

# The Great Exodus



*5732\* and the Russian Chassidim*





## This year marks 50 years since a fascinating period in Chabad: *The exodus of Russian Jewry.*

For close to 50 years, the Iron Curtain had been sealed shut. A small crack had opened for a short time after World War II, but afterwards almost no one had been able to leave. Millions of Jews lived there with no hope of ever reaching a free land.

For the hundreds of *anash* families that remained in Russia, the suffering was ten-fold. They desperately wanted to raise their children in the ways of Chassidus—but the government persecution continued without letup. The large network of underground *chinuch* institutions was not as strong as it had previously been. The thought of leaving Russia and uniting with the Rebbe seemed like a distant dream.

In 770, the plight of Russian Jews remained a constant presence. At every farbrengen, the Rebbe would mention the Russian Jews. Letters and instructions from “*Dyedushka*—grandfather” would secretly make their way into Russia.

And then, the unthinkable happened. The government began allowing families to leave. Beginning with a small trickle in 5726\*, the doors began opening even wider in 5730\*-5731\*. Soon, hundreds of *anash* families began arriving in Eretz Yisroel.

The Rebbe personally invited each immigrant to visit 770 at the Rebbe’s expense. Each Tishrei, a large group of new immigrants would arrive.

They became a feature of 770 life in those years. The Rebbe would exhibit great *kiruvim* towards them; at farbrengens the Rebbe would speak about their self-sacrifice and Russian *niggunim*—like *Ech Ti Ziemlak*—became a staple of farbrengens, led by the new immigrants.

The year 5732\* brought perhaps the largest such group of new immigrants, and the Rebbe showered them with attention.

A *Chassidisher Derher* sat with two of the Rebbe’s shlichim, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Zaltzman (Toronto) and Rabbi Moshe Chaim Levin (Kensington, NY). Both arrived to the Rebbe from the Soviet Union during that year as young *bochurim*—Rabbi Zaltzman for Tishrei and Rabbi Levin before Pesach—and they merited to live through those special times in 770.

We thank them for their fascinating interviews.

לע"נ  
הרה"ח השליח ר' חיים ב"ר שמואל גרשון ניסן ע"ה  
גורביץ

נפטר ביום ג' פ' ויקרא בעיצומו של "מבצע מצה"  
ג' ניסן ה'תשפ"א

נתרם ע"י בנו  
הרה"ת ר' רפאל דובער  
וזוגתו מרת רבקה ומשפחתם שיחיו  
גורביץ

## Before we begin discussing your time with the Rebbe, please tell us about your years in Russia.

**Rabbi Zaltzman:** I was born in 5716\* and grew up in Samarkand. We were an old Lubavitch family—my grandfather, Reb Avrohom, was a *Tomim* in Lubavitch. However, my father never saw the Rabbeim. He was born five years after the Friediker Rebbe left Russia.

Samarkand was unique in that it boasted a decent number of such *chassidishe* families. We had a warm, *chassidishe* culture that was unparalleled throughout the Soviet Union. My mother was from Moscow but when my parents got married my father insisted on bringing her to Samarkand because no place could possibly compete with its *chassidishe* environment.

Most children in *chassidishe* families were forced to attend the Russian public schools but my parents were adamant that their children would not attend, come what may. The authorities were told that I lived with my grandparents in Moscow, but that meant that I couldn't be seen in Samarkand. For the nine months of the school year, I would not venture out of my house at all; I couldn't even go close to the windows.

One of the elder Chassidim once berated my father for keeping me locked up at home. "He is going to go crazy!" But my father answered with a straight face, "Better a *kranker* (not healthy) *Yid* than a *gezunter* (healthy) *goy*."

I learned together with a small group of children for several hours a day. During the rest of the time, my mother would have to occupy me with cooking cholent and gefilte fish and all sorts of activities to ensure that I



REB MOSHE CHAIM (SECOND FROM THE RIGHT) AS A BOY IN MOSCOW IN 5725\*.

didn't begin climbing the walls out of boredom.

When I reached middle school age, it became easier to avoid enrollment and I was finally able to be in the sunlight. We had a small yeshiva—housed in the storage shed at the far end of our backyard—where we learned Torah and grew into genuine *chassidishe bochurim*. Some teachers were elder Chassidim who had seen the Rebbe Rashab, while others were simply *bochurim* a few years older than us.

## What was your level of connection to the Rebbe?

**Rabbi Levin:** I grew up in Moscow and Riga. We knew that there was a Rebbe in America, and in spirit, we were fully dedicated to the Rebbe's *inyanim*. Everything revolved around the Rebbe; every *farbrengen* was about our desire to see the Rebbe. However, we had very little knowledge about the Rebbe. There was one picture—the full portrait image of the Rebbe at a doorway holding a *siddur*, on his way to *siddur kiddushin*. It was carefully hidden away.

From the mid 5720s\*, Jewish tourists would occasionally arrive from America. It was dangerous to speak to them, but sometimes we would endanger ourselves to send messages to the Rebbe through them. I was once arrested for a short time while making contact with such a tourist.

We would ask them to send regards to the Rebbe, and sometimes we would send a bottle of *mashke* with them, upon which we would transcribe our names and mother's names. Many of these tourists ended up seeing the Rebbe and developing a connection to the Rebbe through us. If the tourist had seen the Rebbe, we would milk every piece of information from him.

We had an abundance of Chassidus *sefarim* which had been printed before the revolution; there were *genizos* full of them. But new material was hard to come by. Sometimes, relatives from America would send *maamarim* disguised within personal family letters—the letter would begin with regular pleasantries, and then randomly transition into a *maamar*.

At some point, a copy of Hayom Yom arrived in Russia. It was passed



from city to city, and we all copied the entire thing by hand. At some point we also received the first four volumes of Likkutei Sichos, and copied them by hand too. We also received two Nichoach records.

When I became a *bochur*, I traveled to learn in the yeshiva in Samarkand. There, we always farbrenged about our hope to one day see the Rebbe. However, it was not something that seemed possible.

**Rabbi Zaltzman:** When we would write to our cousins in America, we would sneak in questions for the Rebbe. When my father needed an operation and when my mother was expecting a child, they made sure to receive the Rebbe's *bracha*.

One Simchas Torah at our private *hakafos*, someone came over to me and told me secretly that he had *mashke* from the Rebbe. He gave me a sip on condition I didn't breathe a word about it to anyone.

When the first shliach—Reb Binyamin Katz—came to Russia, my father and uncle made a special trip to see him in Tashkent, and they brought back the niggun *Hoshia Es Amecha*.

We never imagined that we would actually manage to leave; we used to *bentch* each other that Moshiach should come and we should leave Russia—in that order. But I heard that the Rebbe said the opposite: A Chossid once said that “Moshiach should come so that the Russian Jews will be able to leave,” and the Rebbe responded that the opposite order would be more correct.

But by the time of my bar mitzvah in 5729\*, things started to change. My bar mitzvah farbrengen actually revolved around the fact that our neighbor Itche Mishulovin had received permission to leave. We were all very excited—and quite envious—that he would soon see the Rebbe.

## When did you leave Russia? What happened when you arrived in Eretz Yisroel?

**Rabbi Levin:** I remember three shluchim of the Rebbe coming to Russia: Rabbi Nissan Mindel, Rabbi Binyomin Katz, and Reb Gershon Ber Jacobson.

Rabbi Mindel's shlichus was top secret, and only a few Chassidim met with him against his will. Binyomin Katz, on the other hand, traveled throughout Russia and connected with a number of Chassidim<sup>1</sup>. But Reb Gershon Ber's visit was very special for our family. He brought the Rebbe's *bracha* which got us out of Russia, with open miracles.

We arrived in Eretz Yisroel on Rosh Chodesh Kislev 5732\*. Shortly after our arrival, my father took me on a visit to his old friend, Reb Velvel Zalmanov, and he had a special treat for us: He put on a record player and played a recording of the Rebbe's farbrengen. This was the first time I heard the Rebbe's voice.

**Rabbi Zaltzman:** We left Russia for Eretz Yisroel on 12 Av 5731\*, and settled in Nachlas Har Chabad.

I vividly remember the first time I heard the Rebbe's voice. It was Chof Av 5731\*. We woke up in the middle of the night, went to *mikveh* in Nachlah, and then traveled by bus to Kfar Chabad to hear the 3:30 a.m. hookup. The yeshiva was packed with *anash* from all over Eretz Yisroel.

Several weeks later, I heard that my father would be going to the Rebbe for Tishrei. I understood the prices were prohibitive, but I couldn't withhold myself from asking to go along; after all, we had wished all our lives to go to the Rebbe, and now I finally had the opportunity! In the end, Rabbi Hodakov called us all in after Simchas Torah and reimbursed us for the full cost of the trip.

## How was the experience of arriving at 770 and seeing the Rebbe?

**Rabbi Levin:** It was a very special moment—we had waited our entire lives for it!



REB YOSEF YITZCHAK ZALTZMAN WITH HIS FAMILY SHORTLY BEFORE LEAVING RUSSIA IN THE SUMMER OF 5731\*.

ZALTZMAN FAMILY



I arrived in 770 during Maariv on 7 Nissan 5732\*, together with the entire *kevutzah* of that year. I was 19 years old. We waited in the foyer, and when the door opened for the Rebbe to return to his room, I saw the Rebbe for the first time. I said *Shehecheyanu* out loud, and the Rebbe responded with *Amen* while looking closely at me.

I had an interesting story in the days that followed: I came down with a high fever; Yud-Alef Nissan was approaching, and missing the farbrengen was unthinkable, but Dr. Seligson told me to find a place to sit. I listened to his advice, but as the farbrengen progressed, I found it more and more difficult to remain.

But then I experienced a miracle. After the *maamar*, I said *l'chaim* to the Rebbe, and the Rebbe nodded his head at me—twice. Suddenly, I began to feel better. I quickly regained my strength, and by the next morning I was able to rejoin the *seider hayeshiva*.

**Rabbi Zaltzman:** Our flight to New York was through London, where we joined an entire charter of Chassidim going to 770. One of them was Reb Mendel Futerfas who had left Russia eight years earlier. He had stayed in our house in Samarkand and we knew him well. Needless to say, the entire trip was one long farbrengen.

We arrived in New York on Thursday, 26 Elul 5731\*, and the first time I saw the Rebbe was when he returned from the Ohel. All the new Russian immigrants made sure to be there, lining the walkway to 770 from both sides.

The Rebbe's car pulled up and I saw the Rebbe's holy image for the first time. The Rebbe was clearly in a hurry; he opened the door before the car stopped moving and began walking very quickly up the walkway. But then, some of us began to recite *Shehecheyanu*. The Rebbe slowed his pace considerably, and answered a



REB BEREL ZALTZMAN SINGING AT THE REBBE'S REQUEST AT THE FARBRENGEN OF 13 TISHREI 5736\*.

clear *Amen*. Then, he picked up his pace again and entered his room.

## What was it like to finally be by the Rebbe?

**Rabbi Zaltzman:** On our first Shabbos in 770, the *gabbaim* approached my father—a talented singer and *chazzan*—and asked him to lead Musaf. My father refused. He could not fathom davening in front of the Rebbe; it was a job for a *chassidische Yid*, and he did not feel worthy of it.

Seeing his persistence, Reb Mendel Futerfas came over to speak to him.

"I understand," he said, "why you feel uncomfortable. But imagine the *nachas* the Rebbe will have when a 35-year-old *yungerman* from Russia, born and bred after the Frierdiker Rebbe left, davens with the original *nusach* of Lubavitch as you learned it from your father. The Rebbe will definitely have a lot of *nachas*. Don't do it for yourself; do it for the Rebbe!"

My father agreed. I remember how he was trembling during the opening *kaddish* and even during the beginning of *chazaras hashatz*. Finally, during Kesser, he took a breath and began to sing beautifully. We noticed that the

Rebbe kept on glancing at him during his 'performance.'

Afterwards, Reb Mendel came over to my father.

"Ah! You should have seen the love in the Rebbe's eyes as he looked at you!"

Right after davening, we prepared for the farbrengen. Someone directed me to the *bochurim*'s place, and I nonchalantly took a place on the bench.

Soon, a *bochur* came over and said, "This is my place," so I moved back a little. Another *bochur* came with the same claim, and I moved again. I soon realized that there were set places and I would be left with nothing...

I asked them to give me some space as a new guest from Russia, but my request fell on deaf ears and they tried to casually move me back until I was almost off the bench. I held tightly onto a poll and didn't budge.

After the Rashi *sicha*, the Rebbe asked all the Russians to come up and receive *l'chaim*. After the adults received *mashke*, I went up as well.

The Rebbe asked me for my name, and I said, "Yosef Yitzchak."

"*Vos iz dein tzveiter nomen*—what is your second name?"



THE FIRST RECORD PRODUCED BY REB BEREL ZALTMAN SOON AFTER ARRIVING IN ERETZ YISROEL. THE REBBE REQUESTED HE MAKE THIS RECORD AND EVEN PARTICIPATED WITH SEVERAL THOUSAND DOLLARS.

I didn't understand what the Rebbe meant. The Rebbe smiled and said, "*Familye nomen.*"

"Zaltzman," I replied.

"The *shliach tzibbur* is your father?" the Rebbe asked, pointing at my father.

I nodded yes.

"*L'chaim v'livracha*," the Rebbe gave me *l'chaim*.

As I returned to my place, I realized that the *bochurim* had the opportunity to keep me out. But this time they were wiser, having seen that the Rebbe gave me *l'chaim*.

It was worth their while. The Rebbe then said two *sichos* in Russian, one for the men and one for the women, and I was able to translate it—to some extent—for them.

As a postscript to the story:

People overheard the Rebbe call my father "the *shliach tzibur*," and concluded that he must be *chazzan* on Rosh Hashanah as well. There were various *chazakos* for leading the davening in 770, but they made a raffle and Rabbi Yosef Wineberg was chosen to give my father his place as *chazzan* on the first day. Rabbi Wineberg was hesitant, and wrote to the Rebbe for a *bracha* that he not be harmed by breaking his custom. The Rebbe blessed him and it was all settled.

The *gabbaim* also took my father to the store to purchase a kapote. After all, in Russia we only wore short jackets to ensure that we blended into the population. Now my father became 'part of the crowd.'

On the first night of Rosh Hashanah, I heard that if I wanted a good place for *tekios*, I needed to come early in the morning and grab a place. I came the next morning and stood there for several hours, but before Shacharis, the *gabbai* announced that the Rebbe wanted the Russian guests to stand on the *bimah* during *tekios* together with him; we were about 35 people!

It was amazing. I stood right behind the Rebbe, and I needed to hold the crush of people from pushing into the Rebbe—it was a very small *bimah* at the time.

I remember hearing the Rebbe singing a *tenua* to himself. It was very intense. At one point, when the Rebbe threw his tallis over the *panim*, it fell all the way over his head. For a moment, I saw the Rebbe's hair, and it was literally sticking up like needles.

On Motzei Rosh Hashanah, the Rebbe asked my father to sing Russian *niggunim* during *kos shel bracha*. I was standing on the top row of the

bleachers when suddenly the *bochurim* pulled me out, "The Rebbe is speaking to you!"

The Rebbe was pointing to me; he said, "*Du bist doch mechuyav in kibud av, farvos helfst nisht dem tatte zingen*—you are obligated to honor your father, why don't you help him sing?"

I went to stand next to my father, and the Rebbe asked him with a smile, "*Er ken zingen*—can he sing?"

My father smiled and shrugged, so the Rebbe said, "*Yetzt iz doch bein hazmanim, nishto kein seder hayeshivah, kenst doch em lernen*—it is now vacation time and yeshiva is not in session, so you could teach him..."

**Rabbi Levin:** On Pesach, the Rebbe held a *farbrengen* on the first two days of Yom Tov, where he asked the Russian children to recite *Mah Nishtanah*. On the first day, it was a very small group, but on the second day, they already prepared a special platform, the *bimah* of *krias haTorah*, to hold all the children who had come to participate.

It was a very special moment. It seems to me that all the *farbrengens* that Pesach were in honor of the guests and the Rebbe was very *ufgeleigt* throughout.



REB MOSHE CHAIM LEVIN RECEIVING DOLLARS FROM THE REBBE AS A "TANKIST" ON 30 TISHREI 5736\*.

At one of the farbrengens, the Rebbe asked my father to sing a *niggun*. He began singing but the crowd didn't know the tune and didn't sing along. Surprised, my father looked at the crowd and blurted out, "This is Shloime der Geler's *niggun*!"

The Rebbe gave him a beautiful smile, and some people began to sing along.

I also remember another farbrengen where the Rebbe held an "auction"—over who had sat the longest in Soviet prisons.

People began raising their hands—three years, four years, five years, and so on. One Georgian Jew claimed the winning title with eight years, but the Rebbe told him in Russian, "But he sat longer," pointing at my father, who had been in prison for ten years of his life.

## What about yechidus? When did you go into the Rebbe's room for the first time?

**Rabbi Levin:** My first *yeichidus* was considered very long, lasting a full seven minutes. *Bochurim* usually went for one minute, but since it was my first *yeichidus*, I wrote my entire life-story, filling up almost two pages.

At that *yeichidus*, the Rebbe gave me a special instruction which I still fulfill today:

He instructed me—unprompted—to work with Russian youth. "*Ton un mashpia zein oif di vos zeinen arois mei'achorei masach habarzel vehamedinos hasmuchos la*—influence those who left from behind the Iron Curtain and the nearby countries." He repeated this instruction twice.

There used to be a day school for Russians in Crown Heights, and I began teaching there for an hour every day.

Then, at one farbrengen, the Rebbe said a sharp *sicha* that *bochurim* should learn and do nothing else. I got scared and asked *hanhalah* what I should do,

but they told me that the Rebbe was only referring to those doing activities without permission of *hanhalah*.

My parents also had a very interesting *yeichidus* during their first visit to the Rebbe.

The Rebbe first told them as follows:

הש"ת וועט אייך העלפן, און אייך דארף מען דאך ניט דערציילן אז ער טוט ניסים. דאס איז דא אין אמעריקע – דארף מען דערציילן אז הש"ת טוט ניסים.

"Hashem will help you. You don't need to be told that He does miracles. Here in America, people need to be told that Hashem does miracles."

My mother told the Rebbe that my father was dealing with a challenging situation ("א שווערע פּעקל אויפן הארצן"). The Rebbe turned to him with a smile and said,

"אויב איר האט א פּעקל אויפן הארצן, לאזט אים איבער דא."

"If you have a 'package' weighing down on your heart, leave it here."

He pointed to the corner, to the wall near the window, and added, "אלע לאזן דא איבער זייערע פּעקלאך. עס וועט קיינעם ניט שאטן. ס'וועט מיר אויך ניט שאטן. דא ווערט דאס צוריקן."

"Everyone leaves their 'packages' here. It won't hurt anyone. It won't hurt me either. Here they fall apart..."

The Rebbe asked my father where he wanted to settle down, but he didn't respond. He was hoping the Rebbe would choose. The Rebbe asked again, but he still remained quiet. When he asked a third time, he responded, "Wherever the Rebbe will say..."

The Rebbe said that since my grandmother hadn't seen her brother for 40 years, we should settle near him in Eretz Yisroel.

**Rabbi Zaltzman:** From the moment I stepped foot in New York, and even before, I understood that I wanted to remain near the Rebbe in yeshiva. I actually told my parents to buy me a one-way ticket—thereby saving them money—but my mother immediately

ruled out my brilliant idea. "You are 15 years old; you are coming home after Tishrei."

I didn't make a fuss, but I also did not give up on the idea.

After Rosh Hashanah, when Rabbi Hodakov spoke to us about *yeichidus*, I asked to enter alone, as I was already 15 years old. Rabbi Hodakov offered the day after Yom Kippur or the day after Simchas Torah, and I chose the earlier date; our trip back was only a few days after Simchas Torah, and I wanted more time to act.

On Yom Kippur morning, my friends Shmuel Notik and Yossel Misholovin—with whom I grew up in Samarkand—told me that Rabbi Shmuel Heber would be *farhering* them the next day for Morristown yeshiva. I decided to join them without telling my father, and by the next morning, I had been accepted into the yeshiva. But I still needed my father's permission.

That night was my *yeichidus*. Reb Mendel Futerfas and Reb Berke Chein told me to write about my entire life—all my experiences of *mesiras nefesh* in Russia, and so on. After writing it all out, I added a paragraph saying that I had been accepted into Morristown, and I asked for the Rebbe's agreement and blessing.

With just a few hours until my *yeichidus*, I sat down in the small *zal* to recite Tehillim. My father sat down next to me.

"Did you write your *tzetel yet*?" he asked me. "Can I see it?"

Now I was in trouble.

"Tatty," I said, "you could read the first page, but the second page is private, between me and the Rebbe."

My father, to my surprise, was very impressed. He proudly told his friends that his young son felt so connected to the Rebbe that he had matters which he shared only with the Rebbe and not with his own father.



Meanwhile, I waited near the Rebbe's room. The line got shorter and shorter, and soon it was my turn. I was obviously very nervous.

I walked in. The Rebbe was reading a letter; after a few moments, he placed the letter aside and looked up at me to take my letter.

The Rebbe placed it on the table and read it very quickly, moving his head back and forth. He made several notes with a pencil, and then he looked up at me to answer my questions in order.

"In merit of the *mesiras nefesh* of your parents for your education, Hashem should give you success in learning Torah with *hasmadah* and fulfilling mitzvos with *hiddur*."

That was the gist of the Rebbe's *bracha*. The Rebbe answered a question I had asked, and then he continued:

"Since the yeshiva in Morristown accepted you, may it be in a good and auspicious hour."

With that, the *yechidus* was over.

I began backing out of the room, but—facing the Rebbe—I couldn't find the doorknob. Rabbi Groner somehow realized, and he opened the door and pulled me out. My father was waiting anxiously outside the room. "What did the Rebbe say?"

"Tatty, I don't want to forget the Rebbe's words. Let me write them down."

I sat at a table and began writing out the Rebbe's answers with my father watching over my shoulder.

"Morristown? Accepted? What's going on?" My father asked in shock.

But with the Rebbe's *bracha* in my hand, he accepted it wholeheartedly. We called my mother to share the news with her, and she gave her blessing as well. That's how I had the *zechus* to remain near the Rebbe.

Afterwards, Reb Michoel Teitelbaum—who had been my father's teacher in Samarkand—reprimanded my father, claiming that Oholei Torah was a more *chassidishe* yeshiva. My father brought up the matter in his own *yechidus*, but the Rebbe brushed away his concerns.

"The *hanhalah* is the same in both yeshivos, and the *bochurim* are the same in both. But in Morristown, there is better air..."

## What was the Rebbe's *yachas* to the Russians? Did you feel special?

**Rabbi Levin:** We were a group of six Russian *bochurim* who came to New York as part of the *kevutze* from Eretz Yisroel for the duration of one year, but the Rebbe asked that special effort be made to obtain permission for the six of us to remain for an additional year.



REB YOSEF YITZCHAK ZALTZMAN (TOP RIGHT) AS A BACHUR IN 770 PARTICIPATING IN A "CHAZARA" OF THE REBBE'S FARBRENGEN.

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REB YOSEF YITZCHAK ZALTZMAN BY A "SUNDAY DOLLARS" ON 30 SHEVAT 5750\*.

This was meant to be a secret; we weren't supposed to know about it. We 'smelled' something after a half a year, when Reb Shlomo Zarchi warned us not to slack off on the *sedarim*, "because it would impact our future." That's when we realized that something was going on.

We remained for an extra half a year, from Nissan to the end of Elul 5733\*. Afterwards, they couldn't extend our permission, and we had

to return to Eretz Yisroel. We left for Eretz Yisroel shortly before Tishrei.

It was very disappointing. 5734\* was a *Shnas Hakhel*; large numbers of Chassidim were coming for Tishrei, while we were compelled to leave.

Before we left, the Rebbe called us all over at the farbrengen and gave us *mashke*, and on Sunday, we had a *yechidus* together. The Rebbe said to take the *mashke* to Eretz Yisroel, to hold farbrengens with the Russian *bochurim* learning in the various

Chabad yeshivos, and to repeat the Rebbe's *sichos*. If it was too difficult to go to all places together, we were to split up the locations. (I must note that those farbrengens were very impactful.)

I asked the Rebbe for a *bracha* to come back as soon as possible. Indeed, most of us managed to find our way back to New York within the next year.

**Rabbi Zaltzman:** Over that year and beyond, the Rebbe showed many beautiful *kiruvim* to the Russian

Jews. On Chanukah, the Rebbe sent *Chanukah gelt*—dollars—to all the *bochurim* in Morristown. But to the three Russians, myself included, the Rebbe gave silver dollars.

On the first night of Sukkos, there was an interesting occurrence.

I was told that all the Russians were gathering in *Gan Eden Hatachton* after Maariv to speak to the Rebbe. I obviously joined as well. The Rebbe noticed us as he came in and opened his hands in surprise, wondering what we were doing there.

Reb Yaakov Notik began talking. He said that we had never had the merit of participating in the Rebbe's farbrengen in the Sukkah, and asked that the Rebbe farbreng in the Sukkah once again.

I didn't know at the time, but there was a backstory. A year earlier, the Rebbe had ceased the farbrengens in the Sukkah when the crush of the crowds had simply become too dangerous. But the Chassidim had never lost hope, and they thought that perhaps the Rebbe would do it for the Russians.

As the Rebbe opened the door, he said, "*M'hot eich untergeshtelt*—you were set up..."

Sharply, the Rebbe asked, "*Ver vet nemen achrayus far pikuach nefesh? S'iz umeglich, s'iz a sakana*—Who will take responsibility for the *pikuach nefesh*? It's impossible, it's dangerous."

But before he entered the room, the Rebbe said, "*Ich vel nisht bleiben kein baal chov*—I won't remain in debt to you..."

Two special events followed: That Shabbos Chol Hamoed, the Rebbe came down to the big shul at eight o'clock in the morning to deliver a *maamar*. Additionally, on Motzei Shabbos Bereishis, the Rebbe held a special farbrengen to see off the guests..

Another very special thing happened during that month:

One day, we received a message: The Rebbe wants all the Russians to come into his room. When we all gathered in *Gan Eden Hatachton*, Rabbi Hodakov brought us in, and the Rebbe made a request. He asked us to visit Reb Moshe Feinstein and tell him about our lives in Russia.

"*Pravet nisht kein anivus; zog em vi der Shver's Chassidim hoben gelebt in Rusland*—Don't display any humility; tell him how the Friediker Rebbe's Chassidim lived in Russia."

Rabbi Klein and Rabbi Krinsky drove us to Reb Moshe's home. We gathered around his table, and he paid special attention to the three young *bochurim*, testing us in our learning. I remember that after I answered his question, he began to cry. I was frightened; I thought I insulted him. It took me a moment to realize that he was actually overcome with emotion seeing Jewish children from Russia who were proficient in Gemara, Rashi and Tosfos.

He turned to us and asked, "How did you manage to do it?"

Reb Yaakov Notik responded, "Did we have a choice?"

**Rabbi Levin:** On Erev Pesach, when the Rebbe distributed matzah, my father asked the Rebbe if he should send matzah to Russia.

The Rebbe said "Yes. To whom?"

My father said, "To our *yungeleit*." "To whom?"

My father began listing names of the *anash* in Riga, and the Rebbe said, "And for Yirmiyah [Branover] too? *Ich hob fun em bakumen a telegram*—I received a telegram from him."

Amazingly, he had sent a *mazal tov* telegram from Russia to the Rebbe in honor of Yud-Alef Nissan (he left Russia a year later).

On Erev Yom Kippur half a year later, I asked the Rebbe for *lekach* for the Russian Jews, and the Rebbe gave me three pieces. I soon realized that the Rebbe gave me an exact amount:

On Erev Pesach, my father had received four pieces for the four *anash* families living in Riga. Since then, one family had left, so I therefore received only three pieces.

**Wow! We can listen to your stories all day long! What do you have to share, in closing?**

**Rabbi Zaltzman:** When we lived in Russia, our hope was to be able to live as Chassidim in the free world, near the Rebbe. With Hashem's help, that wish came true. But as time passed, the initial excitement began to dissipate, and at the same time, I began to understand that in our generation, there was a far greater mission: *hafatzas hamaayanos*.

I quickly came to the conclusion that I wanted to be a part of the Rebbe's army. As a *bochur* I began working with Russian children in camp, and I hoped with all my heart that the Rebbe would allow me to become a shliach when the time came. Indeed, all of the *bochurim* from our group in Russia went into shlichus and *avodas hakodesh*.

I like to tell *bochurim* that our situation in Russia was very similar to our situation today. My father grew up in Russia without ever seeing the Rebbe, and he yet raised a beautiful *chassidishe* family. We knew next to nothing, only that we had a Rebbe, but that didn't stop us from being true *chassidishe bochurim* and *yungerleit*.

Today, despite not seeing the Rebbe, we have so much more. It is not an ideal situation, but it is also no excuse for us being anything less than perfect. **1**

1. See our interview with him, "A Crack in the Iron Curtain," *Derher* Adar 5775.