

HERE'S my STORY

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A FATHER'S FINAL WORDS

MR. BENZION CHEN

I was born into a Chabad-Lubavitch family in what was then called Leningrad (and now is called St. Petersburg). During my childhood, *chasidim* suffered greatly in Soviet Russia, as these were the years when the KGB mercilessly persecuted those who were intent on keeping the embers of Judaism burning.

A few months before her wedding, my mother watched her father, Rabbi Yitzchok Raskin, as he was aggressively dragged from his home by KGB agents for the crime of teaching Torah underground. Before he left, he managed to say to his children, "Keep the ways of your forefathers" — which earned him a blow from his captors. Unfortunately, these were the last words they heard from him — they later learned that he was murdered just a few weeks after his arrest.

When World War Two ended, a treaty was signed between Poland and the Soviet Union allowing Polish citizens, who fled to Soviet territory during the war, to return to their homeland. Lubavitchers used this opportunity to organize an extensive network of document forging, which enabled many to leave under the assumed identities of Polish citizens.

My parents also wanted to leave and, for that reason, we moved to the border town of Lvov where the network functioned. But before the arrangements could be made, the KGB found out and my parents, among many others, were arrested on the charge of treason. Thus, at the age of eleven, I was left without parents and had to bounce around from one relative's home to another.

After the death of Stalin, many of the prisoners who had been sent to labor camps were released, including my parents, who were freed after six years of imprisonment. A little while later, we moved to Tashkent, where there was a large community of Lubavitchers.

I got married in Tashkent and began working as a technician in the Soviet Union's aerospace industry. The whole time we were hoping to leave. In our *farbrengens*, the



participants would wish one another that they should one day merit to meet the Rebbe in America, and we even had a song that we would sing about this.

Eventually my wife and I and our two daughters were granted an exit permit. We went to Israel, where we settled in Kfar Chabad, and just before Passover of 1973, we traveled to New York to visit the Rebbe for the first time. Our dream of many years was finally fulfilled!

When we arrived, we requested a private audience. We were staying at the home of my wife's cousin, Rabbi Gershon Jacobson, and he helped us get ready for our audience. At his suggestion, we prepared a written list of all the topics we hoped to discuss with the Rebbe, as well as the many requests for blessings that other Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union had asked us to bring before the Rebbe. Rabbi Jacobson said that if we don't write these things down in advance, we might forget them in the Rebbe's presence.

Indeed, when we finally came into his office, I was so moved that I was unable to utter a word. However, when I looked at the Rebbe's warm face and his fatherly smile, I felt a calm come over me and I was able to speak.

continued on reverse



**EVENTS. IDEAS.
PERSONALITIES.**

Marking 70 years from the anniversary of the Rebbe's leadership, each week, JEM will be focusing on one event, idea or personality in the Rebbe's life.



The Rebbe asked us many questions. He was very interested in life in the USSR and wanted to know how the *chasidim* there celebrated the holidays, what their *farbrengens* were like, and how they were managing to keep the Torah.

After we answered his questions, we asked the Rebbe to bless those who had given us their names. Among them was the name of a student in the school where my wife worked; the boy was very sick and we submitted a letter from his parents to the Rebbe. The Rebbe read the letter but didn't say anything. At that point, my wife spoke up, but the Rebbe only said, "I know; I was already asked."

Unfortunately, after we got back, this child passed away. We understood that the Rebbe must have seen things that others couldn't and that, in this case, he knew there was no possibility of overturning the decree.

Also in this conversation, I asked the Rebbe about the various job opportunities that were suggested to me in Israel — among which was a position in the aerospace industry. I was inclined towards this field since I had experience in it, but there were other promising offers as well. The Rebbe asked me about the kind of people who work in this industry, and upon hearing that these were highly-educated people, he advised me to accept this position.

He spoke about the need to reach out to the many highly-educated but secular immigrants coming to Israel from the USSR, saying that we have to ease their absorption process not only materially but also spiritually. Despite the fact that they were well-educated and had university degrees, most of them were lacking basic knowledge of Judaism. The Rebbe suggested that we open centers where we could teach them Torah and Jewish history in order to bring them closer to Judaism.

The Rebbe also told us, "In recent years, many Jews have arrived in New York from cities in the Soviet Union where Chabad *chasidim* lived. And through those *chasidim*, these people were connected to me. But many have never come to see me. I've sent a few of my disciples to ask them why they don't come, but the only answer has been: 'If we come, we won't have a choice but to change, and we're afraid of that...'"

After we left the Rebbe's office, I said to my wife, "This is very interesting information, but why did the Rebbe feel the need to tell us this at four o'clock in the morning? There must be some significance to this."

It took several years, but eventually I found out.

In the beginning of the 1990s, when the big waves of Jewish immigrants were coming from the former Soviet Union, I came to understand that we had to help them not just with their physical needs but with their spiritual needs as well — as the Rebbe had instructed us. We needed to

connect these Jews with him, as this would influence their connection to their heritage.

This then became my primary aim, and the impetus behind the books I published in Russian.

Recently, a friend of mine from Moscow contacted me and told me that his daughter visited Israel with the Birthright program. Before departure, he gave her my book, *The Rebbe You Don't Know*, a compilation of inspirational stories about the Rebbe. When she finished reading it, she gave the book to her friend, but the friend returned it, explaining, "I don't want to read this. I am afraid that if I read it, I will have to change my way of life..."

When I heard that, the Rebbe's words echoed in my ear. It reminded me how right the Rebbe was and encouraged me to increase my efforts in continuing to spread his message — because the more people learn about the Rebbe, the more connected they feel to him, the more they want to make positive changes in their lives by keeping Torah and its *mitzvot*.

Mr. Bentzion Chen worked in Israel's aerospace industry for thirty-five years, during which time he published eight books in Russian on Judaism and Chasidism. Since retiring, he has devoted himself to spreading Torah among immigrants from the former Soviet Union. He was interviewed in February of 2015.

This week in....

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשינ

> **5741 - 1981**, the Rebbe sent word that several hours later, at 3:30 pm, he would hold an unscheduled *farbrengen*. (*Farbrengens* were generally scheduled well in advance, and began in the late evening. However, a wedding had been scheduled for that night, with which the Rebbe did not want to interfere.) At the *farbrengen*, the Rebbe spoke about the Torah's commandment to "be fruitful and multiply," responding to a number of common concerns that cause people to refrain from having children. Rabbi Nachman Bernhard, who was visiting from South Africa, later disclosed that the Rebbe was responding to questions that he had been asked and forwarded to the Rebbe.¹ 1 Shevat

1. *Sichot Kodesh* 5741 vol. 2 pages 93 and 820

MY ENCOUNTER
with the **REBBE**

While we have done our utmost to authenticate these stories, they reflect the listener's recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe's words.

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