

# HERE'S my STORY

## FAMILY MEMORIES

**RABBI SHOLOM BER BUTMAN**



**M**y family is related to the Rebbe's family. That is, the Rebbe's grandfather was my grandfather's brother.

In 1947, my entire family was able to get out of Russia on false papers. We came through Poland and Austria and made our way to Paris, where we had an uncle, Rabbi Zalman Schneersohn. And the Rebbetzin Chana Schneerson, the Rebbe's mother, also came to stay with our uncle in Paris after she was smuggled out of Russia. This happened just before Passover.

Soon after, the Rebbe arrived from America to be reunited with his mother, whom he had not seen for close to twenty years due to the war. And, although he did not stay with our uncle — he stayed at the Edouard VII Hotel, on the Place De L'Opera — we were all together for the Pesach Seder.

I remember that Seder very well. The Rebbe — who was not yet the Rebbe then, he was the son-in-law of the Rebbe Rayatz — was at the head of the table. His mother was on his right side along with the other women, and the men were on his left side. But it was not like a Rebbe and his *chasidim* — it was a family meal.

I was twelve years old at the time, and I remember the Rebbe reading from the new Kehot *Haggadah* with his own newly-published commentary. It was the first time, if I'm not mistaken, that the Rebbe read from it — it had just been printed then.

The Rebbe brought his own grape juice. At this time it was impossible to get kosher wine in Paris, so my father made his own wine by soaking and fermenting raisins, but this process required sugar. The Rebbe did not use sugar on Passover, so he made his own grape juice from raw grapes which were quite sour at that time of the year, and this is what he used for the four cups. He also brought his own matzos, which he kept on a chair next to him, not on the table. This was a new custom to us — though, of course, it is now the accepted Chabad custom — not to put the matzos on the table lest they accidentally come in contact with liquids.

He stayed in Paris until after Shavuot. During the time between Passover and Shavuot, it is customary to read *Pirkei Avos*, Ethics of our Fathers, and when we were reading Chapter 5, the Rebbe said to me, "You have to *learn* this, not just read it ... Next week, I'll test you on the forty-eight ways through which Torah is acquired."

I did learn it, but he never tested me. Perhaps he was afraid that I hadn't learned and didn't want to embarrass me.

On Shavuot, we recited the *Tikun Layl Shavuot* — the verses which it is customary to recite during the course of that night — and it so happened that the caretakers of the synagogue forgot to leave the lights on. So we placed candles around the lectern and we all gathered there. I remember the Rebbe's recitation — he said everything audibly, but very fast.

When he finished, he put his coat on to walk to the hotel. It was not a short walk — it would take him about thirty minutes. And it was summer; it was hot outside. So my father told the Rebbe not to put on his coat. But the Rebbe answered, "It's not proper to go out with the

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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 900 videotaped interviews conducted to date. Please share your comments and suggestions. [mystory@jemedi.org](mailto:mystory@jemedi.org)



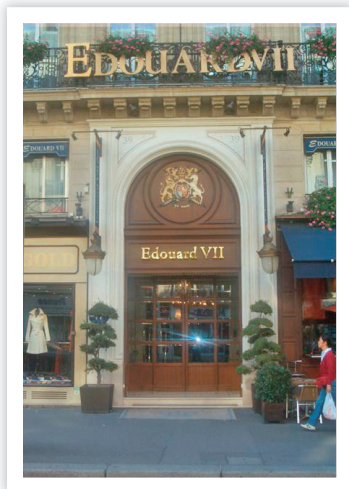
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silk *kapota* uncovered." A *kapota* is the long jacket worn by *chasidim*.

I was a smart aleck, and I said to him, "I've seen French people walk about in silk coats. It's alright."

The Rebbe smiled at me. "Yes," he said, making a joke, "but they have a top hat." He was referring to a silk hat that the elite French used to wear in those days.

Then he explained that once he was with his father-in-law, the Rebbe Rayatz, in Vienna on Shabbos, and he walked out with his silk *kapota*. He said, "I could tell my father-in-law was not pleased."



Hotel Edouard VII, Paris, France

So he put on his coat. And I remember that, in all the years that he was Rebbe, he never walked out on the street without a coat on top of his silk *kapota*, even in hottest days of summer.

A few days after Shavuos, the Rebbe left Paris with his mother. Before he left, he brought us a photograph that he

had found of himself playing chess with the Rebbe Rayatz, and he asked my father to reproduce it. They had apparently played many times, and the Rebbe Rayatz used to tell him, "Play for real!" He was not to give up and just let his father-in-law win the game.

Just before the Rebbe left Paris, there was a *farbrengen* at our house. The Rebbe explained to each of us how, according to Kabbalah, our names suited our character traits. And then he gave all of us presents. To the women, he gave china — a set of dishes. To me, he gave a book of the discourses of the Rebbe Rayatz. To my younger brother, who was three, he gave a bicycle with training wheels attached. To my older sister, he gave a stamp album. During the time he was in Paris, he used to bring foreign stamps from letters he received and give them to her, so now he gave her an album to put them in. To my father, he gave copies of the *Hatomim* periodical and *Chasidic* discourses — and I still have them. To my cousin, Sholom Ber Schneerson, he gave a "Sinai" *Chumash* and the Code of Jewish Law. He thought of something for everyone.

In 1954, we came to America and we went to see him — he was the Rebbe then. When we entered his room, he smiled very broadly, and said to us, "Children, do you remember me? I remember you!"

*Rabbi Sholom Ber Butman is the director of Chabad Midrachov Nachlat Binyamin serving downtown Tel Aviv's trendy pedestrian mall. He was interviewed in the summer of 2001.*

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

## This week in...

- > **5712 — 1952**, the Rebbe began a practice of delivering a *Chasidic* discourse on the first night of Shavuos at the crack of dawn, the exact moment the Torah was given to the Jewish nation. Due to the nature and timing of the discourse, *chasidim* dubbed the yearly discourse 'the discourse of Matan Torah'. This practice continued until 5730-1970. 6 *Sivan*
- > **5715 — 1955**, a new practice was instituted wherein the yeshiva students walk to nearby synagogues to share *chasidic* teachings and the joy of the festivals with other communities. The Rebbe would urge people of all ages to participate in the practice. 6 *Sivan*
- > **5715 — 1955**, starting from Shavuos until the surprise attack of the Yom Kippur War, a period of four months, the Rebbe spoke at public gatherings and wrote in many letters, about the urgent need for Jewish children to study Torah and perform Mitzvos, which "puts an end to the enemy and the avenger."<sup>1</sup> 7 *Sivan*

1. *Igros Kodesh* Vol. 28, p. 10

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