

לזכות
כל נכדינו שיחיו
שיגדלו לתורה לחופה ולמעשים
טובים לנח"ר כ"ק אדמו"ר

נדפס ע"י
הרה"ת ר' יצחק מאיר
וזוגתו מרת לאה שיחיו
שפאלטר

ESCAPE to SHANGHAI

**TOMCHEI
TEMIMIM'S
BATTLE FOR
SURVIVAL**

BY RABBI MENDY GREENBERG

(Twinsburg, OH)

TRAPPED

It was a quiet Friday morning in Otwock. A group of *bochurim* emerged from the mikvah, exhausted from an all-night farbrengen celebrating Tes-Vov Elul, the anniversary of Tomchei Temimim's founding 42 years earlier.

As they set out on the half-hour walk back to the Yeshiva, a series of deafening explosions shattered the morning stillness. Planes roared overhead at an alarmingly low altitude, shaking the air with their noise.

At first, they hoped it was just a Polish military exercise. But as they made their way back, the grim reality set in. Germany had attacked Poland. The Luftwaffe had just bombed Otwock, leveling buildings and leaving many dead. Poland was at war.

Panic gripped the city. Reports flooded in—the Polish army was in retreat, the Germans were advancing quickly. The bombings continued. Fear and confusion spread. Should they flee to Warsaw? Would the capital be any safer? Should they head east, deeper into Poland? Or was it best to stay put?

Amid the chaos, the Frierdiker Rebbe's home remained an island of calm. He showed no fear, reassuring those around him. Over the next few days, he gave clear instructions: the American *bochurim* were to contact the U.S.

consul and leave Poland immediately, and any *bochur* who wished to could return home to his family. Reb Yudel Eber, the Rosh Yeshiva, covered all travel expenses from the Frierdiker Rebbe's personal funds.

With war raging, maintaining the Yeshiva was no longer possible. The *bochurim* scattered—some followed the Frierdiker Rebbe and his family to Warsaw, others returned home. A group of twelve remained in Otwock, keeping up the *sedorim* as best they could.

Over Tishrei, the Germans swiftly crushed the Polish army, and the entire region fell under Nazi occupation. Nazi soldiers patrolled the streets, tormenting Jews at will. Food was scarce and uncertainty loomed. Families with young children or elderly relatives felt they had no choice but to stay put and hope the worst had passed, but those who could—like the *bochurim*—began searching for a way out.

But there was nowhere to go. To the west lay Nazi Germany; to the east, another menace—the Soviet Union. Under the terms of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact, the Soviets had taken control of eastern Poland, bringing them dangerously close. To the north, Lithuania and Latvia refused to accept Polish refugees, and access to those regions was blocked by Soviet-occupied territory.

While Chassidim in America worked tirelessly to



WARSAW AFTER THE LUFTWAFFE BOMBED THE CITY.

secure the Frierdiker Rebbe's rescue, he, in turn, focused on finding a way to save the *bochurim*. As a Latvian citizen, he had the right to enter Latvia and from there to travel to America. But the *bochurim*, Polish citizens, had no clear escape route.¹

THE ONLY WAY OUT

A ray of hope appeared in Cheshvan. The historic Lithuanian city of Vilna, which had been annexed to eastern Poland after World War I, was now being returned to Lithuania by Stalin in exchange for the right to station Soviet troops on Lithuanian soil. The 4th of Cheshvan was the date set for the transition when Vilna would shift from Soviet Communist rule to free and democratic Lithuania. If they could make it there in time, they would suddenly find themselves in another—and much better—country.

On the designated day, a small group of *bochurim* in Vilna watched in disbelief as Soviet soldiers disappeared and were replaced by marching Lithuanian troops. It seemed too good to be true. Almost immediately, yeshivos and Jewish institutions began to regroup, the economy stabilized, and store shelves—once empty—were suddenly stocked again. For the first time in weeks, people could breathe a sigh of relief.

Only a few *bochurim* made it to Vilna in time and joined the local Tomchei Temimim that had been established by Reb Yitzchok Dovber Ushpal before the war. It was the sole surviving branch of Tomchei Temimim. The Russian yeshivos remained underground, and the Polish ones had been dismantled—only Vilna remained. From Poland, the Frierdiker Rebbe came to a decision: Vilna would become the new center for reestablishing the entire Tomchei Temimim network.

“My friends and I,” related Reb Avraham Yitzchak Garfinkel, “were in Warsaw, learning in secret. After a few weeks, we began to wonder—should we stay and wait it out, or was it time to run?”

“In mid-Kislev, we visited the [Frierdiker] Rebbe. His son-in-law, Rashag, greeted us warmly and shared exciting news: the Russians had returned Vilna to Lithuania. The [Frierdiker] Rebbe wanted the *bochurim* to escape to Vilna and rebuild the yeshiva.

“That same day, we had *yechidus*. The [Frierdiker] Rebbe, his face shining, blessed me with a safe journey and success in reestablishing the yeshiva.

“He asked if we were ready to flee and cross two borders—Germany to Russia, then Russia to Lithuania. He



THE FRIERDIKER REBBE OUTSIDE HIS HOME IN OTWOCK, CIRCA LATE 1930S.

urged me to tell everyone along the way to escape as well, but not to stay under Communist rule—only to Vilna. He promised to cover travel expenses and stressed that time was of the essence. Any day, the situation could change.”

Group after group began to embark on the journey, and *bochurim* began to trickle into Vilna. Each came with a story. Shmuel Dovid Raichik had lost his boots in the Lithuanian forest, suffering from frostbite. Avraham Yitzchak Garfinkel had fallen off a bridge while attempting to avoid the soldiers. Moshe Elya Gerlitzky had gotten lost in the forest during a blizzard when he suddenly found his friend Shìele Bronstien, who guided him like an angel from heaven. Others were arrested and spent several nights in jail. But as the months passed, more and more *bochurim* made it.

As winter turned into spring, forty *bochurim* sat together in the Apatov Shteibel, learning Chassidus and *nigleh*, farbrenging with their *mashpi'im*, and spreading Chassidus to the other refugee *bochurim* in the area. When *maamarim* would be reviewed at the end of Shabbos (“*raava d'raavin*”), many non-Chabad



LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASSIDEI CHABAD

REB YITZCHOK DOVBER USHPAL TAKES LEAVE OF HIS STUDENTS IN VILNA AS HE DEPARTS FOR AMERICA, 5700.



LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASSIDEI CHABAD

REB AVROHOM YITZCHAK GARFINKEL (FIRST ON THE RIGHT) WITH FELLOW TEMIMIM IN VILNA.



LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASSIDEI CHABAD

LUBAVITCHER BOCHURIM LEARNING IN VILNA.



LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASSIDEI CHABAD

GROUP PHOTO OF ALL TALMIDIM IN VILNA.

bochurim and refugees would come to listen. True, they were no longer in close proximity to the Frierdiker Rebbe, but they hoped to soon be reunited. In the meantime, Vilna was their oasis. For an entire winter, they carried on as if there was no war.

THE GREAT RUSSIAN BEAR

“Everything was going smoothly,” related Reb Avraham Yitzchak Garfinkel, “until the first night of Shavuos. In the middle of the night, as we said *Tikkun Leil Shavuos*, a deep, rumbling sound filled the air. Russian tanks were rolling down the main street, right outside the yeshiva.

“The Soviets had taken over the Baltics — Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Their governments had already fallen, and now the Communists were marching through the streets, singing songs about how their ‘great’ government had freed these countries from fascism.

“Overnight, everything changed. Fear gripped the city. People were afraid to speak. Stores emptied, and even basic necessities became hard to find, despite Soviet promises that everything would be fine.

“For us, the future looked bleak. We knew there was no way a yeshiva could survive under Communist rule. Staying wasn’t an option; we had to run. But to where?”

The *bochurim* were already exploring immigration options. The most natural route was to follow the Frierdiker Rebbe to New York, and the Frierdiker Rebbe had indeed been working to secure visas, but so far without success. His attempts to obtain visas to Eretz Yisroel also didn’t bear fruit.

Time was running out. The Soviet takeover would be formalized in less than six weeks, and Lithuania would cease to exist as an independent country. All foreign consulates would shut down. But where could they go? War was raging across Europe.

The only viable escape route seemed to be a long journey across the entire Soviet Union

to the Pacific Ocean, and from there—hoping against hope—to somehow gain entry to America. But there was a major problem: the Russians wouldn't issue travel visas unless travelers had a final destination. Without an American visa, they couldn't even begin their journey.

Then, someone discovered a loophole.

THE NON-VISA VISA

A *bochur* from Holland who was learning in Telz had relocated to Vilna as well, and learned in his correspondence with the Dutch ambassador in Riga that no visa was required to enter the Dutch Caribbean colony of Curacao. Instead, entry was granted solely at the discretion of the island's governor.

He realized this could be his ticket out. If the ambassador would write in his passport that no visa was needed but omit the part about requiring the governor's approval, he could then approach the Japanese ambassador for transit visas through Japan. With those visas in hand, he could ask the Soviets for exit visas, leave Russia for Japan, and then hopefully find his way to America.

To his delight, the ambassador agreed and instructed the Dutch consul in Lithuania, Jan Zwartendijk, to issue similar visas to anyone who requested them. Suddenly, the

Dutch consul found himself overwhelmed with thousands of requests for these Curacao “non-visa” visas.

Issuing them was not without risk. The statement he stamped was only half true, and Holland and the Soviet Union had no diplomatic relations. If the Soviets disapproved of what he was doing, they could easily send him to Siberia. But Zwartendijk chose to help, stamping visas day and night, giving thousands of Jewish refugees a desperately needed lifeline.

The next step was securing Japanese transit visas. Here, another righteous individual stepped forward. Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara telegraphed his government to ask for permission, but when he received no clear response, he made the decision himself. For weeks, he worked tirelessly, issuing as many visas as he could.²

FOLLOW THE AMSHINOVER

But not everyone was convinced. Would the Soviets actually recognize Curacao as a valid destination and grant exit visas? Or would they arrest everyone and send them to Siberia for trying to leave the Soviet “paradise,” as had happened to so many who tried to leave Soviet-controlled Poland? While several thousand Jews took up the ruse, most refugees decided to stay put.



ONE OF THE TRANSIT VISAS ISSUED FOR A JEWISH REFUGEE BY JAPANESE DIPLOMAT CHIUNE SUGIHARA, 5700.



THE AMSHINOVER REBBE, REB SHIMON SHOLOM KALISH, AROUND THE WAR YEARS.

Uncertain, the bochurim of Tomchei Temimim sent a telegram to the Friediker Rebbe in New York, asking for guidance. His response came swiftly: follow the advice of the Amshinover Rebbe.

The Amshinover Rebbe had been close with the Friediker Rebbe back in Otwock, and after escaping to Vilna, he became the spiritual mentor of the refugees. When he heard about the visas, he said, “I’m going.” That was enough; Tomchei Temimim was going too.

Then came the most nerve-wracking step: applying for Soviet transit visas. The NKVD required every applicant to fill out a detailed questionnaire about their background, plans, and history. The *bochurim* submitted their forms—and then waited. And waited.

Weeks turned into months. Summer faded into fall. The Soviets, mercifully, allowed the yeshivos to remain open, but tension still ran high. Thanks to the foresight of Reb Yitzchak Hendel, the yeshiva had stocked up on non-perishable goods—like soap, lightbulbs and the like—right after the Soviet invasion. Now, with store

MIVTZA LULAV IN VILNA

During the Sukkos right after the Soviet takeover, esrogim were impossible to come by, but the resourceful *bochurim* of Tomchei Temimim managed to obtain not one, but four separate esrogim.

A short time later, a message arrived from the Brisker Rov, Reb Velvel Soloveitchik, also a refugee in Vilna. He asked that the *bochurim* be so kind as to give him one of the esrogim. At first, they refused. These esrogim were more precious than gold; they had already decided to divide Vilna into four districts and to make each set of Arba’ah Minim publicly available to the population each morning of Yom Tov.

But the Brisker Rov told them a story. A year earlier, under German bombardment of Warsaw, the Friediker Rebbe had similarly obtained a few precious esrogim—and he had reserved one of them especially for the Brisker Rov, personally carrying them as he fled from one building to another to escape the bombing. Hearing this account, the *bochurim* acquiesced.

That Sukkos, the scene on Vilna streets was prescient; Lubavitcher *bochurim* walking around with sets of Arba’ah Minim, offering passerby the chance to recite the bracha. It was perhaps the first instance of Mivtza Lulav.

shelves bare, they were able to sell them at a profit to help keep the yeshiva running.

After the Yomim Tovim of Tishrei, the silence finally broke. *Bochurim* began receiving summonses for “interviews” with the NKVD. Fear gripped them—were they walking into a trap? But to their immense relief, the meetings were brief and superficial. Then, the news they had been waiting for: visas approved. They were free to leave.

The Soviets had just one “small” condition. The cost

of the visa and travel would be \$169 per person—an astronomical sum, worth over \$3,500 today. In exchange, the refugees would officially be treated as “honored tourists,” given the finest hotels and first-class train accommodations.

Of course, the *bochurim* had nothing close to that amount. They sent an urgent telegram to Rashag, and the money was wired immediately. The Frierdiker Rebbe took on immense debt to save them—but now, at last, the journey could begin.

TRAVELING THROUGH RUSSIA

“Kindly note,” Rashag wrote to a government official regarding the *bochurim*, “that we must be very careful ... that nothing should be said about these students having any connection with Rabbi Schneersohn or Chabad, for this information is not advisable for Russia and it would bring much harm to these students.”

The *bochurim* knew they were heading into dangerous territory. Most of them came from non-Chabad, *Poilisher* families, but their years in Tomchei Temimim had given them an appreciation for the hardships of Russian Jews. Before they left, they were sent a message from America: bring along *seforim*, *tashmischei kedusha*, *sichos*, and *maamarim* of the Frierdiker Rebbe—anything that could be left behind to benefit the Chassidim trapped under Soviet rule.

Their journey began in Teves. A full year had passed since the yeshiva had regrouped in Vilna, and nearly a year and a half since the war broke out. Despite the uncertainty, the *bochurim* set out in high spirits—over the past few months, they had received astonishing news. The Frierdiker Rebbe’s relentless efforts had paid off: the United States had approved visas for all of them, to be delivered at the U.S. embassy in Moscow or Japan. If all went according to plan, they would soon be reunited with the Rebbe.

Traveling through Russia, the *bochurim* immediately felt the suffocating atmosphere of the Soviet Union. People spoke cautiously, always aware of the ever-present secret police. These penniless refugees were riding in comfortable train cars and staying in Moscow’s finest hotels where lavish meals were served—while just outside, long bread lines stretched down the freezing streets. You can imagine the horror on the waiters’ faces when their new guests ignored the platters of chicken and fish,

LIST OF SELECTED BEST STUDENTS OF THE "TOMCHEI TEMIMIM" YERUSHOH IN EUROPE WHOSE U.S.A. VISAS HAVE BEEN ISSUED.

A. At present in Riga (Latvia) Address: Marlinas Iela #25-13.		Date & Place of Birth	
1.	KVAGA Abrams	1918	Sov. Union
2.	GURVICS Sholin Bar	1920	Riga
3.	PINKOVICS Faive	1917	"
4.	OSKOVIC Sholin	1920	Soviet Union
5.	OSKOVIC Simona	1922	do.
6.	BLINKER Jakobs	1922	do.
7.	BLINKER Sholin Bar	1924	do.
8.	KAGANS Hirsch	1928	do.
9.	KAGANS Sholin	1924	do.
10.	GURVICS Samuel	1919	do.
11.	GURVICS Eliezer	1924	do.
12.	GURVICS Melechman	1927	Riga
13.	OSKOVIC Mendel		
14.	BAJMAN Natan	1923	Latvia
15.	KURCS Bar	1923	do.
16.	FRASS Zelik	1924	do.
17.	KRAVICS Abrams	1923	do.
18.	KAGAN Israel	1927	Sov. Union
19.	TEUCHENFELT Moses	1927	do.
B. At present in Vilnius (Lithuania) Address: Vilnius #21, Vilnius.			
20.	MENDEL Icehok	1917	Poland
21.	WATNERS Josef	1917	do.
22.	TECHENMAN Mendel	1917	do.
23.	GRYNGLAS Mendel Wolf	1917	do.
24.	GEPLICKI Moshik Eljass	1915	do.
25.	LEDFERMAN Samuel Moses	1920	do.
26.	COFFENKEL Abram Isak	1921	do.
27.	SEITEN Saml	1914	do.
28.	SOBKIN Chaim Meier	1919	do.
29.	NOVAL Josef	1914	do.
30.	NOBERGSTEIN Josef	1916	do.
31.	FRUM Mojzse	1920	do.
32.	KOTLARSKI Hirsch Josef	1915	do.
33.	HOOGLER Seloma	1920	do.
34.	KRAMER Leib	1918	do.
35.	LAUJE Morduch	1917	do.
36.	FURS Samula Hirsch	1921	do.
37.	BRONSTEIN Bayja	1919	do.
38.	PODOLICKI Josef	1920	do.
39.	MURIN Morvva	1919	do.
40.	MURIN Hirsch	1921	do.
41.	ERENKIN Seelim	1922	do.
42.	RAJNOWICZ Fajsech	1919	do.
43.	RAJNOWICZ Seelim	1920	Poland
44.	FRUM Hoshie	1921	do.
45.	GRANOWICZ Gewson	1919	do.
46.	KAC Bayja Scrush	1923	do.
47.	GLAS Zelik	1913	do.
48.	FRUP Chaim Leikow	1916	do.
49.	ROZENBERG Israel David	1919	do.
50.	FURMAN Abram Josef		do.
51.	LEVITIN Seelim	1922	Lithuania
52.	RAJCZYK Samuel David	1918	Poland

A LIST SENT FROM THE STATE DEPARTMENT TO THE FRIERDIKER REBBE OF THE BOCHURIM WHO WERE ISSUED U.S. VISAS. THE BOCHURIM WERE TOLD THAT THEY WOULD BE ABLE TO RECEIVE THE VISAS UPON THEIR ARRIVAL IN JAPAN.

instead ordering raw eggs and dunking them into boiling water until they were somewhat edible.

Eager to connect with local Chassidim, the *bochurim* made their way to the Marina Roshcha shul to daven and use the *mikvah*. They knew they were being watched, so they kept their heads down and davened quietly. But soon, they noticed a pattern—Chassidim were pacing past them, seemingly by chance, again and again. That was the signal. As one would pass, the *bochurim* would slip in a few words of encouragement from the Frierdiker Rebbe, blending them into their davening with a singsong tune.

The Chassidim looked at them with longing. For them, escaping the Soviet Union was a distant dream. The *bochurim* left with heavy hearts.

A HICCUP IN THE JOURNEY

When close to forty *bochurim* appeared at the door of the American embassy in Moscow, the ambassador was shocked. He couldn't possibly process so many visas during their short stay—he was accustomed to doing it one at a time, if at all. "Go to the embassy in Japan," he told them, "they will issue the visas there."

The train ride continued across the vast expanse of Russia, all the way to Vladivostok, where the entire group boarded a ship bound for Japan. But they weren't free just yet—Russian officials remained on board, keeping close watch until the ship left Soviet territorial waters.

Everyone held their breath. Finally, a small patrol boat approached, and the officers disembarked. Only when the Soviet officials were off the ship did the tension break. A collective sigh of relief swept through the group.

They had made it. They had escaped the Nazis. They had escaped the Soviets. Now, all that remained was reaching America and reuniting with the Rebbe.

They arrived at the American embassy in Tokyo, where the staff welcomed them and handed out forms to fill in—basic details like names, places of origin, and family whereabouts. The *bochurim* casually completed the paperwork, unaware that they were walking into a trap.

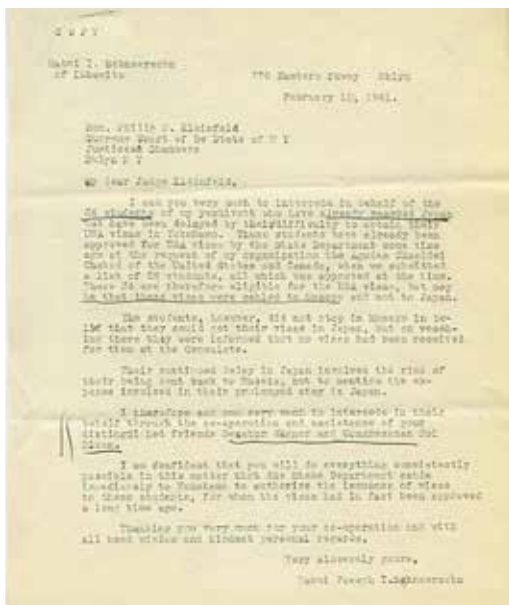
The officials collected the forms, reviewed them briefly, and then delivered the devastating news: "We're sorry, but your visas have been invalidated."

The U.S. State Department had recently ruled that no visas could be issued to anyone with family in Nazi-occupied territory, fearing they might be blackmailed into espionage. With just a few innocent strokes of the pen, the *bochurim* had unknowingly sealed their own fate. Their visas were revoked.

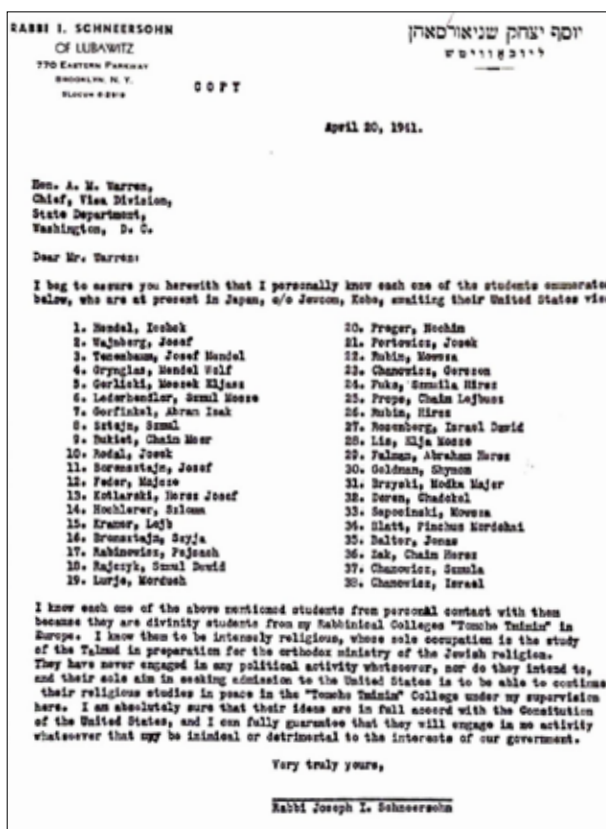
SETTLING IN JAPAN

With nowhere else to turn, the *bochurim* settled in Kobe, Japan, hoping for the best.

The city had a tiny Jewish community, just a few dozen families, but now thousands of refugees were arriving,



LETTERS FROM THE FRIEDIKER REBBE TO VARIOUS U.S. OFFICIALS, PLEADING WITH THEM TO INTERCEDE ON BEHALF OF THE BOCHURIM IN JAPAN. IN THE FIRST LETTER HE ASKS THAT THE VISAS BE RECEIVED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. THE SECOND LETTER WAS WRITTEN AFTER THE STATE DEPARTMENT RULED THAT NO VISAS WOULD BE ISSUED TO ANYONE WITH FAMILY IN NAZI-OCCUPIED TERRITORY IN CASE OF ESPIONAGE. THE FRIEDIKER REBBE ASSURES THE STATE DEPARTMENT THAT THE SOLE INTEREST OF THE BOCHURIM WAS IN TORAH.



overwhelming its resources. Despite the challenges, the local Jews went out of their way to welcome and assist the newcomers. Support also came from the American Joint Distribution Committee, which had been assisting the refugees since their escape from Nazi-occupied Poland. Though their future remained uncertain, for now, they had a safe place to stay.

Japan was unlike anything the *bochurim* had ever experienced. The streets were spotless, food was abundant, and crime was virtually nonexistent. Storeowners left their cash registers open while chatting with customers, and everything operated with precise efficiency.

One Friday, the Amshinover Rebbe and a group of refugees were scheduled to take a train to their next destination. But as the train prepared to depart, the Amshinover refused to board—there was no way to guarantee they would arrive in time for Shabbos. And if he wasn't going, neither was anyone else.

The interpreters pleaded with him, assuring him that Japan wasn't Poland—here, trains actually ran on time, but the Amshinover remained put until he saw the train begin moving precisely on schedule. Then, finally convinced, he stepped aboard; the rest of the refugees scrambled in behind him.

Tomchei Temimim settled into a large house. There were cots for sleeping, and for the *zal*, they even managed to secure chairs and tables—despite the local custom of sitting on the floor. The Amshinover Rebbe lived in the attic with his family but would come downstairs to hear *kedusha* and *leining*. (Once, he came down and asked a *bochur* where the *minyan* was holding. The *bochur* replied, “The chazan just said *melech meimis*.” The Amshinover Rebbe immediately responded, “*umechaye!*”)

Food was a constant challenge. With no *shechita* in Kobe, no refrigeration, and no cook, the *bochurim* had to figure it all out on their own. Their diet consisted mainly of rice, rice bread, vegetables, and fish.

One night, a *bochur* estimated that one cup of raw rice per person would be the perfect portion for dinner. Let's just say, there was more than enough to go around. On another occasion, they left fish outside overnight for the Shabbos day meal, assuming the cool air would keep it fresh. What they didn't realize was that it had been rained on and had spoiled. That night, the entire yeshiva lay groaning in pain on their cots, clutching their stomachs and laughing—after surviving the Nazis and the Soviets, they had been felled by Japanese fish.

Everything around them was foreign, but one thing

remained constant: the *sidrei hayeshiva*. They continued learning *nigleh* and *Chassidus*. The older *bochurim*, like Reb Volf Greenglass, taught the younger ones, while the others learned on their own. Yud-Beis Tammuz was celebrated publicly, joined by many other refugee *bochurim*. The light of Tomchei Temimim remained strong, and the hope to be reunited with the Frieddiker Rebbe helped them carry on to the next day.

WHEN SUNDAY IS SHABBOS AND SHABBOS IS SUNDAY

One of the more intriguing halachic dilemmas in Japan was determining when to observe Shabbos. The Chassidim—including students of Tomchei Temimim, Chachmei Lublin, and others—followed the lead of the Amshinover Rebbe and kept Shabbos on the local Saturday. However, the Mirrer Yeshiva *bochurim* and many *misnagdim* observed it on Sunday. Many in both camps took the cautious approach of refraining from *melacha* on both days.

The issue stemmed from the challenge of determining the *kav hataarich*, the halachic dateline. Most *poskim* held that it resembled the international dateline, deep in the Pacific Ocean, far beyond Japan. However, based on several *Rishonim*, the Chazon Ish ruled that the halachic dateline was at the coast of Asia. Since Japan is an island beyond that point, he held that Shabbos should be observed on Sunday.

The question took on greater urgency as summer gave way to fall and Yom Kippur approached. Telegrams flew back and forth between Japan and leading *Rabbonim*, seeking clarity on what to do. But before a final resolution could be reached, new developments rendered the question irrelevant.

The refugees had managed to extend their Japanese transit visas multiple times, but the Japanese authorities were growing increasingly impatient. As allies of Nazi Germany, their hospitality toward Jewish refugees was politically complicated. Culturally, Japan was wary of outsiders settling in its midst.

But there was another, more pressing reason behind their decision—one that was still a secret to the world. Japan was preparing for its attack on Pearl Harbor. With war against the United States on the horizon, they wanted

all foreigners off the mainland.

After seven months in Kobe and nearly two years since the war began, it was time to move again. With no other options, they decided to go to Shanghai.

THE INTERNATIONAL SETTLEMENT

A heartwarming sight greeted the *bochurim* as their ship pulled into Shanghai's harbor. Waiting for them was a Yid with a long beard, flanked by his two young daughters. It was Reb Meir Ashkenazi, a *Tomim* from Lubavitch and *rav* of Shanghai's Ashkenazi community. His presence was a welcome taste of home.

Shanghai was a city of stark contrasts. On one street, immense wealth stood side by side with crushing poverty. Some boulevards, to one observer, resembled President Street in Crown Heights, while others were the very picture of squalor.

Mainland China was largely undeveloped, desperately poor, and embroiled in a war with Japan. But certain port cities—Shanghai among them—had been shaped by foreign colonial powers like England and France. Decades earlier, these nations had established the International Settlement, a unique district that was technically not part of China—or any country at all. The result? A rare loophole: no visa was required to enter.

During those perilous times, Shanghai was the only place in the world where Jews could enter freely. As a result, despite being thousands of miles from any established Jewish community, it had become a refuge for thousands of Jews fleeing war and persecution.

The *bochurim* were welcomed with open arms. Reb Meir Ashkenazi was overjoyed to have *chassidische bochurim* in his midst and *farbrenge*d with them several times that month, speaking late into the night and sharing stories from Lubavitch. For the *bochurim*, it was the first time in over a year that they had a true *mashpia* with whom to *farbreng*.

Reb Meir did everything in his power to make them feel at home, and the local Jewish community rallied to help. Reb Meir was held in the highest regard by refugees and locals alike—including government officials—and his requests rarely went unanswered. Thanks to his efforts, the yeshiva was given a beautiful space in the French Quarter, settling in alongside the *bochurim* of Chachmei Lublin.



REB MEIR ASHKENAZI DURING HIS TIME AS RABBI OF SHANGHAI.

THE DECISION

After the Yomim Tovim, the *bochurim* gathered for a critical meeting. A very exciting development had occurred, which both exhilarated and worried them. The nine oldest *bochurim* had received visas to Canada. After a special farewell *farbrengen* with Reb Meir Ashkenazi, they had just left on a ship for Canada. They would go on to settle in Montreal and establish Tomchei Temimim there. But the younger *bochurim* were left behind. Until then, the *eltere bochurim* had served as *maggidei shiur* and *mashpiim*, but now the yeshiva was truly on its own.

They made a firm *hachlata*: the Rebbe's yeshiva would continue, stronger than ever. Full *sedorim* would be maintained. Learning would remain at the highest standard. Tomchei Temimim would not change, no matter what.

The results were remarkable. A small group of *bochurim*, far from family, without *Roshei Yeshiva* or *mashpiim*, learning, davening, and *farbrenging* just like in Lubavitch. Many other *bochurim* and refugees were drawn in, stopping by for a *shiur Tanya*, a *chassidisher* davening, or a *farbrengen*. The third year in exile began

on a high note.

On Yud-Tes Kislev, the *bochurim* held a grand far-brenge. Reb Meir Ashkenazi led the gathering, joined by the Amshinover Rebbe, the Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva Reb Chaim Shmuelevitz, and many local Jews and refugees. For those from Chabad families back in Russia, the night was filled with nostalgia, bringing back memories of the Yud-Tes Kislev farbrenge they had once attended in their hometowns.

The next morning, the mood shifted dramatically. The newspapers carried shocking headlines—Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor. The United States was now at war.

Overnight, all communication with America was severed. The Japanese, already in control of much of China, marched into the International Settlement and took over. Life became significantly harder—food supplies dwindled, restrictions tightened, and movement grew increasingly difficult.

But the *bochurim* pressed on. A letter had just reached them—a copy of one sent to the nine older *bochurim* who had arrived in Montreal. In it, the Friediker Rebbe emphasized the importance of Tomchei Temimim and urged them to use their new surroundings to strengthen Yiddishkeit.

The *bochurim* took it as a personal directive. They

redoubled their efforts in learning and began focusing more on the broader refugee community. Under the leadership of Reb Moshe Yitzchak Lis, a married *Tomim* who had escaped with them to Shanghai, they opened an afternoon Talmud Torah, as well as a *yeshiva ketana*. Hundreds of students enrolled.

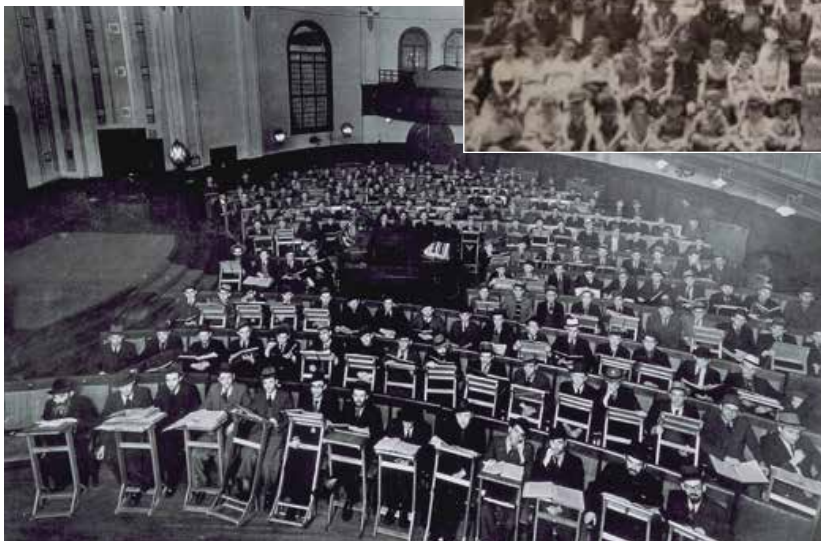
The *bochurim* threw themselves into the effort. Together with the *bochurim* of Chachmei Lublin, each took a student under his wing, learning with him and strengthening his connection to Yiddishkeit.

When a large group of *talmidim* showed exceptional progress in their learning, an arrangement was made with the Mirrer Yeshiva to open special classes for them, with Reb Chaim Shmuelevitz personally taking them under his wing. In that distant corner of the world, the spirit of Yiddishkeit began to flourish.

That summer, the sweltering heat and humidity of summer made maintaining regular *sedorim* nearly impossible, but when Tishrei 5703 arrived, the yeshiva regrouped with renewed strength. Once again, they made a firm *hachlata* to carry on. That *zman*, they learned *Gittin* and *Hemshech Ranat*.

It was now their fourth year in exile. And, as winter drew to a close, a new surprise was around the corner.

THE MIRRER YESHIVA IN SHANGHAI. REB CHAIM SHMUELEVITZ IS IN THE FRONT ROW, SECOND FROM RIGHT.



STUDENTS AND FACULTY OF THE 'TALMUD TORAH' IN SHANGHAI, 5706.

THE GHETTO

On Tes Adar II, tragic news reached the *bochurim*. Shmuel Avraham Chanowitz, their fellow *talmid*, had passed away after several months in the hospital, suffering from typhus. Along with the difficult personal news came concerning news about the plight of the refugees.

Japan made a sudden and alarming decision: all Jews were to be confined to a ghetto. The Jewish refugees were stunned. Despite Japan's alliance with Nazi Germany, they had never experienced direct hostility from the Japanese authorities. But now, under increasing German pressure, Japan was being urged to take harsher measures against its Jewish population. Rumors swirled—talk of a ghetto, and even chilling whispers of a plan to load Jews onto ships and abandon them at sea.

Jewish leaders scrambled to negotiate with Japanese officials, holding urgent meetings to plead their case. In one such meeting with a high-ranking official, the Amshinover Rebbe was in attendance. His dignified presence commanded respect.

The Japanese official turned to him and asked, “Tell me, why do the Germans hate you so much?”

“Because we are Asians,” the Amshinover Rebbe replied, shrewdly hinting to the Japanese—you shouldn't trust the Germans either.

The official was taken aback by the unexpected answer.

Thankfully, the worst fears never materialized. But the Japanese did go through with the ghetto; they forced the Jewish refugees into the poorest section of the city, although the established Russian and Sephardic Jewish communities were allowed to remain free. The yeshivos were crammed into tight quarters, their students forced to sleep in a government-issued building plagued by mosquitoes and unbearable summer heat.

After months of hardship, the *bochurim* were finally granted permission to rent private residences and reestablish the yeshiva. With that, the ghetto became less of an obstacle. Though they were required to wear Jewish identification pins and forbidden from leaving the ghetto in the evening, the authorities largely left them alone.

But life in the ghetto still had its absurdities. The Japanese officer in charge, a man named Goya, was short, ugly, and deeply resentful of the tall, fair-skinned Europeans under his command. Before granting an exit pass from the ghetto, he would often climb onto a chair and slap the applicant across the face.

Reb Shmuel Dovid Raichik, the *de facto menahel* of



A SIGN HUNG DURING THE WAR AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE GHETTO IN SHANGHAI.

the yeshiva, had to regularly endure this humiliation, as he frequently left the ghetto to meet with Reb Meir Ashkenazi regarding the yeshiva's needs. But he never made a fuss. It wasn't life-threatening, so he simply accepted it and moved on.

After the Yomim Tovim of 5704, the *bochurim* once again gathered with firm *hachlatos* for the future, and the winter was spent productively. They learned *Bava Metzia* and *Hemshech Samach Tesamach 5657*, hoping that the war would finally come to an end.

Month after month passed, and the war dragged on. Winter turned to summer. *Tof Shin Daled* became *Tof Shin Hei*. From *Bava Metzia*, they moved on to *Bava Basra*. But there was still no end in sight.

For over three years, the *bochurim* were completely cut off from the outside world. They had no contact with their families in Europe and no word from the Friediker Rebbe in New York. Whatever little money they received had to be carefully smuggled through neutral third-party countries. They waited, they learned, and they hoped.

The *bochurim* immersed themselves in their learning with remarkable *hasmada*. Among all the yeshivos in Shanghai, there was a shared feeling that they had been granted a unique protection from Hashem. They sensed a Divine hand guiding them; they were saved and brought to their corner of the world to keep Torah learning alive. That awareness fueled their devotion to learn even more.

In the summer of 5705, as the *bochurim* delved into the second half of *Bava Basra* and *Hemshech Ayin Beis*, the skies over Shanghai suddenly filled with planes. This time, they weren't German or Russian, but American. The U.S. military had begun bombing Japanese military installations in the city. The *bochurim*, who had miraculously escaped the Nazis and the Soviets, now had to find shelter from American air raids.

The Japanese allowed the Chinese locals to evacuate,

ABBI M. ASHKENAZI
 102 # Cardinal Meyer
 SHANGHAI
 TEL- 70992
 Shanghai, 29th April 1945
 הרב שאר מרדכי אשכנזי
 אשכנזי
 102 מס' קארדינל מייזר
 שנגן

To The SACRA
 Local

Dear Sirs,
 In connection with the Proclamation of 10th Feb. concerni
 ing all Stateless Refugees residing in Shanghai, which also inclu
 des my Rabbinical College at 35 Meulain Rd. I, as Dean, therefo
 re kindly request the permission of the members representing the
 Colleges of Lubavitch and Lublin, Rabbis Rejczyk and Zytmann, to r
 emain outside the designated area in order to help in leading the
 College besides being a necessity for the welfare of the Jewish
 Community in Shanghai.

I remain,
 Yours faithfully,
 Rabbi M. Ashkenazi

Rejczyk Szmul Dawid,
 Sacra registration No.0007.
 Zytmann Abram,
 Sacra registration No.0026.



LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASSIDEI CHABAD

A LETTER FROM REB MEIR ASHKENAZI REQUESTING PERMISSION FOR REB SHMUEL DOVID RAICHIK TO EXIT THE GHETTO ON BEHALF OF THE YESHIVA.

but the Jews in the ghetto were locked in. Their buildings were too weak to withstand the bombings, and hastily built shelters became their only protection. Night after night, they would scatter at the sound of approaching planes, bracing for the next round of destruction.

After weeks of chaos, the *bochurim* held a meeting. They needed a solution. If the war continued, they had to find a safe, sturdy building where they could maintain their *sedorim*. The current situation was simply unsustainable.

It was Rosh Chodesh Elul 5705. That night, everything changed. The Japanese surrendered. The war was over.

THE FIRST SIGN OF LIFE

On Motzei Yom Kippur 5706, the *bochurim* danced with uncontainable joy. The day before, a telegram had arrived from New York—the first sign of life from the Frierdiker Rebbe in three years. In it, the Frierdiker Rebbe instructed them to apply for visas to come to America. After six years of wandering, it seemed like the end of their odyssey was finally in sight.

But they knew the process wouldn't be quick or simple. So, as they had done throughout the war, they pressed



THE BOCHURIM IN SHANGHAI AT THE WAR'S END.

forward, throwing themselves into learning. That winter *zman*, they chose to study *Kesubos* and *Hemshech Tik'u* 5694.

Then, the full weight of the news from Europe hit. Their worst fears were confirmed. Nearly all their families had been murdered. For most, there were no known survivors.

One *bochur*, Reb Gershon Chanowitz, wrote a poignant letter to his uncle, Reb Moshe Leib Rodshtein:

"I'm afraid to look out at the world. I'm afraid to open the window of my *teivah* and breathe the fresh air after the *mabul*... I'm still in shock.

"You received the news little by little, and you had the presence of the Rebbe *shlita* to give you perspective. But we got it all in one shot.

"I remember a story I once heard from a *badchan* at a *Rebbishe chasuna*. He said that during the last war, he saw a Cossack fleeing on his horse at full speed when his enemy came from the other side and struck him down, cutting off his head. The Cossack was riding so fast that he didn't even realize what had happened—until he finally stopped to rest and reached into his pocket for a pinch of tobacco. When he couldn't find his nose, he suddenly understood. His head was gone. He was dead.

"For six years, we've been running. I'm afraid of what will happen when I finally stop to think..."⁴

As the visa process dragged on, the *bochurim* received a request from the Rebbe—who was serving as the director of Kehos—to print Kehos *seforim* in China, taking advantage of the inexpensive and efficient publishing methods available there (see *Pinpoints* in this issue).

Finally, in Tammuz, their long wait was over. Visas

