



לזכות
הרה"ח הרה"ת ר' גדלי' שיחי' קארף
לרגל יום הולדתו התשעים
יום א' דחנוכה כ"ה כסלו ה'תש"פ
נדפס ע"י בניו ובנותיו וצאצאיהם שיחיו



SECRECY, STEALTH AND INSPIRATION THE STORY OF EZRAS ACHIM

This is a partial history of Ezras Achim, the institution created to support and enable the existence of Yiddishkeit in the Soviet Union from 5724* until the complete collapse of the Communist regime in the early 5750s*.

A Chassidisher Derher extends a special thank you to the many individuals who were interviewed for this article: Rabbi Zalman Aharon Grossbaum, Rabbi Nosson Gurary, Rabbi Meir Gutnick, Rabbi Shmulik Heber, Rabbi Gedalia Korf, Rabbi Zalman Levertov, Rabbi Yosef Levertov, Rabbi Berel Levertov, Rabbi Shlomo Zuntz and Mrs. Bracha Levertov.



“As soon as he arrived, he called a meeting in our home for a group of men. He rebuked us for living in luxury at a time when our brethren in Russia starved.”

CONTACT THEM?

“A short time after we left the Soviet Union *a”h*,” related Rabbi Moishe Levertov, “we received a letter from my sister asking us to stop writing letters. ‘Father has fallen ill,’ she wrote, hinting that he had been arrested. From that point on, we completely lost contact.”

A large segment of Lubavitcher Chassidim had left Russia on the famous “*eshalons*,” posing as Polish refugees after World War II. However, many of them left behind friends and family members who weren’t as lucky.

For those that remained in Russia, maintaining contact with foreigners was a grave danger. To the Soviet government, any contact with the free world was considered suspicious, and it was even more dangerous for religious Jews who were already under close scrutiny.

“The single communication that we had over several years,” said Reb Moishe, “was in the form of an anonymous note we received in 5710*. ‘Nochum Zalman’s father-in-law [=my father] died on 7 Elul.’ We never found out how that note made it to us.”

The relatives left behind were always at the front of the minds of Chassidim. At each large *farbrengen*, the Rebbe would conclude with a *sicha* about Russian Jewry; *anash* frequently asked the Rebbe for *brachos* and advice on getting their relatives out. But, living on the other side of the world, there was virtually nothing they could do.

Then, a crack opened. In 5724*, Reb Mendel Futerfas was granted an exit visa in a special gesture of the Soviet government, and he arrived in New York to see the Rebbe for Yud-Tes Kislev.

“As soon as he arrived,” Reb Moishe’s wife, Mrs. Bracha Levertov, related to *A Chassidisher Derher*, “he called a meeting in our home for a group of men. He rebuked us for living in luxury at a time when our brethren in Russia starved. I remember looking around at my collection of used furniture, thinking to myself, ‘You call this luxury?’ But compared to the situation in Russia, it was luxurious indeed.”

“Reb Mendel suggested that *anash* in New York send care-packages to the Jews in the Soviet Union,” Reb Moishe related. I recall being very surprised about his suggestion. When we had lived in Russia, even a letter from a foreign country terrified us. But evidently, the situation had changed a bit.”

A small group of *yungeleit* gathered and decided to take action. A *vaad* was formed, including Harav Zalman Shimon Dvorkin, Reb Leibel Motchkin, Reb Moshe Morosow, Reb Moishe Levertov and *ybchl”ch* Reb Gedalia Korf. They named their start-up organization Lishkas Ezras Achim.

The office was housed in Reb Moishe’s basement, and was initially run entirely as a volunteer organization. When operations began to pick up, Reb Shlomo Zuntz was hired to run the day-to-day activities. Later, more people joined the *vaad*. These included: Reb Yisroel Duchman, Reb Shea Pinson, Reb Zelig Katzman, Reb Hirsh Meilach Spalter, Reb Moshe Slonim and others.



Ezras Achim would later grow to be a significant organization, organizing shluchim's entry into Russia and undertaking other dangerous projects. At the outset, however, the goal was very simple: To send packages to the Jews of the Soviet Union so that they could survive another day while maintaining their Yiddishkeit.

"Russia was still a very dangerous place," recalls Reb Gedalia Korf, "and there was a great need for secrecy. Specifically, the Rebbe's involvement needed to stay secret. Therefore, Ezras Achim was never directly or officially associated with the Rebbe, and the Rebbe's constant emphasis was on the importance of secrecy."

"It was easy to find addresses to people in Russia," explained Reb Moishe. "It was actually more difficult to find out who *really* needed help. From the very beginning, we focused on sending packages to the more Torah-observant families, because we knew those families were much more in need. First of all, keeping Shabbos meant to be basically unemployed, because Shabbos was a regular workday. Secondly, kosher food was difficult to come by, and thirdly, those families had many more mouths to feed. Within a short few years, our lists became very extensive, and we had addresses from Samarkand all the way to the region of the Carpathian Mountains."

A BLACK MARKET OPERATION

Sending a single package to a family once every few months seems limited in scope and impact.



LEFT TO RIGHT: RABBI GEDALYA KORF, RABBI LEIBEL MOCHKIN, AND RABBI MOSHE LEVERTOV, THREE OF THE FOUNDING MEMBERS OF EZRAS ACHIM.

17 SIVAN 5746, LEVI FREIDIN VIA JEW 272034

However, in Ezras Achim they soon hit upon an idea.

"They would make investigations," explains Rabbi Yosef Levertov, Reb Moishe's son, "about the Russian black market. Instead of sending basic items, they would send items that would fetch a high price on the Russian street, and the proceeds would enable a family to survive for considerable periods of time.

"Parker pens, for example, were a high commodity in Russia. Colorful pens and colorful bed sheets were quite expensive, and in later years, jeans fetched a very high price (foreigners in Russia were often attacked in the street and their jeans jackets robbed from them).

"For every item that was sent into Russia, a 100% tax was levied by the Russian government. Obviously, Ezras Achim footed the bill, so if every package cost about \$60, an additional \$60 was paid to the Communists. The return address would usually be an address with a similar name, so the package would seem to be coming from family."

"In our house, we had an extension to the basement phone which received calls from Russia," says Mrs. Levertov, "and when calls would arrive in the middle of the night, I would often be the one

to pick up. One night, we received a call from one of the Ezras Achim shluchim visiting Russia. He asked me to send him an underwater camera, 'because I like taking pictures during my laps.' At the time, I didn't know what laps were, but once we clarified that issue, I understood that underground cameras would fetch a good price on the market."

"The Rebbe very much approved of the technique of packages," says Rabbi Zuntz. "Sending money directly was illegal, as were some other ideas we had, and could get the Jews in Russia into more trouble, and so the Rebbe always rejected them. The package, on the other hand, was presented as an innocent parcel from a relative, so the receiver wouldn't have any problems from the Russian government.

"In our fundraising too, the Rebbe wanted limited publicity. Even though we were a public organization that conducted public appeals, the Rebbe always ensured that we would be extra careful. We once wanted to obtain a list of addresses in New York and do a massive mailing for a fundraising drive, but the Rebbe rejected the idea, saying, 'כל ספק בכגון דא ישי'—להחמיר—whenever in doubt in



BAKING MATZOS IN RUSSIA.



A MIKVEH BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN.

ARCHIVES OF EZRAS ACHIM



THE REBBE POURS L'CHAIM FOR REB MENDEL FUTERFAS, SHORTLY AFTER HIS ARRIVAL FROM RUSSIA, CIRCA 5724.

RABBI AHARON GOLDSTEIN

these situations it is preferable to be extra cautious.”

When the Sefer Hashluchim was printed in 5752*, the shluchim

of Ezras Achim (even those already living in Russia) were listed simply as “Ezras Achim - Brooklyn.”

Correspondence with the Rebbe was usually done in writing and through the *mazkirus*. However, there were occasions, Mrs. Levertov relates, where more inconspicuous channels were needed.

“My husband once needed an answer on a delicate topic, on a day that the Rebbe happened to go to *mikveh*. I was the *mikveh* attendant in those years, and I would normally prepare for the Rebbe’s visit. On that occasion, my husband went instead of me and used the opportunity to receive the Rebbe’s answer when he arrived.”

THIS TAKES PRECEDENCE

The costs associated with running the organization were quite extensive, and fundraising was essential to the *mosad’s* survival.

The earliest fundraising attempts were simple appeals in shuls. Members of the *vaad*, such

He welcomed us very kindly and gave us his own Mussar hour to launch the campaign, and the Rebbe was very pleased about this.

טובה פעולה אחת מאלף אנחות

Rabbi Berel Levertov relates: "On Ezras Achim stationary, there was a famous quote from the Rebbe Rashab "טובה פעולה אחת מאלף אנחות" - One action is better than a thousand sighs." The idea was that although many people are demonstrating for Russia and expressing their discomfort to the way the Yidden are being treated there, they are not accomplishing much, whereas Ezras Achim is actually doing work to help the Russian Yidden. One time, members of Ezras Achim wrote a duch in which they wrote about how various things were not working out. The Rebbe responded by circling the quote and marked an arrow to where the complaints were."

ARCHIVES OF EZRAS ACHIM

as Reb Gedalia Korf and Reb Moishe Levertov, would walk long distances each Shabbos to speak in a shul, and the simple shul-goers would pledge small donations, such as two-times-*chai* and the like. Later, parlor meetings were arranged, and more sophisticated methods were applied to the fundraising efforts.

"Our work," relates Rabbi Zuntz, "began much before the movement for Soviet Jews became popular in the wider Jewish world in the 5730s* and 40s*. However, we were welcomed in many from communities outside of Lubavitch. Many religious Jews from Poland had spent time in Russia during World War II, and knew firsthand about the suffering of Jews there and the *mesiras nefesh* of Lubavitcher Chassidim. They always welcomed us with open arms."

One notable story took place in Lakewood's Beis Medrash

Govoha. In addition to the regular parlor meetings that were held in Lakewood as part of the campaigns in schools, Ezras Achim approached the Lakewood Yeshiva itself. Rabbi Zuntz recalls what happened:

"The *mashgiach* there was Reb Nosson Meir Wachtfogel, who was a very *varemer* Yid. He welcomed us very kindly and gave us his own *musar* hour to launch the campaign, and the Rebbe was very pleased about this."

As more and more Yidden started coming out of Russia, they would often help us in the fundraising efforts, joining our meetings with *baalei batim* and sharing firsthand how the packages helped them and their families tremendously when they were still living there. The Rebbe encouraged the new Russian immigrants to take part in these efforts, increasing the reach of Ezras Achim through their very personal accounts. Chassidim like Reb Dovid Okunov and Reb Yosef Nimoytin, who had previously been beneficiaries of Ezras Achim,

were very influential in the fundraising efforts.

The Rebbe saw the work of Ezras Achim as extremely important, as expressed in the following anecdote related by Rabbi Zuntz:

"Two elderly Chassidim, Reb Elya Simpson and Reb Kaddish Romanoff, once planned to make their yearly trip to Chicago, where they would fundraise for *maamad*. When they informed the Rebbe of their plans, the Rebbe instructed them to hold off their trip until Ezras Achim members would return from Chicago, where they were launching a campaign for Russian Jewry.

"The Rebbe said that our work was *pidyon shvuyim mid'oraysa*, and therefore should take precedence. We heard about this *hora'a* at the time, and to us, it was very heartening."

SHOE POLISH

Following the Six-Day War, there was a major awakening among Russian Jewry. The news about the Jewish victory raised the

dormant spark that had flickered for so many years, and soon small study groups were springing up all over the country where young Jews would study Hebrew, learn about Yiddishkeit, and express their hope to move to Eretz Yisrael.

As the years passed, the authorities slightly weakened their grip on the country, allowing for some more contact to take place. Travel between the continents became more common, and members of Ezras Achim decided to make use of the opportunity to send young Chassidim disguised as tourists with items that they so desperately needed.

Reb Gedalia Korf shares:

“We always chose *yungeleit* who could deliver nice *shiuurim* and be an inspiration to the local Jews. For this reason, many of our ‘tourists’ were actually shluchim or rabbis who were already established in their cities, such as Rabbi Grunblatt of Argentina, who traveled to Russia twice.

Sometimes, the shluchim would travel with their wives, and other times, we would send them with one of our supporters.

“Besides for the regular pairs of shluchim and occasional couples, we periodically sent individuals who specialized in a certain field. For example, we once sent a certain Dr. Kenneth Prager to go deal with the state of medicine in the Jewish community in Russia. Because of his prominent standing, he later became a popular speaker at our parlor meetings with supporters.”



RABBI TZVI GRUNBLATT FARBRENGS WITH LOCALS IN MOSCOW

LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASIDEI CHABAD



RABBI HIRSHEL FOGELMAN FARBRENGS AND DANCES WITH YIDDEN IN LENINGRAD, 5742.

LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASIDEI CHABAD

In addition to personal messengers, Ezras Achim would send parcels with other individuals traveling to Russia.

As Reb Zalman Aharon Grossbaum, shliach to Ontario, relates:

“When I traveled with Reb Leibel Kaplan to Russia, we brought along a number of *tashmishei kedusha*. Each item seemed innocuous. For example, we had a *milah* knife nestled innocently next to a block of cheese. Besides for the *tashmishei kedusha*, we also brought a 35mm

camera, which was very expensive in those days, and we left it in Russia to be sold on the black market (its proceeds were enough to support a family for a year!). That was the only thing that they paid real attention to; they always took inventory of all the ‘foreign’ items that weren’t available in Russia, and made sure you left the country with them, so on our way out, we claimed that we had lost it.”

Mrs. Levertov shared with us some other examples:

“*Safrus* ink was always stored in a shoe polish container, after one individual had his ink confiscated when he showed up at the border with no fountain-pen to go along with it. One couple once brought a large *chalaf* with a long block of salami, and the wife explained that she liked cutting her salami ‘the long way.’ We would get *tallis katan* material directly from the factories, cut into large pieces that could later be cut into four *tallis katans*, so they looked like tablecloths.

“At the beginning, many of the new *sefarim* we sent were immediately confiscated, so we began to ensure the books looked

old. I would pour coffee and ketchup on the edges, scrunch the pages a bit, and let my babies fool around with them. One fellow told the border guards that his many books were for his university studies, and he needed all of them throughout his trip. The guards allowed them through, but they wrote down how many books he came with, and warned him that he better bring them all back out. He happened to be in Russia over Tisha B’av, so he replaced all his books with the leftover Kinot in shul, and the border guards didn’t pick up on his ruse.

“When the first group of shlichim came to Russia, the

Russian Chassidim asked them to leave behind their tefillin. They obviously did so, and during their return trip, they needed to rush to find tefillin at stopovers. Later, we began sending several pairs with each group. When Reb Hirshel Fogelman and his wife traveled to Russia, for example, we sent them with four pairs of tefillin. Rabbi Fogelman had a whole speech prepared explaining why he needed each pair, but the border guard was having difficulty understanding him and called over his superior. Looking at the four pairs, his superior didn’t see any issue at all. He said, ‘It’s easy,

RABBI SHMUEL HEBER ON SHLICHUS IN RUSSIA, 5744.



IT’S A BOMBEH!

Before their departure, the shlichim would often receive a *maaneh* from the Rebbe about the need for caution, and a clear instruction to exchange the Rebbe’s *shlichus mitzvah* dollars only through legal channels.

“The Rebbe *always* instructed people to exchange money legally,” explains Reb Shmuel Heber, who traveled to Russia several times as a shliach of Ezras Achim. “This was especially important, because the official exchange rate was pegged by the authorities to be 30 kopeks to the dollar, but in reality, a single dollar could fetch one hundred rubles on the black market. Tourists would often try their luck on the street, so the government would set up undercover policemen posing as money changers to lure tourists. It was only because of the Rebbe’s clear-cut instructions that we never attempted to do so.”

Rabbi Heber remembers an instance where he learned how much the Rebbe valued the secrecy. Rabbi Heber’s travel companion wrote up a list of addresses of Russian Jews, making only 3-4 copies, for himself, Ezras Achim, Rabbi Heber (who was due to travel there again) and the Rebbe. To their utter surprise, the Rebbe spoke very sharply about the matter at the next farbrengen, saying that the list endangered all the Yidden there and that it was a *bombeh*, no less. “I was so frightened,” says Rabbi Heber. “As soon as the Rebbe ended the farbrengen I raced home and incinerated my copy.”

Every word was recorded and listened to, and searches were often conducted when visitors were outside of their rooms.

two pairs for the husband and two pairs for his wife...'

"We also acquired a machine to preserve and can meat, and we were thereby able to send kosher meat into Russia as well."

MAGIC SLATE

The shluchim who traveled to Russia had a singular mission: To enliven the spirits of the Jews who were suffering under the oppression of the Communist regime. Beyond this general description, there were a variety of things to be done. Some shluchim delivered *shiurim*, others held *farbrengens*, and others fulfilled various rabbinic roles, like *siddur kiddushin*.

No matter what their official job was, extreme measures needed to be taken to ensure complete secrecy around their activities. The shluchim always presented themselves as religious Jews and frequented the local shul; after all, being observant wasn't forbidden under Russian law. However, anyone caught teaching or contacting a local group of observant Jews would be placing that entire group in jeopardy (the shluchim themselves, as American citizens, were considered relatively safe; the most the Russian authorities could do was to expel them from the country after interrogating them).

To ensure that tourists wouldn't have too much contact with the locals, they created an extensive system to control them.

"Most shluchim only went to Moscow and Leningrad," relates Rabbi Heber, "because the

Ministry of Tourism didn't allow tourists to visit most cities. There was a system called Intourist, which controlled everything a tourist did. They booked your hotels, they arranged your trips, and they provided the visas which you needed for each individual city. This considerably hampered your ability to do things. As soon as you arrived in the airport, the Intourist guide would meet you and take you to your hotel."

The Intourist hotels were also thoroughly bugged. Every word was recorded and listened to, and searches were often conducted when visitors were outside of their rooms. Whenever they needed to discuss delicate issues, the shluchim would make use of a "magic slate," a children's toy where you can write things down and then immediately erase them by raising the sheet of paper off the board.

In earlier years, visiting private homes wasn't common, because of the consequences the family would

suffer. As the regime lightened its control, shluchim began visiting local families in secret, but always made sure to give a different address to the taxi drivers—several buildings ahead or behind—to cover their trails.

THE DISHWASHER

The shluchim would normally make their presence known by visiting the local shul, such as Marina Roscha in Moscow. But they couldn't just approach anyone.

"On the first day we arrived in 5742*," relates Reb Zalman Levertov, today shliach in Arizona, "someone walked up behind us and whispered a warning not to talk to anyone in shul. It was Reb Mottel der Shochet, one of the legendary members of the Chabad underground in Moscow. A few minutes later, when apparently no informants were present, he returned and asked us, 'How is the Rebbetzin?'"



THE MORE YOU GIVE, THE MORE YOU GET

The following is an excerpt from the Rebbe's *sicha*, at a *farbrengen* before an *Ezras Achim melaveh malkah*:³

The help that the Yidden here provide for their brethren behind the Iron Curtain pales in comparison to the *hashpa'a* they receive through the *mesiras nefesh* of the Jews there.

Every deed of Torah and mitzvos done by the Yidden there entails *mesiras nefesh*; this situation has lasted over 50 years, and nevertheless, they persevere! The Gemara says⁴ that had Chananya, Mishael and Azarya been tortured for a length of time, who knows if they would have withstood the pressure, yet the Jews in Russia have withstood the pressure for over 50 years!

Moreover: Chanaya, Mishael and Azarya were fully knowledgeable in Torah and mitzvos, yet the Jews behind the Iron Curtain did not receive a Jewish education—not them nor their parents... Some of them don't know what a *sefer Torah* is! When someone mentions a *sefer Torah*, they ask, "*Shto takoy sefer Torah*—what is a *sefer Torah*?"

All they know is that their grandmother told them that they are Jewish, and that they need to circumcise their children... And because of this knowledge, that they are Jews, they risk everything they have...

In reality, we receive help from them, because their *mesiras nefesh* is a lesson and *nesinas koach* for us. However, to ensure that this *hashpa'a* isn't "*nahama d'chisufa*, free bread," we must also help them...

"This was right after the Rebbetzin had broken her foot, but we hadn't heard about it at all. Somehow, the Jews in Moscow were better informed than us, and that was the most important thing they had on their minds. We were simply blown away when that happened."

Every encounter with local Yidden was weighed down with the knowledge of a potential run-in with the KGB.

"There was one occasion," relates Rabbi Heber, "where I gave a class in the home of a *baal*

teshuva who was already under the scrutiny of the KGB. During the class, there was a knock on the door, so they immediately directed me to go into the kitchen and wash the dishes, to make my presence seem innocent. As it turned out, it was the superintendent of the building (who was also an agent of the government, but still not as frightening as an actual KGB visit)."

There were occasions when the shluchim were arrested and sent out of the country. When Reb Yisroel Deren traveled to

Russia with Reb Levi Yitzchak Raskin, he was 'invited' into the hotel basement where he was interrogated by a panel of KGB officers who demonstrated that they knew everything he had done throughout his trip. For two days, they were locked in their hotel room, until the American embassy got involved and they were summarily expelled from the country.²

Sometimes, the trips seemed to go well, but the implications didn't end there. When Reb Zalman Levertov and Reb Nosson Gurary's trip to Russia came to a close, their baggage seemed to have gotten lost. In it was also a camera with pictures of their journey and it was delivered only several days later. The Rebbe was informed of this development and about the trip in general, and he said that they should not worry. Several months later, Rabbi Levertov relates, "The Rebbe told Rabbi Yaakov Yehuda Hecht that he was still worried about the implications of our trip..."

One of the most poignant moments of the trips would be when the shluchim would record audio or videos of the Russian Jews speaking directly to the Rebbe. The speakers would go to *mikveh* beforehand, preparing themselves as if they were going into *yechidus*, and they would have an opportunity to say a few words. The video would be recorded at the middle of a cassette, so that if the authorities would watch the beginning of the film, it would seem to be an empty video.

He had lived all his life in locations with a strong Chabad presence. Where did he find his connection? In a lonely fifth floor apartment behind the Iron Curtain

(WLCC would also send videos of the Rebbe to Russia, packaged as brand-new, empty video cassettes.) Back in New York, the Rebbe would personally watch the films.

JOHANNESBURG - PHILADELPHIA - LENINGRAD

In later years, Ezras Achim's activities continued to grow. They paid for the passage of Jews out of Russia at times when it was prohibitively expensive, because the Russian government would charge each individual retroactively for the university education he received in the Soviet Union. For college graduates like

Professor Yirmiyahu Branover, the cost was many thousands of dollars.

"We also built *mikvaos* in the Soviet Union," says Reb Gedalia Korf. "Our first *mikveh* was in Marina Roscha; it took real ingenious efforts to obtain cement to build, but by the time it was finished, the authorities discovered it, and they closed it down. The news reached Washington and it created a diplomatic crisis for them. Eventually they allowed it to be reopened."

As the Soviet Union began to fall, Ezras Achim set the foundation for shlichus in Russia,

sending and supporting the first group of couples to move there in the late 5740s* and early 5750s*. These included Rabbi Berel Lazar, Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetzki and others. Many *bochurim* also traveled all across Russia on behalf of Ezras Achim to assist communities, direct camps and other activities.

With all of their accomplishments, it always paled in their eyes to the stature of the Jews they were assisting. The *mesiras nefesh* of the Russian Jews continued to astound them, even after decades of involvement.



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RABBI MOSHE LEVERTOV (CENTER) AND RABBI GEDALYA KORF (LEFT), DIRECTORS OF EZRAS ACHIM, RECEIVE DOLLARS FROM THE REBBE, 3 SIVAN 5750.



“When I traveled to Russia,” relates Reb Nosson Gurary, “I was amazed at the willpower of the Jews we met. The people we met were unbelievably *derhoiben*.

“There was an unbelievable yearning and desire among the Russian Jews to learn and find out what was going on near the Rebbe. Many of these individuals were already being followed by the secret police; we were often warned not to speak out loud and to write instead, because the walls of their homes were bugged. But in the face of all their hardships, they persevered.

“The experience was so powerful, that although we thought we had come to give to them, in the end we received much more.” [The Rebbe himself emphasized this point at a farbrengen before an Ezras Achim fundraiser. [See sidebar]].

On this note, Reb Zalman Aharon Grossbaum shared a fascinating experience from his visit:

“Before Rabbi Kaplan and I traveled to Russia, the Rebbe gave us a bottle of *mashke* at

the farbrengen, and said ‘*S’zol zain bichashai*,’ meaning that we shouldn’t announce the purpose of the *mashke* as was customary at the farbrengen.

“After *kriah* on the Monday before we left, we stood near the Rebbe’s door, and he gave Rabbi Kaplan and myself a crisp \$100 bill, instructing us to change it in a legal manner and distribute it as *Chanukah gelt* (it was right before Chanukah). He blessed us that we be able to distribute it in an appropriate manner (it was difficult to know how much to give to each individual, as we never knew who we would meet the next day...).

“We traveled to Moscow, Kiev, and Leningrad. One main point of our mission was to inspect the *mikveh* in Kiev, but what I remember most is the unbelievable *mesiras nefesh* of the Chassidim of Russia. They didn’t just care for their own Yiddishkeit; there was a considerable contingency of Chassidim who actively encouraged other Jews to strengthen their Yiddishkeit, despite the potential repercussions.

“We spent a Shabbos with Reb Yitzchok Kogan in Leningrad.

He had a secret *minyán* in his fifth floor apartment every Friday night, and the participants would enter and leave discreetly, one by one, so as not to attract attention.

“I noticed a young man there, and approached him to open a conversation. I opened in Hebrew, but he didn’t understand. He didn’t understand my Yiddish either. To my shock, he began speaking to me in perfect English! As it turned out, he was a South African who lived in Philadelphia, and he had arrived in the Soviet Union as an exchange student majoring in languages.

“So you found Yiddishkeit through Chabad in South Africa?” I asked.

“No,” he replied.

“So it must have been in Philadelphia,” I said.

“Not there either,” he answered. ‘In Leningrad, I met Rabbi Kogan, and he brought me to Yiddishkeit.’

“I was floored. He had lived all his life in locations with a strong Chabad presence, and yet no one had reached him there. Where did he find his connection? In a lonely fifth floor apartment behind the Iron Curtain, in a secret *minyán*, where the participants had to quietly enter one by one to ensure nobody noticed...” **1**

1. This was the basic gist of the response. The words may have been slightly different.

2. See *Dyedushkah* pg. 494.

3. Shabbos Tzetzaveh 5745.

4. Kesubos 32b.

SAFRUS YESHIVA

Rabbi Meir Hakohen Gutnick relates the following:

In 5746*, I was asked by Ezras Achim to travel to Russia in my capacity as a *shochet* and *sofer*.

There hadn't been a *sofer* in Russia for many years and there was a dire need for various *safrus* issues, including several couples that needed a *get* written for them, and the lack of a *sofer* made it impossible.

However, there was a more audacious mission planned. Ezras Achim wanted me to educate a group of Russian *bochurim* in *safrus*, so they would no longer need to rely on visitors from the free world. I was also to test several youngsters who had studied *shechita*, and give them *kabbalah*.

Before my trip, I received several dollars from the Rebbe together with a *bracha* for the trip. I was briefed by Reb Gedalia Korf about all the necessary precautions and prepared all the necessary things I needed for my mission. I wrapped the parchment around some glass jars of food, and when asked at the airport what it was for, I told them it was to protect the glass from breaking. The ink I told them was for shoe-polish. The *gidin* to sew up tefillin, I said was string, and my *chalaf* to *shecht* chickens was to cut cheese.

When my partner Reb Chaim Dovid Wichnin from Morristown and I arrived at the Moscow airport, the excuses that we gave at the airport control miraculously seemed plausible to them and they didn't see anything amiss with those items, but they confiscated some of the *sefarim* and tapes we had brought.

They then ushered us into a large room in the airport where we were surrounded by a group of soldiers who stood in a circle all around the room. We waited there for many hours. At about 2:00 a.m., a high-ranking official finally walked in, and we were separated into individual rooms to be interrogated. Amongst many questions, they wanted to know the reason for our visit, who sent us and whom we would be visiting. They also asked why we brought cassette tapes, and what were they for. (I had brought a number of Nichoach music cassette tapes and recordings of *shiurim*). They also wanted to know why my partner had some forms which were intended for Jews who wanted to immigrate to Israel. He seemed quite bothered about it. I told him that they can't expect me to know what was in someone else's suitcase.

At the close of the interrogation, we were informed that a decision would be made the next day as to whether or not to send us back to New York. Meanwhile, they took us by car to a building next to the airport where we were placed in a room overnight, with no door handle on the inside of the door, and a small inconspicuous listening device on the ceiling. The next morning, they took us back to the airport, where we met another KGB officer who informed us that we would be allowed to remain as long as we did not do anything "illegal."

After leaving our things in the Metropol hotel, we traveled to the Moscow shul where we met our contact. In a long roundabout manner, I was brought to a house with drawn curtains where a large group of *bochurim*, who had already started

to learn some of the laws of *safrus* weeks before, awaited my arrival. For several weeks, from early morning until late at night, I sat and taught them all the different laws of *safrus*. They had prepared a mountain of old pairs of tefillin and mezuzos, and we went through them together and discussed the various problems found and repaired them when possible. There were some very beautiful *parshius*, a number with the Alter Rebbe's *ksav*. Rabbi Wichnin meanwhile separately gave *shiurim* to the older men on different topics.

We spent several weeks in Moscow and Leningrad, and our unique trip was *baruch Hashem* a success without being bothered by the authorities during our stay. In addition to teaching *safrus*, we arranged the necessary *giting* for several couples, and gave *kabbalah* for *shechita*.

Upon our return, I gave Reb Binyomin Klein a report and several photographs of our makeshift yeshiva, and he showed them to the Rebbe. Afterwards, he reported to me that the Rebbe was clearly elated and expressed his delight at what he saw, and had spent time inspecting the photos and commenting on them.

This endeavor had been very unique, in that we gave the Russian boys tools to be able to do *safrus* and *shechita* on their own, instead of relying on outside help, and the Rebbe was obviously very pleased about it. Following my trip, other *sofrim* were sent to continue the *safrus* classes.

Some of my students, including the Tamarin brothers and others, are still practicing *sofrim* and *shochtim*.



RABBI MEIR HACHOEN GUTNIK TEACHES SAFRUS TO A GROUP OF RUSSIAN BOCHURIM, 5746.