

ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

Rabbi Moshe and Miriam Moskovitz, Jewish Community of Kharkov, Kharkov, Ukraine

Braving the Soviet Frontier, Chabad of Kharkov Part I

By Chaya Chazan

Both of my parents fled to Venezuela after surviving the horrors of the Holocaust. They knew raising proud Jewish children was the best revenge they could take on Hitler, and they made sure my siblings and I grew up on a proper Jewish education.

Although I went to an American yeshiva for a few years, I had to return to Caracas for a year. The only yeshiva in the city was a Lubavitcher yeshiva. Although it was very different from what I was used to, I quickly came to love Chassidus and embraced the Chabad lifestyle as my own.

My wife was also introduced to Chabad Chassidus as a teenager, and took to it as quickly as I did. When we got married, we knew we wanted to move on shlichus.

With my Venezuelan background and my short stints of shlichus all over South America, it seemed as though a South American shlichus was a no-brainer. We'd even begun making inquiries to that end, and my wife began learning Spanish. The shocking news of the fall of the Soviet Union then rocked the world and opened up a whole new world of possibilities.



"You know, I've heard there are some couples moving to the Soviet Union on shlichus," I told my wife one erev Shabbos.

She took it in stride, understanding my subtle hint, and we began looking into it.

Neither of us spoke a word of Russian; we'd never stepped foot in what was once the Soviet Union. We had no family there, no safety net, and no network of supporters. But we knew that shlichus demanded mesiras nefesh, and we were ready to give it our best.

Quite a few couples had already written to the Rebbe for approval to start shlichus there. Those with small children unsurprisingly received direction elsewhere, with the Rebbe notating on the side of their letters, "How will you make such a long journey with a young child?" We weren't sure that we, a young couple with a baby, would receive the Rebbe's approval, but once we heard of a family in similar circumstances who'd gotten the green light, we decided to write. We confessed our worry about traveling with such a young child, and how we'd ensure their chinuch, but knew that - with the Rebbe's bracha - everything would work out.

Fifteen minutes later, Rabbi Groner A"H called me over and showed me the Rebbe's answer, written in the margins of the letter we'd written: *It should be with success and blessings. I will mention the matter at the grave [of my father-in-law, the Friediker Rebbe.]*

We were in!

An organization had been hastily assembled to direct operations in the newly opened region. We took

a trip to the basement that housed the offices of *Ezras Achim*, whose most prominent feature was a huge map of the Soviet Union tacked over the wall of the basement.

"What about Kharkov?" asked the energetic chassid, poring over the map.

We looked at each other and shrugged. With our limited knowledge of Russian geography, this city was as good as any.

"There's a beautiful shul in Kharkov," he explained. "It was built in the early 1900s! But in 1923, the Jewish community was coerced into agreeing they didn't need it anymore, and it was used as a sports arena. Now, with the upheaval in the country, the government has agreed to return use of the shul to the Jewish community. All they need is a rabbi to run it!"

"I guess that's us!" I laughed. "I wonder if Kharkov has electricity...?"

Soon, sticky notes began hanging around every part of our house, declaring the window an "okno," and the table a "stol."

We packed up all our belongings and flew to Moscow, followed by a long, overnight train ride to Kharkov, with nothing more than a smattering of Russian and the Rebbe's passionate words about the plight of Soviet Jewry to help us on our mission.

All we knew about the Soviet Union was gleaned from returning bochurim, who'd had to hide their tefillin from KGB agents and invent creative ways to meet with Jews without being seen by a soul. There were no videos or pictures to review; the moniker "Iron Curtain" had been well-earned.

We were pleasantly surprised to find a modern city with streetlamps, electricity, and cars on the roads. The lurking KGB agents we expected to see around every corner were, remarkably, nowhere to be found.

We also expected to have to coax the local Jews out from their hiding spots and battle a lot of stigma about announcing their Jewishness in public. It was a delight to see the throngs of Jews running to us, thanking us for coming, and begging for any nugget of Yiddishkeit we could give them. The Iron Curtain had lifted, and they were eager to bask in the sunlight they could enjoy at long last.

"So, Rabbi," asked Batya, one of our translators, "what did the Rebbe have to do to convince you to come to Kharkov? Did he offer you money? Did he have to persuade you over and over? Did he invite you to his house?"

"Quite the contrary!" I laughed. "When we sent in our letter about coming to Kharkov, we davened that we would have the zechus of receiving a positive answer. Getting the Rebbe's bracha was a dream come true!"

The battle against the sheer ignorance decades of Communism had imposed was daunting at first. On the very first Friday night after our arrival, over 1,000 people crowded into the shul, anxious to get a peek at the “real, live rabbi!”

I was jostled around and pushed aside while the crowd craned their necks for a glimpse of the rabbi - who'd obviously have a long white beard. It took them a while to realize the young, black-haired man on the side was the one they were looking for.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Rabbi!” said one congregant, enthusiastically pumping my hand. “Is your wife also Jewish?”

The Rebbe had given me a bottle of mashke, and it was my privilege to dole it out to the community.

“Rabbi, we know how to drink!” one man chided, although I couldn’t tell if he was joking or in earnest. “We can handle more than this little shot!”

A few weeks after our arrival was Rosh Hashanah. No one in the city had ever heard of a shofar, let alone seen or listened to one. On Yom Kippur, concerned congregants offered to fetch us cups of water or crackers, since we seemed so pale and weak. When we took our Sukkah mobile across the city, one little boy wanted to know how *he* could build a sukkah, if he didn’t have a truck.

Every aspect of Judaism was unfamiliar and new; their warmth, excitement, and genuine passion for Torah far overshadowed their naivete.

“We’ll be hosting a Sunday school for Jewish kids,” I announced that first Shabbos. The next day, 120 kids showed up, eager and ready to learn. We hadn’t been in the city for even a week! When we announced a yeshiva, we immediately had ten men sign up to learn in the shul an entire day. There was such a thirst for Yiddishkeit, and it was our zechus to share the life-giving wellspring.

From their youths, they’d been trained to do as they were told and never dare ask questions. Now, they turned that into a force for good. “Just tell us what the mitzvos are, and we’ll do them,” seemed to be their modus operandi. Shabbos? Done! Kosher? Done! Tefillin? Done! Bris milah? No problem!

Their absolute kabalos ol and pure love for Hashem often brought tears to our eyes.

Our community grew rapidly, and we soon established a preschool, elementary school, high school, kollel, and Sunday school.

As our children grew up, they joined us on shlichus, and other families came to help support our growing infrastructure as well. In 2022, before the war began, we had a thriving community with thousands of students in school, dozens of guests every Shabbos, and ten shluchim families serving the community full time.

The Rebbe’s vision for Soviet Jewry had borne fruit.

Vadim* is a good friend who comes to shul every morning, and is an active member of the community. Vadim hadn’t had a bris as a baby, and he was eager to rectify the omission. But with flights to the city so unreliable, it was difficult to find a mohel.

“Vadim! Guess what? I found a mohel!” I told him excitedly, one cold, winter morning. “In honor of Chof Daled Teves, the yahrzeit of the Alter Rebbe, a group is visiting his kever in Haditch. One of the guests is a mohel! He agreed to do the bris, but he’s on a very tight schedule. The only time he can do your bris is at 6:00 AM. What do you say?”

“Of course! I’ll be there!” Vadim agreed, happily.

In a very moving ceremony, Vadim, now called Ahron, was welcomed into the eternal bris of Avraham Avinu. As he lay recovering from the painful procedure in the next room, I entered, bearing a special gift for him.

“Ahron, in honor of your bris, I’m gifting you with your very own pair of tefillin!” I said, holding the velvet bag out to him.

To my utter shock and consternation, Ahron struggled to stand up. I tried getting him to lie down again, but he insisted on standing and giving me a bear hug, thanking me over and over for the wonderful gift.

“I’ve never seen such pure love and joy for tefillin,” the mohel told me, his eyes welling up with tears. “What a special neshama!”

Ahron dreamed of one day going to Haditch, but leaving Kharkov was too dangerous for him. With the conscription age pulling men up to 60 years old, any man below that would be immediately sent to the army. Vadim was 59, and he hoped to pass his final

months of recruitment age away from any blockposts. If he traveled outside the city, there was no question he’d be stopped at some point and asked for his papers. His dream, for the meantime, would have to be put on hold.

Then, one morning, Ahron called me, his voice bursting with excitement.

“Rabbi, it’s hasgacha pratis!” he cried. “I’ve been caught!”

“What?!” I yelled.

“Yup! The army has me down on their list, and I have to report to the recruitment office soon.”

“So - wait... why do you sound so... happy about it?” I asked, confused.

“Now that I’m on their list anyway, I can go to Haditch!” he explained, triumphantly.

One year later, on Chof Daled Teves - exactly a year after his bris, he visited Haditch with thanks for all the blessings in his life and gratitude for finding his Jewish roots again.

Ahron continued to come to shul every Shabbos and, like everyone else, joined us in our home afterwards for the meal and a farbrengen.

Usually, we’re relegated to the only three Jewish songs our community knows and can sing along with: Hava Nagila, Havainu Sholom Aleichem, and Oseh Shalom. One Shabbos, Ahron began singing a different song - the Beinoni Niggun! The following week, he led the table with the Pilpul Niggun.

“How do you know these tunes?” I asked him.

“When I’m driving my taxi, I listen to music,” he explained, the customary twinkle in his eye. “I found a great artist - Avraham Fried and Eli Marcus! They sing these beautiful niggunim, and I listen to them over and over.”

**Names changed to protect identity*



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