



A Crack in the **IRON**

Special thanks to Rabbi Ezriel Chaikin,
Rabbi Binyomin Katz, Rabbi Gedaliya Korf,
Rabbi Shlomo Tzuntz, Rabbi Dovid Dubov,
Mrs. Rishe Deitch.

לעילוי נשמת הרה"ח הרה"ת ר' ברוך מרדכי ב"ר זלמן ע"ה ליפשיץ
הנק' מאטל דער שוחט פון מאסקווע
שהיה שו"ב ומוהל במאסקווע למעלה מ-25 שנה
נפטר ד' אדר שני ה'תשע"ד
לרגל יום ה'ארצייט' הראשון
נדפס ע"י נכדיו
הרה"ת ר' לוי יצחק וזוגתו נחמה איידל ומשפחתם שיחיו חזקלביץ'

CURTAIN

*The fateful mission
that produced the
first crack in the
iron curtain and
ignited a spark
of hope in
the gloomy
Russian night.*

WITH TORAH AND YIDDISHKEIT BANNED BY THE CRUEL COMMUNIST REGIME OF THE FORMER SOVIET UNION, AND DARKNESS AND DESPAIR REIGNED OVER AN ENTIRE REGION OF THE WORLD, THE REBBE, THROUGH HIS SHLUCHIM, HELD TOGETHER A CAREFULLY STRUCTURED JEWISH COMMUNITY. NEVER LOSING AN OPPORTUNITY TO STRENGTHEN AND SUPPORT ITS MEMBERS, MANY YOUNG SHLUCHIM WERE DISPATCHED THROUGHOUT THE YEARS, BRINGING WITH THEM THE MUCH-NEEDED SEFORIM AND TASHMISHEI KEDUSHA; AND ABOVE ALL, THE REBBE'S UNRELENTING MESSAGE OF ENCOURAGEMENT. IN THE FOLLOWING STORY, WE LEARN ABOUT ONE OF THE FIRST OF THESE MISSIONS, A YOUNG BOCHUR SENT TO RUSSIA ON A DAUNTING MISSION, AND ULTIMATELY PROVIDING MANY JEWISH FAMILIES WITH MEANS OF ESCAPE FROM THE LARGE COUNTRY-WIDE PRISON.

An expectant hush descended upon the crowd of Chassidim assembled at the Shavuot farbrengen of 5724. The Rebbe had just said *l'chaim* on a full *becher* following a *sicha* addressing the plight of the Russian Jews trapped behind the Iron Curtain. The quiet was suddenly pierced by the Rebbe's call; "Nu, Nu...!"

The Rebbe paused for a moment and then, making a hand motion which seemed to express immense dissatisfaction, he said:

"When dealing with a brother or a relative there would be no need to wait for my directive (to say *l'chaim*), but now, when speaking of a broader group of Yidden, nobody is moved!"

Immediately a few Chassidim raised their cups to say *l'chaim* but the Rebbe didn't even glance in their direction. Instead he said "You make *kiddush* on a full cup of *mashke*, but when it comes to saying

l'chaim for the Russian Jews, a small cup suffices...?!"

Needless to say, the Chassidim were speechless. Someone began to sing *Hoshia es amecha* but the Rebbe made a hand motion similar to before and began singing alone the *niggun Essen est zich*. When the Chassidim tried joining in, the Rebbe motioned with his hand once more and said:

"Tomorrow they will come with requests about sending visas to their relatives. But they should know that earlier, it was an auspicious time where a heartfelt *l'chaim* was to be said sincerely, with 'an *emmes*,' and a good word spoken while it's still yom tov. Great things can be accomplished through this for all the Jews of Russia and they can be redeemed in the blink of an eye. Yet nobody is moved to take action! The fact that there are millions of Jews suffering does not

bother them in the least! They think that they will accomplish something with their money..."

The Rebbe then continued to speak in anguish of the apathetic attitude and indifference towards the plight of the Russian Jews, using words that were extremely difficult for the Chassidim to hear. Many of those present couldn't even bear to look at the Rebbe as he spoke.

Afterwards, the Rebbe requested for a child under the age of bar mitzvah to begin the *niggun* of *Hoshia es amecha*, saying "The children cannot be blamed for this."

When the child began to sing, the Rebbe sang along with him. The Rebbe seemed to be in great *d'veikus* and the look on his face was frightening.

Reb Binyomin Katz was a *bochur* in 770 at the time and was present at this farbrengen. He relates the following:



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The Mission

Rabbi Katz continues his story:

Shortly thereafter, I was approached by Bentzion Shafran, a close friend of mine who was also learning in 770 at the time. After some small talk, he shared with me his thoughts on the Shavuot farbrengen. “Why did the Rebbe feel it necessary to speak about the Russian Jews with such a public display of emotion?” he wondered aloud. “Surely the Rebbe could have accomplished whatever he did from the privacy of his room. It seems as though the Rebbe was waiting for somebody in the crowd to internalize his holy words and heed the call for real action.” Turning to me he said “And I think the Rebbe was talking directly to you!”

At first I refused to believe such a far-out notion. Who was I that the Rebbe should be talking specifically to me? What could I possibly do to help the situation? But Bentzion didn’t let it go so fast. He had an acquaintance who was a businessman that travelled frequently to Russia. Apparently every town that he visited had one or two Jews who were the key figures and served as the unofficial leaders of the community. If someone was to travel to Russia and make a connection with these people, maybe he would be able to bring great assistance to these suffering communities. He thereupon withdrew a pile of photos of these Jews and showed them to me, one by one.

Knowing that he possessed a wild imagination and not yet quite sure what he was driving at, I still wasn’t taking him seriously.

He then proceeded to explain to me why I was the perfect candidate for this job. For starters, I was single. Such a trip was very risky and dangerous, and it



RABBI BINYOMIN KATZ

“After the farbrengen, the Rebbe davened *Maariv* and made *havdala* and then began to distribute *kos shel brocha*. I joined the line right behind a Chossid by the name of Reb Itche Churgin. He was an extremely devout Chossid who had a very unique and open connection to the Rebbe, who was *mekarev* him tremendously. When Reb Itche passed before the Rebbe to receive *kos shel*

brocha I heard him say ‘Rebbe, when I said *l’chaim* today I specifically had in mind the Yidden of Russia...’

“The Rebbe acknowledged that this was true but responded: “I was waiting for a *l’chaim* strong enough to shake heaven and earth!”

“Hearing this exchange, I understood that the Rebbe expected from the Chassidim much more than what had been done for the Russian Jews until that point. The Rebbe wanted us to move heaven and earth, not only to offer assistance to them in their dire situation but to do everything in our power to bring about their ultimate redemption from ‘the valley of tears.’

“There was no way I could have known how much a part of the next few years of my life these efforts were to become...”





THE SHLICHIM TO RUSSIA WOULD BRING THE LOCAL YIDDEN THE JOY OF TORAH AND YIDDISHKEIT.



wouldn't do to send a married man on such a mission. Also, the fact that I was an American boy would make it somewhat safer for me when dealing with authorities. Another advantage that I had was that by nature I was an introvert, and I was also not picky about my food. Both these traits would make it easier for me to endure the trip and all it would entail.

It seems as though he had thought of everything. Until this day I have no idea if he was sent by somebody or he approached me on his own initiative, but he definitely knew how to talk a person into something, and his power of persuasion was quite strong. I soon found myself swept into his words and slowly I became convinced that he was onto something.

A little while later I was slated to go in to *yechidus* for my birthday. Recently, *Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch* had been looking for a couple of *bochurim* to travel to Scandinavia on *Merkos shlichus* where the Rebbe's shliach, Reb Ezriel Chaikin, was in desperate need of extra hands to service the outlying communities. It seemed as though I would be chosen and I planned on asking the Rebbe about it during my *yechidus*. As I was waiting for my turn, Bentzion Shafran came over

to me and showed me a map of Europe. "Look here," he said, pointing to the space between Russia and Finland. "It's a five hour train ride from Copenhagen to Leningrad. Why don't you show this to the Rebbe in *yechidus*?" Slipping the map into my hand, he walked away.

Indeed, the Rebbe directed me to travel to Scandinavia but stressed that I should go alone and that the Jewish community should sponsor the trips. The Rebbe told me to heed the instructions of Rabi Chaikin very carefully and to send a report every single week.

Before the Rebbe gave me the *brocha* one customarily received for his birthday, I pulled out the map Bentzion had given

THE REBBE LOOKED TOWARDS THE WINDOWS ON HIS RIGHT AND AFTER A MOMENT SAID THAT BECAUSE THE SITUATION IN RUSSIA IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE FROM ONE DAY TO ANOTHER, I WOULD HAVE TO WAIT AND SEE.

me moments earlier and showed it to the Rebbe, proposing that following the completion of my *shlichus* in Scandinavia I would travel to Russia. The Rebbe smiled and asked me what I planned to do there. I replied that I was ready to do whatever the Rebbe would ask of me.

The Rebbe looked towards the windows on his right and after a moment said that because the situation in Russia is subject to change from one day to another, I would have to wait and see. As of now, the Rebbe said, I was to completely immerse myself in fulfilling my *shlichus* in Copenhagen and not to think of anything else.

Shortly thereafter I traveled to Copenhagen. After a few months of intensive *hafatza* I was ready to return to New York, but Rabbi Chaikin called and begged me to stay in Copenhagen for Tishrei. The community needed a *chazzan*, a *baal koreh*, *baal tokea*, and everything in between. I told him that there was no way I was going to miss out being by the Rebbe for Tishrei but after he let me know that he had misplaced my return ticket to New York, I knew I was fighting a lost battle.

During my stay in Copenhagen, the Rebbe's mother was *nistalek* on Vov



RABBI EZRIEL CHAIKIN

Tishrei and I sent the Rebbe a telegram. Shortly thereafter I received a telegram back informing me that I would be going to Russia in the near future and that much preparation would have to be made.

These preparations began after Simchas Torah. Rabbi Chaikin was in touch with Rabbi Hodakov and relayed various instructions to me from headquarters. Every detail of the trip, including the cities I was to visit, hotels, and transportation, was to be arranged and paid for beforehand through an official tourist agency. I was to give off the impression of a spoiled rich American boy on a world tour, with the next stop being Australia. It was important that I would not be identified as a Lubavitcher Chossid. I therefore memorized

Verdict of a Beis Din

The farbrengen of Simchas Torah 5722, was a most memorable time in 770. During one of the sichos the Rebbe blessed the Jews behind the Iron Curtain to merit revealed good and be able to leave the USSR immediately.

After saying *l'chaim* and singing a *nigun*, the Rebbe went on to say:

Chassidus translates the *possuk Kein bakodesh chazisicha* to mean that we aspire to have the same longing to Hashem while in the “holy domains” as we would in a desolate land, devoid of spirituality. Applying the concept to this situation, we wish for ourselves to have the same yearning for Torah and spirituality as our brethren behind the Iron Curtain do.

With that, the Rebbe began to sing the *nigun* of *Tzomo L'cho Nafshi*, and then asked that the crowd sing *Hoshia Es Amecha*.

When the song finished, the Rebbe stood up in his place and began to speak with great fervor:

“When the (Frierdiker) Rebbe was given a *pan*, he said that since there was a *minyán* present, the group has the authority of a *beis din*, to whom Hashem has granted the power to decide what is to happen in the world. Whatever the verdict given by the *beis din* here below may be, it must also be obeyed by the *beis din* above. Hence, everything requested in the *pan* must be fulfilled.

“Because there is a *minyán* present now, and much more so, we must declare that all negative things be converted to goodness. And although Hashem takes pleasure when the Jewish people act with self-sacrifice in trying times, He will be “forced” to follow our verdict to give all the Jewish people only revealed good.

“Starting with the Jews behind the Iron Curtain; even before Moshiach’s arrival, they should be redeemed from their captivity, and be allowed to observe Torah and mitzvos openly. May they have their own personal redemption, and through that, the ultimate redemption will come about for the entire Jewish nation!”

all the names of the *roshei yeshiva* in *Torah Vadaas* in case I needed proof that I learnt there. I was not meant to have any obvious contact with anybody, especially Chassidim, for that would put both them and me in danger. In general, the less information I possessed, the safer I would be.

My primary assignment was to simply sit in a public place where Yidden congregate, namely a shul, and to quietly and carefully collect family names. International law stipulated that a request for an exit visa received from an overseas relative was not allowed to be turned down by the government. I was therefore to memorize these names and bring them out of Russia with me so that their relatives can be located and instructed to

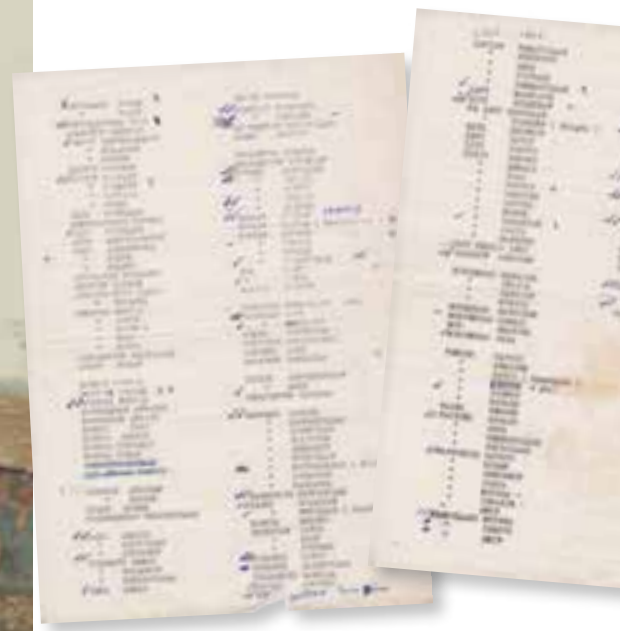
request visas for them. In this way many people would hopefully manage to escape the Soviet chokehold.

There was another purpose in my trip. Recently a delegation of American rabbis made an official visit to the USSR and their external appearance gave Soviet Jewry the impression that authentic religious life in the western world was on the decline. My presence as a *frum* bearded young man would surely lift their spirits. I was to always bear in mind that sitting in my hotel room was just like lounging around back in Crown Heights. I was on the Rebbe’s *shlichus* only as long as I spent time in the local shul.

The preparations took a considerable amount of time but finally everything



BUILDING THE MIKVA IN THE MARINA ROSCHA SHUL IN MOSCOW.



A SECRET LIST OF JEWISH FAMILIES IN RUSSIA FOR THE SHLUCHIM TO MAKE CONTACT WITH.

was pulled together. I was designated to visit a handful of Russian cities, including Moscow, Tbilisi (Georgia), Riga, Odessa, Lvov, and Leningrad. Tashkent was specifically not included in the official travel plans but I was told that if I could somehow manage to arrange a spontaneous visit on the way, I should do so. I bought along the necessary clothing for the three month journey and stocked up on matzos for kiddush and *lechem mishne*, plenty of hard cheese from Denmark, jam, and sausages. This was to be my fare for the next three months. To prepare myself for the lack of food (and to give an appearance of a wealthy, healthy American), I put on large amounts of weight, all of which I shed during my journey.

A few days before the trip, I received a letter from the Rebbe containing a concise sentence in the form of one long acronym which, when broken up, was a *brocha* for *hatzlacha* in my travels, there and back.

The day prior to my scheduled departure, screaming headlines appeared in the newspapers proclaiming that an American professor was arrested on Russian soil and accused of spying on the Soviets. He was imprisoned and denied contact with anybody, including the American consul. After three days he was

released but not before being interrogated and brutally beaten...

When I saw this I became terrified and immediately showed the newspaper to Rabbi Chaikin. About an hour later Rabbi Chaikin returned with an instruction from Rabbi Hodakov: Every week I should write a postcard to a contact in a different country excluding America. I was to report wonderful things about the country and this would please the Russians. In addition, it would give off the impression to the authorities that I was well-connected with many people in various parts of the world, lowering the chances of me being targeted.

At last, I was ready for my *shlichus*.

Fright

Already on the airplane I encountered a most frightening experience. Russian officials boarded the aircraft and read through the list of passenger names, eyeing every one of us with a very fierce glare. If not for Rabbi Chaikin preparing me well for such an instance, I don't know what the end would have been. He repeatedly told me that under scrutiny, I must think Torah in my mind and preserve the image of the Rebbe's holy face before me.

Upon landing in Moscow, I was whisked off by the tourism agency straight to my hotel. After getting settled I made my way to the main shul of Moscow.

Entering the shul, I went off to daven in the side room (the *Chabad'nitze*) when I was approached and greeted warmly by a local Jew who immediately began to assist me. He removed my coat and led me to an area of the shul which was a bit isolated from most of the congregation. I soon realized that he was an informer "on duty" and I quickly learnt to avoid him.

Eye Contact

It was then that I finally understood the instruction that I had been given earlier: In Russia, you will not be able to speak out and inquire about anything; you will have to speculate and put pieces together merely from what your eyes see and what your heart senses.

Indeed, very rarely did I notice proper conversations taking place in between two people. Instead, one would look at the other and it was expected that the look alone would be understood. Even when a few words were spoken, nothing was said clearly, and one would have to make sense of the broken sentences on his own.



I spent a few weeks in Moscow and as per my instructions. Almost my entire days were spent in the shul, taking a break for a couple of hours in middle of the day to go to my hotel room. At the beginning nobody looked at me, let alone made contact with me. The coldness in the air was palpable enough to make one shiver. Through half closed eyelids they would inspect me from across the room and eventually they had their signs that indicated to them that I was “kosher.” Here and there someone would whisper an inquiry about their relatives or chant a request in the tune of davening while looking into his siddur.

On Erev Shabbos I was sitting in shul when I noticed someone standing a few feet away facing the wall and chanting in a sing-song voice. I perked my ears and heard him chant: “It is customary to go to mikveh before Shabbos. There is a mikveh downstairs.” I immediately understood that he was telling me to go down to the mikveh.

I found a few men there but none of them even glanced at me. I undressed and approached the mikveh and from the corner of my eye, I saw them inspecting my tzitzis. After I entered the mikveh a voice from behind asked “Where are you from?”

I didn’t answer. The next question surprised me: “From the Rebbe?”

I nodded.

After toiveling I was greeted by towels and a complete change of atmosphere. At once the air became lighter and after telling me their names and information they began to argue amongst themselves over who would host me for Shabbos.

Suddenly the room became silent and in an instant, the usual chill pervaded the room as everyone became preoccupied with their own business. I looked towards the door and noticed that it was open a little and through the crack, a listening ear was discernible.

Despite the fact that the very walls possessed ears and eyes, people still managed to convey to me their messages.

Sad Fate

A most memorable example that sticks out in my mind: One day in shul, I noticed a Chossid weeping uncontrollably throughout his davening. After he finished, I realized that he was waiting for an opportunity to kiss the mezuzah while I was nearby so that he would be able to share a few words with me. As I approached him, he began to kiss the mezuzah, while reciting some

pesukim under his breath, adding a few words that came out to be something like this: “My name is Yitzchok Yoel Kremenchuger. I served as a *mohel* and now they caught me. My court case is very soon and a terrible punishment awaits me. Will you be able to mention my name to the Rebbe? I am very likely facing a death sentence...”

I immediately responded: “Reb Yitzchok Yoel, I promise that you will be of the first that I will mention to the Rebbe!”

As time progressed, the Chassidim became more confident of my true identity and were therefore comfortable enough to exchange a few words with me. All in all, one can say that the mood prevailing amongst them all was one of hopelessness. As if the curtain was locked and there was nothing to do about it! Most of the Chassidim that I met were either just freed from a long prison sentence or knew that one awaited them in the near future...

Rostov

My journey continued on to Rostov. Although this wasn’t part of my trip, I was asked by the Chassidim in Moscow to visit the Ohel of the Rebbe Rashab and daven on their behalf. My first stop was at a small shul called the Solladatsky

[soldiers'] Shul. I had been instructed to locate a Jew by the name of Shlomo Ish Ne'eman who held the key to the Rebbe Rashab's Ohel. If I would not make mention of this code-name, the key would not be given to me.

In the meantime, I had the chance to meet a Chossid named Reb Mordechai Lifshitz, affectionately known as Reb Mottel der Shochet. Not sparing an extra word he asked me, "Anash?" I nodded. The only thing that he asked me was "How is the Rebbe?" More than that, we simply did not exchange a word...

I then went on to fulfill my mission in this city; to inspect the upkeep of the Ohel there. After doing so, I left Rostov.

I had similar encounters throughout my travels in Russia, but two cities stood out from anywhere else I visited: Tbilisi and Tashkent.



REB MOTTEL DER SHOCHET DURING A BRIS CEREMONY.

Tbilisi

Tbilisi, Georgia. Rabbi Chaikin had told me much about this city as he had grown up there. As I made my way to the large shul, I was reminded of the story that I had heard from Rabbi Chaikin describing the great self-sacrifice of the Georgian Jews to save their shul from being desecrated by the Communists a little



What's bothering a Bochur in Russia?

During the farbrengen of the night of Simchas Torah, 5728, the Rebbe spoke about the need to educate Jewish children in the path of Torah, even if the results don't seem very promising. He brought an example from a story found in Yeshaya where the *novi* insists that they teach Torah to the children despite the dire circumstances of the time. In the end, in the merit of these children, King Sancheirev was defeated.

The Rebbe went on:

Even if the *Yetzer Hora* will try to convince you that this is an ancient tale and is not pertinent to our day and age, we have a more modern example, too.

There are a number of Jews who sit restricted in their observance of Torah and mitzvos. Their children were born into this way of life and have been raised this way as well. They, too, may ask, what sense does it make to educate our children in the way of Torah? It will be very difficult for them to lead normal Jewish lives.

But the truth is that they continue to give their children a Torah education, and they do so successfully.

Many of them don't even entertain the thought of ever being able to leave. I know of a *bochur* who is already at marriageable age, and still does not believe he'll be able to leave.

I received a letter from him; the mere sending of such letter alone poses great danger to him. In it he asks me—not for a blessing that he'll be able to leave; for that he'll need a miracle and he doesn't believe he's worthy of a miracle. He barely has enough food to eat, but that's not what concerns him.

Why he has to face such challenges on a daily basis, I don't know... (The Rebbe began to cry at this point).

So he writes in his letter that he has disturbing thoughts that haunt him during davening, and he seeks advice as how to best deal with them, for these thoughts disrupt his concentration and he's unable to daven properly.

This issue must truly bother him to the core, for if it weren't so, he would not put himself in danger to resolve it. Why does Hashem present him with such trying challenges that he does not deserve? But this boy asks no such questions. The truth is that the entire world's existence depends on him, but he does not know this, and in any case, it wouldn't concern him anyway.

Now, let's compare our own "hardships" that we face here to those of that boy in Russia.

This is no ancient "tale" from the past; the *bochur* exists where he is right now, and I have the actual letter here!"



THE OLD SHUL IN ODESSA, UKRAINE.



over a decade earlier, during Stalin's final years. The government officials had sent a herd of trucks towards the shul with the intention of removing all of the *sifrei Torah* and other holy articles, replacing them with equipment to be used for a Communist Youth Club. Seeing this, all the members of the Jewish community—men, women, and children, young and old—lied down on the street in front of the shul to form a human blockade, preventing the trucks from coming any closer.

Notwithstanding that the Communists wouldn't hesitate to drive right over them, every single person stayed put, placing his life in danger to save the very shul I was now walking into.

In Tbilisi, the tension was less and the people there seemed to be more at ease. I did not feel the same pressure that I did while in Moscow or in the other cities.

I was able to open up a bit and share a few words with the inhabitants of the city and I even met many of *anash*. The one thing of primary concern to these Chassidim was the Rebbe. In general, I found many Jews who felt themselves very much connected to the Rebbe, although they did not know very much about him and what he did in the past fifteen years of his leadership. As long as I remained in Tbilisi, they constantly

asked me to repeat a word of Torah from the Rebbe, or to explain to them the meaning of the concept *uforatzta* and how it is beginning to have an impact around the world.

ONE THING FOR CERTAIN IS THAT THE REBBE DOES NOT ALLOW US TO FORGET ABOUT THEM!

Initially, I had received instructions that when in Russia I was not to visit private homes at all. Just a short while earlier, when the delegation of rabbis from the United States visited the Soviet Union, one of them was hosted by a Jewish family. In the subsequent months, this family suffered terribly from the government, and was constantly harassed and interrogated. But here in Georgia, there was less apprehension and the people felt safe enough to bring me into their homes. Each of these families would invite many of their relatives and acquaintances to join us, and we would sit together for many hours.

Tashkent

From Tbilisi I travelled to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. When I arrived there, I found a rather large community of Chassidim and a thriving network of underground yeshivos and schools. The atmosphere here was very similar to Tbilisi.

Apparently they had received a message: "*Es kricht eppes*—something is crawling around," and they understood it to mean that they should expect me.

At first the only person who dared talk to me was a Chossid by the name of Reb Levik Pressman. He was an official chazzan recognized by the government and he therefore had a simple excuse for hanging out with me—I was a chazzan from America and we were sharing cantorial pieces. Walking through the streets, we would sing *Adon Olam* and other songs at the top of our voices.

One morning during my stay he brought me to a Bucharian shul which was jammed with Chassidim, young and old, and for two hours I sang all the Rebbe's *niggunim*. Some of the people present are still alive today.

The first Shabbos I spent there was *Shabbos Mevorchim*. When I came into the shul courtyard I was greeted by



A WEDDING HELD SECRETLY, ARRANGED BY THE SHLUCHIM.

HOW WAS I TO ALLOW MYSELF TO TAKE SUCH A LARGE SUM OF MONEY OUT OF RUSSIA, WHILE ACTIVISTS IN THE FREE WORLD WERE CONSTANTLY DOING ALL THEY COULD, AND BEYOND, TO SMUGGLE MONEY INTO RUSSIA!

tens of people sitting around outside saying Tehillim. Reb Levik told me to approach the older Chassidim first and converse with them. I would talk into my Tehillim and the person sitting next to me would talk into his and it would all look really casual. Afterwards, I was to do the same with everyone else. I met many Chassidim and one of those who I developed a connection with was a Jew by the name of Reb Leizer Nannes. He had endured many years in the Siberian gulags and had long given up on any hope of ever leaving Russia. Broken and sick that he was from his sufferings, I tried to encourage him and promised to do all I could to get him out of Russia.

One thing that struck me about these Chassidim was their incredible longing to hear about the Rebbe. They constantly begged of me, time and again, to please share with them whatever I can concerning the Rebbe and his teachings.

While I was in Scandinavia I had heard that since the passing of his mother, Rebbetzin Chana, the Rebbe undertook a

new initiative—to explain a Rashi of the week's *parsha* at each farbrengen. I was glad to be able to bring to them this piece of news now.

I had also brought along with me a small book containing the transcriptions of the *maamorim* of the Rebbe from the year 5715. I had received this *sefer* from one of the *bochurim* in Montreal who had typed them out himself, and I kept it with me at all times. Seeing how thirsty these Chassidim were for something from the Rebbe, I decided to leave my copy with them in Tashkent. Years later, when these families managed to leave Russia and some of the *bochurim* came to New York, I found that they were so well versed in these *maamorim*; they could repeat them almost word for word.

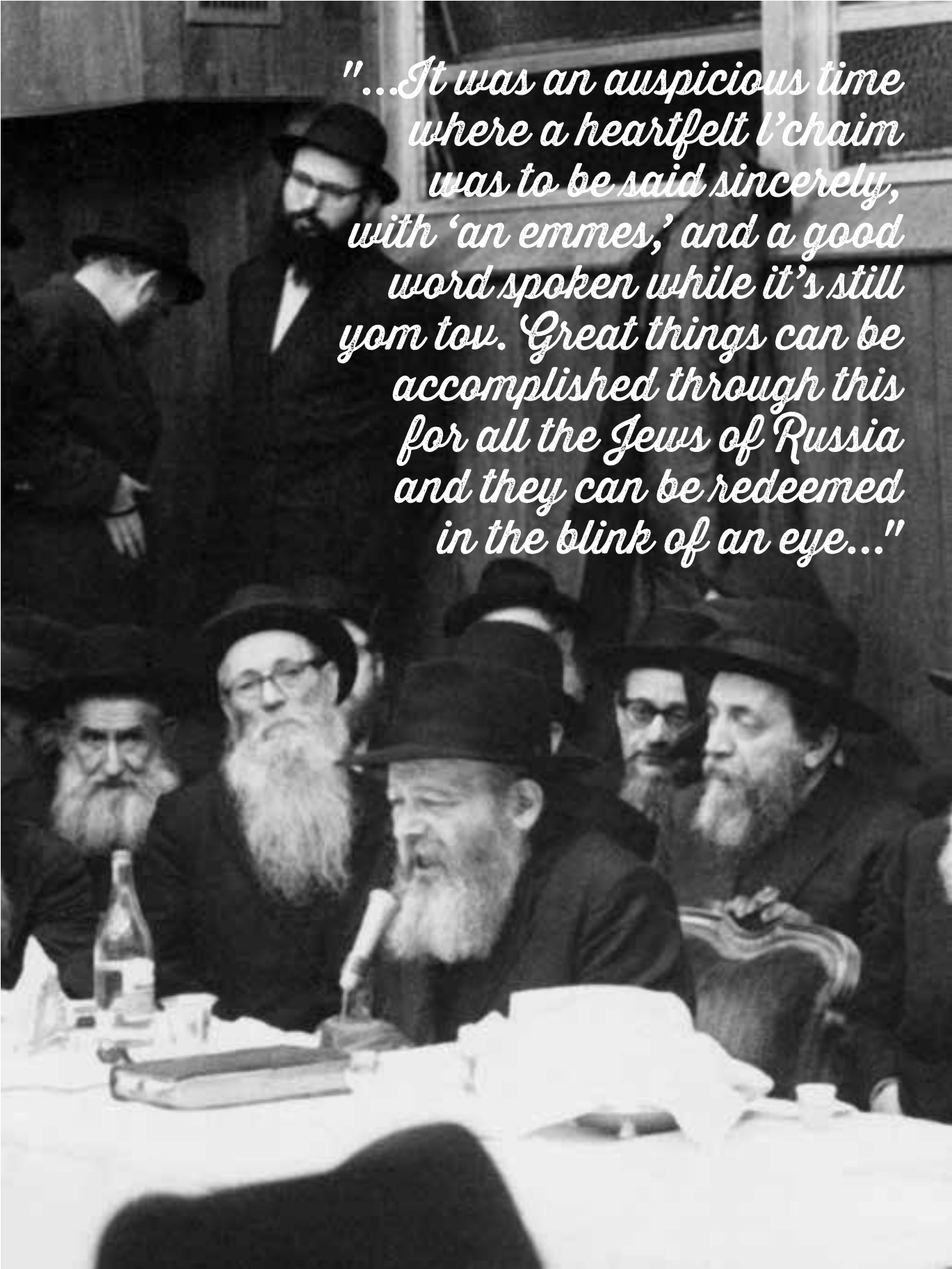
Pidyon Nefesh

As I left my hotel one night heading for the old marketplace, where I was scheduled to meet with some of the younger Chassidim, I suddenly came upon a young couple trying to catch my

attention. They began to direct me by pointing with their fingers and saying broken sentences, until we reached a side street where they were sure that we were not being watched, and then they began their tale:

The husband's name was Reb Yaakov Lepkivker (known in Tashkent as "Yankele der Shvartzer," as he had a black beard). After searching with great difficulty to find employment that would not require him to work on Shabbos, he finally found a job in a laundromat. After a while the exposure to the chemicals that were used in the cleaning process had a serious effect on Reb Yaakov's health and he became critically ill. Having no other choice, they took the risk of sending a telegram directly to the Rebbe and they received a one word answer: "Shomaati" (I heard). Shortly thereafter, Reb Yaakov miraculously began to heal until his health was completely restored. Now, as a way of saying thank you, they wished to send a large sum of money with me to the Rebbe as a *pidyon nefesh*.

I was now faced by a serious dilemma: On the one hand, I was very moved by the devotion and dedication that they displayed. But on the other, how was I to allow myself to take such a large sum of money out of Russia, while activists in the free world were constantly doing



"...It was an auspicious time where a heartfelt l'chaim was to be said sincerely, with 'an emmes,' and a good word spoken while it's still yom tov. Great things can be accomplished through this for all the Jews of Russia and they can be redeemed in the blink of an eye..."

all they could, and beyond, to smuggle money into Russia!

After a brief discussion, we resolved that I would only bring along 18 dollars, and that we would consider it to be on behalf of the whole of the community of Tashkent.

As I turned to leave, I felt a tug on my arm. There were two people standing there preventing me from leaving. I was terribly frightened for a moment, but they began to speak to me in Yiddish, telling me not to worry.

As it turned out, they were Lubavitcher *bochurim*, Yosef Mochkin and Michel Vishedsky. They began asking how they could obtain visas allowing them to leave Russia when suddenly, during our conversation, we noticed a man lurking nearby, but being that we were standing in a darkened alleyway, we couldn't make out who it was. Realizing that we noticed him, the man came over and asked me for a match with which to light his cigarette. Yosef Mochkin immediately realized that the man before us was an informer and he needed a match so that he can identify our faces and report us to the authorities. He whispered for me to turn away...

On the spot I came up with a very simple suggestion that saved the situation—don't give him a match...



REB SIMCHA GORODETSKY

After discussing the visa issue at length, they began describing the hardships that face the Jewish community in the Soviet Union, and asked “Tell us, do the Chassidim on the other side of the curtain think about us?”

I began to explain to them that although I cannot speak for all the rest of *anash*, one thing that is certain is that the Rebbe does not allow us to forget about them! I went on to describe what I had witnessed at the Shavuos farbrengen just a few months earlier, when the Rebbe painfully rebuked the Chassidim when they did not say *l'chaim* for the Russian Jews. I added that often when the Rebbe sings *Hoshia Es Amecha*, he substitutes the word “*uvoreich*” with “*veracheim*”—have mercy. Chassidim felt that by doing so, the Rebbe was intervening in Heaven on behalf of the Russian Jews.

While I spoke, the pair of *bochurim* listened with great affection and they began to cry. Again I witnessed the profound devotion that the Chassidim in Russia possessed towards the Rebbe; sincere, wholehearted *Hiskashrus*.

Mission Accomplished

I spent three months in Russia and when I finished my *shlichus*, I left carrying



REB REFAEL (“FOLLEH”) KAHAN

with me hundreds of names committed to memory, which I immediately wrote down upon arriving in Copenhagen. The very next thing I did was to write a detailed report to the Rebbe about everything that transpired during my *shlichus* and to ask the Rebbe how I should proceed. I was sure that I was meant to pass on the names to someone else and return to New York to continue life as if nothing happened, but I was wrong.

A few weeks later I received a letter from the Rebbe containing instructions for the next part of my mission. I was to travel to Eretz Yisroel where my father was living at the time, and from there, I would work on obtaining visas for the families whose names I had. There would be a special committee there that would help me understand what I was to do. On the way to Eretz Yisroel, I stopped off in Italy and spent *Shabbos Hagadol* with the Rebbe's shliach, Reb Gershon Mendel Garelik. From there I proceeded to Eretz Yisroel, and after Pesach, my real task began in earnest.

I worked for Reb Simcha Gorodetzky and Reb Folle Kahn on the following task:

They obtained for me a special pass from an *aliyah* official by the name of Aron Duvdevani, which gave me free access to the ledger containing all the names and addresses of every person living in Eretz Yisroel. I merely had to walk into any post office and show this pass and I was immediately allowed into the back where I sat perusing the ledger, matching up names with the ones I had.

After pairing up the names, my next task was to determine if any of these citizens I wanted to sell my story to had Communist leanings. Once I got the green light, I would personally travel to their homes and try to convince these Israeli's to send their supposed relatives a visa request, something which was unheard of at the time. I made sure to go in the evenings when most people were home, and I would show them my passport bearing the Russian stamp. I

explained that I had just been to Russia and I had met their relatives who were desperate to obtain exit visas. Most people weren't sure these families were really related to them but I usually managed to convince them by saying that they look similar and shared similar mannerisms.

I immediately encountered a dilemma: Anything to do with Soviet Russia smelled of danger and nobody wanted to be the first one to try. For a long time I wasn't able to convince anybody to be the first example and I was very distressed. One Shabbos in B'nei Brak I met a *yungerman* by the name of Reb Shmulik Gurevitch, who noticed that I was very disturbed. Without getting into details, I shared with him my troubles and straight away, he asked me if there are any Gurevitches on my list. Indeed there was one and he offered to be the first to send a visa to this family. From there, everything went extremely smooth.

Another concern most people had was how they were going to take care of these families once they arrived in Eretz Yisroel. As their supposed relatives, the immediate responsibility of supporting them would fall on their shoulders. I assured them that the Israeli government was committed to taking care of these families from beginning to end.

One day Reb Berke Wolf approached me and asked that I accompany him that night on a trip, telling me to make sure I bring my passport along. I agreed and that night he took me in his jeep



REB SHOLOM DOVBER ("BERKE") WOLFF



A SMALL STUDY-GROUP LEARNING TORAH IN MOSCOW, 5717.

to visit an important Israeli official. I quickly understood the purpose of this trip. A while back, the Rebbe had given a *brocha* to this man for his relatives to leave Russia, but much time had passed since then and they had not yet managed to leave. Reb Berke presented me to this official and showing him my passport, he explained that a major breakthrough was soon to come. This scene repeated itself several times with various important officials, and in this way Reb Berke managed to fortify their *emuna* in the Rebbe's *brachos*.

All of my work remained a very big secret and although people noticed my frequent meetings with Reb Simcha Gorodetzky, very few people had an inkling as to what I was up to.

To this day, I don't know how many Russian families were helped as a result of this project but I can estimate that the number stands in the hundreds. In any case, this was definitely a major breakthrough, and it caused waves which continued for many years. The small crack in the Iron Curtain sparked hope in many hearts, banishing years of despair and gloom that engulfed most of these Yidden.

After more than two years, right before Yud-Tes Kislev 5727, the Rebbe instructed me to return to New York. A short while later I was told that the Rebbe had suggested a *shidduch* for me. Of course I agreed to pursue the matter and a short while later, *mazkirus* notified me that the Rebbe had asked if he can wish me *mazal tov* yet. Of course we closed the *shidduch* right away! The Rebbe instructed that the *kalla* and I stand in *Gan Eden Hatachton* after Mincha and that he would wish us *mazal tov* on the way to his room; and so it was. The next Shabbos, during the *farbrengen*, the Rebbe publicly announced that because I was a *chosson*, and a *chosson* is like a king, I should therefore come up and stand behind the Rebbe for the duration of the *farbrengen*. Reb Yoel told me afterwards that for months the Rebbe had seemed to be in a very serious mood but since I had arrived back in 770 things seemed to have changed.

Although the Rebbe never mentioned my *shlichus* to me, I still feel to this day that the few *kiruvim* I merited to receive from the Rebbe are all in the merit of this unique *shlichus* that I had the incredible *z'chus* to fulfill. **D**