

# HERE'S my STORY

Generously  
sponsored  
by the  Crain-Maling  
Foundation

## FOR THE SAKE OF TORAH

**RABBI MAYER PLOTKIN**

I was raised in Montreal and educated there until my Bar Mitzvah. Shortly after, in 1956, I came to New York to learn at Yeshiva Torah Vodaas School. At that time, it was one of the biggest yeshivas in the world, and certainly the biggest yeshiva in North America with over two thousand students from grade one up until the highest level of *Bais Midrash*. It was situated in Williamsburg, Brooklyn — which was a big change from Montreal, let me tell you.

I stayed at Torah Vodaas for two years and then I moved to the Lubavitch Yeshiva. But while I was still at Torah Vodaas, I heard the following story about the *Friediker Rebbe*, the Previous Rebbe of Lubavitch, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson.

The occasion was the anniversary of the passing of a previous head of the yeshiva, Rabbi Shlomo Hyman, which was always observed with a major address to the entire student body. The speaker that particular year was a rabbi from the Bronx, Rav Shmuel Kuselewitz, who administered testing for rabbinic ordination at Torah Vodaas.

The place was packed with all the students listening. And this is what he said:

"The Talmud states: *The Torah is preserved only by one who gives his life for it*. That means that the Torah cannot continue to exist unless you're ready to die for it."

He went on to explain that a person has to be willing and ready to give everything he has for Torah, to give everything away — everything — and not hold anything back. Then he said, "I'm going to tell you a story about what that means, about somebody who did just that. The story I am going to tell happened right here, in this building where we're gathered today."

"It happened in the war years, '42, '43, or maybe '44. At that time, Torah Vodaas was in trouble. It owed a lot



of money to the bank, and the bank called in the loan. The yeshiva could not pay. The bank went to court and got a verdict that, if the loan was not repaid in full, they could foreclose and take all the buildings away from Torah Vodaas.

"The yeshiva's financial officer, who was responsible for raising the money, fell into a depression. He took it very badly. He felt that because of him Torah Vodaas was going to be closed. He tried everything he knew to remedy the situation. He placed appeals in newspapers, but very little came in, and the deadline was getting closer.

"And then one day, he gets a telephone call from the office of the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, asking him how much money he had managed to raise.

"Now, he knew that Lubavitch had its own hardships, so he didn't expect any help from the Rebbe. He thought, 'The Rebbe can't manage his own, how is he going to help me?'

*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 the over 1,000 videotaped interviews conducted to date. Please share your comments and suggestions. [mystory@jemedial.org](mailto:mystory@jemedial.org)

continued from reverse

"But a few days later, a Chabad *chasid* walks through the door with an envelope in hand, and says, 'This is from the Rebbe.'

"The man is stunned. He is speechless. And then the *chasid* says,

'The Rebbe asked that before I give you this envelope, I advise you of some facts: When he was in Russia, he had to fight against the strongest country in the world so that the Torah would not be extinguished. The biggest tyrant in the world was Joseph Stalin, and the Rebbe paid no attention to him. Whoever needed help in order to strengthen Torah, he helped them. He didn't ask if it's Chabad or not. Whatever they needed — a *mikva*, a kosher butcher, a teacher — he tried to supply it. He did whatever he could so the light of Torah would not be extinguished. His emissaries were caught, shot and killed, and he then had their orphans and widows to support. And still he would send another person to replace the one who perished. All the while, his focus was only that Torah's light not be extinguished.

'And now Divine Providence has brought him to the United States of America where there is freedom of religion, and he is pained to learn that a major *yeshiva* with thousands of students is going to be closed down. Not because Stalin in Russia wants to get rid of Judaism, but because the Jews in America don't care. This the Rebbe cannot abide. He is willing to put his own movement in danger — because he also has debts to repay — but he is giving you a check for the whole amount you need, in order so that the Torah not be extinguished. Please repay it as soon as possible, because everything the Rebbe has built up is now in danger.'"

While Rav Shmuel Kuselewitz was telling this story, everybody was sitting there with their mouths open — the whole room. And then he shouted: "The Torah is preserved only by one who gives his life for it! And that's what the Rebbe did!

"When the Rebbe arrived in America — and I was there when he got off the boat — he was half paralyzed by the tortures he endured in Stalinist Russia. Then he lost his *yeshiva* in Poland to the Nazis. And since he arrived here, he has had to deal with a lot of hardships and opposition.

"Find me someone like that! Find me someone who is willing to put everything on the line for no personal gain.

The check he sent to Torah Vodaas put his own movement in serious debt and in grave danger.

But, thank G-d, Torah Vodaas made sure it was repaid fast. So the Rebbe did get his money back. But when he gave it, he could not have been sure that would happen. That's real self-sacrifice."

This was the story that Rav Shmuel Kuselewitz related, and it became one of the reasons why I eventually went over to the Lubavitch Yeshiva. I saw that same genuine spirit of self-sacrifice in the followers of the Rebbe, and I was so inspired by them. I wanted to be a part of a movement which had such a high level of dedication to Torah and to their fellow Jews.

*Rabbi Mayer Plotkin lives in Montreal with his family. He was interviewed there in January of 2011.*

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

## This week in....

> **5719 — 1958**, the Rebbe requested Rabbi Binyomin Gorodetzky, the Chabad representative in Europe, to assist Rabbi Gershon Mendel Garelik in establishing Chabad of Italy. The Rebbe then encouraged Gorodetzky to travel with Garelik to Italy to help him make inroads in the local communities.<sup>1</sup> 6 Kislev

> **5741 — 1980**, the Rebbe instructed his chief-secretary, Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Aizik Hodakov, to assemble an editorial board to organize indices of all teachings of the Alter Rebbe, the founder of Chabad, which were to be published in time for 19 Kislev, the day of the Alter Rebbe's liberation from czarist incarceration. Only nineteen days later, the Rebbe entered the annual 19 Kislev *Farbrengen* with the newly published title in hand! The Rebbe expressed surprise and gratitude that the work was completed so quickly.<sup>2</sup> 1 Kislev

1. Igros Kodesh Vol. 18, p. 82 2. Yoman Shnas Hakhel, p. 65

לע"נ הת' יוסף ע"ה  
בן - יבלחט"א - ר' נחמן בער שי

By Chaim Piekarski and Family

You can help us record more testimonies  
by dedicating future editions of *Here's My Story*

A project of:



**JEWISH EDUCATIONAL MEDIA**

interviews@jemedia.org | myencounterblog.com | 718-774-6000  
784 Eastern Parkway | Suite 403 | Brooklyn, NY 11213

© Copyright, Jewish Educational Media, 2013