

HERE'S my STORY

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SOVIET JEWRY

MR. ISI LEIBLER



ultimately did, although they protested beforehand that I should not be the person occupying such a role.

I came into the Soviet Union the first time that year, and thanks to the intercession of the Australian Prime Minister, I travelled there several more times, becoming one of the major contact points for Soviet Jewry until I was arrested and expelled four years later. But during those four years, I was part of an extraordinary experience, watching the finger of G-d working in the Soviet Union.

Three million Soviet Jews, so many of them lost to the Jewish people, had not had the opportunity of even an elementary Jewish education. So many of them were at zero in terms of understanding anything about their Jewish traditions or the Jewish way of life. Hardly any of them were Torah observant because they were unable to be or did not know how. Yet, within this oppressed group, a re-awakening had taken place, and a small number spoke up and challenged the government in a way no other group in the Soviet Union had the courage to do.

They demanded the right to live as Jews and the right to emigrate to Israel. These were tough times, and during these tough times, the credit goes to Chabad, which was the only religious movement that remained alive throughout the entire period. Russian Jews began to come back to *Yiddishkeit* because of the contact that they had with Chabad activists, who played a very, very important role.

This was, of course, because of the Rebbe. And I must say, the three times that I met the Rebbe, I was stunned by his breadth of understanding of the situation and his passion for Soviet Jewry.

My feeling is that the Rebbe regarded Russian Jews as something very, very precious. And he was going against what was pretty much accepted in the Jewish world — that Russian Jews are lost Jews, that you can't do anything for them. He never ever accepted that. He felt that Russian

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My name is Isi Leibler. I was born in Antwerp, but I immigrated to Australia with my parents at the age of four, on the last boat to leave Europe before World War Two broke out. I grew up in Australia, where I took up a leadership position in the Jewish community. In 1959, I became involved with the issue of Soviet Jewry and, three years later, I managed to persuade the Australian Government to raise the issue of Soviet Jewry at the United Nations. This was an important event because Australia became the first country in the world to do so.

In 1965, I wrote a book about Soviet Jewry which split the Communist parties throughout the world. As a result, I was sent by Israel to speak to left-wing groups around the globe about the plight of Soviet Jewry. Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain a visa to enter the Soviet Union because the Soviets, rightly, regarded me as an enemy of their system and of Communism.

In 1978, the Australian government appointed my travel agency to handle the Olympic Games for Australia, and this delighted me because the upcoming Summer Games were to be held in Moscow, and the Soviets would be forced to give me an entry visa — which they

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

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Jews would one day come back into the fold. He was convinced that ultimately G-d would get them out.

When he spoke to me about Soviet Jewry, the Rebbe became every animated. His face lit up, and there was fire in his eyes. It was very, very moving. I felt I was in the



Mikhail Gorbachev

presence of a most remarkable person. He left a profound impression on me.

The first time I met with the Rebbe was in 1979, and then again in 1981 and 1982. And each time he asked me questions about where I had been in Russia, the people I'd seen, what I thought was happening, what I predicted would happen, the dangers ...

He knew that I was dealing with Russian authorities on a very high level, negotiating with them about *kosher* slaughter, about easing the plight of those who were in prison, and about granting exit visas to those who were denied them based on security grounds. But I was not very successful with this.

And each time he asked me to pass on a message to one or two families, but I had the feeling that these few people would make sure his message — which was always a message of encouragement — got through to everyone, particularly Chabad activists there.

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, Chabad began to step up its activities in response to the openings created by Glasnost and Perestroika.

For the first time, Torah classes were given openly, and people were flocking to them, responding to the miraculous religious revival, which was growing by leaps and bounds. It was the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union and freedom for Russian Jews. The Rebbe had anticipated it all, believing it was going to happen, even if no one else did, and that's why he was ready for it, and the people he already had in the Soviet Union were able to spring into action the moment the opportunity was there.

In later years, as vice-president of the World Jewish Congress, I became involved in Asia, assisting a lot of small Jewish communities that remained there.

I was working with communities in Singapore, Hong Kong

and Bangkok. And here again I saw the Rebbe's foresight. He recognized that although there were very few Jews in these places, there were large numbers of Jewish tourists who were coming. And thanks to him, Chabad became a central factor in tourism in the whole region.

I think the Rebbe will go down as one of the great historical personalities of his period. There's nobody that stands out quite as much as he does, certainly not in the Diaspora. During his lifetime, people outside Chabad might have underestimated the impact of his actions and of his activities and of his achievements — I don't think they understood that he was a truly great historic personality.

He stood head and shoulders above anybody else of his generation — any rabbi that you can name — and I think that's now clear, and it will be even more clear as history unfolds, as more people come to appreciate the foundations that he built.

He was a spectacular person, and I say that not as a Chabad supporter — because I have my differences with Chabad — but because I see the movement that he had created and developed, growing even after his passing. And this is something quite extraordinary. It's all a reflection on him.

Isi Leibler, a former chairman of the Governing Board of the World Jewish Congress, is a regular columnist for the Jerusalem Post and the Hebrew daily Yisrael Hayom. He was interviewed in his home in Jerusalem in September of 2010.

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

This week in....

- > **5704 — 1944**, the Rebbe received a telegram notifying him of the passing of his father, the saintly Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Schneerson, of righteous memory. Only months later was the 20th of Av verified to be the day of his passing. 28 Av
- > **5735 — 1975**, the Rebbe issued a special request to assist members of the IDF with the mitzvah of *tefillin* and to allow them a chance to hear the Shofar, as customary in the month of Elul¹. 30 Av

1. *Sichos Kodesh 5735 Vol. 2, p. 445*

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**Moshe Melech and Gutte,
and Yitzchok Chananya**
of blessed memory.

By their children Leah and Moshe

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