

# *The Very Life of the Rabbeim*

*Bringing back the Seforim  
from Captivity in Russia*

*By: Mendel Zaklikovsky*

לזכות הורינו  
ר' אברהם שמואל זזוגתו  
מרת רבקה מירל שיחיו שפאלטר  
ר' משה חיים זזוגתו מרת שרה שיחיו גיפען

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

The story of the Library of Agudas Chasidei Chabad is a long and intricate saga. Its many volumes painstakingly collected by the Rabbeim over the generations, together with the many priceless *kesovim*, make it the “crown jewel” of Chabad-Lubavitch.

The Rebbe declared that every artifact belonging to the library is invested with a spiritual part of the Rabbeim, possessing immense *kedusha* and infinite value. Indeed, the struggle of our Rabbeim to maintain and expand the library demonstrates its significance to them. What is a better example than the story of Hei Teves which so clearly illustrates the Rebbe’s *mesiras nefesh* for the library?

As the library traveled across borders and oceans, even surviving two world wars, a large part of the library was lost and fell into foreign hands. Even today, thousands of *seforim* and *kesovim*, known as the “Schneerson Collection,” are held illegitimately in Russian government libraries.

In honor of Hei Teves, the day that the federal court ruled that the Rebbe’s library is the inheritance of every Chossid, we present the full story of the effort to retrieve the stranded *seforim*, an effort initiated by the Rebbe himself.

It is our hope that this will serve as an inspiration to our readers, and lead to concrete action (as will be addressed in the article).

In researching this story, we were greatly assisted by Rabbi Shlomo Cunin and his family, who graciously shared valuable information from their archives.<sup>1</sup> We also made significant use of Rabbi Sholom Ber Levin’s diary of the *shlichus*, published in “*Yoman Hashlichus Hameyuchedes*.”

# Sacred Treasures

At the center of the Chabad-Lubavitch court stands the Library of Agudas Chassidei Chabad, containing priceless manuscripts, the *kisvei yad kodesh* of our Rabbeim. In addition, the library boasts hundreds of thousands of *seforim*, collected by the Rabbeim over the generations.

The library's history begins with the Tzemach Tzedek, who started collecting and cataloging *kesovim* during the Alter Rebbe's lifetime. The Tzemach Tzedek also started the collection of *seforim*.

The town of Lubavitch was composed of wooden buildings and structures, making the city easy prey for wild and destructive fires. Around the year 5617 a fire broke out in Lubavitch. At the time, many of the Tzemach Tzedek's manuscripts were not in his home, since Chassidim would borrow them to study from or copy. This did not help the situation though, because the fire spread throughout the town, and most of the *kesovim* did not survive.

The fire took a heavy toll on the new library. In addition to the invaluable works of *nigleh* penned by the Tzemach Tzedek that were destroyed, the entire collection of *seforim* was burned. The Tzemach Tzedek was left with barely a single *sefer*. Thankfully though, a substantial amount of *kesovim* did survive. These, along with *seforim* the Tzemach Tzedek bought in the years following the fire, made up the Chabad library at the time of his *histalkus*.

The Rebbe Maharash continued the library's growth, in addition to maintaining the existing collection. He affixed stickers to the volumes of *kisvei yad*, describing the volume's

contents. Many of these stickers remain today, and have helped the library staff identify the year, date, and author of each manuscript.

The library continued to grow under the Rebbe Rashab, who, in addition to caring for and safeguarding the existing *kesovim*, also acquired an array of many old and rare manuscripts.

Over the years of his *nesius*, the Rebbe Rashab purchased a huge amount of *seforim*. His library eventually numbered 5,400 sets of books, totaling 12,500 volumes.

While the Rebbe Rashab was expanding the Lubavitch library, his young son, the Frierdiker Rebbe was building a library of his own. After years of research and collecting, the Frierdiker Rebbe amassed a sizable collection which was later added to the central library.

## The Saga Begins

In the mid 5670's, the dark clouds of war loomed over White Russia, as the German army prepared to attack in what would become the First World War. Reports began flooding in of German atrocities toward Jewish communities.

In Tishrei 5676, with the situation becoming more dire, the Rebbe Rashab made the decision to move from Lubavitch to Rostov, leaving behind what had been the epicenter of Chassidus Chabad for over a century.

His 12,500 *seforim*, along with the Frierdiker Rebbe's sizable collection, were packed in crates and sent for safekeeping to a fireproof warehouse in Moscow.

The plan was to retrieve the *seforim* from the warehouse when the war ended. But with the war's end, the Bolshevik revolution plunged Russia into chaos. There was widespread hunger and anarchy, and the precious library was confiscated by the Communists, becoming part of Moscow's Lenin Library.

But the effort to bring back the *seforim* was never abandoned.

In 5686, members of "Agudas Hatmimim" in the United States, wrote to the Frierdiker Rebbe asking how they could help rescue the library from the Russian government.

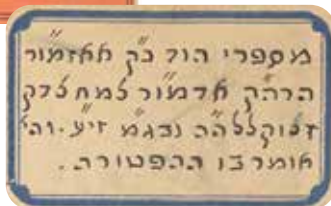
The Frierdiker Rebbe responded with a detailed plan of action. It entailed lobbying Congress and having many Jewish academics write to the Russian government that as the library was essential for research, the government must make it available to the Frierdiker Rebbe.<sup>2</sup>

He also instructed them to influence Dr. Rosen (referred to by his codename "Shushan"), the Joint Distribution Committee's representative in Russia, to help in the rescue efforts. In the end though, the library remained in the Lenin Library in Moscow.

In 5692, the Frierdiker Rebbe enlisted the Rebbe's help in



A STICKER WITH BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON ONE OF THE SEFORIM OF THE RABBEIM, WRITTEN BY THE FRIERDIKER REBBE IN HIS YOUTH, AND A LABEL PLACED IN EACH OF THE SEFORIM THE FRIERDIKER REBBE AMASSED FOR THE LIBRARY BEFORE HIS NESIUS.





THE RUSSIAN STATE LIBRARY DURING SOVIET TIMES.

rescuing the library, writing: “I have a request to make of you. You are aware that my *seforim*, the Lubavitch library, are still in Moscow, and, as I told you a few times, on account of my activities on behalf of Russian Jews, I did not want to use my connections to ask for favors regarding the *seforim*.

“However, the matter pains me greatly, and I am confident that with Hashem’s help we can work to resolve it.”

The Frierdiker Rebbe then went on to list a number of people who can be called upon to help, and discusses the pros and cons of approaching each person. Finally settling on the right one to ask, he finishes: “It would be a good idea if you can visit him a few times, and tell him that I am in much pain on account of the *seforim*.”<sup>3</sup>

The letter ends with more details of what to discuss with this individual, including the fact that the *seforim*’s captivity in the Russian library is a terrible *chilul Hashem*, and that rescuing them would bring the greatest *nachas* to the *neshamos* of all the Rabbeim.

## BRINGING THE SEFORIM TO A CHABAD LIBRARY IN RUSSIA

In Sivan 5751, Dr. Irina-Kogan wrote to the Rebbe with the idea to establish a Chabad library in Moscow. Her reasoning was simple. It would be easier to persuade the Russian government to return the *seforim* to a local library than to convince them to release the *seforim* for return to New York.

The Rebbe responded:

[...] ות"ח ת"ח עוה"פ על פעילות שלה ע"ע, ומתוך שמחה בטח תלך מחיל אל חיל, אבל פתיחת ביבלייתקה חדשה דחב"ד עתה ברוסיא – יכולה לעורר טענה אצל המנגדים שהוצאת ספרי חב"ד מרוסיא עתה – הרי ההיפך מתאים יותר – לבסס התחלתה ע"י ספרי חב"ד הנמצאים ברוסיא – וידחו זה עד לאחר פירסום.

Many thanks again for your activities until now, and you will surely go from strength to strength with joy, but opening a new Chabad library in Russia now, could provoke a claim by the opponents that [instead of] bringing the Chabad books out of Russia now, the opposite approach makes more sense—to establish the founding [of this new library] with the Chabad books already in Russia—and postpone [dealing with] this until after it’s publicized.



FARBRENGEN, 19 KISLEV 5743

However, these efforts too did not bear fruit.

For many years, the fate of the library was unknown. There was fear that it was transferred to the Jewish library in Kiev, which was destroyed by the Nazis, or that it was scattered all over Russia.

## “Things in Russia are Changing...”

In honor of Purim 5741, Rabbi Sholom Ber Levin, chief librarian, submitted to the Rebbe a catalog of the library when it was still in Lubavitch, shortly before the outbreak of World War I. He simultaneously turned to the *mazkir* Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, who had, in the previous year, overseen the

successful return of *kesovim* being held in Poland,<sup>4</sup> to determine the status and whereabouts of the library.

At the time, no information was known. Did the library still exist? If it did, where was it being held? Was it in a single location? And most importantly, could its return be ensured?

There were many questions, but no answers. The research done in New York proved futile. The question of the missing library remained unanswered.

Until the farbrengen of Yud-Tes Kislev 5743, that is. The cavernous shul at 770 was packed with Jews from all backgrounds who had come to participate in the Rebbe’s annual Yud-Tes Kislev farbrengen, among them Rabbi Shlomo Cunin, head *shliach* to the West Coast.

“During one of the sichos,” recalls Rabbi Cunin, “the Rebbe began addressing a situation where one may have



“The next day during Mincha, I noticed the Rebbe looking at me, nothing unusual at the time. After davening, Rabbi Groner came to me and said quietly, ‘take the elevator up to the third floor, and go down the wooden stairs. The Rebbe wants to see you.’

“When I got to *Gan Eden Hatachton*, the Rebbe was standing at his door with a broad smile. The Rebbe told me:

“זאכן אין רוסלאנד בייטן זיך. און ס'איז דאך דא אונזערע ספרים וואס אנדערע האלטן אז זיי האבן דאס פארברענט אבער איך האלט אז זיי זייגען בקיומם, און וויינטראוב האט א גוטן פריינט, ער הייסט ארמענד האמער, וואס ער האט ברייטע קשרים מיט די רוסישע און ער קען דאס דורכפירן.”

(Things in Russia are changing. Our *seforim* are there, and some believe that they were burnt, but I believe that they still exist. Weintraub has a good friend, named Armand Hammer. He has broad connections with the Russians and he can accomplish this.)

“The Rebbe handed me several dollar bills to give to Mr. Weintraub for a speedy recovery (he was suffering from a hiatal hernia at the time). Then I told the Rebbe that Mr. Weintraub had called me in the morning, saying that he is ready to do everything the Rebbe wanted of him. The Rebbe responded with a big smile.”

In the coming weeks, Rabbi Cunin met with Mr. Weintraub and Mr. Hammer about the release of the *seforim*. Mr. Hammer was convinced that getting them out of Russia would be a piece of cake. He was extremely well connected in the Russian government and agreed to use whatever leverage he had to insure the speedy return of the *seforim*.

But things were not destined to move so quickly. Requests made to the Russian government about the “Schneerson Collection” were met with denial of its very existence! Rabbi

Cunin sent to Mr. Hammer lists of *seforim* that were part of the missing collection to be submitted to the Russians, but to no avail.

This ongoing exchange persisted for five long years, until Mr. Hammer—himself becoming skeptical about the existence of the *seforim*—requested from the Russians that a delegation from Lubavitch be allowed to come to Russia to search for the *seforim* themselves. To the joy of the Chassidim, the Russian government agreed.

“As all this back and forth was taking place,” relates Rabbi Levin, “I decided to do a bit of my own research about the whereabouts of the *seforim*. Rabbi Yosef Friedman of Kehos was traveling to Moscow, and I gave him a list of *seforim* that would have been included in the “Schneerson Collection,” with instructions to check the catalog of the Lenin Library in Moscow to see if any of those *seforim* were being held there.

“Rabbi Friedman actually found twelve *seforim* from the list in the antique section of the library. I was now certain that the rest of the *seforim* were also there.”

## Departure

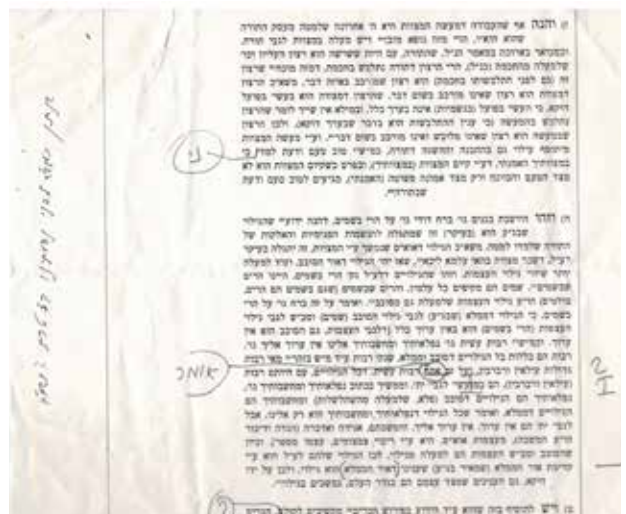
In early Kislev 5748, final approval was given for a group of Chassidim to travel to Moscow. The delegation would include Rabbi Shlomo Cunin, Rabbi Berel Levin and the *mazkir* Rabbi Dr. Nissan Mindel (who spoke fluent Russian).

The necessary paperwork was filled out, visas were obtained and the date for departure was set for Sunday, Chof Teves.

During the weeks leading up to the *shlichus*, Rabbi Levin wrote to the Rebbe extensively regarding the *shluchim's* itinerary and many technical and logistical questions pertaining



RABBIS SHLOMO CUNIN AND BEREL LEVIN, ALONG WITH DR. VERONIKA IRINA-KOGAN, MEET WITH THE REBBE ON 28 IYAR 5751



PART OF THE MAAMER GIVEN TO THE SHLUCHIM.

to the *shlichus*. The Rebbe made it clear that they should search every possible location where the *seforim* could potentially be, and also make an effort to locate any additional manuscripts belonging to Lubavitch being held in Russia.

The *shlichus* was kept under total secrecy by those who were going. Until the Shabbos farbrengen, that is, when the Rebbe spoke publicly about the *shlichus*.

“I didn’t even tell my wife where I was going!” remembers Rabbi Cunin, “Immediately after Shabbos I called her up in California to inform her about the *shlichus* and to fill her in on the details.”

During the farbrengen, the Rebbe underlined the importance of *pidyon shevu’yim* and emphasized that those who are going are “*shluchim*” in its broadest meaning, and that the *meshaleyach* would be traveling with them and bestowing *brachos* upon them.

After the *sicha* the Rebbe instructed those departing on the *shlichus* to say *l’chaim* on a full cup.

## A Special Yechidus

On Sunday, Chof Teves, the day of the group’s planned departure, Rabbi Mindel was in his Long Island home packing when he got a phone call. Earlier that day, Rabbis Cunin and Levin had gone by the Rebbe for dollars and the Rebbe had requested to meet with the entire delegation before he went to the Ohel. Rabbi Mindel

## TRUE BITACHON

On the eve of Beis Shevat 5751, Rabbi Groner gave the Rebbe a report on the progress of the *Shlichus*.

“מ’דארף בא זיי פועלן, זיי זאלן האבן בטחון” אמיתי, the Rebbe said. (We must influence them that they should have true *bitachon* that they will return with the *seforim*).

Rabbi Groner replied that it seems that they have *bitachon*.

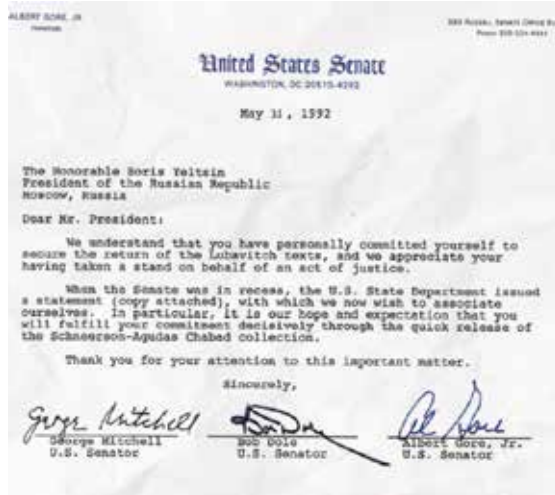
“*Bitachon amiti?*” the Rebbe asked.

“Yes!” replied Rabbi Groner.

The Rebbe smiled.



SOVIET LEADER MIKHAIL GORBACHEV (RIGHT) RECEIVING ARMAND HAMMER IN THE KREMLIN



LETTER SIGNED BY ALL 100 SENATORS TO RUSSIAN PRESIDENT, MR. BORIS YELTSIN.



RABBI SHLOMO CUNIN AND HIS SONS MEETING WITH VICE PRESIDENT MR. AL GORE IN THE MID 5750S



quickly headed out to 770, and shortly after the dollars distribution ended, the group went into *Gan Eden Hatachton* for a *yechidus*.

The Rebbe directed them to search any place where there was potential for finding the *seforim*, as long as it did not compromise their overall mission. The Rebbe also said that they should evaluate the conditions of each place, deciding whether to speak to the Yidden there, since it could potentially have a negative effect on the mission.

Rabbi Cunin asked if he could tell the locals there that the Rebbe had specifically instructed not to speak with them, in order to safeguard the mission, and the Rebbe agreed. He then gave them more money for *tzedakah*.

Later that day, the group received word that the Rebbe would return from the Ohel early in order to have a second *yechidus* with the group. After *Maariv*, the three *shluchim* headed to *Gan Eden Hatachton* and were in *yechidus* for fifteen minutes. The Rebbe gave them each a dollar for *tzedakah* in Russia, as well as a page of the galley proof of the *maamar* published in honor of Chof Teves that year, with handwritten edits.

The Rebbe explained that they were collectively receiving only one copy of the *maamar* and in order to learn it they would have to share with one another. Similarly, their *shlichus* was to be a joint effort and they would have to work together in order to succeed. The Rebbe also said: “היינט איז דאך דער יארצייט פון דעם רמב”ם, און די וואך כ”ד טבת, דער יארצייט פון אלטן רבלין, וועלן זיי ביידע ארבעטן צוזאמען מיט אייך (Today is the Yahrzeit of the Rambam, and the week of 24 Teves – the Yartzeit of the Alter Rebbe. They will both be working with you).

Rabbi Cunin worked up the courage and added: “און דער רבי צוזאמען מיט זיי – and the Rebbe together with them,” to which the Rebbe replied, “Amen.”

The Rebbe then escorted the *shluchim* to the steps of 770 as they left for Russia. The *shlichus* had begun.

## In Russia

The group arrived in Moscow on Monday afternoon, 4:30 pm. After settling in their hotel, they went to scout out the buildings comprising the Russian National Library.

The next morning, they visited the Moscow offices of Mr. Hammer. He graciously offered the use of his office, with its phones, copy machines and typewriters, as the Moscow headquarters for the *shlichus*.

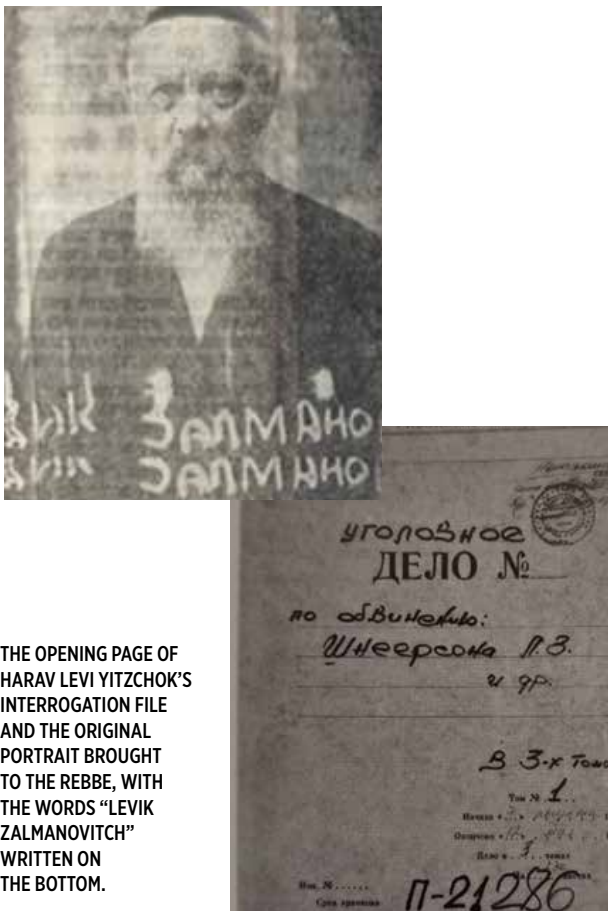
The next week was filled with visits to the library, meetings with librarians and ministers, as well as time in the local shuls and Jewish locations. A key clue was the list of twelve *seforim* that Rabbi Friedman had located some time earlier.

On Chof-Daled Teves, Rabbi Cunin visited the Russian Minister of Culture together with Mr. Hammer. He came back with exciting news: although the minister had denied the existence of the “Schneerson Collection,” he nevertheless agreed to do his utmost to try and locate the twelve *seforim* on the existing list.

The next day the delegation got a call from the office of the Minister of Culture that the twelve *seforim* had been located in the Lenin Library in Moscow. It was Friday morning, and Shabbos came in early during the Russian winter, so the delegation quickly headed over. At the library they wheeled out a cart with twelve books, Rabbi Cunin picked up one of the *seforim* (a copy of the *Avudraham*) and opened it. Inside was written: “זה הספר שייך לבנו של כ”ק אדמו”ר שליט”א” (“this sefer belongs to the son of the Rebbe *shlita*,”—the Rebbe Maharash, son of the Tzemach Tzedek).

The Librarian in charge of the Hebrew books explained that these twelve books were not in any “Schneerson Collection,” rather, they were contained in the “Poliakoff Collection,” a collection of approximately 7500 books.

The Poliakoff brothers were chassidim of the Rebbe Rashab and well-known philanthropists. However, it was clearly evident that these twelve *seforim* were part of the



THE OPENING PAGE OF HARAV LEVI YITZCHOK'S INTERROGATION FILE AND THE ORIGINAL PORTRAIT BROUGHT TO THE REBBE, WITH THE WORDS "LEVIK ZALMANOVITCH" WRITTEN ON THE BOTTOM.



VICE PRESIDENT GORE ON HIS FIRST VISIT TO RUSSIA AS VP, RECEIVES A TANYA TO BE GIVEN BACK TO THE REBBE. THE TANYA WAS ORIGINALLY GIFTED TO THE FRIEDIKER REBBE BY THE TALMIDIM OF TOMCHEI TMIMIM.



To Leon, Lion of the Lubavitch Library  
Congratulating on surviving to another  
Happy Birthday — Bill Clinton

PRESIDENT CLINTON WITH UNDERSECRETARY OF STATE LEON FUERTH UPON THEIR RETURN TO THE USA FROM MOSCOW IN 1994. MR. FUERTH HOLDS SEVEN SEFORIM, BROUGHT ABOARD AIR FORCE ONE THAT WERE IMMEDIATELY RETURNED TO THE REBBE IN HIS ROOM.

PRESIDENT CLINTON WROTE AN INSCRIPTION ON THE PHOTO: "TO LEON, LION OF THE LUBAVITCHER LIBRARY..."

missing collection. Some of the *seforim* even had the Frierdiker Rebbe's handwritten notes on the margins. Apparently, the collection of *seforim* had been renamed the "Poliakoff Collection" in order to hide its true origins.

Nonetheless, the *shluchim* were overjoyed. They had found what they were looking for!

Leaving the library, they quickly went to the office to contact Mr. Hammer and arrange the *seforim's* return. They also called the *mazkirus* to inform the Rebbe of this development.

There are accounts which maintain that the Rebbeztzin called some of her acquaintances that day and excitedly told them that the Rebbe had reported to her that the *seforim* had been found.

That Shabbos in 770 the Rebbe was clearly very happy.

Back in Moscow, on the following Sunday, Dr. Hammer contacted the Minister of Culture in order to obtain the twelve *seforim*. A reply came shortly that such a thing could be authorized only by Mr. Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party.

Meanwhile, the group went to various other libraries, looking at collections of *seforim* in various locations throughout the city. Slowly, the list of found *seforim* grew.

In the United States, the federal government was

putting pressure on Russia as well (with the help of Mr. Hammer). It seemed that the *shlichus* was heading to a successful conclusion.

The time came for the *shluchim* to return to New York. Rabbi Cunin had to attend to a major lawsuit regarding a legacy gift to Chabad in California, and the Russian authorities refused to extend the visas for the remaining *shluchim*.

Rabbi Cunin returned to California with a stopover in New York, where he was greeted by the Rebbe with a salute and davened a joyous Mincha. He then continued to California. Rabbi Levin landed that afternoon as well.

*B'hashgocha protis*, the date that they returned was Chof-Aleph Shevat 5748. Later that evening, the Rebbeztzin was *nistalek*.

## Back to Moscow

Over the next three and a half years, many efforts were made to effect the return of the *seforim*, but they all proved futile. The Minister of Culture, who had helped in locating the *seforim*, was removed from his position, and his replacement refused to be helpful.

The sudden death of Mr. Hammer, a driving force behind the effort to bring back the *seforim* complicated things even more. Other connections proved fruitless and it seemed like another trip to Russia would be

inevitable.

In early Kislev 5751, an opportunity arose for another trip to Russia. Tzach in Eretz Yisroel had just launched a massive project to rescue children affected by the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl. Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Aharonov and his colleague, Rabbi Yitzchok Kogan, were at the helm of the operation, and had developed relationships with Russian officials.

One woman with whom they had come in contact was a Russian lawyer named Dr. Veronika Irina-Kogan. She graciously offered her services in assisting with the effort to free the *seforim* and bring them back to the library in New York.

After receiving the Rebbe's approval, the *shluchim* readied themselves for a second trip to Moscow, this time confident that they would return with the *seforim* in their hands.

The expanded delegation on the second *shlichus* included Rabbi Aharonov and Rabbi Kogan, in addition to Rabbi Cunin and Rabbi Levin, who had gone on the first *shlichus*.

They left New York for Moscow on Monday, Tes Kislev, 5751. Shortly before leaving they received the Rebbe's *bracha*: "לכל הנוסעים שליט"א ויהא בהצלחה רבה אזכיר עה"צ".

The delegation arrived in Moscow and immediately busied themselves with their mission: to obtain the necessary

## THE FRIERDIKER REBBE'S TANYA

In 5752, Tennessee senator Al Gore was instrumental in applying immense pressure on the Russians to return the *seforim*. Later, he joined a ticket as Vice President with running mate, Arkansas governor Bill Clinton, and the two of them promised that if elected, they would do all they can to bring back the *seforim*.

Indeed through their efforts, on Hei Teves, 5754, Rabbi Cunin was given a Tanya that belonged to the Frierdiker Rebbe to bring back to New York and give to the Rebbe.

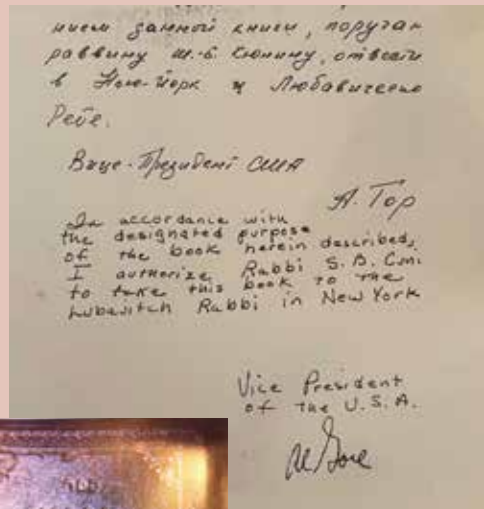
Rabbi Cunin was called to meet Vice President Gore in his hotel room. Mr. Gore presented Rabbi Cunin with the rare edition of the Tanya that he received from the Russians. "I know how the Russians work," the vice president said. "So to ensure that you make it through Russian Customs, I wrote a brief letter in the book, both in Russian and English, using my Vice Presidential power, authorizing you to take the Tanya to Rabbi Schneerson in Brooklyn."

It didn't end there. Rabbi Cunin says, "Mr. Gore sent us to the airport in his motorcade and had the Secret Service escort us all the way throughout the airport until we were safely in our seats on the "American" airplane to New York."

"When we landed, we headed for Crown Heights, straight into Gan Eden Hatachtoin, where the Rebbe was sitting at the entrance to his room," Rabbi Cunin recalls. "We presented the Rebbe with this great *matana*. You could see the smile and the *nachas ruach* the Rebbe had."

Undersecretary of State Leon Fuerth recalled:

"Although it was only one book that was returned, that did not stop Vice President Al Gore. At every meeting he had with the Russian government, he had a picture of the Rebbe placed in front of him to remind the Russians of what was important to him."



VICE PRESIDENT AL GORE AUTHORIZES THE RETURN OF THE FRIERDIKER REBBE'S TANYA.

permissions and documents from government officials to retrieve the *seforim*.

Dr. Irina-Kogan introduced the group to influential Russians, and the expanded team spared no effort in arranging the necessary meetings and conferences with government officials.

It seemed at first that the Russian government was ready to return the *seforim*, and the *shluchim* had high hopes as they once again expected a quick ending to the saga. Unfortunately, every time that it seemed that final approval was about to be given, a new obstacle came up, blocking the path to success.

There was even a point when the President of Russia, Mr. Boris Yeltsin implied that he would be signing the final document, going so far as to demand that the *shluchim* bring the press to cover the ceremony. Yet, when the news agencies showed up on the appointed day, they weren't allowed in. An internal political issue caused Mr. Yeltsin to retract his decision, and to turn over the responsibility to Gorbachov, then President of the Soviet Union.

The case then proceeded to the Russian supreme court, where it was twice ruled that the *seforim* must be returned to Aguch. But the ruling was ultimately retracted.

## Aguch of Russia

On Motzei Shabbos Yud Daled Kislev 5751, just a short while after the *shluchim* arrived in Russia, they received a surprise *hora'ah* from the Rebbe.

The Russian government was planning to give an official scroll of honor to Chabad-Lubavitch of Russia, and the plan was for Ezras Achim, an institution created to support and enable the existence of Yiddishkeit in the Soviet Union, to receive it. However, in this *hora'ah*, the Rebbe unexpectedly directed that it be given to a new institution - Agudas Chassidei Chabad of Russia.

The Rebbe wanted this new *mossad* to be established immediately, with the four *shluchim* serving as its administrative committee. Official stationery and a stamp should be obtained, a bank account should be opened under the name of the *mossad*, a building should be purchased for the institution—and all this should be done immediately.

The Rebbe took special interest in the creation of the new *mossad*, and within a short time, Aguch of Russia had obtained all that the Rebbe had requested.

The Rebbe stated that the administrating members of this *mossad*, along with Dr. Veronika, were to be the only authorized representatives dealing with the issue



VICE PRESIDENT GORE HANDS RABBI CUNIN THE FRIERDIKER REBBE'S TANYA

of the *seforim*'s return.

On the Shabbos after the Rebbe's *hora'ah* to establish Aguch, the Rebbe spoke about the new *mossad* during the *farbrengen* and addressed the current situation of the *seforim*.

## Heading to Washington

Years of hard work in Russia were going by without success. Every time the delegation was convinced that the saga was nearing its end, another setback seemed to land them right back at square one.

With no other choice, the *shluchim* sought to solve the matter in a Russian court. Despite their initial optimism, the verdict was rendered in favor of the Russian government.

Eventually the idea developed from a contact within the Russian government to engage the American government to demand from the Russians that they return the *seforim*. The Russian government desperately needed American aid; the US pressure could be applied very effectively.

Actually, this idea had precedent. Years earlier the Frierdiker Rebbe had written to several politicians with the request that they help bring back the missing library. It seemed now that this method would be most effective, especially considering that every other means

had been exhausted.

Rabbi Cunin relayed this information in a phone call to the Rebbe's Mazkirus. "With the Rebbe on the phone, I raised the idea of sending my sons to Washington, DC," Rabbi Cunin recalls.

The Rebbe approved the plan.

At the end of Adar 5751, the six Cunin brothers—who had been chosen to lead the mission to Washington, DC—passed by the Rebbe at dollars to receive the Rebbe's *bracha* before their departure to the Capitol. The Rebbe handed each of them a dollar, saying, "*Hatzlocha* in Washington."

With the Rebbe's *brachos*, they confidently set off on their *shlichus*. Their first initiative was to have every member of congress sign a letter to the Russian government demanding the return of the *seforim*. They were successful in this initial project, although it did little to sway the Russian government.

Every week they returned to New York and updated the Rebbe on what they had accomplished.

## 'Pidyon Shevuyim'

On the fifth anniversary of Hei Teves, in 5752, with the *shlichus* to Russia in full swing, the Rebbe spoke about the plight of the *seforim* and the significance of their ultimate

1. A portion of the story was published in "A Library Held Hostage," a magazine published by Aguch of Russia.
2. Igros Kodesh Admu"r Harayatz vol. 1 pg. 537.
3. Igros Kodesh Admu"r Harayatz vol. 15 pg. 117.
4. See *Rescuing the Library*, Derher Adar II 5774.
5. Interestingly, in the *sicha* the Rebbe mentioned that in addition to the *seforim*, there are also *kisvei yad* being held in captivity. At the time, no one had heard of *kisvei yad* being held in Russia libraries. Years

return.

"Today, there are still a group of *seforim* and accompanying *kisvei yad* which are waiting for their '*pidyon shvuyim*' [to be redeemed from captivity] and returned to their rightful owner, the [Frierdiker] Rebbe," the Rebbe said.

"And since one *mitzvah* brings another ('*mitzvah goreres mitzvah*'), so the '*pidyon shvuyim*' of Hei Teves leads to the *pidyon shevuyim* of these *seforim* as well."

The Rebbe went on to say that the completion of the 'redemption' of the *seforim* on Hei Teves would be when it caused the redemption of the *seforim* in Russian captivity, as well as all other *seforim* awaiting their redemption.<sup>5</sup>

The next Shabbos, Parshas Vayigash, the Rebbe again spoke about the *seforim* in Russia and discussed ways that everyone could join the effort to ensure their return (see sidebar).

Just how crucial the redemption of these *seforim* is can be understood from the Rebbe's words in the *sicha* of Hei Teves, that the return—*pidyon shevuyim*—of the *seforim* held in Russia brings about the ultimate *pidyon shevuyim*, when Hashem will redeem all the Yidden from *galus*, may it happen right away. **T**

later, thousands of volumes of *kisvei yad* were discovered in the Russian Military Library.

6. Shemos 5748.
7. Ibid.
8. Hei Teves 5752.
9. Vayigash 5752.

## Join the effort to bring back the seforim!

When speaking about the *seforim* held in captivity, the Rebbe gave several instructions about how every *chossid* can—and should—take part in their speedy return:

- Increase in saying Tehillim.<sup>6</sup>
- Increase in giving tzedaka.<sup>7</sup>
- Increase in *limmud haTorah*, especially the study of *Mishnayos*.<sup>8</sup>
- Purchase more *seforim* to add to your home's library.<sup>9</sup>