who, judging by his excess poundage, was more interested in food than fuel—rocket fuel, that is. No clear and present danger was he. So what if he liked the inside of *shul*s. What terrible thing could he be doing under his *tallis*? Besides, it was a good way to keep warm, reasoned the Communists. In a few weeks Binyomin Katz's visa showed he'd be out of their hair, off to another Russian city. Let the authorities there deal with him.

Then, too, after a time, Kaploun, perhaps feeling that he already had done his communistic duty, stopped harassing Binyomin Katz. But then what else could Kaploun do? The darkness of the *shul* hid Binyomin well.

His undercover work went on, through the sage advice and suggestions of two of the synagogue's elders, Reb Eliyahu Sandler and a Lubavitcher congregant, Reb Berel Rickman.

Throughout the day, in the synagogue, men wrote notes with their names on them, slipped them into a *siddur*, and slapped the *siddur* down on the window sill just loud enough for Binyomin to hear. Hearing that, Binyomin put two and two together and

decided that this was the next *siddur* he was going to *daven* with. And as he prayed, he read the slips of names, memorized them and then went to the bathroom to flush them down the toilet. After three weeks in Moscow, the Rebbe's tourist had collected and memorized hundreds of Russian Jewish names of heads of families from his daily visits to the synagogues.

Carrying a camera, even for a tourist, posed certain risks, Binyomin found out. As often as possible, he would join daily talmudic classes for older Jews, a common enough occurrence, as the Choral Synagogue, in addition to being a religious center, was also a nerve center. Inevitably, to the class, Binyomin would bring his camera and sometimes take photographs, especially this one day when he saw a group of ancient-looking men sitting at a long table, studying Talmud. All of a sudden, from nowhere, a man tapped Binyomin Katz on the shoulder and demanded to know why he was hiding his camera under the bench and now and then taking a picture. "What business is this? What are you doing? Why don't you leave your camera out in the open?"

Suddenly everybody stopped learning; all eyes were on Binyomin Katz.

"If you must know," he told the official, "I want realistic pictures of people learning Torah in Russia, and I decided the only way to get them was to hide the camera and shoot these people unawares. If everyone saw me taking a picture, they'd pose for the picture and the spontaneity would be lost. So, what else do you want to know?" Binyomin asked a bit aggressively.

"Nothing further," the man said defensively. Then, as if seeking some kind of direction, he looked at the synagogue's president, who offered none. The official then shrugged and left the room. At once the others went back to studying. As for that officious man, Binyomin Katz never saw him again. Nor did the president ever shake his fist in Binyomin's face nor pound his desk in a menacing way. In the end, there seemed no way to get Binyomin Katz to leave the synagogue until he himself decided.

The Communists had deliberately placed Binyomin in a new hotel—the Ukrana—far from the main synagogue. Indeed, since his room was on the thirtieth floor of the hotel, he was also far from the ground. Might not Intourist (the official Soviet agency that handles travel arrangements for foreign visitors to the then Soviet Union) have placed Binyomin in the Hotel Rossiya, which is closest to the Choral Synagogue, hence especially convenient for Jewish visitors? They might have, but at the time Intourist claimed all the other hotels were filled to capacity with many other foreigners. So, our Jewish hero was stuck on the thirtieth floor of the Ukrana Hotel, and he had many moments, especially on *Shabbos* when he had to walk up and down the stairs, when he regretted he'd put on that extra 90 pounds. Quickly, although, he reminded himself, that is exactly why he—who hardly thought of food—put on that extra weight: so he could miss meals when he had to, especially when the food wasn't *kosher*.

But the *Shabbos*? He had to eat then. Yet to eat in a Russian Jew's home for *Shabbos* meant certain incarceration or persecution for the host family involved. So with the utmost sensitivity—for, let's face it, Jews whom Binyomin met in the *erev Shabbos mikveh*, knowing what jail terms they faced, still invited him to their homes—Binyomin had to refuse such invitations. This, of course, left him no options for *Shabbos*. Still, at the *mikveh*, the offers from other Jews came aplenty. There, they argued among themselves who was closer to the *shul*, whose house Binyomin Katz could stay in, who could safely pull it off, and what subterfuge would be needed.

Every so often such talk would abruptly end, and everyone in the *mikveh* went back deep into their own world. Nobody said anything, but Binyomin sensed something was wrong. He remembered what the Previous Rebbe had once said: In a normal place there are usually six sides in a room: east, west, north, south, up and down. In Russia there is a seventh side that nobody generally ever thinks about. Suddenly, Binyomin noticed the *mikveh* door slightly ajar, and he saw someone's ear sticking in the door opening; suddenly, he understood what the Previous Rebbe was referring to: the ear. "The road has ears, aye, the wall has ears!" as it's written in the Talmud (*Leviticus Rabbah* 32:2). Looking back, long after he left Russia, Binyomin Katz felt grateful he hadn't accepted any *Shabbos* invitations in Moscow, for fear of jeopardizing any Jew.

One day, he met a young man named Reb Mordechai Chanzin in the Choral Synagogue. Despite his beardless face, he resembled very much his brother, Rav Dovid Chanzin of Petach Tikvah, whom Binyomin had met in Crown Heights, whenever he came from Israel to visit the Rebbe. That Binyomin Katz and Mordechai Chanzin talked in the Russian Choral *shul* was in itself a miracle. Clearly at first Binyomin had been warned against talking to Chanzin. He was the synagogue's secretary, which meant he also worked for the government (read: not to be trusted). However, despite the danger of speaking to a snitcher (*malshin*)—"and make no mistake in rightfully calling such Jewish traitors who worked for the Russians that name," Muscovite Jews told him repeatedly—Binyomin felt drawn to him because his brother, Reb Dovid, was a very popular Lubavitcher *chassid*. Surely, reasoned Binyomin, this *chassid*'s brother was to be trusted; Mordechai Chanzin had to be an exception to the rule.

It was on *erev Shabbos* that Mordechai Chanzin approached Binyomin Katz. Seeing him approach, he held his breath. What could they talk about without his words being reported back to the Communists? He soon found out as Chanzin took a seat next to him. Opening up a Talmud, Chanzin began speaking about King David.

"A harp hung over David's bed. At midnight, a north wind blew on it, and it played of itself. Then the king arose and studied Torah till the break of the day."[15] Chanzin stopped reading and looked up at Binyomin. "Of course, you know on such a night like this, on *Hag ha Shavuos*, when he stopped studying Torah, King David died."

Binyomin Katz, who had heard that talmudic story many times, nodded part in sadness, part in acknowledgment.

"You know, Binyomin," Mordechai said, "there are many Davids left in this world. Including David Chanzin in Israel."

Suddenly Binyomin's ears pricked up. "Yes?" That word came out with uncertainty.

"Binyomin, tell my brother," he whispered, "that I would love to have a visa."

"Mordechai, I know your brother very well. I heard when they call him up to the Torah it's Reb Dovid ben Menachem Mendel."

"Yes, that is our father."

And Binyomin said, "Your brother comes to visit the Rebbe and he is considered a

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15. Talmud, *Lamentations Rabbah* 2:22.

great man. Everybody respects him and he has a great name that precedes and follows him."

In the dusky light of the synagogue the two men were able to form a special bond.

Finally, Binyomin felt free enough to ask: "Mordechai, why don't you wear a beard? The other men in the synagogue do."

Sighing deeply, Mordechai said: "Maybe one day when I leave Russia I'll be able to tell you the reasons."

"My friend, rest certain, that I'll do my best for you."

Another moment and Mordechai Chanzin was gone. Binyomin was not certain he'd ever meet him again. Yet, during Binyomin's last two weeks in Moscow, Mordechai Chanzin repeatedly protected Binyomin from falling into the many traps of the KGB. As their Russian and Yiddish translator, he was in a singular position to interrogate Katz when the KGB, hoping to catch Katz in a lie, grilled Binyomin Katz with questions each week in the synagogue. Fortunately, the KGB didn't understand Yiddish, so it was fairly easy to hoodwink them that way. No matter what Rabbi Katz said in Yiddish, Reb Mordechai always made certain that the answer in Russian was the correct answer, when he repeated his translated response to the KGB.

One of the darkest moments came for Binyomin Katz when he gazed upon the people in the Choral Synagogue for the last time. In particular, he noticed one elderly man, Rabbi Gruzman, *davening* in front of the *aron kodesh*, with whom he was never able to make contact. Immediately, Binyomin followed his instincts; he went and sat beside this old man, in the middle of *Kedusha,* and listened to his urgent plea to get him a visa. As soon as *Kedusha* was over, somebody—who else but a KGB man!—roughly tapped Katz on the shoulder and whispered, "We need you right away for the tenth person for a secret *minyan* in the back of the synagogue." When Binyomin looked around he saw the other Jewish congregants blanch at the contact between him and the KGB man. But it was too late. The KGB man locked his hand as in a vise and the two headed to the back room. Was Binyomin headed right into a KGB plot? Would he be asked the wrong question and thrown in jail? There seemed no way out of this ambush. All the other Jewish congregants dared not intervene. He was already imprisoned in the KGB's hand. What would this "secret *minyan*" do to him? His heart seemed ready to burst with anxiety. Suddenly, Katz recalled the words of the Rebbe: *Never show any fear to the Russians.*

But this time, to Katz, in the wild, emotional state he was in, it seemed impossible not to show fear.

Finally, the KGB man and Binyomin reached the door of the "secret *minyan*," and when the KGB man pushed the door open, Katz entered the room with his eyes closed—out of deathly fear. He knew that he couldn't do this long, so he opened his eyes and stared down at each and every person. When his eyes fell upon one man, the kindly, caring face of Rabbi Mordechai Chanzin, he knew he was safe and protected. Suddenly all his color came back to him. *Yes, Rebbe, I shall show these Russians no fear!* he said to himself. At that so-called "secret *minyan*," consisting of ten *goyim* and Rabbi Mordechai Chanzin, Binyomin Katz was plied with many questions by the KGB agents, all in Russian. Katz answered them all, not in Russian. And whatever he said and how Rabbi Chanzin translated his responses in Russian, the answers seemed to satisfy the KGB men. The dreaded time passed without further incident.

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Finished, for now, was everything Binyomin Katz had to do in Moscow before that *erev Shabbos*. Soon he'd be heading for his hotel, the thirtieth floor, where he would spend *Shabbos* alone. But that's not true at all. Every Sabbath eve, a good angel and an evil angel accompany a man from the synagogue to his home. If the man finds the candles lit, the table set, and the bed made, the good angel says, "May next Sabbath be like this!" and the evil angel answers perforce, Amen. Otherwise, the evil angel says, "May next Sabbath be like this!" and the good angel is compelled to respond, Amen.[16]

That *Shabbos* night, over matzah Binyomin Katz recited the *Kiddush*. After he washed his hands, he supped on *kartoshka* (potatoes), black bread, a hard-boiled egg, *pomadorin* (tomatoes), *markov* (carrots), fruit and halavah—everything *kosher*. When he finished the meal, he said, "May next Sabbath be like this!"—and both angels perforce responded, Amen.

On Sunday, he would head for the new city, Rostov, there to do more of the Rebbe's work. For now, there was no time to plan, to think, to worry. The Sabbath was here.

Binyomin Katz knew he was in the right place.

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Part 3: The Tightrope

In every generation there is at least one *chassid* who's suddenly transformed into a tightrope walker who has reached the middle of a rope stretched across a sheer drop. If he attempts to go back, he will have half the length of the rope to cross, and if he wishes to complete his task and reach the other side, he also has half the length to cross. And surely if he looks down, he's doomed. Binyomin Katz, on such a tightrope, was no fool, he kept his eyes up towards his Maker.

Yet he had a big problem the night before he left Moscow to Rostov: there was no *mikveh* in Rostov.

Fortunately, Mrs. Esther Malka Bogomolny, the woman who managed the *mikveh* in Moscow, heard from some religious Jews who Binyomin Katz was and where he was headed. That evening she phoned him at the hotel and told him she'd prepare a clean *mikveh* for him right away.

"Mr. Katz," she said, "I heard you're leaving by plane early in the morning, and if you're planning on visiting the Rebbe Rashab's *kever* in Rostov, you could use the *mikveh* tonight."

Of course, Binyomin readily agreed. "Bless you, and most certainly, Mrs. Bogomolny, I will take you up on your offer," he said.

That night he returned to the Choral Synagogue. When no one was paying attention to him, he slipped away in the *shul*'s darkness and made his way to the *mikveh* door. He knocked lightly. Mrs. Bogomolny was waiting for him. As he walked in and she walked out, she turned to him and said: "I want something in return from you."

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16. Talmud, *Sabbath* 119b.

"Yes?" Binyomin nodded.

"You are soon going back to the Rebbe. My son-in-law Velvel is in big trouble. He was caught baking *matzos,* and now he has a big court case coming up. Please ask the Rebbe to pray for him, that he should be successful in this court case." She also told Binyomin that other Jews were also involved with her son-in-law, "but all the pressure is put on him because he is also a *shochet.* Therefore, since he is going to be in trouble anyway, all the other Jews intend to blame him for everything," said Mrs. Bogomolny. "Oh, Mr. Katz, without a *brocha* from the Rebbe, my son-in-law is doomed. Promise me you'll ask the Rebbe for a blessing. That is why I made you this special, warm *mikveh.*"

Binyomin Katz assured the anguished woman he'd do exactly as she requested.

After the *mikveh,* he realized that he was not alone: suddenly he came face to face with a fellow Jew, short, with a loud voice, who lodged a complaint against him. The complaint? "Mr. Tourist, you've visited all the people in Moscow, but not once the yeshiva students. A fine fellow you are, ignoring the one student waiting for you there. That's all I have to say," and in a huff the pint-sized complainer hastened away. "Wait, wait," shouted Binyomin, "How will I find him?" "Don't worry," the complainer shouted back. "He'll find you." Then he was gone.

That was another coded message, Binyomin quickly found out. Hidden in the dorms of the yeshiva was Yehoshua Heshel Halevi Gurevitch from Riga, an older married man, in his fifties, who obviously had no real need for scholastic studies, but lived there as one of the students. When, that night, Binyomin met the man who limped on one foot, he wondered, *Who is this man standing before me? Is he going to set me up for a fall? I must be on my guard.* But Binyomin soon found out, there was no danger from him. Opening a Talmud on the *shtender* before them, he informed Binyomin that he had learned with Reb Chaim Sachnovitz in Riga and he himself was a noted *talmid chacham.*

"I know I'm never going to get out of here alive, Rabbi Katz."

"*Sha,* Mr. —, don't say that."

"Sooner or later they'll come for me. With one leg, I'm no use to them. Yet the authorities in Riga still want me dead—I know that! And...and," he started choking on his words, "someone's bound to rat on me. I must get away before they kill me." Then tears filled his eyes, and he had a plaintive look on his face. "Please, Rabbi Katz, I need you to supply me a visa for me and my family to get out of this country as soon as possible."

The man was one of the few persons who, when he finally emigrated to Israel, made it his business each time to look Binyomin Katz up—in Jerusalem, Bnai Brak, Tel Aviv, etc.—and thank him for saving his life. Whenever the two met, shaking and pumping Binyomin's hand never seemed enough for the exuberant emigre. But if he could hug his American friend and dance all night, singing the "*Shpoler Zeide's Niggun,*" ah, that would be wonderful! "I tell you, Binyomin, I had no hope of ever leaving Russia except in a pine box."

"*Sha,* don't say that," Binyomin said, again after so many years.

Yes, agreed the happy man, and he proceeded to write heartfelt letters to the Rebbe to express his unending gratitude.

* * *

In Rostov, the American tourist first visited—with his camera, of course—the Soldatska *shul,* the so-called "Soldier's *shul.*" Expect no guided tour through this

spiritless city, with its badly damaged houses and numerous retired soldiers, with no hands or feet, a place where everybody looks as if they need bandages to repair a broken heart, a city, in 1964, especially without much love for Jews. Of necessity, then, Jews lived there, biding their time like Jews everywhere waiting for Moshiach to come and redeem them. For such Jews—alone on their own tightropes—they needed all the encouragement they could get. This was part of Binyomin Katz's task—to tell each Jew there, wherever he went, that, first, the Jews en masse will leave Russia, and then Moshiach will come for all Jews.

In the Soldier's *shul*, the early morning sun created a certain slant, existing like a light of shiny armor around a human body. So it was for Binyomin on the staircase, where he first espied the imposing figure of a man seemingly bathed in that protective armor of light. The man, about to descend the stairs as Binyomin was about to climb the stairs, suddenly stopped, poised on the second and third steps, and if looks could kill, Binyomin Katz was in mortal danger. Unfazed, Binyomin stared right back tit for tat. Each man then moved closer toward the other like two strange dogs meeting for the first time in the street. Silent sneers replaced growls. Any moment a fistfight—no, a dogfight—might break out. But this man wasn't the man Binyomin Katz thought him to be. No governmental official, he turned out to be one of the synagogue's elders, who, protective of his turf in an oppressive society, was shocked at seeing Binyomin Katz show up at his *shul*. For the moment, however, nothing more was said between them. Binyomin went into the *shul* to *daven* and lost track of the man.

After the *davening*, something strange happened. All those worshippers who had watched Binyomin's every move were suddenly nowhere to be found when he turned around. He was alone, with an eerie feeling that he couldn't shake off. It was as if by magic they disappeared into the cold, thick air. How could he do the Rebbe's work if no *Yidden* were there? To stand in a *shul* without other Jews at any time seemed the worst fate he could imagine. The coldness of the room seemed especially bitter to him. He moved toward the door to think what to do next.

Suddenly, as he was putting on his coat to leave the *shul*, he heard a short whistle. Focusing on the direction of the whistle, he saw a finger motioning him to come forward. By the light of the only bulb in the *shul*, the finger mesmerized him and led the way, until the man, his finger, and Binyomin Katz, his camera, reached another room. Here was a bigger *shul*, of course, still in very dull light of a single bulb in the ceiling.

Slowly, the finger took on a face, nostrils, a neck, two arms and two legs. He was the *shammes* of the *shul*, the man told Binyomin, and then he said:

"Listen, everyone who snitches left the *shul* already. So, we're almost alone."

Straining his eyes, Binyomin looked around, yet he could not discern any other human being nearby.

The other man said, "Tell me what's happening in America. Who is the new Rebbe? Who are the *mashpeim* [mentors], *rabbonim* [a selective group of gathered rabbis] and *dayanim* [judges] in America? Who's left after the War? Give over something from the Rebbe to us."

"To us?" Binyomin looked all around.

"Yes, to us," some voices said.

And suddenly Binyomin saw other faces—or rather, their eyes, their ancient glittering eyes, and all focused on him in order, in front, not behind, as Maimonides

himself said..[17] And out of the eyes and mouth of Binyomin Katz poured forth a *sicha*, and the Rebbe's words spread a lamp unto their feet as a guide, and they, in that dim light that easily hid bodies and beards, heard—no saw, with eyes wide open!—the exodus of the Jews from Russia...Moshiach arriving...the new hope of Redemption...and the Rebbe's words... "From the day that I went to o *cheder*, and even prior to that, the vision of the future Redemption began to take form in my imagination—the Redemption of the Jewish people from their final Exile, a Redemption of such magnitude and grandeur through which, the purpose of suffering, the harsh decrees and annihilations of Exile will be understood...with a full heart and cognizance, we will then exclaim: 'I will laud You O G-d for You have vented Your wrath upon me.'"[18]

And then, so caught up in this holy vision, that no word could suffice, no action could satisfy, these men in the room asked Binyomin Katz to sing a *niggun*.

"Introduce us to a *niggun* just as the Rebbe does every *Simchas Torah*." (Evidently, the *chassidim* from Moscow had relayed information to Rostovian *chassidim* that the young tourist, cantor Binyomin Katz, was heading toward them and that they should be prepared for a short gathering, even publicly in *shul*, in honor of their meeting him.)

Binyomin Katz was impressed. *So they know about the Rebbe's niggunim on Simchas Torah. And they want to know more. Good!* So he began to sing one of the Rebbe's *niggunim*, and he felt he never sang it better in his whole life. *Yes*, he told himself, I'd be happy just to sing the Rebbe's *niggunim* all my life.

And after the song, Reb Mordechai Lipshitz, an elderly Russian *chassid*, shouted from the back of the room—"where I never realized anyone was," said Binyomin—"You are singing it wrong. The last letter is different from what is written in our Chabad prayers."

"What?" Binyomin was stunned.

How is that possible? wondered Binyomin.

But Reb Mordechai was right, and Binyomin Katz realized it. In front of faceless Jews who only yearned to hear the Rebbe's *niggun* so that they too could become united with the highest level of the Rebbe's thoughts,[19] Binyomin Katz had changed one word, he was told. It happened to be the song that one sings at the very end of the *slichos* for every fasting date, "and," said Binyomin, "it had something to do with the words, 'G-d is interested in the people who have broken hearts. And he will only answer if Jews cry to him with broken hearts.' The last word is *'ahh nai naw* 'answer us.' And I mistakenly ended the word with *'ahh nai nu'* (the Hebrew word instead of the Aramaic word). I tell you, my face was red!"

All this meant three good things to Binyomin: One, these Rostovian Jews knew more than he realized, for they were the real true "people who have broken hearts"; two, he was happy to learn something, as it's written: "Learning—learning—learning:

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17. "A Man's eyes are in front, not behind." Maimonides, "Letter to Marseilles," 1995, *Responsa*, ii, p. 26b.

18. From a letter of the Rebbe, 11 *Nissan*, 5716.

19. A paraphrase of the following quote from *Sefer Haniggunim*

Each person expresses himself on three levels—thought, speech, and deed..

When a *chassid* carries out his Rebbe's directives, he unites with the Rebbe's actions.

When he learns *Chassidus*, he unites with the Rebbe's facet of speech.

But when he sings the Rebbe's *niggun*, he becomes united with the highest of the three levels—the Rebbe's thoughts.

that is the secret of Jewish survival"[20]; three, he could find some humor poked at him even at the darkest of times.

* * *

Rostov the dead city was not so dead after all, Binyomin Katz soon found out. To Rostovian Jews, it remains alive with the holy memories of the Rebbe Rashab. Stories abound about the wisdom and holiness of the fifth Rebbe of Lubavitch, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber of Lubavitch, who, having been forced to vacate the town of Lubavitch during World War 1, promised his father, the Rebbe Maharash, not to wear a *shtreiml* until he returned to live again in Lubavitch. In his day already the Rebbe Rashab was hailed as the "Maimonides of *Chassidus*," because he developed an analytical approach to the most complex topics in chassidic philosophy.[21]

One such story:

In 1915, the first apartment the Rebbe Rashab rented in Rostov was at 166 Pushkinsky Street, on the second floor. The first floor was occupied by an army general, a mean and vicious-tempered individual of whom everyone was afraid.

The first Purim that the Rebbe *farbrenged* in the apartment, he specifically told the *chassidim* not to worry about the general. Everyone sang and danced as usual, and, thank G-d, the day passed peacefully. After Purim, however, everyone was still nervous about the general downstairs.

All of the Rebbe's belongings had not arrived by Pesach. The Rebbe and his wife, Rebbetzin Shterna Sarah, had to *kasher* their year-round samovar for use during Pesach. The two of them did the *kashering* process themselves, pouring boiling water on the vessel to render it fit for use during the holiday.

When the Rebbetzin saw how much water the Rebbe was spilling all over, she said, "Don't pour so much water on the floor! What about our downstairs neighbor?"

"From downstairs you're afraid?" answered the Rebbe. 'Why aren't you afraid of *Upstairs*?"

* * *

Binyomin Katz soon found out he would have no trouble learning the way to the Rebbe Rashab's grave site. His newfound *shul* friends gave him a slip of paper, with the words "Jewish cemetery" on it in Russian. This, in turn, he handed over to his hotel's taxi driver, who drove him there.

Waiting for Binyomin at the cemetery was good news and bad news. The good news was that the *ohel* itself was separated from the cemetery proper by a wall and locked gate. To reach the *ohel*, a person didn't have to step foot in the cemetery. The bad news? As a *kohen*, our American hero, even with a key to the *ohel* gate, according to *halachah*, couldn't enter the area of the Rebbe Rashab's *ohel* by himself.

All this, Binyomin quickly learned when he arrived at the cemetery. Immediately he went to the main office to present himself as a visitor. There, he was taken aback seeing the very man he met that morning, coming down the stairs of the *shul* as he was going up. Nothing had changed. In the office, both Russian and American stared the

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20. Ahad HaAm, *Essays, Letters, Memoirs*, "Letter to J. L. Magnes, Sept. 18, 1910," tr. by L. Simon (Oxford, England: East & West Library, 1946), p. 269.

21. Many of these remain in mimeographed editions. The most important of the printed collection of his discourses is *Festival of Rosh Hashana 5666* (New York: Kehot Publications Society, 1971).

other down, from head to toe.

Finally: "What do you want?" the Russian demanded of Binyomin.

Unflinchingly, the American said: "Shlomo Ish Nemon [Solomon the trusted one]."

"Eh? Eh?" the Russian said, trying to unnerve the American.

"I want Shlomo the most trusted man!" the American himself demanded again.

What was this all about? Both men, glaring at each other, knew: it was a code name given to Katz to present at the cemetery—and obviously the meaning of which was known to the stern-looking Russian. Was this man himself Shlomo Ish Nemon—Shlomo the most trusted man? Nobody said at the time, but that name seemed to open all doors, including the gate to the *ohel*, for Binyomin Katz. Now acting friendly toward the American tourist for the first time, he not only handed Katz the special key to the *ohel*, he also directed a few cemetery workers to accompany Katz—"Make sure you form a ring around him," he instructed the men; "protect the *kohen* at all costs!" and, now according to *halachah*—because of the human circle afforded him Binyomin the *kohen* could visit the *ohel*.

To get to the *ohel* was a short distance. Once inside the grounds of the *ohel*, the workers, all Jews, informed Binyomin why there were actually two graves there, "although neither is marked," one of the men pointed out. A second man pointed out that in one grave resided the physical remains of the Rebbe Rashab.

Binyomin Katz was curious. "Who's buried near him?" he asked the three men.

The man with a short beard responded first: "In the other grave lies Reb Shmuel Gurary, a *chassid* totally devoted to the Rebbe Rashab in every way.

"Ah," said Binyomin, nodding eagerly as if he just heard something he'd never heard before.

"Yes," now the man with a long red beard added, "Reb Shmuel was told by the Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe that he would always be together with him. Thus this great *chassid*, when he passed away, was granted the honor of being buried in the *dalet amos* [four cubit feet] of the Rebbe."

"Why? Did this student really deserve this very high honor?" Binyomin asked the short-bearded Jew.

(A story is told about Reb Shmuel's total dedication to the Rebbe Rashab: Reb Shmuel was a well-to-do businessman who enjoyed amassing large sums of money in short periods of time. Always he'd seek the Rebbe Rashab's advice and blessing for success.

(Once, things did not work out very well. In fact, he got devastating results and he lost a lot of money on an investment that business trip. A group of other *chassidim*, who followed others Rebbes, bid him to join them at a *melava malkah*. At the gathering, each *chassid*, around the table, was asked to relate an inspiring story about his Rebbe. When it came Reb Shmuel's turn, he declined to do so.

(After much urging from the others, he told the following: "I heard very clearly the wonders of your Rebbeim. Unfortunately, and sad to say, I cannot at this time produce a wonderful story about my Rebbe, as opposed to yours. Regardless of this, I still have trust in my Rebbe and in his blessings. And not for a second would I think of changing my Rebbe or his *brochos* for any of your Rebbes. Whether times are good or bad for me, I am still proud to declare my loyalty to my Rebbe.")

(Another story is told: After the Rebbe Rashab passed away, his wife, Rebbetzin

Shterna Sarah, related the following:

("Some time before the Rebbe passed away, I dreamt that I was in *shul*. It was very crowded. All of a sudden, my mother-in-law, Rebbetzin Rivkah, o.b.m., appeared in the *shul*. She walked right over to the holy ark, opened it up, and took out a *Sefer Torah*. Cradling it in her arms, she started to walk outside. Everyone in the *shul* ran after her to try to take it back, but no one could grab it away. Rebbetzin Rivkah vigorously fought off anyone who came near.

("Then, just as suddenly, Reb Shmuel Gurary snatched the *Sefer Torah* from her and shielded it with his arms so that no one could wrest it away. Again, however, Rebbetzin Rivkah managed to grab hold of it and triumphantly ran outside. Everyone poured out of the *shul* after the Rebbetzin, myself included. I kept running until I came to the river. I jumped in and awoke from my dream.

("The next morning I related the entire dream to my husband, the Rebbe. He laughed when I told him, and said with a smile, '*Nu*, dreaming about water is a good sign.'"

(It was also said that Reb Shmuel Gurary merited to be buried near the Rebbe because of this dream.[22])

"Who knows!" shrugged that man. "Perhaps it's because, as the Talmud tells us: Reb Shmuel did those four things—study Torah, good deeds, pray, carry out his daily tasks—with great zest" (Talmud, *Berachot* 32b).

"It's probably as you say," agreed Binyomin.

Then, as the other two men stood by in silence, Binyomin Katz began to recite *Tehillim* and prayed for the Russian Jews.

With the Rebbe's *sichos* in mind, he implored G-d to have pity on the Russian Jews, "that they should be able to leave Russia, just as the Jews did in Egypt; that they should all go out with all their wealth, with everything that belonged to them. Then, as the Rebbe himself has foretold, Moshiach will come," Binyomin said aloud.

Something happened to the men who had escorted Binyomin: they began to weep.

"Why are you crying?" Binyomin gently asked them.

The weeping men told Binyomin of their family troubles, each very different troubles from the other, and suddenly they begged Binyomin to say *Tehillim* with them.

And to Binyomin, at the *ohel* in front of the Rebbe Rashab's grave site seemed the perfect spot to say *Tehillim* for the men and their troubled families.

And, as the Zohar tells us, "there is no gate that tears cannot break through."

As for the many other Jews who suddenly appeared at the *ohel*, Binyomin Katz had no idea where they came from. They too asked him to say some *Tehillim* on their behalf.

In front of the Rebbe Rashab's *ohel*, despite KGB operatives probably looking on from outside the perimeter, Binyomin Katz did just that, and that too was duly recorded by the *tzaddik*'s ever-lasting presence at the *ohel*.

A miracle:

No Jew who prayed at the *ohel* that day was later bothered by the KGB.

Or was it a miracle?

The Talmud tells that a bird hunter once caught a bird and was about to catch a

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22. Rafael Kahan, *Extraordinary Chassidic Tales* (Brooklyn, NY: Otsar Sifrei Lubavitch, 1997), pp. 224-226.

second when that bird perched itself on a king's statue. At this, the hunter stood still, perplexed, and said to himself: "If I throw stones at the bird, I will forfeit my life, and if I try poking at her with my stick, I am afraid I might strike the king's image. I don't know what to say to you, [O bird], except that you fled to a perfect place and made good your escape" (*Exodus Rabbah* 27:6).

So, dear reader, I leave this matter of a miracle up to you.

* * *

On the way out of the *ohel*, that perfect place for Jews, Binyomin Katz inquired about the mounds situated on the other side of the wall.

Short-beard explained: "These, Comrade, are the empty resting places for the bodies of the Rebbe's other disciples. None is filled with an actual grave. Only Reb Shmuel Gurary was granted that privilege, to be as close as possible to the *ohel*. All the others are empty, I imagine. Nobody really knows now who, if any, are buried in any of them."

Then long-beard whispered to me: "Before you leave Shlomo Ish Nemon must talk to you."

"Uh-huh," I whispered back.

"Something very important."

Binyomin smiled. *So that man in the office is really Shlomo Ish Nemon!*

When Katz returned to the main office, he gave the key back to Shlomo Ish Nemon, who accepted it, opened up a book, pointed with his finger and pretended as if he were reading something from the book.

As the two gazed at the book, this is the bitter story he told Binyomin Katz:

"About 40 years ago, the Rebbe Rashab was moved from one cemetery to this cemetery. Now perhaps the time is coming when we must move him again. Why? Because every so often the Communist authorities overturn a Jewish cemetery, replow it and turn it into a bustling playground for their children or something. In 1930, the Russian government decided to convert the old Jewish cemetery into a building complex. They forbade the transfer of any graves to the new Jewish cemetery. However, defying the order, one bitter wintry night, when no one would venture outside, ten *chassidim* dug up the grave of the Rebbe Rashab and reburied him in the new Jewish cemetery.

"Before that occurs again," the Russian man went on, "perhaps we should move the Rebbe elsewhere."

"By all means," Binyomin feigned. "I see that point stated clearly in this book we're reading together."

"So when you return to the Rebbe in America," continued Shlomo Ish Nemon, "please ask him to decide what should be done with the remains of the Rebbe Rashab: leave him where he is or move him to a new burial ground—and, if so, where? Remember, you are our *shaliach* and you must do this for us."

"I shall do it," Binyomin Katz said eagerly, and the two men closed the book, then, on that matter.

(When Katz returned to America two years later, at a *yechidus* with the Rebbe, the Rebbe asked him if there were still any important pressing problems in Russia. Yes, said Binyomin Katz, who then informed the Rebbe of the situation involving the Rebbe Rashab's *ohel*. The Rebbe directed Katz to discuss that situation with one of his very old

chassidim, Reb Shmuel Halevi Levitin of Rakshik.

("Where can I find him?" asked Binyomin Katz.

(The Rebbe: "Reb Shmuel lives in one of the yeshiva's back rooms. Next to Rabbi Hodakov's [the Rebbe's secretary] office."

(Who was this Reb Shmuel of Rakshik? For the record, around the turn of the century the Rebbe Rashab was greatly troubled about the 100,000 "Mountain Jews" [*Berg Yidden*] who lived in the Caucasian Mountains, far from the centers of Jewish life. The Rebbe directed Reb Shmuel Rakshiker to travel there and set up educational institutions.

(When Binyomin Katz met Reb Shmuel, he discussed the matter with him. Should the Rebbe Rashab's physical remains be moved yet another time?

(To this day, as far as Binyomin Katz knows, nothing has been done. Clearly, Reb Shmuel, whom the Rebbe had charged with making that decision, never decided. Or did he? As it's written, not to decide is to decide. Always, thank G-d, everything remains as it should be in the valley of decisions.)

Yet, shortly, as Binyomin Katz departed Rostov, on the edge of things, the days and nights of danger were not over. They remained ever-clear and present.

But then where and when is man out of danger? Binyomin Katz was about to find out.

* * *

Part 3: The Turtledoves

Day almost breaks. Which way are we going?

The heart of man seeks variety, yet a spy, in his perfect cover, tries to effect sameness in his daily routine. As such, Binyomin Katz, the Rebbe's messenger, also repeated his undercover religious routines in each city he visited, including Chortkov. But then, when another day was almost breaking, he finally heard the voice of the turtledoves speak out in Tbilisi, in the land of Georgia in the south of Russia. Such voices, such Jews, in the Soviet Union, he had never witnessed before. On the streets were Georgian smiles, Georgian hospitality before it was ever known in another place—the American state of Georgia—as Southern hospitality.

Once, the Previous Rebbe had written about another such "family" of Jews.

"The family, at whose head was the famous Gaon Rabbi Zecharyah Yerucham, who had himself studied under the ReMo [Rabbi Moses Isserles] had, after much wandering, settled in a village near Nemerov where everybody worked on the land, and where they all drew their earnings from a 'communal cash box.' In fact, they all lived together in such harmony and brotherhood, that they were nicknamed 'The Doves.'... Here 'The Doves' continued their communal way of life. The older ones, who were past working, retired in comfort to devote themselves to Torah, whilst the younger ones worked and provided for all.

"Then came the never-to-be forgotten year 5408 (1648) when the bloodthirsty Bogdan Chmielnicki, organized the terrible pogroms, and Nemerov became one of the biggest bloodbaths for the poor helpless Jews. Masses of them were slaughtered

mercilessly by the Ukrainian 'butchers,' and all but one of the entire family of 'The Doves' were slain."[23]

Such could have happened, in its own tragic way, to the Jews of Georgia in the 1990s, when most of them fled from that civil war-torn country to Israel, the U.S. and other safe havens for Jews.

"Yet they really didn't flee—they went to," said Rabbi Aaron Chein, a former Georgian citizen now living in New York City. "After all, there has never been a time like this. This is the messianic era. Moshiach—that's what it's taking for the Mountain Jews, after 2,400 years, to come down from their mountain."

But in 1964, these "turtledoves"—these Jews also known for their love of their fellowman, *ahavas Yisrael,* still peopled the paradises of Tbilisi, Abasha, Kobuleti, Kutaisi, and other towns nestled in the Catskill-like mountains near the Black Sea.

This is what our hero Binyomin Katz encountered in Tbilisi.

That he was a wealthy tourist impressed the Georgians little compared to his being a Lubavitcher *talmid*. In opening their houses to Binyomin, they couldn't do enough for him—and fast enough. "They let me *daven* from the *omud,*" Binyomin recounted. "Their *mikveh* was breathtaking. On the main street, women freely lined up, bringing their chickens to slaughter. Inside the slaughterhouse, the *shochet* closed his door and we began to sing Lubavitcher *niggunim*. It was a very wonderful feeling. I felt no pressure whatsoever."

Not far from the Gruzhiner (Sephardic) *shul* was the Ashkenazi *shul* on a *cul de sac* street. Called "Toothpick," it looked like a reconverted garage. A Magen David star was painted on its one window. Inside the chairs were lined up on each side of an aisle. Outside was a backyard.

"Both *shuls* were filled most of the time," Binyomin added.

That first *Shabbos*, the American *davened* as *chazzan* at the Ashkenazic. When the congregation finished *Maariv*, he was invited to hold *Kiddush* as he had done in many Ashkenazi *shuls*. The conversation was heady and pious, as carefully chosen as the wine, which, of course, was "the wine they drink in Paradise," one witty Georgian confided to the American visitor.

The wine was stronger than Binyomin Katz realized, and soon he felt his head ache very much. At moments, he was not exactly certain what he was saying. So he exerted himself to button his lip as much as possible. Still, everyone in the Toothpick *shul* seemed to seek him out to congratulate him for his *davening*.

One such man approached him.First he smiled, then he spoke: "I know now who you are."

Binyomin didn't like the man's tone. So, he shot back, "Well, if you know so much about me, maybe you can tell me something about yourself."

"My name is Malkin," the man said.

"Oh!" Katz scratched his head. "If your name is Malkin then you must be from a Chabad family."

"*Da, da,*" Malkin nodded.

The Georgian then explained to Binyomin that the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe

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23. *Lubavitcher Rabbi's Memoirs*, vol. 1, trans. by Nissin Mindel (Brooklyn, NY: Otsar Hachassidim, 1988), p. 205.

once had a secretary named Reb Choniyah Morosov."

"Morosov?" The name rang a bell in Binyomin's head.

"*Da*, this Morosov had many grandchildren who now are old *chassidim* in Crown Heights. However, Choniyah Morosov was married more than once. His first wife was a young lady called Malkin—her surname, that is—and she was somehow related to him."

In Binyomin's present state of mind, the other man's words seemed at first to be sort of a code for something else. True, Katz was in the birth city of his mentor's father, Rav Chaim Meir Chaikin, *zt"l*, but suddenly he remembered that his mentor had warned him to keep his wits about him even in Tbilisi, perhaps especially there where he might easily let his guard down. Did these Georgian man's words have another meaning in *gematria*? wondered our American hero. But, he shrugged that off, for he knew then very little about that system of equivalences between Hebrew words of equal numerical value.

When the man from Tbilisi invited the American home to meet his father, Reb Shmuel Malkin, Binyomin grew more and more curious. Was this another intriguing subterfuge to meet somebody on the Q.T., or was it an enemy setup? Inclined nonetheless to risk it, he accepted the invitation.

When he met Reb Shmuel, he was immediately struck by the man's magisterial bearing. Behold, with his full, flowing beard, he reminded Binyomin of Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky (1863-1940), recognized then as the greatest living authority in Jewish law and the unofficial Chief Rabbi of Vilna between the two Great Wars. As for what the two men spoke about that night, no one still is at liberty to say. Or perhaps had Binyomin Katz finally forgotten some facts? Still, knowing him, that's highly unlikely. But then, what's a good spy thriller without at least one remaining unlocked secret!

That night, Binyomin could barely walk home.

In retracing his steps, Binyomin Katz wondered aloud:

The wine is penetrating me...I'm so woozy I can't read the street sign clearly...I said of laughter: it is crazy...must get to safety...so cold, my nose...who's that man looking at me?...I desire mercy and not sacrifice...which street to take...O Rebbe, guide my steps...and it's not even Purim...embrace G-d...don't go over to a policeman—to a stranger—to anyone...remember what Rav Chaikin said...Cope-Copen-Copenhagen—Meyer Goldshmidt chanted his first kiddush at a time when there were only nineteen Jews in Copenhagen...wine flowing...will two walk together unless they have appointed to meet?...don't go into the police station for help...cold, hot, cold...keep us far from what Thou hatest, bring us near to what Thou lovest...just try your luck by yourself...a fire engine's passing—I must focus on that...souls on fire...my Rock and my Redeemer...Night, the mystic wine, and everyone looks threatening...must get to safety...in ashes is a solitary spark...kapote, tallis, tefillin, gartel...can't walk another step. ...

Through the long inner monologue, Binyomin Katz managed to walk home to safety. "I determined where the main street was, where the hotel would be, and I started walking in that direction. He was with me, thank G-d, and I made it," he smiled.

And he continued to smile the next morning as he went to *shul* to *daven aloud*, "to put away a beautiful *davening* as only a *chazzan* can." Of course, Binyomin ceased smiling when he turned around after praying *Shacharis* and saw the *shul* almost empty. A full house was reduced to eight Jews, including the *gabbai*. *Deja vu*! No time to take this

personally, he told himself.

Shrugged the *gabbai*: "That's the way things are around here."

Without understanding what the *gabbai* meant by his remark, Binyomin nodded. "It's happened before and it'll probably happen again," he said to himself. "Rav Chaikin was right: paradise or no paradise, I'm still in the Soviet Union."

Before Binyomin left the *shul*, the *gabbai* whispered in his ear: "Don't give up. It's not your fault. Your leading the *davening* was just pleasant. So, may I suggest you return later for our *shalosh seudos* and *melava malkah*, this evening."

The American put on his coat and pretended not to hear the *gabbai*, but both knew that he would return.

That afternoon he returned to *shul* for *shalosh seudos*, the traditional third meal of *Shabbos*. There, he met a different element of religious persons, who simply had to know everything:"Who is the new Lubavitcher Rebbe?"

"I hear, the Rebbe's father left three sons."

"One of them was very quiet, they tell me."

"One of them was a mathematician and he knew how to play chess and learn *Gemara* with you and do anything you wanted and he could beat you and challenge you in anything."

"One was a bit noisier, so they tell me."

"That must be Reb Yisroel Aryeh Leib," another Jew piped in. "One of them always wanted to know what type of tea you wanted and what type of bedding made you comfortable," said still another.

"Which one became the new Rebbe?" everyone asked at once.

Finally Binyomin spoke: "The *quiet one*, who looked at you and smiled at you, said hello and goodbye and said 'b*soros*.'"

"His name? His name? We must know his name."

Binyomin Katz took his time pronouncing the Rebbe's name.

"The Rebbe, *shlita*, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Lubavitch."

"Ah!" every Jew in that *shul* at the same time seemed to cry out with happiness.

At the *melava malka* the *mezuzah* was the thing to watch for the soul of each Jew. Binyomin, who taught his newfound friends some of the Rebbe's *niggunim*, worked out his own secret code with these other Jews.

"If anybody came into the *shul* that night for the *melava malka*, if he kissed the *mezuzah* I'd continue. If he entered the *shul* without kissing the *mezuzah*, which was right on the door, facing the table where I could watch, at once I stopped and started to put my coat on to leave. Sometimes a man didn't kiss the *mezuzah*, but all the religious Jews there told me not to worry.

"With Georgia on my mind for two weeks, it was like living in the best of Israel: no pressures, friction or challenges."

Abruptly, it all came to an end. One day the Intourist, which handles all traveling arrangements in the Soviet Union, phoned him to say, "Your flight for Saturday is on schedule."

"But—" Binyomin Katz protested.

"Get your packing done, and be ready," the Intourist official said.

"I am not going. Saturday is my Sabbath, and on that day I don't travel."

Intourist insisted he was. "It says on my copy that you have to go."

"Well, my copy is marked the eleventh, which is Sunday."

"Impossible!" shouted the Intourist voice. "My copy is clearly marked the tenth, Saturday and that is the day you must leave, as scheduled."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere on my Sabbath."

"May I remind you, Mr. Katz, in Russia, we're the boss."

"You don't even look like my boss! And besides, I'm paying for my trip, not you!" snapped Binyomin, handling the argument, tit for tat, just as he had been primed to do when situations like this arose.

His opponent shouted back, "I don't give a hoot what you paid for."

In the end, both "actors" played their roles to the hilt, and agreed to continue this "conversation" later in the day.

Before that happened, though, Binyomin overheard some Americans discussing their plans to visit Tashkent for a sporting event.

Hmm, should he change his plans and go too? he wondered. He might get away with it. Binyomin knew well enough that had he officially designated Tashkent as part of his original itinerary that would have alerted the Communists that by his action he fully intended to get involved there in all the underground Lubavitcher yeshivas.

"But!" Binyomin now concluded, "if I go to Tashkent indirectly to watch a ballgame, perhaps they won't suspect!"

With that in mind, Binyomin went to the Intourist office, met the "voice," and continued his yelling: "I'm going to Tashkent for the ballgame."

Hearing this, the Intourist official was nonplussed. "What you're demanding is completely out of the routine. Let me call Moscow. Since you are a hard fellow, you may work things out with them, for all I care. If you get their permission to go, to change your itinerary, fine."

A few hours before *Shabbos,* Intourist allowed Binyomin Katz to fly to Tashkent.

"But they made me pay through the nose," he said. "Every dollar they could milk me for, all the changes in my itinerary, they did, without batting an eyelash. Of course, for me, money was not an issue. Rav Chaikin took care of all my expenses; so I had thousands of dollars in my pocket."

If you're not a sports fan, then if you've seen one ballgame you've seen them all, and even one is too much. In Tashkent, Katz joined the other Americans in the stadium, but right after that, now free to move more freely—or so he thought—he headed toward the main Bucharah *shul* at the old market on Sagbon Street.

The same thing occurred there. After *davening*, the *shul* emptied out. Nobody was left for Binyomin to talk to. Of course, somebody always whistled to him. Then the knock. Someone in the shadows always gave him information, told him everything he wanted to hear. "Which Jews the Communists are jailing," Katz said, "and which Jews they are releasing. Quickly I familiarized myself with their names."

It so happened that in those days in Russia there was an old *chassid* named Reb Elazer Nanis, who was forever trying to leave Russia. For 18 years, he was a thorn in the side of the Communists, and they put the screws on him more than on most other Jews. Today, he is very close to 100 years old, and lives in Jerusalem's Shikun Chabad—so you see, he too got out, but it wasn't easy..

In the eyes of the Rebbe Rashab, this *chassid* was a diamond. Why?

One day the Rebbe Rashab mentioned to a distinguished *rav* that he "has students

who, I assure you, sit up most of the night and learn Torah by a table."

"Ah—and?" the other asked, wanting to know more of the Rebbe's thoughts..

"And when they leave that table and sleep at night," the Rebbe Rashab said, "they are still learning Torah. Meditating on it as they merely appear to be sleeping."

"Is that so?" asked the *rav*.

"Come," said the Rebbe Rashab as he took a candle, lit it and escorted the *rav* to the lads who were apparently sleeping in Tomchei Tmimim Yeshiva in the city of Lubavitch. The Rebbe Rashab bent down and tapped a few of them on the shoulder. Opening their eyes, they turned around to face the Rebbe Rashab and the Rav standing next to them.

"What are you thinking about?" the Rebbe Rashab asked them.

Each student expressed exactly the Torah thought he had been thinking about in his "sleep."

Among these lads was Reb Elazar Nanis.

Every effort was made to get him out of Tashkent. Numerous people wrote letters on behalf of Reb Elazer, and because he spoke or wrote only Yiddish, they helped him fill in his applications at the police station. But nothing seemed to help his situation. Perversely, the Russian authorities took pleasure crayoning over vital information on his applications, thereby preventing him from emigrating.

Why am I telling you this when we both know now he's living in Israel? How did he get out? I can tell you this much: One of the most important persons Binyomin Katz met was Reb Simcha Gorodetsky. One evening, out of earshot of anyone else, he said to Binyomin, "I heard you're returning soon to Russia. In the meantime, if by chance the opportunity arises here, this is what I want you to tell a Jew named Reb Elazar Nanis. Tell him word for word what I have to say."

"Is Reb Elazar here in Tashkent?"

"Yes," said Reb Simcha. "Remember to contact *him*. Many unsuccessful attempts have been made. Maybe you'll be successful."

"I'll tell him—what?" Binyomin asked..

"Tell Reb Elazar ever word I say to you. That's the only way he'll ever get out of there." And with that, Reb Simcha, leaning closer, mouth to ear, to Binyomin, whispered the life-saving words.

What did Reb Simcha Gorodetsky tell Binyomin Katz to tell Reb Elazar Nanis? Sorry, it was for their ears only.

So now let's get to Saturday night—any Saturday night as far as Binyomin Katz is concerned. Because, he says, "all good things always happened to me on Saturday night, and this particular Saturday night in Tashkent was the mother of all spy thrillers."

Before he left the Lenin's Hotel, he checked the weather conditions outside his hotel's window. Suddenly his eyes fell upon a beautiful Jewish young couple standing outside. Binyomin had heard earlier there was to be a Jewish wedding, and by their dress, they probably were going there, he thought. But why were they standing outside his hotel? Little did he know they were waiting for him.

As he passed them, perhaps hoping to catch their eye and be invited to the wedding, Binyomin heard something—the wind?—a whisper?—a voice clearing its throat—but the words that followed in Hebrew were unmistakable: "*Yemin veacher kach simohl*" ("First go to your right side on the street, then to the left side.")

Binyomin suited his actions to their words. He walked along the right side of the street, they along the street's left side. Then, when he reached a lamppost, he crossed stealthily to the left side of the street, and they to the right side. Finally, when they were out of eyesight of any strangers on the street, the couple approached Binyomin's side of the street, and he said "*Mazel Tov*" to them as they approached.

Smiling, they said, "Truth is, we were married 15 years ago, but we enjoyed your belated *mazel tov*." The husband's name was Yankel Lipkakah, known as Yankel the Schvarsa. His wife mentioned she was a sister of a butcher in Brooklyn named Reb Cheskel Brod. "Do you know him?"

Binyomin nodded.

"We heard you were here," said the husband, "and you *davened* well. But we couldn't locate you for three days already."

"I'm glad you succeeded in reaching me. How can I help you?"

"We've something for the Rebbe."

"Ah! What?"

"We would like to give the Rebbe a *pidyon*," and they mentioned 1,000 rubles.

"What?" Binyomin was truly surprised.

"Is that too little?" asked the wife. "Let me explain. You see, there was a time my husband was on his deathbed in the hospital. Even though I could have been arrested each time for doing so, I sent many telegrams to the Rebbe to pray on his behalf. One day, I received his reply. He said: 'I heard!' Then, the Rebbe's blessing interceded, and, now, as you can see, thank G-d, my husband is fully recovered."

"But such a great amount of rubles?" Binyomin asked.

They insisted they had many rubles saved up.

"No," the American said. "I'm not going to take any money from you Jews here. I came here to bring money to help others to keep *Shabbos*. It won't be right for me to take your money."

"But we want to show our appreciation to the Rebbe," said the husband.

"Look," Binyomin reasoned with them, "at most I'll take 18 rubles—representing *chai*—as representing all the Jews in Tashkent, with your names, of course, first on the list that I present to the Rebbe. My other stipulation is that you work it out so that the 18 rubles come from the whole group of Jews here in Tashkent."

That, the couple readily agreed to.

As the threesome walked slowly that night to the old market section of Tashkent, making sure to separate whenever they reached a street lamppost, the couple questioned Binyomin about another relative they had in Crown Heights.

"Reb Yaacov Lipsker—do you know him?" they asked.

"Who doesn't know him in Crown Heights?" smiled Binyomin.

"What does he do?"

"Well, he has a grocery store [now Kahan's Superette on Kingston and Union]."

That answer didn't seem to satisfy the couple, for they repeated their question. "What does he do?"

"He sells food."

"*Nu*, what else does he do?"

"He has a large family. He helps his wife, I guess."

The couple remained persistent. "What else does he do?"

Said Binyomin, wondering why the same question over and over: "He *davens*. He is a *gabbai* in the Rebbe's *beis midrash*."

"And what else does he do?"

"Every Thursday, he stays late in the *shul*, locks the door and does a tremendous amount of carpentry work, re-embellishing the beautiful *aron kodesh* for the Rebbe. Then he sweeps up all the sawdust. Later, in the morning, the Rebbe comes in and marvels at Reb Yaacov's beautiful handiwork he wrought through the night."

"That's what we wanted to hear," the husband said, smiling at his wife in satisfaction.

"Oh, if you only knew Reb Yaacov in the days he lived in Russia!" said the wife. "All he lived for was to get out of Russia and be a doorkeeper at the Rebbe's house of worship[24]—or, if that weren't possible, to be a carpenter for the Rebbe. He wants to be able to take care of the Rebbe's *shul*, to sweep his floors, to lick the floors clean. He wants to be the man who cleans the Rebbe's *shul* perfectly."

"Obviously, he's serving the Rebbe well nowadays in Crown Heights."

About a block and a half from the *shul*, the husband told Binyomin to wait there with his wife. "I'm going to run to the house. It's only a minute around the corner and I want to get the 18 rubles for the *pidyon nefesh*."

Binyomin said okay.

The moment the husband left—as if it were set up so—another man, emerging from the shadows of the night, approached Binyomin. He said, "I heard that you came with chassidic booklets [onion sheets of paper with one of the Rebbe's s *maamarim*, from the years 1955-56, on it] from the Rebbe."

Katz felt he was on safe ground with this man, so he nodded.

"Please give it to me and I'll take it to the *shul*."

"But I'm going there, too." Binyomin explained.

The stranger told him in Yiddish, "No, your plans are changed. You're to follow me." And he motioned Binyomin to follow him. As Binyomin hesitatingly stepped forward, he managed to shrug his shoulders at the woman as if to say, "Sorry, but I got to go." Then, he followed the man, leaving the woman to wait alone for her husband, hopefully to find him later on during the week.

To get to the *shul*, the two men had to pass through a marketplace (to Jews, it was known as the *oldmark*) on the outskirts of Tashkent. As they entered the area, suddenly, Binyomin spotted an unusually thin person, standing partly hidden by an equally thin tree. Of all things, the strange man behind the tree began to yell out in the middle of night, on the street, where anybody could hear, he cried out to the American, in Yiddish, "Have you ever heard the *Gemara* about Reb Shimon ben Na'anas?"

"I know that *Gemara*," Katz boldly yelled back at him. *Something is up*, thought Binyomin, *but what?* . . .

Poking his head out a bit more from his tree, the emaciated man said, "My name is

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24. An obvious reference to Psalm 84:11: "I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my G-d,/Than dwell in the tents of wickedness."

Elazar Nanis. Have you ever heard that name before?"

"Surely," said Binyomin.

"If you have," motioned the thin man with his right hand, "follow me."

If Binyomin Katz followed Reb Elazar, he knew he'd be courting disaster. Perhaps all the rest of his undercover work would be nullified by his following Reb Elazar. Yet he stealthily followed Reb Elazar through the marketplace, up a series of large grassy knolls behind the *oldmark*. During this time, neither of them spoke a word to the other. When they came to a dark area of grass on the hillocks, Reb Elazar Nanis lay down, and quickly, having been invited to do the same by Reb Elazar, Binyomin lay down, too. Lying head to head, the two looked up at the moon sliver in the sky. Reb Elazar cautioned Katz that if they heard footsteps, he'd roll one way and Katz should roll in the other direction.

Then, Binyomin Katz relayed the secret words of Reb Simcha Gorodetsky to Reb Elazar. Somewhere on those dark hills, Binyomin Katz told him what he needed to hear to finally leave his Soviet prison and emigrate to Israel.

However, could Reb Elazar believe the American?

"Well," he said anxiously, "everything you say is good and I have to tell you things I want the Rebbe to know. But I'm afraid you will forget, and I really don't know who you are."

"My name's Binyomin Katz, and I'm the Rebbe's *shaliach*, sent here to find men like you."

"For what purpose?" he asked.

"Eventually to provide you with visas to get out of Russia."

That seemed to please Reb Elazar, but still, always a nervous man, he had lingering doubts. "Look, Katz, tomorrow I'll send my wife to your hotel and she'll see how actually you are able to remember the things I tell you now. If you must carry this information around on you, write it down and hide it in the seams of your socks."

"Listen, Reb Lazar," Katz reassured him, "have no fear. I'll repeat to you now everything that you tell me, and you'll see that I haven't forgotten one word you told me. I've no need to write secrets down on paper. Besides, Reb Elazar, I'm no stranger to your family. I know your brother-in-law, Reb Moshe Newmark, in Montreal. I know your wife, his sister, and I know the whole *alef-beis* of your family. If you want to test me, I'll give it over to you verbatim . . ."

And Reb Elazar listened, with his mouth wide open in wonder.

". . . I also know Reb Moshe Yossef Newmark's family, his three daughters—Nechama Gerstel, Nachah Rubin, Bathsheva Saffran. His two sons—Berel and his older brother, Reb Chaim Avram Eliyahu." Here, Binyomin also mentioned that Reb Moshe Yossef's wife was named Luba."

Hearing this, Reb Elazar was amazed.

"How do you know all this?" he asked Binyomin.

"I'll tell you. For three or four years I used to eat at the *Shabbos* table of Reb Hershel and Nachah Rubin's house in Montreal."

"Oh, yes!" Reb Elazar said joyfully. "That explains it!"

Before the two men could say another word, Binyomin Katz suddenly felt two sets of hands grab his shoulders and violently lift him off the ground.

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Part 3: The Dawning

Fearing his end, Binyomin Katz began to say the *"Shema."*

By the time two strangers had grabbed him and yanked him off the ground, he was midway in the air, his feet limply swinging every which way, an elbow pressed against his nose, his arms flailing and his tongue clucking like a decapitated chicken, his eyes screaming like mad. The more he resisted, the longer he might live, it occurred to him, if only to finish "G-d is one!..." Suddenly he was being righted up, his feet wobbly, touching the ground again. Trying to reassure him was a voice, which said in Yiddish, *"Hot nisht kain morah nit" ("*Have no fear, have no fear").

Binyomin took in a whiff of cool air and gasped. That voice! He knew it. Again he shouted, this time saying, "Motchkin, Motchkin!"

"He knows you," Binyomin heard one of his assailants whisper.

When finally he stood firmly on his feet, at first all he could see were the whites of four eyes. Yet, he knew he had to hang tough, whoever or whatever these two men might be. More like an accusation, Binyomin hurled these words at one of the men: "Even if it's the last thing I say, you are a Motchkin."

Unexpectedly, one of the men stuck out his hand and said, "How do you know my name?"

So, realized Binyomin, these two are *Yidden*. What a way to meet! At that, Binyomin laughed aloud and said: "I know a Motchkin voice. You are a Motchkin."

"Aha!" the man said, "it's true."

"Well, you fellows sure scared the wits out of me. And," now looking around for Reb Elazar Nanis, Binyomin asked, "where's Reb Elazar?"

"He abruptly left as we had arranged earlier with him," said Motchkin. "But please, Binyomin...may I call you that?"

"Of course."

"I am called Jossef, and this here," he pointed to his companion, "is Michoel Vishedsky."—Binyomin and Michoel nodded and smiled at each other.—"But," continued Motchkin, "how do you know my last name. Did Reb Elazar mention me?"?

"No."

"But then—what—how?"?

"Very simple, Jossef, I know your father Rabbi Peretz Motchkin in Montreal, your brothers Leibel and Berel, and your sisters, your whole family, including your mother *Henya*. Every day they sit and cry for you, their blind children in prison!"

"How do you know all this?" Binyomin's two newfound friends wanted to know.

Explained Binyomin: "I grew up and spent a good number of my years in Montreal's Lubavitcher Tomchei Tmimim Yeshiva. I know everybody by name. But a Motchkin I know by the voice. There's something about your voice—your voices—a deep guttural sound—I can never forget."

"Rabbi Katz," interjected Michoel, "I must ask you about my older brother, Reb Sholom Ber Vishedsky [nowadays a well-known Lubavitcher rabbi and *mashpia* who

lives on Eastern Parkway, in Brooklyn]."

"Ah, Rabbi Vishedsky!" Binyomin said. "I know him well."

"Tell me," Michoel said, "I know it's not *Pesach*, yet I have four questions of my own."

Amused, Binyomin asked what the questions were.

"Is my brother one of the Rebbe's inner circles of *chassidim*? Is he allowed to hear the Rebbe's *Chassidus* in the Rebbe's private chamber? Does my beloved brother still think much about the rest of his family he had to leave in Chernowitz? And last, does my brother walk around with his beard rolled up in a rubber band or does it hang down?"

In the fast-clipped way Binyomin Katz speaks, this is what he told Michoel: "Sholom Ber's totally chassidic...always part of Lubavitcher inner circles...the Rebbe delivers his *maamarim* to everyone in the *shul*...just look at Sholom Ber's knitted brow, and you know he worries about his family night and day...as for tied up or hanging down—flowing like a waterfall."

Then, quickly Binyomin turned to speak to Jossef.

"Yet your parents still think you and your brother Mullie are blind and rotting in prison."

"We were," said Jossef. "How lucky we are! Those Communist devils boasted to us that never in a million years would we get out of the prison. And yet we have."

"How did you get out?" Binyomin asked.

The three huddled together on the grass, where once Binyomin and Reb Elazar had lain.

"We're safe to talk at length here," said Jossef.

And then Jossef told Binyomin how he and his brother managed to escape their prison guards.

"I tricked them!" said Jossef.

"How?" Binyomin wanted to know.

"Once in a while, Mullie and I got tired of studying Talmud here in Tashkent. So we deceived our rabbi into thinking I had a terrible stomachache. The rabbi insisted that Mullie take me 'outside and you'll feel better.' Of course, I followed his orders and once outside, Mullie and I'd horse around. It worked all the time." Jossef laughed, then Michoel did, too. "The rabbi never suspected my ruse," said Jossef.

"And that's exactly what we did in prison," Jossef added. "We used an interesting piece of logic from the *Gemara*: If you want to argue with me, and want to take something from me, you have to bring proof."

"Or, as it's also written, the burden of proof is on the claimant," said Binyomin.

"Yes," said Jossef, "So I told our warders that we Motchkin brothers were blind. We don't see. It was comic, to us, how we went around the prison groping, touching the walls as two blind man would. After several months, the prison doctors couldn't prove Mullie or I were faking it, so they let us go. We were more trouble than it was worth to keep us, they told us."

"Good for you," Binyomin said.

"But now we need your help, Binyomin," said Jossef.

"How?"

"We're considered underworld figures. Why? For keeping *Shabbos*, for helping

other Jews fight the governmental antisemitic policies. And for that we—Mullie and I—have every black mark in the book against us. And I tell you this: if we continue to live anywhere near Tashkent, we won't live long. But if we can move to a place like Leningrad, where we don't have a blotch on the police blotter there, well, we might just live a long enough time to get visas out of Russia—G-d willing."

"And what do you want from me?" Binyomin asked.

"Help us get a consent from the Rebbe, to move from here," said Jossef.

Of course, agreed Binyomin. And there was no need to thank him, he told the two men.

That night, the other two Jews also told Binyomin that a number of times they had heard Reb Nochum Goldschmidt sharing words of *Chassidus*, like the great sea's voice itself, over the radio from Israel. On Saturday nights they secretly learned *Tanya* and studied the Rebbe's *sichos*, which, explained Michoel, "are translated in Russia and sent here."

The two Jews from Tashkent also revealed to Binyomin what their friends secretly had put him through in the past week. "Of course," laughed Jossef, "without your ever knowing it."

Binyomin was truly surprised.

"This whole past week," Jossef told him, "our friends tailed you. Wherever you went, they went. They checked up on you in your hotel. When you were in synagogue, speaking to people in the dark, in the dim light. Our friends jotted down everything you did."

"What for?" Binyomin said, even more surprised.

"We couldn't take a chance," said Michoel. "Your arrival seemed too good. A man flashing a lot of money. Carrying an expensive camera. Offering to help fellow Jews. Yet we had to find out if you were on the up-and-up. Thus, we went to great lengths. We scaled buildings, your hotel, wherever you were. We checked what you did alone in your room. How you slept. What hours. If you used *negel vasser* in the mornings. If you wore *tzitzis*—and how you prayed with your *tefillin*. We left nothing to chance. Binyomin, you could say whatever you pleased; maybe many unsuspecting Jews would believe you and open their hearts to you, but not us. We wanted to see if you had *emunah*. After all, we have much more to lose. If they ever got us back in prison we'd probably never see daylight again."

"I see," said Binyomin.

"We don't know about *that*," said Jossef, "but we couldn't take chances with you. What if you had been sent by the NKVD to catch us all in a net?"

"Never!" protested Binyomin.

"You realize," Michoel said to Binyomin, "they've done things like that before. In this terrible land, anything is possible."

"Yes," said Jossef.

"But I'm not a counterspy," Binyomin emphasized over and over.

"Our friends told us they were amazed at your abilities," Jossef said.

Michoel's hand flitted through the air, coming to rest on Jossef's right shoulder. "Let me explain it to him," said Michoel to his compatriot. Jossef nodded. "You see, we figured, in your clever tourist outfit, you still weren't pulling too many fast ones over the Russians. They probably sensed you were up to no good, as far as they were

concerned. But what could they do? You made few, if any, mistakes. You even knew correctly how to talk sharply back to them. Yet what amazed us Jews was how you didn't fall apart from the tremendous pressures placed upon you outside your hotels."

"You kept your cool, as you Americans say," Jossef added.

Binyomin Katz bared a big grin. "You know, I knew at all times people were following my every move. But no way did I know that whole blocks of people were involved."

"Ha! You don't know the half of it," said Jossef. "When you walked fast, they walked fast. To throw you off their scent, they changed their clothes three times a day. But the secret police knew you made surreptitious contacts even on the sidewalks, so they literally lined each block."

"Did they!" Binyomin said.

"And how you went undetected, as you passed all those people along the way without taking the bait, astounds me," Michoel said. "I heard reports that as you walked by hundreds of people on the streets, not once did you respond to their hellos or '*Gut Shabbos,*' nor did you turn your head to acknowledge them."

"You see," Binyomin said confidentially, "I'd been forewarned."

"Do you recall all those boys and girls playing games on the streets as you walked by?" said Jossef.

"Uh-huh," Binyomin grunted.

"And all those mothers who were chasing after their kids...moving in all directions around you?" said Michoel.

"Yes?"

"They were not playing ball. They were following you. And the ball was bouncing, and you could never figure out why that ball was always bouncing your way," Jossef said to Binyomin.

"I never knew," Binyomin said.

"All that activity constantly around you was to catch you off guard, to record some remark that could doom you. Yet, thank G-d, you kept your wits about you."

Suddenly, Binyomin stood up, looked at his watch in the moonlight and said, "Gentlemen, I have to be back in my hotel by 12 o'clock."

As the three started to leave the hillock, out of nowhere a dark-skinned man appeared, dressed in the traditional clothes of the citizens of Tashkent. He approached Binyomin and said in Russian: "Maybe you have a match?"

No," Binyomin said. "I don't smoke and I don't have one."

Quickly, Binyomin and his companions held a brief, muffled conference in Yiddish.

"We must knock that man out cold," said Michoel.

Binyomin didn't understand. "This man only asked for a match."

Jossef shook his head. "This man intends to turn us in to the police."

"Look," said Binyomin, "he asked you for a match. I don't have a match and neither do you. So, none of our faces are lit up. He can't see us too well in the dark. He's no way of identifying you two speaking with a foreigner. So now let's make a run for it, each of us going a different way. Okay?"

Before they could do that, the dark stranger himself walked away from them.

When they felt safe again, Motchkin and Vishedsky escorted Katz back down to the street. There they left him and disappeared into the night. Obviously, reasoned

Binyomin, in the lamppost-lit streets his friends didn't want to be identified by the spy, who might still be lurking nearby.

Now alone, the American wended his way through the deserted old marketplace and hastened, more like ran, to his hotel, barely making it before the beginning of the midnight curfew. When he reached the hotel doors, he saw he was not alone; other hotel guests arrived at the same time. Fortunately, the red-bearded hotel guard asked no questions and let them all enter the lobby.

The next morning Binyomin taxied to the *shul*. When he arrived there, he stepped out of the cab and was met by a man ranting at him.

"Last night many Jews were killed because of you!" the man screamed at him.

Binyomin was dumbstruck. How could this be? Everything he'd done was under cover of the night. Yet to think: *Oh my G-d, have I come here so that Jews should die on my account?* he moaned to himself.

Just as he was about to lose his aplomb, he saw another man, standing close to the door of the synagogue, motioning him to come quickly inside the synagogue.

"I suited my action to his sign language, and rushed past the ranting man. Following the more friendly man," said Binyomin, "I walked up a flight of stairs to the top-stairs *shul*. Inside I was amazed to see Lubavitcher worshippers, who usually never attend services openly, sitting in the pews, awaiting my arrival. What could this mean? I wondered."

It turned out that there were nine Lubavitchers in the *shul* and they needed Binyomin to make a *minyan*. But what happened to the other worshippers? he asked the other man. "They left, and since nobody was watching the *shul* after that, we came, hoping to *daven* with you."

And *davened* they did. And when it was over, the Lubavitchers gathered in the courtyard to hear Binyomin give over a *sicha* of the Rebbe and, they whispered in his ears, "Sing songs that the Rebbe taught on *Simchas Torah*." Yet how could he do that in the open courtyard as other Jews and who knew who else, attracted by the gathering, were also filling up the courtyard? As it turned out, Binyomin, who sang many beautiful *niggunim* that afternoon at the *farbrengen*, managed to clue in the others when he intended to sing a particular song of the Rebbe. In turn, the Lubavitchers, hearing each *niggun*, in learning it, repeated it back to Binyomin. The others in the crowd never really knew what was going on.

Finally, when the courtyard filled up with all kinds of people, the Lubavitchers panicked and told Binyomin to stop singing, lest they all be arrested later by the spies among them. Some suggested that Binyomin do something out of the ordinary. But what, why? he asked. "Let the authorities think you're a bit mad. Then they'll turn a deaf ear."

Taking a cue from King David, who feigned madness to escape certain death, and a cue from the early *chassidim* who were considered wild men by the *Misnagdim*, Binyomin Katz, also taking a cue from his own childhood, in the intense heat of that Tashkent day, somersaulted, and laughed and cried and somersaulted again, and feigned a new kind of madness. We can only imagine that seeing him, King David and the many thousands of *chassidim* past warmly smiled on this kindred spirit, even as the Russian spies in the crowd turned away from this "daffy" American tourist and his wild behavior.

* * *

After leaving Russia, for the next year and a half Binyomin Katz dwelled in Israel and worked closely with Rabbi Simcha Gorodetsky, making up "family units" and visas for Russian Jews.

Finally, Binyomin Katz returned for good, to Crown Heights, his undercover assignment done, and he turned over all his film to the Rebbe. The Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Hodakov, cautioned Binyomin not to speak about his Russian activities to anyone, "lest remaining Jews there might pay a heavy price for someone's loose tongue," said the secretary. This, Binyomin adhered to.

So, one can easily imagine, that on the day, in 1967, he was called into Rabbi Hodakov's office and accused of betraying the Rebbe's trust, how flabbergasted Binyomin was.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Binyomin protested. "Eh? Well, I have a tape recorder and I'm going to play something and you tell me what you hear."

On the tape Binyomin heard Professor Velvel Green [now living in Israel] speaking to an audience about *Yiddishkeit*. Suddenly, some of the audience demanded to know why the Rebbe had so far refused to encourage demonstrations against Russia's maltreatment of its Jews. Then, unmistakably, Binyomin Katz heard his own voice conversing with Professor Green. He was asking Binyomin for assistance in responding to the question.

Binyomin heard himself, on the tape, tell the audience, "I cannot answer your question because I am not the Lubavitcher Rebbe, but I'll tell you this: The Rebbe does whatever he can and I am a witness to the fact that he can and does; more than that, I cannot tell you."

Then Rabbi Hodakov told Binyomin. "Even that shouldn't have been said!"

Such accusations coming from Rabbi Hodakov, one of the most respected and revered holy men in the world of Lubavitch, devastated Binyomin Katz. "Rabbi Hodakov," his voice all choked up, he pleaded, "What did I say wrong?"

"Even that...even that little!"

Binyomin knew the secretary was right. A slight infringement of the agreement is still a promise broken.

Crestfallen, Binyomin agreed, to the Rebbe's secretary, to be absolutely reticent."

More *tsoris*. A few days later, Binyomin was summoned to Rabbi Hodakov's office. Again the secretary had to instruct him.

"Listen, there is a picture from the city of Rostov floating around 770. Kids are selling photographs of the Rebbe Rashab's gravesite. "

"May I remind you, Rabbi Hodakov, I gave all my film to the Rebbe at the time I had a *yechidus*."

"Binyomin, then help me investigate how all this started: its source and who's involved."

"I think I know," Binyomin said. "What I heard is that a well-to-do man named Reb Schneur Zalman Gurowitz from Montreal just returned from a trip with his wife to Russia and I believe those are his pictures."

The secretary phoned Gurowitz to check out Binyomin Katz's tip.

Gurowitz confirmed the alleged details. Yes, he was in Russia and took photographs, including several in Rostov, of the Rebbe Rashab's gravesite. "But," he

added, "someone stole them from my home."

Rabbi Hodakov told Gurowitz he knew where some of the photographs were.

"Where?" asked an excited Gurowitz.

"All over *770*."

"What!"

"Yes," said the secretary. "Kids are selling the pictures."

Of course, he immediately promised Gurowitz to retrieve them, and said he was "happy to hear they are your pictures."

After the phone call, a relieved Rabbi Hodakov and Rabbi Binyomin Katz smiled peacefully at each other.

* * *

For a third time, Binyomin was called into Rabbi Hodakov's office. "Your name is in the newspapers. Why?"

"Rabbi Hodakov," explained Binyomin, "I gave no interview nor did I have anything to do with it. Anyway, it's over two years since my last trip abroad. People left Russia and went to Israel, and they told their story how they met some young man from the Rebbe, and that is how, I believe, it was done."

"Well, the *chassidim* here who came from Russia knew many of the Rebbe's *maamarim* from those years. Reb Yoel Kahan wondered how did they know the *niggunim* of the Rebbe when they sing. Everybody said "it all came down to a young man who came to us and sang for three hours. That young man was probably you."

"Of course, that was then part of my job. But I'm not responsible for others speaking up now in newspapers."

Rabbi Hodakov said no more.

In the end, Binyomin Katz was responsible for at least 500 Jews permanently leaving the Soviet Union with valid visas, and for paving a paper trail for the 100,000 Jews who followed.

* * *

If you're expecting this true story to be made into a Hollywood spy thriller, don't. Most of the main cast of characters are alive and thriving in the service of the Rebbe, and I suspect they'd rather do their work to spread *Yiddishkeit*, not Paramount Pictures.

Still, you should also know this before we close the book for good on this story.

Once, Binyomin Katz paid a visit to a relative at the Lubavitcher Center in Stanford Hill (London). There he met the famous *chassid*, Reb Mendel Futerfas (o.b.m.), considered one of the greatest Lubavitcher *mashpeim* (one who teaches others *Chassidus* and offers guidance) for Russian Jewry.

Reb Futerfas asked Katz a very simple question. "Do you have any good news to tell me about the many *talmidim* I left in Russia?"

"Yes, indeed," Binyomin cheerfully offered.

"Well," Reb Futerfas said, almost chidingly, "keep it to yourself. Whatever you want to say to me, don't you dare say it in *shul*."

"Why not?" asked Binyomin (now, in 2000, the principal of a Lubavitcher high school for boys, and a *kashrus* consultant, in a small town in Connecticut).

Said Reb Mendel: "I'll tell you something about the Lubavitcher *shul* in London. The watchmaker that you talked with today, in my opinion, might be working for the Russian government, and the man who *davens* beside him also works for the Russian

government. And that man *davening* from the *omud* today, I believe, also works for the Russian government. In fact, as I myself looked around the *shul* today, I concluded that there's not a Jew there who does not work for the Russian government."

"How can you say that, Reb Mendel?" said Binyomin.

Futerfas said, I'll tell you. I sat in prison in Russia for my beliefs in the Rebbe and Lubavitch. And I'll put it to you straight as I can. In *shul*, don't ever talk to me. Or I'll," and here he shook his fist in Katz's face, "I'll give you something to remember me by."

Binyomin laughed nervously and said, "Promise, Reb Mendel. I rather learn your lesson the easy way."

"But, my friend," he said to Binyomin, "I do want to talk to you. Come to my house. Many people come there to buy plastic. I am now raising money for Russian Jews by selling plastic. The plastic is supplied to me by my relatives, the Deitsch family from Connecticut. Yet I want to see you on other matters."

Binyomin agreed to come to Reb Mendel's house.

"Then, this is what I want you to do," Reb Mendel explained. "Come to my house, ring the bell three times and hide behind the nearby big tree. I shall appear in the large front window. If I bid you to come in, come in. If not, wait behind that tree until I tell you. I may want to clear my house first of guests."

Binyomin Katz agreed to follow the instructions.

That night, he arrived at Futerfas's home, rang the bell three times and hid immediately behind the big tree. From the window, shortly, Reb Mendel appeared and motioned Katz to enter the house.

Once in the living room, Reb Mendel praised the work Binyomin had done in Russia. He told the American that all the Lubavitcher *chassidim* he had met there, he himself had taught.

Suddenly, in the middle of their conversation, a well-known out-of-town rabbi appeared and entered Reb Mendel's living room. Seeing him, Reb Mendel looked a bit startled. He thought he and Katz were alone in the house: unbeknownst to him, his other visitor had until then been in the plastics storage room attached to the house.

But upon seeing this warm, caring individual again, Binyomin's face lit up.

"Hello, Binyomin," said the out-of-town rabbi, "what's new in Russia?"

Later, after the other rabbi left his house, Reb Mendel Futerfas slapped Binyomin Katz's face.

Rubbing his stinging face, Binyomin demanded to know why Reb Mendel struck him.

"I'll tell you," said Reb Mendel, who then confided a personal experience.

Via plane, he was traveling to Australia to collect money for Russian Jews. "I tell you, Binyomin, the plane was three-quarters loaded with Russian spies."

As Reb Mendel was speaking, Binyomin couldn't help wonder why Reb Mendel always saw Russian spies wherever he went. Why was the *mashpia* so obsessed with Russian deviltry? Then, suddenly a *posuk* in *Tehillim* came to him: *Once you sit in the shadow of death you don't forget it*. This, he realized, was where Reb Mendel was coming from.

"Tell me, Reb Mendel . . ."

"Yes?"

"You just told me everybody in the Lubavitcher *shul* at one time or another is—or

was—working for the Russian government. How about...?"

Reb Mendel leaned over and whispered some shocking words in Binyomin's ear.

At first Binyomin Katz blanched. He couldn't believe he was hearing such words. But then he remembered the man facing him was Reb Mendel the *mashpia*. Was this an honorable lie? No! concluded Binyomin. What Reb Mendel had told him aloud was the truth—what Reb Mendel actually felt and believed—compared to the cruelest lies that are told in silence. For the rest of his life, Binyomin knew there would be no way for him to refute these words, especially from a man who sat "in the shadow of death."

From then on whenever he visited Reb Mendel in London, Binyomin Katz always rang his house bell three times, went behind the tree, waited for the hand to bid him enter the house, and he never ever talked to him in *shul*.

This was Binyomin Katz's final lesson of this true adventure, his own personal dawning.

Such silences glistened, transformed, cheered, and, men like Binyomin Katz remain totally convinced, helped turn the Russian Jews' long night's journey into day and eventually destroyed the Soviet Union in 1991.

* * *

According to Moses Maimonides,[25] one of the greatest authorities on Jewish law, Moshiach will have the power of prophecy even before the Redemption[26]; and after a prophet establishes himself to be a true prophet, it is forbidden by Torah law to doubt him.[27] The Rebbe has made numerous prophecies all of which come true.

Not so well known was the 1972 private audience the Rebbe held with young leaders of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA). Among other pressing issues, the Rebbe discussed Russian Jews.

To every one in the room, the Rebbe made passionate their sense of hearing. Perhaps some of these UJA leaders were surprised to hear the Rebbe speak up on this subject, and perhaps some, if not all, were later stirred to action, yet the Rebbe spoke out, and every man and woman in that room heard his finely framed speech, in English. This is what he said:

"The only reason for the Soviet Jews' exodus from Russia is to become more identified with Jewishness. They have better apartments in Moscow. They have left their businesses, all their connections have been severed, they are trying to adjust themselves to a new life in a new country, new language and new habits.

"They will have deprivation on many levels, but they will have the maximum possibility of being identified in the tradition of their grandfather or grandmother or the Jewish tradition in general, to have Jewishness in everyday life.

"Even if the apartment is very important and the job is very important, they must be provided with the proper education, which from their point of view means Jewish education for their children, and proper education from their point of view means the Jewish tradition.

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25. Rambam, acronym for Moses ben Maimon. Spanish physician. Theologian. Jurist. Codifier of the Jewish law. A sage whose commentaries on the Torah and the Talmud are Torah classics. Possibly the greatest medieval Jewish scholar, halachist and philosopher. 1135-1204.

26. *Igeres Taiman*, ch. 3; *Sefer HaSichos 5751* (1990-1991), vol. 2, p. 789, *Parshas Shoftim*.

27. *Mishneh Torah, Yesodai HaTorah 10:5; Sefer HaSichos 5751 (1990-91), vol. 2, p. 792, Parshas Shoftim.*

"The Soviet father is very eager that his children and he himself will receive an education even if he's 50 years old or 40 years old or 20 years old, because in Russia he had no opportunity to study.

"I don't know what is the priority, if it is not helping someone from Russia who is now in Israel to survive as a Jew or to help a Jew living in Kiev or in Odessa to survive."[28]

This is what the Rebbe told his UJA audience. Yet, we already have a strong sense that the Rebbe's first priority had to be, for a long time, "to help a Jew living in Kiev or in Odessa to survive," and that for any concerned Jewish leader the world over is the way it should be. After all, as it's written, "whoever saves a single soul is as though he saved a universe" (Talmud, *Sanhedrin*).

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28. From a private audience of UJA leaders with the Rebbe in 1972.

Appendix B

The Rebbe Discusses Education, Russian Jews, Tzedakah and the Holocaust

Nissan 5759 - March 1999 - *The Chabad Times Magazine* - Page 31

At 11:00 p.m., Sunday evening, March 4, 1972, a small representative group of young Leadership Cabinet members of the United Jewish Appeal was received by the Rebbe.

The session lasted into the early hours of the morning and was, by consensus of those who participated, a landmark of Jewish exploration.

The Rebbe said: There is a special goal, which takes priority over all others, and this [is] Education. By educating people, you are preparing the young of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. Education is not a question of making someone who is not learned more learned, someone who is not fluent more fluent, someone who is not charitable to become charitable or more charitable. Education now is a question of saving a soul, for the Jewish people and saving him for humanity.

Taking into account that a child is someone whose need for education must be met at the first opportunity possible, money can be borrowed now and paid tomorrow, or a year from tomorrow. Even if you have no money neither in cash nor in pledges, it is the first priority and the first duty and obligation of every Jew who can do something in this realm to invest it in Education.

I am not asking you for a check. What I am asking is that everyone of you, before asking someone for a check tomorrow, should become more Jewish than today by adding at least one *mitzvah* in your personal life, in your private life and in the life of your family. I know this from my personal experience. (Despite the fact that I am now 70 years old) nevertheless I hope that tomorrow morning, I will be a better Jew than today. Performing a *mitzvah* in your private life as a private person has an immediate impact on communal activities.

The only reason for the Soviet Jews' exodus from Russia is to become more identified with Jewishness. They have better apartments in Moscow. They have left their businesses, all their connections have been severed, they are trying to adjust themselves to a new life in a new country, new language and new habits.

They will have deprivation on many levels, but they will have the maximum possibility of being identified in the tradition of their grandfather or grandmother or the Jewish tradition in general, to have Jewishness in everyday life.

Even if the apartment is very important and the job is very important, they must be provided with the proper education, which from their point of view means Jewish education for their children, and proper education from their point of view means the Jewish tradition.

The Soviet father is very eager that his children and he himself will receive an education even if he's 50 years old or 40 years old or 20 years old, because in Russia he had no opportunity to study.

I don't know what is the priority, if it is not helping someone from Russia who is now in Israel to survive as a Jew or to help a Jew living in Kiev or in Odessa to survive.

The delegation asked: We are going on a pilgrimage to Warsaw, and Auschwitz to commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto. As we get deeper and more intense in reading the history of these places, we're all having many problems with the questions that the Holocaust and Auschwitz bring [up]. Where do we start in all this?—What did the whole thing mean?

The Rebbe responded: In general, this question, about the Holocaust, means: "I cannot understand whether there is a G-d because I cannot accept that G-d exists and nevertheless he permitted Hitler to commit all of these atrocities." That is justifying one's not believing in G-d Almighty or one's not performing his obligations in general. What I am trying to say is that that's a justification of something that a person is looking for, a justification to have an easier life, to ease one's conscience by not being a Jew as he understands a Jew must be. It's a justification encompassing G-d Almighty, the conduct of the business of the universe in general.

If history teaches us something that we must not repeat or emulate, the best lesson can be taken from the destruction of the Second Temple. We witnessed something so terrible it must bring every Jew to become more identified with his Jewishness, not by giving charity alone, but by putting on *tefillin* and observing *Shabbat*, not Sunday, not as a day of rest, but as a day of holiness. Because it is holy you must rest. Sunday is a day of rest because you are resting. It's the reverse.

And if everyone has an obligation to fight Hitler, it can be done by letting this thing that Hitler had in mind to annihilate not only to continue, but also to make it on a bigger and deeper scale. Hitler was not interested in annihilating the spirit.

This must not infect the German people, must not infect the Russian people, must not infect the Polish people, and because of that he had all the Polish people and Russian people and German people on his side. They regarded the Jews as a foreign body, and a body that does not belong must be eliminated.

If you influence a Jew not to become assimilated and to profess his Jewishness, his pride, his inspiration, and his joy, you are defeating Hitlerism. If someone does his best in his personal life to be Jewish, everyone sees in the street that he is a Jew, that his home is a Jewish home, that he is proud and that it is not a burden, but his pride, it is his life, it defeats the idea of Hitlerism.

When you go to Auschwitz, you must profess that Auschwitz must not happen again. You can ensure [that] by becoming a living example of a living Jew. It has nothing to do with chauvinism. You are not trying to convert someone to become a Jew, but you are fighting, you are struggling for survival, not only as a human being, but also as a Jew. In our time, it is a very acute problem because every one of us must do something, not only to perform this task, but also to replace all those Jews who were murdered and annihilated. Their tasks are our direct duty.

For a Jew, it is not enough to exist, he must be holy. What does holiness mean? It means that special action, when he performs any action, eating his lunch, he should have something else in mind, not only to provide for his hunger. He has a purpose that

is on [a] higher level than his eating. Similarly, when he makes money in his factory or in his supermarket, it must be only a means to something higher.

If you have seven days in a week, you cannot live all these days on the same level. You must have. something on a higher level, and—this day is *Shabbat*. There is an instruction that all the six days of the week must be considered as a preparation for *Shabbat*. What does it mean? It means that Sunday and Monday have been made more holy because there is also an element of preparation [for] a holier day of *Shabbat*.

What is my purpose in bringing this out? I hope that all of you are very successful businessmen and you are doing very good things with your money. As I said before, you will certainly do more tomorrow than today. *Tzedaka* for the purpose of *tzedaka* is one of the biggest *mitzvahs*. You need not have any additional qualification.

If you make a common denominator between one Jew and the second, [the] same thing that is of vital importance to both of them, that means that they become one in the same thing that is vital to, both of them. The giver must give of himself, and to give from himself he must become more involved in Jewishness in general.

One explanation is that G-d Almighty has given so many *mitzvahs* because he's trying to make it possible for everyone to be a "*Mitzvah* Jew." G-d Almighty has given the possibility to everyone, on every level, to become holy, and because of that he has given every possibility to achieve this goal. He promised us with 600 and 13 possibilities for every Jew to become holy.

I am very happy to see so many American-born Jews and young Jews who are successful in the business world but nevertheless are interested in some things on a higher level. As businessmen, you certainly know, that capital must be used to its full capacity. If he's young and he's energetic, a businessman will never be satisfied with 5 percent; he'll put every dollar toward making the maximum.

If he has heard about someone who had gained 12 percent he must at least do twice as much because he's a leader, he's a young man, he's an American.

If all this attention is given for material dollars, certainly it must go for the spiritual dollar. If you gain something, you'll show an example to all the people around you. Your gain will be multiplied by all these people around you, and they will [follow] your example and try to do better, as is common in the United States.

If I may add another suggestion on top of this—an additional task: take upon yourself, I hope for tomorrow morning, to add to your Jewishness; by performing one *mitzvah*. A good thing for every one of us is to add in the study of Torah on top of this additional *mitzvah* that you'll take.

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"In 1970, thousands of visitors came from many different countries to participate in the celebration of two decades of the Rebbe's leadership. On the day that many of them were scheduled to return home, the Rebbe held a special gathering. As it progressed, he sensed their tension about getting to the airport on time, and he began to tell a story about himself and his father-in-law, the Previous Rebbe. 'He was living in Leningrad at the time, and had planned a trip to Moscow,' the Rebbe recalled. 'His train was set to leave in a half hour. This was during the period when the Communists had declared open war on religion, particularly against my father-in-law's efforts to promote Judaism. He was followed wherever be went, and word had arrived that the government was ready to stop him at any cost. When I entered his room, I was

surprised to see that although his train was scheduled to leave shortly, he was perfectly composed, working at his desk, totally unconcerned with the impending danger. I asked him: 'How can you have such self-control at a time like this?' He told me that his father had once spoken of something called 'success with time.' "What does that mean?" I asked. He explained: "You cannot add more hours to the day, so when you are involved in an activity, you must be totally immersed in it, as if nothing before it or after it exists at all." The Rebbe smiled after telling the story. "I realize it is difficult to expect that people who have a flight in a short while, and who still need to pack and say their goodbyes, will be able to totally focus on the present moment, to be oblivious to the fact that there exist airplane tickets, an airplane, a Kennedy Airport! So I will attempt to keep this gathering as brief as possible, and G-d should help that we all have "success with time" in the future.'"

Afterword

Of course, there are many more secrets of the Rebbe that aren't mentioned in this book. Why not? Because. Yet I can't leave it that.

So: this book prints most of the secrets that are fit to print. Yet I'm certain, in the sacred homes and Chabad houses of Lubavitchers around the world, there are many people yearning to tell the world how truly great and caring the Rebbe has been to Jews, indeed to all mankind; every Lubavitcher stands ready to reveal all the Rebbe's effort, all his secrets, all the behind-the-scenes work both the Rebbe Rayatz and our Rebbe have done to save every single Jew and help him or her to return to *Yiddishkeit*, including those left behind in the former U.S.S.R.

Much of these efforts can now be revealed, and that, hopefully, is what you've come away from this book with. But every Lubavitcher also knows the Rebbe's work goes on with an ever-growing presence of Lubavitcher emissaries still encouraging and helping their fellow C.I.S. Jews.

Behind this above-ground work—and thank G-d the underground days are over and done with!—are many more secrets, which, if revealed, might hurt many people still in the C.I.S. today. .

So I leave you with this: As we Jews are wont to say, all such secrets, and other answers, will be revealed with the coming of Moshiach—and may that time be now!

Glossary

Acharon Shel Pesach (Hebrew) The last day of Passover.

Adar (Hebrew) Twelfth month in the Jewish calendar. In a leap year, an extra month is intercalated after *Shevat* (the 11th month) and is called *Adar Rishon* (the 1st *Adar*), immediately followed by *Adar Sheni* (the 2nd *Adar*); *Adar Sheni* is then the regular or principal *Adar* for purposes of observing Purim and other special occasions related to that month.

Afikoman (Aramaic) The piece of *matzah*, broken off from the middle one of the three *matzahs*, at the *seder* service on the first two nights of Passover. It became customary among the *chassidim* to preserve a piece of the *Afikoman* as a charm for protection against the evil eye.

Ahavas Yisrael (Hebrew) Love of a fellow Jew.

Aibeshter (Hebrew) G-d.

Aitz Chaim (Hebrew) The eternal Tree of Life.

Aleichem Shalom (Yiddish) Responding to "*Shalom Aleichem*" ("Peace be with you"), with a greeting of "*Aleichem Shalom*" ("Unto you, peace").

Alef (Hebrew) The Hebrew letter *A*.

Alef-Beis (Hebrew) The Hebrew alphabet.

Aliyah (Hebrew) "Ascent"; being called up to partake in the communal reading of the Torah; immigration to *Eretz Yisrael*.

Amora (Aramaic) Sage/rabbi of the post-mishnaic period (200-500 C.E.), who interpreted the *Mishnah*. Their interpretations comprise the bulk of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds.

Am Yisrael (Hebrew) The Nation of Israel.

Anash (Hebrew) Cordial term for the chassidic fraternity.

Aron Kodesh (Hebrew) The Ark, the place where the Torah scrolls are held in synagogue.

Avodah (Hebrew) The service of G-d, whether in sacrifice, prayer or self-effacement.

Baal Darhsin (Hebrew) A man who expounds Torah.

Baal(ei) Habatim (Hebrew) A supporter of good causes.

Baal Hageulah (Hebrew) A person redeemed on a certain date.

Baal(ei) Teshuva (Hebrew) A Jew who returns to G-d; a penitent who returns to the Torah way of life after having gone astray.

Bais (Hebrew) The letter *B*.

Bar/Bas Mitzvah (Hebrew) Boys coming of age at 13; girls at 12.

B.C.E. Before the Common Era.

Beis Din (Hebrew) A Jewish court of law.

Beis Hamidrash (Hebrew) A synagogue and place of study.

Beis Hamikdash (Hebrew) The Holy Temple.

Beis Midrash (Hebrew) A small sanctuary.

Bench (Yiddish) Say Grace after meals.

Bereishis (Hebrew) The book of Genesis.

Bimah (Hebrew) The dais in the center of a synagogue, where the Torah is read.

Blood Libel (*Alilat Dam*) (Hebrew) This term refers to the "blood accusations" that began against the Jews in the 12th century and lasted until the early 1900s. The allegation that Jews used the blood of a murdered non-Jew in the preparation of *matzahs* occurred in such cities as Fulda (1230), Prague (1305), Regensburg (1474), and Hungary (1882); and the last accusations happened before World War I in Kiev (1911). These allegations were hurled by perverted, bloodthirsty villains and were condemned, which eventually led to the Jews' acquittal. Another name for this accusation is *Mamzayr-Bilbul* (Hebrew, "Illegitimate Perplexity") or *Blut Bilbulim* (Yiddish, "Blood Confusion")—Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of the Sayings of the Jewish People* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), p. 258.

Bochur (Hebrew) An unmarried male.

Borchuni Lesholom (Hebrew) Bless me with peace.

Bsoros Tovos (Hebrew) Happy Tidings.

C.E. Common Era.

Chabad (Hebrew) A chassidic movement founded by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, 1745-1812. The word comprises the initials of *Chochmah, Binah, Daas*: Hebrew for wisdom, understanding and knowledge.

Chabadnik (Yiddish) A follower of the Chabad movement.

Chag Sameach (Hebrew) Happy Holiday.

Chai (Hebrew) Life.

Chanukah (Hebrew) (lit., "dedication") An eight-day festival that begins *Kislev* 25, commemorating the Maccabees' rededication of the Holy Temple in the second century B.C.E. and marked by the kindling of lights.

Chassid(im) (Hebrew) (literally, "a pious man") A follower and disciple of a chassidic rebbe.

Chassidism/Chassidus (Hebrew) The movement of spiritual reawakening within Judaism founded by the Baal Shem Tov.

Chayus (Hebrew) Vitality.

Cheder (Yiddish-Hebrew) Jewish primer school.

Chevra (Hebrew) Society

Chitas (Hebrew) Acronym for *Chumash* (Torah), *Tefillin* (Psalms), and *Tanya*. All three are studied/spoken in daily portions as prescribed by the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe in early 1900s.

Chof (Hebrew) 20.

Chof Menachem Av Twentieth of the month of Av.

Chumash (Hebrew) Pentateuch; the Five Books of Moses; Torah.

Chupah (Hebrew) The wedding canopy.

Chutzpa (Yiddish-Hebrew) Nerve; insolence.

Chutzpadik (Yiddish) Exhibiting chutzpah (nerve, gall).

Da (Russian) Yes.

Daven (Yiddish) To pray.

Dayan(im) (Hebrew) Religious judges.

Divrei Elokim Chaim (Hebrew) The words of the Living G-d.

Druzhba (Russian) Friendship.

Dveikus (Hebrew) An ecstatic state of cleaving to G-d.

Echad (Hebrew) One.

Emunah (Hebrew) Faith in G-d.

Eretz Yisrael (Hebrew) The Land of Israel.

Erev (Hebrew) The eve of (a Jewish holiday or Sabbath).

Eruv (Hebrew) An area encircled by rope in order for Jews to carry inside the roped-off area on the Sabbath.

Esrog (Hebrew) Citron, one of the four species used during *Succos*.

Farbreng (Yiddish) To participate at a chassidic gathering.

Farbrengen (Yiddish) A chassidic gathering.

Frum (Yiddish) A Jew who practices his Orthodox Jewish religion.

Gabbai (Hebrew) In the *chassidic* community, the Rebbe's personal aide and attendant. Synagogue treasurer.

Gartel (Hebrew) A prayer belt.

Geirus (Hebrew) Conversion of a woman.

Gemara (Aramaic) The talmudic traditions, discussions and rulings of the *Amoraim*, based mainly on the *Mishnah*, and forming the bulk of the Babylonian Talmud and Jerusalem Talmud.

Gematria (Aramaic) The numerical value of the letters that comprise a word in the Holy Tongue, and the derivation of in-sights therefrom.

Gentile A non-Jew.

Ger(im) (Hebrew) A convert to Judaism.

Gett (Hebrew) A Jewish divorce.

Geulah (Hebrew) Redemption.

Glasnost (Russian) The declared public policy within the U.S.S.R. of openly and frankly discussing economic and political realities.

Golus (Hebrew) Exile.

Goy(im) (Hebrew) Non-Jews.

Goyishe (Yiddish) Non-Jewish.

Gut (Yiddish) Good.

Guten Chodesh (Yiddish) Good month.

Gut Shabbat (Yiddish) Good Sabbath.

Haftorah (Hebrew) The prophetic lesson read after the Torah reading on the Sabbath or a Jewish holiday.

Haggadah (Hebrew) The story of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt.

Hakodesh Boruch Hu (Hebrew) The Holy One Blessed be He, G-d.

Hakofos (Hebrew) The seven processions made with the Torah scrolls, around the synagogue, on *Simchas Torah*.

Halachah (Hebrew) Jewish Law.

Hashem (Hebrew) G-d.

Hashgacha Protis (Hebrew) Divine Providence.

Haskalah (literally, "enlightenment") A movement originating in 18th century Germany to acquire culture and customs of the outside world. An adherent was called a *maskil*.

Hatzlacha (Hebrew) Success.

Havdalah (Hebrew) The ritual ceremony concluding the Sabbath and Festivals.

Hayom Yom (Hebrew) Day to Day.

Heter (Hebrew) A special law.

Hiskashrus (Hebrew) Bonding between the Rebbe and the *chassid*.

Kabbalah (Hebrew) (literally, "the received tradition") The body of classical Jewish mystical teachings.

Kabbolas Shabbat (Hebrew) (literally, "receiving *Shabbos*") Friday evening praying.

Kaporos (Hebrew) Atonement ceremony on eve of Yom Kippur.

Kapote (Yiddish) Black frock coat, usually worn in honor of the Sabbath.

Kasher (Hebrew) To make something *kosher*.

Kashrus (Hebrew) Observance of the kosher laws. Dietary proprietary of foods by Torah law.

Kavanah (Hebrew) A directed intention of holy purpose.

Kedusha (Hebrew) Holiness.

Keitz(im) (Hebrew) A particularly auspicious time for the Messiah to bring the Exile to an end.

Kelippot (Hebrew) Shells or evil covers of man's spiritual core that form a barrier between man and G-d.

Kever (Hebrew) Resting place.

Kiddush (Hebrew) Blessing over wine expressing the sanctity of *Shabbat* or a festival.

Kiddush Levanah (Hebrew) Benediction of the New Moon.

Kinus Torah (Hebrew) A special meeting; gathering; convention.

Kiruv (Hebrew) (literally, "bringing close") The brotherly endeavor of familiarizing a fellow Jew with Torah and *mitzvahs*.

Kislev (Hebrew) Ninth month of the Hebrew calendar, corresponding to November-December.

Klal Yisrael (Hebrew) The entire Jewish nation.

Kohen (Kohanim) (Hebrew) Priests of the Temple.

Kol D'momoh Daka (Hebrew) In a very sweet, beautiful voice.

Kol Gadol (Hebrew) A big voice.

Kosher (Hebrew) (literally, "fit for use") An adjective used to indicate that food or religious articles have met the standards Torah law prescribes for their use.

Kos Shel Brocha (Aramaic) A cup of blessing, from which the Rebbe pours wine for everyone who asks.

Krias Shema (Hebrew)(literally, "the reading of *Shema*") (a) the daily declaration of faith; (b) the daily stocktaking that accompanies the reading of the *Shema* and certain other passages before retiring at night.

Kristallnacht (Yiddish) (literally, "crystal night") The night of broken glass.

Kugel (Yiddish) Noodle or bread suet pudding, frequently cooked with raisins.

Lag B'Omer (Hebrew) The thirty-third day of the counting of the *Omer*. Also commemorates the cessation of the plague that carried off many disciples of Rabbi Akiva.

Lechaim (Hebrew) A toast.

L'havdil (Hebrew) Word to separate sacred from secular matters, in speech and in print.

Loshan Hara (Hebrew) False slander.

Lubavitch (Russian) (literally, "town of love") The town in White Russia that served as the center of *Chabad* Chassidism from 1813 to 1915 and whose name has become synonymous with the movement.

Maamar(im) (Hebrew) A formal chassidic discourse first delivered by a rebbe.

Maariv (Hebrew) The evening prayer service.

Maasim Tovim (Hebrew) Good deeds.

Machzor(im) (Hebrew) Special prayer book for the High Holy Days.

Mar Cheshvan (Hebrew) 8th month of the Hebrew calendar, corresponding to October-November.

Mashgiach (Hebrew) An Orthodox rabbi who, as spiritual guide, oversees the proper *kashrus* method of food preparation.

Mashpia (Mashpiim) (Hebrew) One who teaches others *Chassidus* and offers guidance.

Mashke (Hebrew) Whiskey.

Matzah (Hebrew) The unleavened bread eaten on Passover.

Megillat Esther (Hebrew) The biblical scroll of Esther.

Melamed (Hebrew) A teacher or private tutor.

Melava Malka (Hebrew) A festive meal eaten after the Sabbath is over.

Menachem Av (Hebrew) 5th month in the Jewish calendar, corresponding to July-August; also referred to as *Av*.

Mesader Kiddushin (Hebrew) The rabbi who performs the wedding ceremony.

Mesirus Nefush (Hebrew) Self-sacrifice.

Mes-Mitzvah (Hebrew) A once-in-a-lifetime occasion.

Mezuzah (Hebrew) (literally, "doorpost") Tiny parchment scroll affixed to a doorpost.

Midrash (Hebrew) The classical collection of the talmudic sages' homiletical teachings on the Bible. The terms refers both to the method of interpretation and to the literature itself.

Mikveh (Hebrew) A ritual bath.

Milah (Hebrew) Circumcision.

Mincha (Hebrew) Afternoon prayer service.

Minhag(im) (Hebrew) Custom.

Minyan (Hebrew) Quorum of ten Jewish men required for Divine service.

Misnaged/Misnagdim (Hebrew) Early opponent of the chassidic movement.

Mitzrayim (Hebrew) Ancient Egypt.

Mitzvah (Hebrew) A religious obligation; one of the 613 Commandments.

Mohel (Hebrew) One who performs ritual circumcisions.

Moshiach (Hebrew) Messiah.

Motzoei Shabbos (Hebrew) The night following the Sabbath day.

Muktzeh (Hebrew) Anything pertaining to work that may not be handled on the Sabbath.

Nachas (Hebrew-Yiddish) Pride and joy.

Natchalnik (Russian) Captain.

Neshama (Hebrew) A Jewish soul.

Neshama Kelalis (Hebrew) A general Jewish soul.

Negel Vasser (Hebrew) Ritual washing of hands in the morning and after leaving a bathroom.

Nichum Aveilim (Hebrew) Condolences.

Niggun (Hebrew) Melody, usually, wordless, especially one figuring in Divine service.

Nusach (Hebrew) Prayer rite traditionally followed by a particular group.

Nyet (Russian) No.

O.b.m. Of blessed memory.

Olim (Hebrew) New immigrants.

Omer (Hebrew) Dry measure. Denotes the period between Passover and *Shavuos*.

Omud (Hebrew) A stand where the cantor prays or chants.

Oyasnenie (Russian) Explanation.

Ohel (Hebrew) (literally, "tent") Where a *tzaddik* is buried.

Parsha (Hebrew) The portion of the Torah read publicly each week.

Perestroika (Russian) Reconstruction.

Perush(im) (Hebrew) A commentary.

Pesach (Hebrew) Passover.

Pidyon (Hebrew) A request of a Rebbe, made in writing.

Pidyon Haben (Hebrrew) A ritual in which a father redeems his firstborn.

Pintele Yid(den) (Yiddish) Jewish spark.

Pirkei Avos (Aramaic) *Ethics of the Fathers*.

Psik Reisha (Aramaic) (literally, "Cutting off the head").

Purim (Hebrew) (literally, "lots") A one-day festival falling on 14 *Adar* and commemorating the miraculous salvation of the Jews of the Persian Empire in the fourth century B.C.E.

Rabbi (Hebrew) A qualified authority in Torah learning.

Rabbonim (Hebrew) A selective group of gathered rabbis.

Rachmonos (Hebrew) Pity.

Rav (Hebrew) A rabbi; the halachic authority and spiritual guide of a Jewish community.

Rebbe (Yiddish) Religious leader of a *chassidic* community.

Rebbetzin (Yiddish) The wife of a rebbe.

Rikud (Hebrew) A type of dance.

Rosh Hashana (Hebrew) Jewish New Year festival, *Tishrei* 1 and 2.

Rosh Yeshiva (Hebrew) Director of a rabbinic academy.

Ruach Hakodesh (Hebrew) A Divine spirit.

Samizdat (Russian) Underground newsletter.

Seder (Hebrew) The order of the festive meal at home on first and second nights of *Pesach*.

Sefer (Hebrew) Book.

Sefer Minhagim (Hebrew) Book of Lubavitcher customs.

Sefer Torah (Hebrew) Torah scroll.

Selichos (Hebrew) (a) Special prayers before dawn during the week preceding Rosh Hashana; (b) the days during which these prayers are recited.

Seuda (Hebrew) ,Festive meal.

Seudas Shlishis (Hebrew) The third meal on *Shabbat* eaten before sunset.

Shabbat/Shabbos (Hebrew) The Sabbath.

Shabbatons (Hebrew) A Sabbath dedicated to the spiritual growth of participants.

Shacharis (Hebrew) Morning prayer service.

Shaliach (Hebrew) Emissary of the Rebbe

Shalom Aleichem (Hebrew) A greeting that means "Peace be with you"; in response one says, "*Aleichem Shalom*."

Shalosh Seudas (Hebrew) The traditional third Sabbath meal.

Shammus (Hebrew) Sexton.

Shas (Hebrew) Sixth tractate of the *Mishnah*.

Shatnez (Hebrew) Combination of wool and linen.

Shavuos (Hebrew) (literally, "weeks") Festival commemorating the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai; in *Eretz Yisrael*, falling on *Sivan* 6; in the Diaspora, on *Sivan* 6-7. On this day, the Baal Shem Tov and King David died.

Shechinah (Hebrew) The female aspect of G-d's Divine presence.

Shechitah (Hebrew) Ritual slaughter.

Shehecheyanu (Hebrew) Blessing pronounced on seasonal and other occasions for thanksgiving.

Sheitel (Yiddish) A wig for a married woman.

Shema (Hebrew) The reading of *Krias Shema*.

Shema Yisrael (Hebrew) The opening words, which are part of the confession of Jewish faith, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is one!" It's one of the central sections of the prayer book.

Shemini Atzeres (Hebrew) The last day of *Succos*.

Sheva (Hebrew) Seven.

Shevat (Hebrew) Eleventh month of Jewish calendar, corresponding to January-February.

Shiur (Hebrew) A Torah lesson or study class.

Shiva (Hebrew) Bereavement.

Shiva Asar BeTammuz (Hebrew) (literally, "the 17th of *Tammuz*")Fast commemorating five calamities, including the breach of the walls of Jerusalem during the Roman siege.

Shlichus (Hebrew) A mission.

Shlita (Hebrew) Acronym for the Hebrew words meaning, "May he live a long and good life."

Shluchim (Hebrew) Emissaries of the Rebbe.

Shmura Matzah (Hebrew) Special matzah that is used solely during Passover, the making of which never involves water.

Shochet (Hebrew) A ritual slaughterer.

Shofar (Hebrew) A ram's horn, blown on Rosh Hashana and at the termination of Yom Kippur.

Shtetl (Yiddish) Village.

Shtiebel (Yiddish) *Shul*.

Shtreimel (Yiddish) Fur hat usually worn on the Sabbath and festivals.

Shuckle (Yiddish) Move in place while praying.

Shul (Yiddish) A small synagogue.

Shulchan Aruch (Hebrew) Code of Jewish Law.

Sicha (Hebrew) A talk.

Simcha (Hebrew) A happy occasion joyful.

Simchas Bais Hashoeva (Hebrew) (literally, "the rejoicing of the place of the water-drawing") Ceremony during *Succos* in Temple times, recalled today by appropriate celebrations.

Simchas Torah (Hebrew) (literally, "the rejoicing of the Torah") The final day (in *Eretz Yisrael*, the eighth day; in the Diaspora, the ninth) of the festival of *Succos* on which the annual cycle of Torah readings is completed; this event is celebrated with exuberant rejoicing. Celebrated on *Tishrei* 23.

Sirtuk (Yiddish) A frock coat used specially on the Sabbath.

Sivan (Hebrew) The ninth month of Jewish calendar, corresponding to May-June.

Siyyum (Hebrew) Conclusion, or party marking a conclusion.

Succah (Hebrew) Thatched hut Jews live in and/or eat in on *Succos*.

Succos (Hebrew)(literally, "booths") Feast of the Tabernacles, celebrated *Tishrei* 15-22.

Taharas Hamishpacha (Hebrew) Family purity.

Tallis (Hebrew) A prayer shawl.

Tallis Katan (Hebrew) A small prayer shawl.

Talmid(im) (Hebrew) Student.

Talmid Chacham (Hebrew) A distinguished Torah scholar.

Talmud (Hebrew) Comprehensive term for the *Mishnah* and *Gemara* as joined in the two compilations known as the Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*; completed in Babylon in the sixth century) and the Jerusalem Talmud (*Talmud Yerushalmi*; completed in the Holy Land, beginning of the fifth century).

Talmud Torah (Hebrew) A school for young students, preparatory for a yeshiva.

Tammuz (Hebrew) The fourth calendar month after Nissan, around June.

Tanach (Hebrew) Acronym for the Torah (i.e., the Five Books of Moses), *Nevüm* (the Prophets), and *Kesuvim* (the Writings, i.e., the *Hagiographa*).

Tanna(im) (Hebrew) Authorities cited in the *Mishnah* and the *Baraita* (an extraneous *Mishnah* containing a tannaic tradition not incorporated in the *Mishnah* as collected by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, but cited in the *Gemara*, *Midrash*, or *Tosefta*), who flourished up to 200 C.E..

Tanya (Hebrew) The Bible of *Chabad-Chassidus*.

Tashmishei Kedushah (Hebrew) Religious items.

Tateh (Hebrew) Father.

Tefillin (Hebrew) Small black leather cubes containing parchment scrolls inscribed with *Shema Yisrael* and other biblical passages, bound to the arm and forehead and worn by men at weekday morning prayers.

Tehillim (Hebrew) Psalms.

Temimim (Hebrew) Students past or present of one of the senior yeshivas of the Lubavitch branch of Chassidism, which are known as Tomchei Temimmim.

Teshuva (Hebrew) Repentance.

Teves (Hebrew) The tenth month of the Jewish year when counting from *Nissan* (or the fourth when counting from *Tishrei*).

Tishrei (Hebrew) 7th month of Hebrew calendar, corresponding to September-October.

Torah (Hebrew) "Teaching"—in the narrow sense the *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses; Pentateuch); in the general, comprehensive sense, the entire body of Jewish law and teachings; also a talk by a rebbe.

Treif (Hebrew) Not kosher.

Tsuris (Yiddish) Trouble.

Tzaddik(im) (Hebrew) Righteous person(s); rebbe(s). One in whom the good qualities of his divine soul vanquish the evil qualities of his animal soul, to the extent of completely eradicating them.

Tzedaka (Hebrew) Charity.

Tzitzis (Hebrew) A ritual fringes worn on a small prayer shawl (*tallis katan*) as an undergarment.

Tzivos Hashem (Hebrew) Army of G-d.

Uforatza (Hebrew) Outreach.

Uskoreniye (Russian) Speeding up.

Vaad (Hebrew) Committee.

Vov (Hebrew) The sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Yahrtzeit (Yiddish) Anniversary of the passing of a near relative.

Yarmulke (Hebrew) Skull cap.

Yechidus (Hebrew) A private meeting with a chassidic rebbe.

Yerai Shamayim (Hebrew) One who serves Hashem with all his might.

Yeshiva (Hebrew) Talmudic academy.

Yevsektzia (Russian) The Jewish section of the Communist party.

Yid(den) (Yiddish) Jew.

Yiddishkeit (Yiddish) The Torah way of life.

Yom Kippur (Hebrew) Day of Atonement, fast day falling on *Tishrei* 10 and climaxing the Days of Awe.

Yotze (Hebrew) Acquitted from an obligation.

Yud Alef Nissan (Hebrew) The Rebbe's birthday, *Nissan* 11.

Yud-Beis Tammuz (Hebrew) (*Tammuz* 12) *chassidic* festival marking the anniversary of the release of the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe from incarceration and exile in Stalinist Russia in 1927.

Yud Tes Kislev (Hebrew) *Kislev* 19, the day the Alter Rebbe was freed from Russian jail.

Zechus (Hebrew) Merit.

Zemira (Hebrew) Song.

Zhid (Russian) Vulgar expression equivalent to "*Kike*."

Z'l (Hebrew) Acronym for *Zecher Livracha*—May his name be for a blessing.

Zohar (Hebrew) (literally, "radiance") Classical work embodying the mystical teachings of the *Kabbalah*, essentially composed by the second century *Tanna* sage, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

Zt"l (Hebrew) Acronym for *Zecher Tzaddik Livracha*—May the *tzaddik*'s name be for a blessing.

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About the Author

Mordechai Staiman is also the author of *Diamonds of the Rebbe* (1998), *Waiting for the Messiah: Stories to Inspire Jews with Hope* (1996), and *Niggun: Stories Behind the Chasidic Songs that Inspire Jews* (1994). He's currently working on a book about Jewish truths that bind us. A prolific writer, editor, publicist, and copy writer for 36 years, Reb Mordechai lives in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York, with his wife Ada.

MENDELSOHN PRESS
565 Crown Street • Suite 4H
Brooklyn, New York 11213
E-mail: mp770@aol.com
Tel: 718-467-1957 • Fax: 718-221-8982

ISBN 1-8881-9598-3
90000
9 781888 195989

20/20 Digital Design 718.493.7592