

MEMOIRS
of
REBBETZIN CHANA SCHNEERSON

wife of
RABBI LEVI YITZCHAK SCHNEERSON
and
mother of
THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE
RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON

זצוקללה"ה נבג"מ זי"ע



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MARAS CHANA

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PREFACE

Memoirs by Rebbetzin Chana Schneerson is an English translation of the memoirs by Rebbetzin Chana Schneerson, wife of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson and mother of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory.

Beginning in 1947 and ending in 1963, Rebbetzin Chana recorded, in Yiddish and in diary form, "some memories of the final years of my husband." Although sections of these memoirs have appeared in print,¹ the present offering is the first in the publishing of the entire extant manuscript. It is our hope to be able to release further sections on a weekly basis, with G-d's help.

The text was annotated by Rabbi Aaron L. Raskin.

May the publishing of Rebbetzin Chana's memoirs about her husband, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, serve as a catalyst to discovering more of her husband's writings thereby increase the dissemination of the Chasidic wellsprings, which will result in the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days.

Kehot Publication Society

6 Tishrei 5772

47th Yahrzeit of Rebbetzin Chana

1. *Tzaddik LaMelech*, (Brooklyn, 1993). In Hebrew translation: *Eim b'Yisrael*, (Kehot, Israel, 1983) and *Toldot Levi Yitzchak*, (Kehot, Israel, 1977, 1984, 1995). In English translation: *A Mother in Israel* (Kehot, Israel 1985, Brooklyn, 2002). A large part of *Rabbi, Mystic, Leader: The Life and Times of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson* (Kehot, Brooklyn, 2008) is based on these Memoirs.

MEMOIRS OF REBBETZIN CHANA

By the Grace of G-d. Wednesday, Fast of Gedalya, 5708.
September 17, 1947

I am not a writer, nor the daughter of a writer. My desire is to record some memories of the final years of my husband, of blessed memory. I am unsure whether I will succeed. Firstly, will I be able to put all my recollections into writing? And secondly, will I have the peace of mind needed for such a task?

The Arrest

March 28, 1939,¹ at three o'clock in the morning, four agents of the NKVD² arrived at our home on 13 Barikadna Street. "Where is the *Rav*, Schneerson?" they demanded.

As I started towards the room in which my husband was at the time in order to inform him of our "guests," they immediately followed me. I noticed that they had stationed themselves at each of the doors, guarding the entrances and exits to the house. Unceremoniously, they summoned him to his study, where the senior agent showed him a warrant for search and arrest.

Not wasting a moment, they got right down to business—the search.

They rummaged through and searched all the books which were organized in five large bookcases, not missing even one. One of the agents was a lettered individual, and when a book seemed suspicious to them they consulted with him as an expert.

1. Evening of 9 Nissan, 5699. See Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson's Kabbalistic, autobiographical note on the significance of his name, arrest and exile (*Introduction to Likkutei Levi Yitzchak on Tanya; Zohar Bereishit*, etc.): "I, Levi Yitzchak son of Zelda Rachel, was exiled for five years...from 9 Nissan 5699 until 15 Shevat 5700..."

2. The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs—the secret Soviet police organization, precursor to the KGB.

They rifled through all works on Kabbalah, responsa, rabbinic correspondence, and extensive correspondence from abroad, by letter and telegram. They confiscated letters from the Rebbe [Rabbi Shalom DovBer] of righteous memory, my husband's *semicha* certificates³ from Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim of Lodz⁴ and Rabbi Chaim of Brisk;⁵ a petition from the community of Jaffa that he serve as Chief Rabbi with the visas for the entire family; correspondence with the Joint Distribution Committee concerning financial aid for the Yekaterinoslav Province, and other such documents.

In a separate bookcase, among rare volumes, lay a book which included a line handwritten by the Alter Rebbe and a complete bound manuscript volume of Chasidic discourses handwritten by the *Tzemach Tzedek*—these they sealed with several seals, and I left them so, untouched, until I eventually moved away.⁶ As for my husband's own Chasidic manuscripts, which numbered thousands of folios, they deliberated amongst themselves, eventually, tying them up in a bundle and leaving them behind.

Three of them worked unceasingly, not stopping for even a moment. At six o'clock in the morning, after they had searched all the rooms, the senior one ordered, "Rebbe, get dressed and come with us!"

3. For more on Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's *semicha* certifications, see the Rebbe's talks of 20 Av 5711, 5712 and 5722. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot* 5711 vol. 2, p. 257; 5712 vol. 3, p. 124; 5722 vol. 3, p. 213.

4. Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Meizel of Lodz (9 Sivan 5581–14 Iyar 5672 / April 11, 1821–May 1, 1912).

5. Rabbi Chaim Halevi Soloveitchik, dean of the Volozhin Yeshivah, and *Av Beis Din* in Brisk (Shushan Purim, 5613–21 Av 5678 / March 25, 1853–July 30, 1918).

Concerning the *semicha* certificate given by Rabbi Chaim of Brisk, see the Rebbe, R. Shalom DovBer's letter to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak in *Igrot Kodesh* (RSDB) vol. 6, p. 92 (Kehot, 2011).

6. The Rebbetzin left Dnepropetrovsk in 1941. The books and manuscripts remained in Russia, and were destroyed at the hands of the Nazis. (See below, p. 00.)

It was eight days before Passover. Knowing full-well that he would not be home for the holiday, my husband asked to be permitted to take along two kilograms of matzoh, which lay in a bundle. They allowed him this request.

I asked them how I would know where he is, so that I could bring him some money and food. They told me to come to police headquarters at two o'clock the next afternoon, where I would be told everything.

The next day I went there, but, alas, I learned nothing. I pleaded to be allowed to bring him something, but they responded that he was not there.

Seeing the gravity of the situation, I submitted a statement to the prosecutor declaring that my husband was ill. "If I will not be permitted to bring him food from home, he won't eat anything on Passover. I therefore request permission to bring him food from my home." On this request I received a formal response: "You will not be allowed to do this. However, in accordance with the law, all the food he needs is cooked for him in prison."

On the arrest warrant, I noticed the signature of the supervisor responsible for my husband. So twice every day—morning and evening—I telephoned him at the NKVD office. Every time, he gave me the best reports: that my husband was being cared for, and that he sits and reads from the *siddur* which he had brought with him.

This is how I continued for five long months. Every ten days, as his turn came, I would go to the prison to bring him food or a change of clothing, but they would always tell me that he was not there, although the prosecutor would tell me that he was.

Spies at the Rabbi's home

A month before my husband's arrest, I noticed two scoundrels who had begun to wander around near our courtyard all day, until late at night, carefully scrutinizing

everyone they saw. At first I dismissed my fears as speculative, but a month later I understood all too well what they had been doing.

On Purim, a large crowd celebrated in our home until six o'clock in the morning. Besides for the older people, there were a good number of young people, including several university students for whom it was absolutely forbidden to be present at such a gathering. My husband delivered many Torah discourses with great passion, and the crowd was filled with joy and with feelings of devotion to him. There was also dancing—something which people were afraid to even *think* of in those days.

For some reason, this time it was difficult for them to part from my husband. Later it occurred to me that they may have had a premonition that this was the last time they were spending with him.

When they finally left the house, they did not all leave at once but, rather, two or three at a time, in order not to attract attention.

When I went outside, I saw the two scoundrels loitering on the street. The day after the arrest, they disappeared. Indeed, they must have been assigned to observe the goings on at our home.

Kosher *matzoh* with Soviet certification

That year⁷ government certified matzoh was baked for Passover. They were matzoh in appearance only because they were not kosher at all.

This situation allowed my husband no rest. He took it upon himself to make kosher matzoh available to anyone who wanted to obtain them. He set himself to work—he

7. 1939.

koshered the two largest mills, acquired new sifters, and set up Passover supervision using many supervisors.⁸

My husband sent a letter to the *Ispolkom*⁹ detailing ten requirements to be implemented at the baking and selling of the matzoh, along with the demand that everything he—or the rabbis he had appointed—would instruct, must be followed. They replied that all his requirements would be met, and that regular flour from the market would not be used.

During that time, the population was fed using ration cards. Every citizen was given a mere thirty grams of bread per day, and new sacks couldn't be obtained by even the highest institutions. But in Dnepropetrovsk, in order to provide the Jews with kosher matzoh, the government provided thousands of brand new sacks and white flour, while everyone else was given only black bread.

The outcome was that people from all over Ukraine and White Russia—and from Moscow and Leningrad as well—traveled to Dnepropetrovsk to obtain matzoh. All the synagogues were stocked with crates waiting to be filled with the matzoh.

On Friday afternoons, all the bakeries would telephone to ask what time they must finish baking before Shabbos, and what time after Shabbos they could fire up the ovens again. They would also inquire on the procedure to be followed when drawing *mayim shelanu*.¹⁰

All this took place, let us not forget, during a time when a private individual who wished to follow a religious lifestyle,

8. For more on this episode, see the Rebbe's talks of 18 Nissan 5743 and 5744; 6 Tishrei, 5750. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot* 5743 vol. 3, p. 1295 ff; *ibid.* 5744 vol. 3, p. 1493; *ibid.* 5750 vol. 1, p. 62 ff.

9. The organ of local executive and regulatory power in the Soviet Union.

10. The water used in Passover matzos must be drawn before nightfall and left to rest overnight before use.

to keep Shabbos as much as possible, was forced to hide in total secrecy so that no neighbor or anyone else would notice.

Once, a supervisor reported that a dough made of four *pood* of flour¹¹ had been left on the table for five extra minutes.¹² My husband immediately instructed that it be sent to *chometz* bakeries, and they supplied new flour for those *matzos*.

All the sanitary supervisors repeatedly inquired how to do everything so that the *matzos* would be of the strictest kosher for Passover standards. Even under the old [Czarist] regime, when religious observance was strong, no other Jewish community managed to accomplish what my husband achieved under the communist regime!

For the Jews who appreciated it, this was a true joy, and for my husband it was a true spiritual pleasure. It cost him much of his own health to ensure that other Jews would enjoy the festival. He himself, however, would experience no Passover Yom Tov joy of his own. By then, he was already under lock and key. For the eight days of Passover, he managed with just water and the small package of matzoh he had taken along with him. He even left a few pieces over for *Pesach Sheni*.¹³

My husband achieved this all by travelling several times to Kharkov,¹⁴ where he pressed to obtain the approval of the *Narkom*,¹⁵ and then of Kalinin¹⁶ in Moscow.

11. "Pood" is an old Russian measure weighing about 36 US pounds, or 16 kilograms. Four *pood* equals more than 144 pounds of flour.

12. Beyond the eighteen minutes after which dough rises and becomes leaven.

13. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *Igrot Kodesh* vol. 2, p. 352.

14. The Capital of Ukraine from 1919 through 1934.

15. Council of People's Commissars; the regional government authority of executive power.

16. Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet.

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Benyomin and Rochel Federman

Yossi and Nechama Dina Katz

Uri and Bassie Laber

Sholom and Esther Laine

May they be blessed with healthy, happy, long lives filled with true *yiddishe, chasidische nachas* from their children and abundant success in all their endeavors