



Transplanting THE WARMTH

FREE - FRIENDS OF REFUGEES
OF EASTERN EUROPE

לזכות
הילד חיים לוי יצחק שיחי'
לרגל יום הולדתו ט"ז אדר
יה"ר שיגדל לתורה לחופה ולמעשים
טובים מתוך בריאות נכונה ושפע בגו"ר
לנח"ר כ"ק אדמו"ר והוריו הי"ו



For over four decades, the Soviet Union had imprisoned the millions of Yidden within its borders. It was excruciatingly difficult to live a Jewish life and impossible to leave. Since the legendary escape known as the Eshalonen in 5707, the Iron Curtain was virtually impregnable and barely a handful of Yidden succeeded in leaving the accursed country.*

For years, the Rebbe remained in close contact with the Yidden there and constantly spoke of their plight publicly and bentedched them that they merit to leave imminently.

In the late 5720s the situation began to change. Through various secret channels of communication, the Rebbe instructed Russian Chassidim that the time was ripe to apply for exit visas from the USSR. To everyone's amazement, a steady stream of Yidden started immigrating to Eretz Yisroel and the United States.*

Their newfound freedom in the western world introduced a new set of challenges. Aside for the obvious difficulties of finding their bearings in a new and strange environment, these heroic Yidden who had sacrificed everything to be connected to Yiddishkeit behind the Iron Curtain were woefully uneducated in Yiddishkeit and since the regular Jewish educational systems at the time were not equipped to cater to them, the threat of assimilation was very real.

In 5729 the Rebbe charged a group of recently immigrated Russian bochorim with the mission of creating an organization that would translate the heroic self-sacrifice of Soviet Jewry into vibrant Jewish life in the free world.*

Following is the story of FREE - Friends of Refugees of Eastern Europe as told by Rabbis Meir and Hirshel Okunov.

“IN THE FULLEST MEASURE”

Rabbi Hirshel Okunov: I was born and raised in the Soviet Union during the darkest periods of Stalinist persecution. After the great escape of Lubavitcher Chassidim following World War II, the remaining Chassidim organized various underground communities with *yeshivos* and *chadarim* which served as resources for Jewish life for Jews across the Soviet Union.

Living in Samarkand during the 5720s*, my brother Meir and I learned in the underground Tomchei Temimim yeshiva there. At the time, there was a Soviet immigration policy known as “Reuniting Families”—families who can prove that they had relatives outside of the USSR would be granted permission to emigrate to be reunited with them.

In 5726*, after my mother passed away, my father Reb Dovid was unsure how to proceed. My mother’s sister Chaya Rubinstein lived in Eretz Yisroel and could serve as a good reason to immigrate there, but on the other hand, most of our family was still in the Soviet Union and it was doubtful the authorities would grant our family reunification with those relatives over the large extended family remaining in the USSR.

The question was posed to the Rebbe and my father received the following response.

I was happy to hear regards from you. Also happy to hear that an invitation was received to live together with relatives. I wish you much mazel. May it be Hashem’s will that all that you want should be fulfilled, with no difficulties and in the fullest measure... [signed] M. Zeidy

My father submitted a request for emigration and received the necessary permissions and documents with no trouble at all. The first part of



RABBI VELVEL NISENEVICH LEADS A FARBRENGEN AT THE OPENING OF A CENTER FOR REFUGEES FROM THE CAUCASUS, 5747.

LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASIDEI CHABAD

“...Happy to hear that an invitation was received to live together with relatives. I wish you much mazel... M. Zeidy.”

the Rebbe’s *bracha* had already been realized.

I was 19 years old at the time and Meir was 20. Both of us had previously received an exemption from military service, but one day after procuring the exit visas, a soldier showed up at our home with a summons for us to present ourselves for the military draft!

Although we were both home at the time, my father remembered the Rebbe’s *bracha* that our emigration will happen with no trouble “in the fullest measure,” so with a straight face he told the soldier that we no longer lived there and refused to sign the summons. Miraculously, the soldier accepted his explanation and left. We arrived in Eretz Yisroel days before the Six Day War began.

“AMERICA IS DIFFERENT”

Rabbi Meir Okunov: That first Tishrei of our freedom, 5728*, the Chassidim who had recently emigrated from Russia were invited to

spend the entire Tishrei by the Rebbe, with all of our travel expenses paid. At the end of Tishrei, I asked the Rebbe for permission to remain in 770 but was told to return to the yeshiva in Kfar Chabad for the time being. Six months later I joined the *kvutza* that arrived in 770 just before Pesach 5728* and have remained ever since.

In the spring of 5728* there was an uprising in Czechoslovakia and Soviet troops occupied the country. As part of the unfolding drama, thousands of Czechs fled the country and numerous Jewish families were settling in Brooklyn with relatives. A mother and two sons, one 14 years old and the second 11 years old, were staying with an uncle and both wanted to learn in yeshiva. Since they spoke only Russian and Czech and had absolutely no previous *chinuch*, none of the *yeshivos* in New York were willing to accept them.

It was in the winter of 5729* when the uncle showed up with his



RABBI HERSHEL OKUNOV RECEIVES KOS SHEL BRACHA.

two nephews at the Tzach office and asked that Lubavitch find a way to educate them. I was asked to serve as a translator for the two boys and they shared with me their sincere desire to learn Torah. Together with some of the other Russian *bochurim* and with the *hanhala's* permission, we arranged a space for them in the yeshiva dormitory and created a full day program to teach them Torah, starting with Aleph Beis and reciting simple *brachos*.

Shortly thereafter, a Hungarian boy, a Romanian boy, five Polish boys and several from the Carpathians joined our fledgling program and slowly but surely, the message went around that Lubavitch was the address to turn to for all Yiddishkeit matters pertaining to the new immigrants from Eastern

Europe, although there was no official organization dedicated to this purpose yet.

In the underground yeshiva in Samarkand, Reb Chaim Zalman Kozliner would teach us Gemara and he always told us that we need to dedicate time to learn with the younger bochurim. "What will you gain by learning more pages of Gemara when a younger bochur doesn't know basic halachos in Kitzur Shulchan Aruch?" he would say. Plus, we were painfully aware that of the millions of Yidden in the Soviet Union, only several hundred families had the good fortune of being connected to Torah and Mitzvos. We felt so lucky that we had an overwhelming urge to share it with others, but in Russia it was impossible.

When we came to America and had the opportunity to help our fellow Russian immigrants to learn more about Yiddishkeit and to do Mitzvos we grabbed the opportunity without asking permission or guidance or crafting any strategy. But the Rebbe envisioned the need for an official *mosad* to properly service the many tens of thousands of immigrants that would eventually come out.

Rabbi Hirshel Okunov: I returned to 770 for Tishrei 5729* and that summer, on 3 Av, I had my first birthday *yechidus*. After the Rebbe read my note he said to me, "Since there are many Yidden emigrating from the Soviet Union now, there is a need to create an organization that will cater to their spiritual needs."



STUDENTS IN THE FREE YESHIVA, 5737. ON THE ON THE LEFT IS REB YOSKE VOLOVIK, ON THE RIGHT IS RABBI LOZIK VILEINKIN, AT THE TOP IS RABBI VELVEL NISENEVITCH



RABBI ZALMAN SHIMON DWORKIN OFFICIATES AT THE WEDDING OF A RUSSIAN COUPLE.



REB VELVEL NISNEVICH SUPERVISES STUDENTS LEARNING AT THE YESHIVA, 5737.

I stood there with a blank expression as I was unsure of what this all meant for me.

The Rebbe continued with a smile. *“You are accustomed to the way things work ‘over there’ (in Russia) where everything is done in utmost secrecy. Here in America it is exactly the opposite. Everything must be done with the maximum publicity.”*

I understood that the Rebbe was giving me the mission of creating this

organization but I had no idea where to begin.

“Speak with Rabbi Hodakov and he will guide you.”

Rabbi Hodakov advised me to create two committees. One committee of activists should be comprised of newly immigrated Russian *bochurim* in 770 who would strategize and get the *peulos* done. The second committee should be comprised of Russian *yungerleit* who

still retained the *“Rusishe varemkeit”*—the warmth and passion of *mesiras nefesh* from their life in Russia—to deal with the finances of this new organization.

My brother Meir and I recruited Naftoli Estulin and Berl Chaskelevitch for the activist committee; the financial committee consisted of Reb Abba Pliskin, Reb Zalman Shagalov, Reb Refoel Wilshansky, and Reb Mottel Chein.

Not everything was smooth sailing and whenever I had an issue I would speak with Rabbi Hodakov who almost always told me to come back the next day for an answer. It was clear to me that he was reporting everything to the Rebbe and that all his instructions were coming from the Rebbe as well.

שלח את עמי - ויעבדוני!

Rabbi Meir Okunov: Shortly after our organization started to organize, Rabbi Hodakov called us in and said that while the many *peulos* are important, the time has come for the organization to have an official office where the fresh immigrants can come by and receive advice, financial help and encouragement. He told us to



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A LARGE CHANUKAH PARTY ORGANIZED BY FREE, 5738.

rent a space and that Merkos would pay the rent for the first while. We immediately rented an apartment at 711 Eastern Parkway and set up shop.

Rabbi Hirshel Okunov: Our first order of business was to create an official yeshiva for the Russian immigrants. The building at 711 Eastern Parkway served as a dormitory and a learning space for several dozen young men in that first year alone and there were several offices there as well.

In those years, the *hanhala* of Tomchei Temimim would have a *yechidus* with the Rebbe every month to discuss matters of the yeshiva and the *talmidim*. During one such *yechidus* in the winter of 5730* the Rebbe clarified the specific role this new yeshiva had.

Rabbi Elya Simpson shared with me that someone suggested that our yeshiva for Russians should operate under the auspices of Hadar Hatorah, since it served newcomers to the yeshiva setting in a similar fashion. The Rebbe rejected the idea since the approach to the Russian immigrants needed to be very different from that of Hadar Hatorah and instructed that the *hanhala* of Tomchei Temimim

“Continue working in the holy mosad Friends of Refugees,” and then the Rebbe smiled and said “or as others call it now—FREE.”

undertake a large portion of the financial burden and the rest of the budget would be covered by *anash* that had the *Rusishe Varemkeit*.

The Rebbe wanted it to be an independent branch of Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim and said, “This is connected to taking all of the Yidden out of the Soviet Union.”

I find it interesting to note that during those years there was a major movement for organizing demonstrations against the Soviets for their terrible emigration policies and the fact that millions of Jews were trapped behind the Iron Curtain. The Rebbe was vehemently opposed to these demonstrations. He spoke openly and forcefully against them on numerous occasions, pointing out that while many of the young people involved had good intentions, the strategy was flawed and the demonstrations were causing terrible trouble for the Russian Jews.

The slogan of these demonstrations was “*Shalach Es Ami — Let My People Go*” and the Rebbe pointed out that while the slogan was borrowed from the Torah, it omitted the most important part of the *possuk*: “*V’yaavduni — so that they [Bnei Yisroel] may serve me.*” Rescuing the Yidden from behind the Iron Curtain comes with the obligation to ensure that they are enabled to learn Torah and observe Mitzvos properly.

This new organization was created to do just that, to provide for the Yiddishkeit of these immigrants and a proper *chinuch* for their children.

Rabbi Meir Okunov: In those early years the Rebbe received lists of the newly arrived immigrants who were staying in hotels for a period of time. As I mentioned earlier, our overwhelming desire to help these Yidden motivated us to visit them without seeking specific guidance or advice. We spent almost every evening in these hotels meeting with them and

PROMINENT RABBONIM AND PHILANTHROPISTS WERE OFTEN HONORED TO SERVE AS THE SANDEK FOR A RUSSIAN JEW'S BRIS.



RABBI GERSHON MENDEL GARELIK SERVES AS SANDEK AT A BRIS.



COURTESY OF FREE

RABBI SHLOMO GALPERIN SPEAKING AT A CELEBRATION FOR FREE'S 85TH BRIS, 5735.



COURTESY OF FREE

RABBI SHOLOM CHARITONOV SERVES AS THE SANDEK AT A BRIS.



THE PUPA REBBE SERVES AS THE SANDEK AT A BRIS.



TO DATE, FREE HAS ARRANGED OVER 14,500 BRISSEIN FOR RUSSIAN IMMIGRANTS.



8 KISLEV 5751, CB HALBERSTAM VIA JEM 60396

RABBI MEIR OKUNOV BRINGS A GROUP OF RUSSIAN JEWS WHO RECENTLY HAD BRISIN TO THE REBBE FOR DOLLARS.

figuring out ways to help them get settled.

For example, someone who was a programmer in Russia had an extremely difficult time finding a job because the systems were different and he did not speak English. We put him in touch with a Lubavitcher owner of a company who hired him without payment to hang around the workplace to get a handle on how programming worked in America. Later when he was ready to get a job elsewhere, he was able to write on his resume that he worked in a previous company and wasn't just a "greener." For those who were tailors by trade we arranged sewing machines for them so they could start a business and other trades.

Obviously we worked very hard on arranging a proper *chinuch* for their children and provided them with

mezuzos and other *tashmishei kedusha* that they needed.

These visits turned out to be very time consuming and at one point I started wondering if it was the proper thing for me as a yeshiva *bochur* to do. When I was in *yechidus* for my birthday I asked the Rebbe about this and the Rebbe said to me that for these fresh immigrants an American or British *bochur* who doesn't speak Russian would have a very limited influence on them. It was crucial for me to continue this work, but it should be at designated times during the week and with the *hanhala's* permission.

Later, when I started dedicating half the day to teaching the Russian children, initially without anyone's specific permission, I eventually asked the Rebbe if it was right for me to sacrifice so much of my own learning for teaching and the Rebbe responded "ומתלמידי יותר מכולם" ("From your

students you can learn more than from anyone else").

THE NAME

Rabbi Meir Okunov: During those years the Rebbe called upon everyone to do everything within their power to help the fresh immigrants physically and spiritually. Mrs. Rosenbloom, the wife of Professor Paul Rosenbloom,¹ was an energetic activist and when she heard one of these *sichos* on the hookup, she wrote to the Rebbe that she would like to begin working diligently to help the new immigrants in every way possible. The Rebbe notified her that there was already a group of Lubavitchers working on these matters in an organized fashion and suggested we work together.

Rabbi Hirshel Okunov: I remember our first meeting with the Rosenblooms in their home. They lived on the Upper West Side



COURTESY OF FREE

A BAR MITZVA CELEBRATION IN CAMP FREE - GAN ISRAEL, LOCATED IN GAN ISRAEL, PARKSVILLE, NY.

SEATED L - R: RABBI GOROWITZ, RABBI, YEHOShUA KORF, RABBI ZALMEN AZIMOV, REB ABBA PLISKIN, REB ASHER SOSONKIN, REB DOVID OKUNOV. STANDING AT LEFT: RABBI ZALMAN SHAGALOV. STANDING AT TOP, THIRD FROM LEFT IS REB MEIR OKUNOV, FIFTH FROM LEFT IS RABBI MENDEL OKUNOV. TOP RIGHT IS RABBI SHLOMO GALPERIN, SECOND FORM RIGHT IS RABBI MOSHE CHAIM LEVIN, FOURTH FROM RIGHT IS RABBI YOSKE VOLOVIK.

of Manhattan and were very well connected in the New York Jewish establishment. Reb Zalman Shagalov suggested that Professor Rosenbloom serve as the honorary president of our organization and Mrs. Rosenbloom wrote up a protocol of that first meeting giving our organization the name “Society for Helping Russian Immigrants.”

Upon receiving the protocol, the Rebbe circled the name in a manner of deleting it and replaced it with “Friends of Refugees of Eastern Europe,” explaining that “friends” is a better term to use than “helping,” because when you commit to “helping,” nothing you do is ever enough, but when you are a “friend,” anything you do is most appreciated. Associating the organization with “refugees” instead of “immigrants” would resonate better and the Yidden we were charged to deal with were coming from all of Eastern Europe, not exclusively from Russia.

When I filled out grant forms, the line available for the organization’s name was often too short for the words “Friends of Refugees of Eastern Europe” so I started writing the acronym F.R.E.E., and that’s how we got our nickname.

In 5736*, when I was in *yechidus* before my wedding, the Rebbe instructed me to “continue working in the holy *mosad* Friends of Refugees,” and then smiled and said “or as others call it now—FREE.”

Rabbi Meir Okunov: In the original group of young men in our yeshiva there was a fellow from Ukraine who did not yet have a *bris*. After some time we were finally able to broach the subject and influenced him to have the *bris* and his parents to agree to it. We made arrangements with a mohel at Maimonides Hospital and the hospital scheduled the *bris* in a week’s time on a Thursday.

We notified the Rebbe that the *bris* would happen the next Thursday and asked for a *bracha* that it should be

successful. The Rebbe responded that delaying a *bris* is not a good idea, and in general there is a halachic problem doing a delayed *bris* on Thursday, because then the most painful day would be on Shabbos. Therefore, we must do everything within our power, even if it means paying a fortune, to do it as early as possible - at least one day earlier on Wednesday. *Baruch Hashem* we were able to arrange an earlier *bris* and it was the first of some 15,000 *brissim* we merited to facilitate over the coming years.

As the flow of immigrants increased, the demand for adult *brissim* skyrocketed and there was a long period of time that we were doing over 20 *brissim* a week. During the years the Rebbe gave dollars on Sundays we would bring the men who had a *bris* the previous week to the Rebbe, and it caused a tremendous *nachas ruach*.

Rabbi Hirshel Okunov: That first year, we arranged a Chanukah party in a large Young Israel shul in Brooklyn



FREE EVENT IN THE SUKKAH AT 770.

with around 200 Yidden in attendance. This huge success was reported in a newspaper and when we submitted a *duch* of the event together with photos and a copy of the newspaper article the Rebbe was very pleased.

For Pesach we were instructed to provide new dishes for the Russian immigrants and to make sure they all had food for Pesach. We recruited *bochurim* to *tovel* the dishes and to help the families *kasher* their homes for Pesach.

A short time before the summer, a venerable Chossid asked me if I was arranging for the Russian children to go to Camp Gan Yisroel. I told him that I did not have the money for their camp tuition and he advised me to send them anyway. "If you have the money, great. And if not..."

Following his advice, we arranged for a group of Russian children to join Gan Yisroel in Parksville that summer in a special program led by some of the Russian 770 *bochurim*, and this continued for many years.

Rabbi Meir Okunov: During the summer of 5734* there was a tremendous campaign of Mitzvah Tanks going to Manhattan every day to do *mivtzoim*. Mrs. Rosenbloom was disappointed that there was no official FREE tank, catering exclusively to Russian immigrants. She wrote to the Rebbe about this and the Rebbe responded to her that the *bochurim* of FREE were currently involved with camp, "and camp is a big tank."

Rabbi Hirshel Okunov: In 5733* we had a surplus in the budget and I asked the Rebbe which area of our programming we should invest in developing. The Rebbe instructed us to enlarge our publication department. We had already been publishing Jewish literature and paraphernalia in Russian for Yomim Tovim, but we now needed to think in broader terms. Thus began a new era in Russian language Jewish publication under the directorship of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Levin. Millions of these publications were distributed around the world, even in the USSR, and untold numbers

of Yidden were *niskarev* to Yiddishkeit as a result.

Rabbi Meir Okunov: Once, in the 5740s, a Russian woman did some work in the Rebbe's home and in conversation with the Rebbetzin shared that she was soon traveling back to Russia to visit a cousin. The Rebbetzin suggested that she go to FREE and take various Russian language brochures and booklets about Yiddishkeit to bring to her family back in Russia.

She came to us and we gave her copies of everything we had. As a tourist she was allowed to bring any type of literature with her to the USSR. Years later, a son of this woman's cousin emigrated from Russia and when he arrived in the US, he refused to eat non-Kosher food and sought out a yeshiva. He told us that he was educated and inspired by the booklets and brochures from FREE that his mother's cousin brought with her on her visit. Today he is a Lubavitcher *yungerman* living in Crown Heights.

An interesting anecdote of how the Rebbe viewed the work of FREE: Once, during the Three Weeks, we offered a certain *yungerman* a position at FREE. Although he was seriously considering accepting the job he did not want to give a final answer until after Tisha B'Av since it is not proper to start something new during the Three Weeks.

It was around the time of his birthday and when he was in *yechidus*, he included this job offer in his note to the Rebbe, explaining why he was delaying accepting the job. The Rebbe told him that the work of helping Russian Jews *bgashmiyus* and *bruchniyus* was started by the Frierdiker Rebbe many decades ago, so he is not starting anything new, and can accept the position even before Tisha B'Av.

Rabbi Hirshel Okunov: In 5731*, three families who had recently

immigrated to Eretz Yisroel from the Caucasus (a mountainous region in the eastern USSR) were being brought to the United States by HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and requested to settle in a *frum* community.

Rabbi Hodakov instructed me to find proper housing for these families in the Crown Heights area. Several months' rent would be provided by HIAS but everything else was on us.

"They need to have brand new furniture," he said. "If it's a family of three they need to have at least five chairs, in case visitors come to their home."

He advised me to shop for the furniture by wholesalers in order to get a better price, but under no circumstances was I to put used furniture in these homes. If there was a deficit, *mazkirus* would foot the bill for the new furniture.

When the apartments were all arranged and furnished, he asked me if the refrigerators work. "Be sure to fill the refrigerators with several days worth of food. These people are coming to these apartments straight from the airport and need to have something for those first few days."

Rabbi Hodakov also instructed me to hire a Russian speaker to be in the FREE office throughout the day so that when a Russian immigrant had an issue there would always be someone to listen to them. "If their problem can be solved, that is wonderful. But even if there is no solution in the office, just hearing someone out can make them feel alot better."

PERMANENT HOME

Rabbi Meir Okunov: In 5733* it became apparent that a permanent home was needed for FREE. After searching for suitable buildings in Crown Heights we settled on 1383 President Street. For many years the Kozlover Rebbe lived in that house and had a yeshiva/kolel there with a



COURTESY OF FREE

REB ITCHE MISHULOVIN WELCOMES A RUSSIAN FAMILY AT THE AIRPORT. THIS FAMILY WAS LATER REVEALED TO BE WORKING FOR THE KGB, REPORTING ON FREE'S ACTIVITIES.

Again the Rebbe hesitated and asked, "But it will reach them today?"



LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASIDEI CHABAD

PURIM 5738

large library of *sefarim*. In fact, the Rebbe would visit the building in the early years to peruse through, and at times even borrow, some of the *sefarim*.

We asked the Rebbe whether to purchase the building or not and the response was:

שייך לרב והיכולת שלכם

This is [a question] for a rav, and depends on your [financial] capabilities.

The first part of the answer was puzzling to us but when we approached Rabbi Zalman Shimon Dvorkin he understood the problem immediately.

Since there was a permanent *minyan* in that house for many years,

there was an issue with converting a Shul into simply the space of an organization, so he advised us to arrange a Shabbos *minyán* there.

Initially we had a *minyán* for the Russian Chassidim and eventually the many Russian immigrants settling in the area started attending and the davening was done in a way that would be more accommodating to them.

PURIM

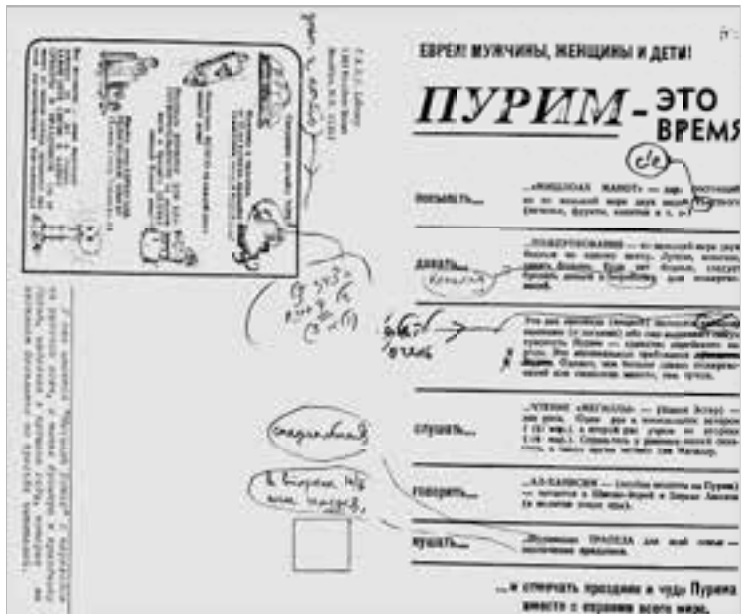
Rabbi Meir Okunov: Some time before Purim 5730* we submitted a *duch* to the Rebbe of the *peulos* we were doing and the the Rebbe responded to us:

ת"ח אזכיר על הציון. בטח פעולה מיוחדת בקשר לחג הפורים.

Many thanks, I will mention it at the Tziyun. Certainly you will arrange a special activity for Purim.

This was before the Rebbe had launched Mivtza Purim and shluchim at the time were not arranging grand Purim events. After some discussion, we decided to arrange a grand *seudah* for Russian families on the Sunday before Purim, with live music and entertainment. We arranged elaborate *mishloach manos* packages for them so that they would appreciate the gift and during the event we would explain the meaning of Purim and encourage them to properly observe the Purim mitzvos at the right time.

The Rebbe approved of the plan and instructed us to prepare a Russian language brochure about Purim to give out to the participants. This turned out to be a unique challenge since we had no idea where to find a Russian language typewriter. Through some of our acquaintances who worked at the offices of the *Novoye Russkoye Slovo*—the oldest Russian language newspaper in New York City—we were granted access to their typewriters and prepared the brochure.



BEFORE PURIM 5735, FREE PREPARED A BOOKLET ABOUT PURIM IN RUSSIAN, INCLUDING SICHOS AND LETTERS FROM THE REBBE ABOUT PURIM. THE REBBE RESPONDED THAT 1) IF POSSIBLE, THEY SHOULD GET TWO PEOPLE TO REVIEW IT, 2) TO ADD THE LAWS OF PURIM IN BRIEF. A BROCHURE WITH THE DINIM WAS PREPARED AND SENT TO THE REBBE. THE REBBE RESPONDED WITH THE FOLLOWING (SEE PICTURE):

הוגה, עכ"פ, המוכרח להחזיר אזכיר עה"צ

IT WAS EDITED [BY THE REBBE], AT LEAST IN A BASIC MANNER. SEND THIS BACK [TO THE PUBLISHERS]. I WILL MENTION THIS AT THE OHEL.



ONE OF THE PRE-PURIM PARTIES AT 770.



RABBI MEIR OKUNOV DISTRIBUTES FOOD PACKAGES FOR PESACH, CIRCA EARLY 5730S

In addition, the Rebbe said that the *mishloach manos* we had prepared for each family was too large and instructed us to separate them into two packages; the larger one as a gift for the family and the smaller one with instructions for them to use as *mishloach manos* to give to others.

The event was held in the Yeshiva of Crown Heights (now Beis Rivka) on Crown Street, and we had over 500 participants. The next year we moved to a larger hall and a year later we had no choice but to hold the event in 770. The large shul was emptied of all tables and benches and we set up a beautiful *seudah* with round tables from wall to wall. There were 1000 participants at this party. To my knowledge this was the first time such an event was held in 770 and we did it at least one other year as well.

During the event, the Rebbe entered the *ezras nashim* and gazed briefly at the proceedings with noticeable pleasure. The Rebbe then sent a package of dollars to be distributed to the participants on his behalf and instructed us to have a *minyan* for Mincha. At the conclusion of the *seudah* we set up a *mechitza*,

and although there were no Russian language *siddurim* and most of the participants were unable to daven, we guided them through answering “amen” and “Yehei shmei rabba,” as well as reciting some of the *tefillos*.

PESACH

Rabbi Meir Okunov: When the Russian immigrant community in Crown Heights started growing, we began hosting a public *seder* at FREE. From 5735* to 5741*, the Rebbe visited the public *seder* at FREE before conducting his own *seder*. We invested a lot of effort in beautifying the room where the *seder* was held and when the Rebbe arrived he walked through every room in the building. We did not expect the Rebbe to enter any of the other rooms and many of the lights were off, but the Rebbe wanted to see the entire building. When he reached the last room on the top floor he asked, “Is there anywhere else to look?”

Each year the Rebbe said a special *bracha* to the participants in Russian, always emphasizing that soon they will be reunited with their family and friends still back in “*yener lender*—those lands,” and many of the

participants *bentched* the Rebbe as well. The atmosphere was very joyful and warm and the feeling everyone felt that the Rebbe is a loving father was palpable in the room².

Rabbi Hirshel Okunov: In 5737* Pesach began on Motzei Shabbos and I was leading a public *seder* for Russians in Boston. Several days before Pesach, my wife and I went to Boston to prepare all the logistics and on Friday morning I flew back to New York to receive matzos from the Rebbe for the public *seder*. I arranged for an ambulance to drive me to the airport to catch a flight to Boston before Shabbos. When the Rebbe gave me the two pound package of matzah, I said that *anash* in Boston are requesting matzah from the Rebbe as well.

The Rebbe handed me another package of matzah but held on to the string and asked, “Will it reach them today?” I responded that I was on my way to the airport to catch the flight to Boston before Shabbos. Again the Rebbe hesitated and asked, “But it will reach them today?” I was unsure of how to respond but the Rebbe let go of the string and I hurried to catch my flight.

There was a traffic jam on Atlantic Avenue and I missed the flight by minutes. Left with no choice, I caught the next flight to Boston which landed before Shabbos but without sufficient time to reach my hotel by taxi. On the flight, I was sitting next to a journalist from the New York Times who was familiar with Lubavitch and he agreed to bring the two packages of matzah to my hotel. I made *simanim* on the packages and I walked several hours from the airport to the hotel.

Anash in Boston did not receive the Rebbe’s matzah for the first *seder* but on the first day of Yom Tov I walked to the Lubavitcher Shul and delivered the matzah, much to their delight.

Several years earlier, Reb Shlomo Galperin and I went to Manhattan

to lead a *seder* in the Lincoln Square Synagogue. When I received matzah for the *seder* on Erev Pesach, the Rebbe asked me how many *sedarim* would be held at the shul. I responded that the condition set forth by the Lincoln Square Synagogue was that we would host a *seder* only on the first night.

“A condition that is contrary to Shulchan Aruch is not a legitimate condition. See to it that there are two *sedarim*.”

Hours before Yom Tov there was no time to prepare anything for the second *seder* and we hoped that by rationing the first night we would be able to scrape together a second *seder*. However, such a large crowd joined us for the first night, that it was impossible to save anything. At the end of the *seder* I invited everyone to join us the next night at the same time and same place, but I had no idea how it was going to happen. There wasn't even any matzah or wine left over.

The next morning we visited all the surrounding shuls and made an appeal for *seder* provisions. We asked people to bring whatever they could spare for that night's public *seder* back to shul for Mincha and it was a major success. An equally large crowd joined us for the second *seder* and there was plenty of matzah, wine and food for all.

A SHUL IN BRIGHTON BEACH

Rabbi Hirshel Okunov: Each year on Sukkos we arranged a large *simchas beis hashoeva* event on the boardwalk in Brighton Beach. One year there were close to 5000 people in attendance and after the Rebbe saw the photo of the event we were told it is time to set up a permanent shul and community center in Brighton Beach for the thousands of Russian Yidden living there. Although there were many shuls in Brighton, the Rebbe explained that the Russians needed to have their own space and would not



A FREE EVENT AT THE HEBREW ALLIANCE SHUL, CIRCA 1950S.

COURTESY OF FREE



SIMCHAS BEIS HASHOEVA ON THE BRIGHTON BEACH BOARDWALK, EARLY 1950S. SOON AFTER, WITH THE REBBE'S CLOSE GUIDANCE, FREE ESTABLISHED ITSELF IN BRIGHTON BEACH.

COURTESY OF FREE

feel comfortable participating in the typical American shuls.

After unsuccessfully seeking a shul that would allow us to use their social hall to arrange a separate *minyán*, the Rebbe instructed us to search out a shul that was closing down and find ways to use it for this important purpose.

The Hebrew Alliance shul had been severely damaged in a fire and they were only using the small *beis medrash* for their Shabbos *minyanim*. We

offered to complete the renovations of the main shul and assume responsibility for the maintenance and utilities on condition that we be allowed to use it for a separate *minyán* for Russian Yidden and the longtime rav of the shul, Rabbi Dovid Hollander, was very supportive of the idea.

The new *minyán* became very popular and serves the Russian Jewish community in Brighton Beach until today.



REB DOVID OKUNOV, BOTTOM LEFT.

and sent to the front in Stalingrad. That pivotal battle proved to be the most deadly and Reb Dovid survived through many miracles which he attributed to the Frierdiker Rebbe's *bracha*.

Towards the end of the war he married Basya Rivka Zubarovsky in Tashkent and together they raised their children to be staunch Chassidim in Communist Russia. They were forced to send their children to the Communist schools but sacrificed everything to ensure they never went on Shabbos or Yom Tov. At the end of the school year many of the tests were held on Shabbos and Basya Rivka went to a local doctor to obtain a letter for her daughter to be exempt from school, due to the increased level of stress the exams were causing. The doctor refused to provide any such letter. This caused a tremendous heartbreak. On her way home she collapsed from heartbreak and passed away five days later, on Erev Shavuos, leaving behind a family of young orphans.

In 5727* the Okunov family emigrated to Eretz Yisroel and for Tishrei 5728* Reb Dovid finally merited to see the Rebbe. The organization Ezras Achim which did tremendous work on behalf of Soviet Jewry appealed to Reb Dovid to remain in America to serve as a model for their cause, to relieve the plight of Russian Jewry trapped behind the Iron Curtain and with the Rebbe's agreement he stayed until Shavuos. Only after he found a proper replacement did the Rebbe allow him to return to Eretz Yisroel where he ultimately found employment as a *mashgiach* in the Israeli Army and was extremely dedicated to the Rebbe's *mitzvoim* and many other Chabad *peulos*.

In 5737* he travelled to New York for his son Hirshel's wedding and the Rebbe instructed him to stay in



A MASS BAR MITZVA CELEBRATION IN THE LATE 5730S. SEATED THIRD FROM LEFT IS REB ABBA PLISKIN. STANDING AT RIGHT ARE RABBIS MENDEL OKUNOV, MOSHE CHAIM LEVIN, MEIR OKUNOV. FROM THE LEFT ARE RABBIS SHLOMO GALPERIN, ITCHE MISHULOVIN, LOZIK VILENKIN, ZALMAN SHAGALOV.

OHEL DOVID

Reb Dovid Okunov, known as Dovid Ramener, (the father of Rabbis Meir and Hirshel Okunov) was educated in the network of underground Yeshivos Tomchei Temimim that spanned the USSR in the early years of the Communist regime under the tutelage of many legendary Chassidim.

When he was called to the military draft he asked the Frierdiker Rebbe (who had already left Russia) how to dodge the draft and was told to claim his health problems with his eyes, "ובטח ישמיעני טוב" - certainly you will notify me of good things." He was exempt from military service during peacetime but told he would be called up in wartime. When Germany invaded the USSR, Dovid was drafted



8 TISHREI 5748, LEVI FREDIN VIA JEW13168

RABBI MEIR OKUNOV

America to find a shidduch for his daughter. He found employment as a *mechanech* in the Lubavitcher Yeshiva on Ocean Parkway and was instrumental in helping many weaker talmidim develop a *geshmak* in learning Torah.

In the early morning hours of Thursday, 4 Cheshvan 5740*, weeks before his daughter was to marry, tragedy struck. On his way to Shul, Reb Dovid was murdered on the streets of Crown Heights in cold blood.

The shock was felt throughout the world, and a few days later on Motzei Shabbos Parshas Noach, the Rebbe held a *farbrengen* and said a *maamar* with the *dibur hamaschil* וירח הוי' את ריחו הניחוח. The *maamar* discusses the idea of the *mesirus nefesh* of Yidden

throughout *galus* and in a voice choked with bitter tears the Rebbe referenced the most recent tragedy.

“How is it possible that after being in such a long and painful galus, it is not enough... and from time to time terrible things happen that have no explanation at all. The galus is so dark, to the point that these tragedies happen to Shluchei Mitzvah...” [Reb Dovid was on his way to Shul when he was murdered. -ed]

Towards the end of the *farbrengen* the Rebbe said that a yeshiva for immigrants from Eastern Europe should be established in his memory and concluded:

“Certainly this farbrengen and especially the new mosad will be a cause for tremendous nachas ruach and is connected to his aliyas haneshama, as he already finds himself in Gan Eden

together with Raboseinu Nesieinu... And this should all translate into revealed goodness here in this world... To the ultimate goodness when we will finally say about the entire galus אודך ה' כי אנפת בך.”

In accordance with the Rebbe's instructions to the family later on, new classes were organized for Russian immigrants in Lubavitcher Yeshiva, Oholei Torah and Beis Rivka under the auspices of FREE and the program was named Ohel Dovid. **T**

1. See *The Rebbe's Man in Mathematics*, Derher Adar 5781.
2. The *sichos* the Rebbe spoke in F.R.E.E. on the first nights of Pesach 5739, 5740 & 5741, were edited by the Rebbe, and published in Likkutei Sichos, vol. 17 pp. 461 and 464, and vol. 22, pp. 285-286. They are the only Russian language text in Likkutei Sichos.