



*Lives
changed*

my story₂

thirty-three individuals share their
personal encounters with the Rebbe

DR. JAN JACOBSON SOKOLOVSKY

The Smile from Ear to Ear

A story about a few good listeners



Dr. Jan Jacobson Sokolovsky is an attorney who presently lives in Jerusalem. She was interviewed in her home in October of 2018.

I would like to tell you the story of my son Danny and of the Rebbe's influence on the trajectory of his life.

In 1966, I had given birth to Danny, the youngest of my three sons. As he grew, he did not speak anywhere near as early as his brothers. When I asked the pediatrician, "Why is Danny not speaking yet?" I was told that he might have a hearing problem. After some testing, the pediatrician confirmed that, indeed, Danny had a severe hearing problem.

At eighteen months of age, he was fitted with a hearing aid. In those days, that meant wearing a harness that carried battery-operated equipment which was connected by wires to the buttons in his ears. It was not a very pleasant setup, to say the least. Danny was an active toddler, and it was a constant battle to prevent him from pulling out this contraption and throwing it on the ground. Eventually, though, he understood that this bulky contraption helped him communicate with his friends.

To be clear, by no means were we strangers to the problems faced by hearing-impaired children. Our oldest son, Barry, had begun to lose his hearing when he was four years old, and it continued to deteriorate until he was seven. But Barry had already learned to speak quite well before his hearing loss. Danny would have to learn to speak after he had lost his hearing—an overwhelming challenge for a young child.

In the summer of 1967, we moved to the Jewish community in Skokie, Illinois, so that Barry, our oldest, could start first grade in a Jewish day school there, and Danny would be able to enroll in a special education



Rabbi Shlomo Zalman
Hecht with Myron
Jacobson at Barry's Bar
Mitzvah. 1974.

*Courtesy of Jan
Jacobson Sokolovsky*

program at Northwestern University that had a big center for young children with hearing problems.

Back then, there was a huge disagreement among educators as to whether hearing-impaired children should learn to communicate with sign language, or they should be taught how to talk. Northwestern University was on the side of trying to teach them to talk, so this is the kind of therapy Danny received until he was three, when he was enrolled in a special education nursery program in our local school district.

IT WAS SHORTLY AFTER WE MOVED TO SKOKIE that we were introduced to Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Hecht, the Rebbe's emissary to Chicago. Although he was not the rabbi of our synagogue, my husband—Dr. Myron Jacobson—and I eventually developed a very close relationship with him.

When it was almost time for Danny to enter first grade, we told Rabbi Hecht that we planned to keep him in the public school system, which had an excellent program for the hearing impaired. We believed that Danny could not succeed in a Jewish day school where he would



also have to learn Hebrew; we feared that a bilingual program would be too much for him.

Rabbi Hecht was not sure we were making the right decision. “This is too serious an issue for you to decide by yourself,” he told us. “You have to ask the Rebbe.”

We had never met the Rebbe, but Rabbi Hecht arranged an audience, which took place late in the spring of 1972.

We were given an appointment for 3:00 AM, so we arranged to fly in for just that one night. We met with the Rebbe who, thanks to Rabbi Hecht, was well-versed in all the details of our situation. We felt that he was totally concentrating on the issue that was critical to us: the life of our son.

WE EXPLAINED OUR INTENTIONS FOR DANNY — we wanted to keep him in a special education program in the public school and hire a private tutor so he could learn Hebrew at his own pace — and we asked the Rebbe what he thought of the plan.

The Rebbe converses with a couple during a meeting of the Machne Israel Special Development Fund. 4 Tishrei, 5750-1989.

*Sam Shlagbaum,
The Living Archive*

“I don’t believe that public school will be good for Danny,” he responded. “You can’t know what will happen to him there. A Jewish boy needs to be educated in a Jewish environment.”

“What would the Rebbe suggest?” I asked.

And this is where the Rebbe surprised us by making a completely out-of-the-box suggestion.

“Tell me,” he said. “Who is Danny’s teacher in public school? Is she Jewish?”

We confirmed that his teacher was a Jewish woman, who was a marvelous educator.

“How about,” the Rebbe proposed, “if instead of sending him to public school with a tutor in Hebrew, you sent him to the Jewish day school where his brothers go, and ask this teacher to tutor him in English?”

He painted a vivid picture for us: “Consider how Danny will feel on the first day of school when he sees his brothers getting on the school bus on their way to the Jewish day school, while he heads out to someplace entirely different. How will that make him feel?”

We got the point and we agreed. We thought it was brilliant — indeed, we were literally overwhelmed by the ingenuity of his advice.

The Rebbe understood that if Danny went to public school, he might get a good education, but he would constantly be reminded of how different he was from his brothers. And in addition, the Rebbe explained to us, he wouldn’t be in the atmosphere of a Jewish day school.

The Rebbe understood Danny better than anyone else, which is why he suggested turning our plan upside down — instead of public school with a Hebrew tutor, let’s do Hebrew school with an English tutor.

We had underestimated Danny’s abilities, but the Rebbe had no doubt about his potential. It was as if the Rebbe put himself in Danny’s head and knew that a bilingual program would not be overwhelming to such an intelligent child.

We were pleased with the idea and eager to give it a try. As we were leaving, the Rebbe added, “If, in the future, the possibility arises of an operation on the ear, Danny should undergo it,” and he blessed us that it should succeed.

Apparently, the Rebbe was aware that an operation for Danny’s condition was available, but at that time and for many years thereafter, it was very risky. This surgery involved a cochlear implant, which meant



Danny follows his brothers Barry and Michael onto the bus for his first day of Jewish day school. 1972.

Courtesy of Jan Jacobson Sokolovsky

drilling a hole in the head and then into the ear. It didn't always work and, when it didn't, it made things even worse, so it was not something to be undertaken lightly. But when it was successful, it gave the severely hearing-impaired individual a chance to truly hear. So we kept this possibility in the back of our minds, knowing that, when the time was right, we had the Rebbe's blessing to go ahead.

WHEN WE RETURNED HOME, we went to speak with the teacher, who immediately agreed to the Rebbe's plan, even though she had never before done any private tutoring (nor has she since). And we sent him to the Jewish day school as the Rebbe recommended.

I have a picture of Danny getting on the bus together with his brothers on the first day of school. He has his lunch box, and he's looking at me with a smile that goes from ear to ear. I think it's the best picture of Danny that I ever took.

We would never have thought of this idea on our own. And certainly the teacher would never have thought of it. Nobody would have. But there it was, right in front of us.



Jan with her son Danny.

*Courtesy of Jan
Jacobson Sokolovsky*

The teacher turned out to be a godsend. She came over to our house several times a week after school and tutored Danny in English and whatever else he needed.

Danny succeeded in his studies and he certainly benefitted from the Jewish atmosphere of the school, as the Rebbe had predicted. He went on to graduate from Yeshiva University and then immigrated to Israel.

EVENTUALLY WE WERE ADVISED THAT THE OPERATION, which was initially highly experimental, had become standard and carried much less risk.

So, in 2005, Danny received a cochlear implant, which was a great success. As we drove home from Hadassah Hospital after the operation, Danny remarked that he could hear the music from the car radio, and he asked me if the ticking sound he heard was a drum. It was just the turn signal. He had never even known that there was such a sound.

I was often brought to tears watching Danny discover a totally new world of sound. He later said that the first week after the operation was one of the happiest of his life. He heard the door open when somebody walked in — he didn't have to be surprised to see people suddenly appearing in front of him. He heard coins dropping. Birds were singing for the first time and dogs were barking.

“I never could have heard any of this without the operation,” he told me. “But I always knew that one day I would be able to hear. I had the Rebbe’s blessing waiting in my pocket.”