

HERE'S my STORY

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RABBI YOSKE SOSSONKO

Whenever people hear that my family left Russia in 1964, they tell me that it's impossible. As those who are familiar with Soviet history know, Jews weren't able to leave during that period. But when our relatives in the free world — my grandfather and others — asked the Rebbe to pray for our release, he assured them that we would come out of Russia without a problem. Somehow, my parents, Reb Asher and Fraida Menia, and myself were indeed allowed to leave that year, along with a number of other *chasidim*.

When we arrived in Israel, my father wrote to ask the Rebbe whether he should immediately travel to New York — he had never seen the Rebbe before — but was told to first reunite with his relatives in Israel, whom he hadn't seen in years. He eventually came for Tishrei, the month of the High Holidays.

In those days, guests who spent the holidays in the Rebbe's court were granted two private audiences, one on arrival, and another before leaving. When my father came to the Rebbe for the first time, he brought a present from Russia: a carton of Kazbek cigarettes.

"I don't smoke," the Rebbe told my father, "but since this is something a Jew from Russia has given me, I will accept it." He then took the carton and put it in the drawer of his desk.

The Rebbe also told my father something that, at the time, he couldn't comprehend: The three families that had just left Russia had opened up the "pipelines," and soon all the Jews of Russia would be able to leave. Standing there and listening, my father could not understand how this was even remotely possible, but he believed the Rebbe.



Just a couple years later, there was an earthquake in the city of Tashkent, in Uzbekistan, where we had lived. The houses in the city were built with mud-brick, not concrete, and almost all of them were destroyed. As a result, the Russian government decided that the Jews of Tashkent all had permission to leave. And only a few years after that, the ban on immigration to Israel was lifted entirely.

After Simchat Torah, the Rebbe asked my father to stay in the United States a while longer. He wanted my father to travel around the country telling Jewish people how religious Jewish life still exists in Russia.

At the end of '66, our whole family came to the Rebbe. I was nine years old. Back in Russia, my parents had been very vague about what they planned to do after we emigrated, due to their fear of the government. They only said that we would be seeing a great *tzaddik* in Israel; once we were there however, I learned that we were really going to the Rebbe in America.

I clearly remember standing by the garden in front of 770 when the Rebbe's car pulled up. This was the first time my mother and I had seen the Rebbe, so we were very excited. At our first audience, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Rebbe took out a black, pocket-sized *Tanya* from his drawer — the same drawer where he had placed my father's cigarettes — and gave it to me. "If you learn from this *Tanya*, you will know it well," he told me. Until today, I try to learn from that *Tanya* every day.

He then took a prayer book from the drawer for my mother, telling her, "May your prayers for a good year be accepted."

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

In those days, 770 was a quarter of the size it is today, and during Rosh Hashanah, it was packed. When it came time for the Rebbe to blow the shofar, the crowd surged towards the Rebbe's place in the center of the room. Being a little kid, I moved away from the pushing.

All of a sudden, one of the *yeshivah* students came over to me, grabbed me, and took me with him. He handed me to another young man, and then I was passed over the heads of the crowd, until I was deposited on a platform, behind a figure wrapped in a *talit*. In those days, there wasn't much talk or explanation; you had to figure things out by yourself. After standing there for a few seconds, I realized who was beneath the *talit*: I was standing behind the Rebbe. Being so close, I heard him cry as he prepared to blow the shofar, and of course I could hear the shofar blasts loud and clear.

Later on, I heard that the Rebbe had turned around, and asked for anyone who had recently come out of Russia to join him for the blowing of the *shofar*. After the adults had come up, he made it clear that he wouldn't begin until everyone was there, and asked for me by name, along with a couple others. While they were looking for me, the Rebbe even remarked that if we didn't *all* come, he would come to us.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, there was a *farbrengen* in the afternoon and the same thing happened. With everyone pushing to take their regular places, I ended up outside. All of a sudden, I was told the Rebbe was calling for me. I laughed, thinking it was a joke, but once again two young men brought me inside. I then climbed on one of the rows of tables that had been arrayed in front of the Rebbe, and walked all the way up to him.

The Rebbe first gave me a bit of wine and some challah dipped in honey, and told me to wash my hands and recite all of the appropriate blessings. After I'd returned from washing, he had me stand behind his secretary Rabbi Hodakov, who was sitting about eight feet from him. For the rest of the month, that was my spot. Every *farbrengen*, the Rebbe made sure I was there, and he would turn around to give me a piece of cake or to pour a drop of wine from his cup.

On the morning of Simchat Torah, for the reading of *Ata Hareisa*, people would donate money to charity for the privilege of reading a verse from the passage. The Rebbe himself would pay for several verses and then he would give the honor of reading them to certain individuals. At one point, people began pointing to me: The Rebbe had purchased the second-to-last verse for me to recite.

There was another incident I remember well: The Rebbe had asked Reb Bentche Shemtov to sing *Mi Armia Admura*, a Red Army song Reb Bentche had adapted for the "Rebbe's

army." The song references all the *chasidim* who were imprisoned or killed in Russia, and I recall Reb Bentche standing behind the Rebbe, singing and crying.

While this was going on, the Rebbe turned around to me with a big smile and I came over. In Russian, the Rebbe asked me whether I spoke the language: "*Panimayesh paruski?*" As soon as I left Russia, I had stopped speaking Russian — I didn't like that country, and I didn't like that language — but I still understood it.

"*Nimnoshka*," I replied. A little bit.

"Nu," he said to me, nodding towards Reb Bentche, "so help him sing!"

Today, when I tell my children and grandchildren about how the Rebbe showed such affection to a child who had just crossed through the Iron Curtain, I find myself inspired. That verse the Rebbe had me read out loud still has a tremendous impact on me today.

Since 1985, Rabbi Yoske Sossonko resided in South Beach, Florida, where he served as a *mashpia* for the Chabad community. He was interviewed in October of 2021 and passed away in April of 2022.

This week in....

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

> **5702-1941**, during the Rebbe's first Rosh Hashanah in the USA, he changed the way that the *chasidim* walked to the *tashlich* service, which would be held in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. The Rebbe instructed the *chasidim* to parade down Eastern Parkway in two straight rows, while singing out loud, in a display of Jewish pride.¹
1 Tishrei

> **5738-1977**, as the Rebbe had suffered a severe heart attack a year earlier, organizers planned to restrict access to 770's synagogue on Rosh Hashanah — which would normally be overcrowded — to ensure that there would be enough fresh air. But at a *farbrengen* the night before Rosh Hashanah, the Rebbe announced, "Obviously, everyone should be allowed to enter for the Torah reading and the sounding of the *shofar*, with no restrictions whatsoever."²
28 Elul

1. Living Torah program 106, interview with Rabbi Zalman Posner

2. Sichot Kodesh 5738 vol. 3 page 470

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