

HERE'S
my
STORYGenerously
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FoundationWHO NEEDS A
COOKBOOK?

MRS. SHEINA BEGUN

When the war came to our home in Kharkov in 1941, my family ran away to Samarkand, and then about five years later we escaped again, in the hopes of leaving the Soviet Union and seeing the Rebbe. We went through Poland, Germany, and France, and then spent eighteen months in Cuba before coming to the United States. But then, a month before we left, the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe passed away. My father, Rabbi Tzemach Gurevitch, was beside himself; he locked himself in a room and couldn't eat or sleep. It was terrible to see. Finally, we came to America in March of 1950, when I was twelve years old.

Six years later, I got engaged. My future husband, Yaakov, was originally from Brazil, and because life as a religious Jew was so hard there, he hoped to bring his parents to America.

Having made our decision, we went to seek the Rebbe's blessing. I remember the moment vividly. In front of the Rebbe's desk stood two chairs for visitors, and we were standing across from the Rebbe, right behind those chairs. He gave us his blessing on our marriage and then said that he would like us to be his emissaries in Brazil. I almost fainted. I held onto the chair, but I didn't say anything. We had gone through so much to come to America, and now the Rebbe was asking us to keep on going.

"Don't worry," the Rebbe reassured me, after seeing that I had gone white, "it's going to be good for you." I accepted what he said but it was a daunting assignment, and I felt terribly anxious.

We paid for our tickets to Brazil on our own, using the money we had received for our wedding. The Rebbe had suggested that we look at several cities before deciding where to settle, so at first, we went to Rio de Janeiro where there were some other religious Jews.

It was the time of the famous "Carnival" when we first arrived, and I thought it was a wild country. Sitting alone in our hotel room, I wondered what I was doing in such a foreign, far-off place. "I'll get lost here," I thought. "I'm not prepared for this. What do I even have to offer?"



Rabbi and Mrs. Begun

Soon after arriving in Rio, we started a day school in our home. My husband went around to different neighborhoods gathering children to study Torah, and I would make them hot lunches.

This was hard for me to do since I never was much of a cook — as a girl I had always preferred studying, having missed out on so much while growing up. Before we left, my mother asked, "How are you going to Brazil without knowing how to cook?"

"Well," I replied, "I'll follow a cookbook." And so, when we came, I brought a very expensive cookbook. The problem was that not many kosher ingredients were available in Rio at the time, so it was not useful. Till today, that book has hardly been used.

We could not buy any kosher bread, milk, or meat. My husband would slaughter chickens in the house and I would pluck and kosherize them. I began baking bread three times a week; and any milk we managed to get was sour by the time it arrived at our house. Because the chicken was only for Shabbat, we just about became vegetarians.

continued on reverse

MY ENCOUNTER
with the REBBE

An oral history project dedicated to documenting the life of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. The story is one of thousands recorded in over 1,700 videotaped interviews conducted to date. While we have done our utmost to authenticate these stories, they reflect the listener's recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe's words.



continued from reverse

For the first few years, I wanted to move back. Later, once we moved to S. Paulo, the Rebbe had told my husband that we should establish “a Little Jerusalem” here, but times were so hard that it didn’t seem possible.

Beyond the material discomforts, there were some religious Jews who opposed Lubavitch and the outreach work we were doing. I would tell the Rebbe about them, and he used to tell us to ignore them; we shouldn’t depend on them, expect anything from them, or care what they said. “Just focus on your work.”

And we did. Eventually, those people started to do the same work as us!

My husband was the first rabbi in Brazil who was actually born there, so he spoke Portuguese fluently and was well liked too. He gave classes to university students, and when couples who were far from Judaism — some of them were even communists — asked him to officiate at their weddings, he would encourage them to observe the laws of family purity.

Because of this contact, many of these people’s children ended up becoming religious, and then their families for generations after. Some were reluctant to send their children to our school, but my husband would explain that their children could be religious and still have successful careers. Today, there are so many doctors and engineers who studied in our school, alongside Torah scholars and rabbis.

It was only about a decade later that I came to recognize that this really was the place we belonged. Now, I can look back and see the eternal mark we left on people. Things seemed to be impossible, but we had a mission and were undeterred, and Hashem did the rest. When you bring Judaism to other people, it’s such a great feeling: I can’t thank the Rebbe enough.

Once, when I was back in Crown Heights, a young man with a little beard came up and greeted me on the street: “Auntie Sheina! How are you?” He was one of those boys who used to learn in our home and later went to study in a *yeshivah*. He still remembered my lunches, too.

In 1991 or ‘92, a few months before Passover, I didn’t feel well. I went to the doctor, who found a growth that was causing some internal bleeding, making me weak and dizzy. I would need an operation, and a long recovery period, but because I was anemic I first had to wait for my blood count to improve. That meant the operation would be just before Passover. People from our community would be coming to us for the Seder and throughout the holiday, as they did every year. With me ill, who was going to prepare for them?

The annual women’s International Conference of Chabad Emissaries was coming up just then, so my husband suggested I ask the Rebbe for his blessing there. I attended a special address by the Rebbe, after which we formed a line to approach him. There were so many other women there, though, that waiting in line began to make me feel faint. Rabbi Leibel Groner, the Rebbe’s secretary, trying to speed up the line, told us to only say one thing to the Rebbe. He even took out a piece of paper to write down

my request so I could quickly hand it to the Rebbe. I told him that I wanted a blessing to delay my operation so that I would be able to prepare for Passover.

When I handed the note to the Rebbe, he gave me a blessing and I quickly walked away. Then, wouldn’t you believe it... when I came back home, I started to feel better. No longer feeling weak or dizzy, I was strong enough to delay the operation until after Passover. The doctor thought that I was taking a risk by postponing, but he kept me as a patient. When he examined me after Passover, he found that — to his utter disbelief — the growth had started to retreat on its own, eventually disappearing entirely, thank G-d. I managed to prepare for Passover as I always did, and in the end, I never had to operate at all.

Mrs. Sheina Begun has been serving as a Chabad emissary in Brazil, together with her husband, for nearly seventy years. She was interviewed in S. Paulo in June of 2012.

This week in....

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין
ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

> **5710-1950**, the Rebbe held a *farbrengen* for the first time after the passing of the Previous Rebbe two weeks earlier. In his talks, the Rebbe described how the Previous Rebbe still cares about what happens in the physical world, and will “certainly bring Moshiach.” Throughout the event, the Rebbe cried each time he mentioned the Previous Rebbe.¹

> **5730-1970**, at a *farbrengen* to see off the guests who had come for the Previous Rebbe’s *yahrzeit*, many participants, who had flights to catch, were anxious about the time. The Rebbe noticed this and described the Previous Rebbe’s ability to remain fully focused on his work only minutes before departing on a life-threatening journey in the USSR. At the time, the Previous Rebbe had explained to the Rebbe that the key to “succeeding with time” and utilizing every moment is to put the future and the past out of mind “as if they don’t exist.” Nevertheless, recognizing that people were constantly glancing at the clock, the Rebbe said he would keep it short. Before leaving, the Rebbe distributed bottles of vodka, so people could make *farbrengens* and share their inspiration back home.²
20 Shvat

1. *Torat Menachem* vol. 1 page 11; *Yemei Bereishis* page 102

2. *Torat Menachem* vol. 59 page 186

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Azriel Tzvi Ben Mordechai

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