

THE REBBE'S POET

THE LIFE OF RABBI TZVI MEIR STEINMETZ

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This book is dedicated to the
grandchildren, who illuminate the world
with the light of Torah.

End of Elul, 5749 (September, 1989)

TZVI MEIR IS SURPRISED to find his old poem printed in the Israeli paper. Entitled "Elul",[1] the poem is an echo of the past. He had written it almost four decades earlier as a young man in Nazi-occupied Hungary.

In the poem, he compares the Jewish people facing the Day of Judgment to lazy housewives sweeping the rubbish under the beds. The sinner "faces the wall, and covers his eyes, hoping that You, too, will not see it." The poem ends with a plea for forgiveness: "Kindness is your attribute, Merciful G-d."

Tzvi Meir regularly sends his poems to the Rebbe. This time, he hesitates. Is the stern message in harmony with the philosophy of Chabad and the approach of the Rebbe? The time is right since it was the month of Elul. With some trepidation, he decides to submit the poem—with the (apologetic) note that it had been composed, "before the light of Chabad touched my creative spirit."

The answer is not long in coming. To Tzvi Meir's astonishment, the Rebbe sends one of his aides to look for him so he can hand the response to him in person.

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1 *Gesharim*, p. 64

The Rebbe has thanked him for the poem and promptly requests another: "Since we are at the end of the month of Elul," writes the Rebbe, "and we are going to wear white because we are sure that G-d has already forgiven us, 'And they were overturned to merit',[2] it is preferable that this idea should be expressed in a new poem for a day on which the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy shine.

"In a lighter tone, like your name, (Yair-Meir) 'make bright', through poetry, and create a new poem swiftly like a deer (Tzvi)."[3]

In spite of the Rebbe's tactful reply, Tzvi Meir tells his daughters that the Rebbe is reprimanding him for speaking harshly of the Jewish people when they had surely repented already. The Rebbe has urgently requested another poem, explains Tzvi Meir, to "fix" the first one. "And it's not easy to write a poem on demand," he admits.

But that is exactly what Tzvi Meir does. Over the next five days, he works on the new poem. On Friday at noon, he submits it to the Rebbe. The Rebbe immediately responds with thanks and appreciation, once again directing his aide to swiftly deliver his response to Tzvi Meir.

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2 Jerusalem Talmud 57b
3 See Appendix, Excerpt I

Early Years

TZVI MEIR WAS BORN on Shabbos, the fifth of Nissan, 5675 (March 15, 1915) in Budapest, to his parents Shlomo Dov and Leah Gittel Steinmetz. He was the third child, to be followed by five more sisters, and the only son of the family. Tzvi Meir's father, Shlomo Dov, had lost his mother at the age of three and was adopted by his aunt and uncle, Avraham Baruch and Chaya Rochel Steinmetz, who had no children.

Tzvi Meir's family stayed in Budapest only for a short while. They had been forced to temporarily flee their village home because of the upheavals of the First World War. They soon returned to Brusztura, which was in the Maramures region near the Carpathian Mountains. Tzvi Meir's family had deep roots in the region. His maternal great-grandfather and namesake, Tzvi Meir Steinmetz, arrived in Maramures in the early nineteenth century together with two of his brothers. The Steinmetz brothers were said to be descendants of the politically connected Saul Wahl, legendary for being Poland's "King for a Day" while the nobles decided on a permanent monarch. Tzvi Meir believed that it is for this reason that three recurring names appear in the family—Shaul, Yehudah, and Meir. Wahl was Shaul ben Yehudah, and his grandfather was Meir Katzenelenbogen, the Maharam.

Speaking of his lineage, Tzvi Meir would also relate that his father was descended from Harav Yom Tov Lipman Heller, the author of the *Tosfos Yom Tov* on the Mishnah. As his descendants, albeit through a daughter, Tzvi Meir's family celebrates the *Tosfos Yom Tov Seudah* every Rosh Chodesh Adar. He would often mention another distinguished ancestor, Harav Yechezkel Panet, author of the *Mareh Yehezkel*, and chief rabbi of Transylvania. Going even further back, the family traced its ancestry to Rashi and Rabbi Yochanan Hasandlar.

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GREAT-GRANDFATHER TZVI MEIR eventually became very wealthy. Tzvi Meir related that he had heard how he kept barrels of gold in his cellar. But he remained a fiercely devoted *Chassid* of his Rebbe, Rav Meir of Peremyshliany.[4]

The Jews of Brusztura were mostly *Chassidim*, due to the town's proximity to Galicia, an area rich in Chassidic life. Only a range of mountains separated the east of Galicia from Maramures. "The winds of Galicia," wrote Tzvi Meir, "would constantly blow through the mountains of *Marmarosh*.... Up until the Second World War, the Jews of *Marmarosh* would travel to the courts of Chassidic leaders of Galicia through the mountains with their horses and buggies."

The connection to Galicia grew even stronger during the First World War when a stream of refugees came west from Galicia to escape the war. Some settled in the villages of Maramures. For this reason, Tzvi Meir explained, he received most of his Torah education from *melamdim* and teachers from Galicia.

The Chassidic tradition of Galicia was deeply ingrained in the family. Shlomo Dov's father was a follower of the Vizhnitz-Ottynia

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4 1783-1850

dynasty, and Leah Gittel's grandfather had been among the founding supporters of the Dulina-Zidichov dynasty.

Tzvi Meir often spoke fondly of Brusztura, a village of sixty Jewish families located forty miles from the last stop of the railroad. But he was quick to add that the majority of the Jews of Brusztura lived in grinding poverty. To be poor in those days, he explained, meant to have literally nothing. Because the Jews of Czechoslovakia were barred from nearly every craft or profession, they were forced to live off each other. If the tailor could not afford to buy shoes, the shoemaker had no money for a new suit. They were both in trouble. "There isn't much work," a villager would say, "but I'm busy all week anyway, trying to borrow money to make Shabbos."

The Steinmetzes were among the few prosperous families in the village. Shlomo Dov, the father of the family, was a lumber merchant. He was away from home all week supervising the cutting of trees in the forest and sending rafts of wood down the rushing river to be sold. At other times, he traveled around selling lumber in the big cities.

Tzvi Meir recalled a miraculous story his father told him. In a lonely spot in the forest, Shlomo Dov was waylaid by robbers. Suddenly, they turned and ran away. On the following Shabbos, his father was supporting his elderly Rebbe as they walked down a hilly path. The Rebbe said to him, "Shlomo, you think you are supporting me. Actually, I am supporting you." Shlomo Dov was certain he had been saved through his Rebbe's intervention.

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GROWING UP IN BRUSZTURA formed Tzvi Meir's worldview in many ways. Though he was to explore other paths of Torah and follow his interest in poetry and culture, he always retained a deep emotional attachment to the Chassidic way of life. He remained

steadfast in maintaining his Chassidic garb and full beard until the Second World War intervened.

The region of Maramures where Tzvi Meir grew up was not only rich in the Chassidic tradition but also in natural beauty. It was a region of majestic mountains, dense forests, and rushing rivers. Tzvi Meir was profoundly affected by this closeness to nature. His poems reflect a sense of the rhythm of the seasons and the presence of the Creator in His works. "The warmth of your fingers yet lingers over Your creations," he wrote. "The trees are still swaying from the touch of Your hand."[5]

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5 "The Warmth of Your Fingers" appears in the Tzvi Yair anthology entitled *Merosh Tzurim*, p. 46

Life at Home

TZVI MEIR'S CAPABLE MOTHER, Leah Gittel, raised her eight children born in quick succession and ran the large household. She was in charge of their home, a small farm, a guest house, and a store selling necessities to the lumber workers. The home had running water, a rarity in the region, pumped in from the river that ran by the house. There were large wood-burning ovens for both meat and dairy. Oil lamps lit the home. Hot water was boiled in the cellar and poured into iron tubs for baths and laundry. Blocks of ice were cut in the winter months and stored to keep the food from spoiling in the summer.

The household was almost completely self-sufficient. Chickens were raised in the yard, taken to the *shochet* to be slaughtered, their feathers plucked, and then *kashered* and rinsed. Vegetables were raised in the garden—the girls took turns weeding—and preserved in jars for the winter. Milk from the four cows was boiled and separated to make butter and sour cream. Thirty pounds of bread were kneaded and baked each day. On Purim, clean white sheets were spread across the beds, and cake and *nuent* (a traditional honey and nut bark) were laid out in preparation for *mishloach manos.*

Pesach was a separate chapter. A month before Yom Tov, the kitchen was *kashered* and non-Pesach cooking was done in the "summer kitchen". The oven was burned out and matzah baked for the

whole village, each family helping by kneading and rolling their own dough. Tzvi Meir's sister remembered *valgering* the dough when she was only twelve years old. Potatoes were grated, washed in water, and dried to make potato starch. Great barrels of cabbage were checked for bugs and pickled in salt water along with large quantities of beets to eat during the eight-day holiday.

Tzvi Meir's mother had two maids to help her in addition to the men who cared for the livestock. But she taught her daughters, "If you want a maid to work for you, do the same work she does—only better."

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LEAH GITTEL HAD ANOTHER responsibility: the family store. It supplied the crews that worked in the forest with food, clothing, and dishes. The store had other "customers" as well; it was a source of sustenance for the poor of the village. Every morning Leah Gittel and her daughters poured milk for the women waiting in line with their pitchers. Every Thursday they measured out two pounds of cornmeal, sugar, and rice for each family so they would have food for Shabbos.

The daughters of the family began to help with food distribution at an early age. Tzvi Meir's sister Freidi recalled her delight when it was her turn to help. Freidi had inherited her parents' generosity, but hers knew no limit. Her sisters called her "the communist". She couldn't bear the thought that she had shoes on her feet while her friends went barefoot, that she had all the food she wanted when her classmates went hungry. Accordingly, she complained her shoes were getting tight and would give them away to another child. She would take extra sandwiches to school and share them with other children, knowing a hearty supper was waiting for her at home.

One day, while pouring the milk for the village mothers, Freidi wondered why they never got the best part, the cream. It was skimmed off the top of the barrel, and stored in small jars for the family's Shabbos

morning treat. Shlomo Dov, who did not see much of his children all week, would serve them *kokosh* cake and sour cream for breakfast. One morning, while helping in the store, Freidi took half the jars, spread the remainder apart, and distributed them to the surprised women. If her mother noticed, she said nothing.

On a different occasion, however, Freidi did not escape censure. One Thursday, Leah Gittel noticed the produce levels in the barrels were surprisingly low. After being questioned, Freidi admitted she had distributed three pounds instead of two. Her mother told Freidi sternly that she had to do as she was told so there would be enough for everyone. Freidi had no choice but to comply. But the indomitable girl found other ways to enrich the diet of the poor people of the village. On Friday afternoon, the families of the town would bring their pots of cholent to keep warm in the Steinmetzes' large brick oven. As she placed the pots on the oven shelf, Freidi quickly slipped some chicken shmaltz into the pots of the poorest families. The brick oven, people said, added a special Shabbos flavor to the cholent.

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IF LEAH GITTEL SET limits for the food she distributed, her hospitality knew no bounds. Every Jewish traveler in the district knew he could stop by the Steinmetz home for as long as he wished and be warmly welcomed. The story of the hundred soldiers for Pesach became part of the family lore. One year when Shlomo Dov and Leah Gittel's family was still young, scores of Jewish soldiers appeared in the village. The First World War had ended and the men suddenly demobilized. It was the week before Pesach and they found themselves far from home with nowhere to go for Yom Tov.

The young couple decided to take them all in. There followed a storm of *shechting*, cooking, and baking. About a hundred soldiers were housed and fed that Pesach in the Steinmetz home. Tzvi Meir, a toddler

at the time, remembered young men sleeping everywhere: in the hayloft, on the porch, on the floor.

One wonders how Leah Gittel, the immaculate housewife, dealt with the invasion of so many unkempt soldiers. But she would say that it was the happiest Pesach of her life. She remembered how one of the soldiers picked up Tzvi Meir and cried. He had left such a small son at home and had not seen him for four years.

"The hundred soldiers" was a one-time event, but in the years that followed there was a constant flow of travelers, poor people, and at times, famous Rebbes. The sisters remember sleeping in one room, several in each bed, so a room could be kept free for guests. When the children would stuff mattress covers with clean straw, their father told them, "First lie down on the mattress. If you find it comfortable, you can offer it to a guest."

Above all, these parents taught their children to treat every guest, rich or poor, with courtesy and respect. Suri, another of the daughters, learned an unforgettable lesson when she was ten years old. During the family's Purim *seudah*, Suri recalled, she was assigned a seat next to Aron Levi, the family's wagon driver. Suri was offended by the smell of horses and refused to sit next to him. Her father called her to the next room, where she got a spanking. "It was the only spanking I recall receiving from my father," she said.

A *melamed* who spent the school year far from home teaching children in another village would stay a few days with Tzvi Meir's family on his way home for Yom Tov. On one occasion, he recognized one of the maids in the house. She had been his neighbor in his hometown and was known by all as a rabid antisemite—if the chicken of a Jew wandered into her yard, she would promptly wring its neck. To the *melamed's* astonishment, she welcomed him graciously and offered him hot tea with bread and butter. He concluded that the hospitality of the Steinmetz home could transform anyone.

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HOW DID TZVI MEIR participate in this bustling household? By his own admission, not much. He was truly proud of his family's legendary hospitality and generosity, and their values guided him throughout his life. But as the pampered only son, he was exempt from household duties. Introverted and intellectual by nature, he read and studied, pursuing his own interests. The daughters of the house seemed to accept this division of roles. Suri, however, felt he took it a step too far. As a teenager, he would ring a little bell and summon his sisters to polish his shoes or brush his suit. At this point, the girls put their foot down. "Only on condition that you teach us a new language," they told him.

It was on the weekend, the holy Shabbos, that Tzvi Meir truly integrated with the family and even had a starring role. On Friday, his beloved father returned home after a week-long separation from his family. He put on his regal *shtreimel* and Shabbos clothing. Then, taking Tzvi Meir's hand, he set out for the synagogue the family had built. Father and son walked together to welcome the Shabbos as the sun sank behind the pines.

Returning from shul, often accompanied by guests, they found the Shabbos table set, the family waiting. Tzvi Meir recalled those Friday nights with twenty guests seated at the table along with their own large family. His father, with his son at his side, led everyone in the traditional *zemiros* melodies. During the Shabbos meal, Torah thoughts were discussed and his father encouraged Tzvi Meir to join in. "I long for those Friday nights," Tzvi Meir used to say.

The only son among eight children, Tzvi Meir was adored by his sisters and the pride and joy of his father. "Being an only son had a deep impact on my life," he said in a 1992 interview. "My father took special care of me and made every effort to give me the best education."

Many years later, in a poem mourning the sudden passing of his father,[6] Tzvi Meir writes:

It was ever his heart's desire that his only son would become
what he could not be,
and for the fulfillment of his dream
he hoped until his last day.
And still, he hopes, his spirit hovers over my life,
for a father's mercy never ends.

6 *Bechevyon Hanefesh*, p. 224

Education

LIKE ALL JEWISH CHILDREN, the young Tzvi Meir was sent to Cheder. "Many friends he did not have as a child," said his sister Ratzi. "He found them intellectually uninteresting." The gifted boy quickly outshone his fellow students and became the favorite of his teacher. It is easy to imagine that the other children would have felt some envy and resentment towards the aloof little prodigy.

Tzvi Meir suffered a traumatic event during his Cheder years. He would recount the event to his own children, seeming to relive the anguish of those distant days. One day, he hurt the eye of a fellow student, perhaps by throwing an object. "You made me blind!" the boy accused him.

What followed was a nightmare for the sheltered only son. The boy threatened to tell everyone what Tzvi Meir had done. For several months, he blackmailed him and exhorted all sorts of payments for keeping his "blindness" a secret. At last, Tzvi Meir could bear it no longer and told him to go ahead and tell. At that point, of course, the ruse ended.

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THE NEXT CHAPTER IN Tzvi Meir's education was a far happier one. When informed by the *melamed* that he no longer belonged in the Cheder, Tzvi Meir's father hired a private tutor to teach his son at home. The tutor was Yossele Vilner, a brilliant young scholar, and he would have a lasting impact on his development. Tzvi Meir would describe his tutor in great detail: a young man with a short blonde beard and, while still in his twenties, a head of white hair. He had arrived from the Galician city of Nadvorna as a refugee during the First World War, married a local girl, and planned to live on his wife's dowry while he continued his studies. Then, disaster struck. He invested most of his money with a cattle merchant who lost it all. That is how the scholar came to be seven-year-old Tzvi Meir's tutor.

"When he arrived at our house, he was a broken man," wrote Tzvi Meir. "Over time, he slowly overcame his loss."

His description of his tutor seems a roadmap of the intellectual path Tzvi Meir himself would follow: "He was a scion of the Rebbes of Lizensk and Ziditchov. He was a student of the scholar and writer, Chassidic Rabbi Yekutiel Aryeh Kamelhar, and also studied under the Lithuanian Talmudic leaders. This self-educated man mastered not only Torah but also the sciences. He had a strong rational grasp, a sharp sense of analysis, and a phenomenal memory—with the ability to learn a language by reading through a dictionary. He was knowledgeable in the Talmud and could delve into the page without needing to reference other places. He knew Hebrew and biblical grammar. He would read every book that came to his hand in Hebrew, Yiddish, or German. He understood Greek, Latin, Russian, Czech, and Polish."

Vilner also taught him *Tanach*—the Prophets and Scripture, and introduced him to Hebrew and German literature.

From the age of eight, Tzvi Meir recalled, he began to write little compositions, fragments of thought and lines of poetry. With his teacher's encouragement, Tzvi Meir wrote his first scholarly essay when

he was eight years old on the significance of Nissan, the month in which he was born. He proudly showed his work to his maternal grandfather. Grandfather, after reading from Tzvi Meir's little gray notebook, did a surprising thing: He told Tzvi Meir to throw it into the burning oven. Tzvi Meir often wondered what motivated his grandfather's action. Perhaps he wanted to shield his grandson from *ayin hara.* Possibly, he wanted to prevent the young scholar from becoming too conceited.

For six years, Tzvi Meir studied with Yossele Vilner. But in the end, a man with such prodigious talents could not be satisfied as a tutor in a provincial town. He found a more prestigious position in Uzhgorod, a central city in Western Ukraine. "With that, I lost a teacher," wrote Tzvi Meir. Years later, Tzvi Meir discovered, to his sorrow, that his brilliant teacher had perished in the Holocaust.

With the departure of such a teacher, Tzvi Meir could not find anyone in Brusztura to replace him. Tzvi Meir spent the next few years studying alone in the attic of the Village Hall, "as the mountains towered over me and the Rika River thrummed in my ears its monotonous melody."

The Search Begins

TZVI MEIR'S SOLITARY STUDIES came to an end when he reached the age to enroll in yeshiva. "My father started sending me to various *yeshives*," wrote Tzvi Meir. "But after a few months, he would call me to come back. He was reluctant to part with me.'

In 1935, Tzvi Meir enrolled in the yeshiva of Galanta, Slovakia, headed by Rabbi Yosha Buksbaum, where he remained for some time. An eager, dedicated student, he was cherished by his teachers. One rabbi described him as "a student who sharpens the mind of his teacher."

A year later, he enrolled in the Solotvyno Yeshiva, perhaps because it was closer to home. Six months later, however, he left the school and returned home. From that time on, he lived with his family, traveling back occasionally to Galanta and Solotvyno, to spend a month or two with his teachers. From these brief trips, he would bring home friends "of the intellectual type", recalled his sister Ratzi, with whom he would spend hours in conversation. Despite his success in yeshiva, Tzvi Meir was not satisfied with the study of Gemara alone. More and more he found himself drawn to the Jewish philosophers, including the Rambam and Yehudah Halevi.

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TZVI MEIR'S PASSAGE TO adulthood occurred at a time of crisis in the Chassidic communities of the Maramures region. Embittered by the crushing poverty of the shtetl and attracted by the promises of secular knowledge, Zionism, and socialism, young people were abandoning the religion of their fathers en masse. "The *yeshives* went into corresponding decline," noted Tzvi Meir, "The ghetto walls were breached, and young yeshiva students were following the winds of the 'enlightenment'."

Like many Chassidic Jews, Tzvi Meir was deeply troubled by this crisis. Appreciative of the beauty of observant life, steeped in the study of the Torah, he was determined to defend Torah-true Judaism against the new challenges. But Tzvi Meir himself had been introduced to secular culture by his brilliant tutor, Yossele Vilner. He too was touched by the zeitgeist. Without altering his lifestyle, he began to study poetry, literature, and secular philosophy. How to reconcile his passionate loyalty to *Yiddishkeit* with the pull of secular knowledge? "This was the beginning of my search for a path in life," he said in 1992.

The philosophy of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the famed and prolific German Orthodox Rabbi, seemed the answer to the young seeker's dilemma. In the philosophical system he called *Torah im Derech Eretz*, Rabbi Hirsch advocated strict adherence to Halachah while embracing the study of science and culture. At the same time, he demanded the dominance of the Torah over secular culture. Tzvi Meir saw in the philosophy of Rabbi Hirsch a way to resolve his own conflicts. But he took it a step further. Naively, he hoped to influence the entire Jewish world with these teachings and to stem the tide of assimilation, he admitted later.

As a first step in combining Torah with worldly knowledge, he resolved to travel to Pressburg, then part of Czechoslovakia, in the hope of joining one of the city's universities. Before embarking on this unconventional move, he approached Rabbi Chaim Yitzchok Halberstam, the head of the Solotvyno Yeshiva and Chassdic leader of

many Jews in Maramures. Of the Solotvyno Rav, as he was called, Tzvi Meir later said, "I received *Chassidus* from him."

Tzvi Meir had confided his intellectual and spiritual journey to his Rebbe in the past. Now he told him about his plans to study in Pressburg. The Solotvyner gave him his blessings. (The affection the Solotvyno Rav had for his student later prompted him to travel to Tzvi Meir's wedding despite the dangerous conditions of the Second World War.)

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IN PRESSBURG, TZVI MEIR studied privately, preparing for exams at the local German language school. A diploma from the school was required in order to enroll in the university, where he planned to study literature. His secular studies did not prevent him from continuing his Torah learning. He soon became acquainted with the city's chief rabbi, Rabbi Akiva Sofer, head of the Pressburg Yeshiva, one of the most prestigious Jewish academies in central Europe at the time.

At the same time, Tzvi Meir began to write for the *Yiddishe Blatt*, published in Munkacs, under the byline H.M. Steinmetz. In articles like "The Orthodox in Exile", he discussed the ideologies that were spreading turmoil in the Jewish world. In others, he dissected the differences between various Chassidic sects.

He passed his exams in Pressburg and applied to the academies. But he became discouraged when he discovered that he would have to complete basic courses in mathematics, Latin, and science before he could pursue his interest in literature. "My heart had no interest in these subjects," he wrote.

He continued to study on his own. Delving more and more into Jewish philosophy, he discovered the writings of Dr. Isaac Breuer, a grandson of Rabbi Hirsch. Tzvi Meir was enthralled by Breuer's book, *The World as Creation and Nature.* In this work, Dr. Breuer makes a distinction between phenomena, which humans can understand, and

noumena, which Man cannot comprehend, such as the creation of the world and the G-dly force that controls it. "He builds a philosophical structure," wrote Tzvi Meir, "where nature itself proves it is a creation of G-d."

Following Breuer's way of adapting culture and philosophy to the Torah's teachings was a relatively modest deviation from the Chassidic way of life. Nonetheless, Tzvi Meir may have felt some guilt about his allegiance to this school of thought. Perhaps in atonement, he pledged never to give up his Chassidic clothing or shave his beard, a unique commitment among those who came to Pressburg to study.

The young man found himself in the center of the battleground for the future of European Jewry. While writing for the newspaper, he became involved with Agudath Israel, an Orthodox umbrella organization established in 1912. An important mission of Agudah was to counter the goals of the Zionist Congress for the establishment of a secular state with their own call for a fervent dedication to observance in the Diaspora.

Dr. Breuer himself was a member of Agudah. Though he opposed the secular approach of the Zionist Congress, he did not share the Agudah's opposition to a Jewish presence in Israel, then Palestine. In fact, he created a program that he unsuccessfully lobbied the organization to adopt, "to prepare the people of G-d and the land of G-d for their union into a state of G-d under the law of G-d."

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IN 1937, AGUDATH ISRAEL was preparing for their congressional meeting, the *Knessiah Gedolah*. Tzvi Meir, who had looked forward eagerly to the event, developed boils on his face. The painful pus-filled bumps were caused by an infection of the hair follicles, doctors told him. He had to shave his beard and apply medicinal powder to his face. "I couldn't do it," he wrote. "I chose to suffer for the next few months."

His condition prevented him from meeting the Chassidic leaders attending the *Knessiah*. Since the boils were contagious, he could not immerse in the *mikvah*, a prerequisite to such meetings he could not forgo. Thus, his wish to meet Rabbi Mordechai Alter, leader of the Gur Chassidic movement, and the most powerful Chassidic Rebbe of his time, went unfulfilled. "I had to be satisfied with listening to his words from afar," he lamented.

The highlight of the conference for Tzvi Meir was his meeting with Dr. Breuer. Tzvi Meir introduced himself and told him about his passionate desire to save the young Jews of his region from assimilation. "We need an immediate cure!" he declared. Tzvi Meir entreated the older man to help bring about the cure by means of Dr. Breuer's philosophical system. At first, Dr. Breuer was suspicious, knowing his ideas were anathema to the *Chassidim*. But over time, his young admirer won his trust and he even recruited him to his cause. "Some kind of friendship was sparked," wrote Tzvi Meir. Their relationship developed through correspondence, to the point the future poet described it as "a great and special passionate attachment."

During the following year, Tzvi Meir abandoned his other studies and dedicated himself to the philosophy of Hirsch and Breuer in the hope of combating assimilation. In the end, the plan to partner with Dr. Breuer in implementing his philosophical system was not realized. Breuer was living in Jerusalem, and the two never met in person again. Tzvi Meir described his frustration at his distance from his mentor in a poem.

Along with his deep attachment to Breuer, Tzvi Meir maintained his connections in the Chassidic world. Shortly after the congress, he decided to visit Rabbi Alter despite his condition. Seeing his face, the Rebbe advised him to use a chemical to remove his beard (a method preferable to shaving in Jewish law) and treat the infection. His face healed shortly thereafter.

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TZVI MEIR RETURNED HOME in 1938 to help with the family business, doing paperwork and traveling to meetings in various locations. In the course of his duties, he visited Budapest, the capital of Hungary, with a large Jewish population.

In Budapest, he met a distant cousin Shamu Kahan-Frankel and his wife Freida. Mr. Kahan-Frankel was a learned and influential man, the president of the Budapest Orthodox Jewish community. But it was his wife, Mrs. Kahan-Frankel who would profoundly affect the course of his life.

Mrs. Kahan-Frankel was the daughter of Adolf Frankel, founder of the Budapest Orthodox community. A fully observant wife and mother, she was a gifted Hebrew poet and artist who spoke several languages. Mrs. Kahan opened her home to young people with an inclination for poetry, art, and literature—Tzvi Meir among them—mentoring and encouraging them. Tzvi Meir had found another example of bridging the worlds of Torah and secular culture.

Mrs. Kahan-Frankel never published her Hebrew poems, but she allowed Tzvi Meir to read them. Deeply impressed, he decided to follow her example. Thus began his transition from prose to verse. He felt that it was due to her influence that he became a poet.

"It is she who gave me the encouragement and direction in my solitary path as a Hebrew poet," he said decades later in the United States. "Tzvi Yair", the pen name of Tzvi Meir, became known as the only Hebrew poet in the Diaspora.

If Dr. Breuer shaped the young Tzvi Meir's worldview, Mrs. Kahan-Frankel fostered his creativity and gift for poetry. Mrs. Kahan-Frankel continued to have a great influence on him for many years.

Tzvi Meir's daughter remembers visiting Mrs. Kahan-Frankel in Paris as the family was en route to America. "She was a

dignified, gracious woman, richly dressed. She showed us an illuminated Haggadah she had illustrated herself."

After her passing, Tzvi Meir wrote a poem in her memory called, "A Call to the Abyss".[7]

7 *Meknaf Haaretz*, p. 111

The Marriage of a Poet

WHILE TZVI MEIR WAS searching for a spiritual path and direction for his talents, his parents engaged in another search: they were trying to find a match for their only son. It was not a simple matter. The seeming contradiction between Chassidic garb and observance, and a wide-ranging philosophy and worldly knowledge, made it difficult to find a *shidduch*. Matchmakers came and went from the Steinmetz home without success. Either the girl was too simple and uneducated or her family had made too many compromises in Torah observance.

His sisters began to despair of his ever finding a wife. "Does he have his entire life to search?" they asked. But Tzvi Meir was looking for a soulmate and would make no concessions. In the end, the match was made. Tzvi Meir would tell his children and grandchildren in vivid detail how it all came about, and the details of the courtship that followed.

One Shabbos afternoon, he was sitting in Stern's "Cholent Restaurant", where patrons paid before Shabbos for the festive meal. A Jew called Lifshitz approached him, "and without asking about my family, origin or material situation, offered me a *shidduch* on the spot," Tzvi Meir said.

His first suggestion did not interest Tzvi Meir, perhaps because the family did not live up to his religious standards. Then Lipshitz, who was

from Debrecen, Hungary, offered another option. Devora Eisenberg, born in 1919 in Debrecen to Tzvi Hirsh and Frumet Mindel, was the youngest of eleven children. The Eisenbergs owned a wholesale grocery store and were a respected Chassidic family. Devora's father, Reb Tzvi Hirsh, a prominent *Chassid* of Sanz, had a full beard and wore *Chassidic* garb, a rarity in Hungary, even among religious Jews. Devora herself, Lipshitz assured him, was lovely and clever.

■ ■ ■

THEIR PIETY AND CHASSIDIC lifestyle was one of few things the Eisenbergs and Steinmetzes had in common. Debrecen was a proper city. Unlike the provincial Steinmetzes, the Eisenbergs were cosmopolitan people and had made prominent matches with their older children. While the father of the family spoke to the children in Yiddish, they answered him in Hungarian. On Tzvi Meir's first visit to the Eisenberg home, the parents spoke to him first. He recalled that Frumet Mindel, an intelligent woman, engaged him in a lengthy conversation in Yiddish. At last, Devora (called "Doidy" by her family) was summoned. Tzvi Meir heard her echo his own feelings at the long wait. She exclaimed, *"Na vegre* (finally)!"

The two had no common language. Devora's Yiddish was spotty, and Tzvi Meir knew little Hungarian. "So we communicated with our eyes."

In truth, it was not only language they lacked in common. Though blessed with a quick wit and sharp mind, Devora had little formal education. After graduating from eighth grade, she went to help in the family business. As for Torah knowledge, she was no different from most girls from religious families at the time. She was taught to *daven* and read Hebrew, to meticulously follow the mitzvos of daily conduct, and to run a kosher home.

From her home, Devora had absorbed a deep and natural faith in G-d. She found little use for philosophy. Though proud of her brilliant future husband's literary accomplishments, she knew no Hebrew and could not understand his poems, with the exception of a few that were translated into Hungarian. Nevertheless, the two were drawn to each other. They seldom saw each other after the initial *beshow.* Tzvi Meir did learn Hungarian, and their relationship continued by mail, much to the frustration of his younger sisters, who were eager to know more about the girl who had finally been able to interest their brother. Ratzi went so far as to learn Hungarian like her brother, so she could correspond with Devora herself.

Tzvi Meir liked telling his children that actually it was Devora who proposed to him. He had written to Devora in a moment of doubt, "I have found the moon, but perhaps I can find the sun?" Devora, in her practical way, advised him to settle for the moon.

■ ■ ■

EVENTUALLY, THE EISENBERGS traveled to Brusztura to meet the family of their future son-in-law. They were impressed by the Steinmetzes' hospitality, Tzvi Meir's sister Chanci recalled Mrs. Eisenberg asking, "Where did you learn to organize a table so nicely?"

Still, there were differences in the lifestyles of the two families. While the Steinmetzes were considered well-to-do in their village and they ran a meticulous home, they could not compete with the worldly standards of the Eisenbergs. Seeing that the young man was obviously brilliant, and their daughter cared for him, the Eisenbergs overlooked these differences. They gave their blessing to the match.

For the first time, Tzvi Meir's sisters met his bride. The girls were impressed by Devora, but felt uncomfortable in her presence. They were simple, provincial girls, while, "Devora was the stylish city girl, who had so much grace and elegance," Chanci recalled.

On her part, Devora was in awe of the capable Steinmetz girls. "Every one of them," she would marvel, "is a perfect *baalabuste*." Intimidated, she tried to keep her distance from them. In later years, the sisters-in-law became close friends and came to appreciate each other's sterling qualities.

■ ■ ■

TZVI MEIR AND DEVORA got engaged in late 1939. They were married on 22 Sivan. That summer of 1940 in Debrecen, the clouds of war were gathering over Europe. Nevertheless, they still had what seemed like a conventional wedding. A wedding photo shows Devora, beautiful in an elegant white gown, holding flowers. The newlyweds moved into the Eisenberg family courtyard, where several of Devora's siblings had apartments as well. At first, Tzvi Meir tried to join the family's wholesale grocery business. Devora would describe how hard her brothers worked in the store, hoisting and wrapping large cases to sell to the peasants who came in from the villages. Her husband, the spoiled only son, was unable or unwilling to do so.

He may have been unsuited to manual labor, but Tzvi Meir soon became useful to his in-laws in another way. That year, under the pressure from the Nazi government in Germany, Hungary passed the Jewish Laws. The new rules restricted the items Jewish stores could sell, in effect slowly choking their livelihood. The latest forbidden item was herring. Tzvi Meir wrote a letter in impeccable German, appealing for the right to sell herring. "After that," Devora would say, "the herring kept coming and coming!"

■ ■ ■

THE YOUNG COUPLE HAD two daughters in quick succession, Henya Yehudis (Judy) and Chaya Rochel (Ruti). Instead of working in

the family business, Tzvi Meir devoted his days to writing poetry, while Devora supported her husband. He, in turn, expressed his love for her in his poems.[8]

Debrecen was a city of 126,000 people, ten percent of them Jewish. Tzvi Meir soon became immersed in the cultural life of the city. Like many others in Hungary, the Debrecen community was split into various factions. One of them, known as the "Status Quo", was led by Dr. Rabbi Pal (Meir) Weiss, an Orthodox biblical scholar and Hebrew literature enthusiast. Both the Status Quo and Dr. Weiss were shunned by the *Chassidim* for their modern approach to Judaism. Inevitably, Tzvi Meir was caught in the midst of the conflict between the two groups, a conflict that reflected his own ambivalence—his attachment to the Chassidic world of Torah and faith in which he had been raised on one hand, and his passionate interest in Hebrew literature on the other.

Hersh Meir, as he was called, was part of Debrecen's Chassidic community, where his wife's family were prominent members. He recalled how Devora's father and brothers would walk to the synagogue on Shabbos decked out in regal fur hats. As a son-in-law of the Eisenbergs, it would have been scandalous to be seen visiting the Status Quo leader. Yet, Dr. Weiss was one of the few people in Debrecen who shared his interest in Hebrew grammar, poetry, and prose, the other one being Erno Gross. So the poet made his way to Dr. Weiss's house in the dark of night. Dr. Weiss enjoyed these discussions as much as the younger man. "The conversation with him rejuvenated me," recalled Dr. Weiss on a visit in Budapest in the 1990s. "It was a pleasure to have a conversation with him."

Despite Tzvi Meir's precautions, word of the visits spread, and soon the poet was shunned by many in the Chassidic community. "Not completely shunned," Tzvi Meir explained later. "I still continued to learn Gemara in the synagogue the family attended."

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8 *Gesharim*, p. 5, 6

But he was hurt by the criticism. He believed the two realms could exist side-by-side, each cherished for the wisdom and beauty it contained. His first book of poetry, a slim volume, under the pen name Ben Shlomo, was published in 1942. It was entitled *Gesharim* (Bridges), in part an attempt to bridge the divide in the community. However, very few people in the Chassidic community even knew of the existence of his book of poems.

The volume was a success, and Tzvi Meir was acclaimed in Hungarian literary circles. The noted literary historian, Laszlo Kardos, who translated classic Hebrew poetry into Hungarian, included three of Tzvi Meir's poems in *Heber Koltok Antologia*, the Anthology of Hebrew Poets, published in 1943. In the prologue, he thanks Tzvi Meir for his assistance in compiling the work.

A Time of Terror

WORLD EVENTS QUICKLY eclipsed the issues of art and observance that concerned the young poet. The war that was engulfing the continent had not yet hit Hungary directly, though antisemitic harassment was increasing. It was clear to Tzvi Meir that the calm could not last. "Since I kept in touch with 'those who escaped the sword' from Poland," he would write in 1972 to *Yad Vashem*, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, "I had no illusion about the German's final intention."

Indeed, Tzvi Meir had first-hand knowledge of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. While the Steinmetz family was still living in relative safety in their village, the Jews of Poland were already suffering the horrors of the Holocaust. One day, two Polish fugitives escaped over the mountains to Brusztura and begged the Steinmetz family to shelter them. The Steinmetzes hid them under the branches of the Sukkah. The refugees were discovered, and the father of the family, Shlomo Steinmetz, was summoned to the Nazi headquarters and forced to walk seven miles both ways on Shabbos. For sheltering the fugitives, Tzvi Meir's dignified father was beaten and his beard was forcibly shaved, leaving permanent scars. He never spoke of this incident to his family.

In 1938, the Steinmetzes had been witnesses to another shocking event. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, Nazi officials were aided by local police in rounding up the poorest families in the village, and without giving them time to pack food or clothing for the journey, deported them to an unknown location. They claimed that these poor families, who had been born in the village, were foreigners since they did not have Hungarian citizenship papers. (The jurisdiction in the area had changed hands so many times that not many had such papers.) To compound the tragedy, most of the fathers were already in forced labor camps.

In an oft-told family saga, Freidi, a teenager at the time, spent the night cooking and baking, and toasting bread to make it last longer. She pursued the group in the family's horse and wagon as they were marched away by the Nazi guards. She distributed the provisions, and even confronted the Nazi guard for his cruelty. Ominously, the guard threatened Freidi, "The Steinmetz girls will be next!"

■ ■ ■

POETRY BECAME A VEHICLE for Tzvi Meir to express his fears and foreboding. In "The Eve of the Decree",[9] which was published in a literary magazine, three sorrowful old men walk through the streets of a busy city. Each warns the Jews about the doom that awaits them. "Flee quickly, before it's too late," says the last one, "for the decree is already sealed." But their voices are drowned out by the din of the city as they slowly take their leave.

One of Tzvi Meir's best-known poems about the Holocaust was "The Meeting in Nemerov". The poem was set in the Middle Ages, since it was no longer safe to write openly about current events. It is a haunting and prophetic poem, alluding to the suffering of the

9 *Bechevyon Hanefesh* p. 194

Jews of Poland at the hands of the Nazis. The poem, translated into Hungarian by Mr. Kardos as "*Nyemeri Gyules*" caused a stir in the literary circles of Budapest. The publishing of the poem, Tzvi Meir later told his daughters, won him membership in the "Pen Club". Belonging to the poetry club was instrumental in providing him with a refuge during the Holocaust.

Tragically, the poem gained fame as Hungarian Jews saw its bitter prophecy fulfilled. Copies were printed and posted in many synagogues. Its lines were recited by heart, it is said, by the Jews in the cattle cars that rolled toward Auschwitz.

■ ■ ■

WHILE WRITING ABOUT THE persecution of the Jews even in a disguised manner was dangerous itself, Tzvi Meir confronted a more pressing peril—the forced-labor camp draft of all Jewish men. In the past, "the Jewish Laws" banned young Jews from joining the armed forces. Instead, they enlisted in the Labor Service, the *Munkaszolgálat*. Until 1942, the Labor Service assisted the army mostly behind the lines. In the spring of that year, a draft was initiated, and things changed dramatically for the worse. The young Jews who were drafted were sent into the combat zone without military training, uniforms, or proper weapons. Assigned jobs like clearing minefields barehanded, they were supervised by brutal guards. In many cases, these guards were told not to allow any Jew in their unit to come out alive.

At first, the new conditions were not widely known, as few survived to tell the tale. But Tzvi Meir knew enough to be deeply suspicious of the Hungarian Nazi government. He understood that the Labor Service was a death sentence for a Jew. By any means possible, he would avoid the draft. Devora was his accomplice, leaving her babies with her sisters-in-law who were now living in Debrecen. One way out was to

prove that one was too sick to join the labor force. Sometimes, a well-paid doctor would write a letter testifying to his "poor health".

On one occasion, Devora slipped her husband an anticholinergic medication to quicken his heartbeat before he appeared at the draft board. Tzvi Meir had to take the pill at exactly the right time and dispose of the packaging immediately. Devora recalled, "I overdosed him. Oy, was his heart beating! Thank G-d, he survived."

■ ■ ■

SEARCHING DESPERATELY FOR an escape, Tzvi Meir, as well as a brother-in-law, Isser Eisenberg, checked themselves into a mental hospital. The admitting doctor eyed Tzvi Meir with suspicion. Tzvi Meir began quoting from his poem "Meeting in Nemerov", ranting about blood, fire, and plague, in order to convince the hospital staff he was hallucinating. Though the doctor eventually caught on, he allowed the poet to remain in the hospital. At the end of the war, the doctor requested a letter of recommendation from his former patient, stating that he had sheltered him in his hospital knowing he was pretending.

Perhaps the most famous mental patient at the hospital was Vaslav Nijinsky, the greatest male ballet dancer and choreographer of the twentieth century. Nijinsky had received the relatively new diagnosis of schizophrenia and for many years went from one mental hospital to another. Tzvi Meir took the opportunity to study his behavior in order to imitate it.

Tzvi Meir realized that he needed a better, long-term solution to his problem. One day, an opportunity arose to obtain forged papers and create a new identity for himself. The first, difficult step was to remove his beard and Chassidic clothing.

Then, in 1942, Tzvi Meir had to leave his family behind in Debrecen and move to the capital city of Budapest, where he could disappear in the crowd. He took on the identity of Lajos Pasztor, a

blonde, blue-eyed Christian electrician. To avoid detection, he had to make a pretense of working in his registered field. Each day, he would take a small case and visit homes in need of electrical repairs. Since his skills were limited to changing a light bulb, he would promise to be back with the required materials, never to be heard from again.

The pampered only son was now a fugitive. He lived in flats with other bachelors, keeping to himself as much as possible, moving when one of his roommates became suspicious. Despite the danger, he continued to write, lying in the attic of one of his temporary lodgings, petrified that he would be discovered. Several of the poems he wrote in this period were published in local newspapers.

■ ■ ■

BACK IN DEBRECEN, DEVORA and the children were still relatively safe. Though he embraced antisemitic rhetoric and promoted restrictive Jewish laws, the Hungarian prime minister Miklos Kallay had so far refused to comply with Germany's demand to deport the country's Jews.

In March of 1944, however, as Hungarian Jews tried to ignore the terrible news of Nazi persecution, German control was imposed upon Hungary. In October of that year, the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party formed a new puppet government. Tzvi Meir worried constantly about his pregnant wife and two daughters in Debrecen. They had been forced to leave their roomy two-story home and move into the cramped ghetto with Devora's elderly parents.

Devora had a vivid memory of meeting the Rebbe of Sanz and crying as she told him about her troubles. The Rebbe sat with his hands shielding his eyes, because he did not look at women, and comforted her, *"Es vet shoin gut zein, es vet shoin gut zein* (It will be good, it will be good)."

■ ■ ■

IN APRIL OF 1944, a month after the Germans occupied Hungary, Devora gave birth to a third daughter, Esther Malka. Devora recalled the hatred that met her in the hospital. The nurses ignored her, refusing to care for her or her new baby until her family doctor intervened. The other patients were openly hostile. One eyed the monogrammed linen Devora had foolishly brought with her to make up her bed, and said, "You may as well give it to me. You won't need it where you are going."

Another woman, who had lost her baby, demanded, "Give me your baby. If you keep her, she will die anyway."

Devora answered, "I am keeping my baby and my linen." But inside, she was desperate, she told her daughters. She didn't know what would happen, to her, to her baby, to her whole family.

Tzvi Meir, far away in Budapest, named his youngest child "Esther Malka", praying, he told her later, that once again G-d would save His people from destruction. He poured out his feelings in a poem entitled *Bloa Hashoah.*[10]

My daughter
born to me in the time of terror.
From Heaven's light
to this dark world you descended.
My love for you is as strong as death....

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10 Bechevyon Hanefesh, p. 138

Occupation

AFTER THE GERMAN occupation, Tzvi Meir searched frantically for a way to save his wife and three daughters. He hoped to bring them to Budapest, where it was easier to hide. As was the case with many Jewish families who survived, G-d sent them a savior from "the righteous of the nations". Nora Vuych was a kind-hearted lawyer and businesswoman known as a humanitarian with many Jewish friends. She was married to a Hungarian nobleman, a high-ranking Arrow Cross official. But Nora spent most of her time in her Budapest office, away from her rural villa. In the past, Nora had business dealings with the Steinmetz family. Now Tzvi Meir approached her to help save his wife and children. Nora promised to find a safe haven for the two older girls, aged three and two, and also for Devora and her new baby.

Tzvi Meir now searched for someone to take the two children from Debrecen, which had turned into a ghetto within days, to Nora's office in Budapest. He met another Jew in disguise, Fred Friedman, who had taken on the identity of Nagy Istvan, an Arrow Cross officer. Dressed in the Arrow Cross leather jacket and green German Tyrolean hat with a red feather on the side, he frequented the places of the Hungarian Nazis. Tzvi Meir saw through his disguise and realized he was the perfect person to go to Debrecen and pick up his children. Friedman readily agreed to travel the seventy-five miles by train to bring the girls.

Years later, in a 1992 interview with The Jewish Week, Mr. Friedman revealed that he had saved seventy Jewish children, ten of them from Debrecen, by taking them to safety. Asked why he never told anyone, he replied: "What I did is between me and the Creator."

Arriving in Debrecen, Mr. Friedman located the Eisenberg family. He found Devora with her newborn baby in the Debrecen ghetto. Devora was not ready to leave her elderly parents, who were in ill health, but agreed to send the two older children to Budapest for safety.

■ ■ ■

MANY YEARS LATER, two of Tzvi Meir's daughters, Judy and Esther, met Mr. Friedman. He was in his nineties at the time of the reunion, active and alert, and a regular shul-goer. He remembered the events of that rescue clearly. "It was an eventful trip," he told them. He took the two children to third class, which was more crowded, so they would be less conspicuous. But his hopes to go unnoticed were dashed. Two-year-old Rochel shrieked loudly for her mother, "*Anyu, Anyu!*" Judy, an articulate three-year-old, chattered loudly with her chaperone throughout the trip. She announced that she did not wear a yellow star, only her mother did.

At one point, a Hungarian police officer became suspicious and questioned Fred Friedman. But when he saw his Arrow Cross identification, he turned pale and excused himself. Friedman announced loudly that he was taking the children to a place where they would take care of these dirty Jews. Nervous that he had not done enough to quell suspicion, he got off at the next stop and walked with the children the rest of the way to Budapest. There, with a sigh of relief, he deposited the children in the office of Nora Vuych. In the office, Tzvi Meir was waiting for his daughters and called out to greet them. Three-year-old Judy recognized the voice and looked around for the familiar bearded face and Chassidic garments. He called again, but Judy kept

walking around, searching for her father. "I knew the voice, but I didn't recognize anyone in the room," she recalls. Then, her father quoted the child saying, "He went away. He isn't here. Daddy went away."

He would repeat those poignant words frequently, adding, "She was right. A part of me was gone. A whole world was gone."

■ ■ ■

A BUSY OFFICE IN Budapest was not a safe place to hide two Jewish children. So the two older Steinmetz children were sent to live with an acquaintance of Nora, with the explanation that the parents wanted them to avoid the war and the bombing. But it was not long before Nora received a message from the family, "Take away the Jews or we will turn them over to the police!"

Once again, it was talkative Judy who had given them away. "We aren't Jewish," she told the family one day. "Only our parents are."

Nora then arranged for the girls to stay with another family in a remote village, where "Margi *Neni*", a kind peasant woman cared for them until the end of the war. Both girls remembered a small hut with a dirt floor and an old grandmother who was pushed around in a sort of wheelchair. Judy recalls hiding in a nearby cave during bombardments.

With two of his children safely hidden, Tzvi Meir now turned to Nora Vuych to rescue his wife and infant daughter as well and bring them to Budapest to the relative safety of her office apartment. She agreed, despite the danger involved. She was well aware that anyone who tried to aid the victims of the Nazis could share their fate.

Nora traveled to the Jewish ghetto in Debrecen. There, she found Devora with her new baby living in cramped quarters together with her parents. Frumet Mindel, the matriarch of the family, was blind and suffering from diabetes. Devora's father was deeply depressed after hearing his children had been deported by the Nazis and very likely murdered. Devora was the only child remaining home to care for her

parents and she was not willing to leave. Her father was also against the move. "You just gave birth," he told her. "How can you go?"

Compounding her reluctance to leave was her mistrust of this strange woman who claimed to know her husband. She had heard of people who posed as saviors only to turn their charges over to the Nazis. Above all, she knew that perilous as life was in the ghetto, getting caught trying to escape was a death sentence. Nora returned to Budapest alone.

The Rescue

THE POET WHO HAD counseled his people to "flee before it is too late," was finding out that escape was not so easy. Obligation to frail and elderly relatives and fear of the real dangers involved prevented many from heeding his call. For the next two weeks, Tzvi Meir searched frantically for another way to save his wife and child. Seeing no other hope, he turned to Mrs. Vuych and again pleaded with her to make one more attempt. Returning to Debrecen, Nora used all her powers of persuasion to convince the young mother to come with her, telling her how dangerous it was in the ghetto and how worried her husband was about her. Only in a big city like Budapest was it possible to hide. "You have children, you have a family, you must save yourself."

Her father, seeing how the situation had deteriorated in the ghetto, persuaded her to go. On the very eve of the deportation from Debrecen, Devora agreed to go, parting from her parents with a heavy heart. An orphaned niece begged to go with her, but Devora had to refuse since the teen had no forged papers.

The short trip to Budapest was fraught with peril. It was forbidden for Jews to move from city to city or to ride on trains. Nora posed as the baby's mother and Devora as the nanny. Devora sat with her head bent, fearing that her dark complexion and Jewish features would give her away. They faced the greatest danger when they arrived at the Budapest

station. There, at a checkpoint thick with Nazi officers, every traveler was stopped and questioned. Nora was not fazed. Blonde, blue-eyed and fearless, she asked one of the Nazi guards in her flawless German to please help her with the baby, since she had so many suitcases with her. The officer obliged, and taking the baby in his arms, led them right past the checkpoint onto the next train.

■ ■ ■

ARRIVING SAFELY IN BUDAPEST, Devora and her baby, Esther, moved in with Nora. The kind woman was willing to share all her food with Devora. But Devora cooked herself beans and cereal in a separate kosher pot. The office soon looked like a nursery, with diapers draped over the furniture to dry. When neighbors inquired what was going on, Nora explained she had hired a new maid, the wife of a soldier on the front. Since Nora was childless, she planned to adopt the maid's baby as soon as the mother finished nursing her.

Every free moment she had, Devora scrubbed the steps and made herself useful in her role as a maid. Much to her alarm, as she went about her chores, she attracted the attention of several Arrow Cross officers living in the building. She tried to ignore their unwanted attention, worrying they might teasingly pull her kerchief off her head. In the way of Chassidic women, her head was shaved after her marriage, and her hair was still very short. One persistent officer kept asking her to go out with him and accompany him to the beach. She excused herself, saying that she was faithful to her husband at the front. There were plenty of other stressful moments. One day, registering as a maid, she came face to face with her family's former maid. Fortunately, she did not recognize her.

Though he dared not come to Nora's apartment, Tzvi Meir would meet his wife in the park. They would sit together, pretending to be

sweethearts, while whispering into each other's ears the events of their clandestine lives. Tzvi Meir also gave her powdered milk for their baby.

Tzvi Meir's confidence in Nora turned out to be well-founded. Despite the grave danger to herself, she sheltered not only Devora and her baby in her apartment for six months, but hid several other Jews as well. Tzvi Meir and Devora made every effort to find hiding places for other children in the family with Nora's intervention. She saved other members of Tzvi Meir's family, bringing them to Budapest and finding safe places for their children. Isser Eisenberg, Devora's brother, later testified that she had saved his son Matyu (Moshe) as well. She had found safety for two orphaned sons of Devora's sister Binah, Ushu (Asher), and Lolly (Shlomo Elazar) Garfein.

Tzvi Meir recalled that she made several other attempts to save Jews from deportation. In addition, Nora was the link between Tzvi Meir and his family who were hiding in the mountains of Maramures. He was sure these were only a small portion of her good deeds.

Devora recalled another example of her heroism. One evening, a Jew was caught by the Nazis, walking in the street without papers. Promising them a hefty bribe if they would let him go, the Jew led the Nazis to Nora's building. Running upstairs to the office, he begged her to loan him the money. The people hiding in the apartment warned Nora that the Germans would come back and arrest them all. Anyone helping a Jew would share his fate. Disregarding their objections, Nora gave him the whole sum anyway. As a precaution, all the people in the apartment, including Nora, moved to another location until they felt it was safe to return.

■ ■ ■

ALL THIS TIME, Tzvi Meir had kept up his disguise, but it was becoming more dangerous day by day as the Nazis' hunt for Jews

intensified. Once, walking in the street, a Hungarian acquaintance turned on him and shouted "You are a Jew. You are a Jew!"

Tzvi Meir jumped on the back of a tram. "Luckily the sun was in his eyes, and I rode away!" he said.

Tzvi Meir recalled another moment of heart-stopping danger. He was hiding—alongside other fugitives, draft dodgers, and wanted men—in a bombed-out building to avoid a German checkpoint in the street. Tzvi Meir knew his forged papers could not stand close inspection. They were spotted, and the German soldiers demanded to see everyone's papers. As Tzvi Meir slowly withdrew his forged I.D. from his pocket, three Hungarian soldiers on horseback appeared as if from nowhere. Splendid in their Hungarian uniforms, they ordered the Germans to leave. "It's our country. We will take care of this!"

The Hungarians proceeded to check all the papers while the Germans watched from a distance. "They accepted any identification at all," Tzvi Meir marveled in later years, "even a cleaner's ticket!" He would later tell his children he believed the three soldiers were the forefathers of our people, Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov, coming to save him.

■ ■ ■

IN THE LAST DANGEROUS weeks before the liberation, Tzvi Meir found a different kind of refuge. He was granted asylum in a branch of the Swiss consulate along with other Zionist leaders. The opportunity was the brainchild of Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz who, like Nora, was a "righteous of the nations". He obtained eight thousand letters from his government granting Jews permission to immigrate to what was then Palestine under Swiss protection. Mr. Lutz interpreted these letters broadly as applying to families, not individuals, saving tens of thousands of Jews in this way. To keep them safe, he designated dozens of homes as branches of the Swiss embassy, where Jews could safely shelter until they were able to travel to Israel.

The most famous of Lutz's safe houses was "the Glass House", a former glass factory, which sheltered 3,000 Jews during the war. The poet was granted asylum there, a welcome respite from impersonating the gentile electrician.

Tzvi Meir felt it was a series of miracles that enabled him to find refuge with the Swiss. Back in Debrecen, a professor had suggested he become part of the Pen Club. Due to his membership, he made the acquaintance of Zionists awaiting immigration to Israel. Two Rabbis, along with his friend Dr. Weiss, requested permission to allow Tzvi Meir to immigrate. In this way, he met the criteria for entering the Glass House, and was permitted to shelter there until the end of the war.

All the time they lived in the precarious safety of their false identities, both Tzvi Meir and Devora were constant witnesses to the suffering of their fellow Jews. Devora described how the streets were lined with cheering crowds as Jewish men, women, and little children were marched to the cattle cars heading for Auschwitz. "And you had to smile," she concluded. "Otherwise, they would suspect that you too were a Jew."

Tzvi Meir recalled seeing a mother wearing a yellow star trying to buy a package of powdered milk for her baby. The grocer refused to sell it to her. Since it must have been curfew time in the ghetto, she turned and ran away empty-handed. "I ran after her with a packet of milk, but I couldn't find her," recalled Tzvi Meir.

Though he had discarded all outward signs of his identity, Tzvi Meir continued to observe mitzvos in secret. Ushu (Asher) Garfein, Devora's eight-year-old nephew orphaned by his mother, was taken under the wings of the surviving extended family. He recalled walking with his uncle through the streets of Budapest on the way to a safe place. Tzvi Meir was reciting *Megillas Esther* to him from memory. It was Purim day. Young as he was, he understood the relevance of the timeless story to their own predicament.

Reunion

LIKE ALL THE JEWS, the Steinmetz couple followed the war news anxiously, praying for the defeat of the Nazis. Hiding in cellars as the bombs rained down on Budapest, Devora had to conceal her satisfaction from her terrified neighbors. The bombs meant the Allies were coming closer.

The Russians liberated Hungary in January 1945. Tzvi Meir and Devora were reunited at last. Their first thought was the fate of their two daughters Judy and Rochel. In the last months of the war, they had no contact with the peasant family sheltering the girls and had been unable to send them money. Tzvi Meir set out immediately for the village, walking many miles because the train tracks had been bombed. Later, he described the terror he felt on that walk. What if the peasants had surrendered the children to the Germans for lack of payment? What if they had become attached to their charges and would refuse to return them to their parents?

His fears were unfounded. After the initial visit by their father, both parents, along with their baby daughter, went down to collect their children. With profound relief, they spotted the girls playing outside the cottage, "healthy, red-cheeked, dirty, and covered in lice," in Devora's words.

The girls did not recognize their parents. Judy ran into the house, complaining to her foster mother: "Mommy, some strange people are outside, and the baby is playing with our toys!" As much as it hurt Devora to hear her daughters calling another woman their mother, she was relieved to see they had been treated well.

As soon as they were settled in their home in Budapest, and Tzvi Meir began to make a living, they compensated Margi *Neni* who had cared for the two children. For a while, she came to visit them, a humble peasant woman in a black kerchief bringing a basket of eggs as a gift. Judy, who was old enough to remember her foster mother, was embarrassed, pretending not to recognize her.

As for Nora, it was unthinkable to offer her compensation. Affectionately referred to as "Noruka", she had become a close friend, almost a member of the family. She lived in the same apartment building as the Steinmetzes in Budapest, and later remained close by when they all moved to Vienna. She went on vacations with the family and was very involved with them. Interestingly, she still referred to them by the assumed names they had used during the war. She loved Devora, whom she called Ilona, and had great respect for "Pastor" (Tzvi Meir), saying, "He can survive on the tip of an iceberg." But most of all, she was attached to Esther, the baby she had helped care for, calling her "*Tzutzikam*".

There was, however, one truly awkward moment between them. The Steinmetzes were preparing to move from Vienna to America. Nora faced the prospect of separation from the beloved *Tzutzikam*. Middle-aged and childless, she came to Tzvi Meir with a startling request: "You have two other children," she said to him. "Let me adopt the little one!"

For once, Tzvi Meir was lost for words. How could he refuse Noruka? She had risked her life many times to save them and their family. After a moment's hesitation, he said, "If you can promise to raise her as a Jewish child."

She never brought up the subject again. But she bore no grudge. She would have moved to America with the Steinmetzes but was refused a visa, moving to New Zealand instead with her second husband, Sipos.

■ ■ ■

LATER, NORA TRAVELED TO New York more than once, and also to Italy to visit Judy's family, and even to Portland, Maine to visit Rochel's. Never having had children of her own, she treasured the bond with her "family". Naturally, she attended Esther's wedding.

The visits were also occasions for other families she had helped during the war to gather together to honor her. "Their love and affection was overwhelming," she would say later. "They gave us the most wonderful feeling of human bonding and sense of belonging. This feeling, I will never forget."

In the end, Tzvi Meir found a way to show his gratitude to Nora. He began a correspondence with *Yad Vashem*, asking them to award her the Medal of the Just. He detailed her rescue efforts endangering her life, stressing the enormous risks she had taken, "as the Germans executed many gentiles who gave aid or shelter to the Jews." He also emphasized that she had received no remuneration for her actions.

Finally, seven years later, at the age of seventy-eight, the medal was presented to Nora in New Plymouth, New Zealand. Nora sent the Steinmetzes a newspaper clipping showing her smiling widely as she accepted the award and a certificate stating that a tree had been planted in her honor in the "Garden of the Righteous" in *Yad Vashem*.

In her speech accepting the award, Nora insisted she had done nothing unique, deflecting the honor to those who bestowed it. "Their gratitude and not forgetting after such a long time is a great credit to them," she said. She added that her greatest reward was simply doing what she thought was right, and saving many lives in those troubled and dark days.

Aftermath

THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL was over. With liberation, the full enormity of what had happened to their families, to the Jews of Europe, was revealed. As Tzvi Meir wrote in "Spring 1945…": "Spring has come, nature blooms, the snow has melted, to reveal the graves."[11]

A short while after Devora had left Debrecen, the ghetto was liquidated. The Jews of that city were among the 424,000 Jews sent to Auschwitz, where they were murdered on arrival. Close to 565,000 had perished in all by the time of liberation in January 1945. Devora discovered that of her whole family, only her sister Juci (Yehudis) and her brother, Isser Eisenberg, along with a few nieces and nephews, had survived, having lived through the war under assumed identities.

She would remember her family with affection and longing. She spoke of her G-d-fearing father, who had once received tragic news about one of his children, but showed no sign of mourning until Shabbos ended when he began to cry. She described her sisters as gentle and capable, tall and beautiful, and far, far better than she was. But it was the memory of her mother, Frumet Mindel, dying on the road leading to Auschwitz all alone, with not one of her eleven children at her side, that haunted her. Her daughters remember her inevitably

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11 Bechevyon Hanefesh, p. 121

ending this tragic story with the words, "But what could I have done? I couldn't stay, I had to save you, didn't I?" And her daughters would assure her she had no choice, sharing a little in her survivor's guilt.

■ ■ ■

TZVI MEIR'S FAMILY HAD, by the grace of G-d, a better outcome. His oldest married sister had been murdered along with her family. But the rest of the family miraculously survived. After the war, Tzvi Meir heard all the details of their story.

By 1939, Czechoslovakia was occupied by Germany. In 1941, Jews from all over the region were deported to the infamous ghetto in the north of Prague, and from there to Auschwitz. By the end of the war, 263,000 Jews had been killed, with only 14,000 remaining alive.

Tzvi Meir's parents and family had fled to Hungary, where deportations had not yet begun. But they were subsequently deported back to Brusztura. One day, a former worker of Shlomo Steinmetz whispered in his ear, "Uncle Berke, It's time to hide."

This young man dug a tunnel high in the mountains and covered the top with fallen trees. The parents, Shlomo Dov and Leah Gittel, and their young, unmarried daughters—Suri, Ratzi, Chanci, and Ruchi—spent six months in the cold, damp pit, with no room to stretch their legs. They emerged at night to bathe, and good housekeepers that they were, to wash their laundry in a nearby stream. Once a week, their savior brought them food, including two small rolls over which the father recited *Kiddush* to sanctify the Shabbos.

Nora Vuych had a hand in saving Tzvi Meir's parents and sisters as well. She traveled numerous times from Budapest to Brusztura, bringing money to pay the man hiding the family and to buy food for them. (The funds were given to Tzvi Meir by Dr. Rudolf [Rezső] Israel Kasztner, a journalist who saved many Hungarian Jews.)

For the duration of thce war, Nora would be the channel of communication between Tzvi Meir in the city and his family in the mountains.

After liberation, Shlomo Steinmetz asked his former worker what motivated him to save the family at great risk to himself. The man admitted that he had his doubts. Before he decided to hide them, he consulted his family. Uncle Steinmetz, he told them, had always treated him kindly, but he feared the Nazis. His old mother helped him decide. "Berke and his family gave life to the whole village. It is only right that they should be allowed to live."

■ ■ ■

THERE WAS ANOTHER AMAZING survival story in the Steinmetz family, as recounted by Freidi's son, Yossi Feldman.

Tzvi Meir's sister Freidi was already married to Mendel Feldman in the city of Ungvar. Freidi's father-in-law foresaw the destruction coming. He ordered his sons to stake out a hiding place for the men of the family—who were most at risk—in Presov, a city in Slovakia where all the Jews had already been deported.

In a cellar beneath a cellar, about ten Jewish boys (Freidi's husband, Mendel, among them) hid in a large barrel originally containing wine. Freidi, under an assumed name, got a job in a bakery nearby, and her sister-in-law, in a grocery store. The young women managed to smuggle food to the hidden men over many months.

After liberation, Mendel and Freidi returned to Mendel's hometown. Together, the two opened a home for the survivors of the camps. Mendel "found" basic groceries, and Freidi cooked from morning to night for the emaciated, demoralized guests.

Shortly after the liberation, the Solotvyno Rebbe brought happy tidings to Freidi's parents: their daughter was alive and well in Ungvar.

Leah Gittel was unconvinced, "How do I know it's my Freidi? What is she doing?"

The Rebbe answered, "*Zi git essen* (she is feeding people)."

Leah Gittel doubted no more.

■ ■ ■

TZVI MEIR WAS ETERNALLY grateful that his parents and six sisters were spared. But the Holocaust had not spared him. He had seen his whole world go up in flames. Brusztura, the village of his childhood, the yeshivos where he had learned, the young poets and thinkers of Debrecen, Devora's extended family—all were gone, only scattered survivors remaining.

Tzvi Yair, the poet, struggled to express what Tzvi Meir seldom spoke about. In his poems, portraits of the victims appear. A small child wanders away from a mass killing.[12] A father, bereaved of all his children, silent and stoic by day, embraces his lost children in the sleepless nights.[13] A man is fleeing endlessly, in desperation, from a cruel enemy that has long ceased to pursue him.[14] In the poem "To a Distant Brother",[15] the poet addresses a Jewish brother from a distant land who came "to count the graves". He asks him,

Do you know the heart of Man, buried alive in darkness?
...Do you know the heart of a mother whose cherished child dies in her arms
begging for a piece of bread?
...Do you know how the silence weeps in abandoned shuls
in the lands of destruction?

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12 Bechevyon Hanefesh, p. 50
13 Ibid., p. 65
14 Merosh Tzurim, p. 203
15 Bechevyon Hanefesh, p. 118

This poem was engraved on the walls of the synagogue in the city of Szeged. Many years later, the poem was recited in the opening of Yom Hashoah in the Israeli Knesset.

Most of these poems offer no answers, no consolation. But one poem, "How Good to Know",[16] expressing the faith of the believing Jew who looks forward to the day when:

All wounds are healed,
all mourners comforted.
All wanderers at rest,
and all suffering ended.
How good to know there will be a day when man returns to Eden.

In the end, both Tzvi Meir and Devora, like so many survivors, strove to rebuild their families and their Jewish communities. And, in the words of the Lubavitcher Rebbe to a community suffering a tragedy, "By rebuilding you will find consolation."

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16 *Ibid.*, p. 85

Transitions

THE TIME HAD COME to pick up the pieces and find a way to support his newly united family. In the immediate aftermath of liberation, Tzvi Meir's parents and several siblings joined him in Budapest, where they attempted to reestablish the family's import-export company named OMNA. Because of the disruptions of the war, however, and the antisemitic Jewish Laws that were still in place, they were forced to conduct business under the radar, in the black market. Shortly, Tzvi Meir, the man who could survive on the tip of an iceberg, was able to establish his wife and three daughters in a sunny apartment on *Madach Imre Ut*. Devora soon had the household running smoothly in the way she had been taught in her parents' home.

Her daughters remember her in the kitchen, wearing unfashionable high-topped shoes for comfort, as she dissected a chicken and asked the girls to pray that it would be kosher. Sometimes she found little yellow eggs inside the chicken, which would later appear in the Friday night chicken soup. The kitchen would be covered with woven baskets holding the salted chicken pieces, which she had to *kasher* herself. Before Succos, she made chains of walnuts and painted them with gold paint, and hung little bottles of oil and wine from the Sukkah roof. The laundry and hard work were done by a maid.

■ ■ ■

AS SCHOOL STARTED AT age six, and ended at midday, the three girls entertained themselves with hours of make-believe, pick-up sticks, and ball play. Frequently, they would visit Nora, who lived two floors below them and was always warm and welcoming, though she didn't try to hide that Esther (*Tzutzikam*) was her favorite.

In the evenings, hungry for entertainment in the days before tapes or even children's books, they begged their mother for stories. She would shake her little finger, "to check if any stories were available." If they were in luck, she would tell them suspense-filled, scary stories she had made up herself, or heard as a child, such as the story of Yosef and his brothers.

The daughters remember she would leave them sobbing, even as they pleaded to hear more. Their father would grumble, "Devora, why do you torture the children?"

"Look how smart and sensitive they are!" she would reply.

The girls were not quite sure if it was their tears that bothered their father or the loud commotion they were making. Tzvi Meir spent most of the day in his office, off limits to the children, working at his imposing desk. Men would come and go to discuss business in that office. It was a stressful period for him. He was trying to put together business deals in war-ravaged Europe while finding some time to follow his intellectual pursuits or to write a few lines of poetry. In any case, he had little time or patience for three noisy little girls. But he had his own way of showing he cared for his children. Every night without fail, he would walk around and check if his daughters had kicked off their quilts. He would conscientiously cover them to prevent them from catching a cold. This habit continued into their teenage years and beyond, even when they slept in well-heated apartments in New York.

■ ■ ■

WHEN IT CAME TO talking about the Holocaust, both parents were selective, shielding their daughters as much as possible. They taught the children gratitude for G-d's mercies in saving their family, Esther thriving in Nora's office under the noses of the Nazis, and the adventures of the older children—hidden, found safe, and reunited with their parents. These were the stories told over and over again.

Nevertheless, their daughters could not be wholly protected from the horrors that had transpired just a few years earlier. In the evenings, when the family hosted old acquaintances and family members, the girls heard them chatting about various things. When a name was mentioned, such as "poor Binah", or "poor Meilech", they knew it belonged to someone who had died. There would be a gasp of anguish and a few moments of silence before the conversation resumed.

Judy recalls seeing her mother one Yom Kippur after Yizkor. "She wore a beautiful white silk blouse and an elegant black suit. Her face was wet with tears. She told me, "Most of all, I mourn for my mother.'"

When a young, orphaned nephew came to visit Devora, they spoke in low voices in the other room. The children were sure their mother was crying. "No, no, we were just laughing," she lied.

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IN SPITE OF THE shadow cast by the war, their parents managed to provide a safe and stable environment for the girls in Budapest. There were health crises in the family, common in the days when immunizations were not widely available. Esther, at the age of two, contracted diphtheria. Unable to speak because of her swollen throat, she pointed to the door to show the doctor out. Rochel, at five, contracted meningitis and remembered laying in the hospital bed and seeing her mother collapse in a faint after a discussion with the hospital staff. But these events ended well, and the girls do not remember a sense of impermanence or uncertainty.

This was not the case for the parents themselves. Tzvi Meir and Devora had no intention of remaining in Hungary indefinitely. Europe, they would say, was a great graveyard, the earth soaked in Jewish blood. They knew that the Hungarian neighbors who spoke to them politely very likely had collaborated with the Germans, or rejoiced in the fate of the Jews. They planned to emigrate eventually, to Israel, America, or perhaps to Argentina where Devora's brother Isser had moved and established a successful factory.

World events forced their hand. The Hungarian Communist government installed by the Soviets was becoming increasingly oppressive. It got harder and harder to leave the country. The Steinmetzes decided to move to Vienna until they settled on a permanent destination, since Austria was free of Communist control. They applied for temporary visas, stating they were going on a family vacation.

The Hungarians sent an official to inspect their luggage and make sure they were indeed going only for a visit, and that they were taking no valuables with them. Earlier, jewelry and other valuables had been sewn into pillows and hidden in cans of food. The daughters felt the tension in the air as an old man with white hair began to inspect their bags. Tzvi Meir offered him an expensive alcoholic beverage. The man enjoyed his drink, became very cheerful, and did not check the rest of their belongings.

To avoid calling undue attention to all the luggage they were carrying, the family split up; the older girls traveling by way of Switzerland with their grandfather, and the rest of the family taking a direct route to Austria.

■ ■ ■

IT TURNED OUT THE Steinmetzes had left Hungary just in time. Soon afterward, the Iron Curtain descended on the countries in the Soviet bloc. Unfortunately, Tzvi Meir's sister Suri and her husband

Yoshka Silber were trapped in Hungary for many years. In the end, they would escape during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, hiding in a wagon with their two sons with bullets flying above them. Devora's only surviving sister, Juci, was married to a high-ranking Communist official and was unable to leave at all. So tight was the surveillance over her family, that when her son, Bubbie, left for Argentina, her husband lost his government position.

Nora, like the Steinmetzes, made it out in time. The Communists had confiscated her family's property and her business. Now it was her turn to feel like a stateless refugee. A few weeks after the Steinmetzes arrived in Vienna, she joined them, living in an apartment close by and continuing their friendship.

Life in Vienna

TZVI MEIR MADE A fairly smooth transition to life in Vienna. Unlike Devora, the language was no problem for him since he spoke fluent German. Upon arrival in Vienna, Tzvi Meir forged a connection with Mr. Schreiber, an important figure in the Jewish community of Vienna. Tzvi Meir and Mr. Schreiber became partners in the import-export business. Mr. Schreiber was also the president of the Vienna branch of Poalei Agudath Israel. Soon, the poet was deeply involved in writing for *Stimme Israel,* published by Poalei Agudath Israel. The bi-weekly was the only Orthodox publication in Europe and was widely read. At Tzvi Meir's urging, *Der Stimme* serialized a philosophical essay by his old mentor, Dr. Breuer. As for the rest of the paper, Tzvi Meir later told the Rebbe, "I wrote almost every article under different pen names."

Once again, Tzvi Meir was a busy man. By day, he ran his business, complete with a private secretary. At night, sitting by his desk, piled high with papers, pamphlets, and bits of paper where he jotted down ideas for a new poem, he was in his element. He had time to read, to learn, to write. He worked on articles for *Der Stimme* and, of course, he composed his poems. Some of these poems reflect his longing for the silence and solitude of the night, free of the cares and burdens of the day.

Tzvi Meir and Devora soon became close friends with Mr. Schreiber and his wife. Rare photos from that time show the two couples on a scenic excursion to the mountains. (The three daughters called it "the mean trip" because they were not permitted to go along.) One unfortunate event occurred while they were living in Vienna. After the war, Mr. Schreiber had been placed in charge of distributing German reparation money to the city's Jews. At one point, accusations were made against him for mishandling the money, and he was arrested. Tzvi Meir was caught in the web of accusations as well, landing in prison for several weeks. Devora, ever the protective mother, told her girls he was in a sort of hotel in another city. She went to visit him several times.

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IN VIENNA, THE STEINMETZES quickly established financial security and a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle that would long evade them once they emigrated to America. Upon their arrival in Austria, they sublet an apartment, since as immigrants, or Jews, they were barred from renting directly. The apartment had padded soundproof doors for an office. They furnished it with a beautiful bookcase with stained-glass doors and velvet couches with hand-carvings. The expensive furniture was left behind three years later, too large and too heavy to be worth transporting to America. But the couple mentioned this only in passing, knowing that things can always be replaced.

A typical European husband in those days, Tzvi Meir left the running of the house and the daily care of their children in his wife's capable hands. Devora hired the maids who helped with the housework, and fired them frequently as well. She suspected the German-speaking women of being antisemites and was probably not far wrong. The girls had piano lessons, and for a while, a governess. In some ways, though, daily life was simple. The children ate farina for breakfast or dry bread

in warm coffee. A hot meal was served at midday, but the menu was plain, containing spinach, cabbage, and other cooked vegetables. Meat was served in small portions, and fruits and vegetables were eaten when in season. The girls had to eat all that was on their plates. Throwing food away, their mother would say, "is *ah nevaireh*," a sin.

Devora found new outlets for socializing in Vienna. She would have elegant dresses made and go out with friends to concerts and the opera, leaving her protesting girls with the live-in maids. "I was young and foolish, and wanted to have a good time," she later told Judy.

Devora took great trouble with the children's clothing. Ready-made dresses were not available. She had to shop for fabric, choose a pattern from a catalog, and hire a seamstress who would pin and measure the dresses on squirming children. Devora loved beautiful things, and the dresses were pretty but meant to be durable as well. Each girl had two Shabbos dresses for winter, and two for summer. Pleats would be let out as the girls grew, and, of course, the dresses were passed down to a younger sister. To prevent staining, white pinafores were worn over Shabbos dresses, and dark ones on school days. When they moved to America, Devora was at first appalled at the throw-away culture of the new country. But she adjusted quickly, happily picking up *metziahs* (sometimes at a dollar a dress!) for her grandchildren.

At times, Devora did get carried away by her love of dressing her daughters. The girls complained that the ragtag neighborhood children in Vienna would call them names and attack them while waiting for their school bus. They threw stones, which actually left a scar on Judy's hand. "It was my fault," Devora admitted later. "I shouldn't have dressed you so well, especially in those red coats with matching hats."

■ ■ ■

IN 1949, THE EFFECTS of the war were all around them, in the bombed empty lots, the ruined parks, and the bitter feelings of the

citizens, who had welcomed the Nazis with open arms. The Steinmetz girls were keenly aware that many Jews, their own friends among them, were suffering the effects of the Holocaust, and were not as fortunate as they were. When toys were distributed by the JOINT to the children on Chanukah, their parents warned them not to take anything, for the toys were intended "for children who had nothing."

One of the daughters remembered visiting a friend in the Rothschild House, a building for impoverished refugee families. She was shocked to find her schoolmate, an immaculate little girl with long chestnut braids, living with her mother in half a room. A curtain separated them from an old man, who was groaning and complaining. Her friend's neatly pressed dresses were hanging from nails on the wall. Soon after, her friend and her mother emigrated to Israel.

■ ■ ■

IN THE SUMMERS, THE family vacationed in Semmering, a village in the mountains, eating their meals in a kosher hotel. Nora often accompanied them and stayed nearby. The fresh air, the freedom, and the beauty of their surroundings were the highlight of the year for the three daughters.

An incident from these summer vacations is vividly remembered by all three daughters. They were sitting with their mother on the porch of the hotel eating strawberries with cream. They spotted a group of children walking down the road with a young woman leading them. The children were orphans, their mother told them. Devora invited the young counselor and her charges, treating the whole group with strawberries and cream. Her daughters remember being proud of their mother's generosity. They also understood that the parents of all these children had died in the war, and felt grateful—and a little guilty—for having a mother and a father.

Tzvi Meir remained in the city, only joining the family for Shabbos. He described those days of uninterrupted solitude as the best time of the year for him. Once, he decided to make himself a potato soup, following Devora's instructions. "I don't know why it didn't taste good," he reported. Devora asked him to recount step by step what he had done, and he discovered he had neglected to peel the potatoes.

While Devora was happy to provide her children with a wholesome summer, she, herself, was too restless to spend the summer vacationing. She would make short trips to the city, leaving the children in the care of Nora and other reliable people. One summer, a young girl was staying with them, the daughter of their faithful wagon driver from Brusztura. At the end of the war, the family was surprised to discover that their humble wagon driver, Aron Levi, had become a hero in Auschwitz. Working in the kitchen, he smuggled food to the other inmates, saving many from starvation. When asked where he got the courage to risk his life, he answered, "I lived with the Steinmetzes. I learned how to give." The family had kept in touch with him since liberation, providing for his needs.

Tzvi Meir's daughters remembered Aron Levi's daughter as gentle and kind, taking good care of them in their mother's absence. But throughout the night, they heard her coughing terribly. It turned out she had tuberculosis, a typical legacy of the war years. Later, Tzvi Meir paid for an expensive operation to remove part of her lungs. She recovered and raised a family in Israel.

■ ■ ■

IT WOULD BE YEARS before Tzvi Meir and Devora returned to their pre-war Chassidic appearance. But their commitment to *Yiddishkeit* remained strong as ever. On Tzvi Meir's part, it was driven by a deeply personal philosophy, as mirrored in his poems. For Devora, it was the natural, unquestioning faith her upbringing had imbued in her.

If he left the running of the home mainly to his wife, when it came to the education of his daughters, Tzvi Meir took full charge. Devora referred to herself as "illiterate" when it came to Jewish learning, having been taught only *davening* and basic Jewish concepts. She revered her husband as a "*talmid chuchem*", and deferred to him completely when it came to religious matters.

Tzvi Meir did not take the decision of choosing a school for his children lightly. He firmly believed that Jewish education for girls, as much as for boys, was the key to Jewish survival. Often, he told his children that he had chosen to emigrate to America for the sake of their education, though he knew that making a living would be a struggle. Looking for a school in Vienna that would reflect his values, he enrolled the girls in a school run by Agudah, pleased with their Torah-true philosophy. But in those post-war years, the school, held in the basement of a synagogue, was loosely organized. Children of all ages sat around two long tables, presided over by two young teachers. There was no set curriculum, not even a consistent schedule. A rickety milk truck was used as a school bus. Rochel once fell out of the back door and was picked off the road when the screams of the children alerted the driver.

Their father soon enrolled the girls in the *Hebreshe Shule*, a Zionist school focused on the Hebrew language and Israel. All instructions were given in Hebrew. Judy remembers that it was a big adjustment since both the language and culture of the school were new to them. But they understood their father wanted them to receive the highest quality education possible. Tzvi Meir immediately recognized the secular nature of the program. He hired a young teacher, called Esther, to fill the gaps. After school hours, she taught them blessings on food, Grace after Meals and other religious subjects.

Tzvi Meir assigned each daughter one of his poems to learn by heart and recite to their teacher. The daughters remember these poems almost seventy years later. One was a poem about a wanderer, knocking

in vain on all doors, while the gates of Heaven are ever open.[17] Another depicts how in childhood one's angel appears to each person, forgotten and yet remembered.[18]

Certainly, he expected that these poems by their father, a Hebrew poet, would burnish their image in the eyes of their teachers. He may also have hoped to introduce some spirituality into the curriculum and the school lives of his children. Tzvi Meir also began to invite his oldest daughter to learn something about his poetry. *Nativ*, a volume of poems, was published in 1951. Tzvi Meir was excited about the new volume, and he shared some poems with Judy, explaining the biblical references and discussing the meaning of the verses.

As they grew older, Tzvi Meir readily engaged his daughters in discussions of faith and Jewish beliefs. When Rochel complained her teachers in Bais Yaakov brushed her questions aside with, "We don't question the Torah," Tzvi Meir replied, "We should ask questions and must be given answers." He gave Rochel the book "Nineteen Letters" by Samson Raphael Hirsch to read.

■ ■ ■

SHABBOS AND YOM TOV was the time to educate the children at home. Strict about decorum at the table, he would relax when he told them stories. Many stories were from *Tanach*, one of Tzvi Meir's great loves. There were also miracle stories of the Baal Shem Tov and other holy *tzadikim*. Pesach was the time "to tell the children." Resplendent in those early days in a white *kittel* and crown-like hat with gold trim, their father would quote Dr. Breuer: "On Pesach, you feel the hot breath of Jewish history."

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17 "At the Gates", *Merosh Tzurim*, p. 57
18 "Youth", *ibid.*, p.42

After listening to the Four Questions, he would explain how the father answered each question with his reply, "We were slaves in Egypt." Then, he would launch into a history lesson. Beginning with Rabbi Akiva, he would tell a story from the life of each great Rabbi conducting the Seder in Bnei Brak. Their mother had a tradition of her own. Exhausted from last-minute preparations, she would plead in vain. "Could we make it faster? Could we speak during the meal?"

Devora did make a comment at least once. When her husband sang, "In every generation, they rise up against us...and the Holy One Blessed Be He saves us from their hands," Devora would murmur, "The nation survives, but what about the people?"

There was one major disappointment during these childhood Seders. "I don't give in to blackmail," their father would reply when a child demanded a prize for returning the stolen Afikomen. One memorable Pesach, their grandfather Shlomo Steinmetz was with them, and he actually gave Judy a red leather manicure case as an Afikomen prize. Years later, Tzvi Meir was vindicated, when his daughters discovered stealing the Afikomen was not a custom of Chabad.

■ ■ ■

AS FOR DEVORA, SHE did not teach religious values as her husband did. But she inspired by way of example. Watching their mother prepare for Pesach, her girls agree, was seeing the fear of G-d in action. *Chometz* was not cleared away, it was hunted down and destroyed. Every pot was scrubbed, dismembered, unscrewed, and boiled in a strong lyme solution. Later, when she was instructed to sell the *chometz* according to the custom of Chabad, she could not bring herself to actually do so. She would entreat her married daughters to take the vodka and whiskey bottles home with them for the duration of Pesach.

As teenagers, her girls would marvel at their mother pronouncing every word of the prayers with great concentration without understanding a word. (Later, she would educate herself in the meaning of the prayers by reading a *Siddur* with English translation.)

Never comfortable in post-war Europe, the couple debated their next move. Newly established Israel was appealing, but conditions were harsh and unsettled. They considered moving to Argentina, where Devora's brother, Isser Eisenberg, was running a highly profitable factory. Finally, they decided to apply for visas to the United States, where a community of survivors was growing, and Tzvi Meir's sister Freidi and her husband, Mendel, were already established.



Shlomo Dov Steinmetz, Tzvi Meir's father



Tzvi Meir's mother, Leah Gittel



The Steinmetz family home in Brusztura, Czechoslovakia



Tzvi Meir's sisters in Brusztura
bottom row, left to right:
Ratzi, Ruchi, Suri.
top row, left to right:
Freidi, two friends, Chanci.
missing: Voichi, Ettu



Devora as a young woman



Tzvi Meir the poet as a young man



Devora on her wedding day, Sivan 22, 1940



Esther Steinmetz with
Nora Vuych, the woman who helped save
the family from the Nazis



right to left: Henya Yehudis (Judy), Tzvi Meir's oldest daughter, born in 1941
Esther, Tzvi Meir's youngest daughter, born in 1944
Chaya Rochel, Tzvi Meir's second daughter, born 1942



Yehudis (Judy)



Rochel



Esther



Gesharim (Bridges), Tzvi Meir's first book of poetry, under the pen name Ben Shlomo, published in 1942.

To New Shores

THE COVETED VISAS ARRIVED. There was an awkward moment when the family accepted their visas. The official in the American Consul, holding Esther on his lap, said, "So, little one, you are moving to America?"

"Oh, no!" declared the girl, educated in the Zionist school. "We are only staying there a little bit. Then we are going to Israel!" Tzvi Meir had a lot of explaining to do.

■ ■ ■

THE JOURNEY TO AMERICA began in the winter of 1951. The family traveled from Switzerland to Paris. They had booked tickets on the Queen Mary, a luxury ship (later to become a museum), which was setting sail from a harbor in France. The parents explained to their daughters that they were going to travel in second class, not being very rich nor very poor. One day was spent in clean, quiet Switzerland, and three days in Paris, where the streets were brightly lit and crowded with men, women, and children late into the night. There, Devora bought a black velvet gown with a bejeweled top and matching jacket she later regretted. "I had no use for it at all in America."

On December 31, 1951, the Steinmetzes boarded the Queen Mary. It was a historic voyage. The ship was also carrying British Prime Minister Winston Churchill on his first official visit to the United States since winning reelection earlier that year. The purpose of the visit was to meet with President Truman and reaffirm the close ties between Great Britain and the United States.

The daughters remember their parents telling them that a great man was on board. Tzvi Meir considered Churchill a hero for taking on the Germans in the war, and for the lesser-known kindness he had shown the Jewish people by supporting the fledgling state of Israel. In fact, around the time of the voyage, Churchill had written, "Centuries of foreign rule, and indescribable, endless oppression, leave them (the Jews) still living, active communities and forces in the modern world."

The voyage began badly. The weather was terrible, the seas stormy, and most of the passengers were confined to their cabins, suffering from seasickness. The Steinmetzes were no exception. Devora, feeling very sick herself, was busy caring for the three girls, who could keep no food down. The girls had never seen their mother like this. She was not only seasick, but totally disoriented because she knew no English.

Tzvi Meir became the family's official translator and lifeline. When Devora needed help from the cabin attendants, she would say the only English word she knew: "My hoosband, my hoosband." They would summon her husband, who would be able to explain what she needed.

Indeed, acquiring a new language continued to be a big challenge for Devora in the new country. Unlike her husband and his sisters, who grew up in multilingual Czechoslovakia, she knew only Hungarian. When her daughters told Tzvi Meir they could not understand the Hungarian letters she mailed them in camp, he joked, "Her English ones won't be much easier to understand."

Actually, Devora acquired an advanced vocabulary quite quickly, even borrowing her daughter's thick library books when lying down to rest her back. But she remained very self-conscious of her

Hungarian accent, refusing to speak in public even when heading the Bikur Cholim organization.

Finally, in the last two days of the voyage, Esther recalls, the sun was shining and they were all feeling well. The older girls discovered a ping-pong table, where they played happily until adults took it over. For the first time, they explored the enormous ship, finding, to their astonishment, a great ballroom, dining rooms, swimming pools, and even a gym.

The ship docked on Shabbos morning, and a grand delegation came to greet Churchill in New York Harbor. All passengers were ordered to disembark. Tzvi Meir had told his family to pack up and clear their cabin as if they were ready to leave with the other passengers. But he had no intention of disembarking on Shabbos.

A prominent Rabbi was traveling first class on the Queen Mary. He had received special permission to remain on board until an hour after sundown, as Halachah prescribed. Tzvi Meir and his family went secretly to the Rabbi's cabin. There, they found a large room with a table set for Shabbos.

They explained their predicament, and the Rabbi graciously invited them to share his Shabbos meal. In the course of the meal, the Rabbi asked Judy if she knew who Rashi was. Tzvi Meir was embarrassed when she could not answer. He hoped that in America, his daughters would receive a true Jewish education.

The family remained with the Rabbi until Shabbos ended when they disembarked in New York.

■ ■ ■

STRAIGHT FROM THE SHIP, the Steinmetzes arrived at the home of Freidi and Mendel Feldman in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Crown Heights, at the time, was an upper-middle-class neighborhood. The population was about forty-percent Jewish, mostly second- and

third-generation Americans. "A big step up from Brownsville, many of the Jews lived in elegant brownstones and spacious apartment buildings with doormen," writes Dovid Margolin. "....No longer poor immigrants, the Jews of Crown Heights were now American Jews, climbing the ladder of success."

But a change was taking place by the time the Steinmetzes had arrived. An influx of new Jewish immigrants from Europe and Communist Russia were moving into the neighborhood. While Lubavitch was the first Chassidic group to join the Jews of Crown Heights in the post-war years, they were not alone. The Novominsker, Sadigura, and Bostoner Rebbes established courts in Crown Heights, as did the Skulener Rebbe, the Bobover Rebbe, the Kerestirer and the Sonsnowitzer. And with them came many Polish and Hungarian survivors who prayed with their Rebbes and opened *shtiebels* of their own.

So, it was not a strange or unfamiliar circle of people that Tzvi Meir and his family found in his sister and brother-in-law's house. Mendel and Freidi had arrived in America shortly after the war and were firmly established in the community. They continued their family's tradition of an open house, and friends and relatives congregated in their small dining room for *Kiddush* on Shabbos after *davening* in the Viznitz shul.

They were also the first stop for friends and family arriving from Europe. Now, they made room for Tzvi Meir's family in their small apartment on Union Street. The three daughters remember sleeping side by side on a pull-out couch, grateful their bed did not move under them as it had at sea. Every morning, Freidi would greet them with freshly squeezed orange juice, even though she was suffering from a backache and a difficult pregnancy. Their first morning was memorable for another reason. Mendel came home carrying two large paper bags. He began to unload sour cream, cottage cheese, butter, fresh rolls and orange juice onto the kitchen table. To Devora's protests at

his extravagant generosity, Mendel laughed. "In America, you eat well, even if you are poor."

Tzvi Meir was happy to reminisce with his family about the years in Brusztura and to taste his sister's *lekach,* but remembering the *vunder Rebbes* of his youth, he could not attach himself as a *Chassid* to the new Rebbes in the neighborhood, who he saw as his contemporaries. He was seeking something greater than himself.

■ ■ ■

BEFORE LONG, THE FAMILY rented an apartment at 613 Midwood Street in Crown Heights. The girls were enrolled in Bais Yaakov. To support his family, Tzvi Meir planned to engage in the export-import business with which he was familiar. He had purchased a large quantity of expensive cigarette lighters while still in Austria and had them shipped to New York. His plan was to engage in importing luxury items from Europe.

He rented an office space in Manhattan, which he furnished with bookcases and another imposing desk. But things did not go as planned. The lighters got stuck in customs for over a year. When they were finally released, the tariffs were so high, he would have been forced to sell them at a loss. Tzvi Meir had to close down the expensive office. The imposing desk was moved to his small study in the apartment on Midwood Street.

Devora too had to downsize. She had planned to furnish the apartment she hoped would be a permanent home in an elegant style. She bought graceful French Provincial bedroom sets, white for the adults and light gray for the girls. But then the money ran out. For many years, they used a foldable table in the dining room and it was a long time before they could afford a couch.

There followed a difficult period when the erstwhile prosperous businessman had to cast around for ways to support his family. One

Rosh Hashanah, he served as a *chazzan* in Boro Park, vowing he would not do so again. His *davening* was not a *davening*, and the Yom Tov was not comfortable for his family. He tried *hashgachas* for a while. Finally, he landed a teaching position in Flatbush Yeshiva, a Zionist school emphasizing the Hebrew language. A short stint as principal of Bais Rivkah did not provide a solution to the struggle for livelihood, but bestowed much greater benefits on Tzvi Meir and his family.

New Spiritual Path

IN THE SUMMER OF 1952, Rabbi Israel Jacobson, the dean of Lubavitch's Bais Rivkah girls' school in New York, was looking for a principal and teacher for the new high school division. An acquaintance of Tzvi Meir from Hungary introduced him to Rabbi Jacobson. As the two men spoke, it became clear to Rabbi Jacobson that the new immigrant before him was a Torah scholar with a warm Chassidic soul and a knack for explaining deep concepts in simple words. He was also Hungarian, as were the families of many potential students living in the neighborhood at the time.

Rabbi Jacobson offered him the job on the spot. But Tzvi Meir, a newcomer struggling to support his family, had just accepted a part-time teaching job in Yeshiva of Flatbush, an Orthodox but Zionist school where the Judaic curriculum was taught in modern Hebrew. If he would be permitted to keep the other position as well, he would happily accept Rabbi Jacobson's offer. Rabbi Jacobson inquired at Chabad headquarters, and he relayed the response to Tzvi Meir. "The two schools have very different philosophies. One cannot hold positions in both."

Tzvi Meir did not pursue the matter further. A few days later, however, Rabbi Jacobson called him back. The Rebbe had decided that it would be permissible for Tzvi Meir to hold both positions. And that

is how Tzvi Meir became a teacher and principal at the Lubavitch girls' high school in a brownstone on Eastern Parkway between Brooklyn and New York Avenues. "I had never heard of Chabad before I moved to Crown Heights," recalled Tzvi Meir. "I once opened a Tanya, but did not read past the first page. Had I read further, I might have begun my journey forty years earlier."

■ ■ ■

HIS FIRST TASK UPON accepting the position was to meet with the Rebbe. Decades later, he remembered the encounter with some embarrassment. He was not aware at the time that *Chassidim* consider it disrespectful to sit in the presence of the Rebbe. "He told me to sit, I sat. He extended his hand, and I shook it. We discussed problems in education, and I was deeply impressed by the Rebbe's approach and views. I was fascinated by the passion and excitement and the many innovations of the Rebbe."

Tzvi Meir had developed his own views on how Jewish education should be organized. He told the Rebbe that he agreed with the opinion of Rabbi Judah Loew,[19] known as the Maharal of Prague: Chumash and Tanach should be taught through the age of ten, the entire Mishnah through the age of fifteen, and only afterward the Talmud, without commentaries at first. Currently, schools jump into extrapolations and novel approaches in the Talmudic text when the students are much younger and do not yet have good all-encompassing knowledge. The Rebbe listened intently to all he had to say, Tzvi Meir recalled. Then the Rebbe answered, "In the end, most educators did not listen to this, and, in fact, this is not followed on the ground."

Tzvi Meir described his relationship with Dr. Breuer and the philosophy of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, strict adherence to Torah

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19 1512-1609

observance along with engagement with the modern world. The Rebbe dismissed this system out of hand as not applicable to the current generation. It would never be part of the curriculum of Bais Rivkah, he told Tzvi Meir. "Our students are unsophisticated. Tell them a slogan and they will follow it."[20]

■ ■ ■

TZVI MEIR STARTED HIS teaching jobs early in the morning. He taught classes in Judaism and Talmud at the Yeshiva of Flatbush. Then he drove to Bais Rivkah where he spent the rest of the day. He had bought a car for his commute and would take a brief nap in the parking lot before starting his second shift. He was a passionate educator. At a parent-teacher event years later, he spoke about the crucial role of parents in their child's education: "Education begins even before the child is born when the child is imbued with holiness from the parents' way of life. Parents are partners with the school in their child's education and have an equal share in the child's success or failure. One can never give up on a child even if there were many failures. Mistakes should be seen as a prelude to growth."

He quoted the fifth Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Dovber Schneersohn, who taught that just as one is required to don *tefillin* every day, a parent is obligated to think about the education of each of his children every day. The *tefillin* are placed near the heart, the center of emotions, and on the head, the seat of intellect. Both these faculties must be used to their utmost in education as well, explained Tzvi Meir, but in a balanced way. A parent cannot allow compassion and empathy to deprive the child of all limits and regulations. On the other hand, using intellect alone can lead to a cold and merciless way of parenting. There must be a healthy equilibrium between love and discipline.

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20 The wording is based on a second-hand account of the meeting (from a 770 *yoman*).

Tzvi Meir devoted himself to his work, creating a curriculum for the girls' school and preparing for his classes for hours beforehand. His students loved him. But the position at Bais Rivkah was fraught with difficulties from the onset. The school accepted girls from all backgrounds, and the level of prior Jewish education varied dramatically. Some girls had come from public school, and were used to amenities that the school could not afford. There was no gym or even adequate classroom space.

In a report addressed to the Rebbe, who was the official president of the school, the new principal worried that these deficiencies were contributing to the students' low morale. "Surely, when they are older, they will realize that these are unimportant details, as they truly are. However, the current situation is creating a negative attitude to the institution and the staff. If we don't find a solution for the current situation, then, G-d forbid, the entire edifice will fall into dust."

In the next report, the last from his time at the school, he wrote that he had hired additional teachers and a new principal, and things had improved somewhat. The students were in better spirits, though the varying levels continued to be a problem. "If there were funds, I would suggest creating a separate class for the more advanced students."

Unfortunately, the struggling school did not have the funds to pay their principal's salary. Reluctantly, Tzvi Meir decided he could not continue his position at the school. Nevertheless, Tzvi Meir later said that his time in Bais Rivkah profoundly influenced the course of his life. Rabbi Jacobson may never have intended to make him into a Chabad *Chassid*. But the exposure to Chabad *Chassidus* and daily conversations in the teacher's room had their effect. "I was teaching in a Chabad format, and I naturally took an interest in Chabad and the Rebbe."

■ ■ ■

IN 1979, TZVI MEIR wrote to the Rebbe that the decision to allow him to hold both teaching positions, "brought me under the wings of Chabad and its leader, and changed the direction of my life and that of my daughters. The Rebbe drew me close without my knowing it."

When Tzvi Meir informed the Rebbe that he would no longer be working in Bais Rivkah, he concluded, "Rebbe, I am leaving Bais Rivkah, but I am not leaving you."

Indeed, Tzvi Meir kept his promise. The European intellectual, the immigrant struggling to support his family, attached himself to the Rebbe with the ardor and enthusiasm of a young boy. Years later, he described his first impressions of the Rebbe in an interview with *Kfar Chabad* magazine. He watched the Rebbe in prayer and, "I had seen the holy Rebbes in Europe, praying with a fervor apparent to everyone. The Rebbe prayed quietly, without outward demonstration of feeling, yet I knew that before me stood an *ish Elokim,* a G-dly man."

Later, he attended a *farbrengen,* and it was the Rebbe's scholarship that captured his heart. "I had been used to hearing Rebbes speak of Torah for half an hour at a time," he told biographer Tovia Preshel. "But here the Rebbe was holding forth for hours—Talmudic reasoning, philosophy, and *Chassidus*. I would sit at the *farbrengen*, and listen to the Rebbe quote from a multitude of sources and add marvelous novel ideas. He opened up new vistas to me, gave new directions to my thoughts. I was enchanted."

All the questions and issues he had struggled with on his own were answered by the Rebbe. The two worlds in which he had lived the first part of his life—Frankfurt and Brusztura—were united as one. "Science, philosophy, and *Chassidus* were in complete harmony, uniting my heart and my mind. And all these were only appetizers to the main course. Chabad *Chassidus* was a sumptuous banquet of wisdom that elevated one's daily experiences into the realm of the Divine."

With every gathering he attended, the feeling grew that this was his place.

■ ■ ■

AND WHAT ABOUT DEVORA? What was her attitude to her husband's transformation? Certainly, she revered the Rebbe as a great *tzaddik* and was grateful for his blessings. This came naturally to her because of her Chassidic upbringing. Her daughters remember her accepting the new Chabad customs and the *farbrengens* that went on late into the night without complaint. On one occasion at least, the new way of life came as a shock to Devora and her daughters. Tzvi Meir had attended a *farbrengen* on the last day of Pesach. Late in the night, there was a knock on the door and two young, bearded *Chassidim* entered, supporting Tzvi Meir between them. He looked pale and sick, barely able to stand up.

"Don't worry," the young men reassured Devora. "He just had too much to drink!"

Devora was incredulous. Her husband never drank! He even substituted grape juice for wine when making *Kiddush* because of his sensitive stomach. Tzvi Meir soon explained what had happened. During the *farbrengen,* the Rebbe had instructed him to drink four cups of wine in a row, as Chabad do during *seudas Moshiach.* Unaccustomed to alcohol, his head was soon spinning. He remembered telling the Rebbe that "Menachem" was the *gematria* of Moshiach. (He may have been referring to "Tzemach," one of the names for Moshiach.) His daughters note that at some point, Tzvi Meir began making *Kiddush* on wine without ill effects.

Tzvi Meir's daughters believed that this incident was the last step in their father's initiation into Lubavitch. As for Devora, she was not yet convinced that the way of Chabad was the only path for her family, especially for her daughters. These reservations would disappear with her backache, both banished by her miraculous recovery.

Livelihood

WHILE HIS SPIRITUAL QUEST was resolved, the search for a livelihood continued. After leaving Bais Rivkah, he found a teaching position in Ohel Moshe, where he taught the eighth grade for many years. He was a born teacher, and enjoyed clarifying a concept in Talmud and bringing a story from *Tanach* alive. He took great pleasure in the give and take of ideas. He answered the questions of an eighth grader in his class as seriously as he addressed the concerns of the new *baalei teshuvah* in the neighborhood. As for control in the classroom, he declared, "I never had any problem with discipline."

His wife and daughters were not surprised. "One look from those steely gray eyes," said Devora, "would quelch even the thought of disobedience."

He had his own methods of pedagogy. He flatly refused to teach Gemara in the Hebrew language, which was the policy of the school. "How could children with a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew grasp the intricate logic of the Talmud?" asked Tzvi Meir. This lover of the language of the *Tanach* and Hebrew grammar insisted on teaching the children in their native tongue. He supplemented his lessons with diagrams on the board, and hypothetical stories about Shimon and Reuven to make the subject comprehensible to his students.

He encouraged independent thought and creativity. Every year, he would bring the graduating class for *yechidus* to the Rebbe. (Indeed, one of the participants grew up to raise a family of Chabad *shluchim.*) One of the meetings of the Ohel Moshe eighth graders on the fifth of Tammuz, 1955 is described in detail:

The Rebbe greeted the students warmly, spoke with them words of Torah and answered their questions with detailed explanations. Two of the questions are cited below.

Question: Since one is guilty of stealing from another only when he actually takes the object, how is it that *Beit Shamai* say that a guardian who *thinks* of taking an object entrusted to him (by stating before witnesses, "I will take the other's object for myself") is found guilty, when he did not actually take it (draw it to himself)?

Answer: According to *Beit Shamai*, the importance of the deed of stealing is that it is a witness to the sinful thought of the guardian (the thought) that changes him from being an honest, trustworthy person, to being a liar and a thief.

There can be no better revelation of his thoughts than the declaration before two witnesses that he has decided to steal the object entrusted to him.

Question: How is it possible to say about a dispute in Halachah that, "Both these and those are the words of the living G-d"?

Answer: In some cases, the decision (of the halachah) depends on the situation of the individual. There is a type of person from whom we can demand a stringent standard. Not so in the case of a different sort of person, if you ask too much (of him) you will get nothing. There are people who are commanded to sanctify themselves by renouncing even things that are permitted. Others, we try to keep them from what is actually forbidden (though there is, of course, a minimum that applies to everyone—*chak v'lo yaavor.*)

And this is the source of the debate between Hillel and Shamai. And that is why it is said that in the days of Moshiach, Halachah will

follow *Beit Shamai*, because then the community will be able to accept more stringent laws than we can today.

The Rebbe then gave the example of changing conditions in the life of the children. When they will be occupied with earning a livelihood, they will be obligated to set a time for Torah learning only in the morning and at night. But now as students, the children are obligated to learn most of the day, and more. It is their situation that will have changed, not the law of the Torah.

At the end of the *yechidus*, the Rebbe brought the example of a person who studied and practiced a skill for many days and became a master of his craft. If, afterward, this person abandons his craft and chooses another field, he is squandering the knowledge he acquired at the cost of much time and effort. He is doing an injustice not only against his own soul, but also his community, his people, and even the whole world since he is part of the creation of the Holy One Blessed Be He.

The Rebbe concluded, "Since you have been learning Torah for several years and have begun to meditate on it and to understand it, if you turn your back on it, G-d forbid, you will be doing an injustice to yourself, to your people, and the world at large.'

The Rebbe blessed the students with success, that they should go higher and higher in learning Torah and fulfilling mitzvos, and thrive in all they do.

Tzvi Meir was deeply impressed with the Rebbe devoting so much time and attention to a handful of eighth graders. It strengthened his own belief in the importance of educating the next generation. Nevertheless, after several years in Ohel Moshe, Tzvi Meir informed the Rebbe that he had to give up teaching and focus on his real estate company full time. During the *yechidus* with the graduating students that followed, the Rebbe asked him, "And this you want to give up for real estate?"

■ ■ ■

AS TZVI MEIR WAS struggling to make ends meet in the new country, Devora too had to take a job. While she was no stranger to work, having helped out in her family's grocery store from a young age, not to mention scrubbing the steps in Nora's building, her jobs in America were far more arduous.

At first, she worked in a factory where she had to lift heavy boxes and then fold the merchandise. She always remembered with gratitude that one Jewish man would stop his sewing machine and pick up a box for her when he saw she had trouble lifting it. Later, Mr. A. B. Berg, a distant cousin, offered her work. He had a factory of imported silk neckties that had to be hemmed by hand. Tzvi Meir would ride on the subway to Manhattan, pick up a box of unfinished ties, bring them home to Devora to hem, and return the finished product to the factory. Devora would bend over her sewing to the point of exhaustion, at times entreating Judy, who was still a child but very capable, to finish off the last six ties.

Devora had to do the housework by herself, as well, with the help of her daughters, since they could not yet afford domestic help. One day, while scrubbing the kitchen floor, she told her girls, "You see, in America I stay home at night. No going to the opera!"

In spite of the difficulties of the early years, the daughters never heard their parents regret the move to America. Both spoke with an affection mixed with amusement about this new country. America did not turn out to be *di goldene land*, but it was *medinas hachesed,* a righteous, giving young land that had never persecuted the Jews, free of the centuries of hatred that ultimately led to the destruction of European Jewry. "Life in These United States" was a running feature in Reader's Digest magazine, and the expression became a family joke. The Steinmetzes would exclaim, "Life in these United States!" when speaking about the quirks and oddities of American life.

At the same time, Tzvi Meir and Devora were well aware of the dangers of assimilation in this open environment. A Jewish family

owned the house where they were living. The grandmother would send them beautiful challahs she had baked, which they could not eat because the house was not kosher. The two chubby grandsons had no knowledge of Yiddishkeit at all.

The Miraculous Cure

AFTER SEVEN YEARS IN the new land, things began to improve. Devora was promoted to a responsible position as forelady at Mr. Berg's factory. She was now in charge of supervising the workers as they hemmed the imported neckties. She had to use all her diplomatic skills to keep the peace between the two rival factions of hand rollers. One group consisted of Jewish women, mostly new immigrants, the other group were workers from Puerto Rico. She used to tell her husband, in great detail, the travails of her job, and he tried his best to soothe her. One incident frightened both of them: A fiery redhead, believing she had been slighted, threatened Devora that one day her boyfriend would get her.

■ ■ ■

WITH THE TWO OF them working, Tzvi Meir teaching in Ohel Moshe and Devora's job at the necktie factory, the Steinmetzes were achieving limited financial stability. Then came another setback. Devora began to suffer from a backache that became progressively worse. She continued going to work until she needed assistance to make it down the steps to the car waiting to take her to Manhattan. In the end, her back collapsed completely. She was totally bedridden for

many months with shooting pain down her legs, unable to turn over in bed without excruciating pain. Dr. Milgrum, the orthopedic surgeon, diagnosed a slipped disk (or pinched sciatica nerve). He insisted surgery was necessary.

A devoted *Chassid* of the Rebbe by this time, Tzvi Meir would not consider making such a grave decision without consulting the Rebbe. When he asked the Rebbe about the operation, the Rebbe did not approve. He also dismissed the other invasive treatments that were proposed. In a letter to the Rebbe before the High Holidays, Tzvi Mei begins by apologizing for daring to disturb the Rebbe's holy thoughts during these precious days, but he was not asking for himself. They had followed the Rebbe's advice not to operate, he continued, but they were running out of options. "We do not know what to do. She was always active, and the idleness is doubly difficult for her." He concluded by requesting the Rebbe's blessing that G-d should grant her immediate and complete healing, and say "enough!" to their woes.

The pain persisted in spite of bedrest and injections. Before the tenth of Shvat, in 1960, the anniversary of the day the Rebbe assumed the leadership of the Chabad movement, Tzvi Meir wrote to the Rebbe that the pain was still unbearable and, "if there will be no salvation for my wife, even on this auspicious day, we will have to operate."

In honor of the day, a grand gathering had been planned. Tzvi Meir had made two trips by car from Ohel Moshe to 770 to bring his students to the *farbrengen* in shifts. "I was totally drained, and sat in a corner to listen," he recalled. Then, all of a sudden, he was told the Rebbe had summoned him to the dais. The Rebbe then took a piece of *lekach* and placed it on a napkin. He folded it once, and said,. "for the *balabusta*," folded the napkin again, repeating "for the *balabusta*," and folded it a third time, once again saying "for the *balabusta*." The Rebbe also directed him to take a small glass of vodka and say *l'chaim*.

Late that night, after dropping off his students, Tzvi Meir came home, woke up his wife, and gave her the cake. Devora protested that she couldn't eat the dry cake. "My stomach is upset, maybe tomorrow."

But her husband insisted, "It's for you, from the Rebbe."

The next morning, as was his wont, he called his wife from school to see how she was doing. Her reply stunned him. Devora asked, "Tell me, do you remember which foot was hurting me? I am lying here, trying to figure out, was it the left foot or the right?"

When Tzvi Meir called the Rebbe's office with the good news that the pain was gone, the Rebbe's secretary told him that the Rebbe smiled and asked, "Does he want more cake?"

From that moment on, the pain disappeared. Devora, while still weak from her ordeal and the months in bed, was back on her feet. Wearing a full-body brace, she was able to resume her activities. Both Tzvi Meir and Devora had seen an open miracle from the Rebbe. Devora's gratitude knew no bounds. The family agrees that from that day on, Devora became a *Chassideste* of the Rebbe in her own right, and not just for the sake of her husband.

■ ■ ■

THE EVENTS OF THE miraculous cure made a deep impression on the three daughters as well. The girls were aware that they belonged to a Lubavitcher family, but until then, it had little impact on their lives. There were isolated events. Once, Tzvi Meir had introduced them to the Rebbe's mother, Rebbetzin Chana, whom he visited often. When they lined up for *lekach* with their father in the early years, the Rebbe had asked Esther if she knew the *brachah*, and she declared indignantly that of course she knew: *"borei minei mezonos!"* The girls seldom attended *farbrengens*, and did not have the background to understand the *sichos*, which were delivered in Yiddish. They focused on their

studies in Bais Yaakov. Their parents were not involved in their school work, but it was an unspoken expectation that they would excel.

On one occasion, Rochel was surprised at how deeply invested her father was in their academic success. When he found out that she was given the second prize at the eighth-grade graduation even though her teachers claimed she deserved the top honor, he was far more upset than his daughter herself. In general, their father was content that they were good, religious girls, and hoped that in time, they would marry Chabad *Chassidim*.

Tzvi Meir did find a way to bring Chabad *Chassidus* into their Bais Yaakov education. All three Steinmetz girls were appointed editors of the Hebrew section of their high school yearbook. With the appointments came a bonus—a well-qualified editor, Rabbi Steinmetz, who corrected and improved the articles of the graduates. Tzvi Meir contributed to the yearbook in another way: For many years, even after the youngest daughter had graduated, the Rebbe's letter addressed to the graduates appeared on the first page of the yearbook.

Without realizing it, the three daughters had absorbed the spirit of Chabad through another channel. All three spent their summers in Camp Emunah, where Rabbi J.J. Hecht's mesmerizing personality and rousing *niggunim* were a part of their childhood and teenage years. After the miraculous *farbrengen* when a functioning mother had been returned to them, being *Chassidim* of the Rebbe began to have far greater meaning in their lives. The girls started attending *farbrengens*. Judy's engagement to a *heisse Chassid,* Moshe Lazar, and their marriage in the winter of that year, put the Steinmetz girls squarely into the Chabad community.

■ ■ ■

THE WEDDING OF THE Steinmetzes' oldest daughter was scheduled for the week after Purim of that year. Devora, who had been

totally bedridden for so many months, was now able to take charge of the wedding plans. While her husband corresponded with the Rebbe about the wedding, Devora worked on the details. She gave much thought to the clothing for the great day—the bridal gown, her own gown, and the dresses of the younger girls.

The wedding was held in the Gold Manor, a popular wedding hall, and she planned the guest list, the menu, and the flowers. The wedding was celebrated with gratitude and joy. Years later, several of the grandchildren wrote about their grandmother's miraculous recovery in their school essays, a testimony to the impact of these events on the family.

Even after she was free of debilitating back pain, Devora could no longer continue her demanding full-day job in Manhattan. Just getting in and out of a car was difficult. Tzvi Meir cast around for a new source of income to supplement his teaching job. Perhaps because he remembered his short-lived attempt at business as a new immigrant, he proceeded with caution.

He obtained a real estate broker's license and began working for a company, trying to sell homes and apartment houses on commission. Afterward, he entered into a partnership with another broker, buying him out after their first sale. Shortly after his wife's recovery, he opened his own office. Devora and their youngest daughter, Esther, who continued to help her parents in the office for years, were involved in renovating an office on Flatbush Avenue. The new business was called Public Realty.

Tzvi Meir continued to teach in Ohel Moshe in the mornings and tried to break into the real estate business in the afternoons. While her husband worked on selling houses without much success, Devora found her own niche. With characteristic single-minded dedication, she began renting apartments for Jewish building owners in the area. Neighborhoods were changing rapidly in the Sixties, and there was a constant turnover in apartments. In her cramped European

handwriting, Devora filled notebooks with available apartments, noting the preference of the landlords. The income from the rentals was small but constant. What is more, by renting their apartments, the Steinmetzes established a relationship with the landlords, opening the door to apartment-house sales and mortgages.

Her skill and diligence could only take Devora so far. When the prospective tenant was ready to put down a deposit, she would usher them into the inner office, where her husband sat behind his imposing desk, and allow him to finish the deal.

"He speaks good English, with only a trace of an accent," she would explain to her daughters. "And he has such a warm, cordial way with people."

Tzvi Meir, in turn, came to appreciate his wife's special strengths during their difficult years as immigrants. When singing *Aishes Chayil* on Friday nights, he would emphasize the words, "She sought wool and linen and worked with willing hands," referring to her labors sewing neckties. He freely credited her hard work and determination for the eventual financial success of Public Realty. "Devora was a warrior," he would say, referring to the Prophetess Devorah in the *Tanach*.

The fruitful partnership had its costs for both of them, however. Devora would entreat her husband, "Steinmetz, go to sleep! You have to get up early for the closing tomorrow!" And Tzvi Meir would reply, "Soon, soon," hoping to catch a few more minutes of precious peace in his study.

Community Involvement

TZVI MEIR SOON FOUND that juggling his double load was not working. Staying up late at night and rushing off early in the morning to his class exhausted him. By the time he reached the office, he had to take a nap, and the business day was gone. Reluctantly, he gave up his job in Ohel Moshe. However, he never really stopped teaching. As evidenced from his letters and reports to the Rebbe (detailed in the coming chapters), he was constantly involved in giving lectures and Torah *shiurim.* Helping bring Jews close to *Yiddishkeit* was a fulfillment of his youthful dream of stemming the tide of assimilation.

He interpreted and explained the Rebbe's *sichos* to those who did not yet know Yiddish. To do so, he had to leave in the middle of *farbrengen.* Feeling that he was missing out on the Rebbe's teachings, he once asked the Rebbe, "Does it not say, 'Your own life comes first'?"

And the Rebbe replied, "This is your life."

■ ■ ■

HE HAD GREAT SATISFACTION from the time he was invited to lead a meditation group in Long Island and turned the meetings into a meditation on Torah and *Chassidus.* Several of the members of the group became Torah-observant Jews.

When the financial pressure finally eased on his family, Tzvi Meir found great joy in giving charity with an open hand in the tradition of his family. Even when his situation was very tight, he had given generously. At one time, when he handed the Rebbe a large check, the Rebbe had looked at him, inquiring, "Is it covered?" He assured the Rebbe that it was. When giving way beyond his means, he would caution his daughters, "Don't tell your mother!"

During the week of his *shivah,* the family discovered that as a teacher in Ohel Moshe, Tzvi Meir had secretly paid the tuition of two students to prevent them from leaving yeshiva for public school. This was even more remarkable because at that time he was struggling to pay the tuition of his own daughters, who remember being sent out of class because the tuition checks were late in coming.

As his situation improved financially, Tzvi Meir became an enthusiastic supporter of the Rebbe's causes.

■ ■ ■

DURING THE SIXTIES, as Tzvi Meir and Devora were beginning to feel secure in their new life, massive social change destabilized the Brooklyn neighborhood where they lived. Violent crime increased to the point that people were hesitant to leave their homes after dark. Tzvi Meir's daughter Rochel recalled an incident that exemplified the changing face of the neighborhood. A student in high school, she was planning to go to a friend's house five blocks away for a sleepover party. Tzvi Meir objected strenuously. He didn't see the point in sleeping on the floor of a strange house instead of in her own comfortable bed. And both parents warned her it was not safe to walk at night, even in the company of a friend, since the neighborhood was becoming dangerous. Rochel prevailed over her "overprotective" parents.

But the teenager soon discovered her parents' fears were justified. As the girls were gathering for the party, a schoolmate—soft-spoken, from out of town—came rushing in, sobbing hysterically.

Her face was swollen and bruised. It seemed two boys had dragged her into the garage and began to beat her. Her loud cries of *"Shema Yisroel!"* caused them to flee. The mother of the house tended to her face and comforted her, but did not call the police. It seemed the police did not respond to minor incidents. (Rochel does not recall telling her nervous parents about this frightening incident.)

"The 1960s saw the vast majority of urban Jewish communities simply vanish, some practically overnight," writes Dovid Margolin. "The Jews of Brooklyn saw their city of trees and security torn apart by drugs and gang wars. The result was a mass community flight from Jewish urban neighborhoods to the suburbs or safer areas."

That is when the Rebbe took a stand.

■ ■ ■

IN THE FACE OF an overwhelming tide of inner-city violence and destabilizing social collapse, the Rebbe announced publicly in the spring of 1969 that he was not leaving Crown Heights, explaining that Jewish law expressly forbade the abandonment of a Jewish community. Jews have no right to flee the community, placing at risk those who remained, especially the poor, elderly and infirm. Moreover, their capitulation would destabilize other Jewish neighborhoods in Brooklyn, the country, and ultimately, anywhere in the world where Jews might live. Crown Heights, in the Rebbe's words, was "a test case" that Jews should not and could not be chased out of their neighborhood.

At the Rebbe's directive, Tzvi Meir, as a real estate broker, joined the fight to preserve the Crown Heights neighborhood. He became a member of an organization called "Chebro", with the aim of encouraging Jewish residents to acquire homes and remain in Crown Heights

instead of deserting the neighborhood. The organization bought homes from those moving away and offered them to people in the community who qualified. The houses were given free of charge, the only obligation of the new owners being the monthly mortgage payments.

Many other initiatives were undertaken at the Rebbe's urging. Though the community no longer contained a cross-section of Jewry, as the majority of those who remained were Lubavitch *Chassidim*, the Jewish community existed and continued to grow, unlike the disappearing communities of the old urban neighborhoods throughout the United States. At the very same time the Rebbe was shoring up the Crown Heights neighborhood, he was sending young people **out** of the community, to "spread the wellsprings" to distant places. Tzvi Meir saw children and grandchildren following the path of *shlichus,* while others remained and built the community. They all gathered from time to time to return to the epicenter, the Rebbe in 770.

To this day, Tzvi Meir and Devora's descendents living in many countries return to be educated in Crown Heights and get married in the place where, as the Rebbe pronounced on more than one occasion, *"Kahn tziva Hashem es habrachah*—this is where G-d commanded his blessing."

The Poet Tzvi Yair

IN EARLY 2022, THE Israeli singer Simcha Friedman put a poem entitled *"Levadecha"*[21] to music. He explained that the poetry of Tzvi Yair gave him great pleasure and inspiration. In the poem he chose to turn into a song, the poet sees life made up of a multitude of people and things. Upon pondering, he discovers their source of life is the Creator. He postulates there is only "You and me." Finally, he recognizes that he himself is but a spark of G-d, proclaims "You alone!"

Another event illustrates the continuing impact of Tzvi Meir's poetry. On a visit to the Ohel in the spring of 2023, the composer Yossi Green found the resting place of Tzvi Meir nearby. He recounted in an interview with COLive how Berel Lazar, a grandson of Tzvi Meir, introduced him to the poetry of Tzvi Yair. "He gave me a copy of a *sefer* filled with extraordinary poems of his grandfather. He said it could be a great source of inspiration for future songs."

The composer studied the poems for many years. At last he came upon the perfect poem, "Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov".[22] The music and lyrics intertwined harmoniously. Yossi Green finally had a song inspired by Tzvi Yair.

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21 "You Alone", *Meknaf Haaretz*, p. 17
22 *Bechevyon Hanefesh*, p. 106

These vignettes are recent occurrences, but they have roots years in the past; the Rebbe had suggested to Tzvi Meir at one time that his poems should be put to music.

■ ■ ■

THE CONTINUED APPEAL OF Tzvi Yair's poetry surprise and delight his children and grandchildren. But what is even more surprising is that the seven volumes of poetry published between 1941 and 1997 came to be written at all. In all the stages of his life—as a European intellectual and activist, a fugitive from the Nazis, a struggling immigrant, a busy businessman, lecturer and Torah scholar, patriarch of a large family—where did Tzvi Meir find time and peace of mind to create such large volumes of poetry of such a high caliber, over so many years?

The poet himself answers this question with a poem,[23] "The Watch of the Night":

Silence.
A man awake,
alone,
with his soul
he unites.
The past—
erased.
The future—
unborn.
Time
stands still.
The present—
everlasting.

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23 *Ibid.*, p. 21

For most of his life, his poetry was created on solitary nights in time stolen from his busy life. With the notable exception of the Rebbe, most people knew Rabbi Steinmetz only as a *talmid chochom*, a businessman, and a *Chassid* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He seldom revealed his other identity as Tzvi Yair, the Hebrew poet. Only in Israel was his Hebrew poetry recognized. But to Tzvi Meir, himself, his poetry was central to his identity. He cared deeply about the creation of his poems, but also about publicizing them and reaching an audience.

■ ■ ■

IN 2006, JUDITH MANOVITCH submitted a post-doctoral thesis to Bar-Ilan University entitled "Zvi Yair (Tzvi Meir Steinmetz): The Last Hebrew Poet in Hungary." She states several reasons for her choice. Besides what she calls "the rare poetic quality" of his work, she mentions two factors that make his poetry unique.

The first is the fact that Tzvi Meir's book of verse, *Gesharim* (Bridges) was the last book of Hebrew poetry published in Europe during the war. The second reason his poetry stands out is that in the very midst of the destruction of European Jewry, Tzvi Yair dared to write about the Holocaust while it was happening, as Hungary was ruled by a Fascist government. His famous "Meeting in Nemirov" was translated into Hungarian. Even though the poem is set in medieval times, the contemporary message of Jewish persecution was clear, and shows, writes Manovitch, commendable courage on the part of the poet.

In her thesis, Judith Manovitch describes the complex, often contradictory personality of Tzvi Yair, "a Holocaust poet who does not restrict himself to the Holocaust, wrestles with existential themes from a highly religious perspective, deeply learned in Jewish sources and still a poet, fears G-d, both a Hassid and an intellectual, a European and an American; his audience is the Jewish Israeli, although he himself is far away from Israel."

The writer of the thesis classifies Tzvi Yair's poetry into three categories. The first includes the Holocaust poems mentioned above, some secretive and encoded while authored during the war, and those that came after the war and reveal the reality of the Holocaust. The second category is his "imagist" poetry, where the poet draws a clear, precise visual image to bring out his theme. Popular themes are the passing of time and the nature of love. Finally, the third type of poem is religious in nature, and this genre reveals two perspectives: on one hand is the believer, "cleaving to his Maker in a mystic manner"; on the other hand is found the rational personality, "who tries to understand Creation in an intellectual manner...to find G-d in nature and creation."

(There is one more category that the writer does not seem to address. This is the group of poems dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, whom the poet called "the heart of the nation." These will be explored in a later chapter.)

The writer also discusses three phases of the poet's acceptance in literary circles. His early writings made an impression in Hungary in the 1940s, and were embraced in Israel in the 1960s and '70s. He was pushed out to the periphery afterward by the literary establishment, but was accepted by the Orthodox and Chassidic communities, an impression that lasts until today.

These ups and downs in Tzvi Yair's literary reputation are well documented by books, articles and his correspondence with publishers and critics through the years.

■ ■ ■

IN HIS HOME IN Brooklyn, Tzvi Meir continued to write during the Fifties and early Sixties. He sat at his large desk in his office while the house grew quiet around him. Shrugging off the petty concerns of the day, he gathered his thoughts and entered the realm of eternal truths from which his poetry emerged—the search for G-d,

time, death, and the Divinity of nature. Sitting by his desk, he once said, was the one place where he felt he was fulfilling his purpose in life. But he worked in solitude. Little of his work was published in those days. In 1966, however, a chapter in the literary collection *Areshet* propelled him into the spotlight of the tight-knit Israeli literary community.

The chapter by Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger was about Hebrew poetry in Hungary. In the end, the author notes that *Gesharim* was the last book of Hebrew poetry published before the Holocaust. The writer then reveals his scoop: "The name of the author is Tzvi Meir Steinmetz, born in Budapest. He lived in the city of Debrecen and lives now in New York."

Literary critic Dov Sadan was surprised and delighted to learn that Tzvi Meir was alive and well in America. "His book *Gesharim* was a remnant saved from the inferno," he wrote. "I gave it for safekeeping to the Bialik House. Especially since I did not know what happened to its author; I felt that his fate was the fate of our brethren in that exile."

Tzvi Meir received the new attention with mixed feelings. His work had matured over the years, He considered the poems he had written in Debrecen amateur at best. "Laszlo Kardos' translation is much better than the original Hebrew," he would say.

When *Al Hachof* (On the Shore) was published in Israel, Tzvi Meir was elated. It was his first book in years, and he seized the opportunity to break into the Israeli world of letters. He sent copies to writers and literary experts in America and Israel, asking for their opinion. "I am a Hebrew poet who lives and creates in Brooklyn," he wrote in one letter. "It is only natural that a poet who is creating in solitude, in exile, yearns for connection with his counterparts."

At first, the responses were slow in coming. But Tzvi Meir soon found several critics and publishers who appreciated his work. Israeli poet and Hebrew literary researcher Aron Mirsky was one of the first to reply. While the poems were imbued with faith and yearning for the Divine, he wrote to the poet, "they also have sophisticated and grounded

logic that reveal the vanity of material life." He added, "The poems are short, almost like aphorisms that are polished and shiny, small mirrors into which a person may gaze and see his life reflected."

Tzvi Meir's correspondence with Aron Mirsky lasted some years. They touched on a variety of subjects—the situation in Israel, the translation of Tzvi Meir's poems into Russian, which Mirsky arranged, and the possibility of establishing a new literary journal. When there was a lull between letters, Aron Mirsky grew worried about his friend. "Please inform me how you, your wife, and your dear family are doing."

There was a reason for Tzvi Meir's silence. The family's real estate company was going through a difficult time. The neighborhood had changed, and the office was becoming dangerous. He did not share these details with his friend. He apologized for his silence, explaining that the many responsibilities in life, which were but a passing shadow, had distracted him. He thanked him for all the efforts he had made on behalf of his poetry, "and for caring and worrying about us."

■ ■ ■

ANOTHER ENTHUSIASTIC READER was a literary critic and poet Yeshurun Keshet. Upon reading the volume of poems entitled *Merosh Tzurim*, he exclaimed, "Such a precious treasure hidden in a corner of our literature—and I did not know!"

Keshet, who had been writing and publishing Hebrew poetry since the 1930s wrote to Tzvi Meir, "It has been a long time since modern poetry stirred my spirit like your volume, which is all filled with delight."

A few months later, Keshet's review of Tzvi Meir's poems appeared in *Haaretz*, the mainstream newspaper. The long article constituted perhaps the greatest literary recognition of his career.[24] "The poems

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24 This review is published in the third volume of the newest edition of the anthologies (*Kol Shirei Tzvi Yair*, Heichal Menachem, 1997), *Meknaf Haaretz, p. 187.*

of Tzvi Yair," wrote Keshet, "are not intellectual poetry, but poems of meditation."

In a letter thanking Keshet for the review, the poet replied that he had read the article numerous times, and discovered new things about his own work. "I had the dream, and you found the interpretation of it."

Another secular critic and poet, Avraham Kariv, was deeply impressed by the poet's command of language. "Your Hebrew makes your table in Brooklyn a part of Jerusalem."

Tzvi Meir was gratified by the new interest in his work. Living in Crown Heights, he seldom mentioned his poetry, where few could read, let alone appreciate, his poems. Even without the language barrier, poetry had become the province of academics and a small group of literary elites, eclipsed by more easily accessible forms of entertainment. The exception was the Lubavitcher Rebbe. "The Rebbe has a great understanding of literature," said Tzvi Meir in an interview, "and he encouraged me in my literary ventures."

Otherwise, he keenly felt his isolation as a poet. He wrote to Keshet, "Who, like you, can understand the feelings of loneliness of the writer, wherever he may be?" At last, he found an audience who could appreciate or even criticize his poems. Perhaps he was reminded of his youthful days as a member of the Pen Club in Debrecen when he was part of a community of intellectuals and writers.

■ ■ ■

TZVI MEIR'S TWO BOOKS, *Al Hachof*[25] and *Merosh Tzurim*,[26] published in Israel under the pen name Tzvi Yair, were well received. Critics described his poetry as a unique blend of modern imagery and religious inspiration. "Tzvi Yair seeks constantly to transcend human

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25 *Machberot Lesafrut*, 1968
26 *Letraklin Leyad Aked*, 1973

finitude and find refuge in G-d," wrote Jacob Kabakoff, professor of Hebrew at Lehman College in New York. "The Divine represents for him the source of light, and the Torah is an echo of the Heavenly song."

As he became immersed in the philosophy of Chabad *Chassidus*, his poetry turned more and more to religious themes. One critic called him a twentieth-century Eleazar ben Kalir, the famous seventh-century poet whose hymns, or *piyutim,* are recited during holiday services. Tzvi Meir took it as a compliment.

Professor Kabakoff saw the religious theme as the poet's attempt to find meaning after tragedy. "Yair has sublimated his sorrow and seeks solace in religious faith."

Not everyone welcomed the change. Israel Zmora, a literary critic and publisher of Tzvi Meir's first book in Israel, *Al Hachof,* wrote that he was not sure if Tzvi Yair was a poet or a philosopher. Tzvi Meir answered Zmora that he might be inspired by philosophical texts, but he was, and always would be, a poet. Zmora conceded that it was possible to have it both ways. He referred to Samuel ibn Naghrillah,[27] a Talmudic scholar, philosopher, and poet in Spain. "So you, too, are a philosopher, and it is a good quality for a poet."

Aharon Amir, a poet and the editor of the literary journal *Keshet* had become Tzvi Meir's personal friend. But he did not refrain from rejecting some of his poems. "It is better for ideas to be expressed like ideas—in an essay. Poems should be an expression, a feeling, and an experience."

Amir had arranged for a review of his latest book to be published in *Keshet.* He offered his own feelings as well. "From one perspective it seems that in the poems...the essential Jewish way of life, the intelligence, and the thought are greater than the emotions, the inclinations, and the experience."

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Sadly, the poet's most enthusiastic mentors, Mr. Keshet and Mr. Kariv, became ill shortly after they discovered the poetry of Tzvi Meir. They passed away a few years later. Thus ended his connection with his greatest advocates among secular Israeli writers.

As Judith Manovitch wrote, the poetry of Tzvi Yair was pushed to the periphery of the literary establishment in the 1970s. The principal reason for the lessening of his popularity among the Israeli intelligentsia was the changes in Israeli society. At the time, the divide between the religious and secular population in Israel had grown into a chasm aggravated by the media. Also, Tzvi Yair's most ardent admirers had passed on or retired. The younger generation of poets and critics were not as immersed in Jewish tradition and did not appreciate or understand the sources in *Tanach*, Talmud, and Chassidic works from which Tzvi Yair drew his inspiration. They preferred modern poetry, which did not appeal to Tzvi Yair. His poetry was published occasionally in religious newspapers like *Shaarim*. The secular journal *Maariv* had accepted a few poems over the decade. But it seemed there was no chance of his becoming a mainstream poet in Israel at this time.

■ ■ ■

IN THE YEARS THAT followed, Tzvi Meir continued to struggle for critical recognition, yet never lost faith in his song. He began to search for a new audience for his writing. It was then that he thought of having his poems included in the curriculum of Israeli schools. Tenaciously, he approached individual religious institutions in Israel, introducing himself and offering his books at low rates. One school accepted, then another.

Yitzchok Refael Etsyon, an activist in Mizrachi, the religious Zionist movement, had written to Tzvi Meir in the past, expressing his admiration for his poems. Tzvi Meir asked him to consider including his poetry in the Mizrachi schools' curriculum. Mr. Etsyon replied

that as a rule, they did not teach poetry, but would make an exception and include thirteen of his poems in the students' Hebrew textbook. The poet was delighted. "Your opinion that some of my poems have educational value strengthens my belief that my literary path is justified," he wrote.

Tzvi Meir then turned his attention to Beth Jacob, a loosely affiliated network of religious girls' schools. At first, there was pushback from administrators who were nervous about entering the realm of modern poetry. "We do not use poetry from after the time of Judah Halevi,[28]" wrote one director of curriculum. The enthusiastic support of Penina Lichtenstein, director of the curriculum at the Beth Jacob Teachers Institute, soon influenced many other schools. Mrs. Lichtenstein, a writer and poet herself (under the pen name A. Margalit) thanked Tzvi Meir for "the Jewish experience and appreciation for aesthetics that the poetry gives our students."

Soon, his work was being taught in schools in Jerusalem, Bnei Brak, Tel Aviv and Safed. "It was one of the greatest and most important successes for my poetry," Tzvi Meir wrote to the Rebbe in 1982.

■ ■ ■

ALL THIS TIME, Tzvi Meir had been lobbying the minister of education to include his poetry in the state syllabus for religious public schools. In 1974, upon the advice of Mr. Etsyon, he reached out to Shmuel Arenberg, supervisor of the religious division of the education ministry. He suggested that they prepare a booklet of some of his poems to be taught in the schools. "Since our generation's religious poetry is lacking and poor, perhaps you will review the poems in the book to see if they are fitting for educational purposes."

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The proposal was flatly refused. "We do not have any such plans," Mr. Arenberg replied, "and we do not publish books of poetry."

Then, in 1978, the seed that Tzvi Meir had planted finally began to sprout. A new syllabus of literature was being prepared for religious schools. Mr. Mirsky's writings were to be an integral part of it, including, at his request, his poetry. This old friend wrote to Tzvi Meir that the Ministry was considering choosing some of his poems as well, to be printed in a separate booklet with a preface and explanations.

The booklet was published in time for the 1980 school year. In the introduction to the collection, Dov Landau, professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at Bar-Ilan University, wrote: "There is no window to a generation like poetry. Through poetry, one may contemplate the generation's pain, worries, quandaries, and faults." The current generation was not a happy one, continued Dov Landau, and had become a dumping ground for negative emotions. In this wasteland, Tzvi Yair's poems were an oasis of hope, prompting readers to ask, "Are there other such poets in this generation?"

The sixty-page booklet *Meshirei Tzvi Yair*, edited by writer Leah Barak, represented a watershed moment in Tzvi Meir's efforts to reach a new generation of readers. His work had been incorporated in the cannon of Israeli religious study.

■ ■ ■

TZVI MEIR'S THREE DAUGHTERS, busy raising their growing families, were unaware of the ups and downs of their father's literary career. But on one occasion, Rochel recalls her father telling her proudly of the impression his poems were making on the young people in Israel. A student of one of the Beth Jacob schools had written to him that she and her friends were so thrilled by his poems, they could not sleep the entire night. "We walked around, discussing the poems until dawn broke."

Another incident revealed the deep impression the poems were making in Israel. A young girl from a Chabad family, who was visiting Rochel's home, noticed a book of poems by Tzvi Yair. She exclaimed, "Tzvi Yair! He is wonderful!" She continued to say that one of his poems is inscribed on the walls of Kfar Chabad. Tzvi Meir had written the poem, "The Heights of the Sanctified" to comfort a community for the terrible act of terrorism that tragically took the lives of children and teachers in the community's school.[29]

When Rochel informed their guest that Tzvi Yair was her father, she was shocked. "Your father? Then he must be old!" Clearly, his poems communicated so powerfully with his young readers that they erased the age barriers.

■ ■ ■

WHEN TZVI MEIR AND Devora were semi-retired from the real estate business, Tzvi Meir considered moving to Israel. But the Rebbe did not agree. "And you want to leave your most precious treasures behind?" (The Rebbe was referring to his children.)

Instead, he visited Israel frequently and enjoyed communicating with his young readership. He discovered the students did not only read his poems but knew them by heart. "The future of education is excellent in Israel," declared Tzvi Meir. In his sessions with these young people, he communicated his twin loves of teaching and poetry. He spoke to them about his own poems, explaining, "They are poems of emotion and intellect. Each poem has an idea."

He also discussed the creative process with them: "At first, the poet immerses himself in a subject deeply. Then, there is a flash of lightning and a poem is born."

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29 Meknaf Haaretz p. 144

After one of these visits, the students asked him if he would continue to write. He answered, "After meeting with you, I have made up my mind that the first thing I will do when returning home is to write more poetry. I thought I was speaking in the wilderness, but I found that I have readers for my poems."

Thus began a new chapter in the poetry career of Tzvi Yair. But throughout all the ups and downs of his reputation, one thing remained constant: His yearly poem dedicated to the Rebbe in honor of his birthday.

A Growing Family

TO THE MANY ROLES of Tzvi Meir—poet, *Chassid*, businessman—another one was added in the 1960s and '70s. He became the head of a rapidly growing family. During these years, the Steinmetzes married off their three daughters. Inexperienced in the ways of the new world, they found mentors to guide them. Rabbi Brod, the owner of a local butcher store, suggested a *shidduch* for Judy—Moshe Lazar, whose large family had escaped Nazi Austria and settled in Williamsburg.

On the occasion of Judy's engagement, the Rebbe blessed the parents that the other daughters would also marry *Temimim* (Chassidic boys who studied in the Lubavitcher yeshiva, Tomchei Temimim). Rabbi Jacobson, who had brought the family into Lubavitch by offering Tzvi Meir the job in Bais Rivkah, was the *shadchan* for the other two daughters. Rochel married Chaim Yaffe from England, and soon after, Esther married Berel Tauber, whose mother and two siblings were also survivors from Czechoslovakia.

Though money was still tight, the weddings were held in a hall with an elaborate smorgasbord and a carefully chosen menu. Devora took great pains with the gowns for the bride and the rest of the family. It was very important for her that everything was *balabatish*, meeting the standards of her Hungarian upbringing. The scattered remnants of their family, as well as the Lubavitcher crowd, were invited.

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AN IMPORTANT PERSONAGE at the wedding was Tzvi Meir's widowed mother, a formidable, dignified matriarch. A living grandmother was a rarity for these Holocaust survivors, and she was a celebrity among the extended family. Devora lived in awe of her supercapable mother-in-law who had managed a great household back in Brusztura. Now she suffered from arthritis, attributing her condition to the months spent hiding from the Nazis in the cold, damp cave. Devora liked to retell how *Nagy-Mamma* Leah Gittel came, cane in hand, to inspect the bride's *staffirung*, the linen traditionally prepared for a bride, and found it wanting.

Three of Tzvi Meir's sisters and their husbands came with his mother. They were all living in New York at the time. They were Ettu Brill, Freidi Feldman, and Suri Silber. (Suri, her husband, Yoshka, and their two little boys had made a harrowing escape from Communist Hungary during the Revolution of '56.)

Devora felt a greater sense of obligation to his family than Tzvi Meir himself. After his sisters had moved to Manhattan and Queens, Devora was constantly cajoling her unsociable husband that it was time to visit his mother, and, after her passing, his sisters.

Devora's own sole-surviving sister, Juci, was trapped behind the Iron Curtain. On one occasion, the three siblings, Devora, Isser, and Juci met in Vienna. Somehow, as they got older, and both were unused to traveling, the sisters did not meet again. But Devora had one consolation: A granddaughter and her husband, Batsheva and Boruch Oberlander, became the Rebbe's emissaries in Hungary and connected with the delighted great-aunt Juci. In the end, the sisters were united in their passing. Juci died during the *shivah* for Devora.

Devora's brother, Isser Eisenberg, did travel at times from Argentina and helped financially toward the weddings. The Eisenbergs, who had become very affluent in Argentina, worried about

their daughters straying from their religious upbringing. Isser and his wife sent their second daughter to spend a year with the Steinmetzes so she could attend Bais Yaakov in the hope that it would have a positive influence on the rebellious teen. (Their first daughter also had a unique experience with the Steinmetzes, Chabad and the Rebbe, as will be detailed in a later chapter.)

Among the wedding guests were also Ushu (Asher) Garfein and Moshe Eisenberg, children of Devora's siblings who had perished in the Holocaust. A photo in Rochel's wedding album illustrates the interesting mix of guests at these weddings. It shows a relative, Meilech Luzer Ehrenberg, a prominent Hungarian Rav, reciting one of the *sheva brachos* under the Chuppah. In the forefront, Lubavitcher yeshiva students are grinning from ear to ear at the unfamiliar pronunciation of Hungarian Jews.

■ ■ ■

REFLECTING ON THE WEDDINGS of Tzvi Meir's daughters, there is a feeling that marriages were simpler in those early days before "the shidduch crisis". Yet, a crisis did arise during the engagement of his daughter Judy that shook her father to the core. So painful must have been this chapter in his life, that he did not speak about it, even to his family. His younger daughters learned the full story only after his passing.

When Judy, the oldest daughter, reached the age of nineteen and was ready for *shidduchim*, she was introduced to Moshe Lazar. Tzvi Meir was pleased with the match, as he very much wanted a son-in-law from the Chabad community.

Moshe was just four years old when his family had fled to the United States as Hitler's troops marched into Vienna. The family settled in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Though they were not affiliated with Chabad, it was decided to enroll the boys in the Chabad

yeshiva in Crown Heights. Moshe quickly absorbed the Chabad spirit of activism. In 1955, at the age of twenty, Moshe and a friend opened the first Chabad overnight camp in the United States. Camp Gan Israel in Parksville, New York, became the flagship Chabad camp, a model for hundreds all over the world. Judy appreciated Moshe's entrepreneurial spirit, his enthusiasm for life, and dedication to *Yiddishkeit*. They were soon engaged, with the wedding planned for the winter of 1960.

In the early years of his leadership, the Rebbe officiated at weddings of Chabad couples, asking in return that the couple accept certain obligations in observance or Chabad outreach. Around the time when Judy and Moshe became engaged, the Rebbe announced that he would discontinue the practice (with very rare exceptions). Moshe's parents, hoping an exception would be made for their son, raised the question during a private audience. But the Rebbe refused, saying, "I will not be there physically, but I will be present."

Moshe was deeply disappointed at the verdict. When he heard a rumor that the reason the Rebbe would not officiate at this wedding was because his future father-in-law did not have a full beard, he decided to confront him.

In a letter to the Rebbe afterward, Tzvi Meir described the encounter, writing in the third person:

"A week before the wedding, on Purim, a day of joy and love for others, the young man arrived at the home of his in-laws. The family greeted him with joy, and he waited until they finished listening to the *Megillah* being read.

"Then, the man approached his father-in-law in a private room and told him of his final decision. He spoke calmly. He had already told his fiancée that he had heard that the Rebbe would officiate at the wedding only if the enhanced mitzvah that his father-in-law knew about would be observed (meaning, if his future father-in-law would agree to grow a full beard).

"The participation of the Rebbe is so important to him, for he is an emanation of Moshe that is present in every generation, and he places his Rebbe before his parents, etc., therefore, if the father of the bride will not agree to fulfill this condition, he has no choice but to break the engagement (G-d forbid).

"When the father-in-law heard these words, the hair on his head bristled, and his heart became like stone."

As soon as the Rebbe was informed of the situation, he sent an urgent message to the groom: "Who officiates at the marriage ceremony is the responsibility of the bride's family. Therefore, you should not involve yourself in it. It is simple and obvious that you should go to the wedding and marriage ceremony etc., with true joy, and it should be at an auspicious time."

To Tzvi Meir, the Rebbe wrote to ask his forgiveness. He was shocked that his words had been so misinterpreted. His refusal had nothing to do with the bride's family. He was simply not officiating at weddings anymore and could not make an exception without offending others. In response to Tzvi Meir's (half-serious) suggestion that perhaps he should not attend the wedding so as to avoid embarrassing the groom, the Rebbe wrote, "There is no reason to suspect me that I wish, G-d forbid, to refuse or to exclude the participation of the parents at the wedding of their children, may they be well."

The incident had disturbed the poet deeply, however. He began to question whether Judy was marrying the right person. The Rebbe reassured him that she was. "The bride and groom have refined character traits and many highly positive characteristics which is a source, in all respects, of much gratification. You and your wife, may you live many long years, should make an effort in all of the above in joy, good health, and with true affection."

When Tzvi Meir raised the issue again to the Rebbe, the Rebbe replied he would keep Tzvi Meir's letter in mind during his prayers. The Rebbe added that Tzvi Meir should relay to the person he was

writing about (concerning the Rebbe's instructions) to study the mystical teachings as explained at length by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, in Epistle 26 of *Iggeret Hakodesh*, that one cannot comprehend and ask questions about G-d's precise, if incomprehensible, plan.

After Tzvi Meir and Devora had given the Rebbe good news (perhaps giving their blessings to the young couple moving to Milan as *shluchim* of the Rebbe), Tzvi Meir had a private audience with the Rebbe, and brought up the subject that gave him no peace.

"It was extremism, the Rebbe conceded, but for a good cause." Tzvi Meir recollected. In the United States, the Rebbe explained, "the idolized dollar" has a very powerful attraction, particularly for young people. "In order to educate the youth that the pursuit of money should not be the center of their lives, you need to educate them to be idealistic. At times, this (idealism) is taken to extreme places that it was never meant to be taken. However, over time, the students fall into the correct pattern—the middle ground—as it should be."

In the end, this difficult period served only to strengthen Tzvi Meir's connection to the Rebbe and Chabad. Over the years, the father-in-law came to appreciate his son-in-law and to take pride in the couple's achievements in Milan, and the affection the community felt for them. Judy, in turn, was grateful to her father for never showing his bitterness and hurt in her presence. She appreciated his putting the whole incident behind him, and, in the Rebbe's words, coming to feel "true affection" for his son-in-law.

■ ■ ■

NO SOONER WERE THE first young couple, Judy and Moshe Lazar, settled in their neat little apartment that they dropped a bombshell. They were going on *shlichus*—joining the Rebbe's emissaries overseas—in Italy. The idea was shocking to Devora. She could not conceive of sending her child so far away. *Shlichus* was a relatively new concept

in those days. In fact, going overseas at the time meant a few rushed, expensive phone calls, letters, and photos, perhaps a yearly trip home, and grandchildren growing up as strangers.The parents were assured that the stay in Italy would be for just two years. That became the longest two years on record. (Moshe and Judy are still at their post in Milan to this day.)

Once she had accepted the new reality, Devora began to enjoy her visits to her daughter after the birth of each of Judy's babies. She loved the change—sunny Mediterranean weather, friendly people, clean streets, and good shopping. Meanwhile, Tzvi Meir remained home alone, gamely burning steaks for supper in a toaster oven and piling the sink high with dirty dishes. He would entreat one of his other married daughters to come to clean up before Devora's return. Soon enough, Devora was rushing off for her daughters' successive births to care for the older children, and, more importantly, to protect her *kimpetur* (post-natal) daughters and make sure they could rest.

■ ■ ■

AT TIMES, THESE VISITS entailed considerable hardship for the grandparents. One Pesach, the Yaffes were expecting their third child. The Steinmetzes spent the holiday in Portland, Maine, the New England community where the Yaffes ran a small day school. Instead of one baby, twins were born. Devora had her hands full running the home, caring for the older children, and even making daily visits to the hospital to visit the twin who was kept longer because of low birth weight.

Tzvi Meir had it even harder. He had to give up the comforts of home, his Pesach routine, his books, and his shul. After *davening* in the local Orthodox synagogue, where very few religious members remained, he had one thing to say: *"Di kaltkeit rint fun di vent."* (The coldness seeps from the walls.) They both accepted these difficulties stoically, however, as the inevitable burden of having children.

■ ■ ■

ESTHER TAUBER, THE YOUNGEST daughter, had remained in Crown Heights. Her family was a constant presence to their grandparents, forging strong ties with them. Soon, their house on Crown Street became the hub of the rest of the family as they came in from out of town to celebrate bar mitzvahs, weddings, and special days on the calendar.

Some grandchildren stayed on beyond a visit. As they grew older and needed a more advanced Jewish education, they were sent to Crown Heights to live and learn. Mindy, the oldest Lazar girl, lived with her Aunt and Uncle Tauber from the age of ten, attending Bais Rivkah and spending much time with her grandparents. Her engagement to Mendel Zalmanov in Crown Heights marked a new milestone for Tzvi Meir and Devora, who were deeply involved in planning their granddaughter's wedding.

Shlomo, the oldest of the Yaffes, was sent to Crown Heights to learn in yeshiva at the tender age of eight. Though he boarded with local families, Devora was ultimately responsible for him. Whenever he came down with a childhood illness, he moved in with his grandparents. Though Devora was working full-time in the real estate office, she managed to care for him. By his own admission, he was not an easy child. Inexplicably, the nine-year-old told her one day that she had so many wrinkles, she looked like a mummy. Devora, who was only in her fifties at the time, and still very beautiful, found the comment hard to understand.

Many other grandchildren joined them as they attended high school, seminary, and yeshiva in Crown Heights. Devora took to her new role naturally. She was loving, amused, worried, and impatient (much as she had been as a mother). Called *Anyu* by the family, she bought the grandchildren clothing and fed them Tofutti bars on the porch—to minimize damage to the Persian carpet.

As the grandchildren got married, she threw herself whole-heartedly into the preparations for the weddings and other occasions her daughters' families celebrated, often sponsoring the affair, even when she was not the one hosting the events. No *simchah* was complete without her rum balls dipped into shredded coconut or powdered sugar. Her granddaughters remember buying the fanciest available festive plasticware for *sheva brachos*, then washing them in the dishwasher for the next *simchah*. She was determinedly tolerant of the moodiness of the young brides, excusing them for being "hysterical" and claiming she was ignoring their bad behavior.

■ ■ ■

FOR TZVI MEIR THE new role as grandfather was more complicated. On one hand, he treasured the innocence and purity of little children, dedicating a poem to "Yankele, the Cheder Child".[30] "In the chambers of his spirit, G-d's angels hover, together with *Eliyahu Hatishbi*."

On the other hand, he valued his peace and quiet and found the noise, the constant activity, and the fighting of rambunctious children hard to tolerate. Devora had to lay down strict rules when Zeidi must not be disturbed. Nevertheless, Tzvi Meir felt he had an obligation to pass on the values and wisdom of his generation to his grandchildren. In a poem,[31] the grandfather sows seeds in the spring fields of his grandchildren, not expecting to reap the rewards of his efforts. But the forgotten seeds will one day sprout and yield a bountiful harvest for generations.

As the grandchildren grew older, their relationship with their grandfather matured. The three oldest boys from each family—Berel Lazar,

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30 *Bechevyon Hanefesh*, p. 179
31 "The Grandfather", *Merosh Tzurim*, p. 208

Shlomo Yaffe, and Yanki Tauber—regularly ate Shabbos meals with their grandparents. The boys came to appreciate their grand-father's vast knowledge, poetic talents, and his special relationship with the Rebbe. Yanki, inspired by Tzvi Meir's example, would become a popular Chassidic author himself. He took an interest in his poems, translating some into English. Shlomo, the grandson who would become the prolific scholar and lecturer, appreciated his grandfather's breadth of erudition, claiming, "If you stuck a needle through the *Tanach* (to choose a word at random), Zeidi would produce the word that followed."

Their grandfather, in turn, had regular learning sessions with them and analyzed their character. One comment he made, however, came back to haunt him. Turning to Berel Lazar one day, he said, "Beri, you are so quiet, never say a word. Whatever will become of you?" For once, Tzvi Meir had to concede he missed the mark. The quiet boy became the Chief Rabbi of Russia.

■ ■ ■

THOUGH HE COULD BE critical toward the children, Tzvi Meir had a softer and gentler side. He took a lively interest in the dating and engagements of young couples, recalling his own courtship of Devora. On one occasion, he became actively involved in a grandchild's *shidduch* that had stalled due to a misunderstanding. His intervention brought the young people back together and resulted in an engagement and marriage that caused the grandfather no end of satisfaction. Even when he was no longer well, he told a granddaughter who had confided in him, "Follow your heart."

The burden a big family placed on the introverted poet was more than balanced with its many blessings. He took great pride in his family, boasting about his children and grandchildren who were emissaries of the Rebbe in Italy, Russia, and Hungary, as well as

American communities across the country. He proudly took the honors at family celebrations. Many pictures show him tenderly holding an infant as the *sandek* at a grandchild's Bris. At family weddings, the last *brachah* under the Chuppah was reserved for him, and he rendered it with much feeling.

Like other Holocaust survivors who had seen so many lost to the Jewish people, he felt great gratitude for the blessing of children and grandchildren. Year in and year out, as he surveyed his descendants at Chanukah parties and *Tosfos Yom Tov* gatherings, he would invariably begin with a quote from our forefather, Yaakov. "For with my staff (alone), I crossed this *Yarden*, and now I have become two camps."



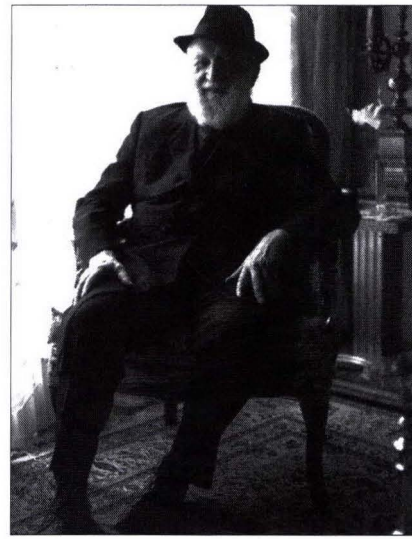
Tzvi Meir at his daughter's wedding



The family at the Chanukah wedding of Chaya Rochel to Chaim Yaffe



Grandmother Leah Gittel in America



At home on Crown Street
(Photo taken in an interview with Kfar Chabad)



Celebrating the Bar Mitzva of grandson Berel Lazar



Wedding of the first grandchild, Mindy (Lazar) Zalmanov



Tzvi Meir and Devora at the weddings of their grandchildren





At the wedding of grandson, Yanki Tauber

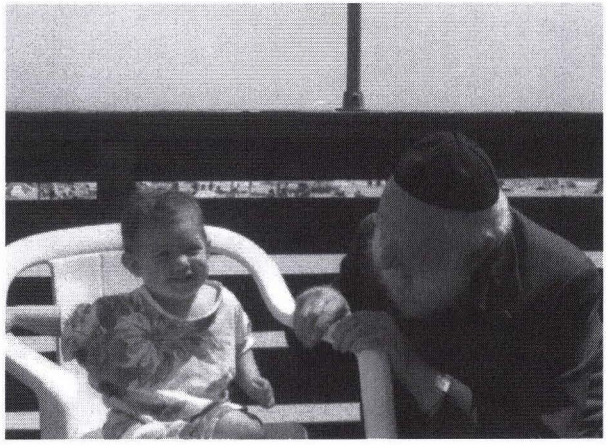


The Final Brachah at every Chuppah





The Upsheren of Baruch Tauber



Bonding with great-grandchildren





As sandek at great-grandsons' brissim





The Tranquil Years

TZVI MEIR HAD ENTREATED his Creator in one of his poems, "Prayer of the Grandfather", to give him a respite from the storm of his life in the autumn of his years. Indeed, in his seventies, he and Devora were blessed with years of tranquility. The real estate office was finally generating a good income. Tzvi Meir had cautiously partnered with a builder, and they were able to sell a row of houses in Crown Heights and other developments they had built.

The Steinmetzes bought a small two-family home in Crown Heights, close to their daughters and to 770. They also bought a vacation home in Belle Harbor, a gated community not far from their Flatbush office. Tzvi Meir and Devora often expressed their delight that just twenty minutes after crossing the bridge, they would be met with the ocean breeze, sand and surf and tidy gardens. The beautiful home had a wrap-around porch facing the sea. Shielded from the beach by canvas roller blinds, Tzvi Meir learned on the porch to the sound of the ocean waves. After much agonizing, Devora renovated the kitchen and furnished the apartment with wicker furniture, decorating it with light, airy colors.

The house was not quite a retreat, however. Devora could not imagine keeping the fresh air, the sand, and the sea just for the two of them. Duly, every Sunday, families of noisy children descended on the

house in Belle Harbor with sandy feet and sticky hands. She would invite a few quiet children at a time to spend Shabbos, as well, reminding them to tiptoe along the porch while their grandfather took his nap. *Anyu* was a different person in Belle Harbor, the granddaughters testify, relaxed and humorous. They remember walking with her the length of the beach as she pointed out the houses of the rich and the famous, picked up seashells, and told them stories about her life.

Like Devora, Tzvi Meir was also driven by guilt, but for a different reason. How could he enjoy such a vacation, when he felt he belonged in 770 with the Rebbe? To assuage his conscience, he spent Shabbos going from shul to shul giving *shiurim*. In the afternoon, the Steinmetzes hosted a ladies' session in the house, serving cake and drinks. Devora was pleased with the number of elegant ladies who came to hear the *shiur*, among them a well-dressed participant wearing a big hat, and she enjoyed their appreciation of her husband's talks (though she signaled to him when she felt the lecture was getting too long).

The home in Belle Harbor was put to good use. Grandchildren could date in privacy at a location distant from Crown Heights. *Sheva brachos* were held on the wide porch facing the sea. The Steinmetzes also invited a bank president with whom they had a close relationship and hosted him appropriately. In Nora's merit, her husband Sipos was wined and dined in Belle Harbor when he came to America for a business trip. When Tzvi Meir's health began to fail, Devora reluctantly sold the home. As often before, Devora had made a shrewd business move: Soon after, Hurricane Sandy swept the house into the ocean.

■ ■ ■

THROUGHOUT THE CHANGES and milestones in family life, Tzvi Meir and Devora continued to work in their Public Realty. But in the Eighties, the Flatbush neighborhood was becoming dangerous. There had been a few robberies. A young man who had at one time worked

in the office was tragically killed while collecting rent in a building. The Steinmetzes decided to close the office in Flatbush. They renovated the ground floor of their Crown Street home, making one long, modern office. There, in the comfort of his home office, Tzvi Meir continued to procure mortgages for home buyers. His work as a poet was no longer confined to solitary nights. He could now dictate his handwritten poems to his secretary, Mrs. Roitblat, who transcribed them on a Hebrew typewriter.

There was more time now to mentor and host newcomers to Crown Heights. A series of young students and *baalei teshuvah* rented the basement apartment on Crown Street. Tzvi Meir answered their questions about Halachah and faith, while Devora worried about their *shidduchim* and the clothing they left behind when they moved on. Things were indeed tranquil, as Tzvi Meir entered his seventies. The only issue was Devora. No longer busy renting apartments, she sought an outlet for her nervous energy and organizational skills. She found it in her role as director of Bikur Cholim.

■ ■ ■

THE CROWN HEIGHTS WOMEN involved in visiting the sick and helping new mothers had turned to the Rebbe with a problem: they needed more volunteers. The Rebbe advised them to look for Hungarian women in the community. Devora began by joining Zissy Klein, another bright Hungarian lady, in visiting home-bound old people and hospital patients. Never content with doing anything halfway, Devora expanded the Chaya Mushka Bikur Cholim and found a role for herself at its helm. Always seeking ways to improve and grow, she studied the methods of Bikur Cholim of Boro Park and Williamsburg, also run by Hungarian Holocaust survivors like herself.

The little Bikur Cholim parties in homes became full-fledged fundraisers, formal affairs with an elegant luncheon, honorees, and

prizes. She distributed considerable money, not just for medical bills, new mothers, meals, and transportation, but also funds for cleaning ladies and camp. She insisted these contributions were necessary to maintain the health of mothers under stress.

All this brought an end to the peace and quiet at 486 Crown Street. "The phone never stopped," said an article in *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*, written when a luncheon was dedicated to her memory. There were constant requests for help and offers to volunteer. Devora answered each ring personally and immediately. "What if it is important?"

The activities reached a crescendo in the weeks before the luncheon. Women tread the plush blue-carpeted stairs to the Steinmetz apartment as they came and went to receive lists of potential donors, discuss prize purchases for raffling off, preparing flyers, and sending out mailings. Everyone had to pitch in. Daughters and granddaughters had jobs calling potential donors, taking photographs, and manning the tables. After the party came the moment of truth—schlepping home the cash and checks and counting it all. How well did the party succeed? It was not just a matter of finances, but a vote of confidence for Bikur Cholim from the community. Devora needed no praise or recognition. The success of Bikur Cholim was her success. Avoiding the limelight, she never once spoke at a party ("What? With my accent?"), content to be in charge behind the scenes.

One Friday afternoon, Devora's dedication to Bikur Cholim actually exposed her to danger. After her husband had left for shul, a man dressed as a *Chassid* rang the bell and asked for cash to buy insulin. Suspicious, Devora asked him for a prescription. The man then held a knife to her throat, demanding the money. At her screams, he fled, leaving an expensive hat behind.

■ ■ ■

WHAT ABOUT TZVI MEIR? one wonders. How did he react to all the noise and tumult, to the invasion of his privacy, and a perpetually stressed-out, distracted wife? The answer: remarkably well. Not only did he tolerate the commotion, but he pitched in to help, providing office space, telephones, and free postage. Devora would struggle over the plaques awarded to the honorees, calling them "plagues." Her husband helped her find the appropriate verse to inscribe on each. Most of all, he helped her rehearse the lines she would say to the Rebbe on Lag B'Omer, asking a *brachah* for her *yom huledes*, her birthday, and the success of the Bikur Cholim party, which usually took place on the same day.

The couple's children would wonder at Tzvi Meir's tolerance. Perhaps, they speculated, the work of Bikur Cholim was in harmony with his own family's tradition. After years of toiling for a livelihood, the Steinmetzes would once again be in a position to help fellow Jews in need. There is possibly a much simpler explanation for Tzvi Meir's support of Bikur Cholim: He saw how important it was to Devora. Over their years together, surviving the Holocaust, struggling to make a living in a new land, and raising a family, these two very different people had become a true couple, sharing each other's aspirations, failures, and triumphs. When a Bikur Cholim party was successful, Tzvi Meir was almost as delighted as his wife.

Conversely, when the new three-volume set of poetry came out in 1997, Devora was its most zealous promoter. She urged her children and grandchildren to distribute the books, and find readers interested in Hebrew poetry. Whoever was witness to Devora's unwavering devotion to her husband in his long illness at the end of his life would testify to the power of their bond.

Chassid and Poet

THE TITLE PAGE OF Tzvi Meir's volume of poetry *Meknaf Haaretz* reads: "From the wings of the earth, beauty to the righteous one (*Tzvi latzadik*)." It is a play on words indicating that *Tzvi* was dedicating his poems to the *tzaddik*. "Under the wings of his love, the love of a father and a brother, all the lost and forsaken find a haven and refuge," continues the dedication.

While Tzvi Meir was connected to the Rebbe in all areas of his life—in his spiritual strivings, his outreach activities, his family, and communal matters—it was his poetry that best expressed his dedication to his Rebbe.

■ ■ ■

EVERY YEAR IN TIME for the Rebbe's birthday, Tzvi Meir would present the Rebbe with a gift, a poem, with the words "the eleventh of Nissan" (The Rebbe's birthday) inscribed at the end. The poems are entitled, "Moshe", "The Leader", "The Mission", "The Lone Warrior", and "The Voice of My Beloved."

From these poems emerges the towering figure of a man of G-d, a compassionate leader guiding, protecting, uplifting, and inspiring his flock. Out of love for his people, he sacrifices everything, even his

solitary communion with his Creator. He storms the barricades of exile to allow the light of redemption to shine through the cracks. The poet worries, "As the rivers of suffering pour into the pool of his heart... How will one heart bear all this pain?"[32] But the poet comforts himself: "Behold the pain was purified and ascended to the heights of Heaven where strength and pain dwell together, and joy and sorrow are joined."

The Rebbe, on his part, greatly encouraged Tzvi Meir's work as a poet. "Song is the pen of the soul," said the Rebbe, quoting Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the author of the Tanya.

■ ■ ■

THE REBBE WOULD THANK Tzvi Meir warmly for his birthday gift of a poem. When Tzvi Meir sent the Rebbe the poem entitled, "The Voice of My Beloved is Knocking," the Rebbe expressed his appreciation in an interesting way.

It was Friday night, after *Kabbalas Shabbos*, Tzvi Meir recalled, and he was standing by the door where the Rebbe would exit the shul and climb the steps to his office. "I merited a *'Gut Shabbos'* from the Rebbe," said Tzvi Meir. "The Rebbe continued walking, then suddenly, turned around, reentered the shul, turned to me, and said *'Yashar koach far'n shir'* (Thank you for the poem)."

When Tzvi Meir failed to include a poem with the letter he would write to the Rebbe on his birthday, the Rebbe noticed, "You have deviated from your norm of including a poem."

On another occasion, the Rebbe asked "Poem?" Adding, "The Mishnah rules, 'And all those who regularly have *shir* go out with their *shir* and are led by their *shir*.'"[33]

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32 *Meknaf Haaretz*, p. 168
33 Shabbos 5:1

The Mishnah above is referring to a collar to which a leash is attached, but the Rebbe interpreted the word *shir* as poetry or song. Thus the line would read, "All those who are poets, go out with their poems, and are uplifted by their poems."[34]

Tzvi Meir recounted that on one occasion he had brought his young grandson to a *yechidus,* where the Rebbe gave them both a blessing and then added, "The blessing does not come close to a poem (from Tzvi Meir)."

■ ■ ■

"I KNOW THAT MANY poets find themselves alone with their creations, and they have many moments of despair and depression," wrote Tzvi Meir. It was his relationship with the Rebbe that preserved him from that fate.

In 1992, he said, "Whenever I needed encouragement or support, the Rebbe literally stood at my side. He knew how to read between the lines about my difficulties. He encouraged me and helped me return to myself."

In a voluminous correspondence of more than six hundred pages that spanned four decades, the Rebbe acted as an emotional and artistic mentor to the poet—praising his work, discouraging self-doubt, and constantly urging him to greater achievement. On many occasions, Tzvi Meir expressed his doubts about his poetic endeavors. Once he asked the Rebbe if his time would be better spent learning *Chassidus* instead of writing poetry. The Rebbe replied, "Your poems will cause many people to learn *Chassidus*."

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34 See Appendix, Excerpt II

DURING THE HIGH HOLIDAYS, Tzvi Meir sent the Rebbe two poems that had been inspired by the Rebbe's *farbrengens*. In the cover letter, he questioned, "Perhaps it is not fitting in the current time to be occupied with poetry."

The Rebbe replied that on the contrary, "during the Ten Days of Repentance we add an additional song to the daily prayers."("A song of ascent, out of the depths I call to You."[35])

A year later, Tzvi Meir sent the Rebbe several poems during the holiday of Sukkos. Again, he could not conceal his self-doubt. He did not understand why the Rebbe gave so much attention to his poems. "This question (about the value of my poems) also causes a diminishment in my powers of creativity, for one will not exert himself when he is not sure his work is worthwhile."

The Rebbe negated these comments by the poet. Thoughts like these, replied the Rebbe, which were without any basis in reality, were simply the work of the evil inclination, which sought to lessen his creative output and all the positive things that came from it.

■ ■ ■

AT TIMES, TZVI MEIR felt that the Rebbe was encouraging him indirectly. During a *farbrengen* in 1979, the Rebbe quoted the Talmud[36] stating that King Chizkiah could have been Moshiach, but forfeited his role as redeemer because he did not praise G-d with song after witnessing miracles. Had he only sung, the Rebbe said, the Jewish people could have been spared three thousand years of suffering in exile.

Sitting in the *farbrengen*, Tzvi Meir felt that the Rebbe was speaking to him. His own "song of praise" had been slow in coming recently, and he felt a subtle encouragement in the Rebbe's words.

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35 Psalm 130
36 Sanhedrin 94

In a letter written several months later, he thanked the Rebbe for the talk, "to express my heart's excitement at the sign of the Rebbe's kindness during the *farbrengen,* for raising me from the dust... As our first Chabad patriarch, author of the Tanya, poetically writes, 'How great is the joy of a common and lowly man, when he is brought near to the king...his heart will be gladdened and his soul will rejoice even with joy and singing, with all (his) heart and soul and might.'"

The Rebbe's encouragement of Tzvi Meir's work may be explained by the importance of poetry in Jewish liturgy. One year before *Shabbos Shirah*—when the portion of *Az Yashir*, the Song at the Sea, is read from the Torah scroll—Tzvi Meir sent the Rebbe a new poem about Chabad *shluchim* who devote their lives to spreading the teachings of Torah to Jews around the world along with his routine report. The Rebbe thanked him for the report, "and especially for the poem," adding: "We should merit, along with all the Jewish people, a new song."

This postscript is a reference to the verse "Sing joyously before G-d—sing Him a new song."[37] The new song, and perhaps Tzvi Meir's poem as well, the Rebbe implied, will be sung when the goal that eluded King Chizkiah is finally achieved—the coming of Moshiach.[38]

Tzvi Meir basked in the Rebbe's encouragement. But most of all, he was delighted with the Rebbe's comments on specific poems, even when they contained criticism.

■ ■ ■

IN ADDITION TO THE prodding from the Rebbe to replace his "Elul" poem with a kinder outlook (see the prologue), the Rebbe took issue with an expression that he felt was too negative in another poem as well. Here Tzvi Meir was criticizing people who use G-d like a

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37 Psalm 33:1,3
38 See Appendix, Excerpt III

crutch, constantly demanding that He "give, give" to fulfill their desires. It is not a good analogy, the Rebbe wrote, "For it is Jewish law to ask G-d for one's needs. I am sure you will be able to salvage the poem by amending the wording."

Tzvi Meir edited the poem and published it.[39]

On occasion, the Rebbe pointed out a line that was too positive. Tzvi Meir had written a poem in honor of the Rebbe's birthday entitled, "The Foundation of the World". In an audience a short while later, the Rebbe commented on the following stanza:

All rivers of sorrow flow
along the channels of his heart
on to the valley of understanding:
Therefore
his fountain of joy
does not falter.

The first part is true, the Rebbe said, for, "understanding makes the hardships sweeter."[40] Regarding the second half of the stanza, however, "his fountain of joy does not falter," the Rebbe said with a smile, "*Halvay* (If only it were so)!"

In another poem, the Rebbe suggested a substitution of just one word. In 1982, the poet had submitted "Verses of Praise" to the Rebbe, quoting from the morning prayers.

You are alone, the L-rd
before the world was created.
You were, as if, lonely
Without a sibling, friend, or beloved.

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39 *Meknaf Haaretz*, p. 171
40 *Zohar, Terumah* 175b

And you have made the heavens,
the Heaven of heavens and all their hosts,
the earth and all thereon.
And in all this, a brother and friend you did not find,
until You chose Avraham.

The Rebbe objected to the implication that G-d could be lonely. Rather, he said, G-d was "singular and distinctive."[41]

Tzvi Meir included this correction in his book, and wrote to the Rebbe that he had the merit to correct the poem, "from the Rebbe's pen."

■ ■ ■

IN 1988, AFTER THE passing of the Rebbe's wife, Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, Tzvi Meir wrote a poem in her memory. A week later he submitted the poem to the Rebbe along with his yearly letter before his birthday, writing, "I pray the Rebbe will graciously accept it."

The poem was entitled, "The Tree and the Rose". It depicts a majestic, glorious tree and a graceful rose of delicate beauty that flowers in its shade. "The tree shielded the rose with wings of kindness, and the rose delighted the tree with her sweet fragrance." The poet then describes the fateful day when a storm carries the rose to the heavens on High, but does not sunder the bond between them. Under the poem's heading, he added a quote from the Song of Songs, "Under his shade, I delight to sit."[42] Tzvi Meir wrote that this poem, along with one other, had appeared recently in the *Kfar Chabad* publication.

Tzvi Meir may have presented the poem with some trepidation. True, he had written extensively of the Rebbe as leader of his people. But here he was venturing into very private territory, even offering

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41 See Appendix, Excerpt IV
42 *Shir Hashirim* 2:3

consolation to his Rebbe who had so often comforted him. He must have been relieved with the Rebbe's reply. The Rebbe thanked him warmly for the poem, and said he would mention it "at the *tzion*",[43] "for increased success in all the above, with joy and a happy heart."

Then, after the signature, the Rebbe added a line that puzzled the poet: "As a preparation for the purpose of every poem to 'sing it' without quotation marks." Tzvi Meir then asked the Rebbe to clarify: "There are conflicting opinions about the phrase 'without quotation marks'," he wrote. "Did the Rebbe mean to recite the poems, or to compose a *niggun*?"[44]

No answer was found for this query. But as mentioned before, at least two composers subsequently put the poems to music.

When the Rebbe failed to acknowledge his gift of poetry, Tzvi Meir became worried. In 1982, at the end of a long report about a visit to Israel and his lectures and classes on Judaism, the poet added that he was anxious for a response to a book of poetry that included several poems about the Rebbe that he had submitted sometime before. He wrote:

"Like a poor man worrying about his offering, a poor offering; on the eve of [the Rebbe's birthday] I gave a gift of new poetry [titled], 'Between Those Who Come'. Surely, tens of holy books are on the table of the king. However, I do not know if the Rebbe had a chance to glance at my gift, for 'it is not the way of the king to discuss small things.'"[45]

The Rebbe responded soon after, thanking him for the letter. His appreciation for the poems for the Eleventh of Nissan, he wrote, "was **self-understood**—and I did not expound on this, even briefly, because (like the conclusion of your letter) it is not the way of people to discuss words of praise about themselves."[46]

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43 the Previous Rebbe's burial place
44 See Appendix, Excerpt V
45 Zohar vol. 3,149:2
46 See Appendix, Excerpt VI

■ ■ ■

IT IS FITTING THAT the last poem Tzvi Meir ever wrote was "Lament and Comfort".[47] The long poem is both a tribute—words of praise—and a prayer. The poet asks:

Will the faithful shepherd
forget his flock?
Will he not have mercy
upon those he raised and watched over
with his very life?....

Then, the poet concludes:

Come let us strengthen ourselves.
Then like a face reflected in water
his power, too, will grow
to hasten our redemption
with kindness and mercy
until Menachem, the comforter, will come to Zion
Amen.

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47 *Kfar Chabad*, 1994

הַשְּׁלִיחוּת

שִׁשִּׁים רִבּוֹא נְפָשׁוֹת –
נַפְשׁוֹ.
שִׁשִּׁים רִבּוֹא תְּפִלּוֹת –
תְּפִלָּתוֹ.
שִׁשִּׁים רִבּוֹא גּוֹרָלוֹת –
גּוֹרָלוֹ.

בְּסֵלַע צִדְקָם
הוּא מָרוֹם יַעַל.
בְּמְעוֹד רַגְלָם –
קוֹמָתוֹ תִּשְׁפַּל.

בְּלָבְשׁוֹ עֹז –
הָעָם יִתְגַּבֵּר.
וְרִפּוּ יָדָיו –
הָאוֹיֵב יִמְגַּר.

הִכְתִּירוּהוּ מָלֵךְ,
וְהוּא עָבַר בְּמַקְלוֹ.
הוּא נִשָּׂאָם בְּחֵיקוֹ,
וְהֵם אָמְרוּ לְסַקְלוֹ.

וַיִּפֹּל עַל פָּנָיו –
כִּי מִנְּשִׁית יָמִים
לְנֶגֶד עֵינָיו
קָם וַיִּגְלֶה
זֵכֶר יוֹם סְנֶה:

הַקּוֹל קָרָא –
הוּא אֹזֶן אָטָם.
הַקּוֹל דָּפַק –
הַשַּׁעַר הוּא סָגַר.
הַקּוֹל רָדַף –
הוּא חָמַק.

נַפְשׁוֹ יָדְעָה,
כִּי מָנוֹס אָבַד –
עַד בּוֹשׁ
הוּא נֶאֱבַק,
עַד הַיּוֹם רַד...

נְאוֹת דֶּשֶׁא,
מֵי מְנוּחוֹת,
סְבִיבוֹתָיו כַּחוֹמָה:
אַל תֵּלֵךְ!
תִּפְאֶרֶת הַבְּדוֹד
חִבְּקָה צִוְּארָיו:
אַל נָא תַּעֲזֹב!

עוֹד הוּא עָמַד
בֵּין רָכְסֵי הָהָר,
בֵּין צוּקֵי הַמִּדְבָּר,
אָדָם בּוֹדֵד
עִם אֱלֹהָיו,
אֶחָד
מוּל
אֶחָד.

אוּלָם
לַבַּת הַסְּנֶה
– יְקוֹד רַחֲמִים
לָעָם בַּאֲזוֹקִים –
כְּבָר בָּעֲרָה
בְּלִבָּם.
וְהוּא יָדַע
בְּכָל מְאֹדוֹ
כִּי לְעוֹלָם
לֹא יִהְיֶה עוֹד
לְבַדּוֹ.

י״א ניסן

The Mission (Merosh Tzurim p. 38)

הִתְוַעֲדוּת חֲסִידִים

מְקֹרָב וּמֵרָחוֹק
הֵם בָּאוּ בַהֲמוֹנִים
וְהַטֶּנֶא בִּידֵי
נְעָרִים וְזְקֵנִים.

וְהַסַּלִּים הָרַבִּים
מְלֵאִים וַעֲמוּסִים
מַחֲשָׁבוֹת וּמַעֲשִׂים
רָעִים וְטוֹבִים.

בְּחֶדְוַת־חֲרָדָה
הֵם עוֹטְרִים שְׁלָחָנוֹ,
וְטַנַאי־נַפְשָׁם
לִפְנֵי הֲדוֹמוֹ.

עֲרוּכִים בַּפֶּה
פְּרִי הִלּוּלִים
וְעִנְּבֵי רוֹשׁ –
לְתִקּוּן נוֹהִים,
לִגְאֻלָּה מְשֻׁוָּעִים,
כְּמַהִּים עַד בּוֹשׁ.

וּבַעֲלוֹת הַמִּנְחָה
וְרָצוֹן בְּנַפְשׁוֹ –
וַיִּפֹּל בָּהֶם
לַהַט אִשּׁוֹ.

וּבְהִתְלַקַּחַ הַשַּׁלְהֶבֶת
וַתֹּאכַל לְאֵפֶר
כָּל חַטָּאת וְכָל אָשָׁם –
וְגַם מְזִמּוֹת הָאָוֶן
אֲשֶׁר בִּלְבָבוֹת
כְּלוּ בֶעָשָׁן.

וְכָל פֹּעַל צֶדֶק,
כָּל רַחַשׁ בַּר,
כָּל צָקוֹן לַחַשׁ –
מִמַּעֲמַקֵּי תְהוֹם
בְּלַהַב דְּבָרוֹ
עָלוּ מָרוֹם.

י״א ניסן

Farbrengen (Merosh Tzurim p. 267)

קוֹל דּוֹדִי דוֹפֵק

"וכן שמעתי מהרב הקדוש מוהר"י אלימלך זצ"ל שכשעשה עלית נשמה ראה שנושאים את כלי ביהמ"ק ואמרו לו שהם אותם הכלים שהוציא הוא מהגלות, ופי"א אמר שנפלה בית טומאה אחד בצורה גדולה מאוד ובכל יום עולים אלפי אלפים בעלי מלאכות, בנאים לבנות החומה אבל יש לי שומר טוב, שכשהרב מוהר"י יעקב מלנצהוט מתפלל תפילת י"ח מתפילת מנחה מפיל כל מה שבונים, והבנתי דבריו הקדושים שמפיל זה ע"י שע"י תפילתו בונה חומות ירושלים וביהמ"ק ולפי ערך זה מפיל בהבית הזה של טומאה כי שזה קם זה נופל".

זרע קדש פ' ויצא

קוֹל דּוֹדִי דוֹפֵק
עַל דַּלְתוֹת לִבּוֹת
עֲרֵלִים
עַל שַׁעֲרֵי נְפָשׁוֹת
נְעוּלִים —

קוֹל דּוֹדִי דוֹפֵק
בִּימִין רַחֲמִים
עַל מִבְצְרֵי מַשְׁטֵמָה
סוֹגְרִים וּמְסֻגָּרִים —

קוֹל דּוֹדִי דוֹפֵק
מְעוֹרֵר יְשֵׁנִים
מֵקִיץ נִרְדָּמִים
מַחֲרִיד שַׁאֲנַנִּים —

קוֹל דּוֹדִי דוֹפֵק
בְּתַחֲנוּן וּתְפִלָּה
עַל פִּתְחֵי פְּדוּת
עַל שַׁעֲרֵי גְּאֻלָּה —

קוֹל דּוֹדִי הוֹלֵם
בַּעֲצָמָיו רוּחוֹ
עַל חוֹמוֹת גָּלוּת
עַל בְּרִיחֵי עַבְדוּת —

כָּל הוֹלֵם פָּעַם
פּוֹרֵץ פְּרָצִים
בְּקִירוֹת כְּלָאִים — —
דַּלְתוֹת שִׁבְיָה יְשַׁבֵּר
בְּרִיחִים יְגַדֵּעַ
אֲזִיקִים יְנַתֵּק —

וּבְעַד הַחֲרַכִּים
בְּעַד בְּקִיעֵי מַחְשַׁכִּים
מְנַצְנֵץ אוֹר גּוֹאֵל
לַאֲסִירֵי עֲנִי וּבַרְזֶל —

וְכָל הוֹלֵם לֵב
בּוֹנֶה נִדְבָּךְ
בְּהַר הַקֹּדֶשׁ —

כָּל דּוֹפֵק עֲרָגָה
מְשַׁבֵּץ אֶבֶן אֶקְדָּח
בְּשַׁעֲרֵי אַרְמוֹן —

הַנּוֹתֵן לַיָּעֵף כֹּחַ
הֲלֹא יִתֵּן עוֹז וְעָצְמָה
לַקּוֹרֵא בְּשִׁמּוֹ בְּלִי הֶרֶף
הַמְפַלֵּס נְתִיב אוֹר
בְּעַרְבוֹת הָאַפְלָה
מְיַשֵּׁר מְסִלָּה
לְפַעֲמֵי הַגְּאֻלָּה.

י"א ניסן, תשמ"ז

The Voice of My Beloved (Bechevyon Hanefesh p. 96)

סִיפּוּר עַל הָאָרֶז וְעַל הַגֶּפֶן 2

עוֹז רוּחַ הָאֶרֶז,
וַתּוֹאֵיל לְהִלָּוֹות לוֹ
לִהְיוֹת לְעֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ
וּבַאֲשֶׁר יֵלֵךְ תֵּלֵךְ
וּבַאֲשֶׁר יִפְנֶה תִּפְנֶה
גּוֹרָלוֹ, גּוֹרָלָהּ.

וַיִּרְבּוּ הַיָּמִים
וְהָאֶרֶז גִּבֵּר חֲיָלִים
וַיַּעֲצוֹר בְּעַד
הָרוּחוֹת הָרָעוֹת
וַיֹּאמֶר "הֶרֶף"
לַסַּעַר הַמַּשְׁחִית
וּכְצִפֳּרִים עָפוֹת הֵגֵן
עַל שְׁאֵרִית עֲצֵי הַגַּן
אֲשֶׁר הִתְלַקְטוּ סְבִיבוֹ
וַיֶּחֱסוּ בְּצִלּוֹ.

וְכָל הַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים
נִצְבָה הַגֶּפֶן לִימִינוֹ
בַּעֲטֶרֶת נְצָחָה
לְסַעֲדוֹ וּלְתָמְכוֹ
וַתִּכַלְכֵּל שָׂרָשָׁיו מִתַּחַת
וַתְּהִי חוֹמָה לוֹ סָבִיב
וּמִפְלָט וּמְבֻטָח
בִּימֵי מָצוֹר וּמָצוֹק
וּבִימֵי שִׁמְחָה וְשָׂשׂוֹן.

וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי הַגֶּפֶן
לָשׁוּב אֶל מוֹלַדְתָּהּ
וַתָּבֹא סְעָרָה וַתְּקָחֶהָ
וַיָּבֹא רָכָב אֵשׁ
וַיַּפְרִיד בֵּינָהּ
וּבֵין הָאֶרֶז
בַּעַל בְּרִיתָהּ.

וַתַּעֲבוֹר הַקִּינָה
בֵּין עֲצֵי הַשָּׂדֶה
וְקוֹל נְהִי נִשְׁמַע
בֵּין הָרָרֵי הַיְעָרוֹת.

גַּם נֶפֶשׁ הָאֶרֶז
כִּמְעַט קָט הִשְׁתּוֹחֲחָה
מֵעוֹצֶר הַיָּגוֹן
וְעַל עֲנָפָיו הִתְנוֹצְצוּ
אֶגְלֵי-טַל מֻעֲגָמַת הַפְּרִידָה--
אַךְ הָאֶרֶז אֲשֶׁר מֵאָז
הִשְׁרִישׁ שָׂרָשָׁיו
עַל פַּלְגֵי מַעְיְנוֹת נְצָחִים
וַיְשַׁלַּח אֲבְרוֹתָיו
מַיִם עַד יָם
לְקַבֵּץ נִפְזָרִים
וְלֶאֱסוֹף נִדָּחִים
תַּחַת כְּנָפָיו
–כְּנֶשֶׁר מְרַחֵף עַל גּוֹזָלָיו–

בְּרַחֲמִים רַבִּים--
הֲלֹא הוּא יִשְׂחָק
לְגַלֵּי הַסְּעָרוֹת,
וַנַּחְשׁוֹלֵי הַסּוּפוֹת
כְּמוֹץ נֶחְשָׁבוּ לוֹ--
הוּא עַד מְהֵרָה הִתְאוֹשֵׁשׁ
וַיַּחֲלִיף כֹּחַ
וַיִּתְחַדֵּשׁ נְעוּרִים
כִּי קוֹל חוֹצֵב לָהֲבוֹת
קָרָא אֵלָיו מְמְרוֹמִים,
וַיְדַבֵּר אֵלָיו דְּבָרִים טוֹבִים
דְּבָרִים נְחוּמִים לֵאמוֹר:
חֲזַק וֶאֱמַץ!

כִּי אֲנִי עִמְּךָ גִּבּוֹר הָחַיִל
לְךָ בְכֹחֲךָ וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּךָ
אֶת שְׁאֵרִית פְּלֵיטַת
גַּן חָמָדְתִּי
כִּי אֵלֶיךָ נְשׂוּאוֹת
עֵינַי תַּחְתּוֹנִים
וְעֵינַי עֶלְיוֹנִים- - -

וְהַגֶּפֶן גַּם הִיא
מִמְּרוֹם שִׁבְתָּהּ,
עַל כַּנְפֵי קֶרֶן אוֹרָה
שָׁלְחָה דְּבָרָהּ:

זְכוֹר לִי חֶסֶד נְעוּרַי
לָכְתִּי אַחֲרַיִךְ
בְּסוּפָה וּבְסַעַר
וְעַתָּה תִּיקַר נָא
נַפְשִׁי בְּעֵינָךְ:
חֲזַק וֶאֱמַץ לִבֵּךְ
וְשׁוּב לְאֵתָנֵךְ
וְלֵךְ מֻחַיִל אֶל חָיִל
כְּמֵאָז וּמִקֶּדֶם
כִּי חֲדָוַת עוֹלָמִים
הִיא מָעוּזֵךְ–
וְהֲלֹא כֹּה אָמַר

הָאֶרֶז הַקָּדְמוֹן
אָבִינוּ הָרִאשׁוֹן
כִּי עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה
אֲחֵרֵי שׁוּבוֹ
אֶל מוֹלַדְתּוֹ,
כָּמוֹנִי הַיּוֹם,
מִשָּׁם יִשְׁלַח יוֹנְקוֹתָיו
אֶל מְקוֹם אֲהֵלוֹ לְפָנִים
וּתְנוּבָתוֹ תְּמַלֵּא
אֶרֶץ וְשָׂמַיִם
בְּיֶתֶר עוֹז
עַד בֹּא מְנַחֵם לְצִיּוֹן
וְעַד בִּכְלָל, אָמֵן
כֵּן יְהִי רָצוֹן

סִיפּוּר עַל הָאֶרֶז וְעַל הַגֶּפֶן

עֵת צָרָה בָּאָה
עַל שָׂדוֹת וּכְרָמִים.
סַעַר קָטֶב הִתְחוֹלֵל
וַיִּשְׁטוֹף וַיַּעֲבוֹר
וַיֶּחֱשׁוֹף יְעָרוֹת
וַיָּשֶׂם שַׁמּוֹת
בְּמַטָּעֵי הַגַּנִּים
מִבְּלִי הַשְׁאִיר שָׂרִיד.

וַיֵּאָנְקוּ הָעֵצִים
בַּעֲלוֹת הַכּוֹרֶת עֲלֵיהֶם
וַתַּעַל שַׁוְעָתָם
אֶל שְׁמֵי הָאֵילָנוֹת.

וַיִּשְׁמַע קוֹל בָּרָמָה
אֶנְקַת תַּמְרוּרִים:
"מַה נַּעֲשָׂה לְגַנִּי
אֲשֶׁר טִפַּחְתִּי וְרִבִּיתִי
וַאֲשֶׁר נִרְמַס וְשׁוּדַד
מְנַחְשׁוֹלֵי הַזַּעַף
אֲשֶׁר חָרְשׁוּ עַל גַּבּוֹ - -
הַכָּלָה יֵעָשֶׂה הַסַּעַר
אֶת שְׁאֵרִית חֻמְדָּתִי"!?
וַיִּוָּעֲצוּ שָׂרֵי מַעֲלָה
זֶה אוֹמֵר בְּכֹה וְזֶה בְּכֹה

וַיַּחְלִיטוּ בְּרוֹב יוֹעֵץ לֵאמוֹר:
הָבָה נוֹרִיד לָאָרֶץ
עֵץ אֶרֶז
חוֹטֵר מִגֶּזַע הַלְּבָנוֹן,
אֶרֶז שַׂגִּיא וְרַב כֹּחַ
עָמוּק-שָׁרָשִׁים
אַמִּיץ-גֶּזַע
רַב-פְּאֵרוֹת וּגְבַהּ-צַמָּרוֹת
אֲשֶׁר בְּעוֹז גִּזְעוֹ
כְּעַמּוּד בַּרְזֶל יַעֲמוֹד
מוּל הַסְּעָרוֹת
וּבְאֶבְרוֹת עָנָפָיו
יָגֵן עַל שְׁאֵרִית הַגָּן
אֲשֶׁר הָיָה לְמִרְמָס.

וַיּוֹאֶל הָאֶרֶז
לָשִׂים נַפְשׁוֹ בְּכַפּוֹ
וְלָרֶדֶת לְלֵב רוּחוֹת הַזַּעַף
וְלָחוּשׁ לְעֶזְרָה
לְאֶחָיו הַנְּמַקִּים
בְּאָמְרוֹ: אֵיךְ אוּכַל
וְרָאִיתִי בְּאָבְדַן
שְׁרִידֵי הַגָּן!?
וַיְהִי בְּהִכּוֹן הָאֶרֶז
לְצָנוֹחַ מִגְּבָהֵי הָאוֹרוֹת
אֶל אֶרֶץ מַאְפֵּלְיָה–

וַיַּעֲמוֹד מֵלִיץ אֶחָד
הַשַּׂר הַגָּדוֹל לִימִינוֹ וַיֹּאמַר:
"אֵיךְ יֵרֵד הָאֶרֶז גַּלְמוּד
וְנֶעֱזָב, בְּלִי מִשְׁעָן
אֶל לוֹעַ הַסְּעָרָה
אֲשֶׁר תְּסַמֵּר עַנְפֵי הָעֵצִים"!?
וַיֹּאמְרוּ לַשַּׂר הַמֵּלִיץ:
"כֵּן דִּבַּרְתָּ"!
וַיַּעֲבִירוּ קוֹל בְּמָרְחֲבֵי מָרוֹם:
"מִי נָדִיב לֵב אֲשֶׁר יִלָּוֶה
לָאֶרֶז בְּמִשְׁיֶמֶת הַחֶסֶד
אֲשֶׁר נָטַלנוּ עָלָיו"!?

וַיַּחַפּוּ עַד בּוֹשׁ
וְאֵין קוֹל וְאֵין עוֹנֶה,
(כִּי מִי יוֹאִיל לִנְטוֹשׁ
גַּפְנֵי נְגוֹהוֹת
לָרֶדֶת אֶל תֵּבֶל תְּלָאוֹת?)

אַךְ פִּתְאוֹם בָּאָה בְּיַעֲף
גֶּפֶן יְפַת נוֹף
(וְהִיא גַּם הִיא
נֵצֶר מִגֶּזַע הַלְּבָנוֹן)
אֲשֶׁר לְקֹחָה אָזְנָהּ

The Tree and the Rose, written after 22 Shvat, 5748

הַגִּבּוֹר הַבּוֹדֵד

הוּא נִצָּב כָּל הַיּוֹם
בֵּין הָאֱלֹהִים וּבֵין הָעָם
בֵּין הַכְּלָל וּבֵין הַפְּרָט
בֵּין הַמֵּתִים וּבֵין הַחַיִּים
בֵּין הַחֲלוֹף וּבֵין הַנֶּצַח.

מֵאַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת הָאָרֶץ
שְׁוָעוֹת אוֹבְדִים
כְּיוֹנִים תְּעוּפֶינָה
אֶל שְׁעָרָיו —

רְפָאוֹת וְיֶשַׁע
הוּא מְפַזֵּר לָאֲלָפִים,
אוֹר וָעֹז
הוּא זוֹרֵעַ לְרִבָּבוֹת —
אַךְ מִי דוֹרֵשׁ לְלִבּוֹ
מִי יָבִין כְּאֵבוֹ!!

וּבְהַאֲפִיל חַשְׁרַת עֲרָפֶל
אֶת שְׁמֵי עַמּוֹ,
מוּל הָאֵימוֹת,
הַחֲשֵׁכוֹת הַגְּדוֹלוֹת,
הוּא עוֹמֵד בַּפֶּרֶץ לְבַדּוֹ
וְאֵין מִתְחַזֵּק עִמּוֹ.

הַגִּבּוֹר הַבּוֹדֵד —
יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה
עָלֵינוּ הוּא חוֹמָה,
לוֹ נַפְשִׁי הוֹמָה.

מְחֻקְרֵי רוֹם
תַּעֲלוּמוֹת תְּהוֹם
רוּחוֹ חוֹבֶקֶת —
עָלָיו נַפְשִׁי מִתְרַפֶּקֶת.

משירי "צבי לצריק"

The Lone Warrior (Meknaf Haaretz p. 176)

Chassidic Activism

MANY CALLED TZVI MEIR, "the Rebbe's poet." Indeed, he transmitted the message of Chabad and the Rebbe through his poetry. The poet himself felt, nevertheless, that he was not doing enough to spread *Yiddishkeit*. He admitted that outreach did not come naturally to him. "While I know the many dangers that are facing our nation," Tzvi Meir wrote to Mr. Amir in 1974, "in many ways like no other time in the history of our people, it is (still) difficult to come out of my shell, and to raise my voice in the open."

In this vein, he wrote to the Rebbe that while he did not actually put *tefillin* on people in the streets, he supported these endeavors, and he pledged his financial and tactical support for the campaign.

■ ■ ■

WITH THE REBBE'S encouragement, he was active in Chadrei Torah Ohr, an after-school program in Israel bringing Torah education to public school children in dozens of cities. The Rebbe also encouraged him to participate in the activities of Poalei Agudath Yisrael's American branch.

Tzvi Meir supported a roving Chabad representative to found *mikvaos* across the United States, and, of course, his own children and

grandchildren who were emissaries of the Rebbe around the world. At one time, he wrote the Rebbe that he paid full support to a grandchild doing outreach in Russia who did not yet have a source of income.

Perhaps his greatest personal investment was the Torah classes he taught across the city in Hebrew, Yiddish, or English, depending on his audience. He expounded on the Talmud, the weekly Torah reading, and Chassidic teachings. His audience was diverse, ranging from devoutly observant Jews to secular Israeli immigrants. As mentioned before, he was especially gratified by the "meditation sessions" held in Long Island, which he transformed into meditations on Torah, and which resulted in several families returning to a life of Torah observance.

He almost never refused a request to teach, even leaving in the middle of the *farbrengens* in order to translate the Rebbe's words in a local synagogue for *Chassidim* who did not understand Yiddish. The Rebbe gave him an unequivocal response that he should continue this endeavor even at his own spiritual loss. (This communication is detailed earlier in the book.)

■ ■ ■

ON THE EVE OF the 12th of Tammuz, the day of the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe's birthday and redemption from prison, Tzvi Meir turned to the Rebbe with a dilemma. He reported that for several weeks he was already giving his regular Shabbos classes in Belle Harbor (where he and Devora had a vacation home). As was his wont, he listed in detail all his classes in the letter: 1. A lesson in *Likkutei Torah* for a quorum of Jews stemming from Hungary and Poland; 2. Talks to the women of the neighborhood and summer visitors on the weekly portion; 3. A lesson on the portion of the week and *Pirkei Avos* in the old age home; and 4. A daily lesson in *Ein Yaakov* also in the old age home, to an audience of twenty or thirty people, in addition to more women listening on the side. Then Tzvi Meir comes to the point. He understood the

Rebbe's teachings that spreading Torah and the wellsprings is preferred to participating in a *farbrengen*. (As the Rebbe had said, "This is your life.") But does this also apply to a *farbrengen* in honor of the "Day of Redemption" that comes only once a year?

The answer came swiftly: "Certainly, this is his life. As our Rabbis have stated, 'More than the benefactor does for the poor man, the poor man does for the benefactor.' Even more, our Rabbis, of blessed memory, said that a soul comes down to this world for seventy or eighty years, all in order to do one favor for another Jew."[48]

■ ■ ■

WHEN WRITING TO THE Rebbe about his own failings and deficiencies, the single comfort he found was in these outreach activities, which he mentioned in a letter:

"This year went by 'like a passing shadow' and the yearly 'balance' of the one penning this in regards to Torah and the service of G-d, to the dismay of my heart, is nothing to be happy about or to give (you) joy. Therefore, I will have to settle for my few activities in the spreading of *Yiddishkeit* and the Chassidic wellsprings—even though they are minute compared to the needs and possibilities in this field, for the many that wander aimlessly in the streets. I hope that this will cause gladness of the heart in the inner sanctuary (alluding to the Rebbe)."

The Rebbe responded with warm thanks for the good news included in the letter, and expressed the hope that he would have more to report in the future. In response to Tzvi Meir's despair at his lack of accomplishment, the Rebbe "was greatly astonished by the sentiment."

Taking up the phrase "like a passing shadow," the Rebbe offered a more positive interpretation: Perhaps, the phrase could be understood according to Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who explains that in

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48 See Appendix, Excerpt VII

dreams, contradictions are the norm.[49] The laws of nature do not apply, so one may see oddities such as a ship traveling in mid-air, because during sleep the intellect is dormant and only the imagination remains. Dreams do indeed pass quickly, the Rebbe wrote. In addition, he quoted the Sages: "Just as it is impossible for the grain to grow without straw, so it is impossible to dream without idle matter,"[50] and this applies even to the dreams of Yosef in the Torah.

To understand the word "shadow" in Tzvi Meir's letter, the Rebbe suggested they look into the Zohar (on the mitzvah of Sukkah) which refers to "the shadow of faith". Tzvi Meir's work educating Jews about their heritage "even outside of his domain" had surely strengthened that "shadow" (of faith). His self-doubt, the Rebbe dismissed as a dream that is "passing," and thus the rest of what he writes is surely "idle matter." The Rebbe finished by asking forgiveness for reframing the poet's words. He was also asking his secretary to return Tzvi Meir's original letter with the Rebbe's response, "because (his own list of accomplishments in teaching Torah and encouraging Jewish education) confirms the above."

■ ■ ■

TZVI MEIR WOULD SEND regular, detailed reports to the Rebbe about his outreach activities and regular Torah sessions. In a letter written in 1988, for example, he reported that every *motzoei Shabbos* he had a regular lesson in *Torah Ohr* and *Likkutei Torah* with four grandchildren he listed by name, at the same time putting in a good word for the boys for their success in learning and in outreach. He also mentioned learning sessions with local *Rabbonim*, and his regular sessions repeating *sichos* every Shabbos afternoon in the Chevra Shas shul.

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49 *Torah Ohr* 28:3
50 Nedarim 88

Tzvi Meir worried that he was "burdening" the Rebbe with all these reports and letters. Earlier, the Rebbe had dismissed the concern, as he said in response to a 1983 letter: "Burden? It is a mistake. It is self-understood that it is not that way...And I wish many more would do the same (and send reports)."

A decade later, when Tzvi Meir expressed the same concern, the Rebbe replied, "A burden?! We know the parable of a package of precious gems, that it is not a burden to carry it. On the contrary, it is a (source of) satisfaction."[51]

■ ■ ■

BESIDES TEACHING AND lecturing, Tzvi Meir found another way to further the goals of Chabad. He became an enthusiastic guide to literary figures who came to visit the Rebbe. When the journalist Yehudah Nachshon, then editor of the Israeli daily, came to New York, Tzvi Meir showed him around.

"To my great delight, I met a Hebrew writer and poet who had come to Israel to publish a book of poetry," wrote Mr. Nachshon. "I never dreamed that I would meet him in his home in the United States and that I would enjoy his dedicated service, specifically when it comes to Chabad."

The poet would regularly converse with the Rebbe about his literary acquaintances, supplying their books and poems for context. One day, the conversation turned to the famed poet Zelda Schneurson-Mishkovsky, who was the Rebbe's cousin. The Rebbe told Tzvi Meir he had been twelve years old when she was born. "One day I came home from my studies, and to my surprise, I saw a new baby on the table."

At the time of the conversation, Mrs. Schneurson-Mishkovsky's husband was ill, and she had fallen into a period of gloom. Hoping to

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51 See Appendix, Excerpt VIII

cheer her, Tzvi Meir sent her an account of his conversation with the Rebbe, adding lightheartedly, "Since you were born in a home full of light—the home of the Rebbe—it is no surprise that you were granted the spirit of song."

She thanked Tzvi Meir for his letter "which came from far, far," before turning to her current situation. "It is very, very difficult. Poetry, I am also not writing. At times it seems that I am alone in the world, alone in quotation marks. The words of the Rebbe, may he live long, how he came from Cheder and he heard how I was born, it was a smile from a world where there is a sun, which is now closed to me. With wishes for a good year to you and your dearest ones, a year of peace without torment."

■ ■ ■

ON ONE OCCASION, the Rebbe asked Tzvi Meir for a favor: perhaps he could write a poem in honor of Zalman Shazar.[52] Shazar took great pride in his Chabad heritage and special relationship with the Rebbe.

On his first official visit to the United States, Shazar had insisted on visiting the Rebbe in 770 despite opposition from his staff and the media. A reporter wrote about their meeting, "This was the first time that I witnessed such deep love and endearment between two individuals." On several other occasions, (including Purim 1971) Shazar visited the Rebbe and spent several hours in *yechidus*. At the time of the Rebbe's request, Shazar was going through a difficult period. "Surely this (poem) will give him encouragement and joy," said the Rebbe.

Tzvi Meir wrote the poem. Decades later, the poet recalled how honored he had been by the request. "The Rebbe utilized every opportunity to remind me that he feels my poetry has worth."

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52 president of Israel from 1963-1973

Family Matters

LIKE ALL CHASSIDIM, Tzvi Meir shared the issues and problems as well as joys and *nachas* of his personal life with his Rebbe. An outstanding instance is, of course, Devora's miraculous recovery from her backache, which turned out to be a life-changing event in the family.

Over the years, Tzvi Meir turned to the Rebbe for advice and blessings in many other areas as well. He submitted *shidduchim* offers that came up for his daughters. He asked the Rebbe if his youngest daughter should make a final decision regarding a proposed *bachur* (Berel Tauber) she had met but a few times. (The Rebbe answered, "Why look further?")

He asked the Rebbe for a *brachah* for Devora's continued health, and that her work in Bikur Cholim should proceed without undue stress. He sought the Rebbe's advice about buying a house for his real estate business. Later, he asked for *brachos* for grandchildren's birthdays and bar mitzvahs. He described traveling to Portland, Maine, to attend the bar mitzvah celebration of his grandson Shlomo Yaffe, and recounted urging parents in the community to send their children away to learn Torah in a yeshiva as his own grandson had done.

He turned to the Rebbe for advice on the Torah education of his grandson, Berel Lazar, in Italy, where no regular yeshiva existed at the time. The Rebbe advised that after the requisite three hours of *limudei*

kodesh (Torah subjects) with his class, he should receive private tutoring in the company of one or two friends instead of staying on for secular studies. As for sitting and studying alone for the afternoon hours, the Rebbe crossed it out and wrote "or (go) to New York."[53]

On another occasion, Tzvi Meir proudly reported that his grandson Yanki Tauber, still a yeshiva student, had brought a Jewish family in an isolated Nova Scotia town close to *Yiddishkeit* and caused the whole family to become *baalei teshuvah*. He mentioned his grandson Berel Lazar, who, as a yeshiva student, had left such an impression on the people of Moscow that they missed him greatly and asked him to return.

■ ■ ■

WRITING LETTERS WAS, of course, not the only way Tzvi Meir connected to the Rebbe. At every milestone, birthday, and family celebration, there was the privilege of *yechidus* with the Rebbe.

Before the wedding of Esther, his youngest daughter, to Berel Tauber, both sets of parents and the *chosson* and *kallah* went into the Rebbe for *yechidus*. They also went to visit Rebbetzin Chana, as was customary, and it was just five weeks before she passed away.

Berel Tauber recalls Rebbetzin Chana telling Tzvi Meir about a miracle that occurred when she was traveling with the one-day Rebbe on a crowded train in 1927. She was accompanying her son to Leningrad. From there, he would travel to Riga to Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, his future father-in-law. Twenty years would pass before mother and son would see each other again. Antisemitism was so great, recounted Rebbetzin Chana, that a Jew was not safe in a train carriage in any case. Nevertheless, when it was time for *Shacharis*, her son put on his *tefillin*. His mother was terrified, lest he would be beaten or thrown off the

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53 See Appendix, Excerpt IX

moving train. Then an amazing thing happened. Several peasants got up and formed a circle around the Rebbe, and continued to stand guard over him until he finished davening and removed his *tefillin*.

It was not the first time that Tzvi Meir had an encounter with the Rebbe's mother. He told his daughter that he used to visit her and she would speak about "my son" with a mother's pride.

■ ■ ■

THERE WAS ANOTHER *yechidus* with the Rebbe that was not celebrating a happy event, but dealing with a family problem. It left a deep impression on Tzvi Meir, and he remembered it vividly. A niece of Devora and Tzvi Meir had grown up in luxury in South America and had strayed from her parents' strictly Orthodox lifestyle. It was not a complete surprise when the young woman announced that she was in love with a secular man. Nevertheless, her parents were devastated.

"Although the young man declared his willingness to become Torah observant," Tzvi Meir recalled, "the entire family, extended family, and circle of friends were united against the young woman's choice."

Her family's disapproval only strengthened her resolve. Finally, with the argument at an impasse, her parents decided to consult the Rebbe in faraway Brooklyn. Tzvi Meir became the family's ambassador, arranging a private audience for his niece and accompanying her to the meeting. At the time, the Rebbe was conducting audiences three nights a week, beginning in the late evening and continuing through the night. "We entered the Rebbe's room close to 3:00 a.m.," Tzvi Meir recalled. "First, the Rebbe and our niece conducted a brief search for a common language, trying Yiddish, Hebrew, English, and French, and finally settling on German."

The niece told her story. "I don't understand what they want of me," she said with great frustration. "My friend has promised to lead a Torah-true life. I know he is sincere. Why is everyone set against us?"

"He may be sincere," the Rebbe replied. "But what value is his declaration if he does not know what he is committing himself to? You know, legally, a signed blank check is worthless even if the holder fills it in with a single cent. One cannot obligate oneself without knowing what the obligation consists of. Living one's life in accordance with the Torah's precepts is most demanding and challenging for anyone, but it is even more difficult for someone who had not been raised this way."

She protested that her fiancé was willing to learn.

"Learning alone is not enough. One may study and accept Torah with the best of intentions, but applying it to day-to-day life is quite another matter. This is what I suggest: Let your friend live with a Torah-observant family for several months. Let him study, but let him also experience firsthand what such a commitment entails on a daily basis, from the *Modeh Ani* prayer upon opening one's eyes in the morning to the reading of the *Shema* before going to sleep. If he still declares his desire to lead a Torah-true life, I give my wholehearted blessing for your life together."

The young woman left the Rebbe's room with a light and joyful heart. Tzvi Meir remained to discuss several personal matters with the Rebbe. But the Rebbe immediately told him to call her back in. "I do not want her to think that we are talking about her behind her back. We are, anyway, not discussing any secrets that she cannot listen to."

The Rebbe's sensitivity left a deep impression on Tzvi Meir. "Although the issue had been resolved to her satisfaction, and she could, in any case, not understand the Yiddish in which we spoke, he refused to talk to me without her being present in the room."

■ ■ &

ON HIS BIRTHDAY, Tzvi Meir would focus on his own spiritual situation, giving the Rebbe an accounting of the past year and making resolutions for the future. When he turned seventy (in Nissan, 1985), Tzvi Meir wrote that he had wasted too much time on superficial matters. Henceforth, he would focus on more important things, such as writing poetry and teaching Torah. "This includes minimizing my time in business beyond what is necessary—G-d should assist me to fulfill this resolution."

The Rebbe thanked him for the good news. Human beings are travelers, wrote the Rebbe, with the ability to go from one place to another also in the realm of spirituality. Then, the Rebbe added a *brachah*:

"Since you are entering and taking an excursion (as discussed recently) at the beginning of your above birthday (until the age of eighty) 'in strength'[54] and after (another) ten years of (spiritual) strength—(until the age of ninety) *lasuach*—." The literal meaning of this word in the Mishnah is "stooped" but the Rebbe interpreted the word to another meaning of the same root letters to mean "verbalizing in prayer and Torah discourse."[55]

The family has pondered this blessing ever since. The first part of the *brachah* for ten years of strength, as he reached seventy and entered into his eighth decade was truly fulfilled. As for the next ten years—Tzvi Meir did live until ninety, but because of illness, not all of his last years were the way the Rebbe would have wished.

Nevertheless, through his enduring poetry, and his many descendants learning and teaching Torah, Tzvi Meir's influence continues, as the Rebbe had written, to inspire "prayer and Torah discourse."

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54 Avot 5:22

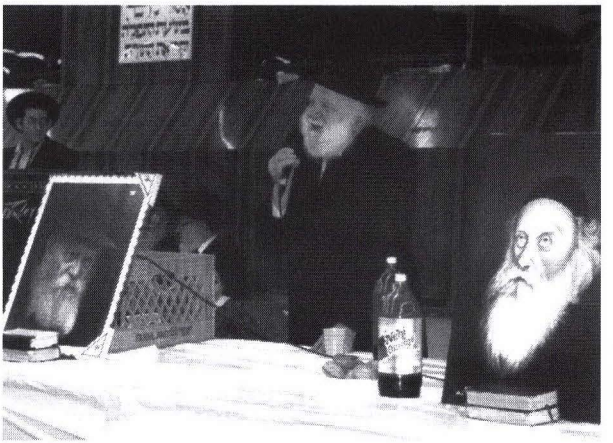
55 See Appendix, Excerpt X



With his eighth grade class in Ohel Moshe



Supporter of Chadrei Torah Ohr in Eretz Yisrael



Speaking in 770 on the occasion of Yud-Tes Kislev



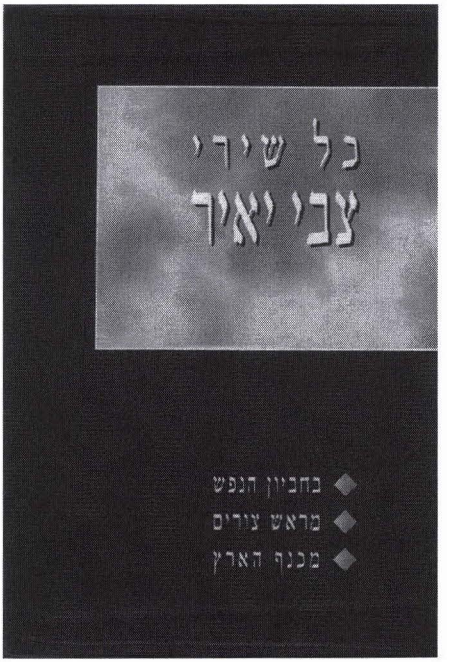
Discussing his poems with students in Eretz Yisrael



Speaking to a Chabad House audience



Discussion with young people at Chabad



The three-volume book of poetry under the pen name Tzvi Yair



At the Rebbe's Farbrengen



Dollars from the Rebbe



Devora asking a brachah for her birthday and the Bikur Cholim Tea



Kos shel Brachah

APPENDIX

THE REBBE'S ANSWERS

I. ALL ABOUT ELUL

צבי מאיר שטינמץ
(צבי יאיר)

H. STEINMETZ
1400 Flatbush Avenue
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11210

212 859-1400

בס"ד לגמח"ט

כ"ק אדמו"ר שליט"א

מצ"פ שיר "תפלה לשלהי אלול" שהופיע
בעתון "המודיע" בגליון ער"ש נצו"י .

השיר נכתב (עם קצת שינויים) בשנת תש"א ונדפס
בחוברת "גשרים" (קובץ השירים הראשון של הח"מ)
בטרם נגה אור חב"ד על יצירות רוחי....

צבי מאיר בן לאה גיטל

מענת הרבי:

השיר נתקבל לת"ח. כיון שבשלהי אלול (יום האחרון שבו) לובשים לבנים וכו' כי כבר זכו בדין ותוכן המצו"ב נהפך לזכיות כדאי שזה יתבטא בשיר חדש של יום יגמה"ר והשם יצליחו גם בזה - וע"ד הצחות: כשמו להאיר בשיר ובזריזות כצבי. אזכיר עה"צ חתימה וגמר חתימה טובה.

הרבי הורה למזכיר הריל"ג שיחפש את הרב צבי מאיר שטיינמץ בדחיפות וימסור לו את המענה בזריזות. **ומיד** הכין שיר חדש המתאים לתוכן י"ג מדות הרחמים והפיכת זדונות לזכיות והכניס את השיר להרבי ביום שישי בשעה 12:00 ערב שבת תשובה. וב12:15 חפש המזכיר את הנ"ל ומסר לו את המעטפה שעל גבה כתוב:

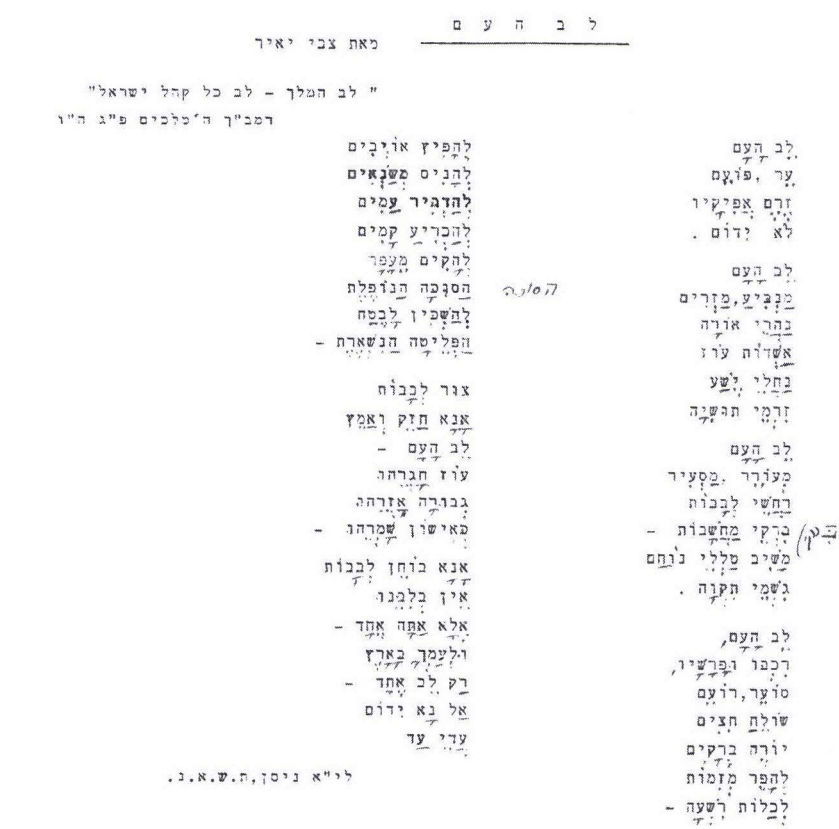
מדה כנגד מדה למסור בזריזות.

והמענה עצמו היה בזה"ל:

נתקבל ערש"ק ביום שמחתכם - אלו השבתות ובפרט ערש"ק שובה בהיותו קרוב אעה"צ חתימה וגמר חתימה טובה.

In answer to the presentation of the poem titled "Elul", the Rebbe urged the poet to write a new, more positive poem in time for "the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy". The Rebbe blesses him with success in all this, as is fitting for his name "to illuminate with song with the alacrity of a deer." The submission of the new poem was immediately acknowledged by the Rebbe with more blessing.

II. UPLIFTED



ל ב ה ע מ

מאת צבי יאיר

" לב המלך - לב כל קהל ישראל"
רמב"ן ה'כלכים פ"ג ה"ו

לֵב הָעָם
עֵר, פּוֹעֲמָם
זֶרֶם אֲפִיקָיו
לֹא יִדּוֹם.

לֵב הָעָם
מְנַגְּיַע, מְזָרִים
נַהֲרֵי אוֹרָה
אֲשֶׁרוֹת עֹז
בַּחֲלֵי יֶשַׁע
זִרְמֵי תִּשְׁיָה

לֵב הָעָם
מְעוֹרֵר, מַסְעִיר
רַחֲשֵׁי לְבָבוֹת
כְּרַקֵּי מַחֲשָׁבוֹת -
מַשִּׁיב שַׁלְלֵי נוֹחָם
נַשְׁמֵי תִּקְוָה.

לֵב הָעָם,
רַכְבּוֹ וּפָרָשָׁיו,
סוֹעֵר, רוֹעֵם
שׁוֹלֵחַ חִצִּים
יוֹרֶה בְּרָקִים
לְהָפֵר מְזִמּוֹת
לְכָלוֹת רִשְׁעָה -

לְהָפִיץ אוֹרָכִים
לְהָנִיס מְשַׂנְאִים
לְהַדְהִיר עַמִּים
לְהַכְרִיעַ קָמִים
לְהָקִים מַעֲפֶר
הַסְּנֻכָה הַנּוֹפֶלֶת
לְהַשְׁכִּין לְבָבָה
הַפְּלִיטָה הַנִּשְׁאֶרֶת -

צוּר לְבָבוֹת
אָנָא חַזֵּק וְאַמֵּץ
לֵב הָעָם -
עֹז חֶגְרָתָהּ
גְּבוּרָה אֲזָרָתָהּ
מָאִישׁוֹן שָׁמְרָתָהּ -

אָנָא בּוֹחֵן לְבָבוֹת
אֵין בִּלְבָבָנוּ
אֶלָּא אַתָּה אֶחָד -
וּלְעַמְּךָ בָּאָרֶץ
רַק לֵב אֶחָד -
אֵל נָא יִדּוֹם
עֲדֵי עַד

לי"א ניסן, ת.ש.א.נ.

מענת הרבי:

וכל המברך - וביחוד כשמצורף ומבורר ומתעלה בשיר וכפי' בדא"ח במאמר חז"ל כל בעלי השיר עולים וכו' - מתברך בברכותיו של הקב"ה המרובות על העיקר אזכיר על הציון.

In reply to Tzvi Meir's blessing, the Rebbe stated that all who bless will be blessed…especially when the person's blessing is accompanied and uplifted by a song. The Rebbe quoted a Mishnah which he interpreted, "All those who are poets, go out with their poems and are uplifted by their poems."

III. MOSHIACH'S SONG

בע"ה אור לש'ניסן,תשל"ה ,ו'לסדר"אש תמיד תוקד...לא תכבה"

אל כ"ק אדמו"ר שליט"א

לקראת יום י"א (ר"ח יום אורה) ניסן,תננו בזה למלא את ברכתו (וכנראה
גם מקודתו)של כ"ק אד"ש בנתנו לי אשתקד בער"ש מצת שמורה שלימה,לאמור:
כי המצה השלימה היא אות וסימן לקובץ שירים חדש בשנה המעלה.

ובכן,בנשיאת לב ורעד נפש ,אני מגיש בזה שי את קובץ השירים
הרצוף,אשר יוקדש בשעת הדפסתו בע"ה

ל (בע"ח) רועה אבן ישראל

בקידה והשתחוי'

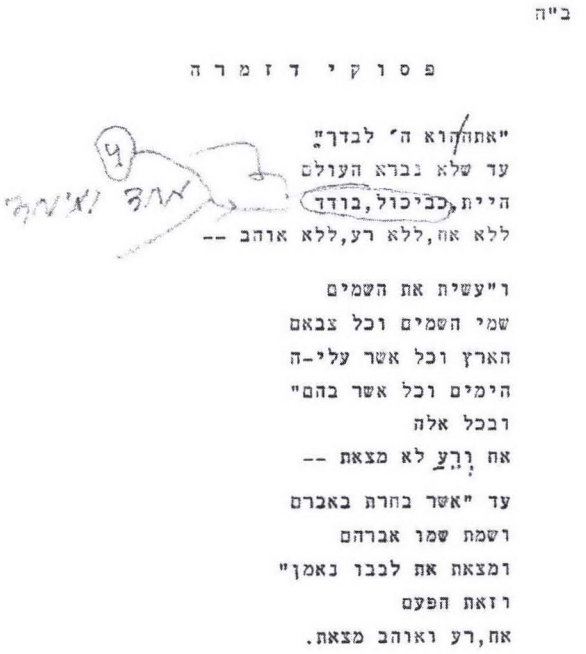
צבי מאיר בן לאה גישל

פיענוח הכתי"ק:

ז"ע נתקבל [קובץ השירים] ות"ח ת"ח (וכמובן - ודאי יו"ל כמו דע"ע).
וג"ז מזכיר ומעורר השייכות המיוחדת דחה"פ (וכתוצאה - גם ימי ההכנה דחג זה)
לשירה, ו(לאח"ז) ושיר - ל' זכר דוקא דלעת"ל וכנאמר בהגש"פ: ונאמר לפניו שיר
חדש. בב"א אכי"ר.

After thanking him for the selection of songs, the Rebbe's personal, handwritten reply connects the poem ("shir") to Pesach, which carries the them of song ("shirah"), and more specifically to the song of the future days, which is also referred to in the masculine: "And we will sing before Him a new song ('shir chadash')." Amen ken yehi ratzon.

IV. ONLY NOT LONELY



ב"ה

פ ס ו ק י ד ז מ ר ה

"אתהלוא ה' לבדך"
עד שלא נברא העולם
היית כביכול, בודד
ללא את, ללא רע, ללא אוהב --

ו"עשית את השמים
שמי השמים וכל צבאם
הארץ וכל אשר עלי-ה
הימים וכל אשר בהם"
ובכל אלה
את וְרֵעַ לא מצאת --

עד "אשר בחרת באברם
ושמת שמו אברהם
ומצאת את לבבו נאמן"
וזאת הפעם
את, רע ואוהב מצאת.

פיענוח הכתי"ק:

[הרבי מחק "כביכול, בודד" וכתב:] **יחיד ומיוחד**

In a rare case of editing one of Tzvi Meir's poem submissions, the Rebbe replaced the word "lonely" in regard to G-d with the words, "singular and distinctive."

V. TO SING IT

(ב)

ששופפה לעבודת מרת זיסל שתחי׳קליין מוטרדת מאד ממצב בריאותו של בעלה שיחי׳
הרי כל עומס העבודה השוטפת והיחוד עבודת הארגון של המכיבה השנתית שתתקיים
בעהי׳ת ביום פסח שני הבעל"ט מוטלת על צוארה ויהי א רצון שתהא בהצלחה.

והנה בצאתי אפיל תחנתי לפני כסא קדשו כי כאשר בעבר (במשך פעמיים "חי"שנים
שאני מסתופף בצל קדשו)הטה עלי חסדו חסד חנם וירם יד ימינו להוציא מים מלבע
האבן אשר בקרבי וירם מעפר דל וזרוע היא סמכתני, כן אל נא ישנני ולעת זקנה
אל יעזבני ויזכירני לטובה לברכה והצלחה לתורה ועבודה בלב זו תפלה וגמ"ח
ולתשובה שלימה ולפרנסה בהרחבה ולהרבצת תורה ויהדות והמעינות מחוץ שלות הנפש
ובריאות השלימה וליצירה ספרותית והפצתה להרבות כבוד שמים וכבוד אוהבי שמו...
ולאריכות ימים ושנים טובות כדי שאוכל לתקן את אשר פגמתי ולגרוך תמיד כל הימים
נחת ושמחה לכ"ק אבינו רועינו שלי"טא יומס יצו׳ה׳חסדו ובלילה שירה עמי תפלה
לא-ל חיי אכי"ר

עבדו

צבי מאיר בן לאה גיטל

מצ"פ אלף שקל למעמד פרסי לכ"ק אד"ש
שני שירים שהופיעו לאחרונה ב"כפר חב"ד"
ואני תפלה שיעלו לרצון לפני כ"ק אד"ש

מענת הרבי:

כל הנ"ל והמצו"ב נת' ות"ח ואזכיר על הציון לתוספת הצלחה בכ"ז ומתוך שמחה וט"ל ולחה"פ כו"ש.

[לאחר השם] **בתורה הכנה לתכלית כל שיר (לשיר) אותו בלי מרכאות.**

In reply to Tzvi Meir presenting the poem, "The Tree and the Rose", the Rebbe thanked him warmly for the poem and would mention it at the Tzion, with increased success in all the above with joy and a happy heart. (After the Rebbe's signature, added:) As a preparation for the purpose of every poem, to sing it without quotation marks.

VI. PARTIALLY PRAISED

והנה לא אמנע טוב מבעליו מלבשר לכ"ק בענין הפצה הפעילות בזמן האחרון:
הנה חזרת שיחות חקדש בביהכ"נ "חברה ש"ס" בעידן דרעוא דרעוין (באנגלית)
נמשכת בקהל הולך ורב.בפ'אמור השתתפו לערך חמשים איש,בפ'בהר-בחוקותי(בחזרת
שיחות הנדפסות) לערך שלשים מקשיבים.
ביום א' העבר נאמתי את נאום הזכרון באספת אזכרת לקדושי השואה של עיר ואם
בישראל אונגוואר (ה"ד)עירו של מהר"ם אש ורבי שלמה באנצפריד זצ"ל.דברי
ההספד וכבושין השאירו,לפי הנשמע,רושם עמוק. (השתתפו לערך מאתים איש ב"קוסטמי
סינאגוג" במנהטן.הנאום הי'באנגלית.
באור ליום ד'העבר הרציתי בחוג דוברי עברית (מיסודו של מר פיעמונטה) בעברית
על ערכי היהדות וכנראה התרשמו מאד ורוצים המשך.
ובשולי הירידה אבא כעני המתפך במנחתו,מנחת עני: בערב י"א ניסן הגשתי שי
את קובץ שירי מחדש "בין הבאים":עשרות ספרי קדש אשר עלו אז על שולחן המלך.
(בשער הספר : הקדשת כל הספר לשם כ"ק ובתוך המפרשירי "צבי לצדיק".בשיר
"פסוקי דזמרה "זכיתי להכניס המלים"יחיד ומיוחד"מעשו של כ"ק ואמנם את
ה"השתתפות" הזאת אני מחשיב להחישג הכי גדול שבכל הספר...
ואמנם לא אדע אם בכר הספיק כ"ק אד"ש להעיף עינו על תשורתי ,כי "לאו אנרחא
דמלכא לאשתעי במלין דחדיושא".ולאות לטובה על הפקת רצון קדשו עיני צופי-ה...

עבדו המבקש סליחתו על הלהג הר

המשך הר"ת:
נתתה ש מ ח ה ב ל ב י צבי מאיר בן לאה גיטל

הרב מ.בן ל.י.בן ח.ש.
(כסוף המלה"בן" כי זיכוי האב וזיכוי האם הם ענינים נפרדים)

מענת הרבי:

ויהא בשטומ"צ ומצורף לצדקה שם. ת"ח על הבשו"ט הנ"ל וכפשוט - על ספר השירים לי"א ניסן - ולא הארכתי במילים על דבר זה - ואפי' לא בקיצור - כי (כסיום מכתבו) "לאו אורחא דבר נש לאשתעי במילין דתושבחתא דילי'. ות"ח ת"ח על המצ"ב אזכיר על הציון

Tzvi Meir wrote that he was worried that he had not received a reply after submitting a book of poetry to the Rebbe. The Rebbe's reply: "It is self-understood—and I did not expound on it even briefly because...it is not the way of people to discuss words of praise about themselves; many thanks for the above."

VII. GIVING IS GETTING

והנה מכיוון שחג הגאולה חל השנה ביום ש"ק התלבשתי והסתפקתי אם הוראת כ"ק אדמו"ר
בשעתה על עדיפות הפצת התורה והמעינות על השתתפות בהתוועדות("כי זהו חייו")
שייכת גם להתוועדות של אחת בשנה כשל חג הגאולה ושאלתי לידידים והראו פנים
לכאן ולכאן --אולם הפצרת קבוצת נשי השכונה כי ארצה לפניהם בביתי הכנסת של
ישראל הצעיר בשבת הבאה ושבמרכז החרצאה יעמוד נושא י"ב י"ג תמוז והגדולות
והנפלאות של כ"ק האדמו"ר מהר"ש הגאולה נגב"מ זי"ע,שכמובן יהוו גם בריח התיכון
של שני השיעורים האחרים -- כל זה חכריע את הכף לשביחת שבתי בבל הרבור ואתמוך
יתידותי בהבשחה וברכה כ"ק אד"ש אשתקד כי "מחשבתו (ורצונו) של האדם ינחוהו
יביאוהו אל המקום אשר לבו חפץ ומתגעגע...
ולמען אשרלא אבא בידים ריקניות יורשה לי לצרף שיר חדש וגם חצלום של שני שירי
שהופיעו בהמודיע בירושלים. (הרהה' ר'שובי'שיחי'בלוי מיחס חשיבות מיוחדת
לחדירת משורר המכונה "חבדניק" לחוג קוראי המודיע הנפוץ מאד באה"ק.כמי
שהודיעו לי נלמדים השירים המופיעים בעתון הנ"ל בכמה מוסדות חנוך של "בית יעקב
השיר "רחף עמודי וכו' כתבתי תחת רושם שיחת חקדש של ליל הוש"ר לפני שנתיים
שהחרידה הלב בשוועה לגאולה ממצולות החלאות.
בצאתי אפיל תחנתי שבהפקד מקומי אל יפקד זכרוני ולא יגרע חלקי בהשפות הרבות
הנשפעות והנזכרות והנעשות ביום סגולה זה ואני מצדי אשתדל לעמוד הכן לקבל
חלק בחלק היושבים על הכלים ...

עבדו

צבי מאיר בן לאה גיטל

מענת הרבי המוזכר במכתב:

אדרבה זהו חייו וכמ"ש חז"ל שיותר ממה שבעה"ב עושה עם העני העני עושה עם בעה"ב. ויתירה מזו אמרז"ל שנשמה יורדת לעולם 70-80 שנה, והכל בכדי לעשות פעם א' טובה ליהודי.

In reply to whether he miss life-giving farbrengens to teach others Chassidus, the Rebbe says: "By all means, this is his life, as Chazal said: more than the benefactor does for the poor, the poor does for his benefactor. Even more, our Rabbis of blessed memory have said that a soul comes down into this world for 70-80 years, all in order to do a favor for another Jew."

VIII. NO TROUBLE

והנשים העומדים בתור לקבלת שקלי הצדקה ב ע ב ר י ת ו ב א נ ג ל י ת
בזה אחר זה, בתור הכנה לכניסתם לפני מאור פניו. (סיפר לי הרב מישאל שי'
ארנבייב, שלפי בקשתו קבלתי על עצמי המשימה הנ"ל, שכתוצאה מדברי התעוררות
שלי על מצות הנחת תפלין וכזיקת הישנות, נגשים אליו ומזמינים תפלין חדשות)

בבקשת סליחה על הטרחתי

עבדו
צבי מאיר בן לאה ניסל
דבורה בת פרומט מינדל

מענת הרבי:

...והטרחתו?!

ידוע המשל שמטען אבנים טובות אינו טרחה כי אם נח"ר וכו'

אזכיר על הציון

The reply to Tzvi Meir's apology for troubling the Rebbe with his frequent reports: "Trouble?! As the well-known parable states, carrying precious stones is not a burden, but a pleasure..."

לכתיבה וחתימה טובה
בע"ה ב'אלול,ב'לסדר שופטים,תשל"ח

אל כבוד קדושת אדמו"ר שליט"א

לפני רגעים אחדים צלצל אלי חתני הרב משה שי'בן פראדל ובקשני לשאול בשמו בעצת כ"ק אד"ש בנוגע למקום למודיו של בנו שלמה דוב פנחס שי' בן העניא יהודית שתחי',בשנת הלמודים הבעל"ט.

אם ישאר במילאנו בשנה הבע"ל (בכתה של ג' תלמידים לערך)אזי קיימות שתי אפשרויות,שאתן מקובלות על דעת הוריו ועל דעתו:
א) או שילמד ג'שעות ביום למודי קדש בכתה הנ"ל ויתר שש שעות הלמודים למודי חול כשאר התלמידים.
ב) או שאחרי שלש שעות למודי קדש ישב בדד ביתר שעות היום בלי מורה ובלי חבר.

אם מתוך שיקולים אלו או כיו"ב יתן כ"ק אד"ש איפוא הסכמתו וברכתו שנכדי שי'הנ"ל יגלה למקום תורה,אז תעלה השאלה: לאן ? לפריס הע"א או לניורק הע"א.וכמובן לא ראי זה כראי זה.

ומכיוון שהזמן קצר,נחלה פני כ"ק אד"ש להודיענו דעת קדשו.

עבדו המשתחו'אפים

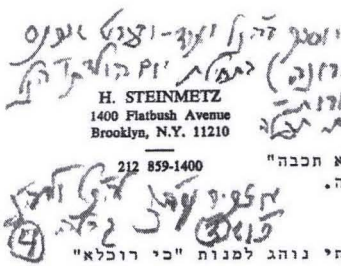
מענת הרבי:

קדימה (שילמוד ג' שעות ביום למודי קודש בכיתה הנ"ל)
(ויתר שש שעות הלימודים [הרבי מחק "למודי חול כשאר התלמידים" וכתב:])
ג"כ קודש עם עוד ב'-ג' אבל מלמד פרטי [הרבי מחק "או שאחרי שלש שעות למודי קדש ישב בדד ביתר שעות היום בלי"] **או לניורק**

אזכיר על הציון

Tzvi Meir asked the Rebbe where his grandson in Milan should continue his education, since the school provided only three hours of Torah studies daily. The Rebbe's answer: ***First.*** *(that he should learn three hours daily in the above mentioned class. As to the remaining six hours of class, the Rebbe crossed out "secular studies with the other students", and wrote)* ***also kodesh with 2 or 3 students, but with a private tutor.*** *(The Rebbe crossed out "or stay home alone after the three hours of Torah study")* ***or to New York.***

X. UNTIL NINETY



צבי מאיר שטינמץ
(צבי יאיר)

H. STEINMETZ
1400 Flatbush Avenue
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ב"ה אור ליום ג'ניסן,ב'לסדר "אש תמיד תוקד...לא תכבה"
ת.ש.מ.ה.

אל כ"ק אדמו"ר שליט"א

הנה מדי שנה בשנה בהגיע יום הולדתי,ה'ניסן,הייתי נוהג למנות "כי רוכלא" את פעולותי בשדה הפצת היהדות והמעיינות.אולם השנה הקדמתי ודוו"תתי לפני כמה שבועות על שעורי והרצאותי במשך חדשי החרף.גם ארבעת השעורים בבל-הרבור במשך חדשי הקיץ ומבצע "מצה שמורה" גלוים וידועים הם לפני כ"ק אד"ש.

והנה ביום ה'ניסן-יום ד'בשבת הבעל"ט -ימלאו לנ בעזהי"ת ובשטו"מצ שבעים שנה לאוויש"ט.(אני נמעם מתביים לבטא המספר..."שבעים שנה ורחבם...")

והנה לבקש הוראות והדרכות לרגלי התאריך המכריע הזה - לא יערב לבי,(ואם אזכה לכך -אשמח כמוצא שלל רב) כי הרי כ"ק יוצק עלינו שפע רב של הוראות והדרכות במשך התוועדויות והלוואי נזכה לקשרן על לוח לבנו.

אולם זאת נחתי אל לביכי הסבה למחדלי הרבים בנוגע ללמודים שונים וביחוד בשדה היצירה הספרותית (לדוגמא גמר והעתק יצירות שהותחלו)נעוצה בסלוף סולם העדיפויות כלומר פעולות שפלות נעשו צרות למשימות חשובות,ולא מדובר בהפצת המעיינות,אשר כ"ק מיחס להן חשיבות רבה,גם לא קיים חשש להעשות "ציבעלע"יותר ממה שאני כבר בלא"ה. אולם המדובר לדוגמא בקריאת עתונים וכתבי עת,שלכאורה הופך תועלת בידיעת המתרחש בעולם בכלל ובאה"ק ובמדינתנו במרס בעניינים הנוגעים לקיומו הרוחני והגשמי של כלל ישראל - אולם אין התועלה שווה ע"ת רוב בנזק הזמן.

אשר ע"כ החלטתי בל"נ על סף העשור השביעי לימי חיי להשתדל לצמצם העיסוק בדברים קלי הערך על חשבון גדולי הערך וגם למעט בעסק המסחר כפי היכולת כבחינת "ששת ימים תעשה מלאכה".והשי"ת יעזור לי לבצע החלטותי בשקול הדעת הנכון.

בצאתי אפיל תחנתי לפני הדום רגליו,כי כאשר בעבר השה אלי חסדו,חסד חנם,והרים מעפר ואשפות דל ואביון,כן יוסף נא עלי חן וחסד לפניו ויזכירני נא לטובה ולברכה ולבריאות השלימה ולתשובה שלימה מתוך שמחה ולבטחון ושלוות הנפש ולזכות ללמוד וללמד לשמור ולעשות מתוך הרחבה ולספלה בכוונה ובצבור ולפרנסה בריחב בנחת וברוח וליצירה ספרותית על פלגי האמונה השהורה ולזכות לגרום נח"ר לאבינו רועינו שליט"א עד כי יבוא מנחם לציון ועד בכלל אע"ג.

צבי מאיר בן לאה גיטל

מצ"ב אלף שקל למעמד פרטי לכ"ק אד"ש

נ.ב: אגב: בחזרת יהודה קדש בשבת פ' זכור השתתפו שלשה רופאים: הר"ר אקרמן הד"ר אורנשטיין יהידו (שהוא משתתללהכניסו תחת כנפי היהדות,הד"ר שלמה אשר הכהן שי'בן רחל ניופלד (רופא למחלות עור)המשתתף בחזרה תמידים כסדרן.גם העתונאי ר' ניסן שי'גורדון משתתף בכל שבת של התוועדות.ולה"ת אחוסמי ספסלי.

פיענוח הכתי"ק:

נת' ות"ח על הבשו"ט הנ"ל, כן יוסיף בהנ"ל ועוד - ובפרט שנכנס ויטייל - וכמדובר בזה לאחרונה) בתחילת יום הולדתו הנ"ל בגבורות - ולאחרי עשור הגבורות - לשוח (בעיקר) בשיחות תפלה ותורה כו' (1)

מנהגי [יום הולדת] (2)

אזכיר עה"צ להנ"ל ולחה"פ כו"ש (3)

קבלה (4)

In response to Tzvi Meir's resolution on his 70th birthday, the Rebbe thanked him for the good news in a handwritten reply, and added: "Human beings are travelers in the realm of spirituality. Since you are entering and taking an excursion at the beginning of your above birthday, (until 80 years) in strength. and after ten years of strength (until the age of ninety) to speak in tefilah and Torah study, (as per) the customs of a birthday, etc."

Acknowledgements

Numerous family members contributed to this tribute to "Zeidi Steinmetz".

Special mention is due to Rabbi Mendel Zalmanov, who researched the poet's voluminous correspondence with the Rebbe and meticulously transcribed the Rebbe's answers that are quoted in this book.

Many thanks to Pessi Stolik for editing the biography, and Chanie Winner for the cover and book design.

The grandchildren called him "*Zeidi*". He was the grandfather who played finger games with them as babies, invented funny nicknames and studied Torah with them as they grew older. As they matured, they discovered many facets to their white-bearded grandfather.

He was the survivor who saved his wife and daughters along with members of his extended family from the Nazis.

Raised as a *chassid* of the Rabbinical dynasties of Galitzia, he changed course in midlife and attached himself heart and soul to the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Inspired by the Rebbe's call to reach out to fellow Jews, he became a tireless lecturer, in America and Israel, speaking to groups big and small.

A new immigrant to the United States, he struggled to support his family, trying the import business, education, and more. Finally, he opened a Real Estate office, where, in partnership with his wife, he achieved economic security.

Throughout his life he wrote poetry in the stillness of the night, in moments stolen from his busy life. It mattered little if the poems were acclaimed by Israeli critics and intellectuals, or studied by children in religious schools, as long as he reached an audience.

He was the devoted husband of the beautiful, determined Devora, and a protective father, believing ahead of his time, that the education of girls was as important as that of boys.

After all the tribulations and accomplishments of his long life, he was above all, a proud father and grandfather. This book is dedicated, in his own words, to the grandchildren "who illuminate the world with the light of Torah."

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