

REBBETZIN CHANA



FIRST-PERSON ENCOUNTERS

She stood on the corner watching. Every Shabbos she was there watching with a pleasant smile on her face. Many people walked by; young couples, children, and she watched them all. Some would walk up to her and wish her a good Shabbos. She greeted everyone, and she watched proudly. These are chassidim of her son; the Rebbe.

The Rebbe's mother, Rebbetzin Chana Schneerson, moved to New York after the *histalkus* of her husband Rav Levi Yitzchok. She traveled through Paris and was escorted by the Rebbe for the long overseas journey to America. Once in New York, she took up residence a few blocks away from the center of Lubavitch. Three years later, she watched her son rise to the *nesius*, becoming the leader of Chabad Lubavitch.

The seventeen years she spent in New York were a bittersweet time for Rebbetzin Chana. The Rebbe and Rebbetzin were her only family; her illustrious husband having passed away in Alma-Ata and of her other sons, one was murdered in the

Holocaust, and the other was living in England. She was very proud of her son, the Rebbe; happily witnessing the Chassidim's love for the Rebbe and the Rebbe's love for them.

[Rebbetzin Chana wrote many Memoirs during those years. A mix of memories and observances, these memoirs were recently discovered and published. This article is an attempt to collect a few stories and observances from those who came in contact with her during those years. We thank the "My Encounter" staff at JEM for graciously allowing us access to the interviews of key individuals while preparing this article.]

The pride Rebbetzin had for the Rebbe was evident. She would regularly attend farbrengens in 770, be present for davening, and attend many Lubavitch functions including N'shei Chabad Conventions and Lag Baomer Parades. The many people who knew her would tell of the pride she expressed at the accomplishments of her son, the Rebbe.



YOUR YOUNGER BROTHER

Some of these stories are told by the Junik Family. Rabbi Berel Junik and his family were very close with Rebbetzin Chana, a relationship that began in Russia. Rabbi Junik merited to serve in *Beis Harav* for many years. Interestingly enough, he and his wife Fruma met Rebbetzin Chana separately many years before their marriage.

After Horav Levi Yitzchok passed away, Rebbetzin Chana was living in Alma-Ata near the Raskin family who assisted her. The decision was made between the leaders of the Chassidic underground to try and help Rebbetzin Chana escape Russia and join her family in New York.

Rebbetzin Chana had to make the long convoluted trip from Alma-Ata to New York. Mrs. Sarah Katzelenbogen (Kazen) – affectionately known as “*Mumme Sarah*”, the sister of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Raskin, and a leader of the underground escape group, escorted the Rebbetzin on one leg of the trip while in Russia, even going so far as to distract the entire train-car of people so they wouldn’t think to talk to the lady in the corner. (This extra precaution needed to be taken, as the name Schneerson was a very dangerous name to bear).

Once in Levov, the border town, the escape organizers began working on sending the Rebbetzin out of Russia.

This is how they got Chassidim out of Russia during what became known as the ‘great escape of the *eshalonen*’:

After the war, the Soviet government agreed to allow Polish refugees to return to their homeland, also a communist country, and a satellite country of the USSR. Passports at that time did not have pictures and they didn’t stamp them with entry or exit visas. Therefore, the plan was straightforward. Bring used passports back into Russia and reuse them for another group of people. Chassidim were buying passports off the streets in Poland and using them to help train loads of Chassidim escape. (By some estimates each train could hold 500 people or more.)

The organizers would try to match the passports with families that had similar family sizes. If the original bearer of the passport was a father with two sons of certain ages, they would try to use it for an actual father with two sons whose ages matched the ones on the passport. In other instances they would combine or separate families, based on the passports, to maximize the number of people to escape Russia.

For Rebbetzin Chana, they arranged a passport of an elderly woman with a grown son. Looking for a son they chose a *bochur*, Berel Junik, because he was nice and *eidel*, and would be a good companion for the Rebbetzin on this journey. He and his sister, Etta Yurkowitz helped Rebbetzin Chana during the



long train ride. (Etta did not even know who Rebbetzin Chana was, she just saw an elder woman and helped her. Only later did she discover that she had been assisting the Rebbe's mother.)

The train-car was basically an animal transport car which was open to the sky. As they traveled, the smoke of the engines swirled around the passengers; not a very pleasant ride as you can imagine.

Because Rabbi Berel Junik came out of Russia using the passport as if he was the "son" of Rebbetzin Chana, both the Rebbe and Rebbetzin Chana referred to him as the Rebbe's "younger brother". Rebbetzin Chana once asked the Rebbe "*Vos macht dyn yunger bruder* - How is the younger brother doing?"

Mrs. Fruma Junik also met the Rebbetzin before they lived in America.



Once out of Russia, Rebbetzin Chana went to Poking, Germany and resided in a Displaced Persons camp for the refugees of the war, where a large percentage of the camp was Chabad Chassidim. From Poking she continued to Paris where the Rebbe came to escort her back to America. The Rebbe came in Adar 5707 and remained there until the American papers were obtained, which was not long after Shavuos.

While in Paris the Rebbe's mother was always treated with the greatest respect. Mrs. Fruma Junik met her there.

"I used to go to school, Schneerson's school. Like a kindler *Haym* (children's home) for the children of

the war. Some of our girls went there, not too many. Since it was Schneerson's building and Schneerson's school, I don't know why, but they chose me to be the spokesman for the school. So they gave me four pages. I learned them by heart and I delivered it in front of Rebbetzin Chana and the Rebbe.

"So I already had an acquaintance with Rebbetzin Chana over there."

In Paris the Rebbe would meet his mother every day. He would go with her on walks, always holding the door for her as she entered and exited buildings. One could see the great honor the Rebbe had for his mother.

APPRECIATE WHAT YOU HAVE

Although Rabbi Berel Junik came out of Russia together with Rebbetzin Chana, the papers needed to enter America were very hard to obtain. This is one of the reasons the Rebbe went to Paris, to speed up the process of acquiring papers for his mother. Reb Berel, however stayed and learned in Yeshiva in Brunoy until his papers were arranged and he came to America a few years later, in 5709.

When he arrived, the Rebbe told him that Rebbetzin Chana wanted to see him.

He went to visit her and this started a close relationship with the Rebbetzin. He would stop by to help her when she needed assistance, especially Erev Yom Tov. He would also visit on Friday nights and Yom Tov nights after shul. This continued even after he got married, and when his children were old enough, he would bring them along as well.

Rebbetzin Chana was very, very proud of the Rebbe. She once commented to Reb Berel "*איר ווייסט נישט וואס איר פארמאגט; איך זאג דאס נישט ווייל איך בין א מאמע נאר ווייל אזוי איז דאס* - You don't know what you have. I am not saying this because I am a mother, but because this is how it is."

THE BIGGEST NES

Mrs. Fradel Sudak also heard from the Rebbetzin how proud she was of the Rebbe. She first met Rebbetzin Chana as a young girl, when she came to New York from England to learn in seminary. There was a N'shei Chabad convention in Sivan, and the young English girl was chosen to deliver a report from London, thereby sharing the stage with Rebbetzin Chana who was sitting at the dais.

Her report was written for her by her father Rabbi Bentzion Shemtov. Included in the report were a few remarks discussing the Rebbe and the importance for Chassidim to connect him, and so on.

After the speech, Rebbetzin Chana approached her and said how much she enjoyed the speech and how she could "hear who is speaking through your speech". Rebbetzin Chana knew Reb Bentche from her time in Paris, as he had helped her immensely during her few months stay. Reb Bentche's family was still stranded in Russia leaving him available to help the Rebbetzin, and later the Rebbe when he came to join her in Paris.

Mrs. Sudak also had the merit of staying overnight with Rebbetzin Chana. There was another woman who usually stayed with her in her apartment so she wouldn't be alone. One Pesach, she wasn't able to be there for the first days of Yom Tov. Reb Bentche, hearing that Rebbetzin Chana wouldn't have anyone staying with her over Yom Tov, arranged for his daughter to sleep overnight in the apartment. On both *seder* nights, She picked her up from 770 after the *seder*, walked home with her and stayed the night, leaving the next morning.

Later, she visited Rebbetzin Chana as a *Kallah* together with her *Chosson*.

The Sudaks got married in London and stayed on as Shluchim. In those days, Shluchim to countries overseas were not allowed to come back to New York more than once every two years. When they came back to New York they made sure to visit Rebbetzin Chana, bringing their infant son Levi Yitzchak who was named after her husband (see side bar). She was very, very happy to see that they had given him the name, and she played with the child for a while.

During that same visit Rebbetzin Chana made a very interesting comment:

“דער רבי טוט אסאך ניסים, די שידוכים איז די גרעסטע נס”

The Rebbe makes a lot of *nissim*, but the biggest *nissim* are the *shidduchim*. These couples come from totally different backgrounds and the Rebbe makes their *shidduch*, and they are so happy together. That's the biggest *nes*.

ROYAL VISITS

As is well known the Rebbe would visit his mother every single day. Rebbetzin Chana would prepare herself for the Rebbe's visit by putting on her best dresses and clothes and a beautiful Sheitel. Sometimes the Rebbe would make tea, other times they would just talk.

What is less known is that the Rebbe would visit on Friday nights and they would go out for a walk. Crown Heights at the time was full of Yidden, most of whom were not Lubavitchers.

When they would see the Rebbe walking with his mother they would nod 'there goes the Rebbe'. Some would approach the Rebbe for a *brocha*.

REB BEREL JUNIK
RECEIVES LEKACH
FROM THE REBBE ON
EREV YOM KIPPUR.

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I RELY ON THE REBBE

Reb Berel arrived in America the week of Yud Shvat 5710, and had one of the last *yechidus* with the Frierdiker Rebbe along with a few other *bochurim*.

A few months later, on Vov Iyar he went to the Rebbe's room for *yechidus*. In those days one could walk up to the door of the room, knock, and the Rebbe would open. When he went inside the Rebbe asked him why he came, and he said that he is wished to have *yechidus*. The Rebbe began to cry, stood up, put on a *gartel*, closed the window shade and sat down for *yechidus*.

Berel put his *pan* on the table. The Rebbe told him “*A pan laiyygt nisht afen tishen; A pan (besser) git men in hant*” A *pan* you don't put out on the table, a *pan* you (should better) give by hand.”

This makes Reb Berel one of the first to be granted a *yechidus* by the Rebbe. He considered that day, Vov Iyar, to be his *Chassidische Yom Huledes* (in accordance with the *minhag* of Chassidim to consider the first time they visited the Rebbe as their Chassidische birthday, and he considered his first *yechidus* in that way).

Throughout the years, Chassidim would go into *yechidus* for their birthdays, usually in the few weeks before. As the amount of people grew and it was harder to fit everyone in, the one time a year when most people would have *yechidus* was near their birthdays. One time, years later, the Rebbe asked Reb Berel about his birthday as he had not been in *yechidus* for a long time. He answered that he considers Vov Iyar to be his *Chassidische yom huledes*. The Rebbe responded: “*Zolstu firren k'minhag Yom Huledes* – [if that's the case] you should follow the *minhagim* of *Yom Huledes* [on that day].”

His *eidelkeit*, and his respect for privacy and delicacy earned him the appreciation of *Beis Harav*. The Rebbetzin asked that he be the one to serve the Rebbe at the meals upstairs (in the Frierdiker Rebbe's apartment) and at the *farbrengens*; which he did until 5752.

The first Pesach, 5710, Reb Berel was serving the Rebbe and preparing for the *seder*, when the Rebbe asked him “Where is your *ka'ara*?”

“*Ich farluz zich af dem Rebben's ka'ara* – I am relying on the Rebbe's *ka'ara*” said Reb Berel.

The Rebbe replied, “*Oib men farluzt zich aif altz, ken men aif dos oich farluzzen zich* – If you rely on [me for] everything you can rely on this also”.

Reb Leibel Zisman recounted how he was stopped by the Rebbetzin during one of these walks. He had met her in Poking and had brought a letter from her to the Rebbe in America. Seeing him now, she stopped him and wanted to know how everything is doing, and how learning is going for him. He tried to make the conversation short and quick because he felt a bit uncomfortable as the Rebbe was standing right there and listening.

YOU'RE MY SON'S SHLIACH!

The pride Rebbetzin Chana took in the Rebbe extended to his shlichim as well. Rabbi Leibel Raskin was sent to Morocco as

one of the first shlichim of the Rebbe. As a faithful shliach, he would send detailed reports of his shlichus to the Rebbe every week.

Interestingly, his brother Reb Dovid began hearing stories of Shlichus in Morocco during his regular visits with Rebbetzin Chana. It seems that the Rebbe would tell her news from Morocco based on the reports that Reb Leibel was sending in.

When Reb Leibel came back to visit for the first time for Tishrei 5722, he went to visit Rebbetzin Chana. When he walked in, she rose from her chair exclaiming “*Vos macht ir* – How are you doing?” and she used the formal, respectful term for “you”. He immediately asked her, why are you using “*ir*” in conversation with a little boy? “*Vos ret ir* – what are you saying,” came the response, “you are a shliach of my son, the Rebbe.”

IN THE NAME

The Rebbe was very appreciative of those who named their children after members of his family.

When the Sudaks' first son was born they wanted to name him after the Rebbe's father, Rav Levi Yitzchak. Rabbi Nachman Sudak asked the Rebbe for permission. In addition to asking for *reshus*, he also wanted to know if it was okay to name the full name “Levi Yitzchak”. All the chassidim of the time named their children after the Frierdiker Rebbe. If he were to give the full name he would be precluding himself from giving the Frierdiker Rebbe's name, and so he wasn't sure if he should do so. The Rebbe gave him full permission.

Rabbi Hirshel Fogelman of Worcester, Massachusetts also named his son Levi Yitzchak. When Rabbi Fogelman next visited Crown Heights he saw Rebbetzin Chana in the street and he informed her that he had had a child and his name was Levi Yitzchak. The Rebbetzin smiled, “I know”, she said, “my son told me”.

At the N'shei Chabad Convention later that year Rebbetzin Chana saw Mrs. Rochel Fogelman. “Mazel tov,” she wished her, “how is Lev Itchikel doing?” And at the convention the next year, and the year after, the Rebbetzin again inquired after the little Levi Yitzchak.

Mrs. Fruma Junik had a son shortly after Pesach 5724. Reb Berel, her husband, wanted to give the name Meir Shlomo after Rebbetzin Chana's father, HoRav Meir Shlomo Yanovsky. No one had portable phones in those days so Mrs. Junik called Rebbetzin Chana from the hospital to ask permission. She was very happy. She mentioned that she didn't know if there was even someone named after her

father yet, and especially not a child here [in America that survived the war]. Reb Berel also mentioned it to her later that day. The Rebbetzin said she would get back to him the next day. Understandably, she asked the Rebbe in the interim, and the next day she gave her full permission.

When little Meir Shlomo was three months old his parents took him to visit Rebbetzin Chana, two months before she passed away. She was very excited to see them and fussed over the baby. They were heading out to the country and she asked them a few times to make sure that they would be careful to watch over him, keep him safe from the cold, and so on.

Fast forward twenty-three years. Meir Shlomo was getting married in Montreal, and he went into Gan Eden Hatachton on Motzei Shabbos to receive the Rebbe's *brocha* before leaving. On the way down the side stairs leading to the driveway, the Rebbe mentioned to Rabbi Leibel Groner “*Er veizt az er iz a nomen noch mayn zeyden* – Does he know he is named after my grandfather?”

The Rebbe then continued out to the car. Suddenly, the Rebbe came back in.

Rabbi Groner shouted to Meir Shlomo to come.

He ran down the stairs and stood on the last step. The Rebbe pointed to him with a big smile and said, “*Mistame veizt du, du bist a numen noch mayn zeyden* – most probably you know that you are named after my grandfather.”





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SUPERSEDING GREATNESS

Rabbi Shmuel Lew also merited meeting Rebbetzin Chana. It was in 5723, when he was given a package for Rebbetzin Chana by Rabbi Bentzion Shemtov in London. When he got to New York he asked Rabbi Dovid Raskin, the contact person for Rebbetzin Chana, if he should give the package to Rebbetzin Chana through him. Reb Dovid informed him that twice a year a group of elder Chassidim would visit the Rebbetzin and hold a small farbrengen, where they exchanged a few stories and a few Lechaims as well as *brochos* for the Rebbe. This would take place on Yud Aleph Nissan and Chof Av. He suggested that Rabbi Lew join them.

When he came to the farbrengen Rebbetzin Chana asked about Rabbi Shemtov, his in-laws, the Jaffes, and the general happenings in England. This developed into a close relationship and he began to visit her with his wife when they were in New York.

On Yud Aleph Nissan 5724 Rebbetzin Chana gave out liquor and everyone said *L'chaim*. She wished "*L'chaim*, it should be good for him, for the Rebbe." One of the elder chassidim said, "I know what you mean. Sometimes when one wants to give a *brocha* but they don't know what to specify they say 'it should be good'."

"That's not exactly what I meant," says the Rebbetzin, "I am wishing him a specific *brocha*, it should be good for him, he deserves it."

When Rabbi Lew visited the Rebbetzin on Chof Av of that same year, about seven weeks before Vov Tishrei, Rebbetzin Chana made a comment as they began to leave, "I've seen many great men in my day; my husband, my father. In our home both in my father's home and my husband's home there were many Rabbonim. But I never saw someone as great as my son. The most significant thing about him, is that he carries this greatness with such simplicity." **D**